

The Magic of Ordinary Lives

— AN ESSAY BY —

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I was at a social function, mopping drool from my eleven-year-old daughter's mouth, when a woman interrupted me. "She's lucky to have you," she said.

I had heard this before, and as always the words made me uncomfortable. My daughter Grace is disabled. She has autism, developmental delays, and seizures. Grace can't speak, but she understands everything. While I know the woman meant well, I always imagine how Grace might interpret comments like this. To her, the words probably translated as: *Most people wouldn't want you.*

I hugged Grace and gave my standard reply: "I'm the lucky one. I get to be her mom." It wasn't just a line. I have six children and feel like I've won the parenting lottery with them. Even—no, strike that—*especially* with Grace.

I didn't feel that way initially. My husband and I adopted Grace from China following a particularly difficult time in our lives. After years of infertility, I had finally become pregnant only to go into preterm labor and deliver our son ten weeks early. Luckily, he was little but healthy. I wasn't so fortunate. I spent six weeks in the hospital and was diagnosed with Crohn's disease, an autoimmune disease that causes your body to attack itself. Crohn's is manageable, but as I learned during my pregnancy, it can become life-threatening.

I slowly recovered, but living with Crohn's taught me how fragile our bodies are. However, I wasn't going to let the disease control my life. When my husband and I wanted to enlarge our family, we focused on special needs adoption from China. After all, we were pros at navigating the medical world. Grace's special need was listed as a small heart condition that had

already been surgically corrected. This was a need we thought we could handle, and we traveled to China excited to meet our little girl. But upon meeting Grace in Nanjing, we realized that something was very wrong. She was twenty-two months old and couldn't hold her head up. She couldn't walk or talk, and scars covered the backs of her legs.

This was not the child we had imagined. We had two options, leave her in China where she would be labeled “unadoptable” and left to die, or let go of our dreams for the child we *thought* we were adopting and bring Grace home.

Our first year was difficult. We spent hours in physical, occupational, and speech therapy. Grace was cast for AFOs (ankle braces), and I learned how to administer Diastat to stop prolonged seizures. I was more nurse than mother, and most days ended with me in tears.

To survive I had to throw out my expectations for Grace and see the world through her eyes. She was extremely tactile, so I filled our garden with lamb's ears. She loved Broadway tunes and old Gospel songs, so I learned the lyrics to “Goodnight My Someone” and “Amazing Grace.” She giggled when I brushed her cheek with lamb's ears and sat in my lap for hours, her ear pressed against my chest, feeling the vibrations as I sang.

Slowly, I stopped trying to pull her into my world and joined her in hers. I began to realize that the only thing *different* about Grace was the way she looked on the outside. She wanted the same things I did. To be loved. To belong. To laugh.

The title character in *The Peculiar Miracles of Antoinette Martin* is modeled after Grace. While writing, I thought about the ways we separate ourselves. Race, gender, physical ability, and all the other categories by which we define ourselves mask the fact that we are more alike than different. We are all broken people living in the shadow of death. When life is viewed that way, the things that divide us cease to matter and everyday tasks become exceedingly brave. That thought can either be terrifying or liberating. I choose to see it as liberating. Before being diagnosed with Crohn's and parenting Grace, I limited myself. I wouldn't have thought I was capable of parenting a disabled child or surviving multiple surgeries and hospitalizations with no real end in sight. My view of the world was too small. The truth is, when thrust into difficult situations, most of us not only handle them but thrive.

Through *Grace*, my book became a story about the ways in which love enlarges our lives, enabling us to do things we never dreamed possible. It became the story of a woman learning to love a girl who isn't her daughter and a mother who realizes that sometimes love means letting go. It became the story of a child with the ability to heal broken bodies—which is the *least* miraculous thing about her.

At its heart, *The Peculiar Miracles of Antoinette Martin* is about the ways in which we are more alike than different. It's about ordinary people stepping beyond their self-imposed limitations and changing the world around them. It is about the magic of ordinary lives and the impact that one person can have, even if that person is a little “different.”