

Back to Normal

The place: a school psychiatrist's office  
The time: Wednesday afternoon

Characters

TED JACOBS, an upper-middle-class father, 40's  
GINA JACOBS, his wife, 40's  
MELISSA JACOBS, their daughter, 8

MRS. BLACK, a school psychiatrist, middle-aged  
MR. HARRIMAN, a federal official, middle-aged

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Scene 1

(A desk sits center stage with a chair behind it and three more in front. A pad and pen sit on top. MRS. BLACK sits behind the desk. MR. HARRIMAN stands behind her. TED, GINA and MELISSA JACOBS sit in front of the desk. MELISSA draws in a sketchbook.)

GINA

We were a bit surprised to get your call, Mrs. Black. We haven't had any complaints about Melissa from her teachers, and she's perfectly well-behaved at home.

MRS. BLACK

Well-behaved. Could you elaborate on that, Mrs. Jacobs? What does Melissa do when she's not at school?

GINA

Well, I suppose she does the same things as any girl her age. She plays with dolls. She runs around in the backyard, she talks with friends, she watches TV. (Laughs.) She even still has an imaginary friend.

MR. HARRIMAN

How interesting. Could we meet this 'imaginary friend?'

GINA

Well, no. (Pause.) Um, I don't believe we've met.

MRS. BLACK

This is Mr. Harriman. (Beat.)

TED

And Mr. Harriman is...?

MRS. BLACK

He's from the government and he's here to help you.

GINA

The government? I don't understand.

MRS. BLACK

Something else you said. Melissa likes to watch TV.  
How much?

GINA

It's not very much, maybe half an hour a day. (She  
smiles.) Sometimes we let her stay up late to watch  
documentaries.

(HARRIMAN perks up.)

MR. HARRIMAN

Did you say documentaries?

TED

I watch a lot of PBS, and she likes to join me.

MR. HARRIMAN

PBS? *Without commercials?*

TED

Well, no, I suppose not. It's mostly just nature  
shows. Sometimes history - Rome, World War Two, that  
sort of thing. She really gets into them. (To MELISSA)  
Don't you like to watch the shows with Daddy?

(MELISSA looks up from her  
drawing.)

MELISSA

I like to see the zebras and the cheetahs. And when  
they tell people what their junk is worth.

TED

She's gotten hooked on Antiques Roadshow. Can you  
blame her?

MR. HARRIMAN

Hmm.

GINA

Is there something wrong with that?

(MRS. BLACK scribbles down some  
notes. She and MR. HARRIMAN look  
at each other knowingly.)

MRS. BLACK

What about her other pursuits? Does she watch cartoons? Disney movies? Play video games?

GINA

Well, the TV stays off until she finishes her homework. And we don't have any sort of video games at home.

MRS. BLACK

And how about music? (To MELISSA) What music do you like? Bruno Mars? One Direction?

MELISSA

I like the show we listen to on the way to school. On NPR. And I just got this really cool CD called Ziggy Stardust.

MR. HARRIMAN

David Bowie? What do the other kids at school think of that?

(MELISSA shrugs.)

MELISSA

I don't care. It's my life.

(TED tousles her hair.)

TED

That's my girl.

GINA

Look, what is this all about?

MR. HARRIMAN

We're asking the questions here!

TED

Whoa! What is this, Guantanamo? Tell us why we're here or we're leaving. And for that matter, why are you here? What's a federal official doing hovering over the school psychiatrist?

MR. HARRIMAN

I am here because my superiors wanted assurance the school system would follow some new government medical directives.

GINA

Like what?

MR. HARRIMAN

Tell them, Mrs. Black.

MRS. BLACK

You tell them.

MR. HARRIMAN

Mr. and Mrs. Jacobs, all of the indicators are there. (Gestures to MELISSA.) Quiet demeanor, good study habits, keen intellect, ability to focus for long periods with minimal stimulation. I'm afraid Melissa will need our help if she's to have any chance of recovering from ASD.

TED

From the what now?

MRS. BLACK

It's all right to be confused, Mrs. Jacobs. Most parents haven't heard of Attention Surplus Disorder yet.

TED

Of what?

GINA

I still don't understand. She gets straight A's. Her teachers all love her. What's wrong with her?

MR. HARRIMAN

Perhaps the better question is, what's right with everyone else?

TED

You lost us.

MR. HARRIMAN

Have the two of you ever heard of the term "normalizing?"

TED

Sure. It's when you recenter all the values in a given data set to make the mean value better represent the average of the population.

MR. HARRIMAN

It's when we recenter all of the values in a given data set to make the mean - oh. Yes.

GINA

It's what you did with the S.A.T.'s, didn't you? You adjusted the scoring so that the average score was 500 again, even though it was really closer to 400.

TED

Because people got dumber.

MR. HARRIMAN

No one got dumber, Mr. Jacobs. The test had simply become more difficult for the person of average intelligence.

TED

(skeptical)

Right.

MR. HARRIMAN

Anyway. In recent months, the federal government has concluded that this process of normalization can be successfully applied to areas far afield of test scores. Which is where your daughter comes in.

TED

You mean - you haven't -

MR. HARRIMAN

You catch on fast, Mr. Jacobs.

TED

But you can't do that to medical diagnoses! That's ridiculous!

GINA

Do what?

MRS. BLACK

What's ridiculous, Mr. and Mrs. Jacobs, is continuing to consider 71 percent of the school-age population of this country to have a medical disorder.

TED

71 percent?

MR. HARRIMAN

That's the percentage of American students, Mr. Jacobs, who were diagnosed last year with Attention Deficit Disorder. Think about it - 3 out of every 4 school-age children falsely ostracized because of their natural 'pep.'

TED

'Pep?' Is that the clinical term?

MR. HARRIMAN

Millions of students hopped up on psychotropic drugs. A nation of Ritalin junkies. Think of the expense to parents, to Medicaid, to society. The stigma. The heartbroken families.

GINA

Well maybe you shouldn't prescribe the kids so many drugs.

MR. HARRIMAN

Exactly. We have done exactly that, Mrs. Jacobs, with a simple swipe of a pen. There will be no more ADD drugs, because there is no more ADD. It is no longer considered abnormal.

TED

(snide)

Well, that's a neat trick.

MRS. BLACK

No kidding.

MR. HARRIMAN

There was, unfortunately, a side effect. By curing ADD, we enabled the spread of an entirely new illness.

GINA

You mean Attention Surplus Disorder?

MR. HARRIMAN

A crippling affliction shared by a full 29 percent of American's schoolchildren. Condemned to spend their lives shunned by their peers. Scoffed at for their high grades and advanced cognitive skills. Lost in a wilderness of books without pictures, museums without touch-screens and television shows without commercials.

GINA

But Melissa-

MR. HARRIMAN

Let me run some names past the two of you. Jeffrey Dahmer. Pol Pot. The Zodiac Killer. Kim Jong Il.

GINA

They had ASD?

MR. HARRIMAN

All quiet, studious, restrained, mild-mannered, just like your -(stops suddenly when he looks at MELISSA.) Cut that out, will you?

(MELISSA has been sitting silently, alternating between sketching and listening to the discussion.)

GINA

What is she doing?

MR. HARRIMAN

(a bit disturbed)

Nothing. She's not doing anything! She's just sitting there watching us! Couldn't she at least fidget a little, shift her weight, hum something? (to Melissa) Bite your nails! Run around the room like you're a firetruck! (No response.) Wait, I know.

(HARRIMAN reaches into his pocket and pulls out a portable video game system. He hands it to MELISSA.)



MR. HARRIMAN

Look! Noises! Sounds! Hand-eye coordination! Keep it.  
We need to get you on the road to recovery, stat.

(MELISSA looks at the game system  
and hands it back politely.)

MELISSA

No, thank you.

(MR. HARRIMAN is stunned.)

MR. HARRIMAN

Mrs. Black, why don't you tell them about treatment.

MRS. BLACK

We can offer you several alternatives.

(She hands TED and GINA a glossy  
brochure.)

TED and GINA

Disneyworld?

MRS. BLACK

They offer an intensive two-week seminar of cultural  
stimulation that promises to cure ASD forever. Noises,  
lights, 3-D movies - enough to kick that little brain  
into hyperdrive and keep it revved up right through  
adolescence.

GINA

But we just took her to Italy for two weeks.

MR. HARRIMAN

Europe? Dear God. That's like PBS, but an entire  
continent.

MRS. BLACK

If you prefer, we also offer medical options.

(She writes out a prescription and  
hands it to TED and GINA. They  
read it.)

TED

You're prescribing Red Bull to an eight-year-old?

MRS. BLACK

One can, three times a day. She'll be bouncing off the walls in no time. And if you can give them to her around bedtime, all the better. She'll never kick ASD if she's getting enough sleep, and plus this gives her more of a chance to fill up on late-night TV.

TED

Do we have a choice about this?

MR. HARRIMAN

Of course you do. You can have a child that fits in with her peers, or you can have a bespectacled, small-chested library geek who might possibly lose her virginity at 40 to someone she met through the Mensa website.

(TED stands up to leave.)

TED

I think we'll take that risk, thanks.

GINA

Hold on, Ted. Maybe we should think about this.

TED

What? You're the one that limits her TV. You take her to the library. Read to her. Cook her vegetables. You've been fostering this "disorder" for eight years!

GINA

I know. I feel responsible.

TED

You think they're *right*?

GINA

Well, he's from the government. He must know something we don't.

MRS. BLACK

Did you say something about vegetables?

TED

Oh, now what?

MRS. BLACK

What can you tell us about Melissa's eating habits? Does she prefer McDonald's or is she more of a Pizza Hut girl?

GINA

We don't eat fast food. We feed her at home, lots of greens and grains. Is that bad too?

MR. HARRIMAN

Good Lord. Has your child ever had a Happy Meal in her life?

GINA

Not to my knowledge. Melissa?

MELISSA

I had one once when I was over at Janey's. It gave me a stomachache and then we lost the toy.

MR. HARRIMAN

Melissa, will you do me a favor? Can you stand up and turn around?

(MELISSA does so. MR. HARRIMAN and MRS. BLACK watch her, then look at each other.)

GINA

What is it now?

MRS. BLACK

I was afraid of this.

GINA

Of what?!

MRS. BLACK

Mrs. Jacobs, your daughter is dangerously under-obese.

GINA

Oh - no!

TED  
That's it, we're leaving.

GINA  
What can we do?

TED  
Gina, we're leaving.

(MRS. BLACK writes on the  
prescription pad.)

MRS. BLACK  
I'm writing you a prescription for Hardee's bacon  
double cheeseburgers-

(TED grabs GINA and pulls her up.)

TED  
Gina, we're leaving!

GINA  
I think we'd better go. Melissa.

(MELISSA finishes her sketch and  
hands it to MRS. BLACK.)

MELISSA  
I drew a picture of you, Mrs. Black.

(MRS. BLACK and MR. HARRIMAN look  
at the picture in concealed shock.  
MRS. BLACK forces a smile.)

MRS. BLACK  
That's very nice, dear. Aren't you a talented little  
girl.

(TED grabs MELISSA and pulls her  
away; as he is doing so, GINA  
quickly grabs the Hardee's  
prescription from MRS. BLACK. All  
three JACOBSES exit stage right.  
MRS. BLACK and MR. HARRIMAN look  
at the drawing.)

MRS. BLACK

She's creative, too.

MR. HARRIMAN

Hitler went to art school. Who's next?

MRS. BLACK

Rodney West. In fifth grade. Honor student, shy, plays the flute and excels at Scrabble.

MR. HARRIMAN

Rodney. Excels at Scrabble.

MRS. BLACK

Also Boggle.

(MR. HARRIMAN pulls a Red Bull out of the desk, opens it and takes a swig.)

MR. HARRIMAN

Gonna be a long afternoon.

END OF PLAY