

SEE STAFF

by

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Kim got out of her car and scurried through the parking lot, her heels clicking, to get in the door of her son's school before the driver of the minivan she nearly cut off could park and get out. Inside, she went to the room that housed the school-aged after-care program, or SACC, and looked through the crowd of kids for Jayson. Her mocha-colored son was usually easy to spot among the pale sea of Codys and Kaylas.

Kim spotted Jayson sitting, arms folded, with a deep scowl. He kicked the side of a bookshelf next to a young SACC teacher who ignored him except to stop his feet from kicking her as she played a game with a group of girls, who eyed him warily. Kim scanned the sign-in/out sheet and wasn't surprised to see the dreaded message, "See Staff," next to Jayson's name. Her chest tightened and her watch suddenly felt too small on her wrist. They needed to be on the road in five minutes if they were going to make their group therapy session on time.

"Hi, Mrs. Kenley." It was Jill, the staffer who was in charge. She looked to be in her early thirties, closer to Kim's age than most of the others, who seemed to be fresh out of college—at least Kim hoped they'd gone to college.

"Hi, what's happening?" Kim said. She'd found that question to be the least confrontational. "What's the problem?" or even "Is there a problem?" appeared to put the staff on the polite defensive, leaving Kim in a position to have to backtrack, which was just more time and energy than she had to spend on a group day.

"Well, he's fine." They always started off by telling her that.

"We had a shutdown today," Jill said. "Jayson wasn't done with the circles he was cutting out for his Olympic flag when it was time to go to the gym." Miss Jill pointed over at a bulletin board where several construction paper renditions of the Olympic flag were displayed.

"He got a little upset when Mr. Kenny said it was time to clean up, and he threw his crayons and scissors on the floor. He wouldn't pick them up when Mr. Kenny asked him to, and then he stopped talking to everyone. So he had to stay back in here with Miss Cara, and so far, no one's been able to get through to him."

“Did they avoid having the kids try to cheer him up? We talked about that earlier with these situations,” Kim said.

Miss Jill nodded. “Of course. We remembered about how the attention just feeds into it.”

Kim looked over and watched as Jayson wrenched away from another little boy in that Kim recognized from Jayson’s first grade class. The boy held out a toy robot. Miss Cara accepted the robot and tried to place it on Jayson’s lap, but Jayson shifted his leg so that the robot fell to the floor. Kim’s cheeks began to heat up when she saw that Miss Jill had caught that exchange as well.

“How about the feelings journal he worked on with his teacher? We brought a copy down here. Did someone have him look at that? He’s supposed to find the feeling he’s having in there.”

Miss Jill looked over at her desk, then at the corner where Jayson was sitting. “I’m not sure. It’s just hard sometimes with so many kids, and we’re just not trained specifically for special needs kids.”

“I understand that,” Kim snapped, then paused. She knew she was being rude, but she could not face Jill’s ‘we don’t have the training’ speech today. “Ms. Turner designed the book so that Jayson could look at it and do the work himself. He needs to know that it’s *his* job to make you understand where he’s coming from.”

“Whew! That’s a big job for anyone, isn’t it?” Miss Jill said with a little laugh.

Kim was confused with this abrupt change. Was this sympathy for Jayson or a shot at their methods?

“Well, just keep us posted on how the group is doing,” said Miss Jill.

“Of course, well, I’ll try to figure out what set this one off and get him in a better mood for tomorrow. Did anything else happen?”

Miss Jill smiled and shook her head. “No, that was really it; he was having a good day up until that. We like having him here.”

The teachers always told Kim that too.

Kim smiled at Miss Jill and walked over to Jayson and Miss Cara. She raised an eyebrow at Jayson, who jerked his head down and covered his face with his hands. “I hear we’ve had some trouble today.”

“Ohhh, we’re not feeling social right now,” Miss Cara said.

“Let’s go, Jayson.” Kim took her son’s hand and drew him from the chair. “Pick that up,” she said, pointing to the robot, which was still on the floor. Jayson shook his head. Kim felt herself tensing up.

She attempted the light voice she’d heard Jayson’s special education teachers use. “All right, Jay-Jay, let’s give the robot back to Miss Cara; c’mon, it’s time to go play with Aiden.”

Jayson shook his head again. Miss Cara, with half her attention on other students and half on Jayson and Kim, smiled in sympathy but did not say anything.

“Jayson,” said Kim, reverting back to stern, “pick up the robot. I know you put it on the floor.” Without waiting for an answer, Kim bent down with Jayson’s hand and put it on the toy.

“Stop it!” wailed Jayson, who had miraculously recovered his powers of speech in time to cause a scene. The girls Miss Cara was playing with paused in their game to watch.

“Then pick it up,” Kim hissed.

“No!”

“Pick it up!” Kim could tell their voices were beginning to rise above the general din of the SACC room. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Miss Cara look past them. Kim assumed the girl was getting some nonverbal instruction from someone behind her, and her cheeks flamed again. She lowered her volume, but not her intensity.

“*Now*,” Kim said, summoning the lowest part of her register for her sternest parent voice. Her mother had had a deadly serious parent voice that rose barely above a whisper and made Kim and her sisters stop cold in their tracks. That was Kim’s goal—but so far she did not seem to be able to produce the same effect.

Jayson grasped the robot and slammed it on the seat of the chair where he had been sitting. He tore his wrist from Kim’s grasp.

“That is not where it belongs, and you know not to slam toys like that!” snapped Kim.

Jayson put his hands up over his face.

Miss Cara slid over and picked up the toy. With a look at Kim, she said, "All right, Jayson, tomorrow you're going to help clean up, okay? I know it's been kind of hard today."

Kim swallowed and said, "Thank you, Miss Cara, we'll be in a better mood tomorrow."

"Of course!" the young woman answered brightly.

Kim took Jayson by the wrist and led him to the area where the kids kept their belongings. She checked her watch and realized that along with enduring the embarrassment of being handled by a woman who was probably about twenty-two years old, she would now have to be the late mom at Jayson's social skills group, rushing in and apologizing to the others.

As Kim jammed Jayson's lunch bag and art project into his backpack, a little voice behind her said, "I tried to see if he wanted to play and not be sad..." then trailed off.

Kim turned. It was the child who had offered the toy robot. Kim recognized him now; he was the one kid Jayson had described as his friend.

"I'm sorry, Ryan; Jayson will be ready to play tomorrow, okay?" Kim said to him.

"Maybe tomorrow," said Ryan, "bye, Jayson."

Jayson deliberately turned away from him.

"Thank you, Ryan, you're a good friend." Kim patted Ryan's arm.

"Yeah." Ryan scampered off without any more attempts to engage Jayson. Kim watched him go wistfully. She was always grateful for how quickly the other boy seemed to get over Jayson's snubs and seek him out to play again. She wondered how long it would last until kids like Ryan gave up and what they would do then.

When they finally got out into the hallway, Kim let go of her son. She never liked to be in physical contact with him when he'd made her angry. She focused on the sound her heels made on the school's polished linoleum and listened for the scuffling of Jayson's sneakers behind her. By the time they reached the exit, she was able to resist slamming the door open.

The doctor that lead the social skills group often told Kim to try to resist calling attention to the disruptive mood and ignore any non self-destructive

behavior. Kim sighed, realized that she had messed up again. She completely mishandled the robot incident, by getting frustrated and trying to control the situation—running after the same pipe dream of commanding the respect her mother seemed to get with one look back in the '70s. Kim wasn't her mother, and this wasn't the '70s. The women in this neighborhood thought raised voices were child abuse; Kim knew she probably had Miss Cara and Miss Jill back there contemplating whether or not to call Child Protective Services.

Kim got in the car and leaned back in the seat as Jayson climbed in and put on his seat belt. She looked in the little mirror installed above the rearview that allowed a full shot of the backseat. Jayson was leaning against the window, his head resting on one hand. Kim immediately felt sorry for him.

She put on her own seat belt and checked her watch again. They were definitely late.

Kim knew that the right thing to do was to call Bea, the other mother in the group Kim had gotten to know. But she hesitated. Bea seemed perfectly nice, but Kim still wasn't sure how to approach this white stay-at-home mother who was always there on time, sitting patiently in the waiting room with a big bag of books and kids snacks, taking calls from a husband who apparently couldn't make a move if she wasn't in the house. But still, they had exchanged phone numbers for exactly this kind of situation.

While she listened to Bea's phone ring, Kim saw Jayson pick up a book from the small plastic catch-all bin she put in the backseat for his books and toys.

"*This Way Myrtle* by Laura Snell, pictures by Robert Vee," he read from the title page of the top book.

"Mommy, Myrtle the turtle is lost, but they find her," Jayson said, as if he hadn't just reported this fact, in those exact words, on the way to the school that morning.

"Yeah, they sure do. Do you remember how?"

"She was lost," said Jayson.

"Riiight, but do you remember how she gets found?" Kim said patiently as she prayed Bea didn't pick up so she could get away with leaving a message.

No such luck. "Hi, Kim!"

"Hi, Bea. Listen, can you let Jeannie know we're coming? We're just now leaving the school. Bad pickup," lowered her voice on the last part as Jayson

continued reading aloud.

“Uh oh,” Bea said, “don’t you just love those days? Our school director gets all folksy on you, like hey, ‘Can I chat at ’cha?’ I know what she’s doing, but it still sucks.”

Kim had planned to make the call short, but instead surprised herself by saying, “Yeah, I guess there’s no good way to tell somebody their autistic child is acting up in your classroom, huh?”

“Tell me about it. Aiden threw a toy train smack into a whiteboard last week when I was in there for snack volunteers. I was seriously contemplating making a run for it.”

Kim laughed. “*Aiden?*”

“Yeah, it’s his latest thing, lashing out when people don’t understand what he’s saying.”

“Well, I don’t blame poor Aiden. There are plenty of people who don’t understand me that I feel like throwing things at,” said Kim.

“We should swap pickups so we could deal with the opposite problem for a change,” said Bea.

Kim sighed. “Yeah, I’m sure not doing my pickups right.”

“Well, I hear Jayson talking in the background,” said Bea gently, “so that’s something. When we started, if he’d had a bad pickup, he’d be unresponsive until about the midway point of the session, right? This is good.”

Kim hadn’t realized that. “Yeah...I guess you’re right.”

“Mommy! Myrtle gets to ride in the basket of the girl’s bike!” Jayson said from the backseat.

“Oh, is that how she gets home?” Kim said.

“We’ll see!” said Jayson, which was what Kim usually told him when he asked her questions about a book. Kim smiled.

To Bea she said, “Well, at least we can enjoy the same book for days on end. It’s new every time!”

Bea laughed. “Think of the money we’re saving. I have to go toy and book shopping about once a year; you just keep rotating the stuff you have! So God

gave us some advantages to this whole special needs thing, right?”

“Exactly,” Kim said. With the promise that they were only minutes away, Kim ended her call. Jayson had paused in the story of Myrtle.

“Mommy? Circles are round, not oval.”

“That’s true,” Kim said absently. She was used to abrupt changes in subject.

“So that’s why I couldn’t put them on my flag. We were making circles, and circles are not ovals.”

Kim’s mental antennae went up. “You mean on the Olympic flag?” she asked carefully.

“Yeah. The white flags have circles, one is red and one is green and one is blue and there are two other colors.”

“Right. Well, how about next time you just ask them to stay and finish if you don’t like your circles?”

“Yeah...” After a beat he whispered, “and pick up the robots.”

“Riiight,” said Kim, wishing there was room to dance around in the front seat of her car.

Soon they pulled into the parking lot of the office park where the group met.

“Ready to go play with Aiden?”

“Oh, wait.” Jayson looked down at his lap. Myrtle had not quite gotten home yet. Kim figured it wouldn’t hurt to let him finish, at least where they were going, people understood that it was just easier to let the child finish what he was doing and get to group in a good mood.

“The next time the family went out, everyone said, ‘Go this way, Myrtle!’ and she did.” Jayson said. He finished the story the way he ended all of his books, by holding it up over his head and clapping it shut with both hands.

“The end,” they said together.