

Her son, Buddy, dies on a Monday morning.

The day starts like any other, with the usual routine. First, Shelly pulls up his medications and lines them up on the counter next to the sink. Then, she wakes him gently and dresses him for the day in something comfortable and cute. His style is sometimes preppy, sometimes sporty, but always on trend for third grade. As the sun begins to rise, Shelly opens the curtains, lets the dog out, starts the coffee, and turns on the music. It's Buddy's choice, as always, what music to play. On their last morning together, he chooses *Kidz Toonz: Songs About Animals*.

"Use your words, sweetie," Shelly says, pushing Buddy's wheelchair up to the dining room table. She clears the space of board books and unpaid medical bills and places his communication device in front of him, tapping on the screen to get his attention. "I know what you want to say, but we need to practice with the words. Let's use the talker, okay?" With her thumb, she presses and holds the power button. The keys light up, blink once, and Buddy's presets light up the screen. "There. Tell me *Kidz Toonz*. And which one."

Buddy looks up at his mother with hooded, sleepy eyes, and she wants to squeeze him and never let go. She looks around the table, moving aside the detritus of medical supplies, used wrappers, and toys until she finds his eyeglasses. "I'm sorry. Here. These will help." She unfolds them and gently places them on his face. Buddy squints adorably. "Let's try again. What music do you want today, Mister Sebastian Silly Pants Theodore?"

Grinning, Buddy bounces in his seat and taps his talker, and Shelly has to physically intertwine her fingers together to keep from showing him the correct buttons. She knows he'll never learn if she continues to do it for him. With some difficulty, Buddy taps out his request with his left forefinger. The mechanical, childlike voice of the talker says, "Kidz Toonz...Duck... Duck...Horse.