

# One of Us

by

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## One of Us

Judith looked around at the bleak, magnolia-walled civic hall. It was quite non-descript, as halls go. Bland, neutral. The sort of place you could convince yourself was fine for a modestly priced wedding reception, provided you could decorate it to within an inch of its life.

Not that it was adorned for a wedding reception today. Today, it was definitely unadorned; positively basic. A symphony of boring neutrality. The only notable things were a couple of dozen trestle tables set out for a residents' association table top sale. What would have been called a jumble sale in Judith's younger days. Eager young men and women were setting out their non-descript stalls. Bric a brac, books, clothes, collectables, and, slightly more interestingly, a home-made soap stall.

Nothing to single the place out at all. Just like the stuff she'd brought along herself. Unexceptional, but good quality. Stuff other people might want to buy at Tamsin's, her goddaughter's, neighbourhood sale.

The double swing doors at the end nearest the road opened and an older man, pursued by two young boys, aged around ten and twelve, entered, carrying a box of paper chains. She watched abstractedly as they started to put them up in great loops around the walls.

I've been here before, Judith thought.

The thought was so sudden that it hit her almost like a physical blow.

Have I been here before?

She seemed to be thrown into an internal debate. Why had she thought the place was familiar? When could she possibly have been here before?

She started unloading things onto the table that Tamsin had indicated was hers, and tried to shake off the strange feeling. What was it, some sort of *deja vu*?

With her first cardboard box unloaded, she studied the hall more intently.

On the left, on the wall furthest away from the road, was a door marked ‘office’. The sign was old, in ‘70s style black and gold lettering, and had been carefully painted around over the years to save replacing it. That door should have been a brighter blue, she thought, then checked herself. Why?

On the other side of the back wall – the right – was a second door, marked ‘kitchen’. The sign was in a different font, but it too had been painted around with care. Next to that was a serving hatch of some sort, with a roller shutter, firmly down. As she watched, an elderly, but vigorous, lady appeared, sliding the shutter up, opening the hatch to reveal a small kitchen; before setting a small blackboard on the counter.

That’s where we used to help ourselves to tea and coffee, Judith thought.

The burst of memory was overpowering. Even stronger was the wave of emotion that came with it.

“Are you alright, Auntie Jude?” Her goddaughter, Tamsin, loomed into view, guiding her to the nearest chair. Judith realised she had swayed slightly. She forced a smile. “Yes, I just realised, I’ve been here before.”

Tamsin smiled. “Well, that’s not so very surprising, we’re only five miles from where you used to live.”

This was true enough. Tamsin and her husband had bought their first flat surprisingly close to where Judith and Simon had lived when they were first married. They had talked about the amazing coincidence several times. This was just a few miles from where Judith and Simon had had their children. Where Tommy had been born. It was Tommy who had brought her to this very hall, thirty years before, Judith realised.

“I came to a speech and language group here. For Tommy. When he’d just been diagnosed. It took the wind out of my sails for a moment.”

Tamsin nodded. “It must have been a very emotional time,” she ventured. Dear girl. She’d always been so mature and understanding. Had always been so good with Tommy, too.

Judith also nodded, suddenly not trusting herself to speak. Tamsin looked at her and smiled gently. “Cup of tea, I think,” she said, “You sit here quietly and I’ll bring it to you.” Judith squeezed her hand gratefully. Tamsin kissed her cheek then went through the right-hand door, to the kitchen. Judith realised with a jolt, that Tamsin was very much at home here. Here, where Judith herself had

felt so at sea, so very strange, and so hurt.

It had been a time of mixed emotions for all those young mums. Judith tried to remember their names. Mara, the beautiful Jamaican girl with the little boy about Tommy's age. Cathy, with that cute little girl with the very strong glasses. Then there was the foster mother with the curiously named little boy. What was it? Rocky. Yep. Rocky, poor child. Then there was... She could barely remember the others.

But she could certainly remember the feelings they had shared. There were six or seven of them. All young mums, although one of them had been a foster mum. All mums of newly diagnosed pre-school children with some form of speech delay. One child had that condition where he would learn a word, but then forget it when he learned the next word. What was that called? Judith couldn't remember.

It was probably called something else entirely now anyway. I'd have known it at the time, she thought. Strange how you could settle into knowing about your own child as an individual, yet not remember all the stuff you read up on when everything was so raw and emotional. So... so... not what you signed up for.

Cathy's little girl had some sort of speech delay. Cathy had shared how heart-breaking it had been to see all her family treat her little daughter as different to all the other kids in the family. That had been in the early days. The days when they were all dealing with the shock of diagnosis.

Reeling, angry; like Judith herself. Even though – she had known. Long before anybody had said the word 'autism' in relation to Tommy, she'd known. But she hadn't been ready for anyone to say it. Because once it was out there, spoken, it would be real.

Here in this drab, unremarkable civic facility, it had become real. For all of them. Here was where they had all learned to say those words. Autism, Fragile X, Asperger's, other things – some of them names that weren't even used anymore, probably. Not these days. But back then, they had needed to be able to say them. To be able to speak them aloud without losing it emotionally.

How angry they'd all been that first meeting. Except, perhaps, for Rocky's foster mum. Undoubtedly, she was very fond of him, but it wasn't the same. Not the same as your own offspring turning out to have this huge burden that would follow them through life. This thing, this – autism or whatever – was going to

blight Tommy's life. And Judith was both cut to the quick and mad as hell about it.

The shutter rattled again, and Judith saw the scene as vividly as if she were there now. Tommy, aged three, played with toys taken from a box placed in the centre of a ring of chairs. The six, or was it seven? – young mums, sat around nervously eyeing each other and watching the children. We were so angry at the world, Judith thought.

Six sessions, nearly thirty years ago. It was, what? Some sort of group therapy for mums of newly diagnosed children, Judith supposed.

But it nearly hadn't got off the ground, we all felt so cross; so very hurt. Judith's cheeks burned with shame as she thought about how grumpy they'd all been towards the nice woman running the group. She was a senior speech therapist, highly qualified. They had all taken – what? – not an instant dislike to the poor woman, but, an instant sense of mistrust? They had none of them felt there was anything she could really teach them, except maybe – what on earth was that foster mother's name?

Judith thought hard. No, it wouldn't come. But one of the other girls was Annie, and the one with the dark brown hair was Claire. Memory could be so strange.

Anyway, they'd all sat there, that first week, with faces like thunder. Judith, Mara, Cathy, Claire, Annie, Rocky's foster mum and the other two. Yes two. A quiet Asian girl called Poonam, with sparkling brown eyes, and one more, a girl with dark, close-cropped hair and purple boots. Not six or seven; eight of them. They'd all sat there, and all eight of them had faces like thunder, wondering what on earth was the point and how could this help anything?

How could this suave, well-groomed, middle-aged, middle class woman possibly understand what it was like to experience your child receiving a diagnosis like autism? Judith had already been told there was a chance Tommy wouldn't speak much at all anyway. Why had someone gathered the eight of them together? So that this woman could tell them what they should be doing from now on? How would she actually know? Theory perhaps, yes; but practice?

She – Elizabeth, was it? – asked each of them in turn to talk a bit about their children. The young women obliged somewhat sullenly. Rocky's mum went first – it wasn't quite so emotional for her, it seemed. Not a judgement on

her motherhood at least. She talked about how he'd come to her with a slight speech delay which had never improved, so it became more noticeable and severe as he got older. "Wouldn't you like to adopt him?" Elizabeth asked at one point. The young woman looked at bit awkward. Put on the spot, really, thought Judith. A bit unfair. "Well, we would and we wouldn't," Rocky's foster mum replied. Honestly – Rocky – what was his birth mother thinking? "We are very fond of him, but we had decided we were going to foster; and if we adopted him, we wouldn't be able to do that anymore. We wouldn't have room." Everyone nodded sympathetically.

Cathy spoke falteringly about her little girl and how mean her brother had been, inadvertently, out of ignorance, mentioning the word 'retarded.' Judith had leapt in, saying that all that 'retarded' really meant was 'late', and she might very well get on as well as all the other children, given time, for all her brother knew. Mara also leapt in. "Your little girl is absolutely adorable," she said. There was a fairly enthusiastic murmur of agreement.

Elizabeth invited Mara to share. Mara looked intently at her. "How about you tell us something about one of your children?" she replied, voicing a hesitancy that most of them felt. After all, this was pretty personal stuff they were being asked to share, by a total stranger, in front of more total strangers. Mara had only said what everyone was thinking.

Elizabeth looked around the group. "Would that make you feel more at ease?" she asked. Everyone nodded, even Rocky's foster mum. Caroline. That was her name. Caroline.

Even Caroline nodded.

"Alright," Elizabeth agreed. "Which of my children?"

"The eldest?" offered Judith, with a shrug. Everyone nodded again. More shrugs.

Elizabeth nodded. "Okay. My husband and I were married for two years when we had our eldest. A little girl. We named her Amy. She was a pretty baby, with blue hair and golden curls. She looked like the sort of baby they used to put on knitting patterns. And she was a delight. When Amy was two, we had a little boy that we called Richard. She took to being a big sister very quickly. She could say his name quite well by the time he was six weeks old."

Judith felt a stab of pain. Tommy at three, had very little language. It wasn't easy hearing little children younger than him speaking words, sentences.

Tommy mostly just pointed or grunted. Hearing about a child who was proficient with language was always hard.

“They adored each other,” Elizabeth continued. “They were inseparable.”

An ideal family. A perfect life. Hard to hear about it. A glance around the room told Judith that they all felt about the same.

“When Amy was four and a bit, she started to get really tired. I was expecting our third child by then, so it was quite an anxious time. We took her to the GP and he, in turn, sent us to see a specialist.”

The group gasped. Or was it just Judith? No, all of them were listening intently.

“Within a month, she had been diagnosed with Leukaemia. There wasn’t a huge amount they could do in those days. About a week before she should have started school, Amy died.” A single tear slid silently down Elizabeth’s face. “Our second son, Paul, was born about two months later. It was a difficult time.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Mara, and was echoed by all the others.

So here, in this pinnacle of blandness, Judith had learned not to judge whether people understood her own tragedy. Here they had all learned to trust each other. Strangers, who could be a help and a support.

A few weeks later, Cathy reported back to them how her daughter – Daisy – had charmed everyone at a family gathering by joining in playing with all the other children there. Not talking, but just having fun with them; chasing them, dancing to music and interacting. Her brother had carried Daisy, piggy-back style, enchanted by her.

There were other stories, but Judith didn’t remember any of them. What she did remember was the emotion. The very slight easing of the anger. The hope that eventually started to grow. Just like a tiny acorn. The learning to shoulder the huge responsibility of Tommy’s diagnosis. The learning to accept help. The realisation that she wasn’t entirely, not absolutely, completely, alone.

The single tear that rolled down that poor woman’s face.

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