

Echolalia

By Lynn S. M. <lois_and_clark_fan_at_verizon.net (Replace_at_with @)>

Rated: G

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Description: What do Superman, pumpkins and light switches have in common, and can Superman help someone he's never even met?

Standard disclaimer: Superman does not belong to me. He belongs to DC Comics and Warner Brothers Studio. One quote in the story was taken from the Lois & Clark episode "I'm Looking Through You." Linus van Pelt and Peanuts belong to Charles Schulz. I am just borrowing Superman and Linus for a little not-for-profit fun.

Non-standard disclaimer and warning: Although this story takes place in the L&C universe, none of the show's characters make an appearance. Superman does play a role in the story, but only indirectly.

My thanks to my beta readers Female Hawk, Virginia R., and Anti-Kryptonite. The story was made much stronger and clearer by their suggestions. My thanks, too, to eagle-eyed Erin, my GE for this story. I am amazed by your ability to spot extraneous commas and spaces!

I love my brother, but I hate pumpkins, flicked light switches, and Superman.

OK, maybe I don't hate them, but I am really, really tired of them. You see, they are my brother Todd's obsessions. Mom says not to call them that; she says to call them his 'special interests.' She says that people with OCD have obsessions; people with autism have special interests. Don't ask me what the difference is; I sure don't know.

Let me tell you about them. His interest in pumpkins started last Halloween. Mom bought a plastic pumpkin that she put on the dining room table as a centerpiece. Todd loved it. When November came, Mom tried to put it away for the year, but Todd wouldn't let her. He kept getting it out of the basement and putting it back on the table. Even though it's May now, we still have the silly thing in the middle of the table.

What's worse is that whenever we leave the house, he insists on taking it with him. It's embarrassing going to the mall and having your kid brother hauling around a plastic pumpkin. But if Mom and Dad try to make him leave it at home, he has a meltdown. And let me tell you, if you have never seen a ten-year-old kid have a fall-on-the-floor-kicking-and-screaming-at-the-top-of-his-lungs meltdown, consider yourself lucky. If Todd is forced to leave the pumpkin at home anyway, he will keep carrying on like that until we get home, even if we are gone for hours. Our parents tried that once, so I know. Only once, though. Then they decided it just wasn't worth the hassle, and he was allowed to bring the pumpkin with him after that.

But the worst part is the ride on the school bus. We've been riding the bus together since last month. Before that, he had been in a school just for kids with autism, but last month they moved him into a special classroom in my school. His new class has three other kids with autism, one teacher, and one paraprofessional. He's not around neurotypical kids once he is in school, and that's a good thing. The neurotypical kids are really

mean to him. They tease him and call him 'Linus.' I'm not sure whether they do that because his pumpkin reminds them of the security blanket that Linus van Pelt always carried around in the comic strip 'Peanuts,' or whether it was because of Linus' belief in the Great Pumpkin. Either way, it hurts me to watch them tease him like that.

And it bothers Todd, too. I doubt the other kids know they are getting to him. Teasing doesn't make Todd cry, and his face is a mask not given to showing his feelings. But I can tell the teasing is upsetting him, too. Whenever he is upset, he'll flap his hands. And he does a lot of hand-flapping on the bus rides.

I want to tell the other kids to knock it off, but I know that the best way to make bullies stop is to act as if the bullying doesn't affect you. And so that's what I've been doing. But I hate to see Todd picked on.

On to Todd's second special interest. Todd loves to flick lights on and off. I'm not sure why; he just does. And it doesn't matter whether there is anyone else in the room. For that matter, he has learned to shut a light off when he leaves a room, but he hasn't learned that if someone else is still in the room, he should leave the light on. I hate it when I am reading or doing something in a room and he starts playing with the lights, or turns the light off when he exits the room and I'm stuck in a dark room having to feel my way to the light switch.

And then there's Superman. He's Todd's biggest obsession — special interest. He watches Superman on TV every chance he gets. He wants every bit of Superman memorabilia he can get his hands on. I'm not sure why he likes Superman so much. It could be because he knows that both he and Superman are different from other people. Or maybe he wants to be powerful or be able to fly like Superman. Or maybe he just likes the colorful costume the hero wears. With Todd, it's impossible to tell.

Any time Superman is on TV, our parents are quick to make a recording of him for Todd. Todd watches those recordings every chance he gets, and can quote every single thing Superman ever said on them. And he does. Boy, does he ever. He repeats Superman's words all the time. Mom calls it 'echolalia,' and she actually encourages it. You see, Todd can't have a regular conversation the way most people can. He can parrot words others say, but that's it. Mom told me that the experts say that the parroting is how some kids on the spectrum eventually learn to talk. They'll start by repeating others' words seemingly randomly and without reason, and then they'll start using their repetitions in an attempt to communicate. Often times, what they say won't make sense unless you know the person and their history well. One of Todd's old classmates, for example, would say "Red car" whenever he wanted to go to eat at Gary's Burgers, ever since his father commented on the red car that was shown pulling up to a drive-through window in a commercial for the restaurant.

Todd parrots Superman all the time. And I do mean 'all the time' — for hours on end. Really. I'm not exaggerating. He'll often repeat Superman's words from the time we get on the school bus in the afternoon until the time he goes to bed. The only time he stops is when his mouth is full of food — and sometimes not even then. The only other people he ever parrots are family members and people who have spoken with Superman. He'll recite both sides of those conversations.

But when he recites the conversations, he isn't trying to tell anyone anything. He'll continue the recitation whether anyone is listening or not. He'll often keep speaking even when he is the only person in the room. His constant chatter can be really annoying, especially when I'm trying to read or watch TV, or even have a real conversation with someone else.

I usually don't think much more deeply about his constant chatter. But sometimes I will also think about how we may never have a simple conversation, how he may never even say "Jerome" except when he is repeating something my parents

addressed to me. And that hurts. I know I've been making him sound like a freak, and he can be really weird at times, but he can't help it. He's my brother, and I love him. He has thoughts and feelings just as much as anyone else does, but he can't express them. That's got to be frustrating for him. Mom says that that's one of the reasons he has his meltdowns — When you or I are angry or hurt, we can use our words to let others know. But when Todd is upset, all he can do is cry.

I sometimes wonder what it must be like to be him — to have such a hard time letting people know what he is thinking or wanting. Our family went to a remote part of Mexico for vacation a couple of years back. Mom and Dad gave me some pesos and let me wander on my own in the market to buy a few toys. But I don't know Spanish, and I had to resort to pointing to what I wanted and holding up the money to indicate how much I was willing to pay. And when I needed to use a restroom, I couldn't even ask anyone if there was one nearby. I had to find one by myself; I made it just in time.

If I had such a tough time when left alone in a different country for less than an hour, how much worse must it be for Todd. The entire world is a strange country for him all the time, and he can't even point or use gestures! He does manage to let us know some things he needs. He'll take us by the hand and lead us to where he wants us to be. He'll move our hand toward the refrigerator door, for example, if he is hungry. Or he'll lead us to the front door if he wants to go for a walk. But there are times when he clearly wants to tell us something and none of us can figure out what he wants. If only he could use speech — even echolalia — to let us know what he was thinking!

But even though he can't let us know what he is thinking, he can let us know what he is feeling. And he does feel, very intensely. Some people think people with autism don't have emotions - that they are like Spock on Star Trek. But these people don't understand either autism or Vulcans. Both Spock and people on the spectrum do have emotions; they just don't express them the way most humans do. Todd only seems to feel one thing at a time, but whatever he feels, he feels intensely. I've talked about his meltdowns already. But when he is happy, he smiles and laughs. Sometimes, he laughs for no reason any of the rest of us can figure out; Mom thinks he may be remembering something he liked or found funny. And he does show us he loves us. He doesn't like to be hugged himself, but sometimes, he'll give what I call a 'stealth hug' — he'll sneak up behind one of us, put his arms around us and squeeze really fast, and then scamper off before we can turn around to return the hug.

My parents and I know without a doubt that Todd loves us, and we love him, too. But how I wish he would talk *to* us. Not *at* us. Tell us what he's thinking or feeling. Not just recite words without meaning. Even if the words weren't his own, even if they were just echolalic. If he meant them, that would be all that would matter.

Jerome looked over what he had just written and then put down his pen, satisfied that his essay would meet with his English teacher's approval. He would never bare his soul like that to any other teacher, but Mrs. Nelson had a well-earned reputation for trustworthiness, and she had established a rapport with her class throughout the school year. She was his favorite teacher, and he had no doubt that he would never have a better one, even if he went to college to follow his dream of becoming a journalist.

He yawned. He really should know better than to wait until the last minute to complete his assignments. He put the essay into his backpack and headed for bed.

The bullies never stopped teasing Todd, but Jerome had decided that they were so close to the end of the school year, he

would just wait until next year to say something. Maybe the kids would mature over the summer. But that all changed on the very last day of the school year. Apparently, the bullies had decided that they would do whatever it took to get a rise out of Todd.

It had started as a typical teasing session. Alex had chanted his usual, "Todd, Todd, dumb as a cod!" And Tommy had mockingly asked, "Hey, Linus, visit any good pumpkin patches lately?"

Todd kept looking down at the plastic pumpkin on his lap, but his hands started to flap. Jerome surreptitiously observed, his jaw clenched.

Alex then asked, "So what's the big deal about the pumpkin? Let me see it." And then he did the unforgivable. He grabbed Todd's pumpkin from his lap.

Todd screamed and lunged for the pumpkin. Alex tossed it to Tommy. Todd threw himself down and started kicking and hitting the floor of the bus.

Jerome's muscles tensed as he watched the escalation. Ignoring verbal taunts was one thing, but he could not simply be a passive observer while his brother was deprived of one of his few pleasures. Ignoring these bullies hadn't worked; it was time he did what perhaps he should have done a month earlier. He jumped out of his seat and shouted, "Enough! Lay off my brother!"

"Or what?"

"Or this."

Jerome had never thought himself a violent person, quite the contrary. But Alex and Tommy had crossed the line. Before he had time to consider what he was doing, Jerome threw a punch which flattened Alex. He turned to Tommy and said with a steely voice, "You give the pumpkin back to my brother. NOW!"

Tommy complied. He put the pumpkin on the floor next to Todd. Todd, however, was too worked up to notice. Jerome helped Todd calm down by sitting beside him and whispering quietly to him, reassuring him that he had the pumpkin now and that he could keep it. Several minutes later, Todd gradually stopped screaming and flapping and sat up. Jerome put the pumpkin in Todd's hands, helped him stand up, and led him back to his bus seat.

By the time the bus reached their stop, Todd had finally regained his usual placidity. Jerome, through long practice, forced himself to appear calm for Todd's sake. Inwardly, however, he was seething — at the other boys for being so mean, at the bus driver for ignoring the entire incident, and especially at himself for waiting over a month to intervene when Todd was being teased. Yes, he had thought that ignoring the bullies was the best approach, but did he really have to wait until their teasing became physical before he did anything? Might he not have deduced after a week or two of ignoring them that his approach wasn't working? Was he, by staying out of it, as responsible for Todd's torment as the bullies themselves?

When they got off the bus, Todd mumbled to Jerome, "We take pride in proclaiming this day, 'Superman Day' and offering you the key to the city. You've made me feel very welcome here and thank you."

Jerome stared at his brother while the import of what had just happened sunk in. Todd had used the Mayor's and Superman's words to let him know that he thought of Jerome as his hero, and to thank him for what he had done. Todd had spoken *to* him. Maybe not in his own words, but in his own way.

Jerome's self-recriminations vanished, and he felt like the hero Todd apparently thought him to be. Maybe pumpkins and Superman weren't so bad, after all.

But he still hated flicked light switches.

I hope this story proved both entertaining and educational. I'd like to dedicate it to my son, who was the inspiration for Todd.

A few odds and ends that I couldn't fit into the story: Everything I mentioned about autism in the story is true to the best of my knowledge, including how some children use echolalia as their pathway into communicative speech. The ending, however, did not reflect a typical first use of communicative speech. Much more typical is to use speech to 'mand' (i.e., to make requests/demands/commands). What Todd apparently used his speech for at the end was for a social function of speech which would in real life have likely come much later in his development, if it came at all. So now you, as a reader of the story, have a choice: Either accept that Todd's development did not follow that of a typical child with autism or else interpret the story ending as something more depressing: Todd may have just been spouting his usual non-communicative echolalia and Jerome may have been indulging in wishful thinking and just read much more into it than Todd had intended. I, personally, prefer the former interpretation, but I purposely left the story open to the latter interpretation for the sake of realism.

Then again, a 'typical child with autism' is a bit of an oxymoron. There is a saying within the autism community: If you've met one child with autism, you've met — ONE child with autism. People on the spectrum are at least as varied as those not on it. Take this story as describing one person on the spectrum, but please do not assume that all people with autism are like Todd, any more than you would assume that every neurotypical human is like Lois or every Kryptonian like Clark.

Oh, and in case you were wondering what the English assignment was that resulted in the opening essay, Mrs. Nelson gave the class the following prompt: Write an essay about someone you know. Describe the person vividly enough to make the readers feel as if they know him or her as well. Suppose you could change one thing about that person; what would it be?

As always, all feedback welcomed.

THE END