

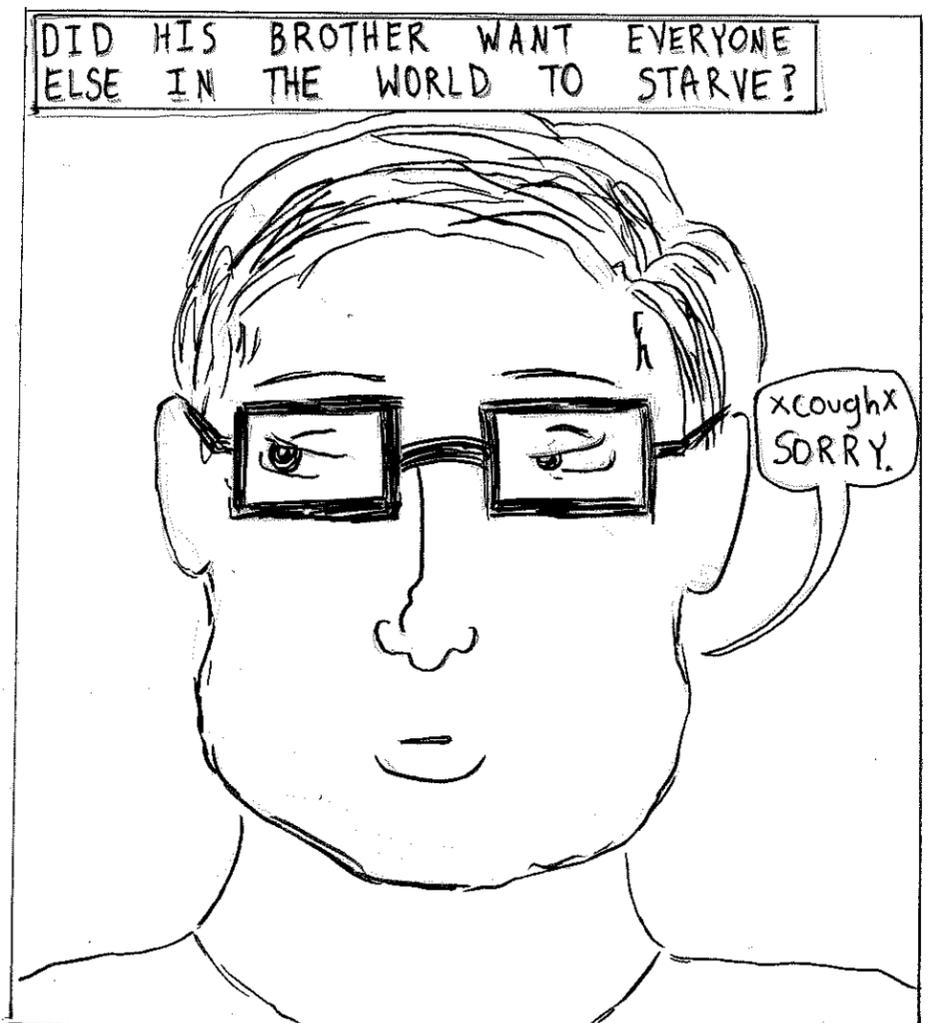
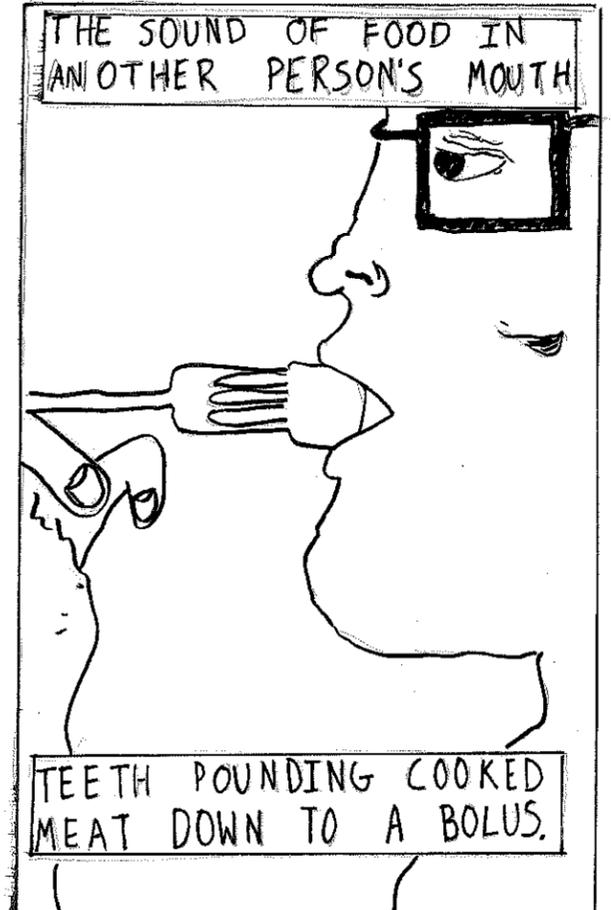


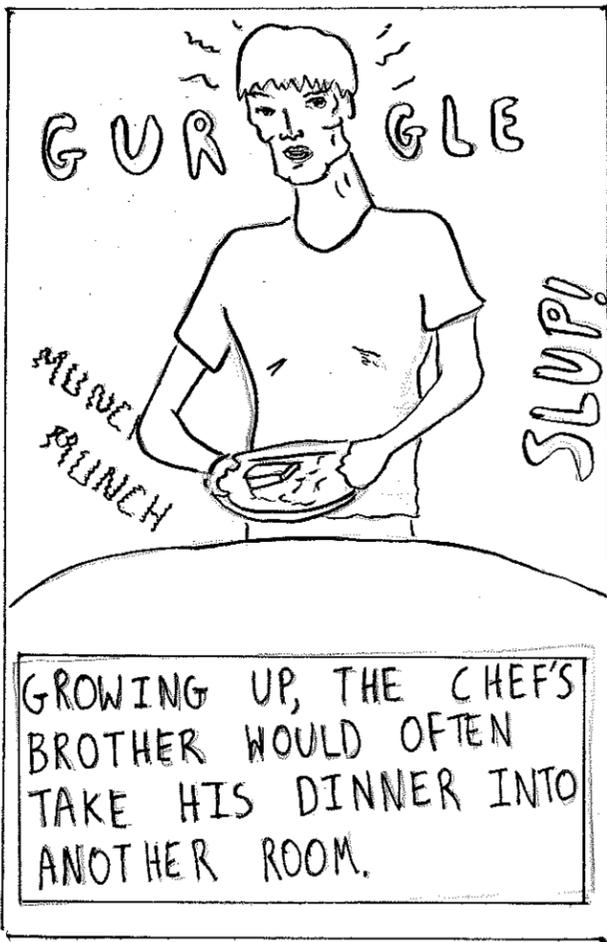
The Velvet Ditch

Issue #2

Written & Illustrated
by Brendan Steffen

LOTS OF
PEOPLE HATE
THE MERE
THOUGHT OF
OTHER PEOPLE
EATING

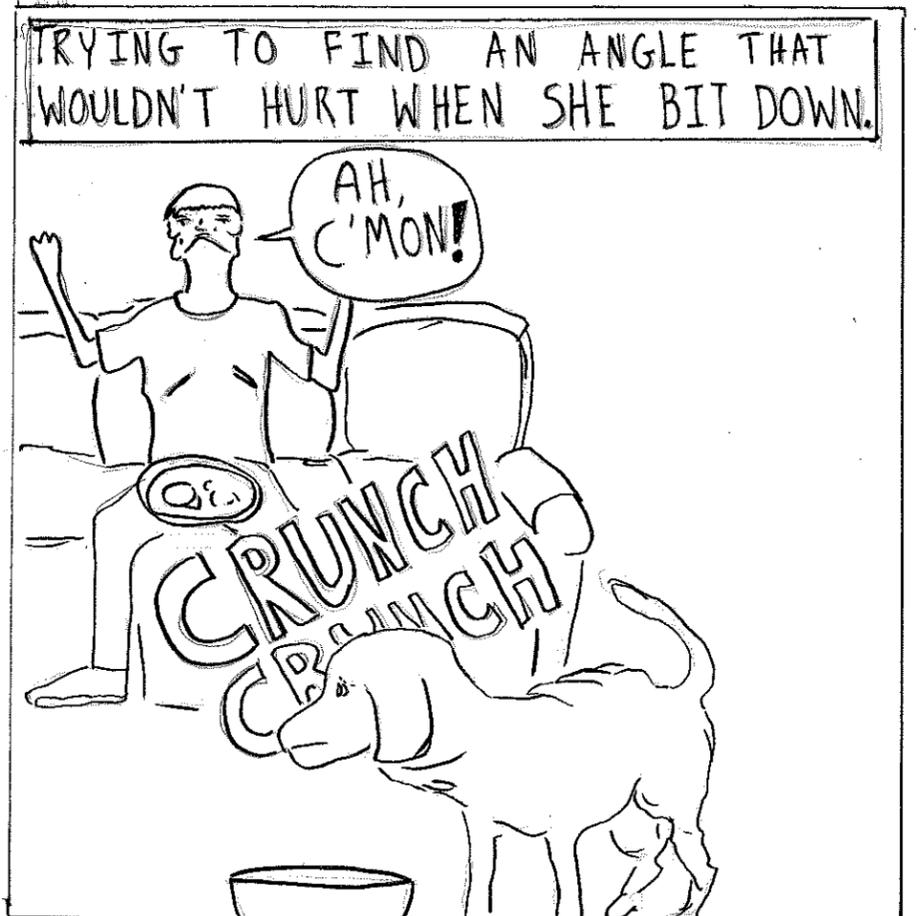




GROWING UP, THE CHEF'S BROTHER WOULD OFTEN TAKE HIS DINNER INTO ANOTHER ROOM.



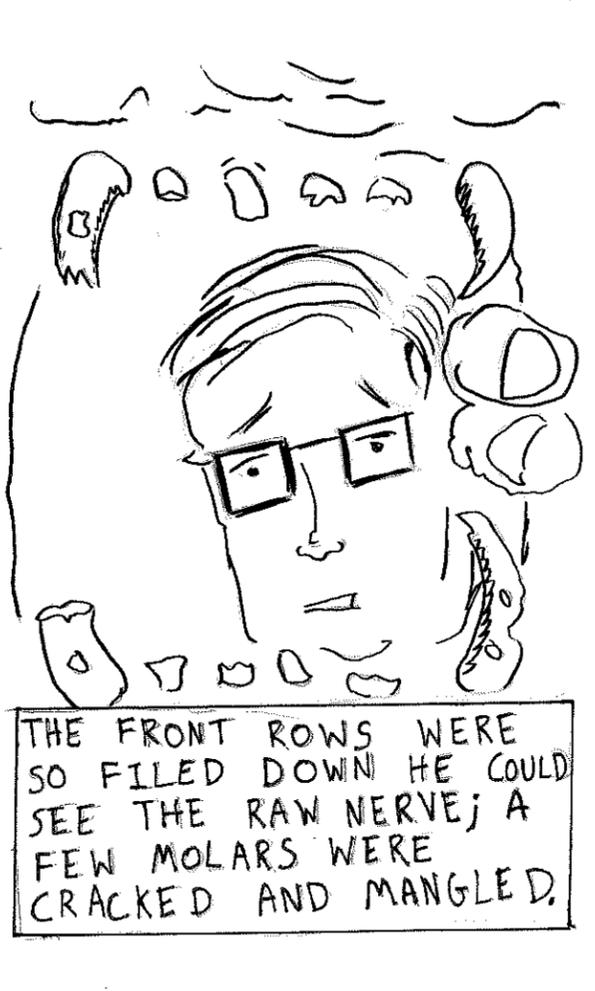
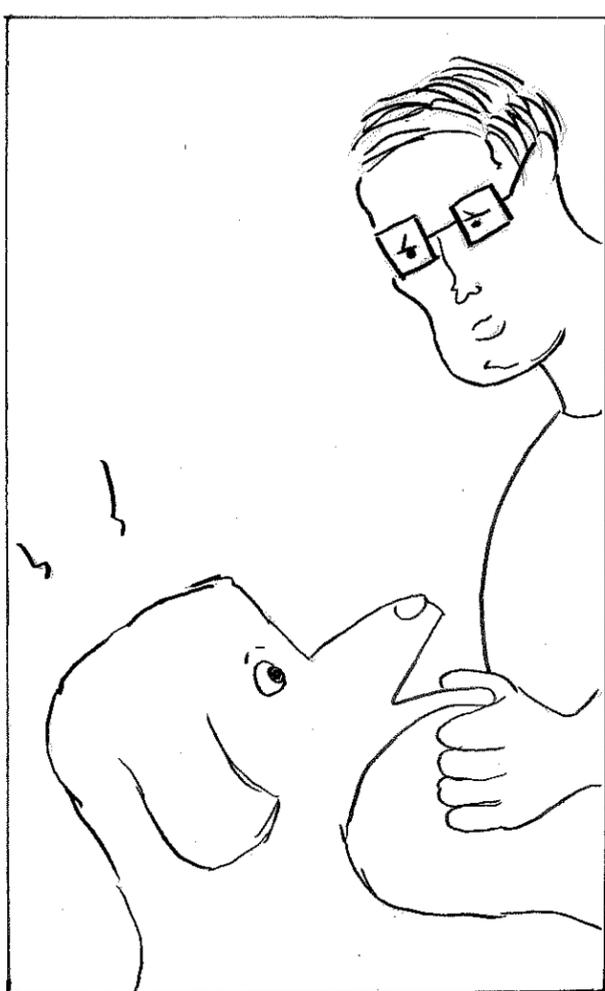
HE EVEN HATED IT WHEN THE DOG ATE, ROLLING THE HARD PELLETS AROUND ON HER DAMAGED TEETH



TRYING TO FIND AN ANGLE THAT WOULDN'T HURT WHEN SHE BIT DOWN.



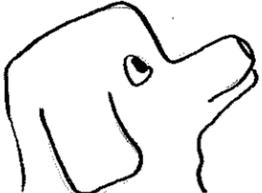
HIS BROTHER'S COMPLAINTS WERE WHAT PROVOKED THE CHEF TO OPEN THE DOG'S MOUTH AND LOOK INSIDE



THE FRONT ROWS WERE SO FILED DOWN HE COULD SEE THE RAW NERVE; A FEW MOLARS WERE CRACKED AND MANGLED.

SHE HAD BEEN A HUNTING DOG, AND BEFORE THE CHEF FOUND HER IN THE WOODS BEHIND THEIR HOUSE SHE HAD SPENT SEVERAL MONTHS NERVOUSLY BITING THE METAL WIRES OF HER CAGE.

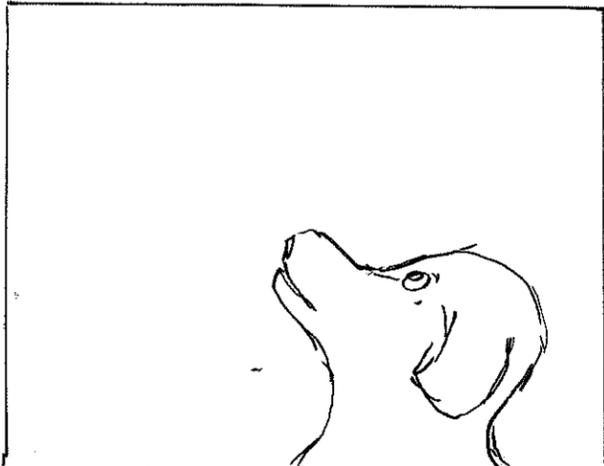
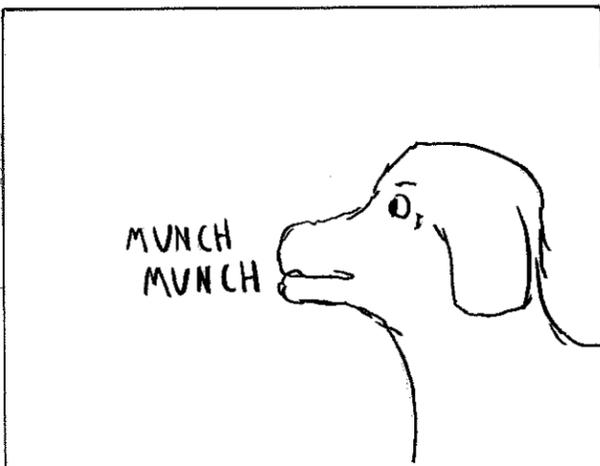
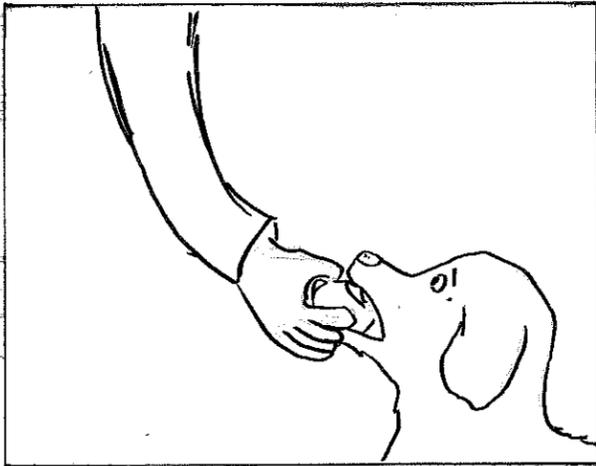
IT HURTS, DOESN'T IT?



HE STARTED SCRAPING THE LEFTOVERS OFF THEIR DINNER PLATES AND MAKING THINGS OUT OF THEM FOR THE DOG TO EAT



SOFT BISCUITS WITH PIECES OF CHICKEN AND RICE INSIDE.



THOSE WERE THE FIRST MEALS THE CHEF EVER PREPARED.

HER
FATHER
TOLD HER
THAT HER
ABOUT NOTHING
HE SUFFERING
MIGHT HAVE
USED THE WORD
'GRATUITOUS'.
THERE WAS
REDEMPITIVE
UNNECESSARY

OK, WELL.

LIFE IS THE SOURCE OF ALL
SUFFERING, AND LATELY LIFE
SEEMED TO BE NOTHING BUT
SUFFERING, SO THEREFORE...

IF YOU TELL SOMEONE YOU'RE
CONTEMPLATING SUICIDE, THINGS
START TO HAPPEN.

PEOPLE TRY TO PUT YOU IN A
HOSPITAL, FOR ONE.

DO YOU HAVE THE MEANS
TO HARM YOURSELF?

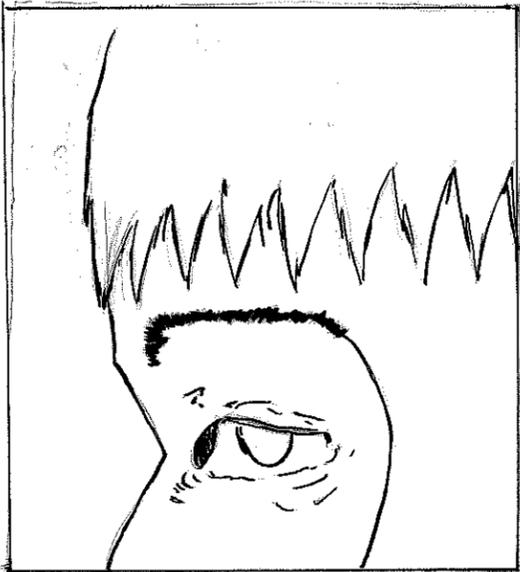
OF COURSE.

IF YOU THINK ABOUT IT FOR
MORE THAN FIVE SECONDS,
OF COURSE YOU DO.

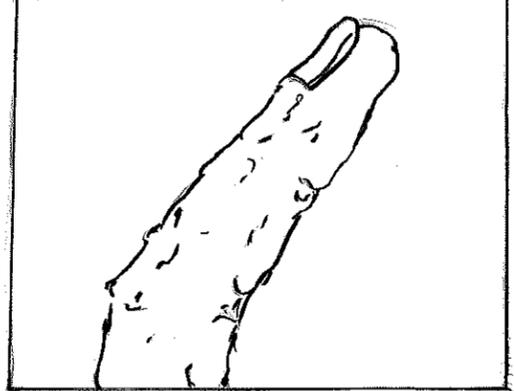


SHE WAS IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH A MAN NAMED TOM - TOGETHER FOR SIX YEARS, LONG-DISTANCE THE PAST THREE.

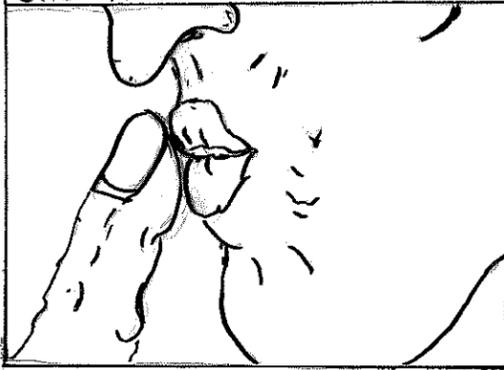
AT SOME POINT TOM DECIDED THAT THE HEIGHT OF EROTICISM WAS FOR LAUREN TO SEND HIM A SINGLE PICTURE OF HERSELF EACH DAY,



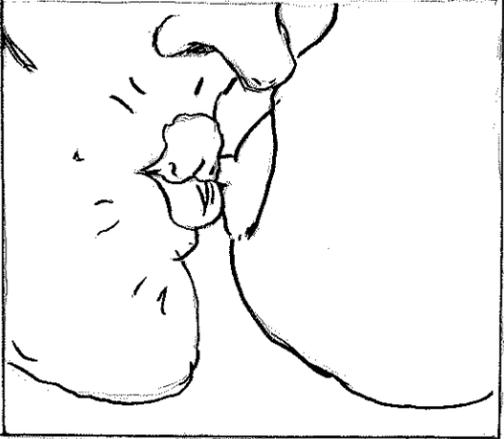
MOVING FROM THE MOST PUBLIC PARTS - FINGERS, EYELIDS - TO THE MOST PRIVATE.



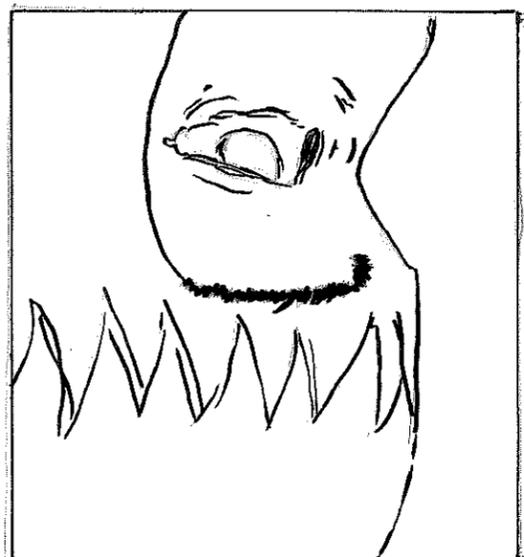
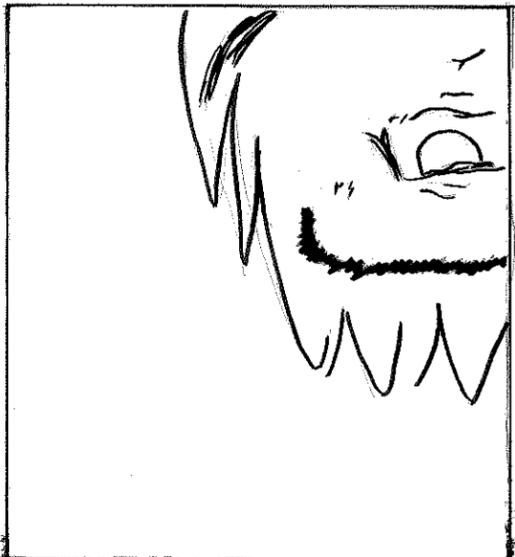
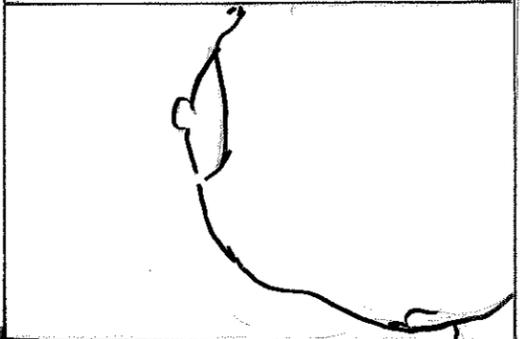
WHEN THEY SAW EACH OTHER, TOM WOULD SPREAD ALL THE PHOTOS OVER THE BED AND KISS LAUREN ON EACH SPOT SHE HAD BEEN PHOTOGRAPHED

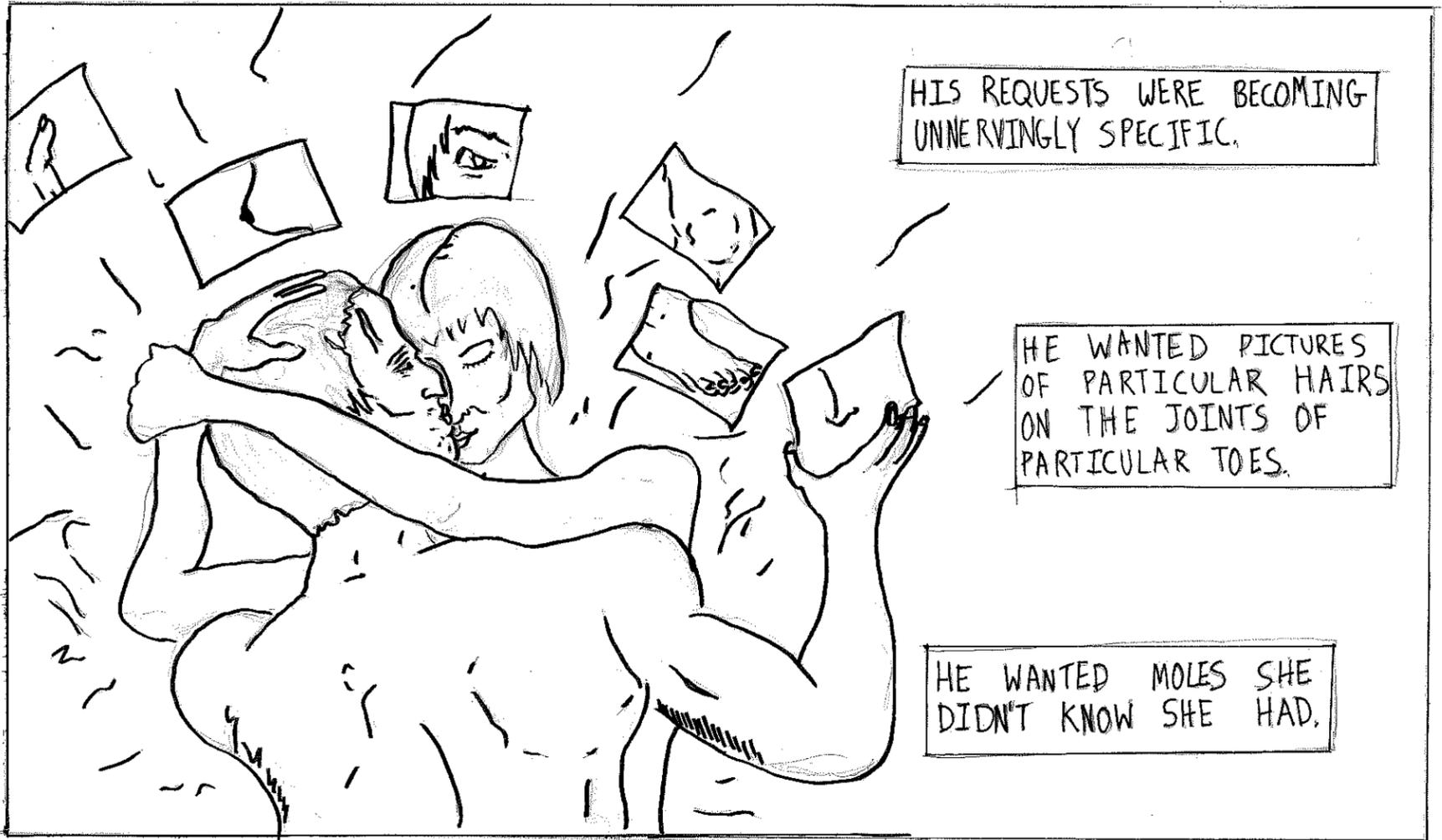


KISSING HER IN THE ORDER IN WHICH THE PHOTOGRAPHS WERE TAKEN.



THEY HAD BEEN THROUGH THIS CYCLE TWICE BEFORE AND HE WAS DRIVING UP TO VISIT HER AGAIN IN THREE WEEKS.

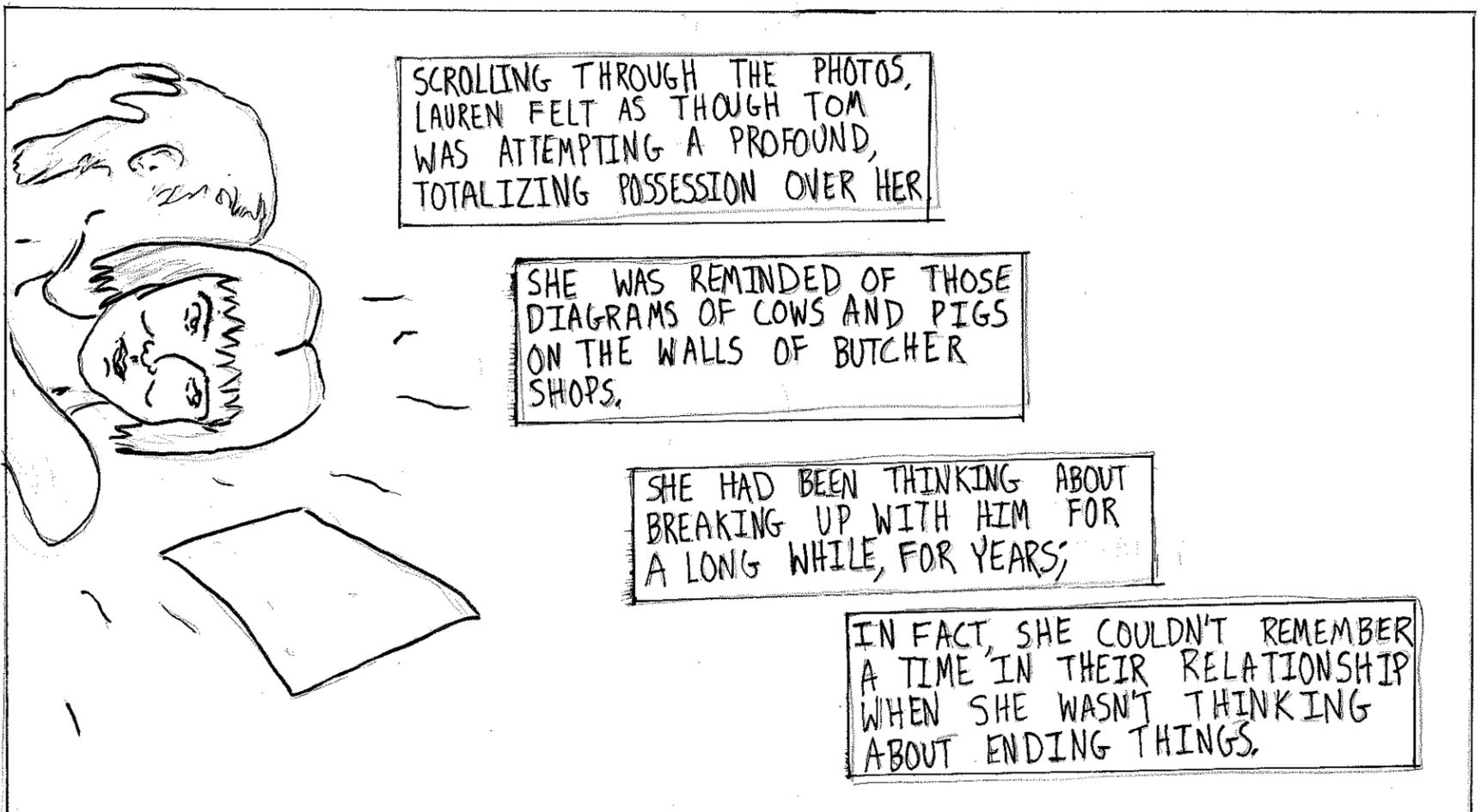
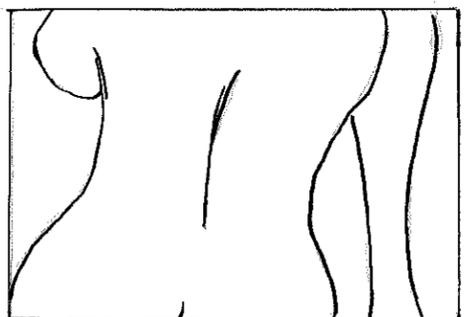
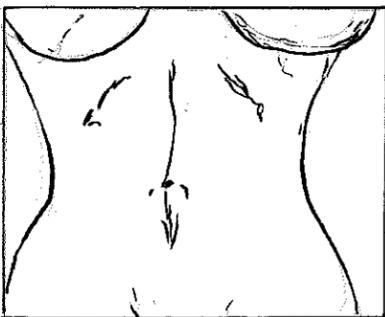
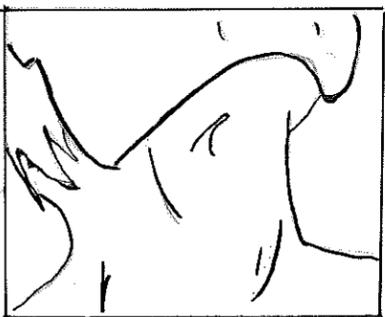
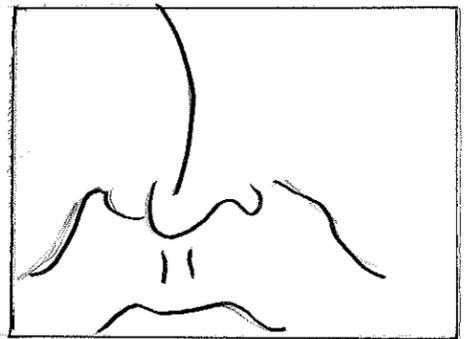
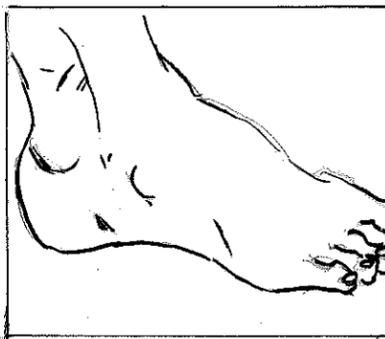
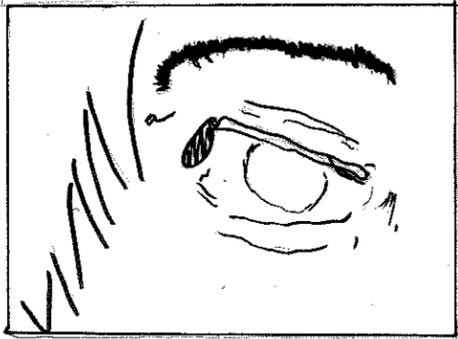




HIS REQUESTS WERE BECOMING UNNERVINGLY SPECIFIC.

HE WANTED PICTURES OF PARTICULAR HAIRS ON THE JOINTS OF PARTICULAR TOES.

HE WANTED MOLES SHE DIDN'T KNOW SHE HAD.



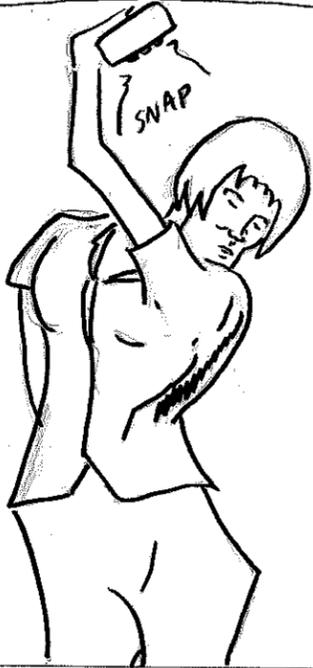
SCROLLING THROUGH THE PHOTOS, LAUREN FELT AS THOUGH TOM WAS ATTEMPTING A PROFOUND, TOTALIZING POSSESSION OVER HER

SHE WAS REMINDED OF THOSE DIAGRAMS OF COWS AND PIGS ON THE WALLS OF BUTCHER SHOPS.

SHE HAD BEEN THINKING ABOUT BREAKING UP WITH HIM FOR A LONG WHILE, FOR YEARS,

IN FACT, SHE COULDN'T REMEMBER A TIME IN THEIR RELATIONSHIP WHEN SHE WASN'T THINKING ABOUT ENDING THINGS.

SHE SET UP A TINDER PROFILE AND STARTED SENDING THE PICTURES TO THE MEN SHE MATCHED WITH.



Henry

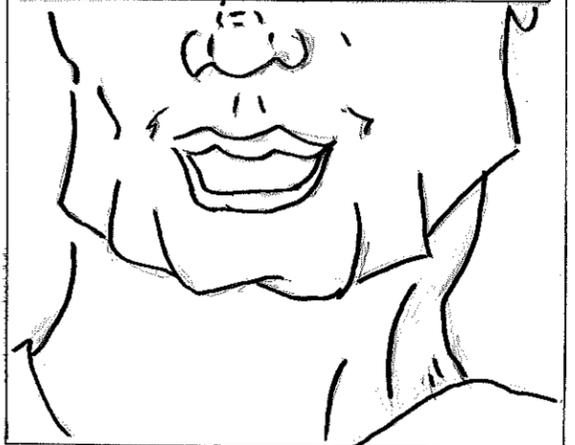
hi!

Lauren

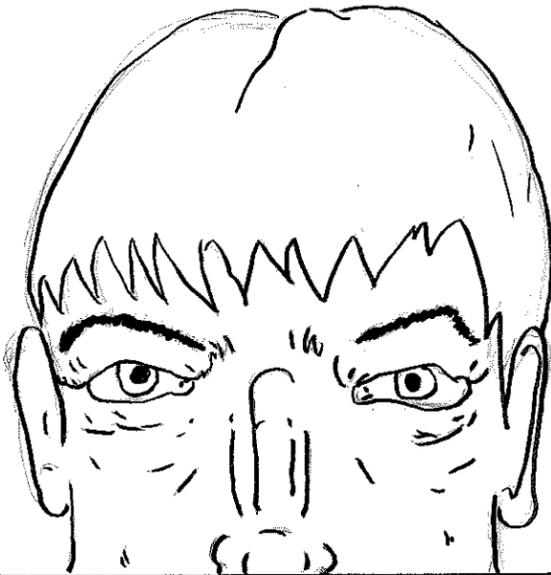
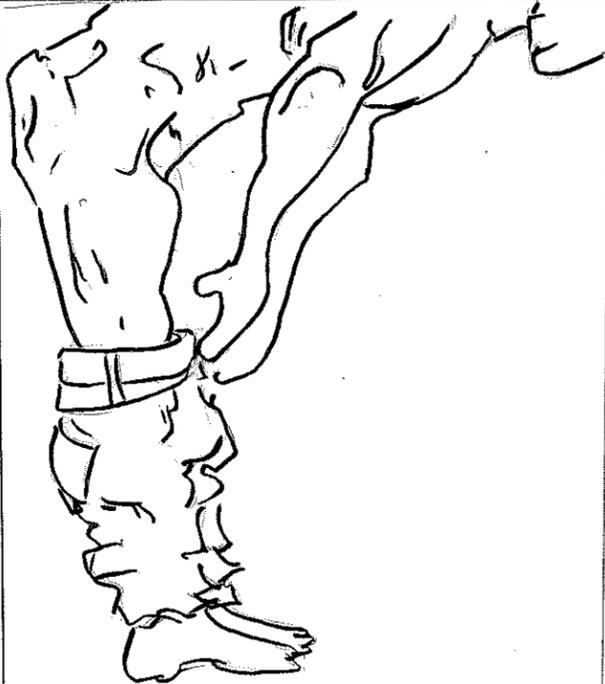


IT FELT GOOD TO SHARE THESE PHOTOS WITH SOMEONE OTHER THAN TOM, WITH STRANGERS, MOST OF WHOM SHE HAD NO INTENTION OF EVER MEETING.

SHE DID MEET ONE OF THEM THOUGH.

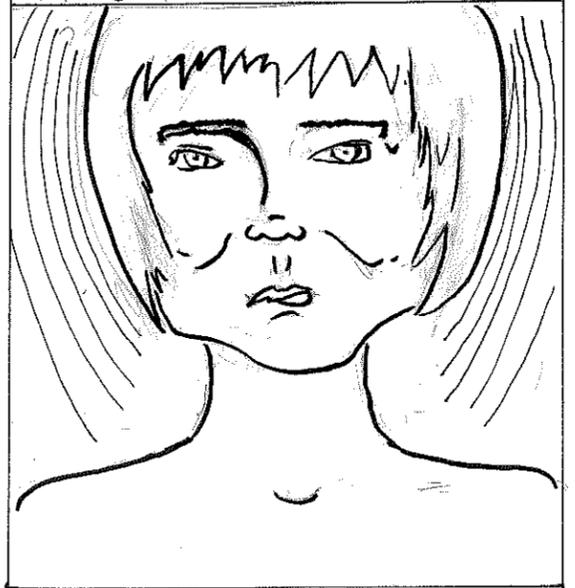


AT THE END OF THEIR DATE, PULLING UP HIS PANTS,



THE MAN LOOKED AT HER IN A HATEFUL WAY THAT CONVINCED LAUREN THAT HE HAD GIVEN HER A DISEASE.

CASUAL SEX WAS A MEAN-SPIRITED, PERHAPS EVEN A CRIMINAL THING, AND WHAT THEY HAD DONE TOGETHER WAS AKIN TO AN UGLY MEDICAL PROCEDURE.



BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT SEX WAS, REALLY, DEVOID OF ALL FEELING.

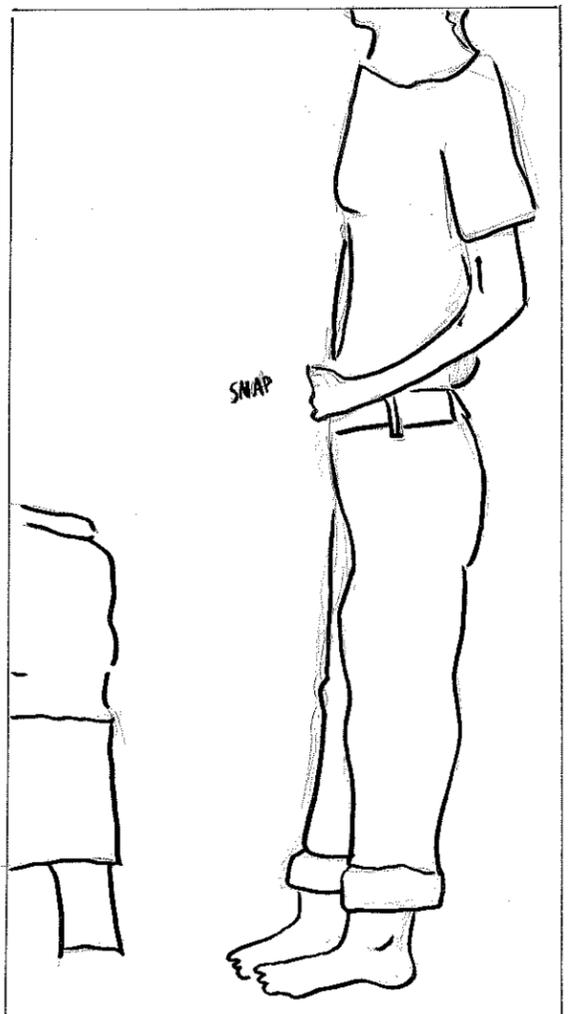
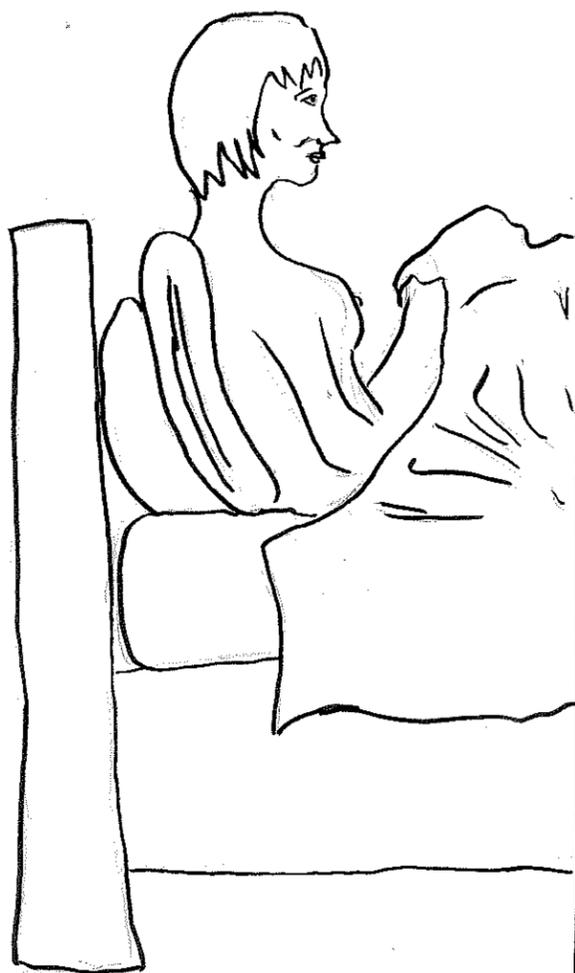
BODIES WERE NOT GLORIOUS;

SEX WAS NOT CUTE

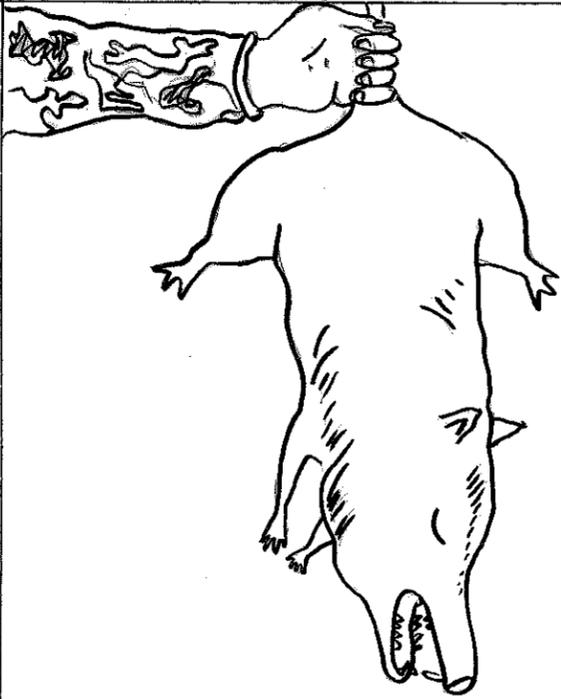
THERE WAS NOTHING INHERENTLY BEAUTIFUL ABOUT IT AT ALL.

HAD SHE ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT?

SHE COULDN'T REMEMBER.



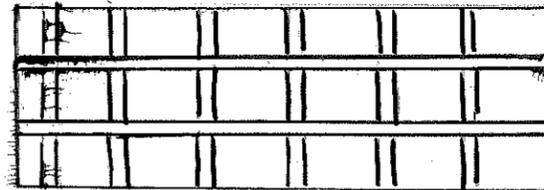
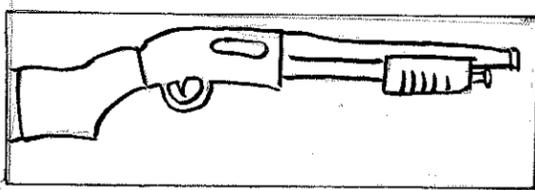
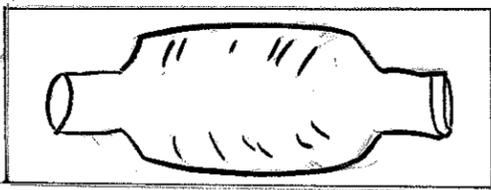
THE EXPERIENCE LEFT HER CHASTENED RATHER THAN EMBOLDENED, AND SHE DID NOT BREAK UP WITH TOM, THOUGH SHE CONTINUED SENDING OUT PICTURES.



LATELY TO A MAN NAMED JACK, WHO LOOKED LIKE A WEASEL AND SENT HER BACK PICTURES OF KNIVES IN HIS BOOT AND LARGE RODENTS HE'D SHOT.



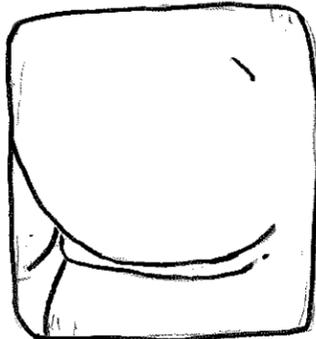
HE TOLD HER A STORY ABOUT HOW SOMEONE TRIED TO STEAL THE CATALYTIC CONVERTER OFF HIS TRUCK AND HE'D HELD A SHOTGUN ON THE GUY UNTIL THE POLICE ARRIVED BUT SOMEHOW JACK WAS THE ONE WHO ENDED UP GETTING ARRESTED AND SPENT A YEAR AND A HALF IN PRISON. SHE SAID SHE WAS SORRY TO HEAR THAT.



SHE'D READ IN A BOOK ONCE THAT A WOMAN'S BEAUTY DOES NOT BELONG TO HER ALONE, AND SHE AGREED WITH THAT UP TO A POINT. SHE REJECTED THE IDEA OF BODILY AUTONOMY, BUT SHE ALSO REJECTED THE IDEA THAT A BODY COULD BELONG TO SOMEONE ELSE.

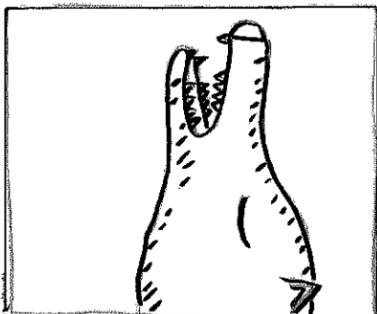
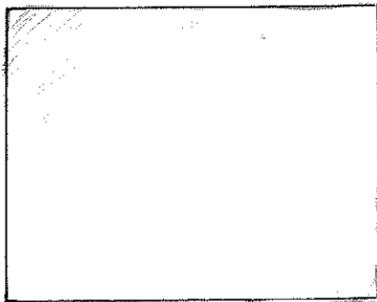
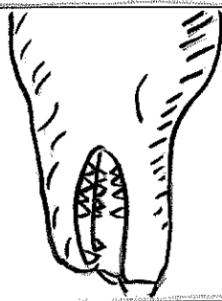
TOM

that little dimple on the bottom of your left butt cheek.



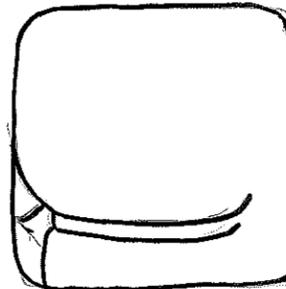
i love you

i love you too



JACK

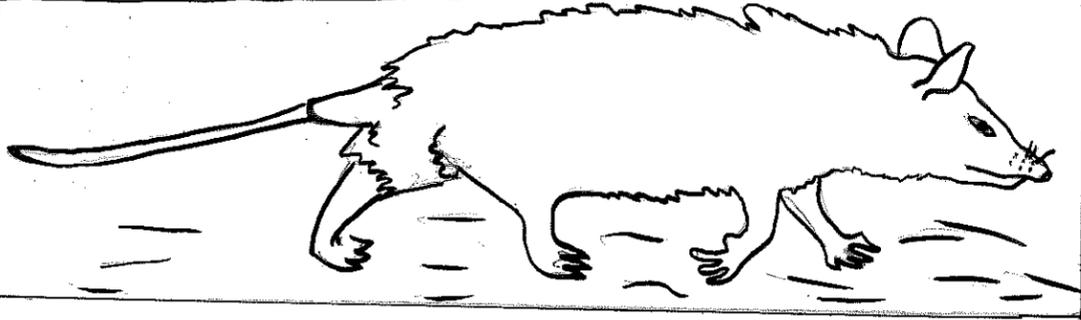
but somehow i was the one who got arrested



i'm sorry to hear that.

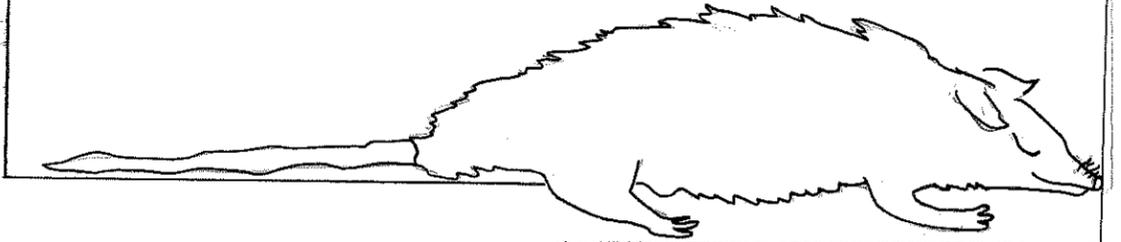
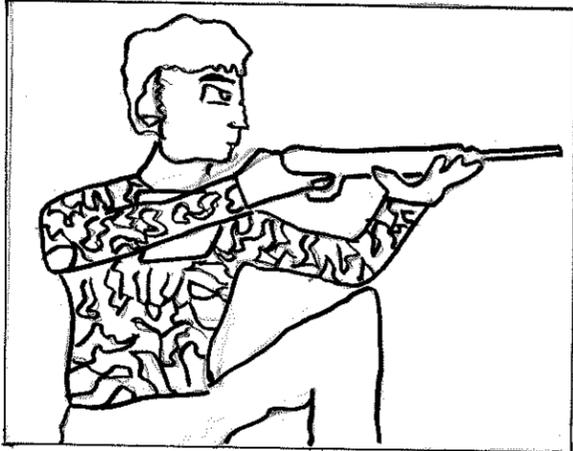
what is that a picture of?

IT BELONGED TO THE WORLD FOR A TIME;

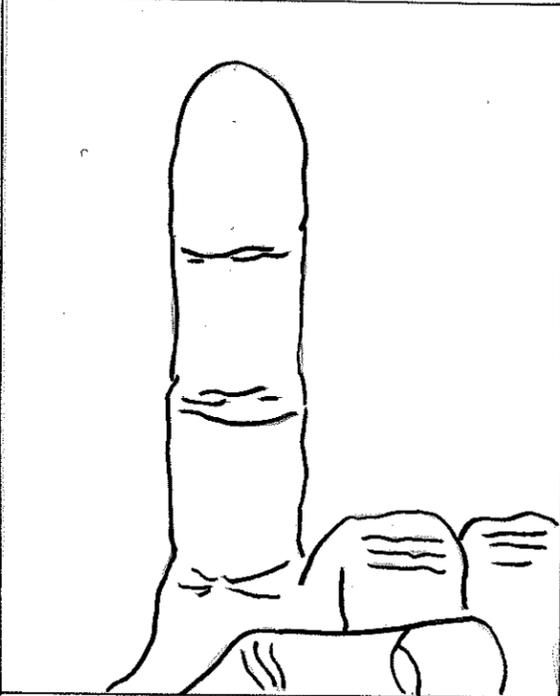


BANG

AND THEN IT BELONGED TO DEATH.



SOME PEOPLE ARE ALIVE ONE MOMENT AND THEN DEAD THE NEXT;



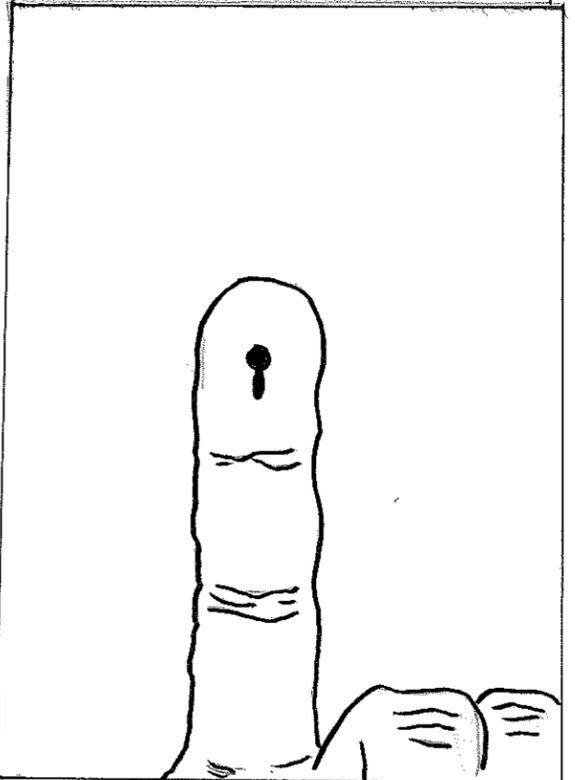
Tom

So this might sound kind of weird, but can i have a picture of your blood?

just a drop.

i want to see what it looks like coming out of your body.

i know this is weird.



FOR OTHERS THE PROCESS IS MORE GRADUAL.

IT WAS A GRADUAL PROCESS FOR LAUREN, AND THAT'S WHAT SHE IMAGINED SHE WAS DOING BY SENDING THESE PICTURES.



Tom

What about your eyelids?

i can't believe i never thought to ask for that before.

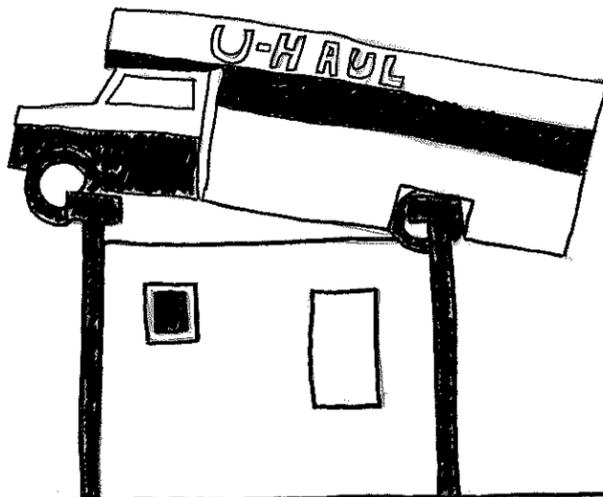


DELIVERING HERSELF OVER THE THRESHOLD OF DEATH, PIECE BY PIECE.

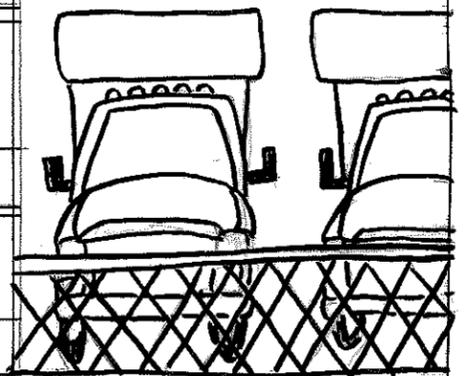
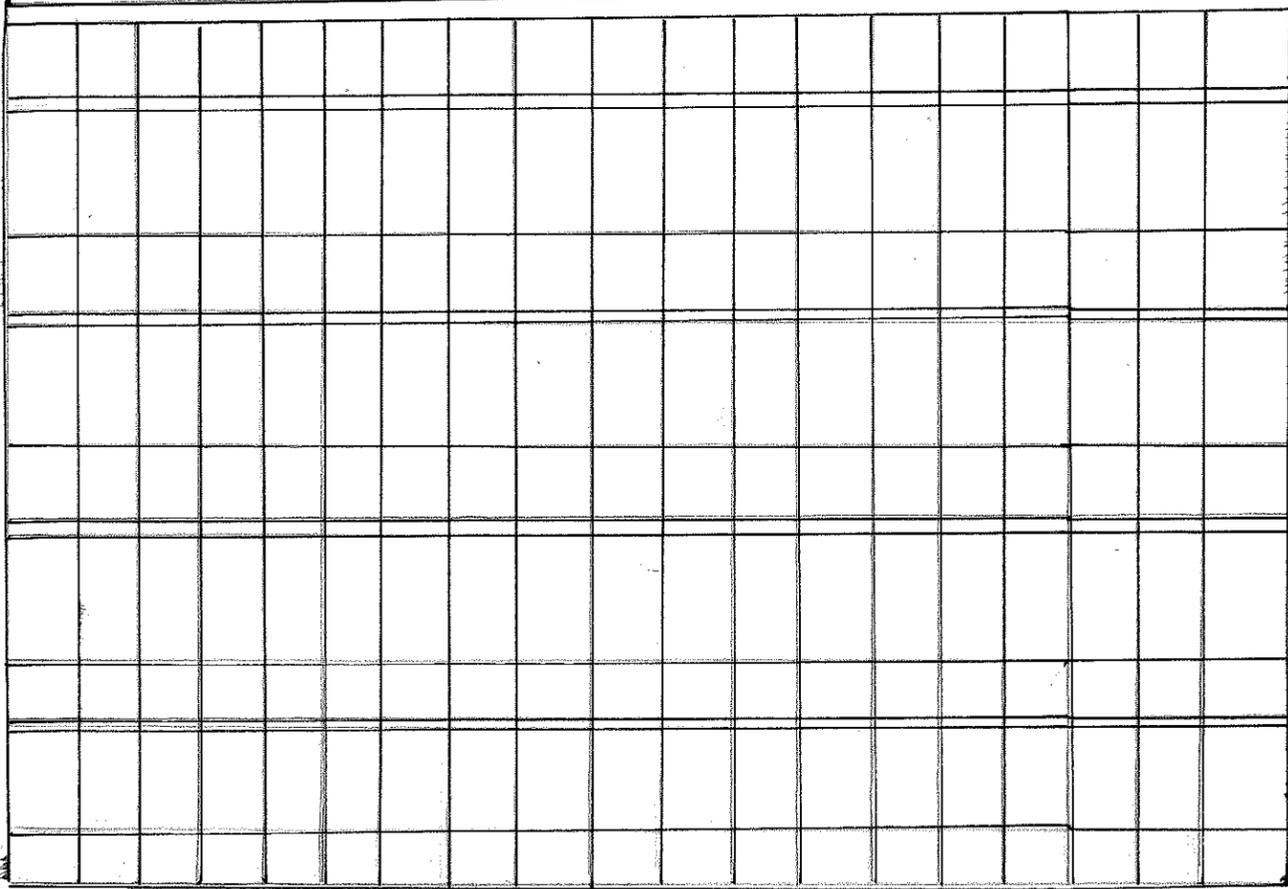
JACK WORKED NIGHTS AS A SECURITY GUARD IN A U-HAUL STORAGE FACILITY DOWNTOWN.

MEMPHIS.

IT WAS A SEVEN-STORY BUILDING WITH GLASS WALLS THAT LOOKED LIKE A GIANT VENDING MACHINE, BUT WITH TEMPERATURE-CONTROLLED SHIPPING CONTAINERS INSTEAD OF SNACKS.



SELF-STORAGE



NO PARKING ANYTIME

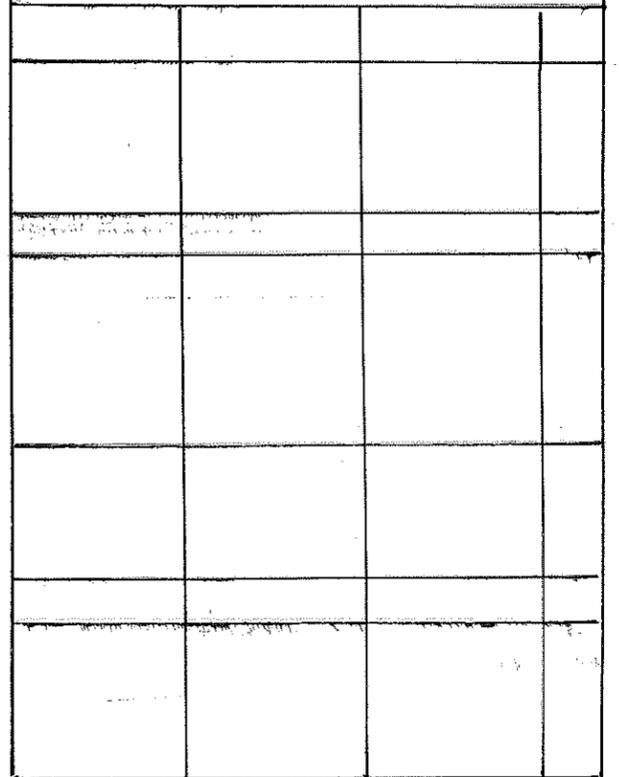
A DECOMMISSIONED U-HAUL TRUCK WAS BOLTED TO THE ROOF, REARED UP ON A STEEL RAMP, SO THAT FROM THE STREET IT RESEMBLED A WEATHERVANE OR A NAPOLEONIC HORSE.

FUNCTIONING U-HAUL TRUCKS, 10 AND 15 FOOTERS, WERE PARKED IN A SMALL LOT ON THE SIDE OF THE BUILDING.

HE WAS ISSUED A YELLOW U-HAUL APRON THAT SAID 'SECURITY', BUT NOT A GUN OR ANY OTHER WEAPON, THOUGH HE CARRIED SOME ANYWAY.

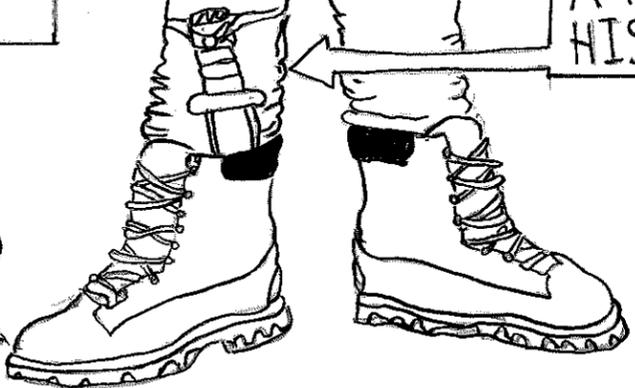
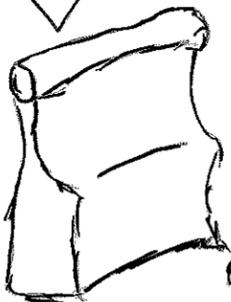


SOME HOMELESS GUYS SLEPT BESIDE THE TRUCKS ON THE SIDE OF THE BUILDING.

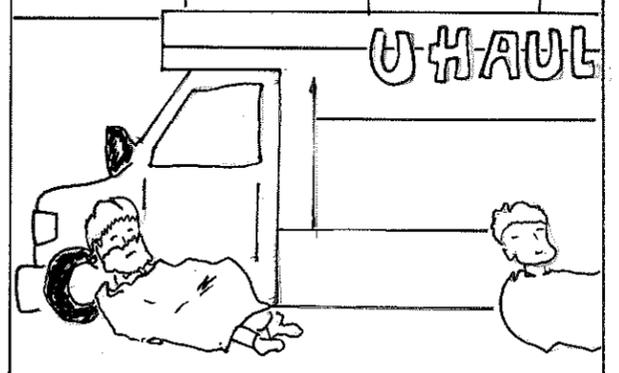
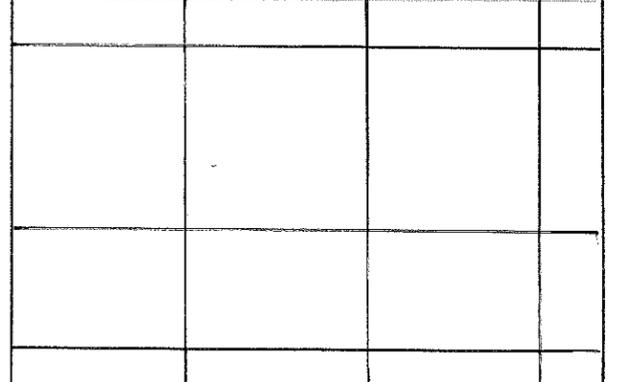


A GUN IN A PAPER BAG THAT ALSO HELD HIS DINNER.

A KNIFE IN HIS BOOT.



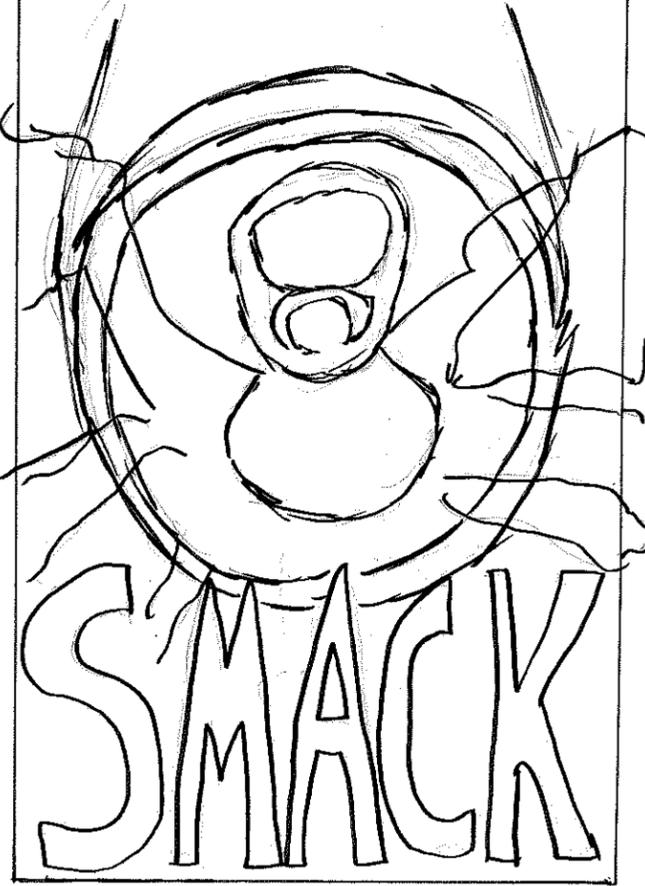
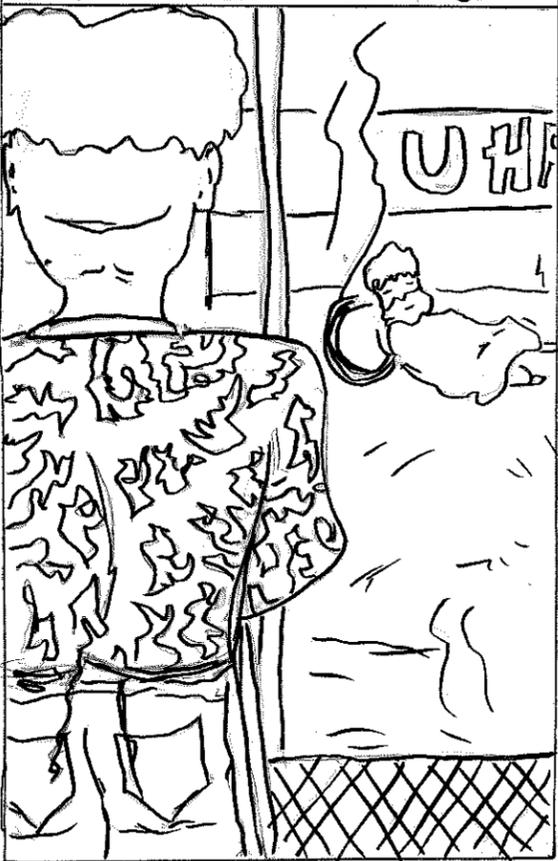
BREAKING THE WIND TUNNELS IN THE LEE OF THE HEAVY TIRES.



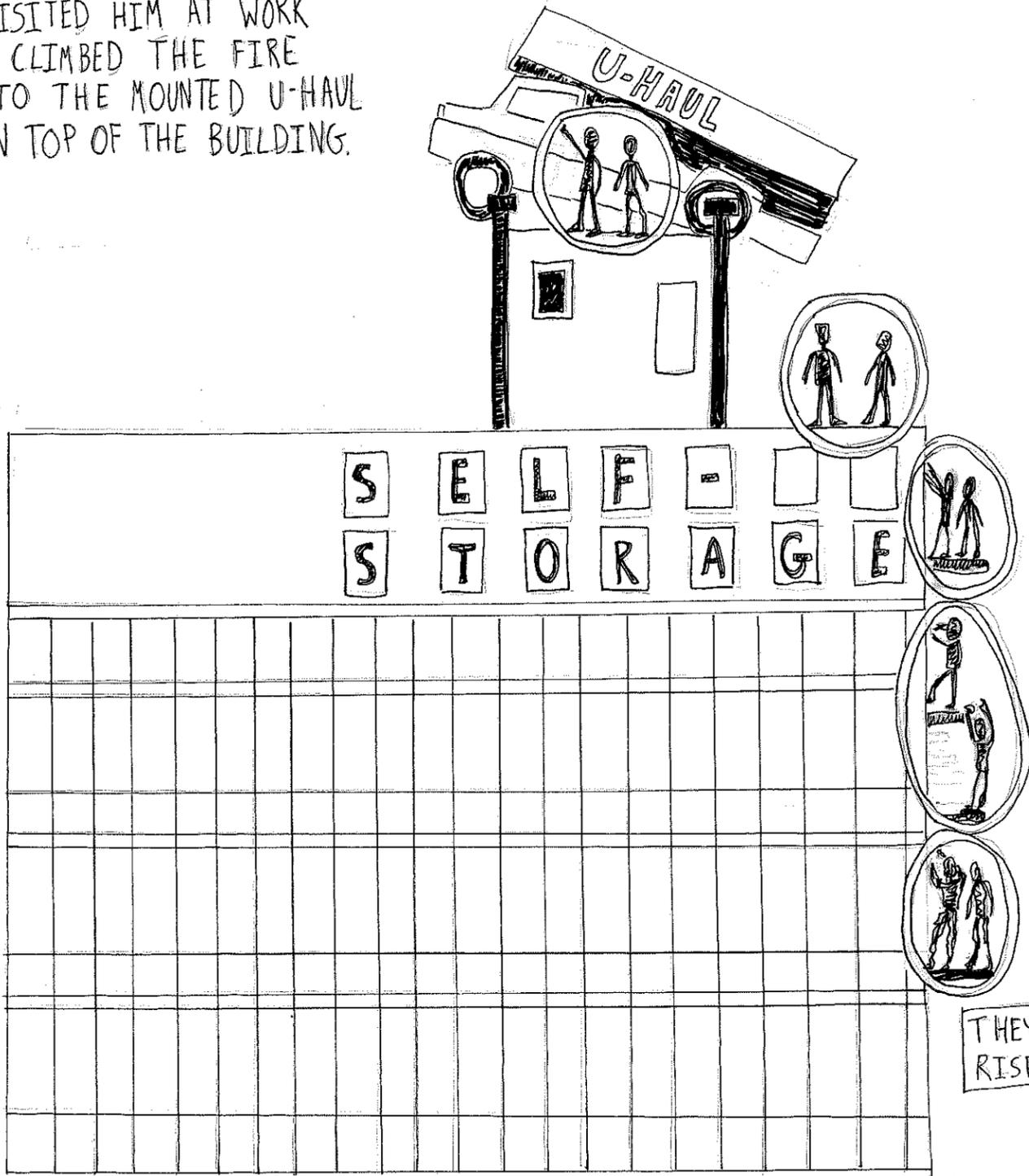
JACK THOUGHT THAT SHOULDN'T BE ALLOWED BUT THE MAN WHO GAVE HIM THE JOB SAID TO LEAVE IT ALONE.

ONE TIME A HOMELESS GUY THREW A SODA AT THE BUILDING.

JACK PULLED HIS KNIFE AND SHOWED IT TO HIM THROUGH THE GLASS.



A WEEK AFTER THEIR FIRST DATE, LAUREN VISITED HIM AT WORK AND THEY CLIMBED THE FIRE ESCAPE TO THE MOUNTED U-HAUL TRUCK ON TOP OF THE BUILDING.



THEY WATCHED THE SUN RISE OVER MEMPHIS.

IT'S BEAUTIFUL. I FEEL INSANE WATCHING THIS.

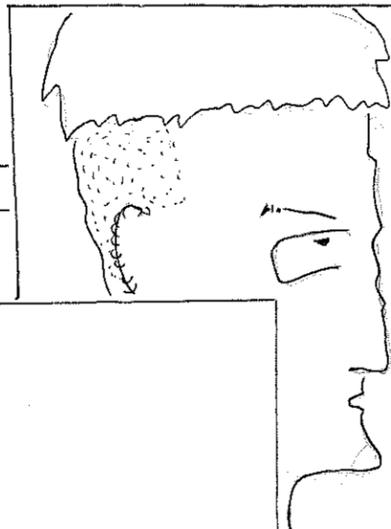


THEY DIDN'T KNOW THIS ABOUT EACH OTHER, BUT NEITHER OF THEM HAD GOTTEN MUCH SLEEP.

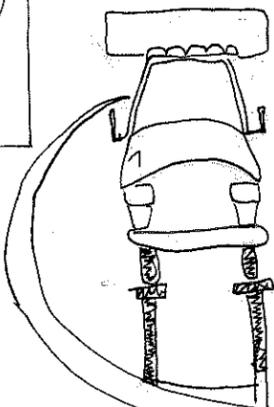
WHEN YOU MET ME, WHAT WERE YOU EXPECTING?

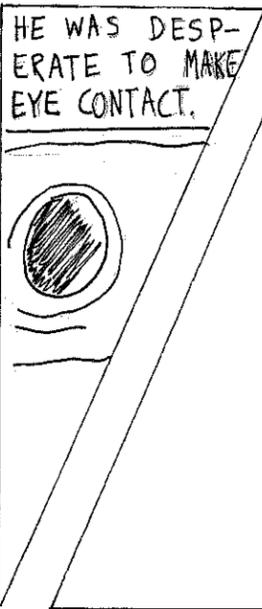
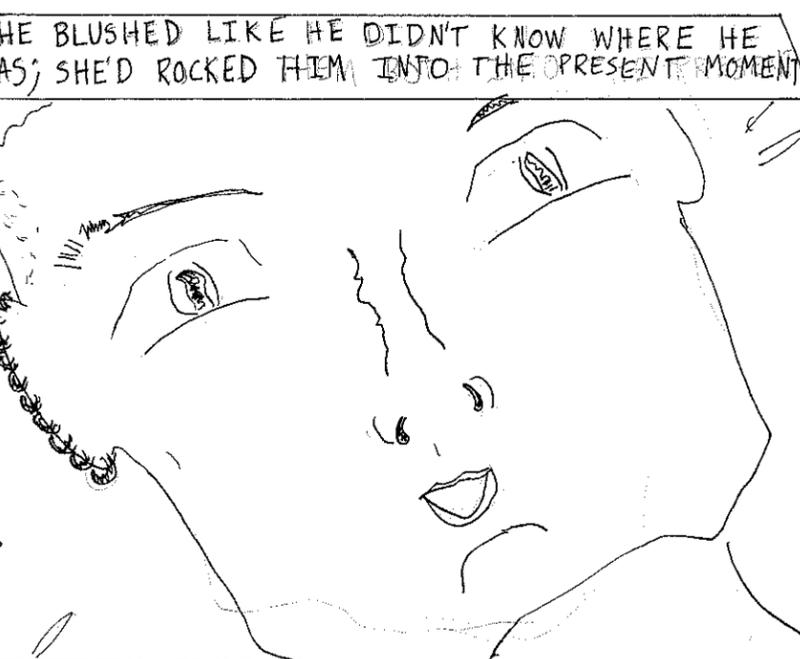
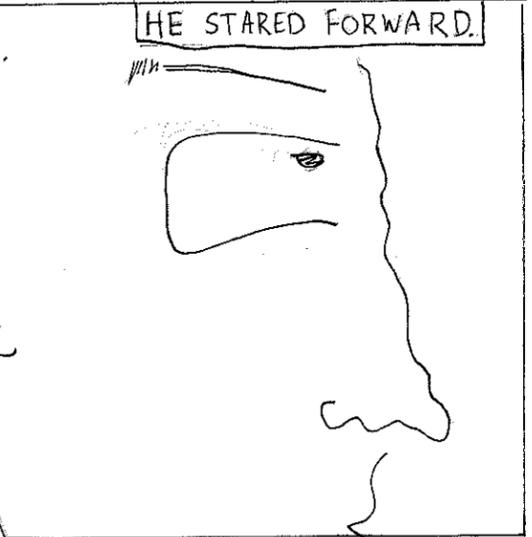
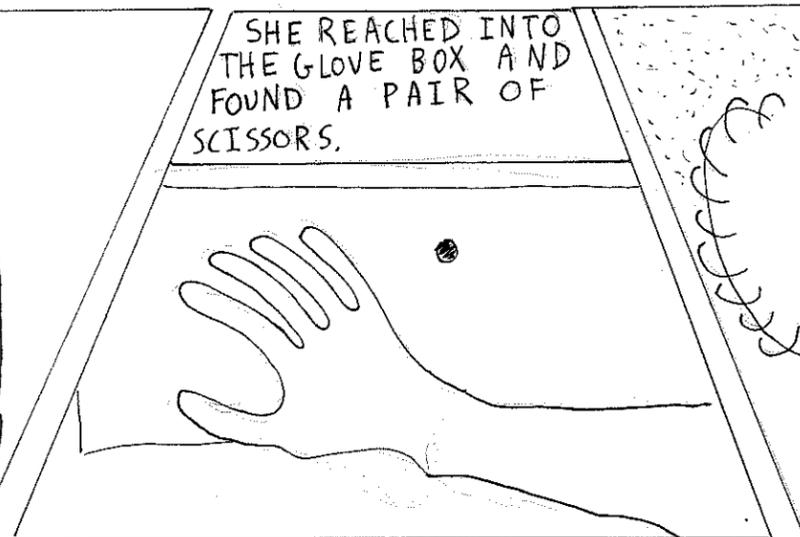
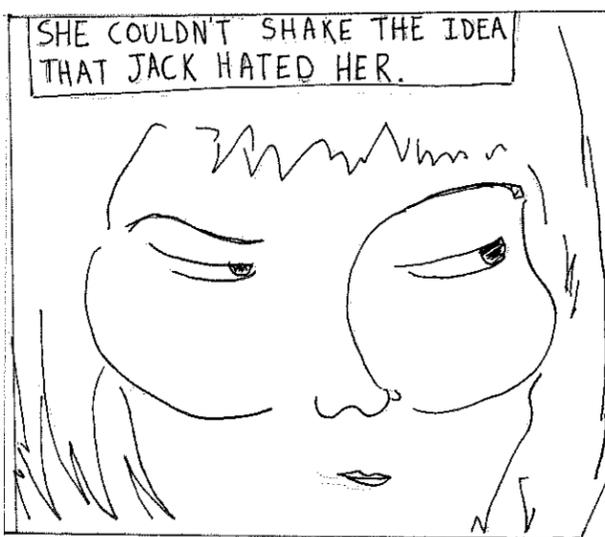
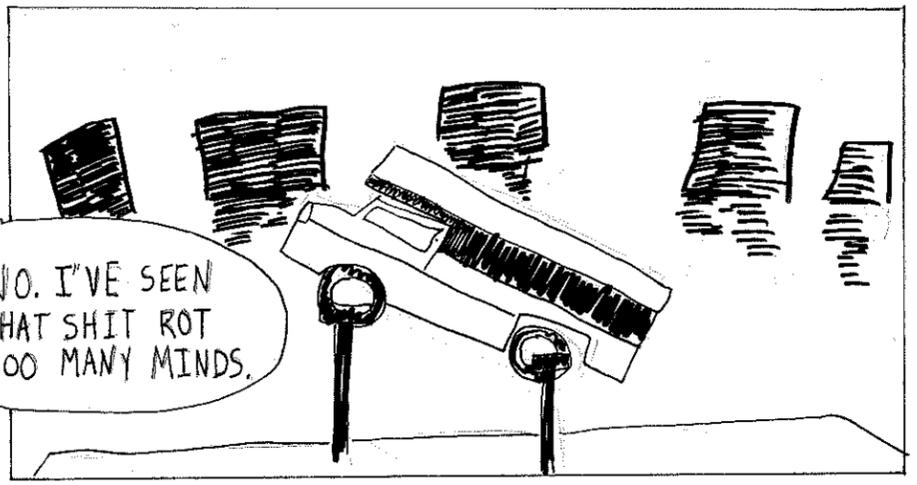
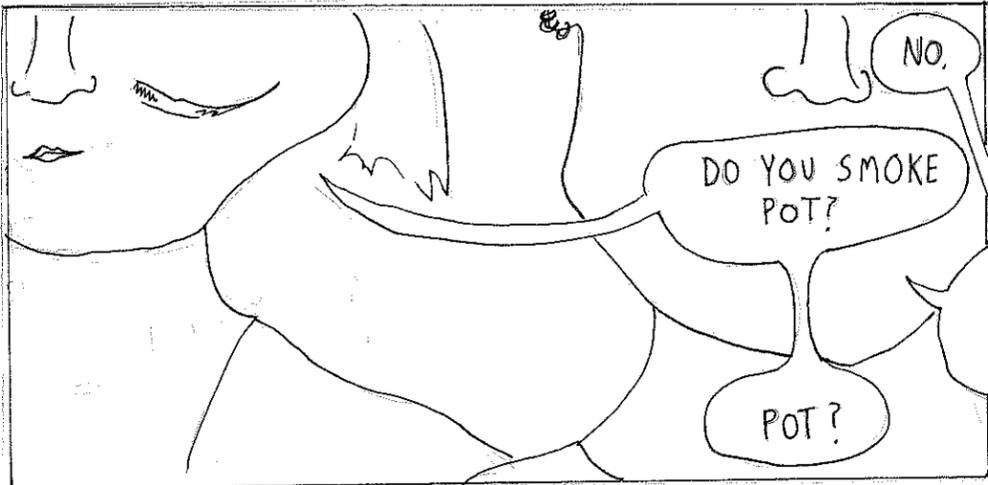
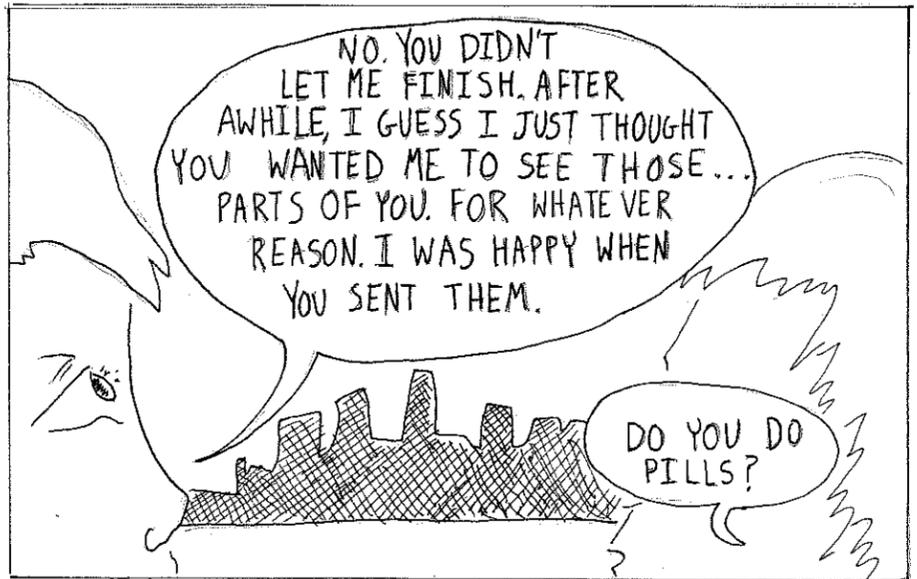
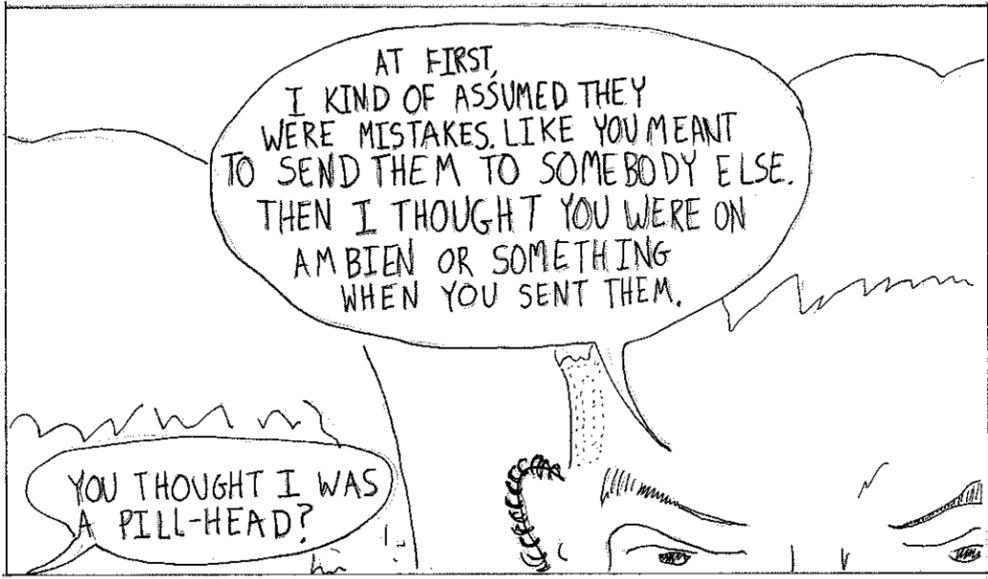


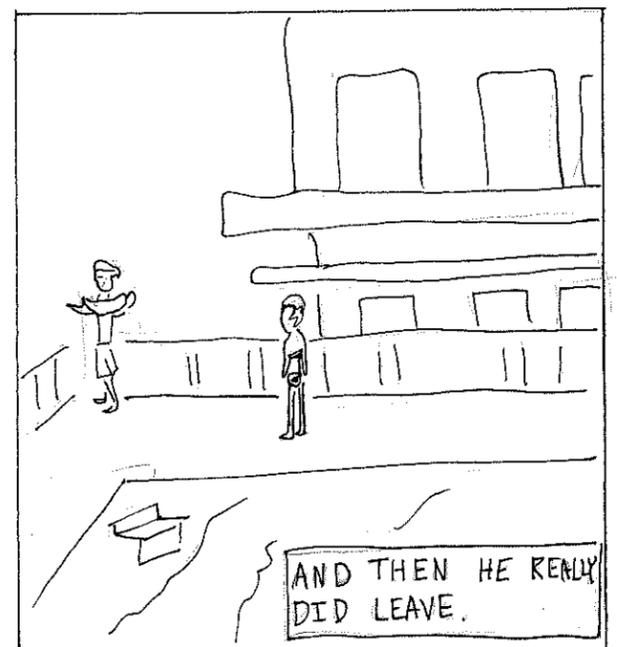
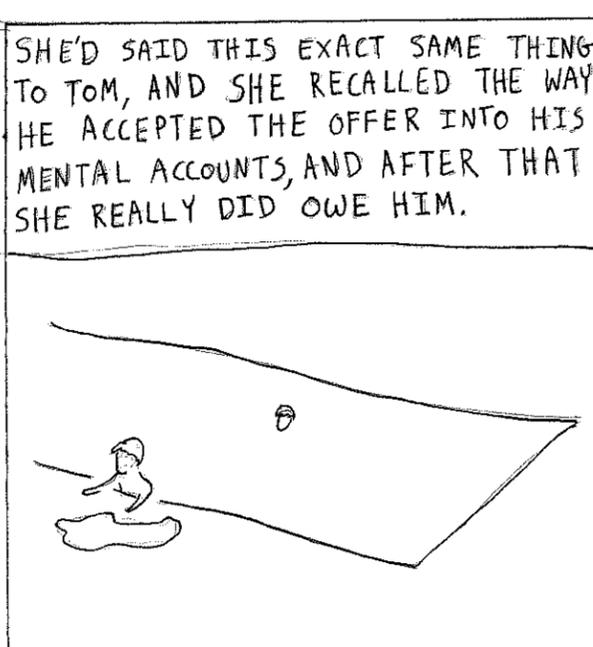
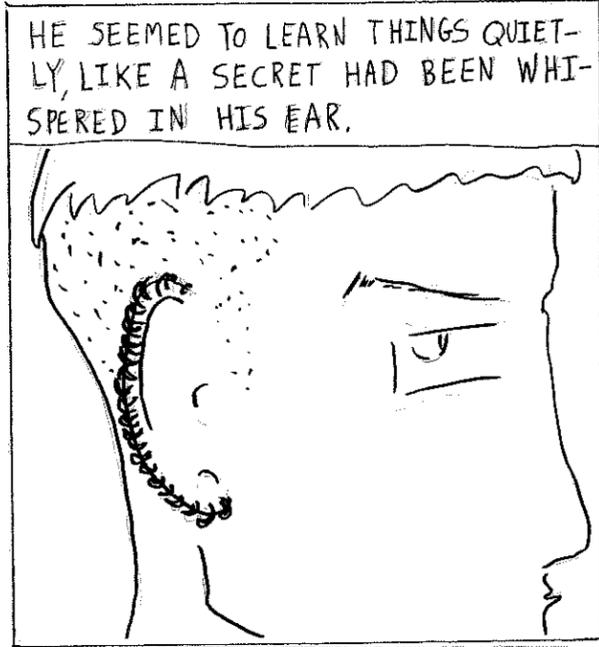
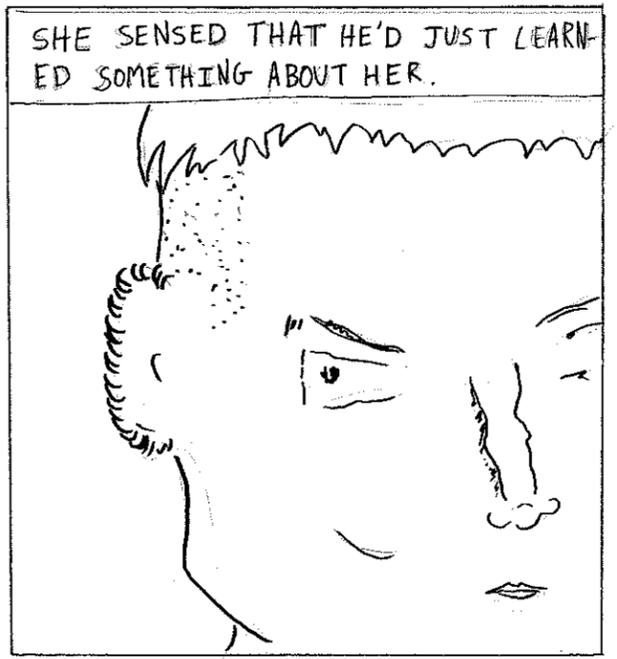
FROM YOU? I WASN'T EXPECTING... HOW DO YOU MEAN?



OH, COME ON. ALL THOSE PHOTOS I SENT YOU? YOU MUST HAVE THOUGHT I WAS CRAZY.



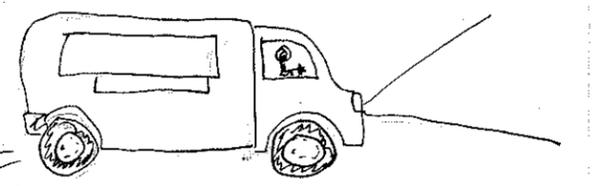




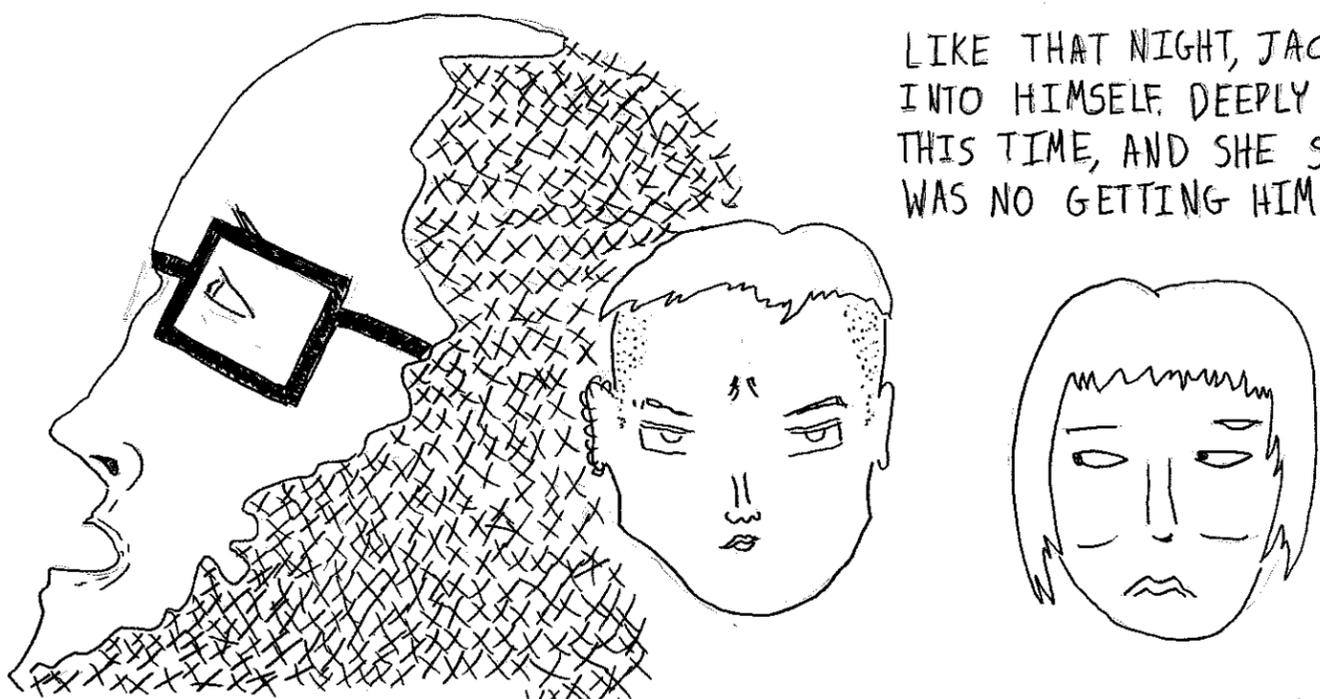
DROVE THE TWO HOURS TO MEMPHIS THAT NIGHT.



VROOOOOOM

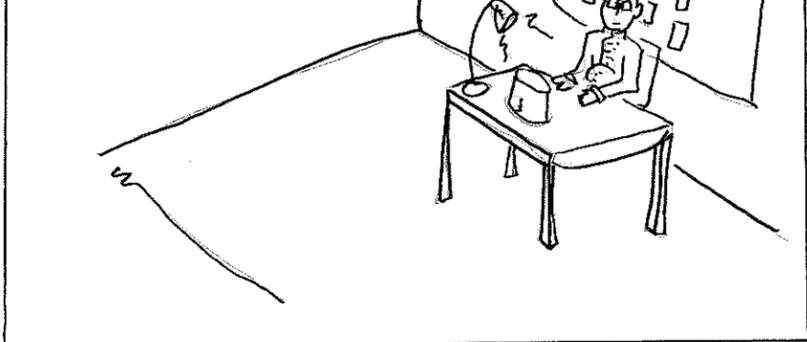


LIKE THAT NIGHT, JACK WITHDREW INTO HIMSELF. DEEPLY WITHIN THIS TIME, AND SHE SAW THERE WAS NO GETTING HIM OUT.

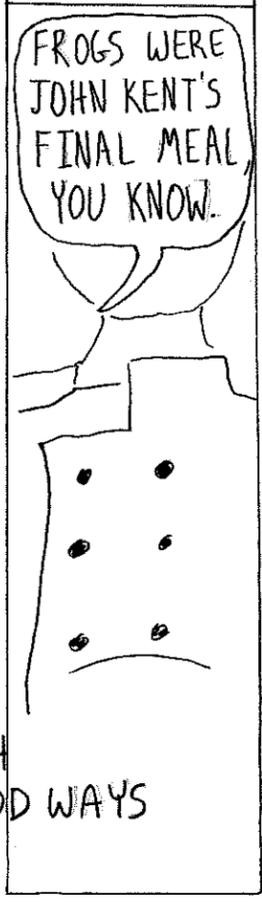
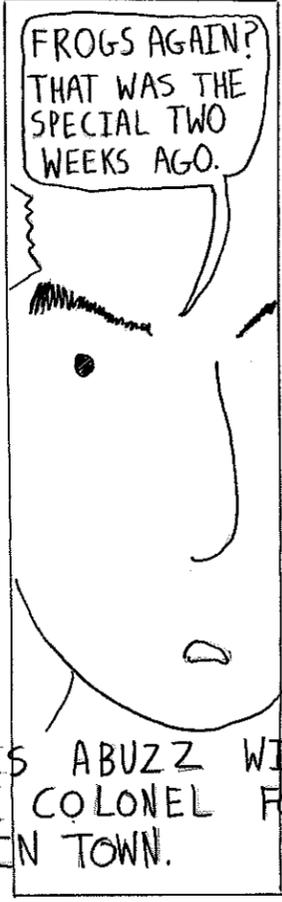
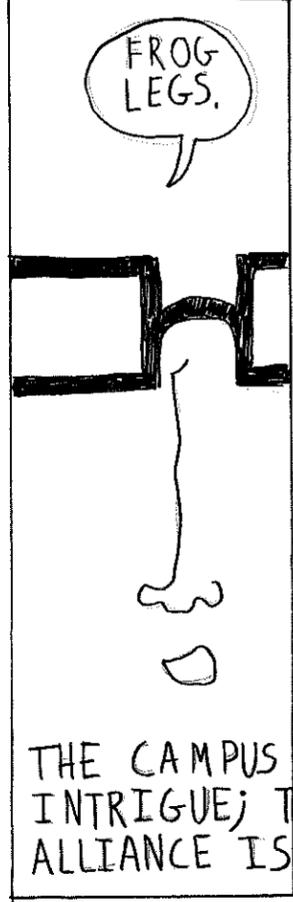
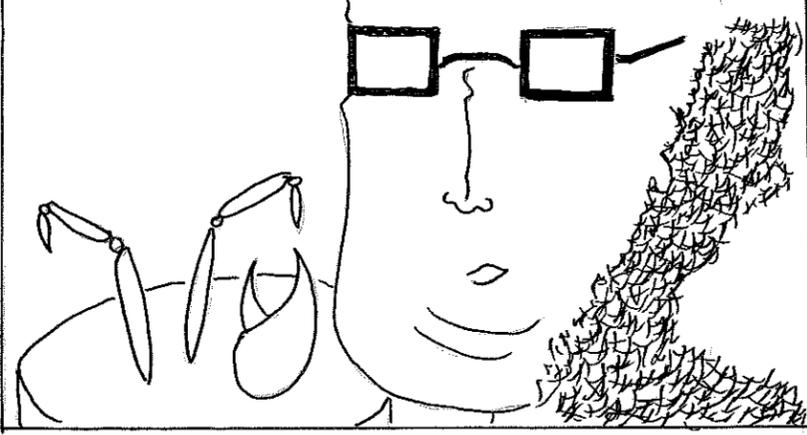


SHE THOUGHT ABOUT OFFERING HIM SEX; MAYBE THEY HAD TO GET THAT OVER WITH.

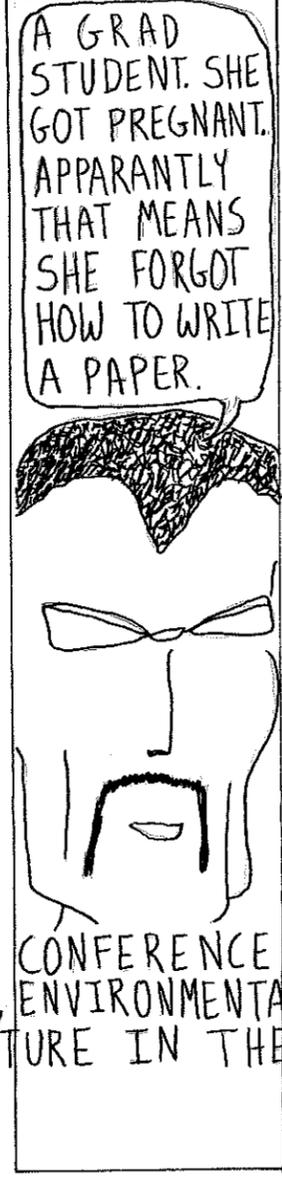
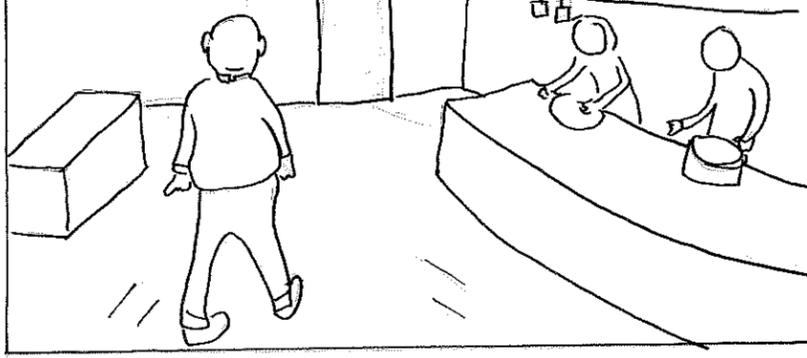
AS THE CRAB LEGS ROTTED IN HIS OFFICE, THE CHEF COULD ONLY CATCH GLIMPSES OF THEM.



HE WAS A HOUND LOSING THE SCENT.



JACK AND LAUREN WOULD HAVE TO RETURN TO THE RESTAURANT IF HE WAS TO SEE THEM AGAIN.



WHO SCORED A TICKET TO THE TICKETED EVENTS?
WHO WAS INVITED TO THE INVITE-ONLY GALA?

WHAT'S THE TOPIC?

OYSTERS AS A MOTIF IN KENT'S SHORT FICTION

THEY WERE STARVLINGS COMPARED TO THE MORE WELL-FED DEPARTMENTS, AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO THE CONFERENCE WOULD LIKELY TAKE PLACE IN SPARSELY-ATTENDED ROOMS.

GOOD MEMORY, CHEF.

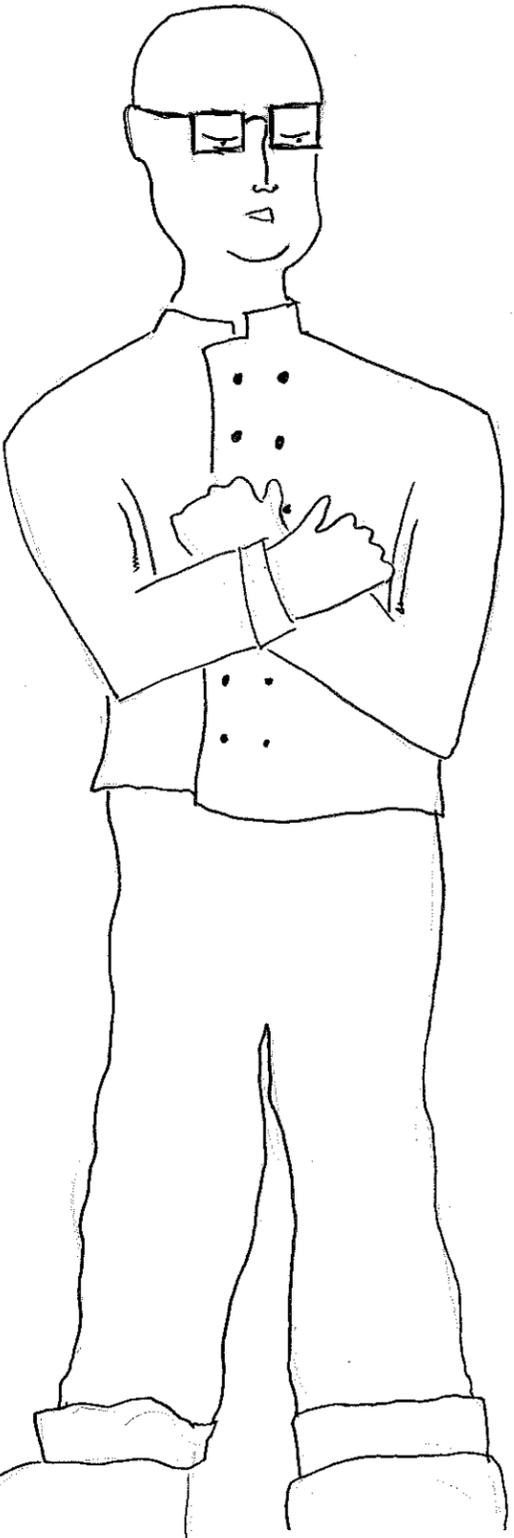
AND WHO WAS ATTENDING THE EVEN MORE EXCLUSIVE PARTIES, THE SECRET PARTIES, RUMORED TO BE HELD LATE AT NIGHT IN THE CHEF'S RESTAURANT?

YOU JUST NEED SOMEONE TO CONNECT JOHN KENT TO THE FOOD THEME?

WHAT ABOUT LAUREN?

DESPITE THEIR 30 YEARS AS LOYAL CUSTOMERS, THE FOUR ENGLISH PROFESSORS HAD NEVER ATTENDED.

THAT WAS HER THEME, RIGHT? JOHN KENT AND FOOD?



ALL OF IT WAS FUNDED BY THE des ESSIENTES FAMILY.

I MIGHT. LET ME LOOK.

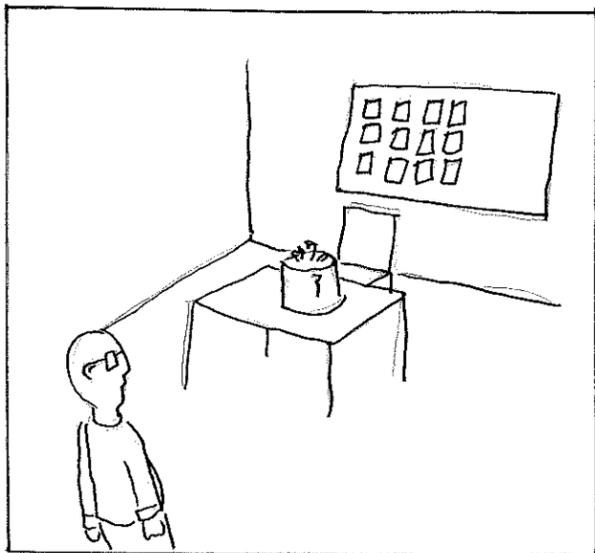
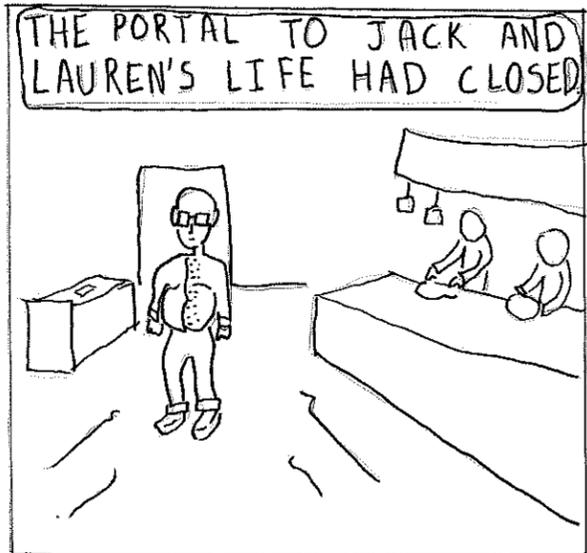
I'M GOING TO GO CHECK ON THOSE FROGS.

DOES ANYONE STILL HAVE LAUREN'S NUMBER? I BET HER STUDENT EMAIL EXPIRED.

FRENCH-MISSISSIPPI ARISTOCRATS WHO HELD ONTO THEIR SLAVE FORTUNE AFTER THE CIVIL WAR.

YES, I HAVE IT RIGHT HERE.

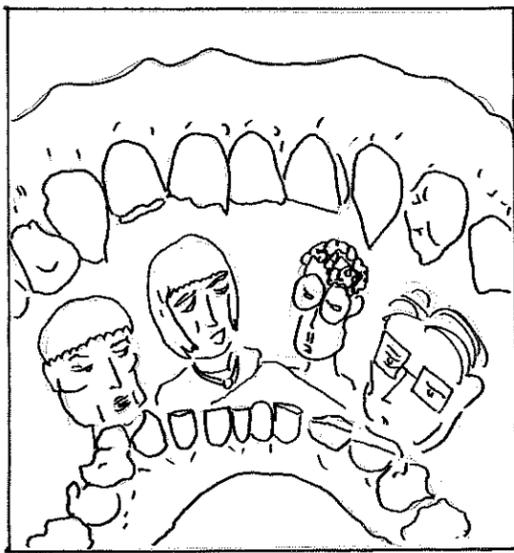
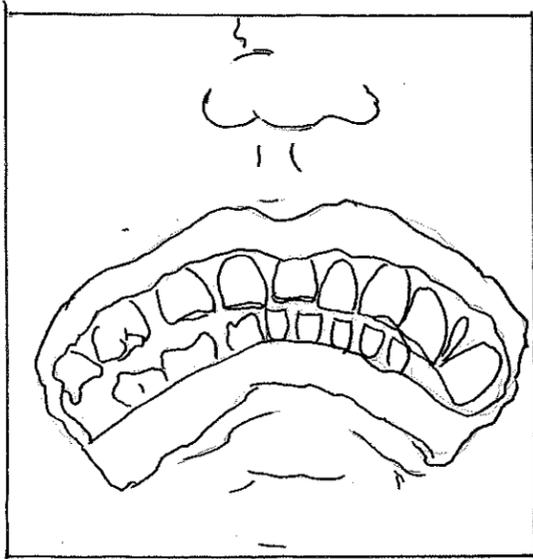
LOOKS LIKE SOMEONE'S EATING OFF OF OTHER PEOPLE'S PLATES AGAIN.



THEIR GRANDFATHER HAD DENTURES THAT DIDN'T FIT RIGHT.

MUNCH

SLURP FLURP BURP!



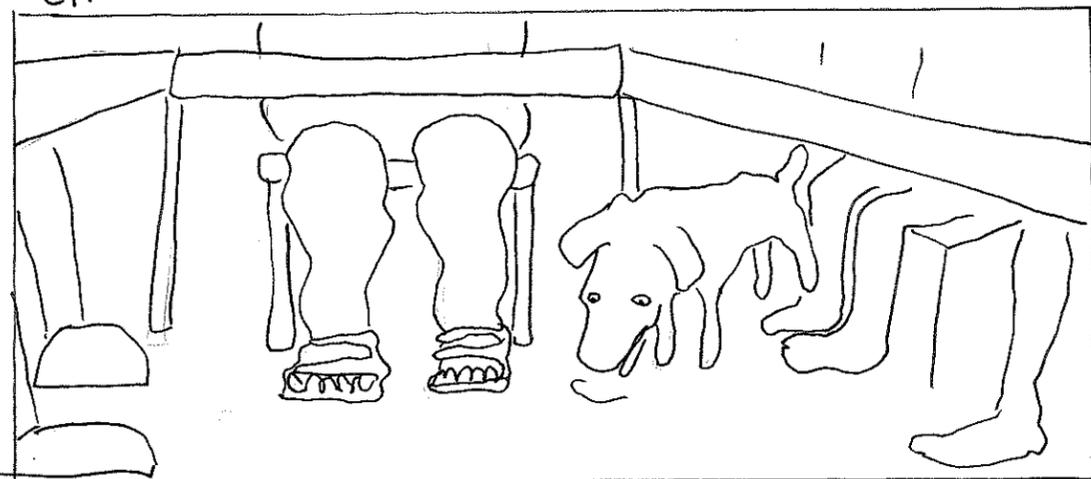
THEY WIGGLED AROUND, CREATING A TERRIBLE, SCUM-SUCKING SOUND WHEN HE ATE.



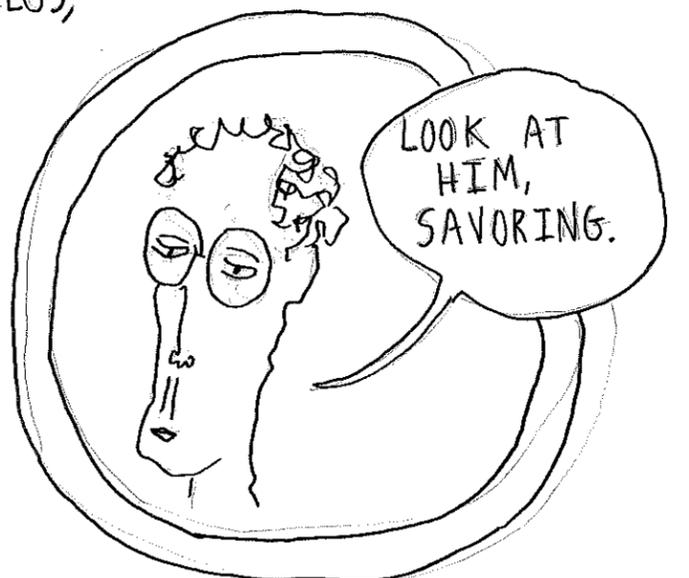
WHENEVER THEIR GRANDPARENTS CAME OVER, THE CHEF COOKED CHICKEN DUMPLINGS.

PUKH BURP!

THE DOG STAYED UNDER GRANDPA'S ENORMOUS TAN LEGS,



EATING THE THINGS THAT DROPPED FROM HIS FALSE LOOSE TEETH.

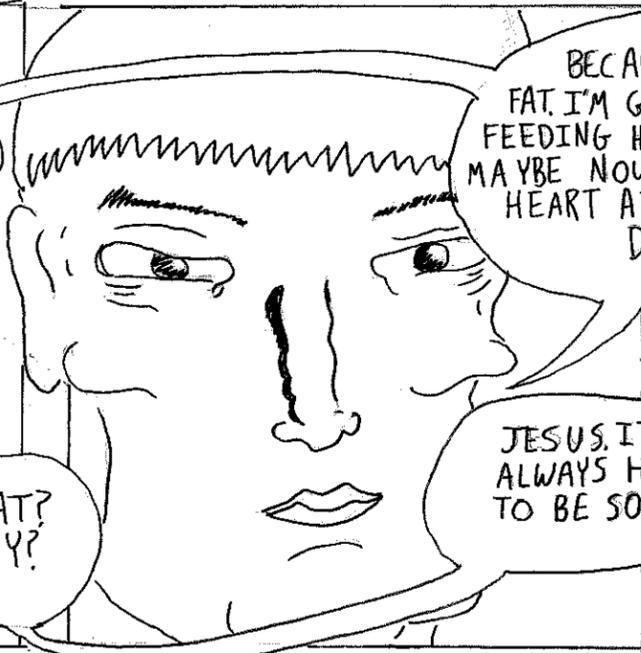


LATER THAT NIGHT...

I HATE GRANDPA.



WHAT? WHY?



BECAUSE HE'S SO FAT, I'M GLAD YOU'RE FEEDING HIM SO MUCH. MAYBE NOW HE'LL HAVE A HEART ATTACK AND DIE.

JESUS, IT ALWAYS HAS TO BE SO...

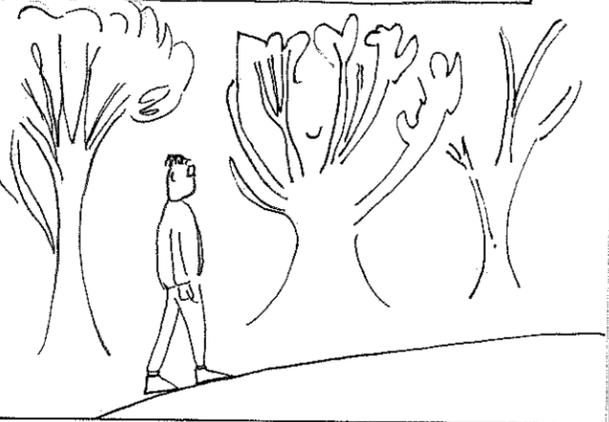
WHATEVER, YOU KNOW I'M RIGHT. HE'S A WASTE OF OXYGEN. WHERE ARE YOU GOING?



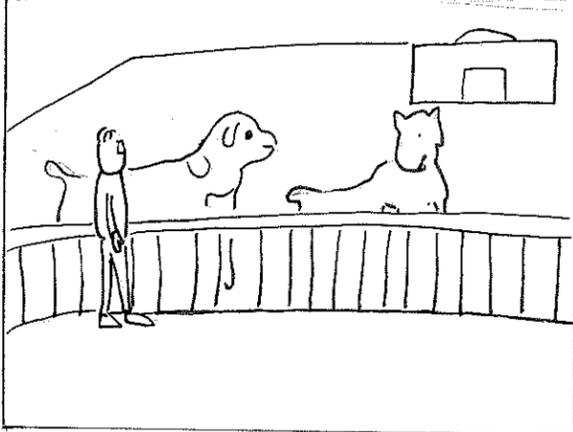
FOR A WALK.



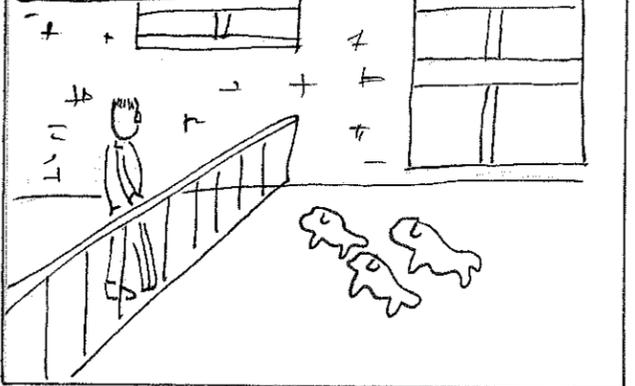
THEIR LAND ABUTTED THE des ESSIENTES FARM,



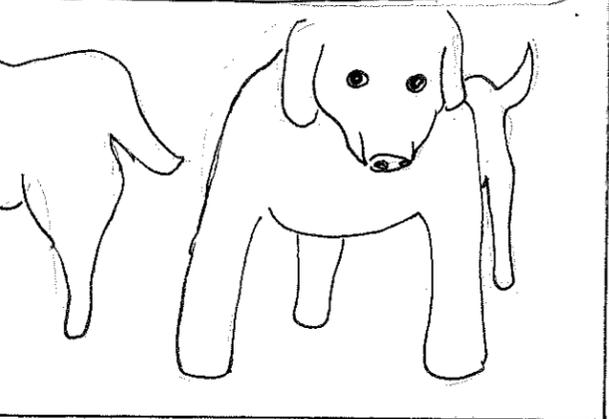
WHERE THE CHEF SUSPECTED HIS DOG CAME FROM.



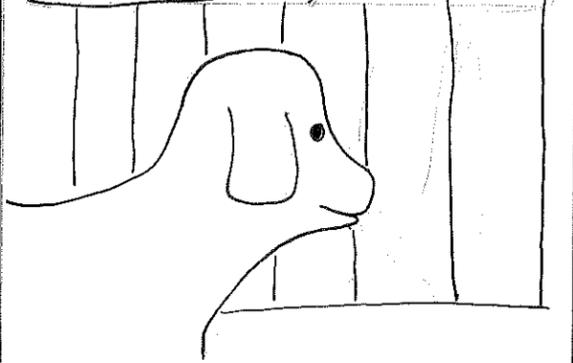
REGINALD des ESSIENTES RAISED HOUNDS FOR THE HUNT.



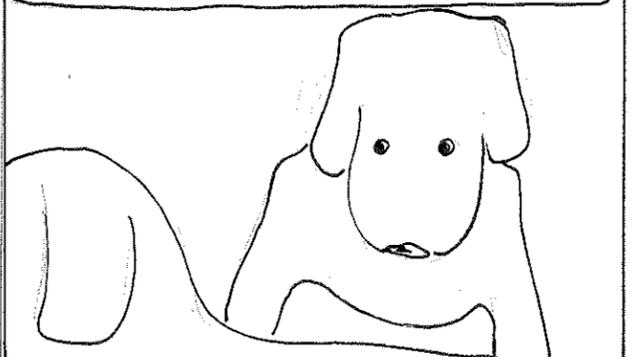
HE ABANDONED THE GUN-SHY DOGS IN THE WOODS.



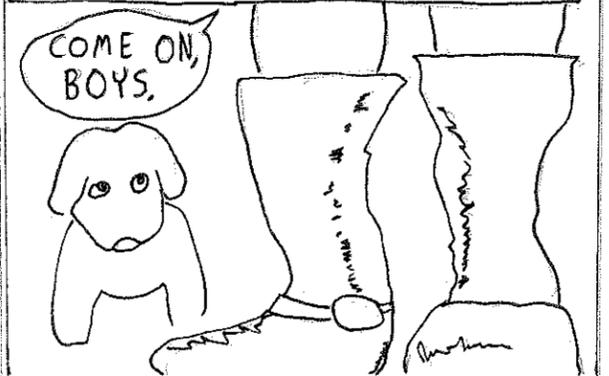
THE FAMILY ONCE USED THE FARM TO BREED DUCKS FOR FOIE-GRAS.



BUT WHEN MISSISSIPPI PASSED LAWS AGAINST THE FORCIBLE FATTENING OF ANIMAL ORGANS,



THE des ESSIENTES MOVED THEIR BUSINESS BACK TO FRANCE.



COME ON, BOYS.

A FEW IN THE FAMILY STAYED BEHIND.



LET'S GO BACK IN THE BARN.

MONSIEUR CHEF, HOW DID MY CHICKEN GO OVER?



MY GRANDPA LOVED THEM. I SAW HIM SAVORING THE FLAVOR.

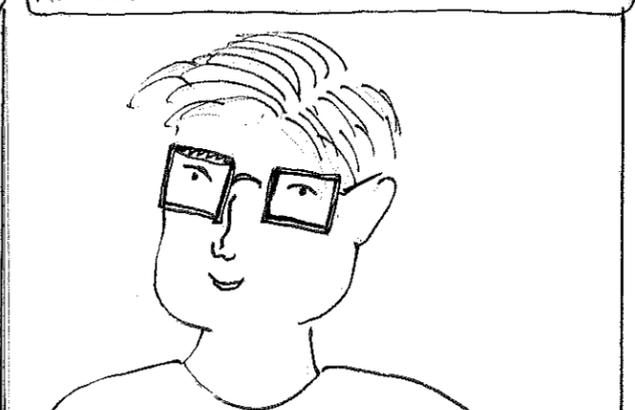
SAVORING?

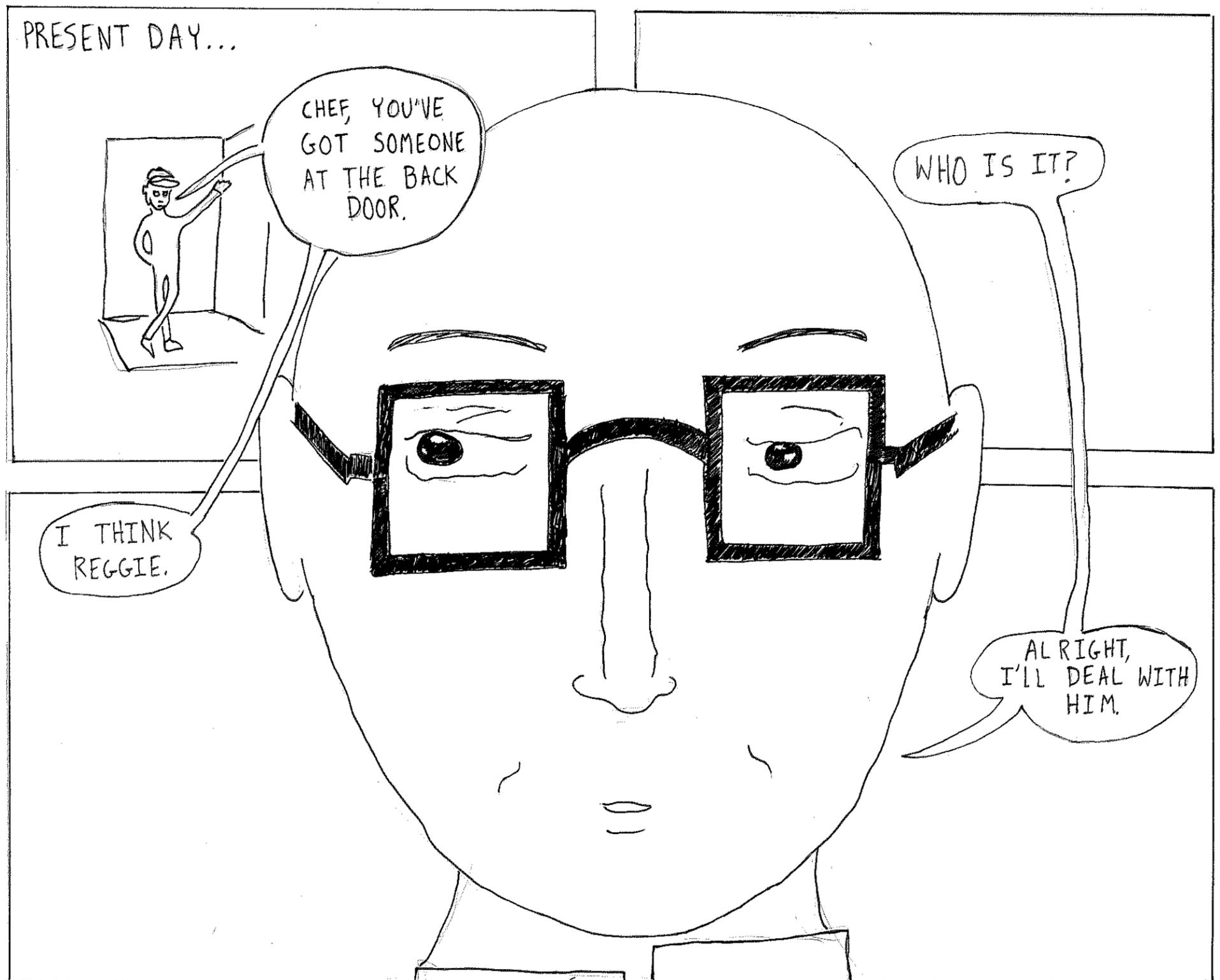
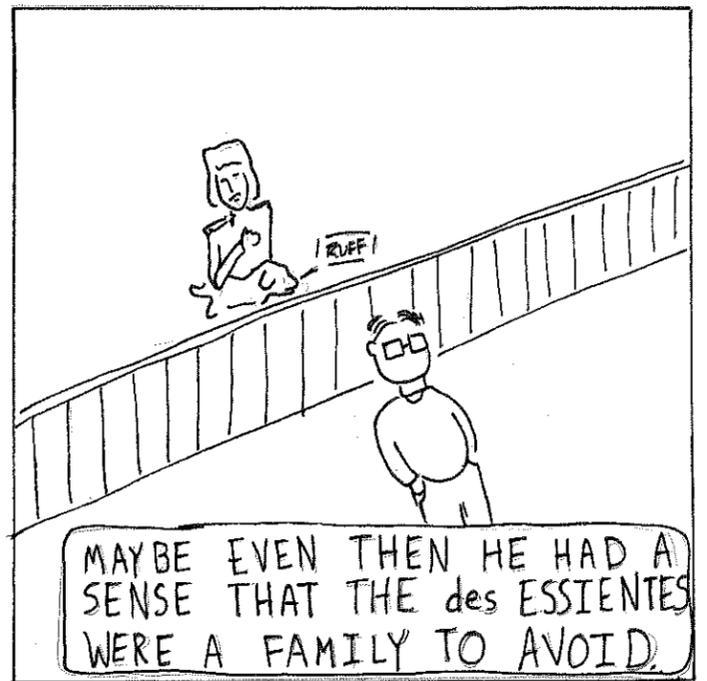
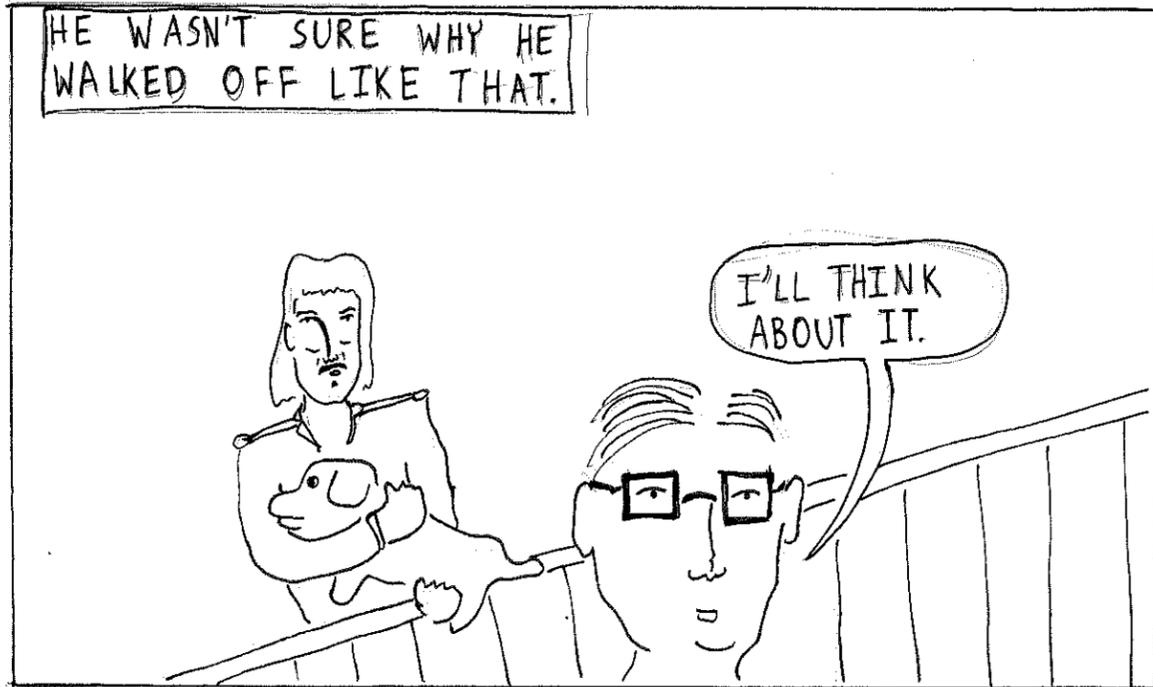
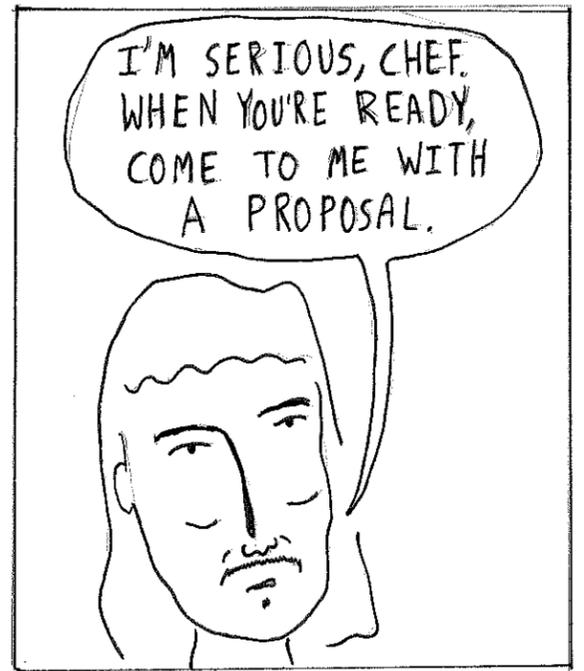


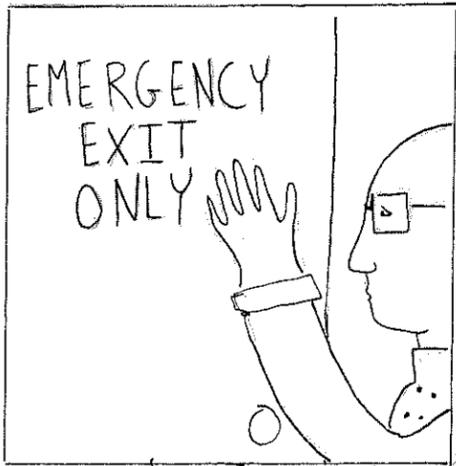
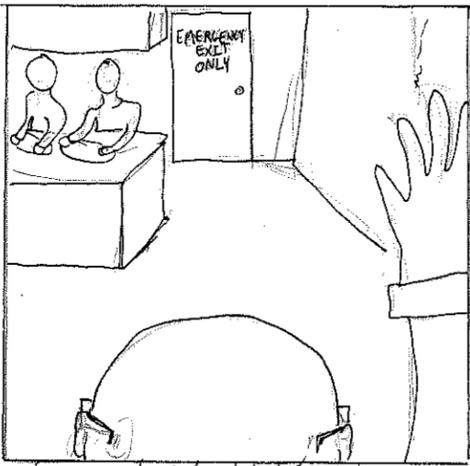
THAT'S SOME HIGH COMPLIMENT.



THE CHEF DIDN'T LIKE THAT REGGIE ABANDONED HIS DOGS, BUT HE KNEW THIS ABUSE WAS UNCONSCIOUS AND THAT IN GENERAL HE TREATED THE HOUNDS WITH AFFECTION.







THE CHEF DIDN'T IMMEDIATELY GO HOME THAT NIGHT.



I NSTEAD HE CUT THROUGH THE WOODS

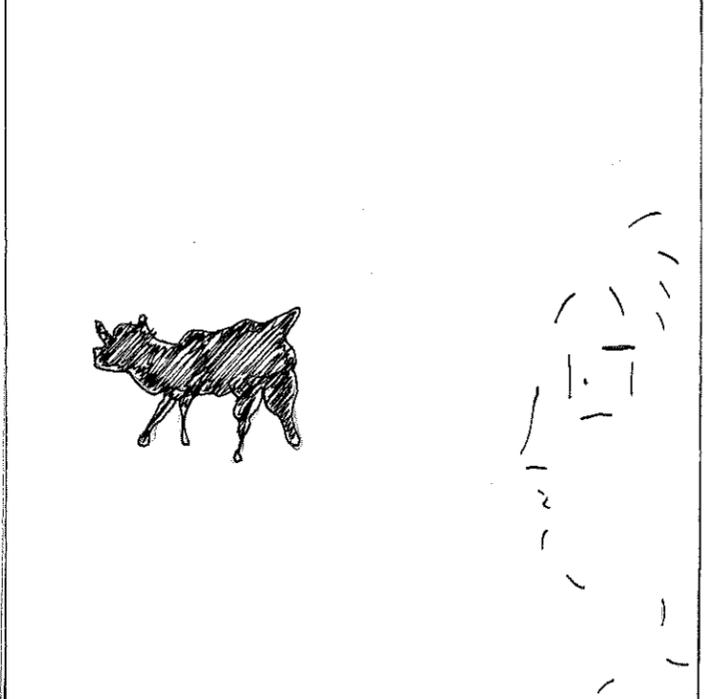
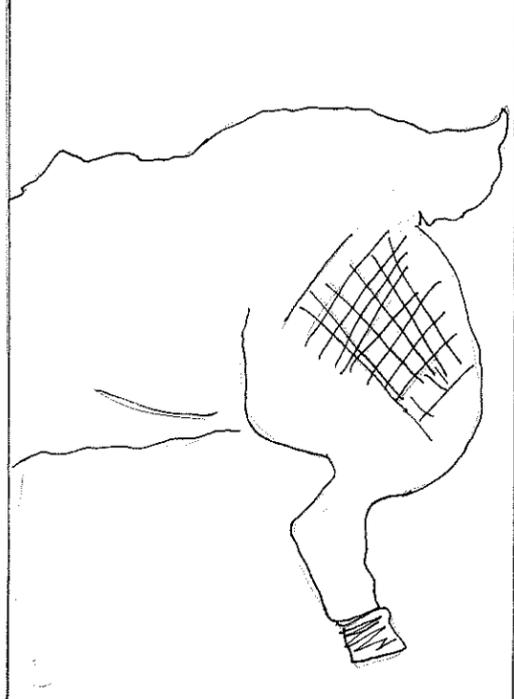
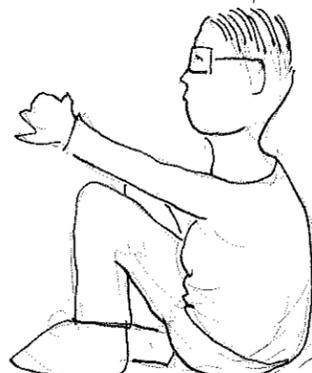
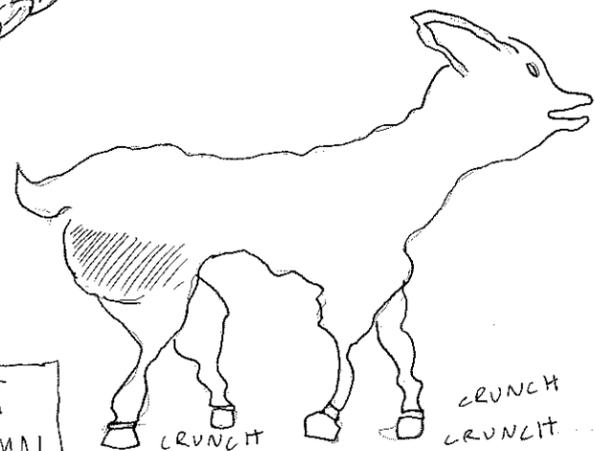
AND ARRIVED AT THE AIRFIELD, WHICH WAS STILL UNDER CONSTRUCTION. IT WAS JUST A BALD BOWL, A MOWN LAWN,

HE HEARD AN UNFAMILIAR CREATURE OUT ON THE GRASS.

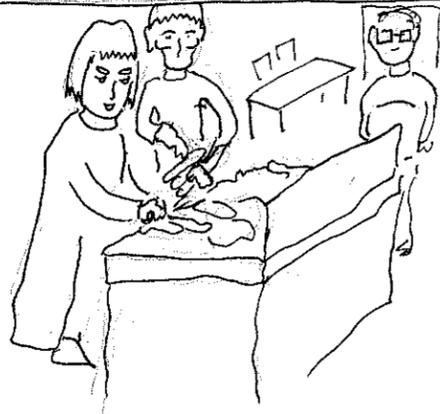
IT WAS A DEER WITH A BRIGHT RED LEG, WASTING DISEASE. VERY CONTAGIOUS.

IT HURTS, DOESN'T IT?

HE KNEW HE SHOULDN'T HAVE TOUCHED THE ANIMAL



BACK AT THE HOUSE,
HIS GRANDPARENTS WERE ASLEEP
AND HIS MOM AND BROTHER WERE
DOING THE DISHES.



HE NOTICED SOME CHICKEN
DUMPLING LEFT ON HIS
GRANDPA'S PLATE.



HE'D BEEN SO NERVOUS PREPARING
THE MEAL THAT HE'D BARELY TASTED
THE FOOD AT DINNER.



OH MY GOD!
THE DOG ALREADY
ATE THAT!



WHAT? WHY WAS IT
ON G-PA'S PLATE?



BECAUSE MOM PICKED
IT UP AND PUT IT BACK
ON THERE.

YOU'RE SO NASTY. IT
FELL OUT OF G-PA'S
MOUTH AND THE DOG
LICKED IT ON THE
GROUND.

WHY WOULD YOU
EAT SOMETHING OFF
SOMEONE ELSE'S
PLATE TO BEGIN WITH?



I...



IT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE FAT!
EVERYONE IN THIS FAMILY
IS FAT AND DISGUSTING.



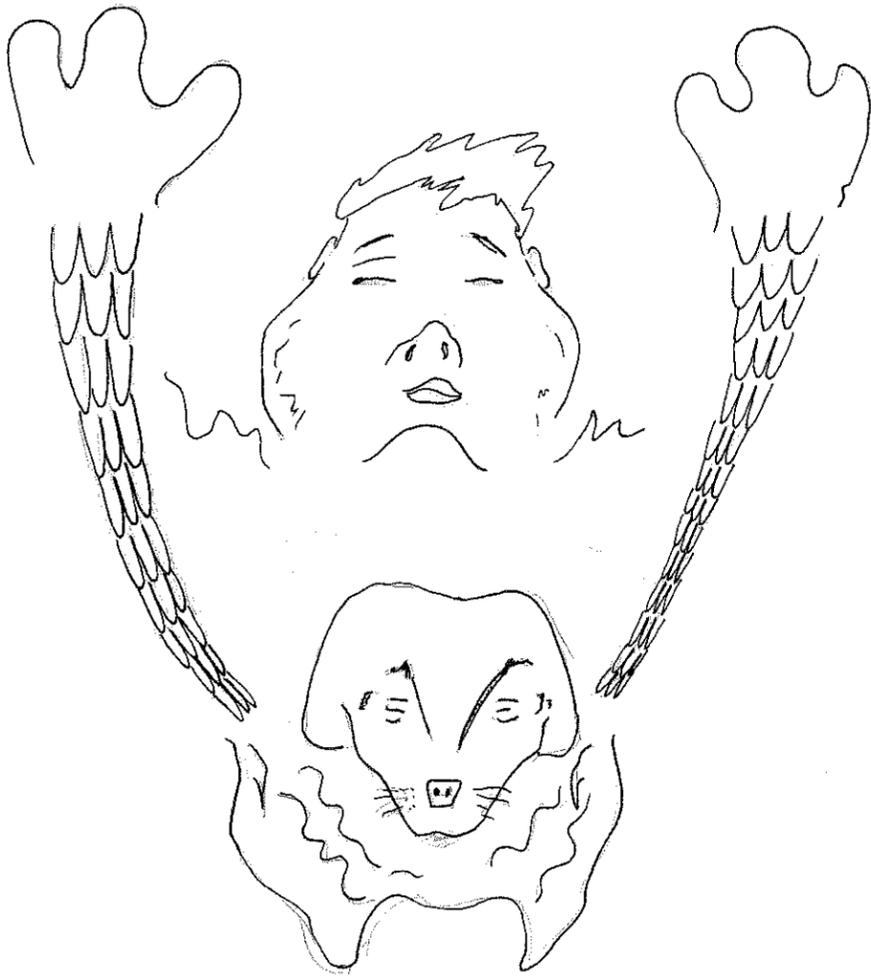
TANNER! DON'T
SAY THAT.



IT'S
OK.



WHEN IT STARTED, THE CHEF ASSUMED HIS BROTHER HAD LACED THE DUMPLINGS WITH A HALLUCINOGEN.



BOTH THE DOG AND HIS G-PA
WERE ASLEEP.

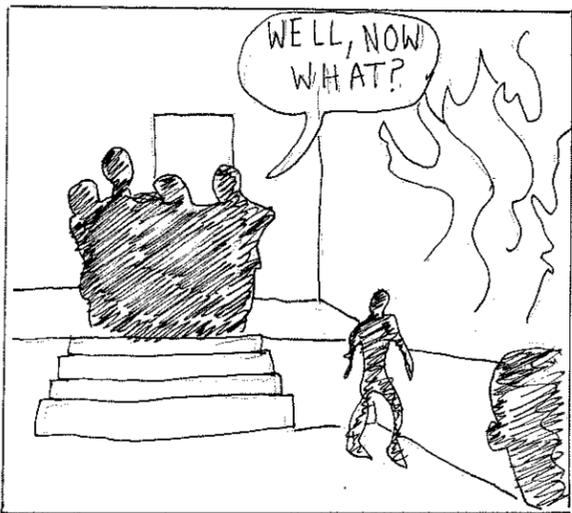
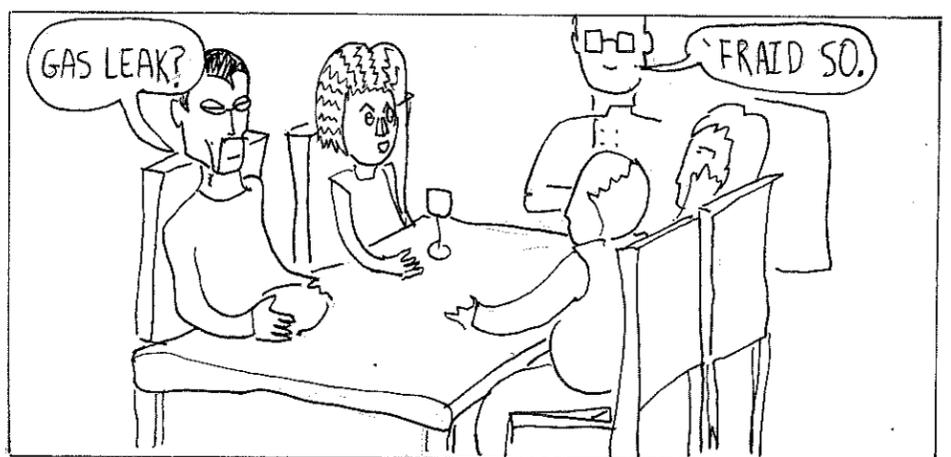
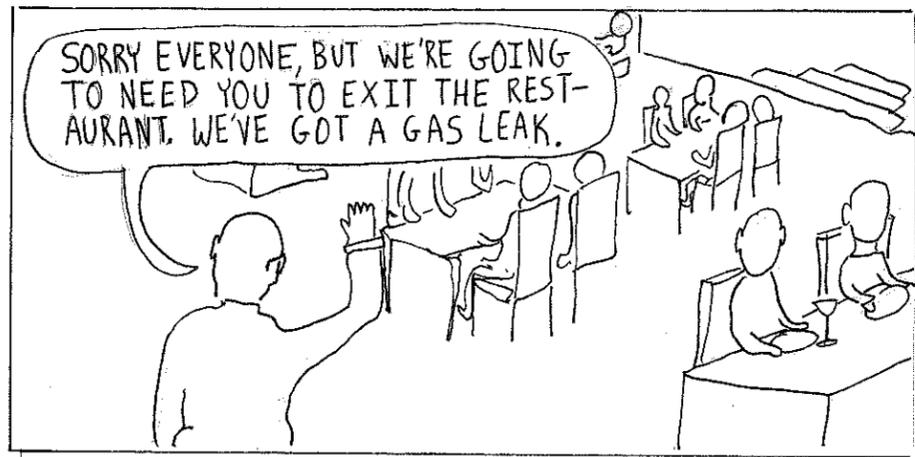
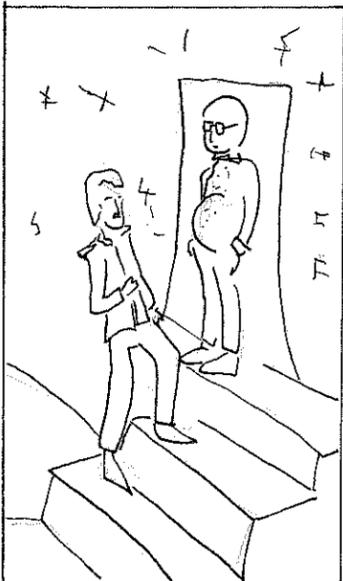
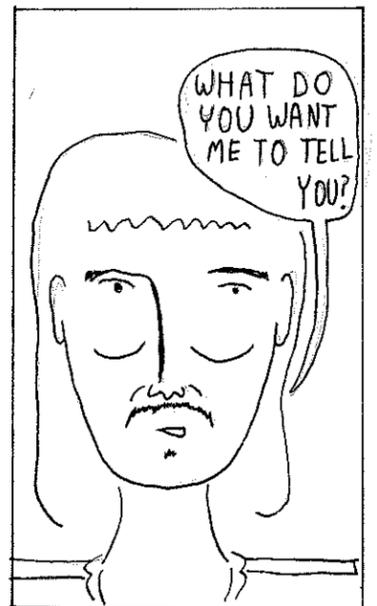
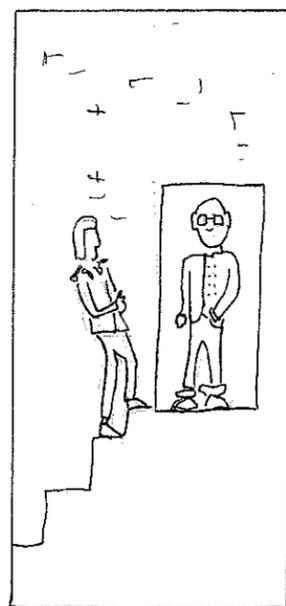
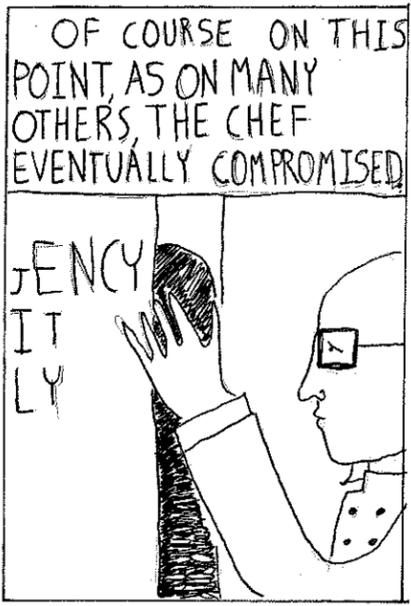
STRANGE IMAGES, BEAGLE DREAMS
AND OLD MAN SECRETS, FUR AND
TAN LEGS.

DOG CONSCIOUSNESS AND HUMAN
CONSCIOUSNESS CRASHED AND
ROLLED IN HIS MIND. AFTER A FEW
HOURS THE CHEF FELT CERTAIN HE
WAS GOING INSANE.

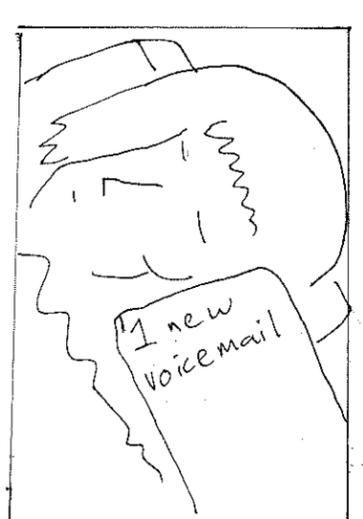
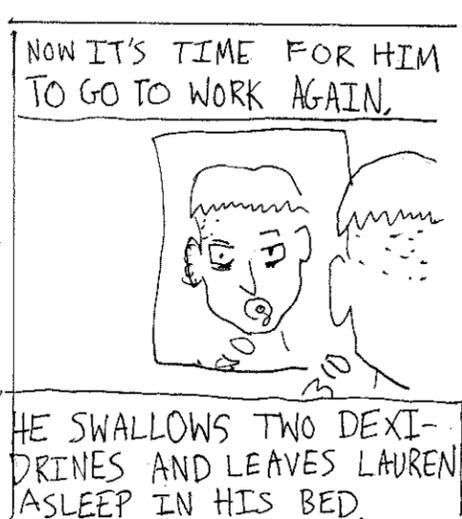
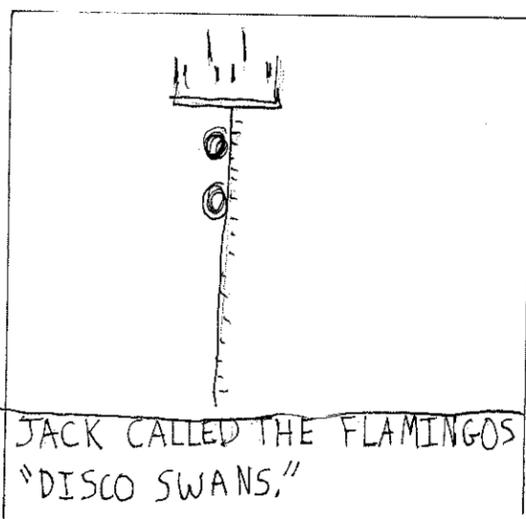
THEN HE HEARD A TOILET FLUSH
IN THE HOUSE AND THE VISION
STOPPED.

AFTER THAT, THE CHEF TOLD HIM-
SELF HE WOULD NEVER COOK AN
ANIMAL AGAIN.

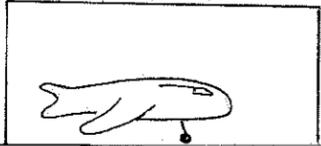
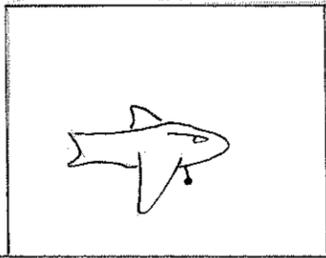
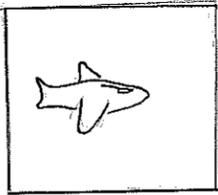
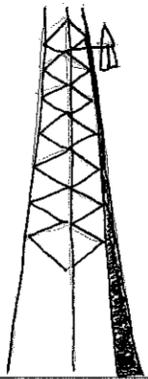




A SERIES OF CELL PHONE TOWERS TRANSMITTED THE CALL FROM COLONEL TO MEMPHIS



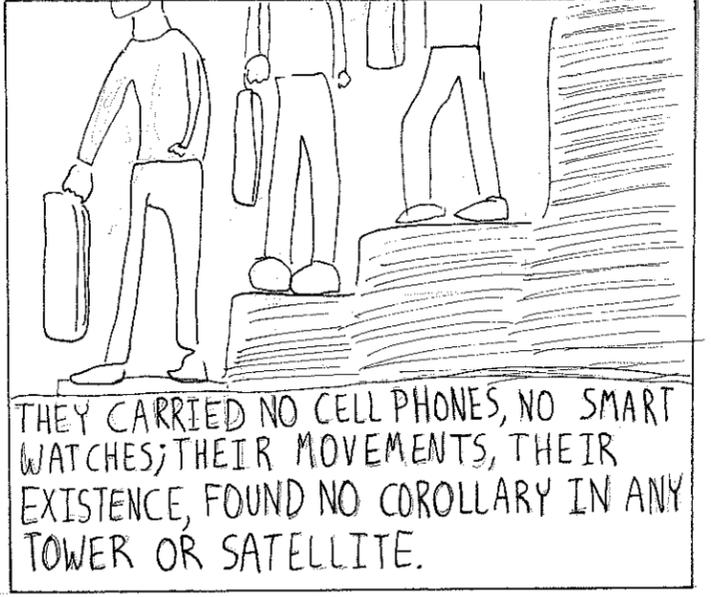
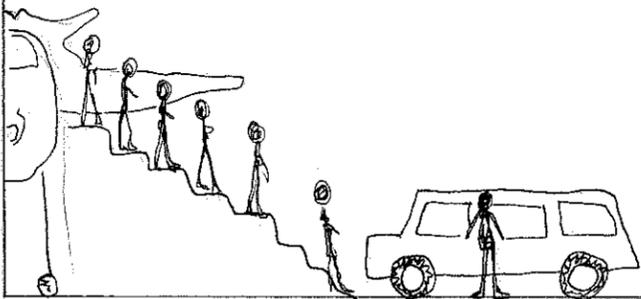
AT 10,000 FEET, THE des ESSIENTES SIBLINGS GAVE REGGIE ANOTHER CALL.



THEY WANTED HIM ON THE TARMAC WHEN THEY LANDED.

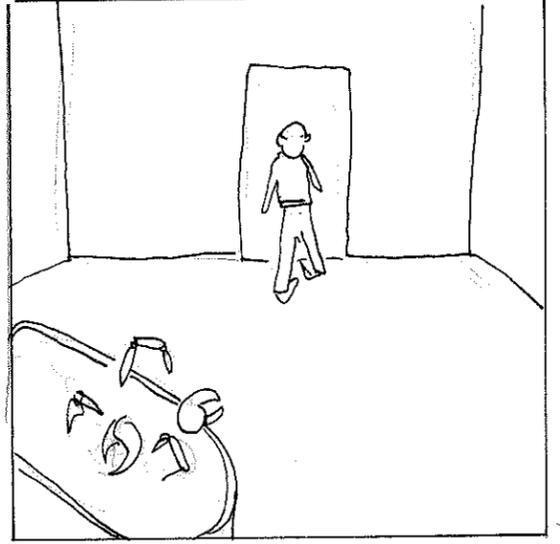
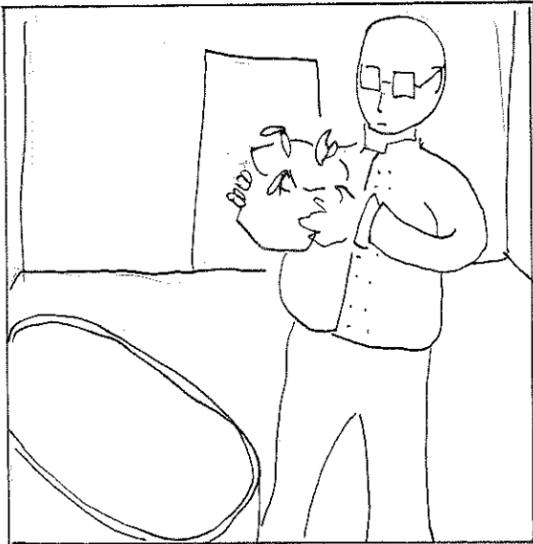


THERE WERE SIX PASSENGERS ONBOARD, THOUGH ONLY THREE WERE LISTED ON THE MANIFEST.



THEY CARRIED NO CELL PHONES, NO SMART WATCHES; THEIR MOVEMENTS, THEIR EXISTENCE, FOUND NO COROLLARY IN ANY TOWER OR SATELLITE.

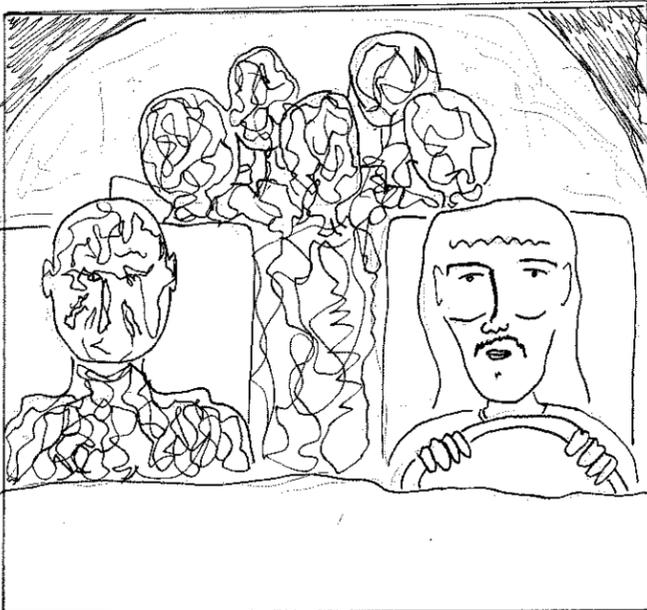
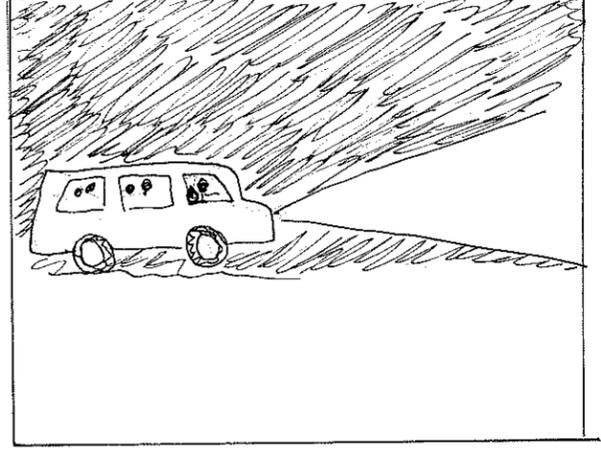
THEY WERE WARM FLESH, HUNGRY AND UNTRACEABLE.



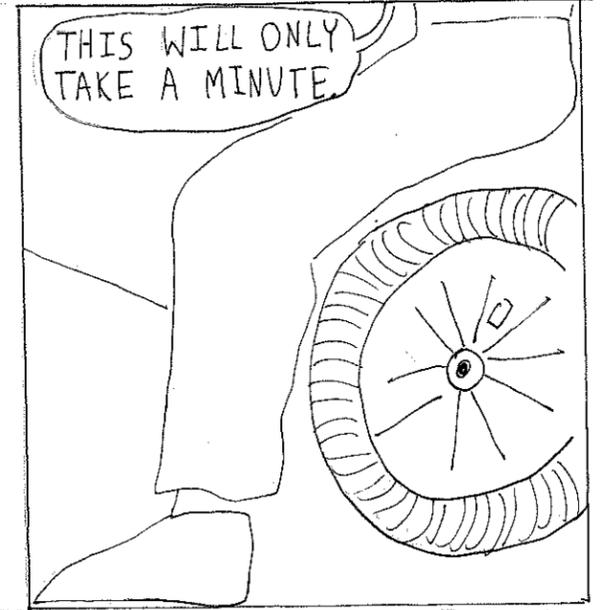
REGINALD! HOW WE'VE MISSED YOU!



WELCOME! THE CHEF'S GOT THE RESTAURANT READY.

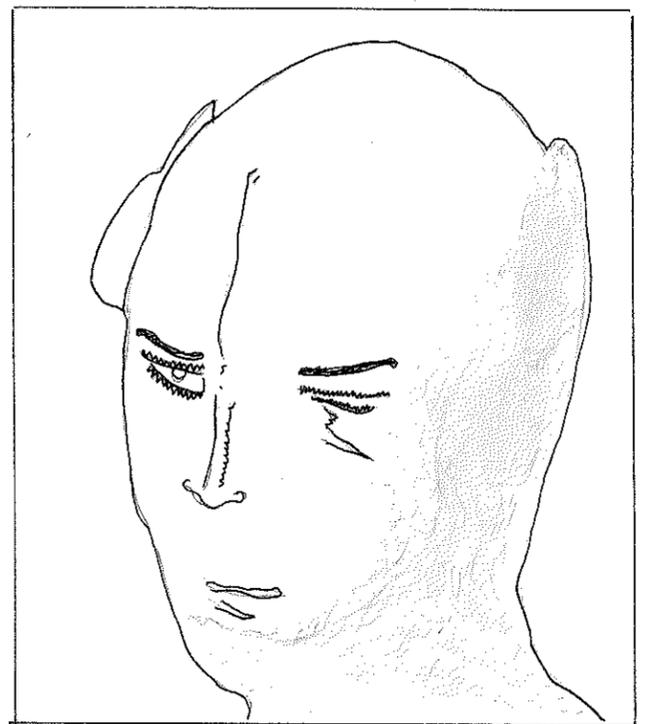
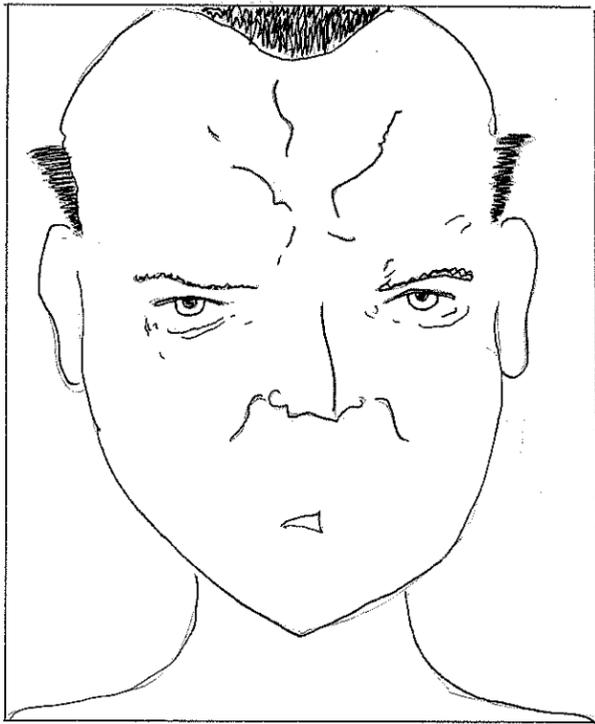
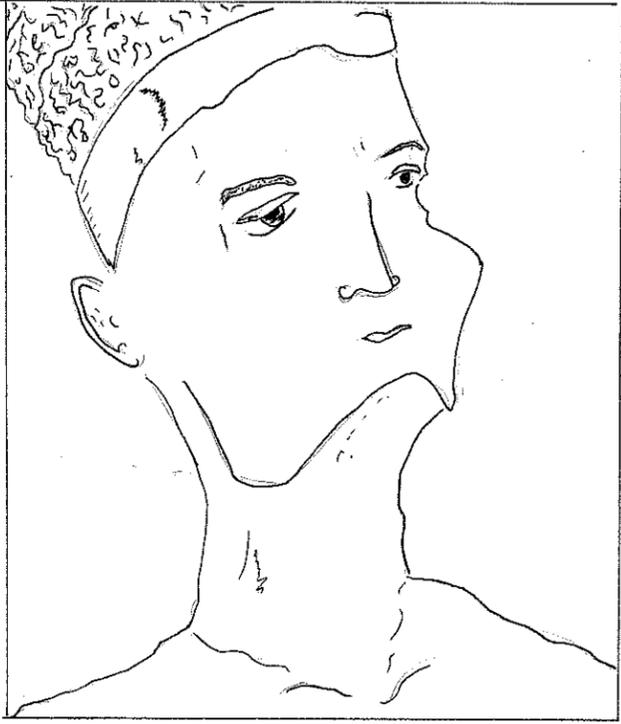
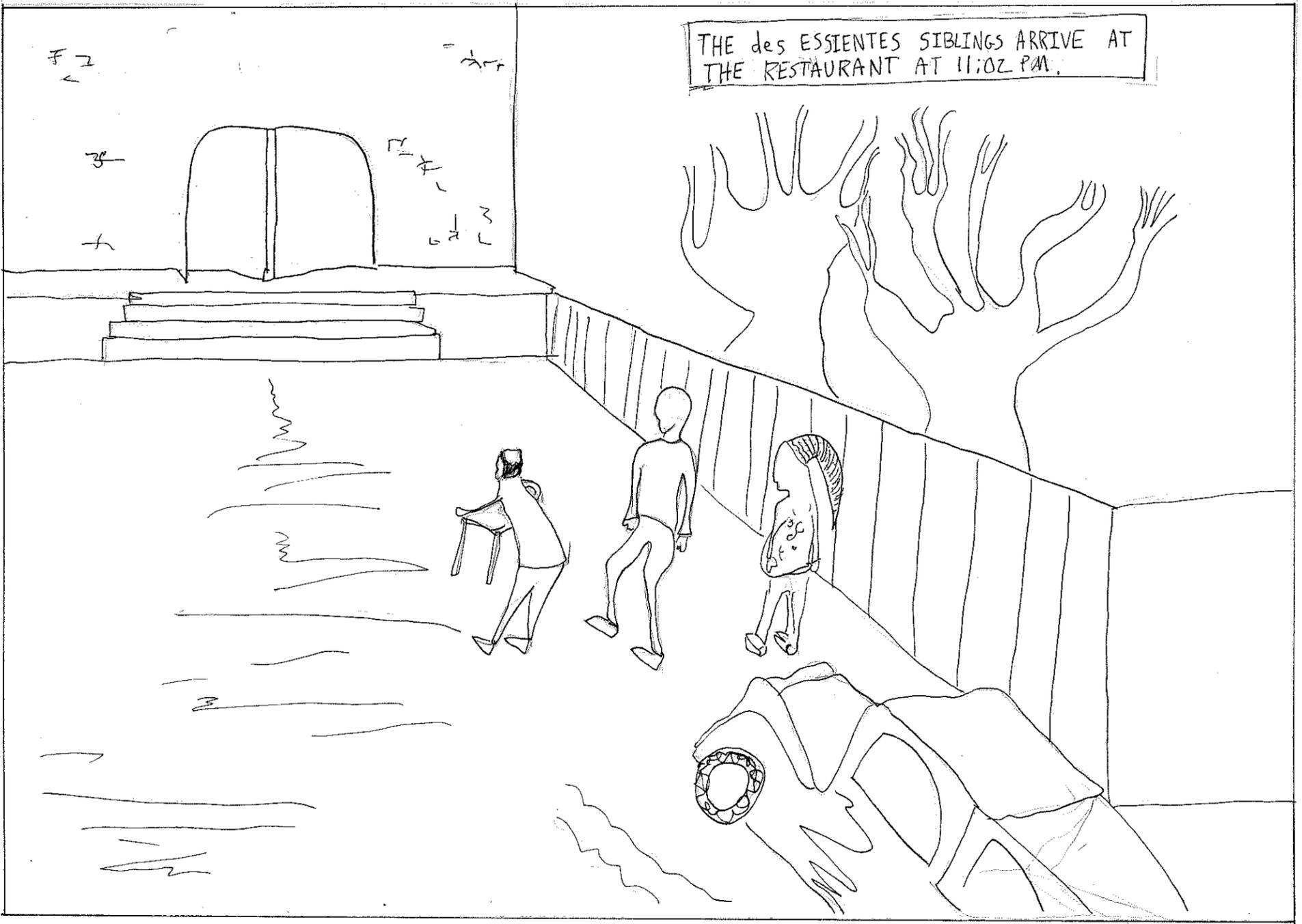


EXCELLENT. STAY HERE WITH THE EATERS, WOULD YOU REGINALD?



THIS WILL ONLY TAKE A MINUTE

THE des ESSIENTES SIBLINGS ARRIVE AT THE RESTAURANT AT 11:02 PM.



THE HUNGER ARTIST part 2

Written & Illustrated by Brendan Steffen