

## Who Am I?

A woman with Autism is a woman with autism, a man with Autism is an Autistic adult, and a boy with Autism is Autistic. A boy who is rude is a boy. A girl who is rude is mean. A boy who throws tantrums is being a kid. A girl who throws tantrums is out of control. On the other hand, a quiet girl like I was is nice and well-behaved. A quiet boy is odd and developmentally delayed. I was taught to fit in where boys are allowed to stand out. People use the excuse “it’s just a phase” or “he’s a kid” or “boys will be boys”. But girls are taught to please others as soon as we can talk. If we don’t talk, all the better. A boy with Autism will still have most of their “out of place” behaviors in middle and high school and can be diagnosed with relative ease. Girls like me are masking most of our “odd” behaviors in high school. Masking means we hide our normal actions to seem less abnormal. These actions tend to be stimming, repetitive movements or words used to regulate our senses and emotions. These behaviors are a part of Autism and are used to diagnose it. We get so good at acting “normal” doctors will miss the best maskers. By adulthood, all Autistic people have either perfected this mask of “normal” or they are hidden from view. We become *invisible*.

I did not speak until I was three and I did not speak sentences until the end of Kindergarten. My aunts and uncles thought I was easy and quiet, but my parents knew better. They knew I had to be diagnosed with something to get any help in life. The doctors misdiagnosed me many times with ADD, hearing impairment, selectively mute, seizures, and so on. The idea a quiet girl could be Autistic did not cross the minds of any of those doctors. I had no idea what was going on, but my parents fought for me, especially my mom. Mom fought to get the right diagnosis and she fought to get me accommodations. She got so good at fighting she started spending her free time fighting for others. When Mom believes she is in the right, there is no stopping her.

“Normal” people say that Autistic people are “in their own world” or “trapped inside themselves”. My first reaction is to recoil in horror and disgust. But upon consideration, the phrases themselves may be right, though not in the way most people use them. I am trapped inside myself by the expectations of “normal” I am held to. The real me is too dangerous to my social wellbeing. I hide my mannerisms behind an artificial stillness. I memorize pleasantries and responses to small talk and any phrase that would replace another perceived as rude. I live in my own world where I am a different person.

In this world, I can do eye contact just fine. In this world, I don’t fidget. In this world, I don’t talk so heavily with my hands. In this world, I am nice, I swear. In this world, I am not overwhelmed by the volatility of everyone’s emotions, including my own. In this world, I totally know what to say and when. I get the joke. I know how to respond to emotion. I know how to be “normal”.

But this world is fiction. / am trapped inside myself, behind a mask that keeps me from revealing reality. / don’t try to escape because I’ve been rejected, over, and over, and over, and over, and over and... I can’t tell anyone that when the chalk screeches, as it occasionally does, that my fingers feel like I had dragged my own fingernails down the chalkboard. I can’t tell anyone that, no, I don’t get the joke. I can’t say the response that first comes to my mind. I can’t even say how excruciating small talk is in how much it limits me.

When it comes to a full conversation where I am exchanging meaningful words with people I talk like I think, for the most part. When I’m comfortable in a conversation, I’m not speaking in monotone, I project my voice. When I’m speaking I am an encyclopedia of information, and I take pride in that. I am loud, boisterous, and a bit overconfident in my knowledge. I love having long, winding conversations with the people I’m closest to.

But to make it through small talk and pleasantries I store and retrieve prerecorded information and phrases, like a language learning AI. It is thanks to this that I can run on autopilot, and forget that I am trying to act like everyone else. I have stored almost 21 years of information, but 21 years, or even 100, is not enough to know how to respond “correctly” to every situation. If someone stays with me *too long*, I will come

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across a situation where I have no prerecorded response. My first reaction is to try to consciously come up with my best guess. If I can't guess, I say the first thing that comes to mind. That answer is most certainly wrong. Though, probably so is my best guess. I know my response will be wrong before I say it, and I will be "rude". As my mom has instilled in me, being "rude" is bad, and I may as well be a bad person. At that moment, the mask breaks, and the world I was trapped in crashes down. THE END.

My mom lives in my fictional world as much, if not more than I do. She expects me to be as capable as a "normal woman". Be polite, get all As, follow this list you heard once, and learn how to do something on your first try. She wants me to be "normal" because she knows my life will be hard otherwise. But as with anyone who is with me *too long*, the mask breaks and the world disappears. I fail her "normal" expectations and it is as if she suddenly remembers "my daughter is Autistic". I see the disappointment and hurt cross her face, and it feels as if I disappointed myself. And then, she buys into another world entirely. The one the "Autism Moms" tout, that as an Autistic person I am immature, I can't understand other's emotions, and I need her careful parental guidance to know what I was wrong about and how to fix it. Her expectations of me are now for that of a child. This world is as fictional as mine.

One August night, I brake one of the rules to being "normal" in from of my mom. I finished watching a show with my brother and I am starving. I pull up beside my mom, who is stirring a pot of tomato sauce and meatballs. The smell is flooding the kitchen, teaming up with my hunger and making it hard for me to focus.

I freeze, mouth open with the first word half-formed. Suddenly, I'm aware that I do not know what to say. I wanted to ask *when is dinner going to be ready*.

But surely that is wrong. It's probably "rude".

But what else can I say? What other option is there?

I don't know but certainly not that!

Well, I have to ask something. It's not like I can say nothing and hope she understands.

But anything, other than-

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“Can I help you?” Mom asks.

“*When is dinner going to be ready?*” I nearly blackout from shock the moment it falls from my mouth. It is wrong!

I force myself to look up at mom. The image is hazy and unsaturated, as if on an old television that can't quite catch the signal. I can make out the emotion of hurt and disappointment on mom's face. Then crying.

“That was rude. You hurt my feelings,” her voice quivered, as if I could not already feel her distress. It nearly caused me to tear up.

Then, she changes. I can see her mentally getting down on her knees for a one-to-one as if I were still an elementary schooler. I could see it better than the image of her stepping closer to me.

Mom demands, “What should you have said?”

My mind goes dark as I scramble internally to find another answer, any answer. No words come to mind.

“Would. you. like. me. to. help?” She slowly pronounces, the way all adults force an angry child to say “I'm sorry”.

Mom always corrects me when I say something wrong. It's her way of caring for me. She does not want me to get hurt by standing out so she takes any chance to “teach” me how to act “normal”. More small talk to add to my repertoire. She always reminded me as a child that “when people know you're different they will try to hurt you.” My experiences prove her right.

But at this moment I realize *this is wrong*. I never asked for her to “teach” me how to act or speak. I certainly did not ask or want her to do it like this. Why is it *me* who has to be fixed? Why do I have to “overcome” Autism? Why do I have to keep it a secret that I am different?

“Say it. ‘Would. you. like. me. to. help?’” She continues. She repeats it a few more times, slower each time.

“Woouuuld yooou liiiiike mee toooo heelp,” I string out the words. I am embarrassed that I have to give in. I have tried in the past to tell her when she hurt my feelings, but when Mom believes she is in the right, there is no stopping her. And now she is emotional, and there's no arguing with Mom when she is upset.

She almost says, “Good!” when I finish. Though she says more with the way she clapped her hands raised in front of me in that showy way you might if a toddler had waddled across the floor to you.

“No, I don’t need you to help. Dinner will be done in a few minutes.”

This crushes what is left of me. All of this pain and effort to say what she wanted me to say, just for her to answer the question she told me was rude. Why did we do all of that? Why must we ask different questions to get answers to our real questions?

Why do people insist I not say what I want to say? Why teach children fables about only telling the truth if society expects everyone to lie or go through the effort to say things in a very roundabout way?

But, of course, I never say anything. I bury my feelings because the last thing anyone wants to hear is *my* side of the story. They will gladly hear my story if it takes their side, confirms their beliefs that I need to change, or if I pull my punches.

A disagreeable girl who talks a lot and gives her opinion is disrespectful, and I know many people who don’t see me yet as a woman. And an angry woman is worse. I was taught to mask anything people did not like about me. I mask my anger and I mask my desires. I even masked my teenage rebellion behind a facade of contentedness. Girls and women are not allowed to be unlikeable.

But this is *my* story as an Autistic Woman. Not the story of me, who is a “normal” woman. This is not the story of me, who “overcame” Autism. Not my parents’ story. Not of any other Autistic person, many of whom would probably disagree with at least one of the things I have said. This is the story of one Autistic Woman who wants to know, *what is my normal?* I am finding who I am by observing those around me and peeling back my mask.