

LOVING AUTISM

A MEMOIR · FREE CHAPTER

Before the *Storm*

*A Father's Story of Autism, Meltdowns, and
Learning to Hear What His Son Couldn't
Say*

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THE OPENING CHAPTER

CHAPTER ONE

He Had a Great Day

The school never calls about Eli.

I know families who flinch every time the phone lights up with the school's number—and we have our own version of the flinch. But ours doesn't come at 2:47 in the afternoon. Ours comes at 3:30, at our own front door.

Here is the thing about my son that took us years to explain to anyone, including ourselves: Eli is good at school. Not easy-good. Working-good. He sits when sitting is unbearable. He stays quiet when the lights hum and the kid next to him chews with his mouth open. He holds steady through the hardest thing of all: the days when other kids act up, when the classroom fills with somebody else's chaos and the scolding that follows it. Trouble that isn't even his costs him more than anything in that building, for reasons a later chapter will make plain. He follows the schedule. He holds the line.

His teachers adore him. And why wouldn't they? Eli is twelve, and he is easy to adore. He

loves cars—all cars, but especially remote-control ones, which he drives with a precision that surprises people who think they already know what my son can't do. He'll spend a golden hour in the backyard with his toy backhoe and excavator, a one-boy construction company. He sings at the top of his lungs and knows every song the radio plays, and when the spirit moves him he becomes Michael Jackson, moonwalking across my kitchen floor. He is also, fair warning, a prankster. His signature move is the stolen seat: at a restaurant, the moment you get up—bathroom, buffet run, doesn't matter—Eli is in your chair, radiating delight, waiting for you to come back and discover the crime. And if the house ever goes too quiet, he'll fix that himself. "Alexa—Eli want fart sounds." Alexa, to her eternal credit, obliges.

The laugh that follows all of it starts in his shoulders before it reaches his face. When something is truly, deeply funny, it tips over into a snort: involuntary, unguarded, completely contagious. Nobody in our house has ever heard that snort without joining it.

At pickup, at conferences, in the little notes that come home in his folder, his teachers tell us the same five words, over and over:

"He had a great day!"

And every time, my wife and I exchange a look that no teacher has ever decoded. Because we know what a great day costs. We know what's coming.

The bus drops him at the corner at 3:26. By 3:30 he's through the front door, backpack hitting the floor, and we can read the whole invisible day in the first ten seconds—the set of his shoulders, the pitch of his voice, whether his shoes come off or get kicked. Some days he makes it to the couch. Some days he makes it to a snack.

This is the part that's hard to explain to anyone who hasn't lived in our house. The same boy who snorts at his own jokes and moonwalks across the kitchen is the boy I am about to describe. They are not two children. They are the same child, at two different pressures.

Some days the door barely closes before the storm he has been holding back since nine o'clock that morning—through math, through the

assembly, through the cafeteria that sounds like the inside of a jet engine—finally breaks loose. He is home now. Home is the only place on earth where he doesn't have to hold it anymore.

People who haven't lived this often get it backwards. They hear that a child is calm at school and falls apart at home, and they quietly conclude the problem must be home—that the parents are the soft spot, that he saves his worst for the people who let him get away with it.

It's the exact opposite. He holds it together at school because he can't afford not to. He lets it go with us because we are the only ones he trusts to catch it.

It took me an embarrassingly long time to understand that the explosion at my front door was not the failure. It was the receipt. It was proof of seven hours of heroic, invisible effort—a twelve-year-old spending every ounce of himself to hold an unbearable world at arm's length, succeeding all day, and then handing us what was left of him.

Which, some days, was nothing at all.



I need to tell you about the part that breaks me, because if you live in a house like ours, I think you may have heard it too.

When the storm comes, my wife goes to him. She's better in the storm than I am—steadier, slower, a harbor. She gets low. She keeps her voice soft. And she always starts the same way, no matter what he's just broken, no matter how far gone he is: "I love you, Eli." Not "stop." Not "calm down." Not "what did you do." I love you, first, every time. Then, softly, the rest of it—what happened, buddy? What do you feel? Can you take a deep breath? Can you give me a hug?—little reassurances threaded through with more love than I knew a person could hold steady under fire. She waits out the thrashing and the screaming, and she holds him when he finally lets her.

And while it's still happening—while his body is still somewhere he can't control, while the wave is still breaking over him—he cries the same two words, over and over:

"Sorry, Mommy. Sorry, Mommy."

He apologizes during the meltdown. Not after, when it's over and he's calm and someone has prompted him. During. From inside it.

I want to be honest about what that apology did to me, early on, because it is not the thing you'd expect. It did not break my heart. It frustrated me. When you are two hours into holding a thrashing child, the storm is about survival and nothing else. There is no room in it for anything. To hear him apologize while he fought me landed as one more thing I could not do anything with. And underneath the exhaustion, if I am telling the truth, was a thought I never said out loud but absolutely thought: if you were really sorry, you would stop. That is the logic of a man treading water. It is also the logic of someone who still, somewhere he won't admit, believes the drowning is a choice.

I'd like to tell you there was a single afternoon when that flipped—a moment the sorry finally landed and I understood. There wasn't. It came apart slowly, over months, as I came to know my son. But it did come apart, and here is where it landed: a child who is misbehaving does not apologize while he is doing it. A kid who's "acting

out” doesn’t say sorry mid-act. He says sorry mid-storm for one reason—some part of him is standing apart from it, watching it happen to him, hating it, and powerless to stop it. The apology I’d heard as evidence against him was, the whole time, the truest evidence for him: proof that he didn’t want to be there any more than I did.

He wasn’t choosing this. He had been choosing, all day—choosing to hold on, hour after hour, with everything he had. The meltdown wasn’t the choice. The meltdown was what happened when the choosing ran out.



For years, our family lived in the aftermath. We got good at it, the way you get good at anything you do every day. The landing zone by the couch. The weighted blanket. The lights down. One of his brothers, who has learned to read the signs, quietly slipping out to give him room. The quiet that has to be rebuilt one breath at a time. We were excellent at 3:45.

But we were blind to 9:15.

That's when it actually starts—we know that now. Not at our front door. At the morning bell. The needle starts climbing with the first jolt of the day, the schedule change, the substitute teacher, the classmate having a louder, worse day than his. It climbs through the cafeteria. It climbs through the afternoon. By the time the bus turns onto our street, it has been pinned in the red for an hour, and the only person on earth who knows it is a twelve-year-old boy using his last reserves to look, to everyone around him, like a kid having a great day.

His teachers can't see the needle. His mother and I couldn't see it. And Eli—this is the cruelest part—Eli can't always see it himself. The same wiring that makes the world come at him too loud also makes it hardest for him to find the words for what's rising inside him. The signals are firing—a racing heart, a clenched gut, something climbing—but the message doesn't arrive in words. It arrives, hours later, at my front door, as the storm.

So he holds. And the needle climbs. And nobody knows until it's too late to do anything but catch him.

One night, after the house had gone quiet, I sat at the kitchen table and asked the question that would eventually change everything for our family:

What if we could see the needle?

Not after. Not at 3:30, reading the wreckage in his shoulders. During. At 10:00 a.m., when the climb starts. At 1:15, when a ten-minute break and a snack and a walk down the hall could still bring it down. At 2:45, fifteen minutes before the bus, so that when he walked through our door we'd already know what kind of day his body had actually had—no matter what the folder said—and we could meet him there. Soft landing ready. Storm seen coming.

It turns out we could. The needle is real. It's measurable. It was there all along in his heart rate, his sleep, his breathing—a day-long story his body was telling that no one had ever been equipped to hear.

All of it—the holding, the catching, the years of “he had a great day”—was the silent part of the struggle, the part nobody posts about. And it starts at the front door, at 3:30, with two words I will hear for the rest of my life:

Sorry, Mommy.

He never needed to apologize. He needed to be heard. We just didn't speak the language yet.

KEEP READING

The story continues.

Thank you for reading the opening of *Before the Storm*. If you know that front door — if this is your house too — the rest of the book was written for you.

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Listen before the storm.