

# Relationships

**BOY'S BEST FRIEND**  
Wills at age 5, with  
his dog, Cowboy.



[ TWO-MINUTE MEMOIR ]

## Cowboy and Wills

An autistic boy's greatest love—and loss **By Monica Holloway**

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HE DAY WILLS was diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder, I took him for a ride to Ben's Fish Store in Sherman Oaks to buy a large freshwater aquarium. We picked up a 10-gallon tank, a filter, multicolored rocks to spread on the bottom, an imitation pirate ship made of clay, tacky neon plastic plants, fish food, and a small green plastic net. It totaled \$462.84—a high price that I could barely afford to squeeze onto my overextended Visa. I didn't care; my 3-year-old had autism.

Wills was elated, I could tell. His eyes were flashing that clear blue twinkle I only saw when he was really, really happy. Sometimes his eyes were more like mirrors, my image bouncing back at me. Those were the times I was most panicked, watching Wills recede so deep inside himself that I saw no way to grab hold of his tiny hand and pull him back to me.

But when Wills was present, the world tilted toward perfection.

It wasn't that the diagnosis was a shock. We'd dreaded hearing it ever since we first took Wills to see Katherine, a therapist, a year and a half before. He was a clingy, anxious baby who hadn't hit a single developmental mark. He was terrified of strangers, he was on sensory overload

every time we left the house, and here refused to make eye contact. But still, the diagnosis hit with the force of a cannonball.

My husband, Michael, and I focused on how smart he was—how advanced. Who'd ever heard of a toddler sitting still for a history lesson in aviation? He had an incredible facility for building things—creating forts, train stations, and airports out of stacks of videotape cassettes and blocks.

But when Wills was 3, it was getting harder to ignore his idiosyncrasies. He was extremely sensitive to textures and noises: A flannel shirt gave him “the goose

something happened. It was so small that nobody in the store would have noticed it. But to me, it was extraordinary. This woman, a complete stranger, patted Wills's shoulder—and he didn't bristle or bolt out of the front door in an absolute panic. He just stood there, staring at us with a shy, “What do you know?” smile. Somehow, with this tiny heart beating next to his, Wills had stepped a little further into the world.

COWBOY'S ARRIVAL signaled the beginning of many firsts for Wills, but none

was extremely ill. I knew it sounded dramatic when I told Michael one night that I “couldn't live without her.” But I meant it. And worse than *my* loss was the unthinkable—that Wills would lose his right arm, his silly sister, his trampoline buddy, the one who'd given him the confidence to sleep in a room of his own and swim in the ocean.

Wills always responded to Cowboy's health snags by thinking of ways to make her life easier. He built a wooden ramp, for instance, to help her walk up to the couch or get to his bed. He also cut up old T-shirts and sweatpants to make her a special extra-soft quilt, which he sewed together with large, loopy stitches.

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## Somehow, Wills had stepped a little further into the world.

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SEPTEMBER CAME, AND Wills started third grade. In his new Nike sneakers (that he could tie himself), he sprinted down the sidewalk and was inside the gate before I could even kiss him good-bye.

The next morning, we decided we couldn't let Cowboy suffer any longer. “We're going to have to let Cowboy go very soon,” I told Wills, tucking his hair behind his ears. He hugged her so tightly that her face was all bunched up.

“Cowboy's third birthday is almost here,” he cried. He was right; she wouldn't make it to 3. “What about her birthday cake from Bones Bakery?” He was hiccuping and crying at the same time.

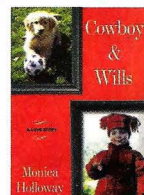
“It feels horrible, unthinkable, that Cowboy will die,” I said. And then, using Katherine's words, I told him, “It might even feel like you can't live through it, but you will.”

He wailed even louder.

I was inadequate. There was nothing I could say to make this any easier. I had run out of words.

MY IMPULSE, OF COURSE, was to run out and get a new dog right away, but Katherine said that Wills needed time to grieve.

Weeks later, Wills came inside and said, “Can we get a new puppy?” I thought he'd never ask.



bumps,” and bubbles in the bathtub actually “hurt” his skin. If someone we strolled by in the park said, “What a gorgeous little boy,” his thrashing legs and ear-piercing screams sent his admirer bolting in the opposite direction.

AS WILLS SLOWLY navigated the preschool minefield of noises and messes and crowded hallways, my animal fixation persisted. With every new problem Wills encountered, I bought him a new pet. We now had six hermit crabs and two hamsters. I cruised Petcos the way drunks frequent bars.

In December of Wills's kindergarten year, we finally went to the pet store to pick up our new dog, whom Wills had already named Cowboy Carol Lawrence.

“Is that your dog?” a woman with perfect blonde highlights and a Birkin bag asked Wills. I instinctively stepped forward to rescue him from the awkwardness of talking to a stranger, but I didn't need to.

“Yes,” he told her, turning so she could see Cowboy's face. “She's a cutie.”

“She sure is,” the woman said. Then

was more significant than allowing other children into his life—opening him up to the possibility of having really close friends.

The transformation began with kids calling to ask Wills if they could come over to play with Cowboy. Knowing they wanted to play with Cowboy made him feel safer, because it was once removed from their wanting to play with him.

When Wills was anxious or sad about something, he confided in Cowboy. Sometimes I'd hear him in his room or the backyard telling Cowboy all his troubles.

When Cowboy was 2 years old, she became very ill and developed a terrible rash. Dr. Werner, the vet, called me while I was making French toast for Wills. He'd finally gotten enough information from all the tests he'd been doing on Cowboy to confirm a diagnosis.

“I can definitely tell you that Cowboy has lupus,” he said.

“Is there a cure for this?”

“No, I'm sorry, Monica,” he said.

Several months later it was obvious to anyone who saw Cowboy that she