

Fighting For Peace

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Every morning I pray for my son. As we sit in the school car park, bracing ourselves for the day ahead, I close my eyes, placing my hand on his thin warm arm, feeling its rough bumpy boyness—his still trust beneath my touch. I search the darkness for the presence of God, and listen for anything but the silence.

The angels gather. They stand and bend and softly whisper, ‘All will be well.’

But I am drowning. My ears are sharp as rocks beneath a pounding torrent of terror, my own hand closing tight around my throat. The only voice that reaches me is that from within, threatening and mocking. ‘Dear God,’ I begin, calling out with my tongue and my heart. I throw my being into the void, longing to touch ground with my feet, my hands, to feel something solid in all this darkness. I try to sound soothing and confident in the ears of my quiet son.

‘Help him to be patient and wise today, and help his teachers to be patient too.’

Dear God, I cry with my heart. Show his teachers who he is! Don’t let them judge him by his silence, his fists, his angry words—let them see beyond to the sweet boy who needs help! Give him the strength to endure the intolerance, impatience, and stupidity of adults who should know better.

I squeeze his hand and close my prayer with the usual request for God’s peace, searching the car for some small shift in the atmosphere, some settling in my spirit to indicate we have been heard.

Dear God, help him get through the day, so that I can get through mine without getting the call asking me to pick him up, telling me he’s out of control, he’s gone wild, telling me I’m failing, and he is to blame.

My son—my beautiful brilliant son—ventures into a world full of too-loud, too-bright, too-ignorant people who cannot speak his language. He is his own country, and I am the only other speaker of his native tongue. Each day I send him out across borders into new territories. Go and conquer! I shout, ‘Have a great day!’

The fear begins. He battles bravely, trying to remember the

dialects, the body language, the rehearsed strategies. But there is so much confusion, so much noise, and he is alone.

And I who have sent him... I sit and write, or clean house, or make plans, or spend time on things I can only do alone. But I am never alone. He is in my skin, in my eyes, and I hear the ticking in my ears—each explosive second that passes.

Dear God, protect him from misunderstanding.

I remember a time when he wouldn't let me pray for him. We would have great, fierce debates about the truth of God; his tight, logical, strangely mature six-year-old mind unable to believe something he couldn't see.

Finally one night, as we argued over prayer, I lost my temper.

'Fine,' I said, 'if you don't believe me, ask God to prove it. If you want to see him, you ask for it. Okay?' He stared at me with solemn eyes.

'Okay,' he agreed.

'Lord,' I prayed quickly, afraid he might change his mind, 'William wants to see you. Please show him you are here.'

'Amen!' came the firm agreement from my son.

Dear God, what do I do? How do I prove that you're real?

I fell asleep exhausted. The next morning we sat down at the breakfast table.

'So,' I began cautiously. 'What happened last night? Did you see God?'

'Yes!' came the bright reply. I looked up at his glowing face.

'Oh? What did he look like?'

'He wasn't like a person. I was in bed, and a light came into my room, and it was God. It was bright, like the sun, but not hot. He made me feel warm and safe.'

I was speechless, humbled. I wanted to see God too.

Last Friday he was at school for half an hour before they rang.

'He needs to be collected... He's just not coping... He's hitting and kicking the teachers... He might be suspended if he stays.'

I shatter. I pick him up. He is outraged.

'They stole my sticks! It's unacceptable! They knew! I told them the sticks were mine!'

I can't speak. What words would meet the hurt caused by such

injustice?

I want to hold him, to tell him it won't always be this way, but I don't know for sure.

Monday we try again. A new day, a new start. He goes back in, possessing a courage I do not have, facing his fears yet again, knowing he cannot trust anyone to listen, or to understand. He is alone.

I give myself two hours. I turn off my phone and go see a movie. Two hours of my life blocked out, two hours to sit and relax, and already panic is setting in.

The movie ends and I turn on my phone with trembling fingers. I clutch it tightly, waiting—fear a tight fist in my throat.

One message from a friend. A few emails. No missed calls.

I break down. I weep with relief, with exhaustion, with shame. I should never have turned off my phone. I cannot take leave from my son. I'm his backup, his ally. What if something had happened?

It is my responsibility—I who fought to be his defender. I cannot get it wrong. But I do. Oh, how I do.

Sometimes I lie. I say to people: I'm sorry, I can't talk right now, my son is having a bad day and he needs me. Sometimes it's true. But other times what it really means is: I'm sorry, I can't talk right now. My son is having a good day. For this moment he doesn't need me and I can just be. I need to be here, away from people and talking and polite conversation. I need to be still and quiet and remember who I am, when I'm not being someone to somebody.

There are days when all is well. He owns them all—he writes words and makes friends and comes home smiling, and we laugh and speak kindly and I know he's going to be okay.

Then there are times he makes it through the day but I do not—I lose my temper, I forget his language, I just want him to talk like me, to speak *my* dialect, and I am the child.

The days he doesn't make it through, I have no words left, no comfort, no explanation for the hardness of the world... The angels call my name and tell me not to be afraid. They reach their hands down and tell me to hold on, they will pull me out. But my hands are full and I cannot let go.

My son—my beautiful brilliant son—you try so hard. Harder than I do. Ours is a fierce fight for peace.