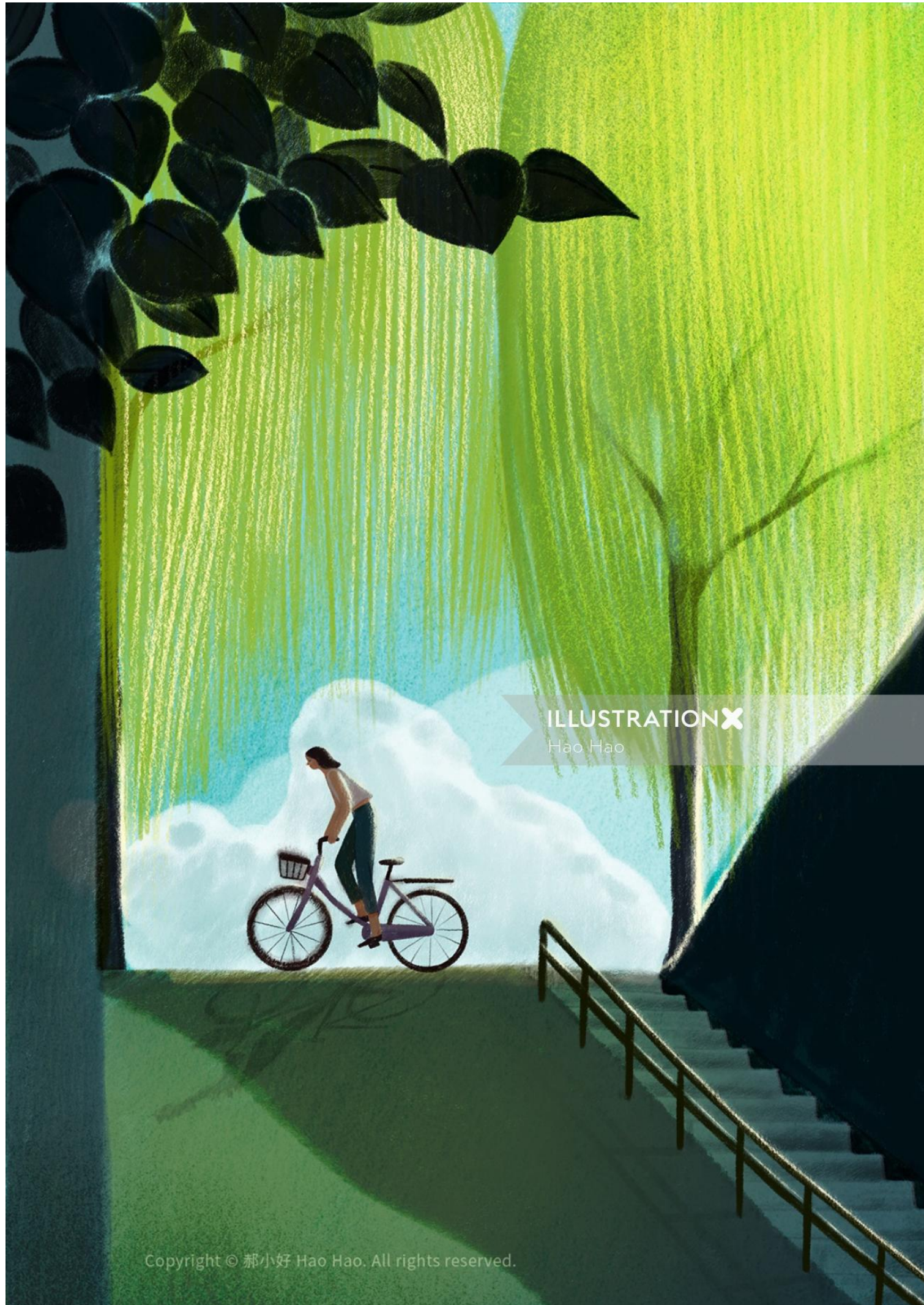


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I Wish I Could Change My . . .

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 used to be a casual walker, but now I can't walk home. The gym couldn't fix this problem. Ever since that fall, my eyes 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. I found Him, and He showed me 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.*

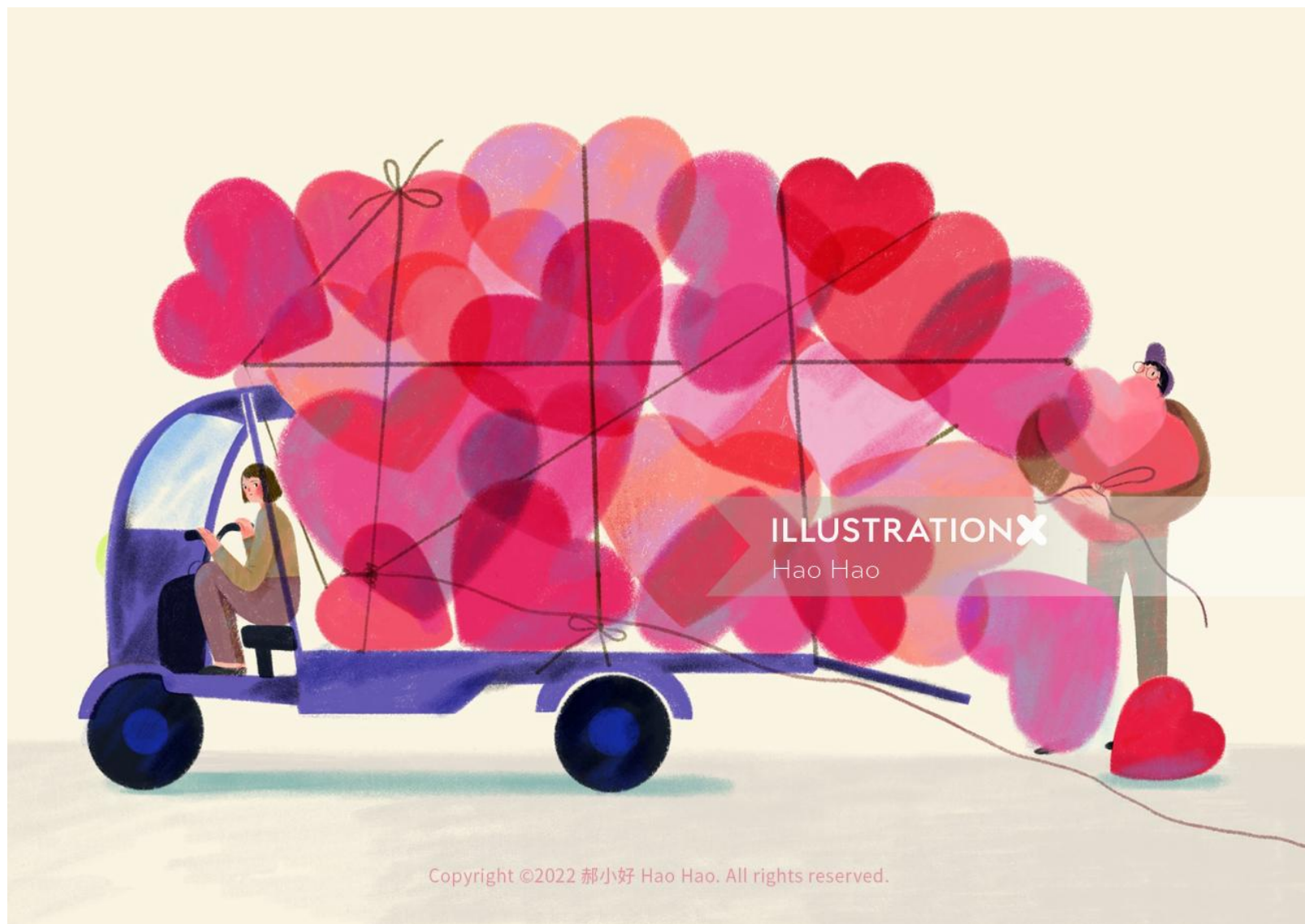
It was the scariest thing I'd ever done. That day, I gave up my unhealthy approach to dieting and stepped away from the gym for a while so I could spend extra time in God's Word. As I surrendered control of my body to God and trusted Him to heal me, I experienced indescribable joy for the first time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

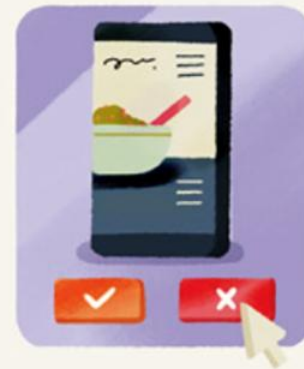


Listen to your body. It will tell you when it needs to be nourished and when it doesn't need more food.



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?



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.

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:

Limit your exposure. Don't feel overwhelmed by diet discourse, avoid the magazine rack and stop clicking on diet posts in social media feeds.



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.

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. [?](#)

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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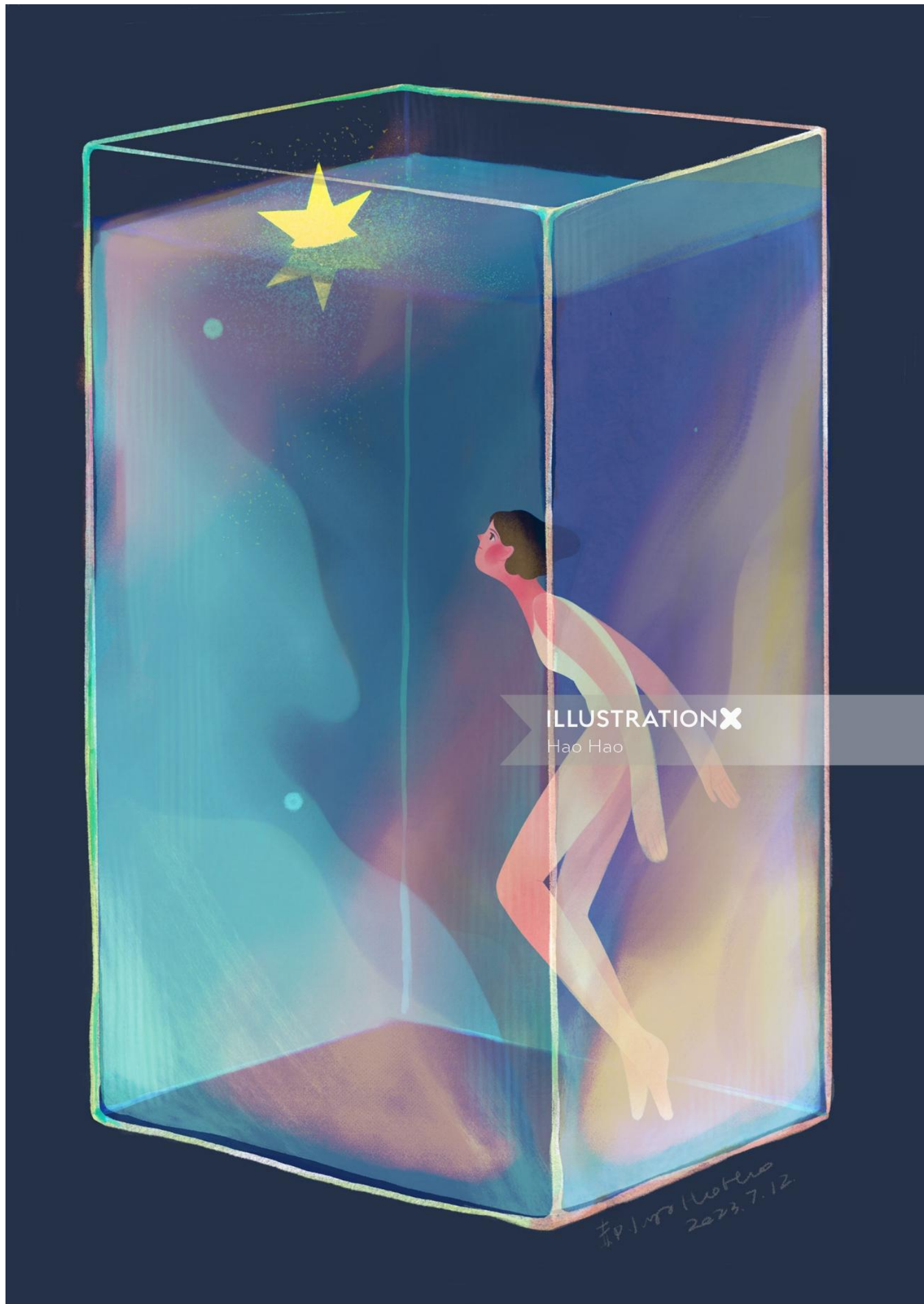


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Establishing your anchor

The apostle Peter tells us, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

Did you catch that? As Christians, we are a people for God's "own possession." Translation: You *belong* to the King of the universe. You can anchor your identity in Jesus when you're feeling alone.

When you hold on to the truth that you are loved, seen and cared for as a child of the King, you can begin taking "every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). When the words *I don't belong* make you feel alone, consider why you might be experiencing these feelings and remind yourself of the truth instead of believing this lie and letting it multiply. Let's take a look at how you can do this:

Reflect: Focus on the Family counselor Elaine Humphries suggests thinking about these questions: *What is it that makes me feel like I don't belong? Who am I in Jesus? What has God called me to do? Who has He called me to be? How does He want me to live?* Answering these questions can help you figure out what triggered your thoughts and feelings so you can redirect them.

Pray: Ask God to remind you that you belong to Him. Tell Him what you're feeling and what initiated these emotions.

Worship: Listen to songs that remind you that you're a child of God and that your identity is in Him. Get started on this with our *Brio* Spotify playlist about belonging.

Reset: When your thoughts start to spiral, try breaking the cycle by physically doing something else. Go for a walk, journal, work on a craft or shift your attention to what's happening around you.

Remember: Open your Bible and fill your mind with the truth of God's Word. Compile a list of verses that help anchor you in Him when you feel disconnected.

SCAN TO LISTEN TO OUR BRIO BELONGING SPOTIFY PLAYLIST



Superficial relationships

Once you've anchored your sense of belonging to Jesus, it's easier to look at your relationships. I remember being shocked when I read that most people have the capacity for only five close friends. That's it—five. This means not everyone in my friend group or on social media is my "close" friend. I'm not going to feel deeply connected to every single person I hang out with... and that's OK.

Consider your five closest friends—the people whose shoulders you can cry on and who you would call when your life is falling apart. My friend said she's ready to close that circle and give up because you can't think of anyone—but still, there are a few of a few people who you admire or would like to become closer friends with. There are ways to change surface-level relationships into deep and valuable friendships. But you may need to be brave enough to take the first step. Here are some ways you can do that:

Ask good questions: Most people like to share about their lives. Being curious, asking good questions and listening carefully will help you learn more about another person.

Practice vulnerability: Sometimes you may need to go first. If you want a friend to be open and honest with you, you may need to share your story first. She may soon follow your lead.

Have patience: It takes time to develop relationships, so don't give up. "A big part of a relationship is the time it takes," Elaine says. "You have to allow yourself to jump into a group. You can't expect to have that kind of intimacy, vulnerability and closeness. It probably isn't realistic without the time component."

Find others with similar interests and values: Consider joining a youth group, a community service group, an after-school club, a sports team, a choir or another group that interests you. Finding people with similar interests and values will help you connect even faster.

As you consider the One you ultimately belong to and how you can connect with others, let me leave you with a simple reminder: You are beautiful, you are worthy and you are enough—because your worth rests in the Savior who created you. You are Jesus' friend (John 15:15), and you belong to Him. 🙏

Launa Potkatter is the managing editor for Brio magazine. She is also a writer who enjoys growing flowers and exploring the sights in Colorado with her husband.

Questions to Ask Your Friends

Before asking your friends, answer these questions yourself. That will help you better understand how others might answer so you can continue the conversation.

I REMEMBER WHEN YOU TOLD ME ABOUT _____ HOW DID THAT GO? HOW ARE YOU DOING WITH THAT?

HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE YOU DURING THIS TIME?

WHAT WAS THE BEST PART OF YOUR DAY? WHAT WAS THE WORST PART?

WHAT DID YOU LOVE ABOUT YOUTH GROUP LAST NIGHT?

IT SEEMS LIKE SOMETHING IS WRONG. WHAT HAPPENED? WHAT DO YOU NEED?

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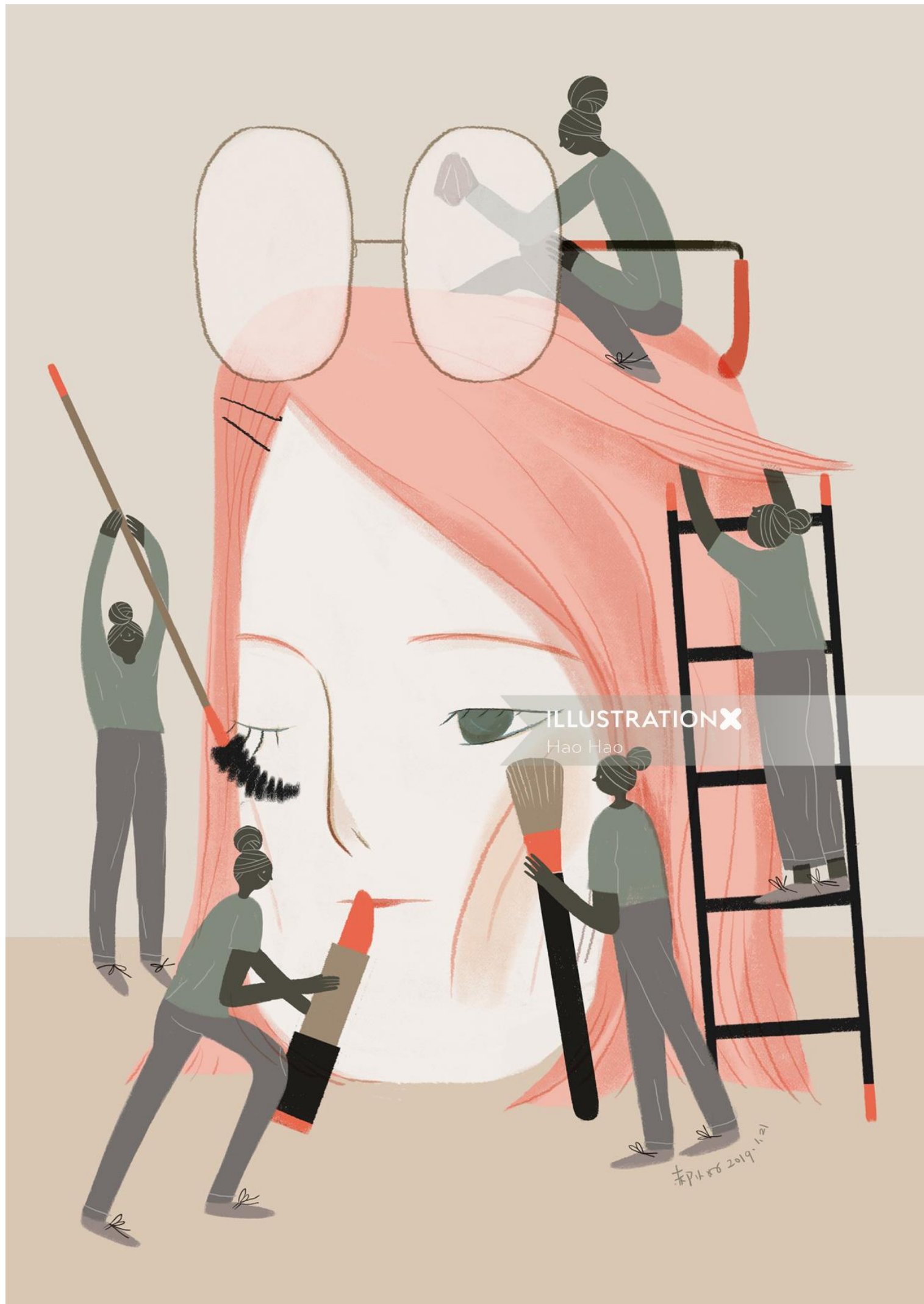
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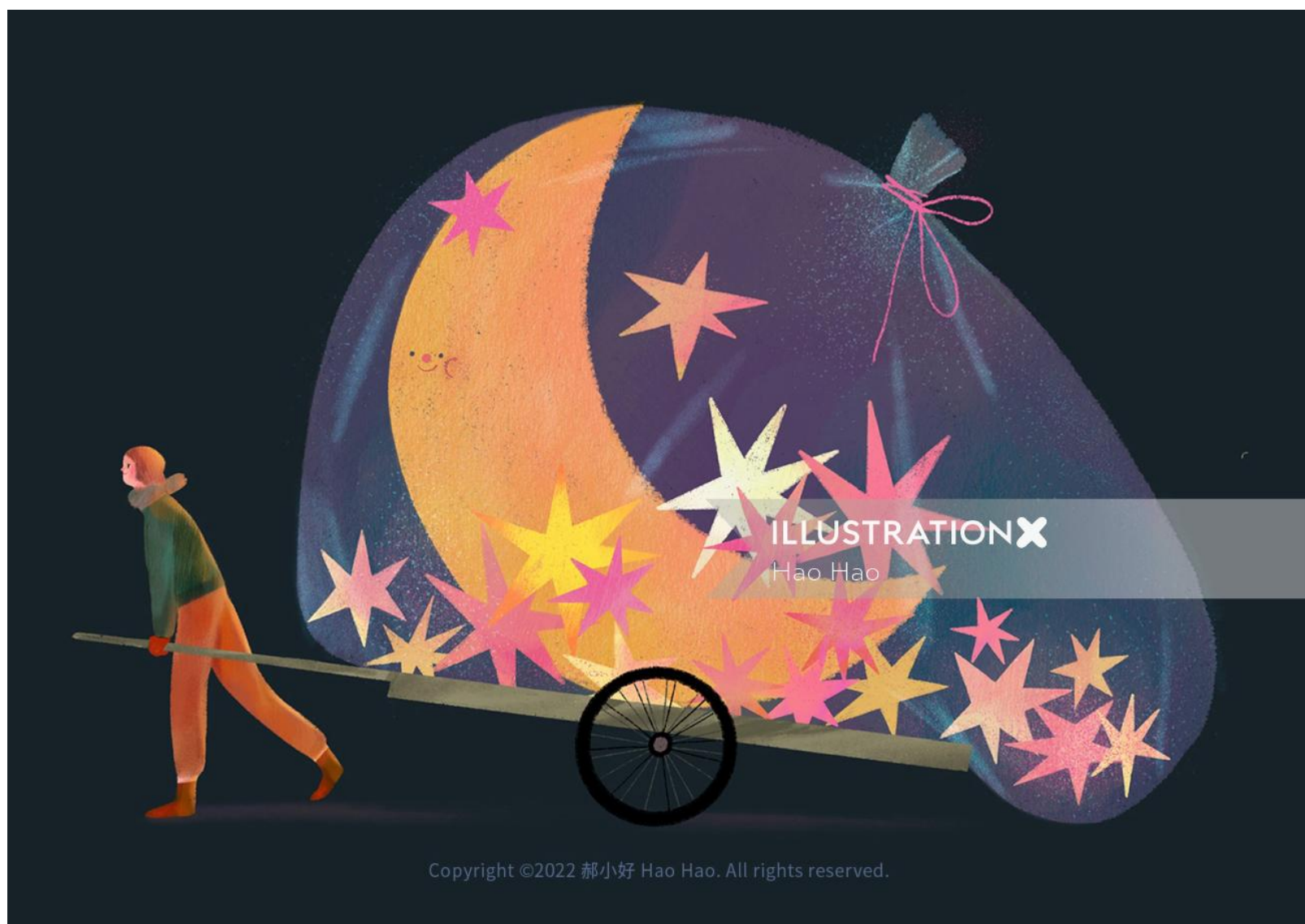
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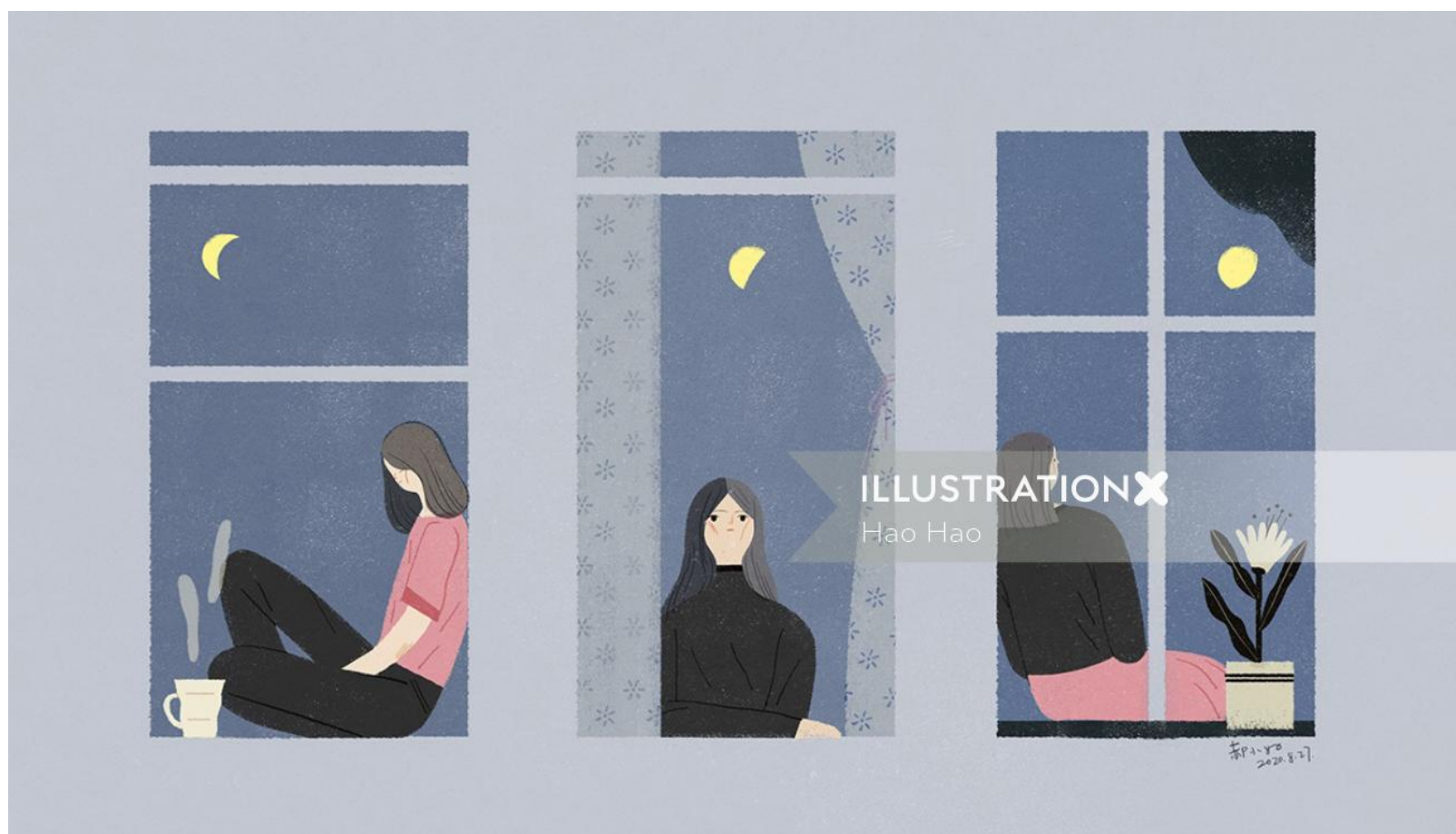
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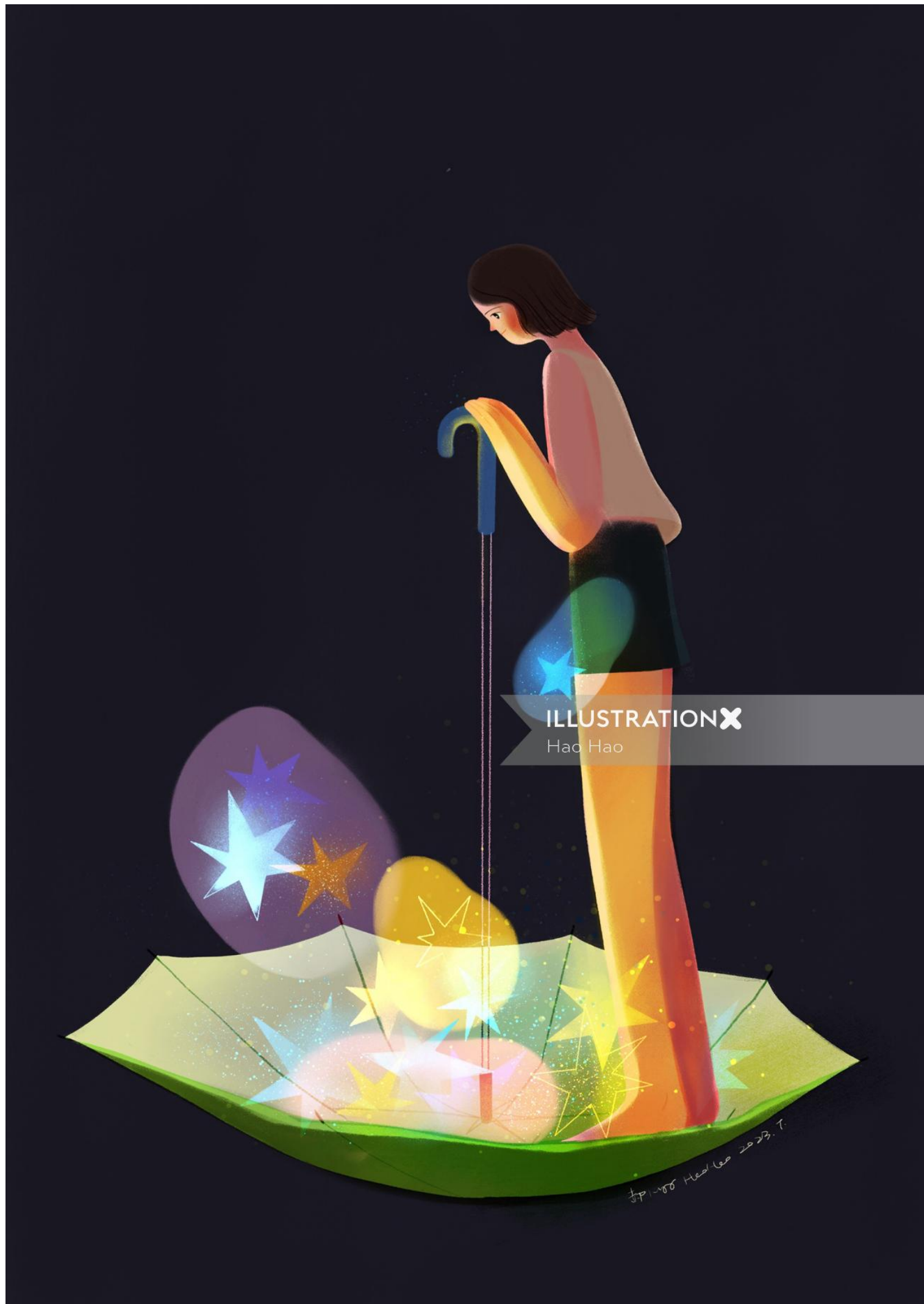


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Live Today—
Hope for
Tomorrow

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*Trusting God with
your dreams and
disappointments*

BY ASHLEIGH SLATER / ILLUSTRATIONS BY HAO HAO

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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.

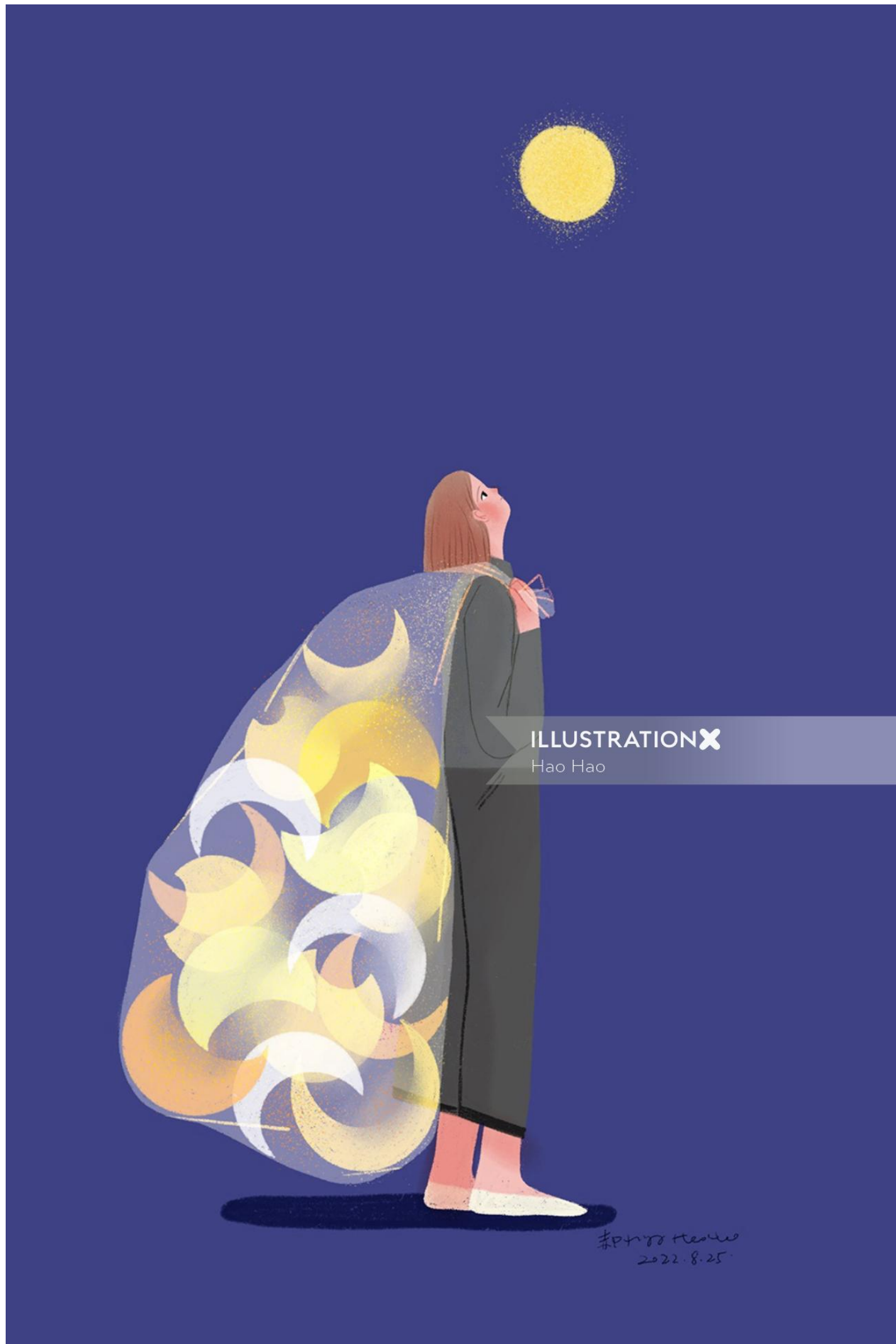
As a teen, you're in a time of transition, even if you're not moving to a new community. Focus on the Family counselor Kari Aho explains transitions this way: "You're between an identity you previously found with your family and a place of independence. Your sense of yourself within those relationships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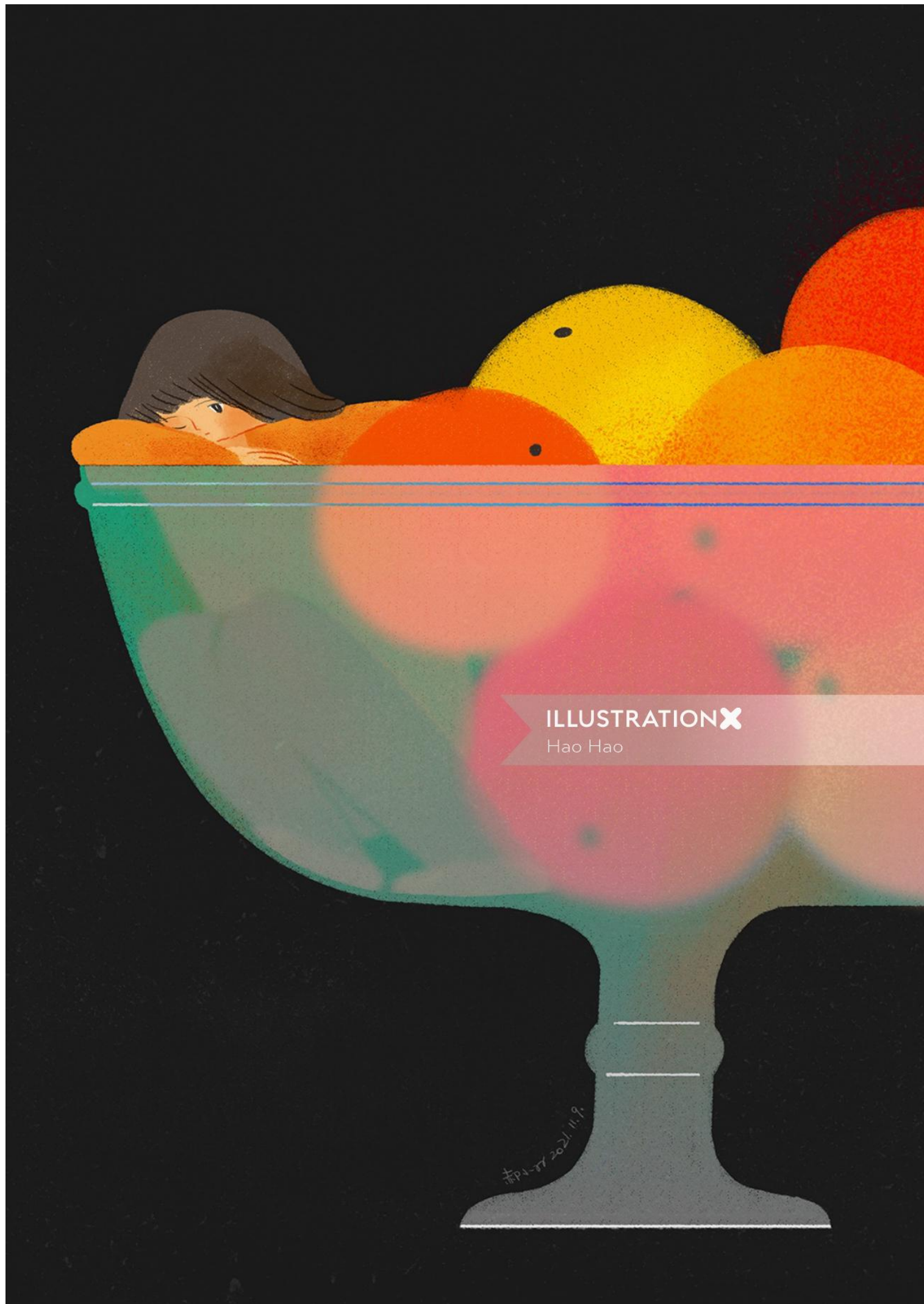


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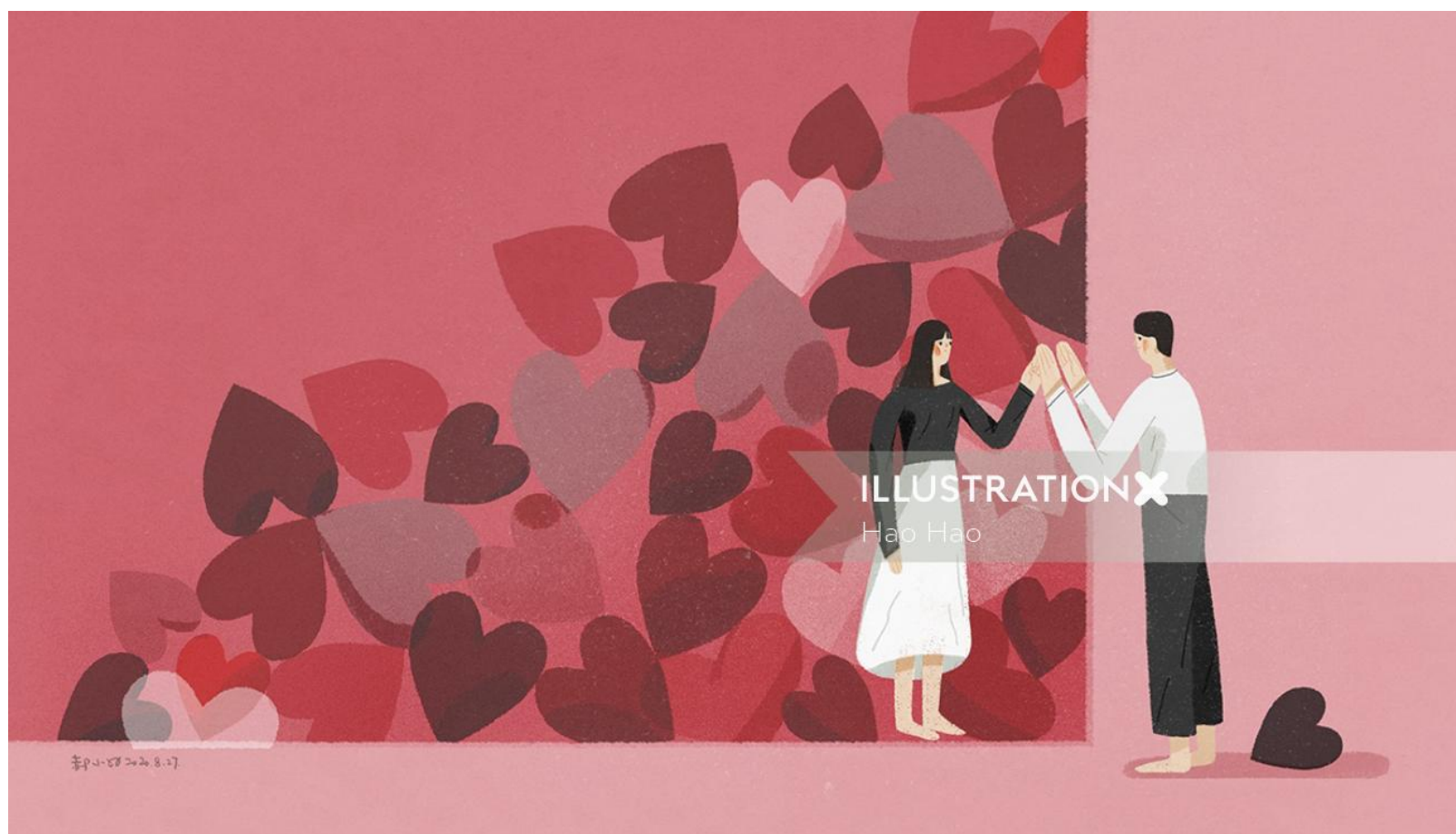
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How Far Is Too Far?

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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