

Produced by and for Autistic people

The Spectrum

Edition **109** January 2022



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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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 **14 February 2022**

Welcome to the January edition of *the Spectrum*.

This issue is a little different to usual — usually, I choose pieces that are representative of the range of submissions I receive. But this issue is made up of more stories and poems, because it seems that fiction writers and poets are happier to fill in permissions forms than other people.

Also, familiar names will appear even more often at the moment, because I have permissions from some of the most prolific contributors.

For those of you who found the permissions form too difficult, too confusing or just too daunting, an improved version is now on the website, where you can submit your work directly and the permissions are included with

the submission. The National Autistic Society's Content Team is looking to make further improvements to the submissions page as well, so this should be the easiest way for you to submit pieces for publication.

I have asked every contributor from 2021 for permissions, and I will be going back asking for permissions forms from contributors in 2020 after I finish this edition, but the quickest way for you to get an old unpublished piece considered will be to submit it through the website.

I know these changes are very difficult to cope with for a lot of readers, and maybe this is worth talking about in the magazine. If so, please let me know,

the Editor

the literary edition — suggestion for next issue on page 17

Contents

Sudbury Town Undergroundcover
photograph by Nick

A crispy, crunchy kind of day4-6
featured story by Paigetheoracle

Bus ride with my brain 7
poem by Jenna

Seth's adventures with Archie Autism8-9
story by Seth

Letters to the Editor 10
one about a woodland from Richard, and
one about left and right from Paigetheoracle

Approaching autistic adulthood11
by Grace Liu
book review by Hermione Cameron

Photograph by Paigetheoracle 12

Masking 13
poem by Virginia Betts

The red fox sets Flora free14-15
story by Anna

One day15-17
story by Mark Reece

Angels 18
by Marian Keyes
book review by S Bee

The rules of *the Spectrum* 19

I, Magneto back cover
poem by J William Nessworthy

A crispy, crunchy kind of day

by **Paigetheoracle**

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“God, that wind is bitter, in a yellowy-pinky sort of way. Need to put something warm and woolly on. Woolly — hmm . . . that has a nice, kind of grey sound to it.”

Mike walked out the door as a gust of cold wind hit him in the face.

“That whistling wind was in A flat — you’d have expected it to be in C sharp!” he laughed to himself.

“Oh well, this won’t get the cow milked or the beer barrels down the cellar,” he said to himself and walked on.

“This is definitely hot chocolate weather,” he thought as he waltzed on down the road.

“Morning, Mrs Wilson!” he grinned at the approaching woman.

“Morning Michael! Cold day!” she replied.

“Yes but there’s a tinge of orange in the air.”

“If you say so.” A look of, ‘Oh my God, here we go again, crept across her embarrassed face, which turned slightly away at this, to her, unfathomable remark.

Michael continued, “You can almost taste it, when the wind blasts you in the face.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Mrs Wilson said in a bemused, rather than amused way. She looked at him strangely, knowing this was just part of him and his strange family. His father, for instance, and the way he referred to all lawnmowers as being “Grahams” — moaning, tough, stubborn and always arguing with you, rather than just

cutting the grass as they were simply meant to do. “Nutters, all nutters,” she thought to herself, “but mostly harmless.”

Michael moved off. “Well, shopping to do, must dash! Goodbye, Mrs Wilson.”

“Yes,” she said, then realising she was looking at him strangely, she shook herself free of the self-induced trance and said, “I must go too.” Turning her back on him, she walked off as well. “Why is it always like talking to the Wooden Tops when I meet that boy?” she muttered to herself with regret, before disappearing down the street.

“Must remember to get some ninety-tvos in Tesco’s,” Michael thought to himself. “I really love that flash of red which the number ninety-two brings to mind.” (Ninety-two evoked scarlet in his thoughts, which was a code for peanuts, for no sensible reason he’d ever been able to discern, but it was always ninety-two-scarlet-peanuts as an association in his head.)

Great Uncle Ernie was funny. He used to say that Tuesday made him sad — not the day itself but the name. All he had to hear was the name repeated, to feel himself slipping into a bleary-eyed state. Kids at school would take advantage of this to make him burst into tears by chanting, “Tuesday! Tuesday! Tuesday!”

“What’s up Smith?” a teacher would innocently ask.

“They’ve been screaming Tuesday at me again.”

To which the teacher would respond by clipping him round the ear, saying, “Pull yourself together boy!” or a baffled, “What the hell are you on about?” again followed by a clip round

the ear, for being cheeky to the teacher. “I don’t know what your game is but I’m not putting up with this utter dribble — do you understand? See me after school.”

“Yes but . . .”

“Don’t but me or you’ll have to stay behind for longer!”

As a small child, he apparently nearly jumped out of his seat at the table because an orange’s bitter taste made him see a bright, green flash in front of his eyes.

“I’ve always been wired up strange,” he always said, when reminded of this and other incidents, that elicited peculiar responses in him.

Uncle Dick was totally different. He became a maths teacher. He said that he was so good at it that numbers jumped up at him. Colours and geometric shapes, stood out like 3-D versions of the real 2-D things, floating in space before him, like what we’d call holograms I suppose. He also used to say that sound was a pyramid and that high-pitched notes were at the pinnacle and low, bass sounds were naturally “at the base.” He also said that the pyramid was coloured — the bottom being dark and physically heavy. As you went up it, it got lighter and lighter, going through all the colours of the rainbow (and then some), until you reached the very top which was bright, and “light” in both senses of the word.

He also used to say that he could see everything in layers or scales, like music (he even said emotion was the same); you name it — it was all graded by opposing forms of existence, from hard to soft, up to down, inside to out, fast to slow, and so on.

He further said that males were hard, rigid, spiky, crude and the feminine was marked out by being soft, round and refined. Women were fluid — melted by their own warmth into one form or worn smooth by time and motion. Men, on the other hand, were rigid crystals — separated by their cold, hard, incisive attitude to life. Women

were settled — coagulated into a rounded form, like the Earth itself but men were always unsettled and unsettling (up in the air).

It’s funny that he was a genius that way because I was useless at maths myself, plus couldn’t tell right from left and was always getting lost as a child because I had no sense of direction.

Auntie Jane was a brilliant artist and the only member of the family to get anywhere, apart from Uncle Dick. She was a mean piano player too, preferring blues and jazz because they inspired her so much, with their dark, opulent colours, she said. “Oh those rich, velvety, jazzy purples,” she’d croon, when tinkling the ivories. She had epilepsy. It was her opinion that the sheer influx of some colours flooded her brain with so much electrical activity that she collapsed into what she termed a mental orgasm of riotous shades. Eventually she ended up in what was then called a mental asylum because of it. I had migraines for the same reason. Particular sounds would overwhelm me and the inside of my head would reflect Disney’s *Fantasia* —flashes of red, yellow, magenta, and so on.

Cousin Tom used his synaesthesia in a constructive way. “The Great Tombola!” as he was known. He could memorise telephone books as a child — not that anybody particularly wanted him to but that was his party trick each Christmas. He was even better at doing mental arithmetic than Uncle Dick but the latter didn’t care too much, saying he knew several mathematicians who couldn’t count their blessings, let alone the change in their pocket.

Ah, here we are! My destination, or at least the one before I go shopping proper: “The Last Gasp Café” as I call it.

“Hello Angela!”

“Hello yourself.”

“Good Christmas?”

“Good? Frozen turkey, frozen water pipes and frozen out by his relatives again.”

feature (continued) and a filler

“New Year?”

“Yes I had one.”

“But was it any good?”

“What do you think: the parents were still there.”

“Whose parents?”

“Whose do you think? Certainly not mine.”

“When are you going back to the funny farm?”

“When it becomes funny ha-ha and not funny peculiar.”

There was a pause.

“Talking of peculiar, don’t you like Theakston’s Old Peculier or something similar?”

“Marston’s Pedigree.”

“Begins with a pee doesn’t it?”

“Yes and talking of pees, I need one before I have a coffee — it’s freezing outside.”

And with that he made his way to the toilet.

“Angela,” he said to himself, “has a nice lemony flavour to it, with a tinge of apricot.”

“Hi, Mike!” said a figure coming out of the loo.

“Hi Ken!” he replied. (That’s a nice walnutty name isn’t it — perfect for this time of year, just like Chris, with its chestnutty feel.)

Five minutes later and he’s out enjoying his nice, hot coffee.

“They say we’re sensory amalgams but society itself is an amalgam of different inputs and outputs: different cultures, different languages, different races — forming and reforming into new combinations, ensuring the human race stays stimulated, alive, aware and awake through this mixing, instead of being bored to death by unchanging sameness; defended by the old-minded, to keep things old — that is, ensure the established stays established and inherited control is passed on.”

Words evoke physical responses in everybody, as with Pavlov’s dogs and conditioning, but this is self-taught repulsion and attraction. Other people don’t see it as being the same thing as our confused sensory orientation, of subjective-objective unity, but it is. It’s all association, as with intelligence and creativity — only making connections most others wouldn’t.

It’s funny but this cappuccino reminds me of pink blancmange for some reason. Angela is a nice enough woman, but it’s Mandy who I usually come in here to see.

“Mandy is sweet.
Mandy is kind.
And with a body like that
She drives me out of my mind!”

He coughed in a nervous way as though embarrassed at what he’d just said — which he was. If only his mother could hear him now.

“Oh well, time to go through my list and actually do what I came here to do.”

And with that, he was gone in a flash of light and maybe just a hint of minty surprise.

We abandon what we cannot understand because we can’t stand the pain of failure (the humiliation of not knowing and therefore not being able to

control something). It is easier to destroy all communications with something than build or maintain them (trust rather than distrust).

by **Paigetheoracle**

Bus ride with my brain

by Jenna

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Bus due at 8:13
Now is 8:12
One minute
Why is that person
Staring at me?
Now is 8:13
Where is the bus?
What do people do
While waiting?
Look at watch
Now what?
Look at phone
It says a different time
Adjust watch
Now is 8:15
No bus
If it arrives now
I will still be on time
Now is 8:20
I won't have time
For my cup of tea
Now is 8:22
Bus!
Let everyone else go first
It's polite
"Hello" to bus driver
A grunt in return
Was it something I said?
Find seat by window
Look at the world whizz by
"Is this seat free?"
What a lovely tree
"Is this seat free?"
"Oh, sorry, yes"
Their shoelace is undone
They haven't noticed
Is it rude to say?
It's hot
I'm trapped in this seat
I'm late
Their shoelace is undone
Those headphones are too loud
Their ears will hurt
I'm late
Their shoelace is undone
It's hot
I'm trapped
It's too loud
Their shoelace is undone

I
Can't
Cope
...
...
Stroke my jacket
Hum to myself
Imagine home
Stroke jacket
Scuff shoe on floor
Ignore
Ignore
Ignore
The stares
Ignore
The noise
Ignore
The heat
Two minutes
Ignore
Ignore
Ignore
Almost miss stop!
Sorry
Sorry
Sorry
Now is 8:47
Run to work
Ignore the stares
Now is 8:50
Only ten minutes early
Staffroom
Do my checks
Colleagues
Will be ignored
Until space is restored
In my brain.

Seth's adventures with Archie Autism

Prologue

by Seth

© Seth Smith-Sims 2022

I know a lot of children's books are written in third-person but this is *my* story and I wanted to write it from my point of view, and not have another person talk for me or describe what is happening to me from a distance.

You find that a lot with autism: all these grown-ups who meet you for a few hours and then tell you what you should think and feel and how you should respond. They hand your parents (not you) a pile of papers, and give some more to your school, that are about you, and nothing much really happens. They step away nodding to themselves that they have done a good job and you will probably never see them again.

It's like being knighted: I pronounce you Asperger's, now off into the world.

They might do a few extra things like take you out of lesson and do "one-to-one work", which can be fun as you get to miss a bit of English, but on a bad day it just makes you feel worse as you know all the other kids

in class already think you're weird or different, and act like you're getting special treatment.

You might be able to take in little things to help you concentrate and have instructions typed out for you, you might get extra time to do work because your brain "processes" things differently to other people.

Doesn't mean you're stupid, it just means it takes longer for the words in your head to come together properly and shoot through your fingers onto the paper, or through your mouth.

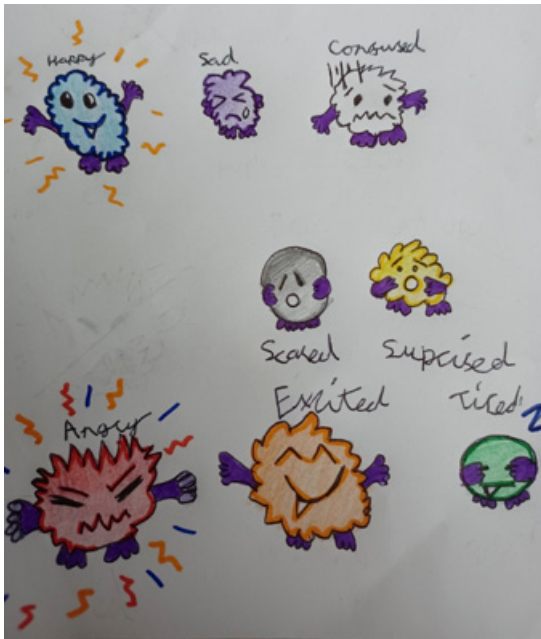
Sometimes it takes so long, you've forgotten the words completely. That's the worst and makes you feel extremely cross, anxious and frustrated.

Other times, your mouth is way too quick for your brain and the wrong thing comes out because the words got muddled. Sometimes bad words come out and you can't stuff them back in because your brain hasn't caught up yet and then you get a red card

from your teacher, and you feel cross at them for giving it to you when your brain tried so hard not to, cross at the girl sat in her chair at the opposite table giving you that disapproving look, but mainly cross at your mouth for shouting it out and at your brain for not coming to the rescue.

But yeah, this is my story and that's why it's first person. Some things might be similar to you. Some things might not. We don't all have to be the same and we don't all have to fit into boxes, some of us do just as good as squiggly lines.

When most kids choose a pet it's usually something fluffy and cute or slimy and wriggly or feathered and chirpy. Not me. Though I think he chose me rather than the other way round. I'll explain later, for now all you need to know is he changes with my moods, his name is Archie and he has a habit of showing up and causing mischief or saving the day.



These are his colours.

I first met Archie when I was moving up to Junior school. Until then, he'd remained mainly hidden. It's kind of like a reverse fairy tale, where the older you get the more the creature appears. I suppose that sounds quite ominous. It's not meant to be, it's just that growing up for most children is full of wonder and nerves and excitement. For me it's hard to deal with all those things: I get really anxious. Sometimes it makes me sad, sometimes angry and that's when Archie appears the most.

But covid has changed everything for everyone and made things much harder. Except I kind of like the social distance rule — that's one rule I *do* understand. I don't really do touching. I do get told off for poking others, even though it's meant in a friendly way. Apparently it's

“aggressive” and “not appropriate”. Not sure what that means but sounds not nice at all and the opposite of what I meant, which usually happens a lot to me (especially at school, with all the rules I keep forgetting), so I just shrug it off and carry on with what I am doing, which is usually playing with a bit of Blu-Tack or twirling my fidget

toys round my fingers so the blood stops and makes them look all strange and wrinkly, or tapping my feet (though again there is a rule against tapping and feet, which is strange, as the teacher taps her pen on the desk all the time — usually to tell us off or point something out. Apparently that kind of tapping and pointing is allowed?!).

See. Rules. Confusing.

Lockdown is like an autism meltdown for people who've never known what it's like to be anxious. Not being able to do what you want and being told by someone else, who doesn't seem to understand or care about how it makes you feel, that you should do this or do that against your every instinct, so that your body wants to run forever and ever or curl up and disappear into itself, like a cat in the

corner, and your brain wants to introduce you to every thought you've ever had all at once so that you feel you can't possibly fit anything else in there in case it comes out of your ears and nose and explodes.

You feel nervous all the time and people are telling you to do more and be like everyone else. More exercise (you can't get out of bed? Don't be lazy). More for charity (you can't get out the front door — don't be silly). More for others (you can't even help yourself — don't be selfish). More. More. More.

Have you ever thought, world, that *you* should be doing more?

Like understanding.

Welcome to a tiny glimpse of our autism world! Only, you will probably, at some point, go back to “normal” and forget what this feels like and forget about people like me.

We, in turn, will return to our world under the duvets, in the corners and continue to try not to be seen; each with our own Archie for comfort.

The blanket's covering us again so the world doesn't have to see.

This is an extract from a much longer piece. I hope to publish another extract later this year, Editor.

letters to the Editor

Hi Goth

Myself and three other Autistic people have started a project in Devon to create a wood that is specifically for Autistic people.

We are currently trying to set up an Autism support picnic group at the wood. Hopefully it will meet once a week or every two weeks on a Friday. We have done a few picnics at the wood and people bring food they have made and it has been quite enjoyable.

One person who comes to the wood knew of you and *the Spectrum* magazine and suggested writing to you asking whether I could do a short article for the magazine and or an advert for the support group. Here is some information about the project.

The wood was purchased in 2019 by myself. It is located in North Devon, it is 3.5 acres and is partially Ancient woodland. The project found volunteers through Autscope and welcomed its first two volunteers in April 2021 and another in July 2021. The wood has Public Liability Insurance and I have had a DBS check.

The aims of the project are:

- to create a wood for Autistic people
- conservation — to restore an area of Ancient woodland
- innovation — to use a method of minimal intervention forestry as described by Peter Wohlleben in his book, *The hidden lives of trees*

- to create a place where Autistic people can visit to relax and enjoy nature
- to create a place where Autistic people can volunteer and participate in the project if they feel like it
- to be a small project so that everyone feels comfortable and so that we minimise our impact on the wildlife of the area
- to be a by us, for us project
- to be inclusive and to be independent of political or religious agendas.

This year we have done a presentation about the wood at Autscope. It included details of what we had achieved in the wood and testimonials by people who had been a part of the project.

It would be great if we could find people to attend the Autism support picnic group at the wood. In the covid era, outdoor groups are a great place to meet and people often struggle to find venues.

I am on the National Autistic Society Community forums:

community.autism.org.uk

Please contact me there if you are interested in taking part or visiting.

Thanks

Richard

Dear Goth,

I notice that I have difficulty with left and right. I can say to my wife turn left but point right and it is my visual sense that is usually correct not my vocal (sonic) one, which makes mistakes and indeed lies under certain circumstances, for instance when fear comes into play. I wonder if this subject of processing difficulties might be

worth discussing in *the Spectrum* and wondered what other readers thought?

Yours,

Paigetheoracle

All subjects that affect our lives are worth discussing — I look forward to it, Editor.

Approaching autistic adulthood: the road less travelled

by **Grace Liu**

published by Panoma Press

ISBN: 978 1 78452 957 4 £12.99 / \$17.95

review by **Hermione Cameron**, National Autistic Society Content Team

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As the title would imply, Grace Liu's book takes us on a journey — from her early years in Taiwan and her diagnosis as a child, to her life as an autistic adult. The author expertly balances personal anecdotes with handy tips, tools, and phrases for surviving the strange world of neurotypicals! Readers are also treated to some fantastic chapter illustrations, drawn by Liu herself, and reflections from fellow autistic adults.

Through her writing, the author discusses themes of intersecting identities — in Liu's case, her identity as a dual heritage person of British and Taiwanese descent, an autistic person, and a member of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Other topics include work, sensory differences, mental health, and relationships. Liu has a talent for describing complex feelings in an accessible way. An example that stuck with me was a passage in Chapter Two, where the author compares sensory and social overload to carrying around a very heavy box without being able to stop or put it down. She writes: "By the time an hour has passed, you have long since had to give up because you are exhausted. People might say things like, "But you were carrying it so well an hour ago. You can keep doing it!" Or worse, "Why are you so tired? We weren't walking that fast." Or someone who didn't see how far you carried the box sees you being unable to walk with it now and thinks you are weak or incompetent."

The author also breaks abstract concepts down into bite-sized categories — for instance, in Chapter Three, she defines three different stages or types of friendship: "the casual friendship", "the fun friendship" and "the close friendship". Of course, each person is different, and in some cases, these categories may seem a bit too formulaic. However, as somebody who often feels overwhelmed by the "big picture", I found these definitions helpful, and they gave me some ideas on how to approach my own friendships.

Another highlight of the book is Chapter Four, which focuses on romance, dating, and sexuality. Liu shares her thoughts on navigating intimate relationships, as well as insight from other autistic adults. She approaches the topic with honesty and sensitivity, offering guidance to fellow LGBTQIA+ autistic people, and tips on how to deal with negative or difficult reactions from other people. LGBTQIA+ readers may particularly appreciate the list of possible phrases (which Liu herself has used in her own life) for talking about sexuality or coming out to friends and family.

The book offers readers an honest, funny, and refreshing take on the autistic experience. It features a wide spectrum of perspectives, and I would certainly recommend it to autistic readers and their loved ones, or to anyone who is interested in learning more about autism.



This photograph, the filler on page 6 and a letter on page 10
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by **Paigetheoracle**

Masking

by Virginia Betts

© Virginia Betts 2022

We meet in the street;
you fancy a chat,
and you go on and on
about this,
and that;
I admire your coat;
you admire mine;
I say you seem tired;
you say you'd look better
if you'd had the time,
this morning,
to put your face on.

To put your face on
means make-up;
like after a fight;
so maybe a brave face;
which is war-paint;
which then leads to Braveheart,
smeared and daubed,
leading the charge;
so, leads charging;
well, there's my laptop
at home, charging up,
like a knight on a white horse —
or loitering alone —
the one in Keats' poem,
where things wither by the lake;
which leads to monsters of the deep,
(though technically that's a loch)
like in a door,
without a key;

stop, stop, stop —

a quay!
where War-Brides stand
to wave goodbye to their land —
and your remark makes my thoughts take off;
spill into my brain
in split-second time,
and, as they take flight,
I miss your next lines.

So I just keep quiet,
and nod and smile
in the right place, I hope;
put on a made-up face;
wear normality like a cloak;

play out the elaborate spectacle
of the mask,
while behind the crafted veneer,
bottomless wells of thoughts
spiral down endlessly,
and the grey shadow of fatigue
follows fast

The red fox sets Flora free

by Anna

Flora never felt like she belonged anywhere. She was always called a “problem child” by her parents and teachers because she was not like the other children — an “enigma” in fact. She was very articulate, yet could not make friends with her peer group, could not learn in the conventional manner, and preferred to lose herself in her books for hours on end. The red fox (*Volpes volpes*) was one of her passions in life, ever since she caught a glimpse of the beautiful creature from her bedside window, her special place. For she rarely left the house other than to go to school, a place that filled her with constant dread and anxiety because of people, germs, movement, noise, and chaos. Flora could only be herself in her den, tucked away among her books with the occasional fox sighting for company.

It is possible that Flora feels an affinity with foxes because they, like her, are often persecuted and hunted. Bullied because of being different, not fitting in, being too wild and invasive for the civilised world. Yet the fox has an indomitable spirit, a fiery resilience that is a beacon of hope as red as its fur. Like the fox, people like Flora will not go extinct, they will carry on living and persisting in a world not made

for them. Flora has often ruminated on these thoughts as she sat meditatively gazing out of the window during the twilight hours, for foxes are crepuscular, which means they are rarely seen in broad daylight. Flora too feels safest when under cover.

Unfortunately, Flora’s next-door neighbour hates foxes because they regularly steal her chickens, and defecate on her immaculate, AstroTurfed lawn. Despite the fact that it’s illegal, the neighbour was intent on trapping any fox that dared to enter her garden. Flora was terrified that one day her fox friends would die a terrible death, and this thought kept Flora awake at night. On one such night, Flora was tossing and turning in restless anguish when she suddenly intuitively knew that all was not well outside. She had to investigate. Stepping gingerly out into the moonlit night, Flora heard a mournful cry coming from her neighbour’s garden. As quietly as she could, Flora crept over the low fence and tiptoed across her neighbour’s garden in the direction of the sound. A baby fox cub had been caught in a trap. The grey ball of fluff looked at Flora with beseeching, doleful eyes, and Flora was overcome with immense pity. What evil ogre could do this to such an

innocent baby! Flora did not know how to remove the trap, but she did know who might help. Taking her mobile phone out of her pocket, Flora rang the Wildlife Rescue hotline. The man at the end of the line took down all the details, and said he would arrive very soon. The wait felt like an eternity, but Flora did not leave the cub’s side, and softly sang lullabies to keep the cub calm. The kindly, elderly man from Wildlife Rescue, who Flora recognised from the television, deftly removed the cub from the trap and told Flora that, after taking the cub to the animal hospital for treatment, he would take the cub back to Flora’s garden so that the little one could find her mother.

The school arranged for Flora to have counselling because the fox incident had been so distressing. The counsellor was a beautiful woman called Mrs Volps, who had long russet hair that fell Rapunzel-like in waves down her slender body. Her eyes were intelligent and searching, but there was a slight skittishness whenever a dog could be heard barking, or Flora moved too quickly. It almost felt as though Mrs Volps and Flora were kindred spirits because Flora, too, had a wariness around dogs, and was terrified of sudden, loud

a story (continued) and another story

noise. Mrs Volps delved deep into Flora's secrets, her interests and cloistered life. Flora's interest in foxes was of special concern for Mrs Volps, and Flora could not help noticing a slight protuberance snaking out of Mrs Volp's rear. Mrs Volps noticed Flora's quizzical expression, and asked Flora if she could keep a sacred secret close to her heart. "Of course," Flora replied, "I like you very much and am more than happy to oblige." Mrs Volps then told Flora that she was the mother of Kit, the little grey fox-baby Flora had saved from the trap, and she wanted to repay Flora's heroic compassion. During the day Volps was a counsellor at the school, where she secretly looked out for fellow kitsunes, young girls who were foxes at heart, but did not know this fact, and so they felt misunderstood and rejected by their peers. Mrs Volps told Flora that she also had a tail, but needed to become conscious of her fox nature in order to be able to make the full vulpine transformation. Once this process was complete, Flora could come home to her fox family during the twilight hours, and play with her fox friends in the brambles. During daytime, Flora would change back into a girl, but she would always know who her real friends were, and would never feel rejected again.

And so this short tale has a happy ending. Flora the kitsune had found her calling among the russet dogs of the night, and when she grew up, Flora too became a school counsellor, looking out for child kitsunes to join her in the wild.

One day

by **Mark Reece**

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content warning: mild gore and horror

Language feels tangible to me. When reading, I slip around words like an eel wriggling through an underwater log. My brain is linguistically well-oiled; I read faster than I can comprehend, feeling out of breath when coming to the end of a paragraph before realising that although I have eaten the words, wrapping my tongue around the cadences, the amount of syllables, the shapes of consecutive vowels, I haven't understood the ideas that shimmer around them. Language entangles all my senses simultaneously. Tautology makes me wince, desperate to wash the stickiness from my brain. Ambiguities poke out of sentences, cutting my tongue. Inelegant use of language smells like gas, making me gag. Fallacies make me irate and ill.

By contrast, elegant phrases lighten my body. When language holds hands to become delicately figurative, I become short of breath. My interoception, weak at the best of times, can break down altogether when reading. I squeeze my tongue between my teeth; time feels chewy, and my imagination

tastes as real as anything I have ever eaten. There is pain around my side that I cannot interpret. It could be hunger, I might need the toilet. I start when it becomes abrupt and peel through layers of clothes, suddenly sure that I have been pierced by something with serrated edges, as if a crazed robot imagined that I was a loose component that had to be bolted in place with an enormous screw, forced through my flesh until metal was painfully incorporated into my organs.

I don't recall the precise nature of what I read that day, only what it induced. Checking my watch, I was surprised to see that it was only two in the afternoon, my exhaustion arising purely from mental exertion. The moment I became aware that I was tired, the sensation was overwhelming.

I woke with a start, knowing that I had slept for ninety minutes, as I remembered dreaming about climbing an infinitely tall tree, which meant that I had gone through a complete sleep cycle. My bunk comprised a metal headrest

a story (continued)

and a white sheet that covered my body to my knees. My surroundings were so radically different from my dream that for a few seconds, I breathed heavily, imagining that I had floated away as I slept.

My room was perhaps twice as wide as the bed. I slept on the top of two bunks, enjoying the breeze from the ventilation shaft on the ceiling, which was strong enough to raise loose strands of hair. The lower bunk was unoccupied; I kept my scavenged books there. The walls were covered with a soft, cream-coloured material, with flower-shaped protrusions at regular points along the surface. Prodding one made it indent like an egg yolk before slowly returning to its original position. The other features of the room were a toilet in one corner, the smell of which I had eventually gotten used to, leaving only a constant urge to wrinkle my nose, and a vertically sliding door that had become stuck half way.

I had to hunt for food daily. I yawned before ducking under the door. The ship had a very efficient design, which was necessary given how many people it was designed for. The corridor outside was barely wider than me and curved subtly. To my right, multitudes of steps led upwards, as if I was standing on a theatre stage, leading to doors similar to the one I had emerged from. I had not liked my location at first, imagining that I would exist

in a cacophony; constantly looking this way and that to determine where a sneeze had come from. However, the sound proofing was so good that I had never heard anyone from the surrounding rooms. I stood there a moment, taking in the sights, before my stomach rumbled.

I held my breath when making my way around the floor, as I always did. There were a series of tiny wedges along the ground, which my clumsy feet regularly struck, making me stumble. The ship was an extremely sensuous world, filled with vast spaces, flashing lights, and sounds just loud enough to hear, such that I often stopped to gaze blankly.

Counting my steps after leaving my room comforts me, although I recently stopped doing so, painfully aware that my feet are still growing, meaning that the measurement isn't accurate.

"Identity card."

I winced when hearing the words, the once light female voice turned abrasive through a flickering power supply. The door leading out of the living area had become security-locked after the emergency. Its panels had long been torn from the metal frame, leaving a series of red notches glowing dangerously.

Something's different. The thought was like a kick to the shin. Routine comforts me.

Counting my steps, trying to calculate how many other rooms there were, feeling the beat of my boots hitting the floor, all those sensations felt like friendly hands under my skull, soothing my brain. Suddenly, I smelt burning, the experience striking, as I have a poor sense of smell, meaning that whatever it was must have been very strong. I started when seeing that my hand had inadvertently explored the edge of the doorway. Smoke emerged, making me jerk away, leaving skin stuck to the surface.

I retched at the sight of irregular flesh, feeling a strange tingling around my fingertips, as if worms were wriggling out of them. It was only when I squeezed my injured hand that the pain became severe, making me close my eyes and press my canines together. I listened to the sound of my breathing rising and falling until the pain settled into a dull throb, similar to the background anxiety I was familiar with and could readily ignore. I tore a piece off my shirt and wrapped it around the injuries. I laughed at the mess when I had finished, which looked like I had peppered my hand with superglue and toilet roll. Carefully angling myself through the doorway, I continued into the storage area of the ship.

I always paused when reaching the containers. I used to work there with Mike. I did not like him. His smile started

a story (continued) and a notice

to rise whenever he saw me, an expression made by one who never laughed unless the sound was tinged with cruelty. I once told him that I hated the phrase “there’s more than one way to skin a cat”, and, thereafter, he made a point of saying it regularly, always with the same grin, looking as if he had a sweet treat secreted in his cheeks.

Remembering it always made me shudder. Such a stupid phrase. There’s only one way to skin a cat: remove its skin. After I pointed that out, Mike snorted then said that there were lots of ways he could do it: with his bare hands, or a knife, or by throwing one in a blender. I stood facing him, staring with flashing eyes. I thought that I would not be able to speak before my words tumbled out of my mouth all at once.

“All the different scenarios you’ve just mentioned represent a single technique. It does not matter what tool you use to perform a method; the method is the same. There’s only one method of ripping paper in half, whether you use a knife, scissors, or a machine. A cat is the same.”

I was shuddering by the time I finished speaking, and from the silence that permeated the area, I knew that I had been shouting. Mike stared at me momentarily then burst out laughing. I instantly became very angry and thought about hitting him before punching a container hard enough to leave a dent. I felt humiliated that he had seen some part of me that I usually kept hidden, a part that from the expression of surrounding faces should be hidden. My skin felt hot and sticky, leaving a horrible sheen over my arms, such that I rubbed them repeatedly as I fled the scene. I didn’t know whether Mike, and those around him, either didn’t understand, or didn’t care about the impact their words had on me, and I didn’t know which scenario was worse. My arms felt pierced with multiple splinters. The words loomed over my head; I expected them to take corporeal shape any moment, for them to fill the corridor and crush the air from my chest.

That feeling was why I decided to stay on the spaceship after it was evacuated. Although I’m very lonely, sometimes, I thought it was for the best.

Every search each day takes longer. I know that soon, I will have to decide whether it is more important to use my remaining hours breaking into vents and hunting down rodents, licking the ship clean, or whether I should die alongside words. Swimming between them, feeling myself drift, grasping their beauty, although one cannot hide from oneself the acknowledgement that blemishes are breaking out over one’s skin like dying flowers, one’s brain desperately seeks oxygen, breaking down until one can no longer be sure whether what one sees are everyday objects or else wild hallucinations, reminiscent of reaching the end of a story, the apex of a poem, where the battle has been won, the hero triumphed, the plot resolved, when one is standing atop a mountain, feeling the cold, bracing air filling one’s lungs, the crunch of snow between one’s boots, one’s cheeks red and one’s muscles pleurably strained.

Details of the author’s work can be found at:

www.markreece.co.uk

If sufficient material is sent in, the theme for April will be **sensory experiences, especially how other people don’t understand you and synaesthesia**. 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!

Angels

by **Marian Keyes**

published by Penguin

ISBN: 978 1 40593 385 8

£8.99

review by **S Bee**

review © S Bee 2022

This novel tells the story of Maggie, a thirty-something recently separated wife, who goes to stay with her stressed out movie scriptwriter friend, Emily in LA.

The different setting was very refreshing, as we go behind the scenes of the fiction film world. This involves agents, pitches, meetings, re-writes and gossip.

In fact, I felt sorry for Emily, having to deal with all that pressure!

Maggie meets Emily's friends, and becomes intimately involved with two of them — then later goes on to regret it.

It's not surprising that she has flings, as the novel is about someone finding herself and having new experiences.

I found it hard to keep up with all the drinks, dinners, parties and so on — I wondered if Marian had over-written these scenes in order to pack the book out. Publishers require books to be a certain amount of words, and this can have its drawbacks.

I didn't find it realistic that Maggie's parents and two adult sisters would join her, simply for

a holiday. However, I could see the sense in Garv, the husband, turning up.

Emily doesn't hit the big time, yet she ends up finding true love.

After a lot of soul searching and facing up to the cold raw truth, Maggie's adventures in LA come to a happy close.

'Angels' is a sad yet sweet novel, heart-warming and honest.

I would love to see this as a TV drama.



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.
- 2) *The Spectrum* is quarterly, published in January, April, July and October. If you do not receive a copy when you expect to, please contact the magazine.
- 3) Pieces that appear in *the Spectrum* are credited using the author's first name only, unless the author requests something different. This is done to protect your privacy.
- 4) Book reviews are the most popular thing with readers of *the Spectrum*, so please consider submitting one. They can be about any book, not just books about autism. If you do not want your review to appear in other National Autistic Society publicity about that book, please make this clear.
- 5) When you send in a piece for publication in *the Spectrum*, you need to complete a permissions form. The online permissions form is at
www.autism.org.uk/spmagpermissions
- 6) The National Autistic Society promotes *the Spectrum* on social media using pieces taken from the magazine.
- 7) The National Autistic Society would like to keep in touch with you about National Autistic Society services, support, events, campaigns and fundraising. If you want to hear from the National Autistic Society, you can opt in to this on the National Autistic Society website. The National Autistic Society will only contact you in the ways you want.
- 8) If you subscribe to the paper edition and move house, please inform *the Spectrum* and include your old address as well as your new address. Even if you've paid for the Royal Mail forwarding service (or another forwarding service), you still need to inform *the Spectrum* that you have moved address.
- 9) You do not have to be a member of the National Autistic Society to subscribe to *the Spectrum*.
- 10) If you phone and leave a message on the machine, please speak slowly and clearly and spell uncommon words, as the line isn't very clear. Please give any phone number you leave twice for the same reason. Remember to give your postal address so that we can find your record.
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- 14) Although each issue is themed, submissions on any subject are welcome. Only some of the letters and articles will follow the theme. All submissions may be edited, especially for privacy, libel, and for fitting the space available.

I, Magneto

I am a magnet
In a box of pins,
Stuck,
Surrounded by the bloody things.
You say you're used to them
With your thick skin,
But here I am,
Trying to "just get stuck in,"
Dragging pins along with me,
Collecting,
Building,
The pins become heavy
Because none will let go,
And so, I get stuck
Where others just flow.

by J William Nessworthy

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