

Letter to the World

1. Jakarta, Indonesia, 1985

I was a fourth grader at the American International School of Indonesia when I was sent to the principal's office for stomping on The Frog. Jenny Twitchell, my teacher's daughter, saw it happen and ran shrieking to the Indonesian playground aide, her lovely little face contorted in revulsion.

"Peyton squashed a frog! She stomped on a frog!" Jenny's hysteria caused a momentary lull in the normal dull roar of recess. The Indonesian staff usually did their best not to get involved with me, but this was *Jenny* crying, who was as maddeningly sincere as she was adorable, and a faculty kid to boot.

The aide began to look around for me. I had already picked up the frog by one of its webbed toes and tossed it in the bushes for later. I was now chatting innocently with my best friend Natalie, a model citizen and frequent student-of-the-month. The aide looked doubtful, but Jenny persisted earnestly, "She did! I saw it!"

Ten minutes later, I was in the principal's office. Mrs. Bonnell was British, with a hard reputation.

"Tell me about killing the frog."

"I didn't kill it. It was already dead." As I spoke, I gazed out her window at the blazing flamboyant bush. I didn't want her seeing confusion in my eyes. My memory was suddenly foggy.

"Why'd you stomp on a dead frog?"

"I wanted to dissect it. I tried to make it flat so I could dissect it at home."

She sat there staring at me, no doubt deeply disturbed. I'd been to her office twice before, but we'd never accomplished much. She now seemed to be performing some sort of silent calculus. *Live frog. Dead frog. Peyton's mother. Peyton's brothers. Evil Peyton. Poor Peyton.*

She said, "Sorry Peyton, but that's so . . . *bizarre.*"

I thought, *you haven't seen bizarre*. You haven't seen bizarre until you've lived with a big brother who carries around plastic animal tails in jars or who screams the house down when asked to wear anything besides an Izod logo shirt with an alligator on it. You haven't seen bizarre until you've heard my younger brother Spencer sing a song about the intestinal tract that he wrote himself to the tune of Loverboy's "Everybody's Working for the Weekend."

She asked, almost kindly, "How are things at home?"

I gave a little snort. *Hah. As if.*

My home in a nutshell: I was the middle child, sandwiched between two brilliant brothers who would both eventually be diagnosed with high-functioning autism. My family was famous not because of my father's executive job at Exxon-Mobil, or my mother's role as chairwoman of the Jakarta American Women's Association. The quirkiness and volatility of our family outshone all of our good works. And I, the undiagnosed, was my parents' last desperate gasp at normality, whatever it was.

To explain, maybe it's easiest to tell another story from that day.

The day I stepped on *The Frog*, my younger brother Spencer had to be sent home from school early. As usual it happened on a Monday. Like many kids with autism, Spencer was upset by the slightest changes in his environment, which is why we hadn't moved the furniture around since he was two. And today in first grade, there were just too many things awry.

First, there were three kids absent from the class with some kind of flu that was going around. Second, Mrs. Murray had changed the bulletin board paper from red to yellow in the night. Third, Mrs. Murray had gotten a haircut. During circle time, Spencer anxiously raised his hand over and over to ask her about it. What happened to the hair? Did they scoop it up in a bag? Why did she have to get a haircut?

"It looks worse than before!" Spencer cried abruptly when she tried to go back to Morning Calendar Time. The other seventeen first graders wiggled anxiously on their carpet squares. They knew Spencer well enough to see the signs of impending doom.

By the time the class started Writers' Workshop, Spencer's least favorite subject, he was in rare form, chewing the ends of his fingers and shoving them into his nose. He was ticking away like a bomb when he sat at the writing table with Mrs. Murray.

Mrs. Murray gently took his hand away from his face and said, "Here, let me hold that for you."

Spencer shouted, "I don't want to! You write it for me! That's your job!"

"Spencer, that's a good start. How about if we write that first?"

Spencer seized the pencil in his awkward grip and scribbled ferociously: I AM NOT DOING ANY WRITING TODAY. And with encouragement, he managed to add, BECAUSE MRS. MURRAY IS MEAN.

"Spencer," Mrs. Murray gushed, "That's the most I've ever seen you write by yourself! Well done!"

Spencer had had enough. He hurled his pencil and hit a little Indian boy named Pravindeep Singh in the head. Pravindeep, who was deeply afraid of Spencer, began to wail. Early in the school year, before Spencer had a personal aide, he'd gotten violent toward Pravindeep, kicking him and calling him "Smelly Black Man." Pravindeep's parents had threatened to withdraw him from school unless Spencer was removed from the class first. But Pravindeep's dad worked for Save the Children and was no match in power and clout for my oil executive dad, and since there were so few good schools for foreign kids in Jakarta, the threat turned out to be an empty one.

Mrs. Murray asked Spencer's aide, a stringy-haired recent college grad named Whitney, to take him out to the swings, but Spencer was by now in full meltdown mode, screaming, "I hate you! I hate this school! I want my mom! Get away from me!" When Whitney moved to take his hand, Spencer turned and bolted out the classroom door, crossed the playground, and sprinted up the main campus driveway, weaving in and out of the cars that were headed in for a room-mother tea. Whitney and the Indonesian classroom aide gave chase. Spencer made it all the way to the main gate before one of the Indonesian guards snagged him by the back of the shirt, just as he was about to run blindly into the traffic on Jalan Sabroto.

Spencer struck like a viper, sinking his teeth into the guard's arm. Fortunately, Whitney and the aide caught up just then and began dragging Spencer back up the

driveway by the armpits. Spencer struggled, hurled abuses at them and stomped on Whitney's toes.

In desperation, Whitney hailed a passing car that was headed in for the room-mother tea. She shoved Spencer into the back seat where he screamed and kicked in a blind fury. The frightened driver and the mother in the passenger seat fled to the sidewalk.

The mother said to Whitney, "Shouldn't you get in there too?"

"It'll just work him up more." Whitney was myopic and slow talking, the human equivalent of the caterpillar in Wonderland.

The mother huffed, "He's ripping my upholstery with all that kicking."

Whitney shrugged.

Once Spencer had calmed down enough to be delivered to the main office, Mrs. Bonnell called our mother at the American Women's Association to pick him up for the rest of the day. My mother was late for one of her Very Important Lunch Meetings, so after hanging up with Mrs. Bonnell, she phoned home and ordered our Indonesian nanny Kartini to come instead. Mrs. Bonnell was furious when Kartini showed up fifteen minutes later, and refused to send Spencer home with her. Instead, she called my father at his office downtown, and because he couldn't leave work, he called my mother at the American Club and yelled her into handling it herself. Mom finally arrived, flushed from wine and slightly drunk, and collected Spencer from the office without a word.

That afternoon, I came home to a brother screaming bloody murder under the kitchen table, and a mother clutching her head and screaming into the phone at Mrs. Bonnell.

"I can't believe you sent him home for that! Don't you people know how to handle children? Were you absent the day they taught teaching at teacher's college? Yes, yes, you can hear how upset he is about being singled out. His poor heart is broken. Shit, I can't think, I have a migraine coming on . . . Spencer, stop screaming Honey, I'm fixing the problem. And get your hands out of your nose. Why? Why? What do you mean all you do for him? Every time I talk to you, I hear that he's making great progress and now you're telling me that you won't take him back next year! I'm calling the lawyer. I'm hanging up now. Jesus."

She slammed down the receiver. I stared up into her lovely, flushed face and watched her anxiously adjust her pearls. My mother had once been Miss Potato Blossom of Pocatello, Idaho. Thank god she had a few years of bliss where she had no idea what was coming down the pike.

I asked, "Why are you calling a lawyer? You can't sue them in Indonesia."

And she rumbled, "I don't need this right now, Peyton."

I held out my letter about The Frog from Mrs. Bonnell. She crumpled it up and tossed it on the floor.

"Peyton," she groaned, "whatever this is, I can't look at it right now. Kartini, don't just stand there! Throw it away."

I shrugged and went into the kitchen to get some cookies and some peace and quiet.

My older brother Aaron was every bit as bright as Spencer, but much more remote. A quiet baby who seemed happiest when left alone, indifferent to even the most exuberant goo-goo talk, Aaron was born with a mask. His face shows the same stony aloofness in baby pictures as it does now at thirty-five.

Aaron walked at nine months and said his first word around thirteen months. Shortly afterward, the sparkle faded from his eyes, and he seemed to lose interest in talking. He didn't say another word until around 30 months. My parents, masters of denial, asked their friends, "That's normal sometimes, right?"

Then it became, "Well, he's also learning Indonesian at the same time, and bilingual kids talk later."

And safe in their illusions, they happily packed him off to preschool.

From his earliest days of preschool at AISI, teachers noted his stubborn silence, his contempt for learning to trace a line or feel for shapes in a bag, his fascination with the wheels on toy cars and the way he rode his tricycle in endless, joyless circles on the playground. He acted like the other kids weren't there, and if they got in his space he'd scream or bite them. I was two years old, too young to come with the family on their tour of Miracle Doctors of Singapore, so they left me at home with my Indonesian nanny every weekend. Weekdays, Mom was so tied up meeting with Aaron's teachers and

carting Aaron around to speech therapy and occupational therapy on top of her civic duties that I only saw her about an hour a day.

My parents, both archetypal Beautiful People, did not take well to the news that they might have produced a less than perfect child. For a time, their rage was directed not at each other, but at the outside world. Their first theory was that Aaron was a misunderstood genius who just couldn't be bothered with the vapidness of AISI's four-year-old program. They got his IQ tested and when it was reported to be around 145, they petitioned to have him accelerated immediately to Kindergarten. When the school point-blank refused, they pulled him out entirely and hired a private tutor, a crisp Singaporean woman who had studied at Harvard.

When Aaron was seven, my mother had a shining moment when Mrs. Bonnell asked after a PTA meeting, "How is Aaron doing?"

"He's writing quadratic equations and geometric proofs," my mother said, practically bursting with pride. I was now in Kindergarten, clinging to her hand. I didn't show Aaron's gift for math, or a gift for anything else, really.

Mrs. Bonnell said, "I'm glad things are working out."

My mother didn't tell her the rest of the story. Life with Aaron when he wasn't studying math was a nightmare. When he left the shelter of his "study area" he would fly into a rage over something as simple as a newspaper left on the table. If I happened to toddle by, he would attack me in a blind fury. Once, when I refused to share a stuffed animal with him, he sunk his teeth into my arm, prompting a trip to the company clinic for a tetanus shot. My parents just made light of it to the ex-pat doctors, shaking their heads and laughing, "Kids, man."

Alone, away from other kids, and largely indulged by my parents (who wanted none of his rages), Aaron had no idea who he was or how to act. He refused to wear any shirts that didn't have an Izod alligator logo and a collar. I remember my mother flying off to Singapore when the cleaners lost two precious Izod shirts, which were by then going out of fashion. She bought 40 of the ridiculously expensive shirts at Raffles and kept them in plastic in the closet, a stock calculated to last until Aaron hit puberty.

Aaron rarely spoke, and although he could do math on the college level, I passed him by in grade two in reading and writing. When anyone took out a pencil in his

presence he screamed (as Spencer would later). When he was agitated, he would break apart his little plastic Noah's ark animals and display their plastic tails in jars on the windowsill in his room. Soon, he wouldn't leave the house without carrying a plastic tail in a jar. My parents fought with him about it but could not stand the resulting tantrums. Through the years, Aaron collected about 600 tails in baby food jars (a project supplied by my parents for reasons I know not), and by age twelve he would not leave the house without at least seven of his precious jars. People stared, so my mother bought him a Reebok duffle bag to put the jars in when we went out.

Around this time, I started refusing to go out in public with my family.

My mom insists that all three of us were beautiful babies, but if you believe the family photo albums, Spencer was the crown prince. My parents were almost violent in their refusal to believe that Spencer, who won a beautiful baby contest at six months and could do adult puzzles at four years, could befall the same fate as Aaron.

Spencer was two-and-a-half years younger than me, conceived as a second chance at having a "normal" son. He learned to talk early and his talk was precocious from the beginning. Because he was so unlike Aaron, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. We have home movies of Spencer on a camping trip at fifteen months, bouncing and screaming with delight in his walker as I dance for him with my Strawberry Shortcake sleeping bag on my head.

I remember vividly a day when I was six and Spencer was three and had just begun preschool. Mom came to pick me up from first grade, and then we walked over to the Early Childhood Center to get Spencer.

Spencer was in the bike corral, riding a tricycle in aimless circles. My mother's hand grew cold in mine.

"Spencer!" she snapped.

Spencer kept riding.

She ran and grabbed him roughly by the shoulder. Spencer, who was a bit of a klutz, fell backwards off the bike which sailed on and hit the fence. I looked around to make sure no teacher had been watching, a survival skill I'd picked up from my mother.

Spencer lay on the ground without crying and looked up with the same blank look that was so unsettling in Aaron. His gaze was peculiar, fixated somewhere on the ceiling. “You’re cheap,” he hissed at our mother. “You’re completely cheap.” And with a frustrated roar he mounted the tricycle and began to pedal.

We were standing on the equator, sweating in our dress clothes, but beside me, my mother shivered.

More or less, this brings us to 1985, the year our family left Jakarta.

Aaron is a slumbering volcano who studies trigonometry and otherwise mopes around or tends his growing animal tail collection. We are running low on Izod shirts and there is a black mood in the house every time one bites the dust. My parents have found two other distractions for Aaron: a Texas Instruments computer (which he instantly learns to program in BASIC) and an Atari 2600. Both machines are from the US and run poorly on our Indonesian electricity cycles; even after they are rewired, the den smells of melting plastic as their insides slowly dissolve. The sound of marching Space Invaders fills our days and nights.

“It’s going to be like an atomic bomb when one of those kicks the can,” I tell my mom. My mother now prays, something she didn’t do in our younger years. She presumably prays that the Atari and the computer will keep on working, keep on babysitting Aaron so that she can go to her cocktail parties and chair Christmas Bazaar committees and publish bilingual cook books.

Spencer is now the main focus of everyone’s attention. Perhaps realizing that it had been a mistake to keep Aaron home, my parents are determined to keep Spencer in school. This is a tenuous process akin to walking a tight rope. It seems every other week there is a wobble, and the school isn’t sure that they can keep him. Spencer won’t write and hides under the table when Mrs. Murray pulls out the guitar. He gets in trouble on the bus and kicks the monitors when they try to put on his seatbelt. He screams and cries when my mom drops him off, when there is a fire drill, or if the class walks to the lunch room by the wrong route. Like Aaron, his IQ is in the stratosphere. My mother announces this triumphantly one night.

“Did you know Spencer has an IQ of 145?” she says cheerfully as he disassembles my Winnie the Pooh clock radio in front of us on our living room rug. I know that there is no use protesting. If I do, Spencer will scream, and then Mom will be mad at me. I have learned not to become too attached to anything or anyone.

“What a waste,” I say, for which I am ordered to clean the upstairs and downstairs toilets. But then Aaron is screaming because there is no film in the camera and he has just reached a record score in Space Invaders and wants to take a picture of the TV screen to send to Atari corp. I never clean the bathrooms, and no one says a word.

It’s morning at the American School. I am alone on the playground, which is technically not allowed for twenty more minutes. Over the years, my parents have decided that since life has dealt them a shit hand, they are entitled to bend the rules. The grounds are gorgeously manicured with flowering bushes and trees, a tropical paradise. There is even a little pond with fish and turtles so that we can learn to Be Kind to Animals. I was right next to this pond when I stepped on The Frog.

I’ve been thinking about The Frog all night in bed. Why can’t I remember if it was alive or dead when I stepped on it? I wander over to the bushes where I tossed it, cautious because in the morning there can be black spitting cobras in the school yard, especially now that the rainy season’s begun.

My mother is inside, meeting with Spencer’s “team,” which includes Mrs. Murray, Whitney, his speech-language pathologist, his resource teacher, his occupational therapist, his counselor and the School-Wide Special Services Coordinator. Spencer has the most exciting team ever assembled at our school, the mother of all teams. It is one of a million ways AISI has tried to keep Spencer afloat. Because if Spencer leaves school, the company may send Dad back to Houston, and then my parents will not be able to afford someone like Kartini to raise the children for them and their days of tennis matches and climbing the corporate ladder and assembling the Jakarta Shopper’s Guide will be over, and just *maybe* Exxon will complain to the embassy and the school will lose its preferential status, and so on and so on. There is so much at stake, riding on the fate of my obnoxious baby brother.

Was the frog alive? I try to remember what I had said to Natalie right before I stepped on it. I think that if I see it, I'll be able to figure it out.

Mom is upstairs, trying to convince the team that Spencer needs to go to music class, even though every time the kids sing he throws himself on the floor and screams. I can just hear her now. *But he sings all the time at home, she'd say. He sings the Alleluia chorus. He's got a very sweet little voice.*

The frog is there, lying limp and broken on a mound of purple snapdragons. I lean over and study it intensely. Around me the playground dissolves, the sand and grass and bushes swirl into streaky colors like melted ice cream, the morning sounds of sweeping brooms and singing birds fade to a hum, and I feel suddenly as if I have slipped into a warm bath. I am made of birdsong and morning sunshine. I feel joy and relief.

The feeling lasts until the sound of violent screaming cuts it like a knife, and suddenly I am just Peyton again, grade four, with dirty stringy hair that mom and Kartini never have time to brush, standing against the unkind gray restroom tile with old animal blood on my hands, and looking up at the terrified black-skinned first grader as if I have just been plucked from a dream.