



Just Forty-Five Minutes

ShuJen Askew

In the chair next to me, my son Kevin bobbed and swayed to the alphabet song before the start of his Zoom class. I matched his enthusiasm, dancing as well until the song finished, and the teacher appeared on the screen with a wide grin.

“Okay, class,” she said, “are you ready for a fun day?”

High-pitched squeals from his classmates blasted through the speakers.

I checked my watch, dreading the next forty-five minutes and praying we make it through the class without a meltdown.

“Roll call.” She held up a nametag. “Who’s this?”

“Amanda,” one of the students shouted.

“That’s right. It’s Amanda. Let’s say hello to Amanda.” The teacher placed the nametag on the whiteboard and sang. “Hello Amanda, hello Amanda, hello Amanda ...”

The class joined in, vocalizing the words as loud as they could.

I glanced over at my four-year-old, who sat with a blank expression on his face.

“Come on,” I said, putting my arm around him. “Sing.”

“Okay, class, who’s this?” She held out a nametag with the name KEVIN on it.

“That’s you, Kevin.” I pointed to the screen.

The kids shouted his name, and he smiled.

“Hello, Kevin.” The teacher clapped. “Hello, Kevin ...”

Kevin drummed to his classmates’ voices with his pencils. I clapped with joy, reveling in his participation, until his banging overpowered the singing and lead chips transformed into small projectiles, striking the wall and me. The IKEA desk I played tug-of-war for with another mother after standing in line for three hours, rocked from side to side, and I swear I saw dents.

“Okay, Kevin, that’s enough.” I reached for the pencils only to have them fly across the room with Kevin giggling.

I glanced at my watch. *Forty more minutes to go.*

The teacher announced the first Halloween project and to pull out the materials. I got the pumpkin cutout, crayons, and glue, but couldn’t find the scissors.

“Okay, class, first cut out your pumpkins.”

I checked the bag once more, sifting through its contents. Paper-clipped papers split apart. School supplies fell out of their bags. Why was I so organized at work, but nothing seemed to be in place when it came to my son’s class. I dumped the entire contents onto the floor.

“Uh, oh.” My son glanced down.

“That’s okay. Mommy will clean it up. Just need the scissors.” I found them meshed in between the cotton balls and Play-Doh. “See.”

I placed them in his right hand and showed him how to cut the paper. He snipped along the pumpkin’s edge until coming across the stem.

“Hold on.” I rotated the paper. “Just follow the line.”

The scissors got stuck, and he grabbed them with both hands.

“Oh, no, not like that.” I tried to show him, but he turned away, snipping at the paper and nearly missing my fingers.

The pumpkin drawing fell apart, and he dropped the scissors, sniffing.

“That’s okay, that’s okay.” I put the scissors away and rearranged the orange pieces into its original pumpkin shape. “See, we just need some tape.”

“Okay, class, let’s move on to stringing beads,” the teacher announced. “Match like colors.”

Or not. I glanced at my watch, *thirty more minutes to go.*

I pulled out the baggie of colorful beads and pipe cleaners then worked with Kevin to string the green beads through first. He got five all by himself.

“You’re doing good. How about the red ones?”

I tried to give him a bead, but he pulled the entire string away then swung it over his head like a rope.

“No. No. No.” I raised my hand to stop him, but he swung faster until all the beads flew off.

I turned the laptop toward him, making sure I was out of the camera’s view, then glanced at my watch once again. *Twenty minutes left.*

I slumped back in the chair. Whose bright idea was it to have online classes for autistic children? My son doesn’t pay attention or even care about what’s on the screen. I wanted to yell for my husband to help, but how could I when he spent the entire morning with our five-year-old daughter’s kindergarten class while working from home.

Stupid pandemic.

“Train ... train ...” Kevin slid on the floor in front of the many toy train sets I snagged on Amazon when I thought the world was ending. Everyone bought toilet paper while I bought toys so my kids wouldn’t be bored.

“Okay, class, let’s string the yellow beads.” The teacher continued.

Instead of following, I placed the laptop on the floor in front of Kevin and went into the bathroom. Tears welled in my eyes. I couldn’t believe what was happening. He was doing well in preschool with the one-on-one instruction, behavior health services to tackle his throwing, and speech therapy to enhance his vocabulary. The First Five—they termed it—the most critical years of a child’s life. Now, where does that leave my son?

A knock at the door startled me.

Ten minutes left.

“Hold on.” I wiped the tears from my eyes and opened it.

Kevin stood there, holding a magnifying glass wrapped in plastic. “Open, please.”

I looked at him, confused. *Where did he get the toy?* Instead of asking, I put on a pretend happy face and opened it.

I then followed him into the living room, where he got down on the floor in front of his laptop and put the magnifying glass up to his eye, copying the teacher.

My heart melted. I smiled big then got on the floor next to him. “What do you see, Kevin?”

