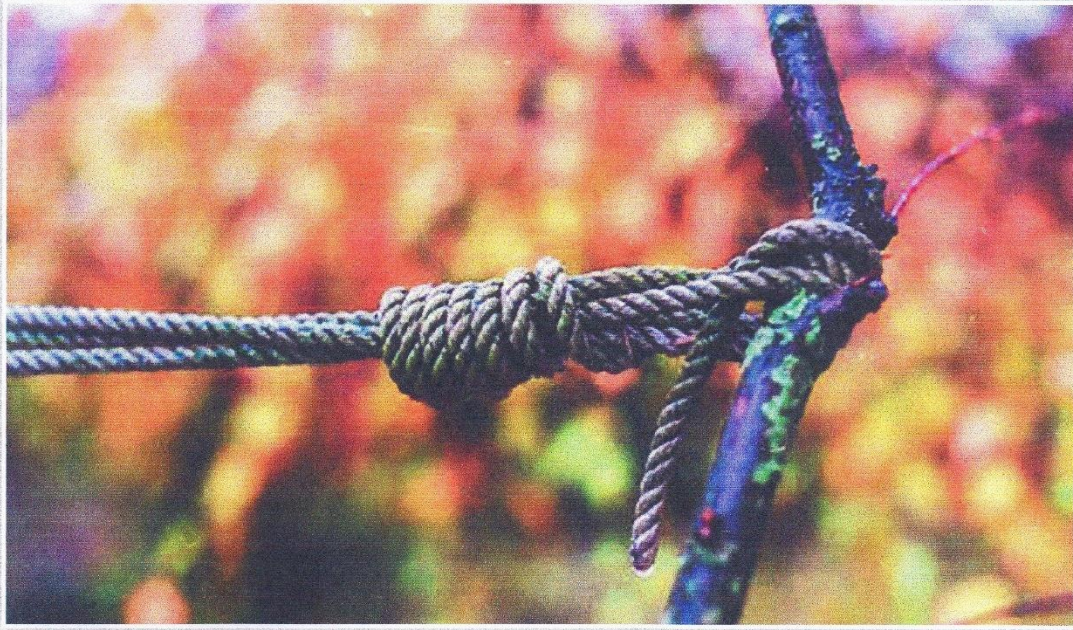


— The End of Me —

By Victoria BAKER



It was an unusually warm spring day. Ian bounced out of the van ready for a quick stop at our local Whole Foods. The after-lunch crowd was quieter, less sensory overload for both of us. Our excursion was an excuse for me to pick up much-needed groceries. For Ian, it was a welcome break from homeschooling and a chance to move around a bit. My idea of getting the wiggles out had a totally different meaning for Ian!

The emotional and academic challenges of public middle school were daunting. Without the school's acceptance of Ian's autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis, there were no educational or behavioral plans in place. It is difficult enough for typical students transitioning into this period of their lives, much less for one wrestling with tremors, motor tics, irritable bowel syndrome, and food allergies, to name a few. Ian experienced bullying. He was hit, and anxiety attacks resulted in meltdowns and academic regression.

"The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want."

Years of advocates, lawyers, mediation conferences, court petitions, school meetings, medical appointments, hospital stays, holistic doctors, metal detoxifications, vitamins, supplements, and therapies all seemed to feed into one cold March afternoon. It was the third time his school case manager phoned to tell me Ian had been hit. At home, he wrote notes saying, "I want to die." He chose to motion his needs instead of speaking, slipping into selective mutism. Fearful he would further regress, I researched homeschooling as an alternative, which soon became our only option.

Two months after that call, Ian, Danny, his younger brother, and I moved through the tears and the trauma of those incidents. Homeschooling, we were amidst healing, having fun, and at last, enjoying life. Ian and I were learning together. Juicing, walking in our neighborhood, exercising with Brain Gym®, snuggling, and reading replaced some of the exhaustingly emotional effects of his autism, daily vomiting ep-

isodes, and frequent meltdowns. Ian walked into the market that day happy, beaming.

"He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters."

On your mark, get set, go! was one way to describe Ian's entrance into the produce section. At 13 years old with facial hair, his gait still awkward, he stood as tall as my five-foot-two frame. Without hesitation, Ian began to skip. Yep, I said it: skip! Ian was having the time of his life, laughing, smiling, singing, and skipping! "Hey, guy," I said, "stay close to me." Yeah, that didn't happen. My eyes darted between shelves grabbing what I could to keep up with Ian who glided up and down each aisle. With each new turn, scouring, judging faces met my glance, void of compassion.

"He leads me in the path of righteousness for His name sake."

"I can't believe this," I thought to myself. My guy is having a wonderful day, he's happy. No one is hitting him; he's not being made fun of or throwing up—he's *talking* for God's sake! "Look away, please! Stop with your condescending stares," I wanted to shout.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil: for thou art with me." My spirit ached.

Scooping up this and that, another scowl greeted me in each new aisle. More thoughts stifled: "I am going to make a T-shirt. It's gonna read, 'This is autism too!' How can people be so cruel? Oh, wait, I know, a big A with a line through it. That will do it!" I contained myself—barely.

"Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

"He's eating strawberries for the first time in his life without gagging. Maybe they were jealous that he could skip without wearing Depends. Oh, I must be a mean momma," I decided during this internal conversation with myself.

I let Ian know it was time to check out. My heart whispered to my Creator. "Father, why do I feel such anger?"

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies."

"Ian has been through so much. Lord, I can't stand the glares. Please, Father, help me. Ian doesn't seem

to notice. But for me, oh Jesus, I may be walking, but I'm on my knees on the inside. I need you."

I was wearing myself out, or maybe Divine Love was provoking me, teaching me, *to let go.*

Free and unaware of his own wonderful distraction, Ian picked a checkout and stopped to a halt. There was a lot of action going on in this aisle. And, it was loud.

"Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."

That wasn't the only thing running over. Tears greeted us as we settled into the checkout.

First, we saw an adorable but screaming toddler in the shopping cart ahead of us. He was inconsolable. Right in front of their full cart, we found his mom, cradling her infant. The little one's pitch was piercing. Time and the waiting cashier stood still. This sweet woman was paralyzed looking at her two screaming children with what I knew was an all too familiar look of defeat. I was sure her own meltdown was seconds away.

Ian and I looked at each other, and I whispered, "Ian, we have to help." Taking *all* things literally, that was the cue Ian needed to hear. Quickly, we unloaded the cart onto the belt. As I moved closer to bag the items, I turned to see Ian speaking to the toddler, "There, there, it's going to be okay." Those words were the few spoken during our encounter. The infant was crying so hard the mom motioned; she couldn't move. Reaching the end of her rope, perhaps herself, she was unable to open her handbag.

The cashier and I found her wallet and gingerly removed payment for her groceries. Perfect strangers were entangled in this personal transaction. I gave her reassuring smiles above the cries. As Ian playfully leaned into the cart, the little boy began to laugh. A sigh from the frazzled mom filled the atmosphere. Her tension released, her baby at last snuggled into his mother. I held back my tears. It was beautiful and intimate. For a moment, we were drawn by a tender Love that boldly connected us. The mom, restored and strengthened, left the store with her peaceful little ones.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."

It was our turn. The cashier watched this boy of mine (the skipper with hair and clothes in usual disarray, no

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matter how I tried, really) calm the storm around her. Silently, without as much as a glance, she checked and bagged our groceries.

Just then I realized I didn't need to make a T-shirt. There was no longer the need to scream or shout about anything. Fear and frustration cannot remain in the presence of Love, the One and Only, Divine Love and Grace. I saw Ian in place of stares. My shortcomings were invaded by mercy. For this mom and me, comfort was realized. Our portion was not withheld. "Thank you, Father." Love soaked into my being and spilled into my deepest cracks. And oh, there's plenty of them.

I beamed in awe of this Relentless Love as I watched Ian sing his way out of the store. Raw, powerful grace, you might even call it organic, healed my aching.

"He restoreth my soul."

Let's say partnering with the Almighty is an evolving habit for me. Forgetting and surrendering my worries and yes, even myself sometimes seems unnatural. Yet, when I do, on purpose, my energy and intention seem to change for the better. I pray it's for the highest good. It wasn't the first time Divine Love showed up when I reached my end. There wasn't room for my pride and disappointment in that checkout line. Those enemies of my soul seemed to fall away.

Ian thrived in his special education homeschool program. Along with nutritional and therapeutic supports, his academic levels soared five grade levels in three years. During year two of homeschooling,

I went back to the school district, faced my so-called giants, and at last, secured an appropriate education for Ian, 12 years in the making. On December 12, 2012, his multiple disabilities were placed in writing, and we looked for a therapeutic high school to meet his needs.

My brave heart began high school at the age of 17. He stumbled upon a film job during a dual enrollment program in our community college while attending his last year of high school. At the same time, Ian's school was speaking with the same film production company which led to an internship for him. This fall Ian began a new life at college in an east coast film school. Talk about serendipity.

In my lifetime, I may reach the end of me hundreds, even thousands, of times. But I know when *all* that

remains is Love, the end of me is the beginning of infinite, magnificent possibilities.

"I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

- Psalm 23 The Holy Bible, (NIV)®



Victoria Baker is the author of *The Making of Faith*, public relations consultant, photographer, self-taught special education advocate, former home educator, single parent, and yoga enthusiast. She shares her spiritual life stories about healing wrapped in prayer. Victoria has learned to fight fear and other obstacles with love, forgiveness, and gratitude. Check out *Reflections*, her whispers to Divine Love (© 2017 Victoria Baker) and daily posts.

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