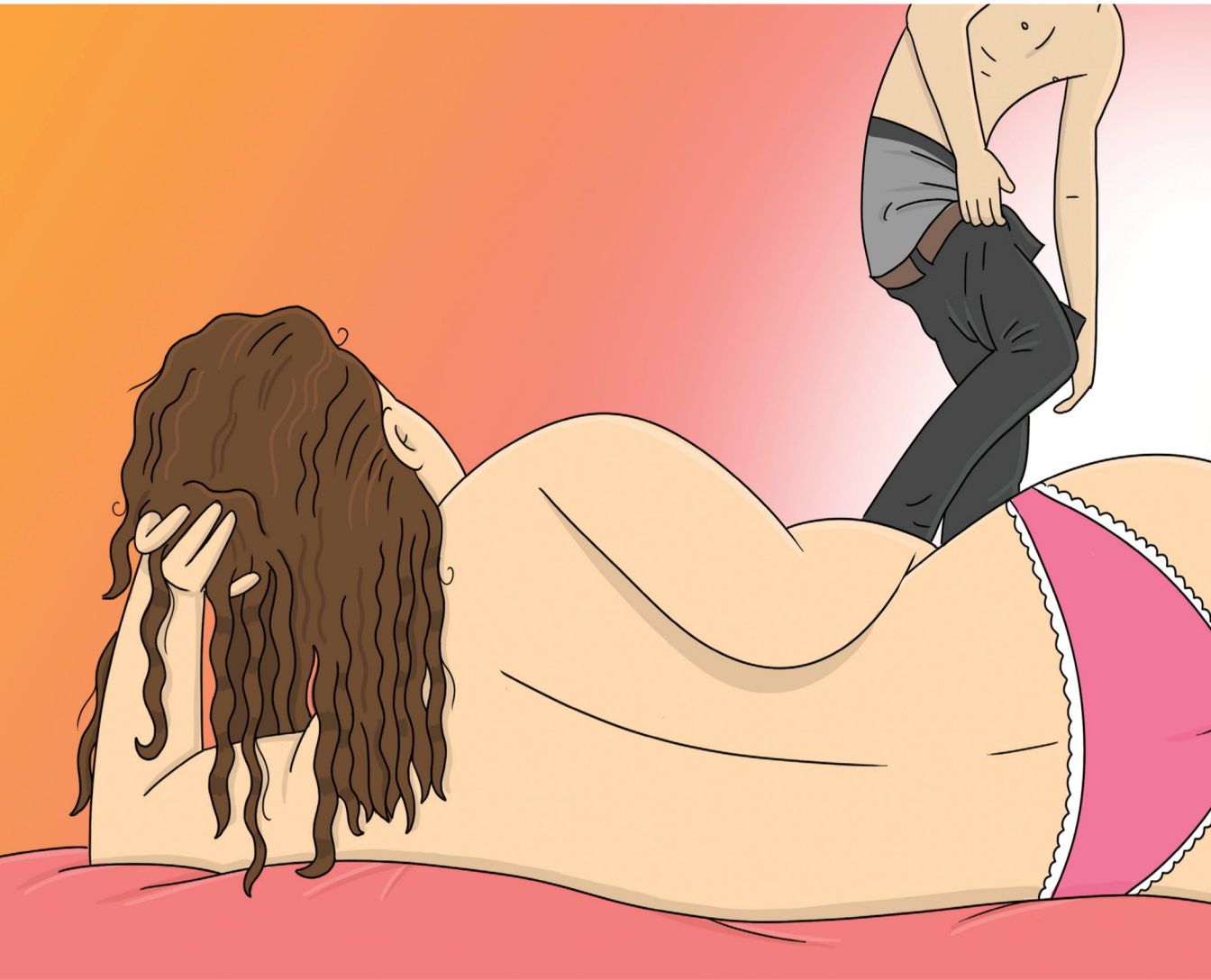


# de**code**pendence

a romantic tragicomic



Lila Ash

*"A must-read for anyone who's ever turned to Cher Horowitz for dating advice..."*

—EMMA ALLEN, *New Yorker* cartoon editor



## Praise for *Decodependence*

**“This book is heroically honest, achingly relatable, deeply hopeful, and still, somehow, funny. I wish I’d had it on my bedside table at every stage of my own codependent life. A must-read for anyone who’s ever turned to Cher Horowitz for dating advice; been broken up with over AIM; or lived with cockroaches (literal and metaphorical) for far too long.”**

–Emma Allen, *New Yorker* cartoon editor

**“This is no ordinary heartbreak, and Lila Ash is no ordinary artist. This clear-eyed, brutally honest memoir knocked my socks off—if you’ve ever suffered the twin contortions of heart and brain that happen at the intersection of romance, toxic relationship behavior, and mental health, this book is for you.”**

–Emily Flake, author and *New Yorker* cartoonist

**“Ash brings her characteristic bright, masterful illustrations to a highly relevant subject matter. She tackles codependency with a mixture of humor and authenticity that makes the reader feel like they were present as her experiences unfolded. Her graphics adeptly set the mood each step of the way, making Ash the perfect guide for this moving story.”**

–Ginny Hogan, author of *Toxic Femininity in the Workplace*

**“Ash’s world overflows with familiar, lived-in details: band shirts, billboards, the awkward body language of new intimacy. We would follow her anywhere. When she begins to confess, with unflinching honesty, we don’t just want to listen; we are riveted.”**

–Jason Adam Katzenstein, *New Yorker* cartoonist and author of *Everything Is an Emergency*

**“Ash’s work is a direct extension of herself, inviting readers into the most intimate aspects of her life as she tackles the difficult and seldom discussed topic of codependency through beautifully rendered imagery and funny, raw writing. Ash’s voice leaps off the page as she shares stories that are so honest and relatable, making you feel as if you’ve just found a new friend and confidant at a party filled with strangers.”**

–Katy Fishell, cartoonist and author of *Sex Is Weird*

**“Ash doesn’t document the world she sees. She documents the worlds she creates. From the deeply intimate spaces inside of her to the people and places she brushes up against, each story, each drawing invites us into a place that is full of beauty, heartbreak, and, most of all, honesty.”**

–Walter Thompson-Hernández, author of *Compton Cowboys*

**“Lila Ash does an excellent job in bringing her personal story to the complex issues around codependency and illustrating those dynamics in creative and humorous ways. In *Decodependence*, readers will gain useful insight and also laugh in the process.”**

–Jessica Baum, LMHC and author of *Anxiously Attached: Becoming More Secure in Life and Love*

# decodependence



# decodependence

a romantic tragicomic

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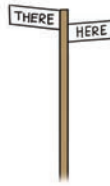
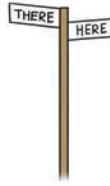
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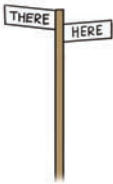
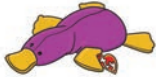
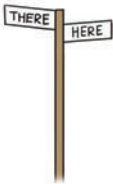
Lila Ash

This book is a memoir, though some people's characteristics have been changed, some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been recreated.

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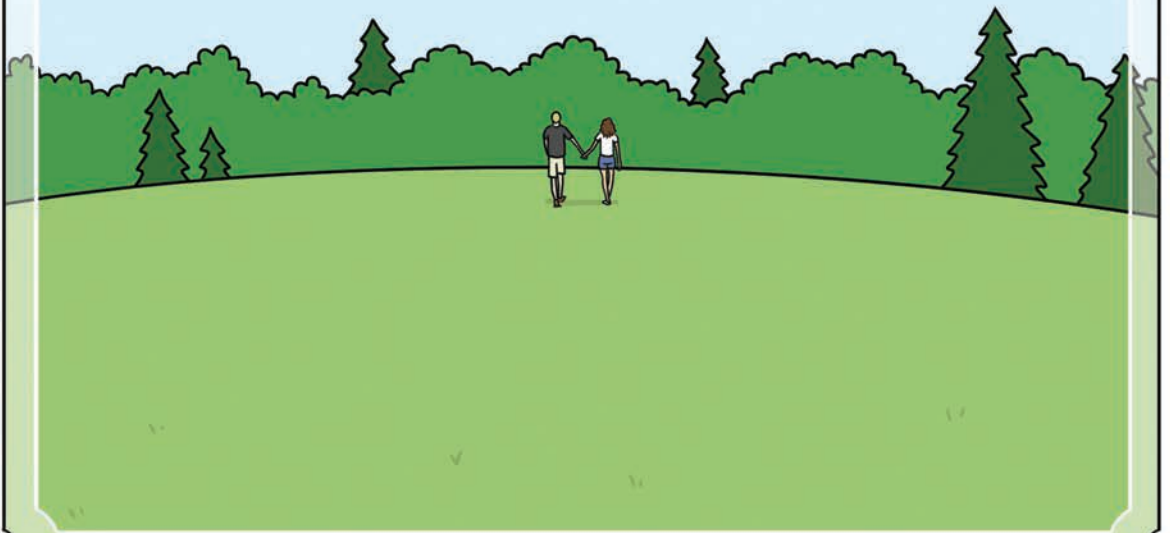




Codependents use sexual attention to gain approval and acceptance.

chapter one

# blow self-esteem



In fourth grade, my first crush friend-zoned me with the nickname "Pal" as he draped his arm over my shoulders.



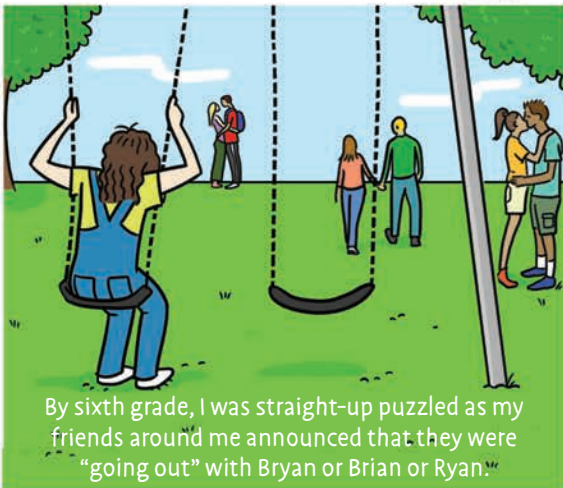
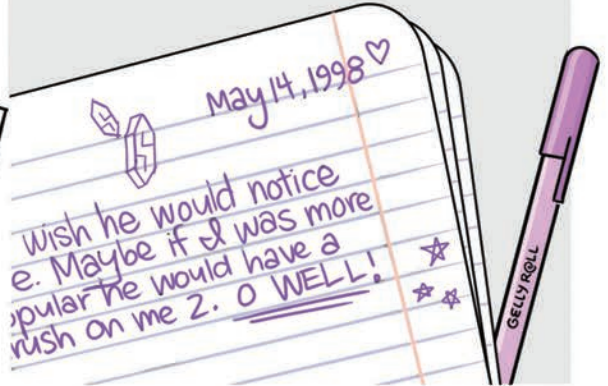
In fifth grade, the bleached spiky tips of my second crush had me totally smitten.



The only thing these dudes had in common was having no interest in me. I idolized and fawned over them despite having no chance whatsoever.



Then there was the next crush, and the next, and the one after that.



By sixth grade, I was straight-up puzzled as my friends around me announced that they were "going out" with Bryan or Brian or Ryan."



Where was everyone "going"?  
Did their parents know?

Things didn't get better for me in middle school when I moved to the suburbs of Atlanta. I was subjected to relentless offers by church-going girls to be saved.



I was more interested in Eminem and Kurt Cobain than their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, or the team quarterback.



But that summer something clicked. I went to sleepaway camp a young girl and came back home a moody, bitchy woman.

## JUNE 2003

	TUES	WED	THUR	FRI
1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20

16 days  
 15 days  
 Science test  
 13 days  
 9 days  
 8 days  
 ONE WEEK!  
 last day school  
 2 days  
 1 DAY  
**CAMP!**

By the time I turned twelve I'd discovered my electric toothbrush was an instrument of pleasure, though I wasn't exactly lusting after anyone in particular.



My mom still remembers how cruel I was whenever I came home from camp to my bland romance- and drama-free existence.

Maybe what caused such a dark shift in my personality was the fact that at camp I was finally introduced to sex.



I went to a creative and performing arts camp in the leafy, green woods of New Hampshire.



Many of my fellow campers are now headlining bands or on TV shows and in movies.



If I could go back seventeen years in time, I'd tell my early teenage self...



I didn't do any of that shit. Instead, I hung out in the camp radio station, crossfading tracks by my favorite rappers.

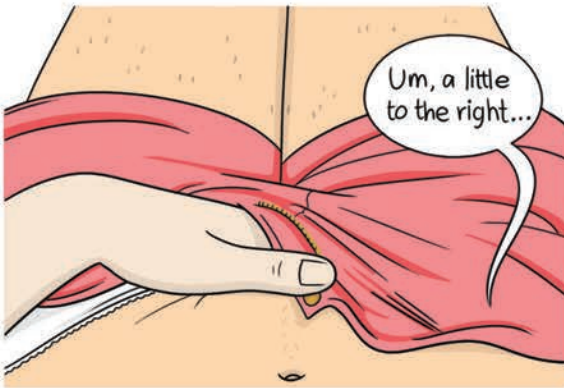


And making out with my very first Official He-Actually-Likes-Me Boyfriend.

The first time I ever caught a dick, I was fourteen, as was the dick itself. Too young for both of us, in retrospect.



But unlike the unrequited crushes of my past, this boy was interested in me.



For the first time in my life, someone actually wanted to hold my hand, to kiss me, to finger me on the bus on a camp field trip. It was what I'd always hoped for.



Despite my dreams coming true, I was terrified. I knew I'd have to confront his penis, though I had no clue what to do with it.

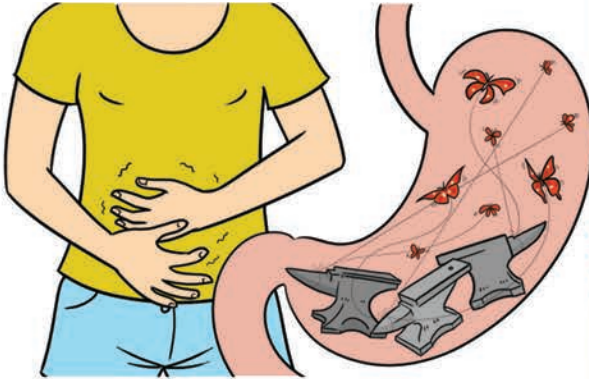


It happened in the middle of a sprawling, dewy grass field minutes before the bedtime bell was set to go off.



When it did, we cut our rendezvous short and skulked off to our separate bunks.

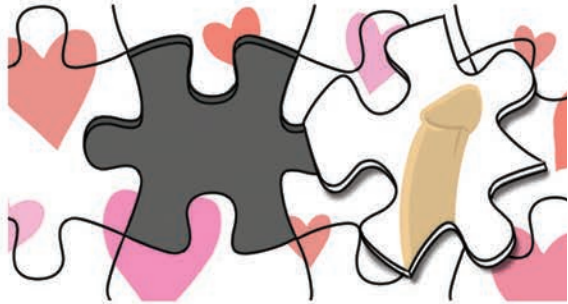
I was overwhelmed with a crushing sense of doom that, because I was unsure if I'd "finished" him, my boyfriend was going to dump me in the morning.



Here is where I'll pause to point out one of my earliest emerging symptoms of codependency:



Codependent partners often have trouble discerning the difference between sex and love.



It's understandable—the feelings of closeness that accompany a casual sexual interaction can easily be misconstrued for something deeper.

I have encountered this conundrum many times since becoming a sexual being in that damp, dark Connecticut field in 2003.



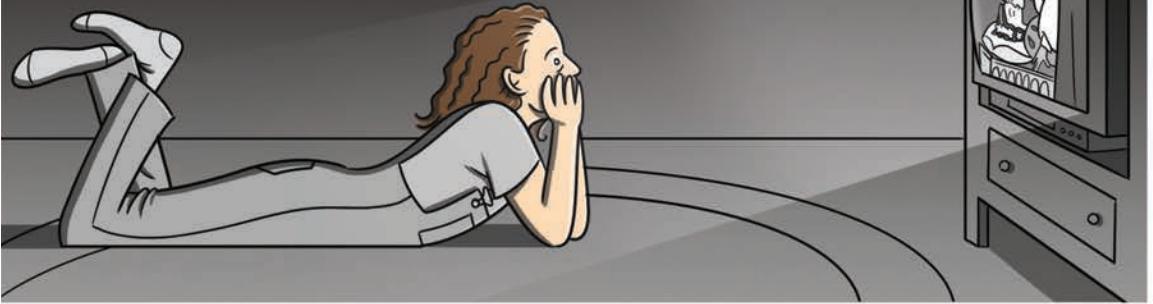
I mistakenly thought that my boyfriend's ability to cum was my responsibility...



...and that the fate of our relationship (and my confidence) depended on it.

Where could I have gotten such a sad, twisted notion?

Where did I get the idea that my role as a female was to dutifully serve my partner and thus transform my entire reason for living into a saccharine fairy tale?



Maybe I had a deeply ingrained belief that all relationships, like that of my parents, were destined for failure.



As an adult woman, this tendency to overhype intimacy has too often tripped me up as I navigate the complex world of dating.

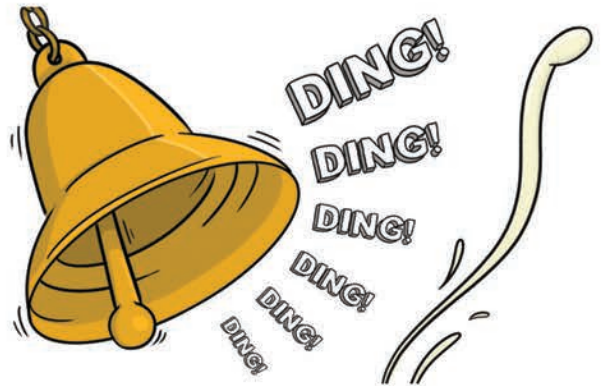
There's now a part of me that insists I should just let myself go with the flow and that maybe I can trust my intuition for this kind of thing...I think.

But getting to that point is a struggle. The fears and insecurities of my adolescence are still as vibrant in adulthood as they were back at camp.

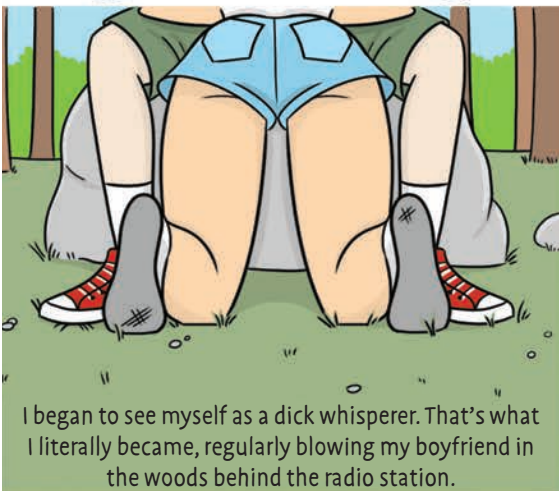


I'm hoping that one day when my inner teen rears her head, I'll be able to politely ask her to fuck off.

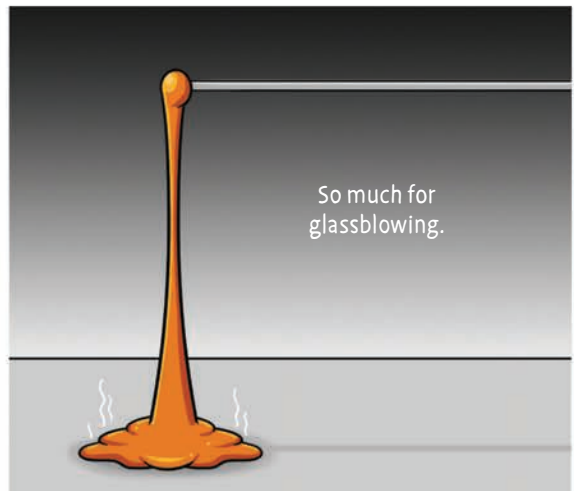
So, back to the hand job. It all turned out fine. I was surprised to discover that I "pulled" it off successfully.



I heard through the camp grapevine that he came at the very moment that the nighttime bell rang. Looking back, the sense of accomplishment I felt was kind of alarming.

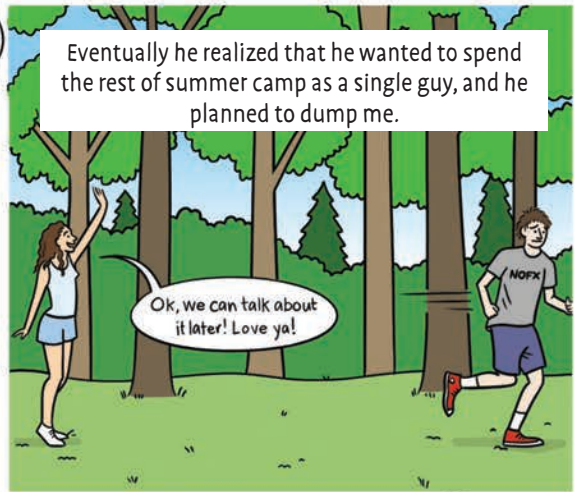


I began to see myself as a dick whisperer. That's what I literally became, regularly blowing my boyfriend in the woods behind the radio station.

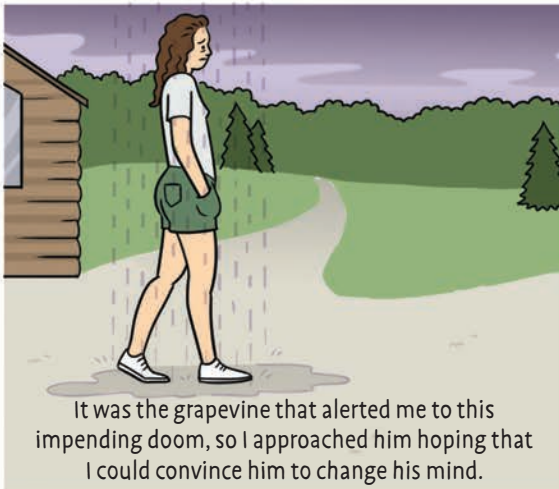




I enjoyed about four weeks of bliss with my boyfriend. I'd soon find out that all good things come to an end, a truth for which I was totally unprepared.



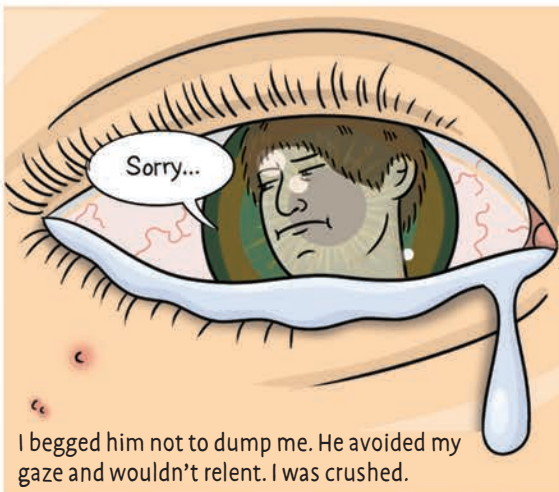
Eventually he realized that he wanted to spend the rest of summer camp as a single guy, and he planned to dump me.



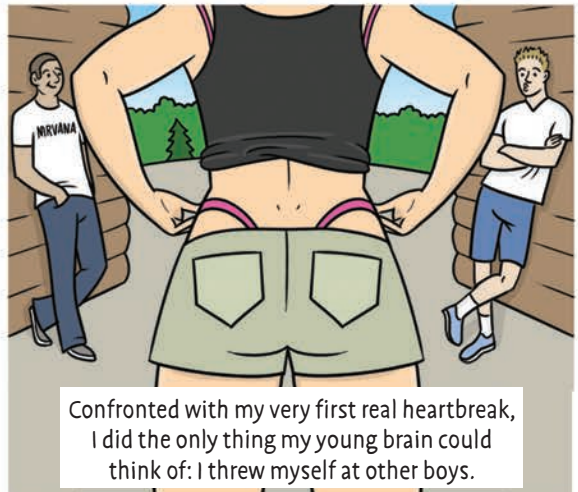
It was the grapevine that alerted me to this impending doom, so I approached him hoping that I could convince him to change his mind.



I couldn't understand why this was happening. Were all those blow jobs in vain?



I begged him not to dump me. He avoided my gaze and wouldn't relent. I was crushed.



Confronted with my very first real heartbreak, I did the only thing my young brain could think of: I threw myself at other boys.



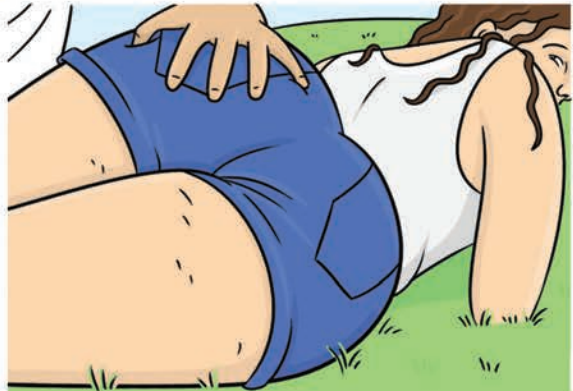
Thanks to the grapevine's lurid details about my sexcapades, I had no shortage of male attention.



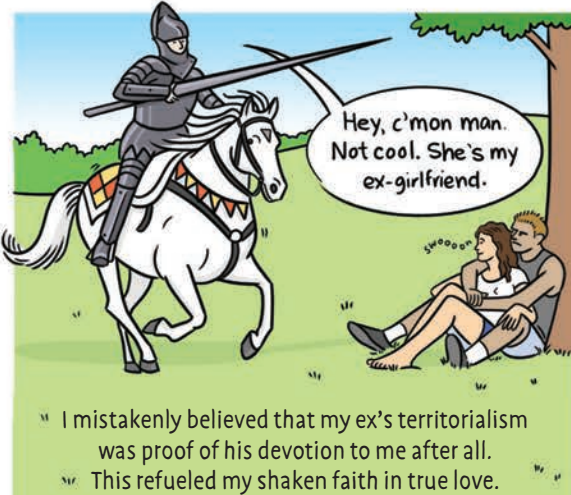
For the first time in my life, I had my pick. It was a fun distraction from my despair over my first lost love.



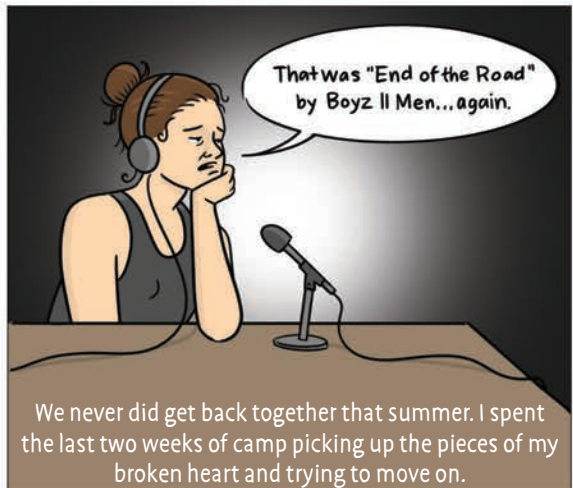
I had objectified myself to become a weapon that could hurt the boy who did me wrong.



The sense of power I felt when I heard my ex was pissed that some dude rested his hand on my left butt cheek for two seconds was intoxicating.



I mistakenly believed that my ex's territorialism was proof of his devotion to me after all. This refueled my shaken faith in true love.



We never did get back together that summer. I spent the last two weeks of camp picking up the pieces of my broken heart and trying to move on.

Back home in Georgia, I felt stripped of my sexual power, unable to gain attention and—dare I say it—even love from boys.



I reluctantly returned to staring out the windows of the school bus at McMansions and megachurches as I listened to Eminem...



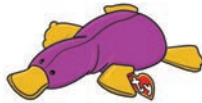
...while subconsciously plotting my return to relevancy through a fairy tale that I still believed was waiting for me somewhere out there.



It became an obsession, a reason for being.



I would find love no matter what.



Codependents often do not perceive themselves  
as lovable or worthwhile.

chapter two  
**daddy issues**



My parents met during a chance encounter. Mom was 28 at the time and living in LA; Dad was 32 and in NYC, his hometown.

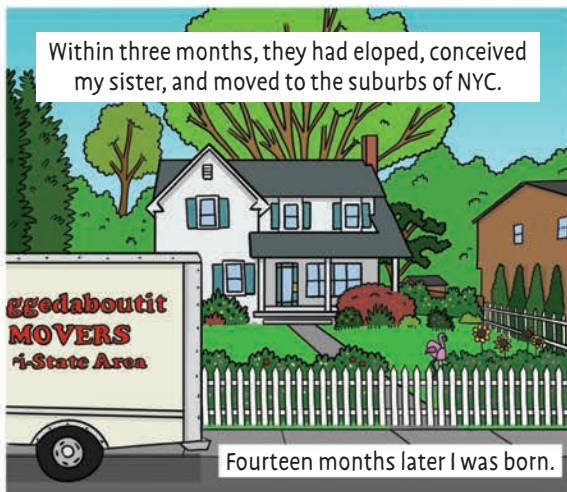


Mom went to New York with a friend on a whim. They ended up at a New Year's Eve party Dad happened to be at.

According to legend, that night Dad asked Mom some of life's important questions.



Within three months, they had eloped, conceived my sister, and moved to the suburbs of NYC.



Fourteen months later I was born.

My sister and I had an idyllic childhood playing with our neighborhood friends.



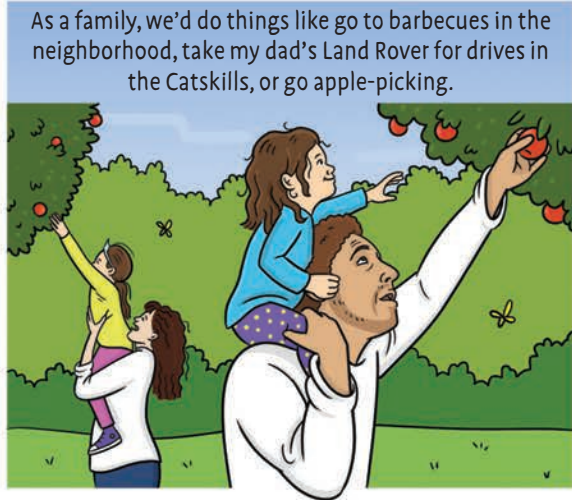
This was the '90s: pre-school shootings, pre-9/11, pre-horrors of the modern world.

Dad had owned an apartment in Manhattan since the early '80s, and it became his office after he became a Family Man.™ He was an agent for photographers.

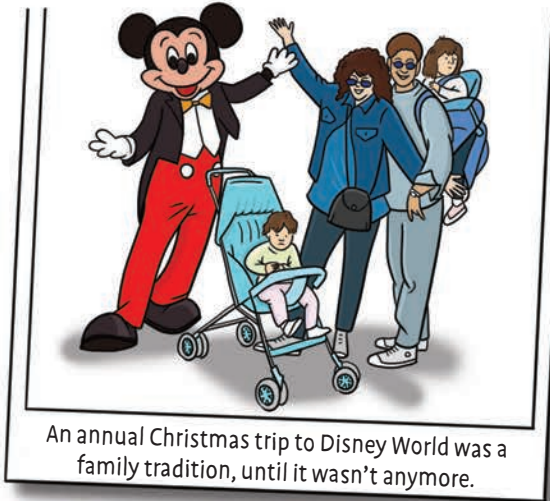




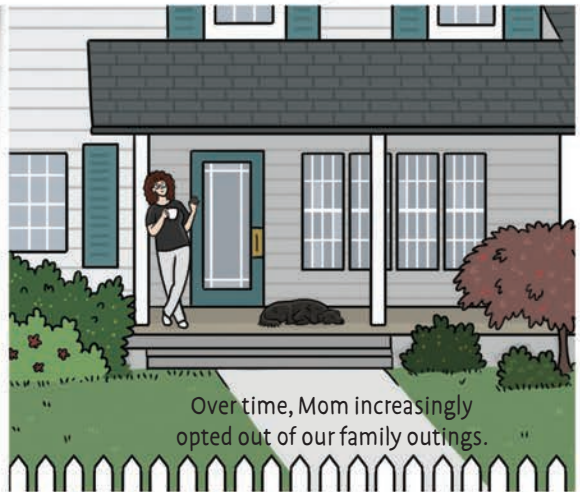
Mom would stay home, take us to school, bake cookies, and host holiday craft events in our elementary school classrooms.



As a family, we'd do things like go to barbecues in the neighborhood, take my dad's Land Rover for drives in the Catskills, or go apple-picking.



An annual Christmas trip to Disney World was a family tradition, until it wasn't anymore.



Over time, Mom increasingly opted out of our family outings.



The increasing sounds of their fighting sometimes kept me and my sister from falling asleep at night. Clearly, something was amiss.

Oh, that's REAL nice!

They're MY kids too!

You're always stoned out of your mind!

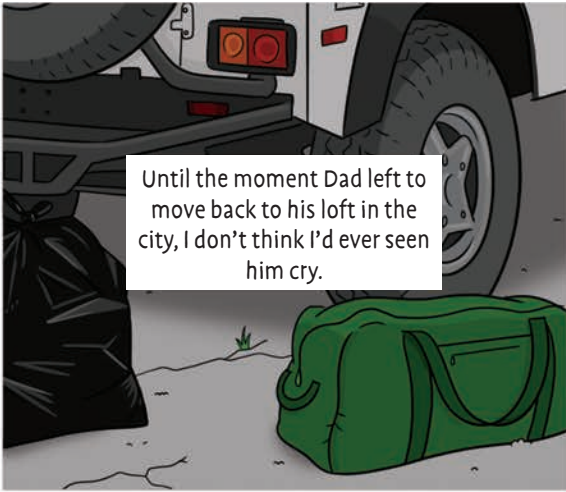
I'm sick of this shit!

Oh, fuck off already!

How am I supposed to pay for that!

I don't care if it's your mother! We're not going!

It's the same argument over and over and over!



Until the moment Dad left to move back to his loft in the city, I don't think I'd ever seen him cry.



I remember being confused, watching him clean out his closet. The night he left I wasn't sure where things stood for my family.



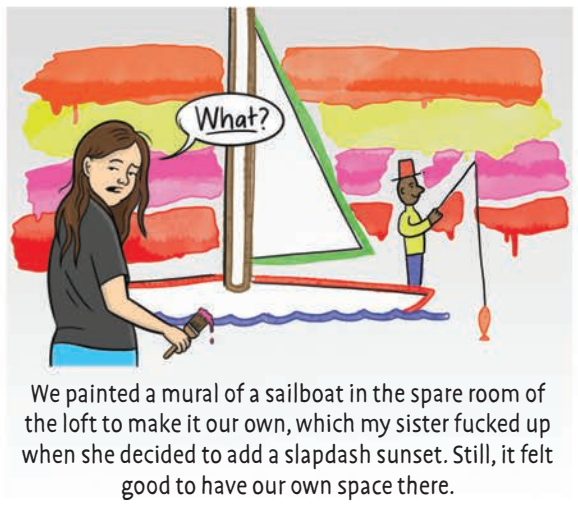
My sister and I were told that our parents were getting divorced.



Dad drove to the suburbs twice a week to take us out to dinners at the local diners.



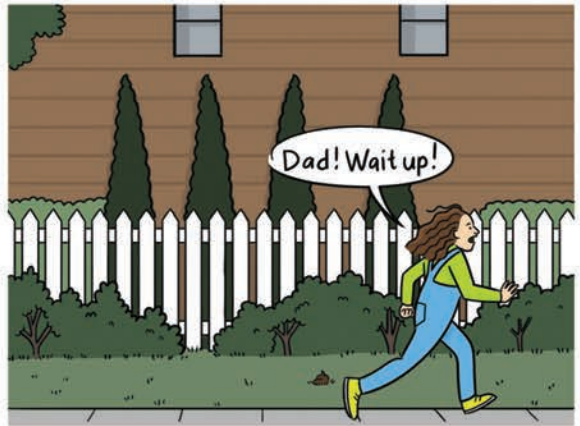
Every weekend, he'd pick us up and take us to the city.



We painted a mural of a sailboat in the spare room of the loft to make it our own, which my sister fucked up when she decided to add a slapdash sunset. Still, it felt good to have our own space there.



Soon, Mom told Dad to stop doing his laundry in the basement of our house, effectively banning him from our family space. The hostility was palpable.



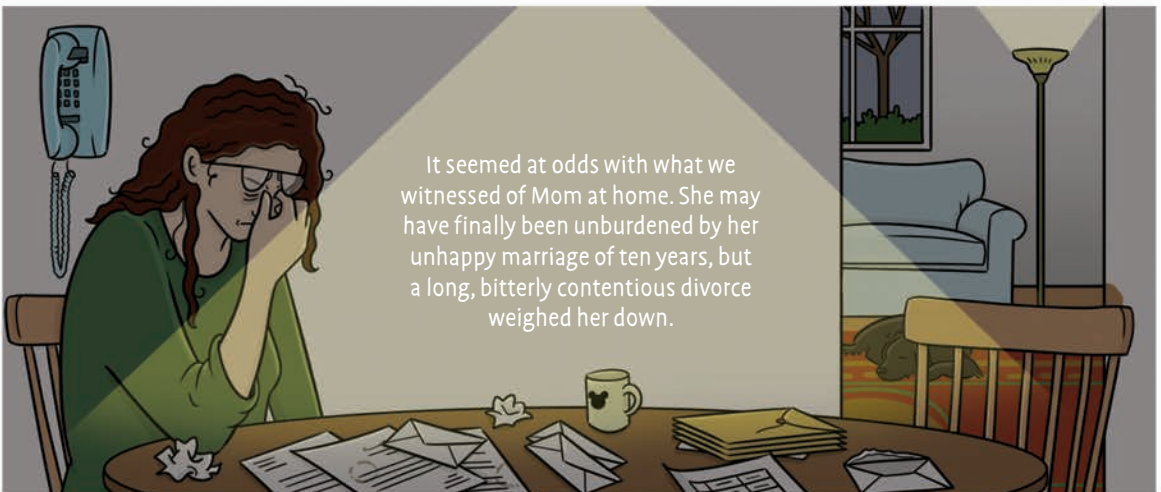
I felt myself aligning with Dad as my sister drifted closer to Mom. A rift was forming.



Dad's newfound independence seemed to bring out a shiny new side of him.



Sure, he appeared to mourn the loss of his Dream Family or whatever, but he also had a kind of pep in his step.



It seemed at odds with what we witnessed of Mom at home. She may have finally been unburdened by her unhappy marriage of ten years, but a long, bitterly contentious divorce weighed her down.

Since we lived with Mom, we were privy to odd divorce details, like the fact that her lawyer was the father of two classmates of mine, who lived in the biggest house in town.



And that in court, Dad's lawyer had mocked Mom for leaving the TV on for our dog, Lucas, when nobody was home.



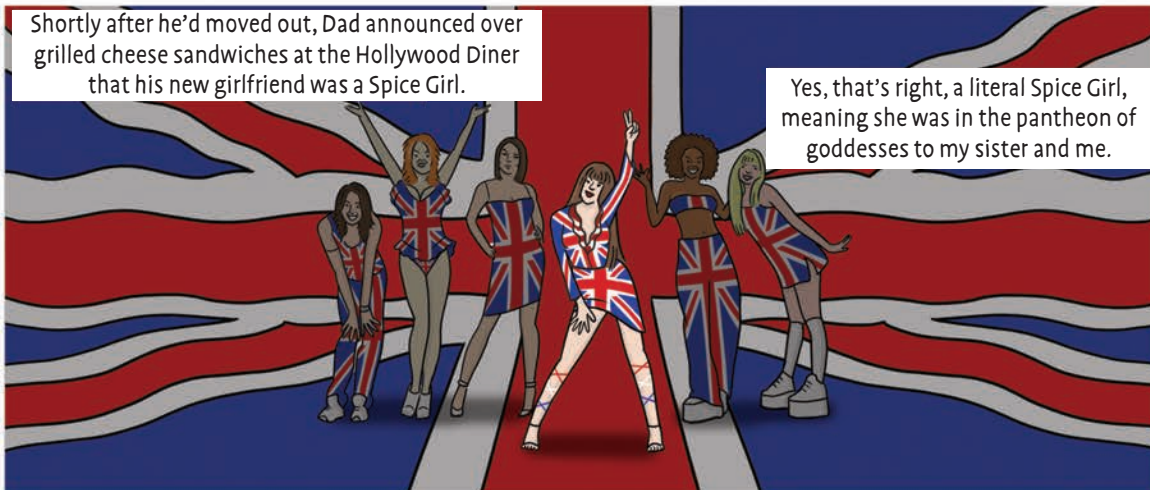
(A practice Dad ended up adopting for his dog, Rocket, a few years later.)

And that Dad flat-out refused to let her take us to LA, where she could restart her dream career in the entertainment industry.



You'd think that unraveling ten years of marriage would've similarly stressed Dad, but he'd found a way of coping that Mom largely avoided—dating.

Shortly after he'd moved out, Dad announced over grilled cheese sandwiches at the Hollywood Diner that his new girlfriend was a Spice Girl.



Yes, that's right, a literal Spice Girl, meaning she was in the pantheon of goddesses to my sister and me.

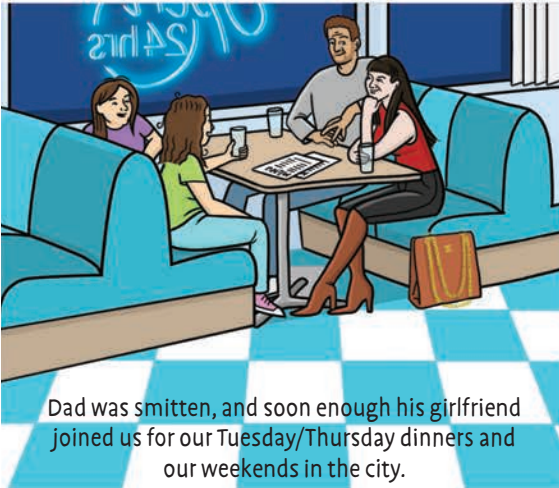
In actuality, Dad's new girlfriend was just British, but to a pair of eight- and nine-year-old girls, that was close enough.



Dad's new girlfriend was the epitome of English glam: she wore make-up, sky-high stilettos, and petite designer clothes.

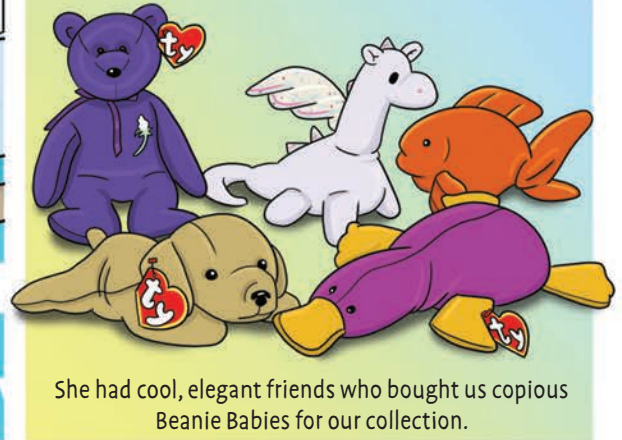


She was 26 years old and also a photography agent.



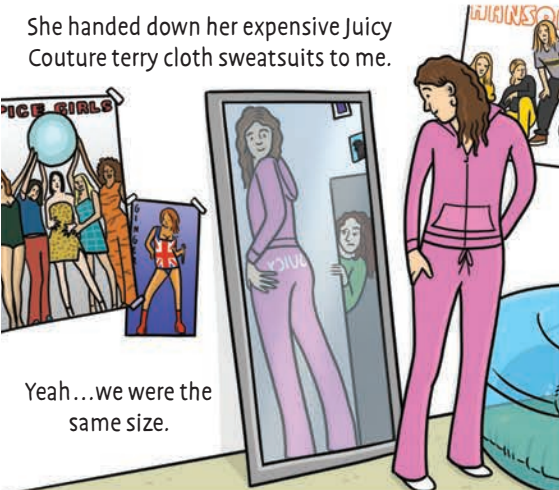
Dad was smitten, and soon enough his girlfriend joined us for our Tuesday/Thursday dinners and our weekends in the city.

She was an exciting addition to our new life with him.



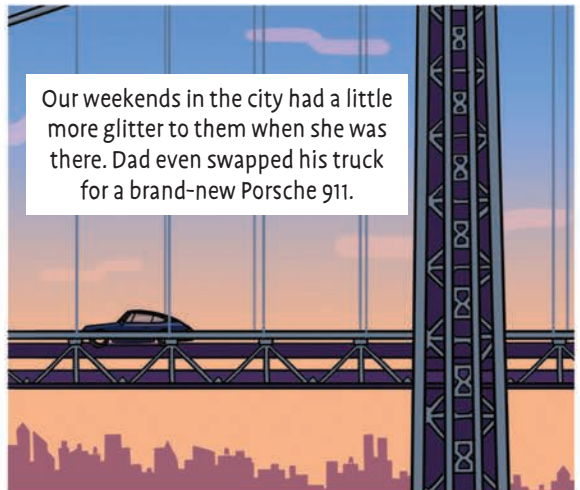
She had cool, elegant friends who bought us copious Beanie Babies for our collection.

She handed down her expensive Juicy Couture terry cloth sweatsuits to me.



Yeah...we were the same size.

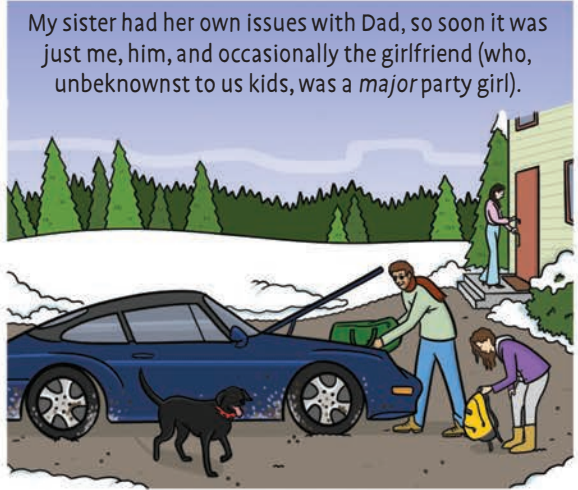
Our weekends in the city had a little more glitter to them when she was there. Dad even swapped his truck for a brand-new Porsche 911.



Dad often brought us to her weekend house in the Berkshires to go snowboarding together.



My sister had her own issues with Dad, so soon it was just me, him, and occasionally the girlfriend (who, unbeknownst to us kids, was a *major party girl*).



Even though Dad's girlfriend soon requested he cut his custody to every other weekend, he and I were closer than ever.

On those city weekends, my sister and I sometimes entertained ourselves when Dad was hungover from a night out with his girlfriend.



There was no shortage of mysterious cabinets and closets to explore in the loft, a space that still felt new to us.

We were used to snooping through Dad's stuff—his new zest for life came with a lax style of parenting.



He didn't seem to notice. If he did, it didn't appear to bother him.

I remember stumbling upon a mysterious little box and poking at a cute, tiny bag of white powder inside.



Another time, I found a tin of some dry, crumbly plant in Dad's car. I shrugged both instances off, not even curious for an explanation.



But one thing I found at the loft disturbed me in a way that a foreign powdery substance could not.

I can't even say I "found" it, because it was in plain sight on Dad's bedside dresser: a small, framed, glossy photograph of his girlfriend.



It nauseated me not because this woman I looked up to was fully exposed, but because it offered a glimpse of the life Dad had when he was alone with her, without Mom, without my sister...

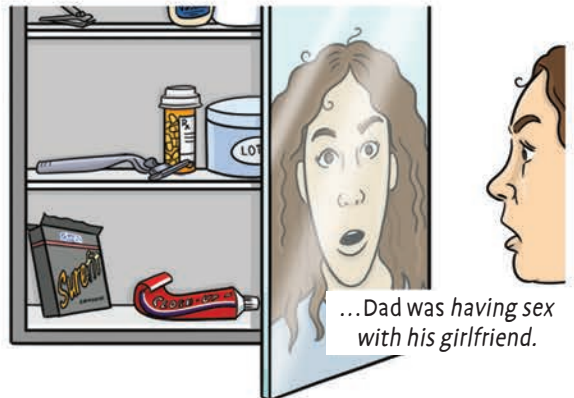


It was a photo from a life that was more exciting, more fun, and more fitting for Dad.

Here was visible proof that his old life with us was behind him.



When a box of condoms turned up during one of my snooping sessions (I had a vague idea that these had something to do with sex), I was devastated to realize...



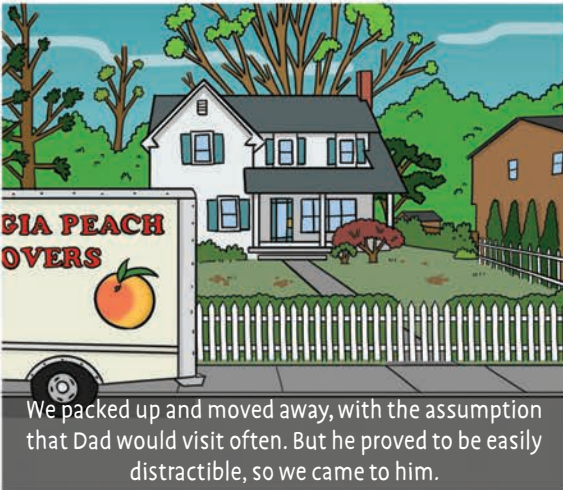
...Dad was having sex with his girlfriend.



I cried myself to sleep that night, not entirely sure why.



As time wore on, Dad finally gave in to Mom's wish to move us out of state. Instead of California, which was too far for him, he agreed to Georgia.



We packed up and moved away, with the assumption that Dad would visit often. But he proved to be easily distractible, so we came to him.



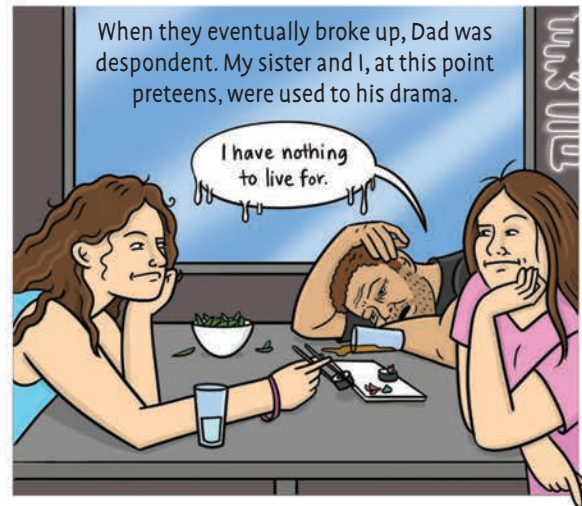
Over time, other girlfriends—and fiancées—came and went.



There was the snobbish Harvard grad who was a far cry from the Spice Girls. Dad took her on a European snowboarding vacation instead of me.

And she took my board.

Yeah... we were also the same size.



When they eventually broke up, Dad was despondent. My sister and I, at this point preteens, were used to his drama.

Then there was the fun-loving, more age-appropriate Long Island princess who loved to get fucked up almost as much as she adored Dad.

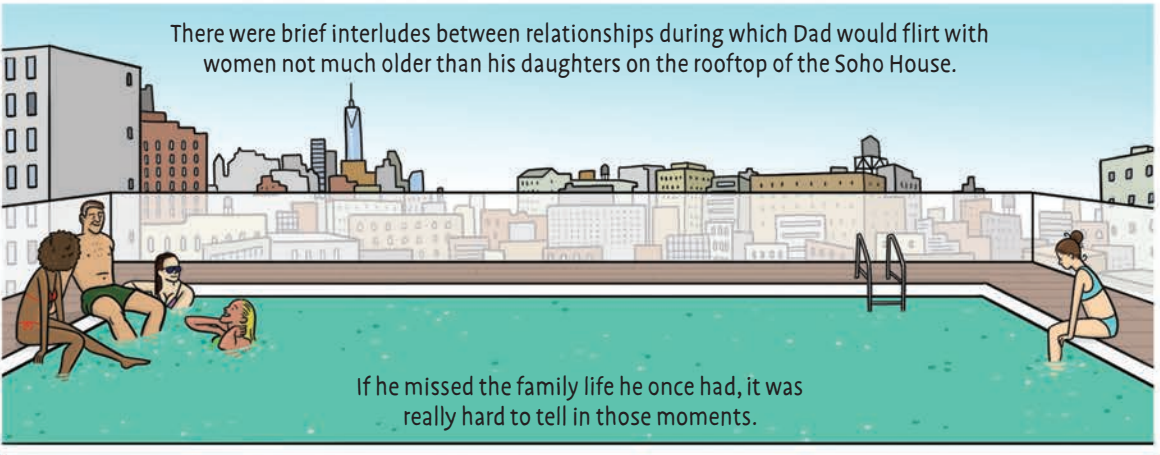


By this time, I was old enough to get high with her myself.

She didn't last either.



There were brief interludes between relationships during which Dad would flirt with women not much older than his daughters on the rooftop of the Soho House.



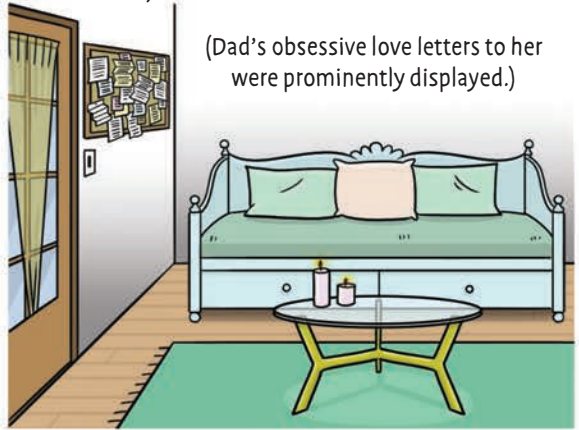
If he missed the family life he once had, it was really hard to tell in those moments.

As we got older, our room at the loft came to feel weirdly sterile and unfamiliar.



Later, when he met the woman who'd become his second wife, it was turned into her meditation room.

(Dad's obsessive love letters to her were prominently displayed.)



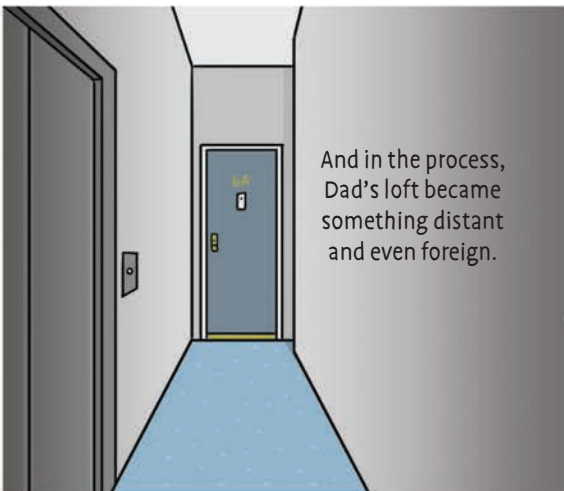
But before that, the room had been devoid of me and my sister for so long that it felt forgotten, faceless.



It was like each of the women who had come and gone had taken up the space that used to feel special when I was a kid



And in the process, Dad's loft became something distant and even foreign.



In 2018, after 34 years, Dad sold the loft. It's probably an Airbnb now.







Codependents accept sex in place of love.



The Sims Online



AOL



Napster



# chapter three virgin suicidal tendencies

Buddy List

Lila Ash  
Available

Br00klynidi0t

mYsWeeTtoOtH821



Xxx



College



Documents



Homework



Music



Games



Stuff



Essays

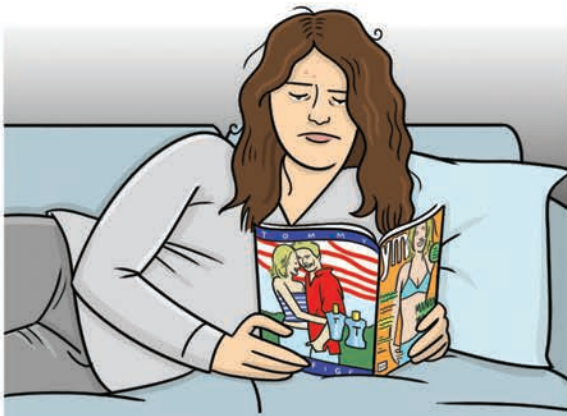


Q° Google

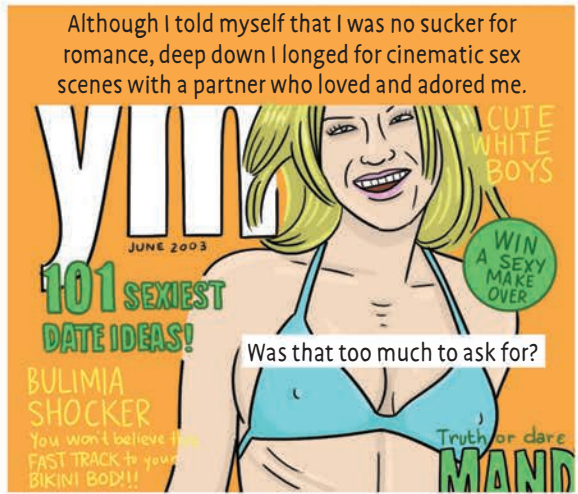
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Google Search

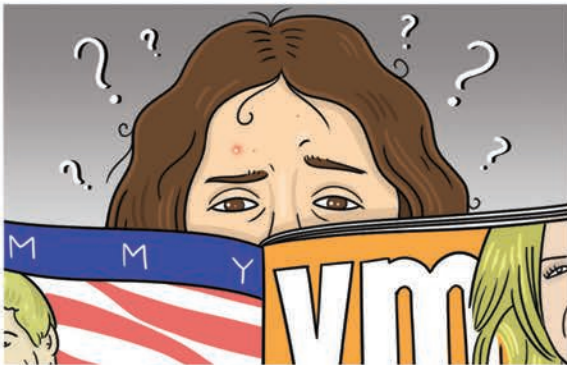
I'm Feelin



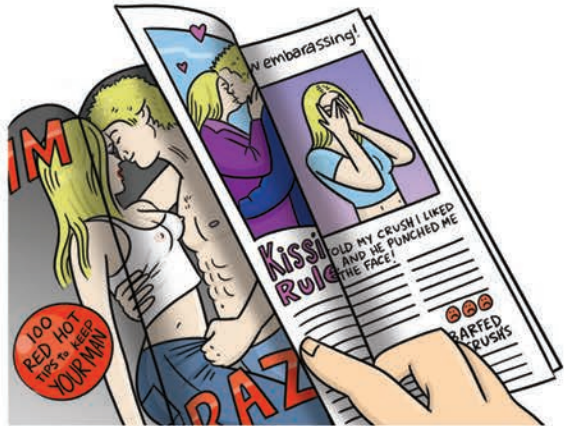
In my teen years, I always felt older than I was. With my summer camp sexcapades behind me, I was fast heading toward the inevitable: the loss of my virginity.



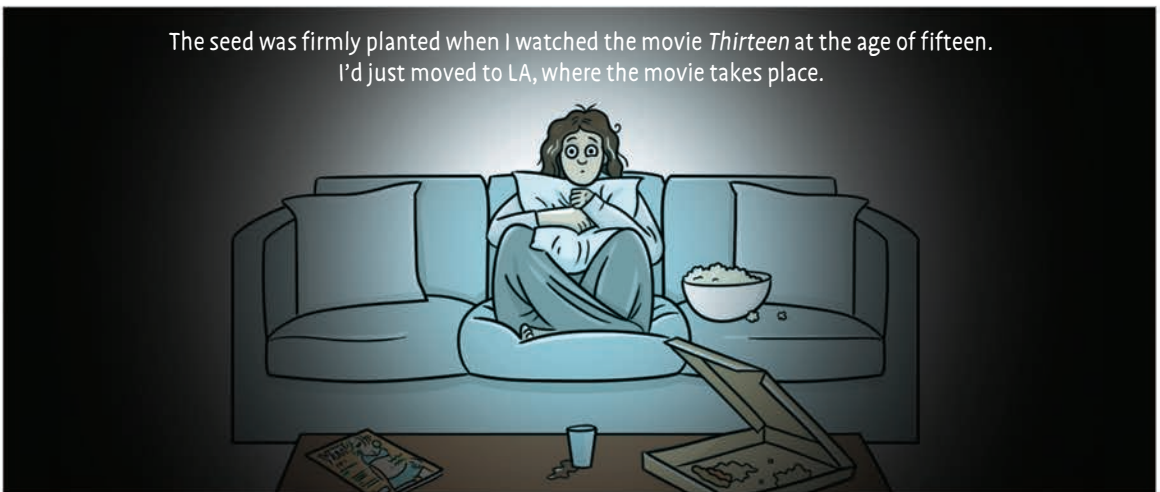
This was not about seeking pleasure for myself. I was mainly fascinated by the idea of losing my innocence.

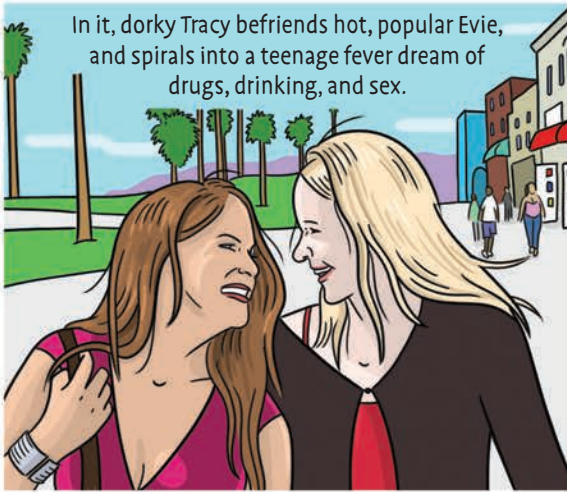


But my track record—blow jobs in the woods, an attraction to bad boys like Eminem and Kurt Cobain, a strained relationship with my Dad, etc.—did not point to any feel-good romance in my future.



The seed was firmly planted when I watched the movie *Thirteen* at the age of fifteen. I'd just moved to LA, where the movie takes place.

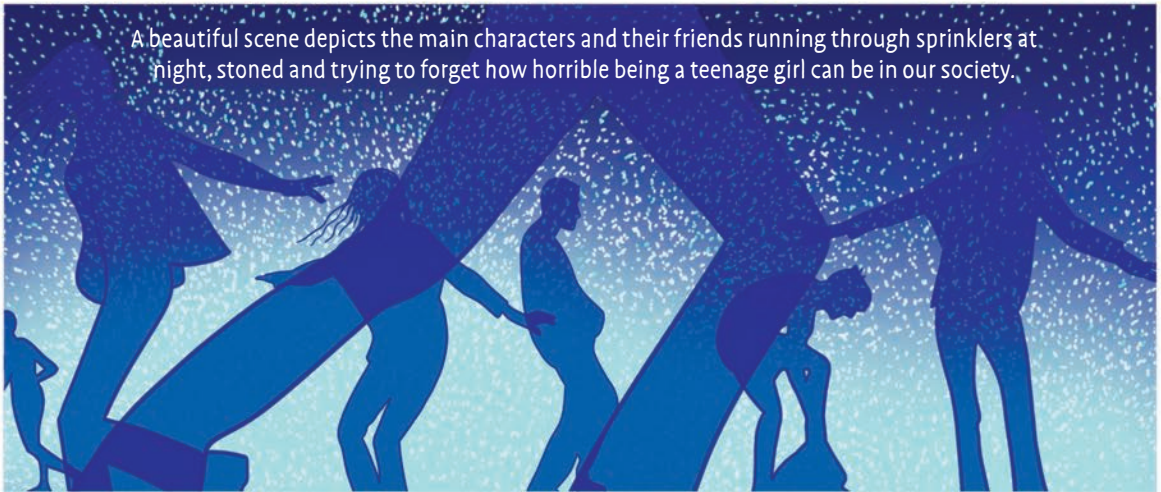




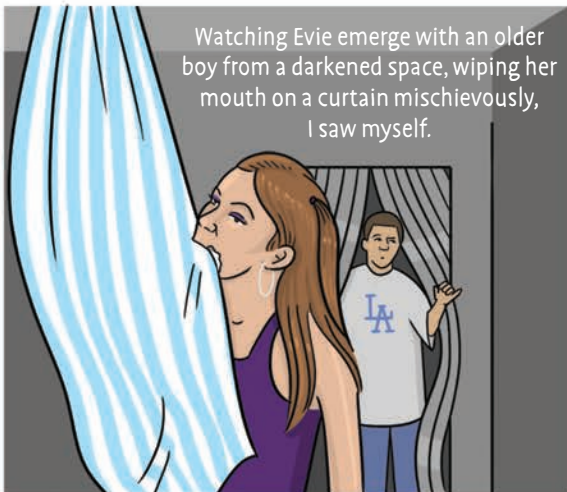
In it, dorky Tracy befriends hot, popular Evie, and spirals into a teenage fever dream of drugs, drinking, and sex.



The horrific ruin of the girls and their families, their abusive friendship, and the blatant racism barely registered with me.



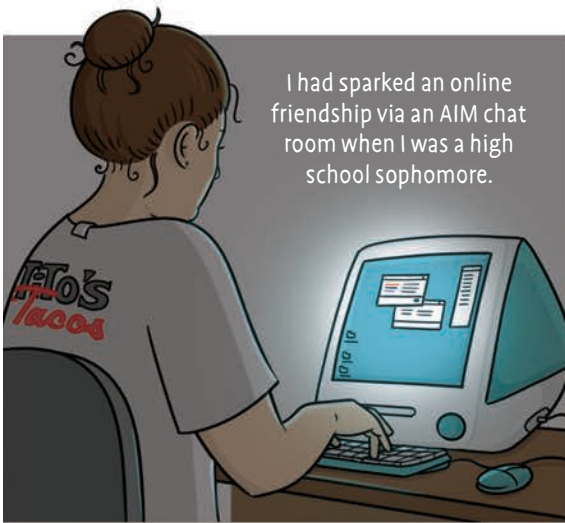
A beautiful scene depicts the main characters and their friends running through sprinklers at night, stoned and trying to forget how horrible being a teenage girl can be in our society.



Watching Evie emerge with an older boy from a darkened space, wiping her mouth on a curtain mischievously, I saw myself.



Like Evie and Tracy, I wasn't a little girl anymore. Like them, I was ready to do drugs. I gave blow jobs. I was a woman.



I had sparked an online friendship via an AIM chat room when I was a high school sophomore.



He was a year younger, lived in Brooklyn, and was friends with a boy I knew from camp.



Chatting with him was a fun distraction from my everyday life. Soon we graduated to phone calls.



It seemed like our interactions meant a bit more to him than they did to me.

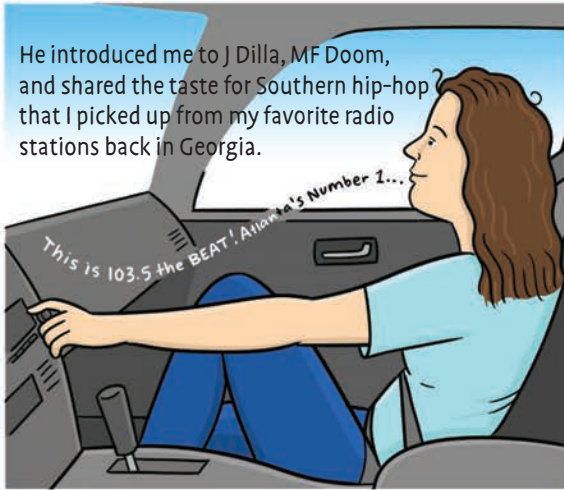


But I was the new kid, yet again, at Santa Monica High, and it felt good to be known (if only by a near-stranger 3,000 miles away).

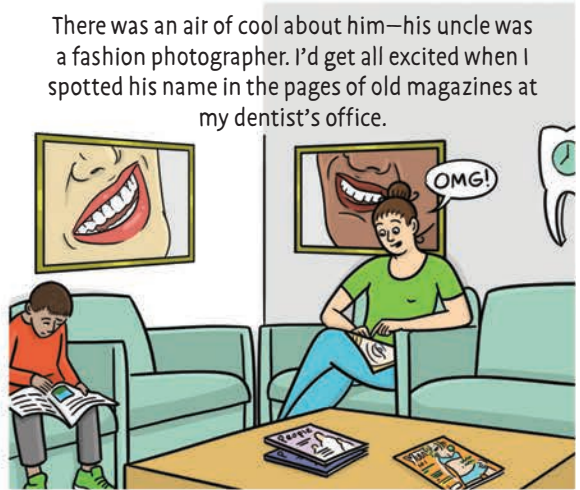


He was kind of charming with his shaggy hair and Australian accent. Honestly, without the accent, I really wonder if I'd have given him the time of day.

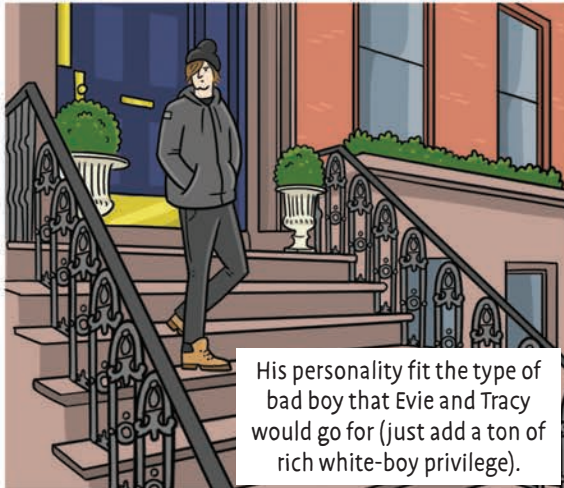




He introduced me to J Dilla, MF Doom, and shared the taste for Southern hip-hop that I picked up from my favorite radio stations back in Georgia.



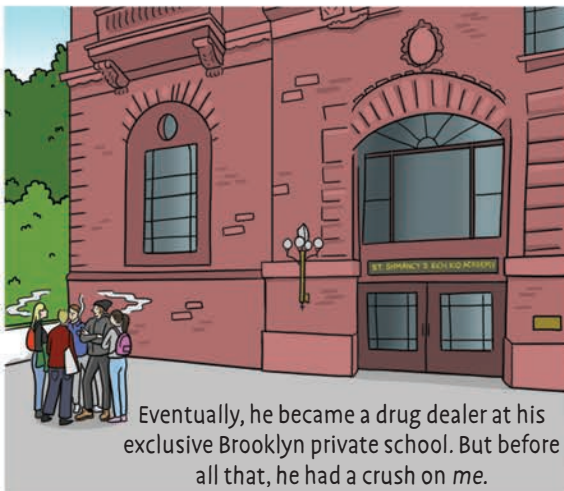
There was an air of cool about him—his uncle was a fashion photographer. I'd get all excited when I spotted his name in the pages of old magazines at my dentist's office.



His personality fit the type of bad boy that Evie and Tracy would go for (just add a ton of rich white-boy privilege).



He loved drinking and smoking pot. He did crazy things like climb billboards at 4 a.m. so he could spray-paint his name across them.



Eventually, he became a drug dealer at his exclusive Brooklyn private school. But before all that, he had a crush on *me*.



Even though our relationship existed mainly on AOL, he was the first boy who'd truly gotten to know me. And he seemed to really like me.

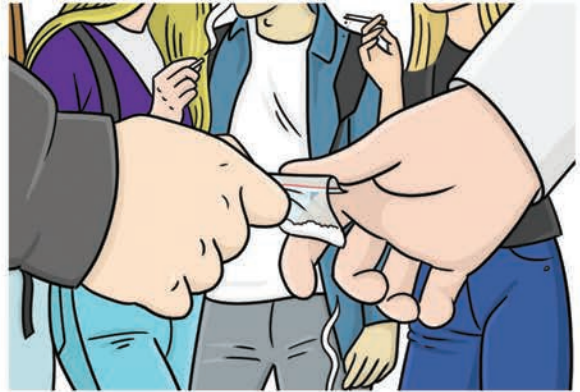
So when Mom announced that for my senior year of high school, we'd be moving back to New York, I thought: I guess I can finally give this relationship a shot.



Still, I was distraught that I'd have to leave my friends and start over at a new high school.



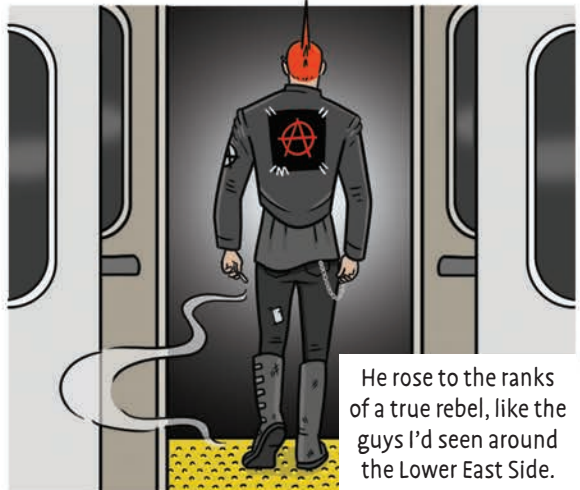
My chat buddy was my silver lining. Maybe he'd rescue me.



By this time, he was sixteen and I was seventeen. He'd risen in the ranks of his fancy-schmancy private school and was now supplying and doing coke regularly.

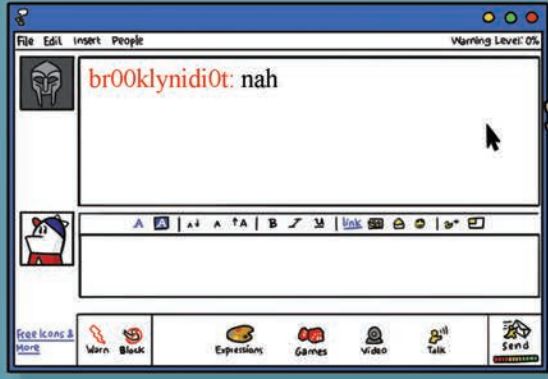


His new role brought me closer to the bad-boy archetype that I'd only ever experienced from afar, in fleeting moments.



He rose to the ranks of a true rebel, like the guys I'd seen around the Lower East Side.

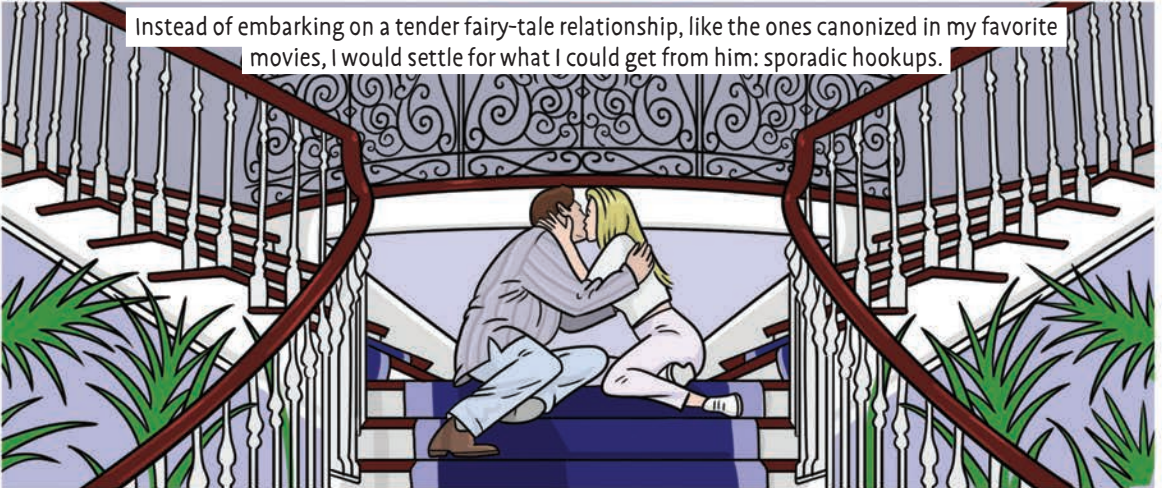
Since he was now a hotshot, it should have been obvious that he would not be my boyfriend when I introduced the idea shortly after moving back.



But that was okay. I knew how to use my teenage body to get those feelings of affection I was so desperate for.



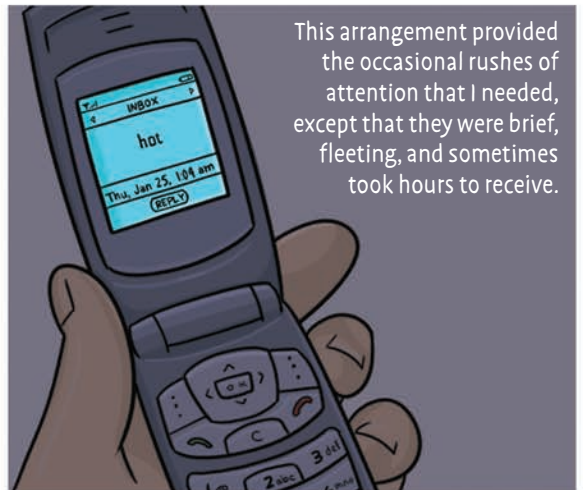
Instead of embarking on a tender fairy-tale relationship, like the ones canonized in my favorite movies, I would settle for what I could get from him: sporadic hookups.



In between our meetings, I would send him nude photos... and this was way before "sexting" was even a word.



This arrangement provided the occasional rushes of attention that I needed, except that they were brief, fleeting, and sometimes took hours to receive.

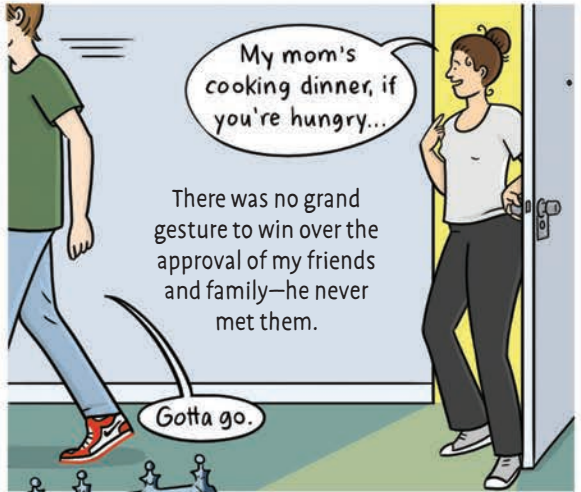




It soon became clear that a teen-movie fantasy this was not. There were no after-school dates, no bouquets of flowers, no prom-posals.



My crush had relegated me to the furthest, most hidden corner of his high school experience.



But despite all of that, he picked me to sneak up with him to a rooftop where I gave him head within plain sight of the B train.

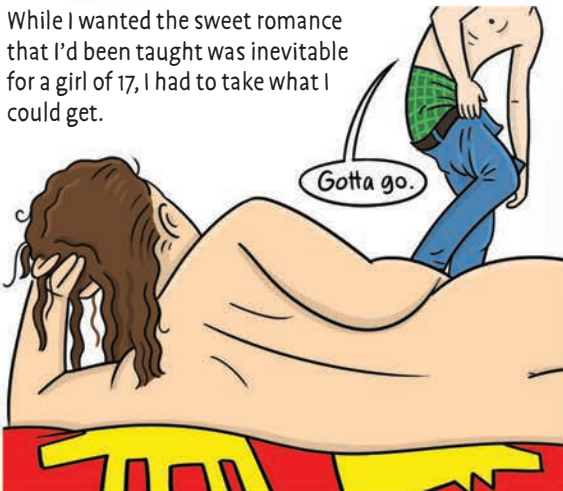




He sometimes cut class to come all the way to Manhattan, where we would smoke pot and fool around on the roof of my Dad's building.



When we eventually had actual sex on the bottom bunk, it felt weird, unpleasant, and illicit—but he did it with me.



While I wanted the sweet romance that I'd been taught was inevitable for a girl of 17, I had to take what I could get.



Despite the promise of pussy, he became increasingly flaky, regularly blowing off our hookups. I channeled my favorite rom-com protagonists by falling into deep despair.

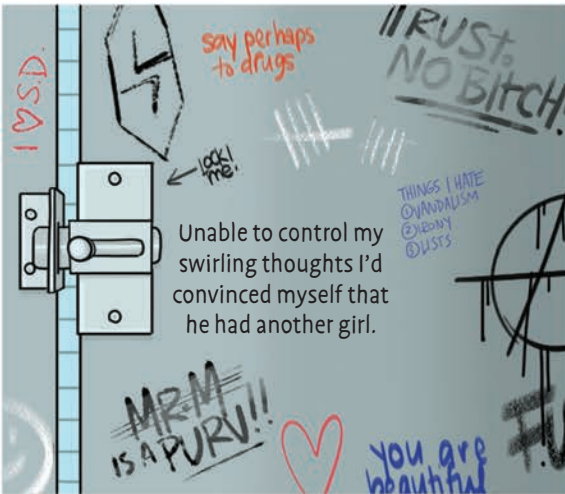
My anticipation of another fix would come crashing down when he'd text to cancel plans.



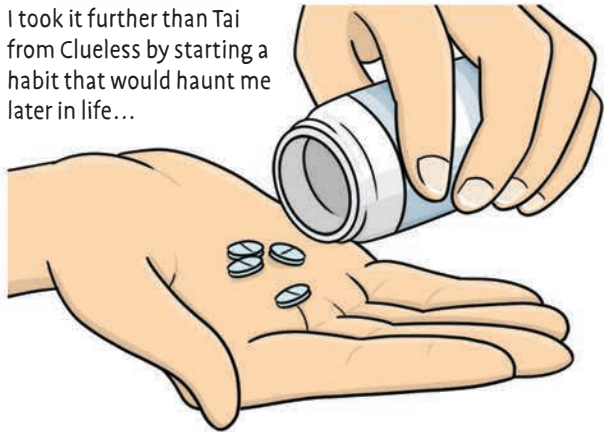
I'd feel sick to my stomach, something that still creeps up on me to this day.



Unable to control my swirling thoughts I'd convinced myself that he had another girl.



I took it further than Tai from Clueless by starting a habit that would haunt me later in life...



...downing over-the-counter sleeping pills to sleep my pain away.

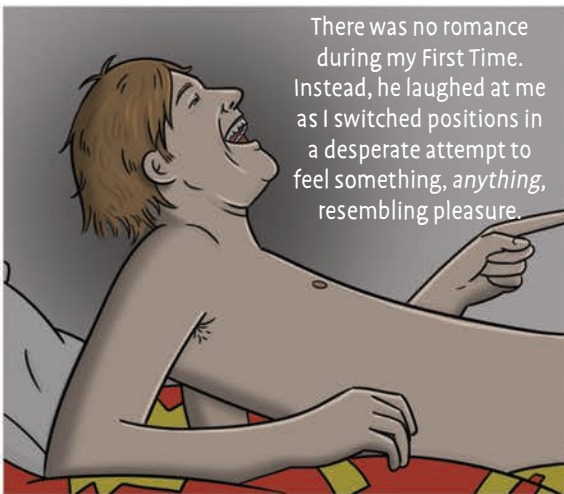
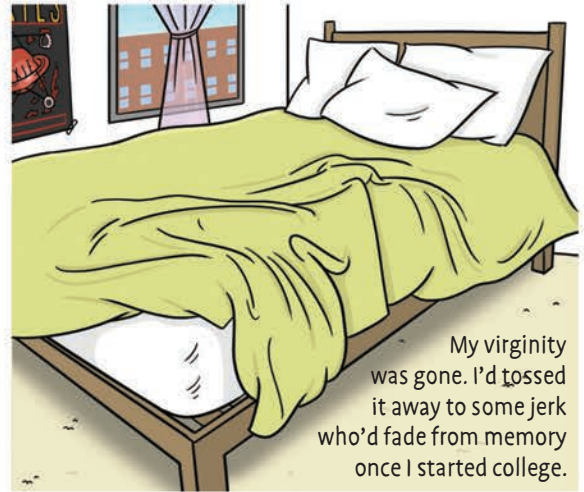
Sometimes, I drank vodka with the pills (eventually, I'd become totally repulsed by alcohol and never touch it again).



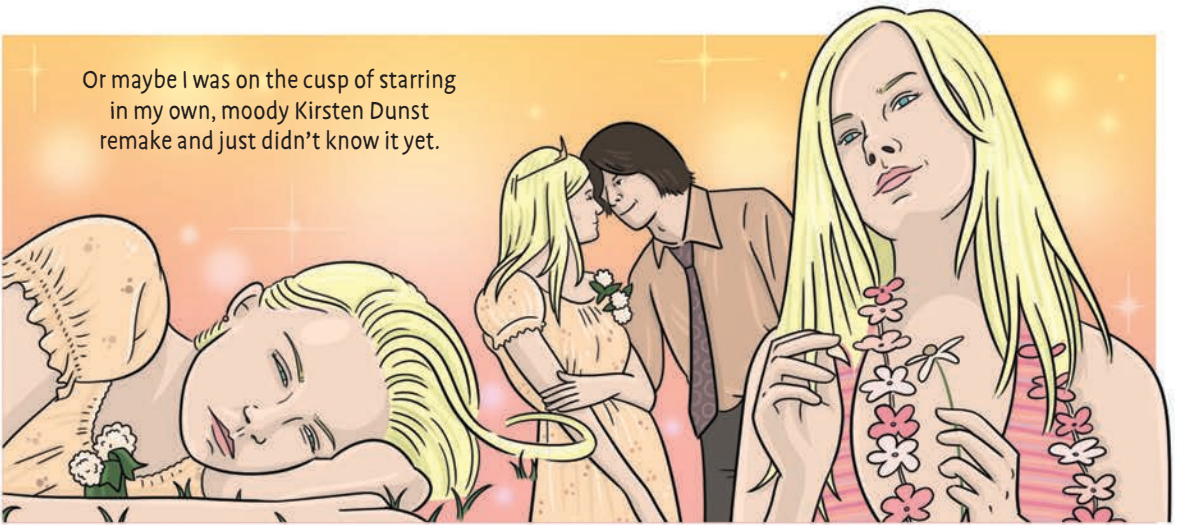
Instead of wishing he'd IM me first, or take me to the movies, or that he'd introduce me to his parents...



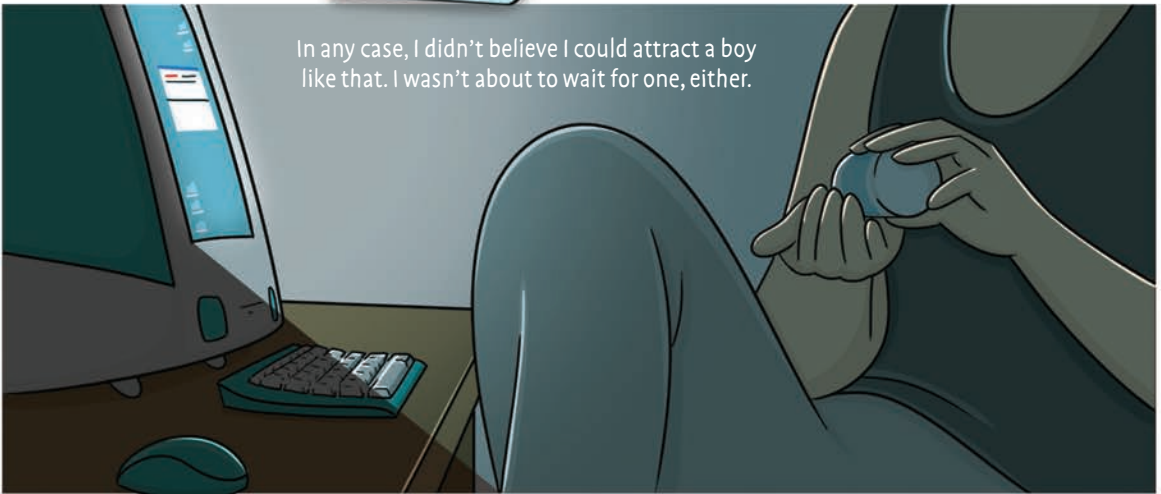
...it was easier just to erase my brain and fall asleep.



Or maybe I was on the cusp of starring in my own, moody Kirsten Dunst remake and just didn't know it yet.



In any case, I didn't believe I could attract a boy like that. I wasn't about to wait for one, either.







Codependents often have trouble setting healthy priorities and boundaries.

chapter four

# a line in the sand



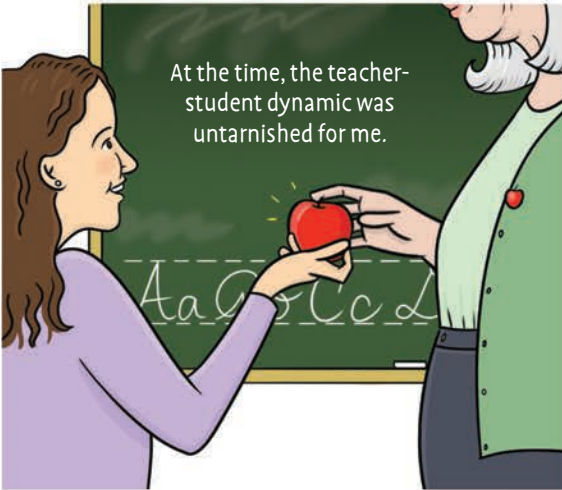
I remember watching *All-American Girl: The Mary Kay Letourneau Story* on Lifetime when I was maybe ten years old.



There was one scene that seared my brain: Mary Kay, the 34-year-old sixth grade teacher of Vili Fuaalau sits in a van with her young paramour, sloppily slurping microwave mac 'n' cheese from his 13-year-old fingers.



At the time, the teacher-student dynamic was untarnished for me.



The absurdity of a romance between Mary Kay and Vili opened my eyes to the possibility that the sacred educational partnership could be exploited and abused.



But at that point, this was relegated to the mythical confines of the Lifetime channel. I was entertained from afar. I never believed I could ever experience this for myself.



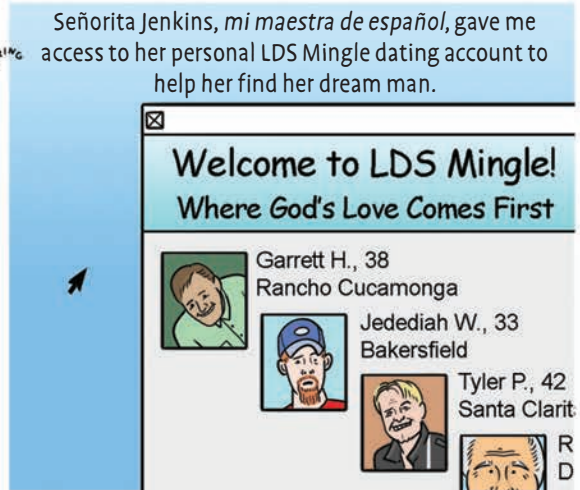
I never grasped how many times the boundaries I thought I'd had with authority figures had been flagrantly disregarded until I was in college. Swapping gossip with my friends about odd teachers, I realized that I had a go-to arsenal of WAY too many instances where things got just plain... weird.



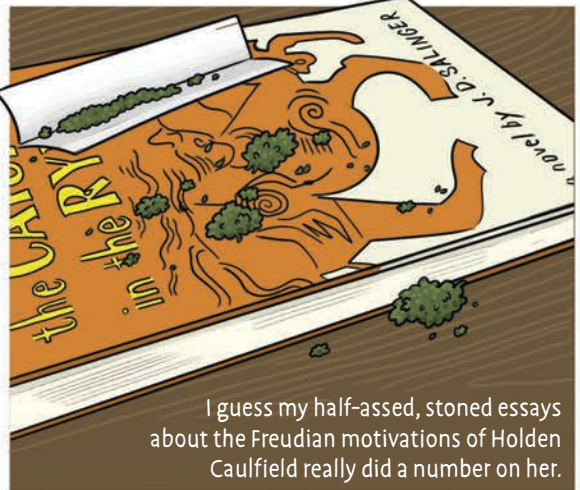
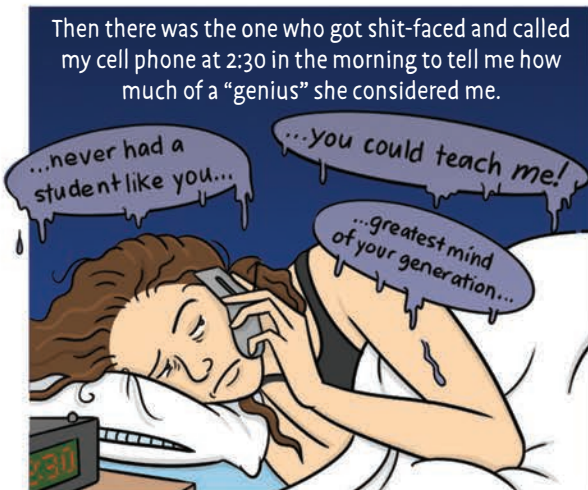
There was the creepy, balding, tenth-grade art teacher who warned me of a spanking when I handed in an assignment late.



Señorita Jenkins, *mi maestra de español*, gave me access to her personal LDS Mingle dating account to help her find her dream man.



Then there was the one who got shit-faced and called my cell phone at 2:30 in the morning to tell me how much of a "genius" she considered me.



She'd hosted a party for our small graduating class at her condo pool in Manhattan.



I was one of the few who'd been granted exclusive access to her apartment upstairs to accompany her while she drank to excess.



It was a bizarre scene, so I split. The next school day, I heard that she'd accidentally flashed my classmates while drunkenly peeling off her swimsuit cover-up.



In my adult life, workplace superiors replaced teachers as my most frequent boundary-flouters. Shit got even more inappropriate.



I briefly rented a room in the home of one supervisor whose wife ended up physically attacking me in front of their two little girls.

Then I had a boss at an art supply store who told me lurid details about her rocky relationship with her boyfriend.



She insisted on suffocating me when we finished shifts.



My first official full-time job was as a window display designer for a hipster clothing retailer—where sexual harassment and bullying from managers turned out to be part of the package.

As a fourth grader watching the Mary Kay Letourneau story, I was made aware that the unspoken rules I'd taken for granted between me and my superiors were hazy at best.



I've since realized that deep insecurity (the kind that maybe someone like Vili and even Mary Kay herself had felt) shadowed me from elementary school right through my post-college years.

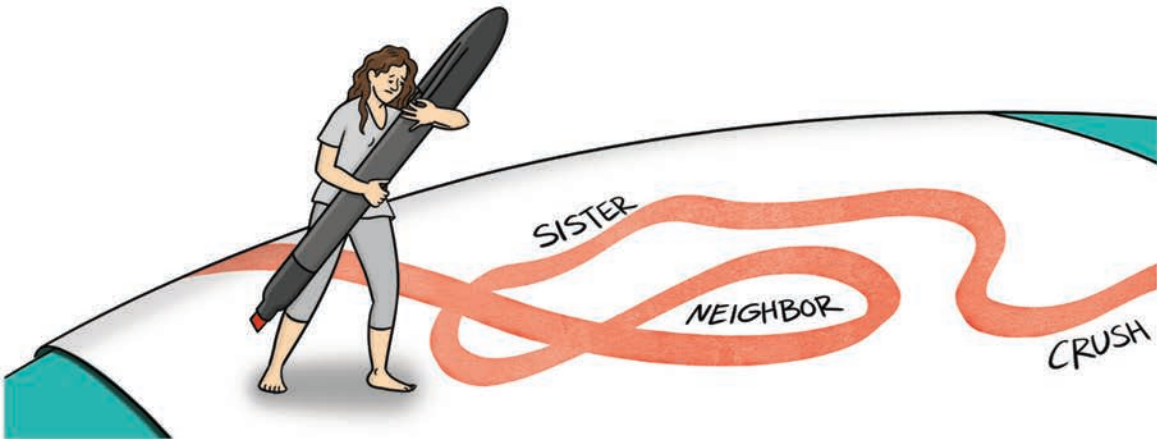


This is why I'd allowed so many strangely intimate moments to transpire between me and the adults whom I turned to for encouragement, guidance, or a paycheck.

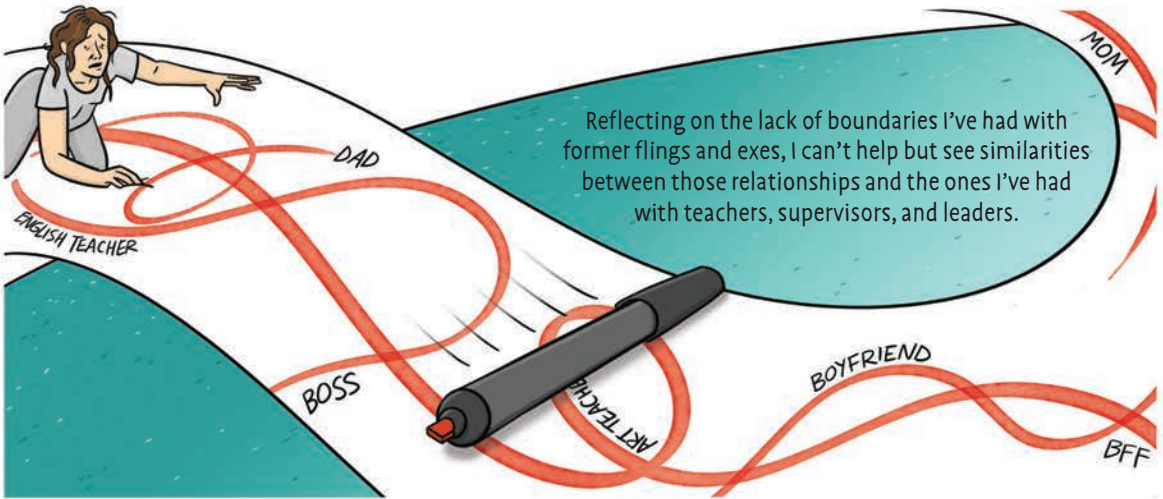
I desperately needed their recognition and admiration because it meant that I had their approval.



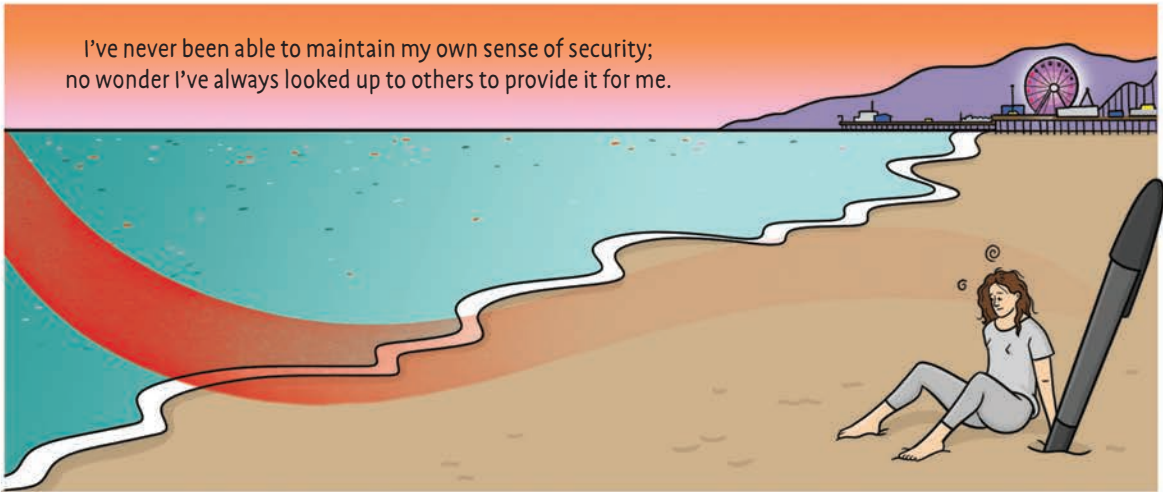
It provided a thin veneer of confidence that ended up inviting more line-crossing from people I thought I could trust.



Recalling the many boundary-violating superiors I've had over the years, I've noticed a distinct pattern: that a hallmark of codependency is a struggle to set healthy boundaries with people.



I've never been able to maintain my own sense of security; no wonder I've always looked up to others to provide it for me.



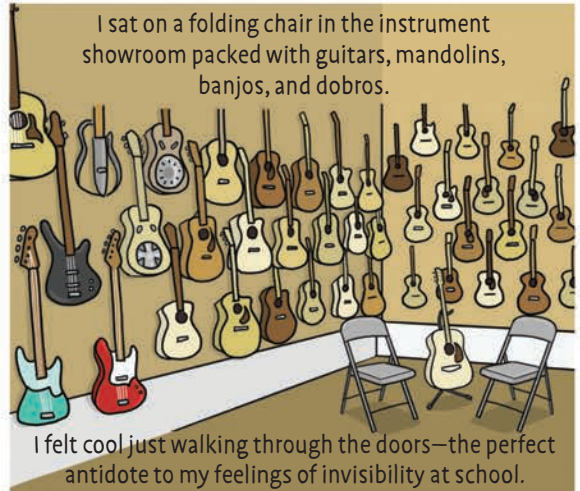
I became aware of this deficiency when I was a sophomore at Santa Monica High School. I walked the halls with headphones in my ears, a trick I'd learned back in Georgia to hide my social anxiety.



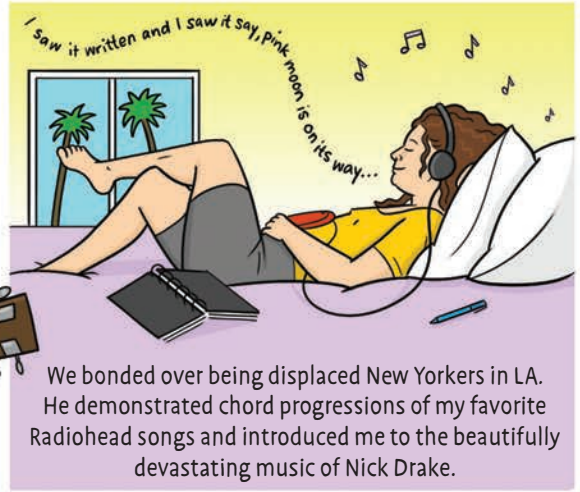
But on Wednesdays after school, I found respite at my guitar lessons. I strapped my acoustic to my back and walked to the music shop.



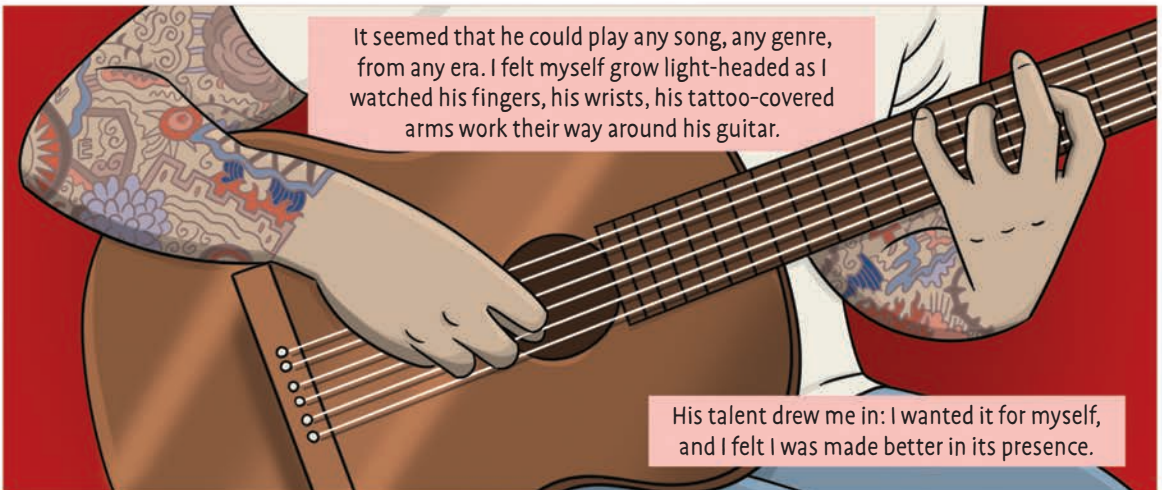
The hallways were lined with autographed black-and-white photos of legends who had played concerts there: Eric Clapton, PJ Harvey, Les Paul.



My guitar teacher was in his thirties, and he treated me like a true friend.



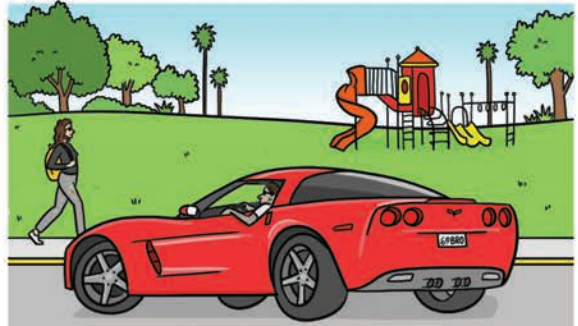
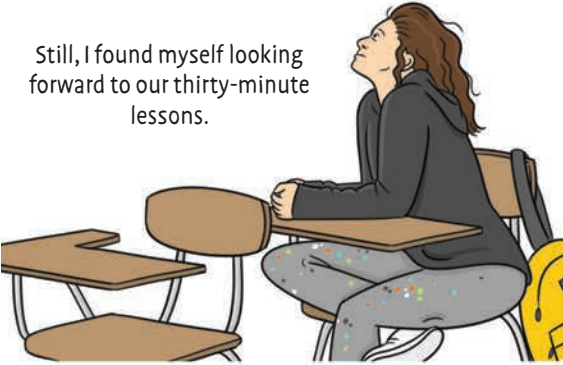
It seemed that he could play any song, any genre, from any era. I felt myself grow light-headed as I watched his fingers, his wrists, his tattoo-covered arms work their way around his guitar.





This wasn't a sexual crush—to me, he was untouchable, on another level beyond physical lust.

Still, I found myself looking forward to our thirty-minute lessons.



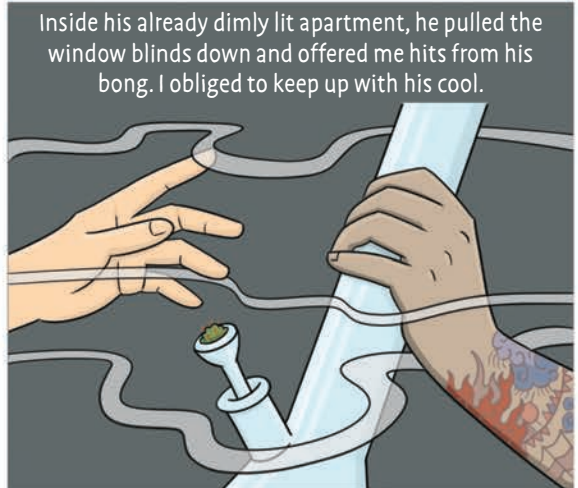
One day we made a plan to hang out, a natural thing for two friends to do. We met in a parking lot, and he drove us to his place a few blocks away.

He wanted to show me some video tapes of Jeff Buckley he had at his apartment.

Uh, isn't she in high school, man?



Inside his already dimly lit apartment, he pulled the window blinds down and offered me hits from his bong.

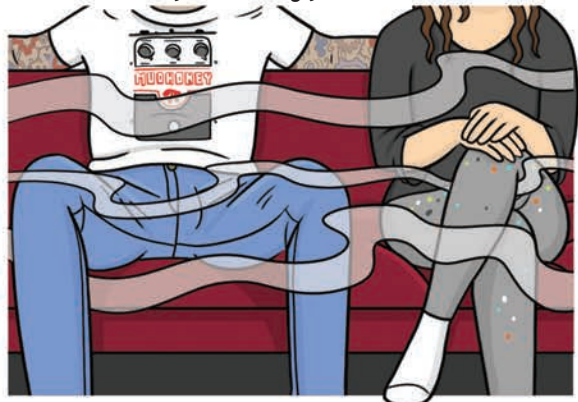


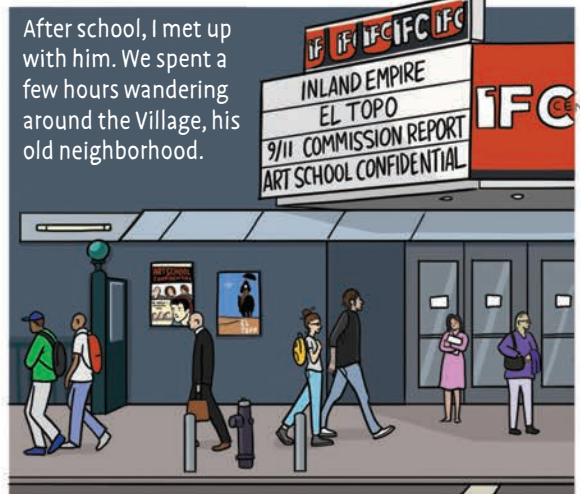
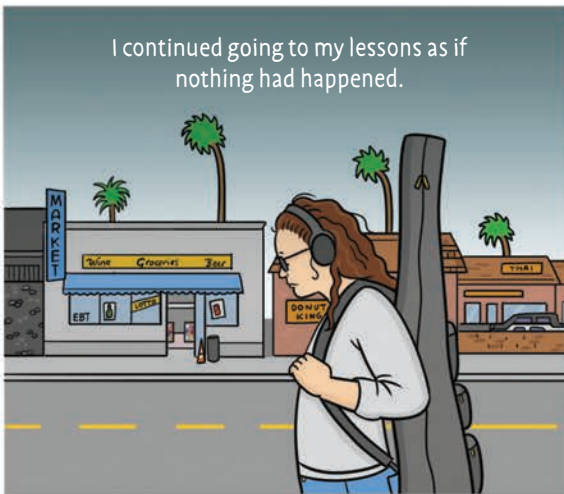
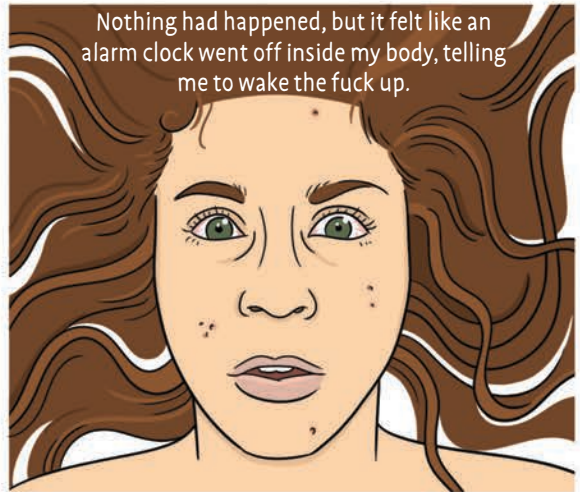
He put the Jeff Buckley tapes on, and I remember my head spinning as thick smoke filled the room.

Yeah, this is definitely weird.



We sat, not touching, and a panic started to overtake me. What the hell was I doing in the apartment of a thirty-something-year-old man?

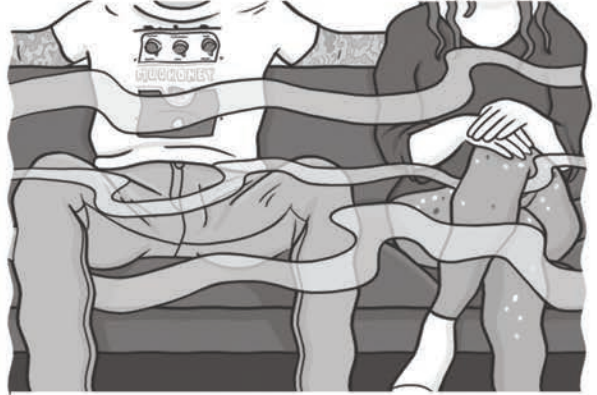




This was the corner where he'd gotten his first kiss; here was the stoop where he'd gotten his first blow job. Why was he telling me this stuff?



I reasoned with myself that if he'd had ill intentions, wouldn't he have acted on them when we were stoned, alone in his apartment back in Santa Monica?



We circled Washington Square Park until I told him I had homework to do. At the subway station, he surprised me when he went in for a hug.

Angling his head down, he planted a wet kiss directly on my lips.



I was stunned. At that point, I'd only ever been kissed by two or three teenage boys. Now, a thirty-something man with tattoos and stubble was kissing me, in public, on the mouth.

What the fuck was going on? How could I have let this happen?



On the long subway ride home, I replayed the afternoon's events with increasing revulsion.



GO!  
GO!  
GO!



The smoking session in his apartment began to feel less like two pals hanging out and more like something perilous that I'd narrowly escaped.

I was disappointed: I really admired him as a person, a friend, and fellow artist. How could someone so cool, so talented, so able to see me have been a predator all along?



He remains one of the most talented musicians I've ever had the pleasure of watching up close. I still feel myself swooning when I remember his fingers plucking and bending the strings.



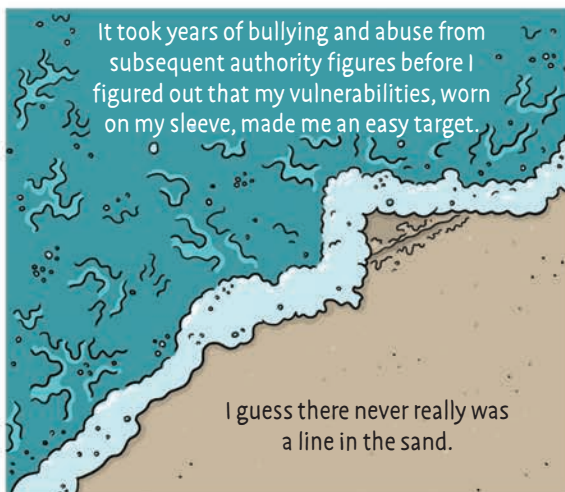
I wonder what he saw in me back then. I was so young and so deeply insecure; he must have picked up on that in an instant.



I thought we'd connected over our shared experiences and love for the Smashing Pumpkins, the Pixies, Nirvana.



It took years of bullying and abuse from subsequent authority figures before I figured out that my vulnerabilities, worn on my sleeve, made me an easy target.

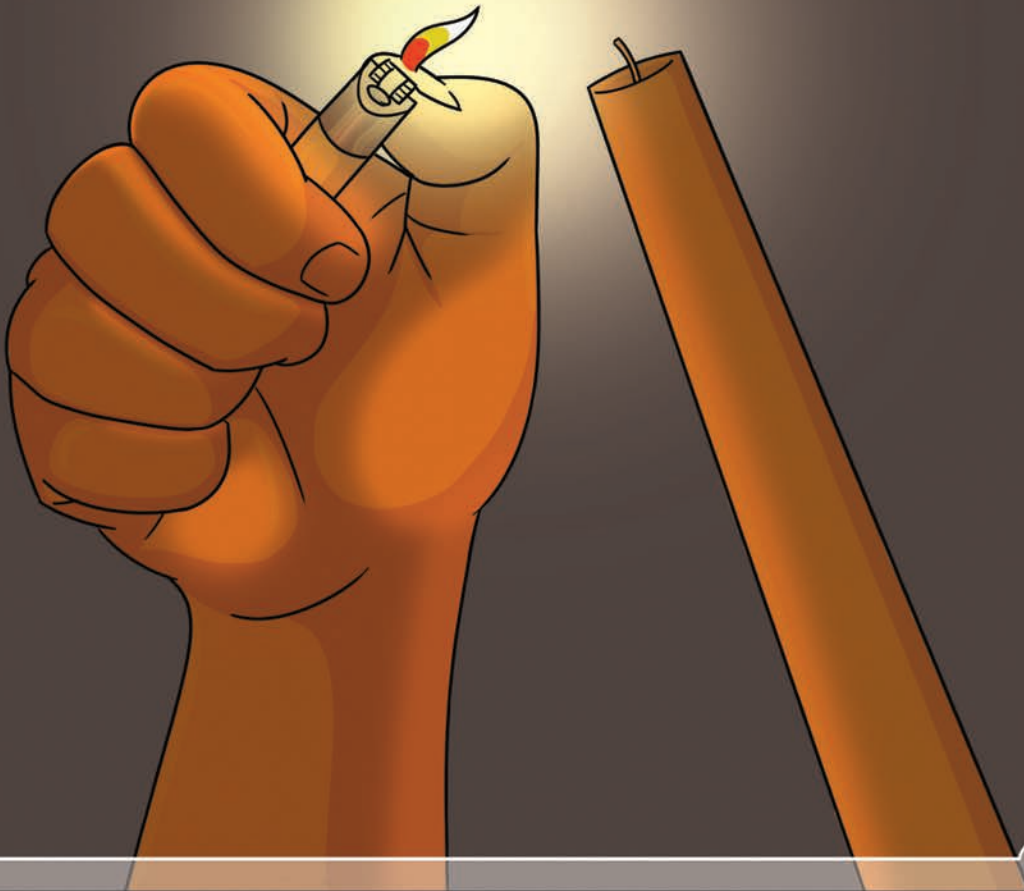


I guess there never really was a line in the sand.



Codependents have a hard time accepting others' unavailability.

chapter five  
**a burning desire**





We were in the same friend group at Santa Monica High, my second of three high schools.



He had a longtime girlfriend since middle school. She was tall, beautiful, and had a mean streak.



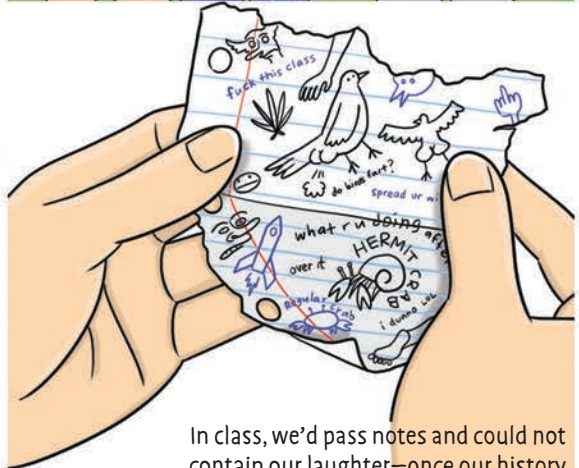
It was an open secret that she cheated on him. He was so devoted to her, it was pathetic, even for high school standards.



We all tried to point out her mistreatment of him, but he was having none of it. Eventually, we gave up.



We all assumed that either they'd be together forever, or someday he'd wake the fuck up. Nevertheless, he was still my good friend.



In class, we'd pass notes and could not contain our laughter—once our history teacher even had to separate us.

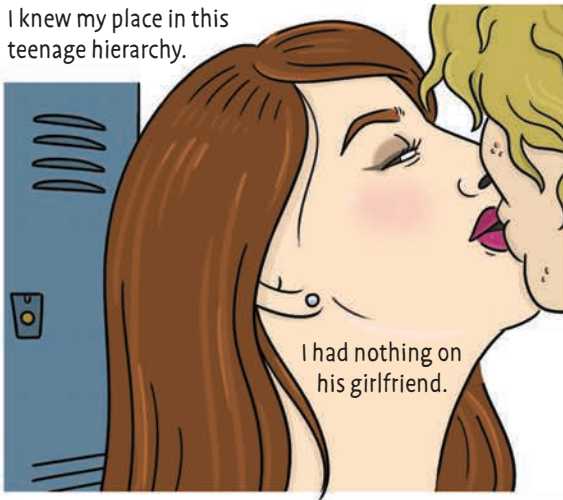
Every day, he'd walk with me across our vast campus to my Spanish class.



I'd imagine that we were more than just friends, until I'd see him trail after his shitty girlfriend so they could make out in the hallway.

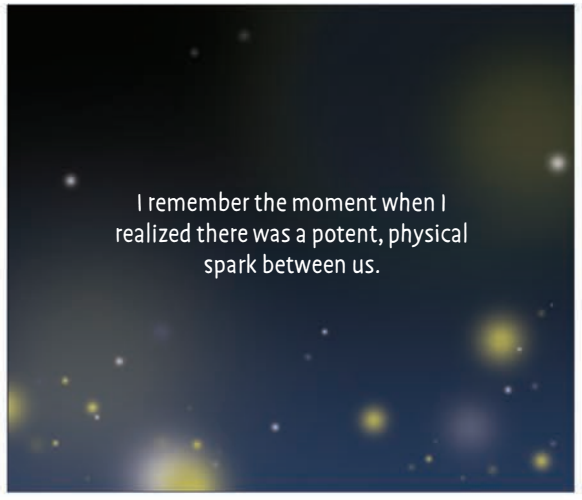


I knew my place in this teenage hierarchy.



I had nothing on his girlfriend.

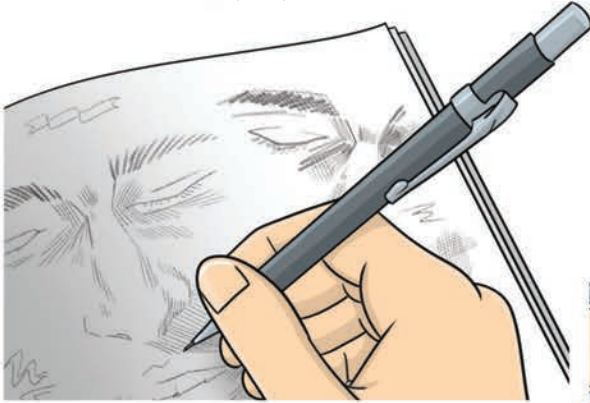
I remember the moment when I realized there was a potent, physical spark between us.



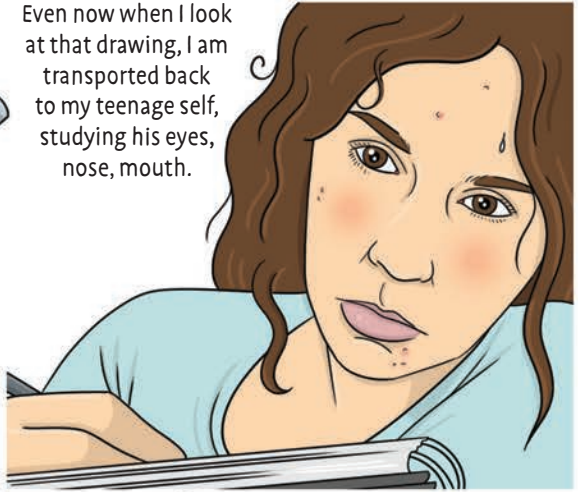
He challenged me to draw his portrait, right then and there, in our friend's bedroom one day.



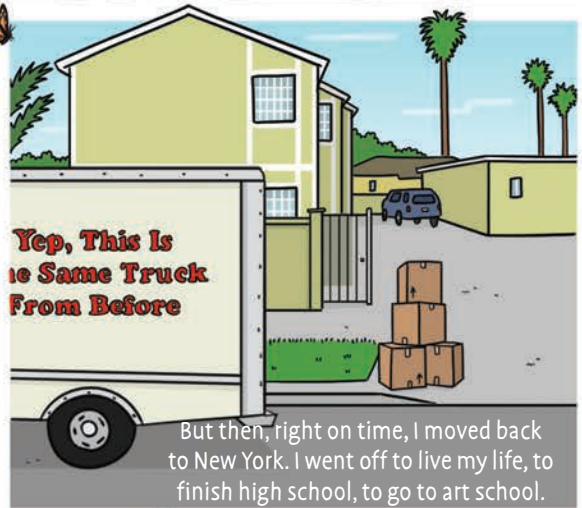
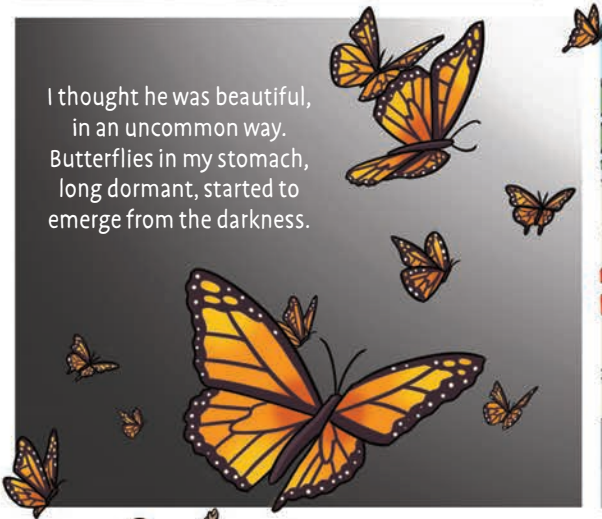
He always carried a fine mechanical pencil—he had dreams of being an architect—and I used it to craft his likeness in my very first sketchbook.



Even now when I look at that drawing, I am transported back to my teenage self, studying his eyes, nose, mouth.



I thought he was beautiful, in an uncommon way. Butterflies in my stomach, long dormant, started to emerge from the darkness.



But then, right on time, I moved back to New York. I went off to live my life, to finish high school, to go to art school.

There wasn't much contact between us; I was busy with my first year of college.



I thought of him from time to time as "my good friend from Malibu."



One night, after hanging out at our friend's house, he announced he was headed home to Malibu.

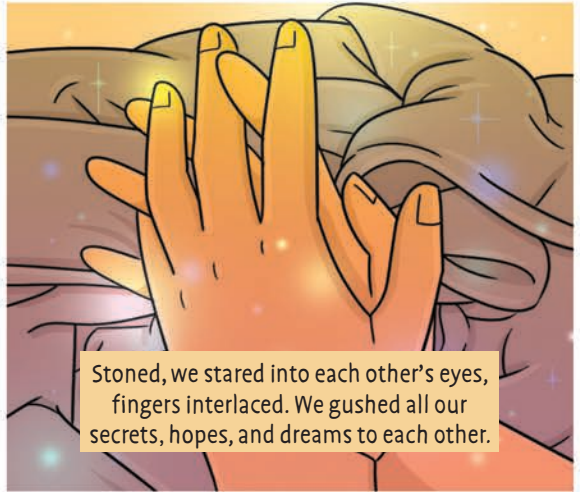
For a week, or maybe it was two, I can't remember,  
we just laid in bed together.



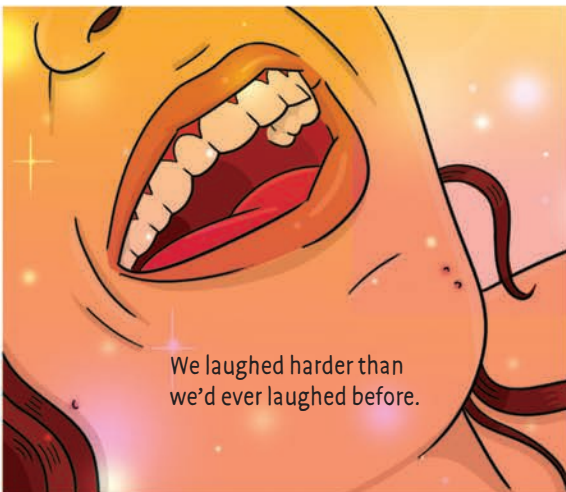
We had incredible  
chemistry, but this was on  
another level: finally, I was  
being treated with care,  
I was being appreciated.



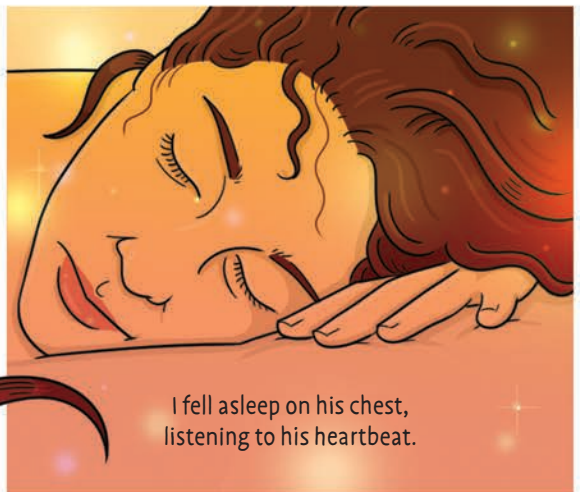
Stoned, we stared into each other's eyes,  
fingers interlaced. We gushed all our  
secrets, hopes, and dreams to each other.



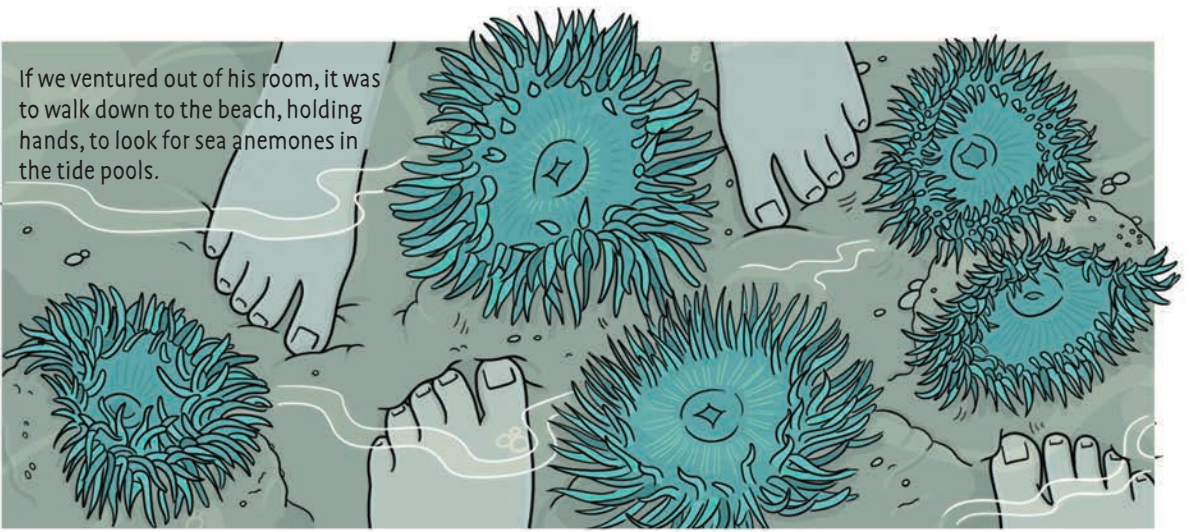
We laughed harder than  
we'd ever laughed before.



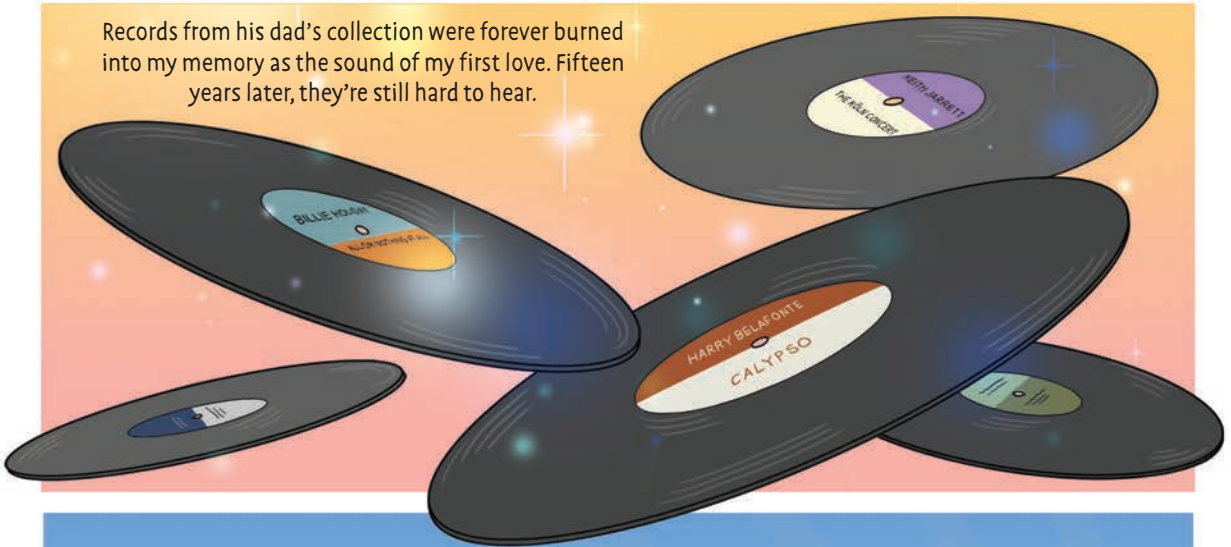
I fell asleep on his chest,  
listening to his heartbeat.



If we ventured out of his room, it was to walk down to the beach, holding hands, to look for sea anemones in the tide pools.



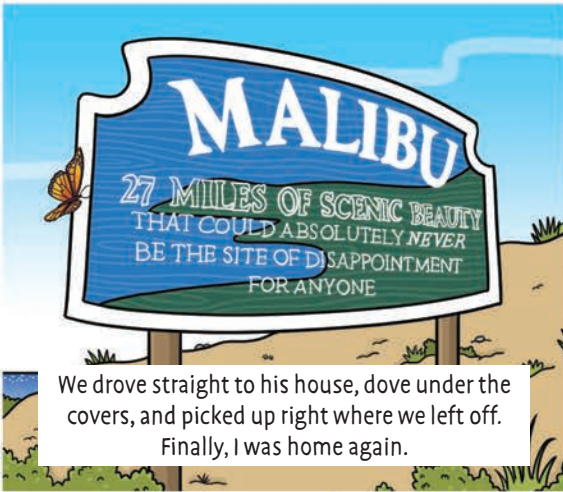
Records from his dad's collection were forever burned into my memory as the sound of my first love. Fifteen years later, they're still hard to hear.



When I had to return to New York, to real life, it was a sad reality check. But instead of my usual baseline depression, I'd felt a glittering sense of hope.







We drove straight to his house, dove under the covers, and picked up right where we left off. Finally, I was home again.



At last, I was playing the unofficial role of The Girlfriend. I was a natural. We decorated the Christmas tree together, I charmed his grandparents and cousins, I smoked weed with his family friends.



Warmed by the living room fire, we had tender, romantic sex at 3 a.m. in a nest of blankets. I was blissed out.



On New Year's Eve, however, things shifted. We went with some friends to the Valley for a house party.

I have hazy memories of that night—it was the first, last, and only time that I've ever gotten so drunk that I blacked out.



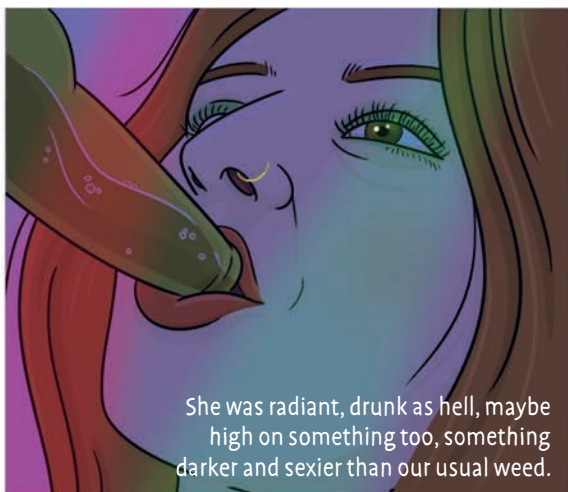
All I remember is drinking vodka like it was water...falling down on the carpet...laying on the backseat of the car until the party ended. Looking back on the only time I've ever been wasted, I think I was preparing myself that night for something that, deep down, my heart knew was inevitable.



Over the next few days, I put the pieces together.



Our friends helped me get to my feet and back to the car while he was at the party, occupied with someone else.



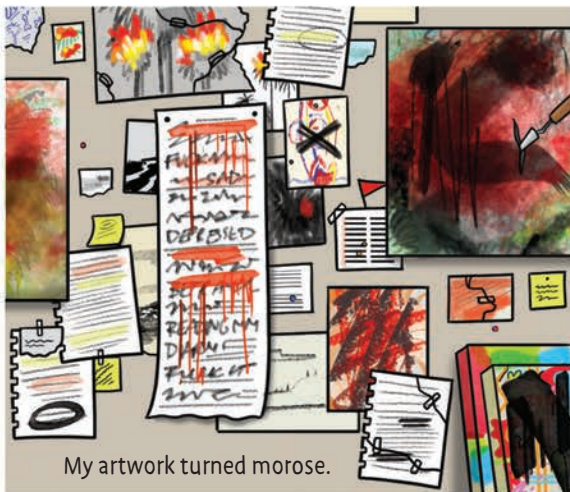
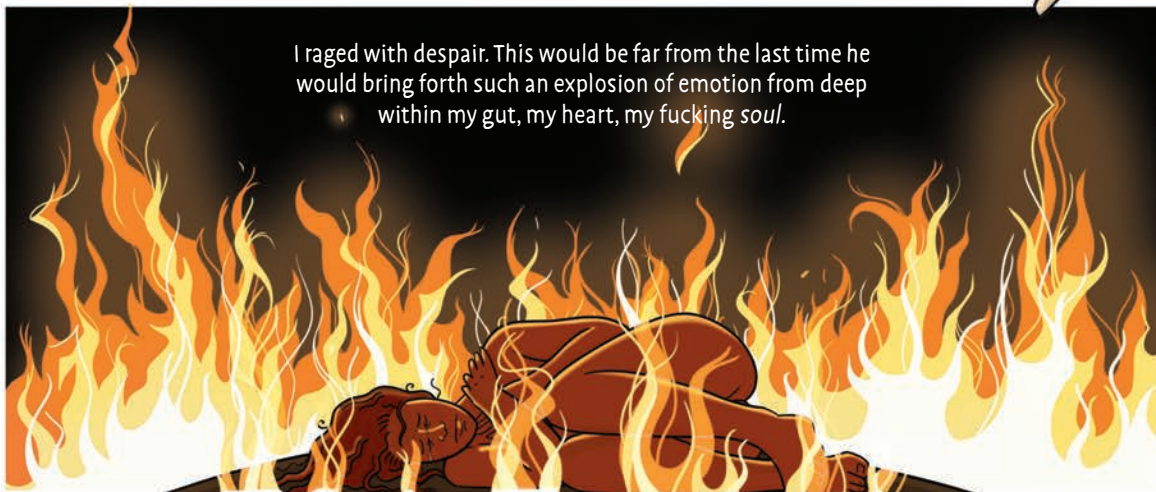
She was radiant, drunk as hell, maybe high on something too, something darker and sexier than our usual weed.

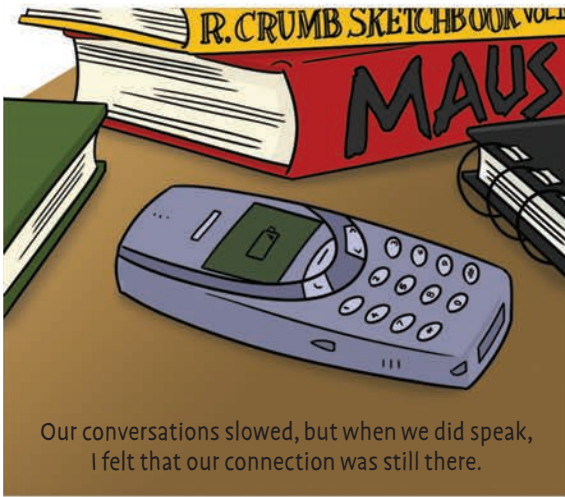


He rang in 2009 with this new, enticing stranger.

A few nights later, during our usual post-sex pillow talk, he told me he'd fallen madly in love with her at the party.

To say I was blindsided would be the understatement of the century. I was devastated, ravaged, crushed, destroyed.





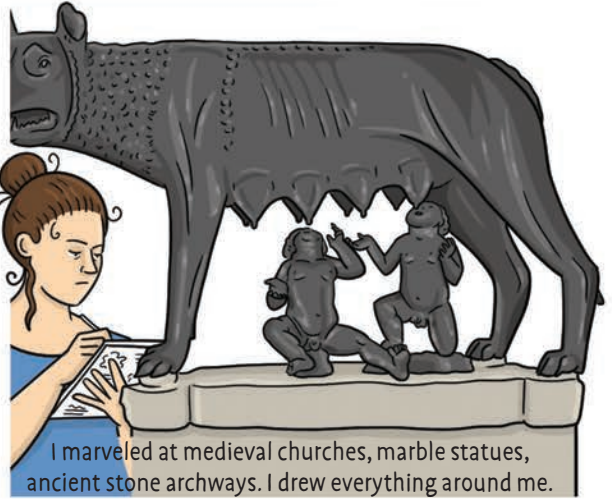
Our conversations slowed, but when we did speak, I felt that our connection was still there.



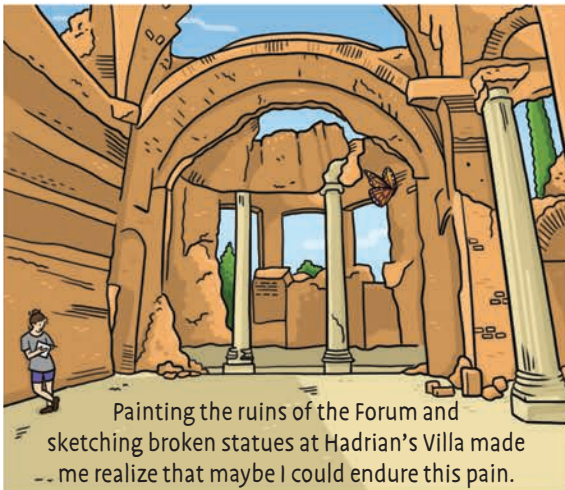
When my junior year came along, I had an opportunity to get away from it all in the form of a study-abroad program in Rome.



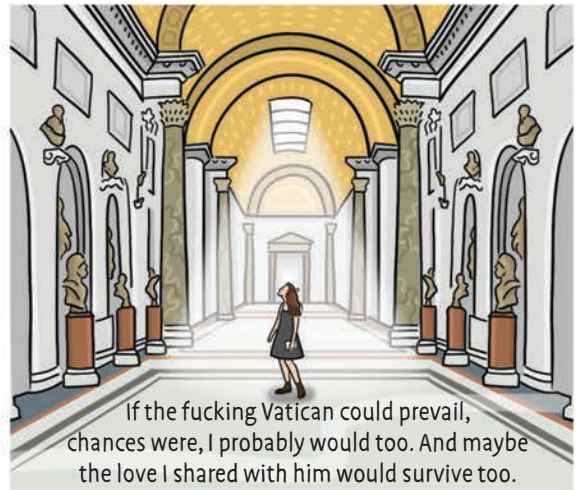
Europe opened me up to a new world—an old world, where time could be seen and felt all around me.



I marveled at medieval churches, marble statues, ancient stone archways. I drew everything around me.



Painting the ruins of the Forum and sketching broken statues at Hadrian's Villa made me realize that maybe I could endure this pain.

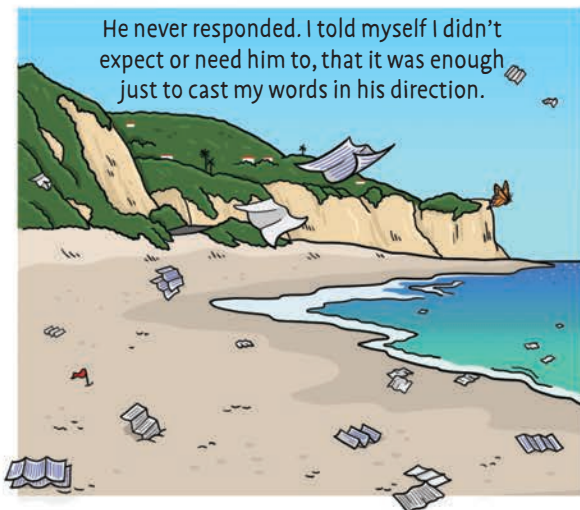


If the fucking Vatican could prevail, chances were, I probably would too. And maybe the love I shared with him would survive too.

I wrote to him every week from Rome and as I traveled in Barcelona, London, Dublin, Glasgow, Amsterdam. Not your average postcard—I wrote him multipage letters, describing everything in detail in the hopes that my words would take him far away from his girlfriend.



He never responded. I told myself I didn't expect or need him to, that it was enough just to cast my words in his direction.



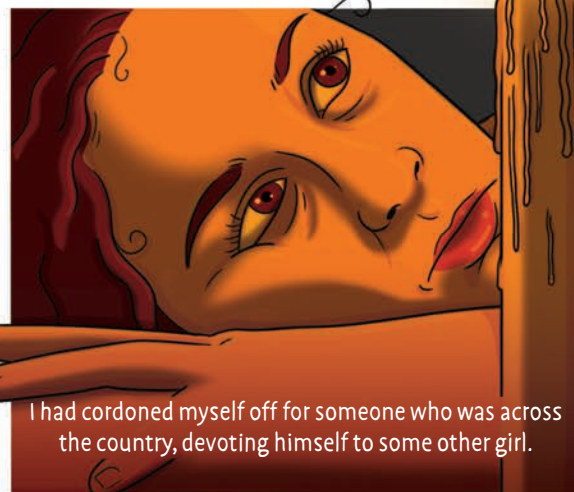
I finished college with my candle for him still burning as bright as ever.



The whole time I was in college, I never had any significant romantic or sexual experiences with anyone else.



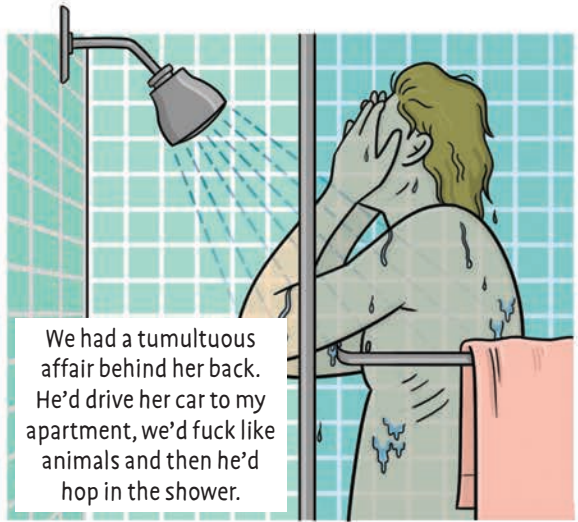
I had cordoned myself off for someone who was across the country, devoting himself to some other girl.



Their relationship continued after I graduated and moved back to Los Angeles.



But I was intent on finally living out my fairy tale no matter what.



We had a tumultuous affair behind her back. He'd drive her car to my apartment, we'd fuck like animals and then he'd hop in the shower.

Once he'd washed himself of me, I wasn't allowed to touch him. Lather, rinse, repeat—somehow she never found out.



Gotta go.

One day, after months of this, he disappeared without a trace. The last time I'd seen him, I was on my knees in front of him. He told me something that I never forgot.

I love you.

It would be three years before we reconnected. I kept the candle burning for him that entire time.



Even though all I'd been given initially was a single spark, it was enough. It had to be, after all that time.

I felt like I'd won an epic battle when, years later, he finally gave in and had a relationship with me.







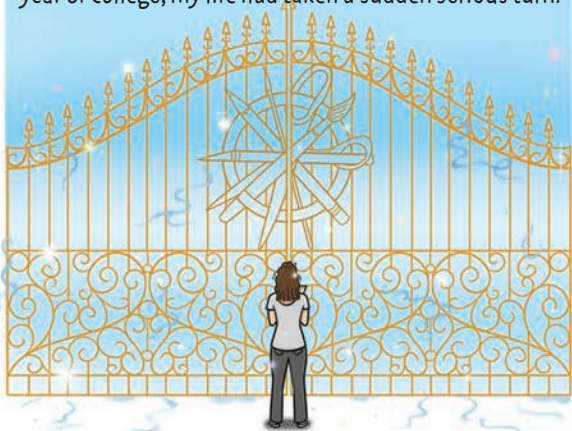
Codependents crave control to feel  
secure in their relationships.

The image shows a decorative book cover. The background is a deep blue gradient filled with numerous small, bright white and light blue stars, creating a starry night sky effect. A white rectangular box with rounded corners is positioned in the upper center. Inside this box, the text "chapter six" is written in a small, lowercase, sans-serif font. Below it, the title "creative control freak" is written in a larger, bold, lowercase, sans-serif font. The entire cover is framed by a thin white border with decorative, rounded corners at each of the four corners.

chapter six

**creative control freak**

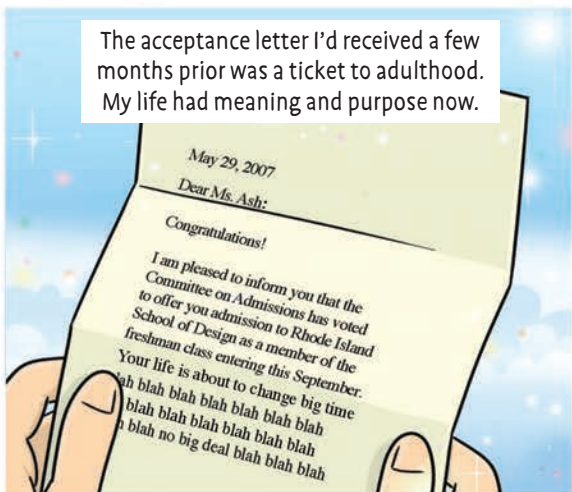
When I'd arrived in Providence at age 17 for my freshman year of college, my life had taken a sudden serious turn.



I was in art school. This wasn't just any art school—it was THE art school: the Rhode Island School of Design.



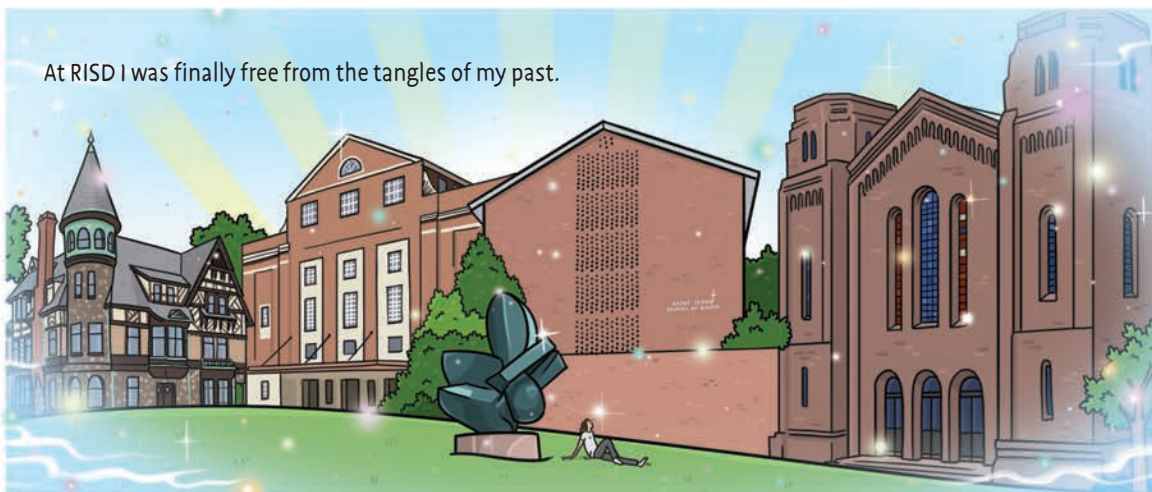
The acceptance letter I'd received a few months prior was a ticket to adulthood. My life had meaning and purpose now.



I was an artist. I would be an artist forevermore.



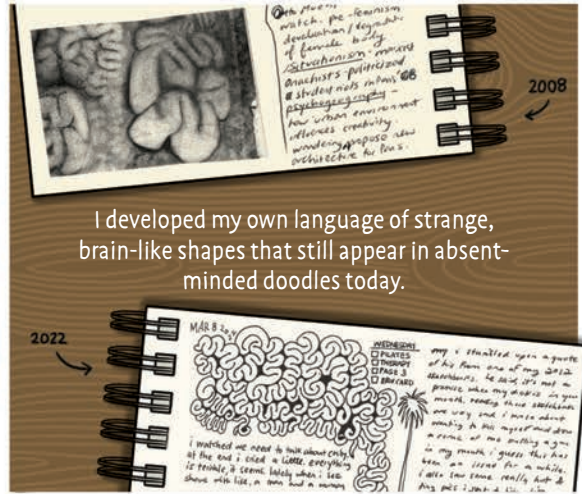
At RISD I was finally free from the tangles of my past.







I carefully mixed dozens of tiny pots of gouache in perfectly tuned gradients.



I developed my own language of strange, brain-like shapes that still appear in absent-minded doodles today.



One day, we all arrived at our studio to find a heap of chairs threaded by taut string zig-zagging across the room. Our professor outlawed rulers and set us to work... for the next eight hours.



By the end, I longed to scrub my body clean of the charcoal dust that would appear in my snot for days after.

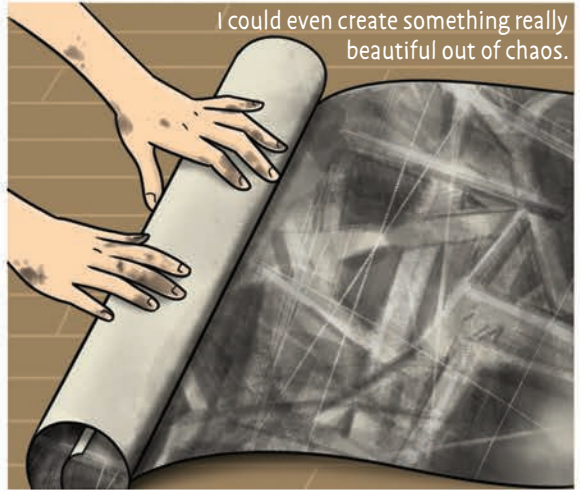


But when I finally completed my drawing, I saw an uncanny recreation of the chaos that intimidated me that morning.

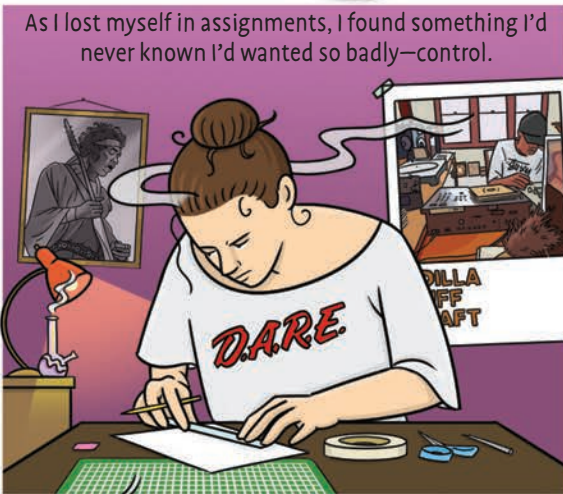
I felt a confidence that never left me, not only because I'd mastered drawing, but because I could make sense of mayhem.



I could even create something really beautiful out of chaos.



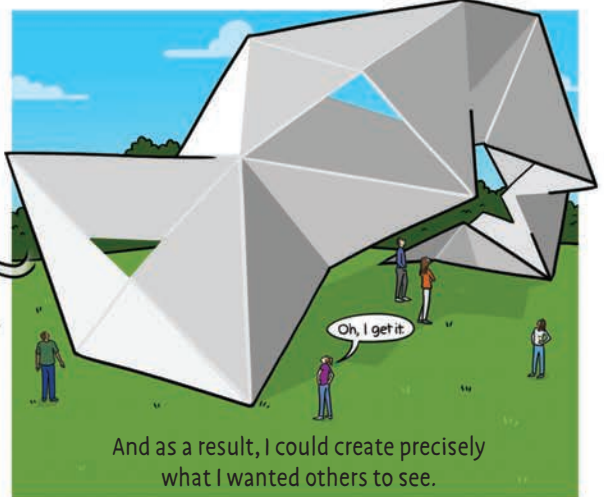
As I lost myself in assignments, I found something I'd never known I'd wanted so badly—control.



The more dedicated I was to my work, the better I became at creating exactly what I saw in my mind.



I got really good at knowing I'd created my visions by learning to trust myself.

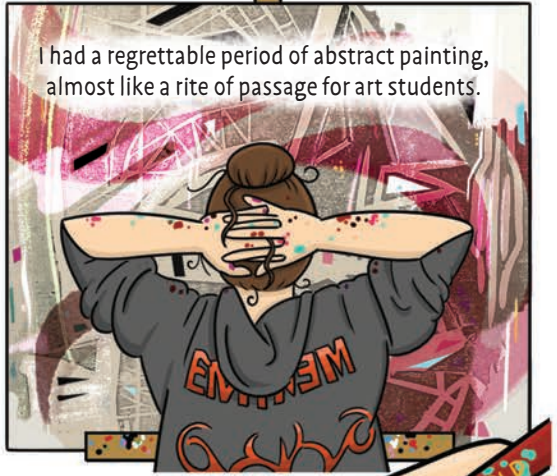


And as a result, I could create precisely what I wanted others to see.

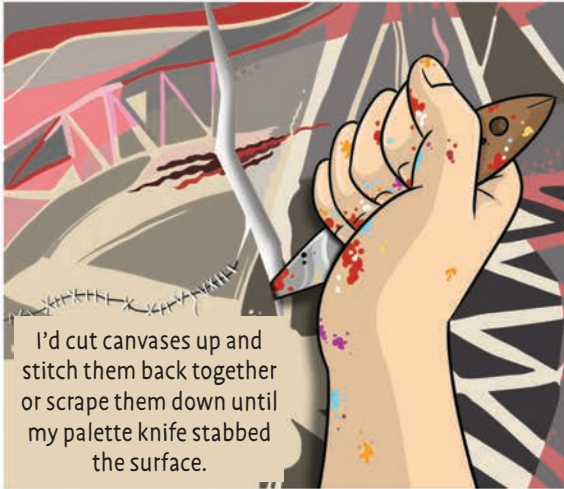
For the next three years, my experiments bubbled over and transformed constantly.



I had a regrettable period of abstract painting, almost like a rite of passage for art students.



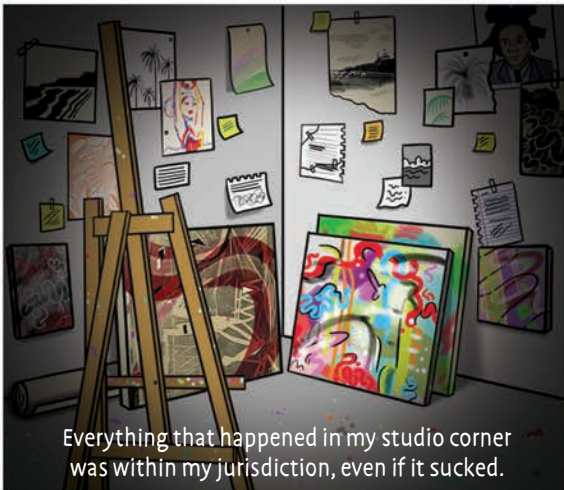
I'd cut canvases up and stitch them back together or scrape them down until my palette knife stabbed the surface.



An errant brush stroke could be obliterated or enhanced by another.



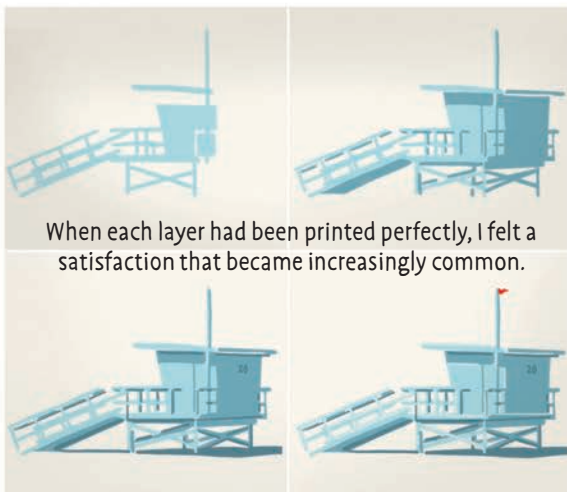
Everything that happened in my studio corner was within my jurisdiction, even if it sucked.



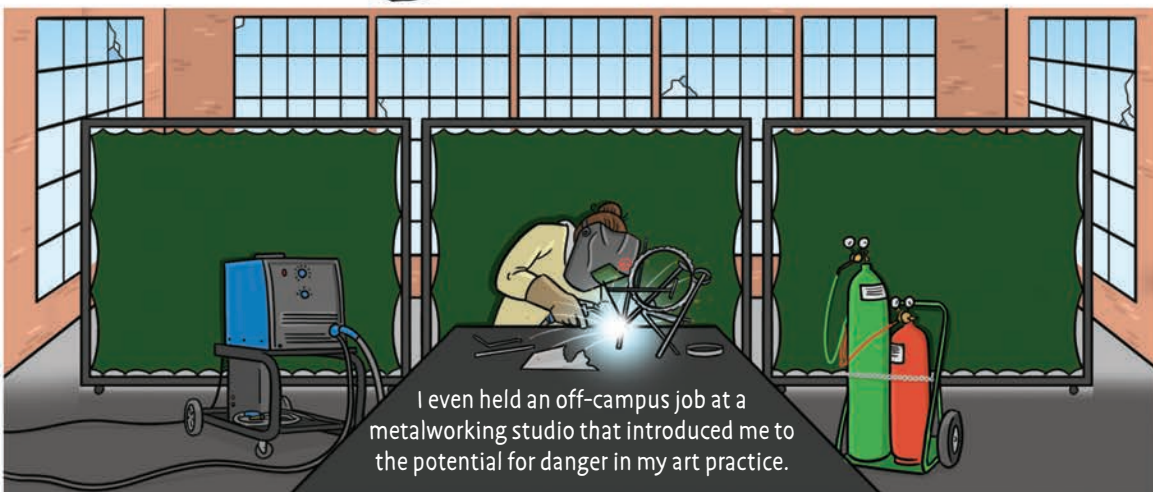
I was curious about the world beyond my major, so I enrolled in a bunch of classes to expand my universe beyond painting and drawing.



In other classes, I appreciated the careful methods of many kinds of printmaking. I performed the steps cautiously.



When each layer had been printed perfectly, I felt a satisfaction that became increasingly common.



I even held an off-campus job at a metalworking studio that introduced me to the potential for danger in my art practice.



Studying in Rome for my junior year was a chance to delve deeply into whatever the fuck I wanted to in this new place.



In my first personal studio, I created my own world out of sketches, cutouts from old magazines, etchings, writings.



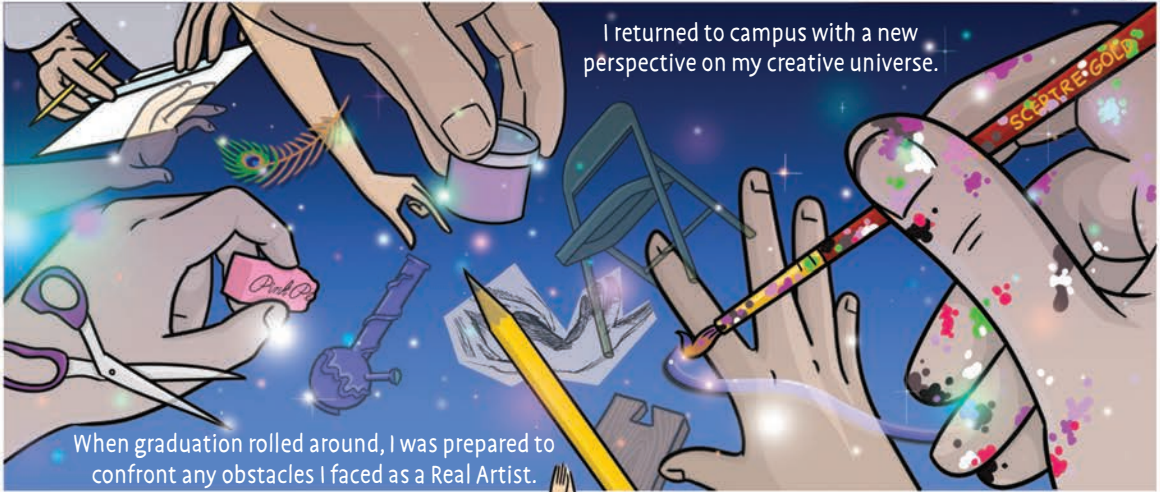
I barely spoke the language and I was farther than I'd ever been from home, but I found an artistic routine that kept me grounded.



All creative personalities push their art of nature into becoming and then... into nature of a real and higher plane.

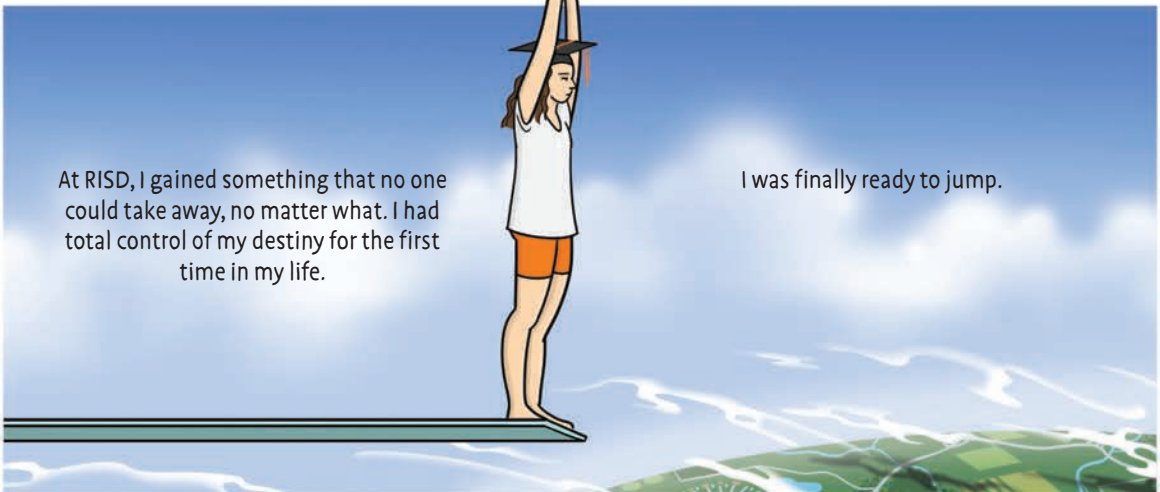


Individuals who withdraw from life for an inward development of personality and then return as performers creative acts in the field of nature.



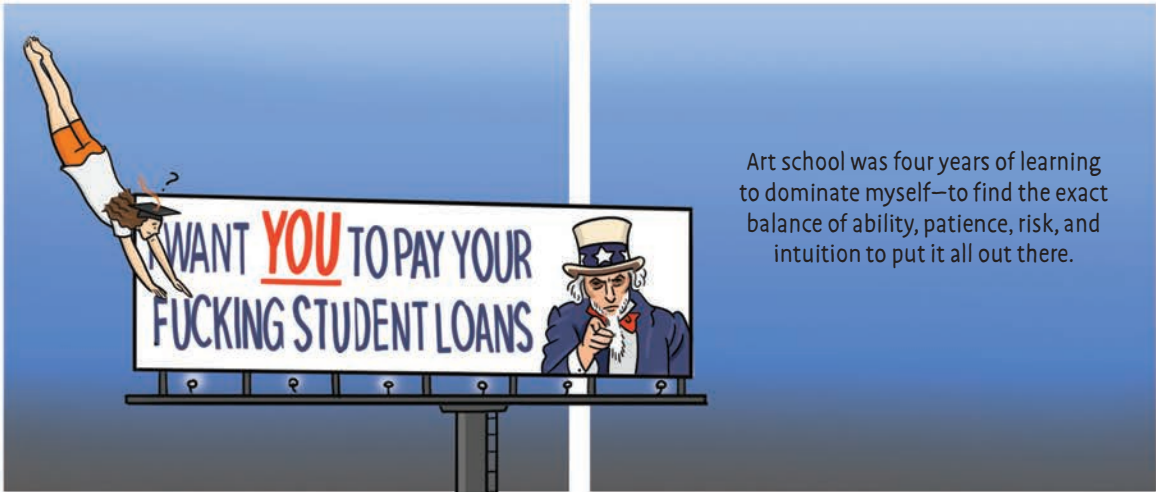
I returned to campus with a new perspective on my creative universe.

When graduation rolled around, I was prepared to confront any obstacles I faced as a Real Artist.

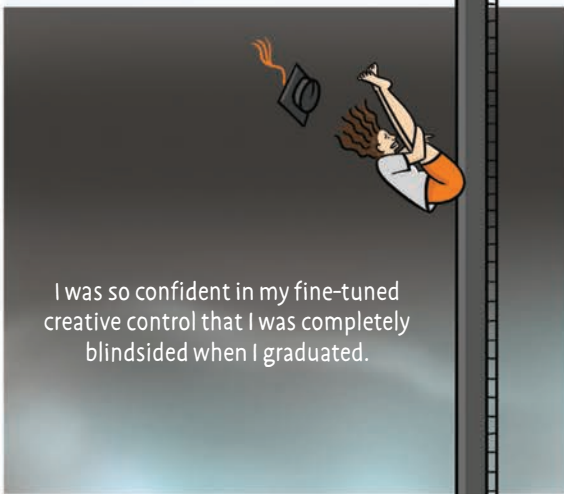


At RISD, I gained something that no one could take away, no matter what. I had total control of my destiny for the first time in my life.

I was finally ready to jump.



Art school was four years of learning to dominate myself—to find the exact balance of ability, patience, risk, and intuition to put it all out there.





Failed friendships and a toxic relationship threatened to sweep me up completely and eventually succeeded.

I was bewildered to find depressing prospects as an artist when I returned to LA. I had little stability. I lost my grasp on everything.



But I found a way to deal.



I tapped back into my universe.



I'd soon find that it was the only place I could control.





Codependents want to fix the people they love.

chapter seven

# labor of a savior



My long-lost love and I finally reunited at a solo art show of mine.



It was a big party to celebrate a series of fifty cartoons I painted.



I knew he'd be there with mutual friends, so I carefully put on makeup (a rarity) with shaky hands.

At the show, our eyes met from afar and sent my heart pounding. I ignored the fact that he never seemed to actually look at any of the artwork on the walls. At the end of the night, he invited me over.



Needless to say, it was a surreal, explosive, unforgettable reunion. I was living in a dream after three torturous years of waiting for him.

It felt like no time had passed. I had so much hope for the future—finally, he was single. Finally, I could convince him to be with me.



In the morning, I woke up before him. I had work to do.



There was a stack of dirty dishes he had yet to wash. I made it my duty to clean up his bachelor life.



When I was done, I even swept the floor. I had to prove that I was wife material: helpful, caring, and, most of all, useful.

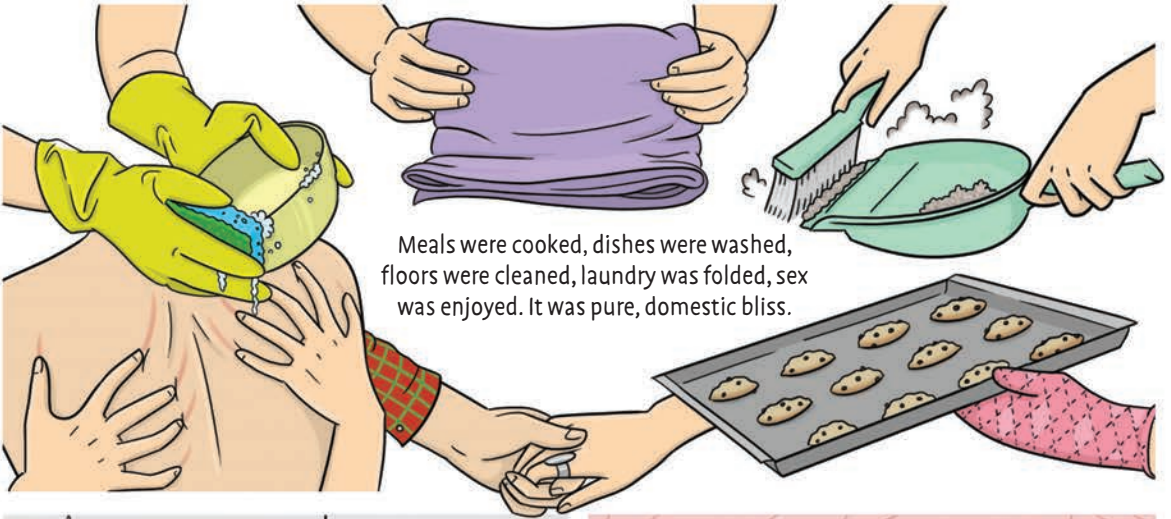


It must have made an impression because a few months later I moved in.

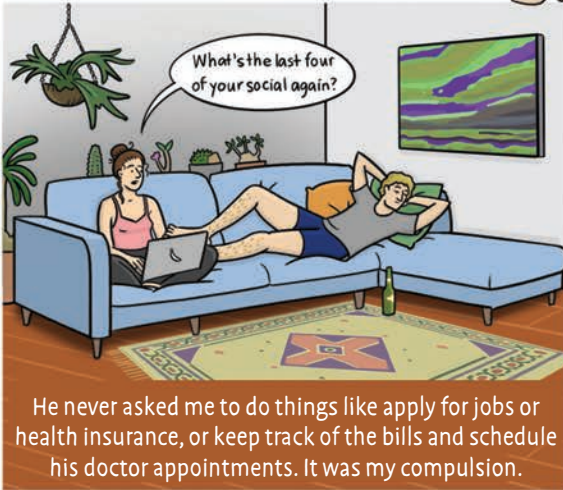
I'd never ventured into cooking before. My experience in the kitchen was limited to sandwiches and scrambled eggs.



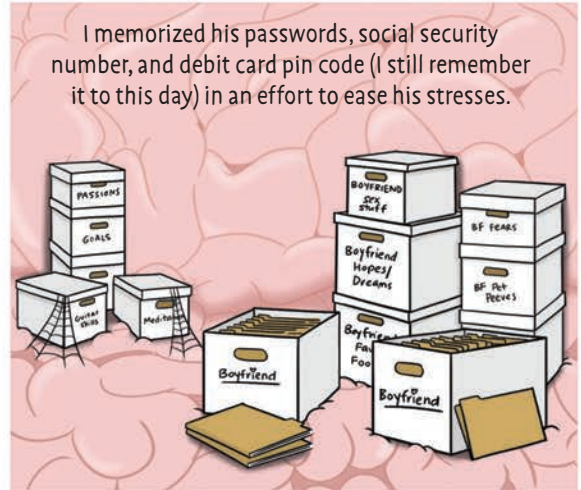
I compiled my mom's recipes for chocolate chip cookies, lasagna, roasted chicken, vegetable soup, waffles, and brownies in a special three-ring binder.



Meals were cooked, dishes were washed, floors were cleaned, laundry was folded, sex was enjoyed. It was pure, domestic bliss.



He never asked me to do things like apply for jobs or health insurance, or keep track of the bills and schedule his doctor appointments. It was my compulsion.

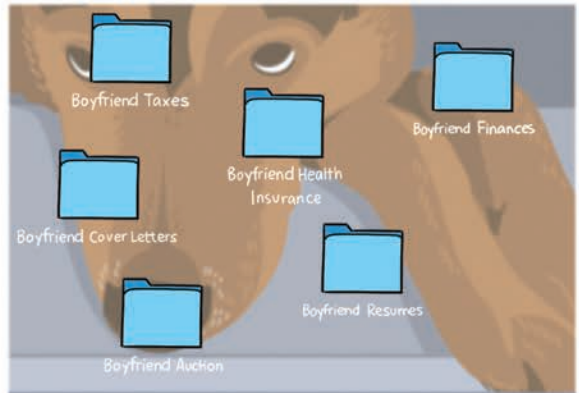


I memorized his passwords, social security number, and debit card pin code (I still remember it to this day) in an effort to ease his stresses.



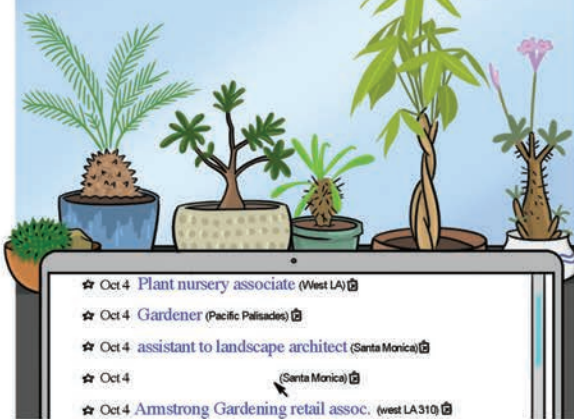
In return, I felt secure with my first real boyfriend. I received his love, his support, his encouragement. It was everything I'd ever hoped for, and more.

My career had stalled at this point. I had a miserable part-time assistant job and was doing focus groups for prepaid Visa cards.



I spent my downtime at the office assembling special folders on my computer dedicated to him: his resumes, cover letters that I'd written in his voice, and more.

My goal was to find him employment that he'd really enjoy, a job that would use his green thumb.



When he finally landed a job, I agreed when he insisted that he'd gotten it because of his interview, not because of my cover letter or that I'd combed through ads for hours.

I so badly wanted him to succeed that I helped him on the labor-intensive job for free.



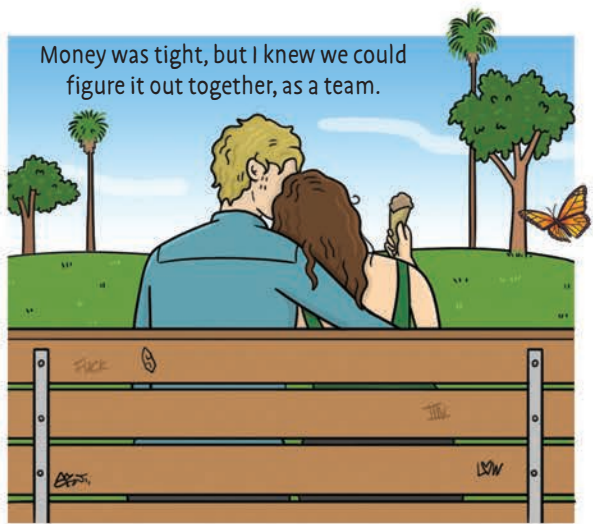
His success made me feel confident that if he needed me, he would never leave me.



I dutifully split payments for our bills, rent, groceries, nights out, whatever.



Money was tight, but I knew we could figure it out together, as a team.



There was a dark side to it, though. When things fell through, like the Craigslist job, I felt responsible for his disappointment.

It wasn't just an existential feeling—I had a physical reaction to his hardship. My stomach literally churned because this was my fault.



I could feel his anger and annoyance with me slowly burning a hole through our bond. I tried desperately to erase my mistakes.



When a friend helped him land another job at a bar, I was afraid he'd decide he didn't need me.



Maybe that nausea I felt was also my intuition. He'd come home drunk two hours after closing and would immediately hop into the shower before crashing into bed.



I felt a rush of relief when he decided to quit after a few months.



Because I could feel his frustration growing, I went into overdrive to make it better.



One night, he came home drunk from a party, stumbling and wailing. He'd fractured his foot jumping over a fence.



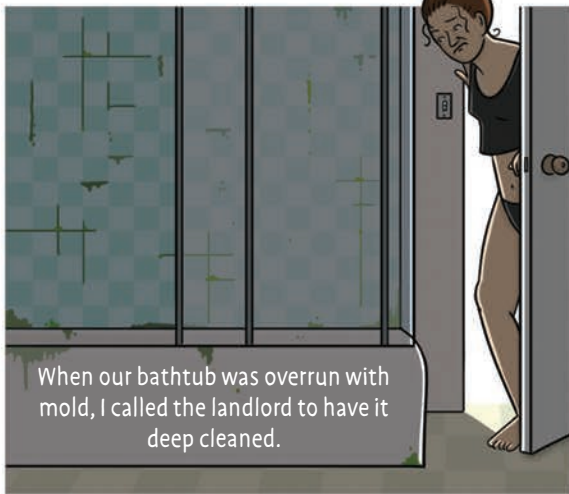


I wanted to stop his pain. The most immediate thing I could do was take care of the details.

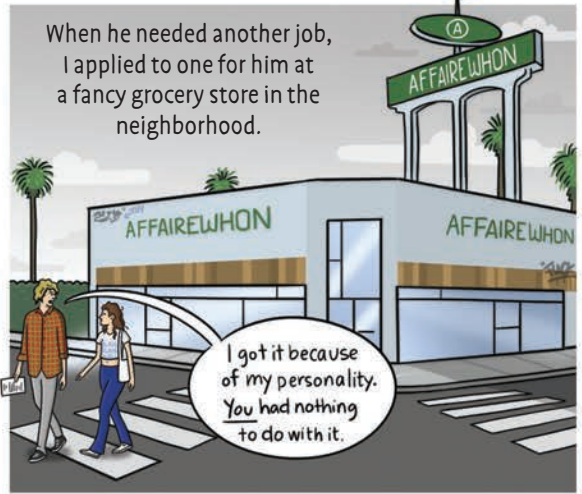


I kept doing what I do best—fixing shit.

Yeah, it's the back window.



When our bathtub was overrun with mold, I called the landlord to have it deep cleaned.



When he needed another job, I applied to one for him at a fancy grocery store in the neighborhood.

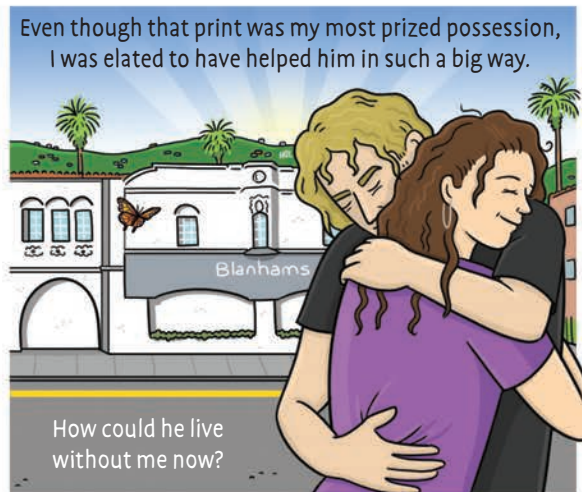
I got it because of my personality. You had nothing to do with it.

When he needed to sell valuable prints he'd inherited (one of which he'd gifted me years before), I navigated the complex auction world and netted him almost \$50,000.



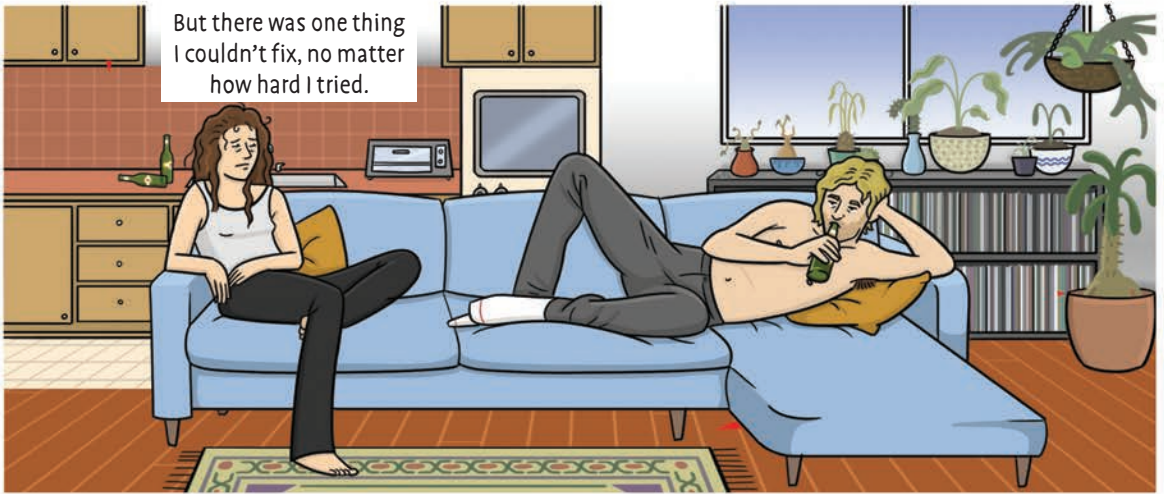
This could probably go for 15 to 20 grand.

FUCK YOU!

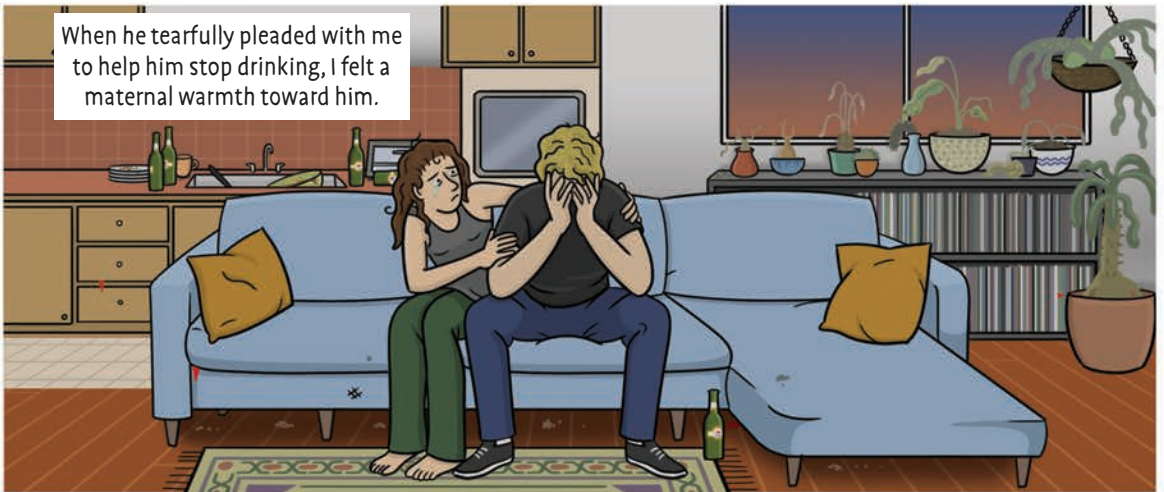


Even though that print was my most prized possession, I was elated to have helped him in such a big way.

How could he live without me now?



But there was one thing I couldn't fix, no matter how hard I tried.



When he tearfully pleaded with me to help him stop drinking, I felt a maternal warmth toward him.



It turned out to be harder than anything I'd taken on before.

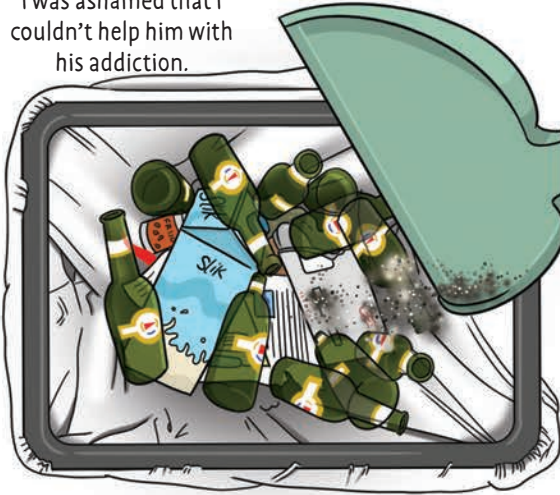


I found myself in a familiar cycle.



Over and over again.

I was ashamed that I couldn't help him with his addiction.



I worried about him.

I worried about us.



In the years that followed, I tried so hard to fix us.



But there was a deep rot that had been festering for a long time beneath the surface.





Codependents stay in toxic relationships way past  
their expiration date.

chapter eight

# breaking point



I tried to help him, I really did.



I gave up after enduring one too many public shamings.



Walking back to the car, he'd swat me away when I tried to hold his hand.



After waiting for his signal, I knew we could resume the routine of laughter and affection that sustained me.



It hurt, but he somehow made me believe I'd pushed him too far.





When alcohol was flowing, I knew better than to try to rescue him.

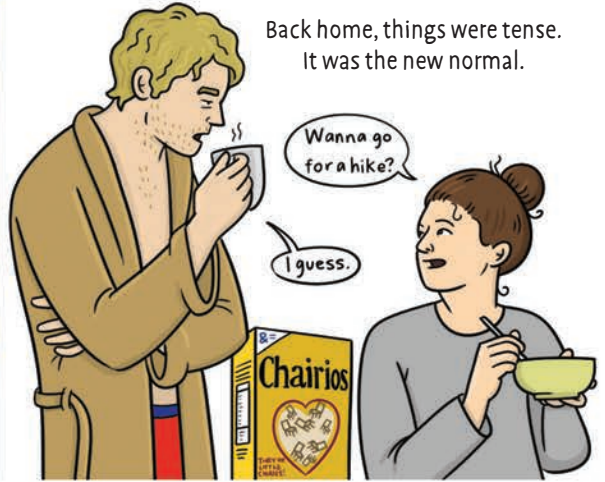


It dawned on me that when he was drunk, he became more aggressive.

You're not driving my fucking car.



When he'd been drinking, I became a fearful passenger.



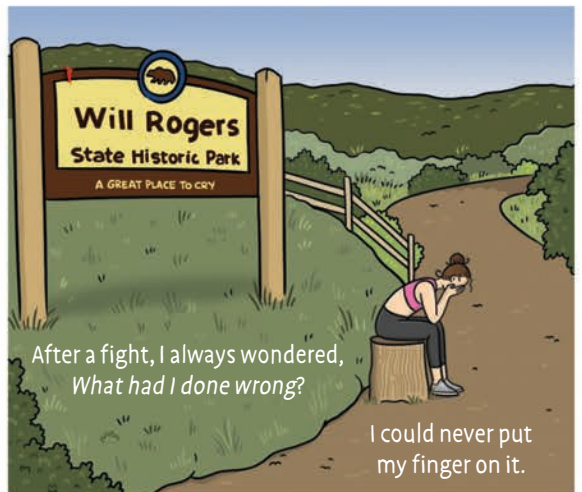
Back home, things were tense. It was the new normal.

Wanna go for a hike?

I guess.



Things that used to bring us together just didn't cut it anymore.



After a fight, I always wondered, *What had I done wrong?*

I could never put my finger on it.

This shame became a regular occurrence as we fought during our increasingly rare dates.



I drowned in it as I walked alone during a rare LA thunderstorm after he'd kicked me out of his truck.



When he circled back later to pick me up, my tears had mixed with the rain dripping down my face.



On top of that, it was starting to seem like he enjoyed making me squirm with jealousy.

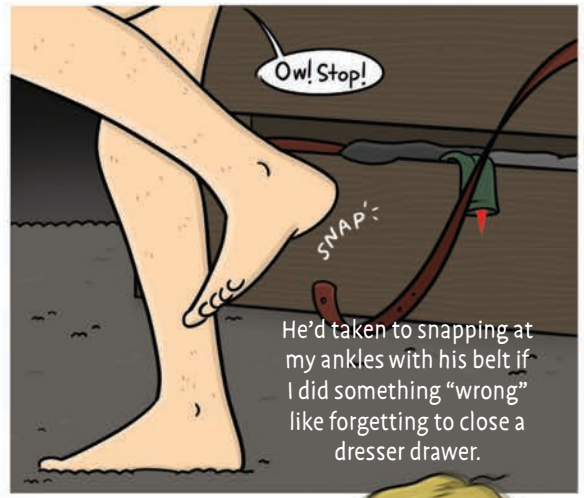


Could I, um, maybe get your number?

Sure!

He'd always called himself "the hot one" in our couple.





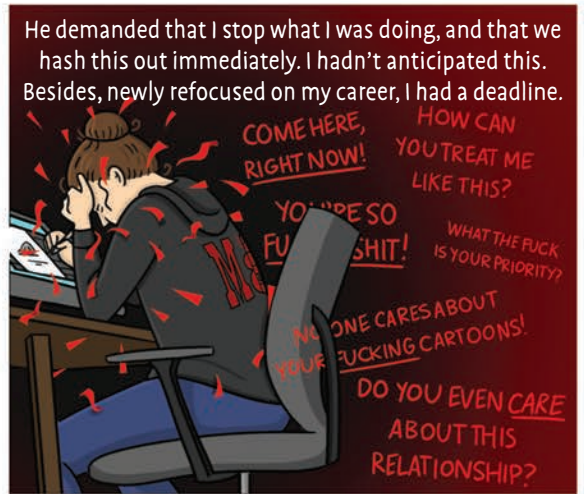




After months of this, I had to say something. I tried a gentle approach.



But it did not go well. He raged.



He demanded that I stop what I was doing, and that we hash this out immediately. I hadn't anticipated this. Besides, newly refocused on my career, I had a deadline.



WE'RE TALKING ABOUT THIS NOW!



He slammed my laptop shut and dragged me off my chair. I tried to protest as he shoved me hard onto the couch.



He slammed the door hard behind him when he left for work.



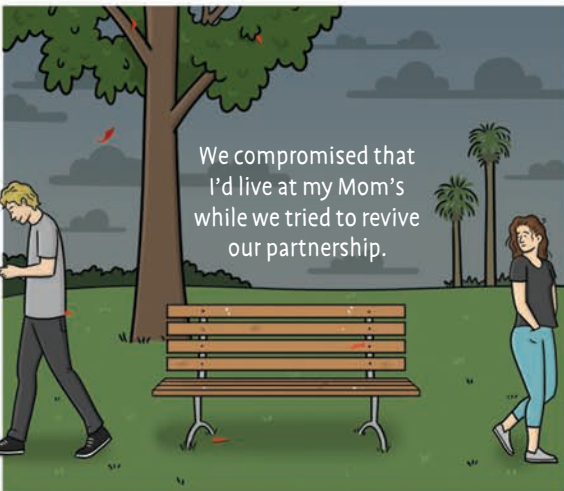
I was stunned and genuinely afraid of him.

So I packed my stuff in grocery bags and left our—I mean, his—apartment for good.



Two weeks of silence went by. When we met again, tears were cried, promises were made.

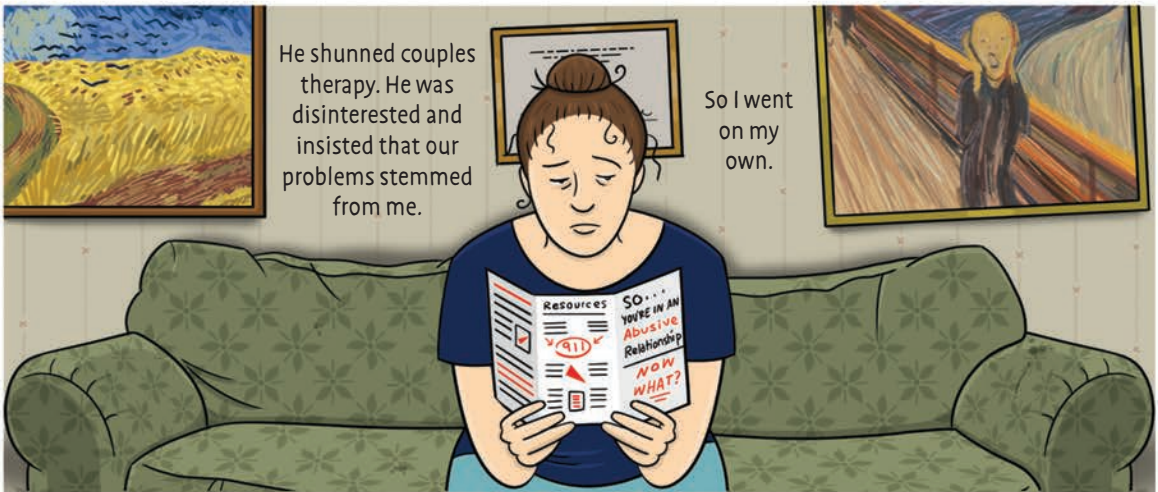
I fucked up.  
I can't live without you.  
I love you so much.  
I'm so sorry.



We compromised that I'd live at my Mom's while we tried to revive our partnership.



Things didn't exactly go as I expected. When I planned dates, he blew me off in favor of his twenty-something coworkers.



He shunned couples therapy. He was disinterested and insisted that our problems stemmed from me.

So I went on my own.

He'd mentioned that in the two weeks after I'd moved out, he started dating a coworker who was now obsessed with him. This timing made me believe she'd been in the picture before I moved out.



Who's texting you so much?

My friends! Mind your own fucking business!

Stupid fucking piece of shit

While he told me he'd cut it off, I was suspicious.

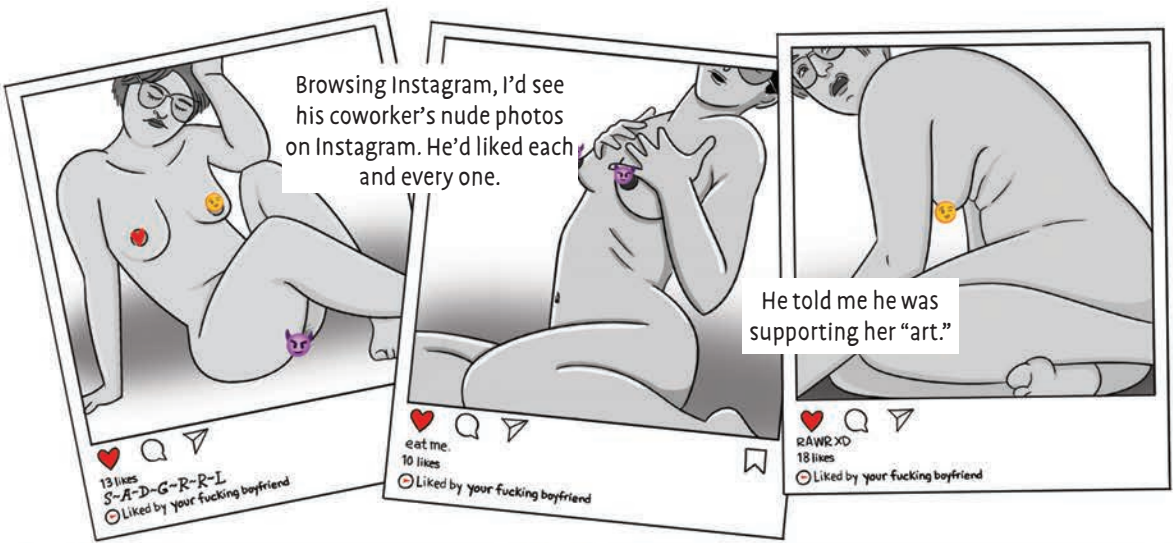


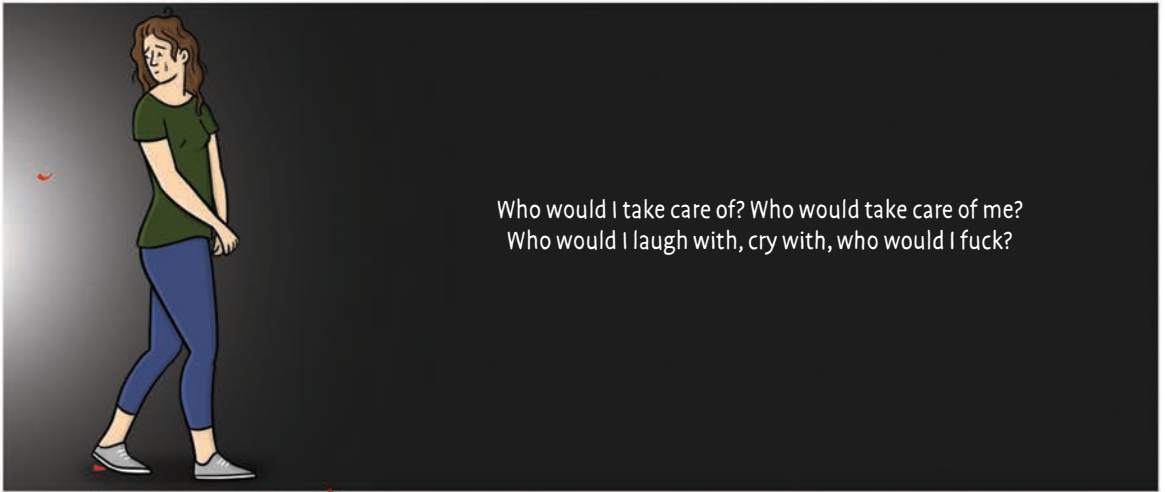
So then she said they hooked up...

He called her and was like...

Did you see how PDA-y they were!?

Although I carefully avoided his shifts at the store, I still caught whiffs of gossip from the staff about an employee who was fucking his coworkers.





Who would I take care of? Who would take care of me?  
Who would I laugh with, cry with, who would I fuck?



Who would I be without my  
relationship?



When my suspicions of his cheating were confirmed,  
I slammed the door on him once and for all.

If only it was that easy.



CODEPENDENCY  
it sucks!

# chapter nine what the fuck just happened?

- anxiety that they will leave you
- power imbalances
- childhood trauma? dad/mom divorce (idk)
- cycle of abuse: you already know

## - Power/control

- violence
- emotional abuse (shit counts as abuse)

• romantic love vs sex sex sex

## FALSE SECURITY

## INTUITION - how to stay in touch w/

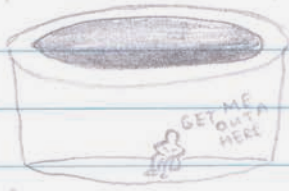
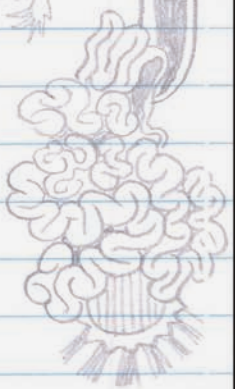
- preserve false expectations fairy tale
- sexual = salvation (false)

## LOW SELF ESTEEM

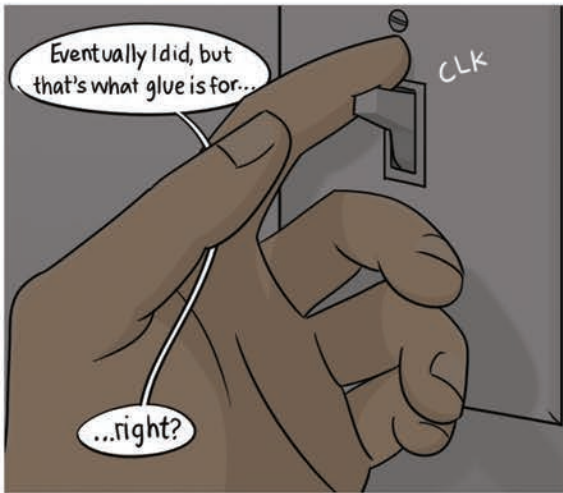
- ↳ attract ① abusive/volatile relationships
- ↳ ② narcissists
- ↳ ③ more codep.

- take responsibility
- obsessions → hobbies, self care, etc

- ① MINDFULNESS
- ② MEDITATION
- ③ FRIENDS/FAM
- ④ DIALECTICAL/cognitive behavioral therapy







I put all my eggs in that basket: he was my best friend, my partner, my lover, my family.



Saying goodbye to that false security was a lot easier said than done.



I still look back and wonder if any of it was real.

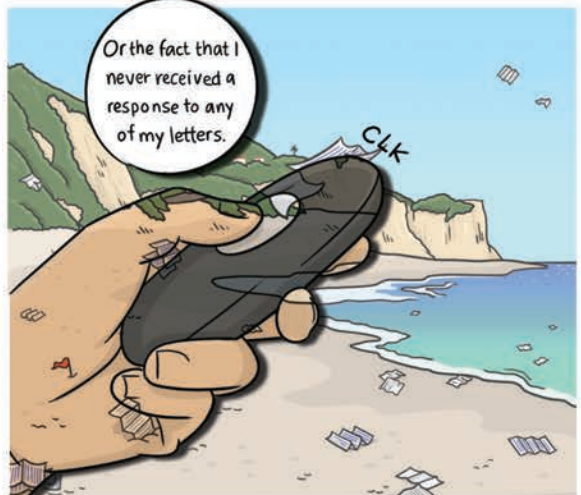


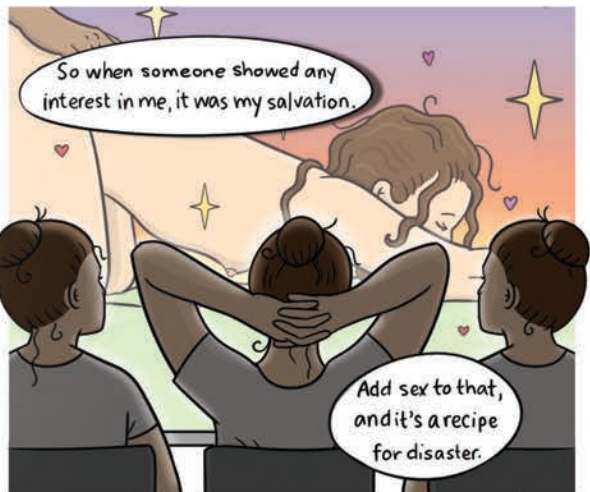
There were hints all along that maybe our relationship wasn't quite right.



Like the whole cheating-on-his-ex thing we did.

Or the fact that I never received a response to any of my letters.







Crumbs of attention were enough to keep me hooked.



Without a person to assign me my value, I didn't think I had any.



I'm now well aware of my role in these toxic situations.

My need to take care of someone—anyone—was pretty smothering (shocker!)

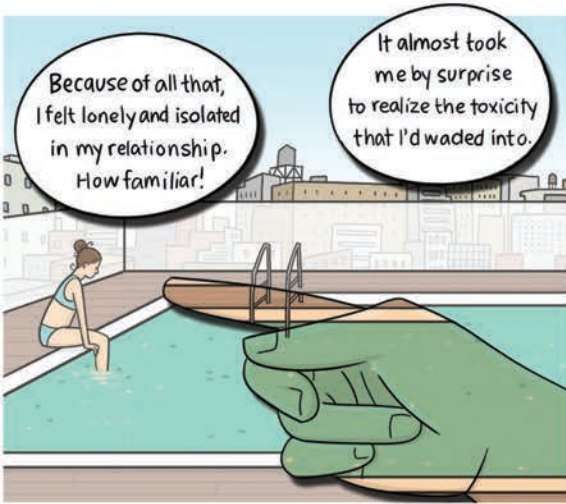


I avoided talking about my needs like they were the plague.



And I wasn't clear about my boundaries until it was too late.

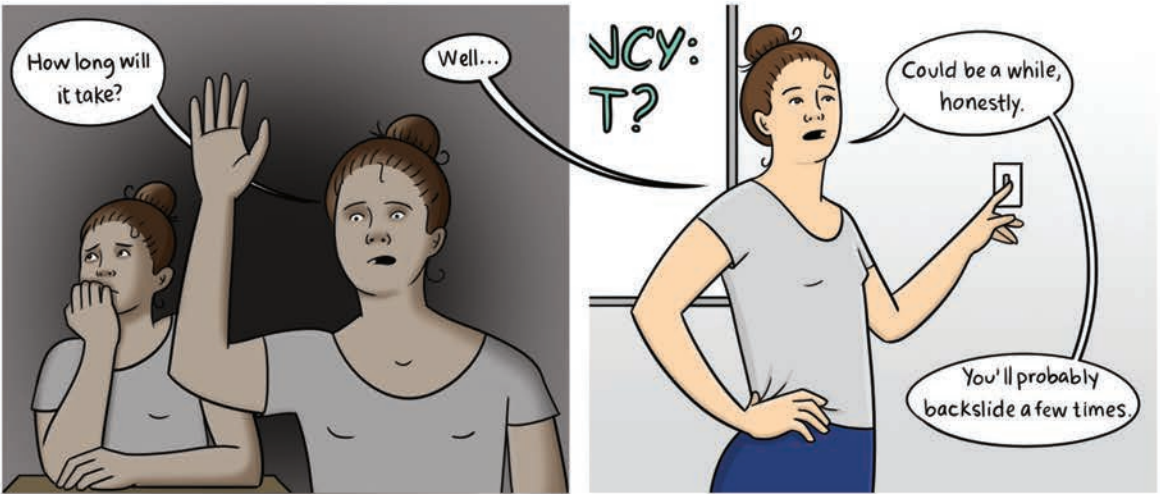
Here. You might need this.



## CODEPENDENCY • NOW WHAT?

- Therapy
- Support from family & friends
- Hobbies & interests
- Mindfulness









Codependents often struggle to understand what  
they want or how they feel.



chapter ten

# identity crisis

I had finally closed the door on my first love. The world should have been my oyster, but instead I found myself living in a cramped room at my mom's house.

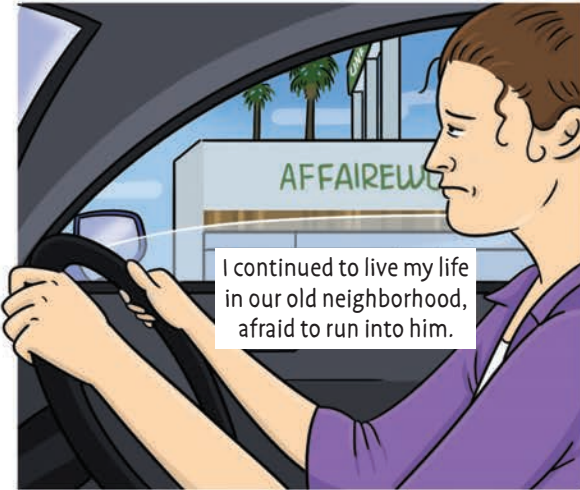


Although I willed myself to eliminate all thoughts of my ex, my despair multiplied.



This was not the escape I'd hoped for.

I continued to live my life in our old neighborhood, afraid to run into him.



My dreams were haunted by his betrayal. I'd wake up with a sore jaw from grinding my teeth all night.



Eager to reinvent myself, I bought new clothes and asked a friend to take pictures of me for dating apps.



I traveled to New York, booked a hip hotel room, and reached out to an old hookup.



A few days later, a snowstorm raged outside.



The old flame blew me off, and he'd posted photos with his ex.

It looked like they were back together.

Great.

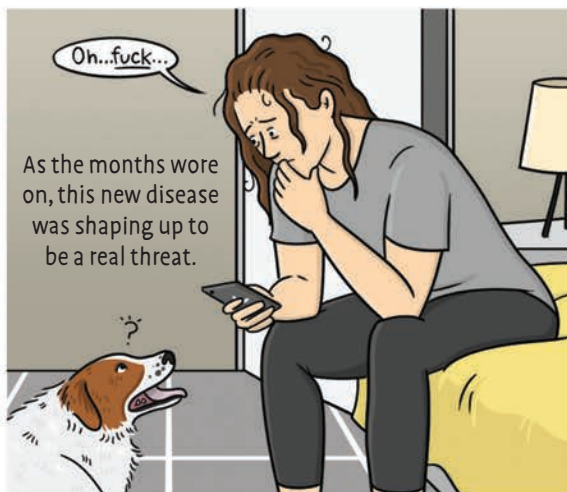


Once again, I felt like a loser. Worst of all, I missed my ex. Or maybe I just missed the feeling of being wanted by someone.



On my way home, I read about a mysterious virus in China. I shrugged it off and went back to my failed life.

Oh. Fuck.



Oh...fuck...

As the months wore on, this new disease was shaping up to be a real threat.

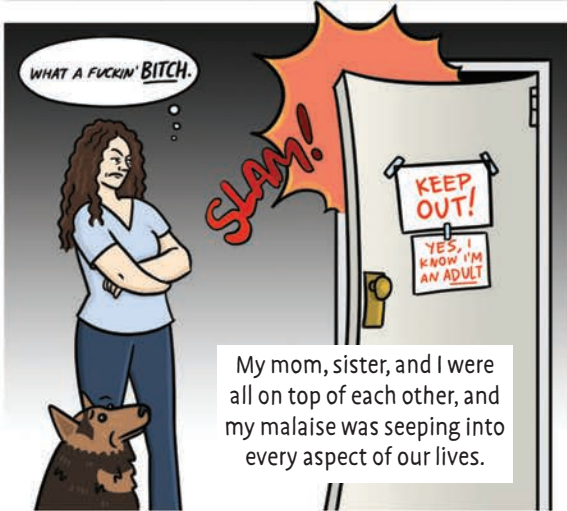


I wondered if I'd be able to keep my shitty job that I wanted to quit anyway. On March 18, 2020, I did just that.

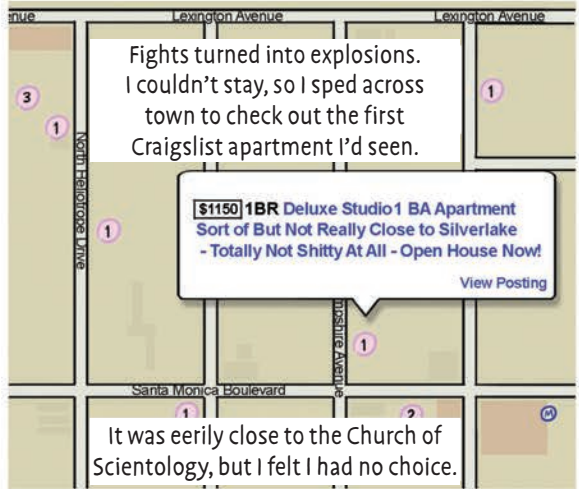


But here we all were, stuck at home.

My obsessive stress-relieving gym habit was abruptly interrupted, so I improvised.



My mom, sister, and I were all on top of each other, and my malaise was seeping into every aspect of our lives.



That same day, I filled out an application and was approved. This was the first time I'd lived alone in almost a decade. I was elated.



As I decorated my 300-square-foot oasis, I was sure that I'd found my path. It was easier than ever to shut down intrusive thoughts.



I'd seen a roach carcass here or there, and even a live one inside the fridge, but those were probably one-time things...right?

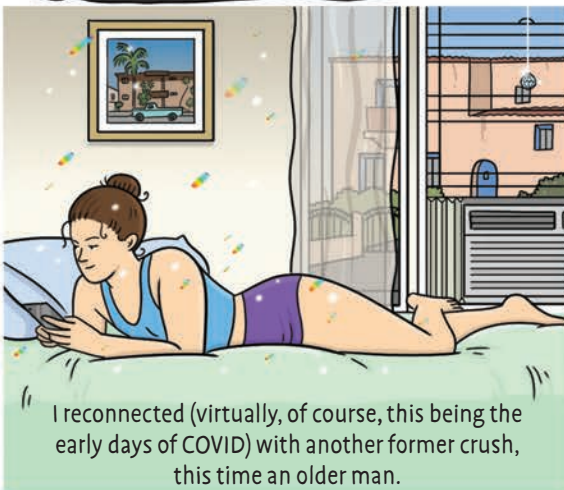


I swept them away as I polished every crevice of my sanctuary.



I went out daily for long walks to explore my new neighborhood.

Everything felt new and exciting (even the creepy church looming nearby).



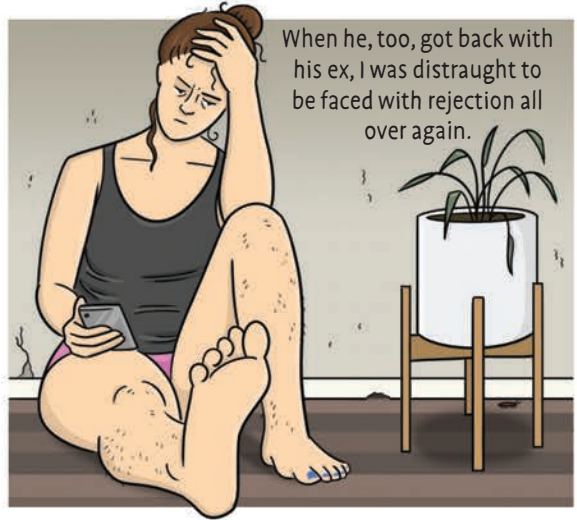
I reconnected (virtually, of course, this being the early days of COVID) with another former crush, this time an older man.



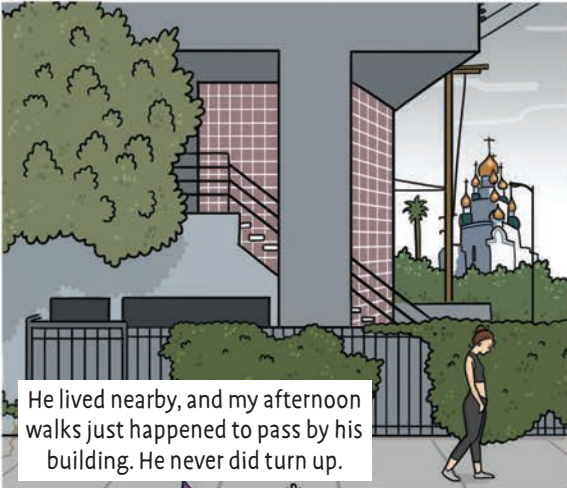
Maybe this was what moving on felt like.



But after a while, his texts became less frequent. He refused to meet up with me in person.



When he, too, got back with his ex, I was distraught to be faced with rejection all over again.

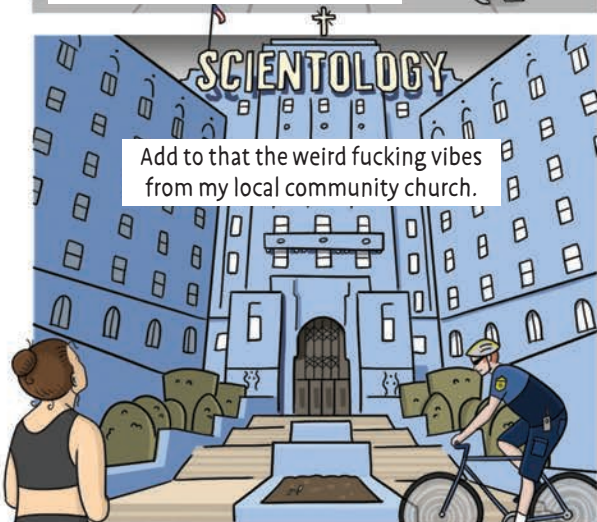


He lived nearby, and my afternoon walks just happened to pass by his building. He never did turn up.

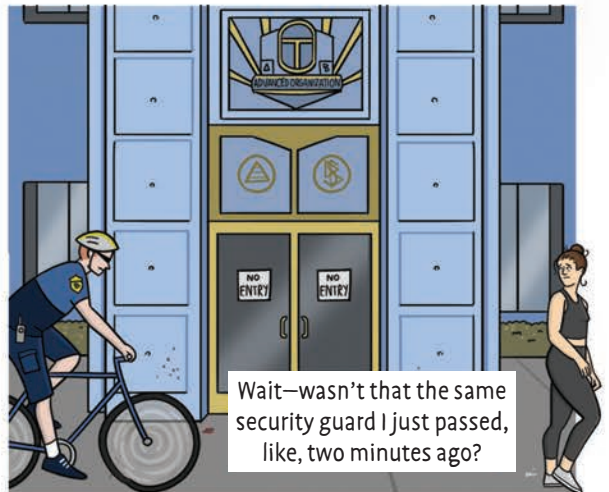


Instead of enjoying my walks, I was lost in anger and loneliness.

Without someone to cling to, my paranoia and insecurity took over.

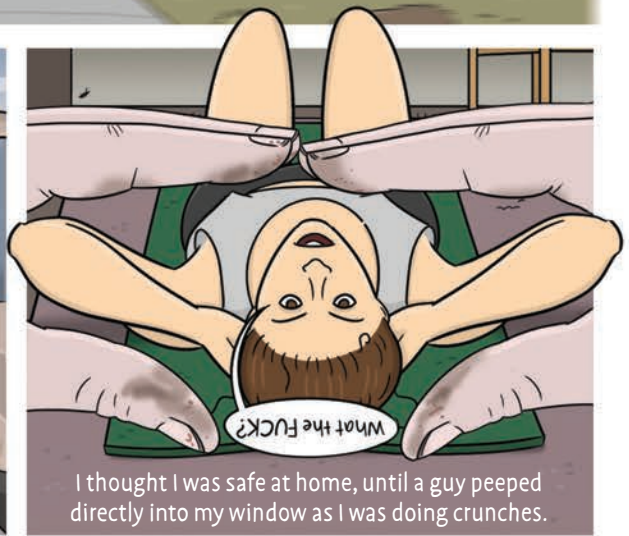


Add to that the weird fucking vibes from my local community church.

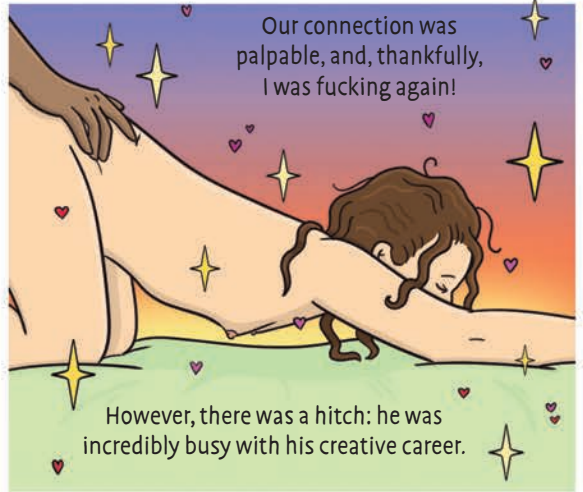
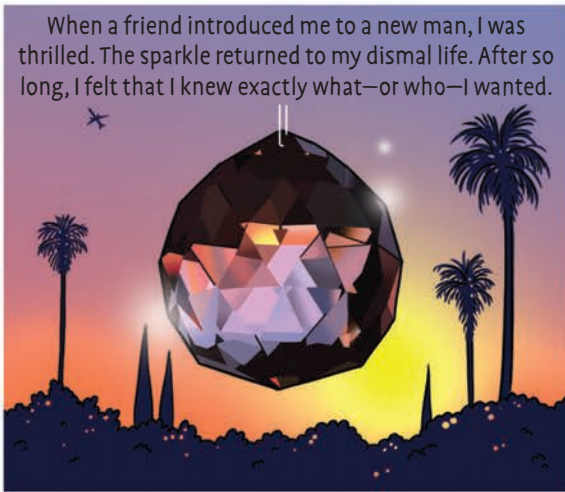


Wait—wasn't that the same security guard I just passed, like, two minutes ago?

I abandoned my daily walks for good after I had to run away from a man who was stalking me.





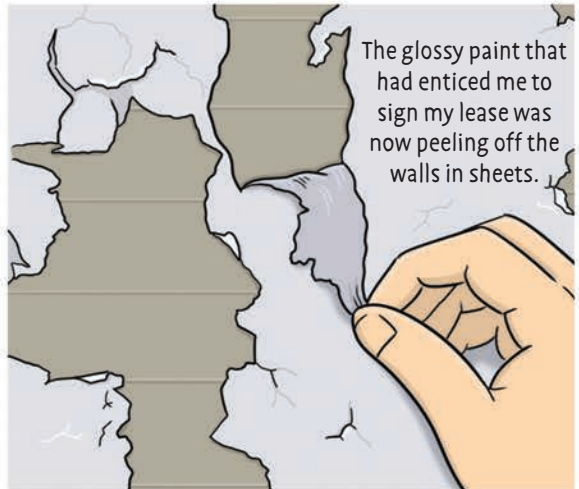


Every week that went by without contact from him, I felt tortured. Was this what I even wanted or deserved?



But when he resurfaced, I'd quickly forget all the feelings of rejection that had been building up.

Meanwhile, the upstairs neighbor left her tub running and flooded my kitchen.



The glossy paint that had enticed me to sign my lease was now peeling off the walls in sheets.



Roaches were increasingly brazen, showing up in broad daylight en masse. And the heavy, thrashing footsteps from upstairs were fucking relentless. Was all this shit some kind of cruel metaphor for my mental state?

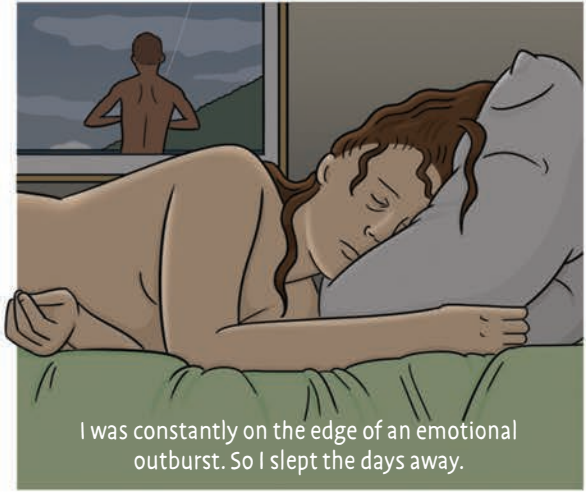


Afraid of the virus, I rarely ventured out of my apartment. I was alone often since the few friendships I had were dwindling in the midst of COVID-defying life developments.

I wasn't sure if I wanted these friends anymore. What did we even have in common these days?



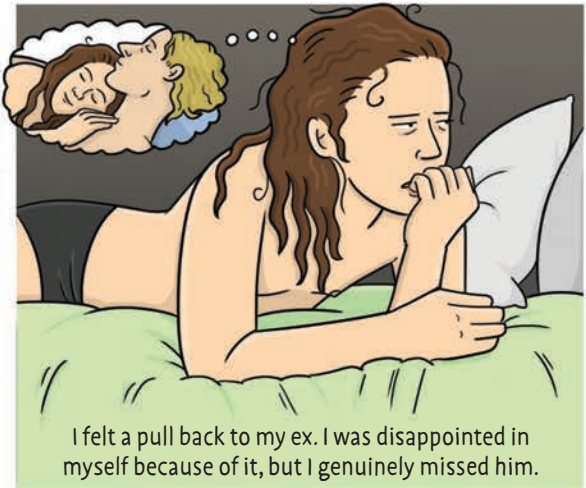
A familiar habit returned from the hidden depths of my past.



I was constantly on the edge of an emotional outburst. So I slept the days away.

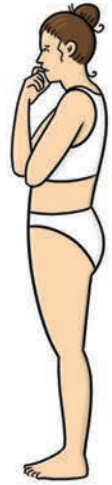
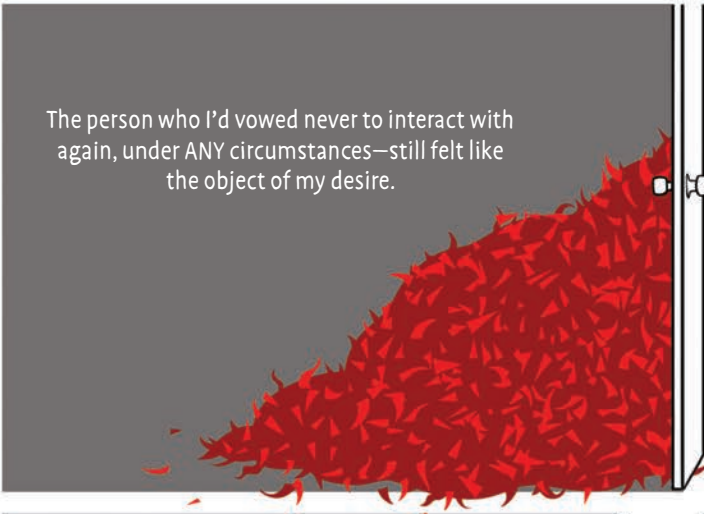


Something as simple as a 15-second TikTok of bison lumbering through a national park would break my heart.

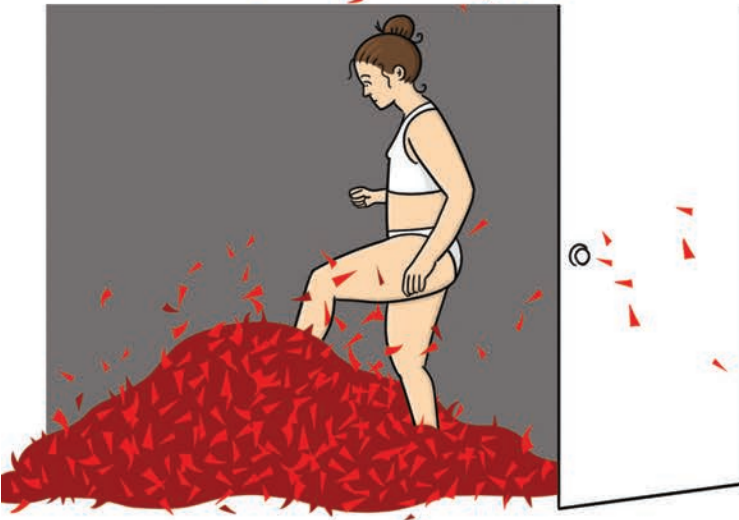


I felt a pull back to my ex. I was disappointed in myself because of it, but I genuinely missed him.

The person who I'd vowed never to interact with again, under ANY circumstances—still felt like the object of my desire.

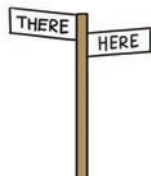


Or did he? I had no fucking idea anymore.



Nine months had gone by since our breakup. They dissolved away when he picked up my phone call.

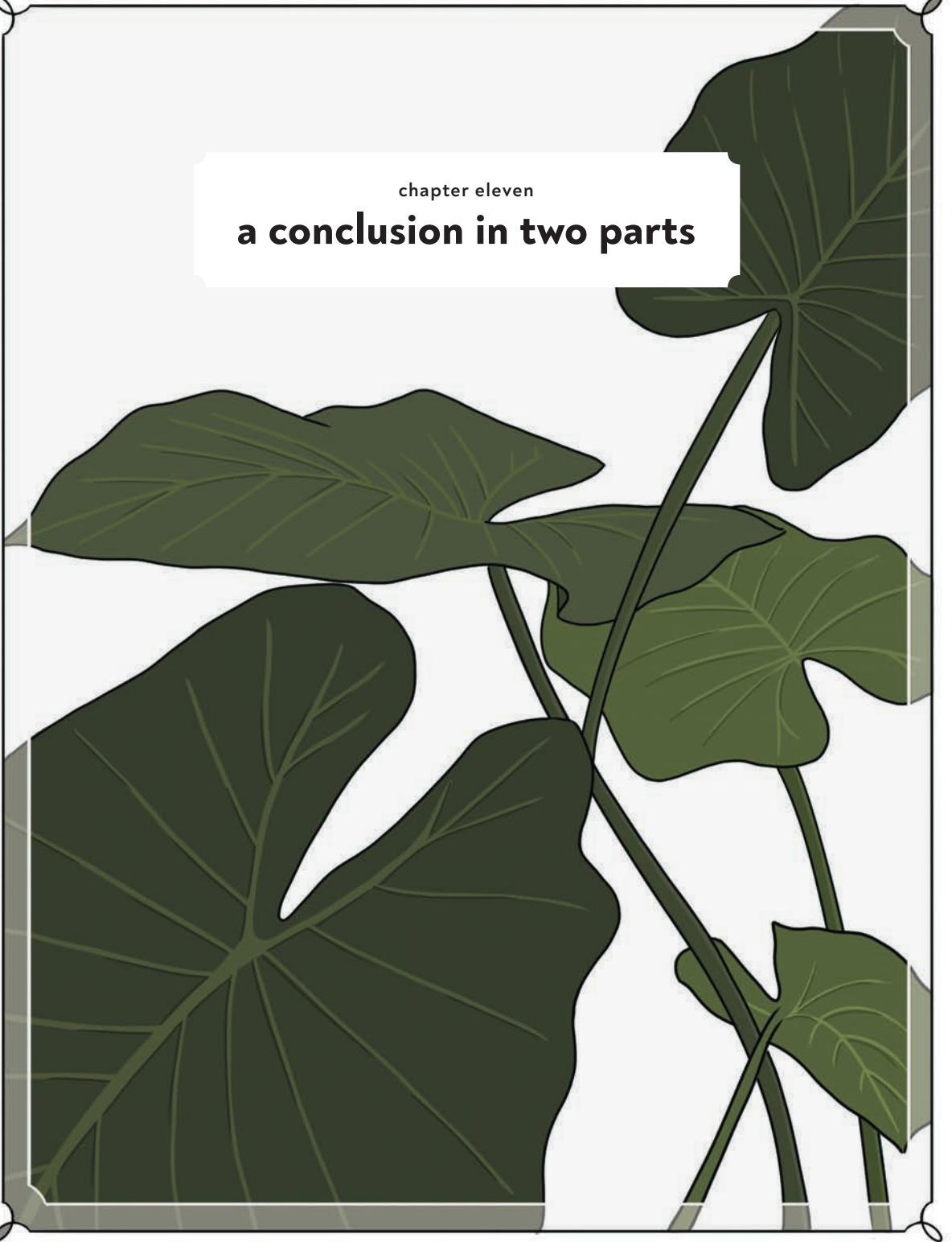




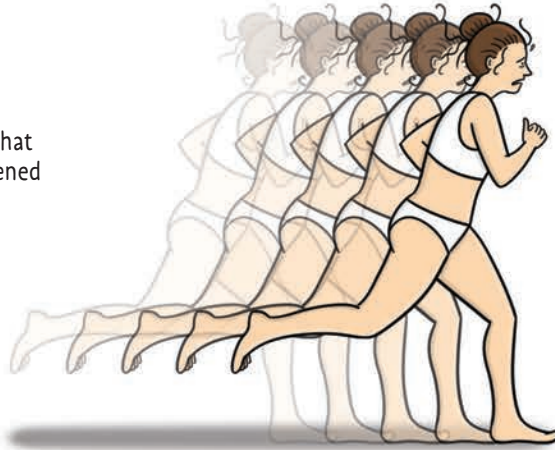
Turns out codependents might have hope after all.

chapter eleven

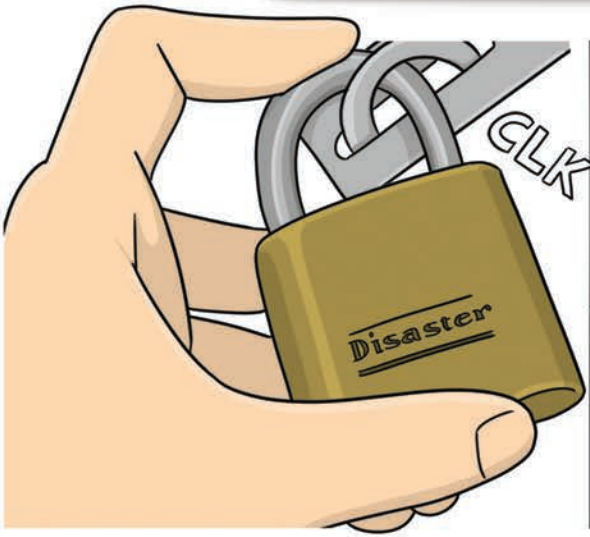
## **a conclusion in two parts**



Okay, we all know what happened when I opened that door again.



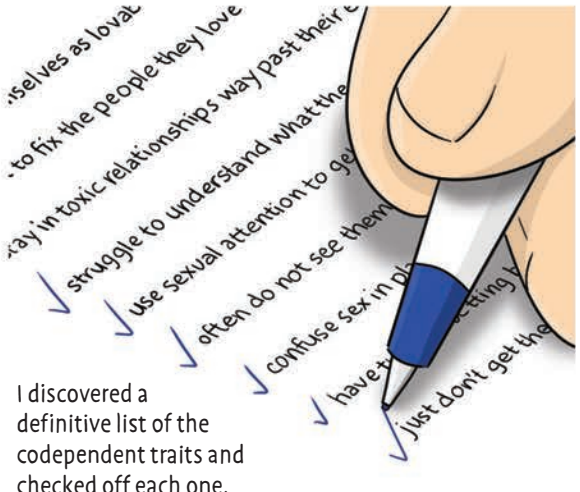
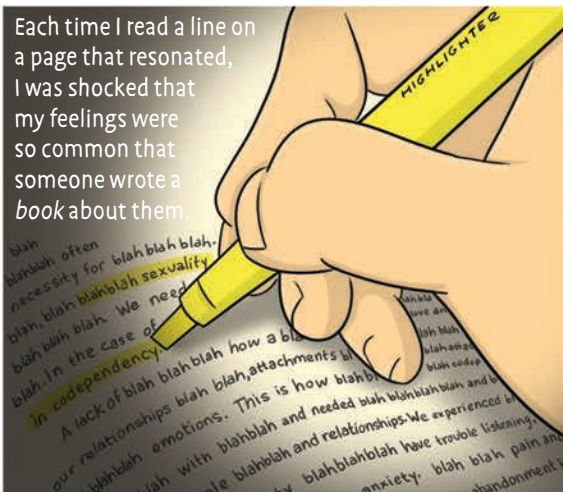
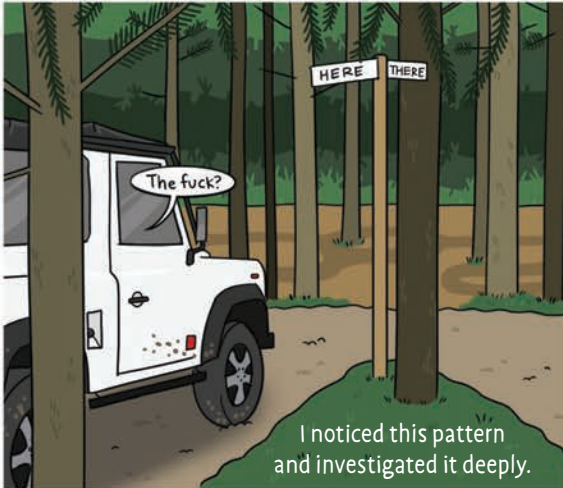
No thanks.

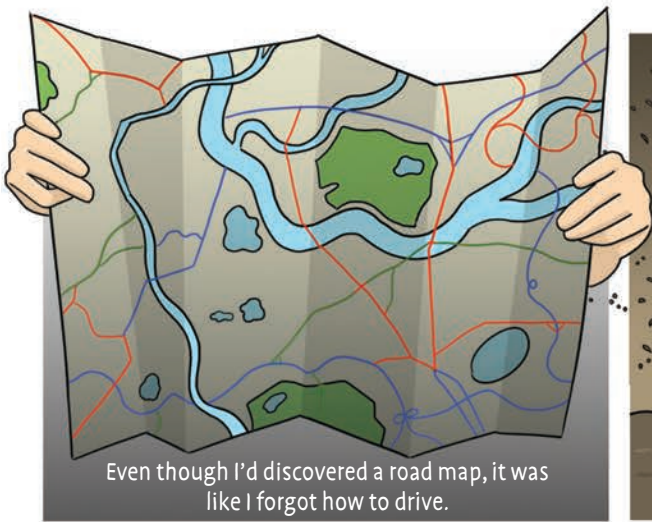


I didn't know it at the time, but all the shit I went through was steadily pushing me toward my codependency recovery.



It has not been a smooth road.

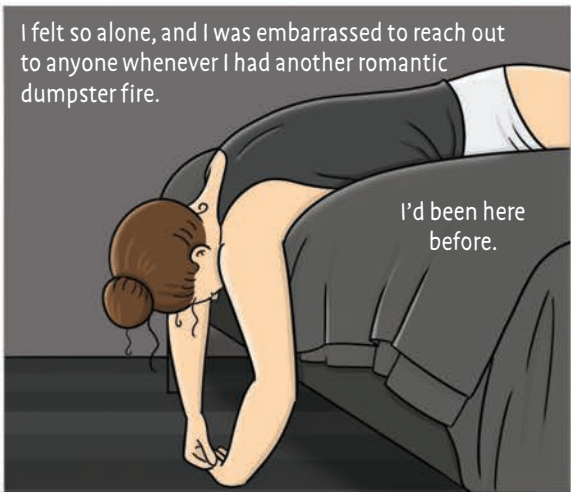




Even though I'd discovered a road map, it was like I forgot how to drive.



Realizing the depth of my fucked-upness hit me like a brick wall. I was stalled.



I felt so alone, and I was embarrassed to reach out to anyone whenever I had another romantic dumpster fire.

I'd been here before.

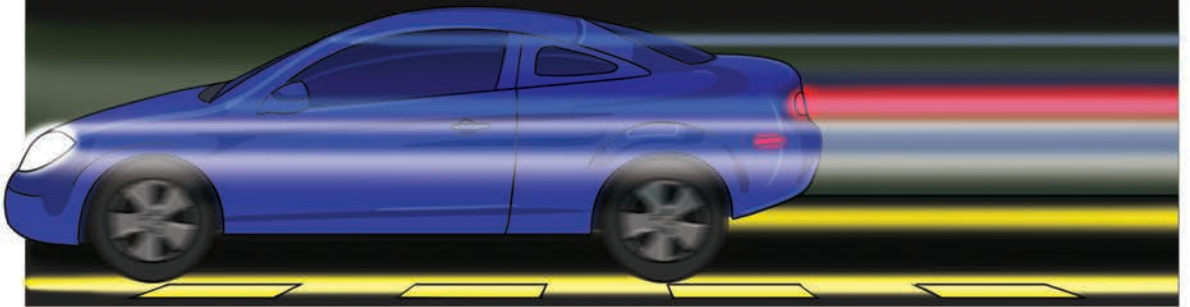


I stewed in my shame and regret in my tiny, dark, crumbling shithole of an apartment.

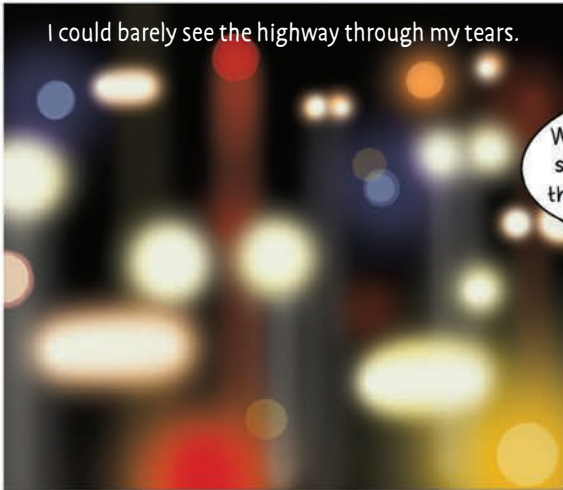


Suicidal thoughts started to crowd the pages in my sketchbook. I felt like I was in a slow-motion car crash, both as a bystander and a passenger.

One night I hit the road at a frantic 90 miles per hour, desperate to escape my roach-infested apartment.



I could barely see the highway through my tears.



I was in therapy, but that didn't seem to be enough. Talking about my misery was making me sink deeper.

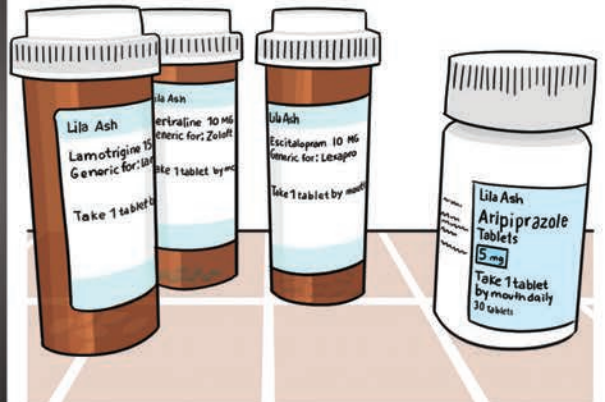
We need to make a safety plan in case this happens again.



I gave in and went to my mom for help. She reminded me that she'd been there all along.



Medication became part of my recovery.



My psychiatrist determined that I have mental illnesses that need a lifetime of constant attention.

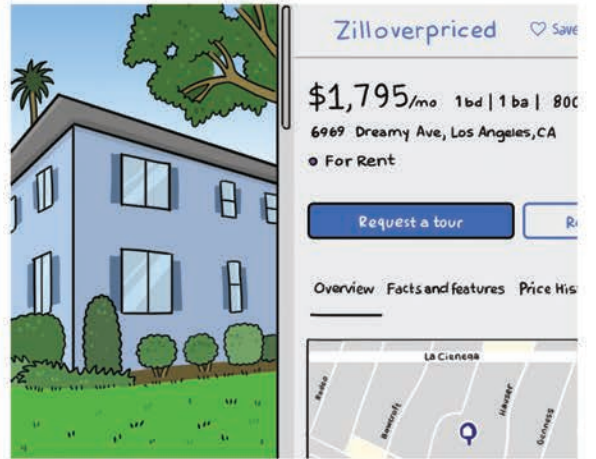
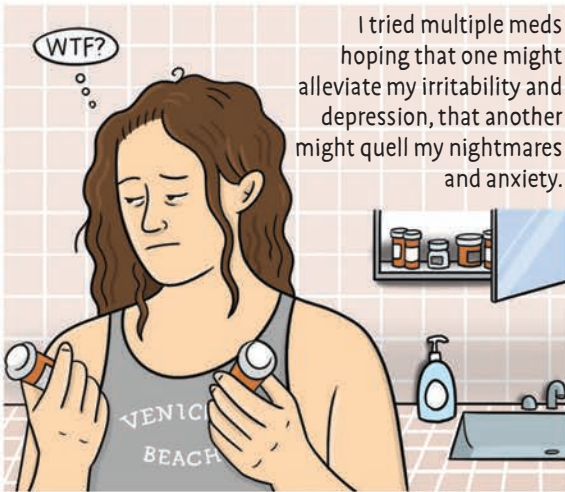


Apparently, codependency was just a symptom of something much bigger going on with me.

I didn't know what to think. But it was a relief to know myself a bit better.

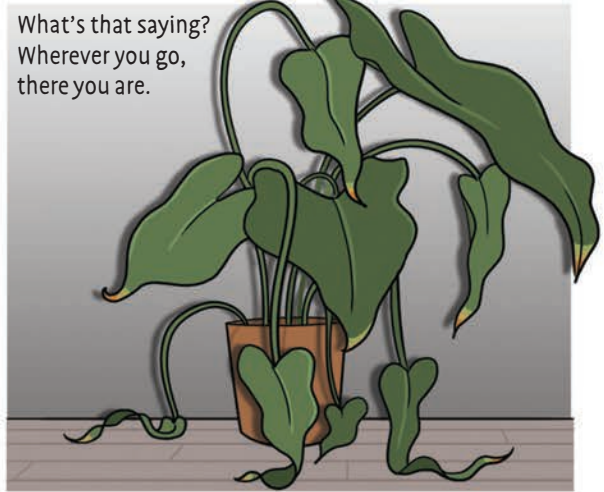


In this middle of all this, I was finally thrown a bone.

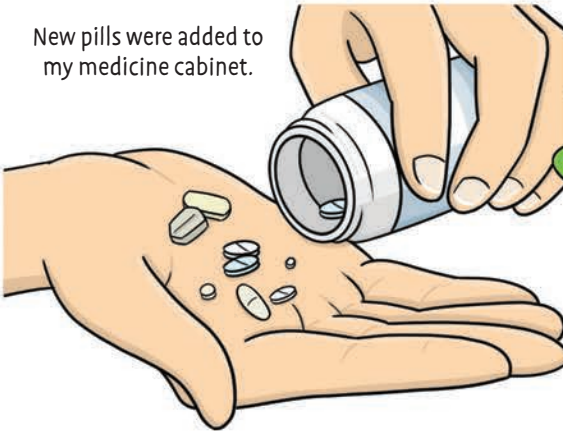




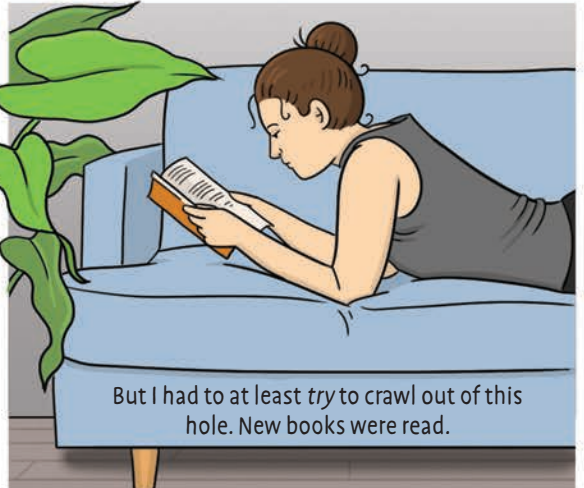
But my depression followed me there.



What's that saying?  
Wherever you go,  
there you are.

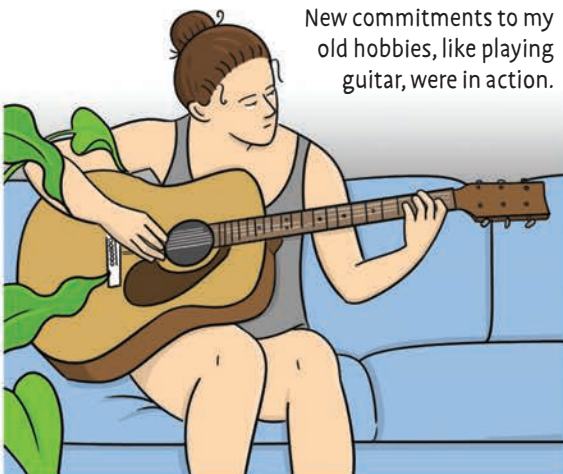


New pills were added to  
my medicine cabinet.



But I had to at least *try* to crawl out of this hole. New books were read.

Despite my misgivings, they actually helped.



New commitments to my old hobbies, like playing guitar, were in action.

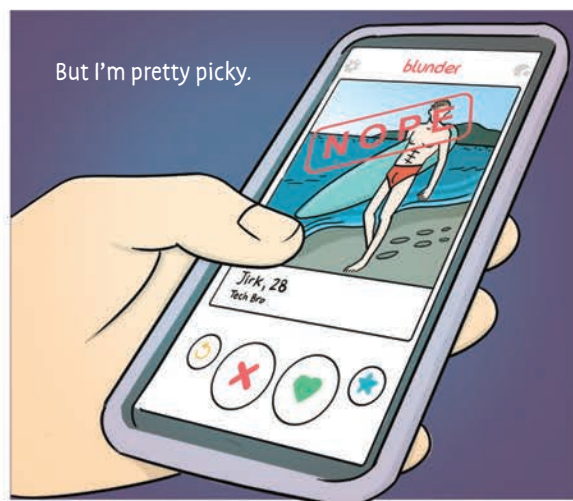
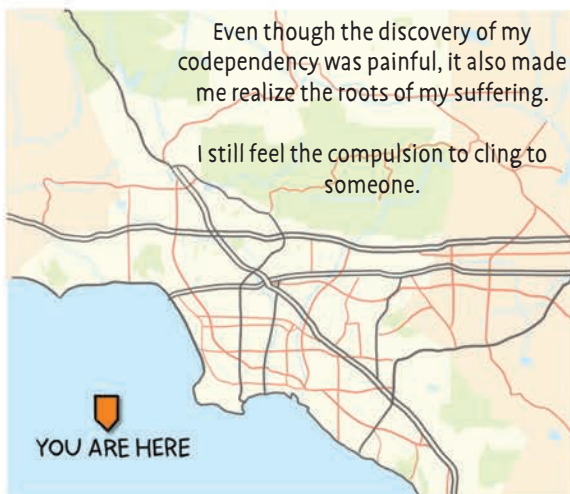
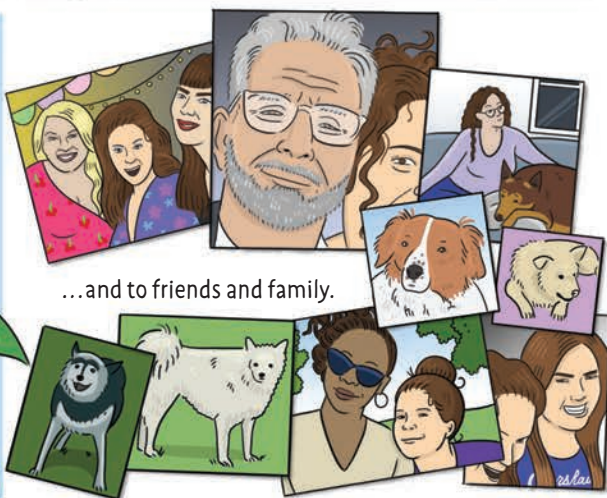
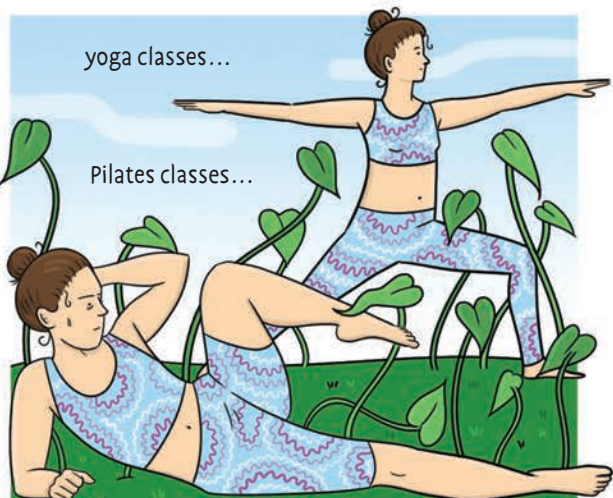


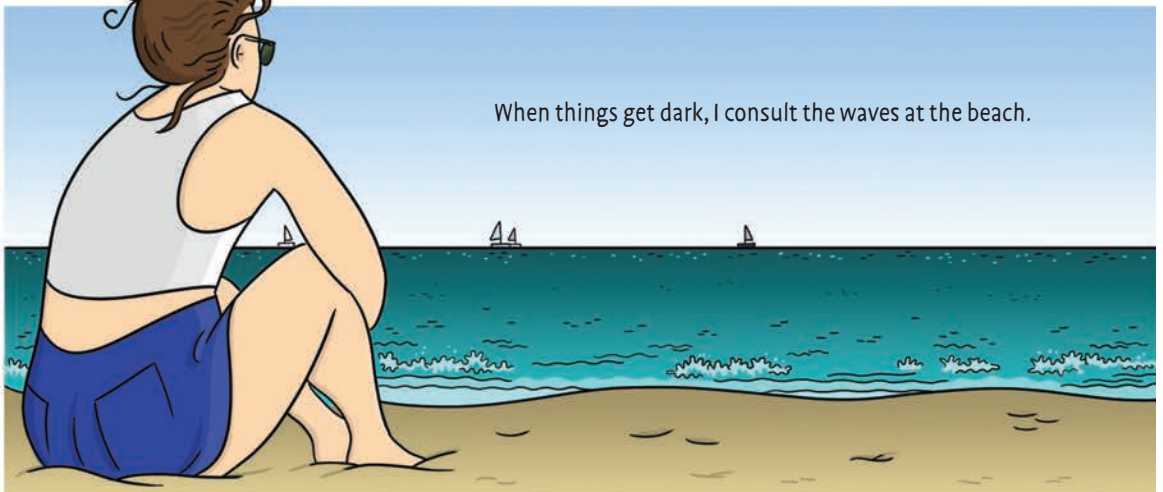
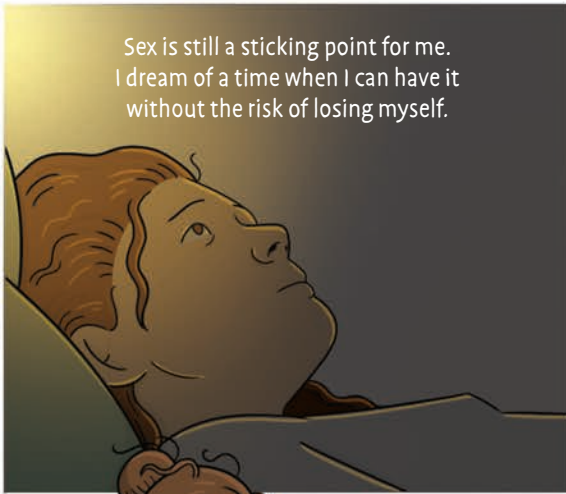
I wanted to get to know myself.

I turned to psychics...



Omg HOW did you know that?!







I have off days, often.



It's a long, hard road.


KA-CHNK



But things are starting to look up. I'm not sure where I'll go from here, but I know I'm heading in the right direction.

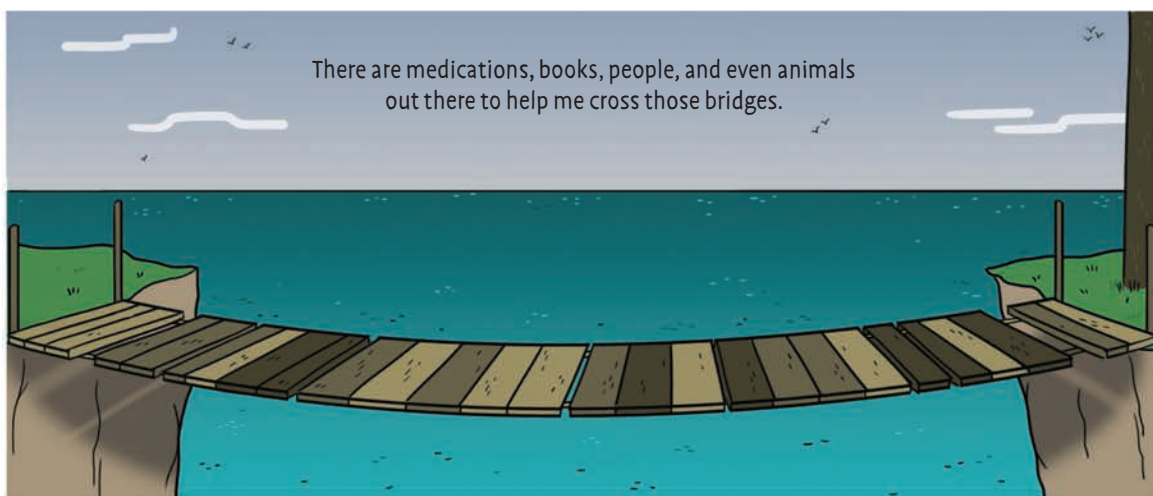


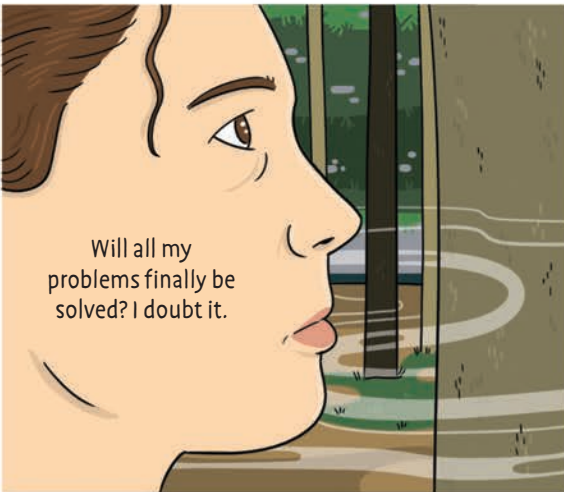


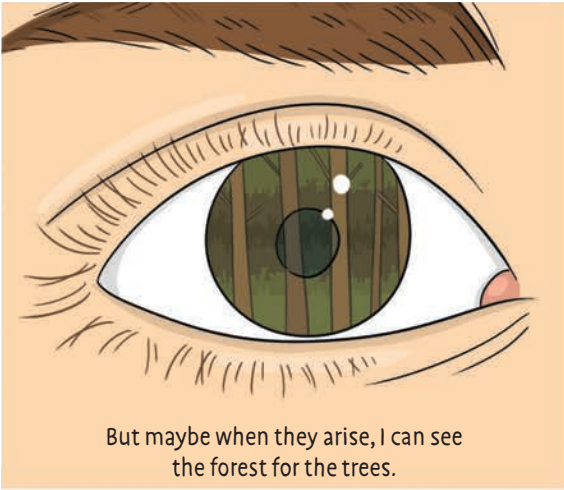


chapter eleven

**part II**







But maybe when they arise, I can see  
the forest for the trees.



I'll be able to handle them without totally  
losing my shit. It'll clear up, I know that.



And when those old feelings  
and painful memories pop  
up, maybe I'll be able to sit  
with them and let them flow  
through me.



But if I can just sit still for a moment and remember myself, maybe they'll lose their power over me.

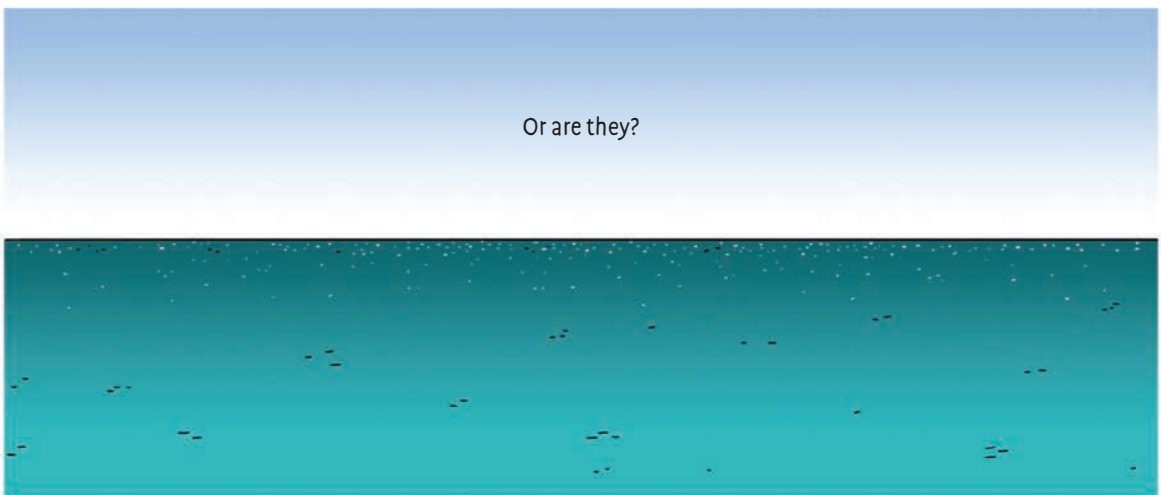


Maybe one day when I feel something exciting and new, it won't overpower me.



My insecurities could still be there, but hopefully I'd be able to pass right through them.







## resources

***Women Who Love Too Much: When You Keep Wishing and Hoping He'll Change*** by Robin Norwood

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***Anxiously Attached: Becoming More Secure in Life and Love*** by Jessica Baum, LMHC

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***Codependent No More*** by Melodie Beatty

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**Co-Dependents Anonymous**  
coda.org  
1-888-444-2359

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**Sexaholics Anonymous**  
sa.org  
1-866-424-8777

**Narcissist Abuse Support**  
narcissistabusesupport.com

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**National Domestic Violence Hotline**  
thehotline.org  
1-800-799-SAFE

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**Alcoholics Anonymous**  
aa.org  
212-870-3400

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**Al-Anon**  
al-anon.org  
1-888-4-ALANON

## acknowledgments

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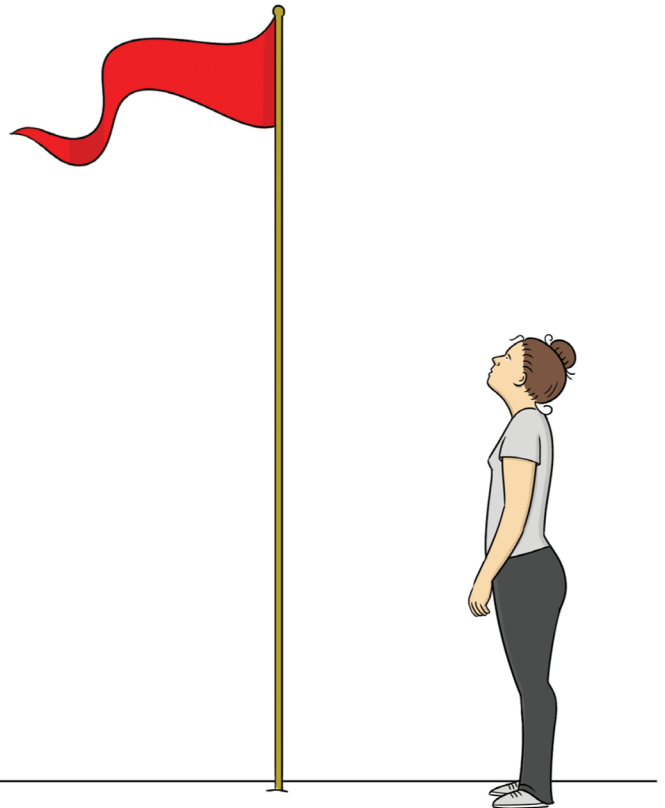
*“Lila Ash explores with insight, wit, and considerable drawing skill what it takes to become a reasonably happy, or at least functional, adult. Although her memoir is specifically about a condition known as codependence, it also applies, in many ways, to all of us.”*

–**ROZ CHAST**, author and *New Yorker* cartoonist

In this bold graphic memoir, author and illustrator Lila Ash navigates family, love, and sex through the lens of codependency. In her late twenties, Ash found herself reliving relationship traumas of her past. Coming to understand that she struggled with codependency would prove to be life changing, as it shed light on many of the behaviors and painful patterns that kept Ash in a spiral of toxic relationships.

Vulnerable, darkly funny, and completely relatable, *Decodependence* will not only have readers cheering for Ash’s recovery to healthy relationships—including with herself—but may help those seeking to identify or understand their own potentially codependent relationship behaviors.

Lila Ash is a Los Angeles–based freelance cartoonist, illustrator, and regular contributor to the *New Yorker*. She has been featured in *Lenny Letter*, *WIRED*, *MAD*, the *Washington Post*, the *American Bystander*, and *Weekly Humorist*. She has created a brilliant set of online comics based on real women’s harrowing #MeToo stories, as well as other works honoring social justice causes. Ash is featured in *Send Help! A Collection of Marooned Cartoons*, edited by *New Yorker* cartoonists Jon Adams and Ellis Rosen.



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