

Bipolar Courage: Are You Sure You're Not Autistic?

Sample extract

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Introduction

'Are online relationships real?' That's a question the author, Xanthe Wyse ("Zan-thee Wise"), asks the reader to consider. Xanthe currently likes to write about relationship drama with disabilities.

This story is mostly set on social media, over a period of a few years. The focus is on the intense connections and clashes with 'Maxwell', an autistic man (Asperger's syndrome diagnosis). The author's primary diagnoses are bipolar affective disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Interaction of their diagnoses exaggerated the complicated dynamics with the friendship.

Most of the events in this memoir only came about because of the author's advocacy as Bipolar Courage. This is an account of some of the juicy and amusing behind-the-scenes events, in storytelling form.

The author expects some people, in certain social media circles, will play a guessing game as to who the characters are. She has never said publicly who the characters are in this memoir.

She has changed names but also further disguised with vagueness. Possible identifying features such as nationality, ethnicity, occupation, family details, political views and appearance, have been omitted.

Dialogue has been paraphrased, to disguise any distinctive speech patterns.

Preferred diagnoses, by characters, where relevant are stated. Yes, some people prefer to state their diagnosis as Asperger's syndrome, despite accusations of being a 'Nazi sympathiser' or an 'Aspie supremacist.'

The author did not rely on her recollections alone. To ensure accuracy of events and emotional truth, Xanthe devoted significant time cross-checking records like her vlog and journals. Neither embellishing nor demonising the story and characters.

Her aim in this memoir is an entertaining story, with some insights from her experiences along the way. Also, to convey her unique perspective: the bigger picture plus details that even Maxwell doesn't know about.

Xanthe's disabilities affect her cognition, communication, and short-term memory. This is despite her long-term memory for some things being exceptional. She is bound to have broken some rules of grammar, despite repeatedly checking.

This is her best writing effort since her semiautobiographical novel, *Pet Purpose: Your Unspoken Voice*. *Pet Purpose* captured the experience of bipolar mania, from the inside and the outside.

This memoir, *Bipolar Courage: Are You Sure You're Not Autistic?* is Xanthe's most emotionally vulnerable book, so far.

The storyline is mostly light-hearted, but there are some intense and potentially triggering scenes. Intended for a mature audience.

If you are easily offended and into faux outrage, this book is not for you.

References, including acronyms and songs, are included at the end of the story.

Enjoy!

1 Meeting Maxwell

When Maxwell Lock first spoke to me, I was a bumble bee on a bright yellow flower with a dark green background. Or at least my profile picture was, on a social media app I had recently started using. Instead of showing my face, my pic was one of my paintings, *Spring*.

Maxwell had renown online; people seemed to be obsessed with him. My first impression was that he was intelligent, keen to debate and reactive.

He made a scathing remark on someone's dancing video:

'Performative dancing videos don't melt my heart, I'm afraid.'

'Hearts of stone don't melt,' I replied to him sarcastically. 'Perhaps if you tried dancing, you would experience some joy instead of being so cynical.'

'You're always attacking me,' complained Maxwell.

'I've hardly spoken to you. Some exaggeration.'

He conceded he was a grumpy old man 'trapped in a young man's body.' His feisty, oppositional temperament with black-and-white views reminded me of my son, Zander.

Maxwell said he had Asperger's syndrome – a developmental disorder with difficulties with social and nonverbal communication skills. It was pretty damned obvious.

'Asperger's autism' (that's how the psychiatrist had worded it), was Zander's childhood diagnosis. He'd had meltdowns over brushing teeth, showers, transitions, noisy malls, the sound of hand-driers and school. By meltdowns, I mean complete loss of control, with high-pitched screaming and physical aggression. He loved video games, but he could only handle a small amount of stimulation in one session, gradually building up a threshold.

He'd gagged on some food textures, such as potatoes (unless very crispy, like shoestring fries with no fluffy centres). He'd insisted that his food was plain and separated, 'with nothing on.'

We were often late to school, as he would be lining up toys in a trance-like state, not registering that anyone was speaking to him. Zander's father, Craig, wondered if one reason he lined up his soft toys on his bed was to do a stock-take, to make sure none were missing. He'd get very attached to objects like empty food boxes.

The school wouldn't do anything about the bullying Zander was subjected to. So, I asked Zander who the ringleader was. He pointed to a boy with blonde curls.

I went up to the boy and said, 'You're bullying my son: punching him in the stomach and spitting in his face. Stop.' I used a quiet voice with a tone that I'm sure conveyed, 'You don't want to find out what I'm capable of, you little shit.' I didn't actually know what I was capable of, but the boy stopped.

Then, another boy called Zander names, so Zander punched him hard, giving him a black eye. Zander developed a school phobia and hid under the tables, lashing out at anyone who went near. He had bruises after being restrained by staff during a meltdown. He was excluded from school; it was obvious that school had failed him, anyway.

Zander cried in distress at home; he wanted to die because he had no friends. It was then, his father finally said, 'That's it, I don't care anymore if he gets a label.' Craig had been resistant to getting Zander assessed.

As Zander was in crisis, we went to a private children's clinic, where he was assessed by a psychologist and a psychiatrist. This was back in 2010 (over thirteen years ago), in Australia.

We were initially recommended a stimulant for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, ADHD, and an antipsychotic for a tic disorder. After I challenged the psychiatrist, she said that medications weren't needed, after all.

I'd been on a lot of meds myself and quite frankly, the side-effects sucked. So, I was worried medications might affect my son's developing brain. I wanted to try child psychologists first.

Asperger's autism became Zander's primary diagnosis. It was to try to get accommodations in school.

A principal from a new school agreed to transition him gradually into school life; starting with some fun activities he could observe, then choose to participate in. He didn't do full school days at first. He was matched with a non-authoritarian style teacher. We had to move house to be in the zoning for the school.

I took him to psychologists and other specialists to learn self-regulation skills and to help with anxiety. Clinicians said to keep in mind that traits of 'challenging-to-parent' children can be valued later in the workplace. He was allowed to take himself away at any time, to calm. We bought a trampoline as that helped him to discharge some excess energy with repetitive movements.

Most of his assertiveness and social skills training was done by me. I appealed to his logic rather than to emotion, as that was how he was inclined. Logical. He also didn't like being told what to do, so I would make a suggestion, and let him come to his own conclusions.

I enrolled him in Taekwondo classes to improve his self-discipline, confidence and physical coordination.

When we arrived at his Taekwondo class, a boy was doing boxing training. Zander said in his stage whisper, 'That boy is so fat!'

Instead of, 'That might hurt the boy's feelings,' I replied, 'That might be true but do you think it's a good idea to say that out loud? Especially when that boy is wearing boxing gloves and can punch hard?'

There would be a pause, as Zander was thinking it over, processing it.

His social skills training, my version, was mainly to learn to zip it. Rather than to blurt out what was on his mind, in that exact moment, to that particular audience, unfiltered.

'Do you think it makes your life easier or harder when you call your teachers stupid to their face?' I asked.

'But I can't help it,' said Zander. 'It just comes out. They *are* stupid.'

'How about muttering it under your breath when they're out of earshot? Or come home and tell me?' I suggested.

Zander would think over what I'd recommended, not demanded. I let him come to those conclusions himself, rather than me telling him what he must do, as he was very oppositional.

I enjoyed the philosophical discussions we had in the car when I picked him up from school. I didn't enjoy aggressive meltdowns though, which could be accompanied by shouting and whacks to the back of my head with a shoe.

Zander and I, both introverts, often sat quietly side-by-side on the couch, doing our hobbies on a laptop or tablet. Craig, a socially orientated extrovert, came home from work and said 'Why are you both glued to screens? Why don't you pay attention to me?'

Craig also complained that Zander and I were 'cold' in that we weren't emotionally demonstrative – our emotions weren't on display outwardly at all times.

I worked hard to help Zander develop skills to help him to succeed with making friends. Anxiety was a big factor behind his meltdowns and other issues.

I asked him, when he was calm, what a meltdown was like.

He said, 'It's like my head is under sand. I can't hear what people are saying.' He also said he didn't realise he was hitting and kicking during meltdowns.

The early input with Zander paid off. He went from no friends to having some friends, a girlfriend and a job.

When he was older, he said, 'Thank you, Mum, for taking me out of that school and for teaching me to respect animals.' I'd taught him to ignore timid animals initially and let them approach him first. Waiting to give them attention when they were ready to receive it.

Zander and I have been separated, living in different countries, since around his twelfth birthday. He's visited a handful of times. I had no choice but to return to New Zealand after a mental health crisis, after my marriage breakup.

My drive to have a voice and my artistic expression has mainly come about to process my grief of being separated from my son. Trying to heal my broken heart.

I've missed out on Zander's teenage years. He's gone from insisting on plain foods and separated foods to liking the hottest curries. He still refuses to eat vegetables, though.

I started advocating independently online, as Bipolar Courage, back in New Zealand. I chose this name because it takes courage to live with bipolar disorder and bipolar gives me courage. I was stuck with bipolar disorder but I wanted to kick trauma's butt.

I take medications to help manage bipolar disorder. I've been in therapy with a clinical psychologist, Patricia, to treat post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, for over four years.

My unpaid advocacy included a blog, vlog and a few other social media platforms.

Social media is a mixed bag, with opportunities for connection plus abuse. Sometimes, there were words of encouragement. 'You matter, Xanthe. You have a purpose. Your art and writing make people feel something.' Someone said this when I was down after being attacked by strangers.

Angela was watching my process videos doing a painting, after I'd been triggered when strangers had tried to force their labels onto me. Angela was curious about the concept of art as therapy, which was a theme for both my solo art exhibitions. She had befriended me on the app and we quite often chatted with private messages.

Angela said she was autistic, more specifically diagnosed Asperger's syndrome, in middle age, well after I thought her country had switched to the DSM-5. She admitted that she didn't fully meet criteria, yet said she still got a diagnosis.

In our chats, she said she'd wondered if she had bipolar disorder.

2 Friends with the Enemy

'Brave,' Angela private messaged me after I'd made a video about some social media drama, after I'd dared to disagree with a blogger. I didn't name Morgan, but I'd called out their hypocrisy. They'd made stigmatising comments about mental health issues.

I'm going to be vague about the specifics, but there are online communities with ideologies built around opt-in identity politics. Demanding everyone in these communities to share the exact same views, or they will be punished.

'Now that's what I call a dog-pile,' said Angela. 'I'm too scared to get involved publicly.'

Anonymous accounts associated with Morgan attacked me at once, then blocked and shared like wildfire what they'd said. It was juvenile and manipulative. I could actually see what they'd said after they'd blocked me, by from looking from a web browser without logging into the app.

'Apologise to Morgan,' the anonymous accounts demanded, swarming like hornets.

'I have nothing to apologise for,' I replied.

'You're autistic. I can see it.'

'I had an assessment. My clinicians said bipolar and PTSD fits better.'

'Autistic women get misdiagnosed bipolar all the time,' insisted Morgan's followers.

'My clinicians are confident my diagnoses are correct.'

'Your clinicians are useless. Get better clinicians to diagnose you as autistic.'

'It costs a lot of money to be reassessed and they might come to the same conclusion,' I replied. 'Nothing is done about an adult autism diagnosis, anyway.'

'You don't need a formal diagnosis. Just self-diagnose.'

'I think self-diagnosis is unwise. Clinicians said it looks similar in my case.'

'You're not allowed to talk to autistics unless you're autistic.'

'Some autistics like talking to me.' It's true. I'm a magnet for autistics.

'Self-diagnosis is valid,' said the accounts. 'All you need to do is self-diagnose, then you're autistic.'

'People can be wrong. Too much subjective bias about themselves.'

'You're either in or out. Otherwise, stay away from our community.'

Who knew that having the opinion that self-diagnosis is unwise is one of the most controversial things on social media? A clinician told me half-jokingly that trainee psychologists and psychiatrists self-diagnose with just about everything.

'The whole of this app knows about you,' said one of the anonymous accounts.

'I didn't know I was so famous,' I retorted back.

The word went out about me to the masses: 'That account is a waste of space. Block and avoid.'

Cult like behaviour if I ever saw it.

There was an evangelical zeal to recruit me into their identity politics, when I was advocating about mental health. Multiple accounts forced labels onto me, making assumptions. Some labels were: 'Autistic in denial' with 'internalised ableism'.

Angela told me she wanted to stay out of the drama publicly, at least under her real name. Mainly because she wanted to keep a professional reputation with her employment and advocacy. She expressed annoyance with those whom she called ‘The Language Police.’

This was reasonable, as those anyone who supported the main target in any way got attacked too.

Angela stirred drama from behind-the-scenes though. She told me she’d made the new account, Molten Lizard Unlocked, to parody Maxwell Lock. Angela said she did it as petty revenge, as Maxwell had mocked something Angela had said, then ignored her.

Maxwell acknowledged that he was initially amused by the Molten Lizard parody account.

I joked around with Angela and her pals on the Molten Lizard account and tried to wind Maxwell up a few times.

I asked Maxwell if he thought his opinion was the only one that was right. He conceded that his opinions were just like anyone else’s and could be challenged. He clearly liked to debate, but arguments on this app usually ended up deteriorating into mindless aggression and name-calling.

‘I have to respect that he said that,’ Angela messaged me, about Maxwell’s reply to me. Even though Angela was annoyed with Maxwell’s political views.

I think parenting Zander helped me to have more patience with Maxwell with strategies on how to manage him. I liked his bright mind, spark and spirited personality. I acknowledged publicly to Maxwell that I could see he was intelligent, although reactive.

As Molten Lizard, Angela moved on to parody other advocates, regardless of which side of the invisible fence their views were. She pissed off some people who admired her.

I agreed and disagreed with points from both camps, which had become polarised over various issues, just like anything political.

‘Maxwell said I’m courageous. I’m going to get into big trouble now,’ I told Angela.

Indeed, Maxwell had publicly acknowledged me to his much larger following. I didn’t name anyone, but I described the manipulative antics in my vlog (video blog). Such as hurling insults, blocking me, then spreading gossip.

Some self-appointed ‘leaders’ instructed their followers, to not give me any more material to ‘mean vlog’ about.

Maxwell was openly critical of some of the ideologies in these online communities. Opposing views of what he used to subscribe to. A renegade fighter.

I agreed with some of Maxwell’s points, even though he came across as abrasive. Why did this young guy have so many hang-ups?

‘I’m ignoring the attack hornets,’ I told Angela.

‘Good. That’ll piss them off to be ignored.’

‘I hope you liked my “fuck you” dance video,’ I wrote to Angela.

I’d said in the video, ‘You know what his means, don’t you?’ and laughed, while giving the middle finger, repeatedly.

‘They’ll probably think you’re mocking them,’ said Angela.

I was mocking them, but I was also expressing something. I often use hand movements to express, instead of words.

Although, sometimes it's gotten me into trouble, combined with impulsivity. Like the time a man wanted to physically fight me; after I'd flipped the bird at him, for mimicking someone with obvious intellectual disabilities.

When this stranger was charging in, Craig said, 'Why did you do that? I will not defend you.' *Coward.*

I decided it wasn't worth getting my teeth smashed in, after my parents had invested in orthodontic treatments to correct my underbite. I de-escalated with no eye contact, no outward expression of emotion. Just a casual, 'Must have been a misunderstanding.' I didn't apologise.

The jumped-up shithead, itching for a fight, stormed off.

Angela mostly wanted to talk about topics like sexual and romantic relationships. She was inspired by my creative process for grief and trauma.

We'd been had talking for a while before she said: 'I didn't realise you were a mother. How did I not know? Were you trying to protect me?'

I guess I was, after Angela had told me she'd lost a child, tragically. I'd avoided talking about Zander at all, keeping him anonymous.

Maxwell initiated contact privately while I was still being attacked by Morgan's followers.

'Hey you were great in the videos. Are those your paintings?'

'Yes, they are.'

'You're talented. Nice to put a face to the avatar.'

My unscripted videos recorded from my bedroom was the first time Maxwell saw what I looked like. *Flirty*, my painting of red lips was on the wall next to a sunset painting. *Bold*, a black swan painting, was still on the easel.

I don't usually wear dresses, but in the video, I wore a loose halter-neck sundress with a jade print. I wore glasses with dark, rectangular frames; my hair in long, natural chocolate brown layers. It's actually lower maintenance for me to have medium to long hair than short hair. I fidgeted with a feather I'd found.

'Nice peacock top. I like your look,' said Maxwell. I ignored the compliment.

'They're telling me to apologise,' I replied. 'They pull stunts like call me a liar then block.'

'Never apologise to bullies. Keep speaking your truth. I don't mind if you criticise me. I'm not the monster they make out.'

'They're mad at me because I no longer call myself autistic after assessment,' I told Maxwell.

'Let them be mad. It takes integrity, a rare thing in this world. You, be you. That's what authenticity is all about.'

He asked about my living situation and if I had plenty of support. I was living with my parents since my divorce, as I had limitations with my independence with my disabilities.

'Online exchanges rarely foster empathy and understanding,' said Maxwell. 'Message me anytime and we can talk.'

Maxwell seemed a lot warmer in his private dialogue than with his public persona.

I told Angela that Maxwell had befriended me. Also, that he'd asked who'd made the Molten Lizard account, after initially thinking it was me. I didn't tell Maxwell it was Angela, as I felt loyal to her as a confidant.

'Good,' said Angela. 'I'm worried he's going to find out I made the parody account. I've had nightmares of him hunting me down.'

I don't know if Angela was joking or not. Maxwell seemed harmless enough. His enemies portrayed him as dangerous, for no apparent reason other than his views. Multiple accounts were obsessed with Maxwell. Their hatred piqued my curiosity.

As I chatted to Maxwell, I also looked him up online, to reassure myself that I could trust him. I read his blog and free sample extracts from his books. I would describe him as a gifted writer working through inner turmoil.

He also had an ability to wind people up, provoking emotional reactions with his comments. I'm not sure if he did it deliberately or not. If he was out for attention, he certainly got it, even negative attention.

His vulnerabilities in his blog and books didn't show as much when he was arguing on the app. He seemed like a complex and complicated individual. Publicly, he was inflammatory and rather obnoxious.

Privately, he was charming. I was fascinated with the apparent contradiction, yet a little suspicious, so I kept talking to him.

'Hey how are you doing?' he asked, always initiating contact with our frequent chats.

'Sounds like you get it rough,' I said. 'Seen as the enemy in petty arguments.'

'I speak what I believe is the truth, even if they chastise me for it.'

'I can be naughty and wind people up,' I said.

'I can be naughty too.' I suspected we were flirting a little there.

'I can be inappropriate at times which entertains some and offends others.' This is pretty typical with elevated moods with bipolar disorder.

'You keep being you. You are more authentic than those fools. I like watching your videos.'

'Even the dancing videos?'

'Especially those ones.'

I was worried he might cringe at those videos, after scorching someone else with his cynicism. I uploaded some of the mania episode footage recorded when I was off medications and in denial of my diagnosis. May as well scare him away early, I figured. He didn't seem to be put off.

Maxwell and I talked about my paintings and our shared interest in writing.

'Are you able to monetise your art?' he asked.

'I won't try to go professional, as I will burn out. I paint as therapy. You write exceptionally well.'

'Writing is a glorified hobby for me,' said Maxwell.

I told him I write because it's exceptionally challenging for me, with my cognitive impairments.

'I forgive my enemies,' he said. 'They possess the same flaws as I do. We're only human, appallingly vulnerable, broken and imperfect.' I noticed the word 'broken', which is sometimes how I've felt as a result of trauma – hit by a sledgehammer and shattered into a million pieces.

I had my first 'decompensation state', which laypeople call a 'breakdown', at age twenty years. During my third year at university. My brain has never been the same since. It took me a few more years to complete my degree in analytical chemistry, as I was no longer able to effectively absorb and recall information.

I can seem calm, analytical and matter-of-fact, as I shut down intense emotion most of the time. I am diagnosed with the avoidance and shutdown presentation of PTSD.

Intense emotion only occasionally surfaced in my videos. Bipolar disorder on top was like slowing things down or speeding things up. Low energy or extremely high energy.

‘In some of my videos, I danced to discharge the surges of energy,’ I said. ‘Even though I felt like a twit posting it.’

‘Don’t feel like a twit. You showed courage. May I ask what your background is? You look Italian.’

‘Yeah, people assume that. An Italian woman argued with me because she wouldn’t believe I’m not Italian.’ I told him I’m a blend of Māori and European.

‘Nice. Mixed-race people are often very attractive.’ He complimented me frequently. I was trying not to get sucked in by compliments, as I wanted to see if he had depth under the flattery.

He expressed shock that I was forty-seven. ‘I thought you were more my age,’ he said. I’m used to people assuming I’m at least ten to fifteen years younger than my chronological age.

Maxwell was in his early thirties. We are both nerdy introverts who enjoy researching topics of interest.

My psychologist, Patricia, said my mind is like too many tabs open on an internet browser at once, so everything ends up slowing down. With therapy, we were aiming to close some of those tabs, going back and forth across decades. My cognitive function has improved a lot, although I still have impairment, which clinicians call a ‘mental injury.’

I have a visual memory and some things go back decades, which unfortunately includes trauma. My mind has tried to protect me by blanking some things out, hence avoidance and shutdowns.

I enjoyed the online connection with Maxwell, being so isolated to the point of spending most of my time in my room, working on my creative projects. I’ve been very isolated since returning to New Zealand, without Zander. Separated because of complex circumstances.

I built a sculpture of a phoenix-dragon, *CouRage* from repurposed materials. It mainly symbolised the fight for courage to speak the truth, to protect the vulnerable. I emphasised ‘rage’ in ‘courage,’ as it had symbolism for me.

When my mood is elevated, I have more bursts of creative productivity. I was processing a lot of triggers and I transform the trauma into art; processing and creating at the same time.

Improvised art helps ease my anxiety. Trying to be a perfectionist about art increases anxiety.

‘Are you planning to self-publish your book?’ asked Maxwell.

‘Yes, as I don’t want pressure to change my voice.’ I also didn’t want the pressure of deadlines.

‘Good call. Don’t want to compromise on your authenticity.’

Maxwell was knowledgeable, with a sense of mystery. Part of me is attracted to danger, especially when my mood is elevated with bipolar. I wanted to find out what made him tick. I was curious about going deeper than the superficial.

He continued with compliments, which I barely acknowledged.

‘I enjoy watching your videos,’ he said. ‘You look beautiful.’

‘I don’t wear makeup in most of the videos.’

‘You clearly don’t need it. Are you still doing art every day?’

‘No, but I do something towards my creative goals every day, even if it’s just taking a photo.’

I showed him a photograph I'd taken of a kereru, a New Zealand wood pigeon. They are larger than standard pigeons and have a distinctive sound in flight, a whirring 'thoop thoop thoop'.

'Beautiful pic! I love birds. You look so young. I was taken aback when you said you were 47. You have soft, supple skin.' Now, surely, he was flirting with me now. Perhaps the compliments were to try gauge my interest? He'd written in his blog that he'd had difficulty with flirting.

'Yes, I have soft skin.' The softness of my skin has been commented on by others.

'I can see the Māori in you. Although I really did think you were Italian. You must get a fair bit of attention for your looks.'

'I don't get that much attention. I try to be invisible. Not stand out too much.'

I don't care about fashion; it's comfort over style for me. One reason I wore my old, baggy clothes in most of my videos was because it was comfortable for me. I've always preferred track pants and T-shirts. Another reason was to downplay my looks to deter predatory types.

Maxwell asked if I had any connections with Māori culture. I did. One of the biggest differences from my experiences with Māori and European culture was attitudes towards death.

'I'm perverse,' said Maxwell. 'I relish the prospect of death as an escape from material reality. I find comfort in the world-view that life is an elaborate preparation for death.'

I recall my mother saying a blog post I wrote about death, was 'disturbing.' Death is quite triggering for me and I usually avoid it. Maxwell seemed to have an unusual fixation on death.

Maxwell said he had a melancholic temperament. I was more melancholic in my twenties, leading to a depression diagnosis.

'Keep doing something meaningful for you,' I tried to encourage him, when he seemed to dwell on death. 'That's what's kept me going. Meaningful projects that give me a sense of purpose.'

Several people said my videos were unique, as the viewer could still see aspects of my diagnoses, despite treatment (medications and therapy). Also, I have seen a lot of clinicians, so I gave my perspective versus the clinicians' perspectives.

Not long after Valentine's Day, I deactivated my online dating profile. I decided I couldn't be bothered meeting anyone unless there was a mind connection as I wasn't interested in just sex. There was a shitty last message to me just before I deactivated. 'Your requirements (sensitivity to smell, local, intimate friendship) are nutty stuff. You're looking for a robot.'

I wasn't looking for an online relationship, yet talking to Maxwell activated some deeper emotions I'd suppressed. The longing for connection.

I bought two identical blue toy steam engines that reminded me of the trains Zander played with when he was little. I posted one to him and kept the other. Zander, Maxwell and my father all liked trains.

Zander had only spent one season in a soccer team, as he would stop to stare at trains going past, instead of kicking the ball.

When we'd visited a train museum, the tour guide had asked if anyone knew what the front grill sticking out the front of the locomotive was.

'A cow-catcher,' young Zander had piped up.

‘How did you know that?’ the tour guide asked, surprised. Craig and I weren’t sure. It was probably from Zander’s train adventure DVDs he listened to on repeat while playing with his train set.

The repeating tune drove me nuts, but Zander was happy. He talked about the carriages being ‘coupled together’ when he was just four years old, showing me how they linked with a hook and eye.

I have lots of memories of Zander recorded in notebooks. Also, memories of Maxwell, in my journals.

I started letting my guard down with Maxwell. I started thinking about him between our chats.

3 Vulnerable to the Flirt

The day I’d filmed the kereru eating berries, on the first day of a New Zealand autumn, I’d journalled:

‘Feel attracted to M. Lock but have not admitted it yet. He said I am pretty and talented. Zander has not talked to me since Xmas.’

Maxwell wrote a comment publicly that superficial attraction isn’t enough for a loving relationship:

‘A meaningful intellectual and emotional connection is needed from both sides, to endure through ageing, disabilities and illness.’

This was a reply to someone who was bragging about his young, glamorous girlfriend. It was deeper than his usual squabbling over political crap.

‘Nice to see your face in your profile pic,’ Maxwell said to me.

‘I was out walking near birds. I couldn’t be bothered faking a smile.’ It was the first time I’d put my face as a profile pic for Bipolar Courage on the app.

‘It’s good to be confident,’ Maxwell said. ‘It gives me satisfaction to feed birds.’

‘I enjoy seeing birds free to fly wherever they want.’

‘Birds are said to be God’s messengers to bring you tranquillity.’ Maxwell was interested in spirituality, with a broader interpretation of ‘God’. We had both researched the history of religion. I’d come to the conclusion that I didn’t need one anymore. Too many rules. It felt freeing to ditch religion.

In my childhood, adults at a church camp had tried to cast demons out of me because I was distressed at forced eye contact. It clearly didn’t work, as I still avoid eye contact.

Sometimes I’ve been interested in spirituality but I am wary of indoctrination.

‘I’m not the demon others have rendered me to be,’ said Maxwell.

‘I got called demon-possessed with bipolar.’

‘You’re not. You’re lovely.’

During our chats, I felt inspired to paint *Soar Purpose*, a metaphorical self-portrait of a bird of my imagination lifted by music. The bird was reaching towards two linked quavers, my goal of completing two novels: *Pet Purpose* and *Soar Purpose*. The bird had a golden heart radiating light.

‘Hey, I was thinking about you when I fed some birds at lunch today,’ Maxwell said.

I showed him the video clip of a kereru I’d seen near the end of my walk. I’d felt lonely and seeing this bird, sitting casually on a low branch, eating berries cheered me up.

The song I had been listening to at the time was ‘What about Love?’ by Heart. I know this, because I checked my journal, a mixture of notes and loose visual mind-maps. Colourful scribbles with felt-pen, in my own language. Complete nonsense to anyone else, but my journals tell me at a glance my mood and what I was processing.

I can skim through later to remind myself for my storytelling.

I told Patricia that I use my personal triggers and create a story around them, with art and writing. She said that she was personally inspired by me.

‘If I had to choose just one subject to paint, I would choose birds,’ I said to Maxwell.

‘Not yoni eggs? I watched that video about your impulse buy.’ He let me know he was amused.

‘Eggs are symbolic to me.’

In the video, I’d told the story of how I impulse bought a yoni egg. Then, I frantically tried to cancel the transaction when I realised the shipping was more than the egg – an expensive rock.

I’d made the purchase when I went into a dissociative high after being triggered by an account going by a fictional supervillain's name and avatar. This account had sent me a message that they were going to break me like eggs or something. It seemed to be a movie quote. My mind immediately linked it to another movie that had broken eggs related to domestic violence.

‘What are they supposed to do?’ asked Maxwell. ‘Sounds a bit dangerous, sticking egg-shaped objects, you know where.’

‘I got sucked into the claims of magically healing trauma even though it’s probably rubbish. Yoni eggs did actually help though. Like a somatic release from massage.’

‘Sounds a bit New Agey.’

‘Yeah, my mania has a New Agey flavour.’ I’m fascinated by rainbows, vibrations, and how everything seems connected to nature in mania. I could hum and feel the vibrations from my fingers to my toes. ‘Mania also has intense orgasms. Now killed off by meds,’ I added.

‘I’ve never experienced mania.’

‘Apparently, it’s like someone high on cocaine or methamphetamines, followed by a crash.’ Patricia told me it’s hard for clinicians to tell if people have bipolar or are abusing stimulants.

I get euphoric highs naturally. I take meds reduce the highs, that those addicted to recreational drugs take to try to induce. Euphoria feels amazing.

‘I had no idea mania intensified orgasms,’ said Maxwell.

It was the first time we were discussing sex. He wasn’t going to waste an opportunity with my openness to talk about it. I read in his blog he’d had trouble with sexual and romantic intimacy, which he’d attributed to autism. I don’t mind discussing sensitive topics, if both parties feel comfortable and reciprocate with depth of sharing.

‘A lot of people experience hypersexuality with mania,’ I said. ‘Extremely high libido. Also, the opposite, extremely low libido. I usually have a non-existent libido. Mania can feel good, which is why people go off meds. It can be destructive to relationships, finances and career with the risk-taking and impaired judgement.’

‘I can imagine. Actually, I can’t. I’m a depressive personality.’ I already knew he struggled with depression.

‘That’s the other side of bipolar,’ I said. ‘Depression.’ I’ve had two decades of a treatment-resistant depression diagnosis before I was diagnosed bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder typically has depressive episodes. So, I could empathise.

Maxwell had written about some of his mental health struggles, which took immense courage. I could relate, as I’ve had some similar experiences. For me, depression was usually more numbness than sadness, as I was shutdown at the same time.

Mixed mood episodes have a lot of anxiety and pain, for me. It was during the mood crashes when the hard crying, psychological distress and intense suicidal ideation was worst, for me. The bigger the high, the bigger the crash.

In the yoni egg video, I wore a dress with pink roses against a black background. I impulse bought it on sale, even though I don’t usually spend money on clothes and I rarely wear a dress.

I don’t usually show cleavage and the dress showed that I am busty. I think it was subconscious, but perhaps it was my way of flirting with Maxwell. He was watching my public videos. That’s how he got to see me.

We talked about other topics of mutual interest, including how people get sucked into ideologies. We even touched upon something we both avoided: emotions. I didn’t know if admitting loneliness would scare him away. I perceived him as a flight risk.

‘I keep myself busy,’ I said. ‘I don’t mind being alone most of the time, but sometimes I feel lonely. Can you relate?’

‘Yes, I can. I crave solitude but sometimes I’m semi-social.’

‘I’m an extreme introvert and self-isolate most of the time in my room.’ My room is where I did most of my creating.

Maxwell was curious to take a look at my manuscript for *Pet Purpose*, so I emailed it to him. I still had a lot of work to do on it, rewriting chapters to flow better, but the story was there. Fiction and memoir blended together. The fiction elements (such as composite characters) were for disguise and efficiency.

I hoped he wouldn’t think I was too crazy. Although, I think I was subconsciously giving him a chance to run, before I developed feelings for him.

‘The scene where the character drove at high-speed yelling “fuck you” – I actually did that,’ I said.

‘For real? That’s mad.’

‘Yeah, mania is mad, but I wanted to show why in my book.’

‘Do you still take meds for bipolar?’

‘Yes.’

‘You look so young for your age. I might have said that before.’ He’d said it several times before.

‘Everyone says that. I joke it’s the silver lining of being frozen in time with the shutdown presentation of PTSD.’ I usually have a neutral face expression, which might be why I have no wrinkles yet. I don’t even have grey hair yet.

‘I think it’s that mixed blood and good genes,’ said Maxwell.

‘Along with the shitty mental illness ones. I notice some advocates only want “pure” autism and crap on those who struggle with mental illness.’

‘Whatever “pure” autism is. Mental health conditions overlap, so can’t be distinguished. Asperger’s is basically anxiety.’

‘What drives your anxiety?’

‘No idea. I can’t control it. It sucks having panic attacks, too.’

‘I’ve had anxiety and panic attacks too.’

‘Painting must be therapeutic,’ added Maxwell. ‘It’s a shame we live in different countries. I’d like to speak to you in real life.’

‘Yes, I’d like to meet you, but it’s obviously not going to happen with geography.’ I didn’t say so, but I had to consider the practicalities of getting emotionally and romantically invested in someone I had little chance of meeting.

‘I love watching the yoni egg video. You come across really well,’ he said.

‘Me being an egg? I was hypomanic in that video. Mood moderately elevated, so I seemed more expressive and outgoing than my usual extremely introverted self.’

‘I like hearing your voice in your videos. Perhaps it’s your New Zealand accent?’

‘I like your voice too.’

‘Maxwell had recently shared publicly an audio recording from an interview he did. It was the first time I heard his voice. Hearing his voice, with an in-person interview, gave me more confidence that he was ‘real’.

‘You are articulate in speaking and writing,’ I said. ‘You have more perspective than those who attack you.’ I also said this publicly, so no doubt some of his enemies would have seen.

‘Thank you for the compliments. You’re most kind. Modern autism advocacy demands ideological conformity rather than insight. Those who engage in critical thinking are vilified and attacked.’

‘I was always criticised for how I speak, which then made me more anxious,’ I said.

I’ve had mutism in childhood and occasionally in adulthood. When I barely whispered, I was scolded by teachers for getting the words ‘wrong.’ I was even slapped by a teacher for not speaking. I can remember a few specific incidents. I felt terrified.

‘You sound fine to me,’ said Maxwell. ‘You communicate with your art. Words are clunky and imperfectly describe a person’s thoughts and feelings.’

I’d been more productive creatively since talking to Maxwell. I paint when my mind is struggling to find words, especially to try to express what I’m feeling. As I often don’t really know. All I knew was that I was enjoying this connection with him.

Painting can also eliminate organising words, which I have difficulty with when my cognition is more impaired. I rarely include words in my paintings.

‘What do you think I am trying to communicate with my art?’ I asked Maxwell.

‘Someone expressing their soul. It comes from the deeper recesses of the mind.’

‘Yes.’ One of the reasons I am so misunderstood is because of my deep intuition, which I could tell Maxwell had too. I think that’s why I enjoyed this connection so much. It was so rare to meet a kindred spirit.

‘Ideas beyond the material,’ Maxwell added.

‘Trying to turn the pain into something meaningful,’ I explained.

‘Transmuting negative energy into positive. That’s why you’re compelled to create.’ Indeed.

‘Yes, I transform trauma into purpose.’

I've never told Maxwell this, but when he made it clear that he understood the deeper reasons I did my art, he captured my heart. I was falling for him.

'I naturally have a more romantic, artistic temperament,' he said.

'I feel like I get you, but you are more cerebral. I improvise paintings, usually to music.' That's why my paintings have a lot of movement in them.

'You're very talented.'

'I struggle to organise words.' Even speaking on video takes a huge cognitive effort, and I frequently struggle with communicating clearly. I can rework things in writing.

'I wouldn't underestimate your facility with words,' said Maxwell.

'My novel is a complex painting with words.' My paintings were loose visual mind maps with symbolism and metaphor to help me remember my themes and storylines.

'People only see what you allow them to see.'

That was true. Despite seeming to be open, there was a lot I've kept private. I filter and selectively reveal. Processing was like composting it, so that a vibrant garden could grow from all the crap I've been through.

'I don't let people see me at my most vulnerable,' I told Maxwell. 'My novel is essentially a love story.'

'Are you a romantic person?' he asked.

'What would you define as a romantic person?' I didn't want to assume he meant in a lovely-dovey way. I thought perhaps he meant in a classical literature sort of way. He was like an old soul.

'Someone who prefers abstraction and ideas to practical reality, I guess,' he replied.

'My art is abstracted with metaphor.'

'Or someone who sees beyond the mundane.'

'I like symbolism. I'm very intuitive.'

'I'd like to meet you some day. I feel like we have an intuition. Or maybe I'm imagining it.'

He wasn't imagining it. I felt the vibe of our connection, too. Different to anyone else. It felt genuine.

'I feel like I get you,' I said. 'My mind is a mix of analytical and creative.'

We talked about brains, the nervous system, personalities, mental health diagnoses, music and more. We both researched in depth topics we were interested in and our interests overlapped.

Maxwell was getting bolder with sharing his thoughts.

'Lately, I can't stop thinking about sex,' he admitted. Now, that might be too forward for some people but I didn't mind, given we'd been confiding on a deeper level.

'Since talking to me?' I asked.

'Well, that would be telling.'

'I get the impression you're fond of me.'

'Well, you are very attractive,' he said. 'But I won't mention it if it makes you feel uncomfortable.'

'Does your libido vary a lot?' I decided to keep the communication open, given it was a brave topic for him to discuss.

'My libido fluctuates from hypersexuality to disinterest,' said Maxwell. 'Perhaps I have bipolar, too? Although I don't think I have manic phases.'

‘Yeah, me too, mostly nothing,’ I said. ‘I’m pretty much asexual.’

‘To be honest, I have a big crush on you,’ he confessed. ‘I hope you don’t mind.’

I’d suspected but hadn’t let on. Partly because I thought it would help his confidence to feel like he was taking the lead.

‘Do you get crushes often?’ I asked.

‘No.’ I didn’t tell him straight away that I felt the same. I sensed he was the type to bolt if things became too uncomfortable for him. I figured he’d been knocked back harshly with rejection, previously.

‘I have a simultaneous aversion and desire for touch,’ he said.

‘I have the same. If I feel safe, I can enjoy sensual touch.’

‘All over? Sorry, getting carried away. I’ll stop.’

I didn’t want for him to stop. I was enjoying the flirting.

End of free sample. *Bipolar Courage: Are You Sure You’re Not Autistic?* by Xanthe Wyse, is available in ebook and paperback formats on Amazon.