For everyone who has ever felt
a different sort of normal.

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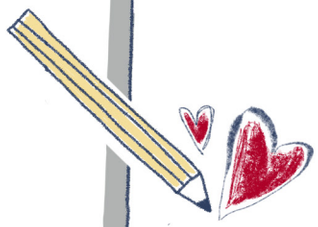
A Different SORT OF NORMAL



Written and illustrated by

ABIGAIL BALFE







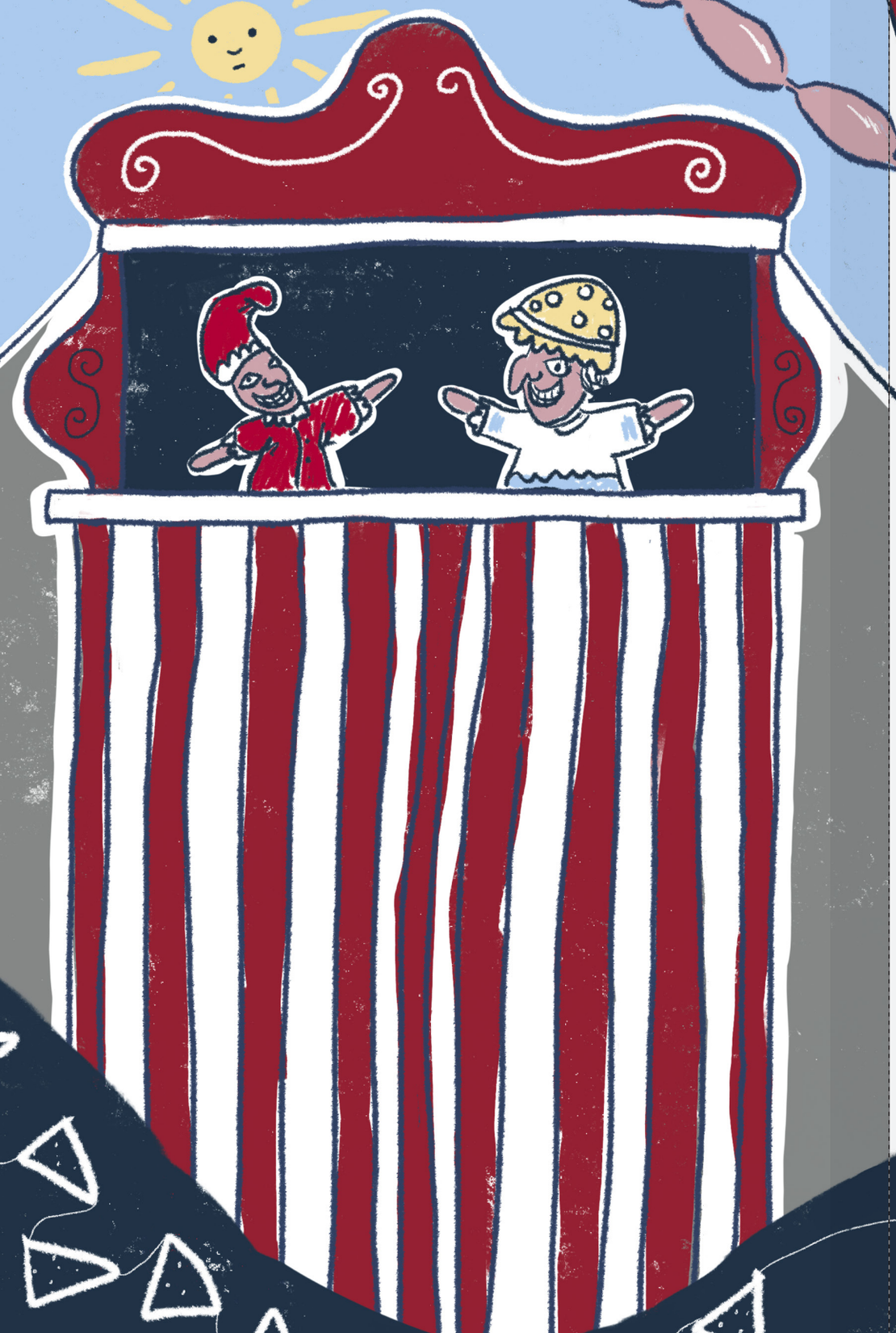
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1. JOKE! That was a classic autism stereotype. You'll find a few more of those in this book too. And you'll also find a much more interesting map of this book on page 30.



A MEMORY

For my **fourth birthday** my parents arranged a Punch and Judy show and invited the other children from my playgroup.

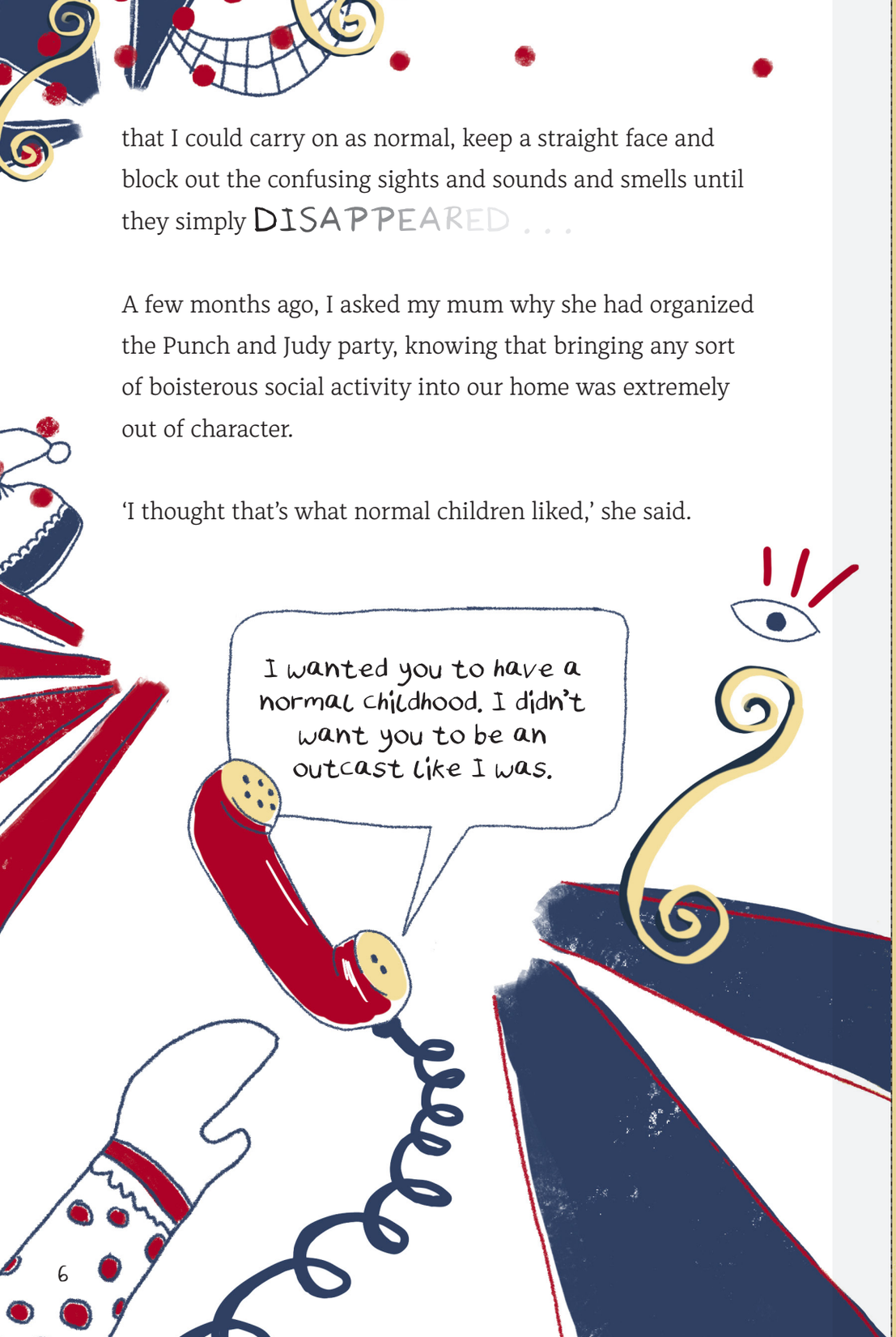
I remember watching the video of this party a few years later. While the other children sat in rows, jumping up and down, pushing to be closest to the action, I wouldn't look. I didn't understand it. And I didn't understand the other children's animated reactions to it.

I walked to the back of our living room, picking up objects and putting them back down, trying my best to ignore what was going on in our home, pretending these unpredictable people and puppets were not really there,

that I could carry on as normal, keep a straight face and block out the confusing sights and sounds and smells until they simply DISAPPEARED . . .

A few months ago, I asked my mum why she had organized the Punch and Judy party, knowing that bringing any sort of boisterous social activity into our home was extremely out of character.

'I thought that's what normal children liked,' she said.



AN INTRODUCTION

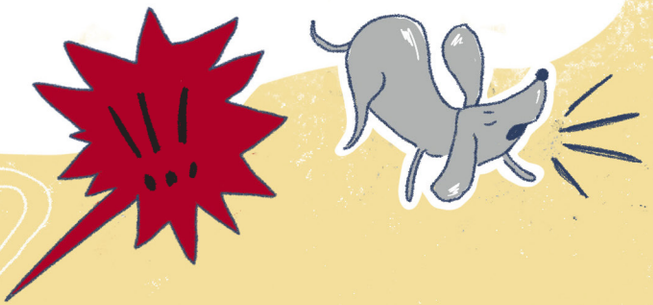
(how formal)

This is a book for everyone.

Yes . . . everyone.

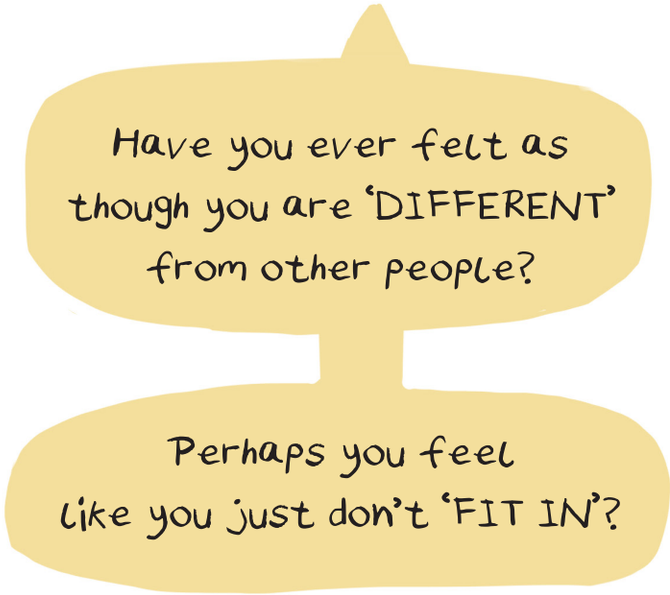
So that definitely means YOU.

No, not the person behind you on the bus. Or the child to the left of you in the playground. Or that loud neighbour you can hear shouting at their dog for the twenty-second time today.



Although, actually – yes, it **is** for them too. But right now **YOU** are the person I'm interested in talking with. And I'm very glad you are here. Thank you.

Now let me ask you this:



Oh, you have? Well, *same*. See, we have something in common already.

In fact, I'd challenge you to find just one person who feels happy and confident **ALL** the time. Because (spoiler alert) that's not really how growing up works. Actually, that's not how life works. And it would probably be a bit **boring** if it was!

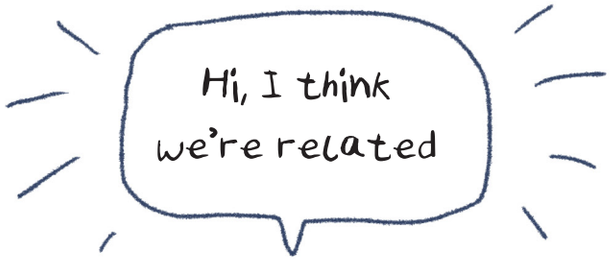
Hello, my name is Abigail and I'm autistic.



Even though we look like two different people because one is taller and wears glasses and is technically an **adult**[2], we are both the same person – just at slightly different stages in our life.

2. I've never really felt like an 'adult' and I don't think I ever will.

I spent years feeling different without knowing quite why before autism popped up to say,



– a bit like a long-lost family member who you can't quite believe you haven't already met because you have so much in common.

Autism is a difference in the brain that affects how a person experiences and interacts with the world around them.



Discovering my autism as an adult-sort-of-person is what compelled me to write and illustrate this book.



This is a collection of doodles and thoughts about my experiences growing up as an autistic child. An autistic child who **didn't know** she was an autistic child.





Because if someone had told me when I was younger that it was OK to not be like everybody else, that it was not my job to try to be 'normal' and to 'fit in', that my way of seeing the world was just as valid and important as everybody else's, then I think I would have found growing up a lot easier.





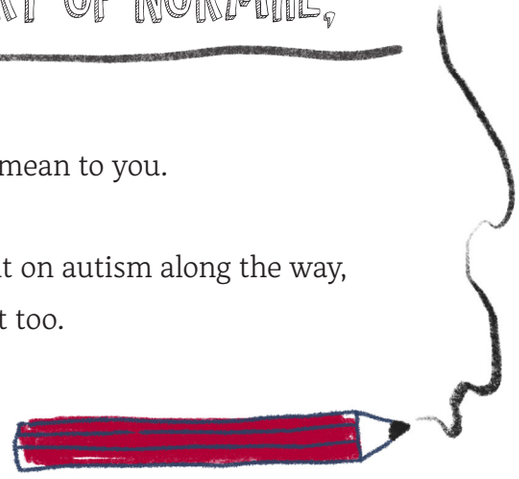
Now, I'm not saying that if you feel out of place in the world, then you must be autistic. I'm here to tell you **MY STORY**. Which is just one story out of many.

Hopefully, through telling you my own growing-up story, I can help you see why it's actually pretty amazing to be

A DIFFERENT SORT OF NORMAL,

whatever those five words mean to you.

And if I can shed some light on autism along the way, then that would be brilliant too.



You see, autism can sometimes look different across the **GENDER SPECTRUM**: a colourful-sounding term that includes the many genders you may come across in daily life. Here are a few you are likely to hear most often:



I am a cisgender woman. This means that the gender assigned to me at birth was female and I identify as being female (those whose gender identity is different from the gender they were assigned at birth are transgender, and you can find out more about this on page 182). But the system that's supposed to diagnose and support autistic people works in favour of white cisgender boys.

This means that those of us who are not white cisgender males may not discover our autism until we have been in the world for quite a few years – if we do at all.

But, a bit like an overwhelming (yet delicious) breakfast buffet, autism is open to

EVERYONE.



However, autism is often **invisible** to the untrained (or indeed often the trained) eye, something that is not very helpful when you are one of those autistic people attempting to make sense of the confusing world around you. (And when you just want a simple, non-challenging breakfast to see you through the day.)

SIDE NOTE: Who in their right mind (whatever that means – I'm pretty sure there isn't a 'right' or 'wrong' mind, just different minds, but anyway that's beside the point) made the decision to put **CUCUMBER** in a sandwich?! It's basically like eating a squashed slug inside a wet piece of cloth. **Disgusting.**



And, yes, now I'm thinking about which animals represent which food combinations best. Because, you see, my brain likes to wander off to interesting places. Most probably because I am **neurodivergent . . .**

NEURODIVERGENT

Differing in brain function from what is considered typical or 'normal'. Examples of neurodivergence include: autism, dyspraxia, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyscalculia and Tourette's syndrome. Anyone who is not neurodivergent is neurotypical.

NEUROTYPICAL

Being neurotypical is the opposite of being neurodivergent. A person who is neurotypical has a more **'typical'** way of thinking. Their brain experiences the world, and reacts to it, in a way that is largely understood by society.

NEURODIVERSITY

A word that covers the **full spectrum** of brain types and celebrates the importance of each one! This includes both neurodivergent **and** neurotypical people.

And another very important word I'll be using throughout this book:



That reminds me . . . You'll be pleased to know that these helpful fact boxes are scattered throughout the book, and if you turn to the back you will find a handy glossary of important words. This is because for **some reason** when adult people write about autism they like to use complicated collections of letters and serious-sounding sentences.

I'd rather not do that, really, but I guess I can't rewrite the dictionary **as well** as writing this book, can I?!



So, yes – I hope this book helps young people and not-so-young people who are on journeys of self-discovery. Those of you who are in search of answers, comfort or maybe just some light entertainment. Whether you are autistic or allistic, neurodivergent or neurotypical – or if you have no idea which category you fall into right now . . .



Before I tell you more about **ME**, I'd like us to look at autism in a bit more detail together, because my autism discovery was such a big part of me learning about myself, and finding my different sort of normal . . .