

## **Learning To Remember (Winner, WriteInvite, March 2015)**

My mother taught me to read and write before I started school. That might not sound like much of an achievement in these days of pre-school syllabuses and tiger mums, but fifty years ago, it was rare. And all the more so because my mother had to teach herself first.

Growing up in a children's home, where behaving yourself and not causing a fuss were far more important than learning, she left school as soon as she could, if not sooner, and at the age of fourteen, started work in the kitchen of 'the big house' where education wasn't necessary, so long as the pots were scrubbed and the shoes were shone before she went to bed.

After I was born, unexpected but loved nonetheless, she vowed I would not have the same upbringing as her. So she asked the cook to help her learn to read: and so the sticker system was born.

Throughout the kitchen, and in the cupboards where no-one would notice them, they would place stickers on dishes, jars, salt, pepper and so on. Each time my mother saw one of the stickers, she had to read it out loud, tell cook what it meant - and then spell it out with her eyes closed. Once she knew the word off by heart, she would write a new sticker and bring it home for me to learn too.

Over the years, the stickers got worn and fell off; and as we moved on to magazines and books - always reading together - we didn't need to replace them. But when my own daughter was born, I put the system back into operation - and she too was able to read before the age of five.

Last week, we visited my mother in her sunny little room in the care home, where she has all her familiar things around her. She still talks about those days back in the kitchen - and sometimes she forgets that the cook is no longer with us. She has such happy memories of that time, even if she can't remember whether she's had lunch or not.

My daughter read to her, while I wrote stickers and pasted them onto cupboards and shelves. As we left her room, I heard my mother spelling out one of the words to herself. Turning, I saw her eyes were screwed shut. She looked fifty years younger once more.