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## *Priscilla*

*Tuesday, June 11*

FELIX and Gabby sat in front of the television while Priscilla cooked. She washed and dried her hands, dumped some almond meal in a bowl, seasoned it with salt and pepper, then cracked two eggs into another bowl and stirred them with a fork.

As her hand methodically spun in circles, Priscilla took a deep breath and closed her eyes. The kids were so quiet when they watched TV. The women in her preschool moms group spoke often and effusively of the electronic babysitter. It was something they laughed about and bonded over, except for Priscilla.

She understood what they meant, especially at moments like this. After a long day, cocooned in the kitchen while the early summer air wafted into newly opened windows—yes, at moments like this, the TV seemed like a blessing. If her kids weren't riveted by reruns of *Sesame Street* (it was all about letters and numbers, how bad could it be?), they'd still be at each other's throats.

Thank goodness it was June, and the end of the year. Things with Felix were getting intolerable. Kindergarten hadn't been like this, but back then, Felix had a wonderful teacher who understood his need for physical activity. Suddenly, in first grade, he'd had to sit at a desk. Felix had survived, though he'd developed a wicked nail-biting habit. The therapist she and Ron consulted advised them to let it go. It took all of Priscilla's restraint to keep quiet when Felix

gnawed on his already-worn fingertips. Something had to change. It had to.

Priscilla poured a generous amount of oil into the skillet and turned on the stove to warm it. These chicken strips were Felix's favorite. She planned to make them again next week, to entice him to come to the homeschooling group's potluck without a fuss. Fortunately Gabby would come along with a smile, no matter what.

Footfalls sounded on the front steps and the door creaked open. "Daaaaddddy," yelled Felix, leaping up to meet his father. Gabby wasn't far behind. Priscilla heard Ron greeting the kids, and the sounds of kisses being exchanged. She smiled.

"Hey, babe," he said, coming into the kitchen with a kid on each hip.

"Hi," she said, turning her face toward him for a quick kiss. She'd just dipped the first chicken strip into the egg and dredged it in the almond meal, so a hug was out of the question.

"Daddy, come see my dragon." Felix had spent more than an hour after school in his room, with his Playmobil castle, trying to keep Gabby away and lay out one of his elaborate medieval scenarios at the same time. Their intolerable bickering finally drove Priscilla to resort to *Sesame Street*.

Cookie Monster's deep, silly voice blared from the living room. Ron turned toward the sound. "Why is the TV on?"

"They wanted to watch a show," Priscilla said, dropping a piece of chicken into the sizzling oil.

"I thought we talked about that," said Ron. Priscilla knew he didn't like her using the TV when she got frazzled or

needed to do something undisturbed, but sometimes she just had to.

“It’s just *Sesame Street*,” said Priscilla. “Letters. I thought it might help.” Felix’s teacher had set him up with a resource specialist because of his difficulty with reading.

“Help with what?” said Ron. “You?”

“Daddy,” Felix was pulling on Ron’s suit jacket. “Come see.”

Ron left with the kids, his question unanswered. Sometimes it felt to Priscilla like Ron didn’t want to hear about her problems, he just wanted her to solve them and be perfect.

She took another deep breath, trying to will away her annoyance. Ron had no clue what it was like. His idea was to put Felix into an after-school program, where there’d be educational programming and social interaction. Then she could go back to work in the fall, when Gabby started kindergarten, just like they’d planned.

Priscilla missed her career as a nurse, but Felix, as difficult a time as she was having with him, pulled her. He hated school, and she felt each day he spent there snuffed out his enthusiasm a little bit more. The times when things did come together, when she and the kids fell into a synergy, when she was reading to them, or they were making cookies, taking a walk in the woods, or just talking, felt precious to her.

It was Felix’s unhappiness that made her look into homeschooling in the first place, but the moments of familial bliss, and the promise of more, were what made her want to do it. She’d done some Internet research, found a support group, and gone to a meeting. Home Learning Together, it was called, HoLT for short, because of some guy named John Holt. Priscilla had already devoured one of his books, *How*

*Children Fail*. She was working her courage up to read *Teach Your Own*. Although she was already thinking seriously about homeschooling, reading an actual book on the subject felt perilously close to commitment.

Perilous, because Ron was against it, and there was enough tension in their marriage already. Still, when the parents she'd met at HoLT talked about their lives, excitement and longing rose in her.



MILVA MCDONALD is the mother of four amazing adult children, all of whom homeschooled for all or most of their child and teenage years. She started homeschooling in 1991, after reading an essay by John Taylor Gatto and realizing school and the PTA weren't for her. She blogs at [apotlucklife.com](http://apotlucklife.com).



SOPHIA SAYIGH is a librarian and the mother of two adult children, neither of whom went to school until college. She stumbled upon John Holt's *Teach Your Own* at the library in 1991, and it struck a deep chord, resonating with her own school experience as a "good" student, as well as her then life with a toddler.

Teresa, Pina, and Carmen grease the wheels and put out fires for the local homeschool support group, all the while welcoming newbies into the fold. Jewel practices yoga diligently but can't get herself to unwind. Priscilla yearns for a solution to her son's struggles in school. Alice gives her dog and her kids free rein. Meanwhile, children are playing, teens are percolating, and the group is gearing up for the biggest potluck of the year. From the interpersonal dynamics between parents to the ups and downs of life with kids, readers, homeschoolers and non-homeschoolers alike, will recognize many of their own joys and struggles in the daily life depicted in *Unschoolers*.

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