The baby was healthy, my grandmother said. Creamy skin, brown curls, and perfect little ears. He cried easily but had the warm dimples of his mother. For weeks our family exclaimed over him as though he was some sort of exotic treasure suddenly bequeathed upon us. I should have known. It seemed too perfect then.

We named him Vignesh, after the elephant-headed Hindu deity. The remover of all obstacles, the lover of science and art, the God who possesses infinite wisdom. Or, as I remember, the one to whom I prayed for an especially long time before an exam.

I was old enough to know then. How difficult it had been for my aunt and uncle to conceive him. No one spoke about the miscarriage that had happened eleven years ago. From my youthful perspective, we were doing it all wrong. We should have listened to their pain for a little longer, acknowledged their loss, let their cries resonate with us. Maybe the adults knew better, though. Maybe sweeping it away was a chance for us to move on. We had to do it sometime.

In any case, it didn’t matter anymore. Vignesh was here and they were parents now. I remember singing to him over the phone. Hearing his sweet baby breathing on the other end of the line. I sang everything and anything I could think of, just to keep his attention. He had a problem staying focused.

The first time I laid eyes on Vignesh was when he was three. His long spindly legs could hardly keep up with his hunger for running, climbing, jumping and falling. He would crawl into my arms for one minute of quiet, staring at a piece of my hair as though it were a fireworks display. He hadn’t started talking yet.
The interesting thing about Autism is that it isn’t really one disease. It’s a spectrum of neuro-developmental disorders, often characterized by abnormal social interactions. Some children are extremely high functioning. They talk to their parents and siblings easily and understand their words. Other children have a less preserved form of autism in which they do not talk, understand, or listen.

To me, the most curious aspect is the repetitive behavior. He can clap, jump, hit walls, and run around a room for hours at a time. Sometimes Vignesh even hits himself repeatedly. He has an unnerving sense of schedule, knowing exactly when he must be fed, bathed, and clothed.

The most recent research suggests that autism is the result of “missed connections” between neurons—synaptic transmission that can’t be communicated. It isn’t much to hold onto and the scientific community doesn’t know if it’s right, but it gives many families some semblance of relief.

There is no cure for Autism, but plenty of therapies exist. It’s hard to separate the good from the bad. Even harder to separate the good from the just-plain-crazy.

It’s amazing how people will search for an answer when someone they love is lacking it. My family has wondered about everything. Was it that cold he had? Was his immune system deficient? He takes pills, supplemental drinks, sees the doctor every week. Was it something in the water? He only drinks filtered water now. Was it their age? Were they too old to have kids? Trust me, he will be their only child. Was it his diet? We gave Vignesh gluten free, casein free, sugar free, organic, pasteurized everything. Was it these new diets we put him on? We switched back. A kid should be able to have normal food, at least.

There was the month my aunt swore off vaccines. She knew the thimerosal has something to do with it. My mother, the biochemist tried to rationalize with her. She
put me, the medical student on the phone, too. When that failed we got my sister, the lawyer. She seemed to make progress.

Some people see stupidity in this quest for reasons. Why look for the cause after it already happened, they ask? Just move on with your life and accept the fact that you will never have the child you hoped to have all those years ago. I don't see stupidity, though. I see quiet and determined hunger. Having a reason means we can assign blame, and when we can assign blame, we can justify why a loving couple that hoped and dreamt and wept and prayed for children, had a child like Vignesh.

There’s a story by Emily Perl Kingsley that I always remember when I think about our experience. It’s called “Welcome to Holland.” In it, a young mother describes what it means to raise a child with a disability. She writes, “When you’re going to have a baby, it’s like planning a fabulous vacation trip to Italy. You buy a bunch of guide books and make your wonderful plans…you pack your bags and off you go. Several hours later, the plane lands. The stewardess comes in and says, 'Welcome to Holland.'"

And it really is like that. You spend some time mourning the loss of the child you hoped to have. You think about the things he could have done. Then one day you realize, you’re in Holland and you may as well make the best of the situation. Those little milestones in every childhood become extra special for you. Watching my uncle beam with pleasure when his son called his name at the age of five. Spending hours sitting with him, singing his favorite nursery rhymes. Realizing that deep down he really is the same baby we cooed over twelve years ago.

Vignesh is a healthy kid, my grandmother says. He has creamy skin, brown curls, and perfect little ears. He cries easily, but has the warm dimples of his mother.