

## Untitled Story by Joni St. John

She knew something had happened the moment her son stepped out of the school. Even though she was parked in the farthest corner of the parking lot, some distance away from the school door, she could tell by his downed head, his slumped shoulders, and his frenetic walk that he was upset. She wondered what it could be this time. He had often come home from school angry, defeated, and wanting to never go back. Because she was parked so far away, she had a couple of minutes to steady her mind. She took some deep breaths and prepared herself for the oncoming difficulties her son was sure to present.

She had often been irritated by her son's insistence that she park far away from the school door, but she also understood why. He was a seventeen-year-old senior who had yet to get his driver's license, and he didn't want his fellow classmates see him get picked up by his mother. Her son not having a driver's license, however, was not something she worried about. In fact, it eased her mind a little. Her son had obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), and she worried that there might be times when he would get too distracted to drive safely. She remembered several times when they had gone out for him to practice driving and he had turned her and yelled out "bad thought," his shorthand version of seeking reassurance when his obsessions were bothering him. During those times it was obvious that his mind was reeling with obsessions and was not focused on the road.

For the last year, school hadn't been easy for her son because his OCD had been in control for the most part of it. He had kept going to school even though it was difficult, a fact she often admired him for. Even though his OCD had lately gotten better, she still figured that it was the reason why he was looking angry as he walked towards her. Any number of possible OCD triggers passed quickly through her mind. During the last year, her son's OCD had latched onto sex as its topic by which to torture her son. She often saw this as adding insult to injury. It's bad enough to be a teenage boy who has OCD but to have it grab onto sex wasn't fair. At the time of life when he should be exploring sexual ideas and having normal teenage experiences, he was terrified by the very idea of sex. And, she knew that school was rife with sexual triggers for her son's OCD. The endless dirty jokes that boys tell each other, the stories they tell about their "experiences," and even, the way girls dress these days all had served as triggers for her son's obsessions.

Even though she had tried hard and had asked her son many questions, she could never quite understand her son's OCD. When asked, the best he could explain was that his "bad thoughts" caused him to feel extreme shame, guilt, and fear. And because of his OCD, he feared that he was an immoral person who was capable of hurting someone in a sexual way. He actually thought that he was some sort of sexual pervert who couldn't be trusted. Of course, she had tried to tell him differently. She repeatedly told him that because he had these obsessions it didn't mean he would ever act on them. People with OCD don't hurt others, and the very fact that he was so worried about his behavior assured her that he wasn't someone dangerous. But true to OCD, he couldn't hear her at all, and her reassurances only served to make him worse.

As he got closer to the car, she tried to read his face. Because she had been the one closest to him for most of his life, she knew him well. She had even learned to differentiate his expressions; his OCD caused his face to appear in a way she knew well. Whereas others would probably interpret his expressions as anger, she knew differently. And, because her son had kept his OCD well hidden from the world, no one else ever saw the truth. All they saw was the negativity that often flashed on his face. Even family members, who she had told about son's OCD, often said things to her like, "He looks fine to me. I don't think there's anything wrong with him." She had also often wondered what others thought of her son's behavior, if anyone ever suspected that he had a mental illness or if most likely, they just thought he was a difficult and defiant kid. Because his OCD often got in the way, he often appeared like he wasn't listening and because of that his teachers often berated him for not paying attention or for not hearing what the homework assignment was. OCD even got in the way of an activity as simple as cross country running. He had always loved running, and she had hoped that by participating in this sport, he could gain some more confidence. But no, his OCD wouldn't even let him alone enough to enjoy a simple activity like running.

If asked, she could never have explained what it was about his face that said, "I'm having obsessions that are hurting me." Was it how he held his eyes, how he frowned, or how he twisted his head back and forth? She really couldn't say. And now, she looked closely at her son to see if he was wearing this OCD-induced face.

As he opened the car door and winged his school bag towards the back seat, she saw. It was not his OCD but something else. She was little surprised by this but then realized that she really shouldn't have been. After all, he had been doing better. About six months ago, she had convinced him to try the therapy that all the OCD experts had said had a good chance of working, exposure and response therapy (ERP). Even though he had resisted at first, he slowly started in and had used ERP to push his OCD back. Whenever she thought about their experiences with ERP she smiled and even felt a surge of pride. ERP was undoubtedly difficult. This therapy forces people to face what they fear the most, and her son had done exactly that. Time after time, he had faced down his OCD and now, it wasn't nearly as large as it once had been. He wasn't yet done with ERP, however, because he still had OCD symptoms.

"How's school," she ventured, trying to keep her voice calm. Her son, not surprisingly, didn't answer but only grunted and stared out the window. She knew better than to try again; it would only irritate her son and not get them anywhere. She had learned long ago that at times like these, it was best to stay quiet and not try to engage her son. The only thing she could do now was to drive home and hope that her son would either work out for himself what was bothering him or would tell her when he was ready.

"Aaron got into MIT, Paige got into Yale, and Steven got into Harvard," her son suddenly spit out about half way home. Now she knew the problem. Her son's anger was centered on where his classmates had gotten into school and where he hadn't. She also suspected that her son's anger wasn't so much centered on jealousy but on his OCD and how it had affected his high school performance. Because his OCD had caused him so much trouble throughout high school, his grades weren't great and he hadn't been able to participate in many extracurricular activities. And since his teachers negatively viewed him because of his behaviors, he hadn't dared ask any of them for letters of recommendation. Because of

OCD, her son's record couldn't begin to match those who had applied to the prestigious universities so her son had instead, applied to their local community college. Even though her son was disappointed with this decision, she wasn't. She thought it was best to keep her son close for a few more years. OCD is tricky, and she worried that it would flare up under the stresses of college and if he was far away, she wouldn't be able to help him through it.

"Good for them," she replied to her son. "They worked hard, and it's what they wanted." In response, her son only glared back at her. She decided not to say anything else. Her son was hurting, and she wanted nothing more than to soothe him. But, she knew that if she said much more it would only make him angry. If she had thought it would help, she would have told her son that she was proud of him and that the accomplishments of those classmates didn't impress her. What her son had been through with OCD and then, with ERP were amazing. She knew her son's strength and knew that what he had accomplished was something impressive. But, she also realized that these accomplishments weren't the ones that could be put down on college applications or were even ones that would be openly discussed. There is still so much stigma surrounding mental illnesses that she feared that if they had ever talked about her son's OCD that it would have harmed him more than helped him. She knew that most people didn't understand mental illness and worried that her son would suffer from that ignorance if they had ever revealed her son's OCD.

As soon as they got home, her son slammed the car door and disappeared into the house. She sat for a while wondering how to handle this latest problem. Maybe there was nothing to do this time but to wait it out. She was sure her son would work through his disappointments. He had before; after all, he had dealt with the awful hands that OCD had given him and had found ways to keep going. He had even survived the many ERP exercises that had been thrown at him. Maybe he would gain some perspective of his accomplishments in time.

But as she walked into the house, she suddenly felt her own anger bubbling up. It wasn't fair that her son had to deal with OCD and its treatment when his classmates all seemed so carefree. She had also gotten so tired of listening to his classmate's parents openly brag about their kids and all the wonderful things they were going to do. She had often sat quietly by, nodding and smiling when she really wanted to tell them off. "Why do you all think your kids have done so much? What's so impressive about straight A's or the endless activities your kids have done? Of course they succeeded. Their minds were unencumbered by a mental illness, so why should we be amazed they did well?"

She had hoped that as the evening wore on her anger would fade, but it didn't. In fact, it was growing. At one point she wondered if she was now more angry and disappointed than her son was. He had looked less angry when she saw him throughout the evening, but he had remained quiet. She suspected that he was working through his anger by himself, and chances are by morning, he would be fine. It was now her emotions that she had to find a way to calm. But she soon realized that her usual activities, reading, watching TV, cleaning, and eating all failed to help calm her. For some reason her son's disappointment in his college choices had hit her hard. But who or what exactly was she mad at? Certainly she hated the OCD but that was now under control. Was it her son's teachers for not seeing what her son was dealing with, was it the college admission committees who insisted on high standards,

or was it the world at large that still placed a stigma on having a mental illness? She didn't know and suspected that there were many reasons why she felt frustrated.

She needed to find an outlet for her frustrations, but what would work? Without even fully understanding what she hoped to accomplish, she decided to write out her thoughts. Maybe if she detailed her son's accomplishments in some form, like a letter, they could become more vivid in her mind and right now, she need to remember her son's successes. But she also needed to share these ideas with her son. Writing just for her wasn't going to help in this situation; she knew this because she had tried before. She also knew that directly addressing her son wasn't going to work. In the past when she had tried to write a letter to her son, he had scoffed at her and refused to even open it. So if directly writing to her son wouldn't work, she would have to try something different. Maybe she could assume the identity of someone else, someone her son would likely pay attention to. But who? When she thought through her own past and wondered who she would have paid attention to as a teenager, it occurred to her that maybe she shouldn't pick someone personal who would directly address her son. Several times in her past, she realized, she would have loved to have read those letters that had been requested on her behalf. In other words, she would have wanted to read her own letters of recommendation. She knew this was a crazy idea, that is, to impersonate her son's mentor and write him a letter of recommendation for a university admission committee. But with OCD, "crazy" just might work.

Dear Sir or Madam,

It is my great pleasure to write this letter on behalf of Mr. Raymond St. John. I have known Ray for several years and am pleased to have this opportunity to list his many accomplishments. Throughout all my years of mentoring, I have never witnessed a young man as incredible as Ray, and I doubt that I ever will again.

No doubt your prestigious university receives applications from students who have incredible records. They have perfect grade point averages and have taken all the difficult courses they possibly could have; they have volunteered nonstop in their communities, they have participated in endless extracurricular activities; and I'm sure many have assumed leadership roles in their many activities. But, I ask you this one question: How many of those students can demonstrate via their impressive records true courage? Have they ever faced down that which was terrorizing them? Have they had to face each day with a fear so intense that they wondered if they might not make it through? Ray has. I have watched Ray battle demons that would derail most adults I know. He has shown me more courage that most people will never have or need.

Ray has a condition called obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). With OCD, one has to deal with recurring obsessive thoughts that cause tremendous anxiety, and to heal from these obsessions, one has to undergo a therapy called exposure and response prevention therapy (ERP). Time and space does not allow me to describe the many aspects of ERP but in short, it entails the facing down of fear. During ERP, one has to purposely and aggressively engage that which terrorizes them and stay with that fear until it lessens its grip. This, of course, doesn't happen with just a few "exposures" to the fear but

requires several hundreds of them over a prolonged period of time. Ray has successfully undergone this therapy. I personally cannot imagine a greater demonstration of courage than what I have seen Ray do with his ERP. I can assure you that there is nothing that Ray can't handle. If he can face the many pains of ERP, then imagine just how brilliantly he could do with other challenges.

Throughout several years of high school, Ray has had to deal with OCD and its treatment. Even with all these burdens, however, Ray has managed to obtain a decent record. I fully understand that his record doesn't match those of many students who are now applying to your university, but it is impressive when considering Ray's circumstances. He kept going with all his classes, strove to take some of the harder classes, and towards the end of high school when he had beaten back his OCD, he was participating in extracurricular activities. Even with all that OCD had taken away from him, he kept moving forward in any way that he could. Most of us would have broken under such a burden, but not Ray. His strength, in addition to his raw courage, is impressive. It was my privilege to have been a part of Ray's journey, and I'm certain that I will never bear witness to such ability again.

I have wished many times that others could have seen Ray's courage and determination. But because Ray was dealing with a mental illness he strove to keep it quiet and away from others. I understand why he insisted on this. There is still stigma surrounding conditions like OCD and those who have these illnesses have often face discrimination. Several times Ray has told me that he didn't want others to know about his OCD because he didn't want them to treat him any differently. He also worried that he might not be taken serious if others knew about his condition. But, he also told me that he doesn't think this situation should continue and has plans to do something about it. As a further demonstration of Ray's courage, he plans to write a book about his experiences and show how he dealt with his OCD during his high school years. He realizes that others are suffering like he did and now wants to reach out and do what he can to lessen their pain. His compassion, in addition to his strength and courage, is beyond what most his age can demonstrate.

In many ways, Ray has now become my mentor. As I have watched him battle his many challenges I have often wished that I had his courage and strength. How much better would the world be if we all could face down our fears and move forward like Ray has done? I can definitely say that my life has been enriched by Ray, and I am certain that as Ray makes his way in this world, he will touch and improve the lives of many.

If your university fails to grant Ray entry, then the loss is yours. Ray will succeed wherever he goes; he has already faced his greatest challenges and there is no reason to think that he won't continue to make amazing progress. The question now is simply this: Who will benefit from the presence of this incredible young man? It could be your university. If even a fraction of your student body possessed Ray's skills, then your university would become an undisputed leader in many arenas.

Sincerely,

Dr. \_\_\_\_\_

As she slipped the letter under her son's bedroom door, she had no idea how it would be received. Would her son even read it? And if he did, would he understand what she was trying to show him? But, she was sure about one thing. It was good that she wrote it. She no longer felt angry and in fact, she felt stronger than she had in a long time. She smiled as she realized something: Her son, in many ways, had become her mentor. Writing this letter had unlocked some hidden strength within her, and she now owed this to her son.