

Hold

^c Whilst finishing my coffee at the local café – double shot latte with a pump of vanilla and two and a half sugars, the usual – it had suddenly hit me. I pull out my phone, vibrating in my hands like an electric shock jolting up my spine; and that's when I see it.

Incoming Call: Minister for Cultural Development

Prior to our interview, my partner Jake and I had applied for roles to create murals to support local communities across the state. We had done this for years.

We keep coming back because there's a remarkable sense of connection you gain when you work alongside the very people you depict in your mural.', I'd eagerly told the interviewer. There's something magical about the budding sense of community ownership you feel when people of different backgrounds come together and collaborate.'

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*I'd say our main influences in life include the

celebration of diversity.' Jake had excitedly remarked. "Learning about all the cultures in this community was really inspiring to us.' The centre director interviewing us undoubtedly shared our sentiment, considering, which gave Jake and I realistic reason to expect this phone call. But now that I see my phone ring on the table, all I feel is an overwhelming sense of inadequacy and dread, even though I know the minister will come bearing good news. *Just pick it up, Mandy, I think to myself, it won't be like the last project.*

Jake glanced at me impatiently.

'Mandy. We need this.'

'I know we do, honey, but...'. Innocuously, he reached across me, picked up the phone and answered the call.

Hi there! Yes... that's correct... I'll hand you over to her now. He utters, placing the phone in my hands.

For two seconds, I stare at my phone – two-hundred milliseconds that felt like an eternity - and my hand apprehensively jittered towards the screen.

Before a word left my mouth, I pressed
HOLD.

Two Christmases ago, Jake and I were commissioned to create a mural for a restaurant in Southbank. Our task was to showcase the restaurant's identity while highlighting Melbourne's many cultures relishing summer, together. We were thrilled to be given the opportunity. *Who'd pass up the chance to make their mark in the heart of the cultural capital of Australia?* Two weeks. That's how long it took us to make a simple mural, wiped out in a matter of seconds by vandals. When nothing goes to plan, you quickly lose a sense of motivation in life.

I.... just can't do it, Jake...'I mumbled as my phone remained on hold, expectant of my response.

During *that* failure of a project, considering the image before myself, I stood silently on the night before the reveal for a few moments. The smell of the spray paint

cans made me feel nauseous and unworthy, like I was a flight captain with motion sickness. At that moment, it had felt like we were a waste of time; a waste of resources; and more than anything else, a waste of faith. Regretfully, we painted over the entire mural before sunrise, struggling to evade the murky and inescapable hole of failure that pursued us.

Now, for the first time in seven months, we had been commissioned. And without a doubt, it was the biggest yet.

'Are you okay?' Jake worriedly asked. I'm paralysed by the haunting failure that stands between myself and our success, freezing my body in time, unable to move.

'Yeah,' I replied timidly, "just a little shaken up, I guess.' With my phone still on hold, all I could ponder was my failure as an artist.

Four years ago, my childhood high school asked Jake and myself to create a mural with the year twelve VCAL students embodying our local neighbourhood, which was significant for me, to say the least. It was the place I was born and raised, the place where I could walk down the street and say hi to at least three strangers who'd probably been to my fifth birthday

party. It was home. That project was my opportunity to prove my worthiness to not just those that had judged me, but above all else, myself. The outcome, however... was humiliating. There's no way to communicate the feeling you get when you're being scrutinised by a group of eighteen-year-old students, eyeing you like hawks to their prey. The sound of the students laughing at my work still echoes in my head.

Picturing my failures then made me feel absolutely empty, but it also made me want to redeem myself – maybe this was my chance to give myself the sense of meaning that I've been missing for the last two years.

With a newfound sense of confidence, I could finally un-press *HOLD*.

'Hey! I'm doing very well, thanks... When can we get started?'