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Anxiety box: the making of

Austin Han

Vassar College

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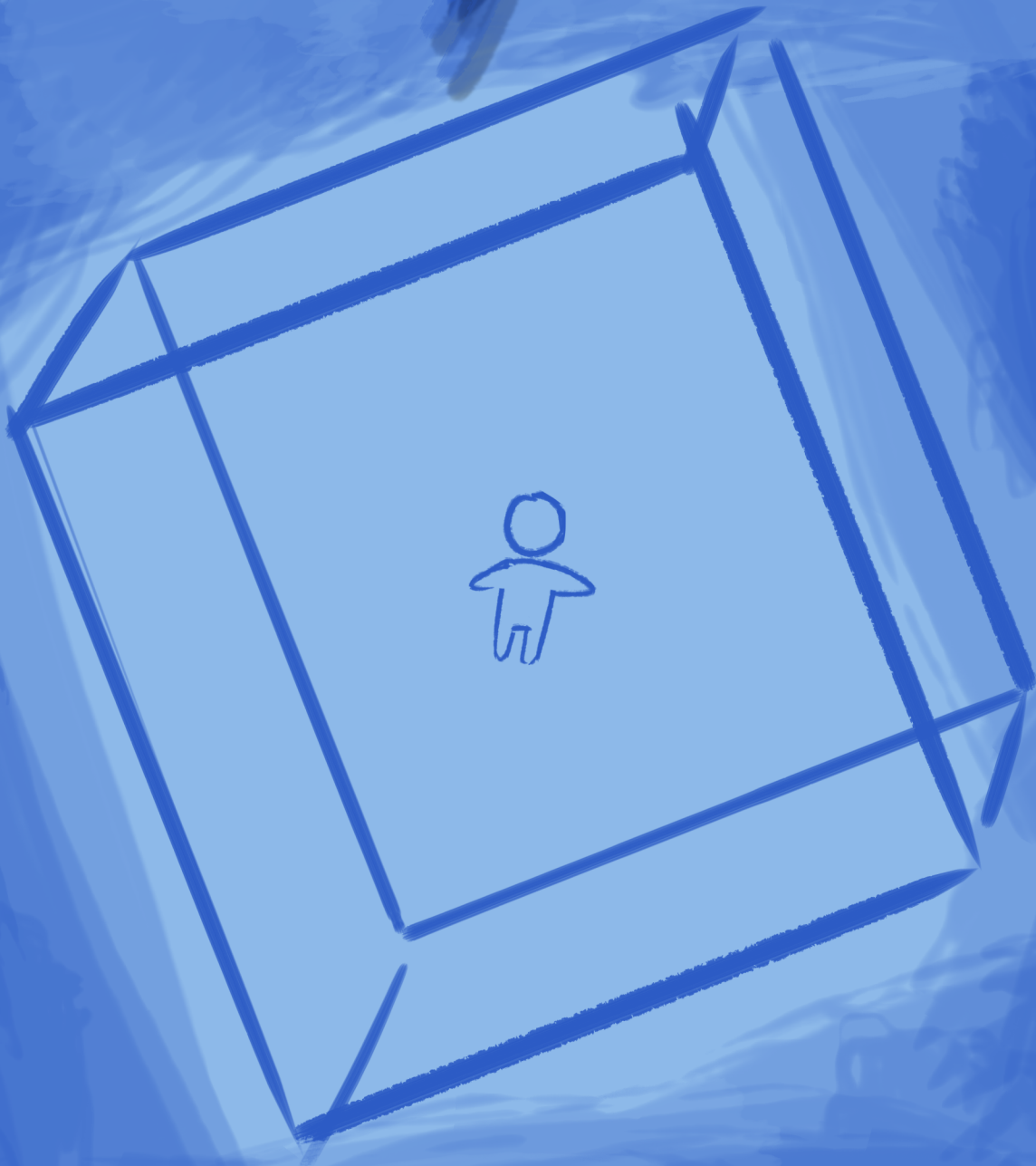
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Anxiety^{*} Box

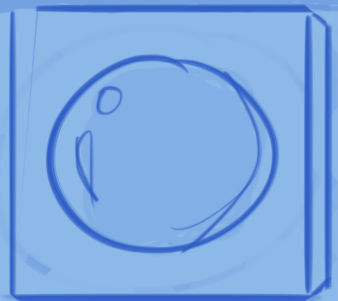


The Blue Collection



A blue-toned, sketchy illustration of a person's face. The person is wearing glasses and has a speech bubble coming from their mouth. The background is filled with abstract, scribbled lines and shapes. The text inside the speech bubble reads: "I don't know man, doing stuff is hard."

I don't
know man,
doing stuff
is hard.



Press this button
and you will die

That
can't be
true.

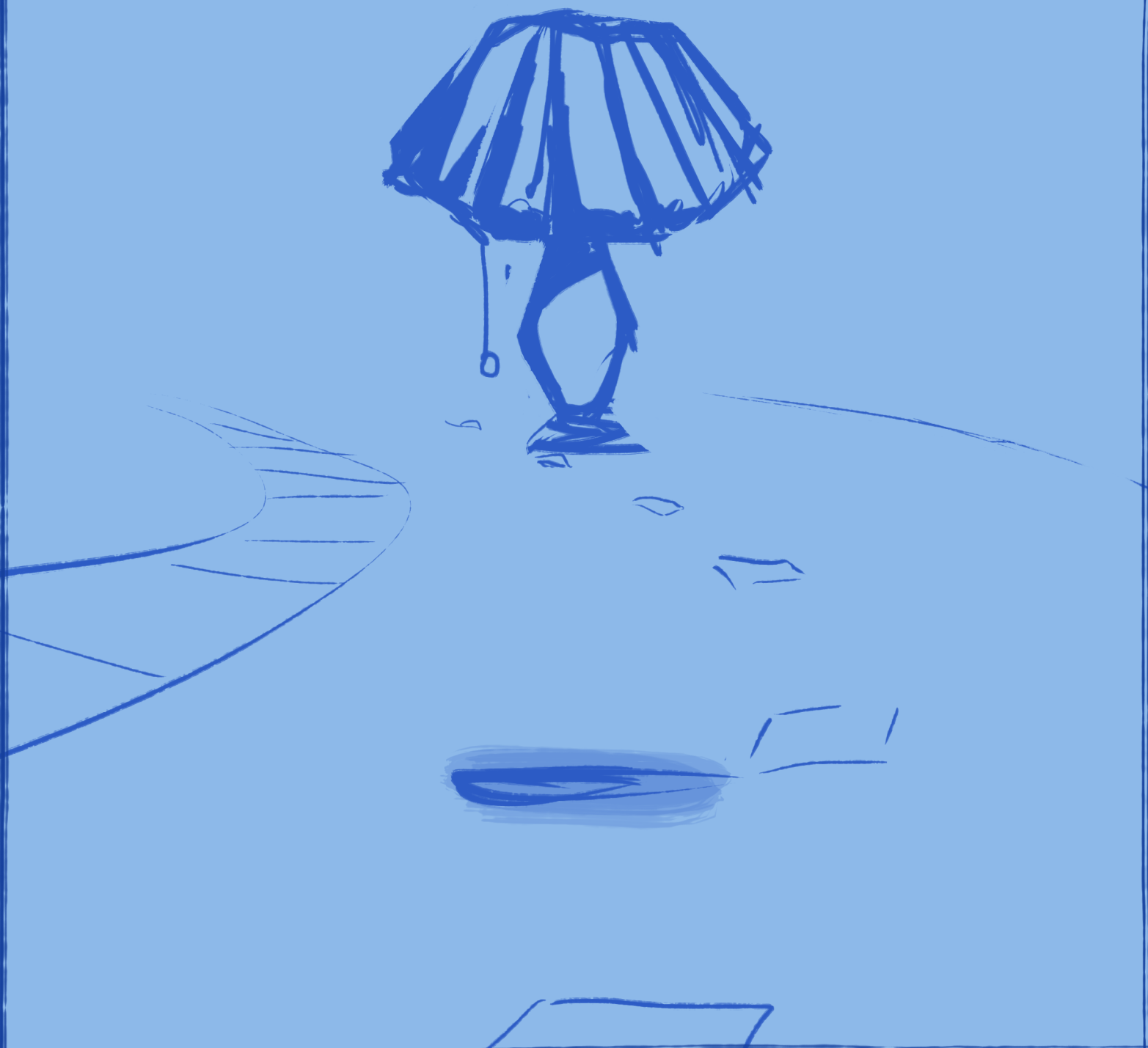


LOST DOG

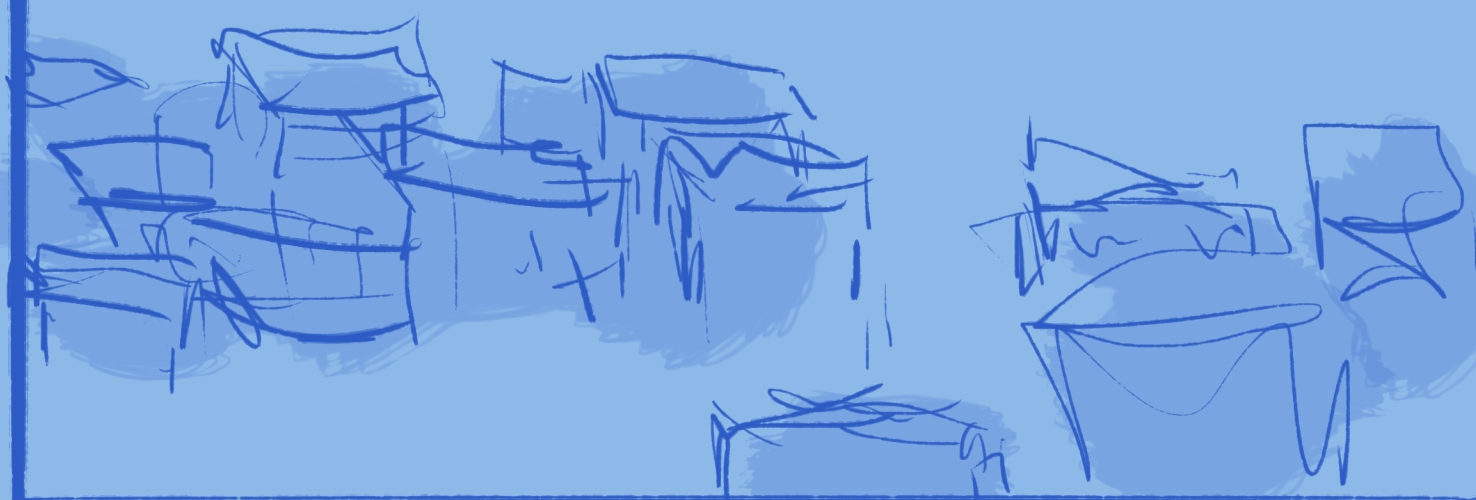


But like, emotionally.
Please help he's very distant

The Lamp In The Middle of the Road



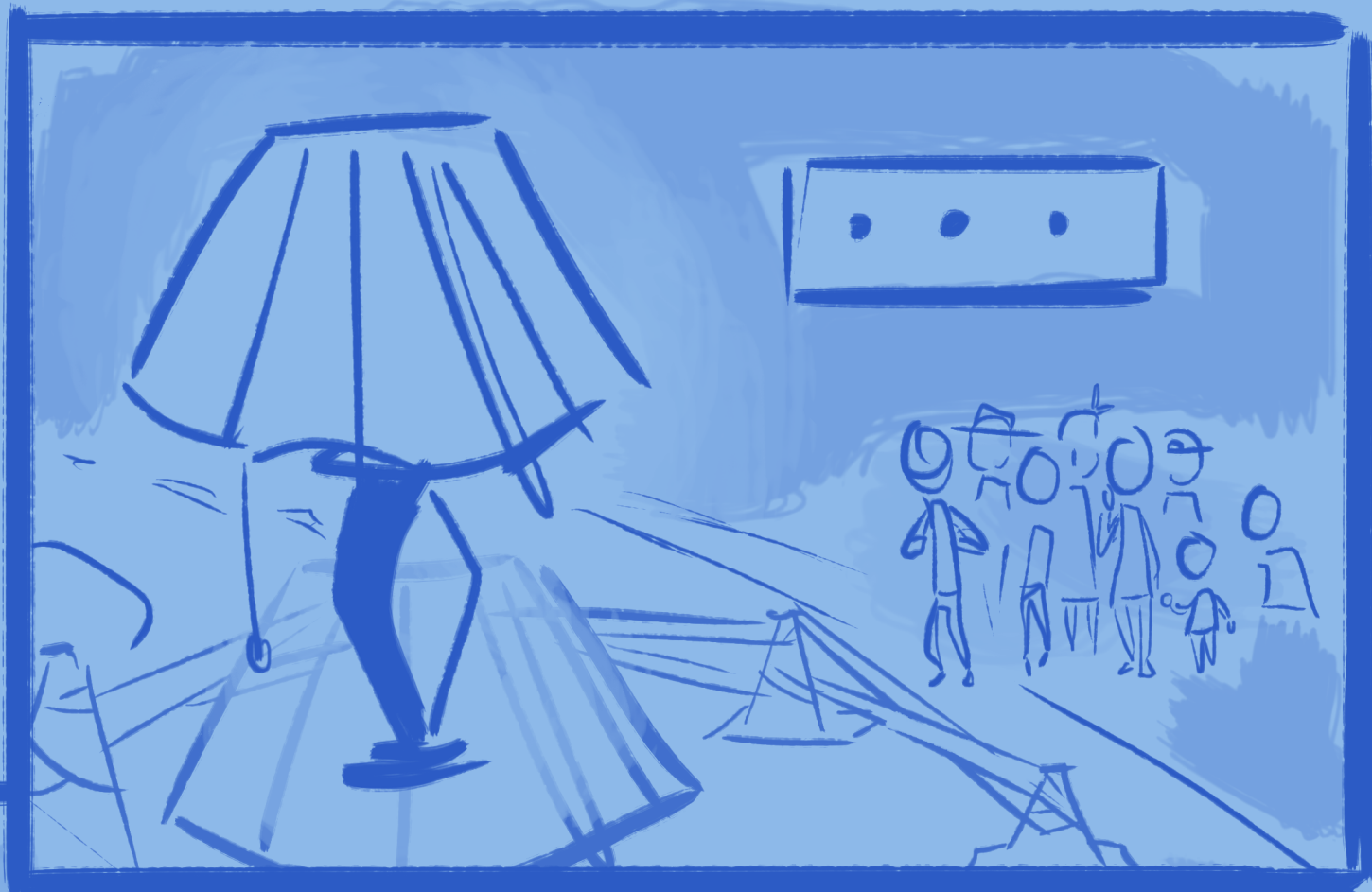
On April 2nd,
at 3:47 PM...



A lamp appeared in the road at [REDACTED]

It was floating.

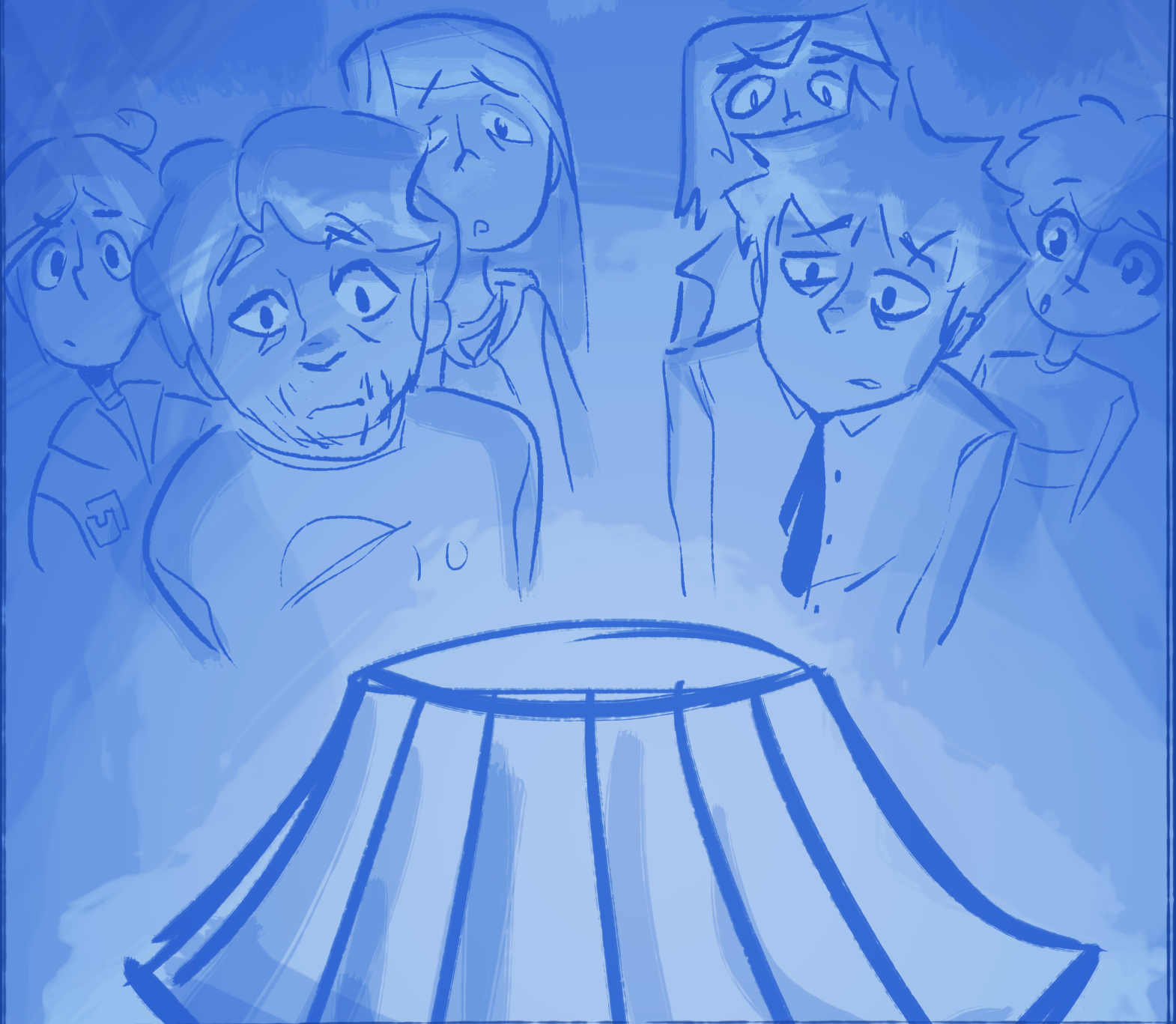
Aside from that, it seemed...



Entirely
normal.



It was utterly
baffling.



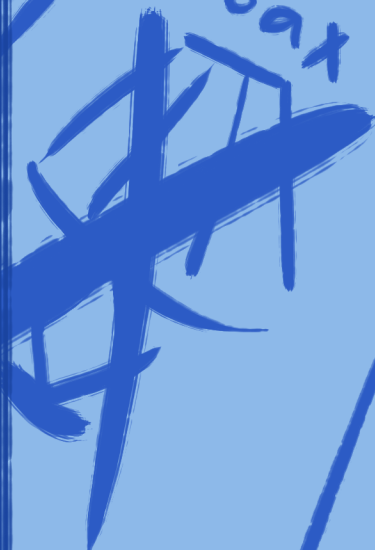
There were quite a few responses

Many
cried
hoax

Some
swore
divine

Others
claimed
conspiracy

But eventually

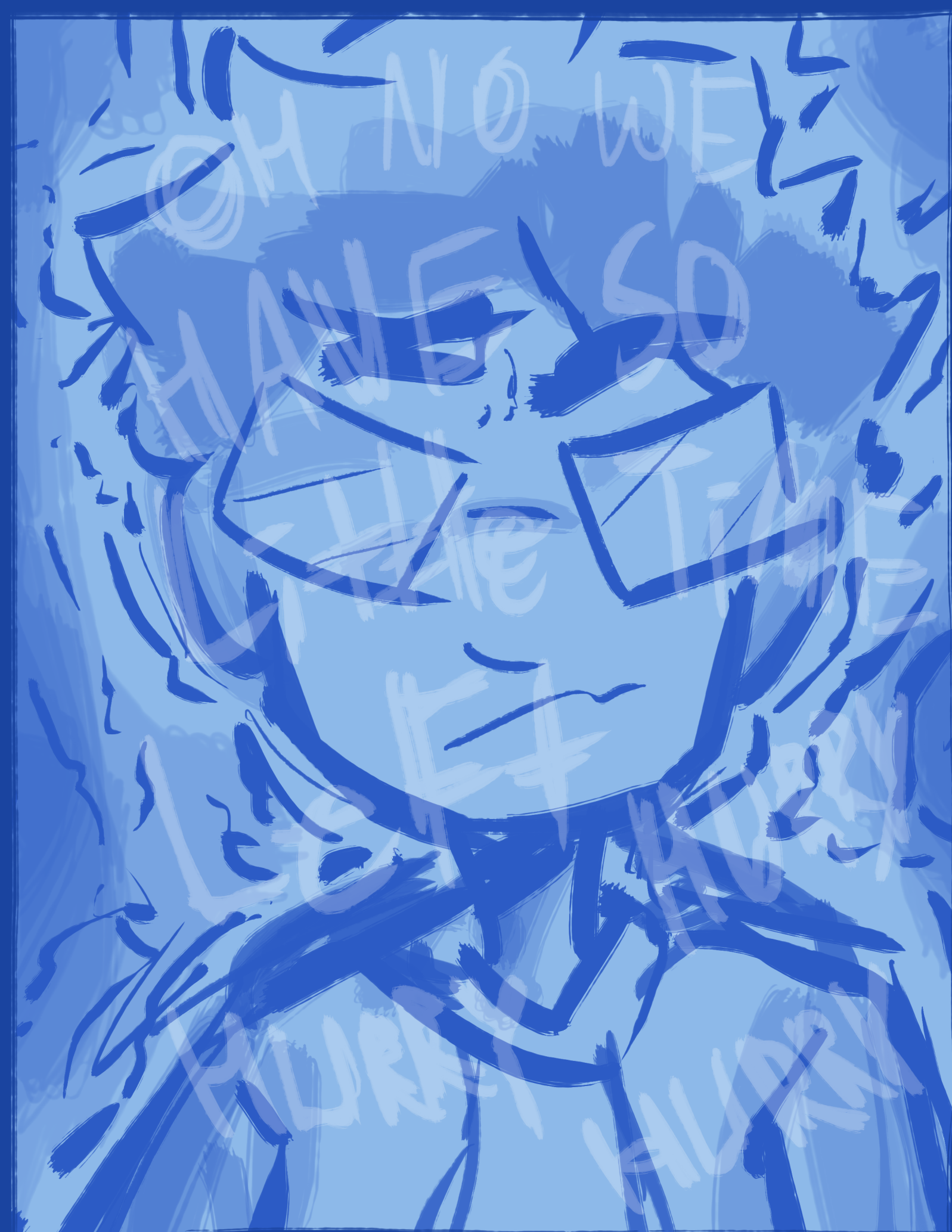


People moved on...



In life, there are bigger things to worry about.



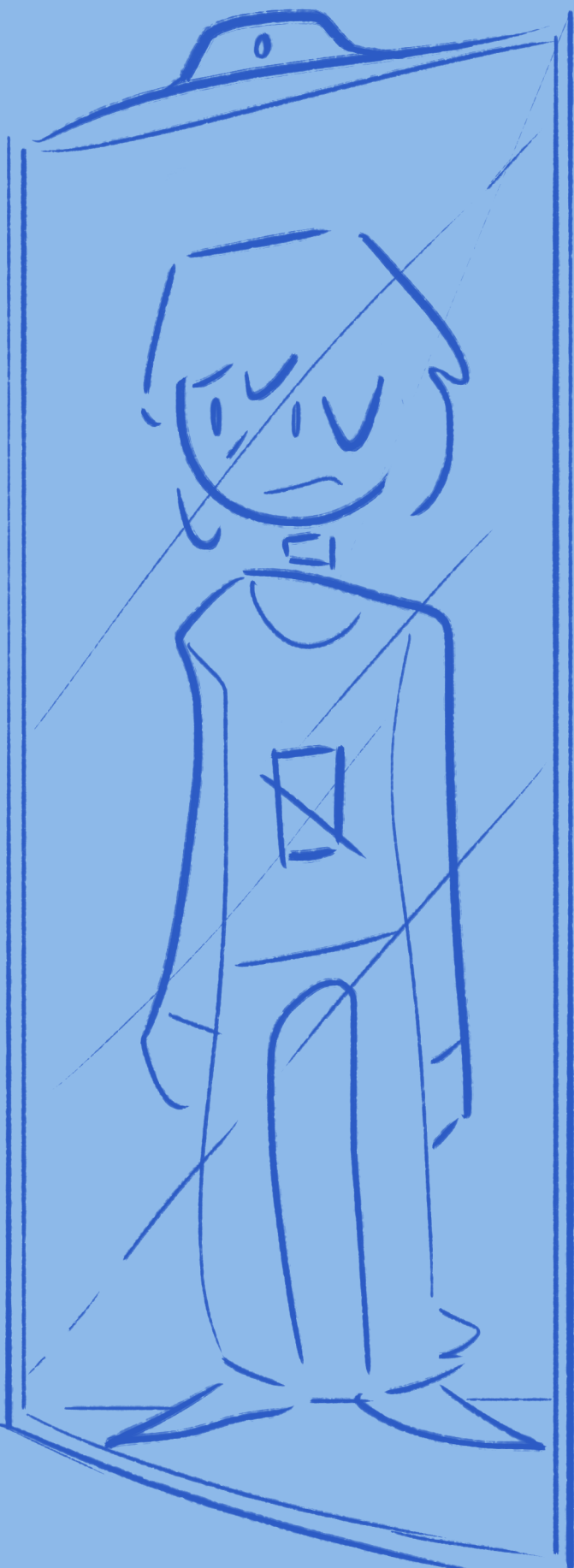




OH  NO.



Would you
mind switching
places?



Comics are
dumb.



Wait
a
minute...



Hmm...

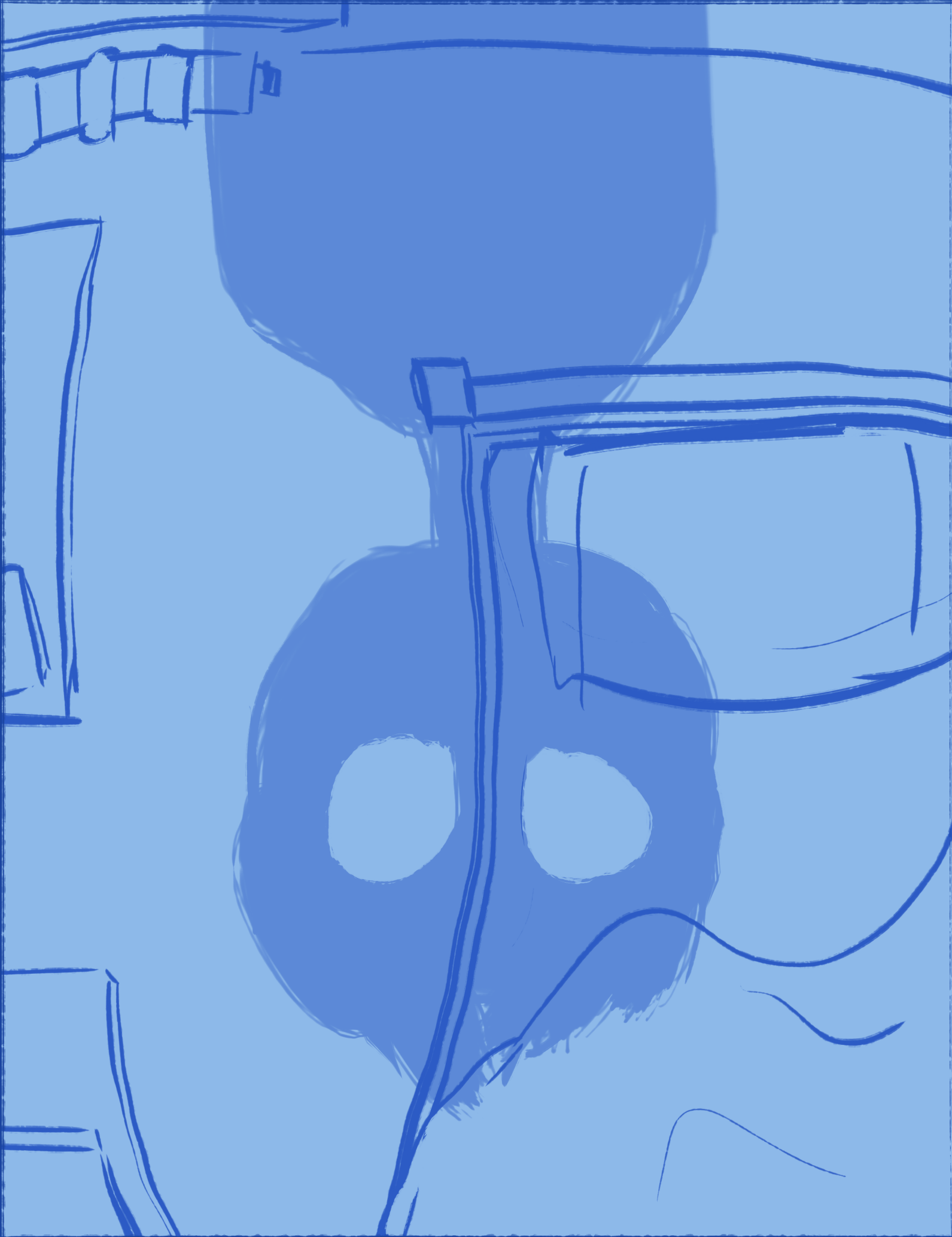


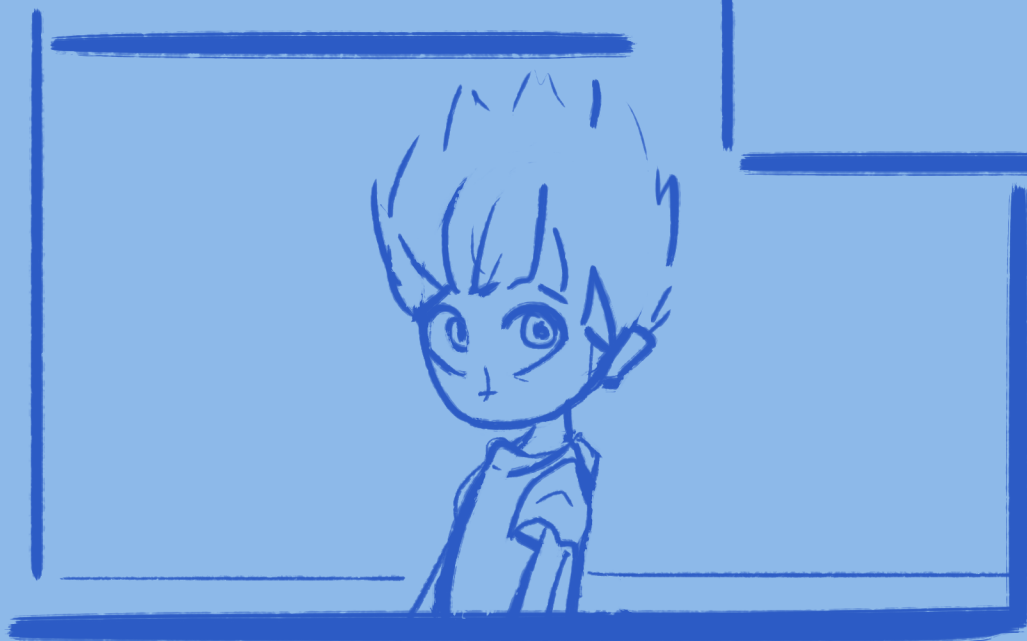
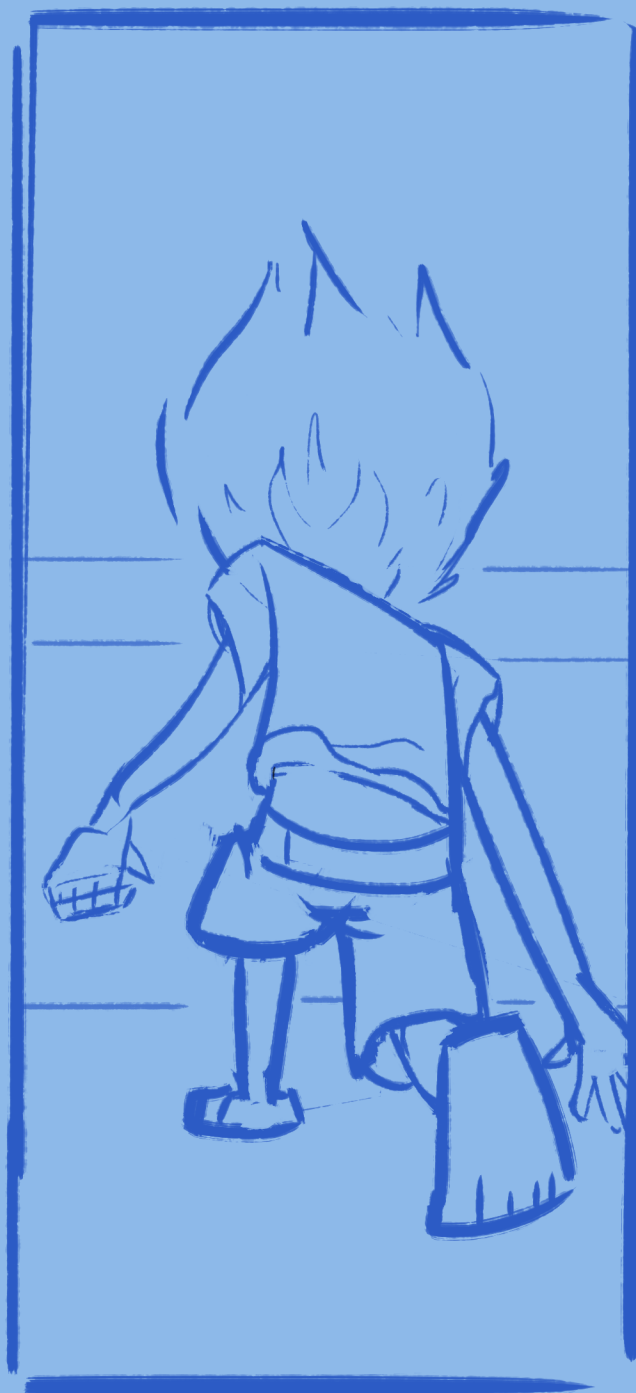
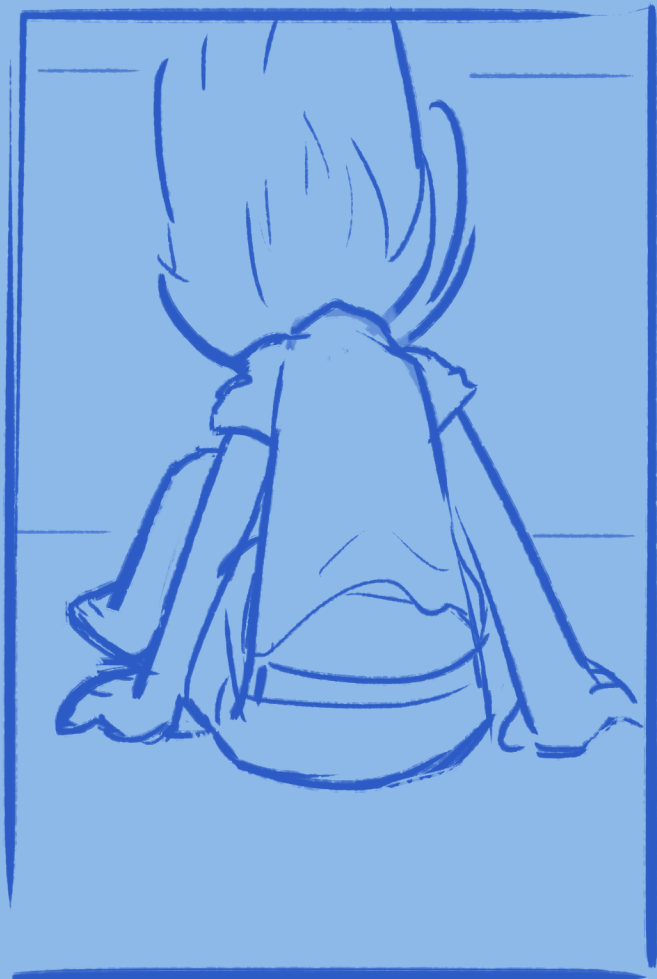
Well...

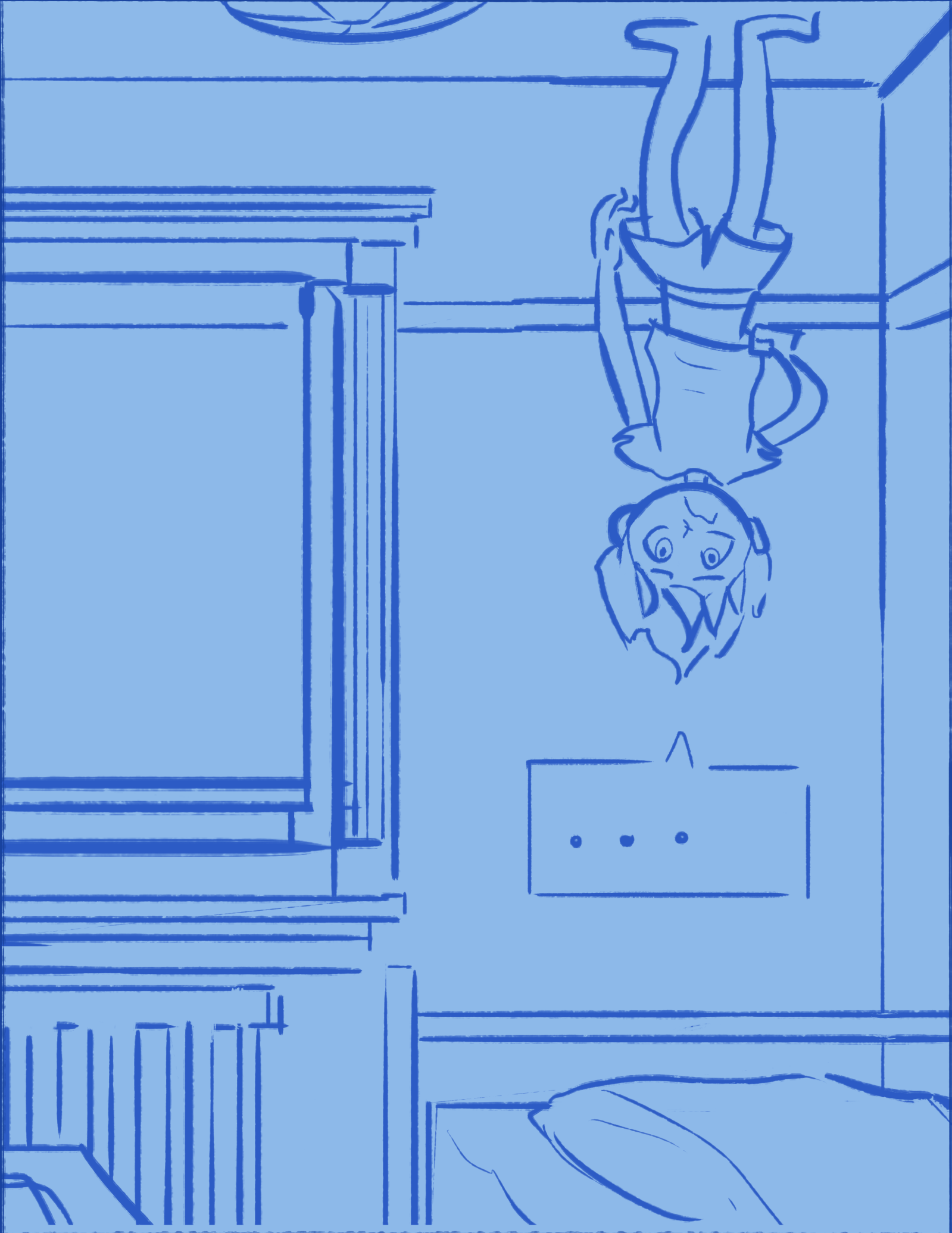


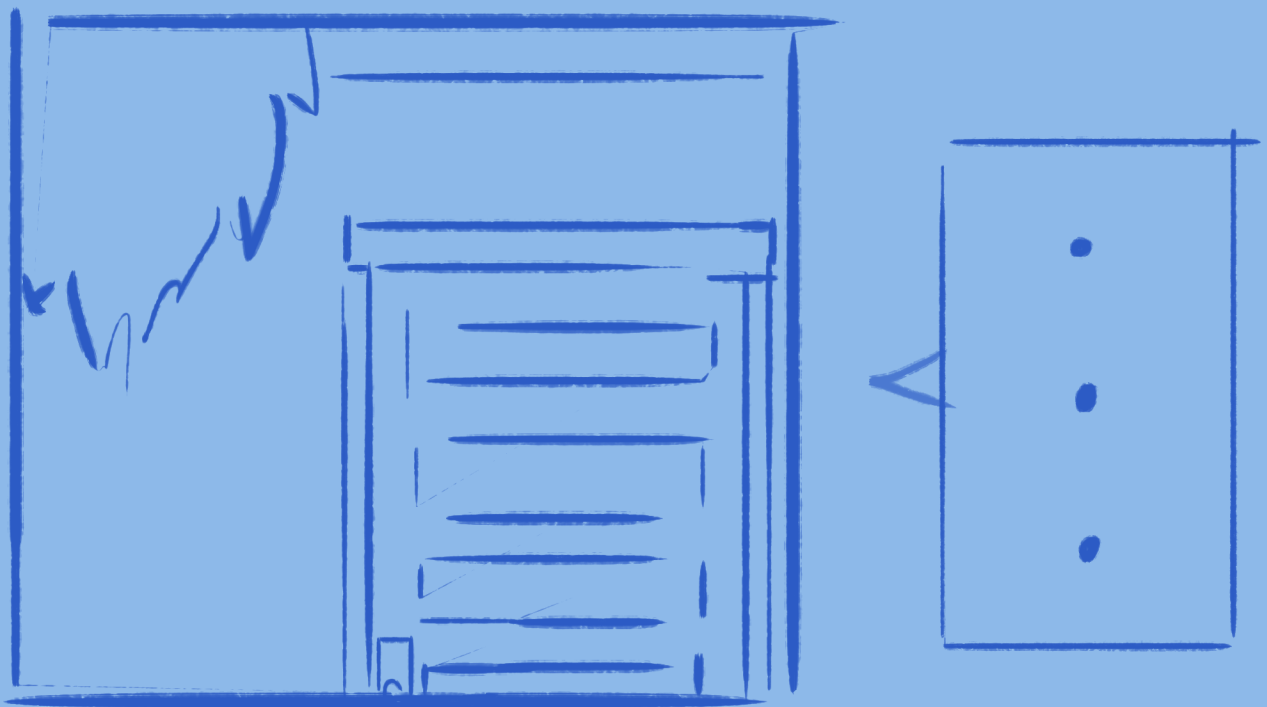
This is
awkward.













How do
I
get
down?



I guess I'll
just wait
for now.



...



I'll figure
something
out...





These
comics
all end so
ABRUPTLY

TIME
TIME
TIME



You're
not doing
enough
panels!!

Too many
full page

drawings!!



Hello



I
do
not
exist

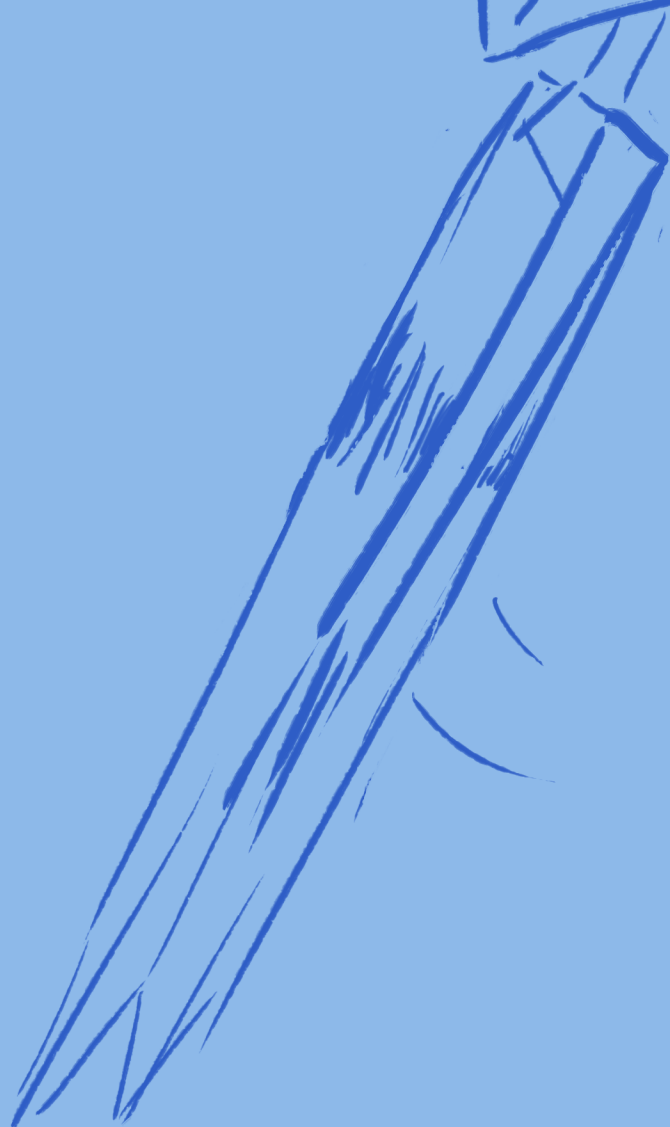


I hope the
other pages
like me

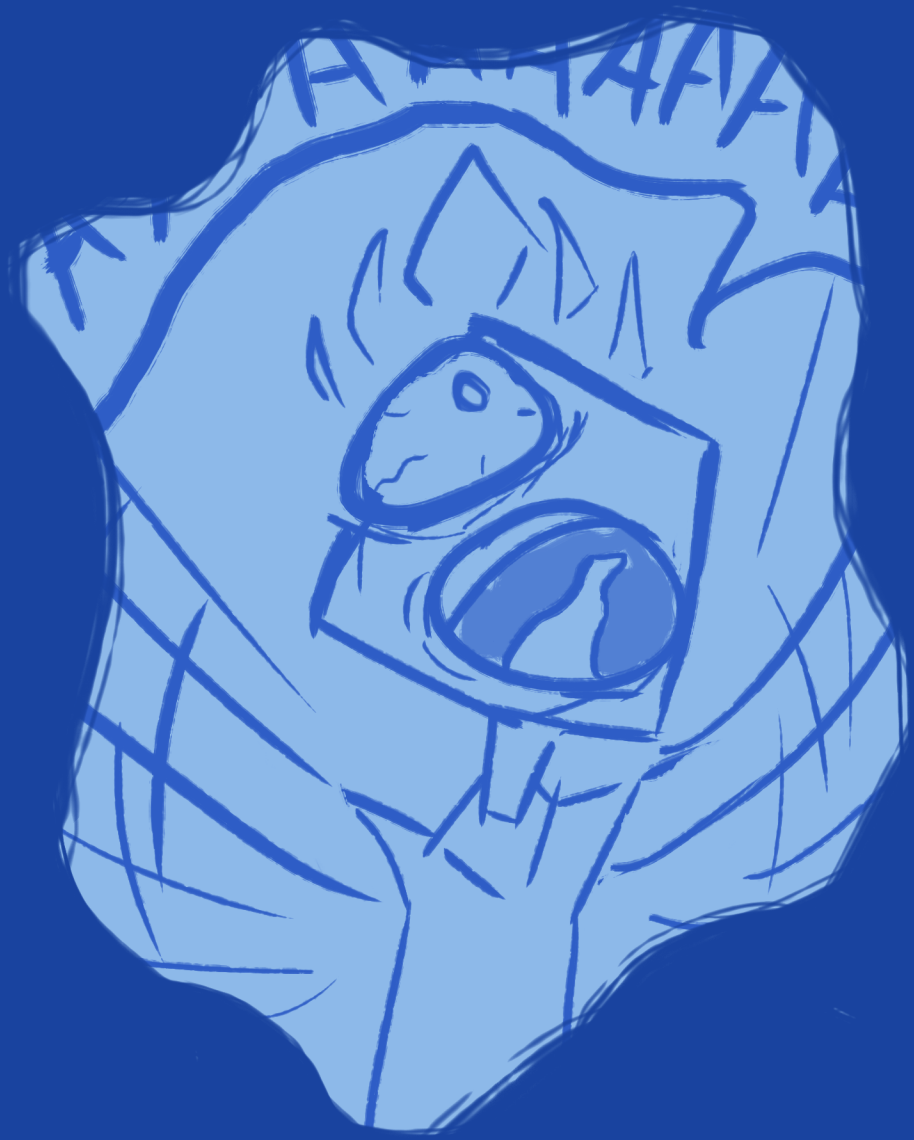
Are those
borders...



...growing?

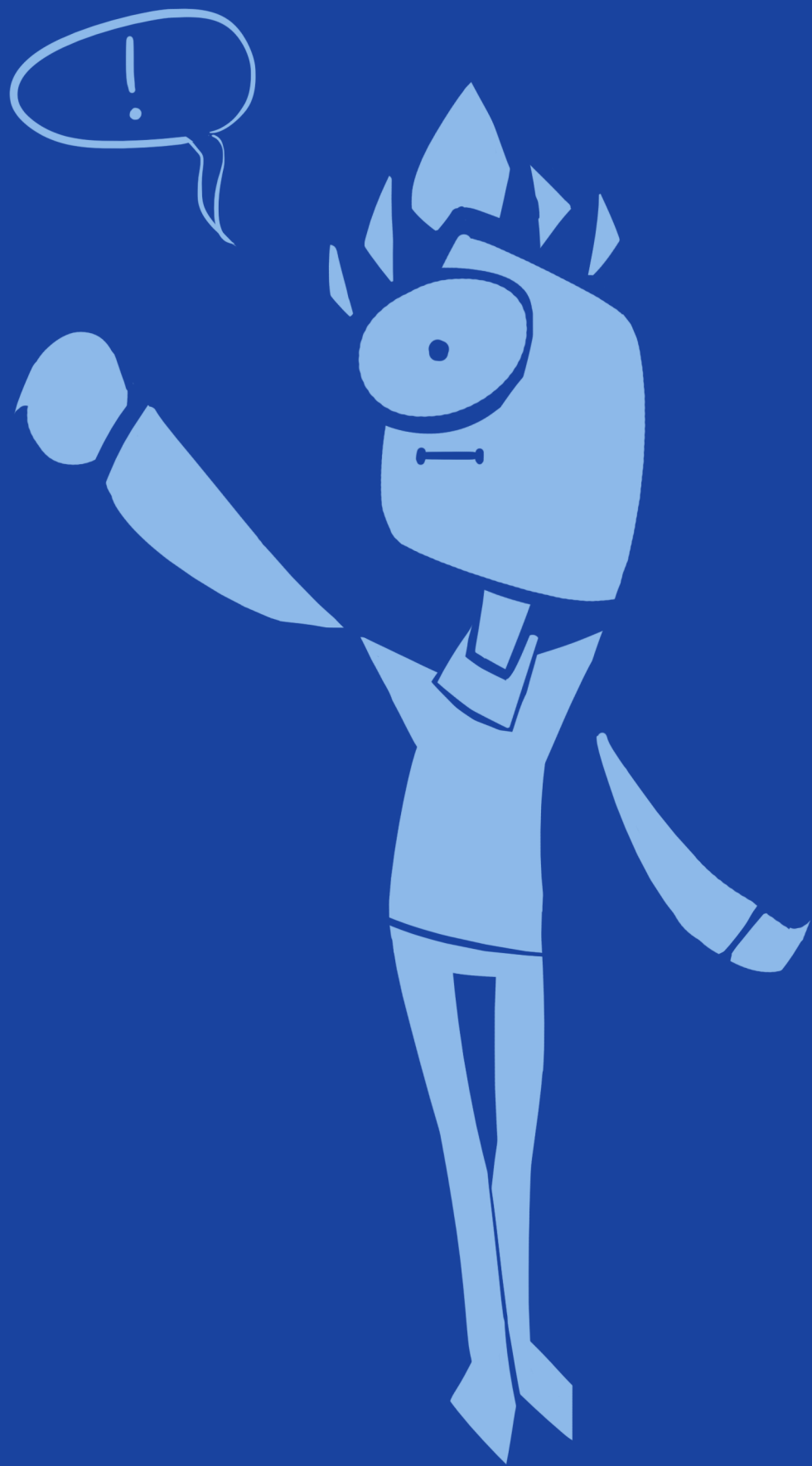


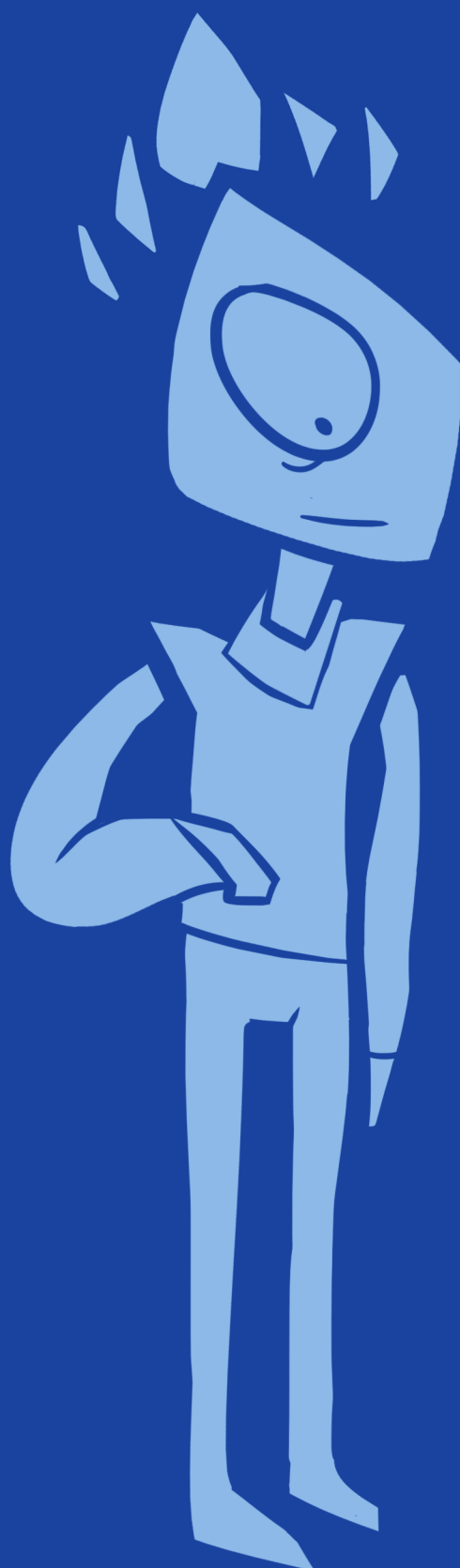


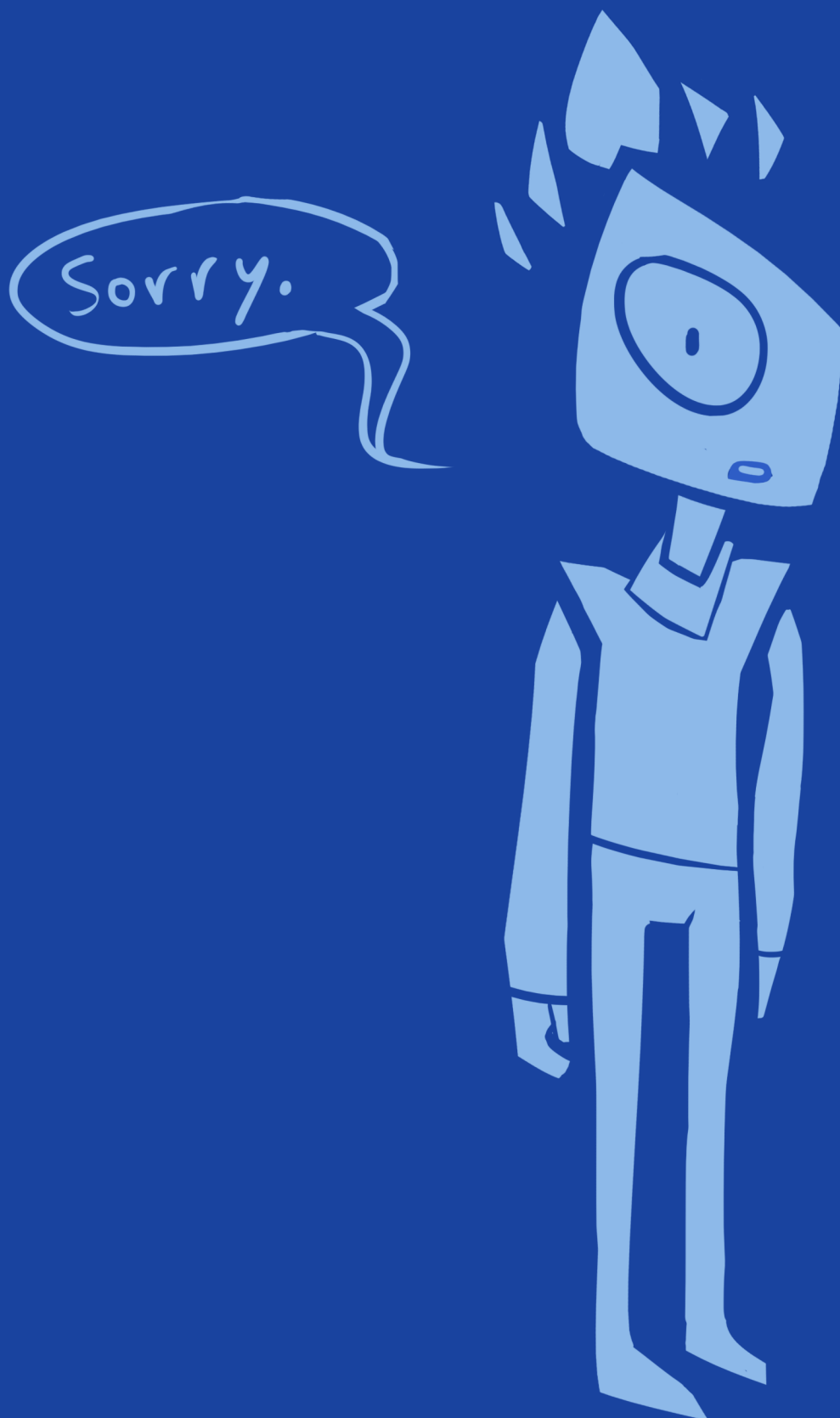


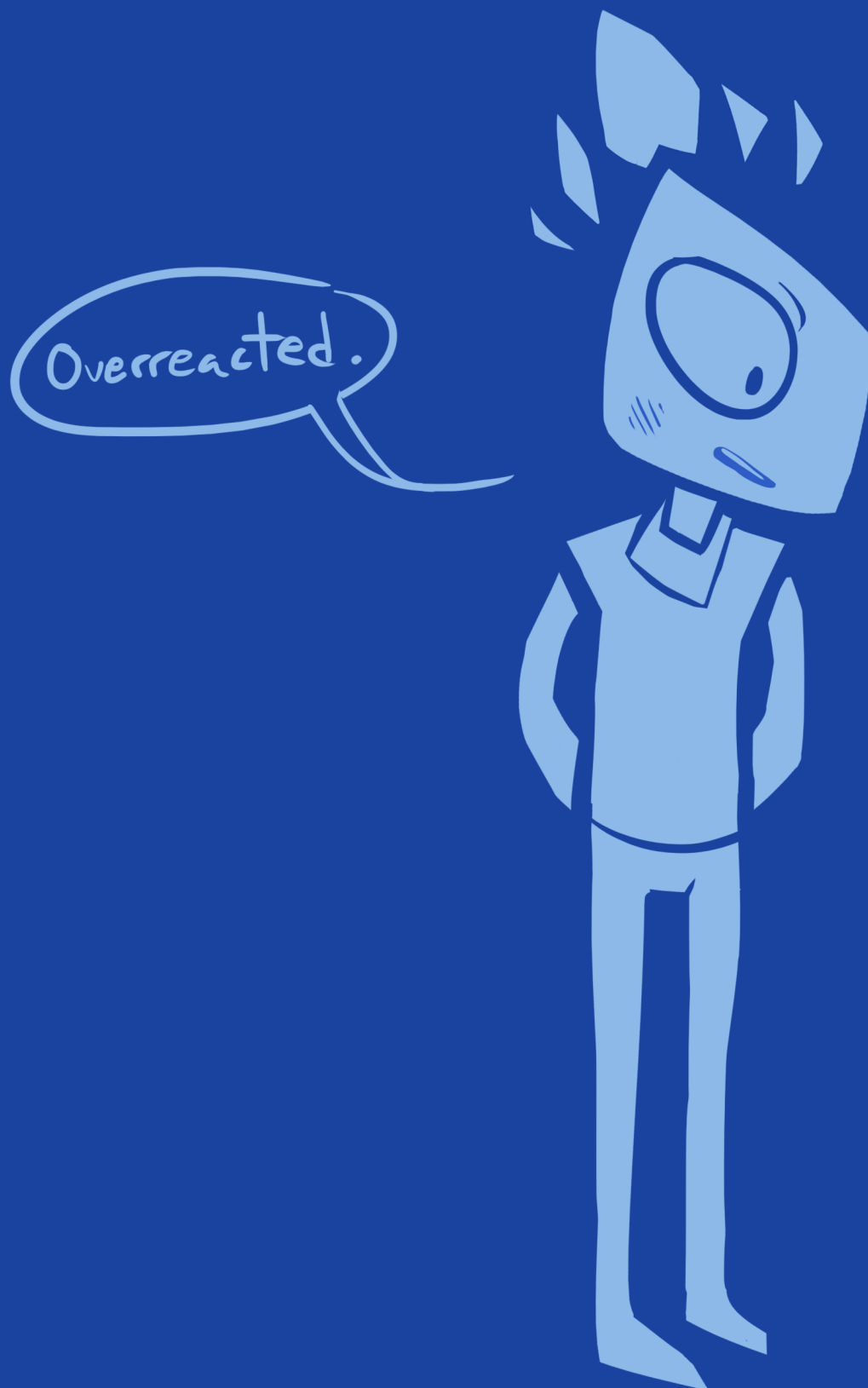














So
much
fluff
and
filler!



This
work



is a
substantive

Could I
have
approached
this
better?

Yes. I think. Still,
Overall I do feel I've
done some interesting stuff.



Thanks for reading

Anxiety Box: The Making Of

Austin Han

Prof. Hua Hsu

Senior Tutorial

Spring 2019b

For my Senior Tutorial Professor Hsu and I decided upon making a series of comics based around selfhood, stress, and anxiety, with heavy focus on the artistic forms through which one can convey those ideas. This collection that I have made is forty-two pages long (including the cover), and operates as a series of shorts interspersed with many smaller one-page works. In addition to the comic I was also to write this – as in this current essay you are reading, in which I talk about the process behind the creation of these comics.

Now, admittedly, the project has changed in some ways from its initial design. While yes, it does still focus on anxiety in some spaces, as well as stress, and strange imagery, there is a greater degree of emphasis placed on meta-narrative than I had initially planned on. This holds especially true of the one-page comics where breaking or leaning on the fourth wall is featured prominently. In addition, the overall tone is quite a good deal lighter than I had first planned.

To clarify, when I say that the comics are lighter than planned, I do not want to give the impression that this was ever meant to be a project entirely serious in its tone. The comics were never going to be some compendium of overly dark, hard-hitting bouts of introspection, not that there is anything wrong with that. Honestly I might have preferred if this endeavor were at times more introspective. Still, right from the very beginning, a number of my ideas were silly and weird. As a matter of fact, the first comic I drew for this project is the “Lost Dog” one, which beyond than any of the others is an outright joke. It is literally a joke that I had thought of before, but never got to implement because it was an ostensibly visual joke that did not fit easily into any of my stand-up comedy routines. Even so, I felt this gag’s inclusion in

the project made sense. The dog is lost emotionally, not physically and I feel that allows it to slot itself into the collection on the basis of thematic resonance. This decision is illustrative of the thought process that shaped itself out during my work on this Senior Tutorial.

My background in comedy, as well as my personal taste in entertainment, tends to skew lighter in tone even when tackling more somber topics. I am no stranger to making jokes of my loneliness, sadness, difficulties socializing, or other such issues. Even death provides an avenue for levity, as being able to laugh at these things makes it easier for us to handle them. These sorts of jokes and stories provide a nice path to commiseration and solidarity, one of the key components of human connection. When people tell each other about their problems, they can carry the burdens together. A big factor in using jokes to talk about heavier topics is for the purposes of trying not to make those topics too heavy. At times, carrying each other's burdens can actually be rather difficult undertaking, and lightening it up a bit with some laughter rather than serious talk can make things more feasible. Serious talk does have its place; it just was not my priority when making these comics.

The cartoon style is prone to lightness in a sense that realism is not. The big eyes and round faces typical of my normal style are soft and inviting, plus capable of being expressive to a degree that realistic faces could not be. Sure, cartoons are not always friendly – we exist in an age of abundance for cartoons with adult audiences. In addition, if we take a gander at the beginnings of animation history there is no shortage of adult oriented cartoons. You had to go to the theater to see an animated

short, adults were the people with disposable income, and so they were the people cartoons to which cartoons would cater. It is not as though cartoons have only ever been for children. There are even cartoons which deliberately exploit their own cutesy natures for the sake of subversion or gross-out, like *Happy Tree Friends* or even *South Park*. This in mind, I wanted to make something that was not flat out adult, but that could still handle some more difficult issues.

That was always my intention with this thesis. A spoonful of sugar helps the anxiety go down. The line between unsettling and whimsical can oftentimes be a blurrier than one might think, and I like to ride that line. There exists a degree to which casual irreverence is appreciated. However, I think beyond being just a conscious decision on my part, there is also an amount to which my overall tone is marked by my art style. While I can, and used to almost exclusively, draw in a more realistic style, my current preference is for the cartoony look. It has been that way for me since middle school. There was a time when I prided myself on being able to draw realistic portraits, but eventually I came to feel somewhat odd about it. I started to feel like I was a human copy machine, not an artist. The difference between technical skill and aesthetic value began to matter to me in a greater sense than it had before. Nevertheless, I do respect technical skill in others. It is simply no longer what I look for most in the majority of my own artwork.

Speaking of, when making this comic collection, I chose to depict some parts of it in a deliberately messy manner. This was partially done in order to ease the drawing process back a smidgen and reduce the time cost needed for each page. In that sense, it was a practical measure. However, it was not only a practical measure.

My reasoning was that a messier style would be evocative of a greater intensity of feeling. When the strokes are harsher and the line art is dirtier, there's a certain rawness that comes through more than it would in a more polished drawing. My scruffiest segments were all in the more high intensity sections of feeling, largely tightening up in more reserved settings.

For example, one thread I had planned out from the start, though didn't implement until the end of the game, was the inclusion of the segments where "I" essentially step in as a color commentator on the events within the comic. The art style of my self-portraits grows more haggard as time winds on, simplifying down until it reaches the point of being merely a stick figure with glasses, hair, and clothes. The final two self inserts then bring the quality back up as the collection comes to a close. I suppose I could have degraded the art quality even further than I did, but while I wanted to explore an idea, I still wanted the art to be decent enough for a reader to take some joy in it. Call it vanity.

I'll admit the vast majority of the character designs I used for this project are pretty typical of my art style. I did not really experiment with these as much as I probably could have, though I do have reasons for this. For one, there is again the practical concern. Using what are closer to my standard body types and facial features allows me to work faster and with increased quality as opposed to something in an experimental vein. Experimentation can lead to interesting results but it requires an expanded iterative process that takes time to produce quality work. Frankly, there is a much higher chance of something going wrong when you decide to experiment rather than stand by with the old faithful.

However, I could not make myself go through with this project without pushing some portions further on the experimental side of the scale. To ride only with the standard feels remarkably unambitious in a manner that I just could not abide by. To that end, I pursued a couple unorthodox designs, and varied up my ordinary way of drawing. While my other designs were somewhat typical, the looseness with which I approached these drawings was unusual. In my web comic, and most of the art that I put online, I am often very structured in the way that I approach drawing. I do sketches, and then line art (smooth and sharp), followed up with coloring. In this collection, I was willing to stay on the sketch layer, sometimes for the entire duration of the picture. I did not need to always see the picture in my head beforehand; I was willing to let it go of its own accord. Of course, this wasn't for everything. As again, there was a mixture of experiment and my "traditional," as it were.

It should balance out to around a medium level of quality. There is experimentation, but there is also a fair share of front-facing depictions of people's faces (a normally stress-free thing to draw). The implementation of even simpler characters than my usual style is also a deliberate choice. There are a couple of pages, like the one that says, "Comics are dumb," or the one that has a character freak out about being poorly drawn where the character depicted is for all intents and purposes a completely blank character without hair, clothes, or even a nose. Use of this design type is done both for the reason of saving time and for the reason of producing an instantly relatable character.

Scott McCloud in his *Understanding Comics The Invisible Art* refers to this phenomenon simply as “the cartoon” in his second chapter. The cliff notes version is that simplistic cartoons are highly relatable to people of all races, genders, and creeds because their simplicity allows creators to amplify the essence of the thing depicted. The blank simple people that I drew have no definite gender, no definite race, no real affiliations other than vaguely human, which is an affiliation that practically all readers will have. You can see this type of character design present in a lot of online comics that bank on being relatable to their audience. Often blank white skin; super deformed chibi features, or barely any features at all. This also helps with exaggeration; since having less detail on the face normally means that when you actually want to emphasize some emotion or feeling you can then really push the detail.

The color scheme I had decided upon was also chosen as an experiment. Yes, I have used blue before, but not really with this kind of approach. There is essentially only one other time when I had tried something similar with blue, that being for a one-page diary comic I made while taking The Comic’s Course. Although that did also contain purple as well as some pink due to my pursuit of a chromatic aberration-type effect. The intent then in this instance was to create a truly monochrome comic, one where there are really only differing shades of the one dominant color. It is not something I’d really done before, and was a worthwhile test of my ability to draw limited color comics. Truthfully, that diary comic likely had a good level of impact upon my approach for the self-insert interludes in this project.

Largely front-facing self-portraits in blue where my eyes are not visible due to the glasses being in the way, that is fairly similar to what I am working with here.

The lack of eyes affords my avatar a degree of almost anonymity. They say that the eyes are the windows to the soul, and blocking off those windows puts an amount of distance between the audience and me at the outset. This makes sense especially in regards to the first interlude, where “I” talk to my unresponsive body. As those interludes continue and become more emotionally charged, my glasses then basically turn into substitutes for my eyes. Those glasses bend and twist with the emotions in a fashion glasses never would in real life. This allows for growth of empathy with that characterization of myself. It gains life as it loosens up. This is further emphasized by the mounting looseness of the rest of each drawing too.

This loosening is a variation on the practice that is “squash and stretch,” the term is more normally situated in discussions about animation, but it is just as applicable to comics. I have done some animation work off and on since high school, which is how I know the terms. When characters are capable of being squashed down and stretched out, they are able to display an exaggerated weight to their forms. This is especially important as cartoons are not real and thus have no weight to them. Providing this sense of weight makes their bodies feel much more realistic and this helps the characters then feel more relatable. Pushing the boundaries of squash and stretch can make a drawing feel much more lively and energetic. Another obvious example of this within my project would be on the pages featuring the one-eyed, head-feathered creature as the borders of the page closed in around

them. This character deforms intensely on its second page and then gets weirder from there.

As for why I chose blue specifically, well blue is often considered the archetypal cold color. The shades I'm using contribute to a bit of a sedated vibe, I would say. Originally I used them in my previous diary comic to evoke the sense of a cold light from a laptop – here it is meant to bring a similar association. My intention was to use blue as a sort of melancholy color, but also as an almost empty type of color. The roughly, muted sky blue that acts as the background color for most of the pages in this project is powdery and soft, but still a bit darker than you would expect. It is just a tiny bit morose, but brings with it a sense of calm as well. The dark blue of the page borders is to my mind very reminiscent of the nighttime hours; this made it a perfect candidate for the color that swallows up the one-eyed creature and plunges them into darkness.

My usage of panels is also predicated upon a desire to experiment mixed with my built-up foundation of old habits. I always try to get some sort of interesting variation out of my panel layouts, and I do think I managed in some instances here. Of particular note would be the section about the person stuck upside down on the ceiling. There is a short with an admittedly simple innovation, but one that I think does have merit. The various ways of demarcating the speech bubbles orientation were also intriguing ideas to play around with. To name a few, there was curling the tale of the speech bubble, turning the line of one side of the bubble into an arrow, or just straight-up placing directional arrows in their own separate front segment of the speech bubble.

I think I'm honestly kind of paranoid about image size, largely due to my web comic background. Most of the people reading web comics on the hosting site that I used were reading on mobile devices, i.e. cellphones. This might have slowly resulted in me catering my image sizes more to cellphones than to desktops or physical editions. I do feel weird sometimes about how many single panel splash pages I tend to draw, enough that I commented on that very issue during some of my self-insert interludes. I worry about the drawings being too small to see, and therefore end up blowing them up larger than might actually be necessary.

To be fair, however, I do think there is valid reason to have made the section with the one-eyed feather-headed person into a series of full-page spreads. I concede that it may be true I am still influenced by the thought of the mobile phone audience and the ability to scroll down a series of pages, but I think this sequence functions better when it is run in non panel-to-panel format. One of the key differences brought about by the comic format, is that you see everything on the page at once. Your eye will be directed to different things first, sure, but even so a non-scrolling format means everything is visible from the get-go. I think that having to turn the page here in order to move the segment along slows the moment down in a manner that enhances the suspense of the situation. Everything there is happening in slow motion, and you have to make the conscious decision to have it continue by flipping the page.

McCloud makes a similar point in *Understanding Comics The Invisible Art* chapter three, as the movement of time is dependent upon the connection between images and the space between panels. The reader must be active in making their

progression through the story. The “gutter,” a.k.a. the space between the panels is where the actions occur – all the in-panel images are still. We rely on “closure,” our ability to engage in inference in order to create this motion and live out these stories. I’ll admit I did not exactly do a ton in the way of research. I am mostly using McCloud’s book to reconfirm things I already know; I actually read his book back when I was a kid. I had to check the book to see that this info was in chapter three, but I did not have to check for the information, as it were. I just want to clear up why I’m sourcing in this way. A lot of this info about comics and animation I just gained over the many years I have been doing this kind of work. At this point I can’t source all of it, like squash and stretch I learned about years ago. I hope that is okay.

To tie things up, I suppose I’ll talk about two of my larger stories’ endings. Both the lamp story and the upside down person story end rather abruptly, a point that is commented on inside of the collection. The reason for this mostly comes down to time constraints. I suppose that choosing to do multiple stories instead of focusing in on one may have rendered the situation less tenable than it would be otherwise. Their truncated runtimes are a direct result of me not having enough time to properly conclude them, thus cutting them short while trying my best to make their conclusions still feel at least kind of satisfactory.

The lamp has people in its thrall for a while, feeling various types of suspicious, but then people move on because in life is so busy and full of worry that an anomaly such as that can only take up so much attention. People ignore ongoing stories all the time, even if it was interesting back when it was a breaking story. The upside down person is stuck waiting inside for fear of going out, unable to contact

others and not doing much about it – that’s an allegory for worsening depression and social isolation. It is a bit of a downer ending, but while there are indicators that things are getting worse, there is no confirmation that their situation stays like that forever. Perhaps it is not great form to confirm the lack of confirmation in an ending, but I feel like pointing it out.

That’s about it when it comes to how I made *Anxiety Box*. That name came along pretty late in the game, but I do feel like it is a pretty apt name for the comic collection, as well as for the process of creating it. It is a forty-two page, decently messy, dive into strangeness and sad feelings. Thanks for reading.

Bibliography

“Chapter Two The Vocabulary of Comics.” *Understanding Comics The Invisible Art*, by Scott McCloud, Harper Perennial, 1994, pp. 28–36.

“Chapter Three Blood In The Gutter.” *Understanding Comics The Invisible Art*, by Scott McCloud, Harper Perennial, 1994, pp. 63–69.