

# Jess and the Banshee: Disability Isn't Binary

## An Excerpt

Carmen G. Farrell

After the kids are bathed, storied, and tucked in, I crawl into my bed to read and regroup before sleep. I stumble upon a predictable magazine article about kids with disabilities. It's about a parental realization something is wrong and the subsequent pursuit of a diagnosis and a meaningful path for the family. I used to enjoy this kind of real-life account—people encountering and overcoming obstacles—but for the past couple of months, I've avoided them. They hold too much potential in my reality, and I'm afraid of their truths. I didn't mean to read this essay tonight—I got sucked into the author's description of a child who's autistic and couldn't tolerate grocery store trips. Even though Jess loves grocery shopping, I have suspected something may be different for him, but remained quiet. He doesn't seem engaged with his environment—he doesn't appear to want much. He vocalizes, but doesn't speak.

Much like a childhood monster that vanishes behind the shield of bedcovers or closed closet doors, I had convinced myself that my worries about Jess wouldn't exist if I kept them contained and voiceless. But the magazine story has uncloaked this anxious being, and the

noise in my head compels me to ask. Perhaps voicing my concerns will stuff the fretful spirit back where it belongs.

"Curtis, do you suppose Jess is autistic?" I ask my husband, busy packing for a short business trip—open suitcase and clothes all over his side of the bed.

"No. Autistic kids are lost in their own world," he says, evaluating a tie against a dress shirt. "Jess isn't."

Relieved, I don't pursue the conversation, but doubt creeps back after a few seconds. Voicing my concern has given materiality to my internal dialogue and now it hovers, cloud-like, in our bedroom. More than opinionated voices, my fears hum with apprehensive foreboding, straddling my determination to picture everything as all right on one side, with my herd of motherly insecurities on the other. It's laced with an eerie premonition.

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From above, a spirit recognizes the woman with her knees bent, an open magazine propped on her thighs. The woman sits upright in bed, back against the headboard, staring without registering

her husband moving about the room, filling an open suitcase on the other side of their bed. Outside is dark. Worry fills the air around the spirit: the woman's despair intermingles, cloud-like: a heavy aura separating her from her husband, from the warmth of the room, from the abundant comfort the spirit perceives around the couple. It senses the mother's indifference to the fluffy red and brown patterned bed coverings with pillows soft enough that the woman's imprint turns them into curled currachs, supporting her body as the boats along the west coast of Ireland had held this mother's ancestors. Material comfort is not what she desires.

It doesn't hear their words, but the aftermath of the husband and wife's interaction lingers in the cloud. The spirit feels the mother's soul-longing. The marital interaction offered the woman no comfort—her sadness hovers in the space, dense and thick, a depression bigger than her weight in the bed. The mother cannot absorb the room's available sanctuary and solace. She does not accept whatever her husband has said. Her desires are different. The spirit senses the mother's aspirations stretch beyond her known capabilities.

Hovering in the air near the ceiling, enmeshed within the woman's darkness and worry, the spirit waits, knowing from experience with previous generations of this woman's family that it can't intervene. It recollects this woman, has been present with her when she was

a teenager and young woman: times of anticipated or shocking loss and grief. The last instance was when it brought this woman's godparent to the other side. Earlier, the spirit was almost needed for this mother's brother, when it took her young cousins from a car wreck. This is the first time it's here for her. Perhaps the spirit is needed; it's not clear. But it's present for this woman and her young son, waiting for what may transpire.

This apparition belongs to the Farrells, and like the spirits of other Irish and New World-Irish families, it straddles two planes of existence. It used to be primarily concerned with death, ferrying souls from one place to another. But in increasingly complicated modern times, it's called upon to navigate different spaces of in-betweenness and help family members traverse extreme emotionalism to return to equilibrium. This mother, the spirit knows, has fallen into a deep, sticky place of "Why me?" The self-pity serves no one, especially her little boy.

The woman looks up from the magazine, turns her head, and scans the room. She tilts her chin and peers at the ceiling near the closet. Pauses. Her eyes move back and forth, she squints. The spirit hides in the sullenness, notes the downturn of the woman's mouth, the rumpled, oversized T-shirt acting as pyjamas. The woman's gaze drops and her chin falls to her chest as she gathers the bedcovers under her chin, burrows her nose into the fabric. Then she raises her

face, sits up with purpose, and pivots toward her husband while moving her lips.

The spirit notices the woman push back the covers and rise from bed. It follows her bare footfalls down the carpeted hallway to the other side of the house—the children’s bedroom—and watches the woman open the bedroom door, check on the elder child, and brush the backs of her fingers on the child’s cheek. The mother sits on the side of the younger child’s bed, contemplates her son’s prone form, then rests her palm on his back for several minutes.

This, the spirit hears. It inhabits the liminal space in the woman’s head...nestles in the synapses of her mind, and navigates the worlds between hazy thoughts and spoken words. Between first impulses and expressed feelings. Between presentimental intuitions and reality.

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My palm rises and falls with his breath as wishful, unrealistic thoughts float from the warmth of his body through the sheets, into my flattened hand. In my imagination, Jess stirs and rolls over, looks up at me, and clearly says, “Hi Mama.”

“I’m here, sweetie,” I say.

“Yes. I know,” he says. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” If these words could wipe away my fear and worry, I

could envision a secure future for him. I could drift off to sleep. In this illusory state, I might hear solutions while my subconscious cartwheels with abandon through possibility and doesn’t concern itself with reality constraints. Jess speaks with me in a place of fantasy.

At other times, the voice isn’t identifiably his, yet I’m left with certainty it is him. In my imagination, sometimes his voice isn’t one I recognize—a genderless, loving, and concerned voice. Not the voice of a child. Nor mine, or an inner critic. Whose? When I try to understand, the voice moves away, and the words dissipate and dissolve into a moan. Our mother-son communication has passed through me, but it leaves its impression of Jess—a confident, loving, and speaking young man.

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The woman rises, closes the bedroom door and returns to her own room, her bed. The filled suitcase rests on the floor, her husband lies under the covers and rolls over to turn off his bedside light. She crawls under the duvet beside him and reaches to turn off hers. The bedroom is dark, but the spirit still perceives the two bodies curled into each other—two side-by-side parentheses. The woman’s yearning is palpable: as she settles into sleep, the spirit is surrounded by the woman’s wishful images of her son.

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Sometimes, in my dreams, his words counsel me from an imagined young man version of himself. Fragmentary synopses—hazy—yet clear. What he tells me hangs in the darkness between breaths, rolls with me in sleep, and blankets my form.

“Be happy right now, Mama, at this moment,” he says, “thinking about

the future isn’t real. Be here, with me. Listen.” He emerges from these fantasies as a hero: the quiet, unassuming, and patient champion. The kind of hero whose way of being creates an untroubled existence. How content a person you are, and how you make those around you happy flourishes more than how much you do and how successfully you do it.

Carmen G. Farrell, <https://carmengfarrell.com>, is a force behind community initiatives for the neurodiverse: para-athlete opportunities for highschoolers, learning-to-work programs at university, and playground inclusion groups in elementary school. Her other published creative nonfiction focuses on disability and inclusion, questioning the assumption that there’s a “normal” way to be with each other. She’s a director on the board of her local writing association, volunteers with The Writer’s Studio at SFU (’24 alum), and is locally known for her creative pursuits beyond the page. North Vancouver is home.