

Produced by and for Autistic people

The Spectrum

Edition **107** July 2021



The Spectrum

The Spectrum is run by and for autistic adults (although some parents subscribe on behalf of their under-sixteens). The magazine aims to connect autistic people through their letters and articles and to share information so that they can lead more independent lives.

Please note that *the Spectrum* receives many letters each quarter so it is not possible to respond to every one, nor for every contribution to be printed. Discussions on editorial choices will not be entered into. The magazine protects the identity of contributors by not printing full names unless the writer asks for their full name to be used.

The Spectrum is available at

www.autism.org.uk/thespectrum

or by paying a subscription. To subscribe you, we need your postal address. Please subscribe online or contact the Goth for a subscription form. All contact details are below. Organisations requiring multiple copies: please get in touch.

Editor: the Goth

National Autistic Society production support: the Content Team

NAS phone support: the Supporter Care Team

NAS database support: the Data Services Team

This magazine was founded as *Asperger United* in 1993 by Pamela Yates and Patricia Howlin, in association with the Maudsley Hospital, and Mark Bebbington and Judy Lynch of the National Autistic Society.

This was in response to a recognised dearth of services for people with Asperger syndrome and the potential for self-help and networking as a means of support for this group.

The provisions for editor's and sub-editor's post was to develop a publication that was truly the voice of the people it was aimed at. This post also provided the possibility of work experience and responsibility and has benefited those who have held the position. These are Richard Exley, David Wright, Martin Coppola, Ian Reynolds, John Joyce and the current editor, the Goth (who does not wear black).

Pamela Yates provided support and advice to the editors until the publication was handed over to the National Autistic Society in 2000.

The name *Asperger United* was chosen by the group of original readers as the most "appropriate name" for the publication. This was suggested by Anna Kaczynski. The name *the Spectrum* was suggested by dozens of people and chosen in an online poll in 2018.

Please send all correspondence and subscription requests to:

Email: **the.spectrum@nas.org.uk**

The Goth
c/o The National Autistic Society
393 City Road
London
EC1V 1NG

All we need is your email address and we will add you to the email notification list.

Please note that the views expressed in *the Spectrum* are not necessarily those of the editor, the National Autistic Society or those involved in the publication of the magazine.

Tel: **0808 800 1050** (free from most landlines) or

Tel: **020 7923 5779** (geographical charges apply)

The Spectrum is available in **large print** on A3 sheets (double the size of this page). If you need large print, please let us know using the email address or postal address above.

Contributions for the next issue should reach *the Spectrum* by **16 August 2021**

Welcome to the July edition of *the Spectrum*.

Although experts such as Prof. John Ashton are saying the pandemic has a long time to run yet before we can get back to “normal”, I judge from your comments that we should move away, for a while, from the subject of covid. So I’m asking for contributions about your hobbies and anything else you do to fill your time. That includes work, volunteering, and pets — indeed, anything you want to write about, it’s good to hear about everything that occupies you.

As I write this, we’ve just had our second warm night of the year and the garden is beginning to grow like it knows it has a lot of time to make up, due to the exceptionally cold and snowy spring. I hope to be spending more of my time “pottering in the garden” than I have for many years, as well as enjoying the flavours of home-grown vegetables, but the storms have set things back so far that that might have to wait for next year.

Maybe I can manage a few experimental crops, but I doubt it will be many.

Another return is in the form of a comic strip — I ran a comic strip for a year about fifteen years ago, and it was popular, but nobody else wanted to draw one, so no more happened until this year. On page 6 is the second *Aspie cat* strip, which I hope you enjoy. Please let me know what you think, as that will determine whether it keeps running.

As I used to mention often, if you feel there’s something missing from the magazine, then the best way to change that is to write (or draw) that thing and send it in, as this magazine is created entirely by its readers — it is all your own hard work that we enjoy here, and the standard of contributions always amazes me.

Yours,

the Editor

the unlocking edition — suggestion for next issue on page 10

Contents

Photograph by Stuart	cover	<i>Split in two</i>	11
<i>Autism, lockdown and me</i>	4-5	poem by David	
feature by Katie		<i>Comforted by a collie puppy during covid</i>	12-13
<i>Aspie cat</i> – comic strip by Grace	6	article by Roz	
Pen pals	7-8	<i>Little Miss Molly</i> , part two of two	14-15
<i>Communication breakdown</i>	9	story by Wesley	
poem by Dave		<i>Why did it take 37 years for anyone to notice?</i>	16-18
Letters to the Editor	10	article by Chelsea	
one about lockdown from Michael, and		The rules of <i>the Spectrum</i>	19
one in response to Michael, James and		<i>The difficulty in sorting out friendships</i> . . . back cover	
Paul from Tony		article by Gordon	

Autism, lockdown and me

by Katie

The past year has taken a toll on my mental health, leaving me unsettled, overwhelmed, paranoid, and anxious. I have been on and off medication, and in and out of therapy for my generalised anxiety, panic disorder, OCD and depression.

I am heavily reliant on routine and find it very difficult to adapt to change, so you can imagine just how well I coped with the ever changing rules, tiers, and lockdowns! — would lockdown knock back my growing confidence? Besides, my usual coping strategies such as going to the gym, a coffee shop or the cinema were suddenly out of bounds, and I was anxious about how I would cope. I mean, how was I going to watch all the new Disney (my big obsession) cinema releases?!

During lockdown, technology became my lifeline. I thought I would explain how:

1. Social media and games

Facebook, WhatsApp and Zoom allowed me to keep in touch with friends and family, as well as continue developing my social skills and confidence. Being able to observe body language during the video calls was extremely helpful as I often rely on it to help me understand semantics.

Using Pinterest for inspiration has helped me stay motivated and hopeful, which I believe is key in the present climate.

However, I do limit my time on social media. Although there is a lot of inspiring and pleasant content out there, it can also be very unhelpful and negative. Limiting my exposure and not using it before bedtime helps me avoid triggering my anxiety, which helps me sleep better.

Admittedly, I have now become addicted to playing Sudoku and various word games on my phone. They require a lot of concentration so are excellent at distracting me from any negative feelings. I also get a massive confidence boost when I complete “expert level” or complete a round I have spent days trying to pass!

2. BBC apps and websites

I have never used BBC iPlayer so much. Very often, all I want to do is escape to somewhere that is free from the everyday stresses, somewhere happy and covid-free. With TV programmes, I can totally immerse myself in their worlds, leaving reality far behind and feeling so much better for it. I have laughed until my stomach hurt at *The Fresh Prince*

of *Bel-Air* and *The vicar of Dibley* and re-watched with so much nostalgia my old favourites like *The musketeers* and *Merlin* (nothing to do with men in armour . . . I promise . . . okay, well, maybe a little . . .).

After much encouragement from my mum, I downloaded BBC Sounds to listen to Radio 4’s brilliant comedy series, *Clare in the community*, which I am currently listening to for the third time . . . or is it the fourth? My interest in history has been reignited with the highly informative and entertaining *You’re dead to me* podcast, and I have been left drooling over recipes and cooking tips from *The kitchen cabinet!* Like iPlayer, it has provided me with a much needed distraction, helping to really lift my spirits.

Although I love baking, I have always struggled with cooking. Whilst I love to eat and try new things, my phobia of being physically sick has resulted in avoiding handling raw meat for fear of food poisoning. However, I found myself moving forward, having recently felt able to face my fears. The BBC Good Food app is full of delicious and easy meals, and I was able to find recipes which did not require too much meat-handling, such as fish pie mac’n’cheese (sounds

weird but is utterly delicious) and sausage pasta. I guess you could say it helped me to step up to the plate (sorry!).

3. ASMR and ambient soundscapes

I am incredibly sensitive to noise with certain sounds resulting in a meltdown, and others really relaxing me.

I discovered the wonderful (although sometimes bizarre) worlds of ASMR and ambient soundscapes. These have been helping me sleep and relax as my brain focuses on the sounds and sensations I am feeling, rather than whatever it is going on in my head that is making me feel anxious. (ASMR is pleasurable internal sensations caused by watching or listening to repetitive things.)

I love listening to sounds that evoke a cosy atmosphere or happy memories, like a crackling fire with the sound of rain hitting a window. I have downloaded the Sleep Sounds app and use YouTube for ambient soundscapes (with some amazing and intricately detailed animations). My favourite channel is *Ambient worlds* where each animated video features a location in a fictional world (for example, a Hogwarts' common room or Bilbo Baggins' cottage) with film soundtracks and sounds you would expect to hear there played softly in the background. I really love the *Chronicles of Narnia* video, set in a winter forest with the Disney

film's soundtrack quietly playing, accompanied by the sound of snow falling, birds singing and leaves rustling. I feel as though I am there . . . I wish I was there . . . maybe I should start investigating my wardrobes again?

4. Amazon

Sometimes I need a little retail therapy to help me feel better! I bought gym equipment to make up for not being able to go to the gym and because exercise is a great stress-buster. I have also bought a lot of books because sometimes, all I need to feel happy and relaxed is a cosy night in, cuddled up to my dog with a nice, big cup of hot chocolate (with extra marshmallows of course!) and a lovely, romantic book!

I have also been having a lot of fun asking Amazon's Alexa to play Disney songs so that I can have a good dance and sing-along (albeit very badly) to shake off all the tension and stress. I have also found myself having the odd conversation with Alexa: I feel it is only polite to ask her how she is every morning and to show gratitude whenever she patiently responds to my wacky requests and intense interrogations. After all I am not a monster! Although you are a monster if your heart does not melt when you ask her to make a porcupine noise!). Sometimes, just being silly and embracing my inner goofball can make me forget everything and have fun.

5. Qualifications

I need purpose in order to keep my mental health on track. By having something positive or constructive to focus on and to motivate me throughout the day, it becomes harder for unhelpful thoughts and emotions to creep in.

I thought the effects of lockdown would make it very hard to find purpose, but it provided the perfect opportunity to achieve something I had wanted for a long time — a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) qualification. It was challenging but it meant I had no time to dwell on negative thoughts. I found myself motivated by the much brighter future that the qualification could open up for me. I felt like I was moving on with my life and that I was no longer trapped by lockdown, the “unbeneficial” characteristics of my autism, or my mental health. Now, as a qualified TEFL teacher, I am about to start a new job. I am hoping to meet interesting people from many different places. I am so excited!

Technology has helped me massively in managing my mental health. Furthermore, as a Platform Housing Group Digital Champion volunteer (helping people develop IT skills), it has made me appreciate how important it is for everyone to have Internet access. For me it has definitely been my lifeline!

a comic strip



by Grace

Pen pals

Pen pal number 336

Hi my name is Joy. I am 38 years old looking for some pen pals. Due to being on lockdown because of the virus it would be nice to be able to write or email and make new friends. I enjoy doing art and craft, card-making, cooking, painting, colouring, puzzles. I also enjoy listening to music, chart music, country and western. I have been to see Boyzone with my personal assistant. Would love to hear from people who have similar interests to me. I am from Warwickshire.

Joy x

Pen pal number 337

Hi, my name is Karl, I am 27 years old this year. I was diagnosed with atypical autism in 1997. All through my school years I was bullied. My mum arranged for me to go to a special needs school most of the time. I enjoyed it but, believe it or not, even there some people bullied me. I also have chronic kidney disease which on top of my autism makes things hard for me to make friends. I go to dialysis three times a week. I do find it hard to socialise. People don't seem to understand me sometimes as it takes me some time to understand things that they are saying as they put them into too-long sentences. My mum has to put it into a context which I understand. I also stammer quite a lot when I get anxious. I'm looking to talk to other people who share the same problems as I do. I would like to make some good friends who would understand me, and me them. If interested please don't hesitate to contact me. Many thanks, **Karl.**

How to place a pen-pal advert

- All you need to do is send your advert along with your name and address (and email address if you want) to this magazine. You can use the Royal Mail or email. The next pen-pal number will be given to your advert when it arrives.
- Please note that this magazine does not print dating adverts, as it is unable to provide suitable support.
- Those under the age of sixteen must have parental permission before placing a pen-pal advertisement in this magazine.
- If you get no replies, please don't take this personally.

How to reply to pen pals

- Please remember to let us know the name and number of the person whom your letter is for. (All pen pals are numbered by the editor, not the person who sends in the advert.)
- Please remember to put your address on your letter.
- To contact a pen pal, please send your letter to the Goth, c/o The National Autistic Society, 393 City Road, London, EC1V 1NG, or email **the.Spectrum@nas.org.uk**
- We will pass your letter on to the person you wish to contact. However, we cannot guarantee the person will reply as that is entirely their decision.
- Please note that all pen-pal letters sent via this magazine are opened before being passed on.

****Important notice — please read****

This magazine is happy to publish pen-pal advertisements but we must stress that we are not a pen-pal or introduction organisation. We do not match people up and we cannot monitor letters (other than the first letter, that is sent via us) so please be cautious when releasing personal details in your letters. The National Autistic Society / *the Spectrum* cannot intervene or be held responsible for any ensuing correspondence between letter-writers.

more pen-pal adverts

Thirty-seven pen-pal adverts have been held over for publication in the next six issues, Editor.

Pen pal number 338

Hi, I'm Lauren, 24 years old, from the North-West of England and I'm looking for someone who can relate to me.

I'm quite an outgoing person, have a huge love for health and fitness, I enjoy watching game shows and playing video games.

I have a very supportive partner, friends and family but they don't understand me and I don't understand them. It's very difficult to communicate my feelings because even I don't get it sometimes. I'd just like to speak to someone who understands.

Pen pal number 339

57-year-old man. Just diagnosed last year. Coming to terms with life and opportunities I have missed. But looking forward too.

I'd like to chat with anyone. But would especially like to hear from people of a similar age or who are recently diagnosed.

I enjoy nature, wildlife, walking, music, art, reading, tv, cinema, and collecting. Enjoy chatting about politics too.

I live on my own.

Jim

Pen pal number 340

Hi, my name is Paul. I live in Southport, England. I have suspected for quite a few years that I may be autistic. I am awaiting a diagnosis. Unfortunately, there is a five-year waiting period before I even see anyone. I am looking for someone to talk to who is autistic themselves. I am discovering a new identity, which can be a little scary at times.

Pen pal number 341

Hi, I'm Lizzie. I'm 17. I was diagnosed about two years ago with autism. I want to talk to others about it and see how they cope with it and help each other.

I like sport and music. I find it really hard to make friends and I find it difficult in social situations. I'm happy talking to people through this hard time as I need someone to talk to as I feel lonely and I get very bad anxiety.

Hope to hear from you soon!

Pen pal number 342

Hello,

my name is Spencer. I am from St Louis, Missouri. I am currently 18 and a senior in high school. I was diagnosed with autism when I was three years old. I will be graduating from high school next year and would really like to make some friends. My favorite things are drawing, playing *Animal crossing*, and watching videos. I hope to go to college to study animation. I hope that someone would like to become my pen pal.

Thank you.

Pen pal number 343

Hi, I am Sonakshi from India and I work as a scientific officer in a genetics testing lab. I am here to make friends from across the world. I like writing poetries.

Communication breakdown

(an Aspie's tale)

I have five accents available:

First, my monotone for the mundane.

Applied for responding to inane queries of my innocuous actions to pedantic managers who think they need to keep abreast of my calendar.

Second, is inoffensive Brummie. I may apply to buying petrol; or lottery tickets; or perhaps giving directions to men in Adidas track suits needing to get to Wetherspoons. I will say "mate" and "cheers"; have a few beers whilst watching a silent live tele with erroneous subtitles – hilariously

Next, my menacing shell: trouble(d) geezer straight from Hell.

Back off; don't harm me and won't have to harm you. May have done bird; may have points on my licence; hate students and authority. Drop that 'g' and 'h' and talk a little louder/deeply.

Fourth is my stuttering doggerel; used when I'm at ease with you.

Motor slower than mind which whirls; I slur
and gabble and stop when I
shouldn't. And start when I shouldn't.

With these

I will go over tomorrow's conversation and facial expressions and appropriate pause for thought, with ease

limiting your input as spontaneity rehearsal needs.

Yes, my syntax is designed for internal rhyme

And word rhythm

For prose well written.

Body language is foreign,

Don't even know my natural gait

I have no nature to fake

If I'm eloquent and verbose or loquacious or articulate with my vocabulary choices; you need to do your research, dumbing down isn't me, shame on you not shame on me.

My handwriting is a scrawl because my mind is faster than my fingers

Frustrating for me, as it belies my belief of my misunderstood genius.

So, this is my communication breakdown

It's how I can interact;

My flow chart for

Integration

Amongst you.

by **Dave**

letters to the Editor

Hello,

I think that a lot of people will feel the same way I do, but don't want to say it out loud.

While the pandemic has of course been awful, and I would never want to diminish the suffering some people have experienced, I have to say that lockdown has been so beneficial to my mental health.

I have been lucky, I am able to work from home, so did not have that stress, but add to that the lack of forced social contact with acquaintances and strangers, having clear rules about what we can and cannot do, not having to avoid social plans without making up excuses . . . it has been such a relief.

Of course, the world has to go back to "normal" at some point, but I am more anxious about that happening than I ever was about catching covid.

Thanks

Michael

Dear Editor,

expediency? Tell me about it. My wife tosses things down without a second thought, then complains she can't find them again. Everything in its right place and orderly would solve this. She says I have a brilliant memory — no, I put things in places where I know I will find them again and arranged by related categories. This includes books by theme (cookbooks, yoga and New Age, self-help, fiction, and so on) and objects by usage (glasses and writing materials in drawers and so on).

Shortsighted thinking? Shallow waters don't run deep — rushing around like a chicken without a head, blind to reality — how can you see the truth? Fools rush in where the autistic have more sense than to tread. Lacking introspection? How can you think, if you don't slow down and listen to your own thoughts? It is all interlinked.

Michael [from edition 106, not Michael on this page], enlightened people look but don't speak — fools speak but don't look. Wisdom is still and silent, so it can hear and see. Would you rather open your mouth and prove you were a fool, like the man at your church or keep your

mouth shut and learn about life as you have?

James, we have no sexual identity as spirits. Like Paul said, we must remember that we are aliens here — strangers in a strange land.

Reading Paul's piece about social gaffes and fear of accidentally treading on people's toes, I have to admit that I am the Duke of Edinburgh of the autistic world.

I remember eating a hamburger at a barn dance in my youth and spilling fried onions on a French girl and if that wasn't bad enough, I did it twice in a row. The amount of times I have opened my mouth on social media and had somebody jump down my throat, for what I thought was an innocent remark is nobody's business. In fact I have just left Facebook because of it (two warnings in a fortnight and a twenty-four-hour ban, led me to think that I would be better off jumping before I got pushed).

What is the correct thing to do or say? I am seventy and still don't know.

Loved Janine's and James's poems by the way.

Tony

If sufficient material is sent in, the theme for October will be **hobbies and other things that fill your free time**. Vote with your contributions: the more submissions on a subject sent in (from different people) the more likely

that that subject will be the theme. Writing on any subject is still welcome as are ideas for new themes, and artwork. Remember, if you want to see different content in *the Spectrum*, the best way to change it is to send something in!

a poem with an accompanying letter

Dear Goth,

firstly, congrats on your marriage! It's something I never managed, for various reasons, mainly to do with my condition, but that's life . . .

I'm sending a poem over that you might like to consider for the next edition. I had a heart attack fourteen years ago, and it is about that.

Yours sincerely,

David

Split in two

The great gash, vein harvesting,
Perfusionist, CABG
Circulation system
Releases a variety
Bits of blood cells
Scalpel slicing through
Over the breastbone,
A blast of burning
And the saw breaking
Oozes marrow mid
I was under the knife.
How to stitch the sutures,
Coronary care,
In situ
The heart attacked
Only the surgeon's skill
Metal midwife
The blood
The triple threat
The body's prow unmanned
The drugs wore down
Rhythm
Round-the-clock
Aided and abetted by
Nursed needfully,
For half of the heaving
I was borne away
Monitored and mentored
I was much the same

heart-lung machine,
"off-pump" surgery,
and the surgery
of debris including
tubing and plagues.
the skin,
electro-cautery buzzing,
as the current cauterised
through the sternum
the centre of chest.
The hand knew how to knit,
the sinews.
the unit unlocked.
the leaking vessel.
heaven no help
could save.
cradling caul.
re-routed.
by-passed.
bowed before
my defences.
re-established
recovery
asomnolent staff,
doctors delivered.
diurnal day.
before coming back.
by disabling darkness.
but markedly different.



Comforted by a collie puppy during covid

by Roz

One rainy dark evening a farmer's son passed a Welsh border collie puppy into my arms. In the car he started to tremble, and as my partner and I joined the traffic the puppy was sick for the first time.

"A dog is not just for Christmas" my partner said. "It's a big commitment to think that we have him for the next fifteen years." My partner already had an 8-year-old Labradoodle that he was very attached to. I had lived with my grandparents as a child, and they had owned a collie that looked like Lassie from the film, so I had fond memories of going for walks round the golf course with my grandpa and our collie Misty.

At home we decided to call the puppy Misty as well, partly because we lived in Yorkshire, and enjoyed going for drives across moors, even when it was misty. We watched Misty take a tentative walk round the room, sniffing at a bag of dog biscuits. Over the next few weeks my partner and I enjoyed taking Misty for short walks, and to the local pub where he was fascinated by people playing darts. Little did I know at this point that within months covid would start, and that I would break my ankle in three places when I slipped on a muddy path.

Like many people, I felt very frustrated when the covid lockdowns began. Prior to this, I had enjoyed meeting friends for coffees, and going to

the cinema to watch films. Suddenly my partner, Misty and I faced weeks of being confined to the village where we lived. My partner had previously had cancer, so we had to socially distance from other people. A highlight of the day was taking Misty to my partner's field, and digging trenches to plant potatoes, coriander and other vegetables. Right from the start Misty had been an obsessional puppy. Misty's favourite activity was digging holes in the field, and I would encourage this by shouting "dig, dig".

When I broke my ankle, and faced gruelling weeks of surgery, bed-rest, and morphine, a highlight of the day was throwing paper aeroplanes for Misty. The planes would sail round the room, and Misty would rush after them, catching them in his mouth. The planes were then torn into tiny pieces by Misty, and my partner was kind enough to Hoover them up.

Collies are inquisitive, inventive, and like to be given plenty to do! Fortunately for Misty he has been my partner's Labradoodle's puppy from when we collected him. Rupert enjoys playing chase with Misty, and together they rush after balls and frisbees. They slept curled up next to each other on their dog-bed. Rupert has never had a puppy before, so helping to raise Misty has given him a fresh challenge. This friendship between the dogs means that Misty relates well to most other dogs as well, from schnauzers to Newfoundlands.

My partner and I have greatly missed normal social contact during covid. At times, when the covid risk was very high, we were even anxious when Misty was getting close to other dogs when my partner walked him in the village. We knew that cats could spread the virus, but we weren't sure about what would happen with dogs. My partner was fortunately able to take paid work repairing lime pointing on outside walls of farms and old houses, and Misty and Rupert would entertain themselves in the car with their toys. My partner would take Misty for regular walks round the nearby field whenever he got a break. By this time I was walking with a pair of crutches, and I would build up strength by taking short walks up the farm track, next to my partner and Misty.

One highlight of lockdown was meeting my partner's friends for a glass of bubbly on a bench in the nearby stone-walled pinfold, and we watched proudly as Misty ran in circles, then stopping when asked to. Covid has meant that we have not been able to take Misty to dog-training classes as we would have liked. We have made the best of strange times to be creative in our training: first of all, we have made toys attractive — for example, when we took a bell out of a ball, and filled it with dog treats that would slip out of a narrow opening when Misty pushed the ball with his nose or his paw. Secondly, we have taken Misty and Rupert for drives across the Dales, and encouraged him to show an active interest in sheep, lambs and goats! My partner and I talked about how we hoped that Misty would become a sheepdog herding a farmer's sheep, or even runner ducks on my partner's fields. Misty has good co-ordination, and lately he has stopped barking at sheep as the car moves past them.

My broken ankle means that sadly I can't walk Misty myself, so I am no longer the ideal owner. Covid puts a significant strain on relationships, and my partner and I have broken off our engagement. That said, I am still grateful for the bond that we had with Misty during the strange times of covid, when I spent many hours sitting in a chair — often throwing balls, or rope toys for Misty. Collies crave socialization with other dogs, so during lockdown Misty was lucky to spend hours chasing Rupert, and sleeping next to him. Now the R-number is down, many people are vaccinated, and the country is starting to move again, my hope is that Misty may start to meet more people and dogs, and enjoy longer walks with able-bodied people. Networking for people to walk Misty was too tough during lockdown, as people did not want to risk mixing. Now that people are meeting for coffees in parks, Misty may run more freely than before. He may sniff new plants and branches, and chase other dogs' tails. He may meet familiar faces in the park, as other people take their dogs for regular walks. I smile at the thought that Misty will enjoy fresh new contact, as we move away from the restrictions of lockdown. I will remember with fondness how Misty lifted my spirits during lockdown when I couldn't walk.

Little Miss Molly

part two

by Wesley

“Right, yeah,” she nodded, leaning back.
“Sorry.”

“It’s fine, we want to get all your thoughts out. Why don’t we begin with the reason you were called in here? From what I know, you got into a fight with a classmate. You even injured a couple and broke someone’s arm.”

“I guess I don’t know my own strength.”

“How exactly did the whole thing happen?” he questioned.

“It . . . it all started pretty normal. I was doing this and that and . . . the day passed by. I remember a wasp got in the class. People were ducking, because they didn’t wanna be stung. One of them actually asked me to eat it.”

“Was that when you got violent?”

“No, but I didn’t want to. I felt angry.”

“So despite your appearance you don’t really eat other insects?” He took notes to what she was saying, nodding periodically but not looking up that much.

“No I-I do . . . it’s just . . .” Her tone showed hints of hesitation as she struggled to get the words out. “I didn’t like how they looked at me.”

“How they looked?”

“Yeah well . . . they were looking at me funny. Like they were expecting me to do something. It’s like, I’m not a cat that deals with mice in your house! Do it yourself! I’m not just gonna eat anything.”

“I see. How did the situation get resolved?”

“I looked down and pretended not to hear them and my teacher swatted it, but people kept looking at me like they were disappointed . . . I never said anything but wanted to be anywhere but there.”

“Why did you feel horrible? Just a moment ago, you said you were angry because of it.”

“Yeah but they kept looking at me like that. My teacher had a weird look too. I don’t know what they want me to do. All I wanted to do was run out of there . . .”

“Were there any other significant incidents during that day?” Alan asked, making some notes as he leaned back. “Did you talk to anyone else about this?”

Molly shook her head. “Don’t talk to a lot of people. Don’t have many friends and everyone’s scared of me.”

“Is this what led to the incident?”

Once more she shook her head. “That . . . it was actually happening during lunch. I was eating by myself when someone came up, they spilled . . . no, they dumped pesticide on me.” More venom went into her already scratchy voice, holding her arms close together. Alan found himself glancing to those arms once again, remembering that they were still bandaged.

“I’m sorry that happened.” Alan leaned forward, frowning, “Sometimes . . . this always happens. Kids your age sometimes don’t know the damage they can do. I guess that makes it easier for bullies . . .”

“It wasn’t just some bully,” Molly corrected, her anger rising. “It was my best friend. I got this

dropped on my arms, so I threw him into a wall.” Seeing the surprise on Alan’s face, she continued, her body tensing up as she hissed softly. “It felt like acid on me, but I was still able to fracture his ribs and arm. I can’t remember what else, but some other stuff is probably broken too.” Initially, Alan didn’t respond, leaving the girl’s words to hang in the silence. She seemed to be expecting him to say something, but the words wouldn’t come out. So instead, she decided to speak up once more.

“I’ll ask again. What do you think about me?”

Alan looked at the girl. Now that he thought about it, she was actually pretty short for her age. A tiny frame, and a thick hoodie that hid a pair of small arms, that were probably even thinner under those bandages. Even if it was to someone her own age, it was unbelievable to think that she could do that amount of damage, and she could barely even remember how much she’d actually done. Jason Mucil, the boy she’d retaliated against had several broken ribs, and both his arms were fractured with a broken shoulder. “Well . . . my opinion hasn’t changed much . . .”

“You liar!” Molly snapped, raising her voice. “I can hear the fear in your voice! My parents told you about the incident, but they didn’t say what I am. They didn’t think you’d accept if you knew what I am. Most places, I heard them talking about finding you, how most places don’t even want me on this side of the world. I see a lot of people are scared of me. Of course none will say it, but I know the look on your face well enough to tell it from a mile away.” She sighed, leaning back, “It’s the same kind I see everywhere.”

“And you thought he’d be different?” Alan piped up. He was anxious, but he still chose to speak. “Jason, I mean.” Molly nodded.

“When we first met, he went up to me and told me I looked cool.” All the sudden frustration had vanished from her voice, her tone neutral and scratchy. “Cool. It was so weird, hearing someone say that about me.” She giggled. “But now, there’s no one who thinks I’m anything. End of the day, I am a monster.”

“I disagree,” Alan replied. “There’s nothing I’ve ever seen like you, that’s true. That doesn’t mean you need to be on your own. Someone like you would go through things and experiences I can’t think of. A life like yours is going to be difficult. But . . . you shouldn’t be afraid of it. Then you’ll be exactly like everyone else who’s afraid of you. And yes, you being here makes me pretty nervous, but you’re something new. You’re a girl who was hurt, you shouldn’t be ashamed of that. You’re not some savage monster that deserves to have pesticide poured on her. I don’t believe that’s who you are. Could you become that? Maybe. It’s a lot easier for you to hurt people. But becoming a monster . . . you may not realise it, but that is something every human is capable of.”

“So . . . what am I supposed to do?” Molly asked, confused. “Just be myself?”

“Yes and no,” Alan explained. “‘Myself’ is something that’s constantly changing, every second of every day. You don’t really want to hurt anyone, but there are others who do. I think you can be the best version of yourself, and that’s what I think you should be focusing on. I think everyone else in this school should do that as well.”

Molly’s back straightened and she looked at him. Though her expression was difficult to read, he had the impression that she was contemplating what she said, her arms relaxing.

“I think we’re nearly out of time,” she said, her scratchy voice seeming a little softer now as she glanced to the clock then looked back at Alan.

“Oh, I suppose so,” he smiled, having completely forgot about that. “I hope this session was helpful.”

Molly slowly lifted herself up off the sofa, walking over to Alan and inspecting him.

“Can I . . . see you again?” she asked, to which he replied with a calm, “Of course”. Slowly, Molly turned around and walked to the door, her hands around her hood as she left, and Alan booked in a time for next week.

Why did it take 37 years for anyone to notice I was Autistic?

by Chelsea

All my life, I've felt different. Weird, bewildered, unfeminine. I've watched from the sidelines and waited to understand how to join in. I've worried and fretted over rules that other people seem to know instinctively. I've literally sweated over things that other people barely noticed.

And all my life people have insisted that there's nothing wrong with me.

You just need to try harder!

Go easy on yourself!

Try to have more confidence!

And so I struggled along. Getting bashed about every day by obstacles no one else could see and that I didn't understand. Dusting myself off and trying hard all over again the next day.

Except for when I couldn't. Because I was exhausted.

Earlier this year, I had one of these episodes of exhaustion. My anxiety got so bad that I couldn't manage all my responsibilities, and I was forced to hold my hands up and ask for help. After a lot of searching and asking and

requesting and pleading and complaining, eventually, finally, it led to my diagnosis. It turns out I am Autistic.

So what were the specific things that I struggled with, that led me here? And how do I plan to deal with them?

Social phobia

When I was a little kid, I was afraid whenever the phone rang. My stomach would churn, and I would feel physically sick.

What if it's my best friend? I thought.

"Chel, it's Lexi!" Mum would shout. And I'd slink to the phone, with a feeling in my stomach.

I was afraid because Lexi always made me call back, so my mum paid the call instead of hers. I knew this was unfair, but I didn't know how to say so. Not with Lexi telling me not to be a wimp. And so, heart racing, I would press the button and dial her number surreptitiously, praying that my mum wouldn't notice.

That's my earliest memory of social anxiety, and it only

got worse. By thirteen, I'd found alcohol to help me manage it, but I couldn't be drunk the whole time. Mostly I had to go to school sober, and that was torture.

How could anyone concentrate on learning when there were people everywhere? I strode through corridors with my shoulders back, not making eye contact. Hiding in the middle of the pretty, popular girls, I prayed nobody would talk to me.

In French, I was so afraid of being picked on in class, that I stopped attending. Mme Bird refused to recognize my lack of eye contact or the way my face turned red. She kept picking on me, as though I were as capable as anyone else. Deep down, I knew I wasn't, and it made me feel ashamed.

Eventually, I started to walk home before the lesson. The first time I realized there was nobody there to stop me, I felt such relief.

Alcohol abuse

University promised freedom, but was, in many ways, worse. Now I was surrounded by people I longed to talk to,

but I could only interact with them if I was drunk. Then I was confident and funny and irreverent. Rebellious and humorous and fun. But university took place in the day, and so I had to do it sober. Many days I missed because I was hungover. Or because I didn't have the strength to overcome my anxiety.

Around nineteen, I went to see the doctor.

"I think I have social phobia," I told him, but he didn't take me seriously.

"You just need to have more belief in yourself," he said. "Healthy, confident women like you need a little more confidence!"

He said I could try anti-depressants, but it was uncertain if they would work, and so I wasn't inspired to bother. Besides he was a doctor. Maybe I was overreacting as he thought. His pep talk gave me the self-belief I needed for about twenty minutes. Until the next time I had to be around people, to be precise. And then, yet again, I understood there was something wrong with me.

And so I continued with my avoidance strategies. I couldn't go anywhere busy or with bright lights, which meant most of the indoor, daytime world was off-limits. By graduation I had accepted the sad fact that I'd never have an

interesting job or find someone who loved me because I was some kind of alien freak. To take the edge off my failure, I drank.

Beer removed my troubles, and naturally, I worshipped it. But it only worked for so long. Then it made my problems worse. By 33, my issues had gotten so much more pronounced that I was forced to get sober. That helped a lot, and I was now at least heading in a good direction.

But still, something wasn't right. I experimented with anxiety medication and anti-depressants and beta-blockers. I meditated and repeated affirmations and visited the doctor for the umpteenth time. I googled my symptoms and filled out an ADHD assessment.

And then, finally, last month, I got an answer.

Executive functioning

Wanting to help me, a friend introduced me one of her friends: a Special Educational Needs teacher. She allowed me to send her a series of (pretty weird, on reflection) emails, explaining my specific issues.

Here they are, in case it helps:

Walking and talking with a friend, I will be too anxious to keep track of where I'm going or the appointments

I have in the afternoon. The conversation will take all of my brainpower so there's nothing left over to keep track of anything else.

I get lost every time I go somewhere new, and even sometimes in places that I've been hundreds of times. Like my home town.

I get exhausted, and it seems out of kilter with what I've done. Teaching a ninety-minute online seminar requires lying down to do nothing for twenty minutes straight after. Even with a five-minute break in the middle. I have to do this because my nervous system feels like it's going to force my head to explode like a soft egg.

I drank to "help" with this, but it made my mental health worse, and even though I'm now four years sober, life still feels unbearably overwhelming.

After reading all this, the teacher asked if I knew much about Autism.

"It presents very differently in girls and women," she explained. "And so it often goes under the radar. Females with high cognitive function become so good at masking, that their Autism can be hard to spot."

On hearing about masking, I felt a thrill of recognition. All my life, I've observed the other girls, tried to act like them, and still, generally, come up short.

an article (continued)

She continued: “But some of what you are talking about sounds like you’re having some difficulties with executive functioning. Executive function is a set of mental skills that include working memory, flexible thinking, and self-control. We use these skills every day to learn, work, and manage daily life. Trouble with executive function can make it hard to focus, follow directions, and handle emotions, among other things.”

Learning about executive functioning difficulties, I felt my internal world sigh with relief. This explained why I found so many different things so hard! My education into Autism began. Particularly Asperger’s syndrome and how it presents in women. And I related.

I related so much.

Assessment

The NHS waiting list for an Autism assessment was two years, and so I looked for an affordable private practice. My hyper-focus had kicked in, and I was obsessed. Could I really be Autistic? Was that why life had been so hard? Was I actually disabled?

I found a place that let me pay in installments, where the diagnosis would be recognized by my work and the NHS, if necessary. The fee was €850, and I agreed to pay €100 a month.

A few days later, I met a wonderful, gentle psychologist, who explained that we would have a series of conversations and see if my experiences mapped onto the Autistic Spectrum Condition profile.

Within two weeks, I had a formal diagnosis. Autistic Spectrum Disorder. “We would have been talking about Asperger’s if that terminology was still in use,” the clinical psychologist said.

Well, well, well. (I told you there was something wrong with me!)

Post-diagnosis

Now the initial exhilaration of finding an answer has shifted, I’m feeling a lot of sadness. How might I have done if I’d had more of the support I needed? How different might my experiences in relationships be?

But I feel proud of myself too. To have succeeded in the ways I have, in spite of feeling confused and overwhelmed almost constantly. I’ve felt seriously out of my depth in every period of my life, and yet somehow I’ve managed.

I feel hopeful about the future. The process of getting sober taught me that it is possible to change your life to fit you better. Quitting booze was a huge transition, and though it was hard and messy, it was worth it. I hope this

period, following diagnosis, will be similar.

As my lovely psychologist told me after my diagnosis: “It’s about feeling empowered to move forward in a positive way.” And so that’s what I intend to do.

I believe I am on my way to somewhere better. That by accepting my limitations and starting to take them more seriously, I can build a life that works to my strengths and doesn’t feel so hard all the time.

My hyperfocus chooses Autism. :))

I’m keen to connect with fellow travelers, so say hello if you relate. :)

You can connect with the Autism community on Twitter. If you have a question, use #ActuallyAutistic or #AskingAutistics (or both). You can also visit The Autism Self-Advocacy Network and the Autistic Not Weird Facebook page and website.



stuff you might like to know about *the Spectrum*

The rules of *the Spectrum*

(contact information for *the Spectrum* is on page 2 and again on page 20)

- 1) *The Spectrum* is funded by the NAS and readers' subscriptions, and is independent of the NAS. Although it was called "*Asperger United*" it aims to be for the whole of the (reading) autism spectrum. That is, the concerns and joys of any autistic subscriber can be printed, not just Asperger's.
- 2) *The Spectrum* is quarterly, published in January, April, July and October. If you do not receive a copy when you expect to, please contact the magazine.
- 3) Pieces that appear in *the Spectrum* are credited using the author's first name only, unless the author requests something different. This is done to protect your privacy.
- 4) *The Spectrum* administers the copyright of everything that appears and it does this on behalf of the authors.
- 5) The NAS plans to expand *the Spectrum*'s presence on social media, so if you don't want your contribution used in this way, please make that clear when you submit it.
- 6) The NAS would like to keep in touch with you about NAS services, support, events, campaigns and fundraising. If you want to hear from the NAS, you can opt in to this on the NAS website. The NAS will only contact you in the ways you want.
- 7) If you subscribe to the paper edition and move house, please inform *the Spectrum* and include your old address as well as your new address. Even if you've paid for the Royal Mail forwarding service (or another forwarding service), you still need to inform *the Spectrum* that you have moved address.
- 8) You do not have to be a member of the NAS to subscribe to *the Spectrum*.
- 9) If you phone and leave a message on the machine, please speak slowly and clearly and spell uncommon words, as the line isn't very clear. Please give any phone number you leave twice for the same reason. Remember to give your postal address so that we can find your record.
- 10) You can sign up for an email notifying you whenever a new edition of *the Spectrum* is posted on the NAS website. Email **the.Spectrum@nas.org.uk** asking for the notification by email and please include your full name, postcode and let us know whether you want to subscribe to the the paid paper edition too.
- 11) If you want to unsubscribe from the paper version, inform *the Spectrum* and include your postal address. Or to unsubscribe from the email notification, include your email address.
- 12) If you want to resubscribe (or subscribe for the first time) inform *the Spectrum* and include your postal address and fee (for the paper version) or email address (for the email notification).
- 13) Book reviews are the most popular thing with readers of *the Spectrum*, so please consider submitting one. They can be about any book, not just books about autism. Also, they do not have to be short (the Goth keeps most of his reviews short to leave more space for other writers). If you do not want your review to appear in other NAS publicity about that book, please make this clear.
- 14) Although each issue is themed, submissions on any subject are welcome. Only some of the letters and articles will follow the theme. All submissions may be edited, especially for privacy, libel, and for fitting the space available.

The difficulty in sorting the good from the bad in friendships

The unknown and unimaginable dangers in the teenage social scene

by **Gordon**

The whole arena of friendships can be a tricky trodden path. The many pitfalls and potential pluses and minuses can be abstract. Intangible. And mind bogglingly elusive. That concrete world of early years replaced by a social world full of subtext and subtlety. Ambiguity and complexity. Doublespeak and hidden meaning. Concrete, literal, childish whispered words replaced by the subtler, sly snigger, smirk and adult eye-roll. Straight-out, clear-cut rejection replaced by the pretence of friendship with the presence of agenda. Shifting body language and changing voice tone — together — convey a meaning and an intention that neither alone ever really could, transcending the literal obviousness of words. A sudden change in conversational topic indicating an uncomfortableness that surrounds it. All mark the transition from a less concrete to a more abstract, complicated social

playing field where shared understanding of social convention rules.

Transitioning to this more complex social playing field can be an especially challenging journey when you have Asperger's or autism. Common social convention can be double Dutch. There can be social blind spots. People say one thing while meaning another. People can be put up to engage in risky behaviour where others would run the other way. Sidestepping this social trapdoor is vital. The key to this is to sort the good from the bad characters. People behave in roundabout ways. True intentions can be masked by seemingly civil surface behaviour. That seemingly outwardly friendly demeanour can be contradicted by conflicting inner attitudes and thoughts that are less concerned with your welfare. The trick is perhaps to scratch beneath the surface . . .

The Spectrum, c/o NAS, 393 City Road, London EC1V 1NG
Telephone: **0808 800 1050** (free from most landlines) or
Telephone: **020 7923 5779** (geographical charges apply)
Email: the.spectrum@nas.org.uk
Website: www.autism.org.uk/thespectrum



Except where stated, all material © National Autistic Society 2021