

HANA SHAFI
SMALL, BROKE, &
KIND OF DIRTY AFFIRMATIONS
FOR THE REAL WORLD

SMALL, BROKE, AND
KIND OF DIRTY

AFFIRMATIONS FOR THE REAL WORLD

HANA SHAFI

Book*hug Press
Toronto

INTRODUCTION: THIS IS NOT A SELF-HELP BOOK

I CAN'T GIVE YOU ADVICE. AND I PROBABLY SHOULDN'T. That may sound strange coming from someone whose art is so focused on mental health and making people feel good. But I always feel it's important to stress that I'm in no way, shape, or form giving folks advice. I'm not in any position to do that. I'm not a psychiatrist or a counsellor or a lifestyle coach. What I am is a storyteller. I tell stories—in words and in art—that make people feel less alone, that affirm people as they are, and that maybe get them a little riled up about the big-picture stuff that really matters in the world.

When I started my affirmation art series on social media in March 2016, I didn't actually know I was starting a series. I had never made any art like this before. I preferred drawing weird, morbid things—surreal black-and-white cartoon portraits. I sort of saw myself as an artist, but not really. I sort of saw myself as a writer, but not really. I just knew I wanted to keep creating, but that's easier said than done when you're broke and giving your art away for free just so it has a chance to be out there. I started to feel hopeless

about the world, and I knew I had to do something different. I wanted to start making things that made me and others feel hopeful—even when it felt like there wasn't much to hold on to, and even when we just didn't feel good.

And then a funny thing happened. Making others smile started to make me smile; it made me feel really good. Maybe there was hope, after all. Maybe art wasn't purposeless. Maybe it could make people feel, and feel deeply. Maybe art could be an act of kindness, and kindness could be a radical type of activism. The series took off online, and I've been making affirmations ever since.

But I've always been a storyteller at heart, and when I started thinking about compiling some of my favourite pieces from the series into a book, I knew I had a lot more to say about each of them. If a simple illustration could make someone feel like they weren't totally alone in this shit-show of a world, then maybe a good story could go a step further and make them feel like maybe the world wasn't a shit-show at all (or at least not entirely a shit-show). If a drawing could make someone feel like it's okay to be sad, then maybe a good story could drive that point home. Maybe it could let that person know they are valid as they are, no matter where they happen to be in their life. That seemed to me like something worth doing.

But when I got down to writing pieces to accompany the art affirmations, I realized I had some unwritten rules for myself. First, I didn't want to come off all sunshine and rainbows and unicorns. That's not my life, and I'm guessing it's not yours either. I didn't want to censor myself by focusing only on the positive. I wanted the words to be real, and raw, and sometimes not entirely pretty. I knew it wouldn't matter whether the story was harrowing or shocking or completely out of this world, as long as it came from an honest place. And this was a deal-breaker for me: I didn't want anything I wrote to be consumed as tragic trauma porn. I would willingly share my own crap (sometimes quite literally, as you'll see), but never with the intent of garnering sympathy or giving off a "Hey, look at what I've been through" vibe. What it came down to was this: I wanted to write about my very regular and sometimes not-so-regular experiences because I hope (and believe) they will reflect some of your regular and not-so-regular experiences. And maybe it's precisely those experiences that say the most about our spirit and that connect us all so universally.

So, I can't give you advice. And I really shouldn't. I haven't yet figured out how to meditate, I've never kept up going to the gym for longer than a week, and I will will-

ingly consume a meal with heavy cream even though I know *very well* that I shouldn't. I am in absolutely no position to tell you what to do. But if you are going through your life clumsily and embarrassingly, sometimes hopefully and sometimes hopelessly, sometimes looking beyond the horizon and other times just trying to figure out whether you'll have enough clean underwear to get you through the week—well, I can tell you that I am too. And maybe, in the end, that's better than advice.

BE KIND. BE EMPATHETIC
BUT TAKE NO SHIT.



FRIZZ
KID

ON KINDNESS



MY BEST FRIEND, MADISON, HAD MY BACK IN THE FIFTH grade when I lost my underwear on a school field trip. It's not as bizarre as it sounds. We went to the waterpark section of Ontario Place, a sort of family-oriented theme park—so no roller coasters that promise to fling your guts around or toss you into space. After we were done playing around, we all headed back to the change room in our soaking-wet swimsuits. I dug through my backpack looking for my underwear—and came up empty. I dug around in there some more, panic rising. Still nothing. I knew I was going to need help (for some reason, my fifth-grade self thought it would be much too scandalous to go commando), but asking for it was mortifying. Who loses their undies? Who begs other people for their underwear?! But I gathered up all the courage I had in me and went for it. I turned to Madison and awkwardly asked her for a pair of clean undies. And Madison saved the day, pulling out the pair of extra underpants she had smartly packed. We vowed to never tell anyone about this moment—our ten-year-old selves believed it to be the most shocking, racy secret ever. It was a covert pact, this passing of an unidentified piece of fabric between our small hands, this illegal underwear transaction at Ontario Place. On the bumpy bus ride back home to Mississauga, we

decided that this solidified our status as best friends. Almost sixteen years later, it seems that the Miraculous Underwear Save of 2003 really *did* seal the deal; we are BFFs for life. Underweargate created the tightest of bonds between us.

Madison has had my back in some really profound ways. She's been there through my most difficult moments—unemployment, anxiety, dealing with discrimination—and she's hung in during the countless times I've texted her, paranoid about something or another. We've seen each other through many failures, heartbreaks, and moments that were definitely more embarrassing than the Great Panties Fiasco. I could share those stories with you—and I have no doubt that some of them would move you to tears—but I don't really need to. The truth is that, somehow, being there with a pair of clean underwear is the good-friend metaphor that really sums up our relationship. In most friendships, it's the weird little things that you most often remember. The person who always has your back is the symbolic spare underwear to your most trying and strange undies-less times.

Thanks for always having my back, Madison—and, of course, for the underwear.



I'LL ALWAYS
HAVE YOUR
BACK.

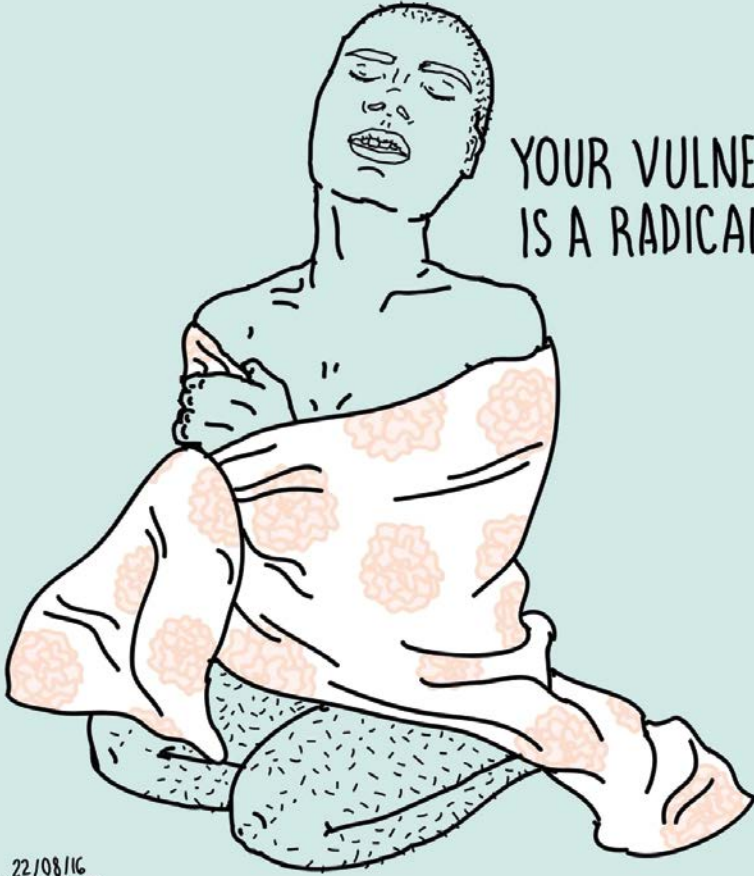
17/04/2017
IG:FRIZZKIDART



I LEARNED TO BE VULNERABLE ON NEW YEAR'S EVE OF 2013/14. It was the first time I had ever cried in front of my core circle of friends (with the exception of one of them). We were all at a dive bar called Sneaky Dee's, a cheap hangout that's sort of a Toronto legend, famously included in the graphic novel series *Scott Pilgrim*. Greasy nachos, cheap beer, and a creaky dance floor upstairs. I was thrilled to be spending NYE out with my friends, at a Toronto bar, with no curfew—I'm an immigrant kid, so this is a huge deal. I'd been going through a hard time over the previous few months. *Hard time* is the neat phrase I use to package the intangible terrors of being stressed, anxious, and filled with existential dread while in university. *Hard times* is code for "Don't ask; shit just really blows."

That night, something in me snapped. The girl who had never cried in front of her friends, even while watching sad movies—yes, even *The Notebook*; even *Titanic*—was suddenly sobbing, fighting through tears to articulate what was wrong like an out-of-breath second-grader who's lost it, seemingly for no reason, at recess. Mascara running, glittery eyeshadow turning into a milky pool of yuck around my waterline, I just stood in the middle of the bar as folks clinked glasses and danced for the hopeful new

YOUR VULNERABILITY
IS A RADICAL GIFT



22/08/16
IG: FRIZZKIDART

year, crying. My new-found emotional depth decided to make its debut in the most embarrassing, pathetic way imaginable. Why couldn't I have just shed a few tears during *Lion King*, like a normal person?

I shuffled over to the bartender and asked for a tissue. I'm sure he assumed I was just another girl who'd had too many whisky sours and was surrounded by shitty friends. It was humiliating, and in that moment, I wished it hadn't taken me twenty years to learn to be vulnerable. I wished I'd realized sooner that it's okay to show the weak, broken parts of yourself—and that showing those parts actually isn't weak or broken at all. In fact, it's the strong thing that'll help you piece yourself back together. Perhaps if I had learned how to express vulnerability earlier—as a child, even as a teenager—I wouldn't have chosen New Year's Eve in a crowded bar as the prime time and location for my breakdown. Or maybe it was fate: a very literal outpouring of the years that had passed in order to cleanse myself for the future.

After this display of vulnerability, I learned who my real friends were. While some were there to hold my hand and say it was okay, others looked visibly irritated. When you show the deepest parts of your life, not everyone is going to like what they see. But through those responses,

you get a sense of who truly loves you, of who is willing to offer empathy and patience even when you're wailing in a public place and getting snot all over your hands. This is why vulnerability is a gift. It's a net that will catch all the yuck, all the people who aren't worth it, and what flows through is the good stuff, the things that matter.