

LIPSTICKS & MARTINIS

ISSUE 04

Saturday
12 September, 2026

10 WOMEN. 90 PAGES.
NO ONE PRETENDING TO
HAVE IT FIGURED OUT.

PLUS!
Friendship drift, career
panic, self-care fatigue,
beauty, boundaries and
becoming

THE almost adulting HandBook

Money, privilege and the
freedom to take a risk

ALMOST-ADULTING
OFFICE HOURS
Your anonymous questions,
answered with a
psychologist's perspective

Includes the lipstick shade
we never outgrew



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EDITOR'S LETTER

I wish I knew where to begin, so let me begin with gratitude.

This issue was not written by me alone. It was brought to life by ***ten incredible women*** who turned their experiences of adulthood into words, imagery and metaphors that went far beyond anything I could have imagined on my own. More importantly, they allowed themselves to be vulnerable. They shared the details we often hide because we are afraid of being judged, misunderstood or told that something must be wrong with us. Through their honesty, they have given the rest of us permission to recognise ourselves within these pages.

I learnt so much while producing this issue. Every story introduced me to another experience, another perspective and another way of understanding what it means to grow up. It reminded me that we are far less alone than we imagine. ***We can spend years believing that something inside us must be broken because we are struggling, only to discover that even the chirpiest souls around us sometimes go quiet at midnight.***



Only three issues into L&M, these women trusted us with their ideas and allowed their creativity to run freely across our pages.

That trust means more to me than I can properly explain.

This issue belongs to every writer who contributed to it, every reader who submitted an anonymous question and every girl who has ever wondered whether everyone else received an adulthood handbook that somehow never reached her.



You are going to experience all sorts of emotions while reading this issue. You may feel motivated on one page and unexpectedly emotional on the next. You may laugh, pause, remember something you thought you had forgotten or find a sentence that describes a feeling you have never known how to name.

But more than anything, I hope you feel seen and heard.

So make your favourite cup of coffee, or better yet, hot chocolate, find somewhere comfortable and take your time with these pages. There is no need to rush through them. L&M was created to be a place where you can slow down.

Adulthood is messy. Sometimes, it feels cruel because there is no single right or wrong way to do it. It refuses to operate according to binary logic. There is no perfect timeline, guaranteed decision or universal definition of success. That uncertainty can be frightening, but it can also be freeing.

Once you realise that nobody has everything figured out, including the people who appear to be doing everything perfectly, there is a little less reason to be afraid.

We are all finding our way. So trust your gut. Trust what your past has taught you. Trust the resilience that has carried you this far. Most importantly, trust yourself. And keep going.

*Deepanshi
Srivastava*

Founder & Editor-in-Chief

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are missing a martini

EVERY MONDAY:

One Look.
One Beauty find.
One Book Line.
One Thought.
One Song.

Five little things worth
carrying into your week.

served every
monday, 8am in your
inbox



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← Pratishtha Agrawal

A writer and marketer exploring beauty, wellness, lifestyle and culture. She contributes to Vogue India and has worked across brand marketing and communications, creating content for beauty and lifestyle brands on LinkedIn. She is especially interested in the products, rituals and ideas that shape how we understand and experience beauty.

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Sama Meerza →

A beauty journalist and social media professional with over five years of experience in digital content. She contributes to Cosmopolitan, Harper's Bazaar, Brides Today and The Style List, covering beauty, fashion, lifestyle, relationships and sexual wellness. Away from her laptop, she is usually with her cats or rewatching Modern Family and Schitt's Creek.



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↑ Shruti

A cultural writer and critic with a master's degree in psychology. She uses fashion as a lens to examine feminism, gender, identity and postcolonial aesthetics. Originally from Mumbai, she is building a career in fashion media and PR communications while writing about the cultural forces that shape what we wear, value and become.

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Ten voices, countless perspectives, and one reminder that none of us is figuring adulthood out alone.

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↑ Ishita Aggarwal

A writer on paper, a creator on Instagram and a yapper in real life. Fuelled by caffeine and curiosity, she writes the kind of wonderfully specific pieces that begin with one passing thought and leave readers somewhere entirely unexpected. Her work lives at the intersection of observation, personality and an excellent flow state.

↑ Shreyanshi

A fifteen-year-old student and writer exploring girlhood, identity and the beautifully confusing business of growing up. As the inaugural writer of The L&M Girl Wall, she writes from inside the questions she has not answered yet, capturing teenagehood with curiosity, tenderness and the growing suspicion that uncertainty might be part of the point.

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← Swara Wankhede

A third-year Economics and Computer Science student at BITS Pilani and the writer behind IT Girl Diaries. Her curiosity moves between agentic AI, personal finance, psychology, fiction and personal essays. She is also building an edtech and career-exploration platform, and spends the remaining hours reading, coding, making art and journaling.



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↑ Ria Khatoniar

A software engineer at Nutanix and a recent BITS Pilani Goa graduate in Computer Science and Physics. Her interests span artificial intelligence, machine learning, scientific computing and open-source software. Beyond code, she writes, paints, reads, dances and learns guitar, following every question and creative rabbit hole much further than strictly necessary.

A BITS Goa graduate, a finance girlie for now and a professional overthinker always. Somewhere between an existential crisis and romanticising her life, she finds herself through dancing, writing, singing and strongly held opinions. She is currently searching for a career that gives both her creativity and logic somewhere to go.

Shereen Malani ↓



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Riya Sardesai →

A second-year Electronics and Instrumentation Engineering student at BITS Pilani Goa. A writer, national-level table tennis player and endlessly curious creative, she is currently building a streetwear brand while exploring Figma, UI/UX and animation. Her interests stretch across true crime, food, Goan culture, social impact, music and the stories that shape people.



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Chapter 1: The Plan

The plan was supposed to make adulthood feel predictable. This chapter is about what happens when the ambition remains but the timeline changes: detours, comparison, uncertainty and the quiet progress no five-year plan knows how to measure.

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Apparently I knew everything when I was 18

The CV of Invisible Progress

The Internet Made my Twenty feel late

Evidence that I'm becoming

I Had Too Many Dreams for One Five Year Plan

by Deepanshi Srivastava, Founder & Editor-in-Chief of Lipsticks & Martinis

The most beautiful thing about this issue is that it wasn't built by me alone. Ten incredibly talented women have brought together the experiences that shaped them, and, in some way, are shaping how their twenties are unfolding. So it only feels fair that I bring a story of my own.

I don't think I ever truly believed there would come a point when I would have everything figured out. The only thing I knew for certain was that I wanted things. *Many, many things.*

I wanted to become an author. At the same time, I wanted to try my hand at marketing campaigns. I wanted to pursue an MBA because, apparently, one degree wasn't enough uncertainty for me. And did I mention my love for all things feminine? I wanted to share my girlhood online while exploring everything that fascinated me about beauty, fashion and books. Name it, and I had probably imagined building some part of my life around it.

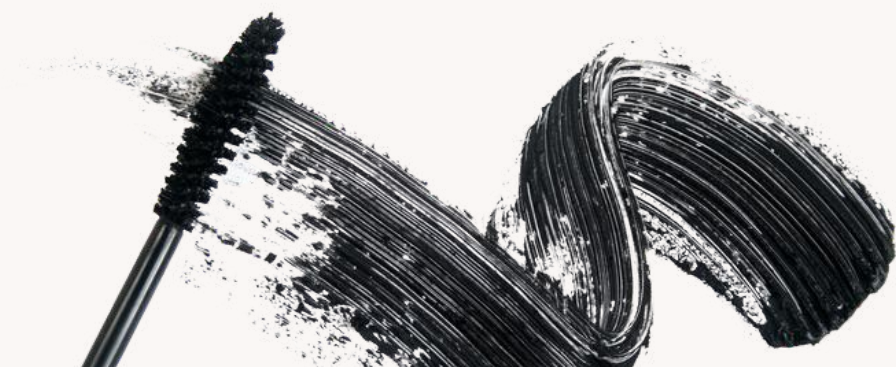
Naturally, whenever it came to choosing one safe thing: one degree, one job, one respectable path, something felt wrong. *Either it felt wrong or it went wrong. In complete honesty, I must admit that.*

Call it delusion. Call it the universe repeatedly asking me to reconsider. **Whatever it was, every time I tried to compress all those wants into one sensible plan, some part of me resisted.**

During my seventh semester of college, I spent six months interning at a venture capital firm. Every day involved a *three-hour commute*, back and forth, and I'll tell you what helped me survive it: dressing up in corporate-girly outfits and getting to interact with startups.

I loved learning what people were building and why they believed it deserved to exist. The space I most wanted to explore, consumer brands, wasn't a major focus at the firm then. Much of the work leaned towards SaaS and a narrower set of sectors.

Nevertheless, the internship gave me exactly what I needed: a clearer idea of what I actually wanted.



I was sitting on the side that evaluated whether a seed someone else had planted was worth investing in. But the entire time, I craved being on the other side, the side planting the seed, watering it and attempting to grow the tree.

Then I flunked CAT. Yes, I tried my hand at an MBA too. Canonical engineering-student experience.

Strangely, not acing the exam didn't make me doubt the idea of building something. It made the desire stronger. If anything, it stripped away another path I might have followed simply because it appeared secure and recognisable.

My story never moulded itself into a fixed five-year plan: graduate, take a job, climb the corporate ladder. Or get a second degree, take a job and then climb the corporate ladder with an additional certificate in hand. Instead, I took a bet on myself.

People love saying that your twenties are meant for experimentation because the cost of taking a risk is lower before responsibilities begin piling up. *Before late-night plans and crashing on your best friend's couch because you're broke are replaced by bills, dependants and the sudden expectation that you should know what you're doing. But taking a risk comes with its own gut-twisting midnight shenanigans.*

There are moments when it suddenly hits you that although the reward might be high, you have absolutely no idea what waits on the other side of the tunnel. **That is the thing about building something from scratch: every day brings a new surprise.** Some days, the surprise—

I'm slowly learning that the right decision can feel terrifying too. Fear doesn't automatically mean something is wrong. Sometimes it simply means you are trying something without knowing the bigger picture. And what do you do when you don't know the bigger picture? You paint it.



—is sweet like a birthday party you didn't know had been planned for you. It arrives as love from a stranger, an unexpected opportunity or revenue finally unlocking.

On other days, the surprise is a clown jumping out of a box. Everything is silent. No number on the chart moves. *Nothing gives you proof that the work is working. And suddenly, the safe path you walked away from begins looking very shiny from a distance.*

Does it scare me? **Very often.**

Does it make me regret my choice? **Of course not.**

Maybe almost adulting is about learning which desires are genuinely yours, which ones you inherited from the people around you, and which ones you pursued because they made your future easier to explain.



I think that is the freedom I am trying to exercise by choosing to build a company instead of immediately entering a pre-set system. **Not the freedom of knowing that everything will work out exactly as I want it to, but the freedom of allowing myself to find out.**

Will I take a job someday? ***I don't know.***

Will I pursue an MBA later? ***Why must I decide yes or no right now?***

Will every ambition I have fit neatly into the life I'm building? ***Probably not.***

Some dreams might grow with me. Some might transform into something I cannot currently name. Others may stop feeling like mine altogether.

Maybe almost-adulting isn't about choosing the perfect plan and following it without interruption. Instead, maybe it is about learning which desires are genuinely yours, which ones you inherited from the people around you, and which ones you pursued because they made your future easier to explain.

I still want many things. I still don't have a clean five-year plan. I cannot tell you precisely where this decision will take me or what my life will look like when I reach the other side of it.

But will I give myself a real shot at finding out? ***Absolutely, yes.***

Q&A: Almost Adulting Office Hours

Ten anonymous questions about careers, comparison, ambition and the pressure to have everything figured out.

Q. Everyone on LinkedIn seems to be achieving more than I am. How do I stop treating other people's announcements like evidence that I am behind?

A. It's hard not to compare, especially when everyone's showing their best moments and none of the in-between. Try to remember you're only seeing a highlight, not the whole story. When that feeling of "behind" shows up, gently ask what it's really about, and let curiosity about your own pace work better than panic about everyone else's.

Q. How do I stop saying yes to everything at work when being helpful and well-liked feels like job security?

A. Saying yes so often can come from a kind and generous place, but also from a quiet fear of not being needed. You might try one small, gentle no this week, just to notice what happens. Often, very little does. And that alone can be reassuring.

Shruti holds a master's degree in psychology and draws upon her knowledge and perspective to offer thoughtful, compassionate guidance. Here, she answers questions submitted *anonymously* by L&M readers, giving voice to the worries that often trouble us but rarely make it into conversation.

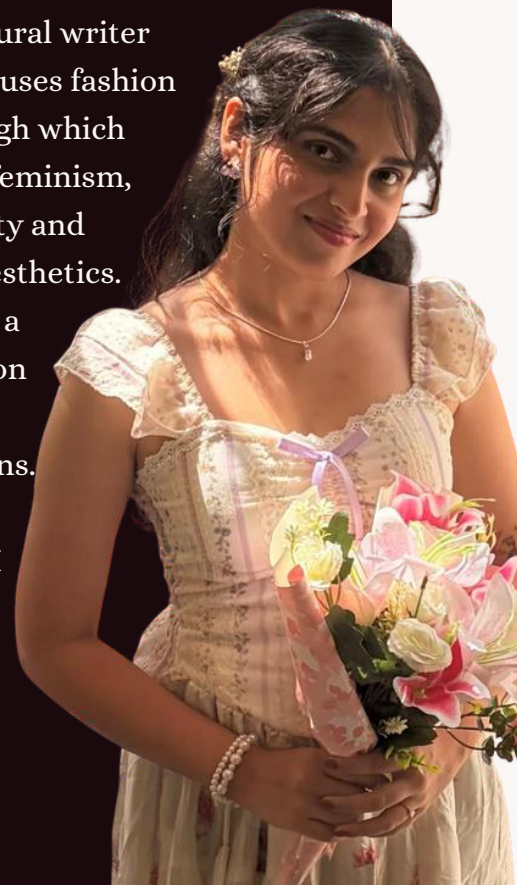
Meet Shruti

Shruti is a cultural writer and critic who uses fashion as a lens through which she examines feminism, gender, identity and postcolonial aesthetics.

She is building a career in fashion media and PR communications.

READ MORE FROM SHRUTI @rkiveofru on Substack

substack.com/@rkiveofru



Q. How do I stop feeling as though one wrong career decision could ruin my entire future?

A. It's understandable to fear one choice could undo everything but careers rarely work that way. They're shaped by many small adjustments. If a choice turns out wrong, you won't be stuck; you'll be informed. Informed people make better decisions.

Q. How can I remain ambitious without allowing my work to become my entire identity?

A. It's easy for "what I do" to quietly become "who I am," especially when you care deeply about your work. Protect a few parts of yourself that don't report to anyone: a hobby, a friendship, a Tuesday with no agenda. Not as an escape from ambition, but as a gentle reminder that you're more than your output.

Q. How do I know whether a job is genuinely wrong for me, or whether I am simply struggling through the uncomfortable beginning?

A. Growth discomfort and misalignment discomfort feel similar at first, but they behave differently over time. One eases as skills catch up; the other doesn't move no matter how competent you become. Give yourself a little time to find out, and trust what you're feeling if it doesn't ease.



Q. How can I set boundaries early in my career without appearing lazy, difficult or uncommitted?

A. A boundary offered calmly and kindly rarely comes across as lazy. It tends to read as someone who understands themselves. You don't need to over-explain or apologize for having limits. Naming what you can offer, gently and clearly, is its own quiet form of commitment.

Q. How do I know whether a job is genuinely wrong for me, or whether I am simply struggling through the uncomfortable beginning?

A. Growth discomfort and misalignment discomfort feel similar at first, but they behave differently over time. One eases as skills catch up; the other doesn't move no matter how competent you become. Give yourself a little time to find out, and trust what you're feeling if it doesn't ease.

Q. I am doing well on paper, but I still need constant reassurance that I am good enough. How do I build confidence that does not depend on praise?

A. Needing reassurance doesn't mean you're not good enough. It usually means you haven't yet learned to trust your own judgment first. Try quietly noticing and trusting your efforts before anyone else responds to them. Slowly, gently, that becomes its own kind of steadiness; one that doesn't depend on someone else noticing.

Q. Is it okay not to have a five-year plan, and how do I choose a direction when I am still figuring out who I want to become?

A. Rigid long-term plans can quietly become a way to avoid the discomfort of not knowing. Not having it all mapped out doesn't mean you're lost; it might just mean you're still listening to yourself. It's alright to be guided by curiosity and what feels meaningful right now, rather than a fixed destination. Often, direction becomes clearer only once you look back at it.



Q. Why do I feel guilty whenever I rest, especially when everyone around me seems to be doing more?

A. The guilt felt while resting often isn't really yours. It's borrowed, absorbed somewhere along the way. Rest isn't something to earn; it's part of how you keep going. You're allowed to slow down sometimes, even when it feels like everyone else hasn't. The people who last longest aren't the ones who never stop. They're the ones who know when to.

Q. How do I define success for myself when my family, my peers and the internet all seem to have different ideas about what my life should look like?

A. So many voices offer their own idea of what your life should look like, family, peers, the world online. It's alright to set those aside for a moment and ask, gently, what would feel good to you. The useful question isn't "am I ahead," but "does this actually match what I care about?" That quieter answer is usually closer to what success really means for you.

CAREER PATH: ROUTE RECALCULATING

Which route is your internal GPS currently attempting?

START
HERE

1

1. YOUR IDEAL WORKDAY

- **PINK** — Clear schedule
- **PURPLE** — Three different projects
- **TEAL** — Different every day

2

2. YOU FOLLOW

- **PINK** — The sensible plan
- **PURPLE** — Maximum exploration
- **TEAL** — Instinct and vibes

3

3. YOUR LINKEDIN BIO

- **PINK** — One clear title
- **PURPLE** — At least three slashes
- **TEAL** — Identity update pending

4

4. WHEN PLANS FAIL

- **PINK** — Make a spreadsheet
- **PURPLE** — Add another path
- **TEAL** — Spiral, then reinvent

5

5. SUCCESS MEANS

- **PINK** — Security and growth
- **PURPLE** — Freedom to explore
- **TEAL** — A life that feels mine

6

6. FIVE YEARS FROM NOW

- **PINK** — Senior position
- **PURPLE** — Multi-hyphenate life
- **TEAL** — Ask again in five years

TALLY YOUR ROUTE

- **PINK** _____
- **PURPLE** _____
- **TEAL** _____

MOSTLY PINK — THE STRUCTURED STAR

You love milestones, but changing the plan does not mean you failed it.

MOSTLY PURPLE — THE MULTI-HYPHENATE

Your career is a constellation, not a ladder.

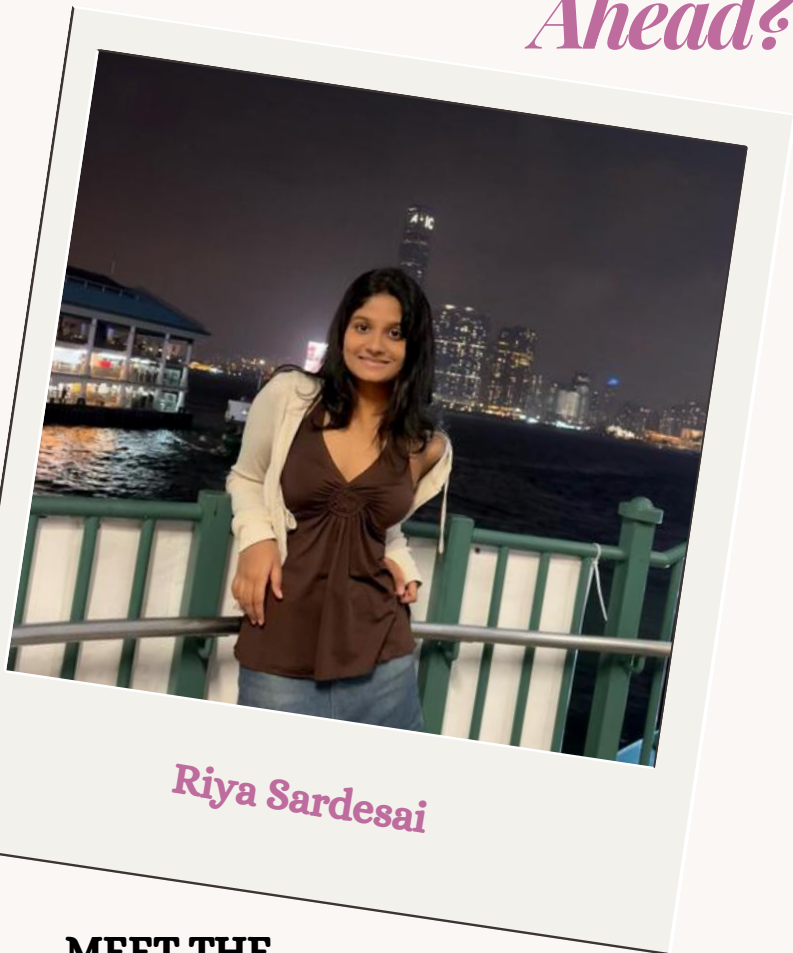
MOSTLY TEAL — THE SCENIC-ROUTE SPECIALIST

Plot twists are part of your professional development.

CAREER CLARITY: **4,782 KM**

No route is final. All destinations remain editable.

Am I Falling Behind, or Is Everyone Just Ahead?



Riya Sardesai

MEET THE WRITER

Riya Sardesai is a second-year Electronics and Instrumentation Engineering student at BITS Pilani Goa, a writer and a national-level table tennis player. She is the author of *Stories Beneath the Surface* and a certified listener on 7 Cups. She is also developing a streetwear brand while exploring Figma, UI/UX, animation and the creative possibilities beyond engineering.

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I think I have a bad habit of measuring my life against people who aren't even measuring theirs against me.

I first noticed it a few months into college. It wasn't one dramatic moment. **I just started looking around and feeling like everyone had something.** There was always someone who was really good at something, someone who knew exactly what they wanted to do, someone who had already started building towards it. I couldn't point to one thing and say, That's mine. **I had plenty of interests, but most of them were still just interests. I could tell you what I wanted to try much more easily than I could tell you what I had actually done.**

I've always been interested in a lot of things, which sounds great until you realise how little I have actually followed through on. I've wanted to make content for years. I'll get an idea, get excited about it, plan the whole thing in my head and then somehow never film it. I tell myself I don't have the time, but sometimes I'm just scared it won't be good. **What if nobody watches? What if I put myself out there and realise I'm not as good as I thought I was?**

Finance is another thing I say I'm interested in without having properly learnt it. Coding has been sitting on my list for ages too. Even **table tennis**, which should probably be the one thing I can point to because I played at the national level, doesn't make me feel particularly accomplished anymore. I don't even think I'm that good at it now.





That was when I started wondering if I was just directionless. I knew I wanted to do something with my life, but wanting a lot of things isn't the same as actually building towards them. **And the more I noticed what other people were doing, the more obvious that gap started to feel. The frustrating part was that I wasn't actually doing nothing. I was constantly trying to change the situation.** I'd apply for things, cold-DM people I'd never met, look for opportunities and try to get into clubs I wanted. I'd push myself to talk to people even though I'm not naturally good at it. I kept thinking that if I just tried hard enough, eventually something would click.



But effort is difficult to measure when there isn't an outcome attached to it. Sending ten messages and getting no response doesn't look like progress. Neither does applying for something and getting rejected. After a while, I started judging myself almost entirely by what I had to show for my efforts rather than whether I was actually moving forward.



I think college makes this especially easy to do. There are so many visible markers of what we're supposed to consider progress. Your **CGPA** is a number you can compare. A club position becomes a line on your CV. An **internship** becomes an announcement. Even the things you enjoy can start feeling more valuable once they've turned into something impressive enough to post about. None of these things are bad. I want good grades and opportunities too. **But when everyone is constantly showing some form of achievement, it becomes very easy to feel like you're doing nothing if you don't have something equally obvious to point to.**

Instagram takes that feeling and makes it impossible to leave campus. I'm about to turn twenty, and I'll see people younger than me doing things that I find genuinely impressive, and my brain immediately turns it into a question about myself. **What am I doing? What's going to make me stand out? Should I have started earlier?** I know I'm seeing a tiny, curated part of someone's life. I know comparing my entire existence to one person's post is ridiculous. I still do it.

I think what I'm actually jealous of isn't always the achievement itself. It's the certainty I imagine comes with it. **When someone seems to have found their thing, I assume they must know where they're going. I don't feel like that. I worry about my future, whether I'm making the right choices and whether I'll eventually look back and realise I wasted time I could have used better.**

And underneath all of that is probably my biggest fear: that I'm capable of more, but I'm the reason I'm not doing it.

That's a difficult thought to sit with because sometimes I know exactly what's stopping me. I'm afraid of being bad at something in public. I'm afraid of trying properly and finding out that I wasn't actually good enough. **So I wait. I tell myself I'll do it when I have more time, when college isn't so hectic, when I feel more confident.**

Tomorrow has become this imaginary version of me who is somehow more disciplined and less afraid.

I eventually started talking to my friends about feeling behind. One of my friends has a 9 CGPA. In my head, she was obviously doing better than me. So when she told me she also felt behind, my first thought was genuinely, But you have a 9 CGPA. I had almost the same reaction when another friend told me she felt behind. She has a family business, so my brain immediately went, Okay, but at least you have a backup option. **It was almost funny how quickly I could find a reason that someone else's problems shouldn't count.** I had created this imaginary hierarchy where everyone was ahead of me because they had—

—something I didn't. Their grades, opportunities or circumstances could always be used as proof that they were doing better. **But if I could look at my friends that way, they could probably be doing the same thing to me.** The friend with the 9 CGPA might be comparing herself to someone else entirely.

Someone who looks like they've figured everything out might be worried about something I know nothing about.

I can never see the full picture of another person's life, but I've been using the tiny part I can see to decide where I stand.

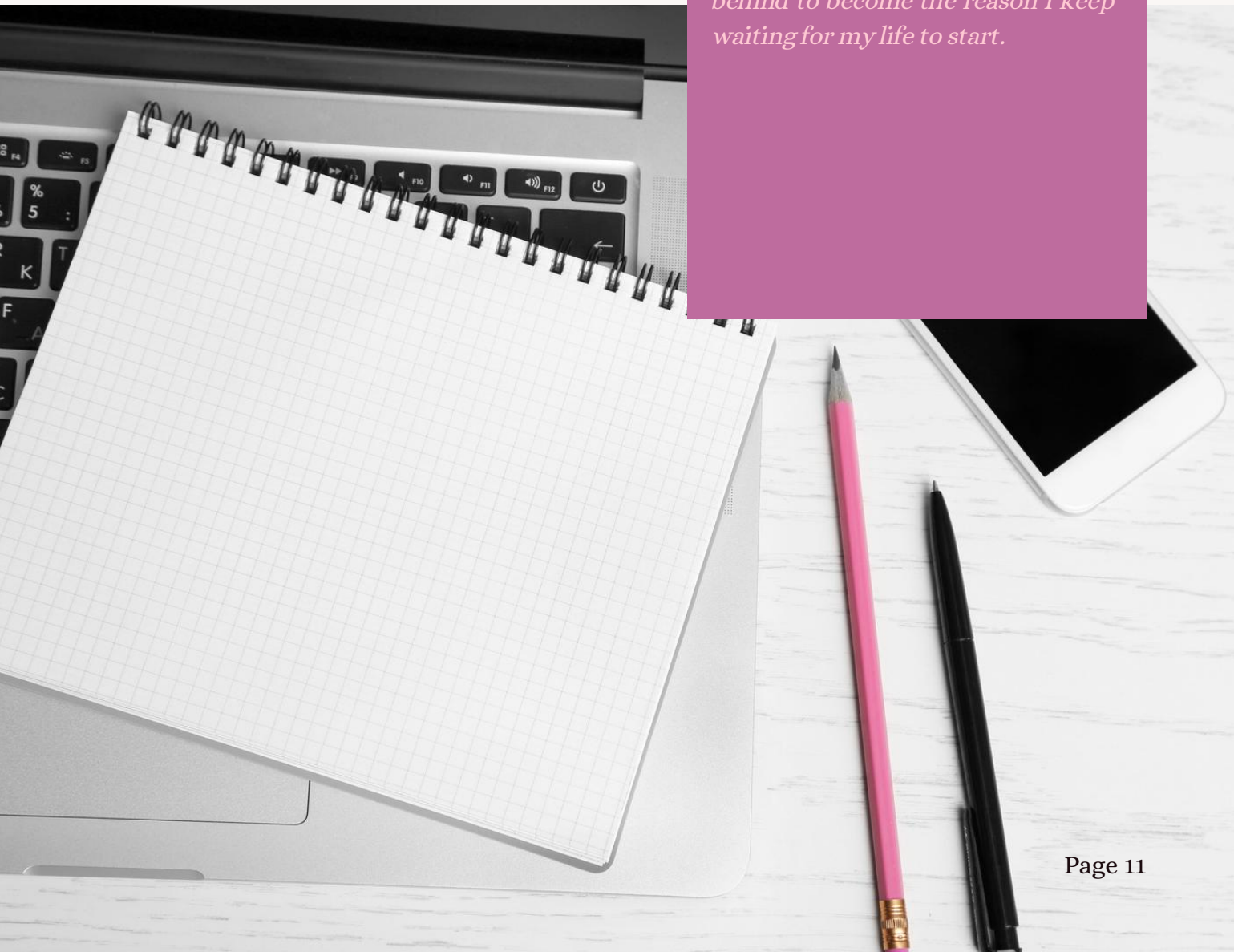


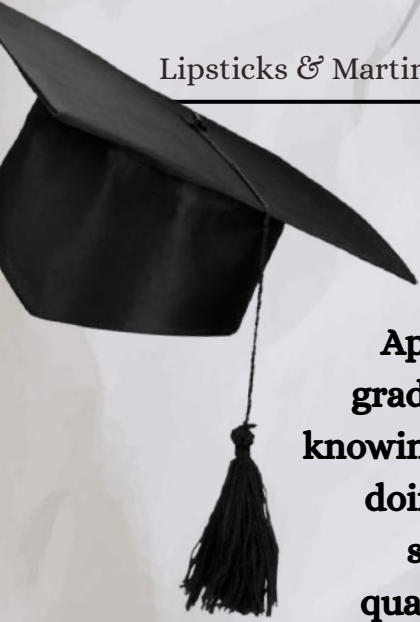
Knowing that hasn't magically stopped me from feeling behind. **I still have moments where I look at what I've done and wonder if it should have been more by now. I still don't have a clear answer for what my "thing" is, and I don't think I suddenly will just because I turned twenty.** But maybe that's what I've been getting wrong. I've been treating being ahead as if it's a destination, when I don't even know what I'm racing towards. I'm still nineteen. I don't have everything figured out, and honestly, I don't think I need to. I just don't want the fear of falling behind to become the reason I keep waiting for my life to start. I might still compare myself tomorrow. I probably will. But I can keep going anyway. I'm not behind. I'm just not finished yet.



“

I don't have everything figured out, and honestly, I don't think I need to. I just don't want the fear of falling behind to become the reason I keep waiting for my life to start.





**Apparently,
graduating and
knowing what you're
doing are two
separate
qualifications.**



**Too many titles and
even more
expectations and
absolutely no idea
what to pack for
lunch.**

The Five Year Plan: Revision History

***A paper trail of every future that
made perfect sense at the time.***



**Applications
temporarily paused
due to rent, deposits
and the price of
buying a single chair.**



**Personal timeline
unknown. Relatives
have already
requested an official
update.**

**Currently loading.
Please stop adding
things to cart while
you wait.**



**Everything was
scheduled perfectly
until life developed a
personality.**



Apparently, I Knew Everything at 18

At eighteen, I had the next ten years planned. Then college, careers and becoming herself rewrote the itinerary.

Taylor Swift was right when she wrote the lyrics “**how can a person know everything at 18...and nothing at 22?**” This line perfectly fits my life right now, and would send chills down my 18-yearold self. Wanna know what I mean? Read along!

Back when I was 18, in 2022, it was my life purpose to get into a good college, because in my head, good college = easy life. I got into BITS in 2022, and I had a 10 year long life plan: how I would come out a software girlie, work for a couple years, do MBA and get into Finance. It seemed like the perfect, most well thought-out path, primarily because my sister had a very similar path, and she was my benchmark. I felt like I had cracked the code of life, but boy that very thought makes me laugh now – ***because I’m 22 and facing more uncertainties than EVER.***

My 10 year plan started dwindling in my first year of college life, when coding started frustrating me and made me want to throw out my laptop. This was around the time I first learnt about stocks – basic fundamental/technical analysis stuff – and I was glued to my screen, taking out time to read it a little everyday (a rare occurrence for someone who runs from acads time to time).



Shereen Malani

MEET THE WRITER

Shereen Malani is a BITS Goa graduate currently working in finance while searching for a career that brings her creativity and logic together. A writer, dancer, occasional singer and committed overthinker, she moves between existential crises and romanticising everyday life. Her Issue 04 essay marks a return to the inner writer she is ready to rediscover.

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As I explored – I came across quant finance – finance + coding...cool right? Right??? **Except not.**

I passionately built projects, tried to learn new concepts but when I was met with the reality that the path is a very tough nut to crack, my delusion cracked. I still kept going until one day imagining myself sitting behind 4 screens, coding out the signals – just didn't click. 'Coz wasn't I actually running from that very thing? I'll be honest, I realized this only recently, in my 8th semester. After completing the finance minor, building projects and trying everything I could think of. **It was like a mini heartbreak, liberating but made me have a mini existential crisis at 21.** Just as I thought my life couldn't get any more unpredictable – I declined my on campus job days before joining because several things didn't align for me and I chose my mental peace. Which was ruined when I started job hunting, after college at home.

But standing today, I'd say it was worth it. These months at home was when I realized, that maybe – just maybe, I don't even want to do corporate my entire life, maybe I want to build a personal brand, something that feels me through and through. I don't know, and I don't know what the next 5 years of my life even look like.

I had a very different perspective back then about friendships too, that I would find group(s) of friends and would have the most LIT college life ever. **The reality? Quite different than the fantasy in my head.** I absolutely have a few friends, who I'm sure are my lifelong ones, but not a coherent group per se. Many days, I would have no plans, others would be busy, and I'd just be by myself. For someone whose mind isn't the quietest place when left alone, I did eventually start liking my company a lot more. So much that I became reserved, a little introvert, but the good bit was that I was now very cautiously selective of my energy. My friends would get my raw, unfiltered, goofy side – and others would get a quiet girl who was a little awkward sustaining small talk (and still does)

I changed in ways I didn't expect myself to. I became more open minded, less judgmental, and much bolder than I thought I would ever be. It was like I had a whole new side of me that I was surprised to discover – the fun, unhinged, bold side of me my parents don't even know fully exists. The side that made me more dramatic, confident and somehow less tolerant of things that don't serve me.

But its not always like this, even today, there are days when I genuinely feel behind, feel a little lonely on days when camera roll hits me with campus memories, and spiral for hours when I cannot see a timeline that would fit my ideal life. **I completely forget that I am doing the adult version of what I did at 18.** But hey! Don't come at me, I'm only 21! Who knows, maybe 5 years from now I'd be writing another blog about my 21 year old self, laughing at how narrow my vision was 5 years back.



To all the girlyies reading this – adulthood is scary, makes you question your achievements, amplifies your doubts and makes you feel like you're doing it all wrong. But luckily, starting from late teens to mid(ish) 20s, you have a lot of time to find your calling, your people, your identity, which will keep evolving no matter what you try to do, so at best, just be (occasional spirals allowed).

Once you realize *you're the author of your life, the protagonist*, it feels a little less daunting. Fall in love, be crazy (within limits), dance your heart out on random nights, laugh until you can't anymore, work hard, travel solo, dress up and be the girl you've always dreamt of being.



“

Surely there'll be days when you feel the complete opposite: heartbroken, sad and cranky, cooped up in bed, and that's okay too, as long as you get back up again. It's all a part of the process. You wouldn't realize when you become resilient and face the difficulties that would've once broke you. You'll never get a decade as exciting and scary as the 20s again, so make the most out of it! Cheers!



A WOMAN STILL FIGURING IT OUT

ABOUT ME

An ambitious twenty-something with experience in changing her mind, beginning again and continuing despite insufficient evidence that everything will work out. Particularly skilled at surviving uncertain seasons, learning things the difficult way and appearing approximately 40% more composed than she feels.

Position applied for:
Functional Adult

Current status:
Application under review

Availability:
Emotionally dependent on the day

Expected compensation:
Financial stability and peace of mind

References:
Past Me: impressed
Future Me: unavailable for comment

EDUCATION HISTORY

School of Figuring It Out

Relevant Coursework

- Advanced Overthinking
- Boundaries 101
- Introduction to Financial Independence
- Making Appointments Without Calling Your Mother
- Applied Friendship Maintenance

KEY SKILLS

- Being alone without being lonely
- Recognising when something no longer fits
- Continuing without external validation
- Looking calm during minor internal emergencies
- Turning a breakdown into a breakthrough

ESTIMATED COMPLETION: UNAVAILABLE

WORKING EXPERIENCE

Rebuild confidence after a bad week

- Survived setbacks like a pro and mastered the art of keeping it together

Changed direction without calling it failure

- Successfully abandoned plans that stopped feeling like mine

Showed up while uncertain

- Repeatedly entered rooms before feeling completely ready

Rested without feeling guilty

- Currently gaining experience.

STILL BUILDING

67% BECOMING



MEET THE WRITER

Swara Wankhede is a third-year Economics and Computer Science student at BITS Pilani and the writer behind IT Girl Diaries, a weekly blog spanning agentic AI, personal finance, psychology, fiction and personal essays. Her interest in social entrepreneurship also informs the edtech and career-exploration platform she is currently building.

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The Internet Made My Twenty Feel Late

Some days I spend way more time than I plan on scrolling through my feed. I tell myself I'm just gathering inspiration, but really it's just comparison, post after post. One night, these thoughts got too loud, so I pulled out my journal and let it spill out: *"I feel underqualified to start a business and feel like everyone else is so ahead. It feels lonely... Why does it seem so easy when you see other 20-year-olds starting their own fashion brand and succeeding?"*

Looking back, that panic had very little to do with building a business and everything to do with time, or what felt like a shrinking amount of it. Turning twenty was supposed to feel like a new beginning, not a deadline. **I felt as if I was supposed to live my whole life within my teenage years.**

Growing up online meant watching teenage founders and people my own age rack up achievements that felt impossible.

It warped my sense of a normal timeline, like if I hadn't done something huge by twenty, I was already behind. It's a distortion a lot of people in their early twenties are living through right now.





We mostly see success stories online; people rarely post the hundred failures that led there. Even when they do, we don't focus on the journey. We only care about the outcome, and look up to them once they've finally achieved something great. *We're comparing our inward, unfinished, unposted process to their already-validated win.* That mismatch is exactly why content marketed as motivational, videos, essays, podcasts about other people's success, so often ends up pressurising instead of encouraging. I felt that pressure myself, and for a long time, it pointed me straight at the wrong goal. Someone else was on the investment banking path, getting praised for it, so I decided I should want that too. **I wanted the status, but did I actually want the work underneath it? Was I willing to make the sacrifices it demanded? Wanting to be seen as impressive is a different desire than wanting to build something I actually care about.**



The deeper question is, why did I have these 'borrowed' dreams? Why did seeing someone else's success story make me want it, even when I knew it wasn't for me?



The answer is that borrowed dreams take hold because they're fed by something real, other people's validation of them. Psychologists call this verbal persuasion, one of the sources of self-efficacy. *Self-efficacy theory* helps us understand where a person's belief in their own ability actually comes from. This source tells us that our confidence is built on being told, encouraged, praised by people we trust.



So when someone posted their success story on LinkedIn and got praise in the comments, I took in secondhand evidence too, proof that this was something worth wanting.

But confidence built this way, on being told rather than on doing, is a fragile kind.

It depends on the praise continuing to arrive. Real belief works almost the opposite way. It doesn't wait for proof; it has to exist first, before anything has confirmed it's worth having. ***Erifili Gounari calls this being 'a little bit delusional,' believing in something before the evidence has caught up to it.***

That's exactly the inward stretch successful people went through, before there was anything to show. Their dreams were built in silence, fuelled by self-belief we never got to see. We only see the finished, polished version, the one that finally gets the praise

How do I believe in something enough to actually do it, before anyone else has confirmed it's worth doing?

Self-efficacy has a few different sources, and one of them is mastery experience. **Real belief compounds the same way any skill does, through small, repeated actions, showing up, trying again, finishing something small, that you notice yourself, not ones an audience has to confirm first.** So now, I keep a log of evidence that I'm building toward my dreams.

I don't just preserve my achievements, I preserve every step: the rough draft nobody's read yet, the pitch that went nowhere, the hour spent on something that might not even work out.

That's the actual reframe: ***twenty never was late, I just didn't have a record of my own unfinished middle to compare against everyone else's finished ending. Now I do.***

Six months after that first journal entry, I wrote another one: "I have been comparing myself to others again, but at least not as badly as I used to. Now, I recognise it and take time to process my emotions." In those six months, I'd learnt to catch my comparison patterns faster, and build up proof that I wasn't behind. I didn't feel like I had to live my whole life by twenty anymore. Twenty is just how old I am. That's all it ever was.



evidence that i am becoming

a completely unofficial progress check

start

When plans
change, what
happens?

I spiral

I adjust

You made a
mistake. Your
next move?

Replay it
forever

Learn and
continue

Someone
dislikes your
boundary. You...

Take it back

Let them
feel it

An opportunity
scares you. You...

Wait to feel
ready

Try while
nervous

A difficult day
arrives. You...

Call it failure

Let it be
one day

CATCHING IT

You still meet the old
patterns, but you notice
them sooner.
Awareness counts.

CHOOSING AGAIN

You are making
different choices, even
when the familiar one
feels safer.

BECOMING

You are not waiting to
feel fearless. You are
building proof by
continuing.

growth rarely announces itself



Chapter 2: The Person

Becoming rarely looks dramatic while it is happening. This chapter is about confidence, girlhood, identity, femininity, curiosity and the small evidence that we are growing into women our younger selves may not yet recognise.

INSIDE THIS CHAPTER

I'm a gallery of everything and everyone I've ever loved

The Lipstick Shade I never outgrew

The L&M Song Receipt

No one tells you how strange it feels to be capable and still not feel confident

Introducing L&M Girl Wall

Yearning for adulthood while making sure I don't mourn my teenage

The Elle Woods Tax

Nerdy Interests Scatter

The Woman I'm becoming would surprise the Girl I was

The house that never stops building



Ishita Aggarwal

MEET THE WRITER

Ishita Aggarwal is a writer and digital creator with a talent for turning passing thoughts into engaging, personality-led stories. Her work is curious, conversational and distinctly human, usually produced with plenty of caffeine and a well-timed flow state. She writes longer reflections through Life of Issue on Substack and creates as @insightsbyishita on Instagram.

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Let me be your tour guide today!

This house was established **21 years ago**, and since then, it's never been off a construction project. Situated in the countryside, at the corner of the street, the three-sided open house cannot be perceived into a single adjective. **It's got character. Rustic details. A traditional facade.**

At its inception, it was just a 2x2 room with very fragile, exposed brick; it took more than six months for the paint to dry. It's a **pastel pink** room with beautiful fairy lights and a nice bedspread. It was very warm in there. Soon, a hallway was constructed. A long passage, wooden flooring, profile lighting. The walls were filled with picture frames and doors, leading to each room.

When it hit the six-year mark, a new room was built right alongside the first. **Let's call it the eldest-daughter room.** It was very hard to establish the walls of this room. The bricks were somehow heavier than ever. More so, they were stronger, built to last, and could tolerate extreme weather conditions, demolitions, and any unplanned damage that might occur. It was colder and darker here.

Somehow it was never finished. There was always something that was a work in progress.

One wall was white, the other was red. Woodwork everywhere. A humongous instruction manual was found in the middle of the room. Looks like it's finished halfway. Anyways, we'll come back here soon. Let's go back.

We stumble into the living room. It is huge. Tall bamboo plants at every corner, big windows overlooking the garden. A lot of light, a lot of green. The couch looks vintage, comfy. No big lights in here. Only mini lamps, accent lights. The place invites comfort. There's no space for stress here. If a room were to give a hug, this would be it. It's a place to relax. A place to hangout. To have drinks after dinner. To have a movie night with your bestfriend. To play mafia with your gang. It's the mom-of-the-group space. It takes care of you. Comforts you. I hope you never wanna leave this space.



Across the living room, we find the kitchen. The place always smells delicious. **Sometimes sweet and chocolatey, sometimes sharp and tangy. Sometimes things burn, get spoiled, or the recipe gets fucked up but eh, that's just a part of life.** The kitchen should always be open. The sink must be filled up, again and again. The coffee, should always find its place in the fridge. Caffeine is a big deal here. The back door from the kitchen takes us to the garden. And yes, we can see the living room windows, but can't see the living room.

Privacy isn't superficial no.

The garden has been here since forever. The grass isn't always green, but never refuses to grow. **It spent a lot of time hating itself, judging itself, letting others walk over it comfortably, but it realised that it won't be green unless it begins to water itself without any external validation.** There are tall sunflowers facing the sun, bird feeders hanging on the orange tree, sparrows chirping all around, a water fountain filling all the silences, leaving no room for doubts and hate.

Entering again, moving to the dining room, separated from the kitchen just by a delicate, sheer lacy curtain, the first thing we notice is not the huge round glass table paired with



glass table paired with comfortably cushioned accent chairs but what's on the table. **The table's got a fruit basket, jars of condiments, sleek silverware, turned-down plates, each of a different shape, size, and colour. Even the patterns do not match.**

We find jars of Nutella, pickle, hummus, pesto, olive oil, salt and pepper, mouth fresheners, fruit jams (all in-house btw), rainbow sprinkles, sugar, all in one rotating tray. The table's built for gatherings. **Because, well, with so many rooms and so many women under one roof, all the needs should be catered to!**

We find a set of stairs, a bit steeper, a little harder to climb than the usual ones. What's interesting about this route is that it seems simple at first because it's very well decorated, but its aestheticism cannot provide access to the complete place. Thankfully, we got it. **And there we go, the bedroom—the soul of the house.**

We try to open the door, but uh-oh, the doorknob comes off. It's very difficult to get in. Pushed the door, and finally, we're here. ***But wait, where's the light?***

Reaching back to the bedroom, the first sight is the bed. **It's cozy, clean, laid out with a beautiful pastel bedspread filled with fluffed-up pillows, irregularly shaped cushions, soft toys, little plushies, and a pretty pink, floral duvet.** As clean as the bed is, the side table is equally messy.

There's a small, burnt-red metal lamp with its light spreading downwards, focusing on a thick diary where the edges of the pages are ripped, ink from a leaked pen, a half-empty glass of coffee, and a list of emergency contacts. Alongside the bed, there is a big scenic French window, opening up to tall, lush green palm trees, letting the air and sunlight glimmer their way in. The vibrations of the wind chime – cherry on top. It's like a whole new place. Nobody

could imagine it as a part of the house we just walked through. There's a rope ladder swinging down. It's crazy how tough it is. Three steps in, it's the house attic! It's dark, dusky, with a weird smell, but somehow familiar. There's just a little 2w yellow bulb hanging by a wire. **And there are boxes. A lot of them. It's unorganised in an organised manner. Each box is labelled differently: 9th birthday, childhood traumas, love life, adulting.** There are photos, diary entries, and letters in each one. Sooner or later, we find a box labelled Do Not Open. Discoloured, torn, smelly pages spill out. Some pictures have never been seen before, unsent texts, journal pages, a lot of it more than 6 years old. Dried flowers. ***Receipts. Cassettes were labeled "hear this when you feel like adjusting".***



It was like a cave. A place to hide. A place to weep. A place that said, it's okay; you're safe here.

Climbing down, reaching the bedroom once again, it's so distinct. It's got much more character. There's an abstract wall. Each space is filled with canvases, paintings, crafts, all handmade. Colourplay is demonstrated very clearly. **Each piece is created at a different stage of life. There are a lot of shelves, filled with picture frames, little collectibles, fresh flowers, diffusers, anything to make a place feel more personal.**

The study area is a chamber of its own. It's dimly lit, focused on the desk. Gives a vintage vibe.



A lot of lists, though. A vision board. A vase of sunflowers. A door to the outside world. The balcony.

The balcony overlooks the garden. We can still hear the water fountain here. It's the place nobody wants to leave. Oh, and this is the fun part. There's a slide, taking us straight to the entrance. And look, there's a porch now.

Told ya this house never stops building!



The Lipstick Shade I never outgrew



MEET THE WRITER

Sama Meerza is a beauty journalist and social media professional with over five years of digital-content experience. She currently contributes to Cosmopolitan, Harper's Bazaar, Brides Today and The Style List, writing across beauty, fashion, lifestyle, relationships and sexual wellness. Her storytelling makes trends and modern culture feel immediate, engaging and genuinely connected to the women reading.

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I might've outgrown multiple things over the years, but apparently, this one lipstick shade isn't one of them. **In fact, if you had told the schoolgirl version of me that I would one day have more than 100 red lipsticks sitting in my vanity, I would have probably laughed at you. I was, after all, the girl who acted like makeup was beneath her.**

I was an absolute **pick-me** in school. I didn't like makeup, I didn't understand makeup and I definitely didn't think I needed it. I was very happy being the simple girl who didn't bother with all of it. Which is quite funny in hindsight because I grew up in a house surrounded by women who loved makeup. My mom, grandmother, sister, cousins and aunt were always doing their makeup, and I would watch them do it. Not creepily, of course. I was just genuinely amused by it all. .

I found it fascinating that something as simple as putting something on your face could make such a difference. At the same time, I couldn't understand why anyone needed any of it



I didn't even know what kajal was called in English. I just knew that everyone around me was putting it in their eyes, so eventually, I decided to give it a go. And once I discovered kajal in school, there was never a day when my waterline was spared. I wore it every single day. I was committed. Unfortunately, my commitment was not matched by my technique.

At some point, I realised that kajal was spreading far too much and making me look like I had barely slept. I would leave home looking like a perfectly normal schoolgirl and come back looking like I had spent the night crying over a boy. And mind you, I was in a convent school. I had, in fact, just been sitting through classes or mostly standing outside of them **side eye**.



But while I was slowly figuring out makeup, I had started noticing one particular shade on the women around me. **Red.** Whenever my cousins or my aunt would fly down, I would see them wearing the same shade. Red lipstick and red nail polish. They wore it like it was their bible and they lived by it. There was never any hesitation about the colour. They just wore red. Even today, it is the same for them. **And I think watching them wear that shade every day since my childhood; I fell in love with it too.**

Of course, being in school meant I wasn't allowed to do much makeup. So when I entered college, I finally had a little more freedom to experiment. What I did with that freedom, however, is something I'm still not entirely sure about. My first lipstick that I bought with my own money was **NYX's Copenhagen.** It wasn't red, but I remember being so ridiculously happy about buying it. **NYX** had just launched in India and, as a college student, collecting ₹600 for a lipstick wasn't exactly easy. **That lipstick felt like a proper purchase because I had saved my own money for it.** I remember how happy I was when I finally got it. I may not—

—remember a lot of things now, but that shade is etched in my memory.



Then there was **Nigella Lawson**. Another one of my inspirations. I remember watching her wear the darkest shade of red with a slight tint of pink and desperately wanting that exact colour. So I did what anyone with the internet and obsessed with finding a lipstick shade would do and started a research party of my own. Eventually, I found **MAC Ruby Woo** as the closest option to her shade. Also, we didn't have a lot of brands back then in India.

It was also expensive enough for me to give up on buying it. Back then, it cost me an arm. Now, I would probably say it costs one kidney, but that's a problem for another day. **I had resigned myself to not owning it until my sister gifted me the shade. I loved that lipstick more than anything in the world. It was my baby, the only best thing I had owned.**

And then I barely wore it.

The problem wasn't the lipstick. It was me. I didn't have the confidence to pull off such a strong shade in public. I had a baby face and had somehow convinced myself that everyone would look at me and think I looked ridiculous. Red felt like a lot when I was younger. I wanted it, I loved it, but I wasn't confident enough to actually wear it.

Then, one day, I wore it to college and someone told me I looked like a **"hoe"**. Yes, it was a guy. I was highly upset. ***And because I was young and didn't have the confidence I have now, that one comment was enough to kill my entire red lipstick moment.***

I stopped wearing it. I shifted to a bunch of nudes instead. **I tried to convince myself that they were more my style, but the truth was that none of them made me as happy as red did. I could wear a nude lipstick and feel perfectly fine. I could wear red and feel like myself.** There was a difference. A HUGE difference. It may seem a bit dramatic how I am so sentimental about red lipstick, but that was my first love when it came to makeup.



It wasn't until I started working at a publication that I really gave makeup another go. **Being around the world of PR and free makeup definitely helped. Suddenly, I had access to so many products and I could experiment without constantly thinking about whether I should be spending my money on them. I started getting better at makeup.** I polished my eyeshadow skills, worked on my liner skills and slowly became much more comfortable with trying things I wouldn't have dared to wear before.

And, of course, I went straight back to red.

I started wearing red on my toes and my tips, and definitely on my lips. Once I got over the fear of what people might think, I realised I really didn't care and neither did they. I loved red. I always had. And I wasn't going to let one random comment from college decide what colour I could wear for the rest of my life. ***Although a big fat fuck you to him.***

Today, I have more than 100 red lipsticks in my vanity. Yes, more than 100. No, I don't need that many. Yes, I still continue to collect them. There is always a new red that somehow looks different enough from the other 100 reds I already own to convince me that I need it. I have made peace with the fact that this is probably not a phase. It's a problem. A good one in my eyes at least.

I have also managed to find my perfect red in a **ColourPop**, which I swear by and wear all the time. But even after finding that one, my love for red is still here. If anything, it has only grown. ***I love how a red lip can make me feel put together even when I've done very little else. I love it with a simple makeup look and I love it when I'm properly done up.*** There is just something about that colour that has stayed with me through every version of myself.

And maybe that's why I don't think I'll ever really outgrow it. ***I have outgrown the girl who thought makeup was unnecessary.*** I've outgrown the girl who thought she had to look a certain way to wear red. I've definitely outgrown the girl who let one stupid comment make her feel like she—



—shouldn't wear the lipstick she loved or anything at all. ***My middle finger is still up as I type this out.***

But red stayed. It loved me back. When I didn't know what or how I was feeling, red made me feel pretty and confident. It all started when a little girl watched the women of the house dress up and do their makeup.

I have a feeling I'll be wearing it for a very long time. ***In fact, I can already picture myself as an old woman, sitting in a robe, wearing my diamonds, with classic red lips and red nails, sipping on some water because I don't do alcohol. It is a very specific fantasy, but I like it. Delulu is the solulu, am I right?***

And if I somehow still have 100 plus red lipsticks by then, I could definitely pass them down as heirlooms because in this economy I have nothing else to pass down.



L&M SONG RECEIPT

THE ALMOST-ADULTING PLAYLIST

ORDER #004 FOR LIPSTICKS & MARTINIS.
ISSUE 04 • SEPTEMBER 2026

QTY	ITEM	AMT
01	Ribs – Lorde	4:18
02	Vienna – Billy Joel	3:34
03	Making the Bed – Olivia Rodrigo	3:28
04	The Climb – Miley Cyrus	3:54
05	Expectations – Olivia Rodrigo	3:40
06	Good Days – SZA	4:39
07	End of Beginning – Djo	2:37
08	Rasputin – Boney M. The	3:40
09	The Prophecy – Taylor Swift	4:08
10	Slipping through my fingers – ABBA	3:52

ITEM COUNT: 10

TOTAL: 35:19

CARD #: **** * 1209

CODE: 120926

CARDHOLDER: THE L&M GIRL

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING!



LIPSTICKS & MARTINIS



MEET THE WRITER

Ria Khatoniar is a software engineer at Nutanix and a recent BITS Pilani Goa graduate in Computer Science and Physics. Her work and research interests include artificial intelligence, machine learning, scientific computing and open-source software. She also writes about technology, books and the rabbit holes that capture her curiosity, somewhere between painting, classical dance and learning guitar.

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No one tells you how strange it feels to be capable and still not confident.

For the longest time, I thought confidence would arrive like a letter of permission. One day I'd walk into adulthood prepared with the right words and answers: sharper, calmer, impossible to shake.

Alas! Not long ago I had to leave my make-believe utopia. Adulthood arrived before I felt ready. It came in rooms where everyone else seemed more certain, in questions I hadn't thought to ask, in presentations where my voice slid lower than the slides on the screen. It came with the embarrassment of realising that being hardworking is not the same as being visible, that knowing something privately is not the same as defending it publicly.

No one tells you how strange it feels to be capable and still not confident.

Before entering the corporate world, I lived comfortably inside my own head. In college, I was never the one with a large circle or a loud presence; two close friends felt like enough. My world was built around books, research problems, conversations with professors and the ambition to think deeply about difficult things. I believed that if I worked hard enough and kept following questions, I could build a life around discovery.

And then I entered a world where intelligence had to be spoken, shown in meetings, defended in reviews, questioned by people who had seen more than me. Wait! When did this become my life? ***Exactly. It never comes invited.***

The first few months were difficult. Responsibility came before I knew how to carry it gracefully. **The struggle was real: presenting my work, asking questions at the right time, making my efforts visible without feeling like I was asking to be seen.**



Unexpected questions felt like evidence against myself. How did I not think of that? Why does everyone else seem to understand the problem before I do? Am I behind or simply new?

A kind of shame from being ambitious and then feeling small in the rooms I had prepared to enter haunted me. Not the loud kind, but the quietness that sits with you after a meeting and follows you home.

Every missed answer felt personal. And here comes the loop. As my confidence dropped, I became quieter. Silence felt safe. If I didn't speak, I couldn't be wrong. But invisibility has its own cost.

One day I admitted that my silence was no longer protecting me. It was making me smaller.

So I began again, awkwardly, asking more questions, approaching people even when I feared sounding uninformed, telling myself that people with more experience aren't proof of my inadequacy; sometimes they are simply evidence of time.

Slowly, I saw that everyone who sounded certain had once been new to a room. That's when the room changed. Or maybe I did.

I used to think confidence was a feeling. Now I think it's more of a relationship, one you build with yourself over the years, growing every time you speak with a shaking voice and realise the world doesn't end there.



But another uncertainty remains. **There is still the girl I imagined I would become, the one who would study deeply, build something important, become extraordinary without losing herself.**

Some days she inspires me. She reminds me to work harder, dream bigger, not settle too early. But some days she is cruel: making my present feel insufficient, rest feel like laziness, confusion feel like failure, asking why I'm not further ahead. This is the strange thing about ambition in your twenties: it can be both a mariner's needle and a punishment.

Part of me wants to sharpen every skill and become undeniable while another part wants to stay soft enough to notice the sky on my way to the office. **I want to succeed, yes, but not at the cost of becoming a stranger to myself.** Before I was trying to become excellent, I was also a girl who loved art, who painted, danced, read novels, wrote things she never showed anyone.

These things don't answer where I'll be in five years, but they keep me human.



Art gives me a place to put the feelings ambition doesn't know what to do with. When my mind feels overcrowded with goals and comparisons, it returns me to something simpler: a reminder that I am not only a person trying to become impressive, but also a person trying to feel alive.

Maybe a meaningful life doesn't require choosing between becoming excellent and remaining whole; maybe the artistic self isn't a distraction from ambition, but what keeps ambition from turning into emptiness.



There are practical things now too: earning money, saving for plans, thinking about higher studies, trying to understand what kind of work and person I want to become. ***This is the pressure of independence, the uncertainty of direction, the negotiation between what is urgent and important.*** Some days I feel clear; other days I feel like I'm holding too many possible futures in my hands.

But maybe that is what this age is: not a clean arrival into adulthood, but a long apprenticeship in becoming. I am not yet the person I imagined. I am less certain, less polished, less fearless than her, but I am also more real. I have failed in rooms and returned to them, lost confidence and rebuilt it slowly. ***I have learned that being capable does not always feel like being certain. Sometimes it feels like trying again while still afraid, asking the question, admitting I don't know yet staying in the room anyway.***

And maybe that is enough for now.



Confidence does not arrive before the room; it arrives because we keep entering. Maybe the future self I have been chasing isn't waiting at some distant finish line. She is being made here, in the midst of uncertainty, by the girl who is still learning how to speak, how to build, how to dream, and how not to abandon herself on the way.



CONFIDENCE

Introducing *The L&M Girl Wall*

For the first time, L&M is opening its pages specifically to **writers aged 18 and under.**

Teenagehood is filled with firsts, contradictions, questions, changing friendships, ambitious dreams and enough everyday shenanigans to fill several magazines. It is the season in which **girls begin discovering who they are**, what they believe and which parts of themselves they want to carry into adulthood.

These girls will slowly grow into thoughtful, brilliant and beautifully individual women. **But their voices should not have to wait until then to be taken seriously.**

The L&M Girl Wall is our new space for **younger writers** to share their stories, ideas and observations in their own words. They **do not need a perfect résumé**, professional experience or a completely polished perspective. They only need something they genuinely want to say.

We are incredibly grateful to **Shreyanshi** for trusting us with her work and becoming the first writer featured on The L&M Girl Wall. Her contribution marks the beginning of a space we hope will make many young girls feel that

Yearning for my adulthood while making sure I don't mourn my teenage



MEET THE WRITER

Shreyanshi Srivastava is a fifteen-year-old student and the inaugural writer of The L&M Girl Wall. She explores girlhood, identity and the beautifully confusing business of growing up, writing from within questions she has not answered yet. Her contribution captures the tension between longing for adulthood and learning not to rush through the life she is living now.

I have spent a surprising amount of my teenage years wanting them to end.

Not because I disliked being a teenager. But because I was eager to become an adult who doesn't need a guardian every time she goes somewhere, pays her own bills, basically all the small things that feel like independence to me. But as every day feels like a countdown to adulthood, I'm realising that once I enter my twenties, I will no longer be the teenager I am today. ***As simple as that sounds, I used to fear this because I confused having a life with having a plan.***

I used to panic at the thought of me not having everything figured out just yet because every day as a teenager, I get asked about what I want to do with my life, who I want to be when I grow up, what dreams I want to pursue as if I have all the right answers.

But honestly? ***I don't think there is a right answer.*** I lived through yesterday without knowing how today will be and similarly I might have made plans for the future 2 years ago without having any knowledge of where I stand today.

So would that mean being an adult would align my entire life story instantly? Would I just wake up one day with no doubt in my head and answers in my hands?

Because that is what we, as teenagers, think being an adult feels like—knowing it all.

Being fifteen, I perceive myself as someone who is a mess, all over the place, not knowing what to do, obsessing over the unpredictable future. **But at the same time someone who feels things intensely and becomes passionate about things, experiencing everything for the first time, like the first step on the road after the first snowfall of the year.**

I would expect adulthood to have similar ups and downs, friendships, emotions but with a sense of familiarity because of my teenage self. I remember when I went shopping for the first time with my friends and how independent it felt to look after myself and interact with people. Even the slightest hint of independence made me feel elated.

Every time I laugh during classes with my friends even though we're on our last warning from the teacher makes me realise how stupid and childish we are, but in a cute way. When I was finally able to recreate the makeup tutorial I saw online, I was the happiest person alive.

Whilst all these things kept becoming memories stored at the back of my head, even the smallest things feel so precious to remember.

Whenever I am being a typical teenager and living moments like these, I have one thought every time *"I'll forever miss being like this"* because even as a teenager I am realizing that every single thing that I have experienced is what has built fifteen years of my life.



When I picture myself being twenty four, sitting in a cafe somewhere, thinking about my life before I entered my adult era, I think the little moments that have kept me happy will be the ones I remember. ***I don't think the stress I carried about my future will be the one I will remember the most.***

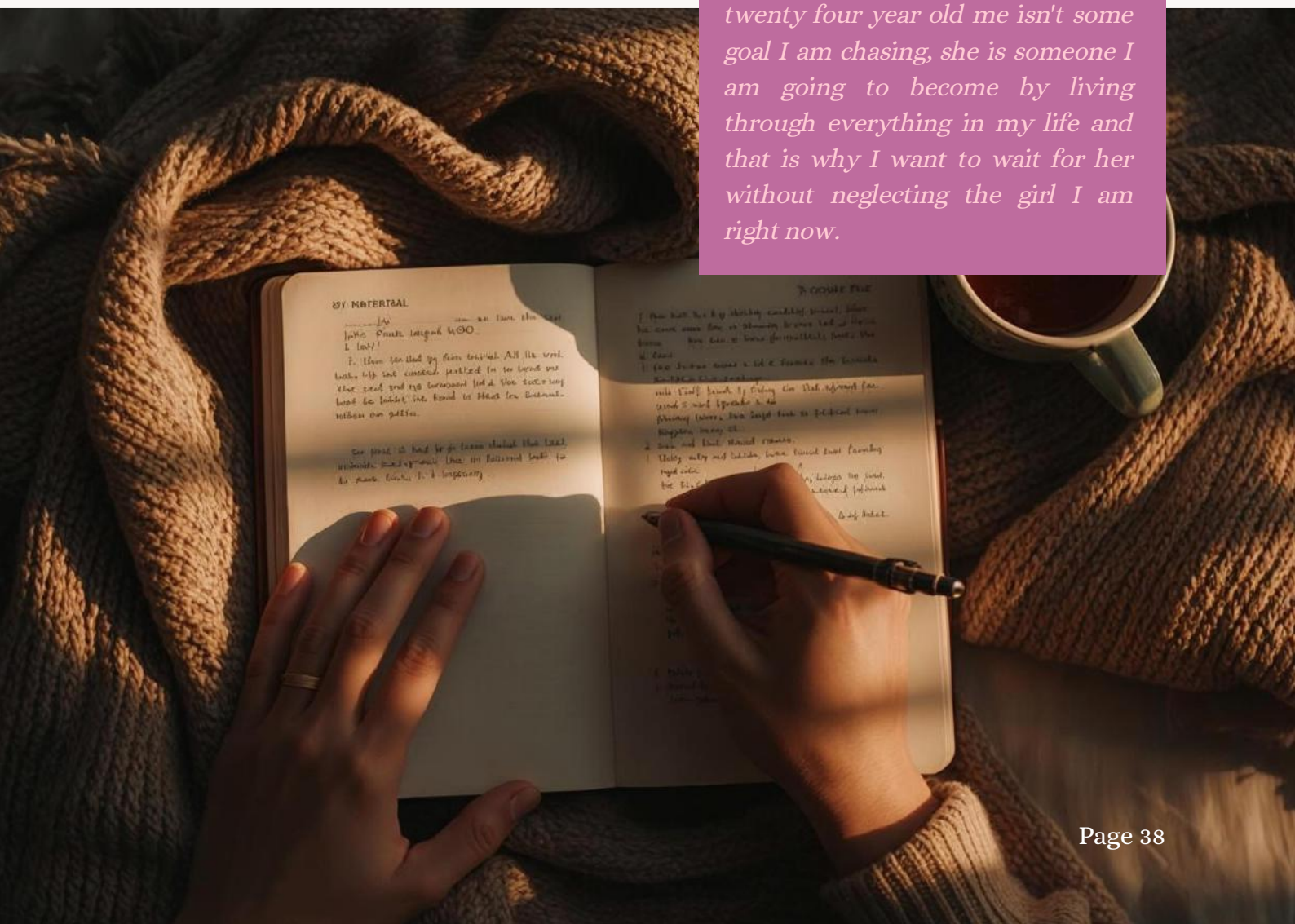


Whenever I think about the woman I want to become, I think less about if she followed the same goals as me but about whether she still feels like me. **I hope that she is an independent, beautifully grown, mature woman who has had numerous experiences and lessons. But at the same time I still want her to preserve the sensitive, passionate and curious girl and never let go of her because just like my childhood self has shaped me into who I am today, I am shaping who my adult version would be.** But that doesn't mean being fifteen is a preparation for who I will be when I'm twenty. It means that I don't need to plan my twenties perfectly. **Thinking about the future does sound scary because it is unpredictable but I have now realised that my adult self is still just a girl, but wiser and more experienced.**



“

I am still excited about entering adulthood because adulting is not about certainty, it is about being comfortable with not having the right answers all at once. Maybe twenty four year old me isn't some goal I am chasing, she is someone I am going to become by living through everything in my life and that is why I want to wait for her without neglecting the girl I am right now.



The Elle Woods Tax

Let's start by talking about **Elle Woods** who was the inspiration behind this entire article. If you have watched the movie **Legally Blonde** (watch it if you haven't already!), Elle can be always seen in bright, colourful, sparkly clothes, something that sets her apart from her peers at Harvard Law where everyone is expected to dress in **grey, monotone, bland clothes**. But even 25 years later, the real world hasn't caught up to the movie.

In this article, the "**Elle Woods Tax**" is referred to the invisible tax that women pay. **The glamorous girl who mutes her monograms and bows the day she enters a boardroom, the "girly" woman who over-corrects into blazers and neutrals to be believed in a meeting.** Femininity isn't just seen as separate from competence, its read as evidence against it. And for someone who dresses in the most feminine way possible, this bias becomes a huge obstacle between my career and I.

The dark suit didn't arrive by accident. It traces back to a shift in the 1800s sometimes called the "**Great Male Renunciation**," when European men stepped back from the lace, colour, and ornament that had marked upper-class male dress for centuries, and traded it for sober black and grey. **The idea was that in a new industrial, money-driven world, a man's worth should show up in his judgment and output, not his peacocking, and so plainness itself became the flex.** That template rode into the modern office almost unchanged: the suit, the muted palette, the absence of decoration as a visual shorthand for "**I am here to work, not to be looked at.**"



Shruti

MEET THE WRITER

Shruti is a cultural writer and critic with a master's degree in psychology. Using fashion as a lens, she examines feminism, gender, identity and postcolonial aesthetics. Originally from Mumbai, she is building a career in fashion media and PR communications, bringing cultural analysis and psychological perspective to the expectations and contradictions surrounding modern womanhood.

FIND SHRUTI

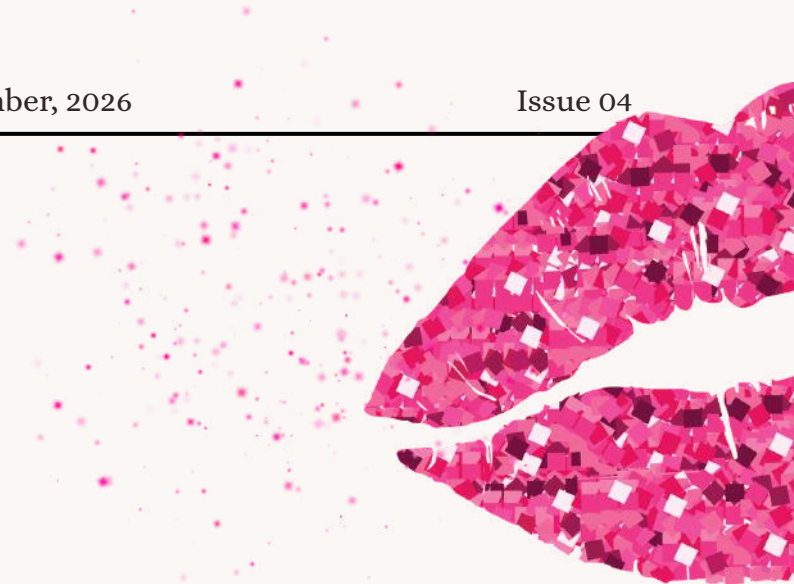
Substack:
substack.com/@rkiveofru

For women, the acceptable professional dress codes have been somewhat different. ***There has always been a set of invisible rules that women had to stick to resulting from stereotypes and expectations that women must deal with in order to fit in.*** This involves choosing attire that allows one to 'blend in', avoiding clothing that is overly feminine and highlights 'femaleness', as well as steering clear of overly masculine styles that might suggest women are trying to imitate men.

Women entering these same offices a century later inherited a dress code built for a body and a history that weren't theirs which is partly why anything read as decorative on a woman still gets treated as a distraction from competence, rather than a variation of it.

According to the research, women job seekers were perceived as less likable and received fewer offers when they self-presented in less feminine ways for male-dominated jobs, suggested gender norms for femininity are still expected of women (Hanek, *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2022). ***However, there is a well-known pattern of women toning down their feminine markers as they climb the career ladder.***

The difference is clear in the Instagram versus LinkedIn profiles. Women presenting in more feminine manner are perceived as less serious and less competent, yet when they do not dress in such manner, they are less likable; a tightrope that men don't walk on.



This likeability bias can be seen in the well-known ***Heidi and Howard exercise***, in which business students read the same case study under either a female or male name. Both were judged equally competent, but Howard was perceived as more likeable and as someone the students would rather work with.

There's a strange double bind sitting inside how femininity gets read at work. Studies on makeup and grooming actually show that a made-up face registers as more competent and more trustworthy than a bare one. ***So, the message isn't "femininity reads as incompetent."***

It's more specific, and more punishing: a little polish reads as effort, but the moment it tips into anything louder, hot pink, glitter, a full glam look, it reads as desperate or unserious.

The blush that looked "put-together" at 20% becomes "not serious" at 80%. It's not that hyperfeminine styling fails to signal effort or care but that effort itself becomes suspicious past a certain threshold, as though a woman who is visibly trying that hard to look good couldn't also be trying that hard at her actual job. Muted is mistaken for serious; vivid is mistaken for vanity.

Clothing and fashion have long been used as status symbols, hierarchy and class markers. Knowing that a certain kind of minimal, expensive-looking makeup reads as polished while a bolder, more maximalist look doesn't, knowing which fabrics, which silhouettes, which brands quietly signal "this person belongs here" is its own kind of fluency, usually absorbed from family, city, school, or workplace exposure rather than taught outright.

The "polished" workplace attire is not neutral but a badge signalling the money, time, and cultural fluency that one needs to look so effortlessly put-together.

For women in Indian corporates, the dress code rules go two ways: Indian formals and western formals. **The decision to pick one or the other depends on the culture of the company.** A saree can be accepted as professional in one workplace while it can be flagged as too ethnic in another. **A bindi is allowed with a kurta but it is "too much" or "too ethnic" with a blazer as if professionalism and Indian-ness cannot coexist.**

The subtle and invisible rules of clothing have a different syllabus. **The senior colleague who pulls a junior woman aside to explain that her hair should be tied back, her nail colour should be—**

—more "office-appropriate," her jewellery too loud for a client call, all passed down like inheritance, woman to woman, dressed up as mentorship. None of this is written in any HR handbook. It doesn't need to be; it's enforced far more effectively through a raised eyebrow, a "just a suggestion," and the quiet correction of the next junior woman in line.



None of this calibration is free, and none of it is quick. It's the extra twenty minutes before a 9 a.m. meeting spent deciding if the kurta is "too colourful" for today's client call. It's the eyeliner redone because the first attempt read as "too done up," and the lipstick wiped half off because "too done up" and "not done up enough" can both get you the wrong kind of comment in the same week. **It's the running mental tally of what a look costs, but in the tiny tax of decision-making itself, repeated every single morning before the actual workday has even started.** A male colleague picks between two identical shirts and walks out the door. A woman is doing quiet math nobody sees and nobody will ever thank her for, labour that never shows up on a payslip, never earns her credit for diligence, and yet, if she gets it wrong, is the first thing anyone notices.

Elle Woods never won by toning herself down. She walked into Harvard Law in pink, argued a murder case in pink, and never once treated her femininity as something to apologize for or trade in for credibility. She simply made the room catch up to her instead. That's still the fantasy, and it's worth naming honestly as a fantasy.



“

Most women don't get to test a perm expert's testimony in a courtroom and have the scrunchie be the detail that clinches the win. In real offices, the tax still gets paid quietly, every morning, in small recalibrations most people never notice. But it's worth holding onto Elle anyway, not as proof that the problem is solved, but as a reminder of what's actually being asked for: not permission to be taken seriously despite the pink, but a world that never needed the question in the first place. Until then, every woman doing that quiet morning math is, in her own smaller way, still bending and snapping against the same old test.





Fragrance Notes

Art-History archives
“peak junk
journalling”



That book
with too many
“professionally
done” annotation tabs

Pop-Culture
Lore collection

The Nerdy Interests Scatter

*things I know too much about
for no practical reason*



Hyper-specific
song playlists

Documenting
everything



Fashion Archives
2000s edition



The Woman I Am Becoming Would Surprise the Girl I Was

*by Deepanshi Srivastava, Founder &
Editor-in-Chief of Lipsticks & Martinis*

If thirteen-year-old me met my twenty-two-year-old self, she would ask for a timeout. A week, at least, to zoom out and process what the hell just happened. Not because her dreams and mine look different. If anything, they match so closely that she would see more than she ever expected to.

I started embracing my creative side when I was thirteen. I wrote poetry, collected **Jean-Paul Sartre** quotes I was probably too young to fully understand and tried my hand at writing novels. **Even then, I knew there was something meaningful waiting inside all that creating. I wanted to put myself out there.**

I just did not want anyone to actually see me do it.

I created, but rarely shared. I knew things, but hesitated to speak about them. I wanted opportunities, but feared making a fool of myself while reaching for them. And honestly, that was fair. ***When you are a teenager, puberty makes far more decisions for you than logic or motivation ever could.*** Who genuinely believes the whole “look in the mirror and tell yourself you are amazing” thing at thirteen? Crap.



The adult version of me is still scared, but she is less obedient to that fear. Somewhere along the way, I became more frightened of never trying than of embarrassing myself.

The first major step was choosing a college outside my hometown. Those four years shaped me more deeply than any single experience ever could.

There is a saying that if you are lucky enough to find yourself holding a plane ticket that can take you beyond your comfort zone, you should take the flight.

I did.

I do not regret a single penny spent on those four years. As a woman, I would recommend living away from home at least once, if the opportunity is available to you. It teaches you things about life and yourself that no book, film or degree possibly can.

The second step was publishing the poems from my journal during my second year of college. Thirteen-year-old me would probably want to throw both the journal and a hundred copies of that book at my face.

But she would be in awe. I just know it.

The third step is difficult to name because there have been too many since. I made choices that would confuse her, frighten her and send her into several existential crisis. I put my work into the world. I walked away from paths that looked safer. I began building something of my own without knowing whether it would work.

For what it is worth, I think those choices would also give her a kind of hope she could not find anywhere else.

I have made both right and wrong decisions, but it fills my heart to admit that none of them carries bitter regret. If I could return to the beginning, I would still make some of the wrong ones. **The right decisions helped things work out for me. The wrong ones taught me things success never could.**

Thirteen-year-old me did not want to reach the top of the mountain so the world could see her standing there. She wanted to climb because she wanted to see as much of the world as she possibly could. There was too much beauty to notice, too much life to experience and too much of herself she had not met yet.



I think she would be proud that this has not changed.

The woman I am becoming would surprise the girl I was, not because she followed the plan perfectly or became fearless, but because she grew brave enough to keep choosing herself. She created the things that frightened her.

She took the flight. She changed her mind. She tried before she felt ready.

So, to every girl reading this, before asking yourself how much further you still have to go, take a moment to notice how far you have already come. It is really important to acknowledge the moments when you outgrew a past version of yourself.

If the younger version of you could see you now, how would she feel?



Chapter 3: The Maintenance

Adulthood is held together by invisible maintenance. This chapter makes room for the appointments, routines, domestic learning, beauty rituals and realistic resets that keep a life functioning without turning care into another performance.

INSIDE THIS CHAPTER

The Realistic Reset

Why does taking care of yourself feel like another full-time job?

The Almost-Adult Self-care Bingo

The Realistic **Reset**



Changed the sheets.
Changed the atmosphere.

Drank water before diagnosing my entire life.



Went to bed before the next day technically began.



Let one good song interrupt the spiral.

Ate a proper meal, without tracking calories, obsessively



One thing at a time.
Attention is treated like currency.
Productivity stops being a performance.



Replied to the message I was avoiding.



Washed the day off, not just the makeup.

Reduced tomorrow to three actual tasks.



Put the clothes away instead of relocating The Chair.



Why Does Taking Care of Yourself Feel Like Another Full-Time Job?

Somewhere between the morning alarm and the last email of the day, taking care of ourselves became another thing to get done.

Wake up. Drink water. Get your steps in. Eat enough protein. Answer your emails. Go to work. Come back. Cook dinner. Clean the kitchen. Wash your hair. Do your skincare. Stretch. Read. Journal. Sleep for eight hours. Repeat.

And if you have managed to do all of that, congratulations: you have successfully completed another day of being a **functional adult**.

Except, when did taking care of ourselves start feeling like a productivity challenge?

We talk about self-care as though it is the antidote to burnout, but the way we practise it looks suspiciously like another job. There is always something else to track, fix, improve or maintain. Your sleep could be better. Your diet could be cleaner. Your skin could be clearer. You should probably be exercising more. Maybe you need a better morning routine. Have you tried journaling, meditation, magnesium or a digital detox?

**The list never really ends.
And that is the problem.**



Pratishtha Agrawal

MEET THE WRITER

Pratishtha Agrawal is a writer and marketer covering beauty, wellness, lifestyle and culture.

A contributor to Vogue India, she has also worked across brand marketing and communications and creates content for beauty and lifestyle brands on LinkedIn. She is particularly drawn to the stories behind the products, rituals and ideas that influence how we understand beauty.

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The World Health Organization defines self-care broadly: it includes the everyday things we do to promote and maintain our health, from eating well and being physically active to getting enough sleep and connecting with other people. **In other words, self-care was never meant to be synonymous with buying a face mask and disappearing for an hour.**

For a woman in her twenties there can be a number of things competing for her attention. There is the eight- or nine-hour workday, the commute, the messages you haven't replied to, the laundry waiting at home, groceries to buy, dinner to make, rent to pay and, if you're freelancing on the side, another laptop waiting to be opened after you've already closed the first one. And then there is the body. The body that is expected to be healthy, rested, groomed, moisturised, strong, well-fed and somehow still aesthetically pleasing.

And maybe that is why we keep postponing it.

We tell ourselves we'll sleep properly once this project is over. We'll start exercising next Monday. We'll book that health appointment next month. We'll oil our hair this weekend. We'll finally figure out what our skin needs when work gets less hectic.

But in reality, work rarely gets less hectic.

There is always another deadline, another meeting, another birthday, another trip, another bill. Life does not usually hand you a neatly labelled afternoon called "Take Care of Yourself."

So we squeeze ourselves into the gaps.

www.fullygrainsite.com



A 10-minute shower instead of a slow one. Cleanser, moisturiser, done. Dry shampoo because washing your hair feels like too much of an undertaking. Takeout because cooking after work feels impossible. **A few minutes of scrolling in bed because, after an entire day of doing things for everyone and everything, your brain wants to do absolutely nothing.**

And then comes the guilt.

We have become so accustomed to being productive that even rest can feel like a failure of time management.

But perhaps taking care of yourself was never supposed to be another item on the to-do list.

Do we need another routine?

There is something almost ironic about modern wellness culture: it promises to help us slow down while giving us more things to do.

There are morning routines, evening routines, Sunday resets, skincare routines, workout splits, meal-prep plans, sleep trackers and wellness apps. ***Even rest now comes with instructions.***

Even rest now comes with instructions: meditate, journal, move your body, practice gratitude. All of these things can be wonderful. None of them are inherently bad. The problem begins when even the activities meant to make us feel better become another benchmark against which we measure ourselves.

Self-care now doesn't sound like "What do I need today?" and more like "What am I failing to do?"

Care has now shifted from listening to ourselves to keeping up with an ever-growing list of expectations about how healthy, rested and put-together we should be.

This difference matters because health is not only about whether your skin is clear or whether you exercised today. The WHO's definition of health and wellbeing also recognises mental and social wellbeing; connecting with other people is part of self-care too.



Sometimes taking care of yourself can mean going to the gym.

Sometimes it can mean cancelling the gym because you are exhausted.

Sometimes it is cooking a proper meal.

Sometimes it is eating something easy because you had a terrible day.

Sometimes it is finally making that doctor's appointment you've been putting off.

Sometimes it is sitting with your mother for an hour, calling a friend, listening to the music you loved as a teenager, painting something badly, reading three pages of a book or simply sitting by the window without turning the moment into a "mindfulness practice." Care does not always have to look productive.

We need to remember how to slow down

Long before "wellness" became an industry, there were the older traditions of care. Indian traditions, particularly those associated with **Ayurveda**, included practices such as bathing rituals, oil massage and daily routines that placed attention on caring for the body. But the useful lesson isn't that women today should recreate an elaborate ancient beauty routine. It is that care was not necessarily imagined as something to rush through. There was a ritual, time and attention in it. And that is the part we've forgotten now.



We don't necessarily need ten products in the shower. We just need to stop treating the shower as something to finish as quickly as possible.

We don't need a two-hour nighttime routine. We might need to go to bed without feeling guilty that we haven't squeezed another task into the day.

We don't need to optimise every meal. We need to notice whether we are actually eating enough, whether our bodies feel good and whether something has been bothering us for weeks that deserves proper attention.

Taking care of yourself can be the ordinary tasks.

It can be washing your hair because it makes you feel like yourself again.

It can be putting oil on your hands because your cuticles are dry.

It can be noticeable that your body has been tired for weeks instead of simply drinking another coffee.

It can be checking in with your mental health.

It can be seeing people you love.

It can be making space for faith, prayer or whatever gives you a sense of meaning.

It can be doing something you loved before you started worrying about whether it was useful.

None of these things need to be Instagrammable.

None of them need to be optimised.

So, what is the goal?

There is a strange contradiction of self-care today. We know we are exhausted, so we keep looking for more ways to take care of ourselves. And then those ways become another source of exhaustion.

I think the answer to this question is another question we need to ask:

“What would actually make me feel cared for today?”

The answer will change from day to day, and sometimes, perhaps, the answer will be nothing.

Because taking care of yourself should not require becoming the most disciplined, optimised and productive version of yourself.

To have an imperfect day. To sleep late once in a while. To eat an easy dinner. To skip the routine. To take a long bath once in a while. To sit around and do nothing. Maybe notice the small things and maybe appreciate what we already have.



“

We spend so much of our twenties trying to build a life that works that we can forget to actually live inside it. Maybe real self-care is not another thing we need to fit into that life. Maybe it is making sure there is enough room in it for us.



The Almost-Adult Self-Care Bingo

TICK WHAT RESONATES. AWARENESS COUNTS.

<i>Washed your makeup brushes</i>	<i>Wore SPF on an ordinary day</i>	<i>Changed your pillowcase</i>	<i>Used body lotion everywhere</i>	<i>Booked the appointment you kept postponing</i>
<i>Finished a product before buying another</i>	<i>Gave your hair a proper mask</i>	<i>Cleaned out your everyday bag</i>	<i>Went one day without heat styling</i>	<i>Drank water before your second coffee</i>
<i>Flossed without being reminded</i>	<i>Filed the one nail ruining everything</i>	<i>FREE SPACE: *morning reading stack in process*</i>	<i>Washed your hair before it became an emergency</i>	<i>Wore perfume with nowhere to go</i>
<i>Threw away expired makeup</i>	<i>Used the fancy product you were "saving"</i>	<i>Removed your makeup before bed</i>	<i>Perfected an everyday lip combination</i>	<i>Cleaned your phone screen</i>
<i>Restocked period products early</i>	<i>Put on matching pyjamas after a shower</i>	<i>Slept before midnight</i>	<i>Said no without writing an essay</i>	<i>Did your skincare even though nobody would see</i>

Five in a row means you are officially doing better than you think.



Chapter 4: The People

Growing up changes not only who we are, but how we love people. This chapter is about friendships that require effort, boundaries that resemble endings and the quiet forms of intimacy that rarely make it into photographs.

INSIDE THIS CHAPTER

The Adult Friendship Calender

When Friendship Stops being convenient

The Ultimate Hangout Guide

I am not afraid of dropping people out of my life anymore

A Letter to the Next Version

THE *Adult Friendship* CALENDAR

All plans are subject to work, distance, emotional capacity and someone saying, 'Can we do next weekend instead?'

SEPTEMBER 2026

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1 we NEED to meet soon 	2	3	4 react to her story	5
6	7 ask how the thing went	8	9	10 compare calendars 	11	12
13 2-hour voice-note session 	14	15	16 plan rescheduled 	17	18	19 emergency rant appointment
20	21	22 send the meme 	23	24	25	26 THE MIRACULOUS OVERLAPPING SLOT
27 social recovery day	28 	29	30 let's not wait this long again 			

FRIENDSHIP MAINTENANCE

- ☐ Remember the interview she mentioned
- ☐ Check whether she reached home
- ☐ Send the meme before forgetting
- ☐ Say 'I love you' outside birthday captions
- ☐ Stop treating affection like an annual subscription



When friendships stop being convenient

by Deepanshi Srivastava, Founder & Editor-in-Chief of Lipsticks & Martinis

The transition from the end of school to moving away for college is insane.

One day, friendship is built into your routine. You see your people in corridors, sit beside them through classes, share lunches and make plans without consulting four calendars and a lunar cycle. The next, everyone is packing for different cities, moving into unfamiliar rooms and promising that absolutely nothing will change. And we mean it when we say it.

We genuinely believe that distance will be a minor logistical inconvenience, that calls will remain frequent, group chats will never go quiet and the girls we once imagined standing beside us at our weddings will obviously still be there when the day arrives.

Then proximity disappears, and friendship is put through its first real stress test.

My experience was, unfortunately, the lesson-giving kind. I grew distant from girls I had once been certain would be my bridesmaids. At the time, losing those friendships felt incomprehensible. How could people who once knew every detail of my life slowly become people I barely spoke to?

There is a saying that asks us to forgive ourselves for not knowing what only time could teach. I return to it whenever I think about the friendships I mishandled, the conversations I should have initiated and the people I assumed would remain without either of us learning how to maintain what we had.

College gives you an almost unreasonable number of things to get caught up in. Classes, careers, friendships, relationships, societies, internships and the ongoing project of figuring out who you are all begin demanding attention simultaneously. If you do not learn to balance them, chances are that something will begin leaking. Eventually, you notice the leak and try to repair it.



But some leaks have already grown too large. *Some friendships cannot return to what they were, not because they were meaningless, but because too much was left unsaid for too long.*

Social media makes this loss especially confusing. **Reels, memes, birthday stories and occasional likes create the appearance of staying connected.** You may know what song someone is obsessed with and where she went last weekend while having absolutely no idea what has been keeping her awake lately.

There are people whose lives I still want to witness properly. I want to be present for their tiny moments, dramatic turning points, ridiculous stories, highs and lows. Yet weeks pass before either of us notices that we have not spoken.

It creates a particular kind of FOMO, one that cannot be healed with a Sunday reset.

And even when everyone genuinely wants to meet, arranging it requires the computational power of a scientific calculator. One person works weekends. Another is travelling. Someone has family plans. Someone else is emotionally unavailable until further notice. Eventually, a single two-hour slot appears three weeks from now, and everyone protects it like a national holiday.



This is, in my opinion, the strangest part of adult friendship: love may remain abundant even when time does not.

As we grow older, more parts of life begin demanding both time and emotional energy. The friendships that survive are not necessarily the ones with constant communication. Sometimes they are the ones in which you have not seen someone for nearly a year, yet the moment you meet, the bond feels untouched. You begin talking as if someone merely pressed pause yesterday.

But there is a complicated balance hiding inside that comfort.

Friendships that require too much maintenance can begin to create pressure and resentment. Friendships that become excessively low-maintenance can quietly turn into ignorance. “We can go months without speaking” sounds lovely until months become years and neither person knows when the other stopped feeling known. Low-maintenance should mean secure, not neglected.

I do not think effort needs to look perfectly equal every day. There will be seasons when one person is exhausted, heartbroken, overwhelmed or simply unable to show up as fully as she usually does. A strong friendship can survive temporary imbalance.

The difference is whether the care continues to travel in both directions.

As long as the effort is not permanently one-sided, ***I believe there is still room for the semi-annual meet-up, the unplanned hour-long rant and the message that begins with "This reminded me of you."***

You may not know every daily detail, but you trust that if life falls apart, this person will still answer.

Showing up begins to take quieter forms.

I have also made my fair share of mistakes. Immaturity, distraction and things I understood too late have cost me friendships I once valued deeply. As much as that hurts, it is part of growing up too: accepting that we were not always the friend we now know how to be.

People often enter our lives for seasons. Some leave once that season ends, but that does not make what existed within it fake. A friendship can be real, formative and precious without being permanent.

Then there are the select gems who remain, not always through constant access, but through repeated choice. They change alongside you, forgive earlier versions of you and continue learning how to love the person you are becoming.

I am endlessly grateful for those who stayed. Nothing could fully compensate for the value they have added to my life.

Adult friendship is not measured by how easily someone fits into your schedule. It is measured by whether, when life stops making room for you, you continue trying to make room for each other.

Because when friendship stops being convenient, intention is what keeps it alive.



WHEN 'WE SHOULD MEET SOON' FINALLY HAPPENS...

Nine plans worthy of the three-to-five business weeks it took to arrange them.

1 RETAIL THERAPY, RESPONSIBLY-ISH

Pick a budget, enter the mall and immediately begin negotiating with it.



2 THE CAFÉ-HOPPING CHAMPIONSHIP

Visit three cafés, order one thing at each and provide unnecessarily serious ratings.



3 PUZZLE, GOSSIP, REPEAT

Attempt a 1,000-piece puzzle while discussing situations significantly more complicated than the puzzle.



4 A PINTEREST PICNIC

Bring fruit, tiny sandwiches and one blanket that will absolutely not lie flat.



5 THE ₹1,000 THRIFT CHALLENGE

Choose outfits for each other under budget—and wear the winning looks somewhere afterwards.



6 POWERPOINT NIGHT

Present extremely important research such as: Everyone We've Ever Had a Crush On—A Retrospective.



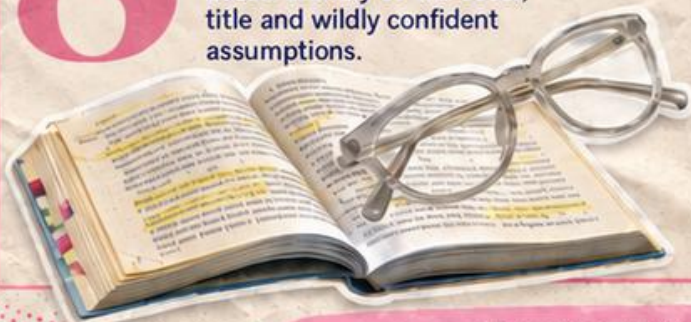
7 THE GROCERY-SHOP COOK-OFF

Choose a recipe, hunt down the ingredients and discover how many people it takes to misunderstand one instruction.



8 BOOKSTORE ROULETTE

Pick a book for each other based entirely on the cover, title and wildly confident assumptions.



9 THE VERY OFFLINE SLEEPOVER

Put the phones away, order food, watch an old comfort film and accidentally talk until 4 a.m.



YOUR ULTIMATE GUIDE

*I am not afraid
of dropping
people out of my
life anymore*



Sama Meerza

MEET THE WRITER

Sama Meerza is a beauty journalist and social media professional with over five years of digital-content experience. She currently contributes to Cosmopolitan, Harper's Bazaar, Brides Today and The Style List, writing across beauty, fashion, lifestyle, relationships and sexual wellness. Her storytelling makes trends and modern culture feel immediate, engaging and genuinely connected to the women reading.

FIND SAMA

Instagram: @samameerza

I used to be terrified of people not liking me. Now, I am perfectly comfortable removing people from my life like they were never there. It took me a very long time to get here because, for most of my life, I was a professional people pleaser. School was probably where it started. I had one best friend, but that clearly wasn't enough for me because I also wanted everyone else to like me. I was friends with people from different classes, I was part of multiple groups and I was always trying to make sure I was getting along with everyone. I wanted to be a nice person. I wanted everyone to think I was nice. I was a yes person in every possible way.

Don't get me wrong. I wasn't lonely or friendless. I had a friend. It's been 20 years of our friendship now. We went to school together. She's a year younger to me but never in 2 decades have we ever had to try hard. In fact, we lived in the same society until she decided to move to Goa last year. Being in the same society we barely met, but when we did the spark stayed the same because we have seen the good, the bad and the ugly for the longest time. **Till today we only msg when she's in town and wants to meet and we speak for hours over a cup of chai. It's a thing.**

But I still needed validation. I still felt the need to be liked. If a friend needed something, I was there. If someone needed help, I would do it. If there was a plan, I would make the effort. I would go over and above for people because I genuinely thought that's what friendship meant. ***I didn't think twice about how much effort I was putting in because, to me, that was just what you did for your friends.***

College was exactly the same. I wanted to be friends with everyone in my class, I was part of multiple groups again and I would call practically everyone my best friend even though I had one actual best friend. I would plan sleepovers, invite them over to eat biryani and other homemade food for people and put a ridiculous amount of effort into making sure everyone was happy. I was basically trying to win the friendship Olympics without realising there was no medal at the end. Then I started working and carried the same mentality there too.

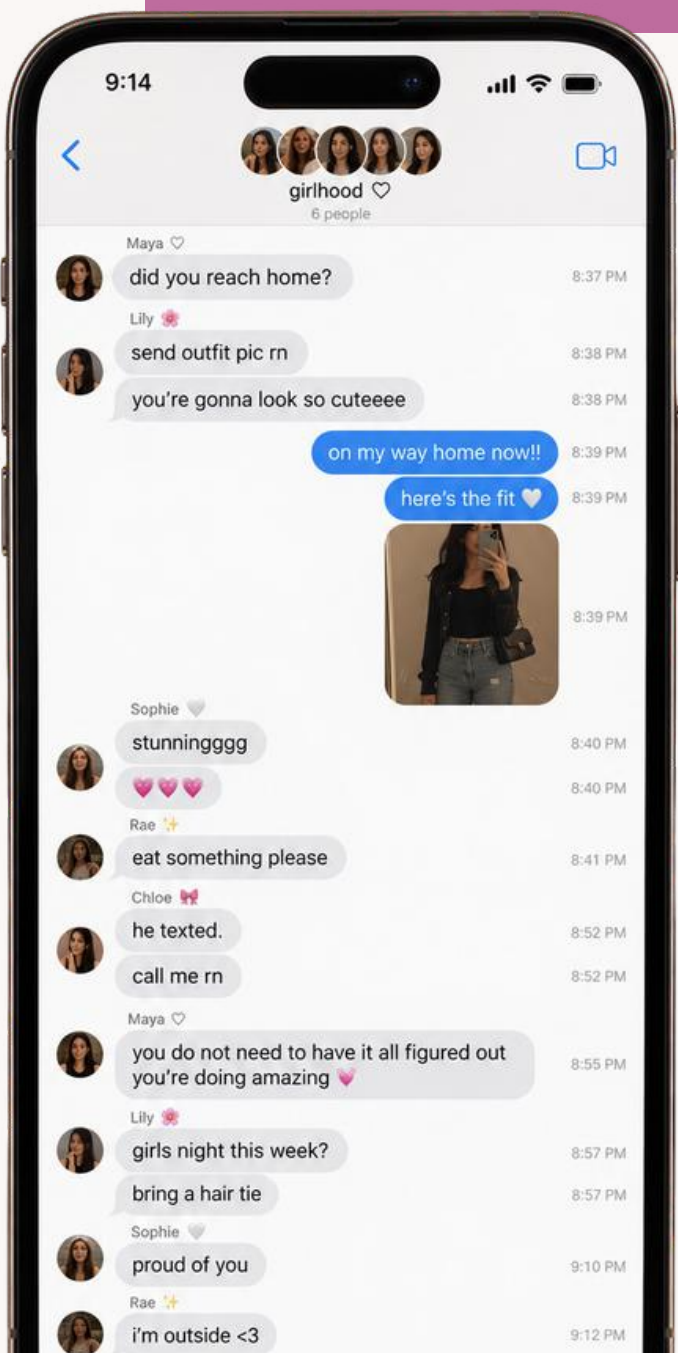
I was constantly trying to prove myself to my boss, my colleagues and everyone around me. I would go over and above, take on things I didn't need to take on as an intern and say yes to almost everything. I wanted to be dependable. I wanted to be the person people could count on. But underneath all of that was the same old need to please people. I wanted people to like me and I thought being useful was one of the easiest ways to make that happen. **And I always ended up failing after giving a huge amount of fucks.**

My second job was probably the first time I started noticing that this didn't always work. I met a lot of people in my team and, naturally, I tried to befriend a few of them. Some of them were too snobbish to be my friend, which upset me at the time. I would see them going out for lunches and dinners and I wasn't included, and I remember feeling bad about it. I wanted to be part of the group. I wanted them to like me. I had spent years believing that if I was nice enough and made enough effort, people would naturally want me around. ***Oh boy was I wrong.*** Then I made one friend. She was my boss back then but she had the personality of someone I could rely on and trust. And for the first time I wasn't wrong. Some 7-8 years later she continues to be my friend.

When the old team left a set of new people came in and I didn't know back then that these girls would be my go-to for everything. Got my periods? Update on the GC. Gotta poop? Update on the GC? Get on a video call in the ugliest form? Check!

These girls made me feel secure and loved. And of course I put in the same effort as I did for other friends except this time I received too. And that's how this friendship began and turned into something so beautiful. I mean are you really even friends if you've ever discussed starting a business or a podcast? That's us on the daily for the past 7 years. Just FYI, podcast coming soon (not sure when, but soon).

It took me a lot longer to understand that this was what friendship was actually supposed to feel like.



And as our friendship grew the efforts seemed to die down. We started meeting lesser, everybody got busy in their lives when we switched jobs, COVID existed, mental health was fucked, we were depressed and probably needed group therapy sessions and we did try that but we still remained depressed. And somewhere between all of this, people started giving up. Including me. I started isolating myself from everyone because that was the only coping mechanism I knew.

No matter what happened I still cared about the people I loved and I cared about the friendships I had built and made so I continued to put in the effort afraid I'd lose them and the thought alone killed me. I couldn't. I would never. They were my people. And then stopped receiving again. I still never gave up. I still showed up and celebrated everyone.

I remember being stuck in this horrible job that have me major anxiety, panic attacks and depression. It kept getting worse each day. I couldn't handle it and the only thing I was really looking forward to was celebrating my birthday with my girls. But they seemed to have other plans and that was my breaking point. I was shattered. I had a panic attack at work. I called my therapist and told her I needed to speak to her or else I'd not survive. The poor woman didn't hesitate and called me. I vented and I told her what went wrong and she told me are they really your friends? Do you deserve this? They don't seem like the friends you should have and then it hit me. She's right.

That was when I started questioning the way I approached friendships altogether..AGAIN.

I isolated myself for a while because I didn't want to be that person anymore. I didn't want to keep being so emotional about friendships. I didn't want to cry over people. I didn't want to spend so much energy worrying about whether someone liked me or whether a friendship was falling apart. I wanted to become a different person, and I did. Thanks to my therapist. If it wasn't for her I don't know what I would've done.

I became much more headstrong and much less emotional about friends. I stopped crying for them. ***I stopped crying over them. I stopped chasing people.*** I stopped trying to keep friendships alive when I was the only one putting in the effort. ***And, most importantly, I stopped believing that every person who came into my life had to stay there.***

Then I started freelancing after that horrible job and made a lot more friends when I came back into the industry of journalism. I met people, went to events with them, messaged them late at night and had those 2 a.m. and 3 a.m. conversations that make you believe someone is genuinely a part of your life. I considered these people my friends. ***So when my father passed away last year, I expected these people would show up for me.***

Spoiler alert: they didn't.

They didn't call. Some didn't text. Some didn't check in at all. And that really upset me because these weren't strangers. These were people I met every day. People I attended events with. People I spoke to late into the night. People I had considered friends.

If I was the old me, I would've forgiven not forgotten. But the born again version of me dropped them like a hot potato.

I didn't ask them why they didn't call. I didn't care enough to stick around and hear their sob stories. I just woke up and completely cut them off. I still haven't spoken to them. Just gave them their closures and left their part on seen.

I think that was the moment I realised I am no longer afraid of dropping people out of my life. It isn't because I don't care about people. It is because I finally care about myself enough to know when something isn't good for me. ***I don't want to keep giving people access to me at the expense of my mental peace, my dignity or my self-respect.*** I spent too many years walking all over myself just to make sure other people were comfortable. I'm done with that shit.

I've also stopped calling everyone my best friend. My definition of a best friend has become very different now. I have friends. I can talk to you, hang out with you, have a great time with you, go to events with you and genuinely enjoy having you in my life. But that doesn't automatically make you my best friend.

That spot is very selective now.

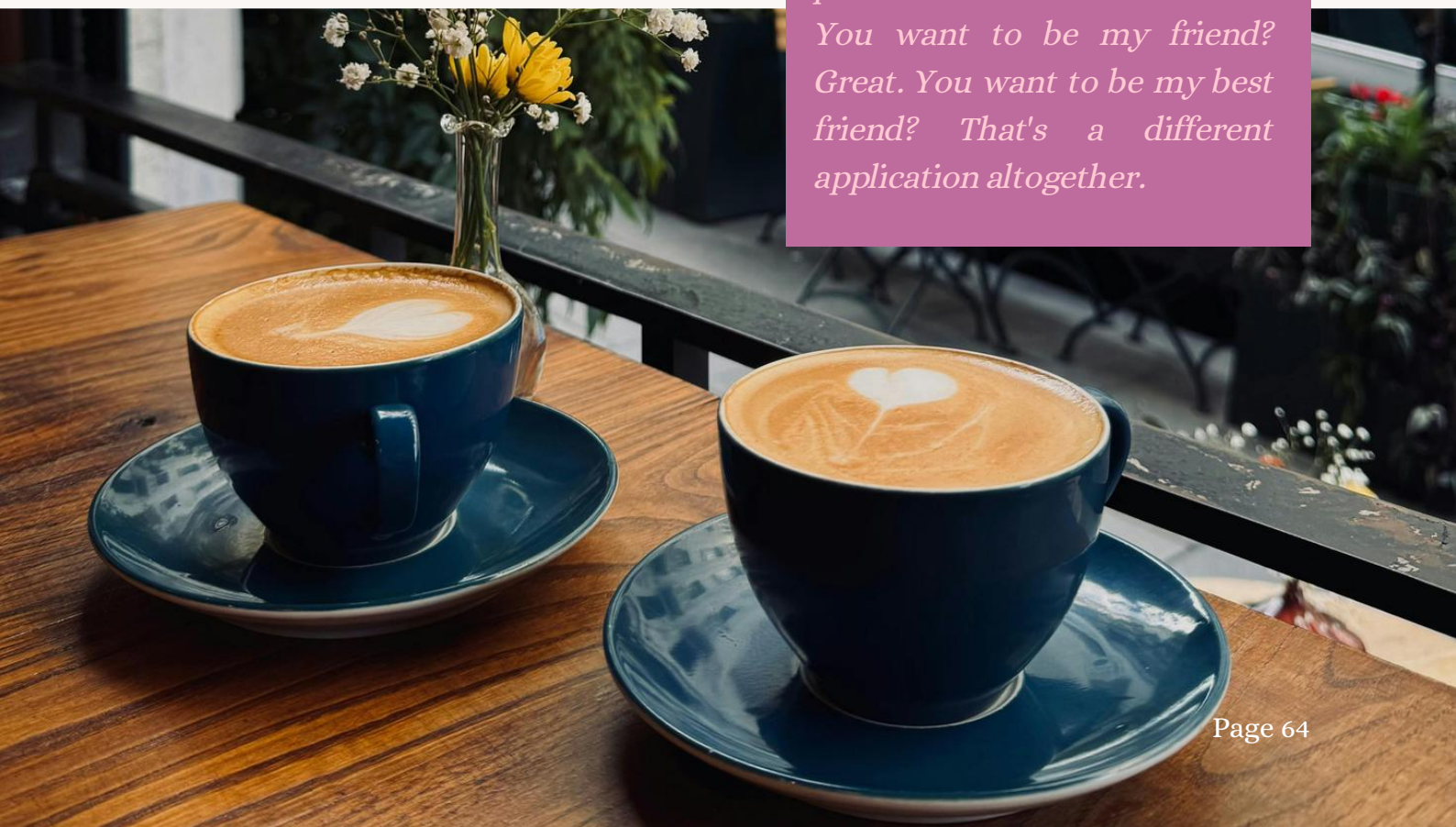


Not everyone gets that kind of access to me. Not everyone gets to know everything about me. Not everyone gets the same amount of my time, energy or emotional investment. And I don't feel guilty about that anymore. If you are my best friend and you hurt me in a way that crosses a line, you are out. I don't care how long I've known you. I don't care how many memories we have. I don't care how much effort I have already put into the friendship. I'm not going to keep someone in my life simply because we have history. Or they'll feel bad. They can go far away from me and feel bad about it. I used to think losing people was the worst thing that could happen to me. Now I think losing myself while trying to keep people is much worse.



“

So yes, I am still a friend. I am still capable of caring deeply about people. I will love you immensely and unconditionally. I will still show up for the people who matter to me. But I am no longer going to audition for a place in someone's life. You want to be my friend? Great. You want to be my best friend? That's a different application altogether.



A letter to the next version

by Deepanshi Srivastava, Founder & Editor-in-Chief of Lipsticks & Martinis

Adulthood feels like an enormous ocean. The deeper you venture, the more you discover, but the water also becomes darker, stranger and harder to predict. Every answer seems to uncover five new questions. Every time you think you have finally learnt how to swim, a new current arrives and reminds you that there is still so much you do not know.

So, maybe being an adult is less about reaching the shore and more about becoming comfortable in water whose depth you cannot always measure.

The more you do, the more you find out. You try something, make a mess of it, learn, recover and try again with slightly better instincts. Not everything turns out beautifully.

Some decisions embarrass you. Some plans collapse despite how carefully you made them. Some opportunities look completely different once you are living inside them. ***Yet, strangely, the experiences that turn out badly often leave behind the lessons that stay with you the longest.***

I am twenty-two as I write this, which is old enough to be responsible for my choices and young enough to feel surprised that anyone is allowing me to make them. There is still so much I want to do.

Most days, that thought excites me. On other days, it terrifies me.



I am scared of wasting my potential. I am scared of discovering, years from now, that I could have worked harder, created more or taken a chance that I allowed fear to talk me out of. Time suddenly feels visible in adulthood. It appears in application deadlines, birthdays, unfinished drafts and plans that keep being moved to “someday.” I want to use it well, but the pressure to use every minute perfectly can become another way of wasting it.

We live in an age that offers more information than any one person could possibly process. Every day, we are handed another routine, warning, opportunity, opinion or blueprint for becoming our best selves. We can watch people build businesses, change careers, move countries and reinvent their lives before breakfast.

Being aware of so many possibilities can feel empowering. It can also make every choice seem insufficient.

When every possible life is placed in front of you at once, how do you know which one belongs to you? How do you listen to your own curiosity beneath the noise of everything you could be doing?

I do not have a perfect answer yet. I am learning that clarity rarely arrives while I am standing still and demanding it. Most of what I now know about myself was discovered through movement. I had to enter the water first.

That is also how Lipsticks & Martinis began.

L&M did not come from having adulthood figured out. It came from being overwhelmed by how loudly everyone claimed that they had.

There were endless reels telling women how to be productive, attractive, confident, financially secure, emotionally healed and completely transformed, often in less than sixty seconds. Some of that advice was genuinely useful. But when enough of it accumulated, it stopped feeling like guidance and began to feel like noise.

I wanted somewhere girls could run to when they needed the world to slow down.

A place where an idea would be given enough room to unfold. Where women could sit with a story instead of immediately swiping to the next one. Where growing up could be explored honestly, without reducing life to a checklist or pretending that one morning routine could solve the entire human condition.

That place became L&M.



Starting it required me to make a decision that did not look especially sensible on paper. I had graduated with an engineering degree and could have followed a more recognisable route into adulthood. Instead, I stepped away from placements and chose to build something whose future I could not neatly explain.

There was no guarantee that the idea would work. There was only the feeling that I would regret never finding out.

I did not suddenly become fearless. I simply became more frightened of never trying than I was of embarrassing myself.

Had I spent all my time feeling intimidated by everything I did not know, L&M would have remained another idea living inside my notes. Instead, I started looking more closely at the things that frustrated me, the gaps I kept noticing and the kind of work I wished existed.

Then I began building.

A question became a concept. The concept became conversations, drafts, designs, contributors, a website, a newsletter and eventually a magazine filled with the thoughts and stories of women who trusted us with their work.

There is something surreal about watching an idea acquire a life outside your head.

L&M has taught me that readiness is sometimes created after you—

And when you do not know what that idea is yet, return to your nerdy little interests. Return to the subjects that make you open seventeen tabs because one question led to another. Return to the books, films, hobbies and strange areas of knowledge that make you talk too quickly. Return to whatever made you curious before you began calculating whether it was practical. Who were you before every interest had to defend itself with a salary, a strategy or a five-year plan?

—begin. ***Confidence does not always arrive first and politely escort you towards action.*** Sometimes, you act with trembling hands. You learn what the work requires while doing it. Slowly, the person capable of carrying the idea is created alongside the idea itself.

That is what I want you to remember when you find yourself waiting to feel completely prepared.

There will always be someone more experienced.

There will always be another skill you could learn, another qualification you could earn and another reason to postpone starting.

Preparation matters, but it can also become a very convincing hiding place.

You may not need another sign.

You may simply need to give your idea somewhere to begin.



Adulthood teaches us to evaluate everything through profitability, security and trade-offs. Those things matter. Rent is real. Financial independence matters deeply, especially for women. We deserve the ability to support ourselves, make our own choices and leave situations that no longer serve us.

But when every curiosity is immediately asked, “Can this make money?” we risk abandoning parts of ourselves before discovering what they could become.



May be the thing you cannot stop thinking about could become profitable once you bring your own perspective to it. It could become a career, a project, a community or something that did not exist until you decided to make it.

Who knows what your idea could become once it contains your particular way of seeing the world?

And may be it will never become a business at all. May be it will simply make your life more interesting, help you understand yourself or give you somewhere to place the feelings that work cannot hold.

That is not a small outcome.

So, to the girl reading this alongside her own unfinished plans, go back to the interests you dismissed as childish, impractical, embarrassing or too niche. Follow one of them a little further. Make something before you feel qualified. Allow yourself to care deeply without apologising for it.

You do not need to turn every passion into a profession. You only need to stop treating curiosity as a waste of time.

Take the opportunity that scares you. Ask the question that might make you sound uninformed. Apply even if you do not satisfy every requirement. Move somewhere new

if life gives you the chance. Share the work you have been protecting from other people's opinions. Begin with the resources you have, even if the first version looks nothing like the one inside your head.

Some decisions will work. Some will not. Neither outcome will leave you empty-handed.



You will learn what you want, what you can survive, what you are willing to compromise on and what you refuse to lose. **You will become more capable because you allowed yourself to be inexperienced first.**

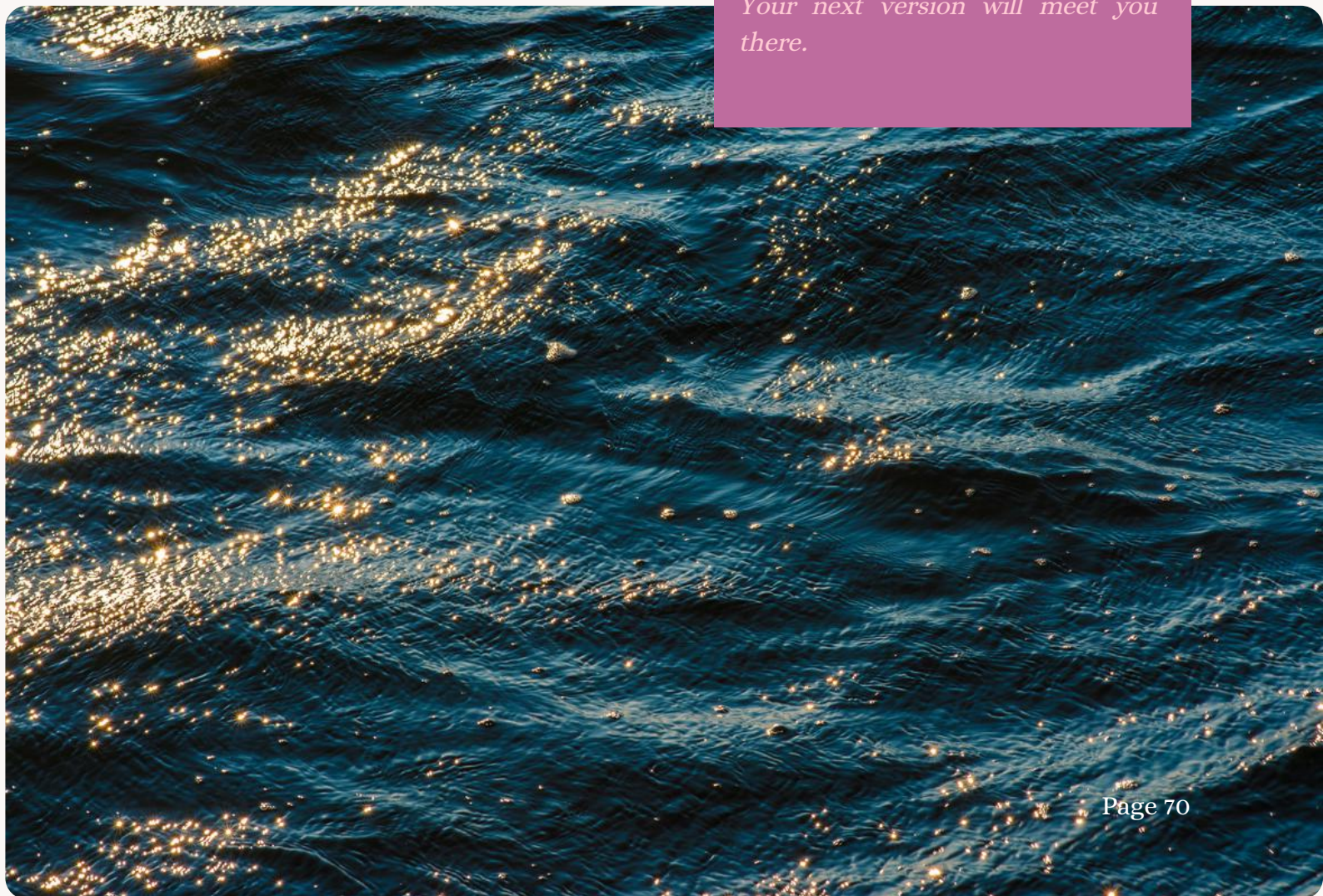
This is only the beginning. There is so much more for all of us to make, learn, misunderstand and attempt again. That uncertainty scares me, but I am grateful for it too.

The next version of you is not waiting at some distant finish line, perfectly accomplished and free from doubt. She is being formed through the choices you are making now. **She is in the idea you finally begin, the mistake you recover from, the interest you return to and the chance you take before certainty arrives.**



“

Adulthood is still a massive ocean. None of us can see its edge, and perhaps we do not need to. For now, dive a little deeper. Follow what makes you curious. Collect whatever the water teaches you. Your next version will meet you there.





Chapter 5: The Price

Independence is sold as a mindset, but it also has a price. This chapter looks at money, safety nets, risk and the complicated privilege of choosing yourself before your choices begin paying you back.

INSIDE THIS CHAPTER

The Independence Calculator

Who gets to bet on herself?

The Cost of Building before you are earning

Almost Adult-Money Milestones

Closing Note

Bibliography

References

ACCORDING TO OUR CALCULATIONS...

THE INDEPENDENCE CALCULATOR

**RENT IS
RUDE.**

INCOME
- RENT
- BILLS
- GROCERIES
- SAVINGS
= CAN I MOVE OUT YET?

**EMERGENCY
FUND:
LOADING...**

**ONE SALARY.
SEVENTEEN
RESPONSIBILITIES.**

RENT

BILLS

SAVE

FUN

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**GIRL MATH,
ADULT
CONSEQUENCES.**

FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE = MONEY + PLANNING + A SLIGHTLY DELUSIONAL AMOUNT OF HOPE

Results may vary depending on rent, responsibilities and the price of one little treat.

Who gets to bet on herself?

by Deepanshi Srivastava, Founder & Editor-in-Chief of Lipsticks & Martinis

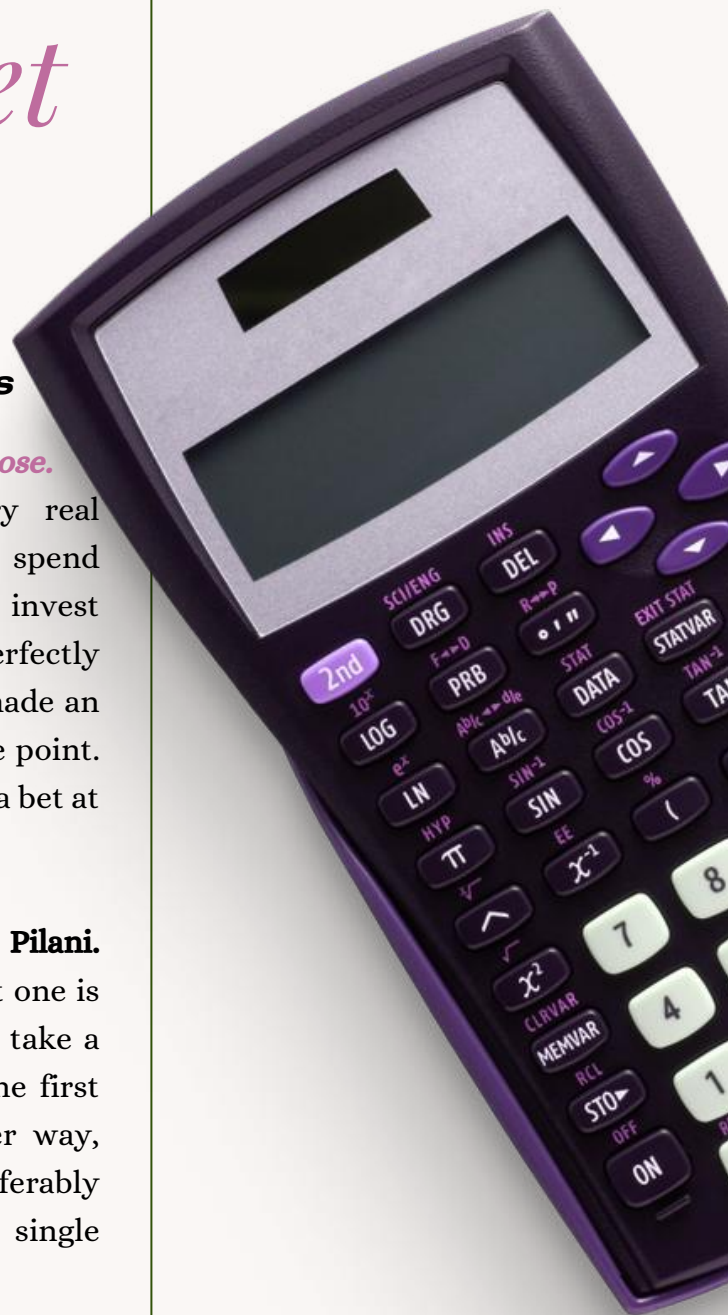
A bet is only a bet because there is something to lose.

There are stakes involved. There is a very real possibility that it will not work. You could spend months building something nobody notices, invest money you never recover or walk away from a perfectly respectable path only to wonder whether you made an enormous mistake. And I think that is the whole point. If the outcome were guaranteed, it would not be a bet at all.

I completed my undergraduate degree at **BITS Pilani**. For the longest time, I assumed I would do what one is conventionally expected to do after graduating: take a job or pile another two years of college onto the first four by pursuing an MBA in marketing. Either way, there was supposed to be a clear next step, preferably one that could be explained to relatives in a single sentence.

Then came my six-month internship.

Every morning, I travelled three hours back and forth, reached work and spent several more hours checking tasks off an Excel sheet. Nothing was necessarily wrong with the work. Yet somewhere between one completed row and the next, I kept feeling that the tasks I was so diligently finishing could be something different. More creative. More mine. **I did not simply want to execute someone else's roadmap. I wanted to find out whether I could draw one of my own.**



I did not simply want to execute someone else's roadmap. I wanted to find out whether I could draw one of my own. Eventually, I chose not to take a job and decided to pursue entrepreneurship full-time, building L&M completely bootstrapped. Even writing that sentence makes me aware of how enormous a privilege it is.

I had the support and safety that allowed me to entertain the possibility of not earning immediately. I had somewhere to live, people willing to believe in me and enough room to try before life demanded an instant return. Not everyone has that choice. For many women, the supposedly "safe" job is not optional, it pays the rent, supports a family or creates the first real taste of financial independence.

I never want to package my decision as though courage alone made it possible. Courage was involved, yes, but so was support. I wake up deeply grateful for that distinction.

Still, having a safety net does not guarantee that the thing you build will succeed. It gives you somewhere to land; it does not make the leap for you. So, if taking a bet is frightening and its outcome is uncertain, where does our fascination with it come from?

I remember watching **The Founder**, the film about **Ray Kroc** and the expansion of **McDonald's**. He went from driving for miles as a struggling salesman to pursuing an idea that eventually altered the trajectory of his life.

The film also shows the significantly less glamorous part: he mortgages his home while trying to make the business work.

Now, I am absolutely not recommending that anyone mortgage her house in the name of following a dream, *please, lol*.

But what stayed with me was the intensity of committing to an idea that nobody around you fully understands yet. *The stakes were high, the proof was limited and belief had to arrive before validation did.*



I have often viewed conventional pathways as capable of placing us in a passive position, unless, of course, they genuinely excite us. I deeply respect people who love their professions and find meaning within established careers.

Choosing a job you care about is not a lesser form of courage. But for many people, a safe path is simply safe. Nothing more.

There is a real possibility that L&M will not unfold exactly as it appears on my vision board. The audience might grow more slowly than I imagine. Revenue may arrive through an unexpected route. The business itself may change shape several times.

But I also know that if I never tried, I would carry the itch of that unlive possibility for years: the question of what might have happened if I had given myself a proper shot when I actually could.

That regret feels heavier to me than the uncertainty.

But taking a bet on yourself does not always mean resigning dramatically, rejecting every backup plan or placing your entire bank balance on one idea. The size of the bet does not determine the size of the courage.

For one woman, the bet might be leaving her job. For another, it might be protecting two hours after work to build something quietly. It could mean saving for six—

—months, applying for the course, sending the first pitch, charging for a skill or finally admitting that the life that looks sensible from the outside no longer feels right within it.

When something scares you and excites you simultaneously, the answer is not always to go full speed. Sometimes, it is to pause and calculate.

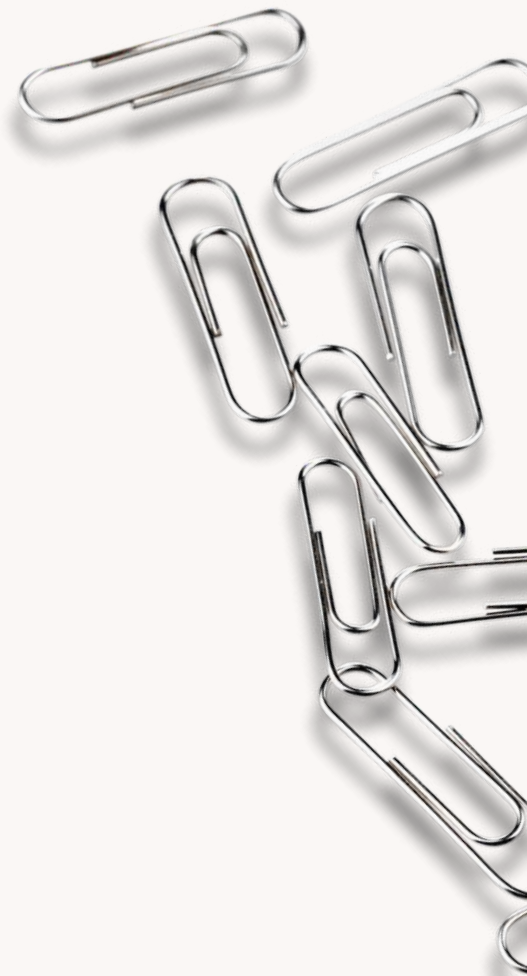
And mind you, girl math is capable of far more than determining how much makeup qualifies as too much makeup.

What is the worst possible outcome? How much money and time can you afford to lose? What responsibilities cannot be compromised? How long can you give the idea before reassessing it? Can you begin smaller? What would make the risk survivable even if the reward never arrives?

Fear does not always mean “stop.” Sometimes it simply means “look properly before proceeding.”

The growth curve of building something of your own is painfully non-linear. Some days bring sudden movement; others produce nothing visible despite hours of effort.

You cannot completely decide whether that curve rises or falls. Markets, timing, luck and other people will always have opinions of their own. But you can decide whether you give the curve a chance to exist. Not every woman is able to make the same—



—bet at the same moment.

But whenever your moment arrives, whether the wager is an entire career or one protected hour a day, I hope you recognize it.

And I hope, if you can afford to take it, you give yourself the shot because your dreams are worth it.

UNTITLED.EXE

THE COST OF BUILDING BEFORE YOU'RE EARNING

An itemised invoice from the pre-profit era.

IDEAS

PLANS

SOMEDAY

SAME GIRL
DIFFERENT BUDGET

CASH BURN.EXE

Website and hosting

Design subscriptions

Domains nobody else wanted

Product samples

Work cafés

Travel and meetings

'Small' expenses that formed a union

THE INVISIBLE INVOICE

327 unpaid working hours

Twelve cancelled plans

Several identity crises

One sleep schedule

Half a social life

An alarming amount of blind faith

PAYMENT DETAILS

Payment method: Savings + support + audacity

Billing cycle: Somehow monthly

Refund policy: Character development only

Revenue status: Refreshing...

IMPORTANT: Zero revenue today does not automatically mean zero progress.

BUILDING_BEFORE_EARNING.EXE

Taking this path may result in:

Unpredictable income

Watching salaried friends book holidays

Explaining your work repeatedly

Feeling behind on random Tuesdays

Becoming strangely good at spreadsheets

CANCEL

KEEP BUILDING

PROGRESS.EXE

BREAK-EVEN: 14% LOADED

Estimated completion time: girl, who knows?

Almost-Adult Money Milestones



CAUGHT IN TIME

Cancelled a subscription
approximately twelve
minutes before it renewed.

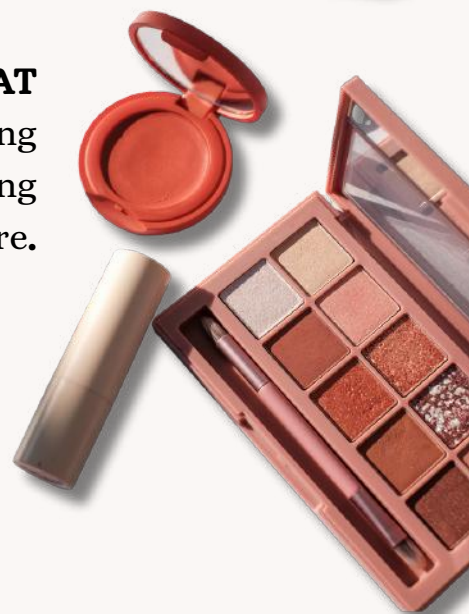


LOOKED WITHOUT FLINCHING

Checked the balance after an
expensive weekend and
accepted the consequences.

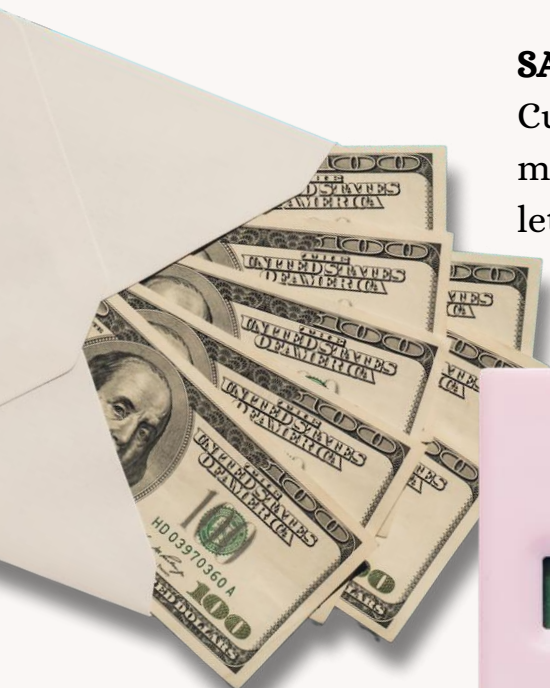
BOUGHT THE LITTLE TREAT

Enjoyed something
unnecessary without turning
it into a moral failure.



SAVED SOMETHING

Current me finally sent future
me a little financial love
letter.



ASKED THE "STUPID" MONEY QUESTION

Because pretending to
understand finances was
becoming extremely
expensive.

Closing Note



We began this issue with plans: the ones we made, the ones we abandoned and the ones we are still quietly hoping will work out.

Somewhere across these pages, adulthood stopped looking like a destination and started looking more like what it really is: a life being built in real time. A changed mind. A friendship deliberately kept. A bill paid. A boundary drawn. A lipstick shade carried from one version of yourself into the next.

If there is one thing the ten women behind this issue have taught us, it is that nobody arrives here fully prepared. The women who look certain are still asking questions. The ones moving quickly still worry they are late. Even the chirpiest souls sometimes go quiet at midnight. We are all carrying more uncertainty than anyone can see, and perhaps that means we are far less alone than we imagine.

So, keep making plans, but leave room to surprise yourself. Take the risk you can take. Call the friend. Return to the interest you loved before it had to become useful. Let some things remain pending. Becoming a person was never a task you were supposed to complete by twenty-two.

Yours truly,
Lipsticks & Martinis



We'll return with another issue, another corner of womanhood to examine and more pages made for slowing down. Until then, let Martini Mondays find you every Monday morning with something to wear, try, read, think about and play. And, Most importantly, remember that a life still under construction is not a life falling behind. We'll be right here.

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