

Indebted

If I look back far enough, I can pinpoint the exact moment in my life when I was presented with two options—the one I took and the one I left behind.

I was two years out of uni, working a job that barely covered my share of the rent. The daily commute from Watford into London was grinding, my co-workers unobliging, but by a stroke of luck, I'd landed an entry-level position in a reputable publishing house through connections I'd made whilst studying. I had my foot in the door, which was where I wanted to be at twenty-three, because I knew I possessed the skills and determination to become a fully-fledged editor someday. I just had to work hard and bide my time.

I wish I could say my mother had been my role model growing up, but nothing could be further from the truth. If I'd followed her lead, I might still been living in Preston pulling pints at the local Spoons.

'A-Levels are a waste of time,' Mum said when I was mulling over which subjects I should take. 'Why don't you get yourself a job? Start paying me rent?'

She laughed in my face when I told her I'd applied to uni. 'You think I can afford to pay for university? You're on your own, love. Do what you want, but don't expect me to bail you out when you're in debt.'

I had to take out the maximum student loan allowed, but the way I saw it, being in debt was a small price to pay if it meant I could escape the benefit trap Mum and the rest of my immediate family were so comfortable living in. I worked twelve hours a week at Primark whilst studying full time to supplement the measly maintenance allowance I was given, which should've been enough to see me through each month. But when Mum learnt I had a job, she demanded I pay her back for the years she spent supporting me. I lived off of instant noodles and tinned pasta so I could pay her fifty pounds a month—money I'm certain she spent at the off-licence.

My break came when my colleague—a junior editor—took time off for mental health reasons. What started as a temporary position soon became permanent and came with a pay rise. Whilst I wasn't earning a huge salary, I was able to start repaying my students loans, and even saved enough to holiday in Tenerife with friends. I stupidly phoned Mum to tell her how excited I was to finally experience a real holiday.

‘**God bless the child** that's got his own,’ she'd said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. ‘If you can afford to go on a jolly with your friends, you can afford to pay me more. It's the least you could do for my having sacrificed my youth for you.’

I put the phone down.

That was twelve years ago.

I never called her back.