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Edward Hurst

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My Two Daughters

by Edward Hurst

Elizabeth and Hannah, night and day, born on June 4th, now ten years of age. Beautiful girls with long pigtails, bright eyes and quick wits. Hannah is astonishingly quick verbally. The CRCT is a measurement of language and math skills. The highest possible score in language is 450 points. Hannah scored 450 while fighting with Elizabeth night and day.

Hannah jokes with her brother Casey, “Maybe you could do better than...no wait, there are no more numbers.” Hannah has a sense of humor and sarcastic wit beyond her age. She invents words in ways that I can’t match. I am proud of her because she is amazing and because she is my daughter.

Elizabeth. Elizabeth is *not* Hannah. Elizabeth is fighting demons I can’t see. I want desperately to help her, but I am lost. Elizabeth appears identical to Hannah, but Elizabeth is...different. She must check her homework six times each day. Her mother or I must read the list of homework assignments to her, seeing that each is completed and in her book bag. Any mistakes in this procedure means we must start over—from the beginning.

Bedtime is the worst. Everyone is tired, but Elizabeth cannot go to sleep until she successfully completes numerous rituals, satisfies numerous compulsions. A week ago my wife broke. She could do no more, so I had to help Elizabeth finish her rituals. It was 2 a.m. Her face and hands were red and chapped from scrubbing. The rituals seem circular in nature, a racetrack hell with no pit stop—and no final victory lap.

Elizabeth does not enjoy these demon voices pushing her any more than I do. That night I tried to force the demons to release my little girl. I took her to her bedroom and held her in bed telling her, “You don’t need to do this; it’s not necessary.”

“I don’t want to wash my face again. It hurts. But I have to.” She pleaded with me, “Let me wash my hands and face just one more time.” Each time

requires a new washcloth. A pile of washcloths beside the bathroom sink each morning re-tells a story I wish to forget.

Hannah can’t sleep. Hannah needs her rest or she won’t be able to maintain those perfect grades. Sometimes I lose my temper with Elizabeth. She gets between my perfect daughter and me. Then I calm myself and remember it’s not her fault. She needs my help to fight the voices in her head that won’t let her rest, won’t let her be more like Hannah.

I helped Hannah with her math homework the other day while Elizabeth was sleeping. Hannah’s fifth grade teacher is introducing the class to decimals. I read a question to Hannah.

“There are three pieces of cloth. One piece is .75 meters, another is .80 meters, and the final piece is .85 meters; which is shortest?”

“The one that’s .75 meters... duh,” Hannah said, rolling her eyes.

She can be a smart aleck. “That was sort of easy wasn’t it, Hannah?”

“They just dolled up some second grade work by *decimalitizing* it,” she replied.

I laughed at this and sent her to play so that I could finish my reading and prepare to face Elizabeth and her stupid rituals later in the evening.

The rituals went smoothly that day. The teeth were brushed for the required four minutes plus an additional thirty seconds to make up for any mistakes. The hourglass timer must lay on its side while she rinses and spits—this is not brushing. The face and hands are washed before the teeth are brushed, washed after the teeth are brushed, and then washed other times for which I see neither rhyme nor reason.

She is happy that the voices have been so lenient with her tonight. Not only does she get to bed earlier, she does not have to face her parents’ anger while defending her rituals. Elizabeth is a smart



girl, too; she realizes that the rituals are useless and time consuming, but she cannot stop.

I try to explain Elizabeth's compulsions to others in a way that is understandable. Imagine you are a responsible person who goes to school or holds down a job. You feel compelled to show up each day and perform your duties. Now turn the world upside down. Everyone you love screams at you to quit school or quit work. You are confused. You know you must perform your duties, but everyone who matters says you should stop. This is the situation of my daughter. She feels compelled to perform acts that others find ridiculous. I know all this. But sympathy is in short supply at 2 a.m.

What should she do? Some rituals do not require outside help. It is the rituals requiring her parents' help that are the most painful. Her parents are ill and anxious. This causes them to make mistakes in the rituals. Mistakes require repetition; tension mounts, anger. It's best not to remember these times.

Meanwhile, Hannah is invited to join the Beta club and do other neat stuff that Elizabeth would enjoy. But Elizabeth has no time.

My only daughter's name is Hannah Elizabeth Hurst, and her stunning gifts came at a price.

