



ABIGAIL BALFE



A

Different

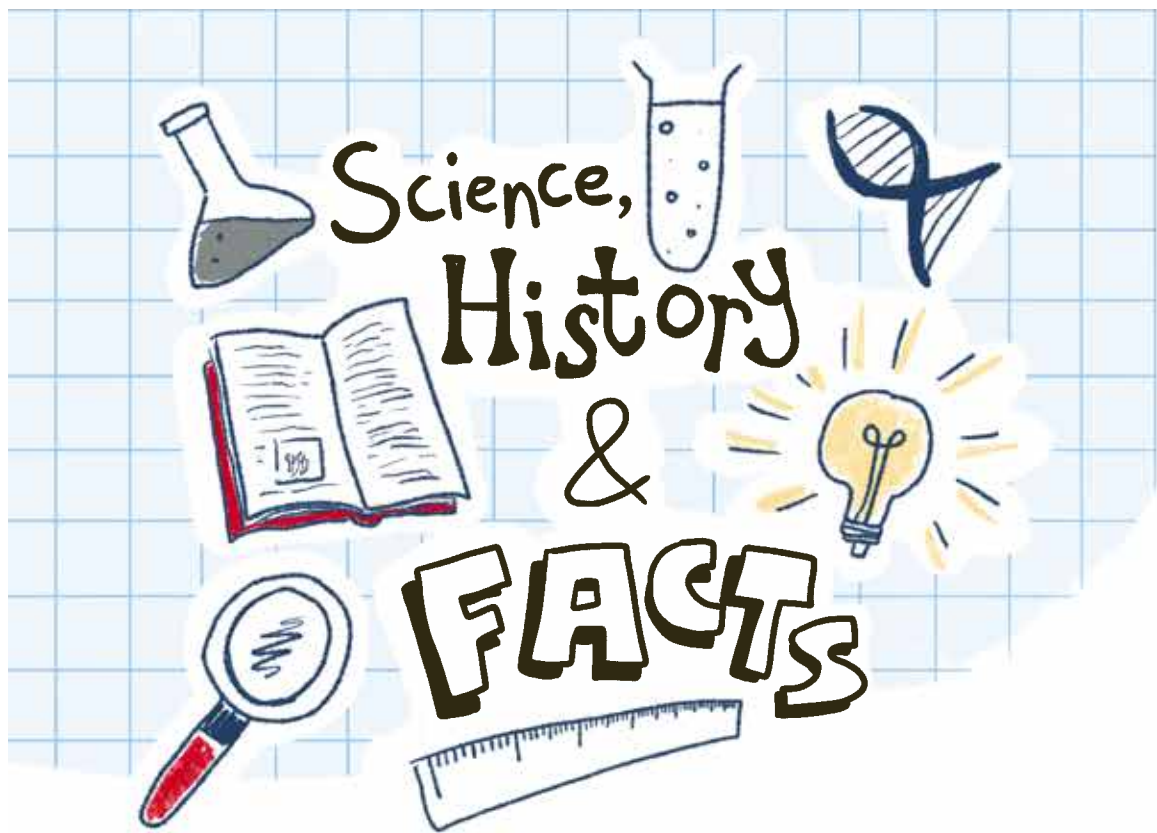
SORT OF

NORMAL



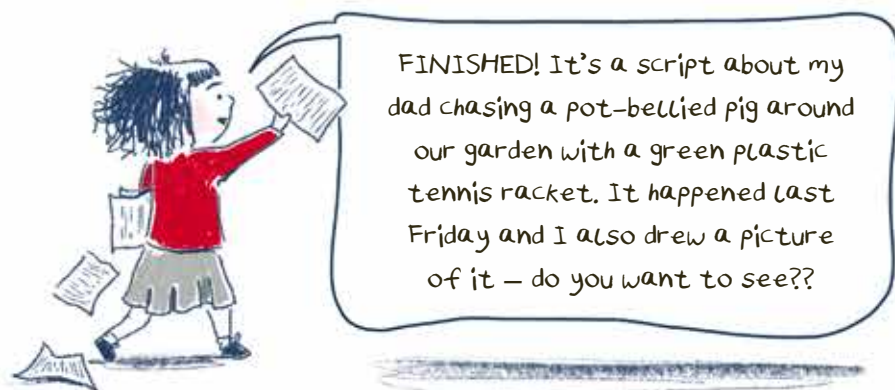
A real-life
COMPLETELY
True Story about
being unique





I am not a scientist, an historian or an expert in neurological conditions (neurological means relating to the nervous system – including the brain).

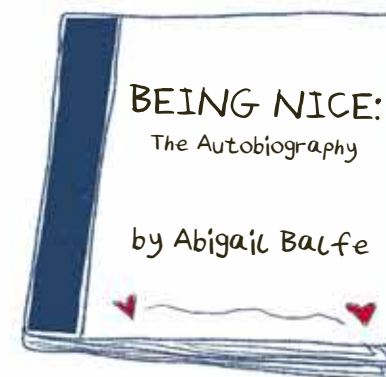
When I was at school, the teachers encouraged me to take double science because my grades were good, but I said no thanks and took art and drama instead.



I am an autistic female with a special interest in autism.

I don't want to get too heavy with facts, figures and history because this isn't supposed to be an information book as such. However, it can be really useful to take a peek at the facts and science behind our real-life stories sometimes.

Plus, autistic people can often be quite into facts and figures and history³, so there will be a few along the way. But mostly this is me, writing my True-Life Actual Childhood Diary, but as a 'GROWN-UP' person who didn't actually have a childhood diary. Apart from the 'autobiography' I started writing when I was fourteen because I thought I was going to be famous on *EastEnders* one day and I figured it would be good to get a head start.



Luckily for me, though, autistic people tend to have very good **LONG-TERM MEMORIES**...

3. Well, I'm a definite fan of these and I know lots of other autistic people who are too.

WHAT IS AUTISM?

If you search 'autism' on the internet, one of the first results you're likely to find is the Wikipedia page and this description:

Autism is a developmental disorder characterized by difficulties with social interaction and communication, and by restricted and repetitive behaviour. Parents often notice signs during the first three years of their child's life . . . It occurs four-to-five times more often in males than females.

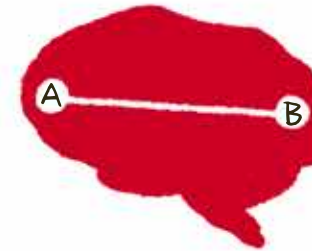


If your eyes haven't glazed over from that definition, then congratulations – you're officially moving through this book faster than I did when I read it back just now!

So, for starters, I don't see autism as a 'disorder' and neither do many autistic people and their families. Many of us see it as a developmental *difference*.

Our brains work differently from allistic brains.

ALLISTIC BRAIN



AUTISTIC BRAIN



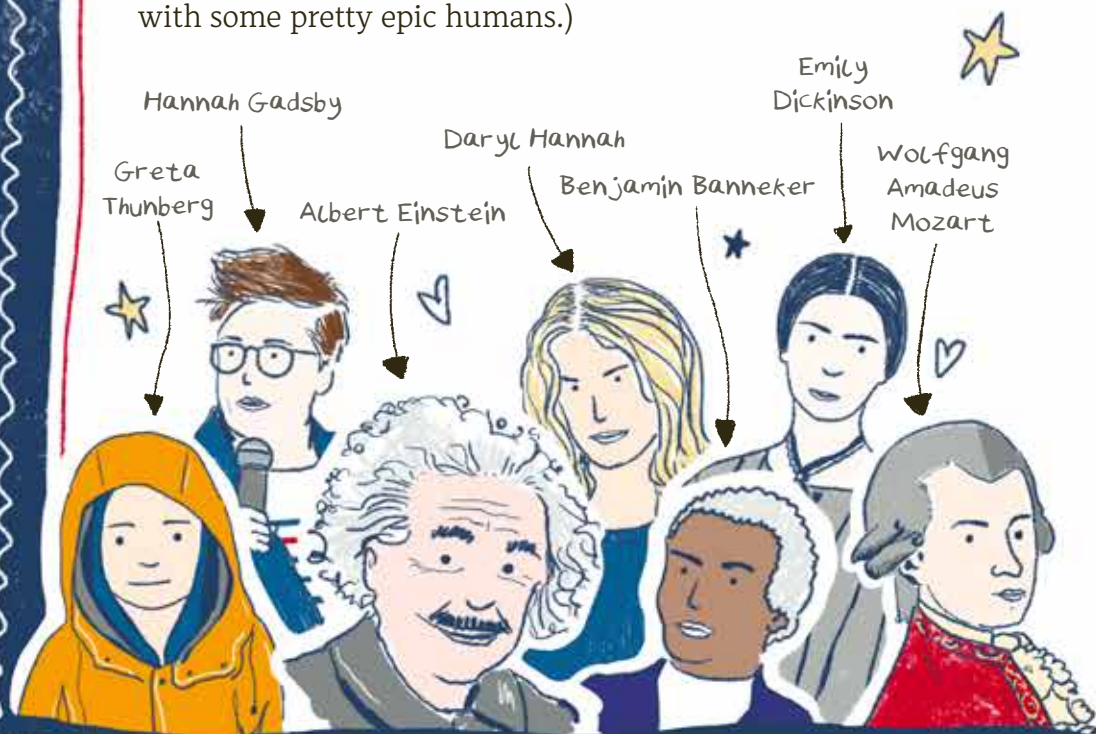
There's nothing wrong with that. Actually, there are loads of benefits to us not seeing the world in the same way as many of the people around us. Plus, who decided that the allistic brain was the ideal brain anyway?! Just because there are a few more people who **AREN'T** autistic in the world than those who **ARE**, that doesn't mean it's the right way to be, does it?

Also, my parents did not notice signs of my autism during the first three years of my life. In fact, it was me who approached my mum to say I thought I was autistic – when I was thirty-one.

This is not a unique story. It is becoming more and more common as people become more aware of the different experiences of autism.

Also, the idea that autism occurs more often in males than females is outdated and incorrect. As we know, autism can look different across the gender spectrum. Plus, people who aren't male can often be a lot better at **masking**. (We'll get on to masking in a bit. Masking deserves a chapter of its very own, really . . . or at least a nice comfy seat in a quiet room on another page while we explore a few other things first.)

OK, so we all know that Wikipedia is not the most **reliable** source for health information. You don't have to be **Einstein** to work that out. (Did you know that Einstein was most probably autistic? Another reason being autistic can be **SUPER COOL**: you get to join a club with some pretty epic humans.)




But, let's face it, most people in search of a quick answer look to the first page of the internet search results. And the answers immediately available are shaping how autism is understood by the world.

It's time we
CHANGED the
search results.



And it's time
we started asking
DIFFERENT QUESTIONS.

I'LL BEGIN . . .



SENSORY SENSITIVITIES

ENVIRONMENT

This does not just mean green fields and forests and oceans (i.e. that big important place we live in that needs saving urgently). When talking about autism and sensory stuff, the 'environment' means everything around you: the things you can see, hear, smell, taste and touch, and the people you find yourself around.

Sometimes I feel like I need an extra layer of skin between me and the outside world. I experience everything very intensely. Sounds, emotions, energy, lighting, pain. Often it's possible to deal with these one at a time, but a combination can prove very challenging.



SENSORY OVERLOAD

Sensory overload takes place when one or more of the body's five senses experiences too much stimulation from the environment and the body doesn't know how to process it. Sensory overload can be triggered by a crowded room, fluorescent lighting, a TV turned up too loud, strong smells and many other things. Anyone can experience it but it's commonly associated with autism.

I am writing this chapter on the train.

This is one situation that causes my senses to become overloaded, and I figured that would help me get the words to feel **REAL**.

HERE WE GO . . .

MONDAY: 9.43 a.m.

London Overground.


Denmark Hill to Shoreditch High Street.

Journey time 22 minutes.

(My favourite number thank GOODNESS or this would be a whole lot worse.)

Let me paint a picture. But with words – I simply cannot paint while I'm on the train because multitasking is not my thing.



A baby has started crying. The fluorescent lighting is too bright for the early daylight hour and what is the point when this is an **overground** train with **windows**?! 

The overhead announcement repeats the same words it repeats every day, which no one is listening to.



A sniff. A jingle of keys. The squeak of trainers, the rustle of a newspaper.



A carrier bag, a rain jacket. It hasn't rained for days.

And someone **STINKS**. Not just a small whiff of unwashed hair, but a nose-hair-yanking **FOUL** stench that makes me gag and immediately feel dreadful because that poor person might not be well or happy.

I feel sensory overload as both a physical and an **emotional**¹⁰ thing. My veins get sore and itchy. My head feels swollen, dizzy and full. And my chest flutters like the family of moths I've been watching eat all the clothes in my wardrobe for the past five years.

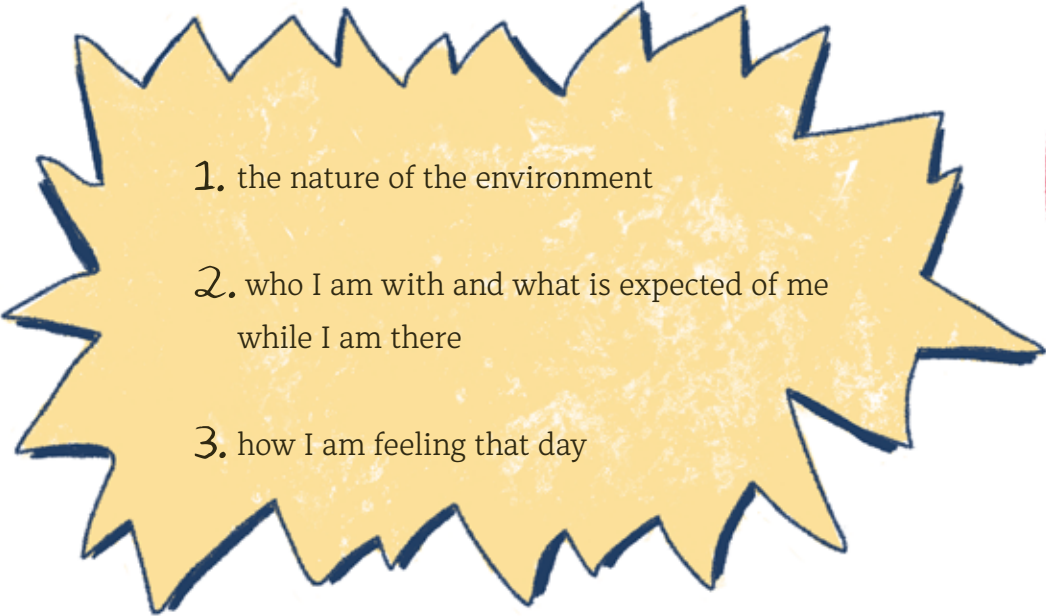
I keep these feelings inside, exit the train, leave the platform and start walking towards my office, ready to begin a full day at work.



10. My editor asked me to include the emotions I was feeling, but that's just the thing – in the moment of sensory overload I am unable to identify these emotions. I can write down the physical sensations in my body, which are all tied up with emotions, but labelling those exact emotions is trickier.

I'm writing from home again now in the quiet. (And I drew the pictures on the previous pages while at home too. Obviously.)

Similarly, when I'm in a social situation, I know I have a limited time before the demands of the environment become too much for me . . . After a while, everything starts to feel **LOUDER** and **BRIGHTER** and more intense than it did when I arrived. And the time it takes for this to happen entirely depends on:

- 
1. the nature of the environment
 2. who I am with and what is expected of me while I am there
 3. how I am feeling that day

I find it much easier to socialize in wide-open and quiet spaces, such as parks, beaches and forests, than in busy and noisy pubs, restaurants or shopping centres. And I much prefer meeting up with a friend for a one-to-one

chat than I do meeting up with a group of friends. Equally, if I am feeling stressed or haven't had enough sleep or food that day, I'll find a social event harder to cope with. Generally I am able to manage around two hours at a gathering before I feel the need to leave. Sometimes this will be more, sometimes less.

It's funny to think that up until a couple of years ago I wasn't fully aware of all this. I would push myself into uncomfortable situations to please other people, which resulted in the **worst anxiety** both before and during events,

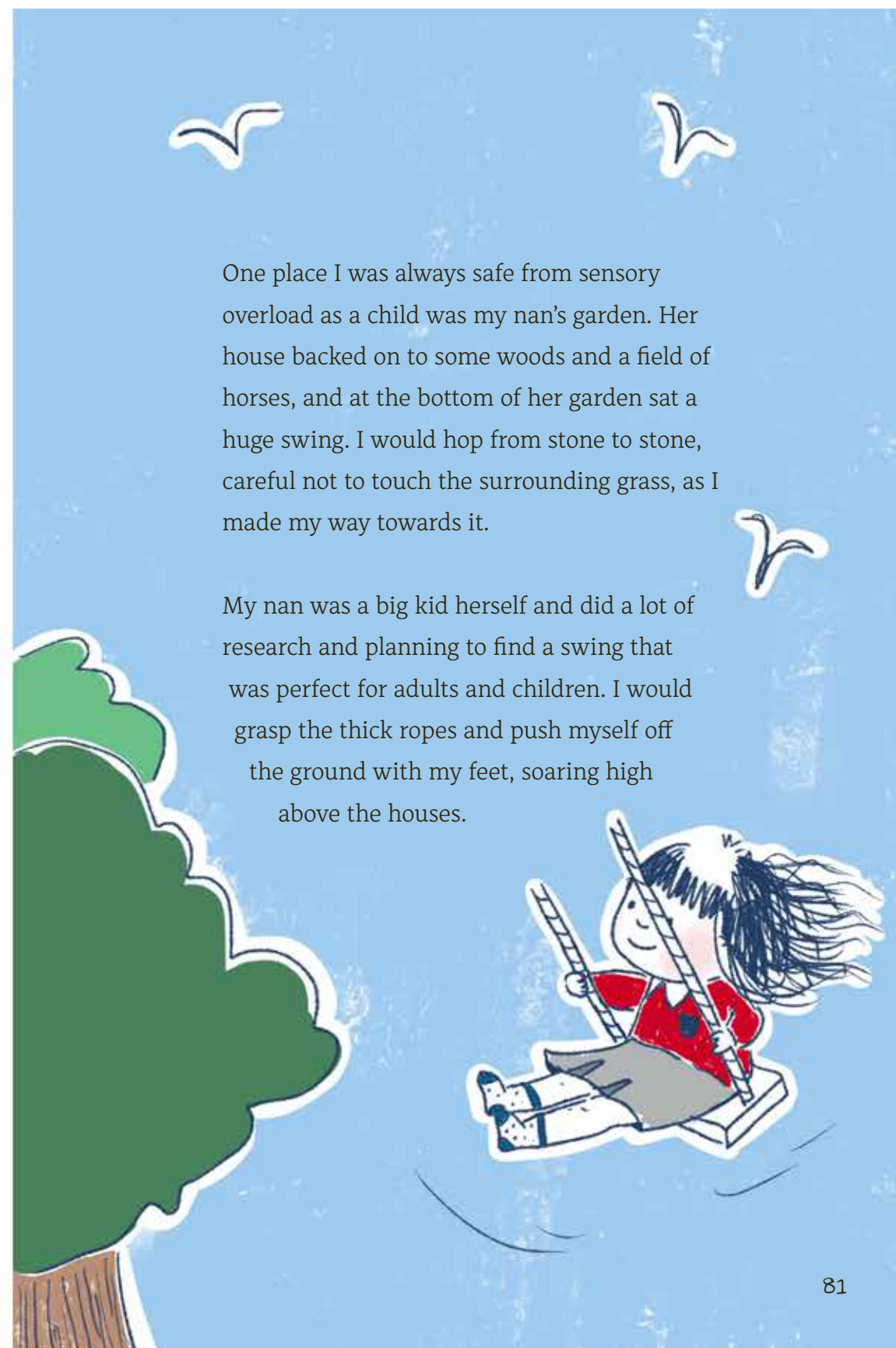
followed by **complete relief** when I was finally home alone, recovering. I would feel sad that I couldn't seem to enjoy the things that 'normal' people enjoyed, or do 'normal' things, like go to school or work or leave the house to go to the shops, without feeling sick to my stomach.



If you've ever had to sit in a classroom with children talking over each other, fluorescent lights, and teachers shouting demands at you, then you'll know that sensory overload and the anxiety it creates feels **a lot** worse than looking at a line-up of colourful cats.

I painted these cats because I love cats and I thought that **MAYBE** if I drew the cats creating the sensory issues I might not feel **quite** so anxious.

It sort of worked. Because I like looking at the cats.



One place I was always safe from sensory overload as a child was my nan's garden. Her house backed on to some woods and a field of horses, and at the bottom of her garden sat a huge swing. I would hop from stone to stone, careful not to touch the surrounding grass, as I made my way towards it.

My nan was a big kid herself and did a lot of research and planning to find a swing that was perfect for adults and children. I would grasp the thick ropes and push myself off the ground with my feet, soaring high above the houses.




HOW TO HELP SOMEONE EXPERIENCING SENSORY OVERLOAD





This is important for those of you who maybe don't experience sensory overload yourselves, but know someone who does.

DO


- ✓ Offer to accompany them to a safe place, away from whatever has caused the sensory overload
- ✓ If that's not possible, remove as many of the sensory stimuli (the things causing the sensory overload) as possible
- ✓ Alternatively stand guard for them while they cover their ears and close their eyes to block out the stimuli
- ✓ Give them space to just 'be' and stim away to their heart's content

- 
- Allow them to communicate with you non-verbally if they wish to. This might involve giving them a piece of paper and a pen, your phone to type on if they find that easier, or asking yes/no questions that they can nod or shake their head to

DO NOT

- 
- Touch or crowd them
- 
- Ask them open-ended questions (a question that can't be answered with a 'yes', 'no' or other short response)
- 
- Place demands on them
- 
- React negatively to their overload/shutdown/meltdown


But, guess what? Sensory sensitivities can also be a nice thing!



Let me tell you about some of MY FAVOURITE SENSORY THINGS




Everything soft.




Soft blankets. I have around seven on my bed at any one time and like to feel gently weighed down by them. One day I will invest in a weighted blanket.



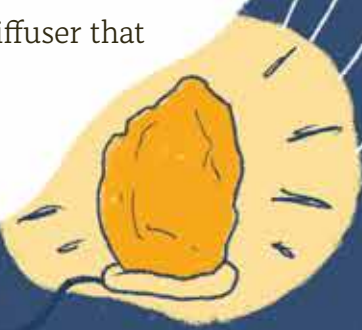
The insides of very soft clothing.



Rubbing a scratchy bit of my thumb on my lip. I do this when I'm nervous or thinking. When I was a child, my mum would come home from her night shift as a nurse and I would grab her thumb and say, 'Scratchy thumb' and rub it on my lip. It's soothing and my version of stimming – I didn't know that word even applied to me until I was diagnosed.



Soft lighting. I love salt lamps and fairy lights. I have a calming colour-changing aroma diffuser that looks and smells relaxing.





Hi! My name is Abigail
and I'm **AUTISTIC**.



However, I didn't know I was autistic
until I was an **adult-sort-of-person**.*.

This is my real-life story about growing up feeling different.

Inside you'll discover all sorts of memories:
from family and friendships, to ice cream and toilets.

You'll also find some Very Important Information about autism.
And lots of drawings of cats. Because I really like cats.

Whatever your story, if you've ever felt
out of place, like you don't fit in . . .

THIS IS FOR YOU.



*I've never really felt like
an actual-adult-person,
as you'll soon find out . . .



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