

My Wife, the Criminal

– JOE WELLS

I think autistic and ADHD is a good combination in a relationship. For lots of couples I know, that's the make-up of their relationship – one autistic and one ADHD. My wife has ADHD and we're the perfect couple – we once went to IKEA without having an argument, our love is eternal. We've been together since we were teenagers. Complementary neurotypes is how I would define us; if both autism and ADHD are spiky skill sets then our spiky skill sets balance each other out. For example, I'm good at turning up to things on time but she's got the social skills to apologise when she's made us half an hour late.

One of the few ways in which our neurotypes don't complement each other is our different attitudes to rules. I like to follow the rules because that way the world is a safer and more predictable place, whereas my wife is a remorseless criminal who is quite happy to refill a soda cup at a fast food restaurant even when it is not stated that drinks are refillable (she claims that free refills are implied by giving us the cup to fill; I don't think this would stand up in court).

My feeling is always that if I've followed the rules as best I can then the possibility of complicated social interactions is minimised. If I'm caught breaking a rule then I am forced to either

maintain a lie or admit to breaking a rule and both of those sound very stressful. Much of the autistic experience is being told that you've done things wrong or broken unspoken social rules so I try to stick to following the more explicit social rules wherever possible. For instance as a child I would never lie about my age, costing my parents hundreds of pounds in full-price museum entry. Under fives go free, 'but I'm not under five! I'm five and two months!'

On the way home from a show earlier this year we went through a McDonald's drive through and were given the wrong order. We returned (what I believed to be) the entire wrong order and were given the correct order. As we drove away my wife revealed to me an *entire sharebox of mozzarella sticks* which she had hidden in the glove compartment because she knew that I would not approve of us keeping them. I know that they would probably have just thrown away the wrong order and, even if they didn't, it's not like we're stealing from a small business. Ronald can afford to take the hit on a packet of mozzarella sticks, but I would never have allowed us to keep the cheese in case we got caught and they sent that big purple monster after us.

Not all our rule-based disagreements happen in fast food eateries. In May 2023 my wife and I attended the brilliant Machynlleth Comedy Festival in North Wales. We arrived early and went for a walk. The countryside in Wales is beautiful, more so in May as it is lambing season so there are baby sheep in every field. As we began our walk, we passed one of these fields. The lambs were sat with their mothers under a big tree in the middle of the field. My wife wanted to go into the field to get a better look at the lambs. I said that we shouldn't do this because it's against the rules. There was a gate with a bolt on it; she pulled it back and went into the field.

I'd sort of reached a point in my marriage where I'd just

resigned myself to my life of crime; she wanted to do all these impulsive things, I would complain but eventually go along with it. I'm already on a watchlist for stealing that cheese box, I thought, so why not add rural trespass to my crime sheet. I reluctantly followed her into the sheep field.

My wife would like it made clear that at no point did she get so close to the lambs that her presence would be frightening for them or for there to be any risk of harm to them, but I would like it made clear that she did go through the gate, which you weren't meant to do regardless of how close you get to the lambs.

She was taking photos of the lambs; I was standing at a distance close enough to the gate that I hoped she might be encouraged to leave quicker. At this point a farmer came along. I know he was a farmer because he wore a flat cap and spoke authoritatively about the sheep field. He told us we weren't meant to be in the sheep field. My wife claimed that she didn't know that we weren't meant to be in the sheep field. I said, 'Well, I did say that we weren't meant to be in the sheep field.' My wife's defence was as follows...

'Well, there isn't a sign so how could we know?'

I love my wife with all my heart. So much of my ability to function day to day comes down to being married to someone who can help me navigate the things I find difficult, she has been there for me when I've been at my lowest, and I don't know how I'd cope without her but...you can't live your life doing whatever you want unless there's a sign there! If this was a defence, then serial killers would be in court saying, 'I'm sorry for the misunderstanding but I didn't see a "no decapitating" sign, so how can I be blamed?' Public spaces would have to be covered with endless signs laying out every possible thing you aren't allowed to do: 'no murdering', 'no kicking children', 'no using a live cat as a skateboard', etc.

We left the sheep field and haven't been back to Machynlleth since. I imagine that there are now signs up with our faces on.

WANTED – sheep field trespassers. Warning – may be in possession of stolen cheese.