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I have lived on a razor's edge. So what if you fall off? I'd rather be doing something I really wanted to do. I'd walk it again.

—Georgia O'Keeffe

I'd made it to college, but I made it my mission to leave without the burden of student loan debt. While still in my freshman year at college I'd secured employment performing at Seattle Children's Theatre for three months out of the year, but I was going to need to hustle throughout the other nine months. So I went to the university library, polished and printed my resume, practiced my smile in the library's bathroom mirror trying hard not to be noticed by the other students, and hit the pavement of the outdoor shopping mall that flanked one side of my college campus, teeming with schools of bougie Lululemon stay-at-home mothers living up the next few hours while their kids were at school, as well as the denim-and-flannel-infested restaurant strip that flanked the other side of the campus. I mustered all my people skills and confidently handed in resumes and asked to introduce myself to managers. I applied to as many places as I could, but I couldn't manage to make it past the interview section of my application process. It made no sense to me at the time, but I've realized a lot since then.

The traditional American interview process is inherently exclusionary to people on the autism spectrum. Eye contact and handshakes may have nothing to do with the actual job the interviewee is striving for, and yet society still feels determined that they are one of the most important deciding factors in an interview. Why is this? It only weeds out the incredible untapped autistic workforce and wastes the employer's money on costs associated with high turnover. We know from a survey by the Center for American Progress that the cost of replacing an employee can be double that employee's annual salary.[1]

Autistic people are known to be incredibly loyal employees who strongly value maintaining their employment with one employer for a long time, and it's common for us to fully invest ourselves into whatever our job is. Giving opportunities to autistic people is an out-of-the-box, inclusive, and effective strategy to limit employee turnover. If society could get over its preference for in-person interviews with lots of small talk, eye contact, and firm handshakes and instead consider working interviews where a person gets to demonstrate themselves doing the job that they love doing, then autistic people would be hired a lot more and employers would be very pleased by the results.

With autism comes a new way of thinking: a fresh eye, a fresh mind. Literally, a completely different wiring of the brain. We think differently than most people, so we are amazing problem solvers and innovators. If most people are looking at a problem from one angle, autistic employees are able to see the problem from a completely different perspective. Who wouldn't want to hire that into their organization? All that said, at this moment in 2020 as I write this book, society isn't there yet, and it certainly wasn't there in 2007 as I was rejected again and again after every interview I got a shot at.

By this point you know the unemployment rate for college graduates on the autism spectrum was 85 percent, compared to about 4 percent for everyone else.

Well, I hadn't even graduated from college yet, and there I was, unemployed. I was not going to just accept the fact that I couldn't get past interviews. This wasn't the plan! I was going to graduate debt-free! The same determination that drove me to invent my own sign language years earlier fueled me again, and I decided to take matters into my own hands. If no one would employ me, then I would be self-employed. Sometimes we all need to be our own biggest champions. I decided to throw myself into street performing. I'd be striding around up on my stilts while juggling or twisting balloons into animals on the sidewalk at public markets, all with a hat out hoping for donations. Many people felt this was a roundabout way to try to survive my newfound independence, but the truth of the matter was, it was the only real option I had.

I had no choice but to street perform with my hat out. Had I secured one of those jobs I applied for, I very well may not have even received a paycheck that guaranteed me enough pay to cover my bus transportation, let alone lunch or rent. At the time of writing this, the federal minimum wage is $7.25 per hour, but only if you *don't* have a disability. Segregated just for those lucky few who have disabilities, there is no federal minimum wage. It is up to the employer to decide how little they would like to pay someone with a disability.

At this point in time, for every dollar a white man makes, a white woman makes eighty-one cents, and a Black or Latinx woman makes seventy-five cents. That pay gap absolutely needs to be filled. But meanwhile there are instances in the United States of America where disabled people have been paid as little as three or four cents per hour at major corporations, even though the federal minimum wage is $7.25 per hour. In recent years, there have been reports of an estimated 420,000 individuals with disabilities who have been paid an average of just $2.15 per hour.[2] In Seattle it cost me five dollars in bus fare to ride the bus from my suburb into downtown Seattle, then another five dollars in bus fare to ride the bus back home at the end of the day. That would have been most of my day's pay blown just on bus fare.

So, every employment-related disappointment had led to me making my way through college by busking,[3] which is the fancy word for street performing. And perhaps it was for the best, because I loved it. The hat I put out in front of me always reminded me of the crumpled wool felt relic from the Seattle Opera House. I learned that it is always important to "seed" your hat with a few bills before beginning work to help people tip you. No one wants to be the first to do anything. It is so hard to be the first person to do anything. I learned that people are like sheep: if I put quarters in my hat, they would tip with quarters; if I put dollar bills in my hat before I began, they would tip with dollar bills; if I put a five-dollar bill in my hat, every so often a person would put a five in! I wore wool high-waisted pinstriped trousers, which, at that point had been sewn for me by the Seattle Opera costume shop, along with a white tuxedo shirt, black top hat, and bow tie. I found that people are only comfortable giving money to you if you appear to already have enough money. Maybe this is why we are more comfortable purchasing from corporations than regularly going to a small family-owned business. We know that the corporation already has enough money, but we give them ours anyway because so many other people do, and it feels predictable.

Having spent my four years of college and nearly a decade after that at farmers' markets across the city, I can vividly recall the unique sensation of cobblestones underneath my stilted feet. The smell of fresh fruit, dried flowers, and grilled vegetables kept my spirits floating even higher than the balloons I'd blow up from on my stilts. Every so often one of the farmers' market stand workers would bring their children, and if I kept their kids entertained during the farmers' market I would leave with a case of blueberries or bag full of fruit.

There was a street performer I looked up to named Robert Nelson, who went by the name Butterfly Man. He was short like me and bald right on top of his head, my genetic destiny. Right in the middle of the C-shaped bull's-eye of hair was a tattoo of a beautiful and colorful butterfly.

The butterfly on his head made me think of the caterpillar that butterfly started as. When a caterpillar wraps itself in a chrysalis to become a butterfly, it first must turn into an entirely liquid soup inside of that chrysalis. There has to be nothing left of the caterpillar, only runny liquid. And goo. And mess. And only then it becomes a butterfly.

At that point in my life, I definitely felt like goo. Interactions with the Butterfly Man helped me lock in on my perspective. Before passing his hat, the Butterfly Man always ended with a poem he would recite while four large, flat, perfectly white rings were flying in an arc over his head:

It matters not
The job you've got
As long as you do it well.
Now the things that are made
By plans well-laid.
The test of time will tell.
But you cannot count
Or know the amount
Or the value of a man.
By the show displayed
Or the beauty made
By the touch of the juggler's hand.

There is something fiercely meditative about juggling on the street. I felt like Philippe Petit, the tightrope walker who crossed the Twin Towers in 1974. He was 1,312 feet above the ground for forty-five minutes with no permits or permissions, committing the artistic crime of the century. He and

I were public poetry in motion. Neither he nor I had any specific permissions to be street performing. Often the police would try to shut me down or chase me out of the park. Police at the Pike Place Market were some of the most hostile toward buskers, which was ridiculous as well as unconstitutional because it had been ruled in court that requiring street performers in Seattle to obtain permits or only perform in certain public areas is a violation of the buskers' First Amendment rights.[4] Even when I pointed this out to the police, they chased me out anyway.

This was the only way I'd found to make an income, and it was being taken from me just because the police felt like it. The criminalization of being poor is so entrenched in policing and largely supported by the wealthy society that is Seattle. But I had no other choice, so once they left, I'd get right back to it. Sometimes the police would threaten me with a fine, jail, or, what felt the most personal and hurtful to me, throwing away my juggling supplies. As an autistic person, I was definitely taking my chances with this line of work. Police often find interactions with autistic people more difficult because we do not fit into the box of how they expect people to behave or communicate. They may not know why autistic people rock, or flap their hands, or may get angry at autistic people for not answering questions in the way they expect. Autistic people just see the world differently, and it's a common autistic trait to first respond by asking a question when something doesn't make logical sense.

Can you see how a police officer, used to automatic obedience, could easily interpret this as disrespect? This is why people with disabilities are such frequent targets of police brutality, with between 33 and 50 percent of those who are killed by police being people with disabilities.[5] Furthermore, if you are a disabled Black person, there is a 55 percent chance that you will be arrested by the age of twenty-eight.[6] My friend Haben Girma, a Black deaf-blind Harvard Law graduate, explains this better than I do:

> If you are wondering why disabled people experience higher rates of police violence: Police walk into situations expecting people to hear their spoken commands, see their visual commands, physically be able to move in a certain way to obey physical commands, and other ableist expectations. When disabled people don't respond to commands because we can't, then police use force. There are many stories of family members and friends telling police a person is disabled, but the police don't believe them or don't care. Our current police system is killing disabled people. We need a bold new system to keep our communities safe.

I was lucky that the police only chased me away, when far too many of my disabled peers end up dead after interactions with police. Maybe it was the unicycle and tuxedo or the long, striped stilt pants and balloons. I know my whiteness contributed. At any rate, street performing while disabled was a risky line of work for me. But once again, what choice did I have? I needed to make money. No one would hire me. And the entire country got a minimum wage of $7.25 except for the lucky, segregated, developmentally disabled few for whom our laws say that minimum wage does not apply. But it was okay. Because I loved busking. I loved it. And besides, everyone who saw me smiled, and I was content with this sense that I had taken back some power over my life. Better a witty fool than a foolish wit. I have never gotten to just live my life without being laughed at, talked about, made fun of, mocked, or called weird. When I am performing, at least I am owning this. At least I am taking back control and giving people permission to laugh at me. I shouldn't have to do this for the world to understand and accept me, but I do. As Shakespeare says, "The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool."

I had been the fool my whole life, but at least now on the street it was by choice and I was being paid to be it.

For three months that year I got a break from street performing out in the elements. I was working at Seattle Children's Theatre, the very theatre that first showed me humanity. It felt like such a full-circle connection with my Geema to be back here, but this time as a performer. I felt such strong personal pride in myself, having worked hard to grow from a nonspeaking child to a performer on that stage. I quietly hoped I would bring the same sense of joy, acceptance, and empowerment to a kid like me who might be in one of my audiences. Unfortunately, my experience was very different as an adult. During the first show I performed at the theatre, I received a phone call from the artistic director on her cell phone during her commute home from work. "I'm driving through a tunnel now so if the call gets dropped I'm going to call you again when I get home, but I wanted you to hear from me as soon as possible," she said more loudly than she needed to, not knowing whether her cell's speaker phone was picking her up or not. She informed me that she had heard from a few actors that much of the chorus was making fun of me. "I wanted to call to apologize on their behalf and let you know that I will not stand for that."

Now, at this point I was an adult in my early twenties. I hadn't realized that people had been making fun of me until I received this phone call. I am always an optimist and always assume that people are trustworthy, doing the best that they can, and working hard to be my friend. In that moment, all my interactions with these friends replayed through my head, and I realized they had been laughing at me, trying to hurt me, not laughing *with* me.

Despite the call from the artistic director, the first two shows I was in at SCT, I was made fun of constantly. Even though I was an audience favorite in the shows, many of the chorus dancers hated me. In musicals, the chorus dancers are all supposed to be nearly identical, flat characters, paper dolls. You have to do all the same dance steps with the goal of each person looking identical to the next. This theatrical idea is so ableist, assuming that all bodies can or should move in an identical way. I didn't know how to reach this nonautistic neutral. I was just a living, breathing person. Most people in the chorus didn't like that there was something different about me and hated others' curiosity or admiration of me. My directors loved that I was different! I remember being in the dance portion of my audition for a musical. Dance auditions are notorious for being incredibly fast paced. Directors and choreographers are looking at not only dance skills, but also how quickly you can learn choreography. They go through the moves with you a couple of times, but quickly the big group following the choreographer becomes groups of five or six with no one to follow.

Sure enough, I got to a point in the choreography where I confidently did a double turn, but upon coming out of the turn so proud that I had successfully landed it, before realizing that all the other dancers were dancing something completely different. I had no idea where I was in the music or the dance anymore, so without missing a beat I just started freestyling, rocking out for the final eight counts, striking a bold pose on the final note, smiling more broadly and genuinely than anyone else. The lone figure in blue jeans and a polo shirt, surrounded by leotards and bike shorts. I was sure I'd blown it but was proud of myself for staying positive, and I encouraged myself that I might get called in to audition again sometime for some other show.

Walking out of the theatre after my audition, I passed by the choreographer. She said she'd be seeing me soon, which I took to mean as I was right and would probably get another shot at auditioning for a different show one day. I was surprised to hear a few weeks later that they were offering me a role! The director and choreographer loved that I had handled the situation with such grace, creativity, and life and wanted that unbridled joy in their production. The show opened, and I was a bit of a left shark before packed houses. The other dancers hit their marks in unison, years of training keeping them all in sharp unity, while my autistic body was just naturally drawn to holding itself in different shapes. But I owned it, just living in every moment, and the audience loved that I was so alive onstage.

The other chorus actors didn't take too kindly to realizing that all their years of training couldn't win them the affection of the audience, and they expressed that by withholding their affection from me. They would change choreography to spite me, doing things like taking a prop that was supposed to be thrown to me for me to catch mid-dance, and instead throw it offstage while whispering, "Fetch" to me. These chorus actors didn't realize that our differences are our strengths and that we are all stronger together. I made the conscious decision to never let this faze me.

During one production I thought I had made true friends. Every time I did something a certain way, said something a certain way, my fully grown adult friends would have me put money into a little box in their dressing room. For a pizza party, they told me. A "Mickey" box. I thought that this was proof of their friendship. I felt so lucky and special that the girls' dressing room had created a little box with my name on it. Why would they have me put my money into a box for a pizza party of all things if they were not friends with me? Pizza parties were something that friends did together, after all. This act of theirs was proof that they were not just my colleagues but also my friends. They had taken time to decorate a box, putting my name on it, almost like a friendship bracelet, I thought.

Sure enough, every time I did something a certain way, or said something a certain way, they would laugh and point at the box, and in my bus money would go. But it was surely a worthwhile investment for this friendship.

It was only one day in the last week of the show when I suggested that we should do the pizza party during our lunch break that they let me know they had already done the pizza party. "We didn't know you thought you would be invited," I remember one larger dark-haired girl telling me while holding back a belly laugh.

I had paid for the entire pizza party because they had insisted that they were my friends. But I suppose for all those months their reality had been different than mine. This felt worse than being ignored.

As I walked home that night, the cold Seattle raindrops pattered hypnotically against the side of my head, down the back of my neck. Like a stim, they drowned out all the unwanted. I kept my headphones pressed tight over my ears, though I'm still not sure what I was trying to shut out.

When someone is cruel, mean, unkind, bad, or a bully, it has nothing to do with you and everything to do with them. When you choose not to allow their behavior to affect you, you take all their power away from them. I just did my best every day and was kind every day to everyone. I did my job while ignoring all the extra baggage. I quickly learned not to let these people affect me. Their behavior was a statement about them, not me.

Even outside of the theatre, I was often made fun of because socializing didn't come intuitively or naturally to me. When you aren't being social, it sometimes misleads people into thinking that you don't want to be friends with them. People thought I stood back and didn't chat with them because I didn't want to be their friend, but that couldn't have been further from the truth. I just didn't instinctively know how to make a friend. Being autistic sometimes feels like everyone else can communicate telepathically, while I'm solely reliant on them saying exactly what they actually mean. Social skills and social norms are difficult for autistic people to pick up on, although we notice everyone else seeming to have no trouble being on the same page with each other. If you see an autistic person standing by themselves, you can invite them into your circle of friends. Know that even if they don't actively participate or speak much, they might be thrilled just to get to be listening and included just standing with you. Or they might say that they want alone time, and that is okay too! It doesn't mean they don't like you or don't want to be your friend.

I always showed up early to places, just as a way to get comfortable in my surroundings before more people arrived and made it uncomfortable again. I was once told by a stage manager not to be "creepy" in regard to my showing up an hour or two early to the theatre. I never bothered anyone, just sat with my headphones on listening to a book on tape. But to nonautistic people this is "creepy." I sometimes wonder how some people can be so preoccupied with what autistic people are doing, especially when so often we are making a point to not be intrusive or a bother—and yet, somehow this is exactly what makes us stand out. It's an impossible game to win.

I ultimately performed in eight productions at Seattle Children's Theatre in the whole decade of my twenties, but I never once had a speaking role. No matter how happy hearted I was while working at that theatre, even though the company loved me and hired me again and again, I was frequently made fun of, intentionally excluded, and alienated by the other actors. Working at SCT should have been a dream come true, but my autism had gotten in the way.

This was around that same time that I officially received my diagnosis. I always knew I was different before this, and I knew I was treated differently than most people. I had heard people's voices raise when they spoke to me the way someone might raise their voice talking to a toddler. I knew that I was different enough to need to go to special education. But no adult had ever specifically told me why or how I was different. So, upon graduating from college I had been seeing a therapist to help me process my struggles building connections with other people. As I described to them my difficulty intuiting social norms, my uncertainty about how to make a friend, and my sensory processing issues, they suspected that I might be autistic and decided that I should be referred to an autism specialist.

Now, despite their professional opinion, a general therapist is not allowed to or qualified to diagnose autism. You need a specialist. However, most autism centers only diagnose people under the age of eighteen. At the time of writing this, the CDC admits that there is no psychometrically validated test for diagnosing adults with autism. It is very difficult to find a specialist in something that doesn't have an established procedure for diagnosis. America is so determined to erase the existence of autistic adults that it doesn't even have an official, standardized test with which to use as a tool in diagnosing autism in adults. Perhaps this is why I often find that when nonautistic people picture an autistic person in their head, they nearly always picture a child. But again, autistic children grow up into autistic adults. And usually when they do, they disappear into unemployment and segregation.

Fortunately for me, Seattle actually does have an adult autism clinic, and I finally ended up with a referral to the University of Washington's Adult Autism Clinic. These appointments book out many, many months in advance for new patients. Once I finally received my appointment, though, the meeting was only a few *hours* long, which is extremely quick compared to the process for diagnosing a child. The room was much like any other therapist's room I'd been in before: a very fashionably curated living room that is also trying *very hard* to be casual and welcoming.

Therapists of old may have had you lie down on a couch in order to relax, but apparently today's therapists try to get you to let your guard down with creature comforts like textured throw blankets and bowls of Skittles. Dr. Freed engaged me in open dialogue but checked off boxes from one of the tests that is used to diagnose children as we spoke. I preferred this kind of testing interaction to a sterile Q and A interrogation. She tilted her head and listened carefully to what I said, sometimes sharing observations such as that I seemed to display signs of social anxiety. Eventually I left with "Autism Spectrum Disorder" written on a piece of paper. This was the first time I had heard those words directly in connection with myself. I felt a huge sense of relief! Much like when six-year-old Mickey first tried on his red glasses and could finally see multiple parts of a tree, the diagnosis was a lens that finally brought my whole confusing life into focus. My whole life I had known I was different. I was treated differently, people spoke to me differently, I went to school differently. I was not surprised by this diagnosis, but I was very relieved. Blood rushed back out of my cheeks, which felt like they had been flushed my whole life, moving back down through my chest, off my shoulders, traveling clearly now through the rest of my body.

When you've felt so different your whole life, it is truly such a weight lifted when you know that there is an explanation. Suddenly you are no longer adrift on a lonely sea, but you are anchored by a name for the thing, and then you find safe harbor in the knowledge that there's a community of other people who feel and think the same way you do and are going through the same things you are. There were other people who experienced the world the same way I did! People who thought the way I did! I wasn't stupid, or bad, or weird. There was a name for it.

Although I was now equipped and feeling empowered by a diagnosis, auditioning was a struggle. Outside of nonspeaking roles at Seattle Children's Theatre and Seattle Opera, I was not getting cast. This had everything to do with disability, in particular my blindness. I am low vision, which means I see the world through a Vaseline-like filter, even if I'm wearing my glasses or contacts. I have extremely limited peripheral vision, and I do not have a driver's license. I can only read large-print text for short periods of time before my eyes lose their ability to focus and read the words at all, and I have to look away from the page for a time and try to reset. Writing this book has so far included lots of voice-to-text writing, with others helping me go through after the fact and edit the voice-to-text typos. I often wander around my neighborhood dictating sentences into my phone. Unfortunately for me, the traditional American theatre audition process is inherently inaccessible to people with vision impairment.

Knowing whether to out yourself as disabled at an audition or job interview is always a struggle. If you tell the world you are disabled, you will be discriminated against. Disability is still the one holdout where people think it is not only right but obvious that your disability status would be a deciding factor at a job interview. This is evidenced by the fact that even though it is illegal to discriminate against someone solely because they have a disability, it is also very legal to not pay them a minimum wage solely because of their disability. Every other protected class in America gets a minimum wage, but if you are disabled you are supposed to simply be grateful that an employer even gave you a job to do for pennies an hour.

If, however, you don't tell the world you are disabled, then you don't get the things that you need. We live in a society designed for and by non-disabled people. Inaccessibility is the design standard, and accessibility is almost always no more than a tacked-on afterthought, if it's even considered at all. Think about your home, or the homes of all your friends. Are any of them wheelchair accessible? Or are most homes in this country built with the assumption that you won't ever be socializing with someone who uses a wheelchair? Small print is the standard text size things are printed in, even though if large print were the standard, more people would be able to read easily. Legally blind folx aside, how many elderly people in your life find small print difficult to read? As a disability rights advocate in my thirties, I now advocate for universal design: design that has accessibility to all built into it. This includes things like ramps in an airport, which not only make a space accessible for those who use mobility devices but also make life easier for business travelers rolling their luggage, and mothers and fathers pushing strollers. It also includes having captions on videos, which not only allows d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing folx to watch the video, but it also allows people to watch the video while in the library, in a waiting room, or on public transportation. Universal design helps us all, not just those of us with disabilities. But in this country, inaccessibility is the primary design standard. If you need an accommodation due to disability, you have to ask for it and hope that the person in power decides to give it to you.

For me, universal design is also about the need to get the text of my scripts enlarged. Otherwise, I've been in a lot of messes of auditions where the audition wasn't really about my acting or storytelling, or connecting with my scene partner, changing and being changed by them. The auditions were just a vision test where the director took the role of the doctor, handing me the script, and saying, "Can you read this eleven-point font?" "Can you read the bottom line on this eye chart?" And you spend the ten minutes working out what that eye chart says instead of acting or showing them how you could collaborate together on a show. If I can somehow get through the audition fiasco and get cast, I'm at a point then where I can make the necessary accommodations for myself. When I'm cast in a show, I secretly record the first readthrough of the show on my phone. (I have to do this secretly due to the actors' union rules that prohibit recordings.) Much like the assumptions built into inaccessible houses, the union makes these rules assuming that someone with vision difficulties would never be working at that caliber of theatre. But if I break the rule in secret with my phone hidden in my pocket, then I can take my eyes out of the equation and simply memorize my lines by listening to the recording. I'd rather not have to break rules, but I have found that if you try to play by the rules in a game designed to make disabled folx lose, you won't ever win. I know because I have tried following the rule book.

When I secured an audition slot, I would often ask whether they could have large-print sides available for me on the day of the audition. Sides are the pages of script that they have you read in an audition. No one has time to see you act out the whole show in an audition, nor is it necessary for a director to consider that much material in order to be able to assess you for the part. Usually just a page or three of the script suffices, and they usually print several copies of them out and have them available for actors to read from at the audition. So, I would ask if they could just make one copy of those pages in large print for me. Only on three occasions out of hundreds of auditions did I actually receive these large-print sides. Most of the time, regardless of the number of emails I sent, auditors would just "forget" to enlarge my audition scripts. Disabled people learn out of necessity to be innovative problem solvers to get by in a world ruled by nondisabled people, and I came up with another easy option for them to level the playing field for me. I'd say that if they *couldn't* print the sides in large print, that was just fine, but could they send the sides to me a few days in advance of the audition so that I could enlarge my own scripts? But many theatre companies refused, stating that this would be giving me an unfair advantage over the nondisabled actors. Neither one of these options, printing one copy in a larger font or sending me the sides in advance, would have been a significant burden of work for these theatre companies. Despite this, they still refused to make these accommodations.

Theatre companies might not ever come out and openly admit that they don't want to work with people with disabilities, but they make it abundantly clear by their firm refusal to make reasonable accommodations. (And people say that autistics lack empathy.) Theatres claim that they don't want to give me an unfair advantage, but are they really unable to see that nondisabled actors already have every advantage over disabled actors, in both the theatre industry and society at large? Do they really not see that they are not giving me an advantage, but rather they are leveling the playing field by simply offering me scripts I can read? (And apparently, I'm the one who's blind.) But of course, I doubt they are actually unable to see this, but simply unwilling. Ableism is one of the frameworks this society is built on, and people cling desperately to its familiarity, even though it oppresses 20 percent of the population.[7] Yes, the oppression of disabled people is familiar to society. To so many people, that's just how the world works.

So, I stopped asking for these enlargements. Society told me that the reasonable accommodation I needed, made legal by the Americans with Disabilities Act, was too much to ask for. Even though the ADA enshrines in law that it is unethical to not make reasonable accommodation for disabled folx, theatre companies would try to gaslight me into believing that I was the unethical one asking for an unfair advantage. So, I stopped. What was I going to do? Try to sue a theatre for not providing me large-print sides? And then what? Never work in theatre again. Always be seen as the actor who made trouble and tried to bankrupt a theatre. No. I had no choice. I stopped asking for what I needed. I started to believe people who told me that it wasn't my eyesight making it difficult for me to read small-print scripts. It was just that I wasn't a talented actor.

I think that there's a false dichotomy right now where people say that the most talented person should get the part. Even if the most talented person should theoretically get the part, or the job, or the position, we're not doing a very good job right now of assessing who's talented, or even what talent means, when you're asking an actor to read text that is far too small for him to read instead of seeing how well that actor can act and connect to a scene partner with appropriately sized text. Our job as storytellers is to help people see themselves. And help people see life experiences very different from their own. What we are doing isn't as linear as running a race or climbing a mountain. Our job as actors is just to be a living, breathing person. And disability doesn't make you any less of a living, breathing person. I'd hope that one day, there could be an autistic person playing Hamlet, or playing King Lear and that the story wouldn't be about autism. The character would just be a person who happens to be autistic and who also happens to be the Prince of Denmark or an aging king, and that there wouldn't be too many questions about it. But until we get there, in the meantime, it would be really nice if when we see an amputee in a movie, the character was actually played by an amputee, that someone was given that opportunity to shine at least then if there are not other roles they would be given the opportunity to shine in.

For a producer, I know it is easier and more affordable for an amputee to wear a prosthetic and long pants in order to play a nondisabled character than it is to digitally remove a nondisabled actor's legs in postproduction to have them play an amputee. Yet productions always choose the latter. God forbid they hire a disabled person! When we see a character with a disability onstage, I'd love to see people representing their own community accurately, the way that community would hope to be represented. More than nice—it would be right. But that is not the world we live in, and I continued only playing nonspeaking roles at theatres that already personally knew and liked me.

Being resilient is one of my strengths, so despite rejection after gaslit rejection, I kept at the auditioning game. One day I was auditioning for a play at ACT Theatre in Seattle. I don't think the casting director knew I was autistic, but she must have been able to just intuit that I was. Many people can just tell. She handed me a book that she had prepared by highlighting a monologue within it. "Mickey," she said, "I have just gotten back from seeing this play at the National Theatre in London. There is no way we will be able to do this play at ACT anytime soon because it is going to go on to Broadway after its run at the National. But you need to read it. It is based on this book. This character is you."

I looked at the book she had handed me and read. I slowly sounded out the small-print words: "The . . . Curioouuus Incident of . . . the Dog . . . in the . . . Night-Time." I gave that audition my best stab, cold reading the small print. But it captured my attention, and I knew I had to go home and dedicate some time to finding an accessible version of the text for me to dive into. Christopher, the main character in this monologue, was autistic.

Later that night I found the audiobook version and immersed myself into the world of Christopher and his adventures through the London subways to find his mother and solve a crime against a neighbor's dog. Representation matters. Much like when I received my autism diagnosis, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* made me realize there really are other people like me out there in the world. It reminded me that I am not weird, or stupid, or bad, but just like Christopher I am powerful, and I can do whatever I want to do and accomplish the goals I want to accomplish. I read the book and knew I was not alone. I had a community. I had a people. I also knew that I needed to play this part. The show was going to be on Broadway next, in New York City. I lived in Seattle. I didn't have an agent. But I did have three things: courage, imagination, and determination.