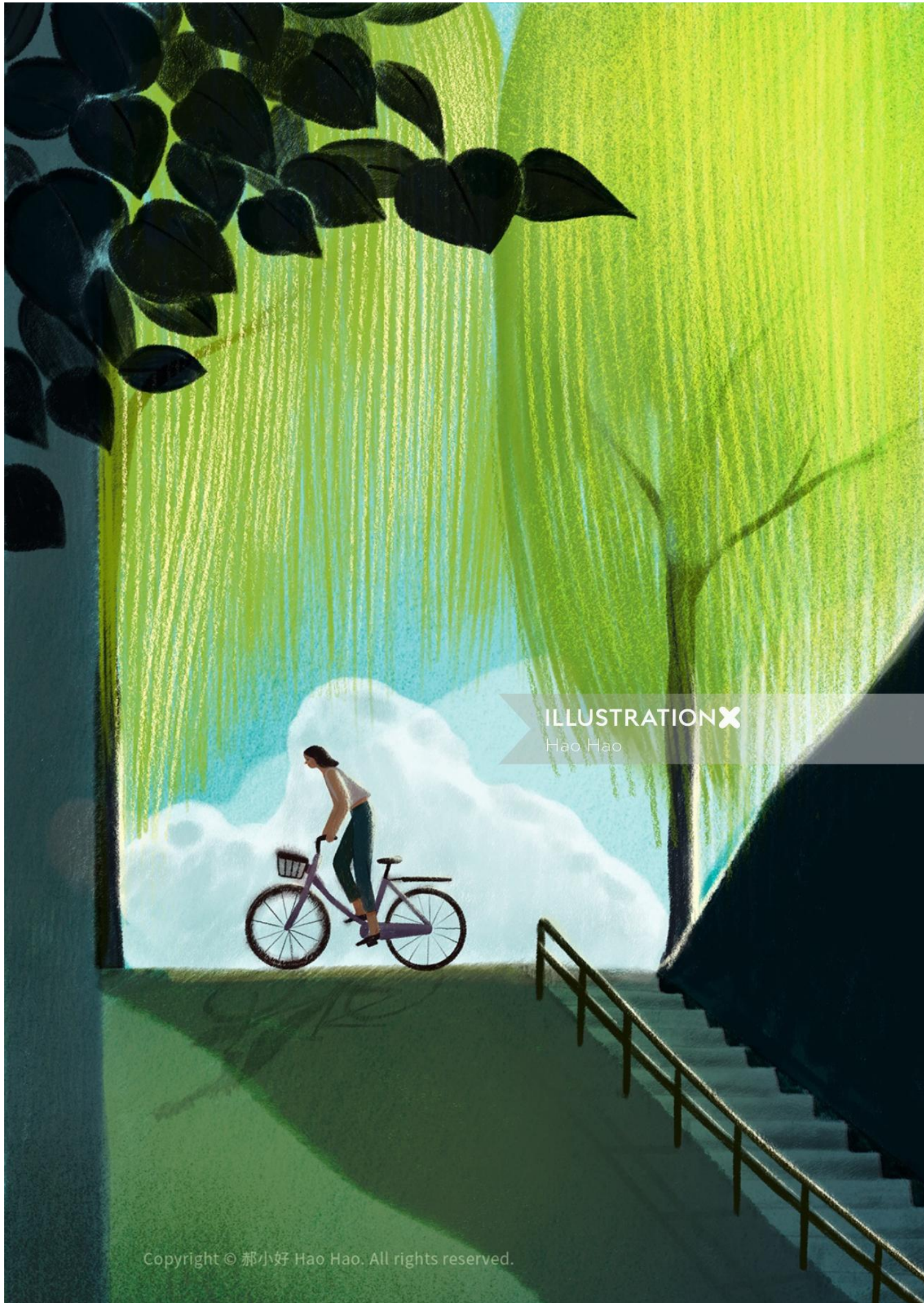


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I Wish I Could Change My . . .
There's more to me than excessively exercising and counting calories

BY HALEY ERICKSON / ILLUSTRATIONS BY HAO HAO

As a college student, I loved to exercise. Workouts at the gym made my problems disappear, enabled me to work off the food I'd eaten and gave me a sense of worth. When others complimented my lean, athletic body, I felt loved and accepted. Eat clean, train mean and everything would be OK.

When other areas of my life felt out of control, I could always control my body. Then one day on a run, I slipped on black ice and fell. I sustained a serious knee injury, and I couldn't walk home. The gym couldn't fix this problem. Even though I'd been there for years, I disappeared in an instant. On top of that, finals were approaching, and the boy I was dating ghosted me. A perfect storm.

After weeks of pain with no relief, I cried out to God: "What is the purpose of my life?" There had to be more to life than spending countless hours at the gym and counting every calorie I ate.

But as soon as my knee started healing, I went back to the gym and forgot about God and those questions I'd asked. I had to make up for lost time.

One day at the gym, an elderly woman stopped to talk in the middle of my workout. The interruption was irritating at first, but her genuine interest in me felt refreshing. We chatted for an hour, and then she invited me to her house the next day for a visit.

Sitting on her couch, I told her more

about my life. As she listened to my story, I felt seen, known and loved. Afterward, she shared the Good News of Jesus Christ and had me read John 3:16 aloud inserting my name in the Bible verse: "For God so loved [Haley], that he gave his only Son, that [if Haley] believes in him, [she] should not perish but have eternal life."

I didn't realize it at the time, but God used this caring woman to answer my cry for help. It was then that I realized my eyes, the focus of my obsession, were not the focus of His. He loved me and the meaning of the Cross. Jesus paid for my sin so that nothing could separate me from His love. I had been running from Him, but I couldn't outrun His love. That's when I decided to follow Jesus.

As my faith grew, the Holy Spirit began to show me that my body had become an idol in my life. Then He shared this powerful truth with me: "Your body is made for worship, not to be worshipped."

God gave us our bodies to glorify and worship Him. It's easy to get so wrapped up in our body image and appearance that we develop an unhealthy focus on ourselves and lose sight of Jesus, who is the only One worthy of our undivided worship. But the following reminders can help us shift the focus from misguided worship to the kind of worship God created us for.

Let go of control
The harder we try to control our bodies, the more they control us. When I started following Jesus, I continued to control my food intake and exercise. But when my health hit rock bottom, I sensed God saying, *Just let go. You can trust Me.*

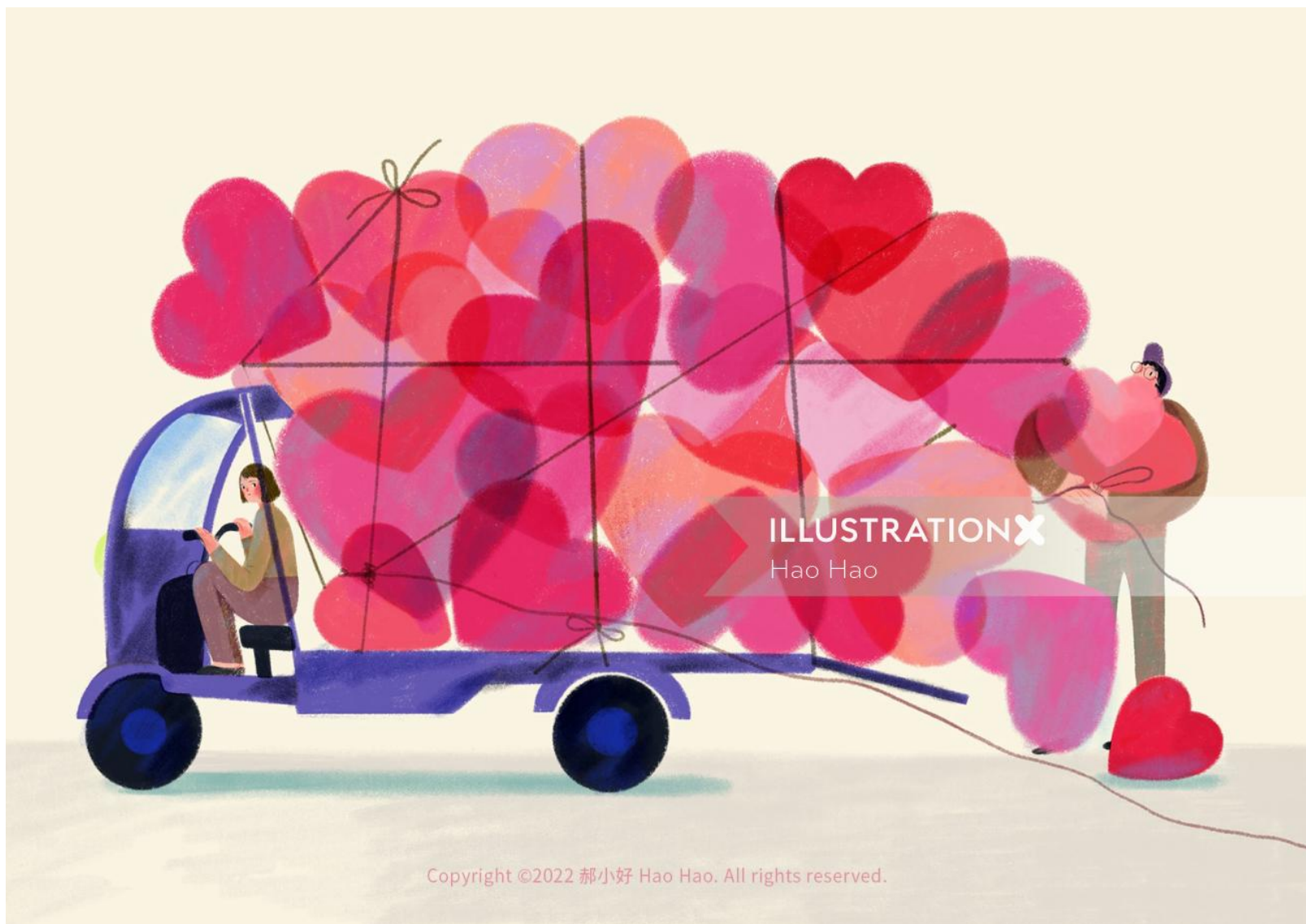
It was the scariest thing I'd ever done. That day, I gave up my unhealthy approach to dieting and stepped away from the gym for a while so I could spend extra time in God's Word. As I surrendered control of my body to God and trusted Him to heal me, I experienced indescribable joy for the first time in my life.

When we let go of control and trust God, we discover the joy and freedom of being who He created us to be. >



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Not Just a ‘Guy Problem’

The truth about porn and how it affects you

BY JESSIE MINASSIAN / ILLUSTRATIONS BY HAO HAO

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The first time Shea was introduced to pornography, she was too young to know what it was. Looking for tips to beat her favorite video game, she clicked the wrong link. At first, she was disgusted by what she saw. Then a natural, yet misguided, curiosity kept her clicking—for years.

Bethany adored her longtime boyfriend. When he suggested they watch a video to “spice up” their relationship, she reasoned they were going to get married someday, so what could it hurt? Eventually they broke up, but she couldn’t stop watching porn.

Lia felt like an outsider at school. When she stumbled onto a fantasy fan fiction group, she thought she had finally found her people. She dove headlong into every book and group they recommended. But soon the books and accompanying art became explicit.

With more than half of kids being exposed to porn by age 13, you might even have your own story. If you are one of those kids, you may feel troubled, guilty or confused, or you may have difficulty staying away from pornography use. Or perhaps you want to know how to avoid the battle of looking at porn altogether and become a trusted friend to someone who might be struggling. >



Ditch the scale.
That number doesn't tell you anything about how strong you are, how fast you run or how great you feel when you climb a flight of stairs.



Listen to your body. It will tell you when it needs to be nourished and when it doesn't need more food.



Eat foods that work with your body.
When you feel hungry, or you're planning your next meal, ask yourself:

- What will give me the most energy?
- Will this make me feel bloated or lethargic?
- Which snack will fill the gap if I'm going to eat soon?
- Will this fill me enough to make it through my workout?



Limit your exposure.
If you feel overwhelmed by diet discourse, avoid the magazine rack and stop clicking on diet posts in social media feeds.



Stop labeling foods as good and bad. You might crave hot, stringy pizza one day and a crisp, green salad the next. Indulging once in a while is perfectly acceptable.



Embrace body positivity. Make a list of the great things your body does for you and then practice thanking God for it. Guard against negative self-talk, and celebrate the things you like about yourself.



Build healthy friendships. Spend time with friends who are comfortable in their own skin. Encourage each other instead of focusing on flaws or exchanging diet tips. It's OK to tell people you're not comfortable with negative comments.

If You Struggle With Body Image

BY SHARI TALBOT / ILLUSTRATIONS BY HAO HAO

What if you resolved to break up with the diet culture? Instead of stressing about your body size, read these tips to get you started:

Being healthy is more important than being a certain body shape, so commit to taking care of the unique body God gave you. If you struggle with food and body image, reach out to your family doctor, a counselor or dietitian. She will work with you and your family to help you better appreciate and respect your body. [8](#)

Shari Talbot is a freelance writer in Ontario, Canada. When not focusing with her husband on small businesses, she enjoys music, the outdoors and traveling with her family. This article first appeared within "Breaking Up With Diet Culture" in the December 2020 issue of Brio magazine.

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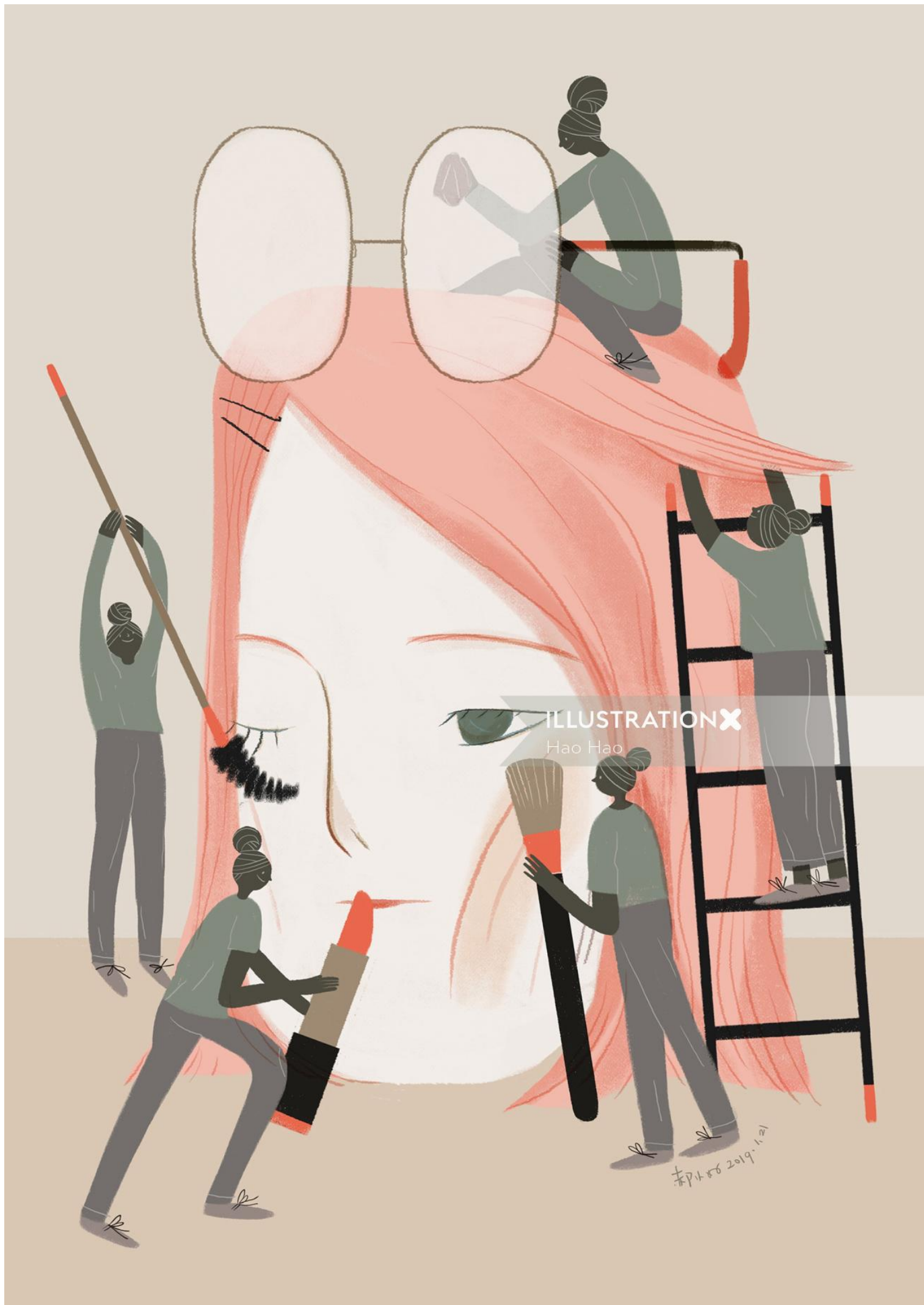
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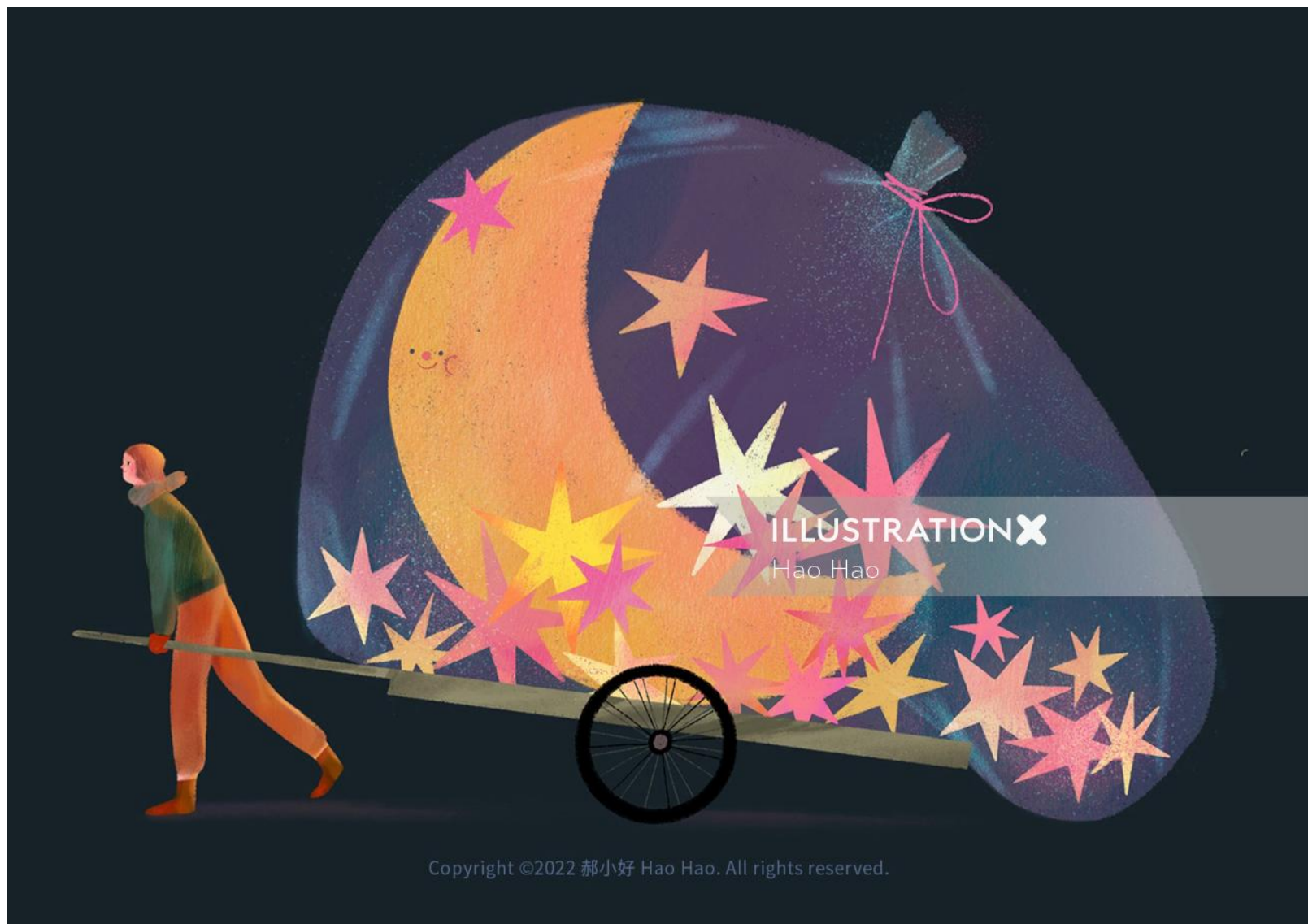
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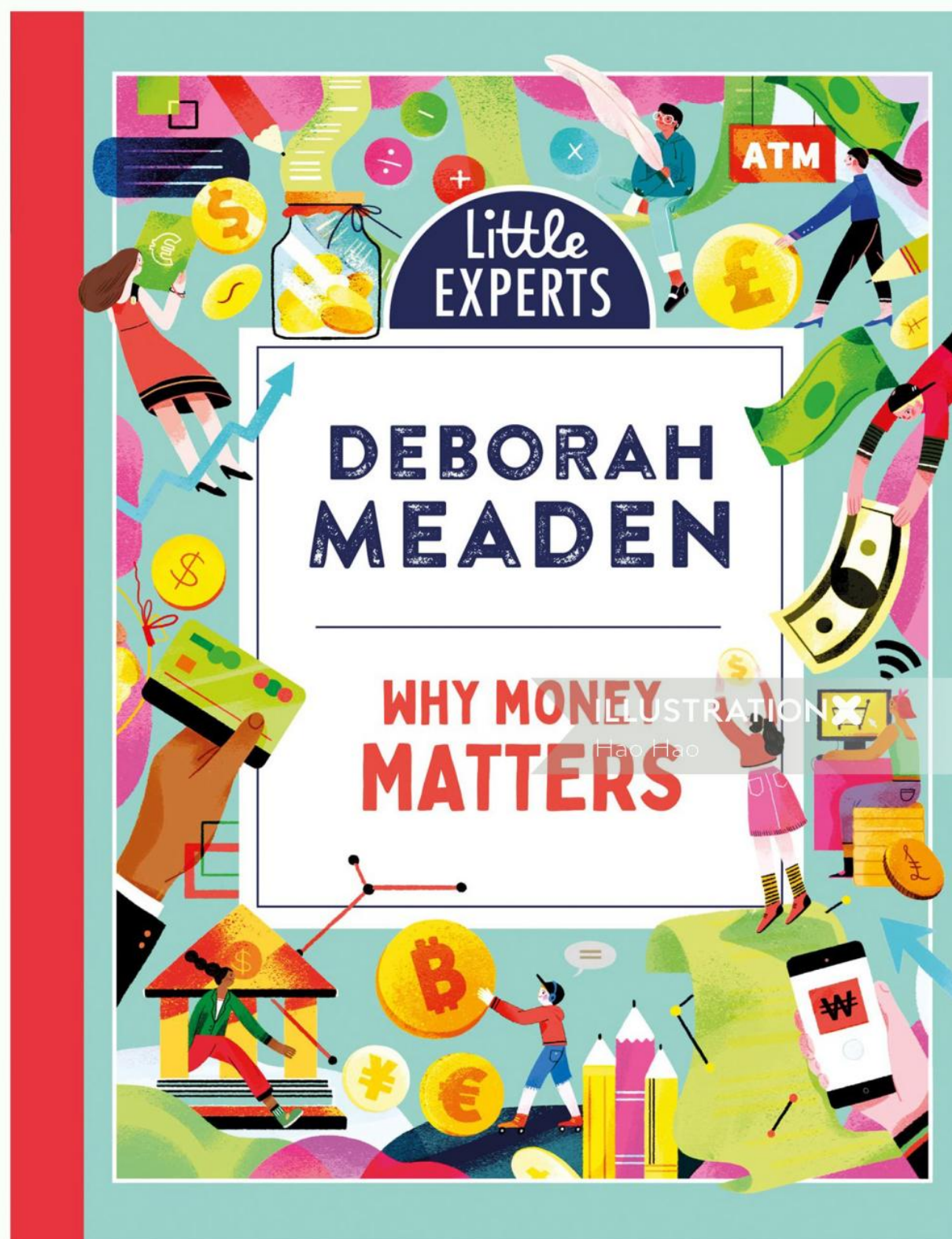
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Longing to Belong
Steps to connect when you feel left out

BY LAURA POTTKOTTER / ILLUSTRATIONS BY HAO HAO

The school bus swayed as it turned into the high school parking lot. The vinyl seats were filled with members of the marching band. Across the aisle, I overheard my friends discussing their evening plans. I waited for someone to share the details and ask if I wanted to join them, but nobody did.

Of course, I could have asked about their plans, and they probably would've included me. But I didn't. And for some reason, I couldn't get past the sadness I felt because they

hadn't intentionally invited me. I went home, sat on my bed and asked myself, *Do I belong?*

Have you ever felt like you didn't belong? Maybe you discovered on social media that your friends were hanging out and didn't invite you. Or maybe you didn't feel like you connected with a group of friends who were chattering and laughing together. Perhaps you wondered, as I did that night, *Do I even belong?*

What is belonging?

Belonging is all about connecting with others and feeling safe and secure with them. Try to picture the people you're closest to—maybe your friends, family, youth group, sports team, drama club or bandmates. How do you feel when you're with them?

In high school, I felt closest to my family. We shared similar interests, and they made me feel safe, accepted, cared for and welcomed. I felt like they *wanted* to spend time with me. I felt like I belonged.

Transitions

Then I graduated college and moved to a new city. The people who knew me best were now 1,200 miles away. I was shifting away from my family and friends and needed to find connection and a sense of belonging in a new community. I started by getting to know people at my work and my church.

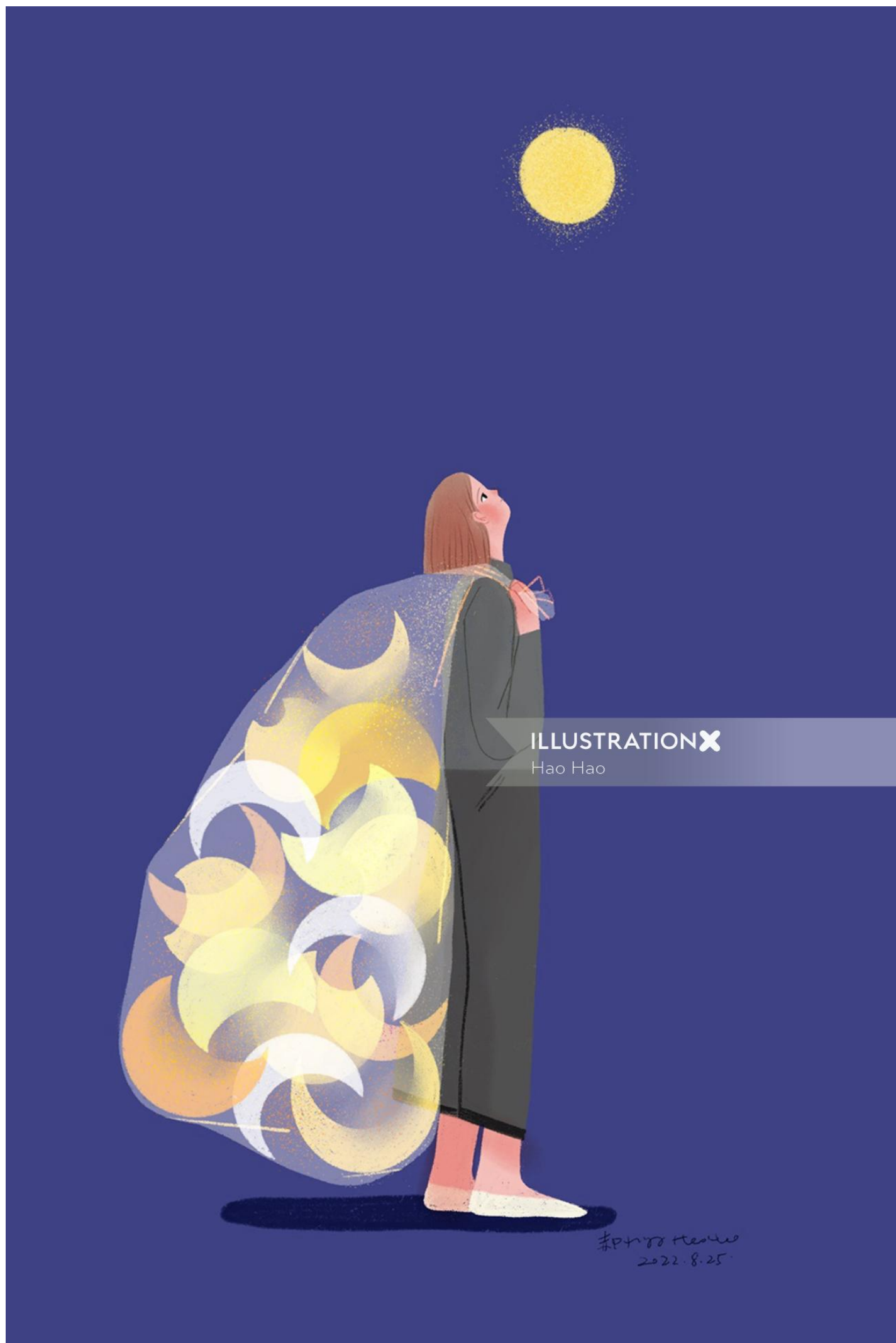
As a teen, you're in a time of transition, even if you're not moving to a new community. Focus on the Family counselor Kari Aho explains transitions this way: "You're between an identity you previously found with your family and a place of independence. Your sense of yourself within those relationships is really shifting and changing."

At this time in your life, you're in the process of stepping into who God has created you to be. You're discovering your own gifts, passions and goals—which is exciting. But these changes can also make you feel disconnected, unseen, anxious or lonely. When your thoughts start to spiral in this direction, it's important to find your anchor—and then your community. >

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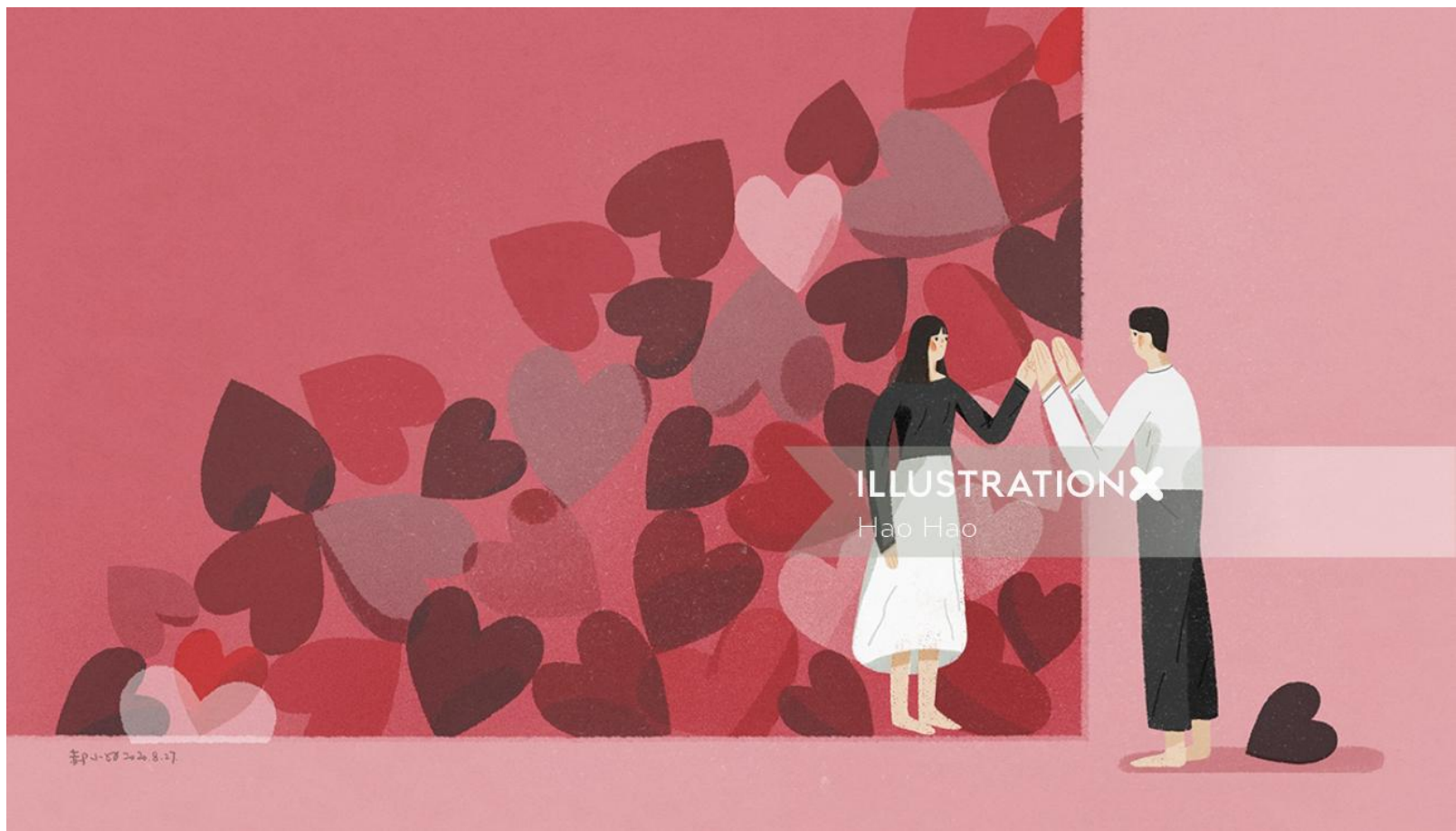
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How Far Is Too Far?

Why purity is more than just saving yourself for marriage

BY JESSIE MINASSIAN

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Rising like an otherworldly, monolithic fin in the center of Zion National Park, Angels Landing—a 1,488-foot-tall mountain formation known for its difficult and narrow hiking trail and steep drop-offs—attracts visitors from all over the world. I mean, with a name like Angels Landing, you'd expect it to be a place of awe-inspiring views. But you might not expect it to be the location where more than a dozen hikers have met their, well, downfall.

Interestingly, the hike itself isn't the most dangerous part. After all, most people who attempt it make it home just fine. The danger lies in that stunning view. Overconfident hikers inch to the edge, maybe for the

thrill or (more likely) an Insta-worthy photo. They believe they're capable of safely getting just a *little* closer. But then forces outside their control take over—a foothold gives way, or a stiff wind blows—and, *adios*.

I often think of that hike when I get questions from young women about sexual purity. Girls questioning, "How far is too far?" Or they're fighting guilt over compromises they never imagined. What I've learned, both from my own journey and from the stories of others, is that physical intimacy is a lot like Angels Landing: The view is amazing, you'll want a closer look, but that edge? Not exactly trustworthy.

To keep hikers from falling off Angels Landing, some have proposed installing a fence. Sounds logical. The problem with that solution? People can always find a work-around. As other national parks with breathtaking views have found, where there's a will to flirt with the edge, there's most certainly a way.

That's why it's so important to understand the difference between virginity and sexual purity. You might say abstinence (or saving the act of sex for marriage) is like a fence that can help keep you from a dangerous edge. But unless your goal is holistic sexual integrity, you'll always find a way to get just a *little bit closer* to the edge, which can possibly lead to that downfall.

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