

Bad Guys: Nathan's Story

Toni was exhausted. She thought that it should be illegal for any one person to be this tired. She felt like she was carrying three people on top of her, delivering them from place to place. And, in a way, she sort of was. That's what it meant to be a mother.

Things had been hard for the last several years, but of course, she wouldn't trade a single hard moment for a life without her children. Her husband, employed by the City Hall, worked long, grueling hours, which meant that the responsibility of getting the kids ready for school fell on her, a waitress at Olive Garden.

Speaking of the children—what were they up to? She was in the kitchen packing up their lunches for school, and they were in their room playing together quietly, something uncharacteristic of them.

She sneaked down the hall and peered around the open doorframe. They were all there, accounted for, safe, playing peacefully. Victoria, her three-year-old, clutched her *My Little Pony* toys, mumbling high-pitched, happy nonsense at and to them. She played with them according to the usual laws of gravity; there were no flying horses in this little game she was playing. No magic. Not talking ponies. Children with Autism didn't have imaginary play.

She watched her three children, all diagnosed or pre-diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, tip-toeing around the room, flapping their hands vaguely. Benny, her five-year-old, was pushing against the furniture, moving it around because he needed to feel that pushing sensation in his arms.

Nathan, her seven-year-old, was playing on the floor by himself.

Benny, with little to no spatial awareness, pushed a chair in Nathan's direction. It didn't even touch Nathan; it just entered his personal space. Before Toni could react, she saw Nathan's eyes widen in shock and disgust at the invasion.

He roared and stood up in full rage. He shoved the chair out of Benny's hands—"Hey!" Benny protested—and then shoved Benny hard in the chest, sending him crashing into the night stand. The lamp atop it wobbled and then crashed to the floor.

"Nathan!" Toni boomed as she ran to Benny's side. He was sobbing, but it seemed more out of surprise and having his feelings hurt than at having an injury. He would probably have a few bruises, and she huffed out the frustration and anxiety at the thought of having to explain to his teachers why he had bruises on him again. She took a deep breath and considered her eldest son with a firm but not fiery gaze.

“Nathan,” she said and waited for him to make eye contact with her. He had already resumed sitting on the floor, having affirmed that he was safe from the threat on his personal space. The only difference was that he was covering his ears, protecting himself from the assault on his senses that Benny’s cries had caused. “Nathan, look at me.”

“Nathan has bad guys,” Benny said. He wasn’t sobbing anymore, but fat tears still dripped stubbornly from his eyes. “He has bad guys in his stomach and his head and in his ears!”

Toni regarded Benny with narrowed eyes, assessing his words with some concern, but she knew ultimately that if she didn’t speak to Nathan about this soon, it would be too late. He would have already forgotten his digression. “Hang on, buddy. I want to hear all about the bad guys, but just a second, OK?”

“BAD GUYS!” Benny insisted, causing Toni to jump. Victoria, who was looking on with mild, quiet alarm, dropped one of her toys in surprise.

Benny widened his eyes unnaturally, baring his teeth. He raised his arms up, let his wrists droop and wiggled his fingers so that they looked like spiders. “BAD GUYS IN HIS HEAD!”

She rubbed Benny’s arms and kissed him on the forehead. “Go play,” she told him. He begrudgingly rubbed the moisture from his cheeks and joined Victoria on the other side of the room.

Toni went over to Nathan and squatted down before him with some difficulty. She wanted to tilt his chin up toward her, but she knew touching him when he was having sensory issues was a bad idea.

“Nathan,” she said firmly. He peered up at her through his white-blond eyelashes. If he hadn’t been so filled with half-cocked rage, it would have been cute. “We do not hit, Nathan,” Toni asserted. “OK? No hitting. Do not hit. You hurt your brother. *Ouch!* We don’t hurt him, OK?”

“OK,” Nathan said, regarding her with glassy, unseeing blue eyes. She sighed. She knew this was the best she was going to get from him, and they were already late for school. Again.

Toni got another call from school about Nathan. When she saw the number show up on her iPhone, she sighed because she already knew what they were going to say. Nathan had another accident, and he needed another pair of pants. More specifically, she needed to leave during the middle of her shift at work to go up to the school to drop off another pair of pants.

She couldn't figure out what was going on with him. He'd been potty trained for several years now. Maybe he was regressing now that Victoria had recently started daycare with him and Benny? Was he feeling like he wasn't getting enough attention from her?

She didn't know, and honestly, she didn't have the energy to try to figure it out. Her boss had been giving her grief about leaving over the past few days, but today, he didn't say anything. He just shook his head. She took that as a bad omen. If this happened again, she'd probably get written up. At least.

She walked up to the nurse's office, a path that had become increasingly familiar to her over these last few weeks. You'd think Toni would just start packing another pair of pants for Nathan, but she kept thinking that maybe *today* was the day she wouldn't have to worry about this. She walked through the nurse's open door and saw Nathan sitting on the medical cot, the sanitary paper crinkling beneath him as he mumbled to himself, tapping the ends of two cups together to make a soft popping sound to stim himself.

"Sorry," Toni said to the nurse, a reflex.

"You know, Mrs. Cocchetti," the nurse began, stepping out of Nathan's earshot, "I think something might be wrong with your son. I mean, I think he must be sick. He doesn't have a fever, but I can't imagine that a child would have an accident on himself every day for two weeks with no cause. Maybe you should take him out of school for a few days?"

Toni sighed and looked at Nathan, the trouble of his own incontinence already forgotten. "Yeah," Toni said, "I think that's probably for the best. Thanks."

At the doctor's office, Toni's view was similar to what it had been back at his school: Nathan sat upon a cushy, sanitary-paper-covered cot, mumbling to himself, tilting his head this way and that. She wasn't sure why he did that. Was he trying to see better? Oh, great, did he need glasses? Just one more expense to add to their pile of bills—one too many with all the work she'd been missing lately.

"OK," said Nathan's pediatrician, walking through the door with his eyes on a clipboard, not even bothering to look up to offer a symbolic hello. "Well, my assistant already took his temperature, and he's not running a fever."

Toni recalled the assistant poking and prodding at Nathan, fully setting off his sensory anxieties. He had tried to bite her, and despite the assistant's look of horror, she had tried to reassure her, and herself, that Nathan wasn't a violent boy. He was just scared.

The memory from that morning flashed in Toni's mind: Benny insisting that Nathan's head was full of "bad guys." Did he think his own brother was bad like this assistant did? Nathan wasn't *bad*, was he?

"Yeah, we know," said Toni, unable to hide the irritation in her voice. "The school nurse just told me the same thing." *For free*, she thought bitterly. "But something's gotta be wrong, right? This isn't normal behavior for Nathan."

"I can understand why you're concerned," said the doctor, briefly considering her over his wire-rimmed spectacles. "But there's nothing to suggest that he's sick. In fact," he began, setting the clipboard down and really looking at her now, "since these accidents have been happening for the last few weeks, one of two things would have happened by now: Either it would have cleared up, and we wouldn't be seeing any accidents at all, or he would have gotten a lot worse, and we would have seen an increase in symptoms. Nathan is perfectly healthy."

Nathan had gotten off the cot to reach for a few things on the small counter in the examination room. He smudged his fingertips against large glass containers that held cotton balls, swabs and other prodding devices. Was he looking at his own reflection? Was it the coolness of the glass that enticed him? Did he want a chance to prod someone the way the assistant had poked at him before?

What was going on in Nathan's head?

"That just doesn't make any sense," Toni answered. "If he's not sick, then what's wrong with him? Is he regressing? His little sister started at his daycare program. Is he acting out for attention?"

"We don't usually see regression in children Nathan's age," the doctor countered carefully.

"But he has special needs," Toni contended. "Nathan's timeline has always been a little different than other kids'."

"It's possible," the doctor conceded. "The fact remains that, whatever's causing Nathan to go on himself, the accidents are behavioral, something he could completely control if he wanted to. You might consider seeing a behavioral specialist."

The sting of the doctor's words followed her to her car, where she buckled Nathan into his booster seat. What was she going to do? The school didn't want him back. How could she go back there and tell them her son was just acting out, inconveniencing everyone with his waste on purpose? This was ridiculous.

As she strapped him in, she plopped his backpack down into the floorboard. She reached for his lunchbox on the pavement beside her, but her hand only touched the rough surface of the ground. There was no lunchbox to grab.

She looked at the empty spot, stunned, confused. Had she left it in the doctor's office? But no, she didn't remember ever bringing it in. After a quick survey of the car, she realized she left it at school and that they'd have to go back today after all.

When Toni got back to the school, her thoughts whirled. What was going on with Nathan? Why would he do this on purpose? Was he trying to spite her? Did Nathan know that this hurt her and his teachers, like he knew he was hurting his brother this morning?

She parked as close to the entrance as possible and coaxed Nathan out of the car with promises of a trip to Five Below at the end of the week. "Be good, and you can get those little toys you like, OK?"

"Now?" Nathan asked on the sidewalk leading up to the front door.

"Not now, buddy. Not today, OK? Later this week. Remember your days? Today is what day?"

"Wednesday," said Nathan as she swung open the glass front door for him.

"That's right. And we get treats on what day?"

"Friday for being good," he said.

"That's right. Great job." If she weren't so distracted, she probably would have taken him to Five Below right that moment, just for remembering the days of the week. It had taken them ages to get that right, and if he wasn't giving his full attention to the question, he still sometimes got it wrong.

She ducked her head into the front office and said she needed to swing by Nathan's classroom for his lunchbox. The office attendant called the classroom and said a parent would be stopping by. When she hung up, she permitted Toni to pass with a tired smile.

Toni padded down the hall as fast as she could without leaving Nathan behind. He didn't like for her to hold his hand, but it was really tempting, even when she knew a meltdown would follow. He got distracted by all the posters on the walls.

“Red,” Nathan said pointing at an apple on one of the posters. “Make good choices,” the poster said. “Red,” he said again and muttered incoherently to himself, touching the apple, petting the picture, bringing his face right up next to it.

“Good job, buddy, but we gotta hurry, OK?”

Finally, they reached the classroom. Toni reached for the handle and found, yet again, that Nathan wasn’t behind her. She looked around and found him standing at the end of the hall, staring at the classroom door. His eyes were wide.

“Nathan? What’s up, buddy? We’re not going back to school just yet. We just need to get your lunchbox, remember?”

“No,” said Nathan quietly without looking at her.

“‘No,’ you don’t remember? Or ‘no’ school?”

“No,” said Nathan.

Toni sighed. She looked at the door, her hand still on the handle, and then back at Nathan. She’d only be a second. He would be alright out here alone for just a second, wouldn’t he?

“OK, Nathan, I’ll be *right back*, OK? Where are you gonna be when I come back out? Right there, right?”

“OK,” Nathan said.

After a few back-and-forths concerning Nathan’s future whereabouts, Toni’s anxieties were quelled enough to go into the classroom alone.

Once inside, she was nearly blinded by all the white in the room. The walls were bare of the usual motivational and educational posters. Even the ABC strip that usually adorned the top of the whiteboards in elementary school classrooms was missing. The desks were pushed against the walls, many of them unable to be reached without moving other desks out of the way.

“Can I help you?”

Toni jumped. She had been so distracted that she hadn’t even noticed a young woman sitting at the desk. “You scared me!” she chuckled nervously, clutching her chest and steadying her breath. “Yeah, I’m just here to get a lunchbox we left behind.”

“Oh, right!” said the woman, hopping out of her chair. Instead of having a swivel chair, she sat in one of the student’s seats, much too small for her frame. She crouched by a corner labeled “Lost and Found” and retrieved his bag.

“I’m Sarah, by the way,” she said, extending the bag to her. “Well, Miss Marks, the new Teacher Aide.”

As Toni took it, she took one last sweep around the room. “Are you guys moving classrooms?” she asked, distracted.

“What do you mean?” asked Miss Marks.

“Well,” said Toni, “everything’s gone. It’s empty in here.”

“Oh,” she said. She seemed a little uncomfortable. Her brow furrowed, her mind working out what she could or couldn’t say. “There’s a boy in the class who...well, he has some behavioral issues. When he’s angry, he tears things down from the walls. He pushes desks over. He rips up his worksheets. Sometimes—and he doesn’t mean to; he’s just a kid—but sometimes he even hurts the other children. When he’s angry, he just has no idea what he’s doing.”

Toni’s stomach sank and twisted. Her mouth filled with saliva, like she might throw up. Her face grew hot. She knew she was turning red. Could this woman be talking about Nathan? Was Nathan the boy who hurt the other children? She thought about Nathan shoving Benny over, hard, his eyes emblazed with the intent to hurt. She thought of all the other times he had ever hurt Benny and Victoria. Was he treating his classmates the same way?

The aide, seemingly unaware of Toni’s inner struggle, continued: “We took everything down, so he wouldn’t have anything to grab onto and rip or break during an episode. We pushed the desks out of the way, so he couldn’t push them over. At this time, we’re having lessons out in the hallway, so the other children don’t get hurt. The teacher and I are talking to the advisors to figure out a more permanent solution. We might have to transfer the student elsewhere. We’re just not sure what to do anymore.”

Toni was sweating. She could feel herself growing hot under her armpits; her work shirt was getting damp. She wanted to pull her collar away from her neck and blow down her blouse cartoonishly, creating a draft for herself. She didn’t. She was trying to look cool.

“What’s his name?” she finally croaked. She cleared her throat and repeated the question. *Please not Nathan*, she thought. *Please not Nathan. Please not him.*

“I’m sorry,” said the aide, slowly, “but I can’t give the boy’s name. It would be a violation of his privacy. I can assure you that your child is not in any danger. We’re doing everything we can to make sure of that. Further action will be taken soon.”

Toni opened her mouth but then closed it again. She swallowed. After taking a full beat to work up the courage to ask the question, she practically whispered, “Is it Nathan? Is it my son?”

Please no please no please no please no please no—

“Nathan?” the aide asked in surprise. “No, it’s—well, another boy. It’s someone else. We’ve been in constant contact with his guardians. You would know if it was your son.”

Toni felt an almost literal weight being lifted off of her. Her breath came more easily. She felt her body cooling down. Unconsciously, she clasped Nathan’s lunchbox to her chest. Not Nathan. It wasn’t him.

“Thank you,” said Toni, her eyes welling with tears. She looked up to trap them before they ran down her cheeks. “For keeping him safe,” she added quickly.

“Oh, of course,” said Miss Marks. “And please don’t think less of the other student causing trouble. He’s not a bad kid. He’s just going through a lot at home right now. His special needs are more behavioral than intellectual, and his guardians—well, they’re his grandparents. It’s a long story. I can’t get into it, really. I shouldn’t. But they’re doing everything they can too. It’s just...circumstance. Sometimes a situation is bad, and makes people behave badly.

“It’s really a shame,” Miss Marks continued. “Most of the other kids will do almost anything they can think of to get away from him... They’ll say they have stomach aches. They frequently ask to go to the bathroom—”

Something in Toni clicked. Nathan. He wasn’t having accidents to spite her. He was trying to get away from a situation that gave him sensory overload. He was using it to escape. Nathan, with a disability that kept him from communicating his needs through words, got himself out of an uncomfortable situation in the only way he knew how. Everything was starting to make sense.

Toni nodded and smiled, relief flooding her entire body. She turned and left the classroom in a daze.

She opened the door and looked down the hall to find Nathan standing exactly where she had left him, whispering whimsical secrets to the little girl in the apple poster. As fully as she felt a wave of relief, she also felt shame. How could she have been worried that her son was bad? Just because he did hurtful things, that didn’t mean those actions were inherent to his character.

He was her son, and that meant that he was good, no matter what.

She walked down the hall toward him and stopped, extending her hand for him to take, calling his name softly. He turned to her, reaching for her hand, but instead of taking it, he stroked it swiftly, a small but deep affection, and walked down the hall ahead of her.

Toni chuckled softly to herself. What did she expect? Nathan would always be Nathan.