

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



MY HEAD IS TURNED INSIDE OUT

The speed-pass version of Jack's academic career includes one specialized elementary school for children with autism, two public elementary schools, one middle school, and an emergency residential placement in a psychiatric hospital. High school was rounded out by a boarding school for emotionally disturbed adolescent boys, an alternative high school in another state, and sporadic attendance at his hometown high school. Every step was a nightmare.

Jack's formal education was launched at a carefully selected preschool. We had interviewed preschools with programs for children "who learn differently," or "children who thrive in a creative environment," or finally "children seeking multicultural experiences." We finally had to admit that he wasn't potty trained, but we assured one director that he was adept at changing his own Pull-Ups and would properly dispose of them if they gave him a spot for the trash. That clinched the deal with the multicultural preschool, which charged the highest tuition.

Although the staff welcomed him with lots of attention that first day, Jack was hesitant. He was five years old, nearly a year older than children who surrounded him, but with much less of their school confidence. I sat with him most of the first week until he announced to me, somewhat forcefully, “I don’t need a babysitter, I have teachers. Go home.” I went.

Early grade teachers were kind to Jack. “His likeability factor is extraordinary,” they told us. Through a sunny disposition, a cheerful attitude toward his peers, and a complete lack of interest in school, he achieved a cloak of invisibility, wandering at his own pace with little to irritate or to challenge him. Easily bored, he often found refuge in his assigned coat cubby, crawling inside to sleep. He didn’t bother anyone if no one bothered him.

Sam and I confused the feeling of warmth extended toward our son with a conviction that he could make his way through school. Jack treasured belonging, as long as he wasn’t asked to produce anything. I began to believe that he would be all right; he was young, and we would support him as he learned in quirky, unusual ways such as saying the alphabet backward while missing three letters every time. Always P, K, and V. By kindergarten he had it down, moving forward and including all the letters. He still prefers saying these twenty-six letters backward and never regrets the absence of P, K, or V.

As more was expected of him as he moved toward first grade, we were encouraged to do schoolwork at home, trying to force Jack’s perspective away from free-floating play and provide him with some of the discipline school would require. A short attention span and limited interest in anything he couldn’t discover alone at his own pace impeded our progress. I was determined to become a source of inspiration for my educationally challenged son. We would start with a short book.

Settling him on the couch, I asked the question no one had ever gotten him to answer. “Why won’t you read the book with me?” I asked.

“My head is turned inside out, and my eyes can only see the back of my nose.” He sounded so confident, his logic flawless. By now, most children were reading short books and recognizing dozens of words. Jack’s system was different. He would pay attention the first few times he heard a new story, concentrating on the pictures. Over time, he memorized the words, and triggered by the pictures, he always knew if I took a short cut to the end, leaving anything out. But he wouldn’t learn to read.

I took personally his refusal to even look at the words on the page. I had dreamed of the intimacy I would create with my child through the world of books. I couldn’t accept that reading, so vital to my own life, was beyond my son’s interest. I knew he had the intellect. He could read road signs and anything written on the side of an eighteen-wheeler.

Despite his popularity with teachers, Jack’s life at school was a daily experience of being out of touch with the talents and growth of other students. I thought I understood the searing need of the outsider to belong. But Jack’s isolation from his peers was so much larger than anything I ever had experienced. As he rejected my best efforts to teach him to read, we opened up another way for us to be strangers. I hoped that, like me, he would find solace in faraway places, that friendship with pirates and orphans and princes would protect him from loneliness and fire his dreams. But Jack wasn’t like me.