

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>		11
CHAPTER ONE	Can't Smile Without You	17
CHAPTER TWO	Dream On	24
CHAPTER THREE	Build	34
CHAPTER FOUR	A Family Affair	44
CHAPTER FIVE	Lesson One	52
CHAPTER SIX	Distant Relatives	62
CHAPTER SEVEN	Scooby Dooby Doo	71
CHAPTER EIGHT	Step Outside	81
CHAPTER NINE	Falling	92
CHAPTER TEN	The Long Climb	103
CHAPTER ELEVEN	Separate Lives	111
CHAPTER TWELVE	The Doctor Will See You Now	123

CHAPTER THIRTEEN	The Best Days of Your Life	136
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	Play Away	148
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	Let's Add a Label to It	158
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	The School Run	169
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	Working Nine to Five	179
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN	Legs Eleven	191
CHAPTER NINETEEN	Disco Fever	200
CHAPTER TWENTY	He's Behind You	215
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE	School's Out for Summer	224
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO	I Want to Tell You a Story	231
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE	Tomorrow	241
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR	My Page	246
<i>Author's Note</i>		249
<i>Acknowledgements</i>		250
<i>About Connor Sparrowhawk and Justice for LB</i>		252
<i>About Express CIC</i>		254

*I would like to travel the world with you twice.
Once, to see the world.
Twice, to see the way you see the world.'*

– UNKNOWN

INTRODUCTION

Well, The Boy is a wonder. He's my wonder. Despite the challenges or maybe even because of them, he's the very best thing in the world. You could line up every precious diamond in *Minecraft* and it wouldn't come close to how precious he is. And, of course, I'm biased. But I want people to give him a chance. To look past some of the seemingly strange, challenging behaviours and the outbursts. To chip away at some of the rock and discover this brilliant, dazzling boy inside just waiting to shine. That's why I wanted to tell our story. We only really celebrate disability in this world when there is a skill involved. The Paralympics, amazing though they are, celebrate the ability and aptitude of the athletes. Well, sometimes just 'being' is enough. And we don't celebrate just 'being'

enough. Yet often, it's in the smallness, in the everydayness of life that real beauty occurs. And that's what I want all this to be about: a celebration of the everyday, of 'being'.

MY SON'S NOT RAINMAN BLOG

It was autumn 2011 and I'd been booked as a stand-up comedian for an office party in a London comedy club. From a comedian's point of view, gigs like this are notoriously difficult, full of people who don't really want to be there, apart from the one person in the office who had the brainwave in the first place. The rest of the audience are largely drawn by the prospect of a free bar more than any great desire to be entertained. Still, I was a relative newcomer, at the ripe old age of thirty-nine, and I knew very little about which gigs to avoid or what was a good or bad audience. Someone was willing to pay me to get onstage and tell jokes. Cracking. Let's put what happened next down to naivety.

The thing is, I'd always wanted to talk about my family life when I was onstage. Other comics did it; for many it's the staple of their sets, talking about their wives, their children, the foibles of everyday life. I knew my home life was different in some ways, not least because The Boy's mum and I had separated some years earlier, but I could still share it with people couldn't I? Couldn't I?

The comic before me went down a storm. Stories of screaming toddlers in supermarkets and his wife's inability to understand

INTRODUCTION

him; they lapped it up. Then it was my turn. I got onstage, opening with some of my old material that I knew worked, just to get them onside and reassure them that I was funny. I got a round of applause for the first joke, the seal of approval every comic hopes for. They were going to be OK. Now seemed the time to hit them with the new stuff.

‘I’m a single dad,’ I said, building in confidence, ‘which basically means you all think I’m a much nicer person than you did twenty seconds ago.’ They laughed at the time, although now it’s written down it doesn’t seem the funniest of gags, I grant you. We’ll put it down to one of those ‘you had to be there’ moments.

‘Why is that?’ I continued, the glare of the stage lights beating down on me. ‘Why when I mention I’m a single father am I meant to be some kind of hero? Single mothers? You’re all benefit-sappers apparently, but single fathers, ooh, we’re all heroes. Next year it’s me and a war veteran fighting it out at the Pride of Britain Awards.’

They were a good audience. Things were going OK. I relaxed a bit more. I started talking about my son, about the things children do, how they drive you mad sometimes. That familiar sound, the laughter of recognition, filled the room and, shallow as it might sound, a little bit of it filled my heart too. It felt good. I was on a roll. I decided to talk about my home life some more. ‘My son,’ I said as one joke finished and the laughter was just ebbing away, ‘he’s autistic.’

Silence.

Time. Stood. Still. Whatever had gone before was suddenly over. Two hundred people just stared at me. The party pooper had put an end to their night. Each blank face looked out at me from the shadows with the same thing written all over it: 'We're having a night out. Why are you telling us this?' I was booked to do twenty minutes that night; I managed seven. I didn't even have a chance to get to the bit about cerebral palsy. I left the stage dejected, broken. They hadn't just rejected me as a comedian, they'd rejected my son too. As I snuck out of the back door I could hear the next comic onstage, talking away about parents' evenings and once again laughter filled the room. I caught the train home, emotions changing with each passing station, from incandescent rage to utter sadness.

I'd like to tell you that by the next day I'd moved on, but it took a fortnight of dwelling on every moment of that night before I eventually picked myself up. And then I cancelled every gig I had booked. (That sounds fairly dramatic – there were only six in the diary. I wasn't quite ready for prime-time Saturday-night television just yet.) If I couldn't find a way to talk about the thing that mattered to me most, then I didn't want to talk about anything at all.

There had to be a way, though. There had to be a way to share our story. Despite my son's diagnosis, and maybe even sometimes because of it, my world is filled with joy and laughter. That was all I ever wanted to get across. He'd faced discrimination at every point of his life to date. If I could only get people to understand him more, maybe, just maybe, that might change.

INTRODUCTION

So, in October 2012, nearly a year after that fateful corporate gig and with my son's age reaching double figures, I started to write a blog, all about him. I referred to him as 'The Boy', primarily to save his blushes, but also because that's what he wanted to be called. And over the next couple of months I began to put together a comedy show about the two of us. I thought if people know the subject matter beforehand, maybe they'd be more open to it. It turned out that there was no 'maybe' about it. People read the blog and came to the shows. Lots of people. And they laughed. In some small way, they shared the joy. It seemed they understood The Boy and accepted him more than I ever thought they would.

This book is just another part of that process – another opportunity to share the highs and lows of our lives together. I don't want it to be just a story about autism; I want it to be about a young boy who happens to have autism – there is a difference. He will forever be more than just his diagnosis. And there's more here, much more. Fundamentally, I want it to be about every brilliant piece of him. I want it to be about belonging, about fathers and sons, about all our childhoods, about turning on a light when the monsters come out at night, about how if you keep looking for what's wrong you might just miss the very thing that's right. I want it to be about laughter, lots of laughter, proper hurting-from-the-belly laughter that comes in waves and then ebbs and flows to live on in memories long after the tears have stopped. I want it to be about love. Bucketloads of the stuff. About discovery, about adventure, about knights slaying

MY SON'S NOT RAINMAN

dragons, about superheroes, about victory for each and every little man in this world.

And long after I've left this world, I want it to be a book for you, son. Although I've shared so much of it with you over the months I've been writing it, my biggest hope is that one day in the future you might sit down in a quiet moment, turn to the first page and read it all from cover to cover. Know you are loved, precious boy.

This is our story.