

Scripts

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This is to certify that the thesis prepared

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complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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## **Abstract**

On the Intersections of Neurodivergence and Queerness

Nicola Sibthorpe

*Scripts* is an autobiographical narrative that explores the intersection of neurodivergence and queerness through the lens of “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” as expressed by Judith Butler. Following the narrator from birth to her early twenties, this work explores how the intricacies of social dynamics are negotiated.

This is also a story about family, and the strength that can come from familial relationships. The narrator explores the struggle of raising a child who doesn’t automatically adapt socially.

The work is divided into four sections - The Baby, The Child, The Teenager, and The Adult - but largely takes place in the last three. The narrative moves through different points of view, each meant to reflect the sense of self the narrator is experiencing. Similarly, formatting and genre varies throughout the text to demonstrate skills the narrator is learning to develop.

Act One

“An identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” -- *Judith Butler, Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*

## The Baby

On June 26<sup>th</sup> 1995.

In Montreal, Quebec.

In the St. Mary's Hospital.

A baby is born at 9:05 pm.

(Otherwise known as, a Cancer sun/Gemini moon).

The baby is a totally fine baby. A healthy one. Born to two, twenty-five year old parents only recently graduated from university. They are both thrilled. The baby's grandparents are thrilled. The grandfather gets the call while he's in a restaurant for a business meeting and he buys everyone he's with cigars and wine. The baby gets a name and a check-up from the hospital. The baby is normal. Fifteen days later, the baby's mother drives down to Vermont with one of the grandmothers. The baby doesn't even have a passport yet.

On the way, the car breaks down, and the three of them are forced to wait at the side of the road for a maintenance vehicle. When the car is fixed, the three continue on, driving past dilapidated farm houses, down roads that are made of dust and gravel, past large forests that are home to animals that will one day excite the baby in stories and fairy-tales.

For now, it's hard enough for the baby's eyes to stay open for more than fifteen minutes.

At nine months, the baby still doesn't crawl. The baby wiggles along the floor, until one day the baby decides that walking is faster. The baby doesn't toilet train; instead, the baby decides to stop using diapers. The baby doesn't like stuffed animals in bed; instead, the baby hides books under blankets and down the sides of the mattress. The baby doesn't read, but likes to flip through the pages.

The baby is never taught to read, the parents never have to worry about sounding out the words, they read to the baby and then one day the baby knows how. Fourteen months after the baby is born, so is a brother. Seven years later, a sister. Eight years, another brother.

The baby's first word is 'dog'.

The baby is a baby. Like most babies, this one is healthy, and happy, and loved.

Act Two

**Autism**

Pronunciation /'ɔ:tɪz(ə)m/

NOUN

*A developmental disorder of variable severity that is characterized by difficulty in social interaction and communication and by restricted or repetitive patterns of thought and behaviour.*

## The Child<sup>1</sup>

When you're eight, your mother points at a hawk outside the car window.

"Look!" she says, and her voice rises with excitement.

"Cool!" your seven-year-old brother says, peering past you.

"Where is it?" you ask, trying to follow her finger.

"There on the branch," your mom says. "Can't you see?"

You look, but the car is moving quickly, eighty kilometers an hour and the tree is out the back window. You crane your neck and try to at least get a glance.

"No," you say. "I missed it."

"Next time," your mother assures you.

The leather seats of the car are sticky underneath your knees, and you peel the skin away. There are imprints left in red. You place a sweater underneath so you won't get more.

Music is playing over the radio but it's easy to ignore while you read your book. Your brother

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<sup>1</sup> The following footnotes are different from other footnotes you might come across. YOU and YOU ALONE are in charge of what happens. There is only one path that will lead you to success. Ignore them if you want, you don't have to play along, but if you do, feel free to go back at any time and TRY AGAIN.



starts sniffing though, or scratching his arm, or chewing, and it's the type of noise that once you notice it, echoes around your head like gunshots.

Next time, it's a herd of deer across a field, and you miss that too.

You don't have the words to explain why talking is hard. It feels like someone hit the fast forward button on the VCR and you're still running at normal speed<sup>2</sup>.

"They asked you a question," your mom says, drawing your attention back to the room. You are standing a foot away from her, shoulders and head angled away and back towards the door. The party is loud, and there are people shouting, and lots of people laughing, and the sun is hot against your neck.

"What?" you ask.

"*Pardon,*" she corrects, and gestures to the adult in front of you. "They asked what grade you're in."

"Oh," you say.

The party isn't really a party, it's a barbeque, held at the local pool, but it's where everyone will be going over the next few months for swim lessons and to escape the inevitable August heat. You've already seen some people from your class. Your family moved to the small town in the suburbs a year ago and you still feel like a stranger to them. You're wearing a towel draped across your shoulders and a bathing suit. You can tell that the goggles digging into your forehead will leave indents. Your mom is still looking at you. You mumble, "two."

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<sup>2</sup>It's a normal school day and you've just been assigned a group project on the life cycle of the woodpecker. You've been told you need to find a partner. Down the hall there is a group of girls from your class and one of them smiles at you. If you a) approach them turn to page 11. If you b) walk away, turn to page 9.

“Well,” your mom corrects, “you just *finished* grade two.”

You shrug. Then nod.

“Can I have a hamburger?” you ask. There’s a book you just got from the library in your bag and you’re eager to read it.

Sequestered in a corner and out of direct view, you try not to drip ketchup on the pages of a book about a girl who switches place with her brother so that she doesn’t have to go to finishing school.

One day you think to yourself, you’ll be a knight who gets to ride a horse and have a purple-eyed-black-cat that sits in a basket on the saddle.

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Even in elementary school you recognize how hard your parents are trying. How much they love you. Animals in general are easier, and for as long as you can remember you have spent long hours crawling around on all fours or galloping around the field as a dog or a horse. Your parents laugh about the one time you were all going to a wedding, and before everyone got in the car your brother had drawn across his face with a permanent marker that no amount of Vaseline could remove. They laugh even harder when they next mention that as soon as you’d all arrived, you ripped your beautiful new velvet dress crawling on the floor and pretending to be a puppy. Your parents say this was the moment they realized there were times as parents that they couldn’t do anything but pull back and watch.

When you’re five, your parents adopt a dog. He’s small, but sturdy, a two-year-old terrier-bichon mix who struggles adapting to a new life where he has plenty of food and walks. He’s the family dog, but you can’t help but feel like your parents got him for you. Your

obsession with dogs has led you to reading books almost exclusively about animals and to memorize dog training tips and breeds. When asked you can list over fifty different breeds and recognize them by sight. There are plenty of books that tell you how to read a dog's body language. What it looks like when they're happy, when they're anxious, when they're scared. They tell you how to introduce yourself, palm up from the side so they can see you, keeping your eyes on their ears and eyes and tails. Dogs are easy.

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Your family moved to the suburbs just as you were about to enter the second grade. The house you live in is right across the street from the elementary school. You don't even have to walk a half block. When you leave your door in the morning all you have to do is walk in a straight line (remembering to look both ways when you cross the street) and you will arrive at the school door<sup>4</sup>.

This house is different from the old one. You don't know how to say that you miss the creaky floorboards and the large living room doors with the glass windows. It's been a few years though and now you're used to this one. You're putting on your sweater and shoving last night's homework into your bag. It was actually given to you a week ago, but you forgot. Now it's messy and your handwriting almost indecipherable. You pick up the book you're currently reading, and shove it in as well.

"Why don't you leave the book at home?"

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<sup>4</sup> b) You walk away from the group. You still have half hour before lunch is over and you wanted to read your book. You feel, sort of...lonely, but it's easier than trying to force something to work that you know won't. TRY AGAIN.

There aren't a lot of moments where your dad doesn't know what to say. This is one of them.

But you're eight and it feels like an attack.

"No," you say, and start to walk away.

Your dad doesn't move, but says again, more firmly, "Why don't you leave the book at home?"

"Why?"

"You should try and talk to people at recess instead of reading."

"No one wants to talk to me though," you say.

You spend your recess sitting with your back against the brick wall and a book in hand. The gravel digs into your skin uncomfortably, and your legs always go numb. The sun comes down exactly where you sit, and if it's too strong, there's a small patch of shade you can escape to. In winter, it isn't as nice, but now the snow is mostly melted and you get to sit there, warm and dry.

It's the best part of your day.

"The school spoke to your mum and me. They want you to leave it at home. They're worried you don't socialize enough."

You argue, but he's firm and you hand over the Harry Potter book you were rereading for the umpteenth time and storm off. Anger and frustration tight in every muscle.

It's all right though. You have a second book in your bag. And a third one in your coat cubby.

You read, all the time. You are never without a book in your hand, or your bag, or, if you're lucky and wearing the right sweater, your pocket. You read *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* by E.L. Konigsburg and dream about running away to live in a library. You walk into museums and picture where you could sneak away into alcoves and build yourself a fort. These are buildings that feel grand to you, places of magic and mystery and knowledge. Reading, whether it's a text or understanding the symbolism in art, is never something you work at and you excel without trying. You build friends out of book characters, have whispered conversations with Hermione or Bulbasaur in the school bathrooms<sup>5</sup>. You have sprawling worlds that you escape to, places where you are a hero, where you have a best friend who is always at your side. Places where you can be brave, and generous, and kind, and those feelings are rewarded.

Sometimes it feels like reading is the only thing you're good at.

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It could have been any year in elementary school, but this time you're ten. Meant to be enjoying your grade four year. Teachers say you're intelligent, but lazy. They say you don't want to try at math, or science, or French, or English grammar. You think they're wrong, but you also know that you've snuck a book under your desk and if you're not caught, it's how you'll spend your afternoon.

Your parents try to understand how it is you'll learn. They understand more than your teachers do that there's something about school that *just doesn't make sense* to you. Your dad suggests physically moving, sends you on runs around the house that you hate more than

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<sup>5</sup> a) You approach the group, but you haven't been invited into their conversation yet. If you a) wait for them to acknowledge you go to page 13. If you b) say hello, go to page 17.

anything. Your mother writes out the first bit of French verbs on large pieces of construction paper, then she asks you to attach the right ending. You spend hours with her, trying to figure out why you *just can't remember*. She gets frustrated and yells. You yell back.

There are tears.

Later, hiding in the room you've shared with your brother since the new baby was born, you'll wonder how it is everyone else does it. They know how to read a clock, and not just the digital kind. They can memorize their multiplication tables, have known them since grade two. *Four times six equals twenty-four* in the space of time that you've realized you can get the right answer by adding two twelves together. You are embarrassed to admit that it took you until you were eight to properly remember how to spell your last name. A long jumble of letters that, thankfully, is spelt like it sounds.

Your parents send you to a child psychologist. She makes you nervous.

"Tell me, what school's like?" she asks.

"It's fine," you say. "I feel like I'm starting to get it now."

You pretend that everything is okay, that you're happy and healthy. She passes that on to your parents; it's meant to be reassuring. They knew without asking you that you'd lied.

(Years later, they laugh about how easily you were able to fool her.)

"She's fine," the child psychologist says.

You all know this is wrong.

Your teachers recommend speech therapy. Say that it might help the peculiar accent you sometimes have, the jumble in which words fall out, when you're nervous or stressed, all of them trying to escape at once<sup>6</sup>. You start attending during lunch twice a week. It doesn't help.

You sit around a table with the other kids who have been flagged as needing extra attention. One of them is new to the school and painfully shy; she doesn't talk at all. One of them is new to the country; he talks a lot in English, but his French is non-existent. The supervisor asks you to introduce yourself, and say what you're hoping to learn.

You shrug.

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In summer, you spend long hours reading, lying on your stomach and basking in the sun on a beach towel. Your mom brings you washed purple grapes and cut up apples in little plastic containers. Your brother can draw you into a game of tag, or Pokémon cards, and there are many magic potions, made from grass and water and crushed flowers. When you aren't in Montreal, the summer humid and almost unbearable, you are in Vermont. Your grandparents have a cottage there, next to a lake and a mountain shaped like an eagle's head.

Some of your favorite memories:

Here is where your grandfather's garden grows, with its crunchy green beans that he hands you off the vine, the flowers he shows you how to water, the leafy green rhubarb that flops towards the ground on red stalks. Here is the wooden swing, hung from a tree branch at

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<sup>6</sup> a) You hover just outside of their group. They're talking about the group project and weekend plans. None of them say hello or invite you to join the conversation. You wait for ten minutes, and try to catch one of their attention. They start to look at you, but it's not a kind look. Without talking to you they all get up and leave. You think you can hear them whispering about you. TRY AGAIN.

the edge of a very small hill by a yellow cord that scratches your hand; you can push yourself further and further upwards until the ground seems to disappear beneath you and the hill is impossibly tall. Here is the lake with a sandbar that appears during low tide, and the dock you can jump off of when the tide is high. Here is where your parents stop the car on the side of the road because you're obsessed by the farm with the little goats, and you plead for one every Christmas. Here is where your dad teaches you how to fish, and your grandmother tells you stories, and your mother admires the garden snakes and frogs you catch. Here is where your brother feeds the blue jay that visits every morning. Here is where bats squeak in the walls, and the rooms smell like wood and age and dust and books. Here in the mornings the windows are always open and it smells like green. Here you can sit on the screened in porch and watch thunderstorms or play crazy eights or watch the moths throw themselves at the yellow lamps.

Here is where the rain beats down on the grass and everything smells like geosmin and petrichor and the lightning flashes brightly over the trees and the lake.

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You are ten when you get your first script, even if none of your family has a name for it yet. All you know is that kids are mean, and sometimes the only reason you know they're being mean is because someone else tells you so. Your parents say that people aren't friends if they only pay attention to you when it's convenient to them. They tell you that school is temporary, especially elementary school. There are much bigger and brighter things in your future.

But first, you should learn how to stand up for yourself.

First, they try to get you to express yourself first. They say things like: "Tell her how you feel. You don't have to tell her everything, just let her know you're upset."



The words get caught in your throat. This isn't something you know how to do. You wonder aloud if there's a book you can read that will teach you how to talk to people. Your parents say, "Practice with us. Here's what you're going to do."

SCENE. INT – PARENT'S BEDROOM

*The NARRATOR turns to face who she's talking to, looking them in the eye and making sure that they're listening. She takes her time, speaking clearly, and trying to remember to stand up straight. She's tall, make use of it. Currently, she is sitting on her parent's bed, the comfiest one in the house. Scattered tissues litter the bedspread and tear tracks are still visible down her cheeks.*

MOM

Melanie, I am not your doormat.

YOU

I am not your doormat.

MOM

You're mean to me around the other girls, and I won't be your friend just because we live next door to each other.

YOU

Really? I have to say all that?

DAD

Yes.

YOU

Fine. You're mean to me around the other girls, and I won't be your friend just because we live next door to each other.

MOM

Good, let's practice that a few times then.

On Friday, Melanie ignores you throughout the day. Years later, you will realize she only befriended you out of convenience but for now, you are heartbroken. She is your only friend. Part of your sadness is tinged with jealousy; you and Melanie can pass as siblings: blond hair, tall, chubby. Neither of you are considered cute by the rest of your grade. But Melanie has made it into the popular crowd. She has sleepover parties that people go to, and she talks to people through AIM after school. When you had a party the year before, nobody showed up, and you felt like the cliché out of a bad teen movie. You stop watching teen movies.

But Melanie comes up to you after her other friends have gone home.

“Hey!” she says, perky and bubbly. “Do you want to come over this weekend? We could watch a movie or something!”

There is a pressure in your throat and stinging in your eyes and you can’t speak.

“Hey!” Melanie says again as you keep moving. “What’s wrong?”

The two of you are in the junior section now, and kindergartners race around you, impossibly small and fragile. Your youngest siblings are even smaller, and you can’t imagine them ever growing up.

You turn, words caught, and they don’t come out at first. You feel the tears start to fall.

YOU

Melanie, I am not your doormat!

It’s all you can get out, and you yell it accidentally. So, you turn and walk as quickly as you can out the doors, sidestepping the children along the way.

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Like every other student in grade six, you begin to look at high schools. It’s exciting. You can see a finish line, one that’ll let you get out and escape all the people you hate and all the

people who hate you. You look at the schools nearby, but you know those are the ones that people from your elementary school will be attending. Secretly, in one of the deepest, darkest parts of yourself, you know that if high school is like elementary, you won't live past fifteen.

Your parents only know that they don't want you to be miserable. So, when they see your face, and how excited you are when you walk into Trafalgar School for Girls, they know that they'll do everything they can to send you there. Years later, they admit they took out another mortgage on the house to do so. (You're so grateful, it makes you cry).

You score a perfect mark on Traf's reading comprehension exam and you want to shove it in your English teacher's face. The one who accused you of cheating when you handed in your grade six practice exams. She had said that there was no way someone with your math marks could have done so well<sup>7</sup>.

Elementary school is still hard. And it made everything else seem harder. But with the promise of something else on the horizon, everything changes. You tell your classmates and your teachers what school you are going to, and watch how first confusion then disbelief then the slightest glimmer of respect passes across their faces. You are proud of yourself for one of the first times you can remember. You check out of elementary school before the year is over. You go to school, you're physically present, but you're already thinking of somewhere else.

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<sup>7</sup> b) "Hello," you say. These are your classmates, you don't always need a reason to join in on the conversation. "How are you?" one of them asks. If you a) tell them how you really feel, go to page 19. If you b) ask them how they are and talk about the project, go to page 21.

Act Three

**Asperger's syndrome**

Pronunciation /'aspə:dʒəz ,sɪndrəʊm// 'aspə:gəz ,sɪndrəʊm/

NOUN

*A developmental disorder related to autism and characterized by awkwardness in social interaction, pedantry in speech, and preoccupation with very narrow interests.*

## The Teenager

Trafalgar's uniform is a blessing in disguise. You love to wear it at first, the kilt and tie a novelty in an ever-revolving closet of sweatpants and t-shirts. Jeans are too rough against your skin, the textures more distracting than comfortable. You like loose clothing, what passes for pyjamas<sup>8</sup>. You want to be able to play and read and not worry about what you should or shouldn't be wearing. The uniform means that no one has the chance to judge you based on clothing. It also forces you out of your comfort zone. You begin to wear jeans, even if you're not quite sure about the texture yet.

You make friends.

You're still weird, but some of them are weird too. And you're nice; everyone wants to be friends with someone who's nice. But friendship isn't built only on niceness, so you make jokes. People don't always laugh, but it's okay, because they will next time.

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<sup>8</sup> a) "I'm having horrible cramps!" you admit. Periods are things that most girls will understand, right? That's what the teen books you got from the library promised. "So, so awful." The other girls look at each other. "That sucks," one of them says. You nod. The conversation stalls, and soon everyone heads to class. TRY AGAIN.

Grade seven. You don't understand why showering is important -- your parents have been insisting it is for years -- but you're starting to understand that it's something that can help people to like you. You still don't like how the water feels against your dry skin, and the brief passage of time between dry and wet hair. You start taking one every two days, and making sure to remember to brush your teeth in the mornings and evenings. Slowly, you're beginning to understand that there are some things you just have to do. Maybe this is why people didn't want to be your friend in elementary school.

Your mother is an actor. She took a break while she raised four kids. She helps you practice your lines. Your dad is a businessman. He knows how to use words to get what he wants; he helps too. They both help you practice.

SCENE. INT – SCHOOL HALLS

YOU

Hello, I'm a new student here. What's your name?

YOU

Could you show me where the library is? .... What's your favourite book?

YOU

Are you looking for a partner for the project?

YOU

What do you think about that new movie that just came out?

YOU

Have you seen this cat video yet? Let me show you! It's *so funny*.

YOU

I missed that, sorry, could you repeat it?

YOU

Pardon?

Years later, looking back, you realize that memories of elementary school are mostly locked away in a box you don't want access to. You poke at it, then realize you don't want them back. You wonder if it's a coping mechanism. It probably is. Remember that you don't care, because you have so many better memories to replace them with.

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You will always be awkward.

You realize this in grade nine. There is something off about the way you speak. Or maybe it's the way you stand, with your shoulders hunched, like you're trying to make your five foot nine frame fit into the body of someone five inches smaller. Maybe it's how you look at people sometimes, out of the corner of your eye, because you don't like to feel the weight of their full attention<sup>9</sup>. Maybe it's because you talk too fast, or trip over your words. Or maybe you talk too slow, don't get your point across. There are a lot of maybes.

Not a whole lot of answers though.

You realize this standing in the locker room after gym class. You're having a conversation and thinking really hard about the rules. You have a list. You like lists, they help you stay organized and focused on what you have to do, rather than what you think you have to do.

1. Face the person you are talking to.
2. Make eye contact.
3. Don't pause too long when they're done speaking before you say something.

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<sup>9</sup> b) "I'm good! How are you doing?" you ask, "How are your projects going?" If you a) ask them about their groups go to page 30. If you b) wait for someone to ask you go to page 32.

#### 4. Don't interrupt.

Funnily enough, her name is Melanie too. What you didn't realize is that you weren't the person she was talking to. She was directing her conversation to the class, everyone banging open and shut the metal lockers as they hurried to get out of their sweaty clothes, but when she asked what people were doing for the project, she meant the people she actually *liked*. She doesn't like you.

She follows up with, "Eww, are you staring at me? *Oh my god*, you're such a lesbian."

It's meant to be an insult? Maybe?

She follows up with something that is, and her voice is high pitched and nasal.

"If you want to look at a girl naked, go look at yourself in a mirror."

Years later, you remember what she said verbatim, because even then you were struck by the ridiculousness of it. You're stunned, and don't know how to respond, so you let it go. Chuckle awkwardly, maybe try and explain yourself. Ultimately, in the aftermath you add another rule to your list.

#### 5. Timing is important.

But maybe she's onto something, because she doesn't stop in the upcoming weeks. She even convinces you to change in the bathrooms because you make everyone else 'uncomfortable'. None of that bothers you though until someone slips a note into your locker with a suicide hotline scrawled across it in neat penmanship. It's the final straw. You can't explain why this is what triggers a reaction, but it does. You bring it to the Vice-Principal and...she listens.

It's not what you're used to.



She calls a grade meeting, and gets the Principal involved. Finally, it feels like adults are doing things besides asking for apologies that don't actually mean anything, or waiting around for things to fix themselves.

The following year, Melanie hits you in the face with a bowling pin during gym class. However, she doesn't have many friends left, and the few she does have will disappear by grade eleven. After a brief flare of anger, you realize you don't care if it was an accident or not, and you don't want her apology.

You don't want to get trapped in the loop of checking and rechecking social media in the hopes of stumbling across some great flaw in the people who'd made you upset. It would be so easy for that to happen, so easy for you to google people's names and judge what they're studying, or what they're not studying. It would be so easy to rate the photos they put on Instagram as if you were a reject *America's Top Model* judge with a chip on your shoulder.

There's a lot of power in realizing that you just don't care.

It's not forgiveness, but instead a deliberate apathy.

Identity stories are always painful. Yours is no different.

But you don't want it to be. Your world got better; *you* got better.

In grade ten, your school holds a workshop, meant to help confront the problems the grade had with bullying. They gather all forty-eight students into the hard-back plastic chairs all the way up in the small fourth-floor auditorium. You remember how bright the sun was, shining into your eyes and blinding you while they played soft, Enya-esque background music.

Three people are leading the workshop, and at the beginning of the class they hand out square slabs of wood and magic markers. They lead you through a meditation sequence, asking

you to write your hopes and fears and what you are trying to overcome onto the board. Even at the time, you found the whole process unbelievably theatrical and melodramatic.

They ask for volunteers at the end of the hour, people willing to come up and hold the board so its owner can kick it and break it in half. Three students go up with their friends, giggling. They end up falling over the first time, their board unbroken.

Raising your own hand, you call down two people to hold your board. The two people you, and everyone in your grade, know to be the catalysts of the cruel things that are said about you. Melanie, the girl from the locker room, is one of them.

Is this some sort of unexamined attempt at revenge?

Probably.

But the organizers have given you the tools to make a truly terrible metaphor out of your teenage angst. So you grab the opportunity with both fists clutched around a magic marker. You remember the sick twist of nerves in your stomach as you kick the board with your heel and feel it splinter. The pieces end up in your locker later, buried under a pile of textbooks and gym clothes, until they were thrown out a few weeks later. You remember how distinctly unsatisfied you felt. How you wanted it to mean more than it did.

How you had wanted it to fix you.

Fix the way you still feel uncomfortable in the locker room, fix that you stumble over words and second-guess the way you stand, and walk. Wanted it to absolve you of the things you felt guilty of, to make you feel better about yourself and give you the confidence to walk away without feeling the need to look back.

There was never going to be an easy fix. No wizard at the end of a yellow brick road to pin a medal for courage to your chest.

In the end, you couldn't control *how* you felt, but you could control how you *acted* in response to those feelings.

The next year you started therapy.

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Still though, you practice responses with your parents, and even if you don't use the skill much, it's a nice thing to have in case you need it.

SCENE. INT – PARENT'S BEDROOM (NEW HOUSE)

*Scene opens. The NARRATOR sits cross-legged on the edge of a large, light coloured duvet. The NARRATOR is a teenager, and in warm pyjamas. It's late on a school night and the narrator's parents are leaning against the headboard as she faces them.*

MOM

You don't have to be so *nice*, try again.

YOU

FUCK YOU!

Midway through grade nine (after the note), you are taken to another psychologist. Even though you're doing *really well*, school is still hard; but you have friends, really good ones. Who laugh at your jokes, and if you don't pick up on it they let you know when they're being sarcastic. The Doctor begins by talking with both you and your parents. Then they wait in the hall while the two of you talk.

"Tell me what school's like?" The Doctor asks.

"It's fine," you say. "I feel like I'm starting to get it now. My grades are getting better."

“Are you?” she asks.

You nod. The Doctor swaps you for your parents. You read your book in the hall, trying to eavesdrop but not able to make anything out through the doors. She calls you back in half an hour later.

“I want you to come back in a few weeks,” she says. “There’s some tests I think we should run.”

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The tests don’t make obvious sense. She has you memorize a list of random words, say them back to her, point out different shapes, draw a picture with different colours as she tells you where each line should go, point out patterns in lists of numbers, repeat the list. It’s exhausting, and certain tasks are harder than others. You wonder if there might be an explanation beyond, “She’s unique.”

There is.

It’s called a Non-Verbal Learning Disability, with the bonus of a Rote Memory Disability.

There are many people who are neuro-divergent, who fall somewhere on a line of identity that affects how they live their life. There still aren’t a lot of examples of how that scale looks for each person. You never read a book growing up about someone who is neuro-divergent; there are no TV shows, no protagonists in movies. No reference point to look to for a mutual experience. There are hundreds of books on your shelves, but none that represent your life, or experience. Not in the way that people can talk about how an author transported them back to a specific time or experience in their life.

People are often confused when they hear about non-verbal learning disabilities. The name is inherently contradictory. You are, in fact, able to verbally express yourself; in fact, it is the opposite; you are able to keep up a conversation for hours. Where you have trouble is in the non-verbal communication, the conversations that happens around the words. The way a flick of the hair can mean frustration, or how flirting is carried out in different contexts and situations. There's still no definition in the dictionary, and it's a diagnosis that varies from person to person.

"Some people think it's like Aspergers," you say, and shrug. "Some people don't."

On the other hand, a diagnosis is helpful. It gives you and your family the ability to talk about what is happening. To learn the language and tools that will help. You never feel ashamed about being neuro-divergent. It isn't something you have to hide. In fact, once you know, you tell everyone you can, using it as a pre-emptive apology in case you do something strange. You try to anticipate potential issues in social situations, and be careful about how others will perceive you.

The more people know, the more it helps. Your parents start to explain why things have to be done in a specific way; your friends helpfully point out when they are being sarcastic. As you get older, and more confident in your social skills, you stop offering explanations. You no longer feel the need to justify your actions, or the way you speak, or feel uncomfortable asking someone to elucidate further their statements. Now, it's a fun fact about yourself, and something you don't feel the need to bring up in a first conversation with someone. Instead, you use it to talk about why you think accessibility is important.

But there still isn't anyone outside your family who has grinned and said, "I have that too!"

You want to meet another non-verbal person. Not just your siblings, or your dad, but someone who has grown up like you, always on the outside of a conversation. Who has never quite learned how to fake it properly. How did *they* learn that a person's eyes soften at the corners when they like you? Or how pointing your feet and shoulders at another person shows you're interested in what they're saying? Did they ever react inappropriately as a child when being told a classmate's grandfather had died? What tricks did they have? Which school subjects did they love? Which did they hate?

You are glad you have siblings with similar experiences, even if they have always been higher functioning. It's not something you talk about much, but your relationships with each other are stronger for it. You can relate to each other's experience in a way that the world can't. There are no support groups for non-verbal learning disabilities, and you don't form your own because...you don't have to. You know each other already, and that is enough.

Higher-functioning is a strange concept. Because to a certain extent its misrepresentative. When people say that learning-disabilities are on a spectrum, they seem to think of it like the dial on a speaker. Where you can turn it all the way up or all the way down, and somehow this is meant to represent that someone is low or high functioning.

Instead, it's more like the soundboard of a music producer, with many different sliders, all of them adjusted to different levels and sounds. Each of them representing a different symptom that the person experiences. There is something of a checklist that accompanies a

diagnoses. This list is from the Michigan University Website, and there are variations. But most of the symptoms for non-verbal learning disabilities remain the same.

- ✓ Great vocabulary and verbal expression
  - Excellent memory skills
- ✓ Attention to detail, but misses the big picture
  - Trouble *understanding* reading
- ✓ Difficulty with math, especially word problems
- ✓ Poor abstract reasoning
- ✓ Physically awkward; poor coordination
- ✓ Messy and laborious handwriting
- ✓ Concrete thinking; taking things very literally
- ✓ Trouble with nonverbal communication, like body language, facial expression and tone of voice
- ✓ Poor social skills; difficulty making and keeping friends
  - Fear of new situations
- ✓ Trouble adjusting to changes
  - May be very naïve and lack common sense
- ✓ Anxiety, depression, low self-esteem
  - May withdraw, becoming *agoraphobic* (abnormal fear of open spaces)

Of the sixteen listed above, you find yourself, and your behaviors, in ten of them. You see your sister in six, your brothers both in five. They might disagree, and find themselves in more, or in less. Nor can you claim to know exactly how the psychologist you all went to reached her conclusions.

What you *do* know is that it is strange to be able to reduce to a checklist some of the things you have always taken for granted about yourself and your personality.

When you were younger, you walked into doorframes a lot. You often dropped things, to the point that your mom wouldn't let you carry anything breakable in from the car, and she asked your brother to pass her plates or vases. You were always falling down stairs and tripping over your own feet. Being clumsy was a part of your identity, as much as being goofy was. At

the time, you passed off these mishaps with a laugh, a bit like a bee taking a few tries to get through an open window.

Turns out, clumsy was a symptom.

The Doctor recommends the after school Taylor-Adolescent Program to your parents. She also gives your parents tips about how to explain things to you in a way that will make sense.

The program is twice a week after school. It's not a tutoring program your parents say, "They're going to teach you how you *learn*." Excitement builds.

Maybe, the thought occurs, you can do what you know you can.

Everyone in your life is optimistic. None of them had had the language or knowledge to understand why you'd struggled so hard with things that were so obvious to everyone else. You tell everyone you can about the diagnosis, and start researching what non-verbal communication is.

You start to watch people interact. Noting how a smile isn't always a smile, how people lean away from one another if they get too close. How not everyone has days of feeling hypersensitive, when every sense is over-aware of its surroundings. People's eyes are interesting. You didn't always like meeting them before, but now you force yourself to, trying to pick out what it is the eyes are saying without speaking<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> a) "Do you all have your groups yet?" you ask. One of the girls shakes her head. "Not yet," she admits. You smile at her, "I don't either!" you say, "We should partner up!" She smiles back and agrees.

CONGRATULATIONS! You have successfully navigated a conversation.



You'd never felt confident before. Not like the confident you become. With a diagnosis, you realize that there is nothing to lose, and when you walk into a group of new people, why should you waste time when you could just say hello? It no longer feels like it's your fault you get the reactions you do, and you'd been blaming yourself for the social missteps for longer than you can remember.

You can forgive yourself the mistakes more easily. You can be kinder to yourself.

You were never a very good actor. You *wanted* to be one. Wanted to be the kid in high school who got the lead role, who got to be center stage and knew all her lines and everyone went up to and congratulated afterwards. You were bitter that you never got much of a role beyond villager number three, and, even though you acted your heart out with the four lines you had, you spoke too quickly, and sweated, and panicked about how you were standing and wondered if everyone was judging you and maybe your shirt was on wrong. You never lost yourself in a character, were never able to fully commit to the story that was being told and to the way you were meant to deliver your lines.

How could you though? You weren't even yet able to know who *you* were. There was no spike tape to indicate where to stand in the hallways.

You played a lot of roles in high school, most of them lifted from books and TV shows. You certainly weren't the only child or teenager doing that, consuming popular culture and finding a character you thought was interesting and then assuming the personality that went along with it, like your sister, who watched Disney shows and came away sassy and sarcastic.

You decide to read your books like instruction manuals, looking for the normal ways that teenagers behaved, and tried to memorize the part you were meant to be playing<sup>11</sup>. There were things normal teenagers were supposed to do, go see movies with their friends, rebel against their parents, lounge on playgrounds in the dark.

Teenagers were also supposed to date.

Which is how you start dating your first and only boyfriend.

You meet him at a robotics competition, which even then you recognize as the nerdiest possible place to find a date. Your team spent months trying to build a robot so you could compete against the other schools. Trafalgar was competing for the first time, and already the school had gotten further in the competition than anyone had expected.

You weren't great at the robot thing, but had joined because it was a fun way to hang out with your best friend. The two of you were inseparable in grade nine, and you slept over at her house a couple of times a month and would talk into the very early hours of the night.

Trafalgar's brother school, Selwyn House, had a booth set up next to yours, much more professional looking than the vinyl banner and undecorated blue curtains behind you. You had a small team and an even smaller budget, and it was intimidating to be going up against schools that had booths modeled after Star Wars space ships, or had mechanical dragons that moved up and down on a pole. Selwyn was an easy way for everyone to distract themselves, giddy and nervous and excited all at once.

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<sup>11</sup> The conversation shifts from group projects to weekend plans. Some of them mention that they're going to see a movie together. They don't invite you. It's probably a good thing though. You'll be spending your weekend working on the project by yourself. TRY AGAIN.

You and your friend introduce yourselves to some of the boys your age. One of them, much taller than even you are, and with bright red hair, immediately becomes friendly. The three of you soon realize how much you have in common, and quickly fall into a heated debate about fantasy books. Talking to new people isn't something you're used to, and you're able to do it because your friend is with you. She makes you nervous sometimes, but more than that, she makes you feel comfortable and confident and she makes you laugh like no one else does.

When the weekend comes to a close you and your friend exchange numbers with the boy, and you and the boy begin talking every day. Texting and emailing each other constantly, while your best friend is doing the same thing. A group of you goes to see *Clash of the Titans*, a spectacularly bad movie, with a plot that immediately bores you. You laugh aloud at some of the dialogue, and you and the boy begin a whispered commentary through the entire thing. Your friend sits a few seats away, and you wonder if she's jealous.

A couple of months later you two get into a fight that ends your friendship, and then a few months after that you and the boy start dating.

The relationship doesn't last a year.

Because it wasn't the boy you were interested in.

Act Four

**Non-Verbal Learning Disability**

Pronunciation /nän'vərbəl 'lərnɪŋ 'dɪsə'bilədē/

NOUN

*Nonverbal learning disorder (also known as nonverbal learning disability, NLD, or NVLD) is a learning disorder characterized by verbal strengths as well as visual-spatial, motor, and social skills difficulties.*

The Adult

After high school I could have different types of conversations, and could improvise beyond the scripts I had written with my parents. , I still found myself using them all the time. Now though, they were not just for making friends, but learning how to ask for what I wanted. How to be more than merely functional.

SCENE. INT – LIVING ROOM

*The NARRATOR is standing across from her dad. Her shoulders are pushed back and her chin slightly raised so she can meet his eyes. He holds a hand out in front of himself.*

DAD

Okay, so what you're going to want to do is grab my hand, firmly, but not too tight, and then squeeze slightly before you let go.

*(The narrator does as instructed)*

Exactly like that! You never realize how important a strong handshake is. Then you say:

YOU

Thank you for meeting with me today, I look forward to hearing from you.

DAD

Perfect, you'll be totally fine.

Job hunting aside, scripts became useful for everything. If I needed to send food back at a restaurant, if I needed to ask for special accommodations at school, if I needed to know how

to introduce myself to a whole bunch of new people. There were practice sessions I could remember and rely on when I was too tired to improvise.

I was lucky that I had those tools, because when I started trying to figure out who I was beyond what I already knew, I had a foundation to rely on.

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I came out two months after high school.

I knew my parents would accept me. But I knew it with a brittle edge that made me stutter when I told my mom, my dad lingering in the background.

It wasn't clear why I felt like I could tell one but not the other. My parents are partners in everything. As my high school classmates watched their own parents move on and away from each other, I had the constant stability of my parents and their relationship at the center of my life.

Coming out that first time had made very little difference in my life. I didn't know anyone who was queer, and didn't have many books or TV shows to tell me how I was supposed to behave. I did start wearing more flannel, worn open over a graphic t-shirt, jeans, and paired with an artsy scarf.

I was lucky, there were other women who had paved the way for me. Two great aunts who had faced a world so much harder than mine. I didn't know about them, they lived impossibly far away, and if anyone ever told me about them, I had forgotten it.

I had a hard enough time dating normally, let alone navigating dating girls.

It was only when I joined the university's LGBTQ+ club that and I understood what had been missing before. Until that point, I hadn't realized how isolated my queerness made me.

The only queerness I knew came from Willow on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the early seasons of *Glee*. Neither of them was helpful in letting me know how I should act and behave.

For regular social cues, I could follow the examples of my parents: I could watch TV shows and movies, and read books. I had endless opportunities to observe and practice and internalize.

I didn't have those same opportunities for modelling queerness. So, when suddenly I did, like most young LGBTQ+ folk, I submerged myself in it. Covered myself in glitter, and flannel, and crop tops, and political theory.

I began to talk about my queerness in every possible fashion. The essays I wrote were on queer subjects; all the shows I watched had at least one out, queer character.

Eventually, after saying it aloud enough times, it began to feel like reality.

I called myself a lesbian.

I identified myself first as a 'she' and then as a 'they'.

I recognized myself as queer.

I didn't realize that it felt like I was faking it. Like I was just waiting for someone to jump out from a corner and tell me I was 'doing it wrong'. That I was a bad lesbian. That I looked too straight, or wasn't angry enough, or tried too desperately hard to fit in.

Dating, for example, was not something I was good at. No, wait, let me specify. I am *very* good at first dates. I like the promise of first dates. There's an excitement to them, the anticipation that maybe this is *the one*. My best friend, who moved to Montreal from South

Africa is constantly baffled by how we date, and says that no one commits to a relationship in Montreal because they think that there's someone better around the corner.

It's hard dating in Montreal.

It should be the opposite. Montreal is always shifting as students come and go. In my first year, we all used to stand, shoulder to shoulder, and try to find each other's Tinder profiles so we could match. It became a joke amongst my friends, that whenever we went out, I would always end up with someone's number.

But somehow, nothing ever sticks. Mostly bland and fleeting, the evenings were bracketed by pleasant conversation and friendly text messages. Although I always ended up being friends with my dates. I'd spent so long learning how to become friends with people that sometimes, I wondered if it's all I'd ever be able to do.

What I have realized is that I hate online dating, and have deleted the apps.

Of course, I come to the same realization every couple of months.

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Montreal has always felt safe in a way that other places don't.

Montreal sprawls across the island. It's bracketed by the English suburbs to the West, and the French suburbs everywhere else. The city is densely packed and populated, divided by areas that are 'French' and 'Not French', a line that is constantly shifting and changing as bougie brunch places open, then close three months later. There are a lot of things that attract people to Montreal: the food, the culture, the tech industry boom, the fact that it's not like Vancouver and is still mostly affordable.



It is easy to find north in Montreal, and the city is laid out logically. It doesn't matter where you are, because you can usually find the mountain, and from there any of the landmarks you might recognize. I still sometimes have trouble telling my left from my right without looking for the 'L' in my thumb and forefinger, and I was even more hopeless at it when I was a child, but I've never had trouble orienting myself north.

On a weekend trip once to Vermont with my girlfriend at the time, I found myself keeping a physical distance from her. I didn't want her to hold my hand, didn't want to put my arm around her shoulders. I didn't know the boundaries of the town, didn't know if there was space divided into 'Safe' and 'Not Safe'. In Montreal I know the side streets, the cafes that are warm and welcoming, I know where to go to for safety. I don't have that in other cities.

But I also know where in Montreal to avoid. Or, in other words: the suburbs.

I don't know if I will ever feel comfortable in the suburbs. Any suburb. The suburbs differ from my dream of moving to an idealized version of a farm, where I could have a chicken coop, and a goat, and could grow my own vegetables and fruit, even though I've killed almost every plant I've ever owned. Like many other people my age, I fantasize about running away to a farm of my own. A place that I could shape with my own hands, dirt under my nails and muscles aching from the hard work.

There is no possibility of a chicken coop in the suburbs, or a little goat, or a vegetable garden that I've painstakingly grown after watching countless hours of Youtube videos and calling my grandfather for advice.

But, I also dream of a little container garden on a balcony outside of a little apartment downtown, where the sun comes down every morning, and I might sit outside and enjoy my

coffee. Where I'd have soft blankets on the couch and the armchairs, and a bed that I can sleep on without my toes hanging over the edge. Maybe there'd be a dog instead of a goat, and I could keep all my baking ingredients displayed in jars on the kitchen shelves, and buy any book that I wanted and spend long hours curled up and reading. And maybe every once in a while I might leave my little apartment and get out to the country and sit in the woods and watch the stars, which would make me appreciate the city all the more.

It's important, I think, to romanticise a future.

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When the 2016 June PULSE shooting in Orlando happened, I was nineteen, and a board member for my University's LGBTQ+ Organization. The fallout of the massacre was felt all over the world and when I woke up to the news in my safe version of Montreal, I cried. Eventually, I stopped and got out of bed to ask one of my roommates, a gay man, if he had heard. We cried together, and then, when my mom called to talk to me about it, I cried again. I would have thought I had no more tears left by the time the memorial came around, but standing in the crowd, surrounded by the rest of Queer Concordia, all of us holding signs, or flags, there was a feeling of great, insurmountable loss.

I tried to memorize the names of the victims when they were released in the news. Staring at every accompanying photo, I recognized my own friends staring back at me. Forty-nine people, most of them people of colour.

It had happened across the continent, not even in Canada.

But it could have. So easily.

The memorial was held in front of the Village's Parc de l'Espoir, or in English, the Hope Park. The Hope Park is already a somber space, built in 1994 in memory of those who died of AIDS. It is often dirty, with garbage piled at the wall, and despite being called a park, there are few plants to speak of. Long, low black stones are scattered around it, in what I can only assume are meant to represent coffins. In the summer, people will often eat their lunch or have a coffee there, next to the tall metal poles with the sad coloured strips of cloth tied to them.

When the weather changes to spring and to summer, it becomes a gathering space. One where people will sometimes play one of the painted pianos decorating various street corners, that are so much a part of the Montreal identity. The wall shelters people from the harsh winds that turn everywhere else in Montreal into a violent wind tunnel. Bright murals are painted, and people leave flowers. There is noise, and there are street performers, and sometimes people are laughing, and sometimes people are fighting. There is movement in the village, and the park is somehow always included.

There is something to be said for people being able to enhance the message of a space.

After the shooting, we gathered in front of the park, and it felt like half the city was there for the memorial. Hundreds of people tightly packed at street corners. So close you could feel the nervous/sad/angry energy sweating off of them. I was flanked by friends. Other board members who knew each other through Queer Concordia, and joined by students we had never met before. Struck by the loss and the understanding that the LGBTQ+ community was always so much more connected than we had thought.

During the ceremony, after forgettable speeches from high-profile people who said kind things that didn't matter, someone threw something at the mayor of Montreal. I remember my

pulse jumping. I remember lifting my hands in front of my face. I remember wondering if I was in danger.

Later, we learned it was a crumpled ball of paper.

I remember how terrified I was. How we watched the police rush the mayor away and how we watched them pull the perpetrator into a squad car with his arms handcuffed tightly behind their back.

My family came, and found me afterwards. My dad's eyes were red with tears. My mom deftly maneuvered through the crowd, my siblings trailing in a line after them, all of them swimming against the crowd, inwards towards the center stage while everyone else was trying to leave. My family all hugged me, my mom hugged everyone else.

They left after that. My middle siblings, somber and quietly thoughtful. My youngest brother, at twelve, awkward and not totally understanding. He had known I was gay only since the end of my first year of university. Not because it was a secret, but simply because we all forgot to tell him. My parents had both eagerly pursued a stance that it didn't matter and that it didn't need to be talked about, while I myself was preoccupied with desperately searching for some sort of community. When we had casually dropped it into conversation at the dinner table, he stopped for a moment, paused to consider it, and softly said "surprise" .

The day of the memorial, I met someone who became one of my best friends. This isn't meant to be some round-about way to say that something positive came out of the murder of so many innocent people. But rather, I think we all realized that we needed to bind ourselves

together. To find some way of keeping one another close and trying to protect each other as best we could.

After the ceremony, our group made its way to a nearby bar. It was empty, either the hour still too early, or people wanting to escape the heavy emotional toll of the day. We sat next to, and across from, one another in stunned exhaustion. None of us quite sure what to say to each other. There were empty glances and the beginnings of murmurs that didn't go anywhere. Not sure how to break the silence we ordered large pitchers of sangria.

Was there an underlying meaning to us choosing to stay in the village when so many others went home? Probably not.

But what we did was turn our exhaustion into delirious giggles and try to reaffirm that we knew each other. That we could see one another. That we could look one another in the eye and recognize that somehow, we existed, and we were there with one another, and that we loved each other even if we had only just met the person we were sitting next to.

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When I was younger I desperately wanted a twin. I had associated being a twin with someone who would understand you on an intrinsic level, who would have an almost telepathic understanding of what you were thinking. All it seemed my brother and I did was fight, which was mostly my fault. Even though he is fourteen months younger, I was always jealous of the way my brother could make friends. Where the West Island made me miserable, he flourished. He played every sport, and seemingly effortlessly inserted himself into what passed for the popular crowd in grade three. Even the girls in my grade had crushes on him. I wanted so badly to know how he did it, but it emerged as resentment. Me going to high school downtown saved

our relationship, because I no longer felt like I was constantly competing with him, and failing. I wanted someone who I could be best friends with *all the time*. I wanted to be able to stay up late and whisper to someone without our parents knowing, I wanted someone who would partner up with me for school projects, who would play pranks with me and who I would be willing to throw a punch for if needed.

It wasn't until I was an adult that I realized my brother and I were, in fact, exactly like that.

My brother and I were often each other's only companion, over long summer weeks in Vermont with barely anyone else our age, or on long car rides, trapped in the backseat and leaning over each other's shoulders to watch the other play Pokémon.

We didn't see each other as much after we entered high school. We still had summers, and family dinners, and winter breaks, but it was different from spending almost all our time together. We didn't necessarily grow apart, but never before had we needed to actively seek one another out. We don't spend as much time together now; he has a full time job with a strange schedule, and I haven't lived with him for years now. Still, there's no one who knows me as well as my older-younger brother does.

I am not unique in my family. All of us have been diagnosed with some type of learning disability. I don't know enough about the science of it to say if there is a genetic predisposition to these sorts of things, but my sister is non-verbal and my middle brother too. My youngest brother and my mom are both dyslexic, and even though he has never been formally diagnosed, my dad and I think in much the same way.

If our parents hadn't realized that we reacted to the world in different ways, hadn't decided to get us tested, my siblings and I could have gone through our whole lives without the tools we have now. Likely, we would have picked up a few by chance, but we would have been very different people, who approached the world in very different ways.

Each of us falls differently on the scale. My sister always functioned better than I did. Although I don't know if it's because of how her brain works, or if it's because my parents had already faced the same challenges with me. We're lucky because all of us are interested in very different fields; it's hard to compete against one another when one wants to be a set designer, the other a doctor and the other a marine biologist. I always knew I wanted to be a writer, apart from a brief time when I thought I wanted to be a vet. Really, who I wanted was to be James Herriot. He wrote such beautiful books, and the ones for children were illustrated with watercolour or pencil crayon illustrations. They had names like *Moses the Kitten* and *The Market Square Dog* and were all wonderfully pastoral in a way that made me fantasize about one day owning a farm and a border collie. I read his vet books too, devoured them during the summers when I was visiting my grandparents in Newfoundland.

If there's one place I loved more as a child than Vermont, it was Newfoundland. I loved it for the same reasons that I loved Vermont, but even more, because it wasn't just a lake, but also an *ocean*. We didn't get a chance to go a lot. But my grandparents went every summer, because that's where my grandmother was from.

Every time we went to see them, we stayed in the cottage that had been built by my great-grandfather. It *felt* sea-worn, the walls salt logged and thin. As if someone had pulled the

bottom of a boat out from underneath itself and cobbled it together with a coat of paint. It was at the top of a large hill where one can see both the freshwater pond and the ocean beyond separated by the *barachois*.

The forest on one side of the cottage was home to a variety the animal population. Great crows, and rabbits, and moose, and chipmunks that had no fear when they ran up to take a sunflower seed from your hand. There were blueberry bushes everywhere, and a path in the woods leading to my cousins' house and a tree that I remember as always being heavy with ripe cherries. The ocean was almost always too cold to swim in, but I have fond memories of running into the waters screaming with my brother.

Sometimes, when we were really lucky, we could see whales in the bay.

But I loved Newfoundland because nowhere else did I feel more like a character from one of my books. Even the name, Sealcove, felt like something from I story. Like I could walk out the door for a normal day and end up in the middle of a fairy ring, ready to have some grand adventure. There was a history in Newfoundland, one I was warmly welcomed into through my grandmother.

Whenever we were there, I experienced some primal connection to story and art. Sealcove wasn't far from St. John's and we would drive in to go to music festivals and readings or watch a performance by the travelling theatre group *Shakespeare by the Sea*. My grandmother could point at seemingly any building and have a story about her childhood, or a relative, or a famous event that happened there.

We were tied to the space in a way I had never experienced before. The hardware store that has had our name on it since 1863, or the craft center that was named after a great-great



aunt, who pioneered women's cooperatives in rural Newfoundland. My grandmother could point to the house she grew up in and the route she took to school. In Newfoundland I wasn't a Sibthorpe, I was a Templeton.

I grew up on Newfoundland songs and stories, and for a long time the only fish I would eat was Newfoundland cod. I knew sea-shanties better than I knew the Backstreet Boys. There was an appreciation for stories there, a mythology you could feel in the way the buildings were built and the way that people spoke to one another. When I was younger, I was convinced that there was something magical about it.

It was special in a way that I had never experienced before. In St. John's many of the houses are painted bright colours, lined up in rows on steep hills. Giant ships come into harbour, massive and blotting out the sky if you're standing close enough.

Newfoundland made me believe in the possibility of magic for much longer than my peers. There is nothing that makes you feel smaller than watching a whale breach the waves. They dive, their massive bodies a visible shadow under the water, until they push themselves upwards and out with a spectacular manifestation of strength. Some forty to sixty feet of them twisting in the air. Until they land with a splash and a tail that hangs in the air for moments before it trails below the waves.

The experience always feels impossible. Like I am watching something I shouldn't be. A grand event that should have been kept secret and out as far from land and human eyes as possible.

It was easy to imagine the stories I'd read about crossing over into the land I was exploring. Even in my family I wouldn't have been the first. In 1935, my grandfather was one of

the people to discover the giant squid that had washed up onto shore. In the nearby Museum, The Rooms, there is a preserved specimen. It's set up next to models of other sea creatures and birds.

The embalming fluid has turned parts of it almost translucent and a very pale beige. The tentacles stretch across the case and it is easy to imagine the great beast when it was alive. Large enough to wrap its limbs around an unsuspecting sailor and drag it down into the depths of the ocean. I could imagine it, the great beast from the deep, rising up from the depths in search of food and becoming entangled in some fisherman's net.

A giant squid had always been something I thought was a story, and having it confirmed when I was eight meant that I couldn't help but wonder what else was real. The fairies in my books that spoke of a tiny village where spider webs were spun into silk? Or where dragonflies were ridden into battle?

I wasn't the only one. Newfoundland's mythology runs deep. The people who settled the island were Irish, and Scottish, and English, all people who had heard stories of faeries from their own parents and communities, and they brought those stories with them. The 'Little People' were dangerous, sometimes mischievous, but should always be respected.

Depending on your belief, the fae were anything from fallen angels to prehistoric beings. My favorites are the stories that developed from Arthurian legends. A lot of them overlapped, Avalon blending with other myths.

There were ways to protect yourself from the fae, rules you could follow— like keeping a crust of bread in your pocket as a bribe, or never giving out your full name. There were never

rules like that in the modern world, only rules like tying your shoelaces properly or looking both ways before you crossed the street, neither of which I was very good at as a child.

The world of the fae was familiar to me. Sometimes even more familiar than my own world, because the stories were always told from the perspective of a human, stumbling into a different world.

It was easy to offend the fae. Even easier to say something you shouldn't and unintentionally give them power over you. There were rules that humans would never understand, instead they had to be learned through books and warnings. It was never made clear if the fae liked humans or not.

I identified with the humans, stumbling into the fae realm, but there was a time when that could have gone completely in the opposite direction. Stories are rooted in truth. They're a warning, an explanation, a way to translate a world. If the fae were used as a way to explain strange behaviour, to talk about people disappearing or why they acted funny after they fell off a ladder and hit their head, then changeling children acted as a warning to new parents that at any point, their baby might be stolen away in the night by the fae and replaced with one of their own.

The popular theory is that "changeling" was a word used to describe children with a physical difference, or a mental one. I like the word changeling, even if I don't think I would have been described that way. I was a strange child, and I never acted like the other people my age, but I never felt like a true outcast. I was never made to feel inhuman, or like I didn't belong. There has never been a time in my life when I've been alone.

The childhood I remember is the one where I'm surrounded by my family. When we would stay up late and already be in pyjamas and my parents might suggest that we "hop in the car and go for ice cream." Or when my dad made his secret, family recipe pancakes, bursting with blueberries and raspberries and we would drown them in maple syrup. I like to remember the skits my brother and I forced my mother to watch over and over again, half written by me, half improv. I like to remember the long days we spent swimming, and the weeks my dad took off from work so we could go camping, and how my brother always lit the fire, but I got to poke it with a stick.

Whenever I talk about what happened when I was child, I always think it's important to mention that I was okay. That it was never going to be amazing. But I was okay, because I had my family.

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After I was diagnosed with a non-verbal learning disability, I was able to use a computer to write my exams and my grades went up. I also started using the computer to communicate in a way I had never expected to. Talking to people through text or facebook messenger allowed me the opportunity to socialize without feeling overwhelmed. Through messaging, I didn't have to worry about deciphering sarcasm, or interpreting body language. Instead, everything was accompanied by an emoji, the most basic interpretation of human emotion possible.

The best part was that I wasn't the only one. Everyone my age was reveling in the widespread development of smartphones. Through them we started sharing apps and

information and photos at a rapidly increasing pace. We had super computers in our pockets and we used them to their fullest extent, whether that was sharing homework and looking for news articles, or laughing at cat photos.

It was strange to watch social norms change too. Suddenly, it was rude to ignore a voicemail for multiple days. People weren't supposed to put a period at the end of a text. I found myself repeatedly explaining these new social rules, for once on the other side of a conversation I'd been having all my life. It was interesting, watching how people became more and more reliant on their cellphones. How something that was optional became a necessity.

I got my first cellphone, a cheap flip phone with terrible texting, when I first entered high school. Given that I was taking the train from home to downtown an hour each day, my parents wanted to make sure I was safe. Two years later I got my dad's old smartphone. Now, like everyone my age, I've always got mine in my pocket.

I check it multiple times a day. The usual social media apps, any texts I receive, news sites I like to check when I'm waiting for the bus, or the coffee to brew, or when I'm just waking up and not yet ready to get out of bed. My phone is very rarely out of reach.

Which leads me to believe, without any doubt, that we have reached the reality of a cyborg population. A cyborg is just an organic body or being with cybernetic components. Considering how closely tied we are to our phones, I don't think it's a stretch to say that we have moved beyond the point of no return. Which is *so exciting*.

Our brains are evolving at an unprecedented rate. Jay N. Geidd published a paper titled "The Digital Revolution and Adolescent Brain Evolution" on the evolution of the teenage brain in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* in 2012. (Coincidentally that was also the year I graduated

high school.) In this article, Geidd notes the extreme capability of multitasking, and the way that teens are being rewarded via hits of dopamine through videogames. Most interesting to me was the discussion about how online communities allowed teenagers to communicate with people all over the world, something that he theorizes could raise empathy and reduce prejudice.

These rapid technological advances mean, in theory, that we are becoming closer and closer to each other every day. The world is becoming smaller. We form patterns and connections more easily, standing on one another's shoulders and research.

At least, that's what I also thought in 2012. I wonder if Geidd would have reached the same conclusion in 2019. I'm certainly no longer as optimistic. It's too easy to see how the internet is being shaped into a space of radicalization, and advertisement, and misinformation. Playing on people's fears and anxieties to twist their ideas into something awful and force that out into the world. Maybe it's the anonymity. The fact that you can hide, faceless, like a monster in a horror movie that lurks in the shadow. Or perhaps it's how the desire for connection and community can so easily be warped into something else.

On the other hand, computers changed my life. They gave me the chance to make friends when I was out of my depth. Through them, I had a common connection with my peers. Computers were comforting to me. They were an equalizer when I was unable to relate to my peers in a way that would let me be friends with them.

And there are now many other examples of people being able to use computers in radically positive ways. For example, the Facebook group, Montreal Queer Spoon Share, was created by a friend of mine, who based it on one they had been a part of in Vancouver.

The Spoon Theory was created by Christine Miserandino to explain chronic illness and mental health to people who are healthy and don't share the experience. It asks the listener to imagine starting every day with a finite number of spoons that they can spend throughout their day. Depending on their energy levels, a person may be required to expend their spoons on simply waking up and accomplishing small tasks, such as brushing their teeth. In other words, a person would need to be very careful about how and when they will spend their spoons.

The Montreal Queer Spoon Share was created to connect people with fewer spoons to people who had more spoons/energy to spare. People might ask for help walking their dogs, or getting to a doctor's appointment, or filling out a form, while others offered meals, or to spend an afternoon with someone having a hard day, or to help by making a phone call.

Another benefit of the internet is that there is so much information available online. (For free!) anything I wanted to know, I could find out in less than a minute. I can watch videos about Ancient Egyptian raft building, or cake decorating, or movie fan-theories. The computer never feels isolating to me; instead, I am connected to information much greater than myself.

The ease I had developed with computers, the skills I'd been learning through osmosis and exploration, were skills that people needed. Basic computer knowledge is a necessity for job hunting. In my first year of university, I ended up with a job teaching computer knowledge at a local library: showing senior citizens how to turn on their desktops for the first time; how to make a phone call on their smartphones; explaining how excel works to a room of apprehensive adults. It was fun, and through this, I quickly became comfortable with improvised public speaking. It is a job I am really good at, and it's nice to feel like an expert.

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I never liked meditation, I got bored and my mind would start to drift and soon I would be running through my plan for the day. It was never as relaxing as it was supposed to be. Instead, baking became a form of meditation. There's so much focus that goes into baking, following the recipe step by step, making sure you don't get lost in your thoughts and accidentally overmix the batter. Baking is meditation with something delicious to eat at the end of it.

It's a process that relies on you being calm. Trying to rush through the instructions means that your cake may not rise, or you'll forget the molasses in ginger bread cookies, or you'll burn yourself on the oven door. The more you rush, the more likely the chance of disaster.

I use baking to organize my thoughts. It combines my love of lists and instructions with something physical, something I can do with my hands. I have a few recipes I've almost memorized if I know I'm overthinking something, or can't put words into the right order. When I'm baking, I can let my mind wander while my hands are distracted by folding the wet ingredients into dry. I've always called myself a stress baker, and in university I always brought in batches of things at the end of semester.

My baking abilities began in high school. We didn't have home economics at Traf, but we had advisory meetings three times a week. Advisory meetings had the school divided into groups of ten with one teacher who would pass along forms that needed to be signed, as well as giving out important information. There was a rota assigned as to whose turn it was to bring in a snack. In the true spirit of a competitive school, this became a way to show off your skills.



People would bring in impressively decorated cupcakes, topped only by the cakes they would bring in for a friend's birthday.

I am not a great decorator. It takes a lot of patience and I don't want to put the practice in. Instead, I made things that I knew would be delicious, cookies and coffee cakes, things that I could transport downtown easily. The more I practiced, the more I realized I loved it. There was no need to buy expensive tools, and every recipe I got came from online.

Mostly, I use baking to center myself. But baking is also a nice way to show someone you care. To take time from your life and make them something delicious that they will enjoy. It's a science, every action causing a reaction, and once you know the rules you can deviate from the path and do something new and exciting that you probably won't be able to recreate again. At heart, though, it's almost always just a combination of butter and sugar and eggs, which is hard to mess up. Even if it doesn't look professional, if you haven't burnt it, it's usually delicious.

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Liminal spaces are places of opportunity for change. They are able to shake you into a new being. A new self. You step inside them and eat the pomegranate and you are forever changed in that moment. It might be better, it might be worse, but something within you is new.

Always, I am surprised, and charmed, by them. Tim Hortons at five in the morning, a campground at dawn when it's cold enough to see your breath evaporating; the women's bathroom at a club in the middle of the night; a gas station in the middle of a long road trip.

They are filled with potential. A chance encounter around the corner. The opportunity for excitement and joy, for passion and frustration. When I was first starting university, I told myself that I would allow myself to be open to emotion. It was all too easy for me to spend full days in my bed scrolling through social media, and watching episode after episode of a show (it's always helpful to be more concrete. If you tell us the name of a show you liked, it gives us that much more detail) on Netflix. I was becoming more aware of the social mistakes I was making. Of how difficult it was to say the right thing at the right time, and how badly I was at expressing myself through conversation.

The first apartment I lived in was unclean and dusty. One of my roommates didn't clean, and the other decided to follow suit out of protest and so the mess quickly spun out of my control. I didn't like the feeling of dirt sticking to the soles of my feet so I wore socks around the apartment. I was cold in my apartment, but the heating made popping noises when I turned it on, so instead I piled two duvets on my bed and wore a sweater and a hat when I went to sleep.

The weight of it was soothing.

But it needed to change. So, I got a cat. I moved into a place without roommates where I could clean the floors and they wouldn't immediately get dirty again. I started studying in coffee shops and with friends. Anything to get myself outside and away from the looming heaviness.

It wasn't exactly in that order of course. Nothing is ever as neat and perfect as it is on paper. But it's close enough. I promised to redirect my emotions when they weren't the ones I wanted to put out into the world. If I said it aloud enough, if I playacted the emotions again and again, eventually they would become real.

My life has been measured in small obsessions. When I was a kid it was dogs, when I was a teenager it was *Harry Potter* and *Doctor Who*, then Marvel comic books and Dungeons & Dragons. Things I could talk about with my friends when I was worried about not having anything interesting to say. I had many smaller obsessions too, ones that were just my own: bees and horses and scarab beetles. Important because they were things I didn't know, and I wanted to know everything I could. My favorite sentence when I was a kid began with, Did you know...?

"Did you know Dung Beetles use the Milky Way to navigate home?"

"Did you know beeswax used to be used to fill cavity holes?"

"Did you know Leonardo Da Vinci used to buy birds from the market and release them?"

There is still so much to learn, and I never feel like I know enough. I endlessly consume information, fascinated with the world around me and how much I have left to learn. I want every experience, but if I can't yet see the Northern Lights yet, then I will read about them.

I deeply believe that no information should be kept secret. I am excited to learn everything, to the point that— without any hint of exaggeration— I can confidently say that I had read every English book in my elementary school library before I'd left. I couldn't understand why people *wouldn't* want to know things. Which sometimes gets me into trouble.

In grade five, I was left alone with some of the neighbourhood kids while all our parents went out for dinner. My brother was there, and our neighbours, a boy a year younger than my brother, and a girl five years younger than I was, and my sister.

We were sitting in the living room. Somehow, it ended up that I was facing everyone else, sitting on one couch while everyone else was on the other. I don't remember how the

conversation began, but it was likely initiated by me. See, we had just finished the beginning of Sex Ed in my grade, a talk that wouldn't be covered for at least another year in my brother's case. A conversation I had been fascinated by because they had told us how our bodies would be changing, and what we could expect once puberty started. It forced me to think of my body in more practical terms, not just as a container for my brain. A lot of what we were learning was also kind of gross in a poke-it-with-a-stick kind of way.

To my mind, everyone should know what I knew.

So I gave them the same lesson I had gotten earlier that day, centering on a thorough discussion about periods and what hormones were. As my mom likes to tell it, I also explained to everyone what a tampon and a pad was. I had visual aids and pamphlets.

The next day, the neighbor's mom came over to our house to talk to my mom in disapproval. All my mom could do was laugh. She told me not to do it again, but she made a point to mention that she couldn't be mad at me for teaching.

If I wanted to, I could point to this moment as foreshadowing my eventual success as a teacher.

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I love constellations and the mythology attached to them in the same way that I do liminal spaces. Star charts strike me as a means of building a personal mythology. I loved reading about the stars, and my copy of *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths* was as well-worn as my copy of *The Philosopher's Stone*. I would spend hours pointing at stars and telling people what they were and the stories that accompanied them.

I couldn't always find the constellations that books promised were there. At times, all the thousands of tiny dots bled together until it felt like I was just assigning the stars' names at random. You couldn't see them in Montreal, and I didn't bring library books for reference on camping trips (only creased and wrinkled second hand copies of *Nancy Drew*, or *Animorphs*).

For the longest time, my favourite constellation was *Ursa Minor*, because I could always find *Polaris*, and through that orient myself North. When I am outside of Montreal, I don't have the mountain to rely on, and needed another reference point. *Polaris* barely moves throughout the year, and it's bright enough that it doesn't take a lot of skill to recognize it. It's nice to be able to be somewhat directionally proficient for once.

Now, my favorite constellation is *Lyra*, built by Apollo from a turtle shell, and then given to Orpheus, whose music was said to be beautiful enough to charm the plants and trees into movement. When his lover, Euridice, is killed by a snake bite, he follows her into the Underworld and makes a bargain with Hades to let her go.

In exchange for one of his songs, Orpheus and Euridice are permitted to walk out of the Underworld, but Orpheus mustn't look at her. In the darkness, without sound, presumably cold and unable to feel one another, he panics, and turns around.

And so Euridice vanishes back into the Underworld.

There's a joke that floats around the online queer community that states you're either a gay who knows how to drive or a gay who knows how to read astrology. I can't do either. There are a lot of variations on this joke, but this is the first iteration I came across.

Driving scares me. I'm fine when I'm the only person on the road, but I don't like not being able to control all the variables on the road with me. Ultimately, I don't trust any of the other drivers.

I am not afraid of astrology; at least, not in the same way that driving scares me. Rather, where driving is a result of my actions outwards, astrology forces you to look inwards and examine your personality. Many of my friends believe deeply in astrology, and one of them, very self-reflexively, once told me "It's nicer to think that my personality is because of my star chart, then because of the trauma in my past."

Still, I don't place a lot of confidence in the idea that you can know so much about a personality based on the alignment of the stars.

I'd like to think that you could know a person at their most fundamental from their favourite stories, from the ones they tell about themselves, from the ones they collect from other people. I'm not sure if you can gain the same analysis of personality from a person's favorite constellation as you can from their birth chart, but here's mine. Do with it what you will.

Zodiac : Tropical				Placidus Orb : 0					
☉	Sun	♋	Cancer	4°57'		I ASC	♏	Capricorn	10°47'
☾	Moon	♊	Gemini	24°08'		II	♒	Aquarius	26°13'
☿	Mercury	♊	Gemini	13°28'		III	♈	Aries	9°23'
♀	Venus	♊	Gemini	19°57'		IV	♉	Taurus	9°46'
♂	Mars	♍	Virgo	16°12'		V	♊	Gemini	1°58'
♃	Jupiter	♐	Sagittarius	7°29'	R	VI	♊	Gemini	20°58'
♄	Saturn	♓	Pisces	24°41'		VII	♋	Cancer	10°47'
♅	Uranus	♏	Capricorn	29°26'	R	VIII	♌	Leo	26°13'
♆	Neptune	♏	Capricorn	24°42'	R	IX	♎	Libra	9°23'
♇	Pluto	♏	Scorpio	28°18'	R	X MC	♏	Scorpio	9°46'
♁	Lilith	♊	Gemini	19°36'		XI	♐	Sagittarius	1°58'
♁	Asc node	♏	Scorpio	3°38'		XII	♐	Sagittarius	20°58'

Astrology tells me that *because* I am a Cancer, I am tenacious, and loyal, and suspicious. My diagnosis tells me that I am non-verbal *because* I had poor motor and social skills. I want to define who I am apart from a list of characteristics determined by somebody else. People change, and yet, astrology and my diagnosis try to tell me who I will be for the rest of my life.

My diagnosis helped give my parents and myself answers. We had the opportunity to learn skills that would help me be happier. However, having a non-verbal learning disability is not something that was immediately fixed with a diagnosis. It was never going to be a simple solution of antibiotics and rest, but tools that we could develop, modify and put into practice.

When I was ten, I got glasses for the first time and realized how much I had been missing. Suddenly, I could see the individual leaves on trees. I could read street signs from inside the car. My glasses didn't make me good at sports, but I could see the ball for once, and where my feet were when I ran. From where I sat at the back of the class, I could finally see the blackboard.

Before glasses, I had just assumed that everyone saw the world like I did.

As an adult, I don't identify with much of what is on the checklist from the University of Michigan. But it did give me the language to describe myself as a teenager. To explain why I needed warning if plans were going to change, why I sometimes felt the need to withdraw from a too loud party. Now, it no longer feels like it defines who I will be for the rest of my life. It's no longer a conclusion to my personality.

I was never a good actor because I couldn't fully understand other people. However, it was also because I was constantly acting in my daily life. I performed being a person until I could *be* a person, until it became natural. I was lucky, because my family kept looking for an answer. It took two psychologists, a social worker, a speech therapist, a psychiatrist and another psychologist before we found it.

Having a diagnosis helped me be happier because it was through that I gained the tools to communicate. Tools that made it easier for me to pursue my passions, to learn and to experiment.

My disability helped shape me, but it doesn't define me.

If an identity is created through a series of repetitive acts, then it's comforting to know that at any time we can reshape who we are. Consciously or unconsciously, we form identities out of habits made from actions. I'm grateful for the opportunity to understand myself, to be able to deliberately decide who I wanted to be and work with people who can help me achieve it.