



# Caught in the Current

“What’s wrong with Will?”

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**M**y five-year-old son is afraid of mascots. Dale and I took him to a Boston Red Sox game this summer and I promised Will repeatedly that we wouldn’t see Wally, The Green Monster. After two hours in the car and a long walk from the parking garage, we entered the stadium and I watched my son’s face

fill with fear.

“You’re not going to see Wally,” I insisted, “Stop worrying.” I was irritated. This was supposed to be fun.

“It’s only a man in a costume,” I told him, and before I could say more, we were swept into the stadium with a wave of bodies. And even though I was gripping his hand, I forgot about Will. Distracted by a sea of bodies, I watched the faces, listened to the sounds, (the heavily accented voices) smelled the pepperoni pizza and draft beer. I followed my husband as we threaded our way toward the seats (so close to the dugout!) and didn’t notice what we were heading toward. Instead, I felt a tightening in my hand, and a weight on my arm as Will pulled me to a stop. There was Wally, right in front of us. My son was a leaf caught by a branch in the river, spinning in place instead of moving forward with the current.

Mascots were just the beginning. Field trips were the next activity crossed off our list. Birthday parties followed soon after. I shouldn’t have been surprised. It all started years ago with playgrounds and play groups and story hour. Desperate to be out of the house with my toddler, I’d crouch down next to another child in the sand and start digging. “Look, how fun!” I’d smile at Will. I watched the other mothers talk while their children played, feeling resentful. I just wanted a minute to stand alone, I just wanted someone else to play with my child. At play groups I sat on the floor making towers of wooden blocks with the other toddlers, while my own buried his head in my lap. We never made it longer than 10 minutes at the local library’s story hour. What was the point? I could read to him at home where he wouldn’t be clinging to my neck, burying his face in my shoulder.

After five years, I was suffocating. I was dragged down by the anchor of my child’s fear. Pre-school birthday invitations seemed to arrive in the mail on a weekly basis and each time my stomach sank. I had become all too familiar with the party routine of standing in the corner as Will cried until the clown/kangaroo/pirate/superhero was gone. His classmates raced around yelling and laughing, occasionally stopping at our feet to ask,

“What’s wrong with Will?” Standing in the corner with my son, I waved them away with a big smile.

“He’s fine,” I said. I was five years old all over again, standing on the edge of a pool at a classmate’s birthday party, too scared to join in. Watching the other kids splash and play, I hated my fear and I hated myself.

“No more!” I pounded my fist into the steering wheel as we drove away from the party, forcing the painful image from my memory. I was angry.

“Why do we even bother going?” I yelled. Looking into the rearview mirror I saw Will’s face, relieved that we were gone, worried that I didn’t love him. It didn’t matter that the Red Sox had won the game, that the four-year-old turned five, my child was losing.

Checking out books from the library on anxiety, I began to feel empowered. Driving to pre-school, as Will whimpered in his car seat, I used the coping techniques I’d read about; *breathe deeply*, I commanded, *count to ten*, *think happy thoughts*. I bought him a watch and set the alarm to go off when I’d be there to pick him up. We wrote notes to his teachers to remind them that Will was going home at lunch, and he clutched the piece of paper in his hands as we pulled into the parking lot, his face full of fear. This wasn’t working.

“It’s only a couple of hours,” I said, wanting to scream. Driving away I was guilty, full of blame, angry and frustrated that I didn’t know how to help my son. Will wasn’t the only one losing.

Christmas vacation meant a long break from school, and a break from worrying about birthday parties, mascots and field trips. We flew to New Hampshire in hopes of a white Christmas, and (thanks to global warming) spent a lot of time watching old movies with my dad instead of skiing. There I was on the screen at Will’s age, dancing in dress-up clothes on my parent’s bed. I danced like there was no one watching, like I was happy, and worry free. Will wanted to watch the movies again and again, and we sat side by side in the dark mesmerized by my childhood self. Turning on the lights I could almost remember it, the dancing, the smell and touch of the old clothes, the feeling of being free. Why had I forgotten this? I painted the image into my mind with thick, heavy brush strokes, deliberately covering the memory of being scared at the edge of the pool.

Dad, Will and I went for a hike through the woods along the rushing river. I walked slowly, protecting my face from the branches and making sure to step in the right places on the overgrown trail. Will followed my dad up ahead, jumping over logs and climbing up rocks as if he’d done it before. He was free, fearless and full of light. I stopped at the edge of the river and reached with my walking stick to free a floating, yellow leaf from a jumble of branches. Will yelled for me to “Hurry up!” and I watched him scamper up a huge, slanted rock at the edge of the river. I had to stop myself from yelling, “Careful!” Will stood, at the top of the rock, his body electric, filled with the thrill of the height. Dad hunched forward to listen to the excitement in Will’s voice, and as they stood at the edge of the rock I could hear Will say,

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

And he jumped.