

AUTISM IS A GIFT

BY KATHERINE CAIRNS

THE LUNA MOTH CAN BE FOUND – THOUGH NOT EASILY SPOTTED – ACROSS THE MARITIMES. AS A CATERPILLAR, IT MIMICS THE COLOUR OF THE BRIGHT GREEN LEAVES IN THE TREE WHERE IT IS BORN TO RENDER ITSELF INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM FOLIAGE AND THUS AVOID NATURAL PREDATORS. TO OUR EYES, THEY APPEAR VIRTUALLY IDENTICAL, YET THIS MUTATION ALLOWS THE CATERPILLAR TO SURVIVE TO MATURITY IN A UNIQUE WAY. THE LUNA MOTH USES ITS COLOURS AND PATTERN TO TELL A USEFUL LIE.

Similarly, in grade school, to become a girl who resembled her peers, I repeated lines from television and movies as conversation. By arranging the lines correctly, I could amalgamate scripts from *The Princess Bride*, *The Simpsons*, and *Saved by the Bell* to craft a personality that didn't get itself stuffed into a tire swing, subsequently wound 40 times, then left to spin until it was too dizzy to walk. As with our caterpillar, it took time to develop camouflage. It took even more time to understand that real friends won't make you drink grape juice up your nose using a straw for the life-changing opportunity of sitting at their lunch table. I quickly developed an understanding that learning the periodic table of elements to the tune of "Modern Major-General" was something that made bullies want to aim dodgeballs directly at your head, after arguing who had the unenviable privilege of picking you last.

No one with agency over my life's course had the capacity to see me as anything other than "gifted," and so my autism, though painfully obvious, went undiagnosed. When my person was located anywhere other than at home, where I was comfortable, I would walk around in a fog. Lights too bright, sounds too loud, traffic too fast: the ability

to communicate slowed down. When I am stressed, words still stubbornly refuse to move on the road from my brain to my mouth, very much like when my dog rejects the idea of getting out of the driver's seat of my car. Things didn't get any easier through high school. Blissfully unaware that anyone might be anything less than honest, I regularly did homework for cheerleaders, who would assure me that "that cute boy liked me" and that they would "tell me what he said" just as soon as I finished this set of math problems for them. But I was learning to fit in better. At least the cheerleaders were talking to me now? Just like our friend the luna moth, I could very often be still enough to pass for a leaf in social settings.

Throughout my twenties and thirties I landed and quit over 40 jobs. I earned some of the best marks in school but couldn't complete university. I spent a few months working as a spare crossing guard, felt as if I wasn't living up to my potential, and took a course in zoology (maybe working with actual monkeys would be easier than children?). I accepted some weekend work as a rodeo hand and then spent every weekend wondering if this was what I was actually meant to do. If I was so smart, surely I was meant to do something with rockets. I signed up for a course in astronomy. I took temp jobs at a pizza-dough factory, a credit-card laminator and a guard-dog training facility. As the luna moth comes to maturity, it emerges from the cocoon with wing tips curved like tiny ribbons to confuse the sonar of bats. In the same way, I fluttered around southern Ontario attempting to look like a competent adult.

All the while, I failed to connect with almost every person I met. Obviously, there was a common denominator to why I couldn't find my place. It was not abnormal for me to look away during deep conversations to watch the other person's words make pictures in my mind or to synthesize enormous amounts of data yet remain unable to read someone's face well enough to know if they were teasing. Although I had begun to feel like a visitor from Jupiter's third moon, humans did genuinely seem to like me — or at least I was able to tell enough jokes when around the humans that they laughed, and their faces made the expression that human faces seem to make when pleased. It wasn't until I came across a list of autistic traits in women and thought someone must have been following me around, made a pamphlet on their findings, delivered it to the printer, paid extra for glossy cardstock, and placed it at my pharmacy. It felt as if an actual lightbulb lit with a million lumens appeared over my head. This list was

“No one with agency over my life's course had the capacity to see me as anything other than “gifted,” and so my autism, though painfully obvious, went undiagnosed.

Suddenly, at 33, I wasn't the failed human I always feared myself to be — I was a different human who needed tools and support. Two years after moving to Prince Edward Island with my husband, in March of 2019, I did my first stand-up comedy set at Baba's Lounge in Charlottetown. For 10 years I had done sets solely for babies too young to talk (and obligated to listen due to lack of gross motor control) and my pets, but I was starting to accept my quirks and wear them with pride. "If even one person laughs once," I told myself, "I'll call it a success." Lots of people laughed! Most satisfying, these were people without fur who didn't need me to retrieve their sippy cup halfway through a joke. Within five minutes I was hooked. "So," I thought, "this is how I fit in." Those of us on the autism spectrum think in pictures and use them to form patterns. My brain holds a hyperlinked database of images, endlessly useful in joke telling. It turns out these vast swaths of information I had always thought to be useless flotsam and jetsam were in fact my personal humour thesaurus. Many of us on the spectrum also have synaesthesia: our senses overlap and combine. Words in my world have not only sounds and letters but also shapes and colours. It's how I know some phrasings are ostensibly funnier than others. We only have one open mic here, but I practised every week on Monday like clockwork. The host nicknamed me the "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin of Maritime comedy." This moth was making friends?

Because of my diagnosis I have learned that the only thing wrong with me was that I was hiding, too busy mimicking everyone else to fit in. Self-acceptance is a powerful tonic.

The luna moth as an adult lives only for three weeks, during which time its only purpose is to breed prolifically. Born without a mouth, it never eats a meal. It's important to know when to disengage from a metaphor though. I now tackle life like a hummingbird. I show up at your window, causing great delight and surprise, drink something loaded with sugar, and shine while I flit away. No need anymore to hide away among the leaves: I have a future to look forward to because I am comfortable being completely myself. [E]

