

THE
ASPARAGUS
BUNCH

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For Carmel (Nana) and the Thornton family
of Kilmacud, Dublin 14. For everything.



A note about the autism and dyslexia representation in this book

While this book is based on my own lived experiences with autism, I did draw on important support from the UK's National Autistic Society when addressing autism in this story. Though there are common challenges that autistic people share, autism is a spectrum condition and affects people in different ways.

The advances that have been made these past decades in understanding autism have been substantial, during which time, different diagnostic labels have been used, such as: autism, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), classic autism, Kanner autism, pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), high-functioning autism (HFA), Asperger syndrome and Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA). Based on recent changes however to the main diagnostic manuals, Autism Spectrum Disorder is likely to be the most commonly given diagnostic term, according to the UK's National Autistic Society.

The problematic history surrounding Hans Asperger has provoked widespread debate within the autistic community. Indeed, today, many people whose profile fits that of

Asperger syndrome are being diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder instead.

That being said, every person is different and should feel comfortable in choosing how they wish to identify themselves. Those people who have an Asperger syndrome diagnosis may well choose to keep using the term, whereas others may prefer to refer to themselves as autistic or having an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Dyslexia is a learning difference that also occurs on a spectrum; some people are mildly affected and others more severely. Everyone with dyslexia is different but there are commonly shared difficulties with reading, spelling and writing and related cognitive/processing difficulties.

Jessica Scott-Whyte,

Paris, May 2022

Introduction

(The completely pointless part that nobody reads)

This is a waste of time.

Chances are you've already snuck a peek at the last chapter and know how the whole thing ends, so what good is an introduction to you now?

My 'we're kind of a big deal' book publisher, however, insisted they knew better and said that I had to write an introduction – no ifs, ands or buts.

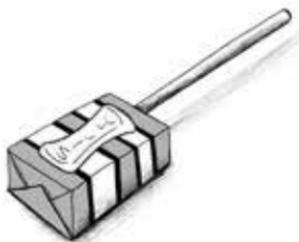
I told them they were delusional and that there was no way I could write an introduction without using the words *if*, *and* or *but*. Then they got cross and told me I had an attitude problem.

So, here's my introduction:

Hello.

My name is Leon.

I have an attitude problem.



1

The Basics

Everything you need to know about me:

1. I'm Leon John Crothers
2. I'm 4,779 days old (13 years and 1 month, if you're mathematically challenged)
3. I live with Caroline
4. I've been moved on from 6 different schools
5. I'm currently attending Deluney College (school #7)
6. Most people think I've got an attitude problem

Everything you need to know about Caroline:

1. Caroline Angela Crothers is my mum
2. I call Caroline by her first name
3. Caroline doesn't mind that I call her by her first name
4. Caroline is, among other things, a single parent, a whistler, a knitter and an indiscreet nosepicker
5. Caroline rides fairground attractions for a living
6. Caroline doesn't think I've got an attitude problem

Everything you need to know about my attitude problem:

1. It has nothing to do with the fact that I'm from Blackpool
2. Or my squeaky noise phobia
3. Or my deep hatred of baked beans
4. Or that I own 14 identical yellow hoodies
5. Or my opinions on trainspotters
6. Or how I eat my Cadbury Creme Egg



2

Soggy Chips

Tea at ours is very straightforward.

Tea meaning dinner if you're not from round here.

You see, Caroline's a hopeless cook.

As soon as I was old enough to coherently tell her this, I took matters into my own hands:

Monday: Fish and chips

Tuesday: Chicken and chips

Wednesday: Pizza and chips

Thursday: Egg and chips

Friday: Sausage and chips

Saturday: Steak and chips

Sunday: Curry and chips

I wouldn't call myself a picky eater. I'm just not keen on surprises. And Caroline isn't keen on me skipping meals, so this way, everyone's a winner.

And as we're on the subject of meals, maybe just a quick word about the chips.

I eat my chips plain (no ketchup, vinegar, mayonnaise etc. – only salt) and they can't touch any other foods on the plate. It generates stress. Unnecessary stress. Don't waste your time wondering why I don't just eat my chips from a separate plate – spare me. Been there, hated that.

As I was saying, tea at ours is very straightforward.

I always sit beside the kitchen door with my back to the shelf where Caroline keeps her collection of ceramic ducks, because they're hideous, and Caroline sits at ninety degrees to my right. Over the years, I've encouraged Caroline to sit there so that she'd have a nice view out of the kitchen window but really, I just don't like her sitting directly opposite me at mealtimes. I don't like anyone sitting opposite me at mealtimes. Who needs to see all that chewing and swallowing? Listening to it is bad enough.

Conversation is to be kept to a strict minimum. It drags out the eating process. For me, eating is really more of a hassle than anything else and something I prefer to do alone. I only eat at all because if I don't, my vital organs will eventually stage a mutiny. Caroline has a thing about the two of us eating together whenever her work schedule allows, for 'bonding' purposes. In the past, this has been a frequent source of arguing, but we've finally come to, what I think, is a fair compromise: mealtimes spent together – ask only about the weather.

So, like I said, tea at ours is very straightforward.

My story, however, is anything but straightforward and starts right here.

To give you a more accurate timeframe, it was a Monday evening, two weeks before I was due to start at Deluney College: my new, new, new, new, new, new, new school.

The two of us were making our way through our fish and chips in relative silence, when suddenly, out of nowhere, Caroline said the strangest thing:

‘I’m worried about you.’

I quickly scanned my plate to see if she was referring to a runaway chip situation, but everything seemed in order, so I just carried on eating.

Caroline cleared her throat.

‘Leon, I was thinking that before you start at your new school, you—’

‘Correction: new, new, new, new, new, new, new school.’

‘OK, before you start at your new, new, new, new, new, new, new school, it might be a good idea that we go and see someone who helps young people who’ve trouble making friends and, well, interacting with people in general. What do you think?’

I stabbed a piece of battered fish with my fork.

‘No thanks, Caroline.’

Case closed, I figured. Caroline had asked a question (albeit a non-weather-related one) and I’d answered. But the same question came back again the following night over breaded chicken, and *again* on Wednesday between mouthfuls of margherita. Normally I wouldn’t describe Caroline as annoying,

but this new teatime routine was pinching a nerve.

Then, on Thursday, she changed tactics:

'I've made an appointment for you to see Dr Snot on Saturday afternoon.'

I looked up from my egg and chips.

'What?'

'On Saturday afternoon you've an appointment to see Dr Snot.'

'Dr Snot?'

'Snot.'

'It's not.'

'What?'

'*Snot.*'

'Yep. Snot.'

'Dr *Snot?*'

Caroline knew full well I'd fall for her plan. If someone tells you there's a man alive with a name as stupid as Dr Snot, of course you're going to go and see him. You're *obliged* to. The conversation was now distracting me to the point that some of the yolk from my egg had dripped off my fork onto my chips. Beads of sweat were forming on my forehead and my elbows were starting to itch.

'*Fine*, Caroline, I'll go and see him,' I said, as I scraped my food into the bin.

3

Dr Snot

Two days later, we were sitting in the waiting room of Dr Snot's surgery. Caroline passed the time with a stack of sticky magazines that she'd picked up from the reception desk, while I tapped my chin with my index finger to the rhythm of the clock that was mounted on the wall.

When we were finally invited into his office, Dr Snot was sitting behind his big, brown, shiny doctor's desk, wearing a white doctor's coat and a pair of ugly doctor's glasses. He was bald, with some wiry grey hair sticking out of his ears, an unhealthy-sized belly and a few too many moles on his face. He basically looked like your average, close-to-retirement physician. *Complete* disappointment.

I turned to leave.

'What are you doing?' said Caroline, nudging me back in. 'We just got here.'

'You said you wanted me to go and see Dr Snot,' I answered. 'I've seen him, so I can go now, right?'

She sighed heavily. 'Leon, I didn't mean to go and see him, *literally*.'

'It's all right, Ms Crothers,' said Dr Snot, with an impressively deep voice. 'Lovely to meet you, Leon, and thanks for taking the time to come all this way just to have a look at me. Good to see that you're a lad who keeps his word!'

We sat down.

'Snot isn't really your last name, is it?' I said.

'Beg your pardon?' said the doc.

'Which controversial family tree are you trying to distance yourself from?'

'Leon,' Caroline hissed under her breath.

'Was your grandfather Hitler's secret love child or something?'

'Leon!' Caroline shrieked.

I threw my eyes down to the floor. When Caroline's voice gets loud it means I've said something that's likely to have caused upset, anger or offence.

'Sor-ry,' I told my shoes. 'I may have said something that has caused upset, anger or offence.'

I waited a moment for the expected '*listen here, young man*' speech but none came, so I looked up at Dr Snot, who was leaning over his desk with his hands cupped under his chin. He was smiling.

'Tell me, Leon, what do you think of Milky Ways?'

Now I was *really* confused.

'Are you questioning the meaning of life?' I asked him. 'Or are you planning to take up astronomy as a hobby when

you retire?’

‘No, no, the chocolate bar!’ the snot doc laughed. ‘Did you know that Milky Ways have been a favourite of mine since I was a young—’

‘The Milky Way bar is a chocolate-covered confectionery bar with a nougat centre, manufactured and distributed by the Mars confectionery company. It was created in 1923 by Frank C. Mars after the famed malted milk drink (milkshake) of the day, which was in turn named after the Earth’s galaxy. The American version of the Milky Way bar has a caramel and nougat filling, while the European version has just an airy nougat filling. The Milky Way’s low density of 0.88 grams per centimetre cubed means it floats when placed in milk, a phenomenon that was used for an advertising campaign across Europe in the late 1980s.’

‘Very impressive,’ said the doc. ‘Your mother had already mentioned to me on the phone that you had a great passion for the world of confectionery. Who knows? Maybe someday you’ll be the next Willy Wonka!’

The doc got up from his chair and squeezed himself around the side of his desk.

‘Leon, I would like that you and your mother come back and see me next week for a chat, before school starts. Would that be OK?’

‘Not a chance,’ I said. ‘Willy Wonka’s a fictional character in literature with lunatic tendencies who exploited ingenious

dwarfs as slave labourers and was a few Everlasting Gobstoppers away from being charged with infanticide.'

Caroline hurried me out of my chair.

'OK, Leon, let's be off.'

I stood up.

'Keep in mind, Dr Snot, that the American version of the Milky Way bar contains 240 calories in each 52.2-gram bar, while the British version only contains 95 calories. I say that because you're visibly overweight, so you might—'

Caroline yanked my hoodie.

'Leon... hop to it. Now.'

'That went better than expected,' I said to Caroline as I pogoed out of the doc's office on one foot.

4

My Hobby

Author disclosure: *I haven't consented to the publication of this chapter for the following reasons:*

1. Against my wishes, the chapter's initial 22-page count has been ludicrously reduced
2. I wasn't allowed to include any pie charts, line graphs, histograms or frequency polygons
3. This book has been edited by someone whose chocolate bar of choice is a **Bounty** – enough said

Carnival folk generally have a reputation for being dodgy swindlers who'll hack off their heavily tattooed right arms to make a few quid. But it also must be said that carnies are very loyal and protective of their people. So, when Caroline showed up to work at Blackpool Pleasure Beach, one day way back when, with a newborn baby in her arms (nine months after being hired to test-ride the dodgems), they treated me as one of their own. In fact, I quickly became a sort of side-show attraction within the carny community along the promenade.

Anytime I'd toddle past a stand or a booth, a hooked finger would beckon me closer and a sweet would be dropped into the front pocket of my red corduroy dungarees.

Thanks to what can only be described as a spectacular show of parental negligence (kudos, Caroline), my constant access to processed sugar uncovered in me a rare talent that landed me my first ever paid job at age four: taste-testing bootleg fairground sweets to see if they were near, past or way past their sell by date. I was paid £1 for every stash I sampled, with a £5 bonus if I managed to detect that a stash had been infiltrated by vermin. I used the money I made (and trust me, I made *a lot*) to expand my confectionery knowledge beyond the realms of fairground fare. Today, scoffing sweets from around the world, be it through chewing, chomping, licking, sucking, munching, or crunching, is my life's calling.

Caroline childishly calls it my hobby.

Nowhere near everything you need to know about my hobby:

1. My pursuit of sweetness has already seen two near-death experiences. Some years back, I almost choked during a tasting experiment involving a mouthful of bullseyes and only last summer, a piece of saltwater taffy got lodged in my throat and had to be removed in A&E using forceps.
2. The results of my in-depth study into jawbreakers,

conducted four years ago, remain inconclusive. I was forced to abandon the study after cracking two of my back molars, but I plan to resurrect and complete the project when I'm in my seventies and have a reliable set of porcelain false gnashers.

3. The most Chupa Chups lollipops I've consumed in a day is 27, which caused me to lose all feeling in my cheeks and I couldn't eat solids for six days straight.
4. Have you ever noticed that the chocolate bars you eat from Christmas selection boxes don't taste the same as the ones you buy at any other time of the year? I'm convinced that confectionery companies alter the recipes of selection box chocolates to create a unique feeling of festive nostalgia in a bid to pump up sales. That's just one of many sweet-natured conspiracy theories that has my name on it.
5. I always taste-test new sweets between 7 and 8 in the morning, just before breakfast. Did you know that saliva builds up in your mouth throughout the day and can dramatically change the flavour profile of whatever you're eating?
6. A side occupation of my 'hobby' includes collecting rare confectionery memorabilia, which I store in a glass cabinet above my bed. Special items include the original prototype of the chocolate frog candy used in the film adaptation of *Harry Potter and the*

Philosopher's Stone, and a glass bonbon dish recovered from the wreckage of the *Titanic*.

7. For the past three years, I've been working on an algorithm to determine the best sweet combinations that make up £2 worth of pick 'n' mix. The best combination I've got so far is: 2 large strawberries, 4 sour dummies, 3 white mice, 6 fried eggs, 4 fizzy cola bottles, 3 flying saucers and 1 red liquorice wheel.
8. I'm currently campaigning for Starburst sweets to be re-released as their original brand name: Opal Fruits. So far, my online petition has generated 18,000 signatures.
9. I eat my Cadbury Creme Egg by first bashing the top off against a hard surface, before sucking out the fondant filling with my tongue and throwing away the remaining shell, just as any respectful egg predator in the animal kingdom would.
10. Thanks to Love Hearts, I learnt to read way before the average kid.

So, there you have it, a very brief glimpse into the epicentre of my world. After reading this, you might be intrigued, possibly inspired, and so you should be.

Anyone who thinks otherwise can just fudge off.

