

# My Mother Ran Away to Heaven

By Eustacia Cutler ©

It was Jaret's way of accepting her death. During the long minutes it's taken him to letter out the words, she seems almost present again, almost as if he could understand her escape if only she'd come back for a moment and explain it to him. Just sit with him long enough to see his lip tremble; the old signal they both knew meant a seizure was coming. He'd like to tell her he knows he's been trouble and is sorry for the burden he gave her, but the words keep slipping off into the dark. They're out there somewhere; he can almost touch them, but where? He grips the pencil closer to the lead and wishes the pencil would speak for him the way Jackie's art crayons speak.

Jackie is Jaret's teacher. She runs an art class for young adults with autism in a public school over where nobody wants to live. The class is the lucky winner of a small financial windfall from the city school system but the sum's too little to cover any teacher instruction on autism. Jackie has to rely on her own intuition.

"Like the day Jaret looked up from his art crayons, threw his hands up over his head and yelled 'Blah!' I copied him, word and gesture," she recalls." He saw me do it and stretched out his hand.' Hold me,' he said. I took his hand and he slid down easily into his seizure."

Is that how his mother did it? Jaret's big; he must weigh over two hundred pounds. Yet somehow he knows enough, cares enough not to fall against anyone when he goes down. It's a concern as touching and

mysterious as his uncanny sense of color when he copies the magazine photo Jackie lays out beside the art crayons.

"There isn't enough money in the fund for supplies." Jackie pays for the art crayons herself. "But I believe all artists should work with the best." Jackie's an established artist with a series of gallery showings to her credit.

Today's magazine photo is of an African mask. Jaret copies it, then colors the mask orange. He fills in the surrounding space with a dense black; so dense it leaves no crayon mark, so velvet dark no light can escape off the paper. It gives a startling set to the orange, Jackie and I note Jaret's visible joy over it. Sound and color are physical vibrations that can be mapped on a graph, but they also have an emotional impact and Jaret's tuned into it.

Jackie lays out art supplies for the three other boys, and puts on music. The boys set to work.

Gerard doesn't speak. What he takes in is hard to fathom as the careful square of blue he sketches on the white paper. Next he scratches around the blue square with a rose crayon, over and over with his ear to the paper. Does he like the crayons scratch the paper? Yes, he nods, as he listens for its whisper.

Hollis draws the same mask as Jaret, only he adds his own drawing -of the Nutty Professor. He likes the combination of the mask, the Nutty Professor, and a ghost. "The Ghost Who Ate My Shoes" is a story he and the other boys have made up together. I ask him how they told it to each others i n c e they speak so rarely.

"Nutty Professor", is all Hollis answers. Then, "Nutty Professor is a pig." He chuckles to himself as he repeats it over and over while running the crayon back and forth on the paper: "Nutty Professor is a pig." It seems to be some kind of private joke, a mantra perhaps? Later I learn he's trying to tell me about George Washington Carver, how pigs had helped Carver uproot and develop the peanut.

Eduardo draws exquisite car models, no bigger than June bugs, copied from a glossy illustration of vintage cars, but his cars never change their vintage. Eduardo's mother doesn't care what he draws she adores him anyway.

"Eduardo's father is gone; Eduardo is my little man now."

The emotional responses of the boys are like tree burls: those strange knobs that grow on tree trunks. Beautiful when cut off and Polished-- full of odd whirling lines instead of ordered tree rings but not fully integrated into the tree's meaningful growth.

As the art period continues, other teachers drop by to learn what they can about autism. They're especially fond of Jaret and speak of his sweet, eerie serenity. As if he'd come to terms with his disorder. They want to include him in some of the regular classes while there's still some time left.

Next year when Jaret hits twenty-one, the state will terminate his school attendance and, in all likelihood, turn him over to an institution. From then on he'll spend his days sitting in front of a TV set with no one to tell him why Jackie, too, has run away to heaven.

These days when I find myself on the podium of an autism conference looking out over a sea of intelligent, comfortably-off faces, I think of Jackie's class. Nobody ever said autism was easy, but every mother I see out there looks capable of figuring out her child's destiny while he's still young enough to benefit from the early help that might have saved Jaret. And if the mothers lack funds of their own, chances are they've long since learned how to apply for financial aid in the educated language of P.T.A. entitlement. It's ironic that when autism first surfaced in the forties and fifties, psychiatrists proclaimed it a disorder of the educated affluent. Apparently it hadn't occurred to the good doctors that only the educated understood the benefit of their work and only the affluent could pay for it. Today we're still reluctant to address the role of money and class in any form of education, let alone autism, but since we've witnessed the bloated dead of Hurricane Katrina, the plight of the poor isn't quite so easy to write off.

That includes New York, our Statue of Liberty port where immigrants still arrive with nothing but innocent hope for a better future and an old-world point of view that may hold them back. Where they still huddle in ethnic pockets, those tight little kingdoms of language, faith, and custom. Where children still speak no English till they're old enough to go to school. The smart ones pick up American ways and melt into the melting pot, but what of those who aren't so smart, or bold, or resourceful, or whatever it takes to make your way in this country?

I think of Jaret's mother. Did she understand what was wrong? And if so, did any doctor pay attention to what she said? Jaret's African-

American. What about Eduardo's mother, probably stitching away in an illegal sweatshop in Queens? Latino women are good at sewing. Did she once harbor a wistful dream that when Eduardo was big enough for school, the school would make everything all right? Or has she long since lost heart, crushed by the old world stigma that drove out her husband?

I think of the bitter words of a young Asperger adult who cuts hair in an Arizona barrio.

"Of course there's autism in the barrio, but nobody cares. These people are expected to fail and become the servants of the middle class." In New York that's the vast army of trash haulers, grocery deliverers, and pizza takeout boys.

When people ask me what mattered most raising Temple, I say "money." Not that money alone was the solution, but whatever Temple needed I had the money for it: doctors, early home therapy, speech coaching, private camp for special children, private country day school, special high school and so on. To add to it, she grew up in a comfortable, educated community where kindly neighbors took her foibles into account and saw to it she was included.

The question never leaves me: who would Temple be today had she not been raised among the privileged?