
“GES (JESS) DO IT”

[Carmen G. Farrell](#)

My best friend’s dog is dying and this reminds me of my autistic son. She is one of three best friends from high school. We are decades removed from those days and now we talk more about our losses: how the parents we knew in vigorous and vital ways are slipping from us, not which cute boy we spied at last weekend’s party. Today my friend’s mom has refused to rise from the couch, next week when her husband is home, her dog has to be put down. For me, I wish my local emergency department offered frequent visitor perks for the recent hospital visits of one parent or the other. Trouble can feel omnipresent.

“Oh, thank God,” she texts about my recent medical scan results. “I was quietly freaking out about you,” she admits after I type the news was good. She’s never been a worrier, but when bad things happen, it’s hard not to expect them to keep coming. She’s struggling not to dwell in the loss. I get it. It can be hard to stay positive.

A few months ago, someone called the police on me, questioning the choice I’d made for my 21-year-old’s independence. By the time the caller found me, she’d been pursuing my son on her bicycle, one hand on the handlebars, the other holding her cell phone to her temple.

“Are you the mom of the boy in the turquoise shirt?” she asks. I nod. “It’s okay,” she says into her phone, “I found the parent.” Disengaged from the non-emergency policing line, we stare at each other for a moment, both brains cartwheeling with what to say. “I’m sorry,” she begins, “I thought he was lost. I could see he was...” her voice trails off, not knowing how to characterize my son’s physical disabilities without offending me. “Well,” she ventures after a breath, “he wasn’t responding to me and so I...”

“It’s okay,” I interrupt. “You were concerned and you acted on it. Thank you for caring.” She apologizes a few more times before she turns to

ride up the wide gravel path that flanks a rushing creek in the mountainside regional park behind our house. The path my son knows so well is always filled with walkers, runners, and uphill cyclists, and it’s where we took a moment for him to complete a 45-minute trail run while I walked the dog. I’d devised a system of Ges (“Jess”) running between a landmark near our house to where the dog and I were on the trail, creating laps of varying distances as I walked through the forest. On this lap he was out of my sight for a few minutes at most. But, even though he’s an accomplished runner with an inspiring para-athlete high school athletics career to his credit, his gait is unusual. His disabilities attract attention.

And here’s something every parent of a child with “difference” knows: our child’s disabilities will always attract attention. We perceive the apology in the eyes of a stranger. We’ve felt the shunning when our child doesn’t behave as expected. The averted eyes or the furrowed brows and lips pressed tightly together: the silent judgements shouted through our children’s idiosyncrasies that ricochet in our parental imaginations. So even though my son was sweaty, purposefully running, and dressed in his athletic gear including his 10km race T-shirt with the team’s name “Ges Do It” emblazoned on his back, a stranger became concerned when my son didn’t respond to her.

I could have retorted so many things back to her. “We’ve taught him not to talk to strangers.” “Why **shouldn’t** he be running on this trail like everyone else?” Or I could have explained. “He’s non-verbal and uses augmentative communication on his phone to speak.” I might have shared one of his diagnoses. “He is autistic.” But I chose none of these paths.

When I told my friends about this incident, some became angry. “Why would she do that?”

they demanded. “Why didn’t you tell her and the police where to go?” they wanted to know.

There are many reasons. Some of which relate to my friend’s dying dog and our rapidly fading parents. That day with the cyclist and the police represented the first time I’d tried an independence experiment. I could have sat at a track like usual, but Ges prefers the trail and the dog needed a walk. I thought I could combine tasks and give Ges the sovereignty he enjoys but that makes me bite my nails.

He can learn a routine well, but cannot reason through an unusual situation—one he might encounter on his ten-minute walk between home and work, for example. Considerable resources have been expended teaching Ges how to use controlled lighted crosswalks. The route to and from work had been planned and practiced for months.

I know Jess checks for traffic after he pushes the crosswalk button. I’ve seen him do it. But is he checking because that’s on his mental list? Or is he checking to see if there are cars? I don’t know. I wonder about the driver who’s distracted, or in a rush. I worry about a driver making a turn at the one intersection Jess needs to navigate, and not seeing the tall young man stepping into the crosswalk because the light told him it was okay.



This woman’s concern has ignited my fears for my son’s safety. *Was I wrong to give him this independence?* Now I stress about calls from worried neighbors or police when he’s travelling to and from work. But the main reason I didn’t engage with the helmeted woman in cycling spandex was this: I don’t know what she’s dealing with. Perhaps, like my high school friend, she’s in the middle of a hard time and she sees potential disaster wherever she looks. This stranger didn’t act to hurt me. She acted from her concern and anxiety. I see the care behind her actions, even if it ruined my afternoon and caused shorter fingernails. Ges was unfazed by it; that’s what matters. If she’d upset him, it would have been different reaction from me.

Since this incident, I’ve had to hang a tag around his neck. It reads: “My name is Jess. I am non-verbal and autistic. I live in this neighborhood and know my way around. If you’re concerned you can call...” with his parents’ contact information. At first, I resented this. But Ges doesn’t. He giggles and smiles when he puts the label-on-the-lanyard around his neck. He giggles because he’s looking forward to heading out by himself. I must accept this label I resent because it achieves the autonomy he desires.

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