PARTICULAR BOOKS

ANXIETYLAND

GEMMA CORRELL

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PARTICULAR BOOKS
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For Bella

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ANXIETYLAND

INTRODUCTION: WELCOME TO ANXIETYLAND

This book is a map, of sorts. It's a journey through my life as someone who has suffered, to various degrees, from severe anxiety—and its BFF, depression—since I was a child. It's also a map I drew for myself, to look back on when I'm feeling lost, to stop me from falling into a downward spiral or, at least, to soften my fall.

Sorry for using the word "journey" there, by the way. It's one of my least-favorite mental health–isms, along with "everything happens for a reason" (um, no, it doesn't. The universe is chaotic and random!) and any mention of "vibes" (shudder). You will not find any of that twaddle in here. (I'm British, hence the occasional strange word you might come across.) What you will find are stories about my own personal experiences with anxiety, some pretty badly written metaphors, and a bunch of drawings of pugs, because it's my book and I can draw what I want.

I am going to mention the things that have been helpful to me in my journey (there's that word again, ugh) but, to be clear, this is not a self-help book. I am not a doctor, or a professionally trained therapist. I'm barely even a functioning adult most of the time.

Everyone's experience of anxiety is slightly different. That's why it can be so difficult to treat. Anxiety is a shape-shifter and a sneaky lil' liar and an all-around crappy piece of crap. Nevertheless, I'm learning to live with it as best I can, in the same way that I live with seasonal allergies and this one freakishly long eyelash that keeps growing back however many times I pluck it out. It's just part of who I am and I'm okay with that. Ouch. (Sorry, the eyelash is poking me again.)

Sometimes, "living with it" can take the form of making jokes and silly comics. I've been making them for years now, ever since I posted my first anxiety-related drawing on Instagram, applied a Valencia filter (yes, I'm old), and nervously sent it out into the world. As it turned out, I was pleasantly surprised by the positive feedback and even the number of followers who told me they identified with how I felt. Still, please know that I am only making fun of my own issues. I believe humor is a useful coping mechanism, or at least a better one than my previous favorites, alcohol and denial. I would, however, never make a joke out of other people's illnesses. I don't like to punch down. In fact, I don't like to punch at all. Or kick. Or move, to be honest. You'll hear more about that later too.

It seems overly generous, not to mention unbearably corny, to say I have "befriended" my anxiety. After all, it has ruined my life at times. But I suppose I can concede a grudging respect. I know my anxiety has, however misguidedly, been trying to protect me—and I am grateful for that.

Now let us go, you and I, to a little place called *Anxietyland*.

ANXIET
CONTROL FREAK SHOW
2
HANGXIETY FALLS
BOOZE CRUISE
LOOP OF AVOIDANCE
LAND OF INTOXICATION
EMOTIONAL ROLLER COASTER
HOUSE OF HORRORS
WORRY-GO-ROUND
DOWNWARD SPIRAL
1

TYLAND
HOUSE OF NO FUN
NO FUN
3
ANXIE-TEA CUPS
THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING COMFORT ZONE
4
THE DEPRESSION OBSTACLE COURSE
MAGICAL THINKING SHOW
5
THE TUNNEL OF LOVE
6
PARADE OF THE THERAPISTS
THE TUNNEL OF UGH, OK, FINE
GIFT SHOP

IT IS THE SUMMER OF 2018 AND I AM NOT DOING WELL.

FOR DAYS NOW, I HAVE BEEN IN THE MIDST OF WHAT SEEMS LIKE A WEEKLONG PANIC ATTACK.

I AM JOLTED AWAKE EVERY MORNING, ADRENALINE COURSING THROUGH MY BODY LIKE ELECTRICITY.

ANTHONY (MY HUSBAND)

I CAN'T KEEP STILL.

I ALTERNATE BETWEEN LYING ON THE FLOOR IN THE FETAL POSITION, SHAKING UNCONTROLLABLY...

AND PACING MY APARTMENT, ATTEMPTING TO OUTRUN THE RELENTLESS PANIC.

I WISH I COULD SOMEHOW UNZIP MY BODY AND CLIMB OUT OF IT.

BUT THERE IS NO ESCAPE.
THE FEELING IS INSIDE ME.

IT IS ME.

PANIC IS ALL THAT I AM.

I BROWSE ONLINE MENTAL HEALTH MESSAGE BOARDS SEARCHING FOR THE ELIXIR OR SEQUENCE OF YOGA POSES THAT WILL PULL ME OUT OF THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL.

I DOWNLOAD APPS AND AUDIOBOOKS WITH TITLES LIKE "POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS FOR PANIC ATTACKS."

I BREATHE.
I BEND.
I FOLD.
NOTHING IS WORKING.
I'M DOING ALL OF THE RIGHT THINGS.
WHY ISN'T IT GOING AWAY?!

I CAN'T FOCUS ON ANYTHING.

I TRY TO DRAW, BUT EVERYTHING LOOKS WARPED AND STRANGE.

I ATTEMPT TO WATCH A MOVIE.

ONE OF MY FAVORITES.

I KNOW THE DIALOGUE BY HEART, AND YET I CAN'T UNDERSTAND A WORD.

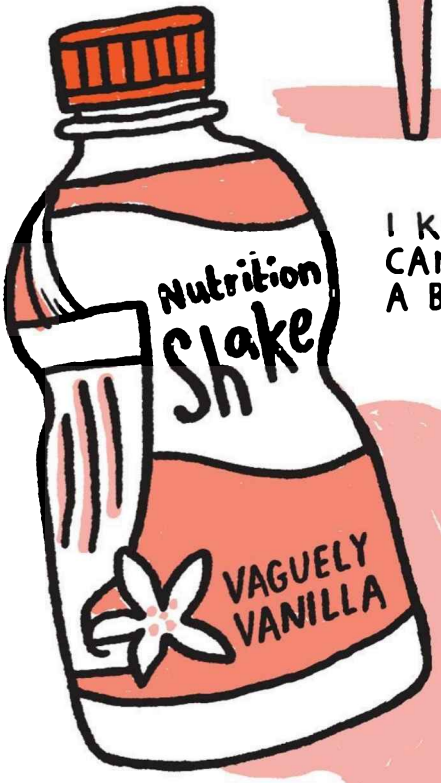
THE IMAGE KEEPS FLICKERING.

THE VOICES ARE ALL DISTORTED.

let's do the time warp again

I OPEN A BOOK BUT THE WORDS WON'T STAY STILL.
THIS MAKES NO SENSE.
IT MAY AS WELL BE WRITTEN IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE.
I CAN'T READ.
I CAN'T DRAW.
WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME?
WHO EVEN AM I IF I CAN'T DO THE THINGS I LOVE?
COME AND HAVE SOME DINNER!

AS THE DAYS TURN INTO WEEKS, I START TO LOSE MY APPETITE ENTIRELY.



I KNOW THINGS ARE BAD WHEN I CAN'T EVEN BRING MYSELF TO TAKE A BITE OF MY FAVORITE PIZZA.

(PINEAPPLE AND MUSHROOM, DON'T JUDGE ME.)

I FORCE MYSELF TO TAKE GULPS FROM BOTTLES OF SWEET, THICK NURITIONAL SHAKES.

WITHOUT MEALS AND WORK AND CUPS OF TEA TO MARK THE TIME, THERE IS NO LONGER ANY STRUCTURE TO MY DAY.

MY BRAIN AND BODY ARE TELLING ME TO MOVE.
AND SO, I MOVE.

I WALK FOR MILES EVERY DAY.

PAST MY FAVORITE BOOKSTORES FULL OF BOOKS THAT I NO LONGER HAVE ANY INTEREST IN READING,

PAST BAKERY WINDOWS STACKED WITH TREATS THAT I'D USUALLY SALIVATE OVER BUT NOW MAY AS WELL BE PRETTY LUMPS OF SAWDUST.

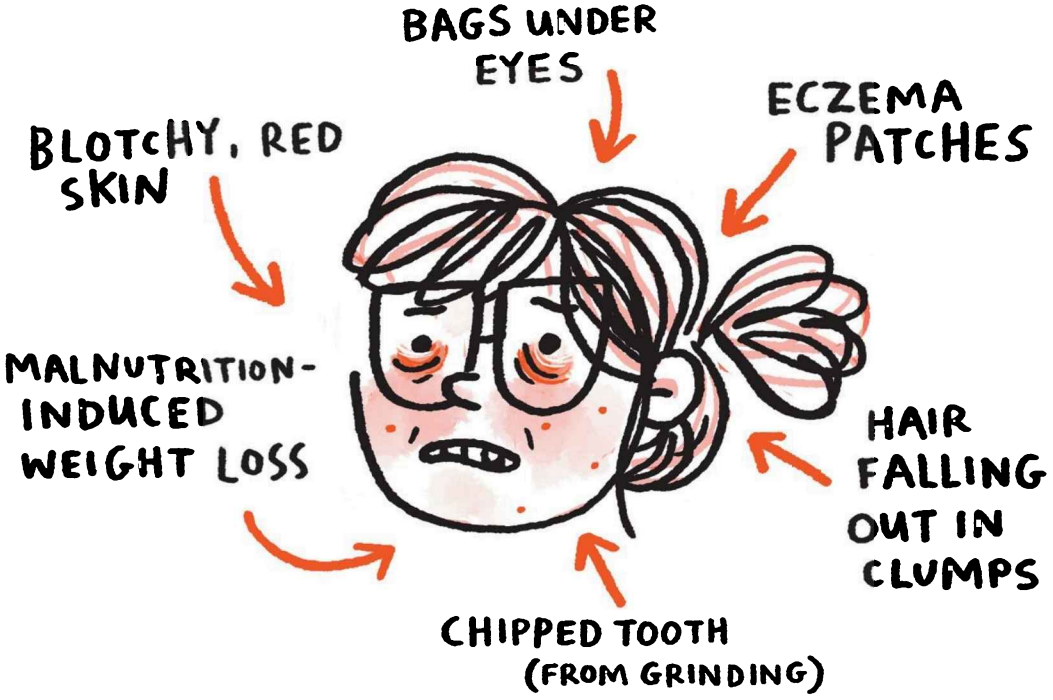
I GO INTO MY LOCAL THRIFT SHOPS, NO LONGER EXCITED BY THE PROSPECT OF HIDDEN TREASURES BUT SIMPLY TRYING TO WASTE A FEW MINUTES OF THE INTERMINABLE DAY.

I ORDER COFFEES.
I DON'T DRINK THEM.
Café
ENJOY!
THANKS!
I WON'T.
THRIFT
OPEN
HOW CAN THEY JUST SIT THERE LIKE EVERYTHING IS NORMAL?
CAN'T THEY TELL THE WORLD IS FALLING APART?

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN SO GOOD AT HIDING MY ANXIETY FROM OTHER PEOPLE, BUT THAT IS BECOMING IMPOSSIBLE.

I KNOW THAT I LOOK TERRIBLE BUT I DON'T REALLY CARE.

ALL I CAN THINK ABOUT IS THE FIRE RAGING INSIDE MY BRAIN.



I AM NOW A FULL-ON, "CAN'T STOP SHAKING, NOTICEABLY SWEATING, BURSTING INTO TEARS IN THE MIDDLE OF CVS" CARICATURE OF AN ANXIOUS PERSON.

MENTALLY ILL PERSON
LOOK
BEFORE YOUR VERY EYES
!
ALIVE
BEHOLD

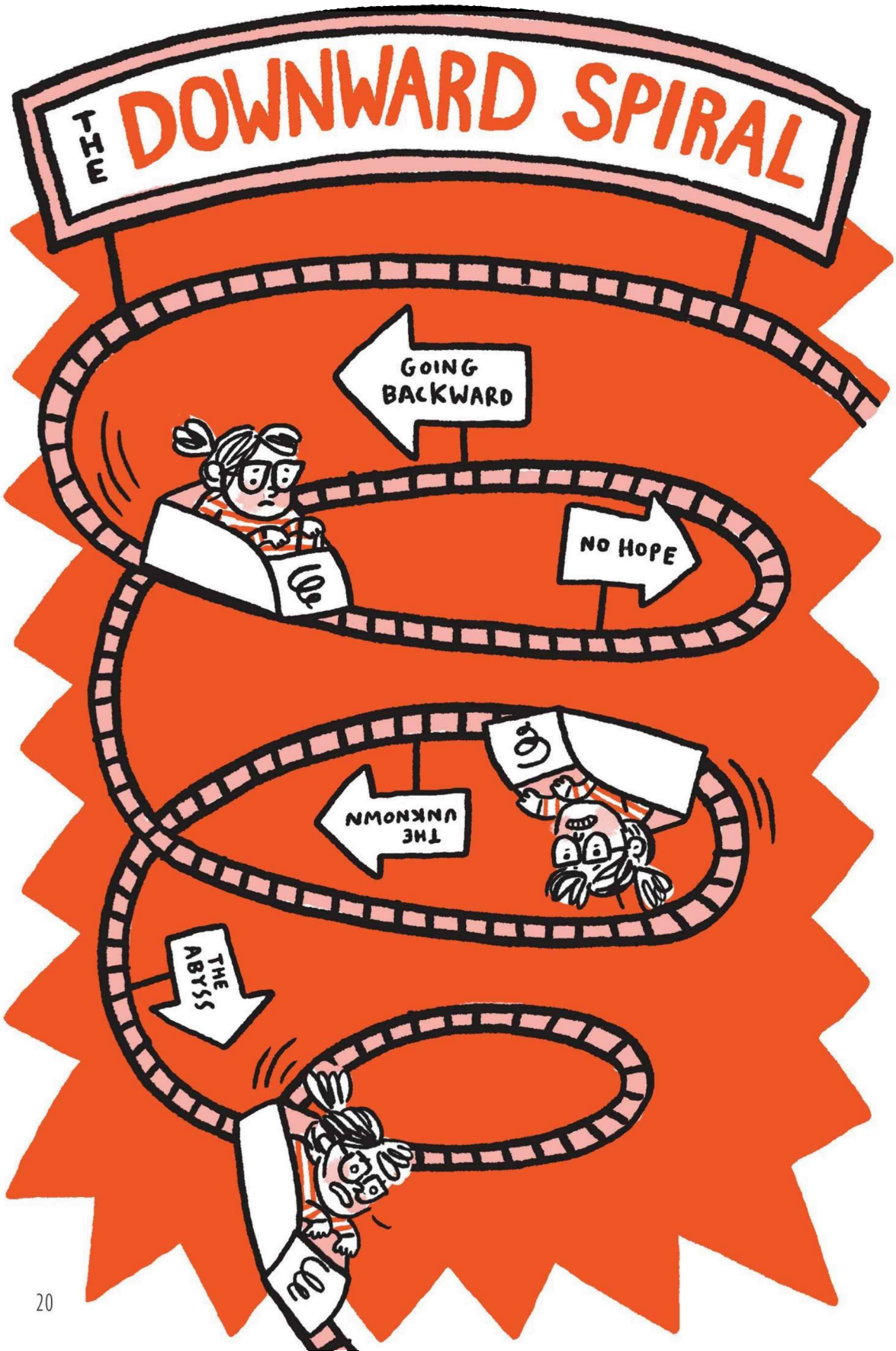
I TEXT A FEW OF MY CLOSE FRIENDS, THE ONES WHO KNOW ABOUT MY HISTORY WITH ANXIETY, ALTHOUGH PERHAPS NOT THE FULL EXTENT OF IT.

I CALL A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS HOTLINE.

MY THERAPIST TOLD ME THAT ANXIETY AND EXCITEMENT ARE EXACTLY THE SAME THING. IT'S ALL ABOUT HOW YOU REACT TO IT!
OK THANKS!
I'M NOT ANXIOUS, I'M EXCITED.

I'M NOT ANXIOUS, I'M EXCITED.
I'M NOT ANXIOUS, I'M EXCITED.
I'M NOT ANXIOUS, I'M EXCITED.
I'M NOT ANXIOUS, I'M...
I NEED HELP.

I FEEL LIKE I AM ON A RUNAWAY TRAIN, UNABLE TO PULL THE BRAKE LEVER.



I AM SPIRALING OUT OF CONTROL, TOWARD AN ENDPOINT THAT I CAN'T SEE.

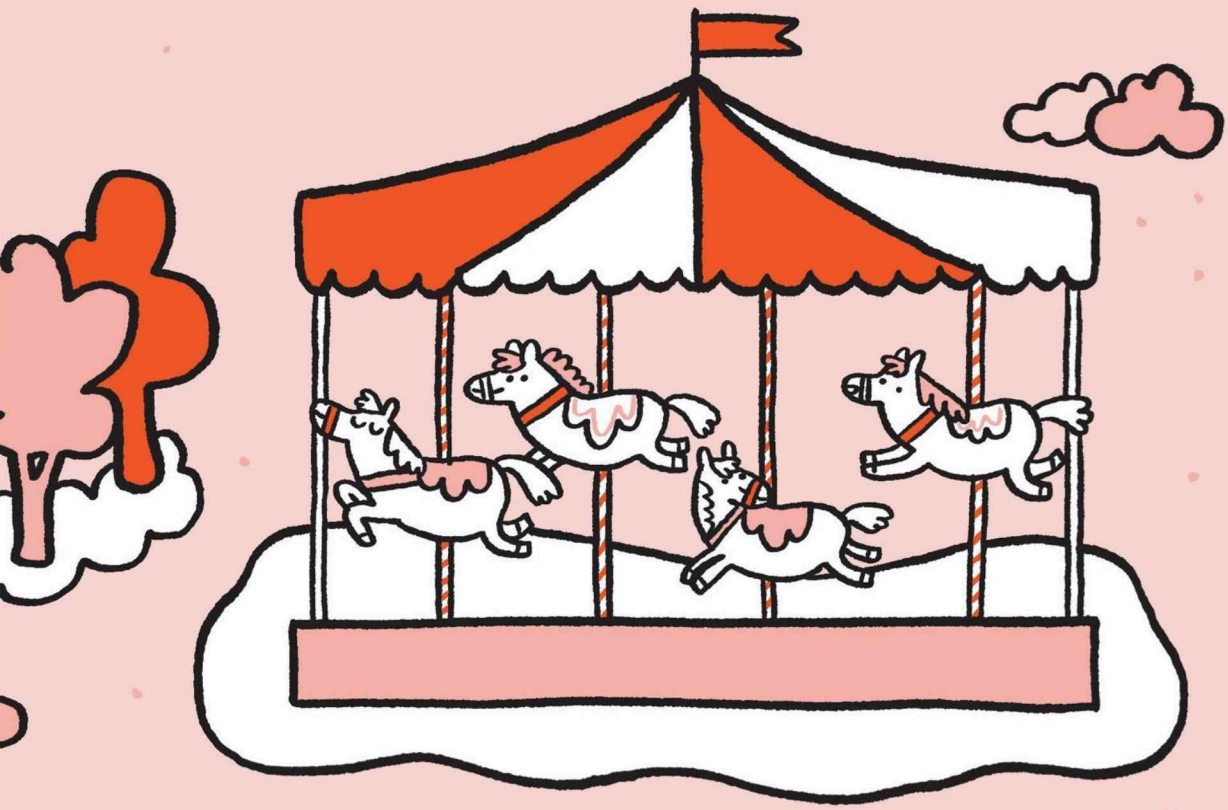
I CAN'T DO THIS ANYMORE.
I'M SO TIRED.
IT'S NOT SO MUCH THAT I WANT TO DIE.
I'M JUST NOT SURE HOW MUCH LONGER I CAN CARRY ON EXISTING.

I THINK I NEED TO GO TO THE HOSPITAL.
YEAH.

SOUVENIRS

CHAPTER ONE

THE WORRY-GO-ROUND



I'M IN THE ER OF A HOSPITAL IN BERKELEY.
(I DON'T KNOW WHICH ONE.)
I SPENT THE RIDE CURLED UP ON THE BACK SEAT OF MY NEIGHBOR'S CAR
HAVE YOU HAD THOUGHTS OF HURTING YOURSELF?
IT'S REALLY BUSY.
HELP!
IT HURTS!
BEDS LINING THE HALLWAYS
WE'RE GIVING YOU SOME FLUIDS.
Mmhm.
EVENTUALLY, THEY FIND ME A ROOM.
DO YOU WANT SOME LORAZEPAM*?
WARM BLANKET?
JELL-O?
YES.
I'VE NEVER WANTED ANYTHING MORE.
THE NURSES ARE SO KIND.
* A BENZODIAZEPINE TRANQUILIZER

I'M SHARING THE ROOM WITH ANOTHER WOMAN
HELP!!!
HELP!!!
I WANT TO DIE!!!
DON'T WORRY ABOUT THAT. FOCUS ON YOURSELF.
PRIVACY CURTAIN
IS SHE OK?
SECURITY GUARD AT THE DOOR
SHE JUST LAY DOWN IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FREEWAY!
... SAID SHE WANTED TO DIE!
CRAZY, HUH?
GUESS HE DOESN'T REALIZE I'M HERE FOR THE SAME REASON.

I FEEL GUILTY FOR TAKING UP SPACE.
WHAT AM I DOING HERE?
SOMEONE WHO HAS A REAL ILLNESS NEEDS THIS BED.
I KNOW IT'S ANXIETY BUT...
IT'S NEVER BEEN THIS BAD BEFORE.
YOUR BLOOD WORK IS FINE.
JUST LOW POTASSIUM.
EAT SOME BANANAS.
IT WAS ONLY A PANIC ATTACK.
SHE'S NOT LISTENING.
I'M WASTING HER TIME.
SHE THINKS I'M BEING HYSTERICAL.
HARASSED-LOOKING DOCTOR

WE DON'T HAVE ANY PSYCHIATRISTS AVAILABLE.
YOU NEED TO DECIDE IF YOU WANT TO BE ADMITTED TO THE PSYCH WARD.
I DON'T KNOW.
I CAN'T THINK STRAIGHT.
IT'S UP TO YOU.
I WISH SOMEONE WOULD JUST TELL ME WHAT TO DO.
I CAN'T.
I WANT TO GO HOME.
I'LL BE TRAPPED!
IF I GO TO THE WARD, I'LL BE LOCKED IN.
DO I NEED TO GO?

WHEN I WAS A KID, I HAD NO IDEA WHAT WAS WRONG WITH ME.

I FELT LIKE I WAS TRAPPED INSIDE A CLOUD OF MURKY BUT PERSISTENT DREAD.

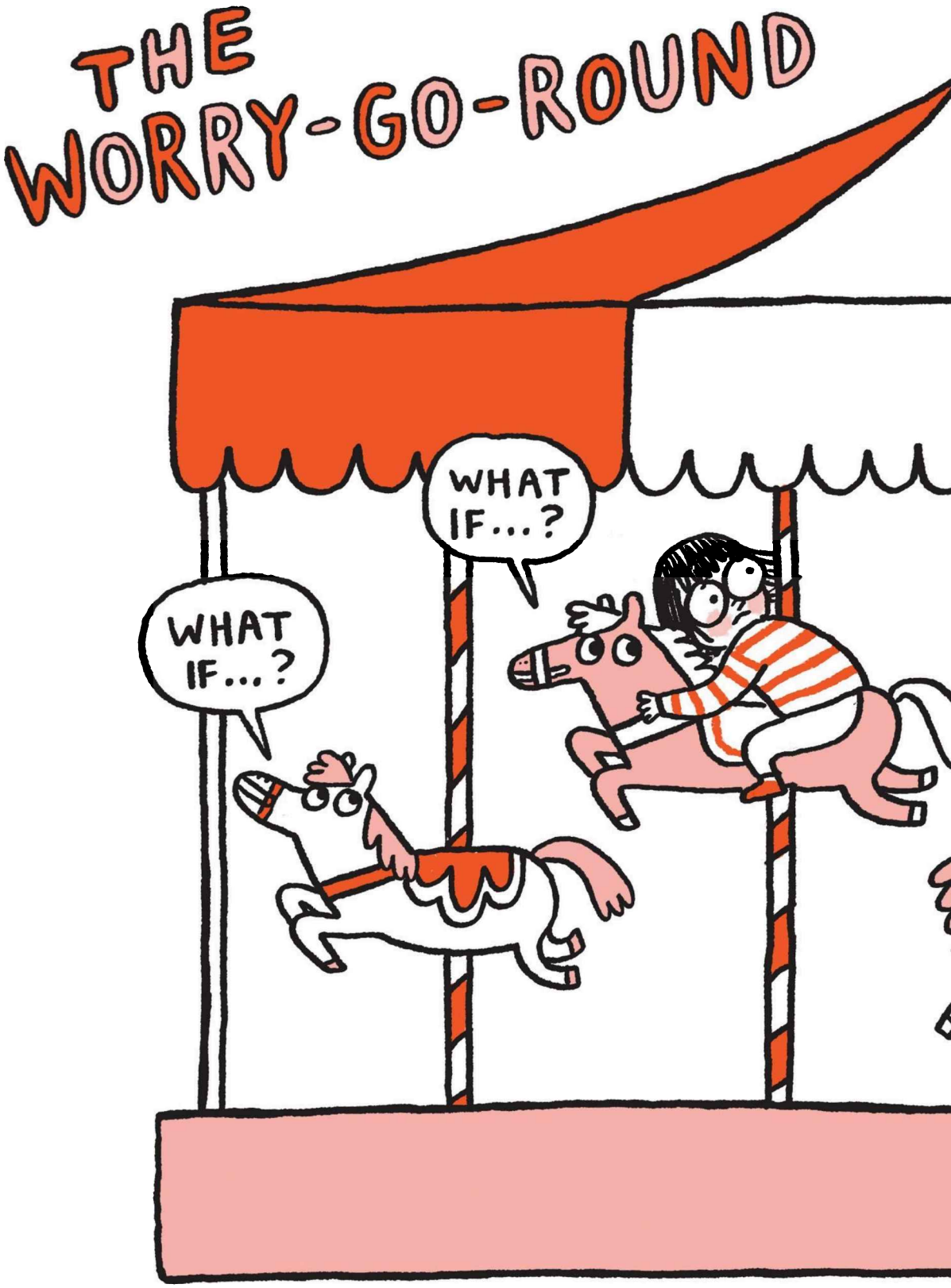
IT WAS LIKE I WAS ALWAYS WAITING FOR SOMETHING TERRIBLE TO HAPPEN, BUT I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THE THING WOULD BE.

IT FELT BAD, SO I CALLED IT—

THE BAD FEELING

THE BAD FEELING FELT LIKE...

AND LIKE A CAROUSEL INSIDE OF MY HEAD, CONSTANTLY SPINNING.


THE WORRY-GO-ROUND
WHAT IF...?
WHAT IF...?

WHAT IF...?
WHAT IF...?

THE BAD FEELING WAS LIKE ALL OF THOSE THINGS AND YET NONE OF THEM BECAUSE IT WAS TOO BIG FOR WORDS.

IT FILLED MY HEAD WITH FEAR, TELLING ME THAT SOMETHING TERRIBLE WAS GOING TO HAPPEN.

TO MY PARENTS...

* I WAS REALLY INTO *OLIVER TWIST* AT THE TIME.

OR TO MY PRECIOUS CAT, OLIVER
(YES, HE WAS NAMED AFTER THE BOOK, TOO).

IT MADE MY STOMACH BUBBLE AND MY THROAT BURN WITH ACID NAUSEA.

I MUST KEEP OLIVER SAFE.
Poisonous Plants
HUNTING AROUND THE GARDEN LOOKING FOR POTENTIAL DANGERS.
PULLING UP PLANTS THAT I THOUGHT MIGHT MAKE HIM SICK.
HMMM.
INSPECTING THE FENCE FOR ROGUE NAILS, WHERE HE MIGHT CATCH HIS LITTLE PAWS.
SPRINKLING VINEGAR AROUND THE PERIMETER TO KEEP COYOTES AWAY.
Vinegar
(THERE ARE NO COYOTES IN ENGLAND.)

SOMETIMES, I SECRETLY LOCKED HIS CAT FLAP SO THAT HE COULDN'T GO OUTSIDE.

IF I COULD HAVE LOCKED ALL THE DOORS AND KEPT MY ENTIRE FAMILY FROM EVER LEAVING THE HOUSE WITHOUT ME, I WOULD HAVE.

THERE WAS NO OBVIOUS REASON FOR THE BAD FEELING.

I HAD A VERY NICE MIDDLE-CLASS LIFE WITH PARENTS WHO LOVED ME, A LITTLE BROTHER WHO MOSTLY TOLERATED ME,

AND AN EXTENDED FAMILY WHO INDULGED MY EVERY WHIM.

IT WAS JUST THERE. ALL THE TIME.

I DIDN'T KNOW THAT OTHER PEOPLE FELT ANY DIFFERENTLY.

AS FAR AS I KNEW, THE BAD FEELING WAS JUST THE DEFAULT EMOTION FOR EVERYBODY.

I HATED WHEN THINGS FELT OUT OF MY CONTROL.

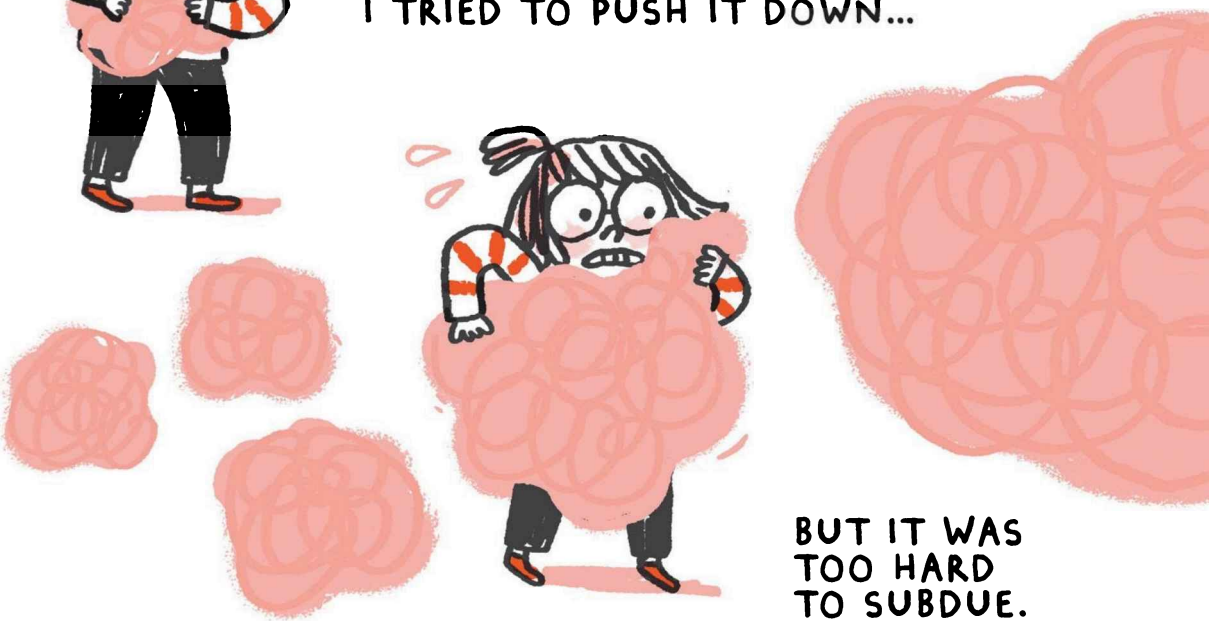
GROWN-UPS WERE ALWAYS CALLING ME SENSITIVE.

I GOT THE IMPRESSION THAT IT WASN'T A GOOD THING.

I MUST ALWAYS BE POLITE AND QUIET.
I MUSTN'T BE SAD OR ANGRY.
I MUSTN'T TELL ANYONE ABOUT THE BAD FEELING.
I HAVE TO BE A GOOD GIRL.
IT WILL MAKE GROWN-UPS MAD.
A PERFECT GIRL.
I HAVE TO GET RID OF IT.

SO I TRIED TO KEEP THE BAD FEELING INSIDE ME, WHERE IT WOULDN'T BOTHER ANYONE.

I TRIED TO PUSH IT DOWN...



BUT IT WAS TOO HARD TO SUBDUE.

WHEN I THOUGHT I HAD IT UNDER CONTROL...

IT JUST FOUND NEW WAYS TO GROW.

IT MUTATED AND CHANGED SHAPE...

UNTIL IT TURNED INTO SOMETHING MUCH BIGGER AND SCARIER.

BACK HOME AFTER THE ER
I'VE RESUMED MY BUSY SCHEDULE OF WALKING MARATHONS AND EXHAUSTION NAPS.

IT IS THE LONGEST TWO WEEKS OF MY LIFE.

I AM OUTSIDE ANOTHER HOSPITAL IN BERKELEY.

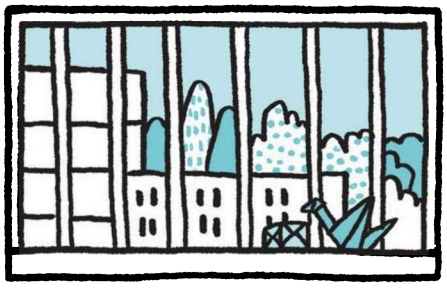
OK, I'M JUST GOING TO NEED YOUR INSURANCE INFO...
HOW LONG YOU STAY HERE WILL DEPEND ON YOUR PROGRESS... AND YOUR COVERAGE.
CLACK CLACK
IF YOU COULD JUST FILL OUT THIS PAPERWORK...
AND THIS...
AND THIS...
AND THIS...
INCONGRUOUSLY SNAZZY PEN
WHO'D HAVE THOUGHT MENTAL ILLNESS WOULD INVOLVE SO MUCH ADMIN?
OK, GREAT!
FOLLOW ME...
GULP.
HERE'S THE PHP ROOM.
PARTIAL HOSPITALIZATION PROGRAM (ADULT)

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT BEHIND THE DOOR.

THE REALITY WAS FAR LESS DRAMATIC.

IT LOOKED MORE LIKE A SCHOOL CLASSROOM THAN ANYTHING I HAD IMAGINED.

APART FROM THE BARS ON THE WINDOWS.



CHEESY INSPIRATIONAL POSTERS

VERY REGULAR-LOOKING PEOPLE

CRAFT CUPBOARD

BOOKS

COMFY CORNER

WIPE-CLEAN PILLOW

ORIGAMI

COLORING BOOKS

WEIGHTED DOG-SHAPED PILLOW (MY FAVORITE)

OH GOD, EVERYONE IS LOOKING AT ME.
THEY ALL LOOK SO NORMAL.
I LOOK RIDICULOUS.
THEY'RE ALL THINKING ABOUT WHAT A MESS I AM.
AM I SUPPOSED TO SAY HELLO?
squeak
WHAT IS THE CORRECT ETIQUETTE FOR PSYCH WARD INTRODUCTIONS?

I HATE THIS.
I HATE THIS.
I HATE THIS.

SHYNESS IS CUTE WHEN YOU'RE A LITTLE KID, BUT THEN YOU TURN THIRTEEN AND IT SUDDENLY BECOMES "WEIRD" AND SUSPICIOUS.

IT HADN'T BOTHERED ME MUCH UNTIL I GOT TO HIGH SCHOOL.

IT WAS LIKE MY NATURAL TIMIDITY HAD JOINED FORCES WITH THE BAD FEELING TO BECOME SOMETHING BIGGER.

AND NASTIER.

IT HAD CLAWS NOW, AND TEETH.

IT SPOKE DIRECTLY TO ME.

IT TOOK THE WORRIES I HAD ABOUT MYSELF AND MY SHORTCOMINGS AND FED ON THEM.

I DIDN'T THINK TO QUESTION IT.

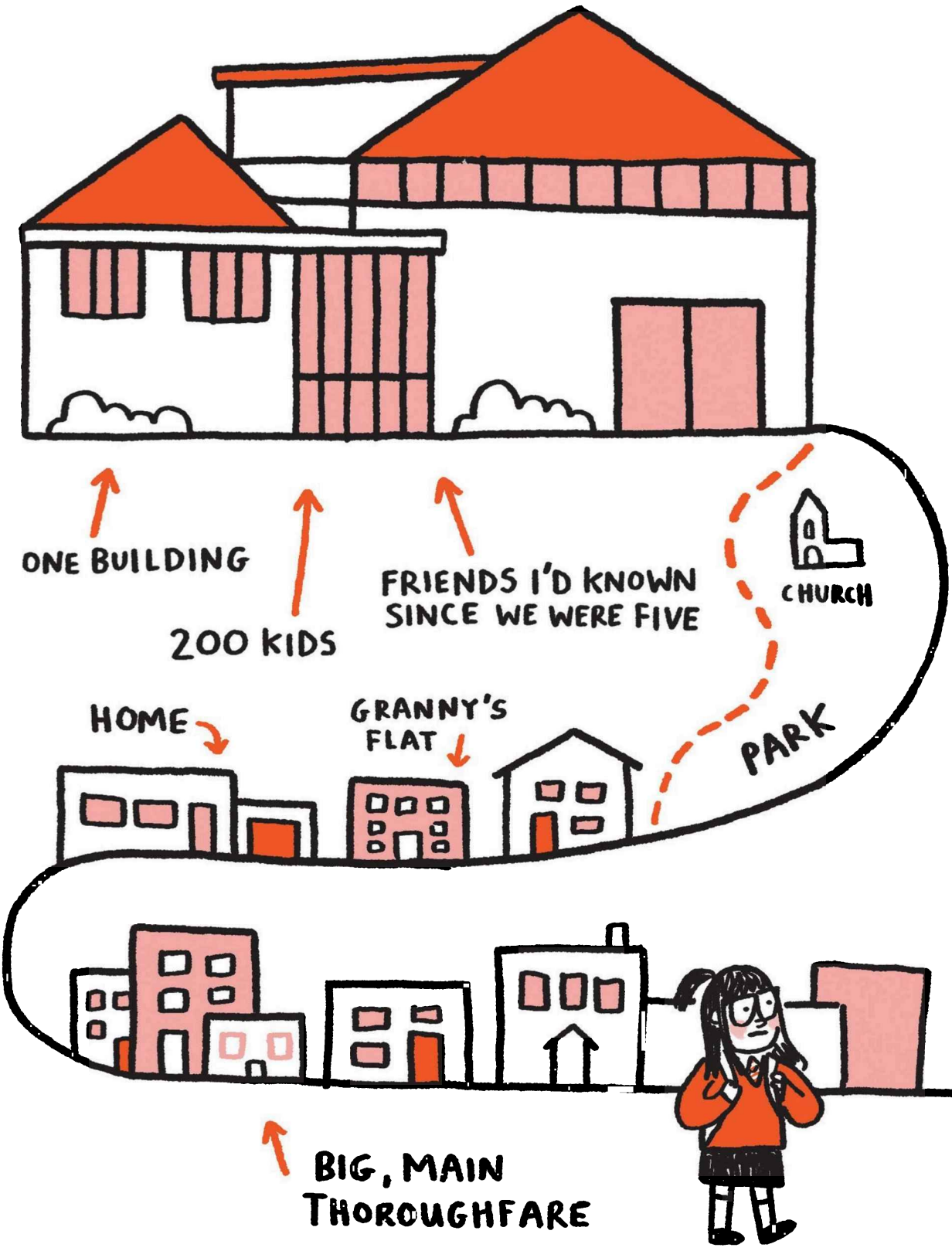
OF COURSE IT WAS TRUE.

IT WAS THE LATE '90S. THE ERA OF THE SPICE GIRLS AND GIRL POWER!!!

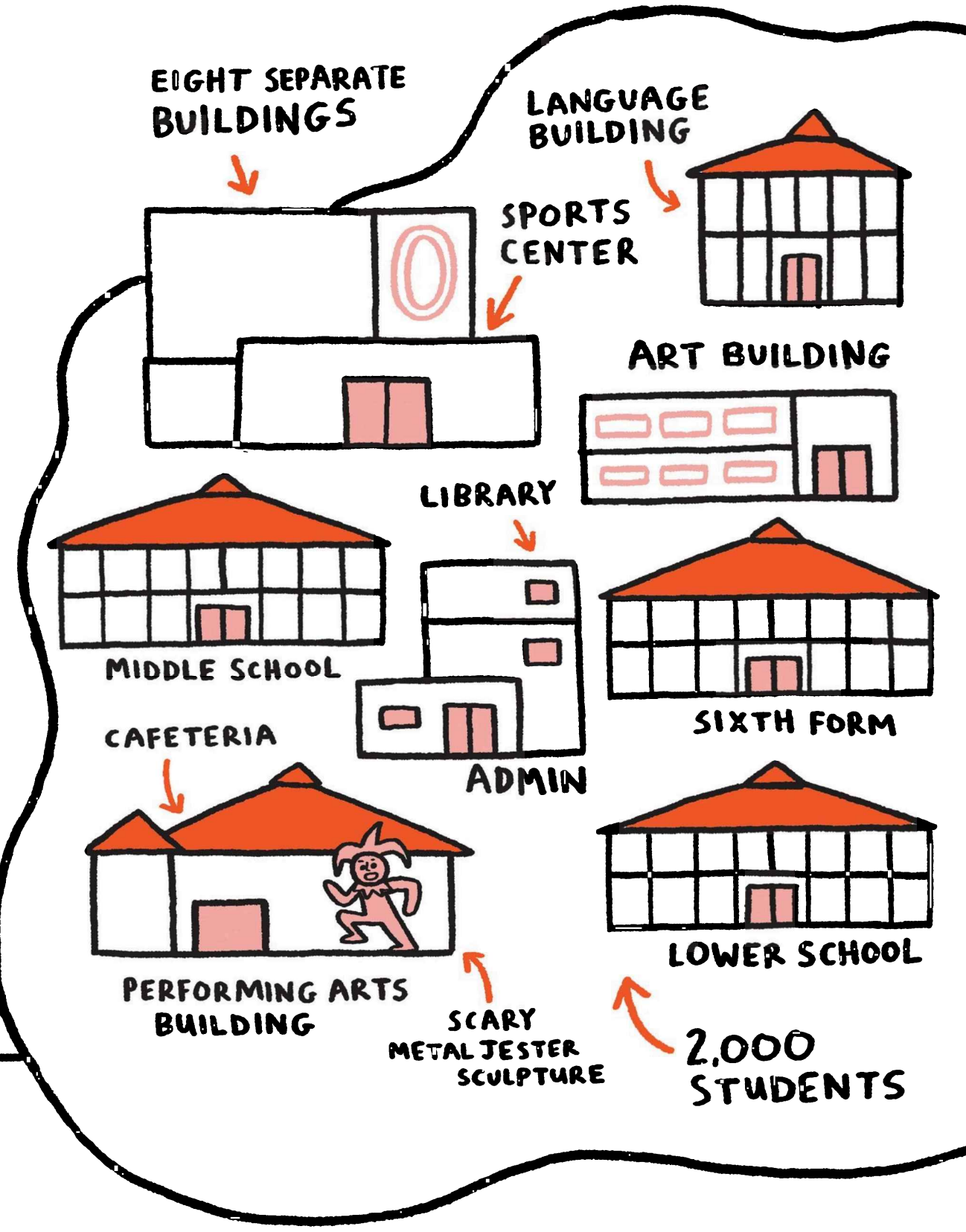
TO BE POPULAR THEN WAS TO BE EVERYTHING THAT I WAS NOT.

EVEN THE LEAST SPICY SPICE GIRL (BABY) WAS MORE EXTROVERTED THAN I COULD EVER DREAM OF BEING.

MY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL HAD BEEN FAMILIAR AND COMPACT.



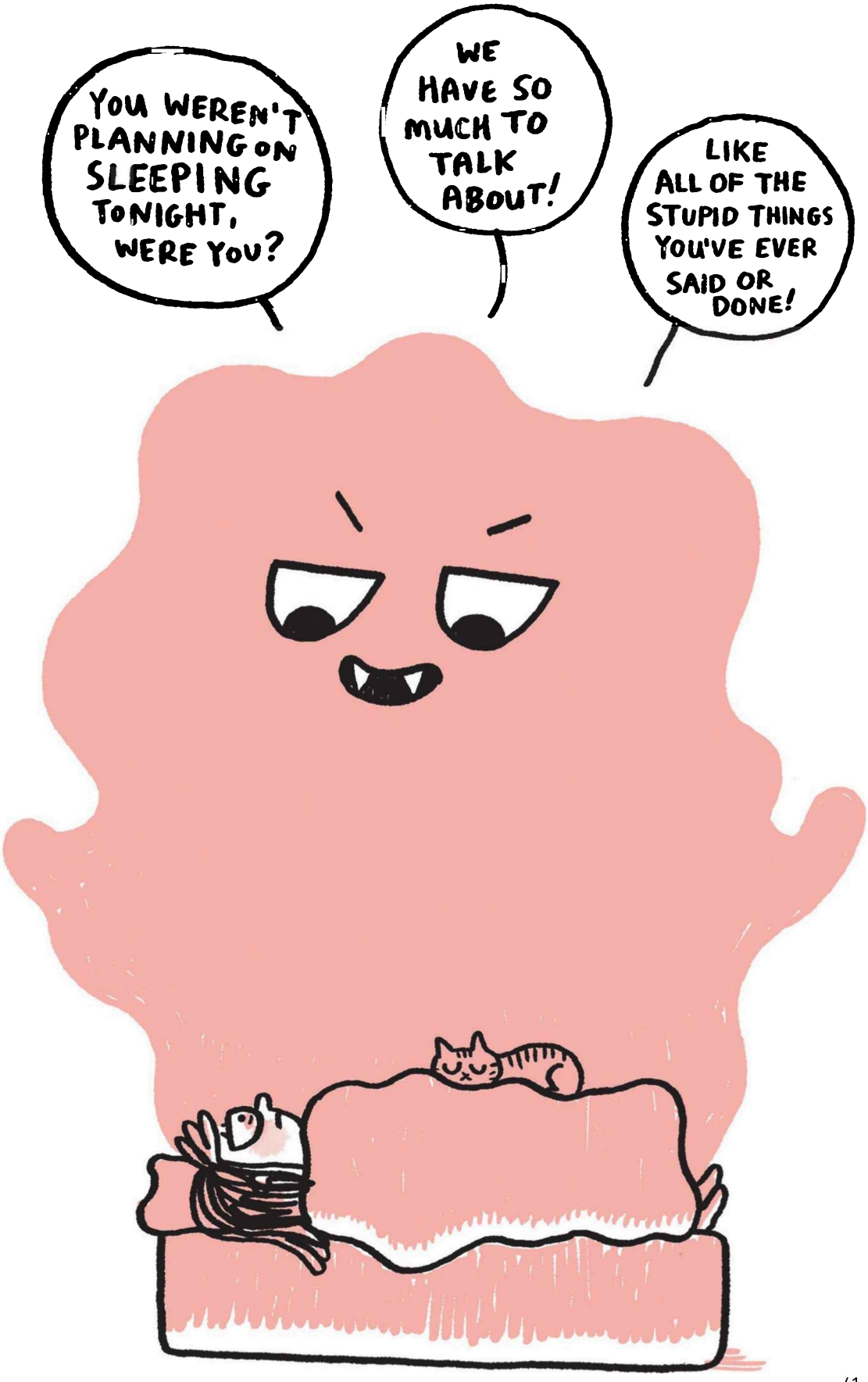
MY HIGH SCHOOL WAS ONE OF THE BIGGEST IN THE COUNTY, OPEN TO STUDENTS FROM ELEVEN TO EIGHTEEN YEARS OF AGE.



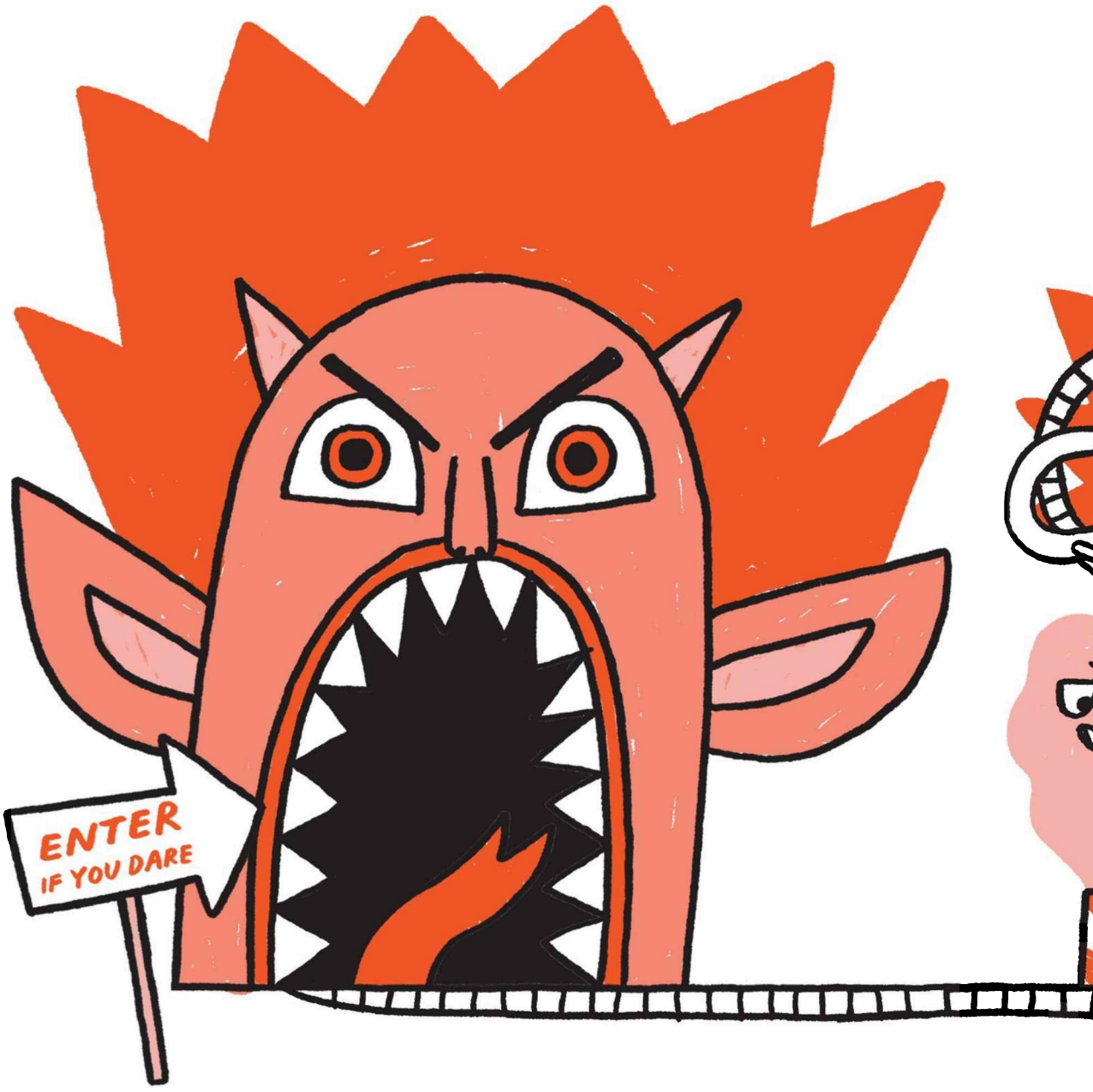
EVERYONE IS SO BIG...
...AND LOUD.
DON'T MAKE EYE CONTACT.
RAISING MY HAND IN CLASS
CAN I GO TO THE BATHROOM?
EW, GROSS! NOW EVERYONE KNOWS YOU PEE!
MAKING ANY KIND OF NOISE AT ALL
SQUEAK
EW, GROSS! NOW EVERYONE KNOWS YOU ARE ALIVE!
HOW SHAMEFUL.

HOLDING MY BREATH
COUNTING THE OTHER READERS AHEAD OF ME
PLEASE LET THE BELL RING BEFORE IT'S MY TURN.
EVERYONE WILL LAUGH AT YOU.
YOU'LL MESS UP.
YOU ALWAYS DO.
YOU'LL NEVER MAKE ANY FRIENDS.
YOU'LL BE ALONE FOREVER.

GEMMA, CAN YOU COME UP AND WRITE ON THE BOARD?
HA!
TRIP
THAT ONE'S GOING STRAIGHT INTO THE NIGHTTIME SHAME ROTATION!
CAN'T WAIT FOR TONIGHT!


YOU WEREN'T PLANNING ON SLEEPING TONIGHT, WERE YOU?
WE HAVE SO MUCH TO TALK ABOUT!
LIKE ALL OF THE STUPID THINGS YOU'VE EVER SAID OR DONE!

THE HOUSE OF SOCIAL ANXIETY NIGHTMARES



SIMPLY EXISTING IN PUBLIC!
VOICING YOUR OWN OPINIONS!
EYE CONTACT!
ORDERING FOOD!
PHONE CALLS!
PUBLIC TOILETS!
TIME TO RUMINATE ON ALL OF YOUR SOCIAL ANXIETIES!
STRAP IN! IT'S GOING TO BE A LONG RIDE.

THE POPULAR KIDS SEEMED TO SENSE THAT I WAS AN EASY TARGET.

THEY MADE FUN OF ME, TRYING TO GET A REACTION.

SOMETIMES ANGER WOULD BUBBLE UP IN MY CHEST.

ONCE OR TWICE I TRIED TO FORM A CLEVER RETORT,

BUT THE WORDS GOT CAUGHT AND JUMBLED IN MY MOUTH.

I SWALLOWED MY TEARS UNTIL MY THROAT HURT AND SQUEEZED MY HANDS INTO FISTS.

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THE ANGER, SO I PUSHED IT DOWN INTO THE SAME DARK, FERMENTING PLACE AS ALL OF MY OTHER UNWANTED EMOTIONS.

BUT ALL OF THOSE FEELINGS HAD TO GO SOMEWHERE.

THEY TURNED INTO HEADACHES AND BOUTS OF NAUSEA THAT REGULARLY SENT ME TO THE NURSE'S OFFICE.

WORSE THAN FEELING SICK, THOUGH, WAS THE SWEAT THAT SEEMED TO DRIP FROM MY EVERY PORE.

IT DAMPENED MY UNDERARMS AND MADE MY HANDS CLAMMY AND HOT.

I BOUGHT EXTRA-STRENGTH ANTIPERSPIRANTS AND CLAMPED MY ARMS AT MY SIDE ALL DAY.

MY BODY WAS TRYING TO COMMUNICATE WITH ME, BUT I WASN'T LISTENING.

I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO.

I JUST ASSUMED THAT IT, LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE ABOUT ME, WAS DEFECTIVE.

IT WASN'T LIKE I WAS SWEATING BECAUSE I WAS ACTIVE.

WALKING TO AND FROM SCHOOL WAS THE ONLY REAL EXERCISE I GOT.

I HATED PE LESSONS, POPULARITY CONTESTS MASQUERADING AS EDUCATION.

I HATED HAVING TO GET CHANGED AND SHOWER IN FRONT OF SIXTY OTHER GIRLS.

I HATED THE TEACHERS.

NOT TO MENTION THE ACTUAL PLAYING SPORTS PART.

I HATED THAT I WASN'T GOOD AT PE, AND I HATED THAT IT MATTERED SO MUCH.

I DID EVERYTHING I COULD TO AVOID HAVING TO PARTICIPATE.

WHEN THINGS GOT TO BE TOO MUCH, I HAD A COUPLE OF GOOD HIDING PLACES.

I LOVED TO LOSE MYSELF IN THE WORLD OF A BOOK,

OR IN THE ACT OF CREATING SOMETHING NEW.

MY DRAWING SKILLS GAVE ME MY ONE TINY PIECE OF SOCIAL CURRENCY.

I DREW ALL THE TIME.

BUT EVERYONE MADE IT CLEAR THAT ART WAS NOT CONSIDERED TO BE "REAL" WORK.

SO I FOUND ANOTHER PLACE TO HIDE, IN GOOD GRADES AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS.

I DID MAKE FRIENDS.

WE FOUND EACH OTHER EVENTUALLY, IN THE LIBRARY STACKS AND LUNCH LINES.

* THEY WEREN'T—BUT IT WAS THE 1990S, SO WE TOOK WHAT WE COULD GET.

WE WERE THE GOOD KIDS. THE ONES TEACHERS CALLED—

WHEN I WAS WITH THEM, I FELT SAFER, INOCULATED AGAINST THE WORLD IN OUR LITTLE BUBBLE.

...MOSTLY.

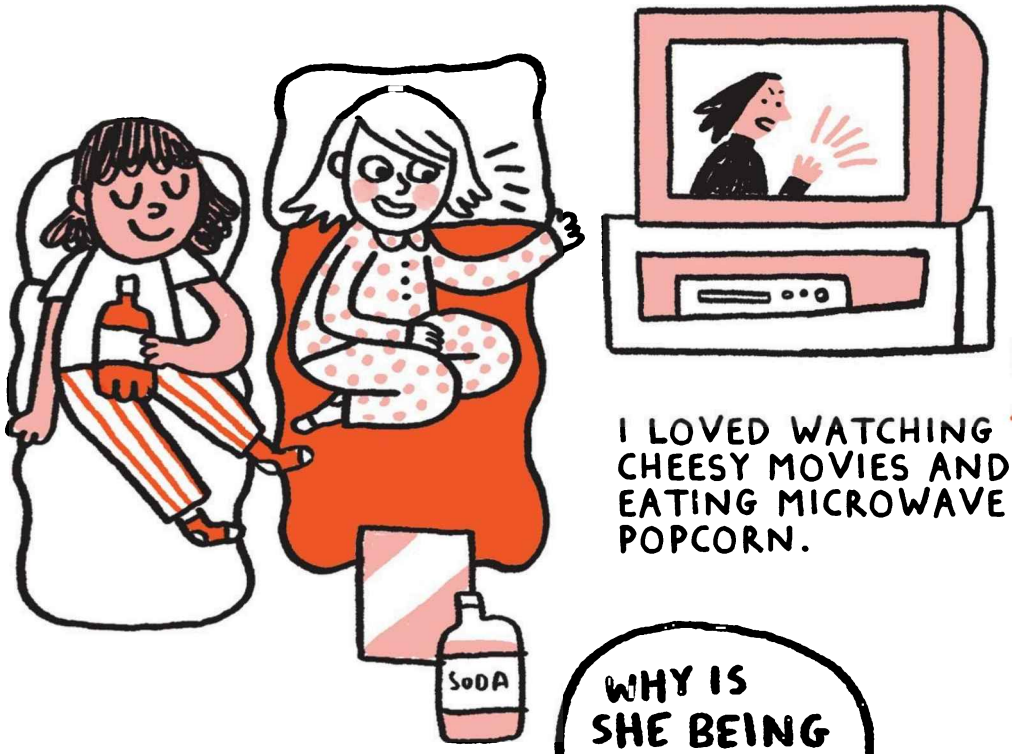
AND YET, EVEN WHEN I WAS WITH MY BEST FRIENDS, I FOUND SOCIALIZING DIFFICULT.

I KNEW THAT, AS A TEENAGE GIRL, I WAS SUPPOSED TO ENJOY THINGS LIKE PARTIES AND CHATTING ON THE PHONE.

MOST OF ALL, I WAS SUPPOSED TO ENJOY SLEEPOVERS.

AND I DID, TO AN EXTENT.

I ENJOYED THE FREEDOM OF BEING AWAY FROM HOME.



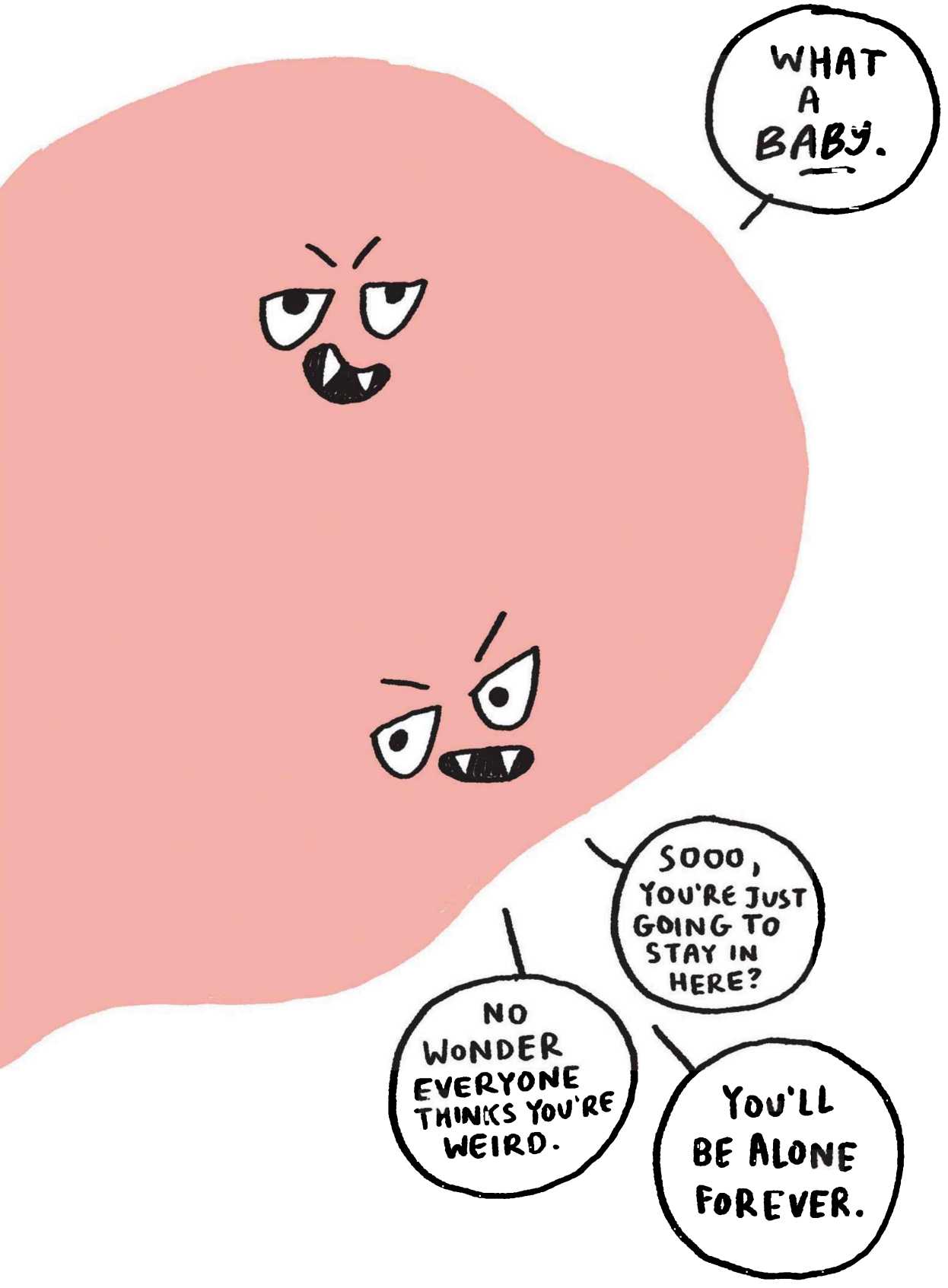
I LOVED WATCHING CHEESY MOVIES AND EATING MICROWAVE POPCORN.

BUT AFTER A FEW HOURS, I WOULD OFTEN FIND MYSELF BECOMING OVERSTIMULATED AND GROUCHY.

THEY DON'T WANT YOU HERE.
THEY JUST FEEL SORRY FOR YOU...
THEY ALL SECRETLY HATE YOU.
BECAUSE YOU'RE SO PATHETIC.
THIS IS TOO MUCH.
I MISS OLIVER.
WHAT IF SOMETHING BAD HAPPENS TO HIM?
I WISH I WAS AT HOME.
I DON'T FEEL SO GOOD.
I NEED SPACE AND QUIET.
TOLD YOU SO.
shuffle shuffle

AND SO, I'D SEQUESTER MYSELF IN THE TRADITIONAL DECOMPRESSION PLACE OF SOCIALLY ANXIOUS INTROVERTS EVERYWHERE-

THE BATHROOM.

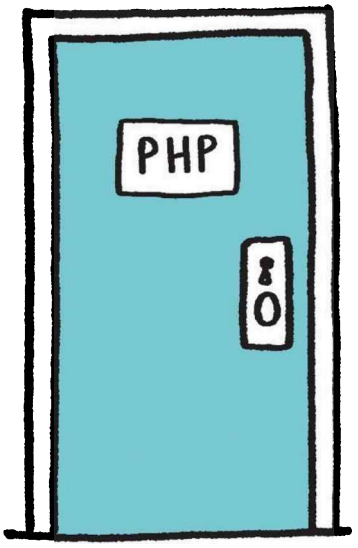

WHAT A BABY.
SOOO, YOU'RE JUST GOING TO STAY IN HERE?
NO WONDER EVERYONE THINKS YOU'RE WEIRD.
YOU'LL BE ALONE FOREVER.

THERE'S NO ESCAPING TO THE BATHROOM HERE.

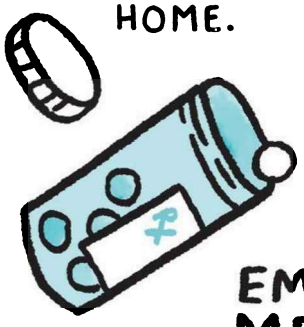
WE'RE EXPECTED TO SPEND ALL DAY IN THE PHP ROOM.

TECHNICALLY, I COULD LEAVE AT ANY TIME. THIS IS ALL VOLUNTARY.

BUT WHERE ELSE WOULD I GO?



I FEEL SAFER HERE THAN AT HOME.



THERE ARE EMERGENCY MEDICATIONS AND DOCTORS AND THERAPISTS AND SOCIAL WORKERS

STRIDING PURPOSEFULLY THROUGH THE HALLS

AND THE EVER-LOOMING PRESENCE OF

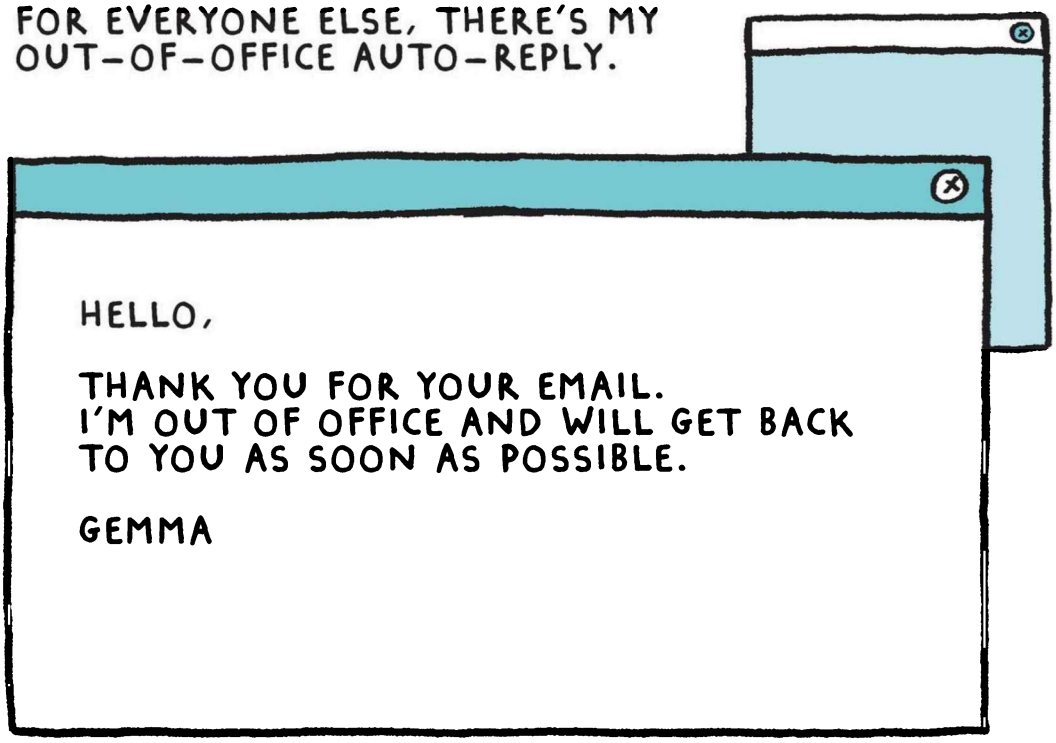
The INPATIENT PSYCH WARD

ONE FLOOR ABOVE US

IT'S BOTH A THREAT AND A COMFORT TO ME.

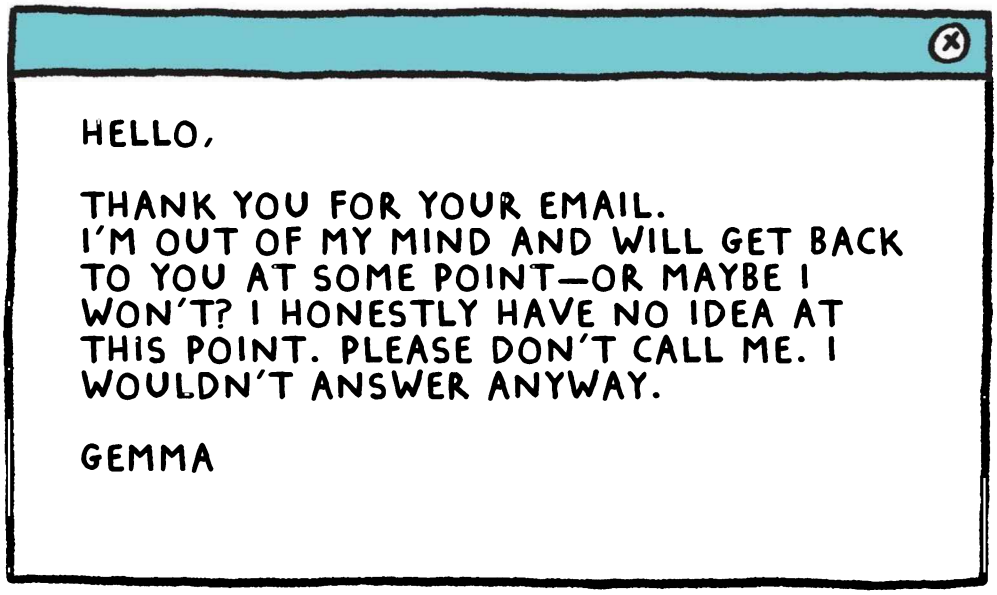
I HAVEN'T TOLD MANY PEOPLE WHERE I AM. ANTHONY HAS TOLD MY PARENTS AND MY CLOSEST FRIENDS.

FOR EVERYONE ELSE, THERE'S MY OUT-OF-OFFICE AUTO-REPLY.



WHAT I SAY

WHAT I WANT TO SAY



9:30 am
LET'S DO OUR MORNING CHECK-INS.
EVERYBODY TAKE A PAGE AND FILL IT OUT.
SOCIAL WORKER
GEMMA, IT'S FINE IF YOU JUST WANT TO OBSERVE TODAY.
MY DEPRESSION IS AT 6/10.
MY ANXIETY IS AT 2/10.
I TOOK THE TRAIN WITHOUT FREAKING OUT!
WELL DONE!
I'LL NEVER GET TO THAT POINT.
I DON'T KNOW IF I CAN BE HELPED.

I COULDN'T PARTICIPATE IF I WANTED TO.
Check-in
Rate your depression
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Rate your anxiety
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Goal
NOT PANICKING EVERY MINUTE OF THE DAY
I DON'T THINK I CAN DO THIS.
I CAN'T BE IN THIS ROOM ALL DAY.
I CAN'T STOP CRYING.
I CAN'T SIT STILL.
I'M GOING TO PANIC.
I HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE.
PUSH

I WAS FOURTEEN YEARS OLD, RIDING THE ELEVATOR AT MY TOWN'S SECOND-BEST SHOPPING MALL, SOMETHING I HAD DONE COUNTLESS TIMES BEFORE.

I HAD FELT FINE WHEN I'D STEPPED INTO THE ELEVATOR BUT NOW, AS IT ASCENDED, I KNEW THAT SOMETHING WAS TERRIBLY WRONG.

IT'S TOO CROWDED.
TOO HOT.
THERE ISN'T ENOUGH AIR.
I CAN'T BREATHE.
THE WORLD IS GOING BLURRY AROUND THE EDGES.
THE WALLS ARE CLOSING IN.

THERE WAS NO OTHER EXPLANATION.

I AM HAVING A HEART ATTACK...

...I AM DYING.

EITHER THAT OR I'M GOING MAD.

PROBABLY ALL THREE.

I HAVE TO GET OUT. RIGHT NOW.

IF I DIDN'T ESCAPE, SOMETHING TERRIBLE WAS GOING TO HAPPEN.

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT IT WAS, BUT I KNEW THAT IT WOULD BE REALLY, REALLY, REALLY BAD.

FINALLY...
WHAT'S TAKING SO LONG?
DING
PLEASE OPEN.
PLEASE OPEN.
PLEASE OPEN.
OH, THANK GOD.
...I ESCAPED.
PHEW.
I AM FREE. I AM SAFE.
I HAD NEVER FELT SO RELIEVED IN MY ENTIRE LIFE.

AHHH, FOOD COURT BURGER GREASE...
NEVER HAS THE AROMA SMELLED SO SWEET.
I'M EXHAUSTED.
WHAT WAS THAT?!
DO I LOOK WEIRD?
CAN SHE TELL?
ACT NORMAL!
HEY! ARE YOU OKAY?
ALEX
I'M GREAT!
WANNA GO TRY ON CLOTHES WE CAN'T AFFORD?
ABSOLUTELY!

I KNEW THAT SOMETHING HAD FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGED THAT AFTERNOON.

I HAD ENTERED THROUGH THE ELEVATOR DOORS AS ONE PERSON AND EMERGED AS...WELL, I LOOKED EXACTLY THE SAME.

BUT INSIDE, I WAS DIFFERENT.

NOW, AS SOMEBODY WHO IS, UNFORTUNATELY, VERY FAMILIAR WITH PANIC IN ALL ITS NASTY LITTLE PERMUTATIONS, IT SEEMS GLARINGLY OBVIOUS—

THE SCARY PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS.

THE SENSE OF IMPENDING DOOM.

THE URGENT NEED TO ESCAPE...

IT'S PANIC ATTACK 101.

PANIC MAKES SENSE WHEN YOU'RE RUNNING AWAY FROM AN ANGRY BEAR, OR AN ANGRY PERSON WITH AN AX, OR BASICALLY ANYTHING THAT IS ANGRY AND SCARY AND CHASING YOU.

IT MAKES LESS SENSE WHEN YOU'RE DOING SOMETHING LIKE RIDING IN AN ELEVATOR AT YOUR LOCAL SHOPPING MALL, WHERE THE BEARS ARE SOFT AND INANIMATE AND (PROBABLY) NOT GOING TO CHASE YOU.

THERE WAS NO ACTUAL DANGER, BUT MY BODY REACTED LIKE THERE WAS.

MY HEART RATE AND BREATHING SPED UP AS MY BODY PREPARED FOR A LIFE-THREATENING SITUATION. I WAS IN FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT MODE, READY TO FIGHT—OR ESCAPE.

BUT I DIDN'T KNOW ANY OF THAT THEN. I JUST THOUGHT I WAS BROKEN.

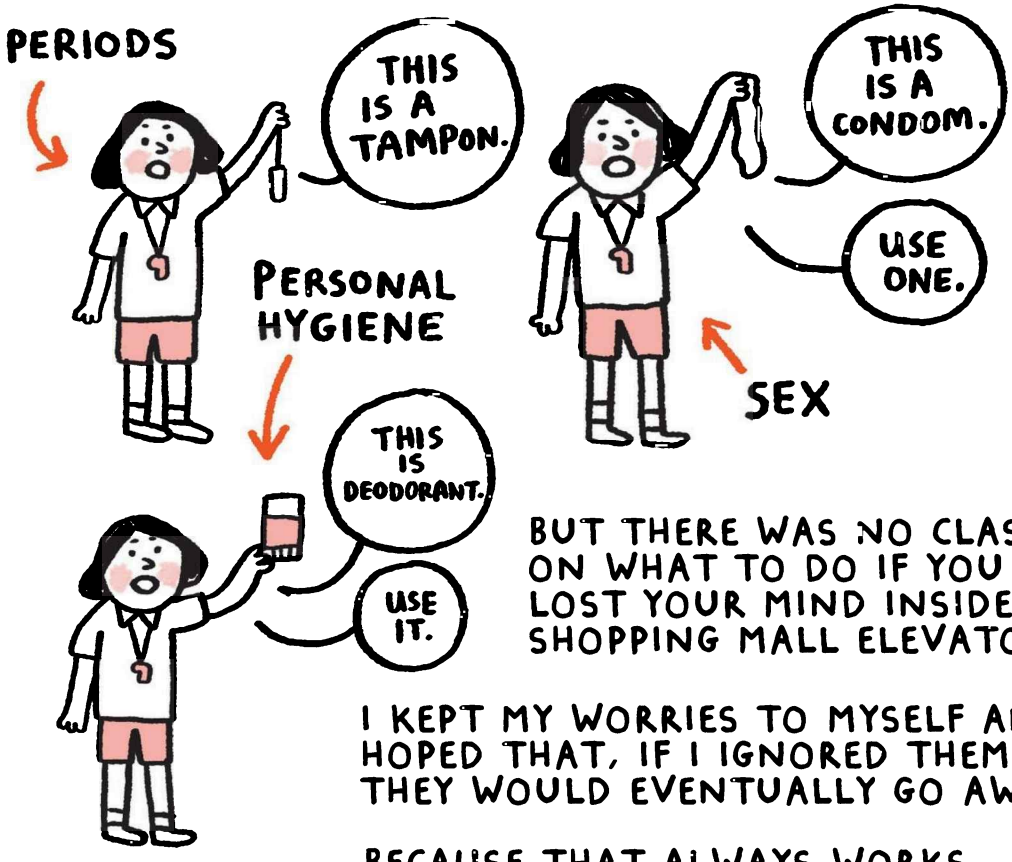
I COULDN'T STOP THINKING ABOUT WHAT HAD HAPPENED AT THE MALL.

I DIDN'T CONNECT THE TERROR I'D FELT IN THAT ELEVATOR WITH THE BAD FEELING THAT HAD DOGGED ME SINCE CHILDHOOD.

THE BAD FEELING WAS CONSTANT AND HEAVY AND NAGGING. WHATEVER THIS WAS HAD BEEN SUDDEN AND BIG AND VIOLENT AND SO PHYSICAL.

MENTAL ILLNESS WASN'T DISCUSSED AT MY HIGH SCHOOL, EXCEPT FLIPPANTLY AMONG STUDENTS, IN THE BELIEF THAT IT HAPPENED TO OTHER PEOPLE, NOT NORMAL KIDS LIKE US.

THERE WERE CLASSES ON—



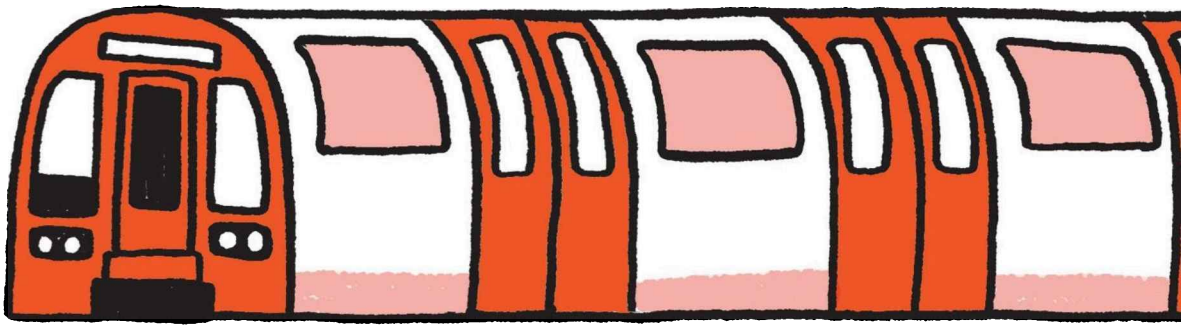
BUT THERE WAS NO CLASS ON WHAT TO DO IF YOU LOST YOUR MIND INSIDE A SHOPPING MALL ELEVATOR.

I KEPT MY WORRIES TO MYSELF AND HOPED THAT, IF I IGNORED THEM, THEY WOULD EVENTUALLY GO AWAY.

BECAUSE THAT ALWAYS WORKS.

IT DID NOT WORK.

A FEW MONTHS LATER, I WAS ON A LONDON UNDERGROUND TRAIN TO CAMDEN WITH MY FRIEND KAT AND HER MUM WHEN A SICKENINGLY FAMILIAR FEELING CAME OVER ME.



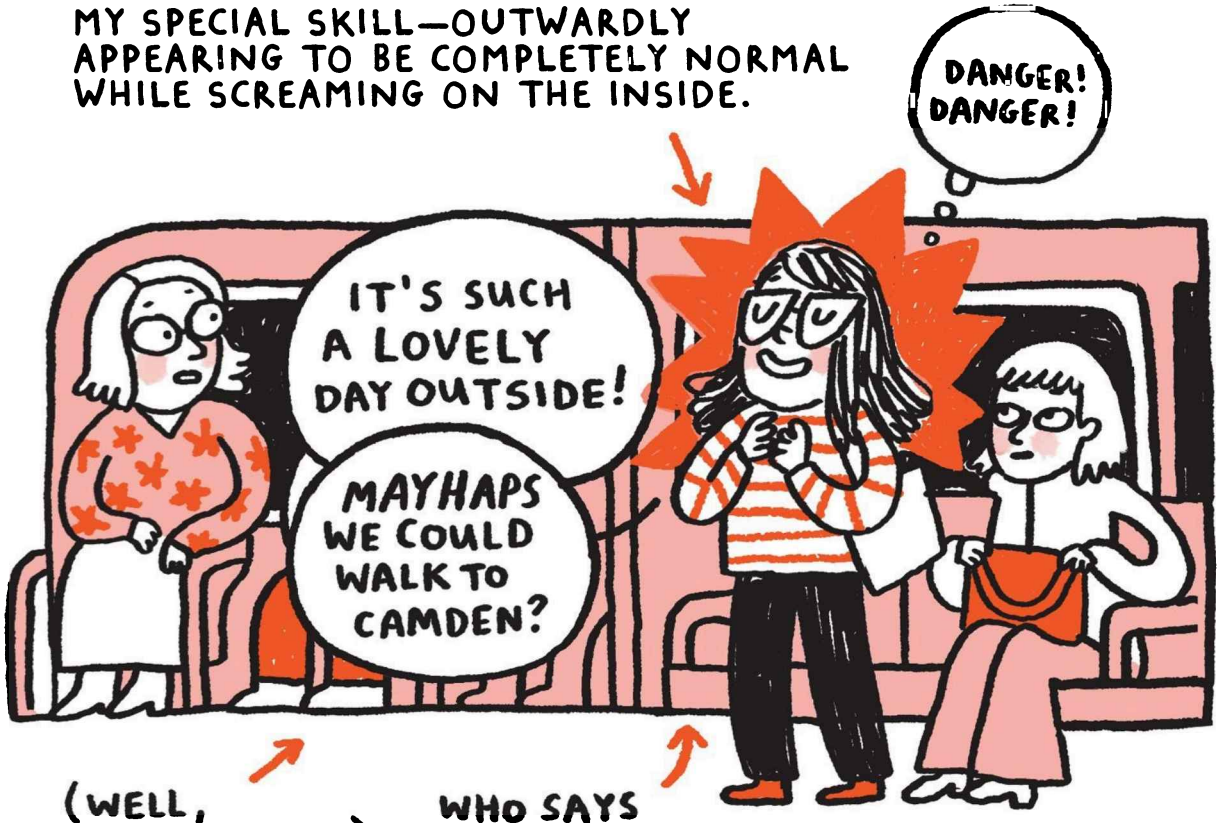
IT WAS KAT'S BIRTHDAY AND SHE WANTED TO SPEND THE DAY SHOPPING IN THE BIG CITY.

ONE MOMENT WE WERE DISCUSSING THE GREAT QUESTIONS OF OUR TIME.

THE NEXT, I HAD LOST CONTROL OF MY LIMBS.

NOT THIS AGAIN.
COLD SWEAT
I'M GOING TO FAINT.
SHAKY ARMS
I'M IN DANGER.
RACING HEART
AM I DYING FOR REAL THIS TIME?
JELLY LEGS
CAN EVERYONE TELL?
NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO

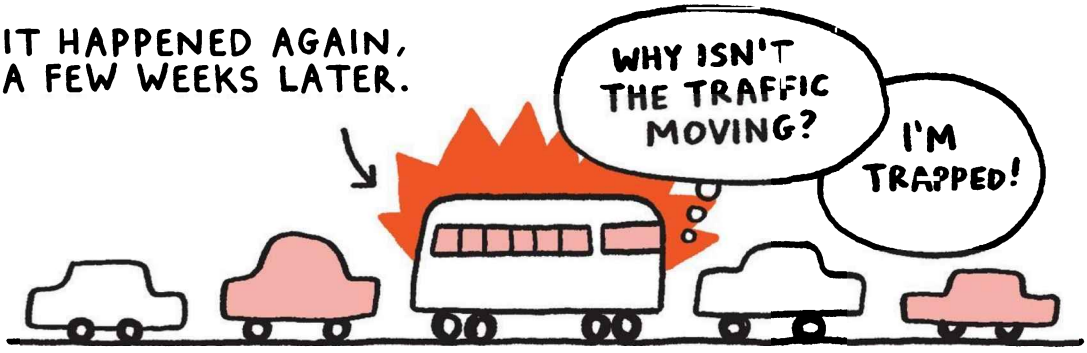
MY SPECIAL SKILL—OUTWARDLY APPEARING TO BE COMPLETELY NORMAL WHILE SCREAMING ON THE INSIDE.



I SPENT THE REST OF THE DAY MAKING MY CASE FOR TAKING THE BUS BACK TO THE MAIN TRAIN STATION.

I GOT MY WAY, OF COURSE.

IT HAPPENED AGAIN, A FEW WEEKS LATER.



AND AGAIN.

I BECAME HYPERVIGILANT.

THE ANXIETY LODGED IN MY CHEST LIKE A LIT FIREWORK.

LITTLE SPARKS FOLLOWED ME EVERYWHERE, READY TO IGNITE AT THE FIRST SIGN OF POTENTIAL DANGER.

I CONSTANTLY MONITORED THE WAY I WAS FEELING, HYPERAWARE OF EVERY SENSATION IN MY BODY.

JUST THE TINIEST DEVIATION FROM "NORMAL" WAS ENOUGH TO CONVINCE ME THAT SOMETHING BAD WAS GOING TO HAPPEN.

AND IF I COULDN'T ESCAPE, I PANICKED.

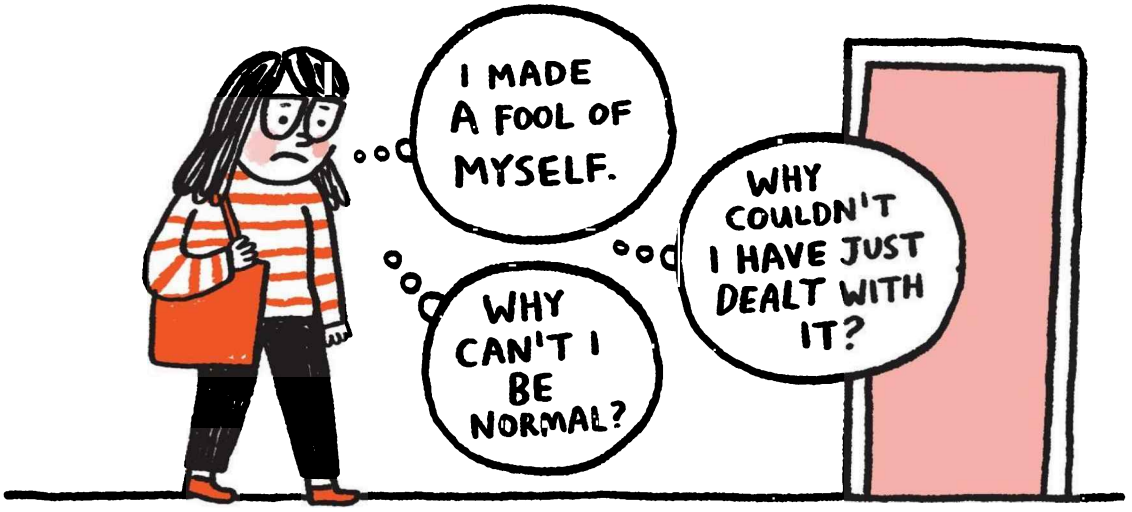
THE PANIC ATTACK
I CAN'T COPE WITH THIS.
THIS IS GOING TO BE BAD.
I'M GETTING ANXIOUS.
IT'S HAPPENING AGAIN.
OH NO, I FEEL WEIRD.

HELP!
AAARGH! I'M GOING TO GO CRAZY!
THIS IS THE WORST FEELING IN THE WORLD.
OK, IT'S GOING AWAY...
IT'S NEARLY OVER.
I NEVER WANT TO FEEL LIKE THAT, EVER AGAIN.

WHEREVER I WENT, I WAS ON EDGE,
ALWAYS SEARCHING FOR THE CLOSEST EXIT ROUTE.

AS SOON AS I ESCAPED, THE PANIC WOULD BEGIN TO DISSOLVE.
OF COURSE IT'S NOT BLOCKED.
WHY DID I DO THAT?
BASICALLY EVERY '90s TEEN FILM
GEMMA, ARE YOU IN HERE?
HERE.
YOU MISSED THE PART WHEN SHE TAKES HER GLASSES OFF AND BECOMES HOT!
I'M NOT FEELING VERY WELL. I THINK I'M GOING TO GO HOME.
I'M RUINING EVERYTHING FOR EVERYONE, AS USUAL.

AFTERWARD, I'D FEEL ASHAMED.



AND WEIRDLY HUNGOVER.

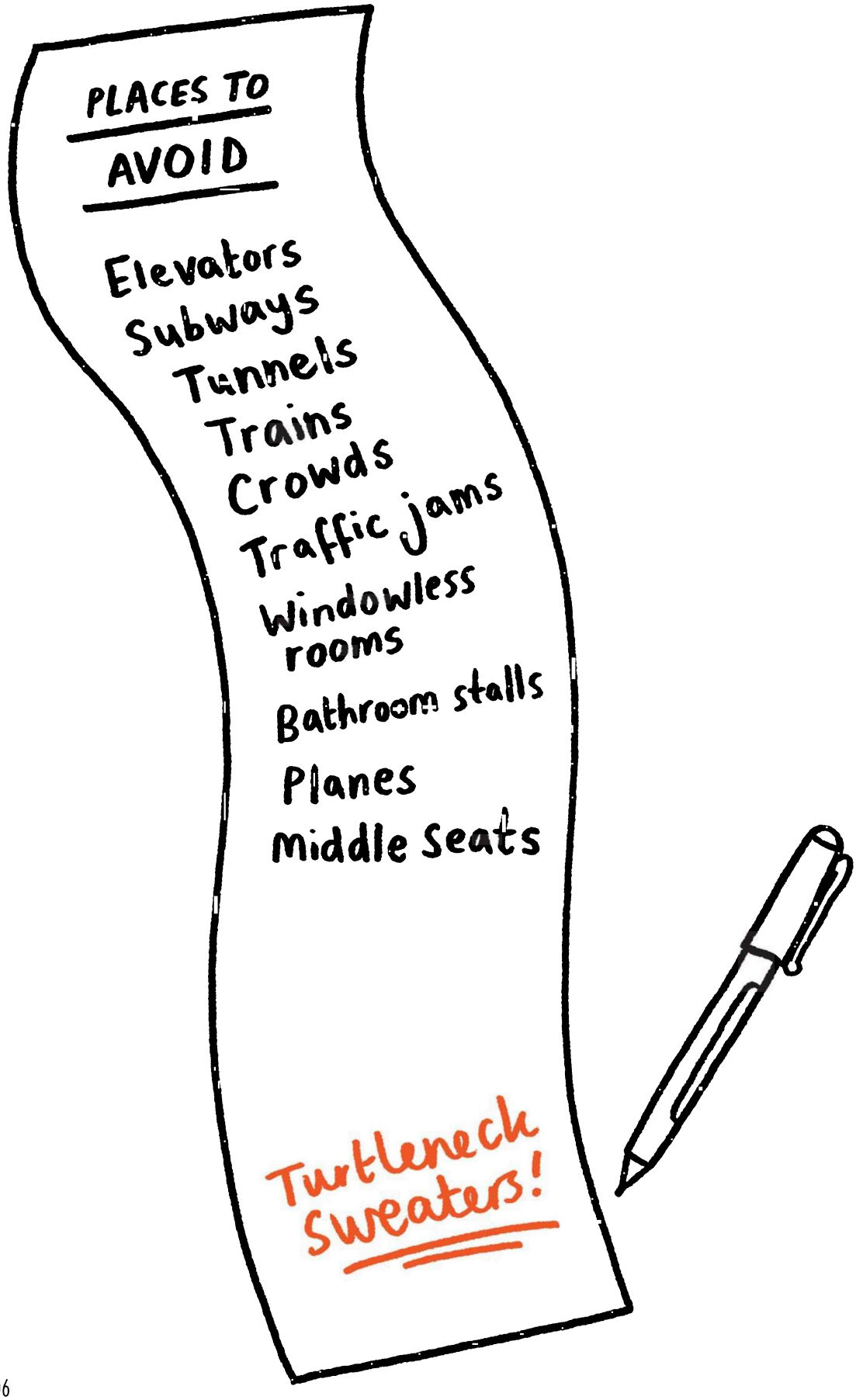
MOST OF ALL, I WAS TERRIFIED THAT IT WOULD HAPPEN AGAIN. IT WAS ALL I COULD THINK ABOUT.

I SURVIVED THE PANIC ATTACK*
* THIS TIME
BUT WHAT IF IT HAPPENS AGAIN?
AND WHAT IF NEXT TIME THE FEELING DOESN'T GO AWAY?
Your souvenir photo

SO, OF COURSE, IT DID.

OF COURSE I KNEW, RATIONALLY, THAT I WASN'T REALLY GOING TO DIE INSIDE A TURTLENECK, EVEN OF EMBARRASSMENT.

BUT THE DANGER SEEMED SO REAL THAT IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO BELIEVE THAT THERE WAS NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF.


PLACES TO AVOID
Elevators
Subways
Tunnels
Trains
Crowds
Traffic jams
Windowless rooms
Bathroom stalls
Planes
Middle seats
Turtleneck sweaters!

I SPENT MORE THAN THE NORMAL AMOUNT OF TIME (WHICH IS ZERO HOURS) RUMINATING ON THE INCREASINGLY UNLIKELY HYPOTHETICAL SITUATIONS IN WHICH I MIGHT MEET MY END.

I COULD GET BURIED ALIVE...

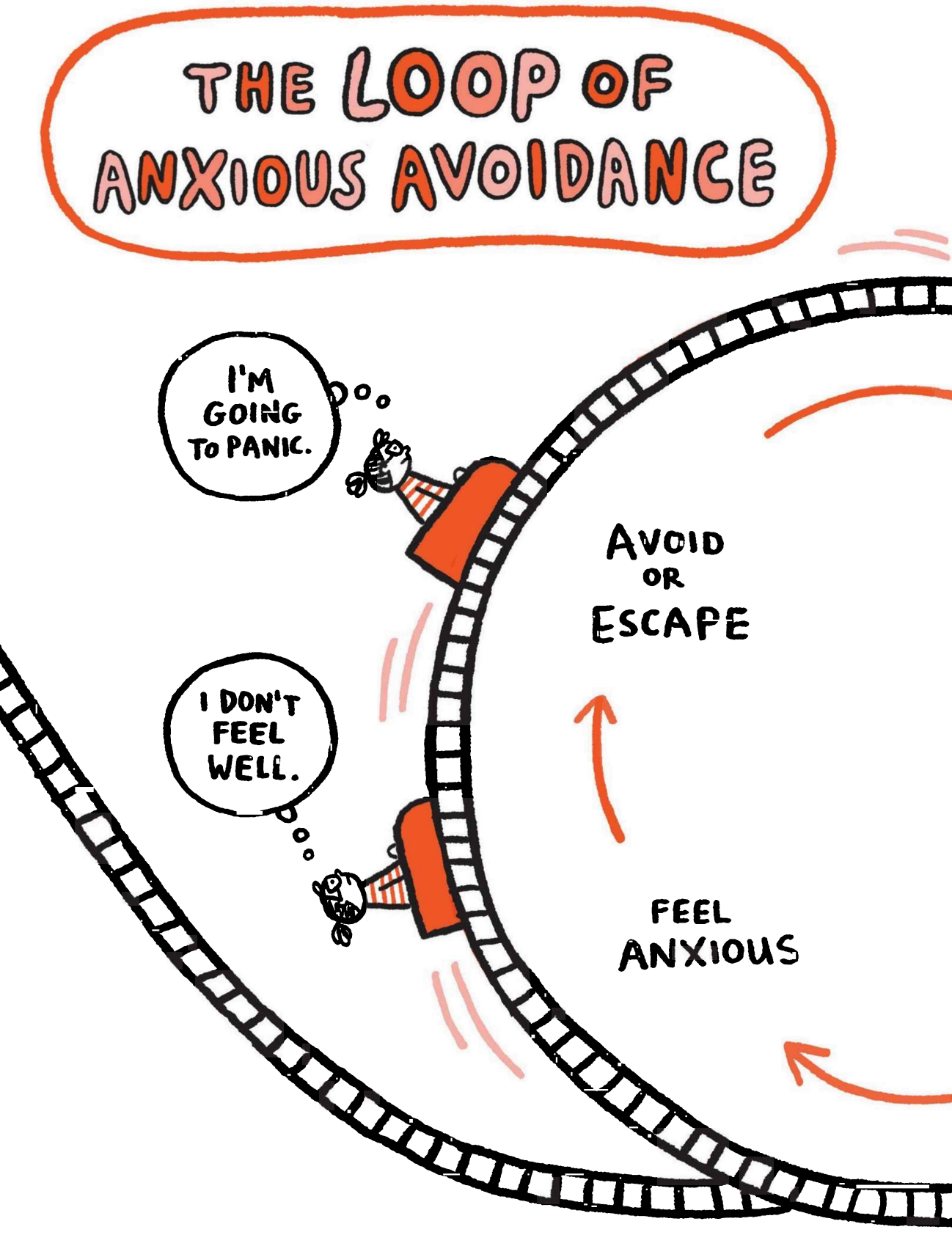
OR LOST INSIDE A CAVE.

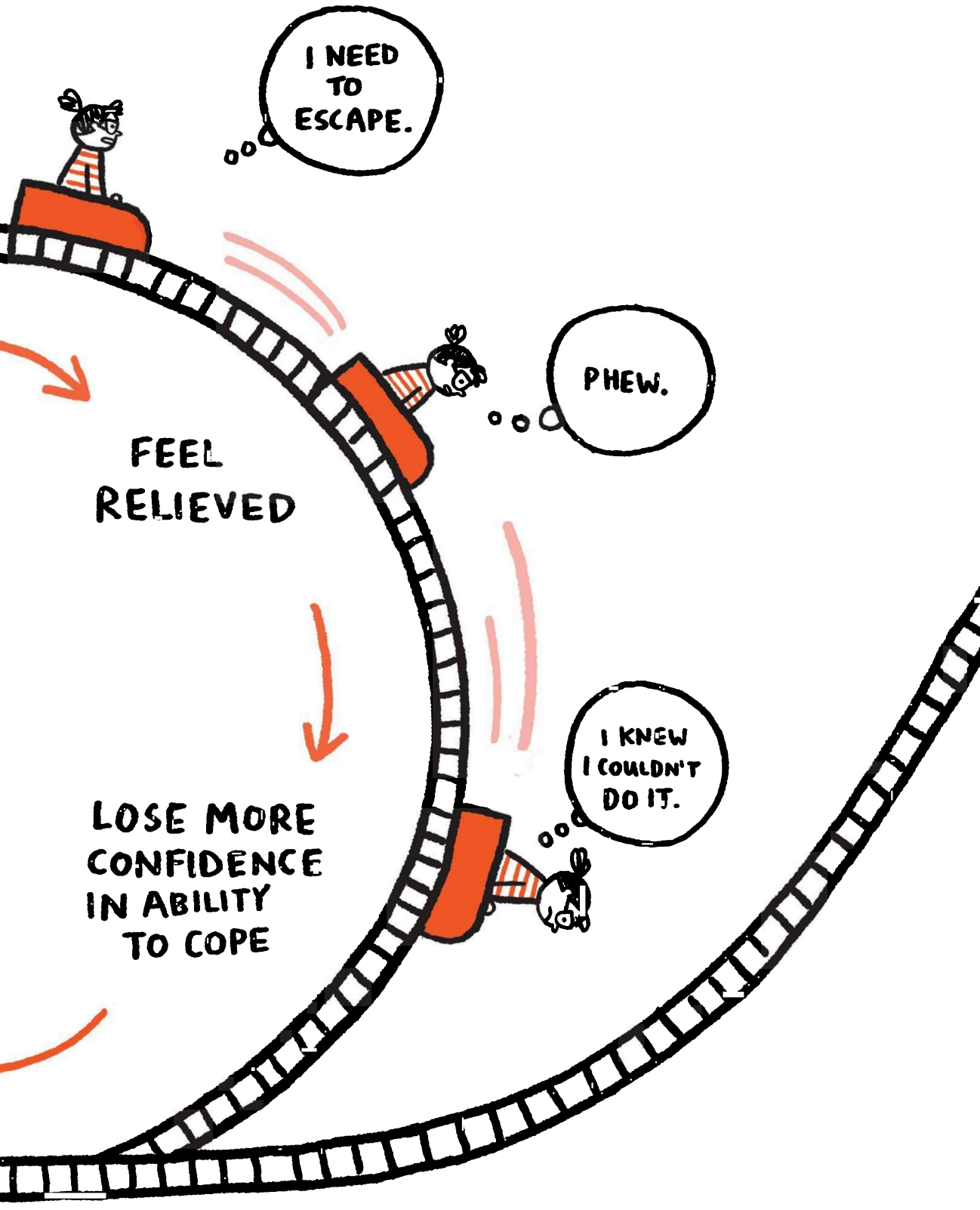
I COULD SOMEHOW WANDER INTO A WALK-IN FREEZER AND GET SHUT IN THERE...

OR GET ARRESTED AND SENT TO PRISON...

OR KIDNAPPED AND SHUT INSIDE THE TRUNK OF A CAR, LIKE MARTY IN *BACK TO THE FUTURE*.

THE POSSIBILITIES WERE ENDLESS.


THE LOOP OF ANXIOUS AVOIDANCE
I'M GOING TO PANIC.
I DON'T FEEL WELL.
AVOID OR ESCAPE
FEEL ANXIOUS


I NEED TO ESCAPE.
PHEW.
FEEL RELIEVED
I KNEW I COULDN'T DO IT.
LOSE MORE CONFIDENCE IN ABILITY TO COPE

BY THE TIME I WAS IN MY FINAL YEAR AT HIGH SCHOOL, I HAD BECOME AN EXPERT IN EVASION AND AVOIDANCE.

AT CROWDED CONCERTS

IT WAS EASY ENOUGH TO MAKE BELIEVABLE EXCUSES. I GENUINELY DID HAVE IMPORTANT STUFF TO DO.

EXAMS—AND THE FUTURE—LOOMED.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CONTROL FREAK SHOW

THIS MORNING, WE'RE GOING TO TALK ABOUT RADICAL ACCEPTANCE.
OOH, STATIONERY!
OPEN YOUR BINDER TO PAGE TWENTY AND GRAB A HIGHLIGHTER.
THE Binder
EVERYONE GETS A BINDER WHEN THEY ARRIVE.
I'VE ALREADY COVERED MINE IN STICKERS.
COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS
DIALECTICAL BEHAVIORAL THERAPY
AKA THE PHP BIBLE
WORKSHEETS
HALT
HUNGRY
ANGRY
LONELY
TIRED
SAFETY CHECKLIST
PHOTOCOPIED PAGES FROM THERAPY WORKBOOKS
PLANNING PAGES

I'M NOT SURE THAT I CAN PUT ANY OF THIS STUFF INTO ACTION YET...BUT I CAN AT LEAST WRITE IT ALL DOWN IN MY VERY BEST CURSIVE.

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN A GOOD STUDENT.

CAMBRIDGE, ENGLAND
2002

I DON'T USUALLY TELL PEOPLE THAT I WENT TO CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY. IT'S NOT BECAUSE I'M ESPECIALLY MODEST OR HUMBLE.

IT'S BECAUSE I ONLY WENT THERE FOR TWO WEEKS.

IT WAS A HUGE DEAL WHEN I GOT ACCEPTED.

I WAS IN THE LOCAL NEWSPAPER AND EVERYTHING.

THE TRUTH WAS, I'D SPENT SO LONG TRYING TO MAKE EVERYBODY ELSE HAPPY THAT I DIDN'T REALLY KNOW WHAT I WANTED.

THE PEOPLE PLEASER
SORRY!
I'D HATE TO INCONVENIENCE YOU!
WHATEVER YOU PREFER!
REAL
ALIVE

SELF-ESTEEM LIMBO!
WATCH HER BEND OVER BACKWARD!
IT'S FINE!
HOW LOW CAN SHE GO?!
SEE HER TIE HERSELF IN KNOTS!
CONTORTIONIST!
NO WORRIES!
SHE'LL DO ANYTHING TO AVOID CONFLICT!
DISAPPEARING ACT!

I HAD APPLIED TO A BUNCH OF DIFFERENT UNIVERSITIES, NARROWING THEM DOWN WITH MY UNUSUAL LIST OF PREREQUISITES.

I DIDN'T REALLY CARE WHERE I WENT, AS LONG AS I COULD AVOID THE THINGS THAT TRIGGERED MY PANIC.

MY FRIENDS WERE ALL HEADING TO DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE COUNTRY.

EVERYONE WAS SO EXCITED. IT WAS CONTAGIOUS.

I COULDN'T WAIT TO START MY UNIVERSITY ADVENTURE.

I ARRIVED IN CAMBRIDGE THAT OCTOBER.

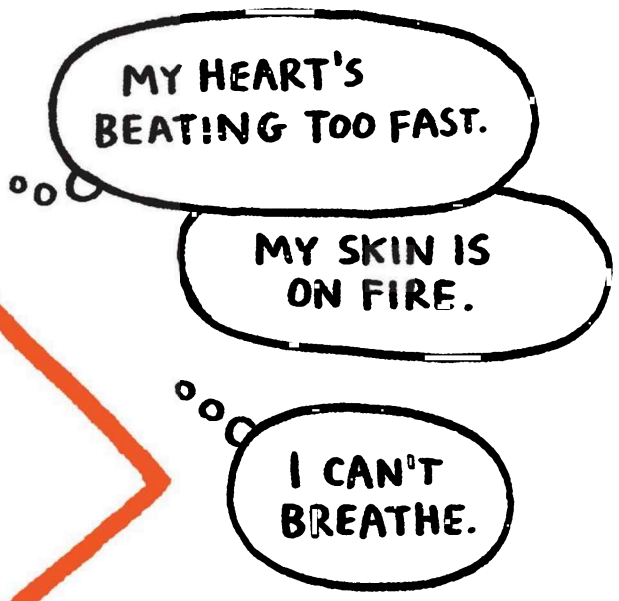
THEN I HEADED TO ORIENTATION CLASS.
GULP.
I FEEL VERY ALONE ALL OF A SUDDEN.
EVERYONE LOOKS SO CONFIDENT.
IT'S LIKE THEY ALREADY KNOW EACH OTHER.
I DON'T BELONG HERE.
THEY PROBABLY ALL WENT TO THE SAME BOARDING SCHOOL OR SOMETHING.
I CAN'T GO IN THERE.

I RECOGNIZED IT RIGHT AWAY.

IT WAS THAT SAME BAD FEELING.

THE ONE FROM THE ELEVATOR AND FROM THE SUBWAY CAR AND FROM EVERY TIME I FELT TRAPPED SOMEHOW.

THE SAME SCARY PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS.

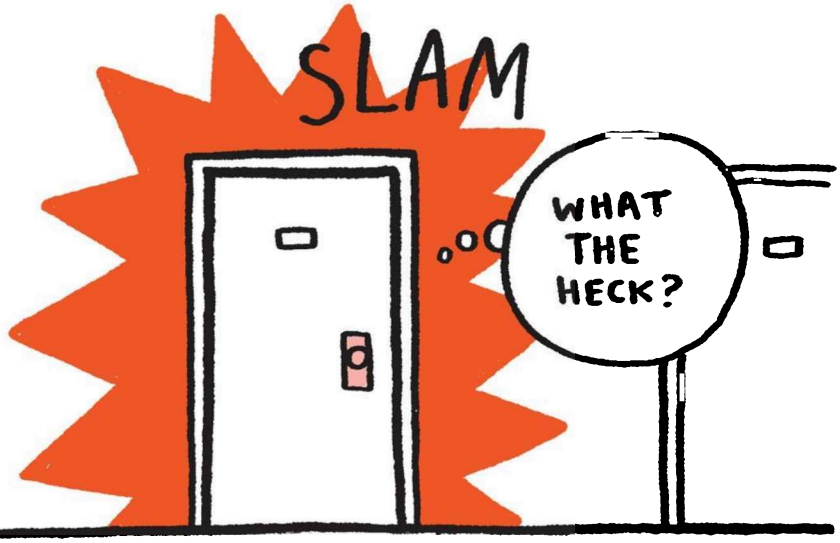


THE SAME SENSATION OF IMPENDING DOOM.

THE SAME URGENT NEED TO FLEE.

I RAN BACK TO MY ROOM,
THE BAD FEELING SNAPPING AT MY HEELS.

AND THERE I REMAINED FOR THE REST OF THE DAY.



AND THE DAY AFTER THAT...

AND THE NEXT...AND THE NEXT...AND THE NEXT.

I DIDN'T EAT.
I BARELY SLEPT.

I JUST SAT, THINKING IN CIRCLES...

...CONJURING EVERY WORST-CASE SCENARIO IN MY HEAD.

THE GREAT CATASTROPHIZER

WATCH HER JUMP TO THE WORST POSSIBLE CONCLUSION!

DOOM!

MISERY!

MARVEL AT HER ABILITY TO PREDICT THE OUTCOME OF EVERY EVENT!

SEE HER BLOW EVERYTHING OUT OF PROPORTION!

FAILURE!

A COUPLE OF TIMES, DURING MOMENTS OF RELATIVE CALM, I ATTEMPTED TO ATTEND CAMPUS EVENTS.

BUT AFTER A FEW MINUTES OF TRYING TO KEEP IT TOGETHER, I'D BE OVERCOME BY PANIC AND HAVE TO FLEE.

I DIDN'T EVEN CONSIDER THAT THE ISSUE MIGHT NOT BE EXTERNAL AT ALL BUT, RATHER, WITHIN ME.

I CALLED MY PARENTS.
CRYING HYSTERICALLY
I HATE IT HERE.
I MADE A MISTAKE.
I NEED TO COME HOME.
BUT YOU WORKED SO HARD TO GET THERE! WHY DON'T YOU GIVE IT A LITTLE LONGER?
I CAN'T.

I MET WITH THE DEAN.

I CAN'T REMEMBER MUCH OF OUR CONVERSATION, TO BE HONEST.

I KNOW THAT I SAID SOMETHING ABOUT WANTING TO STUDY ART, WHICH, WHILE PARTIALLY TRUE, WAS NOT THE REAL REASON I WAS HAVING A BREAKDOWN IN HIS OFFICE.

AFTER A FEW MORE TEARFUL PHONE CALLS, MY PARENTS RELENTED AND CAME TO PICK ME UP.

WE DROVE HOME IN UNCOMFORTABLE SILENCE.

I FELT RELIEVED THAT I WAS FINALLY GETTING MY WAY BUT ALSO FULL OF GUILT AND SHAME.

GOING TO UNIVERSITY HAD BEEN SUCH A BIG DEAL, AND NOW HERE I WAS, BACK IN THE TOWN I'D BEEN SO DESPERATE TO LEAVE.

WHEN MY PARENTS TRIED TO TALK TO ME, I PRETENDED NOT TO HEAR.

I KNEW THAT IT WAS PAINFUL FOR THEM TO SEE ME THIS WAY, BUT I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY.

I DIDN'T KNOW IF "HELP" EVEN EXISTED FOR MY PROBLEM, WHICH I WAS CERTAIN WAS UNIQUE TO ME, THE CRAZIEST PERSON IN THE ENTIRE WORLD.

I WAS SO USED TO SUPPRESSING MY EMOTIONS THAT I FOUND IT HARD TO EVEN RECOGNIZE THEM, LET ALONE VERBALIZE THEM.

I DIDN'T WANT TO LET ANYBODY HELP ME BECAUSE I DIDN'T BELIEVE ANYBODY *COULD* HELP ME.

THE EMOTION SWALLOWER
YEARS OF EXPERIENCE!
I'M FINE!
FEELINGS
WOW!
Repression!
LOOK AT HER SHOVE THOSE UNPLEASANT FEELINGS WAY DOWN DEEP!
YOU'LL BE AMAZED AT HER LEVEL OF DENIAL!
TOTALLY PENT-UP!

I FELT COMPLETELY ADRIFT.

I SPENT MY DAYS IMAGINING MY HIGH SCHOOL FRIENDS HAVING THE TIMES OF THEIR LIVES.

ALL OF THE THINGS I SHOULD HAVE BEEN DOING INSTEAD OF ROTTING ON THE SOFA.

MY FRIEND NINA, WHO WAS STUDYING AT THE LOCAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

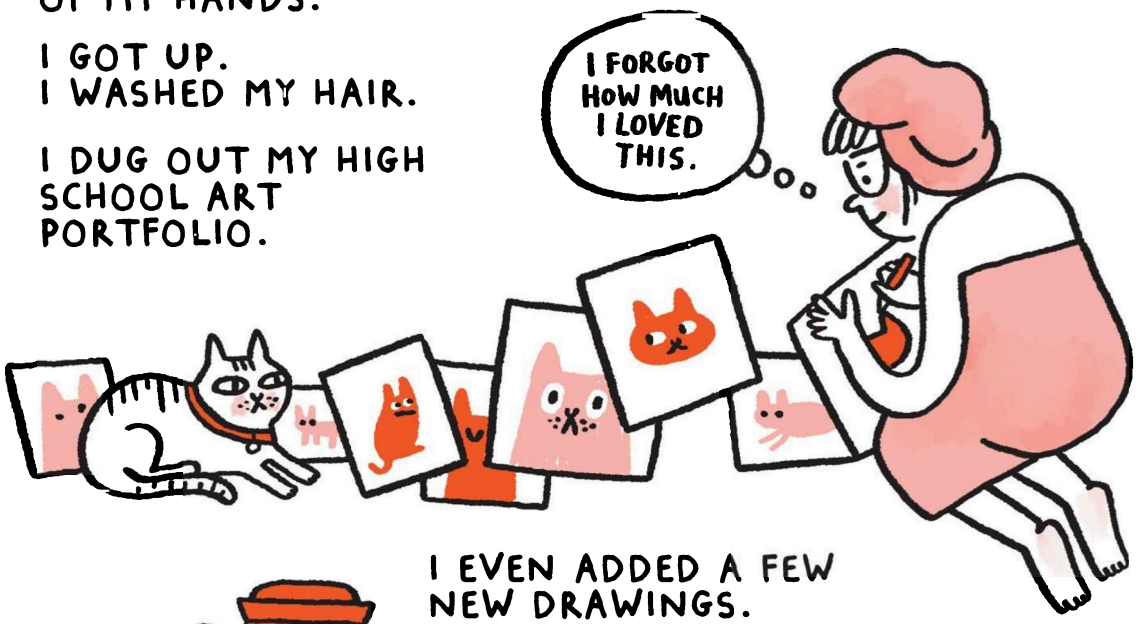
HELLO! MY MUM SAW YOUR MUM AND SHE MENTIONED THAT YOU WERE BACK HOME. THERE ARE STILL PLACES ON THE FOUNDATION ART COURSE. I THINK YOU'D REALLY LIKE IT.
IF YOU WANT, I CAN SPEAK TO THE TEACHERS FOR YOU?

NINA XXX

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN WEEKS, I FELT A SENSE OF PURPOSE, LIKE THE FUTURE WASN'T SLIPPING OUT OF MY HANDS.

I GOT UP.
I WASHED MY HAIR.

I DUG OUT MY HIGH SCHOOL ART PORTFOLIO.



I EVEN ADDED A FEW NEW DRAWINGS.

I LEFT THE HOUSE FOR THE FIRST TIME IN TWO WEEKS TO MAIL THE PORTFOLIO.

A FEW DAYS LATER, I WAS ACCEPTED.

PROBABLY JUST RELIEVED THAT I'D WASHED, TBH.

IT WASN'T EASY.

THE COLLEGE WAS ONLY A THIRTY-MINUTE WALK FROM HOME, BUT SOME DAYS, EVEN THAT WAS TOO MUCH.

OCCASIONALLY, THOUGH, I MADE IT THROUGH A FULL DAY.

SOMETIMES I EVEN MANAGED TO ENJOY MYSELF.

I GRADUATED, BARELY, AFTER SIX MONTHS, WITH THE WORST GRADES I HAD EVER RECEIVED.

MY PORTFOLIO WAS MESSY AND UNFINISHED.

BUT IT WAS ENOUGH TO GET ME ONTO A DEGREE PROGRAM AT AN ART SCHOOL.

BAD POETRY

(NO, YOU CAN'T READ IT. I BURNED IT ALL.)

I COULD HAVE AT LEAST BEEN PROUD OF MYSELF FOR ACHIEVING SOMETHING DESPITE MY ISSUES, BUT, AS YOU'VE PROBABLY GATHERED BY NOW, THAT IS NOT MY STYLE.

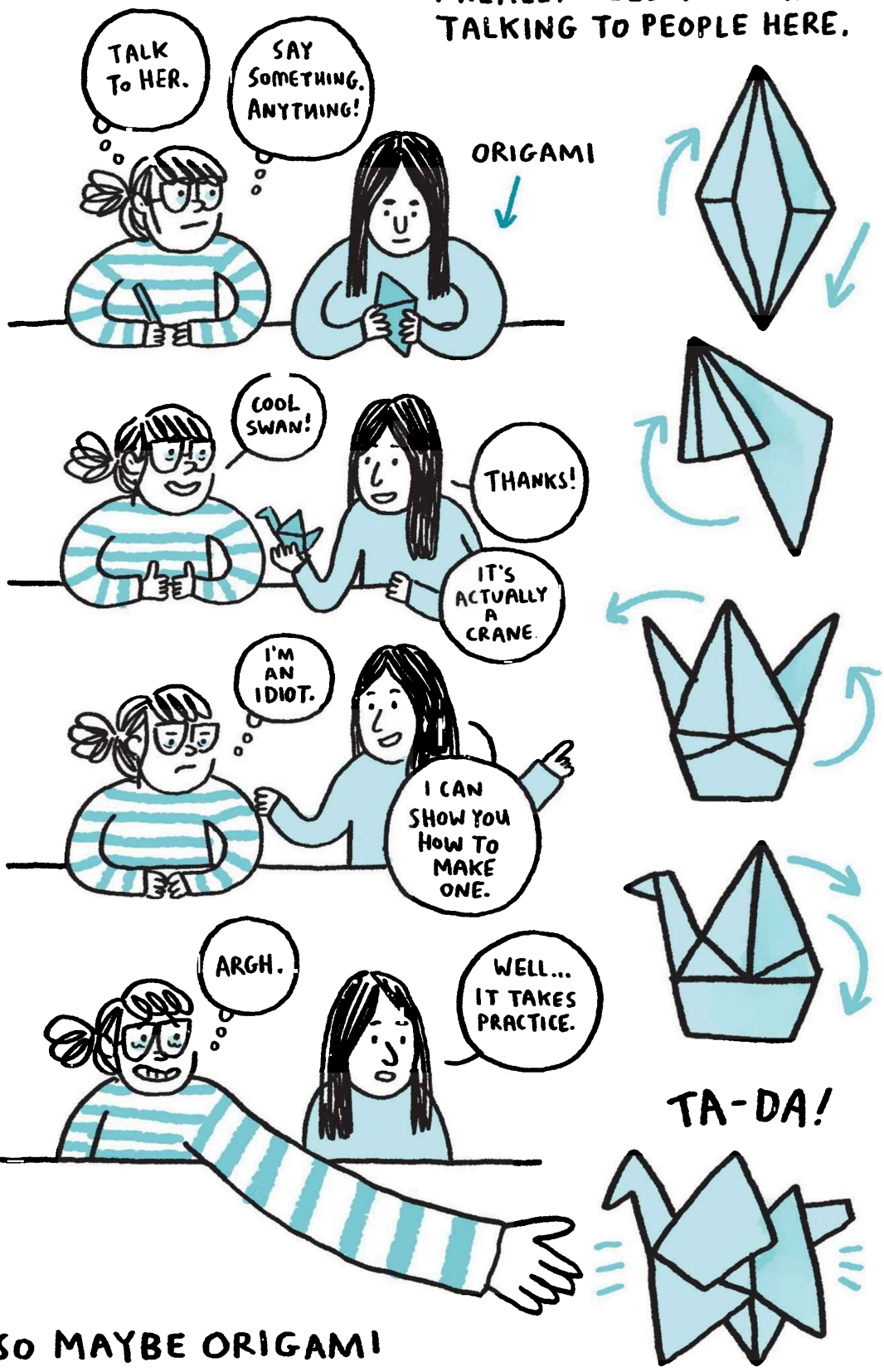
THIS TIME AROUND, I LEFT FOR COLLEGE WITH CONSIDERABLY LESS FANFARE.

MAYBE IT WAS EASIER THAT WAY...

LESS PRESSURE.

10:30 am

I REALLY NEED TO START TALKING TO PEOPLE HERE.



SO MAYBE ORIGAMI IS NOT MY FORTE.
BUT AT LEAST I SPOKE TO SOMEONE!

I'M SLOWLY LEARNING EVERYONE'S NAMES.
People in PHP
Kaya. Good at ORIGAMI!
BRYCE? Bryce
NINA PHD Student!
So funny!
ALI Teacher? Has a cat
Tom. Retired
Mia
From Uruguay!
Grace?
TUNDE
Lots of students and professors because of the nearby University
IT'S A RELIEF TO BE AROUND PEOPLE WHO GET IT.
CRYING AGAIN
I LEARNED HOW TO DO THIS UPSTAIRS.
"UPSTAIRS" = INPATIENT PSYCH WARD
OMG, I DID SO MANY CROSSWORDS UPSTAIRS.
EVERYONE'S SO OPEN AND HONEST.
WE DON'T HAVE TO PRETEND TO BE OK AROUND EACH OTHER.
AND THAT'S A SPECIAL KIND OF FRIENDSHIP.

BREAK TIME!
AT 11 am, MOST OF US DECAMP TO THE DOWNSTAIRS CAFÉ.
ON THE HOUSE!
JOHN (THE MANAGER) - HE'S THE BEST.
HE GIVES ME FREE CROISSANTS.
WATERY CAMOMILE TEA
I HAVE GIVEN UP COFFEE. IT MAKES ME JITTERY.
I MISS COFFEE.
WHAT IF I CAN NEVER DRINK IT AGAIN?
DAMNED TO A LIFE OF SAD, TASTELESS HERBAL TEAS?

EVEN ON DAYS WHEN MY THROAT IS TOO TIGHT WITH ANXIETY TO TALK OR EAT—WHICH NOW, IN MY SECOND WEEK HERE, IS STILL MOST OF THEM—I LOOK FORWARD TO BREAK TIME.

WHEN I WAS AT ART SCHOOL, I WOULD HAVE BEEN ENJOYING MY FIRST DRINK OF THE DAY AROUND NOW.

AND IT WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN CAMOMILE TEA.

WHEN I WAS SIXTEEN, I DISCOVERED A MAGICAL ELIXIR THAT BLURRED THE SHARP EDGES OF MY ANXIETY, MELTED THE TENSION IN MY BODY, AND MADE ME FEEL LIKE A MORE CONFIDENT VERSION OF MYSELF.

I AM, OF COURSE, TALKING ABOUT ALCOHOL.

MY FIRST NIGHT OF DRINKING INVOLVED NECKING A SIX-PACK OF WINE COOLERS IN THE BASEMENT OF MY FRIEND JESSICA'S HOUSE.

AFTER A FEW SIPS, I FELT LIKE A DIFFERENT PERSON.

I WAS INSTANTLY SMITTEN.

THE FRUITY DRINKS MADE ME FEEL WOOZY BUT IN A GOOD WAY, LIKE THE THINGS THAT HAD BOTHERED ME DIDN'T MATTER QUITE SO MUCH ANYMORE.

COME WITH ME
AND YOU'LL BE
IN A LAND OF
PURE INTOXICATION
ALE
BIER
BEER
COUNTRY
TIPSY POINT

DON'T LOOK OVER THERE!
HANGXIETY FALLS
FRUITY COOLER
ICE
WINE COOLER CORNER

ALCOHOL QUICKLY BECAME MY GO-TO SOCIAL ANXIETY SOLUTION.

WITH A FEW DRINKS UNDER MY BELT, I COULD GO OUT ON THE TOWN WITHOUT FEELING THAT EVERYBODY WAS JUDGING ME.

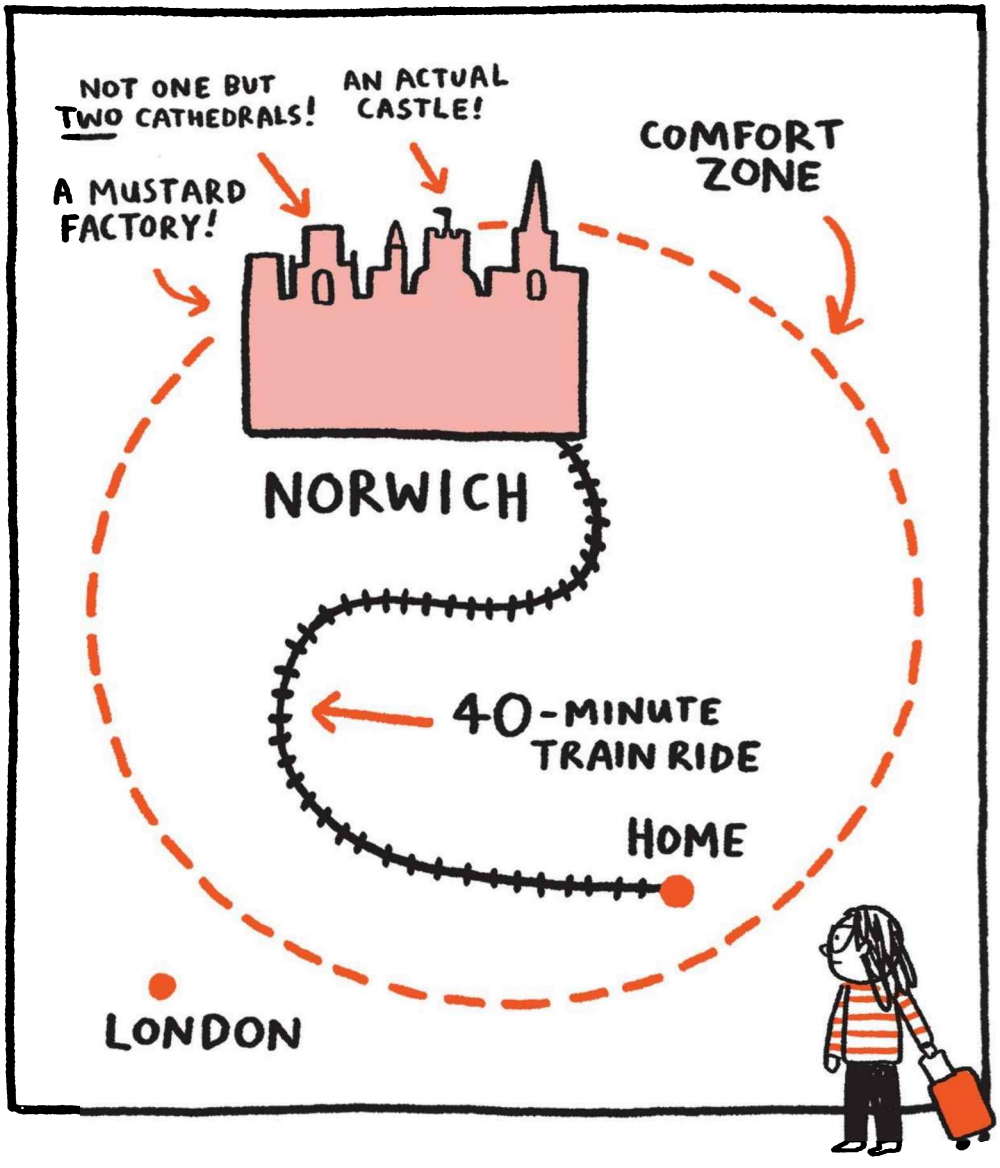
ON WEEKENDS, MY FRIENDS AND I WENT OUT TO PUBS AND CLUBS, AS WAS THE NORM FOR KIDS OUR AGE.

* THE LEGAL DRINKING AGE IN THE UK IS EIGHTEEN.

MY PARENTS ONLY GOT MAD WHEN I NOISILY WOKE THEM WHEN THEY HAD TO GET UP FOR WORK THE NEXT DAY.

NOISILY MAKING WHATEVER-IS-IN-THE-FRIDGE SANDWICHES

IN 2003, I WAS ON MY WAY TO ART SCHOOL IN NORWICH.



I COULD TELL YOU THAT I CHOSE TO GO TO NORWICH UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS BECAUSE OF ITS EXCELLENT REPUTATION FOR GRAPHIC DESIGN.

OR PERHAPS FOR ITS LOCATION IN A CITY CENTER BOASTING SOME OF THE OLDEST REMAINING MEDIEVAL ARCHITECTURE IN ENGLAND.

BUT THOSE WOULD BE LIES—AND ALSO PARTIALLY CRIBBED FROM THE NORWICH TOURIST INFORMATION WEBSITE.

THE TRUTH IS, I CHOSE IT BECAUSE IT WAS CLOSE TO HOME, AND FAMILIAR.

ALCOHOL HELPED ME TO GET OVER MY NERVES AT SCHOOL.

HERE, THERE WAS NO PARENTAL BEDROOM TO CREEP PAST WHEN I CAME HOME LATE AND DRUNK.

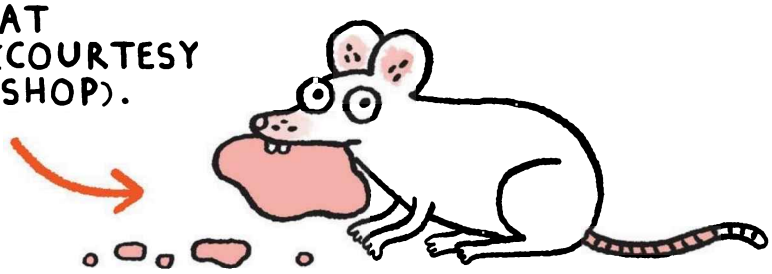
NO CURFEW.

NO 7 AM ALARM WAKING ME UP FOR SCHOOL THE NEXT DAY.

PLUS, I WAS EIGHTEEN NOW.

I HAD MOVED INTO A SHARED HOUSE FULL OF MISMATCHED FURNITURE (COURTESY OF THE PREVIOUS TENANTS) NEXT TO A KEBAB SHOP,

AND WITH A RAT INFESTATION (COURTESY OF THE KEBAB SHOP).



LUCKILY FOR ME, THE SOCIAL CULTURE AT BRITISH UNIVERSITIES IN THE '00s REVOLVED AROUND BINGE DRINKING.

IT WASN'T UNUSUAL TO STUMBLE INTO A MIDDAY LECTURE ALREADY DRUNK.

AND THEN AFTER CLASS, WE'D GO BACK TO THE PUB.

ALCOHOL WAS CHEAP AND PLENTIFUL.

I FELT BOTH GIDDY AND PARALYZED BY THE FREEDOM.

THE PROBLEM WAS, I HAD TO BE PROPERLY DRUNK. NOT JUST A LITTLE TIPSY. THAT JUST MADE ME FEEL OUT OF CONTROL AND MORE ANXIOUS.

I NEEDED COMPLETE OBLITERATION.

I WASN'T FUSSY ABOUT WHAT I DRANK.

THE ATTENTION I GOT FROM MEN WAS NEW AND EXCITING.

IT PROVED THAT THE DRUNK VERSION OF MYSELF WAS BETTER THAN THE SOBER ONE.

IT WAS EASIER TO LEAN INTO THE PARTY-GIRL IMAGE THAN TO TELL ANYBODY THE ACTUAL TRUTH.

* TRANSLATION—I TRIED TO LEAVE THE HOUSE THIS MORNING BUT ALMOST HAD A PANIC ATTACK, SO I WENT HOME AND DRANK A FEW SIPS FROM THE BOTTLE OF BUDGET VODKA THAT I KEEP ON MY BEDSIDE TABLE. I CAN FEEL IT WEARING OFF A BIT NOW, ACTUALLY, BUT I'VE CRAFTILY POURED SOME INTO THIS EMPTY WATER BOTTLE.

SOMETIMES, ALCOHOL MADE ME DO STUPID THINGS...

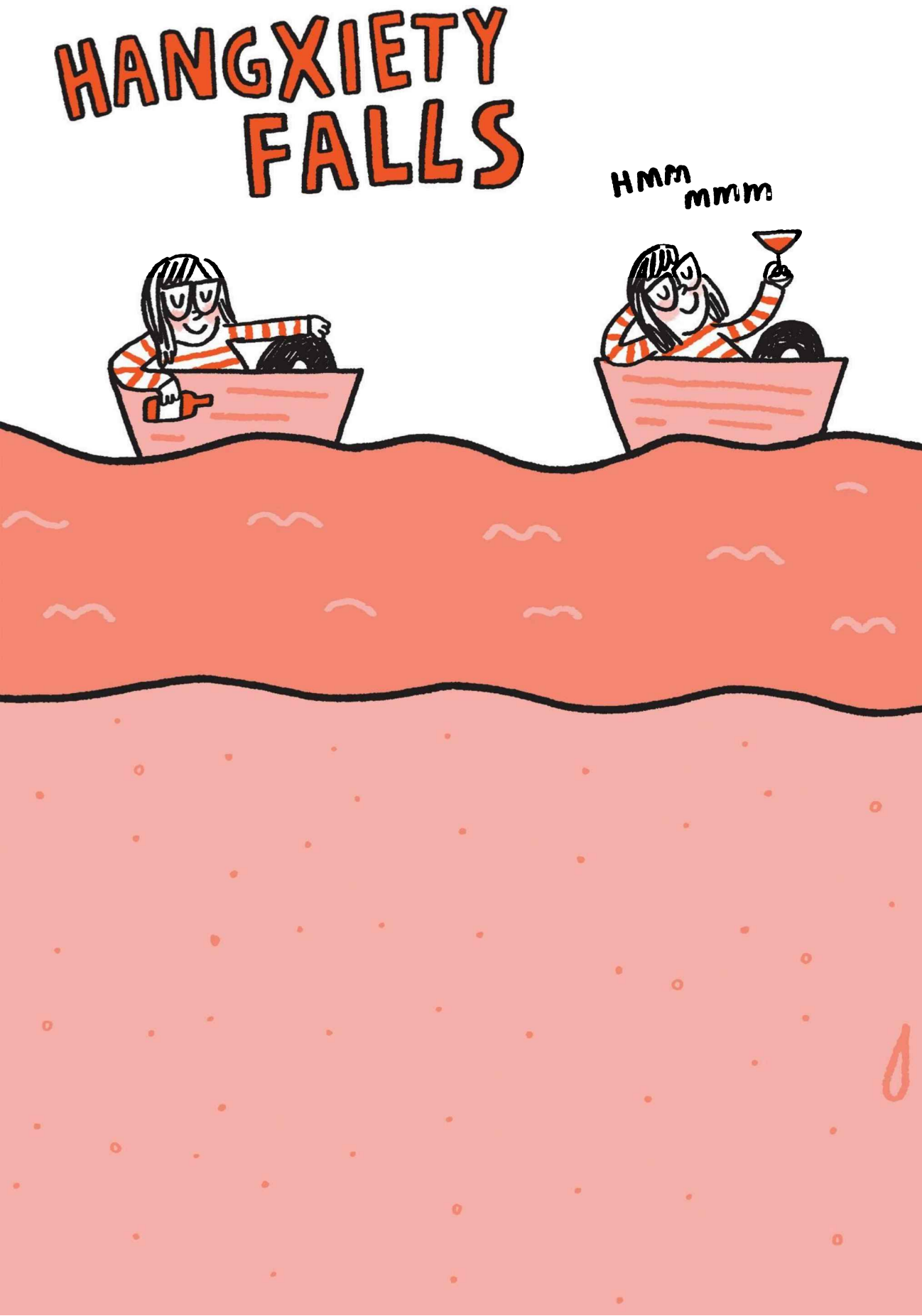
CUT YOUR BANGS!
YOU'LL LOOK JUST LIKE AMÉLIE!
OUI!
SNIP SNIP
TRÈS CHIC!

...AND TAKE DANGEROUS RISKS.

WHAT WAS I THINKING?

THE CONSEQUENCES COULD HAVE BEEN SO MUCH WORSE THAN BLOODIED FEET AND WONKY BANGS.

THEN THERE WAS THE MORNING AFTER, FULL OF DREAD AND FIZZING PARANOIA.


HANGXIETY FALLS
Hmm mmm

NO TURNING BACK!
DANGER
AAAAAAAA
OOPS.
BOOZY

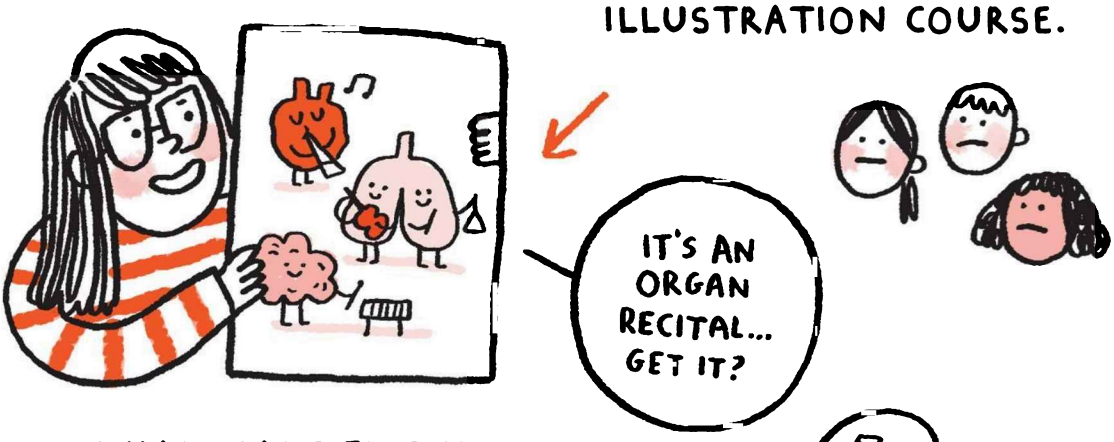
I'D LIKE TO SAY THAT THERE WAS SOME BIG MOMENT OF REALIZATION THAT LED ME TO RECOGNIZE THAT ALCOHOL WAS TRAPPING ME IN A VICIOUS CYCLE AND MAKING MY ANXIETY WORSE.

BUT IN TRUTH, THE URGE TO LOSE MYSELF EVERY NIGHT IN A HAZE OF BOOZE HAD STARTED TO LOSE ITS SHINE.

I WAS FED UP WITH FEELING SICK ALL THE TIME.

PLUS, BY MY SECOND YEAR AT COLLEGE, I WAS FINALLY FEELING MORE COMFORTABLE IN MY NEW HOME.

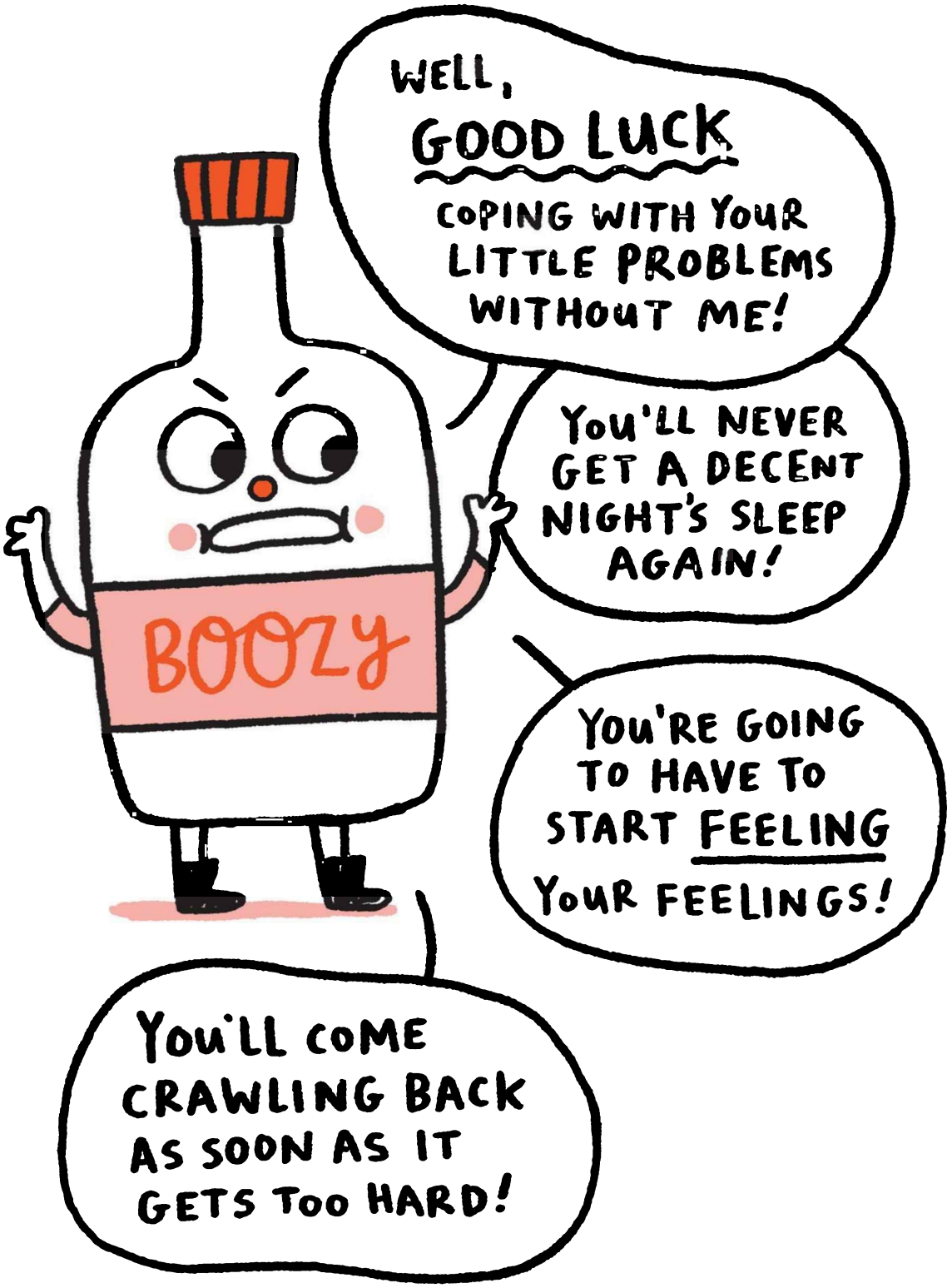
I WAS ENJOYING THE ILLUSTRATION COURSE.



I HAD MADE FRIENDS...

AND FOUND A PART-TIME JOB THAT I DIDN'T HATE...

WORKING AS A RETAIL ASSISTANT IN A FANCY HOMEGOODS STORE.


WELL, GOOD LUCK COPING WITH YOUR LITTLE PROBLEMS WITHOUT ME!
YOU'LL NEVER GET A DECENT NIGHT'S SLEEP AGAIN!
BOOZY
YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO START FEELING YOUR FEELINGS!
YOU'LL COME CRAWLING BACK AS SOON AS IT GETS TOO HARD!

HAD I SIMPLY REPLACED ALCOHOL WITH ANOTHER UNHEALTHY COPING MECHANISM (OVERWORKING)?

ONLY TIME WILL TELL! (HINT—YES, I HAD.)

NO FUN

CHAPTER THREE

THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING COMFORT ZONE

11:30 am

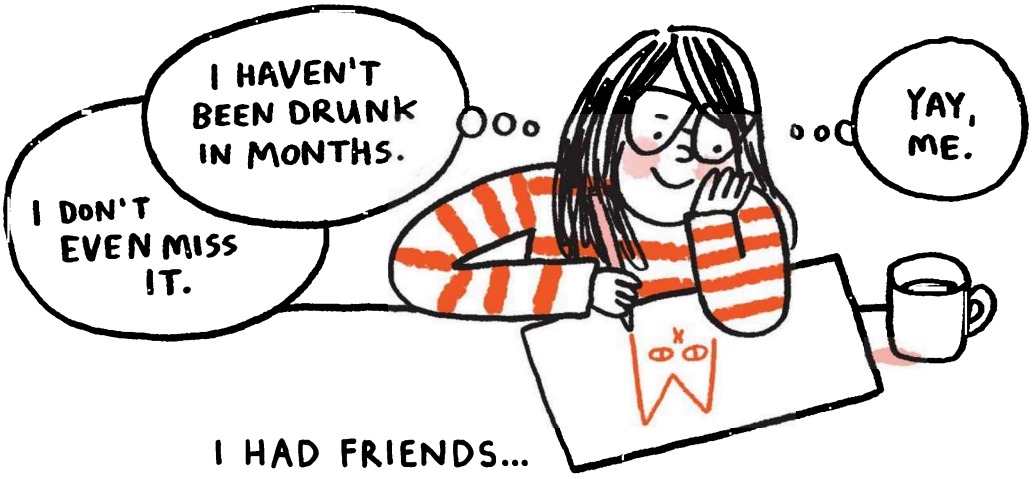
I'VE BUMPED INTO A SOCIAL WORKER ON MY WAY BACK TO THE PHP GROUP ROOM.

ALL SPACED-OUT AND FLOATY...
...LIKE I'M LOOKING DOWN ON MYSELF FROM ABOVE.
THAT SOUNDS LIKE DISSOCIATION.
IT'S YOUR BRAIN TRYING TO PROTECT YOU DURING TIMES OF HIGH ANXIETY.
OUR NEXT ACTIVITY SHOULD BE HELPFUL FOR YOU.

WE'RE GOING TO TRY SOME GROUNDING TECHNIQUES.
THIS ONE'S CALLED THE ICE DIVE.
IT STIMULATES THE PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM, PROMPTING THE BODY TO RELAX.
WHO WANTS TO GIVE IT A TRY?

I'LL TRY IT!
WHAT AM I DOING?
INHALE
HERE GOES...
GO FOR IT!
PLUNGE
Soooo, HOW DO YOU FEEL?
A LIE
UH... BETTER? I THINK?
THE SAME, BUT WETTER
WHY DIDN'T THAT HELP? AM I INCURABLE?!

BY MY SECOND YEAR OF ART SCHOOL, I WAS DRINKING MUCH LESS AND FEELING MUCH MORE COMFORTABLE.



I HAD FRIENDS...

AND MY DUSTING JOB...

AND A GOOD LIFE FOR MYSELF... WITHIN CERTAIN LIMITS.

AND SURE, IT MEANT MISSING OUT ON CLASS TRIPS TO PLACES LIKE BARCELONA AND NEW YORK CITY, BUT WHO WANTED TO GO TO THOSE PLACES?
WOW! NEW YORK!
ARE YOU GOING TO GO?
WELL, ME. I DID.
THAT LOOKS AMAZING.
BUT...
WHAT IF WE HAD TO RIDE THE SUBWAY?
WHAT IF A VOLCANO ERUPTED AND WE COULDN'T GET HOME?
WHAT IF I PANICKED IN FRONT OF EVERYONE?
IT'S TOO RISKY.
BUT MY ANXIETY WASN'T ABOUT TO LET THAT HAPPEN.
NAH.
THINK I'LL GIVE IT A MISS.
REALLY?
IT'S TOO EXPENSIVE.
A LIE. IT WAS HEAVILY SUBSIDIZED.

I MISSED OUT ON SO MUCH.

IN MY THIRD YEAR, I MOVED TO A NEW (AND RAT-FREE!) HOUSE WITH TWO OF MY BEST FRIENDS.

I THOUGHT THAT I WAS DOING PRETTY WELL, ALL THINGS CONSIDERED.

ALTHOUGH I DID GO TO THE DOCTOR QUITE A LOT, WITH VARIOUS VAGUE COMPLAINTS.

NO MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL EVER SUGGESTED THAT MY SYMPTOMS WERE ANYTHING OTHER THAN PHYSICAL, EVEN WHEN THEY COULDN'T FIND ANYTHING WRONG WITH ME.

IT WAS THE FINAL YEAR OF COLLEGE.

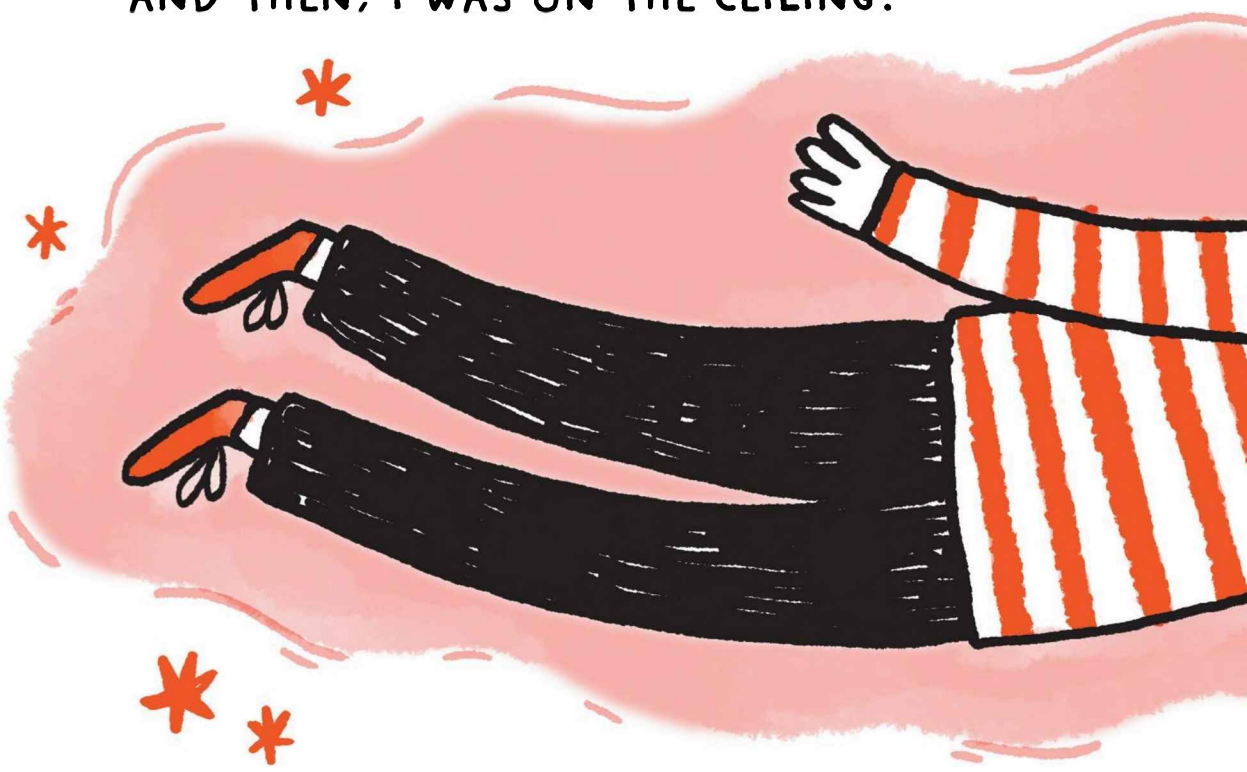
NOT GETTING MUCH SLEEP
NEVER ALLOWING MYSELF A SECOND OF DOWNTIME
IT'S ONLY 2 am.
I'M NOT EVEN TIRED.
I SHOULD MAKE ANOTHER FIFTY-PAGE COMIC.
I BET NOBODY ELSE IS GOING TO MAKE TWO.
NRG
CHIPS
IBU
PAINKILLERS FOR ALL THE HEADACHES
CAFFEINE
JUNK FOOD
RELYING ON CAFFEINE AND SUGAR FOR ENERGY

AT COLLEGE
WHAT IF
WHAT IF
WHAT IF
WHAT IF
WHAT IF
I WAS SITTING IN A TYPOGRAPHY CLASS, TRYING MY BEST TO KEEP IT TOGETHER BUT SORELY TEMPTED TO GET OUT OF MY SEAT AND FLEE FOR THE SAFETY OF MY HOME.
ANXIETY SPARKING AT THE EDGES OF MY CONSCIOUSNESS, AS USUAL, BEGGING FOR MY ATTENTION.
I FEEL ODD.
LIKE I'M IN A GIANT BUBBLE.
HUH?
WHAT'S GOING ON?

THE PROFESSOR'S VOICE SOUNDED DISTANT AND MUFFLED.

AS IF HE WAS TALKING ABOUT BASELINES AND CAPLINES AND KERNING FROM SOMEWHERE DEEP UNDERWATER.

AND THEN, I WAS ON THE CEILING.



I COULD SEE MYSELF FROZEN IN MY SEAT BELOW, PEN IN HAND.

LOOKING TOTALLY UNFAZED.

I FELT STRANGELY NUMB, REMOVED FROM THE PANIC THAT PUSHED ME UP THERE.

AFTER WHAT SEEMED LIKE HOURS BUT WAS PROBABLY MERE SECONDS, THE WORLD RUSHED BACK IN LIKE A TIDAL WAVE.

NOBODY FOLLOWED ME, SO I MUST HAVE APPEARED CONVINCINGLY LAID-BACK DURING MY RUSHED EXIT.

I FELT LIKE I HAD JUST STEPPED OFF A PARTICULARLY VIOLENT FUN HOUSE RIDE.

EVENTUALLY, THE WORLD STOPPED SPINNING.

I WALKED HOME.

THE HOUSE OF NO FUN

HOURS OF ENTERTAINMENT

OR ARE THEY JUST MINUTES THAT FEEL LIKE HOURS???

SEE YOUR OWN BODY PARTS DISTORT!

FEEL LIKE YOU'RE TRAPPED INSIDE A GIANT BUBBLE!

EXPERIENCE FEELING TOTALLY DISCONNECTED FROM THE PEOPLE AROUND YOU!

YOU'LL **GASP** AS YOUR OWN FORM CHANGES...

BEFORE YOUR **VERY EYES!**

WATCH TIME ITSELF SPEED UP, SLOW DOWN AND EVEN STAND STILL!

FLOAT OVER YOUR BODY AND WATCH YOURSELF FROM ABOVE!

WOW!

IT KEPT HAPPENING, WHENEVER I FELT OVERWHELMED.

SOMETIMES THE THINGS IN FRONT OF ME WOULD DISTORT AND GROW AND SHRINK TO ODD PROPORTIONS, LIKE IN A FEVER DREAM.

IT MIGHT LAST FOR SECONDS, OR HOURS.

* UNLIKELY. AND I WASN'T ACTUALLY DRINKING THE COFFEE ANYWAY. I JUST CARRIED IT AROUND WITH ME IN AN ATTEMPT TO LOOK LIKE A NORMAL PERSON.

FROM INSIDE MY BUBBLE, IT WAS DIFFICULT TO COMMUNICATE WITH OTHER PEOPLE.

I COULDN'T HEAR THEM PROPERLY, AND THE THINGS THEY SAID SOUNDED FUZZY AND MUTED.

I MADE WHAT I HOPED WERE THE APPROPRIATE FACES AND EXCUSED MYSELF AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE.

I WASN'T EVEN TOTALLY CONVINCED THAT PEOPLE WERE REAL.

EVERYONE STARTED TO LOOK FAKE, LIKE A CARDBOARD CUTOUT.

I ALSO APPARENTLY TURNED INTO A NINETEENTH-CENTURY COWBOY?

HERE WAS PROOF THAT I HAD FINALLY GONE COMPLETELY, INCONTROVERTIBLY MAD, AS I'D ALWAYS KNOWN I WOULD.

EVERY TIME IT HAPPENED, I WOULD FIXATE ON THE TERRIFYING IDEA THAT IT MIGHT NEVER GO AWAY.

AND IT WAS HAPPENING MORE AND MORE, WHENEVER I LEFT THE HOUSE.

THE LINE IS TOO SLOW.

I'M TRAPPED.
I'M GOING TO FREAK OUT.

I CAN'T COPE WITH THIS.

I'M SO SORRY!
HEART RACING
HOT FLASH
DIZZINESS
THE USUAL
PALMS SWEATING

I'LL BE OK WHEN I GET HOME.
I BEGAN TO FEEL PANICKY EVEN IN FAMILIAR SPACES.
MY FRIEND'S HOUSE.
I'M TOO FAR FROM HOME.
I DON'T FEEL GOOD.
I NEED TO LEAVE.
THIS SHOULDN'T BE HAPPENING HERE.
I'M NOT SAFE HERE.
UH, I'M TAKING MY BREAK NOW!
AT MY PART-TIME JOB
SORRY, I'M NOT FEELING WELL...

IN CLASS

SO EVEN FAMILIAR PLACES WERE DANGEROUS NOW.

IF I COULD HAVE A PANIC ATTACK AT COLLEGE, IT COULD HAPPEN ANYWHERE.

MY ANXIOUS BRAIN TOLD ME THAT IT HAD MY BEST INTERESTS IN MIND.

AND I BELIEVED IT.

IT TOLD ME TO STOP GOING TO CLASS AND TO WORK AND EVEN TO THE CAFÉ I LIKED WITH THE CUTE BARISTA.

SO I DID.

AND SO, MY WORLD GOT SMALLER

AND SMALLER

AND SMALLER

AND SMALLER

UNTIL
I STOPPED GOING
ANYWHERE AT ALL.

BARELY A MONTH HAD PASSED SINCE MY PANIC ATTACK AT THE SUPERMARKET.

I DIDN'T WANT TO SEE ANYONE.

ANXIETY MADE ME SELFISH, UNABLE TO THINK ABOUT ANYTHING OTHER THAN THE NOISE INSIDE MY HEAD.

I STOPPED CONTRIBUTING TO THE HOUSEHOLD CHORES.

I HOARDED CROCKERY IN MY ROOM.

I NEVER DID THE DISHES.

DURING THE DAY, I SLEPT.

IT WAS MY ONLY RESPITE FROM FEAR.

THE ONLY TIME MY BRAIN SHUT UP.

AND I WAS EXHAUSTED.

ANXIETY IS INCREDIBLY TIRING.

IT WASN'T GOOD REST.

I NEVER WOKE UP FEELING REFRESHED, JUST OVERWHELMED AND GROGGY.

PEOPLE ON THE STREET OUTSIDE

THE LACK OF DECENT SLEEP MADE ME IRRITABLE.

EVERYTHING ANNOYED ME.

MOST OF ALL, I WAS ANGRY AT MYSELF.

I'D SPENT SO MANY YEARS TRYING TO FORCE A LID ONTO MY ANGER BUT NOW I COULDN'T STOP IT FROM BUBBLING OVER.

BECAUSE I'D STOPPED GOING TO THE SUPERMARKET, MY FOOD SUPPLIES HAD BEGUN TO DWINDLE.

MY DIET WAS ALREADY... NOT THE BEST.

I MOSTLY SURVIVED ON RAMEN AND FRENCH FRIES.

NOW I RELIED ON MY MEAGER STASH OF CHIPS AND STALE SAMOSAS.

I AM NOT PROUD OF THIS NEXT PART.

I MEAN, NONE OF THIS IS PARTICULARLY PLEASANT, BUT THIS IS HARD TO WRITE.

SO I STOPPED SHOWERING.

AND BRUSHING MY TEETH.

AND COMBING MY HAIR.

AND LOOK, I'M A PRETTY GROSS PERSON, EVEN AT THE BEST OF TIMES.

I RARELY WASH MY BRAS.

MY FAVORITE BEAUTY PRODUCTS ARE: DRY SHAMPOO AND "WHATEVER IS ON SALE."

I CAN'T REMEMBER THE LAST TIME I FLOSSED (SORRY, DR. HANNA).

BUT THIS WAS A NEW LOW, EVEN FOR ME.

I'M SO SORRY TO BURDEN YOU WITH THIS NEXT PIECE OF INFORMATION.

I HOPE THAT YOU CAN, SOMEDAY, FIND IT IN YOUR HEART TO FORGIVE ME.

READER, I PEED IN THAT COFFEE MUG.

IT DIDN'T BECOME A REGULAR OCCURANCE. EVEN I HAD SOME STANDARDS.

BUT I THINK THAT WE CAN ALL AGREE THAT WHEN IT COMES TO URINATING IN THINGS THAT ARE MEANT FOR DRINKING OUT OF, ONE TIME IS STILL TOO MANY TIMES.

THAT MUG WAS THE DISGUSTING STRAW THAT BROKE THE DISGUSTING CAMEL'S BACK.

I ALREADY SPENT A LOT OF TIME ONLINE, PRETENDING TO BE A FUNCTIONING HUMAN BEING.

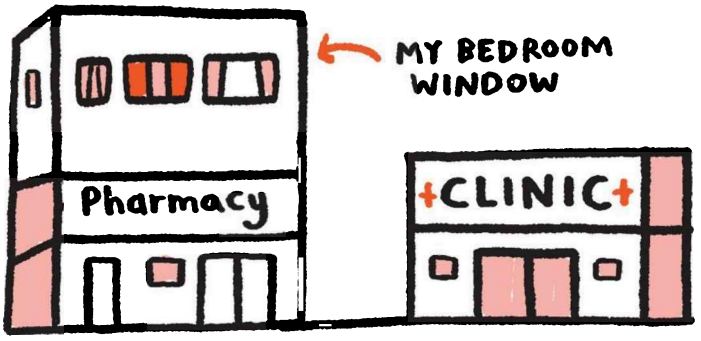
I HAD TO KEEP MY SOCIALS UPDATED, LEST ANYONE SUSPECT THAT I WAS HAVING LESS THAN AN EXCELLENT TIME AT UNIVERSITY.

THIS WAS BEFORE THE DAYS OF SMARTPHONES.

aAfraid tm leave houspe
Did you mean: Afraid to leave house?
Results: Agoraphobia
Read more
THERE'S A NAME FOR IT?
I'M NOT THE ONLY ONE WHO FEELS LIKE THIS?!
AGORAPHOBIA IS BLAH BLAH
BLALALJFNLENHLN-
HTELHNKNGKJRENGKJREN-
JKHNBLTJENHLKETNBLKHN-
NZBLKNLEKNBL
BNLKTNLKBNLT
RTBNKLTABNKL
NLKTEANBKLNL
BLKTEBNLKANE
TLEA
FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, PLEASE GO AND SEE A DOCTOR!!!!
PARAPHRASING HERE, OBVIOUSLY.

CONVENIENTLY, THERE WAS A CLINIC RIGHT ACROSS THE STREET FROM MY HOUSE.

EVEN SO, IT TOOK ME A FEW DAYS TO SUMMON THE COURAGE TO GO OVER THERE.



I LEFT THE WAITING ROOM BEFORE MY NAME WAS CALLED MORE THAN ONCE.

THEN ONE DAY, I STAYED.

I SCRIBBLED IN MY NOTEBOOK AND SHOVED IT ACROSS THE DESK.

SOMETIMES IT'S EASIER TO WRITE THE WORDS DOWN THAN TO SAY THEM OUT LOUD.

HMM. I SEE.
I'M GOING TO PRESCRIBE MEDICATION FOR YOU.
IT WILL HELP.
AND I'LL SET YOU UP WITH OUR COUNSELOR.
TAKE THIS NEXT DOOR...
scribble
Tear
Rx
OK, THANKS.
THAT'S IT?
THAT'S ALL I HAD TO DO?
PHARMACY
WHAT IF I SEE SOMEONE I KNOW?
GOOD OLD STIGMA
MEDICATION IS FOR CRAZY PEOPLE.
I DON'T WANT ANYONE TO FIND OUT.
ACT CASUAL.
JUST DOING A BIT OF NORMAL-PERSON SHOPPING.
PICKING UP SOME ESSENTIALS...
EYELINER, SOAP...
GOSSIP MAGS...
GEMMA!
YOUR FLUOXETINE IS READY!

THE BOX OF PILLS SAT ON MY BEDSIDE TABLE FOR DAYS.

I FINALLY TOOK THE PILL AND WAITED FOR SOMETHING TO HAPPEN.

(REPEAT EVERY DAY FOR SEVERAL WEEKS)

NOTHING MUCH HAPPENED FOR SIX WEEKS.

AND THEN, VERY SLOWLY, I BEGAN TO NOTICE SMALL CHANGES.

I REALIZED THAT WORRY WAS OCCUPYING LESS OF MY BRAIN, LIKE THE VOLUME OF MY ANXIOUS THOUGHTS WAS TURNED DOWN.

IT WAS LIKE THE FIRST TIME I GOT GLASSES.

NOW IT WAS TIME TO TRY SPENDING TIME OUTSIDE MY COMFORT ZONE.

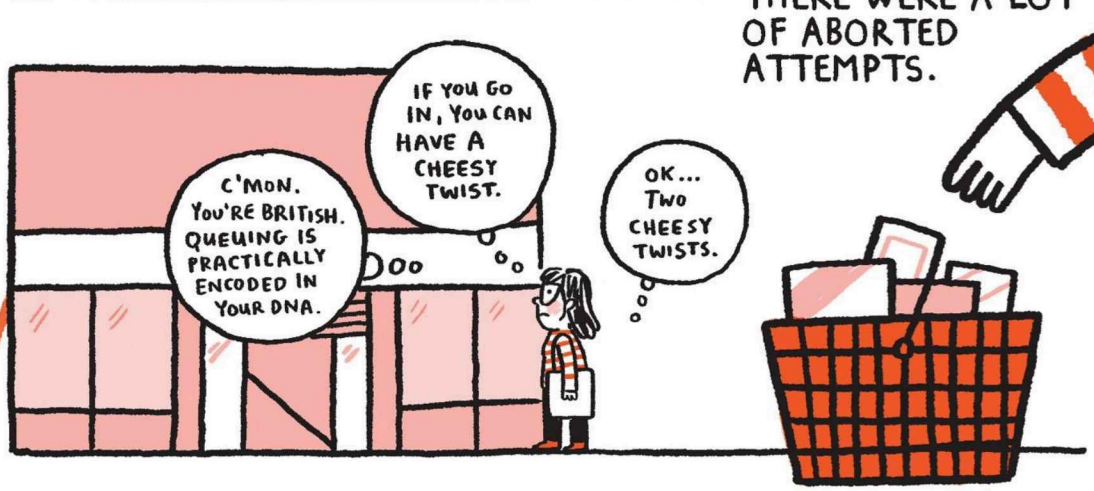
I TRIED TO WALK A LITTLE FARTHER EACH DAY.

IT DIDN'T ALWAYS GO TO PLAN.

BUT NOW I HAD THE CONFIDENCE TO PUSH MYSELF.

THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE WAS GOING BACK TO THE SUPERMARKET.

THERE WERE A LOT OF ABORTED ATTEMPTS.



ABANDONED SHOPPING BASKET

BUT EVENTUALLY...

AND THEN ONE DAY, THERE WAS CAKE.

I WISH I COULD TELL YOU THAT I BAKED THE CAKE MYSELF, THAT ALL IT TOOK TO TURN THINGS AROUND WAS—

(CUE INSPIRATIONAL CAKE-BAKING MOVIE MONTAGE)

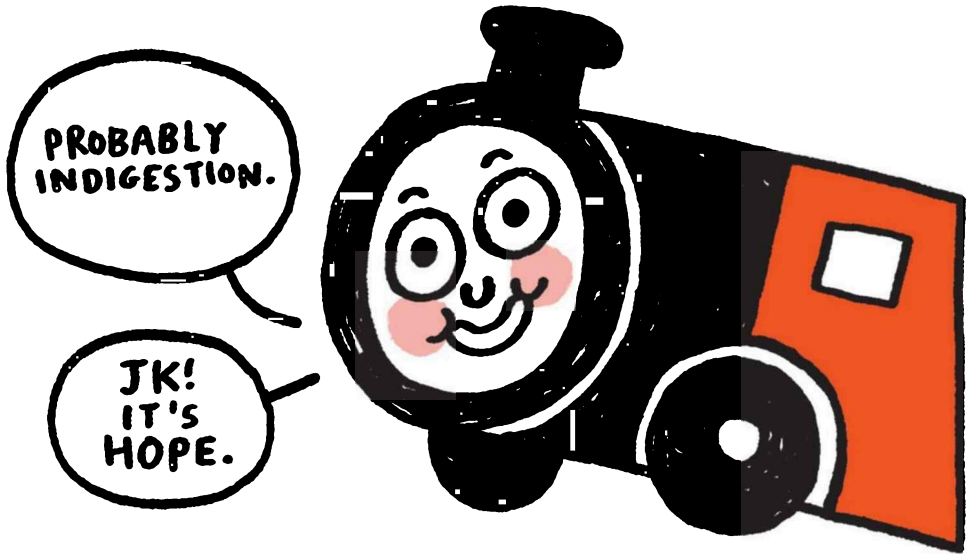
BUT NO.

THIS IS NOT A ROM-COM.

I SPOTTED IT IN MY FAVORITE AREA OF THE SUPERMARKET.

I WALKED HOME WITH A SENSATION IN MY CHEST THAT I HADN'T EXPERIENCED IN SOME TIME.

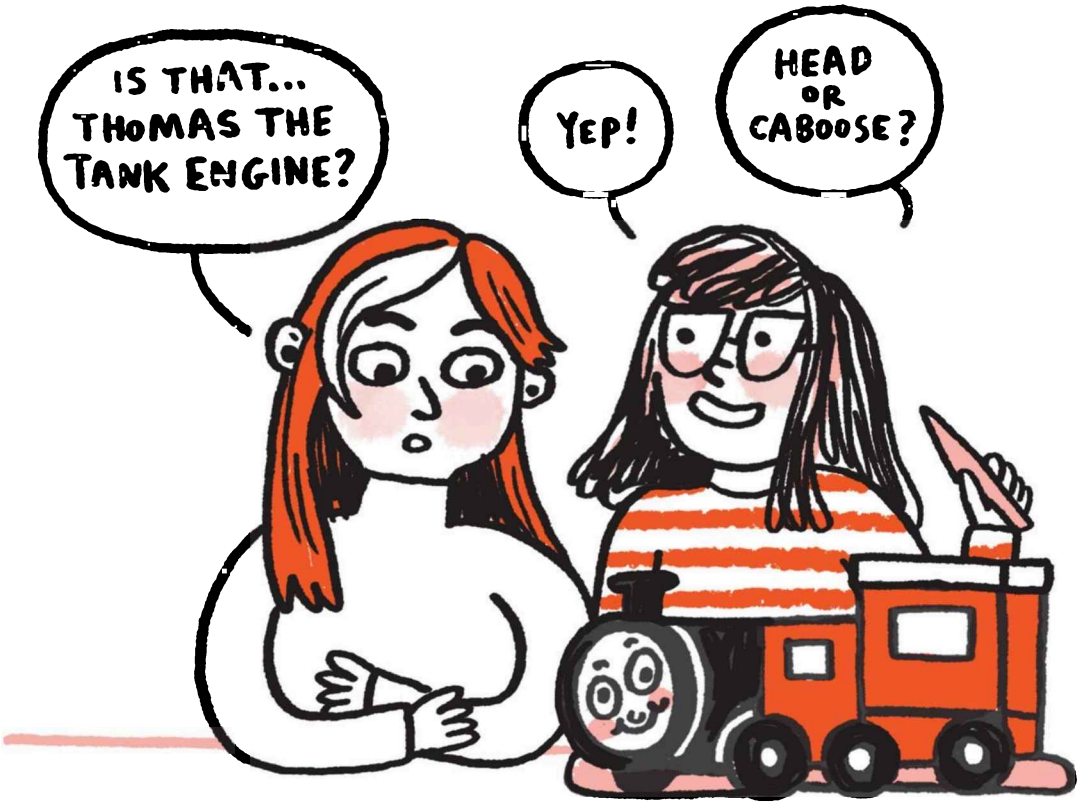
IT TOOK ME A WHILE TO RECOGNIZE IT.



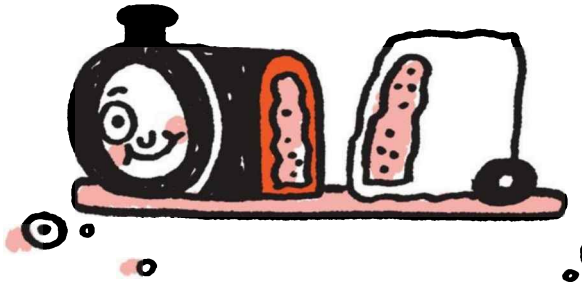
FEELING PRIVATELY TRIUMPHANT ABOUT MY SUCCESS, I WANTED EVERYBODY TO SEE THE AMAZING, BEAUTIFUL BARGAIN TRAIN CAKE AND BE AS ENTHUSED ABOUT IT AS I WAS.

SO I TOOK IT TO CLASS.

IF ANYONE WONDERED WHY I'D DISAPPEARED FOR WEEKS AND THEN REEMERGED BEARING A SLIGHTLY STALE CHILDREN'S PARTY CAKE, THEY WERE POLITE ENOUGH NOT TO MENTION IT.



IT WAS NOT A GOOD CAKE. IT WAS CHEAP AND OVERLY SWEET AND SEVERAL DAYS OUT OF DATE.



BUT I HAVE NEVER ENJOYED A DESSERT AS MUCH AS I ENJOYED THAT GARISHLY ICED, WONKY NOVELTY SPONGE CAKE.

THAT CAKE WAS THE REASON I GRADUATED COLLEGE.

OK, AND ALSO THE MEDS. AND THE FACT THAT I WORKED INCREDIBLY HARD.

I SAT DOWN AT MY DESK AND NIBBLED ON THE TRAIN'S SMUG LITTLE FACE. AND SINCE I WAS THERE, I FIGURED THAT I MIGHT AS WELL DO SOME WORK.

IT MIGHT BE THE SUGAR TALKING BUT I THINK I'M ACTUALLY HAVING FUN!

I DIDN'T HATE IT. SO I KEPT DRAWING.

I DIDN'T FEEL TRAPPED, OR ANXIOUS.

I FELT GOOD.

THE NEXT DAY, I WENT BACK AND DREW SOME MORE.

AND AGAIN THE DAY AFTER THAT.
AND AGAIN AND AGAIN.

I STARTED ATTENDING CLASS MORE OFTEN.

SOON I WAS AT MY DESK EVERY DAY, REDISCOVERING THE LOVE OF ART THAT HAD LED ME TO UNIVERSITY IN THE FIRST PLACE.

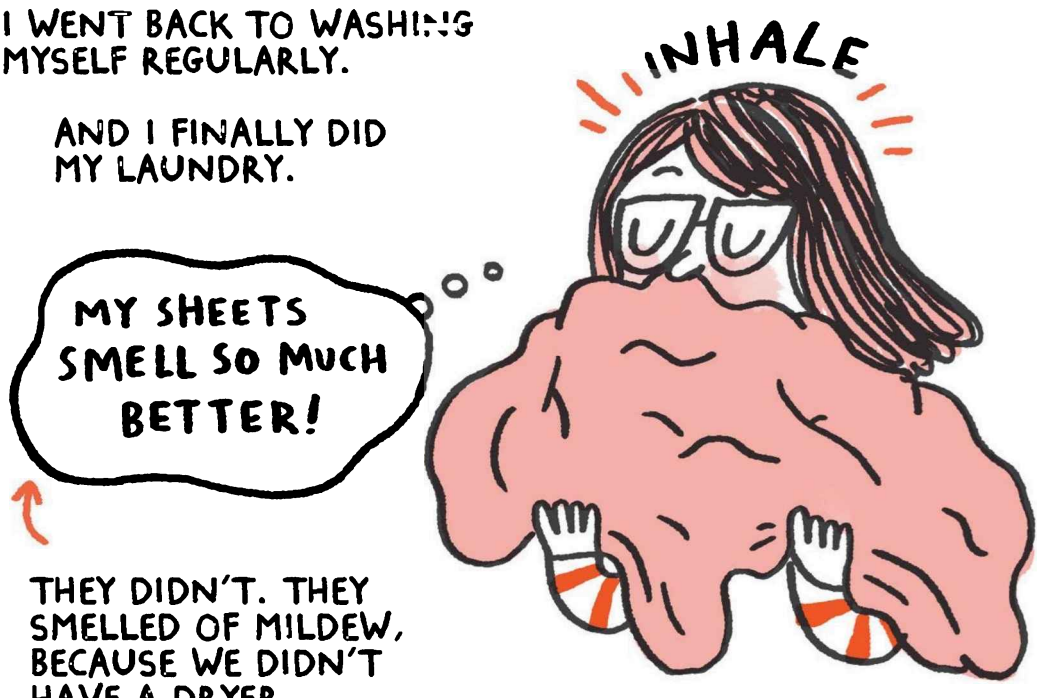
I SPENT TIME WITH MY CLASSMATES AND DRANK COFFEE IN THE STUDENT BAR.

I MADE SHY EYE CONTACT WITH THE HANDSOME GREEK GUY FROM THE PRINTMAKING COURSE.

AT HOME, I STARTED COOKING AGAIN.

I WENT BACK TO WASHING MYSELF REGULARLY.

AND I FINALLY DID MY LAUNDRY.



THEY DIDN'T. THEY SMELLED OF MILDEW, BECAUSE WE DIDN'T HAVE A DRYER.

I BECAME A (SLIGHTLY) BETTER HOUSEMATE AND A NICER PERSON TO BE AROUND IN GENERAL.

...AND EVERYTHING WAS FINE AND DANDY.

THE END.

JUST KIDDING!

ONCE A WEEK, AT SOME POINT DURING THE DAY, I AM PULLED OUT OF GROUP BY EITHER MY PSYCHIATRIST OR MY THERAPIST.

(WE ARE ALL ASSIGNED ONE OF EACH.)

MY THERAPIST AND SOCIAL WORKER
IN CHARGE OF LISTENING PATIENTLY UNTIL I STOP CRYING
HAS A HUGE SCARF COLLECTION, WHICH I THINK IS A THERAPIST PREREQUISITE?
DIANE
Social Worker
ID #3248121
MEETING ROOM
HOW ARE YOU FEELING TODAY?
NOT GREAT, PRETTY ANXIOUS.

I CAN'T STOP CRYING...
I CAN'T GET ANYTHING DONE.
scribble
I FEEL GUILTY BECAUSE I SHOULD BE WORKING.
WHY DO YOU FEEL THAT WAY?
BECAUSE WE WON'T GET OUR GREEN CARD IF I'M NOT WORKING...
AND RENT IS SO EXPENSIVE...
AND I'M JUST NOT USED TO TAKING TIME OFF.

IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU'VE BEEN EXTREMELY STRESSED OUT.
I GUESS...
BUT I FEEL LIKE I DON'T DESERVE TO BE STRESSED.
THERE ARE PEOPLE HERE WHO HAVE BEEN THROUGH AWFUL, TRAUMATIC THINGS.
I'M SO PRIVILEGED.
STRESSORS AREN'T ALWAYS BAD THINGS.
GOOD THINGS CAN BE STRESSORS TOO. GETTING MARRIED, MOVING HOUSE...
MIND BLOWN
MOVING TO A COMPLETELY NEW COUNTRY.
WHOA.

YOU HAVE TO GIVE YOURSELF TIME TO DE-STRESS.
IF EMOTIONS ARE ALLOWED TO BUILD UP LIKE A PRESSURE COOKER WITH NO WAY TO LET OFF STEAM, THEY WILL COME OUT SOMEHOW.
AS PANIC ATTACKS, FOR EXAMPLE.

UH-HUH.
IT IS TRUE THAT MY WORST EPISODES OF AGORAPHOBIA AND PANIC ALL HAPPENED AT STRESSFUL TIMES.
THIS IS ACTUALLY REALLY HELPFUL.
SO THIS IS WHAT THERAPY IS SUPPOSED TO BE LIKE?!

THE COUNSELOR WHO MY DOCTOR IN NORWICH SET ME UP WITH WAS A NICE MIDDLE-AGED LADY NAMED BARBARA.

BARBARA WAS KIND AND PATIENT AND CLEARLY WANTED TO HELP.

BUT I THINK MY PROBLEMS WERE A LITTLE MORE INTENSE THAN SHE HAD BARGAINED FOR.

I DIDN'T GO BACK.

I WANTED PRACTICAL, ACTIONABLE TOOLS THAT WOULD HELP ME LEAVE THE HOUSE WITHOUT WANTING TO DIE, NOT COZY SELF-CARE TIPS.

The SPINNING
ANXIE-TEA CUPS
I DON'T FEEL SO GOOD.
I WANT TO GET OFF!

I WAS STARTING TO FEEL BETTER ANYWAY, SINCE SEEING THE DOCTOR AND BEGINNING TO TAKE MEDICATION.

I WAS GOING TO COLLEGE EVERY DAY.

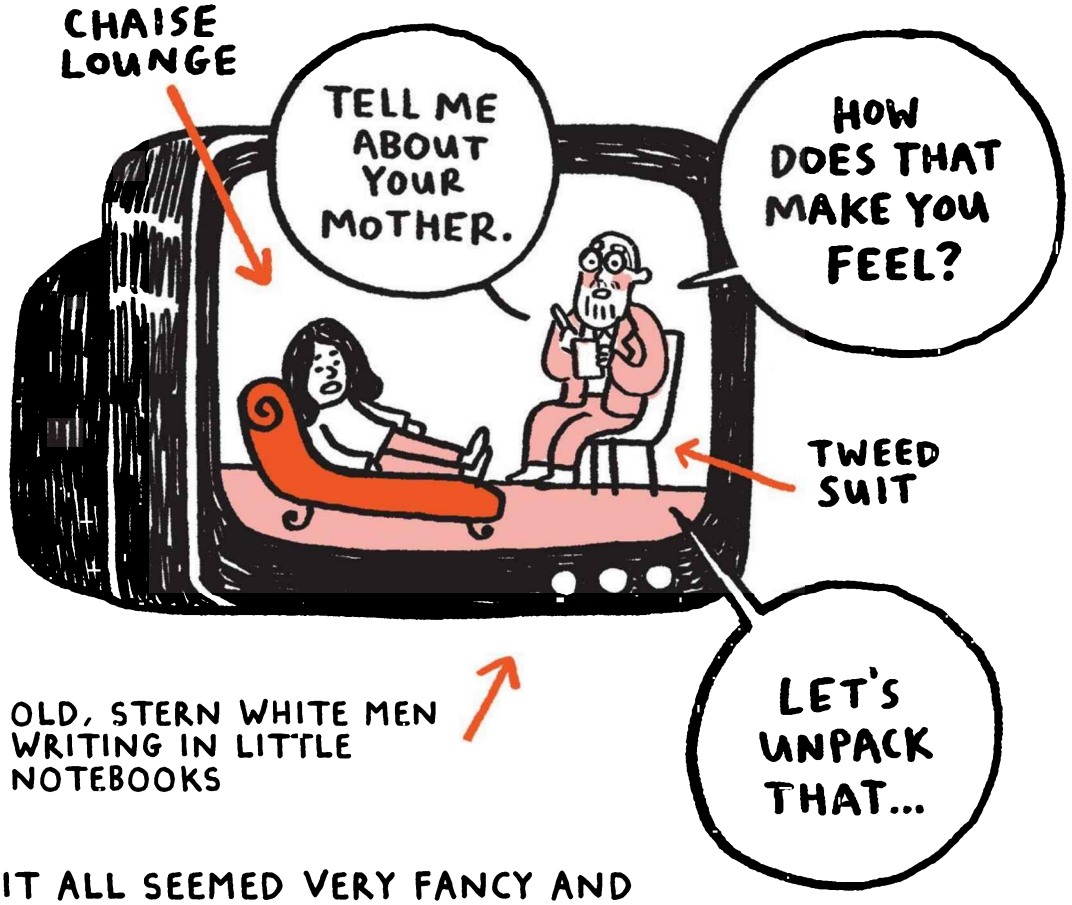
I WAS EVEN HAVING A GOOD TIME.

BUT I WAS STILL LIVING A SORT OF HALF-LIFE, STAYING INSIDE MY COMFORT ZONE AND AVOIDING TRIGGERS.

I KNEW THAT IT WASN'T NORMAL.

THE PROBLEM WAS, I DIDN'T KNOW WHERE TO LOOK, OR EVEN WHAT IT WAS THAT I WAS LOOKING FOR.

GROWING UP IN ENGLAND, I HAD ONLY EVER SEEN THERAPY SESSIONS DEPICTED IN AMERICAN TV SHOWS AND MOVIES.

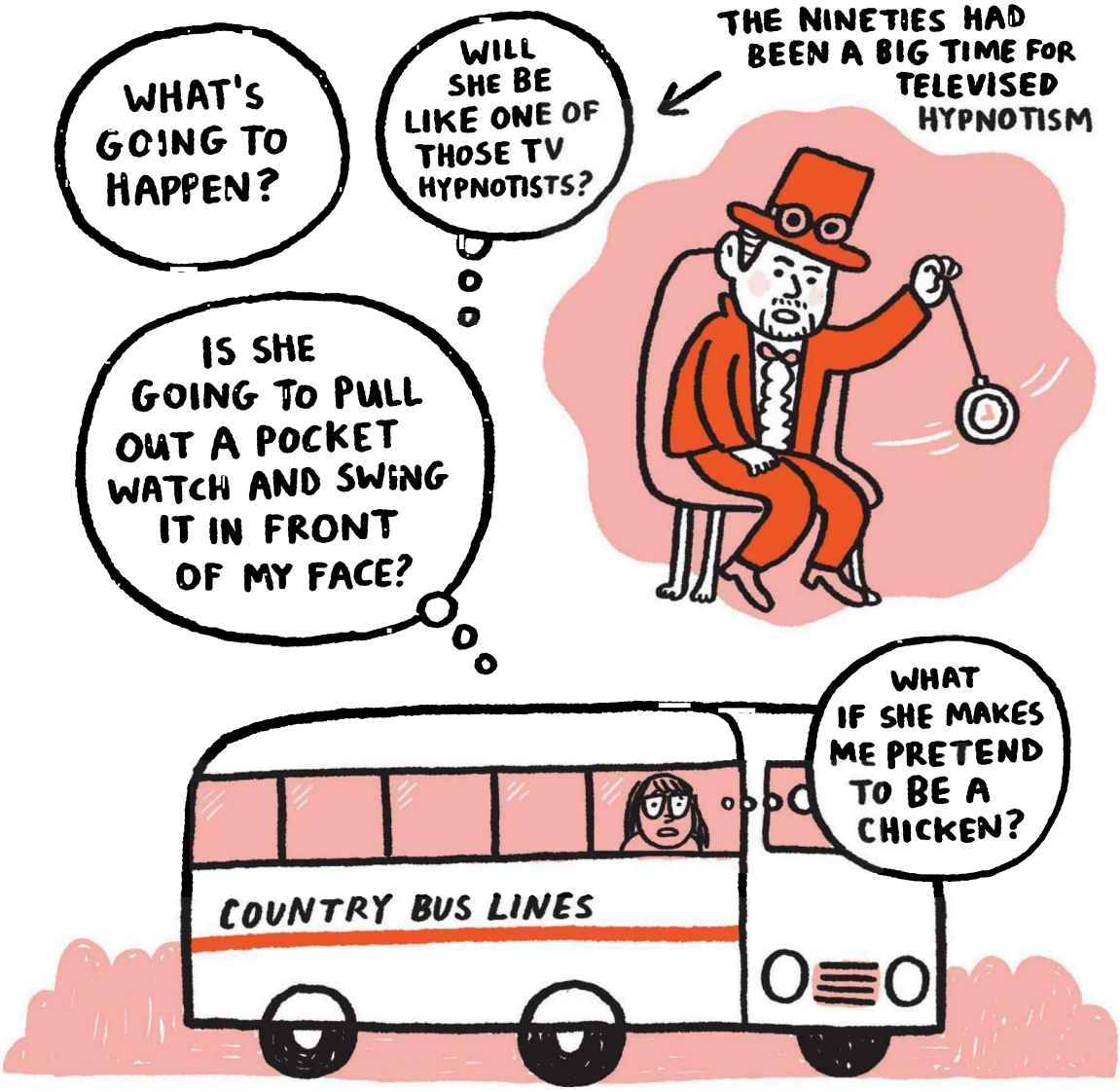


IT ALL SEEMED VERY FANCY AND SELF-INDULGENT. AND THEREFORE, VERY UN-BRITISH.

I ASSUMED THAT THERAPY SIMPLY WASN'T A THING THAT EXISTED IN THE UK. AT LEAST, NOT IN MY HOMETOWN.

THEN ONE DAY, WHILE BROWSING ONLINE, I CAME ACROSS AN ADVERT.
HMM.
search
panic attack help
HYPNOTHERAPY CAN HELP YOU
Carole W.
CALL TODAY!
STOP SMOKING!
CURE PANIC ATTACKS!
LOSE WEIGHT!
DID YOU KNOW GERI HALLIWELL USED HYPNOTHERAPY FOR WEIGHT LOSS?
WELL, IF IT'S GOOD ENOUGH FOR GINGER SPICE...
search
Panic attack help
results:
HYPNOTHERAPY

I BOOKED AN APPOINTMENT FOR THE NEXT DAY.



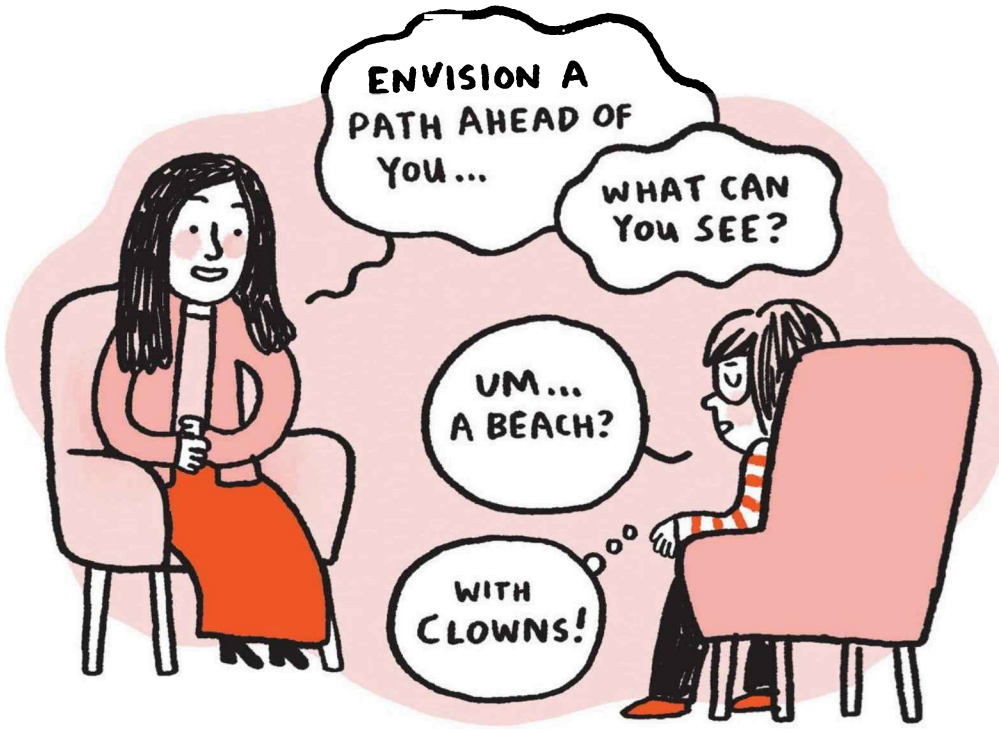
IT TOOK ME HALF AN HOUR TO GET THERE ON THE BUS—THE FARTHEST I'D TRAVELED IN SOME TIME.

CAROLE'S HOME / OFFICE
YOU MADE IT ALL THE WAY HERE.
JUST GO IN...
WELCOME! COME ON IN!
GO THROUGH THERE.
SEEMS NORMAL...
LAVENDER-SCENTED AIR
PLINKY PLONKY MUSIC

AND THEN, I WALKED INTO HER OFFICE.

GET COMFY.
I TRIED MY BEST TO RELAX AND FOLLOW CAROLE'S DIRECTIONS.
IS IT RUDE TO ASK SOMEONE YOU'VE ONLY JUST MET IF THEY'RE A CLOWN?
BUT I COULDN'T CONCENTRATE.
CLOSE YOUR EYES...
DON'T THINK ABOUT CLOWNS.

I COULDN'T STOP THINKING ABOUT THE CLOWNS AND THEIR TERRIFYING, CONTORTED FACES.



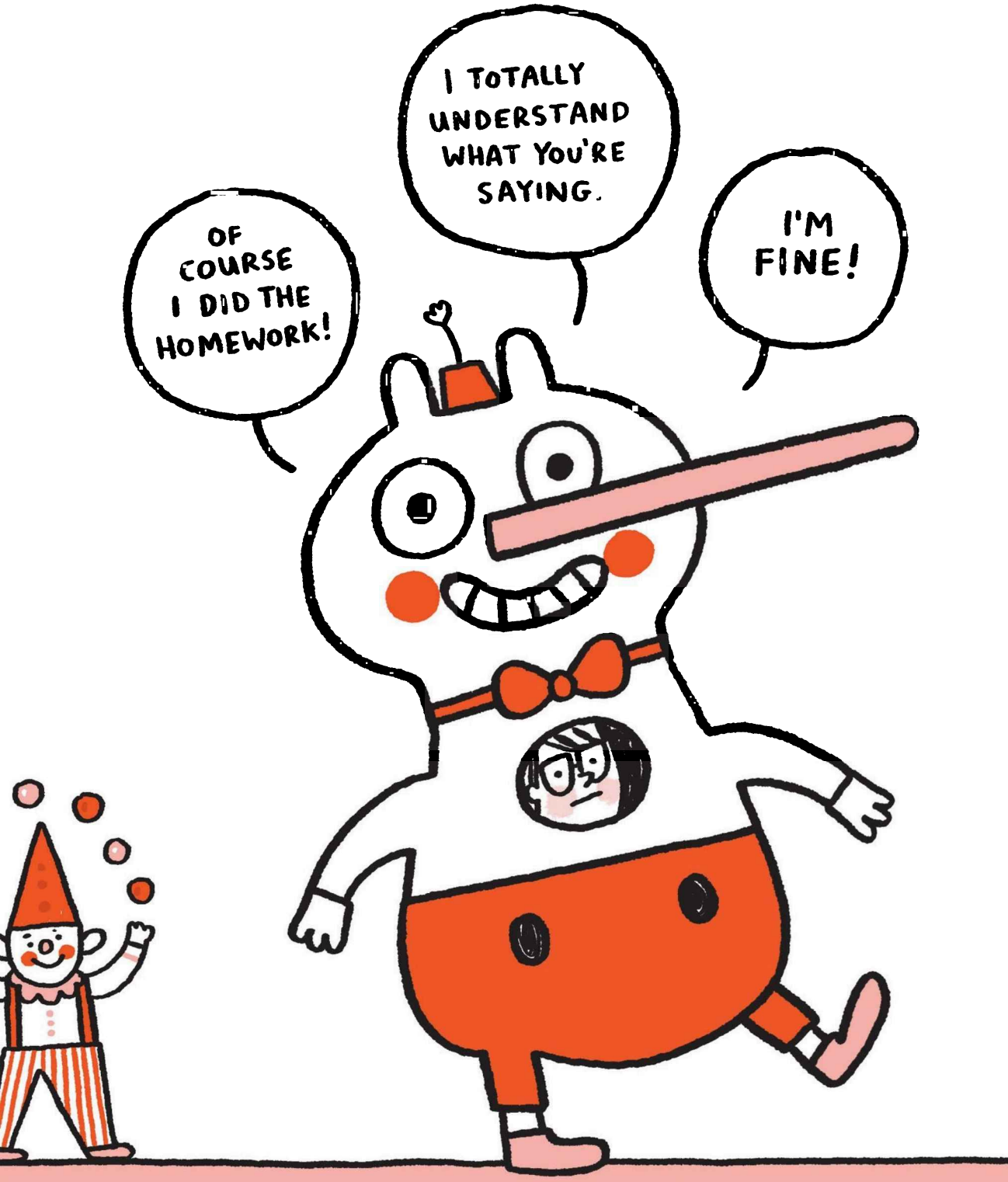
THE MORE I TRIED TO BLOCK THEM FROM MY MIND, THE MORE THEY FORCED THEIR WAY IN.

WHICH IS A PRETTY GOOD METAPHOR FOR PANIC ATTACKS, NOW THAT I THINK ABOUT IT.

FEEL THE SUN ON YOUR FACE...
STOP THINKING ABOUT CLOW...
I FEEL LIKE THEIR MAKEUP WOULD MELT.
THEY MUST GET HOT IN THOSE WIGS...
AND WHAT'S UNDER THOSE LONG SHOES?
FOCUS!
DO THEY HAVE WEIRD LONG FEET?
GROSS.

IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I LIED TO A THERAPIST, BUT IT CERTAINLY WOULD NOT BE THE LAST.

THE BIG OL' LIAR ON PARADE!
WHAT IS SHE DOING?!
WHAT AN ABSOLUTE CLOWN!
(I'M ALLOWED TO SAY THAT.)
SHE'S WASTING EVERYONE'S TIME!
INCLUDING HER OWN!


I TOTALLY UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU'RE SAYING.
I'M FINE!
OF COURSE I DID THE HOMEWORK!

I MADE ONE MORE ATTEMPT TO FIND HELP.

AFTER THAT, I GAVE UP.

I WASN'T SURE WHERE ELSE TO GO.

IT WOULD TAKE ALMOST TEN YEARS, AND A MOVE HALFWAY ACROSS THE WORLD, BEFORE I TRIED AGAIN.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE DEPRESSION OBSTACLE COURSE

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF ANXIETY, MY BRAIN IS QUIET.

MAYBE TOO QUIET.

EVERYTHING FEELS FLAT.
NOTHING BRINGS ME ANY JOY.
NOT EVEN DOG-BASED GOSSIP.

I'M EATING AGAIN BUT I'M FEELING UNCHARACTERISTICALLY UNENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT MEALTIMES.

FOUR YEARS AFTER ART SCHOOL, LIFE WAS GOING WELL.

MY ANXIETY WAS BACK DOWN TO PRE-COLLEGE LEVELS.

I HAD MANAGED TO TRAVEL OUTSIDE THE CITY A FEW TIMES.

I'D EVEN VISITED FRIENDS IN OTHER PARTS OF THE COUNTRY.

IT DIDN'T ALWAYS GO TO PLAN...

BUT I WAS GAINING CONFIDENCE IN MY ABILITY TO COPE WITH BEING AWAY FROM HOME.

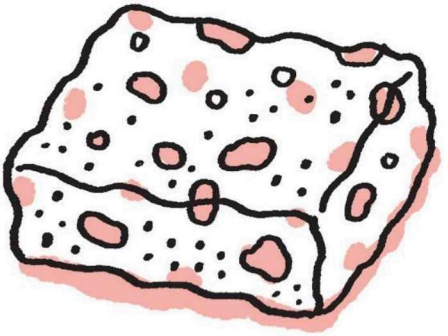
FOR TWO YEARS, I HAD BEEN DATING A NICE GUY CALLED ANTHONY, WHO I'D MET THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY (OUTSIDE A PUB).

I HAD SEEN HIM BEFORE, IN THE ART SCHOOL BAR. (THE CUTE GREEK GUY!)

I HAD ALSO, THRILLINGLY, NOTICED HIM WORKING IN A LOCAL DELI, CARRYING TRAYS FULL OF CAKE.

HIS BROWNIES WERE KNOWN AS THE BEST IN THE CITY.

THAT'S NOT A EUPHEMISM. THEY WERE JUST BLOODY GOOD BROWNIES.



HE BROUGHT A BOX OF THE BROWNIES TO OUR FIRST DATE...

A PICNIC IN THE PARK.

YES, HE BROUGHT GARLIC CLOVES AND STINKY CHEESE TO OUR FIRST DATE!

AND THEN HE KISSED ME!

I KNEW RIGHT THEN AND THERE THAT HE WAS THE ONE FOR ME.

EXCEPT, OF COURSE, I DIDN'T.

ONE OF THE MANY FUN THINGS ABOUT SUFFERING FROM MENTAL ILLNESS IS THE EXTRA LAYER OF WORRY ABOUT HOW SOMEBODY NEW IN YOUR LIFE MIGHT REACT WHEN THEY FIND OUT.

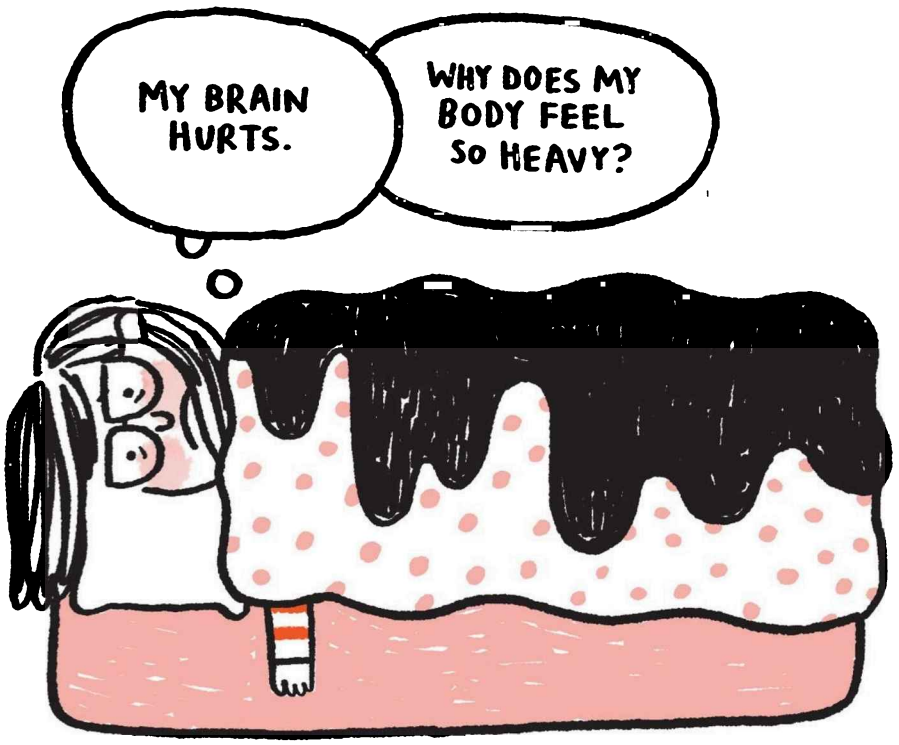
ESPECIALLY IF YOU REALLY LIKE THEM.

A FEW MONTHS AFTER OUR FIRST DATE, WE MOVED IN TOGETHER.

I OFTEN FELT INSECURE ABOUT MYSELF.

BUT MY AGORAPHOBIA SEEMED TO HAVE IMPROVED.

THEN ONE DAY, I WOKE UP AND COULDN'T GET OUT OF BED.



IT SEEMED TO HAVE COME OUT OF NOWHERE.

SOME DAYS I SLEPT UNTIL NOON.
UGH.
SOMETIMES I MANAGED TO ROLL OUT OF BED AND PULL ON SOME CLOTHES.
EVER-EXPANDING FLOORDROBE
THIS IS EXHAUSTING.
WHAT'S THE POINT?

IT FELT SOMEHOW ABSURD THAT I HAD TO GET UP EVERY DAY AND CONTINUE DOING THINGS THAT I NO LONGER HAD ANY INTEREST IN.

EVEN THE THINGS THAT I OBJECTIVELY LOVED.

I HAVE ZERO INTEREST IN THIS.

DID I REALLY USED TO ENJOY READING?!

I FELT LIKE I WAS GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS OF BEING A HUMAN PERSON.

MAYBE I'M JUST NO LONGER A PERSON WHO "ENJOYS THINGS" OR "WASHES THEIR HAIR."

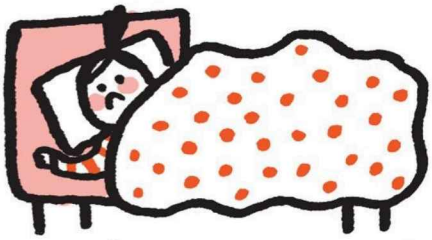
I'M GETTING BEHIND WITH WORK...

...BUT I DON'T HAVE THE ENERGY.

EVERY DAY FELT LIKE A NEVER-ENDING OBSTACLE COURSE.

The DEPRESSION OBSTACLE COURSE

CHALLENGE!



HAUL YOURSELF OUT OF BED!

TAKE A SHOWER

WATER OBSTACLE!

PUT SOME PANTS ON!

BONUS IF THEY'RE CLEAN!

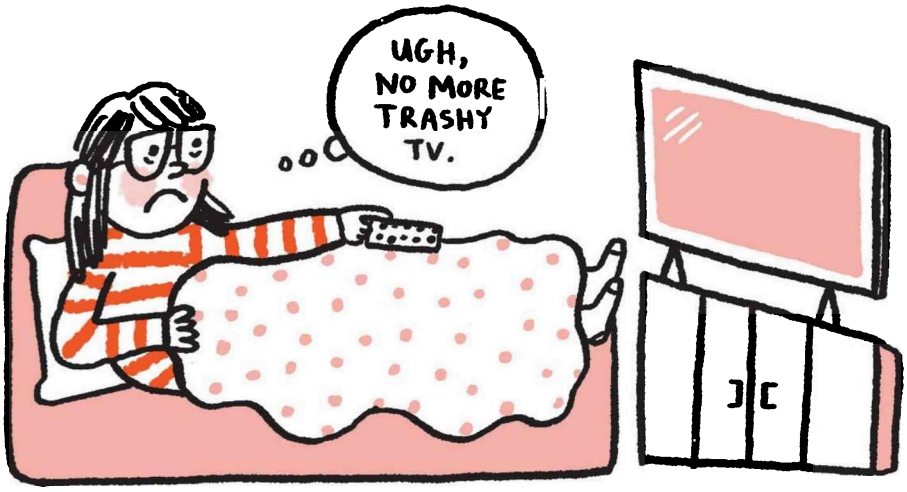
CRAWL THROUGH THE MUD OF EXHAUSTION!

EAT SOMETHING (NOT JUNK)!

ATTEMPT TO CLIMB
THE LADDER OF LOST INTERESTS
WHAT'S THE POINT?
NAVIGATE THE MOUNTAINS OF GRIME!
LAUNDRY
DISHES
Rx
BONUS CHALLENGE!
TAKE YOUR MEDS
SCALE
THE ULTIMATE TEST: GO OUTSIDE!
THE WALL OF APATHY
THE PIT OF GUILT

WHEN YOU CHOOSE TO TAKE TIME OFF AND LIE ON THE COUCH, IT'S THE BEST.

BUT WHEN YOU ARE DEPRESSED, IT FEELS LIKE TORTURE.

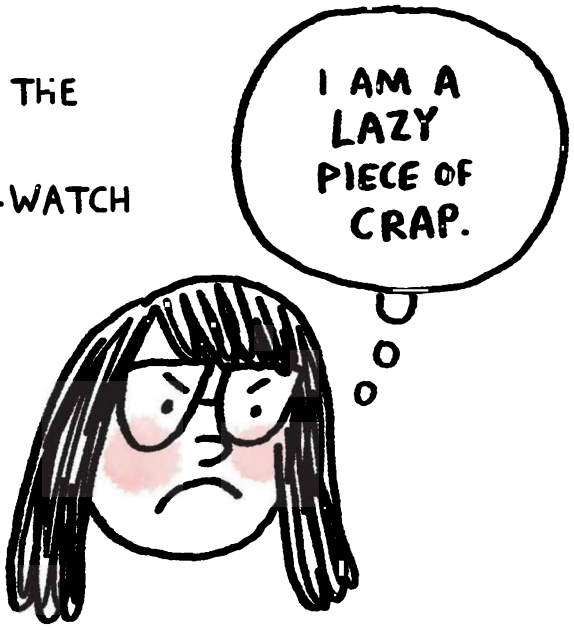


I DIDN'T WANT TO LIE ON THE COUCH ALL DAY.

I DIDN'T WANT TO BINGE-WATCH *JERSEY SHORE*.

I DIDN'T WANT TO EAT MY WEIGHT IN JUNK FOOD.

I JUST FELT COMPLETELY UNABLE TO DO ANYTHING ELSE. AND I HATED MYSELF FOR IT.

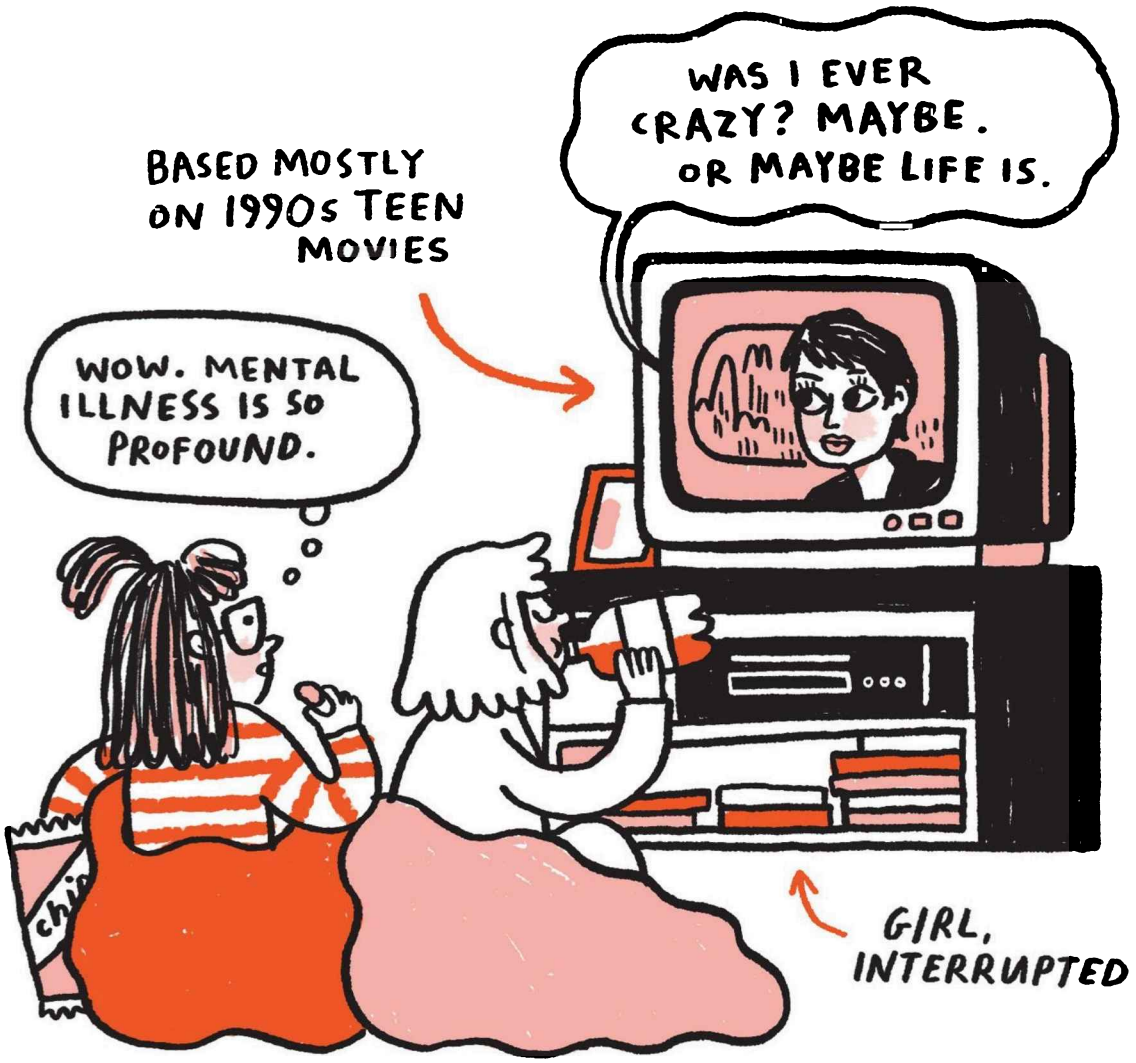


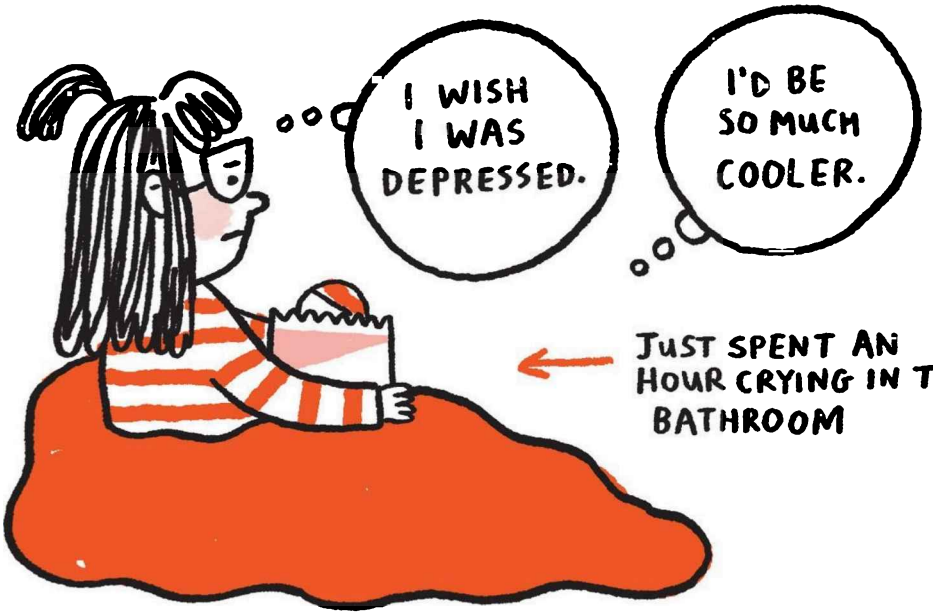
CAN YOU ESCAPE FROM...
THE PIT OF GUILT?
THE THINGS YOU SHOULD BE DOING
YOUR SELFISHNESS
THE PEOPLE YOU'RE LETTING DOWN
EVERY BAD THING YOU'VE EVER DONE

WHEN I HAD FIRST GONE TO THE DOCTOR, WHEN I WAS IN ART SCHOOL, HE HAD SURPRISED ME WITH AN EXTRA-SPECIAL BONUS DIAGNOSIS.

ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION ARE OPPOSITES, AREN'T THEY?
SURELY THEY CAN'T COEXIST.
I DON'T WANT TO DRINK ESPRESSO AND READ SYLVIA PLATH...
Rx
I JUST WANT TO BE ABLE TO LEAVE THE HOUSE WITHOUT PANICKING.
Rx
I'M NOT DEPRESSED.

OF COURSE I'D HEARD OF DEPRESSION BEFORE, BUT I'D ALWAYS ASSOCIATED IT WITH A MELANCHOLIC, GLOOMY KIND OF SADNESS.





DEPRESSED GIRLS WRITE POETRY AND HAVE PIXIE CUTS AND SMOKE CLOVE CIGARETTES.
I LIKE MUSICAL THEATER AND FROTHY COFFEES AND I LOOK TERRIBLE WITH SHORT HAIR.
ONE DAY
MORE
I'M TOO BORING TO BE DEPRESSED.

ANXIETY HAD ALWAYS BEEN MY MAIN SQUEEZE, COMMANDING ALL OF MY ATTENTION.

BUT DEPRESSION HAD BEEN THERE, TOO, ALL ALONG.

SO INTERTWINED WITH ANXIETY THAT I COULDN'T TELL THE DIFFERENCE.

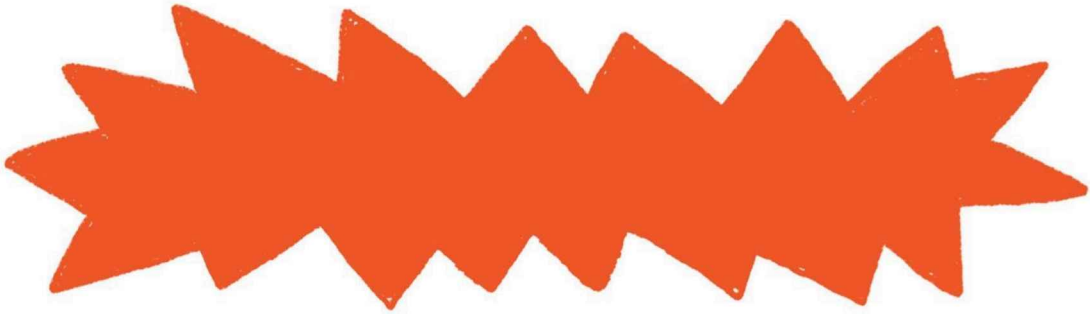
IT HAD BEEN THERE WHEN I WAS A LITTLE KID, CRYING ALL NIGHT BECAUSE MY CAT HADN'T COME HOME.

IT WAS THERE ON THE DAYS WHEN I WAS A TEENAGER AND COULDN'T GET OUT OF BED IN THE MORNING.

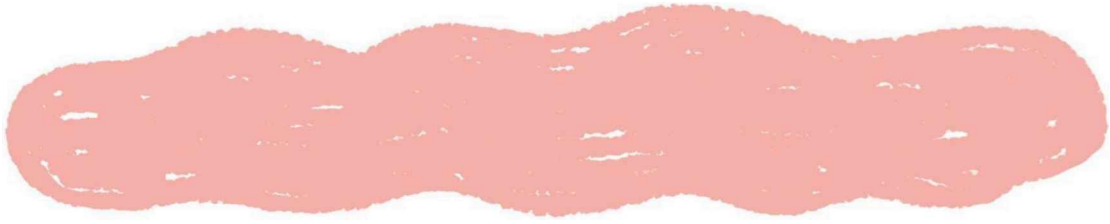
IT WAS THERE WHEN I WAS SHUT INSIDE MY BEDROOM, THINKING IN CIRCLES.

AND IT WAS HERE NOW, SUCKING THE LIFE OUT OF ME.

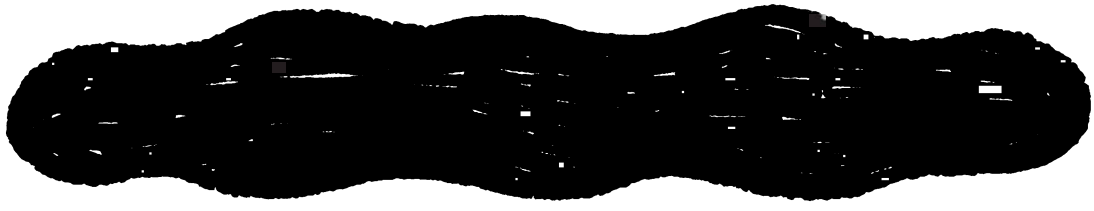
IT HAD JUST TAKEN ME A WHILE TO SEE IT BECAUSE IT DIDN'T LOOK THE WAY I EXPECTED IT TO.



IT WAS A DESPERATE, IMPENETRABLE THING THAT EXISTED SOMEWHERE BENEATH THE BIG, SHARP, ALL-ENCOMPASSING LOUDNESS OF PANIC.



IT WAS QUIETER THAN ANXIETY, MORE SLY.

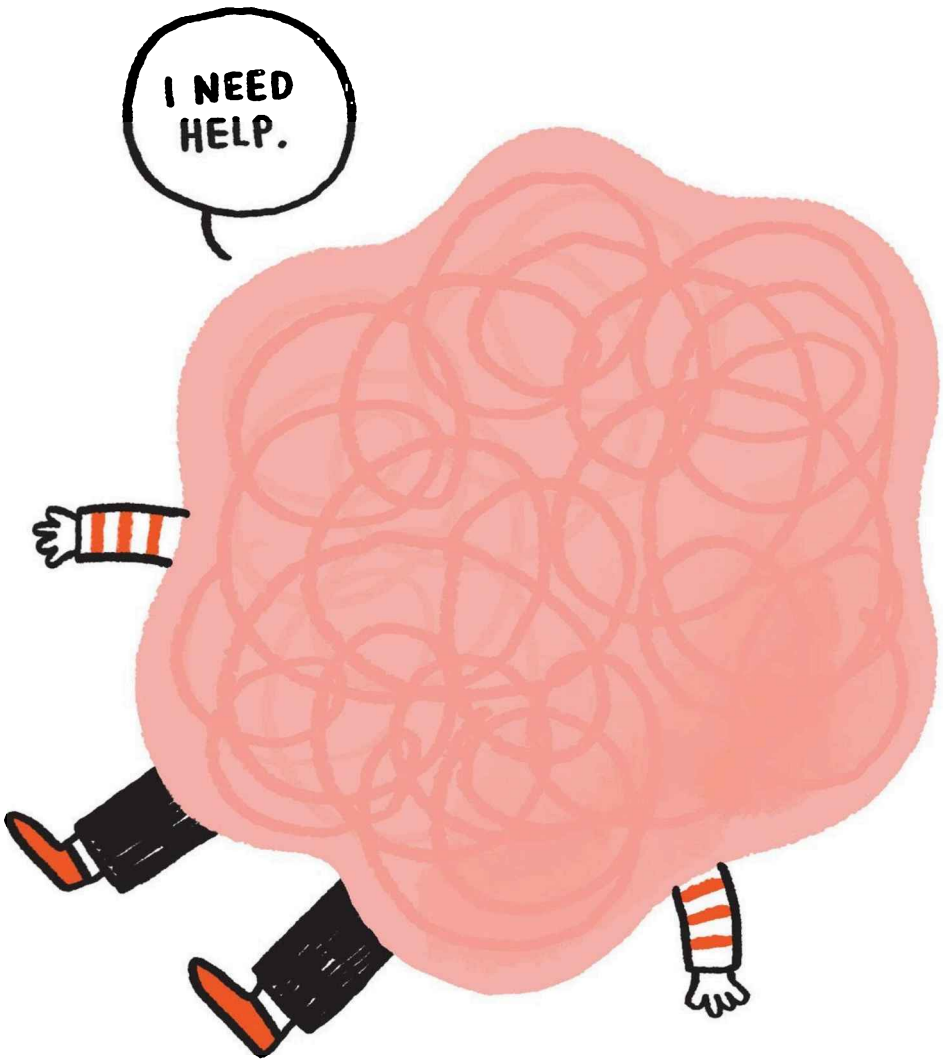


IT LOOMED UNDERNEATH...

SO HEAVY THAT I WASN'T SURE IF I COULD GET OUT FROM UNDER IT.

IT WASN'T THE OPPOSITE OF THE BAD FEELING.

IT WAS THE BAD FEELING.



AND I KNEW I HAD TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.

WITHOUT TELLING ANTHONY, I WENT BACK TO THE DOCTORS' CLINIC THAT I'D VISITED WHEN I WAS IN COLLEGE.

IT WAS SOMEHOW EASIER TO SHOW ANTHONY THE LITTLE BOX OF WHITE PILLS THAN IT WAS TO TRY TO EXPLAIN WHY I NEEDED THEM.

HE DIDN'T RUN AWAY SCREAMING, OR LAUGH AT ME. HE JUST LISTENED.

IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I'D TOLD ANYBODY ABOUT MY DIAGNOSES.

IT GOT BETTER.

BUT THIS TIME, THERE WAS NO CAKE.

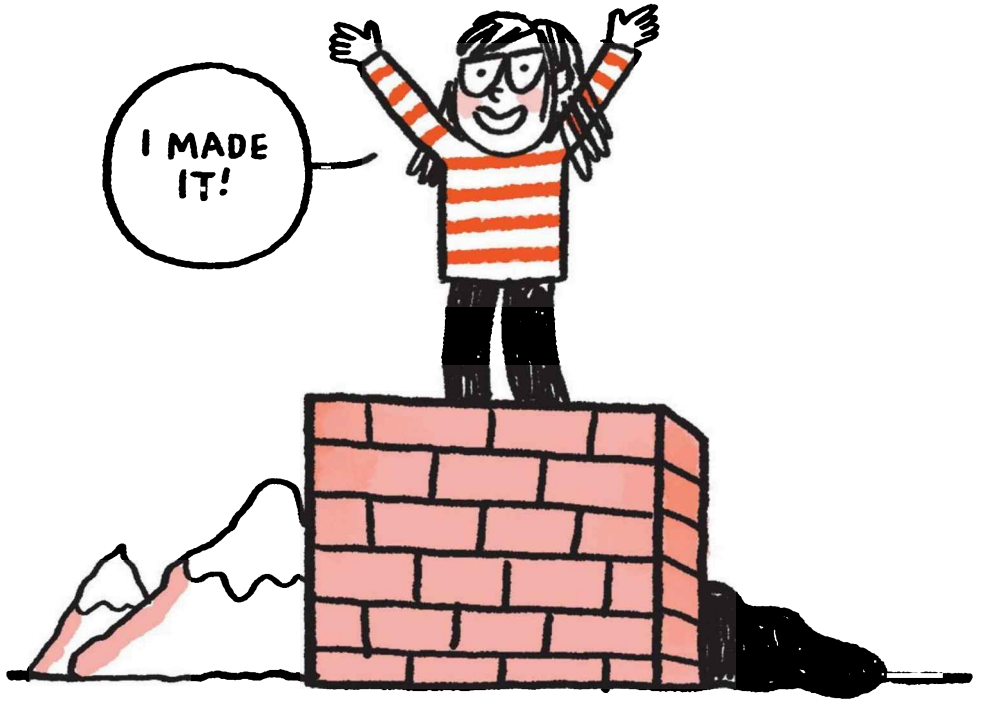
THERE WAS NO BIG TURNING POINT, JUST WEEKS OF WAITING FOR SOMETHING TO CHANGE, EVEN WHEN IT WAS HARD TO BELIEVE THAT IT EVER WOULD.

SOME DAYS, THE OBSTACLE COURSE FELT TOO GRUELING TO EVEN CONTEMPLATE.

SOME DAYS, IT FELT LIKE I WAS GOING BACKWARD.

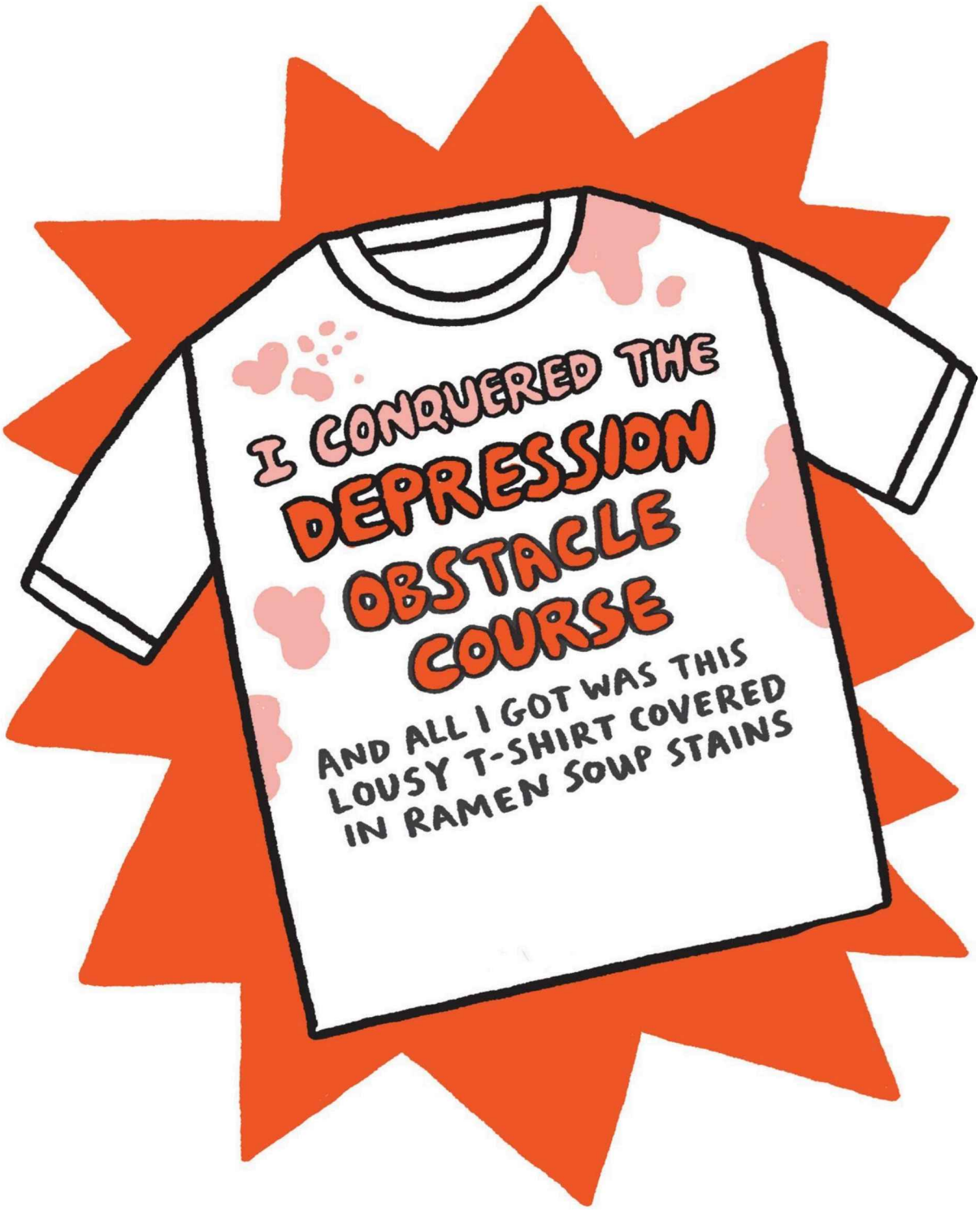
I LEARNED TO FIND THE GOOD MOMENTS AND LIVE IN THEM.

IT WASN'T UNTIL I HAD CLIMBED OUT OF THE DEPRESSION THAT I COULD LOOK BACK AND SEE HOW BAD IT HAD ACTUALLY BEEN.



EVENTUALLY, I WAS ABLE TO CLIMB HIGH ENOUGH THAT I COULD SEE BEYOND THE DARKNESS TO A FUTURE I WANTED TO BE A PART OF.

AND IT FELT AMAZING.

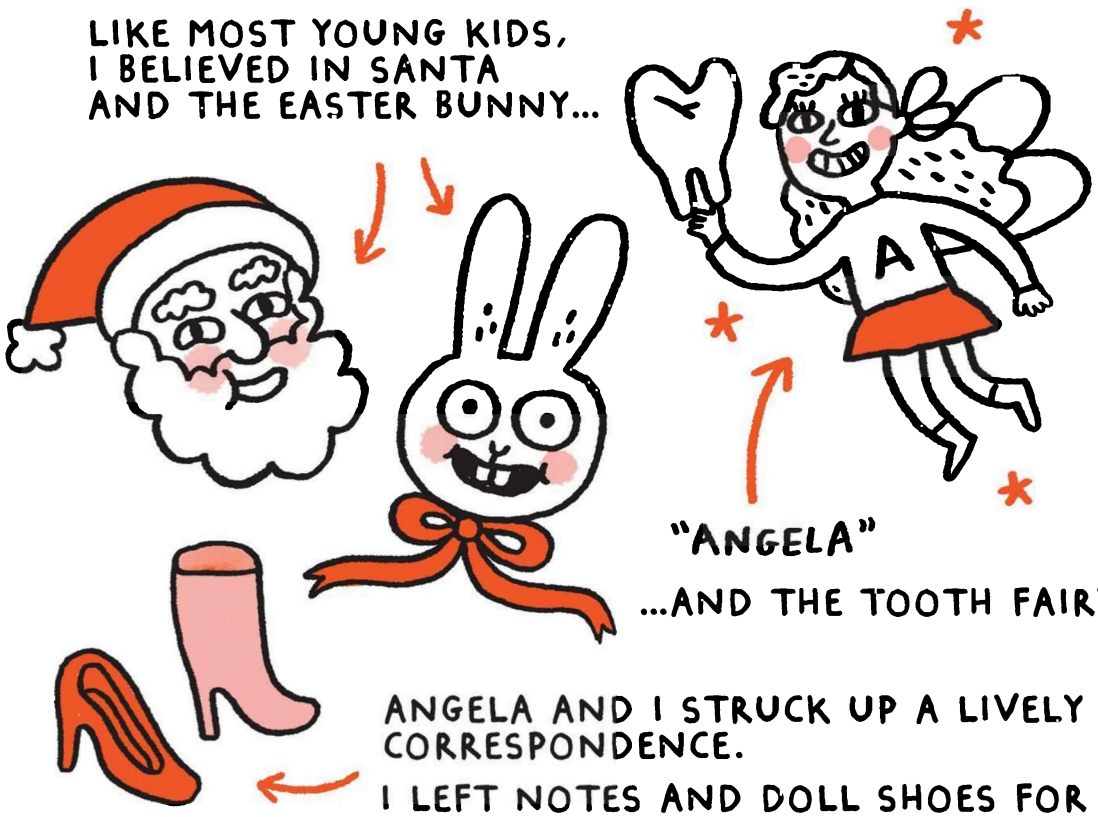

I CONQUERED THE DEPRESSION OBSTACLE COURSE
AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS LOUSY T-SHIRT COVERED IN RAMEN SOUP STAINS

2 pm
CIRCLE TIME.
OUR DAILY GROUP THERAPY SESSION
THIS IS YOUR TIME TO DISCUSS ANYTHING THAT IS CONCERNING YOU.
BEANBAGS
I'M HAVING A HARD TIME WITH MY DISABILITY SUPPORT APPLICATION.
SOME PEOPLE TALK.
SOME PEOPLE SIT QUIETLY.
SOME PEOPLE DO CRAFTS OR READ.
SOME PEOPLE CRY (USUALLY ME).
ZZZ
SOME PEOPLE TAKE A NAP.

MY PROBLEMS SOUND SO MINOR COMPARED TO EVERYBODY ELSE'S.
I'M SUPPOSED TO BE GOING TO NEW YORK THIS WEEKEND, FOR WORK...
I JUST HAVE THIS GUT FEELING LIKE SOMETHING BAD IS GOING TO HAPPEN.
LIKE, THE PLANE WILL CRASH.
BUT I DON'T KNOW IF I CAN GO.
I FEEL SAFE HERE.
WHAT IF SOMETHING BAD DOES HAPPEN?
AND I PANIC...
... AND I UNDO ALL OF THE PROGRESS I'VE MADE HERE?
MAYBE I SHOULD STAY...
I FEEL LIKE I'VE BEEN SEEING SIGNS THAT I SHOULDN'T GO...
LIKE, THE SONG "CRASH" WAS ON THE RADIO THIS MORNING.
THAT'S MAGICAL THINKING.
ANXIETY IS NOT INTUITION.

MAGICAL THINKING IS A NORMAL PART OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT.

LIKE MOST YOUNG KIDS, I BELIEVED IN SANTA AND THE EASTER BUNNY...



"ANGELA"

...AND THE TOOTH FAIRY.

ANGELA AND I STRUCK UP A LIVELY CORRESPONDENCE.

I LEFT NOTES AND DOLL SHOES FOR HER UNDER MY PILLOW.

SHE STOLE MY TEETH AND WROTE SWEET LITTLE LETTERS BACK TO ME.

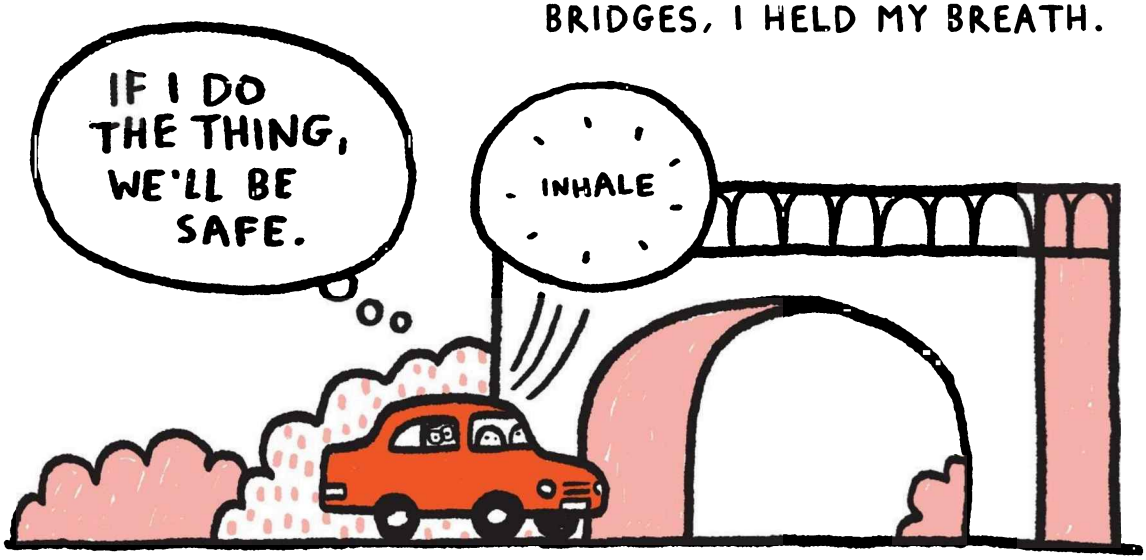
TINY HANDWRITING (STRIKINGLY SIMILAR TO MY DAD'S)

I BELIEVED IN MONSTERS AND THAT HAGGISES WERE SMALL, FURRY CREATURES THAT LIVED IN SCOTTISH CAVES.

I ALSO BELIEVED THAT I COULD KEEP MY ENTIRE FAMILY SAFE DURING CAR JOURNEYS BY PERFORMING SECRET LITTLE RITUALS.

I THOUGHT THAT I COULD STOP BAD THINGS FROM HAPPENING IF I JUST CONCENTRATED HARD ENOUGH.

WHEN WE DROVE UNDER BRIDGES, I HELD MY BREATH.



I RACED RAINDROPS DOWN THE WINDOWS, PLACING SILENT BETS ON THEM.

IF THAT DROP GETS TO THE BOTTOM FIRST, WE'LL BE SAFE.

I COULD IMAGINE, IN VIVID DETAIL, THE HORRIFIC DISASTERS THAT WOULD OCCUR IF I DIDN'T DO THESE THINGS.

AND I NEVER, EVER ALLOWED MYSELF TO RELAX OR, GOD FORBID, FALL ASLEEP.

IT WAS ALSO IMPERATIVE THAT NOBODY ELSE KNEW ABOUT THE RITUALS.

AND IT WOULDN'T EVEN HAVE OCCURRED TO ME TO USE THEM ON AIRPLANES.

FLYING WAS A NOVELTY AND A MAGICAL THING OF ITS OWN, FAR BEYOND THE DOMAIN OF MY EARTHLY POWERS.

IT WASN'T UNTIL I WAS SIXTEEN AND ON A FLIGHT HOME FROM ITALY WITH MY LANGUAGE CLASS THAT IT FINALLY HIT ME.

IT WAS THE LAST FLIGHT I TOOK FOR ALMOST TEN YEARS.

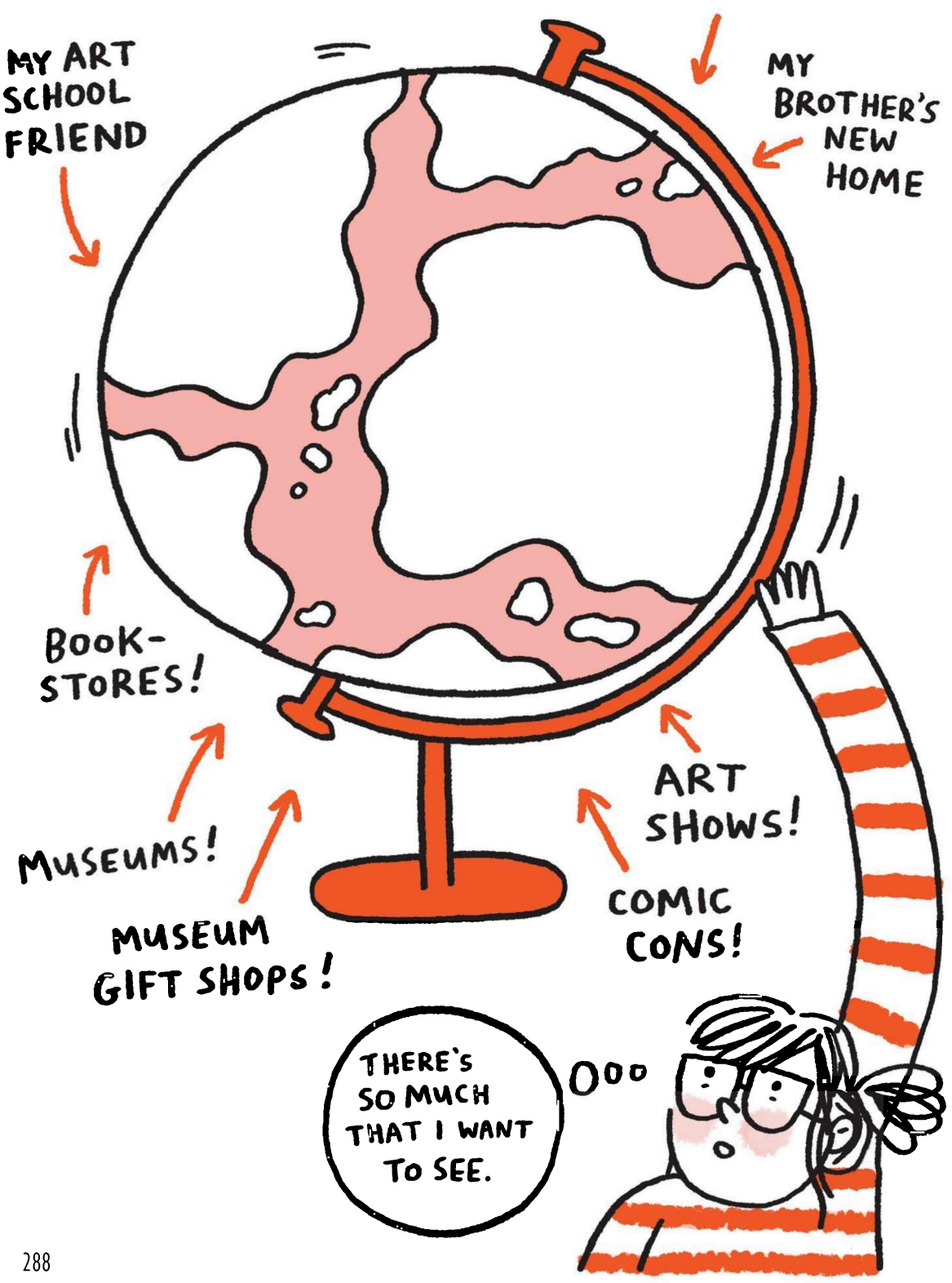
IF I COULDN'T FIND AN ALTERNATIVE ROUTE FOR A TRIP, I SIMPLY DIDN'T GO.

PLANNING OUR POST-FINAL EXAMS GROUP VACATION

AND SO MY FEAR GOT BIGGER, AS PHOBIAS THAT ARE ALLOWED TO FESTER TEND TO DO.

AFTER COLLEGE, I BEGAN TO EXPAND MY COMFORT ZONE. I DECIDED THAT I WANTED TO TRAVEL MORE.

I WANTED TO SNATCH BACK SOME OF THE TIME THAT AGORAPHOBIA HAD STOLEN FROM ME.



AND I REALLY, REALLY WANTED TO GO TO THE USA.

I HAD VISITED MY DAD'S FAMILY IN NORTH CAROLINA WHEN I WAS A KID AND WAS INSTANTLY ENAMORED.

THERE WAS ONLY ONE PROBLEM—THE WHOLE "HAVING TO GET ON A PLANE" THING.

A FEAR OF FLYING IS AT LEAST EASY TO UNDERSTAND, UNLIKE A FEAR OF LEAVING YOUR OWN BEDROOM.

AND SO, IN 2008, I FOUND MYSELF IN THE DEPARTURE LOUNGE OF OUR LOCAL AIRPORT.

NOW BOARDING FLIGHT 64 To EDINBURGH.
ANXIETYLAND AIRLINES
I DON'T THINK I CAN DO THIS.
YOU CAN.
I'M HERE FOR YOU.
YOU'VE GOT THIS.
I'M HERE FOR YOU.
OW.
I'M HERE FOR YOU, BUT...
...COULD YOU PLEASE LOOSEN YOUR GRIP?
SWEATY PALMS

WE'RE IN THE AIR!
THERE'S NO GOING BACK NOW.
YOU'RE DOING SO WELL!
GUESS I'LL TRY TO DISTRACT MYSELF FROM MY IMPENDING DEATH.
WHY IS IT SO BUMPY?
WE'RE GOING TO DIE.
IT'S JUST THE CLOUDS.
IT'S NORMAL.
HMM.
YOU OK?
I WOULDN'T SAY I'M ENJOYING THIS BUT YEAH, I'M OK.
WE'RE LANDING!
LOOK AT THIS VIEW!
WOW.
NAH, I'M GOOD.

WE LANDED SAFELY AND HAD A GREAT STAY IN SCOTLAND.

I WAS ACTUALLY KIND OF MAD THAT WE HAD TO TAKE AN EIGHT-HOUR TRAIN RIDE TO GET HOME.

I TRIED TO BE PROUD OF MYSELF, BUT IT FELT LIKE TOO MUCH OF A RISK.

THE
Magical Thinking
SHOW
LIVE!
WATCH HER PULL "FACTS"* OUT OF THIN AIR!
* "FACTS" HAVE ZERO BASIS IN REALITY.

IF YOU ARE OPTIMISTIC ABOUT SOMETHING, IT WILL GO BADLY!
SO NEVER ALLOW YOURSELF TO BELIEVE THINGS WILL GO WELL.
IF YOU THINK NEGATIVE THOUGHTS ABOUT SOMEONE, YOU WILL CAUSE SOMETHING BAD TO HAPPEN TO THEM!
CAN YOU GET BACK IN THE HAT, PLEASE?
NO!

WE WENT ON SOME MORE TRIPS AND DISCOVERED THAT I LOVED TRAVELING.

WITH ANTHONY, OR ALONE.

FLYING AND BEING AWAY FROM HOME STILL MADE ME ANXIOUS, BUT THE DESIRE TO SEE NEW PLACES SOMEHOW OVERRODE THE FEAR.

EVEN SO, THE ANTICIPATORY ANXIETY WOULD TAKE OVER MY BRAIN FOR DAYS BEFORE A FLIGHT.

AND THINGS DIDN'T ALWAYS WORK OUT.

BUT I KEPT TRYING.

TO KEEP MYSELF SAFE I INVENTED MY OWN SET OF RULES.

I STARTED MAKING BARGAINS.

MAGICAL PROMISES THAT ALLOWED ME TO FEEL SOME SEMBLANCE OF CONTROL.

(I BROKE THEM ALL AS SOON AS WE LANDED.)

ON BOARD THE PLANE, I FOUND MYSELF FOLLOWING A SET ROUTINE.

MENTALLY VETTING THE PEOPLE IN THE EMERGENCY EXIT ROWS.

ALWAYS CHOOSING A WINDOW SEAT.

PAYING FULL ATTENTION TO THE SAFETY BRIEFING.

MAKING EYE CONTACT WITH THE FLIGHT ATTENDANT SO THEY KNOW THAT I AM THE BEST PASSENGER.

I ALWAYS ORDERED GINGER ALE...

HMM, GINGER ALE. THE LAST THING I WILL EVER DRINK...

HMM, PITCH PERFECT 3, THE LAST THING I WILL EVER WATCH...

SURELY THE SADDEST LAST MEAL

HMM, PRETZELS, THE LAST THING I WILL EVER EAT...

...AND TOOK MY HEADPHONES OFF AT THE FIRST SIGN OF TURBULENCE.

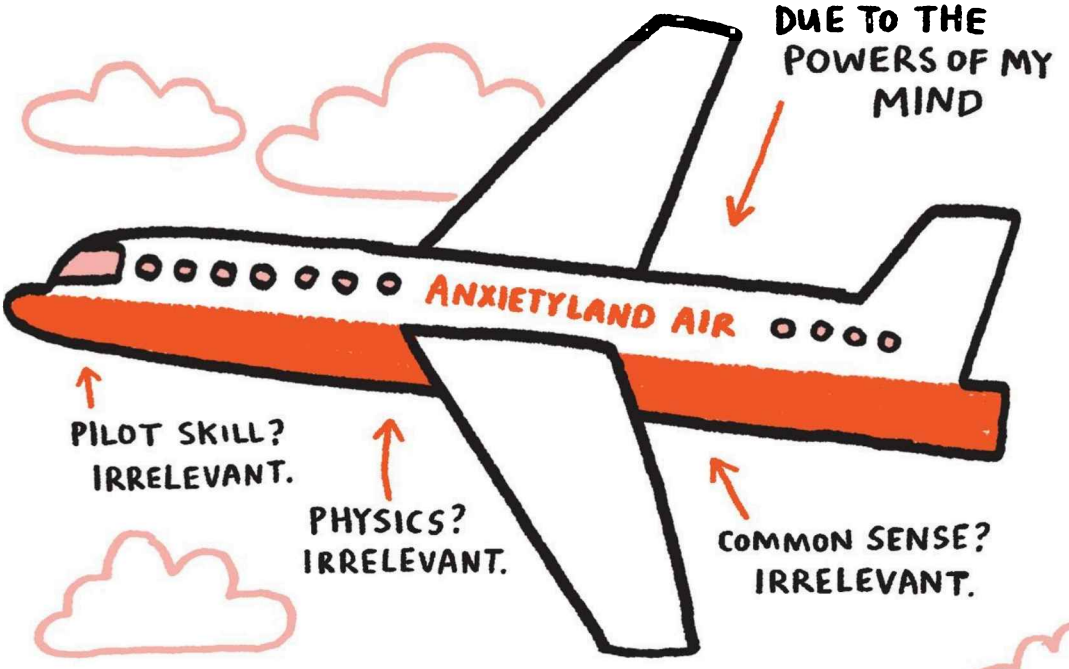
I KEPT THE WINDOW SHADE OPEN AT ALL TIMES.

AND I NEVER ALLOWED MYSELF TO FALL ASLEEP. (SOUND FAMILIAR?)

EVEN WITH THESE RULES, I STILL FELT SURE THAT THE PLANE WOULD PLUMMET TOWARD THE EARTH SIMPLY BECAUSE I WAS ON IT.

I AM FULLY AWARE THAT IT IS IRRATIONAL.

BUT ONCE YOU'VE ESTABLISHED RULES THAT YOU BELIEVE ARE KEEPING YOU SAFE, IT'S VERY HARD TO LET THEM GO.



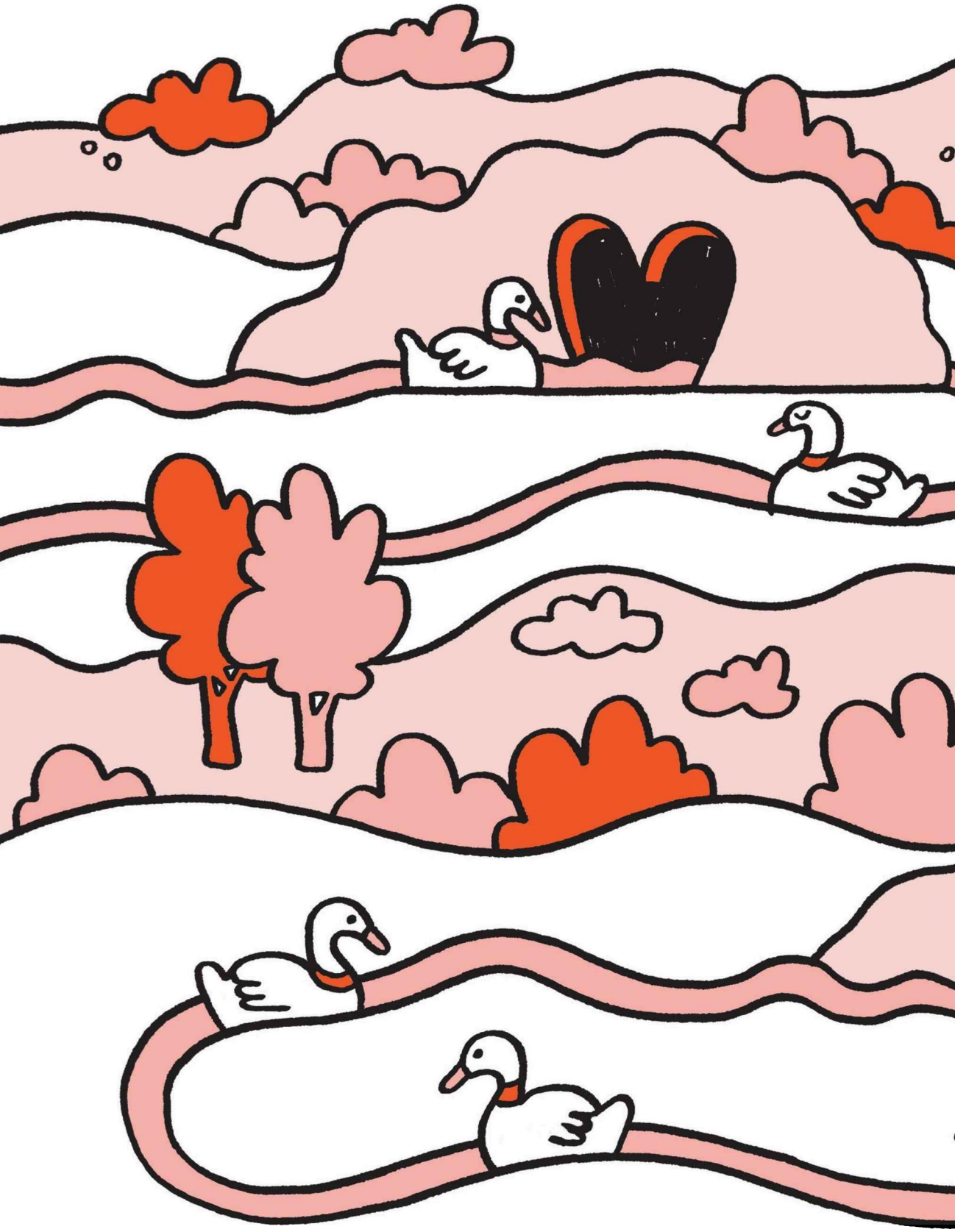
EVEN THOUGH I KNOW THAT FLYING IS SAFE...

...IT'S NOT LIKE AIRPORTS ARE RELAXING PLACES, FOR ANYBODY.

...BECAUSE WHAT IF IT TURNS OUT THAT I REALLY DO HAVE MAGIC POWERS?
WOULD YOU WANT TO BE ON THAT PLANE? RELYING ON MY BRAIN TO KEEP YOU ALIVE?
WELL, I'D BE FINE WITH IT BECAUSE I KNOW YOU DON'T HAVE POWERS.
YES BUT WHAT IF?

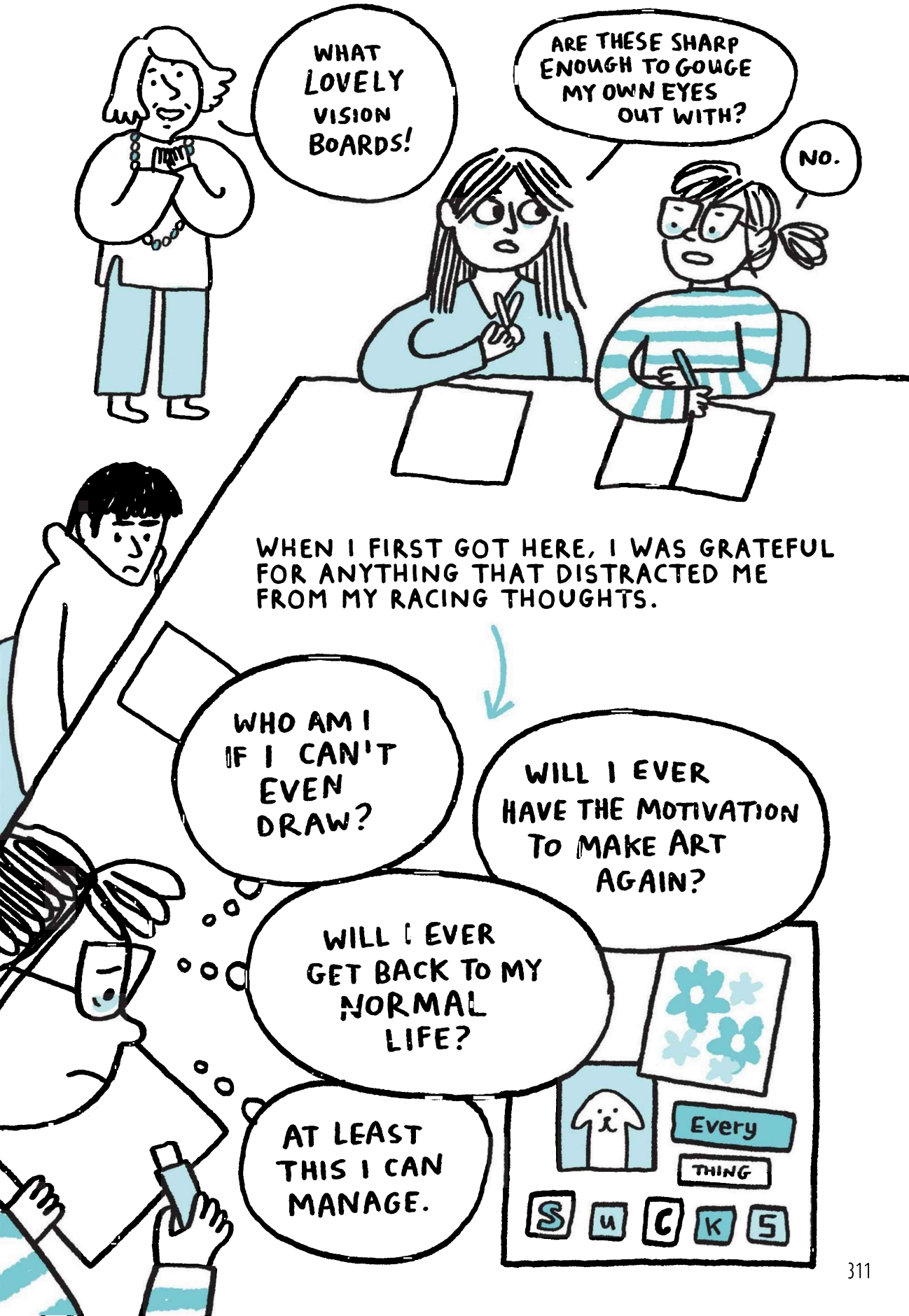
MY AVIOPHOBIA—LIKE ALL OF MY PHOBIAS—IS AT ITS WORST WHEN MY MENTAL HEALTH IS POOR.

WHICH IS WHY I HAVE DECIDED...



CHAPTER FIVE
THE TUNNEL OF LOVE

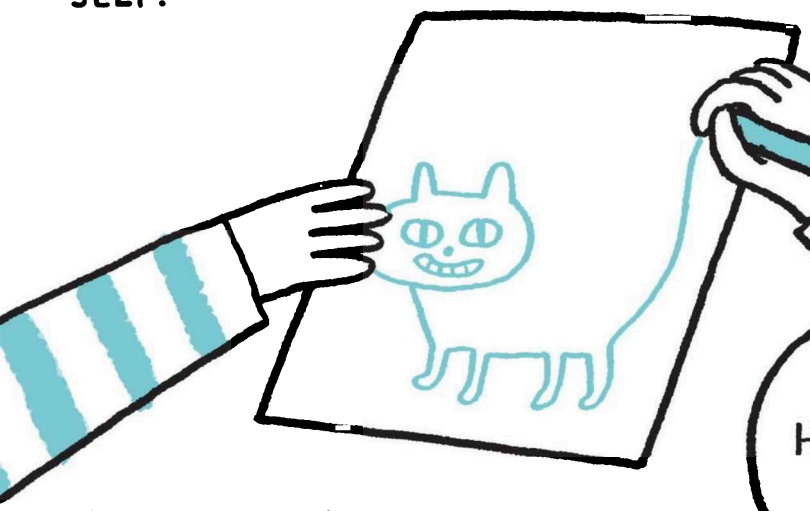
2:30 pm
OUR DAILY ART THERAPY SESSION. SOMETIMES THIS MEANS—
DRAMA!
LET'S DO SOME ROLE PLAY!
OH NO.
CRAFTING!
(MY ORIGAMI SKILLS ARE IMPROVING! SLOWLY!)
MUSIC!
I ALWAYS GET THE MARACA.
BUT USUALLY, IT MEANS
COLLAGE TIME!
UGH, GREAT.
ANOTHER DAY AT PRESCHOOL.
NOT EVERYONE IS INTO IT.


WHAT LOVELY VISION BOARDS!
ARE THESE SHARP ENOUGH TO GOUGE MY OWN EYES OUT WITH?
NO.
WHEN I FIRST GOT HERE, I WAS GRATEFUL FOR ANYTHING THAT DISTRACTED ME FROM MY RACING THOUGHTS.
WHO AM I IF I CAN'T EVEN DRAW?
WILL I EVER HAVE THE MOTIVATION TO MAKE ART AGAIN?
WILL I EVER GET BACK TO MY NORMAL LIFE?
AT LEAST THIS I CAN MANAGE.
Every
THING
S U C K S

NOW, AFTER EIGHT WEEKS, I'M GETTING BORED.

MORE INTERESTED IN READING THE MAGAZINES THAN COLLAGING WITH THEM.

I GUESS THIS MEANS I'M FEELING MORE LIKE MY OLD SELF.



I'M REDISCOVERING THE JOY I GET FROM DRAWING WITH NO END GOAL.

BUT I'M ALSO BEGINNING TO WORRY ABOUT REAL-LIFE STUFF.

SOMETHING I'VE STRUGGLED WITH FOR A LONG TIME.
I NEED TO FIGURE OUT MY "WORK-LIFE BALANCE."
The Juggler
ART AS WORK
ART AS FUN
I CAN'T LET MYSELF GET SUPER STRESSED AGAIN...

IN 2014, ANTHONY AND I STARTED OUR US VISA APPLICATION.

THAT IS GENUINELY WHAT IT'S CALLED.

MEETING WITH AN IMMIGRATION LAWYER.

ELIZABETH

ELIZABETH WASN'T EXAGGERATING.

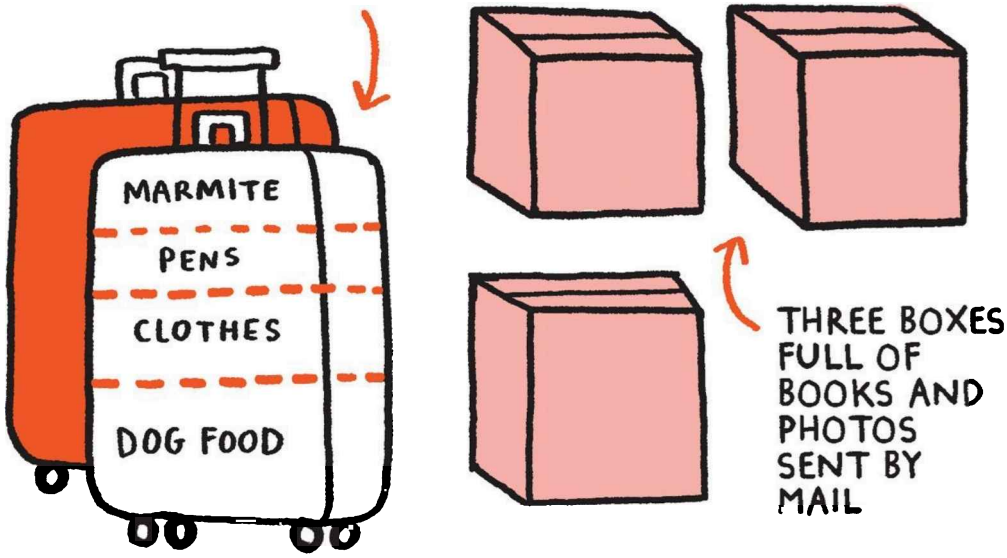
THE NEXT SIX MONTHS WERE... INTENSE.

EVERYTHING WENT VERY QUICKLY FROM THERE.

IN A MONTH, WE SOLD ALMOST EVERYTHING WE OWNED...

...SAID GOODBYE TO OUR FRIENDS AND FAMILY...

...AND LEFT THE UK WITH JUST TWO SUITCASES FULL OF ESSENTIALS.



OUR ROUTE WAS LONG AND CONVOLUTED.

BUT WE MADE IT.

THE FIRST FEW WEEKS FELT LIKE A VACATION.

EVERYTHING WAS SO EXCITING.

BUT IT COULDN'T LAST FOREVER.

SOON THE REALITY OF MOVING TO A DIFFERENT COUNTRY STARTED TO SET IN.

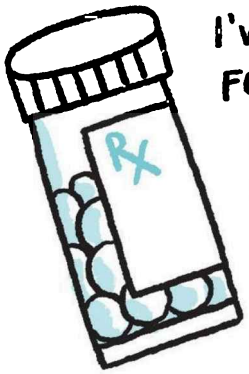
STILL, WE WERE HAVING A GOOD TIME.

WHAC A MOLE
WORK-LIFE BALANCE
MONEY!
HAPPINESS!
TIME!
HEALTH!
GROWTH!

AFTER A YEAR IN CALIFORNIA, WE KNEW WE WANTED TO STAY.

EVEN THOUGH IT WAS NOW MY FULL-TIME JOB, I STILL FOUND IT HARD TO SHAKE THE BELIEFS ABOUT ART THAT HAD BEEN INSTILLED IN ME AS A CHILD.

4 pm
DR. A. IS HERE TO TAKE ME IN FOR MY WEEKLY PSYCHIATRY CHECK-UP.
KNOCK KNOCK
GEMMA?
HERE.
ENJOY YOUR COLLAGE!
SHUT UP.
SO, HOW'S THE MEDICATION TREATING YOU?
MUCH BETTER.
I FEEL MORE EVEN.
LAST WEEK WAS ROUGH.
I WAS VERY DEPRESSED.
I INCREASED THE DOSE FOR (I THINK) THE LAST TIME
THAT'S ACTUALLY COMMON AFTER A DOSE CHANGE...
IT CAN GET WORSE BEFORE IT GETS BETTER.
YOUR BRAIN IS STILL GETTING USED TO THE CHANGE OF CHEMICALS.
IT'S TEMPORARY.
UM. WHY HAS NOBODY EVER TOLD ME THIS BEFORE?!



I'VE BEEN TAKING MY NEW MEDICATION FOR SIX WEEKS NOW.

I'VE BEEN UP AND DOWN, MOOD-WISE...

...BUT THE PHYSICAL SIDE EFFECTS HAVE BEEN MILD.

WE DON'T HAVE MUCH TO DISCUSS ANYMORE (MOSTLY JUST DOGS).

SEE YOU NEXT WEEK!

SAY HI TO YOUR DOG FROM ME!

I KNOW THAT I'M LUCKY. OTHER PEOPLE HAVE BEEN STRUGGLING.

I'VE TRIED SO MANY MEDS.

NOTHING WORKS.

WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE?

WHEN IT'S WORKING?

I FEEL SO BAD FOR THEM.

IT'S LIKE THE NOISE IN MY BRAIN HAS BEEN TURNED DOWN AT LAST.

I STILL HAVE ANXIOUS THOUGHTS, BUT THEY'RE NOT AS *LOUD*, SO I DON'T DEVOTE AS MUCH TIME TO THEM.

BY OUR SECOND YEAR IN CALIFORNIA, I HAD BEEN TAKING THE SAME MEDICATION, ON AND OFF, FOR NEARLY TEN YEARS.

AND THANKS TO MY HABIT OF POSTING COMICS ABOUT ANXIETY ONLINE, I GOT A LOT OF WELL-MEANING BUT UNSOLICITED ADVICE.

SPIN THE WHEEL OF UNSOLICITED ADVICE!

HAVE YOU TRIED...
YOGA?
FASTING?
EATING CLEAN?
HOMEOPATHY?
CBD?
ESSENTIAL OILS?
[INSERT EXPENSIVE SUPPLEMENT]?
CAMOMILE TEA?
CRYSTALS?
MAGNESIUM?
ASMR?
EDITATION?
SERT
D DIET]?
NG UP
AR I
LUTEN / JOY?

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT HAD "CAUSED" MY ANXIETY.

PRETENTIOUSLY, I PREFERRED THIS OPTION.

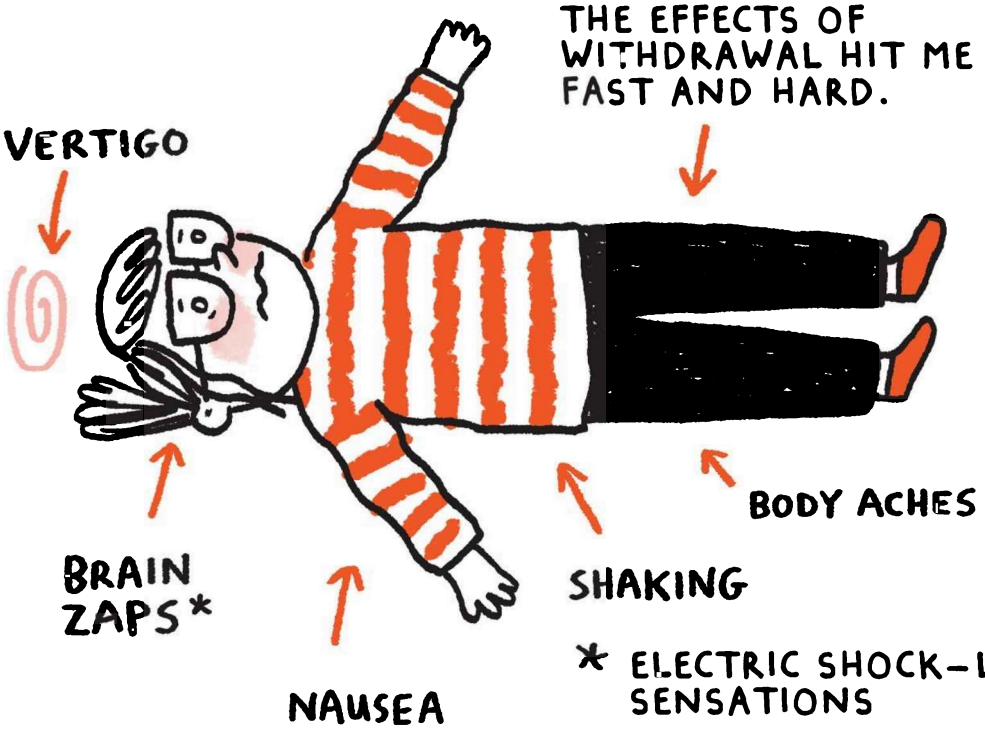
I HAD THE MISGUIDED, BUT COMMON, IDEA THAT MENTAL ILLNESS WAS PART OF BEING AN ARTIST.

FORGETTING THAT, IN THE PAST, WHEN MY MENTAL HEALTH WAS BAD, I COULD BARELY SUMMON THE MOTIVATION TO DRAW ANYTHING AT ALL.

I DECIDED TO STOP TAKING MY MEDICATION.

MAYBE I WOULD HAVE BEEN MORE SUCCESSFUL IF I'D WEANED OFF SLOWLY, UNDER MEDICAL SUPERVISION.

BUT I DIDN'T DO THAT.



BUT AFTER A COUPLE OF WEEKS, THE WITHDRAWAL EFFECTS STARTED TO FADE AND I FELT A BIT BETTER.

I STARTED RESEARCHING AND PURCHASING VARIOUS REMEDIES AND SUPPLEMENTS.

PEOPLE ONLINE SEEMED TO FIND SUCCESS WITH THESE THINGS, SO IT WAS FRUSTRATING WHEN THEY DIDN'T WORK FOR ME.

I RESEARCHED NUTRITION AND SPECIAL DIETS.

MAYBE THESE THINGS WOULD HAVE HELPED IF I HAD STARTED THEM EARLIER, RATHER THAN IN THE MIDST OF AN EXTREMELY STRESSFUL PERIOD OF MY LIFE.

MAYBE THEY'RE MORE EFFECTIVE FOR ANXIETY THAT'S ON THE MILDER END OF THE SPECTRUM.

IN ANY CASE, THEY DIDN'T SEEM TO BE DOING MUCH FOR ME. I WAS STARTING TO FEEL WORSE.

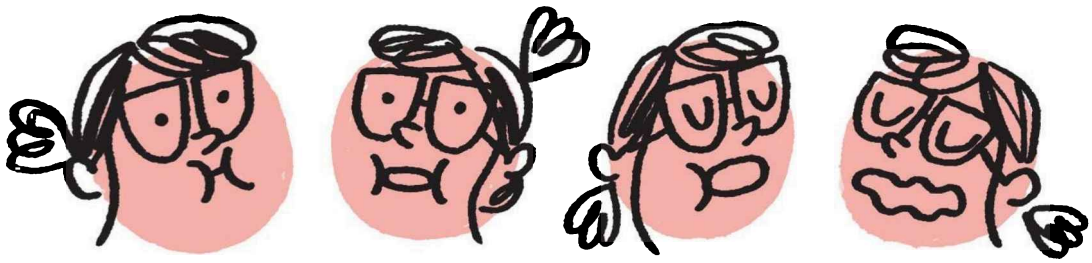
IT DIDN'T HAPPEN ALL AT ONCE.

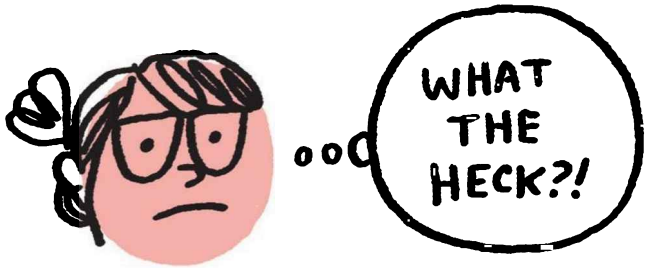
ANXIETY IS A SNEAKY LITTLE SHAPE-SHIFTER.

IT MORPHS AND MANIFESTS IN DIFFERENT WAYS ALL THE TIME.

NOW, IT LODGED ITSELF IN MY ESOPHAGUS.

I'D NEVER BEEN A GASSY PERSON, BUT NOW...

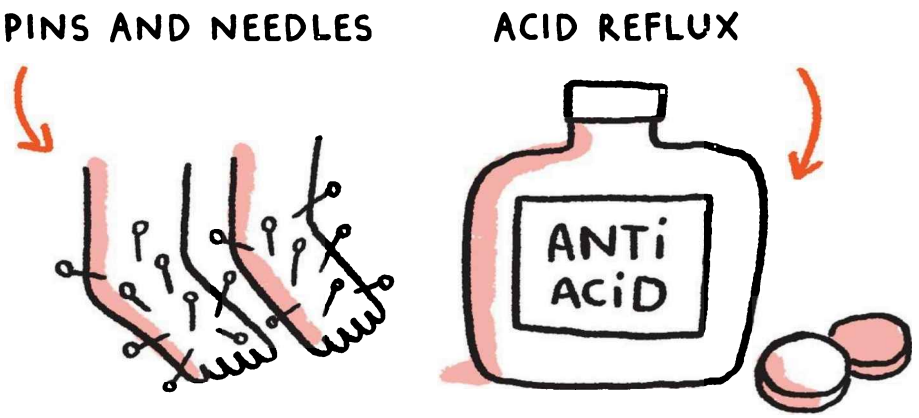




IT WAS GROSS.

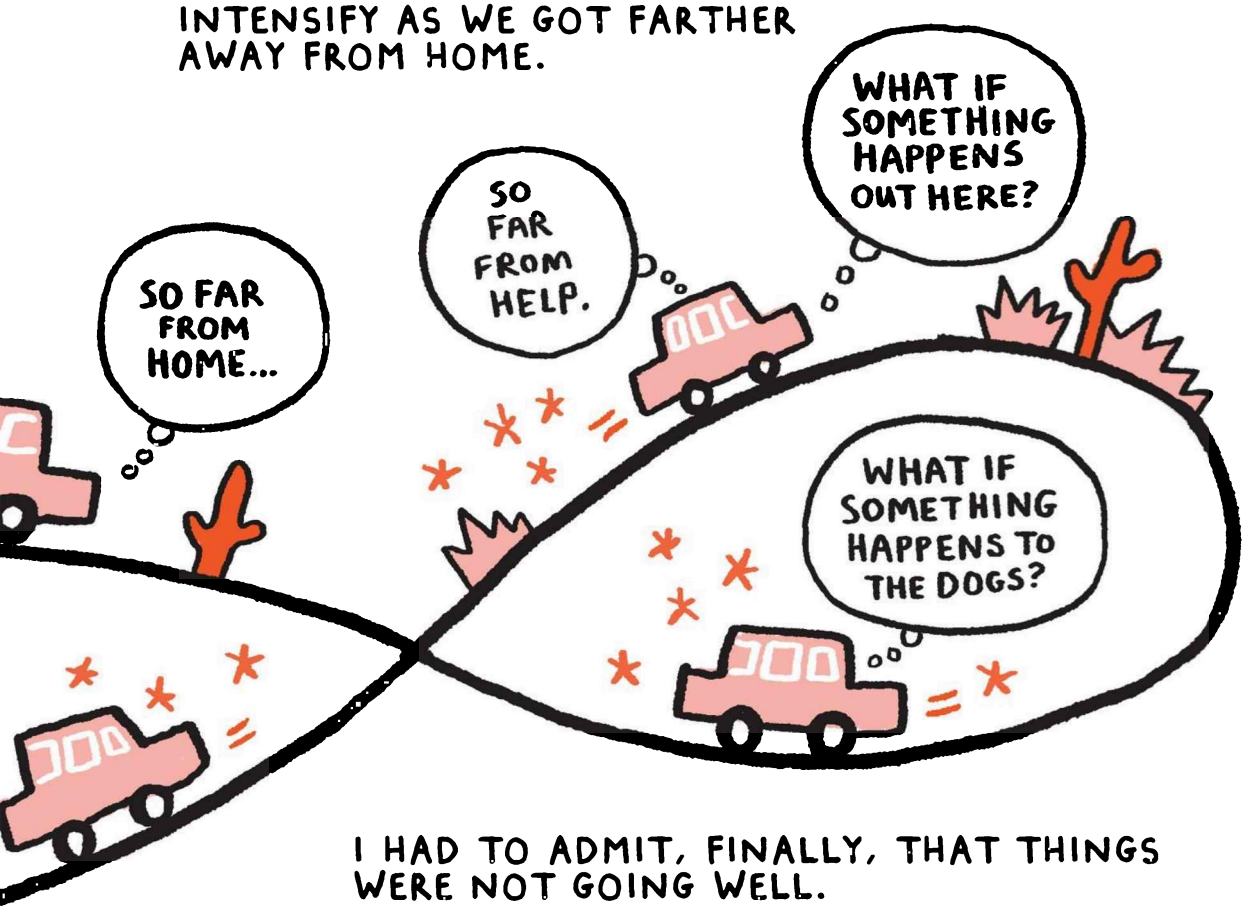
OTHER SYMPTOMS FOLLOWED CLOSELY IN THE WAKE OF MY STINKY BURPS.

WARNING SIGNS THAT I WASN'T AWARE ENOUGH OF MY OWN BODY TO RECOGNIZE.



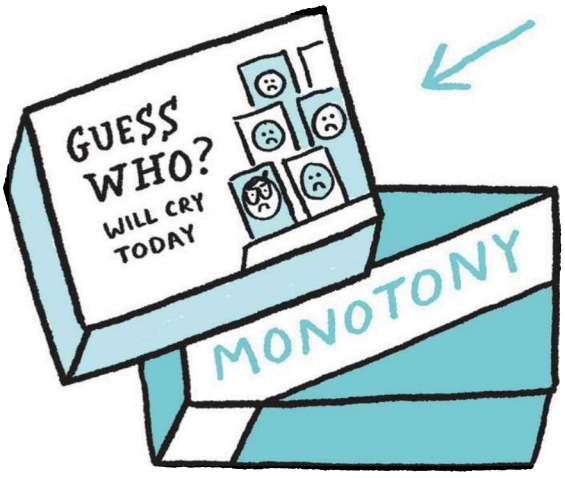
THEN, ONE WEEKEND, OUR FRIENDS INVITED US FOR A COUPLE OF NIGHTS IN THE CALIFORNIA DESERT.

I FELT THE SPARKS OF PANIC INTENSIFY AS WE GOT FARTHER AWAY FROM HOME.



I HAD TO ADMIT, FINALLY, THAT THINGS WERE NOT GOING WELL.

4:30pm BOARD GAME TIME!



TECHNICALLY, IT'S GENERAL RECREATION HOUR BUT WE NEARLY ALWAYS END UP PLAYING A BOARD GAME.

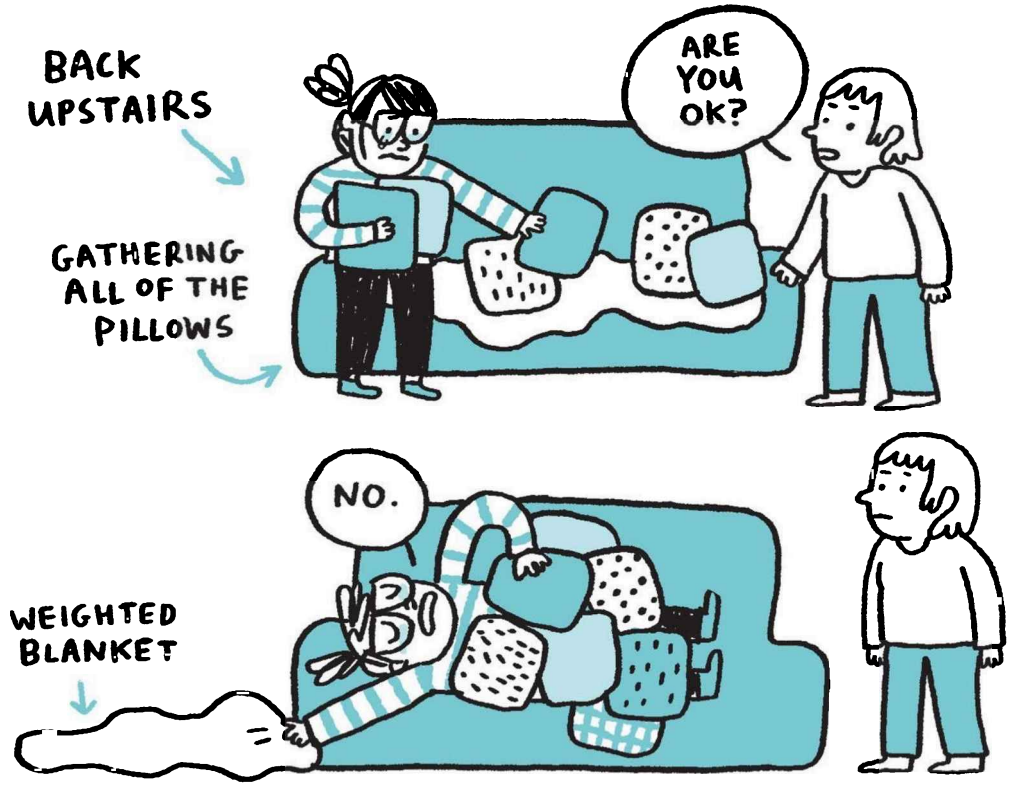
(USUALLY SCRABBLE)

IT CAN GET PRETTY COMPETITIVE.

THE ONLY PERSON I'LL ANSWER THE PHONE FOR, BESIDES MY GRANDMOTHER AND ANTHONY

IN THE HALLWAY
Sunnyhill Vet CALLING
HELLO?
HI, THIS IS DOCTOR MCNAB. IS THIS A GOOD TIME TO TALK?
WE TOOK OUR DOG BELLA FOR TESTS LAST WEEK.
SURE.
WE HAVE BELLA'S TEST RESULTS. I'M AFRAID IT'S NOT GOOD NEWS.
OK.
IT'S CANCER.
PROGNOSIS IS POOR...
...ORAL MELANOMA...
...1 TO 2 MONTHS...
... RADIATION...
...CHEMO...
...
OK. THANK YOU.

DRAMATIC WALL SLIDE
(I THOUGHT PEOPLE ONLY DID THIS IN MOVIES)
WAAAAAAAAA
STAFF BARELY BATTING AN EYELID
WAAAAAAA
THERE IS NO PERFECT PLACE TO HAVE A MASSIVE NERVOUS BREAKDOWN, BUT A COMBO PSYCH-ONCOLOGY WARD IS PRETTY CLOSE.


BACK UPSTAIRS
GATHERING ALL OF THE PILLOWS
ARE YOU OK?
NO.
WEIGHTED BLANKET

I'VE BEEN WONDERING WHEN— IF EVER—I WILL FEEL READY TO LEAVE THE PROGRAM.

* THE WEIGHTED DOG PLUSHIE

THIS IS IMPORTANT.

I NEED TO BE THERE FOR BELLA, LIKE SHE HAS BEEN THERE FOR ME.

BUT I FELL IN LOVE WITH SOMETHING ELSE THERE, TOO.

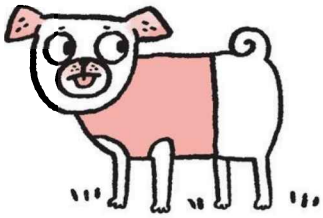
WE HEARD IT BEFORE WE SAW IT.

A SMALL, FURRY LITTLE POTATO APPEARED BEFORE US.

WHAT ARE THESE MAJESTIC CREATURES?

PUGS, I THINK.

THEN ANOTHER.



AND ANOTHER.

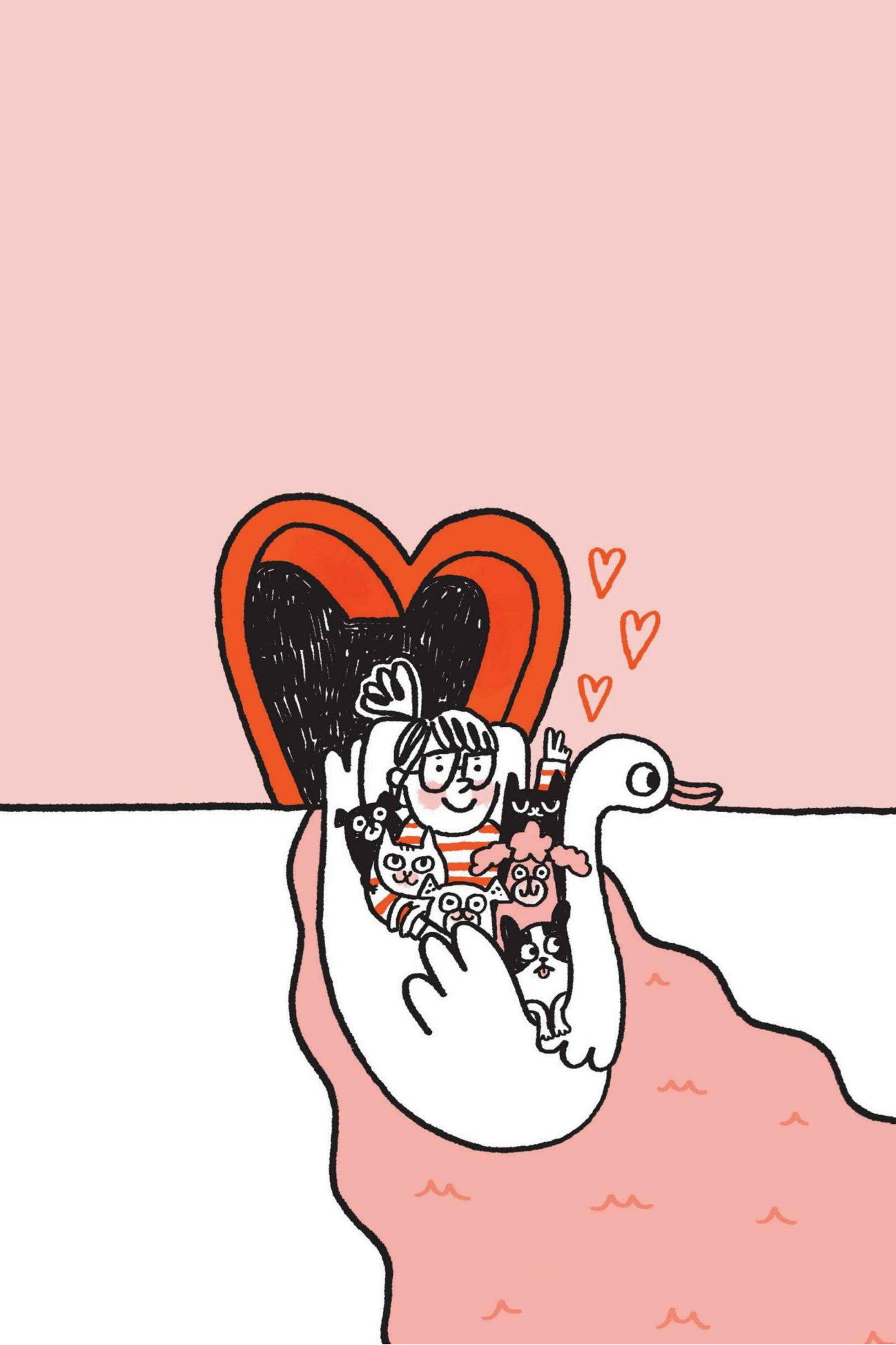
WE HAD UNWITTINGLY STUMBLED UPON A GATHERING OF THE POTATO-SHAPED BEINGS KNOWN AS PUG DOGS.

ON THAT DAY, OUR LIVES WERE CHANGED FOREVER.

I MUST HAVE ONE.

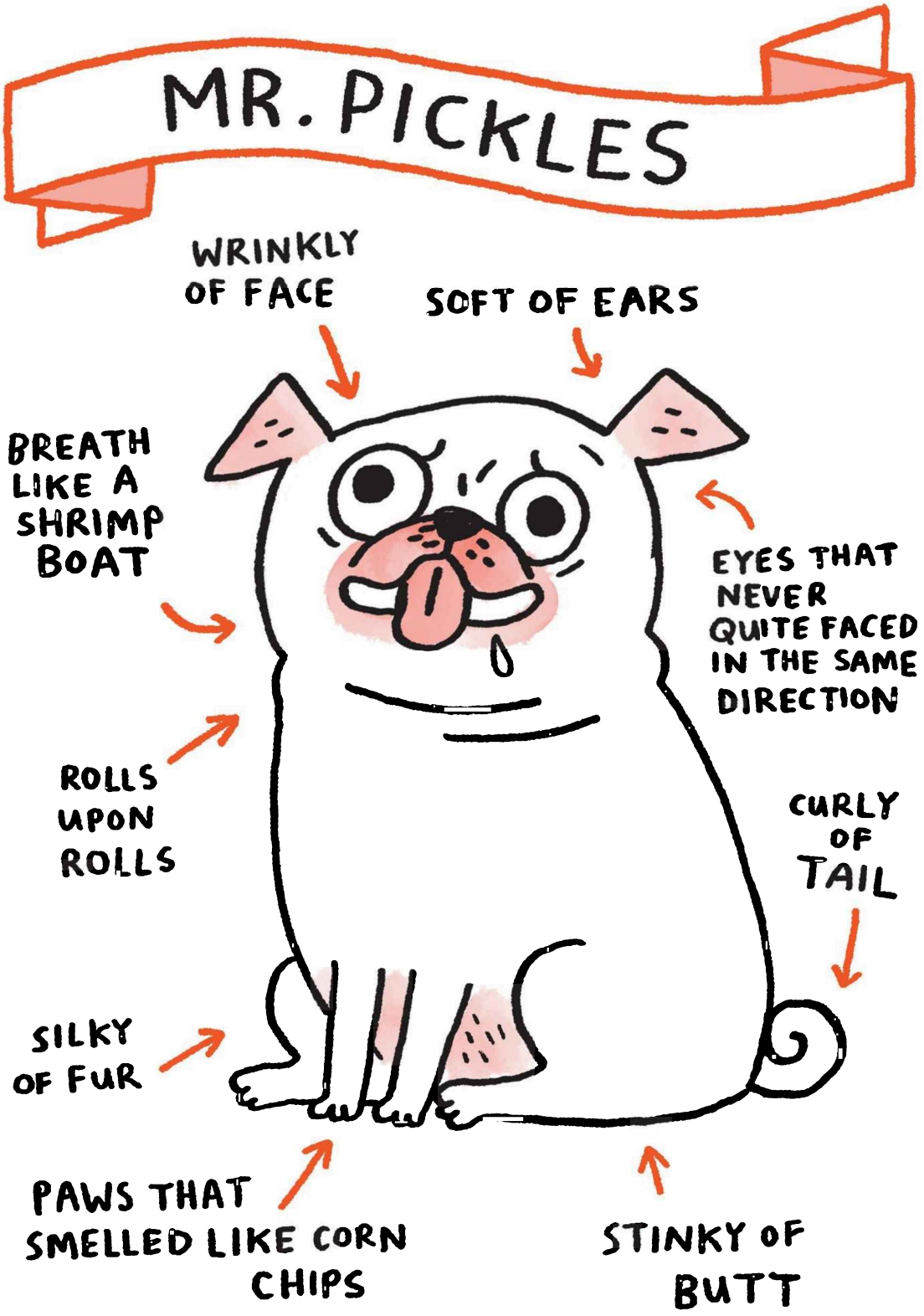
I MUST MOVE TO CALIFORNIA AND GET A PUG AND ONLY HAVE TO WEAR A LIGHT CARDIGAN MOST OF THE TIME.

THE TUNNEL OF LOVE



A YEAR LATER, THE FIRST PART OF MY DREAM CAME TRUE.

WE ADOPTED OUR VERY OWN TINY, ADORABLE LITTLE POTATO-MONSTER.

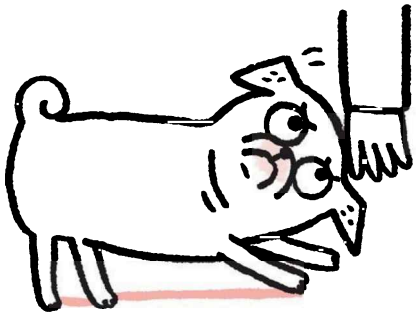


UPON ARRIVAL, MR. PICKLES SWIFTLY DECLARED HIMSELF KING OF THE HOUSEHOLD.

PEE STAINS

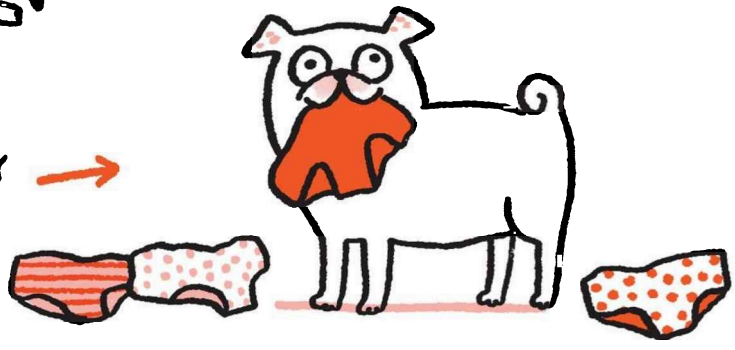
HE MERCILESSLY COMMANDEERED ALL OF OUR TIME, ENERGY, AND PERSONAL SPACE.

HOWLING LIKE A BANSHEE BECAUSE HIS DINNER WAS A MINUTE LATE



HEADBUTTING ME BECAUSE I'D STOPPED PETTING HIM FOR A SECOND

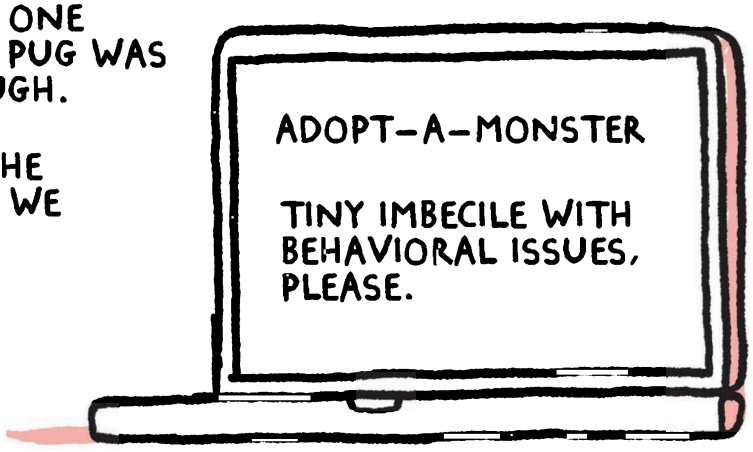
STEALING ALL OF MY UNDERWEAR (PERV)



HE WAS A SPOILED LITTLE BRAT. WE LOVED HIM SO MUCH.

A COUPLE OF YEARS LATER, WE DECIDED THAT ONE SPOILED-ROTTEN PUG WAS SIMPLY NOT ENOUGH.

SO WE TOOK TO THE INTERNET, WHERE WE FOUND BELLA.



SHE WAS PERFECT.

BELLA HAD A SWEET PERSONALITY THAT BELIED HER PREVIOUS FOUR YEARS SPENT LIVING INSIDE A CAGE.

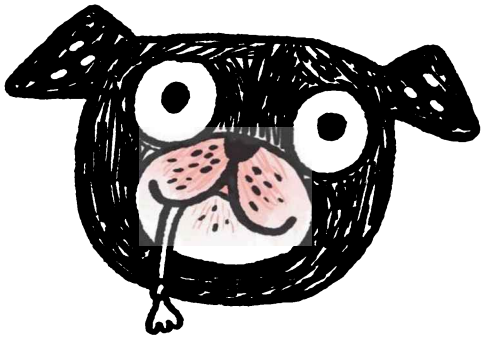
SHE INSPIRED IN ME THE SPECIAL KIND OF ANGER RESERVED FOR THINGS THAT ARE ALMOST UNBEARABLY CUTE.

SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL. AND DISGUSTING.

SHE PARTOOK IN ALL OF THE GROSSEST DOGGY THINGS WITH GLEEFUL ABANDON.

ROLLING IN FOX POOP

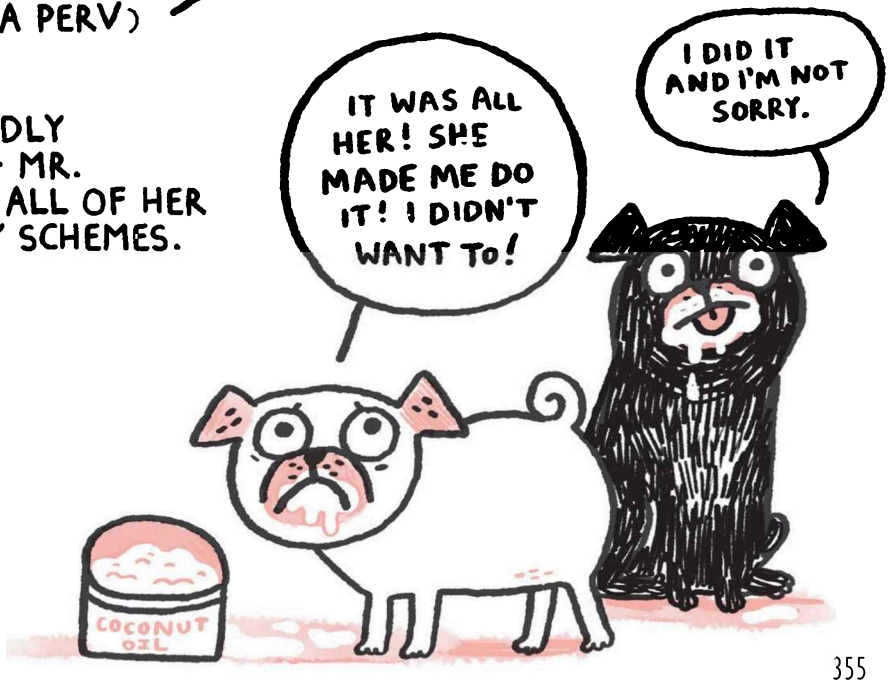
NOISILY WASHING HER GENITALS IN PUBLIC



DIGGING THROUGH THE BATHROOM TRASH IN SEARCH OF DISCARDED TAMPONS.

(ALSO A PERV)

UNASHAMEDLY INVOLVING MR. PICKLES IN ALL OF HER DASTARDLY SCHEMES.



BELLA AND MR. PICKLES QUICKLY BECAME A TEAM.

A TEAM WHO DID NOT BELIEVE IN SLEEPING IN.

I HAD TO TAKE THEM OUTSIDE, WHICH AT LEAST GOT ME OUT OF THE HOUSE.

AND I DISCOVERED THAT TAKING CARE OF THEIR NEEDS REMINDED ME TO LOOK AFTER MY OWN.

I FOUND THAT THEY WERE A HEALTHY DISTRACTION FROM MY SOCIAL ANXIETY, TOO.

WHEN I WAS OUT IN PUBLIC ACCOMPANIED BY TWO ADORABLE LITTLE LIMELIGHT HOGS, I WORRIED A LITTLE BIT LESS ABOUT HOW OTHER PEOPLE MIGHT PERCEIVE ME.

AT TIMES WHEN I WAS SO ANXIOUS I COULD HARDLY THINK STRAIGHT, THE PUGS MADE ME LAUGH.

I HAD TO ADMIRE THEM.

THEY DIDN'T WORRY ABOUT WHAT OTHERS THOUGHT OF THEM.

OR CATASTROPHIZE ABOUT THE FUTURE.

THEY ONLY CARED ABOUT THE PRESENT MOMENT.

IT WAS INSPIRATIONAL.

SPENDING TIME WITH THE PUGS HELPED ME GET OUT OF MY OWN HEAD, OFF THE ENDLESS WORRY-GO-ROUND.

THAT'S NOT TO SAY THAT PETS ARE A CURE FOR A MENTAL ILLNESS, BUT THEY ARE ONE OF THE THINGS THAT HELP TO MAKE IT JUST A LITTLE BIT LESS CRAP.

I KNEW THAT MR. PICKLES AND BELLA WOULDN'T BE AROUND FOREVER BUT, WHILE THEY WERE, I VOWED TO GIVE THEM THE LIFE THAT THEY TRULY DESERVED.

AND YOU'RE SURE YOU'RE READY?
YES. MY DOG IS SICK, SO I WANT TO SPEND MORE TIME WITH HER.
BUT I DO THINK I'M READY.
SORRY, I CAN'T STOP CRYING.
YOU DO NOT HAVE TO APOLOGIZE FOR HAVING FEELINGS.
OH GREAT, HERE I GO AGAIN.
HEY.
HEY, IT'S BREAK TIME.
WANT TO GET SOME COFFEE?

THIS CAN'T BE GOOD FOR YOUR ANXIETY LEVELS, HUH?
ACTUALLY, IT'S WEIRD...
THIS ANXIETY FEELS DIFFERENT.
IT'S NOT JUST RANDOM. IT HAS A PURPOSE.
SO I DON'T WANT TO PUSH IT AWAY...
I WANT TO USE IT TO TAKE ACTION FOR BELLA.
I'M GOING TO DO EVERYTHING I CAN FOR YOU.

5 pm
WE ARE ON A MINDFULNESS WALK AROUND THE BLOCK.
HOSPITAL ENTRANCE
ANOTHER NEW SOCIAL WORKER
TOUCH THE LEAVES!
SMELL THE FLOWERS!
FEEL THE GROUND BENEATH YOUR FEET!
HA!
ALL I CAN SMELL IS EXHAUST FUMES AND PEE.
IS EVERYONE LOOKING AT US?
CAN THEY TELL WE'RE PSYCH PATIENTS?
OCCASIONAL TAI CHI
WE DON'T DO A LOT OF EXERCISE HERE.
BUMP
SORRY!
YOGA, ONCE A MONTH, MAYBE
BUMP
SORRY!

WHEN I FIRST ARRIVED, I WAS WALKING TO AND FROM THE HOSPITAL EVERY DAY.
2.7 MILES
HOME
HOSPITAL
FULL OF ADRENALINE
NOW I USUALLY GET THE BUS HOME.
WAIT!
FULL OF BOBA
ASHA TEA
PEGASUS BOOKS
OAKLAND ZOO
Gemma: HEADING HOME.
Anthony: MEET ME AT THE PARK?
BUT LATELY, SOMETHING STRANGE HAS BEEN HAPPENING.
I'VE BEEN EXERCISING ON PURPOSE.

THERE'S NOT MUCH I WON'T DO FOR AN ALMOND CROISSANT.

AT FIRST, THE PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF EXERTION SCARED ME.

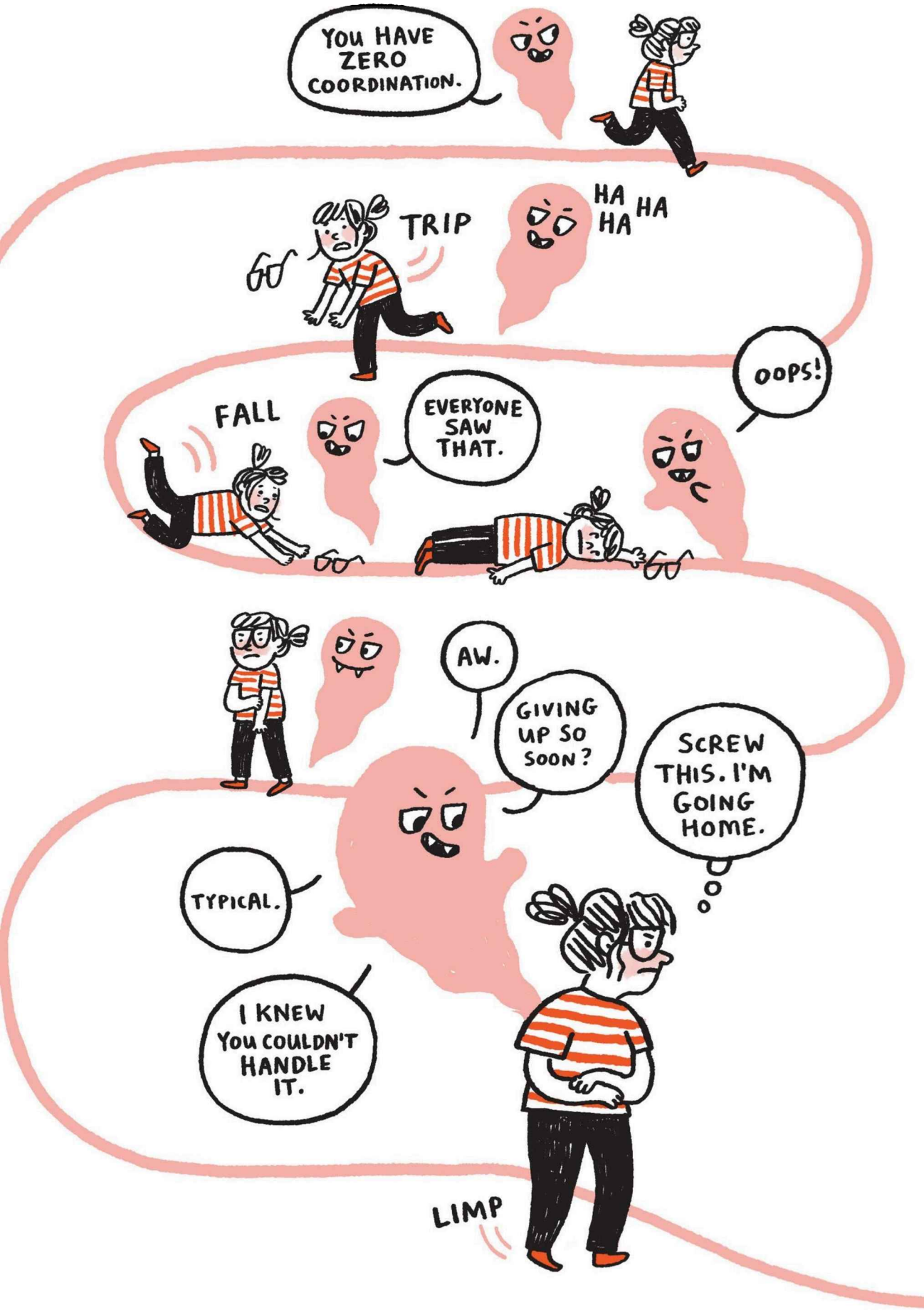
THEY FELT TOO MUCH LIKE ANXIETY.

ARE YOU OK?
OF COURSE.
I FEEL WEIRD.
CAN WE STOP FOR A MINUTE?
I'M OK.

BUT WITH TIME, I GOT USED TO THE PHYSICAL DISCOMFORT.

I EVEN BEGAN TO ENJOY MYSELF.
IT'S SO PEACEFUL UP HERE.
I FEEL LIKE I HAVE ACHIEVED SOMETHING.
OK, I CAN SEE WHY YOU PEOPLE ARE INTO THIS.
THE WONDERS OF NATURE AND ALL THAT.
I NOTICED THAT I WAS SPENDING LESS TIME INSIDE MY OWN HEAD.
LOOK!
A WOOD-PECKER!
LOOK AT YOU, BIRDSPOTTING!
I HAVEN'T THOUGHT ABOUT HOW FAR AWAY FROM HOME WE ARE ONCE!
UNTIL NOW.

THE MERE MENTION OF THE WORD "EXERCISE" USED TO MAKE ME SHUDDER.

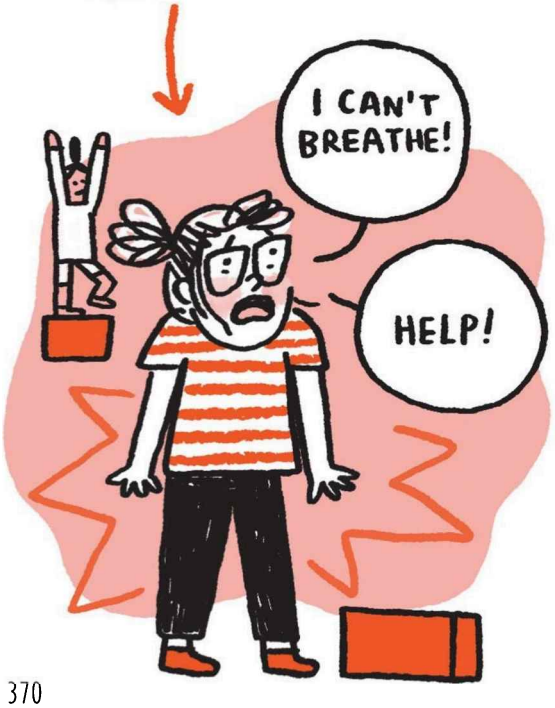

YOU HAVE ZERO COORDINATION.
TRIP
HA HA HA
OOPS!
FALL
EVERYONE SAW THAT.
AW.
GIVING UP SO SOON?
SCREW THIS. I'M GOING HOME.
TYPICAL.
I KNEW YOU COULDN'T HANDLE IT.
LIMP

OVER THE YEARS, I TRIED A FEW EXERCISE CLASSES BUT I ALWAYS FOUND A REASON NOT TO GO BACK.

AUDIBLY FARTING IN YOGA CLASS

TRIPPING OVER MY OWN FEET AT ZUMBA

HAVING A FULL-ON PANIC ATTACK DURING AEROBICS



COPIOUSLY VOMITING INTO A BIN IN A FANCY PILATES STUDIO AFTER EATING TOO MUCH CURRY

MAKING A FOOL OF MYSELF AT SPIN CLASS

EVERY FAILED WORKOUT WAS SIMPLY FURTHER CONFIRMATION THAT EXERCISE WASN'T MEANT FOR PEOPLE LIKE ME.

I WAS CONTENT TO LABEL MYSELF "NON-SPORTING," LIKE A BICHON FRISE AT A DOG SHOW, AND COMMIT MYSELF TO A LIFE OF BLISSFUL INACTIVITY.

HORRIBLY UNGRATEFUL FOR THE IMMENSE PRIVILEGE OF BEING HEALTHY AND ABLE-BODIED.

NOW I HAVE FINALLY BEGUN TO ABANDON THE IDEA THAT EXERCISE IS ONLY FOR A CERTAIN TYPE OF PERSON.

I WOULDN'T GO AS FAR AS TO SAY THAT I ENJOY IT.

I DESPISE THE WHOLE RIGMAROLE ASSOCIATED WITH WORKING OUT.

FINDING THE MOTIVATION TO DO IT IN THE FIRST PLACE

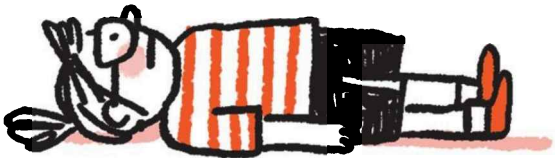
GETTING SWEATY

WEARING SUPPORTIVE FOOTWEAR

HAVING TO CHANGE CLOTHES

WARMING UP

COOLING DOWN



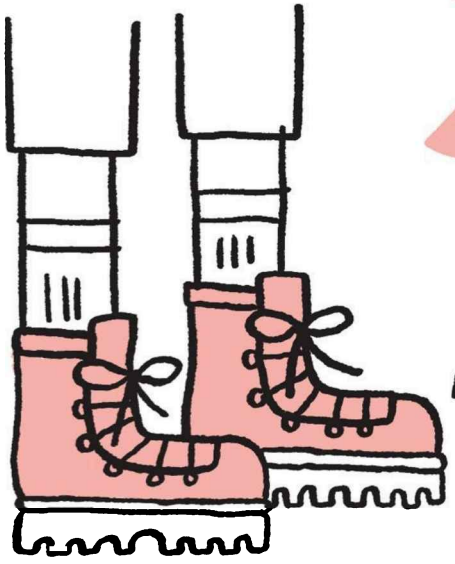
(ACTUALLY, THIS BIT'S NOT TOO BAD.)

AND DON'T EVEN GET ME STARTED ON THE TORTURE DEVICE THAT IS THE SPORTS BRA.

IT'S ALL FAR TOO MUCH WORK FOR SOMETHING THAT I DON'T REALLY WANT TO BE DOING IN THE FIRST PLACE.

IT SEEMS UNFAIR, LIKE TELLING ME THAT LICORICE WILL CURE MY ALLERGIES.

NOT TO MENTION THE FACT THAT, WHEN YOU'RE DEPRESSED, EXERCISE IS CLOSE TO IMPOSSIBLE.

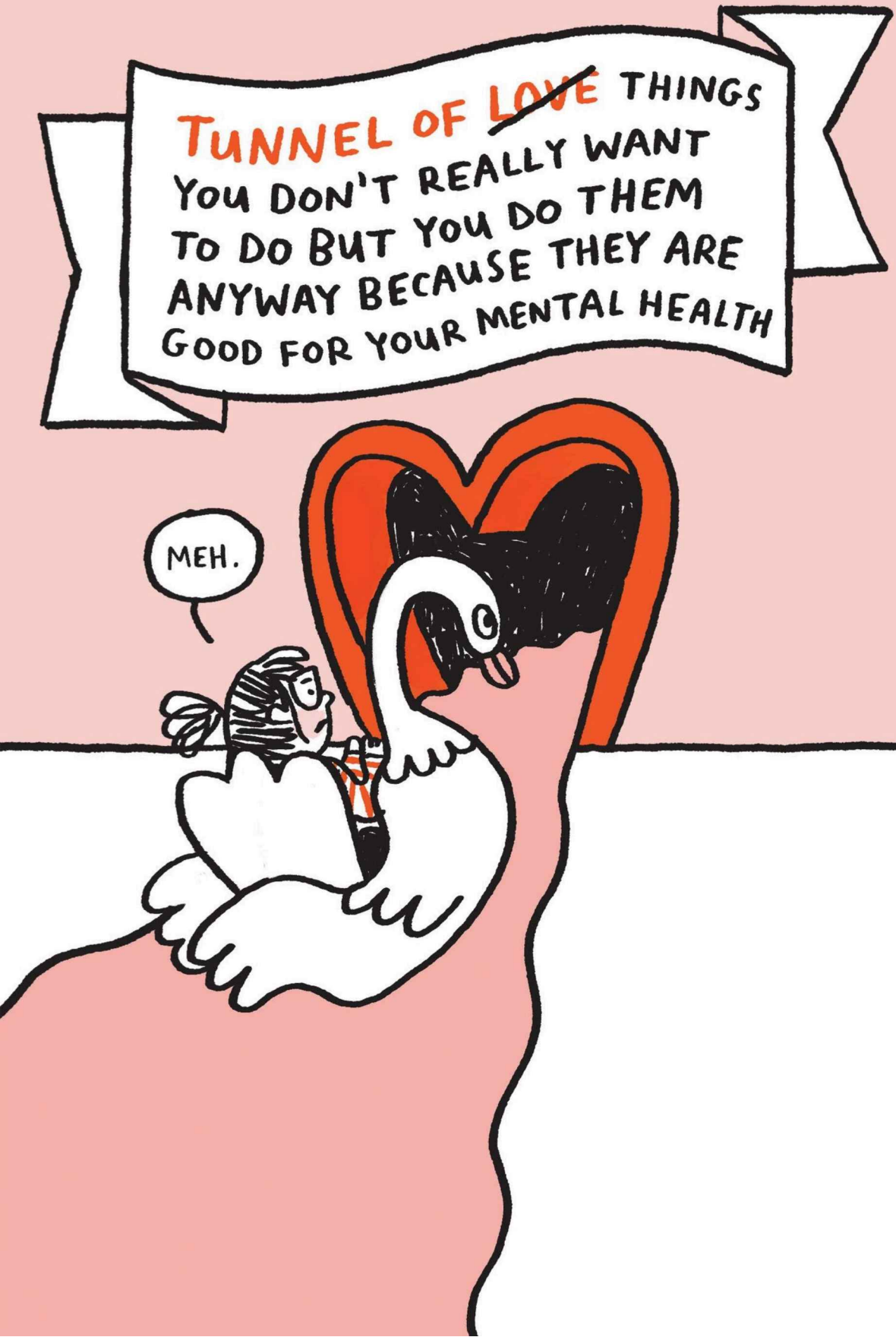


BUT I AM, WHEN I AM FEELING WELL ENOUGH, NO LONGER A NON-SPORTING DOG.

I'VE EVEN BOUGHT A SUPREMELY UGLY PAIR OF HIKING BOOTS.

I DO YOGA NOW, SOMETIMES.

(AT HOME, WHERE NOBODY CARES IF I FART.)


TUNNEL OF ~~LOVE~~ THINGS
YOU DON'T REALLY WANT
TO DO BUT YOU DO THEM
ANYWAY BECAUSE THEY ARE
GOOD FOR YOUR MENTAL HEALTH
MEH.

UGH, OK, FINE.
THAT WASN'T SO BAD.
TOLD YOU SO.

SHOULD I GO HIKING?
DO I LOOK STUPID?
AM I WEARING THE RIGHT SOCKS?
ARE MY BOOBS PROPERLY SUPPORTED?
SHOULD I STAY HOME AND SHOP FOR BRAS?
EEK! SO MANY EMAILS.
SHOULD I STAY HOME AND WORK?
IS IT TOO HOT?
DOES IT LOOK LIKE RAIN?
IS THE AIR QUALITY POOR?
OOPS
MY LACE BROKE.
IS THAT A SIGN I SHOULDN'T GO?
IS MY DOG LOOKING A BIT SAD?

IS IT TOO DARK TO GO OUT?
IS IT TOO DANGEROUS?
AM I GOING TO GET MURDERED?
WHAT ABOUT COYOTES?
OR BEARS?
WHAT IF I PASS OUT...
...AND COYOTES EAT MY FACE?
AND NO ONE FINDS ME FOR DAYS?
WHAT IF I GET LOST?
WHAT IF I RUN OUT OF WATER?
OR SNACKS?
IS THIS SHIRT STINKY?
EW.
SHOULD I STAY IN AND DO LAUNDRY?
Hmm.
THE ONLY TIME I EVER GET A SUDDEN URGE TO DO LAUNDRY IS WHEN I'M PROCRASTINATING.
NO! I'M DOING THIS.
THE FIRST STEP IS THE HARDEST.
NO EXCUSES.
OK HERE I GO.
ANY SECOND NOW.
NOW...
NOW...
NOW...

I DON'T WANT TO DO THIS.
I DON'T WANT TO DO THIS.
I DON'T WANT TO DO THIS.

I DON'T WANT TO DO THIS.
I'M GLAD I DID THAT.

CHAPTER SIX

PARADE OF THE THERAPISTS

5:30 pm

IN OUR LATE-AFTERNOON SESSION, WE FILL OUT A DIARY PAGE WITH OUR PLANS FOR THE EVENING.

YEP, AS IF I HAVEN'T HAD MY FILL OF THERAPY DURING THE DAY, I'M GOIN' IN FOR MORE.

IT'S A REQUIREMENT OF THE PROGRAM THAT WE FIND A THERAPIST BEFORE WE CAN GRADUATE.

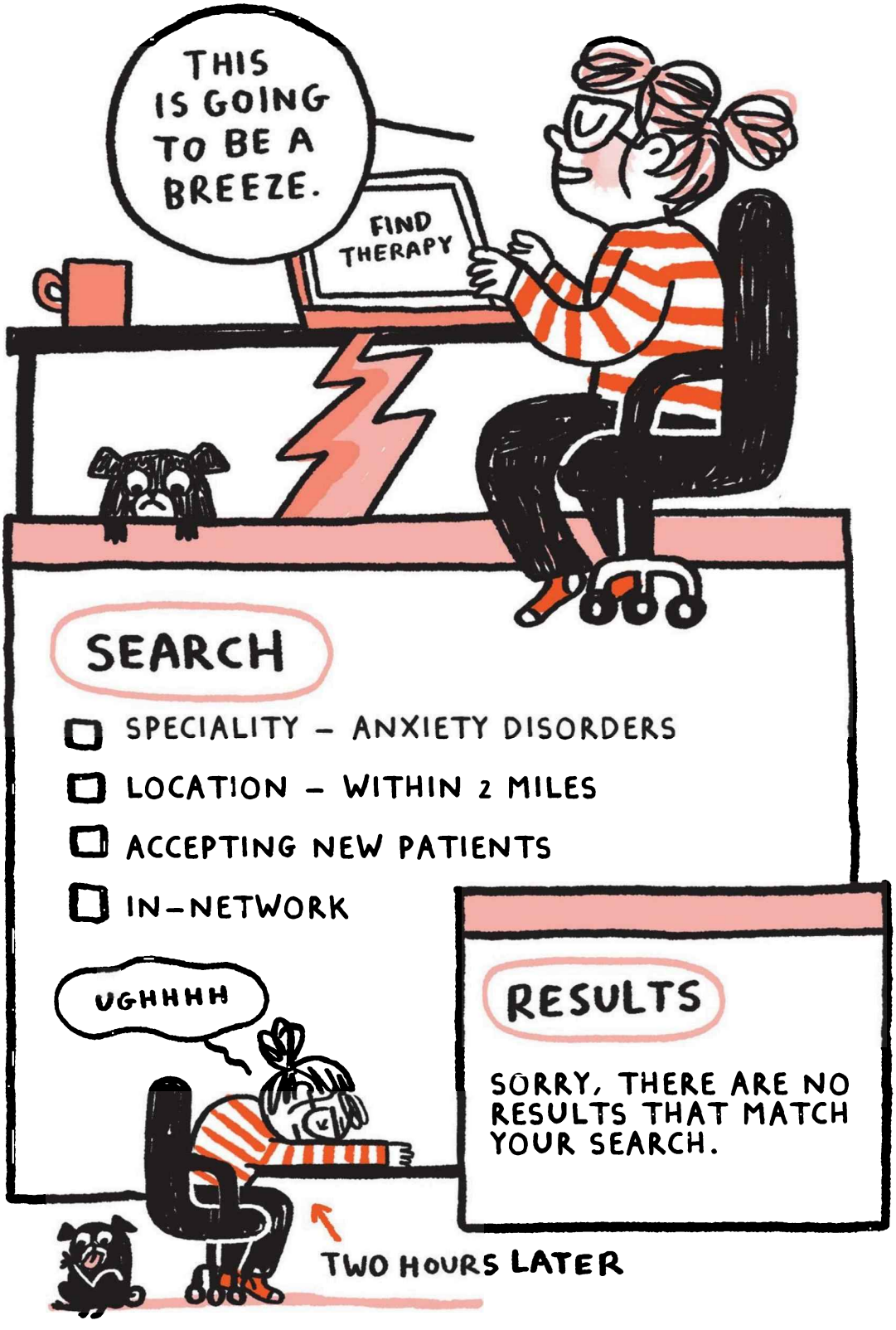
SO, WHAT DO YOU WANT TO WORK ON IN THERAPY?
COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL SKILLS AND EXPOSURE THERAPY.
I KNOW ALL THE LINGO NOW.
LET'S CALL SOME THERAPISTS.
BUT... I HATE PHONE CALLS. I ALWAYS MESS UP WHAT I'M TRYING TO SAY.
I'LL WRITE YOU A SCRIPT.
HELLO, I'M LOOKING FOR A CBT THERAPIST WHO SPECIALIZES IN ANXIETY AND...
NO SPACES, SORRY.
NOPE.
GUESS THAT'S THAT, THEN.

HELLO, I'M...
WE DON'T ACCEPT THAT INSURANCE.
NOPE.
HELLO
WE'RE CLOSED.
NOTHING AVAILABLE FOR SIX MONTHS.
WE'VE MOVED.
BEEP
NOPE.
NOPE.
SLAM
NOPE.
NOPE!

I FINALLY HAVE A THERAPY APPOINTMENT!

MY PANIC ATTACKS WERE INCREASING IN FREQUENCY.

I KNEW THAT I NEEDED TO TRY SOMETHING ELSE.


THIS IS GOING TO BE A BREEZE.
FIND THERAPY
SEARCH
SPECIALITY – ANXIETY DISORDERS
LOCATION – WITHIN 2 MILES
ACCEPTING NEW PATIENTS
IN-NETWORK
RESULTS
SORRY, THERE ARE NO RESULTS THAT MATCH YOUR SEARCH.
UGHHHH
TWO HOURS LATER

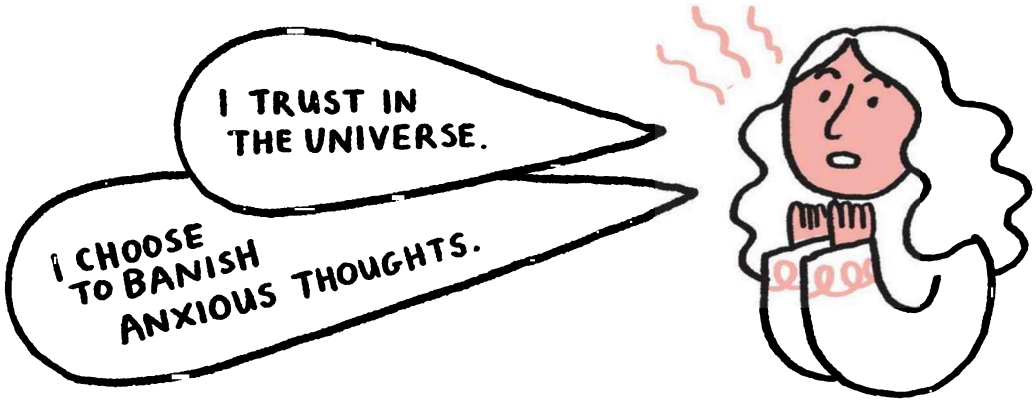
I EVENTUALLY FOUND A THERAPIST WHO WORKED NEARBY.

HER NAME WAS JAN.

JAN DID NOT BELIEVE IN MEDICATION OR CAFFEINE, OR, APPARENTLY, DEODORANT.

SHE WAS INTO ESSENTIAL OILS AND ACCUPUNCTURE, WHICH WAS NICE AND EVERYTHING BUT NOT REALLY WHAT I WAS LOOKING FOR.

SHE WAS VERY INTO MANTRAS.



AND THIS THING WHERE SHE VAGUELY WAVED HER HANDS OVER MY BODY.

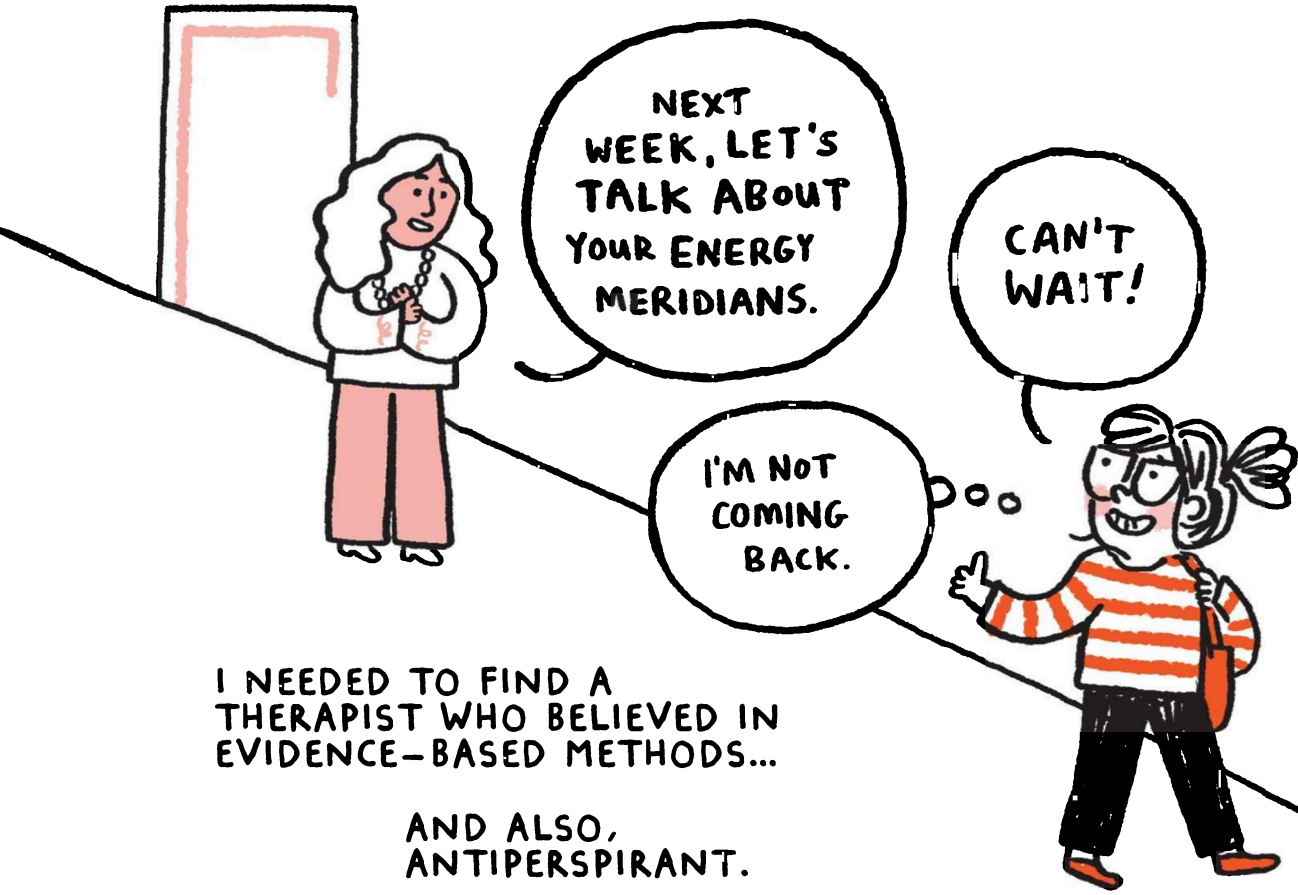
CLEARLY, THIS WAS NOT THE THERAPY FOR ME.

BUT I DIDN'T REALLY KNOW WHAT SORT OF THERAPY I NEEDED. I'D JUST CHOSEN THE CLOSEST AND CHEAPEST OPTION.

THE CRYSTALS WERE THE LAST STRAW.

LOOK, I LIKE A SPARKLY ROCK AS MUCH AS THE NEXT GIRL, BUT TOUCHING A CRYSTAL IS NOT GOING TO HEAL AN ANXIETY DISORDER.

IT JUST ISN'T.



I NEEDED TO FIND A THERAPIST WHO BELIEVED IN EVIDENCE-BASED METHODS...

AND ALSO, ANTIPERSPIRANT.

PARADE OF THE THERAPISTS

DAVE,* SOCIAL WORKER

CLOSE TO MY AGE

SEEMED NICE

STRUMMED HIS GUITAR THE WHOLE TIME

OFFICE SMELLED LIKE HAM SANDWICHES (GROSS)

* NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED BECAUSE I CAN'T REMEMBER THEM, TO BE HONEST.

MARIA,
PSYCHOTHERAPIST

VERY KNOWLEDGEABLE

OFTEN LATE

CALLED ME "JENNA" AND I WAS TOO POLITE TO CORRECT HER

KAVYAN,
CBT THERAPIST

TOOK A LOT OF NOTES

SERIOUS EYEBROWS

COMMUNICATED MOSTLY IN THE MEDIUM OF HUMMING

VERY EXPENSIVE

GRACE,
ONLINE THERAPIST

A BIT IMPERSONAL

NEVER REALLY CHALLENGED ME

CONNECTION ISSUES (PRACTICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY)

NONE OF THE OTHER THERAPISTS LASTED EITHER.

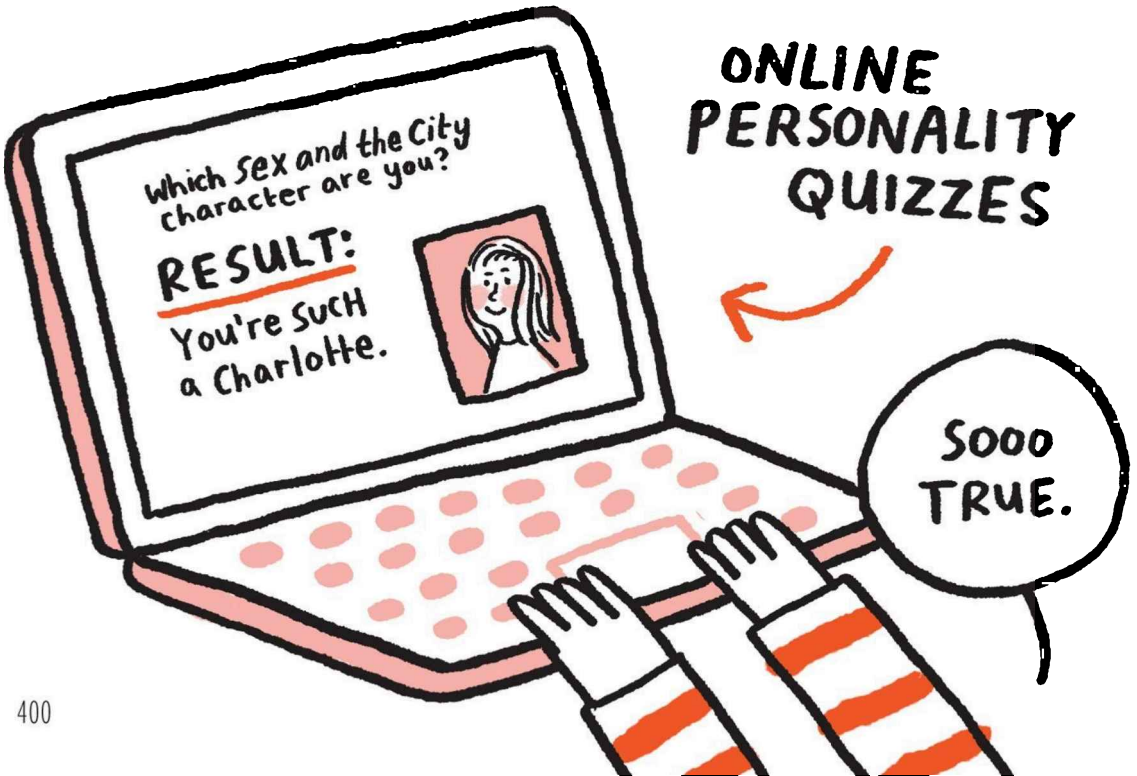
I'D GO TO THE INTAKE APPOINTMENT BUT THEN NOT RETURN FOR THE FIRST REAL SESSION.

I TOLD MYSELF THAT I JUST HADN'T CLICKED WITH ANY OF THEM, WHICH WAS PARTIALLY TRUE.

BUT THE WHOLE TRUTH WAS THAT I WAS SCARED.

ONCE AGAIN, I ABANDONED MY SEARCH FOR A THERAPIST

AND WENT BACK TO MY FAVORITE METHODS OF SELF-ANALYSIS...



AND GOOD, OLD-FASHIONED DENIAL.

I ALMOST BELIEVED IT MYSELF.
ALMOST.

THEN, ONE DAY, I WAS ON MY WAY BACK FROM A WALK IN A NEARBY CITY.

THE BUS ROUTE WENT THROUGH A SHORT TUNNEL.

BUT I'D DONE IT MANY TIMES BEFORE, SO I WASN'T ANXIOUS.

UNTIL, SUDDENLY, I WAS.

I STOOD THERE, FROZEN, WATCHING PASSENGERS GET ON AND OFF.

IT TOOK ME AN HOUR TO PULL MYSELF BACK TOGETHER AND ORDER A TAXI.

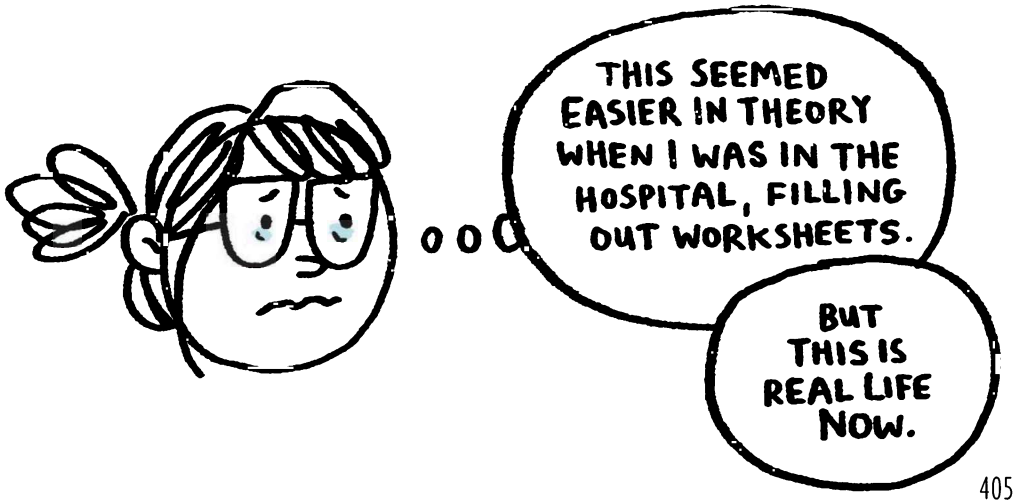
IT WAS THE WORST PANIC ATTACK I'D HAD IN MONTHS.

...I FELT LIKE I COULDN'T GET OUT OF THE PANIC ATTACK...
AND IT SENT ME INTO THIS DOWNWARD SPIRAL...
I ENDED UP IN HOSPITAL.

AND, WELL, HERE I AM!
I'VE FELT LIKE THIS FOR HALF OF MY LIFE. I DON'T KNOW IF I EVEN CAN GET OVER IT.
BUT I REALLY, REALLY WANT TO TRY.

I'M IN A THERAPY OFFICE JUST DOWN THE STREET FROM THE HOSPITAL, IN BERKELEY.

THIS, I KNOW, MEANS EXPOSURE THERAPY, THE THING THAT I DREADED THE MOST WHEN I SIGNED UP FOR CBT.



TELL ME ABOUT HOW YOU FEEL WHEN YOU'RE OUTSIDE OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE.
IT KIND OF EXPANDS AND RETRACTS.
SOMETIMES IT'S AS SMALL AS MY BEDROOM. ON OCCASION, IT'S AS BIG AS THE WHOLE WORLD.
USUALLY IT'S SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN.

FOR A LONG TIME, I THOUGHT THAT IT WAS CLAUSTROPHOBIA. BUT I'M NOT AFRAID OF THE SMALL SPACES THEMSELVES.

I'D BE FINE IN AN ELEVATOR IF I KNEW FOR CERTAIN THAT IT WOULD NEVER GET STUCK AND THAT I COULD ALWAYS GET OUT IF I NEEDED TO.

SOUNDS LIKE AGORAPHOBIA.
THE FEAR OF BEING UNABLE TO ESCAPE FROM A PLACE OR SITUATION.
EXACTLY.
YOUR ANXIETY BELIEVES THAT IT'S PROTECTING YOU.
IT TELLS YOU THAT IF YOU STOP THINKING, PLANNING, AND TRYING TO CONTROL EVERYTHING, THE WORLD WILL FALL APART.
BUT THAT'S NOT TRUE.

YOU NEED TO LEARN TO TOLERATE UNCERTAINTY.
WE WILL START SMALL AND SLOWLY BUILD UP.

DO YOU THINK YOU CAN TRY LOCKING YOURSELF IN THE BATHROOM?
DOES IT HAVE A WINDOW?
YES.
OK.

YOU'RE GOING TO GO IN THERE AND LOCK THE DOOR FOR ONE MINUTE.
IT WILL FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE. YOU MIGHT WANT TO CHECK THE LOCK AND "ESCAPE."
BUT YOU MUST LET THE PANIC COME. DON'T RESIST IT. LET IT DO ITS WORST.
IT CAN'T HURT YOU.
REMEMBER— FEEL THE FEAR. ACCEPT IT. DO IT ANYWAY.

READY?
READY AS I'LL EVER BE.
WHICH IS NOT AT ALL.

I HAVE LOCKED MYSELF IN THE BATHROOM.

* ACTIONS TAKEN TO PREVENT OR REDUCE THE LIKELIHOOD OF PERCEIVED THREATS.

THE PANIC IS RISING.

MY HEART IS RACING.

I WANT TO OPEN THE DOOR AND ESCAPE.

I STAY PUT.

I AM ALLOWING THE THOUGHTS TO COME.

I AM ALLOWING THE BURNING SENSATION TO RUN THROUGH MY BODY.

THAT'S JUST MY ANXIETY.

I DON'T HAVE TO REACT TO IT.

I AM NOT IN DANGER.

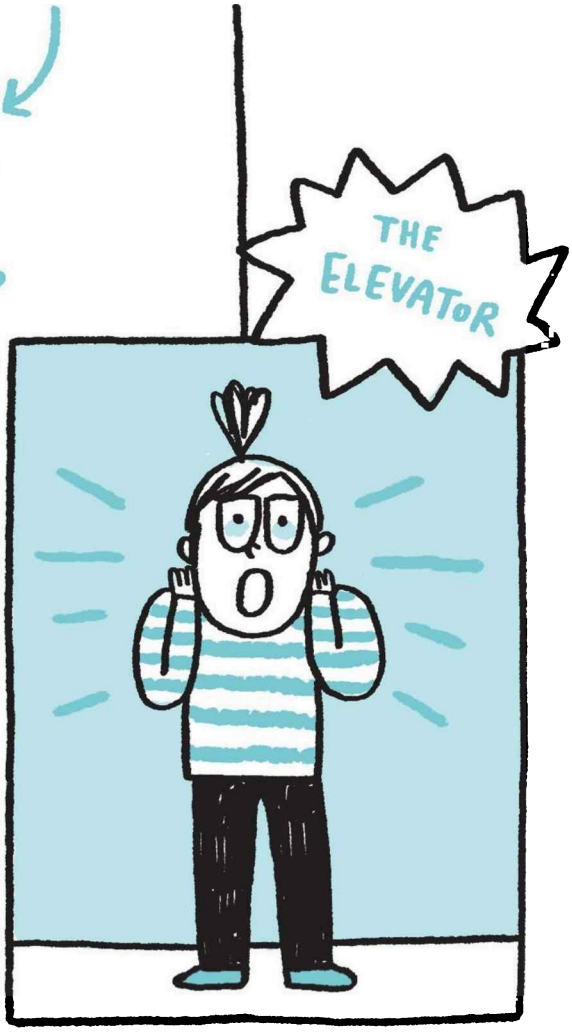
I AM SAFE.

DAN HAS GIVEN ME HOMEWORK, WHICH, TRUE TO FORM, I LOVE.

I AM SUPPOSED TO PRACTICE MY EXPOSURES, GRADUALLY WORKING UPWARD IN SMALL DOSES.

FROM THE LEAST-FRIGHTENING THING...

...TO THE MOST.



I DO NOT DO THE HOMEWORK.

BECAUSE DOING THE HOMEWORK MEANS THAT I MIGHT FAIL.

I CAN'T FAIL. I NEVER FAIL.

I HAVE TO BE THE BEST AT THERAPY.

WHAT AM I DOING?
WHAT A WASTE OF TIME AND MONEY IT IS TO LIE.
WHAT A PRIVILEGE TO BE ABLE TO AFFORD THERAPY AT ALL.
BUZZ

I HAVE TO ACCEPT THAT I CAN'T CONTROL THERAPY, OR MY THERAPIST'S OPINIONS OF ME.

I CAN ONLY DO THE WORK.

IT'S NOT GOING TO BE EASY. BUT I'M READY FOR IT.

6 pm

AT THE END OF THE DAY, WE WRITE DOWN THE THINGS THAT WE'RE GRATEFUL FOR.

WHEN THEY FIRST MADE US DO THIS, I THOUGHT IT WAS RIDICULOUS.

NOW I GET IT.

BELLA PASSED AWAY IN MY ARMS, AT THE LATE-NIGHT EMERGENCY VET.

I'M GLAD SHE'S NO LONGER IN PAIN.
I DON'T KNOW HOW I WOULD HAVE COPED IF I WASN'T IN THIS PROGRAM.
I'M SO GRATEFUL FOR EVERYONE HERE.
IT SOUNDS SILLY BUT I THINK THAT BELLA WAITED FOR ME TO GET BETTER BEFORE SHE PASSED.
THAT DOESN'T SOUND SILLY AT ALL.
ANIMALS ARE VERY INTUITIVE.

IT'S MY LAST DAY HERE.

IT'S HARD SAYING GOODBYE TO MY FRIENDS (THE ONES WHO ARE STILL HERE), BUT I'M READY TO GET BACK TO REAL LIFE.

WITH THE HELP OF THE PROGRAM AND THE PEOPLE I'VE MET HERE, I HAVE BEEN ABLE TO FIND MYSELF AGAIN.

I NOW KNOW THAT I CAN FALL TO ROCK BOTTOM AND SURVIVE.

I HAVE LEARNED WAYS TO COPE WITH FEAR AND DEPRESSION AND TO ESCAPE THE ANXIETY SPIRAL—

OR AT LEAST LEARNED HOW TO PAD MY FALL SO THAT IT DOESN'T HURT QUITE AS MUCH IF I START TO SLIP.

I AM LEARNING HOW TO LIVE IN ANXIETYLAND.

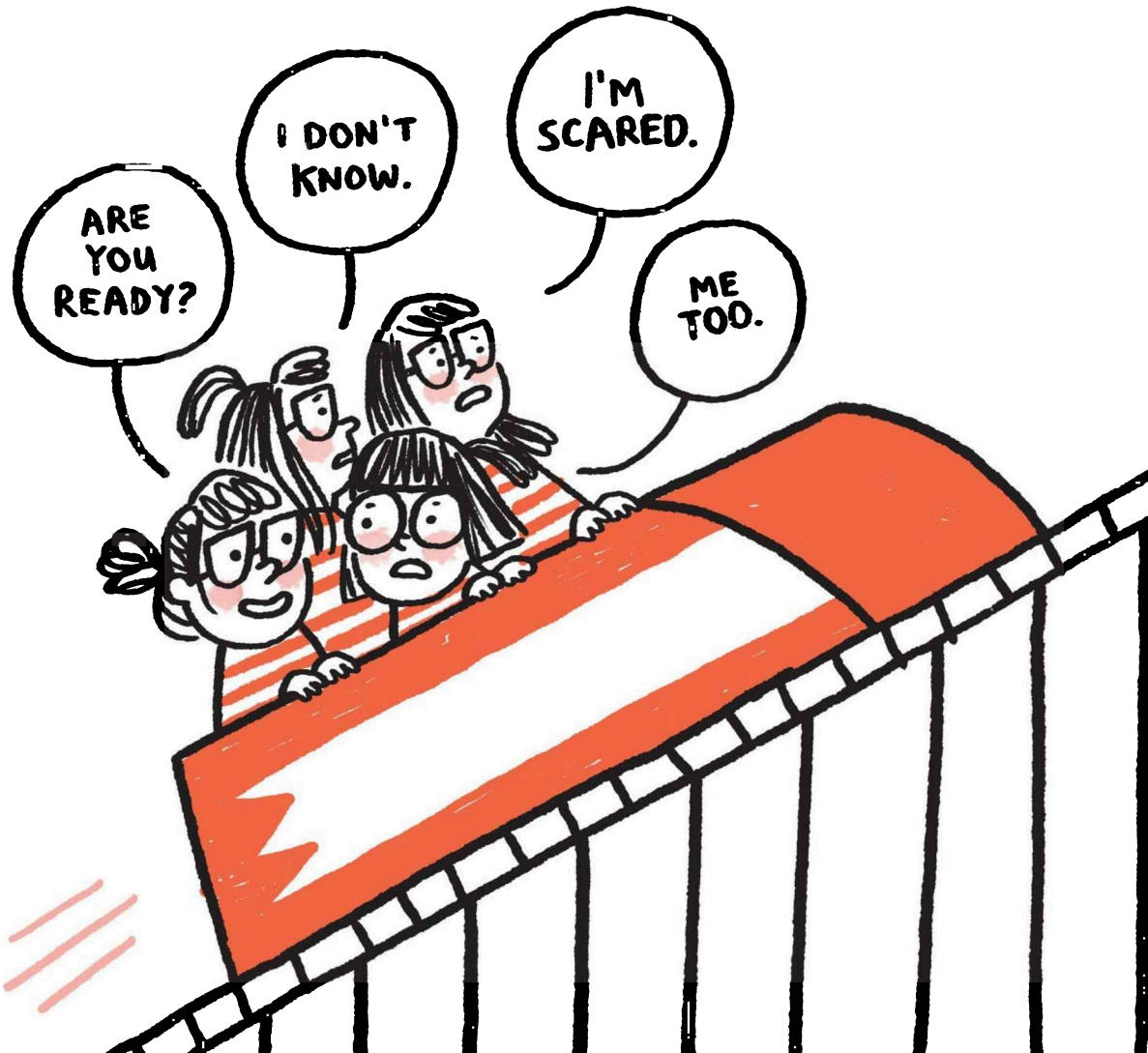
I WISH I COULD GO BACK AND TALK TO LITTLE GEMMA.

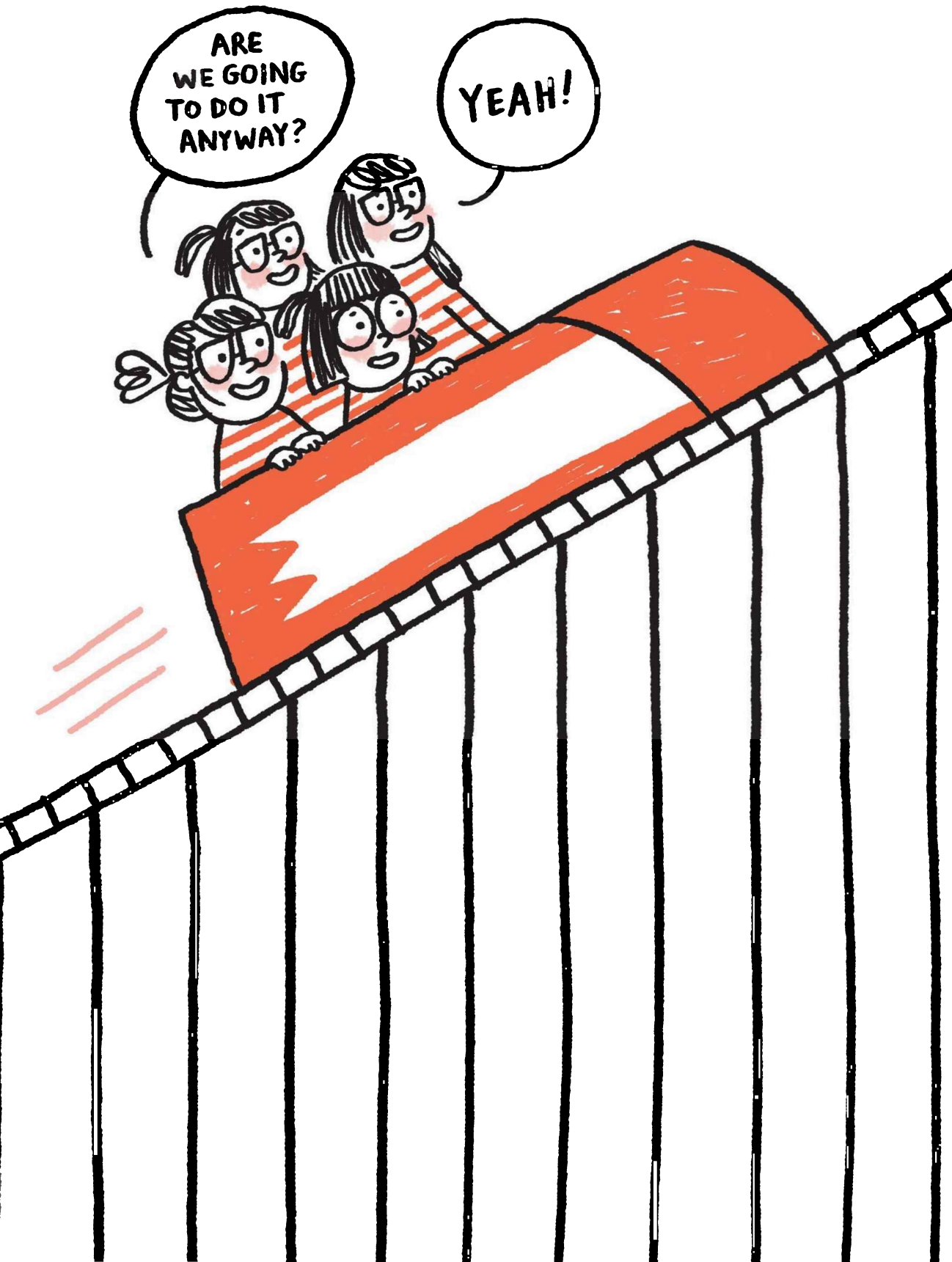
I WISH I COULD TELL HER THAT THE WAY SHE FELT WASN'T NORMAL. THAT SHE HAD A MENTAL ILLNESS THAT COULD BE TREATED. THAT IT WASN'T NECESSARY FOR HER TO FEEL BAD ALL THE TIME.

AVOIDING THE THINGS THAT MAKE YOU FEEL ANXIOUS DOESN'T WORK. IT MAKES THE FEAR BIGGER.
STOP TRYING TO PUSH AWAY YOUR EMOTIONS. THEY'LL JUST COME OUT IN OTHER WAYS.
IT'S NOT WEAK TO ASK FOR HELP.
IT'S ACTUALLY REALLY BRAVE.

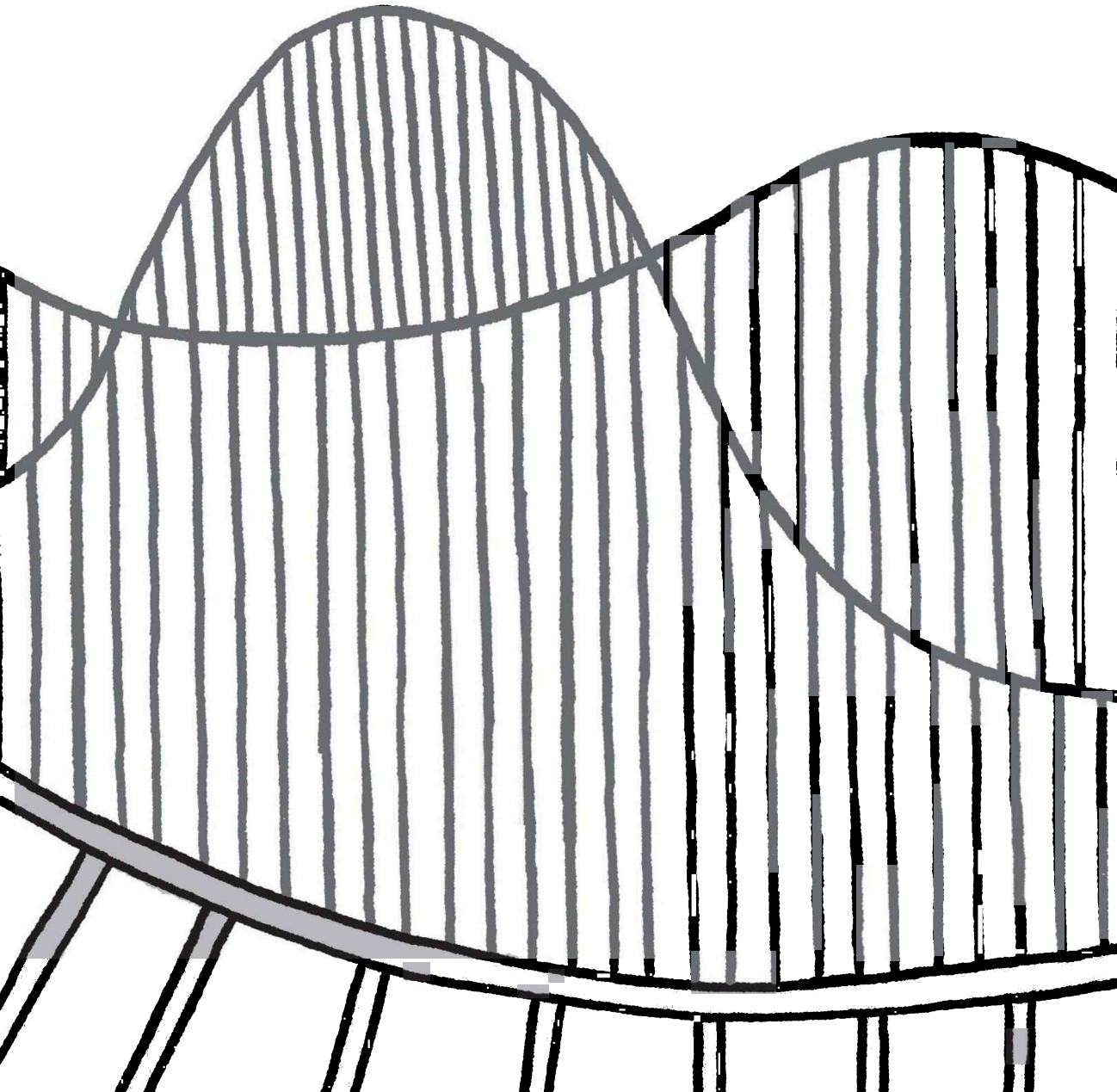
Soooo, you don't have the bad feeling anymore? What did you do to make it go away?
I didn't.
So you still have panic attacks?
Yes, I still panic sometimes, but I am much better at dealing with it.
You can learn to cope.

WAIT, WITHOUT ALCOHOL?
I DON'T KNOW IF I CAN.
YOU CAN HANDLE SO MUCH MORE THAN YOU THINK YOU CAN.
ANXIETY LIES TO YOU AND TELLS YOU THAT YOU'RE NOT STRONG ENOUGH. BUT YOU ARE.


ARE YOU READY?
I DON'T KNOW.
I'M SCARED.
ME TOO.


ARE WE GOING TO DO IT ANYWAY?
YEAH!

LET'S GO!



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I can't believe I'm writing an acknowledgments page for this book, which means that I actually finished writing it! And you are reading it! Which means it actually got published and wasn't just some kind of long-winded, complicated prank (thanks, Imposter Syndrome).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GEMMA CORRELL is a British illustrator and cartoonist currently based in Southern California, where she lives with her husband, Anthony, and beloved dogs Zander and Bean. Gemma's illustration clients include *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and JetBlue. She has published cartoons online at *The Nib* and Tinyview Comics and illustrated numerous books for both children and adults. She is also the art director for the PBS Kids/Augenblick Studios animated show *City Island*. Gemma has collaborated with charities including Mental Health America and WaterAid, as well as various animal rescues. Her hobbies include playing the piano (badly), collecting antiques and folk art, and buying far too many books, if such a thing is even possible.