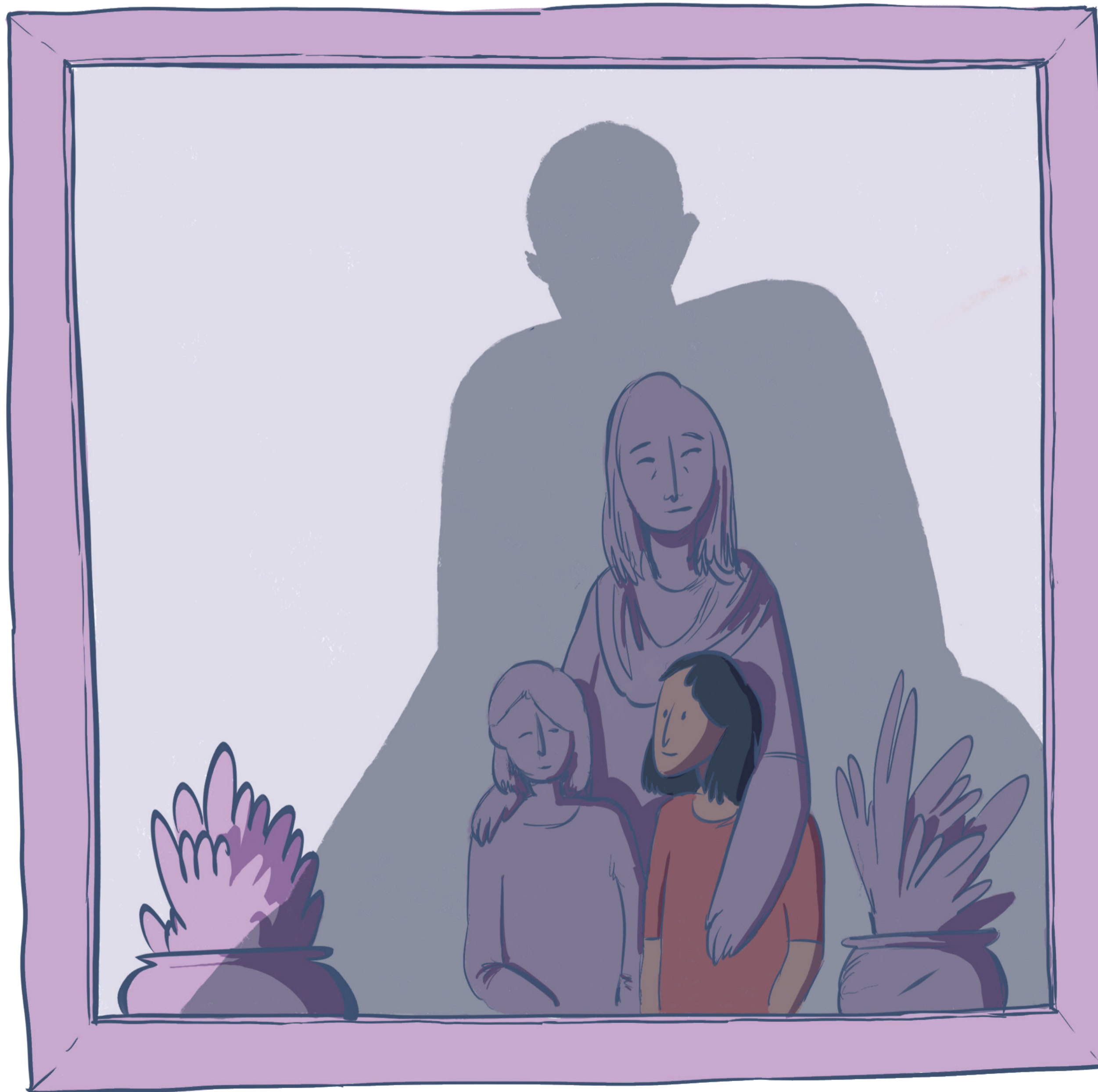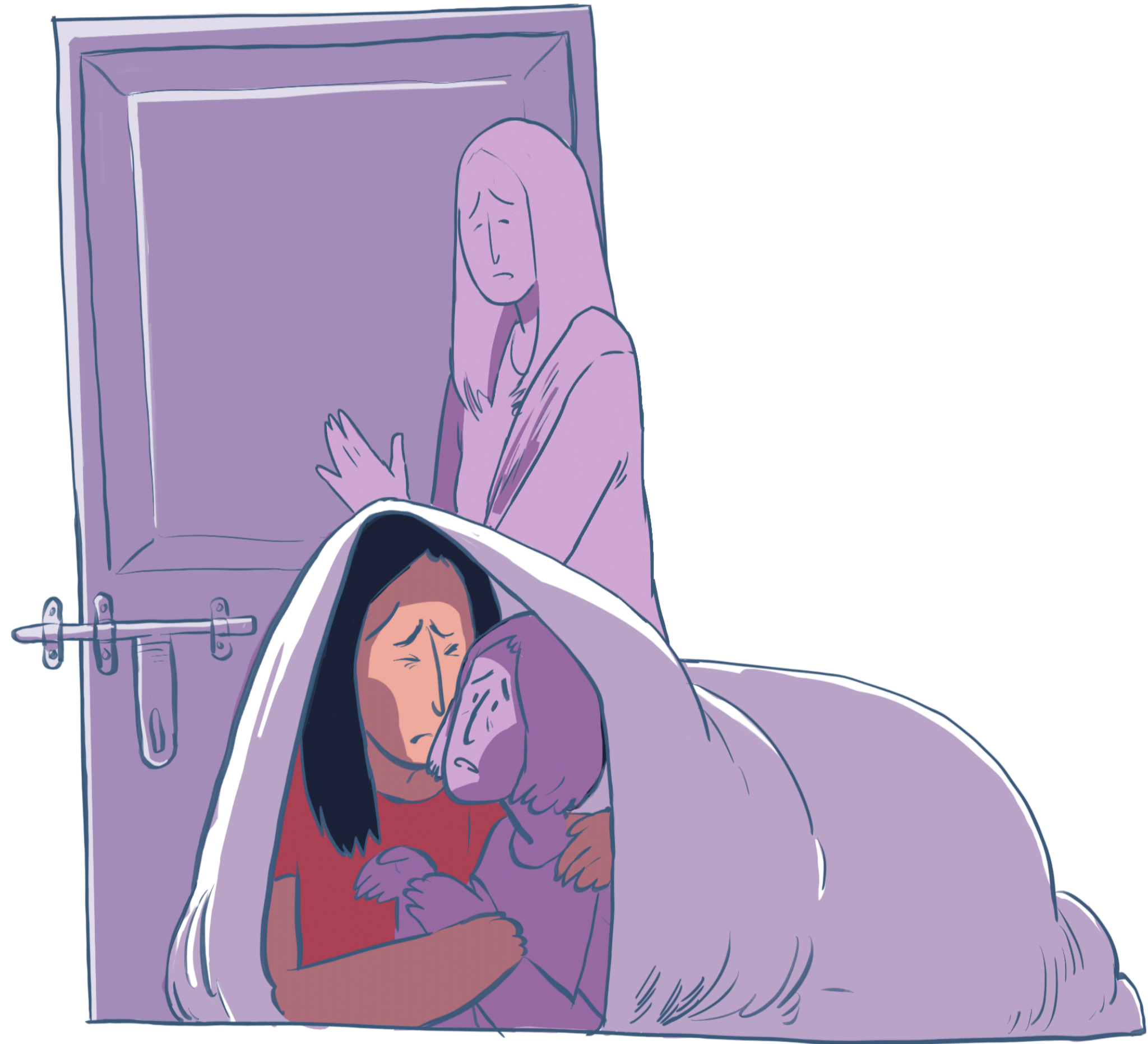The Picture Changes

I remember we would lock our doors and then sit next to the door, he'd be banging and pushing against the door, the three of us would put all our weight against the door to make sure that he couldn't get in. After he left, sleeping felt peaceful, and were much less afraid.

Growing up, we had so much fear inside us. If being a child with a single mom wasn't bad enough, it was just us three women at home. You're made to feel a certain kind of insecurity when there isn't a man in the house

We loved going to the cinema to watch movies together, my mum, sister and I. But, honestly, I remember going to movies at night and the theatre would usually be filled with men. When we were walking out after the film, we would kind of protect each other in case, you know, someone tried to grab one of us or something. We would always form a kind of protective circle, the three of us.
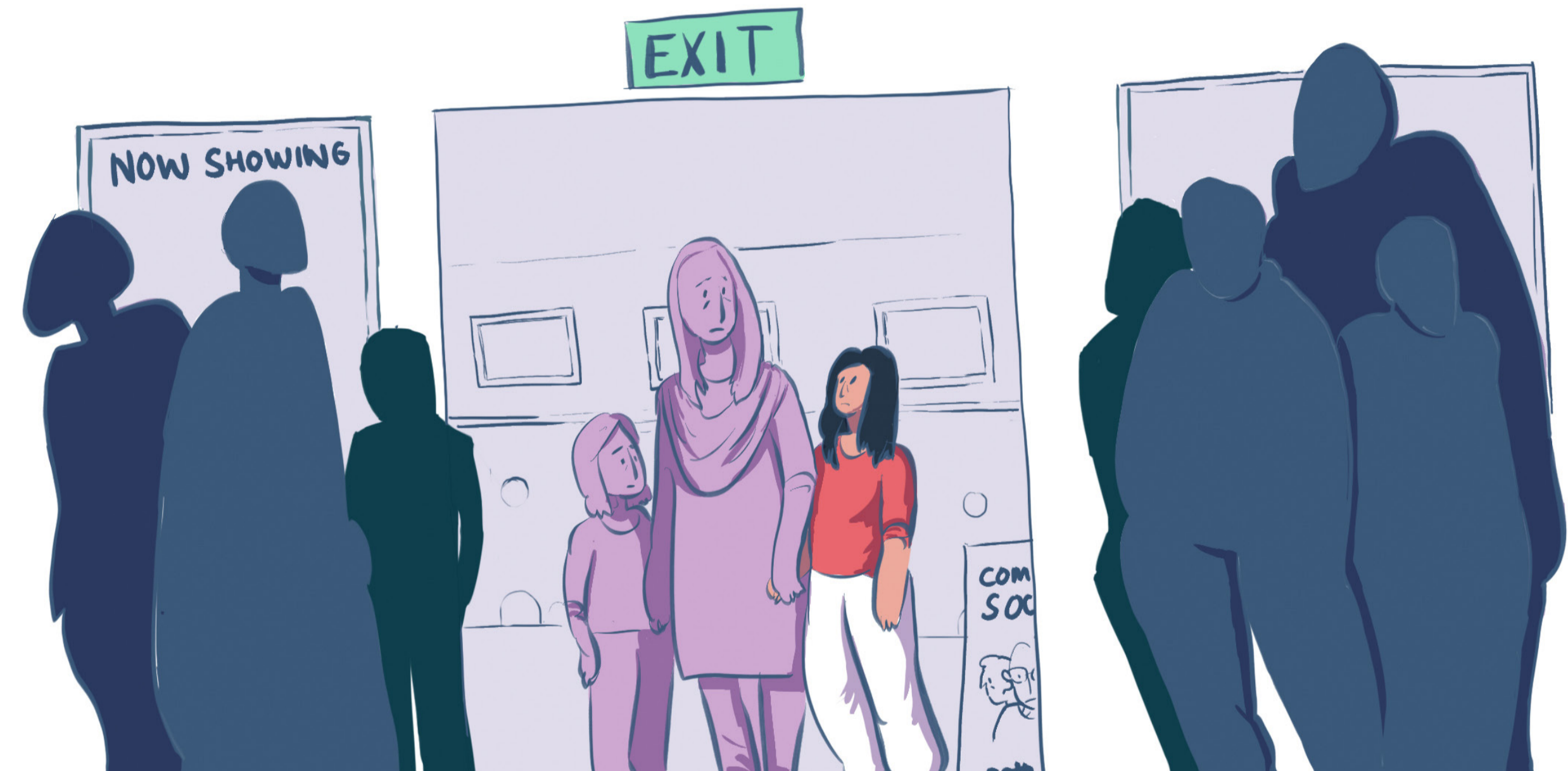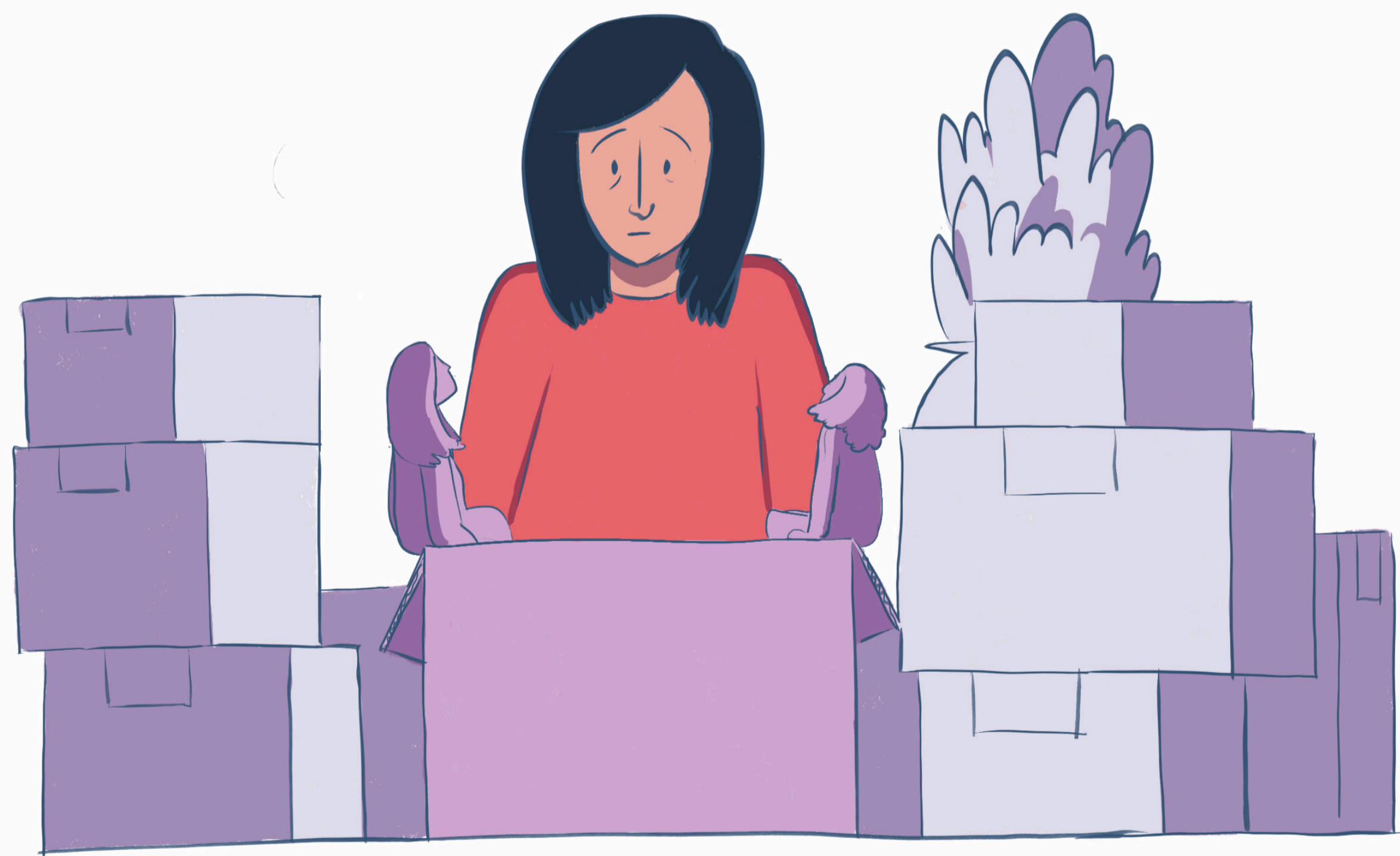
I somehow assumed the male role because my mother and my sister both have asthma. Whether it was lifting heavy boxes when we moved houses, because we rented houses, so moving around a lot was quite common, or cleaning and dusting. To be honest, this was at times another point of stress for me because I was just a child, I was not supposed to assume a role like that so early on.

I think those experiences made me stronger for sure, because when I was moving out of home, I was already kind of prepared for all of it. I was ready to live alone. I never thought I would be able to live alone, but now I do. I felt prepared for everything that people get prepared for in their teenage years. I was always prepared as a younger child, always kind of one step ahead of my generation.
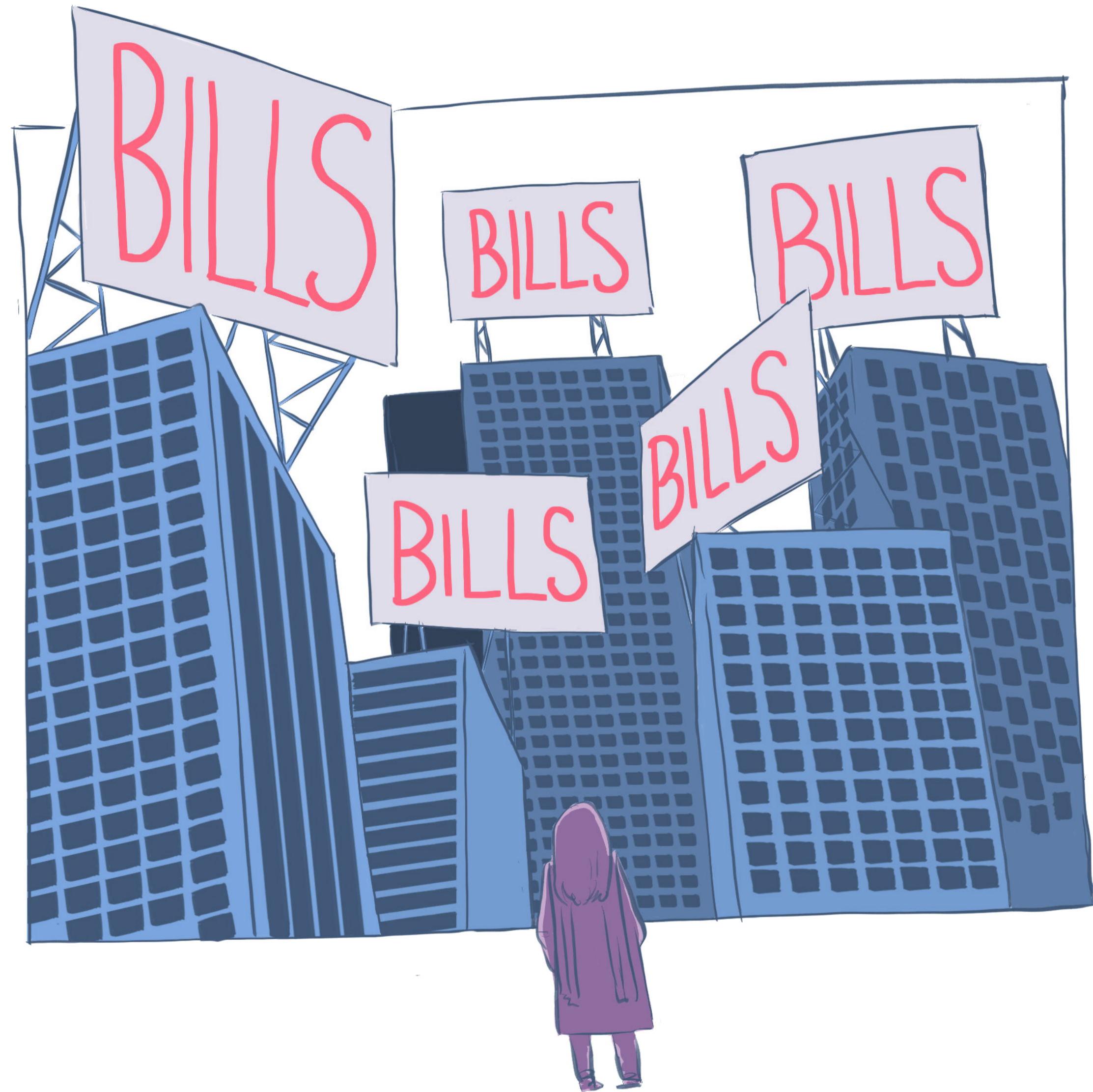
Because my dad and mom separated when I was young, so I obviously felt the whole, sort of, burden of "doing well". The pressures of having a single mother are not easy. My mom has no family support of her own, and so while she didn't put any pressure on me, our circumstances put immense pressure on my academic and career choices.

We were always short on money, and money was always a big issue for us. So, my sister and I always knew that when we grew up, we had to become independent and earn money, so that we could support our mom and she wouldn't have to work all her life. I had to do well, I had to earn a lot of money, and I had to be at the top of my field.

When I failed my CA final exam the second time, there was so much pressure that I just broke down. It took me a long time to get comfortable with the idea of not being a CA. Everyone still keeps telling me to take the exam again! I never thought I would make the decision of never giving it, and once I did, it just made my life much easier. Today, I know it's not the end of the world, there are a lot of other people who do so without even having a Masters degree.
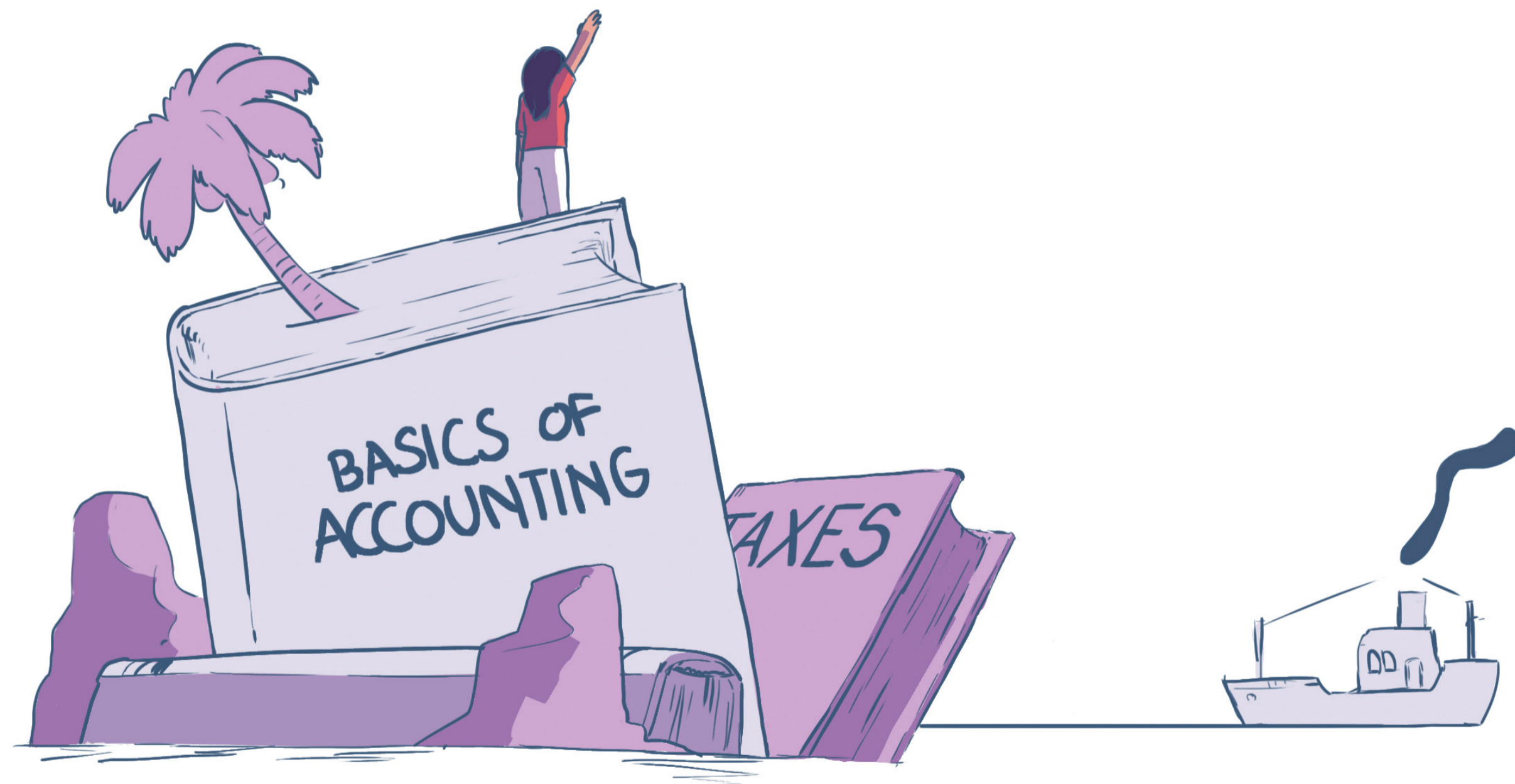
Even when I failed my exam the first time, I was severely depressed. But, I didn't want help at that time. I thought to myself, "It's something that I can shake off. I can do it. I just need to have a break from the exam." The second time I failed the exam though, that's when I hit rock bottom, I think. After hitting rock bottom, that was when I thought, "Okay, fine, maybe I do need help."

I would be depressed for weeks on end. At that time, if a boyfriend broke up with me, I would really struggle to handle it. I think it's related to the sense of abandonment that I grew up with. We are taught to believe that a man is a safety net for you, a man is a kind of pillar of strength to lean on all the time.
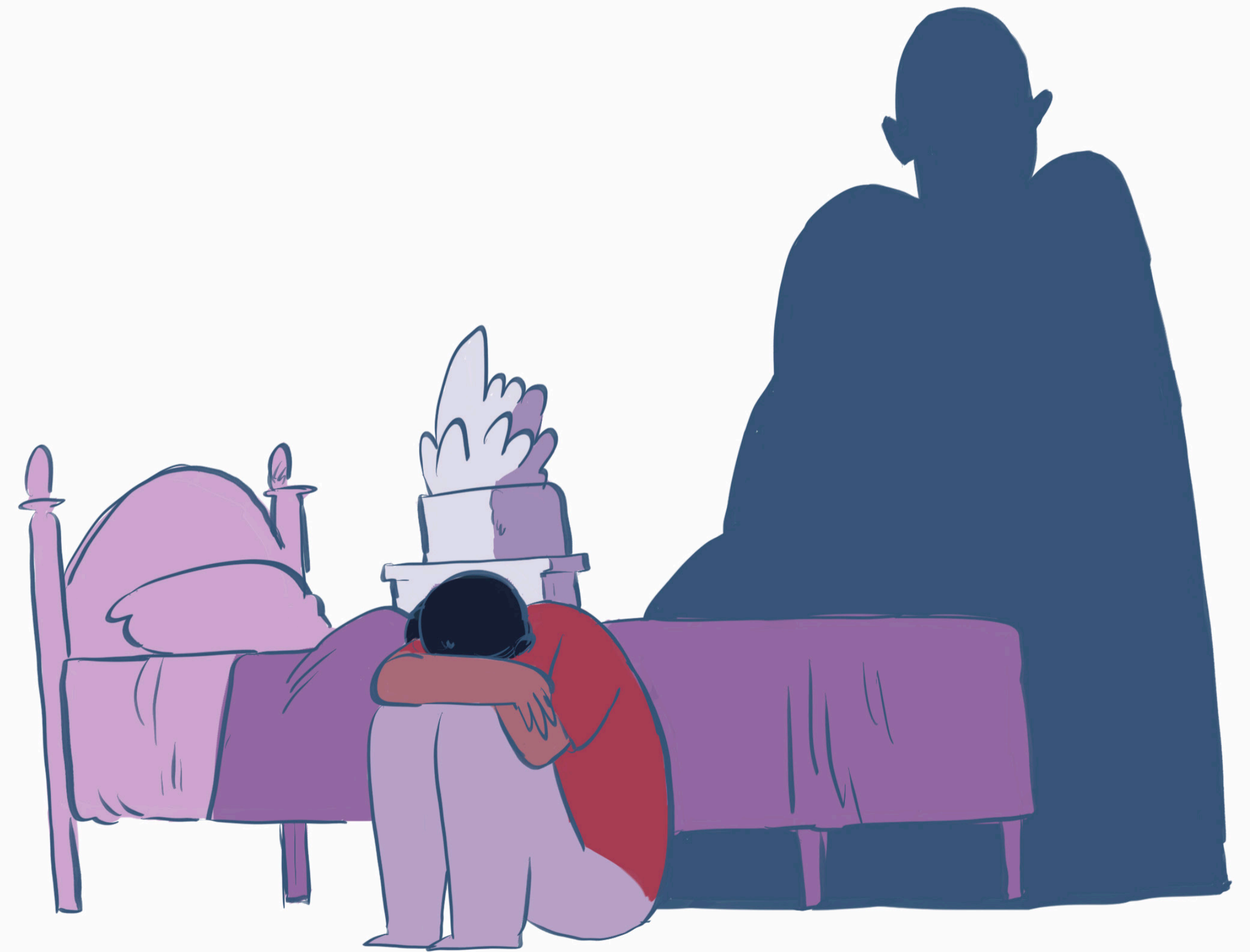
Today, I'm at a point in my life where I've realised that a man is not a fatherly figure, he is a partner to you. He's not someone you're supposed to depend on for your every need, but someone who you can share your life with. So, find support in him, but not depend on him. So, my views on relationships have changed drastically, from thinking of a boyfriend as a safety net to thinking of a boyfriend as a tennis partner, you know, to keep sharing your life with him.

I went to therapy for almost two years and everyone thought I was getting the help I needed, so they thought I was going to get better. I went to a psychiatrist too. Everyone just told me that I was mildly depressed, so therapy was the only thing that would help. But after two years, things hadn't really improved. I had been fighting for so long and there was no answer. It's kind of like a blow to your own self-confidence when you feel like you're not getting anywhere!

Growing up, my mom was really depressed, some days she was unable to get out of bed and a family member would have to come and help her with her daily tasks and bathe her and stuff like that. So, obviously seeing that as a child, you don't understand why it's happening, but once I grew up a little more, I understood why, but I never really thought about it in my own context.

Finally, when I went to the right doctor, it took him two minutes to diagnose me, he looked at me, he heard what I had to say, and the first thing he wrote down was, "Borderline Personality Disorder". While receiving a specific diagnosis may not be right for everyone, it was extremely helpful for me. I understood that many of the symptoms I was experiencing such as the fear of abandonment, self-harming behaviours, mood swings, unstable relationships, or binge drinking, were put into context for me, as well as a treatment plan that suited my condition.

I've become less dependent on others, I have learnt to take care of myself, take my medicines, go for therapy, keep the negative thoughts at bay, keep my morale up — I can't depend on anybody else to do this, I have to do this myself.

I remember this one time where I mixed alcohol with my medication. I felt like I was falling and I could not walk. That's the day I decided, "You can't do this, you need to take your medication seriously, you can't be flippant about it, you can't always be dependent on someone else to pick you up." Today, I have kind of reached a point where I can just have two drinks and stop at that. Otherwise, initially I would just be a binge drinker, but now I've managed my alcohol pretty well.

Most of us are ignorant about how we harm ourselves. I've had self-harm scars and I've wrapped a bandage around it on my wrist and gone to work and people have come up to me and said, "Oh, boyfriend ne dump kar diya kya?", and making fun of it like it's some kind of a joke. And sometimes even I make light of it; but self-harm can manifest itself in many ways, not just cutting, recognising that I inflict pain on my skin and body in different ways was important. I wish other people were also more aware of how common self harm is.

I'm actually very proud of myself today because the job that I'm currently doing is a job that technically only a CA would get. I was able to crack the interview without having done the exam. So, I mean, I'm a little smarter than just my degree, I'm capable of manoeuvring through life, taking things into my own hands, and making them work for me.
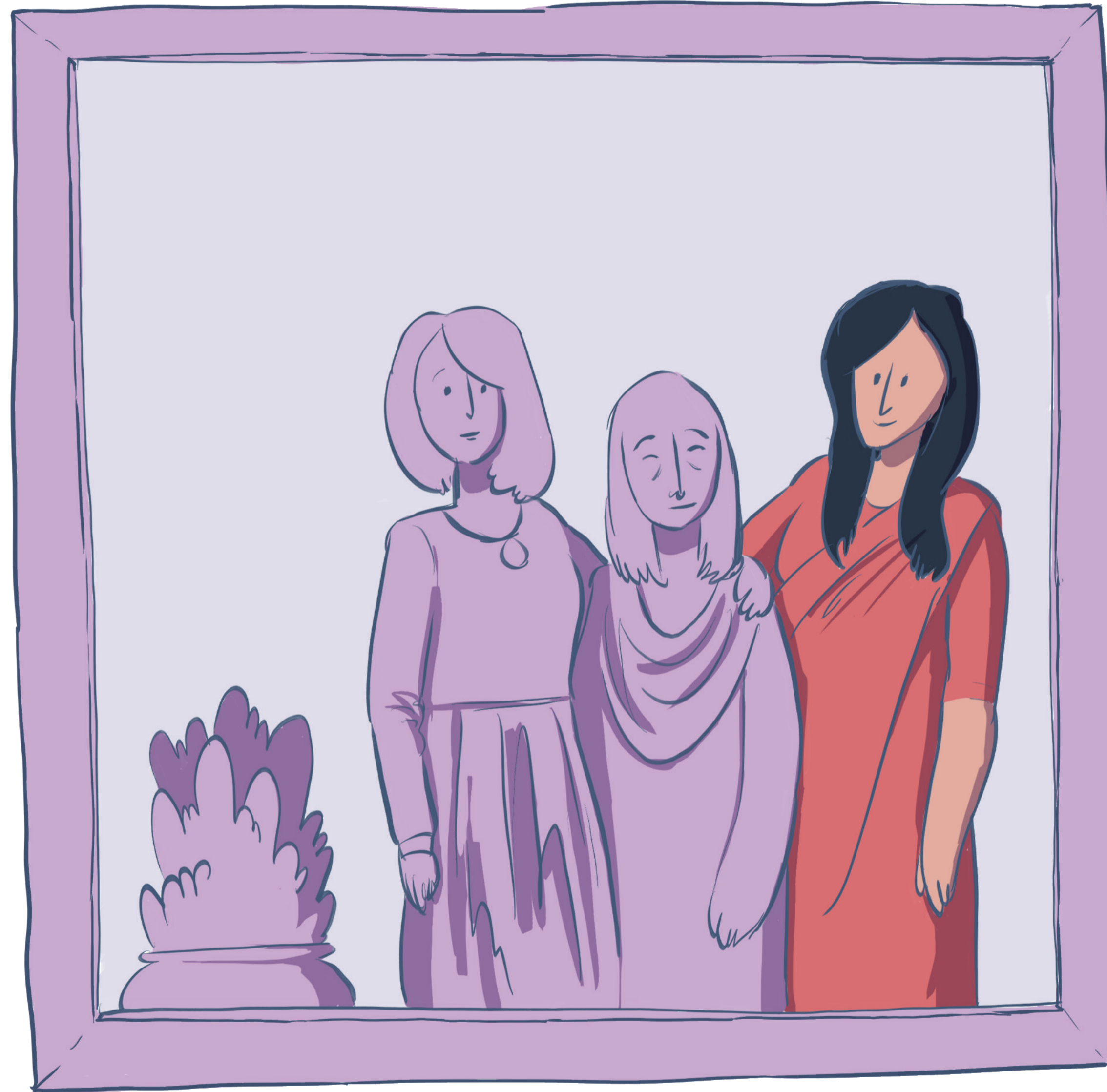
Team Credits : Contributor Tarini Chawla | Story research, writing and curation Faith Gonsalves | Artwork and Illustrations Saket Ghaisas | Media production Kapil Das | Voiceover Tarini Chawla

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IT'S OK TO TALK

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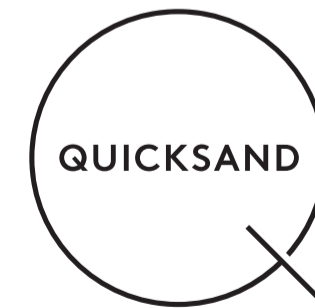
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