

Angelica

and the BEAR
PRINCE

Award-winning
author of
The Magic Fish

TRUNG
LE
NGUYEN



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ALSO BY TRUNG LE NGUYEN

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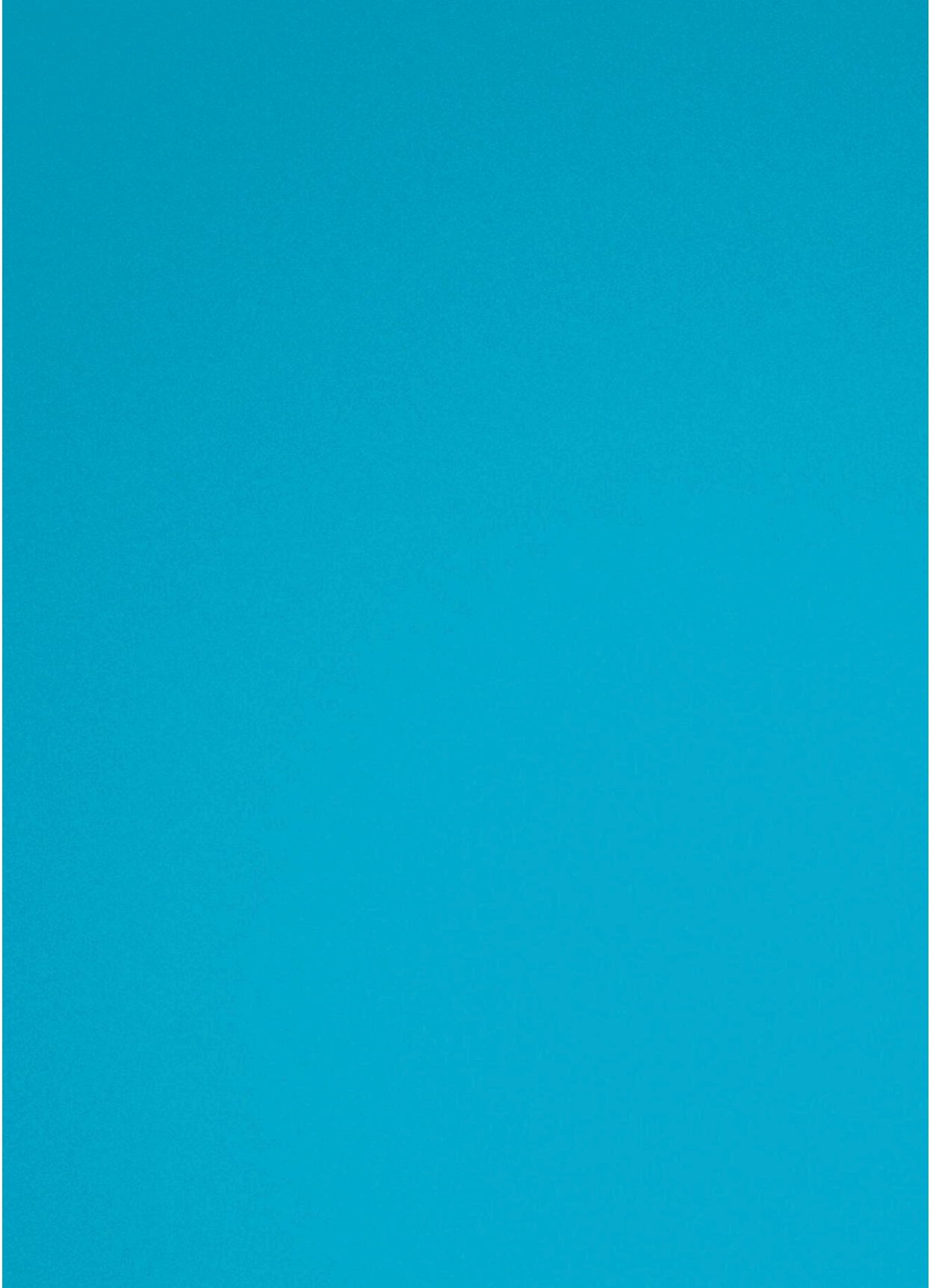
A comic on every bookshelf

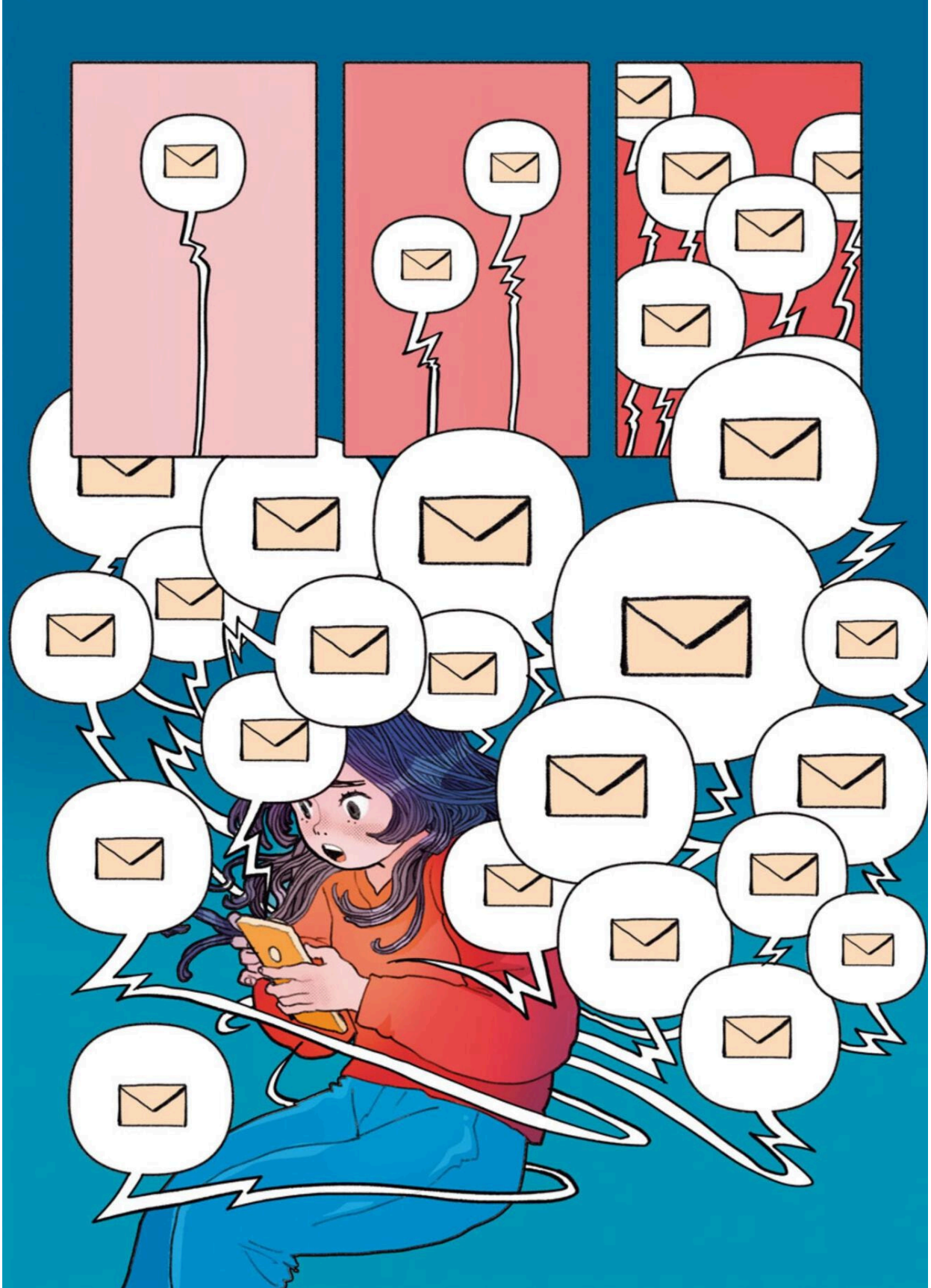
To Flora and Ronan — upon this book's publication date, neither of you will be quite old enough to be its target reader. However, Flora once mentioned how nice it would be to have a book dedication, so I'm obliging.





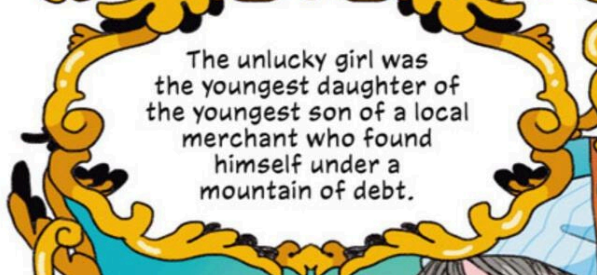
Chapter
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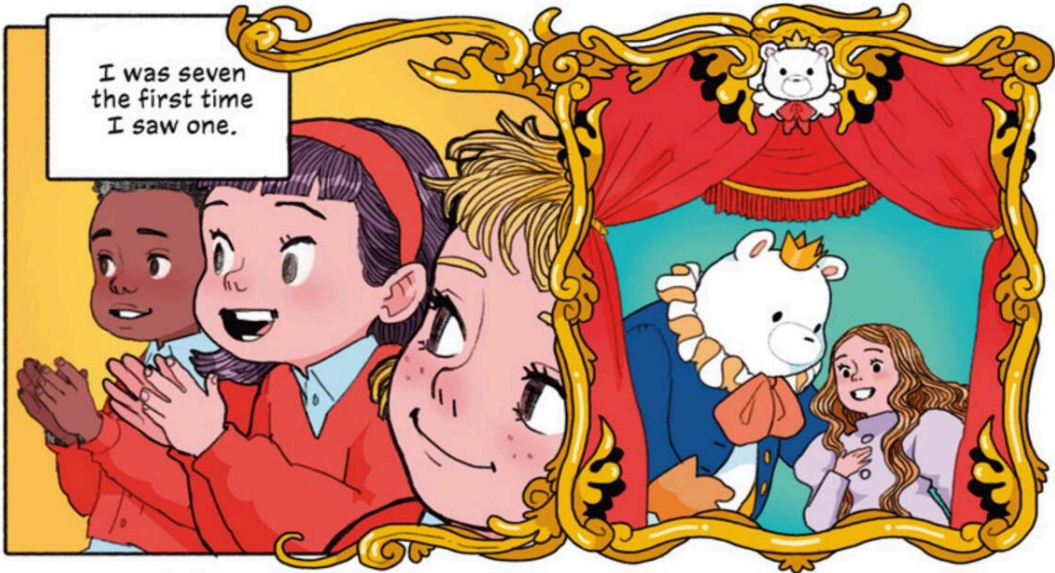
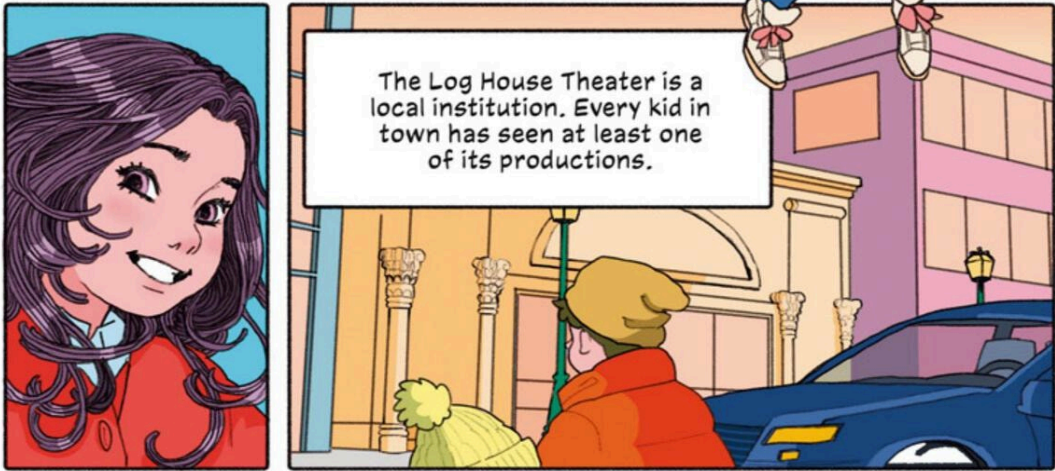








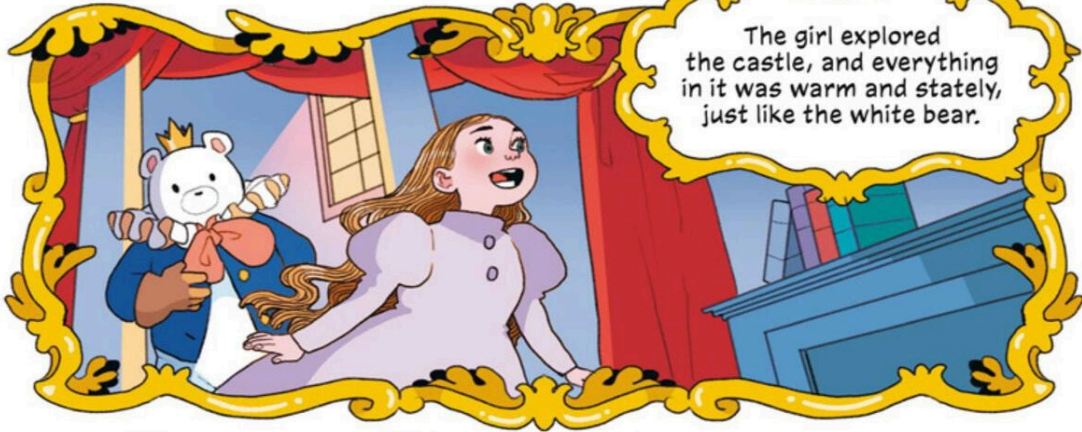




The youngest daughter was sent off by her father to live with the bear. By all accounts she lived a very happy life in the big castle in the snowdrifts.

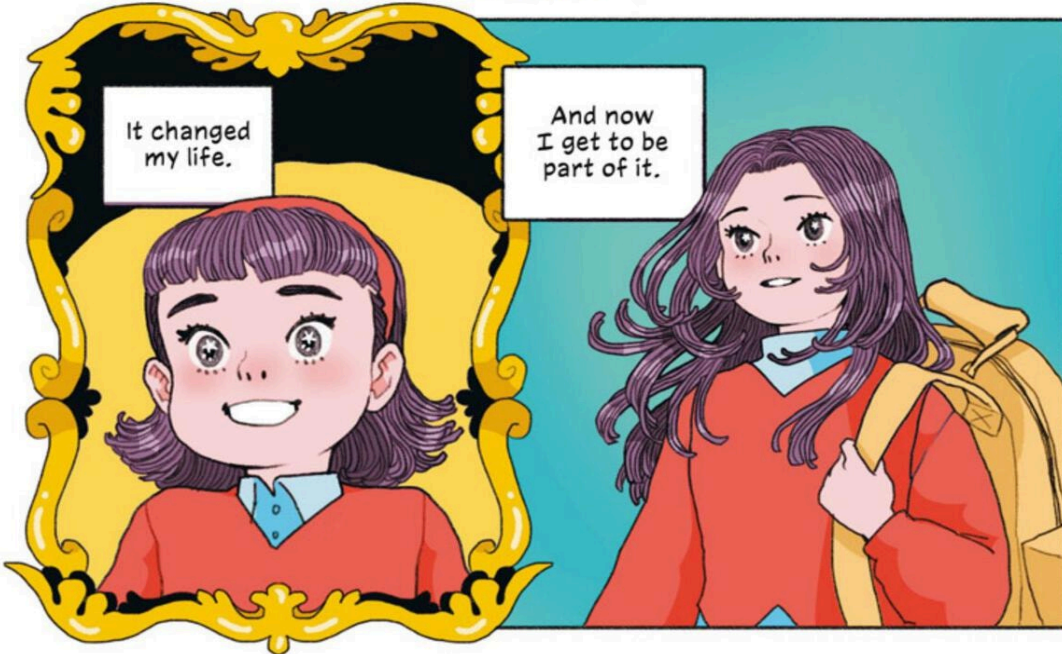


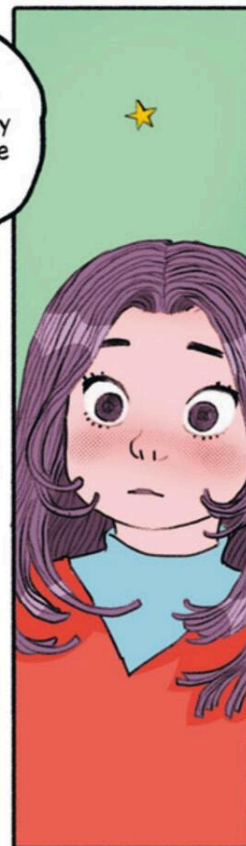
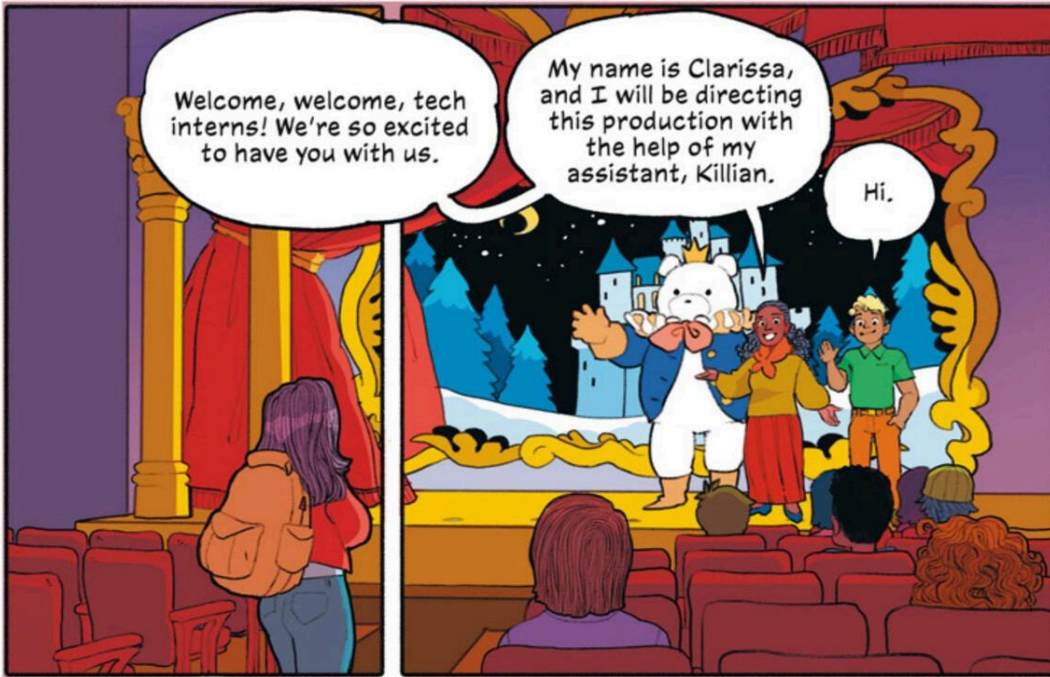
The girl explored the castle, and everything in it was warm and stately, just like the white bear.

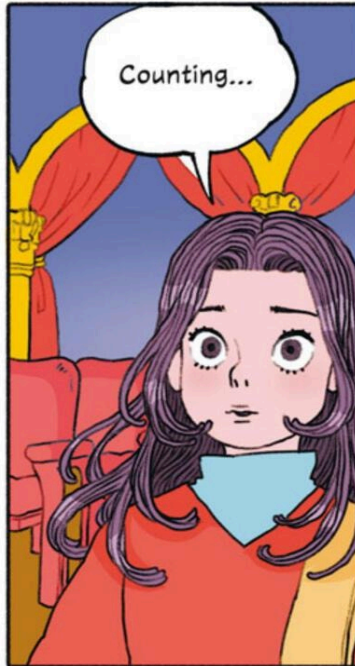


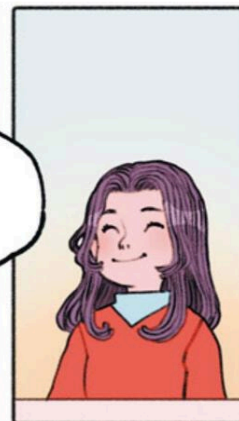
It changed my life.

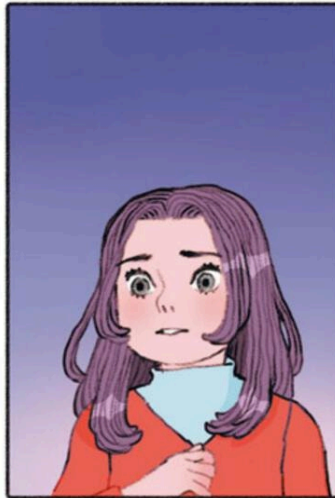
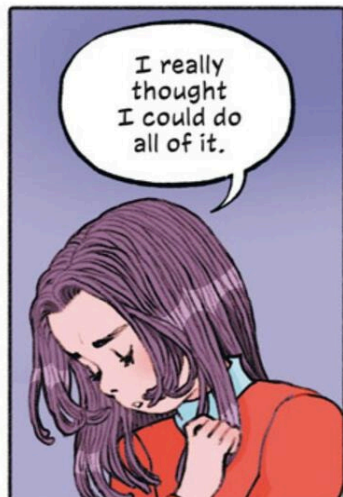
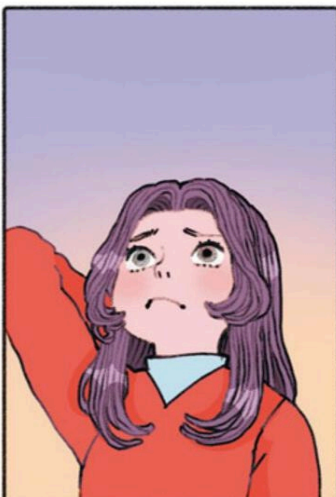
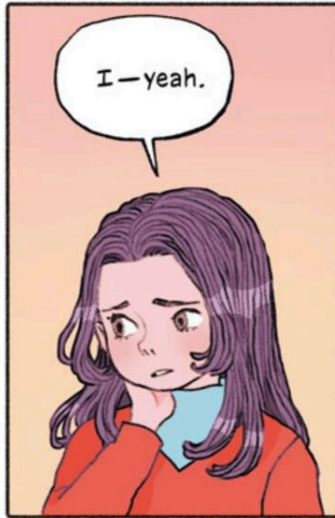
And now I get to be part of it.

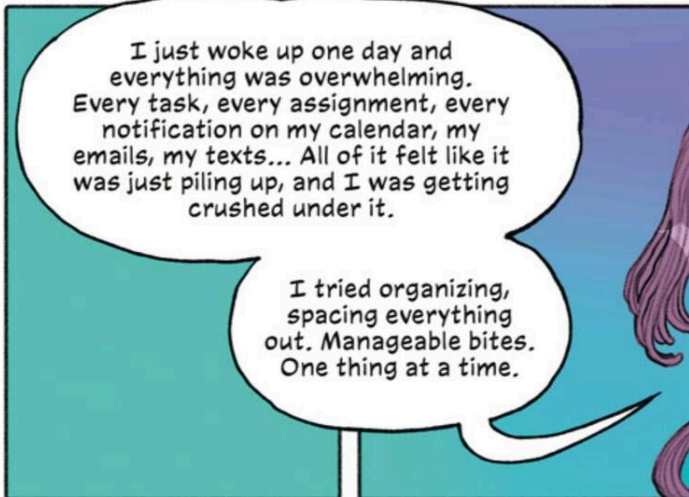


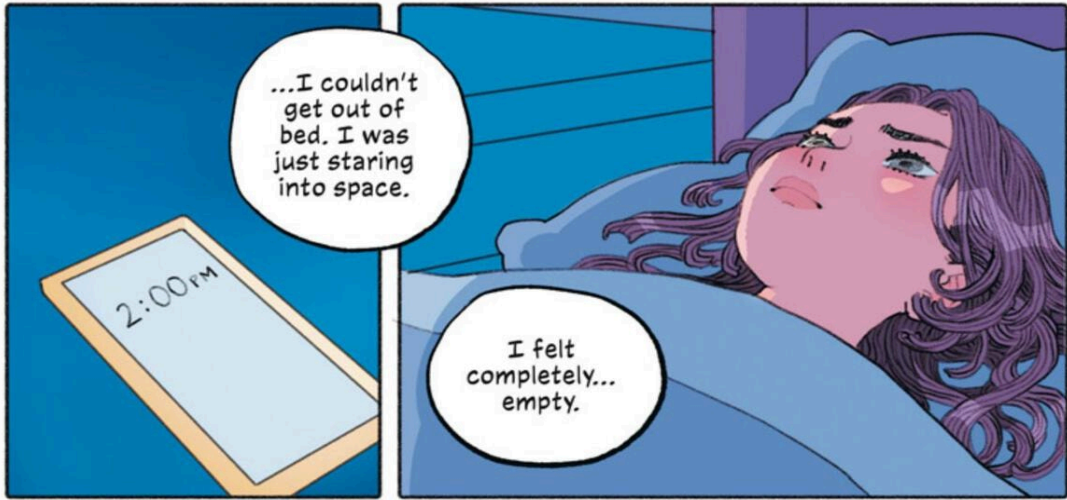




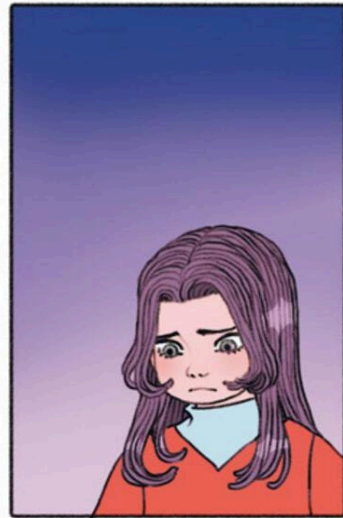






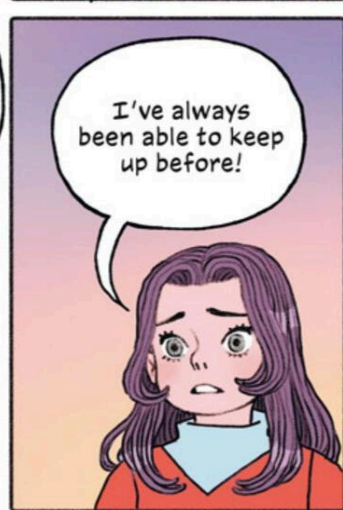




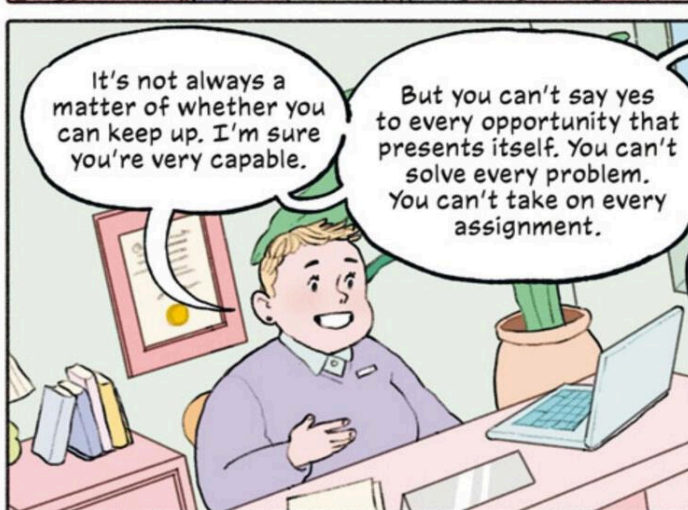


It sounds like you hit a wall.

You burned out. It's okay to take a step back. Take a break.

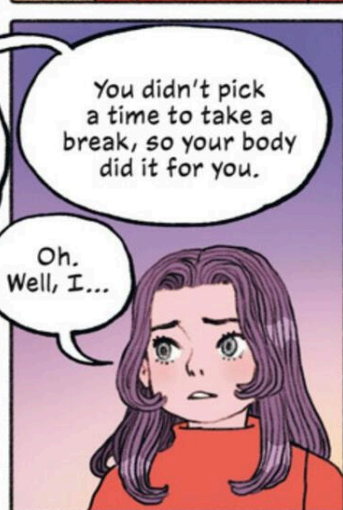


I've always been able to keep up before!



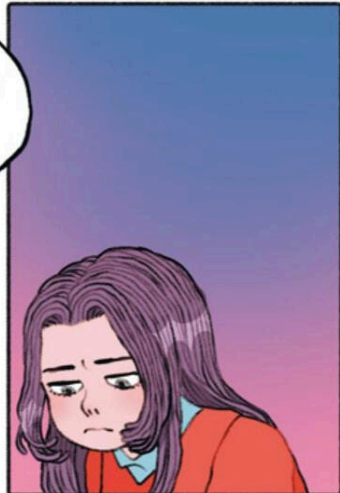
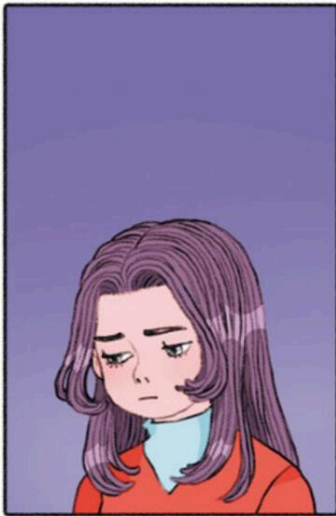
It's not always a matter of whether you can keep up. I'm sure you're very capable.

But you can't say yes to every opportunity that presents itself. You can't solve every problem. You can't take on every assignment.



You didn't pick a time to take a break, so your body did it for you.

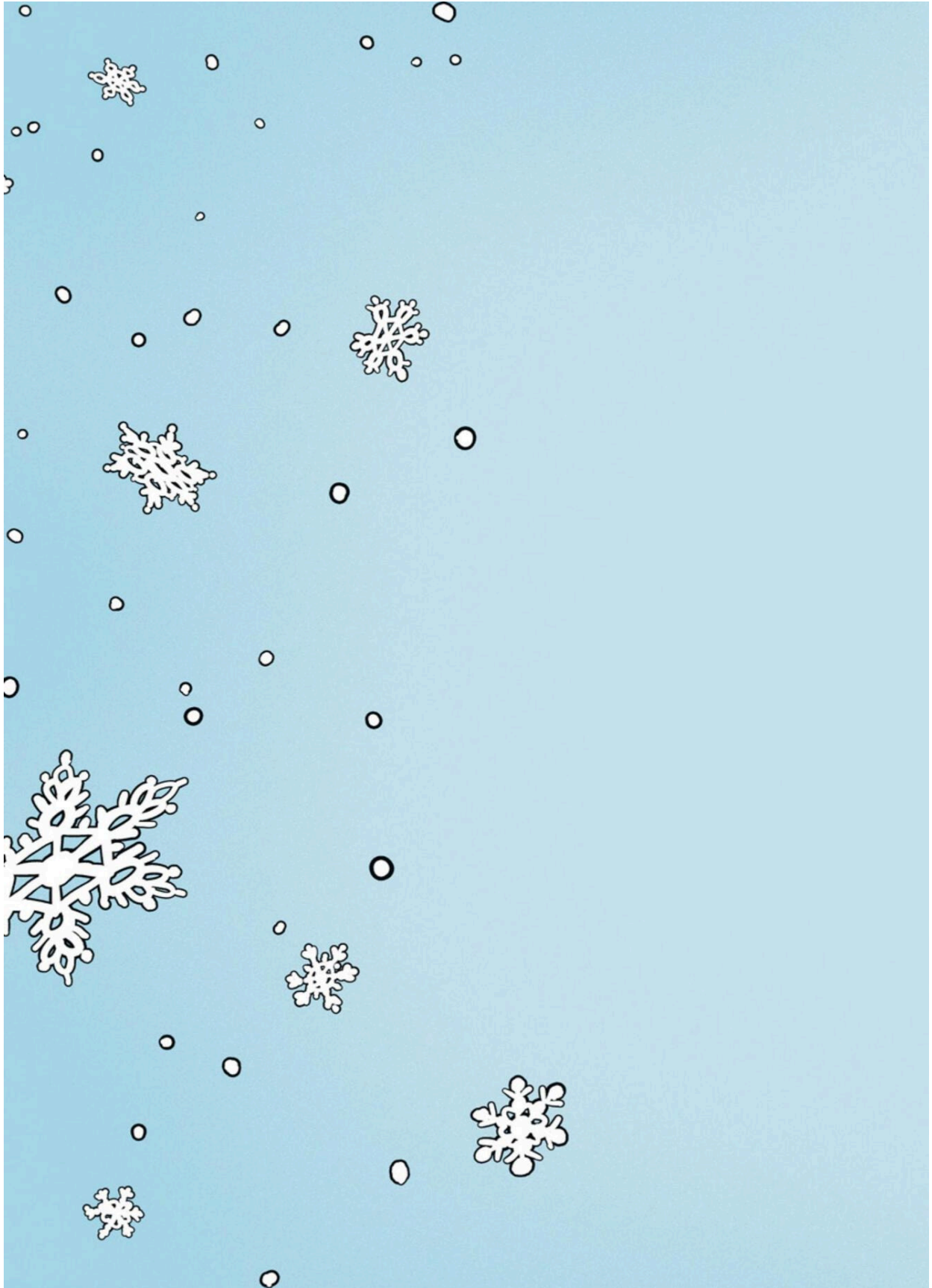
Oh. Well, I...





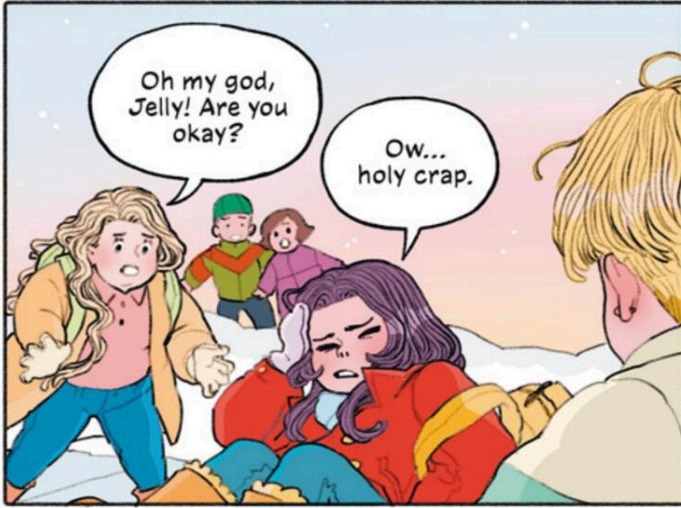


Chapter
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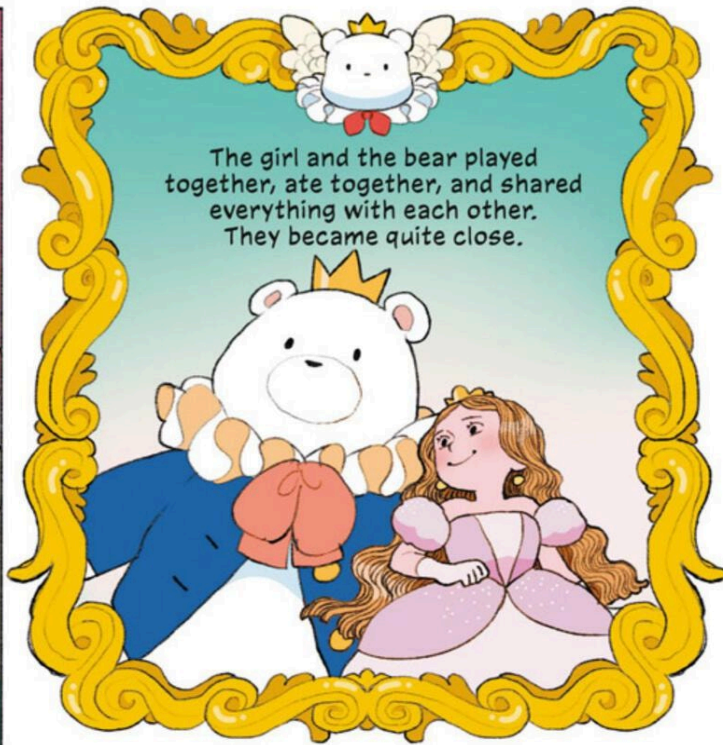


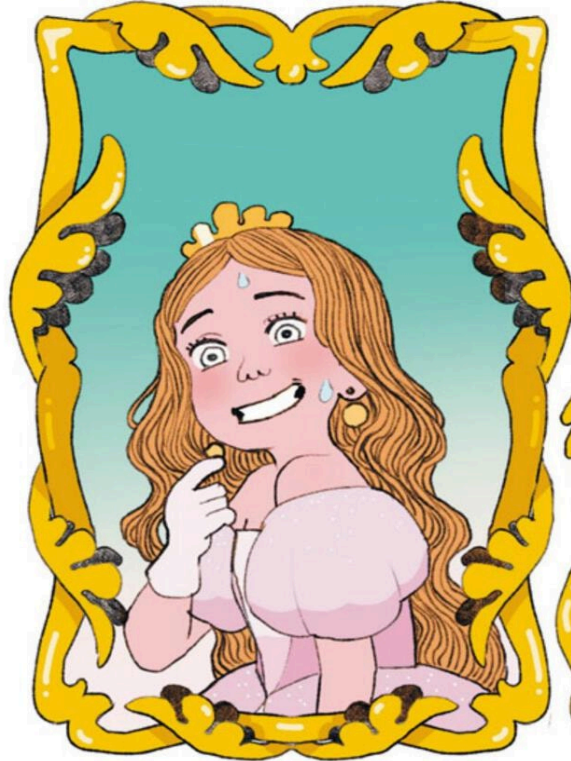
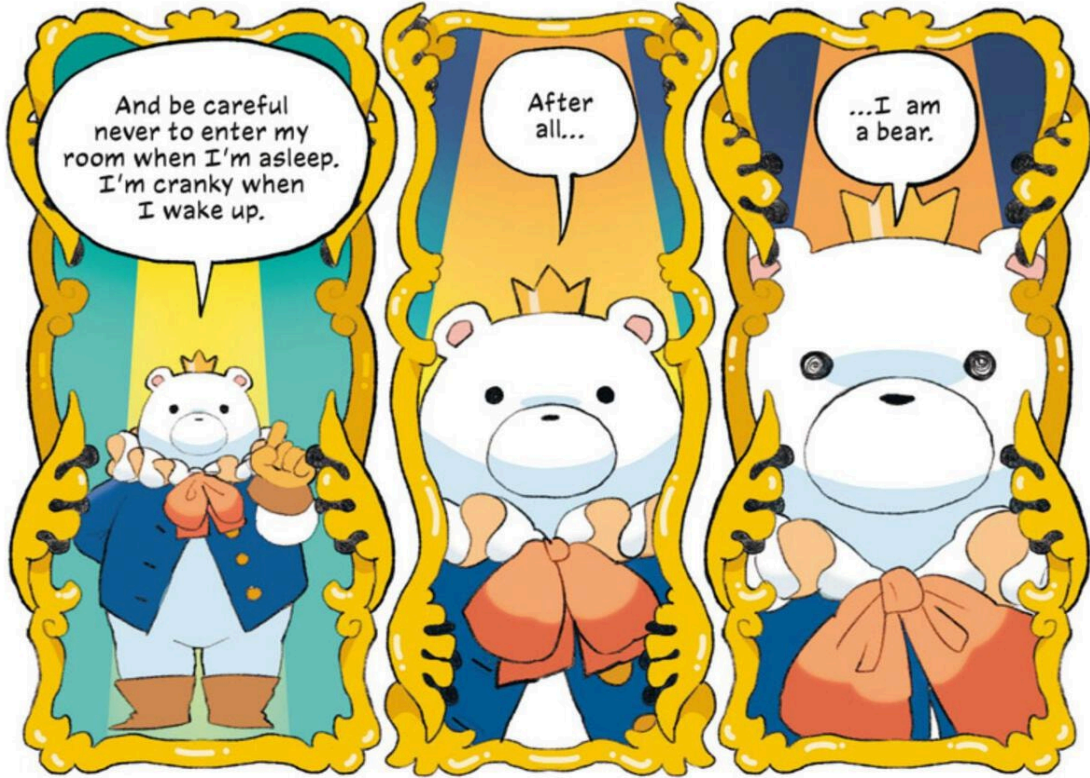


CRASH

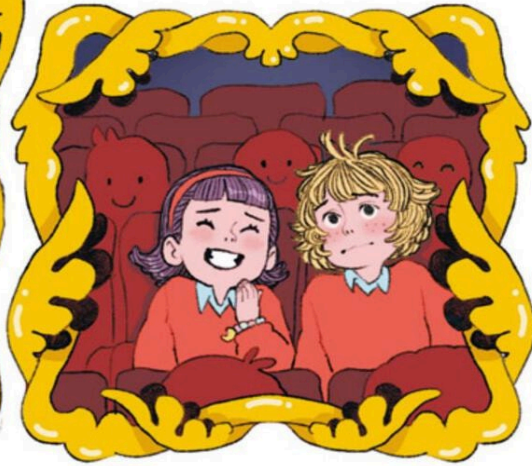


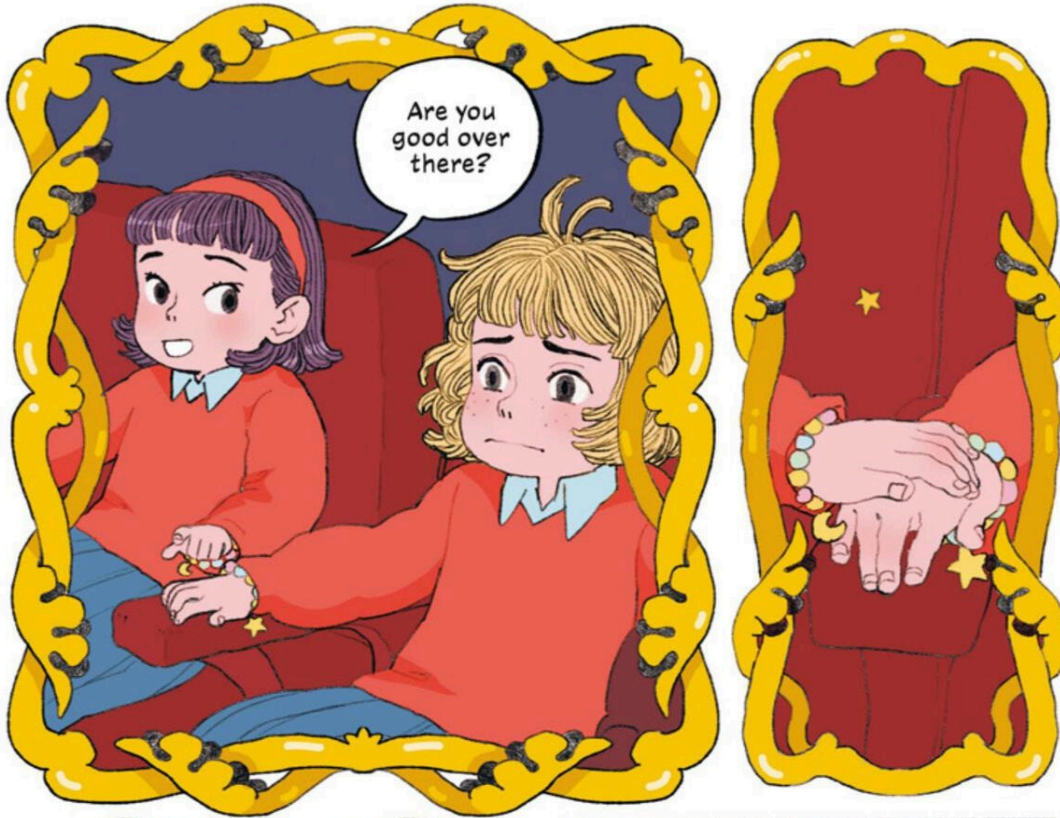




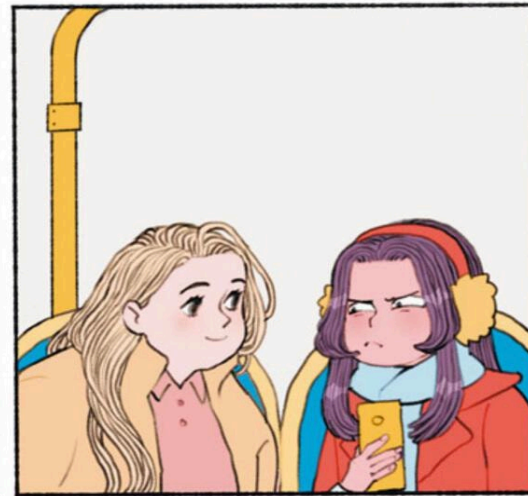
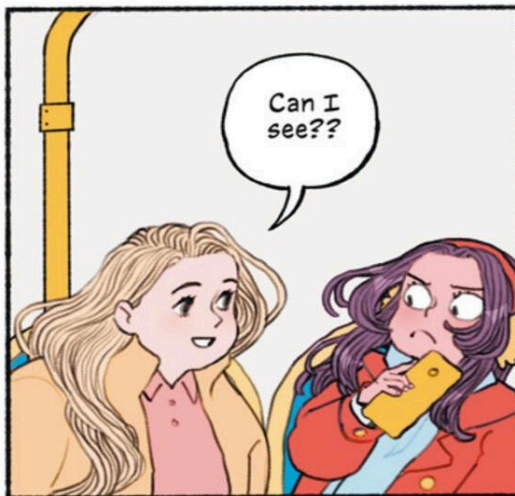
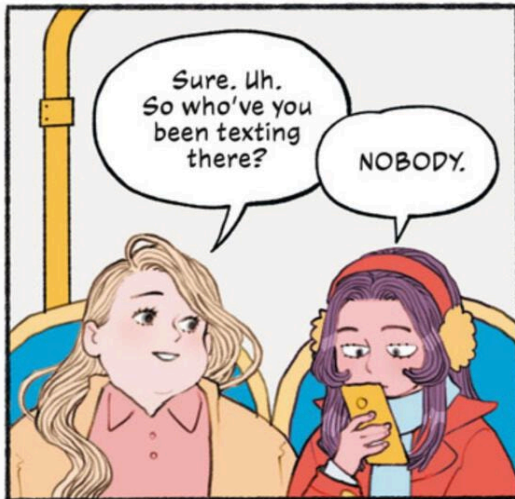


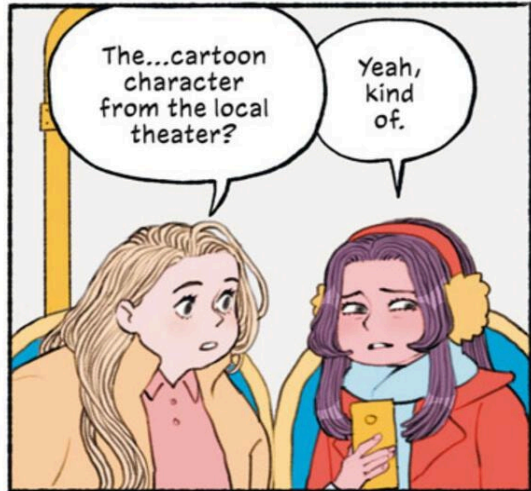
The girl always thought something was not quite right with the bear, but she also felt he was entitled to his secrets.

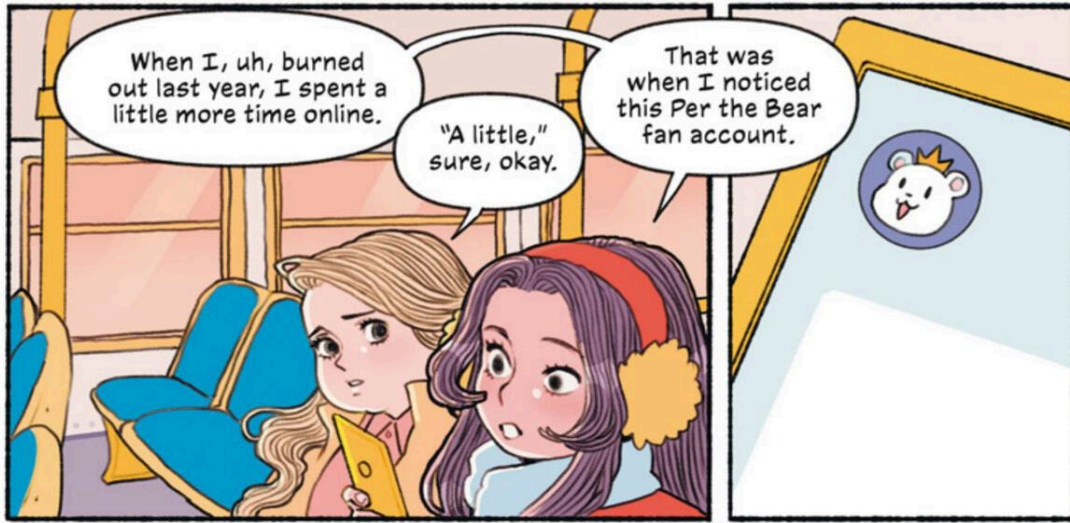


















Dear Per the Bear,

I am an internet rando who is having a really bad day, and I saw one of your posts, and it made me smile.

I've loved the whole Log House Theater crew ever since I was little, and it's really just been a bright spot for me.

I hit a wall recently, and I really didn't know what to do with myself, so I thought I would let people know when they've made a positive difference in my day.

So thanks for that.

An Anxious Jellybean



Dear Anxious Jellybean,

I'm so sorry you had a bad day. As a fan of the Log House Theater myself, I strive to make sure everyone can have a little break, but it's a very big job for one bear. It really brightens my day to know that I helped make your day even just a little bit better.

Your friend,

Per, the Bear Prince





Anyway, we just kept checking in with each other after that.

So when that internship at the theater popped up, I knew I had to apply. It felt like fate. Besides, it's not like I was doing much.



I guess I wanted to do something where I could feel...

...a connection to this work.



That makes sense.

Plus, you're trying to find the identity of the Bear Prince, right?

No! No. Oh, no. No. No no no.



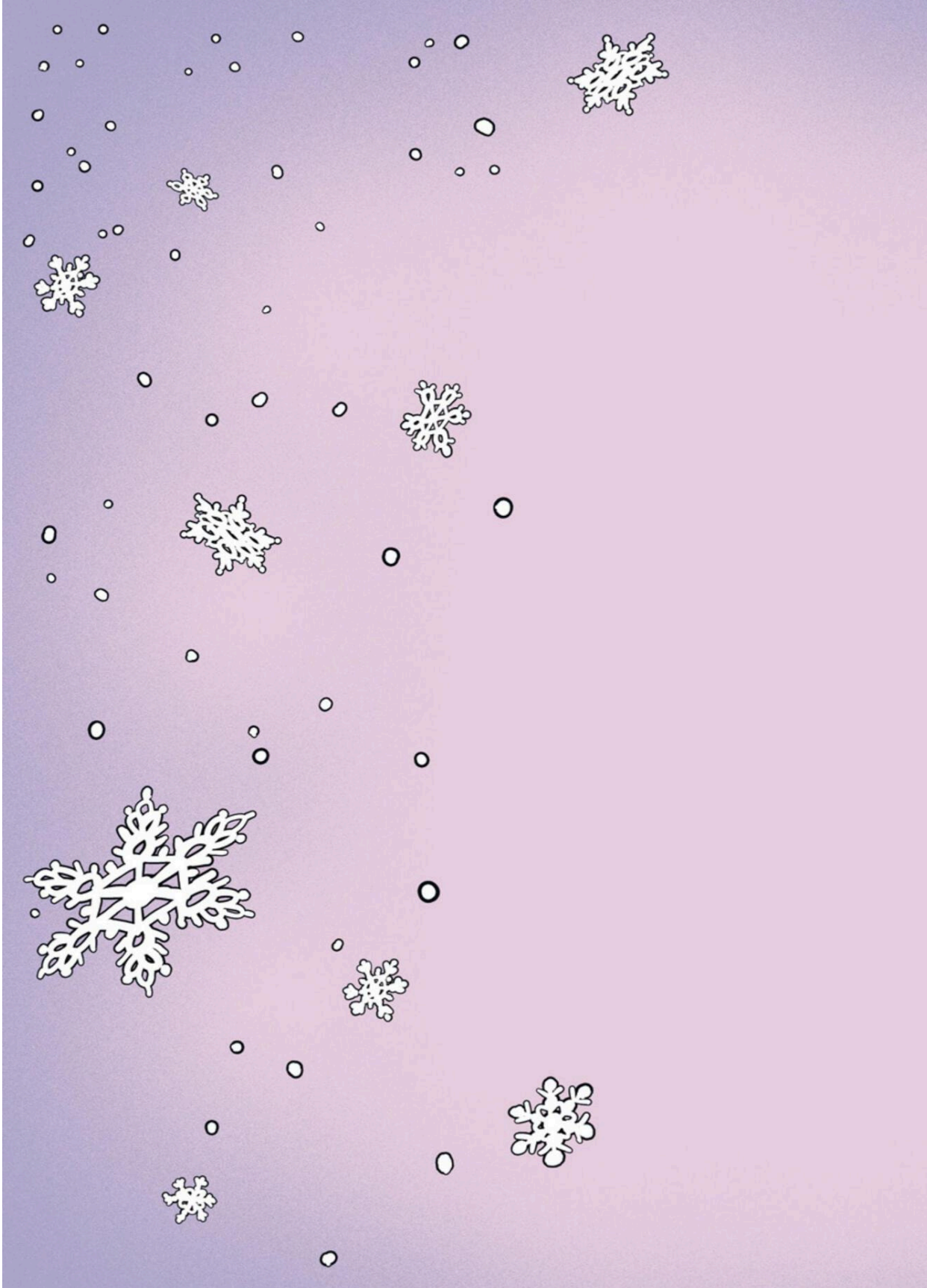
Maybe.







Chapter
3

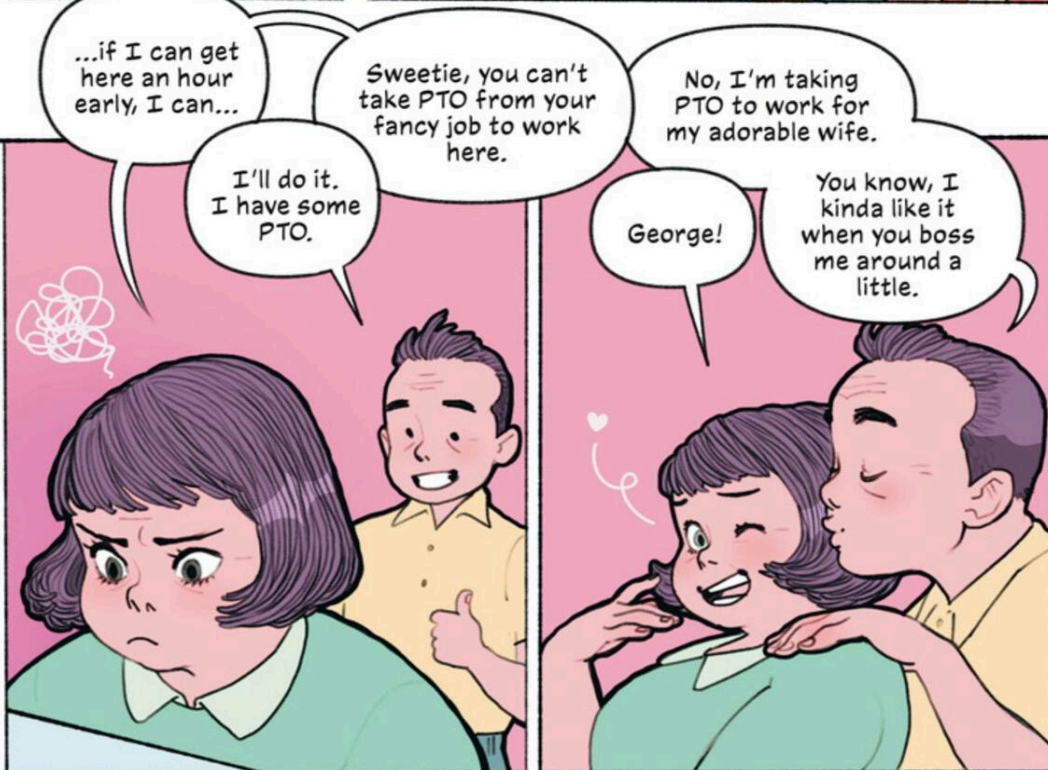




We're gonna be a little short-staffed this year. I bet I can cover those extra hours.

We're not letting the Fancy Spoon outmaneuver us again this year. Always so much paperwork. Applications, health inspections...

Oh, but someone has to do inventory. I guess...hmm...



...if I can get here an hour early, I can...

Sweetie, you can't take PTO from your fancy job to work here.

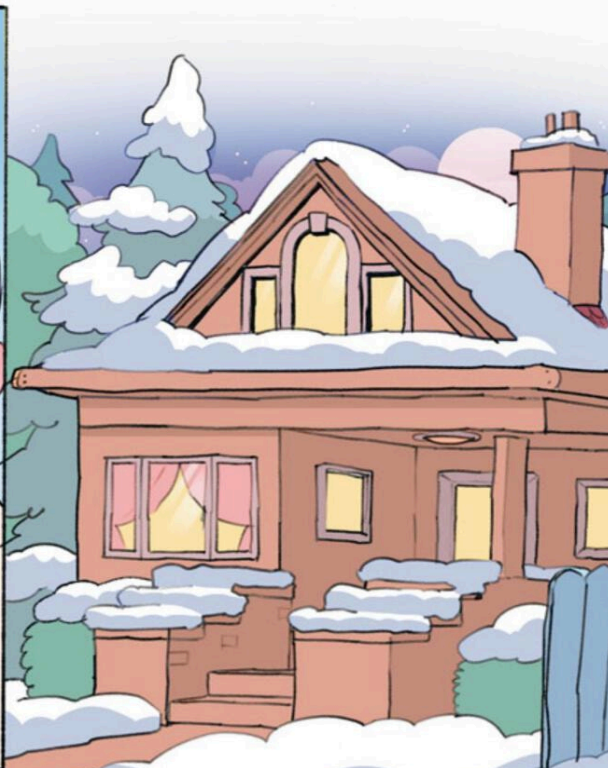
No, I'm taking PTO to work for my adorable wife.

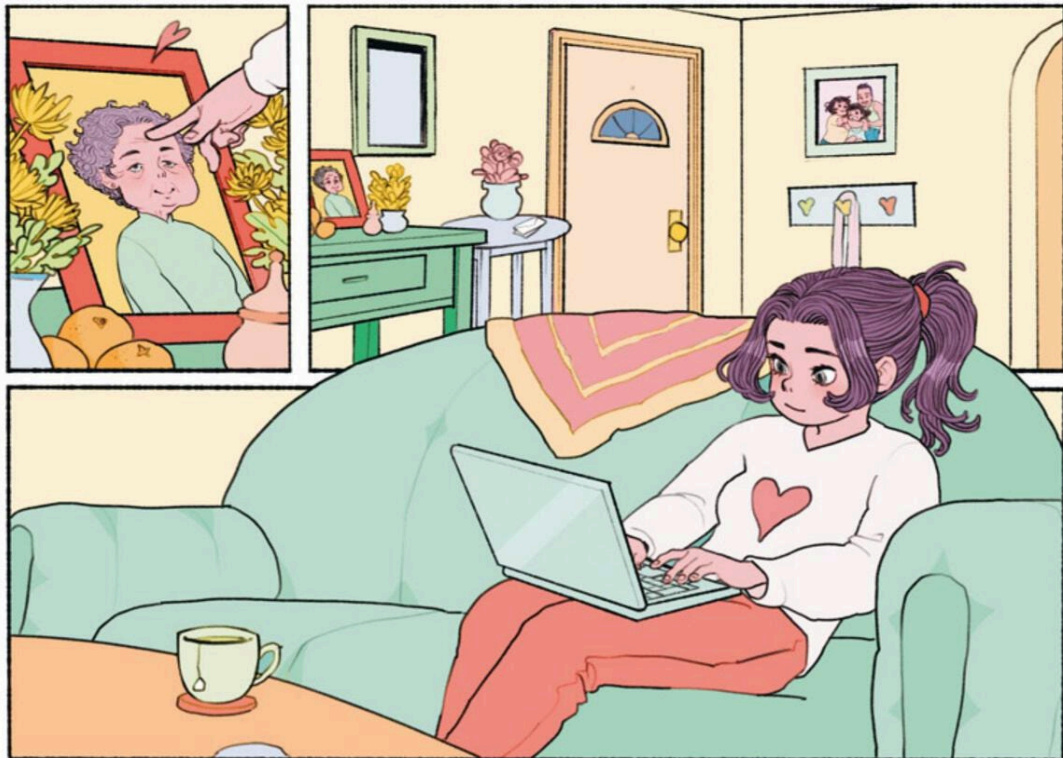
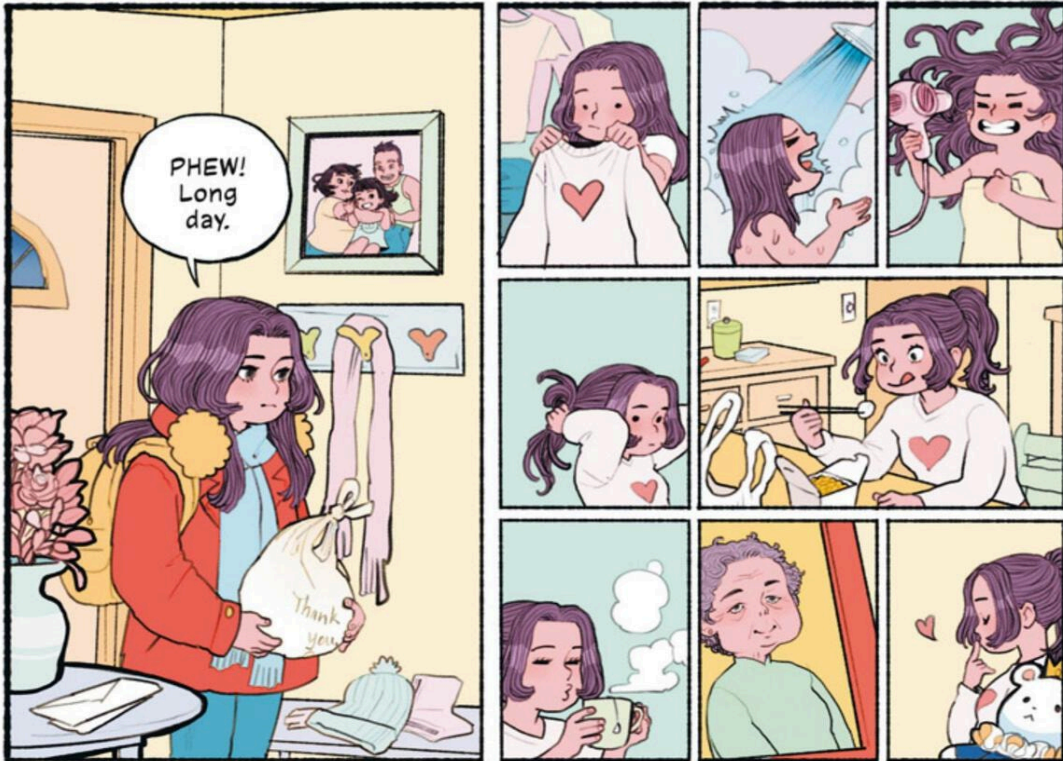
I'll do it. I have some PTO.

George!

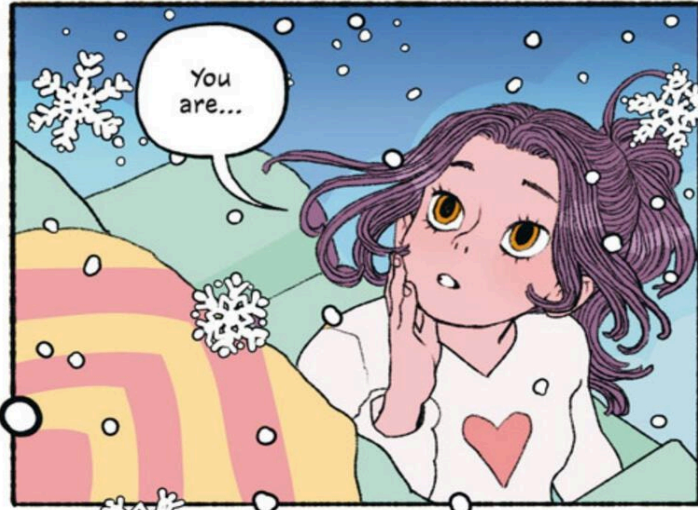
You know, I kinda like it when you boss me around a little.

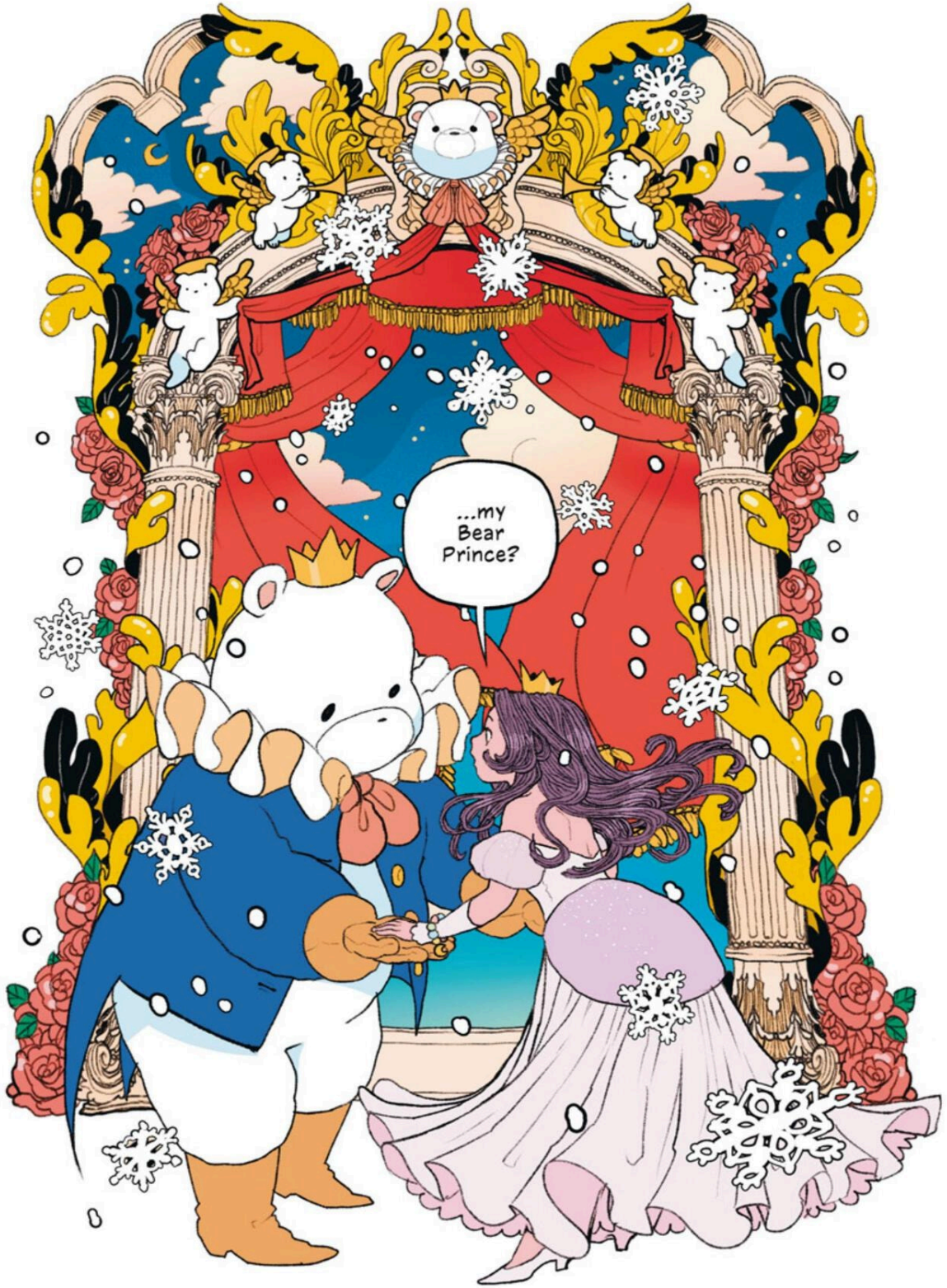


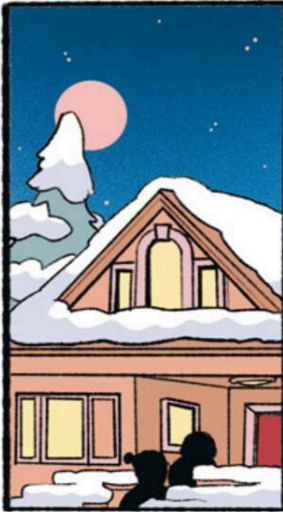




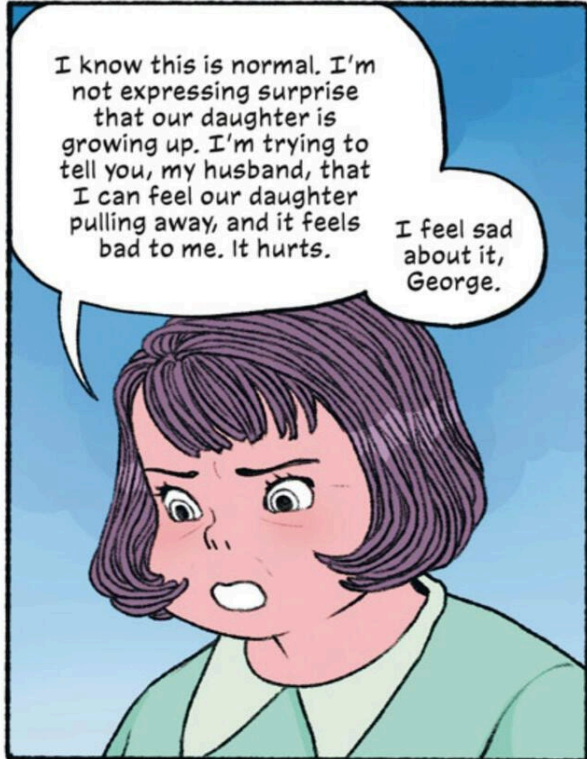
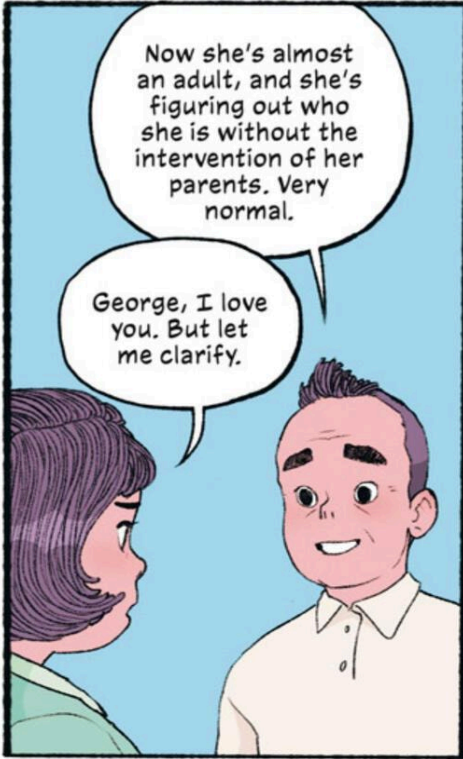














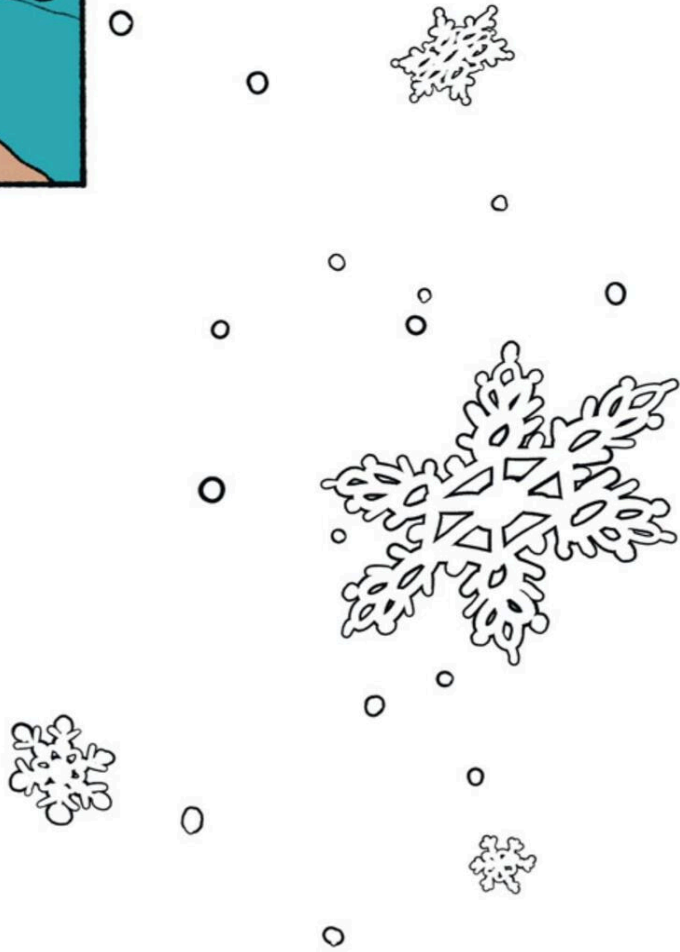
You always knew what to do.

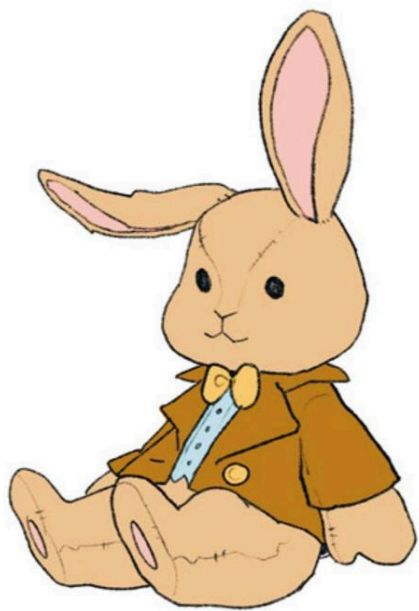
I wish you were still here sometimes.



I still don't think I'm used to that feeling.

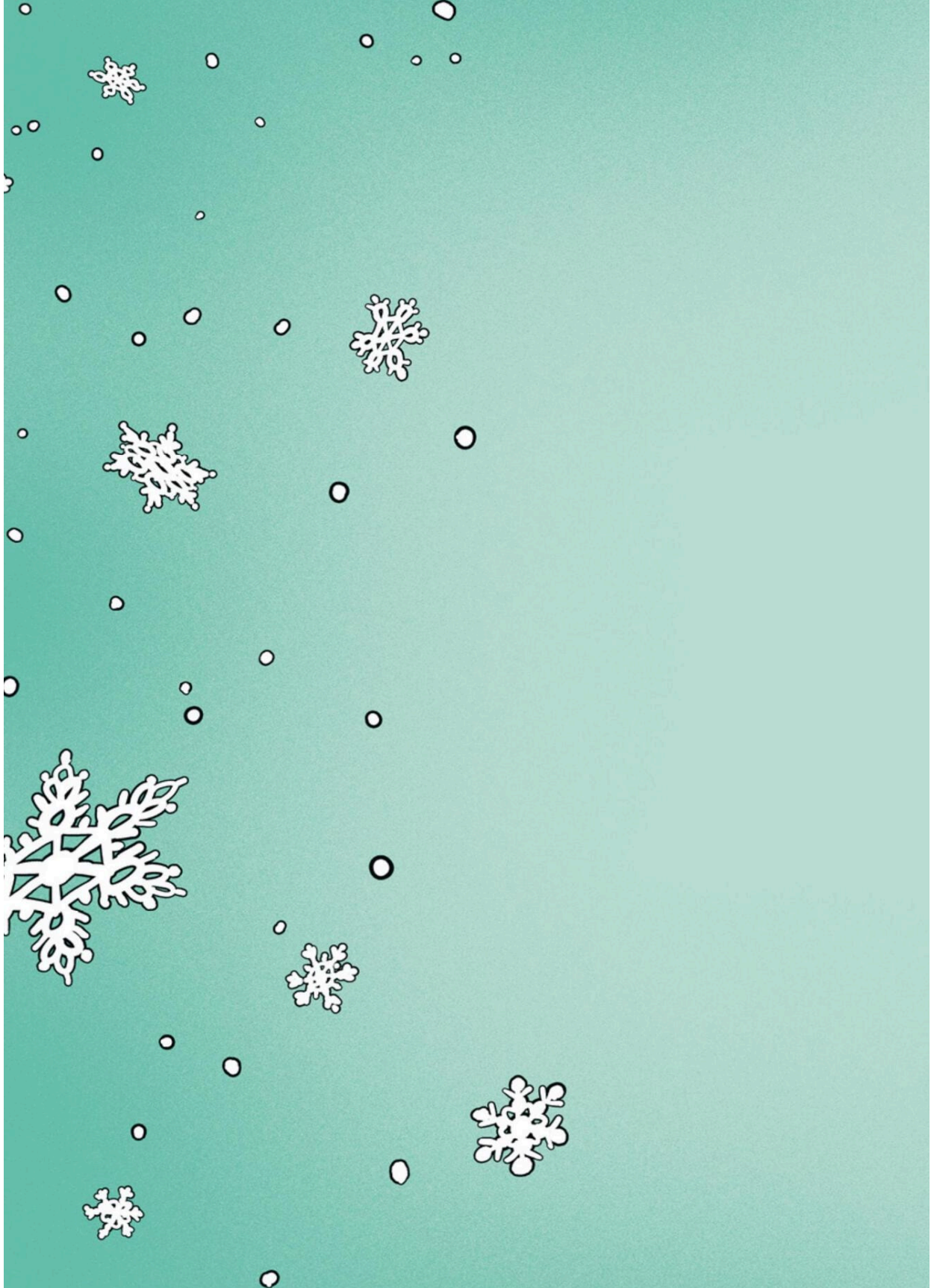








Chapter
4





Dear Per,

It's been a decade since my grandma died. And I still miss her.

But sometimes, when I forget just how deeply that hurt when I was little, I feel bad.

Do I miss her less now? Or do I just miss her less frequently?

It just doesn't seem like something I'm allowed to get over.

I don't think I can fully "get over it." But why do I feel guilty that it's easier than it used to be?

I lost her when she'd been around for one hundred percent of my life. Devastating.

Now that I'm seventeen, she's this foggy presence that only occupied forty percent of my lifetime so far. Maybe even less, if I can't remember stuff from before I was three.

Maybe it's good that things get easier.



And then... sometimes the memory of her hugging me tight hits so vividly that I feel my breath catching in my throat.

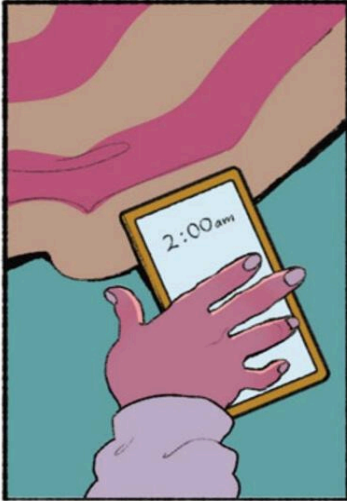
It almost feels like if I exhaled, even a little bit, a dam would break, and I'd be seven years old all over again.

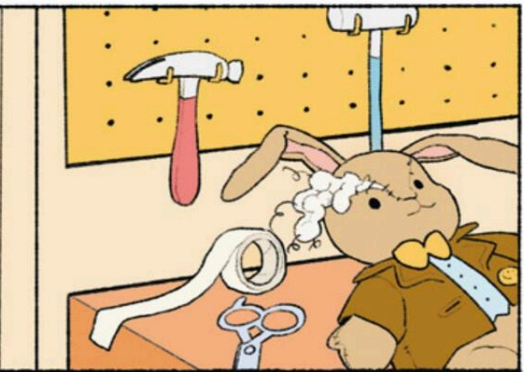
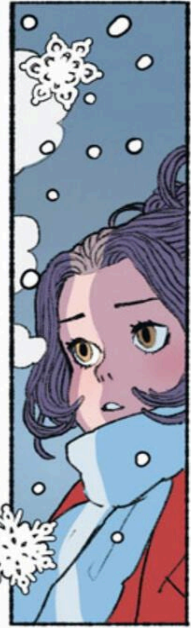


It's just too much.

And I freeze up.









Mr. Nielsen?



Hello, Jelly!
You're up
awfully late.
Shouldn't you
be asleep?



I'm an
overachieving
teenager. My
sleep schedule
is shot to hell.

What is all
this?

Retirement just
didn't sit a hundred
percent right with
me, and I found a
few things to do.



This is
amazing.
Have you
always done
this?

Stayed up
past my
bedtime to
play with
teddy bears
and dolls?

Haha,
sure.



Yes. I've always loved fixing old knickknacks. Toys, especially.

There's just something about a well-worn bit of fabric and stuffing that's so special.

Loved to pieces, memories in every scuff and scratch and tear.



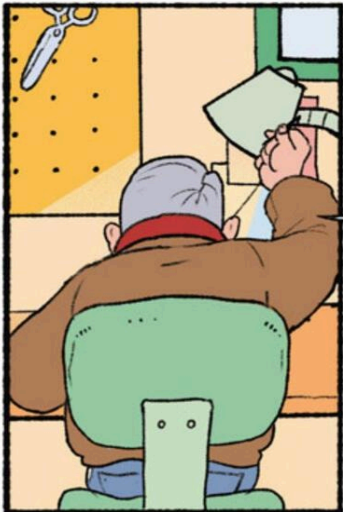
That's really lovely.



I fixed things for work, too, but this feels so different.

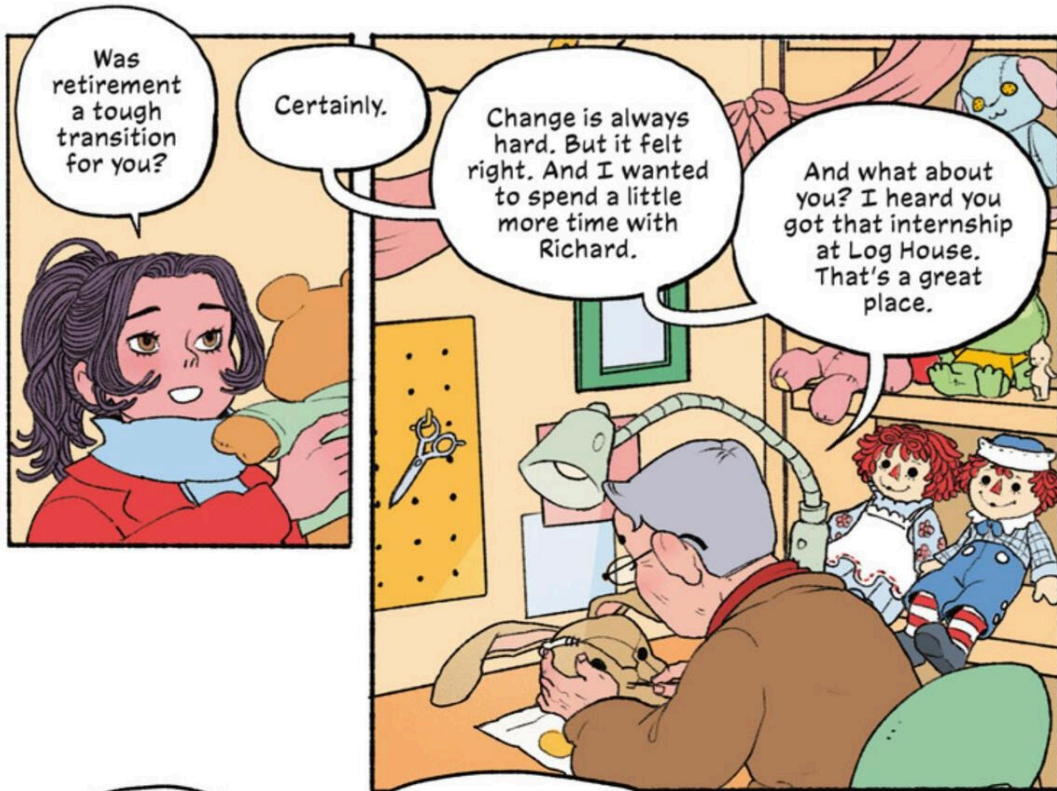


This is smaller.



Feels like I'm finally doing it just for me.



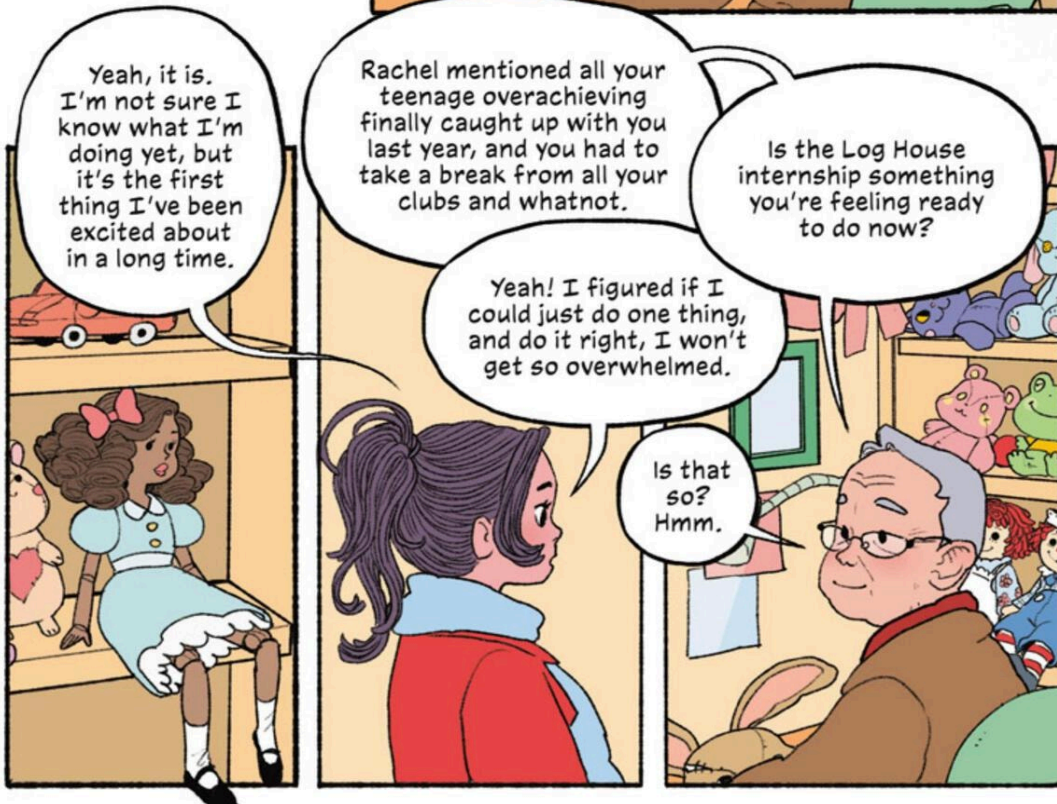


Was retirement a tough transition for you?

Certainly.

Change is always hard. But it felt right. And I wanted to spend a little more time with Richard.

And what about you? I heard you got that internship at Log House. That's a great place.



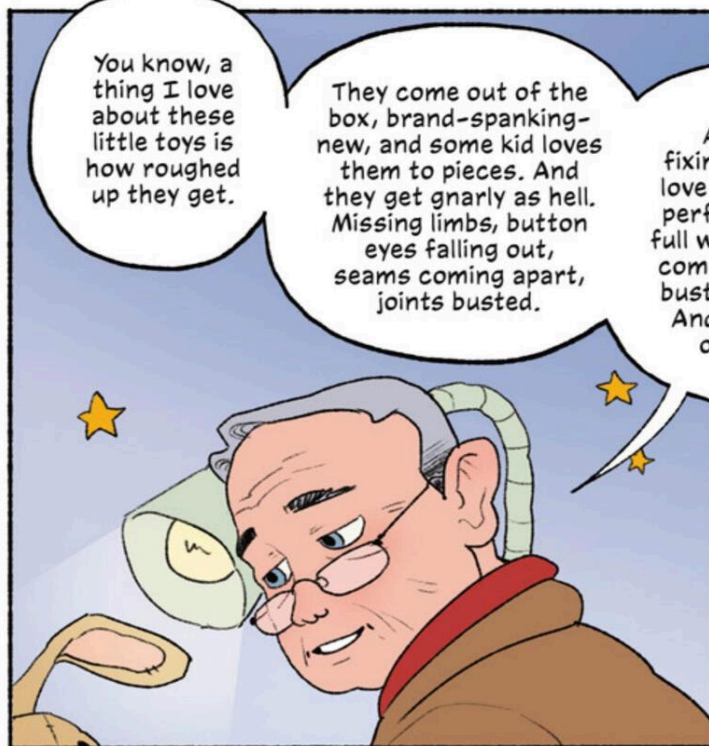
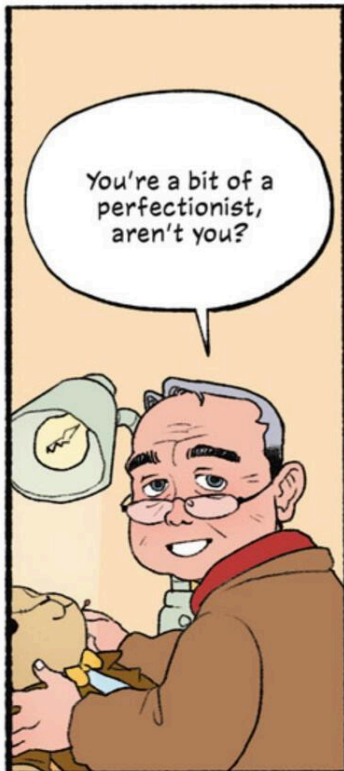
Yeah, it is. I'm not sure I know what I'm doing yet, but it's the first thing I've been excited about in a long time.

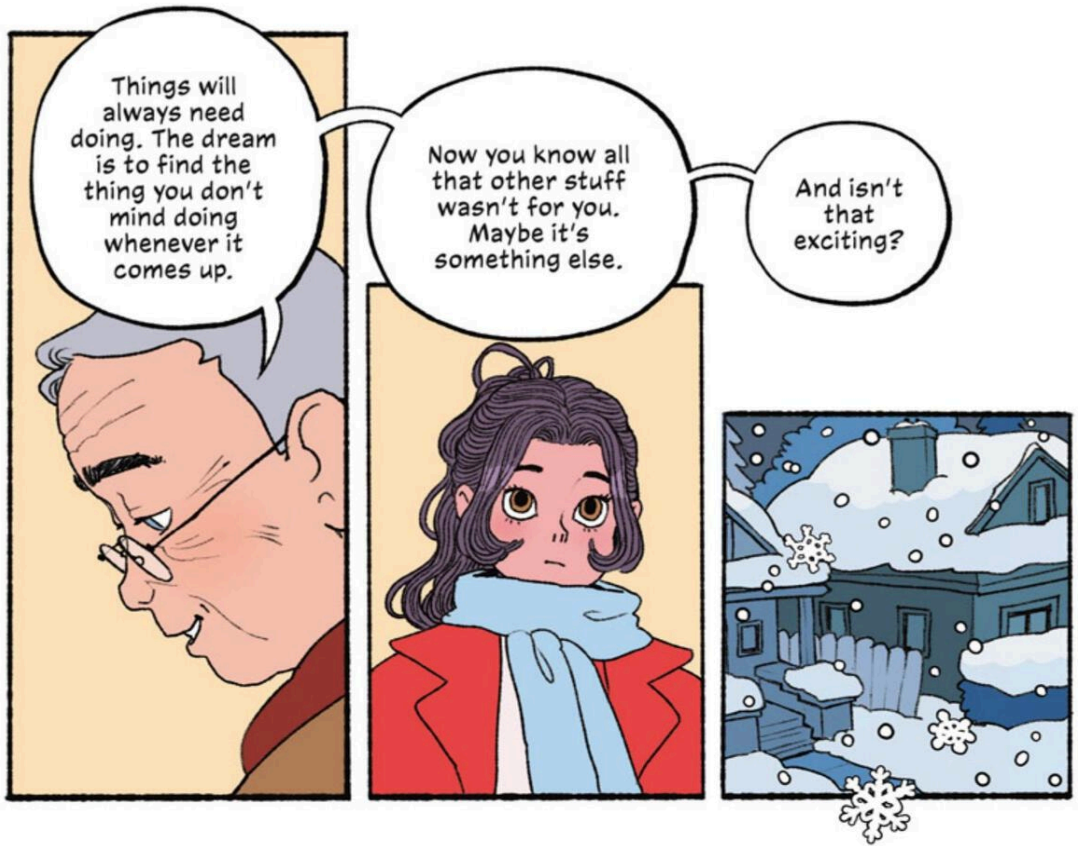
Rachel mentioned all your teenage overachieving finally caught up with you last year, and you had to take a break from all your clubs and whatnot.

Is the Log House internship something you're feeling ready to do now?

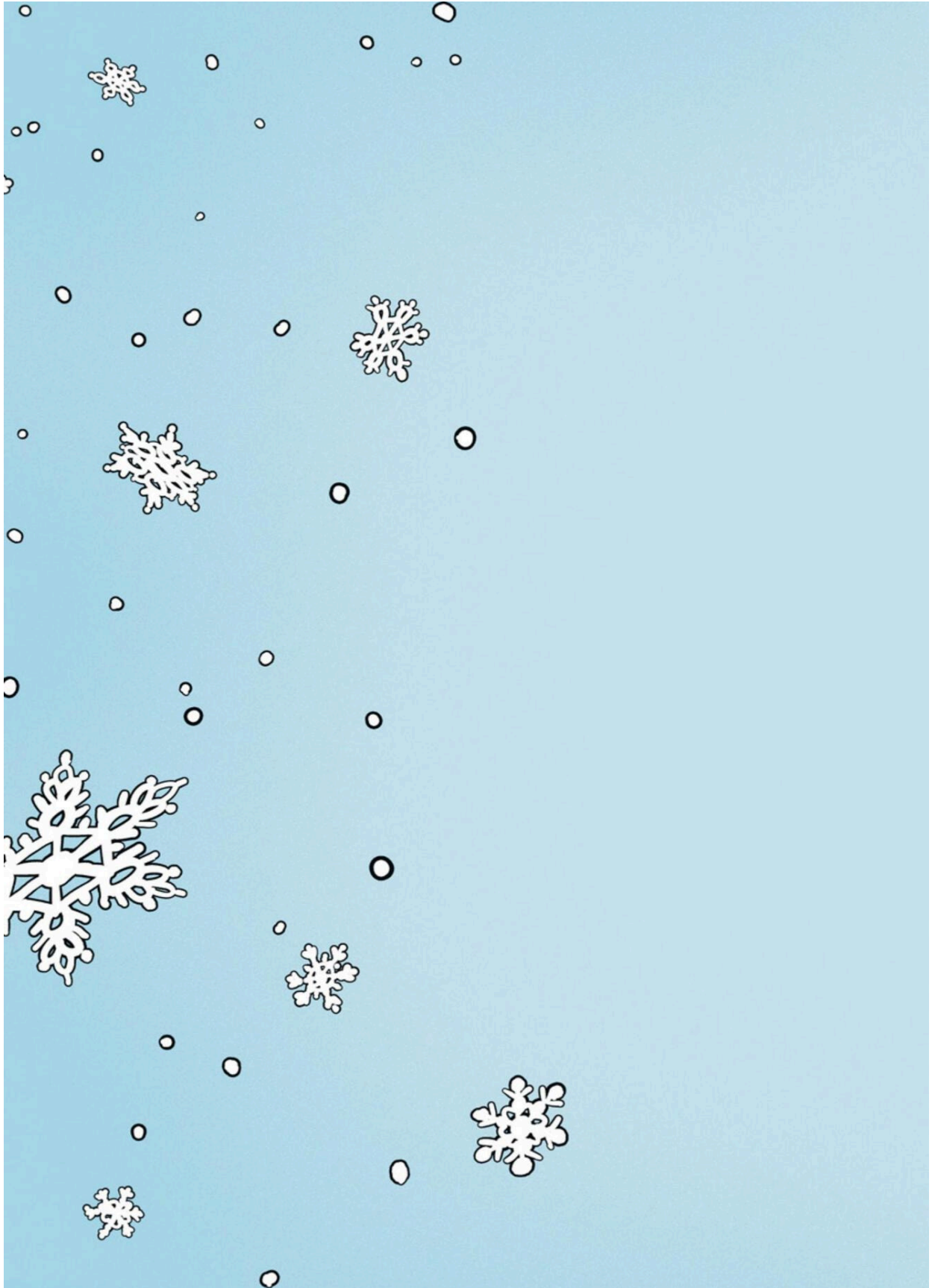
Yeah! I figured if I could just do one thing, and do it right, I won't get so overwhelmed.

Is that so? Hmm.











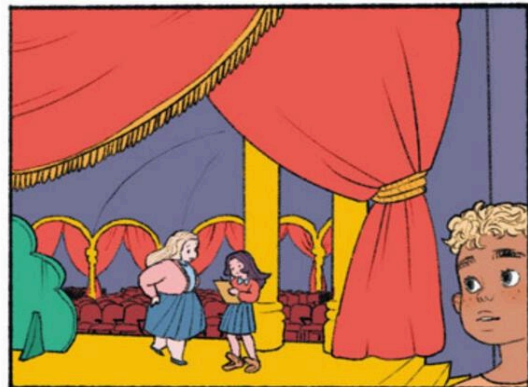
Dear Jellybean,

I'm sorry about your grandma. This sounds tough, and I want you to know in advance that I give you my full support because I'm about to say something that might come off a little bit harsh.



You strike me as someone who overthinks. You feel things in a lot of layers, like you said. You're sad about your grandma. You're sad that you're no longer sad enough about your grandma. You feel guilty that your grandma is no longer such a big part of your life since she passed. I can't help but think that you've put a lot of distance between yourself and your feelings in order to make those observations.

I don't know. Maybe I'm totally talking out of my ass, but I think you're trying to tackle an emotional problem with logic, right? You even went and did the math—she was in a hundred percent of your life, and now she's only in forty percent, and you wonder what that means for you as those numbers get smaller and smaller over the years.



Maybe you just feel what you feel when you feel it, no numbers about it. There are a lot of things about yourself that you can't know. I bet that seems scary and out of control, but the mystery invites curiosity, doesn't it? You might surprise yourself! And I know you're not opposed to a little mystery.

That's probably why we're friends.

Per, the Bear Prince

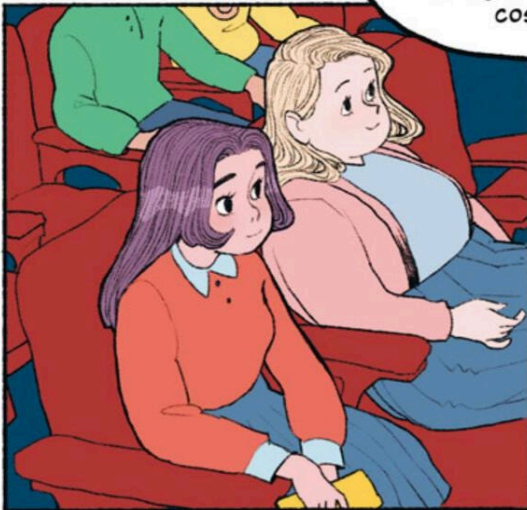
P.S. Please say hello. I'm coming to visit today.

Attention, everyone!

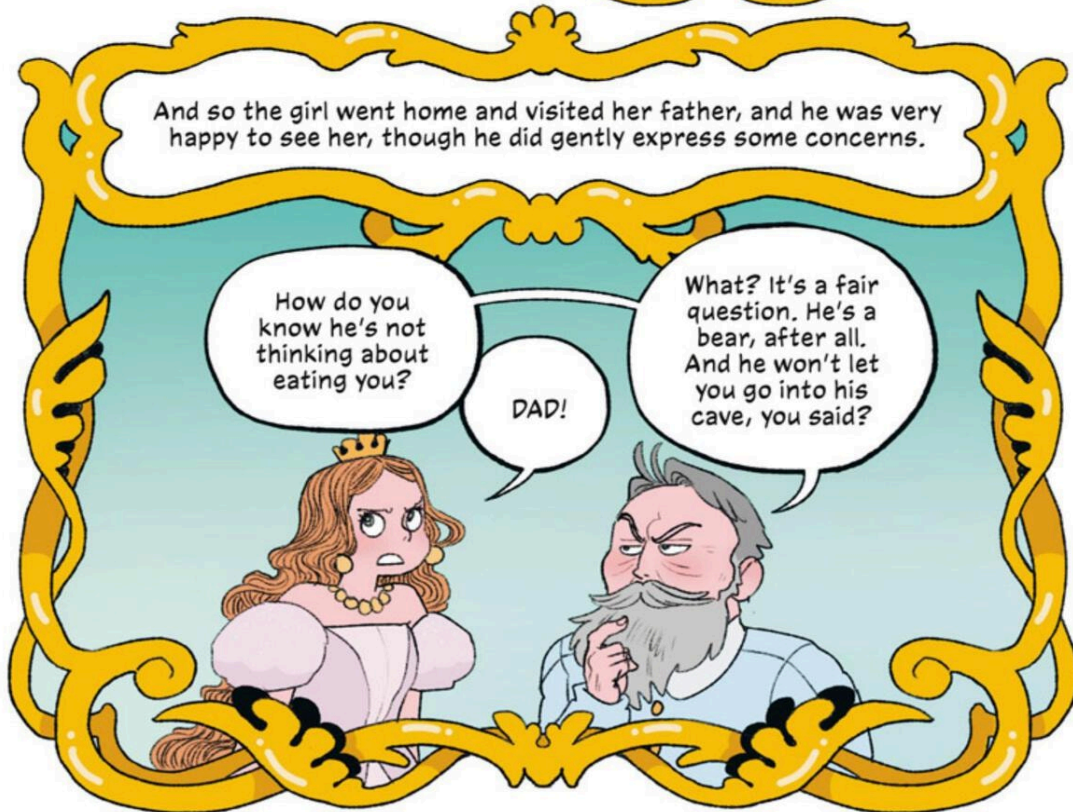
Interns, artists, tech folks! I'd like to introduce you to the founder of the Log House Theater, Mrs. Phoebe Jorgensen.

Thank you, Clarissa, for that introduction. Hello to all of you, my lovely theater cohort.

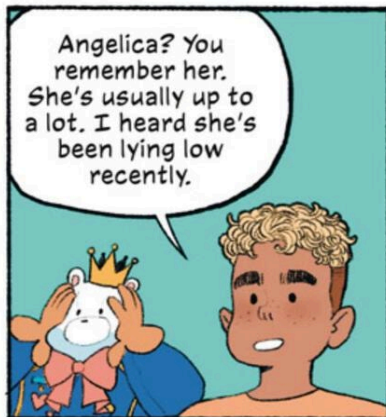
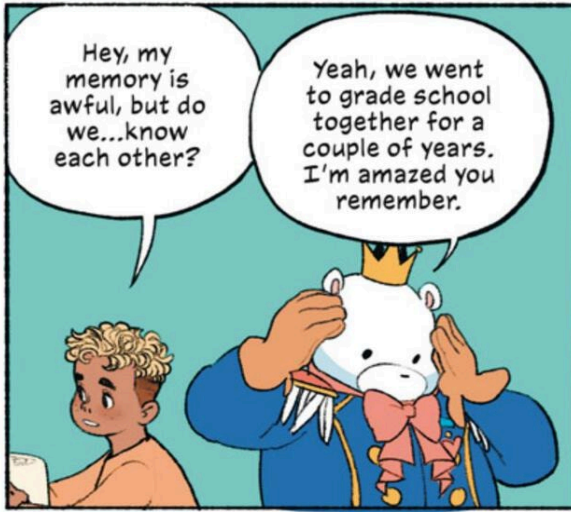
As I'm sure you know, my late husband and I started this little theater years ago. This performance will mark the fortieth anniversary of the Log House Theater. And for that, we've decided to bring out the classic costumes.

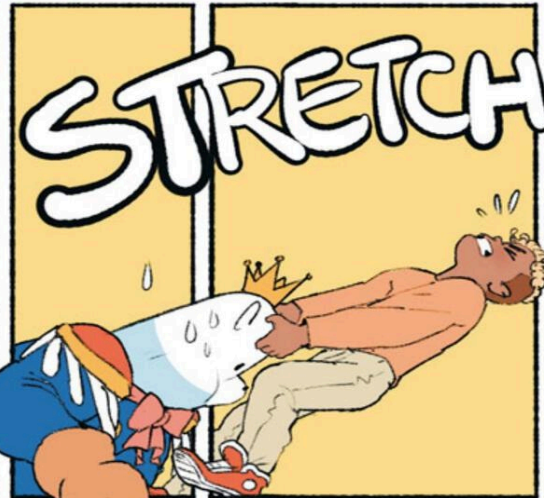
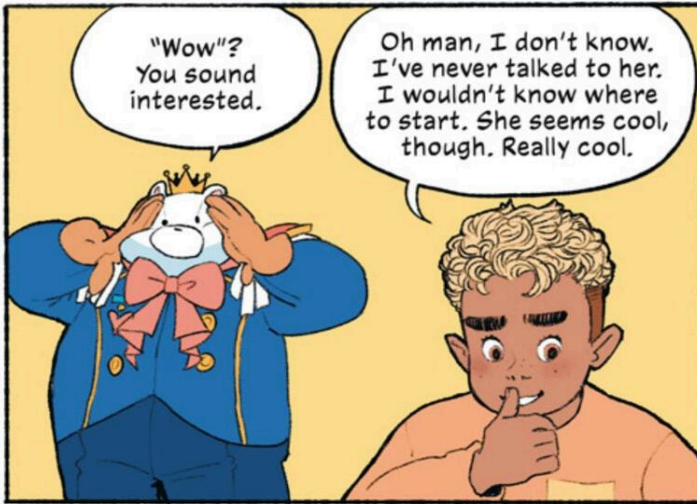


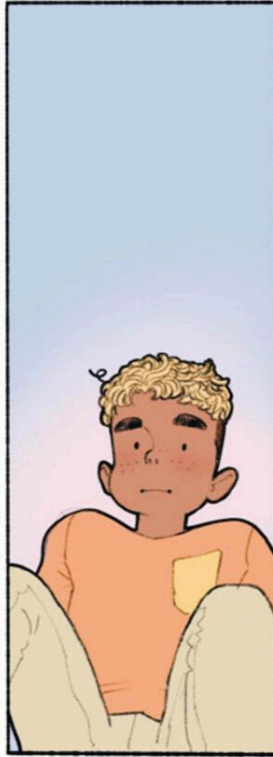


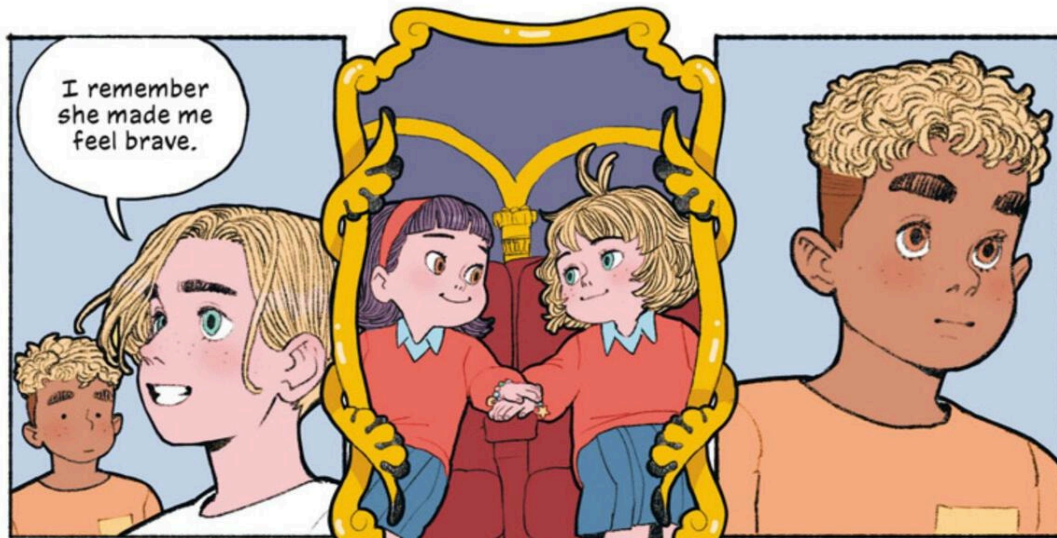












I remember she made me feel brave.



My parents finalized their divorce one summer.

I moved out west with my mom.



I guess I'll be seeing ya.

I'll write to you! I'll write you letters every day.

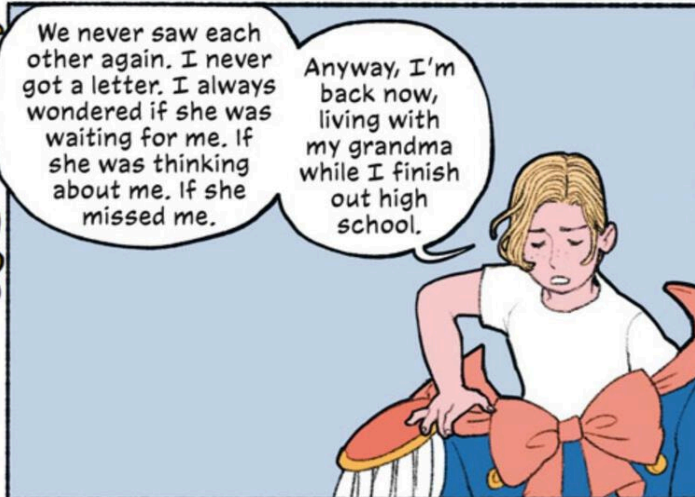


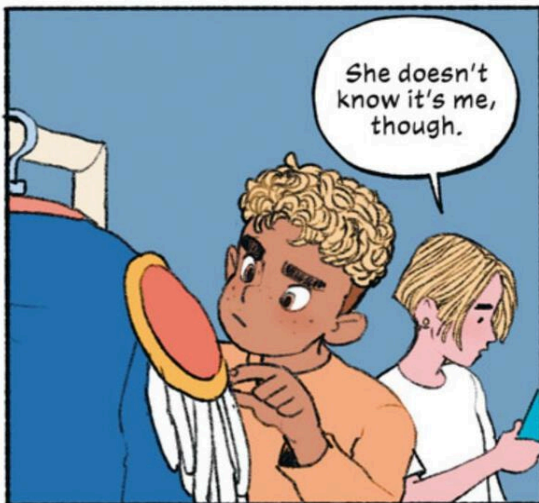
And I'll send them. And it'll be like we're still friends, even if we're really far away.

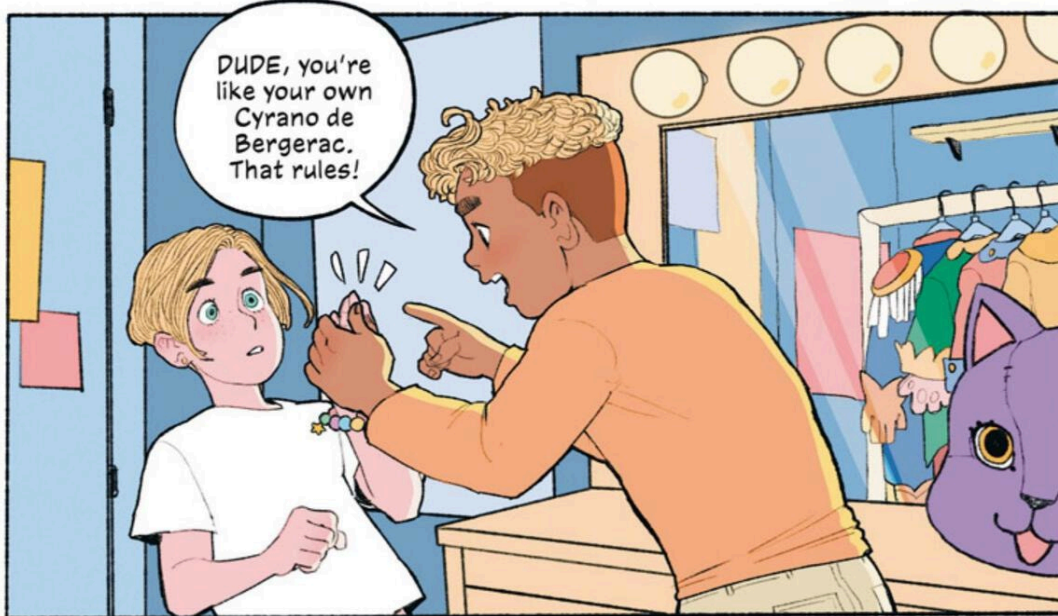
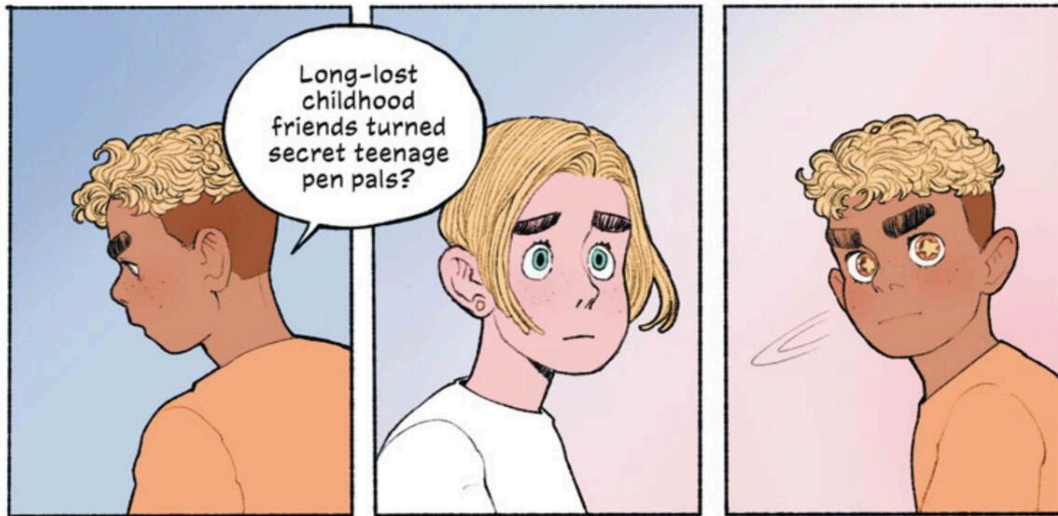


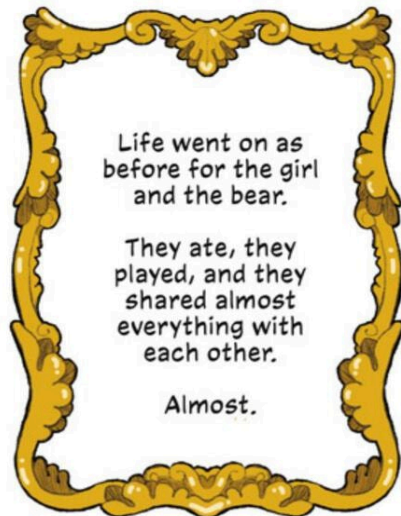
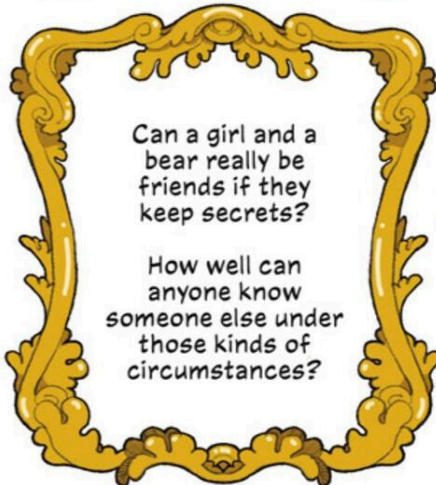
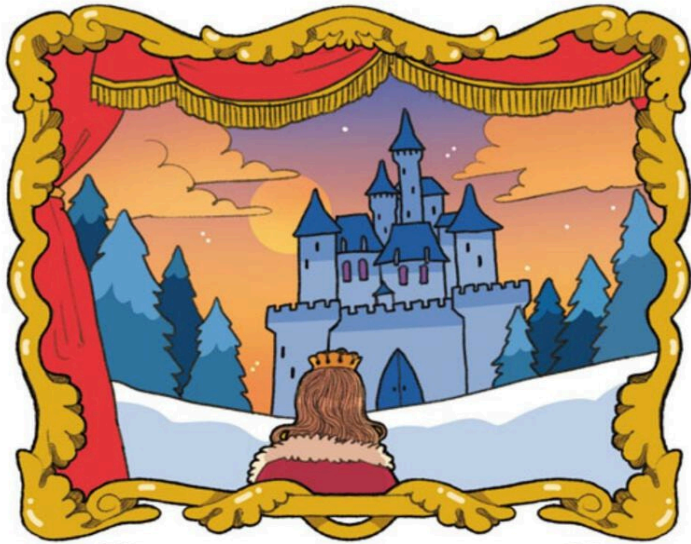
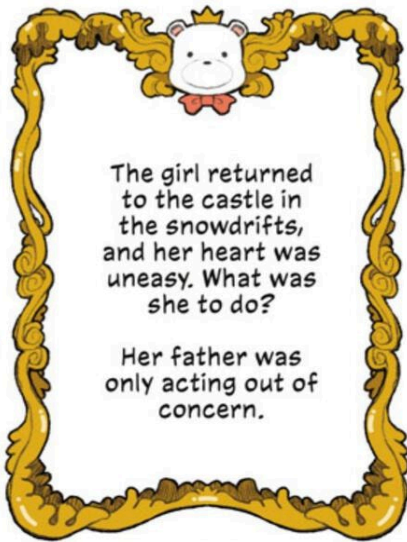
We never saw each other again. I never got a letter. I always wondered if she was thinking about me. If she missed me.

Anyway, I'm back now, living with my grandma while I finish out high school.







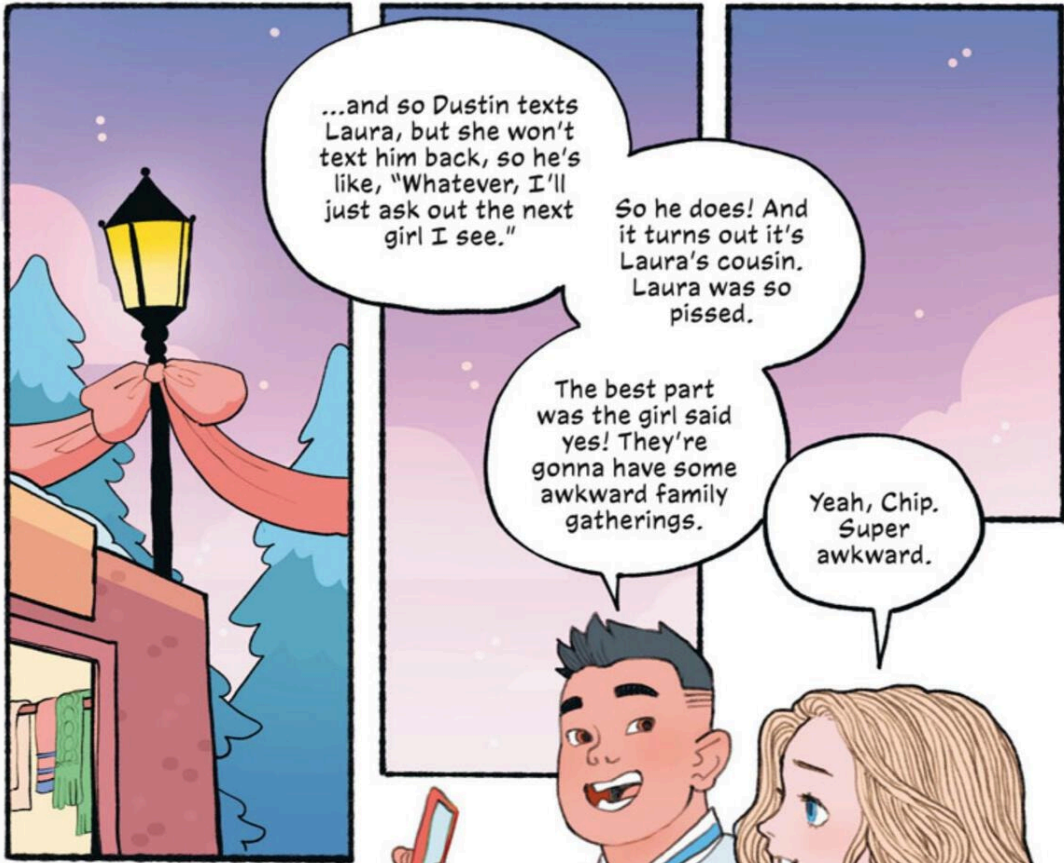






Chapter
6





...and so Dustin texts Laura, but she won't text him back, so he's like, "Whatever, I'll just ask out the next girl I see."

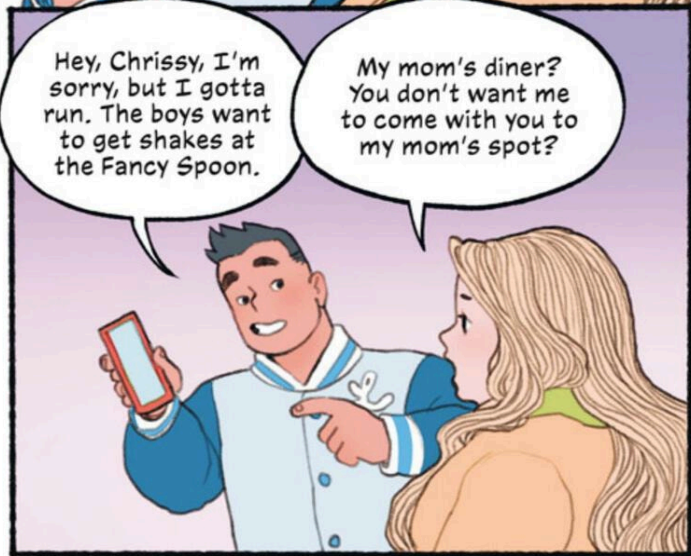
So he does! And it turns out it's Laura's cousin. Laura was so pissed.

The best part was the girl said yes! They're gonna have some awkward family gatherings.

Yeah, Chip. Super awkward.

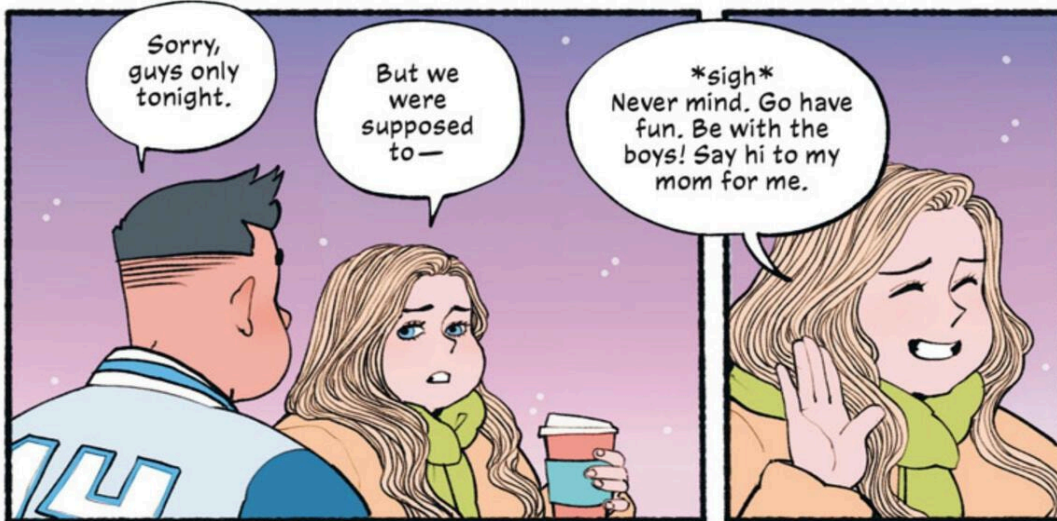


Right? Right?? Man, it was so funny.



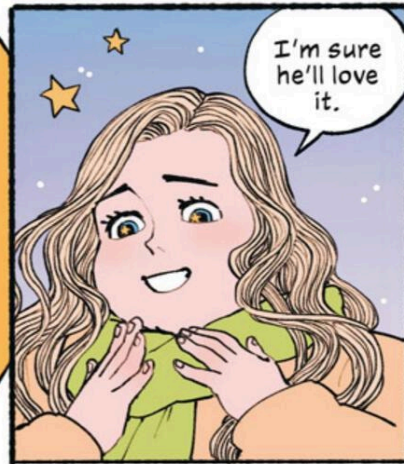
Hey, Chrissy, I'm sorry, but I gotta run. The boys want to get shakes at the Fancy Spoon.

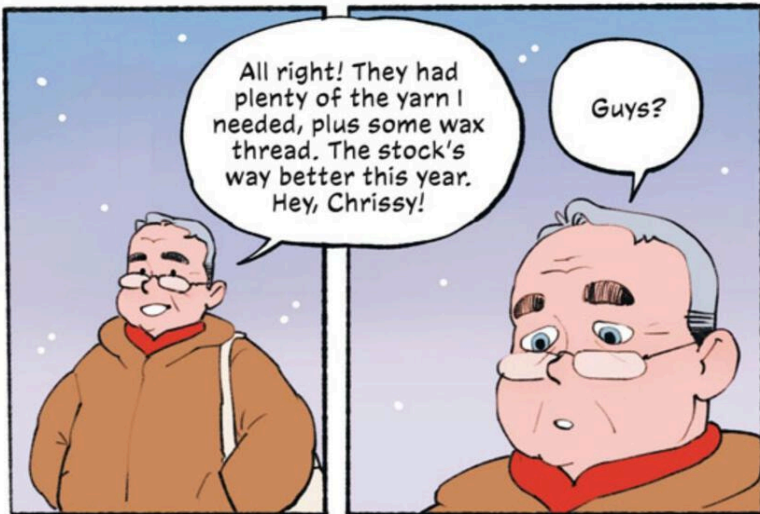
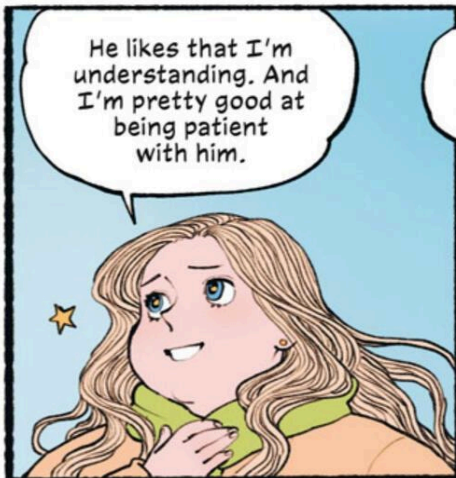
My mom's diner? You don't want me to come with you to my mom's spot?





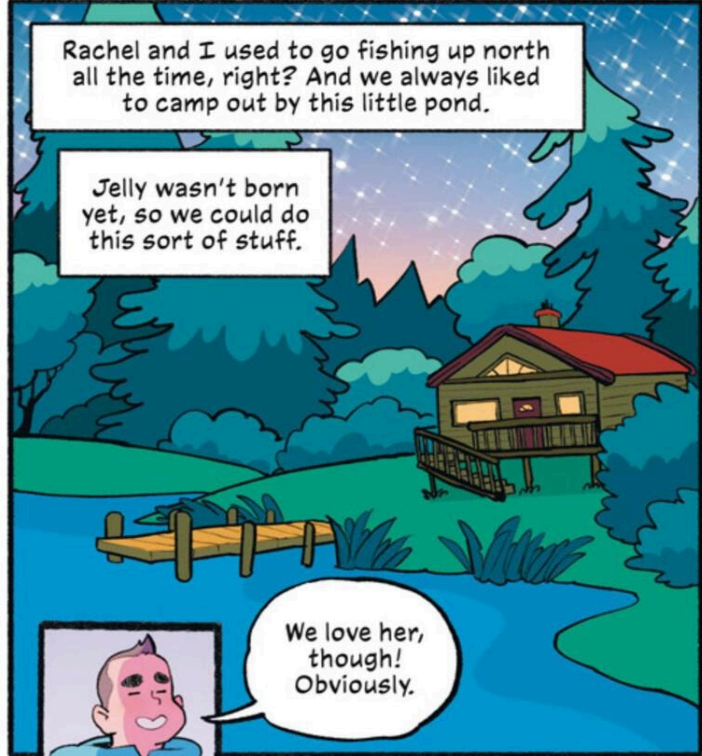
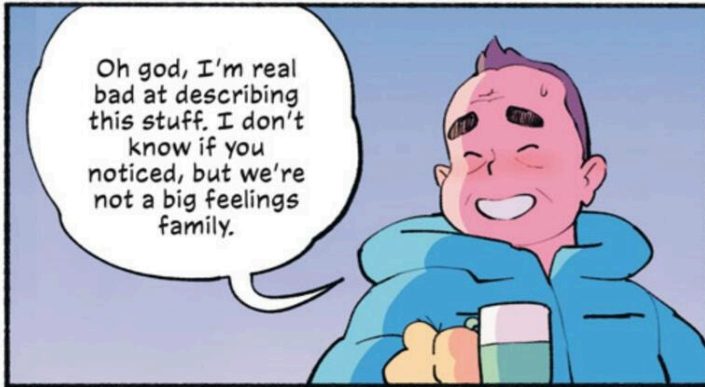


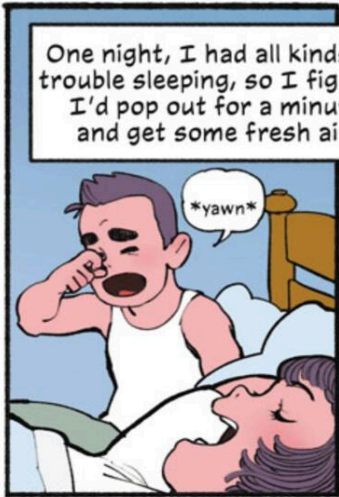












One night, I had all kinds of trouble sleeping, so I figured I'd pop out for a minute and get some fresh air.



Rachel basically never had trouble sleeping.



Anyway, there I was, under the stars, and I look up and there's this big, beautiful moon. Looked like a damn pearl just floating in the sky.



Neat!

And then I saw the moon reflected on the water.



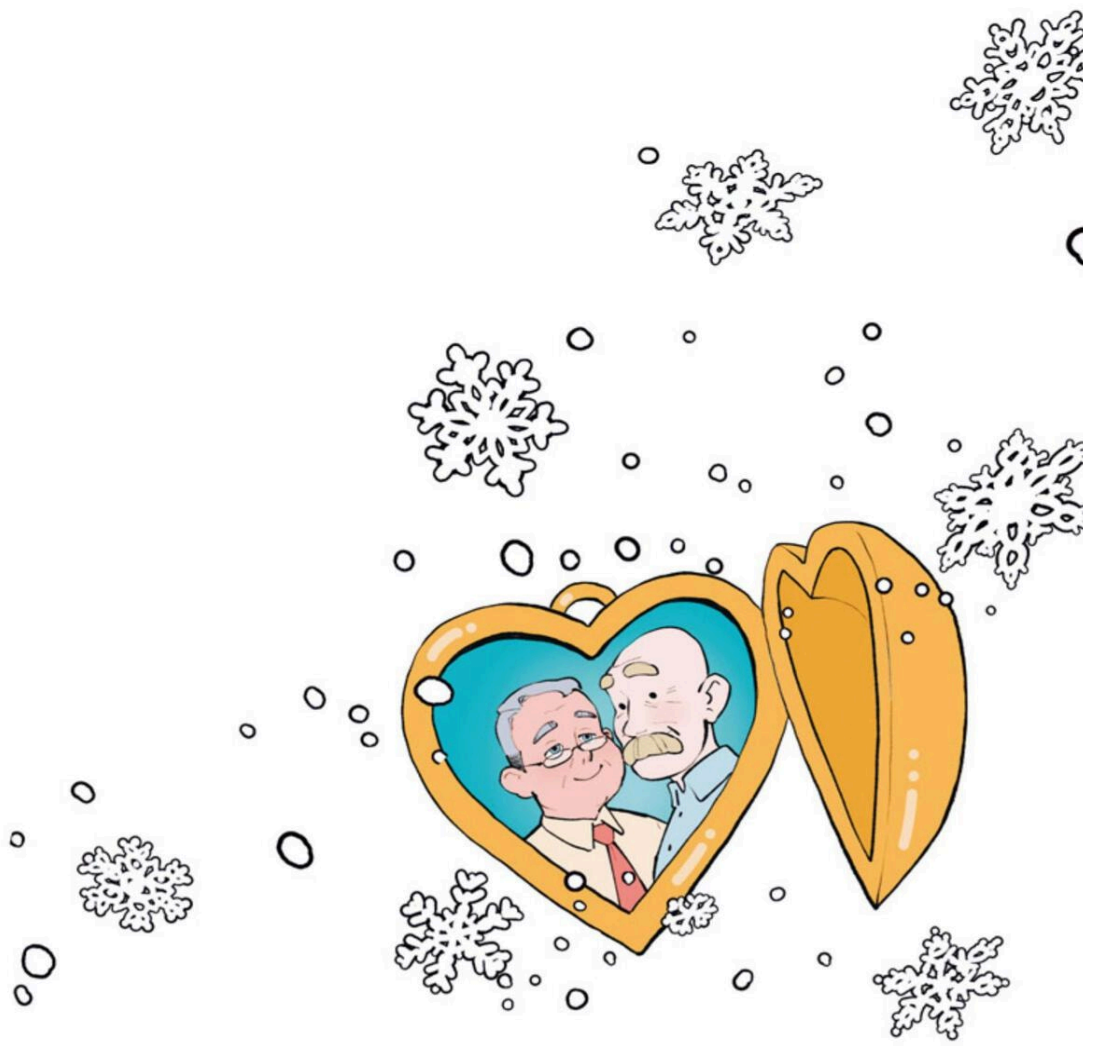
And the little lake surface was just trembling and rippling, like they do. Not a perfect reflection, but... I dunno.

It seemed to me like the lake was trying its darndest to show the moon just how beautiful she was —

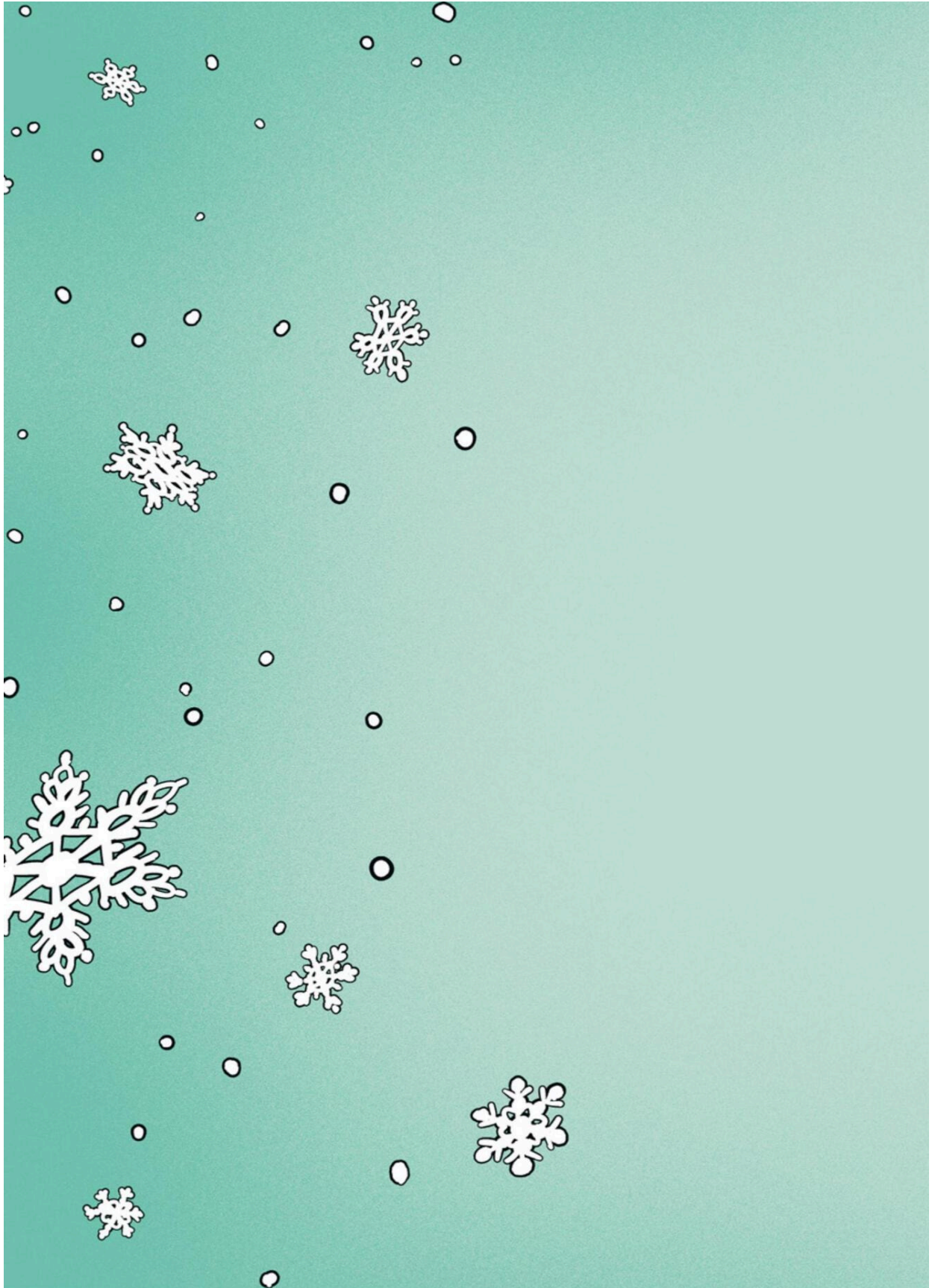
— in its own clumsy, messy way.













This year is going to be great for us. I can feel it.

I'm manifesting. It's gonna happen!



This is the year the Steamy Bun finally puts the Fancy Spoon in its place.

I can't wait to see the look on Jessica's smug face when she sees all our customers.



We've got streamers and lanterns, the whole shebang! I think it'll be really great.

And then maybe I can finally get that new stove for the Bun. Get real fancy. What do you think, Jelly?

Mm-hmm.



What?



Are you tired, hon? You seem a little out of it.

sigh Yeah. Just overwhelmed. Busy day.









Dear Per,

I don't think you were harsh. You were frank, and I like that. We've been talking long enough for you to know a little bit about me, and you're right. I overthink. Sometimes it helps keep my mind busy. Or at least it used to. I'm not sure anymore.

My rationale was always "Feelings can be hurt. Ideas can't be."

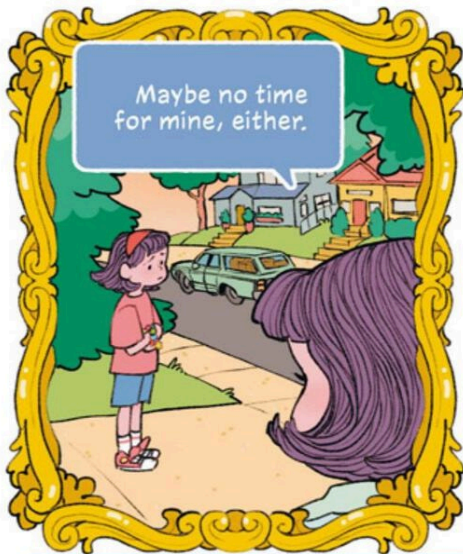
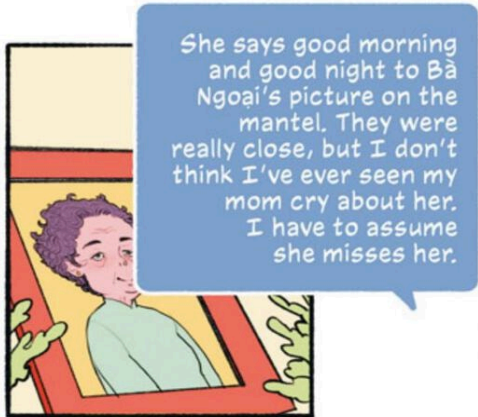
I thought that if I turned my feelings into ideas, I could pick them apart and figure them out.



I think my mom and I deal with our feelings similarly, which scares me. We like to be busy.

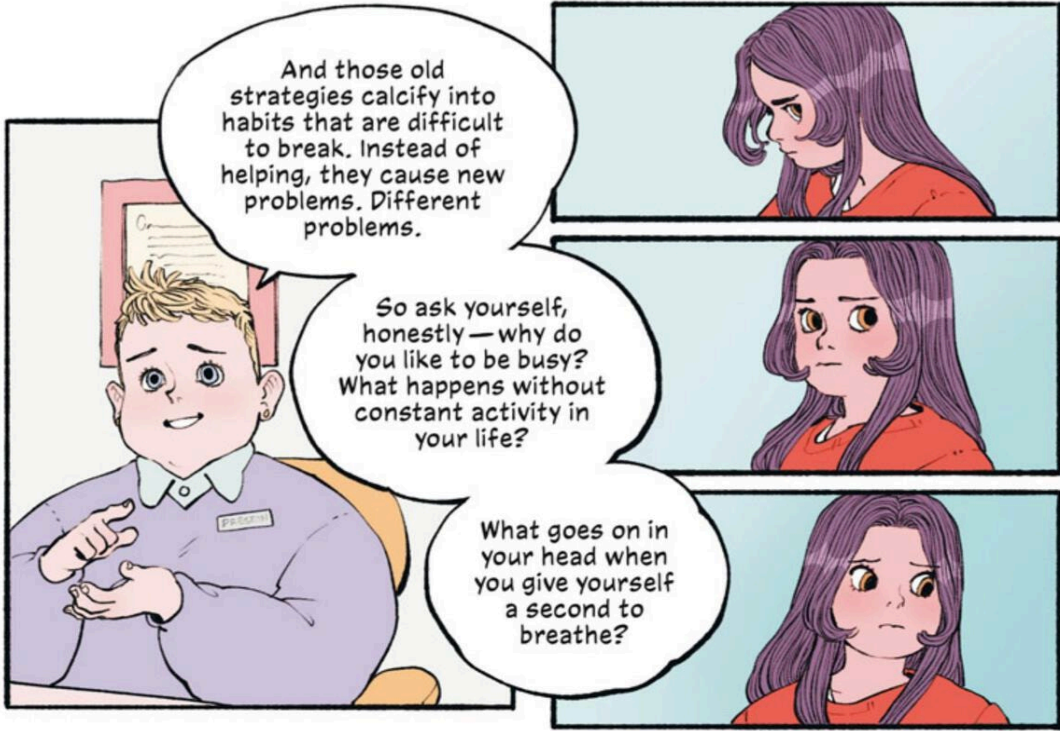
I think she's more used to it, though. She has her strategies.





I've been working out some of the messier aspects of this recently.









Anyway, Per, do you have any advice for me? Also, tell me about you. You're a busy bear these days. I'd love to know what that's like for a magical bear.

Your friend,
Jellybean





What do I really want?

I want...



I want to do something with you for Valentine's Day.

Nothing big or anything. I just want to hang out.

Let's go for a walk and maybe look at the moon.



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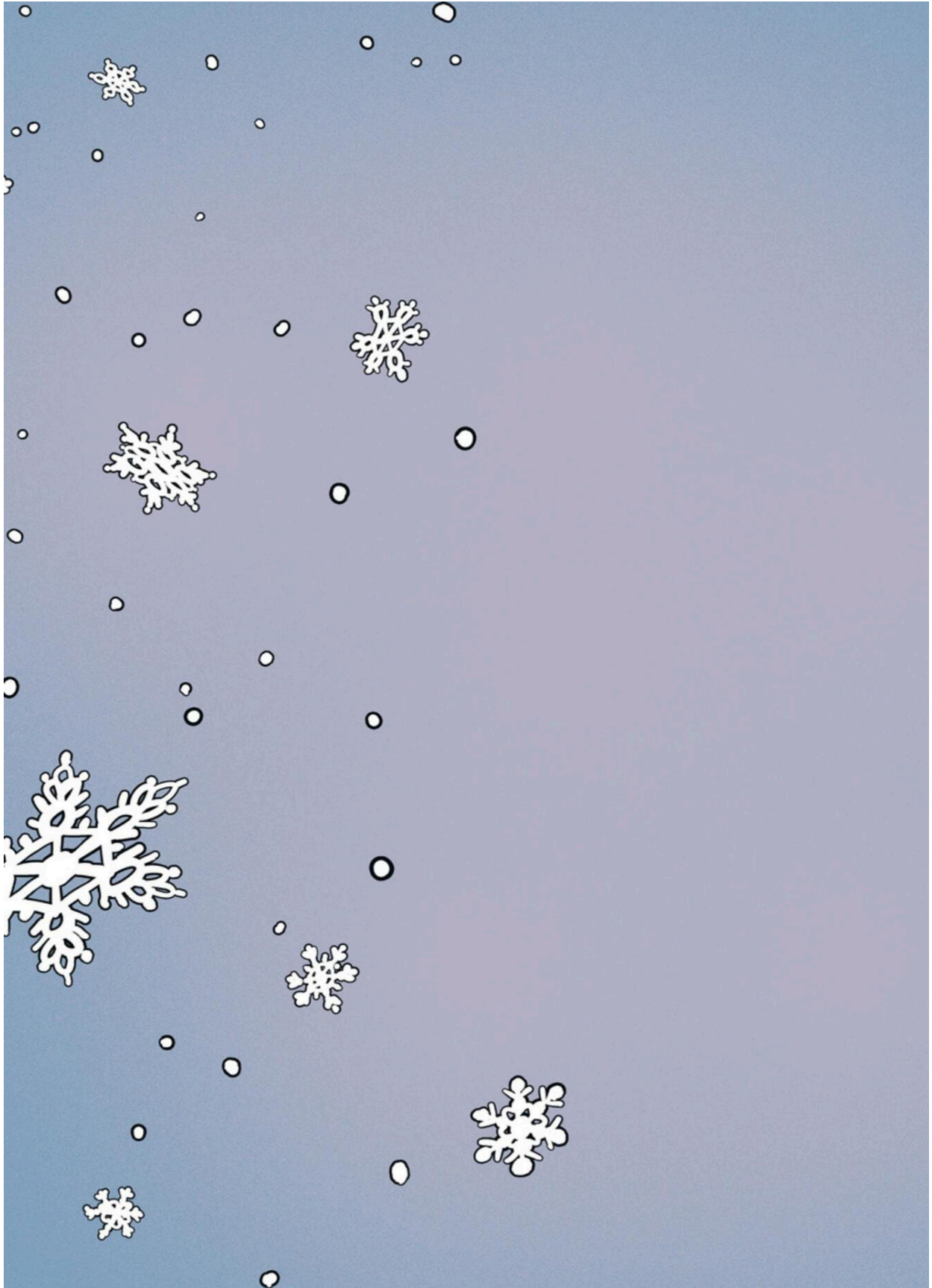


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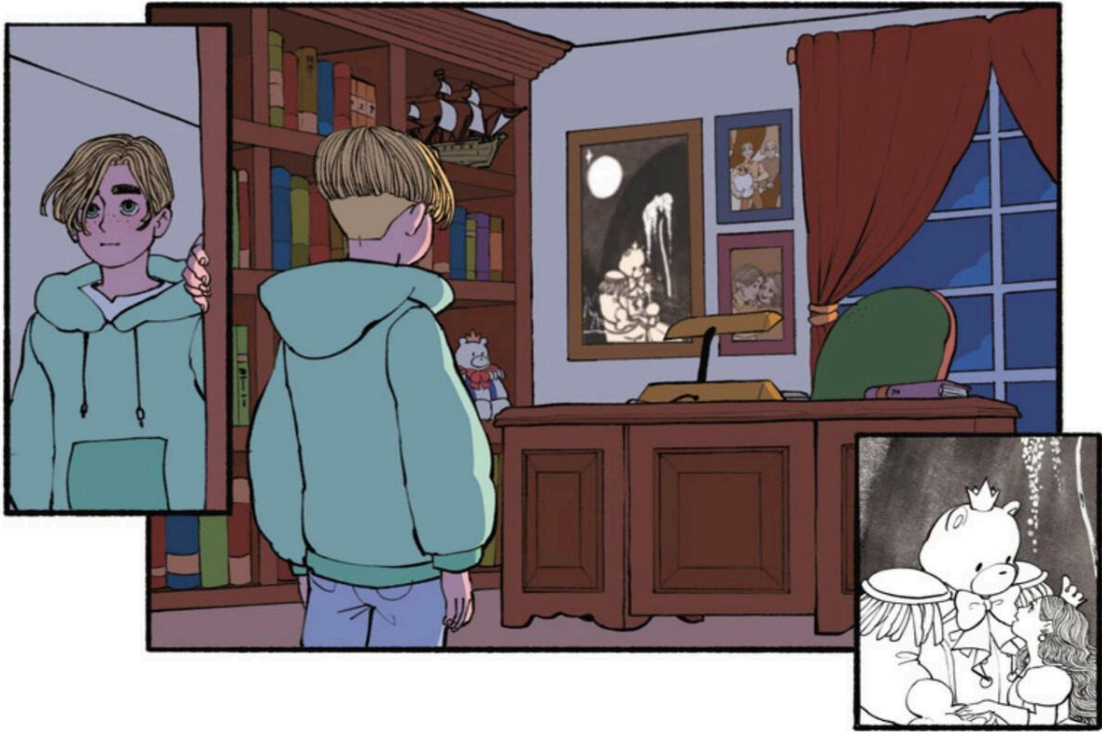


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8

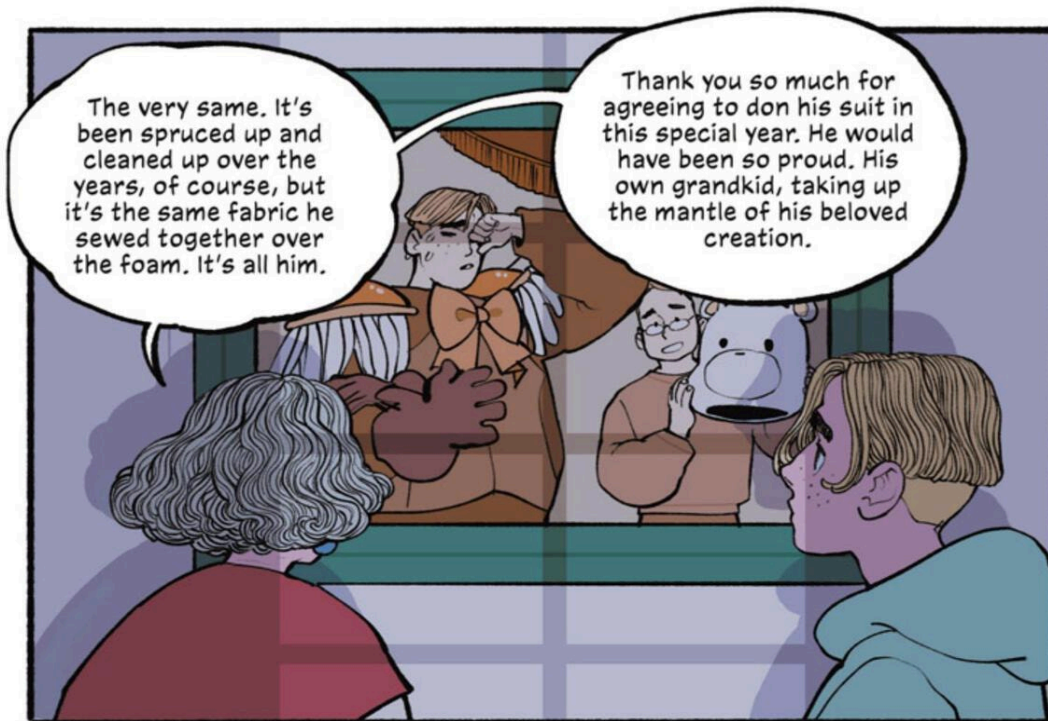






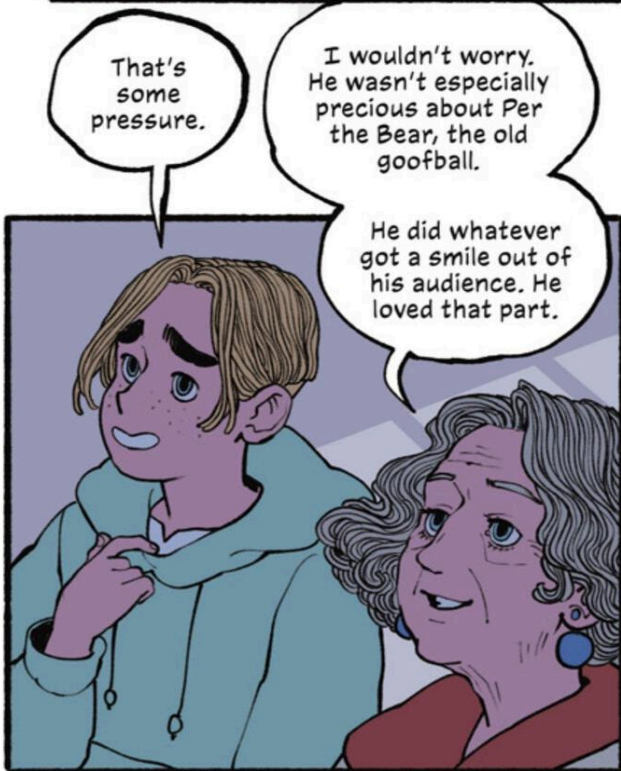






The very same. It's been spruced up and cleaned up over the years, of course, but it's the same fabric he sewed together over the foam. It's all him.

Thank you so much for agreeing to don his suit in this special year. He would have been so proud. His own grandkid, taking up the mantle of his beloved creation.



That's some pressure.

I wouldn't worry. He wasn't especially precious about Per the Bear, the old goofball.

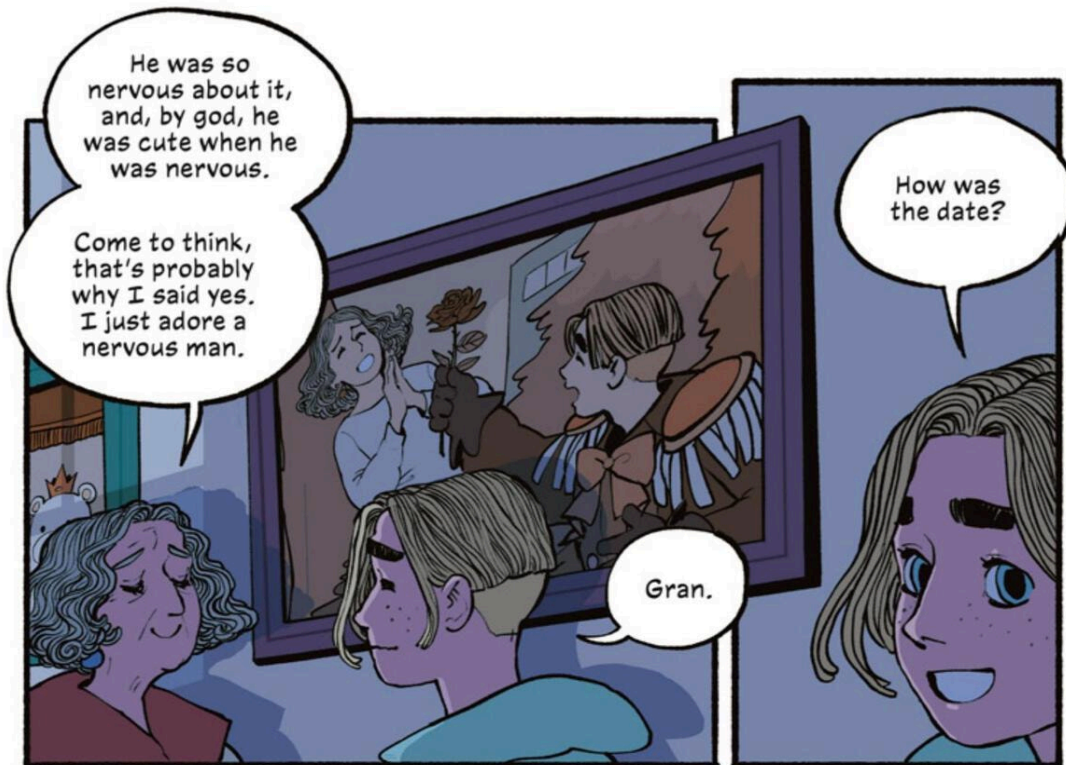
He did whatever got a smile out of his audience. He loved that part.



This was taken just as he asked me out.

He'd just taken off the bear head. He smelled terrible.

It *is* pretty toasty in that suit.





Dear Jellybean,

I can't pretend to know what you're going through, specifically, so I don't know that I have any advice for you. Just know that I'm here to listen to you if you ever need to work this stuff out.

You clearly loved your grandmother. I live with mine, actually. She's really cool. She used to be an actress, so she's got a flair for the dramatic. She's still pretty involved, locally. I help out where I can.



My granddad passed away when I was pretty young, but I remember him well. He was kind. He laughed a lot.

He believed in the power of a love letter. He wrote little notes to my grandma almost every week up until the day he died.

She keeps them all in his office. I don't think she can quite bring herself to open them anymore. She's left his office exactly as it was.

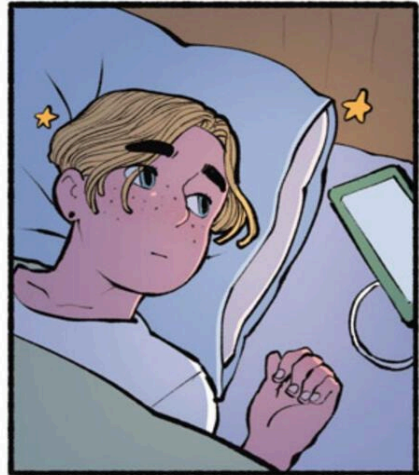


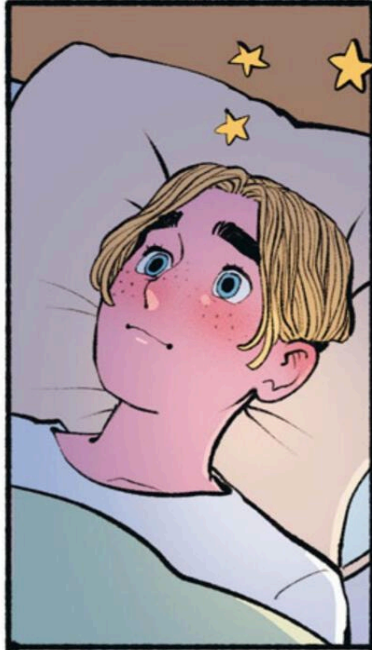
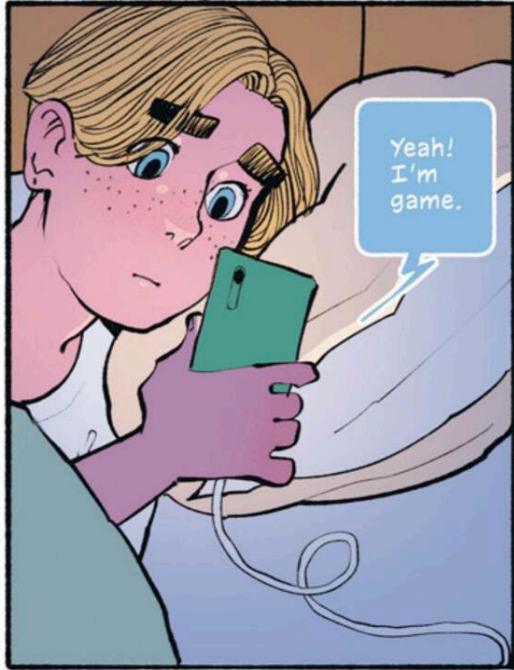
Even so, she tells me the only way to move past old memories is to make new ones.



And in the spirit of making new memories, I might have a crazy idea.

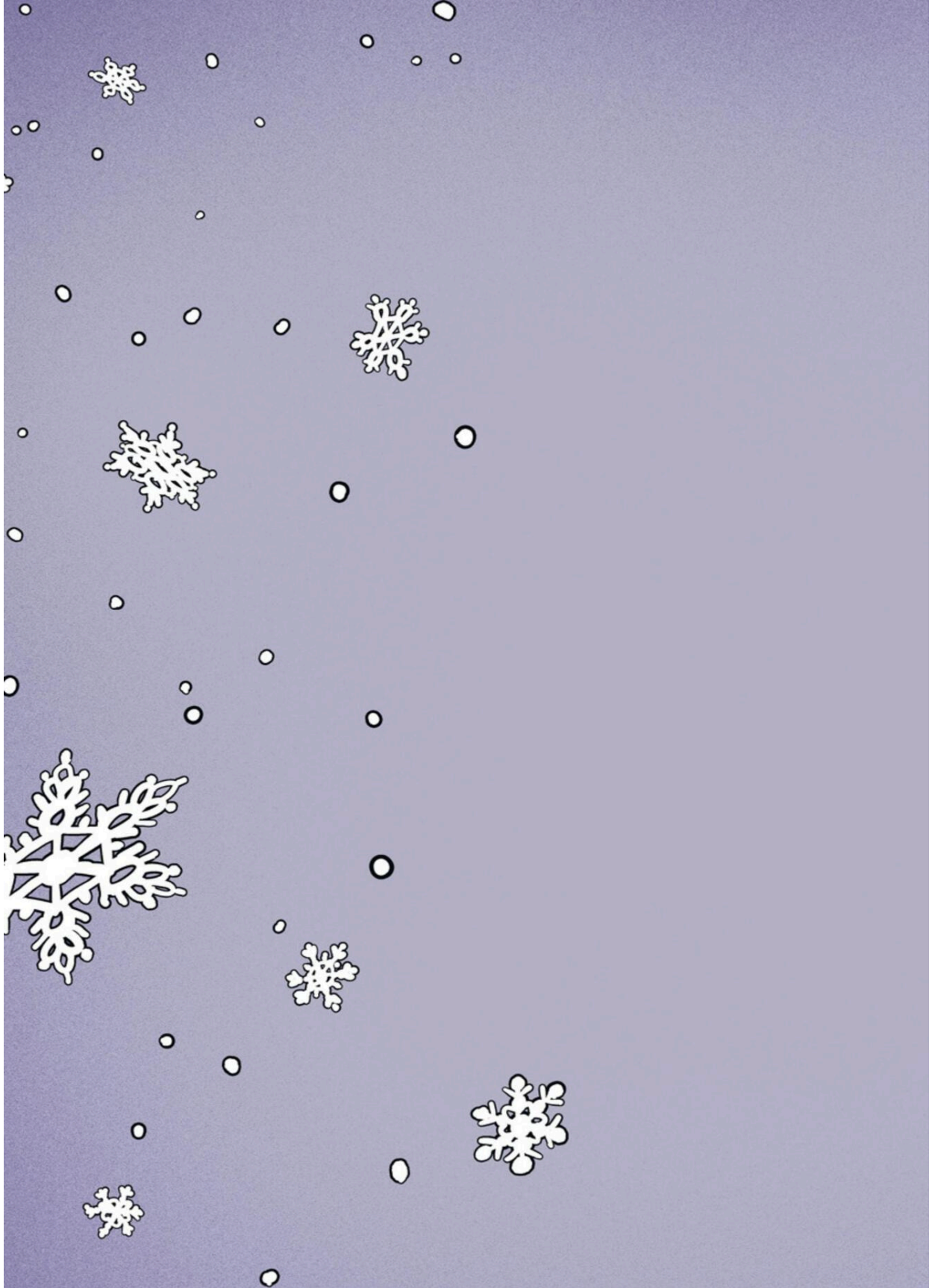


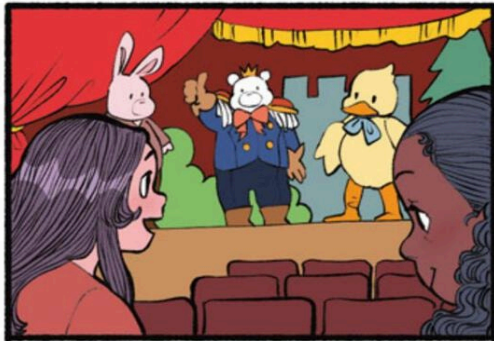
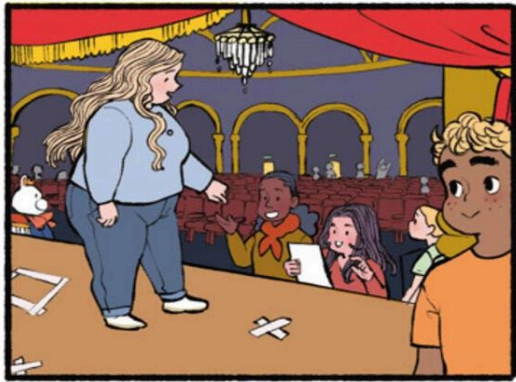


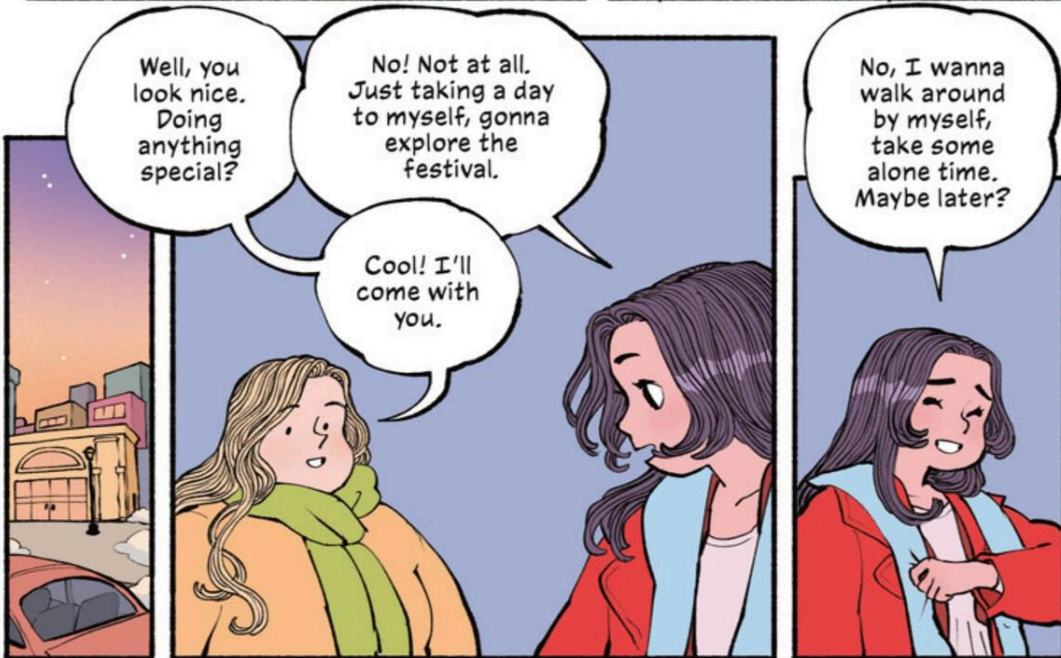




Chapter
9









It's just...
Chip's not
around much
recently. He
keeps ignoring
my texts.



I mean, it's only
been a couple
of days. I'm not
freaking out or
anything, but,
like—I feel...



What do you want
me to do? Want me
to text him? Man, he
sucks. I could text
his friends?



No, Jelly,
I just...

Because I'll do it.
Oh! We could TP
his car! It would
freeze to the
windows. It'd be a
total nightmare to
clean off.



Jelly,
you're not
listening.



Then
what?

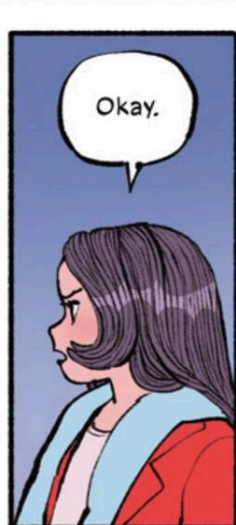


I'm not trying to do
anything about it yet. I
kinda feel like it's too soon
to bring it up. It could get
messy. I just felt a little
frustrated and thought my
friend might want to hear
about it.

Oh, is
that all?

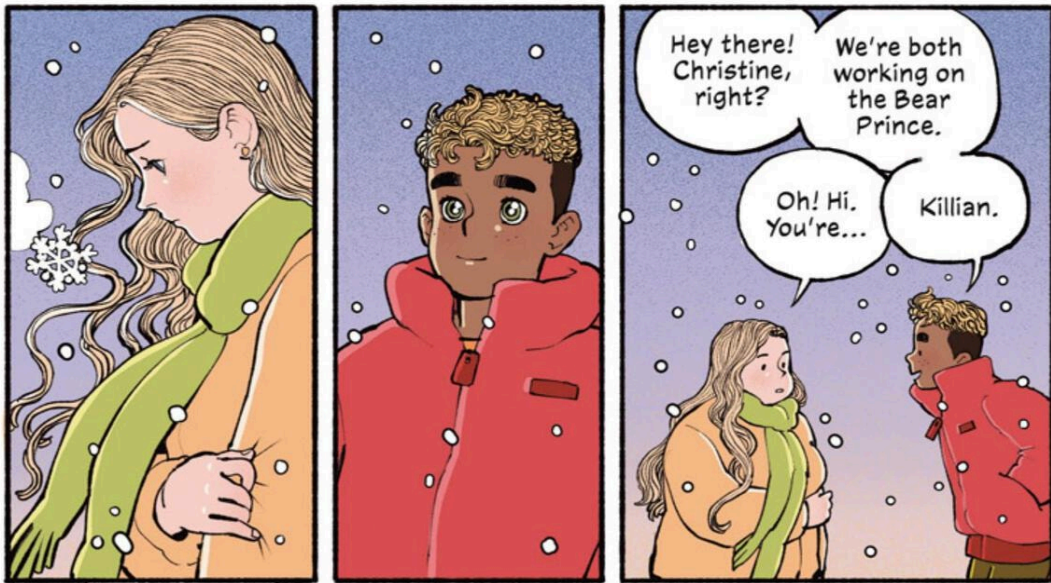


I guess
that's
all.



Okay.







So you actually work with the costumed actors, right?

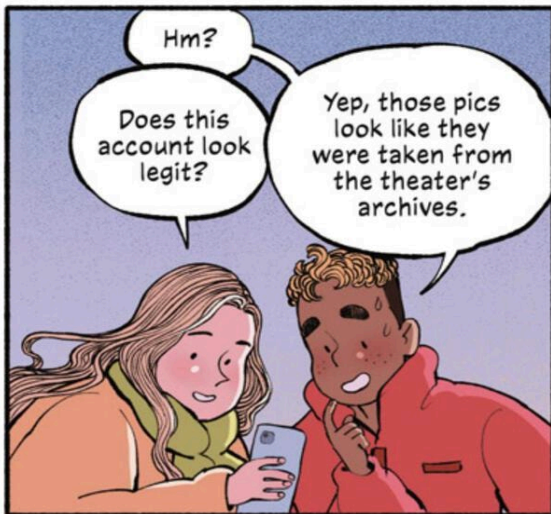
Is it weird to treat them like the characters when you know who wears the costumes? Don't you want to interact like normal?

Mrs. J says it breaks immersion. She wants all the actors to treat, say, Per the Bear as just another actor. At least until teardown. Which is kind of cool, I think.

So you know all the people inside the suits, right?

For sure. I'm not supposed to say, though.

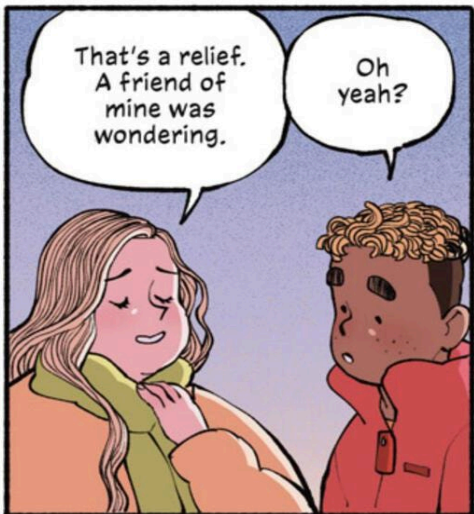
Yeah, all right. But can you maybe confirm something for me?



Hm?

Does this account look legit?

Yep, those pics look like they were taken from the theater's archives.



That's a relief. A friend of mine was wondering.

Oh yeah?



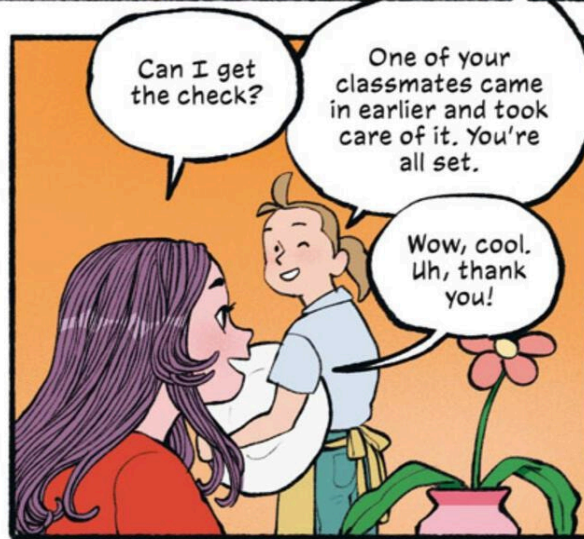
This paper-craft store is really special. I loved making little folded paper animals as a kid.

I used to come to this corner of the square with my grandparents all the time.



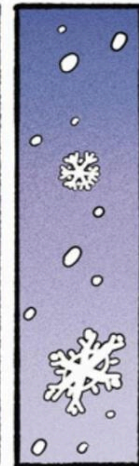
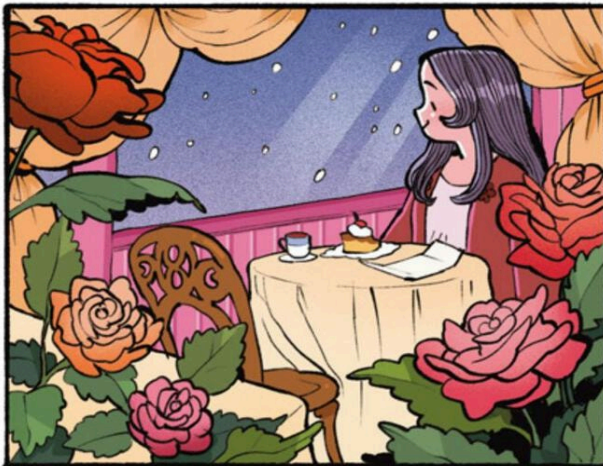








This little cake shop serves some of the best tea in town. I think. That's what my grandma says. I don't know tea that well, honestly. But I loved coming here with her as a kid.









Let's do it together next time.



Tiki Water is earth's finest water, don't you think —

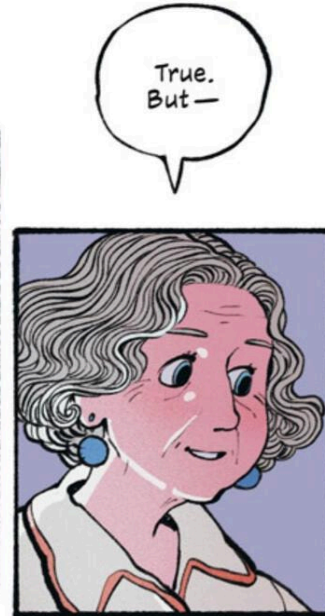
Gran, why don't you just pay for the subscription plan without the commercials?



I like the commercials. You can get up, get a snack, make a little sandwich, and come right back.



But you could do the same thing whenever you want if you just paused the show.

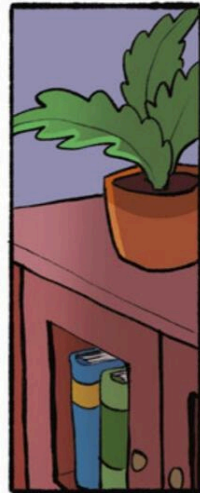


True. But —



You know, Gable, when you go off to college in a couple of years, I'll be alone again.

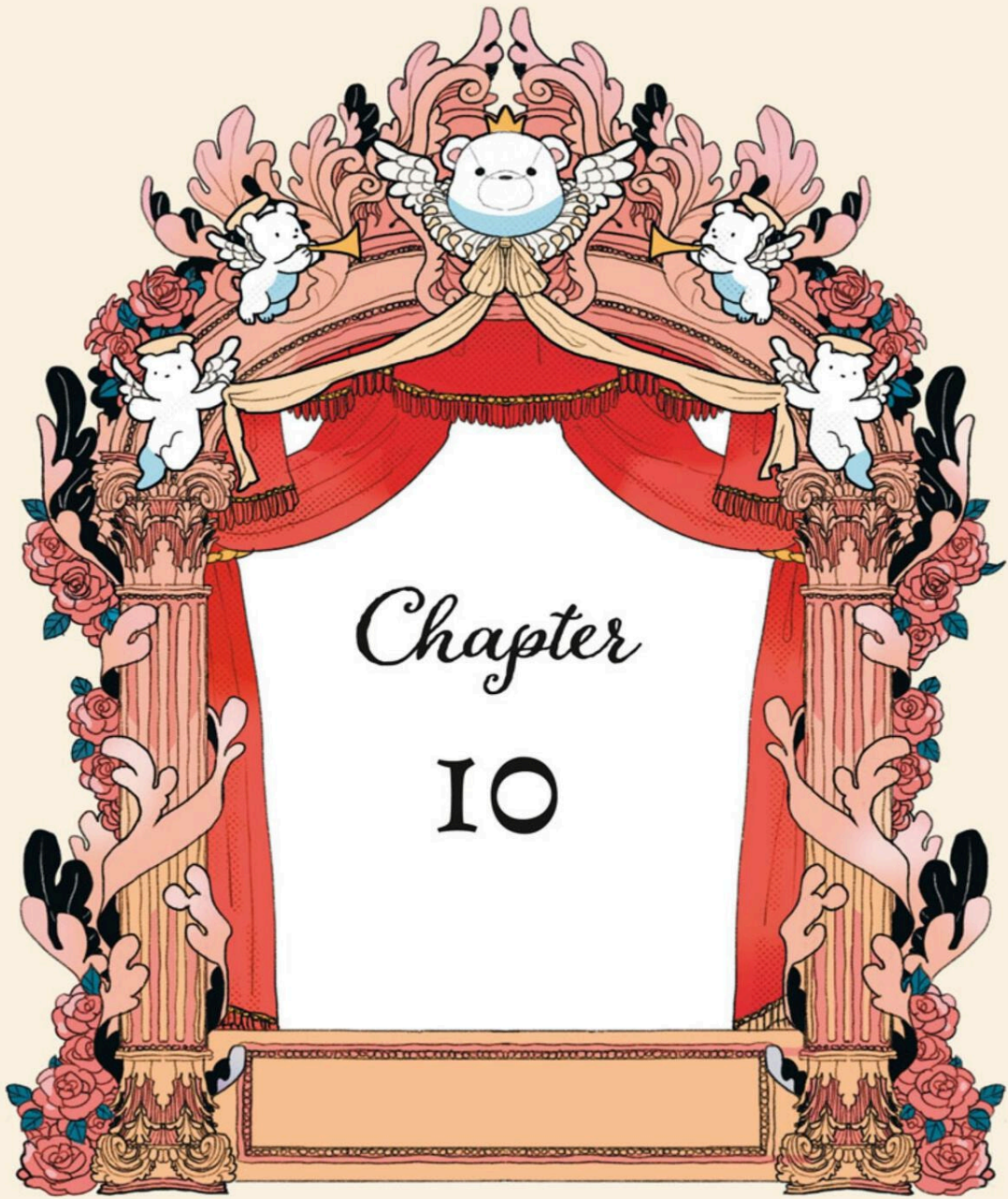
And I don't mind it so much, usually.



But when I pause the TV, the house goes quiet. There's no idle noise. No other person shuffling around on the couch. No little grumbles. No laughter. No sighs.

And suddenly, being alone turns into being lonely.

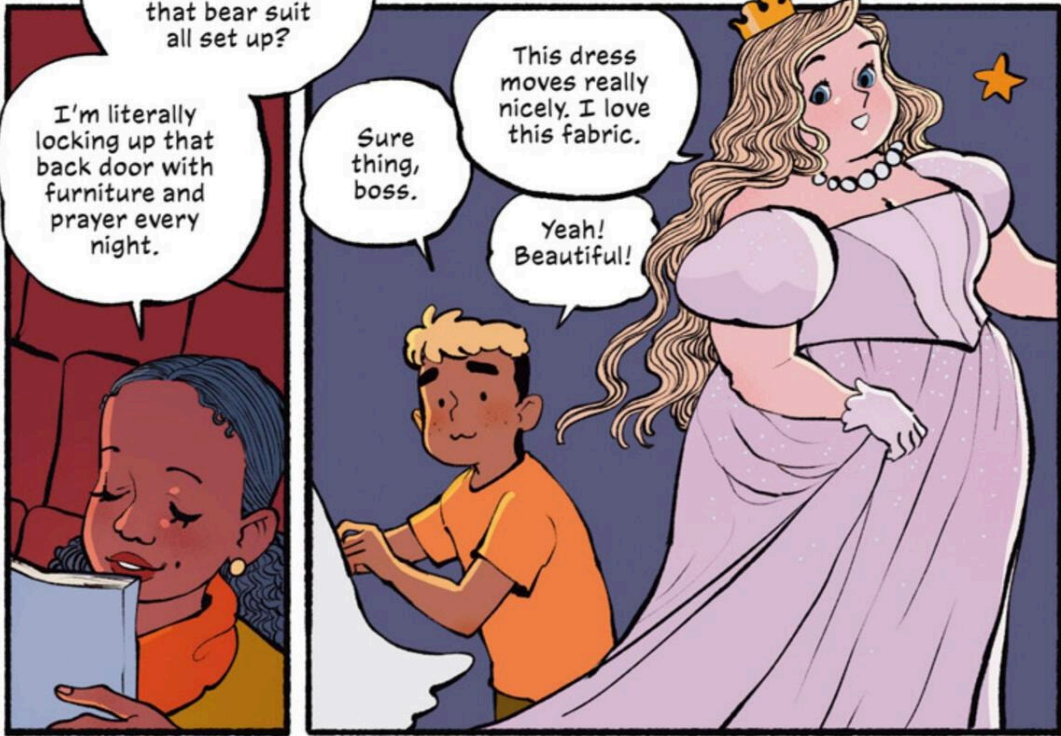
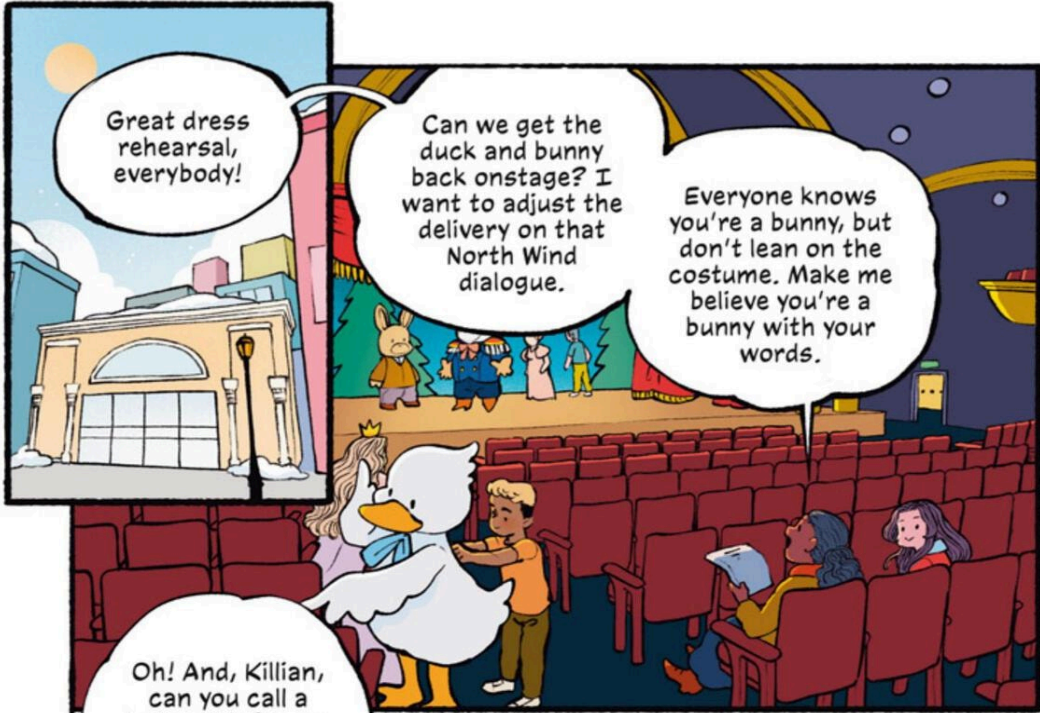


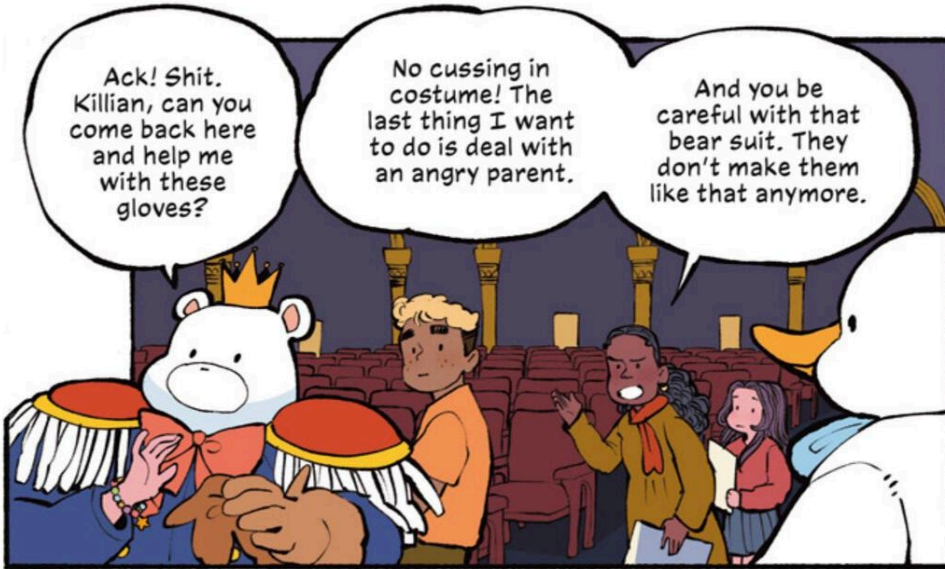
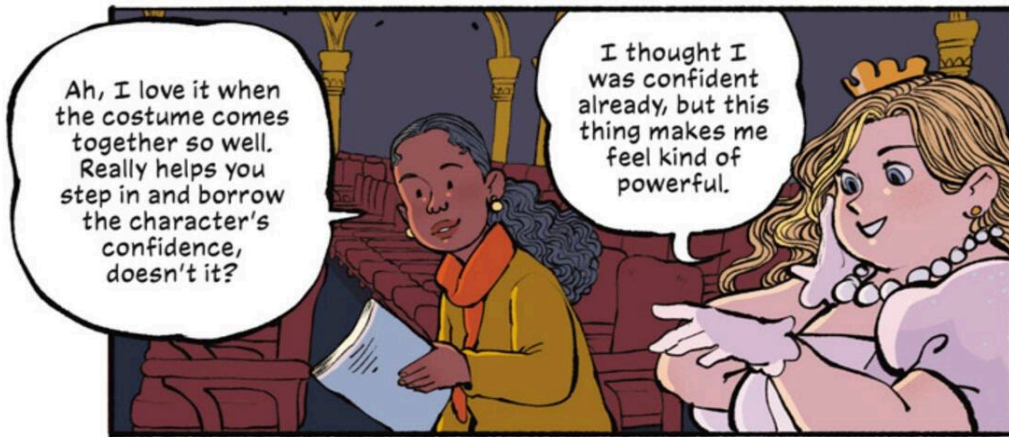


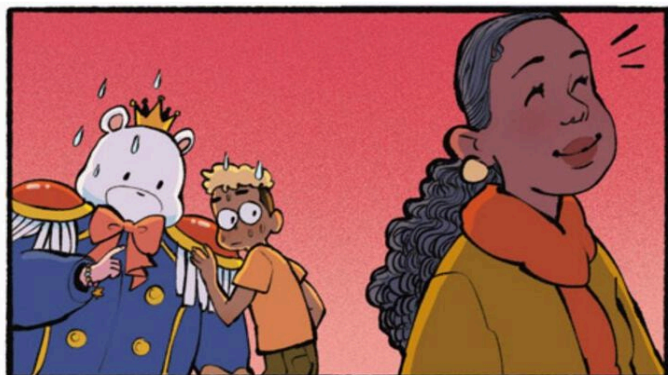
Chapter

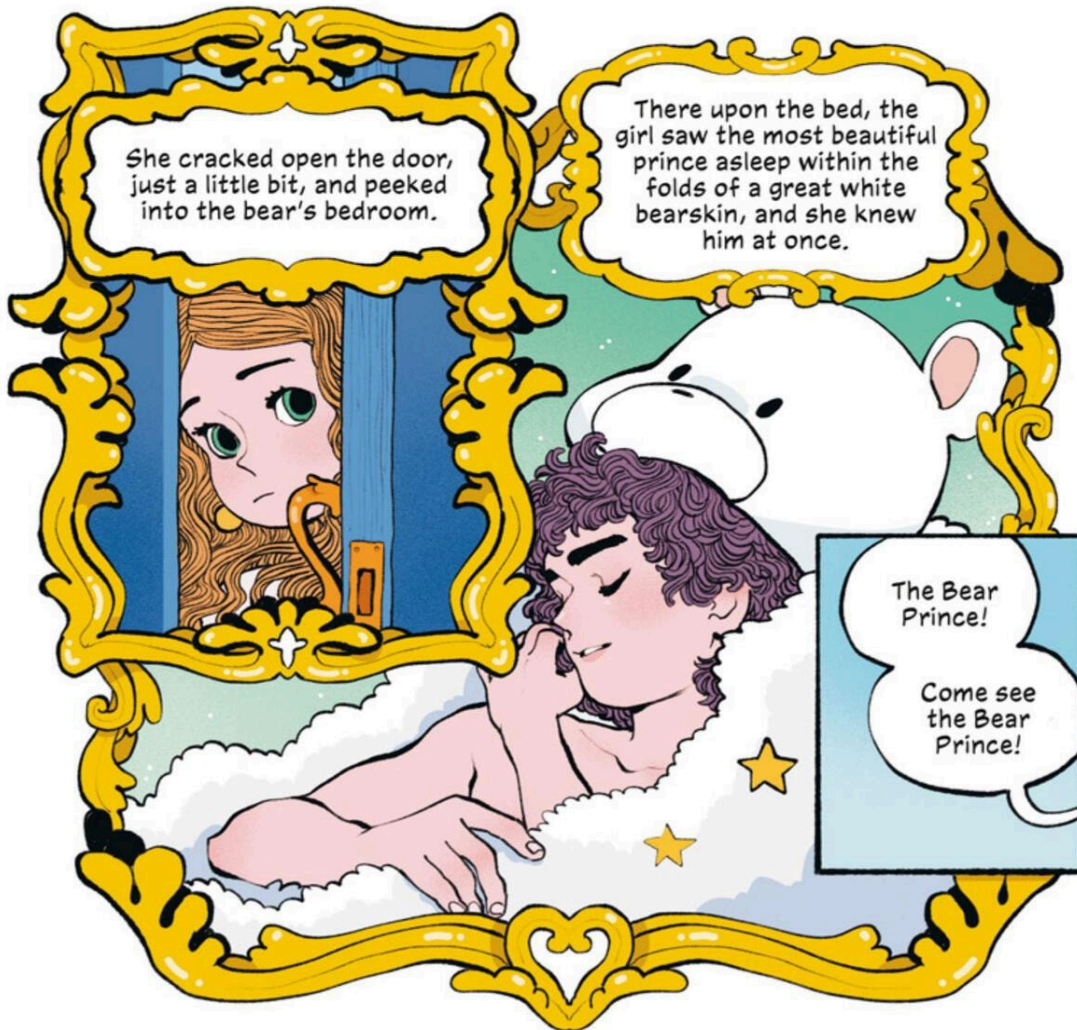
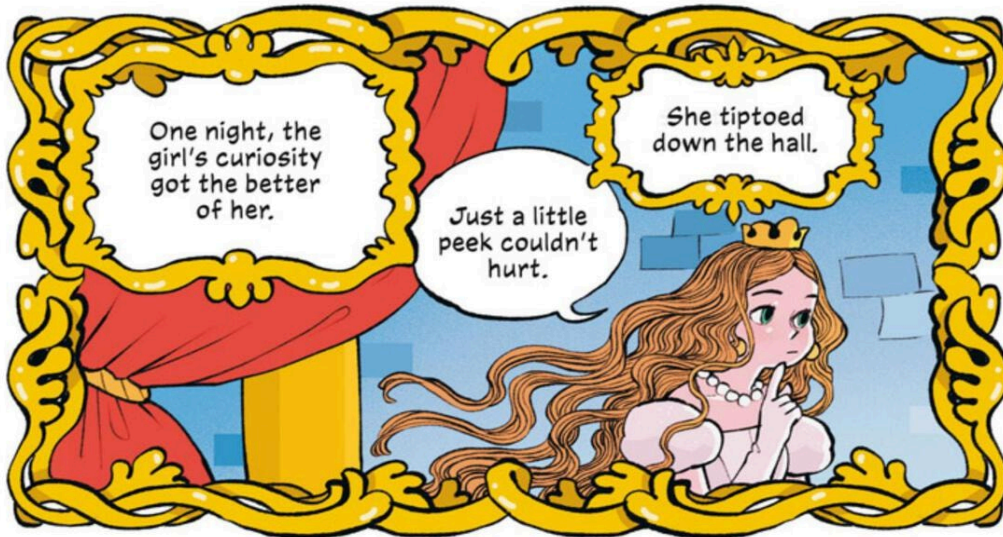
10







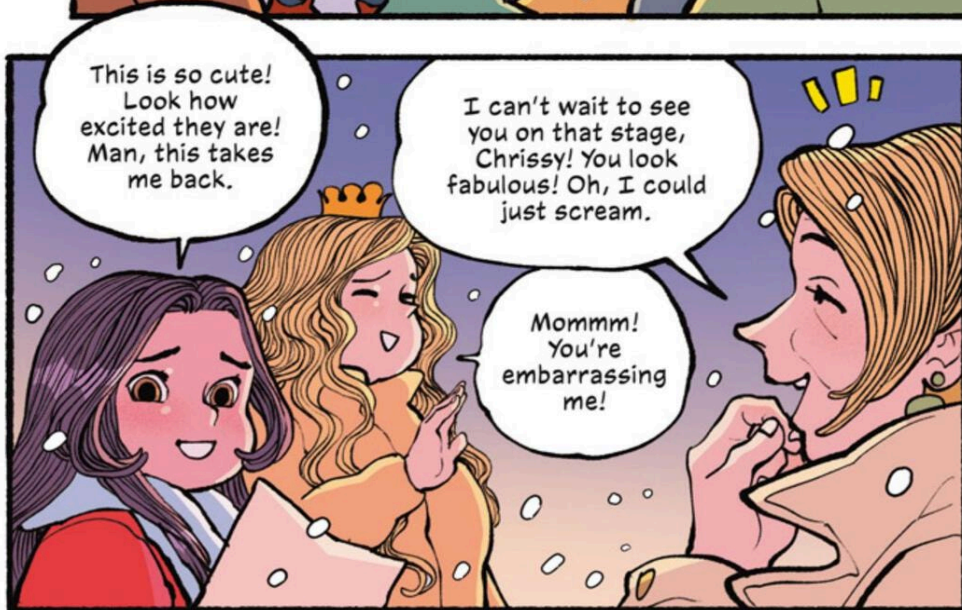






Come to the Log House Theater's production of *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, starring our very own local favorite—

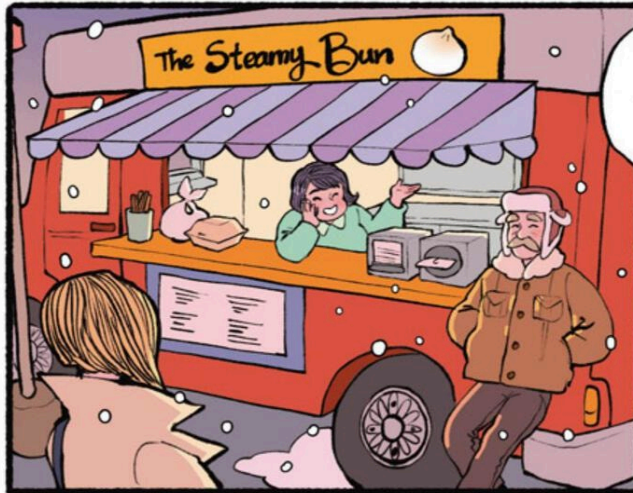
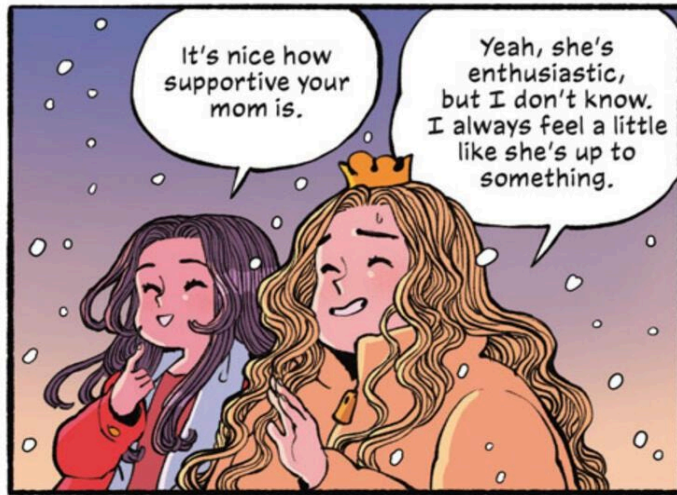
—Per the Bear!

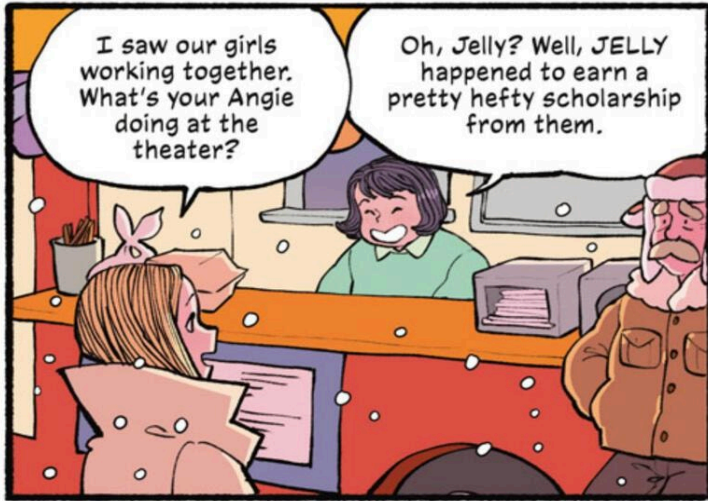


This is so cute! Look how excited they are! Man, this takes me back.

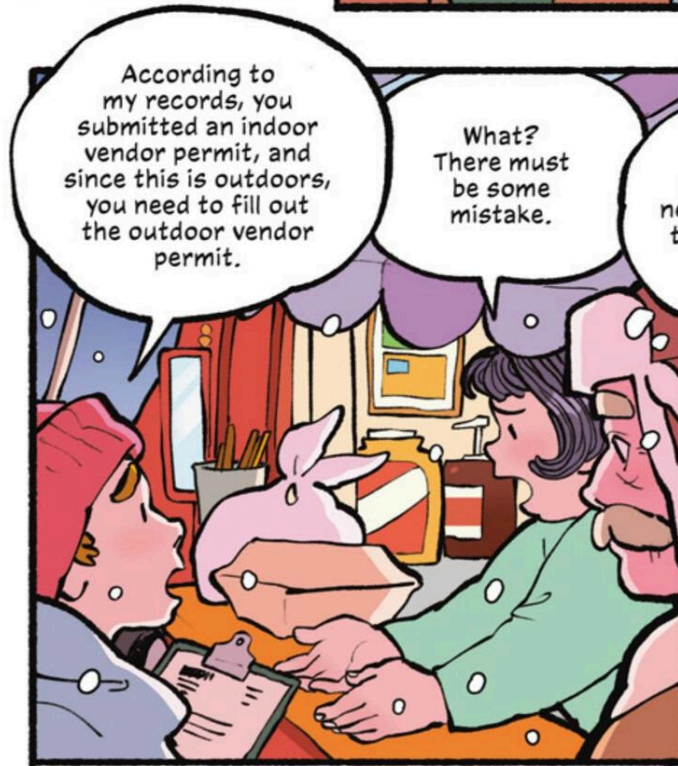
I can't wait to see you on that stage, Chrissy! You look fabulous! Oh, I could just scream.

Mommm! You're embarrassing me!



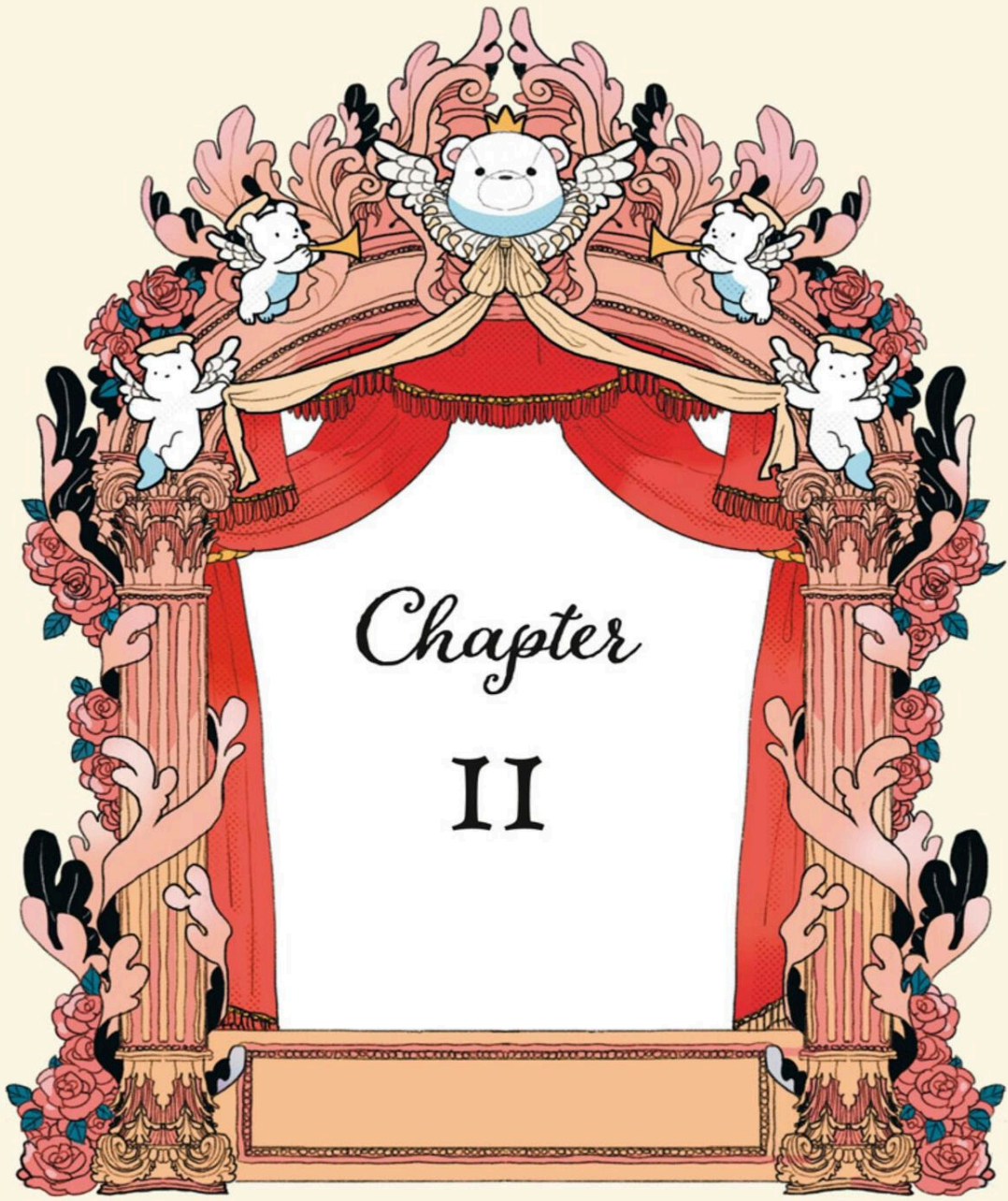










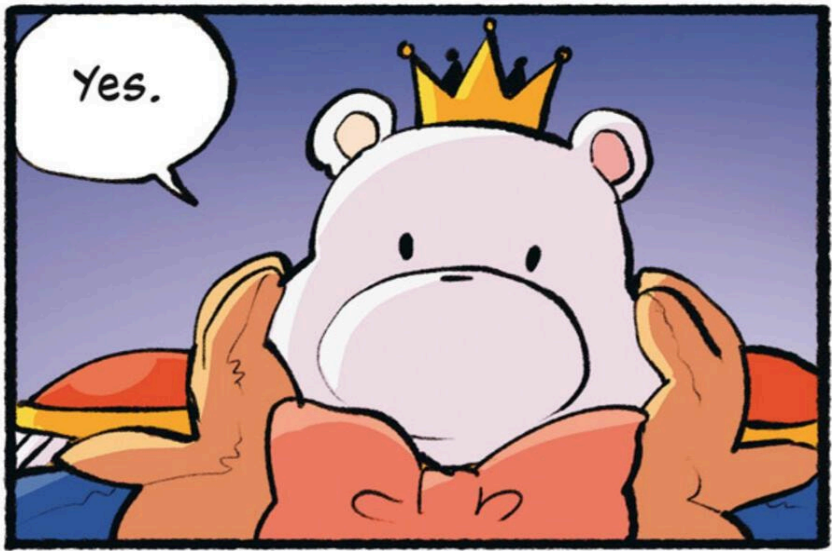
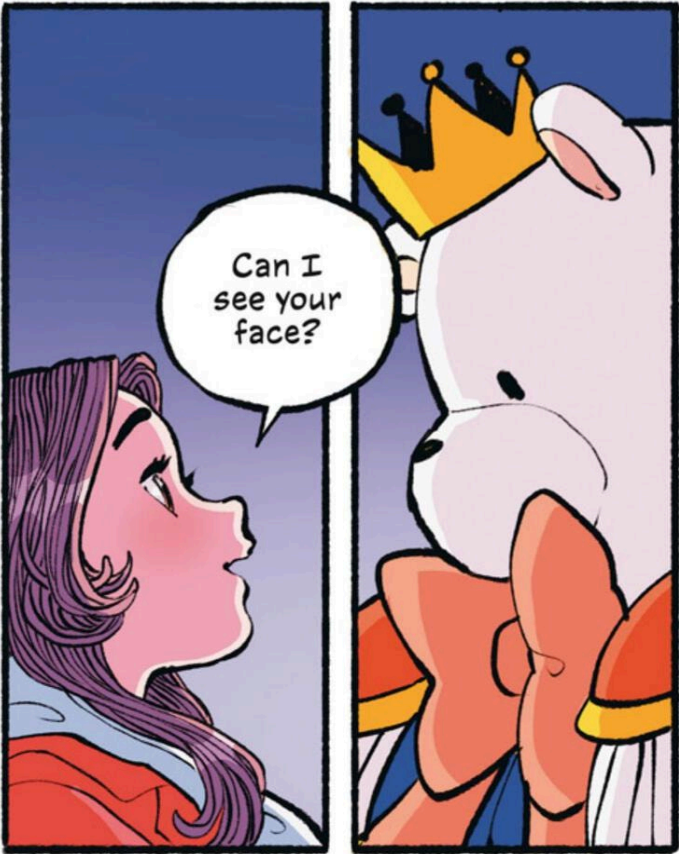


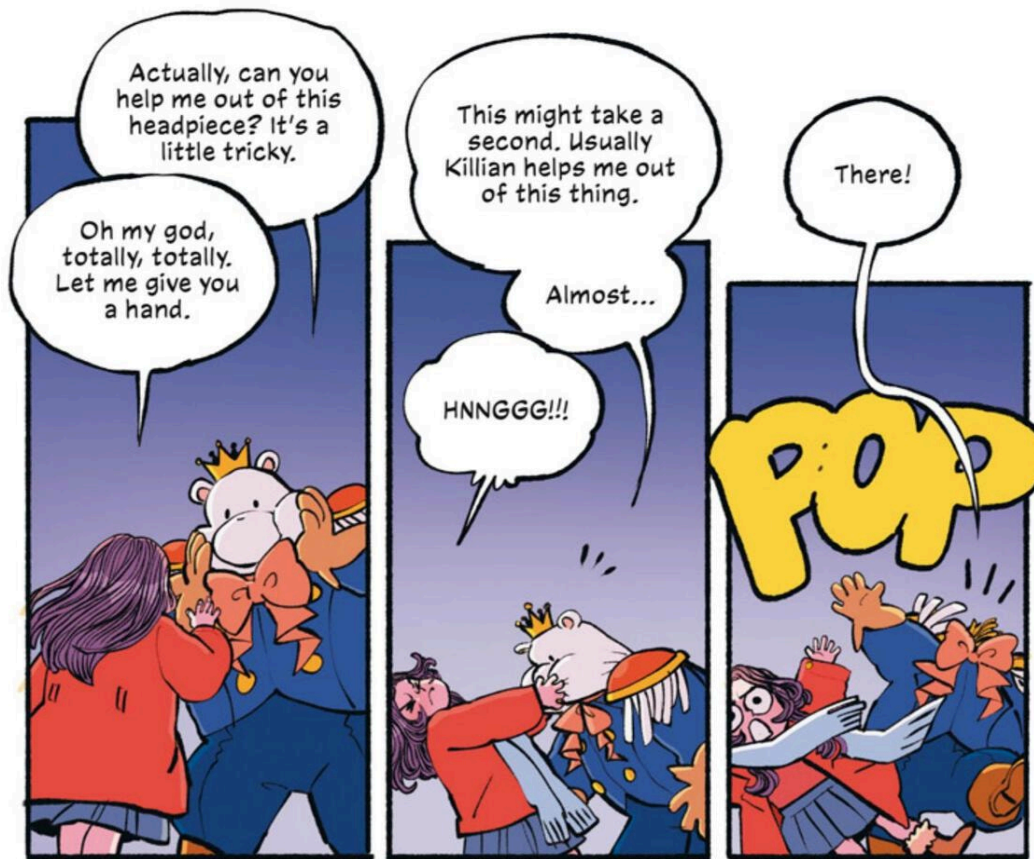
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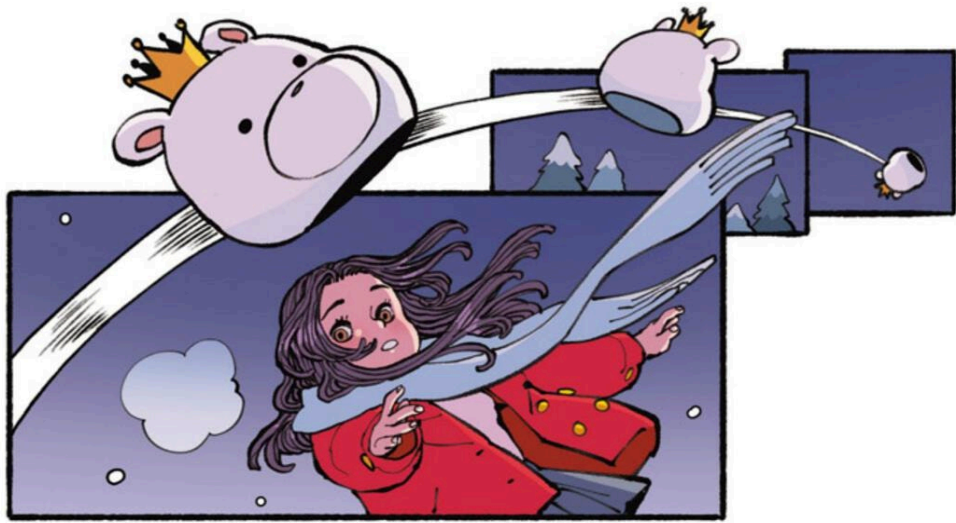
II













It's you!

Hi, Jelly.

My name's Gable now.

Gable! It's so nice to meet you again, Gable.

Wait.



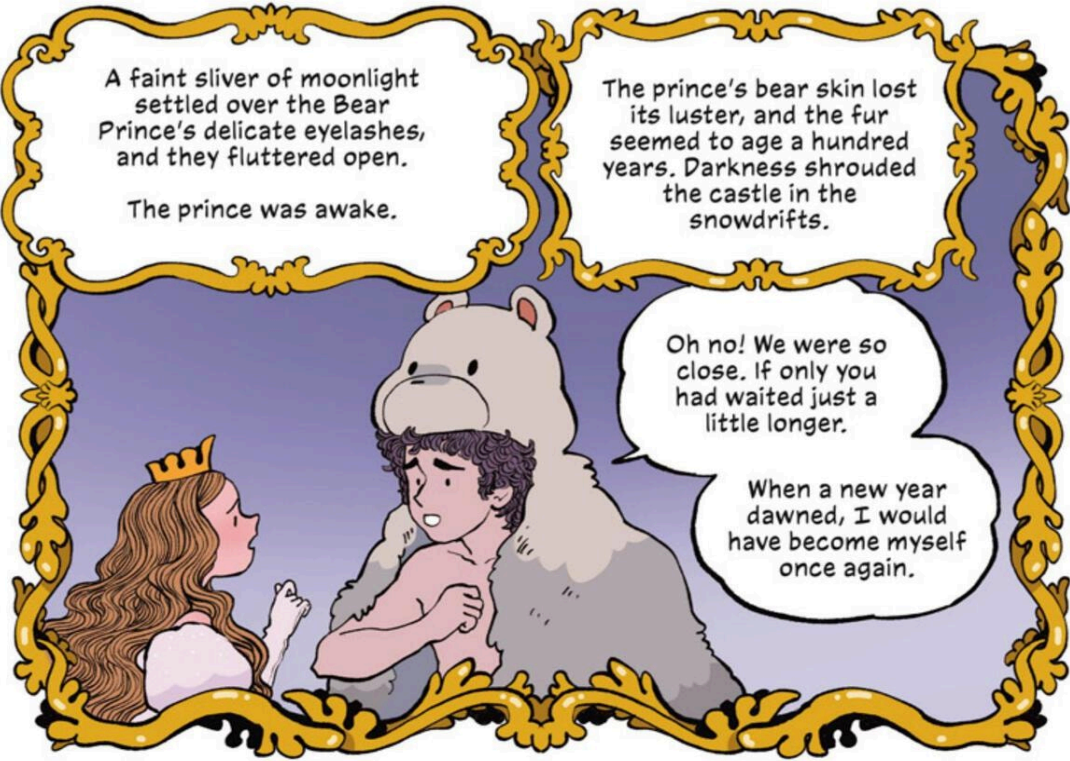
A faint sliver of moonlight settled over the Bear Prince's delicate eyelashes, and they fluttered open.

The prince was awake.

The prince's bear skin lost its luster, and the fur seemed to age a hundred years. Darkness shrouded the castle in the snowdrifts.

Oh no! We were so close. If only you had waited just a little longer.

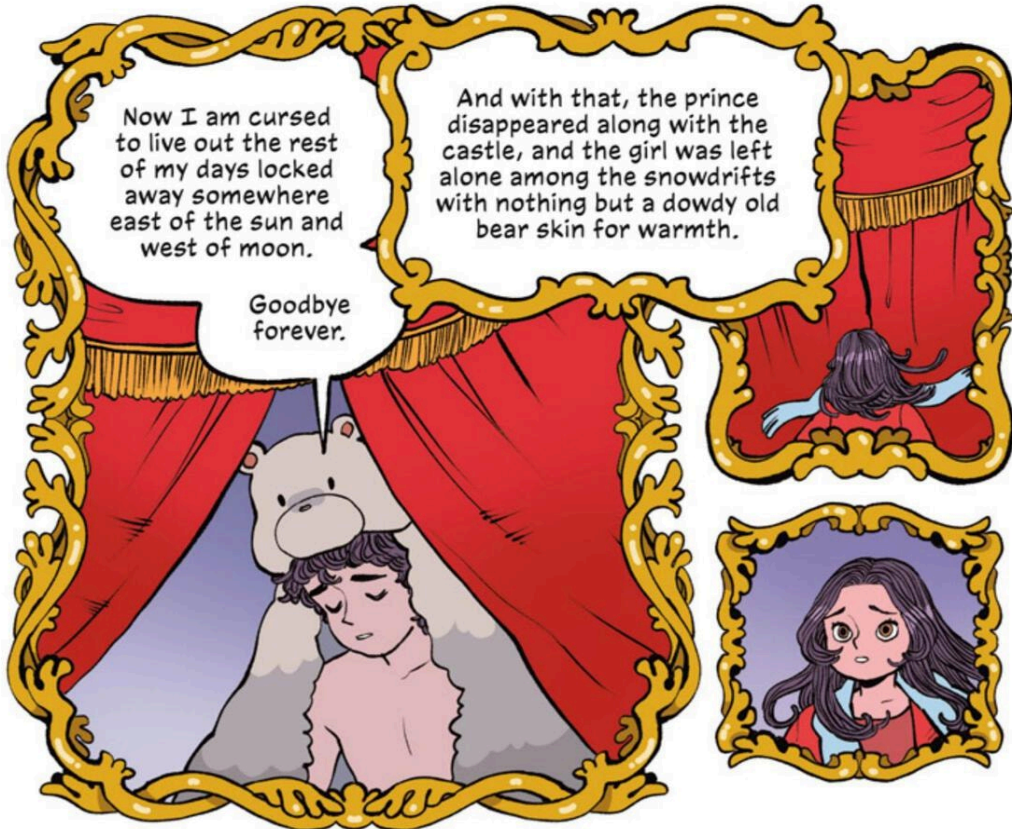
When a new year dawned, I would have become myself once again.



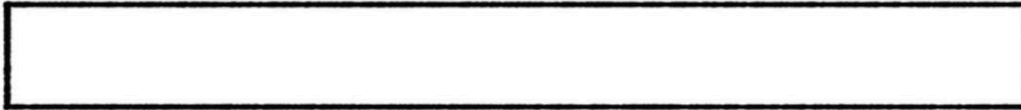
Now I am cursed to live out the rest of my days locked away somewhere east of the sun and west of moon.

Goodbye forever.

And with that, the prince disappeared along with the castle, and the girl was left alone among the snowdrifts with nothing but a dowdy old bear skin for warmth.







I thought I made it clear. That suit was your grandfather's...



I know, Gran. I'm so sorry.

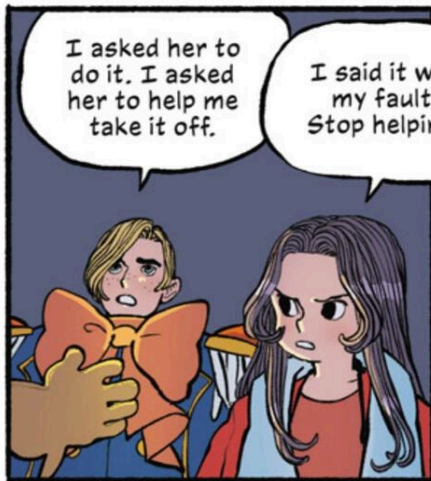
It was my fault.



Was it now? Tell me, girl. How did it happen?



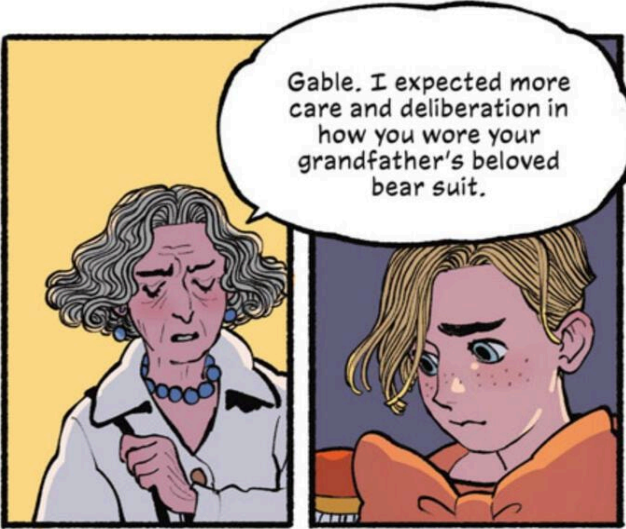
I was trying to remove the head. I didn't realize it would...



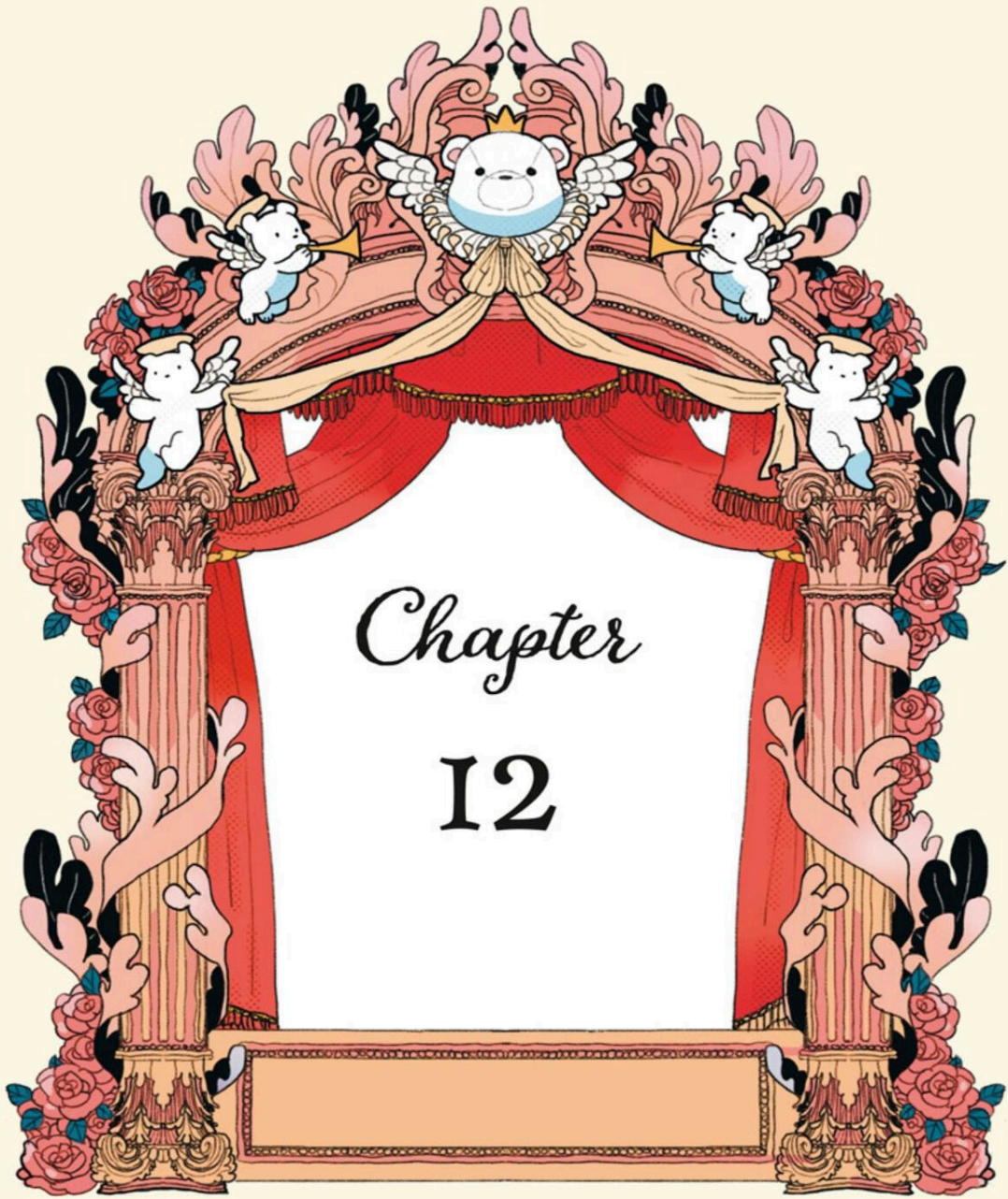
I asked her to do it. I asked her to help me take it off.

I said it was my fault. Stop helping.



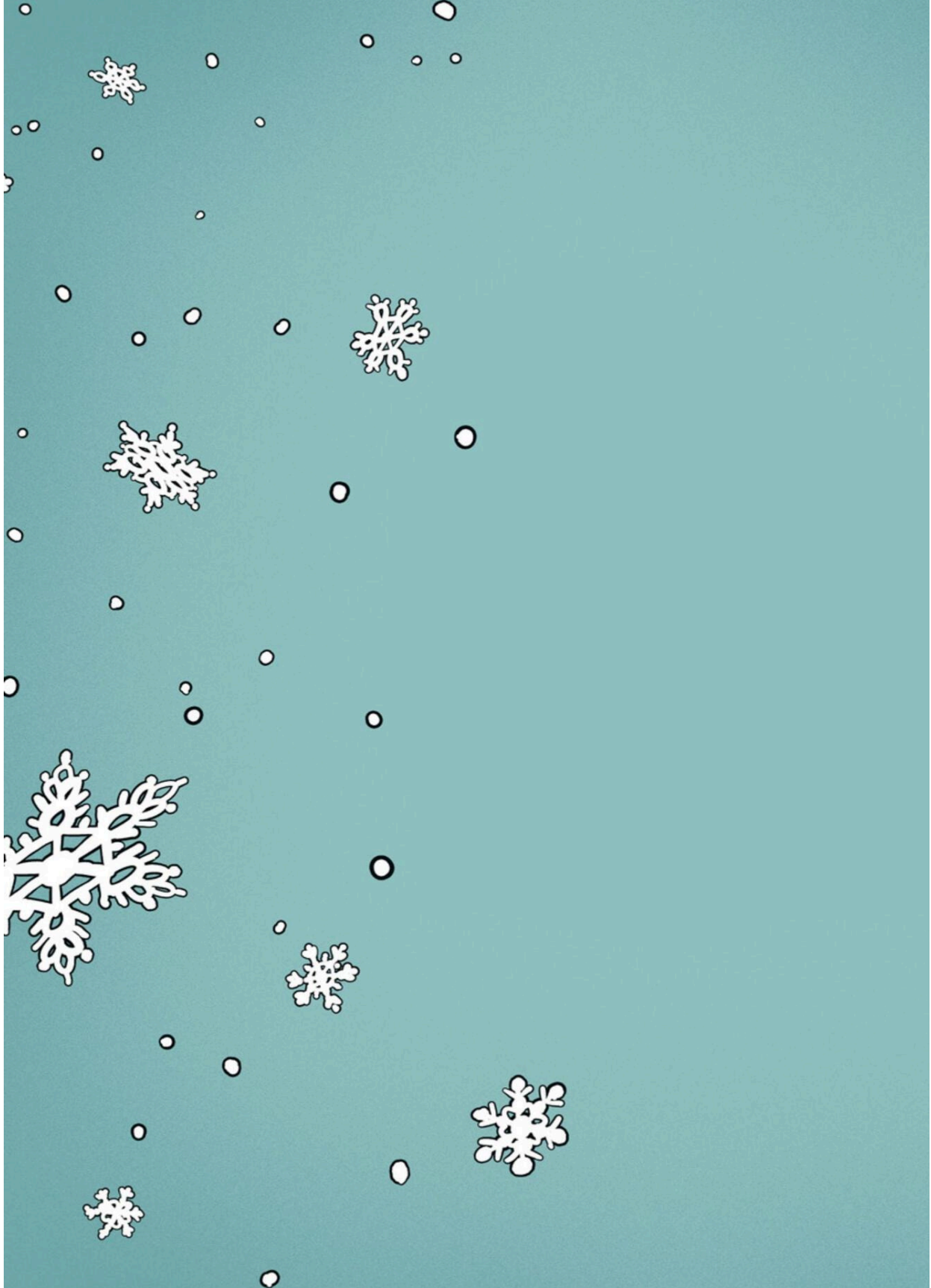






Chapter

12













We really could have walked to the theater.

It's too cold for that. What kind of father would I be letting you walk around in all this snow?



Says the man who has "winter shorts."

They're a thing!

They are not a thing!



So I actually have no game plan for when we get to the theater.

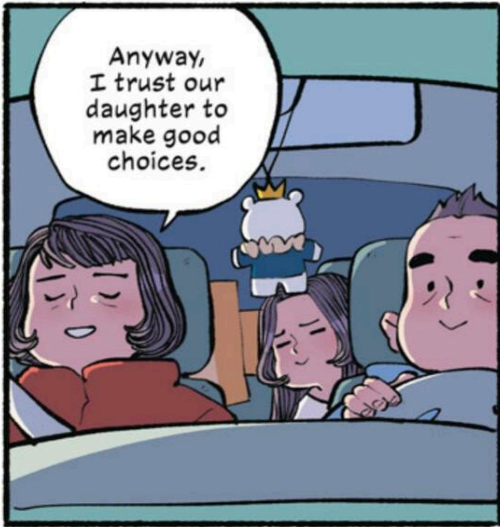


Which is another reason why you need a driver. For a speedy getaway.

George, are you suggesting that we're about to do something illegal?

Hey, I thought we were being supportive tonight.

You seem a little excited is all.





Jelly, why didn't you wear your coat? It's freezing.



Looks like Killian never got that lock fixed.



Is it still technically breaking and entering if the door was wide open?

Why doesn't this place have an alarm?

I don't know.

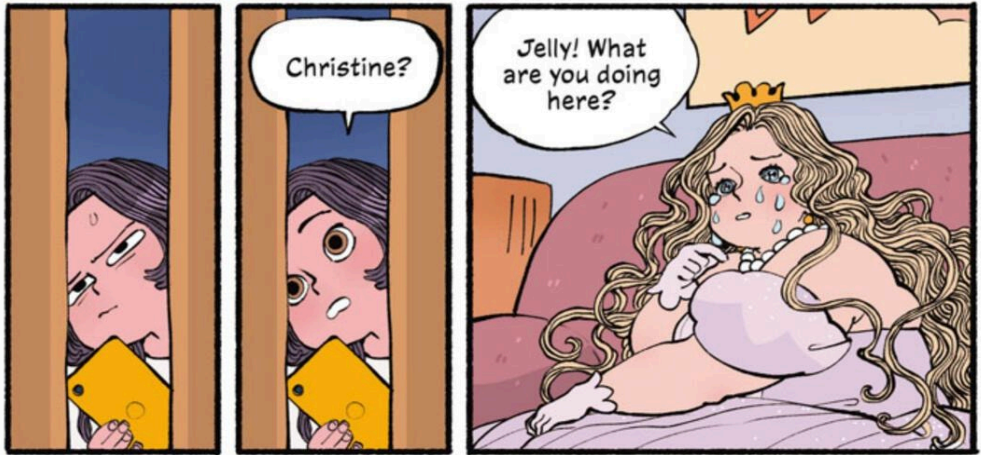


This can't be safe. Is this theater, like, a way smaller operation than I thought?

It's local theater, Mom.

So yes?

Sh-shush! Someone's definitely in here.

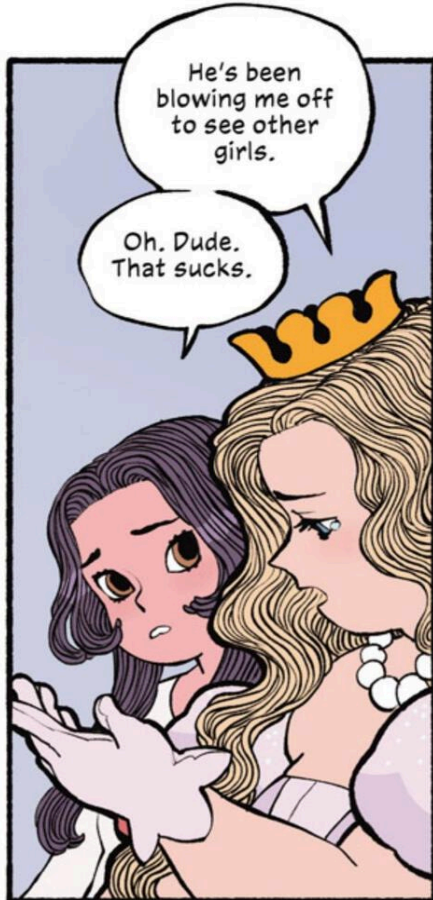




I don't need you to do anything for me. I want you to listen to me.



Yes. I'm sorry. I'm here. I'm listening.



He's been blowing me off to see other girls.

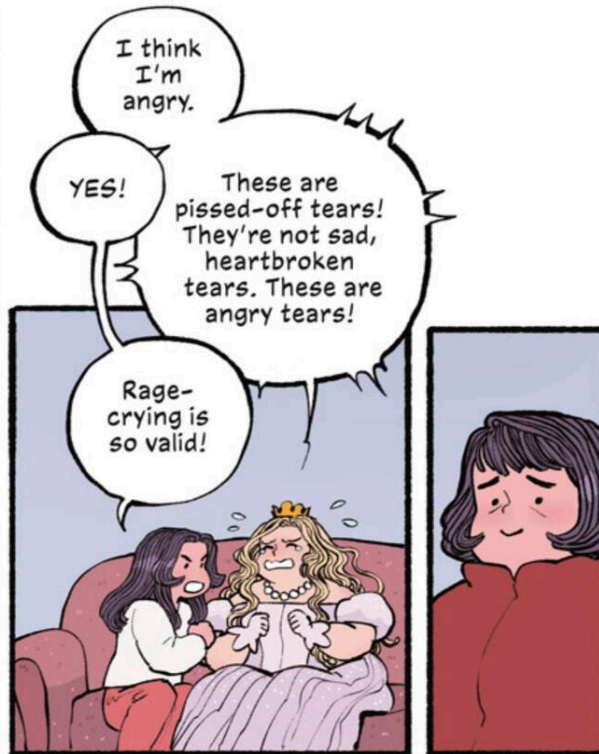
Oh. Dude. That sucks.



It's fine. I'm not, like, heartbroken. We weren't super serious. I wasn't, like, imagining a future with him or anything.

It was fun to hang out with him. I liked him fine. I just —

— I feel so disrespected, you know?





I should change back into my own clothes. But it did help, borrowing a little confidence from the princess.

Oh yeah, we probably shouldn't risk mucking up another costume for this show.





Man, I want to punch him in his dumb face so bad.

Well, try very hard not to, Jelly. This is my thing.



Are you feeling up for this? You're sure you want to go in alone?

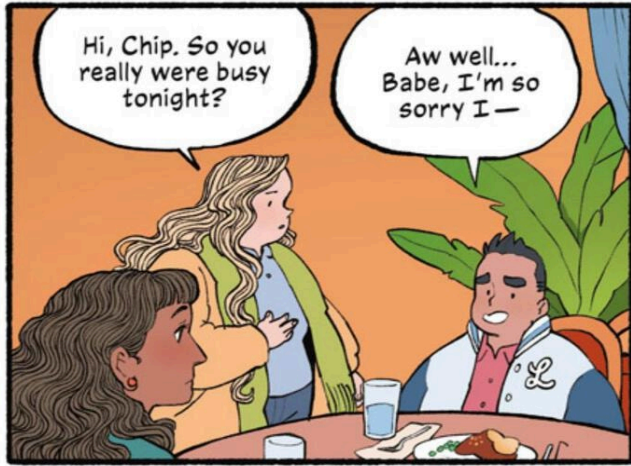


I'm sure. I just—I hate this sort of thing. Confrontation sucks.



It's never easy. You're doing amazing.

And we're gonna be right here when you're ready.

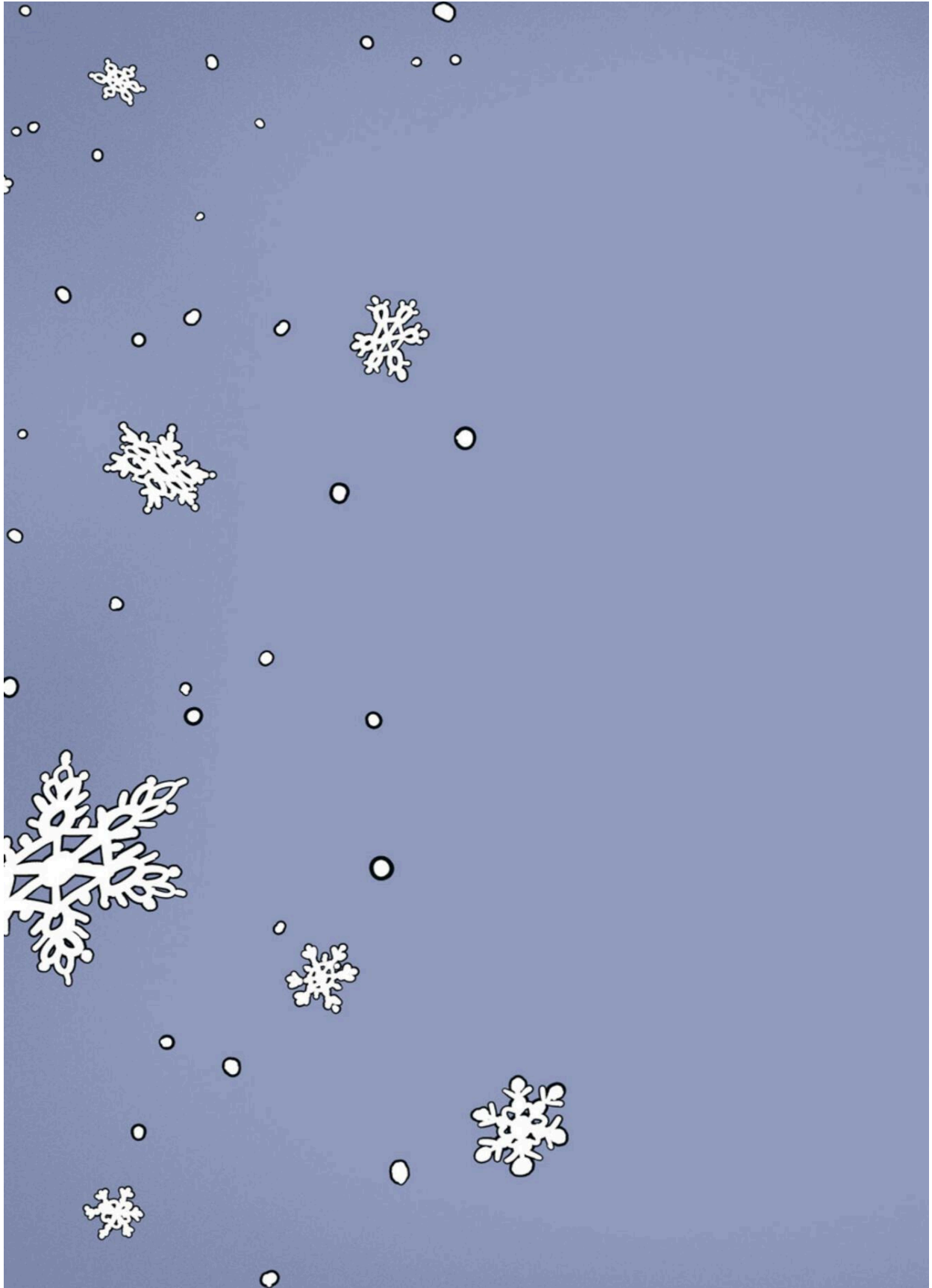


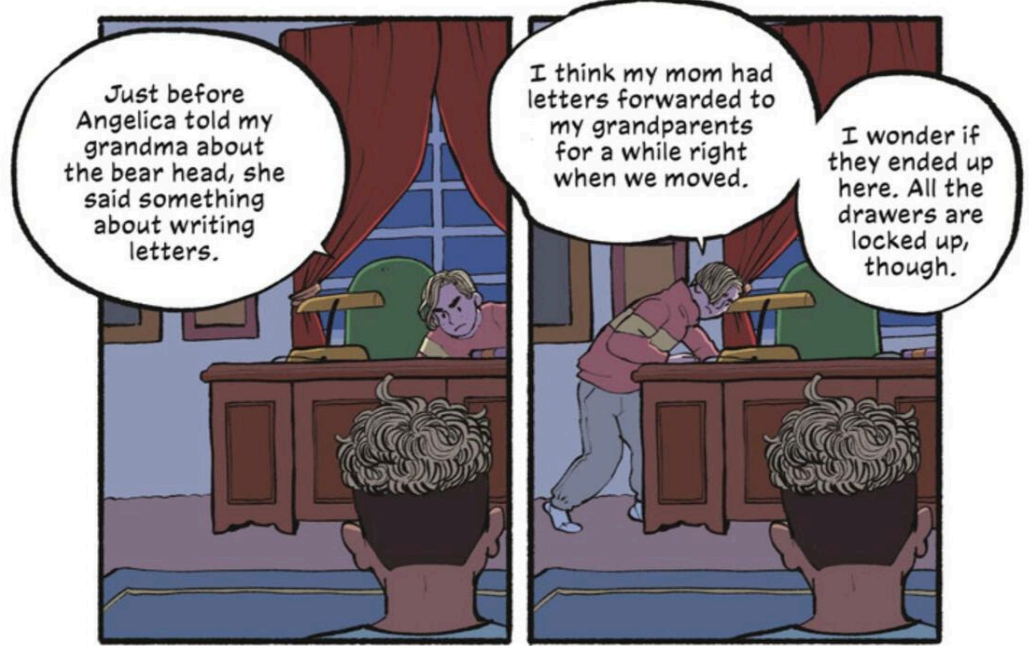






Chapter
13







And here is your mother at the prom.



Wow, that hair.

Let's flip to the next decade. Look, there I am!



Whoa, was that you, Gable?

I had that deep-cut dinosaur phase.

That was a phase? I've been buying you dinosaur things this entire time. You have to tell me when your interests shift!

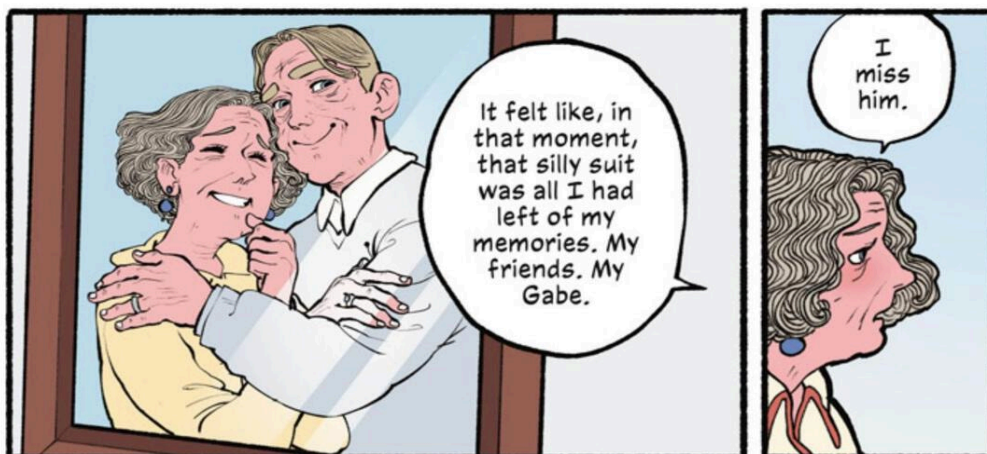
I still like them!

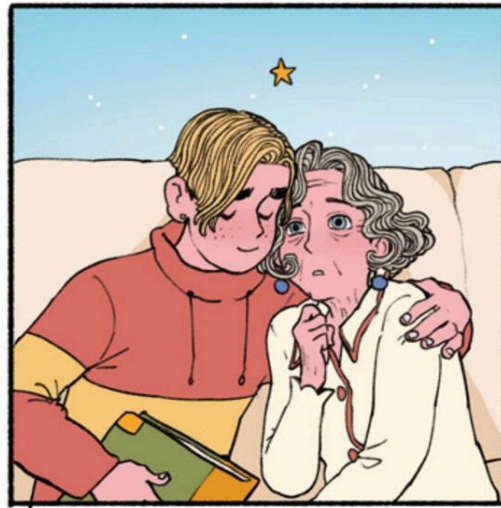
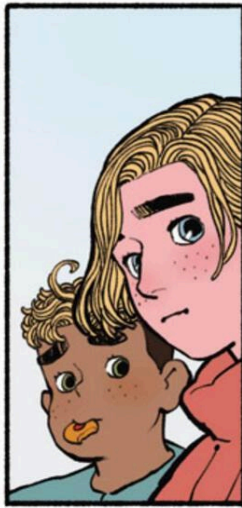


Well, good, because I got you dinosaur slippers for your birthday, and I'm not returning them.

Do we not believe in surprises anymore?









Dear Per the Bear,

I guess I should be calling you Gable now, since the bear head incident.

I'm sorry about how we left things. I was embarrassed. I guess it's important to me to look like I know what I'm doing.

Ordinarily I'd be like, "I'm usually not this rattled," but, as you know, lately I'm not so sure. And I thought I'd at least be frank about that.



Anyway, you should stop by. I feel like we have more to discuss, but it seems silly to do it over the internet now.

I'll be busy trying to figure out how to reconstruct your head. Well, Per the Bear's head. You know what I mean.

And if you decide it's all too much, that's fine too. I'll see you at the show this weekend. Hopefully, I'll have fixed things by then.

Yours,
Angelica



And then there's the matter of actually putting this all together.

I don't know how to construct this.

Me neither. I'm not a crafty person.



Do we know anyone who is?

You do. Apparently right next door.

Good evening, Phil. What a nice surprise.

Clarissa! Glad you texted.

Mr. Nielsen! Can you really make a new bear head?

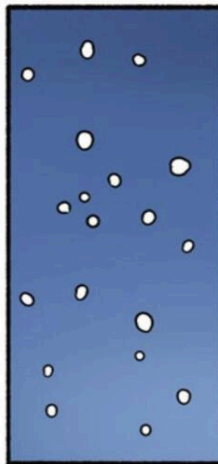
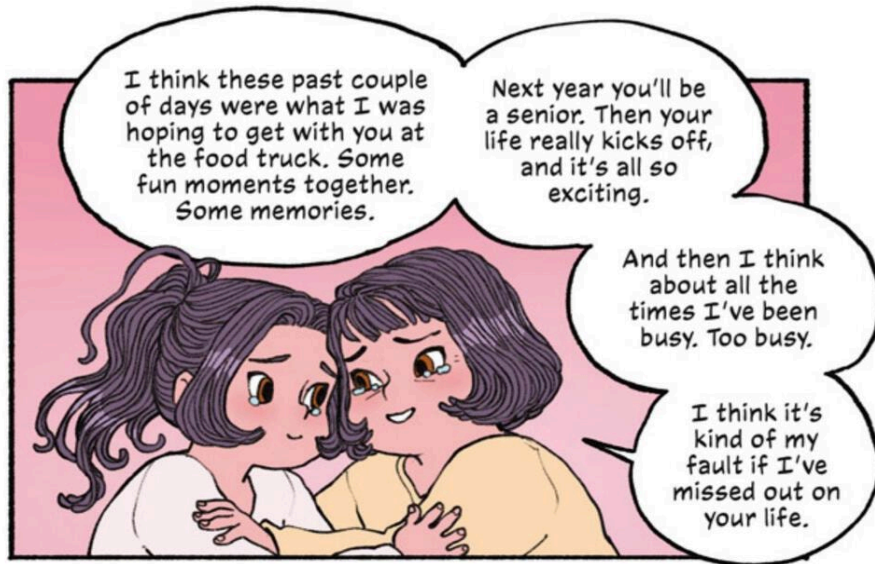


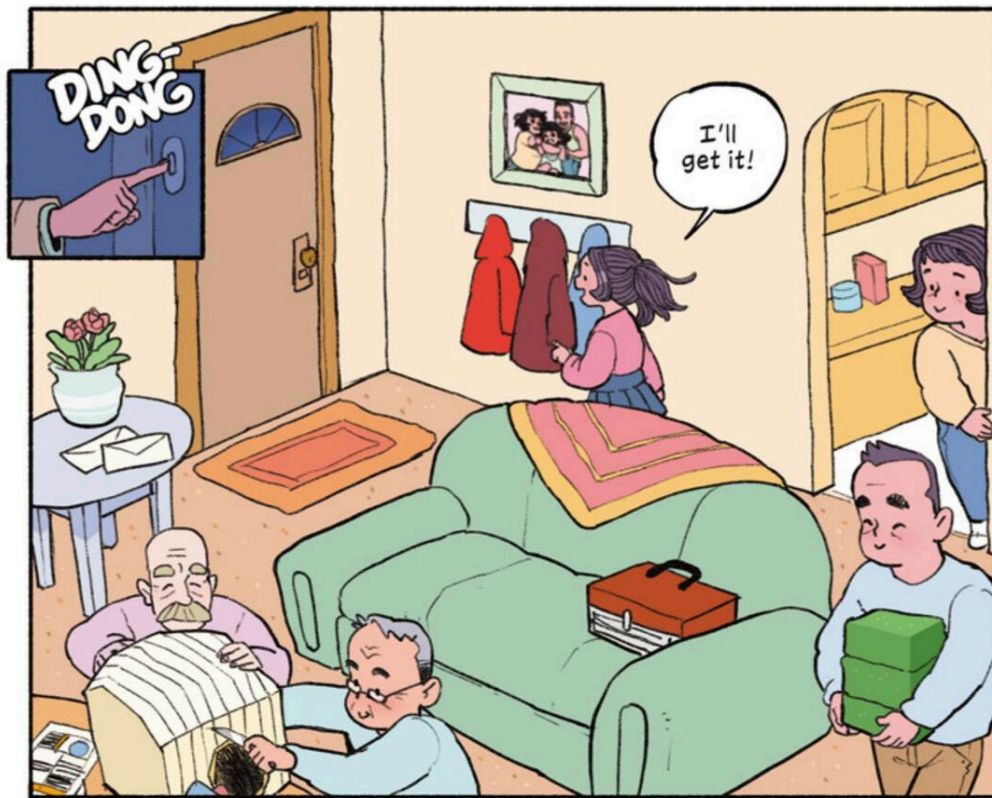
Of course I can. I made the first one, after all.

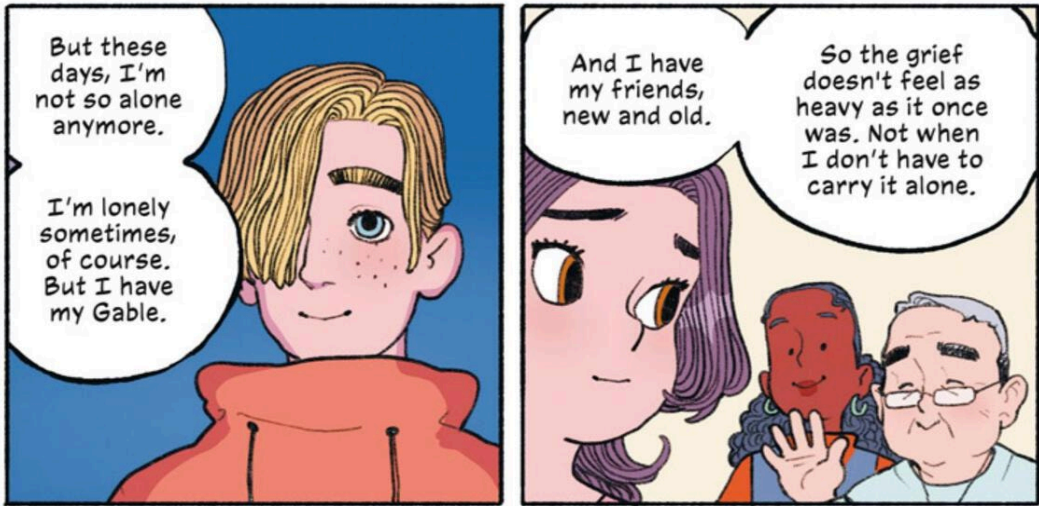
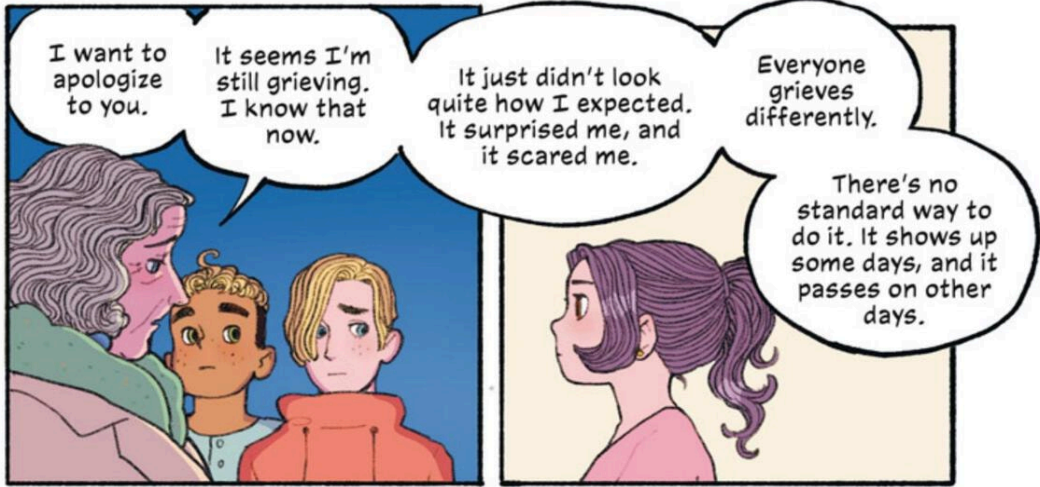
Ooohh!

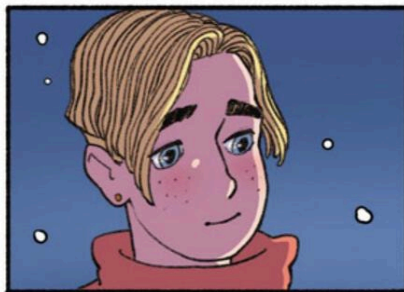
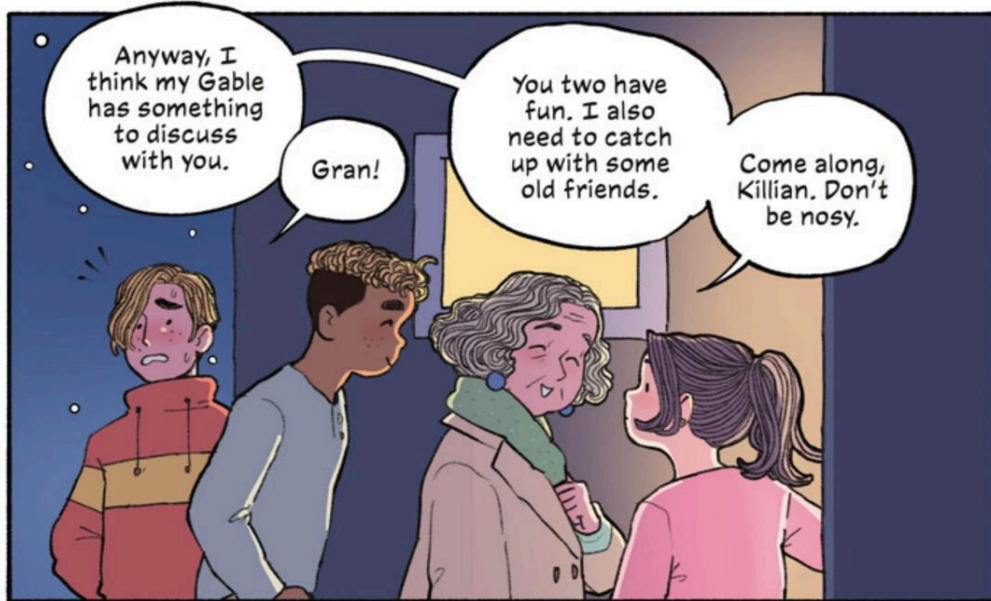
Just bring me those materials and leave it to me.















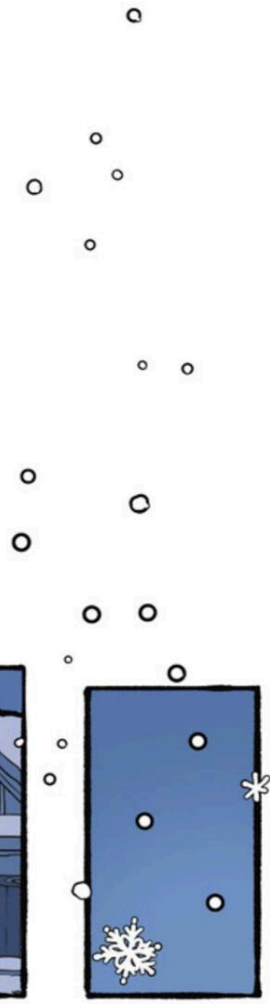
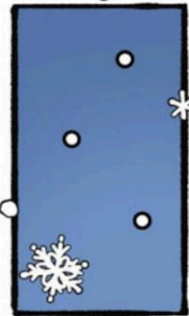
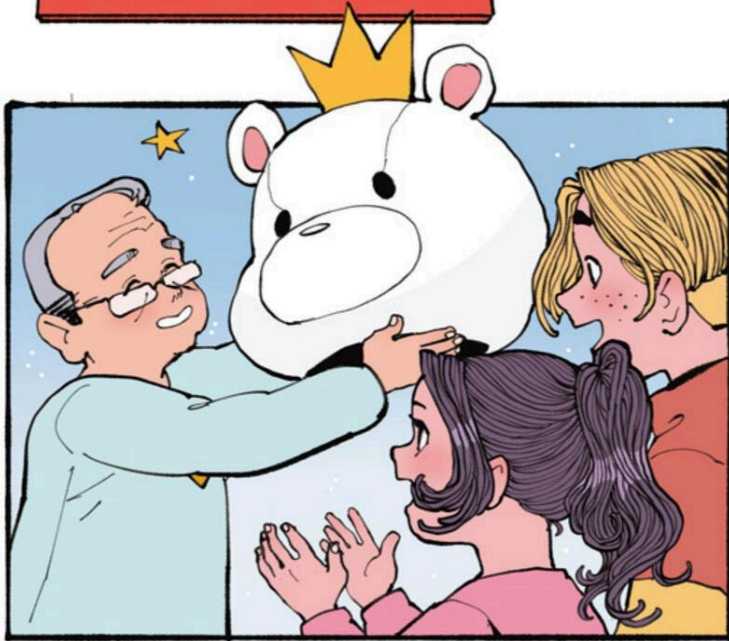
Great. Because I was hoping we could start writing each other again.

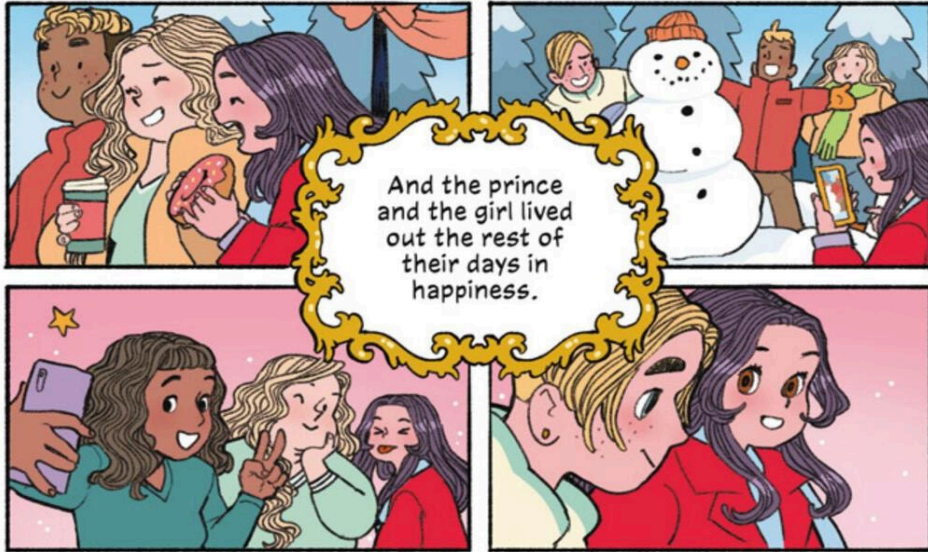
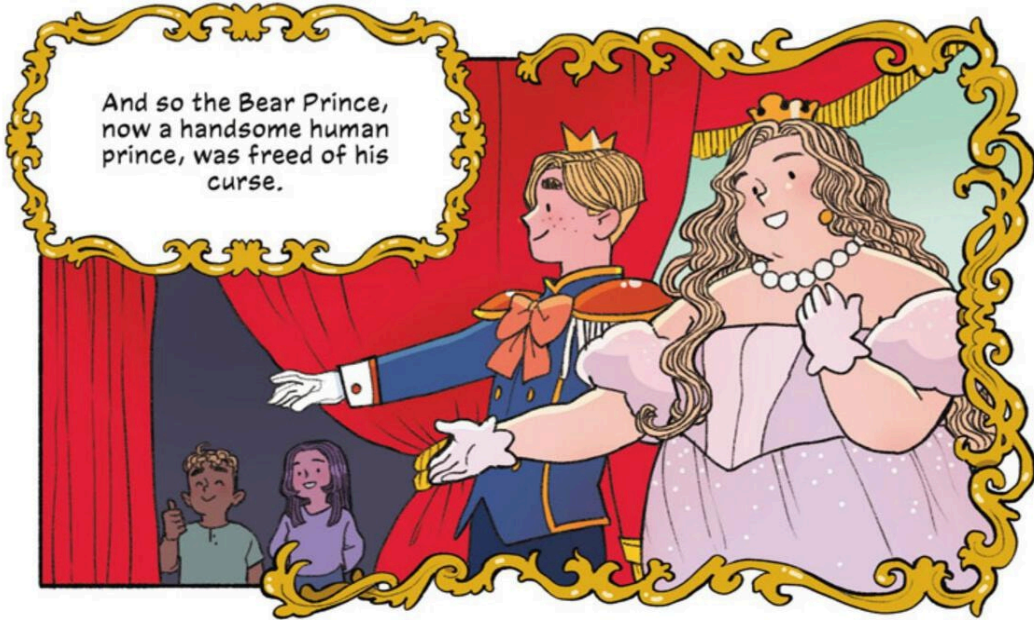
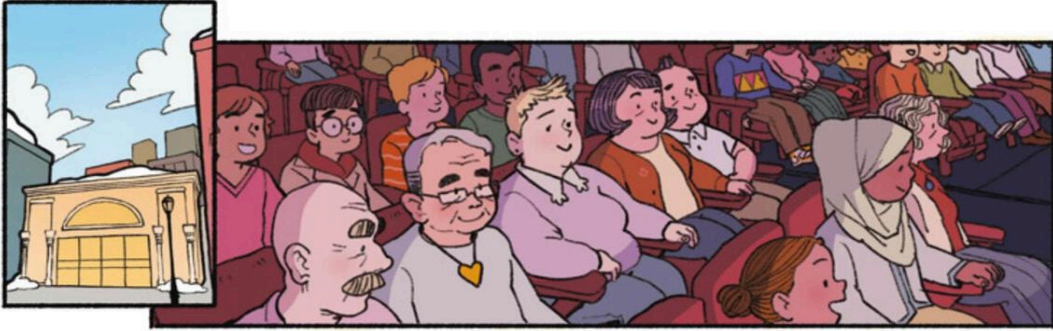
And maybe spend some time together...

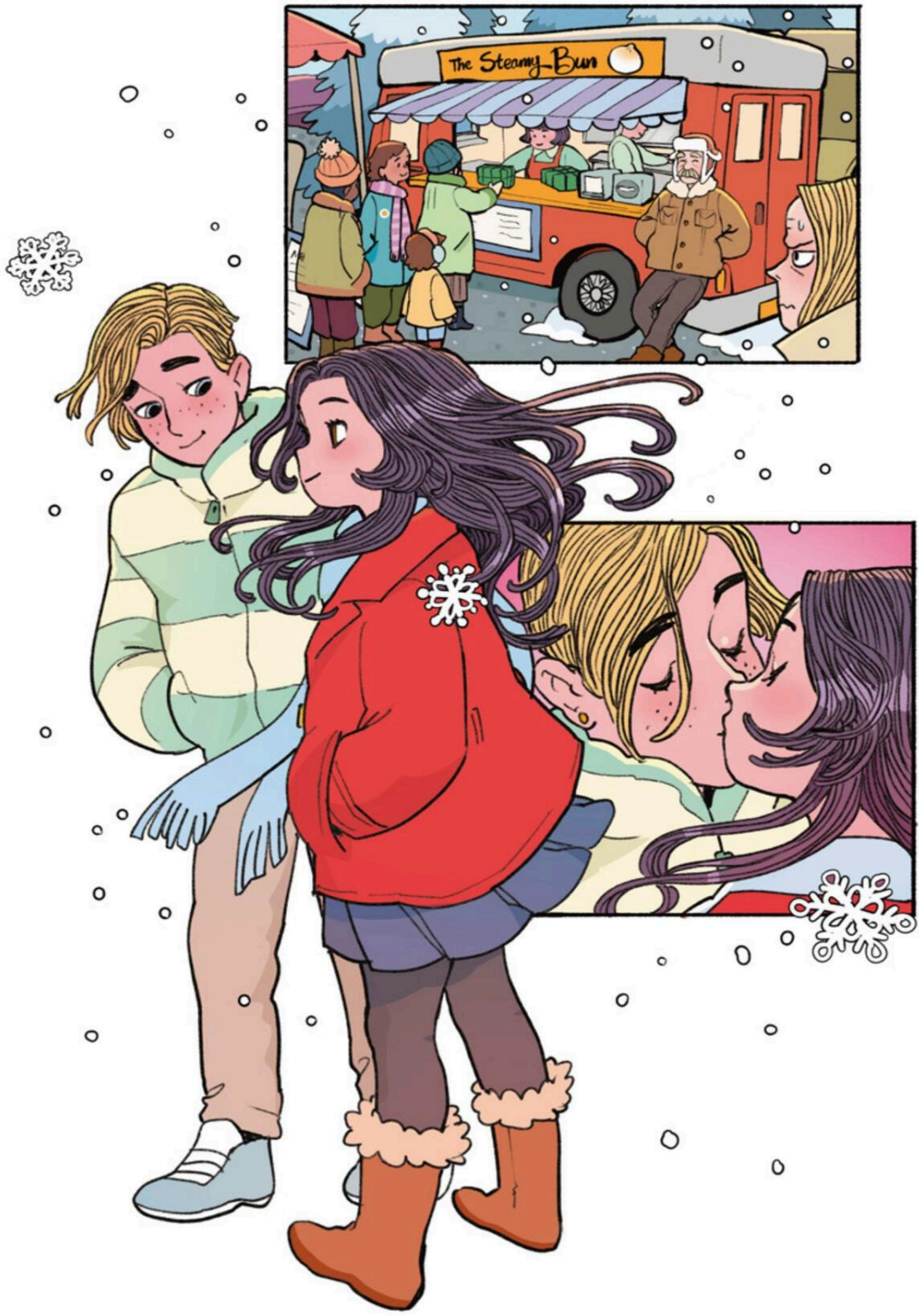
...as ourselves.

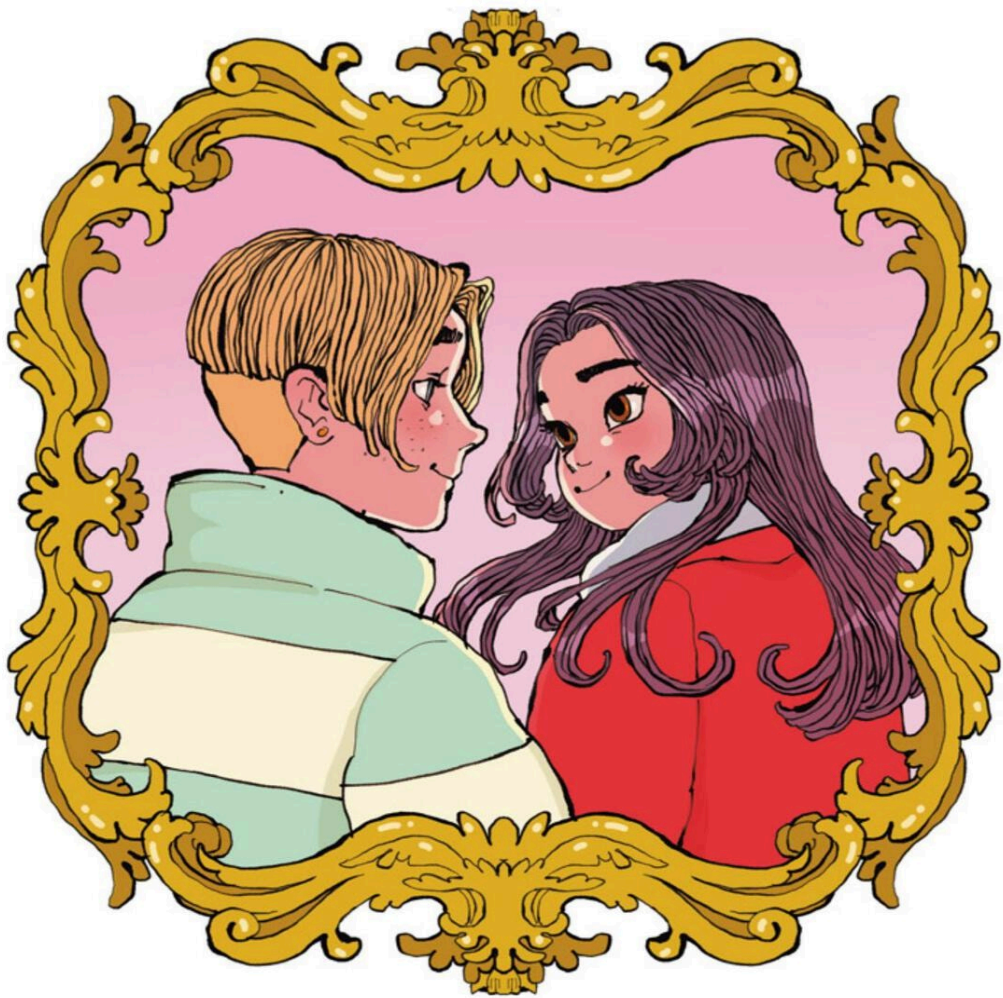
I'd love that.











The End



Author's Note

Angelica and the Bear Prince has been a joy to make, but I wanted to talk to you, dear reader, about a point in the process of this book I consider a failure. It was entirely my fault — the best-laid plans, etc. etc. — but that failure really continues to steer the way I think about storytelling and readership.

My debut graphic novel, *The Magic Fish*, came out in October 2020, toward the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. It truly began as a professional excuse to adapt my favorite fairy stories into comic book form. With the guidance and support of my agent and my editors, I was encouraged to make the project more personal. I felt emboldened to interrogate why these stories were important to me and to weave a little more of myself into the story. I'm still so proud of it, and I will forever cherish every person who had a hand in crafting that very special book.

Of course, one part of letting a book out into the world is that you have to talk about it all the time. I was forewarned about this! I'm certain multiple people told me about this — "You will deliver a book report about your own book for the remainder of its shelf life or yours, if you're lucky." Having absolutely no context for what being an author would be like, I think I absorbed this as cerebral information, the way you check your weather app in the morning and note the temperature — a little number that will guide your sweater-adjacent decisions for the rest of the day. Once you step outside, though, and find the biting cold frosting at your ears, clarity strikes, and the meaning of the little number in your phone is made known to your clattering mortal coil.

Talking about *The Magic Fish* was sort of like that. The book was heavier than I anticipated, and I didn't quite realize it until my dozenth or so school visit. I found myself becoming frustrated. How did I not anticipate this? The fraughtness of language, of navigating queerness, the grief of family separation, and the existential uncertainty of one's refugee status are all clearly very emotionally loaded! For so long, all those things were just aspects of my life — simply facts of the matter — over which I had no control and spared very little thought or grief. As a person, you do what you need to do to move along with your day. As an author, however, I had to confront the weight of those things with honesty. I owe that to my readers.

I eventually became much more adept at navigating those topics, but project-wise, I set the intention that my sophomore stab at a long-form comic would be lighter. It would be fun and frothy. Heck, I really wanted it to be a little bit vapid, if I can be totally frank. I went in with the notion that I could tell a story and come out of it entirely, emotionally unbothered, and that's where I tripped and fell face-first into my feelings.

It seems I'm just constantly learning obvious lessons. The bedrock of storytelling is empathy. It's a journey the storyteller and the listener take together, bonded in our shared humanity, as we feel our way through the creases and folds of a particular narrative tapestry. We can't escape it. I don't know why I thought I could.

At some point, in spite of my intention to give myself an emotional reprieve from my first book, I realized *Angelica and the Bear Prince* is about grief. I pitched it as a modern retelling of "East of the Sun and West of the Moon," but it wound up being an exploration of how the experience of mourning feels so lonely and unwieldy simply because there appears to be no right way to do it. Why do I feel this way? Should I feel this big way about small things that don't matter to anyone else? How long should I feel this way? Am I a monster for not feeling it long enough? Am I stuck in this forever because I can't tell where this feeling will end? Grief, big and small, is completely inescapable. And I can't help but feel like some cosmic force is having a good laugh at the way I really thought I could just skate on by (at least professionally) without encountering this mainstay of the human experience.

And so, in that way, I failed. In the end, I gladly, joyously, gleefully failed in my endeavor to make a story that didn't hurt my own feelings a little bit. It sounds so silly to say, but the empathy born from the act of sharing stories is the antidote to the isolation of the rudely artisanal ways a heart can break. And if we're trying to avoid it, if we're trying to ride out a story smoothly and unscathed, I hope we all fail.

And so, dear reader, I hope you had a lovely time. I hope the book made you smile and frown and groan and sigh. I tried not to put my all into it, and it happened anyway, and you should absolutely have a good giggle about that at my expense. I'd be so glad for it.



—Trung

Sketches





GABLE

Pranks in the
BEARSUIT



NONBINARY
90'S HEARTTHROB





Acknowledgments

I know it's customary to thank one's agent in the acknowledgments, but I'd sing Kate McKean's praises up and down, totally unsolicited, any old day. I never fuss over whether a publishing question is silly. She always handles them with grace and humor.

Whitney and Danny, my editors, are an absolute joy to work with. I don't think I've ever gotten an edit I didn't like, and Whitney in particular has been so kind and patient with me every time life kept happening in and around the making of this book. Design is a skill I simply have not developed, and Bob, our designer, made the book look beautiful while also wrangling together all the disparate and probably highly unhelpful file formats I threw at him.

A huge thank-you to everyone at Random House Graphic and Penguin Random House through whom this book might have passed. I know it's part of all our jobs to read and reread these books until they're as perfect as we can manage, but I still want to commend everyone's skill, dedication, and patience in bringing every book to print. It's such an undertaking, every single time, and you're all juggling quite a few books at a time. Absolutely superhuman stuff.

I want to extend heaps of gratitude toward my color artist, Angela Phu, better known online as "popoalu" on various platforms. I adore her sense for palettes, and she added so much to this book. Big thanks to Tina Roland, whom I met playing *Overwatch*, I think, and who was kind enough to advise me on the ins and outs of mascot suits for this book.

I would also like to thank Mr. Skip Dye at Penguin Random House. As an author of books that frequently run into bad-faith book challenges in schools and libraries, I've become aware that he plays a great part in fighting those book bans and supporting our public libraries. Making a book is such a labor of love, but it remains labor. The prospect of continuing to make books while also advocating for my right to exist in public and participate in this industry is daunting and exhausting, so I must express appreciation for every person who has a hand in standing with authors in a climate that is hostile to stories by queer authors and authors of color.

Closer to home, I want to thank my dear partner J, who is always reminding me to eat and drink over the course of a day when I've fallen too deep into the flow of making comics. Thank you to my lovely friends and neighbors Jess, Peter, Christine, and Matt, without whom I worry I would never have otherwise felt inclined to leave my house.

And of course, thank you so much to my readers. I'm honestly still astonished that I get to do this for work. Every librarian, every bookseller, and every reader has made this work possible and joyful.



TRUNG LE NGUYEN

is an award-winning Vietnamese American cartoonist. Trung's first full-length graphic novel, *The Magic Fish*, was named a best book of the year by the New York Public Library and numerous publications. It was also nominated for an Eisner Award and won the Harvey Award for Book of the Year. Trung has also contributed work—both as an author and as an artist—for a variety of comic publishers, including DC and Marvel. He lives in Minneapolis, dutifully raising a small flock of very spoiled hens.

“Sweet, sincere, and hilarious. A masterful modern fairy tale.”

—VICTORIA YING, award-winning author of *Hungry Ghost*

*Being a teenager is no fairy tale . . .
but that doesn't mean you can't find
a little magic.*



The much-awaited follow-up to Trung Le Nguyen's *The Magic Fish*, *Angelica and the Bear Prince* is another gorgeous tale that will captivate readers' imaginations with whimsy, humor, and romance.



Praise for
The Magic Fish

“One of the most astounding graphic novels of the year.”

—ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

“Beautiful and brave.” —GENE LUEN YANG,
author of *American Born Chinese*

“Unique, powerful, and inspiring.”
—TILLIE WALDEN, author of *Spinning*

★ “Beautifully illustrates how sharing old stories can be the best way to learn how to share new ones.”

—KIRKUS REVIEWS



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