ONLY ON THE *Weekends*

DEAN ATTA

HODDER

PROLOGUE: PRESENT DAY

Matching combed-out Afros,
Matching nervous smiles,
Matching electric-blue agbadas:
Dad and I are a matching pair.

But Mum's not here.
She can't be.
Although I feel her,
Like a gentle hand between my shoulder blades.
I stand taller.

"It's go time, gentlemen," says Gem,
Dad's once-assistant, now-producer.
She taps me and Dad on our backs.

Gem's jasmine perfume
Complements Dad's spicy cologne.
I turn to her voice,
Signature black bob and red lipstick.

She models an electric-purple dress,
One shoulder uncovered.
Gem would look perfect
On the red carpet beside Dad.
But that's my role.

Gem's purple dress
Makes me think of someone else
I need to keep out of my mind
Right now.

Smell the flowers.
Blow out the candles.

I inhale the present
And exhale the past.

"Mack!" loud-whispers Gem,
With a snap of her fingers.
My cue to step onto the carpet
And pose for the cameras,
Before Dad takes questions
And I stand in his shadow.

With Dad always a step ahead of me,
There's little chance
The cameras will pick up
The shimmer of my blue eye shadow
Or the bling of my earrings.

Dad's ears aren't pierced.
He doesn't need diamonds to shine.

He marches ahead,
Ready to take on the world.
I turn back to Gem and quiet-whisper,
"Matching outfits was cute when I was ten.
But I'm almost seventeen."

"What would you rather wear?"

My red dashiki.

"I don't know," I reply.

I pick up my pace, as I spot Dad ahead:
The reporter by his side turns to me
Instead of him.

Weird.

"Mackintosh, rumor has it
That you and Finlay are dating.
You appear in multiple posts on his social media.
There's even a hashtag for the two of you.
Is it true?"

A microphone in my face.

Through the flash of camera lights,
Dad's eyes fix on me: W I D E.

My forty-year-old father
Caught up in my teen drama.

I can picture the clickbait headline:
Director-in-Law:
Director's Son and Lead Actor's Secret Steamy Love Affair.

I stifle a laugh.

The reporter laughs along:
"Can we take that to mean the rumors are true?"

Gem moves in from the wings.
She holds up her palms.
"These questions weren't authorized.
Since you have no questions about the film,
Teju and *his son* Mack *are done* here.

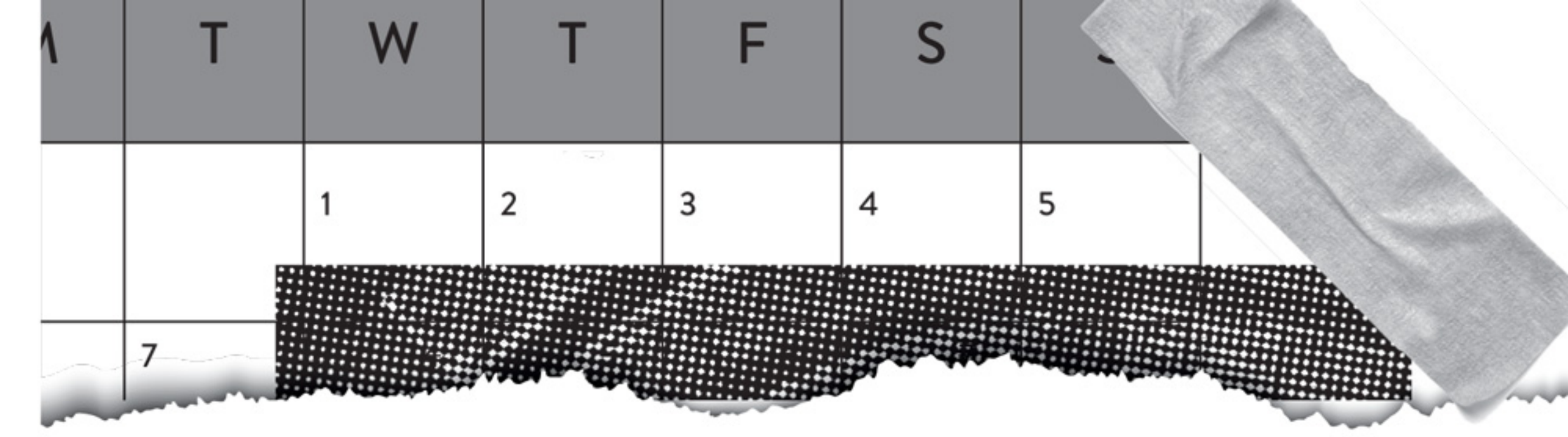
Thank you."

Gem's "Thank you" is polite but final.
She has an authority all her own.

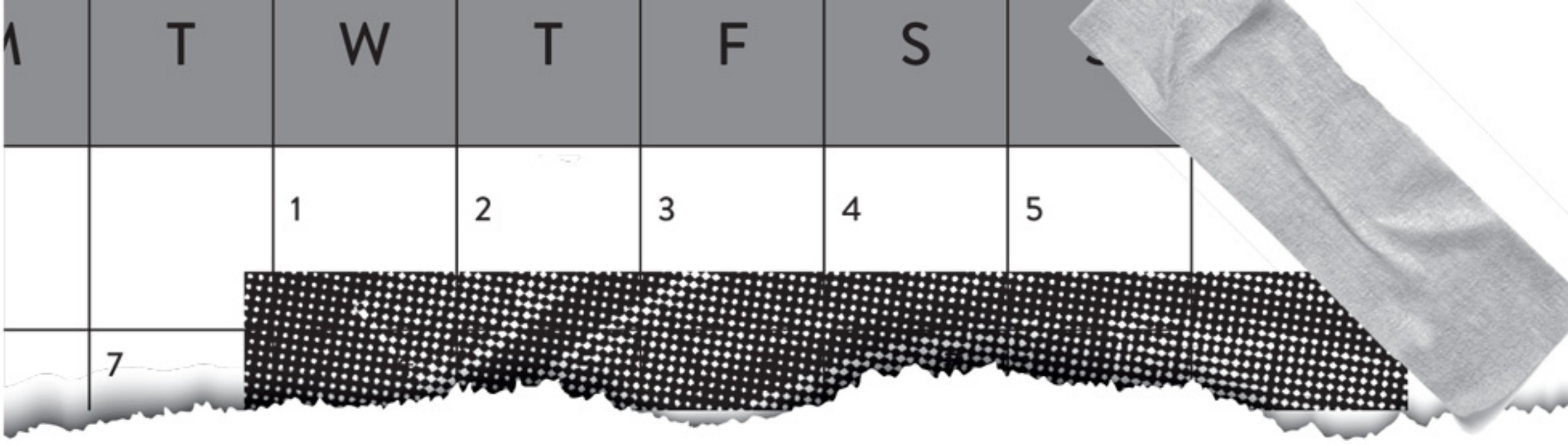
I look away, relieved.
This isn't my night.

It's Dad's moment. It's not right
That I steal his thunder with my own storm.

This is
A Tejumola Fadayomi film premiere.

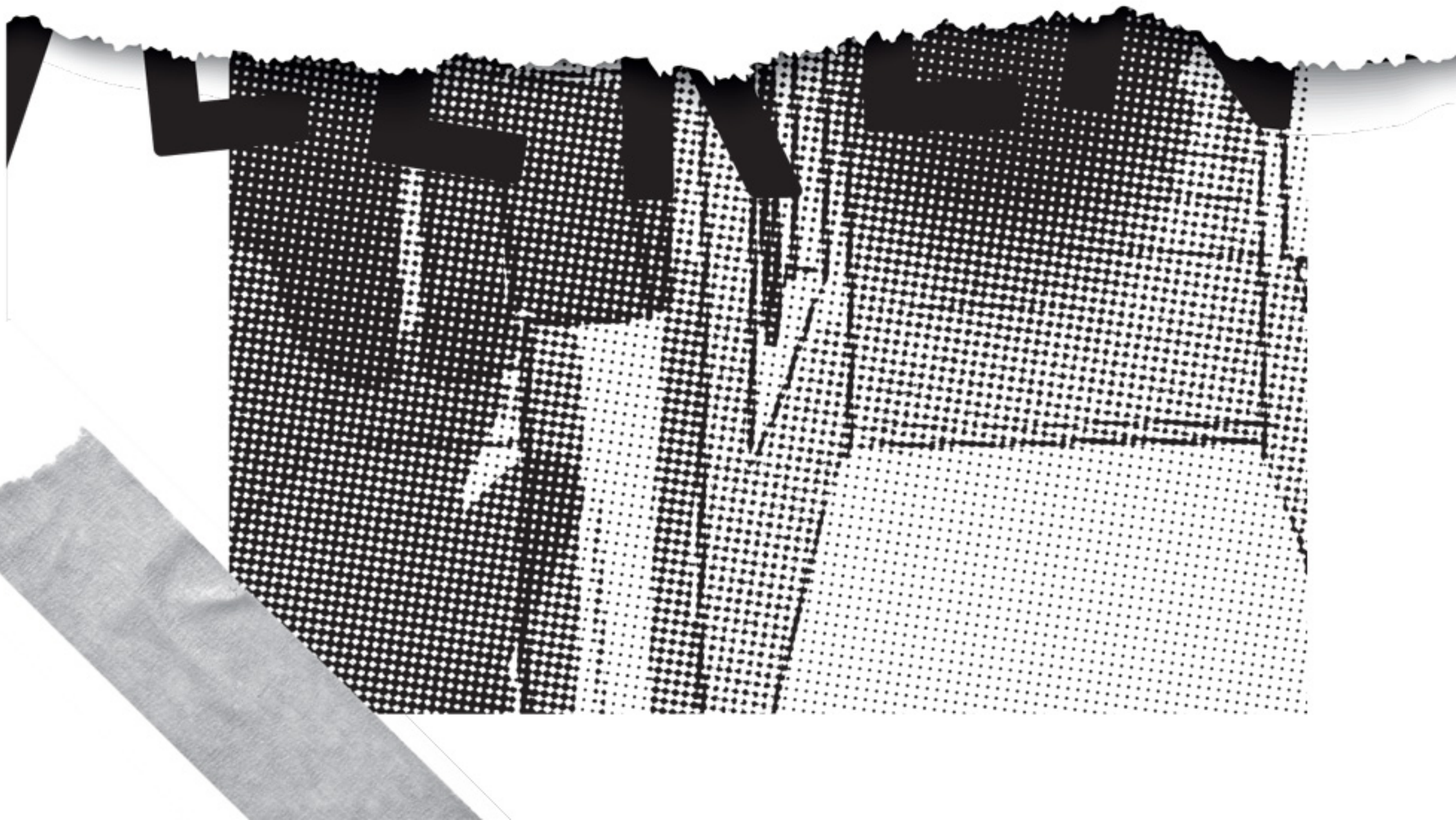


EIGHTEEN MONTHS AGO



PART ONE

FRIENDS



SEPTEMBER

FOOD TECH—MONDAY, second period

I don't have a partner
But I'm happy to work alone.

It's a new school year
And my first food tech class.

It's the only lesson I have
Without either of my best friends,
Femi and Sim.

Food tech's the only elective class
I couldn't convince either of them to pick.

I tune out the noise of the room
And read the recipe card
Miss Rossi just slid in front of me:
VEGETABLE SAMOSAS.

"There's too much chatter at the back.
Maz, please come up front.
You can work with Mack."

I feel the heat rise through my neck
And across my face
When I hear Miss Rossi say my name
Because it sounds like
Working with me is Maz's punishment.
Maz and I have never chatted before.
But sometimes
I spot her walking home along Bow Road

With her cousin, "K."

Karim.
King of our year.
The hottest boy in school.
Captain of the basketball team.
Polite.
Handsome.
Wholesome.
Modest,
Despite unbelievable beauty.
Never a bully,
Despite being strong and tall as a tree.

Hopefully,
The Future Love of My Life!

Is this my chance
To discover more
About this boy I can't help but be drawn to?

Maz dumps her bag at the table's side,
Pulls out the stool, and grabs the recipe card.
"Don't you mind being the only boy in this class?"

"Not really," I reply.
"I just wanna learn to cook."

I line up the utensils.
Maz piles up potatoes.
"I know what you mean. When we're in Egypt,
I get to help Gidda and my aunts in the kitchen.
But Dad does all the cooking in our house here.
He says he wants me to focus on homework."

"Is Gidda your mum?"

Maz smiles and hands me a potato to peel.
"'Gidda' means *grandma* in Egyptian.
My mum died when I was younger.
Cancer."

"Same," I say.
"My mum died of cancer when I was a baby."
Awkwardness runs through my stomach.
I run the peeler down the potato.
I can't look at Maz.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"I'm sorry, too."

"I guess you can't talk about food
Without talking about family," says Maz.

"True."
I push peelings into a pile.

"Is your dad a good cook?"

Should I lie?

"We mostly eat takeaways.
Dad's always busy with work.
He's a film director," I say,
As casual as possible.

"We need to cut the potatoes into small cubes.
Okay?"

Did she hear me?

We cook together.
Just the sounds of chopping
And breathing
Over our quiet thoughts.

We don't talk about K.
We don't talk about Dad either.

NEXT WEEK—MONDAY, first period

I wait in line with Femi and Sim,
For Mr. Charles to let us into English class.

"Hey, Maz."
I step out of line,
As she passes me in the corridor.

"Hey." She turns back and waves.

"See you next lesson!" I wave back.

Femi and Sim exchange a glance.

"See you next lesson," Femi mimics:
Exaggerated high-pitched voice and a goofy wave.

Sim bursts into hysterics.

"You into girls now?"
Femi rests his hand on my shoulder.

"You know I only have eyes for you."
I put my hand on top of his.

"Allow it with that gay talk."
Femi recoils
And shoves both hands in his jacket pockets.

MONDAY, second period

Maz enters surrounded by giggles,
Khadijah and Louisa on either arm.

Don't forget to ask about K!

As she spots me at the front,
Maz whispers something to Khadijah,
Then Louisa.
They smile at me.

Do those smiles show a hint of pity?

Khadijah and Louisa release Maz's arms
And link up with each other:
They chatter their way to a workstation
At the back of the room.

"What did your dad think of our samosas last week?"
Maz sidles up to me.

"I left them out with a note
But they were still there in the morning."
I roll my eyes. "I had them for breakfast.
I don't even know if my dad came home last Monday."

Maz's face drops.

"It's okay!" I smile. "I saw him the following evening.
No need to ring Social Services or anything like that."
She laughs and rests her chin in her hands.

"Well, my dad didn't get to try them, either.

My greedy-guts cousin munched them all
When he got home from basketball."

K!

My heart thuds.
I think fast.
"Did you tell K we made them together?"

"K doesn't care who makes it.
As long as it's halal, he'll eat it."

K doesn't know I exist.

"Good morning, class."
Miss Rossi circles the room.
"Nice to see the two of you together again.
You made an excellent team last week."
She lets today's recipe card float onto the table:
HOMEMADE PIZZA.

Maz turns to face me.
"Miss Rossi is right, you know.
Our samosas were banging!"

Our palms touch in a high five,
Like it's the most natural thing in the world.

"Not that food tech is gonna help me become a lawyer,"
Maz adds.
"Why'd you want to be a lawyer?" I ask.

"I guess I have a thing for justice.
I've wanted to do law since I was twelve."

"The only thing I knew when I was twelve
Was that I'm gay."

Maz's eyes glance down toward the recipe,
Then back up at me.
"I saw a great a documentary recently
Called *My Name Is Pauli Murray*."

Is Maz changing the subject?

'Oh, yeah? What's it about?'

"Pauli Murray." Maz chuckles,
"She was a Black queer feminist,
A civil rights and women's rights activist,
A lawyer, a priest, and a poet."
Maz gets even more animated.
"Pauli was arrested with her friend Mac
For protesting bus segregation
Fifteen years before Rosa Parks."

"Are you planning to get us arrested?"
I take the card from Maz and fan myself.

There is mischief in her smile.
"The bus protest was the reason
Pauli made the decision
That law school would be her destination.
I found her story really inspiring.
I think you would too."

I smile back.
"I'll check it out."

"Cool." Maz nods,
Then snatches back the card.
"Now, are you ready
To make the best pizza this school has ever seen?"

Halfway through the lesson,
I still reel with the echo of what Femi said.
Allow it with that gay talk repeats in my mind.
I feel I can trust Maz,
So I tell her.

"And what did you say back?" she asks.

She spreads the tomato puree on the pizza base,
As I grate the cheese.

"I said:
'Femi, I've loved you since primary school.
Your name means *love me*, after all.'"

"You're brave to joke like that," says Maz.

"How is it brave?
I was just messing with my friends."

Maz scatters mushroom slices
Along the edges of the pizza.
"I guess I would have thought
Straight guys and gay guys
Would find it hard to be friends."

"I used to think the same.
Femi asked if I was gay when we were maybe ten.
I said I wasn't.
'Cause I didn't want to lose my best friends.
But when I did tell him and Sim a few years later
They were cool."

Maz squints at me.
"So, you're not actually in love with Femi?
Doesn't every joke contain some truth?"

I want to tell Maz both secrets:
I used to be in love with Femi
But now I have a mushrooming crush on her cousin.

"There is someone I like, actually.
But it would probably be awkward
If I told you who it was."

Maz raises an eyebrow,
Half smiles.
"Are you done with that?" she laughs
And points to the plate of grated cheese.

And then to me:
"Mack and Cheese."

"Very original," I say,
Crushed
By Maz's lack of interest in my crush.
"I've never heard that one before."