

Behavioral Health

“Ugh! It reeks of chaos. There’s something wrong hiding in here, and I need to find it.” I inspect the refrigerator for the source of the odor.

“That’s not chaos, Mom, it’s probably mold or something.” Charlie rolls his eyes.

He’s right the same way I’m right.

I pull the offending jar of dodgy olives from behind the bagels in the back of the fridge. On further inspection, I find a white to-go container back there, too. Thrusting them into a plastic bag, I hand them to my son.

“Take these out and dump them in the garbage. Use the bag like a glove to get all the gross stuff out so I can clean the containers for recycling.”

“Gross! Oh man, what a waste!” he says. I hear a gag beginning to form in the back of his throat as he squints at the jar. “I *used to* love olives!”

“Indeed, if we’d only harvest the chaos, and do something that requires energy with it, we’d create order.” I close the refrigerator door.

“You mean, like if we ate it before it got gross and used the food for fuel? Like that kind of energy?” Charlie questions.

“That would have been ideal, of course, but what I mean in this case is to harvest the energy of this in its current state. I bet it could be a strong fuel of some kind if we were only capable of utilizing it somehow. That’s what I mean. But right now, these stink. I need them gone. Hurry, so we can go get your brother from his appointment.”

“Which appointment?” he asks after emptying the containers.

“Behavioral health.” I wash the containers and set them in the drainer to dry. “Let’s pick out snacks for you two for the car ride after we get Vincent.”

Charlie rummages in the snack drawer and selects fruit chews, juice boxes, and granola bars. He picks a canvas bag from the hook by the kitchen door to carry them. He looks up at the shelf above the hook. “Hey Mom, where’d your marksmanship trophy go?”

“Oh – yeah, I put that in the garage next to the others.” I grab the keys and we head out to the car.

The sun is shining so brilliantly on this cold February afternoon, Charlie and I need our sunglasses for the drive. There is still ice on the road in certain long shadows. A beat-up yellow pickup truck pulls out in front of us spurting black clouds and making hiccupping sounds.

“That truck reeks of chaos,” I say.

“That’s not chaos, Mom. That’s exhaust, and probably a bad muffler and something wrong with the engine.” He lets out a sigh.

Three blocks later, a loud bang blasts out when the truck backfires pulling into Raul’s Auto Repair on American Avenue. I jump slightly at the sound. “Chaos properly dealt with can result in stronger order than if there’d been no chaos in the first place.”

“I don’t understand what you even mean by that,” he says.

“What I mean is, when you repair something that has been broken, it’s often much stronger and more solid than it was originally, especially if you’re replacing old, used parts with newly constructed pieces.”

“You’re weird, Mom.” Charlie mutters.

“Yes. I know.” It’s an old argument. Charlie is not amused.

The Behavioral Health Specialists office parking lot is just next to the playground of an elementary school. We find a parking spot near the building’s entrance. As we walk in, I notice a maroon late model sedan parked next to the playground’s fence with swing sets on the other side. There’s some sort of chaos going on there, although I don’t see anyone around. I don’t mention my suspicion about it to Charlie, though. It would only annoy him.

We are early to pick up Vincent. So, we will sit and enjoy our time together while we wait. This child, older than his brother by two years, who’s always been so insightful, has his feet firmly planted in science. Recently, his views on the world have set us up to argue about many of the things that have always seemed reasonable to me.

Next to me, Charlie scrolls on his phone. Suddenly he says, “Hey Mom! Did you hear about the Boeing 787’s test flight that crossed the Atlantic Ocean last week?” He reads from his phone, “it used sustainable fuel made from used cooking oil and plant stuff! It tells all about it in this article! Is this how our moldy olives could have made energy? I can’t even believe you were right!”

“Yes, sometimes I’m right. Pretty incredible, I know.” I smile at his astonishment and wish more of the things he reads on his phone would confirm what I tell him.

There are times when I think it’s good that he has me for a mom, to show an example of what it’s like to have beliefs without benefit of factual evidence. For all I know, the way I discern things could eventually prove out to have scientific backing.

I can see it now. They will run trial groups. All who’ve suffered trauma from an early age will be welcome to participate. Special recompense to be given to unique individuals who’ve experienced trauma since before language was developed – from before the emergence of semantic boxes. Certain individuals who’ve wondered why they spot “red flags” and subtle nuance in behavior or energy indicating impending rage or violence in other human beings will be excellent candidates. Like the people who forever sense the increased volatility, ignition, explosion, implosion, and other micro-fluctuations most people seem oblivious to. The ones who haven’t had the – same – well, *training*. Maybe someday there will be enough research to satisfy skeptics like Charlie.

“Hey, Mom, what are you thinking?” Charlie senses the seriousness of my thoughts.

“Oh, I was wondering what it must be like for you to have a brother with autism. Does it make you feel different from other people? Other twelve-year-olds?”

“No. Vincent’s the one who’s different.”

My sons – these brothers are in sync today. Vincent loves it when Charlie comes with me to pick him up. They walk to the elevator together, arms over each other’s shoulders.

Charlie asks, “Hey Vincent, how was your appointment today? Did Conrad let you swing on the platform swing? What’s that on your shirt, did you guys play with the shaving cream again?” Charlie wipes at the creamy substance on Vincent’s shirt. Vincent laughs brightly. Charlie helps him put on his coat. They laugh together outside the clinic and the sunshine is gleaming on their hair. We make our way to the car.

The parking lot is nearly empty now. The wind blows a discarded fast-food wrapper and a piece of white paper debris skittering across the asphalt. The sun dips behind a cloud. The old burgundy sedan is still there. Now there’s a boy of around seven years old on the hood gesticulating wildly and shouting expletives at the fence, and the playground, and the swing sets. There is a woman in the driver’s seat with the door open and one foot on the pavement. Clouds

in the sky grow thicker, cloaking the sun, casting the afternoon in gray tones, shadowing the parking lot, the few cars, and the children playing in the playground. There is a sudden chill in the air that wasn't there when Charlie and I arrived.

"That reeks of chaos." I say.

"That's not chaos, Mom. That's probably Tourette's, and autism, or something." Charlie is certain.

"Not the child," my voice deepens with unease. "– The mom." I have an intense worry inside, a flame of fear flickering low and resonant. "Get in the car with your brother. Share the fruit chews and snacks with him. But wait to give him his juice box, I don't want him to squirt it all over in the backseat. I'll be back in a few minutes." I hand him the car keys.

"You can't even help yourself, can you?" Charlie mutters.

As I walk to the burgundy car, I sense I'm correct. Chaos rolls off this woman in dizzying waves. Her hand trembles on the car door handle. She is staring straight through the windshield at the child sitting on the hood. She does not see me.

Every sense in my body is screaming to get away. Get the boys. Get away.

One step closer, now I see her other hand, tightly gripping a silver handgun. My mind wants to explode with panic. Time slows down as I aim the trajectory of my next step to place myself in a spot she'd think impossible that I've seen the weapon. Inside this moment between two steps, I observe the steely hardness and hate in her expression. I know her intent. She is going to kill them both. Her rope has ended. She reeks of chaos. It crackles around her. And he is vulnerable. I have to try helping this child. No one else is around.

And I can't even help myself.

Not knowing what to say, but knowing time is running out, I force a casual tone and blurt out, "Hey, do you happen –" Her face snaps toward me, a gargoyle, which I dare not acknowledge by peering at, her gun hand still not visible. My breath catches in my throat, but I bring up what I hope sounds like an embarrassed laugh. "Oh! I'm so sorry I startled you." To avoid looking at her too closely, I throw my hand over my face in a show of air-headedness. "I should have realized you didn't hear me approach. It's just that my phone is dead, and I need to know the correct time." I hold my hands up signaling helplessness.

Allowing sudden concern into my voice, I ask her, "Are you okay?" I pretend to just now notice that her child is making a scene on the hood of her car, and I am an unwanted witness. The

three children playing on the swing set on the other side of the fence watch the boy for a moment, then burst out laughing. They run across the field away from the parking lot. Away from this chaotic scene.

I brace myself and force a measured breath into and then out of my lungs. “This looks like one of those hard days. I sometimes call them ‘dark days.’ Is there anything I can do to help?” I make an open gesture with my arms so she can see I’m not a threat. “You know, some days I’m not sure how I’d have gotten through if the right help didn’t come along at just the right moment.” In a further attempt to appear that I’m nothing more than a random woman chattering in the parking lot I work hard to stare off at the rimrock that runs along the north edge of our town and let my focus become hazy.

“Sometimes when my son seems so unreachable to me, I just hold my hand out to him. Even though I know he doesn’t want to be touched when his autistic tendencies are exacerbated...” And here I let my voice trail off, hoping my hesitation will spark her interest. “Yeah, he doesn’t like being touched at all when he’s like that.” I force this slow cadence, making up relaxed sounding small talk as I go, pausing between my thoughts. “He has a hard time with eye contact when he’s like that, too. I still do it. I hold out my hand. I just let it hang in the air in front of me. I think it lets him know that if he did want to reach out of his own world that I’d be here waiting to connect.”

I keep talking. The words tumble out of me, the sentences falling forth. I feel almost as if the sound of another human speaking can pull at someone lost in loneliness and despair. It doesn’t matter what I’m saying as long as it’s about acceptance and love and kindness and patience.

I’ve no idea how long I’ve been talking. I need her to step out of the car and go to her son. So, I talk and laugh lightly about stories of devastating hardship. She just stares at the boy on her hood.

Suddenly, in a serious, sharper tone, I say, “It’s a wonder more people aren’t dead.”

She looks at me now. Her expression filled with the rage of being called out. I can’t look into her eyes for fear of giving myself away. She holds a weapon, and my boys are too close to this chaos. They are right over there, only a few parking spots away. My heart shudders rapidly and my palms quiver. Despite my panic, I compel a tiny smile to my lips. I keep talking, outwardly calm, shifting to a gratitude message with the change in her demeanor. “I feel lucky

for the lovely moments. The ones you don't expect, but that show up every now and again." A chill colder than any I've felt whips through the air around me. The tranquil exterior I've manufactured vibrates with the wind. "We just have to make it through the 'dark days.' Even if it means reaching out." Here, I look at her son on the hood of the car. His puffy red jacket has a cartoon of a luchador wrestler on its back. He's stopped shouting expletives but is rocking back and forth in an agitated state. Her glance follows mine. "Like hanging your hand out in the air in front of you, so your son will know you'll be with him no matter what." The wind thrashes the naked branches on the trees on the edges of the parking lot and in the playground.

At last, she emerges from her car emptyhanded, steps around the car door and away from me, carefully approaching her son.

Without waiting to see what she will do, I move into the open car door and snatch the handgun from between the seats.

She hasn't seen me. She is fixated on her son, reaching out to him with a tentative hand.

I whirl so that my back is to her. My focus is on the weapon I'm holding. I inspect it for a safety and make sure it is engaged. I marvel at the order of the piece itself. Fierce chaos bound by order. In a former life, I used to enjoy target shooting, but right now I can't get this weapon away from me fast enough. There's so much residual chaos on the thing, from her dark intentions. It lingers like a sticky film.

My superficial shell begins to crumble, and my breath comes in ragged bursts. Aware that I need to keep it together a bit longer, I steel myself for whatever will come next.

As I look up, a startled man in a suit and tie is looking at me with a terrified expression on his face. He's halted walking and is staring at me with an open mouth. I point the gun down to the ground and let it rest loosely in my palm along my leg so that he knows I'm not going to shoot anyone.

"What's going on here?" He sees the woman and her son and says, "Cynthia, what's going on? Who is this woman?"

"Cynthia, is it?" I repeat. "Is this man your son's psychiatrist?" She still hasn't seen that I have her gun.

"No." Cynthia whispers. "He's mine."

Oh, thank goodness. I'm so relieved that someone is here to take over this situation. Someone who knows her and can help. The tension I've been carrying is threatening to

overcome me. I tremble slightly. I need to explain what is going on and get my boys out of here. “Well, in that case, doctor, you should be aware that your patient appears to be experiencing homicidal and suicidal ideation.” My voice no longer carries the casual tone and if I’m not careful I am going to cry. I push the emotion down. With only a trace of vibration in my speech I continue, “When I walked up to her car moments ago, she was about to fire this weapon through the windshield at her son, and then likely turn it on herself.” There. I’ve said it. This will now become his situation to deal with. “Please summon security.”

At this the woman breaks down and falls to her knees, sobbing that it was true. And how, oh god, it was true. Collapsing further, she appears to be relieved at her own admission. On some level I have to believe that she will ultimately be grateful she was stopped in time. The doctor keys something into his phone and runs toward her. Her son rocks rhythmically on the hood of the car.

I can see my boys in the back seat of our car. Vincent is laughing and Charlie is singing. The sun has emerged from the clouds again, shining brightly and making their hair gleam reddish-gold on the tips where it is getting curly and unruly. They are due for trims. Both of them.

Then out of the building runs a security guard. I explain that I’d like to hand over this firearm and get my children out of here before any police show up. That my son has severe autism, and I don’t want to prolong our time in the parking lot any more than it already has been.

He takes the handgun from me. He doesn’t seem to know what to say. Instead of waiting around and risking being tasked with more obligations here, I turn and head for my car.

As I get into the driver’s seat and start the engine my body shakes, and my breath is labored. I reverse out of our parking space and drive toward the exit of the parking lot. I want to be far from here when the police, ambulance, and children’s services arrive.

Vincent reaches into the front seat next to me and snatches his juice box from the canvas bag. Charlie is worried. He looks through the back window at the woman and her son. “Hey Mom, what happened? Is everything okay? Why are you shaking?”

“Everything will be fine. She and her son will be getting the help they need.” I wipe away the tears sliding down my face. As the distance between us and the parking lot grows, my nerves begin to calm. I’m breathing easier already. “But now we need to get home.” I say, “If you deviate too much from routine, you’re just asking for chaos.”