Nia had delayed this well-rehearsed plan long enough. She couldn’t bear one more week ending the same way it had for the last two years. She began executing her plan by having an early dinner that night. Nia took extra care to prepare a delicious prime rib dinner with all of the fixings for her husband, Fernando. She wanted it to be just right, knowing it would be her last loving gesture despite his all too familiar foul mood.

It was 5:30 pm. Nia had her Jeep already packed with Mika’s favourite books and Disney movies and his portable DVD player. Nia also brought fifty tablets of his antipsychotic medication, a large bag of Smarties, and two cans of Coke. In the back of the vehicle she kept her own stockpile of antipsychotic meds, including fifty antidepressant tablets for her. Her chaser was not going to be a can of Coke, though. She had her favourite 1.5-litre bottle of chilled white wine to soothe her during her hopeless and desperate plan.

Nia was well beyond her ability to endure one more sad day. Mika was reluctant to get into the vehicle, knowing he would have to go back to his dreaded place, Children’s Psychiatric Research Institute (CPRI).

“NO I, NO I, NO I,” Mika desperately cried out to communicate emphatically using his extremely limited vocabulary. This was his usual decry to returning to the place he hated. Nia knew what his reaction would be getting into the vehicle. Over the past months, she’d heard and felt his heart-wrenching cry to be rescued him from that dreaded place. When she first heard his imploring words, she recognized them to be his attempt to find the right words, which sounded like “no-eye, no-eye”; it took her months to figure out he was saying, “NO I” as in the last letter of CPRI.

Mika aggressively and vehemently shook his head while pulling at Nia’s face for her eyes to meet his. She needed to reassure him she understood his distress at returning to the place where he received residential treatment for his aggressive autistic behaviours. He had been there for two years, and he wasn’t getting any better. Mika’s hate for the place negated the objectives of the treatment. Despite his high-level psychology team having identified this obstacle, there was nowhere else for this severely autistic teenager to go.

Every weekend, he was allowed a one-night leave of absence (a brief relief, from Saturday afternoon until Sunday after dinner). Mika loved to see his mom’s Jeep drive up to his maximum-security building. Nia would see his sad face turn into a smile, and his shoulders would drop into a more relaxed state. As he entered the vehicle, he would begin his excited utterances well understood by only his mother, “I of you, ways ever” (I love you, always forever). He didn’t have the language skills to convey to his mother all the things he thought and felt, but he could script his desire to reconnect with his mother. There was always a cataclysmic emotional storm in her gut as she picked him up. She missed her son, and she loved him so much. However, she needed the help of a team of health care professionals to find a way for him to decrease his destructive behaviours and be less of a threat to his family, others, and himself. It was terrible, and she knew it’d only get worse.

Upon arriving home with Mika, Nia’s husband always retreated to the study. With the door firmly closed, he wouldn’t have to listen to his son screaming. That would interfere with his televised hockey game. Sadly, her daughter was no longer living at home but with her grandmother. Isabella, only fourteen, couldn’t cope with Mika’s meltdowns and physical abuse. Nia had no other choice but to protect her daughter.

Nia didn’t want to resort to having Mika confined to a residential behavioural treatment facility, but she’d exhausted all of her options. Mika was only getting worse, and he was a burden everywhere he went. His extended family avoided him out of fear. The pain was too great; Nia couldn’t bear dropping him off at CPRI one more time. He was screaming “NO I” until Nia gently whispered in his ear, “No I.” Mika stopped screaming, holding Nia’s face close to his to validate with her words, her soft voice, and her tender smile. “No I.”

Hand in hand, they went to the garage and got into the Jeep. Nia ensured Mika had his seat belt on before he could see what was packed in his backpack. As predicted and planned, he squealed in delight at all of his favourite things in the bag. Nia notice Mika’s hesitant looks at as she drove down the street. She knew he was concerned about her turning in the familiar direction to the dreaded “NO I.” Mika’s face relaxed in relief as Nia turned the opposite direction.

It was twilight; she’d rehearsed this camouflaged nightmare more times than she cared to recount. She drove to Lobo, a tiny village outside of London, where there was a horse farm with an old abandoned barn to park in the back. Nia’s friend, Bri, leased the pasture where her horses stayed outdoors for the winter. Nia knew no one except the animals would be witness to this homicide-suicide. The horses were unconcerned with her vehicle approaching and continued with their munching of hay. Nia turned off the Jeep while Mika cheerfully watched the horses.

Nia walked around to the back of the vehicle for the bag with all she needed to complete the plan, including an old towel. She rolled the towel like a long tube and stuffed it carefully into the exhaust pipe. After taking her bag, she closed the back and got back inside the Jeep with her son. Mika was happy to be with his mom, his Aladdin movie, his pop, and his Smarties. She cracked open the wine bottle and took long, purposeful gulps of the cool, delicious, familiar nectar of the serpent from hell. Yes, that was where she was most certainly going, but not her dear son; Mika would be rescued from his hellish life on earth. She leaned back, took another long drink of wine, and savoured the commencement of her happy place—being numb. Nia’s fingers reached toward the dangling keys. They almost reminded her of the mobile that danced above her children’s cribs. Mika, who was happily absorbed in his cartoon, didn’t hear the slight clang as her fingertips brushed against the keys. It took another sip of wine for the voice of warning to fade and replaced with the neutral feeling that accompanied going on a random errand. With a twist of her wrist, the engine came to life.