

Love Lessons
Laura Shumaker

It was February 16th; two days after the Valentine's Day storm paralyzed the Northeast. I had just finished my continental breakfast—a rubbery muffin and weak coffee—at a mediocre hotel near the Philadelphia Airport. My flight from Oakland had arrived late the night before, following hours of delays, and I was tired and jittery. I was on my way to pick up my twenty year-old son, Matthew, who is autistic, at his special school in rural Pennsylvania. He had been begging me to take him to Washington D.C. since he'd enrolled at the school three years before, and I thought it would be fun to go over the President's Day weekend break.

When the storm hit I almost backed out, but maternal love and guilt pushed me forward. Sending Matthew to a residential school was the last thing that my husband and I thought we would ever do. But it was absolutely necessary.

Matthew always wanted to be something he can't be: a regular guy like his two younger brothers. In fact, Matthew didn't just want to be a regular guy, but *the* guy—the poisonous plant and weed expert, and the lawn care authority of our northern California community. He would often be seen at our local hardware store with his large hands wrapped around a bottle of weed killer, studying the label intently. My socially awkward son would approach strangers with warnings about deadly nightshade, oleander and water hemlock. Some would snicker and walk away.

Just a few days into his 16th year, Matthew decided that he should drive a car like a regular guy, and drove my car through a wall in our garage. There were other close calls. During his freshman year at high school, he observed a guy pushing his girlfriend flirtatiously and then tapping her on the head. When Matthew tried the same move with too much force, I was summoned to his school to find him crying in the principal's office. "Joe did it to Sue, and she liked it!"

Just when we thought things were calming down following that incident, a letter arrived from an attorney asking us to contact him about a bicycle accident involving Matthew. Matthew had collided with a young boy on his bike the month before.

"Matthew," I asked him, "what's this about a bike accident?"

"Who told you?"

"Someone sent me a letter. Was the boy you bumped into hurt?"

"Pretty much"

Dear God.

"Was he bleeding?"

"Probably. Am I in trouble?"

It became clear that Matthew was no longer safe in the community where he had grown up, and his impulsive actions were putting others in peril. He needed more supervision, more than we or the local school could provide. So we searched for the ideal facility for him, and found this one in Pennsylvania.

My other son's words played in my head as I approached Matthew's home. "Matthew would be really good looking if he wasn't autistic." As unkind as it sounded, it was true, and still is. Matthew is very handsome, with a tall and solid frame, broad shoulders, and sandy blonde hair. His eyebrows arch dramatically to frame his brown eyes, and his jaw is square and masculine. But his exaggerated expressions and awkward body carriage make him stand out in a crowd. His forehead twists with intensity, he smiles too suddenly and his hungry-for-friendship gaze is desperate. And he insists on trimming his own bangs, with unfortunate results.

When I arrived at the home, Matthew was waiting on the porch. He smiled widely as I pulled into the snowy driveway of the house he shared with two other students and his house parents, Dawn and Lazlo. That old familiar lump made its way back to my throat. It was clear that he had just cut his bangs again, another botched job. He was wearing jeans, black snow boots and a thin t-shirt, even though it was only 28 degrees. He was blowing the snow with the leaf blower that I'd given him for Christmas.

“He’s been so excited about this trip,” Dawn said as she loaded Matthew’s bag in the car. Matthew had been unusually aggressive about making contact with “hot” girls when his school group went on outings, using suave pickup lines such as “Can I touch your hair?” and, “When was the last time you had a seizure?” When counselors from the school tried to offer suggestions of more appropriate exchanges, Matthew yelled, “Stay out of my business!” The pretty girls had scattered, rolling their eyes, and leaving Matthew angry and inconsolable. I applauded anyone who tried to crack Matthew’s socially awkward behavior, but I was losing hope that Matthew would ever be able to enjoy the relationship that he craved.

The drive from Pennsylvania to Washington was stressful as I swerved to avoid shards of ice, remnants of the storm, that flew off cars, trucks and tree limbs. Matthew seemed oblivious to my angst, and played Beatles music loudly, replaying the first thirty seconds of *Octopus’s Garden* over and over each time we entered a new state. By the time we got to D.C. I was ragged and hungry. While I was thrilled to see the Washington Monument, the White House and the Jefferson Memorial for the first time, I worried that it was all too much for Matthew, who was smiling but flapping his hands and rocking double time. We found a pizza place (Matthew’s first meal while traveling must be pizza) and Matthew settled down after eating his cheese pizza “with nineteen French fries on the side” before heading back to our hotel for the night.

During breakfast at our hotel the next morning, I bit my lip as Matthew leered awkwardly at our attractive young waitress while ordering three Belgian Waffles and a side order of sausage. “First time in D.C.?” she asked, “You have *got* to go to the Botanical Gardens! Look,” she said, pointing at our map, “It’s just about six blocks away, right next to the Capitol.”

“I’m smart about gardens, I tell you,” Matthew said earnestly, trying to impress, “and you should stay away from oleanders. They’re poisonous.” The waitress rushed away, stifling laughter, leaving me with the heavy feeling in my chest that mothers get when people laugh at their children.

I panicked when I first saw the enormous glass conservatory that housed the botanical gardens and the swarm of people streaming in. Clearly, this was a popular week for middle school tour groups in Washington. A pack of girls in their early teens was bunched in front of us, giggling uncontrollably.

“Those girls are hot!” Matthew said loudly enough to elicit wary looks from the chaperones. “They’re too young to be hot,” I shot back nervously as Matthew pushed towards the entrance. “Stay away from them or you’ll get in trouble.”

“Let me go in first,” Matthew said, still eyeing the young teens. “I don’t want people to think I came here with my mother.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “But Matthew, this is Washington D.C.” I pointed at the pair of armed security guards at the entrance. “It’s important that we stay together and use our best manners. Do you understand?”

“If I don’t use my manners, will they think I’m a bad guy?” Matthew asked, raising his brows slyly.

“They might. You’re a big guy, you know how to behave.”

I tried to suppress the sinking feeling that I’d already lost control of the day, that this entire trip had been a bad idea, that the reward for my sacrifice would be heartache for me and frustration for Matthew. It had been easy to fantasize about this trip from California, where the magnificence of Washington was uncluttered by snow, crowds, and hot middle school girls. But here we were, at the entrance of the Botanical Gardens. I had to try to make our day a successful one.

Matthew followed the group of young middle-schoolers past the security guards, darting through a series of automatic sliding doors that separated the collections of plants. He was working so hard to distance himself from me that he looked suspicious, and I looked like an undercover agent tracking him. This was not a good place to be running after an oddly behaving son, and I caught Matthew by the arm just as a security guard started marching toward us.

“Is everything all right here?” he demanded. “My mother keeps following me,” wailed Matthew, “I need some space. I want to be independent!”

“Of course you do,” said the guard, glancing at the hacked bangs that explained all. “But you need to stay together while you’re in this building.”

Gripped by his desire to connect with pretty girls, Matthew took off again once the guard turned his back, and I followed until he raced through the exit and turned to me, stomping his foot. “Stop stalking me!” he yelled, echoing the words he’d heard directed toward him so many times before. I felt like the young mother whose child was having a meltdown at the grocery store—if only I could just pick Matthew up and disappear into my minivan. Instead, I had to remain calm.

“I have a great idea,” I said, “Let’s drive to Virginia! You’ve never been there before.”

“Or we could go there first,” Matthew said, pointing to the Capitol Building. There was a line curving around the imposing marble steps, also protected by armed security guards. I took a breath. “Can you promise to stay with me and walk slowly,” I implored, “and will you remember that this is the most important place *in the world* to follow the rules?”

Fortunately, the line that led to the entrance of the Capitol was moving quickly. It wasn’t until we got to the security checkpoint that I learned we were in the line for the gallery that overlooked the Senate floor. There was a special Saturday session debating the Iraq war. Matthew and I were led into the second of three rows that overlooked the Senate floor, where John Warner was speaking. No walls, no bulletproof glass...just open air and the Senate floor right before us. A camera crew was taping the proceedings for CSPAN. Then I noticed five very good looking college-age girls seated in the row behind us.

God help me...

The hot flashes I’d experienced before were nothing compared to the *whoosh* of heat that rushed through me now. Matthew promptly got down to business, leaning back and flirting loudly and awkwardly with the co-ed behind him. She shook her head and motioned for him to turn around, which he did with a sly smirk.

“Talking is not allowed here,” I whispered firmly. “I’m serious.”

“O.K!” he yelled. I glanced at the security guards. Matthew had gotten their attention. What would they do if he erupted again? Just as Carl Levin rose to speak, Matthew twisted around again, tapped the knee of another girl behind him and waved at her.

“*Cut it out!*” she whispered, then looked at her friends in disbelief. While I was frantically thinking of a way to coax Matthew out peacefully, the girls got up and left in disgust. Matthew rose to leave with them, but one of the security guards motioned for him to stay seated. Matthew looked surprised, hesitated, then sat down and faced forward. His face turned red, and tears poured down his face. Diane Feinstein made her way to the podium. I looked pleadingly at the security guard, and he came to my aid. “Let’s go, son,” he said kindly, his arm outstretched, and my sobbing son and I filed out of the gallery.

Once outside in the hallway, Matthew confided to the security guard that he wanted a hot girlfriend because he was healthy. I put my arm around Matthew’s shoulder and we left the Capitol. I wondered what I could say about this experience that would make sense to him. The obvious explanation would be that since 9/11, it was more important than ever keep a low profile. But how in the world could I communicate that to a person devoid of common sense?

“Those girls really hurt my feelings,” Matthew said as we exited into the cold. “They weren’t nice.”

“I know Matthew, but you know what? One time when I was your age, something like this happened to me, too.”

“Really? Where were you?”

“Well, I was in church, and some really cool guys were sitting behind me. I decided to talk to them.”

“Then what happened?”

“I started to talk to them and they told me to shut up!”

“Then what did you do?”

“I started crying. Then my mother, your grandma, walked me out of the church.”

“Was she angry with you?”

“No, she knew that I felt bad because the boys yelled at me. She explained to me that at church, you are not supposed to talk. And the boys knew that and didn’t want to get in trouble.”

“Oh.” Matthew was quiet for about a minute, and wiped his runny nose on the sleeve of his pale blue sweater.

“But Mom?” he asked, his voice quavering, “Did the boys actually think you were nice?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I never saw them again. But later there were other boys who thought I was nice.”

“That’s good. I’m done talking about the girls now. Can we have lunch in Virginia?”

We headed toward Virginia, and as Matthew cued up *Octopus’s Garden* on the car’s CD player, it occurred to me that this silly ritual had a purpose: it distracted Matthew’s heavy, longing heart. As littered with roadblocks as it was, Matthew’s search for a meaningful relationship, his need to be a regular guy, was as important as anyone’s.

I looked back wistfully as we drove away from the Washington Monument and Jefferson Memorial that we wouldn’t visit.

I’ll see them next time.

Laura Shumaker is the author of the forthcoming memoir, *A Regular Guy: Growing Up With Autism* (Landscape Press 2008) and a regular contributor to *NPR Perspectives*. A columnist for *The Autism Perspective*, her essays have also appeared regularly in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Contra Costa Times*, the *East Bay Monthly* and *Hallmark Magazine*.

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