

dear damsels

Annual 2020



your words | your stories | your collective



Dear Damsels,

Welcome to the DD Annual 2020, our fourth print collection sharing the words and stories of women. In this annual you will find pieces of fiction, non-fiction and poetry, including a list of life lessons, an essay on eating alone, daydreams about disappearing, and stories of self-acceptance. You'll also find illustration and photography by brilliant, creative women.

We've come a long way in the past year – hosting our biggest event yet, successfully crowdfunding our first book and taking our first ever month off (really). We're betting you've come far too, which is why this annual exists: to celebrate all that we've achieved together.

So what are you waiting for? Turn the page and get stuck into a joyous year's worth of writing by women. It's for you.

Love,
Abs & Bri
DD x



Dear Damsels Annual 2020

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dear damsels

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Co-founded by Bridie Wilkinson and Abby Parsons



Our beautiful cover was illustrated by Alice L Clark,
You can find her on Instagram at @alicelclark

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AUGUST

growth

*Glance down and see the roots
beneath you. Think about where
they've come from.*

Nobody Cares

by Jo Fisher

Nobody's staring as much as you think,
and nobody cares about you.

Life's too short not to wear it or do it;
too short not to try something new.

Stop spending your hours thinking of them,
so certain they're watching, agog;
they're too busy writing and chanting their own
internally harsh monologue.

We're all the lead cast in our own little story;
the hero, the centre, the core;
but don't expect them to forfeit their very own plotline
and read from the pages of yours.

One of the secrets of growing up, love,
that we so rarely remember to mention:
move the spotlight from them back onto yourself;
be the focus of your own sweet attention.

'move the spotlight from them back onto yourself'

Deadhead

by Heather Lee Shaw

Growing is a thorny issue.

Karen grows two inches over the summer and I feel sorry for her.
She cries in the toilets, telling me all the mean things the boys,
all now at least a head shorter than her, say to her.

BFG.

Bigfoot.

Mantis.

I pat her back and tell her not to worry. Boys are dumb. Friends last forever. All those things my romance books tell me I should say.

The next summer Karen grows again, but this time so does everyone else. They climb up into the sky like beanstalks. Karen no longer gets name called, now everyone just makes comments about me. Lil Jessie Philips, they say.

‘Don’t worry, love,’ Mum tells me, as she snips at rotten flowerheads. ‘It’s just not your season.’

Mum loves gardening. Courgettes, runner beans, tomatoes and kale. She won a spot in the allotment in 2013 and now she’s known as Green Finger Gale, the woman with all the bloody kale. She grows so much veg that she goes around the estate offering it out. Our neighbours love her. Me? I wish she would cook us a bloody burger once in a while. Maybe then...

The year I turn sixteen I tell myself: it’s now or never. Two more years have gone by and now I have to look up at my classmates – I’m elbow height. The boys call me Titch, at least the nice ones do. The nasty ones call me BJQ – Blow Job Queen. When I walk past them in the halls they call, ‘oi, while you’re down there!’

It’s embarrassing. Karen tells me boys are dumb and I shouldn’t listen. I miss the days when she was the BFG and I was no one at all.

That’s why I’m giving myself one more summer, one more hot, pregnant August, to let my body grow and become no one again. Just another girl in the crowd. I know a lot of girls want the dream: big tits, long legs, killer bone structure. I don’t, I’m not greedy. I was happy when we all stood shoulder to shoulder, playing the same games, swapping snacks under the tables. I liked it when people were just people, all sorted by whether you were friends or not friends. Now we

were boys and girls, best friends, old friends, boyfriends and girlfriends. Someone in class even bragged about having a daddy, my Mum is enough for me, thankyouverymuch.

Summer comes and go, nothing changes. It's the last straw. Even though Mum is still sprouting that season nonsense, I notice we now have meat on Thursdays and she lets me order double burgers when we're out, so I steal the key to her greenhouse and make a copy.

I start small, taking only handfuls of fertiliser at first, filling my bed with the foul smell. When a large 'DO NOT DISTURB' sign appears on my door, Mum thinks I'm hiding something but her guesses are mundane. She asks me about boys and slides a book under my door about safe sex and female pleasure. I rip out the pages to make mulch for my compost.

Slowly I start to see improvements; within a month I've gone up a shoe size. When I need new shirts to accommodate my new breasts, that's when I start drinking Miracle-Gro in my coffee.

"You look good," a boy called Fisher tells me one day after class. He's red in the face as he says this, almost the shade of roses. The boys no longer call me names, and I thought that would be enough, but I find myself agreeing to meet Fisher in the park.



It's a Wednesday when I get my first kiss. The sky is rumbling with rainclouds and the air is thick, I taste it as I taste him. 'You smell lovely,' he tells me when we pull apart. I let him nuzzle his nose against my neck. He's not the best looking lad, but I like his ginger hair and the freckles on his nose. I only put up a brief fight when he dips a hand under my shirt. After all, what's the point of breasts if you can't let others enjoy them? They're very squishy, I've been playing with them at night.

It's a shock to both me and Fisher when his hand comes back bloody. 'What the hell?' he says. There's a thorn in his hand. 'Sorry,' I try to laugh it off, 'must be a dodgy bra strap.'

I don't tell Mum about the changes because I can tell she's happy for me. When I sprout up past her she claps and gives me seconds of the courgette risotto. I try my best to go along with it, but I'm scared. My body keeps changing and when I take away the fertiliser my skin cracks like a desert floor, making it painful to move. I bring the dirt back, drink water, but the thorns are growing thick and fast. I find them in my hair, on the ridge of my spine. I wear my uniform buttoned all the way to the neck, yet my chest strains against the fabric and I can feel eyes watching me. When I'm alone I poke at the protrusions, sometimes pricking open my fingers. Blood drips onto the sheets.

Fisher meets me one more time. He's scared, but I know no lad can turn down a willing girl, and I'm determined to take control. We kiss, lightly, then not so. He rests his hands on my waist but doesn't dare go higher, so I guide them down. I let him reach all the way into my skirt and push aside my underwear. What comes next makes me gasp but then Fisher howls.

There's blood everywhere. I pray that he still has his fingers, which he does, but they're ripped raw. The skin torn apart by what looks like a hundred angry needles.

'There's something wrong with you!' He runs away, I can't blame him really.

When he's gone I know I can't go home. I'm too tarted up in blush and eyeliner, my shirt too covered in a boy's red, red blood. I go to the only place I know I can go.

The greenhouse is warm and comforting when I get inside. I curl up with the roses, letting the sound of plants breathing, recycling the air,



lull me to sleep. When I wake up, I try
not to scream.

‘Oh my love...’

Mum finds me just before lunch.
Lost and afraid, the flowers took me
in. Now my hair is petals and my feet
gone, curled down into the ground,
searching for nutrients, hoping to keep
me still.

‘I’m dying,’ I tell her. I’ve grown too
big, I just know it. I’m beautiful but I can
already feel the rot set in.

‘Nonsense,’ Mum says. ‘This is just
a phase. If you can bloom once, you can
do it again.’

She picks up her shears and starts to prune my hair, cutting out
all the deadheads. I close my eyes and remember when I was small,
just a seed, so full of unknown potential.



Illustrations by Lucy Goodwill

25

by Emer O'Toole

A list of life lessons.

I'm turning twenty-five next month. I'm less than delighted about it.

Adults – actual grown-ups, I mean – keep telling me that I'm being an eejít. That I'm still a baby, and that I have my whole life ahead of me.

Of course, they're right (the wisdom of age, eh?), but this birthday has a heaviness to it that nineteen and twenty-two and twenty-four didn't carry.

Maybe it's numerical: I'm officially, unambiguously, slap-bang in the middle of my twenties now, whereas up until this year I could still let on that I was in the early stages.

Maybe it's because I'm moving up an age category on check-box forms online, or because it seems to take me ages to scroll down to my year of birth.

It definitely has to do with the fact that, were I on *The X Factor*, I'd be an 'Over', and would be shipped off to a manor house in County Monaghan with Louis Walsh, not to a Marbella beach with Simon and his 'girls'.

Mostly, it's because I entered my twenties seeing a huge, delicious decade stretching out in front of me, ripe with opportunities for redemption after an icky adolescence that I mostly spent feeling out of step with myself and with everyone else. I had ten whole years to travel, find my dream job, find the love of my life, find myself. Then I blinked. Now, the time is half gone. I still haven't done everything I'd wanted to do, and I'm still nowhere near being the person I'd hoped to be. I don't have as much time left anymore.

So, in an effort to convince myself and others that the past quarter-century has, in fact, taught me important life lessons – not least how to speed-read uni texts, how to make a really nice cup of coffee, and how to avoid earning enough money to pay back my student loans (let's pretend it's been intentional) – here are twenty-five things I know to be true.

1.

If you don't find something funny, don't laugh.

2.

Don't mask emotionally fraught times with a style revamp. That fringe/dye job/tattoo will only exacerbate your existing problems; nobody who's feeling fragile needs the added stress of a high-maintenance hairdo or crusty lotus flower on their ankle. Go and have a cuppa and a bun instead.

3.

Do wear suncream, take your makeup off before bed, drink water, and moisturise. I mean, I've yet to discover if these tenets of skincare are indeed a step in the right direction towards a perpetual babyface, but surely they can't hurt.

4.

Black tights go with everything. Polka dots are a neutral. Wear comfortable shoes. It doesn't matter what your handbag looks like as long as it holds gum, a book, a powerbank and an emergency chocolate bar. No girl looks bad in red lipstick, a grey jumper, or a denim jacket. This is the only style advice I feel even remotely qualified to dole out, but they're all hills I'm willing to die on.

5.

To steal an Irish proverb: A good laugh and a long sleep are the two best cures for anything.

6.

Foods and drinks with unfailing healing properties include excessively buttery toast, a Smarties milkshake drunk on the beach you always went to as a kid, roast chicken on a Sunday night, a glass of red wine, McDonald's fries eaten in the car to a '00s pop soundtrack, and Nigella's lemon linguine.

7.

Talent, jobs, nationalities, accents, languages, and looks are not sexually transmissible. You should be with someone because you adore each other and because they're kind to you.

8.

For the love of God, back up your files. Seriously. Become so pernickety and OTT about it that if – on a spectacularly shit day – your laptop got stolen, your phone smashed, your memory stick exploded and your photo albums melted in a fire, you'd still have a backup copy of those precious last pictures with your granny, or a blurry highlight reel of your first girls' trip squirrelled away somewhere.

9.

When in doubt, make a list.

10.

Don't cover your face or run away when someone points a camera at you, even if you think you're the ugliest creature ever to crawl the planet – chances are you aren't, but even if you were, who cares? Don't get to twenty-one and realise you've no photos of the past half of your life.

11.

If someone is in your bed with you, it's because they want to be there. Stop holding cushions over your stomach and reaching for the light switch and apologising for the state of your thighs. Bit of a mood killer, tbh.

12.

Pay attention to red flags on dates (being rude to waiters, rape jokes), red flags in friendship (cynicism, an inability to be happy for you), and red flags at work ('A and E? Appendicitis, you say? Right, well, what time will you be here tomorrow?'). Those crimson buggers are waving at you for a reason – so that you can get yourself out.

13.

Say yes.

14.

Say no.

15.

Your teenage years don't set the tone for the rest of your life. It's okay if you haven't had the best days, dates, kisses, or friendships by the time the clock strikes midnight on your twentieth birthday.

'When in doubt, make a list.'

16.

Fill a notebook with an ever-expanding list of all the things that will never stop bringing you joy, no matter how trivial they seem. The smell of October air when you leave the house at night; cinema popcorn; tortoiseshell cats; Scottish accents; a new pen; the paintball scene in *10 Things I Hate About You*; Dublin in the rain; a booth in a restaurant. Write it all down and then, when darkness descends on your mind, you'll have something tangible to remind you of the million tiny reasons why life is still worth living.

17.

It doesn't matter how many hundreds of hours you spend listening to music – you won't find a more succinct summary of unrequited lust than Kate Nash's 'We Get On'; a better ode to ethereal, fluttery love than The Cure's 'Just Like Heaven', or a song that better describes the tugging ache of desire than Bruce Springsteen's 'I'm On Fire'.

18.

Show up for your friends. It doesn't matter if you're a bit sleepy after work, or if you've sneezed twice in the past 48 hours – chances are you aren't at death's door, and constantly getting cancelled on makes people feel like they don't matter. Stop being flaky and selfish in the name of self-care when you'd just be heading home to refresh Instagram until 2am anyway.

19.

Don't make your siblings, friends, or relatives feel like disposable time-fillers with whom you only want to hang out until your boyfriend or girlfriend finishes work. Non-romantic relationships should be as much of a priority as romantic ones. If you value your friends, prove it.

20.

Go to the doctor if you're worried about something, no matter how stupid it seems. You're not annoying them, you're not wasting their time, and your body isn't too gross to be worthy of medical attention: your health matters, so look after it. Oh, and the toe-curling mortification of hearing your GP say 'No, that's not a tumour – that's just your skull' will eventually dissipate. Mostly.

21.

Even the saddest, sorest, and most embarrassing moments of your life will seem funny in hindsight.

22.

You'll drift away from people who you once swore blind would be bridesmaids at your wedding. It'll be awful – really, really awful – and a few years down the line your chest will still ache when you hear a certain song or see a pair of girls who look like you two cackling away on a bus. This doesn't mean you'll be estranged forever (although it might). This doesn't mean you'll never get over it (although it might). It just means that you still really care about them.

23.

Nobody will ever wind you up the way your immediate family can, but nobody will ever love you as much or make you laugh as hard as they do.

24.

Women are conditioned to stay in awful situations because we feel like we have to. You're not obliged to be there for someone unconditionally if it's ruining your life – even if you love them, or even if they're having a tough time. There's a difference between supporting someone who doesn't have it in them to be a good friend right now, and enduring cold, calculated, dangerous, belittling abuse that will seep into your lungs like cigarette smoke and make you sick. The former, you can let slide; the latter, you mustn't. Know when to run for the hills.

25.

Your life is happening to you now. Not in a year, or in five, or in a vague future realm where you're thin and have that job and that boyfriend. Stop waiting for someone else to turn up and make you feel like your life is real, and has value. Stop waiting for someone else to give you permission to live.

25 (i).

On that note, don't wait for milestone birthdays to reflect and write preachy lists about what matters.



NOVEMBER

Feast

*You fill your plate and stuff your pockets,
take as much of it as you can.*

Eating My Feelings

by Sarah Murphy

The pros and cons of broken-hearted snacking.

Recipes for Sad Women by Hector Abad sounds like a cookbook, but really, it's a book of spells. Chapter by chapter, it names all the pains suffered by the female heart and remedies them with food. It says that white rice will prevent uncontrollable sobbing, and twenty-eight leaves of lemon balm in boiling water should soothe your fear of abandonment. Reading this is comforting, like watching YouTube tutorial videos about how to hex an unfaithful lover. As a cure for a broken heart, *Recipes for Sad Women* suggests a single cauliflower: 'Take this sad, white, solid flower and steam it. Salt it with your own tears. In the end this flower will gradually soak up your melancholy.'

'Chocolate', says Brittany Snow's character in *John Tucker Must Die*, 'can mend a broken heart.' (She's sprawled across a bed with her friends, feet in the air – Hollywood body language for 'this girl has given up on love'.) Medical websites say to treat heartbreak with almonds and freshwater fish – foods to help repair your dilapidated liver and immune system, to boost the levels of serotonin which you once got from making love. Maybe it's scoops of Haagen-Daaz eaten crouched in the light of the freezer, or a bottle of red wine if you're the recently dumped heroine of a British romantic comedy.

To be clear, no single meal can cure a broken heart – that obsessive, bloody organ, with its ceaseless cry of 'I'm in pain', as persistent and difficult to ignore as the Internet. But it is a beautiful thing to decide to butter bread, separate stems from leaves, stir a thickening pot to boil; to pour goodness and heat and pleasure back into your vitamin-deficient body, during a time when you're also considering taking an oath to lock yourself and your wounded feelings away in a windowless room with no phone signal for the next hundred years. Anyway, even if you do decide to become a hermit out of spite at an ex, there will still be snacks. Heartbroken snacking is always done alone, preferably in a bed, and is rarely sensible. It might be honeyed cardamom milk and oranges if you are a poetry kind of person, or slices and slices of buttered-gold toast, hot and piled messily like paperbacks, if you're chaotic.

My heartbreak food of choice used to be pasta, but the ravioli incident changed that forever. One night, in the aftermath of a particularly lethal breakup, I had cried so much that the crying had stopped feeling cathartic in a ‘Bette Davis in mink fur, regretting murdering her European husband’ type of way and had become boring and dehydrating instead. Realising that I was hungry, I had to wrestle with the dilemma that is the bedrock of young adulthood: do the financial losses of having a takeaway delivered outweigh the spiritual and physical setbacks of going to the supermarket? Somehow managing to heroically pull a coat on over my damp pyjamas, I walked through November drizzle to the nearby Lidl. I needed something easy going but fancy – the thought of having to dutifully hone ingredients at a stove made me want to curl up on the pavement and welcome death, but my ego was too wounded to bear the indignity of slicing up an oven pizza.

As always, Lidl had the answer: a 20% discount on ravioli, starchy diamonds stuffed with crab and ricotta. It was ready in two minutes and I arranged raspberries on the side as a last-minute touch, stupidly wondering if it would photograph well and if I could post it on Instagram with a pithy caption and gain instant sympathy for my solo pasta dinner and my heartbreak. I cracked an egg on top as a last-minute decision, and my head was so foggy from all the crying that I forgot to separate the yolk of the egg from its whites. When it came to eating my pasta I had to confront the membrane on top of it, thick and colourless, the stuff of grief. This pasta failed to cure my broken heart – in fact, most of it ended up in the bin – but it did teach me the importance of carefully separating an egg.

A year after the ravioli incident, I’m sitting alone on Telegraph Hill. As usual, I’ve brought a snack. It’s one of those May afternoons in London, pale lemon and buttery, everyone clutching the lapels of their coats a little regretfully around their floaty maxi dresses. This is technically my second breakfast of the day, as I have just spent the morning with an old friend, Maryam, talking over *idli sambar*. We spoke with real honesty, maybe a bit too cuttingly, as we are wont to do, about the young women we are now, wondering whether our childhood selves would look at us disapprovingly, with our overdraft fees and abandonment issues and intolerance for dairy. Maryam had flung her head and limbs back against the sofa and exclaimed, mock-plaintively, ‘My life is so good and I don’t know how to live it!’ Then

***Heartbroken
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she painted my fingernails for me, a mauve stone-like colour which we decided on because it would 'ground' me before my date later that night. Maybe it's the golden sun on the way home, or the feeling that my heart is so full it might burst at the seams, but something about the afternoon demands for fresh bread, so I stop at the Co-op and buy an almond braid for 40p. I pick up toilet paper too, as we've just run out. It's very difficult to maintain any sentimental feelings about the spring weather whilst clutching a six-pack of Cusheen, but I think I manage it. The afternoon is still and white and compressed, like an eiderdown coverlet someone has shaken out and is slowly settling. The trains ghost around the borders of the city. I fill the silence with bread.

Enough

by Michelle Nathan

Before I travelled to Sri Lanka
for the very first time
My cousin told me that
the most important word I could learn in Tamil,
is Kaarnum.
Enough.

And I didn't understand why
Until I got there

There
Where each meal is so distinct,
but also seem to slowly meld together
As one ends, the preparation for the next begins

There
Where they
pile the plates so high
the food could almost touch the sky

There
Where the edible leaning tower before me
threatens to spill over the sides and floor me,
I somehow find the strength to say
Thank you,
Jaya Auntie,
Kamala Marmee,
but please, it's enough!
Kaarnum
Bas

She does not even hesitate,
but simply continues to spoon more food onto my plate
Unwavering in her mission
It's a condition that all aunties suffer from;
They feel the need
The need to feed

I even cover up my dish with one hand
Form a line of defence with my palm and fingertips
She will never get through this elaborate barrier
I think to myself

But little did I know,
that she is not afraid to pour hot *sambar*
Spicy, soupy
liquid gold
directly onto my skin
So at least that way,
some of it can still soak in

These daily feasts are feasts of near perfection
that I have never even tried to replicate

Because feeding a family isn't easy,
by any means
Hours over an open fire stove,
no microwave or Uber Eats to lessen the load

And we're living in a patriarchy
Naturally
So the women will wait
hand and foot
on the men
while they barely lift a finger,
unless specifically asked,
...and sometimes not even then

But I think that my Kamala Marmee
is happy, at least

She is more
Joyful
than most people I know

Her laugh is a song that I would play on repeat, if I could
There's no real melody,
but as she cackles and whoops,
the sound fills my heart with so much joy
it could literally burst

And
she is
Selfless
to a degree
that I find hard to conceive

When I give her a gift
That my sister has sent to her
from across the seas
She hides it in a cupboard
for a rainy day
Or more likely,
to give away to someone else
who's more in need

She is everything I wish I could be
A teacher,
a mother,
the most compassionate of caregivers

I stayed with her
In Vavuniya
For only four days
In a near constant
sleepy, satiated haze

There
Where we were trapped in language barriers,
but not when it came to food
Because cooking my favourite dishes was how she said
'I love you'
Every day
Without fail
And that needed no further translation

Because even though it is dripping in syrup
the *payasum* is never too sweet
Make no mistake
It will give you cavities
And maybe a sugar induced stomach ache
But that's only for the weak
Because in my heart
It's never too sweet to eat

And the curries are never too spicy
Even when there are hot tears trailing streaks down my
cheeks
And my nose threatens to run off and away with the dish
and the spoon
They are never too spicy to try

And even when my Aunty
Marmee
Asks me
Finally
‘Kaarnum?’
Enough?
My response to her
Is a resounding
‘No.’

Because even when I’m so full that
I resemble the moon
Hanging low and heavy in that rusty red sky
Or a full, ripe mango that
could roll down the street
And pop like a balloon
I will never, ever, have had enough
Of you

Fifty-four Meals

by Alex Lemon

Confronting the shame of lonely eating.

In South Korea there's a word for eating alone, *혼밥* (*honbap*). A pushing together of syllables from *혼자* (*honja*) meaning 'alone' and *밥* (*bap*) meaning 'meal' (or, literally, 'cooked rice'). A pushing together because, in a country that puts group before individual, that emphasises social capital and personal connections, to eat alone raises eyebrows, questions, doubts, a feeling of pity, the prospect of shame. Where are your colleagues or friends? Does no one want to eat with you? Did you do something wrong? Are you unliked? Unlikeable? Eating alone isn't enjoying your own company, it's implying you're *왕따* (*wangdda*), an outcast.

*

I'm travelling solo around South Korea, from Seoul, down to Gwangju, across to Daegu and Gyeongju, then back to Seoul. A trip of eighteen days. Fifty-four meals. I'll be eating a lot of *honbap*. I'm anxious about the new cities, about moving between them, about finding my feet each time, about deciphering their subways and buses, decoding their streets, finding a loo. I'm anxious about the different culture, the different customs, the different language and script I've been learning for only a year. I'm anxious about waking lonely, sightseeing lonely, exploring lonely, feeling lonely. I'm anxious about eating lonely, too.

Back home I eat alone a lot. I live alone and have done for a decade. I'd like to say I'm used to it, but I'm not. I hate it. To me, sharing food is a fundamentally human practice. Eating alone makes me feel less part of humanity, less human even. My meals are sustenance, existence, they fill the gap in time and company. In London, with its distances between friends and barriers between people, restaurants are where I get to eat with others. In Korea, I'll be alone even there.

The evenings of my trip loom loneliest in my mind. The day's sightseeing over, the sun gone, the darkness putting a sharper edge on being alone. I'm willing myself to see dinners alone, far from home, as a kind of nighttime sightseeing, another way to watch this other world go by. I want these meals to be for enjoying, for luxuriating in, for savouring every bite of Real Korean Food in Actual Korea, feeling it



Illustration by Alexandra Lappa

in my body as an experience of travel, not just fuel. But I can't. I dread them. I don't need honbap to shame me; I do that myself.

*

Food is tightly woven into the fabric of Korean culture. One word for family is *식구* (*sikgu*), another portmanteau of syllables that boils down to 'mouths to feed'. A Korean's *sikgu* might ask a casual '밥 먹었어?' (*bap meogeosseo?*) to enquire "How are you?", but the direct translation is 'Have you eaten?'. At the end of your meal, you don't say thank you to the person who paid for it – who, by custom, will be the most senior in age or superior in status – instead you say 'I ate well', '*잘 먹었습니다*' (*jal meogeoss-seubnida*), using the formal, polite verb ending so your words show your respect.

*

One day on my travels I hike up a mountain, Mudeungsan, just east of Gwangju. I do it alone, of course, but not anxiously. It isn't remote. It's a half-hour bus ride from the city, which drops you by the rangers' station, the one near the Starbucks. In a country more densely populated than India or Japan, I'm barely out of earshot or eyeline of other walkers. But, to keep myself reassured, at the halfway point I use my shaky Korean to confirm with a couple resting on a bench, '제가 여기 지도에 있어요?', 'Am I here on the map?'

'Oh, your map is in English!' the husband replies, in English. (I'm learning to take this as Koreans' enthusiasm for practising my language rather than a comment on my butchering of theirs.)

'네, 영국 사람이에요.' 'Yes, I'm English,' I reply. (My Korean more certain since you learn this on Day 2.)

'English! I used to live in England, on the south coast. Brighton.'

And so, halfway up a Korean mountain, beside a small Korean city that few Western tourists visit, I discover that this Korean stranger, who I interrupted at random, lived in the English town I was born in, at the time I was living in it. He even remembers the January of 1986, so unusually snowy we sledged to the shops.

I talk more to the couple, Kyung-hwan and In-jung, as we wend our way up the mountain, then they tell me they have coffee and invite me to drink it with them over our picnic lunches. I nearly say no, out of British reserve, from not wanting to be a bother. But I say yes, because they're kind, because I've

*I'm anxious about
waking lonely,
sightseeing lonely,
exploring lonely,
feeling lonely.
I'm anxious about
eating lonely, too.*

missed conversation, because something is telling me here, in Korea, to Koreans, it might be ruder to decline the food offered than to devour their entire lunchbox. They give me the coffee and some rice cakes; they divide their apple into three parts, not two. It's my first shared food in eight days, in twenty-five meals. In return I offer boiled sweets, the only food in my backpack that isn't mangled or limp. The apple tastes sweeter. Afterwards, when I return from the loo (easily found in South Korea, even at 900 metres), they've decided together to invite me to dinner. We're taking different routes down the mountain, but they'll meet me at the bottom, they say, and we exchange numbers.

I set off alone again for the second half of my hike, glowing with wonder and joy from the couple's kindness, their keenness to make a lone stranger feel welcome in their city, to feel warmly about their country. I stare out across both from the top of the mountain, see the blooming silvergrass ripple on the slopes below, feel the warm autumn breeze and the warm autumn sun, and I know that I love it here. I begin my descent full of lightness, skipping down rocky paths with sure-footed speed. But as I get lower, the bright silvergrass disappearing with the shade of the trees, my mind starts to churn. My pace slows enough for the question to catch up: was I invited to dinner because I look a bit *wangdda*?

*

South Korea's everyday phrases, preoccupied with food, have drifted down from older generations, the republic's first citizens, those who lived through colonisation, world wars, civil war, the birth of a new country, and in the aftermath, poverty and hunger. Now the Republic of Korea (its official name) is a place of wealth, if you look at the numbers, and a place of youth, if you look around. In my eighteen days, I barely see a building constructed before 1960. I see only two elderly people who haven't dyed their grey hair black again. I see more suggestions of surgery in Seoul's faces than I've ever seen elsewhere. I see a lot of this season's Gucci.

*

I meet Kyung-hwan and In-jung at the foot of Mudeungsan and they suggest a restaurant nearby. 'Or,' Kyung-hwan says, 'my friends live in a traditional Korean house. I've called them. We can drive there to see it and have tea.' I'm nervous about this gesture but nosy about seeing inside a *hanok*, so I say yes. On the way he asks what kinds of Korean food I've not tried yet and, thinking it's just a casual enquiry, I reel off my list. Later I realise it wasn't.

We arrive at the *hanok* and it's beautiful. Inside, the owner, with delicate care and the feeling of ritual, serves us six types of tea, each the colour of a precious jewel. One is a famous twenty-one-year-old tea from Huinan in China; another she makes herself from magnolia flowers, which it takes her two days to cure. Afterwards Kyung-hwan announces we'll all go for dinner together, the five of us. As we drive there, he tells me with a twinkle that he and his friend had a debate about which of them will pay for everyone's meal, and that he lost. Which means I'm about to be bought dinner by someone I met just an hour ago, when I – a total stranger from the other side of the world, who his friends found up a mountain – turned up at his house. I feel my English shame well up hot-cold inside. To try to stop it choking me, I tell Kyung-hwan how lucky I feel. 'Lucky, lucky, lucky!' he replies. 'We are all lucky here.'

*

South Korea may be a country where deference to seniority must be shown in every verb, but, as anywhere, young people find ways to defy. In South Korea they do it through trends, continually writing new rules to create distinctive, exclusive worlds where they hold the power, in fashion, hairstyles, music, gaming, language, food. With demanding careers, pressured lives and globalising values, the younger generations are shifting the meaning of *honbap*, reducing its shame, increasing its cool. *Honbap* itself is a trend now. There are *honbap* restaurants in Seoul, catering specifically and solely to solos. There's a *honbap* app to help you find your solitary meal because, entrenchment being the counterpoint to defiance, still some establishments won't let one in.

*

Knowing it's custom doesn't make generosity easier to accept. Especially not this time. The five of us arrive at the restaurant and are led, me unwittingly, through sliding paper doors to our own private room, where we sit cross-legged on bright silken cushions. Two low tables are carried in over our heads and set down in front of us. They are covered in plates, bowls, pans, platters, hotpots on burners, all holding uncountable traditional and local delicacies. This is not a quick bite to eat – this is *한정식* (*hanjeongsik*), the Korean banquet of multiple dishes and side dishes, once the preserve of royalty and aristocrats. This is the one meal that could never be, and will never be, *honbap*. I am wide eyed and speechless, in both languages. I quell my discomfort by trying everything. I become stuffed beyond comfort but never delight. I offer thank yous in both languages, then throw in

a fumbled ‘잘 먹었습니다’ (I ate well), which meets with surprised little chortles that I know the phrase. I know the real meaning now, too.

Then we leave and I’m dropped home and I’m alone again. I don’t even make it into the lobby of my apartment before I cry. I cry all tens floors of the lift ride, I cry as I open my door, I cry as I close it behind me. I stand in the silence of my empty room and I sob. I think it happens because I’m overwhelmed with emotion, from receiving such kindness, inclusion, generosity, care, from no less than four complete strangers, half of whom didn’t even speak my language. The sobs subside to snuffles and I realise that’s not why. I’m crying because I don’t feel I deserve it. Not because I’m a stranger, a tourist, someone they may never see again, but because I’m me. All they got was me. Who am I to be that special? How am I that special? I’m not. I’m just me. And the tears fall again.

*

I don’t use the *honbap* app while I’m in Korea. I don’t seek out a *honbap* restaurant. I don’t need to. I feel no shame in *honbap* now. Complete strangers can meet me and decide, within hours, within minutes, that I’m worthy of food, of good food, of a banquet, a feast. For the first time, I see – enjoy, luxuriate in, savour – that I’m worthy of it too. Wherever I’m eating, whoever I eat with, even if it’s just me.



Thanks

Thank you, as always, to you, the reader.

By choosing our annual you're helping us to create a space for women's voices and stories to be heard. We hope you've enjoyed it, and are inspired to visit us again soon.

This annual has been created by the collaboration and creativity of many, many talented women. We'd like to thank Libby Earland for her gorgeous photographs; Alice L Clark for designing our stunning cover; the illustrators of Bath Spa Illustration Society for interpreting our writers' words and Tova Persson for coordinating it all; and our hard-working project editor Kitty Stogdon for her patience, time and care.

Thank you to our designer Marcus Chamberlain for making this publication as beautiful inside as it is out.

And finally, a thank you to our writers, whose stories make all of this worthwhile. It's our honour to publish you and share your voices. Keep writing.

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Bath Spa Illustration Society was created by co-presidents Laura Medlicott and Emma Flood. Born out of a desire to meet other illustrators and provide a community, they held their first meeting two years ago. Since then, it has flourished into something far greater than they ever imagined – with a full committee and a sister society in Madrid.

Bath Spa Illustration Society organises trips to galleries, museums and art fairs, runs workshops and creates its own collaborative zines on top of weekly meetings where everyone comes together to draw. With hopes to hold their first-ever public exhibition of members' artwork next summer, the committee has big plans to come.

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