

"I fell in love with the fascinating, brilliant family at the center of this riveting book."
—ANN NAPOLITANO, author of *Hello Beautiful*

HAPPINESS FALLS

A NOVEL

ANGIE KIM

AUTHOR OF *MIRACLE CREEK*

HOGARTH 

Advance praise for *Happiness Falls*

“I fell in love with the fascinating, brilliant family at the center of this riveting book. Ranging from the older daughter, Mia, who is hyper-verbal, to the younger son, Eugene, who is unable to speak, this novel thoughtfully, compassionately explores the role language plays in how we love and accept one another. I’m so happy to have read it.”

—Ann Napolitano, author of *Hello Beautiful*

“A brilliant novel that has everything I want in fiction—great writing, fascinating characters, suspenseful storytelling, and thought-provoking themes. Readers are going to fall in love with *Happiness Falls*.”

—Imbolo Mbue, author of *How Beautiful We Were* and *Behold the Dreamers*

“There is a freshness and originality to Angie Kim’s work that brings joy to the reader. Sophomore efforts are notoriously difficult for writers, particularly after a debut like *Miracle Creek*. But rest assured, *Happiness Falls* is another superlative effort in what is fast shaping up to be a remarkable career.”

—David Baldacci

“Brilliant, immersive, and deeply moving, *Happiness Falls* is more than just a fantastic story well told. It’s a book that will change the way you think—a book that will change your life.”

—Julia Phillips, author of *Disappearing Earth*

“I began reading *Happiness Falls* expecting a murder mystery. What I got was the most moving and humbling portrait of humanity I’ve read in quite some time—a reminder that each one of us, no matter what outward appearances may imply, carries within us a flame of hope and life.”

—Mary Beth Keane, author of *Ask Again, Yes*

“*Happiness Falls* is a rarity: a riveting page turner about a missing man and a precise (and luminous) exploration of what it’s like to be the teens he has left behind. The twists are surprising and the turns are moving. You will fall in love with this family—and this novel. It’s a treasure.”

—Chris Bohjalian, author of *The Flight Attendant* and *The Lioness*

“*Happiness Falls* is a riveting, revelatory masterpiece by one of the finest novelists working today. Angie Kim subverts the tropes of the missing-person narrative to explore the elemental mysteries: How do we define, much less enact, a good life? How does language shape and distort our interpretations of truth? What do we owe each other? I stayed up half the night to finish this novel, and when I woke in the morning, I turned back to the first page to begin again. It’s that good.”

—Anthony Marra, author of *Mercury Pictures Presents* and *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*

“*Happiness Falls* is the best kind of mystery—one that keeps you thinking and guessing and feeling all at the same time. I loved getting to know these characters, and I will miss them now that the book is over.”

—Liz Moore, author of *Long Bright River*

“If you don’t like to feel things, stay far away from Angie Kim and *Happiness Falls*. Kim is a tremendous writer with a particular gift for conveying the dramatic churn of families in crisis, capturing big emotions

with such observational acuity that they just blast right off the page. This book is a compelling mystery as well as a guide to managing the uncertainties of life and the challenges of family, the exquisite torture that so often accompanies unconditional love.”

—Steph Cha, author of *Your House Will Pay*

“*Happiness Falls* is one of the best mystery novels ever written. Most mysteries delve into the mind of the killer, perhaps the victim, but Angie Kim strives to capture the universal. The result is what Dostoevsky might have written if he had been an American and also not a jerk. *Happiness Falls* is as turbulent and fast as a river, but in the end it lands the reader on new and unimaginable shores.”

—Gary Shteyngart, author of *Our Country Friends*

“A sublime literary mystery that is a mesmerizing update to the missing-person story, a layered and innovative exploration of family, love, happiness, and race. With dazzling intellectual range and tremendous warmth, Kim makes us fall in love with this close-knit family while spinning her suspenseful and twisty tale. A gorgeous read that grips both heart and mind.”

—Jean Kwok, author of *Girl in Translation* and *Searching for Sylvie Lee*

“An exhilarating literary tour de force—one part mystery, one part family drama, one part interrogation of the meaning of happiness, it will introduce you to extraordinary characters whose lives will leave you forever changed. An incredible achievement.”

—Danielle Trussoni, author of *The Puzzle Master*

“What do you expect out of life? What do you deserve? Plus: Whodunit? *Happiness Falls* is on the one hand a profound meditation on the meaning

of life and the nature of happiness, while on the other hand a riveting mystery replete with suspense and peril. A remarkable achievement.”

—Chris Pavone, author of *Two Nights in Lisbon*

“Angie Kim has written that rare book that can change your entire outlook on the world. Part page-turning mystery, part meditation on the power of expectation, *Happiness Falls* will both open your eyes and tear your heart apart.”

—Janelle Brown, author of *Pretty Things*

“In the profound and moving *Happiness Falls*, Angie Kim weaves a suspenseful missing-person mystery, yes, but also invites readers to explore fundamental questions about the meaning of happiness, human connection, and even life itself. This book will stay with you long after you turn the final, satisfying page.”

—Alafair Burke, author of *Find Me*

HAPPINESS FALLS

| *A Novel* |

ANGIE KIM



LONDON / NEW YORK

Happiness Falls is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Grateful acknowledgment is made to the International Association for Spelling as Communication (I-ASC) for permission to reprint an excerpt from a collaborative poem entitled "It's Sure Been Quite a Year" created at the Neurolyrical Café, organized and sponsored by I-ASC, copyright © 2022 I-ASC. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Kim, Angie, author.

Title: Happiness falls: a novel / by Angie Kim.

Description: First edition. | London; New York: Hogarth, 2023 |

Identifiers: LCCN 2022059340 (print) | LCCN 2022059341 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780593448205 (hardcover; acid-free paper) | ISBN 9780593448212 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Missing persons—Fiction. | LCGFT: Detective and mystery fiction. |
Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3611.I45286 H37 2023 (print) | LCC PS3611.I45286 (ebook) |
DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20221220

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022059340>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022059341>

International edition ISBN 9780593730638

Ebook ISBN 9780593448212

[randomhousebooks.com](https://www.randomhousebooks.com)

Book design by Susan Turner; adapted for ebook

Cover design: Cassie Gonzales

Cover art: Quint Buchholz (house), Boyan Dimitrov/Shutterstock (waves)

ep_prh_6.1_144776262_c0_r0

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Author's Note

Dedication

Acknowledgments

By Angie Kim

About the Author

I lost a World—the other day!

Has Anybody found?

—EMILY DICKINSON (1896)

One sits down on a desert sand dune, sees nothing, hears nothing. Yet through the silence something throbs, and gleams. “What makes the desert beautiful,” said the little prince, “is that somewhere it hides a well...”

—ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY, *The Little Prince* (1943)

It’s a crazy world out there. Be curious.

—STEPHEN HAWKING, *The Universe in a Nutshell* (2001)

PART I
EVERYONE'S FINE

ONE

Locke, Bach, and K-pop

WE DIDN'T CALL THE POLICE right away. Later, I would blame myself, wonder if things might have turned out differently if I hadn't shrugged it off, insisting Dad wasn't *missing* missing but just delayed, probably still in the woods looking for Eugene, thinking he'd run off somewhere. Mom says it wasn't my fault, that I was merely being optimistic, but I know better. I don't believe in optimism. I believe there's a fine line (if any) between optimism and willful idiocy, so I try to avoid optimism altogether, lest I fall over the line mistakenly.

My twin brother, John, keeps trying to make me feel better, too, saying we couldn't have known something was wrong because it was such a typical morning, which is an asinine thing to say because why would you assume things can't go wrong simply because they haven't yet? Life isn't geometry; terrible, life-changing moments don't happen predictably, at the bottom of a linear slope. Tragedies and accidents are tragic and accidental precisely because of their unexpectedness. Besides, labeling anything about our family "typical"—I just have to shake my head. I'm not even thinking about the typical-adjacent stuff like John's and my boy-girl twin thing, our biracial mix (Korean and white), untraditional parental gender roles (working mom, stay-at-home dad), or different last names (Parson for Dad + Park for Mom = the mashed-up Parkson for us kids)—not common, certainly, but hardly shocking in our area these days. Where we're indubitably, inherently atypical is with my little brother Eugene's dual diagnosis: autism and a rare genetic disorder called mosaic Angelman

syndrome (AS), which means he can't talk, has motor difficulties, and—this is what fascinates many people who've never heard of AS—has an unusually happy demeanor with frequent smiles and laughter.

Sorry, I'm getting sidetracked. It's one of my biggest faults and something I'm trying to work on. (To be honest, I don't like shutting it down entirely because sometimes, those tangents can end up being important and/or fun. For example, my honors thesis, *Philosophy of Music and Algorithmic Programming: Locke, Bach, and K-pop vs. Prokofiev, Sartre, and Jazz Rap*, grew from a footnote in my original proposal. Also, I can't help it; it's the way my mind works. So here's a compromise: I'll put my side points in footnotes. If you love fun little detours like Dad and me, you can read them. If you find footnotes annoying (like John) or want to know what happened ASAP (like Mom), you can skip them. If you're undecided, you can try a few, mix and match.)

So, anyway, I was talking about the police. The fact is, I knew something was wrong. We all did. We didn't want to call the police because we didn't want to say it out loud, much the same way I'm going around and around now, fixating on this peripheral issue of calling the police instead of just saying what happened.

Here goes: My fifty-year-old father, Adam Parson, is missing. At 9:30 A.M. on Tuesday, June 23, 2020, he and my fourteen-year-old brother Eugene hiked to the nearby River Falls Park, the same as they had done most mornings since I'd been home from college for the quarantine. We know they made it to the park; witnesses have come forward, a dozen hikers and dog-walkers who saw them together at various points around the waterfall trail as late as 11:10 A.M. At 11:38 A.M. (we know the exact time from the dashcam recording), Eugene was out of the woods, running in the middle of a narrow country road in our neighborhood, forcing a driver who'd run through a stop sign and turned too fast to swerve into a ditch to avoid hitting him. Just before the dashcam video jolts from the crash, you can see a fuzzy Eugene, not stopping, not turning, not even looking at the car or at anything else—just stumbling a little, so close to the car you'd swear he got hit. The screech of the tires and the sound of the car thudding

into the ditch, not to mention the chain reaction of the two cars behind it, apparently caused a terrible cacophony of metallic crunching, banging, and squealing that brought people out, and bystanders reported seeing a boy they later identified as Eugene staggering away. It bears note that not one of the five bystanders, three drivers, or two passengers involved in the crash saw my father precede, follow, or accompany Eugene. We confirmed this multiple times, and it is beyond dispute: Eugene was in our neighborhood alone.

While all that was going on, I was in the midst of what I was thinking of as one of the great tragic moments of my life. It's funny how relative these types of judgments are, how much they can change depending on context: that day has obviously since become The Day Dad Disappeared, but if you'd asked me that morning, I'd have sworn it was The Day of the Big Breakup. Not that it was as dramatic as all that. The breakup itself had, unbeknownst to me, happened earlier through Vic's semi-ghosting, which I'd noticed but misinterpreted as him needing alone time. This was my first Serious Relationship (as in, one lasting more than six months), and I thought I was being considerate in stepping back rather than nagging for attention and insisting he open up to me and bare his soul or whatever, but what I was apparently *actually* doing was failing a test of some sort—how much I cared, how much our relationship meant to me, etc. That morning's call was merely a courtesy notification of the results.

I listened quietly to Vic's (trying a little too hard to be) cool, matter-of-fact conclusion that he thought it best we "remain separated" because I obviously didn't care all that much, and it occurred to me that this call was yet another test, which I could pass by acting upset and saying "of course I care" and "it's just the quarantine and the agony of being apart, the angst of isolation," blah blah. But I don't do drama. Also, I was pretty pissed that this guy who usually extolled my "refreshingly low-maintenance lack of game playing" was playing one himself and expecting me to participate and excel. It was juvenile, insulting, and, frankly, more than a little deceitful. Which is exactly what I said as soon as he stopped talking, right before I hung up. (I believe in saying what you're thinking, as much as is

practicable.) I threw my phone across the room—hanging up on an iPhone isn't nearly as satisfying as slamming down an old-fashioned phone like our kitchen landline, and besides, I had an industrial-strength titanium phone protector—but damned if it didn't land on my plush comforter.

I was contemplating picking it up to try again when I saw something out the window that stopped me: a boy in a bright yellow shirt, rounding our street corner, running fast. The thing my brain couldn't reconcile was that the shirt was definitely Eugene's—I distinctly remembered him wearing it that morning—but that running gait was definitely not. Eugene's mosaic Angelman syndrome means that he has two distinct sets of genes in his body: some cells with an imprinting defect and some that function normally. The mosaicism makes him “less affected,” without some of the most severe symptoms that can plague AS kids, like seizures and difficulties walking and eating.^[1] Eugene can do some things he's been practicing all his life like using utensils, walking, and even running, but he has issues maintaining consistent coordination and speed. It's like a tongue twister; you might manage saying it once or twice carefully and slowly, but the longer and/or quicker the utterance, the greater the chances of tripping up. Eugene needed years of therapy just to walk long distances—that's why the daily hikes to and from the park with Dad, for practice—and I'd always thought he didn't like running at all. So how was it possible that this boy who appeared to be my little brother was running the length of our long street?

It's funny with siblings, how you think of them as just there, but then something great or awful happens that unearths and makes visible what Koreans call jeong. It's hard to explain in English; it's not any particular emotion—not affection or even love—but a complex bond defined by its depth and history: that sense of belonging to the same whole, your fates intertwined, impossible to sever no matter how much you may want to. I rushed downstairs, threw open the front door, and ran outside, barefoot. “Oh my God, Eugene, look at you go,” I yelled out and clapped and—God, this is so not me, but I couldn't help it—even whooped and jumped a little.

Where was Dad? I've racked my brain trying to think if this question even crossed my mind at the time. I didn't notice that Dad wasn't there, but I didn't *not* notice it either, if that makes sense. I mean, I didn't see him, but parents are like that. They just seem like they're always there, so you assume they are if they're supposed to be. I didn't give any thought to it, is what I mean, but I suppose it was in the back of my mind that Dad had been encouraging Eugene to run, and once they were in our neighborhood, Dad let him run as fast as he could. There were so many reasons why Dad might have lagged behind—he might have been slowed by an arthritic knee (he didn't have one that I knew of, but this didn't seem unreasonable given that he'd already turned fifty), or he might have stopped to take a video the way parents are always doing. Not that I consciously thought these things at the time; like I said, I thought of him the way kids think of parents, which is to say, not at all.

Maybe this is an excuse, but I think I was too mesmerized by Eugene to think about anything else. He is beautiful. Everyone comments on it, what a gorgeous mix of our parents he is—not a hodgepodge of different features from either parent, like John and me, but a true blend, as if you morphed Dad's eyes/nose/skin color/etc. into Mom's halfway. The sunlight on his face, his huge smile, triumphant and proud, and most of all, the way he was cutting across our front lawn, his legs and arms in elegant athletic synchronization as I'd never seen before. As he got closer, I saw scratches on his knees and dirt on his yellow shirt, but those made him look even more joyous, visions of a rowdy boy traipsing through the woods with friends, laughing and not caring what scrapes they were getting into.

My perpetual annoyance with John, my hurt over the harsh words from Mom the previous night—none of that mattered. I hated that they were missing this, wished I had my phone so I could record Eugene to show them. I forgot I was annoyed, forgot about Vic testing and retesting me, forgot about Mom's ultimatum, forgot everything except how I'd never seen Eugene look so graceful, so typical, and I ran across the lawn to hug him tight.

I don't know what I was expecting—a tight hug back, maybe, for those arms that looked so strong and agile right then to wrap around and squeeze me, or even his usual quasi-hug, just standing there as if tolerating my hug, his arms rising limply, feebly, then flopping down as if he couldn't quite manage it. We hadn't hugged at all lately, and I suppose I was hoping for the excitement of this moment to erase the awkwardness between us, to undo what happened at Christmas. Hope is dangerous that way; it leads you to confuse what's possible with what's not.

Eugene kept running, and just when we got within arm's reach, with that huge smile still on his face, he raised his hands and shoved me. Eugene, my baby brother, shoved me out of the way, down to the ground. Hard.

Thinking back, I should have been on guard, with the way he was running full on, right at me. But that smile—that smile is trouble. I know it doesn't always equal joy, that Eugene sometimes smiles and laughs when he feels anxiety, pain, sensory overload, even anger; I've read about it, talked to doctors about it, seen proof of it. But some things are so ingrained in our culture, maybe in humanity itself, that it's hard to convince yourself otherwise; intuition trumps intellect, every time. A smile is one of those things. Not the tight, upturned-lip fake ones, but huge, whole-face ones like Eugene's—lips, eyes, eyebrows, even ears all buoyant. My parents and John claimed to be able to “read” the subtle differences in Eugene's smiles to figure out his true emotional state, but I'd never been able to differentiate them. Plus, I had no reason to doubt his happiness; I was so taken with the extraordinary normalcy of the moment, so happy myself, that I assumed Eugene must feel the same way, and his smile matched that, confirmed it. I was utterly unprepared for the shove, is what I'm trying to say, and I fell. My ankle twisted, and a jolt shot up my spine. “Ow,” I screamed, louder than the physical pain warranted, more to get Eugene to stop, but he kept going, straight through the open front door into the house.

Why didn't I get up right then? It seems clear to me now that this was one of those hinge points in a person's life, a crucial juncture of two possible realities. Reality A: I grit my teeth, get up, go into the house to get some ice, and start wondering where Dad is and text/call/ping him; I get

worried by the lack of response and call Mom and John, who immediately come home; we start our search before the storm, maybe even call the police; Dad is found—hurt, maybe even medevaced, ICU, coma, amputation, whatever, but alive—and we all learn a lesson about taking our good fortunes and each other for granted, and we go on living the rest of our lives, whatever happiness levels and lengths they may be. Reality B: I lie there and do nothing.

I chose B.

In my defense, I did try to move, and it did really hurt. I could have borne the pain and gotten up, it's true, but it seemed hard, and I didn't want hard. Plus, I was tired, and it was strangely nice being outside, the grass cool and prickly against my fingers, the bottoms of my feet. Our neighborhood's officially a suburb of DC, but it used to be part of the park and retained its rural look, with isolated farmhouses, wooded backyards, and narrow, gravelly streets. Our street had a particularly quiet, deserted feel, and sitting there with no phone and no computer, I felt a calm peace infuse me, the pain in my ankle dulling to an ache.

Eugene's room was right above me, and his window must have been cracked open because I could hear him start jumping, accompanied by his high-pitched vocals—what I call *splaughing* because it sounds like a mix of singing, laughing, and playing violin spiccato (with a lightly bouncing bow). It's what he does to de-stress: just get lost in the repetitive motion and sound to restore order when his senses get overwhelmed.

I looked up at his window. The sun was in my eyes, but through the veil of light, I could see the top of his head bobbing up every second, the piercing treble right when his head reached the apex, followed by the bass tone of his feet hitting the floor. It almost sounded like a rhythm track to a song—*heee-boom, heee-boom, heee-boom*—precise and rhythmic, his *splaugh* a high note some coloraturas can't even hit. I have perfect pitch, so I could tell it was a D, almost an octave higher than his usual F.

I lay down on the grass and kept staring, listening, thinking. The higher pitch, the faster run, the shove. In retrospect, it seems obvious these were clues, adrenaline-fueled aftershocks of the car crash and whatever had

happened in the park with Dad, but at that moment, I could focus only on how much Eugene was changing, had already changed while I wasn't paying attention. That push, in particular—it shocked me. Not just him lashing out for no apparent reason—I'd seen that before—but how strong he was, how aggressive it felt. Two arms bent, chest level, then a smooth, easy, efficient snap of the elbows to send all five foot seven inches and 130 pounds of twenty-year-old me tumbling backward and down. The last time he'd gotten physical with me was at Christmas. Only six months prior, but he'd been shorter, a skinny little kid whose arms I could hold down to keep him from clawing—though not from kicking, as I found out the hard way. Now, he was my height and definitely bigger and heavier. Fourteen: no longer child but not quite man, the awful, magical age when gawky can morph to invincible and back in a second, even coexist simultaneously. He would be fifteen soon, the age when John shot up to six feet. The bigger and taller Eugene grew, the more careful I'd need to be. Pretty soon, maybe already, he might be able to overpower even John or Dad.

My eyes were tearing up. Not crying tears—I rarely cry. It had to be the sunlight, the brightness of it shocking my entire visual system after spending 90-plus percent of the last three months of lockdown in my room, curtains drawn. Plus, my eyes were tired, my lids heavy and sore. I'd gotten into the habit of staying up, falling asleep around sunrise, being forced awake for the mandatory family breakfast, then going back to sleep, but thanks to The Call from Vic, I hadn't slept that morning. The adrenaline rush of the Vic-Eugene one-two punch had kept me going, but that and the pain were fading fast, leaving me drained.

I was getting drowsy, eyes closing, when I heard a steady crunch of gravel—footsteps coming up the driveway. Dad. I'd forgotten he wasn't home yet. I expected him to come check on me and get me inside, and just the thought of it exhausted me even more; I didn't want to move, didn't want to talk about Eugene shoving me, didn't want to have to deal with anyone or anything. Still, I have to admit it stung when he kept walking, said nothing; I couldn't help but imagine the way he undoubtedly would've run up and fussed if it had been Eugene lying here, unmoving. I almost said,

In case you're wondering, I'm not dead. Thanks for the concern, though, but it felt more satisfying to say nothing, just lie there and blink back tears, luxuriating in my righteous indignation about being semi-ghosted, shoved to the ground, and now ignored by the people who are supposed to love you. I realized even then that my doing and saying nothing was a passive-aggressive test of the sort I'd just, not ten minutes prior, accused Vic of, but there was something wonderfully indulgent about it, almost romantic.

The footsteps continued down the driveway, around to the back of the house. As I heard the faint *squeak* of the porch screen door opening, I wondered if Dad was avoiding me on purpose, the way he had the previous night after my fight with Mom. It wasn't a big deal: she found out I changed majors—from philosophy and music to computer music, with a concentration in algorithmic composition—and had just gotten approval to graduate college a year early, which I hadn't told Dad or her about yet. It wasn't like I was keeping it a secret; it just didn't occur to me to discuss it with them. I talked to my professors and academic advisors, and honestly, I thought my parents would approve of my choosing a more practical field, not to mention be happy about saving a year's tuition.

"That's not the point," Mom said. "It's not the substance of the decision, but that you didn't bother telling us about it." I said sorry, but with the ridiculous course load I was carrying to pull this off, I was distracted and forgot to bring it up.

"But you've been back for months, and we've been together every day, at least for breakfast and dinner. Honestly, Mia, you act like a tenant. I know so much more about what's going on with John's life."

Oh, please. First: we didn't talk during dinner, due to mandatory daily Family Movie Night + Dinner, part of our parents' campaign to use the pandemic to bring us closer together. Second: I'm sorry, but John was a bit too much, with this weekly melodrama, breaking up and getting back together with his girlfriend, whom our parents *adored*. Between detailed reports of that, plus the family's collective angst about Henry's House—Eugene's therapy center and John's summer internship—battling to stay open through the quarantine, all I did during breakfast was listen and eat.

I thought for sure Dad would come into my room after Mom left, a combination of expressing his own hurt and smoothing things over between Mom and me, but he never did. Mom said at breakfast she and Dad wanted to “sit down with me” later, which sounded ominous. I thought about preempting the whole thing with a teary recital of the agony of the Vic breakup drama, but no, I was fairly certain I hadn’t mentioned Vic to them, which would make it worse, add to Mom’s point about my not telling them anything.

I closed my eyes and placed my face directly in the blinding sunbeam. The world turned blank. A bright orange. A kaleidoscope of phosphenes swirled, replaced by bursts of red that exploded like translucent fireworks, turning the palette darker and more intense, into a deep crimson. I squeezed my eyes tighter, and black pinpoints oozed into blobs like inkblots on wet paper, bouncing up and down in the same rhythm as Eugene’s head in the window, the visual echoes of his jumps matching the *heee-boom* from above me. I lost myself in the rhythm of it all, the sun warming my eyelids, and let myself fall asleep.

1 On the other hand, autism makes Eugene less social and communicative than many AS kids, who crave social connection. In fact, I've heard people describe autism and AS as opposites because of the stereotype that autistic people are emotionless and not sociable. The doctor who diagnosed Eugene said that AS itself is rare enough (one in 20,000 live births), so with the mosaicism variant *and* the dual diagnosis of autism, Eugene was a "true one-in-a-million marvel," which I think was supposed to make us feel better.