

Come Back to Me

By Jen Sammons

I don't know exactly what happened on the day my son was born, because I wasn't there. But I do know this: He arrived, inhaled, aspirated meconium and immediately needed to be resuscitated. His first experience of life on the outside was that he couldn't even trust the reflexes of his own body. Nothing was safe.

My son was born into a crisis. It started two years prior when his birth mother, a then fourteen-year-old child, learned she was pregnant for the first time. Really, though, it began long before that when she herself entered foster care, which means it actually began with his biological grandparents, and most likely his great-grandparents, and back and back and back. Generation upon generation of trauma, instability, loss and pain are written on my son's DNA.

I could tell you about everything he's endured and witnessed in his four years of life, but that's his story to share and maybe someday he'll tell you.

Today, though, I'll tell you mine.

It's winter. Outside, silent snowflakes settle on small mountains of still-wet snow, while inside, screaming sends our sweet dog scurrying to the safety of the basement. I sit on the floor of my son's bedroom with my spine pressed against the heavy four-drawer wooden dresser. He flails and thrashes in my arms as I try to prevent him from injuring either of us.

Take a breath, love, I urge, talking louder than I want to in order to be heard over his shrieking rage. You'll feel better.

NO, I WON'T! he roars.

It's true, really. Each therapist, teacher, and specialist we've worked with has encouraged him to use breathing as a coping skill. It's a good idea in theory but telling my son to breathe seems to work in reverse: He panics instead of relaxes.

My son has Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which means that everything in the world feels like something to fear, something to fight, something to attempt to control in an effort to keep himself safe. When he encounters a trigger, his mind is instantly catapulted back to those moments and he no longer sees his safe home and his good parents. In his mind, we have become the people that hurt him: We are the enemy.

I whisper sweet nothings into his ears trying to soothe him and he wildly waves his arms around his head as though bees are swarming him.

Get them off, get them OFF! he screams.

This is one of the recurring hallucinations that accompany his flashbacks. At least I don't have to set traps for these insects the way my wife did for the actual ant infestation that accompanied our son's toddler joy in flinging watermelon or maple syrup-slick plates to the floor.

ALL DONE! He would crow, clapping his hands with delight in his cleverness and the mess.

These bugs though—the ones in his mind—can't be trapped or squashed or ushered outside: They can only be endured by a terrified little boy.

When my wife is home, we tag-team in order to help him and each other get through his trauma flashbacks. We recognize the signs instantly: his pupils double in size, his smile becomes too wide, his mouth fills with saliva and he starts that laugh. The maniacal hyena-sounding laugh that we dread. The one that means he—our sweet, funny, articulate son—is again being terrorized by his own mind. One of us holds on tight to our screaming, kicking, hitting, biting, spitting child whose surging cortisol levels have triggered an extreme fight response, and the other fetches cold washcloths for his forehead and frozen blueberries that we spoon-feed him in a sensorial effort to alert his brain that he is here, that he is safe, that the bad things are gone. We kiss him and rock him and tell him over and over we've got him, we love him, we promise he's safe now. We lock eyes with each other, sending silent reminders that although he is screaming horrible things at us, we are not the ones who hurt him. When it's finished, we hold each other and weep.

But today—this not so silent winter afternoon—I am alone.

I weigh my options quickly as he arches his back and screams with fury. If I let go of him to get a cold cloth or berries, he might hurt the dog or try to break something. If I carry him with me, he might writhe out of my arms and fall. I stay put and hold on.

I rock back and forth and back and forth with the precision of a metronome, trying to slow his heartbeat to match mine, trying to help his body become regulated again. I start to sing the song he loves the best, and for a moment he is still.

*Clear in the darkness, a light shines in Bethlehem
Angels are singing; their songs fill the air*

He wants to stay quiet, to hear the songs fill the air and push the noise out of his head but he can't yet. He exists exclusively in his brain stem—the most primitive part of the brain—where there is no rational thought or reasoning—only survival-driven instinct. He begins to scream again, and I keep singing, keep rocking, keep kissing his head. The muscles in my arms throb with pain. I will myself not to let go.

*Wise men have journeyed to greet their Messiah
But only a mother and baby lie there*

What if, on the day of his birth, he had been able to lie there with his mother; to inhale and exhale safely, securely swaddled in her arms or on her chest. What if she had been able to care for him, to give him stability and protection and comfort? What would his story be today?

What would mine be?

He stops screaming and starts flinging insults at me. We engage in an absurd call and response, a parody of sacred choral music.

Ave Maria
STUPID LADY!
Ave Maria
BUTT LADY!
Hear the soft lullaby the angel hosts sing

Ave Maria
MISS POOPY LADY!
Ave Maria
I'LL KILL YOU, STUPID LADY!
Maiden and mother of Jesus our king

He's quiet, but his heart is still pounding, and I know it's not over. Sweat gathers under the bridge of my glasses and pools inside my bra, and when I press my lips to his forehead, he is on fire. I keep rocking, keep humming and keep kissing. I wish for the frozen blueberries; those tiny blue spheres—those earth-shaped pills that work like an Alice in Wonderland remedy or Dorothy's ruby slippers to propel his mind through time and space back home.

He shifts so that his elbow juts into my ribcage and makes guttural gurgling noises. The interlude of calm is ending. I need another song.

Come back to me, with all your heart
Don't let fear keep us apart

He goes in and out and in and out of flashbacks, wanting, trying desperately to come back to me. One moment he looks at me, eyes wide with recognition and relief.

Mama! He whispers, caressing my face with his small hands, and the next moment his eyes shift out of focus, his hands retract into fists, his leg muscles contract, and he's gone again.

I hate you, stupid lady!

Nope, not stupid. Not today. Stupid would be to react, to punish, to yell, to push away. I've done this. It doesn't work. I gently pull him closer.

*Trees may bend, though straight and tall
So must we to others call*

He sneezes and is temporarily disoriented. He drags his sleeve across his nose, takes ragged, shuddering breaths, then reaches up to grab two fistfuls of my hair like a drowning swimmer clinging to the lifeguard's rescue. He looks deep into my eyes and whimpers, Hold me please, Mama.

It's over.

I stand up with him in my arms and he melts into me, his head resting on my shoulder, his hands still clutching my hair.

*You shall sleep, secure with peace; faithfulness will be your joy
Long have I waited for your coming home to me and living deeply our new life*

I carry him to his bed and pat his back as he nestles under the white fleece blanket with red snowflakes he fell in love with when he spied it on an endcap at the grocery store. When his ribcage begins to rise and fall with slow, measured breaths, I gently lift my palm and see the hand-shaped indentation molding his beloved blanket—and my love—to him.

I kiss his forehead, then tiptoe out of his room and into the kitchen, where I stand, blinking, aftershocks of adrenaline sending spasms down my spine. I lean against the counter for support. I stare out the window and see nothing.

I pour myself a bowl of frozen blueberries.

Lyrics from Christmas Lullaby by John Rutter and Hosea by Gregory Norbet.

Jen Sammons lives in Dayton, Ohio, where she explores the intersections of being a queer writer, mother and teacher and advocates for visibility in all three. Sammons holds an MFA from Miami University where she is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the English Department. A performance version of "Come Back to Me" was recognized as a co-winner of the inaugural Shirley Bach Memorial Prize at the 2020 Western Michigan Medical Humanities Conference. Sammons is the author of the chapbook *Trisagion*, the nonfiction winner of the 2018 Gertrude Press chapbook contest. Her work has appeared as an AWP Intro Journals Award winner in *Tahoma Literary Review*, as well as in *River Teeth*, *Slag Glass City*, and *Palaver*. Visit her at jensammons.com

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