

# Prologue

Today's game was unlike the rest, so it killed me to be late. I had spent all morning catching up on yesterday's remaining errands, and I was missing the start. Rushing down the gravel path, I was surprised to find the parking lot full. I had expected a much smaller turnout. I found that the only spot remaining was in the far corner next to the dumpster. Begrudgingly, I parked my car beside a weekend's worth of half-eaten hot dogs and empty Gatorade bottles. It wasn't the best, but it would do. I grabbed my chair from the trunk and headed for the field. A blanket of blue hovered overhead, and the temperature had topped out at a glorious seventy-eight degrees. It was a perfect Sunday afternoon for baseball.

As I approached the field, I could see that my options for a viewing spot were limited. I had my chair, so it didn't matter that the stands were filled. Though given the number of parents crowding the fence, it seemed unlikely I would find a spot to set up. There was barely enough room to slip myself in, let alone a chair.

Scanning the field, I found one small opening near third base and made my way through the cluster of parents, none of whom I recognized. I propped the now useless chair against a nearby trash can and wedged in close to the fence. Jack was already there, having come

with his father. He wasn't taking his usual position today, so it took me several moments, but I finally found my son standing across the field at first base next to a dark-haired boy who looked to be about eight or nine years old.

Chaos surrounded them.

The field was cluttered with boys and girls of all ages. Mixed among them were the familiar faces of boys that Jack played with regularly, most of whom were chatting and laughing with one another.

A father was playing the role of pitcher, though he stood just six feet away from home plate. Softly he tossed a plastic ball to the batter, a small girl in a bright pink dress. "That's an odd choice of attire for a baseball game," I mumbled, reminding myself though that this wasn't your average game.

She took a determined swing at the ball, missed, and nearly toppled over, but it didn't stop her from jumping back over the plate. She readied herself for the second ball, and this time sent it rolling across the grass. As shouts of encouragement rang out, pure enthusiasm twirled off her. In her excitement, she was oblivious to the parents urging her to run to first base. The volunteer at her side gently took her hand and led her down the baseline, and as she bounced along, I saw Jack bend down to say something to the boy next to him. The boy gently rocked back and forth and shook his head as if to say yes but didn't move. Jack wrapped his arm awkwardly around the boy's shoulder and guided him to second base.

There were already two other children there. One was lying in the grass, kicking his sneakered feet in the air; the other was fiddling with the buttons on his shirt. A boy who looked to be nearly an adult wandered back and forth between second and third base, patting his head and muttering, while a redheaded girl in a wheelchair waited patiently at third for someone to push her home. I watched it all unfold with astonishment.

The day's game had been organized by our local little league in an effort to make baseball accessible to children with disabilities. Regardless of age, sex, or disability, each child was paired with a teenage volunteer to help guide them. When I first heard the idea, it made perfect sense, though given Jack's own disability, I wasn't quite sure how he would fare in this volunteer role. Even though he was fourteen, having Asperger syndrome meant he was easily frustrated and bored. I didn't know if he would make it through the game without losing interest or if he would understand how to guide his young buddy. I questioned if he would even talk to him.

The game went on for the better part of an hour, and there didn't appear to be any rules. Everyone was given the opportunity to circle the field and score a run, whether they hit the ball or not. As each one crossed home plate to the waiting praise of supportive parents and grandparents, I was overwhelmed. So many children—so much worse off than Jack—and all of them right in our backyard. In this context, Jack's disability seemed like barely more than a scraped knee.

There were several moments when I found myself wanting to motion to him, to get his attention and urge him to interact with the little boy next to him. If nothing else, I wanted him to laugh and joke with his teammates volunteering alongside of him. I wanted desperately for him to connect and engage more fully, or to at least look like he wasn't bored out of his mind, but I had been making more of an effort recently to take my hands off the wheel. I let go of my expectations and breathed a sigh of relief once the game was over.

As Jack, his father, and I headed out into the parking lot, I heard a woman's voice calling us. "Excuse me," she repeated as she grew closer, and I turned to see that it was the mother of the young boy with whom Jack had been paired.

“I just wanted to thank you,” she said, catching her breath, “for giving up your Sunday afternoon for this.” Turning toward Jack, she went on. “I really appreciate you being so nice to my son.”

I thought that Jack really hadn’t done all that much. But the simple fact that he was here and had interacted with this complete stranger, and that he had made it through the entire game without losing his patience or having a meltdown was a significant accomplishment. He had done quite a bit without anyone even being aware of it.

“You’re welcome,” Jack replied, glancing at her just briefly before looking away. He barely acknowledged her further as she went on to tell us how difficult it was for their family, dealing with her son’s autism—and how lucky we were. He shuffled from one foot to the other and rubbed his eye in agitation before cutting her off midsentence.

“Can we go, Mom?” he asked and turned abruptly toward the car.

The woman was taken aback.

I had to hand it to my ex-husband. He didn’t miss a beat and handled the situation perfectly. He was very gracious in telling the boy’s mother that we appreciated her gratitude, going on to delicately point out that she was the lucky one. Her son’s disability was obvious, and because of that, people were likely to be very understanding and tolerant. He explained that Jack, too, has a disability, but it’s one that few people can see. On the surface, he appears normal, and when he acts otherwise, which is most of the time, people see him as being rude and assume he’s poorly disciplined.

Her expression changed to one of apology, and suddenly my heart was as blue as the sky. Blue for this mother and her son—and blue for Jack. He could be counted among this group of kids. And yet he couldn’t. He attended a regular school, took regular classes, played

on regular sports teams; he did many of the things you would expect a regular teenager to do.

On which side of the fence did he fall? On some difficult, unpredictable-version-of-normal side—or the truly disabled side?

It's a question I've asked myself countless times.