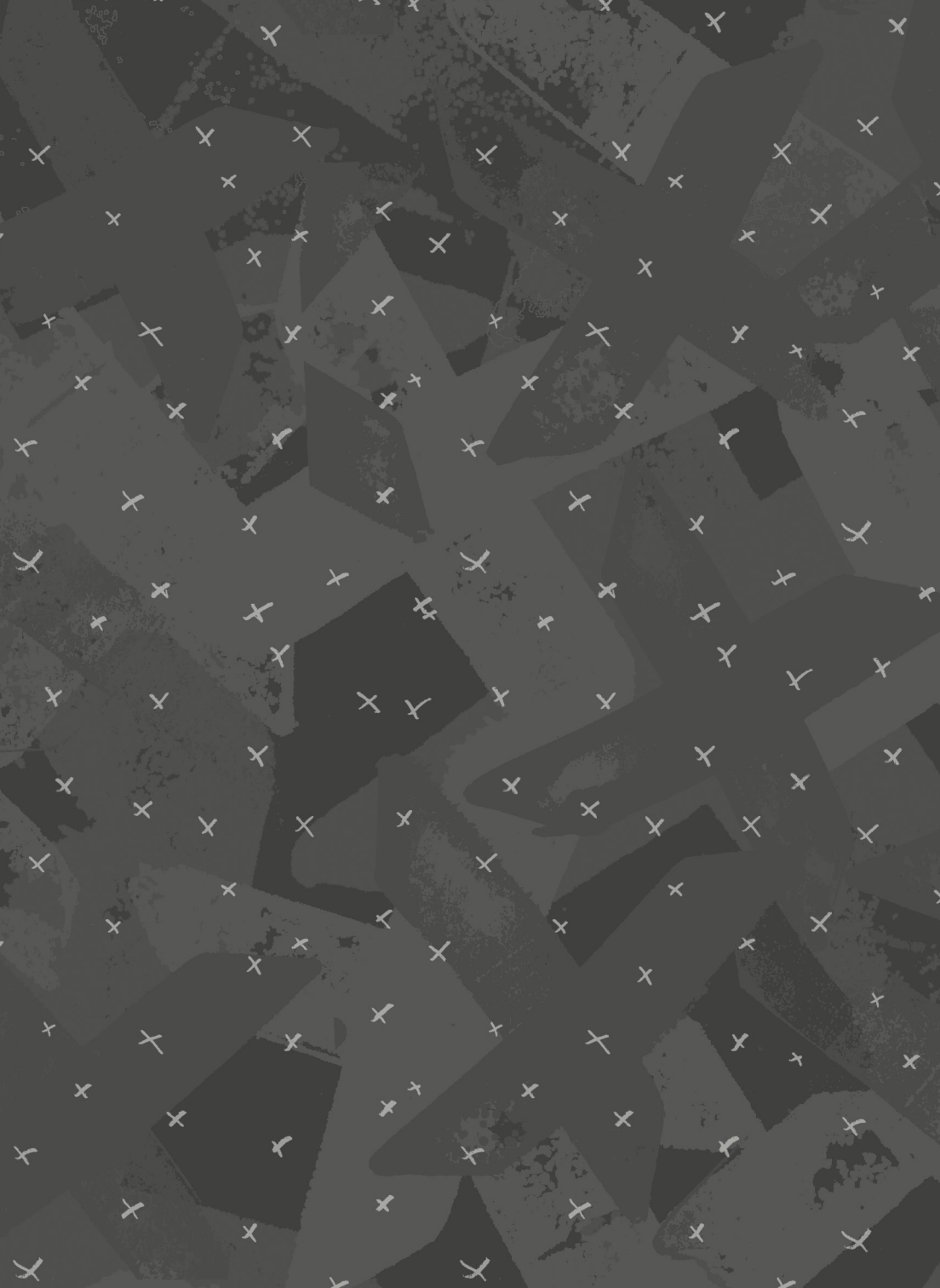
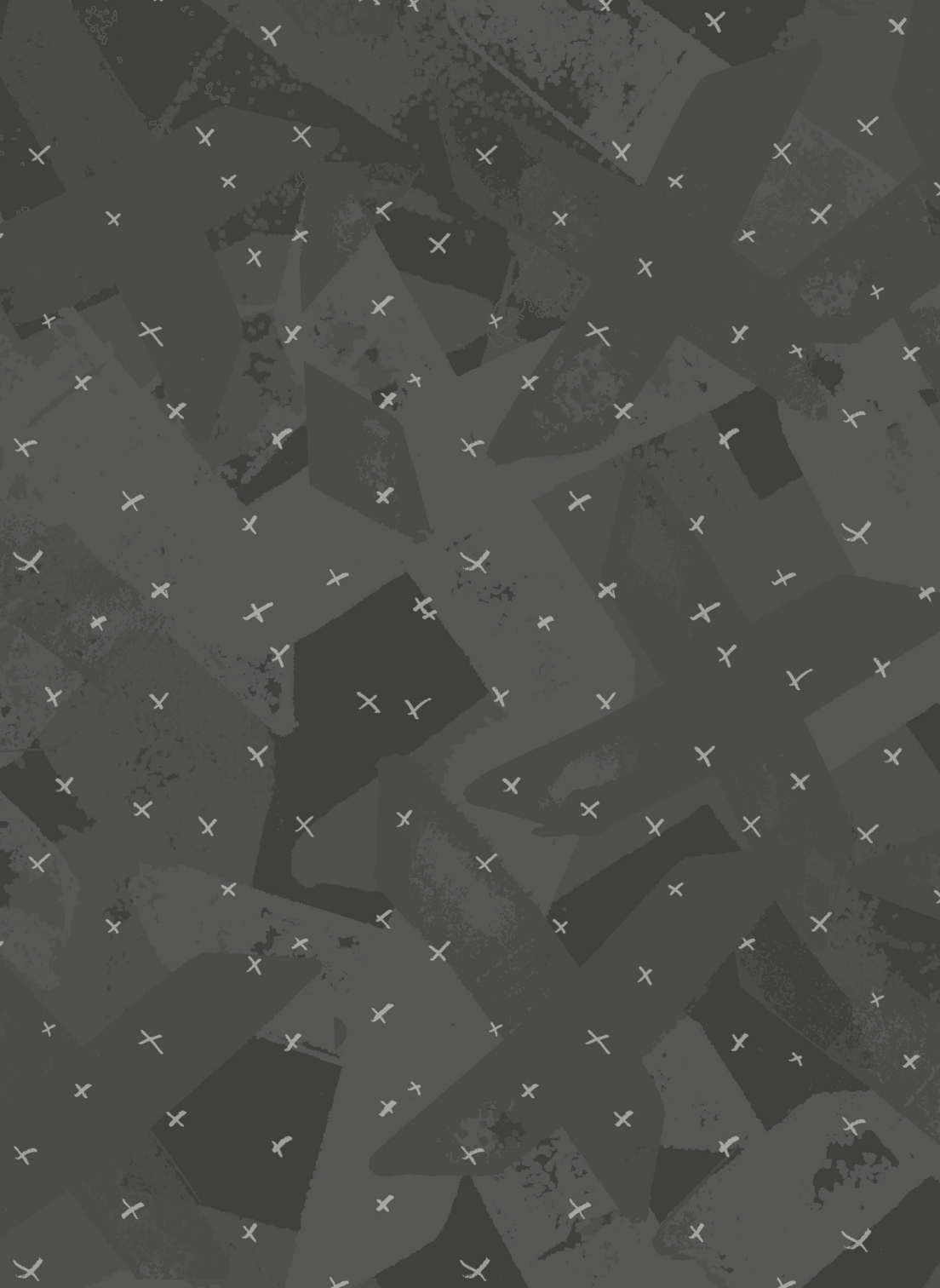




Second Best Friend

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Non Pratt



Barrington Stoke

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For Beef & Liberty

1

Dumping Rob King

Rules for breaking up with the hottest guy in school.

1. **Know your reasons**
2. **Look fierce**
3. **Take your best friend for moral support (even if she puts up a fight)**

"It's not like I'm going to be there when you do it, creeping up behind Rob, giving you a thumbs-up and whooping, 'You go girl!'" Becky says. She's sitting on my bed, the back of her hand a rainbow of colour from testing all the different eyeliners I've tried and rejected for tonight's look.

"But could you?" I ask. "Because that would be awesome."

"Jade ..." Becky pleads, and I turn from my reflection to look at her.

"Please," I say. "I need you."

"I didn't exactly come prepared for a night out." She holds out the hem of her giant *Adventure Time* T-shirt. It's old and faded and covered in moth holes.

"Good job we're the same size," I say. Same everything, pretty much. Same golden blonde hair, same height, same style.

I reach into my wardrobe and pull out a galaxy-print cami that Becky's borrowed so many times it may as well be hers. She looks unsure.

Time for the big guns.

There's a tangle of necklaces hanging over the corner of my mirror and I hook out my favourite – laser-cut acrylic planets on a silver chain.

Becky looks from the necklace to my hopeful expression and rolls her eyes.

I win.



It's standing room only in the bit of the cinema that can't decide whether it's a bar or a coffee shop. Becky and I push past the popular lot on the leather sofas, and find some space by the window where Willow from orchestra is chewing a straw and guarding a pile of bags and coats dumped at her feet. She's wearing a bright yellow tennis dress and purple satin bomber jacket – the kind of outfit only someone with Willow's deep brown skin and sky-high confidence could ever carry off.

"Cute necklace!" Willow says. She stops chewing her straw long enough to wave it at Becky.

"Thanks, it's Jade's ..." Then Becky stage whispers, "... *for now*."

The look I give Becky makes it clear that 'for now' means 'for ever'. Becky might be my favourite person, but that doesn't mean I'm prepared to give her my favourite necklace.

"Heads up." Becky nudges me. The lads are on the move from where they've been messing around at the counter.

"Jade!" Coxy, the loudest of the lot, directs to Becky, then he turns to do his trademark finger-guns at me. "Becky!"

"You're hilarious," I say.

He isn't, but it's routine for him to make the joke and me to be sarcastic about it. Not that it matters – like the rest of his mates, Coxy has turned to talk to Becky and Willow, leaving me to face Rob King, my soon-to-be ex.

Rob slips a hand under the hem of my top, his fingers tracing a line across the skin of my back as he murmurs, "Looking good, Jade."

If you'd told me a month ago that Rob King, a boy so hot he should be measured on the Scoville scale like a tasty little chilli pepper, would touch me like this, I'd have melted into a puddle of lust. I mean, he's *gorgeous*. Dirty blond hair brushed up into an effortless, scruffy quiff, cute smile and a dimple to die for.

All things best admired from afar. Get any closer and you discover his moves are cut and pasted from a '*How to Make Girls Fancy You*' Wikihow, the quiff is more product than hair and, after he's had a beer or two, that cute smile is a cover for some epic fish breath.

"Let's go somewhere quiet," I say, hooking my fingers with his.

I glance back to see Becky mouth, "*You got this!*" as Rob and I weave our way around the crowd from school and towards the darkened doorway of a fire exit.

As Rob dives in like a haddock on heat, I twist away so all he gets is my cheek.

"Everything OK?" He brushes aside a strand of hair that's fallen from my pony-tail and gives me his Serious Eyes.

When you're as fit as Rob you *really* shouldn't have to try so hard.

"Not really," I say, then let everything out on the next breath. "This has been fun, and you're gorgeous and all, but I'm just not feeling it."

"Feeling what?" Rob has a funny little smile, like he's not taking me seriously.

"This." I wave at the space between our bodies. "Us."

Rob's face stays the same – the puckered brows, the patronising smile – but there's a tightness to it as his humour pulls back. Like a bow tensed before the arrow is fired.

"*You* aren't feeling *us*?" Rob asks. Before I can reply, he shrugs and steps back. "Whatever. Like there would ever have been an 'us' if your mate had been up for it."

I stand there, too stunned to process what he's saying. Which mate? Up for what?

"What do you mean?" I manage.

"Everyone knows Becky's the hot one." Rob reaches up to pat my cheek and I slap his hand away. He laughs, a nasty hiss through his teeth. "Everyone except you, Jade."