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totally immersive.”

—AMIE KAUFMAN,
New York Times
bestselling author

the

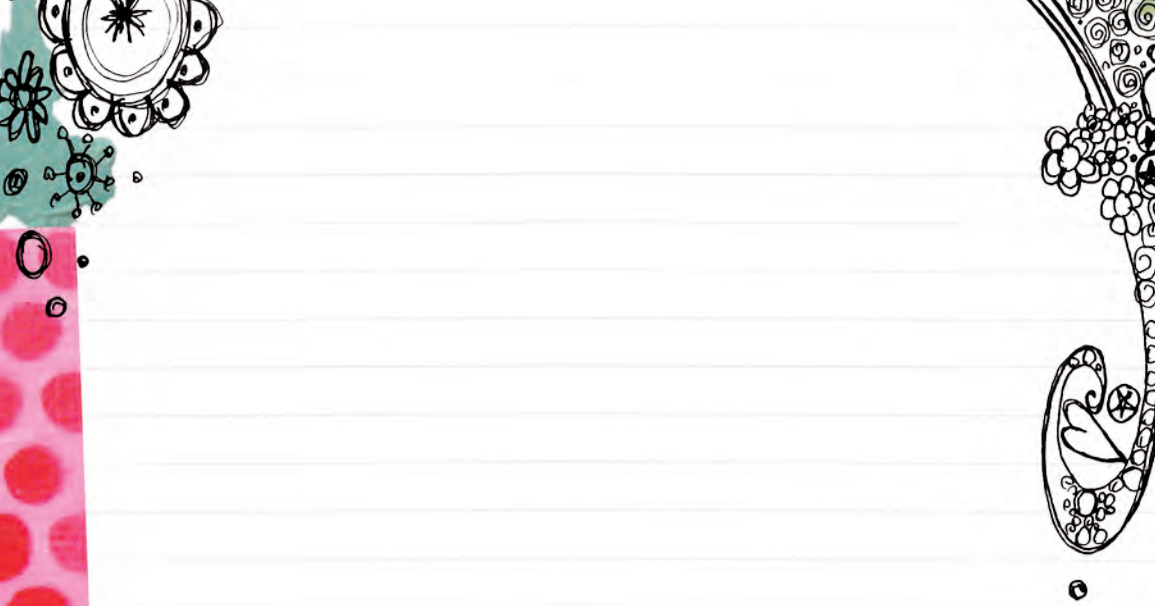
Words

in my

Hands

by ASPHYXIA

the
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First published by Allen & Unwin in 2020

Annick Press edition published 2021

Cover for the Annick Press edition designed by Paul Covello with art by Asphyxia

Annick Press Ltd.

Thanks to Drisana Levitzke-Gray for reviewing the Note on Sign Language: Auslan and ASL. From the original edition, thanks to Deaf reader Anna Seymour and Auslan interpreter Belinda Diggins for double-checking the Deaf cultural content in the story.

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: The words in my hands / by Asphyxia.

Names: Asphyxia (Novelist), author, illustrator.

Description: Previously published: Sydney, N.S.W: Allen & Unwin, 2020.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20210188510 | Canadiana (ebook) 20210188588 | ISBN 9781773215280 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781773215297 (softcover) | ISBN 9781773215310 (PDF) | ISBN 9781773215303 (HTML)

Classification: LCC PZ7.A825 Wor 2021 | DDC j823/.92—dc23

Illustration technique: acrylic and watercolor paint, ink, collage, encaustic, plaster, spray paint, rubber stamp, Photoshop and Procreate

Thanks to Elise Jones for editorial support

Text design by Sandra Nobes & Jenine Davidson

Set in 11.5 pt Sabon by Sandra Nobes

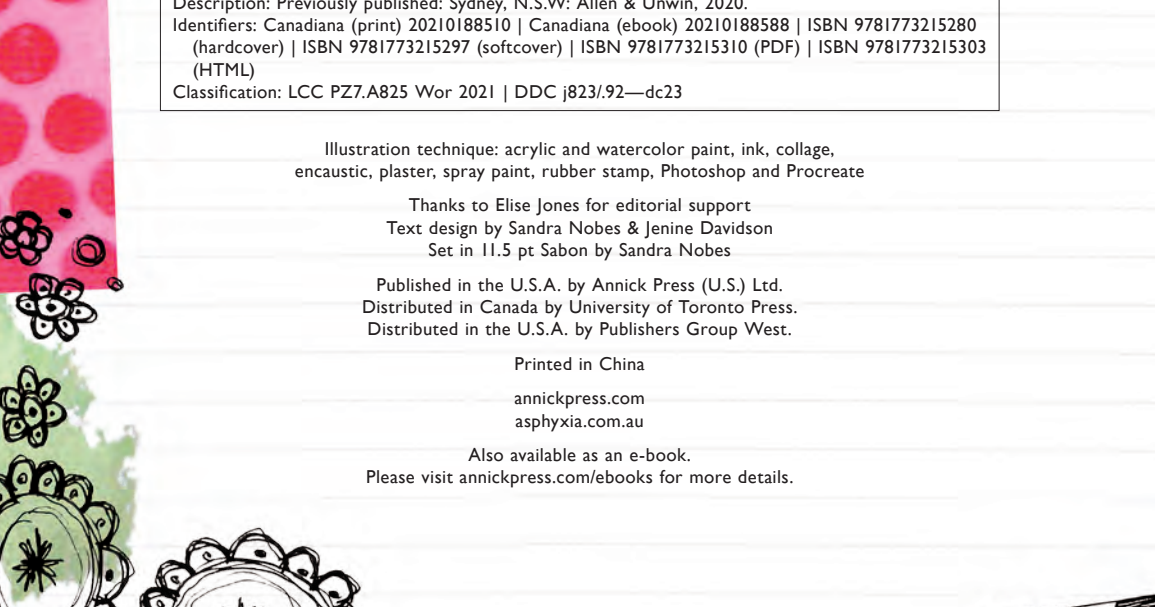
Published in the U.S.A. by Annick Press (U.S.) Ltd.
Distributed in Canada by University of Toronto Press.
Distributed in the U.S.A. by Publishers Group West.

Printed in China

annickpress.com

asphyxia.com.au

Also available as an e-book.
Please visit annickpress.com/ebooks for more details.

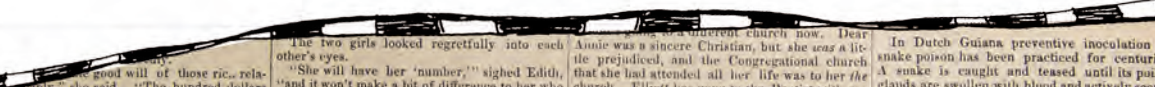


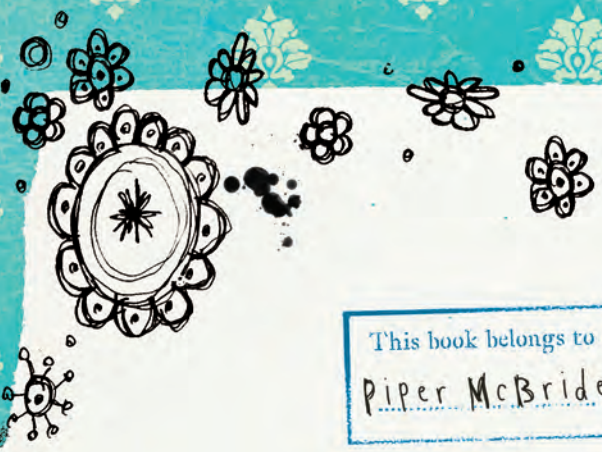


the
Words
in my
Hands

by **ASPHYXIA**

 **annick
press**
toronto • berkeley





This book belongs to
Piper McBride

PRIVATE! (Do not read.)





WEDNESDAY 17 JUNE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

 NEWSMELBOURNE



Recon Rally Unfounded

Parents of unwell children are rallying at Federation Square, expressing concerns recon could be causing the recent rises in rhinitis, asthma, and Energy Deficiency Syndrome, particularly in vulnerable people such as the young and elderly. However, Organicore's leading scientist, Irene McBride, provides reassurance that recon is not the cause: "Increasing pollution, declining air quality, and problems with water due to desalination plant issues are all likely culprits for health issues. We at Organicore are committed to finding solutions, not creating problems. The common cold, cancer, and obesity are now history, thanks to our research team, and we are working on detoxification boosters to include in recon to address these current problems."

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

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

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

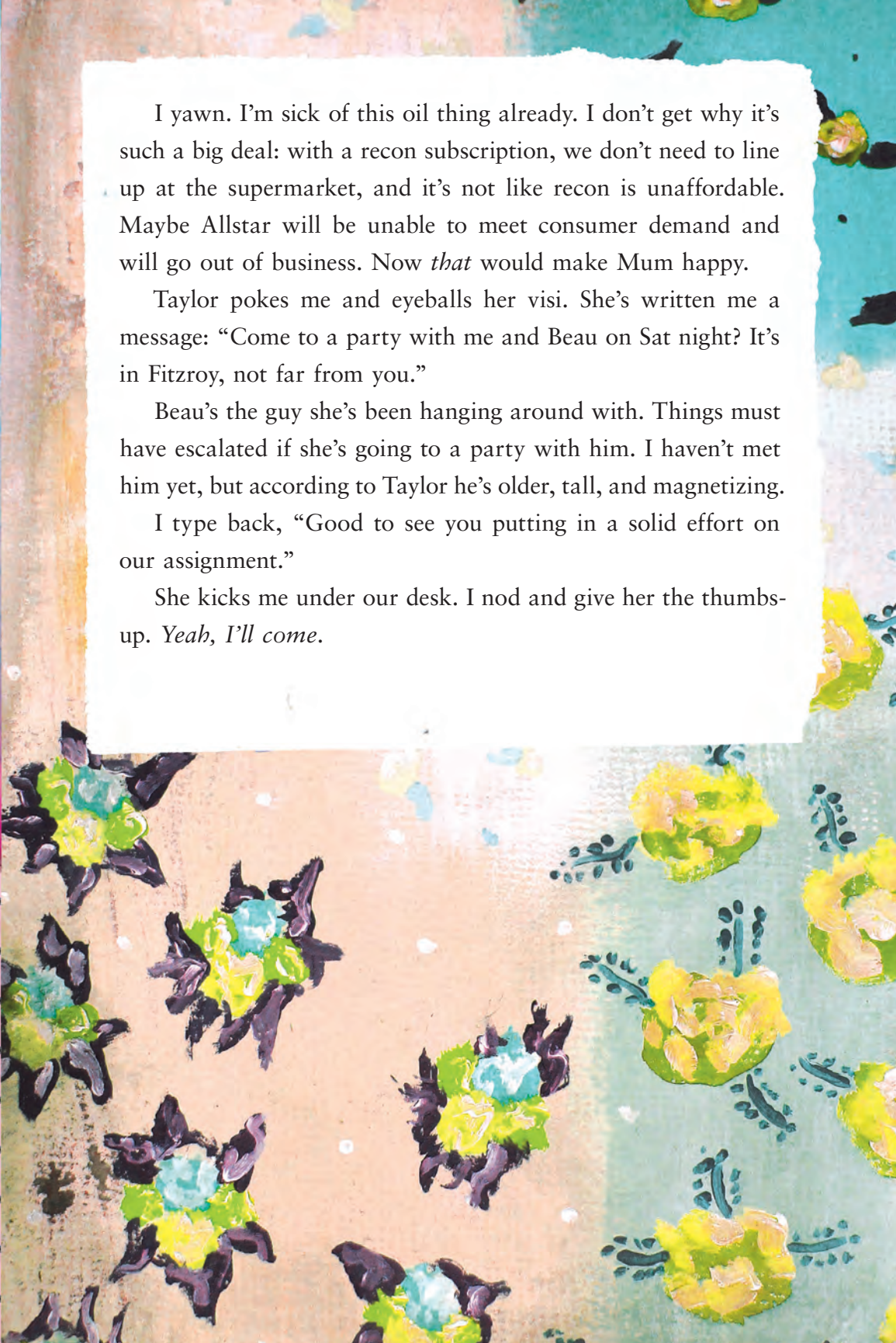
A new feed has replaced the one about recon, though. Mum's already history. Instead, there's a photo of Organicore's biggest competitor: people are crowding through the doors of an outlet of the Allstar supermarket chain.

NEWSMELBOURNE



Consumers Swarm Supermarkets

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



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

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

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

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

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



Piper McBride

FRIDAY

19 JUNE

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

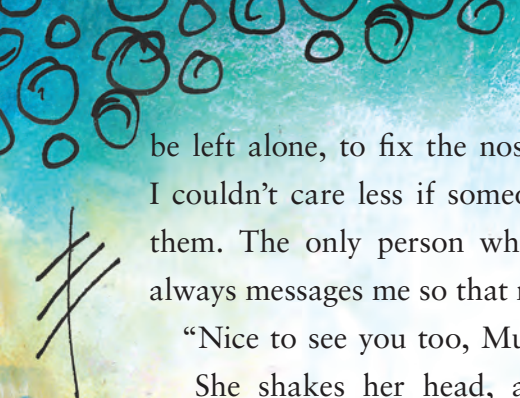
Now, how to capture my skin? It's pale, with a few freckles. When I try to draw the freckles, that's just what they look like: drawn on. I ignore my school uniform and sketch in my favorite top instead. I'll add red paint later. My nose isn't quite right, so I check the mirror again and nearly jump out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

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

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

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

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



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

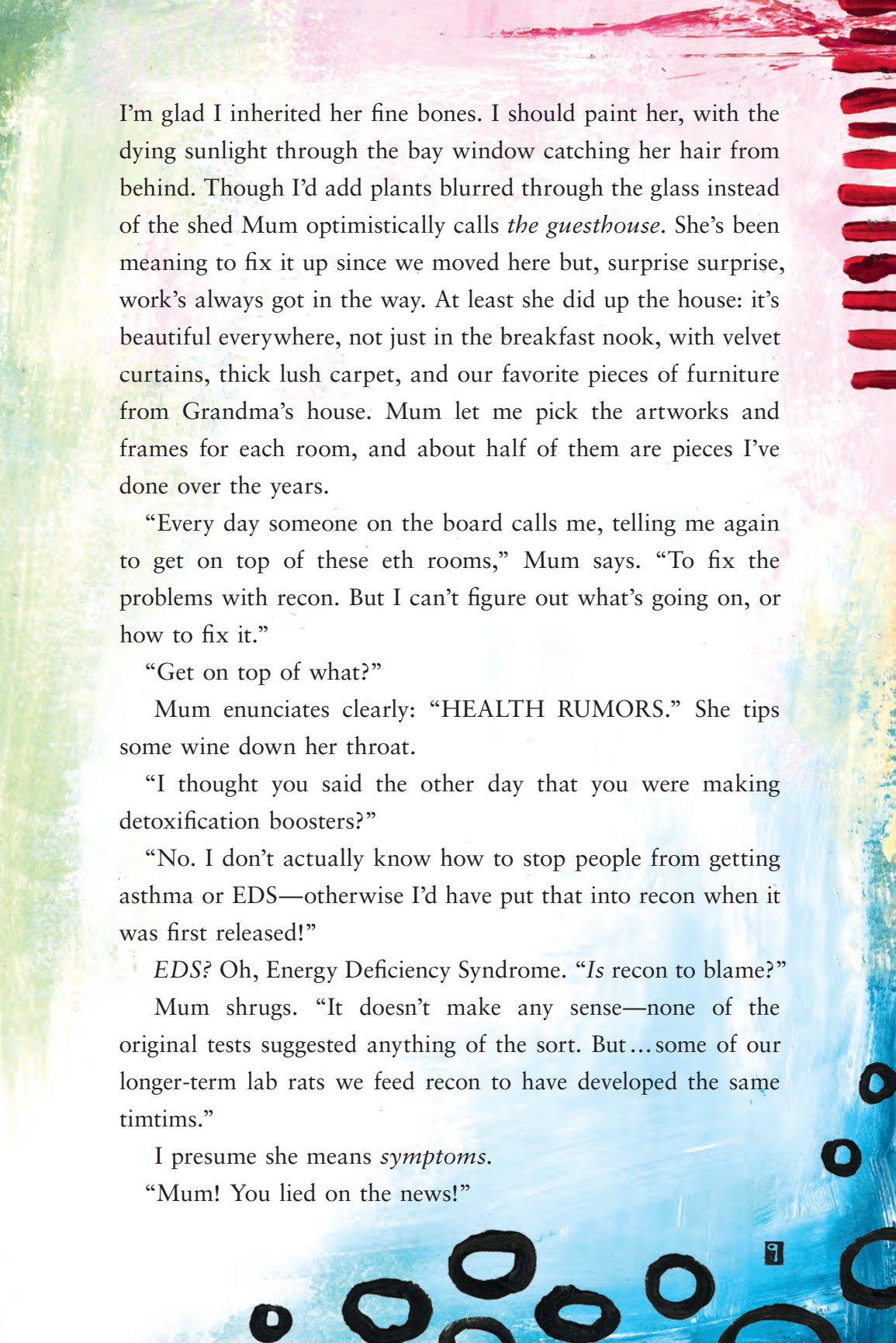
"Nice to see you too, Mum. How was your day?"

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

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

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

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



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

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

"Get on top of what?"

Mum enunciates clearly: "HEALTH RUMORS." She tips some wine down her throat.

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

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

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

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

I presume she means *symptoms*.

"Mum! You lied on the news!"

“I was just buying us more time. A mass scare would create chaos. We have about 65 percent of the population eating recon now, and if they suddenly reject it, we’ll go under. Imagine the consequences if that happened. Piper, we eradicated *cancer*! I’ll fix this, I know it. I just need more time. But the latest experiment I tried hasn’t worked out, and the board’s getting impatient. *And* there’s a may problem—”

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

“MON-EY.” Mum drains her wine. “My monthly pay didn’t come through last week; I’m still trying to sort that out. And filling the car with petrol cleaned out my account. How can they charge \$47.50 per liter? And now there’s an electricity bill that’s just ridiculous!”

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

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

“Three-quarters?”

“Yes.”

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

“Piper, didn’t you hear anything I just said? We have no money, and until Organicore fixes up whatever is going on with

their payroll, I'm not buying anything!"

"I meant after they pay you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"SY-KEE, Piper."

“Huh?”

“You say SY-KEE, not SIKE.”

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

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

While we wait, Mum says, “Did you do the vocation tutorial at school?”

My headache intensifies. My lack of ambition is the bane of Mum’s life. “I entered all my interests and it suggested nursing. Can you see me as a *nurse*? The doctor would tell me to administer 8 milliliters of morphine to the patient in bed 14, and I’d go to bed 40 and administer 80.”

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

“*Boredom*, Mum! I can barely keep my eyes open during science. How do you expect me to survive 50 years in the field? I’ll be in a coma by the time I’m 20.” I rub my hearing aids. My ears are itching again. “So that leaves one option: art!”

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

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

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

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

“That reminds me,” Mum says. “A certain package from Spain arrived today.”

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


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

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

She smiles. She does love to indulge me, I’ll say that. “Happy 16th birthday, Piper.”

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

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



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

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

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

Mum nods.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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