

Produced by and for Autistic people

The Spectrum

Edition **111** July 2022



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National
Autistic
Society

The Spectrum

The Spectrum is run by and for autistic adults (although some parents subscribe on behalf of their under-sixteens). The magazine is owned and run by the National Autistic Society, and 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.

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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.

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:

Web: www.autism.org.uk/theSpectrum

and follow the link to the submissions form.

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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.

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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 **15 August 2022**

Welcome to the July edition of *the Spectrum*.

A fantastic response to the “next issue” suggestion of being yourself or fitting in — there’s never been such a large number of replies to a suggestion before, so it feels like I really touched on something.

The idea seemed to follow on from the response to the previous edition, which was the sensory edition, so I’m trying to follow on again with the freedom suggestion on page 10. However, if your mind takes you in a different direction, then please write about that — the suggestion is only a suggestion, after all.

Wherever this issue takes you, I hope it inspires you to “write” in (it’s mostly by e-mail and the website these days). The more people who write in, the less I will rely on the very numerous contributions of Kayleigh, Paigetheoracle and S Bee — I am not showing favouritism, they just send in many, many more pieces than I will ever be able to print, so I’m actually under-representing their contributions.

I shall look forward to the postbag.

Yours,

the Editor

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Reflections on sensory differences and their impact

by **Naomi**, part of **Autistic Selves**

© Naomi, part of Autistic Selves 2022

I am autistic, diagnosed aged 42 which is clearly a very late diagnosis. As is very common, my realisation that I was autistic followed the diagnoses of my children. I am now 46. Finally, my life is starting to make sense, particularly in terms of why my sensory differences have resulted in so much misunderstanding over the years.

I have only recently realised that when I process the world around me, I do it differently. I will hear sounds others are not aware of and similarly, will not notice something that is obvious to others. For example, I can hear the sound of electricity and the constant buzzing distresses me. My brain has not evolved to tune out repetitive sounds — I will continue to hear them and the noise will become overwhelming, preventing me from functioning.

My way of experiencing the world is so unique to me that most people do not expect me to be experiencing it in the way that I do. As a child, my distress was dismissed and trivialised. I was forced, or forced myself, to remain in situations that were so distressing I would term them as traumatic. My nervous system would be overflowing with information and I would be so overwhelmed I would be screaming inside, and still, I would remain. My desire to appear normal overrode the messages my body was giving me — it pleased others when I sat quietly and appeared attentive. It did not, however, please me.

More and more, I see people discussing the concept of “autistic trauma”. I feel that growing up undiagnosed autistic and without the self-awareness of my sensory differences and their impact, caused me such autistic trauma that I developed other personas to deal with the unbearable situation that I could not cope with and yet could not physically leave. I created an

escape route in my mind. I became able to leave a situation mentally, without even having the awareness that I was doing so.

I retain the ability to psychologically leave my body when I cannot tolerate the sensory input around me. I will find myself feeling as if I am floating on the ceiling, looking down on my body, no longer processing and suffering the cacophony of sounds, sights and smells that are, literally, too much for me to be around. Now that I am an adult, I can mostly control the situations I find myself in and so avoid these out-of-body experiences. Leaving my body is not a pleasant experience, it takes days to fully recover and is confusing and exhausting.

Due to the trauma of growing up autistic, I developed (without awareness) an entire system of personas, or alters, that are part of my body but separate to me. Each alter has their own name, age and unique history. Developing alters was a coping mechanism to enable me to survive in a world that didn't understand me and which denied my sensory experiences had any reality or truth to them.

I process the world differently and it is hard for others and, even myself, to understand. Even now, at 46 years of age, I am still learning about my sensory responses to stimuli that others don't even notice yet to me cause immense pain and distress. Some of my alters can tolerate sensations that I cannot. I am grateful to my alters for enabling me to survive in a world that is, quite literally, too much for me.

I have started a YouTube channel called Autistic Selves, where I post videos about what life is like as an autistic person who also has alters. My videos help me to understand myself

feature (continued) and a second feature

and it gives me great pleasure and validation when others contact me to say that they have been helped by the films I have made.

Autistic Selves on YouTube can be found at [youtube.com/c/AutisticSelves](https://www.youtube.com/c/AutisticSelves)

Understanding the sensory experiences of autistic people of all ages is key to supporting

them and keeping them regulated and feeling okay. Once I started understanding my own children's sensory needs and providing them with the sensory input their bodies required, I found family life became much calmer and enjoyable. For an autistic person, understanding our sensory experiences is as important as eating healthily and taking enough exercise — our sensory needs are a basic human need that must be met in order for us to grow and become the best we can be.

Being yourself or fitting in

by **Phillip B**

My employer has clear values publicly stated and on a big poster in the staff area.

I particularly reference: “BE YOURSELF. ALWAYS: We’re quirky, proud and at our best when we are free to be ourselves” and “WE NOT ME: When we work together anything is possible.”

So, as in most things, the answer to being oneself or fitting in is not binary.

Being myself:

When a customer is disappointed that we’re out of stock and names one of our competitors, I’ve been known to say, “Never heard of them!” with a smile in my voice and on my face (as best one can with a mask on).

When a manager asks if all the horticulture stock has been brought in before we close, I cheekily say that I’ve left some for them.

Fitting in:

I work a section with one or two colleagues. We have to collaborate on what we do. And we share warehouse space with the whole team, so need to keep walkways clear, stock chillers tidy, lifts available, and so on.

In the break room, we mostly sit quietly, eating and drinking, with just the occasional bit of banter. When what I’d like to do is have a chit-chat with someone.

Openness matters:

I was able to clearly declare my autism during the application process, stating that for me the interviewer being aware is usually sufficient. And so far I’ve not needed any Reasonable Adjustments, but I know that they will be freely given should they be.

I am myself, but not to the exclusion of all else. I have a notebook in which I copy things that I find meaningful, which includes:

“Individuals aren’t naturally paid-up members of the human race, except biologically. They need to be bounced around by the Brownian motion of society, which is a mechanism by which human beings constantly remind one another that they are, well, human beings.”

– Terry Pratchett, *Men at arms*.

A bit of bumping is necessary in life; the art is in achieving the balance between absolute-zero and meltdown.

an open letter and an article

Dear Society,

there's still a lot you need to learn about Autism. You're better than you used to be, but you have a tumultuous journey ahead of you. Your perceptions need to grasp the whole picture, not just grabbing a small handful of sand and walking away as if we're not visible to you. We aren't invisible. We're human beings, with hearts, souls, likes, dislikes, fears, aspirations for the future.

This world can sometimes be trepidatious and like we're walking on eggshells, being meticulous not to bring attention to the plight we face daily. The little things you take for granted — like going shopping or to school — you may not see any miscalculation, but for individuals like us, our senses are tangled together like wires and it glitches, leaving us to shatter as though we are fragile shards of glass.

All these senses accumulate inside our brain, our sight, the textures of certain food, the pungent smells and the cacophony of noises can make us feel like we're in deep water, in contention of the blistering waves trying to engulf us as a whole and leave us drowning above a surface that doesn't understand difference or the people within its roots. Don't surmise that we are all the same in this walk of life.

Every individual on the spectrum is varied, we're all affected in different ways. Some can verbalise, are bright, yet find social situations a minefield. Others may need more guidance to live their lives the way they want to.

I am a person who is articulate, quiet, polite, creative, an intellectual at heart, resilient, brave and someone's daughter, niece, grandchild and friend. I don't want to be defined by my Autism, I'd like to be seen for who I really am, a person. I may be a little quirky — you can call me eccentric — but all I wish for is to never change for anyone, to be treated like everybody else and to help others. That's all.

Yours,

Olivia

Being yourself or fitting in

by **Lavender Girl**

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I have spent a lifetime trying to fit in. From early days at school trying to join in with the playground games — I was a child of the 1970s — the games were noisy and boisterous — British bulldog, tag, and kiss catch. Torture for a girl like me and far too noisy. All I wanted to do was read or draw. I often went off on my own with my ball or got on my bike and felt the wind in my hair, freedom.

I tried so hard to fit in but I was going against the grain. Not for me any clubs or team sports, I was happiest on my own or with just one friend. High school was exactly the same, a difficult time full of anxiety. I got by and covered everything up as best I could — if I was ever my real self it caused me lots of problems.

Marriage and children followed — I never fitted in with the other mums either, I always felt better with the other kids! I did okay and raised two beautiful and confident children, now adults.

I've now got grandchildren and with them I can be myself — I can act silly and they don't judge. We spend lots of time laughing and playing and spending time in nature. I have a lovely partner and a part-time job in a library, where I've worked for twenty years.

I've spent a lifetime trying to fit in but finally at the age of 55 I've recently had a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Condition. What a revelation and a blessed relief. Now at last I can really start to be myself!

Do you have anything to report?

by **David Cohen**

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“Better get a call in to Emma, so we can take a lunch break without being interrupted, Jim.”

“Yes, I guess so, Jane; I’m sure it’ll just be the usual stuff.”

“This is Alpha Xenon 3 Galactic Central Energy Control calling Space Solar 5 . . . this is Alpha Xenon 3 Galactic Central Energy Control calling Space Solar 5 . . . come in Space Solar 5”

A short pause, some white noise, a bit of crackle.

“This is Space Solar 5 reading you loud and clear, Officer Emma Doon reporting.”

“Hello Emma. Commander Jim Cloud here, alongside Colonel Jane Blond at Galactic Central Energy Control. Please report your status, as per usual.”

“Status report for 4 June 2203 — all space mirrors aligned, sunlight collector levels normal, onward energy transmission to Alpha Xenon 3 surface holding.”

“Thank you, Emma. Do you have anything additional to report?” A longer pause than usual, some white noise, a bit of crackle. “Yes, Commander, I do have an additional report.”

“Please repeat your response, Officer Doon. Say again.”

“To repeat, I do have an additional report.”

“That’s very odd, Jane, as in the five years that Doon has been reporting — and she’s been up there since the launch of this world saving technology — there’s never been an additional report — ever!”

“Better find out what’s going on, Jim.”

“Commander Doon, please file your additional report.”

“Sir, I didn’t want to bring this to your attention, but something strange is happening up here. I was conducting my normal rounds when I came across an unusual message on one of the sunlight collectors.”

“Which collector was this?”

“It was Platform 12, Level 3, Section 5, Sub 3, Corridor 7A, Collector 103, Reader 6.”

Jim and Jane give each other a very quizzical look. “What did it say, Emma?”

Another silence, a pause, crackle, waiting. Jim and Jane stare at each other, waiting for something big to happen.

“Sir, the message read as follows: ‘Space mirror energy collector levels will need increasing due to increase in energy usage on Alpha Xenon 3, source unknown’. Ends.”

“Are you sure, Doon, are you absolutely sure?” “Yes sir, one hundred percent.”

“Jane, do you realise what this means? Someone, or something is using more power on the planet than they should be, and that goes against the galactic climate personnel energy usage rules, and everything humanity has worked for, and if someone doesn’t find out quickly what’s going on, it could be the end of us.”

Next day. Jim and Jane see the front-page headline in the on-line newspaper, *The Alpha Xenon Bugle*:

“Hermit living in backwoods of Eurasia discovered to be making something called ‘toast’ with new-fangled contraption they called a ‘toaster’, causing critical drop in world energy availability levels.”

“What the hell is toast, Jim?”

“I’ve no idea, Jane, but we’ll soon find out . . .”

Fitting the mask

by **Kayleigh Butler**

© Kayleigh Butler 2022

Fitting in is a challenging thing to learn and can feel necessary to survive. I think it is a widely spread Autistic experience that we don't feel as though we "fit in" especially in school settings, we can feel alienated and like outsiders most of the time. Until we realise our Autism, it can seem impossible to place the reasons for any of this. There is always this overwhelming sense of a rulebook that our peers seem to have been given at birth and we did not. No one would share their social etiquette secrets with us which leaves us to fill in the gaps and hope we can fake it till we make it.

By watching those around us and every interaction that leaves us in trouble for something we do not understand, we begin to mould our mask. Masking is a common Autistic trait where we mimic other people's mannerisms and try to present in a similar way to our neurotypical peers. By masking our Autism, the aim is to "fit in" better and protect ourselves from harm related to being identified as "other" or "different".

It is a most common practice for Autistic girls to pretend to enjoy the same things as their peers and not know why they don't actually feel they belong there. It is part of the reason why young girls have the possibility of Autism being overlooked far more regularly than young boys. As a woman I had this experience in my younger years, I felt lonely and worked so hard to be like the other girls but never felt like any of them were my real friends. I felt disconnected and was often bullied for being different. I became very good at mimicking other people's voices and mannerisms.

This followed me into customer service. I had my scripts and would always say them in exactly

the same way as I first heard them, and people perceived me as good at my job and efficient in communicating. To me it felt like I had a completely different persona at work than I did at home. On the occasion I slipped up I would receive strange looks and confused customers that appeared to suddenly no longer understand me or that I had somehow become a different person before their eyes. Every day I went home exhausted, irritable, and miserable.

My colleagues were always surprised when I needed time off as I presented so well during the days I was there. They never saw the burnout from carrying the weight of this mask all day everyday because my true Autistic self was not equipped to work such in a highly demanding job as being in front of customers without a moment to breathe five days every week.

The worst part is I had perfected this mask and I did seem like I fitted in to everyone else, internally however I never felt more alone. Anything that wasn't masking was considered inappropriate or unprofessional. It is safe to say after my diagnosis I learned why I felt the way I did as well as taking time off over lockdowns realising that I was unhappy masking and if the way I was without it wasn't going to be accepted then I did not want to work there anymore.

I found I was hiding stims, changing my voice, the way I looked and just about everything else about me to appease those around me and I am sure after so many years of building my mask up it will take many more to break it back down. I believe there should be better education for relationships of all kinds so that cliques and isolating groups become less common, and kids can be free with their self-expression. Most things that happen to us as children end

an article (continued) and another article

up affecting adulthood and how we relate to the world. The early developmental stages that Autistic people often have delays and difficulty with are overlooked when we are able to present like the other children, leaving us to feel lost amongst our peers.

For us fitting in can truly be the loneliest thing we can do. Which makes little sense to neurotypicals and quite frankly I still don't know how they maintain their friendships with others. Finding happiness alone can be beneficial to creating lasting relationships

with others later on. It doesn't mean it isn't hard sometimes, but it can be more fulfilling than pretending to be something we are not. Dropping the mask can reveal who our true friends are and those who just want to surround themselves with people just like them. Doesn't that sound boring? Who wouldn't want to be surrounded by all sorts of people with so many special interests you can share together? I know what I would prefer! To find more articles like this you can find me at

kayleighcreativeworld.wordpress.com

Being yourself

by Nick

Being yourself seems such a simple concept and yet one I find so hard to achieve. Like so many on the spectrum, I have masked to fit in but this is not a solution and only serves to make life even more difficult. Being brutally honest with yourself and setting out how you wish to live your life is a starting point. I am undergoing this process now and am finding it very useful. I joined a local cycling club to go out and meet like-minded friends but this has not always worked out, due to a lack of understanding and ableism which I found upsetting. Now I am reaching the conclusion that this may not be the group I wish to be part of and find being alone refreshing and liberating. There is often a push for us Auties to join in and socialize, which is no bad thing but might not be for everyone. So please do not feel pressured into being around people. Not that I am a grumpy loner, so please feel free to say hello should you spot me on the London Underground system stroking the brickwork of a Charles-Holden-designed station. Yes, it was me and they released me after questioning!

In order to be myself, I am now setting out to be kinder to myself and not be pushed into

accepting a situation that I am unhappy with. I no longer try and do things that I find hard due to my dyspraxia and recently sent my Land Rover to a specialist for an engine re-build instead of battling to do it myself. Even though I would love to re-build the engine, I just know I would have struggled with the tricky parts and it would have been a long and painful process, so let someone else do the work. What I am doing is taking on building a model of a DC 3 aeroplane as I have a great interest and want to challenge myself that despite my difficulties, I can do something and achieve something. I go out by myself on the bike and find a good café to visit and enjoy coffee and cake while people watching and not be pressured into being something I am not. Not having the pressure of unrealistic expectations is liberating and I love it. Let's face it, life is complicated enough so why make it more complex by being in situations you are not comfortable in?

So, what does being myself mean to me? Well, it means being true to myself and not being super-polite and accepting something that I do not feel comfortable doing. This is a big issue for me as I hate to be rude and yet suffer for it.

a letter to the Editor and a notice

Dear Goth,

two sections in the last issue grabbed my attention and both are related. The first was *My nephew — the Taoist* by Chris Pearce. He talks about a distrust of words and this is I believe because labels limit. I have struggled with words for years, jumping on them like Luke and his bees because they seem to shoot off all over the place if you don't control them (all the right words but not necessarily in the right order, to misquote Eric Morecambe when challenged by André Previn about his piano playing). It is sometimes (and used to be worse) like Alice down the rabbit hole or a fruit machine, throwing up anything and everything but in no particular order.

The next item was the book review, edited by Marianthi Kourti, *Working with autistic, transgender and non-binary people*. Once again, this is about identity and identifying with something but this time, not tying down words but bodies. I think this screws us up because we don't necessarily identify with males or females but the fact that we are spiritual beings. By this I mean that we lack a connection to the body we see when we look in the mirror and especially the role we are supposed to take on in respect to this. We are not bodies but beings and all this current sexual confusion is based upon not realising this. Sex is not about being but doing and to us it seems bizarre in the extreme. I think we would be happier not being pigeonholed but society will have none of this. You've got this body, so that is who you are. No! We as beings are continually in transition and that

means not identifying with anything or being anything in particular — hence our inability to hold down a job (I'm a good example of that at seventy, being unemployed most of my adult life), a relationship or even a conversation (What do you want from me? What do you expect of me? Well I can't supply it in either case as all this stuff confuses me and reduces me to the nervous wreck that is autism). You all think you are in a fixed state — we all know that everything is in a state of flux and confuse you because of this (Arghhs all round! That is you and us both).

As an old fashioned writer, I write down notes for stories in longhand (tried learning shorthand once but gave up). I then compose the final item on my desktop computer as previously I had used a typewriter. The disadvantages of the latter was not being able to insert words, unless I had tippexed the previous ones out and if they were longer than the original, it was a question of rewriting the whole thing up to that point (arghh!). Likewise with moving paragraphs or lines around, which you can do with computer-generated text.

Recently I discovered an even better way of completing my material — predictive text. I use the phone to write it up and then send it to myself in an email, for storage on the main computer. This has sped up composition no end for this old technophobe, who used to hate the way the software would jump in with suggestions for something I was writing. I simply loathe it when this happens in real life and somebody jumps in to finish my sentences for me, like a *Two Romnies* sketch.

Anyway I would heartily recommend this process to anyone, who finds this long, drawn-out way of doing things a real chore or a bore.

Paigetheoracle

© Paigetheoracle 2022

If sufficient material is sent in, the theme for October will be **freedoms, freedoms you have, freedoms you want**. 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, small pieces to fill awkward spaces like this, and art. **Please fill in a permissions form** when you submit something, as all published pieces require a completed permissions form. Remember, if you want to see different content in *the Spectrum*, the best way to change it is to send something in!

Enter the National Autistic Society extraordinary 60th anniversary art competition

by **Chrystyna Chymera-Holloway**
Head of Marketing

on behalf of the National Autistic Society

We're celebrating our 60th birthday in style with a new art competition.

Send us your 60th-themed art or photography, the more extraordinary the better, and your work could be featured in *the Spectrum* or *Your Autism* magazine. Our theme is: 60 years of the National Autistic Society.

It's been an extraordinary 60 years, and we want to make the next 60 count. We're looking for art and photography that illustrates (or takes a snapshot of) how far our charity and attitudes towards autistic people have come over the past 60 years, and what things might look like in the future for autistic and neurodiverse people — whether it's 60 days from now, 60 years, or even 600 years. We invite you to get as creative as you like!

Need inspiration? Travel back in time: take a look at our timeline to see how far we've come, meet some of our autism heroes, and hear extraordinary stories — including the tale of the man who wore two wristwatches. Visit

autism.org.uk/timeline

Visit *the Spectrum's* online art gallery, and get inspired by fellow autistic artists.

autism.org.uk/theSpectrum

You can submit art by email or post.

Please include your entry form with it.

You can download the form at:

autism.org.uk/artcompetition

Email your art to:

artcompetition@nas.org.uk

Post your art to:

60th anniversary art competition
National Autistic Society
393 City Road
London
EC1V 1NG

The deadline for entries is **14 August 2022**.

Our judges will shortlist the top three and the winner will be decided by an online poll. The top entries will be displayed in an online gallery on our website.

Art can be paint, pencil, ink, or photography. The maximum size for a piece is A2. This means we can't accept sculptures, statues, or multimedia (but we can accept photographs of these).

The winning adult entry will be published in the October issue of *the Spectrum*.

The winning children's entry will be published in the November issue of *Your Autism* magazine.

Good luck!

Oh Aunty Brenda!

by S Bee

© S Bee 2022

When Aunty Brenda unwrapped my birthday gift and peered at the heart-shaped glass bottle, my heart sank. I just knew what was coming.

“It’s very thoughtful of you, but this is quite expensive, Ella.”

I shook my head in frustration. Oh Aunty Brenda!

I’d had a good idea that she’d say this!

“It doesn’t matter about the expense. I wouldn’t have bought it for you, if I couldn’t afford it. Anyway, I thought you liked ‘Essence of You,’” I said.

She smiled. “I do, love. Look, it’s a smashing birthday present, but it’s way too posh for me.”

I stifled a sigh. “But Aunty Brenda – ”

“Don’t argue with me please, Ella. I’d like you to give the perfume to someone who deserves it, for a birthday or Christmas. Now love, I must get on. My shift at the charity shop starts in half an hour.”

Brenda was my Dad’s older sister, a childless spinster.

She was a sensible, no-nonsense type of woman, yet caring and warm-hearted too. From the age of fourteen, I’d stayed with her at weekends.

Around that time, my parents had divorced — Mum was very wrapped up in her sales career and Dad’s job had taken him to Australia, so Brenda and I appreciated each other’s company.

She disapproved of the divorce, yet wisely didn’t criticise my parents.

Yet penny-pinching Brenda (as my Mum unkindly called her) was just what I’d needed — she’d offered me stability and security.

When I left school and began office work, I decided to lodge with Brenda.

“It’s silly forking out for rent and bills when you can live with me and save most of your salary,” she pointed out.

“That’s a great idea!” I’d said.

Now Aunty Brenda was retired, she spent her days volunteering at a charity shop. She was on a decent pension, yet she loved bagging a bargain there (and in other charity shops) and boasting about it to me.

But buying something special for Aunty Brenda was a very difficult experience.

She appreciated the thought behind my gifts, yet there was always a reason why she couldn’t accept them.

No matter how many times I reassured her that she deserved to be treated, she wouldn’t see sense!

Although I could plainly see that she adored it, the pale rose silk blouse I’d bought her the Christmas before was deemed “a wicked waste of money.”

So I kept the two gifts — the perfume and the blouse — and tucked them away in a cupboard, in the unlikely event of a change of mind.

On Saturday, I called into the charity shop where Aunty Brenda volunteered.

After her shift, we were lunching in town. Naturally, she favoured a cheap, greasy-spoon cafe.

When I'd suggested we visit a lovely new vintage style tea shop, she'd spluttered: "Don't be silly, love. I'm not paying those prices!"

"But everything will be of much higher quality there. Look, don't worry, I'll pay," I soothed.

"No Ella, I won't allow you to — it's a complete rip-off!"

So that was the end of that!

Later, when we Skyped Dad, he had a suggestion. "It's my fiftieth birthday next month. I'd love to see you two. Why don't you book a trip out? You can stay at my beachside apartment, there's plenty of room."

My heart leapt. I'd love to see him too and the thought of sunshine, blue sky and sea were very appealing.

"Air tickets for two to Australia will cost a small fortune. I'm not made of money," Brenda retorted.

He waved a hand. "I realise that, Brenda. I'll cover the cost of the flights."

It was an automatic response: "No, you won't, Terry."

He shrugged, clearly hurt by her dismissive tone. "Oh well, it was only an idea. How are things at work, Ella?"

Later, I reflected on the Skype chat. This time, I felt Aunty Brenda was being really foolish.

"Why won't you take the trip to see Dad?" I asked gently, as I placed two mugs of cocoa on the coffee table. "I really miss him."

"I miss him, too. But it's the cost of the tickets, love. I don't want him to waste his money."

"Right. Well, this is the way I see it — he hasn't a partner, or any other children. There's no expensive hobbies and he hasn't got a pet. He's not into designer clothes or show-off cars, and he doesn't take exotic holidays — so why shouldn't he spend on his family?"

She scooped up the remote control. "Shall we switch over to the news?"

The next day, I emailed Dad and poured out my frustration.

He replied: "Maybe this will explain her attitude. We didn't have a great childhood,

Ella. Money was tight because Dad was a gambler, so Mum took a series of low-paid, part-time jobs. We didn't go hungry, but there weren't any extras, such as holidays, nice clothes or a family car," he went on. "Being raised like this leaves an impact. I became ambitious, but Brenda became cautious."

Ah — it all made sense now. I finally understood her cost-cutting ways!

That night after I'd gone to bed, a soft tap rapped on my door.

"Come in!" I called.

Brenda sat on my bed. "I've been thinking about what you said. I've been so silly, demanding you pass on the gifts you've bought me. You must have felt upset."

I nodded, as tears spurted.

"I'm sorry I've hurt your feelings, Ella. From now on, I'll accept any gift from you gracefully with thanks. So about that blouse, and the perfume . . . have you given them to someone else?"

I smiled. "Of course I haven't."

"Good. Because I'll need them if we're going to Australia."

My spirit soared, as I hugged her. "Yippee!"

Penguin

by Casey Connery

1. I asked my mother for a penguin every birthday, every Christmas.
a negative of a girl. She covered her eyes with her hands and turned away.
2. The story that penguins fall over backwards in the snow while watching aeroplanes is untrue.
3. The best thing about penguins is the waddle.
4. It was noticing my daughter's strange gait that made me think she might be on the autistic spectrum.
5. The keepers at Edinburgh Zoo place multicoloured plastic bead bracelets on penguins' flippers to identify them, and their parents. Percy Penguin, for example, wears a yellow one and his daughter Minnie's is pink and yellow.
6. People on the autistic spectrum can display black-and-white thinking, for example, believing that anything below 100% is a failure.
7. The Australian charity, Penguin Foundation, knits multicoloured jumpers for penguins rescued from oil slicks. These can be purchased from their Penguin Parade gift shop.
8. I showed my daughter
9. Penguins often return to the same rookery in which they were born.
10. We've wanted to move to a new house for years. My daughter says, "But my new bedroom would be different."
11. Don't be fooled, the zookeeper said, when a penguin's flipper hits you, it feels like a cricket bat.
12. The social worker asked, "Does she flap her arms, like a penguin?"
"Yes" I said.
13. Most species of penguins live in large colonies of up to a thousand birds.
14. The first time my daughter went to town wearing her new white dress, a man winked at her and she cried.
15. When swimming, a penguin is camouflaged with countershading: its black back merges with the murky darkness of the sea, but when viewed from the sea looking upwards, a penguin's white belly blends with the bright sky above.

Preschool

In pink tutus and satin ballet slippers, little girls are being prancing ponies. Penguin sits on the floor because there is no point to this behaviour. I love that Penguin is characterful.

After lunch, the children must sit at the small primary-coloured plastic tables, but Penguin does not sit because there is no reason to do so. The teacher is cross. I am cross with the teacher.

Year 7

Why would anyone decide to build a school the size of several aeroplane hangars when Penguin cannot fly?

Why fill it with strip lights that seem to shout as loud as the two thousand kids?

Penguin texts: "Mum, I don't like it I'm sad."

Why does Mr Pugh's voice serrate the air, when Penguin is silent?

"Mum, school is being illogical it's upsetting me."

Penguin cannot say how she feels, so she writes it with the bathroom scissors, then shows it to me.

Year 8

The third-floor art-room window is dangerous.

I tell Penguin's tutor.

Penguin's tutor says he will put something in place to help immediately and contacts the head of year.

The head of year says he will put something in place immediately and contacts the special needs officer.

The special needs officer says she will put something in place immediately and contacts the safeguarding lead.

The safeguarding lead says she will put something in place immediately.

Nothing is put in place.

I complain,
by which I mean, I ask again for help,
by which I mean, I became a
"difficult parent".

They give her a "red card"

The card, which they call a "red card" is, in fact, dark pink.

I don't understand. Why do they keep saying it's red?

Penguin can hold it up when she needs to leave the classroom.

But there's nowhere to go; no quiet room, no sick room.

"Mum, I'm scared I'm in the toilets."

Year 10: tutor intervenes

At break time, Mr Lacey asks if she is okay. She says, "(No, I am afraid I am shaking inside, can you not tell?) Yes," because that is the right answer.

Later she asks to go home. Mr Lacey arrives. Mr Lacey says, "But you were okay earlier," and she says, "(I was afraid to tell you the truth and in front of my friends.) Yes," because that is the right answer.

Mr Lacey says, "You're not afraid of me, are you?" She says, "(You make me feel like a tiny island and you are a tsunami.) No, I am not afraid. Mr Lacey, please Mr Lacey, can I go home?"



The door

She narrows herself to walk the shark-filled corridors.

Mum, I feel kind of fuzzy.

Today, she passes the front door

and runs.

I'm in the park, Mum I'm sorry, Mum I'm sorry.

Grey drizzle, mudded grass.

On the bench by the closed café,

I see a shiver inside a school uniform.

I'm allowed, just this once, to hug her.

Back home, and I tell her tomorrow's another day.

Her weighted blanket finds better words.

as she snuggles up in her bed,

and I wonder,

which takes more courage:

to run out of a door,

or walk back through it?

Seth's adventures with Archie Autism

second extract

by **Seth**

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It felt like being in a video game at this point, with Sam as lead and us tagging along, dodging grabby hands and bitey teeth; yelling instructions and warnings to each other to help evade capture.

Alex was super speedy and good at shouting out where the hoards were at any one time. Jay and I flailed along at the back.

But then it happened.

Worst case scenario!

I tripped over my own shoelace.

I hate tying shoes, just can't get fingers and thumbs to work together; it's like they are two warring factions and refuse to cooperate, and no matter how much brain shouts at them, they always end up doing the opposite, or nothing at all, until I surrender and shove the laces in the side of my trainers.

Why we can't just all go with Velcro?

Who decides that after a certain age Velcro is forbidden and you must now tie laces?

Like some sort of coming-of-age ritual.

People — mainly adults, who think these things count — do that frowny-face thing at you and make you feel like you are the worst.

“You must complete the quest for the laces or you shall never pass through the gates to adulthood.”

It's only laces.

As long as I can get my own shoes on and off then what's the big deal?

(I dunno, ask my physio who had a whole worksheet and exercises dedicated to the tying of the shoelace — but failed to tie them “right” on the demonstration shoe anyway?)

And anyway, bits of string never did Theseus any good, he still got lost in the maze and ended up facing the Minotaur!

Pretty sure that wouldn't have happened if he'd been using Velcro!

But yeah, back to the tripping over the shoelace, which resulted in Jay running full pelt into the back of me and sending us both sprawling over the disgusting sticky earth.

We skidded for ages until I could see Sam and Alex towering over me, drenched and sweaty and with painful expressions on their faces. Jay was just hauling himself up beside me. My brain finally woke up and with a jolt got all the parts to work together and speak the same language.

And the language was the language of:

RUN!

I shot up and off we went again, flying through squelchy mud, hurdling over half-broken tombstones, reminding us of the broken gnashing teeth advancing behind us ever closer. Yelling each other on, “Faster, go, go, go!”

a story (continued) and a poem

I could hear their disgusting drools reverberating in my ears like speakers when the music doesn't come through properly and it makes that horrid buzzing screechy sound which makes my body tremble and my skin hurt, giving me goosebumps. All I really wanted to do right now was go hide in a bush and cry and talk to the birds, but bushes and birds seemed in short supply and I really didn't fancy being gobbled for lunch (again — I mean, what is it with the creatures in this place, they all seem to want a bite! Perhaps someone should think about launching a chain of restaurants or something here, because this is quite frankly inconvenient!)

The graveyard is vast and the zombies just seem to keep coming but they are not as fast as us and we finally outrun them. With legs and arms flailing like flags on a stormy ship, we make it to the base of the purple mountains, and just like that, the zombies stop dead (or undead, I guess?).

It's like they have met some sort of invisible barrier and can't get past.

In fact, it looks like they are scared. It's not a wall that is stopping them, it is their fear.

(Kind of like when I'm told I have to do a test at school and I know the answers, it's just I can't get the words out onto the page and the pencil feels like an immovable stone statue and the paper looks like a vast swirling, angry sea I have no hope of crossing no matter how much I try).

Maybe, looking back now, we should have taken this as a warning that something worse might be lurking in the mountains, but all we could think was how nice it was to flop down onto the softness of the base of the mountain

and how the purple reminded me of bubble baths and violet sunsets and Mum's dressing gown back home.

I had to squeeze back tears really hard and scrunched my eyes tight shut and put my fist over my face so my friends couldn't see. I didn't really need to worry as I'm pretty sure that they were thinking the same, but I don't like when people see me cry. They always seem to want to know more and ask me lots of questions and even try to touch me — Mum says people do this because they care and want to make sure that I am okay, but if they really did care and really wanted me to be okay then they wouldn't ask questions that made my brain squirm and get all cross and make my eyes water even more and make my body go

tight

and stiff

and want to freeze like a statue till they

GO AWAY

and

STOP

and

LEAVE ME ALONE!

Maybe that's why zombies are the worst, because they seem to want to get up in your face and touch you; though I suppose it's more because they want to eat you, rather than the whole asking questions and hugs thing.

Typology of Depression

Is it a pet monster, sleeping in the shed, or a tornado crashing through, a yo-yo between Heaven and Hell or a nagging, put-down shrew?

Does it come in the night when it's quiet? In the painful sunshine of the day? In the wind and cold of the winter? Or does it constantly stay?

by Yevgeniya Przhabelskaya

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Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration

Edited by **Sal Mendalgio**

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review by **Paigetheoracle**

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I think of Dabrowski and his theory of positive disintegration as like a volcano, where lava is the unformed, undifferentiated potential in everyone and certainty the volcanic cone or differentiated and compartmentalised (crystallised layers of reality); stillness and motion. It is like shuffling a pack of cards to create new formulations of reality. For some, facing the vastness of infinite possibilities is too much as in *The hitchhiker's guide to the galaxy* and the Total Perspective Vortex or the whale in the same series, who is enthralled by anything and everything he experiences as opposed to the potted plant, who has a fatalistic attitude of "Oh no, here we go again" (Groundhog Day for those consciously reincarnating).

Overexciteability? Hyper-aware?
Hypersensitive, more like. As such, being a hermit alone with your thoughts makes you asocial, seeing society as irrelevant before the vast creative potential hidden within us.

R D Laing, Art Janov and Stanislav Grof have all stumbled over this same need to breakdown and rebuild ourselves afresh each day. Films like *It's a wonderful life*, *A monster calls* and indeed *A Christmas carol* have all struggled with this Dark Night of the Soul and the need to understand it as necessary for our spiritual growth as human beings.

Overconfidence is inflated ego, which stops us trying (certain we're right). Underconfidence pushes us to more effort because of our

uncertainty. The more you think of yourself, the less effort you will put into achieving (the Fonz effect). Altruism is seeing the bigger picture, than the limited one of just the individual self alone (short- versus far-sighted). This is concern for the future (the bigger self as opposed to the present, smaller self).

Still waters run deep — shallow ones run fast. This means perception is lost through action or gained through stillness and silence. Struggling? This is hitting the social glass ceiling, where you are ignored, or sound-barrier equivalent that you cannot penetrate. What is positive disintegration but the chrysalis effect of re-organisation — the I-ching statement of "Before the beginning of great brilliance, there must be chaos."



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 National Autistic Society and readers' subscriptions. We welcome submissions on any topic from people across the whole of the autism spectrum.
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Fly like an Antonov

by **Phoenix A**

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Fly like an Antonov on metal wings
Fly higher and faster
Than war and greed
You're different
Unique
A beautiful dream
My everything
You were beautiful
Powerful
Too special for the world
You deserved more
Belong to a peaceful time
Return to blue skies
Will dreams ever die?

The Antonov An-225 Mriya (meaning: dream) was the heaviest aeroplane ever built and was a commercial cargo plane registered in Ukraine and destroyed in the Russo-Ukrainian war earlier this year; Editor.
