

Part 1

M's World

secretly, I just want to be normal.

★ Chapter 1 ★

FROM: J.Twinnings@st.andrews.ac.uk

TO: ALL STAFF

**Subject: Year 8 Student –
AUTISM DIAGNOSIS**

Dear all,

Please be aware that I received a copy of letter from local NHS Trust that student M has a diagnosis of autism. Her mother requested that I make staff all aware of this.

Any problems, I am available 1–2pm Tuesdays to Thursdays.

Regards,

Jill

Head of Pastoral Care

The Head of Pastoral Care, Miss Twinings, sent an email to all the staff, explaining that I had a diagnosis of autism. Mum had to chase it up a few times but on November 30th she finally sent it. I heard Mum on the phone to her friend Jackie.

“Seriously, Jacks, this bloody Head of Pastoral Care woman is so unhelpful... I just don’t think she believed that M has autism... I had to practically send the email myself!”

Year 8 started well. It was much better than Year 7. Which had been difficult with Nev and Lara and their stirring and causing trouble for me and my anxiety had got really bad, out of control, but after I got the diagnosis things in my life began to make more sense. Me and Mum realised I wasn’t going mad and I wasn’t weird, it’s just I experienced the world differently.

My diagnosis gave me some stability... So when I went into Year 8 I felt like I knew myself a bit more. As Fiona my counsellor said,

“Life is going in the right direction and this is really positive.”

And just like what Mum’s fridge magnet says,

POSITIVE THINGS HAPPEN TO POSITIVE PEOPLE!

I was able to concentrate more on my school work. I found new ways of working and even new ways of walking around the school, which made me much happier. Much more relaxed.

But stability can **W-O-B-B-L-e**. Stability is a state that gets challenged and battered all the time. I like stability. I want stability but I wobble a lot.

Lots of the teachers were more understanding to me after the email, but some teachers, like Mrs Chiswick, who teaches maths, said,

“Autism sounds like a great excuse for behaving badly and not trying hard enough.”

I’m good with numbers and generally can get the answers straight away but Mrs Chiswick wants us to,

“Display our workings out in our books, otherwise I won’t know if you’ve cheated.”

Mum would look at my work and say,

“You’ve got a good instinct for maths M.”

And I knew what she meant. I understand the numbers and where they fit well and how they should but it doesn’t matter, I still get Ds because I can’t explain how I get my answers.

Corridors at St. Andrew’s have always been very difficult for me and most teachers let me walk around the school the way I wanted, but some teachers like

Mrs Chiswick would insist I walk along the maths corridor and wouldn't let me enter the class room via the outside fire exit. She said,

“Use the corridors efficiently, like any normal human being.”

NORMAL HUMAN BEING

But you see corridors are a hostile territory to me and I wish I could saunter along them, so that I too could be one of these NORMAL HUMAN BEINGS.

Corridors echo.

Posters on the walls, **S**
l
i
d
e and fall.

Windows can be open or closed.

Lights flicker.

Corridors: Tunnels, lined with doors which people can exit from, **suddenly!**

Corridors off corridors. Corridors with staircases. Glass corridors. Cold blue corridors linked to overheated corridors, linked to dark brown corridors with draughts.

And corridors change frequently. Lots of people – then empty. Posters change. Noticeboards change their information. Doors open and sometimes they **SLAM** shut, rattling the glass that rattles, and lacerates my brain.

People rush down corridors.

People dawdle.

Some people d-r-a-a-a-ag their hands along corridor walls and then PULL a poster off a notice board.

Very UNPREDICTABLE PLACES!

The Beast of Anxiety lurks behind lockers and pounces on my back or waits for me, sneakily behind a door, ready to ambush me and stop me from getting to where I need to be!

And corridors mean a change of situation. Crossing into a new territory! Transitions! CHANGES! And changes are not a good thing for me.

And the blue, maths corridor is cold. And I feel like I am entering a hostile territory: unnerving peeling paint, cutting draughts and rattling windows.

RATTLING WINDOWS +
DRAUGHTS = FEAR

BATTLE + RATTLE = ANXIETY

PEELING PAINT + HARSH
SUNLIGHT = HEADACHE

FEAR + ANXIETY + HEADACHE

does *not* equal a good maths lesson.

So my grades in maths began to **S**
l
i
d
e from Cs

to Ds and Mrs Chiswick would get angry at me and slam books down on my desk and ask questions like,

“What time did you go to bed last night?”

And Joe would whisper,

“She thinks you’re tired and that’s why your grades are getting worse.”

“Well? What time did you go to bed last night?”

And I can’t answer. I don’t know why she is asking me this. I don’t understand, and anxiety has me in a head lock and it’s tightening its grip around my little neck and I am struggling to breathe. And I use all my strength, all my focus, to draw my shaky breath, deep into my lungs, like how Fiona, my counsellor, taught me. Deep, deep steady breaths.

Deep breath in.

And out.

Deep breath in.

And out.

The truth is I went to bed last night at 9.00pm but I didn't sleep till 6.00am. I often have nights without much sleep. Mum calls them my "all-nighters." When my worries are the size of Kilimanjaro or Mars or the Great Wall of China and these are great, big enormous things that I just can't push aside at 4.00am. They sit, big, bulging in my head.

Lara's phone beeps.

Mrs Chiswick swings around and I swear she shouts at her almost with delight and stands over her desk. The attention is taken away from me and anxiety loosens its hold, a little. Joe whispers,

"She's power mad M, don't worry. I'll help you with your homework. I could come over this evening?"

So Joe likes to come over and visit and we'd do our maths homework at the kitchen table. Mum really likes him. She says,

"I like Joe, he's a very mature boy," and Toby says, "He's cool."

Not that Toby sees him much because Toby goes out a lot. But when Joe is over he lingers at the door. Half in, half out. Very disconcerting. Toby changes when Joe is about. He acts a bit like a dad or a teacher

and even called him “mate.” He actually behaves like a nice person, maybe that’s how he wins all the “Most Polite Boy” certificates, stuck all over the fridge. The certificates I want to rip up and throw in the bin because I don’t get certificates...just letters home about my behaviour.

Dear Parent,

Your daughter’s disruptive behaviour in lesson 4 on Thursday 16th October has resulted in:

A Stage 2 on St. Andrew’s Code of Conduct

According to the school contract, which you signed when your child joined St. Andrew’s, this means a meeting is required with head of form and Head of Pastoral Care to discuss personal and academic goals. Please attend a meeting on 17th November 8.40am.

There are lots of these letters stuffed in drawers and bags...they don’t make it to the fridge door.

Anyway, Joe. Everyone really likes Joe. (Except Nev and Lara, but they don't like many people.) He's just one of those "even people" that everyone gets along with. Bella, our big, fat Labrador, likes Joe. She wags her tail and gets all excited when he comes over and Joe even takes Bella round the block if he stays for dinner and Mum always insists that he stays for dinner. She says,

"Joe, you've saved me a fortune in maths tuition." To be honest Joe does lighten the feel of the house sometimes.

"You've got a great family," said Joe one evening, while I was trying to work out the ratio of women to men in a fictitious software business in Nevada, USA.

"Really Joe? Are you serious?" I ask. "There's a bit missing," I said and Joe looked at my calculations.

"No, from my family," I reply and he laughs. He does this a lot and I used to get annoyed with him and hurt, then he explained sometimes we have "funny misunderstandings."

"Is this a funny misunderstanding, Joe?" I ask.

"Yes," he says, smiling. "Your hair looks good M."

"Thank you. I know," I say and he smiles. "I look pretty today, don't I?" And he laughs.

I know I am pretty. Everyone tells me this and I do assess from looking at pictures of other teenage girls that I'm on the high end of the pretty scale. Plus I wear really fashionable clothes and I've read things on the web and magazines that style and fashion can really enhance your attractiveness.

He flicks a pea, left over from dinner, and it hits my white school shirt.

I am shocked!

"I'm sorry M! I was only teasing."

Teasing is one of those words, concepts that I really don't understand. I've known people to tease me and it's horrible and they've got in trouble, and when Dad lived at home he would tease Toby and they'd both laugh and then I heard someone on TV saying they would "tease the information out of the suspect." So it's at points like this I have to withdraw. It's words like this which keep me separate and feeling dislocated from this world.

However, I am annoyed. He's got dinner on my white shirt.

"And what do you mean, a bit's missing from your family?" he asks.

"Well, Dad. He's not here." I don't tell him that I did it. I broke the family because my anxiety drove

Dad away and my guilt, the size of Russia, the biggest country in the world, 17,075,200 square kilometres, hangs around me all the time.

“Yeah but he’s still your dad. To be honest, M,” he continues, “my dad is around and I wish he wasn’t.”

“We’re a broken family Joe. That’s what we are called.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple M...” And I think to myself that nothing ever, ever is that simple. How I long for simple.

“Anyway, bent, broken or cracked I really like it round yours. You get some peace.”

“Peace? Really? Toby is so loud and booming and Mum is always shouting up the stairs or her phone is going off, she’s listening to the TV *and* talking.”

“Well, it’s peaceful now,” he said, and we stopped and listened. I could hear:

1. Fridge whirring intensely.
2. The kitchen light buzzing, drilling.
3. High sounding, tinny screeching coming from Mum’s radio upstairs.
4. Bella’s breathing.
5. Toby slamming the front door shut and shaking the whole house.

6. The neighbours plugging things in.
7. A car passing outside.
8. A car door slamming.

“This isn’t peaceful, Joe.”

“I’ve got six brothers and sisters, M. This is peaceful compared to mine.” I make a mental note, *never, ever* visit Joe’s.

“And your mum’s really nice. She actually talks to me.” And I think Mum talks too much. “My mum just shouts a lot and your mum’s got a cool job.” Mum is a textile designer and she makes all these amazing materials and designs, which is where everyone says I get my love of textures and colours from... But I’m not sure it works that way. Where do I get my anxiety from? Who gave me that?

Joe tidies his books away and asks if I want to go to a film on Saturday, but I can’t because Dad is coming to visit on Saturday, but I’m glad I can’t go because the truth is cinemas are very difficult places for me. I wait for films to come out on Netflix or the internet and anyway I need to watch some Skylar on YouTube.

Mum comes into the kitchen after Joe leaves and points to the stain on my white shirt.

“What’s that?” I go to the sink and scrub at the stain.

“Joe flicked a pea at me.” Mum’s eyes go big and wide and she sidles across the kitchen floor to me.

“OHHHHH, somebody likes you, M,” she says. “He’d be a perfect son-in-law, M! He’s so polite!”

“Mum, are you suggesting that I *marry* Joe?”

“Oh, M! You could wear white and I’ve always thought Rose Vale House would be a perfect wedding venue!

“Are you teasing me?” I ask. A car passes on the road outside and the neighbours shut their front door, they walk up the front path, click-click – click-click on the concrete and in my head. I tap my face with my fingers and I sense The Beast of Anxiety in the room. Its eyes **lock** on me. Mum says she’s sorry and she explains that she wasn’t teasing me, she was dreaming of a happy future for me. I tap more.

“A future? When in the future? What time Mum? When?!!!” She’s planning events, and a wedding at Rose Vale House is unfolding in front of me at a very high speed. The future is a frightening place.

“Stop it, M, please!” And I tap more and I walk towards the stairs.

“Stop what? Mum, exactly what should I stop? What have I done?” The Beast of Anxiety, eyes still locked on me, paces around the room.

“Stop getting stressed out. Please. I was just thinking about the future, when you’re grown up... I was dreaming, M. It’s just what mums do! Dream. I shouldn’t have said anything...”

“I need to change my shirt, the smell of the pea is making me nauseous.”

“It’s just you seemed really on track M, in life. I was just joking around. I thought maybe I could. Did I push it too far M? I did, I pushed it too far, didn’t I?”

“Shouldn’t you be in love with the person you marry?” I ask.

“Yes, darling, most definitely,” she answers.

“I don’t love Joe.”

“Well, that’s very sensible of you, M, and I was just being silly.”

I escape up the stairs to the safety of my little pink room and avoid a full-on assault from anxiety. I was spared this evening but I know it's still hanging around, waiting for its next opportunity. Ever present. I get into bed and wrap myself tightly in the purple and grey blanket my mum made me and I think about how I love Lynx. I should marry Lynx...

I'm supposed to be in a pack
but I haven't found it yet.