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FUTURE

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Australian Government

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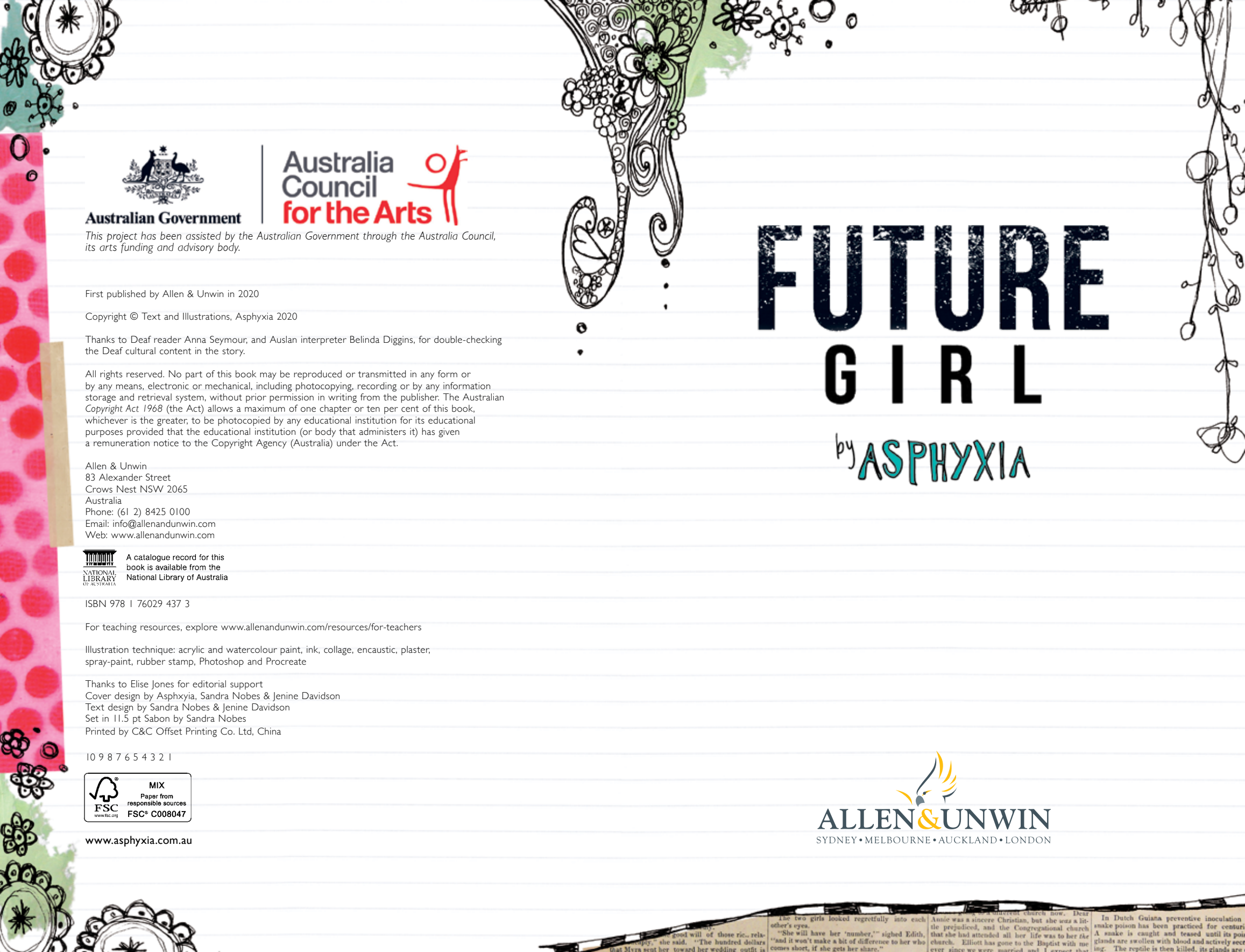


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FUTURE GIRL

by ASPHYXIA



The two girls looked regretfully into each other's eyes.
"She will have her 'number,'" sighed Edith, "and it won't make a bit of difference to her who comes short, if she gets her share."
Annie was a sincere Christian, but she was a little prejudiced, and the Congregational church that she had attended all her life was to her the church. Elliott had gone to the Baptist with me ever since we were quitted, and I agreed that
In Dutch Guiana preventive inoculation snake poison has been practiced for centuries. A snake is caught and teased until its poison glands are swollen with blood and actively secreting. The reptile is then killed, its glands are

WEDNESDAY 17 JUNE

My pencil scratches over the plastic sheet, outlining a red cylinder. With a white pen I add tiny hairs, a floating tail. Not bad. It's luminous, glowing. Taylor nudges me, points to the time on her visi-screen. She means, *Stop faffing around with that drawing, focus on your visi, and get on with the assignment.*

I add a caption to the bottom: *E coli.*

'That's E coli?' Taylor types. 'I thought you were inventing recon lollies. Something new for your mum to make.'

'This is a dangerous missile,' I type back. 'It lurks in wild food, waiting to kill you. Don't be deceived by its pretty face. And anyway, Mum doesn't do food design. She just researches the nutrition to include.'

Taylor scowls and smooths her fringe with her palm. She only cut it last week – it still looks weird on her. My hair is long and straight and dark and has been that way forever.

'I know that,' Taylor types. 'Are you gonna help write this thing up? We'll get dismal marks if you leave it to me.'

She's done as I asked, drafted an outline. I sigh and punch 'food poisoning' into Cesspool. It spits out a long list of feeds about people who ate wild food and died. In a perverse kind of a way, Mum loves this stuff. Every time another story comes out, recon sales jump. One of these days, everyone will be eating recon and wild food will be a distant memory.

This book belongs to
Piper McBride

PRIVATE! (Do not read.)

My head throbs and the insides of my ears itch. I'm sick of sitting under fluorescent lights, lined up in rows with a hundred other girls wearing blue-and-white uniforms, staring at our transparent plastic desk-mounted visi-screens. But that's Mary Magdalene Ladies' College for you. I rub my ear moulds so they scratch at my ears, but it's not enough. I can't take out my hearing aids yet, though; not until class finishes.

Taylor nudges me again and gestures with her head towards Madison, Alyssa and Briony. Something's going on. They're crowding around Madison's visi-screen, a matching set with their new fringes. A buzz ripples through the classroom as a bunch of other girls notice and wander over to join them. Soon enough, they're all talking emphatically...and they keep glancing over at me.

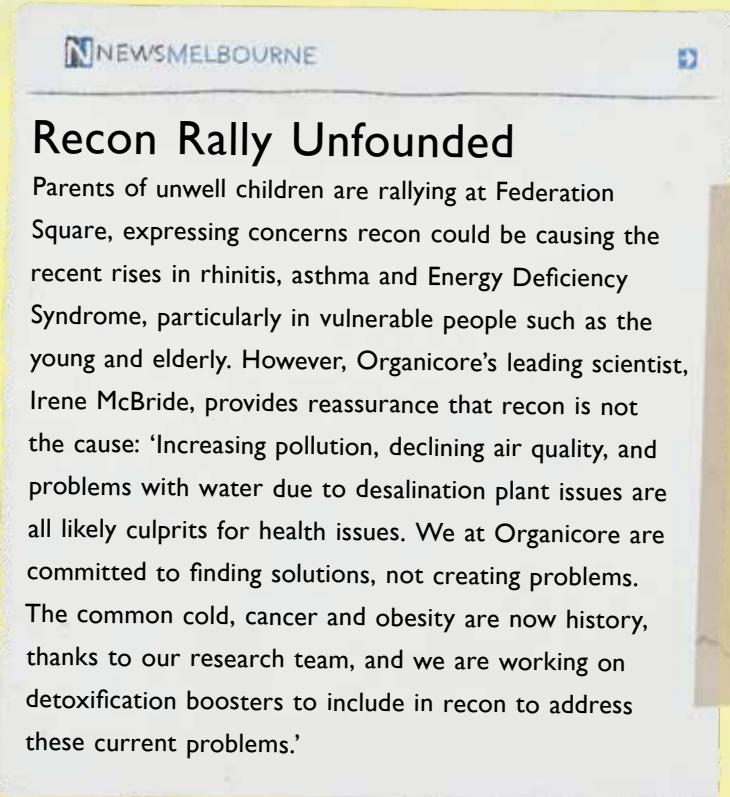
I check our teacher, Lisa. She throws me a glance before typing something into Cesspool and bringing up whatever it is on her own visi. She's supposed to be controlling our behaviour! Why isn't she telling everyone to shut up and focus on food poisoning? And what does whatever's going on have to do with me?

I strain my eyes, trying to catch my classmates' words on their lips, but everywhere I look I see faces obscured by long locks of shiny hair. My hearing aids are no good for stuff happening on the other side of the room.

I stare anyway and notice a rim of inflamed red skin around Madison's wristlet. She's had it implanted! Wow. No wristband required, and no need to recharge it anymore. Forgetting your wristlet because it's charging has been the worst – no tram check-ins, no access to your money at shops, no way to prove your ID – since the government rolled out Cesspool

(sorry, *QuestTool*) two years ago. I just wish I was better at one-handed typing, but despite the new school subject they introduced to help us adjust, I'm as hopeless as everyone else. Except for Briony, who has lightning fingers.

Taylor taps her visi and brings up News Melbourne. Mum comes into focus, speaking to the camera. Oh. Everyone knows I'm Irene McBride's daughter. Taylor taps again, and the text version rolls down the screen.



Onscreen, Mum looks poised. The image cuts to Fed Square, where angry parents are clutching pale, wheezy-looking children. One placard says *Don't drug our kids*, which seems a bit harsh.

I remember when Mum added the fat-destroyers, cancer-zappers and virus-killers to Nutrium Sustate, the nutrition powder she developed. At first the idea of mass medication in our food was controversial, but that changed once Karen Kildare was elected prime minister and News Melbourne started publishing the stats each week so that we could all see the health benefits for ourselves.

I massage my temples and try to ignore the stares. So what? It's just news. But I can't help myself from sliding News Melbourne into view; despite Mum's apparent confidence, I know this will be stressing her out.

A new feed has replaced the one about recon, though. Mum's already history. Instead, there's a photo of Organicore's biggest competitor: people are crowding through the doors of an outlet of the Allstar supermarket chain.

I yawn. I'm sick of this oil thing already. I don't get why it's such a big deal: with a recon subscription, we don't need to queue at the supermarket, and it's not like recon is unaffordable. Maybe Allstar will be unable to meet consumer demand and will go out of business. Now *that* would make Mum happy.

Taylor pokes me and eyeballs her visi. She's written me a message: 'Come to a party with me and Beau on Sat night? It's in Fitzroy, not far from you.'

Beau's the guy she's been hanging around with. Things must have escalated if she's going to a party with him. I haven't met him yet, but according to Taylor he's older, tall and magnetising.

I type back, 'Good to see you putting in a solid effort on our assignment.'

She kicks me under our desk. I nod and give her the thumbs up. *Yeah, I'll come.*

NEWSMELBOURNE

Consumers Swarm Supermarkets

This week's oil price jump has affected incoming shipments of food and consumer goods, resulting in a shortage on supermarket shelves. Desperate consumers are stockpiling basics, leaving with trolleys piled high, while others meet sparsely stocked shelves with disappointment. It's a tough week for consumers, with electricity and gas prices also on the rise and petrol already beyond the average household budget.

FRIDAY

19 JUNE



Piper McBride

My hand flies, the pacer pencil I'm holding scribbling grey lines loose and fast across the plastic sheet. I glance in the mirror. My picture needs to be darker around the eyes. I work back and forth around the eyelids, my face coming into focus. It doesn't look much like me, I don't think, but I've finally done a face with the right proportions!

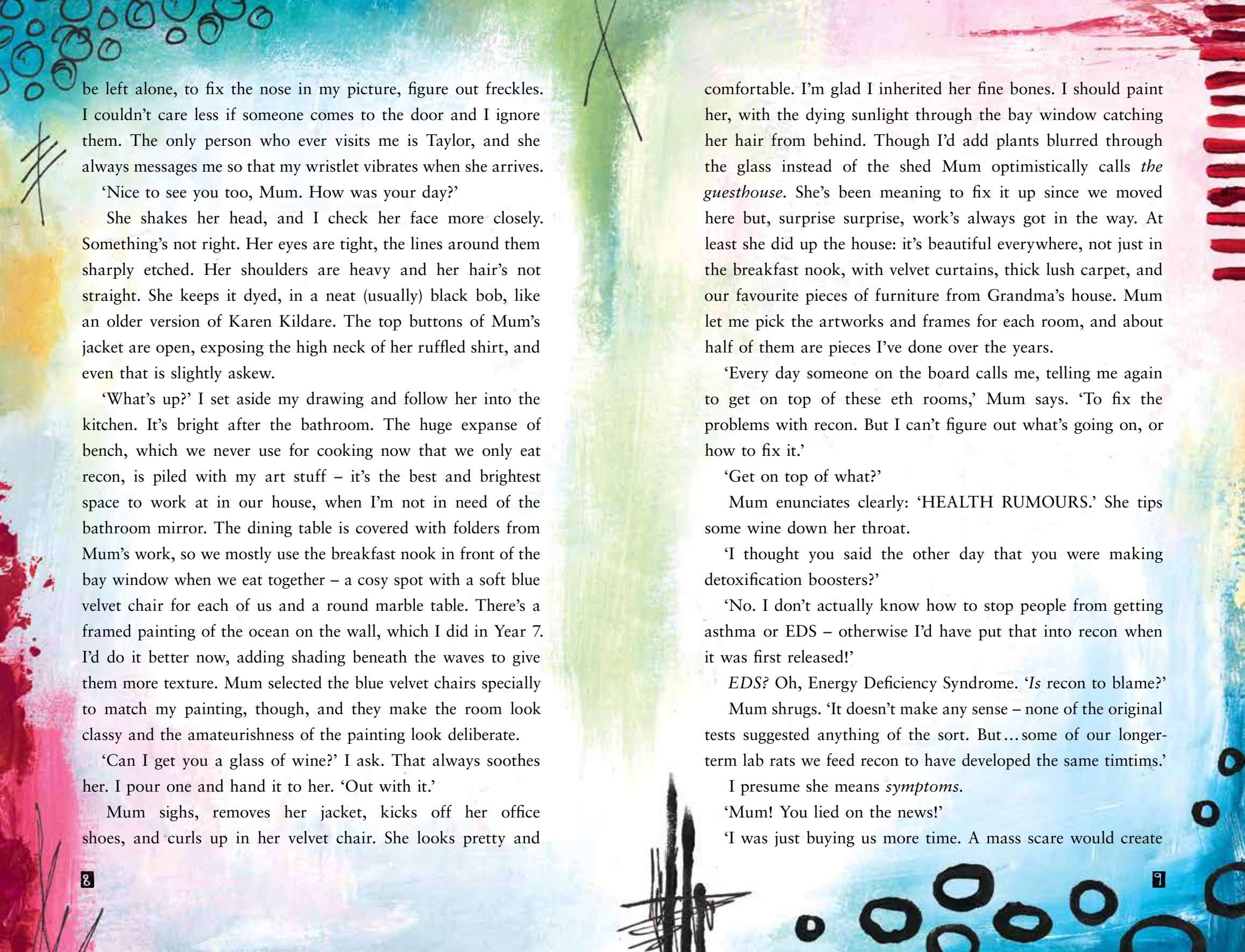
Now, how to capture my skin? It's pale, with a few freckles. When I try to draw the freckles, they look just that: drawn on. I ignore my school uniform and sketch in my favourite top instead. I'll add red paint later. My nose isn't quite right, so I check the mirror again and nearly jump out of my skin. Mum's right behind me.

'Hey,' I say, though I can't hear my own voice.

She gestures for me to put my hearing aids in. Sigh. The desperate must-get-a-cotton-bud-now itch has only just worn off my ears. Not that a cotton bud ever satisfies that itch. Reluctantly I plug them back in and turn to Mum. 'I didn't realise you were home.'

'Piper, you should be wearing your hearing aids. What if there's a fire? How will you hear the alarm? What if someone comes to the door?'

My eyes throb. Mum's easy for me to understand, but the headache is arcing up again anyway. Right now, I just want to



be left alone, to fix the nose in my picture, figure out freckles. I couldn't care less if someone comes to the door and I ignore them. The only person who ever visits me is Taylor, and she always messages me so that my wristlet vibrates when she arrives.

'Nice to see you too, Mum. How was your day?'

She shakes her head, and I check her face more closely. Something's not right. Her eyes are tight, the lines around them sharply etched. Her shoulders are heavy and her hair's not straight. She keeps it dyed, in a neat (usually) black bob, like an older version of Karen Kildare. The top buttons of Mum's jacket are open, exposing the high neck of her ruffled shirt, and even that is slightly askew.

'What's up?' I set aside my drawing and follow her into the kitchen. It's bright after the bathroom. The huge expanse of bench, which we never use for cooking now that we only eat recon, is piled with my art stuff – it's the best and brightest space to work at in our house, when I'm not in need of the bathroom mirror. The dining table is covered with folders from Mum's work, so we mostly use the breakfast nook in front of the bay window when we eat together – a cosy spot with a soft blue velvet chair for each of us and a round marble table. There's a framed painting of the ocean on the wall, which I did in Year 7. I'd do it better now, adding shading beneath the waves to give them more texture. Mum selected the blue velvet chairs specially to match my painting, though, and they make the room look classy and the amateurishness of the painting look deliberate.

'Can I get you a glass of wine?' I ask. That always soothes her. I pour one and hand it to her. 'Out with it.'

Mum sighs, removes her jacket, kicks off her office shoes, and curls up in her velvet chair. She looks pretty and

comfortable. I'm glad I inherited her fine bones. I should paint her, with the dying sunlight through the bay window catching her hair from behind. Though I'd add plants blurred through the glass instead of the shed Mum optimistically calls *the guesthouse*. She's been meaning to fix it up since we moved here but, surprise surprise, work's always got in the way. At least she did up the house: it's beautiful everywhere, not just in the breakfast nook, with velvet curtains, thick lush carpet, and our favourite pieces of furniture from Grandma's house. Mum let me pick the artworks and frames for each room, and about half of them are pieces I've done over the years.

'Every day someone on the board calls me, telling me again to get on top of these eth rooms,' Mum says. 'To fix the problems with recon. But I can't figure out what's going on, or how to fix it.'

'Get on top of what?'

Mum enunciates clearly: 'HEALTH RUMOURS.' She tips some wine down her throat.

'I thought you said the other day that you were making detoxification boosters?'

'No. I don't actually know how to stop people from getting asthma or EDS – otherwise I'd have put that into recon when it was first released!'

EDS? Oh, Energy Deficiency Syndrome. 'Is recon to blame?'

Mum shrugs. 'It doesn't make any sense – none of the original tests suggested anything of the sort. But...some of our longer-term lab rats we feed recon to have developed the same timtims.'

I presume she means *symptoms*.

'Mum! You lied on the news!'

'I was just buying us more time. A mass scare would create

chaos. We have about sixty-five per cent of the population eating recon now, and if they suddenly reject it, we'll go under. Imagine the consequences if that happened. Piper, we eradicated *cancer*! I'll fix this, I know it. I just need more time. But the latest experiment I tried hasn't worked out, and the board's getting impatient. *And* there's a may problem—'

'A what problem?' I massage little circles around my eyes. I wish I had something like wine to relax me. Sometimes I take painkillers for my headaches, but they upset my stomach, so I try not to use them too often.

'MON-EY.' Mum drains her wine. 'My monthly pay didn't come through last week; I'm still trying to sort that out. And filling the car with petrol cleaned out my account. How can they charge forty-seven dollars fifty per litre? And now there's an electricity bill that's just ridiculous!'

I wouldn't have a clue what petrol costs normally, but going by her face, the news isn't good. 'You could get the tram to work?' I say. I've been at Mum for ages to ditch the car and take up public transport. Save the world and all that.

'I'm going to have to. Petrol costs threguas of what I earn in a week!'

'Three-quarters?'

'Yes.'

I blink. I didn't expect her to say yes. Or to share any of this information with me, for that matter; we don't usually talk about this sort of stuff. Maybe I should capitalise on her agreeable mood! 'Mum, do you reckon I could get an implant?'

'Piper, didn't you hear anything I just said? We have no money, and until Organicore fixes up whatever is going on with their payroll, I'm not buying anything!'

'I meant after they pay you.'

'After they pay me, the first thing I'll be focusing on is paying my overdue electricity bill.'

Wow. This really is quite bad. I've never heard Mum complain about money before.

'You could pay for the implant from the Europe account,' I say. Next year we're going to Europe. We'll see the Louvre and the Tate and the Van Gogh Museum. Mum's taking a whole month off work. Mum, me and all the famous art of the world. I can't wait. We were supposed to go this year, but Mum got caught up at work and we had to postpone.

'The savings for our trip to Europe are all in shares. They'd have to be sold. I'm not touching them until it's time to buy our airfares.'

Mum gets up and opens this week's recon cupboard, which we always keep where the fridge used to be, perusing the choices. I follow her over and stare at the rows of boxes neatly lined up in their slots.

'Clopa foos padta we cheeps,' she says, taking one out. I read the box label to understand her. *Global Fusion: Pad Thai with Chips*. 'I think Organicore has gone a bit far this time.'

Organicore has a whole team of meal designers. They take the Nutrium Sustate powder from Mum's team, mix it with BioSpore, which is just a calorific spongy mass, and then add flavours, colours and texturisers. When it comes out of the mould, you can barely tell it's not really fish, porridge or baked beans.

I hold out my hand. 'Let me have it. Experimentation is good for the psyche.'

'SY-KEE, Piper.'

‘Huh?’

‘You say SY-KEE, not SIKE.’

Oh. It’s pretty hard to know how to say stuff the right way when you don’t get to hear it being said. I take the box and go to press *heat*, but Mum snatches it back.

‘You can’t have that one; it has my name on it.’ I roll my eyes as Mum finds me my own Global Fusion and puts her one back, picking herself out Smoked Trout with Salad instead. She’s a stickler for ensuring we eat the recon tailored specially for us – our body weights and medical statuses – I suppose because she invented it. I don’t tell her that Taylor and I swap meals all the time.

While we wait, Mum says, ‘Did you do the vocation tutorial at school?’

My headache intensifies. My lack of ambition is the bane of Mum’s life. ‘I entered all my interests and it suggested nursing. Can you see me as a *nurse*? The doctor would tell me to administer eight millilitres of morphine to the patient in bed fourteen, and I’d go to bed forty and administer eighty.’

Mum sighs. ‘Yes, that might not be appreciated.’ She pours herself a second glass of wine and takes a big mouthful. ‘Science, Piper. There are always jobs in research. And depending on the role, maybe your **D**eafness wouldn’t matter.’

‘*Boredom*, Mum! I can barely keep my eyes open during science. How do you expect me to survive fifty years in the field? I’ll be in a coma by the time I’m twenty.’ I rub my hearing aids. My ears are itching again. ‘So that leaves one option: art!’

Mum rolls her eyes. ‘No one except Picasso ever made any money from art, and he was probably dead before the dollars

started rolling in. Think of your dad.’ She reaches for her recon box and I see the light’s gone off. I never hear the beep.

I open mine. It smells delicious; I love pad thai. ‘Dad could be a famous artist by now.’

Neither of us would know it if he was. He left when I was a baby and we haven’t heard from him since. Mum doesn’t seem too cut up about it, and I can’t say I miss him given that I never really knew him.

‘That reminds me,’ Mum says. ‘A certain package from Spain arrived today.’

I jump to my feet. ‘*Mum!* Where is it? How could you forget?’

She gestures towards the hall and I tear down to the table by the front door. Yep, there’s a plastic box there with my name on it. I rip open the packaging, and there it is: my long-awaited *real paper* journal. The cover is plain, bound with tape. I’ll paint something to stick over it. I open the journal and finger the pages. The texture is lush, nothing like plastic. It’s smooth but not slick, creamy but still white. Everything, *everything* I draw and paint looks better on real paper.

I bring the journal to the kitchen and throw my arms around Mum. ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you!’

She smiles. She does love to indulge me, I’ll say that. ‘Happy sixteenth birthday, Piper.’

My birthday was two months ago. It took this package ages to arrive. But it’s here now. *Real paper!* I’ll keep it with me always, and make myself a little kit to keep with it: a pencil case with a few colours of paint, my favourite pens, scissors, an eraser, a set of graphite pencils... and I can’t forget a glue stick...

I rush to my room, flick on the light, and open my desk drawers. Which paint colours? Definitely red. And I love black.

SaTuRdaY 20
JUNE

But not too many or it will be too much to lug around. I'll include my tin of watercolours for sure. And a few brushes... Maybe I can fill a little bottle of water to keep with me. I grab my largest pencil case and begin collecting supplies.

The light flicks off, plunging the room into dullness. Mum is standing in the doorway. 'Guv the letriss situation, we're going to have to conserve it until my pay comes through. One lie at a time. And I'm turning off the heating. And the hot water too, unless you stick to threemy showers once a day.'

It's hard to lipread her when it's so dim, so it takes me a moment to figure out what she's said. 'Electricity? One light at a time?'

Mum nods.

Threemy? Oh! 'Did you say I can only have three-minute showers?'

'That's right. You'll have to learn to wash your hair faster.'

Whoa. I can't believe Mum's serious. At this rate, she'll single-handedly save the world after all.

She holds out my dinner. 'You forgot this.'

But who cares about pad thai and chips, or electricity for that matter, when I have a portable art studio to set up? 'Do you think you could bring your dinner in here, Mum? So we can have the light on in my room instead of in the kitchen?'

Mum obliges, and once the room is bright again and she's settled on my bed, eating, she says, 'You know, there are plenty of jobs with QuestTool, and they probably wouldn't rely much on hearing. You could start at the bottom, approving content, and work your way up.'

'Mum! Not now!' I turn back to my drawer and fish out an 8B pencil. I'll need a rag, too, to wipe my brushes on.

I follow Taylor into a lounge room. The house is dark, but the party's not exactly rocking: there are maybe ten people sitting on mismatched old couches and armchairs set around a table littered with half-finished beers, vodka and cherrygrog. Incense is burning, ash spilling onto the table. I hope it won't melt the plastic. The smoke is cloying. Music blares and the beat thumps in me, but the rest is a jumble of random sounds. I want to rip my hearing aids out, but figure I'd better leave them in to be sociable.

A tall, skinny guy with dirty-blond hair and a tattoo of a menacing crow on his forehead peels himself off the couch and greets Taylor, pulling her into his arms. Is this Beau? He's wearing a thick shirt with a high ruffled neck, and neat trousers with zips in the legs going up to his knees.

Now I see why Taylor's all dressed up. She's pulled her hair into two buns on top of her head, and suddenly her fringe looks chic instead of weird. Heavy black eyeliner rims her eyes and the effect is tragi-glam. She's wearing a short blue dress made of some kind of fake wool, with long sleeves, ruffles at the wrist, and a high white faux-fur collar. Despite the warm dress and some platform boots, her solid legs are bare. I've never seen this outfit before. I didn't think Taylor had the money for new clothes.

I glance around the room and see that the other girls are dressed similarly, with upswept hair, dramatic make-up and gorgeous dresses. I feel underdressed with my bare skin, flat hair, jeans and thick jacket. I look more like one of the guys, only not as clean and sharp.

Taylor grabs my arm and introduces me. I was right, this is Beau. He takes my hand and leans in to kiss me perfunctorily on the cheek, assaulting me with an intense cloud of perfume. I resist the urge to step back, giving him my best smile instead.

'How are you?' I ask. If Taylor likes him, he must be nice.

He says something back that I don't catch. It's too dark for me to have a hope of lipreading.

I glance up at Taylor. 'Drink,' she mouths, miming herself downing a cup.

'Thanks, that'd be sweet.'

Beau disappears, and Taylor finds a spot for us on one of the couches. I squash up against a beefy guy who's leaning back against the cushions and looks half asleep. He eyes me lazily and says something.

I don't think I'll hear him if I ask for a repeat, so I just smile. Taylor turns to a girl on her other side and starts having an animated conversation.

The beefy guy speaks to me again and I glance at Taylor, nervous, but all I can see is her back. I smile, nod and give him the thumbs up. That seems to satisfy him for the moment. I hope no one else speaks to me.

I wait for the guy to look away and then surreptitiously slip my hearing aids out of my ears and zip them into my jacket pocket. The world goes quiet, save for the rhythmic thump of the beat, which I feel more than hear. That's better.

Opposite me on another couch, three guys and two girls are immersed in conversation. I can see them shouting to be heard, laughing. I think the blonde girl is flirting with one of the guys. Two of them have implanted wristlets.

Next to them in a chair is a couple making out, and that guy has a wristlet implant too. The girl's kneeling on his lap and he's holding her butt cheeks while they tongue each other. I watch, curious and mortified. Sweet sixteen and never been kissed, that's me. I can't picture any guy wanting to kiss me, and while I like the idea of being kissed, I'm not sure I'd want to have my arse groped in public like that. It seems undignified.

Beau reappears and hands me an opened can of cherrygrog. His wristlet is implanted too. He leans down and says something into my ear.

I lean back, turn my head, and strain to see his mouth. 'What did you say?'


He tries again to access my ear and we do this weird dance, with me trying to keep my eyes on his face. I win. He repeats himself, confused, but it's hopeless. I shrug.

'I can't hear you over the music,' I shout. I can't bring myself to admit I'm deaf. I just want to fit in, be like everyone else, despite the fact that my outfit is all wrong. Why didn't Taylor tell me? Though if she had, what would I have worn? It's not like I own platform boots or a short dress. Taylor and I always wear jeans when we hang out. Maybe I need to go shopping.

Beau tries again and gestures to the other people in the room.

'Cool place...?' I say.

He nods and gives up on me, probably thinking I'm too inane to have a real conversation with. He reaches past me for



Taylor, pulling her to her feet. Then he wraps his arms around her and they dance. It seems that things have progressed in the Beau department.

I sip the cherrygrog. It's sickly sweet and burns my throat, like cough medicine. The air starts to take on a surreal texture, the faces opposite me seeming to move almost in slow motion, luminous against the shadows. I take a deep breath, try to clear my head, but the incense smoke catches in my throat and I cough.

I wish I'd brought my journal.

I can't do this.

The couple making out are practically lying sideways in the armchair now, and the guy's hand slides up the girl's leg.

The beefy guy shifts. He's waving his hand slowly near my face, a patronising gesture: *Earth to plain girl*. I realise he's been speaking to me and I've been ignoring him.

'Sorry. What did you say?' I ditch the cherrygrog on the table. I've tried Mum's wine before and never liked it. I don't like this stuff either.

He leans towards me, and I feel his breath on my face as he speaks. But I can't catch even a single word. His mouth barely moves. I smile and nod, my fallback, but it doesn't satisfy him, and I realise he's asking me a question.

'What? Sorry, I still didn't hear you.'

More breath on my face. I try to guess the possibilities. *How do you know Beau? What do you think of this party? Where do you go to school?* But nothing I can think of matches the shapes his mouth makes. I throw him an uneasy smile, shrug and stand up. I've got to get away. This is not working.

Taylor is still dancing with Beau. She's smiling a flirty smile, but I can tell she's not quite comfortable. After a moment,

I see why. Beau has dipped down and is sliding his hand up her leg, all sexy-like. Taylor flinches slightly and spins out of reach, dodging him, but he does it again, and this time she lets him. Only her head is ducked forward, and when Taylor does that it means she's thinking about what to do next.

When his hand disappears up her dress, Taylor's head tips back and she laughs. She's decided to go with it. But I know he's moving too fast for her. Can't he read her body language?

I tap her shoulder and she turns to me, eyebrows raised. Beau says something and they both laugh, their faces friendly and warm towards me. I have no idea what's so funny, but it seems mean to stand there with a stony face and I really do want to make a good impression on Beau, so I laugh too. Beau makes another comment and we all laugh a bit more.

Finally, I grab Taylor's hand. 'I'm sorry, but I have to go.'

She turns from Beau, who stops dancing and reaches for another drink. She makes sure she's facing the light and mouths clearly: 'Why? What's wrong?'

'Can we go outside for a minute?' I ask.

I take her hand and Taylor traipses after me. The air outside is cold and crisp, clearing my head instantly. I inhale deeply. We stand under the verandah light, Taylor facing it so I can lipread her. I put my hearing aids back in.

'Don't let him do anything you don't want him to do,' I say.

'I know. But it's exciting being with him. He's kind of bad. Know what I mean?'

I shrug. 'I don't think I've felt that.'

'I can handle him. Why are you leaving?' Taylor rubs her legs.

'I can't lipread in the dark. Aren't you cold?'

Taylor nods. 'But it's worth it. Gotta suffer for beauty.'

'I guess that's why I'll never be beautiful. Not prepared to suffer.' I gesture to my boring clothes.

'You're always beautiful, Piper,' she says. 'Me, I need a funky dress and make-up to pull it off.'

'Where'd you get the dress? It's gorgeous.'

'Lollies and Dirt.'

My eyes widen. 'It must have cost a fortune!'

Taylor laughs. She's shivering.

'You're cold. Go back inside. It looks like Beau fancies you as much as you like him.'

'Maybe tonight's going to be my night. Will you be okay to get home without me? I'd come, but...'

But she might have sex with Beau. 'I'll be fine. Go.'

As soon as I'm alone I pull my hearing aids out of my ears again. I walk slowly to Smith Street and hail a tram. It's crowded even though it's late. There are hardly any cars on the road. When I wave my wristlet past the tram's check-in point, it vibrates.

Insufficient funds.

What? I had plenty of money in my account! I should get off the tram, but I don't. I cast my eye around for inspectors but don't see anyone official. Bringing my bank account up on my wristlet, I see that I have exactly fifteen dollars left. That should be plenty.

Then I see the last transaction: me checking in on the tram to go to the party. Eighty-five dollars at 9.12 pm. *Eighty-five dollars?!*

I hope Mum's pay has been sorted out. I'm going to need some more pocket money. The guy in front of me gets off at Clifton Hill and I see a row of new ads above the windows.

We apologise for an unavoidable fare rise due to increased fuel costs. Please check updated fares before travelling.

It's a bit late for that. Have they increased fare evasion fines too?

I think of what I'll paint in my journal tomorrow: A page of deep blues and greens. Lots of layers and texture. A tiny sliver of grey sky at the top.

You're NOT drowning. Just swimming DEEP.
I'm not sure I can do this teenager thing.
Perhaps I'm doomed to stay a child
FOREVER



TUESDAY 23
JUNE

Three days later I'm on the tram again, on my way home from school, and an inspector climbs on, scanner ready. I push urgently through the throng and manage to dive off just before the doors close. About ten other people dismount with me. Are we all travelling without checking in? I don't know how else to get home.

Organicore still hasn't paid Mum, and she didn't give me this week's pocket money. We haven't talked about the fact that I can't pay my tram fare. I wonder whether she can't either; she ditched the car this week as promised. Thanks to the lack of heating and light, we've both basically been spending as much of our time at home as possible in bed.

I shake my head, trying to push the worry away. I'm only in Church Street, so it's a long, long walk home, with the wind whipping my hair. I switch off my hearing aids but leave them in my ears for warmth.

The roads are quieter than usual. The streets and sky are grey. I miss trees, and green, and I curse the tree vandals who stole them all, leaving only stumps behind. If only wood never became so valuable. I sigh. There are some shrubs behind garden fences, but they're dry and listless thanks to the water restrictions.

I jump as a guy races past me on a bike, grazing my arm. Couldn't he have given me a little space – like, ridden *around*

me? He probably rang his bell, presumed I'd move out of his way. I wish the *possibility* that I can't hear would occur to people. Taylor has reported this to me before: the swearing and yelling as I walk calmly on, 'ignoring' cyclists and their bells.

Over an hour later, I trudge into my street and it's the same: grey, grey, grey. There's a wide island down the middle of the road sprinkled with dead grass – thank you, drought – and no one in sight but me and an old guy trudging along slowly. I've seen him before, working his way up and down, up and down the street, going nowhere; it seems lonely. Organicore has delivered – there are recon cupboards inside the gates of about half the houses, including ours. Even the cupboards are grey.

My feet ache. I push the cupboard aside, knowing I should bring it inside, but wondering instead whether my old bike might be in the guesthouse with the rest of the stuff we don't use anymore. Taylor and I used to mess around on our bikes together, but after I crashed mine the handlebar was twisted and it felt weird. I haven't ridden it since.

I drop my schoolbag by the back door and head for the guesthouse. The smell of damp and dust assaults me as I flick on the light, illuminating piles of crap Mum and I haven't dealt with in years. I move a box out of my way and it shoots up a puff of white powder when I plonk it down, so I check out the packet inside – plaster! Wow. I reckon I could use that in my journal.

I find the bike and fiddle with it, wondering if I can fix the wonky handlebar, or maybe learn to ride with one hand further forward than the other to compensate. Then I take it for a test ride. It's in pretty bad shape. I think there's a repair place in High Street.

Leaving the bike out the back, I take the plaster inside. In the kitchen, I mix it with some water and spread it over some pages in my journal. It doesn't take long to dry, and the texture is amazing, like an old wall. I turn a page and it feels substantial, heavy. The plaster cracks a bit, and even that looks good.

I decide I'll add layers...collage some stuff over it. I take a sheet of plastic and paint it yellow. Then, using black, I add stripes. I tear the sheet into strips and glue it down randomly onto empty pages. The effect is strangely appealing. I dig out my sewing kit and stitch a plastic pocket inside the journal's front cover, then slip in the leftover part of the striped sheet to use later.

Thud. The house vibrates. Surely it's too early for Mum to be home?

But I put my head into the hallway and it *is* Mum. She's standing at the hall table by the front door, face red, mouth working furiously, hair wild. She always talks – okay, shouts – to herself when she's angry.

'Mum?' I say tentatively. 'What happened?' I need my hearing aids.

She turns to me, furious, her mouth going a mile a minute, and thumps her fist on the table. The hall reverberates. This is bad.

I hold up a finger and retreat into my bedroom. When I put in my hearing aids, I'm slammed with the noise of Mum shouting, the sounds random and incoherent. My head throbs. How to calm her down?

I go back to the hallway, but she's charging towards the kitchen. I follow and find her glaring at her work notes on the dining table.

'Do you want some wine?' I ask.

Instead of answering me, she swipes at the table and her notes fly to the floor, spilling across the kitchen. A chair topples with them, causing a crash I feel through my feet.

'MUM!' I shout, grabbing her. She deflates, sagging against the table, breathing hard. I'm standing on her notes. 'What happened?'

'I lost my job.'

What?! No. That's impossible.

'What did you say?'

'I. LOST. MY. JOB.'

'You can't lose your job!'

Mum's been with Organicore since the beginning. She *is* Organicore – she's their scientific foundation. Organicore is *us*, too – the core of our lives. This doesn't make sense. Why would they fire her? I know she's been struggling with solutions to the health problems, but it took her way longer than this to come up with Nutrium Sustate in the first place.

I check the cupboard under the bench for some wine, but it's empty. Huh? Mum never runs out. I fill a glass of water instead and hand it to her. She takes a sip.

'Theyfa hips of peep. Bob Forsy too.'

My headache tightens. Making sense of lip patterns exhausts me. Sometimes I understand Mum perfectly for hours at a stretch. Every now and again, I don't. But now I have it: *They fired heaps of people. Bob Forsyth too.*

Bob Forsyth is Mum's colleague, but also her biggest competitor. She's always only one step ahead of him. Her worst nightmare would be for him to step into her job.

'Speak clearly, Mum. Why did they fire Bob Forsyth? No, scrap that. Why did they fire *you*?'

‘They said it was because I’m making no progress, but that’s crap.’ This time Mum enunciates clearly, and I hear her as well as lipreading her.

‘Well, obviously.’ I stare at Mum with my eyebrows raised. ‘What’s the real reason?’

‘Olprees.’

‘What?’

‘Oil prices.’

‘What’s that got to do with your job?’

Mum takes a long drink of water and scowls at the glass. Then she sighs. ‘Picking up the BioSpore from the farmers and getting it to the warehouse, delivering recon to subscribers, it’s all costing too much. So they’ve cut every department they can, including their research division. Even marketing is gone. You can’t run a company without investing in its future!’

‘That’s ridiculous.’

‘I know. I think Organicore may not *have* much of a future, Piper, and I think they know it.’

That’s impossible too. A company that feeds sixty-five per cent of the population will always earn enough to run.

‘At least now they’ll have to pay the money they owe you,’ I say weakly.

Mum looks down, her hair falling over her mouth as she says something. It sounds like *train of monk monk*.

‘What did you say?’

‘They’ll pay me when they can.’

‘Which means never?’

Mum shrugs.

Maybe I’m going to have to get a job. But who’s going to employ a deaf person? Maybe Cesspool, like Mum suggested

the other day, since they hire lots of people to make sure there’s no pornography or other inappropriate stuff being published. I’d be no good with the videos, but I could vet the text? The thought sits heavily inside me.

I pick up the chair, set it back on its feet. ‘Early dinner?’ I suggest. Given there’s no wine, maybe food will put Mum in a better mood. Recon is delivered every second Tuesday, so we’ll have plenty of new stuff to choose from today.

I can’t tell if Mum replies, because she’s looking down again. I take it as a yes, head out the front, and wheel in this week’s cupboard. Pressing my thumb over the scanner, I feel the click as it unlocks. But only half the slots are filled.

I show Mum, who doesn’t seem surprised.

‘I hope they charged half for this!’ I say.

‘They charged double. I had to sell some shares to pay for it.’

At this rate, it might be a while before we get to Europe. ‘Will they deliver the other half next Tuesday?’ I ask.

‘I doubt it. Because it’s so expensive to pick up BioSpore, they’re only getting it from the closer farms. So now there’s a shortage. We’re going to have to ration this, Piper. From now on, we each get one recon for dinner, but only half a recon to eat through the day. At least until we see what happens next Tuesday.’

This is surreal – like stepping into a movie. Mum and I each pick our recon and shuffle through the mess on the kitchen floor to the breakfast nook.

‘What’ve you got?’ Mum asks.

I hold up the box. ‘Minestrone.’

‘You say MINNA-STROANY, not MIYN-STROAN.’

Even with civilisation collapsing around us, Mum can't stop fretting about my pronunciation.

'MINNA-STROANY,' I repeat back to her. 'So much for those silent *es*.'

Mum taps her wristlet and our big visi-screen lights up. Lately she's restricted our use of it to one hour a day. She picks the first half-hour, which is always news, then I get to pick the second.

Mum's face, enormous, looms in front of us. They're showing old footage I've seen before, of her leaving some conference hosted by Organicore. She looks poised, calm and elegant. Mum taps again and the subtitles appear.

'...has left Organicore. It is unclear why she and Organicore have parted ways. Could this be related to rising concerns that recon may be affecting the health of some consumers? Organicore spokesperson, Lily Jones, says the decision is part of the new, streamlined Organicore, poised to beat distribution issues...'

My wristlet vibrates. It's Taylor. I tap and she comes into focus on the tiny screen. She's on a visi, sitting at a table I don't recognise, looking happy and vibrant – the opposite of the mood going down in our house – though there are dark circles under her eyes.

'Beau and me and a bunch of others are going to tunks tonight,' she says. 'Want to come?'

'Going where?'

Taylor makes the shape of a pipe with her hands, then crosses her wrists over in a giant X. 'TUN-NEL X,' she enunciates clearly.

I rub my temples. I can't think of anything worse: Trying to lipread in a dark nightclub, making like I'm not awkward

as hell. Fake smiles, laughter, and nodding at incomprehensible words. And anyway, it's Tuesday. How come Taylor is allowed to go out on a Tuesday night all of a sudden?

'Uhm... it's not a good time for me. Mum just lost her job.'

Taylor covers her mouth with her hand and I catch a glimpse of bright-red skin around her wristlet. Her hand disappears so I can lipread her, and in the background Beau walks past, greeting someone offscreen.

'That's terrible!' she says. 'I thought your mum was the *core* of Organicore.'

'Tay, what have you done? Did you get the implant?!'

She holds up her wrist and grins. Sure enough, the flat screen is embedded in her skin.

'Did it hurt?'

'Like getting a blood test. There was a prick from the needle. Then I watched them slice into my skin with a knife but couldn't feel anything. It was bizarre. After the anaesthetic wore off it started to hurt, but I took painkillers. It's not too bad.'

'I can't believe you *watched*!' I say. Then Mum grabs my arm and I jump. 'What?' I ask her.

She gestures to the big screen, on which a plane is landing.

'...Dow Index plunged another whopping twenty-three per cent, with some companies entirely underwater, including Air Australia, Tel-Event and Wealthco. Australians are panicking...'

Oh god, our shares. Our trip to Europe. Mum's entire savings.

'Tay, I'm sorry, I can't talk now. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Concern fills her face. 'Are you okay?'

Mum's fingers are still digging into my arm. 'I'm fine. I'll talk tomorrow.'

I disconnect and look at Mum. She's white, eyes wide.

'I hope you sold a lot of shares,' I say.

'Just a few.'

'Have you got enough money for me to get my bike fixed?

I'll get caught if I keep taking the tram without checking in.'

'I can give you sixty dollars. I don't have more than that.'

'Mum, we need to make a plan.'

She sags in her chair, and for the first time, she seems small to me. Her fingers drum on the armrest, and eventually she says, 'There is one asset we still own outright: this house. If we move into the guesthouse we could rent it out until I get a new job.'

'The guesthouse is hideous!' I exclaim, then I shut my mouth abruptly. I sound like a brat.

'You have a better idea, Piper?'

But I don't.

'There's a sink,' Mum says, more to herself than me. 'But no hot tap, only cold. If only I'd renovated it when I did the rest of the house – but at least I put the toilet in. Why, oh why, didn't I add a shower at the same time?!'

To compensate for my previous comment, I say, 'Plenty of those new cheap apartments don't have kitchens these days either. We'll hardly be the only ones.'

Mum throws me a weak smile. I can see she appreciates the effort.

But inside I feel sick. *The guesthouse?* It's just a grotty shed crammed with stuff. And where would we *wash?*

'I'll need to work out my morning coffee,' Mum says. 'The coffee machine uses too much electricity so I've been heating water on the stove for it.'

'Oh right. But wait, don't we have a camping cooker? From when we went to Wilsons Prom?'

That was *years* ago. Mum hasn't had time for camping in forever.

'Somewhere. But we'd need gas for that. I'll see if I can get some.'

'Maybe Karen Kildare can give you another job?' I ask hopefully. One of the perks of Mum's job is that she works so closely with our prime minister.

'I'll call her tomorrow,' Mum says, and I feel a little better.

