

# *A Brief History of Autism*

by Julia Clausen

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*Father.*

I make music. Maybe because I can't quite express myself any other way.

I make music well. Without any real training or help from anyone,

I made myself.

I am my music. But my music is not me. I have a job.

My students never seem to get it, when I sit down with them,

show them the mechanics of the flute or trombone,

and tell them to create sound.

They don't understand that they are the source of their own magic.

I can't make them see.

But I try every day. Every day. The same dissonance.

And I don't understand it anymore. Clarinets tend to squeak,

and it hurts my ears.

I can no longer hear my wife call to me from her desk where she sits  
baffled by the computer's misbehavior. So I stay on the couch.

I can no longer hear my son mumble about how he's "fine."

So I keep eating my dinner.

I can no longer hear my daughter whisper in a theater.

She used to scream, and now she whispers. As a child she screamed  
from the top of the tree in the old backyard. Because she wanted  
to stay there forever.

She tries to understand the magic in her own way. But she's buried  
it deep.

My son understands sound, but he breaks it down into its parts.

He memorizes it. My wife listens.  
But music should be purple. It should be spoken in phrases.  
It should be free.

*Son.*

I sit and think. About everything. Which is probably too much.  
No one person can handle the world. I can barely confront the fear  
in my own eyes. I don't know how to speak to it, so I let other people  
do the speaking for me.  
Scorsese, Dante, Mahler, my therapist. I don't let my mother speak to it.  
She knows it too well.  
And my father doesn't know how. My sister leaves it alone.  
People seem to like my sister, and I don't know why. I know a lot of  
things. I know how to articulate Plato's theory of aesthetics.  
How to play a Strauss horn concerto. I know the names of every  
Academy Award-winning film since 1970. I even know how to drive  
from South Central LA to Arcadia without taking a single freeway.  
But I don't know why people like my sister.  
All I want to do is explain to someone why I care so much. I want them  
to see it too. But they can never stay until the end. Never hear me out.  
I suspect they get bored. In fact, I know they do. I know they feel left out.  
That's why I'm trying to include them. Once when I was explaining to  
my coworker why logic classes should be included in all early  
childhood education for the betterment of our national politics,  
she asked what I wanted for lunch. She gave one of those blank stares  
babies have.  
So I stopped talking to her as much.  
I like writers. They care. A lot. Maybe too much. Like me.  
My sister tries to tell me how to write. My mother tells me how not to  
write. But I think I know.

*Mother.*

I am tired. I've been to rural China and grown thin living off of  
vegetables and rice for every meal.

I've lived in a hut in Guatemala. I've taught English to South Americans and Spanish to young Californians. I've made a living.

My husband is more tired than I am. He has retreated into jazz and cleaning the pool. I hire someone to clean the rest.

I think I have my daughter, but sometimes I don't. Sometimes I think she wishes I were someone else. Someone who is more certain but less verbal.

My mother talked very little. She would always eat the smallest piece of chicken, and never cake. I like to study history.

My mother's history doesn't feel like history, but it does to my daughter. She asks about life "then," incredulously.

No, that's not the right word. I've run out of words. I teach young children to write, to multiply fractions, to study the clouds.

Last year, one boy ran up to me in the middle of a lecture on birds. He handed me a story.

His story.

It even had a title page. He said he thought I should read it to the class.

His face was so serious.

It reminded me of my son, that face.

I'm so tired. I wake up at two in the morning with a cramp in my foot and the vision of my son crying.

I want to take his pain, but he thinks I'll break it. Maybe I would.

*Daughter.*

I dance. At least, I used to. It was my whole life until it wasn't.

Now I dance in my kitchen while I cook, listening to Mahler's first symphony. My father doesn't think I like his world, but I do in parts.

I rarely invest in the whole of anything.

I love too much, and I like too little. For now I study data science.

Tomorrow, chances are I'll be a professional origamist. Or an academic consultant. Or a Spanish linguist. Or a writing teacher.

Though I know how teaching kills the soul.

No, not kills. Drains. Teaching is giving, and eventually people run out.

Then what is it?

Recitation maybe. Scraping the bottom of the barrel for scraps.

I don't like the idea of scraps. I'm too selfish for that sort of life.  
I've hidden myself away. Maybe I'll move to London and pretend I'm from Los Angeles. I'm very good at pretending to be something I'm not. Plus everyone likes you abroad if you say you're from Los Angeles. Once I was boarding a plane, and the little Irish flight attendant asked me where I was from. He must have looked at my passport. He was so happy and so sad when he heard California. I wanted so many things for him then, but I didn't know how to speak. Maybe I could make a good teacher. I've learned it from my mother. She thinks I don't listen, but I always do.  
Even when she says this shirt makes my hips look too big. Even then. Even when she asks how my brother is doing. Because I'm the only one who will answer when he calls at 11:30 p.m. to complain about *Breaking Bad* for two hours.  
Even when she tells me to go ask my dad for help because she assumes I can't solve my own problems. Even then.