

Winning

Josh is sitting on the bottom stair. His fingers, behaving like uncooked pork sausages, are fighting with two equally undisciplined thumbs. They are attempting to coordinate their wrestling with the separate ends of two long white laces belonging to a pair of brand new white trainers. Josh allows himself to believe that the tears from his eyes come from having to squint because of the morning sun as it glints through the opaque glass of the front door, and the lump in his throat is his excitement at going outside in the first pair of shoes he will have ever laced up by himself. .

For all of his growing up years Josh has worn shoes that could either just be pulled on or that came with Velcro straps which, along with the elasticated waistband trousers and polo shirts, were designed to help him grow towards being as independent as possible. Even with these aids it had still been a challenge for his awkward digits.

“All fingers and thumbs,” he would chuckle on his good days, sounding like his maternal grandmother. On his bad days he would hurl the offending item at the nearest wall leaving smudge marks which would be ignored till Dad had time to paint over them. He knew today he must not throw the trainers or he would have to revert to his trusted black slip-on pumps.

It was challenging for him to remain in control of his temper because his emotions were always at the surface. “What you see is what you get,” he would remind people with a lopsided grin, repeating something he had heard his favourite primary school teacher say.

It was his cheerful ways which drew young children to him and help him to make easy friendships during his childhood. Even though his classmates knew he was different to them they still welcomed him into their pretend games. This resulted in invites round to tea, to birthday parties, trips to the park and the zoo. Josh never noticed that he would get left out of the more physical activities, like going on group bike rides or trips to the swimming pool, which would need the constant help of an adult. Everyone tried to make Josh's life as normal as possible to that of his peers.

Unfortunately, even in public, tantrums and tears came just as openly and easily to Josh as did his smiles and laughter. It was those tantrums that now embarrassed the fragility of his now teenager friends, which meant he got left out of invites more and more.

Josh, in his simplistic way, had decided that the problem for the decrease in invites was all to do with his shoes. He believed if only he could wear trainers like all the rest then he would fit in again. So for his fourteenth birthday his parents gave in to his pleading, begging and tearful tantrums and bought him a pair of white Nike trainers.

This morning Josh's squeals of delight must have been heard across the town as he tore the wrapping paper off the box.

“Must not put new shoes on the table. It's bad luck,” Josh grinned mimicking Grandma, as

he carefully placed the trainers on the floor next to his chair.

Josh fidgeted his way through his birthday breakfast of pancakes and chocolate spread, constantly running his sock encased feet over the shoes as if worrying they might escape. He had wanted to skip breakfast and go straight into lacing up his brand new trainers by himself, but Mum had said he needed to eat first reminding him how sometimes he got 'hangry'. That made him smile and acquiesce.

Over breakfast Mum repeated the plan that once they had eaten and his shoes were on they would catch the bus to Grandma's.

The first time they had ever caught the bus Josh had found the whole experience so dauntingly exciting so he had decided to include it as part of the birthday ritual once he had been allowed to decide what he wanted to do with his special day.

Now with a nub of white lace gripped in tight fists, tears blinding his vision and running down his cheeks, Josh grits his teeth for yet another try to make the knot and bow he so desperately needs.

“How is it going, Josh?” Dad calls from the front room.

Dad and Mum sit on the couch, knees touching, tightly gripping hands – the only way they can stop themselves leaping up and from rushing into the hall. Their whole bodies ache to help his Down's Syndrome son, as they hear the undertow of tearful sobs that have been the bass tone of the house for the past twenty minutes.

Josh takes a deep breath before replying. “Winning,” he yells swallowing hard in the hope of keeping the wobbles from his voice. “Winning!”