My Son Wears Heels

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Harry’s cell phone number appeared on my caller ID. He’d only been gone a day, but the sound of his voice had the same effect on me as a tranquility tank. I knew these calls would be rare in the months ahead.

“Everything is going great, Mom! I met a ton of friends who are all going different places.”

“I’m so glad, honey. That’s really wonderful. Do you have a family yet?”

We’d received word two weeks before Harry left for Spain that he’d be living with a family near Barcelona. Then only days before his pit stop in D.C. for a national student orientation, AFS sent an alert that the family had backed out of hosting a student. The email apologized for the last-minute change and assured us they were working nonstop to find another host. I’d been dumbstruck. I was supposed to send my fifteen-year-old kid to Spain without knowing where he’d be living?
The Pain in Spain

When I called my AFS liaison, who I was sure was a college intern, she’d told me this wasn’t unusual. Nailing down host families sometimes went down to the wire, and other kids headed for Spain were in the same situation as Harry. I didn’t know why she’d thought knowing other kids were in Harry’s homeless boat would make me feel better. I’d hung up the phone believing that AFS Spain was an organization of incompetent imbeciles.

“Oh, yeah, that’s why I called,” Harry said. “I’m going to stay in a suburb of Madrid with a lady named Valerie and her son Alvaro who’s eighteen.”

*God bless the Niña, the Pinta, and Santa María!* Harry had a family.

“But they’re only a ‘welcome’ family,” he continued, “which means I can only stay with them for two weeks while they find me a permanent family.”

*Dammit, what?!* “Welcome family” sounded like emergency family to me. And Harry was supposed to start school soon. So now he was going to have to switch families and change schools, too? I was pissed. At least I could erase the mental images of Harry sleeping under a blanket on the couch at the AFS headquarters in Madrid.

“Well, it’s progress, Harry,” I said, feigning calm. “Be sure to email me her phone number and your address when you get there, okay?”

“I will. And can you please send my parka, my yearbook, and some microwave mac and cheese?”

My next contact about Spain arrived via email from a yahoo.es account. It was Harry’s Spanish mom, Valerie. I clicked on it and
was surprised to see a full-page letter. I pushed aside my desktop keyboard and quickly scanned the tiny type.

“AFS has me on their list in case they need temporary shelter for students . . . I have been in touch with them throughout these two weeks to know what was happening with Harry’s future host family . . . There are three more students apart from Harry who don’t have a host family . . . I was supposed to hear by today of two possibilities for him . . . the manager is on her way to a general meeting in north Spain . . . hadn’t left any message for me . . . I am going to write a very critical report to the national AFS office . . .”

I felt little flashing lights flip on in my head. Harry was being left hanging by AFS and now his mom in Spain was worried about him being in a temporary placement, too. She wasn’t the only one who’d be writing to AFS. I read on.

“. . . awkward situation . . . his real integration into Spanish life is being unnecessarily delayed . . . although he is a very mature person, he is nonetheless only 15 . . .”

I wanted to hug her. She was looking out for Harry and was prepared to defend him to the top of the study program’s messed-up hierarchy. She knew the person in charge of all the volunteers, who had confirmed that night that AFS Spain was overwhelmed by work and relied on volunteer young people who don’t fully assume their so-called job. So they relied on former AFSers like her to help sort out the situation. I read on.

“. . . there is no definitive family yet, although they are interviewing a few.”

She asked me to put pressure on my local AFS contact. She gave me the number of AFS Madrid and also her home telephone.
Tapping all of my fingers on the arms of my chair, I debated whom to call first. It was just before noon my time, so I called Harry’s mom in Spain. She spoke fluent English with a French accent. Her voice was warm, kind, and admittedly frustrated. She said no one at AFS was being helpful. I empathized with her and thanked her repeatedly for taking Harry in and remaining so patient. In the end, she agreed to let Harry stay longer than she’d originally offered.

After we hung up, I stretched my arms over my head, clasped my hands to crack my fingers and let my head hang back. I felt the tension in my spine loosen. I sat up, dialed AFS National and left a message for my contact Courtney, who was on the phone with another parent. I imagined phones ringing like the switchboard at a 911 dispatcher, all calls from moms whose kids were in Spain. Next I searched online for international gift delivery companies and arranged for Valerie to receive a goody basket the size of Texas.

She sent another email five days later. Harry was enrolled in school and, according to her, enjoying it. She explained that regardless of where his eventual host family lived, it was easier to transfer schools than to register late. Then I learned that the three families they had lined up had all fallen through. She hadn’t told Harry that yet. My spirit and shoulders slumped thinking of Harry expecting to hear any moment about which of those families would take him. I leaned closer to the screen for her last lines:

“*They have told me that there is now a family in Seville. You see, Spain is not an easy country to find host families. I am afraid their only mistake is to accept too many students. But I am sure there will be a solution soon. Anyway, maybe by Tuesday, AFS Milwaukee should check again. . . . Don’t worry! Your son is in good hands. Valerie*”
The Pain in Spain

I drummed my fingers on my collarbone. I was relieved to know she was still looking out for Harry, but I was now livid that my first suspicions of AFS Spain as a dis-organization were being confirmed. She and I were both on the phone with AFS multiple times over the next few days only to be assured by so-called administrators on two continents that they would soon have a family for Harry. I moved into corporate powerhouse mode, taking on the persona of Joan Collins as Alexis Carrington Colby Dexter Colby from the ’80s TV show Dynasty, and listed all of the facts that proved their bungling of Harry’s placement. I demanded that a host family for Harry be found immediately. But then I felt silly. I knew I was powerless to actually make anything happen. So I fantasized setting up camp in the lobby of AFS Madrid with a tent and sleeping bags for Harry and me until a family was secured. But I knew that was ridiculous; Harry would kill me. Plus, I had scheduled a Colorado mountain biking trip and some work with a feng shui colleague there for a couple of businesses in Breckenridge.

Valerie’s final email arrived while I was still out west. It had been a month since she first welcomed Harry into her home. I calculated the time difference to just before midnight her time. Her message was brief.

“I wanted to write to let you know that this morning I called AFS Madrid and found out that they still haven’t found a family for Harry. I have waited, but now I have a friend coming from Paris to visit. So I will drive Harry tomorrow afternoon to AFS office in Madrid and they will have to take care of him. I have discussed the situation with Harry and he understands. I do feel sorry for him . . .”
The Pain in Spain

I closed my eyes and dropped my face into my hands. What the hell was going on in Spain? I learned from Harry that it was indeed actual hell that was going on in Spain. He sounded defeated when he called from the AFS office to say he’d be spending the next week in downtown Madrid, at the apartment of an AFS volunteer’s friend.

“And it’s weird, Mom,” he said in a hushed voice. “There’s a look-book in the lobby here with photos of all the kids who need families, and my picture’s not in it.”

My eyebrows wrinkled. That did seem odd. But if staff members were all on the phone for hours as Harry had described, calling everyone they knew to find host families, maybe they didn’t keep up with lobby materials.

“Maybe those are just old photos, Harry.”

“No, they’re not,” said Harry, incredulous. “There’s another boy I know who needs a family, and his picture is in here.”

What the fuck?! They didn’t have a family for Harry, they’re calling around desperately, and yet they don’t include his photo in the lobby book? I knew it might be difficult finding a family for Harry; he was a vegetarian and allergic to cats, dogs, and cigarette smoke. But all of that was made clear on his application. I started to grind my teeth. Were they treating my creative and colorful son differently because they thought he was gay?

“Listen, just tell them to do it,” I instructed, being careful not to misdirect my anger at AFS onto my stranded child. “There’s no excuse for your photo not to be in that book. Clearly they don’t know what they’re doing.”

Subsequent reports from Harry came via email. He was sleeping on the couch in this second “welcome” family’s one-bedroom
apartment. The young couple’s only bathroom was attached to their bedroom, and they slept until 3 p.m. They didn’t give Harry a key so he couldn’t leave before they awoke, which on several occasions forced him to pee in the sink. The week after that, despite his noted allergies to smoke, he was placed with Family Number Three, where the dad was a heavy cigar smoker. According to Harry, he only removed the smelly chewed-up stubs from his mouth to eat or hack up sizeable chunks of his lungs.

I woke up each morning to thoughts of Harry being handed off like an unwanted orphan. I drank coffee, but had no appetite for anything but my cuticles. I lost weight. My dermatologist diagnosed a pimply rash on the back of my neck as neuro-folliculitis, an inflammation of the hair follicles caused by anxiety. I left his office with the advice to alternate applications of Neosporin and hydrocortisone and not to worry so much.

Harry called me from the AFS office after being freed from the smoke chamber to confer about Family Number Four.

“They found a family for me east of Madrid, with two kids in college,” he said in a low monotone.

“Thank God, Harry!” I said, flopping backwards onto my bed. “Finally! I was getting ready to come over there and get you.”

“But I’d have to go to a Catholic school run by nuns,” he whispered. “The same school their boys went to.”


“I know,” Harry answered. “That’s why I need your permission. The town’s public school didn’t have room for any more kids. The next closest one is an hour and a half away, and they don’t want to drive me. It’s even longer if I have to take two buses.”
The Pain in Spain

I got up and began pacing the wood floor in a U-shape around my bed. This was crazy. Ken considered himself a fallen Catholic, and Harry’s only tie to religion was my influence of casual Judaism. I wouldn’t send him to any religious school in the United States, so why would I agree to a parochial school in Spain of all places? But Harry needed a family placement in order to be in school. And he needed to be in school for the credits required to graduate from Shorewood. I took a long, deep breath. I decided to leave it up to Harry.

“Tell me how you feel about it.”

“Well, I asked if corporal punishment was allowed, and they said no,” he replied, “so I guess I’m okay with it.”

I chuckled. “Good question, Harry. I wouldn’t have thought to ask that. But I guess you never know with Spanish nuns.”

“The school is run by Italian nuns, Mom.”

*What?* As if nuns from the Spanish Inquisition weren’t enough, now they were Italian? As far as I was concerned, that was only one step away from the pope. I imagined Harry as a young Federico Fellini, surrounded by a swarm of sour-faced nuns in starched white habits and oversized winged headdresses.

“Are you sure about this, Harry?”

“Honestly, Mom, if I don’t take this family, Madalena, who runs the office, said she didn’t know how long it would take to find another one.”

My next phone call from Harry came two weeks after he’d started at the Catholic school, where his new schedule included religion class.

“Mom! They’re trying to convert me!” he shouted into the phone, sounding panicked. “I’m not kidding! Sister Clementina
handed out these cards of people with yellow circles around their heads. And—"

“You mean the saints?” I remembered Sally Polinski, the pretty blond baton twirler on my block growing up, showing me those cards after her first communion.

“I don’t know what they are, Mom, but she gave me one of a guy who was Jewish and then saw Jesus and then went blind and was finally beheaded!”

“Well, that’s ridiculous,” I said. “And so is the fact they’re even making you take that religion class in the first place.”

“I was hoping it would be a survey class, but no! It’s all about Jesus being like the broken pieces of an indestructible vase, or something.”

This can’t be happening!

I put my hand to my forehead hoping to pull some psychic solution from my brain. With each call from Harry I felt myself edge closer to a state of maternal vengeance. Harry was with his fourth family in two months. And now some medieval anti-Semitic nuns were persecuting him? I seethed hatred for AFS Spain, but I needed to calm myself and be the voice of reason. I brushed the bangs off my forehead and cleared my throat.

“Listen, Harry, talk to your Spanish mom. Ask her to get you out of religion class. You said the family’s not at all religious, so she’s not going to care. I’m sure she’ll do that for you.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll ask her.”

I hung up the phone and sat immobilized on the chair outside my bedroom. I never got headaches, but now felt a tight pulsing on the left side of my forehead. How much could one kid take? How much more could I take?
A week later, I was leaned up against the kitchen counter sipping coffee and paging through the morning paper when the home phone rang. It was Harry.

“Mom?” he asked, his voice quavering.

I stood at attention and pressed the phone to my ear. “Harry, what is it? Are you okay?”

“Today was the most horrible day of my life,” he said softly, his voice still shaky. He sniffled, and I knew he’d been crying.

Every nerve ending in my body flared. I made a fist. Why was Harry crying? Who had hurt my baby? I took a deep breath.

“Oh, no, Harry. What happened? Tell me.”

He explained he’d been in science class before lunch when he got called down to the Mother Superior’s office. He assumed it was to find out he’d be going to the library during religion class. His mom there had completely understood and talked to the head nun at school about getting him out of it.

“The Mother Superior, who doesn’t speak a word of English, started off asking me about my problem with religion class. But then she paused and told me she’d been hearing some things, personal things about me. ‘Have you been telling people about yourself?’ she asked me. I pretended I didn’t know what she was talking about.”

He stopped to blow his nose.

“She said, ‘I heard that you like boys.’ And I said, ‘Oh, that. Yeah.’ Then she gave me a death stare for about five minutes before speaking again. She wanted to know why I would say something like that. I told her that’s the way I am, and that I wasn’t embarrassed about it.”
“Good for you, Harry,” I said. “But I’m surprised you told anyone you were gay, given you’re at a Catholic school.”

“I didn’t tell anyone, Mom. I decided before I left that I wasn’t going to say anything, but if someone asked me I wasn’t going to lie. And the girls figured it out in like five minutes.”

“Okay, honey.”

I was so proud of him for being true to who he was, but I didn’t like where the conversation was headed. My stomach began to feel unsettled. I knew it wasn’t the coffee.

“Then the Mother Superior said, ‘Society is very cruel, Harry. Do you know that?’ And I told her that all the kids had been really nice to me. But she wasn’t talking about the other kids; she was talking about their parents. She said there were parents of kids at the school who didn’t want their child in class with a homosexual.”

“Oh my God, no! I can’t believe this.”

I wanted to stab a silver crucifix through that motherfucking nun’s black, rosary bead–sized heart.

“I felt so terrible, Mom,” Harry said, his voice cracking. “I was on the verge of tears when she said, ‘There are some homosexuals who don’t practice.’ Then she asked me why I wasn’t seeking professional help.”

“What? Is she crazy? How dare she talk to you that way!”

“I told her I didn’t need help because I didn’t have a problem. By that time I felt tears on my cheeks, and she asked me why I was crying. When I told her this was a situation I’d wanted to avoid, she said, ‘If you don’t want to cry anymore, stop talking. Silence. Be silent.’ I was just so shocked, Mom, and I felt like she was threatening me.”
The Pain in Spain

I wiped away a rivulet of my own and realized this was the first time that a person in authority had not only not stood up for Harry, she had attacked him. I flashed back to the year I was Harry’s age and my mother had chased me around the kitchen table swinging a leather dog leash.

“Oh, Harry,” I choked, “I am so sorry you had to go through this. That woman is a monster. She had no right talking to you that way. I wish I could be there with you right now.”

Harry felt so far away he might as well have been in outer space. I had to take over from Earth Central Control. I clicked into Mom 911 mode.

“What about your Spanish mom? Does she know about this?”
“No, I came right home from school and called you.”
“You have to tell her, Harry. She has to know. You can’t stay at that school.”

“Ugh,” he groaned. “I don’t even want to go back there tomorrow.”

“Harry, I’m not going to say you have to, but if you don’t go you’re giving up your power to that Mother Superior, and she deserves no power. It’s up to you. Either way, somehow we’re going to get you transferred to that public school they said was full. I swear, Harry, something good will come of this.”

After we hung up, I felt numb. Harry had been mortified. This was not the worldly experience promised in the AFS brochure. I called Ken’s direct line at the studio and told him the whole story.

“This is unbelievable,” Ken groaned. “That poor kid.”
“I want him to come home, Ken. Will you back me on that?”
“Can we do that? Will Harry do that?”
“I don’t know,” I said, “But I’ll figure it out. Enough is enough, right?”

“Yeah, I think it’s time,” Ken agreed.

I opened the kitchen desk drawer and pulled out the Shorewood High School Directory. I made an appointment with Harry’s guidance counselor. I couldn’t imagine the situation in Spain getting any worse, and I needed to know that Harry could return for second semester without any problems.

When I got a call two days later from Courtney at AFS National, I realized that instead of going to the high school to meet with Harry’s counselor, I should be seeing my doctor for some anti-anxiety medication. I learned that at the same time Harry had been telling me about his visit to the Mother Superior’s office, her Supreme Evilness had called Harry’s mom in Spain to complain about him and blamed her for allowing a homosexual into her school.

Courtney assured me Harry’s mom cared about him and thought he was a great kid, but she felt so pressured by the town’s church officials that she just couldn’t keep Harry anymore. It was a small town, she’d said, and people were talking. AFS Madrid was going to have to find Harry another family.

I was completely stunned. “Do you realize what you’re putting Harry through?”

I thought of him having to face another episode of rejection, this time from Spanish parents he felt comfortable with, and I wanted to throw up.

“You have to let me tell him,” I said. “I don’t want him to hear this from anyone else.”
The Pain in Spain

“All right,” Courtney said. “I can arrange that. But Friday will have to be his last day. There’s a midsemester weekend retreat in Madrid for all AFS students. Tell Harry to bring all of his things with him.”

I went up to Harry’s room, sat down on his bed and broke down in loud wails. The thought of telling him he was going to have to switch families and schools for the fifth time felt like theater of the absurd. This couldn’t be going more wrong. I searched for the words that would let him down in the gentlest way. I would tell him the truth: that his Spanish parents just didn’t have the resources to deal with the outrageous bullying behavior of a vicious Mother Superior and her church henchmen. I picked up the blue stuffed toy bear Harry left propped against his pillow and held it to my face, hopeful I could breathe in some of his strength. I knew he’d want to stick it out in Spain for the remainder of the school year, but I was going to tell him one semester was enough. It was time to come home.

He called me Saturday morning from the student orientation in Madrid, sounding like his happy, confident self.

“Mom, you’re not going to believe what happened on my last day at school!” he exclaimed. “It was amaaaaazing!”

“What? Tell me!” I couldn’t wait to hear some good news for a change.

“Well, I wasn’t going to tell anyone it was my last day, because I didn’t want to have to deal with explaining anything, but I did tell my math teacher before class, because she was cool and I liked her.”

“Was she a nun?”
“No, she wasn’t. But at the end of class she tells everyone to be sure and say goodbye to me, because it’s my last day. In the courtyard afterwards some friends wanted to know why I was leaving, so I told them what happened with the Mother Superior. All of a sudden they start chanting in Spanish, ‘Tolerance! Tolerance! Out with the nuns!’ And then the whole student body joined in.”

I covered my mouth as chills shot through me. I pictured Harry standing in the middle of a crowd chanting over and over in support of him.

“Oh, Harry! That sounds incredible!”

“It was! And none of the teachers could quiet them down. So the Mother Superior came out. She clapped her hands and the kids stopped. Then she said, ‘I only called Harry into my office the other day to help him. Isn’t that right, Harry?’ And I could not believe she was saying that. So I said, ‘No, you’re a liar. And a witch!’”

“What?” I said, laughing. “You really said that to her face?”

“I did! All of the kids started cheering and they wouldn’t stop. It felt so good!”

“Oh, Harry, what a great ending!”

“Yeah, it is pretty great, isn’t it?”

After our call, I felt like I’d just finished watching an *ABC After-school Special*. I could see the description in the TV guide: “A gay teenager studying abroad stands up to the homophobic Mother Superior at a Catholic school while the whole student body cheers him on.” Harry had just made my day the happiest in months. I couldn’t wait to tell everyone.

Harry spent the next ten days in a youth hostel in Madrid along with three other kids who’d also left their Spanish families. According to Harry, they all had horror stories. One girl hadn’t
been allowed to leave the house and was expected to teach their son English. Another girl said she’d repeatedly caught the father at her second family watching her sleep. And a third girl’s family would only speak to her in English. Background checks, my ass, I thought. I wasn’t crazy about the idea of Harry running loose in Madrid when he should have been in school, but at least he was out of the clutches of the Dark Ages.

After calling everyone I could think of with contacts in Europe, a friend of my sister knew of a family in northwestern Spain who would take Harry in and register him for school those remaining five weeks of the semester. I couldn’t wait to get him back home.

Ken and I met Harry at the Milwaukee airport five days before Christmas. His Aunt Jean was there with a sign decorated with curly red ribbon and a pinecone ornament that read, “Bien Venido Casa Harry!” Ian, Kayla, and three other friends of Harry’s from school skipped out of the last day of class and took the bus there to greet him with a welcome-back sign and some little cakes.

I stood with my camera as close to the security gate on Concourse D as was allowed. “He’s here!” I yelled with a little jump when I saw him.

He was wearing the navy parka with a bright orange and yellow stripe he’d asked me to send him. A white scarf with a Middle Eastern print was wrapped around his neck. He wasn’t wearing his glasses, and long bangs covered his eyes. I noticed his gait was different; it was slower, more confident. He appeared older than he did when we’d said goodbye to him at JFK three and a half months earlier. I couldn’t wait to hug him, the boy who had smacked down the Catholic Church in Spain and survived triumphant.
The Pain in Spain

As Harry neared me, I realized how amazed I was by the fortitude of this kid. I had felt so helplessly out of control when I couldn’t be there to protect him from ignorance and persecution, yet he had managed to stand up for himself with conviction. He hadn’t cowered. He hadn’t pretended to be something he wasn’t. And he was only fifteen years old. I had always loved Harry for just being Harry, and I’d believed in him. And now this remarkable teenager was doing those things for himself. I was bursting with pride, or as his Great-Aunt Anita would say, I was “kvelling.” And more than that, I marveled at Harry’s ability to never forget who he was.
High school graduation, class of 2008