

2nd Place winner in the 2015 Edition of Short o Words (Adult Author Competition)

**Follow The Arrow
by Karen Wang**

(Inspired by Photo #4 – Snow Man)

My little Louie woke up at 4:42 a.m. but we managed to be late for our 9:00 appointment anyway. I took him to the bathroom, then I fed him some breakfast, which is more complicated than it sounds. By then, it was already after 6:00, so I bundled him up to shovel snow with me.

Snowflakes were falling softly in the darkness No time to pause and enjoy the winter scene I had to clear enough snow to pull my car out of the driveway while keeping Louie out of the road. I attractively arranged the little snow shovel and all the sand toys near the front porch, but it was no use: he darted straight for the street. So I had him on one hip while shoveling and singing five verses of “Amazing Grace”. It was the only way to calm him. One of the neighbors came outside and studiously ignored me.

Around 6:45, Lou came out and held Louie for a minute before going to work. “Don’t bother shoveling my half of the driveway. I’ll be home around 4.” He drove over the snow in his all-wheel drive Subaru without kissing me goodbye. Lou was still angry with me for scheduling the appointments. He didn’t want answers.

I taught Louie how to make a snow angel. I made little snowballs for him and showed him how to throw them. He kept trying to take off his mittens and coats, and he wouldn’t let me pick him up anymore. His fussiness escalated, and I had to give up shoveling. My pajamas were soaked with sweat, and it was only 7:20. So I uttered the magic phrase, “Mommy has milk!” In a flash, we were back inside. I stripped him down to his underpants, traded my wet pajamas for a bathrobe, whisked him to the bathroom and got his bottle ready in the kitchen. No meltdown this time. Success is all about timing.

He wanted to be cradled tightly at my chest, and he gazed up into my eyes while I held the bottle for him. During bottle feedings, everything stopped, even Louie. Even my anxiety. How could I doubt his perfection when he looked at me like that? Who on earth could assert that this child failed to make eye contact or express emotion appropriately? But when the bottle was empty, the fact remained that I was bottle-feeding a three and a half year old in a breastfeeding position.

I packed a water bottle, a juice box, raisins, sunflower seeds, a granola bar, a turkey sandwich and some Cheerios in a brown paper bag. I thought, *I'll be ecstatic if he eats even one of these foods*. Louie tried to run out into the snow in his underwear, but I caught him on the porch. I packed three puzzles, two picture books, a vibrating toy, four fidgets, an emergency diaper and a complete change of clean clothes in size 4T (including shoes) in my big tot. Louie was moving furniture in a grand scheme to reach the kitchen knives, so I gave him a piggyback ride and put the parking pass in my purse. I was still wearing my bathrobe. I hadn't brushed my teeth or combed my hair, I collected Louie's clothes, lined up our toothbrushes. With Louie on my back, I pushed the dresser in front of the bedroom door then rolled on the bed, saying "Snuggle time!" He squealed and giggled. I played airplane with him a few times, kissed him and held him close. I had his full attention. "First brush teethe, then get dressed...and always I love you."

He chewed on his toothbrush while I got myself cleaned up. I sniffed my armpits *No time for a shower now, it's after 8:00*. I wiped with a washcloth, and decided that for \$3,000 the diagnostic team would just have to deal my body odor. No time for make-up, either. I would wear my sleep deprivation with pride today. I got my bra and sweater on, but couldn't find any clean pants Louie was trying to move the dresser away from the door. "Stay with Mommy, Louie!" I pulled some ripe yoga pants out of the dirty laundry basket Good enough. I wrestled Louie into his clothes. "Shirt. On. Shirt. On. Shirt. On."

I had to explain everything before attempting to move the dresser. I held up my hand, raising one finger at a time. "One: Coat. Two: Car. Three: Dr. Gonella. OK?"

He answered, "Go car!"

All the bags went in first. This stage was sensitive, so I broke into song with the prayer of St. Francis. Louie let me pick him up and he nuzzled my neck. He didn't fight me as I buckled him in and kissed each cheek. I kept singing as I pulled out in to the snow, "...to be understood, as to understand, to be loved as to love with all my sooooouuul..." I checked the traffic both ways. I checked again. All clear. I gunned the engine down the driveway, through the snow bank, into the street. I didn't get stuck. We were on our way.

I looked at the car clock. 8:38 a.m. We weren't going to make it on time. Don't stop singing.

At our destination, I turned off the ignition and took a breath. "OK, God, I know I'm out of favors. Just stay with me today." Already ten minutes late for the appointment, I

was on the third floor of the parking garage. We had to find the elevator, go down to street level, cross the street and walk one and a half blocks uphill in the snow to the clinic. I calculated the risk. Too many dangers if I let Louie walk. I took my coat off one arm and sat in the backseat with Louie. Gently I loaded him onto my back, put my parka back on around him, held him in place with one arm behind me, grabbed my bags on the other arm, locked the car and started walking. Louie was warm and relaxed in the womblike interior of my coat.

I spotted the man before I could hear him. Students on campus called him Buffalo Bill, because he looked like he stepped out of the Wild West. There were lots of stories about him, but no one knew what was truth and what was fiction anymore. He just liked to stand and recite stuff like the Gettysburg Address, Shakespeare. Today he was performing Robert Frost next to the Autism and Communication Disorders Clinic, under a one-way sign graffitied with the word “Love”.

“The only other sound’s the sweep of easy wind and downy flake. The woods are lovely, dark and deep...”

Too easy. As I approached, I finished the poem, *“But I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep.”*

“Good morning.”

“How very optimistic of you,” I chuckled, opening the door to the clinic. I was ushered down the hall to the small room where the whole team was waiting for us. How I wished I had a camera to capture the looks on the faces when we entered, entangled, smelly, like a two-headed creature from another world.

“As you know, Mrs. Callahan, today we will meet for three hours, completing the nine hour assessment process for your son Louie. We will spend the first hour on play-based evaluations of our son’s development skills, then we’ll take a short break and review the data and diagnosis with you. During the review period, you will be able to ask any questions that you have for us. Did you bring anyone here today for support?”

I didn’t cry in front of Dr. Gonella. I made sure that Louie was hydrated, fed, toileted, safe. I listened. Even though I knew what was coming, the diagnosis still hit me hard, and the pain spread through my body, never to leave me. At 12:00 I stood up with Louie re-loaded on my back inside my parka with a bag of Cheerios already being spilled

down my sweater. Outside I blinked away my welled-up tears. Buffalo Bill had moved on to Emily Dickinson:

*“In snow thou comest --
Thou shalt go with the resuming ground,
The sweet derision of the crow,
And Glee’s advancing sound.”*

I smiled and looked into his eyes. He expected my answer.

*“In fear thou comest –
Thou shalt go at such a gait of joy
That man anew embark to live
Upon the depth of thee.”*

“You seem to have a strong preference for American poetry today, Bill.” I handed him our snack bag.

“Much appreciated. What’s your name?”

“Amy.”

“Follow the arrow, Amy, the way of love. You’re strong. Don’t be afraid.”

“Thank you. That’s the nicest thing anyone has said to me all day.” I carried Louie back to the car, and I never saw Buffalo Bill again.