

# MAEBH

• Misunderstood

• Isolated

• Fearful



Written by  
Emma Midnight



# Maebh

## Contents

Preface

Chapter 1: The Bus Journey

Chapter 2: Diagnosis

Chapter 3: Aunt Lucie Picks Me Up

Chapter 4: The Birthday Party

Chapter 5: Copycat

Chapter 6: New Start

Chapter 7: Pretending to be Normal

Chapter 8: Changes

Chapter 9: In Search of Work

Chapter 10: The Final Interview

Epilogue

# Preface

My name is Maebh Sickett. I am a middle-aged autistic woman and this is my story. It isn't a happy story, by any stretch of the imagination. It's a story of isolation, masking, fear, and of being constantly misunderstood. But it needs telling. It all started when I was five and a half years old, when my parents were taking me to the bus stop in order to go to the doctor's because they decided the daughter they had known for five and a half years at that point simply must have something wrong with her.

And from there, I had my label, and my life hasn't got any easier ever since. But here it is.



## Chapter 1: The Bus Journey

My Dad held one of my hands and my Mum held the other. They were holding them tightly and they hurt. I wished they'd stop, turn around and take me home.

My eyes were also hurting from the lights on the road monsters whizzing up and down the road – they were like little sun-shines and I wanted to cover my eyes, but I couldn't. It had been like this since we left home and set off down the street. I was crying. Why wouldn't they take me home? This was too much. 'Stop it!' Dad shouted at me. More noise. Dad's words rattled around in my head like a lot of cymbals going off all at once.

I couldn't stop. I wished I could let him know so he'd stop shouting at me, but I couldn't speak. Not that I wasn't capable of speech, but just that momentarily, my vocal cords had tightened up so that I couldn't speak at that moment.

'This isn't right,' said Dad to my Mum. Then he rounded on me again – 'You'd better pack this in, young lady, before we get to the bus stop! What are people going to think of you acting up like this?'

A few minutes later, we got to the bus stop. I was still crying uncontrollably. My hands were still hurting from being held too tightly by Mum and Dad. My eyes were still hurting from the road monsters with their little sun-shines. Nothing had changed.

Then the bus came. My Mum took me to the back of the bus while my Dad bought the tickets. As soon as my Mum let me go, I fell to the floor of the bus, still crying and flailing about. Then my Dad came towards us and groaned. 'Maebh,' he said just as tersely as before, 'stop it. You're on a bus. For goodness' sake, behave yourself!'

I couldn't stop crying. He didn't understand. Neither of them did and that made me more upset. Why was it just me? Then, as if matters couldn't get any worse, an old man sitting next to my Dad, started banging his walking stick angrily. 'Will you get that child under control?!' he all but yelled at my Dad.

'Stop it!' my Dad yelled at me. 'Now! You're getting on people's nerves!'

Then my Dad sighed defeatedly.

'Why some people can't control their children, I just don't know...' the old man muttered to himself.

Meanwhile, an old lady turned towards my Mum. 'She'll grow out of it by the time she's old enough to start school,' she tried to reassure my Mum. 'You'll see.'

'She's already in school,' said my Mum. 'I know she's very small, but she's five and a half.'

'Oh, I'm sorry,' said the old lady, turning her back on us in surprise at my Mum's words.

Shortly after this, the bus stopped and my parents pulled me by the arms again and we got off the bus.

We went to the doctor's surgery not far from the bus stop. This was a dismal looking building, all made out of tired old bricks with a triangular roof and a bright yellow awning running along the top of the door and front window.

'Get in there,' said my dad.

We got into the reception area and my parents sat down. My Mum looked apologetically at the receptionist. A few minutes later, the receptionist told my Mum, 'Dr Begnier will see you now.'

A door opened and we went into an office. It had a desk not far from the door, with a chair behind it, a computer on the desk and two chairs in front of the desk. At the desk sat Dr Begnier. At the back of the room, there was a box of toys and a doll's house. It was an old-fashioned dolls house. All the dolls had long hair and wore elegant clothing. There were numerous dolls and I found one I liked for me. It had black hair and wore black trousers with a red top. It was a boy really, but I liked it. Then the doctor came in sat next to me.

'Hello, Maebh,' he said much more gently than how my Dad had been talking to me earlier. 'It seems you've been quite upset. Could you tell me what you were upset about?'

So, I told the doctor what the problem was.

'I see. So, the lights on cars are too bright for you and they make too much noise for you, do they?'

'Yes,' I replied.

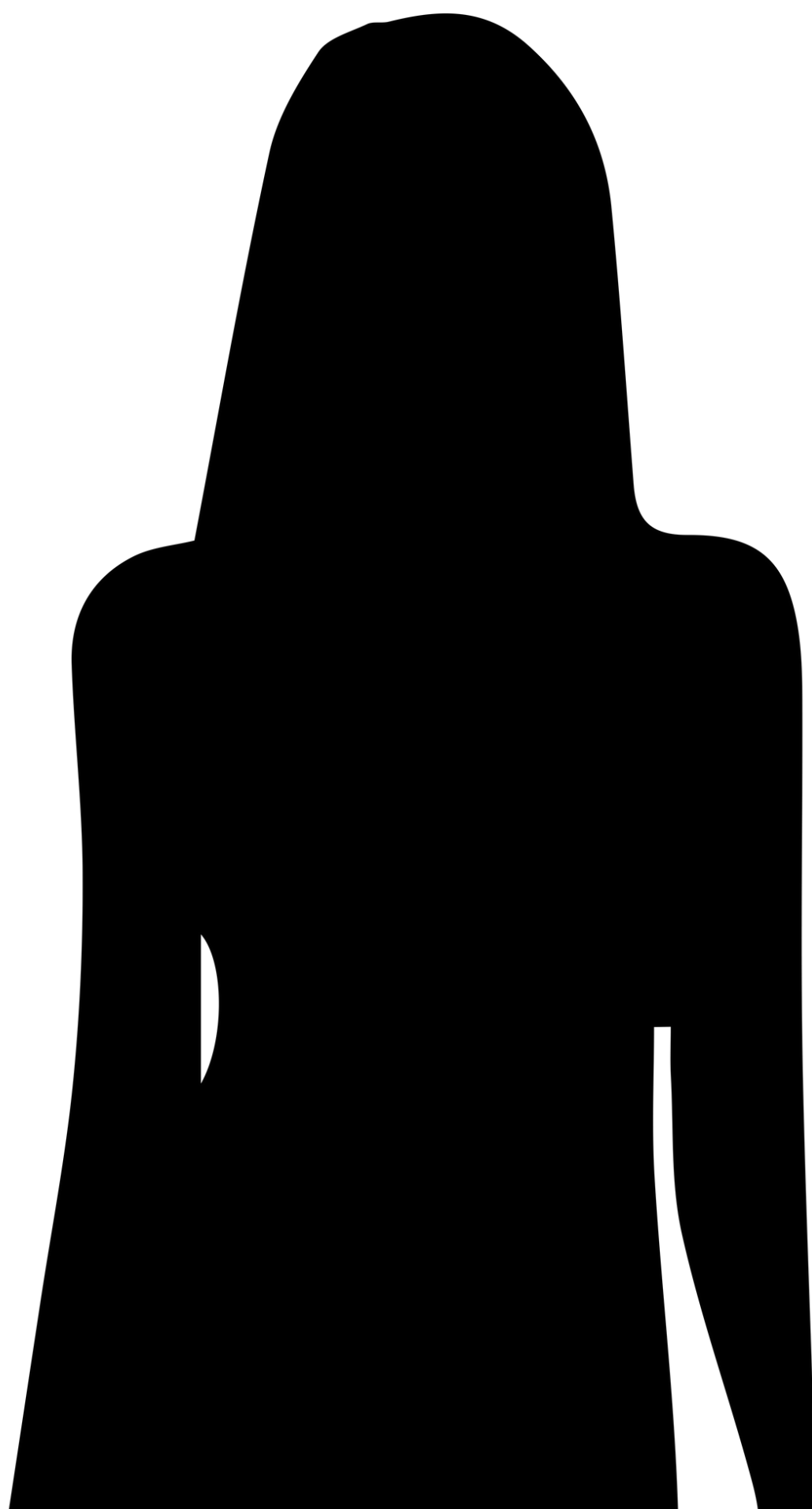
The doctor nodded his head, then observed what I was doing with the doll's house.

'Right... what if I'm the teacher?' asked the doctor, and picked up one of the dolls that looked older and more grown up than some of the others. But I played out my day, being isolated and being on the fringes of the other kids in my school.

'Hmm... I don't think you're all that interested in interacting with me, are you?' asked the doctor.

I gasped. 'Sorry,' I said, confused and worried I'd done something wrong all at once, though I couldn't quite tell what I could have done wrong.

'No matter, no matter,' the doctor said hurriedly, seeing my emotions flicker on my face. 'Don't be uneasy.'  
Then the doctor stood up and turned back towards my parents.



## Chapter 2: Diagnosis

'Autism spectrum disorder,' Dr Begnier told my parents. 'She'll grow out of it, of course,' said my Dad, but then he met the doctor's eyes. 'Er... won't she?' 'No, she won't,' said Dr Begnier. 'Autism isn't an illness that one simply grows out of. It's a lifelong neurological difference.'

'What?!' My dad burst out. 'She'll be a laughing stock!' Evidently, Dad still had the horrified looks and alarmed reactions of the fellow passengers on the bus. The doctor shrugged.

'Well, what are you going to do?' asked Dad. 'What do you want me to do?' retorted the doctor. 'I don't know, give her some medicine, or give her some therapy or something!' said my Dad.

'There's no medicine for autism,' said the doctor. 'There's no cure for it. Any medicine I could give her would be symptomatic treatment for other things, such as anxiety disorders or mental health issues, something which autism is not in and of itself. And whilst psychotherapy of some sort might help with certain things if she needs it when she's older, that won't change anything either.'

My Dad let out a long, drawn-out sigh of exasperation again and we left.

## Chapter 3: Aunt Lucie Picks Me Up

At school, I was on my own and completely misunderstood. My situation was rather unique in that none of the boys wanted anything to do with me, just because I was a girl, although I sometimes wondered about the games they played, and none of the other girls wanted anything to do with me either. If they didn't completely ignore me, it was only to say I was a freak, to tell me to go away, or find more freaks to be with, or some combination of the above.

I got told off in class when my teacher was starting to teach us about shapes. She put some pictures of some shapes – specifically, a circle, a square and a triangle – on the board and asked the class what they were. I wrote down the word shapes in capital letters on a piece of paper and held it up in front of me, and the teacher told me off because I didn't put my hand up like the other kids in the class. But I didn't like speaking out loud in class. But I looked around at the other kids, and no one else was putting their hands up. Granted, they weren't writing anything down on pieces of paper either, but I didn't get this business of raising my hand when my parents had told my teacher it made me anxious to speak out in class.

Then the teacher asked if any of the class knew what the names of specific shapes were as opposed to just in general, but still, no hands went up and although I knew the answers, I decided I'd better not risk getting told off for communicating in my way again.

But besides classes, break times and lunch times were the worst. We were expected to go out into the yard and amuse ourselves. For the boys, that mainly meant running around, playing some sort of rough-looking game or other. For the girls, that mainly meant standing around chatting to each other about goodness knows what. For me, that meant nothing.

There were times when I was able to sneak off to the library, which was just a quiet square-ish shaped area in the corridor between the classrooms, with a slatted wooden fence at two

sides. The bookshelves were positioned against this slatted fence on both sides. It had a couple of large, round tables towards the back of the library and soft-cushioned chairs and beanbags dotted about. I loved sitting on a beanbag, reading a book and today was one of those times I could sneak off to my bibliophile's paradise.

Not long after I'd got myself comfortable and chosen a book, I heard an all-too-familiar voice. It was Dreselda. She was pretty much the leader of the in-group of girls, and whereas the other girls mostly just ignored me, except the odd couple who'd occasionally go out of their way to comment about me, Dreselda was downright antagonistic. In fact, let me put it plainer than that - Dreselda seemed to hate my guts, as far as I could tell, and I got more 'freak' comments from her than anyone else.

'Maebh!' she called. 'I'd better not find you in that library!' I pulled my book up in front of my face. Luckily, the light was off, so the only light entering the room was from the windows and they weren't very big. I had enough light to read by, but in the dim-ish light, my clothes could be mistaken for some of the beanbags around me, or so I hoped.

'Come on, Maebh! Miss Conaghan wants me to take you to the canteen!'

A likely story, I thought. Although it might be plausible that the teacher might be concerned if she thought I wasn't eating at all, and might have asked someone to accompany me, I very much doubt she'd have asked Dreselda specifically, although I could see Dreselda having volunteered for such a task as a means of

bullying me. I usually found some way of eating, usually by sneaking up to the canteen towards the end of lunch time when it was quieter and taking my food to a spot where not many people went, but sometimes I ended up going without lunch.

You see, eating around people made me anxious as well. I preferred to eat on my own, and Dreselda knew this. If Dreselda had volunteered to take me to the canteen, no matter what the teacher's motives, Dreselda would try and make sure I couldn't sneak out to eat on my own.

Dreselda flicked the light switch, then said, 'thought you'd try to fool me by not turning on the lights, did you? Well, you can put that book down and come with me!'

I didn't put the book down, but Dreselda continued her advance and then pulled the book out of my hands and flung it on the floor.

'How are you reading a big book like that?' asked Dreselda.

'Gosh, is that another thing that's freakish about you?'

So, there was I, reading Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, whilst the rest of the class were just getting to reading full sentences... Well, I guessed in the sense that I was once again the odd one out, she was right, but was having been able to read and sometimes spell better than the teacher from a young age really such a bad thing?

But then, Dreselda dragged me up the stairs to the canteen.

'Come on, get to the back of the queue,' she said, 'you're not waiting at the front and getting a tray of food at the last minute' - and she pushed me until I was standing in front of her at the back of the queue.

entrance to the hatch, then looked at Dreselda, and frowned, then she went back into the reception and into her office. A couple of minutes later, she came back in and said, 'Maebh, come with me.'

'B-b-b-but...' Dreselda stammered.  
'But nothing,' the receptionist said, 'Maebh's coming with me.'  
So, I followed the receptionist.  
'Take a seat,' she told me sweetly, 'someone's coming to pick you up shortly.'

So I sat down.  
About ten minutes later, the doorbell rang. The receptionist answered the door and in came Aunt Lucie.  
'Aunt Lucie!' I belted out happily.  
'Maebh, come here, my sweet pea,' said Aunt Lucie.  
'What's happened today?' she asked the receptionist.  
'I'm not entirely sure, but I saw her in the queue in the canteen in front of Dreselda.'

Understanding at once what that must mean, Aunt Lucie frowned. 'I think I can guess,' said Aunt Lucie to the receptionist. 'It doesn't take a genius to spot that Maebh gets anxious around people and doesn't eat in company.'

The receptionist nodded. Then Aunt Lucie and I left. We went back to Aunt Lucie's house. When we got there, I took my shoes off and went into the bathroom and got changed out of my uniform and into the spare clothes I had in my bag just in case I needed them, then I put my bag next to my shoes in the hall.

'Would you like some sandwiches and a cup of tea?' asked Aunt Lucie.

'Yes, please,' I replied.

So she made me sandwiches and a cup of tea. Then, as I was eating, Aunt Lucie got some paper, paintbrushes, paints and a glass of water and put them down in front of me. She knew I liked painting.

When I was finished eating, she took my plate away from me - my tea was still too hot yet.

I painted a blue and green vase and some green flower stems coming out of the top of the vase, then I mixed together some paints - red and black, red and orange, orange and yellow, yellow and white. I also put blobs of plain red, plain orange and plain yellow on the palette, then started painting flowers in the colours I had, ranging from dark red to pale yellow.

When I finished, I showed the painting to Aunt Lucie, and she put it on the windowsill to dry. Then I played the piano - I couldn't play much. I knew a few scales because I'd seen my mum playing them and I copied them. And I could sort of play a few short tunes, but not any proper songs or pieces of music. Shortly after my painting dried, my parents came and picked me up and we went home.

## Chapter 4: The Birthday Party

A couple of days later at school, Yasmine, one of the girls in my class, put a letter in front of me. I turned it over, to look at the front of the envelope and it read 'Mayv', which was Yasmine's phonetic spelling of my name. I opened it - it was an invitation to her sixth birthday party. It read: 'To Mayv, pleez come to my partea at my howse on Sattydy at 11:00. V partea will end at 1:00.'

I put the invitation back in the envelope, then put it in my bag, smiling. This was the first time I'd been invited to anyone's birthday party. It felt great to be invited to one at long last, but I wondered why.

At break time, I thanked Yasmine for the invitation. When I got home, I showed my parents the invitation and my mum phoned Yasmine's mum to tell her I could go. Then on that Saturday, my mum took me to Yasmine's house and spoke to Yasmine's mum while I joined the other girls. All the girls in the class were there - including Dreselda. I stood against the wall so she didn't notice me as she was talking. Then I heard the front door close after my mum left and Yasmine's mum entered the kitchen.

First, we played musical chairs. This was fun. The first time we played it, I managed to keep finding a chair to sit on until the music had been stopped three times. The second time, I managed to stay in until almost the end of the game. Then we played pass the parcel a couple of times. The first time, Aoibheann won, and the second time, I won.

After that, the other girls played a rather noisy game that I didn't like. They were stomping on balloons which had been blown up and had sweets inside them. As soon as I heard the first pop, I ran into the sitting room so I couldn't hear the noise as much, and covered my ears.

Yasmine's mum came in then and asked if I was OK. I told her I didn't like the noise of the balloons.

'Would you like me to bring you some food?' she asked. 'You can eat it in here if you like.'

'Yes, please,' I said. So, Yasmine's mum went away again, then came back with a couple of plates full of party food. There were sausage rolls, cheese and onion rolls, cocktail sausages, chicken drumsticks, chicken wings, sandwiches with assorted fillings - ham, cheese, egg and cress, and raspberry jam.

There were also cubes of cheese on cocktail sticks and mozzarella sticks. There were also assorted small cakes - chocolate teacakes, cupcakes with different coloured icing and some with sprinkles on them, French fancies, chocolate snowballs, flapjacks and some tarts Yasmine's mum had made - some had strawberry jam in them, some had blackcurrant jam in them, some had lemon curd in them. She'd put one of each on one of the plates for me.

'Thank you,' I said to Yasmine's mum when I saw the two plates piled high with food. She then also brought me back a couple of bottles of water, with an empty cup and a litre bottle of blackcurrant squash, so I could drink as much as I wanted of either and dilute the squash if that was what I chose.

So, I ate and drank and when I'd finished what I could, Yasmine's mum offered to put the rest into a bag for me to take home.

As I went back into the kitchen, I heard Dreselda talking -  
'Who invited Maebh?' she said.  
'I did,' said Yasmine's mum.

Dreselda and I both look shocked, although I was more pleasantly surprised, whereas Dreselda was more horrified and looked like she was desperately fighting an impulse to laugh. Then, we played duck, duck goose a few times. The first time, Yasmine was the goose. She chose Aoibheann to be the next goose and she beat Aoibheann around the circle, then sat down again. Then Aoibheann chose Demi to be the goose, but Demi sat down before Aoibheann, so she was the goose again.

This time, she chose me to be the goose, and beat me around the circle. I then chose Dreselda to be the goose and beat Dreselda. Dreselda continued to be the goose a few times, losing to Yasmine, Lily, then me again. Then after that, Yasmine's mum gave me a couple of party bags, one with my leftover party food in it, one with my prizes, a couple of slices of the birthday cake, and a few sweets in it. Then my mum picked me up and took me home.  
'Did you enjoy that?' she asked.  
'Yes,' I replied, 'except the balloons.'



## Chapter 5: Copycat

Yasmine's birthday party was great, but I was still pretty much friendless. Yasmine and Aoibheann were at least talking to me a little bit - in that they'd say hi to me and ask me how I was, that sort of thing, but nothing more. They were still very much part of Dreselda's pack. The rest of the girls were just ignoring me, as usual, and Dreselda was still at least still as antagonistic towards me, if not more so. But anyway, I wanted to see if I could find a way in.

I started watching the other girls in my school like a hawk, something I hadn't really done much of before. I'd just resignedly accepted the status quo - that the boys didn't want anything to do with me, because I was a girl, and the girls didn't want anything to do with me, because I was a freak. It was only

now that I had any sort of concept that the status quo could change... ..if it was forced to.

I noticed the other girls were usually wearing the same styles and colours of clothing - usually dungarees in varying shades of pink and purple with plain tops, both short-sleeved and long-sleeved in pink, purple or white. I tended to wear trousers and tops and preferred reds, blues and sometimes black. If I wore purple at all, it was more towards the dark end of the purple spectrum, and definitely blue-toned. Usually, I had no time for pinky-purples. Now, that had changed somewhat. I had to like pinky-purples, pinks and lighter purples in general because I wanted to be one of the girls.

I also listened to some of their conversations and made mental notes about some of the common phrases they used and what key words were in most of their vocabularies. These girls couldn't read as well as I could [something else Dreselda thought made me a freak], so I might have to ditch the reading and time I spent in the library when I could and try not to seem so bookish. That clearly wasn't popular, so that had to go. I noticed the girls talking about Barbies a lot, which were silly-looking nylon blonde-haired plastic dolls you could dress up, apparently, but if they were popular with the girls, I'd get myself into Barbies too.

So, I think I had a few things to be getting on with. After school on Monday, I went shopping with my mum and got some plain white tops and some dungarees. 'Are you sure about this, Maebh?' asked my mum. 'This doesn't seem like you.'

'Well, now it is,' I insisted. She was right, it wasn't me, but it was the 'me' I had to be from now on.

'And Barbies?' asked my mum. 'This is quite a change from playing with dolls' houses...'

The way I used to play with dolls' houses was very specific - I'd use them to play out my days in school, that was the old way they'd be, generally speaking, but I was trying to change that, and just playing out stuff with dolls wasn't going to work, not when no one else had the sort of dolls I had.

So, we got a couple of Barbie dolls and a few different sets of clothing and accessories and when mum asked me which ones, I went for the ones with as much pink and pinky-purple in them as possible.

Over the next few days at school, I wore my new outfits and brought my Barbie dolls in with their new pink outfits to match those of the other girls and walked up to the other girls when they were in the yard, just watching them still mostly, but hoping one or two of them noticed me and would start involving me in their conversations. I said hi to some of the girls and smiled at them. Yasmine and Aoibheann still turned around to me and said hi, and they looked surprised when they turned around now.

‘How does my outfit look?’ I asked Aoibheann.

‘It looks great,’ she said, but I didn’t know if she was being genuine or not.

‘What are you looking at?’ Dreselda asked Aoibheann.

‘Oh, er, I was just talking to Maebh,’ she replied casually.

‘You. Were. Talking. To. Maebh?’ said Dreselda, pausing a little after each word in her question for emphasis.

‘I think Maebh wants someone to talk to,’ said Aoibheann.

‘And has she found someone to talk to?’ asked Dreselda.

Aoibheann made a somewhat muted ‘hmm’ sound as if she was going to say something, which Dreselda noticed and prompted, ‘someone suitable for her to talk to?’

Aoibheann promptly lowered her head.

‘Because last time I checked,’ Dreselda went on, ‘she was only freak in this school.’

Aoibheann sighed.

‘Dreselda...’ she said with exasperation.

‘What?’ asked Dreselda.

‘Maebh’s right there,’ she said, pointing towards me.

The circle of girls then parted and Dreselda walked towards me.

'Oh, no way,' she said. 'Don't think I can't see what you're up to, Maebh.'

'What?' I asked, trying to sound innocent.

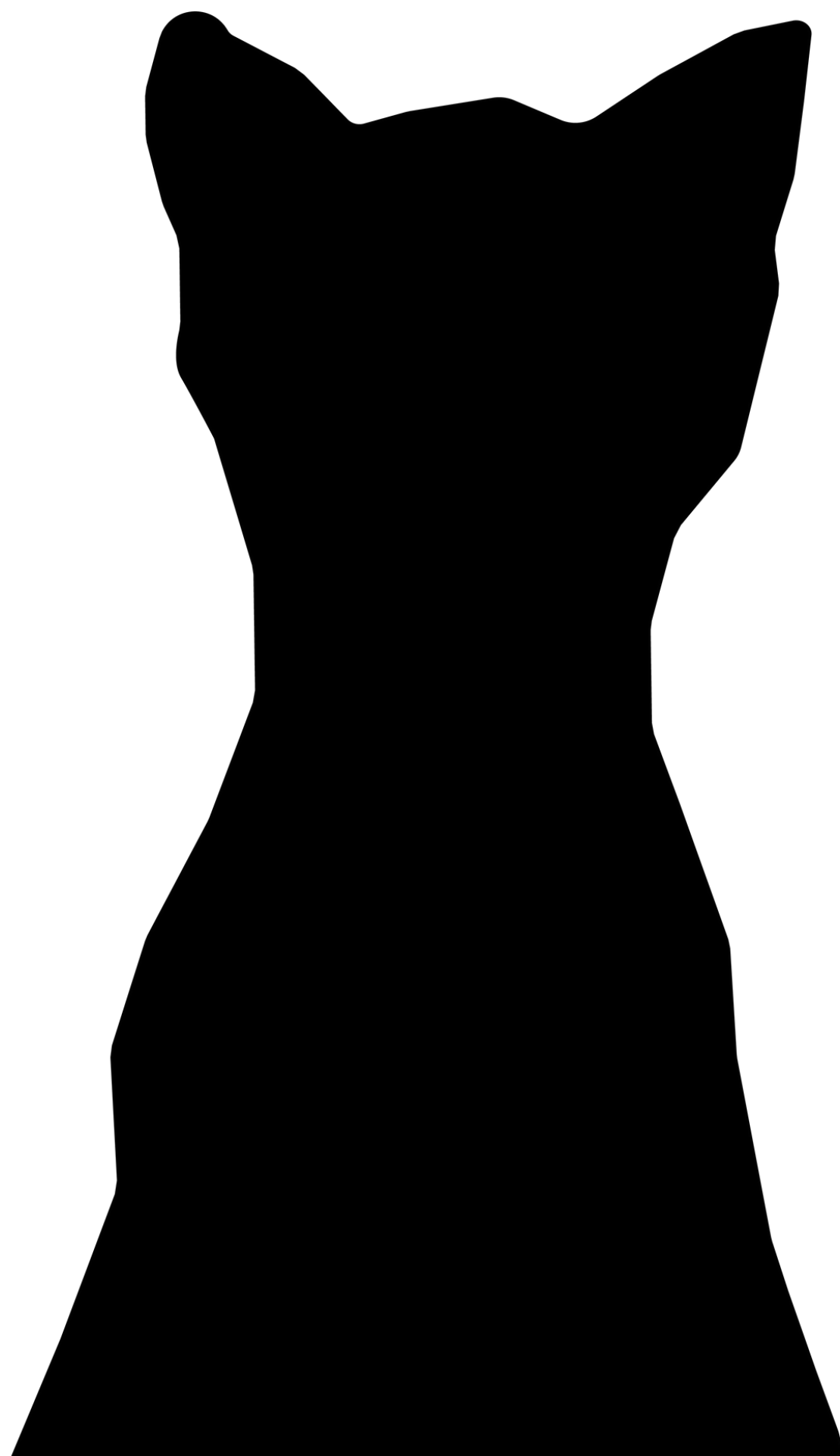
'You. Are. Not. One. Of. Us.' Dreselda said, again, pausing in between each word and jabbing me in the chest with her index finger with every word she said.

I gasped.

'You can try to look like us, play with the same toys as us and so on, but it won't work. If there's one thing I dislike more than

freaks, it's copycat freaks, so forget it, Maebh. You have to know by now that you just don't cut the mustard.'

I ran off to the library, crying. What did a girl have to do in order to make friends around here?



## Chapter 6: New Start

Now I was ten and I'd left my old school and it was time to start afresh. I was going to a new school, I'd meet new people, have new school subjects and new experiences – hopefully more positive ones than I'd had in my previous school.

My mum had got me a mobile phone, the latest model of the Vlabatsky Parlerphone series – why? Because everyone had them, apparently. Did I want to be like everyone else? Actually, yes, I did. In fact, I needed more than ever to be like everyone else in this new place. I was going to a boarding school. It was a huge place and there'd be loads of new kids there. But if I let the old Maebh back out, then I might as well give up on trying to make any new friends right now. Besides, how many freaks could one school handle, no matter what its size? Nah, I'd better try and not give them any problems.

My parents walked me to one of the bus stops not far from our house and as I got on the bus – a huge double decker bus with a red and gold exterior – I heard my mum say to my dad 'I can't believe she's changed so much...' and I'm sure I caught my dad grinning like a Cheshire cat.

Then they waved at me as I took my seat and I waved back, then off the bus went.

The school was very beige – it was made of the plainest bricks you'd ever seen... probably. There were multiple buildings. The main one at the front was three storeys high at the back, and two at the front, looking at a map my mum had got for me. When the bus pulled into the front drive, I saw the huge beige brick façade and a large wooden pair of doors, curved at the top and with glass windows in them.

We went into the reception and then into the canteen. It was a huge room with a horrid linoleum floor that I couldn't quite tell whether it was green or brown and almost white walls. How tasteless.

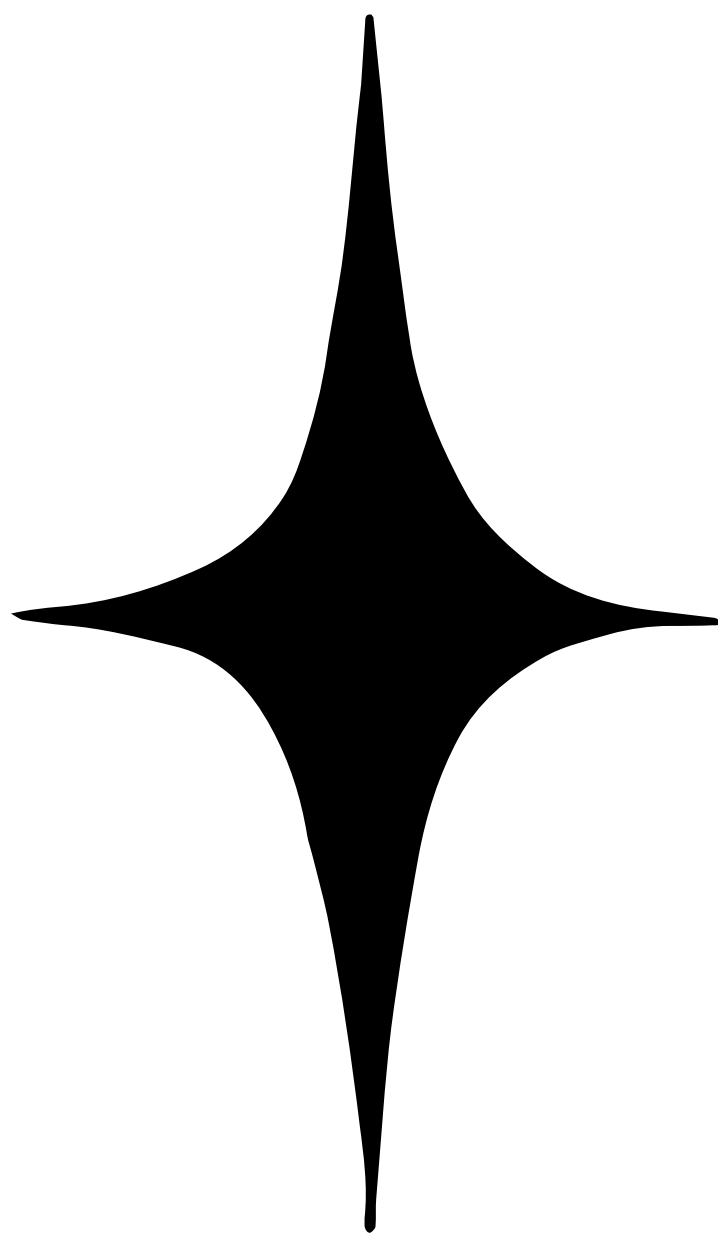
We all sat in rows and pretty much filled the room, except for a few pockets of space at the front and back. The headteacher welcomed us to the school and sorted us into one of four houses, then we were herded out of the canteen in large groups. There were at least a couple of hundred of us sat in that canteen.

First, we went to our form rooms and were given planners and timetables with our lessons on them – jeesh, the days were long! We stuck them into our planners, then went to our first lessons which basically amounted to shortened versions of the

headteacher's introductory speech with the odd word – or ten! – omitted here and there, and an introduction to the subject and an overview of the topics we'd cover this year.

Then at break time, we were told we'd be given the normal third hour off to unpack all our things.

Over the next few days, we got to know the teachers and their subjects a bit, but I still wasn't quite prepared for how long the days would be once we were in full swing.



## Chapter 7: Pretending to be Normal

A month into my time at my new school and I was exhausted. There was so much to do – the hours we spent in lessons were long for starters – we had very few hours in our week where we had free time. And the people I was trying desperately to make friends with spent the evenings chatting in groups, which meant I did too. I mostly got by, by not saying anything unless I was asked a direct question or I ended up being able to have a conversation with one person from the group if they took an interest in something – that was rare though. What better way to hide that you were doing some sort of maths puzzle in your head and that following where the conversations were going was like doing some sort of obstacle course than simply keeping your mouth shut most of the time?

I didn't eat around people – I was still too anxious to do that. But I hid it by just saying I preferred to eat alone. Besides, from what I heard people saying about me, they just seemed to think I was shy, or perhaps introverted, both relatively harmless

things to be considered. So far, people weren't muttering 'oh, she must have social anxiety, or something', which I was glad about, because, well, you know how that goes...

But I was finding this all exhausting... I was ending up in detention more often than not at break times and lunch times for missed homework, but the teachers just didn't understand [although, now I mentioned it, did I really want them to?] – by the end of the school day, I just had no mental energy left for doing homework. But if they had an inkling of my situation, they could insist on giving me a support worker, and I definitely didn't want that. That was wrong. There shouldn't be an adult in a classroom besides the teacher. Nothing says 'I'm a weirdo' more than needing an adult sitting next to you.

As more time went by, I was getting more and more exhausted and forget about homework, which had been steadily piling up over time, I was getting too exhausted to even bother sitting with my new acquaintances, so I tended to go back to the dormitory and read. I used to think that being bookish was part of what got me so ostracised, but now I saw them as sort of textbooks, only they weren't about anything I learnt in lessons, but about life in general... and about people... normal people, that was.

So, whilst I either sat or lay in my bed, reading, letting people think I just wanted to be left alone, I was working on developing my script. I had a basic sort of script when I spoke to people, including saying hello to them, asking how they were, mentioning the weather, and a few other boring bits and pieces, but I wanted it to seem like I didn't have a script, because most people didn't.

As the autumn term dragged on, my mask kept slipping and slipping and the real Maebh Sickett was starting to poke through the cracks. I was trying to push her back behind the mask, because I knew people wouldn't like it. The real Maebh Sickett was Mr Hyde, hiding behind the sort-of-socially-able Dr Jekyll mask, but Dr Jekyll was causing Mr Hyde to run off to bed early, hide under her covers and cry into her pillow. Jekyll who was so good in lessons meant that Hyde couldn't do her homework. Hyde didn't have the mental energy to do her homework and was completely exhausted by Jekyll.

It would soon be the day where my parents could visit me, which I wasn't looking forward to. I wanted to fool them like I was my teachers and classmates for the most part and for them to think everything was all fine. If they knew everything wasn't fine, they could speak to my teachers. In fact, if they spoke to my teachers at all, things could blow up pretty quickly. How on earth was I going to be able to keep all this mess under wraps?

Unfortunately, I wasn't allowed to write to my parents to ask them not to come. My best hope was that they forgot the date or were busy with something themselves.

When the time came, I was beyond caring what I looked like. I was such an emotional wreck that I simply put on my plainest, shabbiest, most drab looking clothes. They were pretty much dark grey and black. I wore pretty loose-fitting wide-legged grey trousers, with a long-sleeved black top, with a long black cardigan on top, which I wrapped around me and tied with a belt made of the same-coloured wool that was attached to it. Then I wore my black boots and just put my hair up into a clip.

‘Maebh,’ said Jasmine, evidently surprised at my outfit, ‘you look... lacklustre.’

Yep, I did, but that was also how I felt. I couldn’t be me, but at the same time I couldn’t stop myself from being me sometimes.

At the parents’ day, my parents turned up and they were smiling and waving at me from the back of the canteen. I walked over to them, and as my mum saw me, she spoke to my dad, ‘hey, stop it, there’s something wrong,’ and he stopped. ‘Hey, sweetheart,’ both my parents said. ‘How are things?’ ‘All right,’ I lied. I tried to smile and hopefully convince my parents things were OK and that I just somehow needed to perk myself up a bit.

‘Are you fitting in OK?’ asked my dad, predictably.

‘Gary!’ my mum whispered to him.

‘Only asking, sweetheart. Maebh might have turned over a new leaf for all you know.’

Well, I’d tried to and had still been trying to for the most part up until recently, but I left that out of my conversation with my parents, and just said ‘I hope so.’ At least it was true.

‘Shall we go and see your teachers?’ asked my parents. At that point, I left my parents and ran back to my common room. They wouldn’t be allowed in the common rooms and dormitories.

Of course, I could have had no idea what my parents had said to my teachers, but when I went to my first lesson on Monday morning, there was an adult sitting in my seat. This adult was a

large, chubby middle-aged looking woman who wore a thick pink woollen cardigan, a plain white blouse and a long, pleated skirt. She looked like a granny. The teachers had decided I needed a support worker. Yikes! I ran from the room before anyone else noticed where I'd gone.

Then ten minutes later, my form teacher and Jasmine found me and they had this support worker with them.

'Maebh,' said my form teacher, 'this is Miss Raphael. She's come to help you in your lessons.'

No, really, why was she here? My marks had been at the very least good, if not excellent since the start of the year. No one who saw my classwork would put another adult in the room based on that. I still waited in the dormitory out of sight, waiting to hear the real reason she was here.

'Maebh -' repeated the teacher, but then Jasmine jumped out in front of her, and said, 'hello. Do you mind if I talk to the new member of staff about Maebh?'

'Miss Hawthorn,' said the form teacher, 'go ahead.'

'Maebh does pretty well in classes,' said Jasmine. 'I've never seen her get bad marks.'

'Why do you think she ran away from Miss Raphael in first lesson today?' asked our form teacher.

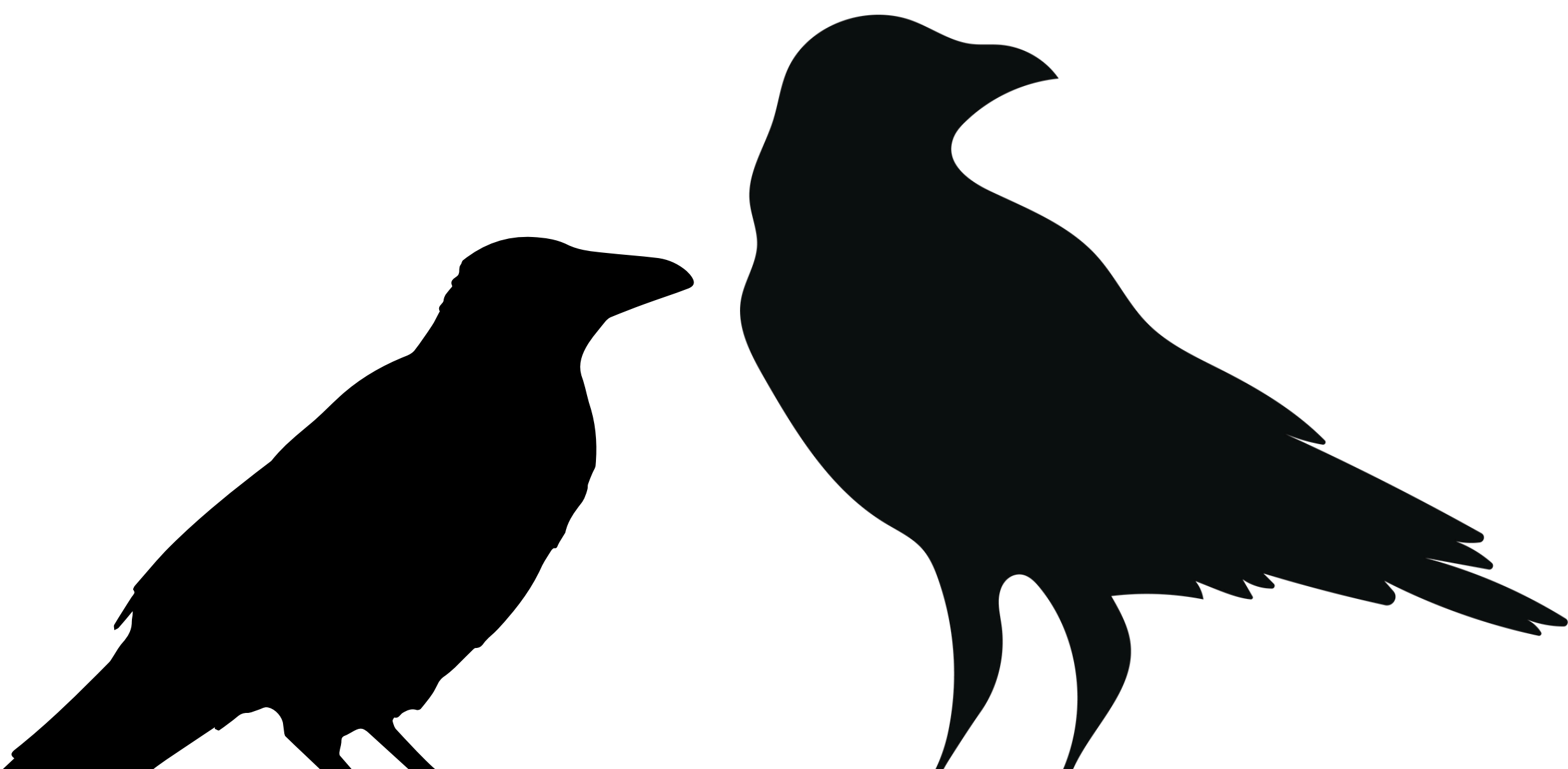
'Maebh is trying really hard to fit in. No one else in the class needs someone sitting next to them, so why does she?'

'Fair point,' said the form teacher. 'But also since the start of the year, she's yet to hand in a single piece of homework for any of her teachers.'

'And what has that to do with me?' asked Miss Raphael, which was a relief - she appeared to have more sense than whoever had called her in.

The teacher didn't say anything, like she thought the answer should be obvious, so Miss Raphael went on, 'I offer academic support. My work is based solely in the classroom. That, it would seem, is precisely what Miss Sickett here does not need. From what you and her friend have told me, it would seem Miss Sickett's issues are more emotional and psychological. Goodbye.'

And with that, she left.  
The form teacher went off, leaving me and Jasmine together for the rest of the first hour.



## Chapter 8: Changes

In the holidays, my parents took me to the doctor I'd seen when I was younger again. He wanted to see how things were going.

'Sounds like she might need a counsellor,' he replied when mum and I had told him what was what.

'They tried putting in a support worker for her to get her to do her homework?' asked the doctor, as flabbergasted as I had been at the time.

'I don't know what they were thinking,' said my mum.

'Some teachers try to help things by trying to put in place the easiest thing they can, regardless of whether it could solve an issue or not rather than endeavouring to tackle the problem the right way,' said the doctor. 'It's all about money.'

'But they'd have wasted money on Miss Raphael for an hour when they needn't have bothered.'

'True,' said the doctor.

The school got a counsellor in for me who I saw once a week. She also occasionally held whole class sessions to talk about some subjects, presumably to try and affect some sort of change within the rest of my class, but I didn't know what.

People were people, after all.

I was in my early teens now and all around me, people were changing. The boys were growing taller, and whereas their voices used to be high-pitched to mid-range when they were younger, many of them were getting deeper – much deeper in some boys' cases. Meanwhile, the girls were growing breasts and their legs seemed to be getting wider and all around me,

kids' faces were covered in tiny little red spots. I'd heard this was called acne. I thought the boys growing taller and most of their voices deepening at least somewhat was cool, but I didn't want acne and I certainly didn't want boobs. Ugh.

One of the girls with a larger chest had started wearing a bra already. How could she wear such an awful contraption day in, day out? I couldn't bear to think of hard metal wires sticking into my chest.

As for my way around it...?

'Maebh! Eat something, please!' Jasmine implored me at the dining table at breakfast time one morning. 'I haven't seen you touch anything for at least two days.'

When I next saw the counsellor after this - Jasmine had obviously spoken to her about my eating habits [or lack thereof], and said, 'do you think you're fat?'

'No, I don't,' I replied. I most certainly wasn't fat.

'Good. Then what is the matter?'

I told her what my problems were and she chuckled. 'It happens to all girls, Maebh. And not everyone gets acne - it depends on the type of skin you've got. Only people with oily skin get acne, but then it clears up at some point. They don't have it forever. Besides, there are ways of making yourself look a bit more masculine without looking like a skeleton, Maebh.' So, I looked like a skeleton, did I? Well, in that case, I guessed I could afford to put on a bit of weight.

A lot was changing in school. There were new subjects as were approaching our final couple of school years as well. But I still had no idea what I wanted to do when I left, so I just chose the same subjects Jasmine chose.

## Chapter 9: In Search of Work

Now I was twenty, and between leaving school and now, gone to some colleges and done a couple of courses relating to my interests, but I needed to find something to do and hopefully earn a living. It was hard to think, with my qualifications, what I could do.

I was quite creative – I'd always liked writing, so maybe I'd write my own story down at some point and try and get it published. Maybe I'd try finding a job at a publishing house. It could be a foot in the door, so to speak. Who knew?

So, I tried searching for publishing houses in the region I lived in – there were a fair few, most of them too far away though, so I only applied to the ones I could either get to using public transport myself, or ones my dad wouldn't mind taking me to too much.

Some emailed me back the next day saying my application had been unsuccessful. A couple invited me for interviews. At the interviews, they both asked similar questions – why I wanted the job, where I could see myself being in five years' time, what

I was like working in a team, any team activities I'd been in I could describe, what my organisational skills were like and what would I do if some sort of problem arose.

I was perfectly honest about the first two questions. As for what I was like working in a team, well, I didn't think I could answer that one truthfully. No one would want a lone wolf. For the one after that though, I told them about a couple of scenarios where I'd been part of a team. As for organisational skills, well, what could I say? Honestly. I was neurodiverse. People like me weren't exactly renowned for our organisational prowess. So, that was another question where I pretty much had to lie and hope I sounded somewhat plausible. And then I answered the problem-solving questions truthfully.

'Thank you for that, Maebh,' the interviewers said, 'that will be all.'

Then I got emails after my interviews saying to wait two weeks for a reply, or if they didn't reply within that time, to assume I'd been unsuccessful. I need hardly say what happened.

'Well, there's a huge jobs fair going on not too far away. I'll take you to that and you can see what you can find there.'

The jobs fair was as huge as dad had promised it would be.

However, most of the tables at the jobs fair were either advertising jobs I wasn't qualified for, ones I could probably do but weren't in my area or schools and colleges advertising further education places, which I'd already done. I spoke to two people - one advertising health and social care, and the other a council-based one. With the first one, although a couple of people had occasionally told me I was kind and caring, I

doubted personality traits were enough. With the second, the job I felt I was most suitable for wasn't available in my area.

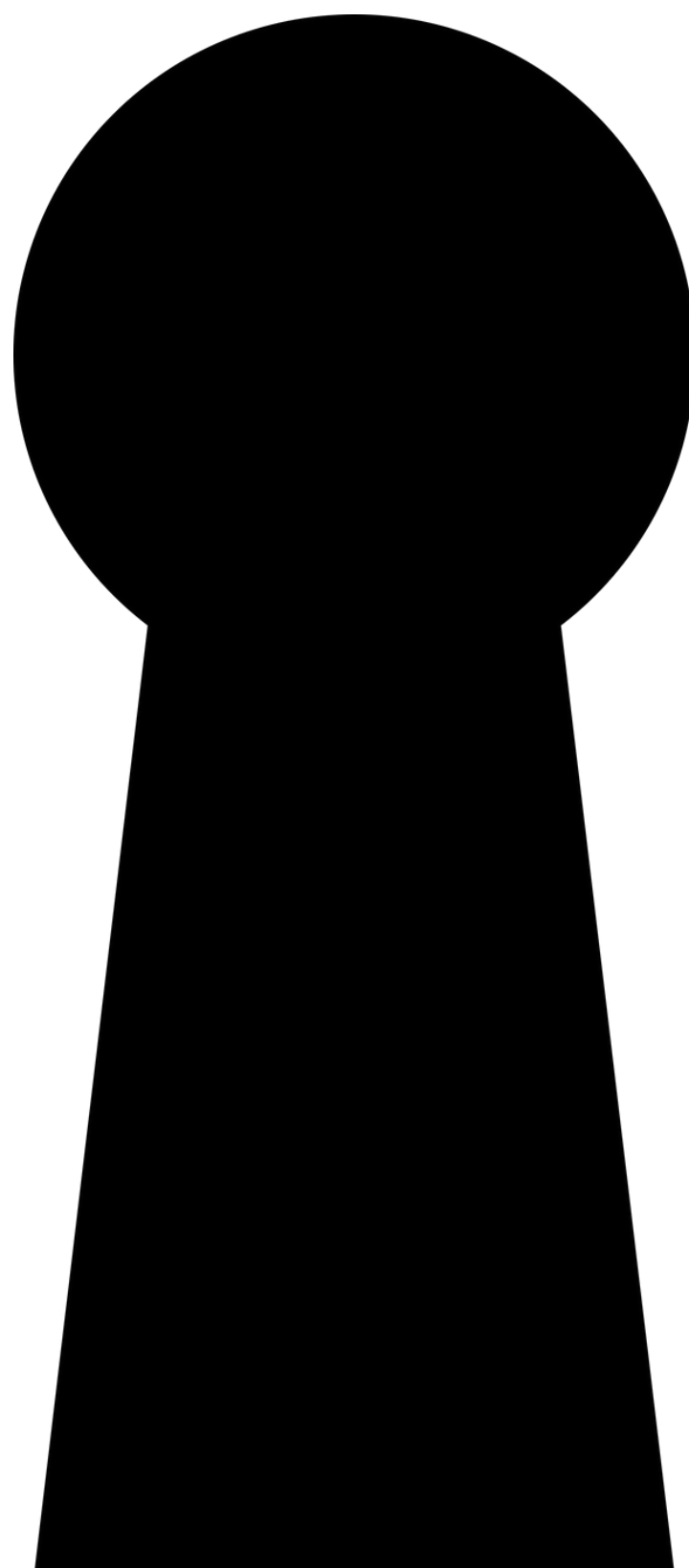
And after that, we started just walking past tables... walking past more tables... and more tables... until we ended up at the entrance again. Although there had been a lot of tables, they were organised in groups of tables advertising the same sort of things, which was why it had been so easy to rule a lot of stuff out.

I did occasionally get jobs. One was the council position I'd been interested in at the jobs fair but wasn't available in my area at the time. They'd opened up a relatively new office and were hiring like mad, hence me getting the job. I did everything that was asked of me [well, almost everything,

but I'll get on to that] and completed all my training. The one thing I didn't do [for my own good] was go to a works do for someone who was going on maternity leave. I don't know what it was, because even my supervisor said all my work was good, but I only lasted a month and then I was sacked. It had been a complete mystery to my supervisor as well.

Another job, I was a special needs teacher for a couple of kids in a school who were autistic [like me], but also had intellectual disabilities and several learning difficulties [mostly unlike me].

That was OK, until at the end of the school year, the head emailed me to say that due to cuts in staff funding, he was having to make a few redundancies, and as a few of the more senior staff had declined the offer of an 'early retirement', my name had come up, along with the name of the other special needs teacher. What a cheek.



## Chapter 10: The Final Interview

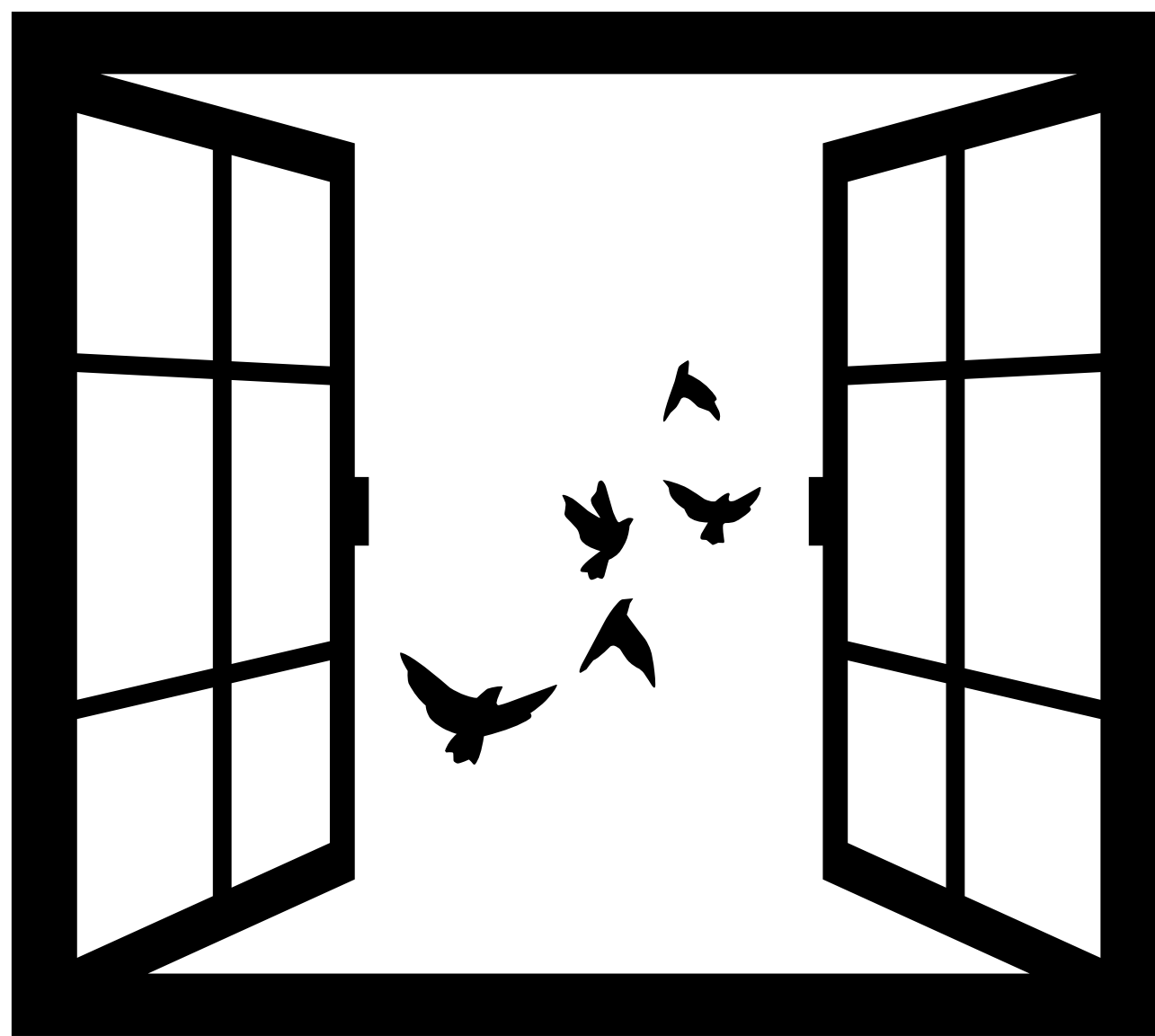
In the meantime, I'd moved house - to a different part of my region. My parents still lived where they were, but I was independent. As I was out of the old radius of publishing houses that had turned me down, I applied to some different ones that were closer to where I was now and I got the familiar interview invites intermingled with rejections.

But this was the story of one particular interview I felt went quite well.

So, I got the train from a station near me to one in the town the publishing house was, walked down a few streets and found the publishing house. I went in and told the receptionist my name, then a few minutes later, a member of staff came out of a room and called me. I followed her into the room and I sat down at one end of a table.

The questions were the same, pretty much, except they didn't ask me to rate my performance in a team, thankfully.

I was given the usual time frame, so I waited, and at the end of the two week period, I got an email saying that my application and subsequent interview had been successful and that they wanted me to start the job on Monday.



# Epilogue

So, I was happy in my new job, and a year or so later, when I'd written my story down about most of my troubled life so far, I had a word with the chief publisher and she agreed to publish it without an editor or an agent.

The loneliness I've often felt at different times in my life, the feelings I've had at times that I just wasn't good enough, and my desperation to fit in in order to avoid the isolation and bullying of my childhood, which led to my almost masking myself into oblivion, those things will never leave me, but what was important now was that I'd found my niche of people where I did fit in.

indeed, I didn't think a single member of staff wasn't a misfit in some way or another - and that I was able to get my story out into the world.

