



## The Mall

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### Dearest Susan

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## Dearest Susan

*Alexandra Cordill*

“When I was a child I was ostracized by my peers. Mostly for saying words like ostracized.”

-Patrick Ledwell

Dearest Susan,

You were with me through my first year of life. My little towheaded self crawling around on the ground with a teething ring in my mouth and one in each hand, all because you told me to. Because of you I could name every character in Richard Scarry’s Busytown before I could read.

Our childhood was very unconventional. We spent our time sprawled in large piles of books instead of playing with kids our own age. Poring over the intricacies of Fabergé eggs and the work of impressionists, you nestled beside me helping me commit every crevice and brushstroke to memory. From the ages of 4 to 7 I only had one good friend because of you. Every single time I tried to make other friends, you tied my stomach into knots and made me blurt out odd sentences at random times. You convinced me you were all I needed. You robbed me of a whole part of my childhood. Not a day goes by when I wonder what it would have been like without you.

I remember you standing next to me at age 8 while I stared at myself in the mirror and practiced facial expressions for hours on end until I had perfected each one and knew which one my face was making at any given time. I had gotten rid of the toothy smile that scared off my peers, replaced it with a much more subdued one and learned how to frown properly. At the time, this was the greatest feat I had accomplished in my young life, and I was convinced it would turn our social life, or lack thereof, around drastically. But, I was wrong, I was still the girl who played by herself at recess and was better friends with her teachers than her peers.

In Junior High things went from bad to worse. Because of you, we were bullied. Bullied for not understanding the intricacies of the middle school social classes. Bullied for you not being able to understand basic social cues like how not to interrupt people when they are speaking and when the hell to use certain facial expressions. Bullied for you forcing me to tap my fucking fingers on the desks. I couldn't help it, you would drop rocks into my stomach if I didn't keep my hands moving.

Come to think of it, you do that a lot for the most insignificant shit. Like when we were 7 and you had a full-fledged meltdown in Von Maur on two separate occasions because Mom bought a watch for the first time in 15 years and Dad started to wear jeans again. You can't accept change. You just freak out instead of being logical like you are in literally every other facet of life, undoubtedly to a fault. You wrap my brain in the itchiest sweater you can possibly find unless I eat meals in accordance to your absurd routine: vegetables, fruit, starch, then meat or when I eat something with the wrong texture. You realize that makes absolutely no sense, right? Melon is damn good but you don't like foods to be watery and crunchy simultaneously. By the way, what the fuck is up with your stomach churning aversion to mayo? It's a completely normal food. You refuse to let me study in the library because the fountain is too damn loud or take tests in the same room as my peers because you can't let me think while the sound of pencils is pounding in my brain. Or when you make me lose all concept of time when I fixate on something so insignificant it's laughable. You erase faces from all my memories. Do you know how fucking sad it is to have to memorize photographs so I can remember what my family looks like? I couldn't describe our mother's face to a sketch artist. Your complete inability to maintain some facet of normalcy around cute guys is literally the only reason I have never had a boyfriend. The more I think about all your transgressions the more I ask myself why I've put up with you my entire life.

I guess the best answer is that you're like an annoying sister. I can only be mad at you for so long before I remember all you do for me. You have forced me to become an expert at reading people's body language which is more helpful in life than one might think. You also have a fucking steel trap of a memory. Which has come in handy in the sense that I barely had to take notes in high school to get A's on tests. You give me the ability to have a laser focus on whatever task is at hand. Two years ago, I decided that I wanted to memorize the entirety of Alphabet Aerobics by Blackalicious. For 2 weeks, I listened to it on repeat during my 20 minute rides to and from cadaver lab every Wednesday and Saturday until I had it memorized by heart.

I have thought that there might be something different about me but I was never able to quite put my finger on it. I never realized it was you all along. On the morning of the AP psychology exam, May 1<sup>st</sup>, I finally learned your real name: autism. A weight had been lifted off my chest, I wasn't different for no reason, I had a developmental disorder. As Dr. Heinrich delved into the details of my diagnosis all I could think was, "I'm not crazy". Two weeks earlier I had gone into the Dr. Heinrich's office for a grueling battery of tests and questions. For 4 hours, I filled out questionnaire after questionnaire and answered questions about our childhood. I was almost certain that the tests were going to come back positive. For 5 months, I had been researching about you for hours on end after I had noticed that Max from Parenthood reminded me too much of my own internal dialogue. One day after class I approached my AP psychology teacher with the idea that I might be autistic, I could tell she was taken aback. I spent countless hours after school with her figuring out my next steps for diagnosis. Mom had to convince my pediatrician who was certain that nothing was "wrong" with me to give me a referral to a pediatric neurologist in Champaign. Eventually I got an appointment with Dr. Heinrich a psyD specializing in pediatric developmental disorders. It is increasingly rare to be diagnosed with autism at the age of 18. Typically, you are caught within the first five years of life but I guess we are part of that small percent. Coming to

terms with having a mental disability is not an easy thing to do. I guess that is why I separated you from me all these years. My autism is not me, and I am not my autism.

When I tell people about you they feel bad for me, they say, “You don’t seem autistic” as if to comfort me. But in fact, I don’t need to be comforted. There is a negative stigma attached to being diagnosed with autism. You are by no means a burden to me, you are a part of me just as much as my fingers and toes.

I’ve found that when people think of autism they think of Sheldon Cooper, the good doctor, or whatshisname the main character on Atypical. But that is not me, and that is not the vast majority of people diagnosed with autism. When explaining to people what it is like to live with you I like to say that it’s like being an alien on your home planet. Or playing a video game without the tutorial. I was basically thrown into life with zero social instincts, and your weird ass. I had to teach myself the basics of human interaction through mimicry. I would watch TV to learn how to interact with others. From Sesame Street, I learned not only how to share but when it is appropriate to laugh and when it’s appropriate to frown. From iCarly I learned how to make friends and keep them, and from Friends I learned the intricacies of adult society. People seem to view me as an other because of you but I’m really not, I’ve just had to learn things a little differently than everybody else.

Gone are the days where I have so much social anxiety I have to hide in a bathroom to keep my shit together. You no longer force me to break out in hives so I can get out of socializing. You have just about stopped giving me panic attacks when I fuck something up so bad you believe it’s beyond repair. I no longer have to watch Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat at least once a week. You have really stopped being as much of a bitch as you used to be and I thank you

for that. But your bitchiness lives on in your name, a tribute to the typical, white suburban mom with the "may I please speak to a manager" haircut.

In my opinion, you have changed my life for the better, although I am not you, and you are not me, you have made me who I am today, a somewhat normal 18-year-old girl. I have more friends than I have fingers and more fun than I could ever have dreamed. When I learned I would be coming to college autistic, I'm not going to lie, I freaked out. I spiraled into a deep researching hole. Spending hours upon hours on google and adult autism forums. Gathering up every tip I could find and reading every book about you I could get my hands on. But you, so far, have not fucked up my college experience. I recognize that you will never go away. But I still notice you today, you sneak up on me in the smallest ways. When answering questions in class I look approximately 4 inches above the professor's head. I constantly have trouble figuring out when to speak in social and classroom situations. Sometimes I wonder if people can tell that I'm different and what would happen if I was "discovered". Would people treat me differently? Then I remember that I am not ashamed of you, we are a packaged deal. I know we will continue to coexist and change together. But I'm proud of how far we've come thus far.

All the best,

Alexandra