

REBECCA SULLIVAN

*Max in Three Words*

Max speaks robotically. Uses three words. Three word phrases.

Our journey began. Twelve years ago.

I cannot abort. Richard will stay. He loves me. A son arrives. He looks old. A little man. He is wise. I think so.

I'm twenty-three. Months go slow. He grows slowly. Grows too slowly.

We are referred. A specialist needed. They take blood. Max cries out. I can't watch. Max stops crying. I start crying.

A deviance found. A chromosome abnormality. A geneticist required.

Six weeks later. Geneticist sits still. Richard walks in. Geneticist tells us. *Your son's unique. One sex chromosome. X partially deleted. Y clinging X. One chromosome less. Less than normal. The full meaning? We don't know. No others recorded. Growth probably slow.*

Doctor is swift. Off we're sent. Max in arms. He looks normal. He is pretty. My little baby.

Referred to physio. Six weeks waiting. The therapist arrives. Starts her training. Makes some suggestions. Suggestions for me. She's training me. Suggests quitting work. Staying with Max. All day long.

I quit work. It is autumn. The sun outside. Baby in arms. The room dark. Inside we sit. It's cold in. The heater's on. A dull glow. The therapist arrives.

Back to training. Her words robust. *Exercises for Max. Show him everyday. Stop the heater. It's warm outside.* Then she leaves. We are alone.

24 years old. My work transformed. Mother of one. I'm a trainer. A speech therapist. An occupational therapist. Even a dietician. Just to one. One little boy.

He cannot speak. I cannot move. His head floppy. My head full. The couch indented.

Richard marries me. A wedding day. A naming day. *Maximus* officially named. A big name. Very little tuxedo. We all celebrate. They go home. We go home.

Richard's at work. We're alone again. Max and I.

The banging begins. Max is banging. Smashing his head. Smashing between everything. Head to floor. BANG BANG BANG. Smashing between feedings. BANG BANG BANG. Between physio visits. BANG BANG BANG. Between the walks. BANG BANG BANG. Refuses to eat. BANG BANG BANG. Starts to smile. BANG BANG BANG. Beautiful blonde curls. BANG BANG BANG. Tiny little body. BANG BANG BANG. Bruised third eye.

I distract him. Create constant diversion. We go out. He enjoys outings. Especially the park. But everyone's curious. The opening question. Always the same. *What's his age?* I continuously lie. He's fourteen months. I say *seven*. I walk away. They can't understand. Why so little? Explanations are arduous. I save definitions. Definitions for friends. Only for friends. Family and friends.

They console me. They assure me. *You are strong. It will change.* They are wrong. Or am I?

Max starts singing. Still can't talk. But he sings. Sings with tone. Sings with melody. I sing back. We have communion. We don't talk. We can sing.

It happens again. I am pregnant. Choose to scan. Eleven weeks gestation. Needle penetrates uterus. It's a girl. All chromosomes present.

Willow is born. Willow grows fast. She learns fast. She is big. Bigger than Max. Max's big sister.

She is one. Max is three. Max can crawl. Max can sing. Max can bang.

He's banging again. An afternoon tyranny. Television goes on. It's ABC time. Max is banging. Willow's watching playschool. Max is banging. Willow's watching Elmo. Max is banging. Willow's watching Wiggles. Max is banging. Richard's at work. Max is banging.

Is there help? Can anyone hear?

A psychologist arrives. A behavioural psychologist. Max is surrounded. The fort built. In the portacot. Four walls surround. Tall foam walls. A safe place. A soft place. Big soft prison. If he bangs. He goes in. He can't escape. Is this right? Things are blurry. Did it stop? I can't remember.

Max is growing. Growing very slowly. Max is singing. Avoiding eye contact. Starts saying words. Yells out *WATER*. Names it *CUP*. It sounds robotic. Everything in monotone. He talks mechanically. He sings melodically.

A special day. Max is happy. Makes eye contact. Looks at me. Strings three words. *I love you*.

Is he copying? Are they mine? His first three. First three words.

Four years old. Max starts walking. A vertical world. Max bangs less.

He becomes louder. *EEEE EEEE EEEE*. The sound between. *IT'S A HELICOPTER*. *EEEE EEEE EEEE*. *MUMMY GET BREAKFAST*. *EEEE EEEE EEEE*. *MUMMY IS GOING*. *EEEE EEEE EEEE*. *SAY HELLO MAX*. *EEEE EEEE EEEE*. Parrots around me. Quiet amongst others. Beside the between. *EEEE EEEE EEEE*.

Most don't know. Think him stupid. He ignores them. Mostly he's ignored. Only a few. Just a few. Try to interact. Aunty asks him. *What is that?* She expects nothing. Max answers her. *IT'S A STETHOSCOPE.* Her mouth drops. *Yes it is!*

Doctor calls again. Max is labelled. At five years. *Max is autistic. It is severe.*

At the appointment. Max cuddles me. Cuddles me tight.

Is it night? Is it morning? It is dark. It's 3am sharp. Max cries out. *MUMMY CUDDLE ME.* I am awake. I'm always awake. He gets louder. *MUMMY CUDDLE ME.* I struggle in. We snuggle close. He holds tight. Won't let go.

Max cuddles me. Willow wants cuddles. Both hips occupied.

He plays alone. Willow is confused. Tries his games. Flaps her arms. Taps on plates. Bangs her head. Not much fun. Willow plays alone.

Willow starts talking. She laughs loud. She copies him. *MUMMY GET BREAKFAST.* She sounds funny. It is cute. It is worrying.

Decide on three. Sister for Willow. Someone to play. It is best.

Cadence is born. She is perfect. Max is seven. Willow is five. We are five. A family unit.

I am thirty-one. Things get blurry. I can't hear. Where is Max? Where is Willow? Where is Cadence? Are they real? Nothing seems real. I am scared. What's the time? Where's the sugar? Can't stop crying. Ants are crawling.

In my ear. Willow's soft voice. *Don't cry mummy. You're not alone.* I can't stop. Don't feel real. I barely hear. I can't remember.

I am labelled. It's situational depression. A psychological derealisation. No fucking joke.

I try everything. Yoga doesn't work. Walking doesn't work. Throw the book. Affirmations don't work.

Thoughts keep bombarding. I feel unworthy. I feel unsafe. Nothing underneath me. I am falling. So I surrender. Accept the advice. Take the pills. Start to function. Brain wakes up. I can hear. I can remember. Happiness is elsewhere.

Start marriage counselling. Find out statistics. Married with autism. A sobering rate. Ninety percent failure.

Ten years together. Ten percent success.

Start separation counselling. Who to blame? Guilt is insidious. Anger is sadness.

Move to Holyrood. Holyrood Street Hampton. Two-bedroom unit. Tell the kids. One week Holyrood. One week Sandringham.

It's my week. Max's first week. He arrives home. Off the bus. He yells loud. *MUMMY'S IN HOLLYWOOD*. I speak softly. *It's Holyrood Max*. He yells louder. *MUMMY'S IN HOLLYWOOD*.

Two years later. Richard is remarried. Cadence starts school. I start university. I study Psychology. I study poetry. I write poems. Read them loud. I am loud.

A lesson ends. I go home. On a train. Back to Holyrood. Holyrood Street Hampton. My week on. It's four o'clock. The bus beeps. Off he comes. Into my arms. I carry him. Even at twelve. Still so little.

With big voice. He yells out. *MUMMY'S IN HOLLYWOOD*. The driver smiles.

It's 3am sharp. Max yells out. *MUMMY CUDDLE ME*. I cuddle him. Cuddle him back. Back to dreams. Return to bed. Snuggle the girls. Then I'm awake. It's light outside. The sun's up. From

my room. I hear laughing. In his room. He is happy. I wander in. I smile softly. I lie down. I ask softly. *Max cuddle mummy?* Max cuddles me.