



Laurie with son Jack and daughter Jessica

‘Mummy, I Hear Voices Telling Me To Do Bad Things’

Laurie Ferris reveals the pain, heartbreak and fear of living with a child with mental illness, and how she ultimately helped her son beat his demons

JUST AS I TURNED MY MOBILE phone on, it started ringing. It was my babysitter, Andrea. She was screaming hysterically. I couldn't understand what she was saying. The only words I caught were: 'Come right now!' My husband and I ran out of the shopping centre to our car, dreading what we were going to find when we got home.

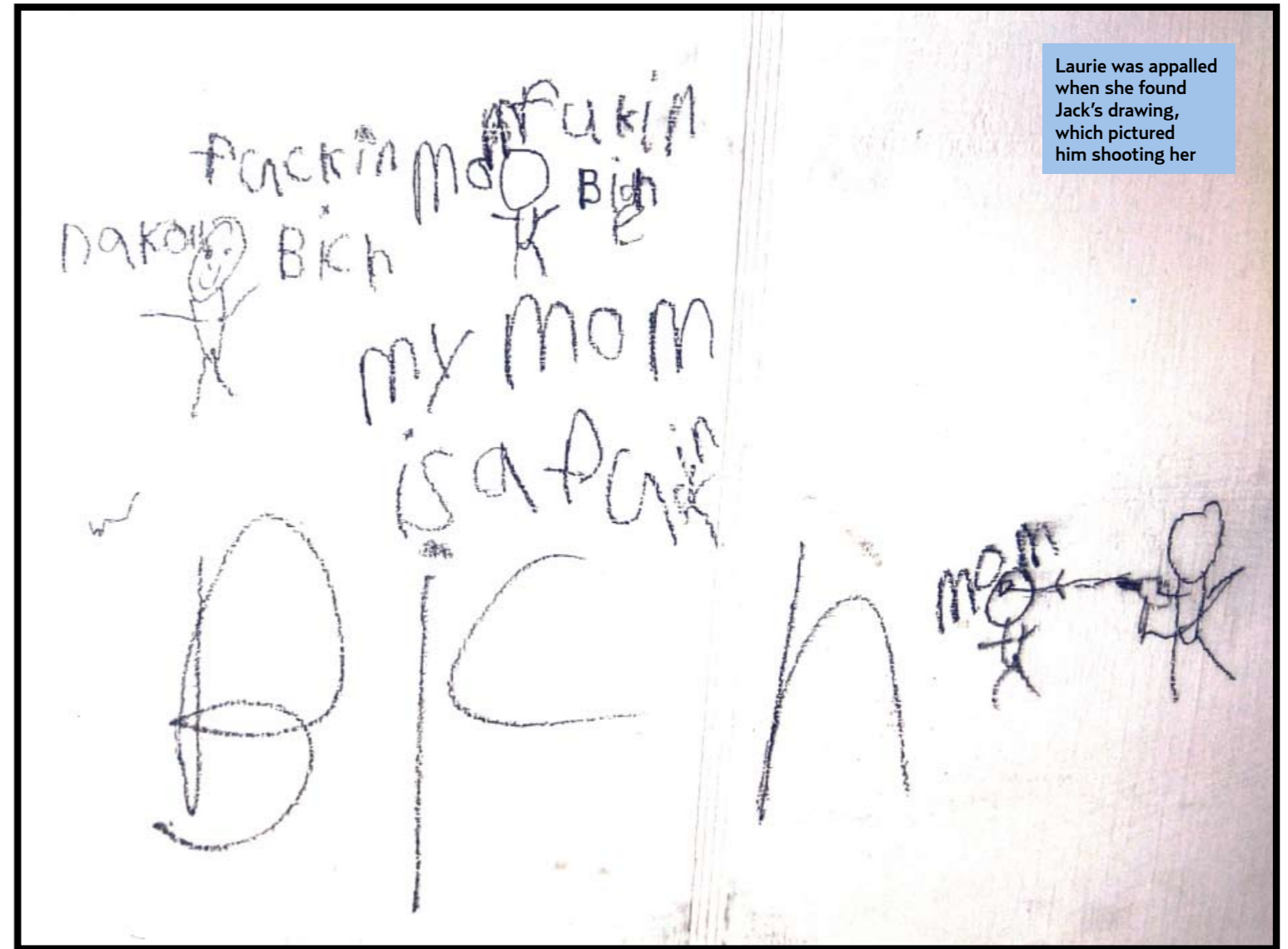
In my wildest dreams, nothing could have prepared me for what I saw on that warm summer evening two years ago. When we entered our house, it was eerily quiet. I remember seeing toys and clothes strewn on the floor, broken glass, chairs overturned and faeces smeared on the walls. I called out, but no one answered.

In a state of shock, I ran upstairs and found my seven-year-old son, Jack, lying naked on his bed. I begged him to tell me what had happened. He couldn't answer. He was in some kind of catatonic state, unable to make eye contact and shaking uncontrollably. It was then that I heard faint sobbing coming from our bedroom. My husband stayed with Jack while I ran to find Andrea and our five-year-old daughter, Jessica. I tried to open the bedroom door but it was locked from the inside. Then I noticed the large dents in the frame where someone had tried to bash it in and I started yelling. When it flew open, I was shocked to see Andrea, wide-eyed and shaking. On the bed behind her was my daughter, huddled under the blanket and softly crying. 'Mummy, he didn't mean to hurt us,' she said.

Walking through the debris and chaos in the hallway, I slowly made my way back to Jack's room. I stared at his little body on the bed and tried to find the words to reach out to him. There weren't any. This wasn't my son. He simply wasn't there.

The next morning we drove Jack to the hospital. Heartbroken, I filled out paperwork to voluntarily admit my little boy into a locked-down paediatric psychiatric ward. It was devastating. He didn't belong there, yet he didn't belong at home.

I'd always known there was something different about our son. Since the age of two, it was as if Jack couldn't live in his own body. His level of hyperactivity and aggression were off the charts. He seemed to be in perpetual motion, unaware of personal space, oblivious or highly sensitive to noise, human touch and pain.



Laurie was appalled when she found Jack's drawing, which pictured him shooting her

By the age of four, he had undergone countless evaluations by leading doctors. We were told Jack was a complex child who had symptoms of various mental conditions, including severe ADHD, sensory integration disorder, unspecified mood disorder and Tourette's syndrome. They suggested medication but we didn't want our little boy to go on pills.

JACK WAS FIVE WHEN HE TOLD ME he heard voices in his head, telling him to do bad things. Or, as they became, really bad things. I was giving him a hug when he wrapped his arms around my neck and squeezed hard. 'I feel all tight inside,' he whispered in my ear. 'I feel like killing you, but I don't want to.' Listening to my little boy say that was

not just frightening but deeply traumatic, and my husband and I eventually agreed to start Jack on medication. I had no idea then how much worse it would get.

Life became a roller coaster. One minute he was the sweetest and most loving boy in the world. The next, he was spitting, hitting, kicking and throwing things at us in an absolute rage. Sometimes he would stand on the spot and continuously thump his head, as though to pound the thoughts away. But one of the most upsetting things for me was how remorseful he was after each meltdown. As a mother, it was incredibly hard to

hear my little boy say sorry for being the person he was, and not have the power to help him change. After one particularly violent episode, he covered his face with

his hands and said: 'I don't want to hurt you, Mummy - I just do it.' He then burst into tears.

During this time, Jack was barely holding it together at school. With the help of an aide, he was allowed to integrate with the other children, but it was tough. Throughout

this, he was seeing numerous specialists and undergoing MRI scans to determine what was causing these outbursts. I was reading every book I could {continued}

'As a mother it was incredibly hard not to have the power to help my little boy change'



Jack has now learned to control his anger and is off all medication



Jack was hyperactive from an early age

find on ADHD and other diagnoses. We tried different behavioural plans, special diets, therapies and mainstream approaches. Nothing worked.

As time went by, the strain took a toll on my marriage and on my younger daughter. It was exhausting caring for Jack. Our family life had been reduced to simply getting through each day. By the time he was seven, things had escalated to the point where we could barely manage him.

Living in fear became the norm in my home. I removed all the kitchen knives from within Jack's reach. The nights when my husband was away working, my daughter and I would sleep in my bedroom with the door locked to protect us from the stranger in my son's room.

ONE DAY, WHILE washing dishes at the sink, I caught sight of Jack's reflection in the window in front of me. He was standing behind me, pointing a knife in my direction. I stayed calm – that's how I'd learned to deal with these situations – and carefully prised it from his hands. I called his psychiatrist, who said that if this continued, we should consider sectioning our son.

The following day, I was cleaning his room when I found a graphic drawing of

him killing me with a gun. Wild and angry expletives were scrawled across the page – I'd never had a clearer insight into the noise and horrors going on in his head. As I sat alone on his bed, all the emotions of the last five years caught up with me and I began to cry uncontrollably.

When Andrea's frantic call came a few weeks later, I knew we'd reached the end of the road. Jack's attack on our babysitter and Jessica had completely crossed the line. We could no longer keep Jack or our family safe,

and on 17 June 2008 we admitted our seven-year-old son to a secure psychiatric ward. It was devastating.

It's hard to put into words what we went through during those months when Jack was in care. But good things happen when you least expect it, and six months later I came across a unique counsellor

who believes our thoughts are energy and that we project what we think onto others. He explained that our son was, in his words, an 'energetically sensitive child' who was particularly affected by negative thoughts. By learning to control his mind, he could control his actions. I wasn't convinced, but by then we were willing to give anything a try, so we made an appointment.

During the first few sessions, Jack learned a number of exercises that helped him relax his body and mind through reflective thought. He began to verbalise his experiences and open up about what was upsetting him. I found out that showing was distressing for him because he couldn't stand the sound of the water. I also began to learn things about myself.

OVER TIME, JACK began to calm down and feel better. After about six months he was able to start making, and holding, eye contact. After another six months, he had begun

to find ways to manage his thoughts and control his rages and tics. Gradually, we began weaning him off his medication and watched in amazement as he adapted to family life like any other normal child. If I hadn't lived it and seen it with my own eyes, I never would have believed such a transformation would be possible.

Over the past two years, we've watched as Jack's violent behaviour has disappeared and he's learned to control his thoughts. Today, he is living at home and is off all medication. We took the locks off our bedroom doors a long time ago, and I no longer fear my son. At times, he finds himself responding to his old thoughts, but he quickly realises what he's doing and turns it around. We live in the moment and know that things can change. But, for now, I have my son back. If I've learned anything from this experience, it is never to give up on your child and what it means to truly love. ■

Live to Tell by Lisa Gardner, a novel inspired by Laurie's story, is out now (£12.99, Orion).

'When my husband was away I would sleep with the door locked to protect us'