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by Shellie Richards

Concerned about your test score? [Click here](#) to chat with an online therapist.

My immediate concern was not my test score, but that an intrusive dialogue box would appear in the lower right-hand corner. Hello! How can I help you today? Only I wasn't trying to return a pair of ill-fitting sandals or a T-shirt that ran small. I had just finished the test for the Asperger's Quotient, and my score had me deep in Asperger's territory. I was in the thick of it. But I was not concerned. I was not even surprised.

In true Asperger's fashion, I did not want to chat online. I don't prefer to *chat*. I prefer to talk about why I am even here to begin with. I want to know about the human condition, if suffering makes us who we are, whether we are alone. I want to know the why of things. *Why* is why I took the test. Curiosity. Suspicion. And so I answered fifty questions about my imagination, about counting things, about comfort.

I texted my results to my sister, a therapist, who, assuming I'd share, told my parents. I hadn't planned on sharing. My family members denied my Asperger's test result the way some deny climate change. But I kept thinking about my imagination, about counting things, about comfort.

In the gospel of Mary Magdalene, she has a vision; her spirit is floating above her lifeless body, and her mind speaks—*You are leaving? I never saw you come*. Her soul replies, *I served you as a garment, and you did not know me*. I think my imagination serves me as a garment. I do not know it, but it is a protective cloak.

For years—eighteen—I rocked. In my bed at night, I'd get on all fours, plant my head in my pillow, and rock until my long, curly hair was matted, or until I collapsed on my side, too sleepy to continue. I found this greatly comforting, but to visitors who could see from the sofa, it was disturbing.

What is wrong with her?

They asked out of curiosity or concern or neither.

I also rocked in my dad's recliner. I would sway back and forth, taking deep breaths, meditating or unthinking. According to pediatricians, rocking is a self-comfort activity. Sometimes self-comfort is the only kind. So I would sit, firmly planted in the gold and brown tweed recliner, my naked toes barely touching the ground but enough to wear the shag carpet as thin as tissue. My mother moved the recliner around, but no matter. I made more spots while I listened to the scratch of the stereo, the diamond needle dragging across the black vinyl over the dust motes to the music. My choices included Dylan, The Beatles, or The Rolling Stones. I liked *Paint It Black* or *Sympathy for the Devil*. *Sympathy* sounded nice.

My dad doesn't remember the bare spots in the carpet. Only the rocking.

I waited until I was eleven years old to speak at school. Until then, it was only "Present," "Please," and "Amen, Alleluia."

"You can be far inside, or you can be far outside," Jon Arno Lawson writes. I was both. I walked to the beat of a different drummer. At least, that's what my mother told me. I listened for the drumbeats for the longest time after that. Dylan. McCartney. Jagger. I never heard them. Perhaps because I was in lockstep with the drumming.

Yes, I count things. Ceiling tiles at the dentist. Slats on blinds at the home store. Windowpanes at work. Pictures on a wall at a restaurant. Or maybe the empty tables and chairs, the number of waitstaff as they scramble with pitchers of water, or the number of cooks tossing pizza dough in the air. Cars at stoplights, people in lines, noodles on my plate. Always, I count.

In my early twenties I landed a job at a local university. On my first day, my boss—the only person I was obliged to talk to—was out. I sat at my desk, mostly silent, across from the departmental mailboxes—all seventy-five of them. It was a hub of major activity; people checking mailboxes, opening letters and interdepartmental envelopes, inquiring about each other, meetings, students, and of course, introducing themselves. Beyond hello and my name, no words came out of my mouth. Only the quiet flurry of thoughts and ideas that constantly crowded my brain. After a few weeks, my coworker, who was both sweet and wise, turned to me and said, *You're gonna have to start talking. If you don't speak up, these people will run you over.* In my life, no one had ever suggested I talk or that speaking was a means of self-defense. The idea that not

speaking somehow exposed me was enough to frighten me out of my comfort zone. I began speaking, and speaking led to talking, to arguing when necessary, to speaking truth to power, to calling people out when needed—to a transparency that has been nothing short of freeing. If I'm being honest it's a switch that I turn off and on as needed—my default setting is still wallflower. But thanks to my coworker, I have a choice that never existed before.

I recently attended a luncheon that included students, their families, and faculty. I volunteered to stand outside and direct guests to the room where the celebration was being held. I was alone and without obligation to engage in conversation with strangers. It was glorious until I realized that I was counting the people in the hallway and taking inventory of brisket and turkey club sandwiches at the luncheon. (Though consciously recognizing that I was counting did nothing to assuage my frustration over counting sandwiches that were constantly taken by guests and immediately replenished by the caterer.) A colleague, realizing I felt trapped by my social hobgoblins, came over with a student to talk about her job prospects. And though I was nervous, my burden felt lighter, less evident, and I was grateful for the instincts of my fellow human.

Sometimes the weight of silence is a lovely blanket, sometimes it is crushing, but it is always invisible.

Tonight, I will attend a large wedding reception and I will likely listen to gregarious people toasting and wishing the newlyweds well, and though I wish them all the happiness in the world, I prefer to raise my champagne in silence. It is who I am. I prefer to observe—even though at age fifty-one, I feel as though I've pushed through my inclination to disappear into the wall, to watch while others talk, to “unspeak.” I speak when it is important, and sometimes because I am nervous. But I speak. I have verve I didn't have before, and even though I don't always give voice to it, it is there, unrelenting.

People with lots of letters behind their name assure me that the Asperger's Quotient test is the gold standard for a gateway screening. I'm not sure whether I passed or failed. I suppose it depends on whether I prefer blending or standing out. The quiz asked a lot of questions that seemed to me spurious. What did it mean, these

questions about things so natural to me? I am an introvert with a vivid imagination who likes to count things. Where was this going?

There are bigger things, it seems to me. Are we alone? Does suffering make us who we are? What is the why?

I wonder.



Shellie Richards currently edits scientific manuscripts and teaches technical writing at Vanderbilt University. Her writing has appeared in *Cream City Review*, *Oatmeal Magazine*, *Bending Genres*, *Bartleby Snopes* (where it was awarded Story of the Month), *The Chaffey Review*, among others, and she has work forthcoming in the *Coachella Review*. Richards holds an M.A. in English from Belmont University and will complete her MFA in 2020. She lives in Nashville with her family and three scruffy dogs.