

A Personal Essay

A Stranger Wearing My Son's Face

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"Somebody wanted your head."

He said it with a smirk. The kind of smirk I had only ever seen on the faces of killers in the anime shows he used to love. He was thirteen when I first noticed that smirk. By the time I could name what it meant, I had already lost count of how many times I had cried.

I looked at my son and did not recognize him.

That is the hardest thing a mother can say. Not *I love him*, which is easy, because love does not ask to be explained. Not even *I am afraid of him*, which is true but simple. The hardest thing is this: I looked into the face of the boy I carried inside my body, the boy I nursed and named and sang to sleep, and I did not know who was looking back at me.

THE FAUCET THAT WOULD NOT CLOSE

In March 2024, my husband and I made a decision that I believe no parent should ever have to make. We decided to take our son LJ to a rehabilitation center in Quezon City. We could not tell him the truth, so we told him we were going on a vacation. We said his father's aunt had come home from the United



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Kingdom and we would celebrate together. He believed us. He had no reason not to.

In the days before we left, I pampered him. I bought him things he liked. I held him longer than usual. I kept crying and could not explain why, and he kept looking at me with confusion in his young eyes, not understanding the weight of what I was carrying. I told him, through my sobs, "*Anak, be strong even if Mommy is not beside you.*" He gave me a thumbs-up, the way only a teenager can — casual, unbothered, unaware that the world as he knew it was about to change.

When we arrived at the facility and they separated us, something in me broke open. I think it was the part that had always believed I could fix things if I just loved hard enough.

He thought it was a hotel. That detail still destroys me. While my husband and I sat in the office signing contracts, the tears came like a faucet that no one could turn off. On the long journey home — from Manila to Batangas, then by boat across the water to my province in Oriental Mindoro — I went through four handkerchiefs. Four. I had bought them at the mall when we were shopping for his things, not knowing then what they would be used for. They are still somewhere in my home, stiff with grief, witnesses to a kind of courage I am not sure I deserved to feel.

My husband flew to Dubai for work. And I was left alone with the silence where my son used to be.

HIS BIRTHDAY



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For two months, I could not visit. The facility allowed no photographs, only phone calls through a nurse who held the phone and relayed words between us like a translator working in a foreign country I had never meant to visit.

His birthday came in June. It was the saddest birthday of my life, though I smiled through all of it. We celebrated at the facility, surrounded by strangers who were each carrying their own broken stories. I thought about all the birthdays before — the cakes, the noise, the cousins running through the house — and I understood for the first time what it means to mourn something that is not yet gone.

A few months later, he pleaded with us. He begged to come home before the six-month program was complete. The facility had given us very few updates. The silence had grown unbearable, a living thing with weight and texture. We missed him too much. We brought him home in July.

HISTORY REPEATING

We tried to rebuild. We traveled together — Baguio City, Manila, Isabela — chasing something that felt like the old us, the family we had been before all of this. I was trying to fill in what had gone missing, the months, the milestones, the ordinary evenings that had simply not happened.

My mistake was giving him my iPhone. I told myself I could monitor what he installed. I believed I was in control.

I was not.

The threats came back. He refused school again. History repeated itself with the precision of a curse — not randomly, but deliberately, as if it had been waiting. The wound I had carved into him with my anger, my comparisons, my



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visible disappointments, had never closed. It had only gone underground, where wounds grow stranger and more dangerous.

My husband decided to send him to Romblon, to his hometown, for a fresh start. At first, things seemed quieter. Then we learned that LJ had been bullying a classmate who had just lost his father. That news sat inside me like a stone. This was not the child I had raised. Or perhaps, more painfully, it was — shaped and sharpened by everything he had seen and heard in our home, every moment I had failed to be what he needed.

THE SECOND FACILITY

In January 2025, I found another center, this one in Silang, Cavite. It was more affordable. The staff was kind. They sent photographs and regular updates — small mercies, small anchors when the days felt like open water. The contract was for eight months, with no visitation allowed for the first five.

Difficult and unbearable. But we endured.

We exchanged letters through Messenger. I would type my words into my phone, and the staff would print them and place them in his hands. He would write back, and they would photograph his letters and send them to me. Our love traveling a digital bridge to reach each other. I would read his handwriting and press my fingers against the screen as if I could feel the paper he had touched.

My fortieth birthday came in April. I spent it alone in Ilocos Norte and Ilocos Sur — the ancient churches, the sweep of the coastline, the wind that does not care what year you are turning. I meditated. I cried. I blamed myself in the quiet



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way that mothers do, turning the question over and over like a stone: *where did I go wrong?* I had no answer. I am not sure there is one. But the question would not leave me alone.

THE DAY THAT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE

September 15, 2025, arrived like a wish finally granted.

Before flying home, we ate at Vikings, a buffet restaurant in a mall, and I watched my son fill his plate and laugh and ask for more, and he was my LJ again — my sweet sunshine, gentle and present, the boy who used to kiss my cheek and call me his world. I bought him clothes, shoes, a new bag for school. I was so happy I could hardly breathe.

I booked flights to Singapore. I planned a Christmas trip to three cities, inviting cousins and family to join us. I wanted to cover him in good things. I wanted to believe that this time, we had made it through.

Two weeks later, the nightmare returned.

No warnings. No signals. He threatened to kill me again. He threatened to burn our house. He had no cellphone this time — I had been so careful — but the pain did not live in the phone. It lived in him, fed by years of wounds that neither of us had known how to heal. He screamed at me the things I had once said to him in anger. He held up a mirror I had forgotten I had made.

I called the police. I called the DSWD. I had no other choice. What if he did something none of us could take back? The barangay officials came to my door. He threatened them all — holding a knife, wild with a pain I had helped create. It took more than ten people to carry him out. The police had to break through



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part of our house to reach him. An ambulance took him away while I stood in the wreckage of my own home and felt, for the first time, the full and unguarded truth: I had failed.

Not because I had not loved him. I had loved him with everything I had. But love, I was learning, is not always enough. And the ways we love can sometimes leave marks as deep as the ways we wound.

AGAIN

Now it is 2026. We let him come home once more. We wanted to believe the fear of going back would be enough to hold him steady. We wanted to believe that this time, things would be different.

He bought a smartphone with money he earned working with my mother. When I found out, he began destroying things again — shouting, raging, wandering between my sister's house and my aunt's, threatening to end his own life. He cannot sleep. He will not take his medication. He is spinning in a darkness I cannot enter, and I am standing at the edge of it with my hands outstretched, reaching for someone who cannot feel me anymore.

I keep asking myself: *where did I go wrong?* And I keep arriving at the same answer, which is not really an answer at all — I did everything I knew how to do. My best, in every season of this, was real. It was given with my whole heart. If my best was not enough, I cannot undo that. I can only carry it.

I have made the decision again. He will return to the facility. As much as I long to cook his meals, to sit beside him while he does his homework, to watch him simply exist in the ordinary, laughing way of a teenager — I cannot do those



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things right now. The love is not gone. It is here, fierce and constant and aching. But love, I have learned, does not always look like holding on.

Sometimes it looks like letting go, again and again, into the care of others, into the hands of strangers who will watch over him when I cannot.

Sometimes it looks like a mother standing alone in an empty room, hoping — still hoping — that someday, when the distance has done whatever it must do, her son will come home.

And that this time, they will both be ready.

This essay is part of a continuing personal memoir about motherhood, mental health, and the limits of love.



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