



## A new world with my brother, the Rain Man

Marina Baker always knew her brother Martin was different. At last, after many lost years, she decided to investigate and discovered he suffered from a form of autism, Asperger Syndrome. And, as with Tom Cruise in the film Rain Man, knowledge has led to a greater understanding.

Last summer my brother Martin came to visit me. We have spent very little time together since we were teenagers. Now both in our thirties, I saw it as a chance for us to get to know each other again. Growing up with Martin was never dull.

He was a strange boy who found it impossible to integrate socially with other children. He was odd, obsessed with statistics on the Second World War. He talked at you, rather than to you; he had strange verbal and visual tics. He reacted in weird ways to normal things. He was a mecca for bullies. I always led the defence. To the education and medical professions, he was 'maladjusted'. He was deemed 'unteachable' and was given jigsaw puzzles to solve instead of learning to read and write along with his peers. Now 34, he could at best be described as an eccentric; at worst as an outcast, a loser, a weirdo. He has a loud, monotonous booming voice, uses complicated vocabulary and has a habit of repeating your last sentence which is most disturbing. (Think Rain Man.)

Martin is also a complete darling. I love him. He wouldn't hurt anybody. Except accidentally if he's dancing wildly at a party. He sleeps with his clothes and shoes on and with his overcoat buckled up because, he says, 'it saves time in the morning'. For the same reason he doesn't bother using a bed. Instead, he settles on the floor next to his beloved computer, the centre of his universe. Obsessed with photography, Martin carries a camera everywhere he goes. His computer skills are highly developed and he provides technical support and advice on a voluntary basis at a drop-in club for the unemployed near his rundown council flat in Norwich.

He has never had a proper job, one with wages. He lives on Jobseeker's Allowance. As he can't get through an interview, no-one will employ him. But would you employ a man who looks a cross between Charles Manson and Dougal in Father Ted? A man who, should you offer him an outstretched hand, will laugh maniacally instead of shaking it? So far, no-one has had the courage.

When Martin came to stay last year, we forgot about the dreary present. Going on picnics, long walks, buzzing around town, raving at parties, we became kids again. The blinkers lifted and we found a secret entrance into each other's worlds. That is exactly how it felt. I came to realise that his was a world of facts and nothing else. Numbers. On, off; black, white. What he seemed to be lacking was an imagination. He cannot imagine himself in anyone else's place. He assumes that everyone thinks what he is thinking, as he is thinking it. So he misreads signals all the time. He is friendly, so he thinks the big brute about to flatten him must be friendly, too. I think, to a certain extent, he was able to access my world through me, and made an effort to talk about things that interest me. We found common ground in gardening. Then it dawned on me that he was reading my books and talking me through them as though he had known things for years. Dishonest maybe, but it looked suspiciously as if he had a near photographic memory. Now I really was thinking Rain Man.

When Martin was little it was never suggested that his behavioural problems, as they called them then, might be symptoms of some underlying cause. He could be disruptive. But if your teacher hates you and the children delight in flushing your head down the toilet at every opportunity, you might be a little angry and wish to express it. He did this through alternate bouts of self-mutilation and lashing out at anyone who came near. But his behaviour resembled that of a tortured animal, the kind you see covering in the corner of a cage at Battersea Dogs' Home.

He wasn't the problem, it was the treatment he received from other human beings. There was never an official diagnosis. But in the Sixties and Seventies there was this pervasive idea (I blame Freud) that all bad behaviour meant emotional damage or psychotic tendencies. Children like my brother were either institutionalised or taken out of normal lessons to bake cakes and build jigsaws instead. He was considered to be a child not worth teaching who probably had a mother who didn't believe in love and cuddles. But, er, hang on. I'm his sister. Same mother, same circumstances. No-one seemed to have thought of that, but I was beginning to think about it rather a lot.

It struck me that Martin might have suffered some sort of brain damage. That would explain why some bits of his mind operated perfectly well while other areas appeared to be totally missing. I can't believe it has taken me all my life to realise this.

I decided to have my brother's case investigated last summer. I was going to get him tested for anything that might explain his unusual personality. I was prepared to fight. First I had to talk to mother. She ensures he eats - he never cooks. She pays his bills, keeps him clothed and does her best to protect him from the ne'er-do-wells who prey on his vulnerability and her generosity.

People are always stealing his things. Once they left him tied up after removing his computer, guitar and TV. He was stuck there for two days. Mother opened his fridge recently to find it crammed with milk cartons dating back four or five months. The smell nearly knocked her out. Martin hadn't noticed. Once the fridge was full, he stopped using it. Logical.

Mother was understandably uneasy about my plans. She thought it would be opening a can of worms. She really believed she was to blame for her son's 'antisocial tendencies'. She carried the guilt and muddled through, coping as best she could with the monster that she had apparently created.

She made great sacrifices in order to send Martin to a private school where she hoped that smaller class sizes would make a difference. He did get a few O-levels, in maths, chemistry, physics and technical drawing. Not English, though. That was unclassified. Mother quite rightly worried about how Martin might feel. He doesn't think he is odd. So how can we tell him we think he is, and we want to find out why and maybe change the way he views the world? And who could guarantee that it would be a better way? But then again. Just suppose his condition could be explained in physical terms? At least there would be more understanding.

I didn't want a label to tattoo on his forehead. Quite the opposite. What I wanted was a fair deal for him. I wanted him to have enough money to live on, I wanted him to be helped into suitable employment. I didn't expect to find a cure, just maybe to find people similar to himself. He might make friends and have a better quality of life. Mother agreed to help and took Martin to a GP, who referred him to specialists. Amazingly, a formal diagnosis took just six months. He has Asperger syndrome, a form of autism. Mother is coming to terms. We don't yet know what causes it, but it most certainly wasn't Mother's parenting skills.

It makes me very sad. What might Martin have achieved had he been diagnosed earlier? Children diagnosed today with Asperger syndrome are given specialist help to develop their unique skills and are taught the basics to help get along in the normal world.

But although the syndrome was first identified in 1944, it is only in the past three years that its existence has found its way into the consciousness of the medical profession, which now feels able to offer the diagnosis. That things have developed this far is mainly thanks to The National Autistic Society, which has campaigned relentlessly since the Sixties to have Asperger syndrome recognised. The NAS also provides help and support for families and sufferers. Mother is set to become an avid correspondent.

They can set Martin up with a work placement, provide education opportunities and introduce him to fellow sufferers. Already he has a community nurse who visits him. Meanwhile, he's been busy accessing the NAS website, and surfing the net, downloading information on Asperger syndrome for mother to read. So how does he feel about having a label? 'A label? Ooh. I don't mind, it's unlikely to damage my reputation.'

*Marina Baker*