

Different

I was diagnosed with autism at sixteen. At the time, it was the most earth-shaking thing that ever happened to me; all of a sudden, my life made sense. I would go around telling everyone I knew about autism. After a while, though, it became less of an epiphany and more mundane. Sometimes I forget I'm autistic at all, and when I do remember, I have a lot of mixed feelings. The diagnosis was exciting, but it also put a whole new layer on my identity that I didn't know how to process. I tended to ignore it instead. Sometimes, however, in a particularly awkward situation, I would be confronted by my autism and forced to think about it. One of these situations stands out in my memory: a conversation with a drummer.

Every Wednesday night, our church hosted a service for middle and high school students, complete with its own band and youth pastor. I played bass and electric guitar occasionally, but tonight I didn't; I just showed up with my sisters on that frigid October evening, dressed in black clothes and even blacker shoes, sliding a can of Dr. Pepper from the snack counter and popping the tab with a carbonated hiss. The service was over, and we were waiting for our mom to pick us up, talking about something that I don't remember.

I sipped on my soda, knowing my parents didn't like me drinking caffeine this late, but also knowing it was delicious and they weren't here to stop me. Besides, caffeine doesn't affect people with autism or ADHD—it actually makes them *more* tired; at least, according to the Internet, but I liked to use it as an excuse. It was at this point, savoring my Dr. Pepper and talking, guard down, to my siblings, when someone approached me from behind.

“Hey,” someone said, and I turned around to face a guy my age that I didn't recognize. “So, you're a musician.” I looked at him in what I assumed at the time to be a normal, casual

gaze, but what was most likely a wide-eyed stare of confusion and shock. He was talking to me, right? But why? Who was he? How did he know who I was?

“Yes,” I managed to speak through my stupor. My mind felt like a slow computer, stuck on a loading screen.

“A bunch of us are going to get together on Halloween and play some music with our bands,” he told me. “So you can bring *your* band if you want.” I was still trying to process what he had said when he started speaking again. “Text Ezra if you’re interested.”

“Cool,” I said, hearing his words but not fully understanding what he was saying.

“Cool,” he repeated. Then he gave me two thumbs-ups with his black-painted nails and walked away. I watched him leave for what felt like an hour, releasing the tension in my muscles that I didn’t even know I had. I blinked a couple of times, trying to activate the refresh button on my brain so I could think properly.

I turned back to my older sister, plastering a grin on my face. “That was weird. Who was that, anyway?” I asked.

She told me simply: “Ethan.”

Ethan! I smacked myself on the forehead. Of course! Ethan was the drummer in the youth band, the drummer who I had not only played music with several times before but had also had several conversations with—and who was now the drummer that I had stared at like an idiot, thinking he was a total stranger. He had even mentioned Ezra, the rhythm guitarist, but I somehow didn’t connect the dots. I ran my fingers through my hair. “That was Ethan?” I asked, horrified.

A lot of autistic people have face blindness, a condition that inhibits our ability to recognize faces. It varies from person to person; some people can’t even recognize their own

reflection. Mine isn't as severe. I can recognize myself, as well as most people who are closest to me, such as my friends and family, but changes in appearance throw me off. Ethan, for example, had gotten a haircut, which was why he suddenly became a stranger when he talked to me that night.

I felt a mixture of embarrassment, guilt, and shame, convinced I had screwed up by failing to recognize Ethan. What I didn't consider was that face blindness is part of autism and, therefore, beyond my control. I often tend to view my disorders and disabilities as something to be ashamed of. Any reminder that I'm different from everyone else feels like a reminder that I'm doing something wrong, and anything uncomfortable that happens makes me resent the fact that I am the way I am.

It's unfortunate that I associate all of my awkward, negative experiences with autism rather than the positive ones that autism still affects. Self-acceptance is hard to achieve in a world full of people who might not understand, but it starts with the understanding that being different doesn't mean being weird or bad. Sure, I wish I had recognized Ethan, but in the end, it didn't impact our relationship at all. Besides, it made for a pretty funny story.