

# THROWAWAY COMMENTS

LIFELONG HURT

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Helping you understand the lasting  
impact of microaggressions

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N A B S

**About this book**

This book was borne out of a desire to better understand the lasting impact our acts and words can have.

Here at Ogilvy Health, we put a call out to contacts within the industry and beyond to share their lived experiences. These anonymised stories were sensitively curated and brought to life by a diverse set of illustrators, using creativity to communicate their impact in a compelling and new way.

The following stories are real accounts based on real situations. Some of them are short, while others are long. All are equal in their validity and importance.

This book is dedicated to all those who have been victims of microaggression and all forms of marginalization and discrimination.

To everyone who contributed to the book, our heartfelt gratitude.

**Foreword**

Mounting evidence demonstrates that people from marginalised groups are disproportionately affected by mental health challenges. At NABS, our frontline services team hear first-hand the impact that microaggressions have on a person’s mental wellness.

Each story in these pages is a brave revelation and this publication is evidence of a shared commitment to a more enlightened and inclusive industry.

Once you have read these stories, pause, and reflect: have you ever unwittingly contributed to this undercurrent of discomfort and exclusion? This is a crucial moment of introspection, an opportunity to examine your own actions and beliefs. The power to unlearn and transform lies within each of us - we all have continued work to do.

These stories might stir up painful memories or emotions for readers. Discrimination, in any form, is deeply distressing. In recognition of this, NABS is a pillar of support. We offer emotional solace, a safe space for those continuously exhausted by the impact of discriminatory experiences.

This collection is both a reckoning and a relief: a call to action and a testament to strength. Collectively, we can dismantle the barriers that divide us and forge a more inclusive and compassionate future for our industry community.

**Sue Todd, CEO, NABS**

Contact NABS for confidential support and guidance:  
0800 707 6607 | [nabs.org.uk](https://nabs.org.uk)



**My hair isn't yours to touch.**

I like to change my hair quite often but, whenever I do, there are often people who feel like it's an open invitation to start reaching out to touch my new hair and style like I'm some sort of animal.

**How do you think the situation should change?**

I think people should educate themselves on different types of hair and styles. There is a lot of information out there that is easily accessible. The most important element, however, is to be courteous, respectful and not to touch people or their hair without their explicit permission.





### Gay men don't count.

This story isn't about a microaggression aimed at myself, but rather a story of how everyone has a role to play in speaking up against it.

I was contemplating a career change to move into an HR position, so I was discussing the possibilities with someone from the HR team. For the purposes of the story, I must make it clear that I am a straight male. During the chat, this person mentioned that they had never really heard of a man being part of an HR team, which took me by surprise that they would even think to voice this, then they continued after a moment of reflection to say: "Oh, well I have known gay men in HR, but they don't count". I don't identify as gay, but we were standing in the middle of the office and the statement in question was quite loud. It shocked me and made me feel very uncomfortable.

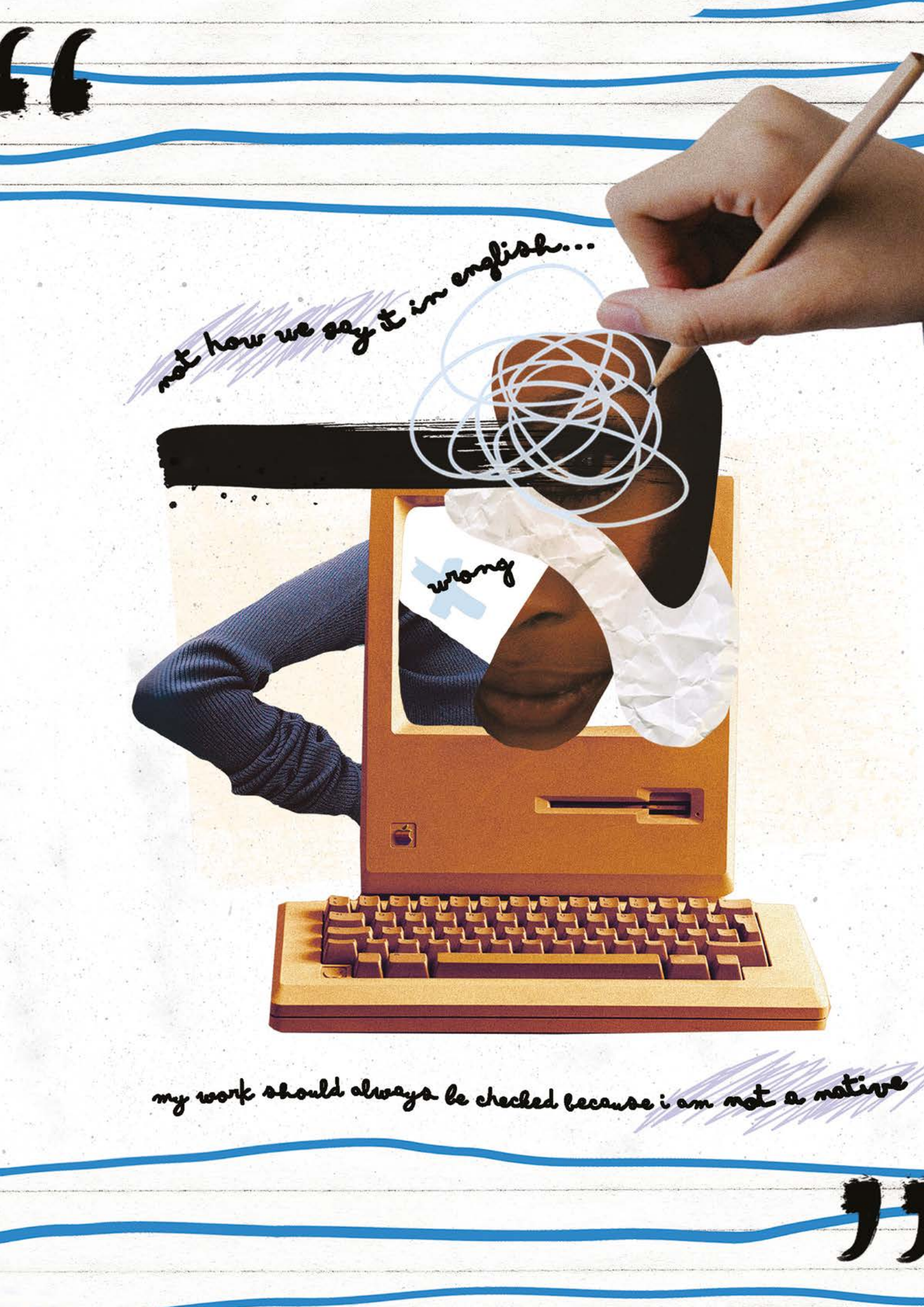
At the time, I didn't say anything, but I wish I had.

### If you were to replay the situation(s) you described, how could it have gone better?

I would have taken the person aside to have a quiet conversation with them to explain why their statements had made me uncomfortable.

I think that there is an almost accepted trope in society that gay men don't count as men and it's damaging. It fuels a lot of discrimination.





#### English lessons.

As a writer, I take pride in my abilities and the work I present, so when someone questioned me on my understanding of the English language because they believed I was a non-native speaker, I was affronted.

The first time it happened was when this person was reviewing my work and, instead of asking me about the use of a particular phrase, they immediately criticised that it was “not how we say it in English”, thus implying that my grasp on the language was insufficient compared to theirs due to our demographic differences.

The phrase in question was correct – a fact that my colleagues supported.

The second incident occurred after discussing a wording issue with a client, wherein the same person implied that my suggested phrasing alternative was wrong because I was using my native language. Again, this was not the case.

There was also a third occurrence when the person in question made a generalised comment about the fact that my work should always be checked because I am not a native speaker.

All of these incidents undermined my position as a copywriter and were brought forward without substantiated evidence.

**If you were to replay the situation(s) you described, how could it have gone better?**

Writing can be subjective, especially in copywriting. It is completely understandable and expected for people to have comments and discussion points about each piece of work, but there was never any reason to bring up the fact that I'm not a native speaker. Approach critique with reason, but also with an open mind.





**Respect should be earned,  
not expected.**

I've found that within particular teams and working environments, some colleagues believe they should be given more respect and particular attention simply because they are older than other colleagues, not necessarily because they are more qualified.

**How do you think the situation should change?**

People should be respected based on merit they have earned. A good idea is a good idea, no matter who it comes from. The same line of thinking could be applied to negative ways of working as well.

**Don't call me gurl.**

For me, experiencing microaggressions is unfortunately a semi-regular occurrence, each manifesting itself differently.

Once, I was simply just walking down a corridor, when someone described my gait as walking “like a gangster” and all I was doing was walking normally. At the time, I was walking with a White colleague whose walking style was not commented upon.

Another time, whilst walking down the same corridor, someone with whom I rarely speak decided to greet me by yelling “YO!” in a mock ghetto voice, to which I replied with a polite “Hello” to acknowledge that I don’t speak in the manner of the mock voice.

On one particular project, I experienced frustrations with a supplier, who interacted with me in a different manner than they did my White colleagues. They continually interrupted me when I was trying to explain key project points and told me that I was being overly aggressive when trying to negotiate with them. My colleagues, on the other hand, were not subject to such discourtesies.

Another prominent microaggression experience I have encountered is with my hair. White colleagues have described my hair as a “weave” or “wig” without understanding the full impact of their statements. One person once gave me some trusted information and asked me to keep it under my weave. Another colleague didn’t feel comfortable saying the term “black hair” and wanted to bring up the subject in a discussion, so resorted to pointing at my head and saying “Your hair or whatever it’s called” to bring up the topic.

I often experience variances in how I am addressed compared to other people, with people referring to me as “gurl” rather than my name. Someone once asked me about urban slang terminology because I am “down with the kids”.

**If you were to replay the situation(s) you described, how could it have gone better?**

I would like to not have things pointed out and exaggerated by White people. It’s obvious that I am Black, and proud of being Black, but to be made to feel different in professional settings isn’t appropriate. For each of the stories, there are more respectable ways to approach the situation:

It would have been better to not say “YO!” in the first place, or compare me to a “gangster”. Not being called “gurl”. It’s unnecessary. Assuming that it’s okay to talk about my hair in the ways mentioned. Just say “hat” as you would with anyone else. Just stating upfront that they feel a bit uncomfortable with talking about “black hair” and do not want to offend me. Not asking the only Black person in the room about urban slang terms.





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**That head thing.**

A senior team member once asked me about my religion, so I told them I was a Muslim, to which they promptly questioned:

"So, why don't you wear that thing around your head?"

This remark made me feel very uncomfortable.

**If you were to replay the situation(s) you described, how could it have gone better?**

Ignorance lies behind a lot of offensive commentary, but there are always more polite ways to ask questions and find answers.

In this case, I would have preferred it if the question was worded in a less blunt and offensive manner.



**Client comments.**

I have been in a situation where a client made a flippant comment about my sexuality.

My manager and I were having a discussion with the client, when a topic came up that caused me to mention the fact that my partner was male.

The client responded to this statement by saying it was “really obvious” I was gay, and so there was no need for me to qualify my partner’s gender.

**If you were to replay the situation(s) you described, how could it have gone better?**

It made me feel uncomfortable because, whilst he wasn’t being actively malicious, I felt like he was making assumptions about me in a way that felt derogatory. I wish my manager at the time had commented on the inappropriate manner of the client’s response.



**Pregnant, not skiving.**

I was four months pregnant and starting to show quite prominently, but had yet to break the news to one of my main clients.

We had a large planning session organised wherein the client was coming into the office, so I was going to take this opportunity to tell them I was pregnant whilst bringing in a senior colleague who would be supporting the account in my absence.

I had hoped that my male colleague would introduce their role by focusing on the great work we were already delivering and establishing their responsibility for continuity. Instead, my colleague declared “I’ll be taking over while she’s off... at least you don’t have to worry about me getting pregnant and disappearing for a few months!”

The comment sounded as though they were equating my pregnancy with being unreliable and lacking in commitment to my job. Furthermore, the statement felt like it grandly surmised that men were more dependable in general because of this fact.

Another senior colleague was also present to hear the comment, but did not respond at the time, or afterwards.

At the time, I told myself I was probably overreacting due to pregnancy hormones, but now I can see the damaging effects of these comments and understand the importance of standing up against them, either on behalf of ourselves or others.

**If you were to replay the situation(s) you described, how could it have gone better?**

I don’t believe there was any negative intention when he said the comment, but it probably wasn’t apparent to him that it was discriminatory in nature.

If this situation occurred again, I would have followed it up with both of my senior colleagues to let them know how it made me feel.





### The curse of the cliché.

In a previous job where I was customer facing, the senior team helped to create a sales brochure that illustrated the range of customers we were likely to meet, giving advice on how to approach and understand each group of people. The brochure itself was extremely problematic for a number of reasons.

The first customer group was described as “affluent” and depicted a White family. The imagery was bright and joyous. The description elaborated that this group typically shopped in high-end supermarkets, took frequent ski trips and had disposable income. We were to treat them accordingly.

The second customer group pictured a South Asian family and was described as “middle class”. Like the previous group, the image was colourful and they were pictured smiling. This group frequently went on holiday and had disposable income so were open to additional services.

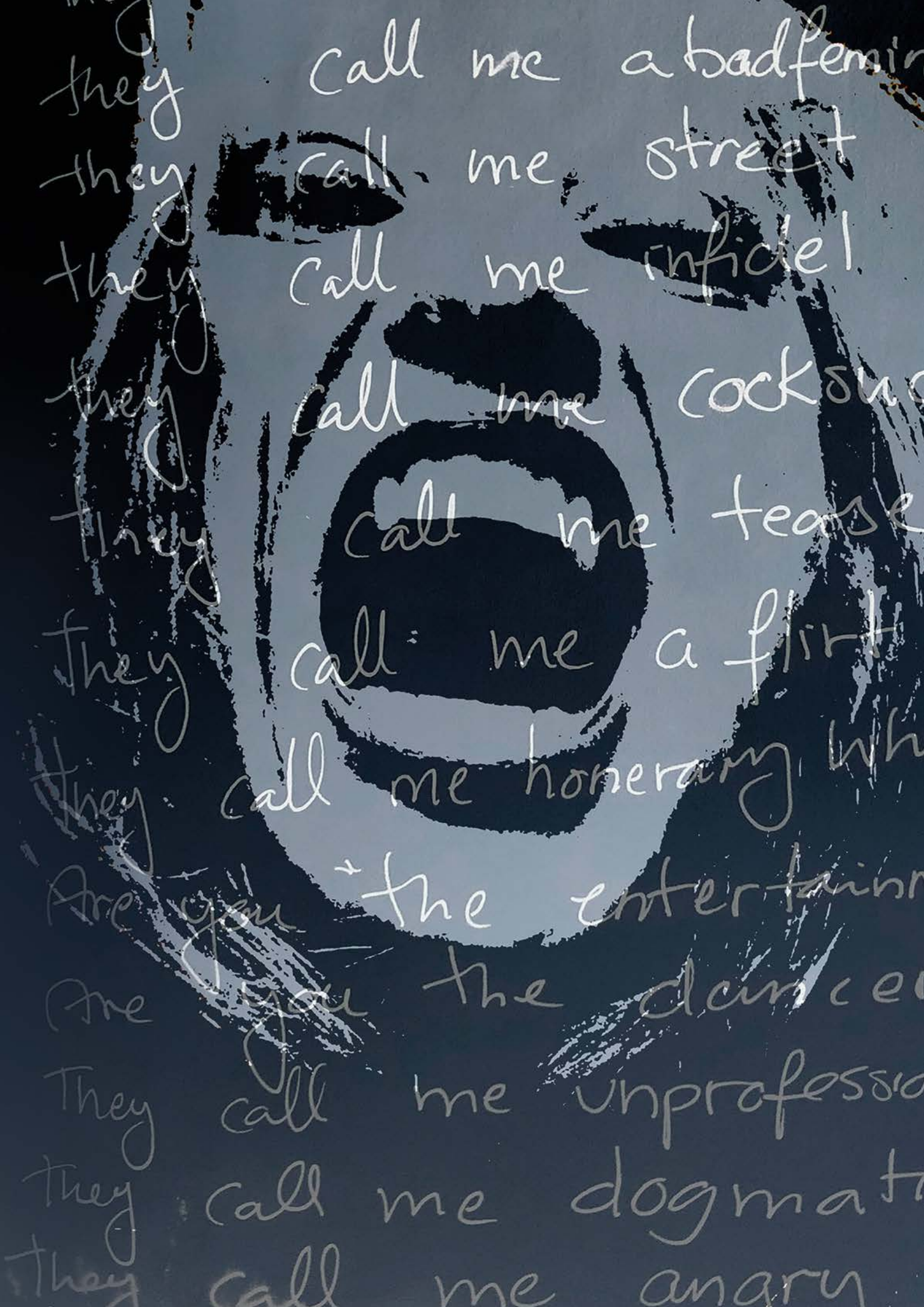
The final customer group pictured a single Black mother. She wasn’t smiling and she was not pictured with her family. Even the grading of the photography was subdued. This section was titled “urban adversity” and described how the woman pictured was indicative of this group, describing how she could not afford school dinners or school laptops, and thus relied heavily on government assistance. She also wasn’t able to help her children with their homework. In terms of how to approach this group, we were told to mention discounts and offers.

### If you were to replay the situation(s) you described, how could it have gone better?

The issue was eventually brought up with the team, but I would have liked for them to have acknowledged the prejudice earlier on in the process and the pain that this could cause.

Even if people don’t personally understand, every person’s experience and emotional response is valid. Next steps that involved training or policy change should have been introduced, but instead the company just moved on from the brochure and did not address the cause of the issue, which was disturbing and disheartening.



**Do the coffees luv.**

I often feel as though I am treated differently as a female team member by male counterparts. When starting new roles throughout my career, I am often asked if I go by my actual name or if there is a nickname they can use in its stead. I find that my male colleagues are not approached in the same manner.

My senior role has also felt undermined in meetings when often some male colleagues, typically of a White middle-aged demographic, have expected me to be the one to take notes or fetch refreshments, regardless of my senior standing.

**How do you think the situation should change?**

All peers should be treated equally, regardless of age, race or gender. If these situations were to happen now, I would address the fact that I should be respected for my role and not have particular questions or expectations weighted upon me because of my gender.





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**My name is my name.**

In a previous role, I was tasked with taking a new starter out for lunch and a query about my name came up. When she arrived in the morning, everyone in the team introduced themselves individually before settling down for the morning into their workloads.

Over lunch, my colleague and I were getting to know the new team member, laughing and learning more about each other, when she asked me what my real name was. I was taken aback at first, confused by the question, so reaffirmed my name for them, to which she replied: "Yeah, but what is your real name?" I am an ethnic minority and my name is Anglo-sounding, and I found it difficult to respond to the question. I reiterated my name again, confirming to them that this is, in fact, my real name, and tried to laugh it off.

**If you were to replay the situation(s) you described, how could it have gone better?**

If I could replay the situation, I would have questioned why she thought my name wasn't my "real" name and disclosed my feelings on the situation by letting them know that such comments and questions can make others feel embarrassed or awkward. I would have politely explained that even if it wasn't my real name, I shouldn't have to justify or explain why it is being used.





### **Racism? Not a problem here.**

I think a particularly frustrating form of microaggression is the denial that discriminatory occurrences happen in the first place.

For instance, I have been part of conversations about racism where someone has responded with a remark such as: "That doesn't happen here" or "I think people know better than that".

These denials can be subtle or said in passing. When any discrimination is disputed, it creates room for further denial of other instances.

I feel that we need to acknowledge that just because you believe you don't see outwardly racist acts, it doesn't mean the small microaggressions should also be overlooked.

Everyone has their own unconscious bias and none of us are perfect, so we must continually work to evolve, unlearn, change and be better. We must become comfortable with being uncomfortable, as it is likely we have all hurt someone without knowing it, myself included.

### **How do you think the situation should change?**

I think we need to acknowledge every discriminatory act, subtle or overt, big or small, in order to bring attention to the change that is needed.

We must all accept that we have unconscious bias in order to confront it and evolve.





**Why does it always have to be about sex?**

I am bisexual, but many people wrongly presume that I'm a lesbian because I have a girlfriend, which then leads them to make sweeping assumptions about me and my lifestyle. It becomes awkward when I have to explain my bisexuality in this context because I feel like I have to reassure that person that I don't "like" them.

**How do you think the situation should change?**

I think any situation where sexuality is concerned requires considerate judgement. I am happy with people asking me questions, but they shouldn't assume I am willing to divulge personal information about my sexual life in a professional setting. Some people feel like it's okay to probe because they believe me to be gay or know I am bisexual.



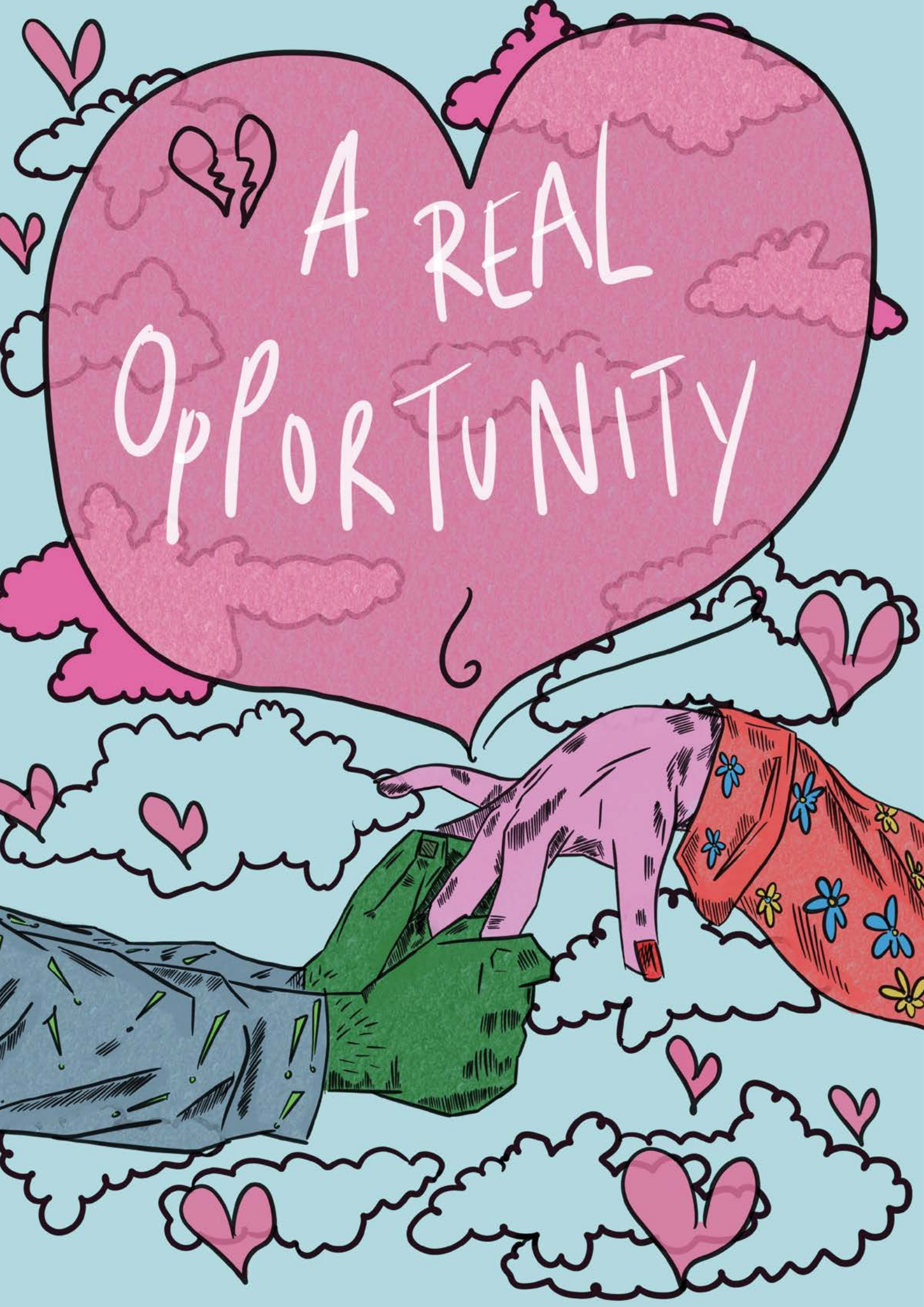
**The unlikely lesbian.**

A short but common microaggression I receive is:

"You don't look like a lesbian".

Believing that someone's sexual orientation should affect or determine their appearance is irrational and offensive, because it reduces their entire unique and complex personality into a single fact about themselves that, quite frankly, is nobody else's business. Not to mention that it perpetuates stereotypes and judgemental behaviour.





**Hey girl, flash that smile.**

My appearance has been commented upon in the workplace in an unprofessional manner. I've been told that if I ask "nicely" people will be willing to do "anything" for me.

A colleague once told me to "flash that smile of yours" in order to get the help I needed. I have also been pulled aside and warned not to interact with a senior team member, because it was implied that my appearance might cause that person to act in an unprofessional way towards me.

**How do you think the situation should change?**

We need to acknowledge that commenting on appearance in a way that perpetuates young, female gender stereotypes is unprofessional and undermining to someone's work ethic and intellect.





**Oh boy, another boys' club.**

I used to work in a role that handled marketing for a casino. It was very much a male-dominated industry that glorified roguish, boyish behaviour and favouritism.

I would craft a detailed marketing plan and present it to my senior colleagues for their approval. Then, the same senior team would all play golf together on the weekend and, over a few beers, would change my proposal. I would get a call on the Monday informing me of the now agreed changes.

Instead of supporting my frustrations, my male manager would tell me not to worry, because he was invited to the next golf day so he could raise any concerns on my behalf going forward.

**If you were to replay the situation(s) you described, how could it have gone better?**

Now, I would confront the team on their boys' club behaviour. It is an extremely unprofessional manner in which to conduct business, as well as ostracising to other colleagues.



**I do not carry a knife.**

I was at work one day and a colleague and I were discussing what we had done over the weekend.

It was the usual sort of conversation when suddenly my colleague decided to take it upon himself to ask me if we carried knives.

He felt it was appropriate to ask the question because of where I lived.

When I explained that my neighbourhood was not as he imagined, he then tried to turn the conversation around by claiming he was “only joking”.



**Women – stop asking questions.**

I was working on a project that needed a few things clarifying with the client, so I was brought into a call to ask a few questions.

When handing the conversation over to me, my colleague felt the need to precede the next part of the meeting by exasperatingly exclaiming to the client:

“These women and all of their questions!”

This immediately undermined my position and forthcoming queries by incorrectly inferring that they were an unnecessary trouble caused by my gender, not to mention how damaging it was to the perception of all other women within the agency.

**If you were to replay the situation(s) you described, how could it have gone better?**

At the time, it was brushed off as a minor, irritating comment, but I should have been introduced to the client in a professional and reputable manner.

Trust lies at the heart of any business and if colleagues are quick to use archaic stereotypes to belittle the opinions and standings of others for the sake of a quick laugh, then we will never be able to build the respectful and honest relationships we need in order to progress and be successful.



**Sikh speaks fluent German: shock.**

At my first job when I moved to London, the office manager used to struggle saying my name. My peers didn't struggle saying my name, so I always used to find it odd that she didn't even try. One day, I asked her why she didn't say my name and she replied that she didn't know how to say my name so she wasn't even going to try. That she would just call me "pal" instead.

Background: At the time, I was working at a major life sciences company. I was in my early-to-mid 20s and am from an Asian background (Indian/Sikh) with a typical English name. I was based in our UK head office working as a senior project coordinator, catering to the German market as I am fluent in German. Over the course of 4–6 months, I had taken on a project for a German client, I spoke to them on the phone and exchanged emails with them on a daily basis. When the time came for their contract renewals, we arranged an on-site visit in Germany to sign the contracts.

Upon arrival, I sat in the waiting area for a few minutes. My colleagues, who were senior members, then approached the waiting area and called out my name. When I stood up and greeted them in German they looked very confused, paused and said to me in English: "Are you Robbie?" I confirmed who I am, which confused them even more; they proceeded to speak English to me and made a comment, "Can you even speak German?" I responded in German: "Yes, we have been in touch speaking German on a daily basis over the last 4–6 months".

Throughout the meeting, I noticed some hostility; nevertheless, the papers got signed and the meeting was successful. Since the meeting, I noticed that they treated me differently and refrained from making small talk during meetings, which they had done prior to meeting me in person.

My conclusion is that they did not expect me to be from an ethnic minority background, which triggered them to behave the way they did.



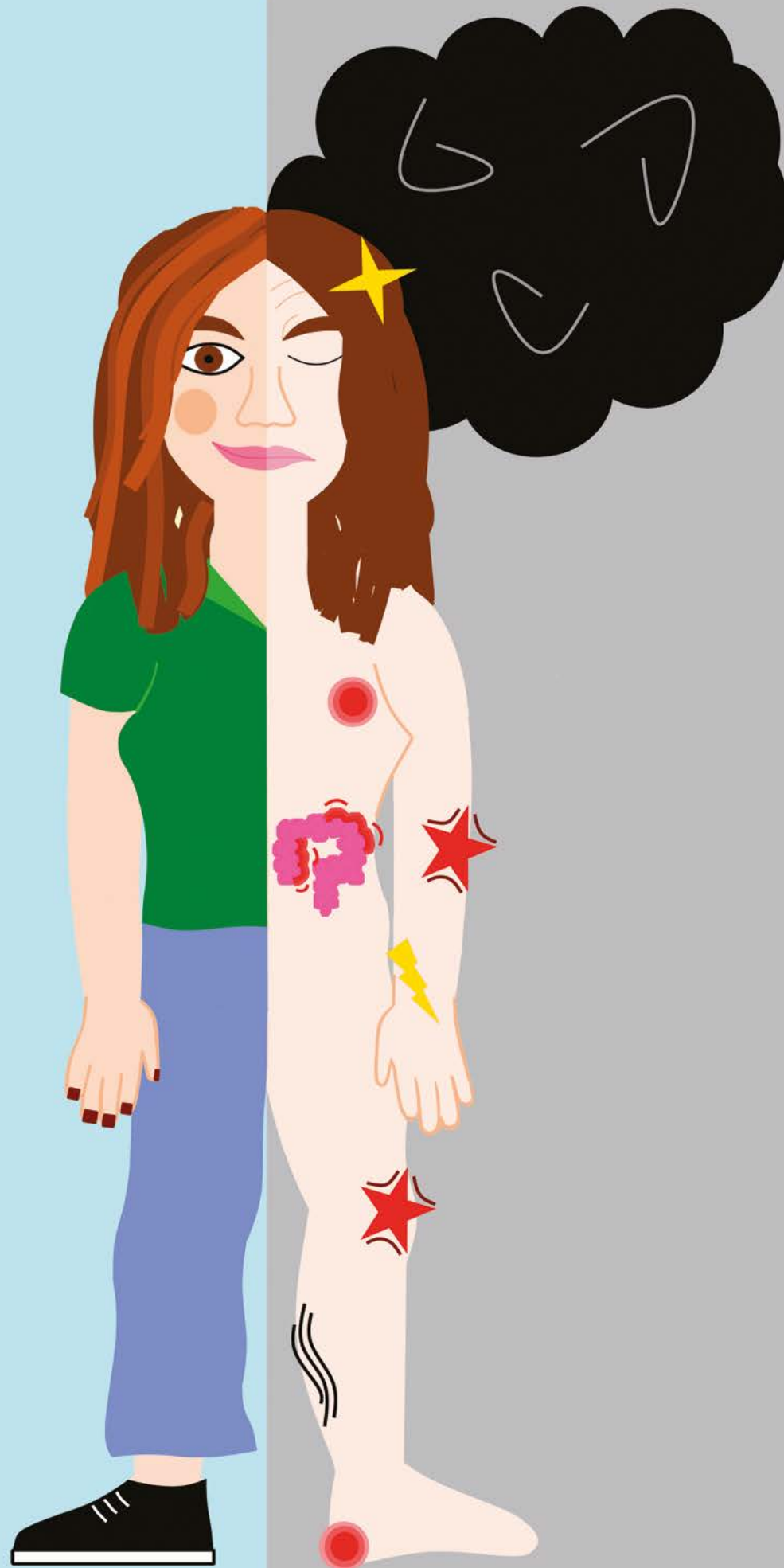
**Leading by bad example.**

During a group training session at work, a colleague was called the name of another Black man by a member of the leadership team. She continued to do this multiple times throughout the training, laughing about it each time.

Another member of the leadership team continued to comment to other colleagues about how loud a former work colleague of mine was talking, not realising she was registered disabled and deaf in one ear.



### Chronic pain meets chronic ignorance.



I have an invisible disability called fibromyalgia. A few years ago, I was working in a high-end sofa shop with two colleagues – my manager and a newer member of staff. I had been there for two years and enjoyed my job. My two colleagues were aware of my disability.

One day, whilst it was just me and the newer member of staff, I mentioned that I was in a particular amount of pain that day. My colleague laughed it off as if to say I was making it up, which I get a lot, having an invisible illness. I then said to her “You know I’m disabled” to which she replied, “You’re not disabled”. I looked at her in pure shock and replied, “Yes I am, I have fibromyalgia”. Her response to this was “Well, if you’re disabled then so am I”.

I then asked what makes her disabled and she replied with “I’m dyslexic”, to which I responded with “Okay, yes you do have a disability also, but that’s not what we are discussing here and you have no right to tell me that I am not disabled”.

The conversation got very heated, with my colleague making many horrible remarks about me being in chronic pain and I ended up in tears and walked off the shop floor. This was all said to me in front of customers. I was in complete shock and could not believe that my colleague had felt the need to speak to me in such a way.

I ended up having to go to HR and filed a grievance because my manager had said he wasn’t prepared to do anything because there was no CCTV to back anything up and it didn’t sound like something my colleague would have said.

I actually had a witness who was a customer that was there when it happened and was just utterly embarrassed that my manager thought I would make something like this up. The company never wanted to speak to the witness.

My colleague completely twisted the events and told HR that it was me who told her she wasn’t disabled and that I also “flipped her off” (to be honest, the fact that she felt the need to add this to the story was quite amusing and has turned into a running joke with my friends, all of which know that that is not something I would ever do). I never worked with this person again after that day because I could not put myself in a situation where I knew something like this could happen again and make my pain worse.

I ended up having to leave the company. It caused me a huge amount of stress and anxiety, both of which make the symptoms of fibromyalgia worse and cause huge flare-ups. I had a meeting with one of the top people in the company before I left and she actually cried when I explained how I had been treated after being a victim of harassment in the workplace.

I am now in a job that I love and have the most supportive colleagues around me who would never dream of questioning my disability.





**You there, the Black person.**

I've been incorrectly called the name of the nearest Black person many, many times.

They're usually people who actually look nothing like me. No similarities other than our skin is a shade of Brown. Sometimes many shades apart.

I've been in a job where someone emailed me, so they typed in my name and email address but still addressed the email to my POC colleague in the office. My colleague and I have completely different job functions, so not only did the microaggressor email me addressing me with the wrong name, but they also asked me to do my colleague's job function.

Another situation was where a second assistant director on a shoot I was production managing for called me by the only other on-set POC, who happened to be one of his cast members.

As a second assistant director, his primary job function was to handle the cast and he only had three cast members' names to remember. As the production manager however I liaised with the cast and crew, checked locations; in fact I managed all the logistics. Therefore as an integral member of the team I have no idea why it was a problem remembering my name.



**Act older kid.**

My clients didn't feel safe with their accounts being handled by someone who was 20 (back then), and I would try to avoid revealing my age as much as possible...but sometimes you just couldn't lie.

As soon as I would communicate my age, I could see them thinking: "Why is this kid handling our contract? We are the biggest provider of..!"

I've always done my job professionally and because of my maturity, I was able to get to the positions that I was in, but traditional and older CEOs saw my age as a weakness.

I was told at one job that I should pretend to be ten years older, just to give some comfort to the client, or I was told not to shave my beard to seem older.



**The stupid foreigner.**

I was in communication with a colleague from another office via email, and the email address and my signature contained my name. We were in exchange of emails for a number of days and when I wasn't able to provide them with what they wanted, they called me. Upon answering the phone, I used my name and the colleague on the other end sounded surprised.

They told me they were surprised because I have an Eastern European-sounding name and that I have an English accent. They laughed about how they thought that because I was foreign that was why I wasn't doing what they had asked of me. At the time, I didn't respond to this comment and explained why I wasn't able to do what they were asking.





**Born in Brazil.  
Belittled in Britain.**

My husband is from Brazil and speaks English very well, but as it is not his first language, he has an accent. I was born and bred in South East London.

I've heard people, such as doctors and tradesmen, talk down to my husband as if he is stupid or doesn't understand, because of what I can only assume is the fact that he isn't English.

He was on the phone to our doctor once, on speaker and he was trying to arrange an appointment. He was clear and concise, yet the woman kept repeating "What?!" every time he said something. I've called our doctor many times for myself or my daughter and they've always been very polite.

Another instance was when our boiler broke recently, so I asked my husband to call around to get some quotes.

He was dicked around and given quotes that were sometimes up to £500 more than quotes I got, from the same tradesman! He is also called the wrong name at work, wherever he has worked! His name is Leandro, or Lé (pronounced Lee), but he's always been nicknamed Leonardo or Leo.

He has always said these things do not bother him, but this is because he knows no different, whereas I see it, I hear it and I know he is being treated differently to me.

It makes my blood boil.





**You're so old. That's so funny.**

To people half my age, I am old...yet I don't feel old (I'm only 62). I don't believe that old people should demand respect. Like everyone else, we must earn it. However, I do find it odd that ageism is seen as a soft discrimination..."no harm done".

Even a dismissive comment about something being "old school" is hurtful, because it is saying that the past is in some way unfit for purpose. Mozart, unfit for purpose? Nobody has ever said in a meeting (that I've been in) "That's so Black", "That's so gay" or "That's so disabled", yet the collective giggles that follow a comment about age tell me that we are not considered important enough to be given consideration of our feelings.

Ironically, the "new thinking" we are all meant to embrace is often not new. It's just repurposed through technology. But that's the beauty of age...you've seen an awful lot in life, very little of which is fit for purpose.





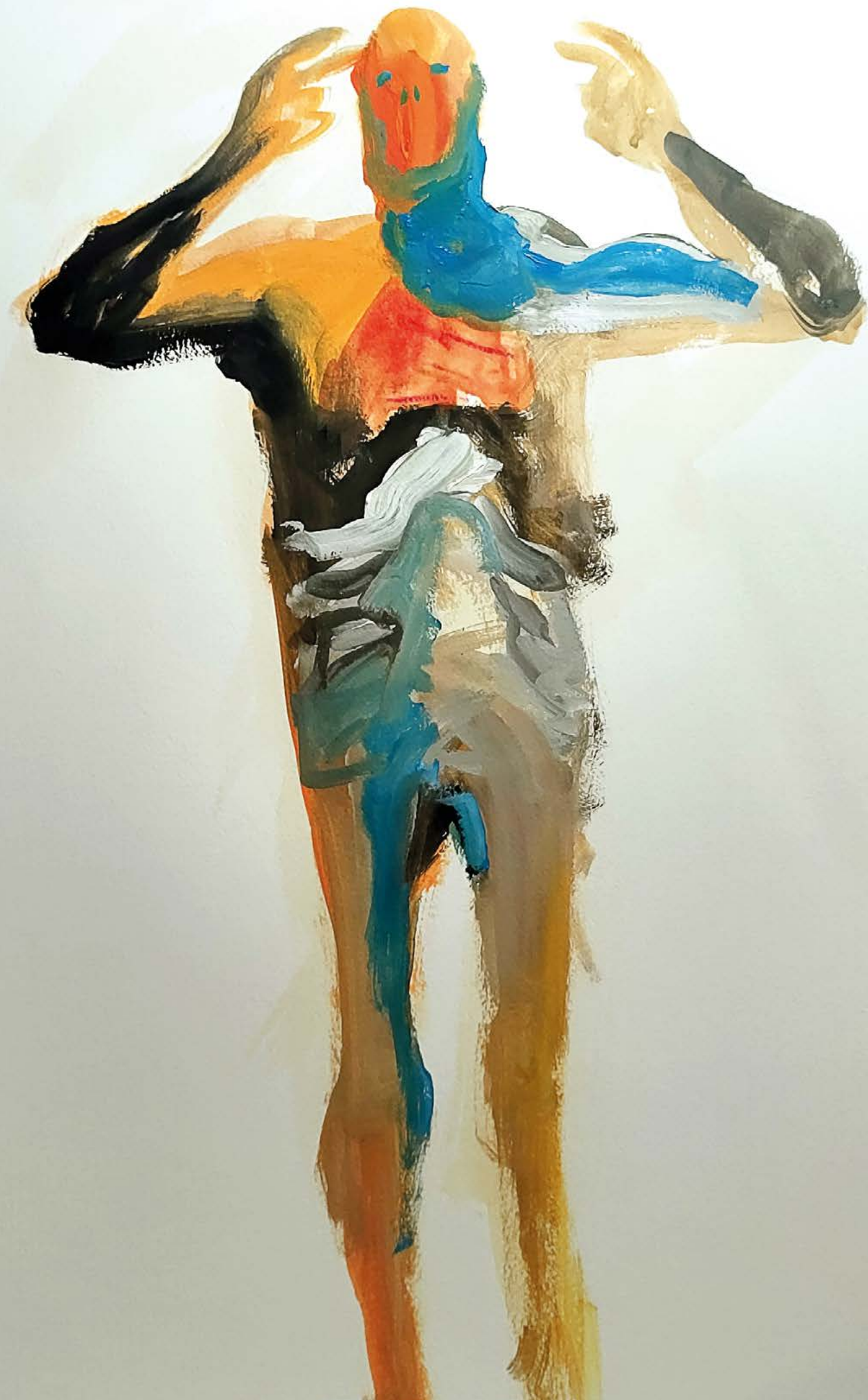
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**The damsel in no distress.**

Once, on an audit job, I was carrying a pile of files to put back once we completed the job. A guy that worked in that office saw me and asked if I needed help (gave me a look as if I was a damsel in distress). I said "No, it's fine, I can manage", but he insisted as if he thought I was struggling.

Eventually, I handed him the files and his body kind of dropped as he took them and his eyes opened wide in surprise as they were a lot heavier than he thought (assuming because I'm a female they couldn't be that heavy).



**Carnival of preconception.**

I attended Notting Hill Carnival one year with some friends, when I bumped into a colleague of mine. We had a brief chat and then went about our way enjoying the rest of the day at the carnival.

At my next shift at work, another colleague of ours approached me and commented that he didn't know I was friends with Black people (however, the term he used was far more offensive). This colleague was Black, so clearly felt it was appropriate to use such terms. I, however, felt really uncomfortable as neither me nor anyone in my friendship group used such language.

I asked him why this mattered and he told me, in his opinion, I didn't look like the type of person to have friends of colour.

I'm a White male with a shaved head, so to him that meant I wouldn't associate with anyone else who didn't look like me.



**Low regard for high anxiety.**

I'd had a really hard time at a job, which resulted in me having high levels of anxiety.

After leaving and starting a new job, I was honest with my manager and told her that I did have high levels of anxiety.

Within the next six weeks of my new job, the new manager did not feel I was achieving the level she wanted and I seemed very down, so she placed me on a performance review. During this review, I had to label my reasons for enjoying work every day and other patronising observations I had to make.

Once I left this job, I heard that the manager was telling people it was "tough love" she was giving me and not a hard time.

It was just a gentle nudge in the right direction, she felt. Ultimately, my mental state was seen as a hindrance and she was pushing me to fit the mould she had of me.

**If you were to replay the situation(s) you described, how could it have gone better?**

To be honest, just be kind. I had endured over two years of bullying from my previous manager, so I just needed kindness. If she had communicated her level of expectation of me in a better way, I would have worked myself to change what was visible. Forcing me into this space didn't help and ultimately made my anxiety much worse.



**Conscious bias.**

When I worked as a finance manager, the accounts were always prepared in the same way and according to accounting standards. I was ACA qualified and one day the CFO, who was a banker, just started questioning everything to do with assets on the balance sheet and how they're accounted for.

I was new there, but nothing had changed, the accounts were being prepared exactly the same for years and the company even had an external accountant who showed me exactly how they did it.

He prepared the original spreadsheet, but they never questioned his work.



**Can't spell. Can't think.**

In terms of neurodiverse microaggressions, I have a form of dyslexia and people often point out spelling or grammatical issues first when reviewing something, rather than commenting on the (great) content.

It frustrates me constantly as it feels like you can't be perceived as "good" or "clever" if you can't spell. My husband even admitted that he has, in the past, unconsciously judged a person's intelligence based on how they wrote an email or whether they had made spelling mistakes. He thinks a little differently now!

I had never really considered this a microaggression, but I guess it is.





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**Just eat.**

Many years ago, I was very ill with anorexia, which is a condition that still affects me, albeit in a more manageable way these days. At the time, however, my condition was outwardly obvious, so it would often attract comments, the most common one being “Why would you do this to yourself?”

For someone struggling with an eating disorder, this question not only trivialises the illness by implying that the sufferer has chosen to be ill, but it makes it seem like something that’s easy to fix...just eat.

In reality, nobody with an eating disorder would ever choose to have one – it’s a mentally exhausting, lonely and miserable way to live that affects everyone you love.

Eating disorders have one of the highest mortality rates of any mental illness. This is partly because it is incredibly difficult to stop them gaining momentum once they have been triggered. As the severity of the illness increases, you become less rational, more immersed and harder to treat.

I have struggled with eating for 14 years, and while many of the old habits have faded away with time and treatment, some aspects of the disease are unlikely to ever go away.

Needless to say, it is not a life I would’ve chosen for myself, so we should always be mindful of implying that people with eating disorders have made a conscious decision to be in that situation.



**Organised chaos.**

I have lived with OCD for most of my adult life, with the majority of my obsessions and compulsions being centred around checking behaviours (e.g., checking locks, plugs, switches, taps, ovens and pretty much any household appliance that may pose a vague risk of fire or flooding). Consequently, it can take a really long time for me to leave the house, and travelling far from home is even more stressful.

OCD also affects my work life, as I struggle to remain within budgeted hours or adhere to a brief due to my constant need to ensure everything is perfect, whether requested or not.

To do this, I will read a piece of work over...and over... and over...and over until I'm sure it is just right, with each read through causing more and more anxiety.

If someone interrupts me while I'm reading, I must start from the beginning of the document, even if it is hundreds of pages long. If I send a piece of work back to a team, I must download it again from my sent messages and read it once more to ensure I sent the correct version. The list of things I check is seemingly endless and managing the condition leaves little time for anything else.

Unfortunately, OCD is a condition that is often mentioned in casual conversation: "Oh my God, I'm so OCD about that" or "I had a bit of an OCD moment the other day".

These comments are very common and generally come from a lack of awareness, thought or understanding rather than ill intent, but for someone who lives with the condition, such comments downplay an incredibly time-consuming and distressing illness.

In most cases, when people use these phrases, it's in relation to an isolated incident where someone was a bit picky about choosing a colour of paint or overly finicky about cleaning the house before a relative came over to visit.

However, living with severe OCD in its clinical form is very, very different. There is a misconception that all people with OCD are rigid, organised and pedantic... that they require structure in all aspects of their lives.

While this may be how it looks on the outside, the actual experience of OCD and the thought processes that occur when it's triggered are uncontrolled, chaotic, frustrating and often go hand in hand with unbearable levels of anxiety when you try to stop repeating your behaviours.

Suffice to say, it's a daily challenge and not at all like choosing a colour of paint.





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**A very wrong assumption.**

A colleague and I are at our desks and a new member of the organisation approaches us.

My colleague introduces me to the new member and this person proceeds to address me in an aggressive form of street slang. I did not respond and he continued to engage in this manner with me. Eventually, speaking appropriately, I cut the conversation short.

Assumptions can be damaging and hurtful. Do not assume that as a person of colour, I use street slang as part of my vocabulary. I felt as if this colleague was mocking me. And they didn't even know me that well.

At least if we were better acquainted, I would have felt better placed to tell them in more detail just how upsetting their attitude was.





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**My body. My rules.**

I chose to breastfeed my child beyond 12 months – in fact, only recently at 21 months did my child decide that they were ready to stop.

When people realised that I still breastfed, they would be really shocked and say things like:

“Oh my god, I can’t believe they still breastfeed”.

“Don’t you think it’s time to stop? Six months is usually good enough”.

“It’s not emotionally healthy to continue breastfeeding once they can walk”.

“You won’t be doing that for too long; they must be biting your nipples every time they feed”.

“Ouch! Bet those teeth get in the way”.

“Seems like this is more for you than it is your child”.

It is so embarrassing, especially sexualising and/or biting comments and it made me feel very ashamed, when in fact, it is a beautiful thing.

My body, my child, my rules.



We would like to thank all of the illustrators below who brought the anonymous stories and experiences to life visually.

**#01**  
**Sharna Neil**  
@sharna\_neil

**#02**  
**Adele Rego**  
adele.rego@gmail.com

**#03**  
**Flávia Felipe**  
@flafllpe

**#04**  
**Natalie Narh**  
@nataliiee\_n

**#05**  
**Israel Kujore**  
@israelvisual

**#06**  
**Zosia Bonkowska**  
www.zovska.com

**#07**  
**Nilesh Parmar**

**#08**  
**Naki Narh**  
www.nakinarh.com

**#09**  
**Céline Moya**  
www.celinemoya.com

**#10**  
**Simmi Dullay**  
sdullay@gmail.com

**#11**  
**Katrina Indiana**  
@katindiana

**#12**  
**Boaz Torfstein**  
@illustrated\_by\_boaz

**#13**  
**Freddie Rowland**  
freddie.studio

**#14**  
**Céline Moya**  
www.celinemoya.com

**#15**  
**Emily Camacho**

**#16**  
**Liv Rae Auckland**  
@l.r.auckland

**#17**  
**Kofi Ntiforo**  
@wisilmitty

**#18**  
**Alex Jones**

**#19**  
**Sandy Birdi**  
cheekybirddesigns.ldn@gmail.com

**#20**  
**Zosia Bonkowska**  
www.zovska.com

**#21**  
**Caitlin Rich**

**#22**  
**Geoffrey Bean**  
gbean@tomlinbean.com

**#23**  
**Cameron Billing**  
cambilling@gmail.com

**#24**  
**Saasha Akighir**  
@xavierverse

**#25**  
**Gus Bozzetti**  
@gusbozzetti

**#26**  
**Giovana Lorensatto**  
@giovanalorensatto

**#27**  
**Sandy Birdi**  
cheekybirddesigns.ldn@gmail.com

**#28**  
**Gus Bozzetti**  
@gusbozzetti

**#29**  
**Ian Hammond**  
ihammond1@mac.com

**#30**  
**Emily Southwell**  
@emilyeliza\_art

**#31**  
**Chelsey Toms**

**#32**  
**Lauren Glomski**  
laurenglomski@gmail.com

**#33**  
**Charlotte Shawyer-Tarora**

**#34**  
**Alexa Hawksworth**  
@alexaandthehawk

**#35**  
**Georgina Osei-Hwere**



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This book was developed through a collaboration between Ogilvy Health UK, Ogilvy UK and NABS.

If you have been the victim of a microaggression, NABS is ideally placed to help with support and advice.

Contact NABS for confidential support and guidance:  
0800 707 6607 | [nabs.org.uk](https://nabs.org.uk)

We would also love to hear your feedback and thoughts at [throwawaycomments@ogilvy.com](mailto:throwawaycomments@ogilvy.com).

