

## Vignette

### The Cat and I

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Even now, during quiet moments, my thoughts drift back to a time of uncertainty and sadness. I can see my son, Joey, recently diagnosed with autism and a communication disorder at age five, in his little 'I'm in Kindergarten' shirt. Joey's big brown eyes look into mine with fleeting glances and an understanding shared only between a mother and child. I wrap my arms around him and rock him to soothe his sensory-charged body. His hair has a sweet baby shampoo smell as he leans toward me for a hug. I never want this moment to end...

A year went by and everything changed. I'd been the classroom mom before Joey's diagnosis; and suddenly, I was no longer included in school activities. Even the other classroom parents seemed more distant. Is it my imagination, or did the invitations to birthday parties and friends' houses decrease by half?

When Joey began elementary school, I stood at the front door of the school with tears stinging my eyes and watched him walk down the hallway looking back at me. My thoughts raced. What's going to happen to him; will he be ok?

After numerous teacher recommendations about social interaction problems, my son was evaluated and met the Federal criteria for an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to support his individual needs and improve his educational results. The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) supports placing students in the least restrictive environment possible. With his limited receptive and expressive language skills, Joey lacked the ability to understand the expectations of either his regular or special education teachers; so he was often removed from the classrooms and placed in a self-contained classroom for students with behavioral disorders. I was informed that he was failing his classes in both classrooms. My head spun; how do you fail special education? The IEP is an individualized education program to meet individual needs. Related services and supports are to be provided to help children make measurable progress toward the annual goals on the IEP. Failing was not an acceptable word in my vocabulary when it came to my son.

I discovered Joey was removed from the general and special education classrooms almost daily by a classroom teacher or aide who brought him to the car at the end of the school day. He often came home with red pressure marks on his arms and shoulders, with no explanation from the school. I was bewildered and angry. When I'd ask Joey what happened to his arm or

shoulder and rub the spots to ease his soreness, he'd sit on the couch and stare at the TV or the wall as though he had not heard a word I said. It was almost as if he had a hearing loss, his round face remaining expressionless. I tried to comfort him with hugs, although at times he flinched and moved away.

Further complicating his situation, Joey was soon diagnosed with a sensory processing disorder, a condition in which the brain has trouble receiving and responding to information coming through the senses. Consequently, Joey became overly stimulated by ordinary sounds, smells, textures, and touch. He would go into a fight or flight defense mode to escape what was causing the overload.

The next morning, I immediately addressed my concerns about the marks on Joey through the school chain of command. The school principal and his teachers would not give me a direct answer describing exactly what happened. I was told that Joey was clumsy and fell against things or that he may have been playing roughly with other boys on the playground. After I told them that most days Joey was punished and denied recess and therefore was not even on the playground, the meeting ended abruptly. My heart raced as I realized that none of my questions had been answered. I didn't go home after that meeting; instead, I found myself in a nearby park where I would bring Joey as a baby. I sat in the swing and cried for what seemed like hours.

One afternoon when I drove to school to pick Joey up, my eyes widened as I saw he was being escorted to the car by a teacher on one side and an aide on the other, each holding onto his arms. He was sweating profusely and crying. I asked what was going on. The aide said that it had been a rough day and that Joey never got settled and needed to stay in the behavior classroom. Then she walked back into the school. After getting Joey in the car, I said, "Honey, what happened today?" His expression remained blank. I changed the conversation and asked if he saw his friends and played at recess. Still, he said nothing. I leaned over and very gently put my hand on his and wiped away his tears. I was shaking so hard I could barely drive out of the school parking lot. I wondered what Joey went through each day behind closed doors, in the name of receiving a free, appropriate, public education.

As the months passed, the occurrences at school became more frequent. I requested a daily communication notebook to be shared between educators and myself through the IEP. I could tell which room he was in by who was writing in the notebook. I made copies daily of the information as notebook pages would be torn out at times. The notebook consisted of a template and told me nothing about Joey's day. This strategy was merely done to stay in compliance of the IEP. I repeatedly questioned school personnel and other staff in the building about my concerns, but to no avail. I later found out they were told not to speak to me about anything.

The only time Joey would speak was to ask if he had to go to school the next day. He grew fearful and angry and could not sleep through the night. He did not want to leave the safety of his room. Home was where he found structure and safety.

On one extremely rough morning, Joey cried that he did not feel well, and his tummy hurt. He clutched his bedroom doorknob and braced himself. He cried, "No, Momma. No," as I lifted him into the car. My heart was breaking, and I did not know what to do; but I felt that neither Joey, nor I, could take another rough day.

## Under City Lights

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I told Joey to get out of his school clothes and dress in jogging pants; we were going on an adventure. We drove to the local humane society and walked through the rooms to look at the cats and kittens. The cats were fearful of the unfamiliar people walking by their cages and hid in the corners. Joey was mesmerized by the various sizes, colors, and the cries coming from the cats, each one appearing hopeful they would be chosen to go to a new home. One gray kitten walked from the back of the cage and touched Joey's finger with his paw. After we finished our tour and knowing how much I wanted my son to learn to show and express compassion, I told him to pick a pet of his own. He was so excited that he began running (a no-no) in the shelter to find the special gray kitten who had reached out to him during our walkthrough. He took my hand and led me to the cage. I asked, "Are you choosing him?" Joey was all smiles and said, "He picked me, Momma." The newest addition to our family was named "Charcoal." However, Joey liked calling him "Marcos." Little did I know what an important role this tiny gray furball would soon play in our lives.

School continued to get worse by the day. I received additional notes from the school staff telling me how difficult my son was and that he had no friends. One school staffer told me he needed to be medicated. I cannot imagine how Joey felt as he wandered through a large building with no friends and unable to predict how his day would go. Structure is so important for children with autism spectrum disorders. Joey still would not tell me anything that was going on at school.

The one consistent joy in his life was coming home to Marcos at the end of the school day. Each afternoon he ran through the door, swooped the kitten into his arms and carried it to his room. I felt relieved to hear him talking and laughing through the walls. Marcos was Joey's confidant and friend. Marcos was even better than therapy when it came to encouraging Joey's communication skills. It was almost as if there was a new little boy trying to break out of the shell he had been trapped in. Joey's speech had developed from mostly non-verbal to speaking in complete sentences. He sometimes used words in the wrong context, but he was improving. He was communicating orally!

I was standing by Joey's bedroom door one evening and overheard him telling Marcos that there were monsters in the hallway at school, and they were bad and scared him. He told Marcos not to worry because he was safe in his room. Joey said, "It's ok, Marcos. Just don't tell Momma." Tears streamed down my face. I wanted to rush into his room and wrap him in my arms and tell him I would make sure he was never mistreated again. However, he had not shared this information with me yet, and I knew I needed to respect his space and time.

Sitting on the couch with swollen eyes, Joey asked me later if Marcos told me about the monsters at school. I said, "No, but would you tell me?" He said, "Yes, yes, they are there. I can't tell." His entire body became rigid and he began rocking back and forth and lining up his matchbox cars. When he finished, there were six little red cars perfectly parked in the middle of the living room.

I was astounded by the realization that something awful was indeed going on at school, and I needed to get to the bottom of it. Evidence-based research has shown that a child must feel safe in their environment for learning to occur. The next morning, I started knocking on doors and ringing phones to find out what was going on with my son. I started by questioning the teachers and ended with the county superintendent. I called on parents of students in the classroom and even talked with the custodian. I was a mom on a mission.

Unexpected visits to the school seemed to encourage resentment from some of the staff, while others looked like they had something to say but could not. Before entering school, my son had been evaluated and met the Federal criteria for an IEP to support his individual needs and improve academic skills. IDEA supports placing students in the least restrictive environment possible. As a parent with an education background, I knew that teaching social skills in isolation was not effective. As professionals with certificates and degrees in Special Education, I'd trusted that the school would place my child in the least restrictive environment based on a continuum of services as dictated according to law and best practice. This did not happen.

I finally cornered the head of the school and insisted that I needed answers. Still I could not get a direct response. He brought up the possibility that Joey might be hallucinating about the monsters. I was stunned at this response to my concerns. If there were a possibility of a medical or mental issue developing with Joey, why it had never been brought to my attention? Not once had any of the employees or volunteers ever asked about my feelings or concerns when discussing my child. The most I ever received from my requests was the shaking of heads as I walked to my car feeling desperate for answers. This year in elementary school had been one year we would never forget.

The next morning, I called Joey's psychologist, and we were seen the same day. After assessing Joey and talking to him one-on-one, I was assured that he was not hallucinating, and his behaviors were a response to something going on in the school environment. My son stood and showed his psychologist how he had been restrained with his arms behind his back, one of the worst things to do to a child with sensory processing disorder who experiences touch aversion. On the long drive home, I tried to get Joey to talk to me, but he still would not answer and continued to gaze out the car window.

Upon arrival home, Joey spent the entire evening rocking back and forth, not saying a word. I sat on the floor beside him and looked into his eyes, trying to figure out what he was thinking. Joey's social skills at school were declining.

I prayed that I would find the help my son needed to be in a healthy school environment and be able to learn and make friends. It was time to fight for what was best for him. I began researching Carol Grey's Social Stories and I developed a social story specific to Joey about people who sometimes do things that are not right to you, but if they do, it is ok to tell your mother. Such social stories are used to develop skills so children can understand concepts that may be beyond their ability. The social story I used was of a child telling her mother things that went on when she went to school. Each day after when she got home, she and her mother would talk about all the things that happened.

I found out his teacher wasn't certified in autism. I reconvened the IEP team to demand a certified autism teacher for my son, one who would understand his disability and know how to meet his individual needs. As a result, my son gained a wonderful autism teacher, and his attitude about school began to improve. As the school year ended, Joey was no longer bracing himself inside his room. There were no more days spent in isolation, and there were no more marks on his little arms. The autism teacher taught him social skills, and Joey made a few friends.

The next few years the autism teacher stayed with Joey, and we worked together to support his needs. The biggest problems happened when the autism teacher was unable to be at work.

## Under City Lights

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Substitute teachers without a background in special education were a disaster for him. He often was denied his recess, sent to main office, and sent to what was referred to as the 'behavior classroom' which was a self-contained environment. One week he was 'punished' for speaking during quiet time and had to eat lunch with the principal in her office the entire week. I asked Joey why this happened. He thought he had been chosen so the principal would not have to eat lunch alone. He never realized he was being punished.

Middle school and high school brought different issues for Joey. During his 8th grade school year, I discovered from Joey's discussions with Marcos that he was being bullied and by which students. Joey also told the kitty that he was told not to tell me things that happened at school, or he might get in trouble. His autism teacher resolved this problem quickly.

I learned many valuable lessons that year and the years that followed. The silence and the struggle of my little boy taught me how unfair and cold life can be. But I also learned that the love and friendship of a pet could bring immense joy into the heart of a young boy. I learned that you cannot convince educators who do not believe a child's diagnosis. Some people see a disabled child as the problem instead of seeing an opportunity to enhance the child's life and teach him invaluable skills.

A missed day of school and a trip to help a homeless kitten had made our life complete. I do not believe I would have ever found out the real story about the monsters at school had it not been for that little gray kitten. I remember the first time I heard Joey tell Marcos that he loved him. One night as he was saying goodnight to Marcos he murmured, "I love you;" and then paused and continued, "You know, I'm just not like the other kids." That was a monumental milestone for a child with autism who often lacks the ability to show emotion and compassion. There is no doubt in my mind that Marcos was sent by an angel to support our journey.

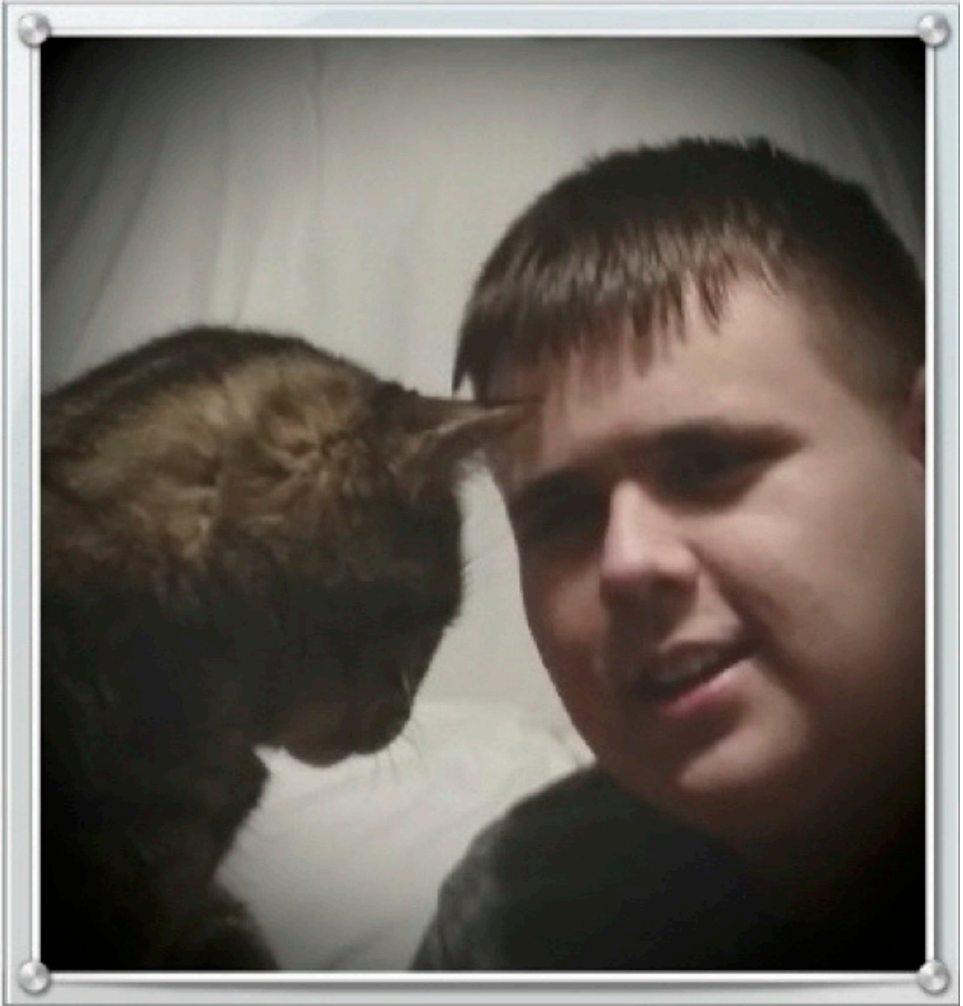
It took the love between a boy and his cat to bring this story full circle. My son still does not know how many conversations I overheard through the years. I laughed and cried with the two of them. I never stopped advocating for my son, who is now a young adult, and I never will—that is what mothers do. I even started talking to Marcos too; and when I did, I discovered that Joey was listening at the door, so I always made it a point to tell Marcos how much I love Joey.

As Joey matured, he began orally sharing more and I figured out the connection between Joey and Marcos. He saw the kitten as being much like himself—not fitting in, playing alone. A more perfect pair could not have been found. Joey once told me, "Momma, I share everything with Marcos. But he doesn't answer; he just listens and purrs."

Joey told me more times than I can count, "Don't be sad today, Momma; be sad tomorrow." That is uplifting advice because we never know if tomorrow will come. Joey's younger years were extremely rough. As I glance at my young adult son, I see a smile and a twinkle in his eyes that is larger than those early years. He has a way of making everything okay even when it is not. We all learn lessons throughout life, but one lesson I hold close to my heart is the one learned and shared between the cat and I.

### Author Note

The author is solely responsible for the contents of this vignette. The contents do not necessarily reflect the position of the organizations and communities that she serves. The author has no financial conflicts of interest.



*Photograph by the author.*