

A Year With ‘Susan’

By Chris Cai

Summer

Every day, she sat quietly on the side of the street, clutching worn crutches and empty shopping bags full of holes. There was a peaceful distance in her eyes and a set smile etched on her face. She seemed content watching the traffic crawl by.

On my way back from work one evening, I asked her, “Do you mind if I sit next to you?”

She slowly looked up, surprised. “Of course not,” she replied, “My name is Susan.”

After about an hour, Susan said, “My crutches were made too small and have been hurting my back for months.”

I looked down at her crutches and saw two shiny brass buttons that marked an adjustable leg. Susan added, “Adjustable crutches are too expensive.”

With a little wiggling, I snapped the crutches to more appropriate length. It was sad to see how shocked Susan was. She exclaimed wide-eyed that no one had ever taken the time to show her this before. I was guilty of this too. For months, I had walked by her, accepting her as part of the scenery.

Susan and I both grew up in small suburban towns only a few miles apart. Together, we laughed about the woeful performances of our local football team and tried unsuccessfully to identify a few constellations. We talked into the night and seemed to have much in common. The next thing Susan said, however, reminded me what separated us.

“I got into a car accident when I was younger,” Susan said, “...and I have some mental disabilities now.”

Susan smiled. Little things like this, small twists and tumbles of chance separate a person going to college from a person who has to worry about her next meal.

I had spent the year convincing myself that traveling abroad or writing flowery social commentary made me an expert on global health. Susan, however, was living the issues that I had only talked about. I have never had to choose between spending my last dollar on pain medication or food. My family has never rejected me because of my mental illness and I have never had to walk across town on broken crutches.

When professors ask me what I want to study, I find it so easy to supply them with the answer “I want to study public health inequities.” But do I want it more than I want to party? Not some nights. Did I want it enough to donate 15 seconds to a stranger? Not for most of that summer.

Fall

Susan and I lived in the same town but in separate worlds. Soon, however, I learned that weekend nights were the best time for getting to know her better. We chose a place for our first lunch together based on an offhand comment she made one day: “The Reuben sandwich there is my favorite. But I haven’t had it in years.”

Most of the dinner went like any other meal I've ever had. We chatted bemusedly about the confused local weather that vacillated between storms and sunshine. We laughed and smiled so often together that I felt like I was taking my grandmother on a lunch date.

And yet, I felt a latent nervousness the entire time. Beneath the table, I clutched a wrinkled list of affordable housing options I had investigated the night before. Sometime between Reuben and blueberry pie, I decided to bring it up. Unfolding the crumbled list and rubbing the sweat off my palms, I tried to sound as casual as possible.

"Hey Susan. It's no big deal or anything, I made a few calls yesterday and it looks like there are some long term housing options that might be interesting. Just something maybe we can think about."

Susan didn't stop chewing but let out an admonishing smile. "Dear, you know that won't work. My employers...well the FBI has me working on a fresh round of cases. It's really busy... you understand."

"Oh...well, how about seeing someone for your teeth? There's a free clinic nearby. What if I called and—"

"Oh sweetie, I'm far too busy. The legal battles with the FBI you'd have to go through...it's far better that I stay where I am, at least until the cases are over. The FBI won't—they won't allow it," Susan smiled proudly, "These are tough cases...but, well..."

"Someone has to do them," I offered.

"Someone has to do them," Susan agreed.

A few moments of silence. Susan smiled thankfully.

"Well maybe when you get less busy, we'll talk again," I smiled.

"That's sweet of you, darling."

More silence.

"Anything else bothering you?" I continued

"Well, I suppose...the crutches you gave me broke," she said, between bites of Reuben, "These crooks come during the night and poke holes in my bags and crutches."

I had bought Susan crutches in the past and had even naively called some physical therapists the other night.

"Nothing you can do, of course. Same crooks I told you about last time."

"Okay, well, I'm really sorry I can't be of help, Susan. Maybe...would you like to tell me more about your job with the FBI? Sounds quite exciting."

Beneath the false cheer, I felt a strange mix of emotion. At the very bottom of it all was resignation. Perhaps I had been overstepping the boundaries of friendship.

We would have this conversation again many times—perhaps during another dinner, on another day, but always... the same conversation.

Spring

Susan must have spent the winter in some place warm. I didn't see her until spring.

I saw Susan again on a particularly gorgeous spring day. She sat on a church bench overlooking a busy outdoor food court, bustling with students and brimming with conversation. She seemed refreshed, her wispy white hair cleaned and combed to a side.

I ran up to greet her. We exchanged hugs.

In the past year, all my efforts to connect Susan to healthcare or housing failed. In the end, the only thing that seemed to make a difference was simply sitting next to her and listening, whether it was in cozy sandwich shops during cool fall evenings or on worn bench

tops during the peak of spring. It was during these hours, when we both lived in Susan's culture of delusions that the conversation began to feel real.

"No one chooses to be homeless," she once told me. It was sentiment I'd heard a hundred times from friends and professors, but had never quite understood.

I don't know if Susan's story of growing up 90 miles down the road from my hometown was real. But it was clear her desire to be loved and accepted was all too real. Perhaps that should have been enough for me.

"It's such a beautiful day!" Susan said.

She had untreated mental illness that clearly manifested in delusions and mild paranoia. Half her teeth were gone, which led to nearly continuous, throbbing pain.

"The court cases are going so well!" Susan said with exhausted satisfaction. She sat up and gave me a smile.

I don't know if Susan will ever get the healthcare she deserves. She still needs medication for her illness, new crutches for her chronic pain and companionship for her chronic heartache. Companionship is all I have to offer. It is not enough, but it is the only thanks I can give for a woman who has become my dear friend and mentor.

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