

The World Inside Camden
(Understanding Autistic Spectrum Issues)

By

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This paper is dedicated to my third grade teacher and the kids in the class at Salt Creek Elementary, especially, Susan, Tim, Karen, Robert, Ken, Wendy, and Linda.

I.

Camden was not sure why people kept waking him up so early when he would have been happier to sleep a few more hours. What was the big rush all about; there were so many more interesting things to do than washing up or brushing. He signaled to his mother that he was awake now, and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He found that getting dressed was not very interesting, so he pulled himself back inside mind to the place where he was driving the stock car again. It was his uncle Mike's; the one with the huge hemi engine and the roll cage. He climbed in through the window and strapped in. The engine roared to life, and he pushed the pedal to the floor as he flew onto the track. He felt the back of the car swinging back and forth as the track tried to catch up with the tires. The wind swirled around him as the car accelerated. The track felt bumpy as the needle on the speedometer passed one hundred and thirty. He felt the car lurch as . . .

"Camden, the bus will be here in fifteen minutes, and I want to see you eat some breakfast today."

Camden got up, but had to wait for his sister Sheila to finish up in the bathroom before he could get washed up, and brushed his teeth. He tried on

several different shirts and pants before deciding on them because many of them made his skin feel uncomfortable. He only liked clothes that were soft and pliable. Blue jeans were the worst; there had been many battles about wearing them when he was younger, but now he could pick his clothes if they were clean and presentable. He finally picked a set and headed for the hallway. He shuffled downstairs after dressing, and managed to get a half a bowl of cereal down before heading out the door. At the bus stop he to be very quiet and still. He knew from past experience what could happen if he tried to join in with the other kids laughing at jokes or even looking at them. He kept his eyes down, and looked away from the others. Today it worked and nobody bothered him. He wasn't so lucky on the bus. Jimmy Lawson noticed that he was rocking in his seat so Jimmy started imitating him with exaggerated movements and mocking grin on his face. When Camden looked up at him, he said, "What are you looking at, Stupid?"

Camden replied in his halting speech, "If I am so stupid, Jimmy, what is the square root of seventeen?" Camden knew Jimmy couldn't add two and two, but he was in accelerated math. Jimmy's face wasn't smiling now; it was set in a mask of pure malice. He leaned over and punched Camden in the shoulder as hard as he could. Camden acted nonplussed by the blow, but it really, really hurt. He felt somewhat better when he heard the bus driver say, "That's one detention Lawson; want to try for two more?" Lawson shook his head in the negative, and Camden knew there would be no more trouble on this ride. School might be a different matter. Camden stowed his backpack in his locker and headed for English class. He looked across the hall and there was Lawson giving him the "this isn't over" look. Camden's attention lasted only a few minutes in English, and soon he was staring at his own fingers. Fingers fascinated him; they could move so many different ways and mimic the actions of so many different things like trees blowing in the wind, or spiders swinging on web strands. He was becoming engrossed in a finger movement that reminded him of a jellyfish when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up into Ms. Barnes' face and became aware of classmates laughing. She said, "I'll repeat the question, Cam, what do think the wolf symbolized in this story?" Cam decided to wing it. "I think it stands for the nature of things; when the wolf kills a mouse for food there is no anger on his part at the mouse; he is

just trying to stay alive. I believe that if a bear attacked him, he would see it the same way; it is the law of the wild that you try to survive,” he replied. Mrs. Barnes looked dumbstruck; she had never expected this level of insight from Cam. She said, “That was a terrific answer, Cam.” Cam thought to himself, “Maybe this will be an OK day after all.”

Math was next, and Cam was looking forward to this because everything was so logical and easy to understand. It could be boring when the teacher slowed down too much, but usually it was good. Today Mr. Jackson was moving along the way Cam liked him to, and he answered a few questions correctly. Cam got nervous when he was asked to stay after class, but it was only because Mr. Jackson wanted him to be on the school’s math team for interschool competition. Cam took a chance and said he would be on the team. Mr. Jackson told him that they would practice at lunchtimes Tuesdays and Thursdays so he must eat quickly. He told the teacher this would be no problem because he usually brought a lunch to school. Cam sat near the driver on the bus going home that night so Jimmy did not bother him; he had a feeling that Mr. Gronski, the bus driver, was actually looking for an excuse to give Jimmy another detention, and Jimmy figured that out too. His parents were pleased to hear about him being picked for the math team. They also told him that their friends, the Sandbornes, were coming over later that night with their daughter, Erica. This made Cam feel worried because he barely knew the Sandbornes, and he didn’t know Erica at all. He didn’t have long to worry about it because the in-home therapy team arrived and started working with Cam on social skills. The lead therapist Angie would simulate social situations by role playing, usually pretending to be someone Cam’s age, and then the other therapist, Bill, would give Cam hints or encouragement on how to deal with it. He had learned some valuable skills in how to deal with bullies or just every day encounters with kids in his class. They worked for about an hour and a half, then wished the family a good night and said they would be coming back on Thursday. After supper, he asked his mother what Erica was like, and she told him that Erica was his age and had some special needs. She told him that she had only met Erica once and that she had been very nice, but rather shy. Their conversation was cut short by the doorbell ringing. When the Sandbornes came in, Erica stood behind

them looking quite nervously around. Cam decided to sign “hello” to her and she smiled and signed it back. After a while, they were laughing and kidding around as they talked. They chattered on for a few moments, then Cam’s mother suggested that the children go down to the basement, and see if there was anything to do down there. Cam and Erica decided to try playing some ping-pong. Erica was quite good at it, and before they knew it she had surprised Cam because she was not critical of him like some of the kids at school. They played for a long time before Cam’s mother hollered down the stairs that it was time for Erica to leave with her parents. Cam was sorry to see her go; she had been very nice and had not made fun of his speech. In turn, he had not been critical of hers.

The following day was Saturday and he was up early to go with his dad to the market. His dad liked to go early Saturday morning because the store wasn’t crowded, and sometimes they had extra produce that was brought in for the weekend. They downed some pancakes, and drove to the market. Cam enjoyed it when the misting system came on over the vegetables. Today he noted that one of the nozzles was spraying the water past the vegetables into the aisle so he loosened its bracket so he could redirect it. This caught the eye of the produce manager, a pimply-faced man who looked like a teenager, who said to Cam, “What do you think you are doing?” Cam tried to answer, but when he got nervous he had trouble with speech so he tried to sign to the man, but this seemed to irritate him more. He said, “I don’t care if you know Karate, you can’t mess with our equipment.” By this time Cam’s father had noticed the commotion and came over to investigate. He asked what the problem was, and the produce manager said that “this kid” meaning Cam had been tampering with the water system and then threatened him with some Karate moves. He then asked Cam if this was true. Cam felt safer now and found his voice. He told his father what had happened, but the produce manager did not believe Cam. He said he was going to bar Cam from coming in the store again. Cam’s father nodded in agreement, and, to Cam’s surprise, headed for the door. Just before getting to the door, he stopped and knocked on a door labeled “Store Manager.” A pleasant looking middle aged man answered saying, “Can I help you?” Cam’s father introduced himself and explained the problem. The manager apologized for the pimply faced

man's behavior and said he would take care of the matter. As they backtracked to the checkout line, they heard on the overhead PA system, "Produce manager report to the store manager's office immediately."

When they got home Cam grabbed the biggest peach in the bunch they had bought and eagerly bit into it. It was soft and sweet; and he didn't mind the juice running down his chin. The next day before church his mother made him promise to pay attention to what the pastor was saying. There would also be a rabbi from the local synagogue speaking; and she felt it was important for him to listen to what he was going to say. Cam agreed he would try his hardest, but he knew when he woke up feeling very tired that it was going to be hard to pay attention. His prediction proved to be correct. He made it about half way through the sermon when a familiar urge that seemed to pull Cam to climb back into the race car got the best of him. He felt that he had never gone this fast before and he could feel himself making little noises of excitement about this. Unfortunately the noises weren't so little, and most of the congregation heard them. He could someone pulling on his arm and speaking to him, but the race was extremely enticing. Next, he felt himself being helped to a standing position and walking somewhere. He heard someone speaking loudly to him, and he lost his concentration on the race. The grandstand faded and was replaced by his father's face very close to his while he spoke very loudly to him. Cam focused on his eyes and said, 'What is it dad?' His father told him what had happened, and Cam promised to pay more attention when they returned to church. Fortunately he was able to do this, and thereby evaded some repercussions when they got back home.

After breakfast, Cam went down into the basement to play some video games, but shortly after booting up his computer he found himself back in his racecar again. He hadn't been there long when he heard his father talking to him, but he didn't want to give up racing. Then he felt his father's hand on his shoulder, and climbed out of the racecar. "Cam, I don't want you down here today, it's a beautiful day and you need to be outside. Go for a walk or a bike ride; or you can give me a hand weeding in the garden. This was an easy decision, and Cam was soon headed to the park on his bike. When he got there he parked his bike, then

sat on the swing set. He hadn't been there long when he noticed a shiny object back on the road so he walked over there. It was some type of a car part. He picked it up and looked it over for some time trying to decide what it was. In the end, he noticed that one end looked crushed so he felt it was not going to be something useful. He let it fall back where he had found it, and started walking back to the swings when he hear a man say, "Just a minute, Buddy." He turned and saw the neighborhood policeman, Officer Mel, standing by the car part in the road. "Don't you know it's against the law to litter?" he continued. Cam couldn't answer for a minute because he had had trouble with this man before. Occasionally, when Cam was younger, Cam had had problems with anger; and his mother had had to call Officer Mel to settle Cam down. When Cam had recovered from the shock of seeing Officer Mel, he told him what had happened. Officer Mel said that it was still littering and asked him for his name and address. "You know my name and address already," Cam replied. The policeman said he had to be sure, and then wrote out a ticket.

Cam showed the ticket to his father when he got home, and he and his dad talked about it for some time. Once or twice, Cam started to go back into his racecar because he didn't want to talk about it anymore, but he wisely didn't do it. His father told him that he didn't want him leaving school for this, and he would go to court and talk to the judge about it and let Cam know what the judge said. Cam was relieved to hear this, and told his father that if he saw litter he would be community minded and throw it away unless it was icky like an old tissue. His father accepted his answer and invited him to throw a football around. The rest of Sunday went well, and for supper they had Cam's favorite meal, sausage and sauerkraut. The bus ride the next morning went well because Cam sat near the driver again and Jimmy Lawson always sat in the back of the bus where he was harder to see. When they got to school, Cam walked around to the front of the building and ran into Officer Mel coming out the school. Cam looked away from him pretending he didn't see him. He was almost to the door when he heard the familiar, "Just a minute, Buddy," and saw that Officer Mel was standing next to him.

"Is there anything you want to tell me about?" the policeman inquired.

“Like what?” Cam replied. “

“Like some spitting through my squad car window,” he said, and then told Cam to come with him to the Principal’s office. Once they were there, he kept asking Cam why he did it, and Cam kept replying, “Check the camera.” This made Officer Mel increasingly unhappy, and he told Cam that when he came out of the building earlier, Cam had been standing right next to the car so he was the most likely suspect. He pulled out his ticket book, and started to write Cam another ticket when Cam said, “Check the camera inside your car and you will see I didn’t do it.” Mel could see the merit in that, and told Cam to come with him while he reviewed the recording in the camera. Cam watched as he reversed the disc, then saw a clear recording of Tom Kricheck spitting through the car window. Officer Mel got a funny look on his face, and then told Cam he was free to go. Cam looked at him for a while and then said, “Officer Mel, do policemen ever say they’re sorry when they make a mistake?”

“Not usually, he replied, “but they should. I’m sorry I made a mistake, Cameron.” Then he smiled. Cam had never seen him smile before, but it looked good and Cam smiled back.

That evening, Cam’s father told him that the ticket Officer Mel had written had been rescinded by Officer Mel and this made everyone in the family happy. They celebrated with soft-serve ice cream after supper. After getting home, Cam went in the basement intending to do some car racing, but his father came down after him. He said, “Cam, your therapists and I have been talking it over, and we would like you to see Dr. Long who is a special doctor who works with your particular type of difficulties. She was recommended by Erica’s parents who said that she had helped Erica quite a bit.”

“Will she give me a shot?” Cam asked.

“I don’t think so, his father said.

“Will I have to take medicine?” Cam replied.

“I think that is likely, but I can’t be sure; besides you take pills without any problems.” was his response.

“I will, if you feel I really need to.” Cam said.

“I would just like to give it a try; if pills don’t work, I won’t ask you to take them.” was his father’s reply.

Cam said, “OK,” and the next day he found himself sitting in Dr. Long’s office. The office didn’t look like any Doctors’ office Cam had been in before; it looked more like someone’s living room. Dr. Long didn’t wear a white coat or have the thing with the black tubes around her neck. She just asked him a lot of questions about his family and school, and then did the same with his parents. When she was done with the questions, she said that there was a medicine she wanted him to try that would allow him to focus better in class and when he was doing things with other people. She explained possible side effect like upset stomach or headache, then wrote a prescription. She said she wanted to see him back in three weeks, and then said goodbye. Cam started the medicine the next day, but did not have any of the possible side effects the doctor had mentioned. In fact, he didn’t feel any differently at all. The doctor had told him that many times loved ones noticed changes before the patient did so he decided he would ask his parents about changes in a few days. After about a week, he did notice something. He no longer felt as much of an urge to drive his racecar, and he was feeling a little more comfortable being with groups of kids his own age. Cam’s comfort with others and his ability to focus in class continued to improve, and before he knew it, he was freshman at the state university majoring in mechanical engineering. He made many friends that year because he became the class “go to guy” for calculus. The years went by, and eventually, he graduated third in his class.

