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## **When You Stop Counting**

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The first time you go, you're a little scared, a little nervous, but excited, too, kind of like your very first day of school, when you wore new shoes and a new dress and your mom took extra time in the morning to make sure you ate all your breakfast and told you that you looked just fine and held your hand while she walked you to the bus.

When you get there, you sit on the tiny chair, your grown-up knees bent up to your waist or higher. You and the teacher smile at each other across your knees, across the blond formica tabletop where folders and samples of work are stacked.

You listen as the teacher tells you things about your child you thought you already knew. Things you thought were just growing up things, adjusting to school things. Things you thought were normal.

When you hear the teacher say that your child loves to play with Legos, you smile. You smile because this is something you know, something you take pride in, because he's only five and already he's building ships and planes and castles with strange names and none of the other five-year-olds you've met can do that. You listen as the teacher says Legos, yes, and he plays with them longer than any of the other children, but gets *up-set* when it's time to do something else, when it's time to put the Legos away. You watch her say the word *up-set*, noticing how the space between her eyebrows wrinkles. You pull out your daytimer to use like a notebook, jotting down "Lego's, upset," to show the teacher that you're listening. You look up from your daytimer and smile, pen poised above the small striped pages.

The teacher rests her hand on the work folders and taps the stack with her forefinger. Her fingernail makes little tap-tap-tap sounds. When he gets *up-set*, she says, emphasizing the word with an extra tap, he gets very angry. This, too, is something you already know. You nod your head, sympathetic to her problem. You tell her the things you do at home to ease the transition from one task to the next, to circumvent the temper tantrums. You tell her that he really likes school, really likes her, even though you don't know that for sure.

You nod your head and take notes as she tells you that he has a hard time socializing with other children. Does not play well with others, you write in the daytimer. Fights during recess, you write.

When she opens his work folder, you gaze at bright colors and lumpy shapes on the first page. The page is from art class. You listen as the teacher tells you the story your child says goes with the picture. The story has many characters and lots of action. The action

seems to center on this shape—a rocket ship—shooting death rays at that shape—it's a house, with stick figures standing out front, arms raised overhead, big stick smiles on their faces. You grin a proud-parent grin, a grin that lets the teacher know you're proud of your child's obvious creative talent. The teacher looks closely at you, her eyebrows wrinkling again. She asks if there's a problem at home that she should know about. You stop smiling and say no. You reach for the picture and as you almost touch it, the teacher, who isn't watching, turns it over.

The paper underneath is arithmetic. He's very good at math, she says. You nod, cautious now, because you think you see a pattern: all the things you knew and thought were good are actually bad. You peek at the math paper. All the threes are backwards, the fives are lopsided and look like twos. Or maybe they are twos. You can tell from their shape that they've been drawn from the bottom up. The teacher taps her fingernail on the top row of problems. He's very good at math, she says again. We don't worry about the handwriting at this age. You're worried anyway, but you nod your head and write math in the daytimer. You don't tell her about your brother who still writes backwards threes and lopsided fives, who still labors with a pencil like a stonecutter with a chisel.

The next page is writing. Two lines are filled with wobbly lower case e's, all upside down. You wonder why she let him do two whole rows wrong, but you don't ask. You remember the symbol for partial differential equations in calculus is an upside down e. Maybe things will work out after all. The fingernail taps a row of e's, impatient counterpoint to the reassuring voice.

When the teacher tells you that he's a bright little boy, you say Thank You, I think so too, and when she says that maybe you should talk to someone about the fighting and the violent stories, you say okay and quietly write down the names she gives you. When you stand up, you shake your legs a little, trying to release the stiffness from crouching on the tiny chair. You say Thank You and she says Thanks for coming in and then you smile at each other. When you finally get back to your car, you sit down and fasten your seatbelt and all of a sudden all the tension you didn't know you had drains out of you and you cry, and you dig through your purse for the tissues but can't find any and you finally blow your nose on an old Dairy Queen napkin you find stuck under the seat.

The second time you go, you're more confident. You're not so nervous, but not so excited, either. You've already seen the teacher half a dozen times since school began this year. You still know the same things, the things about Legos and handwriting and stories. The things about does not play well with others and fights at recess and gets upset easily. The teacher shows you his work sheets. Some of the threes are backwards, the fives still look like twos, and everything is still drawn from the bottom up. You take a breath and ask why he holds his pencil with two fingers and a thumb, bracing it against his ring finger, instead of with forefinger and thumb, bracing it against the middle finger. The teacher shrugs and says his handwriting is fine, there's nothing to worry about. You feel the space between your eyebrows wrinkle and you make a conscious attempt to relax. You open your daytimer to make notes.

When the teacher tells you that your child is developmentally delayed in social skills, you protest. You do not believe, you will not accept this judgment. Developmentally delayed means retarded, stupid, unable to learn; it does not apply to your child. The teacher nods, murmurs sympathetically, and tells you that other six year olds don't do the things your child does. When the teacher asks you if there are problems at home, you clench your jaw and shake your head. You suspect that the teacher doesn't believe you. Afterwards, as you try to unlock your car door, you realize you have crumpled the page from your daytimer into your fist. You drop your daytimer twice trying to get the door open, and when it's finally open, you throw the daytimer into the back seat, hard. You grind the crumpled paper into the slush in the parking lot with your foot, but then, because you're a responsible citizen, you pick it up and shove it into the litter bag in the car. The bag rips, and you throw it into the back seat, where it lands beside the daytimer, crusty Kleenexes and torn candy wrappers cascading across the seat.

When you get home, you call your friend who does testing for intelligence and learning disabilities. She tests your child, and shows you something else you already know: the results are all in the ninety-eighth and ninety-ninth percentiles. The testing does not show any disabilities or delays, developmental or otherwise. The testing does not test specifically for social skills, but your friend includes a handwritten note that says your child plays well with her children, especially her son, who is four years older and very bright. You send a photocopy to the teacher. The next time the teacher sees you, she says Well, we already knew he was smart.

The third time you go, it's the end of the school year, and the teacher has asked for a special meeting. You hold your breath while she tells you that, even though the school doesn't approve of drug therapy, maybe it's time to consider it. You start to breathe again because you're already sure or pretty sure you know what's wrong, what makes your oh-so-bright child oh-so-different, and it's a medical problem, a glitch in the neurological wiring, not some parent-caused emotional problem.

The fourth time you go, the teacher tells you his behavior is much improved. Maybe the drugs are helping. She doesn't mention the bubububu sound your child makes, the sound that makes it almost impossible for him to get through a complete sentence. You think maybe he doesn't make the sound at school, but then she says your child doesn't like to talk in front of the group anymore, he seems to be getting shy and you wonder if it's shyness or something else, but you forget to ask. She tells you that your child still has problems making friends, that he misinterprets other people's actions, and that when she tries to comfort him, he becomes up-set. You try to explain about Tourette's and ADD and OCD and Asperger's and hypersensitivity to noise and touch. You throw in a little about autism, just for effect. When she asks if there are problems at home, you sigh and shake your head.

The fifth time you go, it isn't for a conference. It's for a meeting with the school director. You sit on an old brown sofa in her office. When she tells you that your child has a bonding problem because he screams and kicks when the teacher gives him a bear hug, you nod, unconvinced. When she tells you that if you want to keep your child enrolled in

her school, you must take your child to the therapist she names, you agree even though it means a four-hour drive and almost two hundred dollars.

The therapist tells you that your child has an obvious bonding problem because your own parents were abusive. The connection is not clear to you, but you don't question the therapist because you are too busy pulling your child down from the window, where he has decided to climb after leaping from the sofa to the easy chair in the therapist's office. As you pull your child down, the therapist stands up in front of you and looks at your squirming child. The therapist tells your child Your mother doesn't know how to hold you and he takes your child from you and sits down in the big chair. He wraps one arm around your child's chest, pinning his arms to his side. Your child's head jerks back and he screams, screams so loud you expect the receptionist in the lobby two floors down to rush in to see what horrible thing is happening, but she doesn't. Your child's legs spasm out and up, aiming for you and the therapist and the chair but meeting only air, and then the therapist pins your child's legs against his lap and the arm of the chair. You watch your child's mouth scream, never stopping for air, and you watch his hips thrash up, down, pushing for escape, and part of you is screaming, too, screaming leave my child alone let go this is abuse give my child to me and a part of you connected to the screaming part tries to grab your child and run as far and as fast as you can to escape this place, but then another part of you says the teacher said the director said and instead of running away, you sit in front of the therapist, who is still talking about the proper way to hold a child. When you reach forward to touch your child, to calm him, to let him know you're there, the therapist says no and your hand stops, frozen, moments away from your child's heart. The therapist talks for a long time and finally your child quiets, exhausted, eyes glazed, body limp, and the therapist looks at you, triumph gleaming in his eyes. When he pours your broken child into your lap, he tells you to feed your eight-year-old child apple juice in a baby bottle. When your child tries to curl his limp body into yours, and you begin to wrap your arms around him, to hold him close, to let him know he's safe now, the therapist moves your hands on your child's body, showing you the proper way to hold your child. The therapist pats your hand and looks at your child. When the therapist says it can be a secret, just between you and your mom, you know you will never, ever feed your child apple juice in a bottle and you will never hold him in this terrible posture and most of all, you will never come back to this therapist again.

When you get in the car, your child begins to cry very quietly.

When you get home, your child does not stop crying except when he sleeps. When it is time to go back to school, your child tells you he wants to commit suicide, and you spend long hours holding him, rocking him, singing half-forgotten lullabies. When you tell his teacher, she says maybe he's finally beginning to take responsibility for his actions. When you tell the doctor who prescribes his medicine, he says increase the dosage. When you tell your husband who is out of town on business, he doesn't say anything.

The sixth time you go, it isn't for a conference. When they tell you that your child has attacked a teacher, you tell them you'll pay for medical expenses. When they tell you that the board voted to expel your child, you consider calling a lawyer, but decide you can't

afford it. Later, you insist that your child experience a "discipline lesson" from his karate instructor, because the teacher says it was an unprovoked attack. It does not occur to you to question the teacher. Later, your son says the teacher was suffocating him. Later, you discover that the teacher enveloped him in a bear hug to control misbehavior. Later, you learn that the teacher does not believe in hypersensitivity to touch, ignored the note from the doctor explaining this part of the disorder, and does not understand that your child's skin feels pain when even gentle breezes caress it. Later, you apologize to your child for the discipline lesson.

The seventh time you go, it's a new school. The guidance counselor tells you about her three grown children. One is schizophrenic, two are fine. When she tells you that the two normal ones are the reason she knows she's a good parent, you smile. When she tells you that she's walked out of more than one therapist's office because of the bad mother accusation, you start to relax. When she tells you that she uses a team approach and the team includes you and the doctor who prescribes the meds and anyone else you want to include, you feel your heart skip a beat and you feel a little bit nervous, but a little bit excited, too, like it's the first day of school all over again.

The eighth time you go, you sit in the guidance counselor's conference room. The conference table is made up of two long folding tables pushed together. You sit at one short end, close to the door. Your husband sits beside you, and the social worker from the doctor's office sits beside your husband. The guidance counselor, teacher, principal, speech therapist, two other teachers who teach the same grade, the resource room teacher, and the teacher who runs the Reading Rainbow program for remedial readers sit in chairs at the other end of the table, filling up the end of the table and part of the sides. You listen as each person at the other end of the table tells you about your child. You listen as each one recites something horrible that your child has done. They begin with the first person on the left side of the table, and each one takes a turn, and each one says He's such a bright boy but he and then they tell of anger, and screaming, and hitting, and overturned furniture. The Reading Rainbow teacher says He's a great tutor for the first and second graders and He's never threatened any of the younger children but he threw books in the hallway maybe he shouldn't be in karate. The guidance counselor is last, and she says what would you like to add? but she doesn't say anything about how she knows you're doing your best and she doesn't explain why there are really two teams in this team approach and why your team has only three people on it. When she smiles all her teeth show and you realize they think you don't know and you begin to cry and suddenly boxes of tissues appear from everywhere. Everyone at the other end of the table has a box of tissues and they pass all the boxes to you and you wipe your face and blow your nose, not caring whose box you pull tissues from. Your husband stares at you like you're a foreigner because you never cry in public, not ever, but then you notice that all the people at the other end of the table look relieved. You can almost hear them thinking, These parents won't be any trouble, and you look at your husband and he sees it, too and he finally understands what crying is for. The social worker watches but doesn't say much and when you get back to your car your husband asks how much you had to pay for the social worker.

The ninth time you go, it's another new school and you sit on tiny chairs in a tiny room that serves as the conference room between two special ed classrooms. Your child is now enrolled in a special class for severe affective needs even though everyone agrees that your child doesn't have severe affective needs, but his behavior is a good match for the other children in the class so maybe the program will be, too. The teacher is enthusiastic. When she tells you Wow! what a great kid and these test scores are wonderful you make your lips smile. When she says Would it be okay with you if we included academic challenge in his program, you stare at her in disbelief. When she laughs and says We can do whatever makes sense for you and your child here, you wonder if this is a miracle or a new form of torture.

The tenth or maybe eleventh time you go, you stop counting. The teacher sends notes home everyday, sentence fragments that report progress or not. You read them, sign them in blue or black ink, and send them back. You suspect that parenting is an endurance contest, a contest you will probably lose. When the teacher asks your permission to put your child in a special math class for gifted children, you hesitate, remembering broken furniture and banged heads and hour-long screaming. Then you remember his discovery of multiplication when he was four, his hours playing on the computer at home, and you say yes, let's try it and the teacher says he can do this, I know it. You tap your fingers on the table top and say but what if he gets up-set in the class and the teacher says it's okay, we'll just give him a break back here if it happens and then you sign the form. The daily notes continue, with a special note on math day. Excellent progress, behavior good read the math day notes. You remember to breathe, but it's not the same as hoping for a cure.