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A Lapse in Vigilance and a Lesson in Instinct

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It would have been easy to ignore in other children, but when it comes to Jonah, our autistic son, nothing is beyond scrutiny.

He was home on summer break from his residential school, and though his appetite was good and his behavior typical, watery droplets ran from his nose.

There were no other cold symptoms, just a slow dribble that collected in the crease above his lips.

The school nurse had called the week before to report that Jonah, who was almost 13 at the time, had taken a tumble, something he did more often than most. He was a slip-and-fall kind of guy, seeing only what he wanted, never the things that were in his way.

We'd had many rides to the emergency room and knew from experience that any scans or X-rays would require general anesthesia, heavy artillery for a routine test. Hoping to avoid a hospital ordeal, the nurse agreed to follow Jonah closely for the next hours and days. She phoned often, assuring me that Jonah was fine, "up to his old tricks."

I believed her and besides, he'd be home in a few days. I would be able to judge for myself.

Professionals stay away from treating their own, so I, not Jonah's physician father, played sleuth to his assorted ailments.

I was the one who figured out that Jonah's sour breath equaled strep throat, that quietude and overcompliance meant it was time to start the Tylenol and that head-scratching could mean a headache or an allergic skin rash.

I raised the possible connection between the mysterious drip and his recent fall. My husband agreed: Jonah should be checked out.

His pediatrician is a rare clinician who listens without looking at the clock and treats childhood illness with a one-two punch. But she was away on vacation. I could wait for her to return or see her associate.

I wanted answers to questions I should have asked sooner.

In the exam room, Jonah did his anxiety thing, being loud, chest banging, flailing and grabbing at everything from a nurse's stethoscope to the neatly stacked ear pieces for otoscopes.

Jonah does not tolerate waiting well, and by the time the doctor knocked, the room was trashed. She'd never met Jonah before and her fake cheeriness and forced smile did little to conceal her uneasiness.

I explained the situation — the fall, the residential school, Jonah's autism and my sense that something sinister might be going on.