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Christmas with an Autistic Twist

By Jennifer Peterson

As I write this account, it is the morning after a family Christmas party held at a Chinese restaurant. Everyone had a wonderful time at the party and our two small children were still smiling by the end of the evening. That was far from the case last year.

Our son was two and a half years old at Christmas in 2005. A few months prior, he had been diagnosed with high-functioning autism and was receiving occupational and speech therapy. Thomas had always been uneasy around new situations and crowds, so it came as no surprise that he didn't have a good time. However, we had a lot of strikes against us before even stepping foot into the restaurant.

Many parents of autistic children know that in order to tolerate—let alone enjoy a new outing—everything must magically fall into place to make the child feel comfortable. Visual schedules, favorite toys, suitable distractions and the child's personal comfort level must be included in any plans. This did not happen for Thomas. In fact, several things that we did not plan for had happened that night, many of which were severely aversive to him.

We had a two hour drive to get to our destination and had hoped he would nap during the car ride. He did not, preferring to enjoy the bleak December scenery along US-10. Upon arrival, we checked into our hotel room and settled in for another attempted nap. Thomas is also tube-fed and had a feeding later than scheduled. On top of that, he did not fall asleep until 15 minutes before we had to leave for the dinner party. So far, we already had three strikes against the possibility of having a successful family occasion. Disaster awaited.

Christmas dinner at Pi's in Midland has long since been a tradition for my husband's side of the family. This had been Thomas's first year in attendance due to prior holiday obligations the last couple of years. To say that he was slightly bewildered to see 40 strange faces would be an understatement. Many of the people were happy to see us there and clamored to see the latest additions to our family. All of the loud and boisterous greetings were too much to bear and Thomas sank deeper into the hood of his winter jacket.

Once we were seated, he refused the high chair, preferring his father's lap. I was preoccupied with trying to feed our infant daughter while my husband attempted to keep Thomas from wriggling away. I knew from the first spoonfuls of soup that it would be an

uphill battle trying to keep him calm for the rest of the evening. Within five minutes, my husband and I were taking turns walking our son around the lobby so he could relax. Meanwhile, the other parent would scarf down as much food as they could and try to feed our daughter at the same time. Luckily, there were more than enough relatives who wanted turns with the baby, so we had one less person to worry about.

Thomas, like a lot of autistic individuals, contends with sensory issues. Anything too visually “busy,” loud noises, boisterous people, and strangers impeding on his personal space make our son very nervous and prone to a meltdown. Combine the previous interruptions of the day’s routine and we had the makings for a spectacular disaster.

It was my turn to guide Thomas around the lobby when he decided to look into the glass of the entryway. It was dark outside, so he was able to see the reflection of the lights on the inside in the glass. He loved it! Seeing reflected light was one of his favorite stims at home, so I thought that he could settle down a bit. Wrong!

What happened next seemed to go in slow motion and there was nothing neither Thomas nor I could do to stop it. As we were next to the doors of the restaurant, we heard the slight jingle of sleigh bells. We then heard the heavy crunch of boots on the snowy pavement outside. Then we saw red...lots of red.

The door opened and the Santa my father-in-law had hired for the event bellowed, “HO, HO, HO!!!” Thomas froze in sheer fright, not knowing what to do. Santa bent down toward Thomas, asking, “And who is this little fellow, hmmm?”

Just so the reader is aware, my father-in-law had given Santa a list of children in attendance who were afraid of him. Each of their names was on a list, marked with an “X” so Santa would know not to make a big scene around them. Thomas was one of those children but Santa had no way of knowing who he was yet.

I quickly scuttled Thomas to my side and stuttered out an excuse to Santa and Mrs. Claus, something to the effect of, “Sorry, he’s a little shy.” They understood and proceeded to make their grand entrance into our family’s dining area.

Thomas was near tears at this point when a waitress quickly approached him. If you have ever seen “A Christmas Story” on television, the family in the movie has dinner at a Chinese restaurant where the wait staff had very thick accents. Our experience was eerily similar.

The waitress came nearly nose-to-nose with Thomas and had intended to cheer him up but only made him more fearful. She put her hand on his arm and said in a loud, thick accent, “YOU GO SEE SANTA NOW! HE GIVE YOU LOTS OF TOYS! SANTA MAKE YOU FEEL ALL BETTER!”

Thomas went from silent shock, to fright, to screaming in a matter of seconds. Again, I pulled him to my side and stammered out once more that he was “just shy.” I wasn’t about to go into the whole “my son has autism” explanation.

Watching the scene transpire in front of me was simultaneously tragic and hilarious. We left soon thereafter and went back to the hotel. Our family had made the effort to attend this event despite knowing that this was a very possible outcome. It was good knowing we had taken the chance to get out of the house but remembered with the lingering ache that it was at our child’s expense.

This year was much better by far. Thomas was a little subdued at first but we had brought along some of his favorite books to read and he was able to play with his cousins after they had finished eating. Most helpful was the year of therapies and preschool that Thomas has completed. He is now able to relate to the outside world a little easier and actually enjoy himself. A good time was had by all.

I was told one time that every family affected by autism has these occasions happen at one time or another. Despite our success at holiday gatherings this year, I am not about to think that the events from last Christmas will never happen again. Whatever happens, I’m sure it will eventually make fodder for a good story.

Jennifer Peterson is an at-home parent and uses her experience as a Paralegal to ensure the medical and educational needs for her children. Her son Thomas is a delightfully complex child with the diagnoses of multiple food allergies, Eosinophilic Gastroenteritis with a GJ tube for enteral feedings, High Functioning Autism, and most recently Mitochondrial Disease (Complex II and IV). Despite everything he has been through, Thomas remains a chipper, smart and cute little kiddo with an infectious smile. Although her family has been dealt the tougher hand, they make it by leaning on their offbeat sense of humor, which is the basis for sharing this story.