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ON!

THE QUEEN OF THE NEW BUZZ SPORT SHAUNA COXSEY, 28, climber

Google videos of Shauna Coxsey in action and you'll be mesmerised: she nips up climbing walls, sometimes using only her arms, legs swinging rhythmically, in a manner that'd put a mountain goat to shame. There's little wonder that sport climbing, making its debut in Tokyo, is set to be one of the Olympics' buzz events.

'The fact that our sport will be on the most prestigious stage in the world — and that'll encourage more people to try it — is so incredible,' she says.

Like climbing, Coxsey is also making her Olympics debut, although she has won 11 gold medals over her career. Oddly, it'll also be her swansong — she announced her retirement from competitive climbing shortly before she headed out to Tokyo. 'It's been a decision I always knew I would make. I've achieved every goal I've ever set myself in climbing,' she insists. Her husband, Ned, is a rock climber who put his competitive career on hold to support hers and their post-games plan is to tour the world scrambling up cliff faces together. What if she has a dazzling Olympics though — would she rethink that retirement? 'I'm really stubborn once I've set my mind to something,' she grins.

Coxsey got the climbing bug as a four-year-old after watching a documentary about French mountaineer Catherine Destivelle and heading straight for her local wall in Runcorn. Today she lives in Sheffield, in a house fitted out with climbing walls and various 'Beastmakers', which sound like torture devices. 'It's wooden training apparatus that I hang off with weights attached to me,' she says.

Having never previously pondered the lack of other women in her sport, launching a female climbing symposium to boost participation was an eye-opener.

'Because I'd been doing it from such a young age I was oblivious to the barriers women were facing,' she says. 'Worrying about things like getting bulky, getting stronger than their boyfriends or climbing on their periods. But it's clear climbing is growing among women. Sport helps break down so many barriers with body image. Women are realising that beauty and strength aren't mutually exclusive.'



THE LAID-BACK EX-PAT LONDONER NETHANEEL MITCHELL-BLAKE, 27, 200m and 4x100m relay sprinter

There's cool as a cucumber and then there's Nethaneel Mitchell-Blake, who lived in east London until the age of 13, when his parents moved the family back to their native Jamaica. There a teenage Mitchell-Blake would watch local hero Usain Bolt fly around Kingston's running track. Cut to the Rio 2016 Games, and he's competing against the fastest man in the world. 'I don't have time to be in awe of the competition,' he shrugs. 'But at the end of the day, he's a once in a lifetime talent.'

Having won an athletics scholarship to study international trade and finance at Louisiana State University and then making Florida home, Mitchell-Blake hasn't lived in the UK for half his life. The accent, however, is unmistakably east London. 'I'm most definitely still a Londoner. I represented Newham on a club level and I still remember my roots.'

The British relay teams have enjoyed success in recent years and it's always the most thrilling event on the athletics' schedule. Does he have sleepless nights about dropping the baton? 'I've never dropped a baton in my life! We put a lot of work into our exchange skills. It may look simple but it's not easy when someone runs into you at maximum velocity with a small stick, with 50,000 people cheering.'

He's relaxed and ready for Tokyo, his second Olympics: 'I'm excited to go to war. I feel like we're modern day gladiators.' He spends his downtime putting that finance degree to good use 'diversifying my portfolio — I dabble in stocks, the crypto market, real estate. Athletes retire at 33, 34 and that's the age most people are getting their second promotion. I need to prepare for the future.' He's future facing when it comes to running too. 'I'm not at the pinnacle of my sport yet, there's way more to achieve.'

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LOTS OF
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THE SPEED DEMON FROM STOKE ASHLEIGH NELSON, 30, 4x100m relay sprinter

There's a photo on Ashleigh Nelson's Instagram showing her submerged in an ice bath, the hardcore recovery method of choice for sports stars. She's grinning like a Cheshire cat (appropriately enough as she's from Stoke) — is she mad? 'It's not that bad!' she laughs. 'You just have to suck it up. Maybe it's the northerner in me — I can deal with the cold.' Maybe it's the elite athlete in her too. 'What we do is very special,' she admits, 'but because we're in it day in, day out, you just get on with it. When you take a step back you think, "Actually we're super-human." There's only a small percentage of Olympians in the world.'

There's no danger of Nelson getting too big-headed though — her family keep her in check. After winning a relay silver medal at the 2019 World Athletics Championships, she 'cried like an absolute baby on the telly. I was like, c'mon Ash, but it meant so much to me. I got so much gyp from my brother and cousins though.' Older sibling Alexander is also an Olympic runner — the two both went to Beijing 2008 together — and one of those cousins is Wes Nelson, alumnus of *Love Island* and then *Dancing On Ice*.

Nelson's civil servant parents were both sporty, with her dad playing for Stoke City in the 1980s. She later moved to London to study photography, a move that changed everything. 'Growing up a mixed race woman in Stoke, there wasn't much representation, especially for sporty women. When I arrived in the city I was, like, oh my gosh, there are people who look like me, I am one of many.'

She trains at Lee Valley athletics centre in Edmonton and in her spare time runs The Athlete Method bootcamps and PT sessions in Finsbury Park, with hurdler Kerry Dixon. But for now that sideline has to wait — Tokyo is calling, her third games. 'I'm super excited. With everything that's been going on this past year, the Olympics is what the whole world needs.'

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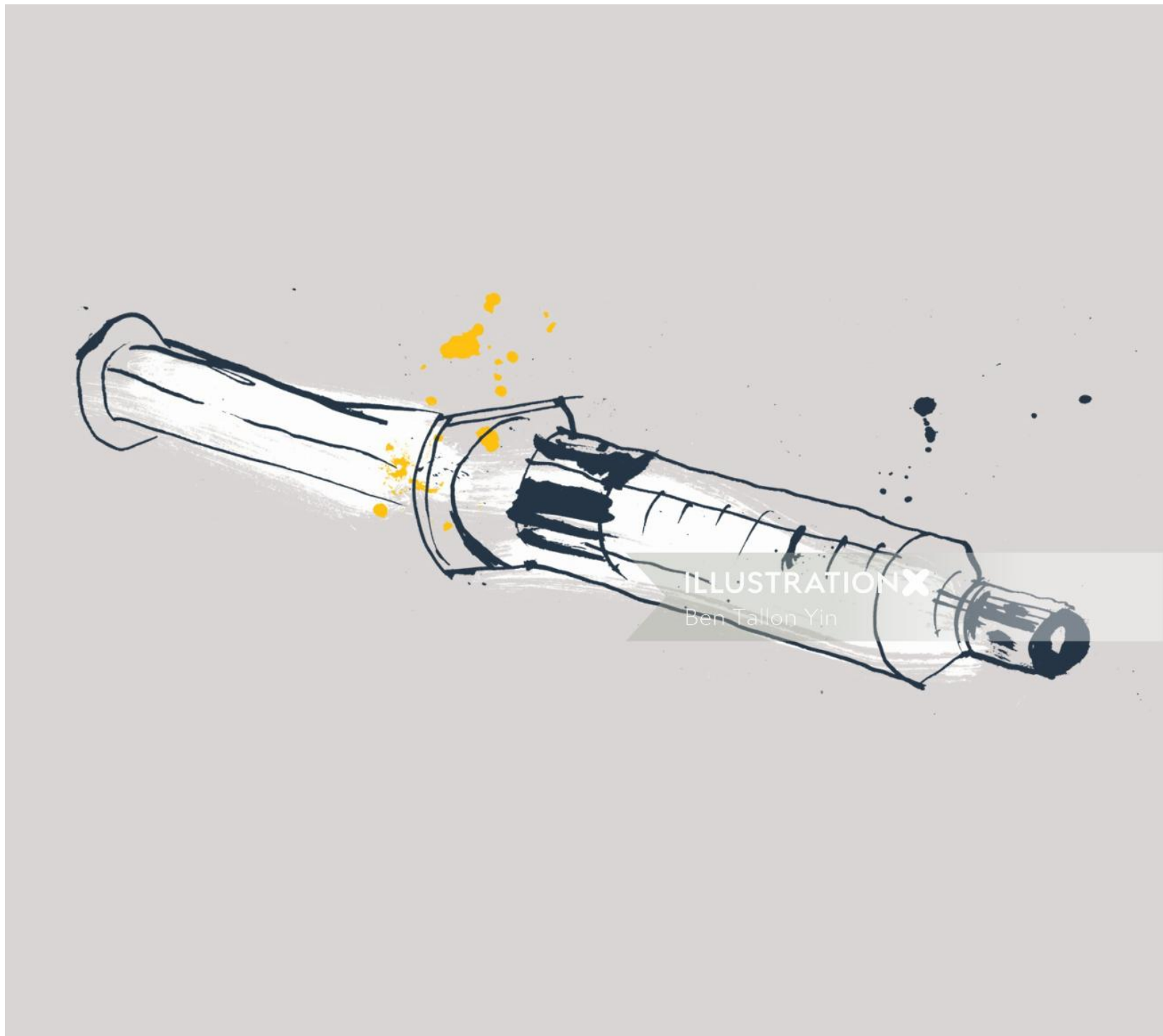
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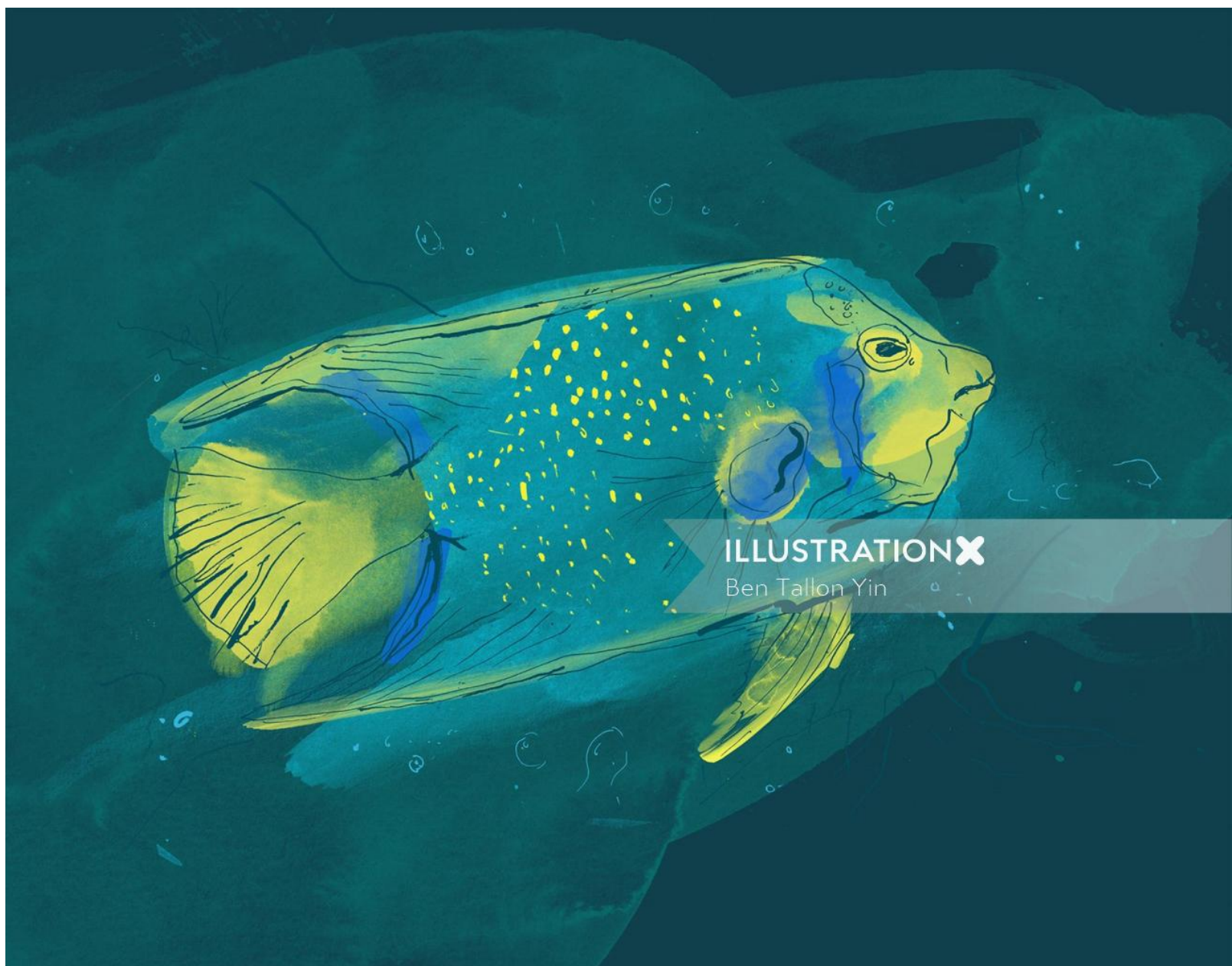
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GAMES

The summer bonanza of sport is about to get even bigger as the greatest spectacle on Earth blasts off in Tokyo. With Team GB gunning for another bumper medal haul, *Kerry Potter* meets five of our brightest stars

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BEN TALLON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEN DUFFY

England's amazing run in Euro 2020 from a team who represent the very best of modern Britain (not forgetting: Jack Grealish's legs). The chutzpah of Bromley schoolgirl Emma Raducanu at Wimbledon. Cricket's whizzy new format, The Hundred, designed to boost its appeal among women and kids. It's been quite the summer for sport so far; one that's warmed the hearts and relocated the mojo of the nation. Sport is one of our few remaining collective rituals that has the power to unite — I mean, you don't watch it on catch-up, do you? And who hasn't welcomed the distraction and the sheer life-affirming exuberance of it all after the communal trauma of the past 18 months.

And so it continues with the start of the Tokyo Olympic Games on 23 July. It is, of course, a year later than originally billed; tortuous postponement for the elite athletes who've endured vast disruption as they meticulously build towards this career pinnacle. Tokyo is eight hours ahead which means many inconveniently timed morning sessions for UK viewers, taking place in silent stadiums, as no spectators are allowed. However, there is still plenty to look forward to. This multi-sport spectacular caters for every taste — and even more so this year with the introduction of skateboarding (look out for 13-year-old Sky Brown, the youngest British summer Olympian of all time), climbing, karate, surfing and baseball (which is big in Japan, hence the inclusion). Team GB is sending 376 athletes — let's meet five of our big medal hopes (no pressure, guys)... *'All To Play For: How Sport Can Reboot Our Future' by Matt Rogan and Kerry Potter is out now (Ebury Press)*

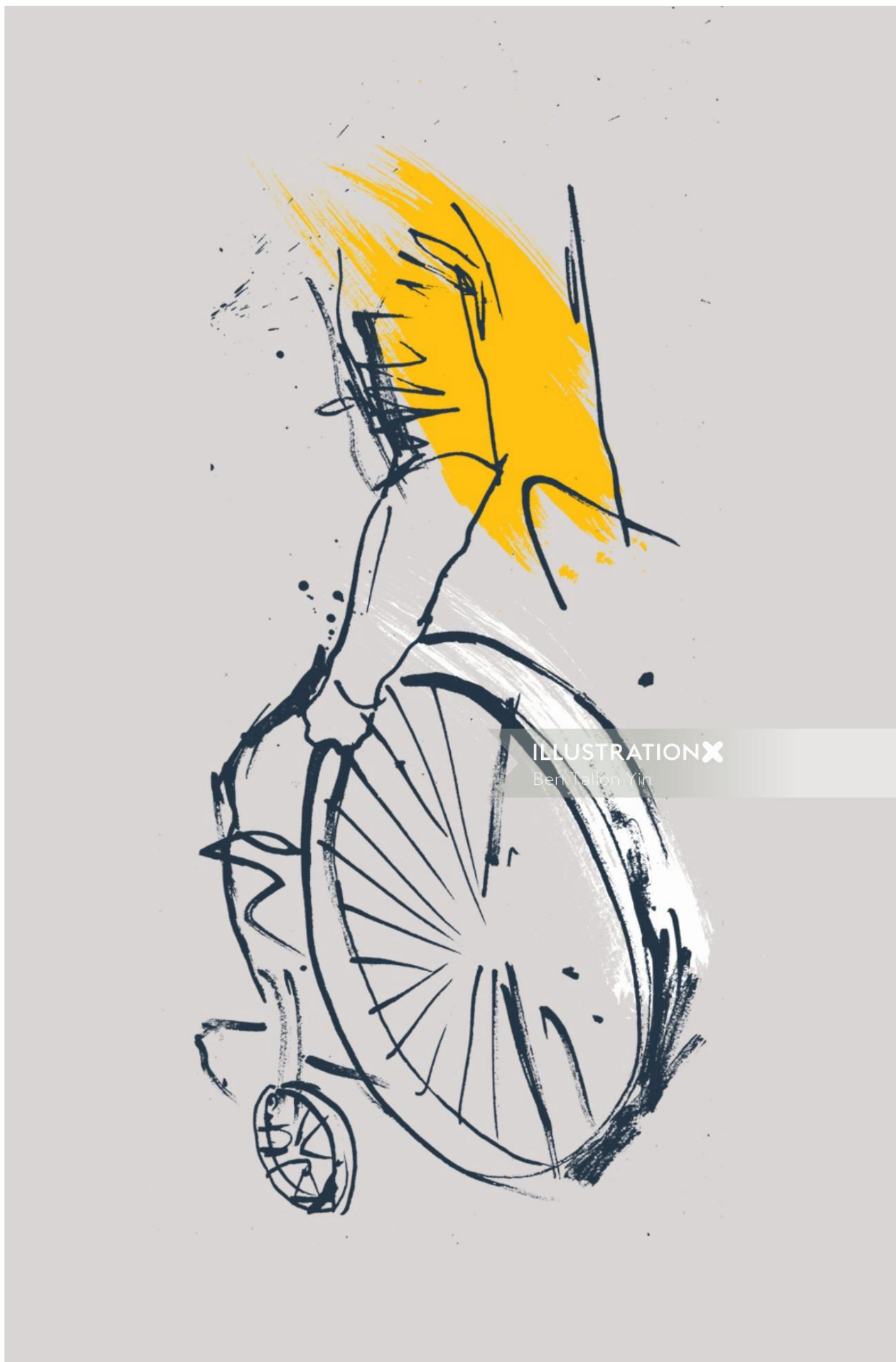
Adidas has created the official kit for Team GB. Shop the kit at adidas.co.uk/teamgb



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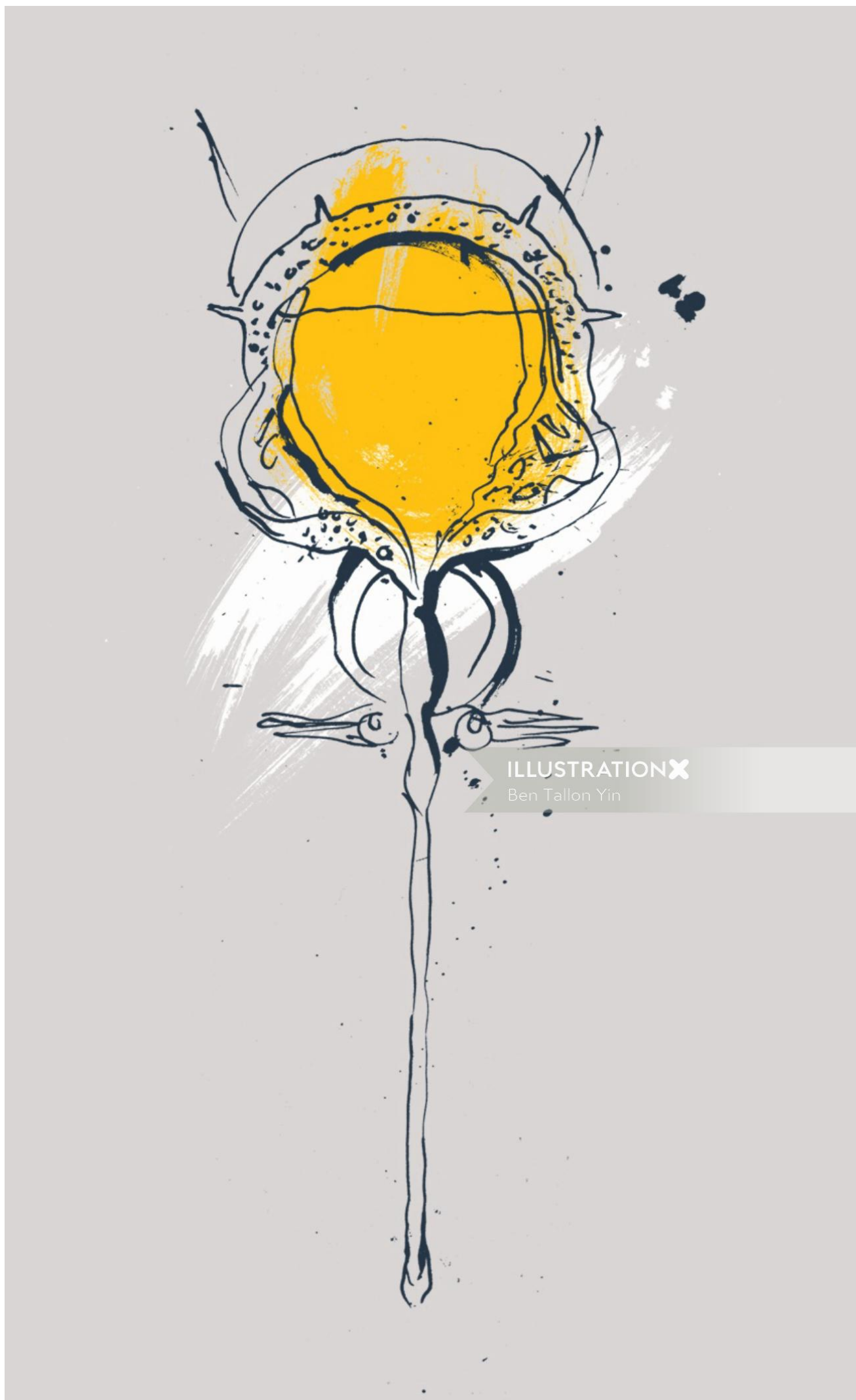
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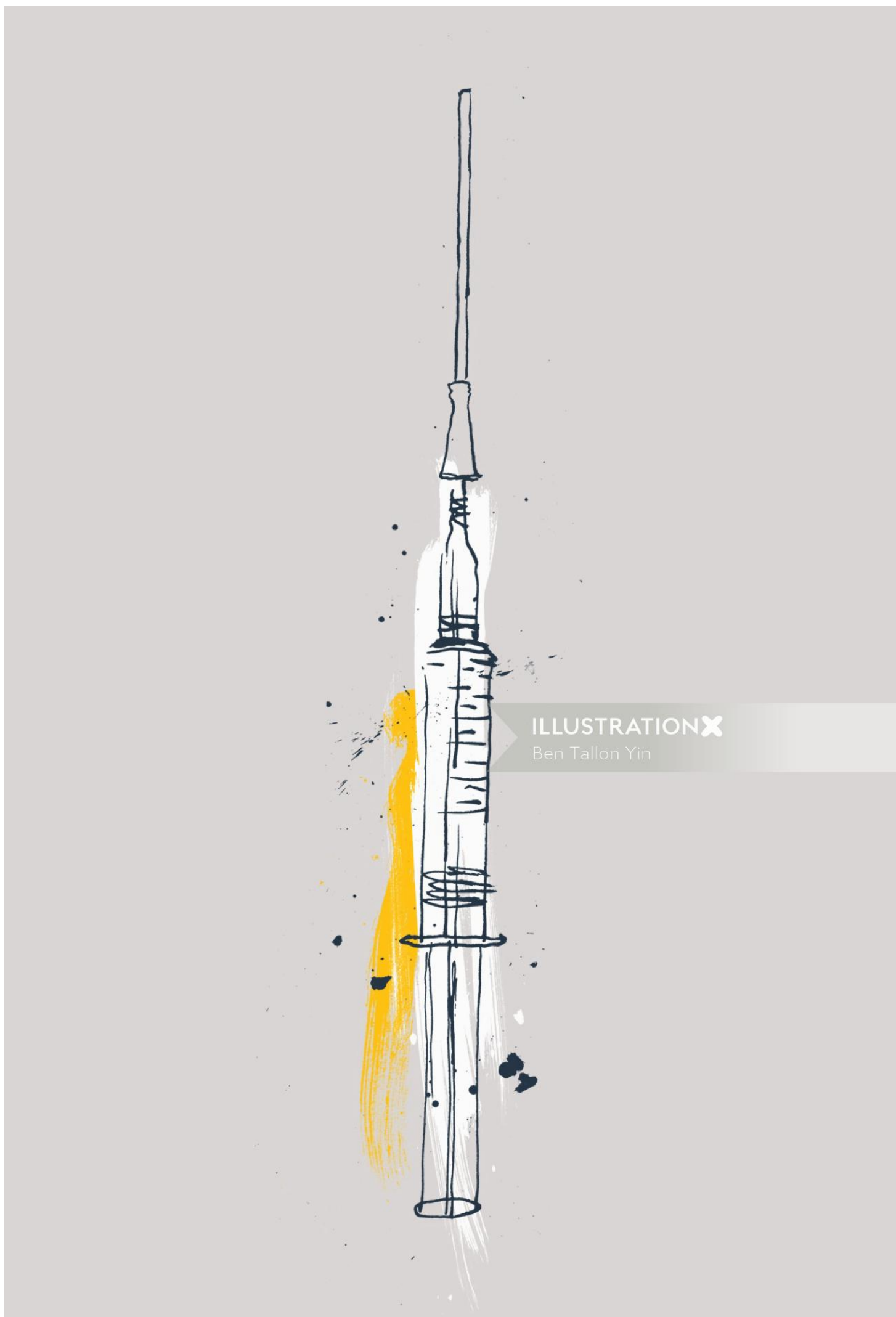
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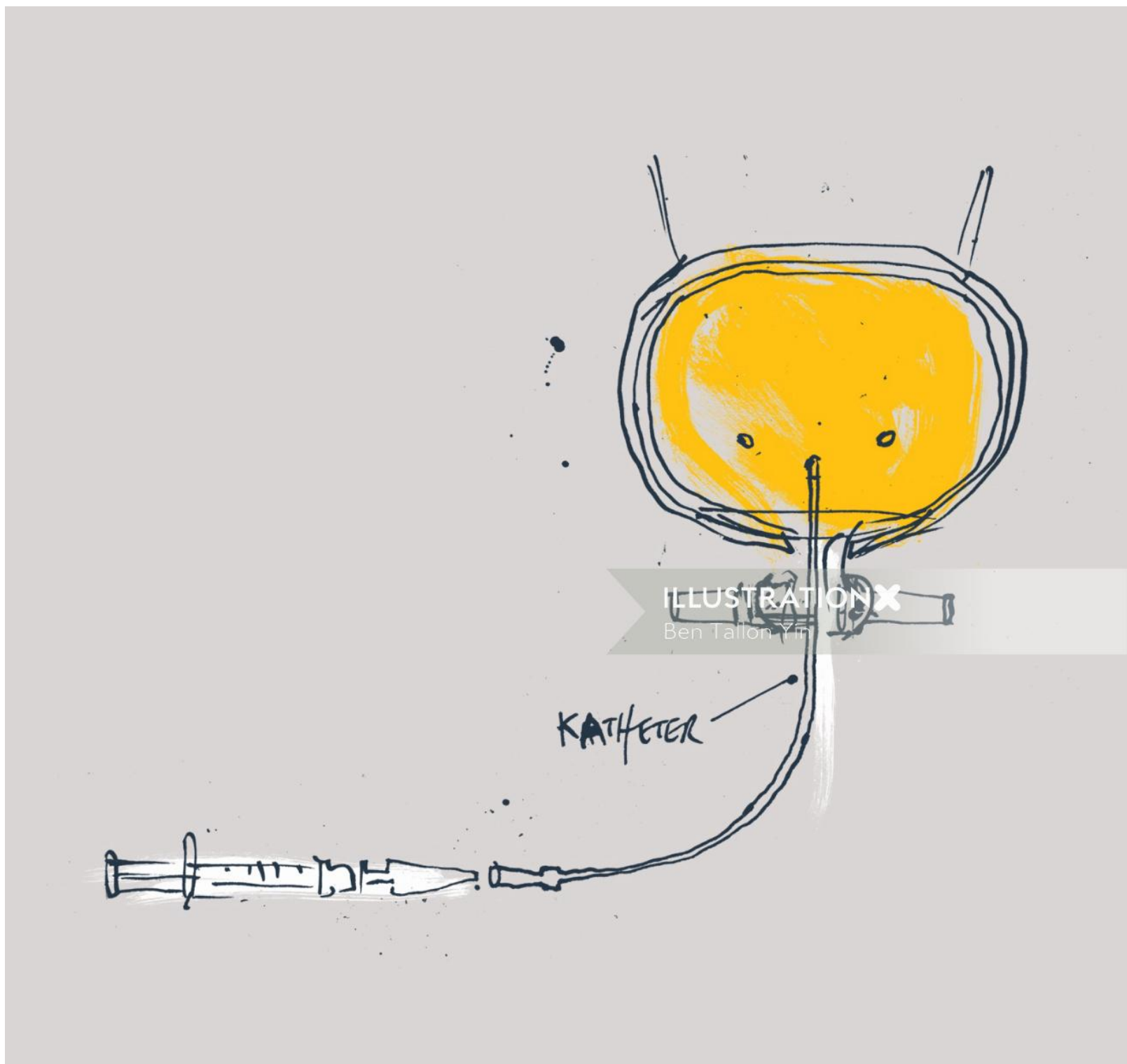
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