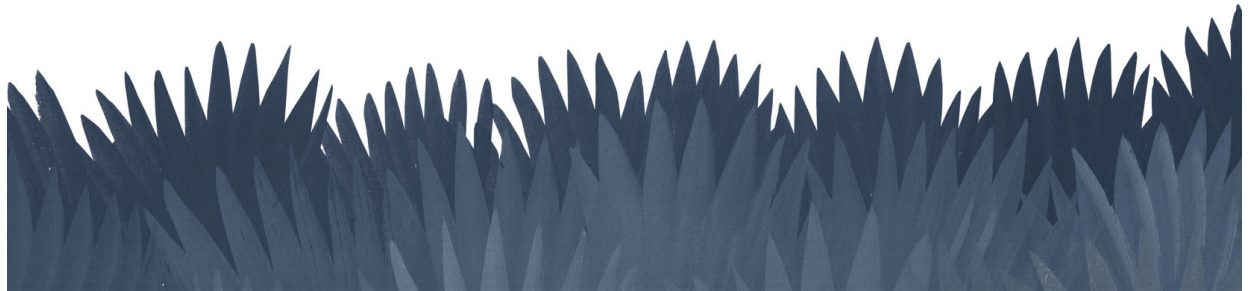


STONE FRUIT

LEE LAI



LEELAI
STONE
FRUIT

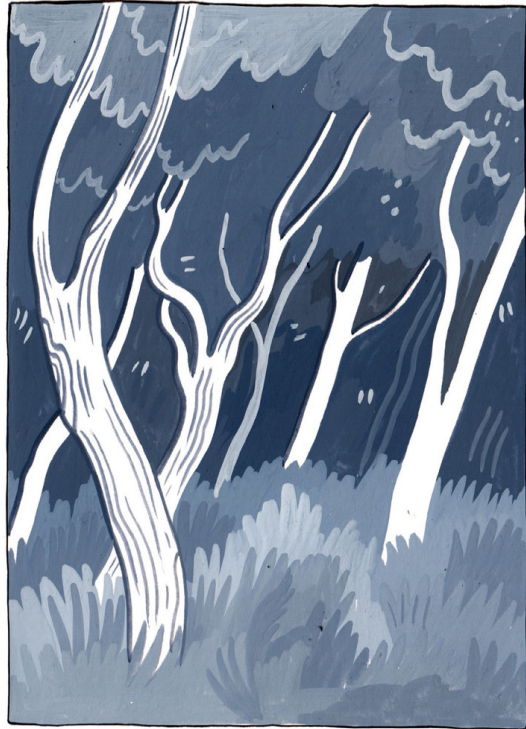


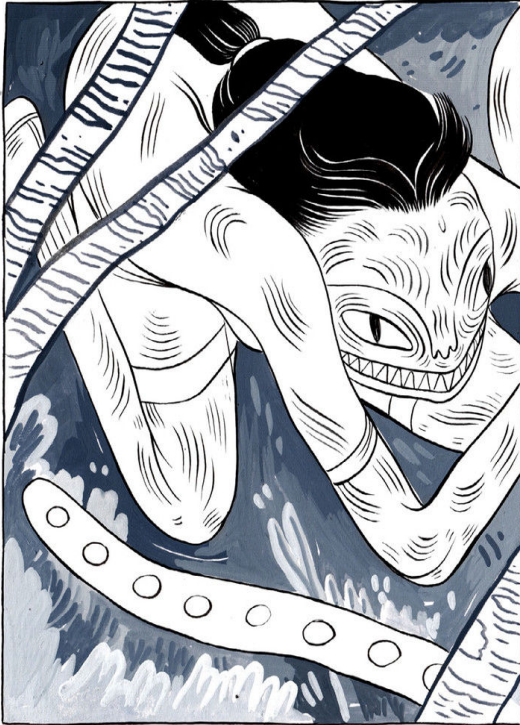
For Cesca,
my sister.

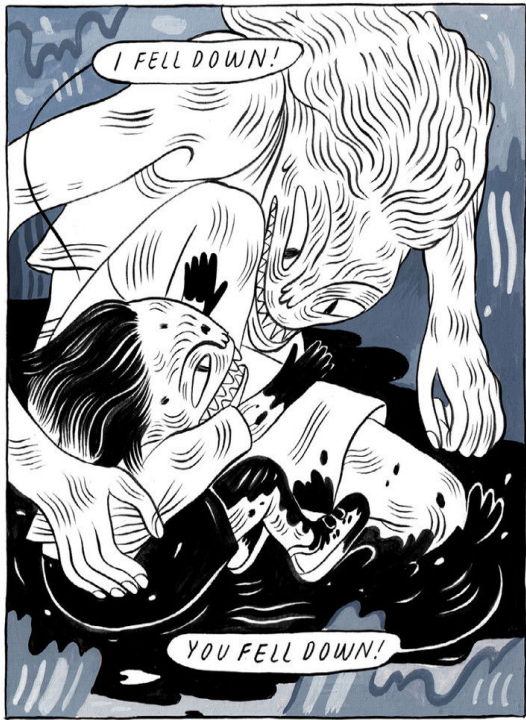


CHAPTER ONE





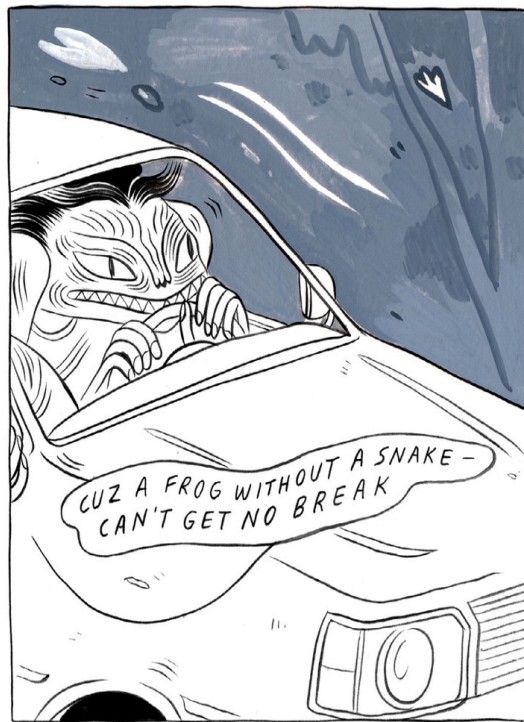
















YOU'RE LATE.

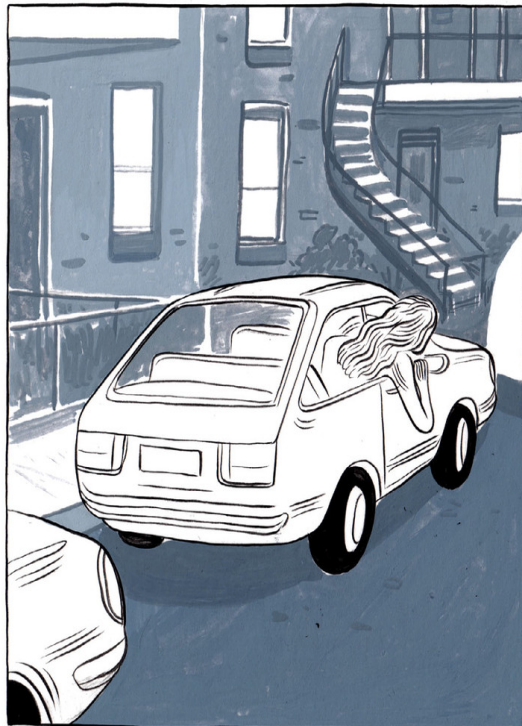






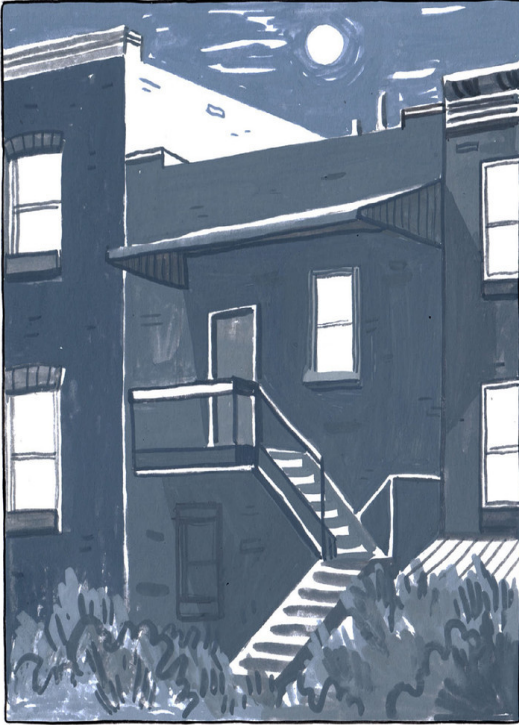






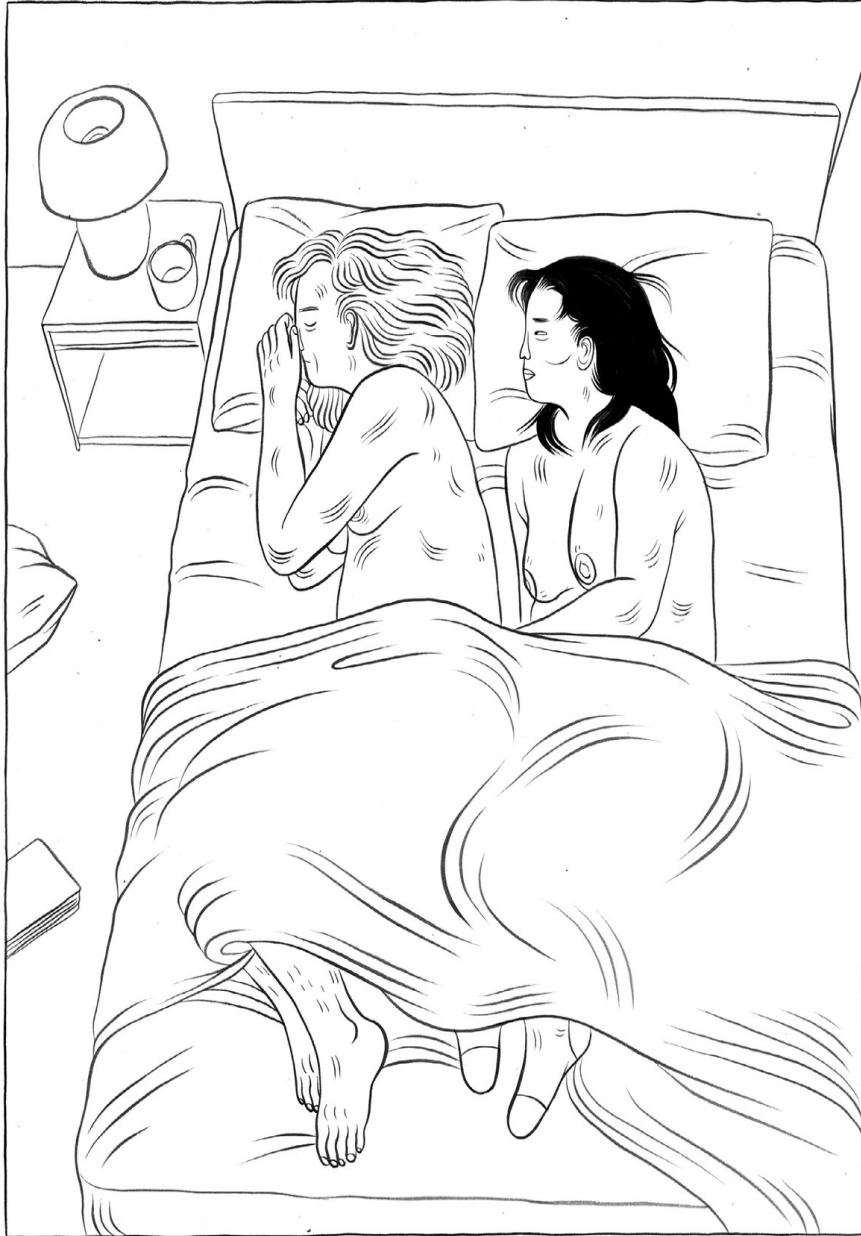


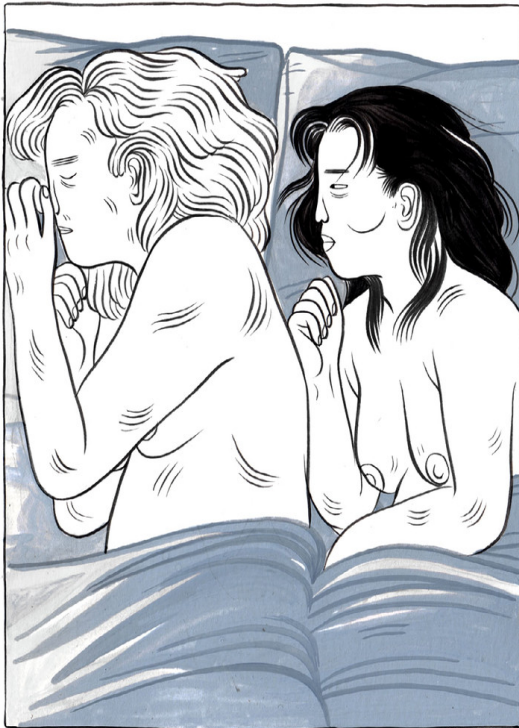












WHEN WE STARTED OUT, BRON
WOULD TEASE ME ABOUT BEING
A TOUGH NUT TO CRACK.

BUT SHE CRACKED ME, WITH
HER CHARM AND HER HUMOR
AND HER PATIENCE.



SHE WAS SO SOFT AND SO FUCKING
SWEET THAT IT WAS HARD TO BE
ANYTHING ELSE, WHEN I WAS
WITH HER.



BUT AS TIME PASSED, AS WE GOT CLOSER,
I REALIZED THERE WAS SOMETHING
HARDER, IN HER, DEEPER IN THERE.













RESISTING THE URGE TO TEXT HER
THROUGHOUT THE DAY



BUT I MANAGED.

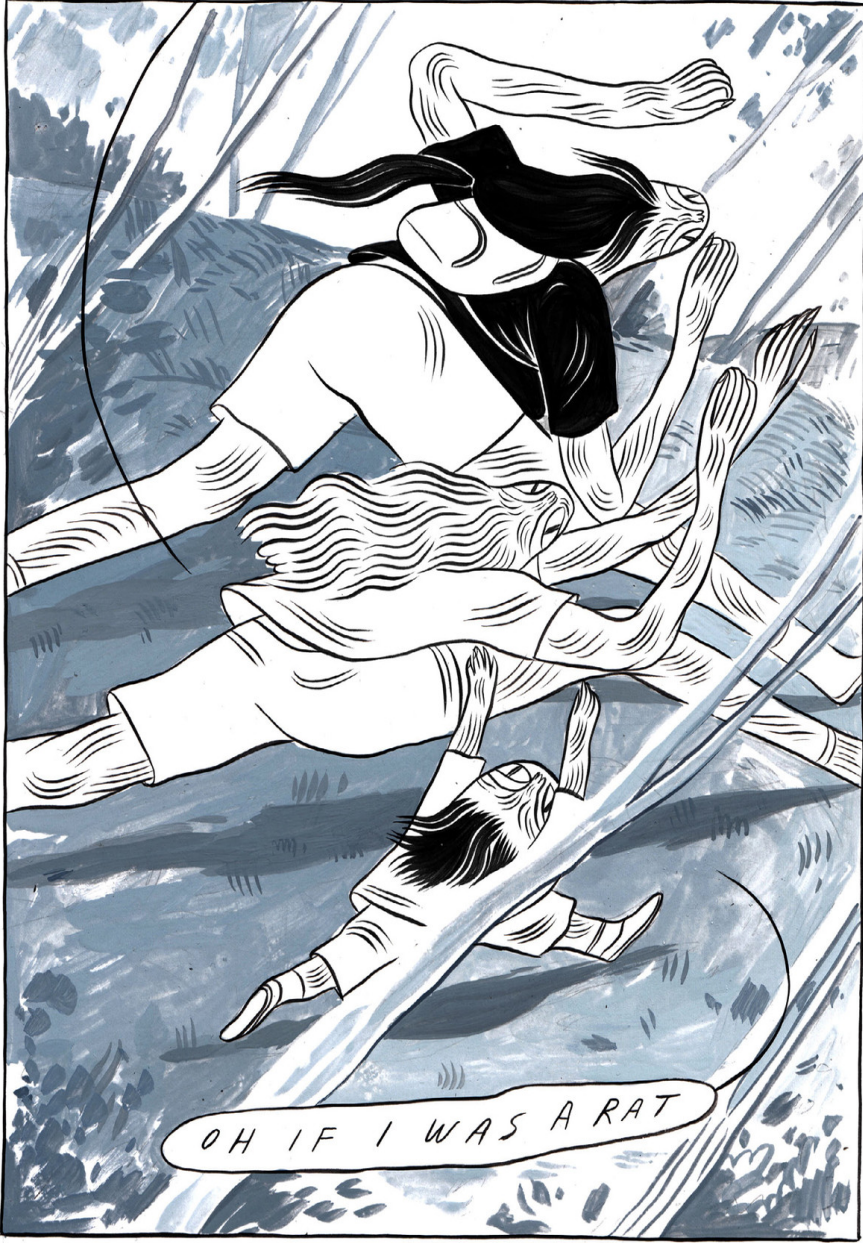




CHAPTER TWO



OH IF I WAS A RAT!



OH IF I WAS A RAT



























AND DON'T YOU PISS ME AROUND, AMANDA!
YOU ALWAYS FIND A WAY TO UNDERMINE
ME AND BRON'S TIME WITH NESSIE.

IT WASN'T THE AGREE-
MENT. IT WAS SUPPOSED
TO BE YOU LOOKING
AFTER HER, NOT YOU
AND HER.



SO WHAT IS IT THEN? IT'S FINE
IF I'M ALONE, BUT YOU
DON'T WANT TO HAVE
NESSIE GETTING ALL
CORRUPTED BY SEE-
ING NASTY, FREAKY
QUEER LOVE?



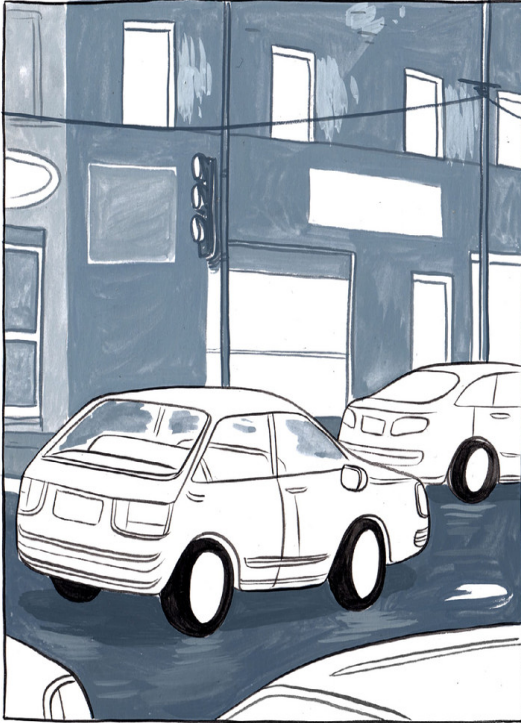
YOU'RE JEALOUS OF HER. YOU'RE THREAT-
ENED BY HER BEING DIFFERENT FROM YOU
AND YOU'RE THREATENED THAT NESSIE
ADORES THE SHIT OUT OF HER -



SHE IS DIFFERENT! YOU'VE TOLD
ME WHAT SHE CAN BE LIKE -
SHE'S SICK IN THE HEAD!
SO YES, SHE'S DIFFERENT.

AND I THINK
THAT'S BAD FOR
NESSIE.













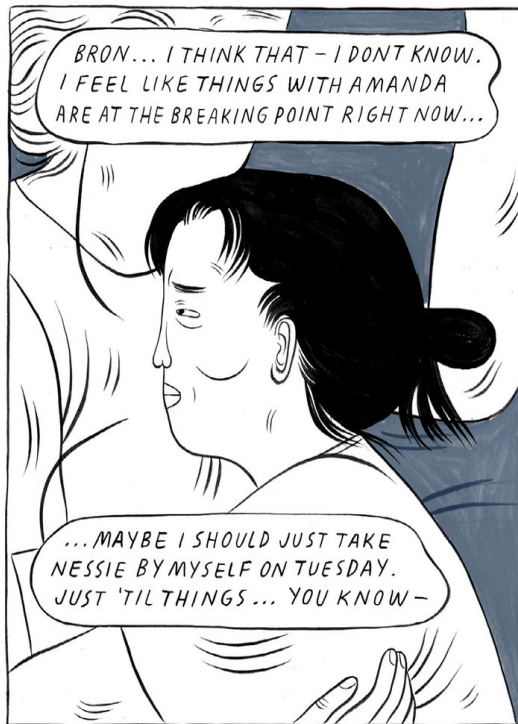






YEAH.

I WAS THINKING. MAYBE NEXT TUESDAY WITH NESSIE WE CAN GO BACK TO THE SAME SPOT. THERE'S ACTUALLY HEAPS OF PARKLAND THERE WE HAVEN'T SEEN YET.



BRON... I THINK THAT - I DONT KNOW. I FEEL LIKE THINGS WITH AMANDA ARE AT THE BREAKING POINT RIGHT NOW...

... MAYBE I SHOULD JUST TAKE NESSIE BY MYSELF ON TUESDAY. JUST 'TIL THINGS ... YOU KNOW -



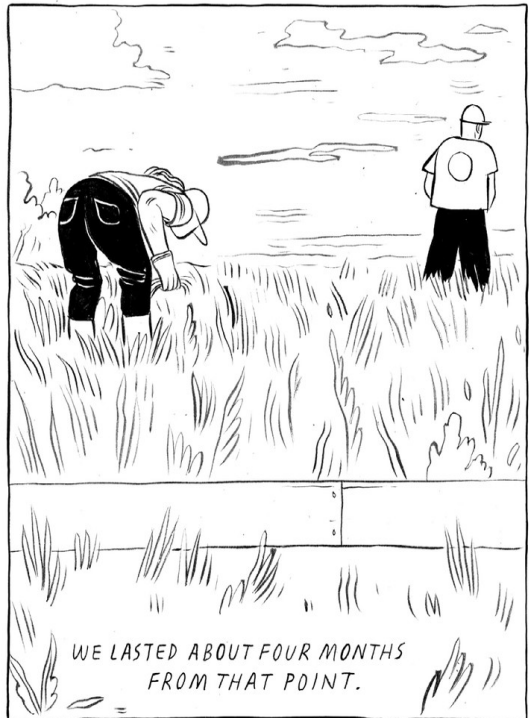
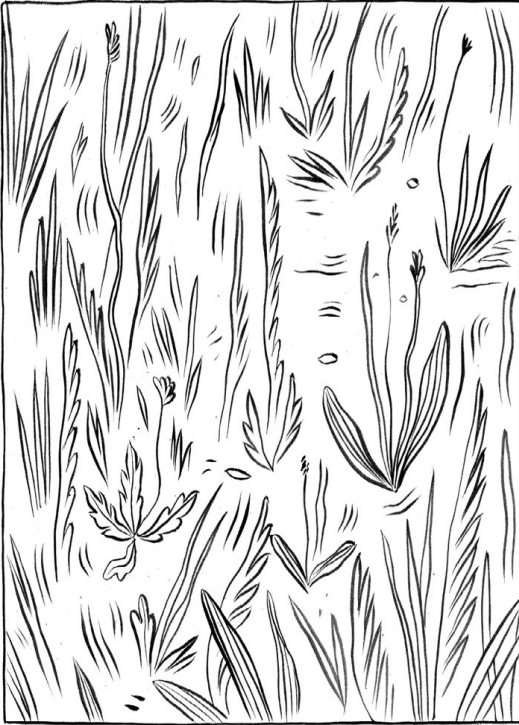
I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU.

I'M NOT SIDING WITH AMANDA. SHE HASN'T GOTTEN TO ME. IT'S JUST - TODAY WAS REALLY HARD, BABE.



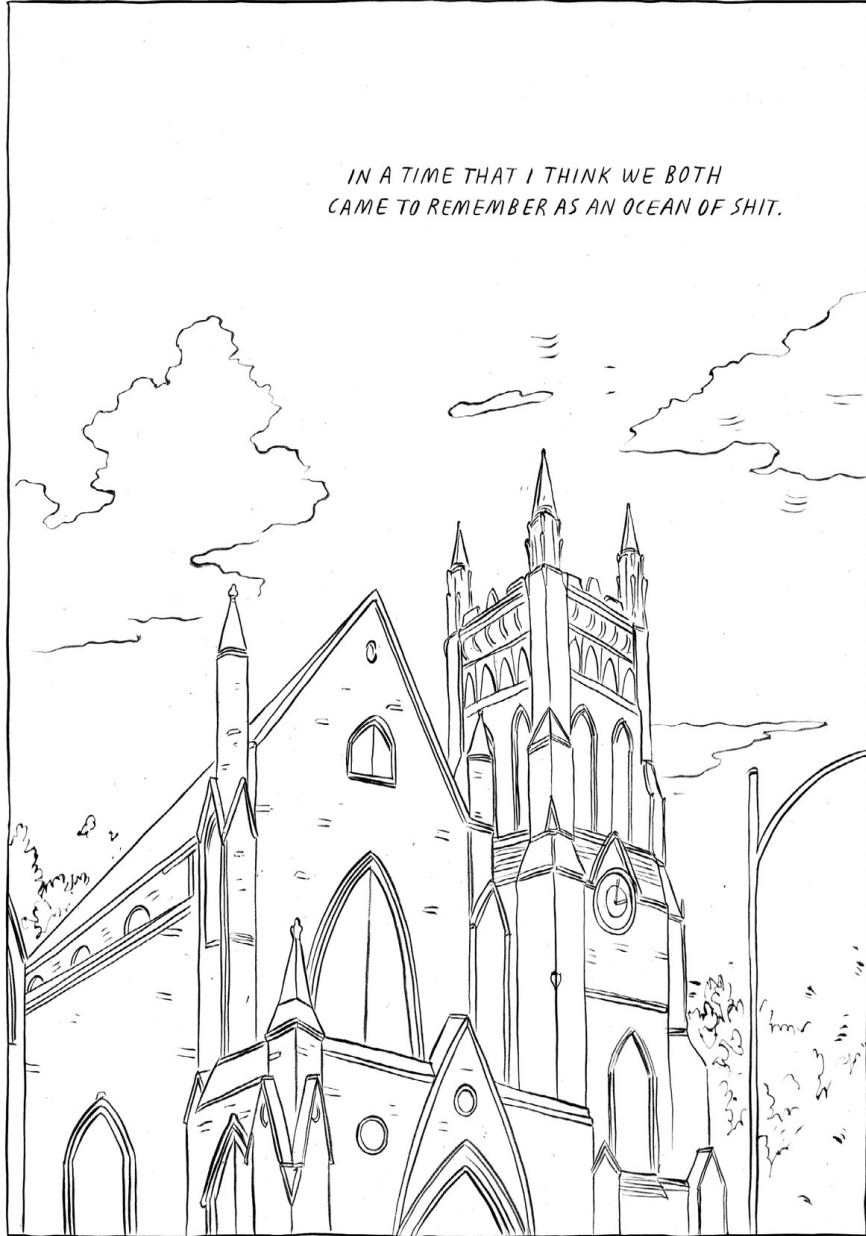
BRON, PLEASE.

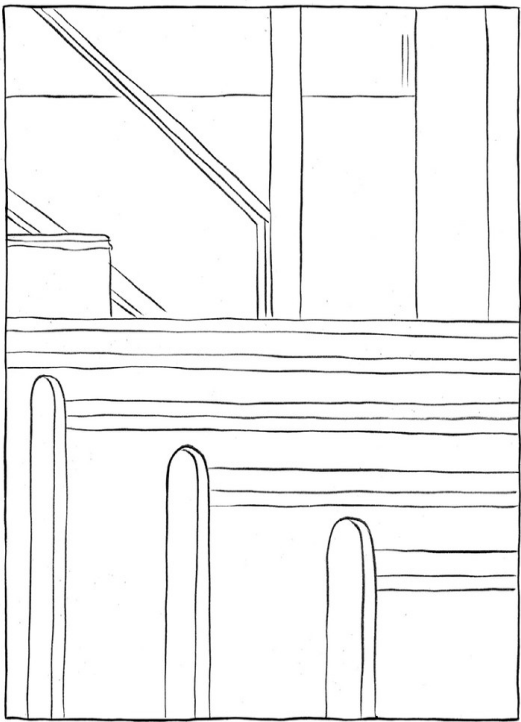
I'M SLEEPING ON THE COUCH.

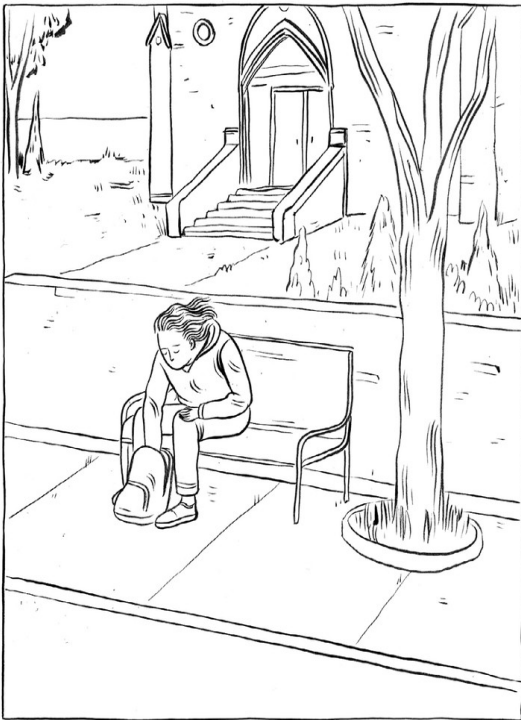




*IN A TIME THAT I THINK WE BOTH
CAME TO REMEMBER AS AN OCEAN OF SHIT.*







HI, DAD?

YEAH, IT'S ME. YOU GOT TIME TO TALK?

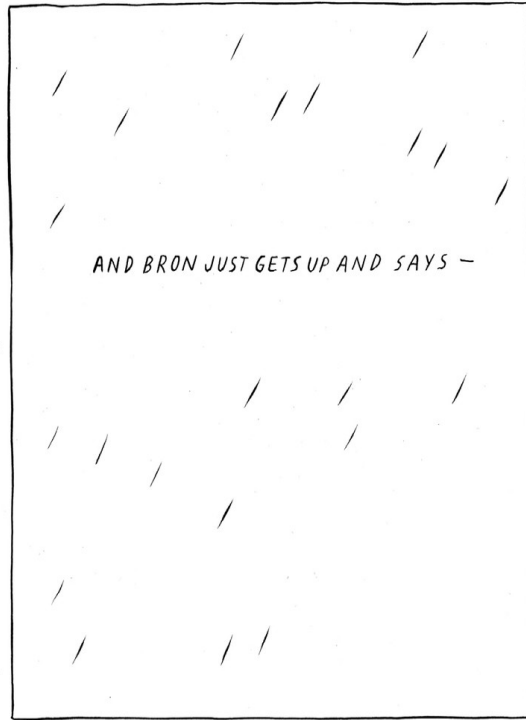
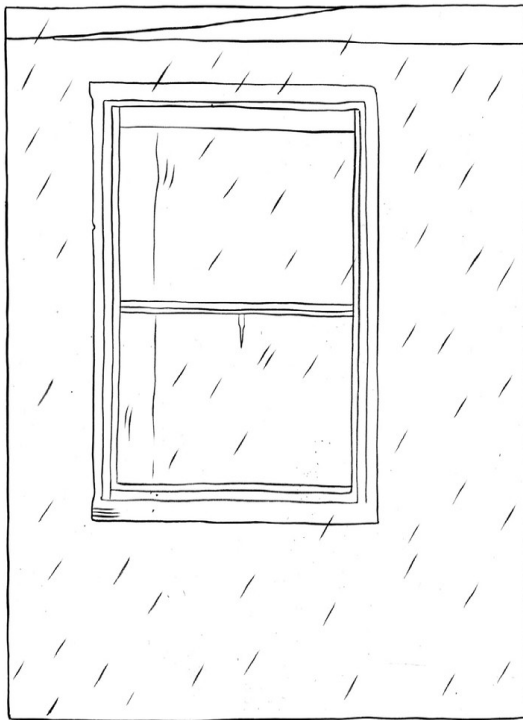




AND THEN,
YOU KNOW -



THE WINTER STARTS ROLLING IN,
AND IT'S A MONDAY AND
IT'S RAINING...



AND BRON JUST GETS UP AND SAYS -











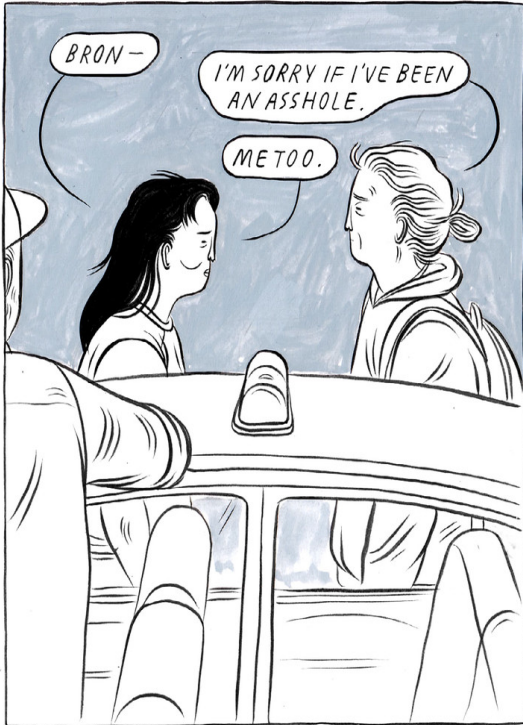






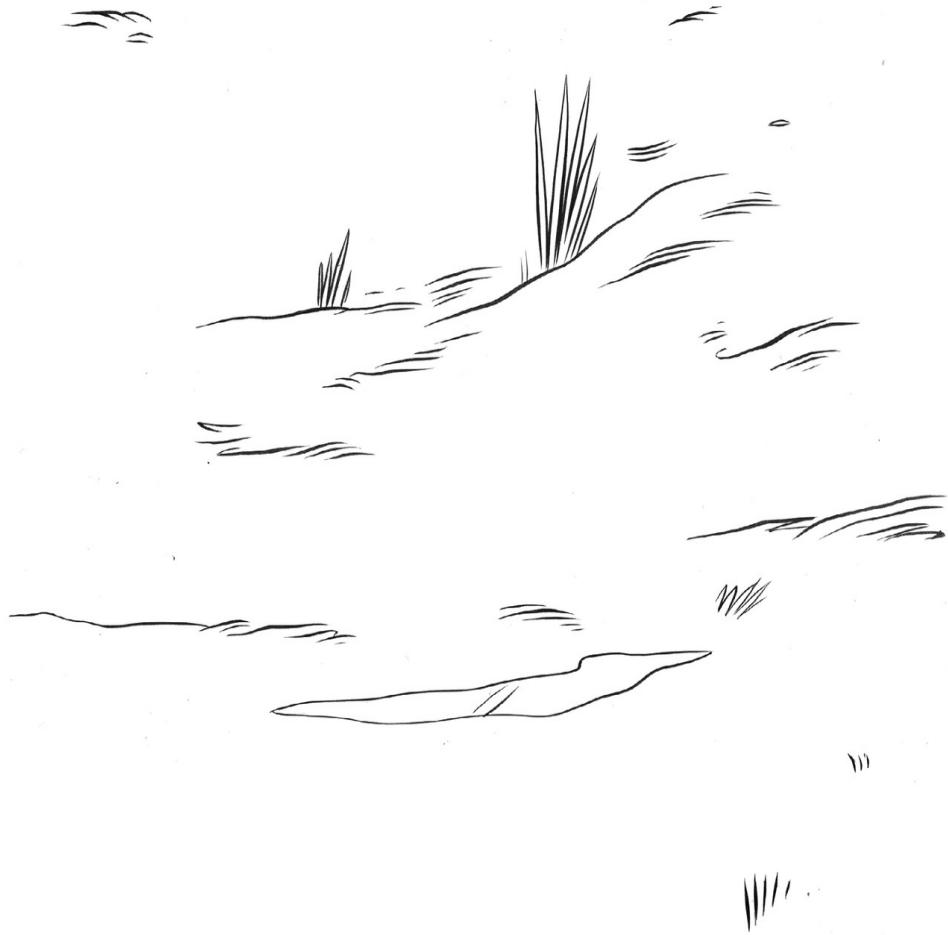












CHAPTER THREE

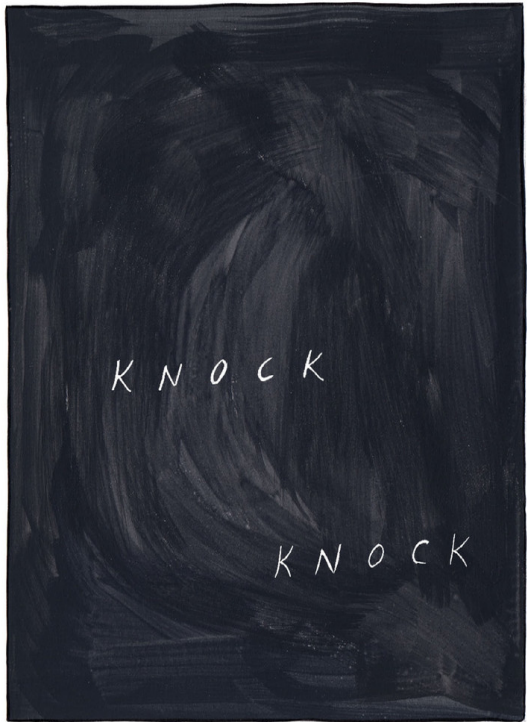
















- GOD, YOU LOOK LIKE HELL. WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?

JESUS CHRIST, IS IT TUESDAY?

YES, RAY. TODAY. TUESDAY. ELEVEN O'CLOCK. YOU HAVEN'T SEEN ANY OF MY CALLS HAVE YOU.



HAVE YOU BEEN DRINKING?!

NO, GOD, OF COURSE NOT. I JUST... I HAVEN'T BEEN SLEEPING SO WELL.



... I CAN'T MAKE OTHER ARRANGEMENTS, I'VE GOT A CLIENT COMING IN HALF AN HOUR.

IT'S FINE, I'VE GOT IT.



WE'RE GONNA HAVE FUN, RIGHT? WE GOT THIS.

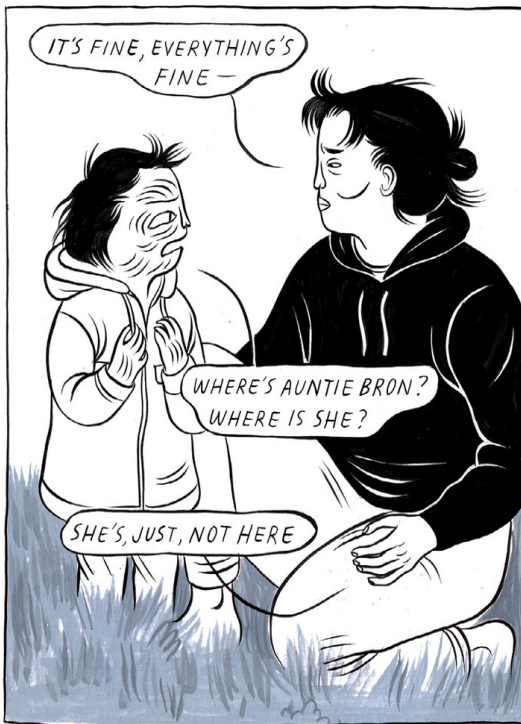
WE GOT THIS!!

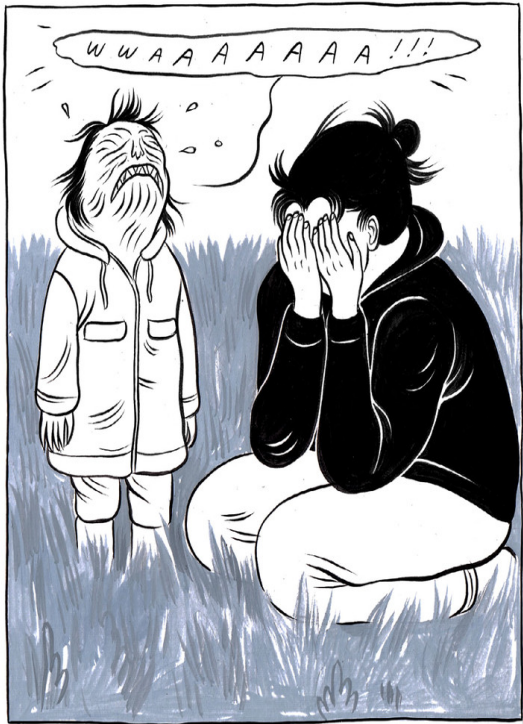




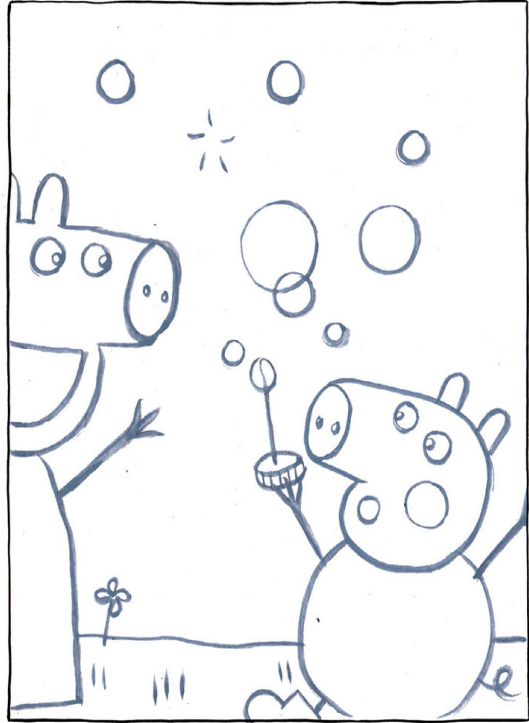
















PAT))



CAN YOU TAKE NESSIE FOR A FEW TUESDAYS AND SATURDAYS? I FEEL LIKE I'M BREAKING APART, AND I DON'T WANNA UPSET HER—

... DON'T BE STUPID, RACHEL.



WHAT?

THIS ISN'T ABOUT UPSETTING NESSIE. WHAT YOU'RE ASKING FOR IS TO SHIRK YOUR RESPONSIBILITY SO YOU CAN FALL APART.



N-NO, THAT'S NOT WHAT... I'M SAYING I JUST NEED A SEC—

YOU'RE SAYING THAT YOU WANT TO DISAPPEAR INTO SOME HOLE BECAUSE YOUR DAY GOT A BIT HARDER—

SO YOU CAN JUST POP UP WHEN YOU'RE READY, AND BE FUN AND LIGHT AUNTIE RAY AGAIN.



YOU THINK I GET TO BE FUN AND LIGHT FOR NESSIE EVERY DAY?



WHEN DAVE WALKED OUT, I CRIED EVERY DAY FOR THREE WEEKS. IT FELT LIKE THE WORLD WAS ENDING.

AND NESSIE SAW MOST OF THAT, BUT I DON'T THINK I RUINED HER OR ANYTHING.



I STILL GOT HER UP, AND FED, AND DRESSED. EVERY DAMN DAY.



AND THEN YOU STEPPED IN, EVEN THOUGH WE HADN'T TALKED SINCE DAD DIED, AND YOU SAID YOU WERE DOWN.

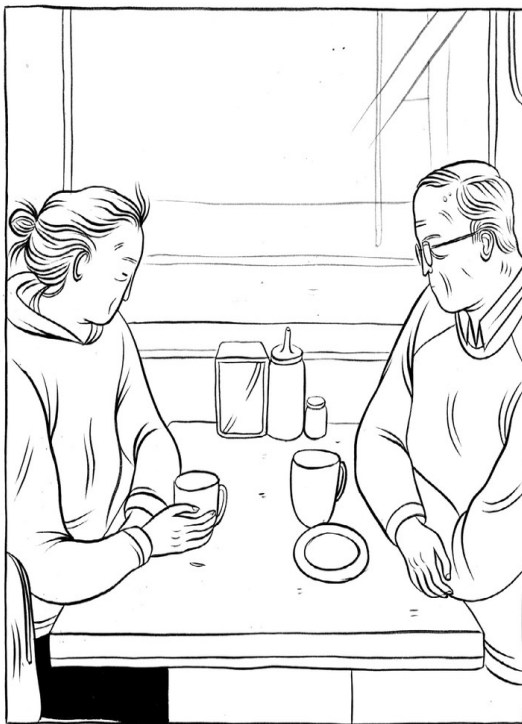
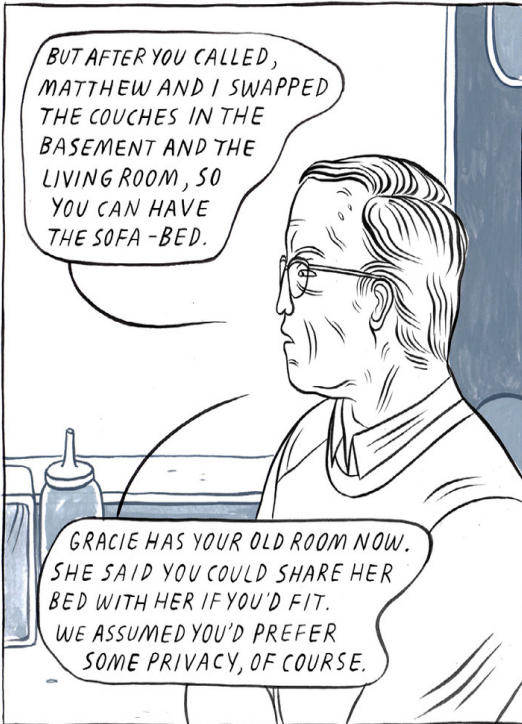
DO YOU KNOW WHAT DOWN MEANS?





















... BUT ANYWAY. THIS KID, HER NAME IS NESSIE. SHE'S SIX, AND A BIT SMALL FOR HER AGE.

BUT SHE'S LOUD AND VIBRANT AND VERY IMAGINATIVE.

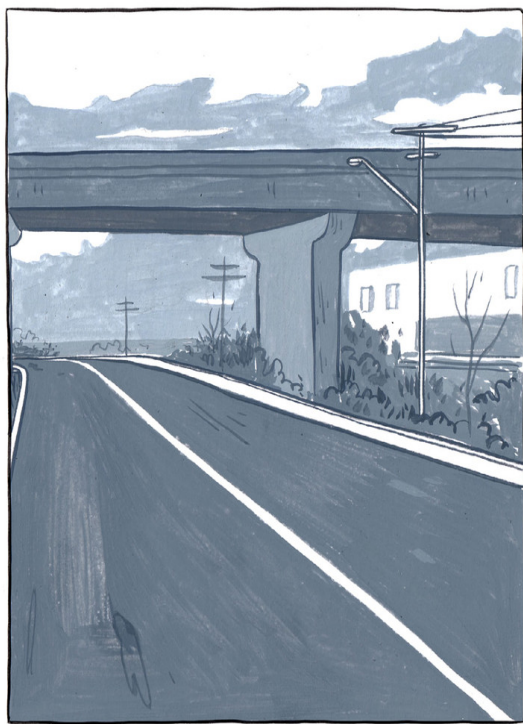
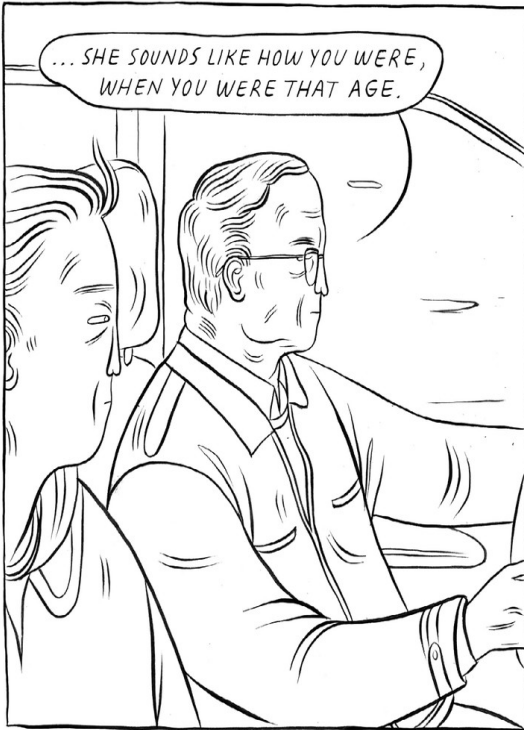


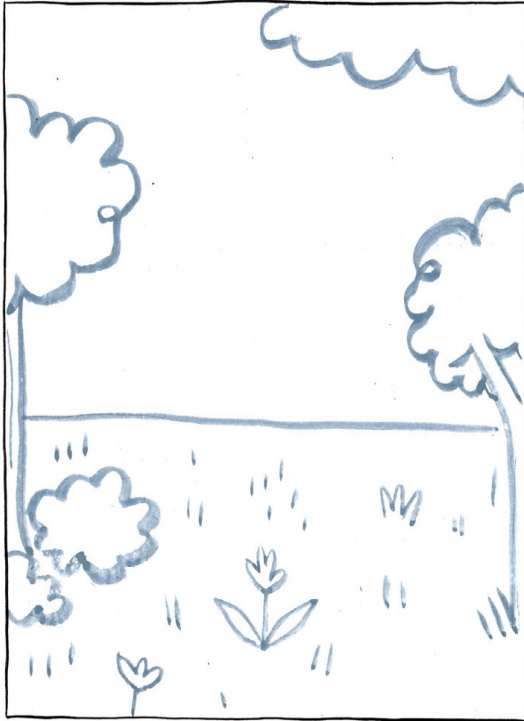
SHE'S A GOOD LEADER WITH GAMES. WHEN SHE'S AT DAYCARE, SHE GETS THE OTHER KIDS TO ENTER THESE, LIKE, SCENES - OR WORLDS - WITH HER.

IT'S LIKE SHE KNOWS HOW TO GET EVERYONE FEELING AS EXCITED AND FREE AS SHE IS.



SHE'S SO... WEIRD. AND EMOTIONAL. AND JUST, VERY FULL OF LOVE. AND SPIRIT.















SO WE NEED A BOAT -
BIGGER THAN THAT, AUNTIE RAY!

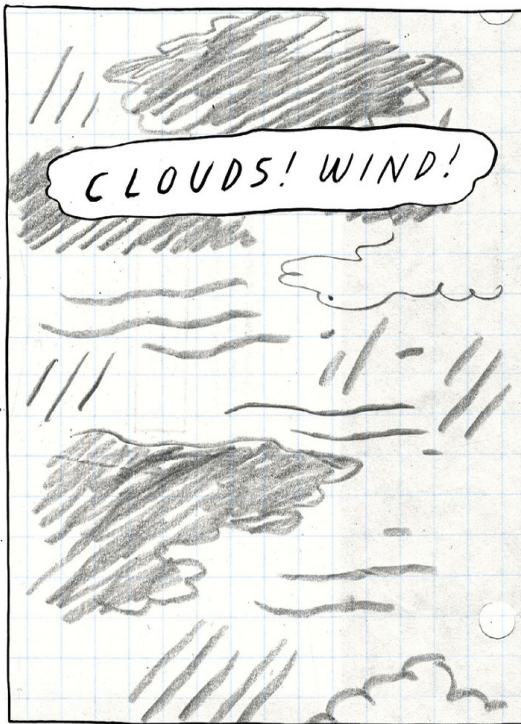
GOT IT.



AND WE'RE ALL IN THE BOAT, AND
THE WATER'S ALL FROTHY AND WAVY -

BUT IT'S A RIVER, BUB,
DON'T YOU THINK IT?

AND IT'S
STORMY
NOW, WATCH OUT
AUNTIE RAY!



CLOUDS! WIND!

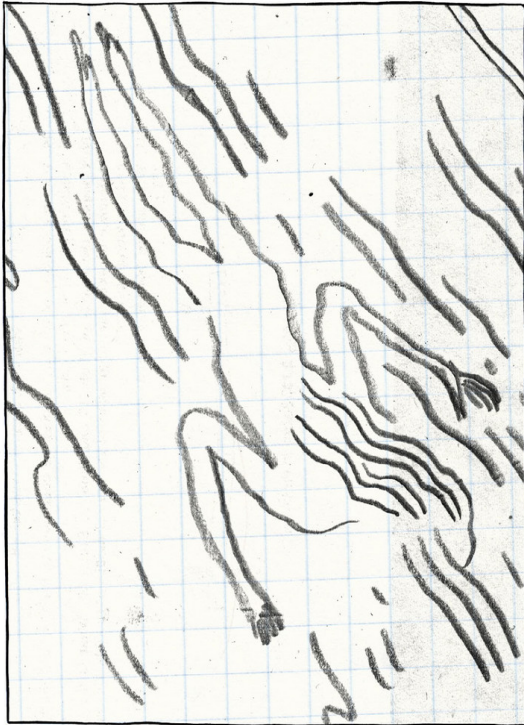


A BIG STORM IS COMING
WITH RAIN AND LIGHTNING









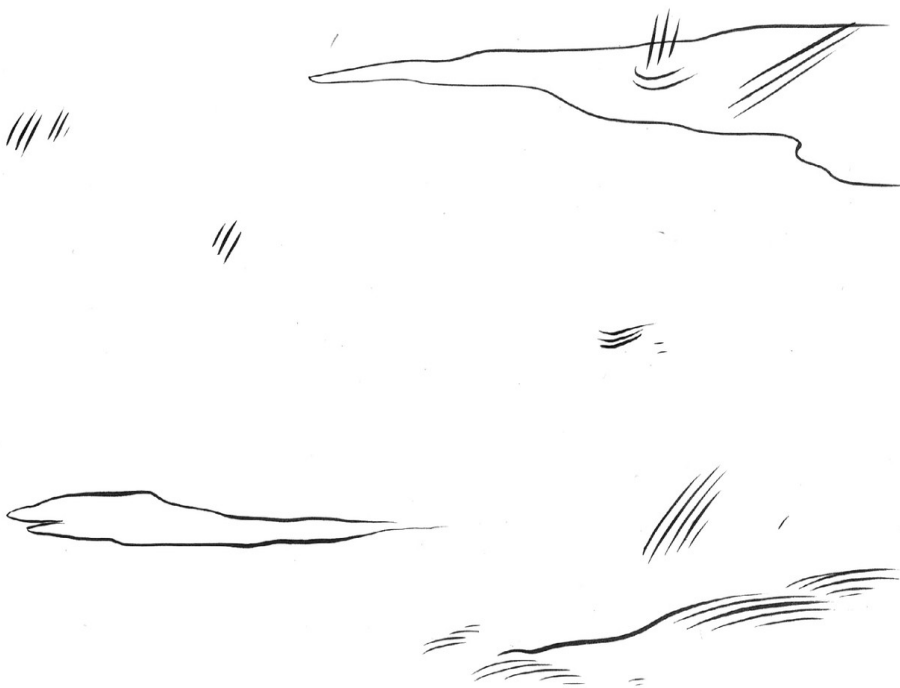


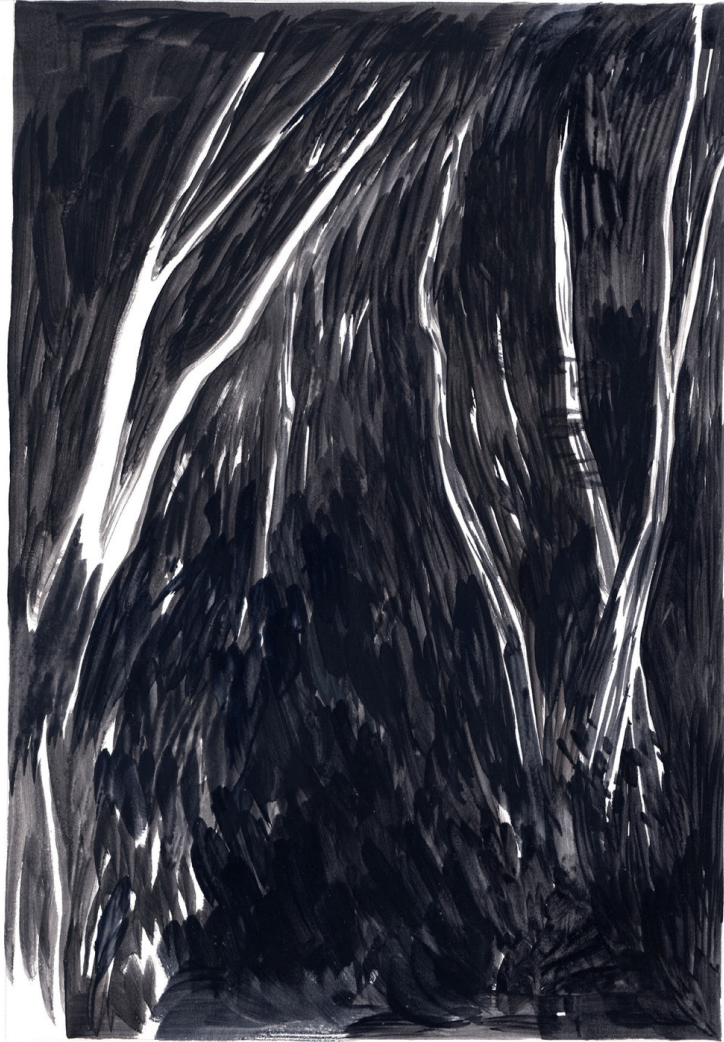






CHAPTER FOUR













GODDAMMIT—

JUST TAKE MY HAND, BABE,
YOU HAVE TO MOVE!!



I DON'T
WANT YOU.



BRON, PLEASE—



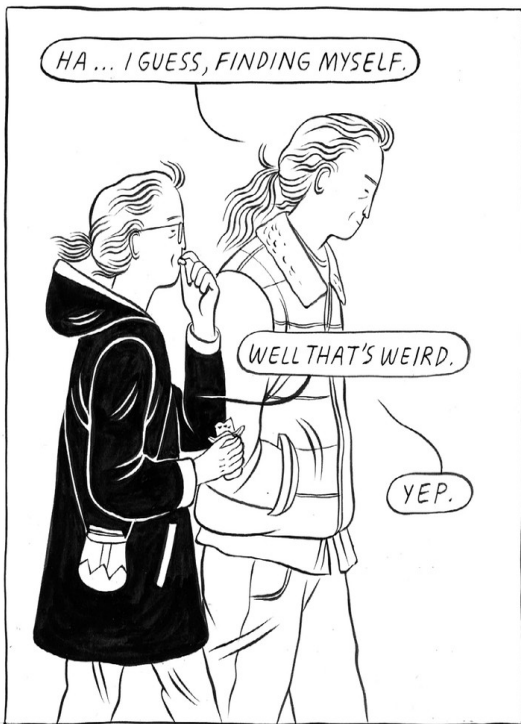
I DON'T
WANT YOU

















WHAT ABOUT THAT GIRL?
YOU WERE TOGETHER, RIGHT?

RAY. YEAH, WE WERE TOGETHER.
I THINK I'VE RUINED IT, THOUGH.



WHY?

WE'VE BEEN LIVING TOGETHER.
AND I'VE BEEN SUPER DEPRESSED AND
LOST AND JUST... I'VE BEEN
DRAGGING HER DOWN.



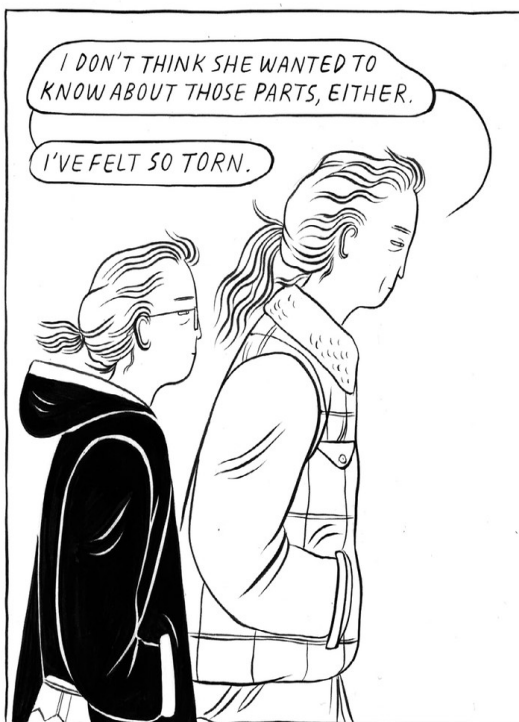
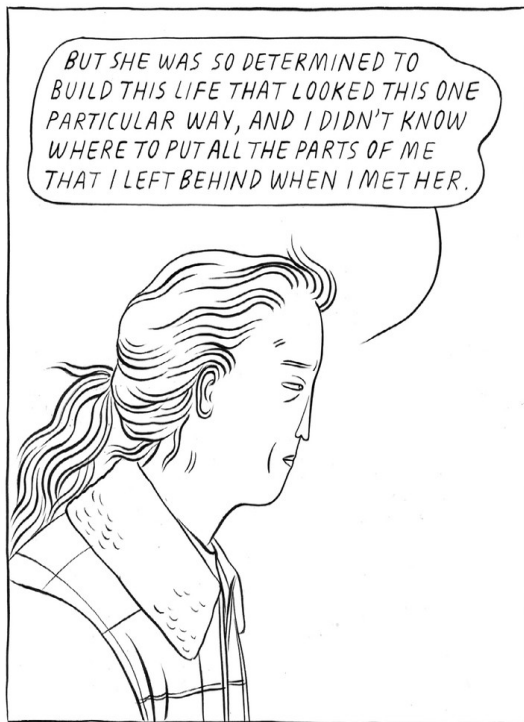
AND THEN I GOT SICK OF FEELING
GUILTY AND HOPELESS, SO I THOUGHT THE
BEST THING WAS JUST TO ... REMOVE MYSELF.

AND I MADE A
MESS OF LEAVING.

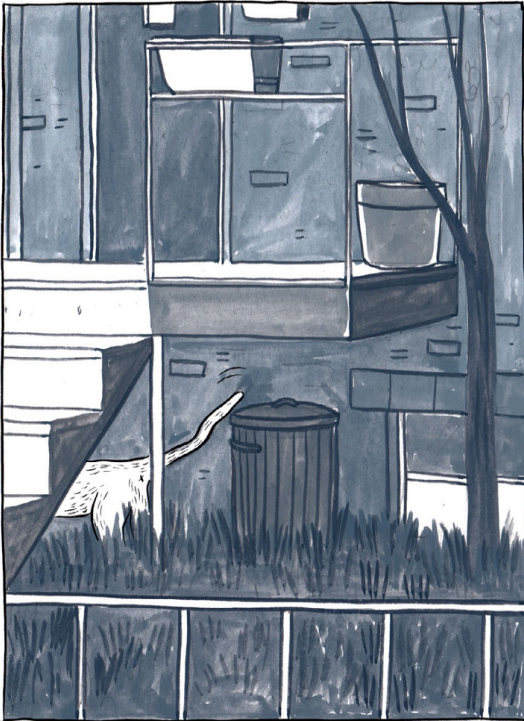


SHE DIDN'T WANT ME TO, BUT SHE
ALSO WASN'T HAPPY WITH THE WAY
THINGS WERE. AND SHE WAS JUST SO
HELL-BENT ON BEING THE REASON, IN
SOME WAY, THAT I GOT BETTER.

I COULDN'T HACK IT.









MY RELATIONSHIP WITH MUM WAS WHATEVER, DAD WAS DEAD, AND AMANDA WAS SHACKED UP WITH NESSIE AND THAT DOUCHEBAG DAVE.



MOVING BRON OUT OF HER FAMILY HOME WAS LIKE THE RUSH OF A JAILBREAK.



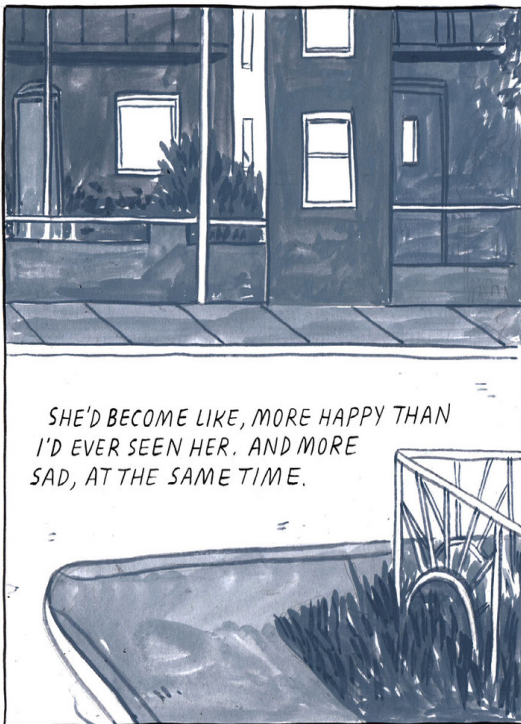
WE SET UP THE APARTMENT FOR THE TWO OF US, AND ALL WE TALKED ABOUT WAS CHOOSING OUR OWN FAMILY AND LIVING EXACTLY HOW WE WANTED TO LIVE.



AND THEN ALL THAT SHIT GOES
DOWN WITH AMANDA AND DAVE,
AND THEN NESSIE'S IN OUR LIFE
ALL OF THE TIME, AND BRON...



I DON'T KNOW HOW
TO EXPLAIN IT —



SHE'D BECOME LIKE, MORE HAPPY THAN
I'D EVER SEEN HER. AND MORE
SAD, AT THE SAME TIME.



AND ALL THE STRUCTURES
WE'D BUILT TOGETHER SUDDENLY
FELT UNBEARABLY FRAGILE.

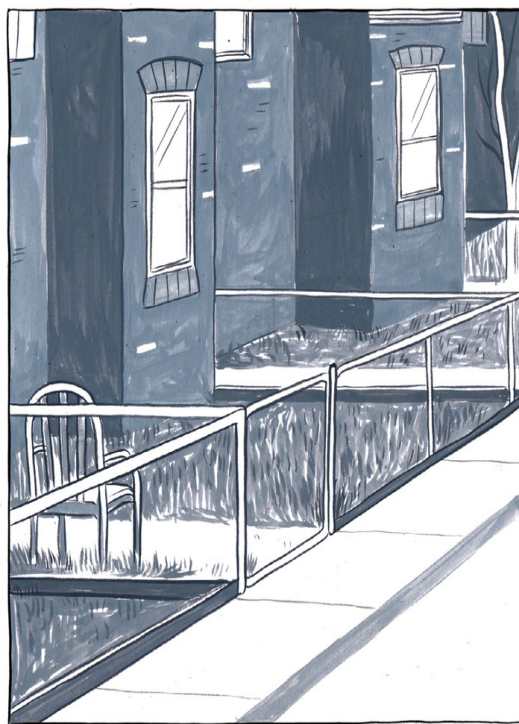


RAY?

WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

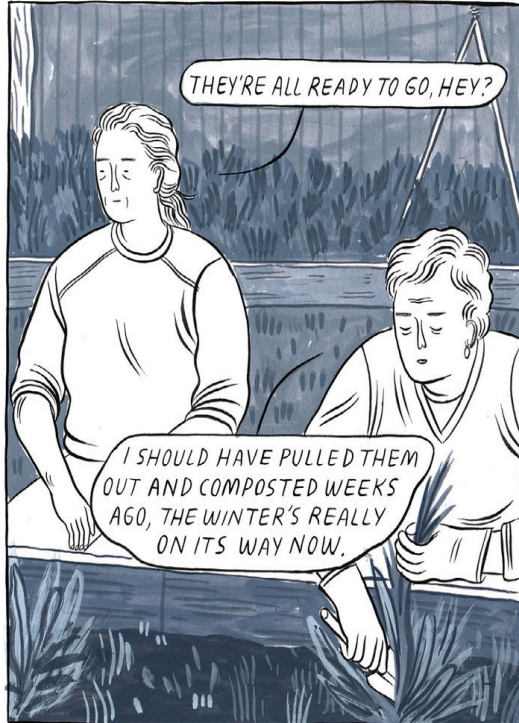
WELL, HI YOURSELF.



















I DON'T THINK THERE IS MUCH MORE TO SAY.



BUT... I NEED TO KNOW WHAT IT ACTUALLY FELT LIKE, FOR YOU TWO.

I NEED TO UNDERSTAND—

THERE'S NOTHING TO UNDERSTAND.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN? DIDN'T IT BOTHER YOU THAT I WAS — WEREN'T YOU WORRIED?



OF COURSE WE WERE WORRIED.

OF COURSE IT BOTHERED US.

BUT CLEARLY YOU HAVE DONE SOME WORK ON YOURSELF, AND LIVING ON YOUR OWN AND DOING WELL IT SEEMS—



SO I DON'T KNOW WHAT MORE THERE IS TO SAY.

I WASN'T LIVING ON MY OWN.









HERE. LOOK WHAT I FOUND.



NO... WHERE WAS THIS?

GREAT AUNTIE MAY'S 80TH BANQUET, I THINK. SHE'S THE ONLY ONE WHO EVER ORDERED SCALLOPS - YOU CAN SEE THEM IN THE BACKGROUND.



OH MY GOD - LOOK AT YOUR FUCKING BRACES!

I KNOW.

LOOK AT MY HAIR.

THAT WAS YOUR "EVERYONE IN THE WORLD MUST KNOW THAT I'M A HUMONGOUS DYKE" PHASE.



PRETTY MUCH.

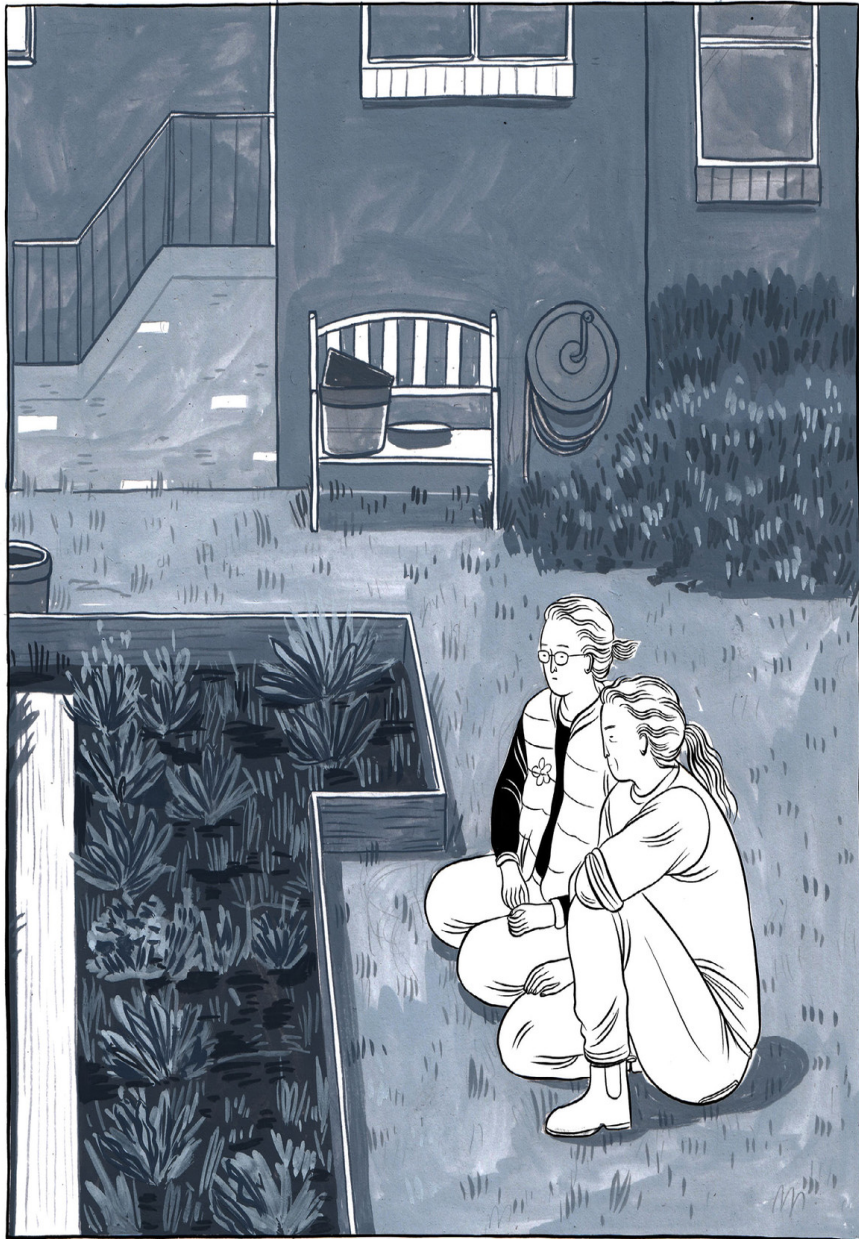
WOW, DAVE. HE LOOKS LIKE SUCH A BABY HERE, NO FACIAL HAIR.



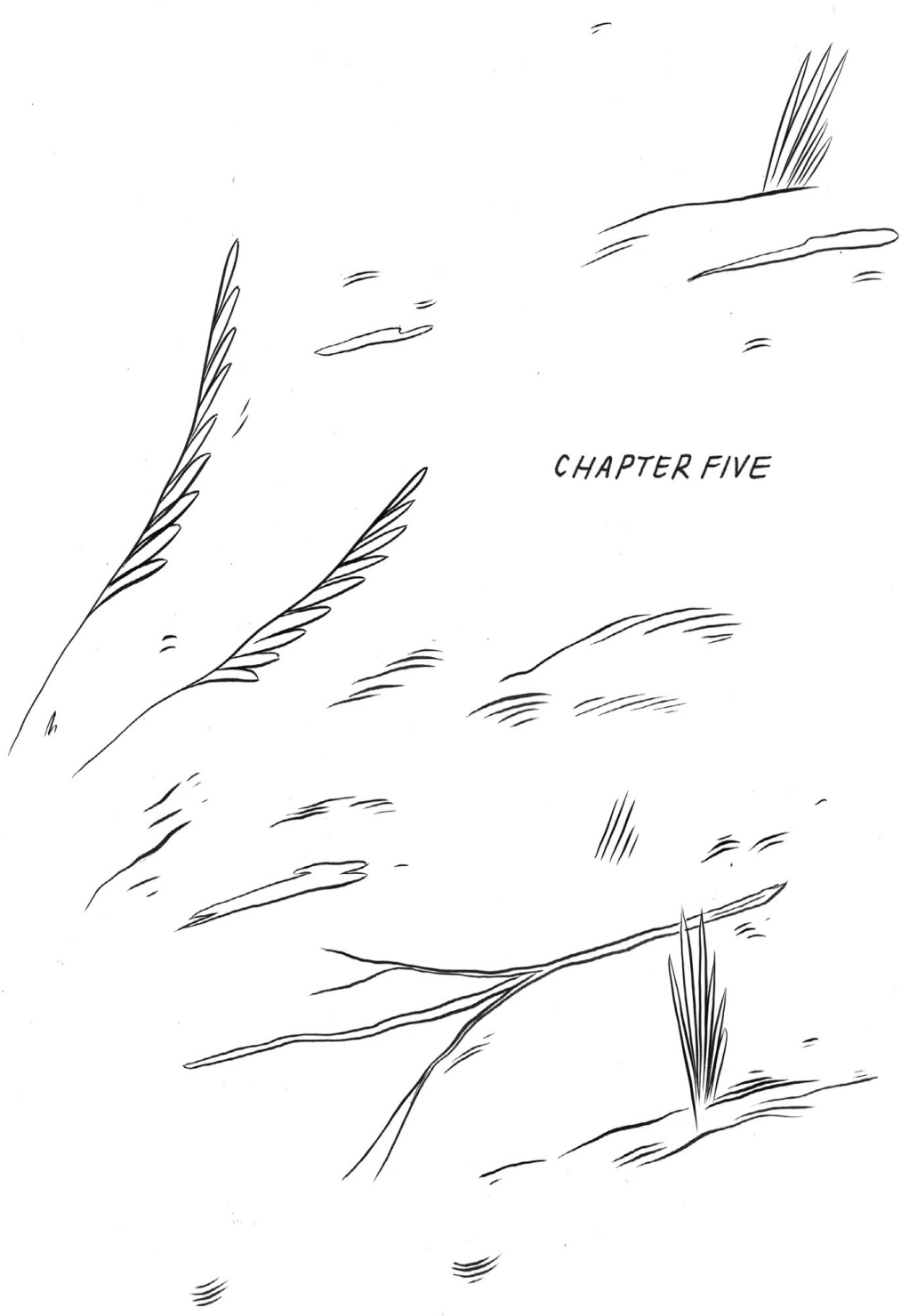








CHAPTER FIVE



*THE FIRST TIME BRON AND I FOUGHT, IT WAS
OVER SOMETHING INCREDIBLY TRIVIAL.*





WE'D SPENT A FULL FIVE DAYS TOGETHER, AND WE WERE GIDDY WITH THE NEW FEELINGS OF FAMILIARITY AND INTIMACY.



SOMEHOW WE'D ESTABLISHED THAT I'D NEVER IN MY LIFE EATEN A NECTARINE, SO BRON MADE IT HER MISSION TO FEED ME ONE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.



WE WENT TO THE STORE AND THEN SAT ON THE CURB, AND SHE STARTED DOING THAT THING THAT SHE DOES.









THIS IS NICE,
BY THE WAY.



BEING HERE, WITH YOU AND NESS.

IT'S NICE... SEEING HOW YOU
TWO ARE TOGETHER.



... I'D BEEN AVOIDING IT, ACTUALLY.
FOR AGES NOW. WORK MADE THAT
EASY, BUT... WELL.

WELL, YOU DID MAKE
IT PRETTY OBVIOUS HOW
MUCH YOU HATED BRON-



I NEVER HATED HER. AND IT
WASN'T EVEN ABOUT THAT.

... I THINK I DIDN'T WANT
TO SEE HOW MUCH I WAS
MISSING OUT ON.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?



















AND SO YOU END UP FEELING CRAZY.

...



WELL, IT CAN BE LIKE THAT FOR ME A LOT, EXCEPT IT'S LIKE... EVERYONE'S MUM.

AND THEY'RE MAD AT ME FOR JUST EXISTING.



BUT... I DON'T GET IT.

WHEN I TOLD EVERYONE LAST MONTH YOU WERE JOINING US, THEY WERE ALL REALLY INTO IT.



LIKE, EVERYONE WAS ACTUALLY REALLY KEEN TO MEET YOU.

MIRANDA HANGS AROUND SPECIFICALLY TO SAY HEY.



MIRANDA'S STARING EVERYTIME I'M AROUND. I THOUGHT IT WOULD GET BETTER AFTER THE FIRST WEEK, BUT SHE'S ALWAYS UP-AND-DOWNING ME AS IF I CAN'T SEE HER DOING IT.

I DON'T KNOW, GRACE-



THIS SHIT, IT USED TO MAKE ME FEEL LIKE I WAS GOING INSANE.

AND WHEN I MET RAY, IT WAS LIKE SHE JUST WALKED IN AND RIPPED BACK THE CURTAIN AND WAS LIKE, "YEAH, I CAN TOTALLY SEE WHAT'S GOING ON, AND I CAN TOTALLY SEE WHAT IT'S DOING TO YOU."



IT MADE ME FEEL LIKE I COULD BREATHE AGAIN.



SO, GO BACK TO HER

THAT'S NOT WHAT I'M SAYING. I'M SORRY, I DIDN'T MEAN TO MAKE IT SEEM LIKE-



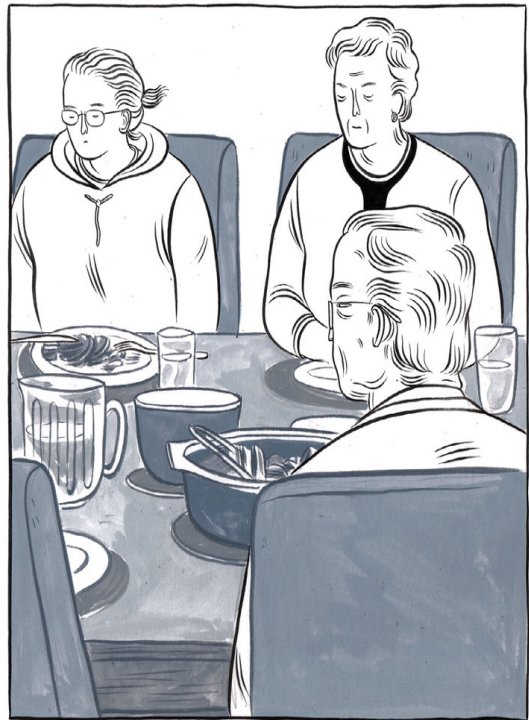


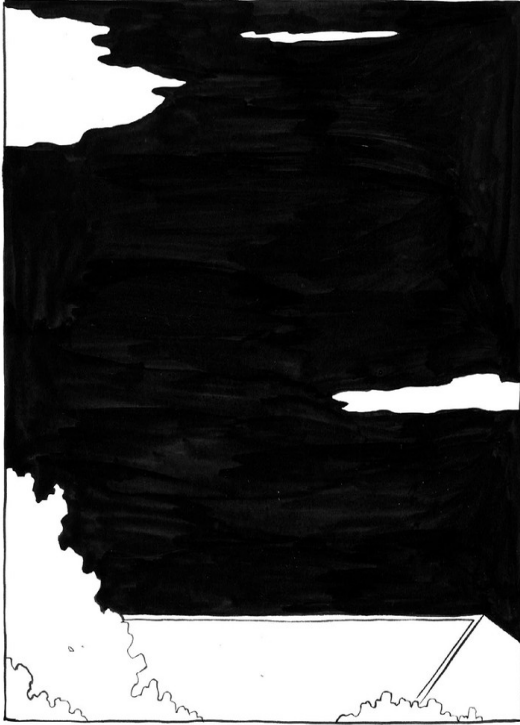






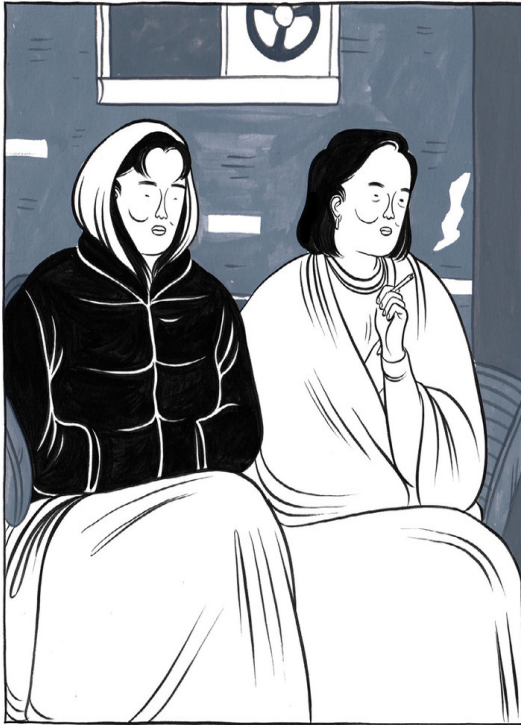






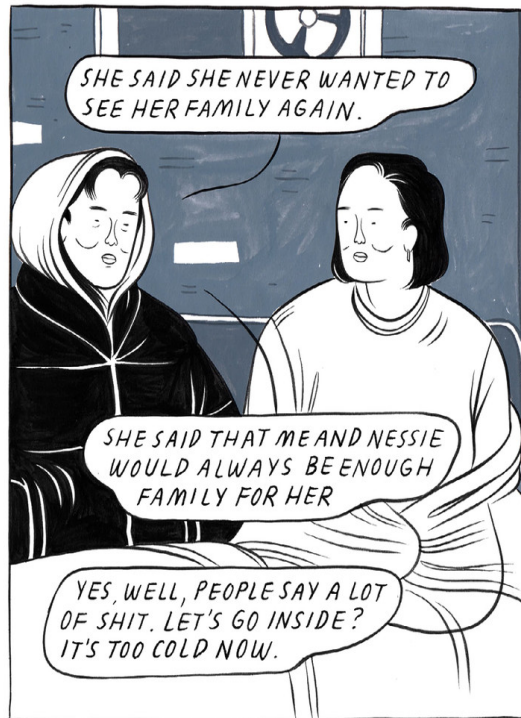
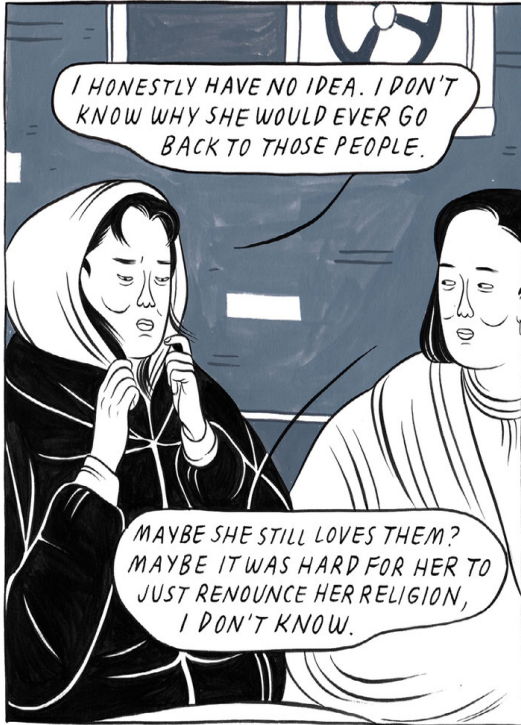
















I THINK IT'S FOOLISH TO PUT ALL YOUR BELONGING INTO ANY ONE PERSON.

YOU DID. WITH DAVE.

EXACTLY.



NESSIE... ASKS ABOUT BRON A LOT.

I USED TO FEEL CONCERNED ABOUT HER BEING IN BRON'S CARE. I FELT LIKE I DIDN'T SIGN UP FOR THAT WHEN YOU SAID YOU'D TAKE NESS TWICE A WEEK.



YEAH, YOU MADE YOUR CONCERNS PRETTY CLEAR

BUT, I DON'T KNOW. THINGS HAVE BEEN...

DIFFERENT. SINCE SHE LEFT.



... WHY DON'T YOU GO OVER AND CHECK IN ON HER?

SHE DOESN'T WANT ME TO. SHE DOESN'T WANT ME ANYMORE.

DID SHE SAY THAT?



TEN YEARS ...



I WAITED TEN YEARS

WE HAVE THE REST OF OUR LIVES -



NO MORE WAITING -



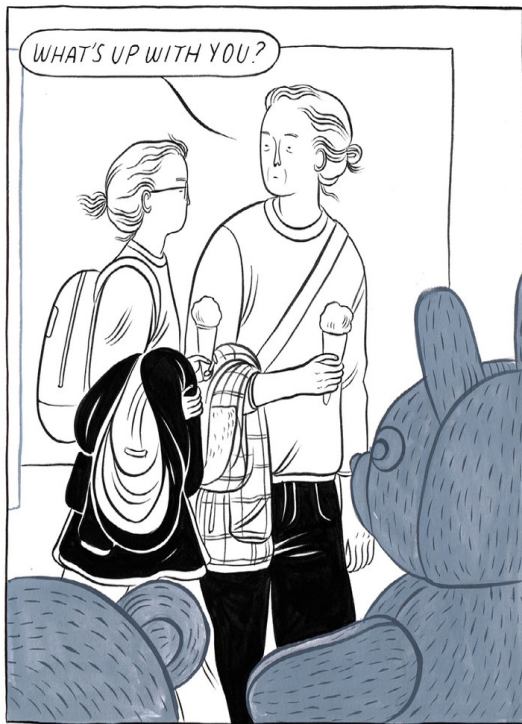
WE'LL NEVER WAIT AGAIN



OH GOD, THIS IS TOO MUCH -

OI! SHHH!!

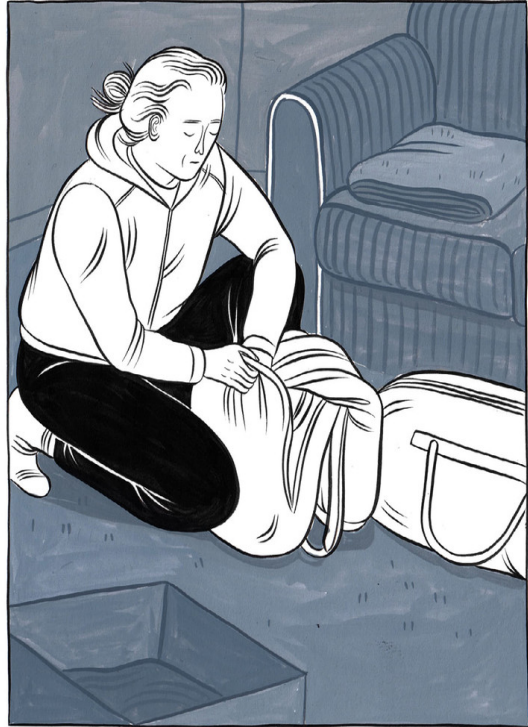






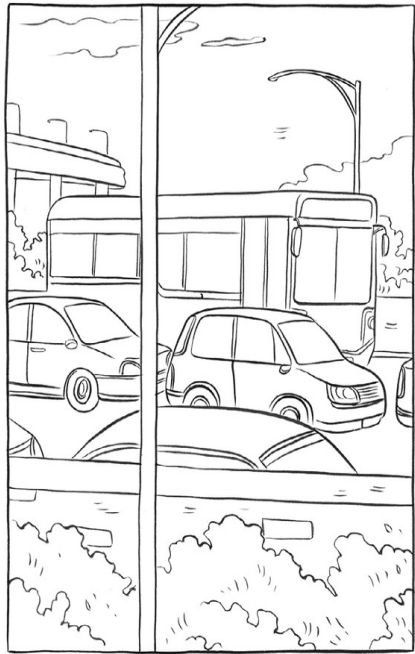








NO I DON'T WANNA BEEE-



THAT SNAIL NO MOORE

]]









IT'S TRUE, SHE'S BRAVE. ALL RIGHT, THAT'S WHAT'S UP TODAY THEN. PLEASSED TO MEET YOU, NESSIE.

PLEASSED TO MEET YOU, AUNTIE HENNY PENNY!



WHAT NOW, SWEETPEA?

WE GO TO THE PARK??



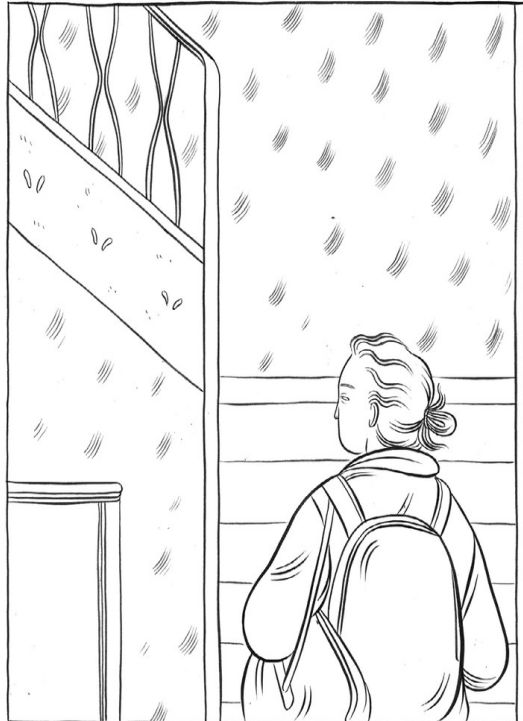
IT'S RAINNING!

YOU DONT JUST WANNA WATCH A MOVIE OR SOMETHING ??

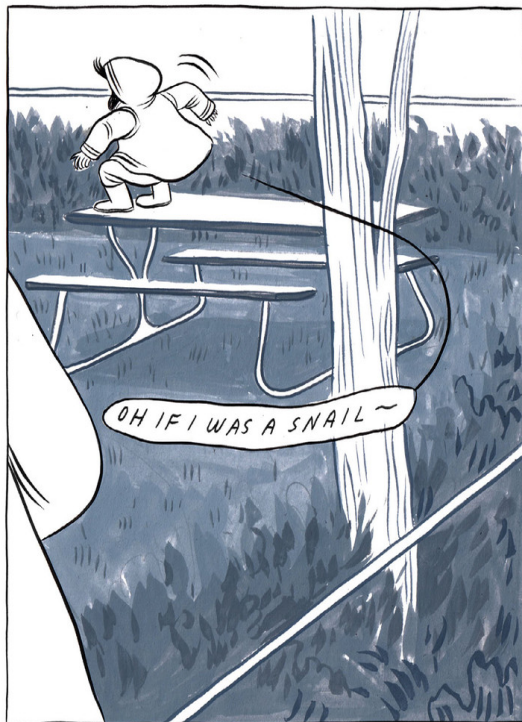
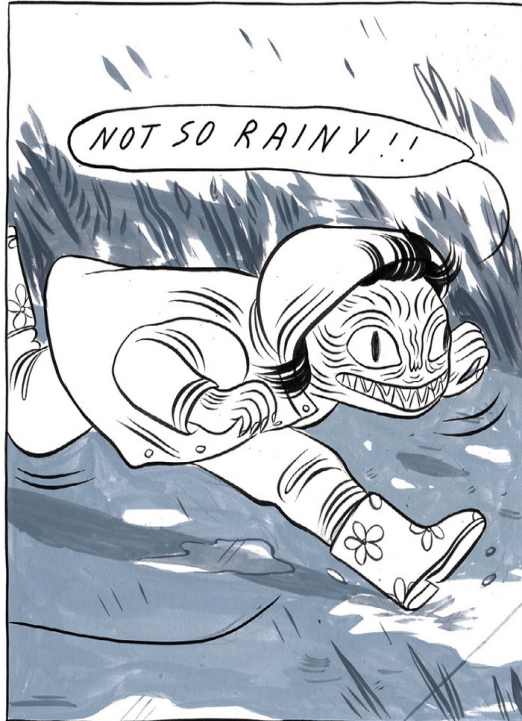


IT'S NOT SO RAINY!!

HENNY PENNY IS A BRAVE AND ADVENTUROUS HEN!!





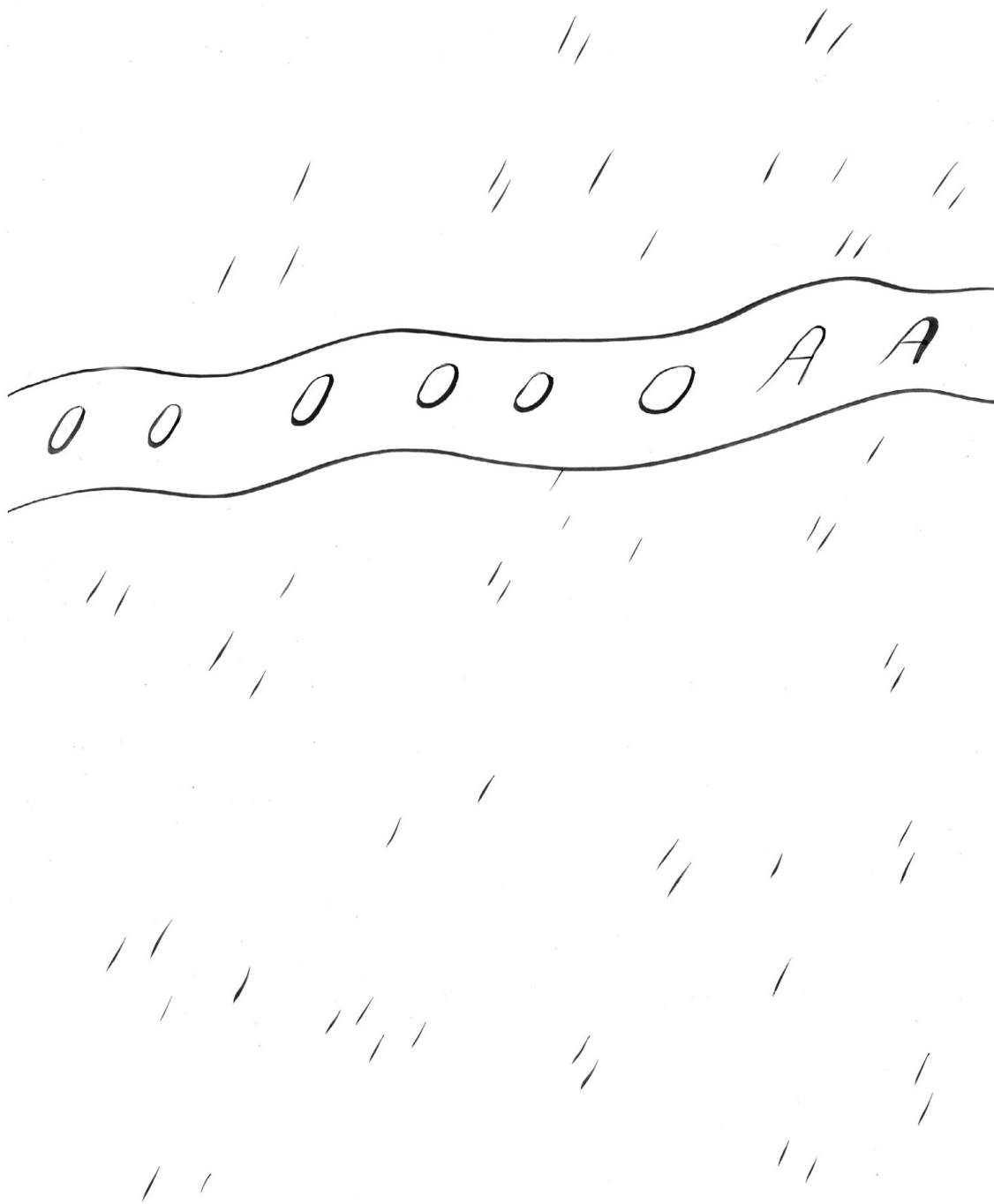


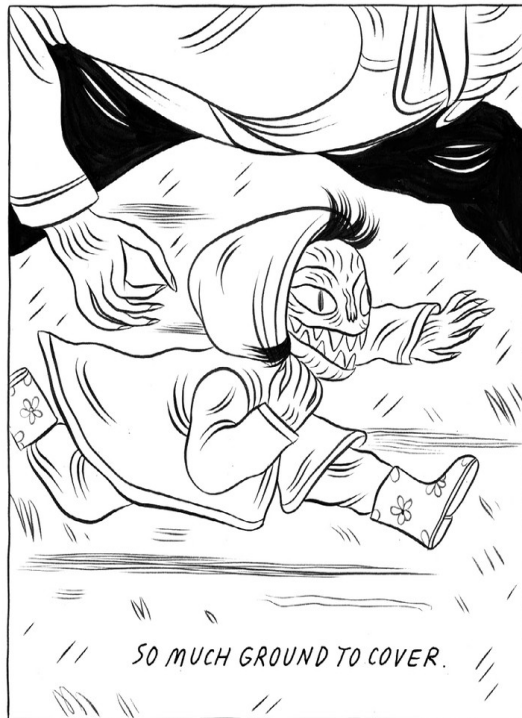
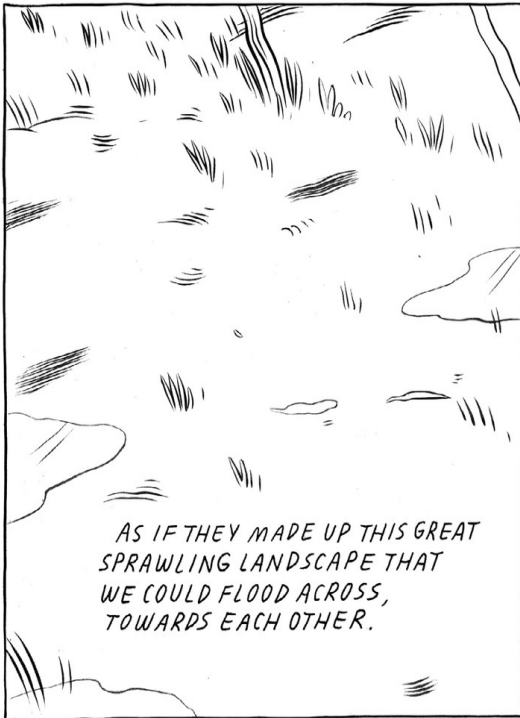
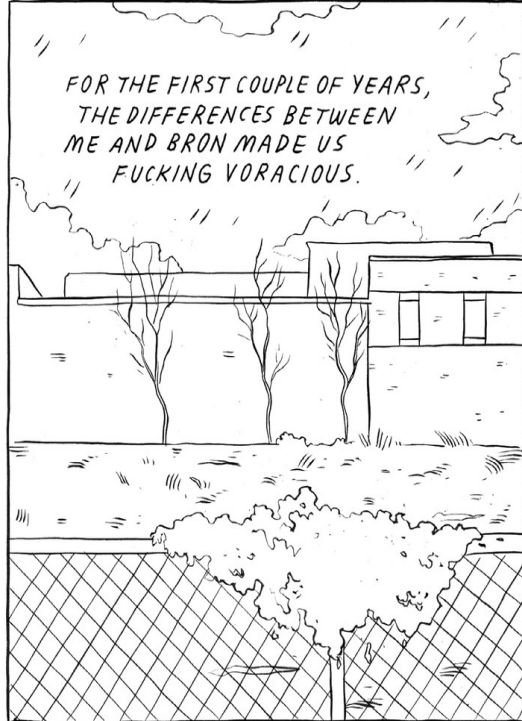














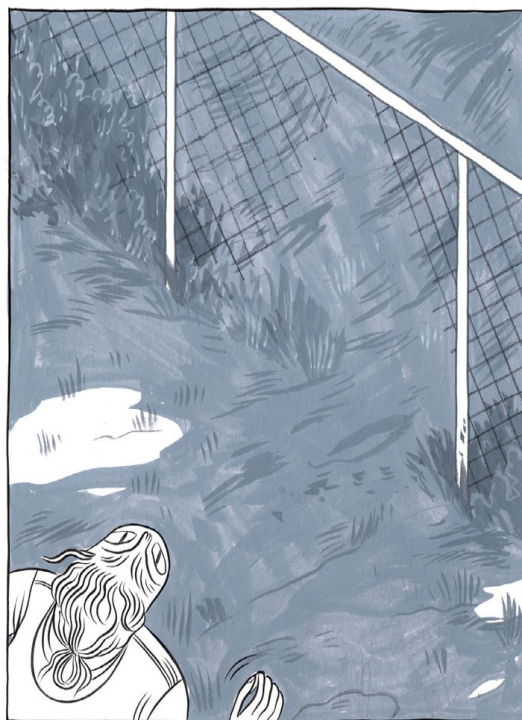
// IT KEPT US UP AT NIGHT-TRYING TO REVEAL AND EXAMINE ALL THE PIECES THAT SEEMED TOTALLY ALIEN, TOTALLY FASCINATING.

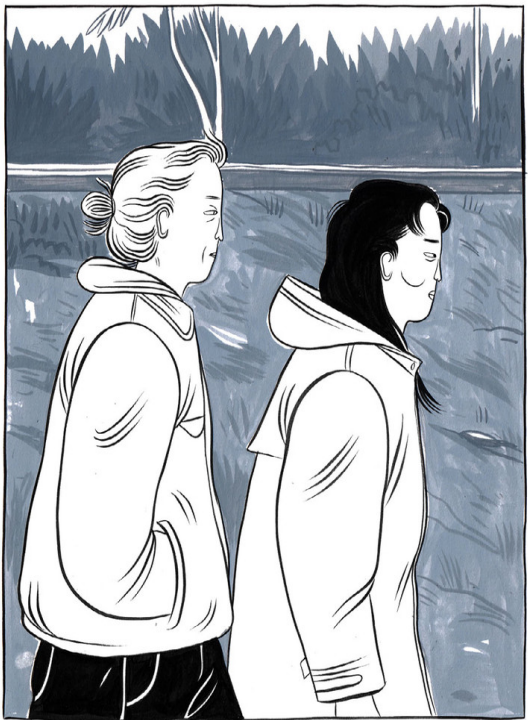


LATER ON, THAT BIG SPACE BECAME ALL MIXED UP WITH LETHARGY, AND SOMETHING LIKE HOPELESSNESS.

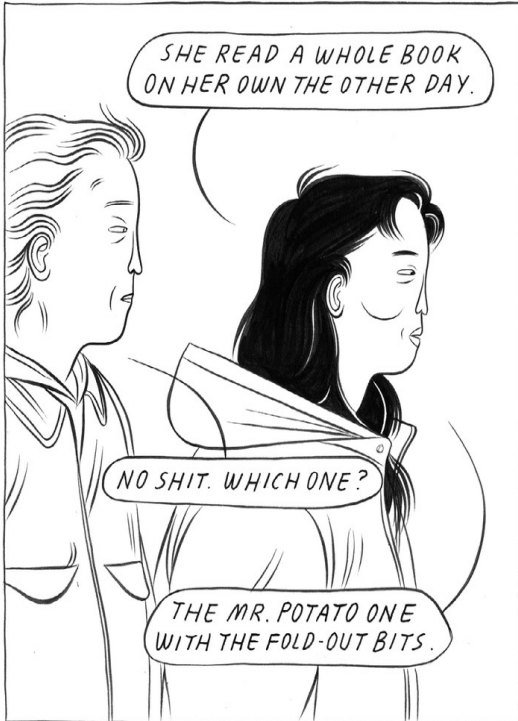


LIKE THERE WAS NO AMOUNT OF STORYTELLING OR SHARING OR TALKING THAT WOULD CLOSE THE GAP.































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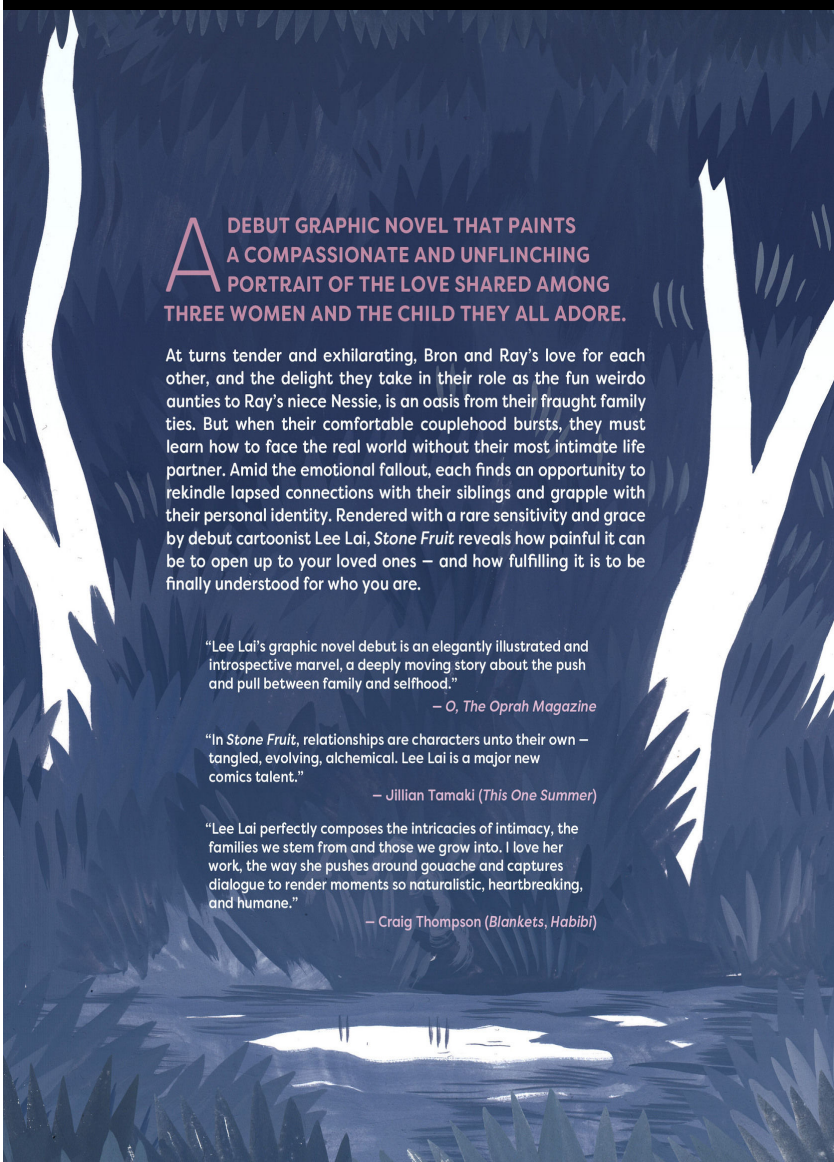
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A DEBUT GRAPHIC NOVEL THAT PAINTS
A COMPASSIONATE AND UNFLINCHING
PORTRAIT OF THE LOVE SHARED AMONG
THREE WOMEN AND THE CHILD THEY ALL ADORE.

At turns tender and exhilarating, Bron and Ray's love for each other, and the delight they take in their role as the fun weirdo aunties to Ray's niece Nessie, is an oasis from their fraught family ties. But when their comfortable couplehood bursts, they must learn how to face the real world without their most intimate life partner. Amid the emotional fallout, each finds an opportunity to rekindle lapsed connections with their siblings and grapple with their personal identity. Rendered with a rare sensitivity and grace by debut cartoonist Lee Lai, *Stone Fruit* reveals how painful it can be to open up to your loved ones – and how fulfilling it is to be finally understood for who you are.

"Lee Lai's graphic novel debut is an elegantly illustrated and introspective marvel, a deeply moving story about the push and pull between family and selfhood."

— O, *The Oprah Magazine*

"In *Stone Fruit*, relationships are characters unto their own – tangled, evolving, alchemical. Lee Lai is a major new comics talent."

— Jillian Tamaki (*This One Summer*)

"Lee Lai perfectly composes the intricacies of intimacy, the families we stem from and those we grow into. I love her work, the way she pushes around gouache and captures dialogue to render moments so naturalistic, heartbreaking, and humane."

— Craig Thompson (*Blankets, Habibi*)

