UNROOTED

by Justin Leung and Lillian Zhao

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Lillian Zhao & Justin Leung

AUTHORS AND ADVISOR

Author
Lillian Zhao

Author
Justin Leung

Advisor
Gregory Paul Corso

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Drawing Team:

Arpitha Cunigal
Sarah Fellingham
Georgia Fernandes
Lauren Li
Adrian Suciu

Advising/Proof-reading:

Jeanelle Cho
Kristabel Wing Lam Chung
Romi Moller
Olivia Porrill

Institutions/Groups:

Syracuse University School of Architecture
The SOURCE

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PREFACE

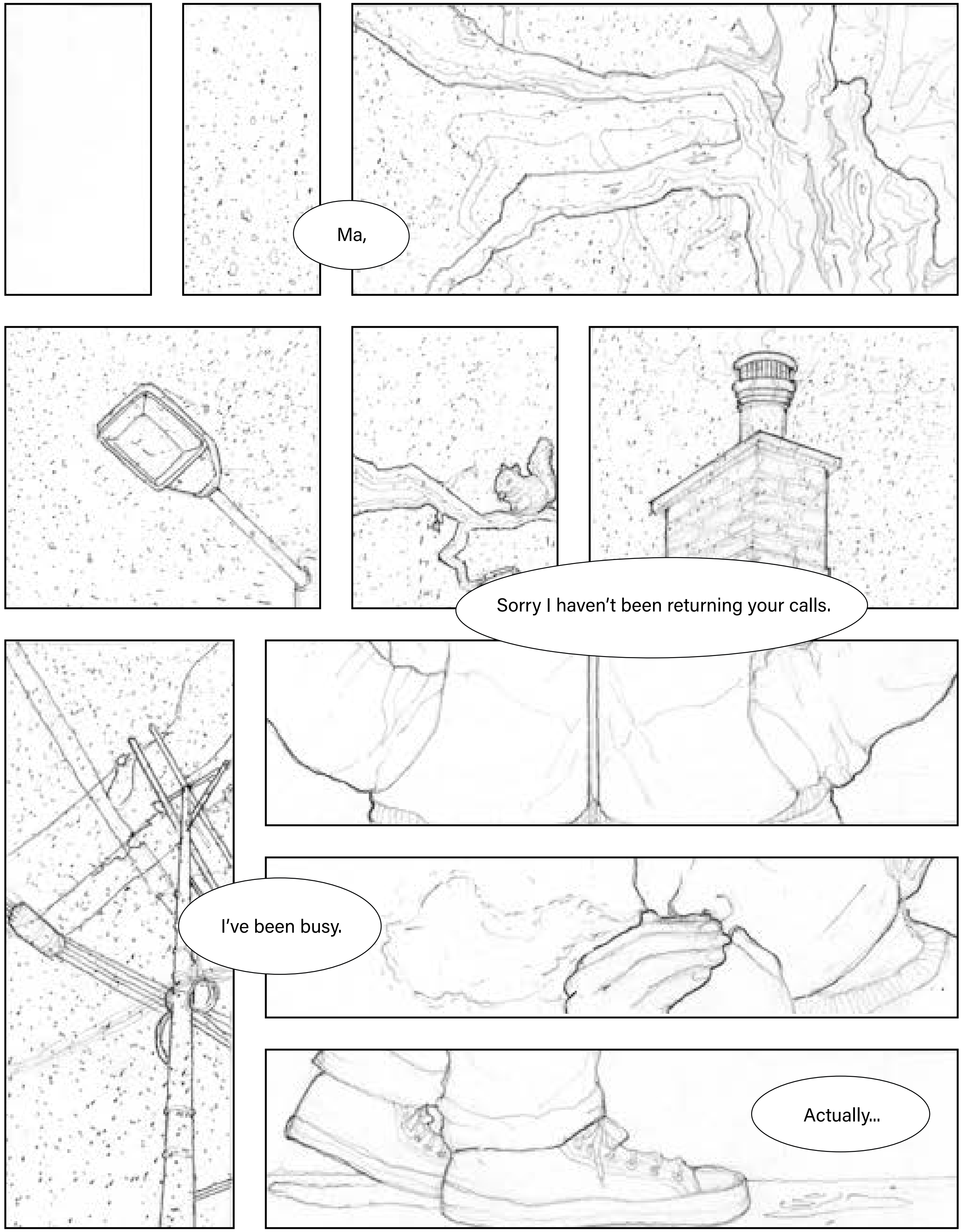
This book represents the culmination of the final thesis project undertaken by Justin Leung and Lillian Zhao. Through our architectural education, we've come to believe that everyday experiences, especially those belonging to multiple cultures, can be profoundly understood through novel architectural documentation. Lillian's navigation between American and Chinese cultures and Justin's journey from Hong Kong to America serve as the shared foundation for documenting and analyzing these identities among various contexts. The characters and narratives are visualized as fictional parallels but are rooted in real-life experiences. Presented as an architectural graphic novel, the book is divided into four main chapters, each anchored in specific sites that explore the concepts of "heritage(s)" and "origin(s)". Each chapter begins with an overview description that contextualizes the visual content within architectural and multidisciplinary discourse, which is then followed by a narrative exploration. The conscious decision of exploring this concept in a graphic novel format was crucial because we believe it allowed these concepts to be easily digestible. Hand-drawn visualizations can effectively show what others are experiencing which reveals the relationship between space and certain experiences. Ultimately, this book seeks to convey a simple desire—to be shared.

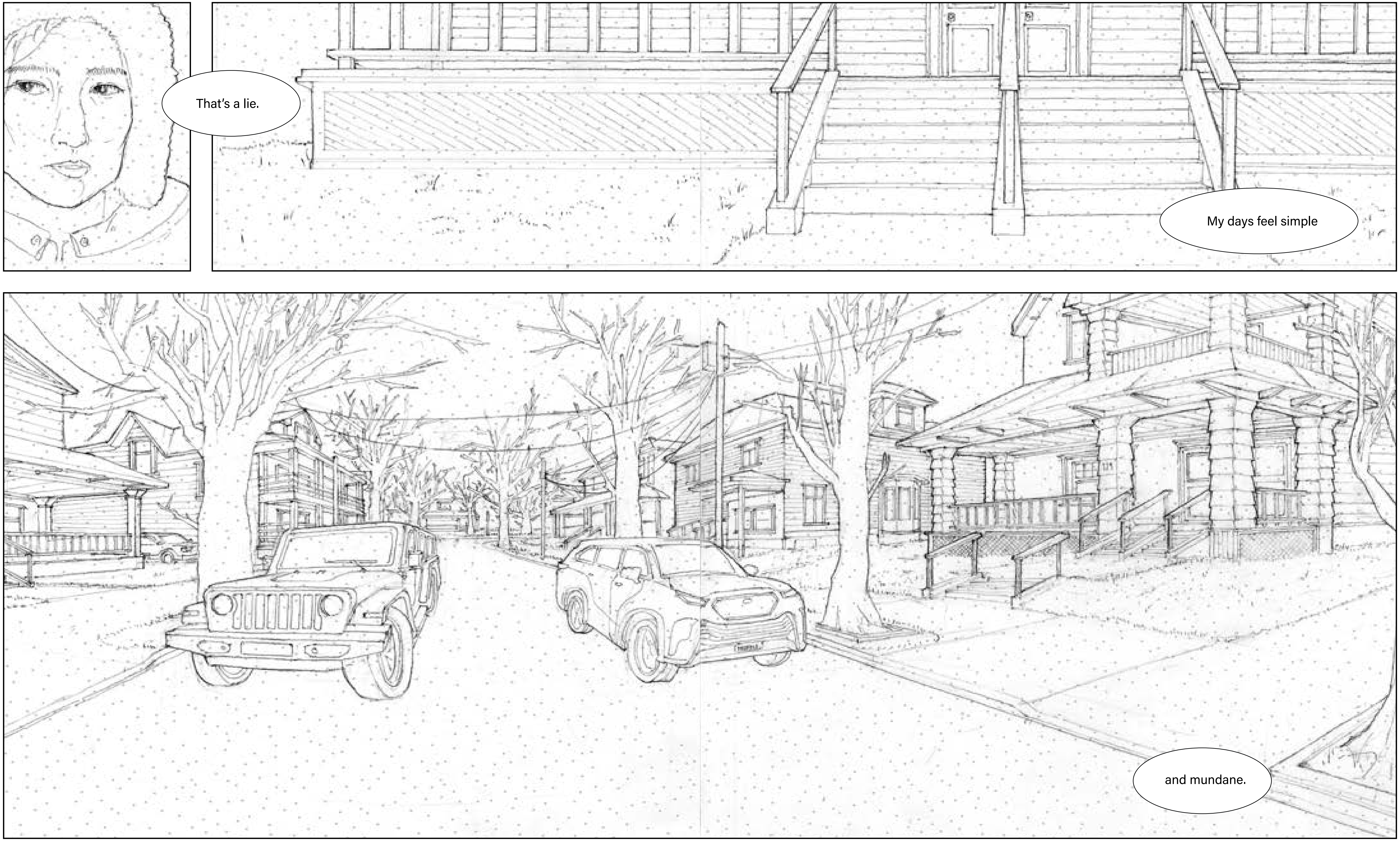
I. CONSTRUCTION

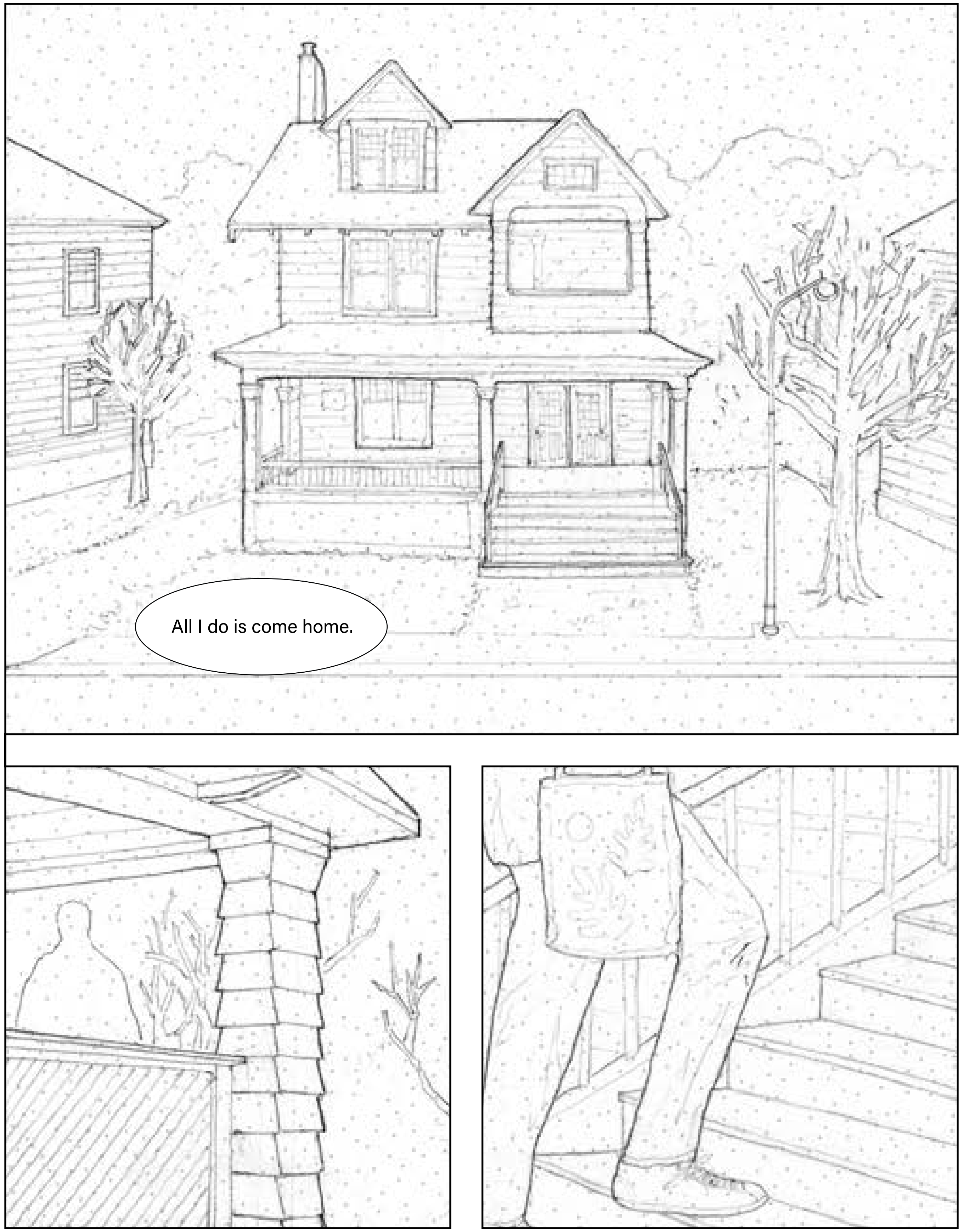
CONSTRUCTION

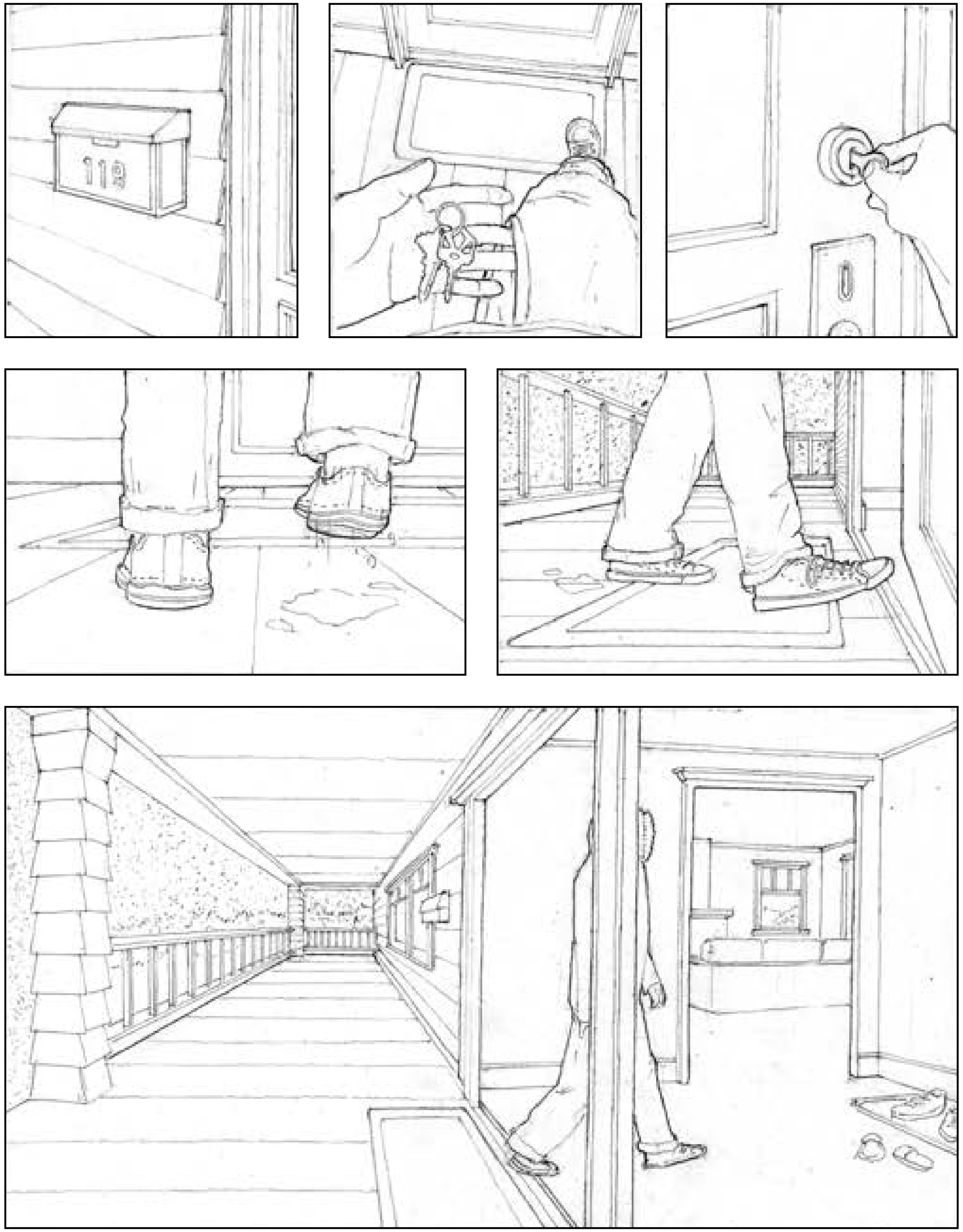
Architects have long stressed the deep psychological importance of “home”. “Home” transcends mere shelter and rather embodies aspirations, motivations, and personal values. As residents personalize their homes to reflect their needs and tastes, it becomes an expression of identity. This process transforms physical spaces into psychosocial ones through active adaptation and decoration. Thus, for individuals belonging to multiple cultures, “home” holds multiple meanings and assumes new roles. Exploring its hybrid territory reveals new understandings of “home” and its origins: from serving as a final refuge against assimilation, to recreating familiar environments. Studying the cultural hybridity of each space sheds light on architectural themes such as physical construction and tangible designs of social relationships. Investigating communication and the sense of safety alongside visual documentation can enhance awareness of emotional integration into different environments and belonging in space.

One, however, will find that defining the thresholds for understanding the integration of the essence of “home” and cultural relationships together can be challenging. “Home” and its tangible construction stem from an internal, emotional space, shaped by family, personal experiences, and future aspirations. When assessing their integration, it’s crucial to question how both the narrator and reader shape their own initial criteria for more complete and holistic understanding. Documenting a personal visual narrative uncovers a private space and aids in analyzing the reframing and organization of perspectives. Sharing it with others transforms this space into a tangible entity, bridging emotional and physical realities. Lastly, opening the door to “home” reveals diverse interpretations of both “heritage” and “origin” and their roles in subsequent endeavors.


Ma,
Sorry I haven’t been returning your calls.
I’ve been busy.
Actually...


That’s a lie.
My days feel simple
and mundane.


All I do is come home.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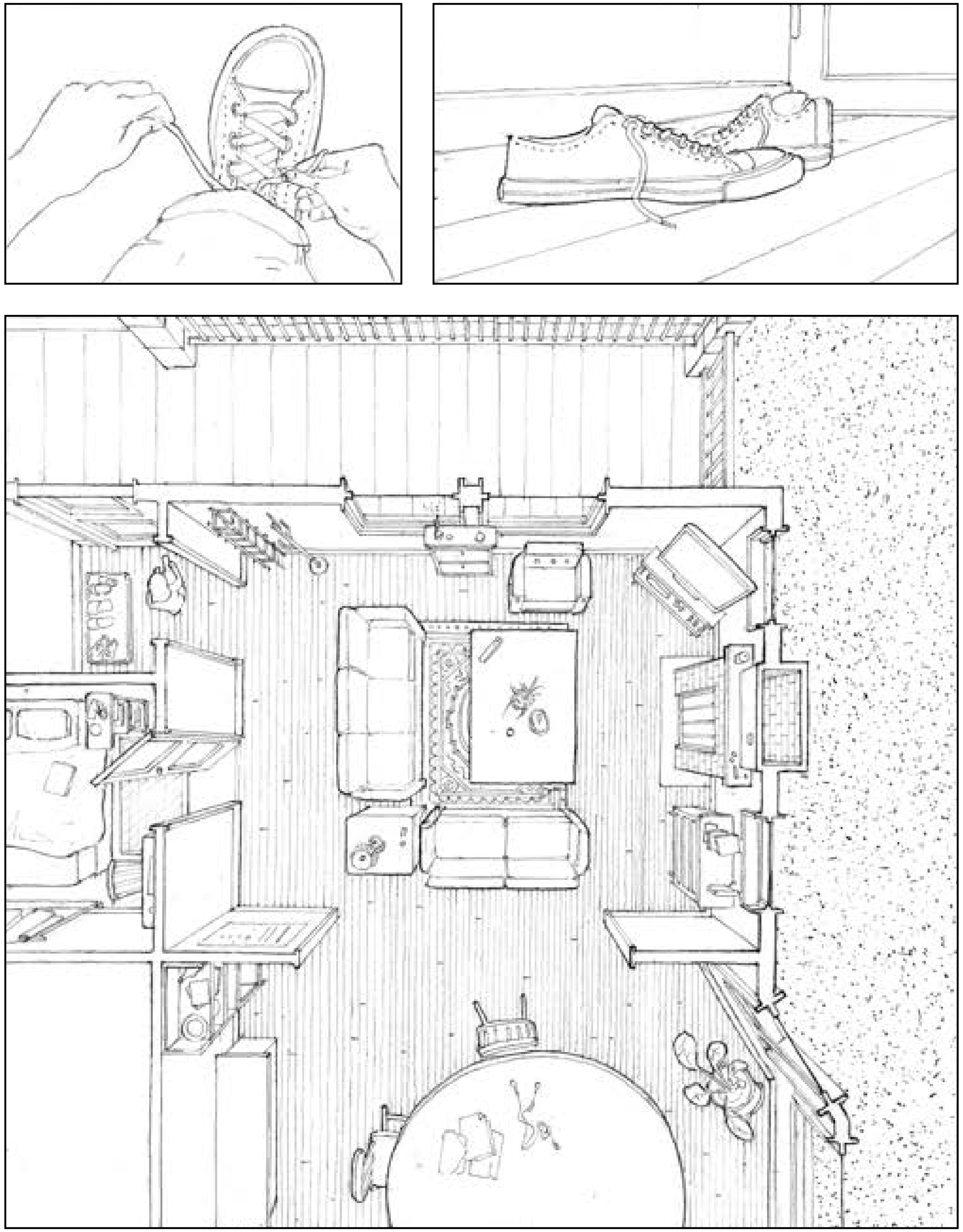
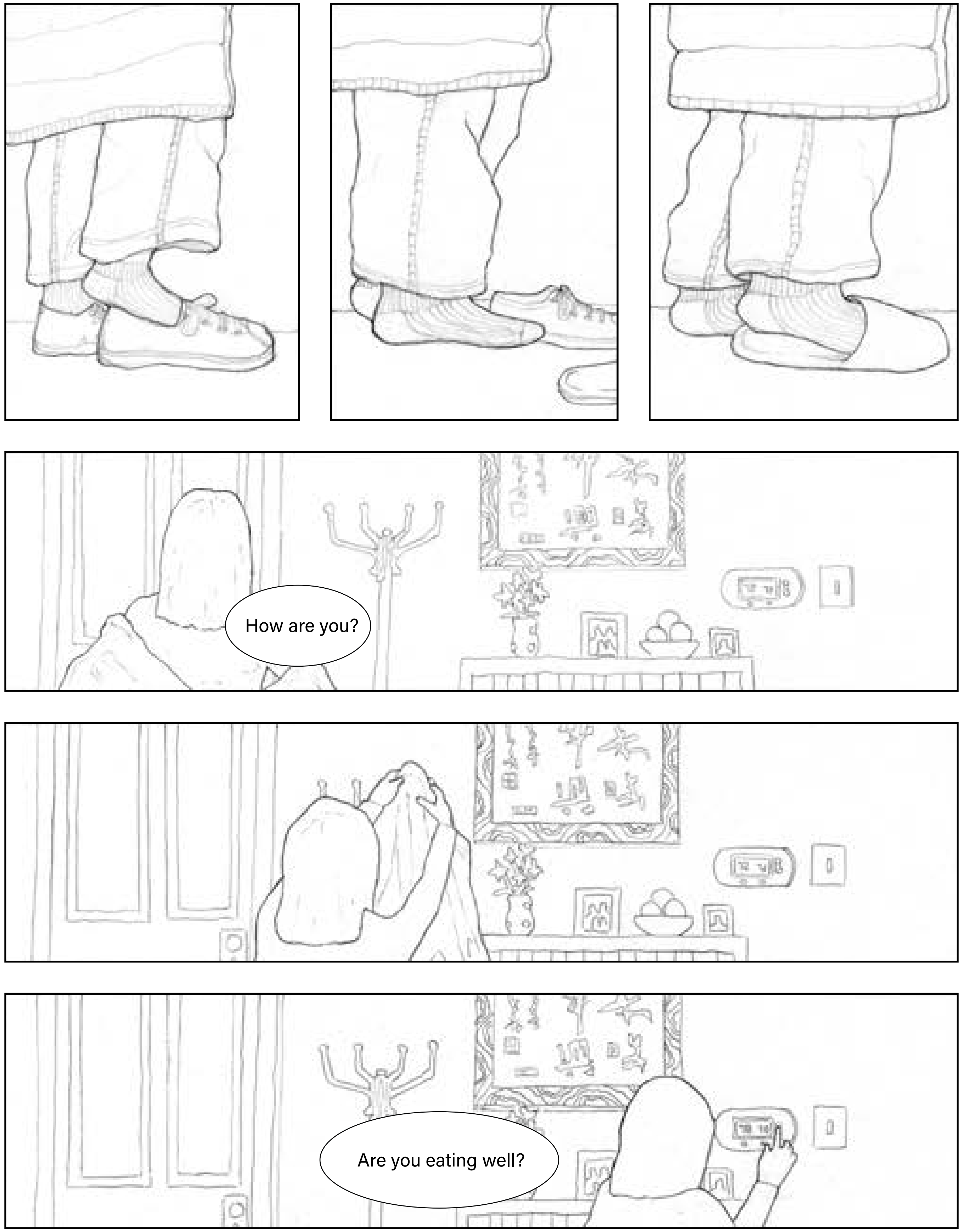
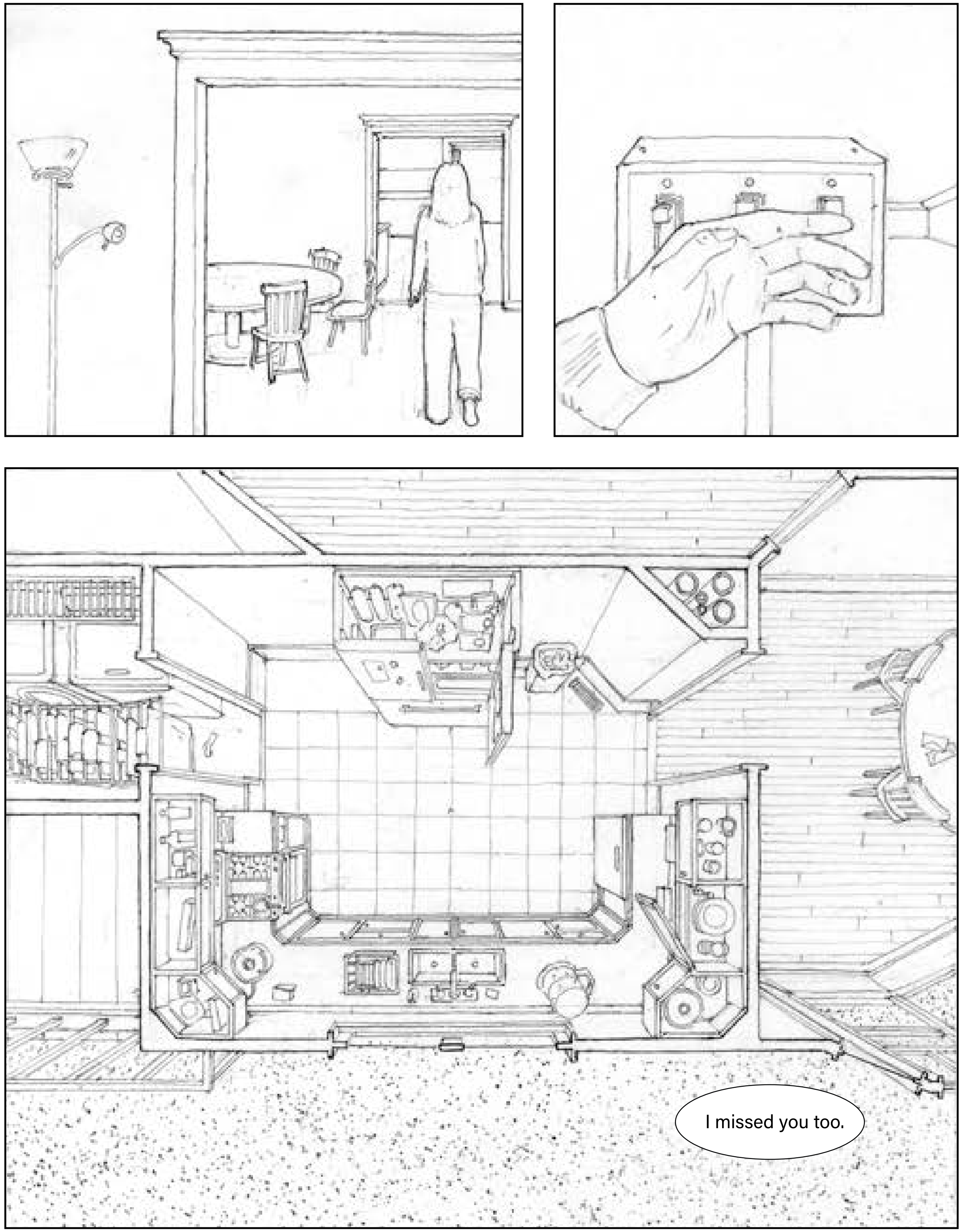
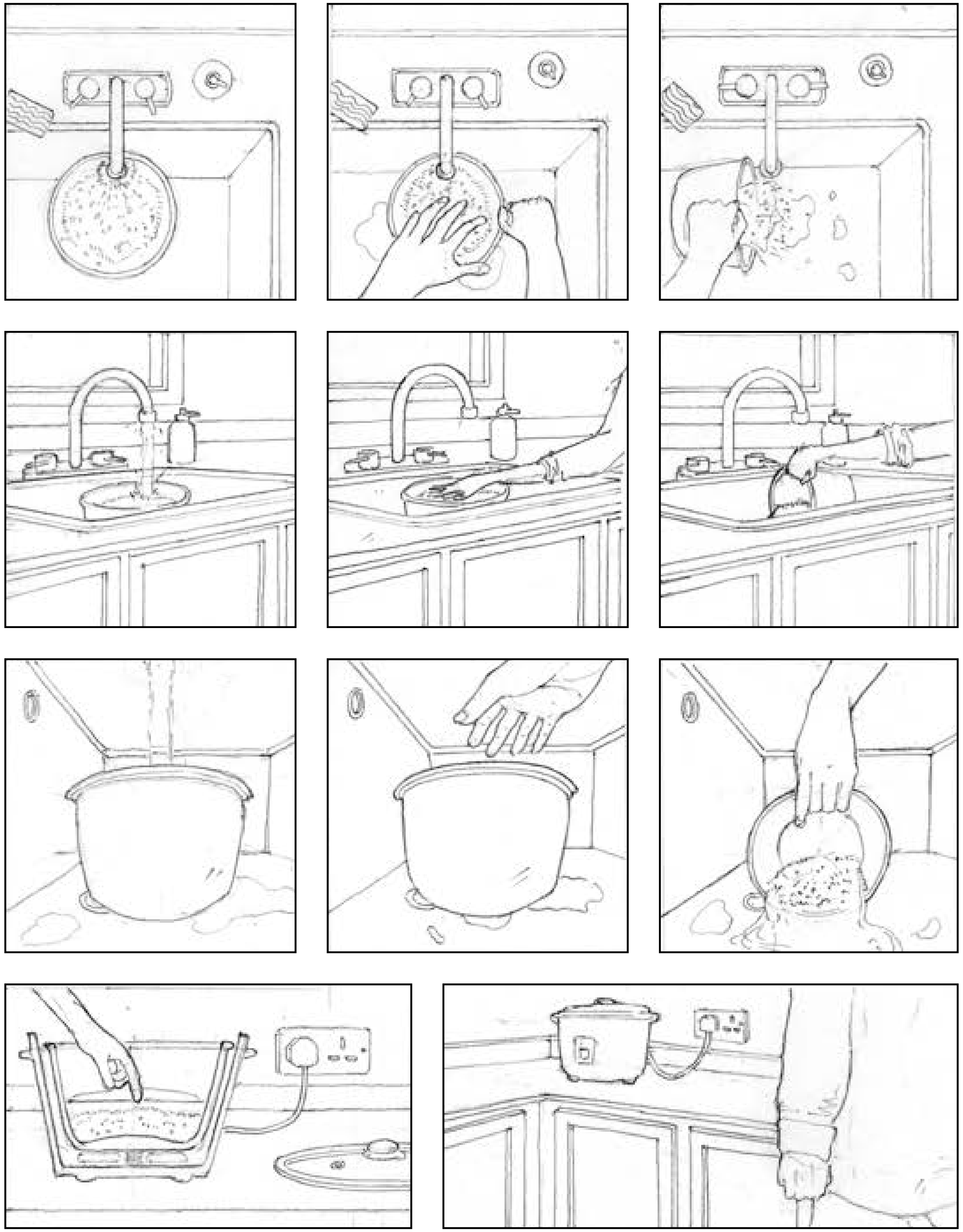
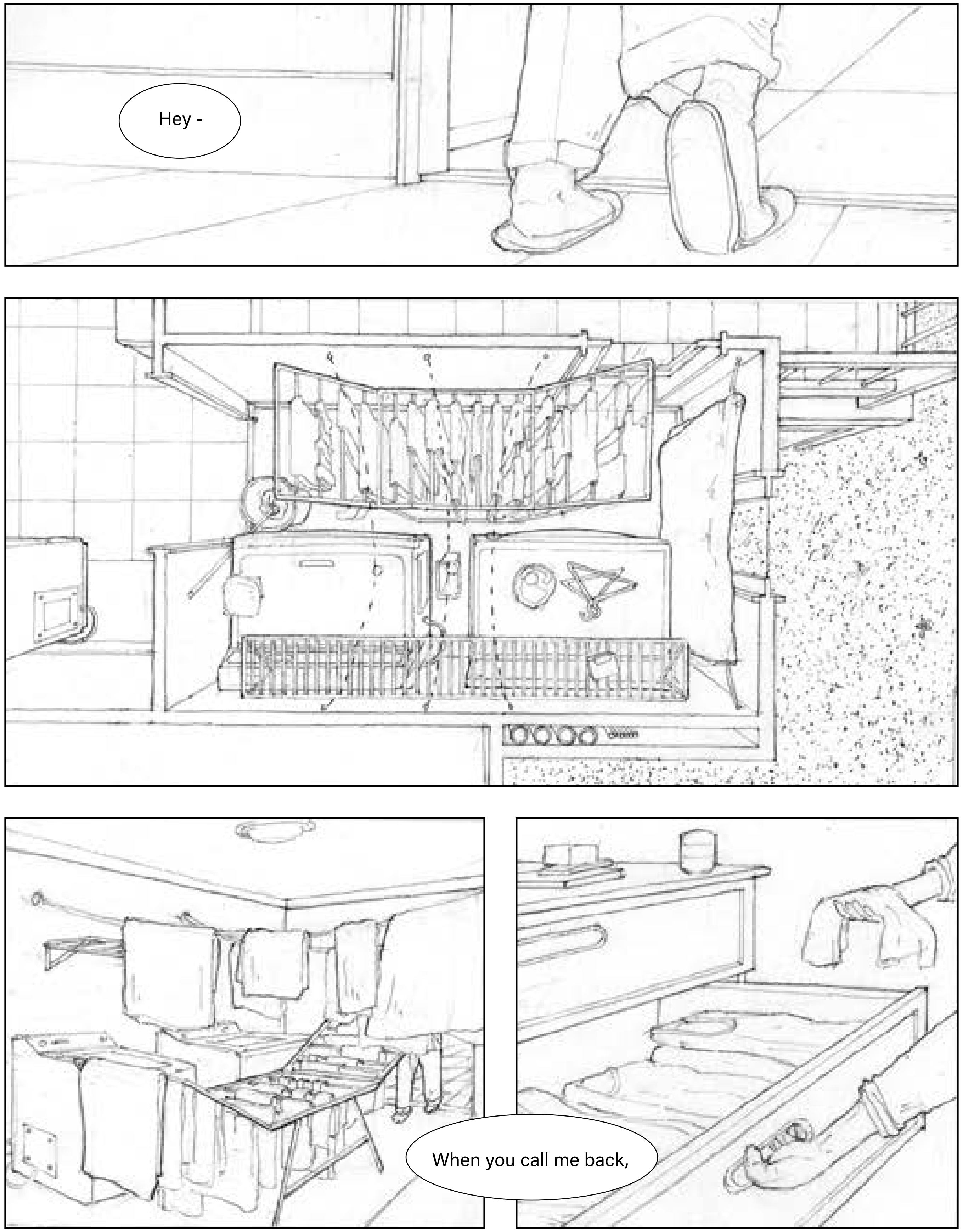
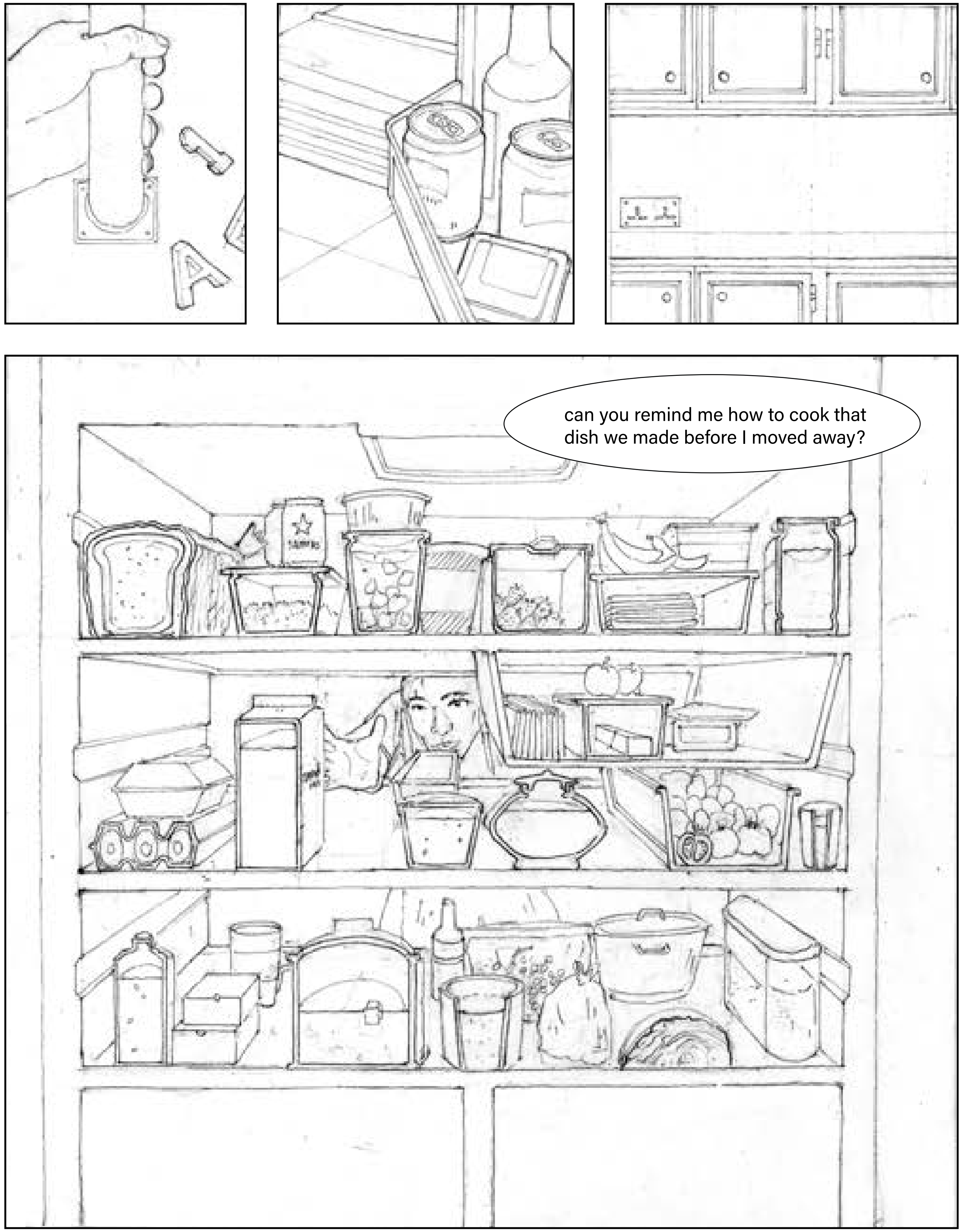


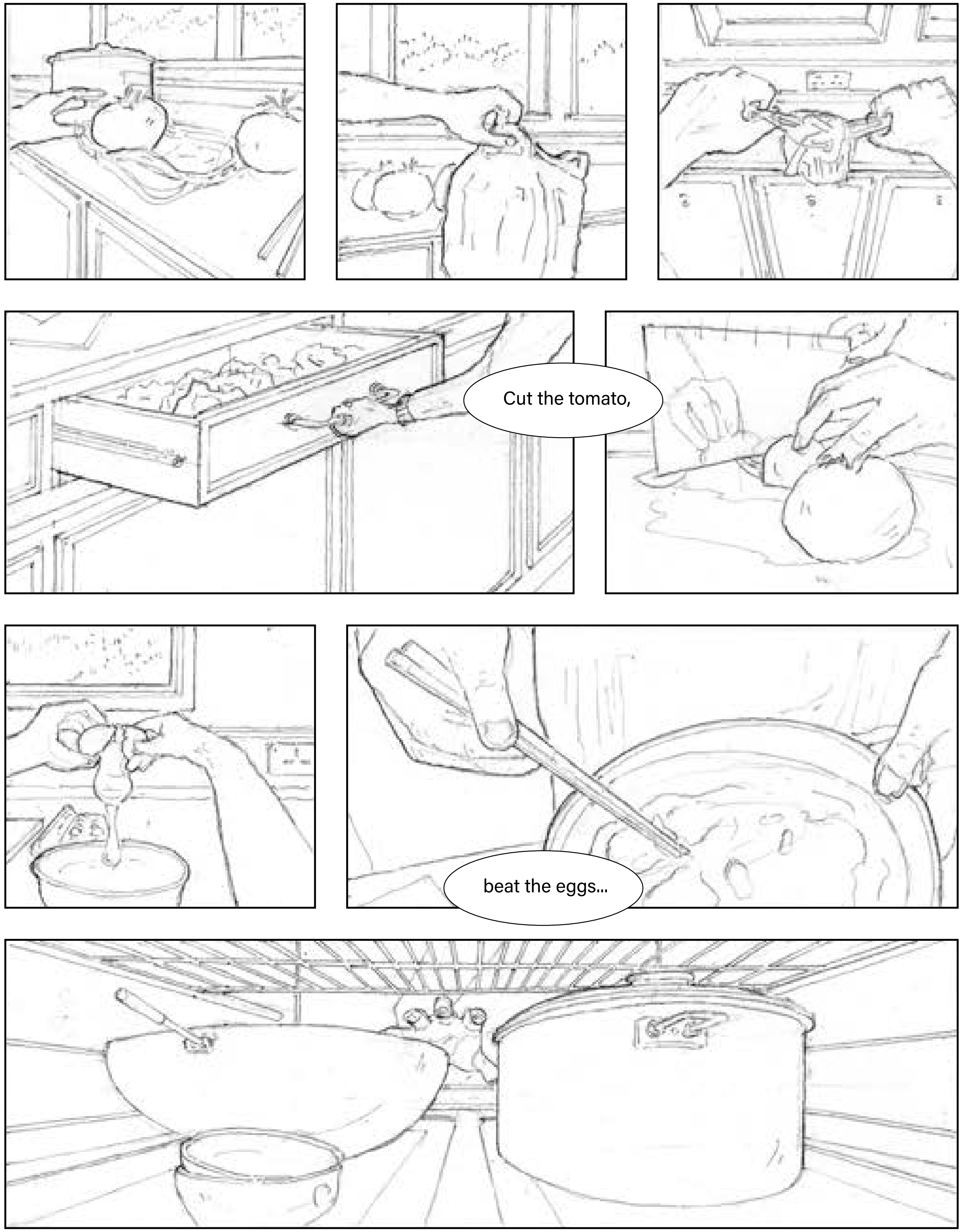

How are you?
Are you eating well?

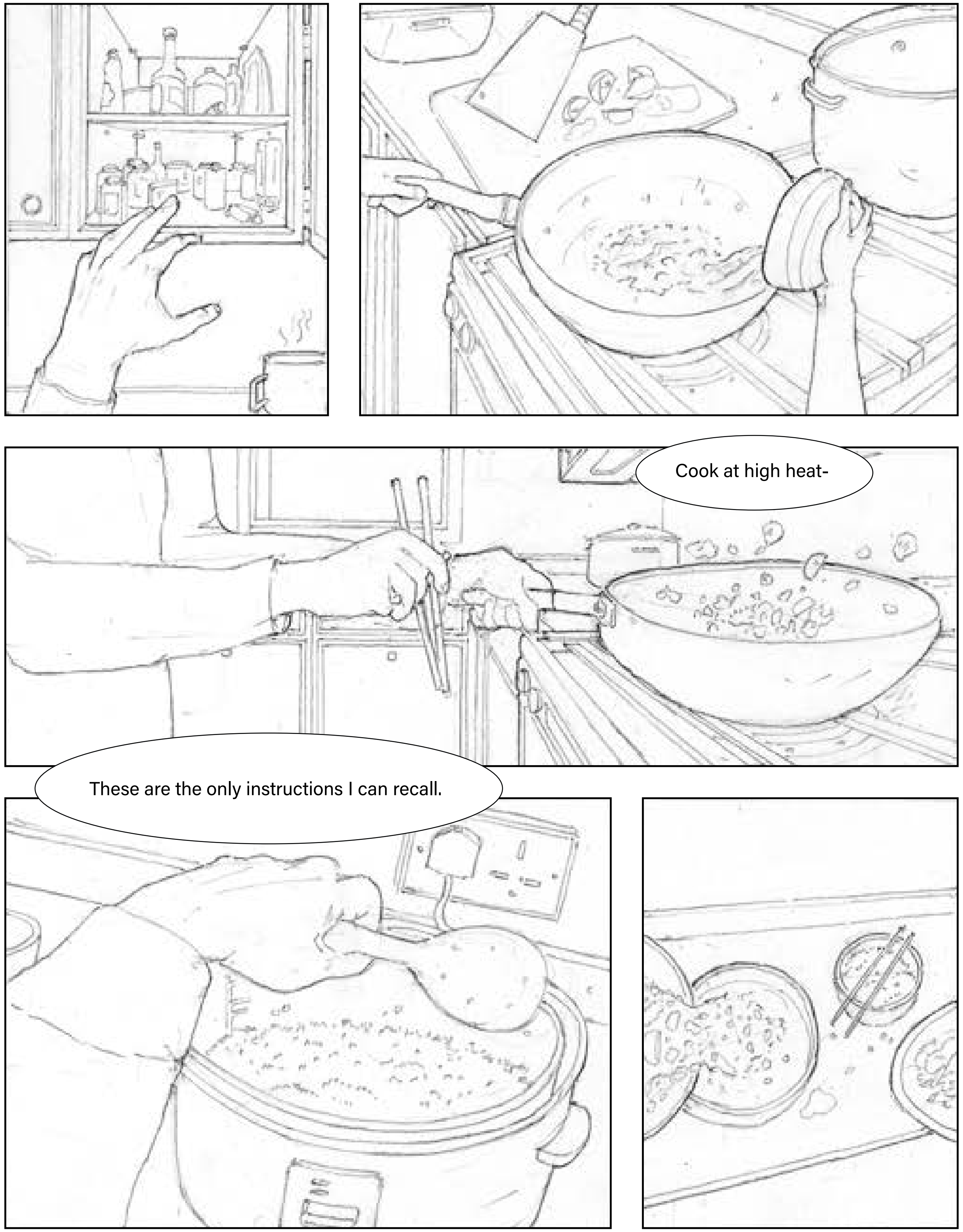

I missed you too.

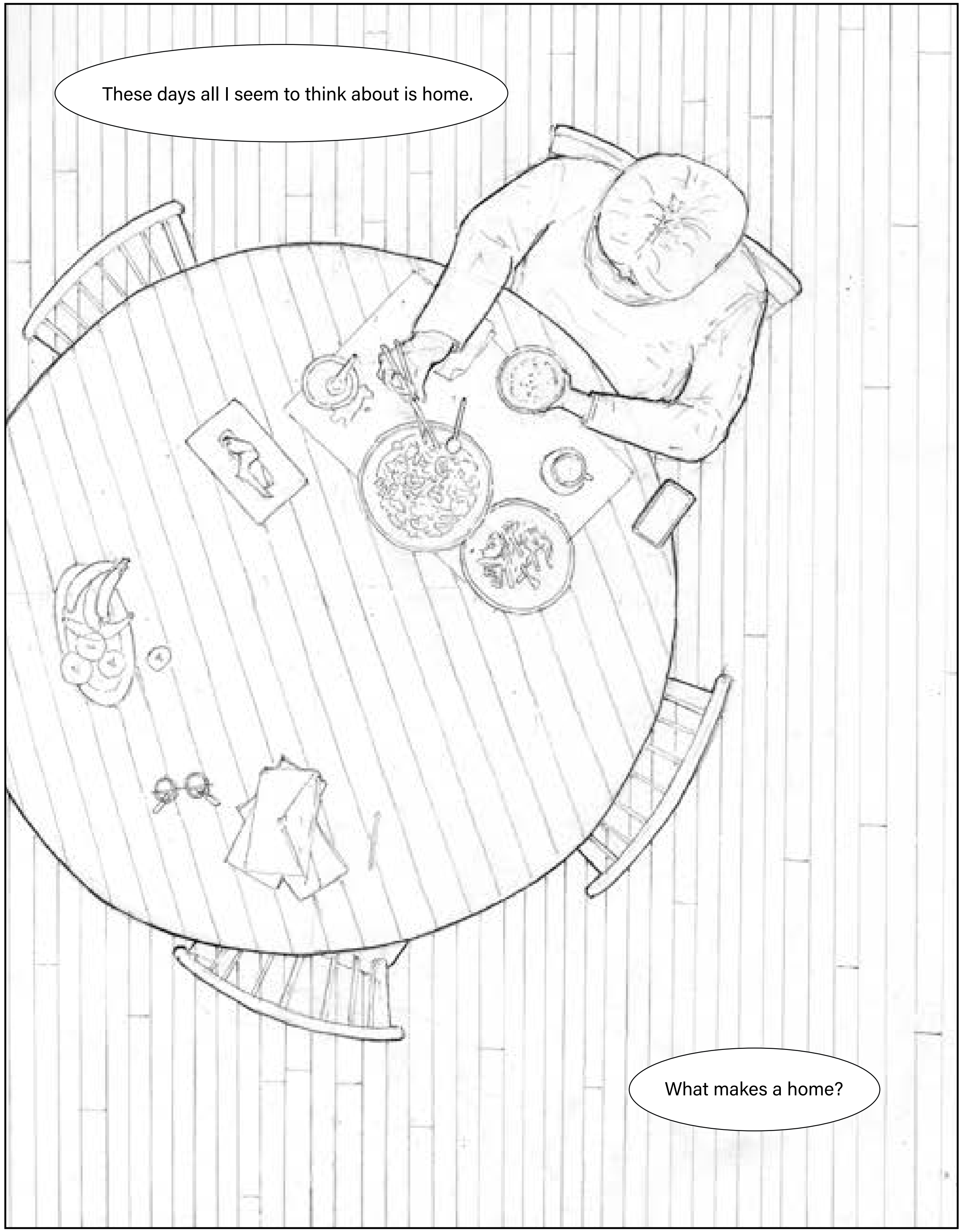


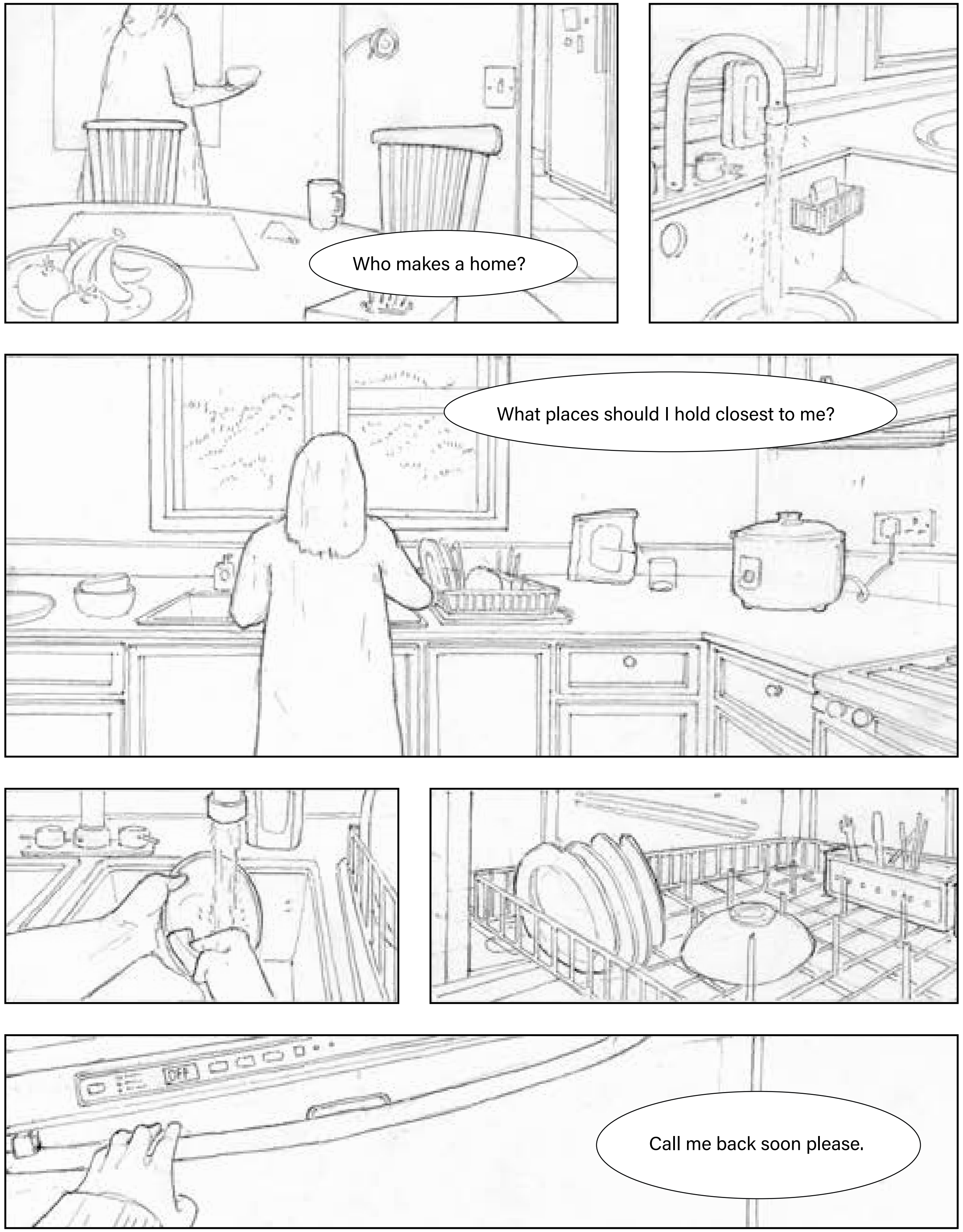

Hey -
When you call me back,

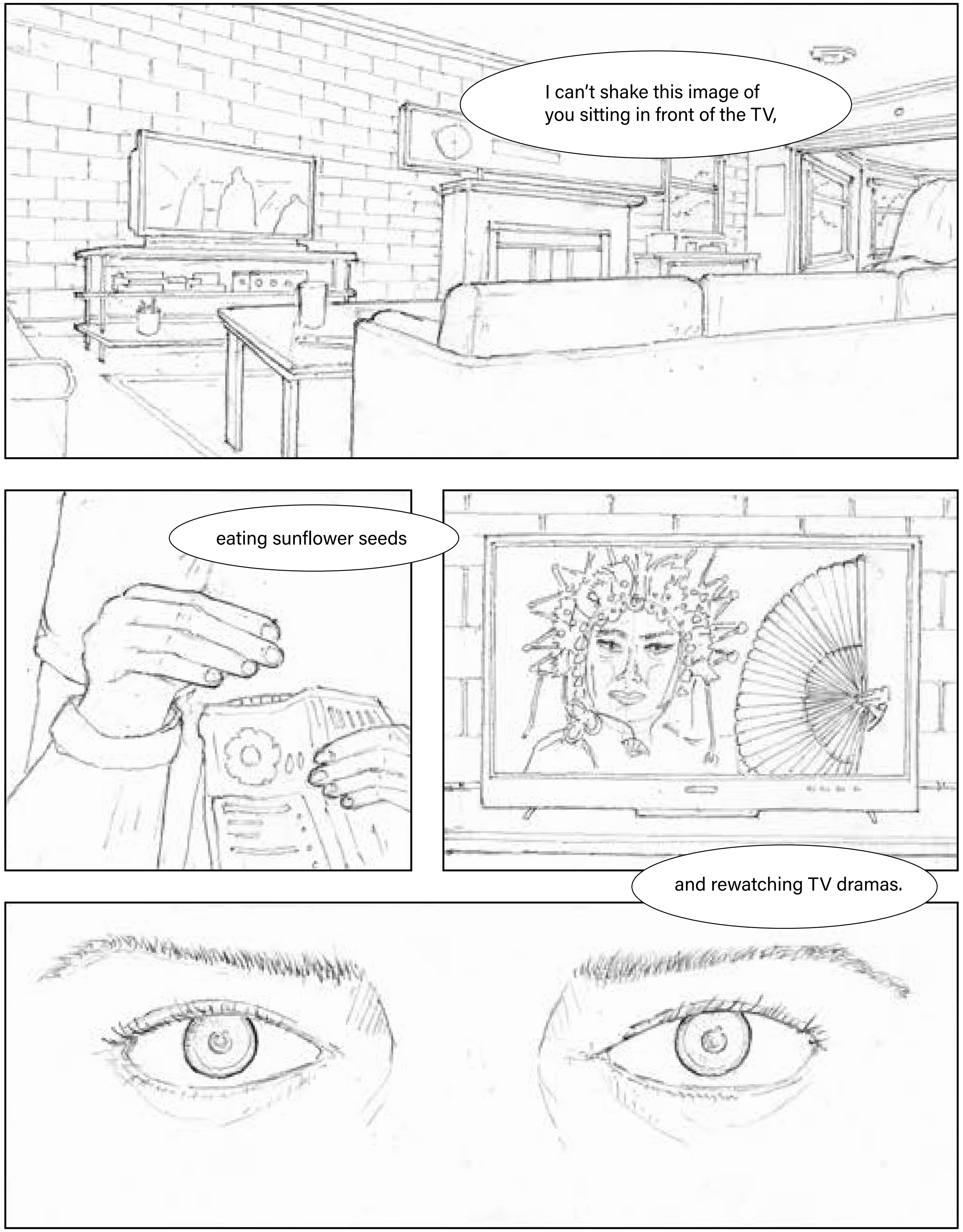

can you remind me how to cook that dish we made before I moved away?

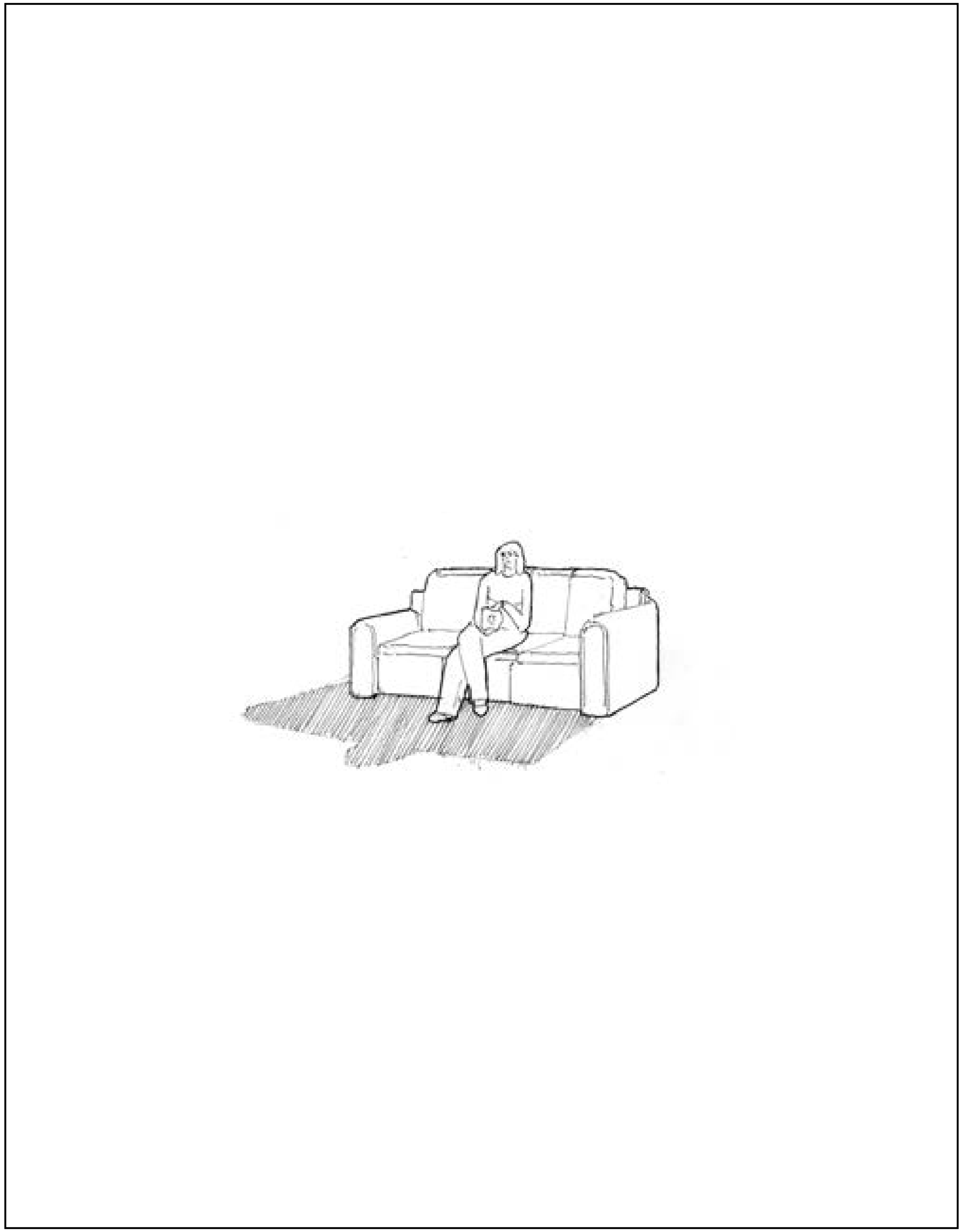

Cut the tomato,
beat the eggs...


Cook at high heat-
These are the only instructions I can recall.


These days all I seem to think about is home.
What makes a home?


Who makes a home?
What places should I hold closest to me?
OFF
Call me back soon please.


I can't shake this image of you sitting in front of the TV,
eating sunflower seeds
and rewatching TV dramas.



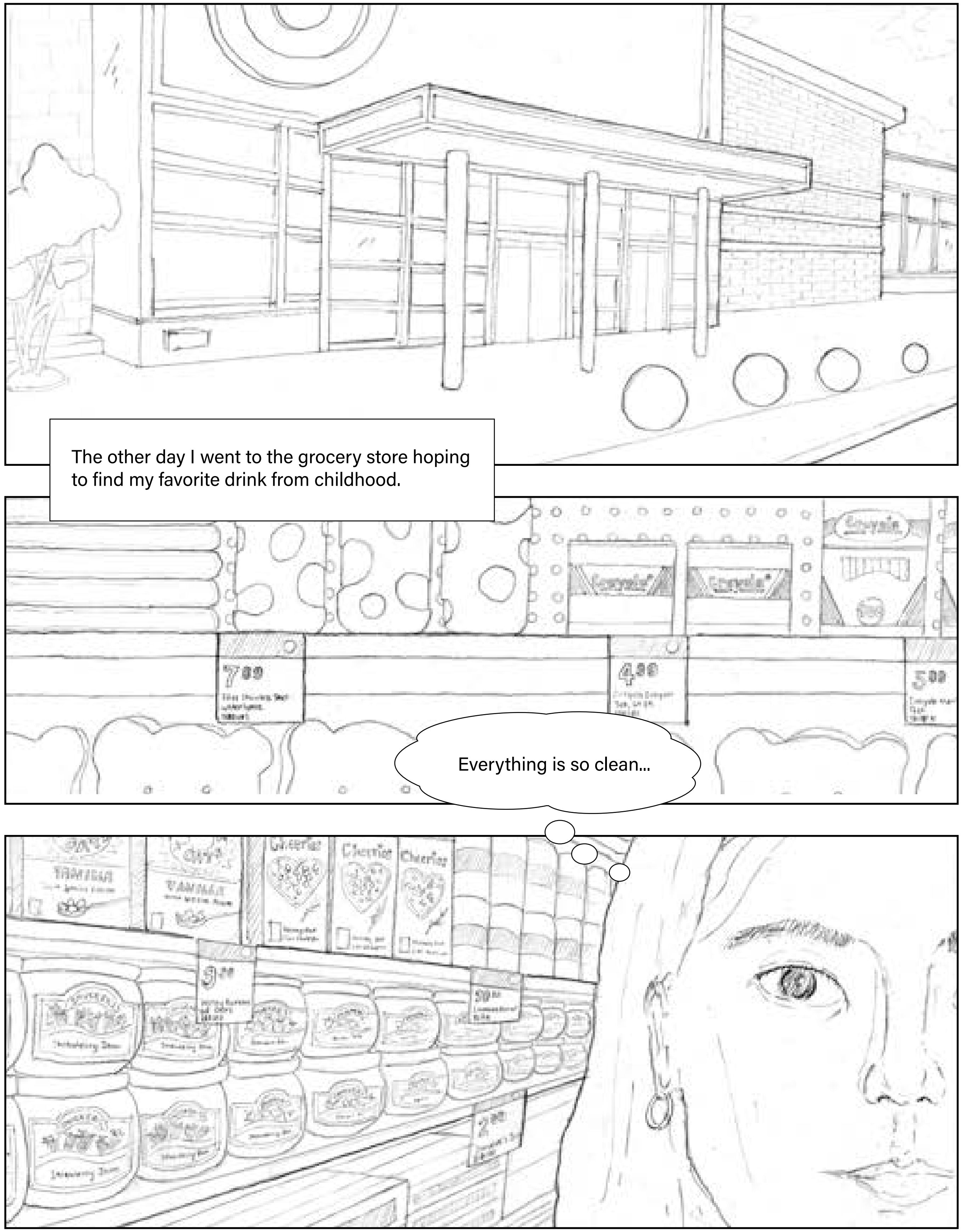
II. LONGING

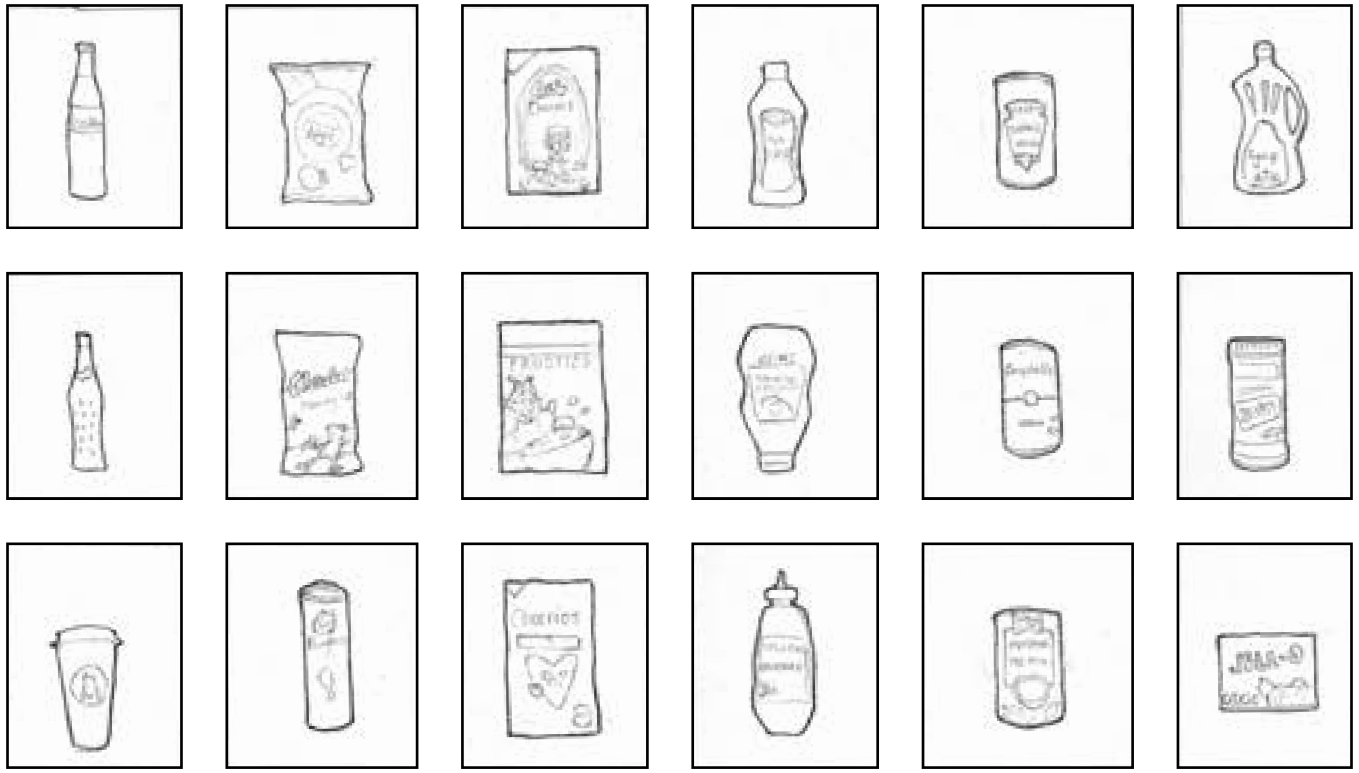
LONGING

Another dimension of hybridity that individuals with multiple cultural affiliations exist within can be found at the community level. Such individuals, particularly those belonging to minority cultures within dominant ones, will seek out ethnoburbs. Ethnoburbs, intentional creations by ethnic communities seeking economic and social spaces within broader societal contexts, are significant cultural and economic hubs. They are characterized by fluid social hierarchies and diverse cultural identities. Their construction is significant in the landscape of urban America.

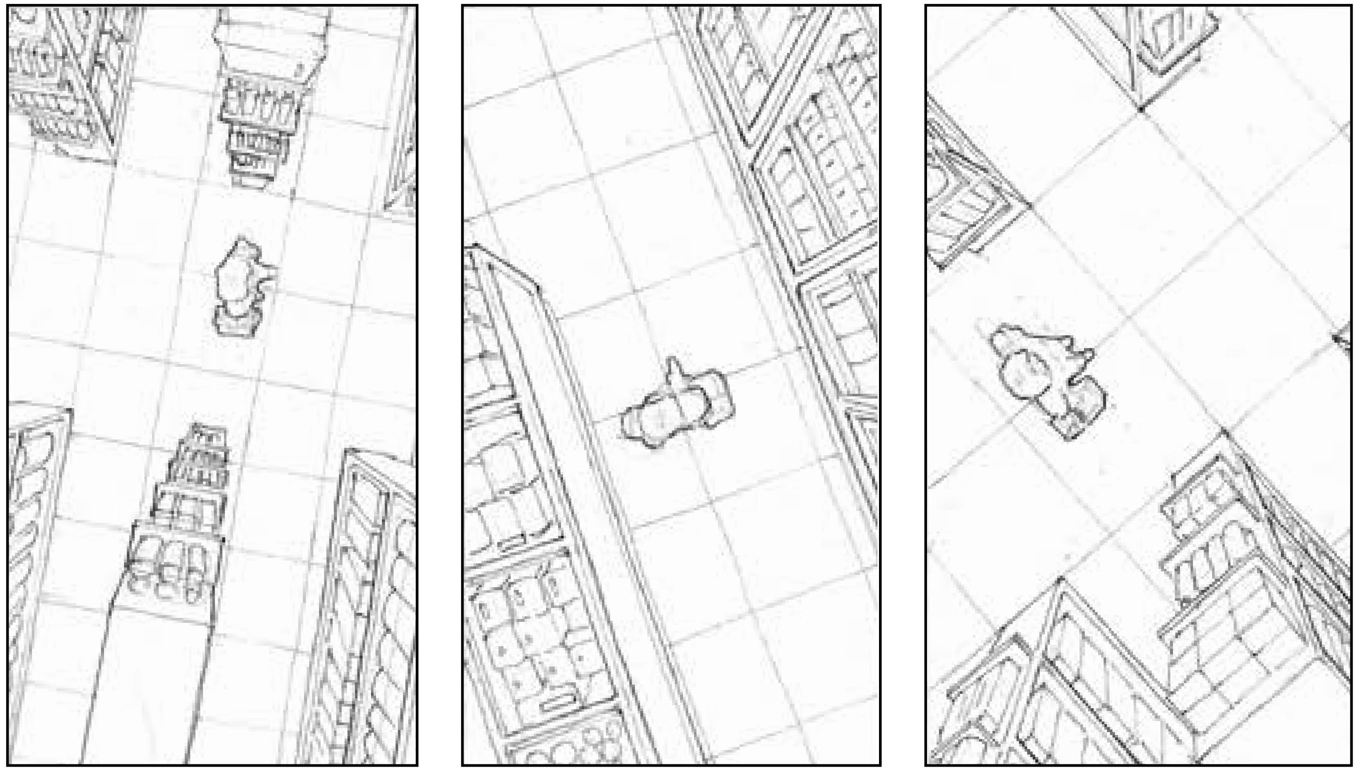
One space that exemplifies the relationship of an ethnoburb to an individual is the grocery store. Playing a crucial role, it intertwines everyday objects with economic structures and spatial organization. The grocery store becomes more than just a place of commerce, they become contested sites that introduce private habits with public consumption. These moments in turn shape multicultural identities, influence community relationships, and prompt reflections on "home" and cultural identity. Examining this space uncovers various narratives that explore the socio-spatial organization within these communities.

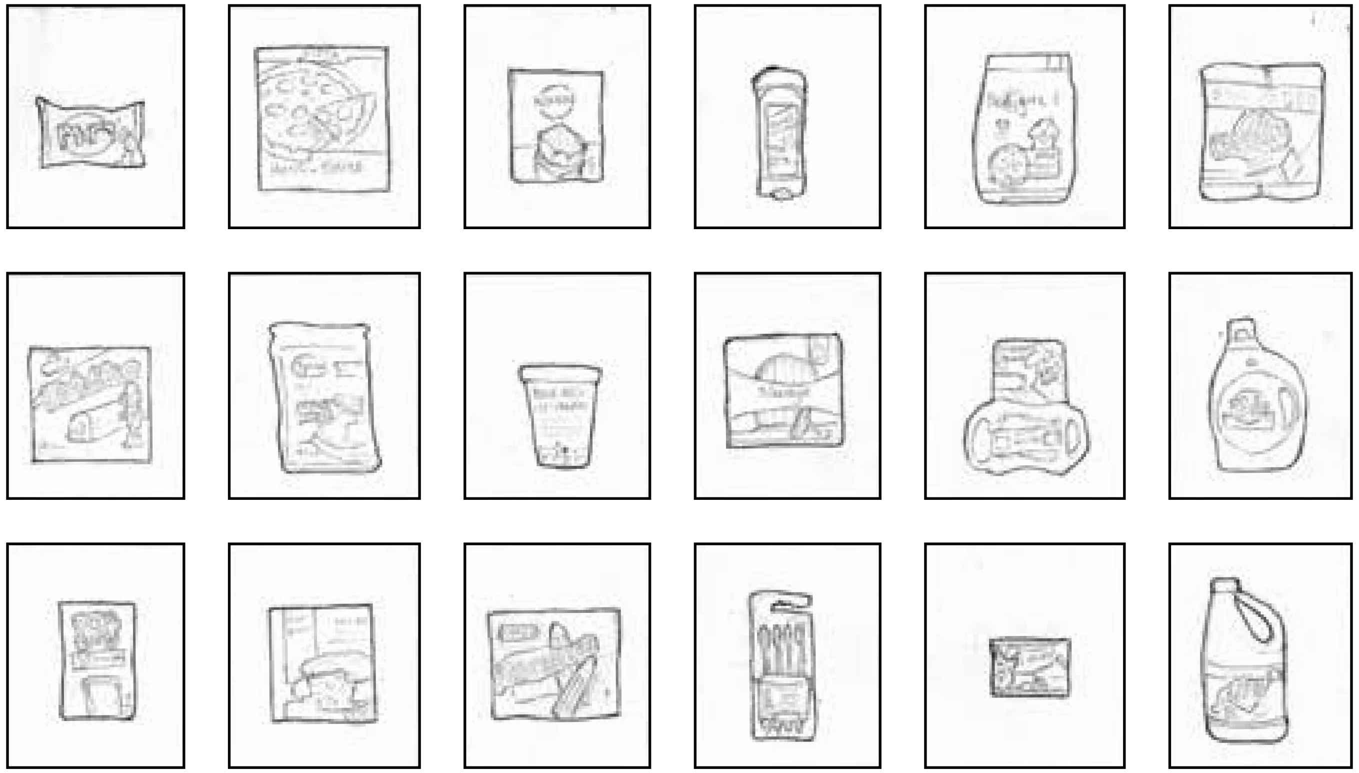
As you observe how these relationships take shape in the built environment, consider how the documentation of these public spaces reveals clearer class and racial dynamics in comparison to private spheres. Ethnoburbs, unlike traditional ethnic enclaves, are voluntary concentrations of ethnic individuals maximizing personal networks and business connections. Comparisons between the two highlight significant differences in spatial containment and socio-economic status. Furthermore, diverse immigrant waves have influenced the construction of ethnoburbs in unique ways. Changing dynamics within immigrant communities are evident through narratives within grocery stores, highlighting the evolution of cultural practices and identity formation. Exploring such spaces unveils nuances shaped by personal experiences and community relationships; this offers glimpses into the complex interplay of food, identity, and symbolism one associates with space. In these scenarios, multiculturalism serves as a vivid illustration of how cultural identity remains in a constant state of evolution. It is a dynamic process marked by ongoing contestation, expansion, and the forging of fresh connections.


The other day I went to the grocery store hoping to find my favorite drink from childhood.
Everything is so clean...

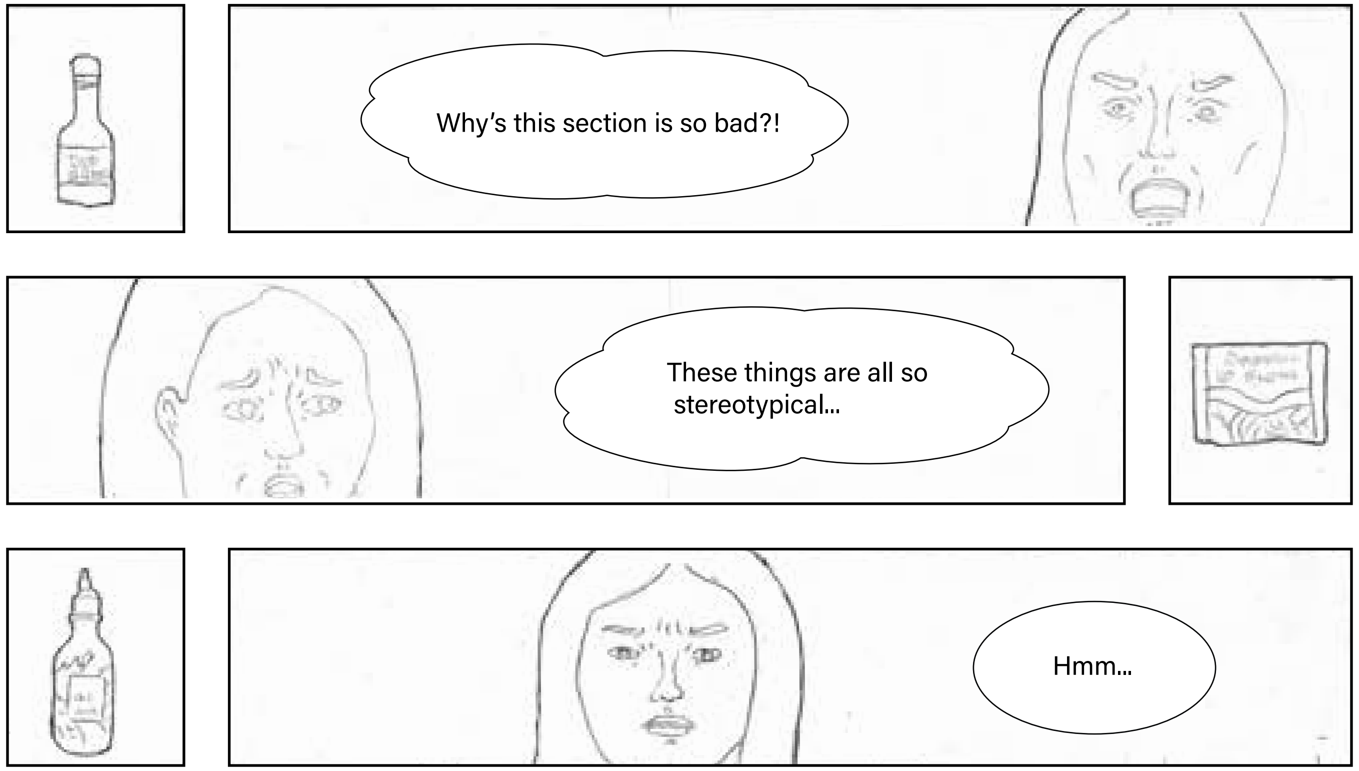


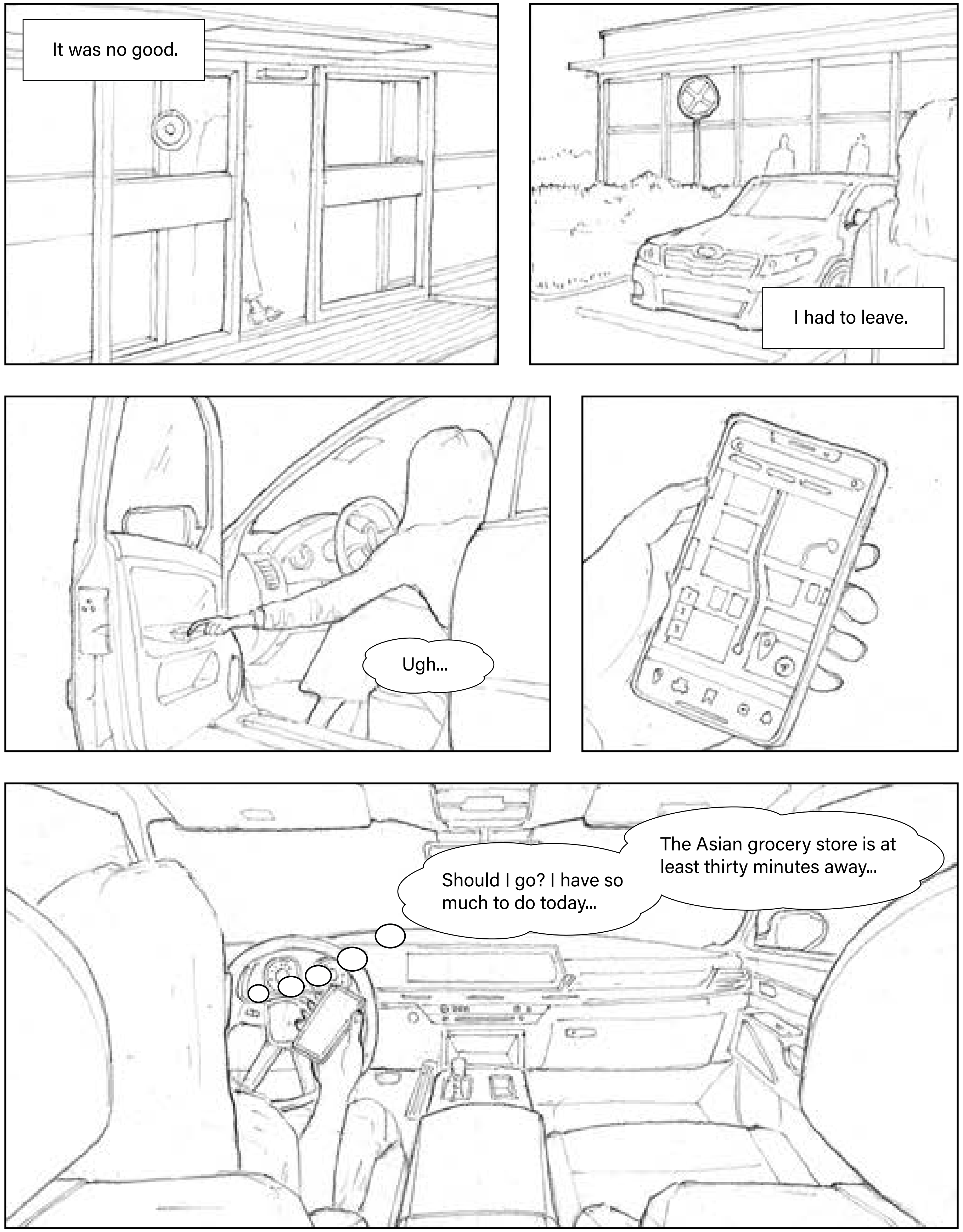
I walked down all the aisles.

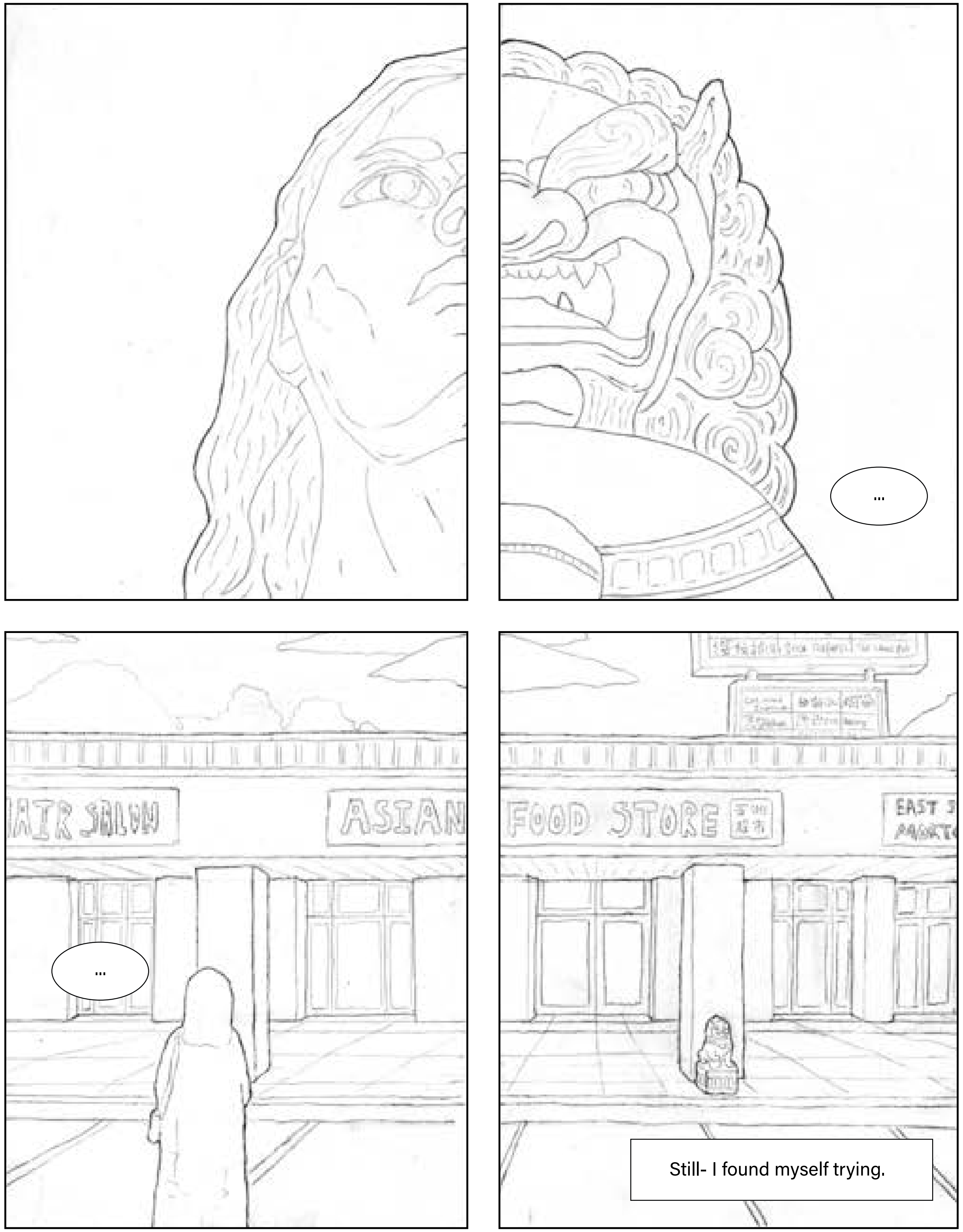


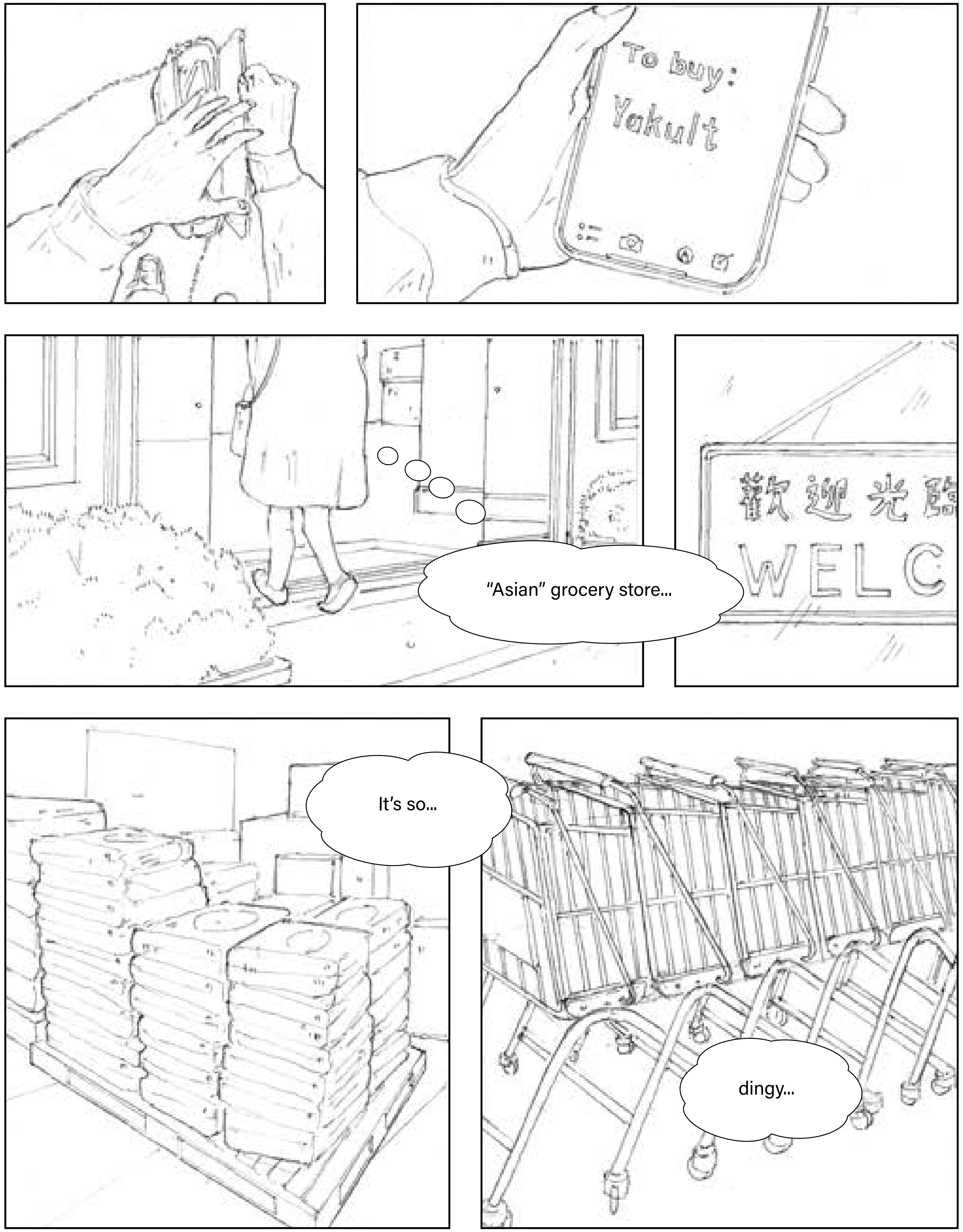


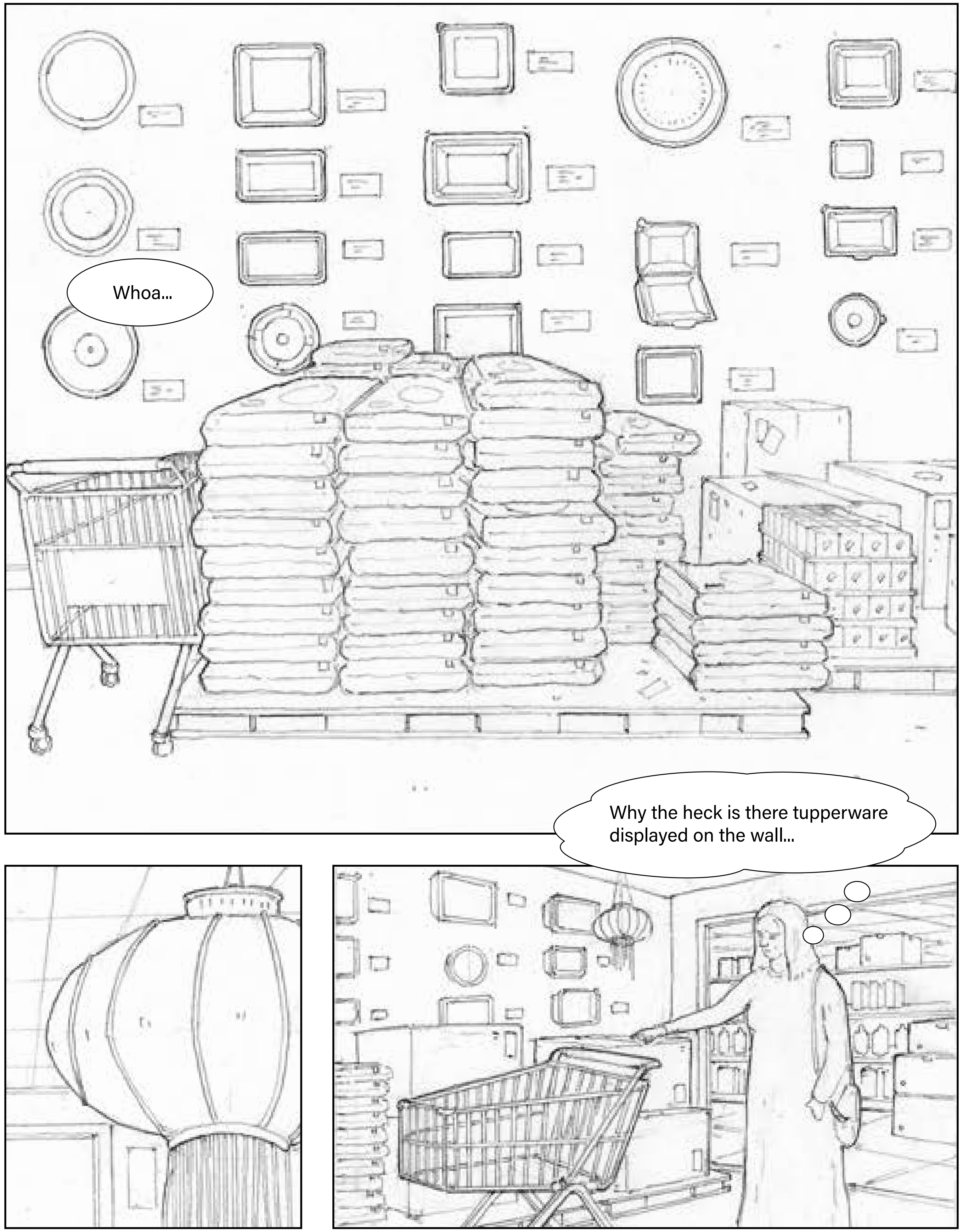
Before I stopped in front of the “Asian” aisle.

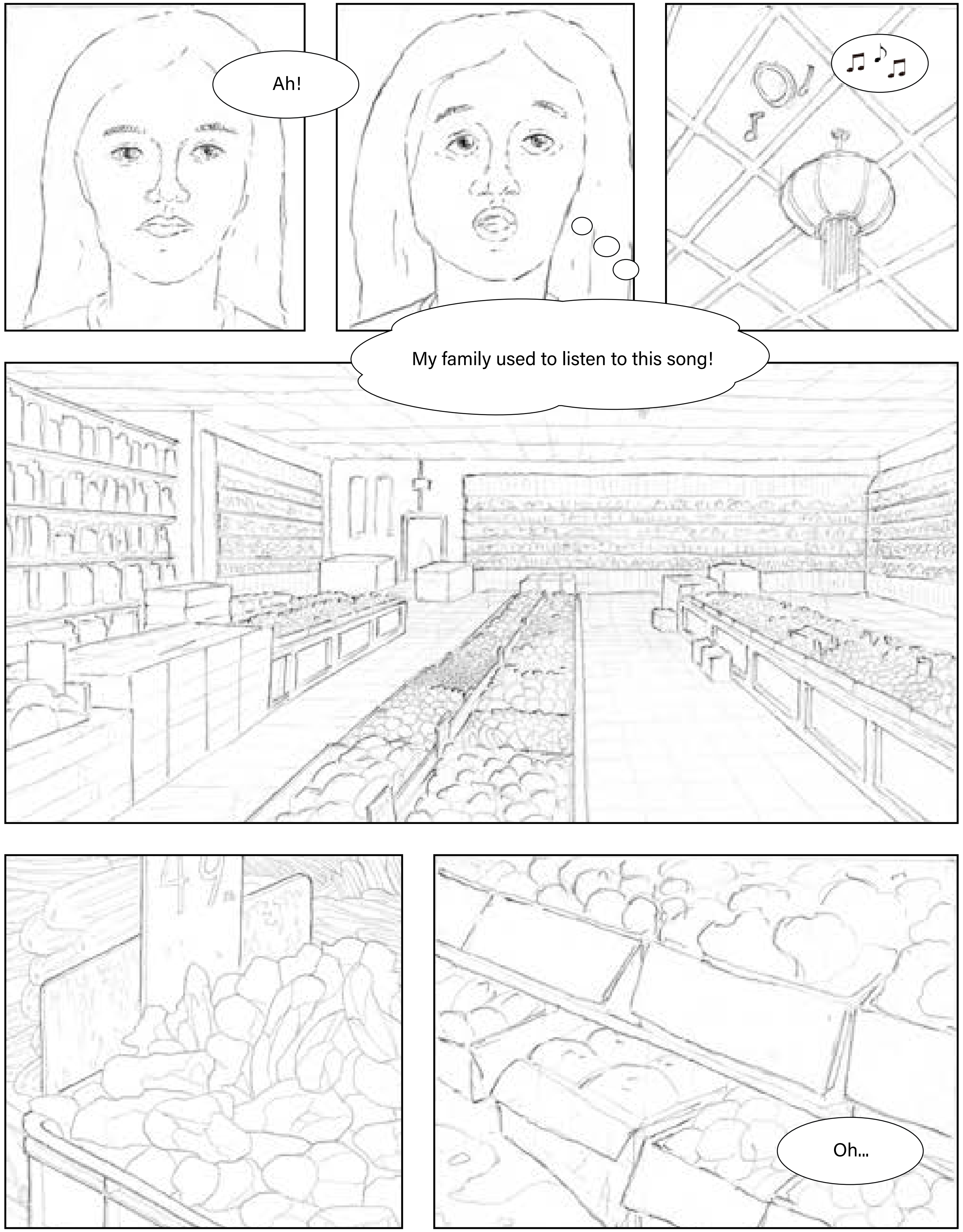

Why’s this section is so bad?!
These things are all so stereotypical...
Hmm...

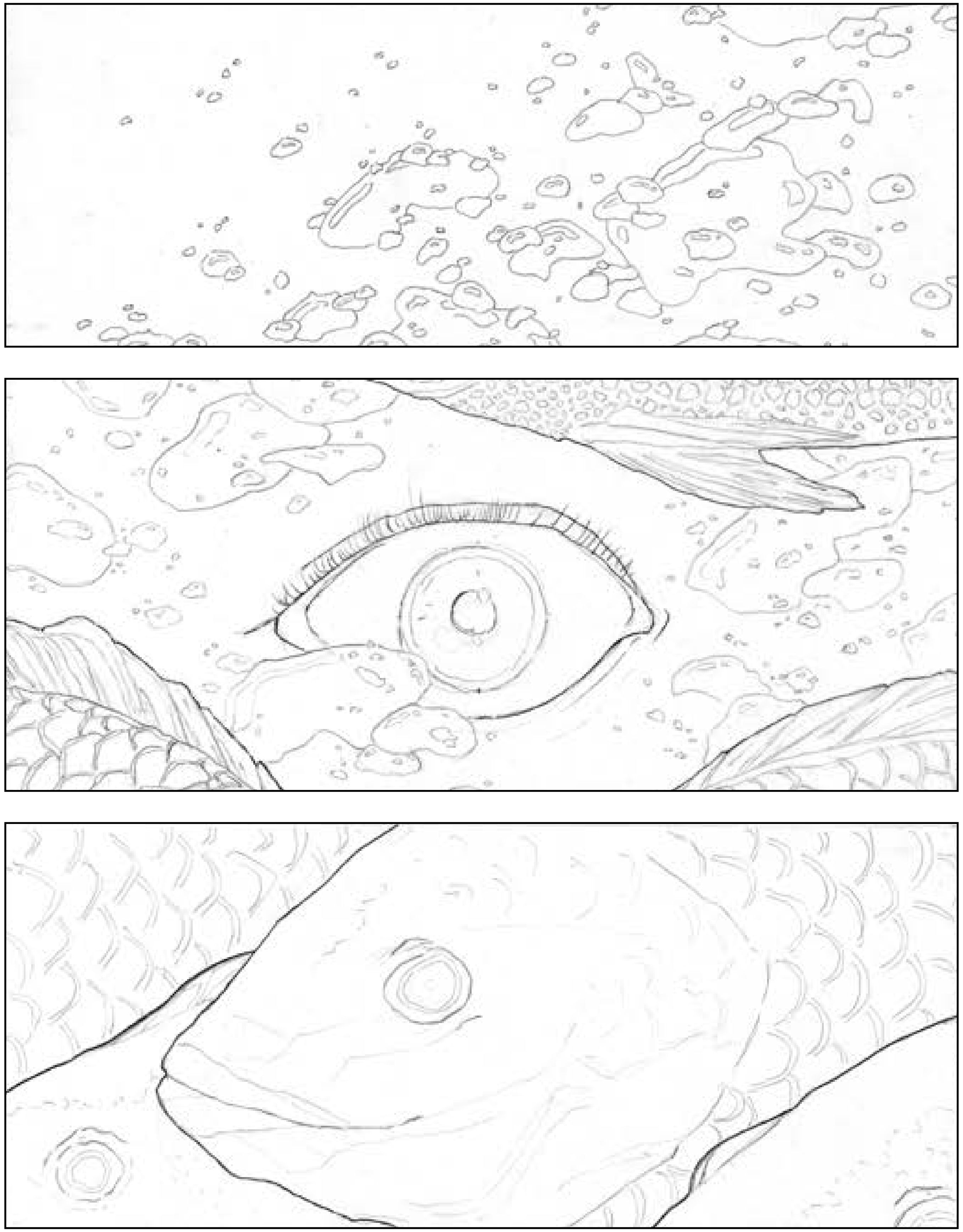

It was no good.
I had to leave.
Ugh...
Should I go? I have so much to do today...
The Asian grocery store is at least thirty minutes away...

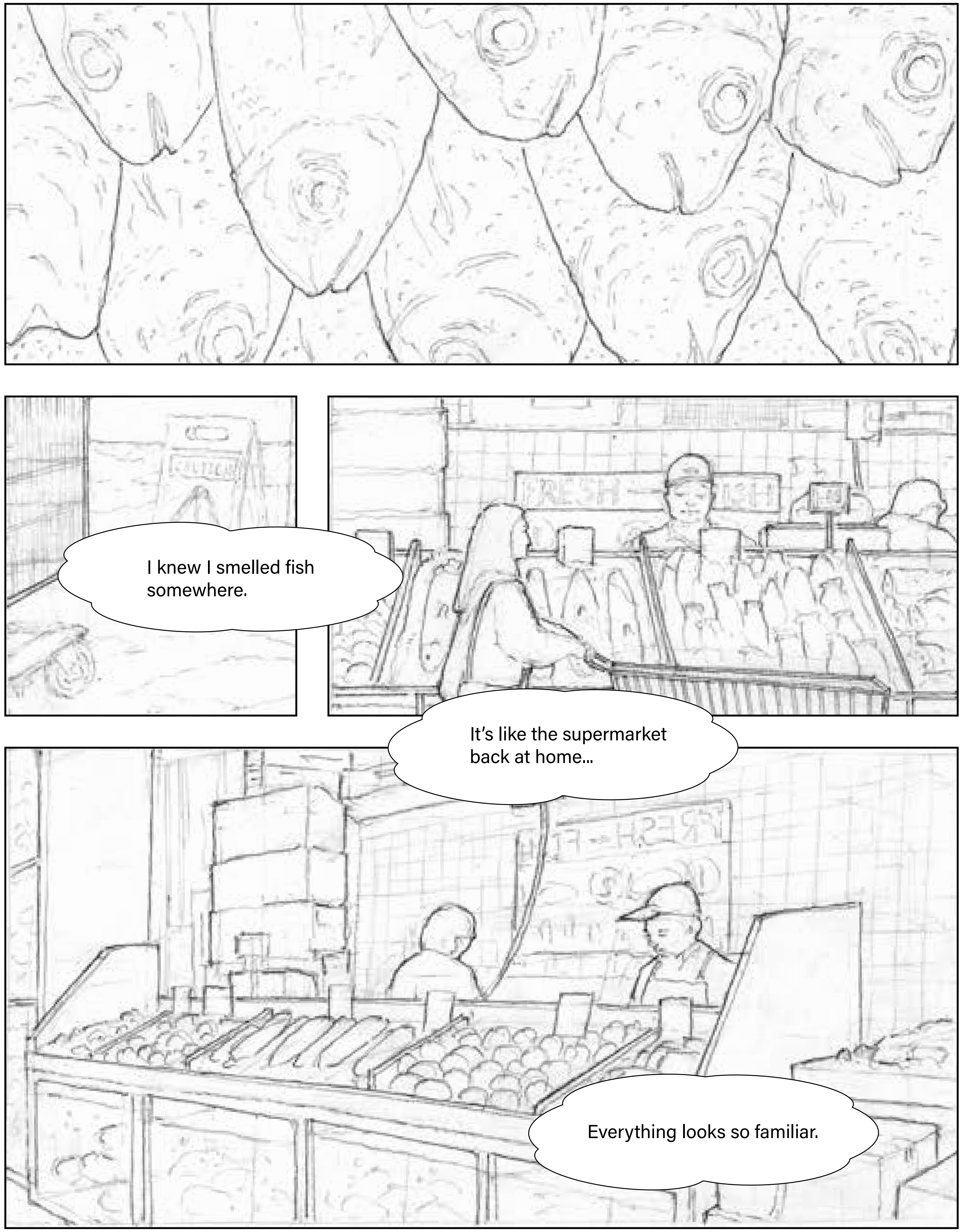

...
AIR SALON
ASIAN
...
FOOD STORE
EAST
Still- I found myself trying.

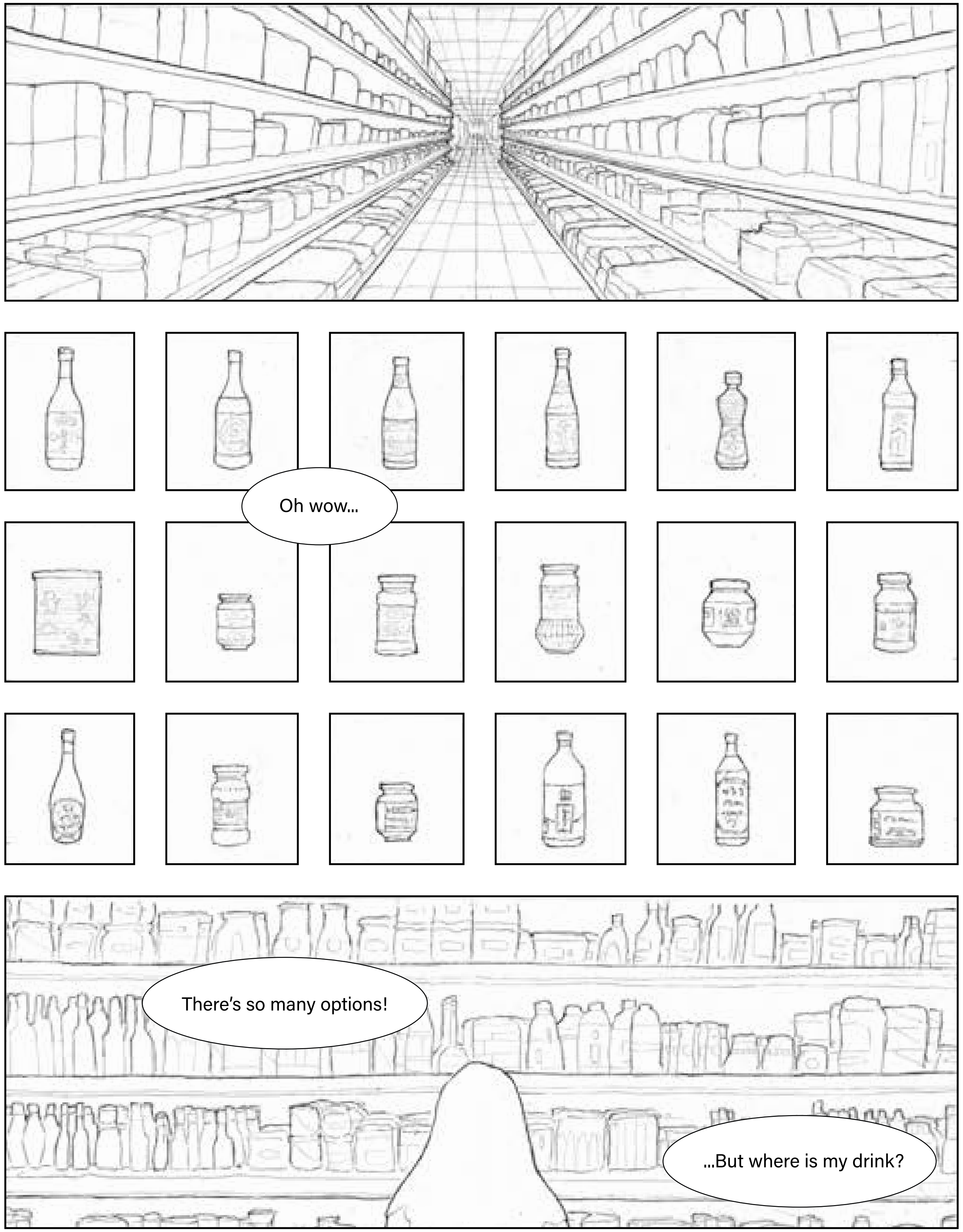

To buy:
Yakult
歡迎光臨
WELC
“Asian” grocery store...
It’s so...
dingy...

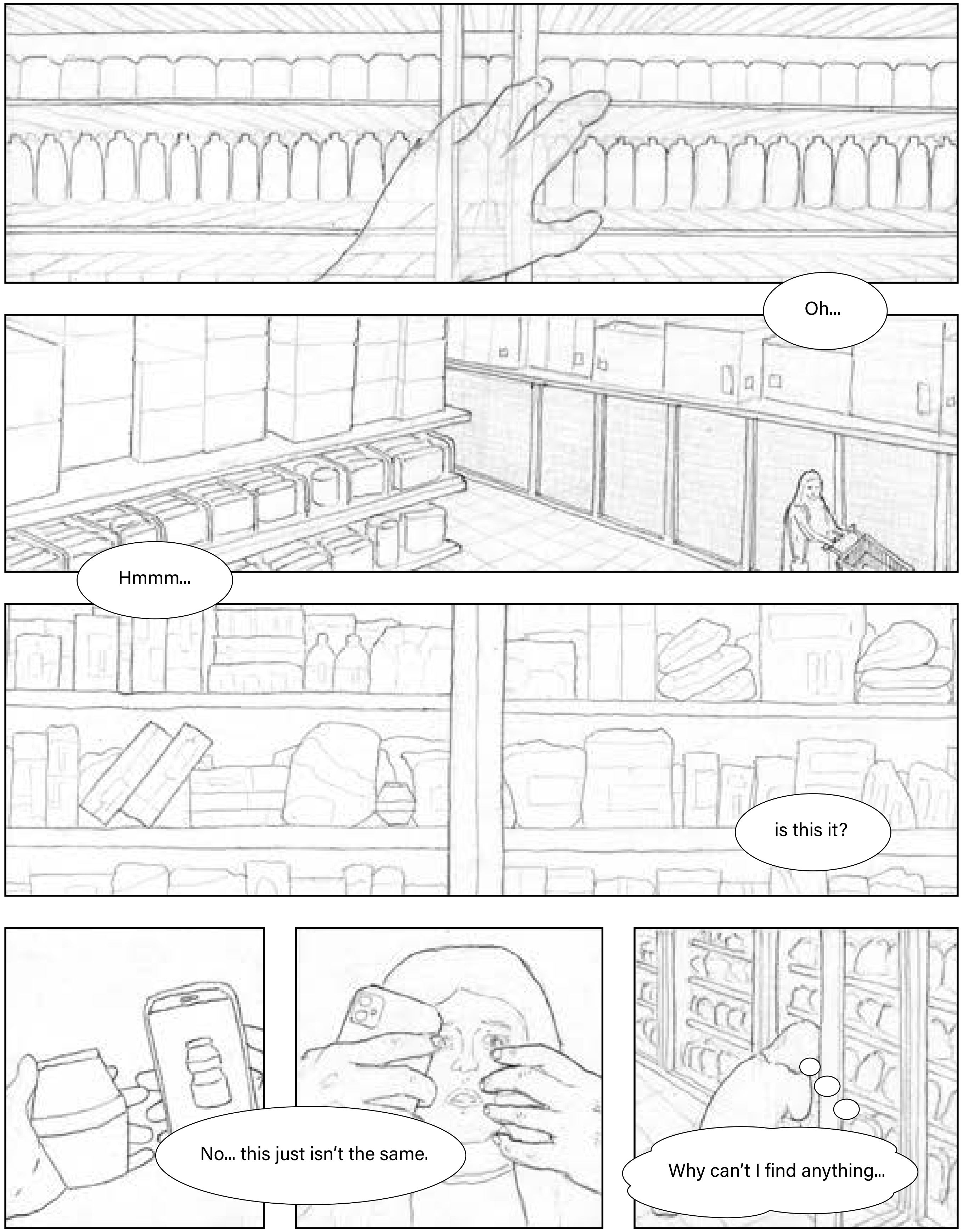

Whoa...
Why the heck is there tupperware displayed on the wall...

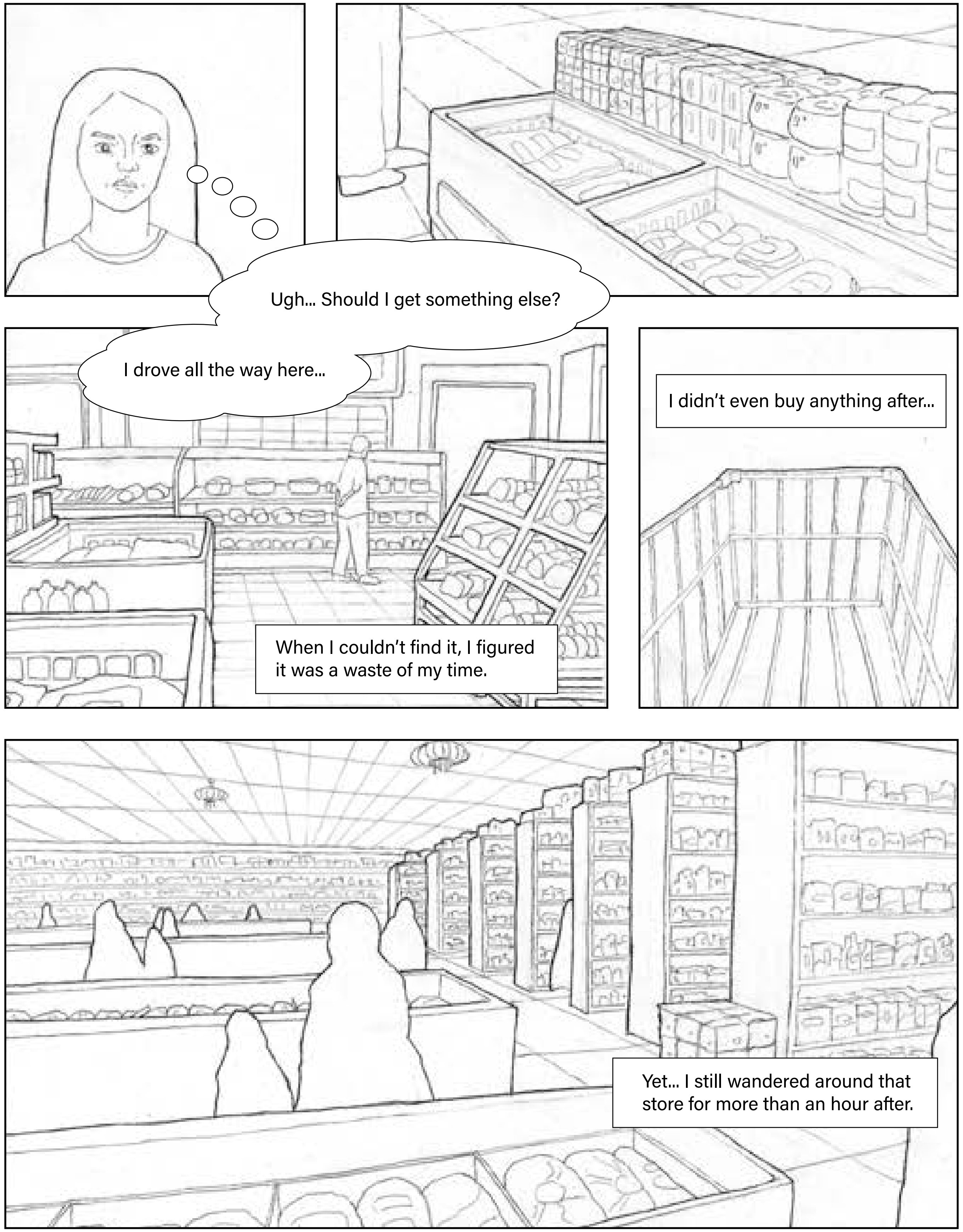

Ah!
♫♪♫
My family used to listen to this song!
49
Oh…

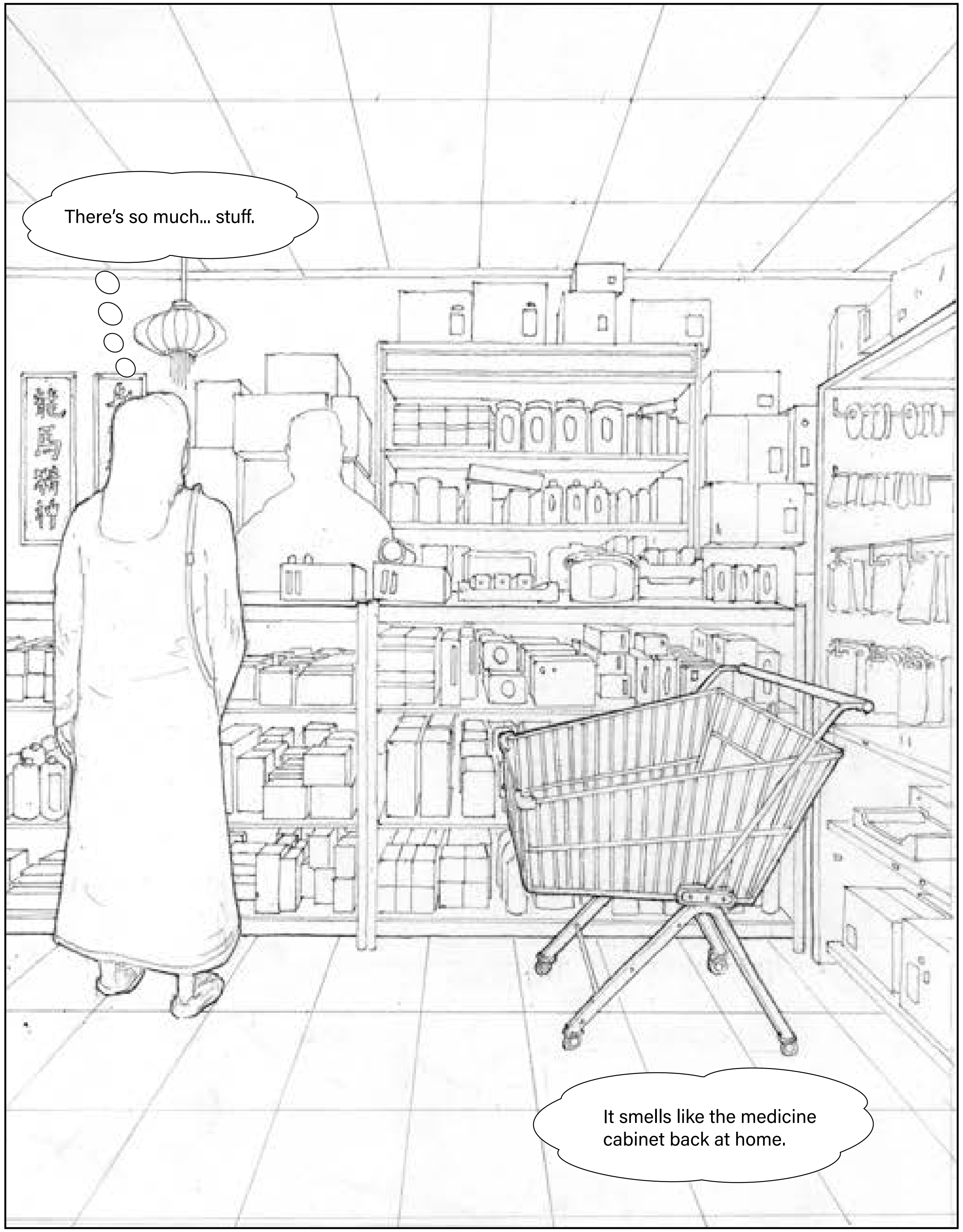


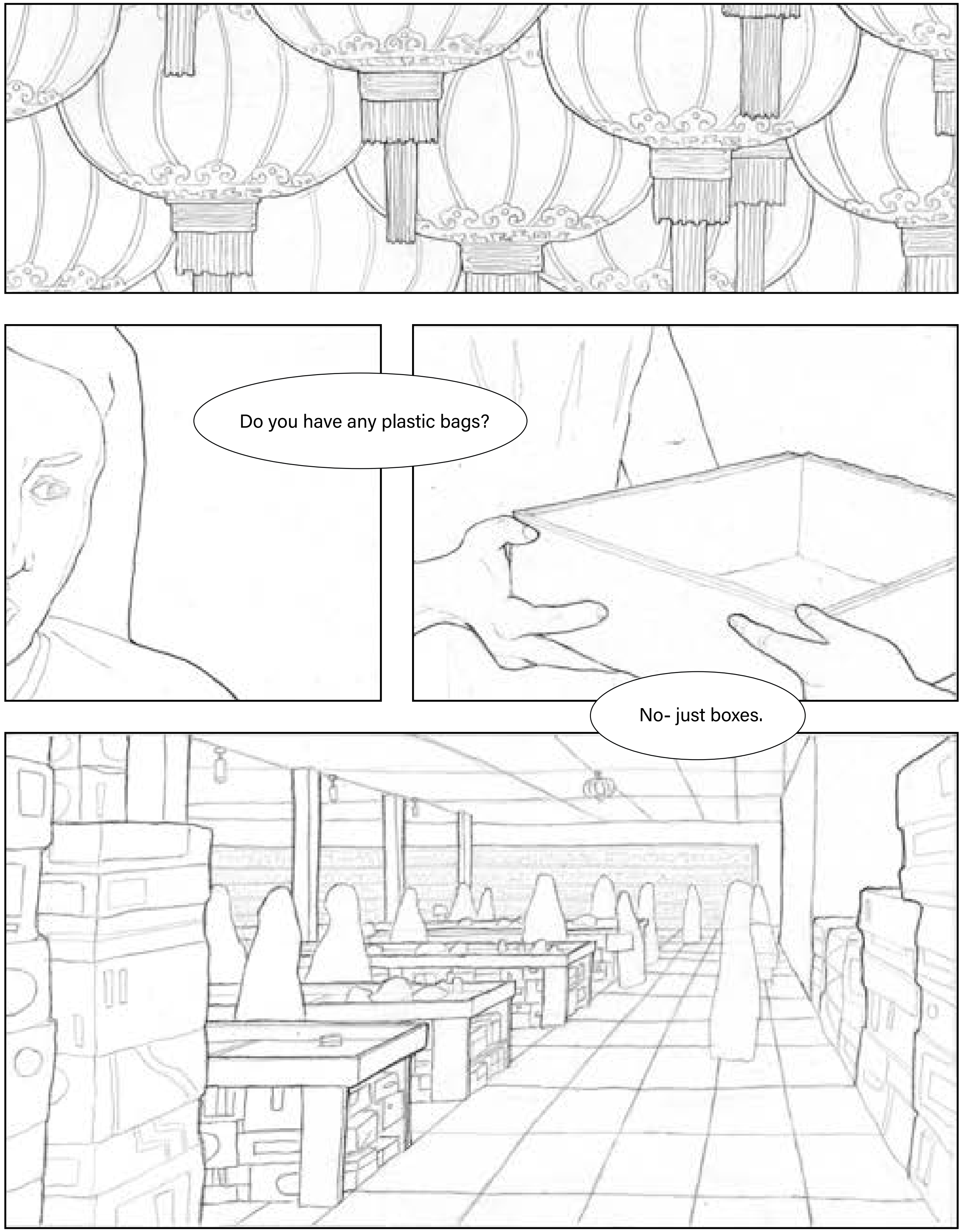

I knew I smelled fish somewhere.
It's like the supermarket back at home…
Everything looks so familiar.

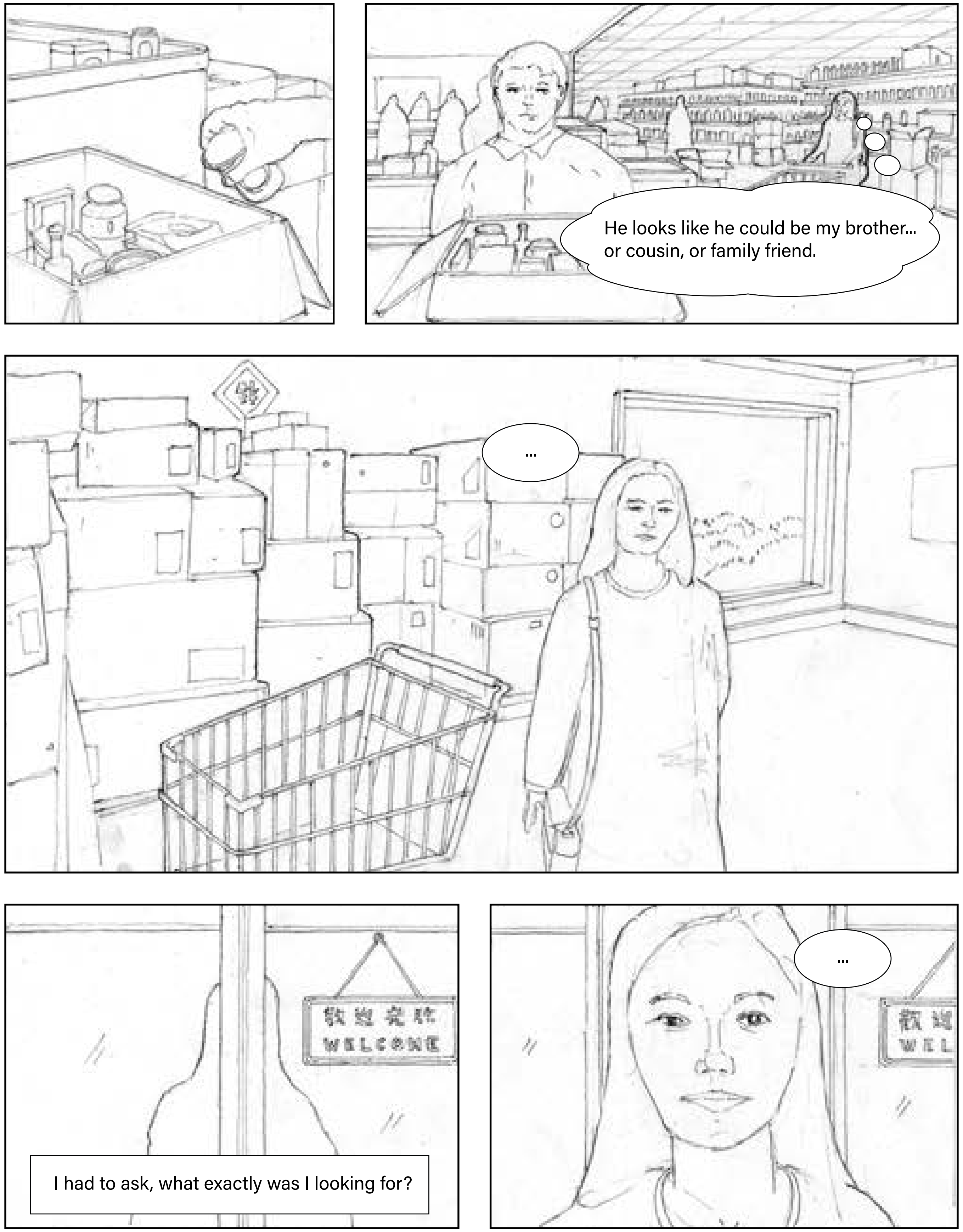

Oh wow…
There's so many options!
…But where is my drink?


Oh...
Hmmm...
is this it?
No... this just isn't the same.
Why can't I find anything...


Ugh... Should I get something else?
I drove all the way here...
When I couldn't find it, I figured it was a waste of my time.
I didn't even buy anything after...
Yet... I still wandered around that store for more than an hour after.


There's so much... stuff.
龍馬精神
It smells like the medicine cabinet back at home.


Do you have any plastic bags?
No- just boxes.


He looks like he could be my brother...
or cousin, or family friend.
...
歡迎光臨
WELCOME
I had to ask, what exactly was I looking for?
...

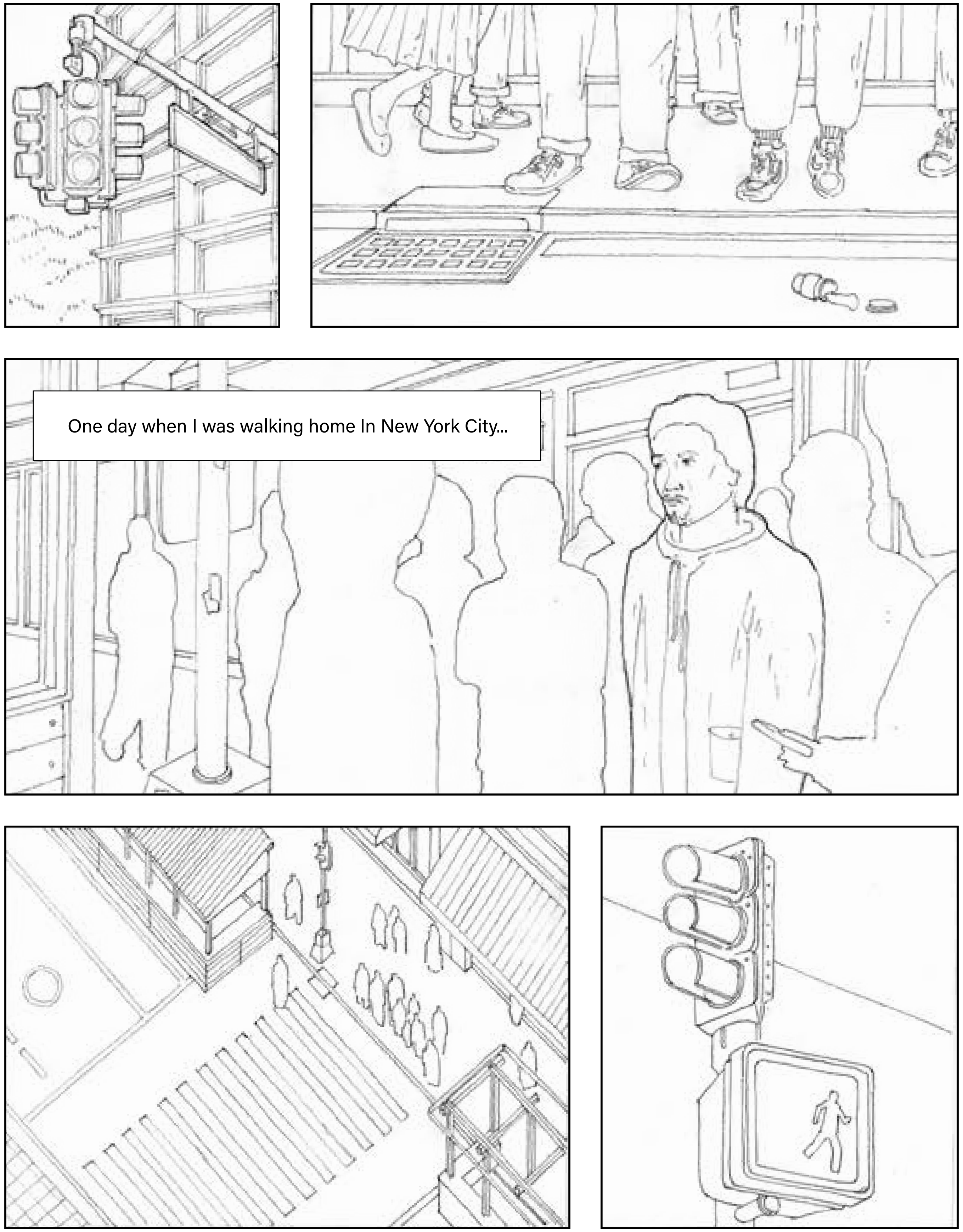
III. MEMORY

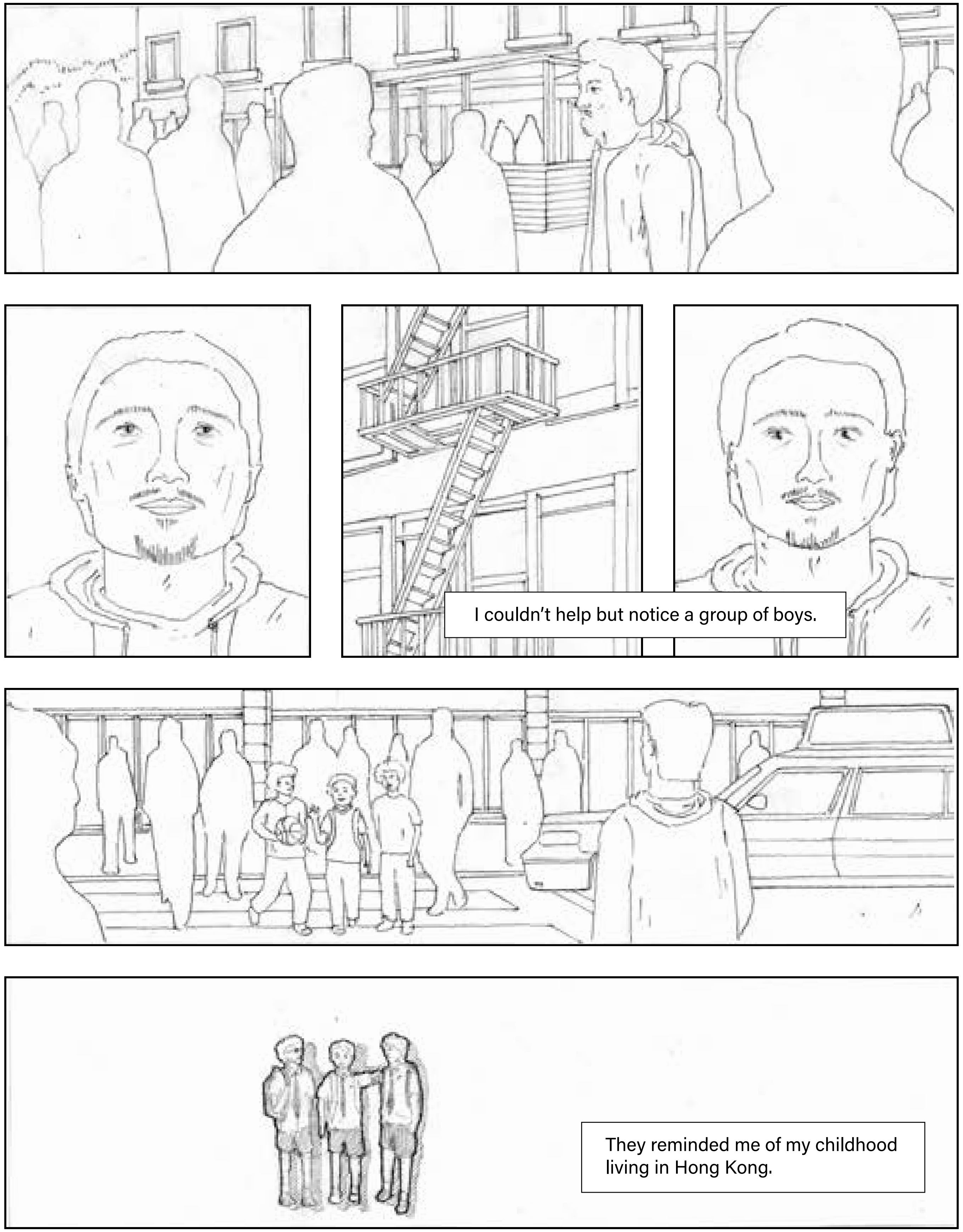
MEMORY

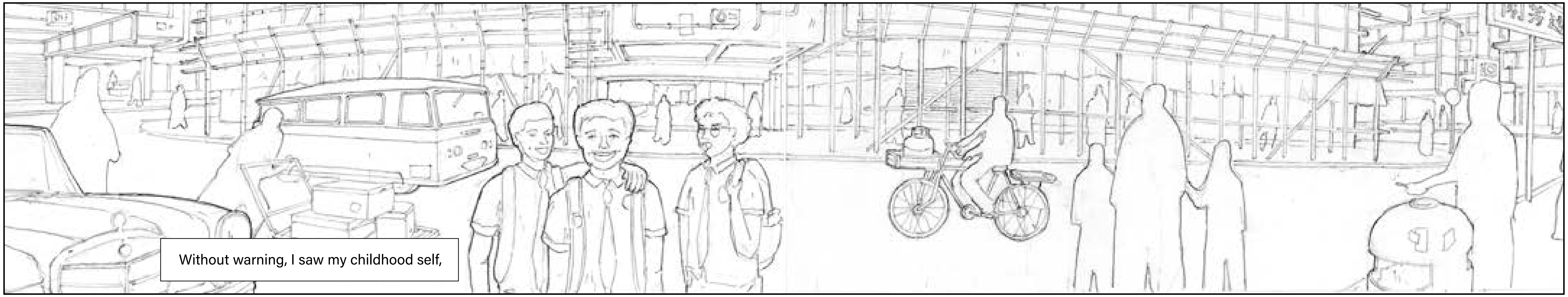
Spaces, whether intentional or not, retain our cultural memories. While emotions, relationships, and experiences often dominate discussions on memory, this chapter emphasizes the significance of physical environments–particularly architecture– that shape our recollection of the past. Factors like time of day, smells, weather, density of people, and accessibility to certain areas form interactions and influence experiences and relationships. When using memory to document a place, it's important to recognize how small and seemingly insignificant aspects of life shape our perception of change in relation to memory and space. If our perception of the past is closely tied to the physical environment, immigration or cultural transitions often result in heightened alternate understandings different from one's present surroundings in a new environment.

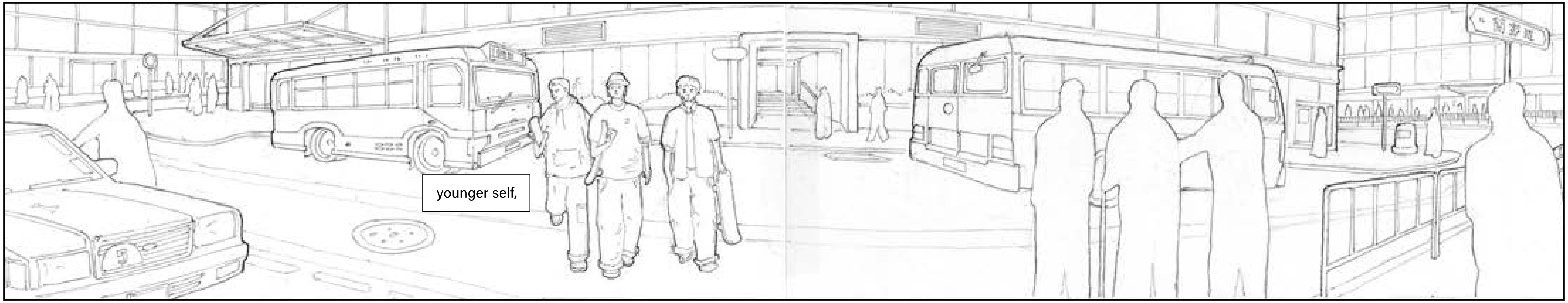
Change is no longer affected simply by time but by culture and region as well. Before becoming "multicultural", individuals undergo a journey of becoming multiple, involving experiences of immigration, adaptation, and transnationalism to new environments. While multiculturalism focuses on diversity within a specific societal framework, transnationalism examines the broader cross-border connections and influences that shape societies and cultures. Such narratives can reveal exacerbated "ghost" overlays and comparisons between different places and scales. These examinations highlight the layers of history and memory embedded within physical environments and our spatial perceptions. Multiculturalism adapts amid rapid globalization. Increased mobility facilitates ties to one's homeland, which adds a layer of transnationalism that can ease cultural shock--yet it can foster isolation. In this fast-paced environment, there is little time or space to adjust fully to a new cultural landscape or context. Returning individuals may find their cherished and familiar memories of "home" transformed, leading to a profound sense of loss and emotional displacement. Multiculturalism becomes dynamic, integrated with transnationalism, entwined with spatial shifts and globalization, shaping psychological landscapes to reflect onto tangible environments.

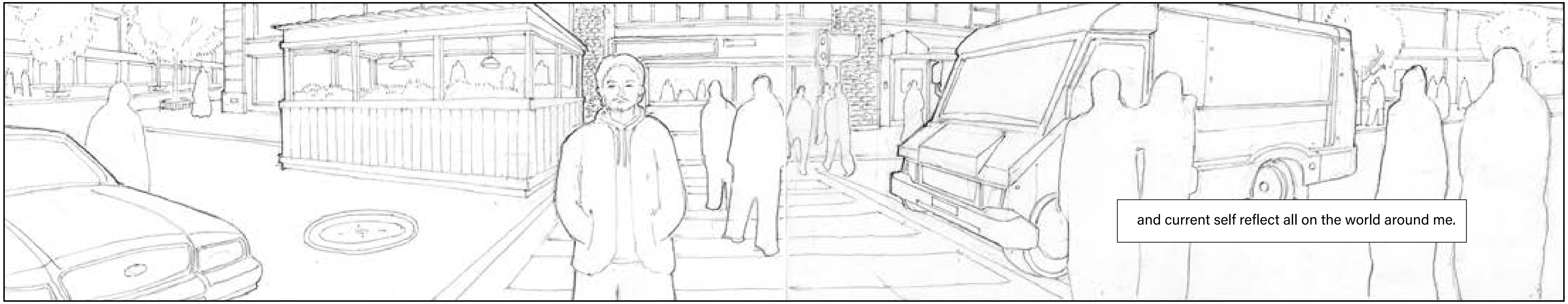
Once again, the physical environment reflects the dynamic nature of identity and places. Identity naturally evolves but is significantly exacerbated by rapid shifts in locations, global economies, and by its blurring of boundaries between home and origin. How can we visualize and reconcile these merging worlds?

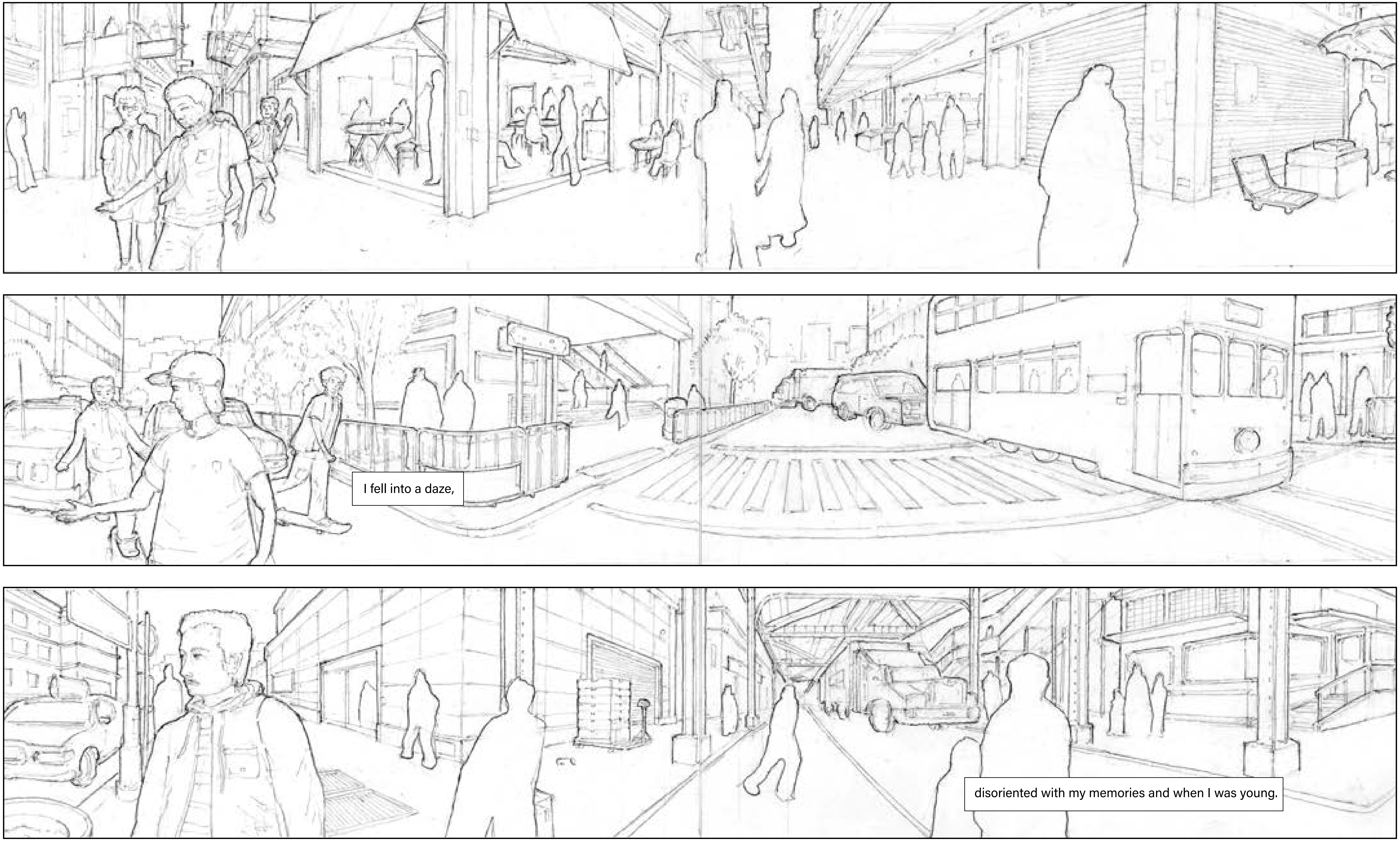

One day when I was walking home In New York City...

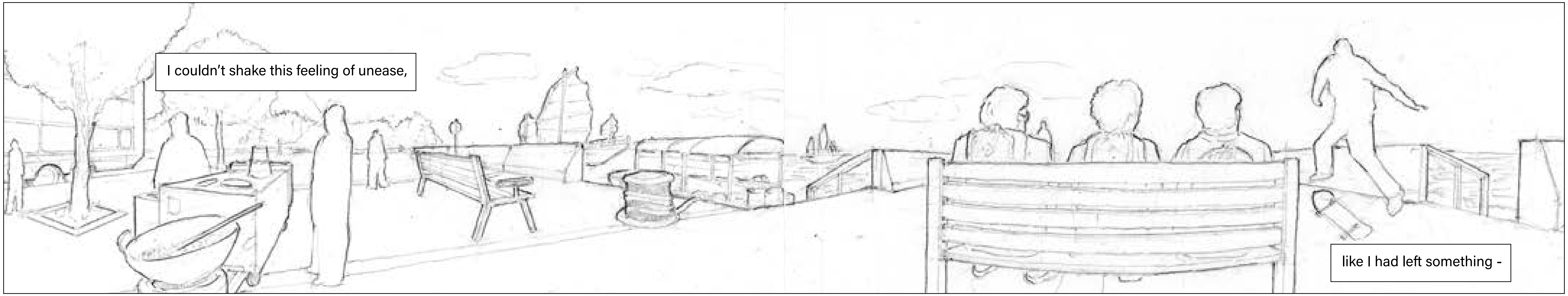

I couldn't help but notice a group of boys.
They reminded me of my childhood living in Hong Kong.

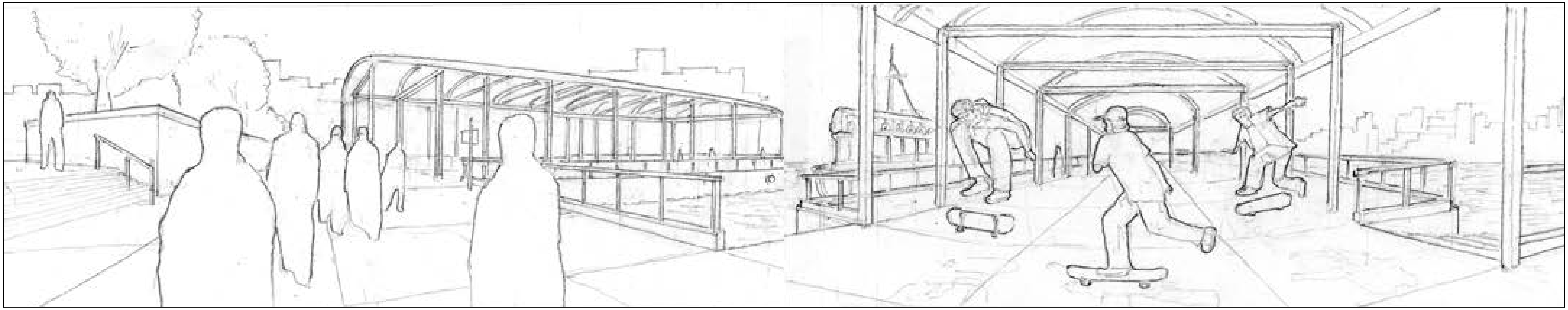

Without warning, I saw my childhood self,

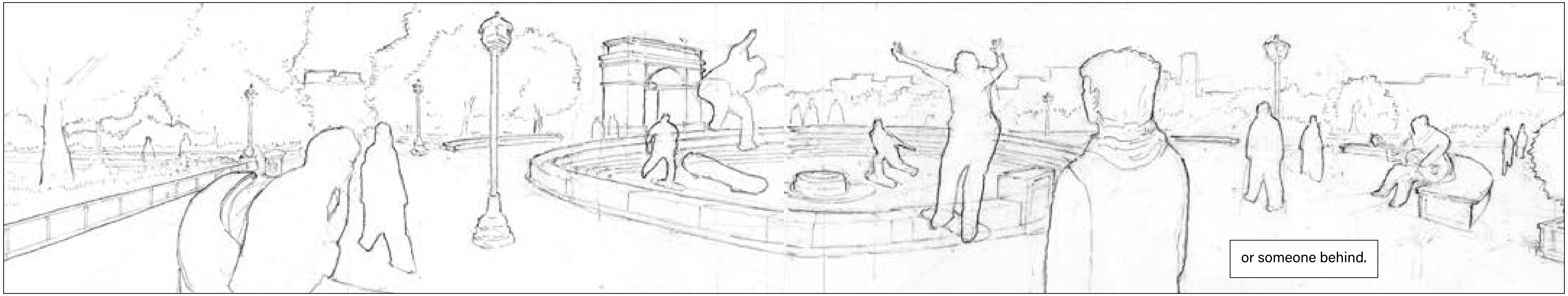

younger self,

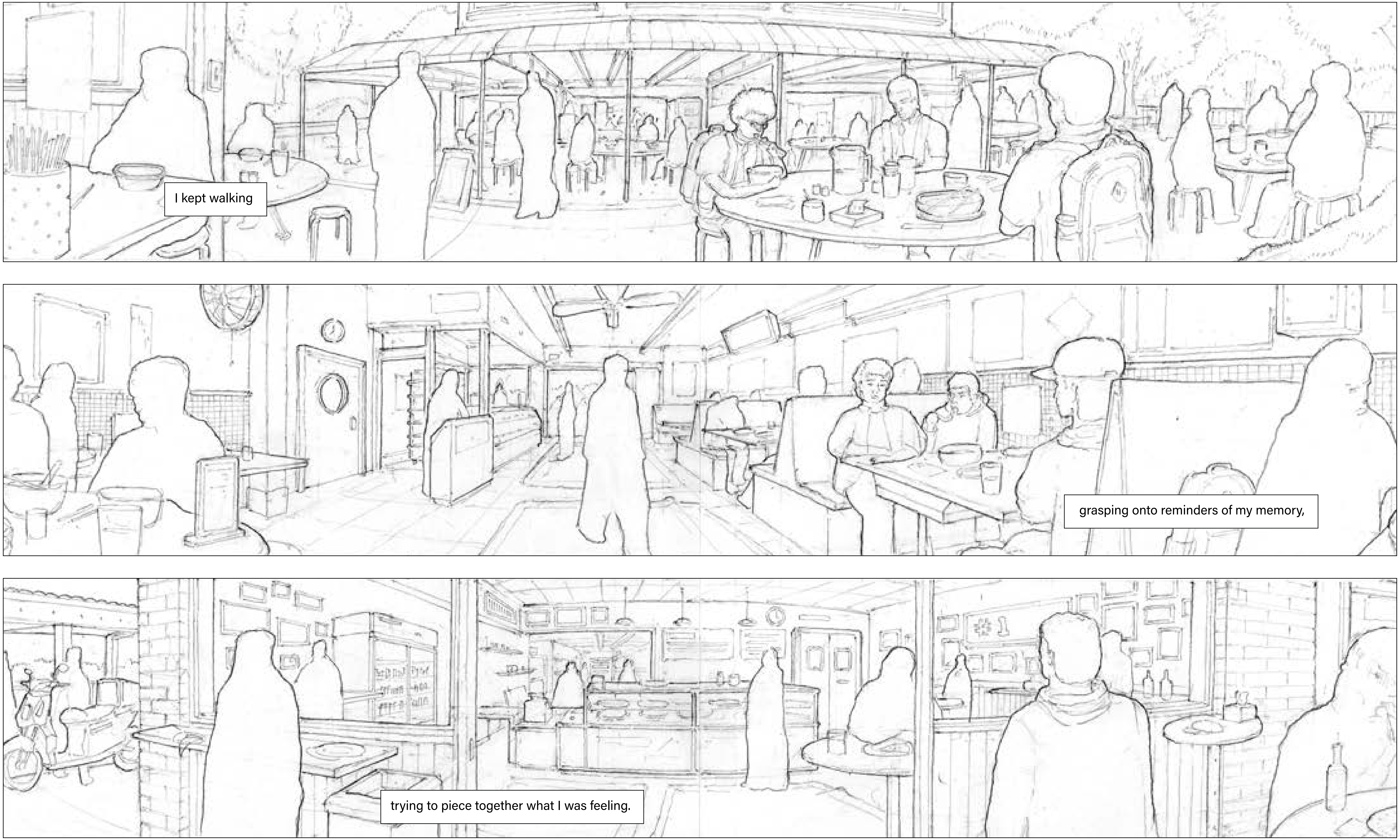

and current self reflect all on the world around me.

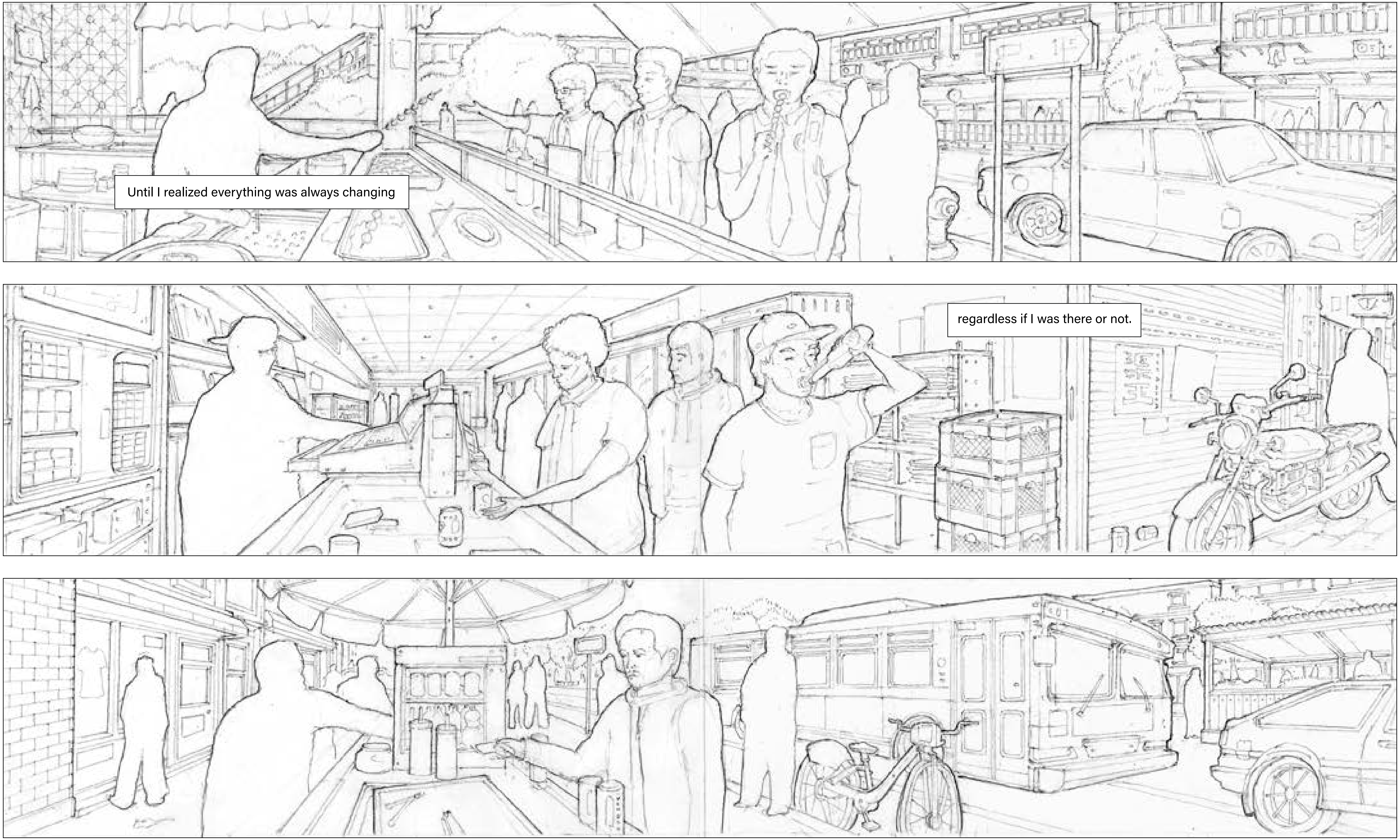

I fell into a daze,
disoriented with my memories and when I was young.

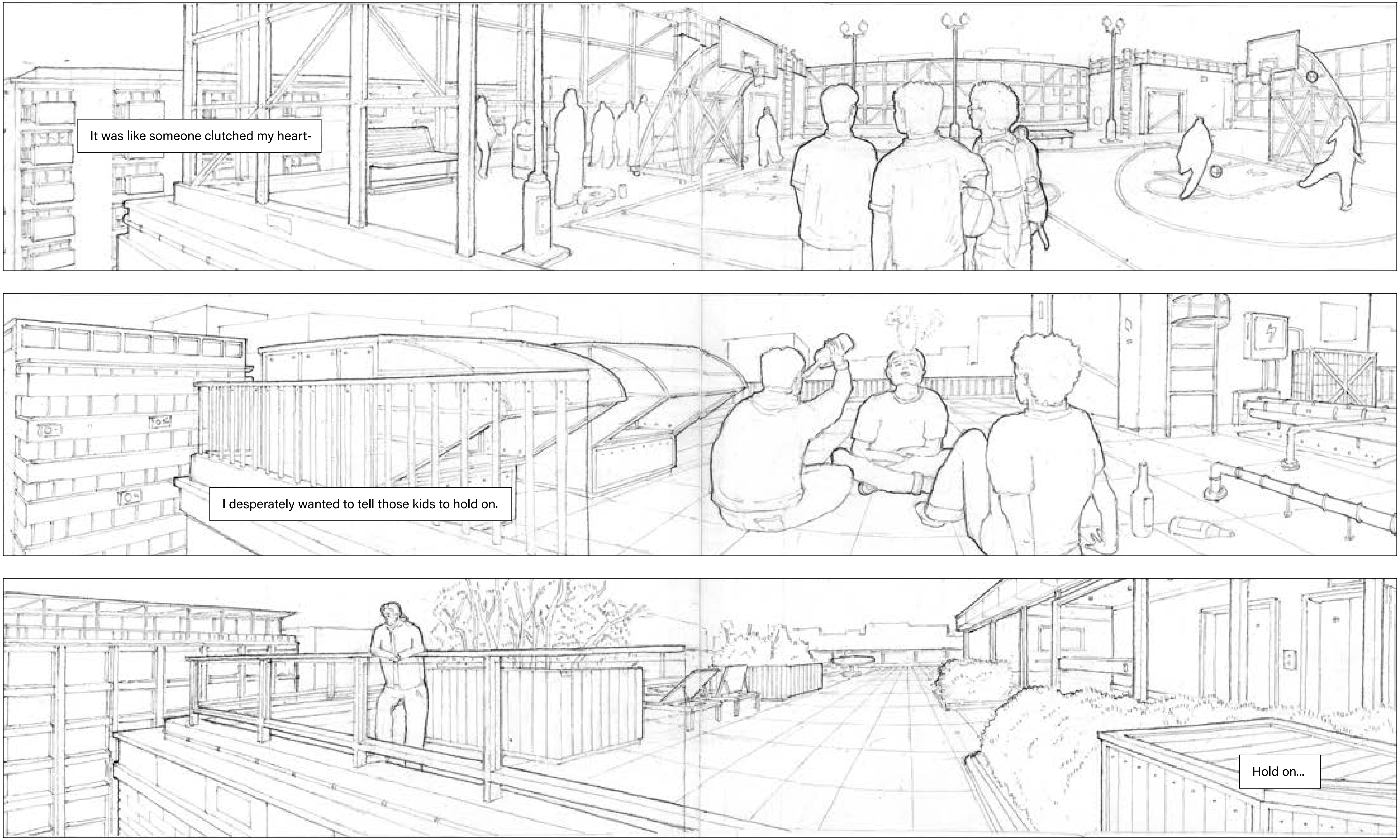

I couldn't shake this feeling of unease,
like I had left something -

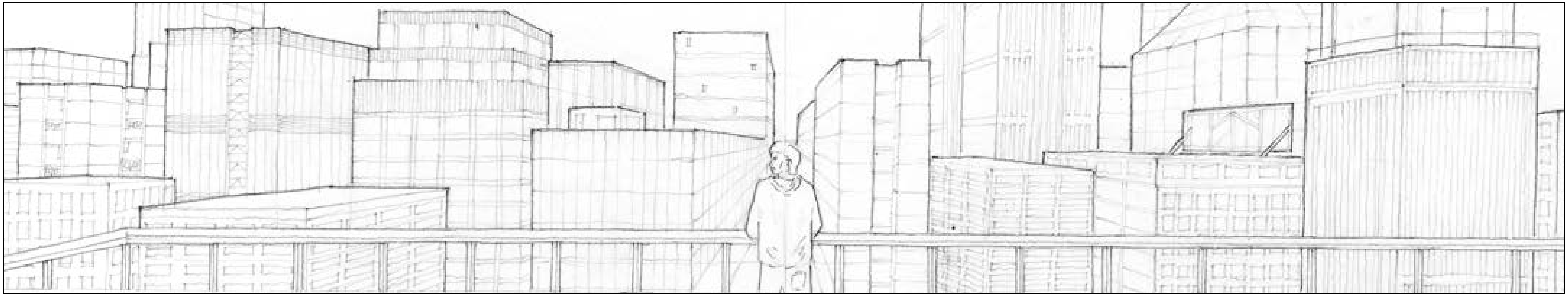



or someone behind.


I kept walking
grasping onto reminders of my memory,
trying to piece together what I was feeling.


Until I realized everything was always changing
regardless if I was there or not.


It was like someone clutched my heart-
I desperately wanted to tell those kids to hold on.
Hold on...



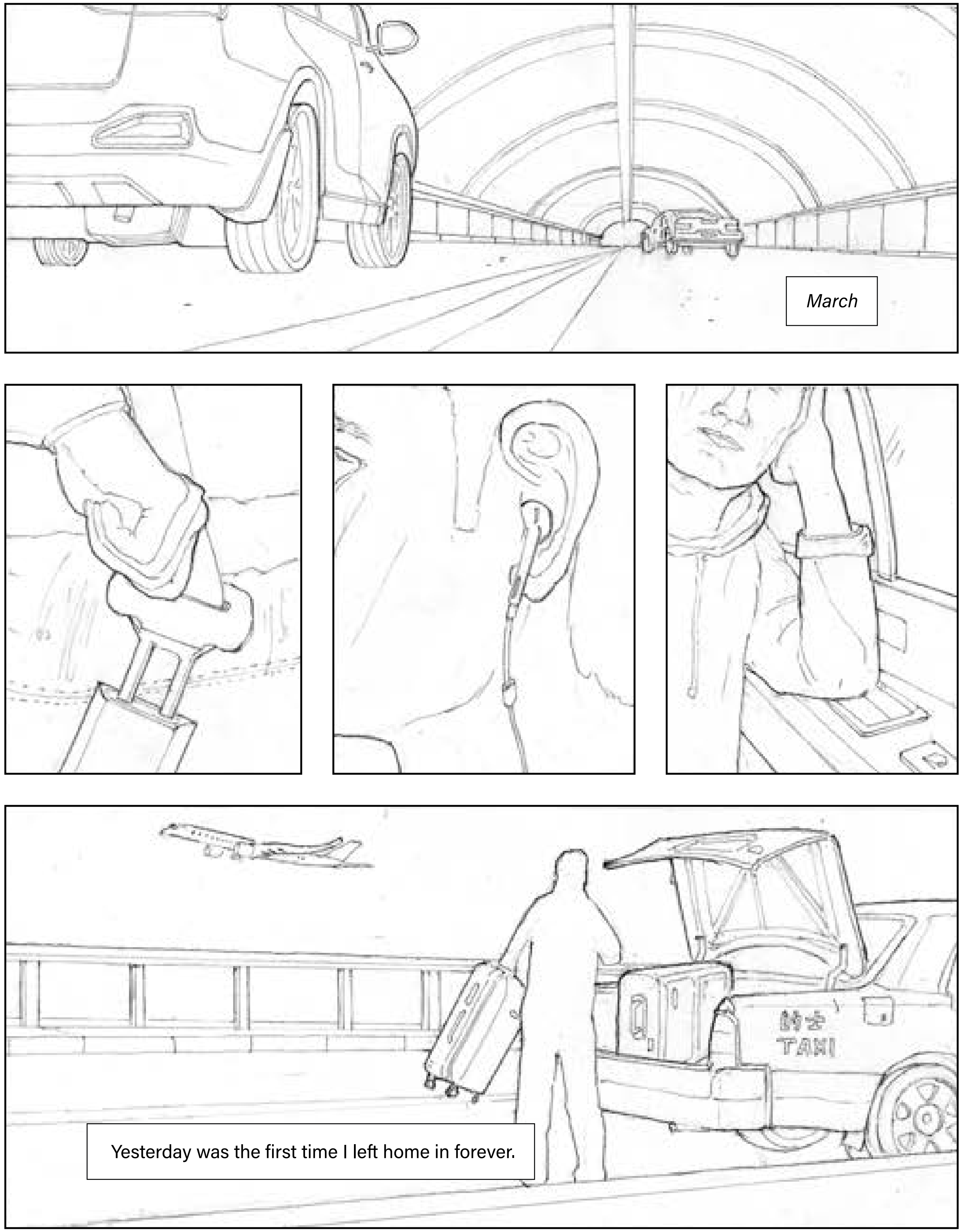
IV. INBETWEEN

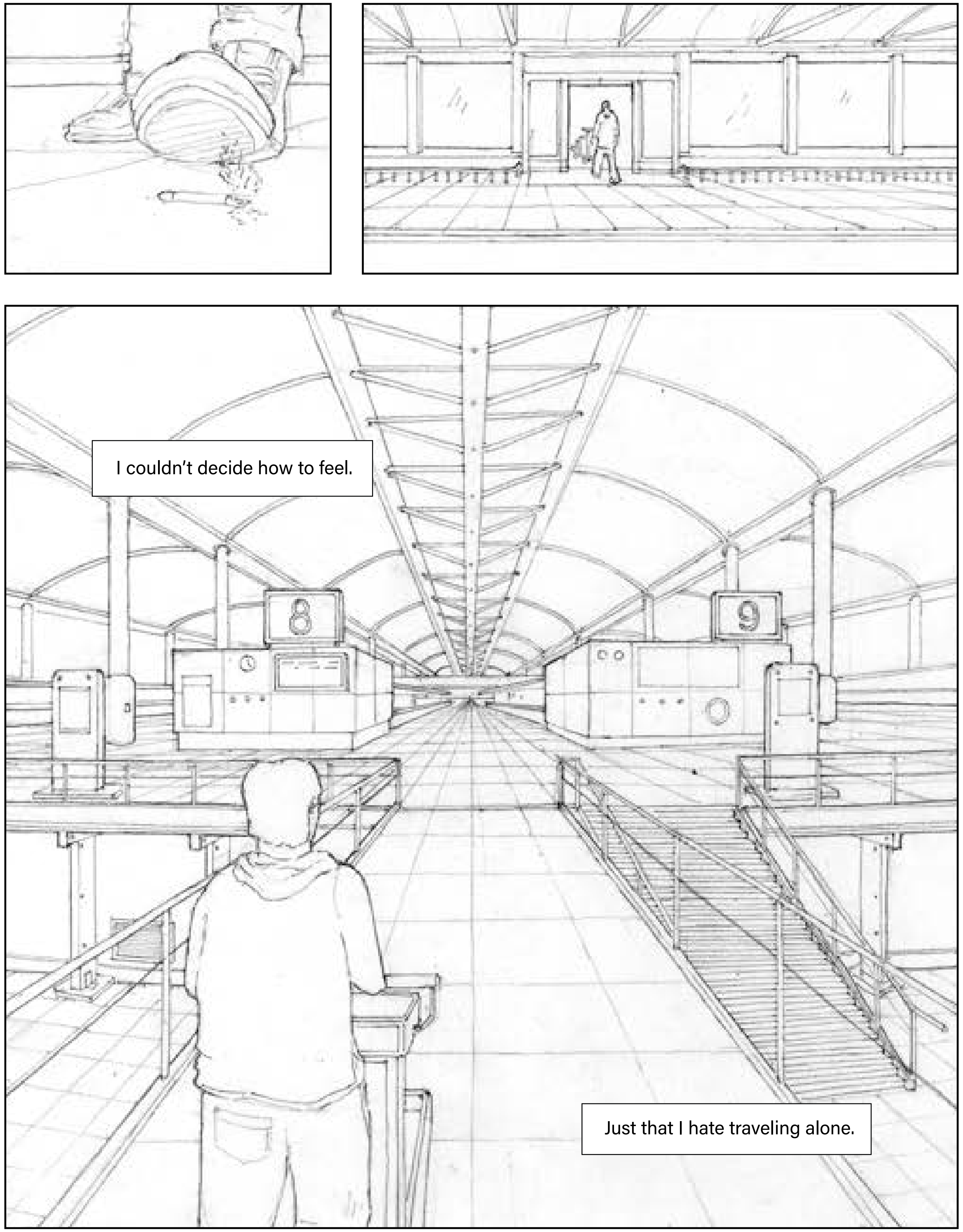
INBETWEEN

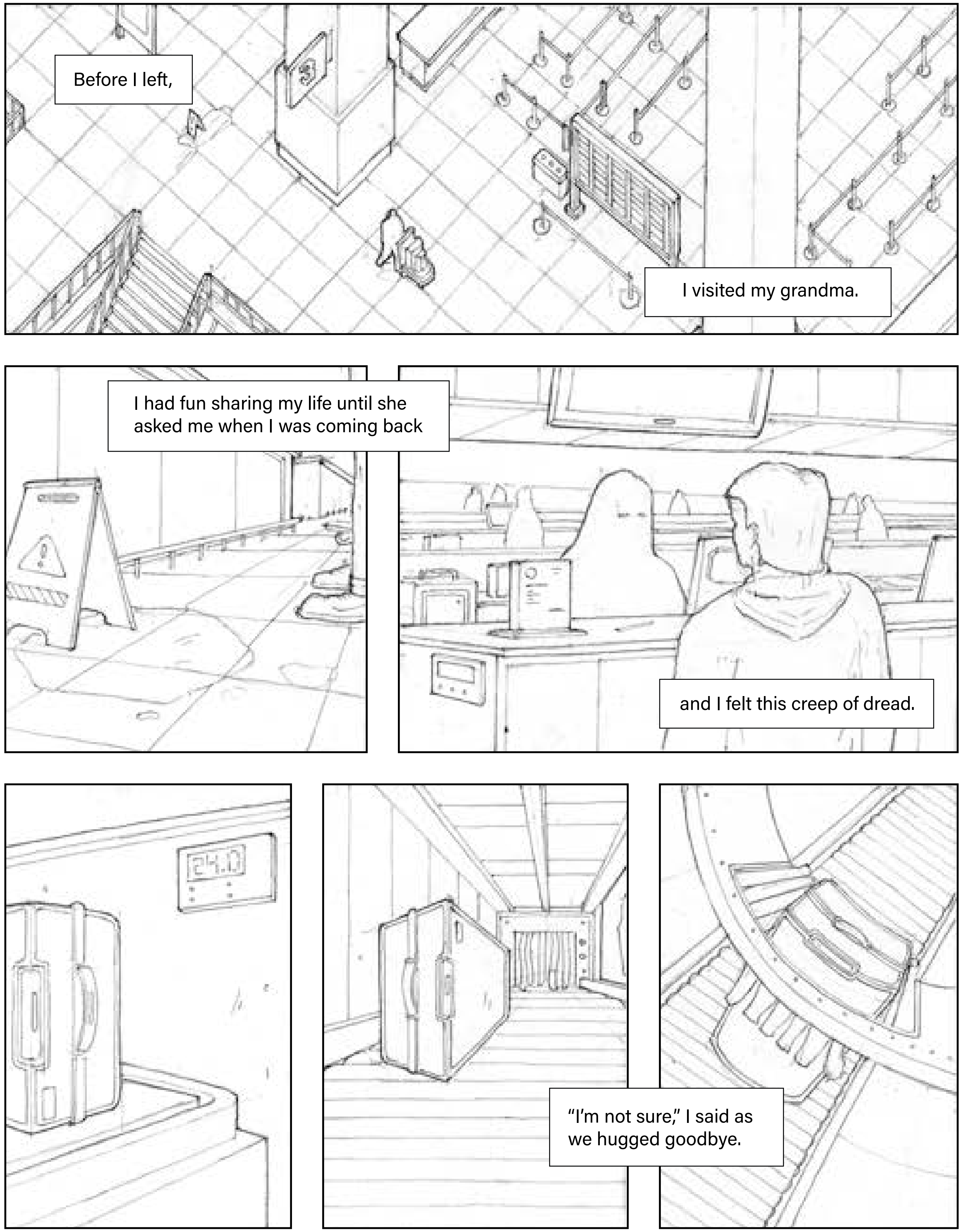
Transnationalism facilitates the exchange of people, ideas, and resources across borders, reshaping globalization and broadening the scope of multiculturalism beyond national boundaries. In architecture, transnationalism fosters a multi-actor approach to urban design within a global context, emphasizing urban transformation through historical insights rather than critique.

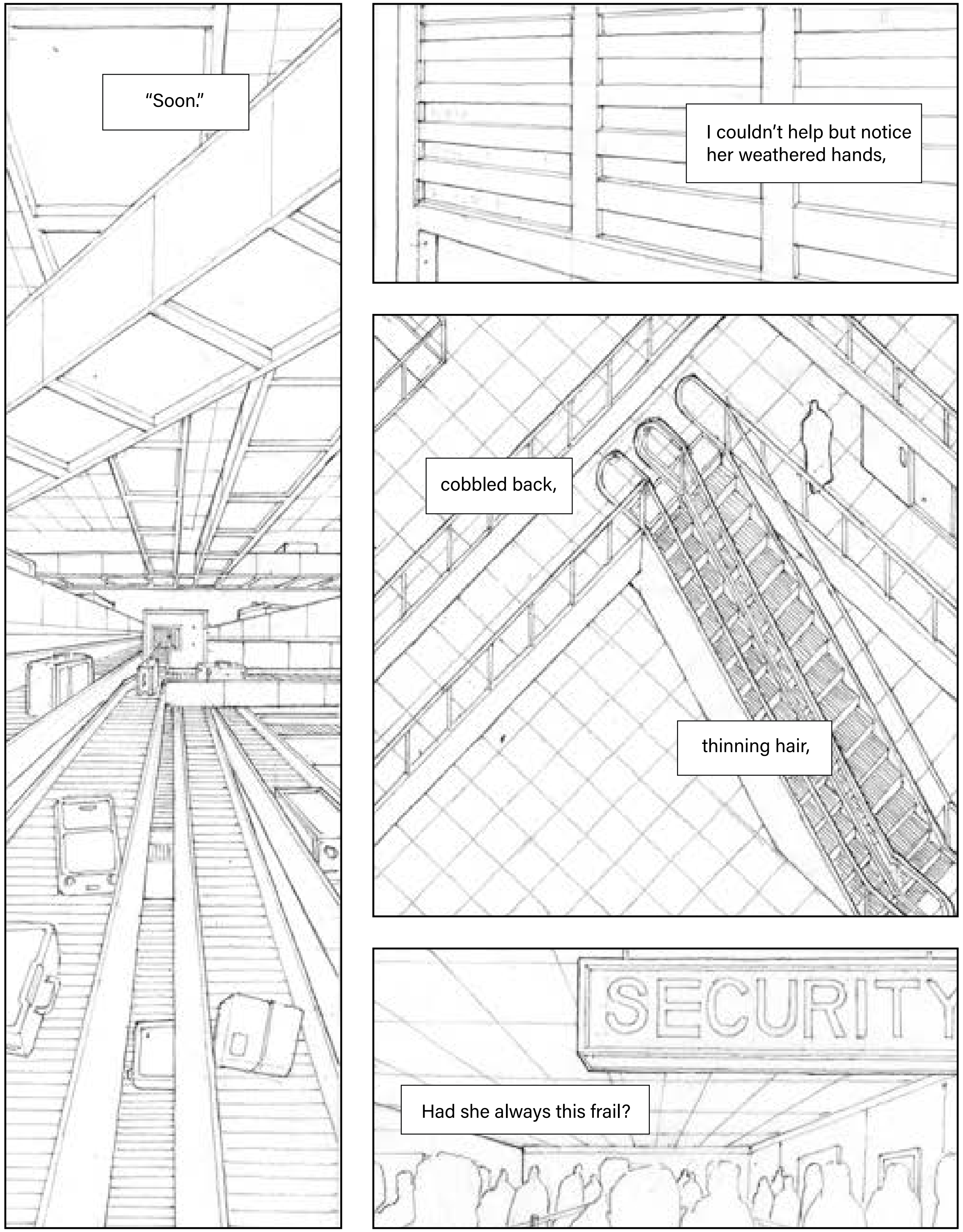
However, multicultural and transnational individuals navigate a complex cultural terrain, straddling two worlds and crafting new identities through ongoing boundary negotiations and a rejection of fixed identities. As active agents in society, they shape their surroundings to mirror their experiences and challenges, echoing the constant communication and alteration of space by the body's internal and subjective experiences.Transitional sites like airports–despite being dubbed "non-places"–embody uniformity, serving primarily as functional hubs devoid of personalized identity. Unlike other establishments that strive for uniqueness, airports remain interchangeable backdrops, highlighting the disparity between their perceived sameness and the diverse human experiences they facilitate. In reality, airports hold profound social and emotional significance as sites for reunions, farewells, and life's milestones despite their sterile appearance. Architects play a vital role in shaping these spaces, navigating globalization's impact on social identity. Geographically rooted place identity offers solace amid these challenges, empowering communities; however, airports remain emblematic of exclusion and privilege. Integrating local elements in airport design faces hurdles in a globalized world, compounded by standardized directional signs which contribute to their uniformity worldwide.

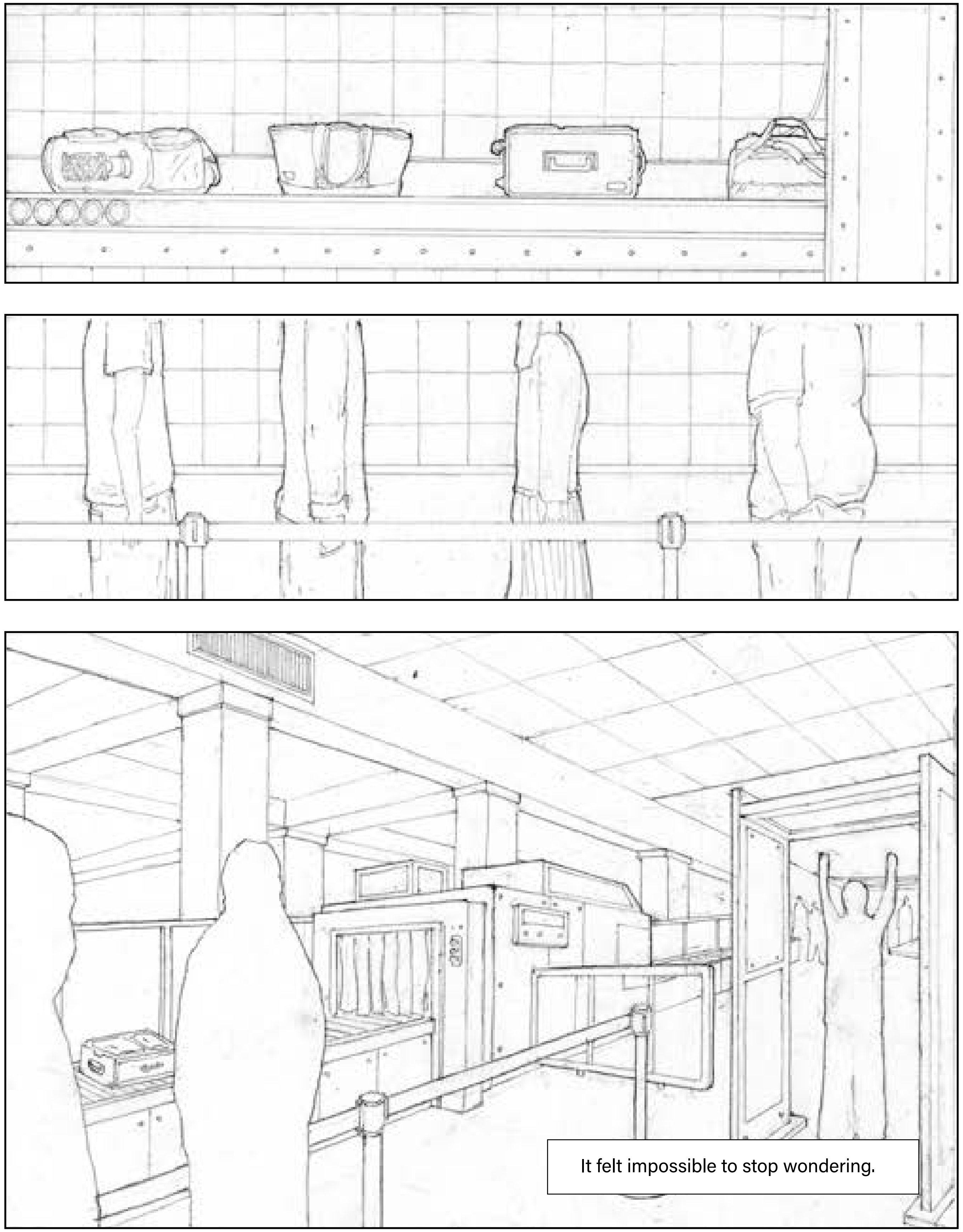
Yet, simply viewing airports as gateways to new experiences and social encounters transforms them into deeply human spaces, integral to the journey itself rather than a mere means to an end. This connection between material space and the "social imaginary" underscores their significance. Despite challenges, these sites of transition can demonstrate resilience, renewing our identity and perception of home while enhancing cognitive flexibility and cross-cultural competence. This transformative process serves as a catalyst for change, symbolizing the realities of thresholds for all, particularly multicultural citizens. What is it like to exist in the in-between space designed to connect you to others?

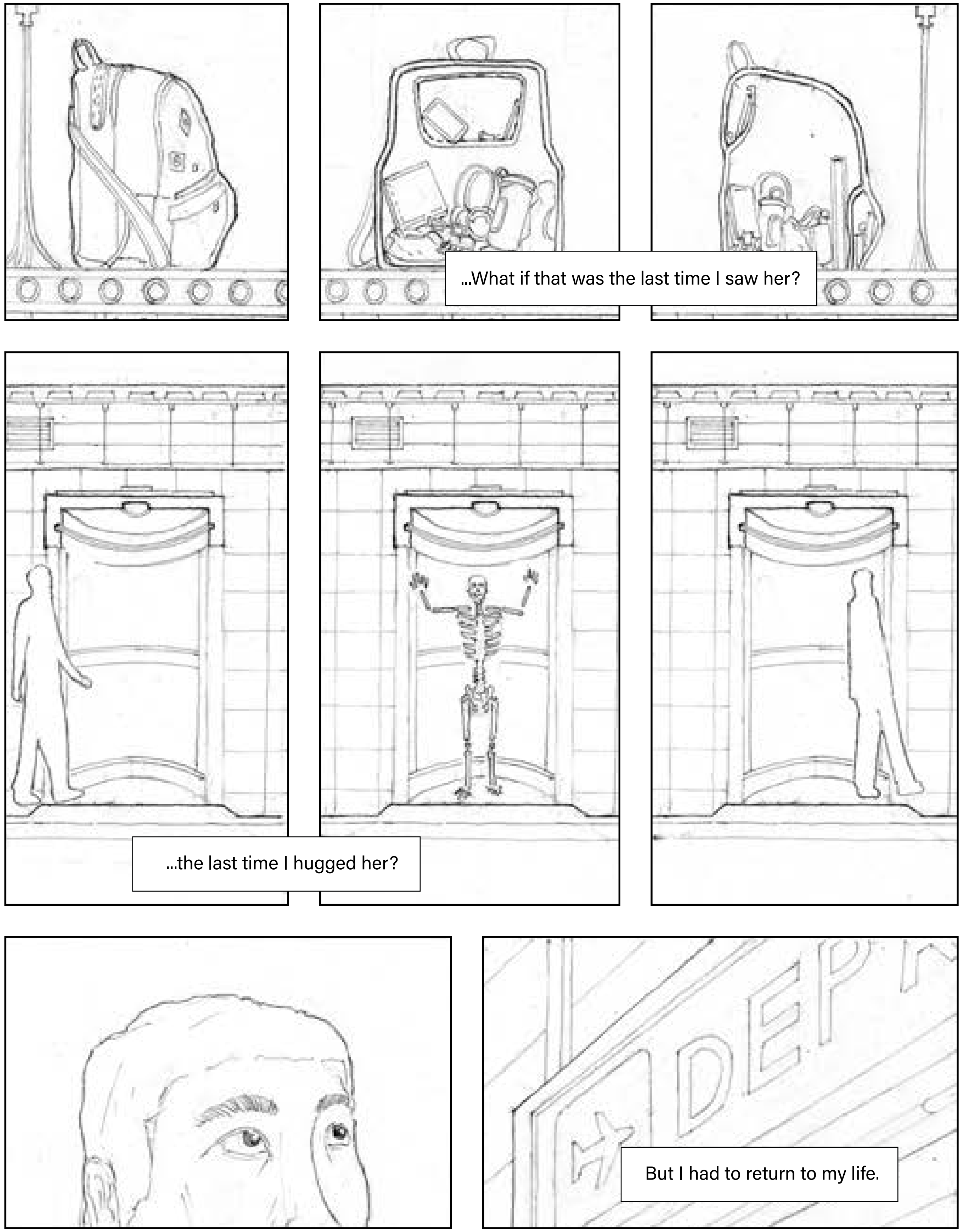

March
的士
TAXI
Yesterday was the first time I left home in forever.

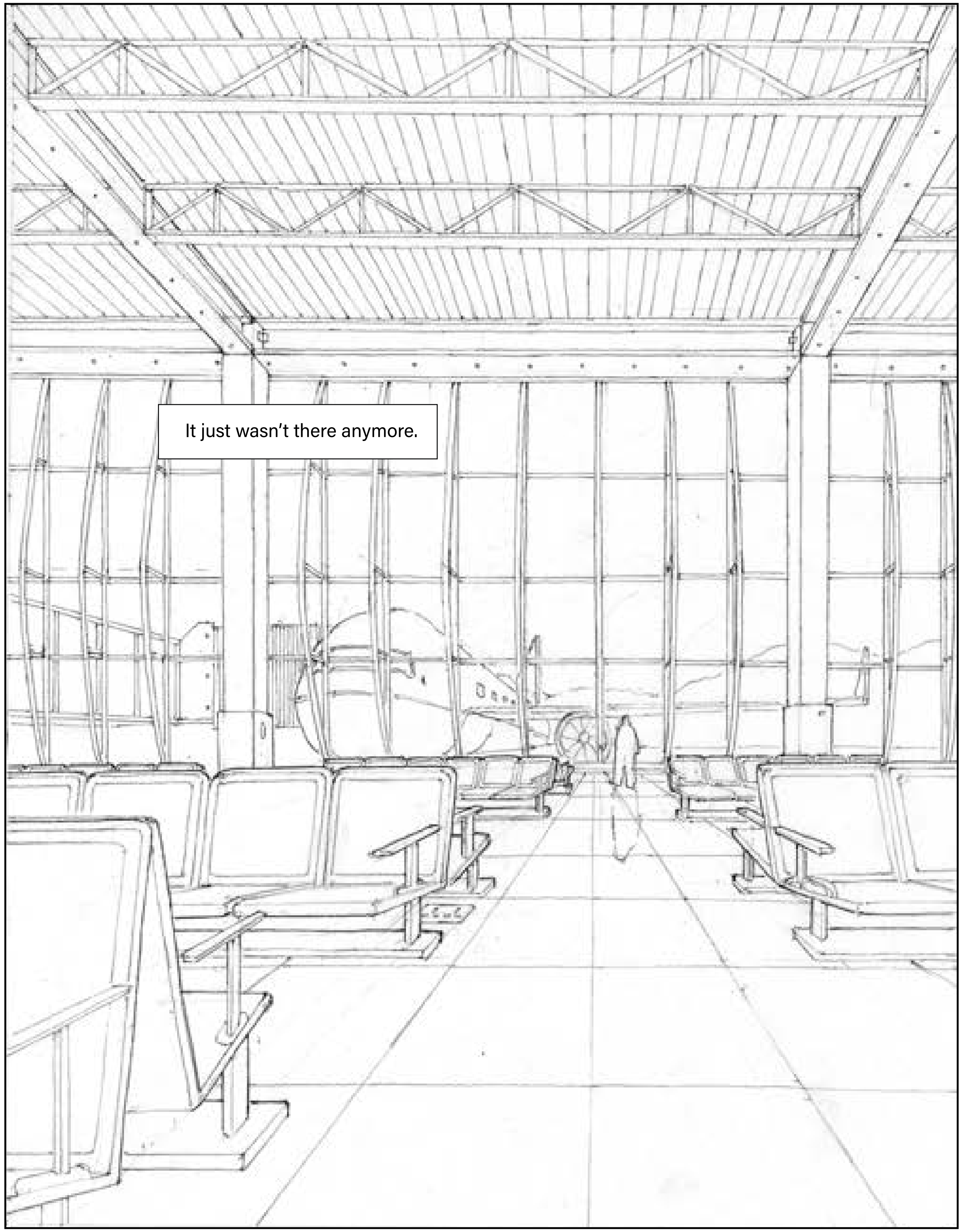

8
9
I couldn't decide how to feel.
Just that I hate traveling alone.

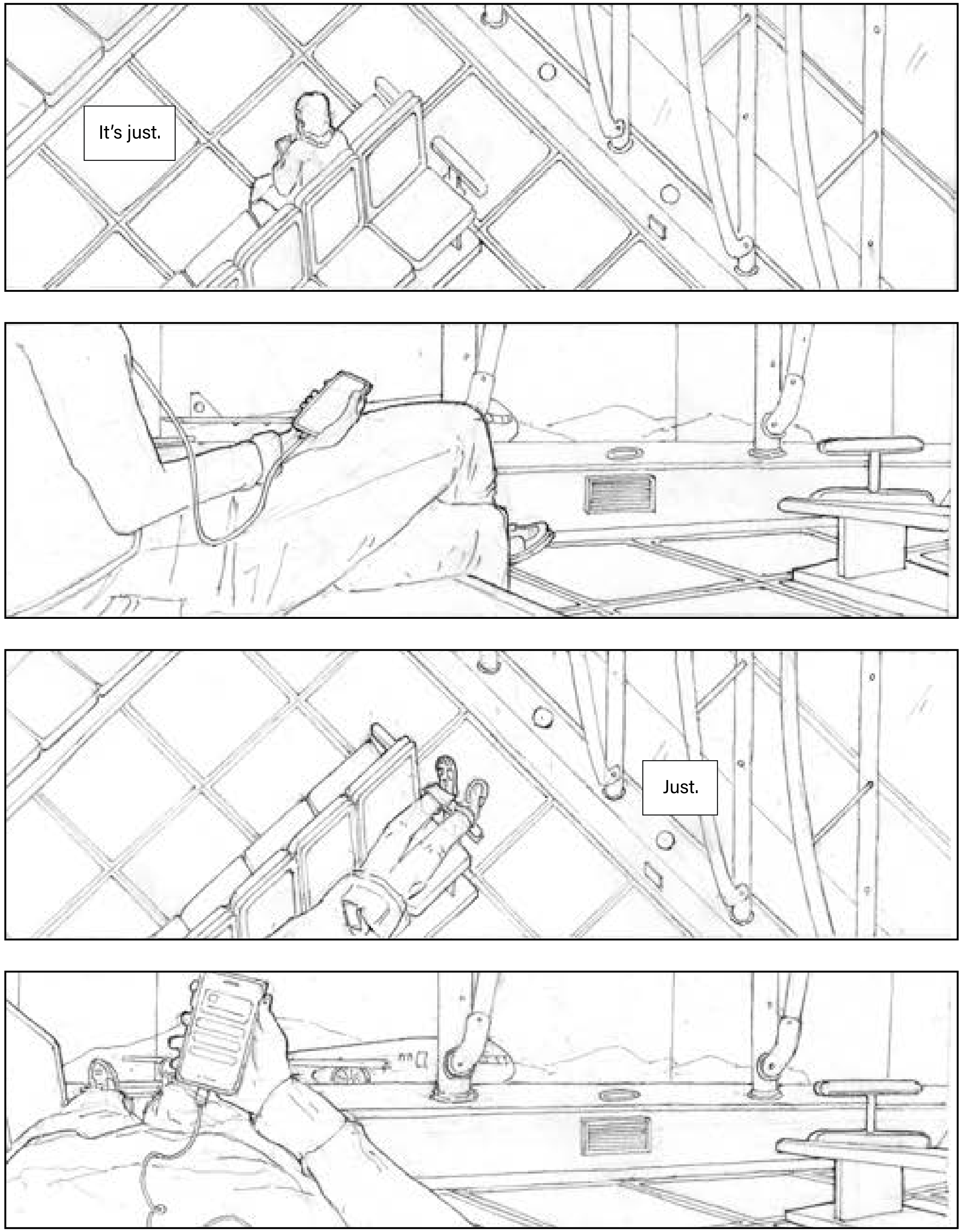

Before I left,
I visited my grandma.
I had fun sharing my life until she asked me when I was coming back
and I felt this creep of dread.
"I'm not sure," I said as we hugged goodbye.

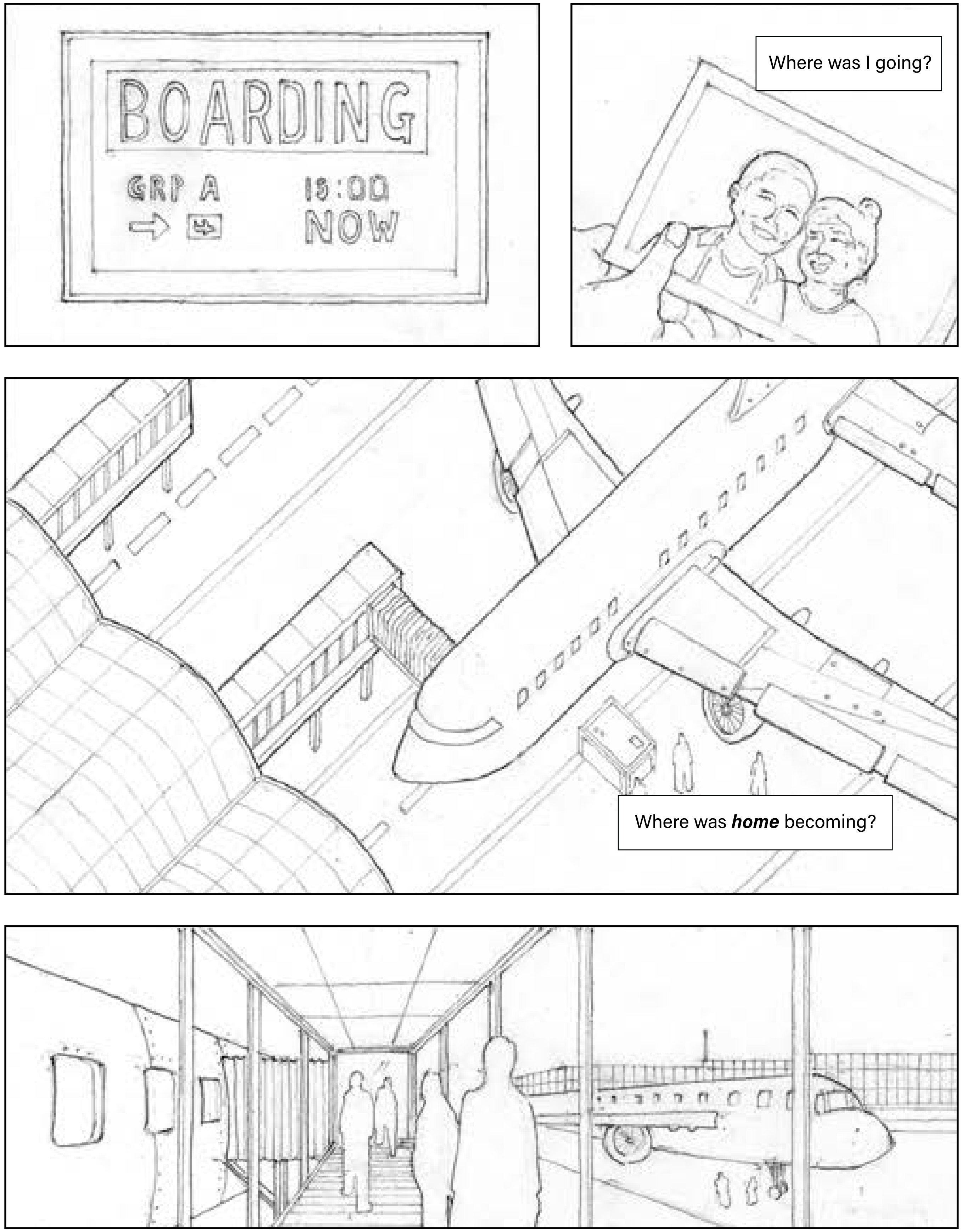

"Soon."
I couldn't help but notice her weathered hands,
cobbled back,
thinning hair,
SECURITY
Had she always this frail?

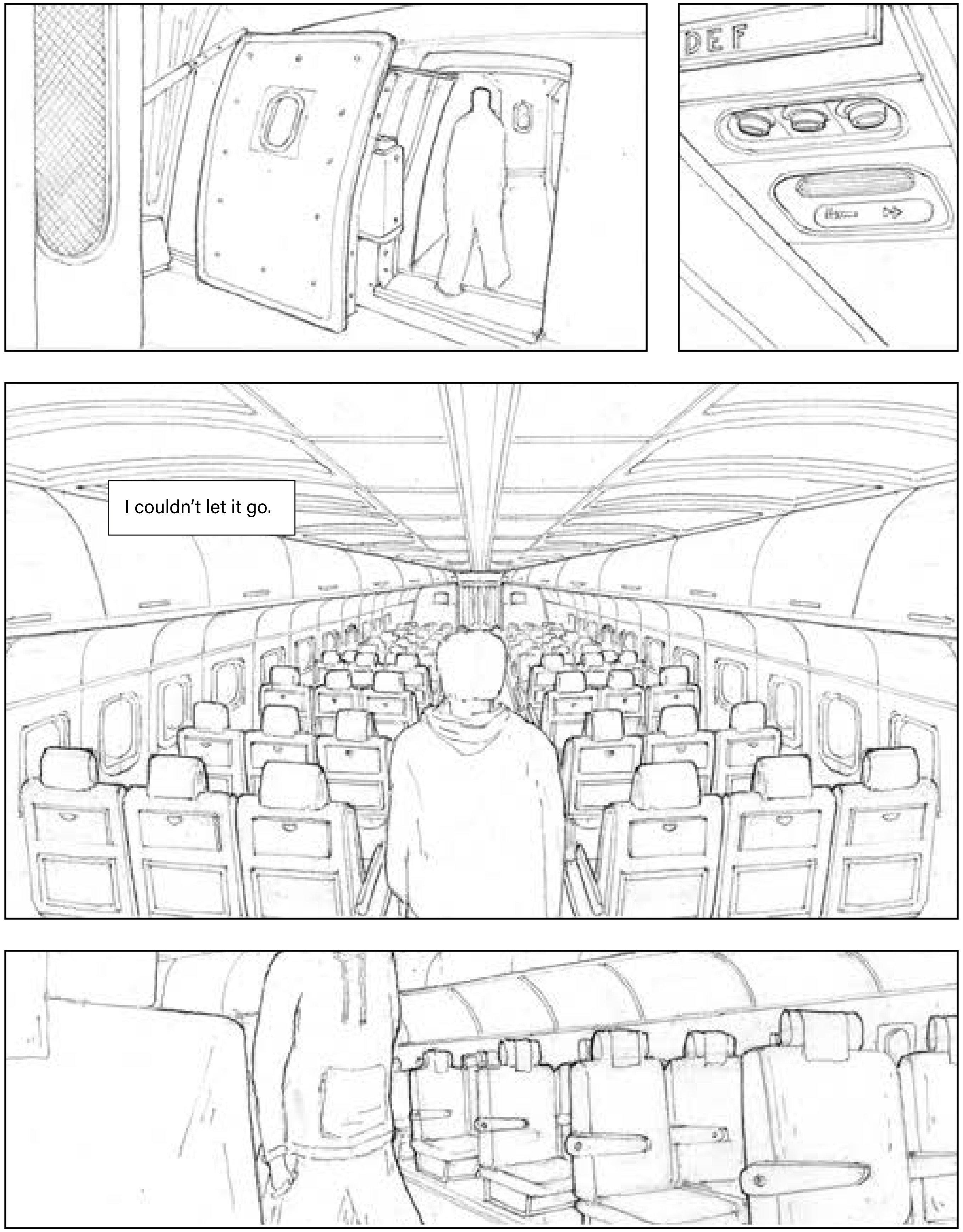

It felt impossible to stop wondering.

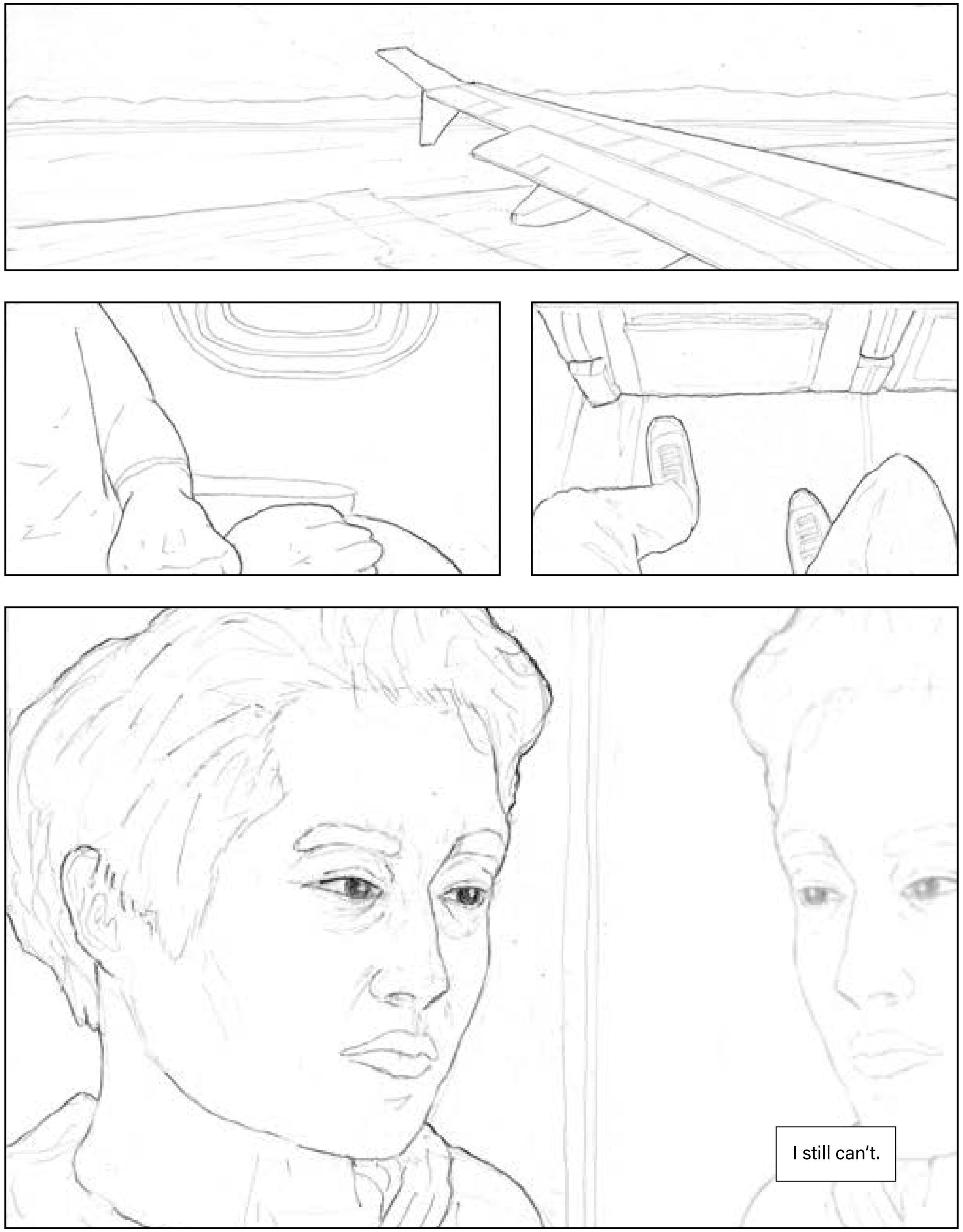

...What if that was the last time I saw her?
...the last time I hugged her?
DEP
But I had to return to my life.

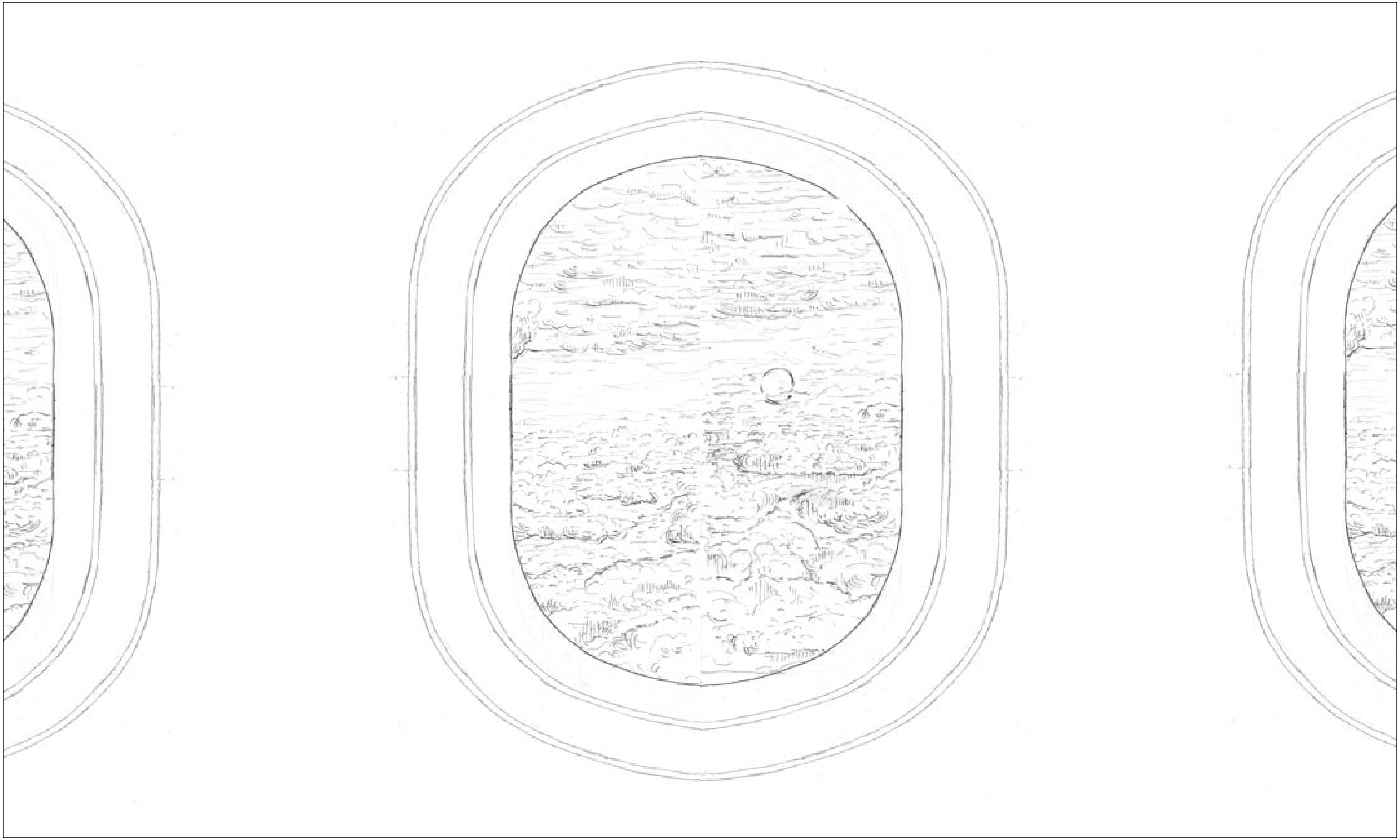

It just wasn't there anymore.

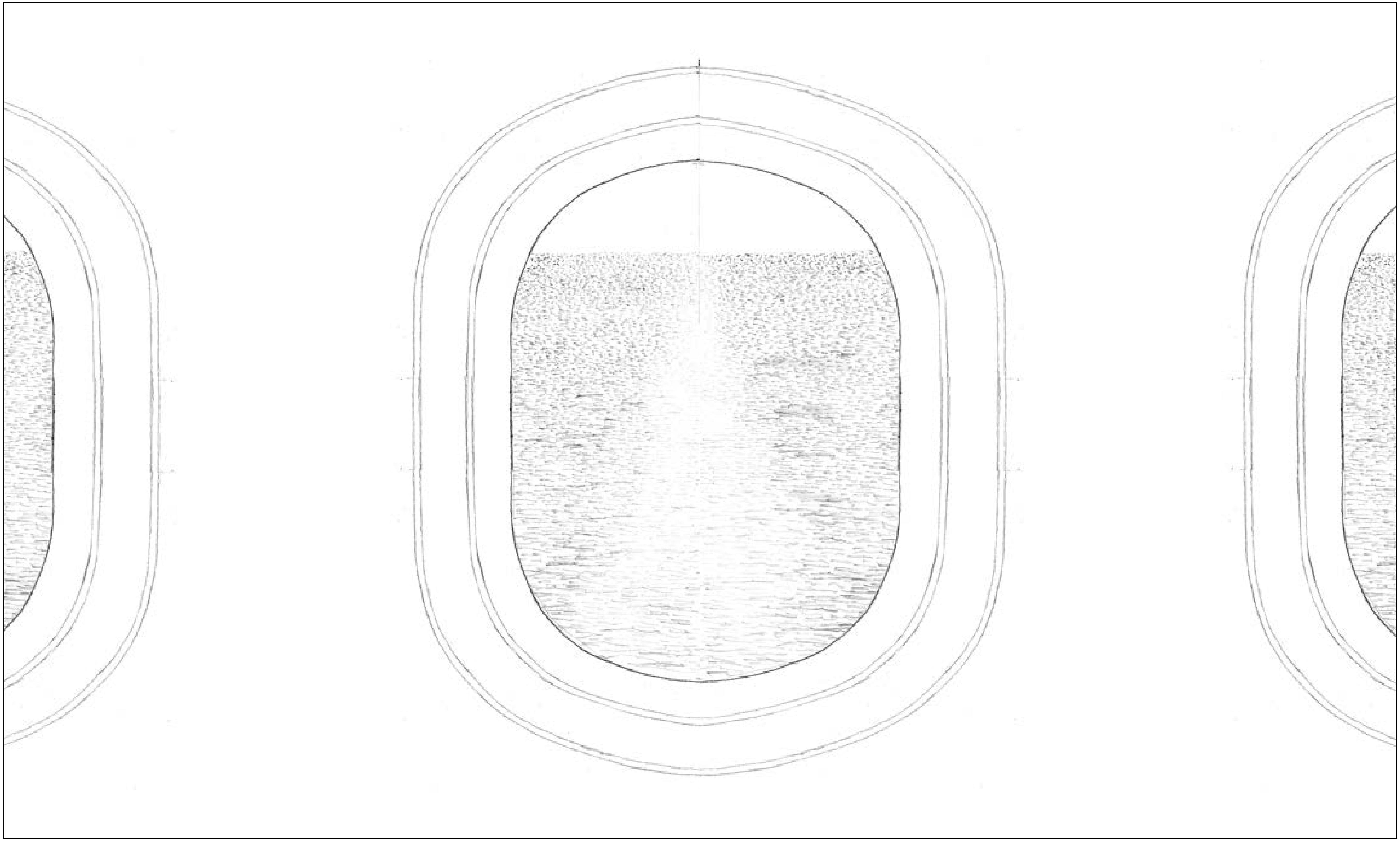

It's just.
Just.


BOARDING
GRP A
15:00
NOW
Where was I going?
Where was ***home*** becoming?


DEF
I couldn't let it go.


I still can't.





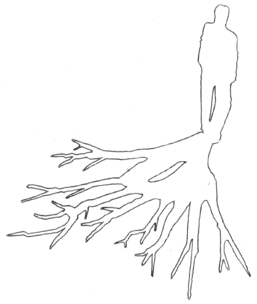
CONCLUSION

Books, like architectural spaces, are designed environments that invite us into immersive experiences. They create landscapes of the mind where readers become active participants in the narrative journey. As we delve into the pages, we travel paths paved by the author's voice and imagination. Yet, at times, we can encounter unexpected turns that resonate deeply, sparking a profound connection and transforming us from mere visitors, to engaged conversationalists. These moments linger in our memory, shaping our perception long after the book is closed.

These experiences become integral to our identity as our everyday relationships form the foundations of our existence. Architecture, at its core, is both structure and art. Creating frameworks to understand our relationships to space begins by recognizing that our perceptions are grounded in the inhabitants, social and physical environments, and their interconnectedness. Recognizing our connections demands honesty, vulnerability, and fostering dialogue and empathy with others to uncover them together. As authors, while our various experiences define the heart of this book, we've barely scratched the surface. As college students exploring Asian identities in America and multicultural experiences for our architectural thesis, we acknowledge the privilege and opportunities influencing the narratives in this discourse. Our goal, however, through reflection and documentation, is to understand our own experiences and contribute them to broader understanding across academic and daily interactions.

This project, born from years of experience, mirrors the richness of our lives and invites readers to embark on their own journey. In time, we hope for more projects to join on this collective embracement of a myriad of narratives that enrich our discussions. Therefore, our greatest desire is that readers grasp the importance and transformative power of everyday experiences.

Finally, our lives are inherently generous—they are journeys brimming with exploration and discovery, birthing insights that create spaces to welcome others into our world. We take any opportunity to view these everyday moments as poetry. Through writing, drawing, and being present, we can imagine new meanings. This space created in this book serves as a vehicle for shared wonder, bridging personal and collective transformation.



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