

Life On The Spectrum

Literature

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High School

In the middle of my sixteenth summer, my parents sat me down by the side of our pool and informed me that I was on the spectrum.) I spent the entire conversations with knees pulled to my chin, peering up at them and wondering when I would be allowed to get back to my book. My mother later told me that my sister showed more surprise at the news than I did.

Looking back, one of the main reasons I didn't show much surprise is because "being on the spectrum" seemed different than "autistic." I knew then, as I know now, that this isn't the case; that's just how I felt. Autistic kids smeared their saliva onto computer screens and didn't like to be touched. They flapped their hands in the air or communicated in sentence fragments. That wasn't me at all.

But even if my case is less extreme than others, I am still autistic. I fixate on things, primarily books, to the point that they hold my attention in a death lock until I'm finished. Sometimes I'll finish a book and then squeeze it to my chest, rocking back and forth, in an attempt to show...someone...how much I loved it. I like books because they manage to be interesting, like people, without all the additional demands of human interaction.

Even when I'm not reading, I still have trouble focusing on the rest of the world. There are times when I'll simply stop moving; I stare blankly into space and thinking about the books I want to read or the meaning of life. I think of this activity as "going catatonic." It has happened at different parts of the day, but it usually strikes when I'm getting ready for school in the morning. I'll be sitting in front of one of my bookshelves, unwilling to move and unaware that I've stopped moving. Luckily, it never lasts for long, or I'd be late to school far more often.

Unlike other kids on the spectrum, I'm pretty comfortable with conversation. I enjoy hanging out with my family, and I can compliment total strangers on their attire. However, my

Auror McKee Haldane 17-043

2 of 5

social skills could use a little work. My mother is always reminding me of the importance of maintaining eye contact and staying mindful of my surroundings. I also have trouble paying attention to what people are saying, which can cause difficulty during class lectures. I have a marginal interest in friendship, although there are some people at school who I like.

I feel safest in the company of my parents. They're familiar ground, providing entertainment without asking much in return. Lucky for me, they're both psychologists, so they can handle my emotional turbulence with ease. The only time I really get upset at them is when they bring up college, which has been happening a lot lately. I know that college is important, but the truth is that I don't really want to go.

My problem is that I'm not that good with change. That's why I have such trouble consuming new foods, even pizza or ketchup. The idea of building a new life for myself in some distant county (God forbid I have to go out of state) intimidates me. I'm afraid that college will demand more work and social interaction from me than ever before, until I will be pushed past my breaking point. The adult world is even more alarming. I know that there's a lot of good things about growing up, but all I can think about are the bad parts--bureaucracy, heartbreak, finances, driving. I see the flaws in adulthood, and I worry that other adults will see the flaws in me.

Then, of course, there's my irrational anger. I don't know for sure if it's a symptom of being on the spectrum, but it's definitely a symptom of being me. The sight of my sister with her hair in a bun bothers me (I have absolutely no idea why), as does the sound of her singing to herself, although I imagine the latter complaints stems from suppressed jealousy. My schoolmates appear to spend their entire lives acting out idiotic scenarios from the Internet or

Aurora McKee Haldane 17-043

385

giggling over the obscene trash on their phones, and sometimes I really hate them for that. It's an effort not to go up to them and say all the horrible things inside my head.

Everybody's emotionally fraught as a teenager, of course. However, not everyone throws their backpack across the floor in a crowded classroom or tries to express their rage at other students by hitting their computer. I want to solve my problems as fast as possible or just attack the source. I remember screaming at a particularly annoying boy in Spanish class. Another time, I calmly told a kid sitting behind me in math class that I would kill him if he didn't shut up. A few minutes later, I said that I didn't mean it, and I think that he believed me. Usually, however, my physical misbehavior is inspired by rage.

I don't always yell, however; sometimes I sob. I am a self-professed crybaby who's started weeping in multiple public place, including the college where I've participated in summer writing programs. I cry because I'm tired, because I'm confused, because I feel like I'm not doing enough. I am especially vulnerable to movies and plays, which my mother says is a sign of my impressive emotional sensitivity. I wept at *Rwanda*, *Cyrano De Bergerac*, and a three-minute-long trailer for a movie whose name I can't even remember. One particularly noisy incident was the time I watched *Gattaca* in Biology class. Growing up has helped a little of course, and experience has taught me to cope with or avoid some problems that would have broken me before. However, I'm still at a greater risk of breaking down in public than most of my peers. The adult world does not take such infractions with the kindness of childhood.

Of course, it's not all doom and gloom. I don't mind my lack of social interactions, even if bothers my parents. I like being able to vanish into my own world, one populated by all the stories I've read or hope to discover. I think my Zoloft helps a little, even if I have trouble

Aurora McKee / Haldane 17.043

4 of 5

remembering whether I've taken it. I've also decided to start bringing headphones to school, so I can block out my classmates at least some of the time. At the end of the day, the spectrum is part of me, and I am part of the spectrum. All I can do is accept it.

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Life on the Spectrum

Haldane 17-043

5 of 5