For Dad.

In the words of Pink Floyd: wish you were here.

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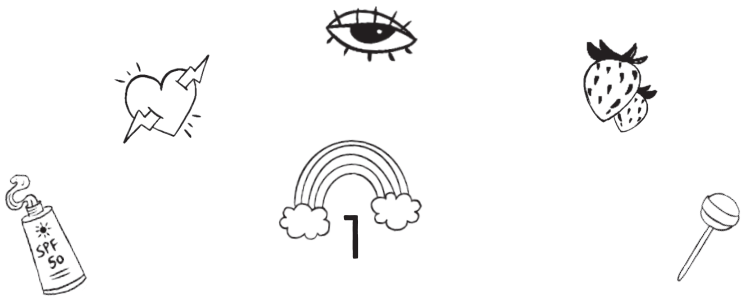
You can listen to the *Ellie Pillai is Brown* album by scanning in the link below and enjoy hearing Ellie's songs come to life!

There are song chapters throughout the story that reference specific songs on the album so we'd recommend listening to each song when it appears in the book, but it's totally up to you!



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A Girl Called Ellie

'Won't you love me?' she cried out to the man in the yellow mac.

My name is Ellie. Ellie Pillai. And these are the words I find myself writing over and over, whenever I have a piece of paper and a pen to hand. I don't know why. Maybe I believe one day I will find unrequited love with a fisherman from a 1950s poster, or one of those hipster types with an ironic moustache and a penchant for Scandinavian clothing. Whatever way you look at it, my subconscious is telling me that this man is going to be rejecting me, possibly even running away from me, with his mac flapping in the breeze like a giant yellow eagle. And I can well believe that to be true, because I'm the kind of weirdo that writes things like 'Won't you love me?' and 'man in the yellow mac' over and over again on my science test, scribbling the words in all different shapes and sizes, like the world's worst calligrapher. I suppose I am a little bit weird, but then, aren't we all, just a little bit?









But Your Face

I'm stood in front of the mirror, staring at my reflection, when I hear it. The Rolling Stones, 'Lies'. It's sort of brilliantly manic. A mash of guitars fighting each other over the sound of Mick Jagger screaming about lies and dirt and mouths and dripping.

I stare at my mouth and wonder whether it's possible to see actual lies. Whether they have a tangible shape, or feel. Whether the reason I don't feel hungry this morning is because my mouth is full of Dripping Dirt Lies and the fear of being Found Out, or whether my stomach's just churning at the thought of one of Mum's back-to-school lectures. Mick keeps intermittently screaming at me, as if that's somehow helpful, as if I didn't already know about lies and dirt and mouths and dripping.

Oh. God.

The guitars feel a bit like they're flying. Like they're soaring above me, and I'm watching them speed away like birds.

I study my face carefully, analysing every feature.

Skin – Brown.

Eyes – Brown.

Lips – Pinkish brown.

Nose – Small, sharp, brown.

Eyebrows – Black. Forming one long arc across my entire forehead unless rigorously plucked daily.

Me – Brown. Obviously.

I never used to think that much about the way I look. Because before high school, being small, brown and not exactly the same as everyone else was OK. It even once earned me a stalker (by which I mean a boy once asked me out, prompting my father to report him to the school as a stalker and potential serial killer). Before high school, being me seemed simple. Turn up, be yourself, go home, repeat.

But then it happened. The day I awkwardly turned up at a new school, my shoes two sizes too big. High school was just different somehow. The stakes so much higher. The expectation that you should know exactly who you are, and exactly what you stand for – as though I should have an opinion on topics as wide-ranging as: how tanned is too tanned (brown, according to Addy McQueen, is the 'wrong kind of tan'), or who's cuter, [insert random teenage Disney person] or [insert random faux Rock God]. I mean, if I had to choose, random faux Rock God – because at least he or she

is imitating something I can remotely connect with. It's like I'm fifteen and I'm a personal brand now, instead of just a person. And my brand isn't the one you'd buy. It's definitely not the one you're posting on Instagram, expecting it to be followed by a million likes. It's more like the brand you get in the sale section of your mum's favourite shop, the one you don't really fancy, but it's there, and seems like the sensible choice. And that's me really. Somewhere between invisible and not very cool. And usually, I'm OK with that.

But today feels different, and I'm not sure why. Maybe because it's the first day back at school after the summer. The year I start my GCSEs. And everything I've spent the last year and a half trying to hold together feels like it's suddenly and unceremoniously about to come unstuck.

I take out the kohl eyeliner, which has only ever succeeded in making me resemble a panda, and attempt to line my eyes. I'm going for French Girl Cool, but it's coming off more Bear Native to South Central China. However much I try, I just can't seem to master the art of this make-up stuff.

'ELLIE! You're going to be late!' Mum knocks on the door emphatically, causing me to lose control of the pencil.

'I'm coming!' I jump as she pokes her head through the doorway. But of course, Mum's wearing eyeliner, and of course, hers is perfect. Because Mum's face is perfect. Even when I know she's been up half the night working and generally

proving she can Have It All and still be Better Than Me at everything.

'Do you need help with that?' she asks, frowning.

'No,' I say, turning back towards the mirror. 'I'll be down in a minute.'

As she leaves the room, I try not to let Mick Jagger get to me. Apparently, I'm a dirty Jezebel.

I nudge my foot against the Rolling Stones album and push it over in retaliation.

Mick responds by suggesting I go to hell. Which seems rude.

All right, Mick, I think, trying not to wonder how Mum gets those perfect sixties eyeliner flicks, when once again I resemble an animal with an insatiable appetite for bamboo. I take your point, OK?

So, I may have told a lie – and not just about the fact I don't need help with my eyeliner (obviously I do), but a different lie. A really tiny, *other* white lie (and why is it that even lies are white when they're a better version of themselves?). But Mick, I ask you – did you have first-generation immigrant parents, who were obsessed with your future, and your opportunities, and every infinitesimal decision you ever made, because it's not just about you, but all the generations that came before you, and the sacrifices they all made to get you here? Did you, Mick, did you?

I sigh in frustration and turn away from the mirror. Normally I love a bit of Rolling Stones. I love any and all music, and the way it transports me to somewhere else, to being some*one* else. But lately, it's like the soundtrack that's been playing in my head, for pretty much as long as I can remember, is getting louder, and brighter, and bolder, and more *visible* to me than ever.

Because even though I have a million and one vinyl records (which most people think makes me weird and strange and super old) I'm not actually playing any one of them right now, I just have the entire Rolling Stones camped out in my head, and Mick Jagger is shaking his hips and frankly looking a bit ancient to be trying these kind of moves, while the rest of the band plays intently beside him.

It's pretty much the strangest thing ever, when music starts playing in your head for no reason; notes popping up like springs that can't be suppressed, sometimes accompanied by the appearance of a brass band or string quartet, or on one particularly memorable occasion, a sixties girl group singing to my PE teacher during a game of dodgeball.

And I know we all have those moments sometimes. When we're listening to our favourite song, or just any song, any music – and suddenly, it's like you're in it. In the music, in the moment, part of whatever's happening with the melody and the lyrics, inextricably connected to it. It's just that's how I feel

I'm living my life. In an album of those songs. Note by note. Like somehow those songs are trying to write my story. Like maybe those songs are my story.

So I can't help but give in to the thrashing of guitars and lightly pulsing drums as I stand up and start putting on my school uniform. Dancing around my bedroom to a song no one else can hear. Nodding my head to the music and mouthing the words to myself in the mirror, followed by some air guitar when Keith takes me to the bridge.

Lies, lies and more lies – yes Mick, I know.

But after that, I might get a bit lost. Somewhere between real life and the one inside my head. Because the next thing I know, Mum is stood behind me, hands on hips, surveying me mid air-guitar solo, as I dance to absolute silence.

'ELLIE. Ellie!!'

It's like the needle's been pulled off the record in my head. A sudden and abrupt interruption.

'What are you doing?' she asks, frustrated. 'It sounds like a herd of elephants up here.'

'Nothing,' I say, grabbing my school bag, embarrassed. 'I'm, er, going to school.'

And I attempt to ignore The Look.

'Ellie, Dad and I need to talk to you.'

'I can't. I'm running late.'

She sighs.

I run down the stairs and pantomime a Late Face to Dad, who looks up and waves before calmly going back to his paper, undoubtedly grateful that whatever Mum and I are on the verge of fighting over, we no longer have time to fight over.

And the last thing I see is Mum, stood in the hallway, her mouth curled around the words.

'But your face . . .' she cries, as I slam the door shut behind me.