



**A Collection of Poetry and  
Short Stories**

**By Isabel Harper**

## About the Author

Isabel Harper was born and raised in West London and started writing at the age of ten.

As a young girl, Isabel was strongly influenced by TV shows and films like "That's so Raven", "The Suite Life of Zack & Cody" and "The Perks of Being a Wallflower". These shows helped inspire Isabel to form a lifelong dream of becoming a writer.

Following on from her successes at school, Isabel embarked on her journey to University where she attended Manchester Metropolitan University in order to study BA Creative Writing.



During this course, Isabel experimented with different styles of writing such as poetry and short stories, many of which were uploaded to her blog

**<https://isabelharperblog.wordpress.com>**

Isabel not only has a passion for writing but also a passion for people. Isabel has always been driven by a desire to help, support and care for those around her and the themes contained within this book demonstrate the unyielding love that she brings into the world. This book contains a selection of work from Isabel's blog.

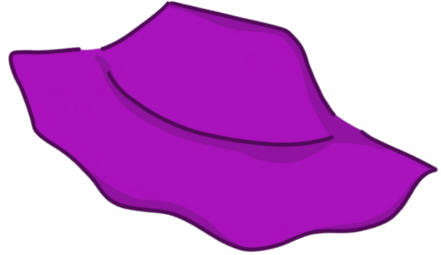


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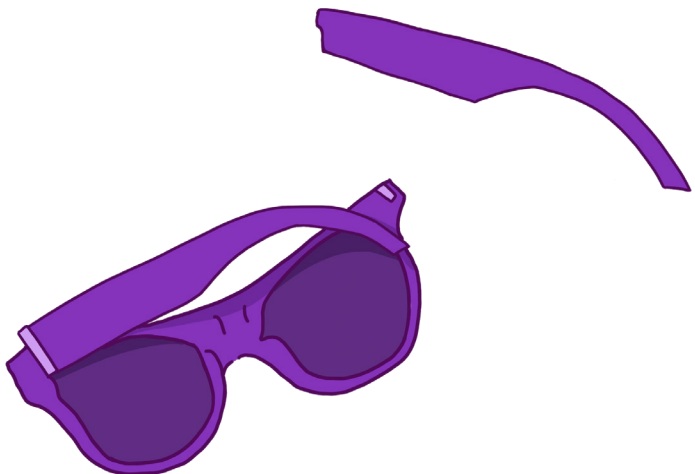
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## I only want you when you're gone (summer)

sunscreen and sugar,  
sea salt and vinegar,  
a cigarette with dinner  
outside.

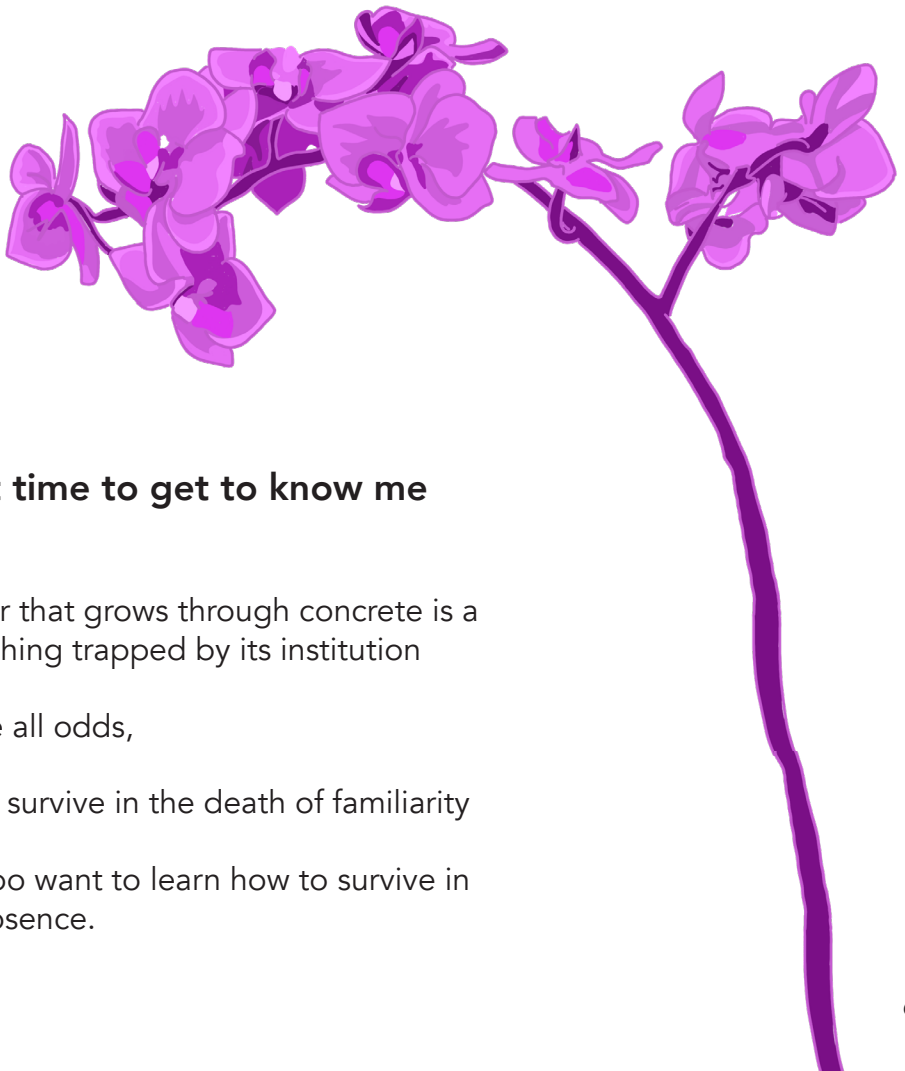


bucket hats and broken sunglasses  
awkward tan lines equals going braless  
watermelon juice trickling down bronzed cheeks;  
secret seeds sown into the gums of your teeth  
coconut and shea butter tanning oils



melted vanilla ice cream,  
worn away sandals  
plastic water pistols and cheap electric fans,  
losing AAA batteries in the sand.  
waking up delirious in a pool of sweat,  
missing a body in your bed  
sleeping on the floor to try and cool down  
hyperfixating on that whirring sound.





## **Worst time to get to know me**

a flower that grows through concrete is a  
pretty thing trapped by its institution

despite all odds,

life can survive in the death of familiarity

and I too want to learn how to survive in  
your absence.

## Limbs

you woke up before him  
but pretended you didn't.  
pale yellow rays seep into the room,  
sunlight sobers the memories of last night,  
you're blushing and now it's time to leave,  
but you want to stay;  
you want him to ask you to stay  
Girl, get dressed.  
limbs entangled does not guarantee intimacy,





skin pressed against skin isn't a deal  
and it's not a crime to be desperate,  
but you sure do look silly,  
trying to make space on their nightstand.  
unravelling from the sheets, he looks over,  
morning breath sealing a tired smile,  
you search for your bra and skirt in silence.  
nothing bad happened, but that's the problem, nothing  
happened.  
now you harbour this secret resentment  
for the lack of a story to warrant your feelings,



and with one foot in your doc martens,  
your pride sinks to the pit of your stomach,  
sloshing around with tequila sunrises and McDonald's.

Girl, it's not you, it's the system.

life isn't like the movies.

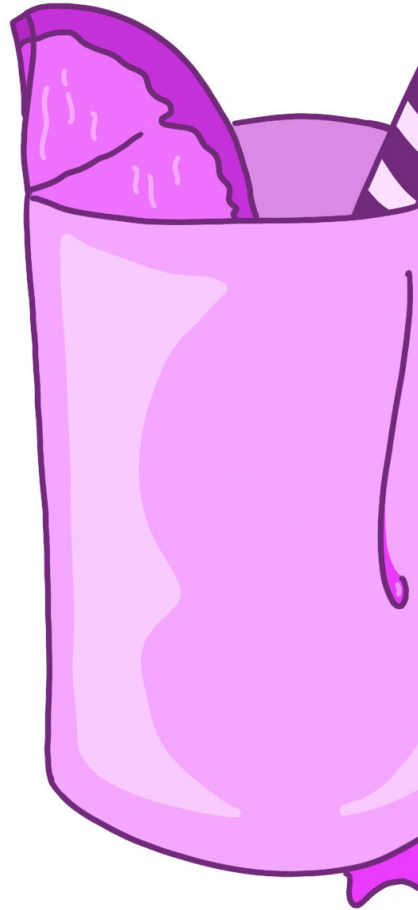
it doesn't mean anything

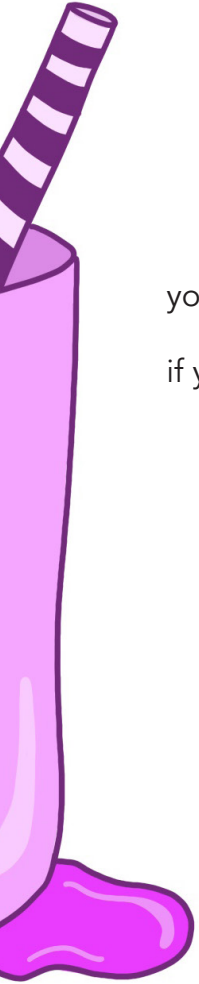
if they part their lips slowly

and hover over your ear to say

'you look so fit tonight'

you'd give it all up for a compliment, but





you could easily romance yourself  
if you were half as kind.

## Saviour Complex

Today, I'm going to change the world.

I'll be nice to strangers on the internet,

I'll share petitions, donate money,

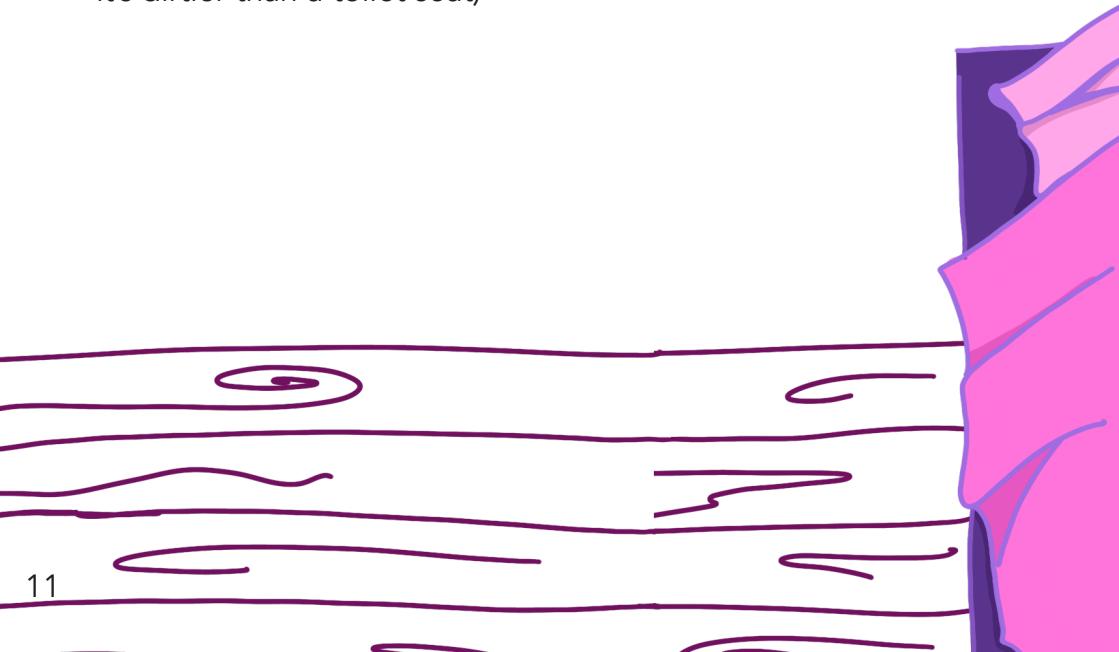
and be kind in 140 characters or less

and maybe even get out of bed.

Today, I'm going to change the world.

I'll write a letter to my MP, critically analyse their policies to see if I agree,

afterwards, I'll sanitise my phone screen, (because it's dirtier than a toilet seat)



and maybe even get out of bed.

Today I'm going to change the world.

I'm serious this time.

I'll peel the sticky labels off plastic bottles,  
collect bags for life in the storage cupboard,  
and buy aluminium straws to 'save the turtles'  
and maybe this time I'll get out of bed.



## Blank Space

“On this bald hill the new year hones its edge.

Faceless and pale as china

The round sky goes on minding its business.

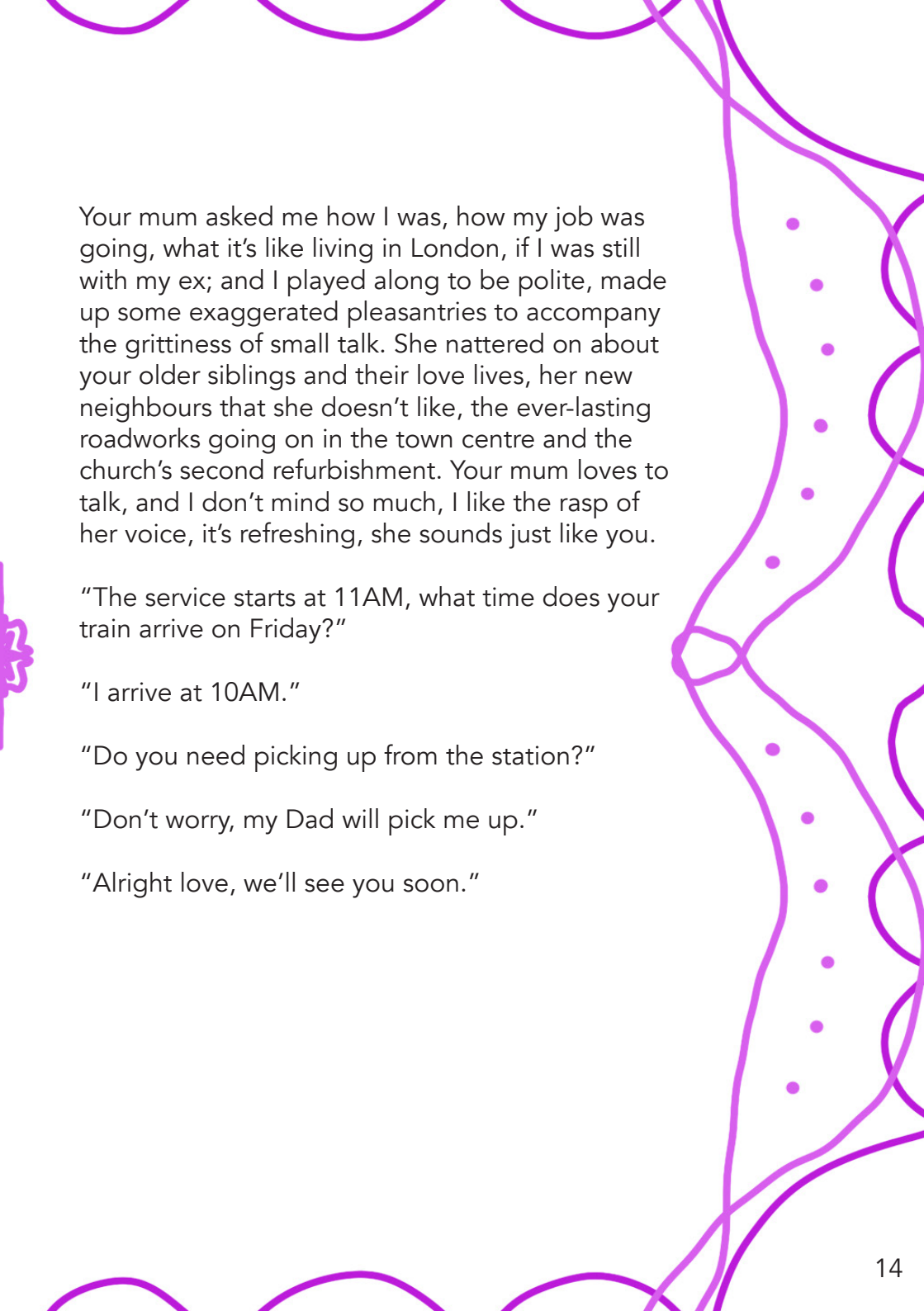
Your absence is inconspicuous,

Nobody can tell what I lack.”

– Sylvia Plath, Parliament Hill Fields

Your mum called me on Wednesday, I hadn't heard her voice in two years. It's your ten-year anniversary this Friday; your mum even made a Facebook event for it. I imagine you would laugh if you were here, I can picture you screwing up your face with fake outrage, making your voice shrill:

“Is that all I'm really worth to you, mum? A Facebook event? Who even uses Facebook anymore?”



Your mum asked me how I was, how my job was going, what it's like living in London, if I was still with my ex; and I played along to be polite, made up some exaggerated pleasantries to accompany the grittiness of small talk. She nattered on about your older siblings and their love lives, her new neighbours that she doesn't like, the ever-lasting roadworks going on in the town centre and the church's second refurbishment. Your mum loves to talk, and I don't mind so much, I like the rasp of her voice, it's refreshing, she sounds just like you.

"The service starts at 11AM, what time does your train arrive on Friday?"

"I arrive at 10AM."

"Do you need picking up from the station?"

"Don't worry, my Dad will pick me up."

"Alright love, we'll see you soon."

Alex, my girlfriend, watched me pace anxiously around our bedroom. "Who is it?" she asked with her eyes, "a family friend" I mouthed back. You've never met Alex, but I like to think you'd like her, even though she might not be what you'd expect, and she doesn't know much about you. You're not a secret. I'm not ashamed of my past, just remorseful. A lot of things can change in ten years, but just trust me when I say it's better this way.

Ironically, in the first session with my new therapist, I told her that for years I wished it had been me instead of you. Her crystal blue eyes softened, and she looked at me like I was a teary-eyed child who had just dropped their ice cream cone. "Do you think that she would agree with you?" I shrugged and sighed "Probably."

I get the feeling that your family wants me to stay sad about you, and I promise I was, but I'm twenty-six now, and you're not the only person I've lost. People love to remind me that getting better doesn't mean I'm forgetting about you, but sometimes I think the only way I will heal is if I do.

Friday 8TH July 2011 – Our Last Night

I didn't want to go to the party.





I was fine with drinking cheap ciders in the park and bumming menthol cigarettes from creepy men, but I told you I didn't want to go to the party. I begged you to just have a sleepover with me, order a pizza and chill out like we used to do. But you'd already told your mum you were sleeping at mine, and I told my Dad I was staying at yours, so how could we not go, when it was so easy as a teenager to lie? Consequences dissolved on our tongues and we washed them down with bottom-shelf vodka and lemonade. Besides, there was nothing I could say that could ever compete with the idea of boys. Boys that were tall, boys with deep voices, boys that could drive.

We sat at the back of the bus with a PE bag full of Strongbow cans, wearing tatty trainers with your older sister's bodycon dresses, that were way too big for us. I told you I was nervous to be around older boys and you just laughed at me and told me to not be frigid, otherwise I'd make you look weird. You thought you would be safe because some of the boys knew your older brother at uni, so you thought they would protect you. We never thought to question why boys three years our senior were at the same house parties as us – we just wanted to look cool because when you're sixteen, that's all that matters.

House parties always looked better on TV. The kind of parties we went to didn't have speakers by the swimming pool, red solo cups, or big confetti balloons. No one danced and we didn't even play party games like spin the bottle or beer pong.



The girls wore tight neon bodycon dresses with chunky gold chains and sleeked ponytails. The boys wore Fred Perry polo shirts with distressed skinny jeans. The girls drank blue WKD, and the boys drank lukewarm cans of Fosters. We would sit on opposite sides of the room in unofficial staring competitions, waiting for the other person to make the first move, which involved going outside to the garden, sticking your tongues down each other's throat and pretending you were enjoying it. I thought my first kiss with a boy would be romantic, I imagined the kiss would feel like floating or that fireworks would go off in my head. Instead, the memory is tainted by the fact that the first boy I got off with had a nosebleed whilst we were kissing and then sneezed blood on my face. You thrived at house parties because you loved the attention. You could command all eyes in the room with the echo of your laugh. You glowed and I was your shadow, at least that's how it felt.

I didn't want to go to the party, but we went.

As soon as we arrived, the panic began to kick in. My hands were clammy, my mouth was dry, I could feel a lump in my throat; I could sense that something wasn't right. This wasn't like the usual house parties we went to with people from school,

where the hosts' parents stayed upstairs voluntarily, as long as we made sure everyone was out of the house by midnight. My shaved legs were trembling, so you made me sit down on the bus bench and smoked a cig before we walked up to the front door.

"Whose house are we going to again?"

"This boy called Josh. He's proper fit!"

"Which year is he in?"

"He's goes to uni."

"Oh. So how did you meet him?"

"BBM."

"Who gave you his BBM pin?"

"He did"



“When?”

“Like ages ago.”

“Ok. So have you met up with him before or...”

“Can you relax, it’s just a house party and he invited me – I mean us, so smoke your cig, and stop being frigid. Just act cool.”

You quickly stuffed some tissue into your push up bra and strolled up confidently to the front door. You rang the doorbell twice as no one answered the first time, and an unfamiliar girl opened the door. Her hair was long and platinum blonde, her skin was smooth and bronzed, and she had these memorizing green eyes. She was wearing the same style of bodycon dress as us, but hers was hot pink and it fit her properly. Her dress showed off her big boobs and sexy curves that we didn’t have yet. She had a bottle of Gordon’s gin in one hand and a small plastic bag with white powder between her index and middle finger. This girl was gorgeous, and I could see the envy in your eyes.

“Hi, um...Josh invited us...” You said in a lower register.

She briefly stared us down before hearing her name being called and reluctantly let us inside. I overheard her friend say:

“ew, who the fuck invited freshers here?”

I remember the bass made the room vibrate, liquids bubbling in bottles on the kitchen counter. Bodies filled every inch of the room, their eyes followed us, confused murmurs shuffled amongst their lips. The room was packed with different cliques, quiet zombie boys passing around a joint, drunk girls in heels were dancing, and almost everyone was putting a house key up their nose. We didn't recognise a single person there; everyone was older than us and more attractive – it was like they were actors for the house party. A group of boys with matching haircuts and cheap cologne approached us.

“hey, you finally made it!”

“Obvs!”



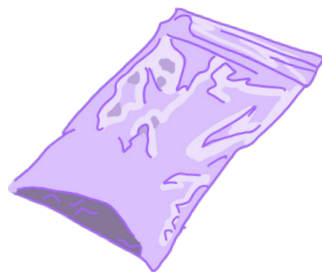
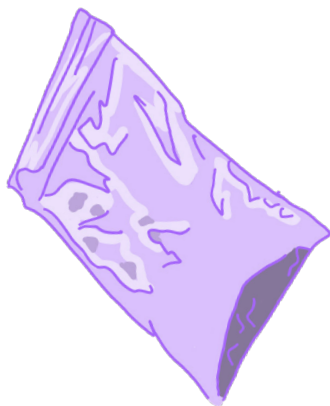
"Your friend doesn't speak much, does she?" Josh teased. Embarrassed, I tried to open my mouth to make a witty comeback, but you put on a fake, high-pitched giggle that you thought made you sound cute, whilst my cheeks flushed scarlet, and I blinked away tears.




He introduced us to some of his uni friends, but I couldn't remember anyone's name and I doubted they would remember mine. You flittered between the people and struck up conversations so easily. I was always jealous of how easy it was for you to make new friends whilst I lingered behind you. The platinum blonde girl who opened the door for us re-joined the circle. She licked her pinkie finger and dipped her nail delicately inside her small plastic bag of powder. She caught me staring intensely at her and extended her hand, "Want some?"



My heart started to race again as I felt people's eyes watching me. "Uh, what is it?" I tried to ask casually, feigning curiosity rather than ignorance. "Coke." The girl replied bluntly before sticking her pinkie up her nose and sniffing hard. Before I could even answer, you piped up again; "if she won't, I will!" and everyone laughed hysterically, including you, and once again I was silenced.





Hours later, I remember sitting on the arm of a sofa that two drunk people were making out on, wishing I had stayed at home.

The last thing we ever said to each other looped around my brain for months. If we had known that this was our last conversation, I like to think we'd've been nicer to each other.

"Um, d'ya know where the toilet is?"

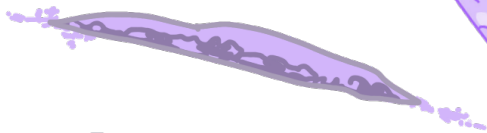
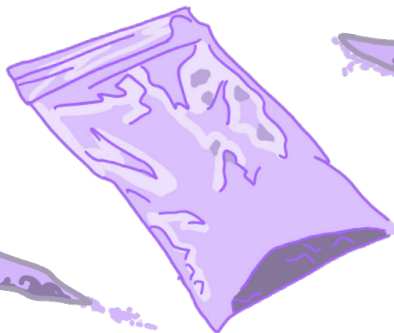
"I dunno. Go look."

"Can you come with me?"

"Why? You don't need me to go piss."

"Please come."

"I can't, I'm waiting for Josh to come back"



“Ok, so you can’t go to the loo with me for 2 minutes  
because Josh might come look for

you?”

“He said he was coming back, why would he lie?  
Don’t be jealous.”

“Whatever, I’m done, I think I want to go home”

“Why, we’re having fun. What do you mean you’re  
going home?”

“I’m not having fun.”

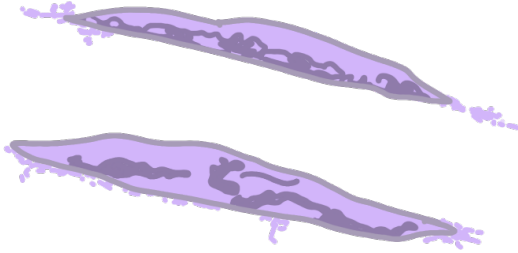
“Well, why you being boring?”

“I’m just tired...and sober- ”

“Drink more.”







"I don't want to."

"Then do some coke-,"

"Are you deaf? I said I don't want to."

"But why not?"

"I don't know, I just don't want to do drugs tonight- "

"You're being BORING!"

"Shut up. Seriously, can we go home soon? It's midnight."

"Nah, I wanna stay here tonight."

"Since when?"

"Since...now."

"How are you gonna get home?"

"I dunno, I'll ask Josh to drive me tomorrow."

"Yeah, sounds like he'll definitely want to do that."

"Look, don't act like you care about what happens to me, if you did, you'd stay with me."

"Well, sorry I'm a bad mate, you wouldn't know what that's like."

"Piss off."

"Sure. Since I don't care, I'm going home then."

"I can't believe you're ditching me! I'll remember this y'know."

"No, you won't. See ya."



No one noticed when I left, I walked home that night in the dark without you. I remember telling myself whatever happens to you is not my fault because I gave you a choice. I kicked an empty Smirnoff bottle the entire journey home until it smashed into shards that got stuck in my trainers. For years, it felt like I cursed you.

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I've replayed that situation in my head for ten years, I've imagined hundreds of different outcomes. I've spoken to psychiatrists, therapists, priests, even AA leaders and no one could help me let go of the guilt.

The worst part is that no one knows how you treated me. No one will ever know how bad of a friend you were to me that night, in the hopes that some uni boy would take your virginity. No one will care about the guilt I felt because it doesn't matter. Knowing the intricacies of your death doesn't make it any easier to grieve, so why share the gruesome details of your last hours?

I woke up groggy at 9 AM on Saturday morning to six missed calls from your Mum.




I remember peering at my Dad through the window, he was leaning against the front door talking to a young policewoman in a hushed but serious tone. I'd almost forgotten about the party; it was so jarring I decided to repress the memory. But then the policewoman came inside, and I heard her ask if I was at home and if I could be spoken to. The dread sank in when I saw the blue flashing lights parked outside your house.

On the day of your funeral, it rained heavily. The torrential downpour felt appropriate for a day that was so fucking awful, a day that clings to walls of my brain and festers. It wasn't the party you jokingly planned, when we used to morbidly discuss how we wanted to be buried in form time. You once made me pinkie promise to make sure we put your ashes in to fireworks and have massive firework display like they do on NYE. You made me promise to plan a drink up instead of a traditional funeral and that everyone should wear bright colours instead of black. Unfortunately, I wasn't brave enough to hold up my end of the bargain; but maybe your family would've been more open to the idea if circumstances were different. Even back then, you had this inkling that you would die before me.

The dealer never stepped forward to atone for his sins of supplying Josh and his friends' cocaine. Unsurprisingly, Josh wasn't invited to your funeral and I haven't seen him since that night. I had to stand with our form class who were invited to attend.



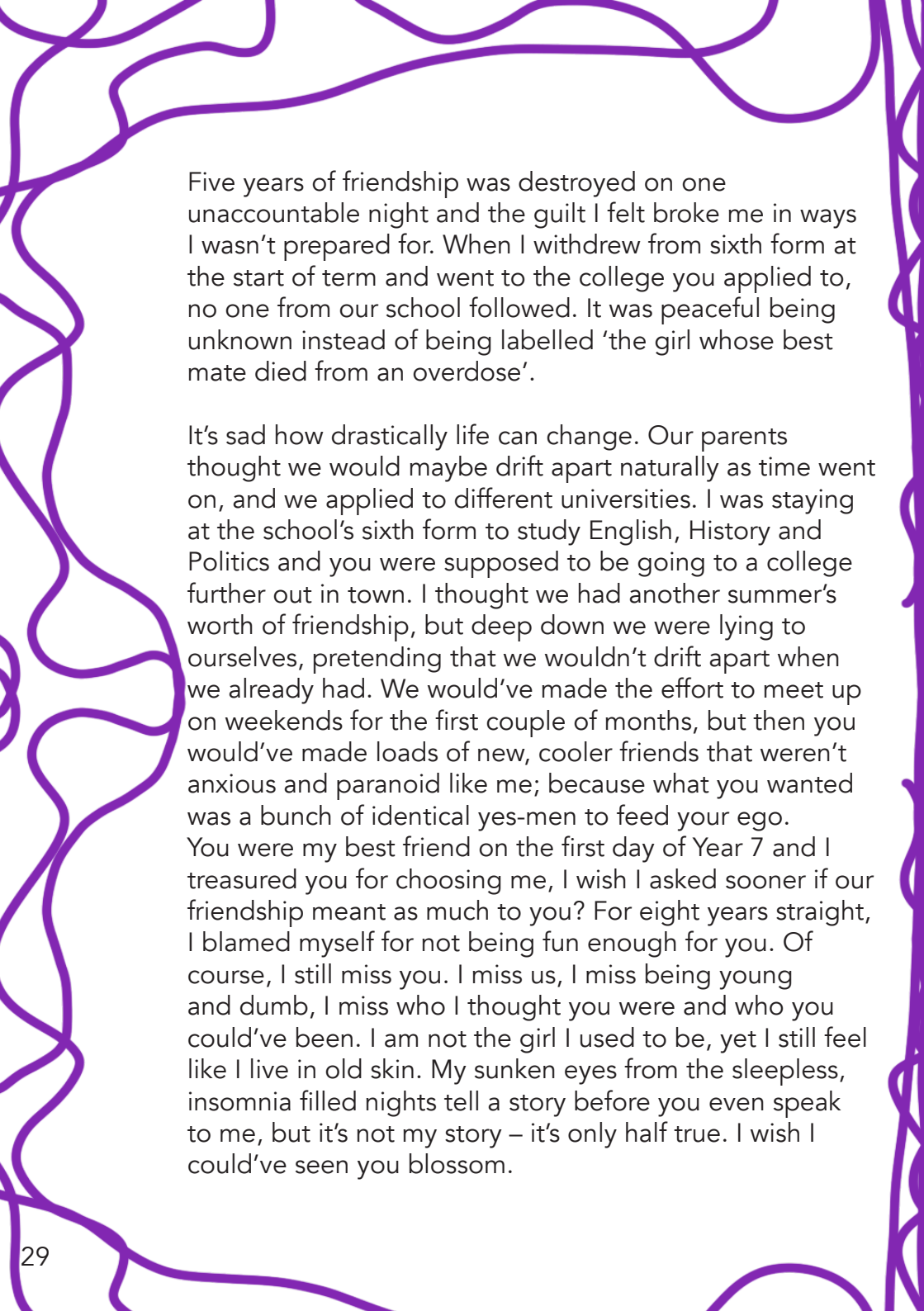


Our headteacher, Mrs Windmill (who once said you were her least favourite pupil) sobbed for you that day, which I bet you wouldn't believe.

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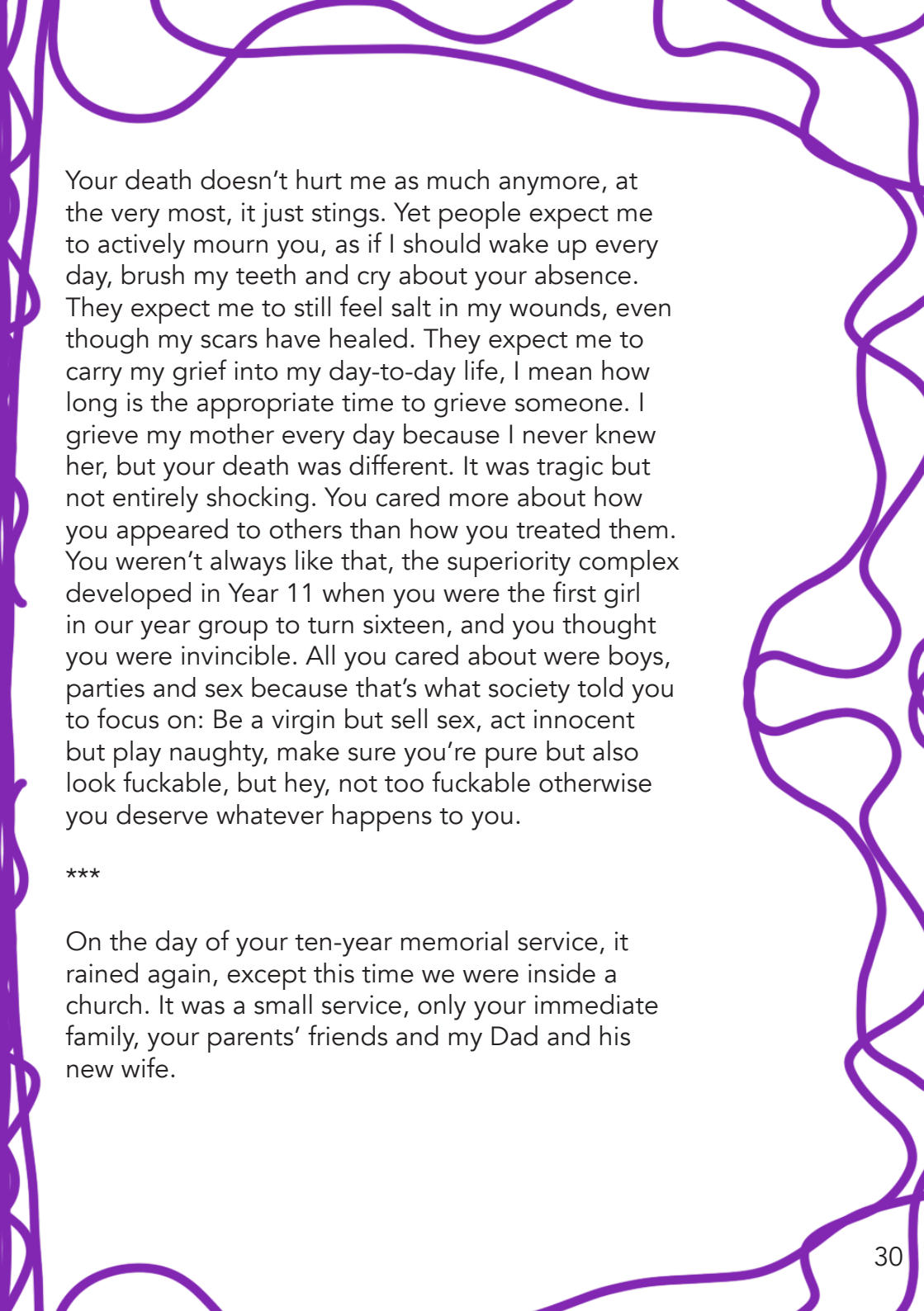
We had a girls' holiday booked for August 4th to Mallorca with eight other girls in our year (who definitely invited us because they needed help splitting the cost of the villa). Your mum had saved up money so you could afford to go. My Dad didn't want me to go on the holiday, I remember begging him so I wouldn't be the only girl missing out. We didn't fully understand the value of money back then, we were sixteen and impatient. I didn't end up going on the holiday.

Our parents hid their financial difficulties so well from us; so that we were none the wiser that they were taking up extra shifts to make ends meet for us. So, they could spare us a cheeky tenner on the weekends that we would use to persuade strangers to buy us ciders and cigarettes. Looking back, I can't imagine how our parents would react if they knew what we were up to all those years ago. We strung well-rehearsed lies to them on the daily, but at least we made sure we did our homework before we got drunk in the fields.

A decorative border made of thick, purple, wavy lines surrounds the text on the page.

Five years of friendship was destroyed on one unaccountable night and the guilt I felt broke me in ways I wasn't prepared for. When I withdrew from sixth form at the start of term and went to the college you applied to, no one from our school followed. It was peaceful being unknown instead of being labelled 'the girl whose best mate died from an overdose'.

It's sad how drastically life can change. Our parents thought we would maybe drift apart naturally as time went on, and we applied to different universities. I was staying at the school's sixth form to study English, History and Politics and you were supposed to be going to a college further out in town. I thought we had another summer's worth of friendship, but deep down we were lying to ourselves, pretending that we wouldn't drift apart when we already had. We would've made the effort to meet up on weekends for the first couple of months, but then you would've made loads of new, cooler friends that weren't anxious and paranoid like me; because what you wanted was a bunch of identical yes-men to feed your ego. You were my best friend on the first day of Year 7 and I treasured you for choosing me, I wish I asked sooner if our friendship meant as much to you? For eight years straight, I blamed myself for not being fun enough for you. Of course, I still miss you. I miss us, I miss being young and dumb, I miss who I thought you were and who you could've been. I am not the girl I used to be, yet I still feel like I live in old skin. My sunken eyes from the sleepless, insomnia filled nights tell a story before you even speak to me, but it's not my story – it's only half true. I wish I could've seen you blossom.



Your death doesn't hurt me as much anymore, at the very most, it just stings. Yet people expect me to actively mourn you, as if I should wake up every day, brush my teeth and cry about your absence. They expect me to still feel salt in my wounds, even though my scars have healed. They expect me to carry my grief into my day-to-day life, I mean how long is the appropriate time to grieve someone. I grieve my mother every day because I never knew her, but your death was different. It was tragic but not entirely shocking. You cared more about how you appeared to others than how you treated them. You weren't always like that, the superiority complex developed in Year 11 when you were the first girl in our year group to turn sixteen, and you thought you were invincible. All you cared about were boys, parties and sex because that's what society told you to focus on: Be a virgin but sell sex, act innocent but play naughty, make sure you're pure but also look fuckable, but hey, not too fuckable otherwise you deserve whatever happens to you.

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On the day of your ten-year memorial service, it rained again, except this time we were inside a church. It was a small service, only your immediate family, your parents' friends and my Dad and his new wife.

After the service, we had dinner with your parents, brothers and sister. Your older sister is a mum now, which means you're an auntie to a beautiful baby boy. His cheeks are so soft and round it's impossible not to pinch them.

The dinner was slightly unbearable, not because of the food or company but because I could hear your parents bickering in the kitchen like they used to when we were teenagers. They got divorced a year after your funeral. Your Dad lives in Wales now on a boat; and your two brothers are still just as quiet and mysterious.

I took a gap year after sixth form and went travelling around Europe. I met my girlfriend, Alex, in a nightclub in Berlin. We both went to university in London and graduated in 2017. Alex went on to study a masters, and I learnt how to drive. We've adopted two cats named Milo and Tommo. I'm training to be a guidance counsellor.

In other news, Mrs Windmill became Mr Windmill in 2018 and Josh is engaged to his fiancé Rebecca (the platinum blonde girl at the party), although she is now a brunette and four months pregnant. Josh works in a bank and Rebecca is an aesthetician.





Like I said before, a lot of things can change in ten years,  
but some things stay the same.

As much as I change my hair, my clothes, my friends  
and my home, there will always be a part of me that's  
labelled as the girl whose best friend died at sixteen. I  
don't use this label but it's how people from our town will  
remember me. No matter how much I accomplish in my  
life, it won't bring you back, but I do it for you because  
even though our last moment together wasn't perfect, it  
doesn't mean I should dismiss all the good memories we  
shared.

What they don't realise is that you are still here, living  
with me. I see you in clothes hanging on mannequins  
in shop windows, I hear your laugh when I re-watch old  
films, I can hear your singing voice when I listen to music  
we used to play on your CD player.

I still feel like it's up to me whether your memory lives  
or dies, just like it was that night. Instead of harbouring  
resentment at a naive teenager – I've got to get in my  
head that I'll never be sixteen again. So if I don't mention  
you all the time, or if I miss an anniversary or a memorial  
service it's not because I've forgotten; I'll never forget  
you, I'm just trying to live the life you would have wanted.





## The Pathetic Man

There is nothing more dangerous in this world than a  
pathetic man.

The pathetic man drives slowly beside the walking  
woman,

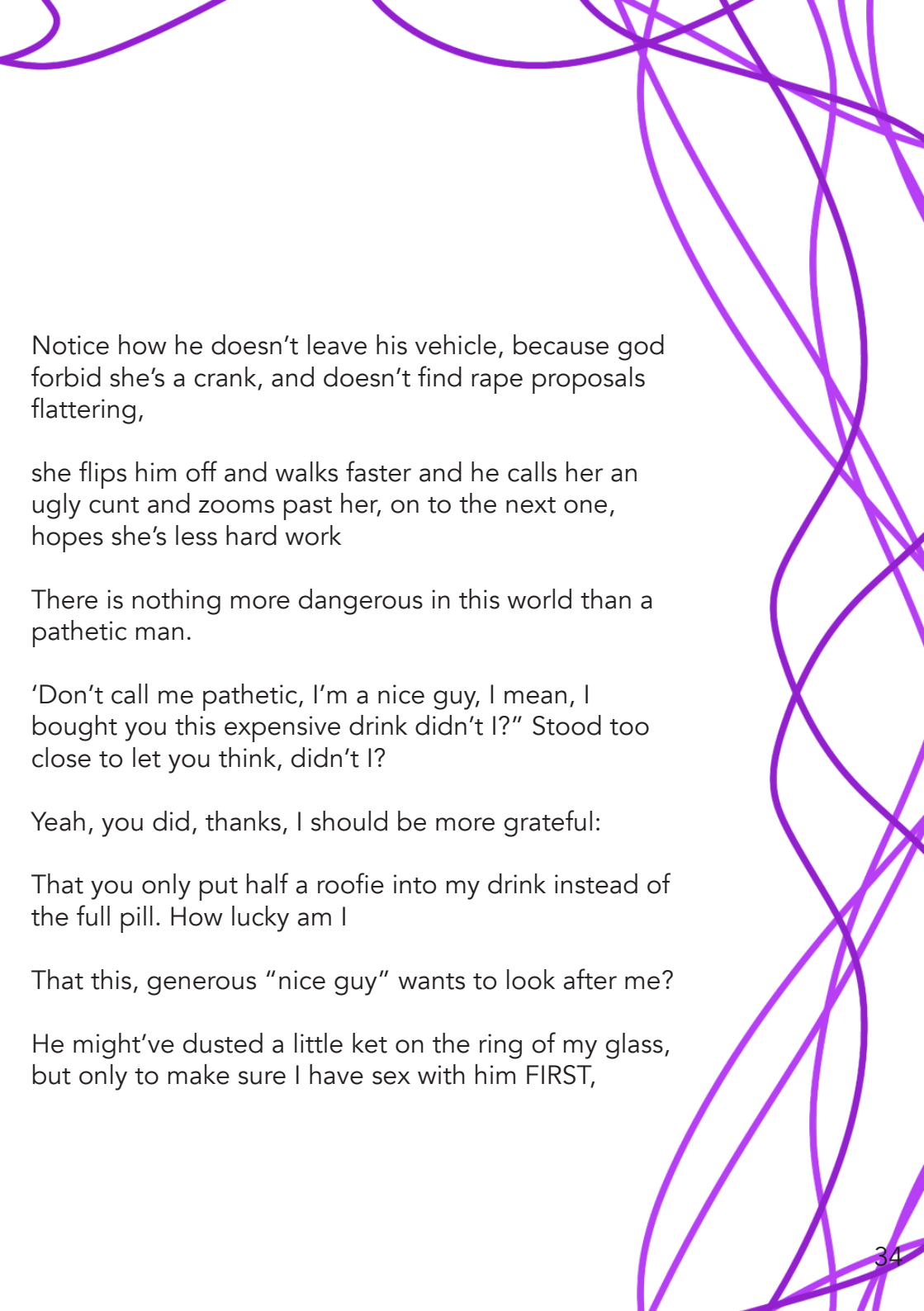
She has her headphones in, no music playing, she scans  
her peripheral every twenty seconds, memorises every  
street sign,

just in case he tries to grab her

But he just wants a chat, poor him, he must be so lonely

To yell out the car window that he wants to take this  
stranger home

Where they can play house like it's 1959



Notice how he doesn't leave his vehicle, because god forbid she's a crank, and doesn't find rape proposals flattering,

she flips him off and walks faster and he calls her an ugly cunt and zooms past her, on to the next one, hopes she's less hard work

There is nothing more dangerous in this world than a pathetic man.

'Don't call me pathetic, I'm a nice guy, I mean, I bought you this expensive drink didn't I?' Stood too close to let you think, didn't I?

Yeah, you did, thanks, I should be more grateful:

That you only put half a roofie into my drink instead of the full pill. How lucky am I

That this, generous "nice guy" wants to look after me?

He might've dusted a little ket on the ring of my glass, but only to make sure I have sex with him FIRST,

he'll carry my limp, unconscious body to the back of his car, and touch me everywhere he can, his semen thick like tar, and when I wake up,

he'll dare to ask me if he can do it again?

Sure, go ahead, I've lost everything already he wants me to say

There is nothing more dangerous in this world than a pathetic man.

The man that blames his violence on the length of your skirt,

or the closed buttons on your shirt,

or the fact that you didn't smile for him on command.

See, when a pathetic man has his fragile, ego bruised, then every woman he encounters has to lose

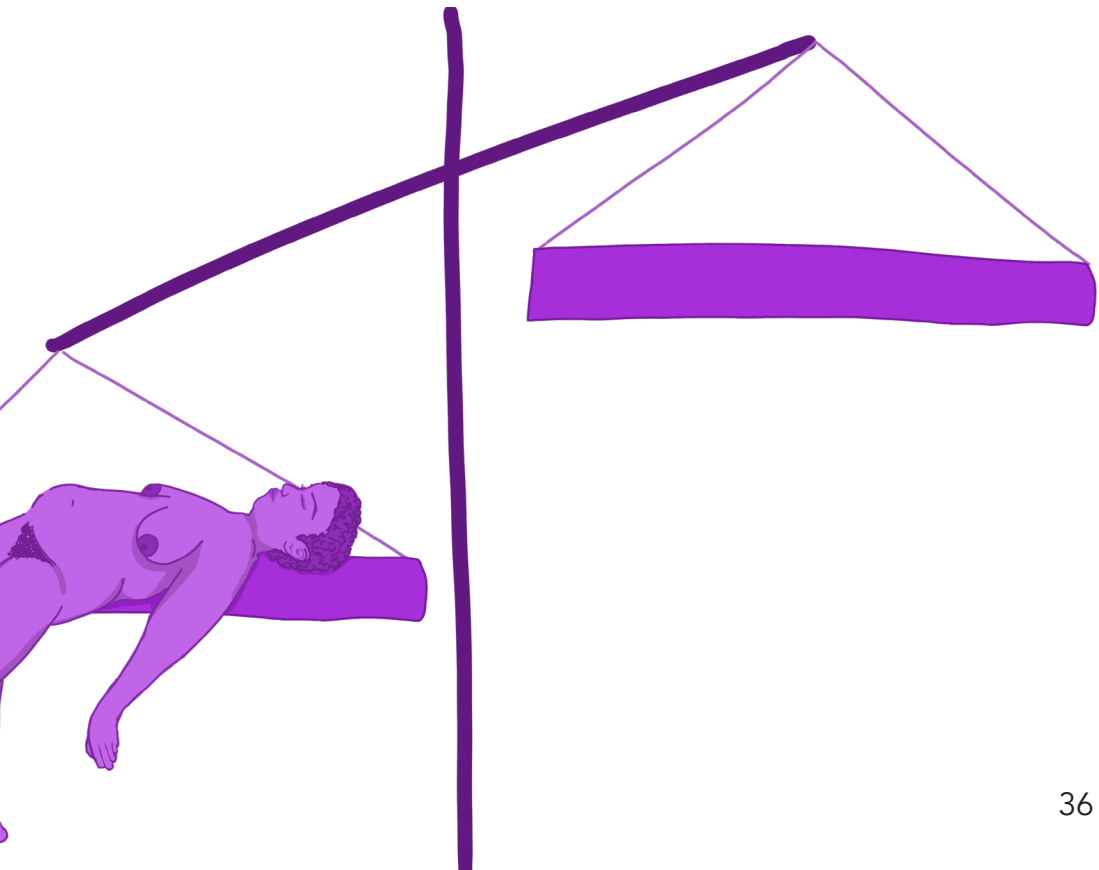


Something or someone

to balance out the scales of man-made inequality.

There is nothing more dangerous in this world than  
a pathetic man

who doesn't believe he's pathetic.



## Mother Knows Best

I hate how my mother is always right.

Always right when it comes to characters

For years she has had this superpower.

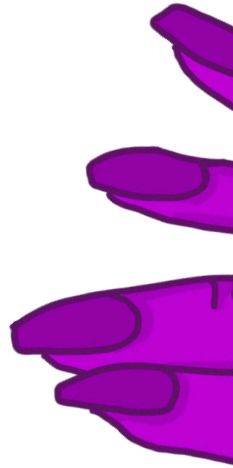
She can sense a corrupted soul from a mile away  
from a simple handshake and hello.

She can see straight through the masks that plaster  
fake smiles and regurgitate pretty lies.

She always tries to warn me, but I never listen.

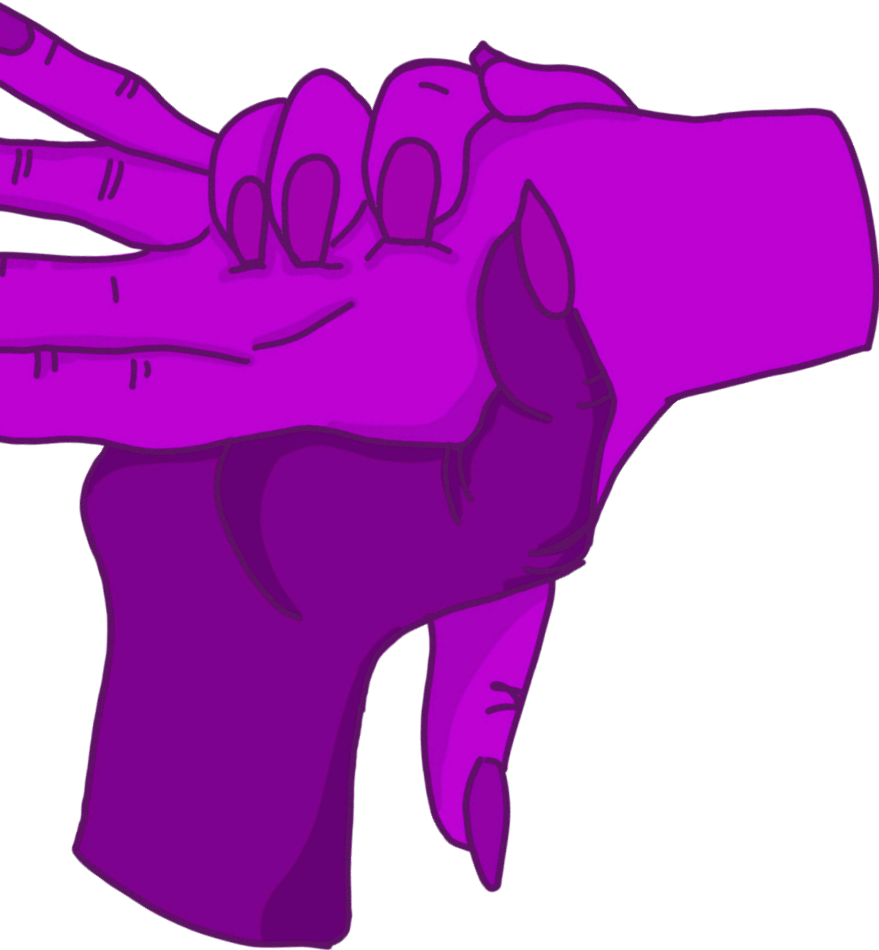
I shake my head in defence and fist in defiance,

I say she's being too judgmental and old fashioned.



But to this day,

I am yet to prove her wrong.



## Fingering the Jam Jar

Dumbfounded

you caught me with

four fingers deep,

plunging

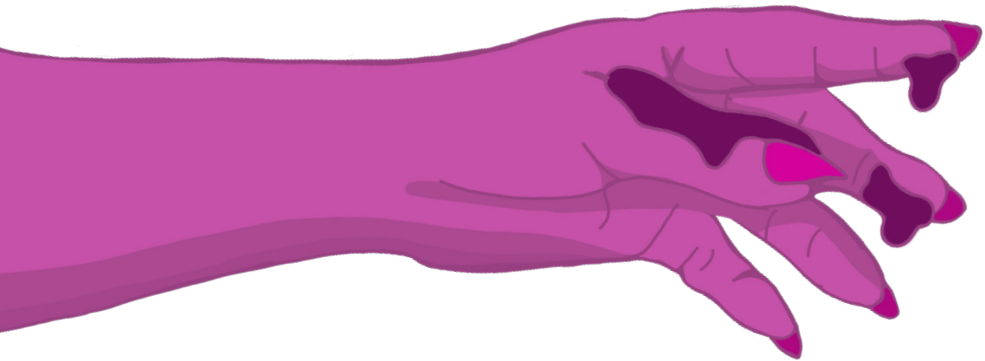
into a mostly empty jam jar

swirling my sticky fingers around the base,

spooning scarlet sugar,

thick red clots of

raspberry conserve lining my dark lips



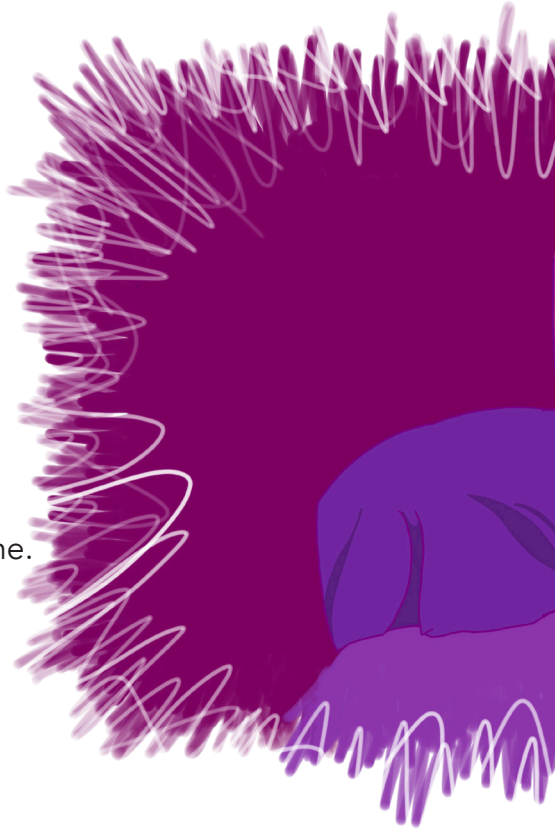


i met your gaze and  
froze like a child  
that has stepped on a loose floorboard  
in the middle of the night  
your gasp echos,  
the confusion tastes so sweet.



## Again. X7

day and night, i curse this sack  
of stiff bones and irritated flesh  
for waking me up from r.e.m  
for another day of: this  
and yet, sometimes  
i'm embarrassed to admit,  
i'm scared of falling asleep alone.  
i used to sleep.  
when i lived by the sea,  
the roads were quiet enough





to hear crashing waves  
from a mile away –  
the emptiness echoed.  
but now that i live in the city,  
the streets are littered with people,  
revved engines sound like waves,  
sirens sound like birds,  
gravel still finds its way into my boots,  
just like a pebble beach.  
i used to sleep. i miss it.

## Enjoy Your Food!

I never expected to say goodbye  
to the gesture of a handshake.

I can no longer make a good first impression  
with the firmness of my grip.

No more hands brushing with the delivery driver  
when they hold out my takeaway.

I never thought I'd miss the unintentional touch  
of strangers' fingertips when exchanging money;

Now my food sits alone on the doorstep,  
cold and crumpled like the person within.





## I have four hours to live.

midday,

my mouth tastes like fur

armpits smell like milk-cheese.

why is the house eleven degrees?

i look at my phone,

eleven seconds past eleven minutes past eleven

i make a wish.

two pm.

ok, let's get up, again





it's a race between me and the sky.

can i,

shower,

brush my teeth,

and eat

all in the space it takes between

my brain getting distracted by

something that smells

or something shiny

or something discoloured

i lose motivation like i lose my socks  
forever stuck with halves  
of something  
that was supposed to be whole.

four thirty pm.

again, why do i act surprised?

when the sky bleeds black

and the streetlights blind our eyes

acting like the stars we rarely ever see

dingy white lights flicker fast,





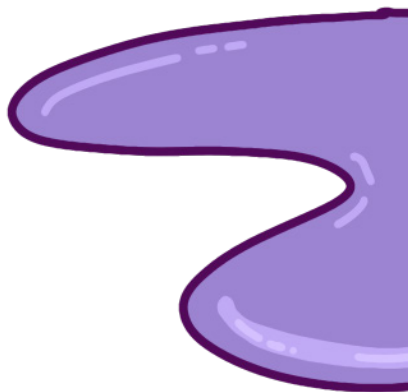
they give me a headache  
but at least they keep me awake  
just like my heart heaving in my chest  
begging, bargaining  
for someone to please  
switch it off for a moment, let it rest.  
everyday, it feels like i have four hours to live  
before the darkness resumes  
and engulfs  
any shred of prosperity

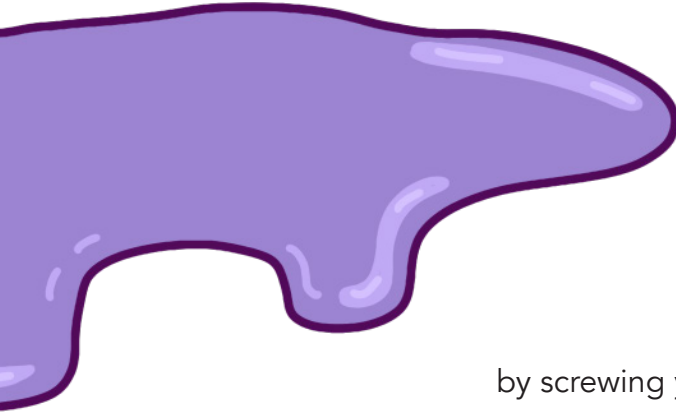


## like wet jeans

i miss the tingling neck kisses  
in passing movements,  
the passionate congratulating  
for personal improvements  
when we chose to save water  
by sharing showers  
the silly, stoned conversations  
that'd last for hours

you'd cut me off, mid-fight





by screwing your bottle up tight  
to store your true feelings  
place it on top shelf of your heart  
because you know that  
i'll never be able to reach  
that far  
you'll show me off to your family  
all the times when it doesn't matter  
you'll force a smile for cameras  
before the façade quickly shatters

we'll laugh like drunk teens  
dance like tipsy lovers  
but behind closed doors,  
you'll mercilessly pick at my flaws  
flick my tears off your shoulder  
like paint splatter

i'll weigh you down  
like wet jeans,  
i'll cling to you desperately  
until you peel me off;



scrunching awkwardly at the knees

twisting purposefully

at the bottom of your cold feet.

## Must Appear Normal.

"Give it back!" she yells

chasing the fleshless creature across her bedroom

watching it bounce from wall to wall

scaling the ceiling to taunt her

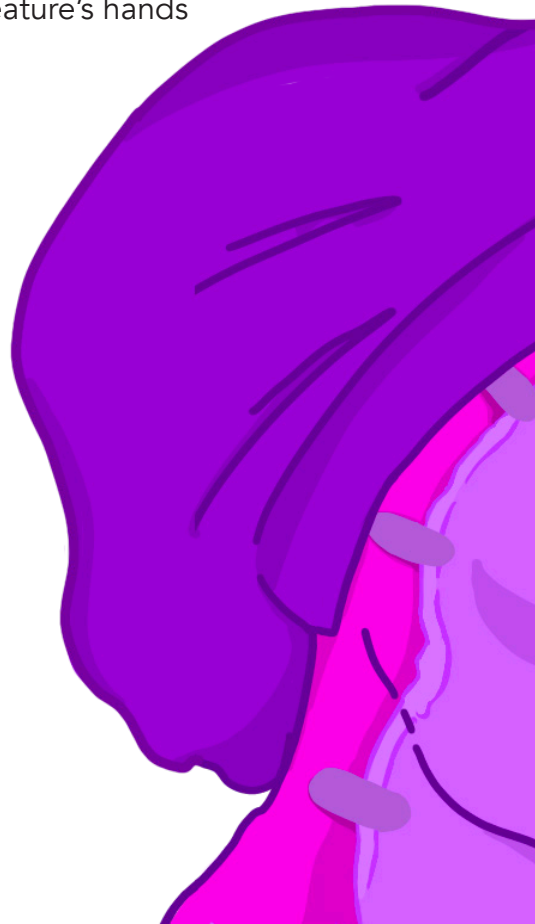
She runs in circles before she finally catches it

cornered in between the window and wall

she snatches the suit from the creature's hands

"That's mine. Not yours."

The creature, now embarrassed



Scuttles inside the wardrobe to hide.  
She steps into her suit in front of the mirror  
It's baggier than usual,  
it stretches when someone else wears it  
She sits down at her desk and opens her laptop  
frowning at her reflection in the black mirror,  
she pulls the skin around her mouth upwards  
forming a limp but good-enough smile.  
She widens her eyes and turns on her webcam,  
Just in time for the family Zoom call.



## **Are you settled?**

Why do we waste away the days?

Waiting for it to stop raining

Inside our brick boxes

Before we can comprehend the thought of

Going outside...

Living.

Wet clothes and wet hair

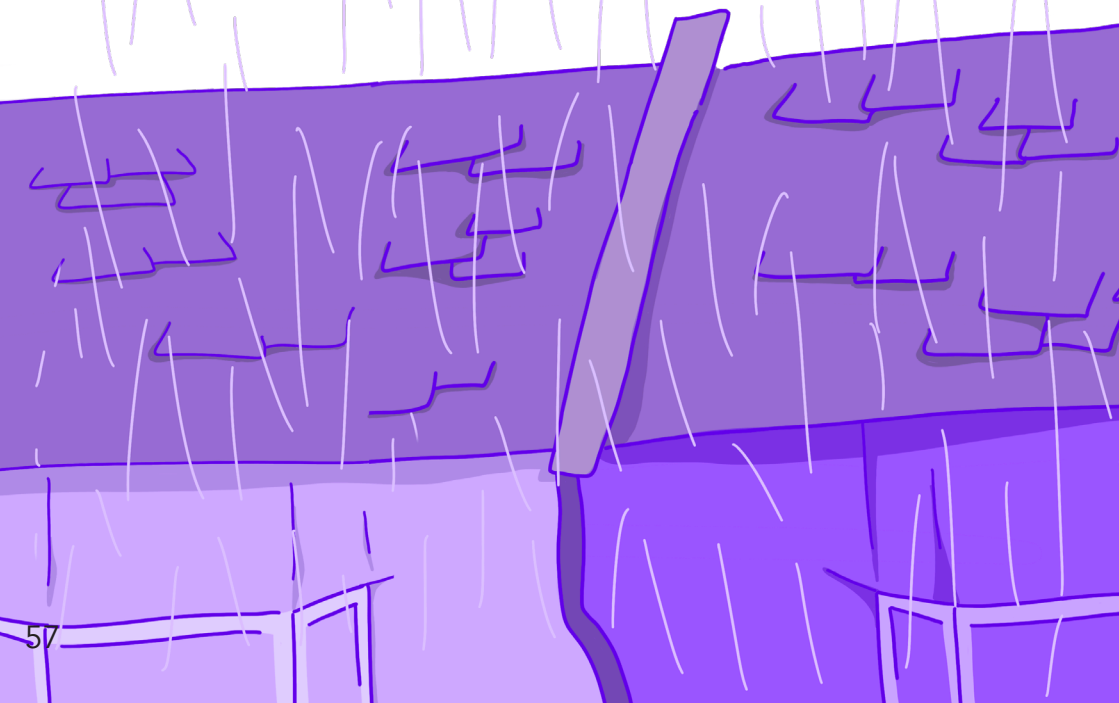
Is enough for some

To hibernate until the summer months



When they can curse at the sun  
For burning too close, too bright  
They have cold weather,  
They have cold hearts  
It's human nature – always want what you don't  
have;  
We desire the heat,  
Crave the warmth,  
The seasonal hug of sun on bare skin,  
Because it's not a constant in our lives  
When the sun returns

And we've cooked our fantasies all the way through  
We're left with burnt scraps of something  
We couldn't handle yet.  
Humans love to rotate  
Between feelings of love and  
Feelings of intense hate  
Obsessed with dichotomy,  
So we're not too happy when it's cold  
Because how will they sell us this new coat?  
Emotions, like clothes, should be reserved for certain seasons.



So, let's curse the rain, taunt her, tease her, blame her  
For our inability to get our shit together  
It's her fault we couldn't leave the house  
Her droplets formed an ocean and trapped us inside.  
Our last season coat isn't actually waterproof,  
just taking up space in the wardrobe.  
Ask yourself why  
you have measured out your life with coffee spoons?  
Why do you drink the dregs  
at the bottom of your cup



Why do you endure the bitterness voluntarily?

Are you settled?

## Overthinker

what do i look like,  
when you remove the thinly disguised  
veil from your eyes,  
to open wide  
and see the world  
in technicolour  
when you tear off  
all of my skin  
let my blood dribble down your chin





am i delicious?

am i stuck between your teeth?

am i a rare find,

a masterpiece?

or

just the mosaic pieces of other people?

do my words haunt the shallowness

of your thoughts

echo clarity inside your head

or

does it go through one ear

and die there.

do you fumble around

the alphabet

struggling to remember how to spell my  
name

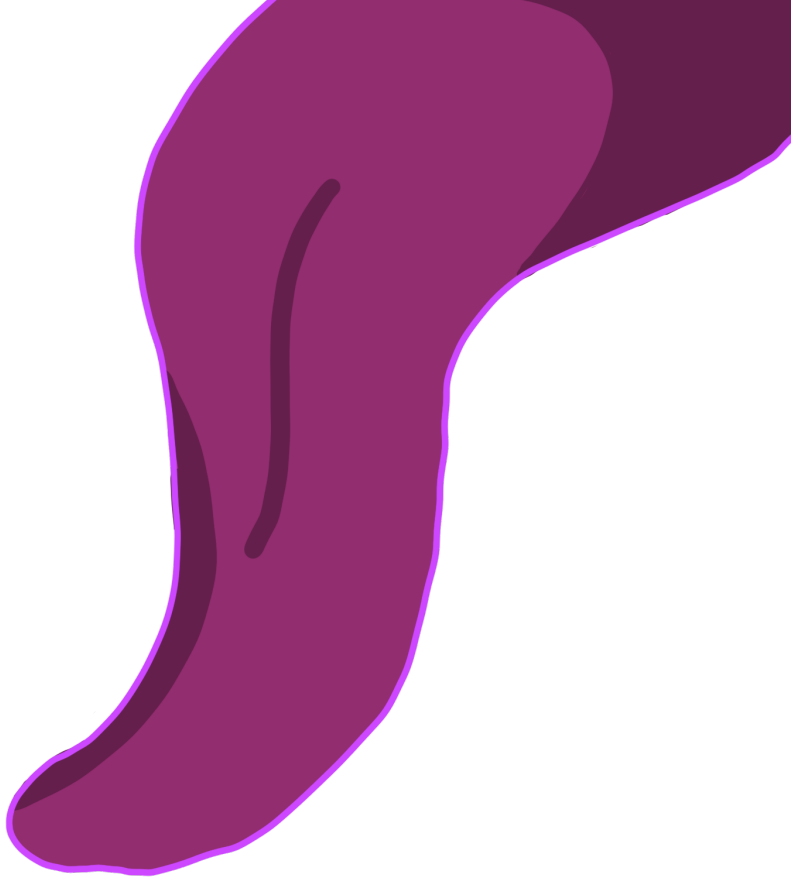
or

does it roll smoothly off your tongue

like a well-recited prayer?

what does my name taste like?

does she taste sweet?



i ask because

it doesn't taste of anything when i say it.



## How do you put your brain on Do Not Disturb?

The great thing about the brain  
Is that it will know when to forget  
something that is too traumatic to remember  
Something that hurt.

Something that hurts.

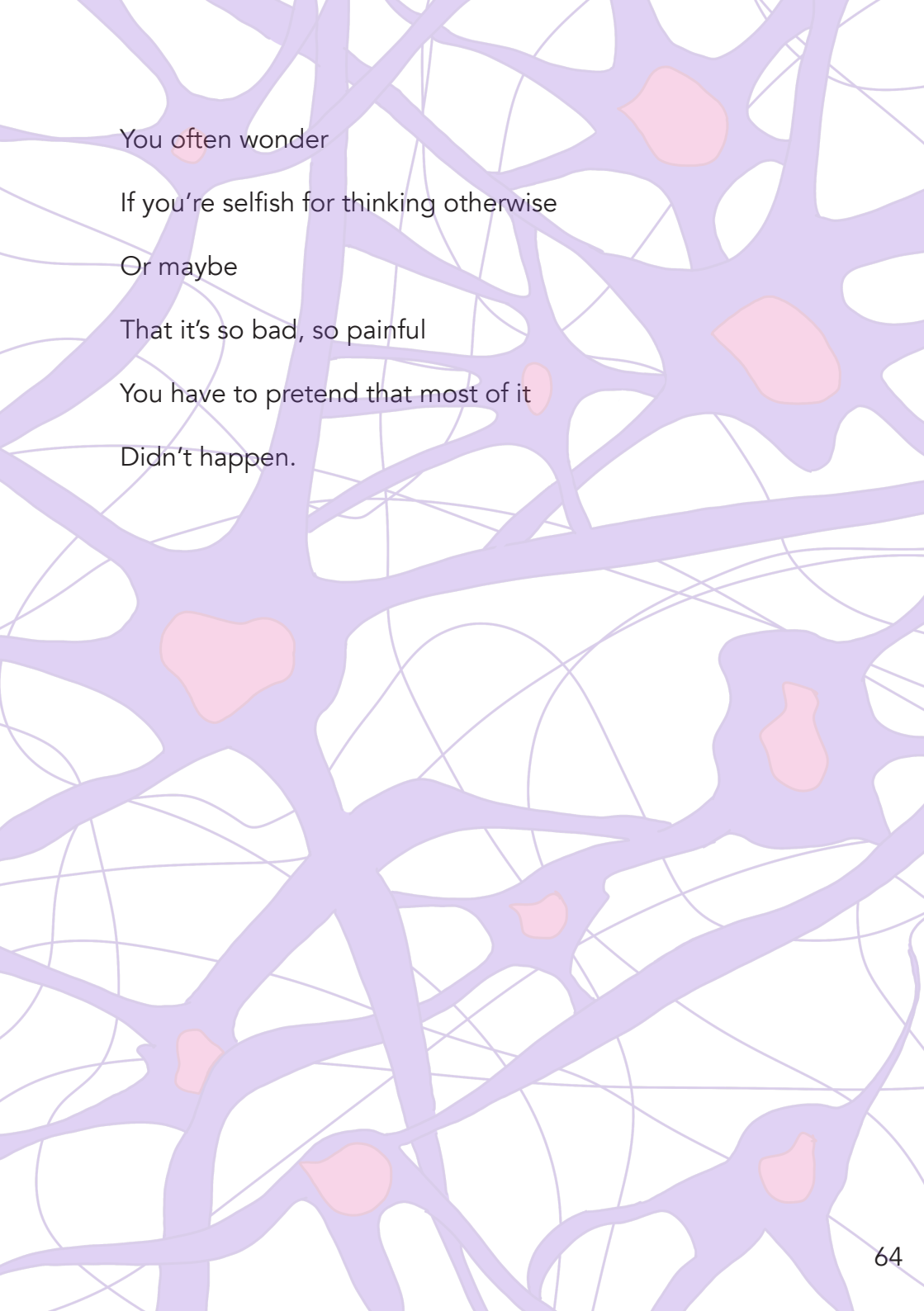
But then,

As time passes

You often wonder

If your life is "actually good"





You often wonder

If you're selfish for thinking otherwise

Or maybe

That it's so bad, so painful

You have to pretend that most of it

Didn't happen.

## Delete Once Read

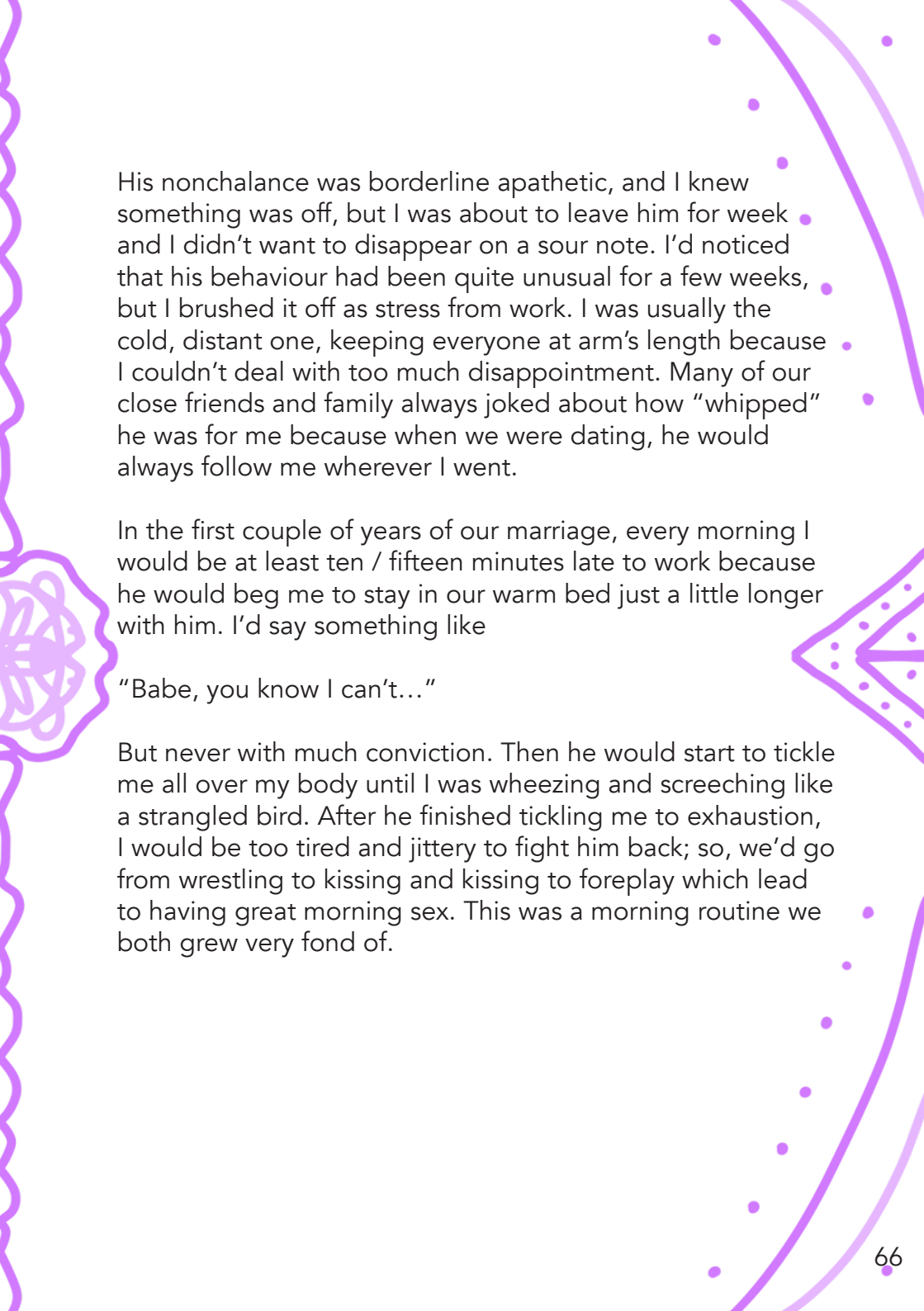
I'd been away for two weeks in London for a business trip that I wasn't supposed to go on. My supervisor caught a stomach bug last minute and offered the place to me, so how could I say no to an all-expenses-paid trip which included staying in a five-star hotel with unlimited room service. The only "thing" that was slightly holding me back from accepting the offer was fact that it meant I was away from home on the weekend of my five-year wedding anniversary. I broke the news to him over Sunday morning breakfast, with a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

"Are you not...disappointed?" I asked.

"No, I understand. Work is important to you, I get that."

"I'm still sorry. Did you make any plans? You do know it's your turn this year,"

"Umm..." he stalled, swirling the yolk of his fried egg with his finger "I, uh, I was just gonna wait till you get back and then we'd figure something out."



His nonchalance was borderline apathetic, and I knew something was off, but I was about to leave him for week and I didn't want to disappear on a sour note. I'd noticed that his behaviour had been quite unusual for a few weeks, but I brushed it off as stress from work. I was usually the cold, distant one, keeping everyone at arm's length because I couldn't deal with too much disappointment. Many of our close friends and family always joked about how "whipped" he was for me because when we were dating, he would always follow me wherever I went.




In the first couple of years of our marriage, every morning I would be at least ten / fifteen minutes late to work because he would beg me to stay in our warm bed just a little longer with him. I'd say something like

"Babe, you know I can't..."

But never with much conviction. Then he would start to tickle me all over my body until I was wheezing and screeching like a strangled bird. After he finished tickling me to exhaustion, I would be too tired and jittery to fight him back; so, we'd go from wrestling to kissing and kissing to foreplay which lead to having great morning sex. This was a morning routine we both grew very fond of.

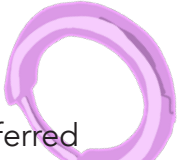

A year later, I got a promotion which meant I was on a better salary, but longer hours. I couldn't carry on with the laid-back, no-fucks-given attitude I used to have a few years ago. He said he was so proud of me and that I deserved the better position, but this new status meant I was waking up at five am every day and had to go to bed by eleven. The sex stopped and so did the passion. He stopped touching me in bed. He stopped kissing me when I arrived home from work. He started going to the gym more at random times at night to avoid talking to me. Every question I asked felt like I was about to witness an explosion. He was tense and on edge all the time, day and night, so much that I was too afraid to ask what was on his mind, in case he walked out on me and never returned.

The day I came home from my London trip, I knew something needed to change between us. We both had to take some responsibility and realise that we've been romantically neglecting each other. I wrote down all of my thoughts and feelings in my notes app on the train and rehearsed it silently in my head to prepare myself for the difficult conversation approaching. When I got back to our flat, he wasn't home. The place was dirtier than usual, but I just assumed he was in a depressive funk, I couldn't blame him entirely, I was too. I went into our bedroom and began unpacking my suitcase. I made the bed and opened the curtains to allow the warm, orange light wash over the room.



Something shiny twinkled in the mirror that made me to squint. I strolled over to our decorated mantle-piece opposite the mirror, and saw a pair of jewel-studded, gold hoop earrings. I inspected the earrings from a distance before I held them between my index finger and thumb, closely examining them as if they were part of a crime scene.

I never wear gold.



Despite it complimenting my skin-tone, I always preferred silver when it came to jewellery because it looks less tacky and fake. I placed the earrings back onto the mantle-piece just how I found them and sat on the bed as my brain started to melt. A hundred thoughts were racing through my brain, some were logical, and some were incriminating. Never in a million years would've thought that Evan would cheat on me. It's just not like him. When we were in our early twenties, he was desperate to settle down and start a family unlike other people his age. He asked me out three times before I said yes, and I only said no the first two times because I was already dating someone else at the time. He had proved his commitment and loyalty to me when we were naive, dumb, 21-year-olds; so, how could he cheat on me? I tried to stay calm and failed.

Maybe they're a present?





Or his mum stayed the night?

Or his sister visited.



All plausible scenarios but none of them felt right. My breathing started to get shaky, so I pulled out my phone from my jean pocket and vigorously scrolled through my contacts to find his name. The phone rang four times before it hung up. I called again, this time one ring before he hung up. I started to shake in anger until suddenly I heard the lock being turned, and the front door was kicked open wide. There he was, with a shit-eating grin and large bouquet of orchids.

"Honey, I'm home!" He cheered. I didn't respond. "Babe? are you home?"

"Yeah."

I entered the living room with clenched fists to see my husband, freshly shaven with a new haircut and beautiful bouquet of sunflowers with a yellow card addressed to me.

"You look...different."

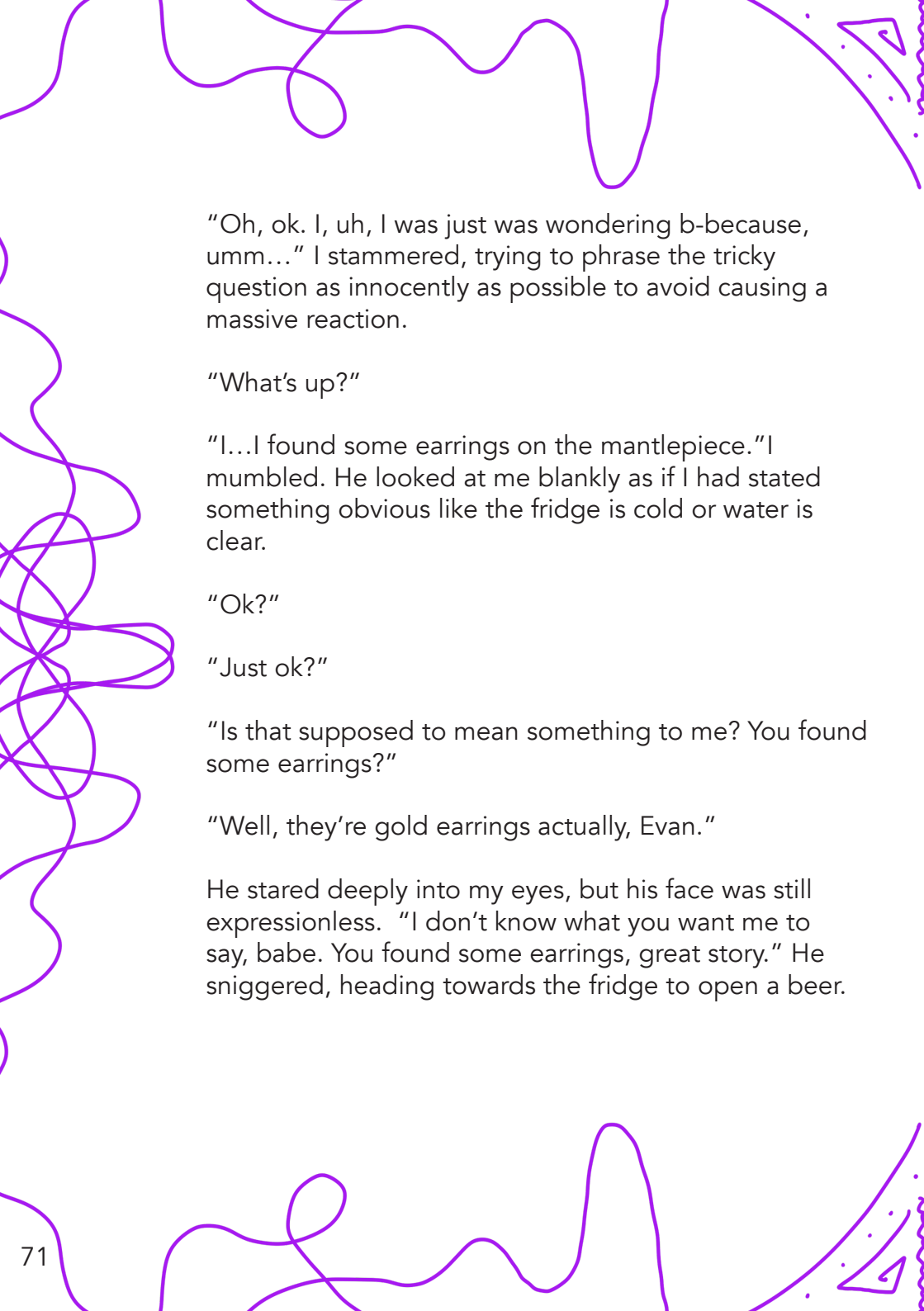


“Yeah, I wanted to look nice for you. I know I’ve been looking and acting like a dick for a while and I think when you left, I didn’t realise how good I have it with you.” He smiled gleefully, he almost looked like his 21-year-old self again: happy, rested, optimistic. He handed me the bouquet and kissed me deeply for the first time in months. My head and my heart were in rivalry with each other. Part of me wanted to forget about even seeing the earrings because this was the first time in a while my husband had shown me so much love and affection. I didn’t want to ruin this cute moment we were having but I knew I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I didn’t find out. I wrapped my arms around his waist and rested my head on his chest to hear his heartbeat.



“Um babe, did anyone come round to stay while I was away?”

“Ummm, no. Oh, wait, yeah, Joe and Michael came over on Thursday night to watch the Man United football game and stayed the night. Sorry, I haven’t cleaned up since then, I’ll get on it now.” He said as he kissed my cheek sloppily and released his arms from the embrace. My heart fluttered but my stomach lurched as soon as he let me go.



"Oh, ok. I, uh, I was just was wondering b-because, umm..." I stammered, trying to phrase the tricky question as innocently as possible to avoid causing a massive reaction.

"What's up?"

"I...I found some earrings on the mantelpiece." I mumbled. He looked at me blankly as if I had stated something obvious like the fridge is cold or water is clear.

"Ok?"

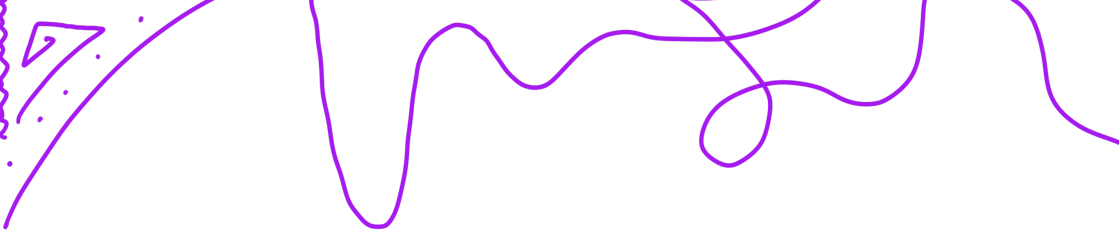
"Just ok?"

"Is that supposed to mean something to me? You found some earrings?"

"Well, they're gold earrings actually, Evan."

He stared deeply into my eyes, but his face was still expressionless. "I don't know what you want me to say, babe. You found some earrings, great story." He sniggered, heading towards the fridge to open a beer.





"We've been together for five years. Have you ever seen me wear gold earrings or even gold anything?" I questioned defensively.

"What are you trying to say, just spit it out already!" He spat; his tone had returned to his signature callous voice I normally recognised. That's how I knew his happy-go-lucky attitude was just an act because he could switch from happy back to the grumpy, agitated boy I've known for years within minutes.

"Evan, I only want to ask this once, so please be honest with me..."

"What is it?"

"A-Are you cheating on me?"

Suddenly, his blank face broke into a burst of manic laughter, he threw himself backwards onto the sofa, clutching his stomach as he howled hysterically in my face. I stood silently across from him, arms crossed in front of my chest and observed him. His body convulsed as his laughter echoed throughout the flat, bouncing off the empty, undecorated

white walls. But then it came to a sudden halt from the downstairs neighbours banging their ceiling which was our floor as a passive aggressive sign to keep the noise down.

I looked at him with tears brimming in my eyes, I was desperate for an answer or even an excuse, but he just stared back at me revelling in my discomfort and confusion.

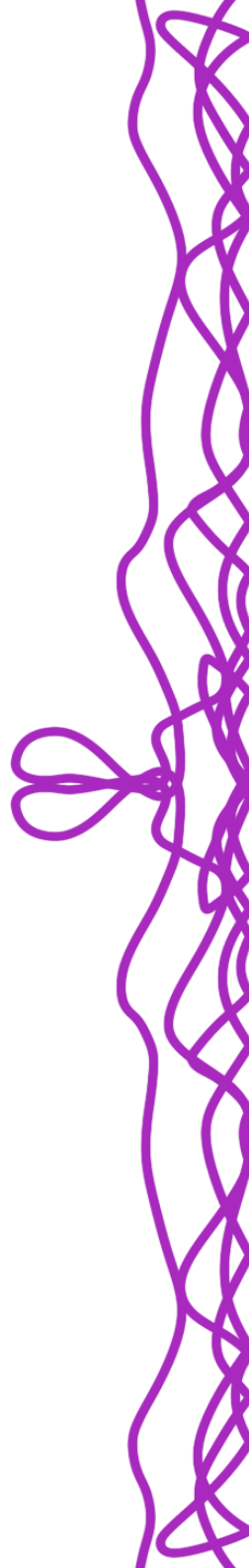
“Well? Say something” I huffed.

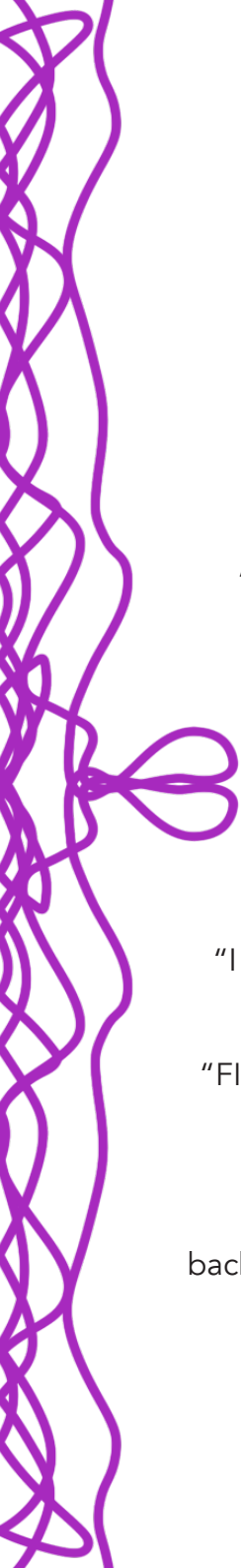
“Ok. Do you remember a couple years ago when we back to Leeds for your sixth form reunion?”

“Um, yeah, why are you bringing-”

“Remember, we were arguing on the drive there because I didn’t go because I felt awkward and left out not knowing all your school friends?”

“Yeah...”





“Remember that guy who came up to us, what was the fucker’s name? Timothy? No, sounded like that but it started with an F, I think. Fraser? Frank? Freddie?”

“Evan, please what are you doing right now?”

“What was his name?”

“I don’t understand how this is relevant-”

“I SAID, WHAT WAS HIS FUCKING NAME, SARAH?” He roared, spilling his beer onto the carpet.

“FINLAY! It was Finlay” I cried, tears flowing rapidly down my red, hot cheeks.

“Yes. Finlay. That was it! Nice guy, right?” He chuckled to himself. I didn’t answer, but slowly started stepping backwards towards the front door in case I needed a quick exit point.

"What's wrong babe? Why are you crying? I thought you liked Finlay...oh wait...maybe I should say like? Present tense, right?" He said, his tone was completely deadpan.

"Evan, whatever you think has happened is wrong, ok? We dated in high school, that's it. He's in the past. I don't see what that has to do with the gold earrings?" I croaked. He smiled at me sinisterly, and for the first time in my life, I didn't recognise my husband.

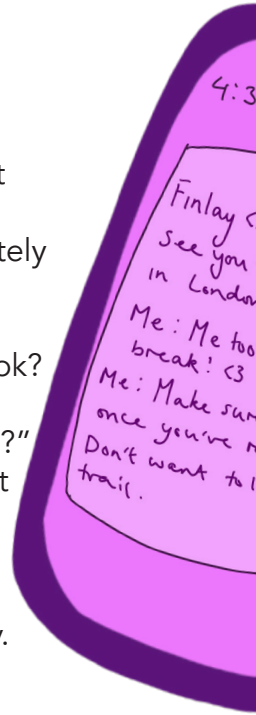
"Well, Sarah if you shut up for a sec, we can maybe piece this puzzle together, right?" He said scornfully.

"Ok, so 2 years ago, we went to your sixth form reunion, and then also 2 years ago, you got a job promotion which you really deserved. Correct?"

"Correct." I responded.

"- And I was so proud of you. So proud that I'd brag about you to all of my friends saying how I'm so fucking lucky to have such a successful wife-"

"Ok...but-" I whispered.





“And then after you got your new job, things started to change, some would call it growing apart, but I think we should just call it what it is.”

“W-what is it then?” I stuttered.

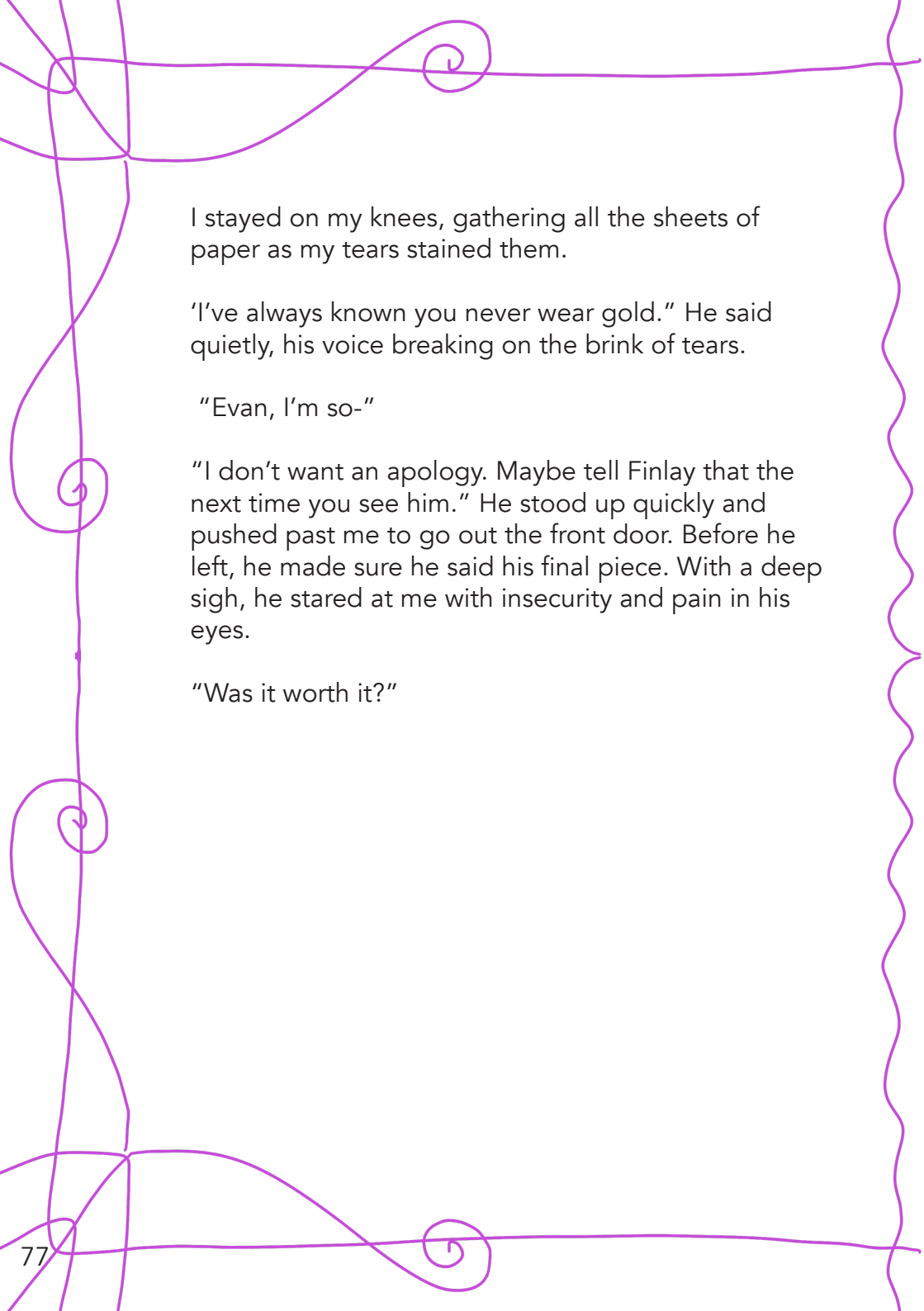
He exited the living room and went into the kitchen. After slamming some cupboard drawers, he returned with a medium stack of papers and a small velvet black box from Tiffany & Co.

He threw the papers on the floor purposefully so they would scatter all around the room. An tornado of screenshots of text messages filled the room. I kneeled down and picked up the first one I saw, and my heart sunk.

FINLAY: “Can’t wait to see you this weekend in London ☹ xx”

ME: “Me too! I need this break! <3”

ME: “Make sure you delete once you’ve read this. Don’t want to leave a trail.”



I stayed on my knees, gathering all the sheets of paper as my tears stained them.

"I've always known you never wear gold." He said quietly, his voice breaking on the brink of tears.

"Evan, I'm so-"

"I don't want an apology. Maybe tell Finlay that the next time you see him." He stood up quickly and pushed past me to go out the front door. Before he left, he made sure he said his final piece. With a deep sigh, he stared at me with insecurity and pain in his eyes.

"Was it worth it?"



## **before we crashed**

clutching the door, i said babe,  
you're driving too fast  
you need to slow down,  
the tyres are screeching  
they shouldn't make that sound  
but you say you don't care  
you just want to get home  
so it doesn't matter that  
you're doing 90

in a 40 limit zone

red

like the blood

as it cascades from my temple

tight, white knuckles grip the steering wheel

you probably imagined it was my neck.

amber

eyes emerge unexpectedly

terrified by the roar of the engine

they dart into oblivion



and I envy their ability  
to disappear so effortlessly

green

means go, before its too late  
before the traffic lights start to change  
before blue flashes and sirens in the distance  
might mistake us  
as a couple.

