Tom's Story

I always felt I was different. Nowadays, that feeling is something I can be proud of. Growing up, it was the opposite.

I lived the first twenty-one years of my life undiagnosed, meaning that my school and social lives, as well as my first stabs at university and employment, were exactly that – stabs in the dark.

Whilst I was fortunate for my home life to be stabilised by hobbies and interests ranging from playing music to reading and watching films, my time at school was fraught. I struggled to make friends, pay attention, and even turn up. I can count the pieces of homework I completed on one hand, and the hours I spent revising on the other. It may be confusing then to learn that I was not once offered formal intervention, support, or an exploration of diagnoses. Why? Because I got the grades.

Now, before we continue, I must draw to your attention that these events did not take place in some post-war small town, deep in the recesses of my memory. This was the mid-2010s. I am twenty-five. I know for a fact that most of the teachers at my school are still there. And thus, the following events could probably have been avoided.

By sixth form, the strain this difference had on my mental health was pronounced. I began showing signs of depression and daily panic attacks were common. I hoped that maybe the grass would be greener in university, once I was away from everything. It wasn't. It got worse. Mainly because I was away from everything.

I dropped out of university after one year and, once again, I thought the grass would be greener once I was in employment. Once again, it wasn't. Menial work and small talk in adulthood was even more soul-crushing than at school, and you didn't even have a decent lunch break. I lasted a couple of months.

The COVID-19 lockdowns were initially comforting for a lot of neurodivergent folks. I for one spent my time binging box-sets, messing about on the internet, and playing music. As we entered 2021 however, and normality looked like could be returning, I realised I could not go on any further as things were.

It turns out my time on the internet over this period was not in vain. Like many others, I'd had space to think about my differences in relation to neurodiversity, and felt that seeking a diagnosis was an appropriate pathway. I first went for ADHD, as I felt that there was less of a stigma attached, but I soon pursued an accompanying autism diagnosis once I realised the former did not cover everything.

At the end of it all, a diagnosis is only a piece of paper. It does not come with support, guidance, or understanding. Those were down to me and, once I built up the confidence to seek them out, took years to acquire. The diagnoses were the gateway though, and I truly do not know where I'd be without one. Whilst it is easy to look back and wish I'd had them sooner, maybe the experience of not having them growing up greater attuned me to my needs and differences, and lent me a maturity and gratitude to approach my eventual diagnoses when they came.