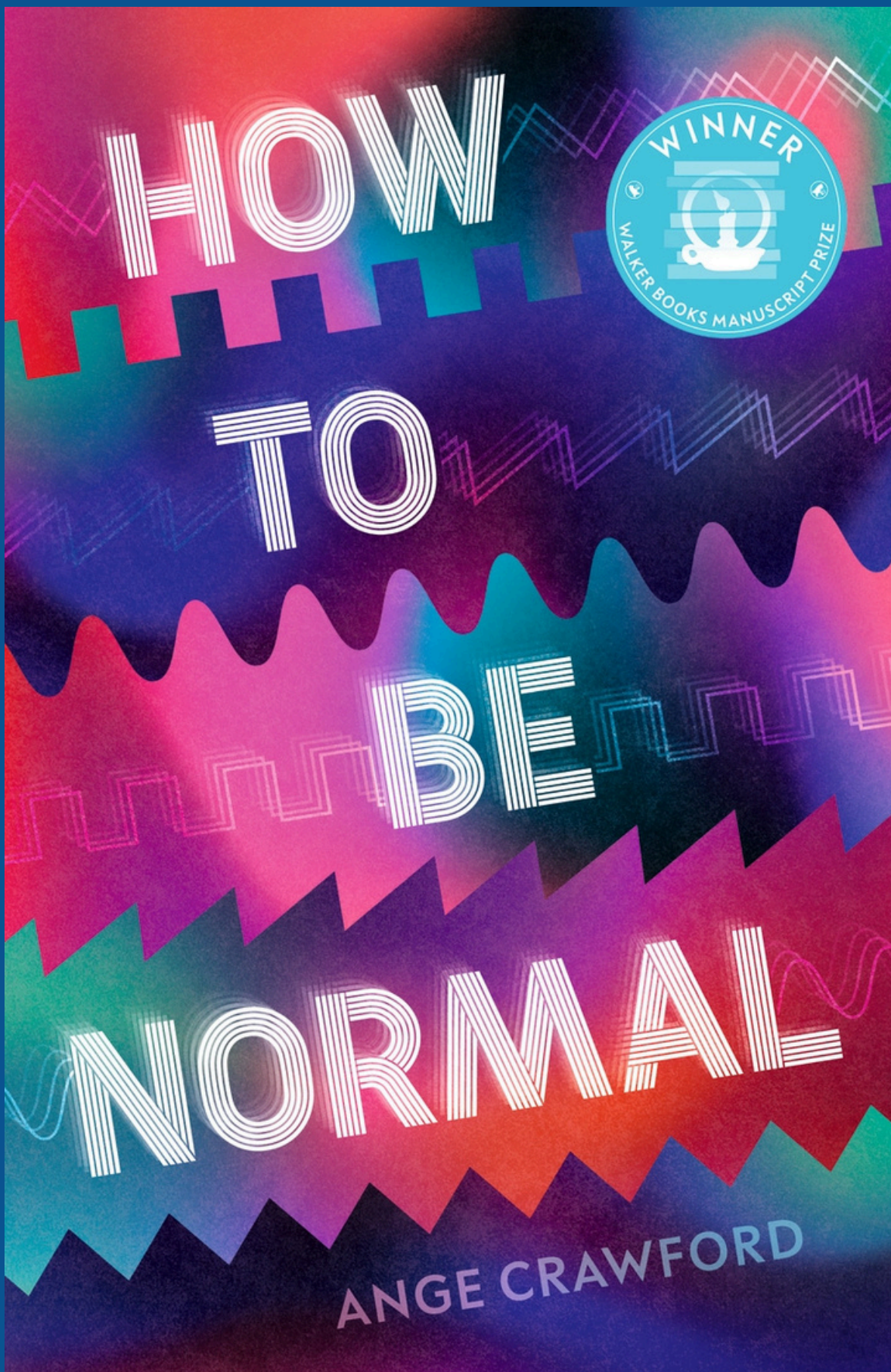


CHAPTER SAMPLER



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How To Be Normal

first published in 2025

by Walker Books Australia Pty Ltd

Gadigal and Wangal Country

Locked Bag 22, Newtown

NSW 2042 Australia

www.walkerbooks.com.au

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Cover design by Sarah Mitchell

Additional cover images: (Abstract Gradient 1) theromb/shutterstock.com;

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN: 978 1 760659 75 2

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Typeset in 12pt Adobe Garamond Pro

Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press


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HOW TO BE NORMAL

ANGE CRAWFORD


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DEAR READER,

The story of this story began in March 2020.

You know this part. Suddenly there were all these rules about how long you could go outside, and with whom, and why. Suddenly, too, the world looked much smaller (about the size of the apartment where I spent Melbourne's 262 days of pandemic lockdown) and much larger (too vast, for example, to reach the beach, slightly more than five kilometres away). Socialising grew difficult. It made some of us a bit quirky for a while. People started referring to lockdown as 'isolation'. But despite how hard it was, isolating was the right thing to do.

One day during this time, I was jogging around my neighbourhood, thinking of all these rules. This restriction (and this fear) was strangely familiar to me. When I was growing up, there were rules like these—about going outside; about who you could see, why, when; about what you could buy and eat and touch. Isolation in so many forms.

But there was no virus. Both the reason for these rules and the consequences for breaking them lived inside my home; my family experienced a type of domestic abuse known as coercive control. This cycle of trauma and pain ran through the branches of my father's family tree. I have now broken this cycle, but many other people (often women and children) continue to face it.



I sometimes felt like we were the only family going through all this when I was a teenager. But there are so many survivors. Recent research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies suggests around a quarter of Australians survived coercive control before turning eighteen. That day, on my run, I decided to write from this place, where so many of us have been (and still are). And by the time I came home, Astrid was with me, and I knew the beginnings of her story.

I've finished writing her book now, but the wider story is far from over. Community services are underfunded; deep gender inequalities and systemic issues remain. Australia has a deep problem with denial, with silence, with intergenerational trauma.

When Astrid's voice came to me that day, I knew she came from this context. But I also knew she had love around her, and friendship, and music. I knew (because I had them too, in my own way) that these would be important companions on the pathway towards healing. But I knew she had to take this journey in her own time and in her own way.

How to Be Normal is not a true story but there are truths in it. If some of them are yours, know that you are not alone. If you need someone to talk to, you can call **1800RESPECT** or, if you're under 25, **Kids' Helpline** (1800551800).

Warmth, solidarity and music,

Ange Crawford

24 August 2024

**To my family and all the
other survivors.**



FADE-IN

My house hides.

My house is ordinary. This is how it hides. If you walked past it on your way to some other near-identical house in our neighbourhood, you'd probably forget all about it. Sure, the hedges are perfect squares, but they're not asking you to admire them in all their perpendicular glory. Nor is the neatly paved path here to welcome you.

My house would rather you kept walking.

Even the sparrows avoid us most of the time, preferring the ragged branches and chipped paintwork elsewhere in our suburb. If you noticed anything about my house at all, it might be this.

It's so still here.

There are no footsteps yet. There are no whispers, no sign that anything is different. On the outside at least.



In the video, a smiling girl my age walks me step-by-step through hairstyle number seven. I grip little clusters of my hair, twisting them over and under each other until they get along. Which is no easy feat.

Hairstyle number seven is perfect: neat, inoffensive, and most important of all, boring. That last part is my secret. Society thinks the worst thing you can be is boring, but that's ridiculous. I've been different my whole life, and it's not all it's cracked up to be. Most people have normal, boring lives. I'd like to be most people.

The video girl's right. My face does look friendlier, more feminine – more like someone else entirely. I try to imagine what my new schoolmates will think when I walk by the lipstick-stained mirrors or poster-covered lockers or whatever else there is in a real high school. I hope they'll accept me as one of their own – and then they'll walk right on by.

Open body language will help. I narrow my eyes so I don't look like a scared doe. Then I roll my shoulders back. I lift my chin. Nope, that makes me look haughty. Chin only moderately raised, then.

I tiptoe towards the empty kitchen, holding my chosen posture as a bit of extra practice. The air is crisp, carrying

the citrus notes of cleaning products. It's unsettling how much this feels like any other morning.

I'm fifteen minutes ahead of schedule, but I race through the tasks of my morning routine, like that will mean my new life begins sooner. I weigh green tea leaves (exactly 2.5 grams) and place them in the teapot next to the bowl with exactly three quarters of a cup of organic muesli. Then I slip through the side door, pulling Mum's gumboots on and wandering in the garden until I find the day's newspaper. I unwrap it, throw the heavy boots off, and pad back through to the kitchen bench, smoothing the newspaper out, aligning it with the rest of Dad's breakfast.

Then I remember there's one extra task for today. I grab the whiteboard marker and scrub out the lines for Mum and me on our whereabouts board.

ASTRID: Out. School. ETA: 4:15.

ELLEN: Out. Work. ETA: 4:15.

CLIFF: In.

My hand hovers over Dad's name as I imagine him sinking into the stillness of the house with nothing ahead today except for repainting the mailbox. Maybe he'll linger awhile, hunched over the classifieds, trying not to think about the life he tried to build here with Mum and me, until money thwarted him, and he finally had to let us go.

We were so happy to go.

The thought makes me sad enough to steal back outside and clip a gardenia for him. I reach for one at the back, where it won't upset the aesthetics. I place it in a glass of water just far enough away from Dad's breakfast: it's imperative that no petal falls into his meal. Especially today.

I fall out of my practised posture, slouching a little, and my elbow brushes against the dish rack. It squeaks.

Oh no. I freeze, listening for a rustle, a footstep, a groan. But the hush has not shattered: Dad hasn't woken up. I breathe out and tiptoe back to my room.

I slide open my wardrobe door, breathing in the comfort of fabric softener. As I take out the traffic-cone orange uniform skirt and white button-down shirt, I'm already missing the comfy, scruffy homeschooling clothes that fill the rest of my wardrobe.

I close the door on them.

This is it, then. I've studied in this room for five whole years, sitting at this desk and staring out this window, not quite seeing the pristine shrubs beyond, but instead dreaming of those teen movies Mum and I have watched in those moments we've snatched over the years, movies with hopeful protagonists who arrive at adulthood with everything – and everyone – they need for a normal life.

Until a month ago, I never imagined that I'd get another shot at joining them. But now ... I can't help thinking to myself: *I'm a real high school student*—

I stifle the flutter of excitement in my chest. *A very ordinary and boring high school student.*

A light tap on my door. From the hallway, Mum whispers, 'Ready, Astrid?'

She couldn't give me just another five minutes, argh. My mind flies back through my checklist: hairstyle seven, open body language, second layer of deodorant ... spare pair of undies? You can never be too prepared for an unfamiliar environment.

The tapping on my door threatens to exceed the allowable volume. Mum stage-whispers this time: 'I'll be waiting outside with the bins.'

Oh no. Bin day.



Outside on our street, the household garbage bins are overflowing. Each bin day, the crows come out to feast, dragging out things I'm sure our neighbours would prefer remain hidden.

We're the only family who coordinates our Monday mornings around making judgemental, white middle-

class eye contact with the sanitation workers to ensure that they leave our pavements clean and bins empty. It's what we deserve, Dad says, given the effort we put into being low waste.

When I see Mum in her corporate wear for the first time, she's stomping on an errant juice packet that blew onto the footpath outside. It's flatter than it needs to be by the time she drops it into our recycling bin. She slams the lid, brushes her hands off on her pants, then winces. She must have forgotten the pristine layers of sheeny polyester, the way they are supposed to remain completely untainted by life outside the office – a notion as weird to her as my orange uniform is to me, I guess. But when I wonder if she is missing her housewife clothes, I can't imagine that.

There's no sign of the rubbish truck, so we wait, arms crossed in matching discomfort.

'He said we don't have to pick up rubbish that blows outside our house anymore,' I whisper.

She rolls her eyes at me. That's enough for me to get the picture. We could have risked believing Dad and dealt with the consequences, but no. Never with Mum.

So now I'm feeling very orange.

And late for class.



Mum swerves into a random cul-de-sac and turns the car off, leaving the keys jangling in time with the indignant beeps of the car's inbuilt keys-in-ignition alarm. Sprawling rendered houses line up on either side of the street, their languid driveways stretching out towards us.

It's a carbon copy of our street, just named after a different Australian native flower. There's never been a reason to consider turning here. Especially not today. I blink at Mum.

'Sorry, honey, I just remembered.' She leans over me, scrambling to open the glove box and pull out a little bag with bright-pink stripes and a plastic zip. It's so nonbiodegradable that it's the last thing I'd expect her to own, so I just keep staring. 'Makeup,' she says. 'It's kind of expected at the firm.'

The autumn morning sun beats down on the car, melting us as we breathe our shallow breaths. A single bead of sweat forms under one of my arms. I panic about it, so of course, it multiplies.

Meanwhile, Mum gets to work doing all these things I've never seen before, leaving us in a suffocating cloud of powder. Her GPS keeps recalculating the minutes left on our journey and they're stretching out, the streets changing from yellow to red as the traffic builds. My breaths get shallower. I only have fifteen minutes left to get to class. Late students get in trouble.

I've crossed my arms without realising. The last thing I want is for Mum to decide to discuss that before we head off again. So, I do something that's usually reserved for Dad-related conflict: I put up my walls. This was Mum's idea originally. When you're behind your walls, you don't let things get to you. You just observe them from a distance.

This works well enough that I can focus on Mum again. She struggles with applying the mascara, leaving black marks on the side of her face. The tissue shakes as she dabs at the smudges on her pale skin.

'You look nice,' I say hopelessly.

She half-smiles, a crease forming in the foundation along a familiar fault line. It's like she's just caught sight of me, her pencilled eyes drifting to the school logo emblazoned on my blouse pocket, then to hairstyle seven. Just as I'm thinking maybe I should reach out and pat her shoulder, she turns away, stuffing all the makeup back in the bag and dropping it in my lap. Well, some things never change.

I waste no time cramming the bag back into the glove box as Mum turns the car on. 'Wait, won't he find it in there?' I ask, before I can help it. It's not like Mum to be this careless.

'Come on,' she says. 'When was the last time he cleaned the car?'

I button my lips. Vacuum-cleaner memories, air-freshener memories, chamois memories clamour their way over my emotional wall, and in those memories the car is on the driveway. Mum and I are on the driveway. We are standing there, watching Nick's car receding into the distance. It is just another Saturday morning, but he is gone. It is just another Saturday morning, so Mum hands me the sponge. The hush falls over us. It is just another Saturday morning, so we are cleaning again, again, again.

I can't. Not now. I squash it all down back there, like the rubbish on our street. It all goes silent.

That's when Mum steps on it, driving back onto the main street. She checks behind her in her habitual way, as though she's just broken the law by painting her face.

Twelve minutes to go.



When we near the school, the students are gathered in twos and threes, talking, texting, slapping each other on the back. I spot a little throng of older girls, probably other Year 12s, who make their orange skirts look cool. They're carrying tote bags instead of schoolbags, and their shoes are bright and definitely outside the uniform policy. I look away before they notice me, my hand closing over

the strap of my standard-issue schoolbag. I wonder if I might end up friends with them. Then I bristle and squash those feelings. Unlikely.

Mum rolls the car forward in miniscule increments, as though she doesn't want to fully come to a stop.

'I think it's okay for me to get out here,' I say. 'Good luck for your first day.'

'Good luck, you,' she says, wrapping me in a hug that I hope doesn't make me smell like the morning's garbage. She clears her throat like she wants to say something else, but then she doesn't. It's time to do this.

I untangle myself from her curly hair, let go and open the door. My heavy new school shoes anchor me to the pavement as I'm met with a rush of chatter, shrieks, and squeals from all directions.

I push the car door closed without looking back at Mum. For the first time, it occurs to me that people from my past – people like Carla from netball – could be enrolled here. Even though our lives undoubtedly moved in different directions since we were twelve, we're still in the same grade. She'd tell everyone about me. That would ruin everything.

I shuffle towards the bus shelter to get my bearings, protected from most onlookers. The lip-liner ad that shields me tells me to *Be Bold*. I groan. Helpful.

I search for Mum, but she's already edged away, her indicator flashing. I imagine thin black lines running down her cheeks and I wonder what it feels like to see your youngest kid off for her first day of school when that kid's already seventeen and six months from graduating.

This is it, then. This is the part where I'm supposed to walk in through the school gate, shoulders rolled back and head held (moderately) high, making confident yet non-committal eye contact with my peers. But it's hard to hold my head up.

Each step is heavy. I study the uneven pavement. Wild grasses shoot through each crack, thriving impossibly in the concrete. A pair of younger students run past, leaving a breeze in their wake that carries the rings of their laughter.

Everything's unsteady. My breathing's too fast. I'll never make it to the office like this.

I seek out a bathroom, pushing past another giggling cluster of students. Heart racing, I dash into one of the many defaced cubicles. The door won't lock. I pull and pull, but its alignment is wrong, and the latch dangles fruitlessly in front of its holder, squeaking in protest with every attempt.

So I rush into the next cubicle. It smells disgusting – someone has blocked it up with a heap of toilet paper and the water is threatening to overflow everywhere – but the

door locks. I just stand there. Even though it reeks in here, I force myself to take deep breaths. I untwist my crossed arms, which got a bit too tight around my chest. My ears ring.

The walls are covered with drawings of assorted hairy body parts and some surprisingly good bright-green marker-pen outlines of anime characters. But there's more.

Scrawled slurs on all sides scream out at me. They glare at me until I shut my eyes, fighting back the thought that maybe Dad's right: social media is breaking everyone's brains and making them hate.

I can't do this. I want to run all the way home and get under the covers where everything is tidy and civilised. That thought horrifies me enough to almost propel me straight back out into the fray: If home is the only place I can belong, I stand no chance of a normal life.

I just have to find the office and get to class before I'm late. I've already lost precious time. If the school calls Dad, this could all be over before it even begins.

I take a deep breath. My shaking hand hovers over the lock.

Footsteps echo. I hear the girls talking before their shoes appear outside my cubicle.

They are in front of the mirror. My exit is blocked. I sigh and lean against the wall. Then I realise it's somehow

damp. I cringe.

'So he's liked all your stuff again.' Her voice is bold and deep, presumed owner of black lace-up boots.

'Yeah.' Her voice is meek and soft, presumed owner of mass-produced plastic-filled white running shoes.

'And he still hasn't said hi to you.'

'I know.' The tap runs.

'I'm telling you, you have to talk to him.'

'What if he doesn't want—'

'Who else even responded to your sad food pics?'

'You did.'

'I had to, though. It was my *duty* ...'

A sharp ring. I gasp. (Only afterwards do I realise I gasped out loud.)

The girls both giggle. To my horror, there's a knock on my door. 'If the bell freaks you out, you're high enough.' More laughter.

I hold my breath. My face burns at my complete failure to blend in even while hidden. Thankfully, their footsteps recede.

When I emerge and breathe the sweetness of the outdoor air, I lower my eyes back to the ground, scanning for those lace-up boots and white sneakers. But most of the students have already disappeared into classrooms, leaving me out of place and out of time.



The weatherworn sign says OFFICE in sombre black letters. I think of how in teen comedies no one wants to get sent to the office, where a frowning principal with greying hair and a mean streak chastises you and gives you detention. It must be 9:05 by now. Maybe this is already punishable by detention.

I push open the office door and am immersed in yet another crowd. The late students bunch up here, talking over one another. I hover behind them as they file out, one by one. There's no sign they're getting detention just yet. But now it's 9:07. 9:08. I fold and unfold the note that declares who I am and why I'm here.

Then it's just me and the receptionist. The polite yet confident introductory speech I've rehearsed eludes me, so I offer him the note with a squished smile that's probably more of a frown. He takes it, calls me by the wrong name, then corrects me when I finally ask to see the deputy principal, Maryam Ebrahim.

'Ms Ebrahim.'

I flush. 'Oh, oh, I'm so sorry ...'

But he's already taking a call, lips pursed.

I shuffle backwards to the solemn green plastic chairs in the corner and choose the one furthest from everyone.

I know, from our orientation visit last week, that the waiting area for parents and prospective students features comfortable leather chairs that you can sink right into while you admire the school honour board or all the sporting trophies. Here, it just smells musty and unfair. According to Dad, high school teaches people how to get kicked around by the capitalist ruling class. I have to say, so far, he's not wrong.

While I sit there virtually shaking, a girl my age strides in, nods at the receptionist and calls him Aaron, and then waltzes right past and into the administration offices. I'm struck by the silver piercings shining out of her nose and ears, the matching shine of her silver glasses, and her short, bleached hair. She is so obviously normal, but so ... herself. This – *this* is who I want to be.

So, a minute later, when she walks past again with a yellow slip of paper in her hand and a band-aid covering the nose ring, I give her a smile that I hope also looks effortless. She doesn't smile back, but she winks as she throws the door open and stalks out. For that second, I am her co-conspirator against the broken rule: *one pair of studs or sleepers only*. It's a ridiculous rule anyway. At least two people working in this office have earrings that are definitely not in line with this code.



Ms Ebrahim, neat and in her sixties, invites me to sit in her office. She's not quite looking at me as I shuffle in after her, still holding my breath. I choose one of the two black leather chairs facing her vast wooden desk.

She sits at the computer, clicks around, then goes to her little printer. My eyes dart over to the tray, dreading the yellow paper slip. I clear my throat. 'S – sorry.'

'What was that, Astrid?' she asks, unwrapping a new ream of printer paper, picking at the corner of the packaging with a painted fingernail. 'You'll have to speak up a bit more around here, I'm afraid.'

'Sorry. Sorry I'm late.' I sink further into the chair, making myself as small as possible.

'Oh. Well, don't make a habit out of it.' Ms Ebrahim slides the printout across to me.

It's white. Not detention-coloured. I breathe out.

'Your timetable,' she says, then she plonks a book on top of it. 'Diary, map.'

'Oh.' I'm too stressed to look at them.

'Did you have any questions for me?' She orients her body towards me as she says this, but her eyes travel towards the door.

I have so very many questions. Something ... like maybe ... advice on how a newcomer with five years of distance education experience can achieve social and

academic success in a state high school environment.

'Um, no, thank you.'

'Are you sure about that?' she presses.

'Yes, um, just ... thank you.'

Okay, so I'm not channelling the silver girl. Yet.



After ten minutes with my face glued to the map, I arrive outside a nondescript block near the edge of the school. It's dead quiet in the courtyard beside the classrooms, with nearby trees casting uneven shadows, their scraggy tips scraping like claws against the roofs and windows. If it were dark, this scene would look haunted.

I check the timetable again. It's definitely here. The 'DRA' in the subject code and the theatrical curtains in the windows have crystallised my fears: This is a drama class. I've never done a second of drama; I wouldn't qualify to be here, even if I weren't mortified by the whole idea of having everyone gawp at you while you cry on command.

The long, unsteady path behind me snakes back up to the administration building. Somehow, it has grown even more arduous since I wandered down here. I glance at the ominous performing arts building ahead. Before I can decide which is the worst option, the drama classroom

door bursts open and an Asian girl with a perfect messy bun emerges in a half-run.

‘Hey,’ she calls out, coming to a halt, and I blink at her as I remember I’m visible. ‘Are you the new girl?’

She wanders over to where I’m standing frozen. Her belongings are stowed in a cream-coloured tote bag casually slung over one shoulder. I spot a bunch of stickers on her laptop – they could be band stickers, something I actually know about. I try to work out what they are, but she shrugs it onto her shoulder, and it sinks out of sight.

‘No,’ I say, squeezing the diary until I’ve imprinted the ring binder into my palm. ‘Well, I mean, yes, but ...’

She clasps her hands together like she’s planned something devious. ‘You should hurry, then. You don’t wanna have to walk in once the play’s already started.’

This last sentence jars the cogs in my brain into gear. ‘Yeah, of course.’ Somehow, I’ve said that.

‘Gotta run. I’m Cathy, by the way. Nice to meet you, bye,’ she calls over her shoulder all at once, disappearing in a flash of pink socks.

The door looms ahead.

I resurrect my rehearsed posture and stride into the darkened theatre, doing my best impression of the silver girl. But gravity is heavier here, so I pull down the seat closest to the door, sinking with relief into the almost-darkness.

The rest of the seats tower above me. No one in them moves or speaks. Okay, so it wasn’t the perfect entrance I rehearsed at home, but it’s done, and maybe no one even saw it.

The curtains open. The stage is dark. An unseen clock strikes. I almost jump out of my seat.

The light rises enough to illuminate a middle-aged blonde woman, clutching a dressing gown around her gaunt shoulders. She paces. Each footstep reverberates through me.

She addresses an older, disembodied voice that she calls Mother. Their words are rhythmic, strange, distorted in the cheap microphones.

She’s lonely, sleepless, constrained. That’s all I can understand.

I, too, am constrained.



A thin sliver of light appears. Cathy is silhouetted in the door. She props her bag against the wall and slides into the chair right next to me, giving me a silent wave. I stifle my smile in the shadows, turning back to the stage with a studied seriousness.

I settle into the glow of this new potential connection, letting the performance wash over me and almost forgetting

my disorientation. Then I hear a muffled snuffle. A sideways glance reveals tears welled in Cathy's eyes, which she wipes discreetly when the light is at its lowest: She's so moved by the play she's crying.

I, of course, will pretend I didn't see this. But I also wish I could understand.

Right as the performance ends, the bell rings. I jump again. Cathy notices, but she just smiles and shrugs at me. A swarm of chatter swells behind us.

'Hey, you already know what I'm going to say,' comes the unmistakable authority of a teacher's voice. A middle-aged olive-skinned woman in a bright green shirt stands in front of the class, her perfect posture and impressive lung capacity making her the obvious candidate for drama teacher. 'Wait where you are, thanks.'

The students obey, falling into compliant silence. I hazard a glance behind me. They're all strangers – no sign of Carla, so at least there's that.

'Let's give a round of applause to our visitors from Calamity Theatre,' she continues.

The actors emerge to wave at the applauding students. There's the gaunt lady, now taller and healthier looking in her black theatre clothes. Beside her, squeezing her arm like they're really mother and daughter, is the actor who must have played the disembodied voice, microphone still

in hand. This older lady wears loose, casual clothing, like she's been out shopping for organic produce. So much smaller, lighter than the voice that just made Cathy cry.

I look away.

Once the actors disappear behind the curtain again, the teacher lets the tide of babbling students go. The rows of chairs rumble with the stampede, and I dodge an elbow and a foot, but I'm stuck to the spot. A boy and a girl stare at me as they cross the room. The girl's wearing black lace-up boots. She looks directly in my eyes, like she longs to ask me a million questions, but when the boy doesn't slow down, she keeps walking – I'm not interesting enough to speak to. Or not normal enough. I can't tell the difference.

As the door edges shut, I force myself to breathe again, a little dizzy. To my surprise, Cathy hasn't left. Neither has the teacher.

'Astrid Waters, is it?' the teacher asks me, like she's just registered my existence.

I give a single nod, trying to gather my strength to tell her about the unfortunate administrative mistake that resulted in my underwhelming presence.

'Welcome. I'm Ms Torres. Not a bad first day, right?'

Actually ...

All I can do is smile.

She smiles back, soft brown eyes crinkling. ‘It’s all right if you haven’t covered Samuel Beckett at your old school. It’s just a different way of speaking. You’ll pick it up.’

She nods at Cathy like it was her in charge all along. Then she walks off to join the theatre people, who are chatting in the far corner of the room, looking just as uncomfortable in a high school as me.

To my utter confusion, Cathy follows me outside. It never even occurred to me that she might stick around, that someone like her would want to be seen with someone like me. I have no idea where we’re going, but we’re going there together ...

‘Pst,’ she says.

I turn and blink at her. She’s gesturing to her skirt.

‘Hey,’ she says, when I don’t get it. ‘You need to change.’

I grab on to my skirt, pulling the side of it towards me until I see the scattering of bloody dots. Out of all the things I crammed into my schoolbag, not one of them was a period product. So much for those supposedly comprehensive online how-to-start-high-school guides.

‘I’ve got spares,’ she says, leading me to another unkempt – but vacant – bathroom.

I slink into the first stall. Despite another unwilling whine, the door locks this time.

Cathy passes me a pad over the stall door. ‘So, which

school were you at before?’

Something about her directness cracks me open. ‘Well, I was homeschooled until a few hours ago.’

‘Whoah, are you serious?’ comes her reply.

I regret everything. ‘I mean—’

‘So, did you just learn everything from whatever your parents told you?’

‘What? No.’

She laughs. ‘I figured. Just playing.’

I try to laugh back, but it comes out as a single ‘hah’.

‘Aww, no, I’m jealous, actually,’ she says. ‘I’d love to be homeschooled, no joke.’

My cheeks turn hot. ‘You’d be surprised.’

‘So, why did you end up here?’

Finally, a question I prepared for. ‘My mum was my home tutor, and she got offered this maternity leave contract at a really great law firm, and Dad’s not working at the moment, so ...’

‘Ah, yay for your mum, but dang for you.’ A pair of sport shorts appears above the stall door. ‘You can borrow these. I don’t want to go to sport this arvo, anyway.’

‘Oh,’ I say. ‘I can’t.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t have sport today.’

Silence. Confused silence, probably.

I make myself speak again. ‘Umm, won’t I get in trouble?’

She laughs again, deeper this time. I imagine the cheap metal sinks rattling with her mirth. I want to sink into the floor. ‘Don’t be silly,’ she says. ‘It’s a hot day. No one’s gonna care if you wear shorts.’

Defeated, I drag the shorts into the stall and pull them on over my spare underwear. The shorts are too short and too tight, but it’s too late to back down now, so I fold up my skirt and undies and stuff them into my bag, forcing the zip shut.

I emerge to find Cathy leaning against the wall, typing an essay on her neon-encased phone. Phones are supposed to be banned during school hours. But, apparently, none of the school handbook rules have an effect on Cathy. Meanwhile, my hands feel super empty.

‘Thanks,’ I say to my shoes.

‘Don’t be so embarrassed. It’s a normal part of life.’ She shrugs, pocketing the phone and bending to retie her pink shoelace. ‘I have painkillers, too, if you need. My cramps are the worst.’

‘Oh,’ I manage, plunging my hands into cold water and willing the message to travel to my cheeks. ‘I’m fine. I never even feel mine. It basically just gushes out of me.’ Um, what?

‘How are you so lucky?’ she says. ‘Well, at least do yourself a favour and avoid cold foods for a few days – that’s my pro tip. Do you wanna get morning tea together? I can tell you what’s good at the tuckshop.’

Echoes of all the things I just admitted spin through my mind. I can’t carry those outside. I can’t. ‘Sorry, I have to go back to the office and sort out some enrolment stuff.’

There’s a beat of silence. I can’t look at her.

‘Cool, well, come find me later if you like,’ she says at last. She’s already back typing on her phone as she wanders out, calling over her shoulder, ‘And you’ll have to give me back those shorts.’



I drift through the school grounds. It could be five years ago, the last time I was wandering a schoolyard alone. The students, simply older, huddle in their groups, still immersed in the smells of sugary yoghurt, body spray and supermarket bread. Just like before. And just like during those half-hearted extracurriculars I tried in my first year of homeschool, no one talks to me. I tell myself that this is what I wanted. I am blending into the background, just like a normal teenager. But it feels more like rejection.

Teachers patrol the bustling benches near the basketball courts, picking up rubbish with those long grabbing tools, stopping now and then to apprehend a student doing the wrong thing. The yellow slips of paper make another appearance during a yelling match. I wince at the sight of them. The shorts squeeze tighter.

Everything is so loud, especially my heartbeat. All I want to do is get away. Back towards the school gate, the crowd thins. I reach the almost abandoned food and nutrition classrooms, with their strange commercial-like kitchens glaring out at me like the set of a budget daytime cooking show. The appliances emit a weird electronic hum that seems to repel the other students. I am finally alone.

I sink down to the grass, despite the shorts crushing my stomach, and rest my back against the sunlit brick wall. My mind punishes me by replaying all the cringy things I spilled out to Cathy. *Gushes*. God.

In my schoolbag, I find the little wrapped sandwiches that Mum packed me. I gently undo the even folds in the beeswax wrap with a pang of sadness. Just last week, I was assembling my lunch on a fresh plate warm from the dishwasher. Mum put on one of her podcasts and we played at arguing with the interviewees about climate policy and labour rights. I was determined not to miss this, but I do.

I take a soft bite of the jam sandwich, the purple sourness sticking to the sides of my mouth. From the distance, disembodied sounds of laughter bounce around me, reminding me I'm here. I am a (normal?) high school student. And I can salvage this day. I have to.



VERSE

My new maths classroom is a rectangular room haunted by sweat, ink and that ubiquitous teenage boy deodorant. When I reach it at the end of morning tea – late but not too late – I think again of the silver girl and I stride inside, ignoring the whispered *who's that's*. I claim the only unoccupied desk and immediately busy myself leafing through the worksheets I find there. Nonchalant. No big deal. Normal.

'You must be Astrid,' the teacher says, peering at me from over his clipboard with the round, dark owl eyes of someone who never sleeps well. 'I'm Mr Vincent. Come to the front for a bit.'

I obey, praying he won't notice my uniform violation. Thinking of the silver girl, I rest my hand on my hip and do my best to look bored and definitely not like the kind

of person who spills gross personal details to the stranger who saved them from period stains.

'Everyone, this is Astrid,' Mr Vincent announces. 'She is joining us from her distance education school. Make her feel welcome, all right?'

Every single person in the room stares at me. Their gaze feels like a magnifying glass, and I am an unfortunate ant.

Mr Vincent leans towards me and murmurs, 'Make sure you wear the correct uniform tomorrow.'

It's too much. My hand falls off my hip, and I forget how to use my knees. I clamber back to my desk before things can get any worse.

'Okay, we need to get you an extra desk,' Mr Vincent proclaims.

I take a second to register what he just said. He's already assessing a pile of junk in the corner, while the students whisper like this is the most exciting event of the year. My face burns. Meanwhile, in walks the silver girl; she stands right behind me, her olive-skinned hand on the back of my chair. It's only then that I realise that my worksheets have a name printed on them in neat purple block letters: *Leila Martinez*.

'Hello again,' Leila says.

I swivel around. She's half-laughing, her shoulders vibrating with mirth, her hand still poised behind me.

‘Please stay there. I hate maths,’ she says, and the whispering turns to laughter.

There’s a pathetic part of me that wants to comply, just in case it will undo some of the social damage. Instead, I stand up and drag my bag away from her like some submissive animal in a nature documentary.

Leila flops into her chair and gives me another conspiratorial wink. I’m caught in the glare of this gesture I don’t understand. Meanwhile, like they’ve received permission, the whole class bursts into conversation, leaving me forgotten and hovering in the space between desks.

I edge further and further backwards until I reach the wall, where I freeze against the faded posters about coding video games and going to space. Every time I glance in Leila’s direction, she’s looking back at me. My hands sweat again. I put up my emotional wall and try to block this all out. But I can’t stop meeting her eyes.

In this time, Mr Vincent has said nothing, but he’s pushed an ancient desk and chair mercifully to the back of the class, beside a quiet boy who hasn’t looked up from his exercise book this whole time, the name Connor Thompson scrawled unevenly across his worksheets.

I catch Connor’s eye, offering a tentative smile. When he grins back, the extent of my relief embarrasses me.



The bell rings. Students file off. Leila is first out of the door. I gaze after her, wondering what on earth I was supposed to make of the way she just treated me. At least, I guess, she’s already forgotten me.

Everyone around me leaves in pairs or groups. No one is alone. No one except me.

In desperation, I turn to Connor. He’s already finished packing his stuff and is reaching for an instrument case – a trumpet, probably. A bunch of other sporty-looking boys pass by him, and he mumbles things about football training at them as they leave. Now he’s the last person in here except for me.

‘Um, where do you usually go for lunch?’ I ask before I can change my mind.

He regards me like I’m from a different planet, which, to be fair, I basically am. ‘The tuckshop?’ He almost spells the phrase out, like he’s worried I won’t understand. Also, fair enough.

I clamour for any ideas about how to get an invitation to join him (or anyone) at the tuckshop, but he’s already leaving and I’m at risk of another break filled with aimless wandering, so I duck out after him.

I follow a careful distance behind him and his trumpet

as they weave their way to a dilapidated concrete brick classroom vibrating with the even, smooth rhythms of drum and bass. He disappears inside. I stay outside, loitering around a corner, so no one will think I'm stalking the musical jock from maths class.

In this negative space, I hold a debate with myself. The music block is the only place I can process what's happening to me. But I don't know if I'm allowed to just walk in. The yellow slips loom large in my memory.

'Astrid, hey!'

It's Cathy, leaning on the door, beaming at me.

There's a second of silence, which I scramble to fill before she can disappear again. I clear my throat and ask, 'What are you up to?'

'Gotta make a bubbler stop,' she says, gesturing towards the rusty water fountains I've been hesitant to use. She rushes over to them and back in an orange-and-white blur.

'Well, are you coming in?' she asks, wiping water off her chin.

She holds the door open for me. Inside, we are sealed away from the shouts and laughter of the lunching students. It smells like resin, and the noticeboard has rainbow paper instead of white for all the announcements: neon green, bright pink, detention yellow.

I don't know if I should keep following Cathy, but I can't help it. She's the only person who seems to see me, and I already pushed her away once. My mind hums with a hopeless brainstorm of all the things I could say to keep her around, but all my ideas get tangled up with memories of our bathroom exchange. There's no way she would want to know me. She already knows too much.

Before I even realise, we're stopping near a tiny room with some *a cappella* voices catapulting themselves at a high note.

'This is me,' she says, vanishing inside.

'Bye,' I say to the closed door. So, that's it, then.

I swallow the lump in my throat and wander to the end of the hallway. Beyond another worn door is a cool, tiny room that smells of new computers. There's a bunch of signs saying not to eat or drink here, printed on stark white paper that signals their seriousness. The computers – two of them – are newer and shinier than any I've used before, and they run with a rapid professional hum. I'm drawn to them. I can't help it.

I close the door and approach the headphones coiled on the desk before I can change my mind. They're too big, sliding around on my head and no doubt ruining hairstyle number seven, but I feel better already. These roomy things remind me of when I first started homeschooling

and Nick and I would sometimes tag along to Dad's work before it closed down. Nick never got it but I'd go right for the big headphones. Dad would play me something by Miles Davis or The Rolling Stones or Eric Clapton, and I'd close my eyes and hold my hands over the headphones, so the sound would seem bigger and more complex, at least in my imagination.

Then, not too long later, I had my own headphones at home, and my beloved music software – Ableton – with its colourful yet patient little bars counting out the silent beats I might one day fill. At first I could do nothing other than scroll endlessly through the library of default sounds, pianos / drums / bass guitars, unable to close the painful distance between myself and all those musicians so able to express themselves through this medium. I'm no performer, and every button I pressed in those first experimental weeks took me further away from those unnameable complexities I felt in Dad's record store. But I never even considered stopping. Then I found the tutorials – the confident yet accessible voices of sound designers and musicians sharing their workflows on the internet. There was a pathway, a process, and if I followed it, maybe one day I could speak through this medium, too. In so many of my teenage days, it's been these voices I've heard the most, apart from my family's, though they don't know that. It was synthesis that

drew me in the most, beginning from the near-blank canvas of a basic waveform – smooth, or jagged, or square – which would sound like little more than a dial tone from an old landline phone, but which held potential to become almost anything. Sometimes, though rarely, I hear something in these synth sounds as I warp and chop and filter them – something that somehow echoes how I feel inside. Even when this isn't the case, the headphones keep everything else out, all the things beyond this musical world, for which there is no process, no pathway, no sense of potential, and sometime no sense at all.

I need this feeling now, on this strange and lonely day. I sit up straight, hands hovering over the pristine white keyboard and elegantly curved mouse. Maybe I shouldn't be here, but I physically can't leave. I might as well enjoy it. So I move the mouse, revealing a screen with the ugly orange school logo in the background and a prompt for a login. No one's given me a login. Even the computers have locked me out.

Grabbing the headphones off the desk, I slide down to the floor and pull my laptop out instead. All the sounds of today are swirling in my mind, all the laughter, all the chaos, all the whistles and bells and alarms and ringtones. Deeper than words, this is where the music lives. Music, or something like it.

This is how I cope: I pour myself into Ableton, the closest thing I have to solid ground. It waits for me on my laptop as ever, those colourful little boxes that tell me, despite how vast this all feels, it can be contained. I click through sample after sample, searching for the sound that will give shape to the murkiness inside my own mind. Today sounds like something wavering with anticipation; a dark sense of something building. And there it is. A long, amorphous, impossible-to-place ambient sound. I choose it. A little turquoise box appears, containing all this confusion into a space the same size as all the other blank ones, only this one is now coloured with my experience. I fill bars and bars of time with this sound, a single note that could go on forever, as long as I keep holding on to the feeling. I hold on.

And then, all the layers. The other emotions beneath the wavering. These feelings, which I could never name, will not be found in lists of default sounds. Instead, I open my favourite synthesis plug-in and start shaping a new sound, something that might resemble my state of mind. Today sounds like distortion (an apple-green box) / Today sounds like metallic ringing (a sky-blue box) / Today sounds like arrhythmic beats (a forest-green box).

There are too many layers. None of this noise makes sense just yet. Neither do I.

A knock startles me. Cathy pops her head in and waves. She talks to me before I have time to remove my headphones, making herself at home on the chair above me.

‘Love that this is where you hang out.’ I catch the end of her sentence. ‘You seem wholesome and uncorrupted,’ she declares.

She takes out a bag of chips, opens it, and crunches loudly.

‘Thanks?’ I might not know much, but I do know that ‘wholesome’ is a synonym for ‘naïve’.

‘Anyway, so I thought I’d come and see how your first day is going.’ Little crumbs appear over her shirt and on the floor. I glance at the sign declaring that food is not permitted. In defiance, a wave of salt-and-vinegar tang envelops us both.

She turns her attention to my screen.

‘So, what are you working on?’ she asks, offering me the chip bag as she slides down to the floor next to me.

I shake my head as the obvious bright white sign commands. In that moment of distraction, she’s turned my laptop towards her with enough conviction to pull the headphones out of the jack. The looping discordant beats blare out at full volume. All the layers. Out in the open.

She blinks. I scramble to the laptop, hammering the mute button and slamming the lid shut.

‘What *was* that?’ she asks.

No one has ever listened to these strange sounds. They are supposed to be mine alone. I fight back the tears.

‘Aww, come on, don’t be embarrassed,’ she says. ‘I meant I think it’s good.’

I swallow. ‘What?’

‘Experimental stuff is the best – oh my god, so I just had an idea. Do you know our talent quest is coming up? I’m a singer. Would you be keen to do a collab?’

‘Really?’ The word catches in my throat. Deep uneasiness roils in my stomach. But Cathy has seen me – heard me – and a tiny part of me wants to cling on to her, to have a companion in this wild and frightening place, to maybe even have a friend. If this is what it takes ...

‘Yeah, it’s a bit late, but I can twist some arms,’ she’s saying now, all business. ‘If you like, I mean,’ she adds.

I manage to smile and nod.

‘Let me put my number in your phone and we’ll work it out.’

‘Actually, I don’t have a phone.’

‘Huh?’ She regards me with something like concern or even pity. She doesn’t dwell on it, though, grabbing my new school diary and writing her name and number on today’s page in neat, bubbly letters.

All afternoon, I have to consciously resist the urge to open my diary and check that Cathy’s number is still there.



I stand outside my final classroom of the day, clutching my bag, watching other students disappear into buses. The school empties and sits desolate within only a few minutes. Now it’s just a few concrete buildings, some neglected turf and some cheap metal fencing. I can’t believe I was so afraid of it.

It’s still forty-five minutes too early for Mum to arrive, so I sit on that yellowing grass and stew. I’ve agreed to join a talent quest. *A talent quest.* Even if I had some kind of talent (?!), the questing aspect would be impossible. For all his love of music, Dad would never approve of me doing rehearsals with some random student he’s never met, on top of being back at school. But I want to know Cathy. I don’t want to let go of this chance, impossible as it might be.

Impossible. A knot twists my stomach. I can’t stay still anymore. I drag myself along the school footpaths, wandering around and around the silent blocks. Inside one of them, the fluorescent lights are still on but the silence persists. The library. My breath catches: beside the window, hunched over a desk, is the silver girl, Leila, in the very last place I would expect to see her, surrounded by a cluster of unusually serious students – all heads down, brows furrowed, earbuds in. I walk away before they can notice me.

But then I hesitate, drawn for some reason to the library entrance. I slip inside, hovering far away from Leila and her group. There, on a table by the door, is the riskiest, unlikeliest solution to my problem, in the form of a flyer with a default Microsoft Word font. I peel the top one off, fold it into a neat little square, and slide it into my blouse pocket, where it sits against my racing heart, daring me to do this.

Homework club. Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday until 5:30. All welcome.



I can only describe the mood at dinner as tense. Change has always been hard for Dad – even if it’s his call, like this decision to bolster his inheritance money with enough for my parents to keep this big, empty house. And then there’s Mum. She’s been buzzing with poorly disguised angst ever since this afternoon, when she hid first the makeup bag and then her new work mobile phone (!) in the ceiling slats of our garden shed – possibly the riskiest thing I’ve ever seen her do. Right now, this big, empty house is filled with emotion. And there’s no room for me in it. Let alone homework club.

My eyes are heavy with exhaustion. While I microwave

the plates of food, Dad asks me questions about my teachers’ values and the school’s routine and it’s hard to pay attention. The adrenaline kicks back in when I spot the tension in his shoulders.

Something could go wrong.

Normally I’d reassure Dad – everything’s fine, school’s great and I’m thrilled to be there – and I’d wait for a sign that he’s relaxing. But, today, after all his repeated *I miss yous*, that also seems like the wrong answer. Instead, I let him think I miss home. It’s not really a lie. Plus, it seems to help.

Until he says, ‘If you’re unhappy, we can still pull you out.’

That’s when I realise I might have done too well.

‘This is exactly what I was worried about,’ Dad continues, as Mum brings his food over and shoots me a look that says, *change the subject*. ‘It’s going to be hard for you.’

I make a show out of a slow nod, but the walls go up inside. The last thing I need is to think about how hard it already is. ‘How was your day, Dad?’

He pauses with the fork poised over the plate. ‘Awful without you.’

Mum’s eyes dart between us as I pad over to the table with my food. The flyer in my pyjama pocket presses into me as I sit down, accusing me of the lie I haven’t yet told.

Dad spits the roast potato back onto his plate. ‘Lukewarm.’

This one word is enough to prompt Mum into action. She grabs his plate and whisks it back to the microwave, which dings in merry obliviousness. I grit my teeth; I was distracted when I heated the food.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Mum says. ‘The fridge has been frosty. I don’t know ...’

‘One day in and we’re already here.’ Dad is almost whispering, drumming his fingers on the dining table. I shovel potato into my mouth. ‘You’re already sucked in.’

‘It’s not like that, Cliffy.’

‘This job won’t change anything; you said that to me. Do you even remember?’

Mum’s turning pale. She opens the microwave before it can ding again, prodding the food with a fork to test it.

‘Now look at you.’ Dad’s voice is louder now. ‘Parading around with the tight pants.’

Mum places a hand on the waistband of her new corporate pants. Her heart visibly sinks. ‘These are the ones we picked out together ...’

‘Don’t follow that example, Astrid,’ Dad says to me, freezing Mum out as she returns with the steaming dinner. He reaches a hand out for my hair, caressing it. ‘New hairstyle, hey?’

I nod. The best thing is to comply. I can almost hear

Nick yelling at me for being a little suck-up. Whole lot of good his attitude did.

Then Dad plunges his fork into a potato again. This time, when he bites into it, he cries out, ‘For Christ’s sake, Helen, is there something clinically wrong with you?’

Helen, Ellen from hell, is the kind of putdown we all recognise here, but looks perfectly harmless from the outside, like the square hedges. Mum flinches and rushes back over to the table. But it’s much too late.

There’s nothing else I can do, either. I rush through my food silently before slipping off to the study nook under the cover of homework.

Dinner sits in my stomach like a rock. I wish I could curl up in bed right away, so I wouldn’t have to hear what’s going on in the kitchen, and I wouldn’t have to think about how Mum’s hurried footsteps echo like the gaunt woman’s on the stage.

I resolve again and again that I will always eat lukewarm vegetables when they’re prepared by someone I love.



In the study nook late that night, the soft blue glow of the computer screen separates us. Cathy – full name: Catherine Lin – grins back at me from the social media

search results, where she sits in the arms of a boy with torn jeans and heat-styled hair. Her body language is open and friendly, like she was caught saying something nice. I smile at her, but the smile freezes on my face. Those nice words weren't for me.

None of this is for me. I don't get to escape like this, like Nick did, into this world of parties and dating and whatever else it is that normal people do. I don't get to forget about this place, about the lukewarm vegetables and the whereabouts noticeboard and all the fallout from Dad's moods. I don't get to date boys with torn jeans. I don't get to join talent quests. In the wake of tonight's episode, even the homework club ruse feels too dangerous. This place is still stopping me from being normal.

I click through my open tabs. Cathy broadcasts her music fandom across her socials. This is a language I speak: classics like Massive Attack and Portishead, pop artists like Beyonce and Billie Eilish. Digging deeper, I find some weird bands I've never heard of. By the time I have ten SoundCloud tabs open, I'm uncertain whether I actually like any of these bands or am just comfortable imagining I do. The distinction between what I really like and what I can appear to like is not always clear to me. Sometimes I worry that this is pretty clear evidence I am a broken person: I can arrange myself in far too many ways.

I sigh, delete my history, and switch the family internet tracker back on before my parents can realise what I'm up to. My secret ability to turn off this software can grant me only a brief moment of undignified social media stalking. That and the search results for a particularly embarrassing research topic: *How to make a new friend*. All these articles claim you should start by finding people who are like you. I'm not sure if I'm any closer to knowing if I'm anything like Cathy.

I can arrange myself in far too many ways.



BUILD

Back in the music room, my mind drifts outside with the swaying trees. It's only day three. Everything is still impossible, but at least I've had the courage to remove drama class from my timetable. Plus, now I even know some classmates' names. There's Lily, the girl with the novelty superhero bag and all the answers in history class; Zafar, the surfy-looking guy who will tell anyone who'll listen about his poetry YouTube channel; Sergio, who seems to treat all of high school as an opportunity to take notes for his Dungeons & Dragons storyline ... Then there's me, hiding out in the school's recording studio, quizzing myself on my fellow students like a totally normal person.

I'm trying not to think about Cathy. Since that first day, I haven't seen her. I keep kind of hoping she'll show

up again here, but she doesn't. Not that I'd know what to say to her if she did. Which is also why I haven't called her yet.

On the studio computer, which now grudgingly grants me access, I pick a plug-in program at random and open a spectrum analyser, a tool that tells you about frequencies in your sound, plotting them on a logarithmic graph. No, I don't really know what any of that means.

That's never stopped me before. I search for a square wave: one of the most basic sounds you can play on a synth. Holding down a key, I stare at the waveform that wavers in jagged lines on the spectrum analyser. I press the headphones closer to my ears, imagining that might somehow help me hear all those ragged frequencies, the stray ones I didn't imagine when I chose to experiment with such a basic, focused sound. This is what music is to me – this quiet exploration of the things I might one day be capable of sensing if I can somehow learn to listen better, to the world and to myself. It's so personal, so private, so hard to imagine sharing with anyone else.



I work up the courage to tell Cathy that night. First, I prepare everything: chores and homework done, Mum

and Dad wrapped in matching blankets in the living room, lines written about the many competing obligations of Year 12 and the impossibility of committing to a school talent quest in these trying (but completely ordinary) circumstances.

But then I get her voicemail.

'Umm, hey, it's, um, Astrid? Astrid from school, I guess?' Then I say the numbers of our home phone number like a dictation. It's only after I hang up that I realise I've also said it all in one breath and have to resist the urge to call back and leave a second message, just in case I wasn't clear.

At least that's done. I sink into the armchair next to our phone in case she's about to call me back. She's always on her phone. She must have seen the message pop up. I pull the throw rug over my legs and wait.

The silence stretches out instead. Sinking further and further into the chair, I'm enveloped in memories of the sounds she heard leaking from my tinny laptop speakers, and all the fear and anger and confusion she might have perceived in them. This must be why she hasn't called. I race to my room, throw open my laptop, and delete the session.



I don't see her at all the next day. But, the next night, she calls me back. I tiptoe away from the murmuring dinner party scene. Dad and Rob won't miss me. As usual, they're deep in their philosophising, Dad regaling Rob with a well-worn story about the people who would rock up at his record store with boxes of a deceased relative's most precious collection, interested only in how much cash they would get.

In the kitchen, a smiling Mum passes me the phone, and my hands are already sweaty as I try to steal away from her for a moment of semi-privacy in my parents' room. For once, I'm thankful for Rob's existence. Dad can't eavesdrop when we have a guest (and Rob is basically the only guest we ever have).

'Sorry I took a while,' Cathy says. Her voice is soft over the phone, and I can only just hear her over the wind and rain outside. 'I haven't called a landline in forever.'

'Ah, it's no stress.' I try my best to keep my response casual, but a lump is rising in my throat again. 'How was the rest of your week, anyway?'

'Meh,' she says. 'Just busy at night. My long-distance boyfriend is always calling.'

'That sounds romantic.'

'It's not.'

'Oh,' I say, surprised at her directness. I don't feel like I can ask what this means, so instead I ask, 'Where is he?'

‘LA now.’ She sighs down the phone like this line of conversation bores her. ‘Hey, so remember what I said about the talent quest?’

‘Yeah,’ I say, still caught up in everything she’s told me. ‘Oh, ummm ...’

‘Yeah, so maybe we could meet up after school sometime next week if you’re free? We could figure out a song. I was serious that I like what you were working on. I can sing something weird and abstract to go with it.’ All her thoughts bounce out at once while I sprawl on the minimalist charcoal bedspread, staring at the air-conditioning vent like it’ll tell me what to do. ‘Are you there?’

‘Sorry,’ I say. ‘This rain is really loud.’

‘This is when texting comes in handy,’ she laughs. ‘I was saying ... you still wanna do a song, right?’

I close my eyes. ‘I do.’



It’s the third week in a row that this chocolate cake is on our list for baking night, and Mum’s busy extolling its virtues as a snack made from pumpkin and almond flour and other Dad-approved ingredients, and yet, a permissible way for her to eat her very favourite food.

I’m happy for her and all, but my mind is too busy calculating an appropriate segue into the subject of secret homework club sessions that are really secret rehearsals. In the meantime, I keep chopping the carrots for the soup because, you know, we’re kind of on the clock here.

‘This was easier when your dad was at work,’ Mum whispers. Even though Dad is spending the dusk playing guitar in the living room, it still feels like we’re being watched. Six months ago, Dad came home much too early with red-rimmed eyes, dropping his shoulder bag on our welcome mat as he explained that, despite all his help and all the regular customers like Rob, the record store would still have to close. Since then, he has rarely gone further from home than the community garden.

‘He had lunch with me again,’ Mum sighs, beating the eggs like she’s in the Olympics for it.

‘That’s so annoying,’ I reply automatically. I scrape the carrot bits into the bubbling soup, dodging the hot water splashing up.

Mum grabs a sponge and goes over the errant water droplets, but she can’t seem to help groaning a little. Her fatigue must be catching up with her. ‘How was your first week, anyway?’ she asks. ‘You’ve barely told me anything.’

‘Okay, I guess.’ I lick some of the pumpkin/chocolate mix, even though it tastes pretty suspect raw, delaying the

moment when I start lying. ‘Sometimes I don’t really get what’s going on.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m worried I’m behind.’ A deep breath. ‘I think I need to go to homework club.’

Mum freezes mid-slice. ‘Homework club?’ Her eyes dart to the whereabouts noticeboard, which watches over us, repeating *home, home, home*.

I lower my voice to a whisper. ‘It’s okay. It runs right after school. I won’t need a note or anything. We won’t have to tell him. I thought ... I thought I could go along on Fridays while you do the grocery run and then you can grab me on the way home.’ Seeing the look on her face, I add, ‘Just for a little while. Sometimes. Until I catch up.’

Mum’s nostrils flare, but she nods. ‘If you promise to be at the gate the moment it ends. The moment.’

‘Promise,’ I say hoarsely. I crush the garlic with more force than necessary.

Mum turns her back to me, taking the foil off the roast and shuffling things around, so there’s room for the cake. ‘I can’t believe people actually like cooking shows,’ she says. Which is her way of telling me that my secret is safe with her.

‘You know, I wish I could never cook again. I’d happily eat that space food stuff.’ Which is my way of telling her

I’m grateful. And sorry.

She rolls her eyes. ‘No, you wouldn’t.’

I look at her fatigued face while she’s busy with the zucchinis, those familiar creases deepening with this new secret. Guilt ties a deep knot in my stomach. ‘Mum, what would you do if you didn’t have to do all this stuff?’

‘I’d spend the day with you,’ she says without a beat.

‘Ugh, don’t be like that.’ This is the genetic origin of my cringe factor.

‘What?’ She’s smiling, though. ‘Am I uncool now?’

‘Come on, Mum, if you had a day off, you’d watch Question Time, wouldn’t you?’

She laughs. ‘And what’s wrong with that?’

‘You need a hobby, Mum.’

‘It *is* my hobby, you know. Maybe if I’d finished my law degree ...’

There’s something else she wants to say then. But we both smell the burning. Old dreams forgotten, Mum dashes to the oven and I follow on her heels. We silently work together to drag out the roast beef, which has become ever so slightly blackened on top: *unacceptable*. I rush for the carving knife and fork, holding the roast still while Mum slices the burnt bits off as smoothly as she can, throwing them in the sink and cursing under her breath.

All the while, we keep an ear out for Dad's guitar music. It doesn't stop. We flip the mangled roast. Its underside is unharmed. We sneak out the back way to bury the evidence under layers of detritus in the garbage bin where he won't find them. Then we sneak back in to wave tea towels in the air.

The smoke alarms don't go off. Dad keeps playing.
We breathe out in the kitchen's silence.



Hours later, I'm sitting between the lavender plant and Mum's succulent, laptop on the study desk, warm slippers on and a cup of green tea beside me in a dusky mug, contemplating university websites. This is a recipe for comfort, and despite everything else that's happened this week, it's kind of working. Even though I have no idea how university will go, I like the thought that, this time next year, I'll have a reason to drive away from here every day, far enough away to be a different person, at least until the sun goes down.

I flick mindlessly to my school email, open on another tab. It's still weird having an actual email address. I take a minute to process the name that has just appeared in my new inbox. My organs squeeze together. I cast a furtive

glance around. The study's not a private room, but for now, I'm alone.

Trembling, I restart the computer in safe mode, take down the parental tracker, and then head back to my profile, squishing the school email browser into the smallest window imaginable. The email's still there, with its subject line – helloooooo sister! – echoing like a ghost.

mum gave me your email

whether u answer me or not i think u should know

shes going to take u and leave him

for real this time

she doesnt want to tell u yet but id wanna kno if i were u

pls be a tough cookie

pls be good to her

if you wanna write back u kno id love that

either way just want you to know

theres a whole world and future out there

hang in there not long now

IT GETS BETTER

N x

I minimise the window, then bury my face in the teacup, gulping a scalding mouthful that causes tears to prick my eyes. In these words, I can't help hearing Nick in his chaotic way – each unfinished thought fired off while the next one's already churning in his mind. In these words, I'm hearing

him whispering reassurances when I insisted on sleeping on his floor that night long ago, when we last thought Mum would leave Dad. I was thirteen. Nick told me all about the normal life we'd have beyond this house, where we'd eat cheesy crackers in our rooms and stay up until midnight and watch all the trendy shows. I believed him with all my heart. It didn't happen. Instead, three years later, Nick was the one who left, heading for that world without me.

When the door closed behind him, it closed on my future, too. But he wasn't thinking about me – or the fact that, once he left, we would no longer have a way to talk.

I can't believe him again now.



The very next day, Friday, I walk with Cathy to her house for our first rehearsal. Nausea follows me. But with each step, this transgression gets easier. I might never get to explore the whole world, but perhaps I can get to know this one person.

It's only a short trip from the school to Cathy's house. I memorise the streets as though my life depends on it. (It does, metaphorically.) The brick houses assemble themselves neatly beside each other. Fences reach out to meet each other, changing only slightly in colour and style. Dogs are walked and children picked up and carried home.

Then we are outside her house. A wedge of disorganised shrubs stretches out across the concrete pathway, leading up to a blue door. Cathy unlocks it.

Then I'm in her vast music room, which takes up most of the space at the back of her house. Her brand-new Korg keyboard looms before me, acting as a stand for my laptop. (I can't play keys.) Above us, there's a little wooden frame with a picture of Cathy sitting in this same room singing, while a beaming boy with heat-styled hair plays bass. (I can't play bass either.)

I have one hour and ten minutes left here. I can't play the sounds for her either.

Cathy warms up for singing before I work up the courage to tell her.

'What do you mean you deleted it?' Without a change in her expression, she drags over the piano chair, inviting me to sit next to her. I perch myself a careful distance from her, so we're not touching. She closes the distance straight away, mindlessly tapping at the unpowered keys in front of us. 'If it's coming from the heart,' she breathes dramatically, 'you'll remember it always.'

'But I *don't* remember it.' Panic sets in.

To my surprise, she laughs. 'Yeah, okay, fair. That was a cringe thing to say. So, does this mean you don't wanna do the talent quest?'

‘No, no, no ... It’s just ... I’m working on a better one.’
I’m babbling again, desperate.

‘Yeah, cool,’ she says.

I wish I was confident, like the boy in the photo with his great posture and obvious musicianship. Then I’d be honest and tell her I don’t write for audiences.

‘I made that,’ she says, following my gaze. ‘You like it?’

‘What’s that?’ I clamour out of my feelings.

‘The frame. I made that at school. I do woodworking.’

‘Oh, that’s cool,’ I say.

‘Thanks.’ She smiles. ‘Well, anyway, I’m wrecked from school. Wanna play a game?’



In today’s obvious news: video games have changed since I last played them at least five years ago. We’re sitting on bean bags in Cathy’s bedroom, among her trophies and jewellery boxes and her unsorted laundry pile. Cathy effortlessly navigates jumps and dialogues and gun fights, swearing all the while. She keeps asking me if I want a turn, so I keep saying I’d rather watch, but she gets a bit confused or maybe even hurt that I’m just sitting here, so I take the controller. It won’t stop pushing the character to go forward, so we barrel ahead and careen into a wall.

As I face the wall, trying my hardest to spin the character in a different direction but spinning the camera and getting dizzy instead, in walks a pale, freckled woman with an array of sugary snacks. I hadn’t even realised anyone else was home. Headphones dangle around her neck, emanating tinny Top 40 melodies, and she’s wearing yoga pants. I blink at her.

She taps Cathy on the arm, sliding the treats between us. ‘Hello! Help yourselves,’ she says.

‘Mum, I said to give us space,’ Cathy interjects. Oh, of course, this is her mum. So much for ‘wholesome’ – I’m more on the ignorant side of naïve.

Ugh.

I can’t help but take a red lolly (the number one artificial colour banned in my household) and I pop it in my mouth. It tastes like perfume. ‘Wow, thanks, Mrs Lin,’ I say, overcompensating. ‘Oh, and um, thanks for having me.’

‘Oh, it’s no trouble at all, sweetie. And please call me Louise.’

‘Okay, *bye* Mum,’ says Cathy loudly. I try not to read this as a bad sign, but my pulse rises to my throat.

When I turn back to Cathy, she’s laughing. ‘You should have seen your face,’ she says. ‘You had no idea my mum would be white, did you?’

I bury my face in my hands, wishing I could delete this afternoon from existence.

‘It happens all the time,’ she says, with a mirthful shrug.

She giggles for another eternity, then scoots over to the door, pushing it shut with a bang that makes me jump. ‘Okay,’ she announces. ‘I just realised I should tell you the deal straight up, if you’re gonna come over and hang out. My mum has anxiety. Panic attacks. She hasn’t had an episode for a really long time, but I always tell my friends about it, in case something happens, and you wonder what’s going on.’

My character keeps running forward into nowhere. I can’t process all these words.

‘That sucks.’ The lolly aftertaste has soured, and I run my tongue along my teeth, imagining the damage. Wait, she said *friends*, even though all I’ve done this afternoon is demonstrate my ignorance on all topics.

‘I’ve been worried lately.’ Cathy pauses, her eyes flicking to the photos on the wall, where a much younger Cathy, often in costumes or at performances, is routinely flanked by her enthusiastic parents. ‘You saw that, right? She’s being weird.’

‘So weird,’ I say, my brain still trapped in mortification and *weird* and *friends*.

‘Why didn’t you tell me you don’t play games?’ she demands.

‘I play games all the time.’ I don’t know why I say this.

‘Seriously, I’m curious.’ She stares at me.

My head spins. A tiny part of me really wants to tell her the truth about life at home, but I can’t. After they’re said, words are out of your control, and everything’s already out of control.

‘It’s your parents, right?’ she asks. ‘They are super strict, right? Is that why you were homeschooled?’

Trapped, I nod. I’m squeezing one of the tiny beans in the beanbag until I feel an imprint where my nail was. ‘Sort of ... I sort of ...’ *I sort of lied to them so I could be here and in thirty minutes I will have to run back to school and pretend I was just in a homework club.* The truth nearly floods out of me again. But I stop it.

She sighs. ‘You know, I think all parents are afraid of their kids growing up and living lives that don’t involve them so much.’

‘Well, I seriously can’t wait for the rest of my life to start.’ My heart races as this statement leaves me and I can’t ever take it back. But it feels ... good. ‘Being seventeen is maddening.’

‘I know,’ she says, sinking back into the beanbag. ‘Anyway, I’ll teach you how to play.’



That night, I'm under my floral blankets, wrapped up and wide awake and smelling of body wash. Nick's email fills up the space in my mind. *A whole world and future out there.* I know it can't be true, but it's haunting me. All those impossibilities. Even though there's been a solid half an hour since the last sound of movement, I make myself count to one hundred as one last check. The stillness persists.

I crawl to the foot of the bed and, tapping the mute key just in case, open my laptop. I turn it away from the door, making sure that the light patterns from its screen don't reach the hallway. Sliding down onto my belly, I jam my headphones on and start fishing around for the charger. Usually it's beside my bed, but it's not.

Before I can change my mind, I'm tiptoeing out of my bedroom. In the total darkness, I let my eyes adapt. The home security system is on at night, to protect us from whoever would bother driving out here to steal old records, but there's a path around them Nick and I figured out years ago.

The blinking red lights on the sensors separate me and the study nook. As long as they keep this same pattern of blinking, we're good. I creep around them, freezing every so often to check the lights like I'm in a bad spy movie with a laser-dodging scene. My bare feet absorb the chill in the tiles. Time is collapsing in the weird pre-dawn, and

I half-expect to have to sneak past Nick on his own after-dark mission, like I often did all those years ago.

I snatch the charger and steal back into my room, away from those thoughts. I load up an empty Ableton session and plonk down a basic beat. *Click / click / click / click.* The looping, monotonous kick drowns out my rushing thoughts. *Thump / thump / thump / thump.* This is my private, wordless world. Or it was, before I went and staked my only friendship on it.

Choosing a vocal-like synth sound, I try to capture this purple pre-dawn in the airy notes. Of course, it slips away from me, but I follow it anyway, channelling this feeling of being alive, almost an adult, in this suburban stillness; this feeling of knowing there's a friend out there, in a near-identical house just down the road, perhaps lying awake in her own silent world, thinking these same thoughts.

I seriously can't wait for the rest of my life to start.

I reach out for her in the only way I know how, imitating the torrent of rain down the phone line, channelling how hard it was to hear her and be heard, turning down the synth pads so there's space for her voice. I'm so afraid of what she will hear in this. So afraid, so excited.

I seriously can't wait.

The morning light and the decision startle me.