

Marks on the Heart
By Debbie Roppolo

“Your son Joseph has autism.”

I dug my fingernails into the arm of the chair, feeling that at any moment I'd sink into the floor. That wasn't the diagnosis I'd expected to hear from the doctor.

A short time after his third birthday, Joseph's speech progression slowed. My husband and I were both concerned, but not overly alarmed. Our older son Jonathan had a speech delay at this age. Joseph would have speech therapy, empowering him to overcome this obstacle, just as his brother had. But autism? I shook my head. The doctor was wrong.

Across the room, Joseph rummaged through a toy box. He giggled as he pulled a plastic phone from the heap. I suppressed my laughter. As usual, my son's joy was infectious. He was too happy. All the autistic children I had ever seen had been withdrawn. There was no way Joseph was autistic.

“That can't be right,” I insisted. “Look at him. He's happy. He can read words too advanced for his age.” A lump formed in my throat as Joseph, smiling, climbed into my lap and wrapped his arms around my neck. Tears ran down my face as I felt his breath on my cheek, his heart pounding against my chest. In my eyes, my child was perfect. Now a total stranger was telling me he wasn't.

“And video games. He can buy games on my cell phone,” I sobbed.

The doctor cleared her throat and said, “Joseph is what we call ‘high-functioning autistic’. That means he's of average intelligence or above. “But,” she continued, “there's to be no excuses. Treat him like you would a typical child, or you'll let autism cripple him. Do you understand?”

The only thing I understood is that I had plans for Joseph. He'd be a leader, leaving his mark on every life he touched. Now those goals were slipping away, faster than water through a sieve.

In the following weeks, I floundered in a well of depression. I doubted my ability as a parent. I berated myself, believing I would've noticed the symptoms earlier if I'd have spent more time with Joseph and less on my writing. And it didn't boost my self-esteem when people said: “My goodness, what did you do while you were pregnant?” or “I guess it's genetic. From your side of the family?” No matter what was said, they made it obvious I was the one to blame for Joseph's condition.

I hated going out in public. It was then Joseph acted the most autistic: yelling spontaneously, rocking back and forth, and slapping his face. All of which drew stares and whispers from onlookers. I hated them all, especially the ones with well-behaved, typical children present. And I detested myself for not wanting to be seen with my precious son.

As a means to de-stress and maintain my sanity, I took nightly walks. One night, as I had so many times in the past, I looked to the heavens for answers to sooth my troubled heart. As I gazed at the stars, twinkling like gems against a canvas of black velvet, I came upon a realization. It wasn't my fault. I didn't cause Joseph to be autistic. I couldn't have done anything to prevent it. I could only move forward and do what I could to help my son overcome his disorder.

I stopped placing blame on my husband, and began working with him, researching different programs and placing Joseph in occupational and speech therapy. I read everything I could, educating myself and other people on the disorder.

I began to see Joseph as he really was, a perpetual, mischievous ball of energy, not much different than other children his age. I marveled over how he lived every second to its fullest, not caring what people thought.

Once, in the grocery store, he burst onto gleeful, spontaneous yells. Cringing as passersby gave us cold stares, I tried in vain to silence him. "Oh let him holler," an elderly woman said, breaking into a toothless grin. "He's just making a joyful noise, that's all. Warms my heart to hear him.

Joseph pondered things I took for granted; the way a raindrop left a crooked path on the window, the swoosh of wings as birds took flight. Even the setting of the sun left him in breathless wonder. Following his lead, I too began to marvel at the little things in life, and I couldn't believe what I'd been missing.

As it was, Joseph hadn't strayed too far away from my goals. He was leaving his mark on every life he touched; especially mine.