

# STORIES BEYOND VIOLENCE

PERSONAL STORIES OF AUTISTIC  
PEOPLE AS VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 01 Preface
- 03 By Maria do Mar
- 05 By Anonymous
- 11 By Rimbaud
- 14 Violence in childhood: story of an adult who was once a child, by Eva (Lia Wolf)
- 21 Late identification and redefining the traumatised self-following sexual violence, by Katrine Callander
- 28 My reflexes took over my mind, by Tess Van Deynse
- 32 By Maria Gonçalves Porto

- 34** Aspie at ICU, by Elina Löfström
- 43** Shadows, by Joana Freitas Costa
- 47** By Jaque
- 53** Flickering Expectations - From the pits of Emptiness to the surReality of Life  
By Flappa McFluttery
- 61** Reports of "Invisible" Violence  
By Andreia Domingos
- 68** What is being normal? A diagnosis for self-perception  
By Daniel Santos Morais
- 72** Violence in familiar words  
By M. Madeira de Sousa
- 76** By Joaquim Guedes
- 80** The Lost Voices of Children.  
by Lily

# Preface

---

The sixteen stories in this book bring you the personal, first-hand experiences behind the grim numbers shown by all the studies on autistic people as victims and survivors of violence. They will help you to gain some insight into autistic people going through trauma and living with scars, both physical and emotional, as well as the reasons for violence against autistic people remaining mostly unreported.

There is a great need for this kind of knowledge. If you search for information about autism and violence, the first things that come up are studies and media stories about autistic people as aggressors, about assessing the risk of autistic people acting violently and managing their violent behavior. You will find speculations about perpetrators of violent crime being autistic, with the implication that autism was a contributing factor in their actions. We hope that this book will raise questions about the reverse situation. What is it about autistic people that so often makes us the targets of violence, and how could the behavior of others be changed to stop this from happening?

Publishing these stories has been made possible by a grant from the European Women's Lobby. Collecting and editing the text has been carried out by a team of autistic researchers led by Sara Rocha.

We are grateful to the writers who have invested their time and effort, recounting painful experiences for the benefit of others. We hope that this work will inspire others to develop better advocacy, support services and preventive practices, as well as helping readers with similar experiences to find their paths out of abusive situations, towards surviving and healing.

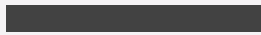
1st April in Vantaa, Finland

Heta Pukki

President, European Council of Autistic People

Warning: This anthology has descriptions of several types of violence and mental health difficulties that readers may find distressing.

# By Maria do Mar



*Trigger warning for meltdown and restraints*

I was having a Meltdown in a public garden.

I just wanted help, I wanted to be told that everything was okay, I wanted a hug to make it all stop. But they just held me tight. That touch was so uncomfortable. It burned my skin. I could see around me people looking at me, filming me. Like I was an attraction in a circus. I just wanted it all to stop. I started to get tired. Seeing all those people around me, I was even more lost. I wanted to get out of there, but they kept grabbing me. I felt so lost, so misunderstood, so hurt, so afraid of what was happening that I wanted to die at that moment. Maybe then it would all go away. But they had already called the police and paramedics.

They grabbed me. I was afraid. I tried to run away, but they threw me to the ground, sat on me, grabbed my wrists tightly. I screamed. I could barely breathe. But nobody came to my aid. They kept looking at me like I was a criminal. I know that I had a very important bracelet on one of my wrists, it was broken into pieces. I had marks and pain on my wrists for a while.

They told me that if I didn't stop immediately, they would handcuff me. How did they want me to stop if I was in the middle of a Meltdown? If the stimuli around me were getting bigger and bigger? If they kept grabbing me, if I felt more and more uncomfortable? If my Meltdown was growing by the second? If none of it stopped around me? If the confusion, noise, and touching only grew?

They handcuffed me. At that moment I felt humiliated. Tired. I just wanted to go home and lie down. They took me to the hospital, strapped me to a stretcher and gave me an injection that put me to sleep for the rest of the day.

I realized that I couldn't be Autistic. That I couldn't show that I was Autistic. That I couldn't flinch. From that day on I was afraid, I still am today. Every time I have a Meltdown this pain and humiliation comes to mind and I'm afraid it will happen again. I'm afraid of having a Meltdown, of not being able to control myself. I'm afraid of being Autistic. I'm afraid of being me. I'm afraid of the police and the paramedics. I'm supposed to feel safe, but I'm just afraid. Every day I'm afraid to go out into the street and face the world.

The authorities should have knowledge, training, and know how to act in these cases. I'm not a criminal, I'm not crazy. I'm just Autistic. I'm just having a Meltdown. And I need your help.

# By Anonymous



*Trigger warning for sexual violence and suicide attempt*

Violence...well where do I start.

Born in a family with a narcissist mom, I was soon aware that I've had to control myself in order to connect? Be loved? I did not know what to expect of her.

Being autistic it was easy to manipulate me. And she knew it.

She mentioned several times that she suspected I was autistic, because of my extreme sensitivity to noise, people in general and she knew I was barely able to speak up for myself. Then came school, another place where my differences were so much more visible than expected. Amazing grades, an extended vocabulary which made me a target.

I also hated the break moments, where everyone ran outside to play, and teachers never let me stay in the classroom alone.

So, I was exposed to noise and kids playing so loudly. It was unbearable. I remember putting my head between my knees trying to stop the noise and trying to be invisible. Well, that didn't work well for me either. My weirdness was detected by other kids, and I was quickly their target.

I was quiet, I was lonely, I never spoke unless asked for...

I guess by 6 years old, the bullying started to get harder.

Kids were jealous of my grades, though that my vocabulary was snobbish...

I was just reading dictionaries and encyclopaedias when home alone. I was already reading adult romances because kid's books were just so boring. The worst came when I changed schools at 10 years old. A much bigger school, I was always overstimulated. Everything was overwhelming, the noise, too many students, students that were between 10 and 15 years old. I began again to get noticed, trying not to get noticed. I tried so hard, to just keep quiet in a corner alone, praying to be invisible. That's when I knew religion was a bunch of lies, because I didn't ask for money, clothes, or superficial things, I just wanted to be invisible. In class, I had kids stealing my work, and erasing it, and drawn or written again by those kids, mostly girls. They did that to spread the rumour that my grades were not earned, that teachers themselves, corrected what I did so I would have good grades. Violence started then being also physical because I was tall and really skinny.

I do not have a single good memory from my school days.

We were quite poor by then, so I had clothes that were given to us. The clothes were not fashionable at all. So, they picked on me for the way I acted, dressed, for the way I walked, for the way I talked. In gymnastics class, all the kids were amazing, so coordinated, I was a total mess.

Imagine a gym court, and having maybe, 50 or a hundred kids watching, and I failed every single coordination exercise. The other girls liked that; I was not good at everything. They found it soon. I remember being insulted, pushed around. And never told anyone. I mean, who would believe me? I was so quiet, so peaceful, why would someone even notice me?

High school...my lowest moments in life happened there. I was losing weight, I weighed 32 kg for 1,70 of height, again, made me a target. I then have flashbacks only from those times. I guess sometimes things are too hard, and your own mind makes you erase some of it.

I was highly medicated, had several hospitalizations for suicide attempts.

One of those suicide attempts was particularly hard.

I had a huge discussion with my mom, who used to hide all the pills I took. Like a huge argument I remember glass breaking, words like you are the worst thing that has happened to me, I wish you were never born... you were not planned, I hate you, I hate you. And she left the house.

I was in distress, I could see she was leaving in her car, and I looked at the kitchen table. She had left all the prescription pills I took on the kitchen table, to make sure I would do, what I did next, what she expected me to do.

I remember taking the pills one by one, not before forming a straight line on the floor with them and counting 117 pills. I blacked out. Was then awoken by my younger brother, my mom trying to hit me because I was such an undesirable person. Ambulance, out of body experience, woke up several days after I was transferred to a major hospital, and was in a coma for a few days. I woke up all painted black from the activated carbon they pumped my stomach with. I had a tube from my nose into my stomach. And they said I would be there for some time.

I don't remember if I was in a psychiatric ward for several weeks or months, honestly, I have no idea. I was able to convince them I was fine, and life was wonderful. I knew how to do it so well; I couldn't not do it too soon or it would look suspicious. I knew the timings, the expressions to use, the key words that would get me back to .... freedom? It's just a manner of speaking. The outside world was a prison, the freedom I found in my room, alone in silence.

I had other bad moments at home, at school, even though my grades were amazing. But life kept wanting to quit again. So, I did it. This time someone found me too soon, although I begged and told I already had thrown up all the pills, an ambulance was called. And the chaos began again. Stomach pumped again, puking black stuff, half conscious.

One night I was in intermediate care, in the emergency room, but a separate temporary place. A male nurse entered the room where I was alone, there were 3 other beds. Empty beds. Why?

He started looking around, closed the curtain of a little window, and closed the door. I immediately froze, like if I knew something was going to happen. He started stroking my hair, saying that I was so pretty, that I was too damn pretty to end my life... Stroking my hair, looking around. I closed my eyes so hard, pretending I was not awake. I then tried to move, to turn my back at him. And that's when I felt that he was holding me. Started kissing my ears, my neck, my back...things escalated quickly.

I was completely paralyzed. I was so scared. I was only 16 years.

And in my mind, I knew if I told anyone...well who would have believed me? The crazy girl from the psych yard? Or the male nurse who was 40 years older than me? I don't know how to talk about those details, I never did. Woke up with blood...I felt so dirty, so degraded. I just remembered being hospitalized again and took a bath, almost ripping my own skin. When I was dismissed from the yard, I went home and took baths with alcohol and bleach. I had the skin red and falling from the bleach baths. Nobody told me anything about it. Mom just thought I was getting crazy again.

All those violence episodes made me afraid of stuff that most people aren't until today, even if I do not let it show. I'm always watching and reading others' intentions, always expecting the worst, never accepting medical appointments with male doctors, always avoiding circumstances where I could easily lose control or not be credible. Because now I am an autistic woman who maybe understood something wrong.

I am the person who took a touch on the hair for sexual harassment. Well, it is. It's in my personal space. It's too close, and some gestures, words, will always act like a trigger.

I'm a 38 year old woman who avoids the hospital, or even exams that imply general anaesthesia, because I'm not controlling. Because something might happen while I'm asleep, or even when I'm in the recovery yard. I do not trust males in general, and always keep my distance. I am cold, arrogant, I try my best to keep a secure distance. I cannot change the past. I can't.

I decided long ago that I would not give power to my aggressor.

That I should not mention again what happened and just move on with my life. In a general way...I did it. I'm married, have kids, and a job. But I still get irrationally scared of things I cannot control, things that go out of my precious routines.

Recently I discovered due to work that I will have to have a medical appointment.

This situation triggered all my fears back.

What is going to happen? What are they going to do to me? Is it a male? Can I leave the door open? How can I protect myself? I know, I will be extremely rude, arrogant, and will give a horrible image of myself, but is it still the only way I know to keep myself safe? If there is another way I don't know.

I wish I knew; I wish I could effectively move on, forget, get over it. Because I just realized that 22 years have passed, and I am still that 16-year-old girl in situations where I might not be in control.

I wish I knew how to react differently; I wish I could process this. Because clearly, I haven't. I thought I had...but no. I'm not over it. He still has power over me, over my life. And that's fucking hard to acknowledge.

wish I knew; I wish I could effectively move on, forget, get over it. Because I just realized that 22 years have passed, and I am still that 16-year-old girl in situations where I might not be in control.

I wish I knew how to react differently; I wish I could process this. Because clearly, I haven't. I thought I had...but no. I'm not over it. He still has power over me, over my life. And that's fucking hard to acknowledge.

## By Rimbaud

Trigger warning for violence and suicide attempt

When I think of violence against autistic people, I don't think of it as a mere question of morality or injustice. It's more of a question of existence. Our existence is the subject of systemic violence, in which the end goal is our erasure from society. Violence can take many forms, so I will not share my story, in the strict sense of the word, because that wouldn't accurately reflect the intricate, insidious nature of it.

Violence is being subject to medical procedures, without your consent. Violence is having to work and mask, so that you can afford your meds. Violence is coming to school, afraid of getting vile judgements of yourself, accentuating the isolation imposed upon you. It is being segregated in an institution because there is no support in their communities. It is becoming homeless because you were fired due to a meltdown. It is getting into an abusive relationship because you need external validation and approval, that were chronically denied to you. It is being stuck with your abusive family because you depend on them to survive.

Violence is waiting months for your psychiatrist appointment, when you tried to kill yourself, just yesterday. It is considering suicide as an option because you cannot live with your traumas, for much longer. It is to be told you shouldn't work in healthcare, because

you are too anxious to mask. It is being put down by the police, when they see your distress as a threat, especially if you are not white. It is being repressed and judged by your happy dancing and interest in nail polish, and you happen to be a guy. It is getting spanked by your parents because you cannot leave your bed on time. It is getting chastised for your assertiveness since they perceive it as disobedience.

Violence is working, even if you have chronic pain, even if your mental illness is getting worse, even if your fatigue is overwhelming, even if you can't deal with the noise, because you need to survive. It is being unable to work and not getting enough disability benefits to afford your living. It is being so dismissed by your doctors, that your undiagnosed chronic conditions get worse, and you don't know why and how to manage them, as they are taking over your life. It is getting threatening to be put in a psychiatric ward, when you are too publicly distressed. It is being denied gender transition, because autistic people shouldn't hold any bodily autonomy, according to doctors.

Violence is not having friends to support you and love you, not despite your autistic identity, but because of it. It is living as a nonverbal autistic under the social expectations to talk, in order to get access to basic needs. It is getting locked in a room, until you are able to maintain eye contact. It is dreadful if fascist and right-wing parties get in power because there is a history of mass

extermination of disabled people, under those regimes. It is living with a perpetual uncertainty of yourself, an identity unbeknownst to you, oppressed by society, so you have to hide it and become doomed by self-loathing and shame.

To put it simply, ignoring the violence that we suffer is to ignore our existence, and as such the erasure of our identity, memory, and community is the terminal stage of the normalised violence against us.

Violence is then intertwined with our existence.

# **Violence in childhood: story of an adult who was once a child**

## **By Eva (Lia Wolf)**

*Trigger warning for childhood trauma and attempted sexual abuse*

How can we talk about violence without plunging into past traumas and soiling our memory on them? And how to separate the waters of the film without filters, from reality and the frames of moments blurred by the years? I don't know. But I will try to be faithful to the events, as I remember them.

Curiously, I only keep instants: of feelings, images, smells, and events. Like sobs trapped in fragile bubbles, blown in echoes.

Perhaps the first memory, when I was two of abandonment: a feeling that stuck to me and clothed me in a mixture of detachment, mistrust, and insurmountable neediness. The image of my father cradling me at night, overflowing with affection. His departure, at dawn, escaping difficult goodbyes. A small body frozen with impotence and incomprehension, punching, and crying, against a closed door, too big and solid to be understood. A week of absence, in which I was assured he would return. The return, which never failed, but could not heal the betrayal of departure.

At the age of three, another stretches of memory. A cold school, stone walls and iron doors enclosing the imagination, watched

over by nuns: severe women used to be obeyed. As I didn't recognise their authority, I rebelled by instinct, making them mark my boldness on my skin: physical punishments abounded, because everyone understood how to kick some ass, according to their schoolbook. No one knows exactly how, nor did I retain it, but I always found a way of escaping from this penitentiary and I appeared, by foot, in my grandparents' shop, without the distance, the pudgy body and the absence of a sense of direction preventing me from finding my way. I never told anyone about the ill-treatment: it did not occur to me to do so, nor to ask for help. Fortunately, my mother discovered it a few months later and got me out of there. From that experience I retained the refusal to cry and to bow my head, in equal parts, even under physical duress: a living monument to misplaced pride. The pain of the body is nothing compared to the will of the spirit.

At the age of four, a change of city, houses, routines. The separation from the inexhaustible source of pampering of the maternal grandmother. The growth of responsibility. The entrance to the swimming pool, a thing for people who grow up enclosed between four walls. Until then, swimming was in the river: which served as a pool, playground, fountain, fridge, pantry, and bathtub. The water was clear and cold, and the fish were plentiful: fat and nutritious. In the pool, always under someone's command, there were lots of rules and orders and lacked fish and freedom. The bath was taken in the changing rooms, and, before diving, we had to do warm-up gymnastics and the small children were used to the water in successively deeper steps.

In the pool, always under someone's command, there were too many rules and orders and not enough fish and freedom. The bath was taken in the changing rooms and, before diving in, we had to do warm-up gymnastics and the small children were used to the water in successively deeper steps. As I was unaware of all this news, as soon as I entered, I gave a cry of joy and threw myself into the adults' pool, being immediately fished out by a diligent teacher, under the horrified and blushing gaze of my brother, older than me in age and wisdom. I did warm-up gymnastics, under the teacher's frown, dripping off the mattresses in the designated area and annoying everyone: classified as a weirdo on the very first day.

At that age I also learned to read, with the usual voracity and curiosity, without anyone noticing until I showed off reading my father's newspaper. When I arrived at school the following year, I took badly to the torture of sitting still and quietly in one place, scribbling, chopping and other things that seemed nonsensical to me, while all my cells clamoured for freedom and stimulation. Imprisoned children, surrounded by adults who strive to replace explosive natural creativity, by blind and uncritical obedience, formatting minds, so that we are all similar, but separated into two well-defined genders with ancestrally determined roles: girls and boys.

New memory at the age of seven. Third year primary school teacher, after two years, bored to death, with no one looking at me. New authority figure, with a vast moustache and rigid spine. The pupils are divided into good, suffering, and bad, and arranged,

strategically, in the room: at the front and centre the best; the worst, by the walls, behind the pillars and at the back - out of sight and out of engagement. I vomit every day, in the morning, my vision blurs and blurs, making the letters on the blackboard dance, I faint easily, without any doctor being able to explain the origin of such discomfort. In class I tremble with fear of being sent to the blackboard, next to the teacher, to parrot some lesson, previously debited by her and memorised by us, which is expected on the tip of the tongue and without stammering. I pray to the fly that lands on the window, to the letters that get tangled up in the notebook, to the bladder that tightens and to the light of the ceiling that makes me crazy, between buzzing and blinking: I hope it doesn't look at me! I try to make myself invisible, more with the power of ingenuity than of the mind, something I have been developing since I was born. But, alas, I have written on my face all that the clenched lips contain, and the teacher calls out to me. I must get up, pick up the deceptively innocent cane next to the blackboard and, in front of the dreaded and detailed map of Portugal, parrot, without fail, from north to south, from coast to interior, all the mountains, ridges, rivers and mines, in the correct order and names.

I sweat, even though our breath is visible in the icy air of terror and winter. One of my eye's whirls, aimlessly, perhaps looking for an escape route, even though, at the consultation, the ophthalmologist assured my parents that my vision is perfect and it must be a desire to imitate the boys who wear glasses. Especially me, who has never had the slightest desire to imitate anyone but the living-room carpet, under the dining table, where I usually hide. I descend with a trembling cane to the Mediterranean Sea, stumbling over the names

lands, waters, and stones: with inevitable failure. Irritated by such ignorance and nonsense, the teacher takes the wooden ruler, well known for tearing tears and pieces of skin from the hands where it is applied with educator/punisher zeal and orders me to come closer. All eyes are on me, because I already have a reputation of not being weak, even if this is the sure way to the heaviest punishments. Crying and giving in is not an option: I grit my teeth, concentrate the hatred in my pupils, which rarely allow themselves to be stared at, I raise my head haughtily, while I obediently extend my hand and receive the payment of ignorance, reinforced by insolence, in blows that leave red and swollen welts: reinforcing my will, instead of breaking it. Five blows: one for each mistake. I return to the seat, after the teacher calls the humiliation over, and concentrate on not feeling the body, focusing on the grudge and the cold metal of the table legs, where I cool the pulse of my palm (and soul).

The next memory is in fifth grade, a new school, much bigger and filled with students, noises, and corridors. A labyrinth in which I often get lost. I discovered poetry (with Florbela Espanca) and music (the recorder), standing out in both, although I remain determined to be invisible: like a chameleon that mimics the colours of its surroundings. Now bullying bites, me at close quarters: with scenes of daily beatings and groping. I learned that being female is an innate disadvantage: we are prey in a hunter's world, and everyone thinks this is normal. It is the right of males to grope, humiliate, forcibly, verbally, and physically subjugate the females around them. I'm beginning to hate my precariously developed body, which apparently classifies me as a female sexually receptive

of advances, which I am very far from being. I wear loose, masculine clothes, trying to disguise my curves. The responsibility, apparently, is ours: we provoke uncontrollable lust in males, exempting them from guilt.

Another memory leap, at the age of thirteen, reinforces this feeling. On my way home, after a tennis lesson, I'm dressed in a simple and discreet tracksuit, following my parents' recommendations so as not to attract male glances, replacing the equipment I usually play with: a very short skirt with shorts inside (sewn by my mother and which I adore), a short-sleeved polo shirt and trainers - all snow-coloured, according to the requirements transmitted to us by the club I attend. I walk up some stairs with my sports bag on my left shoulder and my racket in my right hand, keeping my attention, as usual, turned inward. I don't notice that I run into a man, much older than me, until he grabs me from behind and throws me to the ground. I tumble, over the sharp corners of the stone steps, with his weight on top of me, trying to force my brain to understand and react, while he struggles to yank my trousers down. I remind myself that being non-verbal is a bad idea in these situations, and I shout, as loud as I can, in a voice that sounds strange to me: "HELP!", taking him by surprise and making him hesitate long enough for me to start putting up a fight more effectively, kicking and twisting to escape from under him. He growls a "be quiet, I just want some kisses" at me, trying to cover my mouth to stop me screaming, but I bite him hard causing him to retract and loosen his gag, and I scream: this time much louder and determined to fight to the death. Apparently, this convinces him that I'm not worth

the risk and effort, as we're too close to a main road where cars are constantly passing. He lets go of me, backs away and runs away, leaving me in shock. At the bottom of the stairs, he still looks back, staring at me in a last glimpse - standing rigid, pale, wide-eyed and with dilated pupils - before disappearing into the busy avenue, too close to where I live. I force the body, numb and icy, to continue home. I tell my parents about the incident, in a few words, as I don't want to give physical details of the man: it occurs to me that my father might get into trouble if he finds out who it is. And that's it: nothing more happens, because if I report it to the police, it will be no use, I'm told: I'll just be forced to tell the same story over and over again and listen to the insinuations that I "had it coming", because he possibly saw me playing and followed me on the way home. It's accepting that this is the way the world is and guarding myself, they teach me. I learn. I buy a "spring-loaded knife" and carry it in my pocket, determined never to be caught off-guard again. I learned that man is a dangerous being: a predator. That day I bury the happy and carefree child and resign myself to living in hypervigilance (with various characteristic manifestations of "post-traumatic stress disorder": a state that will accompany me for many years to come, without anyone considering any kind of psychological and/or psychiatric support, because "traumas and depression are the stuff of idle people and they are cured with a broom in their hand, cleaning the house". I learn. And I shut up. I could go on with more episodic memories, but I will stop here: this is (part of) the story of my childhood, which ended that day.

# **Late identification and redefining the traumatised self following sexual violence.**

**By Katrine Callander**



*Trigger warning for sexual violence*

Autistic experience is frequently misaligned with surrounding neuro-normative societal expectations. Sexual violence, sadly a common experience for too many of us, distorts our reality and risks impacting our definition of ourselves. This has long-term consequences in terms of our ability to trust ourselves and others, and our perception of the surrounding world. Late identification made me evaluate the perspectives of my own experiences of violence. I have come to understand that there is an urgent and significant need for trauma-informed support, based on the narratives of autistic individuals. Through listening to autistic experiences of sexual assault and working towards amplifying our voices, I am fighting to help reclaim the definition of our traumatised selves.

I am an autistic woman - a cultural alien in a majority culture where I externally look similar to those around me, but my sensory processing and internal narrative flows along different wavelengths. Until the age of 42, I never considered myself autistic. As I explored my children's neurodiversity, I discovered

material on how autism manifests in women. I suddenly recognised the person reflected back at me, illuminating my life story through a lens that made sense. I made sense. The very early stage of realisation and identification led to a profound shift in my personal narrative. It was challenging to transition my sense of self from one identity to a new version of me, from one explanation and understanding of myself to another. No one could see it happening outwardly. I spent an extraordinary amount of time revisiting past memories, experiencing fluctuating periods of relief, and also experiencing anger that no one ever questioned my differences.

The anger alighted memories, hidden deep beneath self-blame and repression. It exposed episodes of violence and sexual trauma from my youth that I had concealed from myself. Hidden partially due to misplaced personal feelings of shame, guilt, and lack of understanding of why this had happened to me as a young girl. I re-evaluated and challenged my entrenched perception that I should have reacted differently and the ownership I had subconsciously taken of the fact that I had not disclosed it to anyone. It made me furious. Why was I taking ownership of the actions of others that I had not encouraged nor participated in committing? Why had I accepted that my reaction and subsequent silence were invalid and had no meaning? The feelings of guilt and shame that I had experienced were never mine to hold, and I was determined, as part of the re-alignment and acceptance of my own autistic identity, to reclaim the power of agency for myself.

Through immersing myself in the conversations and social

environments of the autistic community, I came to understand that several aspects of my experience were common. For many women, like myself, autistic identification and potential diagnosis comes late in life.

Though I have made the most of my life with my abilities, navigating the outer world without understanding how my specific neurodivergence clashed with surrounding societal expectations led me to experience numerous micro-aggressions – rejections, social dismissals, challenges, and small acts of violence. I often moved to another location or group of people with a faint hope that it would be different. It never was. The mask became stronger, the ability to hide more pervasive. Upon my identification, I realised that many of us, alongside the roles as victims of violence, share the restrictions of the autism diagnostic structure and common cultural perceptions, the stigma, the impact of masking to be accepted within neuro-normative culture, the common traits of compound and prolonged trauma, and the fact that late identification can be both challenging and liberating.

Similar to myself, many late identifying and diagnosed autistic individuals described to me the relief of no longer framing their life histories as failed members of a majority culture. However, this shift also prompted identity negotiation, re-traumatisation, and stigma. I found that taking ownership of my personal narrative in the form of saying 'I' over time and in relation to myself and others, became increasingly important during the initial phase of autistic identification when past trauma first resurfaced. I felt as if I went through a process of accommodating my previous persona as

attempting to be a member of the neurotypical majority society and my post-identification autistic identity simultaneously. I experienced the past in the present, which made the memories of sexual violence impact both my physical and mental well-being.

After my identification and subsequent diagnosis, I allowed myself to embrace and try to understand the anxiety and depression that have resurfaced at various points in my life. In some ways, it made my autistic traits more noticeable to others, as I allowed myself to lower the mask and accept my reluctance for physical contact and need for solitude. As I discussed my perspective on addressing experiences of sexual violence with others, I heard more and more stories of other autistic women struggling with emotional regulation, negative self-perception, disassociation and interpersonal issues. At that stage, I was not aware of statistical evidence demonstrating devastatingly high rates of sexual violence among autistic women, or the extent to which this violence can result in anxiety, depression, PTSD, or even increased suicidality. Through the ongoing talks with other autistic individuals and my growing body of research, I realised how frequently these issues occur and the lack of support and trauma-informed care.

These narratives contained experiences of anxiety, depression, and complex PTSD due to cumulative trauma in addition to specific traumatic and violent events. When I was prescribed antidepressants for anxiety or suffered post-natal depression, there was no consideration of other underlying issues despite my explanations of alienation, social withdrawal, sensory sensitivities or need for solitude. I presume that I was too successful at fitting

in, though the extensive and persistent challenges of masking permeated my daily life. Would my life have been different if I had known I was autistic sooner and understood myself better? I will never know. Those of us who have received diagnoses, share stories of another mental health challenge - diagnostic overshadowing. They explain that when they have voiced concerns about struggling in daily life these concerns have been reduced to potential autistic challenges though frequently, the challenge was not with the actual autistic traits, but being autistic in a social context that does not accept or acknowledge the autistic way of being or the trauma we have experienced. While the fact that we are autistic may not be the reason for increased risks of sexual violence, it can influence our vulnerabilities and the way we cope with trauma. When we have spent our lives not being believed, acknowledged or respected so when we express emotions, feelings or experiences that differ from the accepted norms, this rejection turns inwards and makes it significantly harder to process sexual violence.

I came to understand that the reconciliation of social stigma around sexual violence was instrumental to my recovery, as well as that of my fellow survivors. My experience of feeling unable to disclose the violence was echoed in narratives from others, who had experienced stigmatising negative social reactions including victim blaming, not being believed or being discredited. Many of us internalised this stigma and discrimination, turning the emotions into waves of shame, guilt and self-blame. Our experiences of sexual violence became not just about the trauma-impacted self,

but equally about the prolonged mental distress and physical health issues. Without support, living with sexual violence can make us increasingly vulnerable to mental distress, risky behaviours and damaging relationships. Women that did disclose, often experienced dismissal of their narratives or different personal treatment compared to before disclosure. Unfortunately, these reactions are reminiscent of other forms of treatment throughout our lives, and connections with mental health challenges.

The re-surfacing of sexual violence impacted my sense of self, identity, ability to trust and relate to others. Others described to me how cumulative forms of violence resulted in them trying to manage the silence, shame and overwhelm without comfort or reassurance. This resonated with me as I recognised that I had developed a false self to conceal my core sense of identity and hide my internal wounds to appear as a socially acceptable version of myself. I found that even micro-aggressions could re-trigger and open the emotional wounds left by sexual violence, resurfacing and causing anxiety until I reached out for support.

Thankfully, I was in a place to seek help, though none was offered at the stage of diagnosis or afterwards. Listening to and reading about the frequency of sexual and gender-based violence against autistic women, I came to realise that there may be a need for trauma evaluation in autism diagnostic protocols and trauma-informed support. While my experience of sexual violence will always be present, it does not define me. Late identification made me evaluate the perspectives of my own experiences of violence. It took time to peel off the layer of masks that I wore, even as I was

gazing at my reflection in the mirror and questioning whether it was just another attempt to find a box that I fit into.

For me, the development of a new internal and social self through an extended process of reflection means that I have been searching for ways to achieve personal balance separate from the pressures of societal expectations and acknowledging the validity of my lived experience. My previous ownership of my experience of sexual violence is gradually being replaced, one positive self-affirmation and acceptance at a time. Beyond the frame of violent experiences, it has been a relief to understand and accept that my lifelong feeling of alienation has a name, a community, a way to understand and accept my and other autistic people's challenges as well as strengths. To find pride in who we are and a growing acceptance of our needs.

I now define myself through what I can do for other autistic women. I'm completing a PhD in Social Policy on care, trauma, and identity among late identifying and diagnosed autistic women with experience of sexual assault. Through participatory research and improving understanding of trauma-informed care for autistic individuals, I hope to make a small contribution to our stories being told and better understood. My aim is to expand beyond the historical deficit-based approach to autism and encourage collaborative trauma-informed recovery centred around needs identified by autistic women themselves. It is through emancipatory research and supporting others that I redefine myself.

# My reflexes took over my mind

## By Tess Van Deynse

---

*Trigger warning for sexual violence and discrimination*

April 2011. I went to spend a weekend with the youth travelling organisation KrisKras. In Tournai, the oldest city from the Walloon region in Belgium. A group with 20 youngsters and 3 leaders. There were a lot of activities at the program: guiding tours at the cathedral, beer brewery, tasting local food, playing local games, ... Everything goes well, but not on Saturday evening.

We went on Saturday night to the bars at the centre of this city. The first bar was on the big marketplace. A bar with loud music and voices. I can't hear what the people are saying inside. I felt it as a creepy sphere. I said: "Let's go outside! We can talk with each other and chill!" Everyone agrees. It was nice weather, but a little bit cold. While wearing our jackets, we sat all at the big table.

Next to me, a man with a grey beard and a green jacket with jeans joins our group. He wasn't a participant from our travelling group. He smelled a lot of not fresh sweat, and his clothes were worn out.

He rubbed at my hair. It sounds innocent. I didn't like it. My hair as a white person isn't as special as curly thick hair as many black people have. "Why try it by myself? And not the other female persons at our table. Why did he choose me?" I asked it by myself. "See I am a victim with a mental disability. I wear normal clothes: a jacket with jeans and sneakers. Not as girls in rap video clips with only hotpants

and crop tops.” I screamed at different times to him: “Stop! Don’t touch me.” He didn’t stop. I must use physical violence like hitting, beating, and stamping. I don’t like to use violence to give my borders to people who’s to go far in their bad behaviour, maybe (sexual) abusing me. My physical actions also didn’t help. He didn’t stop.

My solution: “I sat at the other side from the table”. It had no effects. He tried to further abuse me and didn’t start with one of the other women at our table. I felt I was not safe, because I was scared that this man was going to sexual abuse me.

I knew it from past situations, when I travelled with public transport or walked on the streets. Mostly beginning with these questions: “What time is it?” or “Does this bus or tram go to...?” If a man alone asked me, I always refused to help him, because the attempts to sexually abuse me began mostly in this innocent manner. Such as touching my breasts, my hair, kissing, ... from strange men. I didn’t know why they chose me. Why I might look less defensible as the most adult women. If a man gets over my boundaries, I scream these sentences that aren’t true: “I’ve been married” “I have AIDS” “I don’t want sex with you.” That helps because they get away from me.

When the group made a decision to visit other bars. They did it. Except me and one leader. We went together back to the hostel because I felt I was not safe anymore to go alone. I slept with a lot of nightmares that night. The next day was Sunday and there were also different activities at the program. I felt tired, but I participated. Not with the best smile for enjoying it. Sunday evening, everyone went home. Me too.

After this weekend, they got all participants an evaluation form to fill in. Most participants find my behaviour on Saturday Night awesome and disturbing. I understand them. I also don't like to behave badly towards people, but in this case I can't. My reflexes took over my mind because it was dangerous. A reflex from people's brains in the prehistoric times, when I must run from lions and tigers to survive. Our human brains didn't lose this in the modern time, and people in dangerous situations handle their reflexes, because there's no time for thinking for solutions.

This decision from this travelling organisation is: I'M EXCLUDED TO GO WITH THEM AT TRAVELLING IN THE FUTURE, BECAUSE OF MY BAD BEHAVIOUR." I wrote back a letter to them on why I behave badly in this dangerous situation and my reflexes took over my mind. And I didn't dare walk away from our group at the table, because people find it not polite. If I was alone or with my family or good friends, it was easier to get away from dangerous situations. That the organisations don't take my behaviour personally, but it stays no. I made a complaint to Unia (The Belgium organisations to send situations, if you are a victim from discrimination such as race, disability, religion, age, LGBTQ+ ... in situations at studies, work, free time, ...) Unia didn't take my case seriously, because I can't prove my situations on paper, sounds and/ or video. Because I didn't go to the hospital with broken body parts and wounds. But It's equally traumatic for me to go to the hospital with wounds.

I don't trust Unia anymore, because they don't ever take my complaints as a victim of discrimination seriously. The other people with autism living in Belgium also agree that Unia doesn't work for them, because they do nothing with their stories. Because they don't see it on paper, video and/ or sounds. Indirectly such as: exclusion from participating in organisations for free time activities, applying process for volunteering and paid work, not welcome to guiding or speaking people because their other manner of talking.

## By Maria Gonçalves Porto

**██████████**  
*Trigger warning for sexual violence*

I was a 12-year-old girl, living in a very conservative village. My mum was a single mum and me and my brother are from different parents. We also didn't go to church, nor did we believe in God. My family was not from there, so we were isolated and alone; and I was navigating life and school and friendships as an undiagnosed autistic girl.

One summer night I had a sleep over at my only friend's house. She had a younger sister.

The family had a cat that had just had 8 kittens, but the parents drowned 7.

The youngest sister realized the cats were missing and threw a rightful tantrum wanting to know why.

So, they told her the 7 kittens had gone to a party.

As an autistic girl, I was both very literal and very gullible, so it made me very confused. How was it possible that seven kittens had gone to a party? It didn't make sense!

Later, when my best friend, her sister, and their mum went to another room, my friend's stepfather approached me from behind and abused me.

I closed my eyes when it started happening. I froze. It was all very fast.

When he made me touch him, I unfroze and ran away to my best

friend's bedroom. She realized something was wrong and followed me. When I told her, she said he had abused her too. So, we told her mom that same night. She confronted him and he left the house. But this woman wanted her husband to stay, so she woke me up in the middle of the night (I had fallen asleep while they were arguing, because I was exhausted).

She told me that she would tell my mum herself when the time was right; and that she would help me heal. She made promise. I had no reason not to believe her, from my childlike perspective. She then told me that if I told my mum, I would never see my only friend again. Again, I believed her and that thought terrified me, so I kept quiet. I was autistic, gullible, a child, very easy to manipulate, and she did manipulate me for years to come, under the guise of healing my wounds caused by the abuse. That only brought more wounds though. It took me years to realize she would never tell my mum. I told her myself when I was 18.

At 16, when I was diagnosed, wondered... If I hadn't been autistic, maybe things would have gone differently. Maybe the lie about the cats would have made sense to a neurotypical brain, or maybe I wouldn't let myself be manipulated.

I'm 28 now and the pain caused by the abuse has almost healed. That caused by all the manipulation haven't, but I'm working on it and I never blame my autism anymore. I was a child; it was absolutely not my fault. And I didn't let that abuse steal from me. Today, I live a happy, healthy life with my partner. I love being autistic, I love the perspective it gives me on the world.

# Aspie at ICU

## By Elina Ljöfström

---

*Trigger warning for medical malpractice*

“Get a hobby or have a shower”.

In January 2020 my health suddenly deteriorated. I began to experience extreme fatigue whilst walking and every time I stood up all energy just seemed to ooze out of my body. A few days later I started to become sick after every meal. At first, I suspected some type of a gastric flu so I cancelled all meetings with my mentor and didn't see my family. Then I started having respiratory problems. Few days into my symptoms I saw my mum, who brought some food for me at my request. She left the groceries behind my door as agreed. However, she was very concerned about my health and insisted on seeing me. She immediately noticed my breathing difficulties and insisted on taking me to see a GP. I objected to my mother's proposal as I didn't want her to catch the bug. She insisted it was a risk she was willing to take and so we went to the health centre.

An empathetic senior GP referred me to a chest x-ray and measured my oxygen levels. No blood tests were prescribed though. The doctor also decided against measuring my blood sugar levels because I had had some juice and had not been fasting for 12 hours. My mother noted that I had vomited several times after having a drink and pleaded with the doctor to measure

my fasting glucose levels. She explained to the doctor that I had recently been diagnosed with type-2 diabetes but didn't yet have a glucometer. Due to my diabetes, she felt my blood sugar levels should be checked. The GP ignored my mother's pleas and blood tests were booked for the following day.

We returned home and breathing became increasingly laboured. I threw up every time I attempted to eat so I decided to fast. I couldn't really do anything other than rest and even then, I felt like I was running a marathon. But unlike after a run, I couldn't slow my breathing down and continued to be out of breath. I struggled to breathe despite my vast efforts and grew increasingly worried. I needed to breathe in order to be alive, yet I wasn't sure I could carry on doing it.

On the following day my mother enquired whether I was fit enough to go to my laboratory appointment. She was convinced high glucose levels weren't causing my symptoms because I had not been able to eat for days. I was so weak I struggled to walk, and my mother was genuinely worried about whether I was fit enough to go to the health centre. I felt beyond exhausted, but I insisted on going. Had I decided against it, I would have died for sure.

I was so poor I couldn't stand up, so my mother went to get a wheelchair for me. During the blood test the laboratory nurse expressed concern about my condition and urged me to see a doctor. I had severe breathing difficulties and was gasping for air. As we headed to the reception my mother noticed how horrified people were of the state I was in.

After a long wait we finally got to see a doctor. My mother

described my symptoms and wondered whether I was suffering from intestinal obstruction. The young GP pressed my stomach but didn't notice anything alarming. During the examination, the doctor asked me about my hobbies. I didn't see the relevance of that question at all. Therefore, I replied nothing – although I have plenty of hobbies – because a simple no was easier than trying to talk whilst struggling to breathe. The doctor's tone was judgemental as he replied: "well, you should." Then the doctor asked why I was panting. "Breathe normally, that kind of huffing and puffing is not good for you. Do you feel anxious?" I said I didn't feel anxious but rather worried because of the breathing difficulties I had been experiencing for the past few days. Given the circumstances I thought it was quite understandable. Instead of panicking I tried to remain as calm as possible.

I mentioned I had noticed a change in my body odour in the recent weeks. It reminded me of popcorn, which I found strange given that I had not eaten popcorn. "You should shower more frequently", the doctor dourly exclaimed and sent us home. As we were leaving, we heard the doctor noting to the nurse who had been present during the examination "that's exactly what autistic people are like".

"Aspie in very critical condition"

When we got home my breathing became even more laboured and I told my mother I needed to get to a hospital. I feared that eventually I would stop breathing and die given that the health centre had sent us home twice already. Those two visits had

exhausted all my energy. We knew there was no point calling an ambulance because we would be advised to go to the ER instead. Furthermore, I had been sent home from the health centre so seemingly there was no medical emergency. It was a real catch-22 situation.

In the evening my mother received a call from a senior doctor who told me my glucose levels were dangerously high and my condition was critical. He told me he had notified the hospital of my situation and was expecting me. The doctor urged my mother to drive me there as quickly as possible. We sped there to discover they had not been informed of my arrival. However, the medic realised how critical my condition was. Soon one of the nurses examined me and noticed my breath smelled of acetone and realised I had a diabetic ketoacidosis. Once that became evident, I was rushed to the intensive care unit and was treated by a number of doctors. There was a real sense of urgency and soon I was connected to a number of equipment via tubes. All my vitals were monitored: my oxygen saturation levels were critically low, and my glucose levels were sky high. My blood oxygen levels needed a boost whilst the blood sugar levels had to subside.

I asked if my breathing difficulties could be relieved as it felt like the most urgent matter to me. I was told that my panting was a symptom of the acidosis. My body was desperately trying to remove the toxins on every breath and therefore I needed more oxygen than usual. Once the build-up of acids would begin to subside my breathing would return to normal. Once I was taken to the ICU I calmed down because I knew I was in the best possible

care. Should my breathing stop temporarily I could get oxygen. My breathing difficulties continued for three days and were eventually normalised on the fourth day. The doctors wondered the cause of my sudden ketoacidosis until an abscess was discovered. The underlying infection had caused a pancreatic failure, which resulted in a diabetic ketoacidosis. It is an extremely life-threatening condition and if left untreated, it will evidently result in death. I spent three days in the ICU whilst my abscess and ketoacidosis were treated and was then transferred to the ward. The transfer was made during the weekend when there were no medical rounds. On Sunday my mother heard from the nurses that the doctor-on-call was planning to send me home despite not seeing me. The nurses had insisted that before I was admitted I had to learn how to inject insulin.

I have had a fear of needles from early on. I have never really gotten over it even though I have frequently had blood tests. As I have gotten older, I have really worked hard to learn to stay still and relax my muscles. The nurses belittled my phobia and stated that everyone is capable of learning to inject. My mother wanted to see the doctor and discuss the situation. She knew me well enough to know that my fear of needles exceeded the fear of death. She said that if I were to be admitted too early, I would be back at the ward in a matter of days. My mother managed to convince the doctor that I should remain an inpatient and be transferred to my local hospital. The situation was far from over yet. I had had to fight hard to get treatment in the first place and now I had to ensure I remained hospitalised whilst learning to

manage my condition. After the transfer my glucose levels continued to vary dramatically despite insulin injections. My glucose levels plummeted during the night and put me in the risk of being in a coma. Therefore, I required monitoring and had to be woken up to eat. Although my diabetes still wasn't under control, I felt pressured to leave the hospital. Prior to my hospitalisation I had had regular personal assistance.

However, the hours had been too sparse as it was. Due to my poor health, I was in need of daily assistance and had to apply for additional help from the social services. It took a few months to reach an agreement. During the negotiations I tried to apply for a flat in a residential care home but there were no vacancies. After two long months my pancreas slowly started to recover, which enabled me to reduce and eventually stop taking the insulin injections. It had to happen gradually and under careful monitoring as I still suffered from nightly hypoglycaemia.

Although my overall health continued to improve and there was an increasing demand for admission, the doctors knew I didn't have sufficient medical support at home. There were ongoing negotiations with the social workers and finally a doctor told me a decision to provide sufficient personal assistance had been made and I was ready to go home. I was confused by the claim because I hadn't heard any such thing from the social workers or my family. I requested one more day so I could contact my family and get an update. It was, no, there was no standing decision. Regardless of that I was admitted from the hospital and my personal assistant came to pick me up and took me home on the following day.

We barely managed for a while until I was granted daily assistance.

“From an aspie at ICU to a precedent case”

During my stay at the ICU, I had been advised to contact my local health centre and inform them about their serious malpractice. I was told that had I gone to the hospital later, I would have died. My mother contacted the local medical director. He also happened to be an endocrinologist and after a review concluded that serious errors had been made in my initial treatment. The director took the matter very seriously and thanked my mother for bringing it to his attention. He apologised for the drastic errors and promised to discuss the matter with the doctors, who failed to recognise my symptoms. A few weeks into my stay at my local hospital the director paid a visit. He was sincerely apologetic and admitted that a multitude of errors had been made. Although I had been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, during my first appointment the doctor failed to measure glucose levels. He had later realised the mistake and I believed when he said he was deeply sorry for that. Whilst he made a human error and didn't mistakenly measure the glucose levels, he appeared empathetic, took the early onset symptoms seriously and prescribed tests. The medical director then went on to ensure that my case would be used as a precedent case and the glucose level measuring had since been made a standard practice.

I felt compelled to tell the medical director of the junior doctor's attitude. He agreed that the questions and comments made by the

GP were deeply oppressive. The medical director noted that my autism potentially caused the subsequent malpractice and the doctor's dismissive conduct was completely out of line and hurtful.

I noted that whilst the senior doctor had been sincerely sorry and concerned for my well-being, there was no mention of the junior GP. The medical director merely said that there was a lesson to be learned for all the doctors. I felt really good that the director took his time to review the events with me and it resulted in a permanent change of practice.

Although I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes (on tablets), the first senior doctor I saw had made a mistake and didn't realise to take a quick blood glucose sample. The senior doctor told me that the senior doctor had been very upset about it, which I believe he was. He seemed empathetic and clearly took my situation seriously in ordering many tests. Mistakes happen to everyone.

The senior doctor said that, with my permission, this case will now be taken as a textbook case, and a rapid blood glucose test will always be added to the emergency practice.

"What does the future hold?"

My experience has made me concerned about my future and the prospect of dying home alone. Whilst I have daily personal assistance, I may not be able to always insist on medical treatment. Had my mother not fought for me, I wouldn't have made it to the hospital and be dead now. I cannot call for help or go to the health centre without assistance. I was diagnosed with autism as an adult and have thus received treatment as a "neurotypical

individual” for most part of my life. That was problematic in a number of ways, because I was and am neurodivergent. Sadly, my autism diagnosis has not made things easier as some doctors are extremely prejudiced and I am being either misjudged or misunderstood. People view hospitalisation as a horrible thing and wish they never have to go to a hospital. After what I have been through, I hope no such thing. Should there be a next time, I would be delighted in case I am hospitalised as that would mean I wouldn’t have to fight to get treatment or save my life. That is my wish.

# Shadows

**By Joana Freitas Costa**

---

Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, Pinocchio.... These are some of the most known fairy tales people grow up to enjoy. However, one of the biggest fairy tales you grow up to believe is that once you become an adult everything will be easier, people will treat you properly and respectfully, and you will be able to deal with anything in your way. Well... that might be true to some degree, as long as you are neurotypical. Have you tried being autistic in a society where agreeing to meet in a certain X hour means meeting at X+45min? This aspect of our society to this day makes me very uncomfortable. How is it possible for everyone to be on a constantly relaxed schedule, did I miss the memo? Am I the only one that feels the pointer on my clock beating so loud that it sounds like a hammer on my spine? Apparently, I am the only one comforted by the military schedule, otherwise, I cannot deal with anything my way. How I wished it wasn't like that, but at least now I understand why it is so. Retrospectively, I wished I had been diagnosed earlier, much earlier.

You don't know me, but you can call me Jo, after all, it is all family here, right? I am 30 years old, and I got my diagnosis a few months ago. Pretty much I got my diagnosis when you are already supposed to cope well with the fact that by the time you are supposed to meet your friends, they are still conditioning their hair

in the shower. My diagnosis has been both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, it helps me understand why strangers usually feel uncomfortable around me, normally it is because I said something unusual. This understanding gives me time to salvage the situation by distracting them with safe conversation topics like soccer, politics, and the inflation rate, or by bribing them with chocolates. On the other hand, looking back at certain moments - such as my master's degree - makes me wither with sadness knowing that my negative (social) experience could have been avoided if I had known my diagnosis earlier. It is funny though; a diagnosis suddenly serves to understand the present actions of the diagnosed as well as to forgive the past actions of the people around the person that was diagnosed. "If only we knew". In part I agree, knowledge is power, isn't it? In my case, it could have made a difference, particularly with my junior master's supervisor.

Whenever I think of the word violence, this word gets a very defined face, very defined hair, and a very defined voice. As always, my new journey began like many others: sunny, radiant, full of hope, and promising. Everything was going relatively smoothly, with a relatively high rate of successful experiments, and seeds of a scorching competition amongst the group of newcomers were beginning to sprout. Overall, there was a survivable environment... until I "autisticized" my junior supervisor. One late Friday afternoon, experiments were running, and my supervisor asked me if I could do some solutions (plural yes) for her independent experiments, because being a typical Portuguese, she was running late. Any neurotypical in that

circumstance would have said yes, wanting to be in her good graces. Me being an undiagnosed autistic took things literally, I was busy with a predefined schedule polished to the minute. The answer was a soft no; who in their mind would dare to interfere with a military-style schedule of an autistic person? Since I hadn't been diagnosed, I had been branded a rebel, arrogant, and above all, defying. As it might be obvious to anyone with 2 neurotypical brain hemispheres and some maturity, that was not a request, it had been an order. That marked the beginning.

Slow segregation from colleagues started. As soon as you become a liability, you begin to lose your allies. My parting in conversations was deliberately ignored and overlooked, like a passing of an unpleasant aroma that needed to be endured for a few minutes. Suddenly, I was isolated. Worse; for the first time, I felt the pain of solitude. No matter the efforts, the desire to please others to belong, and changing myself to the point of no longer remembering who I was by the end, nothing seemed to help. As a person who loves to know the rules, suddenly I crossed through the looking glass into an unknown and scary world. As it might be predictable, events culminated in an unnecessary explosion. What better way to explode than in a situation where there are no witnesses to tell the tale? It all happened over an informative text message that albeit sent, she did not receive. In that text, I explained why I could not give a departmental group presentation due to a respiratory infection. She got furious because other people (that also received the text) knew before her. A big argument started, culminating in yelling and a near-physical

confrontation. I was 22 years old. Her words have walked all these years by my side, like an extra shadow. She did not shy away from original insults: apparently, I was incredibly rude; the way I spoke made everyone feel extremely uncomfortable; if I was her daughter, she would have spanked me so hard, until I learned how to behave properly; she would be incredibly ashamed if I was her daughter. The worst part? I showed her the sent text on my phone, the light screaming on her face in the dark, cold microscope room.

I was 22 years old when I heard these words.

I was lost and alone.

Depression came.

Dark thoughts embraced me.

Harmful ideas flooded my mind.

It took 1 year to remember who I was. Took 1 year to feel joy again. Took 1 year to start laughing again.

Took me years to understand that words can be the ultimate and most dangerous act of violence. Words can behave like waves of acidity, burning small pieces of you away. Her words follow me like a shadow still, returning in different ways, in different moments until I mumble the words for myself, I have autism. A diagnosis suddenly serves to understand the past and present actions and feelings of a person. Suddenly, despite remaining the same I become a completely different person, especially to others. Would a diagnosis make a difference? Retrospectively, yes, I think it would. Knowledge is power. Knowledge can be used as a shield, yield it.

## By Jaque

---

*Trigger warning for sexual violence, medical malpractice and suicide attempt*

My name is Jaque, I am diagnosed as autistic, and I grew up in a fishing and isolated neighbourhood in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It is a small place that was once inhabited by indigenous people and has archaeological evidence that it was inhabited by "Sambaquis Peoples" in Prehistory. The neighbourhood has correlation with black people trade, coffee trade landowners, and military issues.

My childhood and adolescence took place in this region, and it was a period of anguish and anxiety because I always felt the absence of human connections where I didn't need to feel fear. I was a child with immense difficulty understanding social relationships, and uncomfortable being judged as problematic or strange.

I remember being small and already being hyper-focused on board and card games, and loving books so much... but also, losing my love for school in early childhood because other children would hit me. I went through a lot of bullying, violence, and neglect by teachers... until I started to become reactive and have fits of reactivity due to the need to protect myself, and I was expelled from school without any psychological support.

My godmother always knew that there was some disproportionate suffering in my existence, ever since I was a baby... and at the age of 4 or 5, converging with the school period, I went through my first

episodes of meltdowns, in which I always ended up rolling on the floor crying intensely, and injuring myself by punching, biting, scratching, or crashing into some solid surface. And soon, the episodes of early insomnia also started... I was very unhappy and always acted very naïve and was easily hurt.

As a teenager I was asynchronous with people in my age group, as I was always immersed in classical poetry, dense books, and escapist mythologies, and at 15 I began to have a hyper-focus on more intense philosophers and develop a passion for aesthetics and 19th century elements. As people hounded me even for my appearance, they invented narratives about me that could be irresponsible and hurtful, and I was in a state of deep psychic distress, even regarding my extreme sensitivity to family intolerance. In a time jump, I am already 19 years old and I was exposed to several situations of abuse due to my social naivety and my playful and childish mood? and it was at my first party with "supposed" friends, where I ingested alcohol and had to lie down to get some sleep, and the worst happened: in my memory fragments, which are very confused and hazy, I notice my "friend" entering the room with a child and with a drunk girl, and my clothes being quickly removed? finally, I feel my arms hurting with squeezing that would later become bruises. It is something very humiliating and dark. Today, in 2023, many years have passed but I still feel these bits of memory walking around inside me like pieces of a sharp metal. They are eternally incomplete and chaotic memories in my psyche.... And perhaps, the years of therapy might have been more effective if I hadn't been forced to return to

the neighbourhood where my perverse abuser lives and runs an entertainment and party establishment.... He is aware of all the sadistic power that is in his hands and occasionally still behaves like a stalker... and I "cringe" more and more each day, within the walls of the old room my family lent me. At that time, I just survived, and comforted myself in books. I discovered the possibility of attending a Federal University if I could pass one of the most competitive exams in Brazil... and so it was, because even though I was a child who refused to go to school to the point that my mother got in trouble with the law, I had immense power of hyper-focus and great ease in being self-taught in the humanities. So, I graduated from one of the biggest universities in Brazil and the world, and outside my neighbourhood. I worked as a research fellow, and that was the best phase of my life despite all my comorbidities with anxiety, panic and depression, and the very strong Sensory Processing Disorder. But when I needed to return to my small neighbourhood of origin, it was a movement of immense difficulty for me, and there was something wrong with my neurobiological health that had never been explained and was hindering my progress in financial autonomy. And it was after a suicide attempt by overload that I started to get the first medical feedback about autism in girls, in my 30s.

The diagnosis seemed to be a great salvation and my legal documentation changed to a person with Neurobiological Disability so that I could access my basic rights. Everything started to make sense for the first time in my life since I was just a baby... and I was able to reduce several conflicting feelings, such as guilt, fears,

demands and so on. However, a new battle was beginning, and it would be in search for accessibility, social respect for my condition, for social explanations of my difficulties of needs, and to obtain health rights and to get a job that minimally accommodates my sensory limitations - as the excesses have already led me to even vasovagal episodes with fainting and convulsions.

Recently, I went through 2 major situations that made me think about suicide again, even though it was not consummated due to my immense sense of responsibility for my emotional support puppy. It may sound childish, but my puppy really makes a great connection to all the childhood sweetness I couldn't have (this relates to the inner child that was abused).

About these last situations that happened to me, they involve medical prejudice with my autistic condition, and discrimination with the exercise of my profession along with an immense pressure for me to resign in a school where I was a teacher. And I will briefly discuss the medical event: at the beginning of 2022 I was in a very bad health condition as an autistic person with comorbidities, and I was obliged by law to go to a specific "Family Clinic" (or CSM) to obtain any kind of legal documentation for autistic people. There was a 1 year resistance for the Health Agent who was taking care of my case and the doctor assigned to me to give me an appointment... and the day I got my appointment, the doctor said that "health clinics are not places for autistic people, and that people like us should be in psychiatric hospitals", and that "in his clinic, an autistic person in crisis, adult or child, would not receive priority in care, and if they got sick they would be taken to

a psychiatric hospitalisation" (and etc). In this scary moment, I tried to argue that we were in the autism awareness month and that the day before a mother of an autistic person had committed suicide due to difficult access to medical rights, and I myself was having many problems with suicide ideation... but the lines of medical violence against the autistic community only increased, and finally, I had to walk back home feeling sick and at risk in the middle of the summer period and an absence of enforcement of people driving drunk on the street.

Currently, I have a good academic background, with a postgraduate degree in Autism, but I find myself depending on basic financial assistance from my mother and my godmother, who are 2 elderly ladies who receive the minimum wage in Brazil, and one of them has cancer, while the other has a disability. Faced with such precariousness and desperate context, I started pushing my limits to go back to teaching regardless of the possibility of having to deal with screams and shutdowns... (by then, I was sick). I truly enjoy education, however, I am aware that the most dignified thing for my health would be if I could change my area of work, because Brazil has very high and frightening indexes about mental diseases in neurotypical people who work as teachers. These data, they refer to people who do not even have the sensory processing disorder, as occurs with an autistic ... and I am afraid. However, all I can do now is imagine that, maybe, I will still be able to come close to what has always been my "small but big" dream: To live in a simple place but not full of traumas, to have a job without shouting, to have a means of transport without inhuman

crowds to get to work, and to have a space to go for walks with my dog in the evening. Who knows, even getting to go to some art exhibition occasionally....

I know that for some people who might read this, my dreams represent only the minimum that many people have in life. However, for me, who grew up in such a brutalised and undiagnosed environment... achieving peace is having a lot.

# **Flickering Expectations - From the pits of Emptiness to the surReality of Life**

**By Flappa McFluttery**



*Trigger warning for child neglect, overmedication and psychiatric confinement*

Overture

I'm well aware my story is not the saddest of all, despite how dramatic my telling may sound to you. Through puns and metaphors, I created my own world – fantastic tales, with terrifying monsters and heart-breaking anti-heroes – but I never meant to rewrite the memories of others – instead, I hoped to erase my own, as they faded away through my monotonous wailing.

I hope my stories can inspire those who've felt they failed... to keep their hopes high. I had many mistakes in life, but the worse one was lowering my expectations to a point where even the lowlifes and bandits could be seen as trustworthy and helpful. It's true that I surrounded myself – too many times – with those who were preying on me, because I believed everyone in life deserves a second, third, infinite amounts of chances. I hope that, by seeing my side, you start to see your value.

#1: Empty

Empty, I've always known that feeling. I always felt something

missing in me, so every time I became convinced that I needed something... I would feel that pull, and I couldn't let go. This has led me to betrayal after betrayal, and quickly my emptiness became an abyss, and that abyss has always lingered on even in my brightest moments. If only the abyss and me could become one...

I remember when I felt it for the first time. As soon as mum turned off the lights – and I was cornered at my side of the bed –, I felt it so close to me, luring me from the space between our bed and the window... I could fall any second, to what seemed to me an endless pit, and that was a soothing lie, with which I lulled myself into sleep.

I have secretly felt, since then, one day the abyss would pull me in at last, and that would be the final demise of me – but that pull has come instead in many other forms.

I never felt my mother's love, instead she would torture me in the form of the spoiling she had on me – material spoiling, that is, and none of the affectional kind. By impulsively buying everything I wanted to tell her about – I know why, she just wanted to shut me up –, she fed the impulsivity in me. Over the years, I lost my will to contain it in my darkest moments, and my bingeing behaviour – whether in impulsive buying, playing or eating – has become harder and harder to open up about, in a society who promotes consumption and often punishes abstention.

Nevertheless, the abyss has followed me, even in the moments I was trying to get rid of – in the make-believe threat on my life that convinced strangers to imprison me in a hospital, or even in the

concrete one which my dad orchestrated to rid his life out of his own misery.

Still, the question remains: is the consistent abandonment of the people in my life that motivates this feeling of emptiness, or is this consistency just a mere consequence of my own inner emptiness, hence condemning me to utter solitude?

## #2: Sick

Inevitably this feeling of emptiness led to a feeling of emotional, then to physical sickness. My mum didn't care whether I was gifted or Autistic, the feeling of a mother of someone diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome was for her pure denial. A small tyrant was how she saw me, and now she didn't feel tired of hearing me no more, she felt my words were the ones of a crip, words that no one – not even her – would ever understand.

Soon it didn't take her much effort to let me become a test subject of sorts – I'll never forget the "therapist" who tested my reaction with the supposedly relaxing sounds of Mozart, only to apologize later with a CD Book version of "The Magic Flute". When the school finally convinced her to seek psychiatric help, based on my avoidant reaction to my teacher's lack of support for what seemed to be consistent truancy, I was put on stimulant medication, only to be removed from it a year later, as my then developmental psychiatrist argued that my 18th birthday was an impediment to her area of expertise.

The new psychiatrist was now attempting to diagnose me with Cyclothymic Disorder and introducing me to a blend of

antipsychotics with mood stabilizers – when mum finally discovered that the increasing dosages of Aripiprazole were seriously affecting my liver function, she had me recommended to a new expert, who quickly transitioned me to Paliperidone and kept me on a lower dosage, refusing to introduce me to any more medication in the coming years.

However, the issues in school were still ongoing, and when asked about the right psychological therapy for me, he recommended her to a so-called expert in neuropsychology, who would often engage in confrontational approaches which seemed to have made much more of a hassle to me than actual improvement. After his consistent delaying of appointments on-day and camouflaged avoidance within a disparity of excuses, I found his office closed and didn't hear back from him in years. All I could recall hearing from him was his frantic ultimatum “Do you want to stay in high school forever... or apply yourself to university?” – I needed no more!

### #3: Fear

Fear was a feeling I had to get myself used to seeing around me, before I realized how, instead of provoking it through my actions, it came instead through the helplessness of my efforts. Everyone was so afraid of what would become of me, separated from my dad at the age of 10, losing my mum as I turned 21, now at the hands of an ex-addict as my stepdad and an emotionally unavailable family was my last line of support.

Despite all of the locals' wishes of my being strong in these

perilous times, I had the trust in a distant relative strongly reinforced by my closer family, but that trust came – as I came to uncover too late to stop it – less from their professional experience with the kind of issues at hand, than the mere fact they were the only who dared to have helped my mum through the mending of her own debts. I was now no more than the ghost of my deceased mother, struck as the defendant of a trial for all the past mistakes of my own mother. Worse than that, I was kept away from my dad, as if by my own dead mother, and kept instilled with the same fears from him that my own mother had perpetuated throughout her life after their own separation.

Soon, abandoned by everyone, I caught the attention of several of my mother's childhood friends, who despite having good intentions, only managed to hold me further away from my family's support. In less than a year, I helplessly followed a path of rebellion against my family and the very own locals who feared for me and had me imprisoned in a hospital for six days – where I was violently locked in on a room with no lights and a metal hole as an improvised toilet – then immediately transferred to another, safer one, for thirty days more, in what was deemed by the clinical team a “psychotic episode”. Released without any kind of support, it was a matter of days before I was arrested and submitted to another imprisonment – this time, a compulsive one, attached to a court order that took me three years to be released from – for thirty days once again, where I was locked inside a gendered alley with restrooms with floor as tainted as coal, and strapped to a bed for three days without any access to food or bathroom facilities. After

being released, I was forced to stay at a private clinic – four hours away from my home, every month – for nine months.

#### #4: Grief

The concept of grief is unique: to understand her, you must traverse her steps... and before all that, you must go through loss – but loss is universal to all existence. The steps of grief – stumbling between denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance and, hopefully one day, meaning – have become essential to my work, no matter the nature it follows. I see this concept in my everyday life, feed it onto my own narratives, and feel this as my retribution to the alms the universe has brought on me. The chaos of the natural world is no more than a mere retribution for the pains inflicted by humans in a world that doesn't belong to, nor can be claimed, by us.

I was first struck by grief when I was given the news of my half great aunt's death. We were in the car, my first paternal cousin next to me in the backseat, my cousin's father driving with my grandma next to him. They were talking about a funeral's preparations, when suddenly me and my cousin heard the deceased's name. I was shocked to find out she hadn't moved away – instead, the porcelain dolls she had tried to give me a week ago gained a new meaning, and I understood it as the loss of a remembrance I wasn't allowed to keep anymore.

When my grandpa finally gave in his last sigh, my mum decided to have the funeral at our grandparent's home. To have all these strangers in our home – and a naked dead body lying on a

wooden coffin between white bedsheets – was the strangest feeling... but nothing could have prepared me for the scene where my first maternal cousin was coerced by her own mother to kiss my grandpa's cold lifeless forehead. Nothing that followed it – the long strenuous parade to the church, the honorary flag being removed of the coffin like a rag, the agnostic mass, the burial in silence – could compare to that coward order to a relative of mine! However, the grief for my mother took me more than two years to fully process, and now – combined with the pain of the recent freedom from a whole year of tortuous estrangement – it had become tenfold more painful. Simultaneously trialled for failing to pay a debt everyone had delayed, and condemned with a conservatorship of estate, I wasted the rest of my belongings on stupid microtransactions and spent the next two years waiting for a pension that would go away in less than three months, as I spent away all the money I'd had saved. To make matters worse, all the substantial amounts I received were consistently transferred away by the relative who had become my conservator.

However, not all hope was lost, as I finally found a safe space for cognitive behavioural therapies, and through it, enough power to squeeze out some money into a monthly allowance – which had previously been irregularly delayed, often for a dozen days – sometimes several months.

But soon the days surviving with mobile data came to an end, and I was finally given access again to contracted cable and internet TV. I was then able to enrol in the employment centre, who despite being unable to provide me with a job offer, offered me online

training. Finally, I was starting to be reintegrated within society, with all its ups and downs. The last blow came, however, when my dad attempted to put an end on his life, and the pandemic measures kept me from visiting him.

#### #5: Reality

Despite an apparent recovery, the lack of social support, after being given release, returned him to a life of isolation, addiction, and financial dependency. My psychiatrist and my own family prevented me from visiting him when he needed me the most – so I couldn't prevent a second attempt on his life – nor did the regret of my relatives allowed them to ease his own helplessness.

The alienation of my own wants in the funeral preparations led me to the boycott of the funeral. Through the attribution of a new psychiatrist, I was finally starting to shed some light on my re-evaluation... but as my conservator insisted to be present in the first appointment after my loss, I lost all hopes for clinical cooperation. However, by forcefully bringing awareness to my condition, I was finally routed to social aid, allowing me to request attribution of a Personal Assistant.

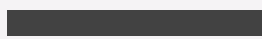
At last, I was not alone on my quest to recovery – I met my significant half, and we vowed together to form the family I had lost my hopes of forming. Though living together is an everyday challenge, we are committed in this uprising – to regain the rights I was cut from, and to become whole.

THE END

(...OR THE BIRTH OF SOMETHING NEW?)

# Reports of "Invisible" Violence

## By Andreia Domingos



*Trigger warning for bullying*

My name is Andreia Domingos, I am a 19-year-old girl, level 1 autistic, with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexic and dyscalculia.

My childhood was not easy, in fact it was far from that, it all started at 3 years of age when I entered kindergarten, since then it was clear that something was not right, because my behaviour was different from the other children, I was a very sensitive girl to noise so I covered my ears and sang on top, before this I was considered a rebel, I had crises I threw objects in the air, I cried compulsively, but again "it was rebellion" and I was punished, I had food selectivity, I could not tolerate yoghurts with pieces among other things, I provoked vomiting because of the agony it caused me, but once again "I was ill-mannered and rebellious", I was punished by having to eat yoghurts consecutively until I did not throw them on the floor or provoke vomiting, I didn't look in the eyes and that was extremely impolite in the eyes of society so they pulled my face and made me make eye contact, I didn't stand still and lived too much in "my world" and that was disrespectful to those around me. By nature, I was left-handed, but the "correct" thing to do in the eyes of the educators was to write with the right

hand, forcing me to become right-handed. All this would be more than evidence that something was going on, but, nevertheless, it was always seen as rebellion and bad upbringing, I went to psychologists, but the intention was always to show me that I was wrong.

Time went by, the marks of the force to correspond to the expectations of what a "normal" child should be, remained and with time they only increased.

I changed kindergartens at the age of 5 for the preschool of the primary school that I would attend, the story repeated itself, I was just "the rebellious girl, who doesn't obey the rules", my parents were constantly called, they were asked to impose rules on me, to punish me, but at no time did they remember to ask them to take me for a psychological evaluation, I was taken to psychologists in my parents' desperation that something in my head would turn around. Up to this point I was a happy child despite these episodes, the world in which I took refuge and which I came to call "Andreland", allowed me to escape from the cruelty of the things that were being done to me, because at that time I was just a pure child, genuine and without malice that did not understand even half of what was done to her, although the marks remained, in the form of trauma.

The time had come for the first cycle, when I entered I was immensely lucky with the jewel of a teacher I had been given, because despite the refusal to learn, the not stopping still, the tantrums she didn't give up on me and referred my parents for a psychological evaluation because she realised something was

wrong, in the second year I was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity, although the other diagnoses appeared later and the teacher knew it wasn't just that, I was given all the necessary support, special education and a joint work between my mother and my teacher, which allowed me to learn everything I had refused to learn in the first year, in the second year or in just one year I learnt the equivalent of two, finishing the second year reading and writing according to the supposed level although with mathematics always far behind, the teacher quickly realised that I was a very intelligent and perceptive child, motivating me without ever giving up and allowing me to make a path as linear as possible until the fourth year. Socialising with colleagues was always intermittent, as there were times when I loved to chat and play and other times when I preferred to be isolated in my corner with my fantasies.

When I moved to the fifth year, it was chaos, a new school, a completely different environment, changes have always been and still are a great difficulty for me. The difficulties became worse, my rights were denied, I was punished for looking everywhere and not stopping still while the lessons were explained to me, disciplinary offences were given for playing with objects from the case during lessons, breaks were taken away from me and I was punished for doing multiplication tables, because they thought that as I had difficulties with maths and it was painful for me to stop still that this would be the best punishment, My mother would constantly receive calls from the headmistress saying that she had to punish me because I wouldn't stop quietly, because I would look at the

window or the notebook instead of looking at what she was explaining and my mother would try to tell her that, as she said in my report, I had ADHD and tried to explain that punishment would not be the best method. This teacher went as far as threatening me that if I didn't comply things would take me away from my parents, making a complaint to the Commission for Children and Youth Protection (CPCJ). The anxiety began, the traumas started to manifest themselves in a strong way, I was referred to Santa Maria for the consultations of eating disorders, because what is called food selectivity and difficulty in eating derived from anxiety was given the name of anorexia nervosa, but that quickly the doctors understood that my clinical picture did not fit there.

Coexistence with classmates consequently became complex, and the spiral of bullying began. I failed the fifth year, due to the "stupidity" of my class director and I changed schools. I repeated the fifth year in a very small and welcoming boarding school, where I regained my rights and adaptations, but by then the chaos was already installed, I developed depression when I was 11 years old, but I finished the year successfully, because I was positively motivated and obtained excellent results, but unfortunately the boarding school closed.

I changed to another one, where I stayed until ninth grade. The adaptation was terrible again. In sixth grade, although the teachers were impeccable, my classmates bullied me in every possible and imaginary way, from verbal, physical to cyberbullying. I had a new psychological evaluation where I was diagnosed, besides ADHD, with mild dyslexia and severe dyscalculia, although autism was not

detected at the time because I refused to collaborate in the evaluation. At the boarding school I had special teaching, adaptations in tests and all the support. However, from my colleagues the rejection was huge and I kept quiet for fear they would make me worse, I developed depression, I got good marks and that was another reason for anger for my colleagues, who made fun of me and said I only got those marks because my tests were different, the only thing that changed was the spacing between the questions and having more time. I was rejected, teased and bullied and in ninth grade I was diagnosed with major depression and hospitalised after a suicide attempt and suicidal ideation. When I left, I didn't return to school and my mother stayed at home with me so that I could recover. I always passed with first period grades and was released from the national exam.

The recovery was long and hard. In the tenth year I went to the technical course of psychosocial support, where it was also far from easy, because of my crises my teacher wanted to prevent me from doing the practical part of the course. But my parents and I fought, and we managed, I did the whole course, and ended up getting interested in SEN, more specifically in autism, I did a traineeship in this area, receiving an immediate job offer. I also did my professional aptitude test in the autism area. During this journey through the world of autism I realised that my problem was the same although to a mild degree, I asked for a psychological re-evaluation and the diagnosis was confirmed.

Today at 19 years of age, I finally have my full psychological report, diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder level 1 with mild

support needs, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, mild dyslexia, severe dyscalculia and mirror vision, all this after much battle and numerous incongruous diagnoses that varied I went from psychiatrist to psychiatrist, from borderline disorder to bipolar disorder, which nowadays, after a screening, were totally annulled and the correct diagnosis was given.

I entered the University that I really wanted and the course I always dreamed of, a psychology bachelor in ISCTE. After the diagnosis I started to accept myself and to know myself better, which was mirrored in my socialisation. I made incredible friends who know my characteristics and accept me as I am, and they have been a great support. Unfortunately, not everything is a bed of roses and despite having the status of student with special educational needs, not all teachers read it, they did not make the adaptations in the exams and tests and I failed some subjects, because although I have these characteristics I reveal an above average IQ in most areas except in arithmetic, which makes me go unnoticed and sometimes invisible in relation to my characteristics and needs. Now I am in a battle for things to be done in a fair way, but it is more painful than I ever thought, because there are many people who refuse to understand the adaptation of the test format and claim that it is impossible for my brain not to process information in those ways.

I keep fighting in a battle for my rights and accessibility questions. The traumas of the past don't disappear so easily and mark all my history, I fell with these failures on the part of the university, the anxiety worsened and the depression that was mild became

moderate, however this story is far from having an end. The social barriers have improved a lot as well as my personal acceptance, now I just need total acceptance from my family who are still learning but my 3 oldest friends from 8 years ago are still on my side and always accepting me as I am. Now with a good network of friendships at university and socialising, all that's left is to straighten out my status compliance. It is a constant struggle, but one that will surely be worth it. I strongly believe in the plans the universe and God have for me and that one day I will be an excellent clinical Neuropsychologist.

This is my testimony of violence, which was often invisible, because it is difficult to detect with the naked eye.

# **What is being normal?**

## **A diagnosis for self-perception**

### **By Daniel Santos Morais**

---

This is a brief contribution about the value of difference and the barriers that are raised against those who in their uniqueness transgress stereotypes or normative standards socially constructed and morally imposed. I speak to you as a cis man, white, homosexual, with a medical diagnosis of anxiety disorder and self-diagnosis of mild autism syndrome. I speak to you from a place of privilege where difference has occupied, and continues to occupy, a defining place in forms of sociability, in personal, emotional and cultural construction over almost three decades of existence. I talk to you about the difficulty of living on difference as a depreciating value of the human condition and its natural diversity. Of the constant need to mask behaviours, emotions, physical and linguistic bodies in order to be accepted, recognised and integrated in the environment where we build ourselves.

Living under the sign of difference, whether ethnic or racial, sexual or gender, class or professional, neurotypical or divergent, is not easy. Often even, I could say, a burden when we are faced with the demand to learn to be according to what society teaches us

and says is "correct" or "normal". To be "strange", "different", "weird", is a possibility that is unappreciated, little understood or respected, leading to the frequent questioning of the intelligibility of these "transgressor" identities. A questioning that, by demanding an answer to the normative standards, often provokes, due to fatigue and emotional overload, isolation and social disengagement. And by this I do not mean that loneliness is not a valid feeling, necessary for emotional health, but rather that the lack of empathy, of understanding, of the will to learn about and with the difference, generates various forms of discrimination, distancing and imprisonment of those who cannot or do not try to mask that difference.

According to my experience, living on the autism spectrum in Portugal is still seen as a cloak of invisibility. There is a lack of understanding and knowledge about the variety of characteristics, behavioural patterns, bodies and subjectivities within the autism spectrum. In my case, as a young adult who has been diagnosed with mild level autism, I am often questioned about this functional possibility by my relative behavioural 'normality'. I give the example of common expressions such as: "Stop saying you are autistic!", "You don't have any disability", "Now autism is fashionable! Everyone is autistic!", among relatives and friends, or yet, "nothing says you fit in the autism sphere. The characteristics presented are common to several pathologies such as depression; bipolar disorder; anxiety; schizophrenia", by health professionals. These narratives show nothing more than a certain refusal to recognise neurodivergent existences in our societies.

All over the world, there are an estimated 70 million people living with hopefully autism. In Portugal, according to recent studies, it is expected that 0.5% of the Portuguese population shows signs of autism, which is equivalent to approximately 50 000 people. However, the number is supposed to be considerably higher when we realise the lack of diagnosis, investigation, and follow-up of free mental health services.

From a very young age I perceived myself to be different. First in kindergarten in the relationships with other children; then, in the first and second cycle of studies with the adaptation to teaching methods; later, already in adolescence, in the affirmation and construction of personality and sexual orientation in a traditional and even elitist environment as it was in this stage of life. Knowing the silence of invisibility and the evasion of attention to a difference subject to acts of physical and verbal violence, for decades I tried to mask behaviours to reduce the anguish caused by the difference. First, I tried to hide affections and sexual desire, the so-called being inside the "wardrobe", then, later, the disguising of "strange" behaviours, which I could not imagine were characteristics of the autism spectrum. Only recently, through the work of the Autistic Voice Association, I had access to a set of information materials, as well as self-diagnostic tests, which led me to better understand certain behavioural aspects that, willingly or not, define my personality. Characteristics such as: having few relationships (friendships); anxiety in social environments; repetition of thoughts about lived experiences; foreseeing social encounters in which a certain behaviour or way of being may be

expected; inability to speak (shutdowns); hypersensitivity to sounds and smells; hyper-focus and loneliness, among other signs that although present since childhood were ignored until very recently. In different contexts I have been called dumb, stupid, and so many other names that led me to quit jobs, loss of self-esteem, depression, and social phobia. Today, with a self-diagnosis of autism, still using psychotherapy, I better understand my social and relationship difficulties, striving to work on specific social skills in order to overcome fear and to be free and autonomous. Even though I continue to be denied the clinical diagnosis of mild autism, neurotypical or not, I believe that the most important thing is to find the right resources to build a happy, safe and dignified life. Having sought help, information and diagnosis allowed me to build myself a little more, to know myself better and to realise that mental health is a progressive work throughout life. There is no treatment for autism, autism lasts a lifetime, and it can evolve or regress. However, the recognition and monitoring of social institutions, the work of training certain behavioural patterns and the empowerment for emancipation are essential tools for a free, democratic, and plural society.

# Violence in familiar words

## By M. Madeira de Sousa



*Trigger warning for childhood and verbal abuse*

She was beautiful. And I loved her like every son should love their mother. But I thought she didn't love me back. This was the everyday - or should I say, the never ending cycle - of a little different child.

In the morning, she looked me right in the eye and said:

- You're selfish. You only think about yourself, you can only see your perspective and the world doesn't spin around you. Think of me first for once! Look into and through my eyes! You're always selfish! Just put yourself in my shoes!

I knew that was bad, but I had just woken up in this crazy world with no rules, no manual, and I really couldn't see what she was seeing, neither could I look at her like she wanted me too. I was born with a blank sheet. How did she want me to put myself in her shoes if her size didn't fit me? I really couldn't do it. I never saw the world like she did. And she blamed me for it... and I started to blame myself for it. Neither of us understood the things at the time... I had to try harder because I thought I was defective. And I started to put herself first, above all needs. In fact, I started to put everyone first because I didn't want others to see me like she did, but I was operating in the dark. I really didn't know what she wanted or how. I did things, but it was not what she wanted. I could

never guess right. How could our worlds be so different...? Why couldn't she understand I didn't understand and just show me the way...? Why couldn't she see through MY eyes? At that time, I already knew I didn't know how to be a good son, how to do anything right, I already knew I was worthless and hopeless, but it didn't take long anyway until I heard her shout again...

...In the afternoon, as I had grown up a little more and developed my speech, she looked me right in the eye and said:

- You are rude, you are disrespectful, you are insolent, you are naughty! No one is going to like you if you continue like this! You will end up alone. All of us are going to leave you! Do you want that? Is that what you want, hã? Now, apologise to me because you made me look bad, and then go apologise to that lady!

I had no clue what I had done wrong. I never had a clue. And no one would explain it to me.

- You know very well what you have done!! It's obvious! You have evil in everything you do and you do it on purpose! It's always the same thing! You just can't shut up, can you?!

It wasn't obvious to me. Everyone saw bad where I just saw the truth... As I didn't know what I had said wrong, I withdrew. I closed myself indoors more and more as I grew older so I couldn't harm anyone. I learned to think a hundred times before I say the smallest word, and I learned to review my speech after I said anything a hundred times more, and a few more before I went to bed (and, yes, this took away my sleep). I was so afraid. More than anything, I was afraid of your words. I was afraid that everyone would just see in me what you saw, because what you saw was

bad. I didn't want to be bad... All I wanted was someone to love me. I started to think that not even you, my own mother, that person that is supposed to love us unconditionally, could love me. I was unlovable. And that hurts like hell in the heart of a little child. But I didn't know how to tell you that at the time. I didn't have the skills. Although I could talk nonstop about art materials or music, I didn't have the skills to tell you how I was feeling. To tell you the truth, I didn't know and I still don't quite know how I was feeling. I just knew it wasn't good. If only I could learn your emotional language like you, if only I could understand it, separate it, if only I could say it, oh, if only... Would have that made a difference...?

As she was kissing me goodnight, she whispered, as desperate as I was:

- Why can't you just be normal, my son...? Why can't you be like your brothers? Why can't you hug me like they do and say and show me that everything is going to be alright...?

Crying over her shoulders without knowing why, as I couldn't handle any more of those words that hit me like knives, with my whole body soaking and burning, I whispered to her back:

- I'm so sorry. I can't. I'm sorry I am not the son you wanted me to be. I'm so sorry.

Please, let me know what you want me to do and how and I'll do it.. I don't know what to do anymore. I want to die so bad so I can be reborn like I should... Please kill me, mom. Please...

She stood by me, in silence. Looked me right in the eye but, this time, didn't say a word. She abandoned my room and closed the door, and one more night I cried until the temporary death that is

sleep took me away. Oh, how I wished upon a star I could sleep forever... But she wanted me to wake up. Maybe I would wake up differently this time... How could I not learn from the mistakes I didn't know I was making? It seemed so simple to her... But every night she would close the door and leave me in the dark. And it became darker and darker...

This was not only what I heard every day growing up, this was what I knew. I was selfish, rude, evil, broken, abnormal, everybody was going to leave me, why couldn't I be like my brothers...? As I grew older, I understood. I am autistic. Although you never accepted, let me tell you now, right in the eye: everything is going to be alright, mom. And, for the other moms and dads and brothers and sisters, remember: words can be more powerful than physical confrontation. Violence starts at home.

## By Joaquim Guedes

---

*Trigger warning for overmedication and psychiatric confinement*

I was diagnosed with autism when I was four years old, and I went to therapy in APPDA-North. My parents never gave up on helping me to integrate into the society that surrounds us and that everyone calls normal, they always fought for me to become an autonomous person and to have everything that other kids my age had. I went to school like any other kid my age and thanks to the help of all the people I met throughout my life, I was able to follow an academic path without any adaptation to the way of teaching. I feel that I am a very lucky kid because throughout my life I have met people who help me, protect me and give me a lot of strength and affection. In my life until adolescence I always considered myself very happy, and even a little integrated into that so-called "normal" society.

When the pandemic arrived, I, already an adult, my routines were all changed, I stopped being with people I liked, going to school, talking to my colleagues, staff, teachers, relatives and even the child psychiatrist who assisted me was replaced, which made me very sad and unable to understand the reason for such a long distance and isolation. I started taking online classes at home, with no face-to-face, sensory contact, feeling trapped indoors. When I got to university, my situation got much worse. I was used to talking and socialising with the people around me, but this was not possible because, apart from attending a new school, I was not

allowed to make new friends, since we had online classes, due to the pandemic we were not allowed to socialise, that is, we became an individualistic society. When I returned to face-to-face classes I met some people who helped me and continue to help me although it was not the same closeness that existed with my previous colleagues.

One day, already in my second year of college, I went to college by public transport as usual and during a conversation with my colleagues they noticed that I was carrying a knife that was used to cut fruit. As they knew about my problem, autism, and had heard about a serious case with another autistic kid in the Faculty of Lisbon (terrorism threat), they thought it was better to contact the disability support team.

I received a contact from them to go to their office, which I immediately did. In the office they asked me why I was carrying a knife with me, I was nervous, but I replied that it was used to cut fruit and I was immediately asked for the object, to which I voluntarily gave it, and then they called my parents. When my parents arrived, as I was very nervous and anxious about the whole situation, they decided to take me voluntarily to the emergency room of the Hospital to see a psychiatrist/psychologist, someone who could calm me down at that moment. Unfortunately, and due to what happened to an autistic young man for an alleged terrorism attempt, the psychiatrists questioned me and my parents: "Does your son watch any inappropriate videos or websites of a violent nature?" My parents and I said I was controlled by a parental control application called "Family Link," which controlled

the Internet sites I saw. I said that the only videos I watched were of video games like Super Mario and some LEGO construction videos, but I also stated that I didn't watch anything violent. The doctors advised hospitalisation at the psychiatric Hospital, due to all the pressure and confusion I was under. They gave a document to my mother, as my guardian, to sign for my admission. Otherwise, they wouldn't let me out of the emergency room and the police would intervene to have me compulsorily admitted. My parents had no choice but to give in to what the doctors recommended and forced them to do. What happened next was much worse than I expected: I went to the Intensive Care Unit with no psychological treatment, no visits, a very strict diet system and several doses of medication that almost debilitated my body, without understanding what was wrong with having brought a knife to just cut and peel fruit for college. I began to feel anxious about leaving that prison that even made me resist staying there, which led to my being placed in isolation rooms, where I was given injectables to sleep and thus stop "getting aggressive and anxious". After a few days, I don't know exactly how long, because for me it seemed like an eternity, they let me call home, which made me feel more at ease. After some time, I was transferred to a ward, where there were other people with various problems, in which I became violent with them, because they talked about things without any sense and I was still revolted with so much isolation, without anyone with whom I could vent and who understood me. I only asked to be taken away and returned to my world, I know that in this period I became more violent and

misunderstood. I managed to get out of that hell a few weeks later. However, at home, I felt like I was having a stroke, my body was all weak, I curled my speech, my saliva flowed without any control and my hands were shaking like two rattles. Mentally I also felt weak and very sleepy, with no willpower to do anything, because I still remembered the trauma I had suffered there.

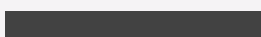
Consequently, my grades dropped, and I put on about 15kg, as I had a very low self-esteem that I was even ashamed of my body and my mind that was debilitated and so I lost concentration in my studies. Furthermore, I felt afraid of being repressed, and judged as a criminal, I felt that nobody understood me, the world was running away from my feet.

Like the Voz do Autista (Portuguese autistic self-advocacy), what I ask for is humanity in psychiatric and psychological treatment and a second chance for all autistic people, because I don't want more suffering for adult autistic people, I think we have to fight as a society against the way we are treated in hospitals, leaving the policy of those who go to a psychiatric emergency room to be considered and treated as criminals, this is not correct, because we simply need help and fundamentally to be heard and understood.

I hope that by telling my story I have helped to understand how much we still need to change our attitudes as a society, especially those who represent our medicine and who I think when they choose their profession should know that many lives may depend on them and on the way, they deal with people.

# The Lost Voices of Children.

## by Lily



*Trigger warning for domestic and sexual violence*

Throughout the turmoil of intimate partner violence (IPV) which culminates in sexual violence, it is probably true to say that the voices of children are frequently lost – before, during and after the violence. This places them in a position where they may be perceived as less valid, unwanted, unattended to and unheard.

Whilst it is possible that this occurs due to the chaotic domestic world within which they are living, it is more likely that due to the intentions of the perpetrator, children are deliberately ignored; their needs seen as a gratuitous burden overshadowing the needs of the perpetrator.

In a family set up that I am describing, I see these children as the lost victims living in a surrounding scenario over which they have absolutely no control. This scenario is imposed on them, and for many they see no escape. If any of these children are autistic or autistic and with another neurodivergence (such as ADHD, epilepsy, dyslexia etc), their perceptions of danger may vary massively in comparison to those of non-autistic individuals or those who are neurotypical – in other words, not from a minority neurotype. Their processing of danger, fear, emotions and ways to communicate their feelings about all of these aspects can prove

challenging in itself, and more so in relation to communicating with those who do not empathise with them, where there is a profound double empathy problem regarding their identities. These autistic children may not have the words to describe their experiences, or even be offered the format to do so. As such they are rendered voiceless. This too is a crime.

But being voiceless does not mean that self-expression does not occur. Communication occurs in a myriad of ways, and an autistic child will use that which best suits them. This is even more so when traumatised. Behavioural changes and their ability to perform and function in relation to general everyday tasks or classroom activities may suddenly take a different turn. Echolalia (or masking) may take over as traumatised autistic children endeavour to fit in with their peers. But this causes additional trauma as it covers up exhaustion and confusion as to their true identity. Ultimately, meltdowns, or the unconscious expression of a build-up of unwanted feelings and emotions, can occur. These leave the child even more exhausted, distressed and misunderstood. They are blamed for trying to fit in, for not having the words to voice their troubles. And their nightmare continues.

Some people working with these children willingly (or without thought) wield judgements without enquiring or exploring sensitively as to what might be informing these changes; these people are complicit in exacerbating trauma and not supporting children; they do so by failing to follow safeguarding protocols and then follow procedures accordingly. Heavy-handed and punitive measures are totally inappropriate when working with children

who, due to their trauma, may be experiencing autistic inertia – an inability to motivate themselves. Or maybe due to their monotropic mindset, they are so focused on their trauma that they are simply unable to switch focus to something else.

Society needs to understand the autistic individual and their unique way of being, and particularly children who have witnessed or experienced domestic violence, sexual abuse, or sexual violence. They may just not have words to describe their trauma narrative, or their words may have been 'stolen', lost in translation as they are passed through a system of people and services who work with 'problem' children. The imposition of distinct narrative agendas by adults keen to (mis) interpret the child so that they can be eased into a therapeutic pocket which does not fit is so damaging and problematic. These children then grow up, confused, angry, hurt and experience a multiplicity of additional destructive factors all of which make it increasingly difficult for them to function at their best.

The adult victim, however, may have a different agenda as their embedded survival instincts manifest themselves otherwise. This can draw on an innate instinct to protect their child(ren). Alternatively, their own trauma and experiences of fear, anxiety and distress may be so great that their own ability to engage or function socially is inhibited. This can make it impossible for them to protect their children or provide the love, care and attention that is so needed; their ability to process events happening around them is completely distorted. Again, as a result, the voice of the autistic child goes unheard.

Services, institutions and society as a whole need to be so much better at providing support for autistic survivors and the [autistic] children living within these violent households. There needs to be improved recognition that the victim, mother or father, is more at risk once they have left the original home. There needs to be heightened awareness that the children too are more at risk, and that they have a lesser understanding of what this could mean.

We need to provide safe spaces and opportunities for the voices of the children to be heard, working with them on issues such as what constitutes a healthy family, looking at issues that may go wrong and who to report to, and how there is always a possibility to dream for a better future. Failure to do so will continue to result in the lost voices of children.

**For more information on this project, please visit our [website](#).**

**Team responsible for the project:**

Heta Pukki

Sara Rocha

Joana Simões

Svea Kučinić

Susy Ridout

**Project coordinated by:**



**Project funded by:**



**Do you need support?**

Find services in your country clicking in this [link](#) or using the QR code below.

