

My Son

A Birthday Wish

by Jennifer Overton

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Last night I had a dream. I dreamed I was driving along a winding coastal road. All of a sudden a beautiful boy dressed in black and carrying a violin case crossed the road in front of me, causing me to stop. I asked him where he was going, and if I could give him a lift. He recited his address, an address I'd never heard, and got in the back seat. I looked in the rearview mirror and a wave of panic rose in me at the sight of his composed angelic face, staring straight ahead. In spite of my unease, I knew that I had to help him find his way home. I began driving. Searching. I woke up, my heart racing.

My son. My beautiful son:

Tomorrow is your fifth birthday. My big boy. My child. Five years old! Dad and I are so very proud of you. We are madly in love with you, and we wouldn't want you to be any different than you are. You are one terrific kid. Very special. And it was exactly one year ago today that you were diagnosed autistic. Autistic. Autism. That word still kicks me right in the stomach. It knocks the wind out of me as much as it did the first time I heard it a year ago, in the cold blunt way we were told of your disorder. "Yup, it's Autism, and it's never going to go away." I remember feeling like all my blood had left my body. And I remember hearing the cold October rain slapping the window of the white, sterile psychologist's office. It's one thing to harbour nagging suspicions; it's quite another to hear the word AUTISM from the mouth of a professional, and to see it in black and white. No longer deniable. Inescapable. Lifelong.

As much as we love you, it's been a very difficult year for me and Dad. Who can prepare for such a thing? It has been a year filled with tears, grief, numbness, panic, desperation, fear, love, determination, and anger. A lot of anger. Anger at a family doctor who repeatedly dismissed my concerns about your development; anger at a medical system that put us on fourteen month long waiting lists, and after diagnosing you, ushered us out the door with nothing more than a wave and a "good luck"; anger that your neurological disorder is shrouded in mystery and stigma and the medical community offers no treatment. It has been a year filled with tears, grief, numbness, panic, desperation, fear, love... I'm angry that I had to spend months reading, researching, desperately looking for information on how to help you with NO ONE to guide me; I wish we lived closer to my family; I wish there was something or someone to blame for this; I feel anger toward friends who have effortlessly developing children and still dare to complain; I'm angry at having been given this huge responsibility!; Angry because I can never rest!; and yes, I'm angry at you for not giving me back things like hugs and kisses- my dear, it's very hard to keep giving when I don't get a lot back in return. Please try to understand. I know you can't help it, but that doesn't make it easier.

But mostly, I'm angry at myself. Angry and guilty for not having recognised the signs earlier, because early diagnosis and intervention have proven to increase chances of full integration into society. I wish I hadn't hushed my concerns. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. For not listening to myself.

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And for not listening to what you were telling me. And when you were diagnosed, I'm sorry for being sad. I want you to know that I am not sad about you, or that you are my son. Never. It's the world: I'm worried about you in this world.

Autism. It conjures images of a solitary, mute, rocking child. That is not you; it never was. But when I think back, and look at your baby book, I recognise what I now know to be the early signs. You screamed at the sound of tin foil being ripped. You stiffened when I held you. Your eye contact was not good. Instead of pushing toy cars around the living room, you turned them over and spun the wheels.

Numbers, letters, and shapes were your favourite playthings. At barely two years of age you pointed to a small eight-sided window and said, "octagon."
Before the age of three you were spelling words with blocks. I recall being in the car and hearing you mutter, "three, one, eighteen. That spells car." It took me a while to figure out that what you had done was assign the letters of the alphabet numbers in your head, and were spelling words with the assigned numbers.

And your memory. Uncanny. Eerie. You sing songs after hearing them once. You remember where you dropped an elastic three years ago. You remember the minutest detail, and forget nothing.

And yet you show little interest in playing with other children. Kids are loud; they move around a lot; they're unpredictable. Not only must it be an assault to your oversensitive senses, but you don't know the rules to that game; the steps to that dance. You don't know how to make a friend. You don't know how to play.

Sometimes your literal mind offers up funny, poetic insights. "Mom, the scissors are clapping." "Mom, can you put your headache away?" Birds dance in the air, tummies cry, and "the gate is broke -- it has no money in its pockets."

Dad and I celebrate your uniqueness. But will the world? Will the kids in school call you a computer with no feelings? A robot, to be turned on in the morning and off at night? Will you ever be invited to a sleepover? Will you learn to be a friend? Will you ever hug me and say, "I love you Mom." On good days I have faith that the world will be gentle. On bad days I just want to hold you in my arms and shelter you. My mysterious child in black, what is the road you're walking down? And where are you bound?

Tomorrow you turn five. We are so very proud of you. You are working hard to learn the life skills you are going to need. We love you. And we will do everything in our power to help you reach your full potential and be the happiest person you can be. And while we're busy teaching you the ways of this world, you can teach us a lesson or two about love, patience, commitment, and beauty. OK?

Happy Birthday son. And thanks for choosing our road to walk across.

Love, Mom

Jennifer Overton is a Halifax actor and writer. She also teaches Drama at Mount Saint Vincent University. She is the proud mother of a five year old autistic spectrum hyperlexic child.