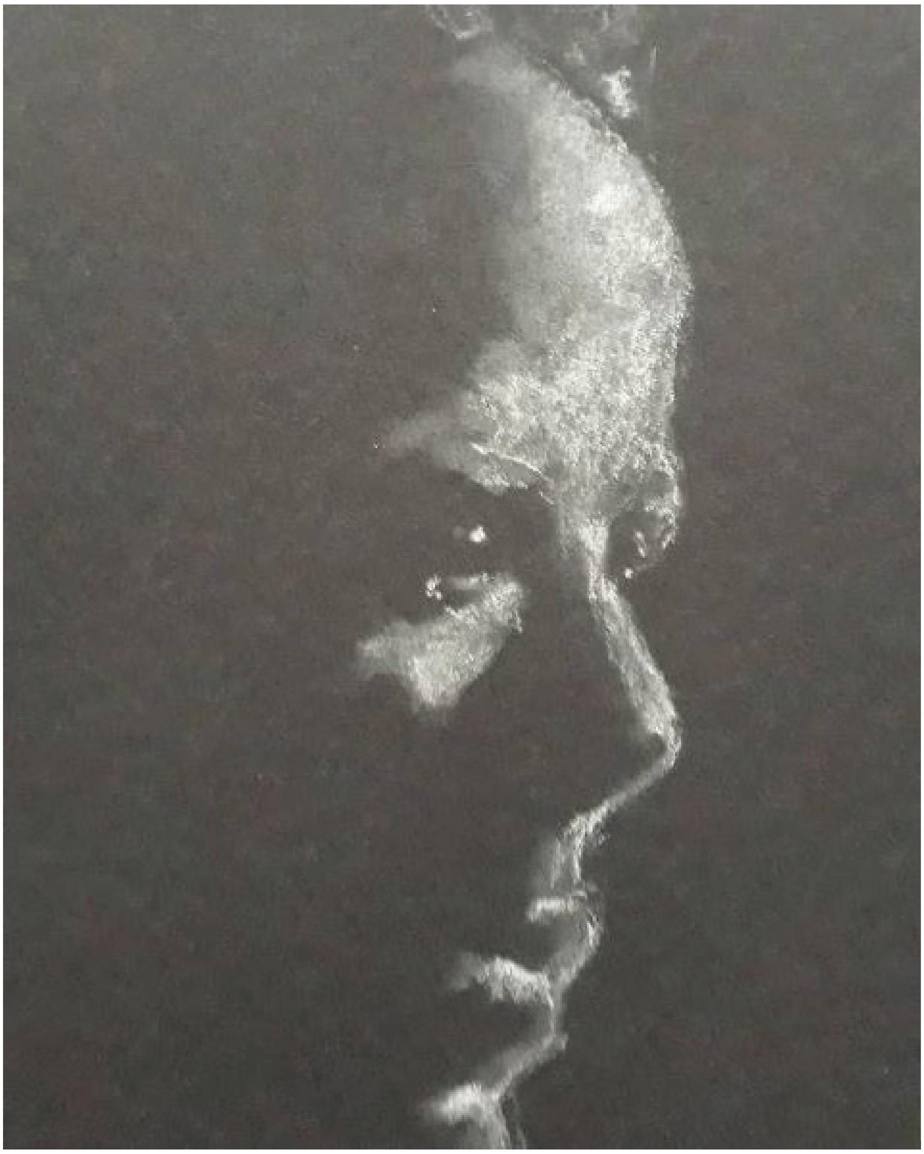
Produced by and for Autistic people

The Spectrum

Edition **106** April 2021



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 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:

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

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: **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 **17 May 2021**

Welcome to the April edition of *the Spectrum.*

A whole year of the pandemic, and it continues, but now the threat is receding due to mass vaccination. In a few months or a year the threat may disappear entirely, and rigorous studies of the effectiveness of the various vaccines will tell us if that will happen.

I am pretty sure everyone has had a difficult year, Autist and non-autist, though hostility towards people with a mask exemption or with difficulty with constantly checking that they're two metres away from others (perhaps because of ADHD, or who hyperfocus, like me) means Autists are amongst those who have struggled the most.

Despite the difficulties, in the last twelve months I managed to get married (never thought that would happen) and buy and move into a house (never thought that would happen). I can't say I coped well or that it was bearable, but I got through it, with only distant help from friends (due to the pandemic) and that sums the pandemic up: we will get through it.

I know a lot of you have even more limited friendship circles than me, and that is kind-of the purpose of *the Spectrum* — a group of people who find life difficult, often in very similar ways, who can take emotional support from these pages. If you think no one has been through what you are going through, try asking in a letter here,

the Editor

the coping edition – suggestion for next issue on page 9

Contents

Health is our wealth

by **Chris**

It's funny that the things that have happened in the past that were seemingly insignificant, are now brought into a new light. A couple of years ago I broke open a fortune cookie, inside the slither of paper read, "health is your wealth". Little did I know that this apparently whimsical saying would dominate my life.

Fast forward to the beginning of the next year: I received a diagnosis that would change my life. I am Autistic. This affects me mainly in social situations. For example, I can get really anxious and talk over people — I also feel a burning sensation in my ears rise as I become increasingly anxious. This meant that my brief career as a teacher had to come to an abrupt end.

I felt hopeless, a bane to a productive society and a thorn in the side of my family. Luckily, thanks to the support of my family, the Cumbria Autistic diagnosis team and First Steps counselling services, I've reassessed my life and have never felt healthier. During this pandemic, which, seemingly, has no end in sight, I feel that it's crucial to share my story and a few things that I've picked up along the way that have helped me stay cheerful and get by.

Receiving my diagnosis of Autism has made me realise the importance of routines. Starting the day at a particular time really helps me feel calm and capable of tackling most things, be it work or home education. Preparing breakfast and clothing during the night for the next day can be really helpful to your mindset too, especially if, like me, you find it difficult to operate in the morning!

They say "seeing is believing", although it's very easy to forget what lies on our doorstep. It is true that most of us have become more active during lockdowns but sometimes going for a jog around the block or even a walk around the park can, after some time, seem like a chore. If ever you feel disheartened or even plain bored during your travel routine, stop in your tracks and just look around you. Taking stock and reflecting on what beauty surrounds you is a great way of breathing hope into your heart.

They say Britain was built on tea and they're right. I could not survive without a faithful cuppa by my side. The only snag in this harmonious relationship is caffeine. That boost you can get from tea or, for that matter, coffee and fizzy drinks, can leave you with a nasty headache or, if you're prone to anxiety like me, you could feel a nasty, dizzying bout of stress you could really do without. How about in the afternoon or even for the evening only, switch to decaf. I find that herbal teas containing passion flowers are a lovely thing to have before bedtime. Sweet dreams!

The most difficult aspect of living in lockdown for lots of people seems to be managing homeschooling. This seems to involve monitoring our kids' workload and productivity, making sure they're ticking all the boxes to ensure you, as a parent, aren't going to receive the dreaded call from the headteacher telling you that your beloved Billy isn't keeping up with the class. Of course, teachers are doing their best to ensure pupils don't fall behind in their education and, potentially, miss out on future opportunities. Just remember that this is time that you will never get back with your kids, especially if you and your partner are committed to full-time work and are now working from home. So, if you can spare a few moments to enjoy a snow day, don't be afraid to grab a sled. Trust me, you won't regret it.

Lastly, and most importantly, this is a time for change. The world is adapting to survive and you, as an individual or as a partnership, can do the same. I understand that change can appear to be a luxury but if there is one thing that you have yearned to do, maybe take up a new hobby (if you haven't already done so) or even think about starting a new career (it's never too late). I urge you that if you do not love what you do (please hang on in there key workers, you're doing an amazing job!) then find that love in what you do, or want to try. This feeling is a big part of your health, the most crucial part, in fact. As our lifestyles are altered, don't be afraid to find wealth in your health.

As best I can

by **No name**

"The pandemic has been rough" is (hopefully) the understatement of the year.

For me personally, after catching coronavirus in the first week of uni, multiple paramedic calls and a couple of hospitalisations, I've dropped out. I struggle daily with long-covid symptoms in addition to newly diagnosed depression. As I'm now disillusioned with the idea of going back to uni, I honestly have no idea what my future is going to look like in the short or long term, and that terrifies me.

In a way though, I feel like this level of autistic burnout was always going to happen, the pandemic just accelerated it. My previous pace of life was hectic and unsustainable, and the way that I managed to push through secondary school (when I got diagnosed) and then college was because of the hope that the next stage of my education and life generally would be better. I would be wrong, but I was hopeful, and I could always just about scrape by. And I can't anymore.

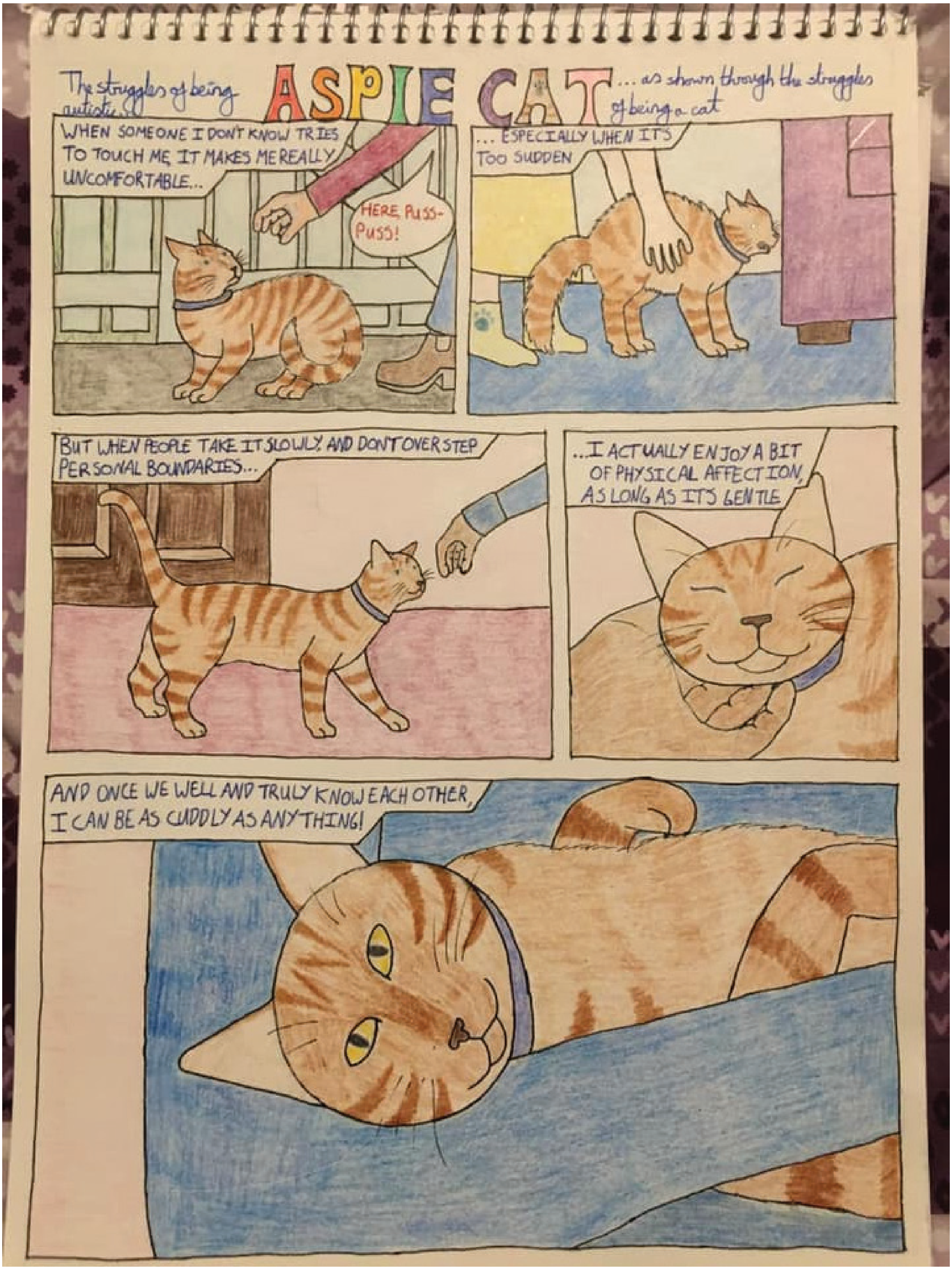
Adjusting to life with debilitating illness and without aim in a world where everything pressures you to stay indoors has been difficult. I vanished from social media for a long time, and the return was overwhelming at first. There were strings of days where I was in so much pain I couldn't open my eyes and therefore do anything other than catastrophise. It took a month for me to re-register with my GP and even start to investigate any of the medical problems.

However, especially with time on antidepressants and therapy, which I should probably have started years ago, there are some things that make existing from day to day just about bearable. I got back into drawing, which I love and hadn't had the time to do for years prior to everything that's happened. My dog has been a godsend for getting me out of the house and feeling needed. My friends and family have been wonderful, and I've even been able to start video calling and meeting up with people for walks. It's the first time I've been able to really relax for years.

Of course, I still worry. In combination with a long-term illness and the fact that I've aged out of many services, I'm concerned that even after the pandemic ends I will never be able to maintain a stable job or reintegrate into society. Life is uncertain, and I think an autistic person's life is even more so. I'm still accepting that going straight to uni might not be right for me, and trying to navigate that anxiety — some days more successfully than others.

But for now at least, I'm just getting through each day as best I can. And for lockdown me (and you) that's all anyone can expect.

a comic strip



by **Grace**

Pen pals

Pen pal number 332

Hi, my name is Ian. I am 38 years old and work in technology in the financial services industry. I don't have an Asperger's diagnosis but it recently occurred to me that a diagnosis would explain a lot about my life. I like classical music, travel, and the outdoors, especially hiking and biking. People have also been a challenge for me — school was particularly challenging — but as an adult I've been able to develop some gratifying personal relationships.

My special interest in software has helped in my career, which has been successful overall. Still, professional relationships remain a significant challenge for me and sometimes I feel stuck. I also struggle with sensory issues at work, particularly noise and distraction.

I would welcome a connection with others working in technology or finance, or to hear from those who sought a diagnosis later in life.

Pen pal number 333

Hi! My name is Cassidy and I'm an Aspergian living in America. I need someone with the same interests to write to me.

My interests include: the bus systems around North-East Winconsin, watching live PD, the news, and this last one is kinda weird, but I'll say it anyway: I love Dr Phil van Neuter from the muppets with a passion! His design, his personality, his gloves — everything about him! Just please don't judge this! Oh, and I love Eighties pop music!

Ciao! (Or should I say, "Cheerio!")

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.

Pen pal number 334

Hi, my name is Amy, I'm 25 years old and live in the Wirral. I was diagnosed with Autism (Asperger's) in September 2017 (I think). I have always struggled with social groups, understanding conversations and starting conversations. I have been bullied most of my school life, to which I find that my own company is best. At the moment I feel like I am isolating myself at home because I feel safe and comfortable.

I am hoping to learn to drive in a few months, to help me get out more.

I am a qualified level-3 childcare practitioner, but I adore animals so much that I hope to work with them in the future. I *love* reading, watching movies and tv programmes, playing Sims on my laptop, colouring and sleeping lol :). I am a *huge* Disney, Marvel and DC Comic fan!

My closest friends don't live in the country, and my past friends didn't really understand me so they just used me and just left me behind.

I hope I get to know some people and take baby steps into a blossoming friendship :) And be able to experience new things such as outings, fun times, creating memories and maybe learn new skills.

Looking forward to talking and getting to know people who have similar interests and hobbies, or who are in similar situation :) x

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

Pen pal number 335

Hi, my name is Katie!

I am from New York State and no, if you say I'm from the city I probably will get frustrated, lol. I am from way in the north country, closer to Canada. Where I live there are more cows than people. No joke! We are considered the North Country in the part of NYS where I live. I am part of the Tug Hill Plateau, so if you have heard about us, idk if it's on the news world wide, but nationally probably we get hit hard with snow, usually.

I believe a few years ago a town fifteen to twenty minutes or so from me was the snowiest place in the US!

For years I had sensory processing disorder, which used to be known as sensory integration dysfunction. Few months ago in November, when I was 27, I was diagnosed of being on the spectrum — the higher-functioning end.

It has taken me a while to accept this news but this month has helped a lot since, in the US, April is Autism Awareness Month.

I would love to connect with a pen pal.

Emails at first would be fine, but I'm fine with letters too! Long or short is fine or I read something lately about Happy Mail — it is so cool, Pinterest it!

Make it as creative as you want.

Age preference — 25-33.

Country — America, Canada, UK, or Ireland.

Interests — watching movies, listening to audiobooks and music, big Harry Potter fan, horseback riding — love horses, dogs, and goats — colouring, working out, exercising, being healthy and active. Health and wellness is a passion of mine. Spending time with family and friends, colouring, being outside, going for walks, shooting hoops — basketball — kicking a soccer — all is fun too — love soccer. Quotes, motivational quotes, and so on.

The 57 bus

by **Dashka Slater**

published by Wren and Rook
ISBN: 978 1 52636 123 3
£7.99

review by **James**

This is a book about two teenagers called Sasha and Richard. Sasha considers themselves agender, which means they don't want to be male or female. Richard was born in a rough background. Sasha was born as Luke and feels comfortable wearing skirts. They also have autism. I find this very inspiring for anyone agender. Richard set Sasha's skirt on fire, but afterwards showed a lot of remorse. When Sasha was in hospital he received support from several people including strangers.

The story is set in Oakland, California, which is where most LGBT events started. Pride events have become more popular in the UK having started in the USA. I attended my local Pride event wearing a dress and people complimented me on it. I would urge anyone who considers themself agender to buy this book.

It makes me think nobody has to be male or female and people can wear what they want. A lot of gendered categories have been removed in recent years, for example best male or female Oscars, because there are more people who don't want to be male or female. When I see bathrooms or male or female slogans I think what if people consider themself agender as Sasha always thought.

When I was at the Pride event I noticed a lot of singers and artists are supportive of the LGBT community, which I found quite encouraging. I have always found loose clothing quite comfortable, which is why I wear skirts and dresses. More people seem to be accepting of different genders in recent years and it all makes me want to prove my point.

This book is all based on a true story on Monday the fourth of November, 2013, and since then more countries have recognised there are people who are agender. People who know that I find skirts and dresses comfortable accept that if I want to be different it is my choice. It is the same with the Black Lives Matter project. Any race or religion is recognised officially on survey forms or voting forms.

If sufficient material is sent in, the theme for July will be **relationships, and maintaining them during the pandemic — not just romantic, any sort of friendship or family connection**. 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!

Dear Editor,

I am a 52-year-old South African citizen recently diagnosed with Asperger's.

Had I not taken my daughter for an assessment at NDC and met a psychologist trained in neurodiversity outside of South Africa it is doubtful that I would have ever received a correct diagnosis.

I really hope that the citizens of your country who are neurodiverse (or who have family members who are neurodiverse) appreciate what organisations like yours and their government do for them.

I have been researching Asperger's to gain an understanding on how others see me.

I do not have a DSM 5 manual nor an ICD 10 manual, but based on what I have read on line, neurotypical people experience us as extreme and we cause them great discomfort.

I have spent most of my life worrying about what neurotypical people think of me, and now I want the opportunity to say what I think in a letter.

I am aware that my experience is limited to the South African context.

Regards

Jane

Dear neurotypicals

an open letter

If Aspies were mainstream, and you were the outliers . . .

If we owned "the printing press" . . .

This is how you would be described in *our* DSM manual.

- Inauthentic
- Lacking in empathy
- Expedient
- Compartmentalized thinking
- Shortsighted thinking
- Lacking in introspection
- Sensory bluntness.

I could add others to this list, but I do not wish to offend, I just want to point out that there is no single truth, just different perspectives.

A friend of mine said to me, when I expressed my frustration at having to take antidepressant medication, "Jane, all the best people I know are on antidepressants". (I don't think this is solely a South African problem, and addiction to substances is just self-medicating.)

I feel that this is a poor reflection of the world we live in, a world created not by us, but by you, yet *we* get pathologized.

Regards

Jane

Dear Editor,

Professor Swaran Singh of Warwick University in the UK, said on BBC's Horizon documentary *Why did I go mad?* that psychosis is about being a "stranger in a strange land", to quote Robert Heinlein. The suburbs are a battleground (terra incognita), where discrimination and bullying reign because of isolation (the new attacked by the old). It is no different from the body and its reaction to external invaders. It is also seen in domestic abuse, where children are not wanted and abused. Integration of society or the individual is the only cure.

Like him I believe it has nothing to do with race, culture, sex or sexual persuasion. The bullying is about trying to find a weakness in someone's character (what you fear being disclosed about yourself, which you are ashamed of in your personal history). It is trying to dislodge an opponent from their physical or mental stance (belief about themselves or the world they come from or belonged to) as in wrestling or debating. Whether you are in a new country, new neighbourhood, or world — it is about trying to move you out again ("Go back where you come from/belong"). It is about obeying the rules or taking your own limitations back to where they come from (if you want to stay, you must dump your beliefs about how the world works or should work and accept our way, our version of it).

Problems with personal sanity or society's way of life? This is it in a nutshell. This is the paradigm wars you face every day and the conversion or rejection that goes on, the universe over ("Are you one of us or one of them?" "Are you with us or against us?" "Do we love (want you) or hate you (not want you here)?").

See also Marius Romme and the Maastricht Approach (Hearing Voices Network) for healing rifts in the psyche.

Tony

Dear Editor,

in response to Zimin's letter of the October issue and Sue's letter of the January issue: I have never actually been expelled from a church, *but*, soon after I moved to my present home, over thirty years ago, a man in the local congregation was extremely nasty to me because I am not very good at making conversation.

Some years later he was given responsibilities in the church. When that happened I got out of that church. (*Asperger syndrome and anxiety* by Nick Dubin.)

Apparently, 300 people attended that man's memorial service. I can't understand him being so popular.

Yours faithfully,

Michael

The Autistic regime

On the spectrum on the solitude scene my days mapped out by fervent routine, I'm turned up to eleven but just what does it mean, a rat on a wheel in a groundhog daydream, a footsoldier of the Autistic regime, sensory overload if you see what I mean? Reams of paper on a dusty shelf, psychedelic whimsy mental health. Now tell me mister Aspie how you spend your days, well I write to keep my ghosts at bay and grind my bones to dust each day. I'm a footsoldier of the Autistic regime, locked in tight to rigid routine . . ..

by **James**

Santiago Zeismer and Oliver Feld

My synaesthesia in abstract art

by **Tamsin**

I see the beauty in every language. Once in a while along comes a voice actor in the foreign dub of a cartoon whose voice touches my soul.

It started at London Metropolitan University when I was obsessed with Santiago Ziesmer, after being obsessed with his performance as Huy in the German dub of *The Prince of Egypt*. I wanted to paint a picture of him and Joachim Kemmer singing *Playing with the big boys*, but I wasn't confident in my artistic abilities, and no figurative painting could capture Kemmer's menace and Ziesmer's ferocity. So I did an abstract painting. Kemmer's voice was represented as deep red flames and Ziesmer's was represented as furious pink and orange explosions. After that I was asked to do a series of abstract paintings of people's voices, but few were as inspired. The only other ones I was enthralled with at the time were Oliver Feld's unskilled but enthusiastic singing as Danny in the German dub of *Cats don't dance*, and Ewa Smolinska's performance as

Lampy in the Polish dub of *The brave little toaster*. Feld's voice was soft and very charming, so I did a purple painting with a white centre and pastel flecks of colour in the middle. Smolinska's performance was refined, but feisty, so I did a salmon-pink painting with a pentagon in the middle. My paintings were part of a student exhibition in the university building.

But it didn't stop there. Soon after I left London Metropolitan, I did a painting depicting Ziesmer and Feld singing a duet as Ren and Stimpy. They harmonised well but Ziesmer's voice outshone Feld's. Still, it was a harmony I listened to over and over again.

Soon after I did an abstract painting depicting the voice of Eberhard Prüter, who voiced Squidward in the German dub of *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Prüter's voice crackled like fire, and it blazed bright. I used a blue background and painted orange and black flames bursting out. I realised later that I had used the colours of the hornbill Zazu, one of Prüter's other roles.

The one who replaced Prüter as Squidward, Joachim Kaps, has a distinctive voice of his own. It was softer, but touched your soul. His voice was hard to capture but I finally settled on forest green, with a palm-tree-like shape on it. Kaps is also a very charismatic actor, having played the kind, childlike Achim in *Brummkreisel* and the boisterous Hans-Günther Koch in *Ferienheim Bergkristall*. I painted this painting in late 2018.

In 2019 I was wowed by the English cast of *Wunschpunsch*. Harry Hill, the voice of Jacob, had a magnificent voice. I visualised the colours of a beach in winter, so I did a steel blue abstract painting to show the loftiness of his voice.

Rick Jones, the voice of Maurizio, is extremely talented, so for his voice painting I did a whirlwind against a pink background, to show the power of his acting talent.

In 2014 I did a voice painting for Akira Kamiya, that was gold and yellow with a warm, flowery, pink-orange centre, to show how much I loved his performances as Iago in the Japanese dub of *Aladdin* and as the title character of *Kinnikuman*. He was a powerhouse as Iago, and as Kinnikuman he was just a natural.

I mainly paint the voices of men because some of the roles these men have played have shown strength and vulnerability, and this has helped me to connect with them. Even Lampy was male in the English dub of *The brave little toaster*, and was made female because "lamp" is a feminine word in Polish. But Lampy's Polish counterpart intrigued me because she was completely different to the English version.

I didn't think that appreciation of voice acting was just an autism thing, but many fans of international voice actors were autistic. On top of it, there have been streamed videos of animated films in different languages, but mainly of princesses and heroines, not of comic-relief characters and cartoon characters. Well, at least things are changing a little. Still, sometimes it takes years before I hear the voice I want to hear.

This has made me feel even angrier and more lonely, as few people feel the way I do about the voices of certain actors. I've tried hard to get people to understand and they don't seem to. All they hear is silly sounds. Just because something can't be understood doesn't mean it can't be appreciated. A perfect metaphor for my autism.

Hello,

I've just read about your art gallery and thought I'd see about submitting something? I've just been diagnosed with high-functioning autism (and I think my love of art and IT kinda gave it away). I'm usually a pencil portrait artist but haven't put anything up for a while (been working on a step counter for the last ninety-odd days . . . to the letter, like a lot of us do) but here is my last piece. I made it with white chalk and black card.

Darren

Two Afters

by **Brokenfoot Hare**

So when I began my quest to autism diagnosis in November 2019, I knew there would be a wait before I moved up to the top of the waiting list for assessment, but as you might expect, I was not prepared for covid to make that wait several months longer. But then again, what's several months compared to twentyish years?

When I was very young, my performance in school was fine (save for some basic motor skills) but my little brother wasn't doing so well. He seemingly couldn't, or didn't want to, pay attention in class, and misbehaved. The first doctor my mum sought help from wanted to diagnose him with ADHD, and she hated that. She just couldn't accept it, and once a second team of doctors figured out he was just partially deaf, her perception of autism was coloured forever.

Autism was just a label they put on children with mystery illnesses, or naughty children no one could be bothered to discipline. Media over the next ten to fifteen years didn't help this idea either, and neither did my schools. I got passing grades, I paid attention and I didn't talk back to teachers, so as far as they were concerned, I was a normal student who needed no attention.

But I should avoid devolving into a long moan about my life because that's not my point, but reflecting on it recently through my assessment, I found myself comparing this to how covid started.

It was just a flu-like . . . thing, spreading in a town on the other side of the world; it was "that country's" virus; it was being "exaggerated" and "over-analysed", being made to sound worse than it was, an excuse for news outlets to scare people. Then, of course, it spread — much like my suspicions about being autistic. Due to the negative attitude towards it, I settled for thinking I might just suffer from minor dyspraxia due to issues with pressure, directions and spacial awareness. I could catch a volleyball fine 60% of the time, so I was still normal enough for the schooling system.

When covid hit 60% of the countries of the world, there probably should've been more concern, yet people still hoped in vain that they could visit family, eat out and go on holidays. There was so much denial, and I think that's what ended up dominating both my life and life for everyone under covid and lockdown.

It wasn't that A-levels were hard because I had processing issues, I just wasn't revising hard enough. It wasn't that university was a big step for me and my coping mechanisms, I was just a coward. It wasn't that the work world was not made with autistic people in mind, I was just a lazy, useless idiot who needed to learn. I couldn't accept that I needed help, and no one in lockdown could accept that it was going to last a while, we'd be out soon.

Except we weren't, this was going to go on, and soon, I realised, were my struggles. I went to CBT for anxiety and depression and on the third session, I got referred for assessment. Relief washed over me, much like the relief that washed over people as lockdown started to affect the rate of infections. There was an exit, even if it was far away.

So come with me now to November 2020, I have a positive diagnosis and talks of leaving the long lockdowns are in full swing. For me there isn't just one After, but two. After lockdown and After misunderstanding, After fear, After loneliness. I can enter two new worlds, a world of care for each other and a world of a better understanding, for me and those who know me — well, while I hold out little hope for the former (sorry, it's just how I feel) I hope I can make my new normal through understanding, honesty and asking for the help I need. What do you hope to make of your new normal? Your After?

Why can’t you just be normal?

Why do you like that tuneless music?
Wear your hair the way you choose it?
I think you get it, then you lose it
Why can’t you just be normal?

Can’t you make yourself conform?
Do anything that’s near the norm?
Don’t you know there’s a uniform?
Why can’t you just be normal?

Why do you hang with those dropout friends?
Dress how you like, ignore the trends?
Your oddness seems to know no ends
Why can’t you just be normal?

Why do you have to say that stuff?
Me and the others have had enough:
Why must you make our life so tough?
Why can’t you just be normal?

Why do you flinch from being praised?
Why can’t you tell that I’m amazed?
Can’t you see that my eyebrow’s raised?
Why can’t you just be normal?

Your posture comes across as rude
Your face is plain and your nails are chewed
You’re not even eating normal food
Why can’t you just be normal?

Why don’t you walk like others do?
Look at me when I talk to you!
Don’t speak unless you’re spoken to!
Why can’t you just be normal?

Why must you flap and skip and spin?
Screech and make that frightful din?
What headspace are you living in?
Why can’t you just be normal?

Why do you sign instead of speak?
Don’t you mind being thought a freak?
A nerd, a loser, weirdo, geek?
Why can’t you just be normal?

No-one likes the way you’re sitting
Won’t you even try to fit in?
I’ve done my best but I feel like quitting
Why can’t you just be normal?

You’re making people stop and stare
You do things that I wouldn’t dare
No-one likes you - you don’t care
Why can’t you just be normal?

You have your strengths: it’s such a shame
Why can’t you play convention’s game?
Then everyone can be the same:
A perfect world of normal

by **Janine Booth**

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Little Miss Molly

part one

by **Wesley**

Alan Bowman got his notes ready. He had just recently settled into his new office, but he already had a patient. This one in particular, he had been told she would be something unique. It was odd to be sprung with this with how little time he had spent in the area, but it was still his job nonetheless. He didn't have many people coming in, so this one would be his last kid for the day. He had spent the time making sure his office was in order, small snacks here and there, with the window open to get some fresh air in.

The little girl he'd be seeing was called Molly, a young student who was described as stressed and "going through various issues that cause her to lash out." It was vague about the issues themselves, and in his exasperation setting everything up and getting the word out he had found himself accepting it. When he first got the call, he was still getting his office ready. Technically it was done, just incomplete and empty with a couple of uncomfortable chairs. Currently, there was a grey sofa sitting against the beige wall, a couple of red cushions sitting on it. Opposite the sofa was a yellow chair with a coffee table between them. In the corner was a small fridge with a couple of soft drinks in it, something he'd splurged a bit to get but made it more comfortable. To the right of the sofa, he walked past his small desk right next to the window, which he'd opened.

Alan glanced at the faint reflection of himself in the window, looking at his blue shirt, with a grey jacket and black trousers to match. He ran his hand over his short black hair and adjusted his glasses, not liking how they looked on him, but all he could do about it was keep an ear out for when his new contacts would come and sighed, going to get the rest of the room ready.

About fifteen minutes later he heard a knock. "Come in please," he called out, adjusting his glasses and his notepad. No one entered, and he found himself standing there with a notebook like an idiot. "Hello?" Alan called out. "Is that you, Molly?"

"Are the windows open?" A young girl's voice called out.

"Yes, they are," Alan replied.

"Could you close them . . . please? The blinds too?" Despite the odd request, Alan obliged. Standing up, the therapist walked to the windows, closing them shut as a fly buzzed in. He tried to shoo it away out the window, but the insect seemed to want to bump its head anywhere but the outside of his office. Sighing, he closed the window anyway and shut the blinds, opting to get it with a rolled up newspaper before Molly entered. He turned around to reach for a magazine, but his hand stopped in its tracks.

On one of the sofas, a small figure sat. They had made no noise entering, but they sat there as if they had been waiting for him. Her face was concealed by a hood while she faced away from him, her hands covered by bandages, sitting neatly on their lap, one of her hands closed.

"Can we begin?" she asked. Now that she was closer, her voice sounded scratchier, not something he'd imagine someone her age having.

"Yes, of course," Alan nodded. "Would you like something to eat or drink?"

"I'm not hungry any more." She replied. Shrugging, he began to walk to the opposite sofa and she tensed up. He noticed her arms seemed to be what tensed up most, fidgeting and shuddering.

"Umm, may I come and sit opposite you? Is there an issue with me sitting there?"

She nodded.

"Would you prefer me not to face you? We don't have to explain why if you're not rea-"

"What do you think of me?"

"This session hasn't been going on long enough for me to make a substantial impression."

"What's your first impression, then?"

"Well from what I know, you've been experiencing troubles at school and home, mainly nervous breakdowns and, on occasion, have been lashing out in some way. Your parents also told me that you injured someone in your year, and that you were . . . different. Though they didn't specify."

"More than you know," she hissed, her fingers tensing under the bandages. "I might get expelled. I wouldn't put it past anyone at this point."

"What's the centre of all this stress, Molly?" he asked, jotting things down on his notepad. For a while, Molly was silent, staring at her hands. Alan waited patiently for her answer, not pushing the girl to do anything.

" . . . Fine, face me," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Nodding, he walked over to the sofa opposite her, and sat down. Molly sat up straight as he did, looking straight at him.

Alan saw a dark brown face with beaded black eyes staring back at him. Her face wasn't brown like any regular skin tone, it was more similar to something you'd see on an oak tree or a leather sofa. In fact, her skin itself seemed hard and leathery too, fangs hanging over her mouth, looking like she could bite a person's head off.

This . . . it was different from anything he had ever handled before. To say he was shocked was an understatement. He could feel his breathing getting heavier as she stared at him, waiting. It was difficult to tell what exactly was going through her head by just looking at her. He was better at reading faces and body language than most, but from her it was . . . difficult.

"At least you aren't screaming," Molly commented, her expression unchanging. Or perhaps it was, it was difficult for him to tell. After a moment, Alan composed himself, sighing.

"I apologise for that." He looked at her fully, though it was a tad difficult to keep eye contact with her.

"I wish I could say that I was used to it but . . ."

"Understandable. Perfectly understandable," Alan held his notepad and pen in hand, raising it and sitting down.

"How did you feel when you saw me?" Her tone was steady throughout her speech, even when he had his scared reaction.

"Well, I was quite surprised and-"

"Everyone feels surprised when they see me. I'm not used to it but . . . I guess I've accepted it, if that makes sense." She looked down at the bandages covering her hands. "But now you're done, how do you feel when you look at me?" He heard hints of tension in her voice after she said that.

"You're . . . definitely irregular. But still, I'm happy to continue."

"Yeah?" Her voice lowered slightly. "I guess so." Sighing, Molly looked back up at him.

"Though, maybe we could stick to one thing. I doubt you want to use up your time by moving this talk to other places."

a letter

Hi,

I would just like to reply to Rachel's writing on page 10 of the October 2020 edition of *the Spectrum.*

I also have Asperger's, though I didn't find out until I was 48. I have always been mentally exhausted after social situations. I have always put my reason down to the fact that my brain seems to be running at high speed all the time in social situations. Am I behaving correctly? Am I participating at the right level in the conversation? Am I saying the right things? Am I avoiding saying offensive things? For me, I don't need a nap afterwards, but I do need to spend time alone to allow my brain to calm down and stop the constant barrage of information and questions. As far as I know, this is the reason for me, rather than a sensory overload type of thing (unless it is words — as I know I can be overloaded with people speaking too much to me). My brain works in numbers, pictures and symbols rather than words. I have to run my social program to deal with people and translate their words into feelings and thoughts I can understand.

Usually this takes me 30-60 minutes before I feel able to talk to people again. Usually, I read things on the Internet in this time, but sometimes I watch a TV programme or write a bit more of a book I am writing. The one thing I never do at this time is read or write emails, because that is just a continuation of the thoughts blasting through my mind. I have to shut down my social program for a while.

One thing I have noticed is that if I am with someone I trust a lot, I have a lot less exhaustion after talking with them. I think the reason for this, is that I can drop my safety behaviours and let them see me, rather than trying to pretend to be normal. They know they can pull me up if I say anything offensive, but I also know they will not take it personally. This is hugely relaxing and must be what it is like for normal people to have conversations. The only times in my life I have been able to enjoy parties or other social events have been when I have had someone I trust with me to look after me and ensure I have someone safe I can talk to. I have lost count of the number of parties I have just had to leave because it was becoming too stressful and mentally exhausting.

It has taken me a while, but my girlfriend accepts that there are times I just need to be alone and it is not a reflection of how I feel about her, but a reflection on what I need to stop the constant stream of words in my head. I do occasionally have to ask her to stop talking to me for a few seconds, as I have to clear the buffer in my head of all the words coming in. It was hard to explain to her that this is not about how interested I am in what she is saying, but about me processing the volume of words. Sometimes now, she will stop herself and tell me she is going to stop talking for a minute, as she can see I am starting to overload. She is wonderful!

There are normal people out there who can help us cope with life with normal people, but it can be exhausting trying to find them. It is hard being an alien in a human world, which is how I think of myself and the world around me.

Regards,

Paul

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.

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The Spectrum
magazine

National
Autistic
Society

Happiness matters

by **Kayleigh**

Okay, I'll be honest, this lockdown has been heavy on my mental health. I have to adopt an old practice of taking things a day at a time and sometimes five minutes at a time. The colder, darker months have been tricky — I doubt many people want to go for a walk in the rain by themselves. I know I don't. I thoroughly enjoyed my walks in the sunshine and taking photos of the beautiful flowers back in the summer, but I don't seem to feel the same inspiration for the other half of the year. I am hoping that now, the start of spring, will help get me back into the swing of things.

I don't mind staying home all that much; I like having time for art and reading. It also means I burn myself out quite quickly. I spent a long time redecorating a flat, I hyper-focused on all the things that needed doing for over a month, I didn't let my brain rest and didn't do any of my self-care activities. Let this be a lesson, self-care is important! Hyper-focus is a difficult thing to manage, sort of acts as a bizarre time-sink. In some ways it is enjoyable, to not have to think about the state of the world but, in others, it means you use up all your energy on that project. No one knows how long it will take to recover from that.

I think now more than ever the end of this situation is blurred and uncertain. It would be wrong to say it isn't scary because it is, or that we can trust everyone will do the right thing, because they may not. I think we have to take our time and happiness into our own hands. Make the best out of a bad situation. Finding something in every day that brings joy and a sense of calm. Watch a movie, read a book, play a game. Whatever it is that helps, you deserve to do it. To enjoy it. And do these things as often and as much as you want. It matters, your happiness matters.

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