When family is safety

Nadia Brady

“I had a dream that Bagel was eating dog biscuits in bed.” are the first words Karin says to me when we wake up. A little embarrassed, I tell her that I was eating Nice biscuits in bed before she woke up, and sharing them with the dog. He’d never had them before, but how could I resist that face? He crunched them so loudly! She laughs and laughs. We’re still laughing about it when Alex, our support worker, arrives and comes into the room, so we tell them too.

Will is sitting on the patio, lining up marbles. The rest of the family is just inside, their conversation loud as three generations talk across each other. There is so much love in my family that sometimes it gets overwhelming. When this day is over I will lie in bed and hold my wife’s hand, wondering how my life can be so full. Now, it is busy and noisy. It’s soothing to come outside and help Will line up marbles. He doesn’t talk with words so he can’t tell me if he comes outside for the same reason. Is it too loud for him? Does he get overwhelmed by all the talk? Quiet time with Will is one of my favourite parts of family days. There are so many things I think I know about Will, but might never know for sure. Is the same thing true for everyone I love?

Karin’s brothers went to the Red Hot Summer concert, which failed to live up to its name by being neither hot nor in summer. The brothers are talking about classic rock bands. I ask if anyone has seen Bob Dylan perform? No? Why? “Holly, you know, Holly who you might have met at the wedding, her dad took her, for her eighteenth.” In my own circular way I tell my story. They nod their heads as they start to understand what I’m saying. One of them agrees with what I have said. My story has been a success! Often I can tell that people can’t wait for me to stop talking so they can go back to their conversation. It delights me when the way I share is accepted. I love Karin’s family so much. Three years into our relationship I am still anxious around them, although, like Karin, they are extraordinarily kind people. Every time I’m included as who I am like this I feel the joy of connection. Not only that, I also feel old wounds heal. Not everyone in the world is safe for me to open up around. Still, I have a community who I can feel safe to be completely open with.

There is a galaxy swirling on our ceiling. A parent in my local autism community recently asked how to transition their child away from a night light. It feels liberating to create a life and a home with a wife who supports all of who I am and all I need. We will never be too old for night lights. The galaxy projector throws planets and swirling colours on the ceiling. I feel the warmth of Karin lying next to me, with Bagel in between us. Sleep is hard. During the day it is so much easier to take a few deep breaths and focus. What can I do now? What is within my ability to influence? What do I take some time to acknowledge and then move on from? When it is time for sleep it is not so easy. My thoughts spiral and swirl. The anxiety, grief, sheer terror of so much that is going on twists in my throat, in my stomach. Now is not the time. I weave together moments of safety, love and joy with my family. This is not because I live in a world without struggle and pain. It is because life for myself and so many people I love is so painful and difficult that I worry about our survival. Right now it is time for sleep. Now I am safe. I am loved. That is enough.