

WEDNESDAY 17 JUNE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SATURDAY 27 JUNE

I wheel my bike all the way up High Street in search of the repair place. There are people everywhere, and it's weird because now there are really hardly any cars around – just the occasional electric car. Instead, pedestrians have filled the roadway, trudging wearily, carrying heavy-looking backpacks. Bikes weave among the people, and every now and again the road vibrates as a tram chugs past, overloaded with passengers.

The shops are dark, too. I miss the bright sparkle of their window displays all lined up in a cheery row. I check a camping store, and the large hardware chain, but all their solar panels have sold out. So have their gas bottles.

My favourite café is closed, with a huge orange sticker over its doorframe: *Health violation – no entry until approved.* Damn. They should've just stuck with recon, instead of insisting on also selling wild food. I peer through the window at the front bar where they sell their recon edible art. What will their artists do for work now they can't create meals that look like bizarre retro objects? And where will all the local high school kids go to try to compete with each other to find the weirdest after-school snacks? I'm still not over how jealous Taylor was the time I scored a Frozen Charlotte doll that tasted of hot chips and cream.

When I reach Thornbury at last and find the bike shop, one ad among a tonne of them in its dusty window catches my eye instantly – because it's written by hand, on actual paper! *Food shortages? Learn to grow your own. A Transition Towns Workshop.*

Mum's voice echoes in my head.

Without Nutrium Sustate, your body doesn't get what it needs.

Recon won't give you food poisoning; stick to the safe stuff. Remember all those colds you had when you were little?

But it's only been four days of recon rations and I'm feeling kind of hungry all the time. Right now, I just want a big meal – who cares if it isn't perfectly nutritionally balanced. And surely a pack and a half of recon a day's still enough to protect us from getting sick.

Despite all the horror stories about wild food, even *Mum* braved the crowd at Allstar this week trying to get us some – not that it did much good. The shelves had been picked bare during the shopping riot last week, and apparently since then new deliveries have been sparse, with people snapping everything up as soon as it arrives.

I take a photo of the ad with my wristlet. We don't have much of a garden: just a tiny patch of grass out the front, and a concrete courtyard between the house and guesthouse. But still, maybe I could squeeze in some food? Grow something in pots?

I wheel my bike inside the shop and squint into the gloom. Strung up on the wall, hanging from the ceiling, and lined up on the uneven concrete floor is a motley collection of old, mismatched and cobbled-together bikes. Some have two wheels, but lots have three, or trailers, or huge crates attached to them. The paint on most of them has rusted off, and nothing looks clean. The floor could do with a sweep.

On the wall, someone's written:

Imagine: if the GDP was replaced with a contentment index.

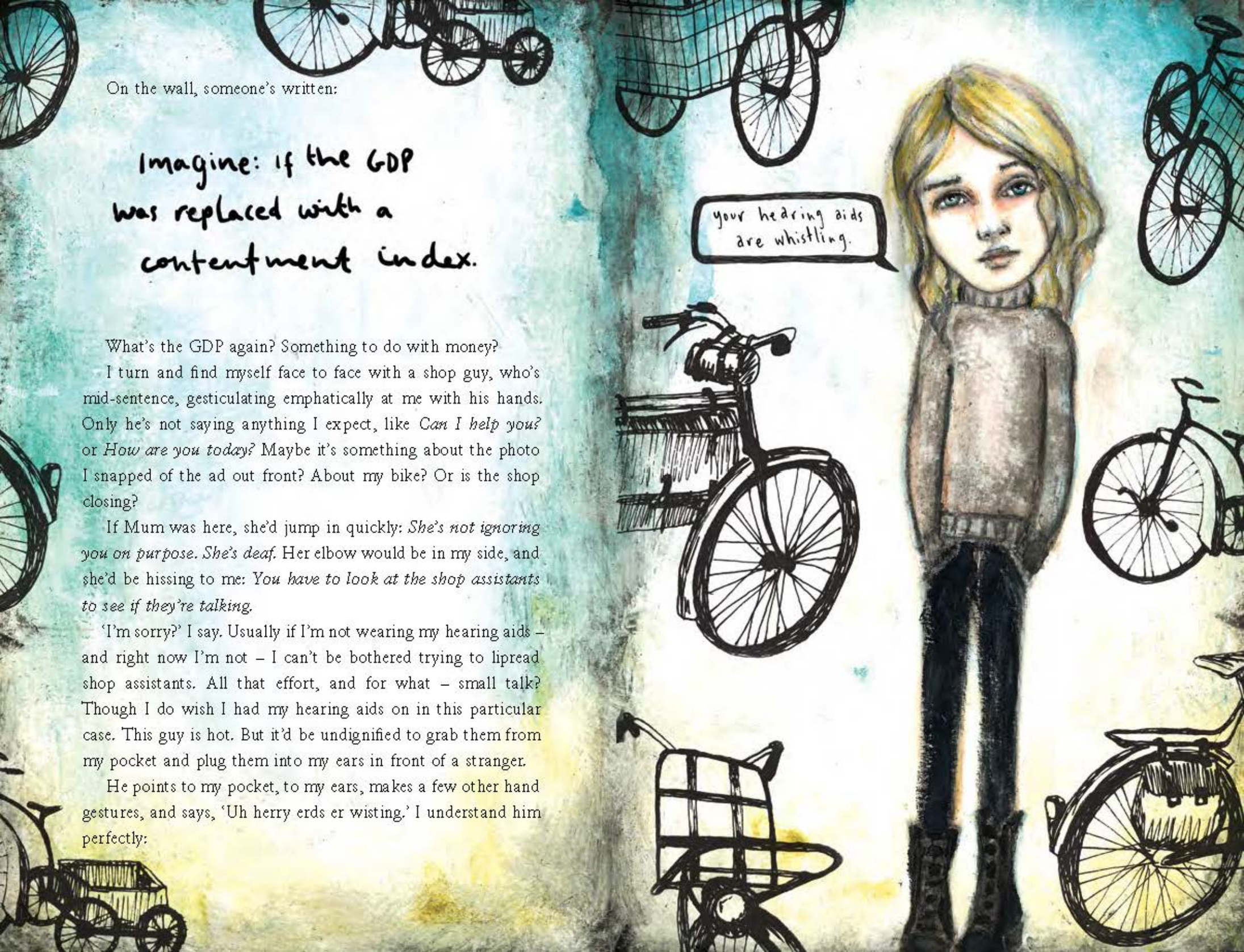
What's the GDP again? Something to do with money?

I turn and find myself face to face with a shop guy, who's mid-sentence, gesticulating emphatically at me with his hands. Only he's not saying anything I expect, like *Can I help you?* or *How are you today?* Maybe it's something about the photo I snapped of the ad out front? About my bike? Or is the shop closing?

If Mum was here, she'd jump in quickly: *She's not ignoring you on purpose. She's deaf.* Her elbow would be in my side, and she'd be hissing to me: *You have to look at the shop assistants to see if they're talking.*

'I'm sorry?' I say. Usually if I'm not wearing my hearing aids – and right now I'm not – I can't be bothered trying to lipread shop assistants. All that effort, and for what – small talk? Though I do wish I had my hearing aids on in this particular case. This guy is hot. But it'd be undignified to grab them from my pocket and plug them into my ears in front of a stranger.

He points to my pocket, to my ears, makes a few other hand gestures, and says, 'Uh herry erds er wisting.' I understand him perfectly:



I scoff down my last mouthful of steak tartare. I could eat another whole meal. 'Should we stop eating recon, if it's not safe?'

Mum shakes her head. 'It's the only thing we have to eat at the moment, unless we're prepared to queue at Allstars at six in the morning and take food from people there who don't have recon subscriptions. Besides, we've been eating it this long... We'll keep an eye out for side-effects, of course. I suspect it *could* be a tolerance thing – some do well, others don't. I think we'll be fine, Piper. This isn't a permanent situation – things are going to get better.'

After dinner I pull off my hearing aids and lie on my bed with my journal, my head spinning in the sudden silence, cold air whispering at my cheek. I think of Marley. Of Karen Kildare, Organicore. The guesthouse as *home*. It's all too much.

I dump the contents of my brain onto a page in my diary – a grid, a symbol for each thing bothering me, wresting order from the chaos – working fast, messy, smearing layers of paint upon paint, until slowly everything settles. Finally, I'm calm enough to sleep.



TUESDAY
14 JULY

Art class is the only time at school that I don't wish I was someplace else. Right now, I don't even care that it's been a week and Taylor's *still* not here. I dab a bit of red paint onto the lips of the girl in my painting and stand back to look at it critically. Not bad. I like the messy effect – but somehow it's still a bit prissy.

Someone touches my shoulder and I turn. It's Alice.

'I said, youcoo go furth wathi, Piper,' she says. 'More lays, more texta, build up depth.'

I think she's telling me to go further with this. *More layers, more texture.*

I nod. That might help with the prissiness.

'Remember you told me your favourite at woks were the ones that have been dirtied and dammy?' Alice asks.

This is art class, so I presume she means *artworks*. Dammy? Maybe *damaged*?

She's still talking. 'Don't be afraid to' – I've missed something – 'carve into them, scratch them up, add paint so that underneath layers are party hidna hevasutty to them.'

'So that underneath layers are what?'

'PART-I-ALLY HID-DEN and have a SUB-TLE-TY to them.'

I'm mortified that she has to over-enunciate these words for me to get them. 'Do you think she looks prissy?' I ask.

'Ista mou.' Alice points to the mouth, and when I look at it I miss her next words.

'What about the mouth?'

She indicates her own face, fingers framing her lips. 'It needs to be wider.'

Yes, I see it now.

