

My dearest Mary,

For the first two decades of my life, I thought I had only two aunts: my father's sister Susan, and my mother's sister Helen.

Susan died when I was eighteen. Though a hilarious woman, she was, like both of her brothers, a half-mad alcoholic and as such could not be relied upon for much more than entertainment. I loved her dearly, of course, and my fondest memories of her are, bizarrely enough, of her appearing across the car park of Aberdeen Royal Infirmary on the back of her husband's motorcycle, all of us to take turns at visiting my grandmother in the stroke ward, and of laughing at her shocking butchery of the French language. I look a bit like her and my dad always said I think like her, which, looking back, I see now is probably accurate.

Helen is alive. You know quite a bit about Helen. On more than one occasion you've advised me to get the police to intervene on my behalf. You've seen first-hand the effect of her games. She's the one who ordered me to leave the Isle of Skye when I was nineteen, and who has used me as a weapon in her inexplicable war with my mother since I was a child. She plays favourites with her own children and has complained to me about the resentment she has fostered, and then tried to blame me for that resentment, possibly because she realised I had seen the root cause. Helen enjoys trouble. It's her best loved hobby, to cause carnage wherever she goes.

You, though, have a mother who is one of many siblings. You have aunts and uncles in spades and despite the fact they can be difficult, you see them and hear from them and are loved by them. I remember you said once that my mother's siblings made you relieved you're an only child. I think I understand that. My brother and I don't always agree but we would never be as venomous to one another as Helen is to our mother.

I loved Susan. It wasn't always easy, for she was often a shambolic woman, but I did love her. She was uncomplicated and yet a mystery all at once; her words were direct but her actions could be senseless at times.

I have tried my best to love Helen. For years I tried to understand why she is this way. The only answer I've ever found is that she is her father's daughter. Her actions are not senseless. Like her father, she gets by on sheer spite and ferocity and delusions of her own perfection.

I love you. And really, you are easier to love. Blunt and flawed you may be, but it is easy to love someone who is openly endearing. You're what everyone I've known has described when talking of their favourite cousin, or grandmother, or aunt, and it is something I had never encountered until my twenties. Until I knew you.

Where Helen told me I'm not as smart as I think I am, you tell me I'm far more intelligent than I credit myself with. Susan didn't know what to do with an autistic girl's strangeness and so we shared very little time, but you accepted it as part of me long before we had a diagnosis for it. To you, it's just my "odd manner" and that's all you've ever wanted of me. You are kinder than Helen and less often accidentally cruel than Susan. You're as half-mad as Susan was, and as fiercely spoken as Helen, but in a different way. In a more human way, I suppose. I see humanity in you which is so rarely found in my bloodline.

You're willingly human, and you've taught me to be the same. Those flaws and cracks and painful scars I thought were my ugliness are all nothing more or less than humanity, and always trying to mask them is to pretend I'm not human. Helen taught me I have to seem like I'm perfect. Susan

taught me exactly how not to live. They both taught me how to fail. You taught me I'm human. Not perfect, but not wrong, either.

"Be like me," was what both my aunts tried to tell me. I came dangerously close at times, and pulled back just as I began to see the damage it did.

You have never told me to be like you. In fact, you have explicitly told me not to be like you in certain ways. Maybe you want me to be happy rather than a carbon copy of yourself. And there are ways in which I can never be like you; confidence and bravery don't come as easily to me as they do to you. Watching you, I've learned how to find them within myself when I need them. I learned how to say "no" and how to fight a battle there's no hope of winning.

That battle. You know which one. The one for which Helen labelled me a "snowflake" and the one Susan was too drunk to notice. The one which led us to the bottom of the stairs, both in tears for different reasons, holding each other with the Hoover at our feet.

Helen taught me to lie. Susan taught me how easy it is to hide. You taught me how to be honest.

Lying and hiding are easier than telling the truth. Better to lie and hide than to let the world see exactly where to strike its blow. Helen would deliberately strike that blow. Susan would either have misunderstood it or poked it with a sharp, ignorant stick. You know how to hurt me and yet you are careful not to do it. I never knew family could be that conscientious, that they could choose not to hurt me in either earnest or ignorance. Did they just not care enough? Was I not something they could love?

Why do we do it? Why do we try to love people who cannot love us? All because they share our name and our DNA and the trappings of inherited traits. We try to fit in with them. Be like them. I tried for twenty years to be like two aunts I could never be happy emulating. After all, Susan is dead and Helen is nothing short of a walking, talking nightmare. Why didn't I realise earlier it was a terrible thing to do to myself?

I fell into a black hole where all blood is family and all family is blood.

I'm now halfway into the third decade of my life. I know better. I know better than to think I have two aunts. I have three.

Susan, who has been ashes in the ground for years.

Helen, whose spite could so easily have broken me.

And you, Mary, who let me be just *me*.

Just human. Not perfect. Not wrong. Always somewhere in the middle. You let me find that. Sometimes I'm right, sometimes I'm wrong. At times you showed me how to step back on to the right side of that line, and at times you had to help me reposition the line altogether. Things I thought were normal, you helped me redefine them for what they were: wrong. When I find darkness around me, I look for the laugh. The terrible joke you'd make about it, or the honesty so blunt that it's funny. The things you showed me it wasn't evil of me to say or think.

Family is meant to show you how to live, how to be happy, how to love, and you are meant to be safe with family. Aunts are supposed to love us and watch our backs. I didn't know that until someone showed me.

I have found in you an aunt who did all the things my biological aunts would not or could not do. An aunt who will endure shopping for clothes with me. Who will tell me when I'm wrong without tearing me to the ground. Who will look at my odd manner and see what lies behind it. Who will hold me when I cry rather than chase me away. Who will take advice as freely as she gives it.

There was a time I believed we were two entirely separate species, like when a dog adopts kittens in their hour of need. As we spent more time together, I realised we are alike in ways DNA cannot bind people. You are family, not blood. They are two very different things, and it was you who taught me that.

For this, and for so much more, you will always be my favourite aunt.

All my love,  
Sarah