

Crosswords

by Linda Manning

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Dear Diary,

She learned English by doing crosswords, my mom. I'm sure she picked up a few things from the people around her as well, but yeah, always doing crosswords.

When I lived too far away to visit regularly, I bought a Scrabble board. I'd bring it with me every time I went to visit. So, together, we learned the rules of Scrabble. Rule number one: everyone draws a tile from the bag and the person whose tile is closest to the letter 'A' goes first. Well, there was only the two of us, so that was an easy rule to meet. I always kept score in the manner that she'd taught me in so many other games we'd played in the past. The numbers were aligned haphazardly in two columns: 'You' and 'Me.' Seven tiles in each rack, a glass of red, and we would laugh at all the funny words that seemed to write themselves. There was never a shortage of laughter.

Her formal education did not exceed the sixth grade, and although I couldn't keep myself *out* of school all those years, she still beat me at this game on a regular basis. Oh, the power of the crossword.

Years passed and with every visit I watched her hair grow a little more gray, her body a little more weak and her ability to finish a game a little more the challenge than the tiles on her rack.

More time passed as did she.

I met some new friends who invited me to a party on 'Talk Like a Pirate Day.' Like any good game, the party also had rules. Wearing an eye patch or sporting a parrot on your shoulder were among the favorites, but the main attraction was all the imaginative ways to use the word 'Arrr.' I didn't go, of course, still sad for my loss. Instead, a friend came to my house to play Scrabble with me.

I pulled the board out of the box and below it was a sheet of paper with numbers on it. At the top, 'You' and 'Me.'

I left two wet circles on my friend's shirt, then we sat down to play. He pulled out a tile; it was the letter 'A.' I thought, 'No way you could be so lucky.' I reached into the bag.

And pulled out the letter 'A.'

Now, I have to tell you that in all the years of playing Scrabble with my mom, never had we *both* pulled out the same letter, let alone the letter 'A.'

Amazed, my friend pulled out another tile. This time it was the letter 'R.' I had to laugh since I'd just missed a party where these letters were in ultra-high demand. I reached into the bag and pulled out a tile I was sure would make me the first player.

It is with God's honest truth that I tell you this, my friend. I looked at my tile and sure enough, it was the letter 'R.'

As we fell over in uproarious astonishment, we laughed all the harder as we heard something banging through the pots the pans. "Mom!" I said, "The next one's gotta be different!"

They were. His was 'V' and mine was 'T.' I went first, and pulled a rack of letters that spelled themselves: 'Teaser.'

For the rest of the night, amidst strange and funny letter combinations, I thought about those letters she'd given me: ART. And I remembered my auntie telling me that Mom would not want me to be sad. So I share this with you, her laughter in my art.

