

CHAPTER ONE

My son's first birthday party took place on a Saturday. It was going to be an extravagant event, at least for us. On my husband's side of the family, there hadn't been a little one around in over a decade. On my side, my nephew was two years older than our son but we still decided to treat this party as one of the most significant events of our married lives.

Being very organized and detail-oriented, I was in charge. We had been in our cool new house for little over a month and I was very excited for my first entertaining opportunity. I had worked frantically to put the house together and make the perfect party. I was determined to make this party a success.

Because the month of February is so unpredictable weather-wise in Southern California, we decided to have an indoor party. We planned on eating inside and didn't bother renting one of those popular bouncers or some other kind of outdoor, kid party entertainment. The only "real" kids in attendance would be a friend's two year old, my three year old nephew, and our one year old. Three kids did not justify the renting of a bouncy in my opinion.

That morning, my house was spotless and I had removed anything I thought would be in the way of the guests. For example, being a note-taker, I typically had notes or lists or projects laid out on the corner of my kitchen counter. Funny how that spot in my kitchen would end up as the exact spot where one of our guests would say something that would change our lives forever.

Hours later, the party was over and it went off without a hitch. There was too

much food, an endless variety of drink options, and plenty (too many) gifts for the birthday boy. Joshua was allowed the first piece of cake (a baseball cake for a baseball-loving family) which he immediately smashed all over his face, frosting everywhere. I assumed he managed to consume some of the cake, at least.

Everyone went home full of food and merriment.

Clean-up for me was just as important as the set-up. This was my new home, after all. I needed to top off this magnificent day by putting my new house back together again.

By six o'clock that evening, I was still full of food, having managed to eat steadily throughout the day (including a large portion of my favorite cake), my house was clean and put back together, and I was tired.

My little guy had managed to get a nap that day. In the late afternoon, he was entertaining himself with one of his new toys. I joined Josh for a bit of Mommy time.

At bedtime, I took him upstairs, changed him, then settled him down with his breast of choice. After he was full of breast milk and finally sleepy, I put him to bed.

During most of the post-party time, my husband was apparently busy on the computer. I hadn't really noticed yet I found out why after I came downstairs.

I remembered the conversation yet I do not recall having any *understanding* of what Richard had told me. He could have begun the conversation talking to me in French (I don't know a word of French) and the evening would have ended just as confusing for me.

Realizing Josh was in bed, Richard left his computer when I entered the room. In English, he said, "Dale said something weird to me at the party." Dale was a softball player on Richard's team. "It really scared me."

Dale shifted and then continued, “Dale was standing in the kitchen watching Josh. Josh was sitting on the family room floor staring at the ceiling fan. Dale said Josh was watching the ceiling fan go around and around and around.”

Richard pointed to the spot where Dale was standing, my kitchen counter spot where I kept my note-taking stuff (my notes were now back where they belonged).

He then pointed to our ceiling fan, the one in the family room. Since I had seen Josh stare at the ceiling fan before, this news hadn’t phased me.

It was what Dale said next that had spooked Richard.

First, here’s some background information:

Dale’s wife, Abby, had a PhD in Autism and behavioral studies. My first memory of Abby was meeting her at a softball game just after Dale had joined Richard’s team. I remembered her telling me what she did for a living. She had mentioned this word, “autism.” I specifically remembered the word during our conversation but I also recalled having no clue what Abby was talking about.

Abby talked fast. She always reminded me of my New York friends, even though she was born in Southern California. During this first conversation, I had nodded and acted curious about her occupation, but I still couldn’t comprehend what this odd job was all about. What was “autism?” She used such bizarre terms to describe what she did. What with the unfamiliar lingo and the 60 words a second pace, I was lost.

Today, while Dale watched Josh stare at our ceiling fan, my husband had joined him. Dale had turned to Richard and said, “Because she works with autistic kids, Abby’s friends sometimes kid her about James (their two year old). One time James was watching a ceiling fan just like Josh

and one of them said to her, 'Hey, Abby, does your kid have autism?'

That was it. That was the comment which scared Richard, sent him scurrying to our computer the moment he got a chance. That comment was all it took for a bell, or rather a loud, vicious-sounding alarm, to ring inside my husband. That one comment lead him to Google this word "autism" for two hours.

During his Internet search, Richard eventually found a list, one which scared the hell out of him even more. He now repeated the list to me. "Stares at ceiling fans, no eye contact, spin things, lines things up, acts like he doesn't hear you, can sit for long periods of time all by himself."

I was suddenly no longer in French class, I was lost in another dimension.

And my internal alarm also went off. Too many items on that list pertained to Josh. I knew it instantly why Richard was frightened and I quickly inherited his fear.

For the next hour or so, we looked at websites while making ourselves crazier by the minute. We didn't know why, but we knew something was going on here. We finally had to stop looking at the Internet, neither of us could take anymore.

What did it all mean?

I called Abby that night and left a detailed message. "Dale made this comment about autism," I said, "and we're confused as to why Dale would say our son has autism. Call us back immediately!"

She didn't call back that night.

For the entire night, all we did was absorb the worst parts of that list, as well as other Internet information we found. We made ourselves crazier by the minute. We barely slept.

What kept my husband awake was a tidbit he read about children with autism never learning to hug their parents. What kept me awake was fear, fear of the unknown.

I was afraid because by now I had recalled that “autism” word Abby had mentioned the first time we met. It was the very same word I had dismissed as “I don’t have a clue what this fast-talking woman is talking about. It doesn’t concern me anyway.”

I laid awake that night because my fear led me to wanting to know more about that funny-sounding word. I wanted information and I wanted it immediately. Mostly, I wanted to be told that none of what Dale had said applied to our gorgeous son. Josh was known as “the Gerber baby” after all. How could a Gerber baby have autism?

As my sleepless night progressed, my need for information segued into a need to understand what this meant to our lives and to the life of our son. Worst case scenarios kept flashing through my head. If I were to sleep at all that night, I would have to find a way to relieve some of those fears. But it never happened.

It was a long night for both of us. We were so scared, Richard and I spoke only briefly before going to bed. Throughout the night, even though we were both still awake, we never once woke each other up to talk. The lack of material, the lack of information, and our common fear caused us both to become mute. Our baby was only twelve months old and he was perfect.

Suddenly, on his first birthday, we were in the dark and frightened.

The next morning, Abby called back. Immediately, she confirmed what Dale had said to Richard (Dale had told her). She then added that Dale didn’t really understand the specifics about autism. And, she added, “Dale was just making a joke. He was not and could not make a diagnosis.”

Unfortunately, that was not the end of the conversation. Far from it. Abby went on to tell

me she had been considering how to approach us with some of her very real concerns. Autism-related concerns.

There it was, I was now officially frightened. It was no longer something I had made up in my head which kept me awake. This expert had concerns about our baby and she wanted to discuss them with us. This day started out worse than the previous day had ended.

Abby tried to calm me down. First, she begged us to stop looking at the Internet. She explained, even though the Internet provided wonderful source material, we had inadvertently scared ourselves. “Josh might just have developmental delays,” she said. “He’s really young. There’s no way I could say he has autism. That’s how young he is.”

We ended our talk with a compromise. We would inquire about getting Josh an evaluation and I would call her anytime with questions I may have.

After my conversation with Abby, I still felt confused and lost. I tried my best to act like this was a typical Sunday, but every time I looked at Josh, I knew it wasn’t. My lack of sleep reminded me that something was off in the world of Gerber babies. My Gerber baby.

Also, I suddenly had to reorder my fears. By Josh’s age, I had already compiled many fears—all in my head—that pertained to this little guy; my pregnancy, my C-section delivery, Josh’s mild jaundice, our early breast-feeding issues, and basically being internally concerned about every rash, cough, burp (or lack thereof), red eyes, scratch on his face because I didn’t clip his nails soon enough, why he spit up this morning and not yesterday morning, and many, many more (mostly irrational) fears. They were typical new mom fears but they were mine and made me feel like a mom. With that “old” list, I was vigilant about being on top of all those little things that crept into Josh’s life.

I was hoping like hell (like every mom in the world) that those “little things” were the only

ones I'd ever have to deal with. I was determined to become proficient at the minor issues while assuming that any major issues were not going to affect my child. Gerber babies did not have major issues, in my head at least.

Here was a potential major issue. Worse, it was completely foreign to was to me. And looking up the word "autism" only added to my confusion. We didn't find a cure-all on the Internet, nor did Abby provide us with one the next day. All she said to us was, "Consider getting Josh evaluated soon."

And I didn't even know what "evaluated" meant.

Autism was this major affliction that snuck up on us. One day we had a baby that ate well, slept well, and was described more often than not (and not only by me) as beautiful. A Gerber baby. He was perfect. A quiet child, too. The next day I was suddenly on the path to discover why he was sometimes so quiet and what I needed to do to help him.