Brick by Brick

Principles for Achieving Artistic Mastery

Stephen McCranie

INTRODUCTION

The Need for Sustainable Creativity

Recently, more and more research is coming to light that indicates talent is a matter of time spent practicing, not a matter of innate ability. The idea that it takes 10,000 hours of deliberate practice to master a skill is increasingly gaining mainstream acceptance. Personally, I'm a big fan of the idea because it gives hope to people who once believed talent to be a gift they had not been given.

Even though this radical idea has massive ramifications for artists, I don't think it has properly made a debut in the dialogue about what it takes to become a great artist. We are still asking "How do you draw that?" when we should be asking "How do you get yourself to keep drawing for years and years and years?"

I believe making creativity a sustainable practice is one of the most important and difficult issues an artist deals with. My hope is this book will help artists who are on the long journey to mastery by giving them insights into how they can make their creative practice last a lifetime.

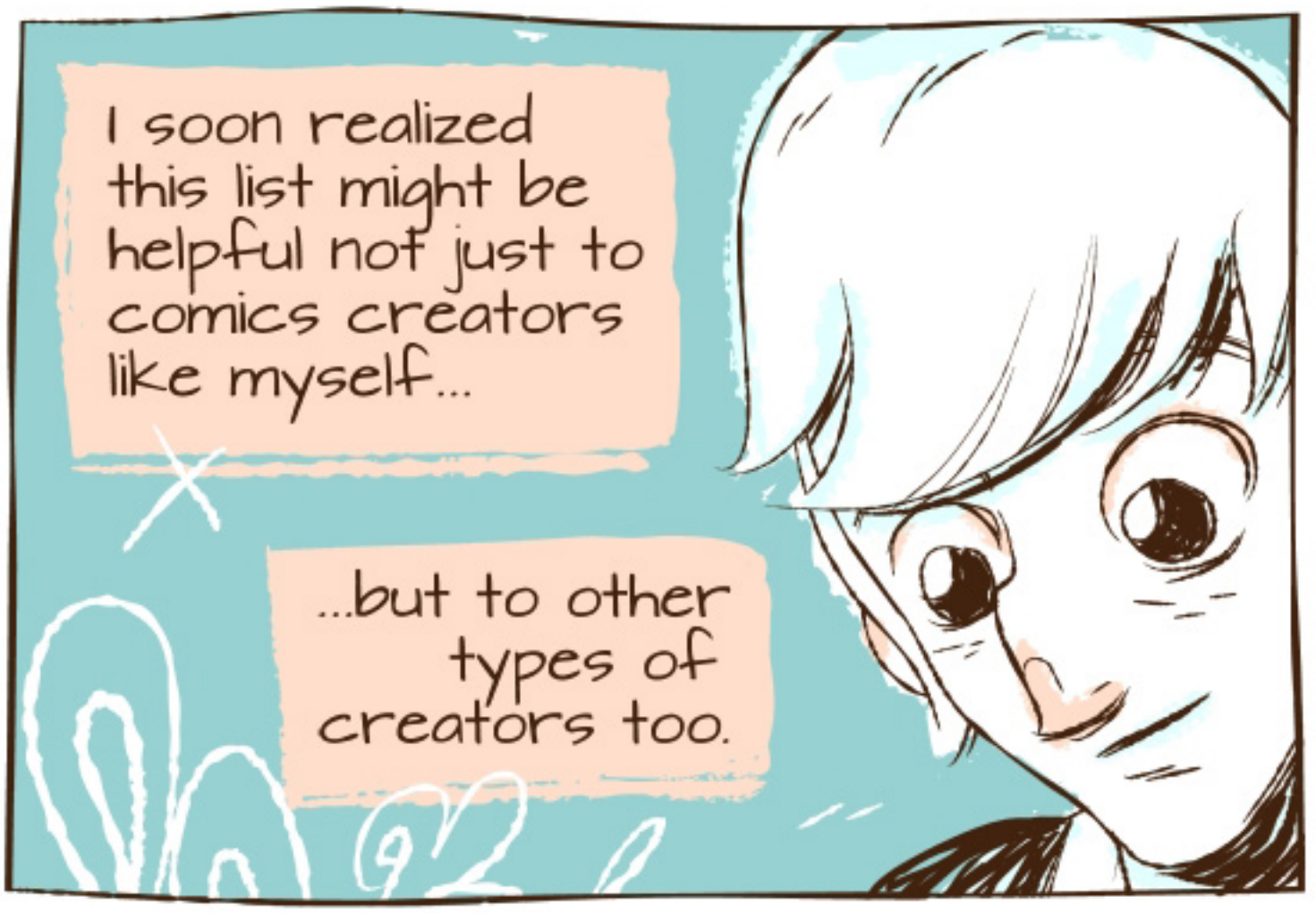
— Stephen McCranie

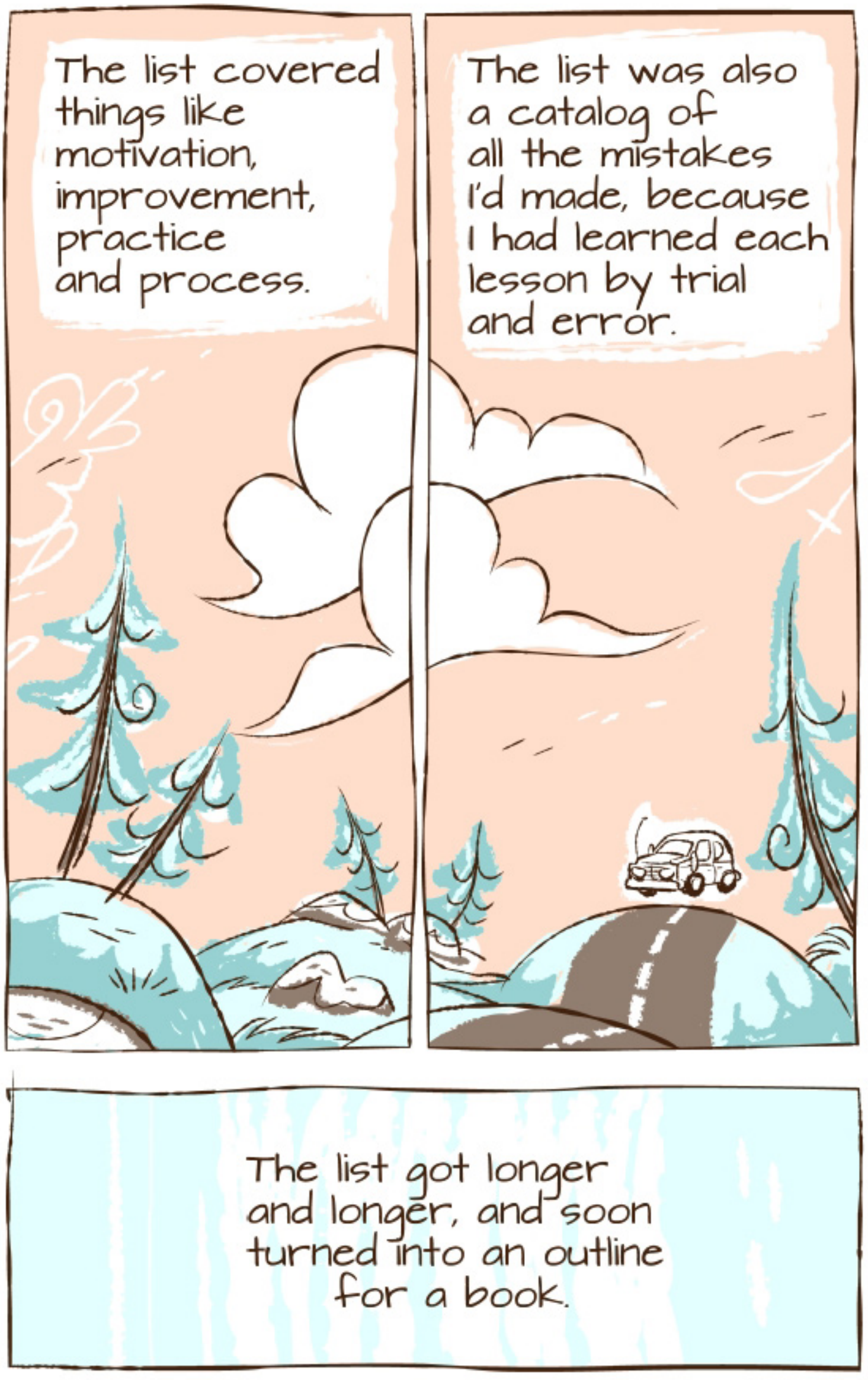
Principle vs. Process

They are true craftsmen, navigating their art with deftness and poise.

I was on a long car ride...

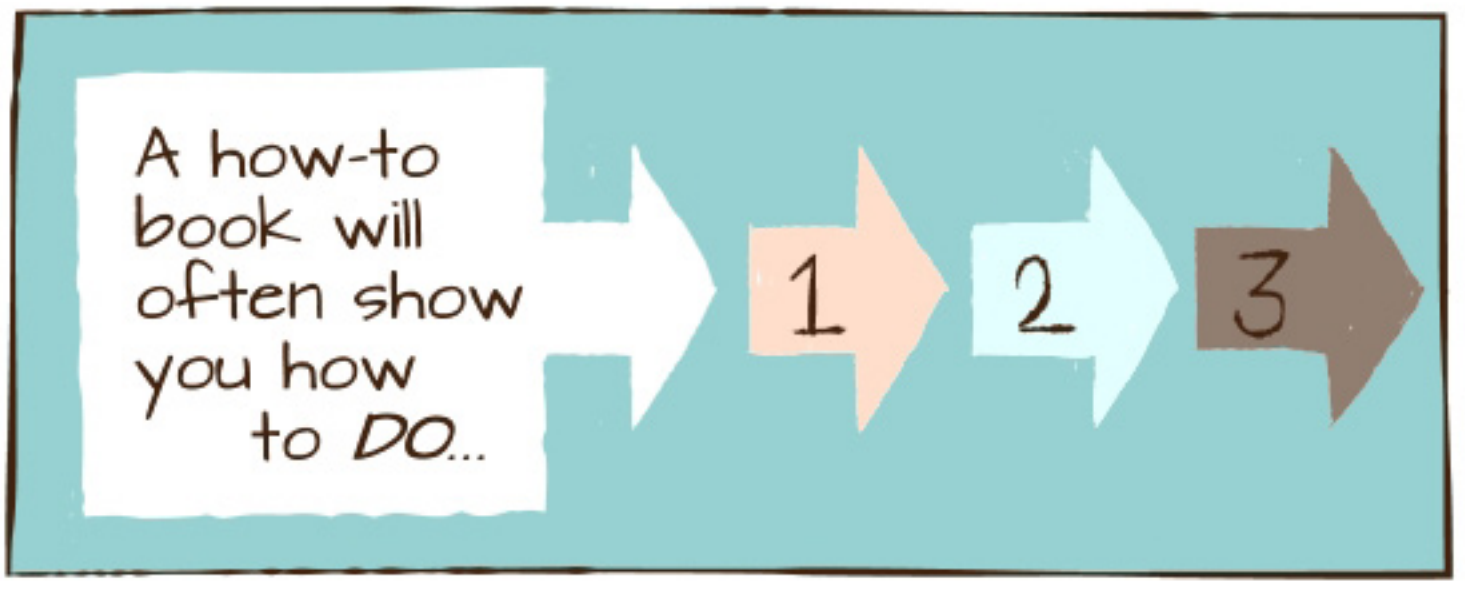
I pulled out my laptop and began typing a list of what I had learned during my first two years as a professional cartoonist.


I soon realized this list might be helpful not just to comics creators like myself...
...but to other types of creators too.


The list covered things like motivation, improvement, practice and process.
The list was also a catalog of all the mistakes I'd made, because I had learned each lesson by trial and error.
The list got longer and longer, and soon turned into an outline for a book.

It wasn't a book about how to create; it was a book about how to be a creator.

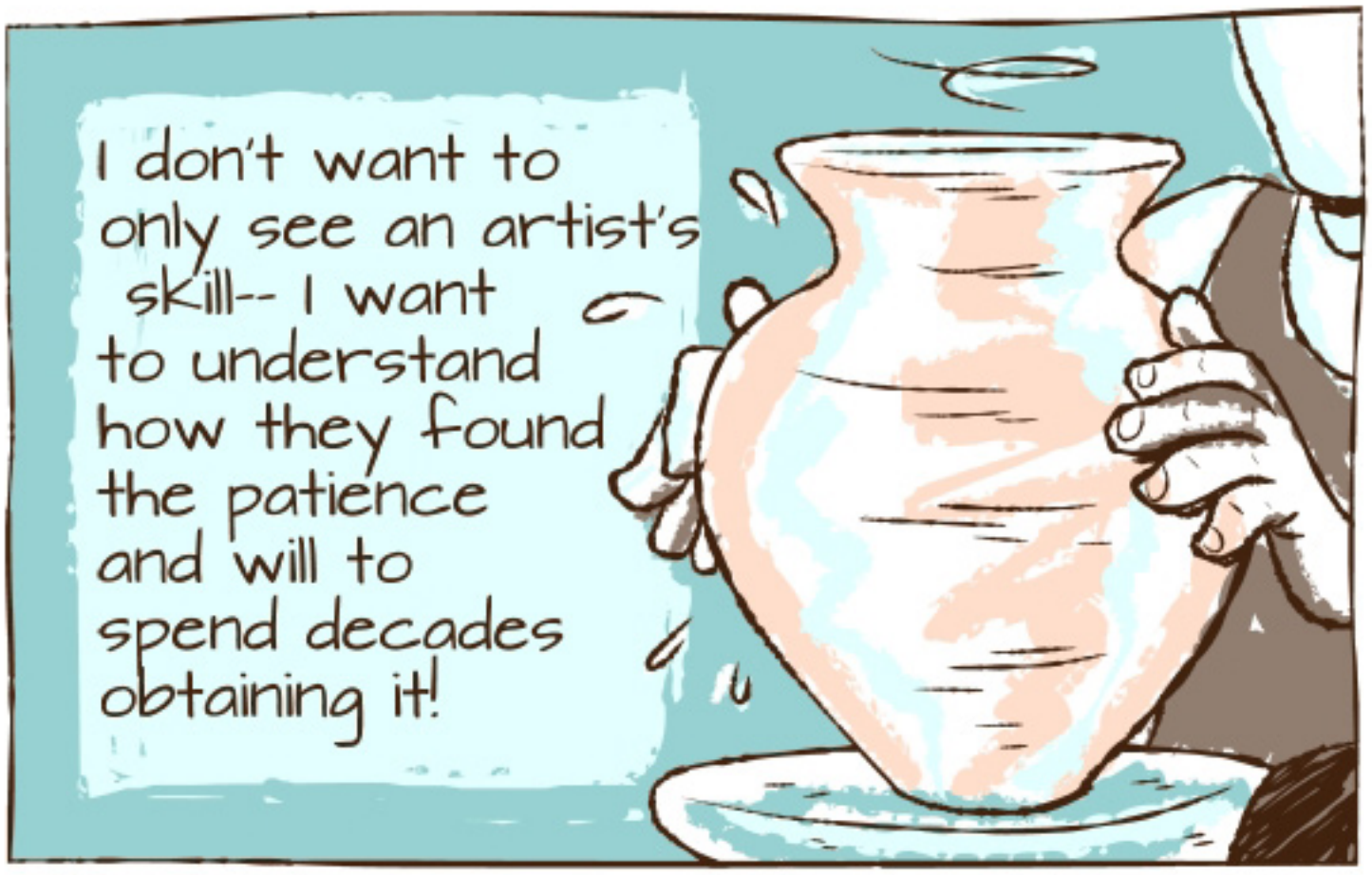
You see, there's a certain art to being an artist, but it's rarely talked about in the how-to books.



The truth is, if we want to be artists, we should study artists, not just art.

That's why, to me, I don't want to only see an artist's gallery--

--I want to see their studio!


I don't want to only see an artist's skill-- I want to understand how they found the patience and will to spend decades obtaining it!

So don't show me just the work, show me the hands that made it! I want to know the principles that guide the artist, not just the process that guides the art.

This book is my best attempt to outline all the principles for good artistic practice I've found so far.

In whatever medium you are trying to master, I hope it helps you on your journey.

GOALS & PLANS

Brick by Brick

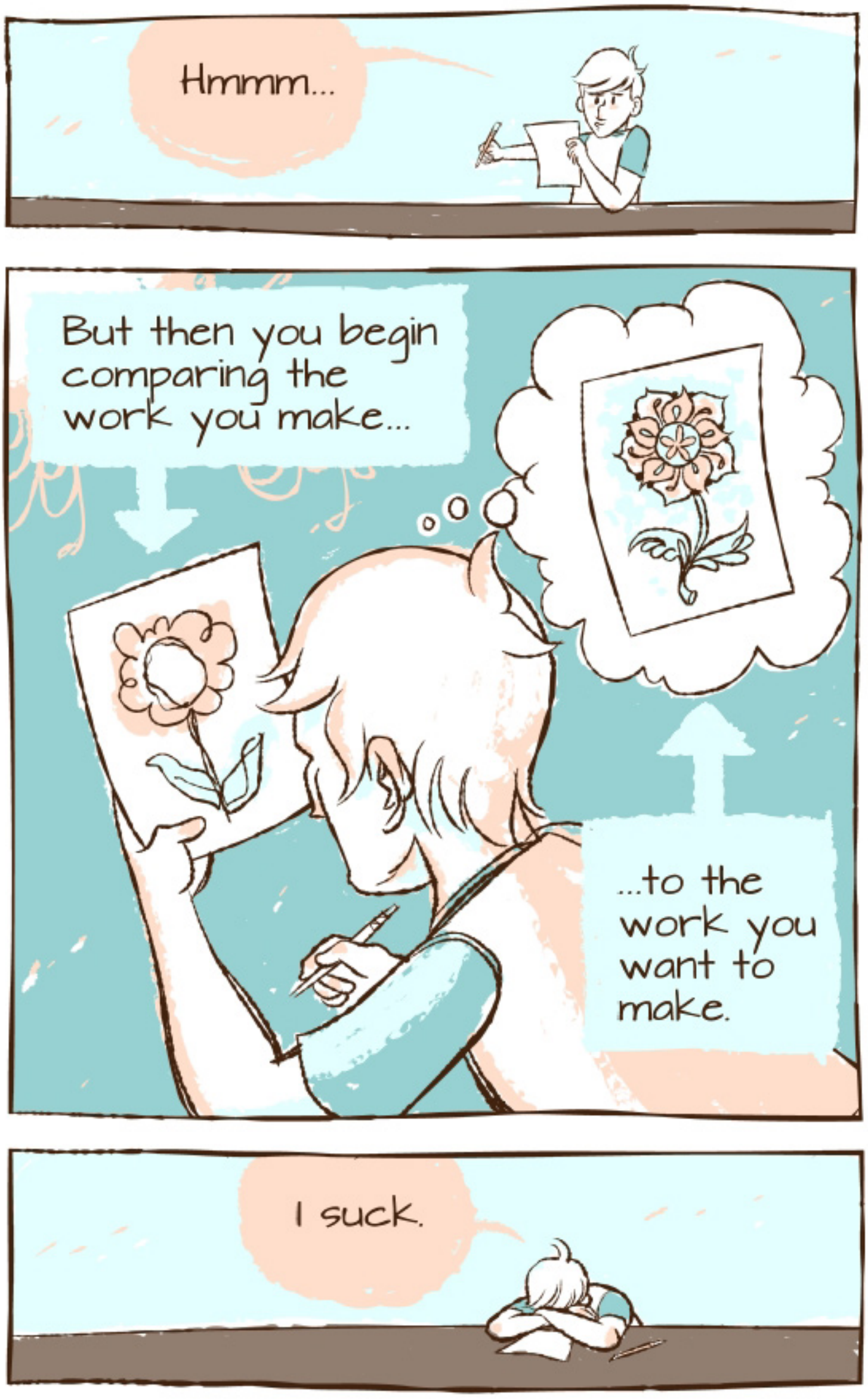
When I see work created by a master artist, it's like standing before an enormous tower of accomplishment.
HOW CAN MY WORK EVER MEASURE UP TO THIS?
It's for this reason many people don't make goals. Making goals can be discouraging.

When you first make a goal, you feel excited.

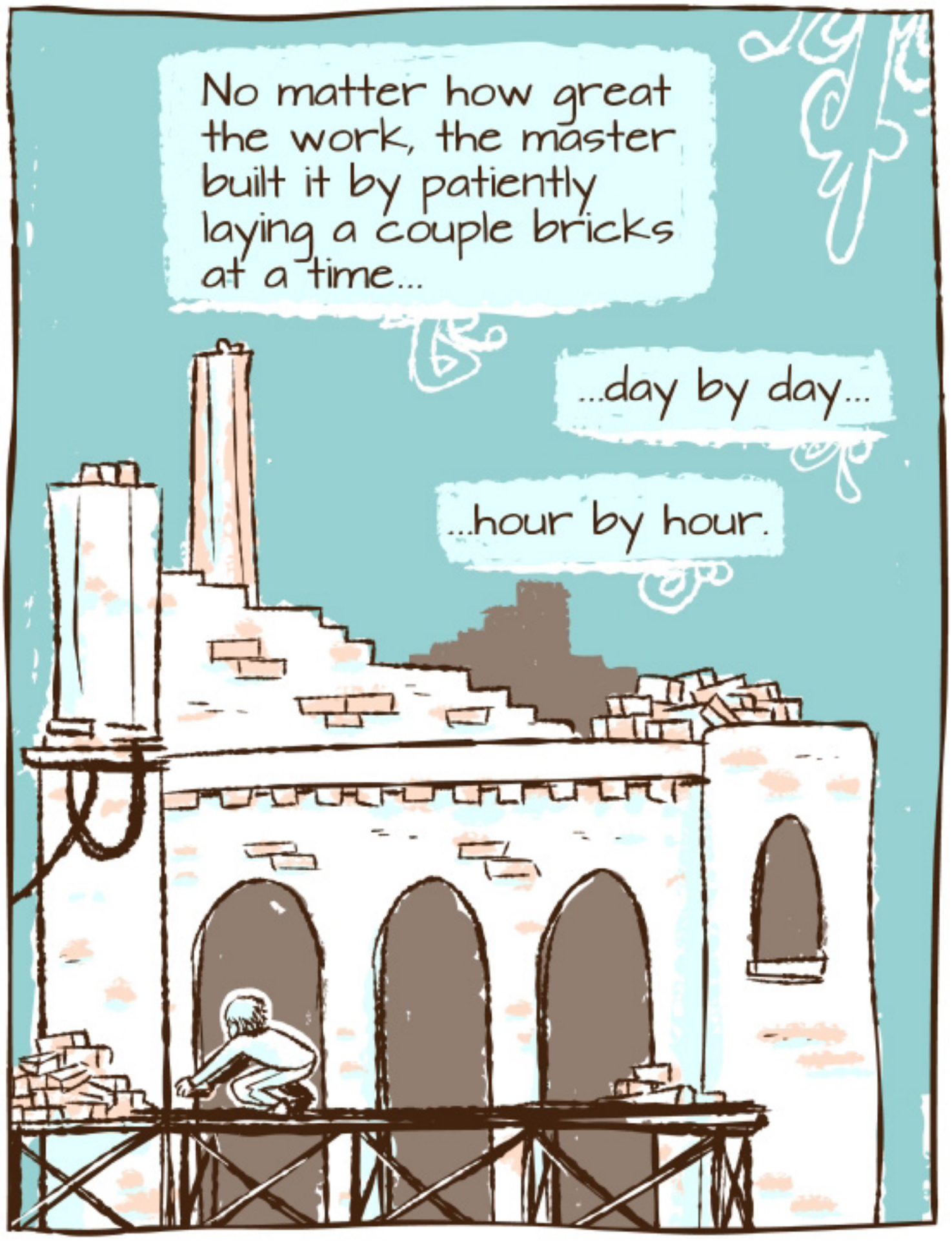
I'M GOING TO BECOME A MASTER ARTIST!

FIRST, I SHALL CREATE A MASTERPIECE THAT HISTORY WILL REMEMBER ME BY!

SKETCH SKETCH SKETCH SKETCH

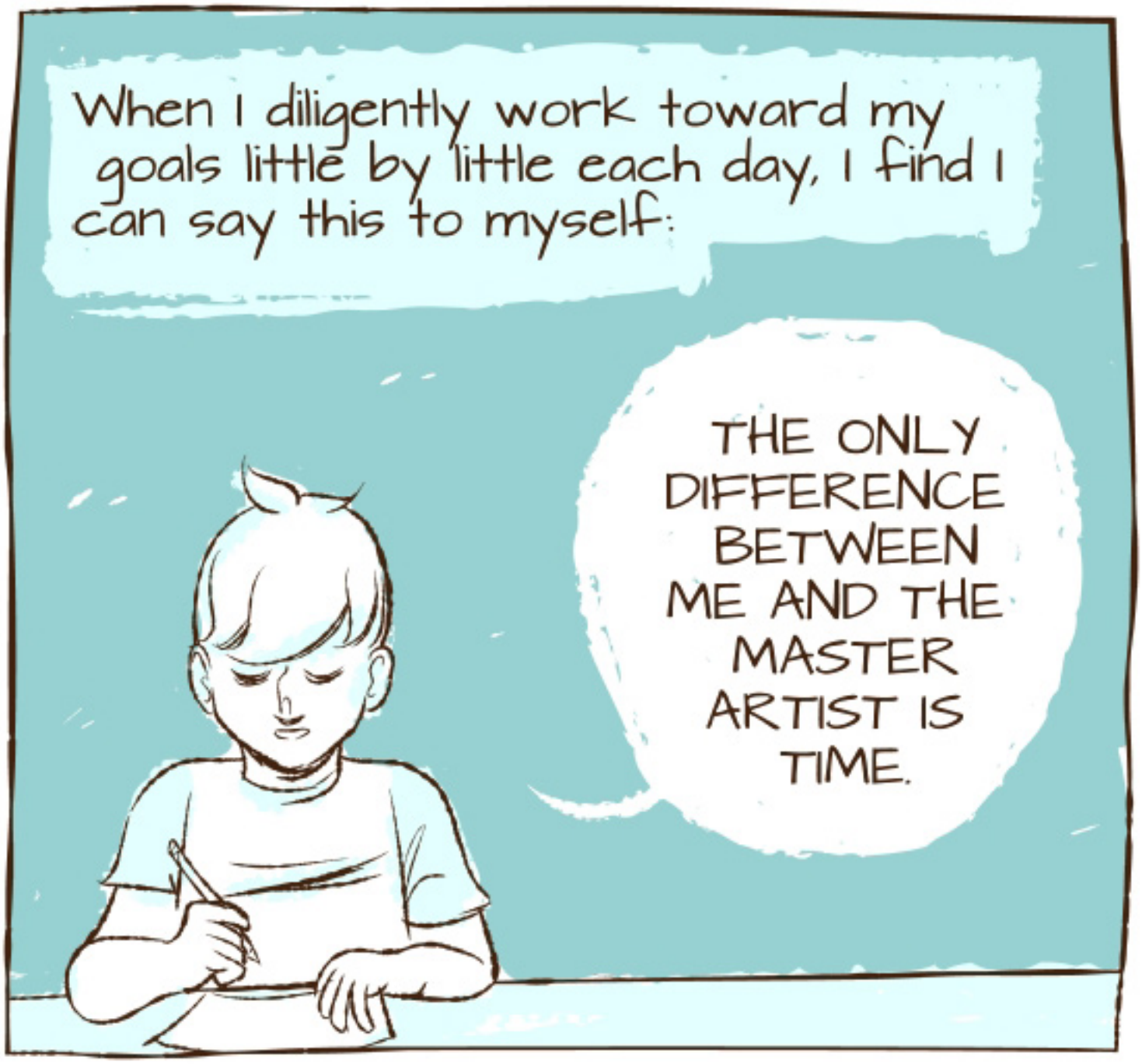

Hmmm...
But then you begin comparing the work you make...
...to the work you want to make.
I suck.

After all, a giant tower is still made of hundreds of tiny bricks, right?



That means your measure for success is not how tall your tower is, but whether or not you've laid your bricks for the day.

After all, that's all you CAN do, right?


When I diligently work toward my goals little by little each day, I find I can say this to myself:
THE ONLY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ME AND THE MASTER ARTIST IS TIME.

Make Your Milestones

The second worst kind of day for me is a productive day with no set objectives.

I finish the day having done a lot, but with no goals set I feel dissatisfied.

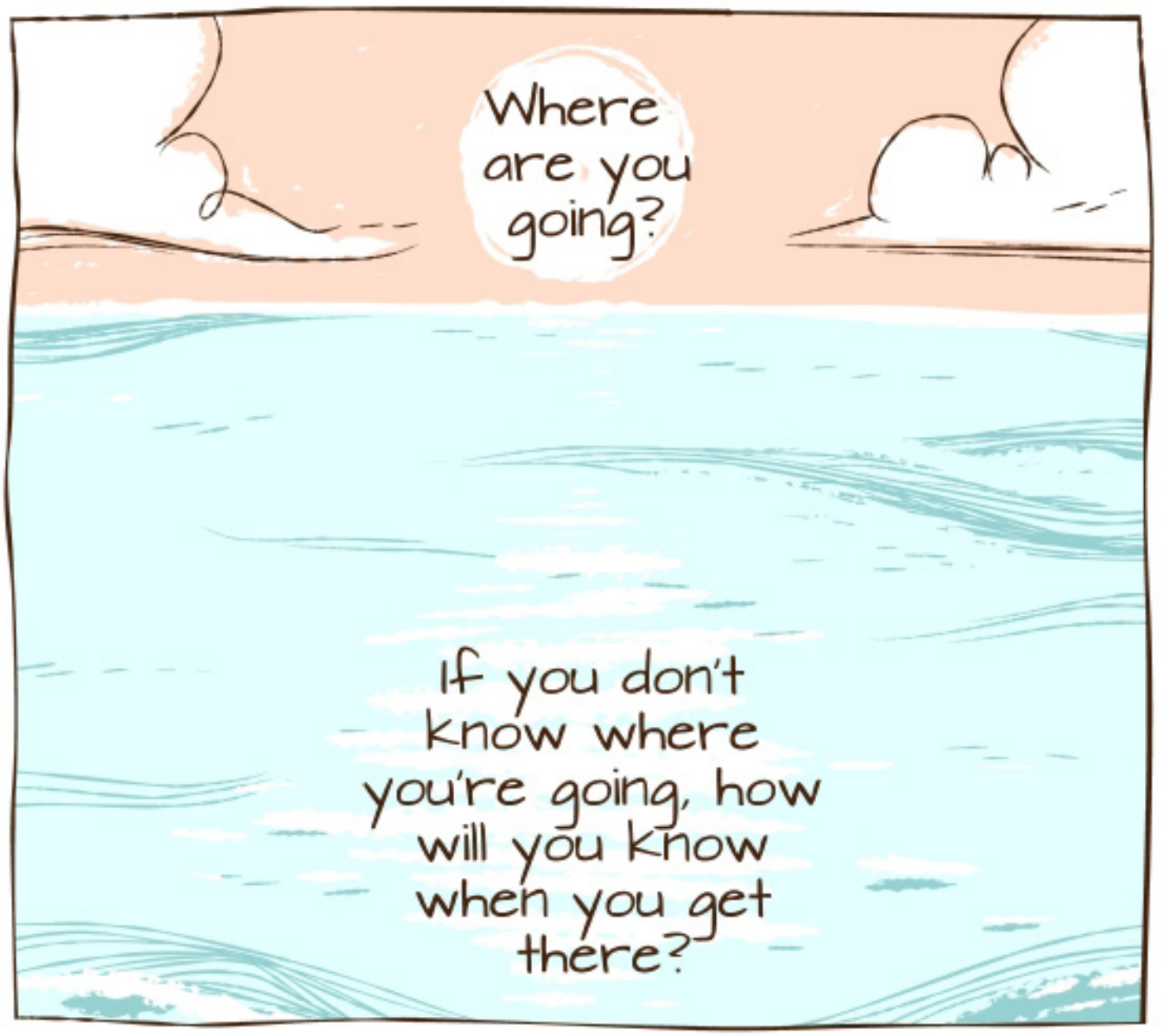
How much have I actually accomplished?

I've done *something* to be sure, but to what end?

I find if you don't decide how much, it's never enough.

SIGH

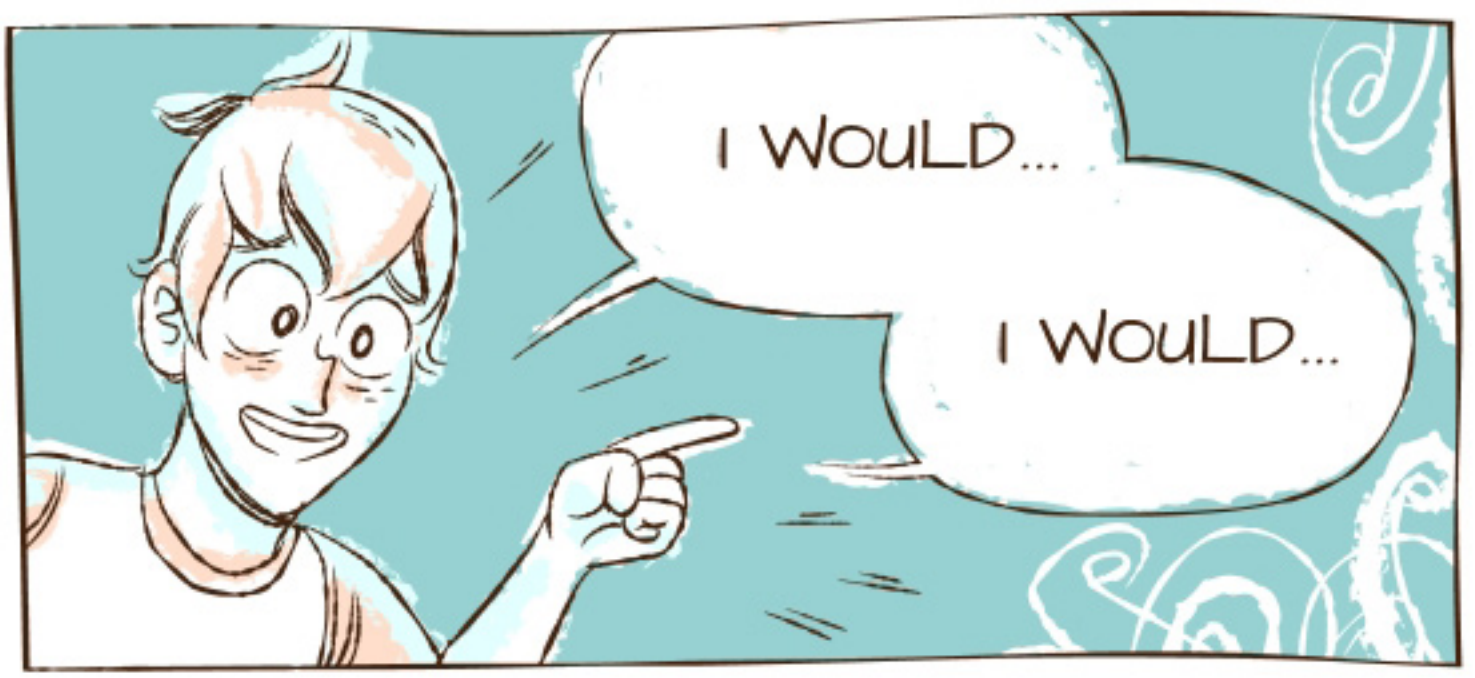
That's why we need to make goals!


Where are you going?
If you don't know where you're going, how will you know when you get there?

We need goals to perceive the path we are on.
They are milestones for progress and accomplishment.

To make a goal, imagine that you have all the time, all the money, all the resources in the world.

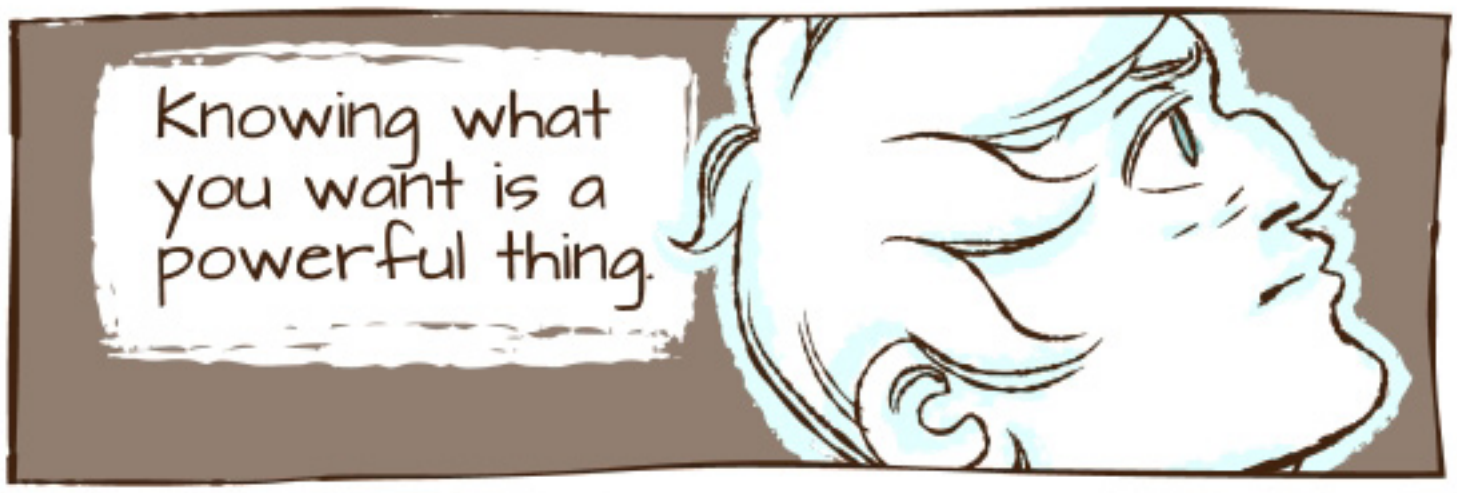
What would you do with it?

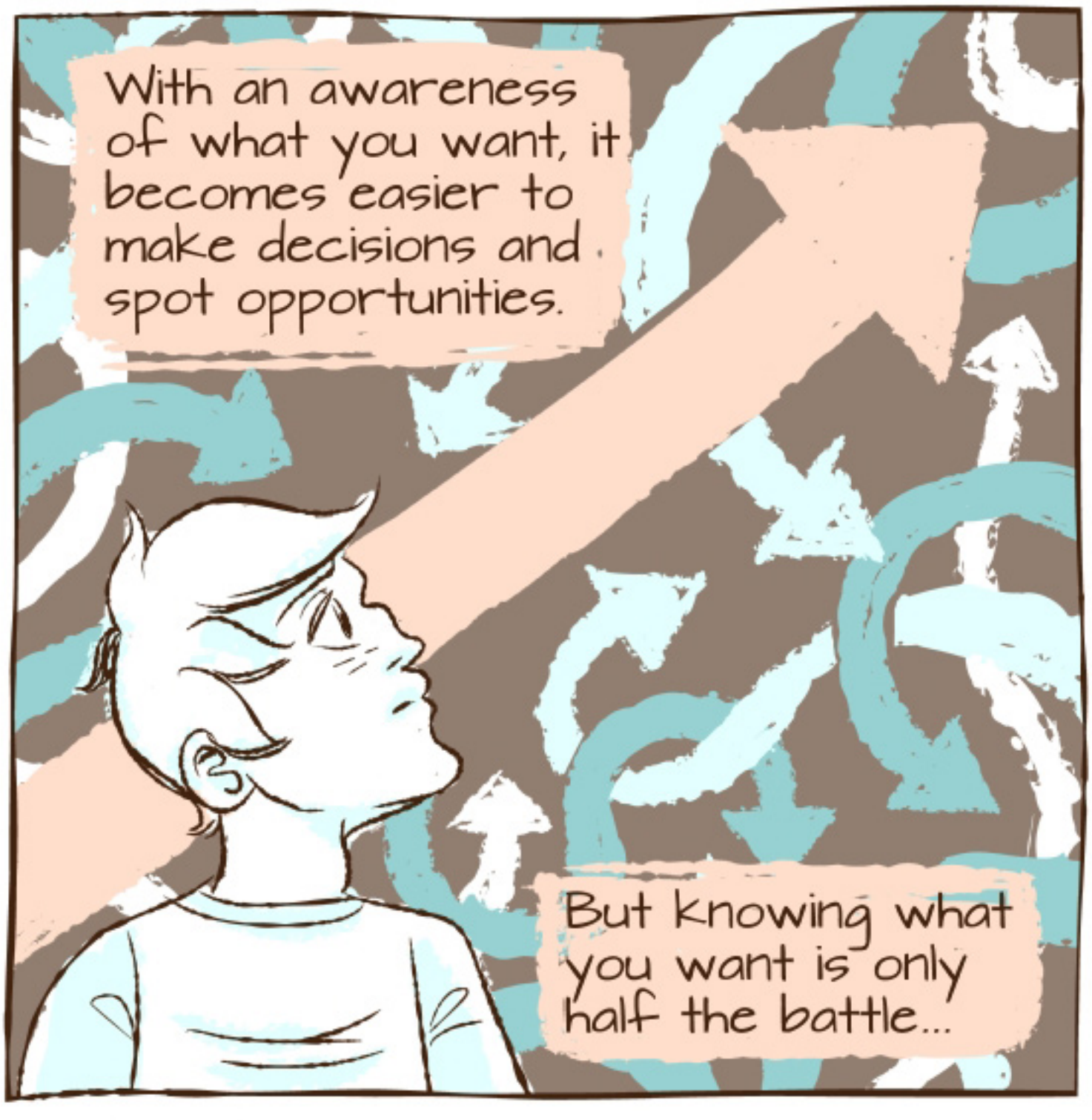


...MAKE AN ICE CREAM CASTLE!
Um...
Try to think big, but not impossible.
IT'S POSSIBLE!
...KIND OF.

What is the best possible life you can imagine for you and for the people you care about? What is it that you deeply desire?

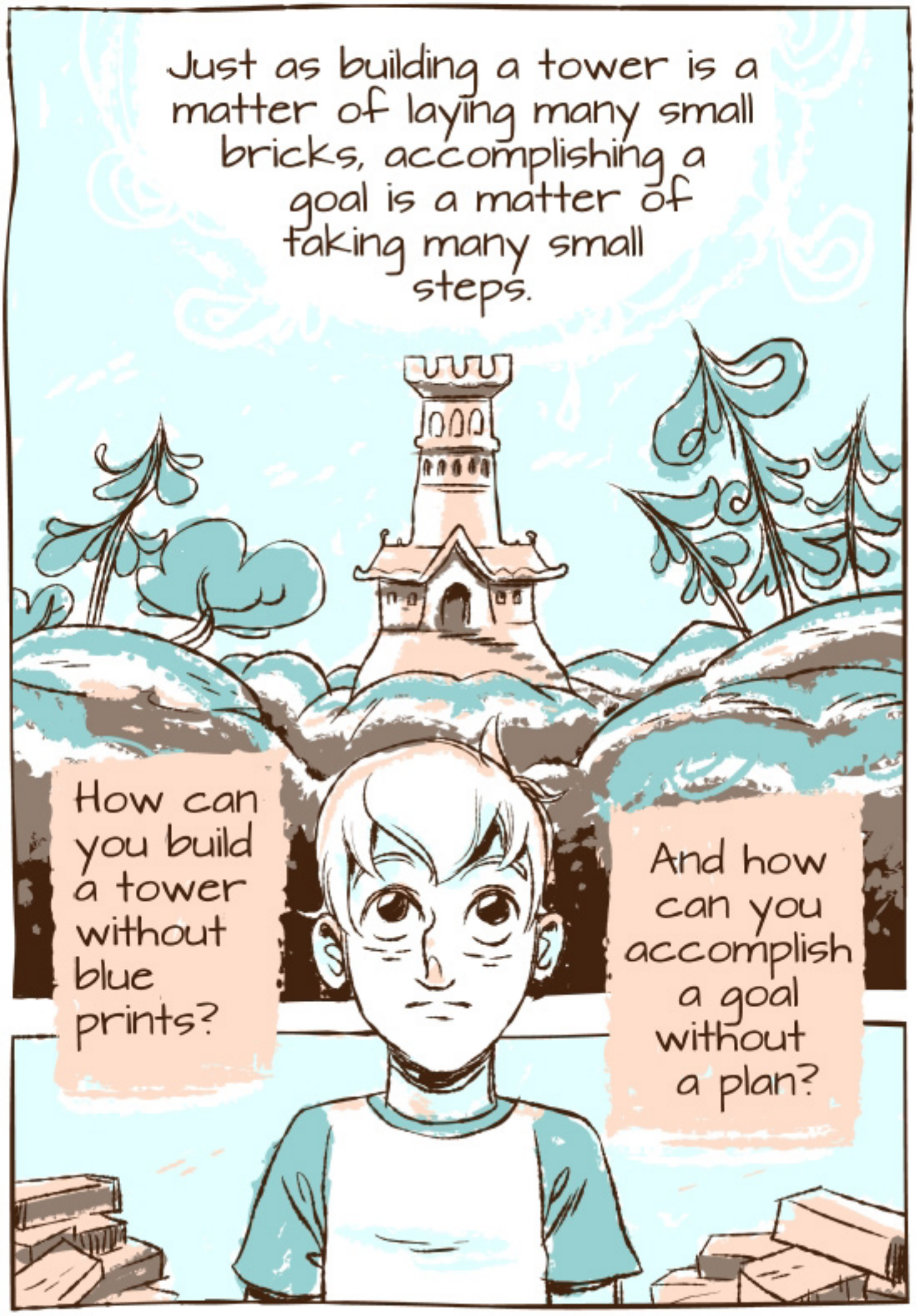
Once you know what you want, you've discovered your goals!





Plan Backwards, Live Forwards

In order to move toward your goals, you must first break them down into manageable steps. This process is called planning.



Failing to plan, is like planning to fail.

I like to make plans using a method called reverse engineering.

Begin by writing down every detail of the dream you have.
How much will it cost?
How much time will it take?
What resources will it require?

Next, figure out how to assemble your dream one detail at a time.

With your eyes on the goal, you trace a path starting from where you want to be...

YOU

...and move backwards to where you currently are.

This is reverse engineering.

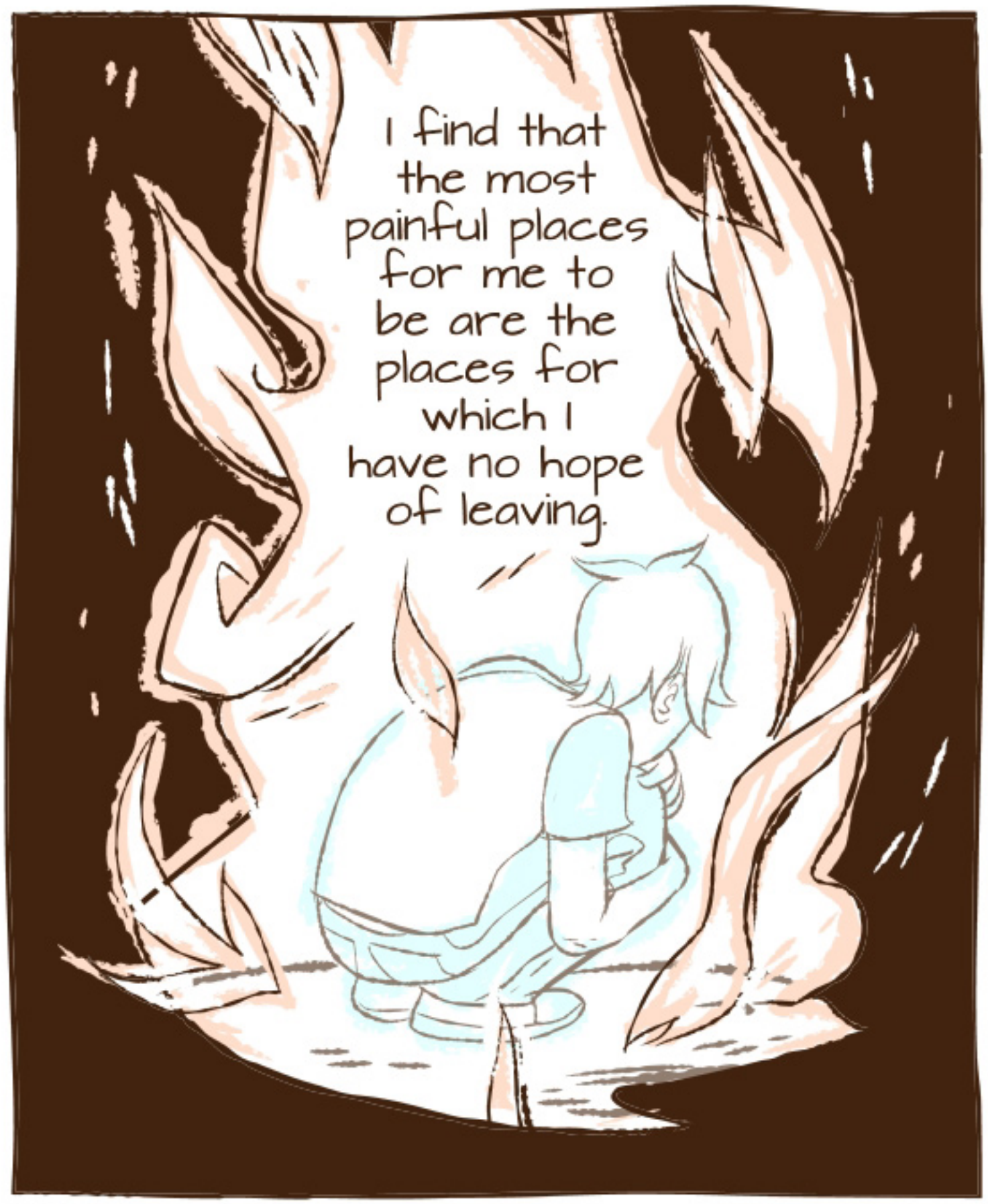
It is planning backwards so you can live forwards.

You break your goals into tasks, and you break those tasks into steps.

And suddenly, you find yourself with the first step.

Are you ready to take it?

Turn Your Pain into Plans



Whether it's a mundane pain or a profound pain, its effect on me is always tripled by the thought that I might have to live in it forever.

What helps me most when I find myself in this place is turning my PAIN into PLANS.

Having a plan is the difference between despair and hope.

A plan inscribes a path out of the pain for you to follow.

Though it may not immediately change your circumstances...
...it will change your perspective.

It lets you know that this struggle is not a dead-end, it is only an obstacle.

You are not stuck inside, you are only going THROUGH.

So turn your pain into plans!

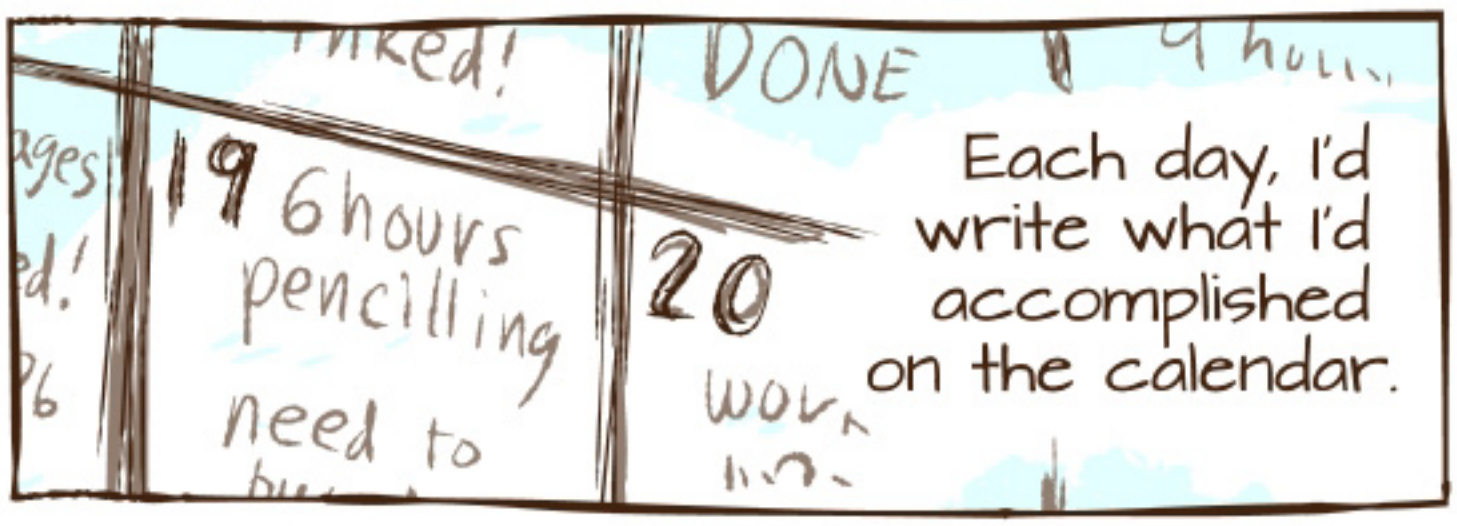
Be Proactive, Not Reactive

Why do now what you can do later?

Sometimes I wouldn't even start an assignment until the day it was due.
In a rush of stress and adrenaline I'd work right up until class started, always finishing on time, but just barely.
My life oscillated between free time and crunch time, but I preferred it that way.
AS LONG AS MY GRADES ARE GOOD, I CAN DO WHATEVER I WANT.

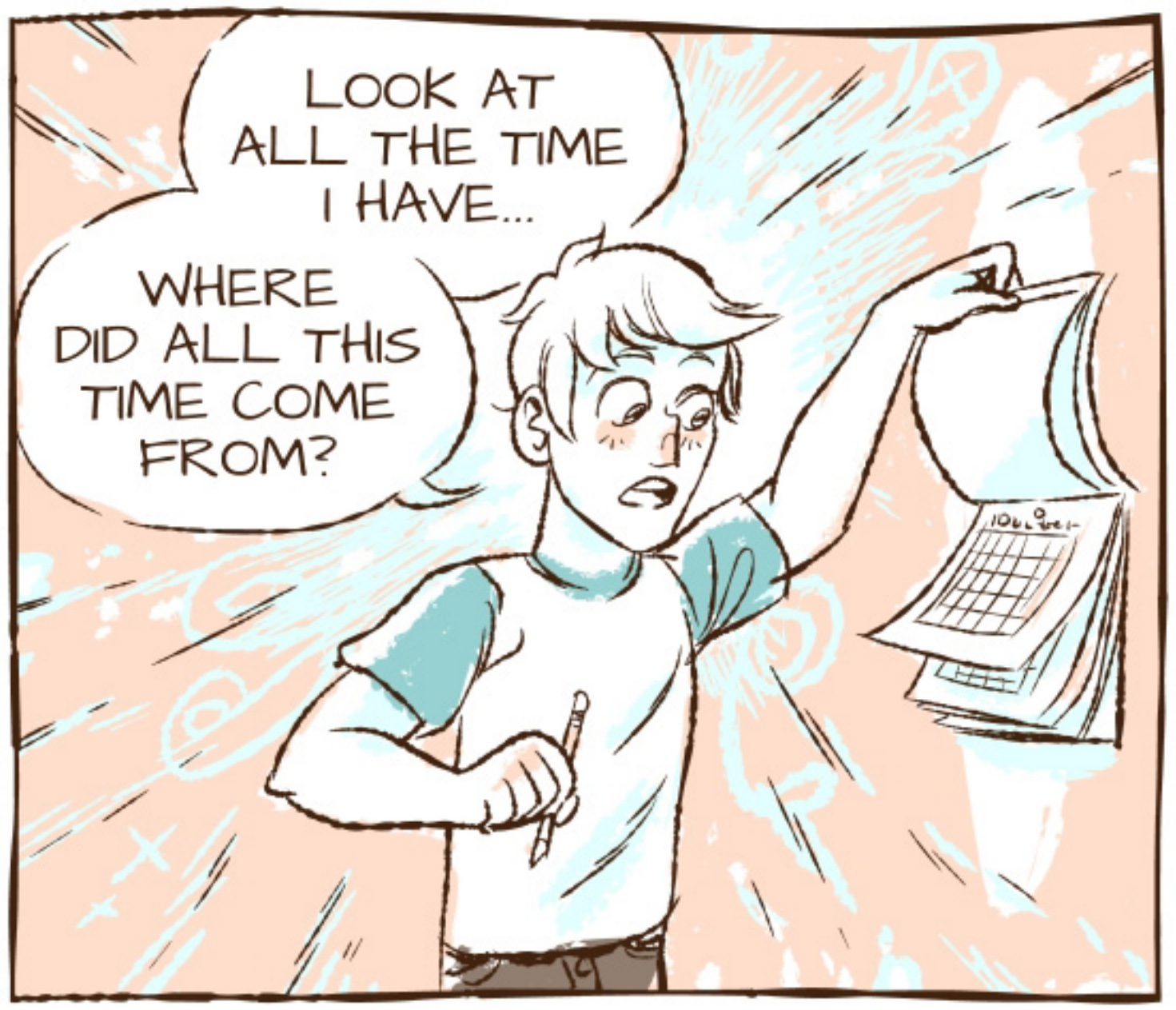
After graduating, I began working on my first graphic novel.

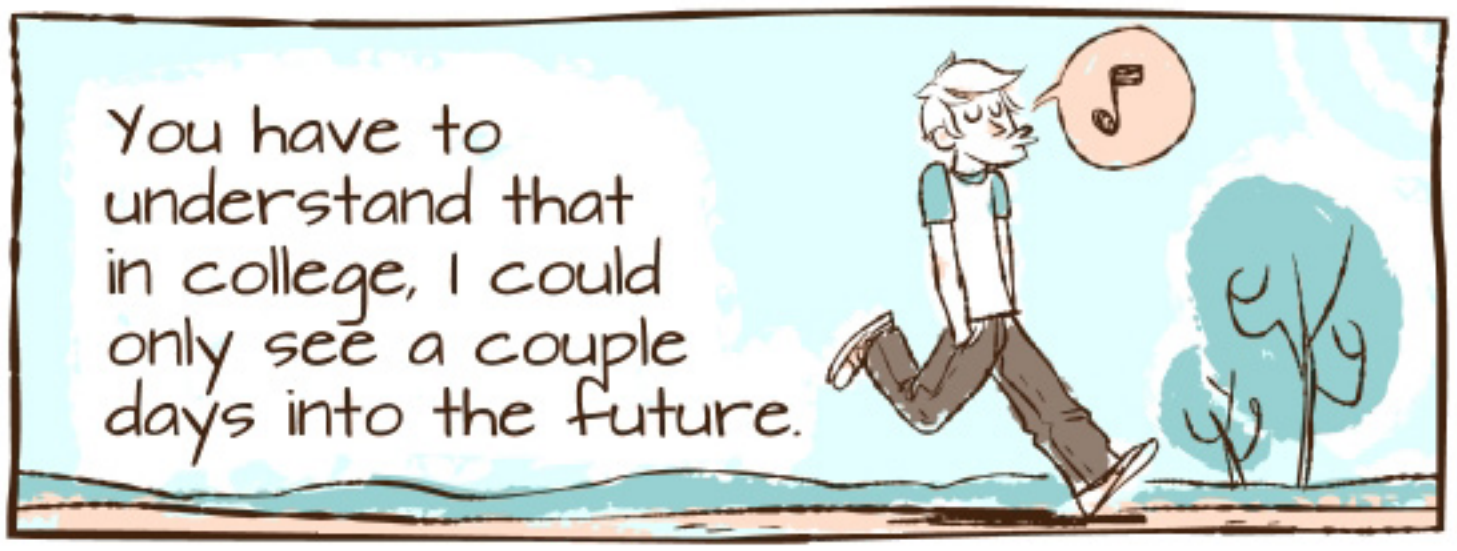
MAY
To record my progress, I put up a calendar on the wall.

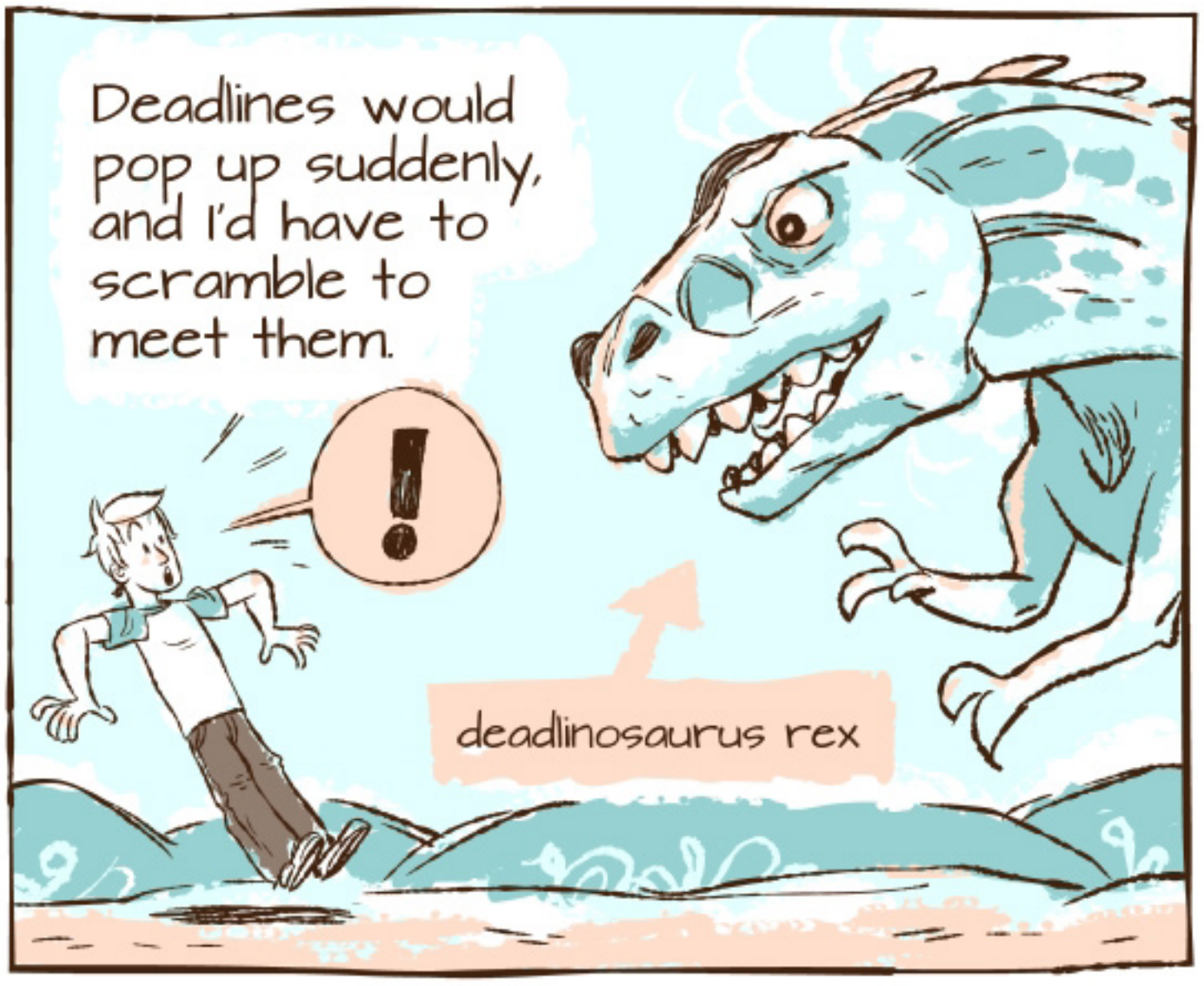

19 6hours pencilling need to
DONE
20
Each day, I'd write what I'd accomplished on the calendar.

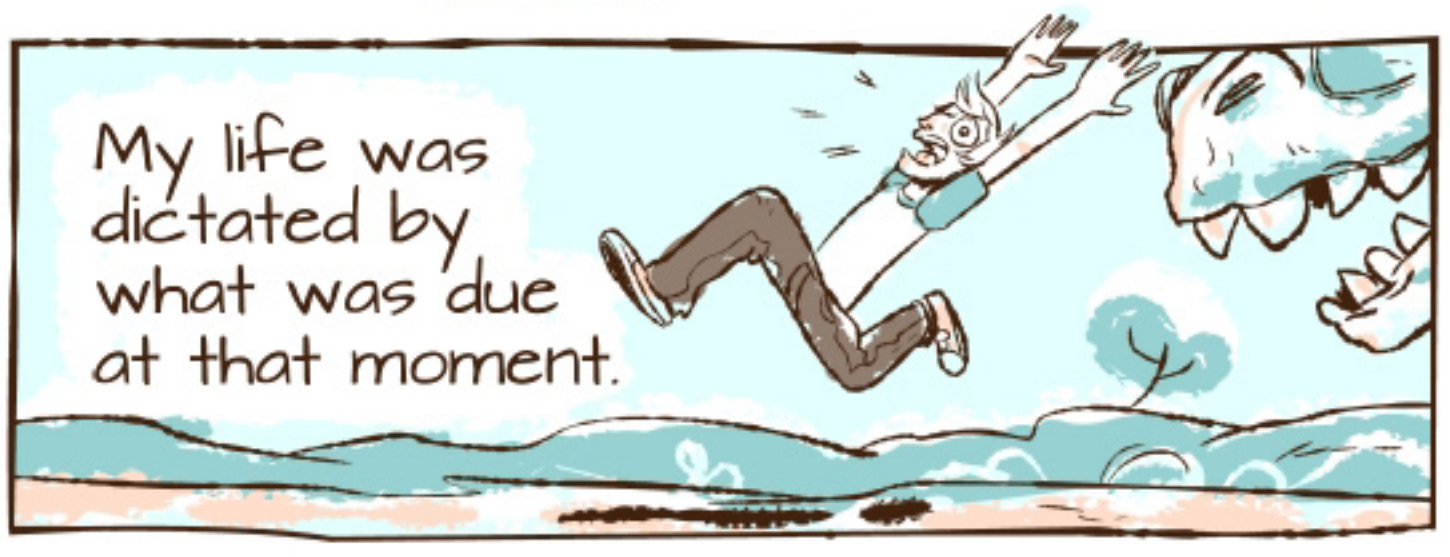
Soon, I began writing down not just what I'd done that day, but what I planned to do in the days to come.
MAY

And then one day, my eyes were opened to something I'd never seen before.
!


LOOK AT ALL THE TIME I HAVE...
WHERE DID ALL THIS TIME COME FROM?


You have to understand that in college, I could only see a couple days into the future.


Deadlines would pop up suddenly, and I'd have to scramble to meet them.
!
deadlinosaurus rex

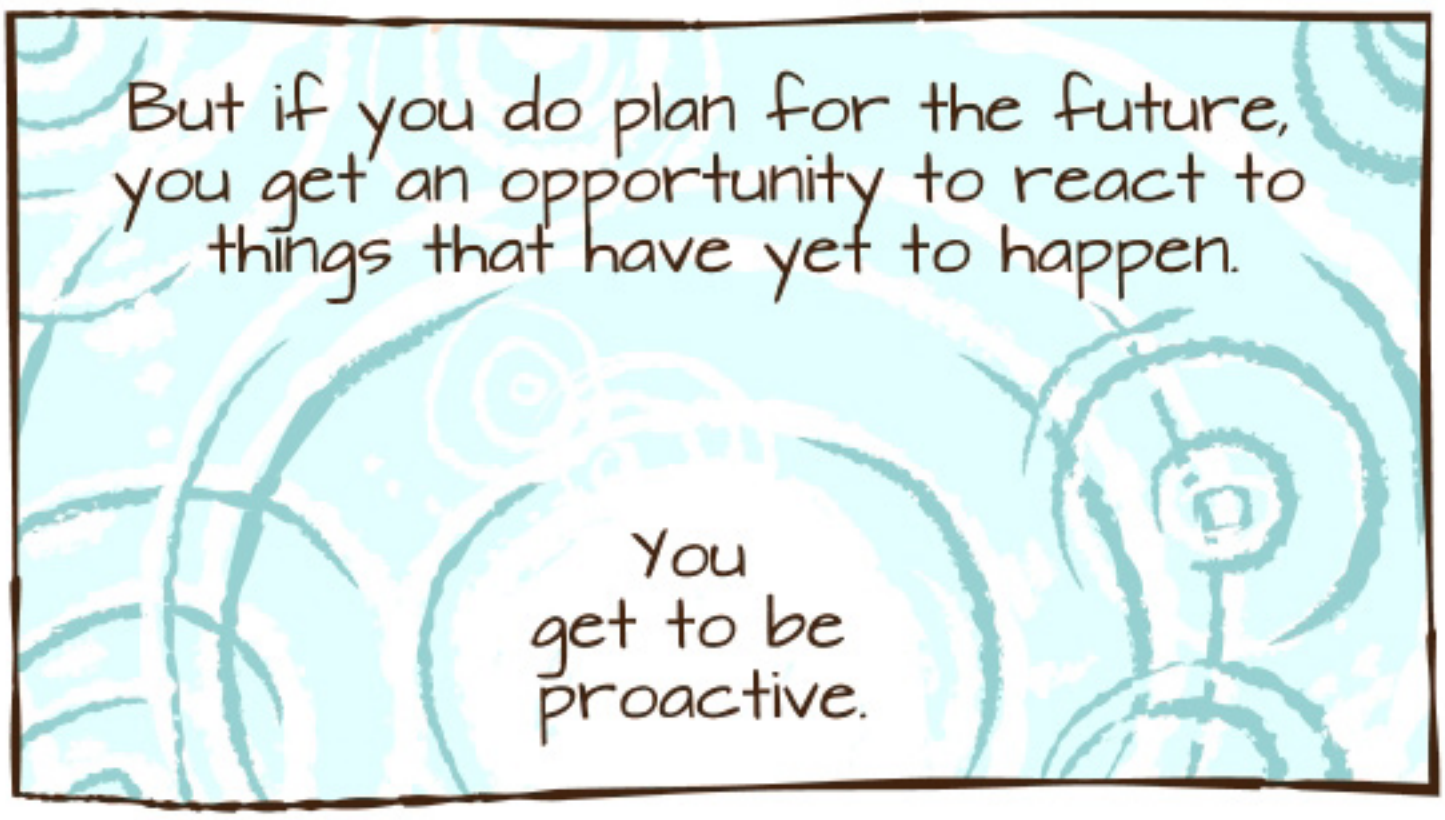

My life was dictated by what was due at that moment.

But with a calendar, I could now see months into the future, even years into the future!

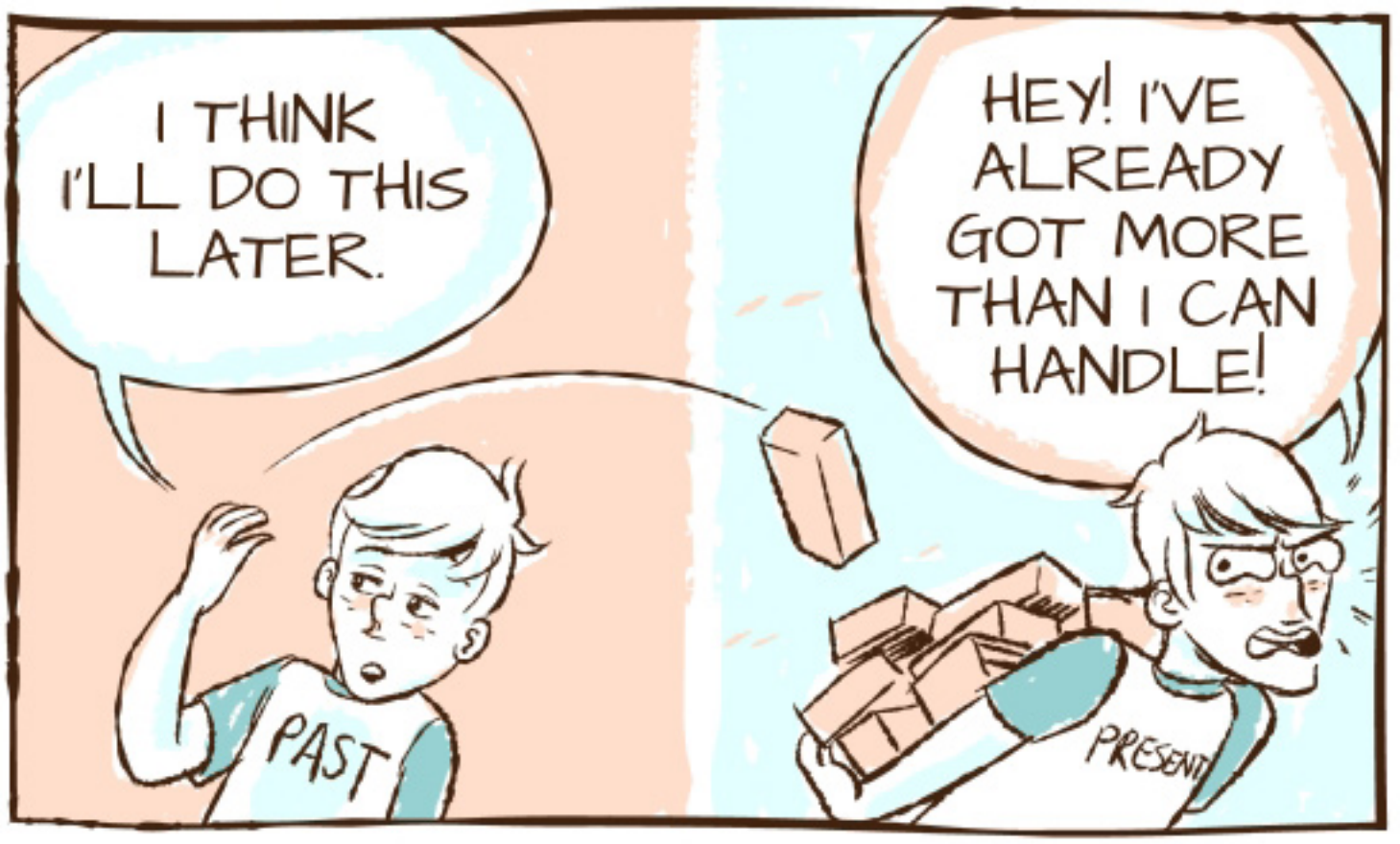
Instead of being blindsided by deadlines, I could now anticipate events and plan for them, so that when they happened, I was ready.

I think this is the wiser way to live.

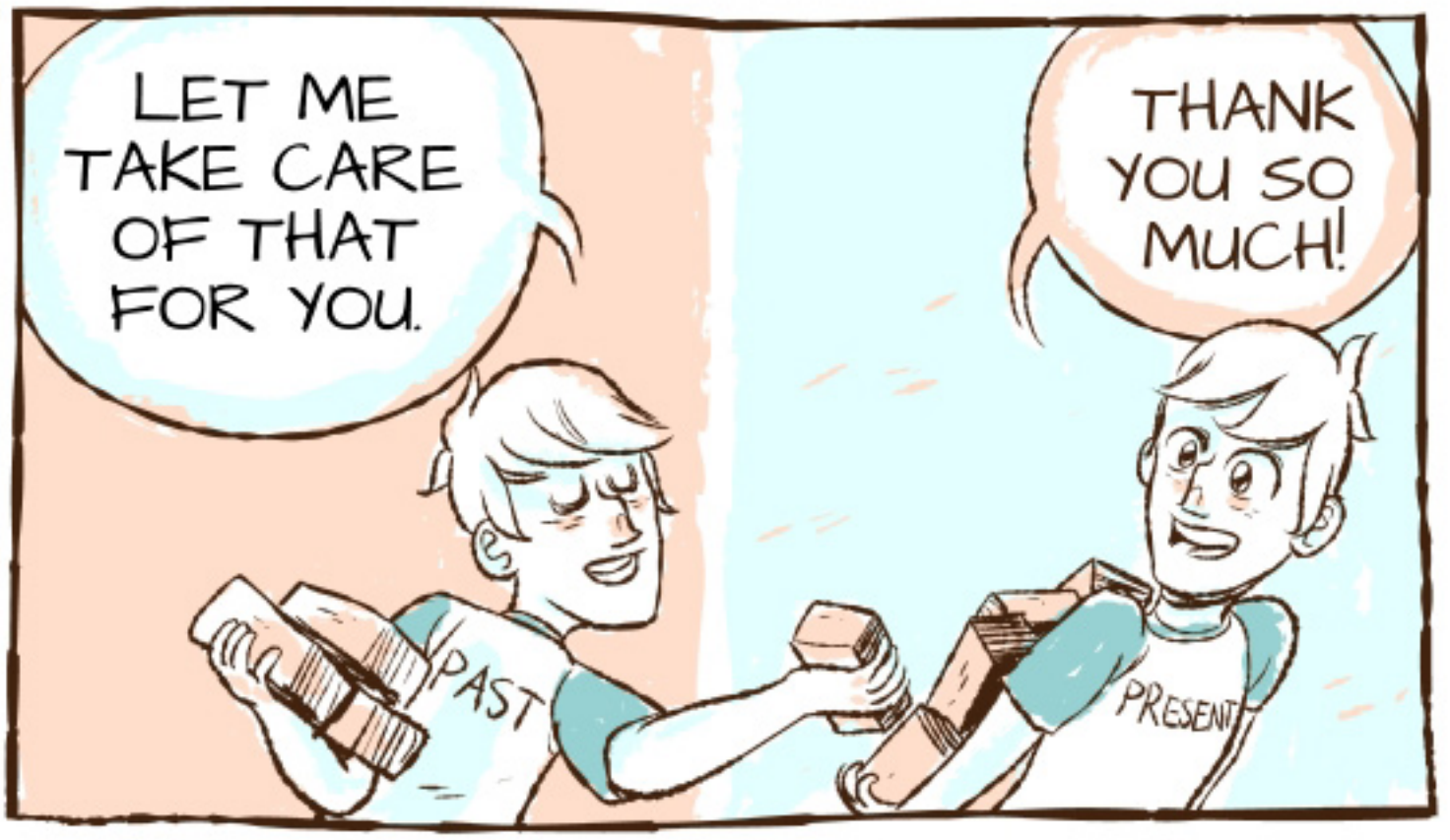
If you don't plan for the future, you will always be reacting to whatever comes your way.
You'll be pushed around and bullied by happenstance.


But if you do plan for the future, you get an opportunity to react to things that have yet to happen.
You get to be proactive.

When you procrastinate, you become a slave to yesterday.

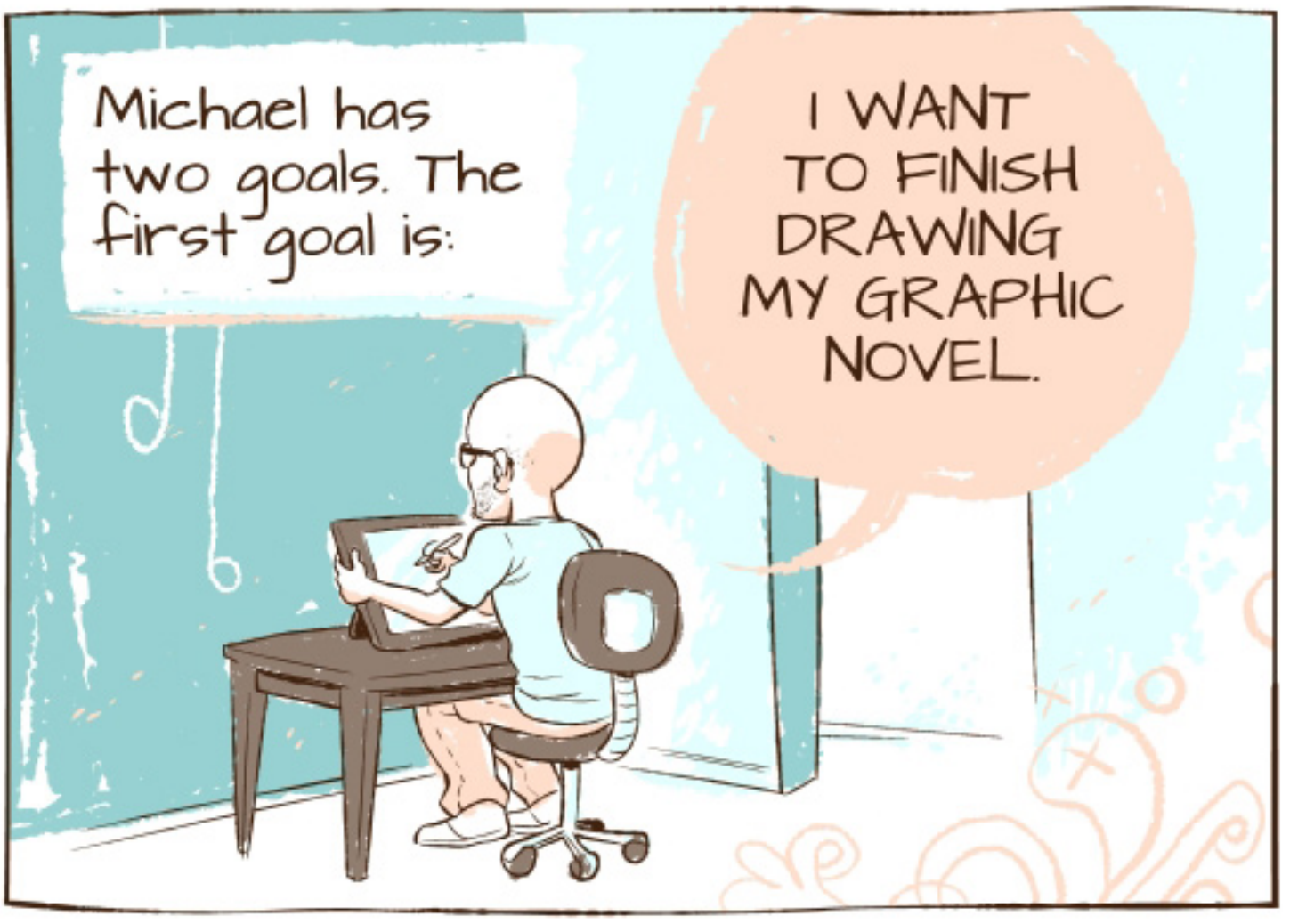


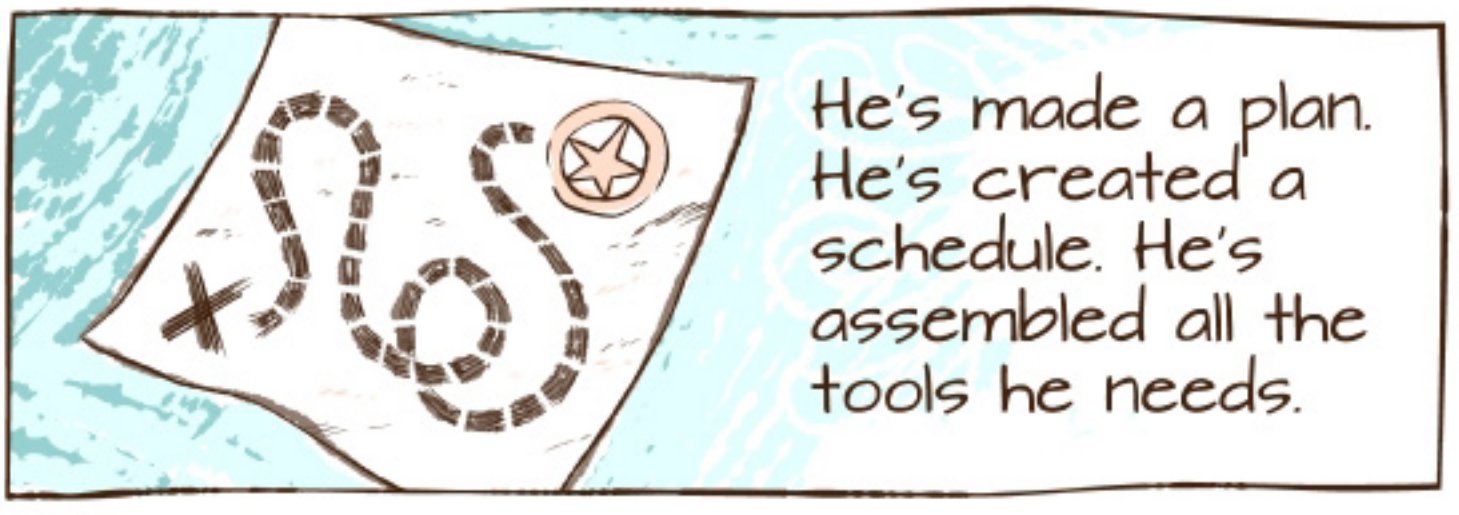
But when you are proactive, it's as if yesterday becomes your secret ally.



Make plans so you can be proactive.

Planning for the Possible





He's plotted each step out, so reaching his goal is only a matter of time and diligence.

His second goal, however, is different:

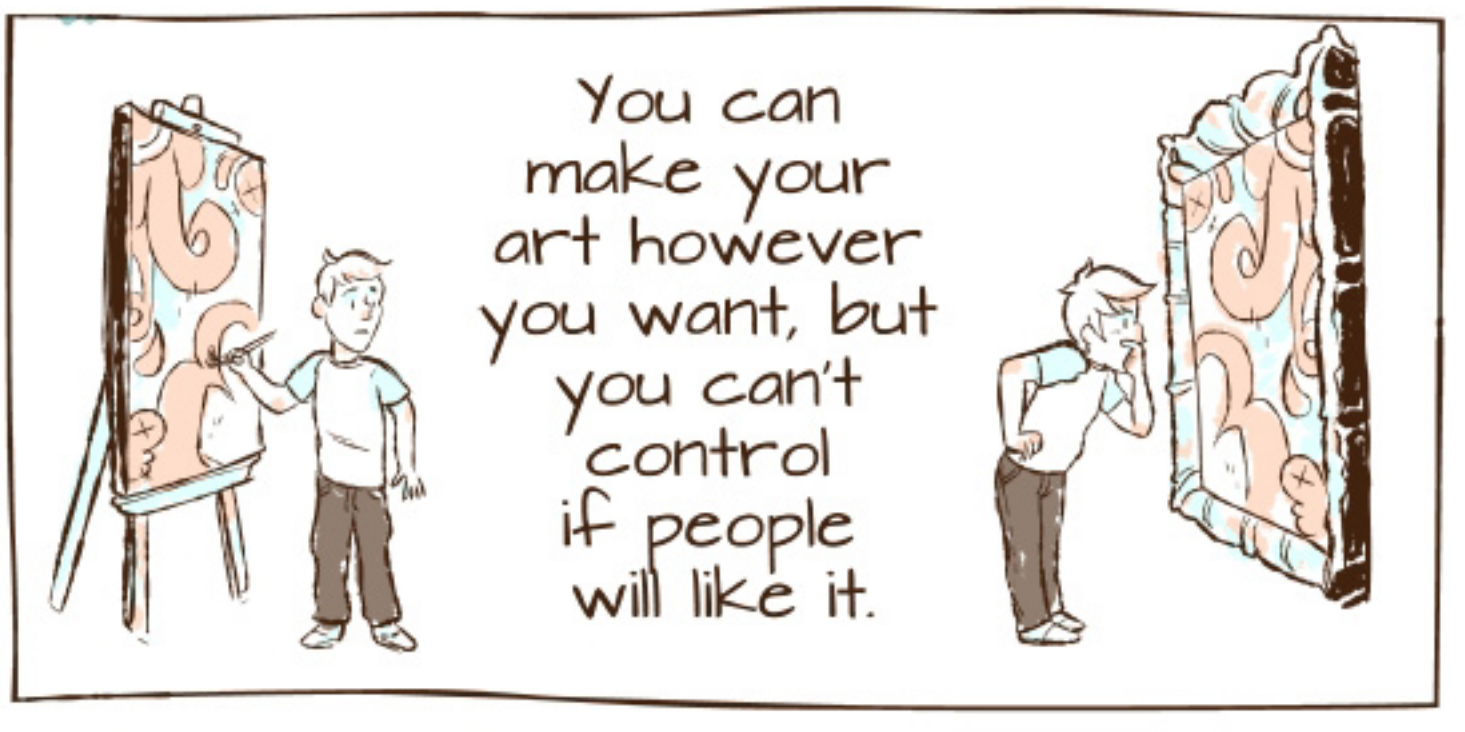
I WANT TO MAKE COMICS FOR A LIVING.

Do you see how this goal is different from the first?

Achieving this second goal depends not just on Michael's labors...
...but also on the whim of a publisher...
...or on the interest of an agent...
...or on the response of an audience.
Working hard will bring about his first goal, but it may not bring about his second goal.
How can my friend plan for his hopes and dreams when he has so little control over them?

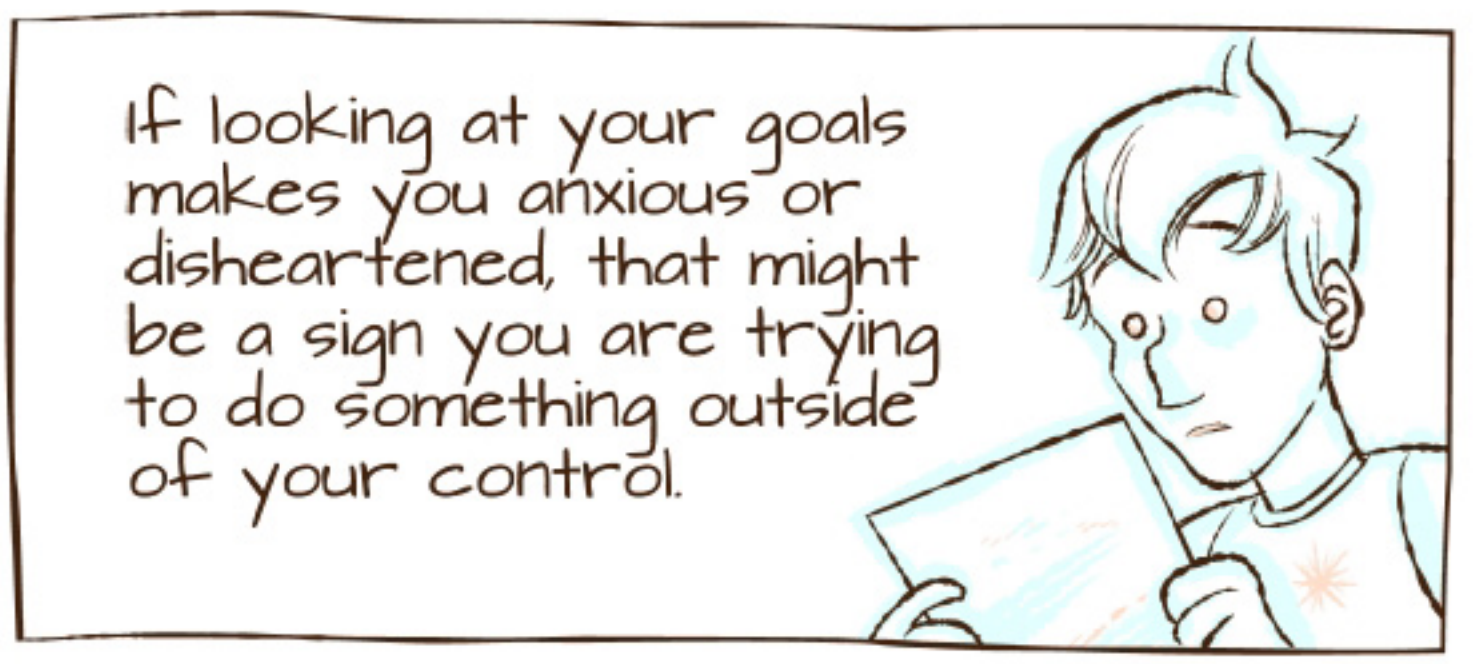
Michael and I talked through this and hit on some important principles I'd like to share with you.

First, it's important to discern what is in your control and what is not.



You can plan your life to the smallest detail, but you can't predict the future.

When you try to control what can't be controlled, it's stressful and discouraging.



The solution to this is not giving up your hopes and dreams, but instead changing your perspective about them.

For some reason, rephrasing your goals this way shifts the focus from what you can't control over to what you can.

With the plans you make and the steps you take, endeavor to make the possible more probable.

Make sure you're enjoying yourself along the way, because things may not happen like you hope.

Give yourself permission to not worry about what you can't control.

You're doing what you can. That's all you can do.

Fallacies to Watch Out for

It's tempting to think that if you buy the same equipment as a master artist, you'll be able to make the same quality of art.

There is no magic brush, so stop looking for it and get back to work!

2 THE IMPOSSIBLE MATH FALLACY

Impossible math is what happens when you get greedy. For example, when you're planning a project:

Or, when you're selling your art:

OKAY, IF I MAKE TEN DOLLARS FROM EACH PRINT SOLD, AND SELL 100,000 PRINTS THEN...

I'LL BE A *MILLIONAIRE!*

What is deceptive about impossible math is that technically your calculations are true.

100,000
×10
1MILLION

Unfortunately, they have no connection to reality.

I THINK I'LL BUY A PORSCHE!

Ultimately, impossible math is discouraging.

IT TOOK ME FIVE HOURS TO DRAW A PAGE! I'LL NEVER FINISH IN TIME.

I ONLY SOLD SIX PRINTS. SO MUCH FOR A PORSCHE.

PRINTS

SALE! %25 OFF

Instead of trying to make reality conform to your calculations, base your calculations off reality.

y=mx+b

y=2c

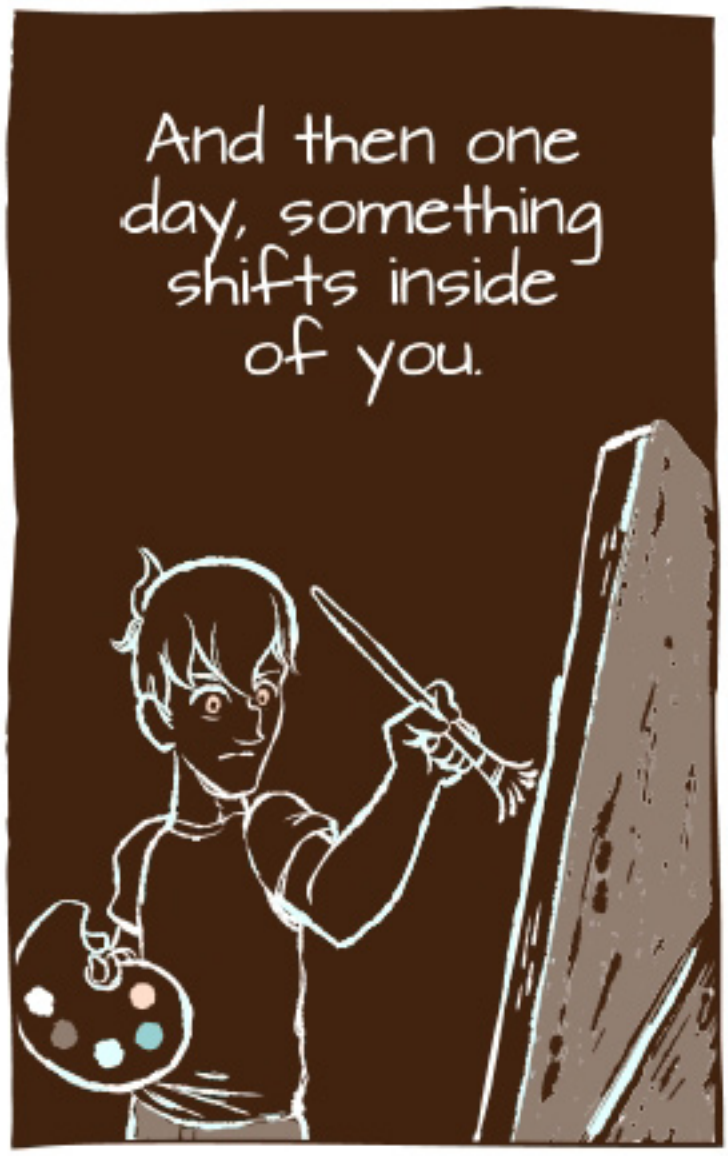
x+y

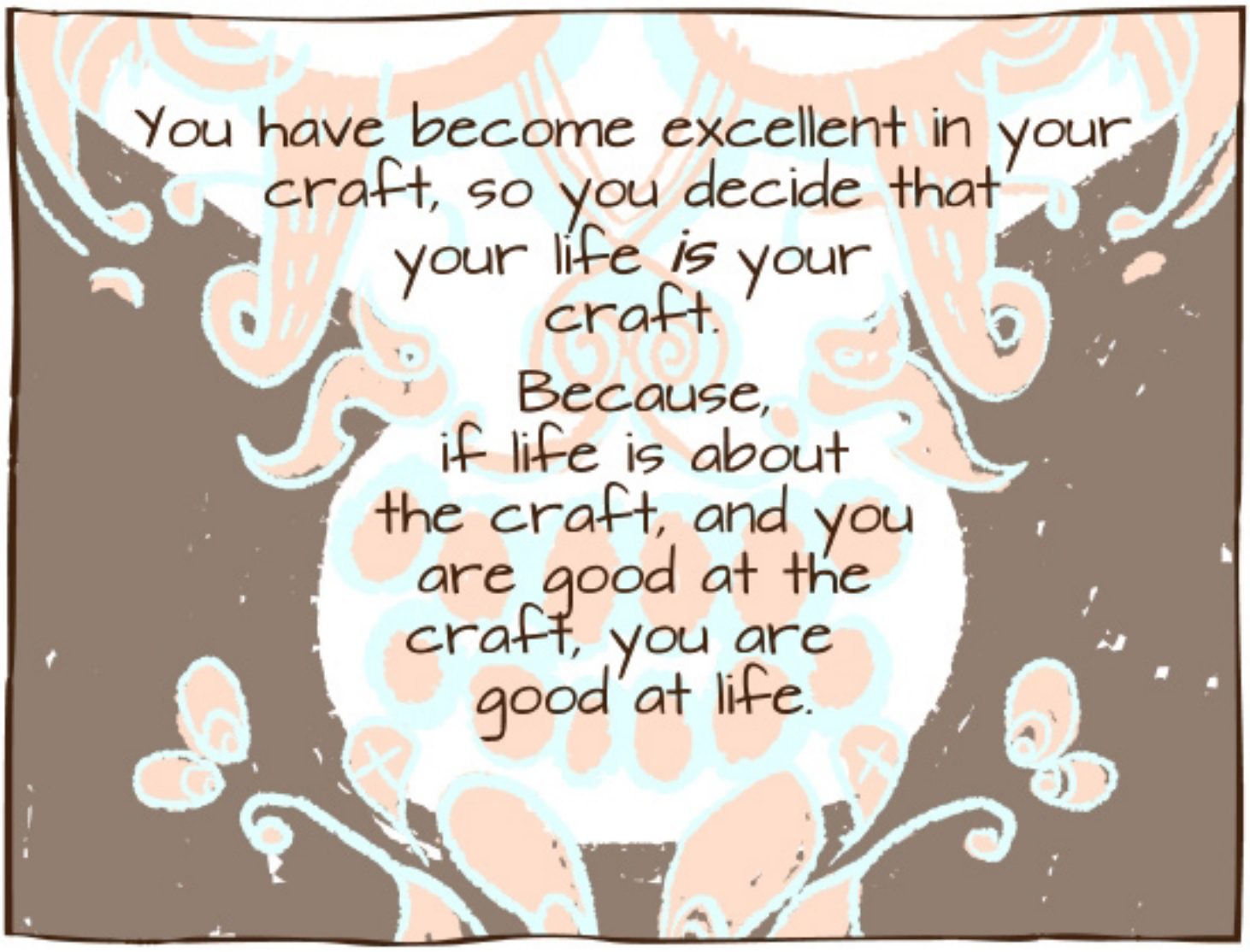
Test for what's possible, then work from there.

You Are Not Your Art

You have to create, because you have to respond to that profound something waiting silently beyond the stars.

So you create and create, and over time, you grow in skill as an artist.


And then one day, something shifts inside of you.


You have become excellent in your craft, so you decide that your life *is* your craft.
Because, if life is about the craft, and you are good at the craft, you are good at life.

At first, it's a rush.

What a joy to find out that life is a game that you happen to be winning at! What triumph!

But something's not right.

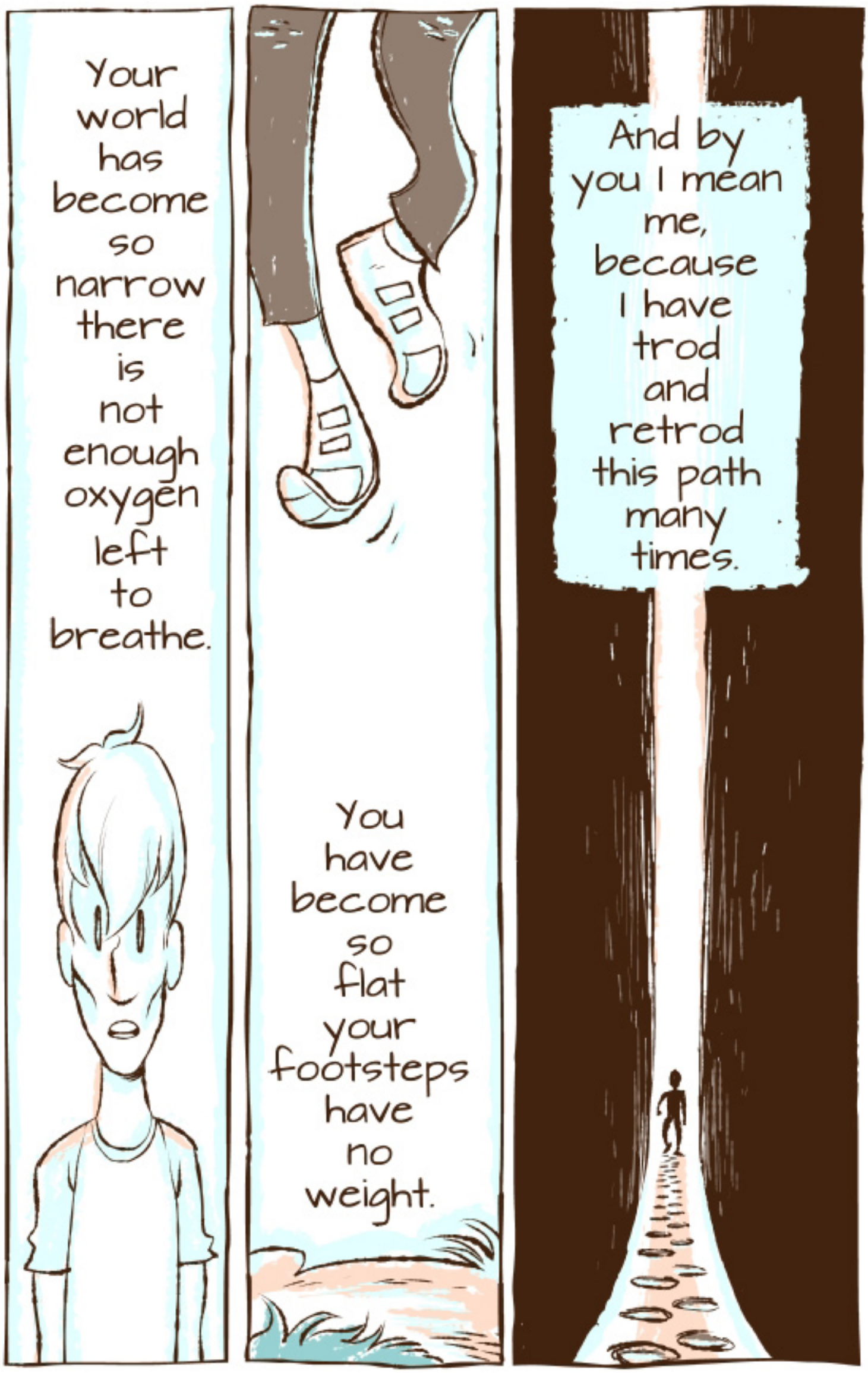
Something snuck into you the moment you decided that your life is your art.

What once was helpful critique of your work is now an attack on your self-worth.

You start to have a paralyzing fear of breaking your hands...
...or going blind...
...or somehow losing the skill that gives your life meaning.

You begin to judge people by how well they play your game.

You treat the masters of your craft like gods...

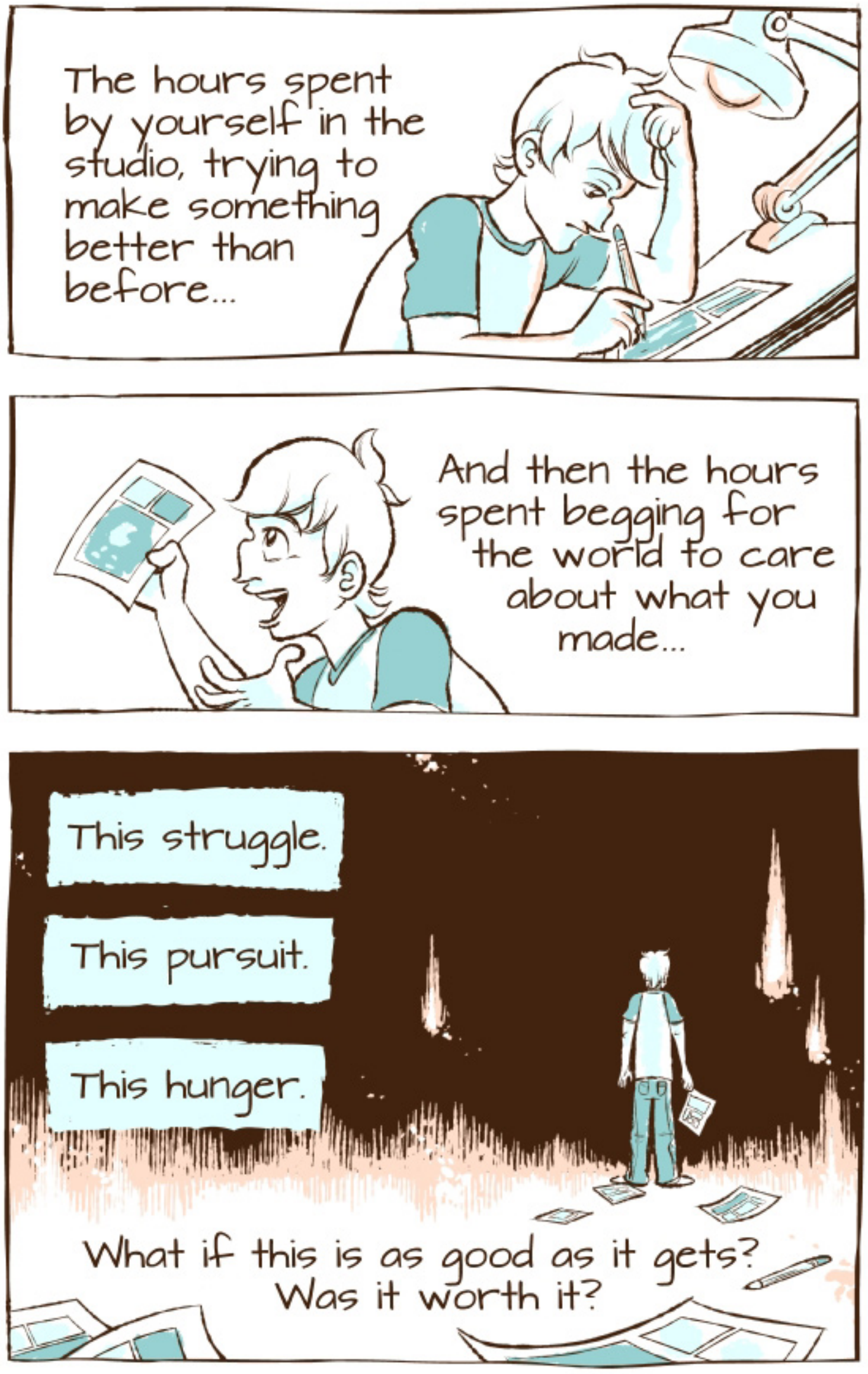

Your world has become so narrow there is not enough oxygen left to breathe.
You have become so flat your footsteps have no weight.
And by you I mean me, because I have trod and retrod this path many times.

This path, this never-ending path that always takes and never gives.

This path, that promises so much and delivers so little.

I'm kept awake at night by the idea that this book I am making for you will lead you down this path.

They are not the same.


The hours spent by yourself in the studio, trying to make something better than before...
And then the hours spent begging for the world to care about what you made...
This struggle.
This pursuit.
This hunger.
What if this is as good as it gets? Was it worth it?

It takes me nine months to create a comic book that can be read in twenty minutes.

I make tiny, paper worlds just big enough for you to stick your head into and look around.

It's been a while.
I look at the sun on the leaves and smell the wind.

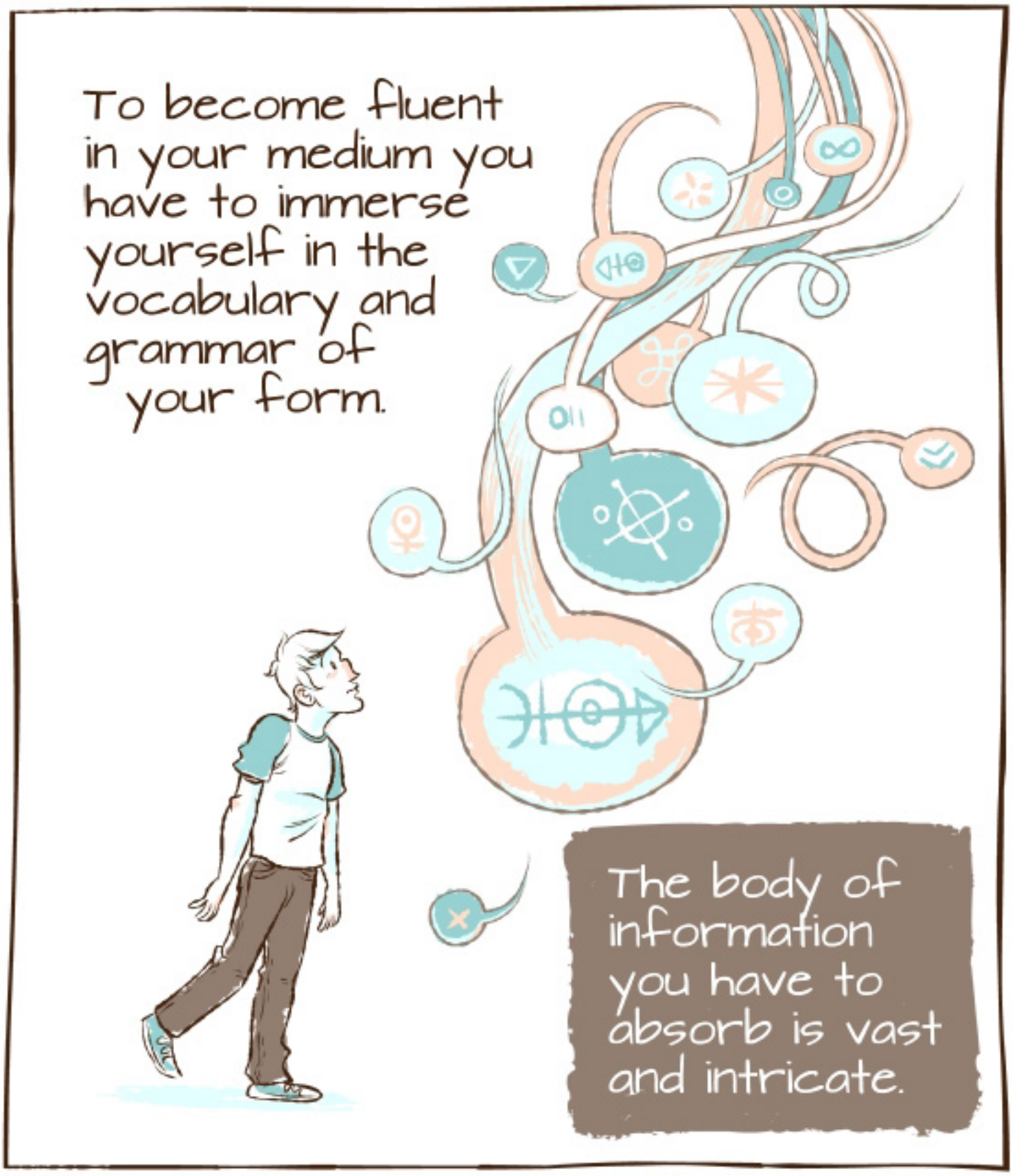
Whoever made all this must be one talented cartoonist, I think to myself.

It's not that happiness doesn't exist, but how could it be in a world I've created?
It wouldn't fit.

ON IMPROVEMENT

Learn to Learn

Learning to express yourself creatively is like learning a new language.

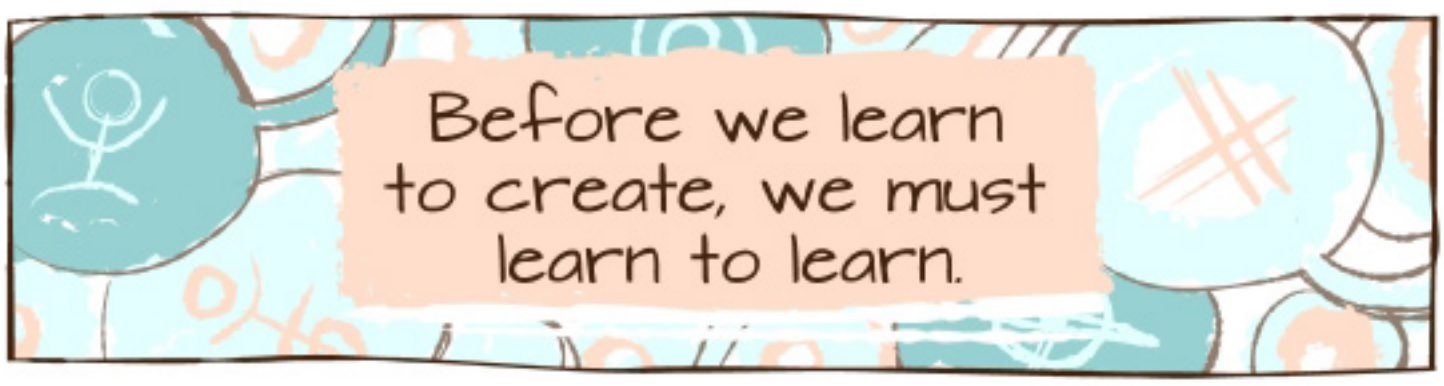

To become fluent in your medium you have to immerse yourself in the vocabulary and grammar of your form.
The body of information you have to absorb is vast and intricate.

Just like mastering a new language, mastering a form of creative expression takes thousands of hours.

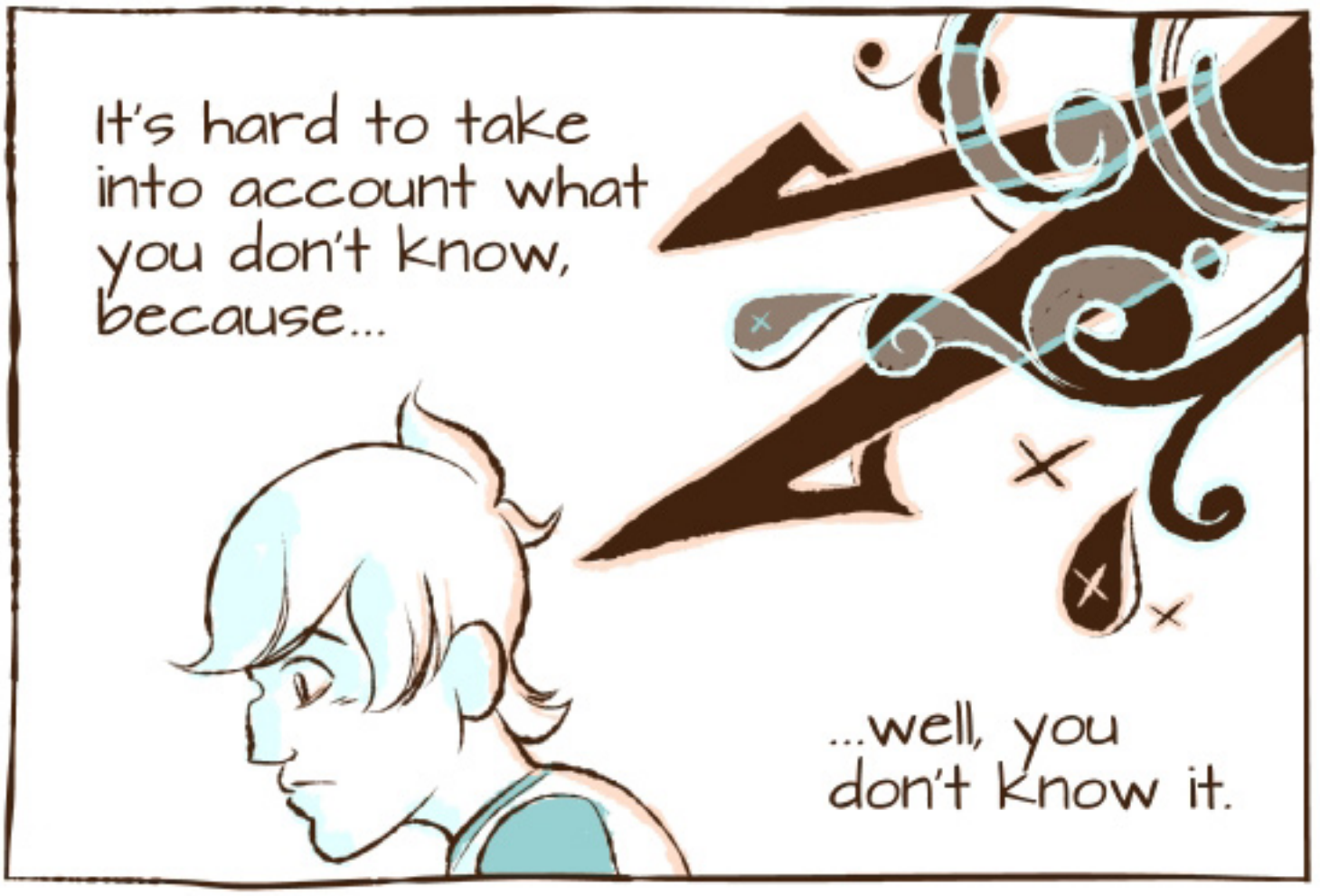
Do you know of any teacher with the patience to stick with you for that long, spoon-feeding you each new lesson, pushing you through each new obstacle...

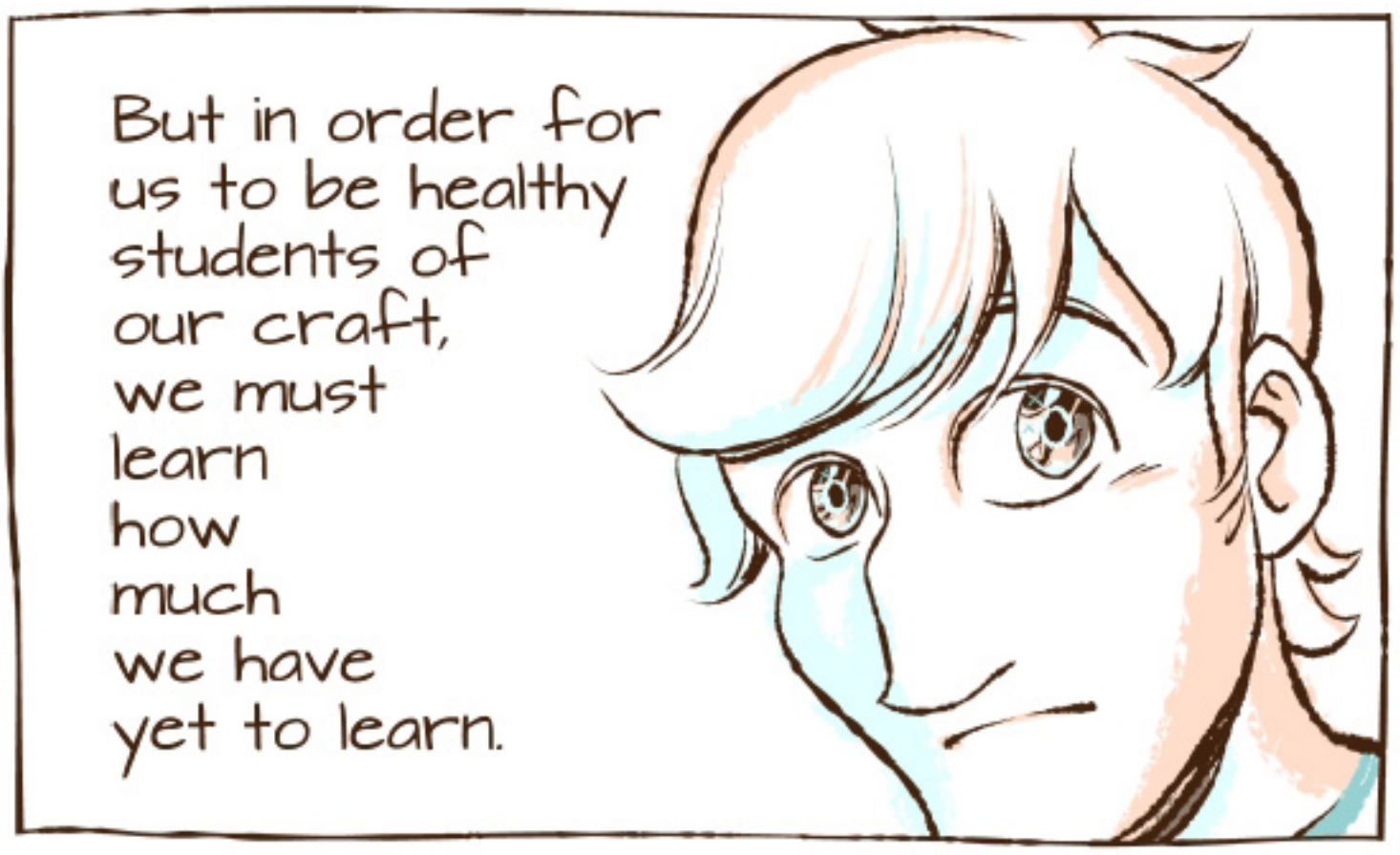
...except yourself?

To grow as an artist, you must learn, and more often than not, there will be no one to teach you but yourself.



Know You Don't Know





Those who think they know everything are in danger of losing their hunger to learn anything.

In ancient times cartographers would sometimes label unknown territories on their maps of the world with the phrase, "here be dragons."

Modern people chuckle at such sentiments, because they hold a map of the world which has no unknown territories, or rather, no unlabeled territories.

I feel sorry for modern people, because they live in a world without dragons.

We have a tendency to assume that by labeling something, we understand it.

We look at a tree growing and label the process photosynthesis.

But has anyone stopped to wonder at the fact that trees eat sunlight?

Trees EAT sunlight!

I couldn't write a poem so beautiful as that.

It is this sense of wonder about the world that inspires us to study and learn and grow.

Pride says:

YOU ARE SO SMART.

YOUR MIND IS BIG ENOUGH TO HOLD THE UNIVERSE!

But to believe a lie like this, you have to think very little of the universe, or rather, think the universe very little.

A terrifying premise, perhaps, but isn't it more fun to be small and live in a big world than to be big and live in a small world?

Humility is quite the elusive virtue.

YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE HOW HUMBLE I AM!

No sooner do I achieve humility than I take pride in my achievement and have to start all over again.

YOU'RE RIGHT. I DON'T BELIEVE IT.

Humility is not the same as self-deprecation. Too often we try to be humble by shouting at the mirror:

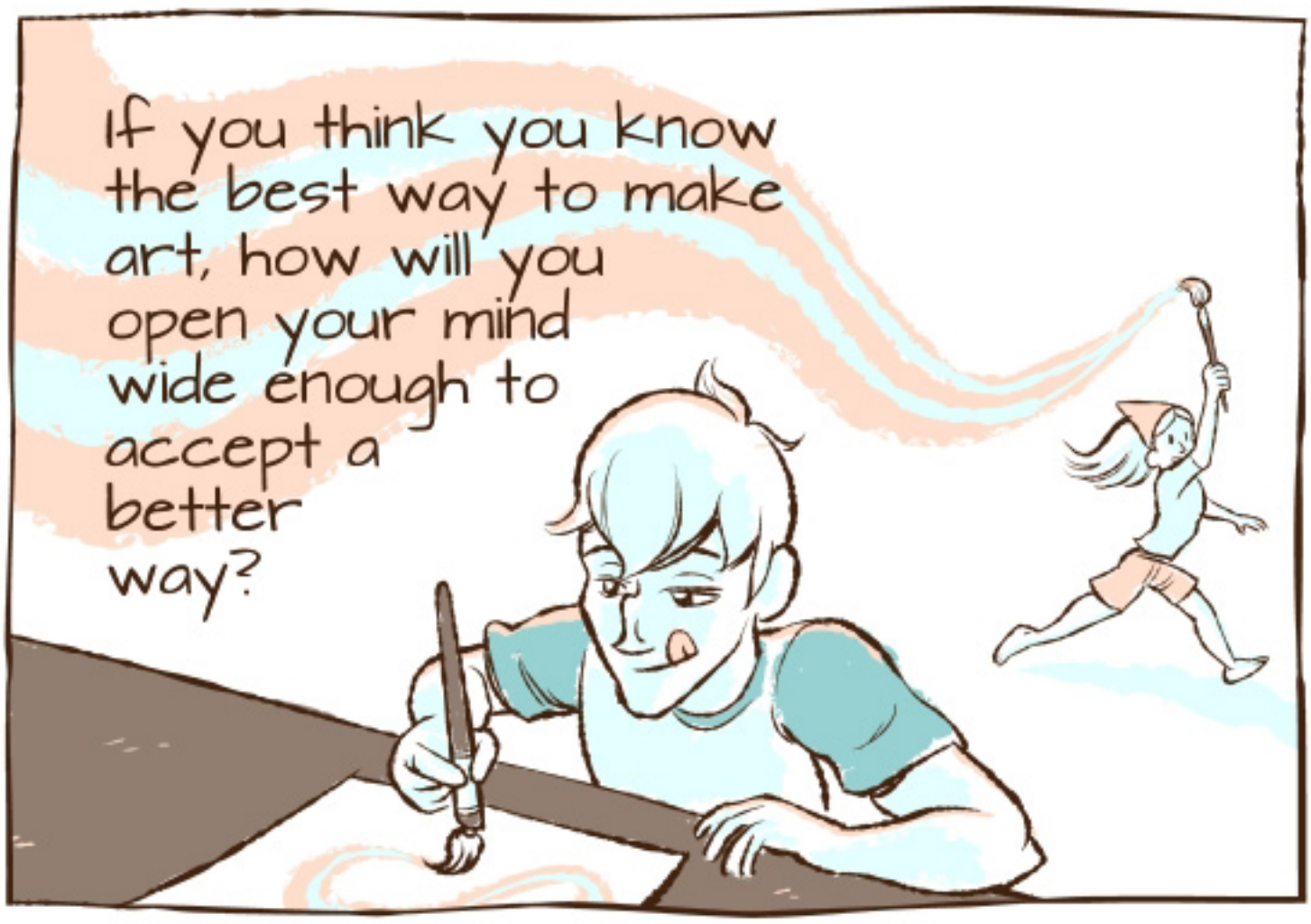
YOU ARE SMALL AND INSIGNIFICANT!

But I would submit that if **YOU** are all you're looking at, you will never be humble.

Instead, go outside...

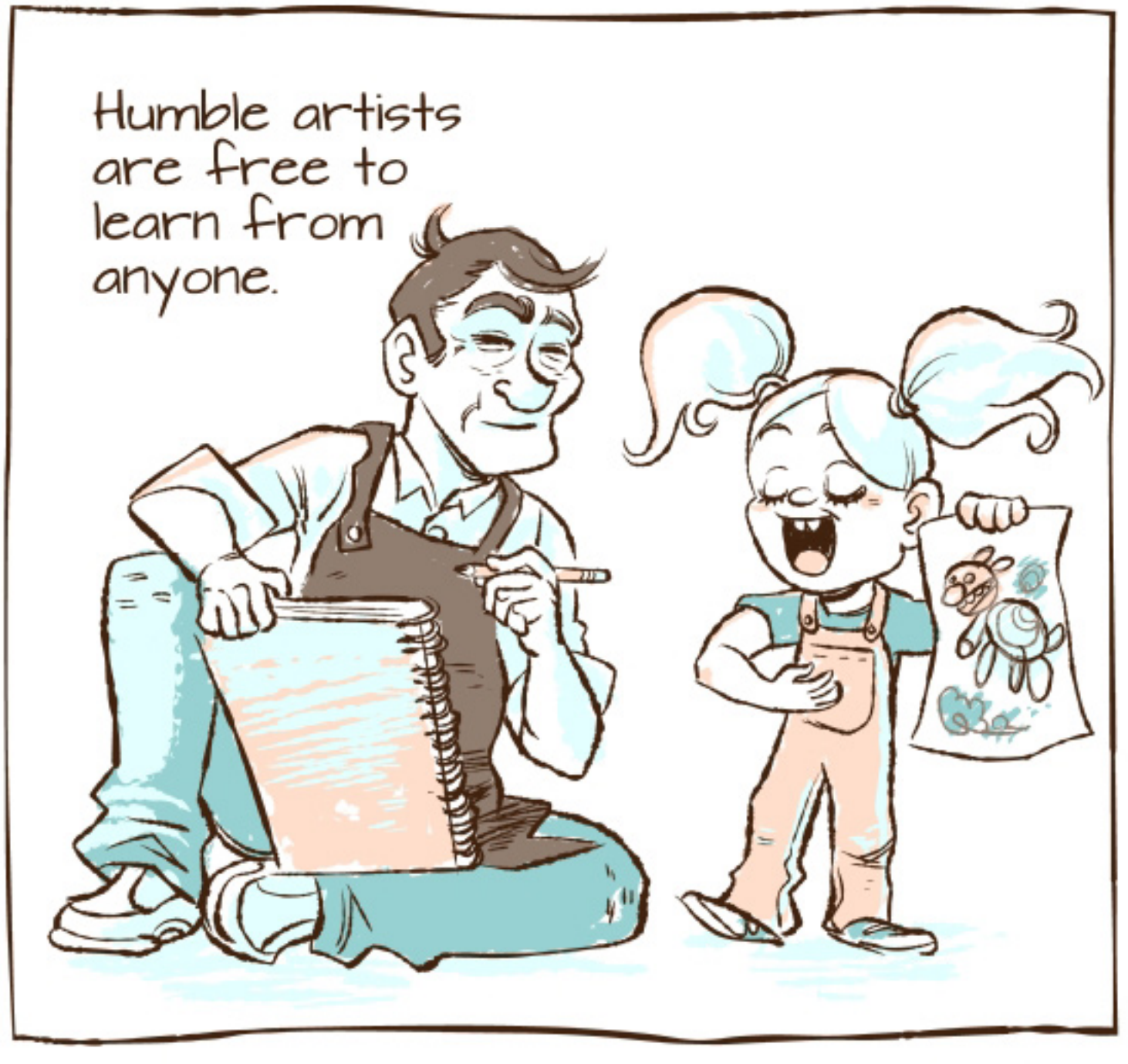
...and look
for dragons.

I REALLY
AM SMALL AND
INSIGNIFICANT...


If you think you know the best way to make art, how will you open your mind wide enough to accept a better way?

Humble artists are free to throw away the good to get the better, because they can admit they don't know everything.

If you think you know better than other people, how will you benefit from honest critique?

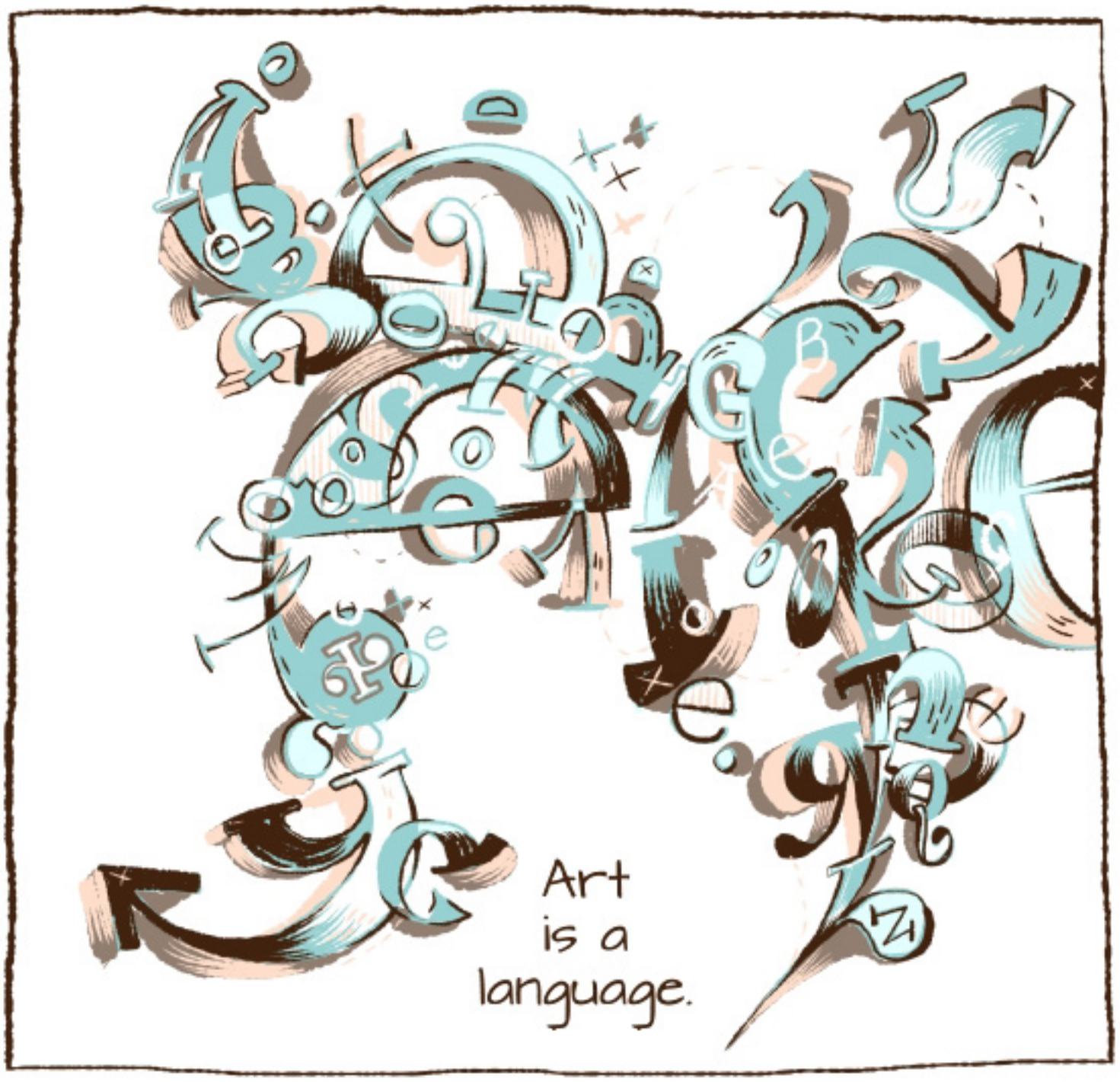

Humble artists are free to learn from anyone.

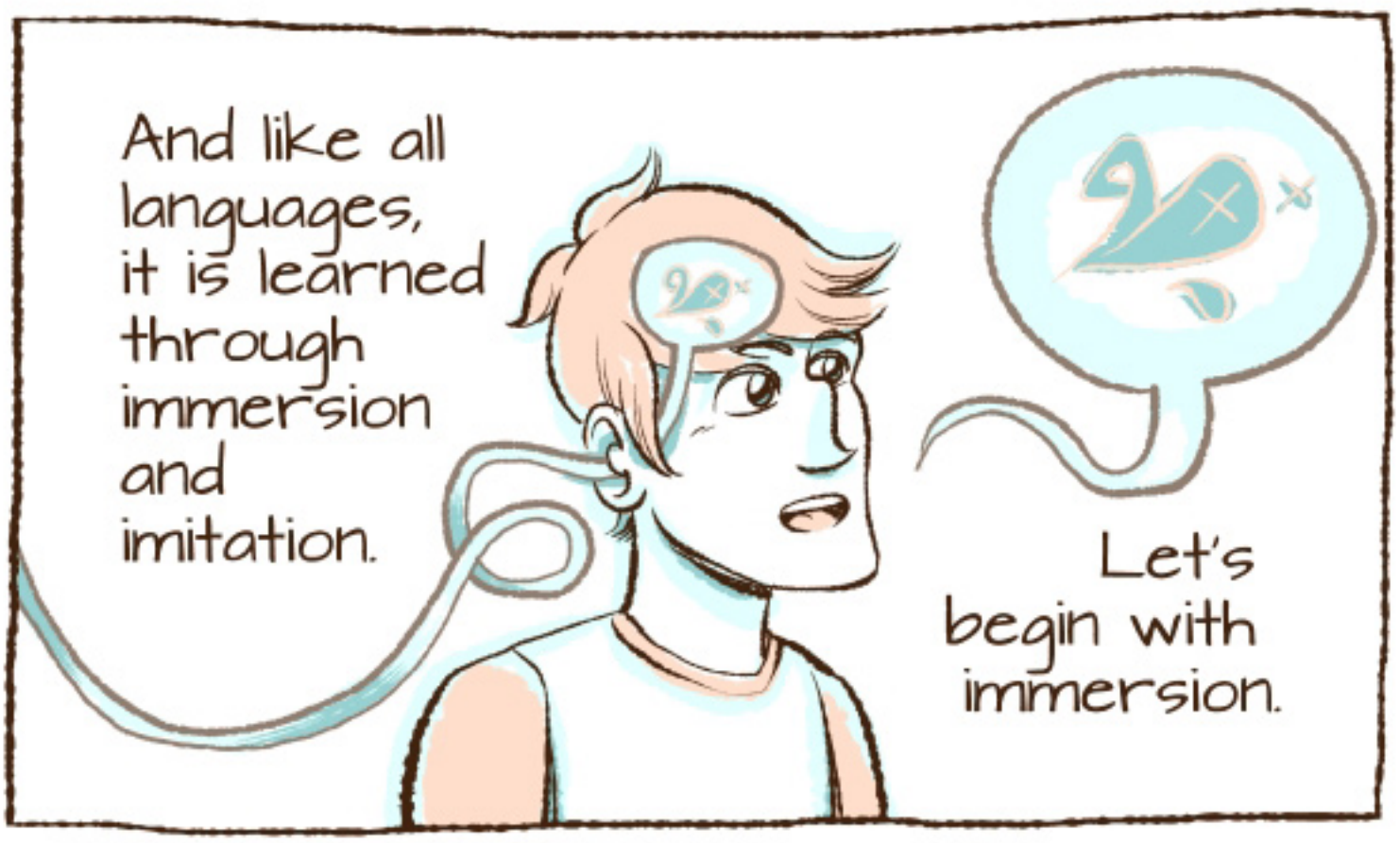
The world contains many lifetimes' worth of good things to learn.

If you are humble enough to accept that, you'll have all the fuel you need to keep learning for a lifetime.

Be humble and grow.

Taste is Your Teacher





When a baby speaks its first word...

POOP!

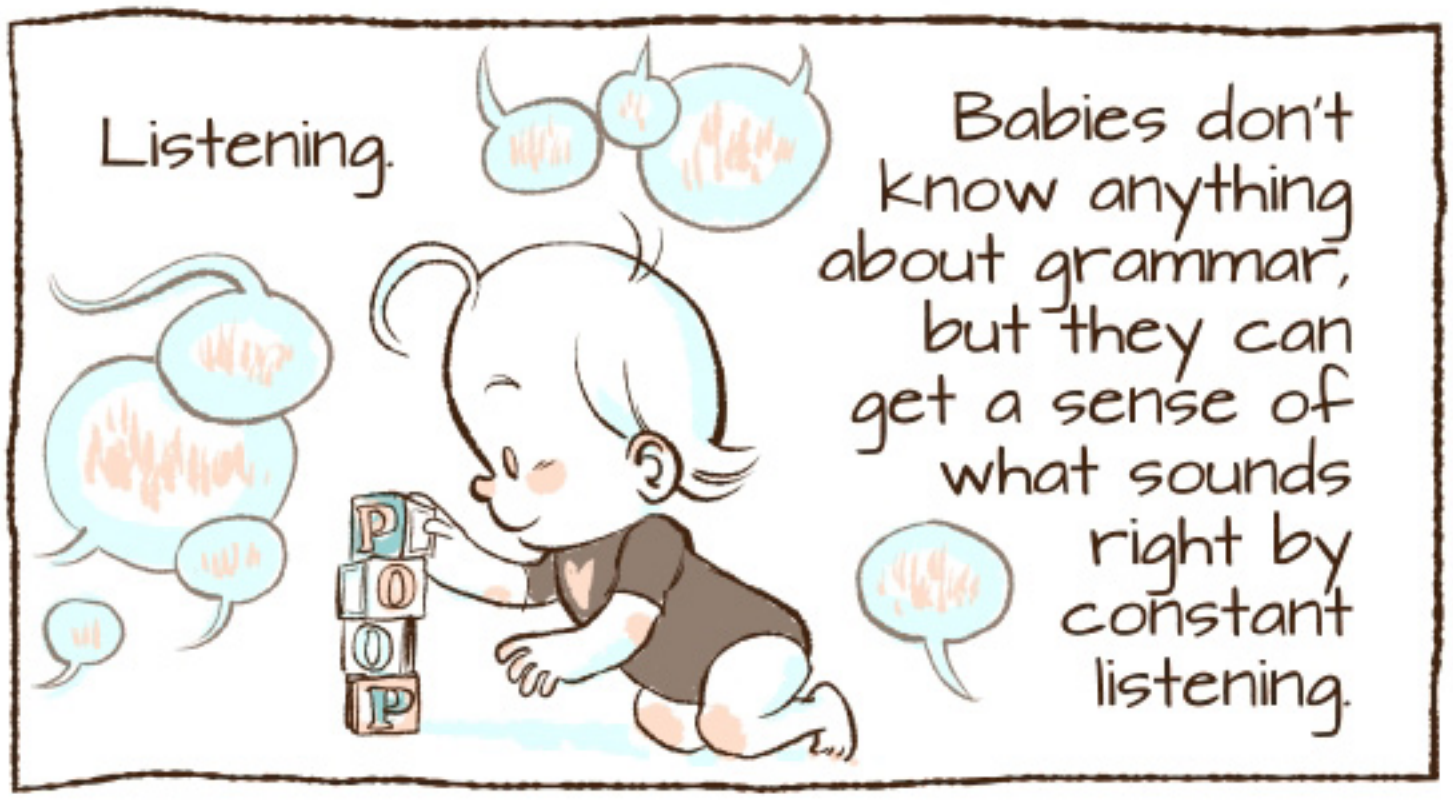
...that is a result of immersion!

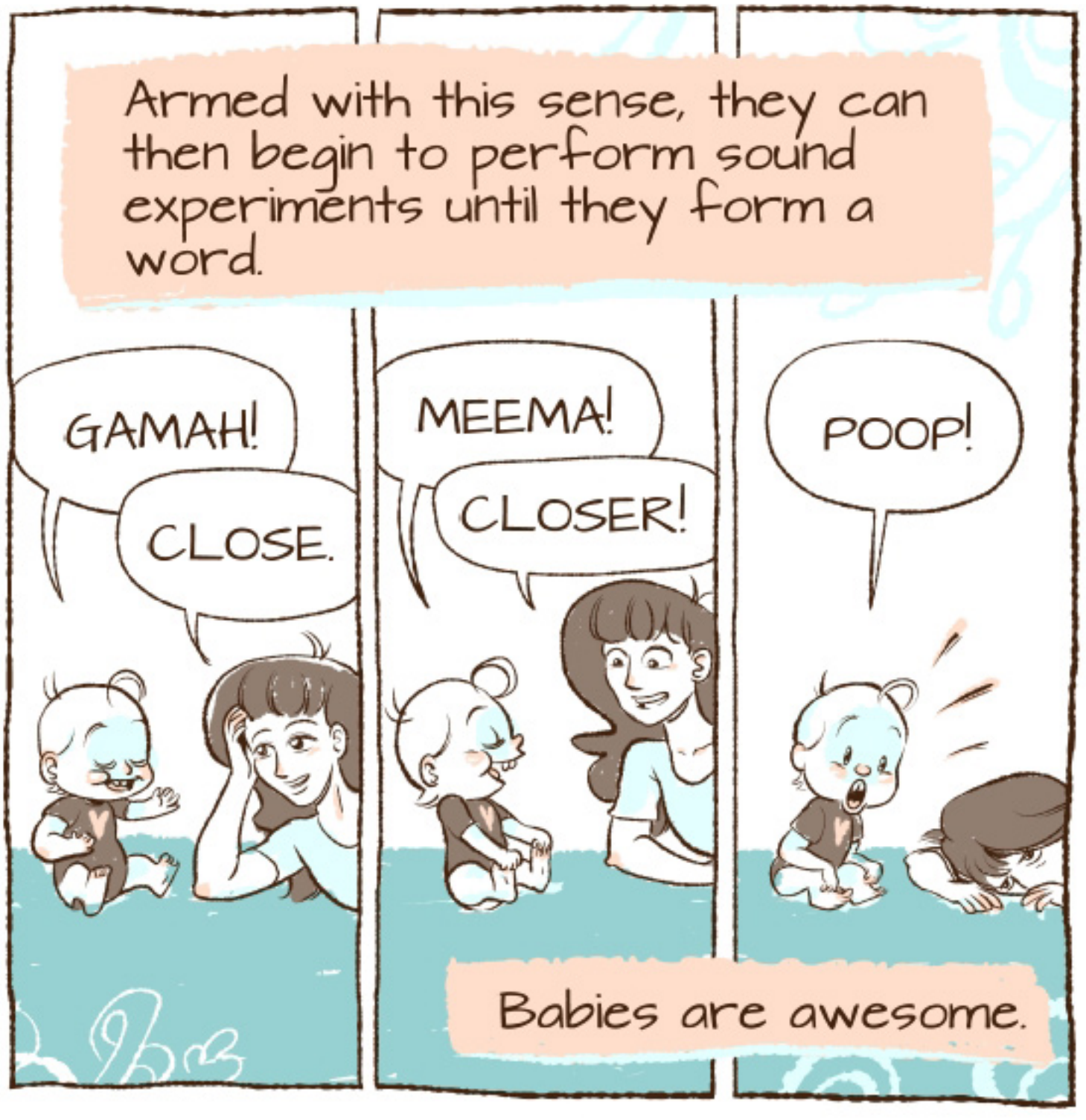
LET'S PRETEND HER FIRST WORD WAS "MAMA."

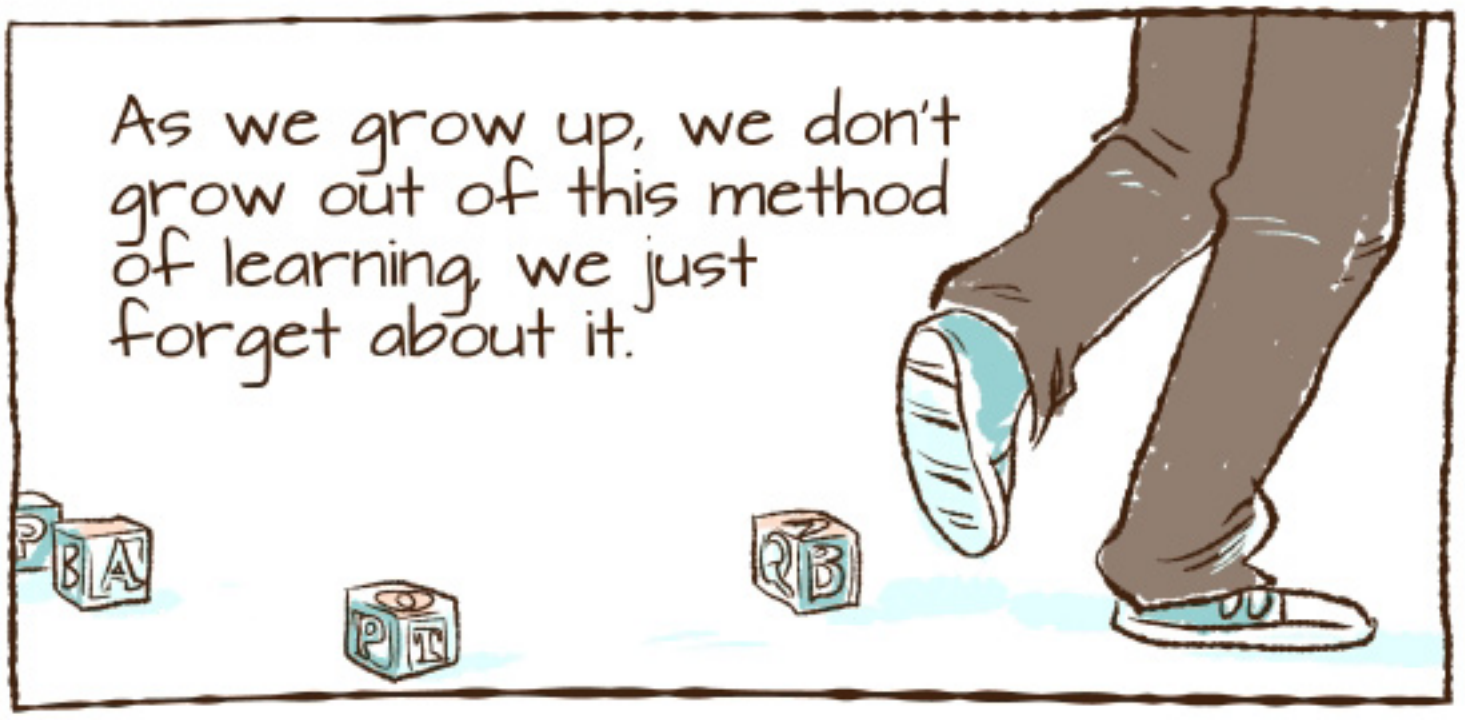
OKAY.

It can take a baby 10 to 12 months to say that first word. That's a long time for just one word.

What are babies doing all that time?


Listening.
Babies don't know anything about grammar, but they can get a sense of what sounds right by constant listening.
P
O
O
P

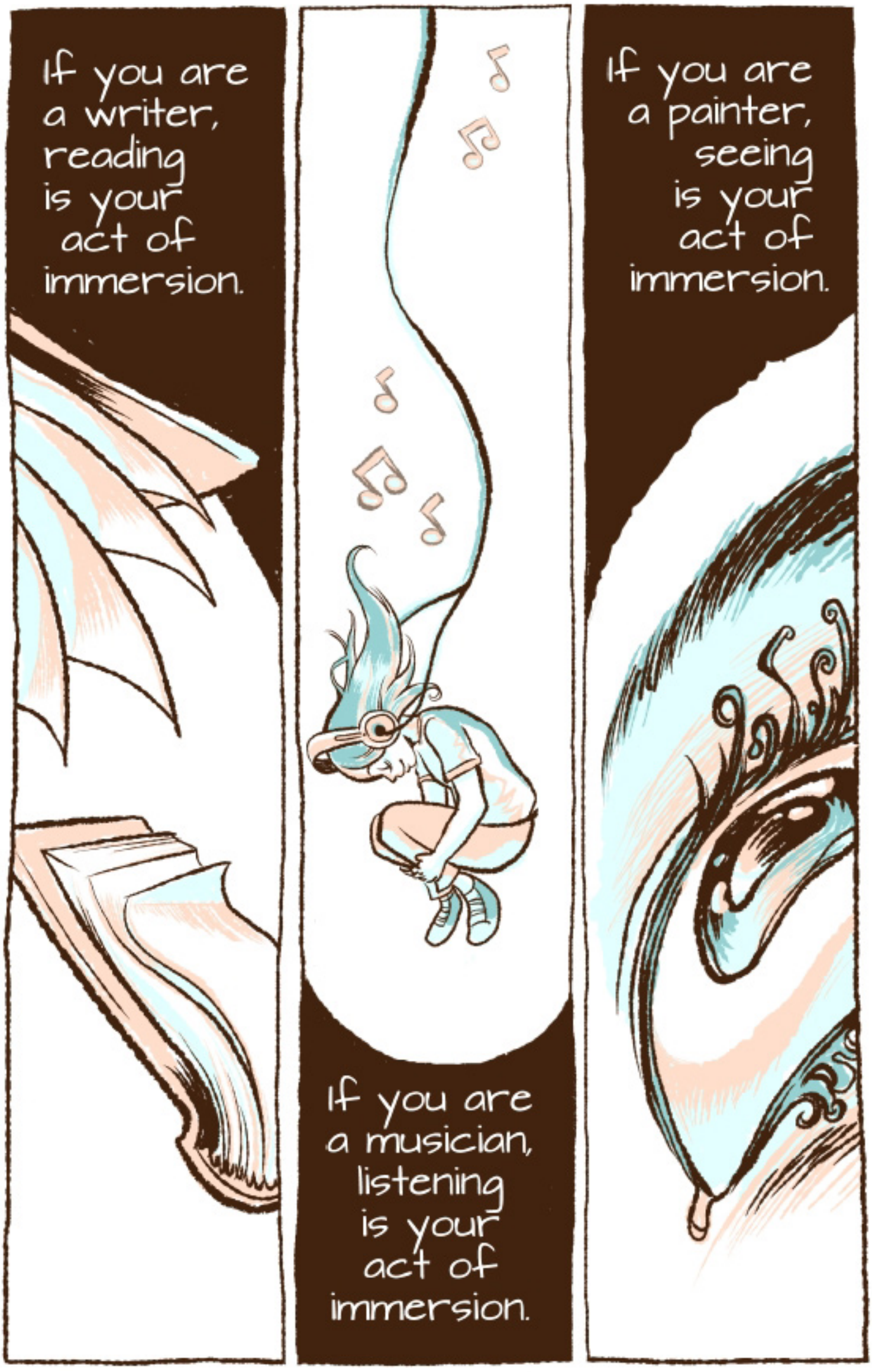

Armed with this sense, they can then begin to perform sound experiments until they form a word.
GAMAH!
CLOSE.
MEEMA!
CLOSER!
POOP!
Babies are awesome.

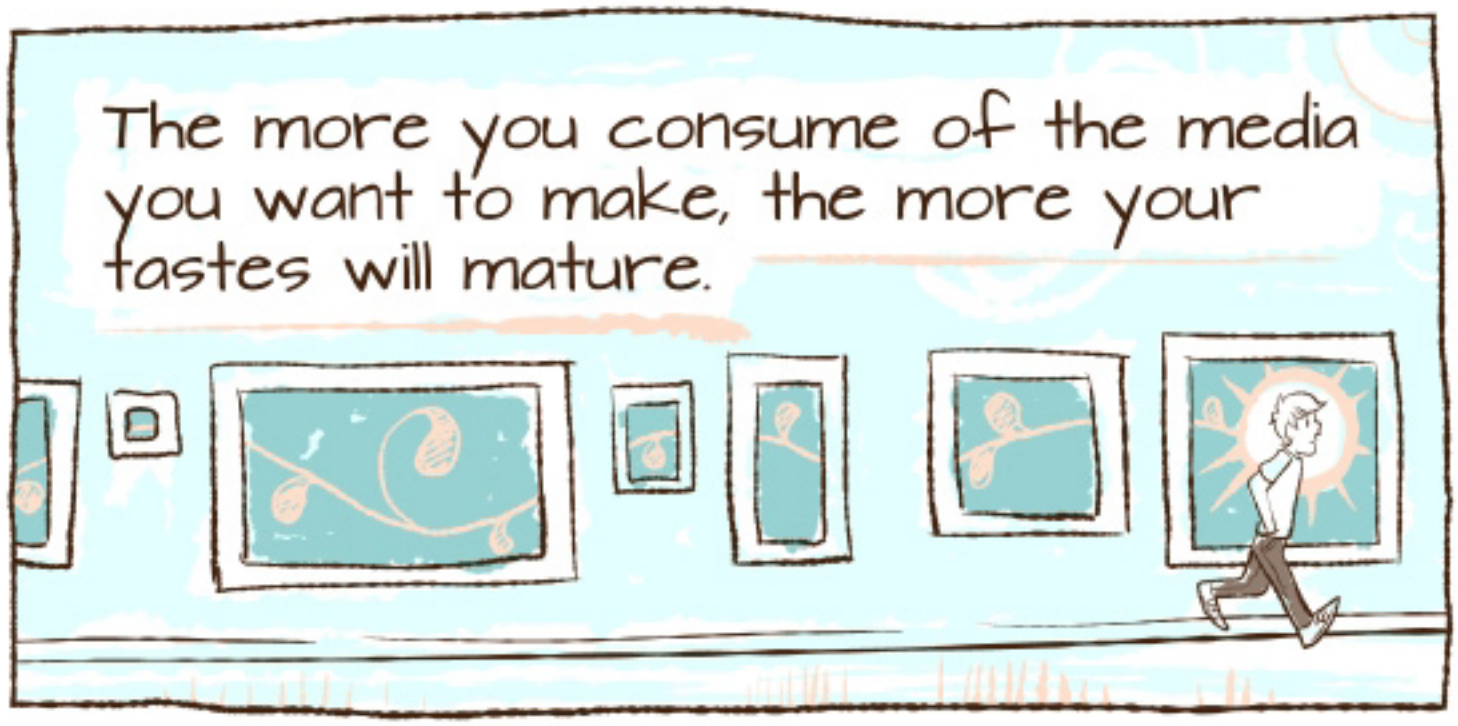

As we grow up, we don't grow out of this method of learning, we just forget about it.

But to speak our first word in an artistic language, the way of the baby is worthy of study.
If we hope to master an artistic language, it's essential.

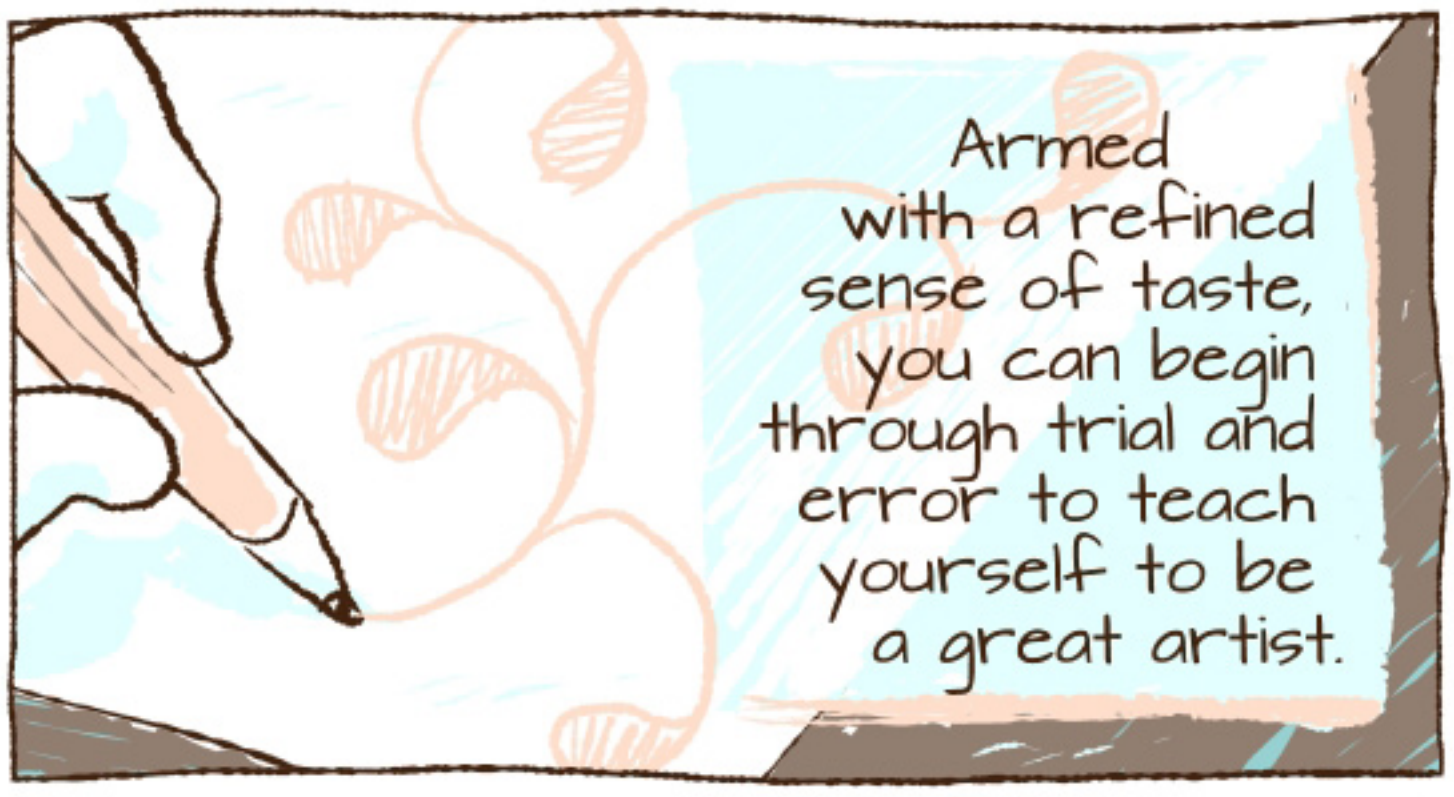
Let's say you're a culinary artist, striving to become a master.

Eating is your act of immersion.

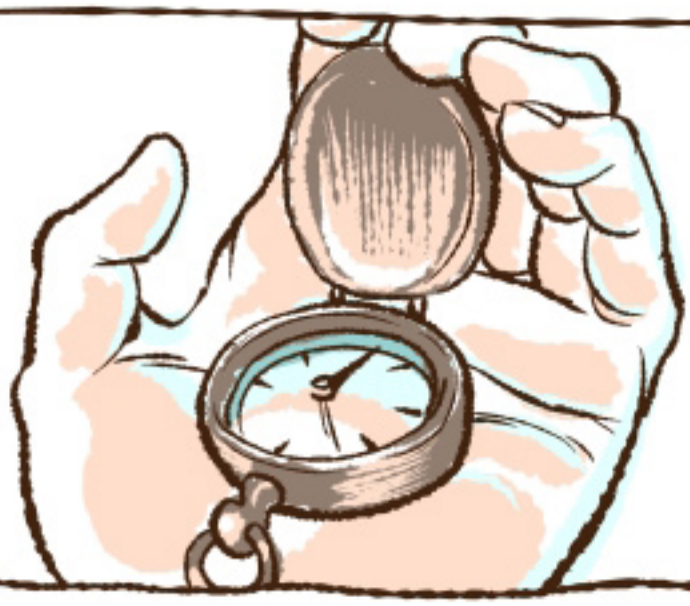

If you are a writer, reading is your act of immersion.
If you are a musician, listening is your act of immersion.
If you are a painter, seeing is your act of immersion.


The more you consume of the media you want to make, the more your tastes will mature.

Even if you lack the vocabulary to describe great art, you can gain a taste for it by immersing yourself in it.


Armed with a refined sense of taste, you can begin through trial and error to teach yourself to be a great artist.

A taste for great art is a compass that points toward mastery.



Build this compass with immersion.

Your taste will be your teacher when no one else is around.

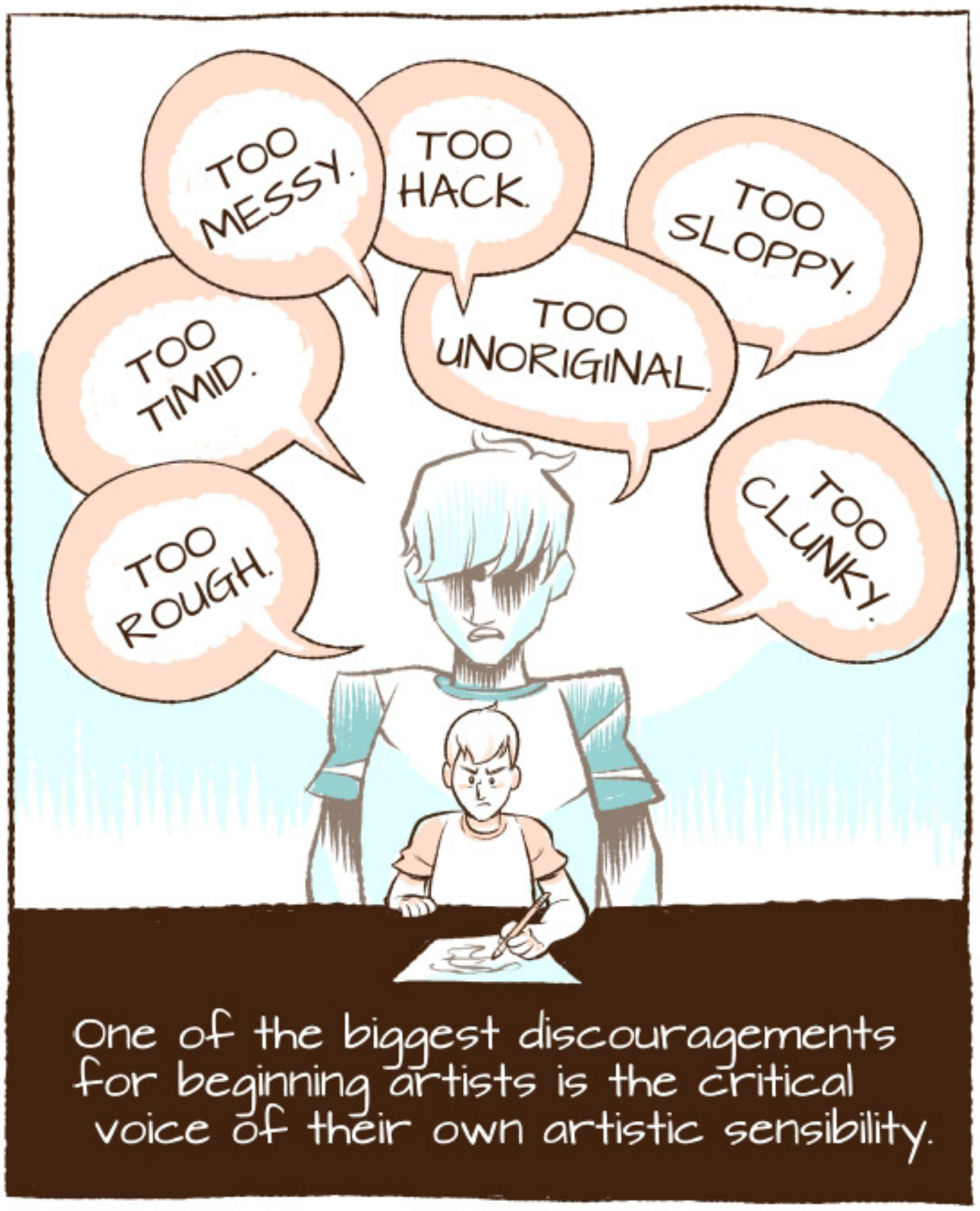
Be Friends with Failure

Your taste can be a great teacher, but for many people taste is a taskmaster.

Have you ever wondered why hands are so hard to draw?

It's because a lifetime of seeing hands has given us a taste for how hands ought to look...

...a taste which points out every single mistake we make.


TOO MESSY.
TOO HACK.
TOO SLOPPY.
TOO TIMID.
TOO UNORIGINAL.
TOO ROUGH.
TOO CLUNKY.
One of the biggest discouragements for beginning artists is the critical voice of their own artistic sensibility.

TOO HARD!
I GIVE UP!

The solution to this problem is not pretending your art is good when it's not.

IT'S WONDERFUL, HONEY.

I LOVE IT!

YOU LOVE EVERYTHING I MAKE, MOM.

Although, it is important to graciously accept encouragement from loved ones.

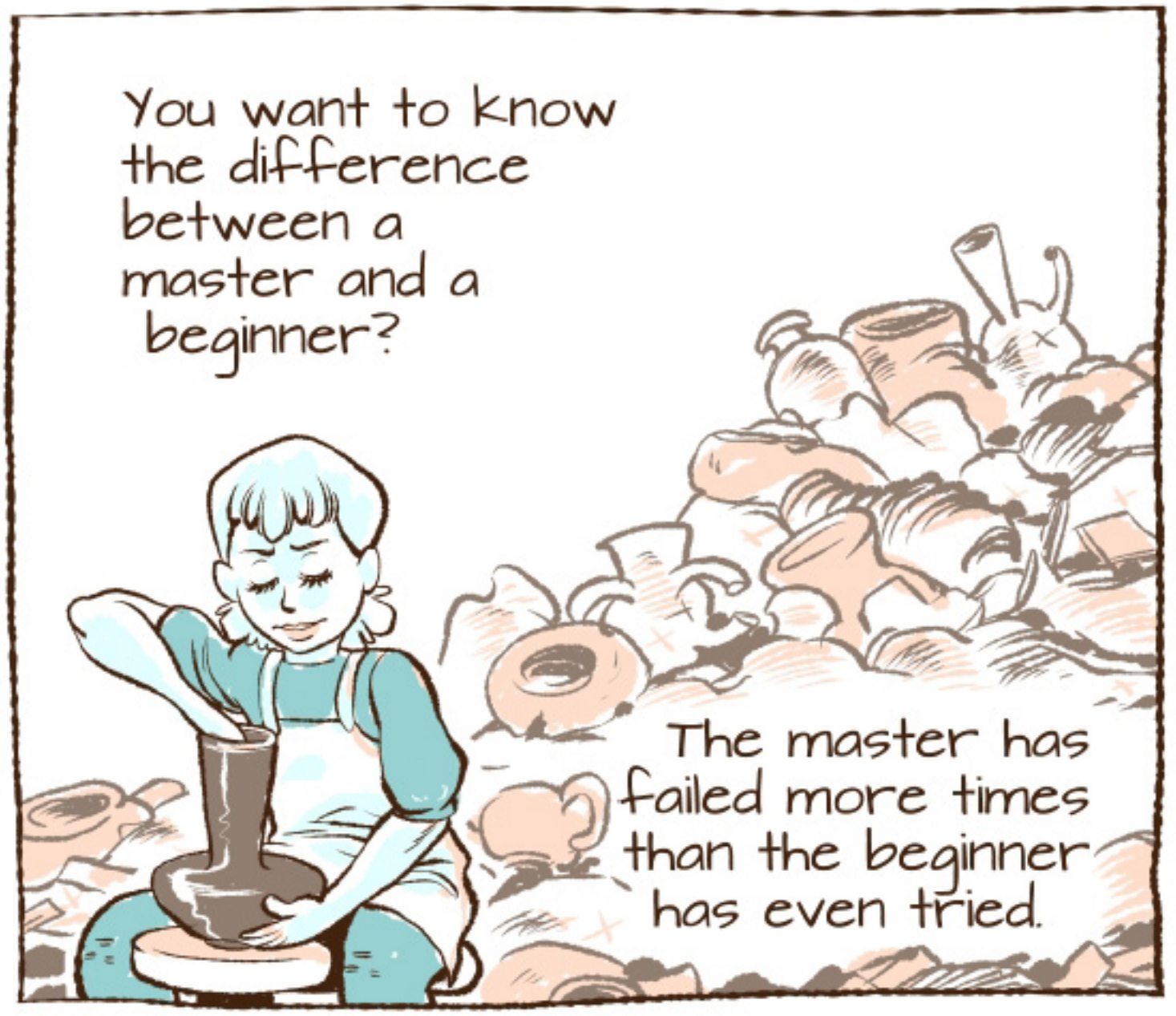
I'LL HANG IT ON THE FRIDGE.

MOM! THAT'S--

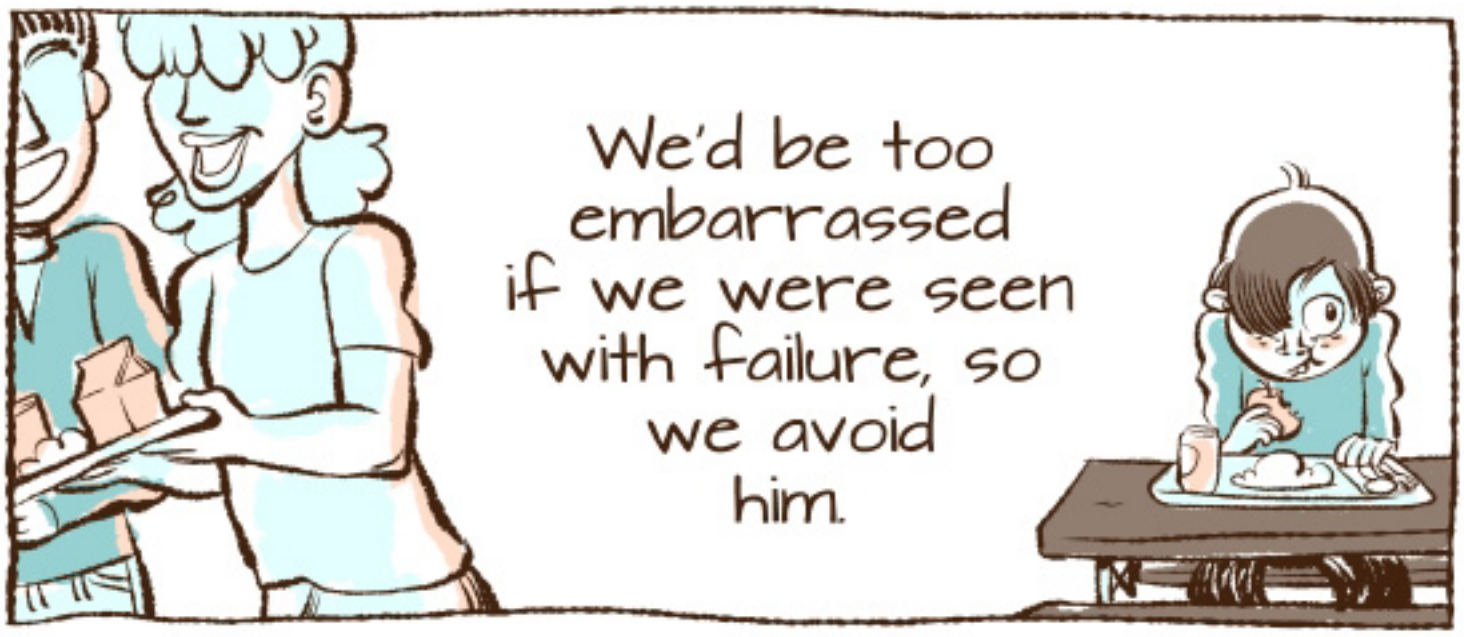
OH--

--ALRIGHT.

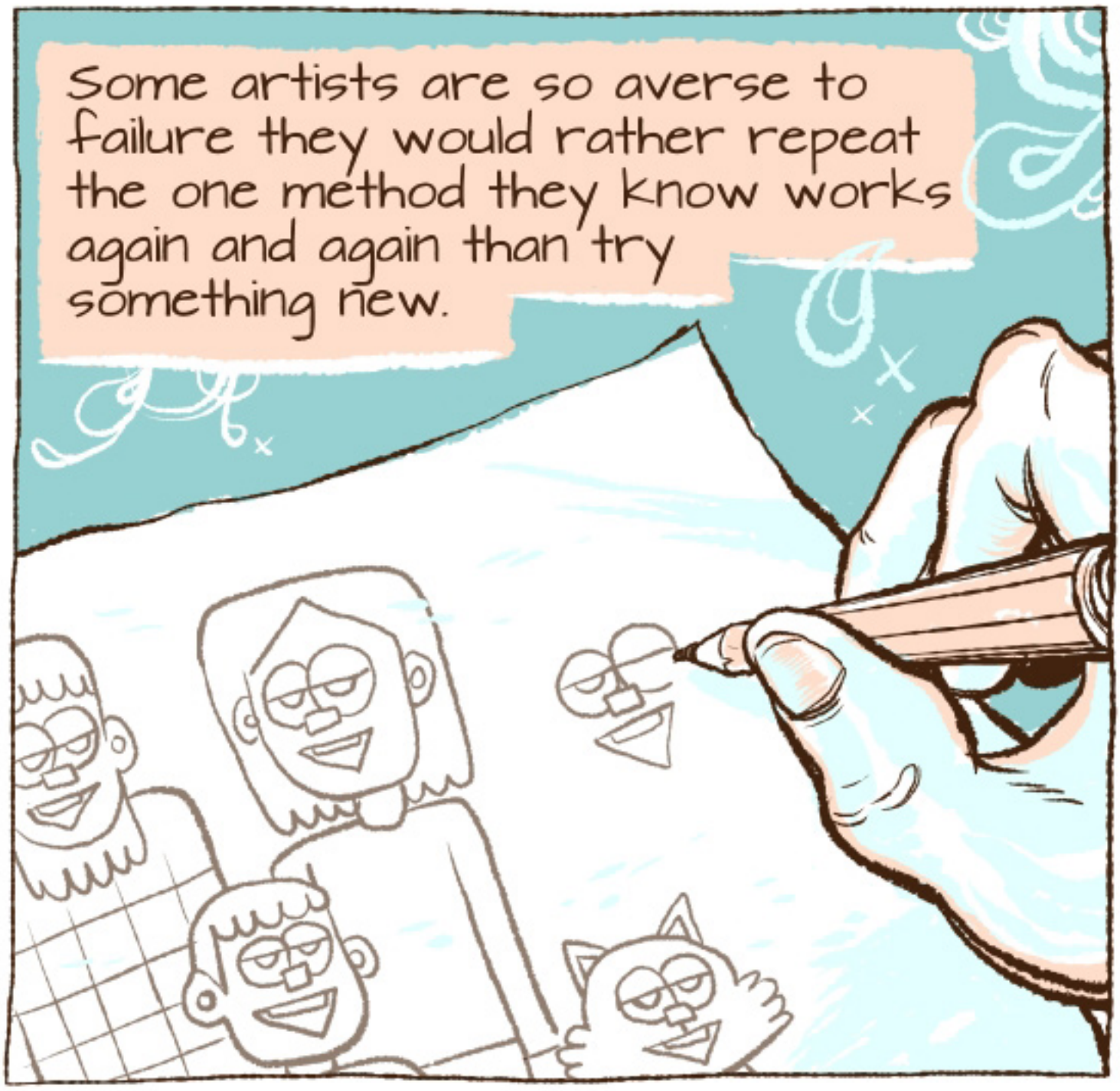
The solution to this problem is making friends with failure.



Failure is the freaky kid who sits by himself at lunch.
Everyone knows he's there, but pretends he's not.


We'd be too embarrassed if we were seen with failure, so we avoid him.

But I think if we stopped judging by appearances and started appreciating failure's good points, we would want to be his friend.



But if you never fail, how will you grow?

Let's ponder once more the way of the baby.

When a baby makes a first attempt to talk...

AH BA DA BAH DAH DOH?

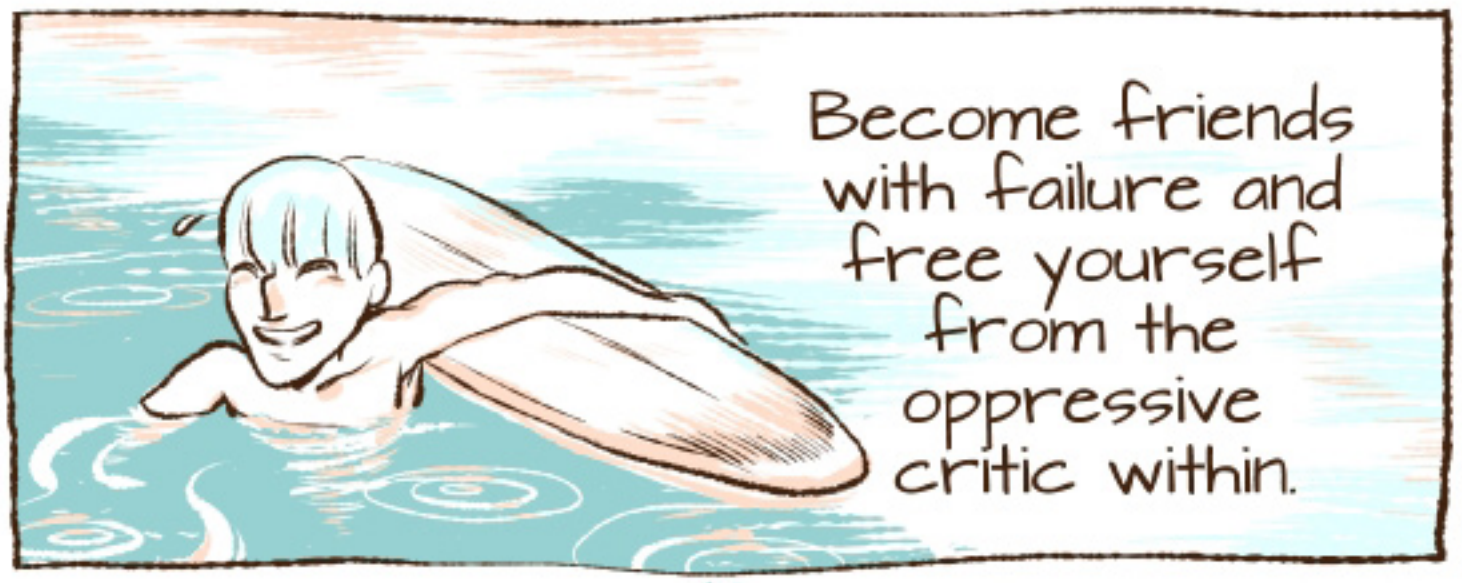
...do you respond like this?

WOAH! FAIL! YOU SUCK AT TALKING! YOU SHOULD QUIT BEFORE SOMEONE HEARS YOU.

You don't talk like that to a baby, so why do you talk like that to yourself?
When you try something you've never done before, you're no better at it than a baby.

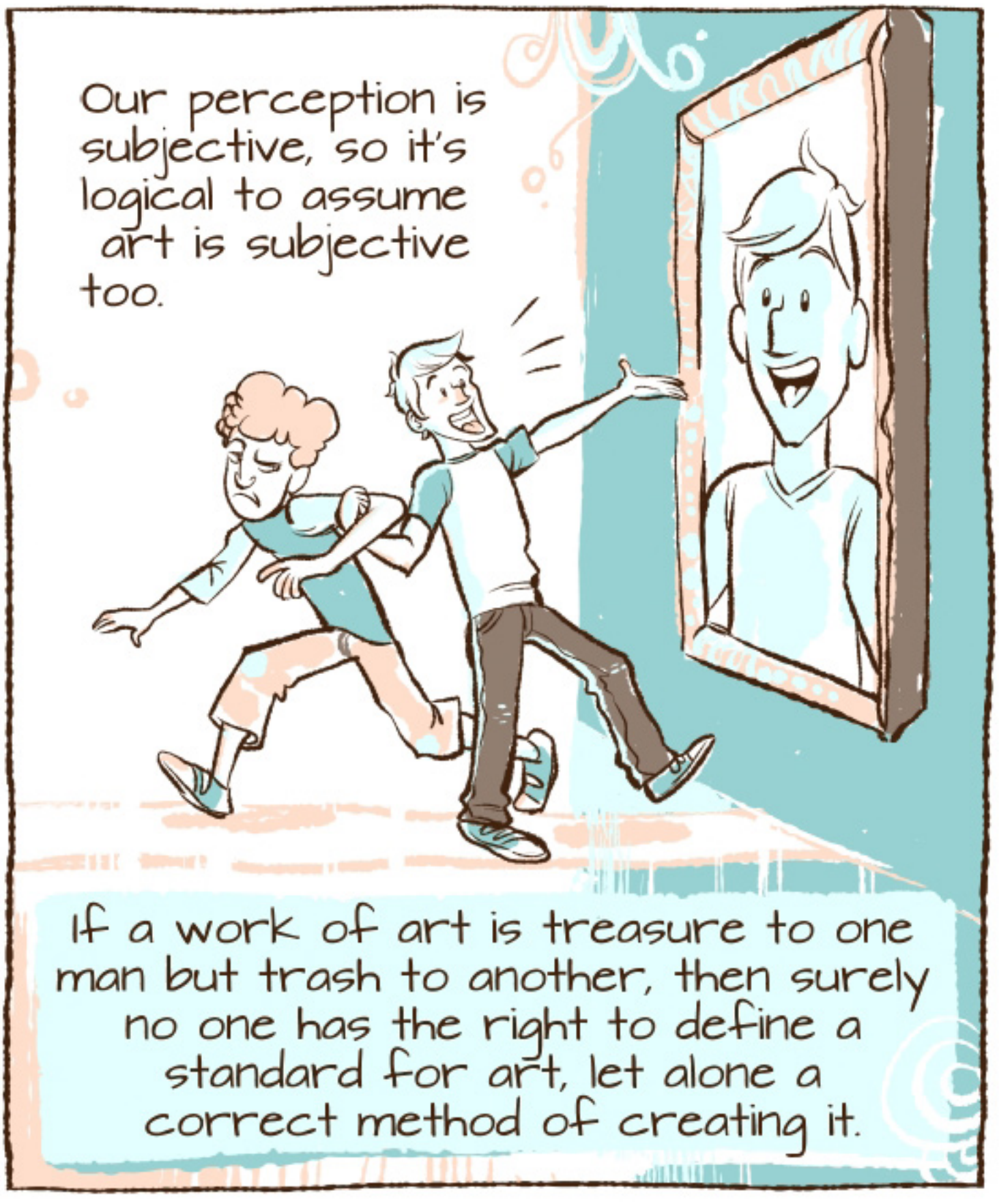
There's no reason to expect more from yourself than you would expect from a baby.

So be nicer to yourself.



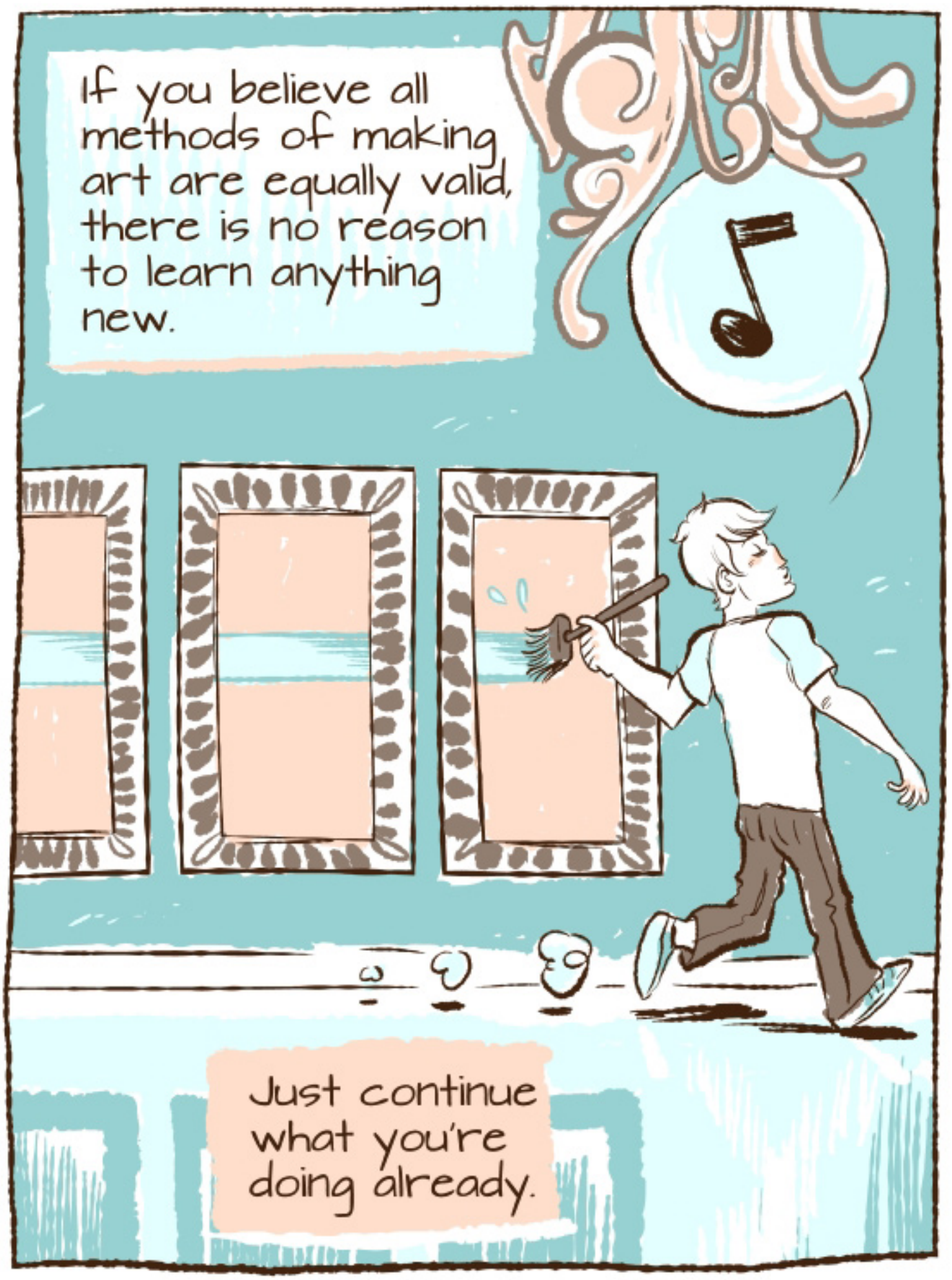
Hug the Elephant

I understand where my teacher was coming from.


Our perception is subjective, so it's logical to assume art is subjective too.
If a work of art is treasure to one man but trash to another, then surely no one has the right to define a standard for art, let alone a correct method of creating it.

However, this way of thinking undermines our hunger to learn.

If you believe all methods of making art are equally valid, there is no reason to learn anything new.



Just continue what you're doing already.

Also, if art is merely a matter of perception, then our aim shifts from making great art to getting everyone to call our art "great."

We need practice no other art than the art of persuasion.

Why learn to make great art when you can just persuade people to accept your subjective definition of greatness?

But I have little interest in bending people's perception in favor of my work.

I want my art to call out and resonate with the deep things already inside people.

It's commonly said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but is beauty really so small it could fit in your eye?

When I see something beautiful, the fire in me says beauty is a big thing, a profound thing, a shared thing.

You may have heard the story of the three blind men who touched the elephant to see what it was like:

OH, I SEE, AN ELEPHANT IS LONG, LIKE A SNAKE.

NO, IT'S THIN, LIKE FABRIC.

NO, IT'S HAIRY, LIKE A...

UM...

...A HAIRY BEARD? OR SOMETHING?

I DON'T KNOW.

IT'S WEIRD, ANYWAYS...

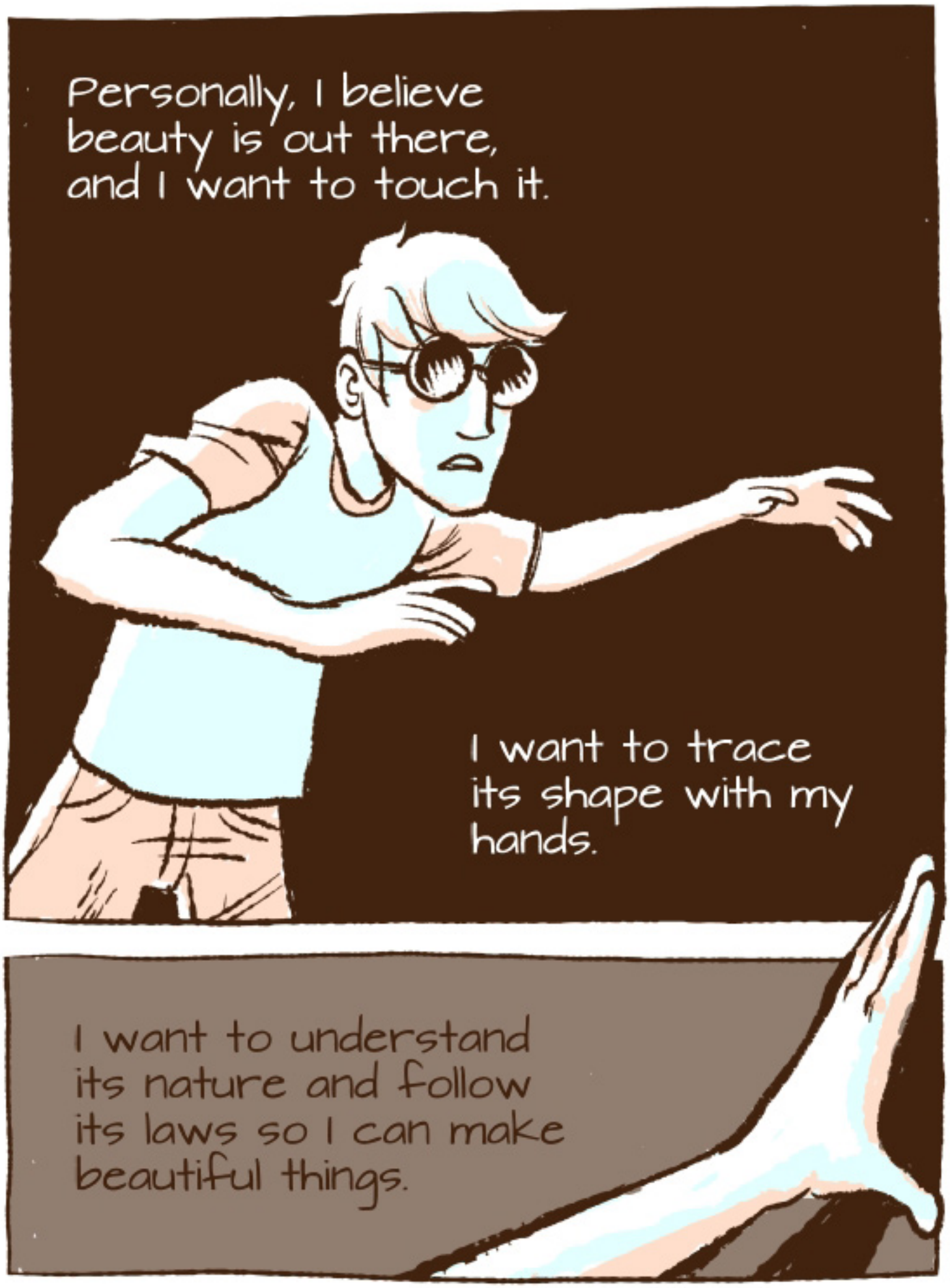
Due to their different perspectives, the three blind men had three different ideas about the elephant.

We have a tendency to think that because the blind men had different conceptions of the elephant, the elephant doesn't exist...

...that because we all see the world through different colored glasses, the world doesn't exist...

...that because we all have different ideas about beauty, beauty doesn't exist.

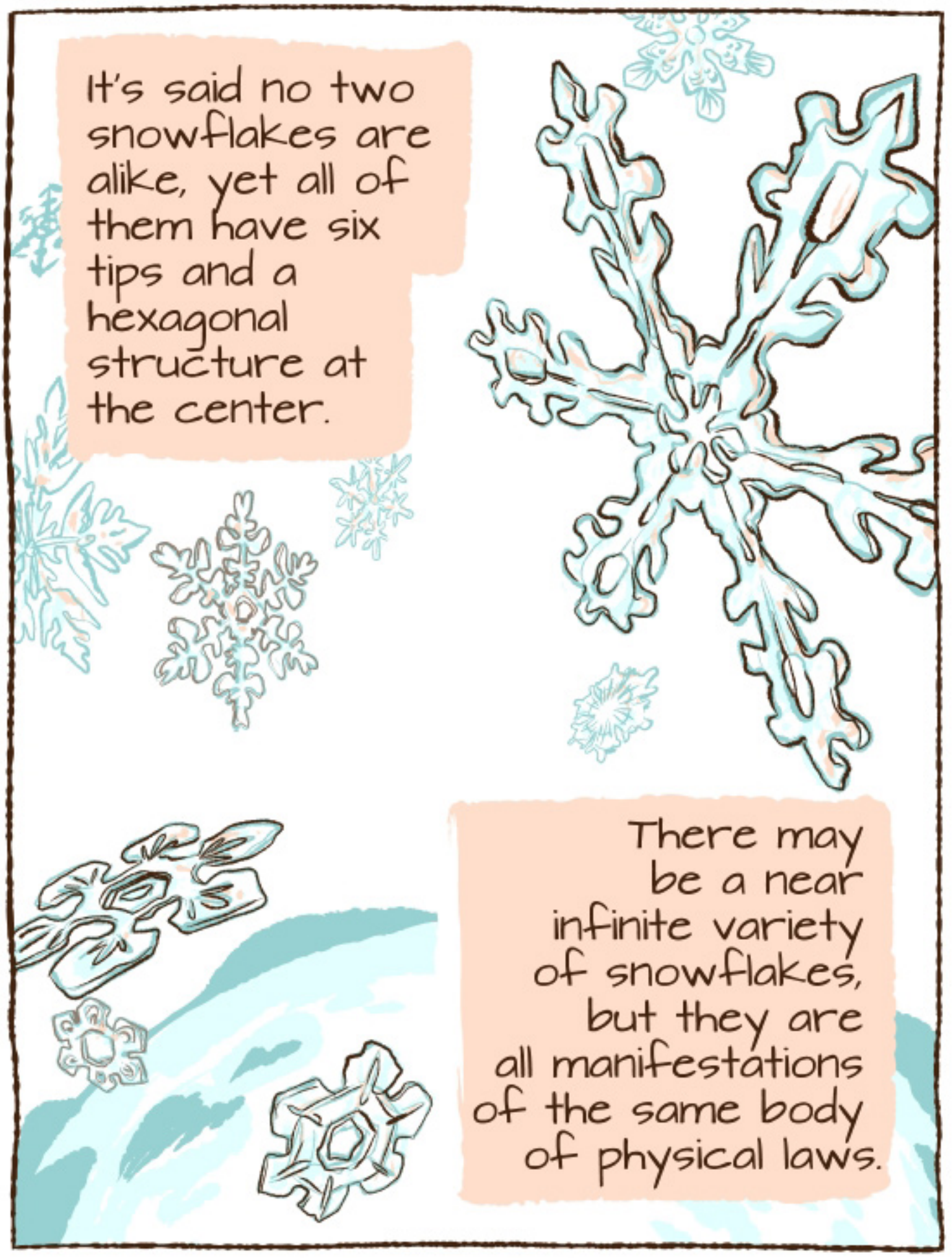
Maybe beauty is out there, maybe it's not, but the subjectivity of perception is certainly no evidence one way or another.



The world contains a diversity of beautiful art, like a cloud of snowflakes, each piece as unique and beautiful as the last.
When you witness the vast range of artistic expression, it's hard to conclude there could be any fixed principles behind beauty.

But think about snowflakes...

It's said no two snowflakes are alike, yet all of them have six tips and a hexagonal structure at the center.



There may be a near infinite variety of snowflakes, but they are all manifestations of the same body of physical laws.

It's like language.

There is a near infinite variety of ways to express yourself, but unless you follow the laws of the language, no one will understand you.

You have to conform to proper pronunciation and shackle yourself to syntax.

You may have freedom of speech, but you don't have freedom of grammar.

Art is a language, and within each artistic discipline is a body of rules that determines the resonance and clarity of a piece of work.

If you have any ambition of using your art to communicate to others, seek out those rules through immersion and study.

Feel for that elephant.

It's a paradox, but becoming a slave to these rules will actually give you more freedom to express yourself in the way you want.

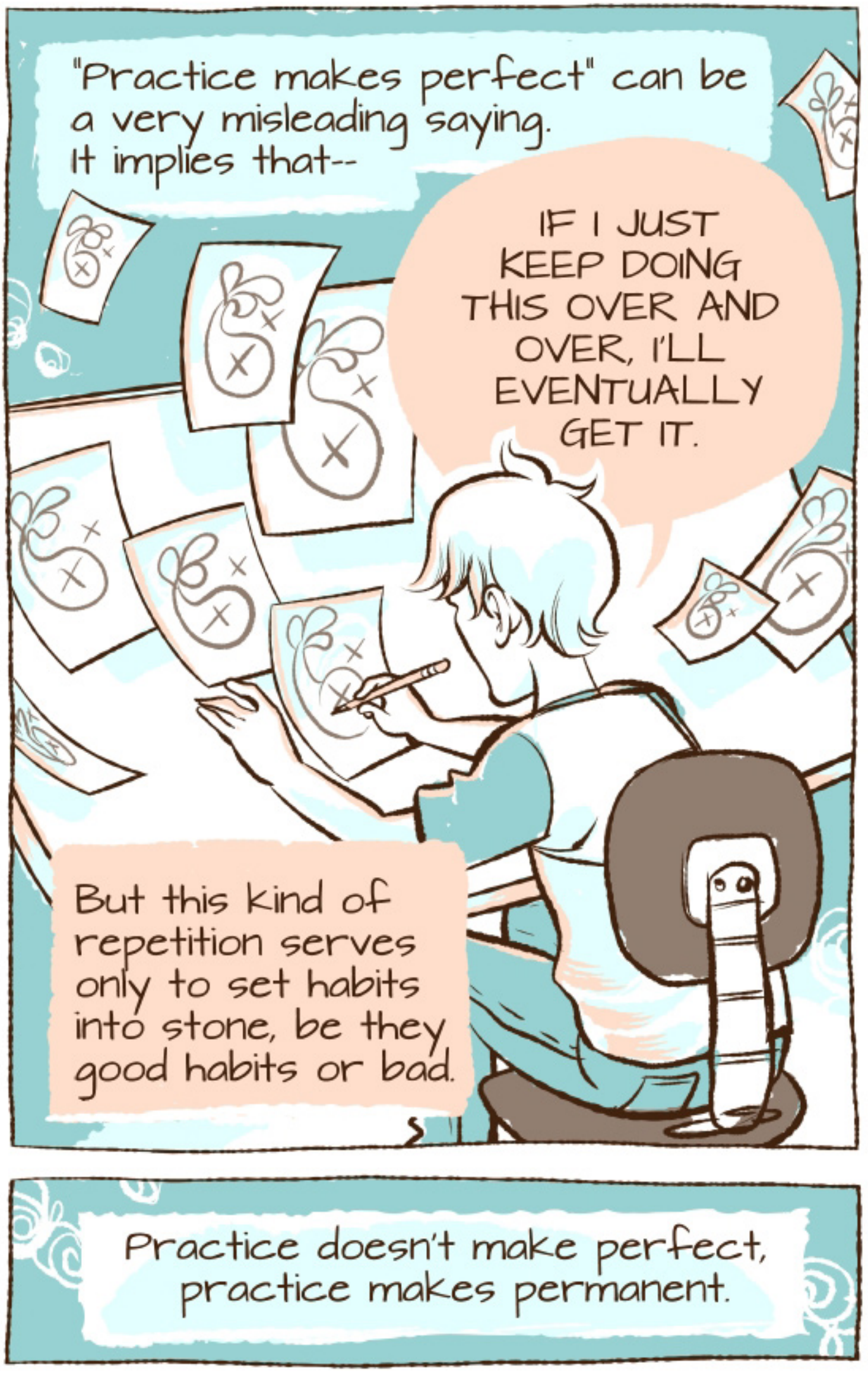
So be a conformist to constants.

Plagiarize sound principles.

Rip-off the right way.

And if you find the elephant, don't just touch him, grapple him with a bear hug.

Practice Doesn't Make Perfect



Practice doesn't make perfect, practice makes permanent.

This is why immersion is so important.

Immersion gives us an eye for perfection so we know what to aim for when we try to improve.

Now, if practice can do as much harm as it can do good, what's the best way to improve our skills?

The answer is: through imitation!

If immersion is our rudder, then imitation is our sail.

STILL CHEESY!

But what does proper imitation look like?

Picasso left us a hint about imitation when he said:

GOOD ARTISTS COPY, GREAT ARTISTS STEAL.

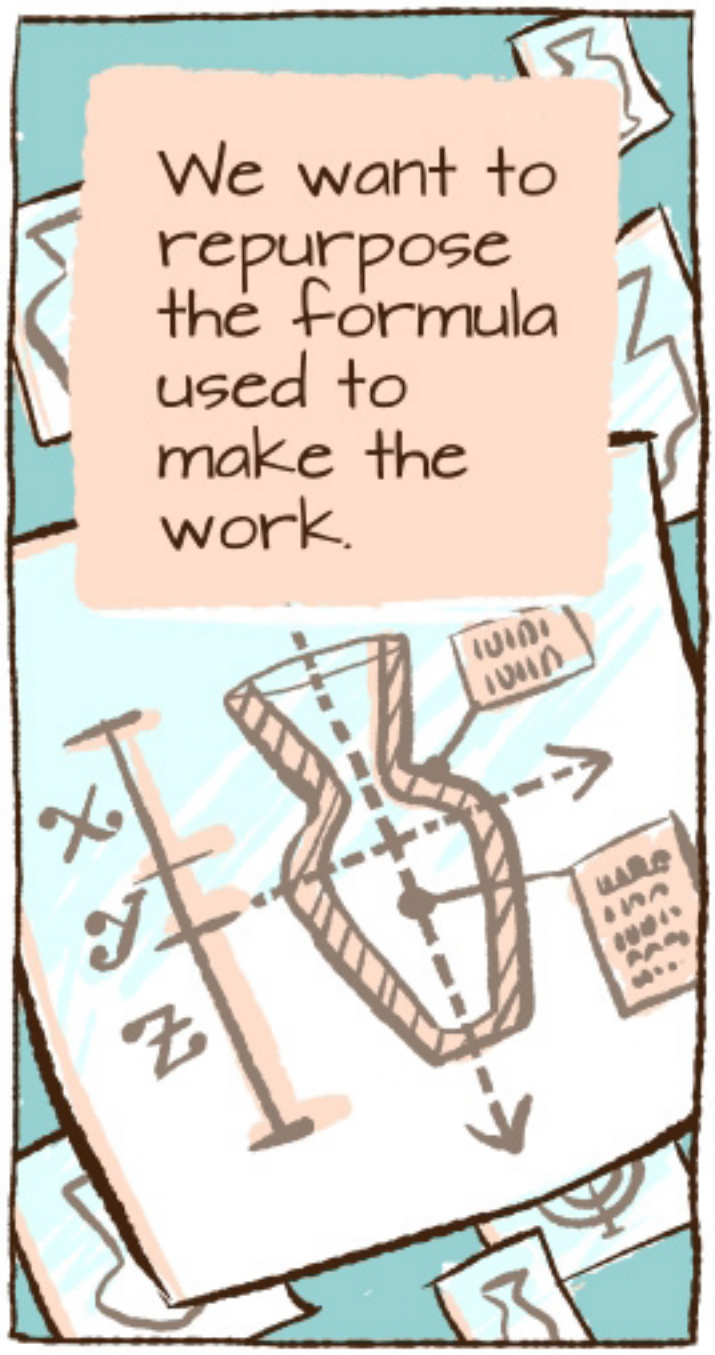
Copying implies mindless reproduction by rote.

Stealing implies intentionality, ambition and ownership.

Do you see the difference?

We don't want to merely replicate the form of a work.

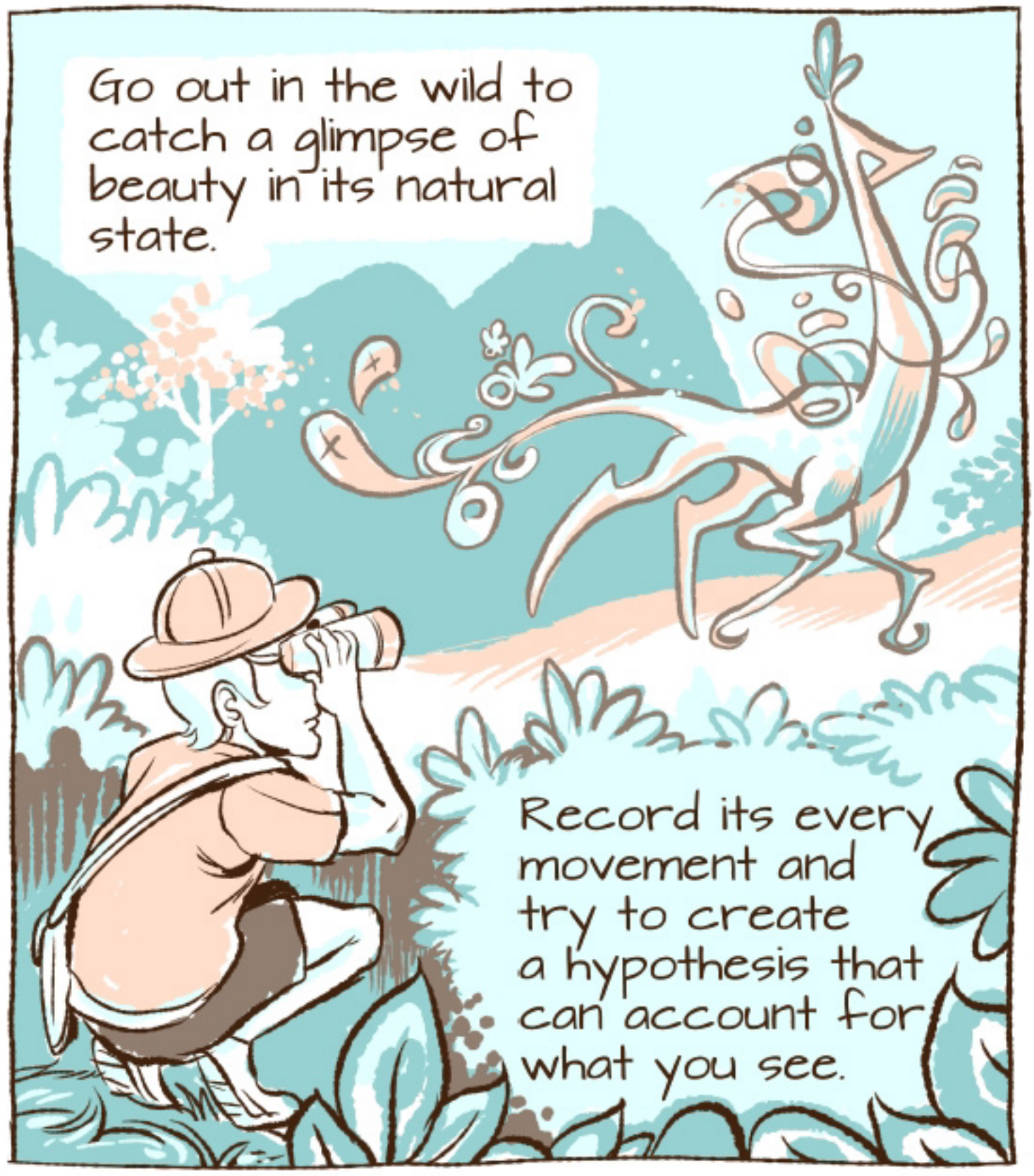
We want to repurpose the formula used to make the work.



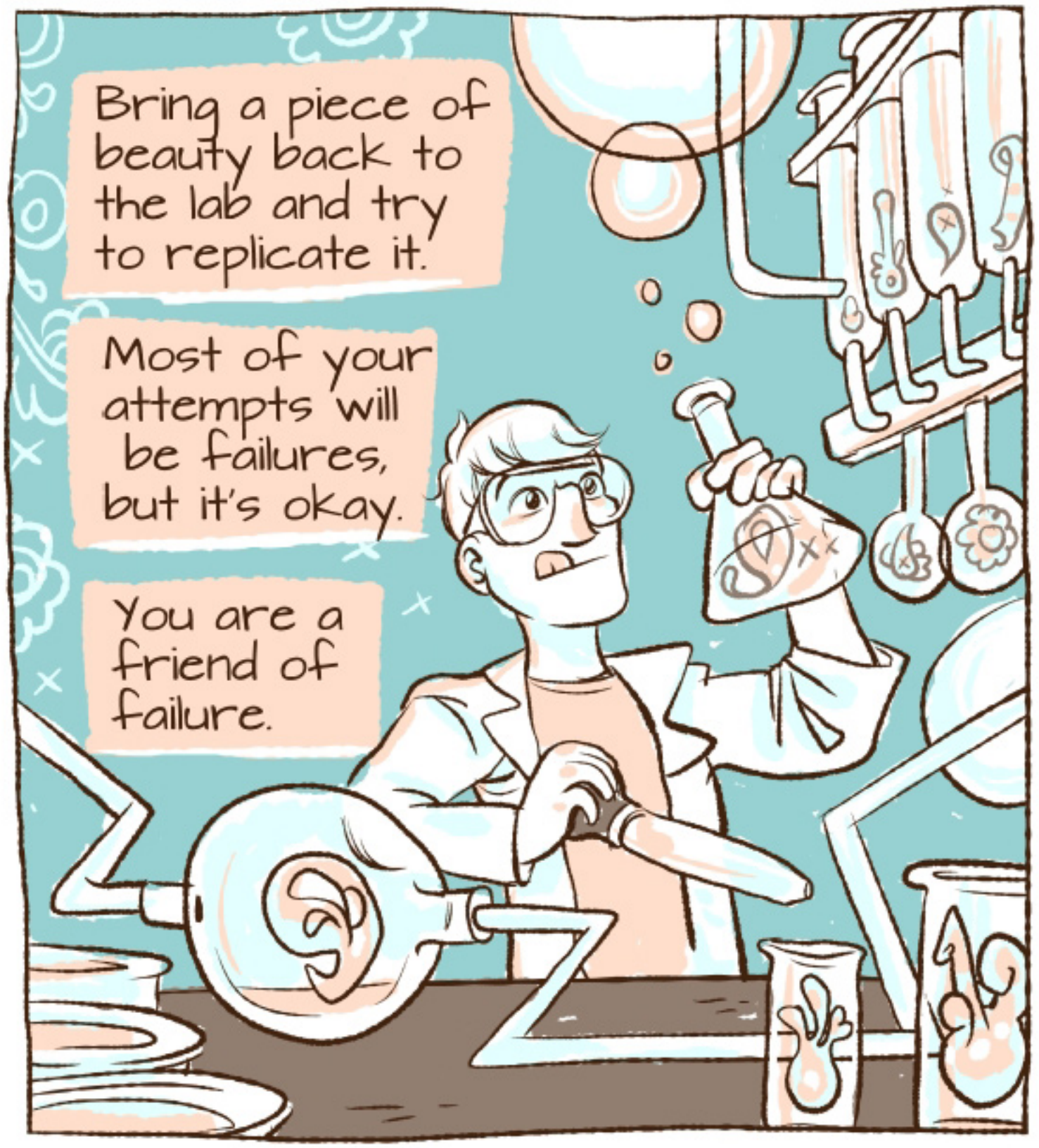
To someone aspiring to be a great culinary artist this would be the difference between knowing how to follow a recipe and knowing how to write a recipe.

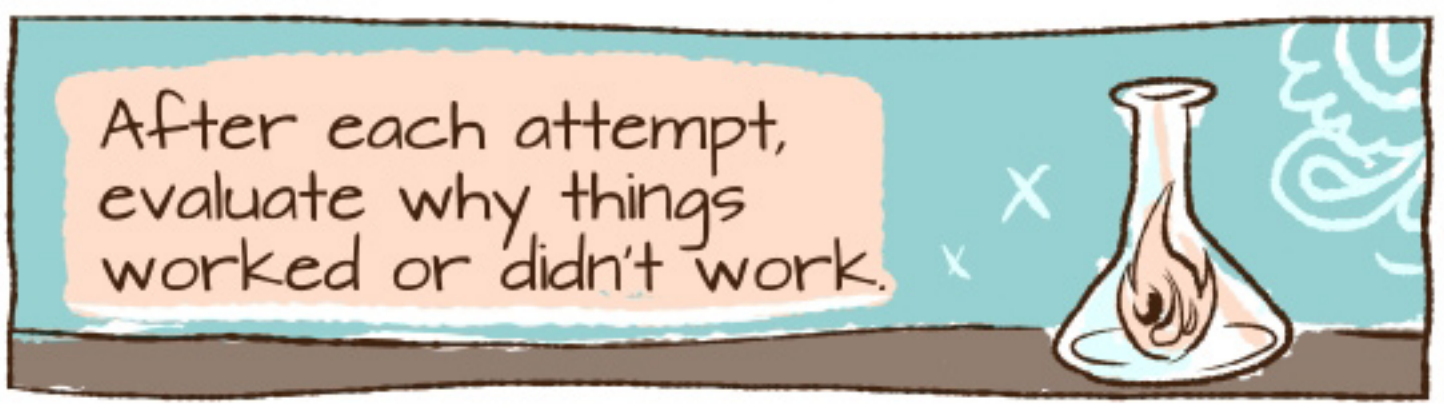
Proper imitation aims to mimic the substance of a work, not just the surface. So, what's the best way to imitate? I offer you three methods of attack.

1 Observe great art and try to figure out why it works. Be like a naturalist.



2 Once you've developed a hypothesis, test it. Be like a scientist.





3 Finally, play with what you discover. Be like a DJ.

Remixing forces you to carefully imitate, not mindlessly replicate.

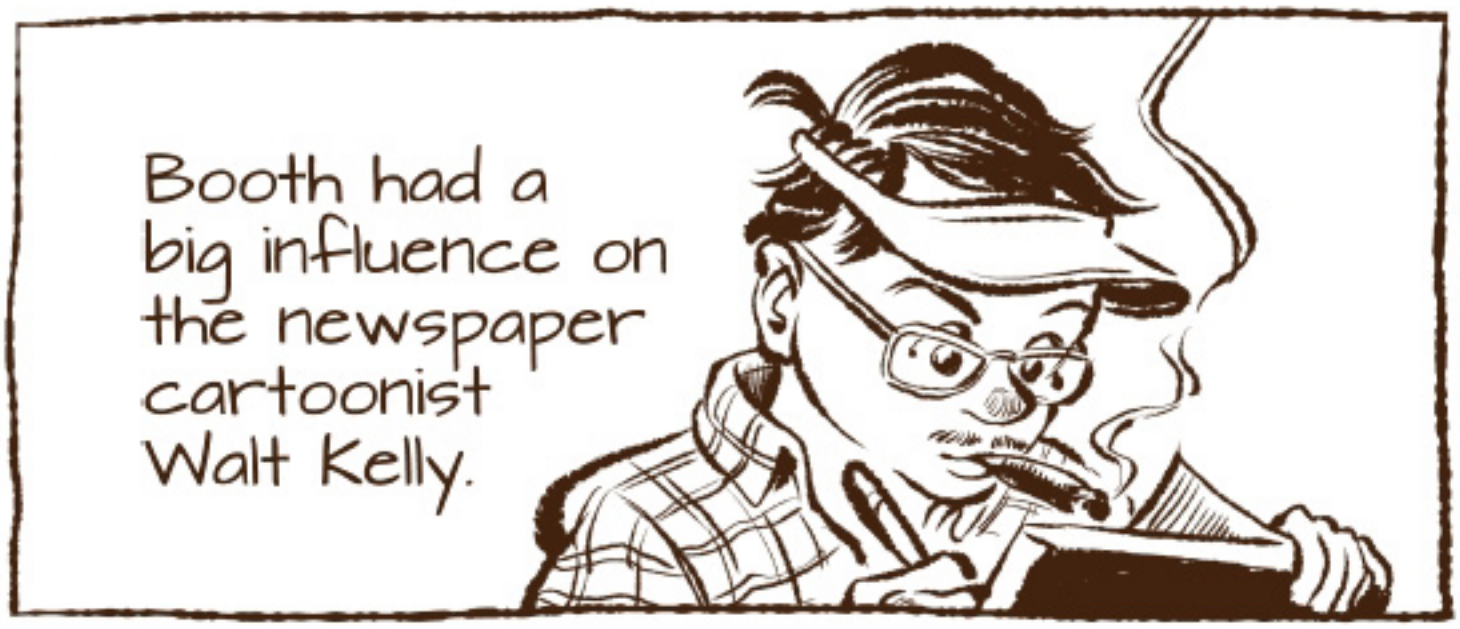
Practice crystallizes your skill set.

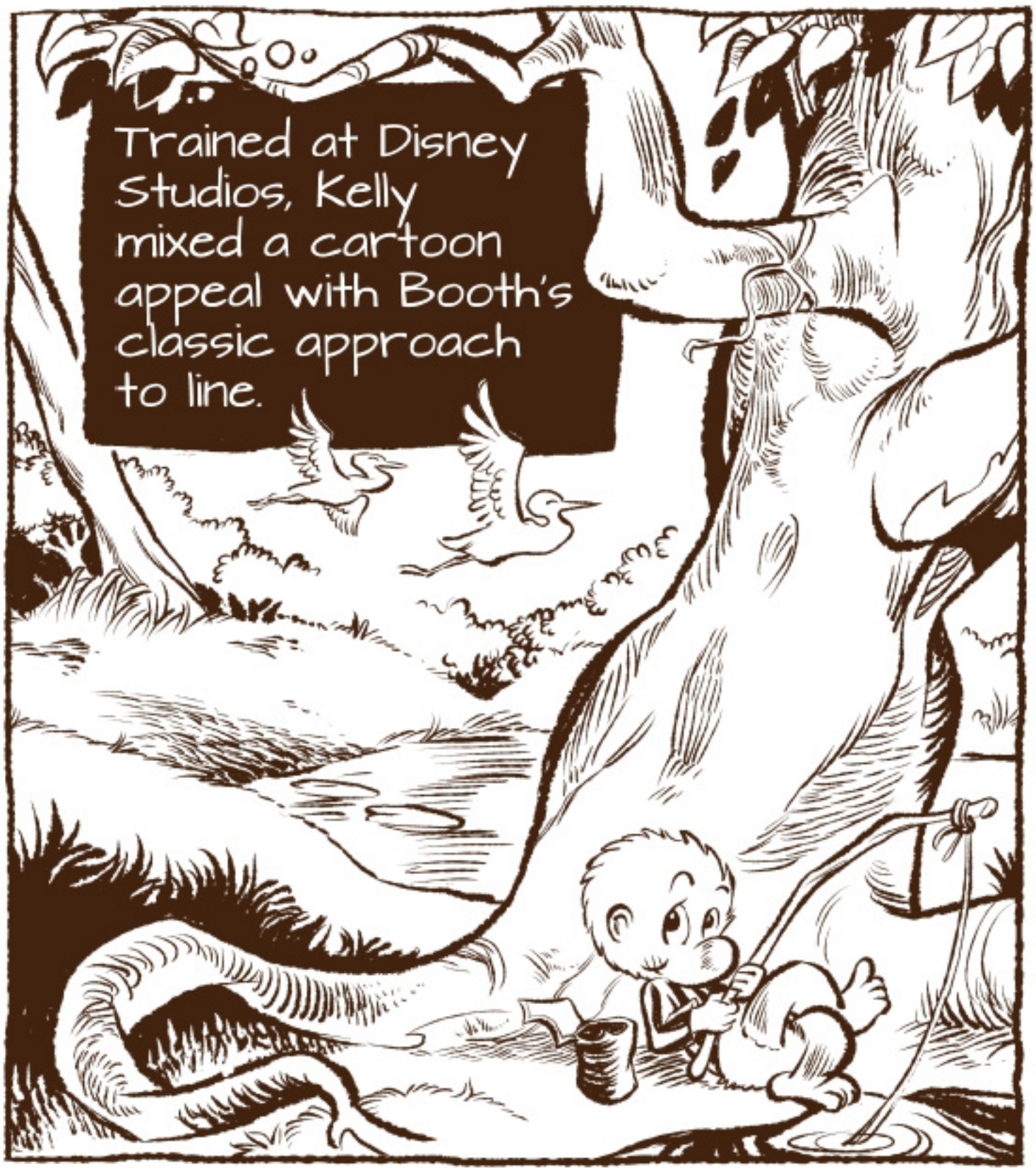
Imitation grows your skill set.

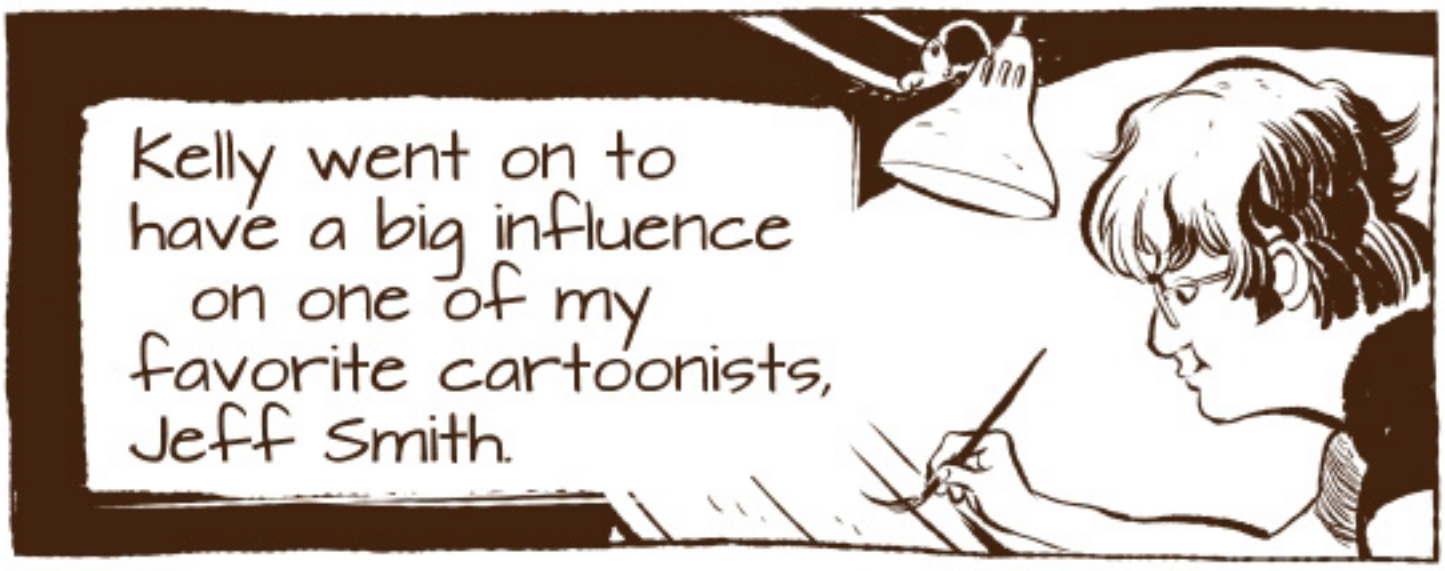
The best kind of imitation is achieved by studying not the surface of a work, but the substance behind it.

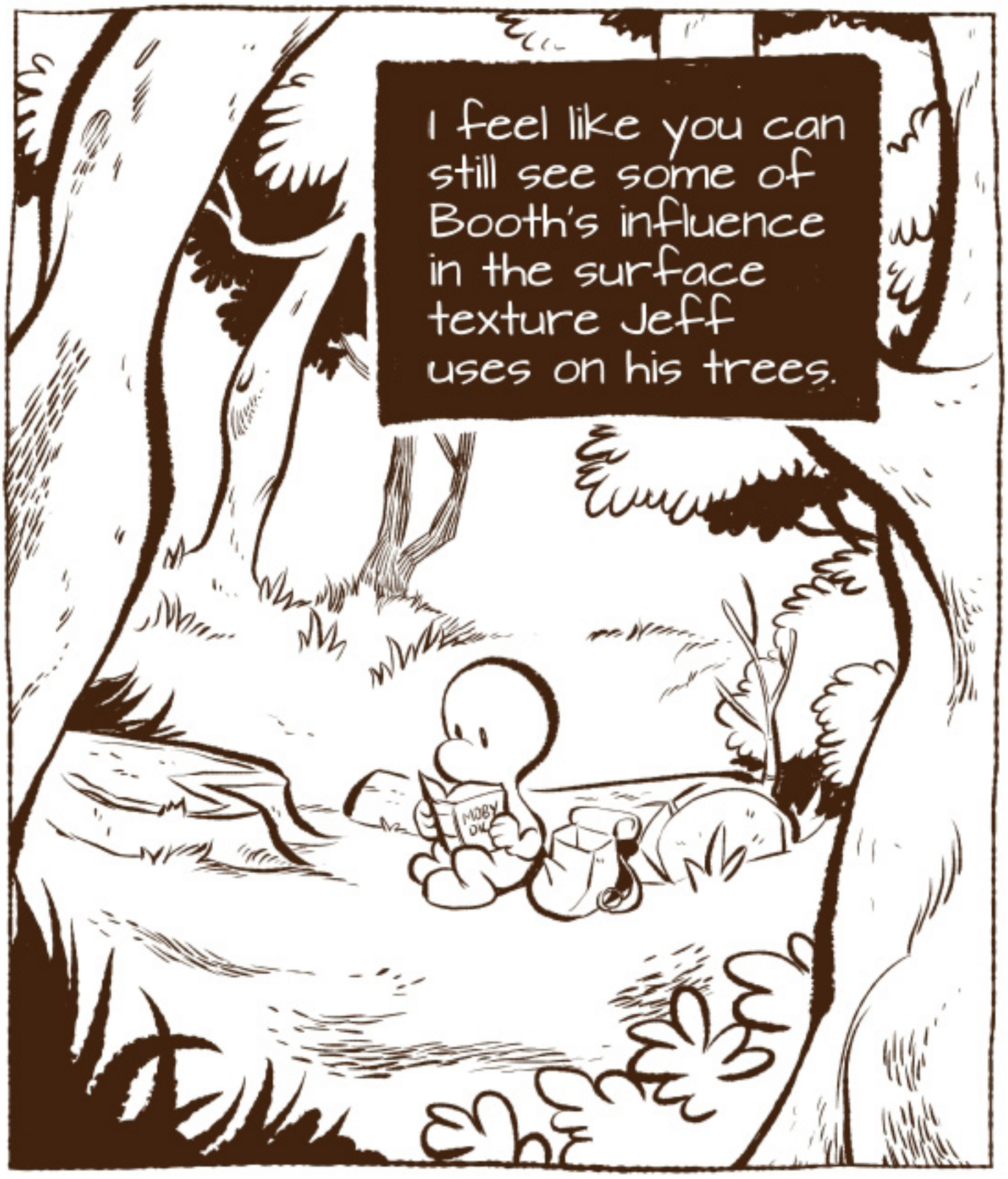
Through observation, hypothesis, testing, and play, you will begin to improve and grow.

Know Your Artistic Lineage


Booth had a big influence on the newspaper cartoonist Walt Kelly.


Trained at Disney Studios, Kelly mixed a cartoon appeal with Booth's classic approach to line.


Kelly went on to have a big influence on one of my favorite cartoonists, Jeff Smith.


I feel like you can still see some of Booth's influence in the surface texture Jeff uses on his trees.
MOBY DICK

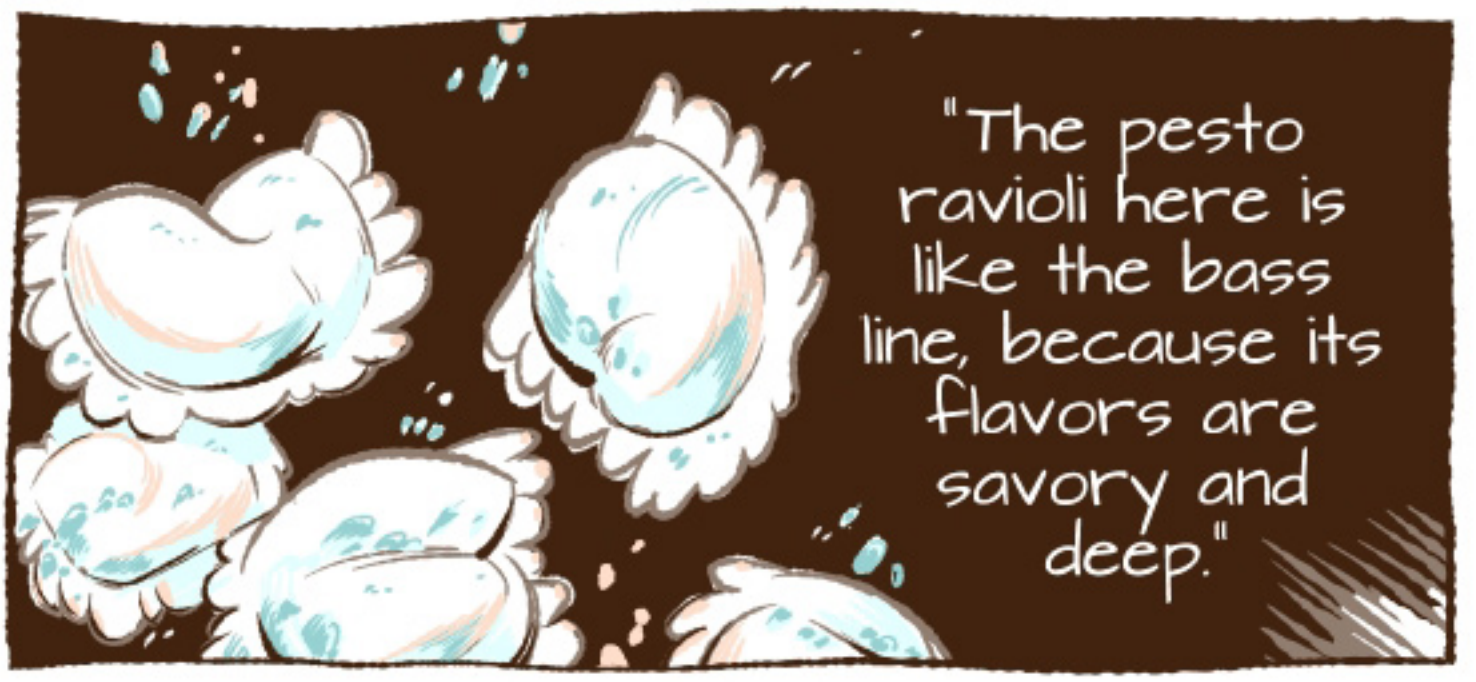
These artists are part of my artistic lineage.

Knowing your artistic lineage gives your growth as an artist a sense of momentum, direction and heritage.

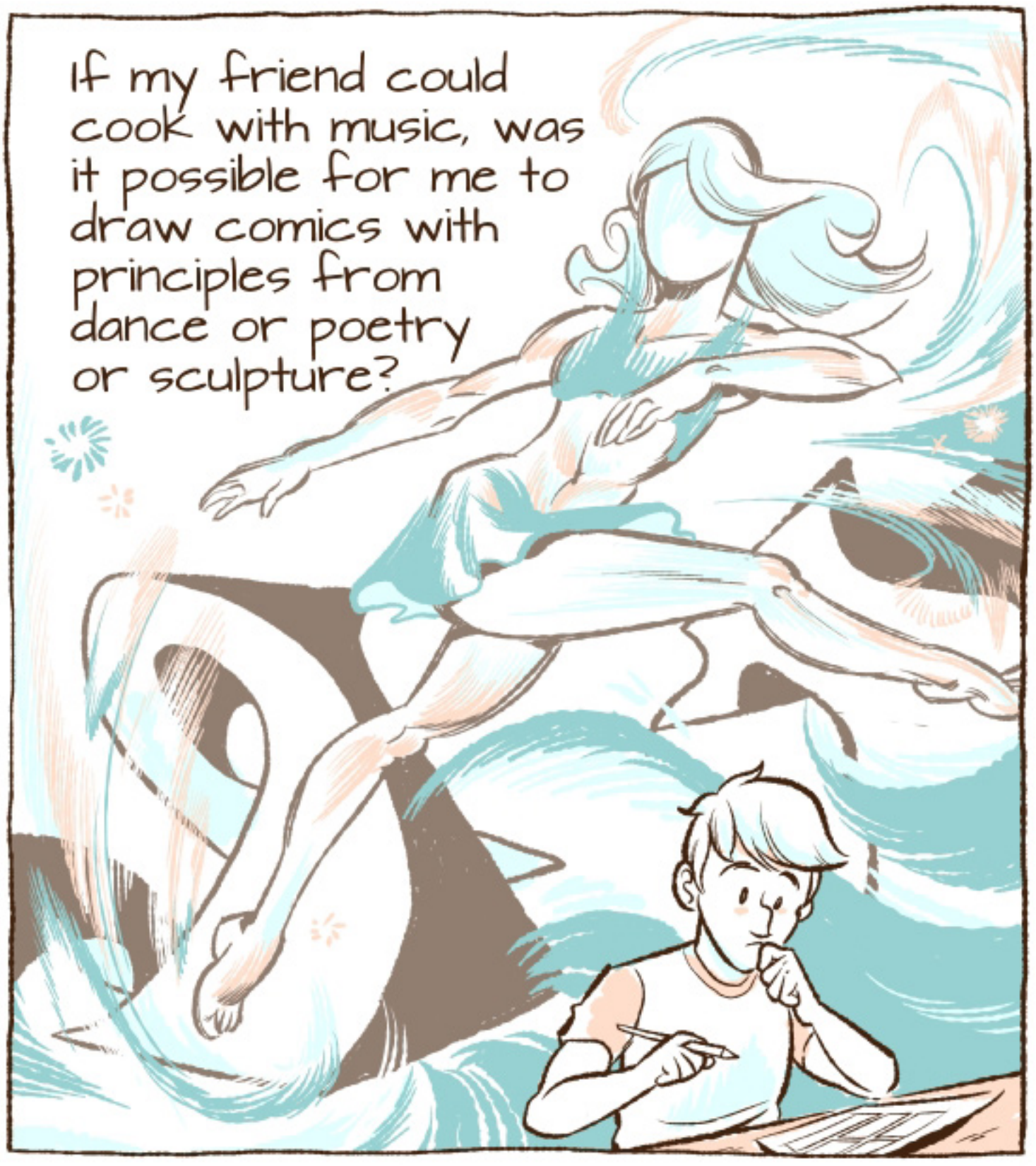
BOOTH
SMITH
KELLY

Look into who influenced the artists who influenced you, and you'll find a whole world of new inspiration to imitate and learn from.

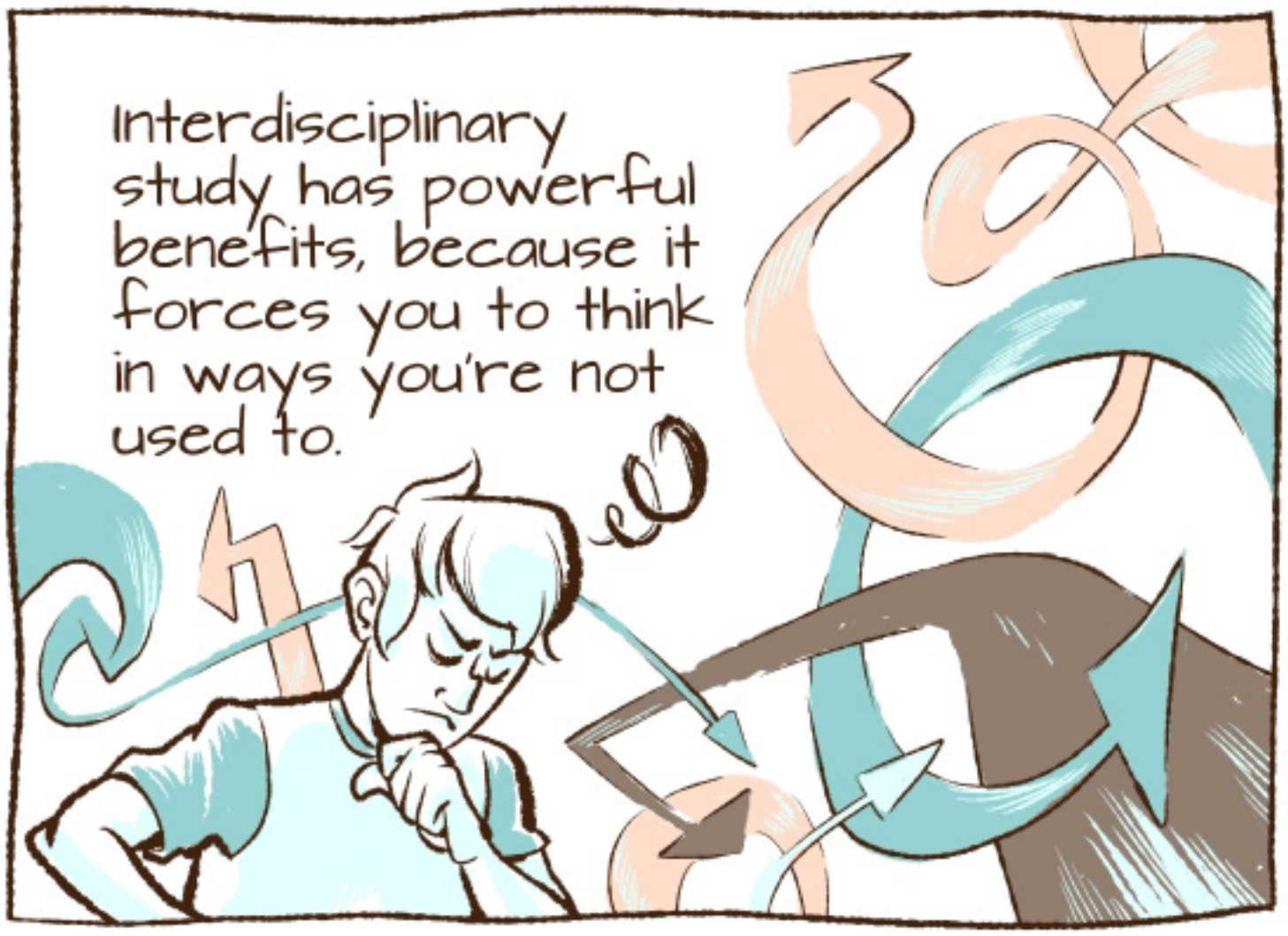
Diversify Your Study

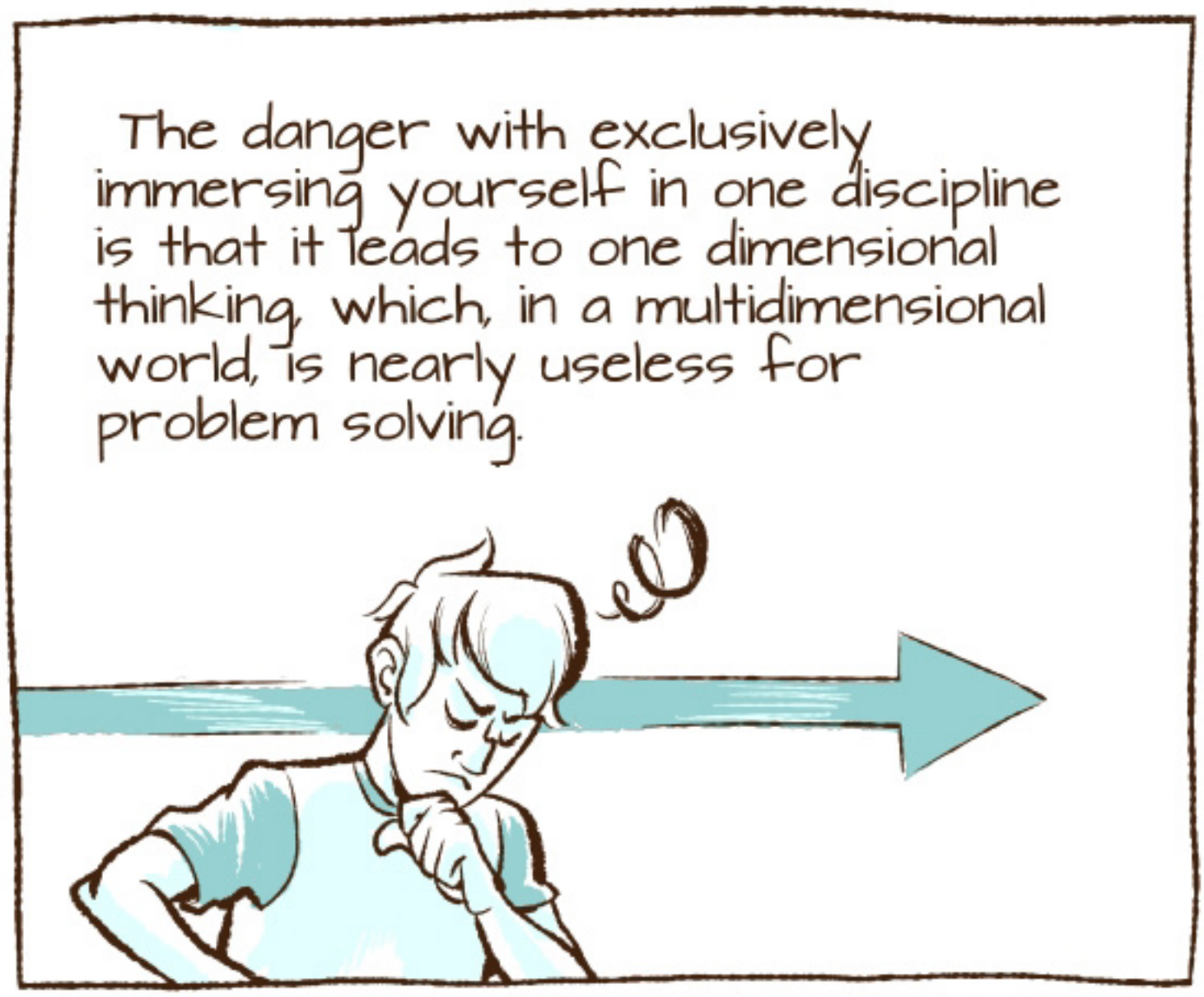


"To contrast the pesto's low notes we can add a food with high notes to the meal, like lemon pepper asparagus, which has sharp, bright flavors."



What kind of cartoonist might I become if I studied fields beyond the discipline of cartooning?


Interdisciplinary study has powerful benefits, because it forces you to think in ways you're not used to.


The danger with exclusively immersing yourself in one discipline is that it leads to one dimensional thinking, which, in a multidimensional world, is nearly useless for problem solving.

Have you ever heard the saying, "To the man with only a hammer, every problem looks like a nail?"

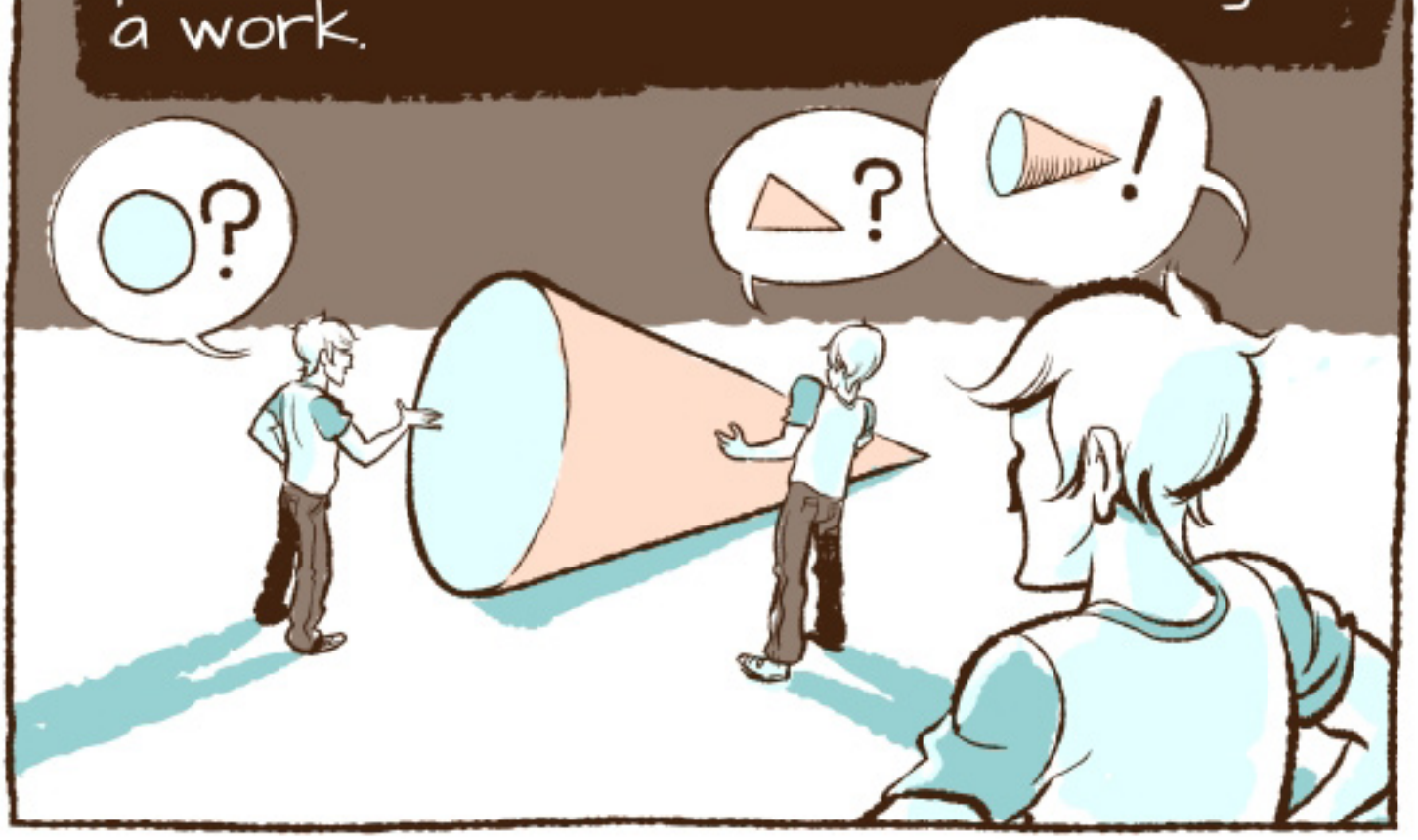
HMM... WE COULD TRY GIVING IT A GOOD HAMMERING...

That's what it's like when you know nothing outside your area of expertise. You can only see problems from a single perspective.

Having a single perspective is like having only one eye...

...you lack depth perception.

However, even a rudimentary grasp of the basic principles from other disciplines can give you new vantage points to better perceive the complex problems that arise when creating a work.



As a piece of practical advice, I would recommend starting with disciplines that have things in common with your field of interest, and then moving out from there.

Name It to Wield It

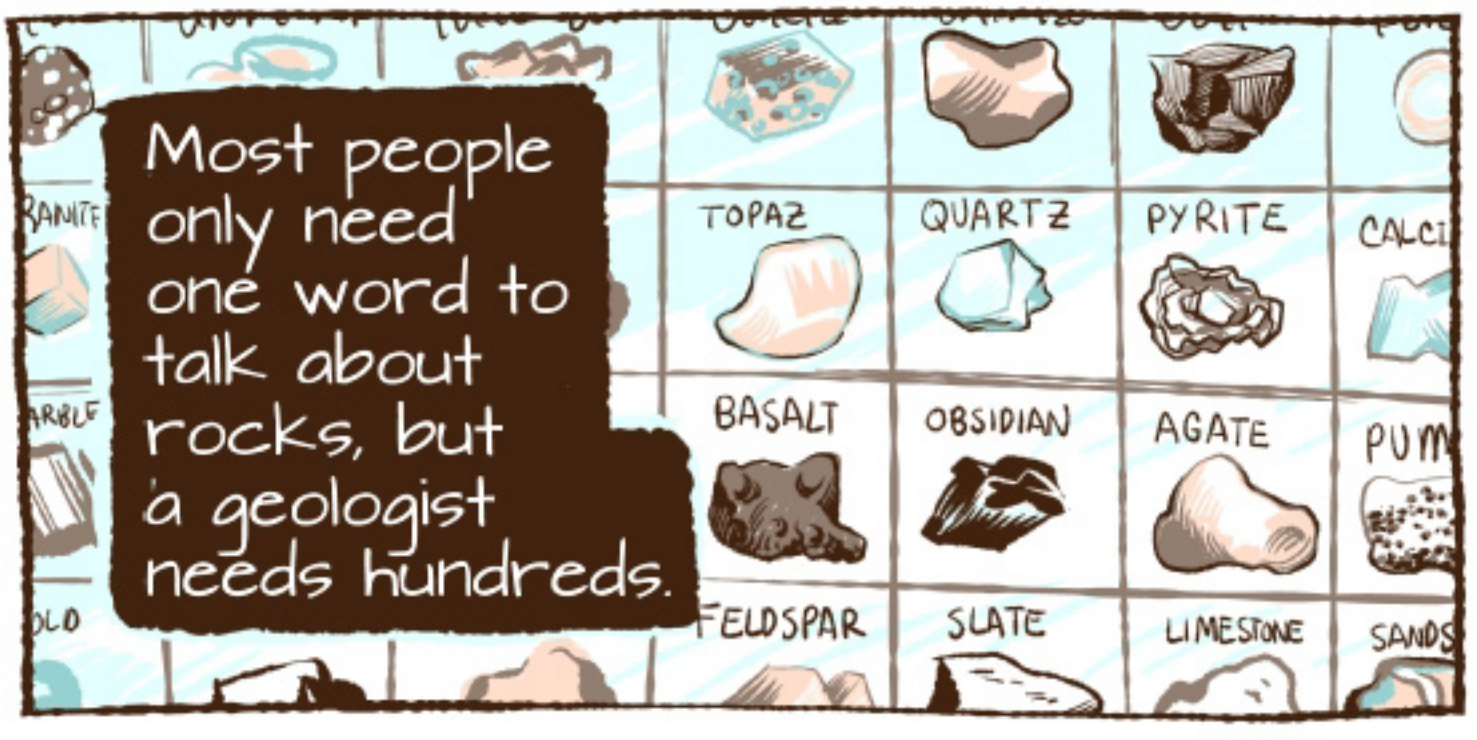
Imagine trying to describe geology with only the word "rock."

YOU SEE, THIS ROCK MELTS, AND GETS MIXED WITH THIS OTHER KIND OF ROCK WHICH MAKES...

um...

...A NEW KIND OF ROCK.

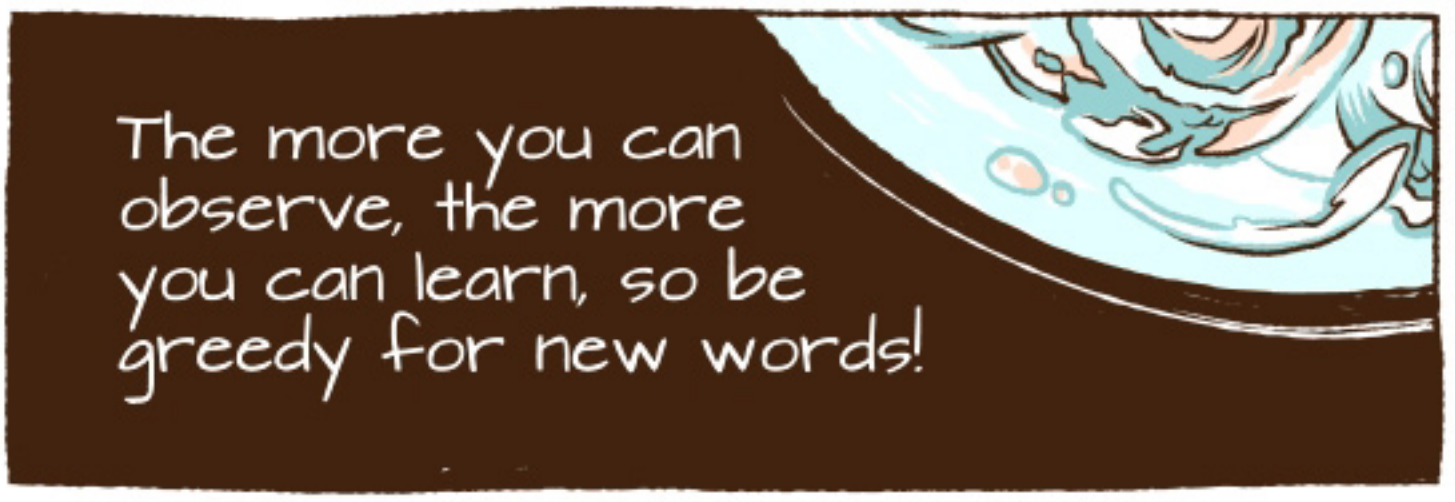
Most people only need one word to talk about rocks, but a geologist needs hundreds.



In the same way, an artist needs many words to describe the many aspects of his or her craft.

The more words you know, the more you can describe.

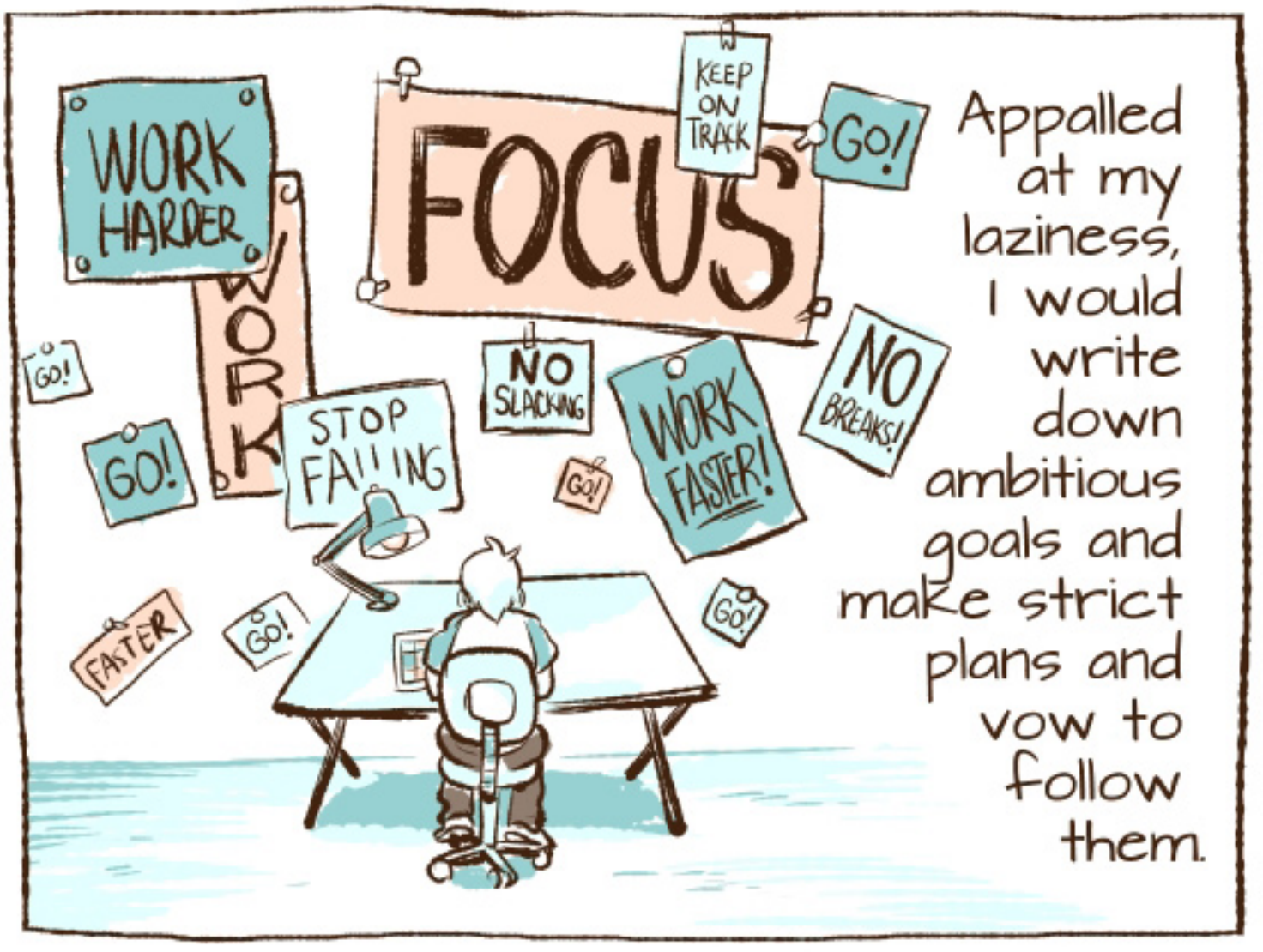
The more you can describe, the more you can observe.

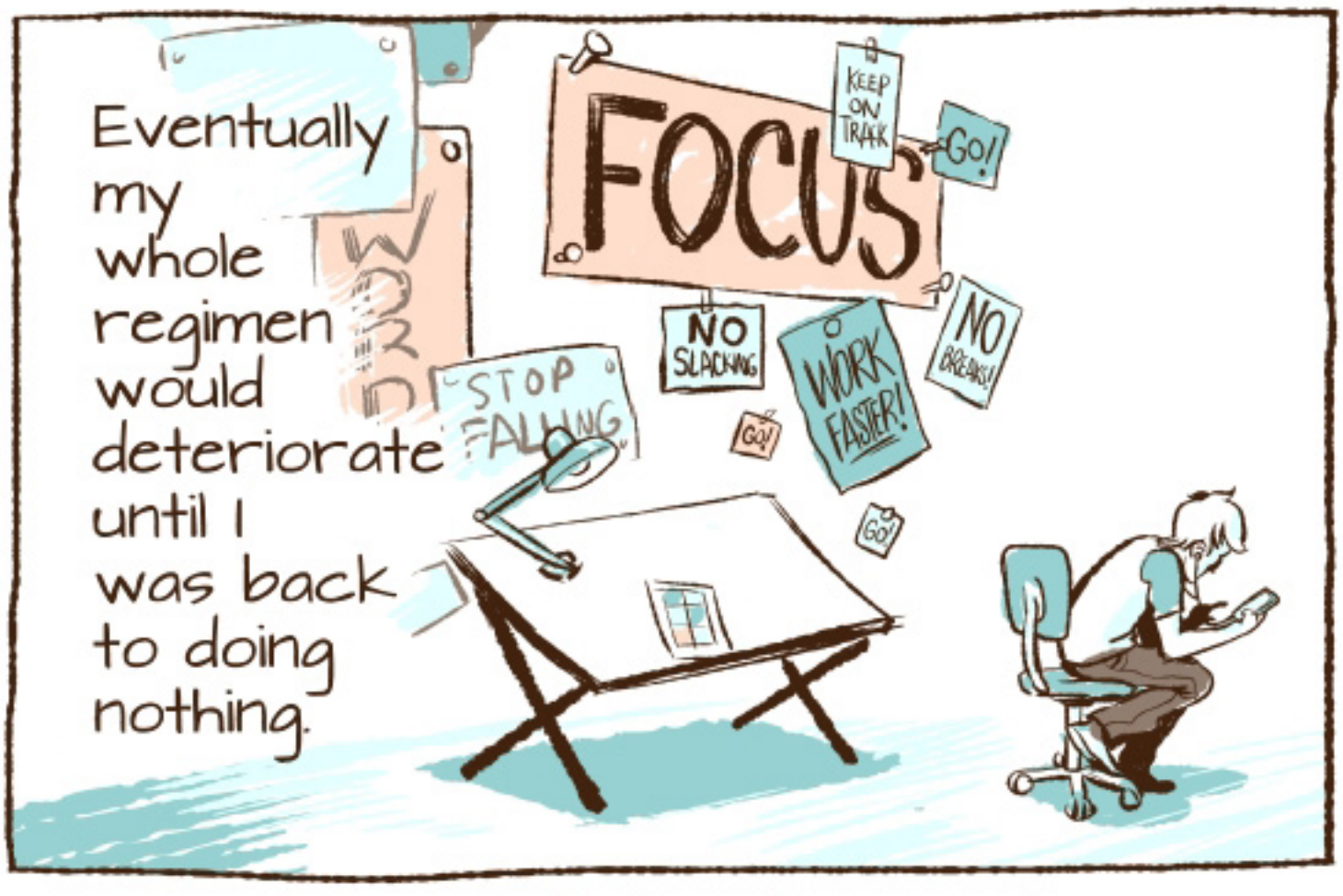

The more you can observe, the more you can learn, so be greedy for new words!

If you can't find a word for something, make one up! Do not ignore the power of words.

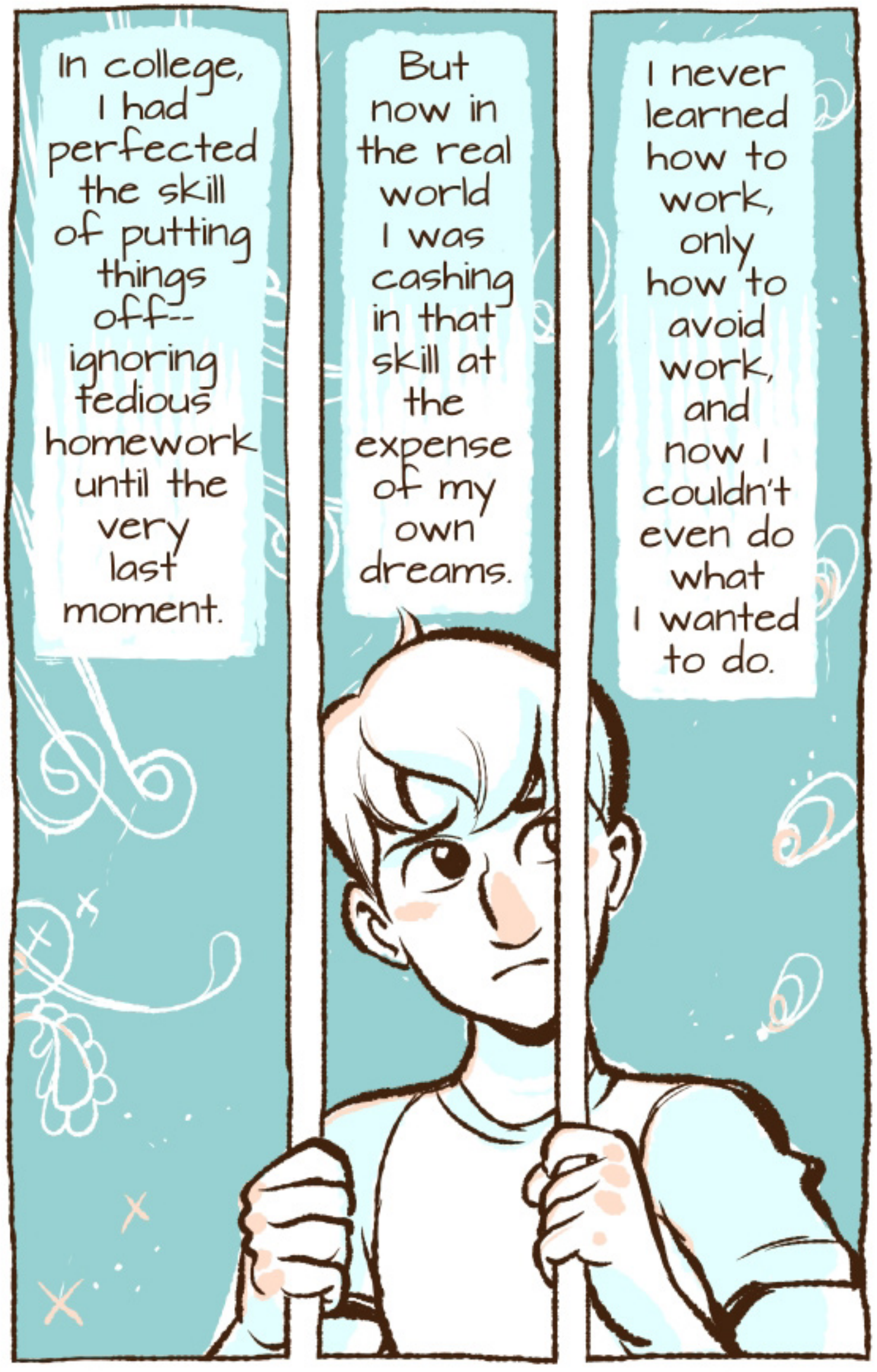
ON MOTIVATION

Get Stuff Done

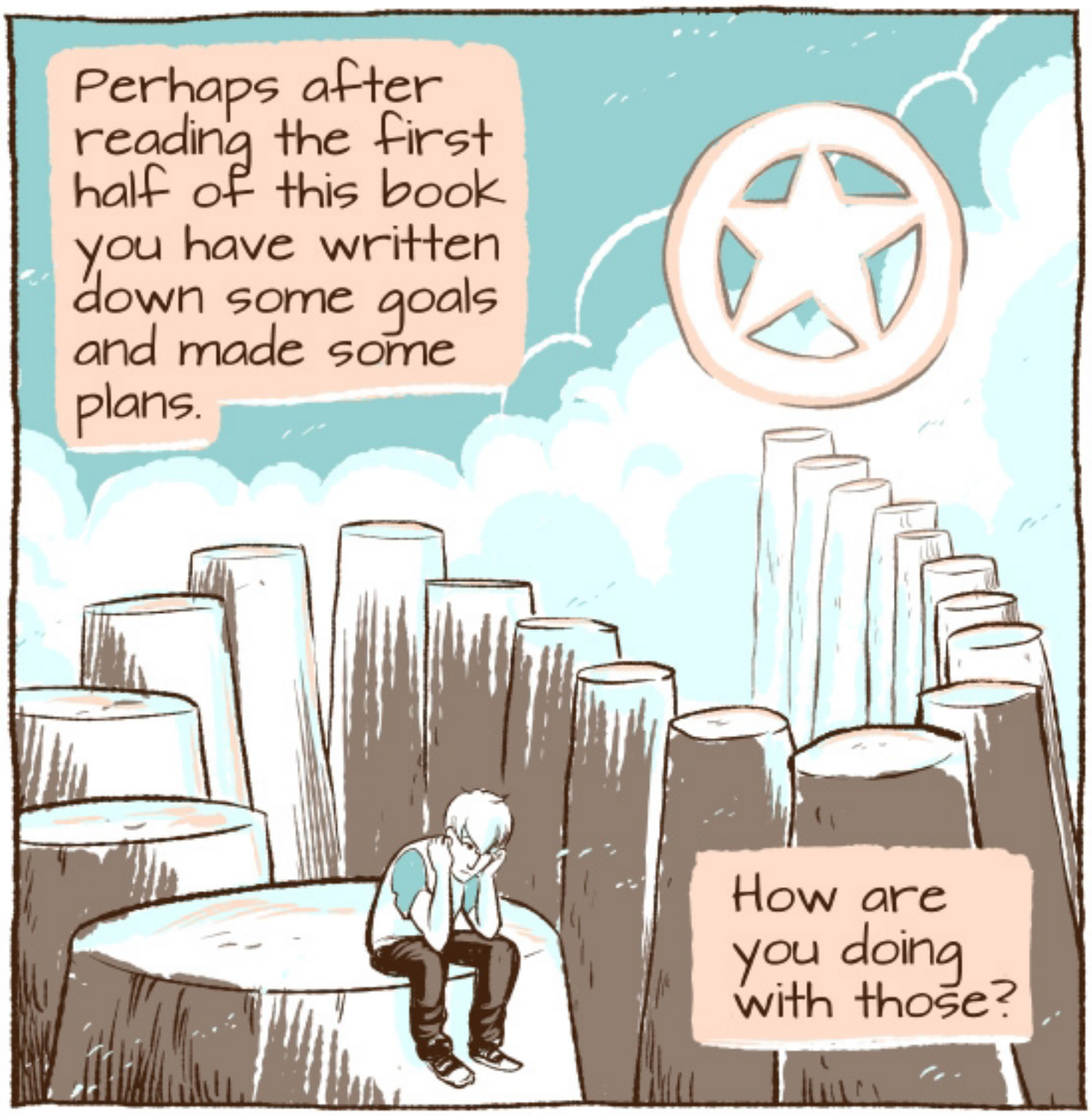




Scolding myself for failing, I'd make stricter plans and repeat the cycle again.


In college, I had perfected the skill of putting things off-- ignoring tedious homework until the very last moment.
But now in the real world I was cashing in that skill at the expense of my own dreams.
I never learned how to work, only how to avoid work, and now I couldn't even do what I wanted to do.

The problem with a dream job is not the dream part, anyone can do that-- it's the job part.



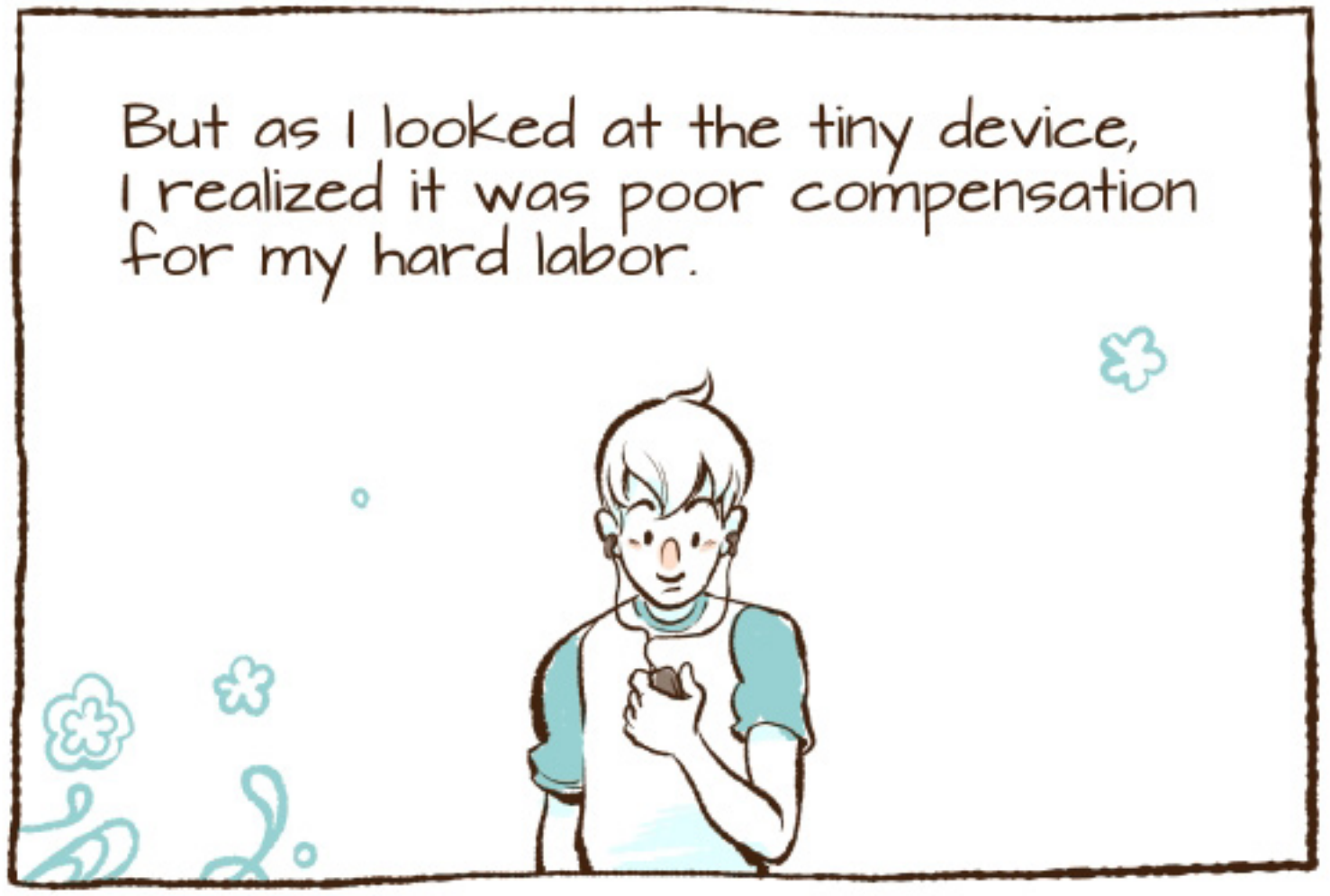
You vs. You

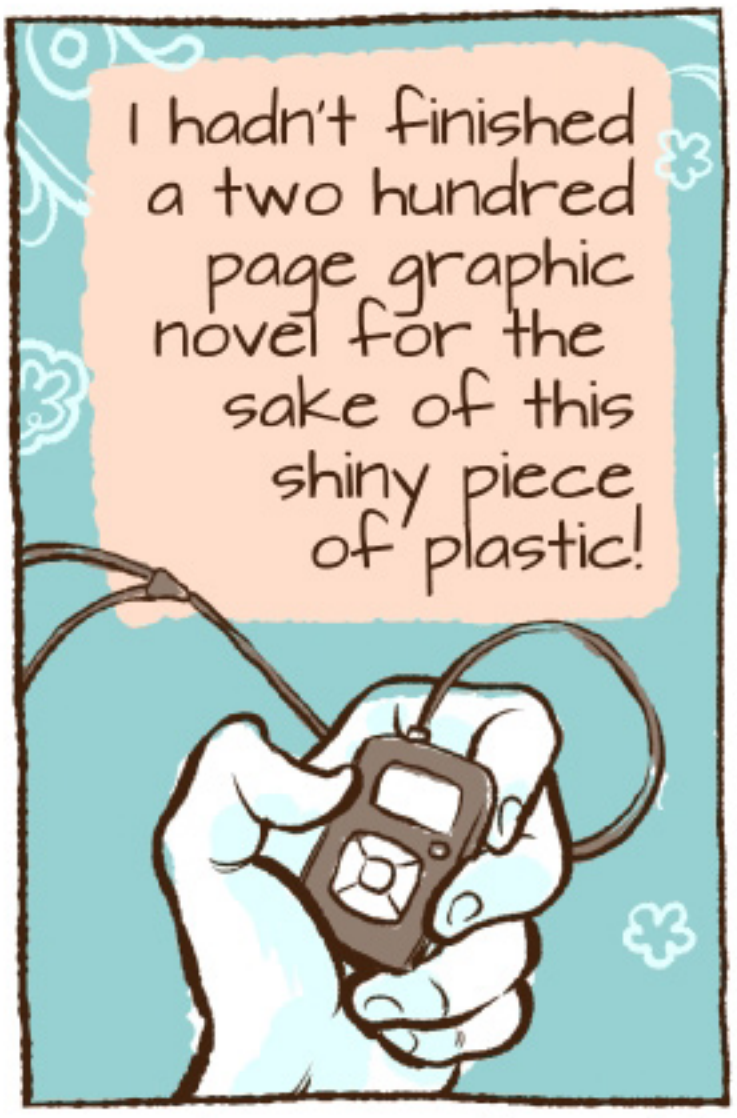
As work continued on my first graphic novel I tried everything I could to motivate myself.

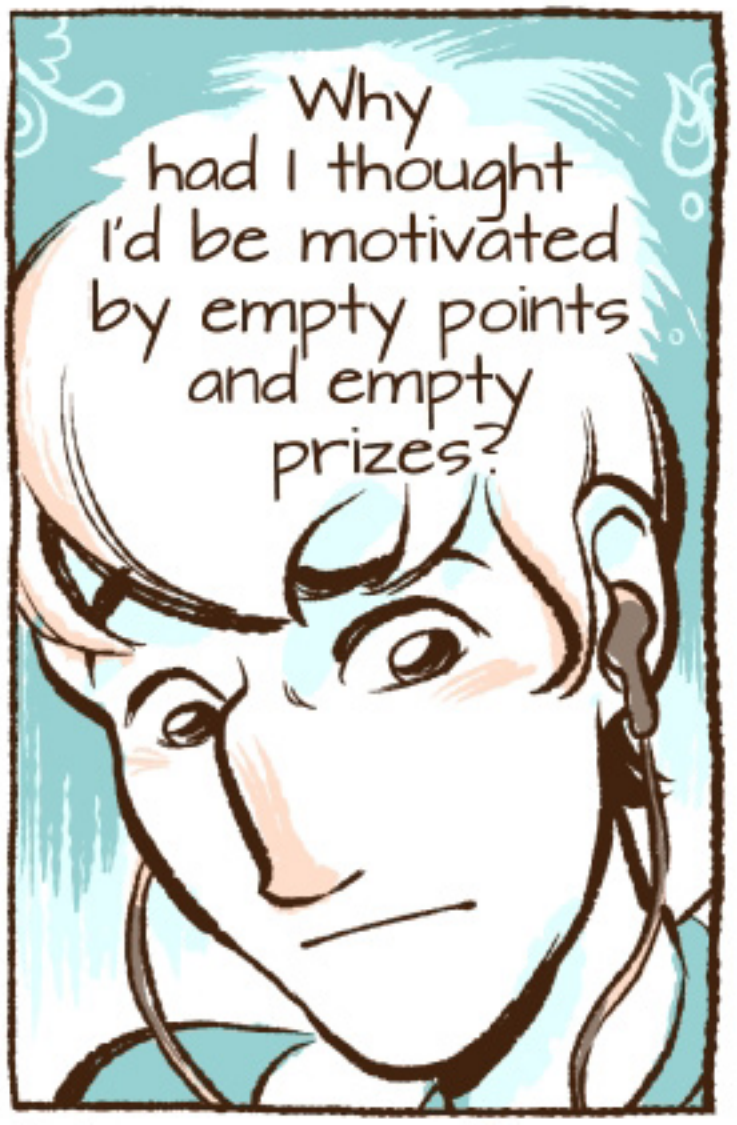
I made an elaborate system where I could score points and earn prizes for completing tasks.

When I finally finished the book, I went out and bought myself the grand prize, an mp3 player.

But as I looked at the tiny device, I realized it was poor compensation for my hard labor.







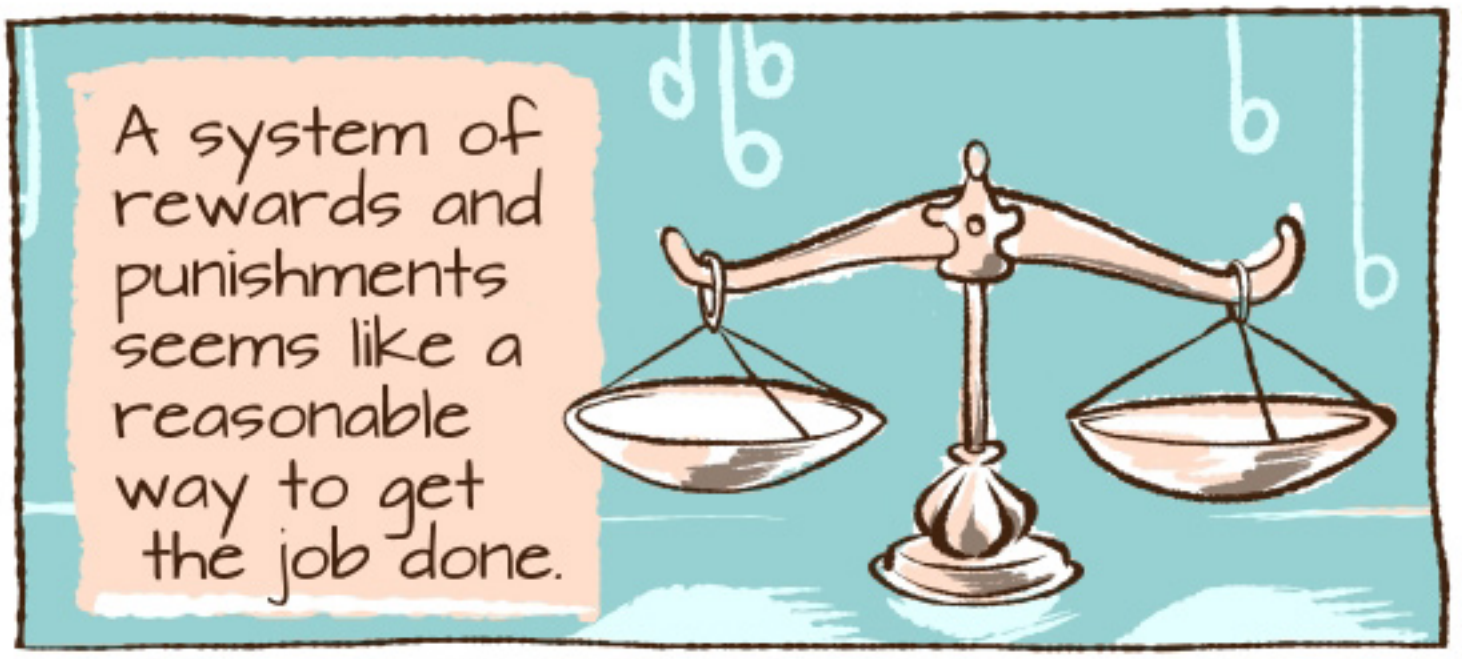
Apparently, I didn't know myself as well as I thought.

You'd think you'd understand yourself pretty well.

After all, you've been with yourself your whole life.

But sometimes, that's not the case.

And, as with all relationships, misunderstanding breeds conflict.


A system of rewards and punishments seems like a reasonable way to get the job done.

But offering yourself carrots if you're good and lashes if you're bad makes you feel like a work horse.

After being treated like an animal, it's no wonder you feel like giving up.

Unfortunately, we rarely understand this about ourselves and take giving up to be a sign of weakness.

YOU NEED MORE SELF-DISCIPLINE!

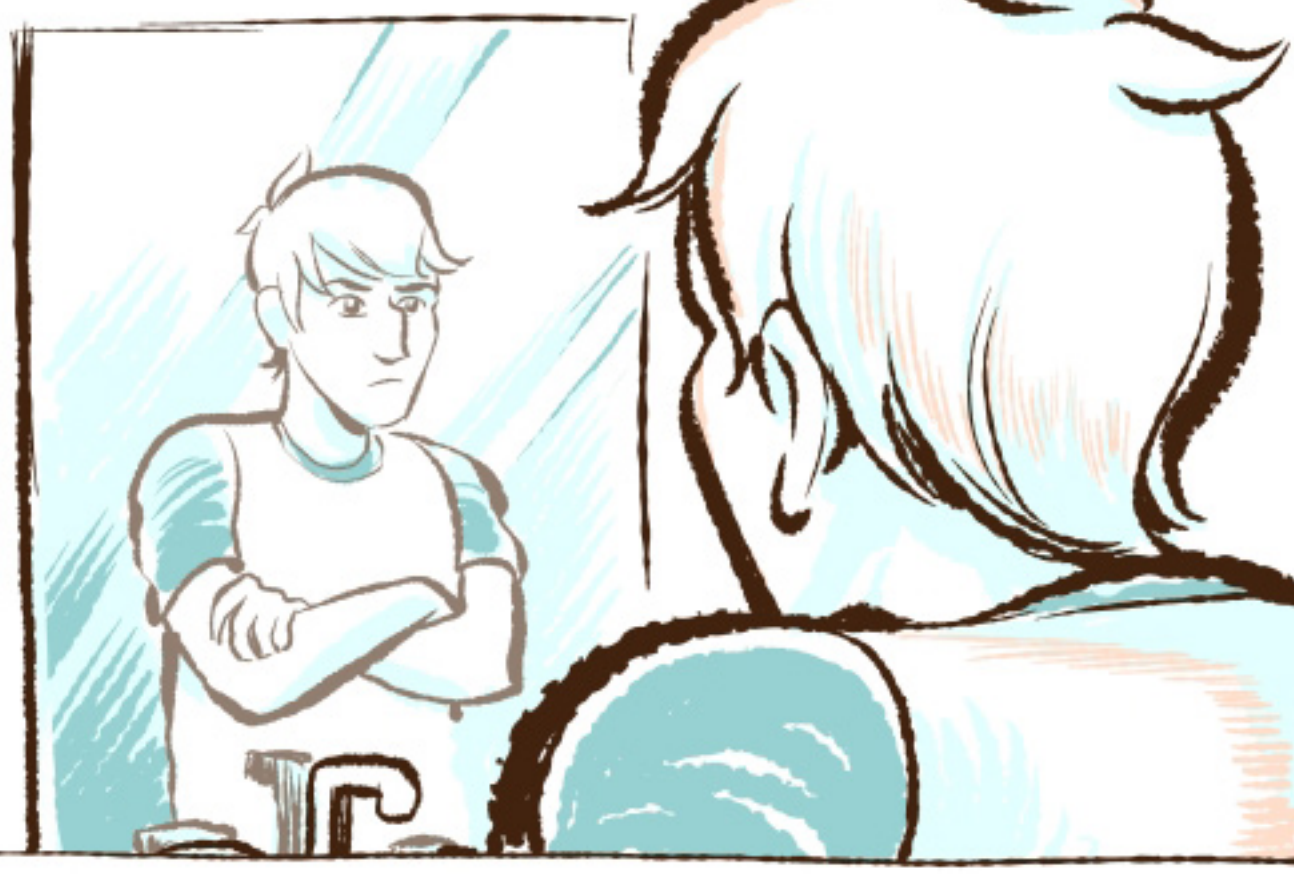
YOU NEED MORE SELF-CONTROL!

We feel powerless to accomplish anything because though our spirit is willing, our flesh is weak.

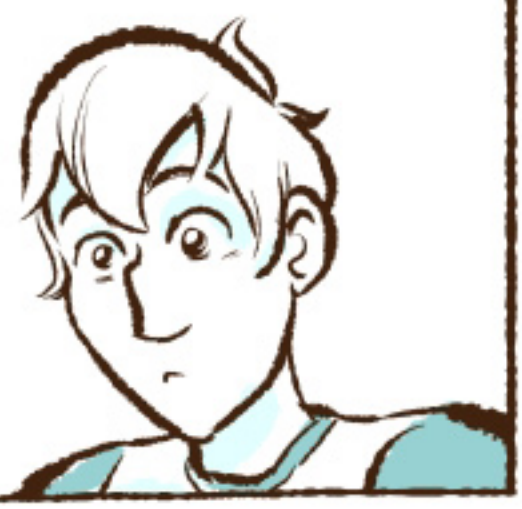
WHY WON'T YOU DO AS I SAY?

What if the spirit is willing, but treats the flesh so poorly the flesh has no desire to help out?

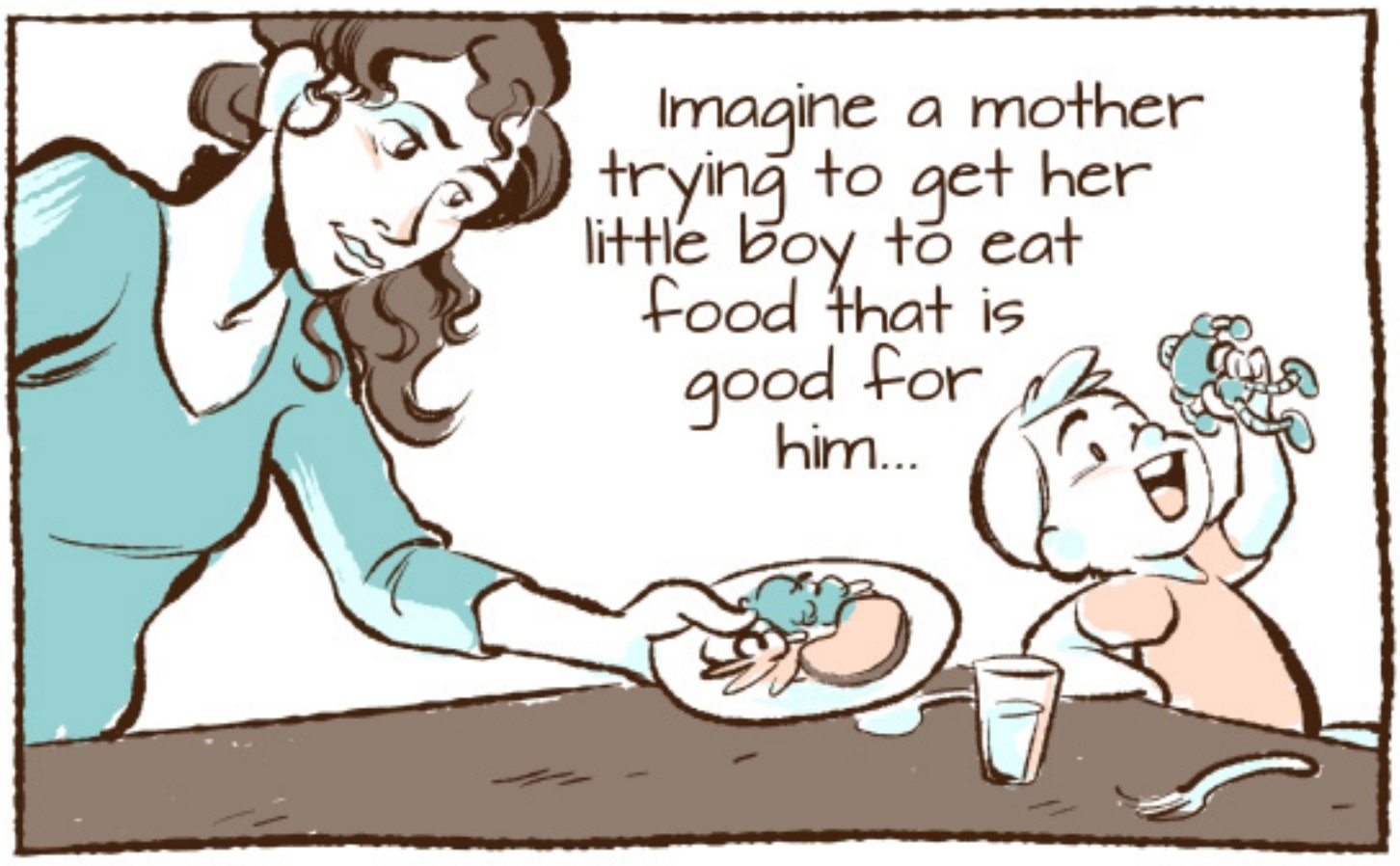
What if the productivity problems you face are not due to lazy labor, but misguided management?



In order to more effectively motivate ourselves, we need to rethink how we treat ourselves.



Instead of treating yourself like a master ruling over a slave, I have found it far superior to treat yourself like a parent caring for a child.

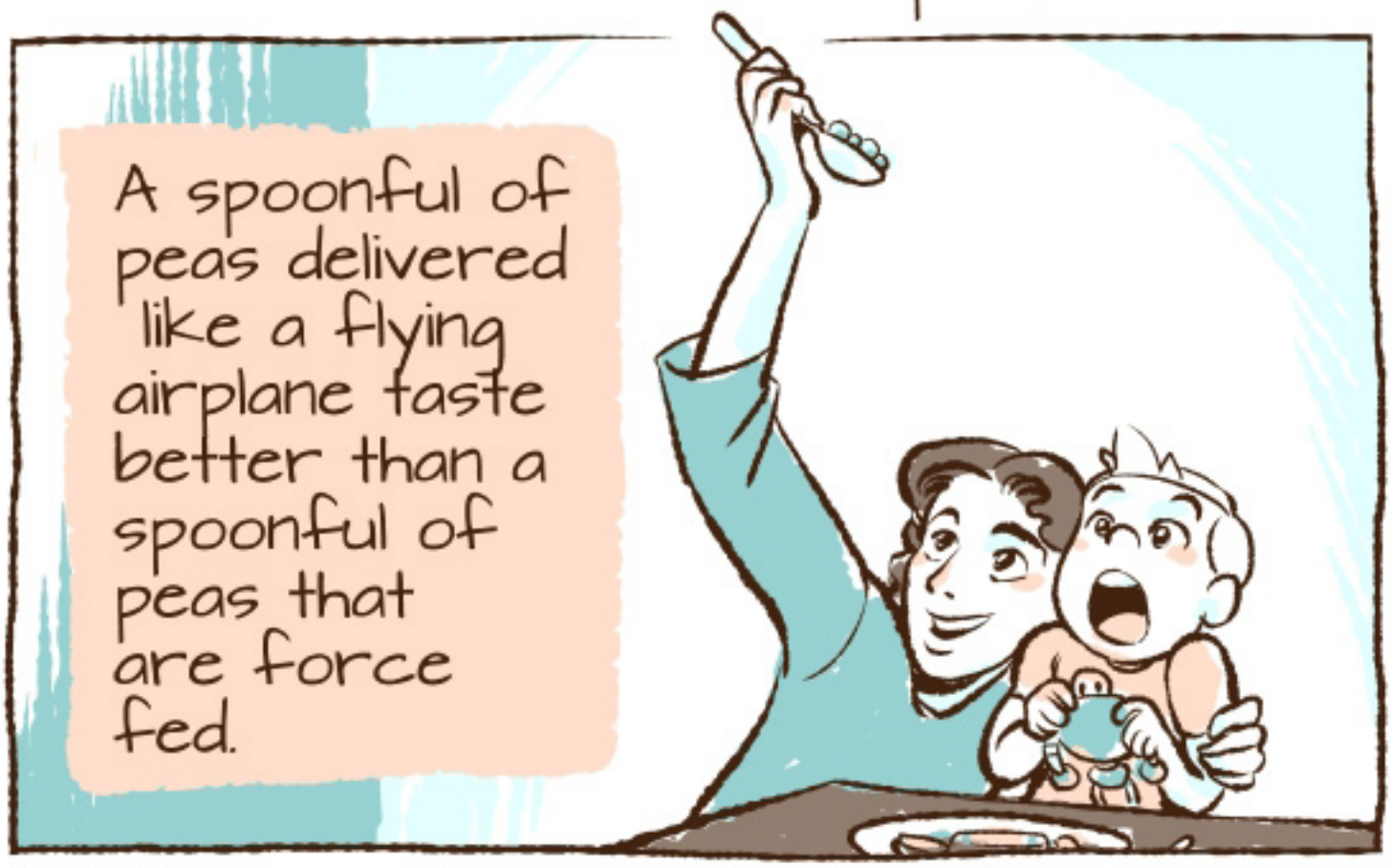

Imagine a mother trying to get her little boy to eat food that is good for him...

First she cuts the meat into small, bite-sized pieces, just like you might break down your goals into small, manageable tasks.

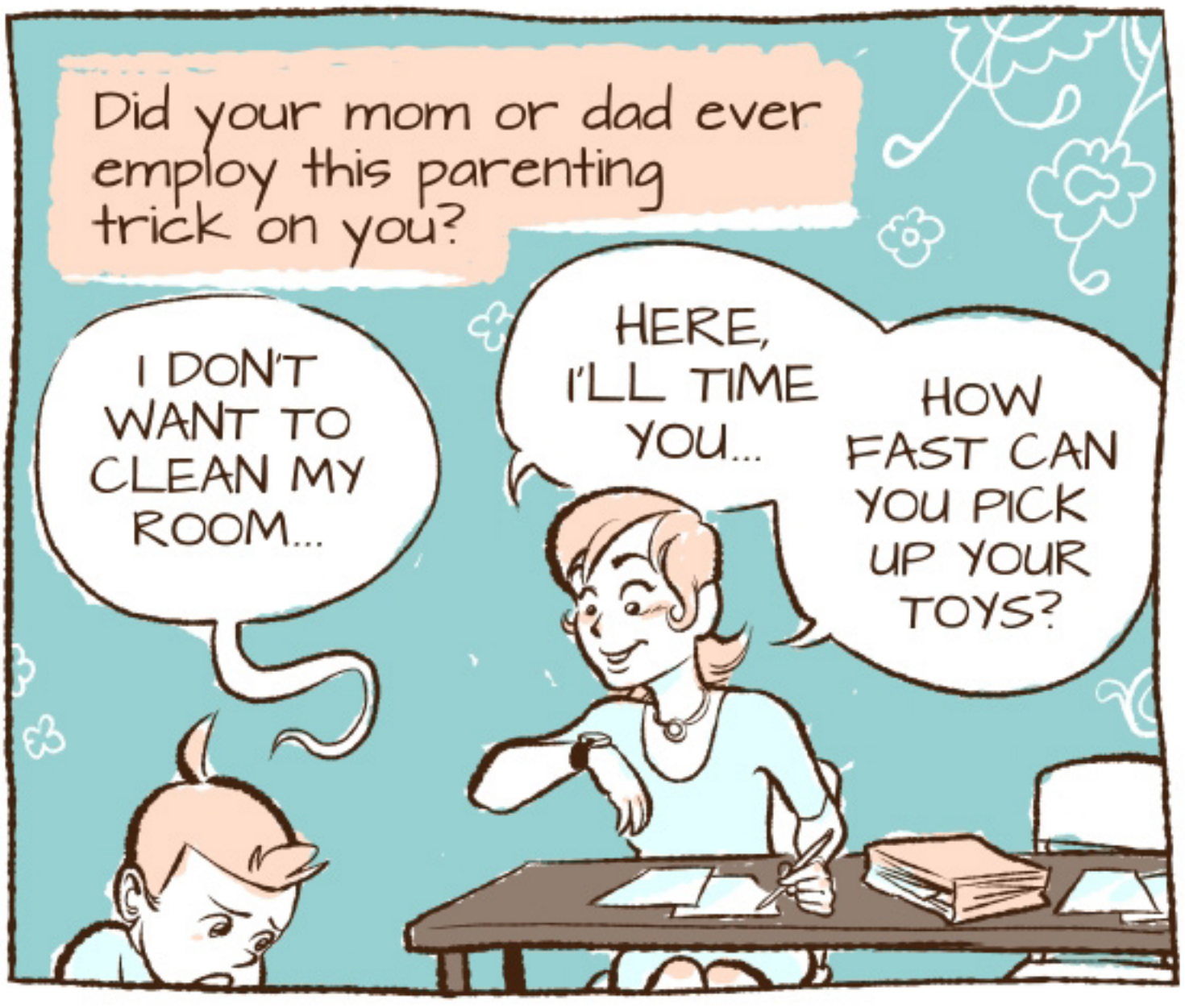
Maybe the boy doesn't like milk, so she adds a twisty straw to make it fun enough to drink.

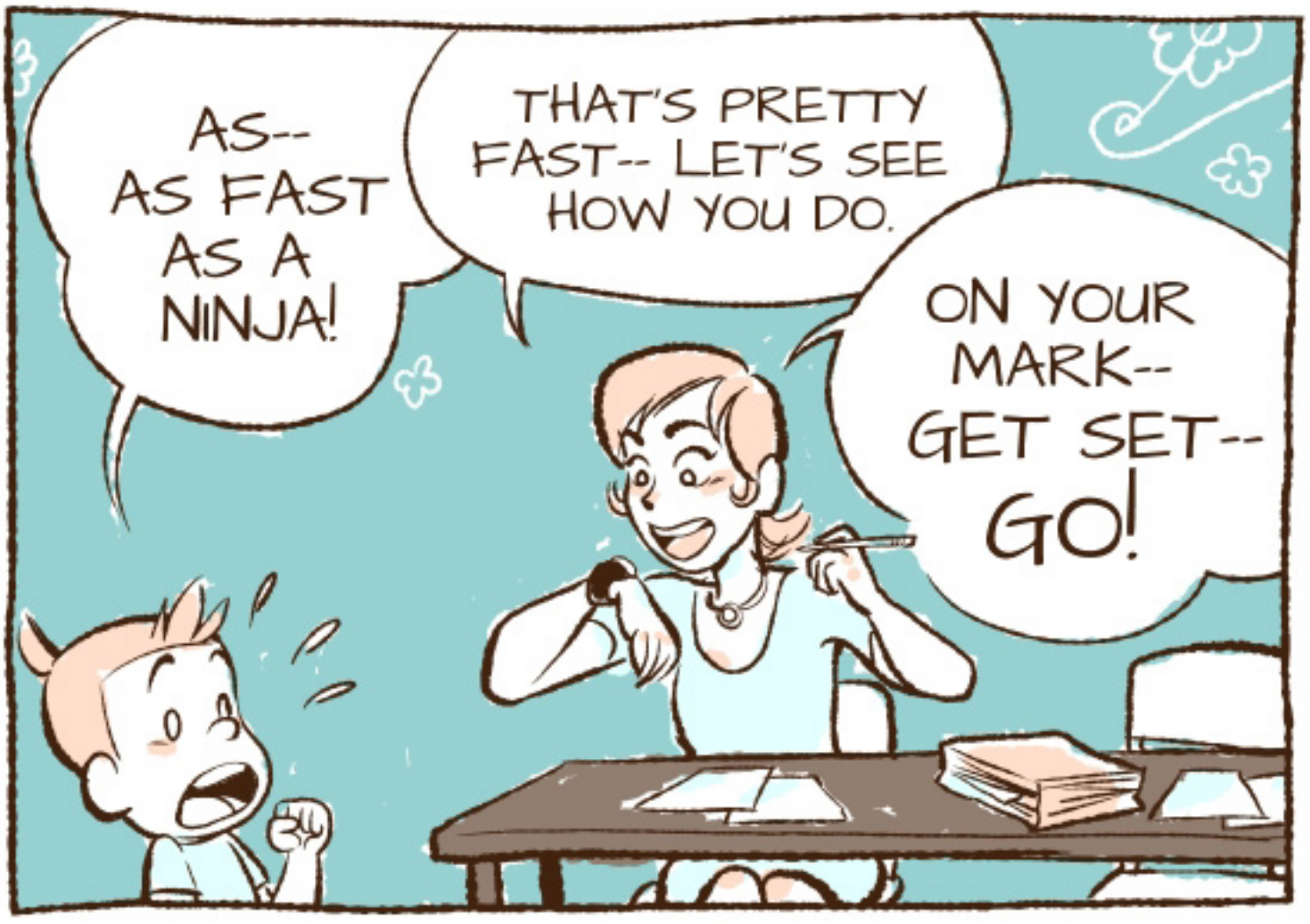
As we'll soon learn, fun is a prime motivator.
PHRT

The big idea is instead of trying to incentivize unpleasant work, we need to make work more pleasant.



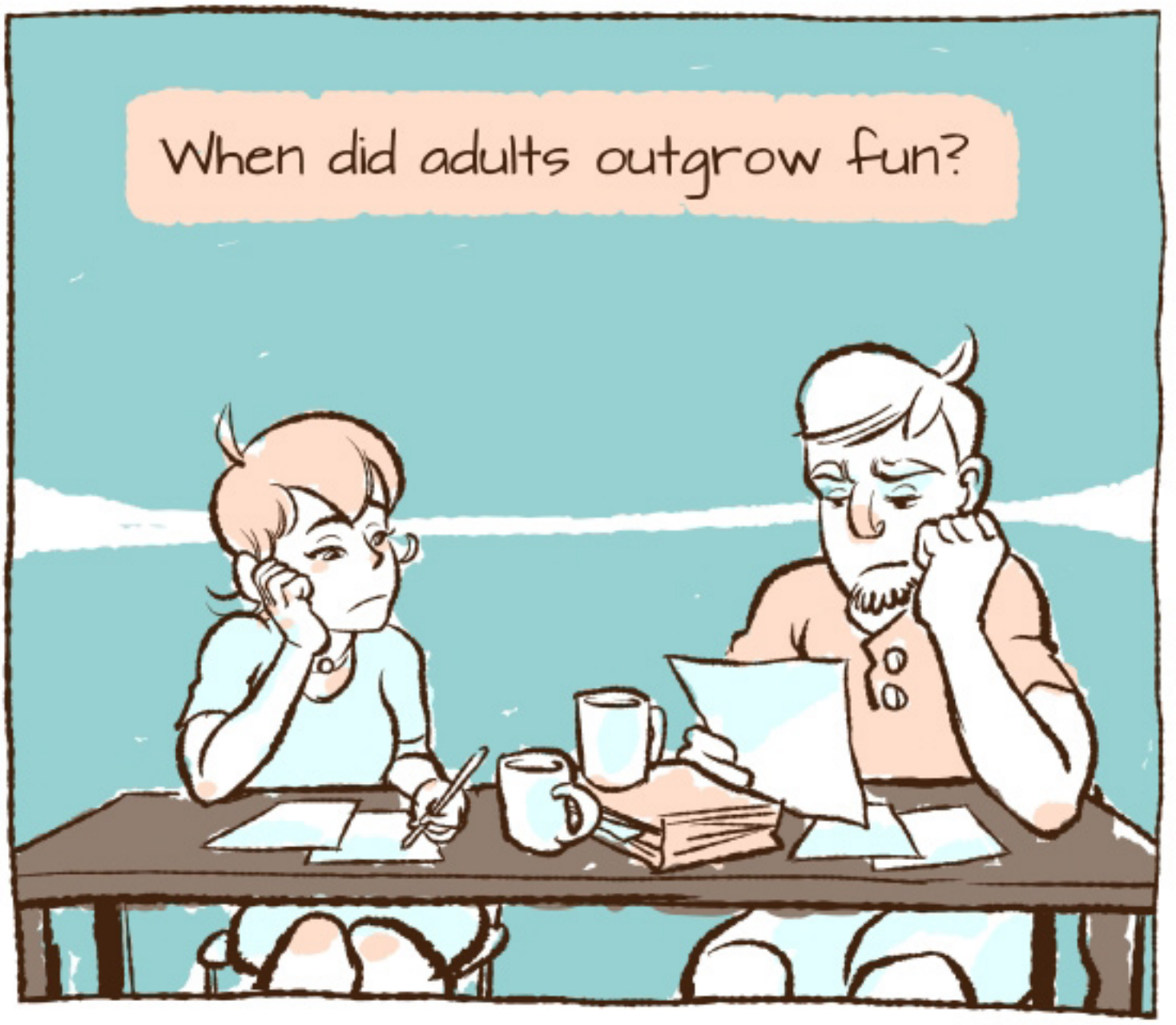
Fun Gets Done



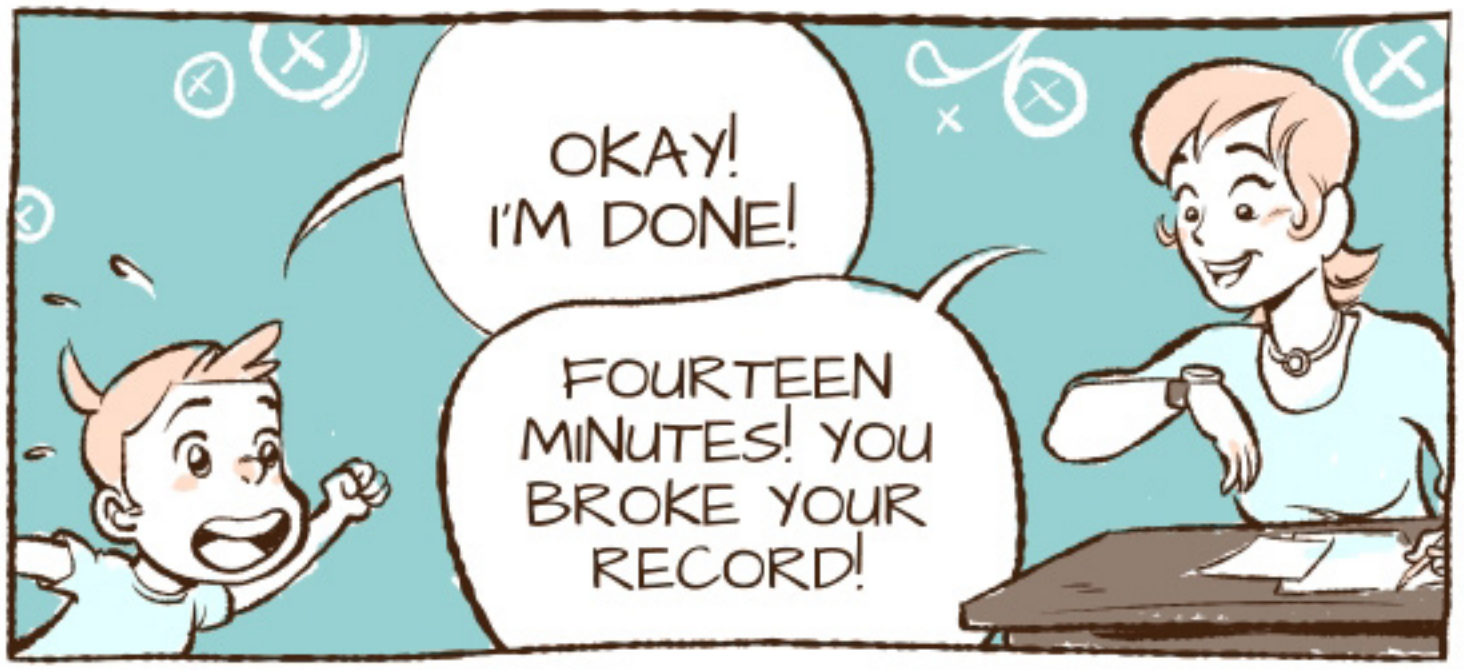


It's quite the miracle when you think about it. Like turning water into wine, parents can turn dull work into enjoyable work.

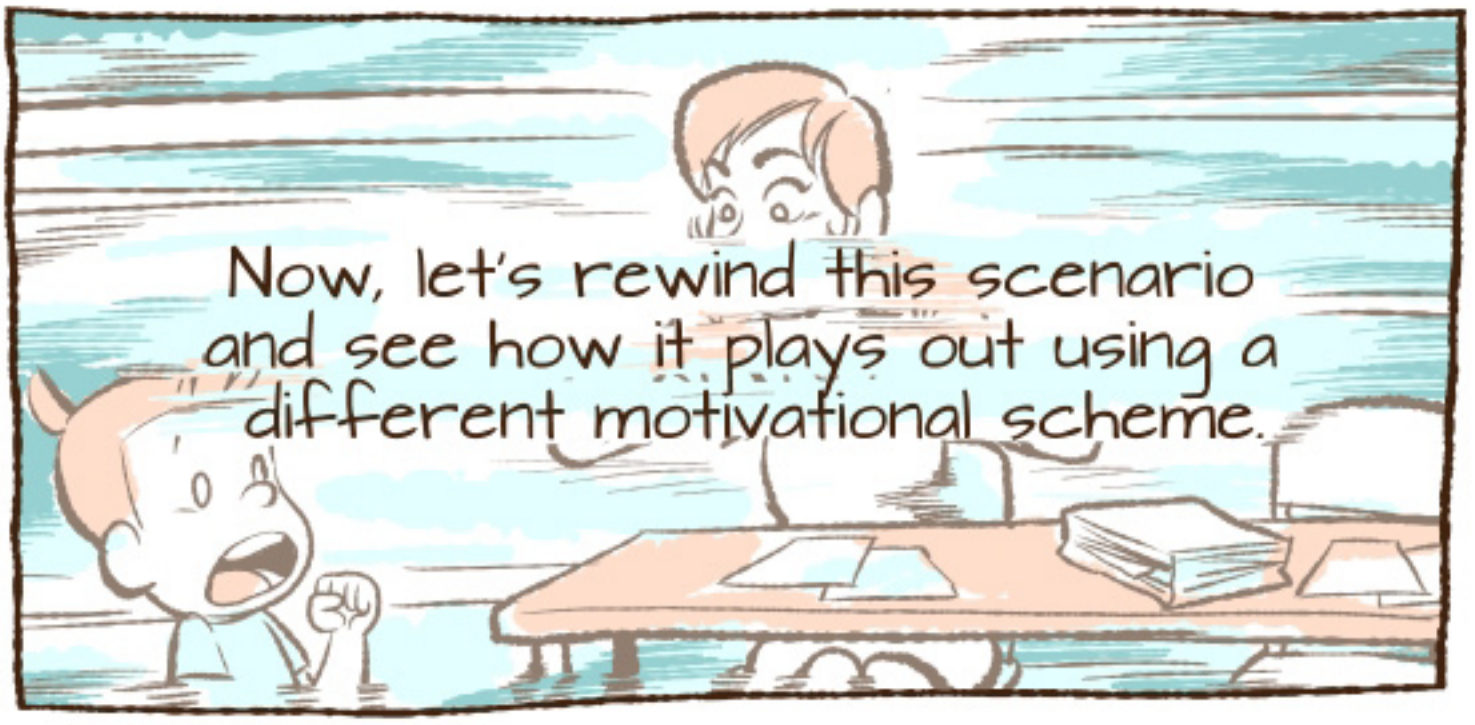
Yet in spite of having this magical power, they never seem to use it on themselves.



Well, we never did, but many of us have forgotten the power of it. Let me tell you a splendid secret:



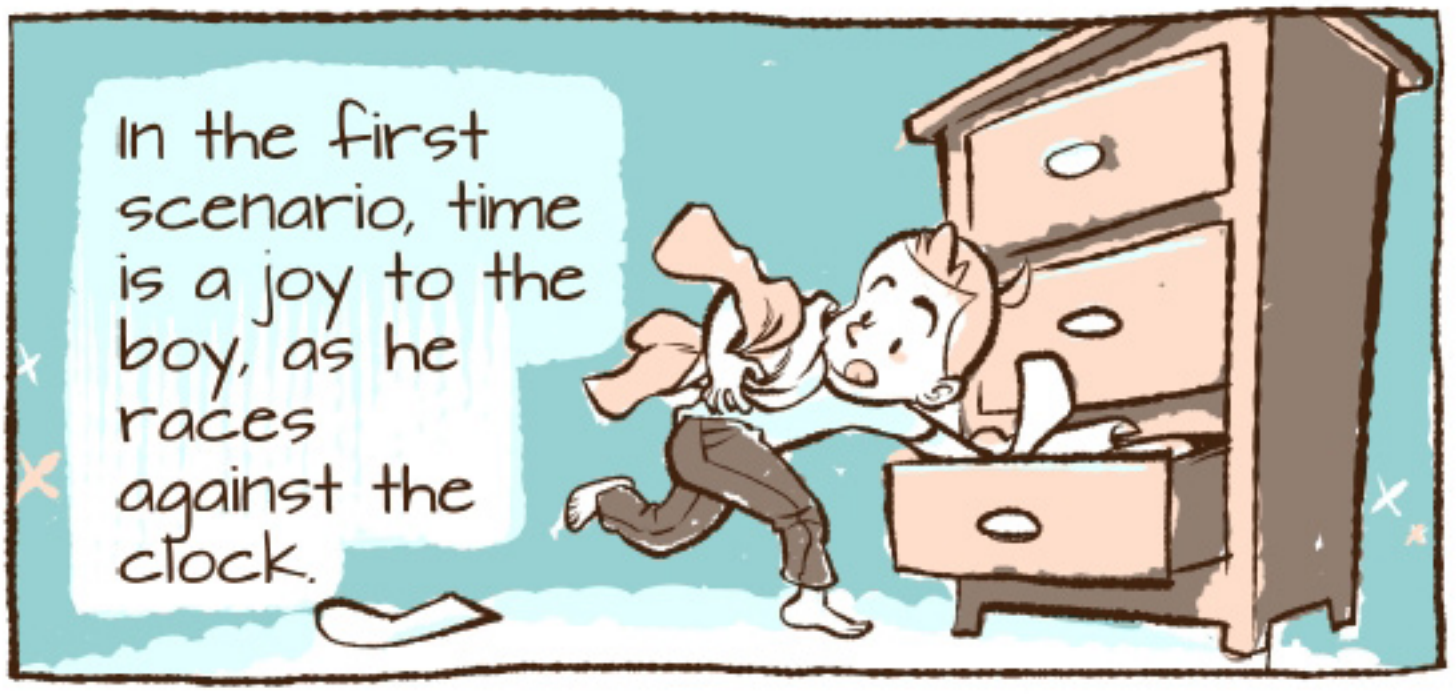
Do you see the wonders of fun?

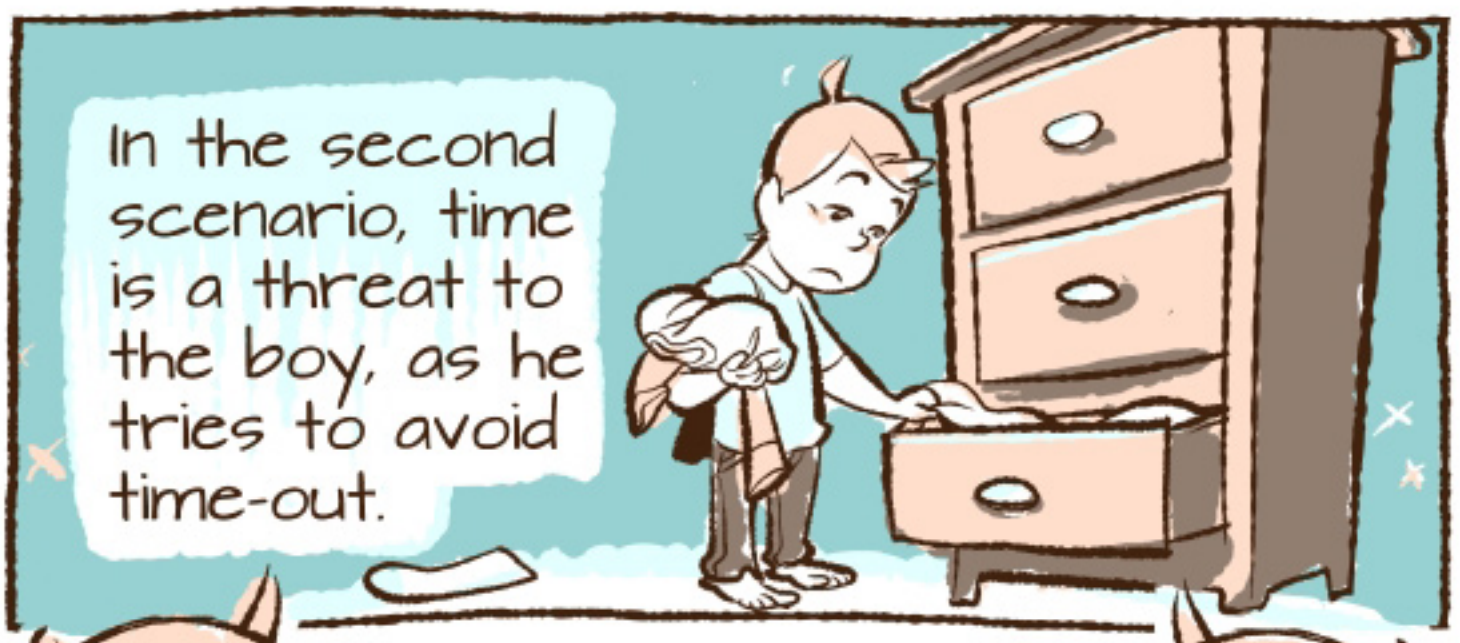


I DON'T WANT TO CLEAN MY ROOM...
I'LL GIVE YOU A SNACK IF YOU DO.

I WANT CANDY!
I'LL GIVE YOU AN APPLE... NOW, DO AS I SAY OR I'LL STICK YOU IN TIME OUT.

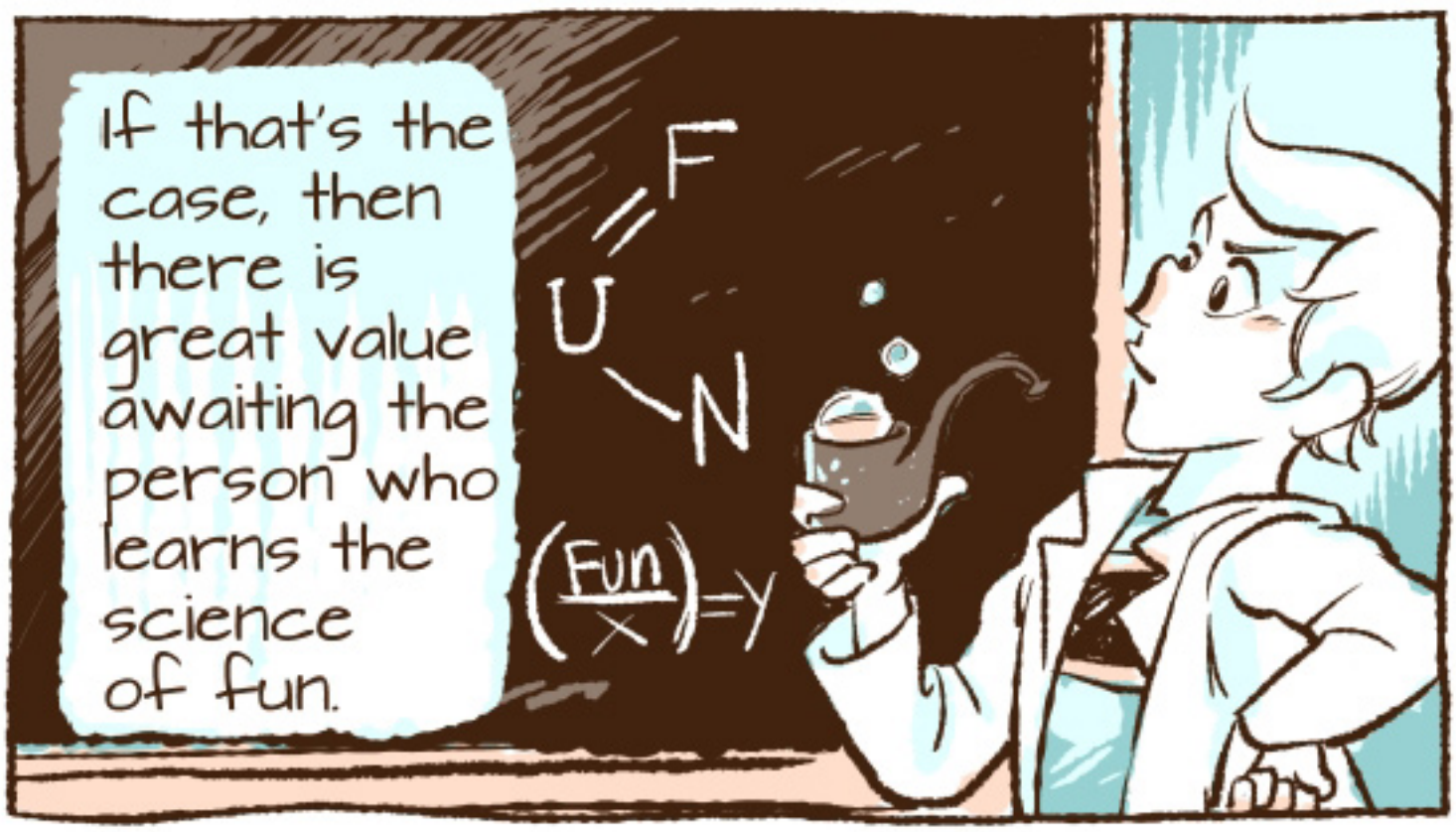
BUT I DON'T WANT TO CLEAN MY ROOM...
YOU'LL JUST HAVE TO GRIN AND BEAR IT.





And yet, in both cases, he is doing exactly the same work!

We assume work is inherently hard, but what if work is just hard to make into something fun?



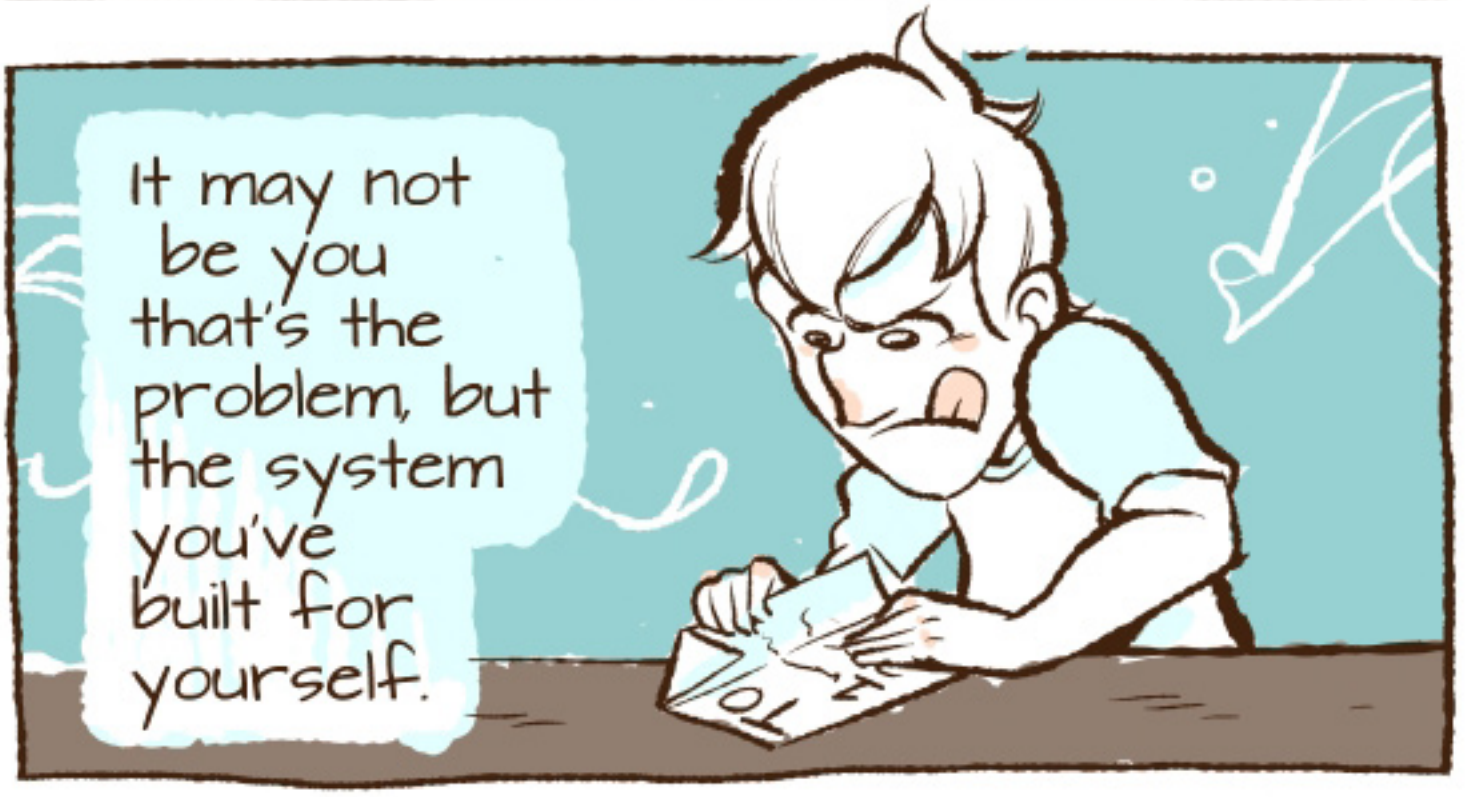
Sure you might have to put your nose to the grindstone every once in a while, but can we all admit that is not a sustainable work practice?

Think how fast you'll lose your nose!

If fun is involved however, you may actually work harder.

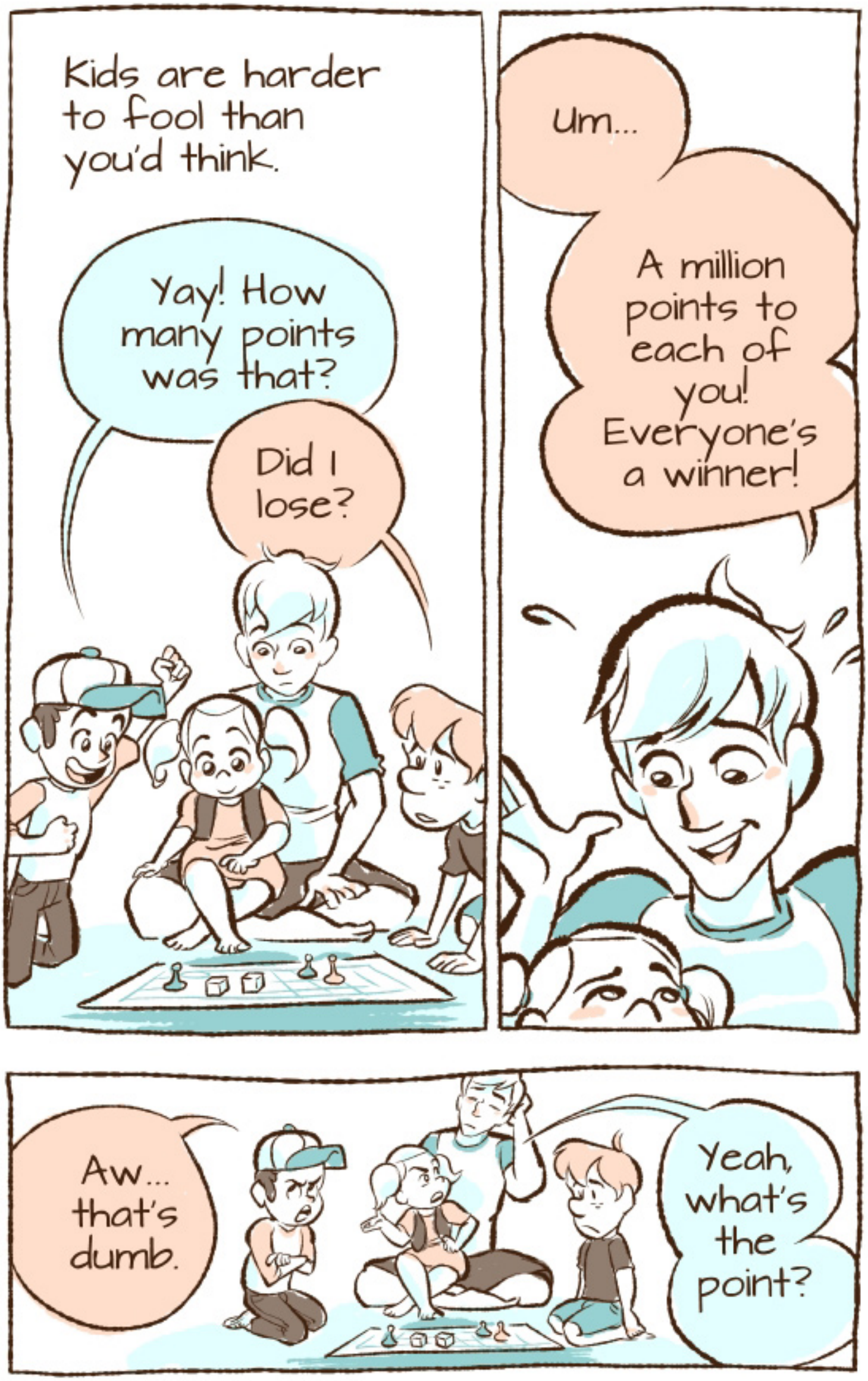
VROOM! VROOM!

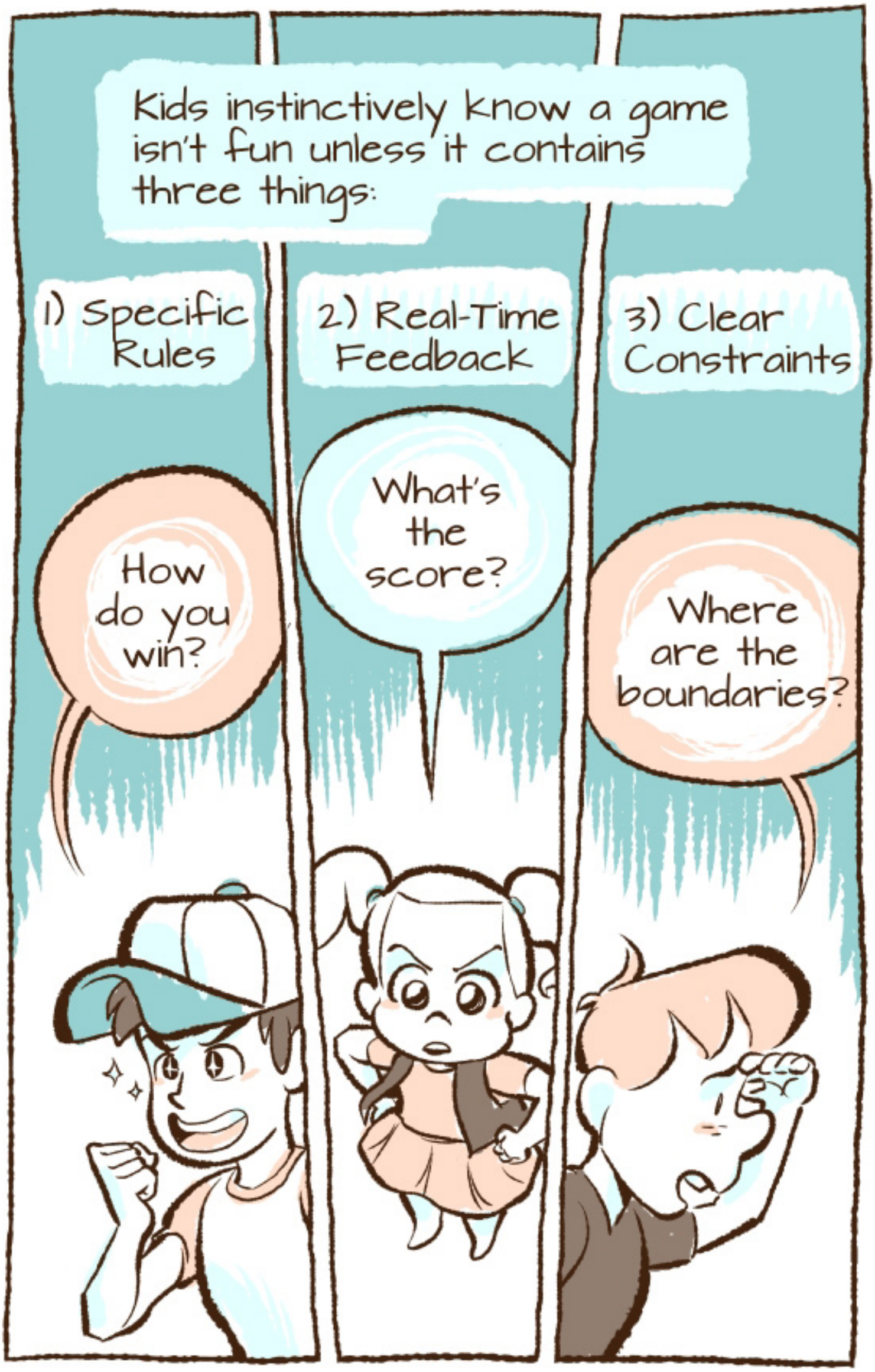
If you can't seem to get yourself to work --even on projects you care about-- you need not jump to the conclusion you are weak or lazy.
To Do
1
2
3


It may not be you that's the problem, but the system you've built for yourself.

Let's explore a work methodology that harmonizes with your internal love for fun.

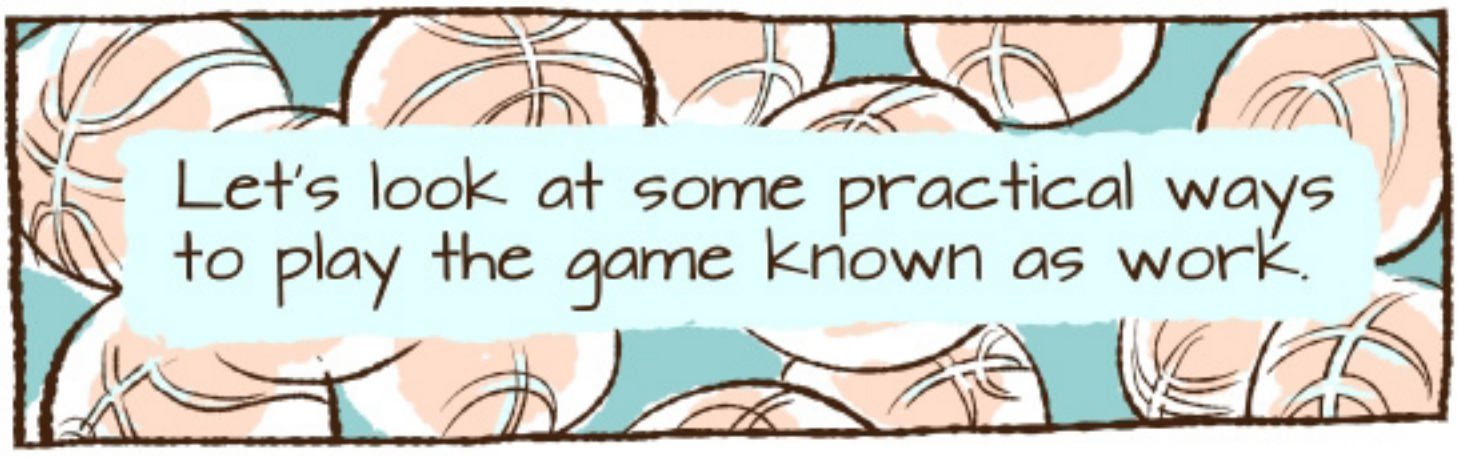
On Gamification



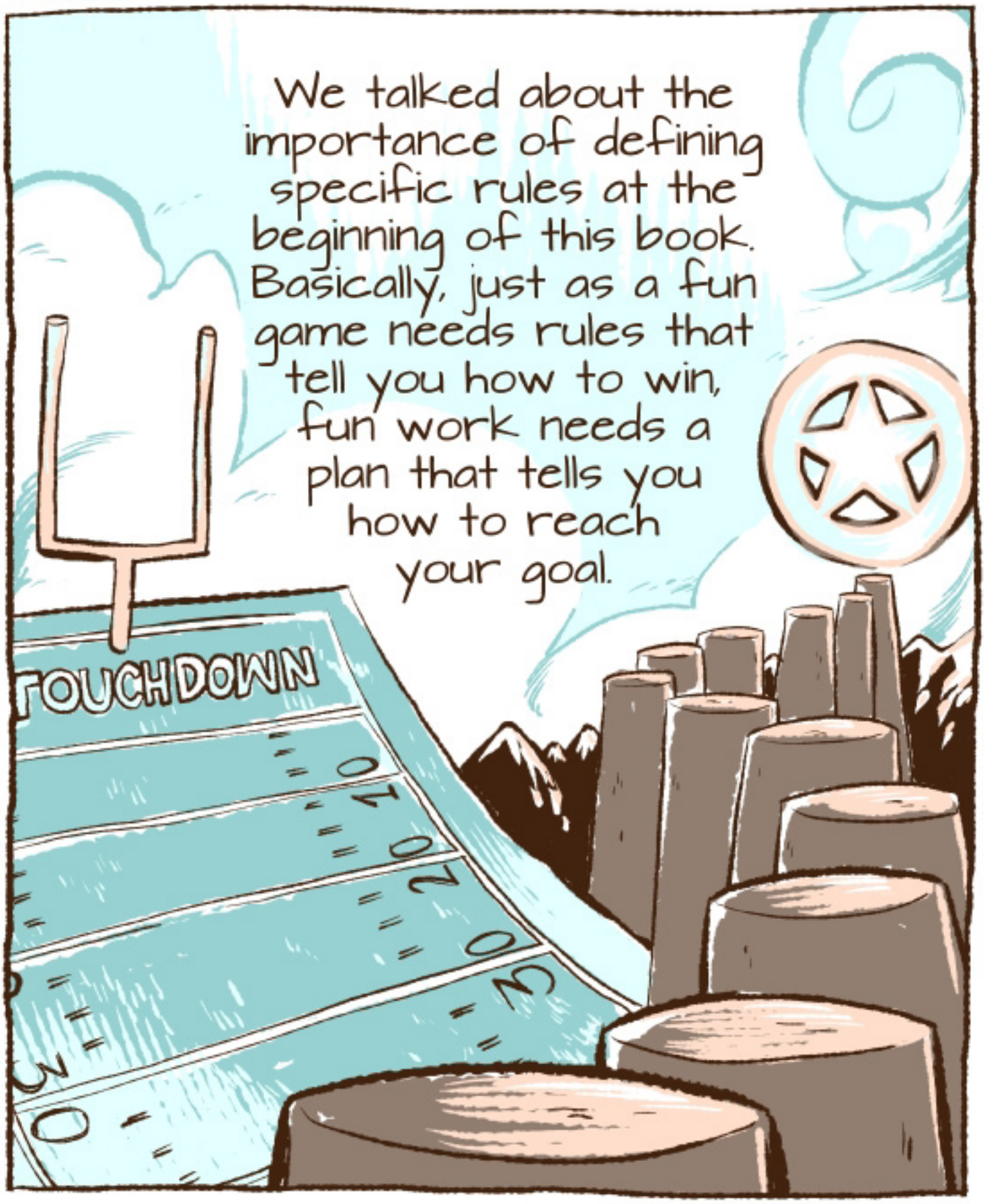

Kids instinctively know a game isn't fun unless it contains three things:
1) Specific Rules
2) Real-Time Feedback
3) Clear Constraints
How do you win?
What's the score?
Where are the boundaries?

And THAT is incredibly motivating.

Using the same principles that make games fun, we can make work fun! This is exciting because if you can make something fun, you can get it done.

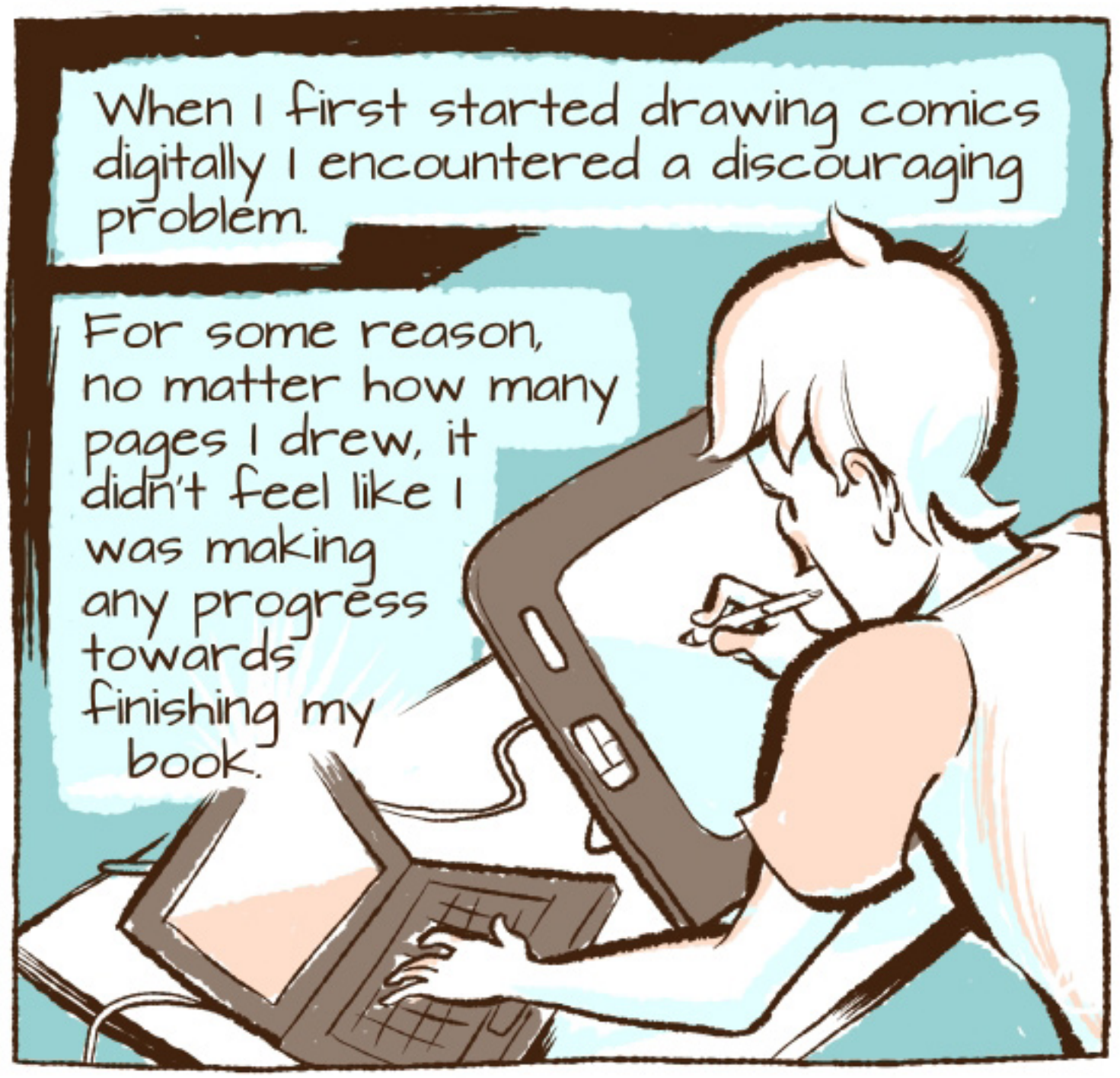


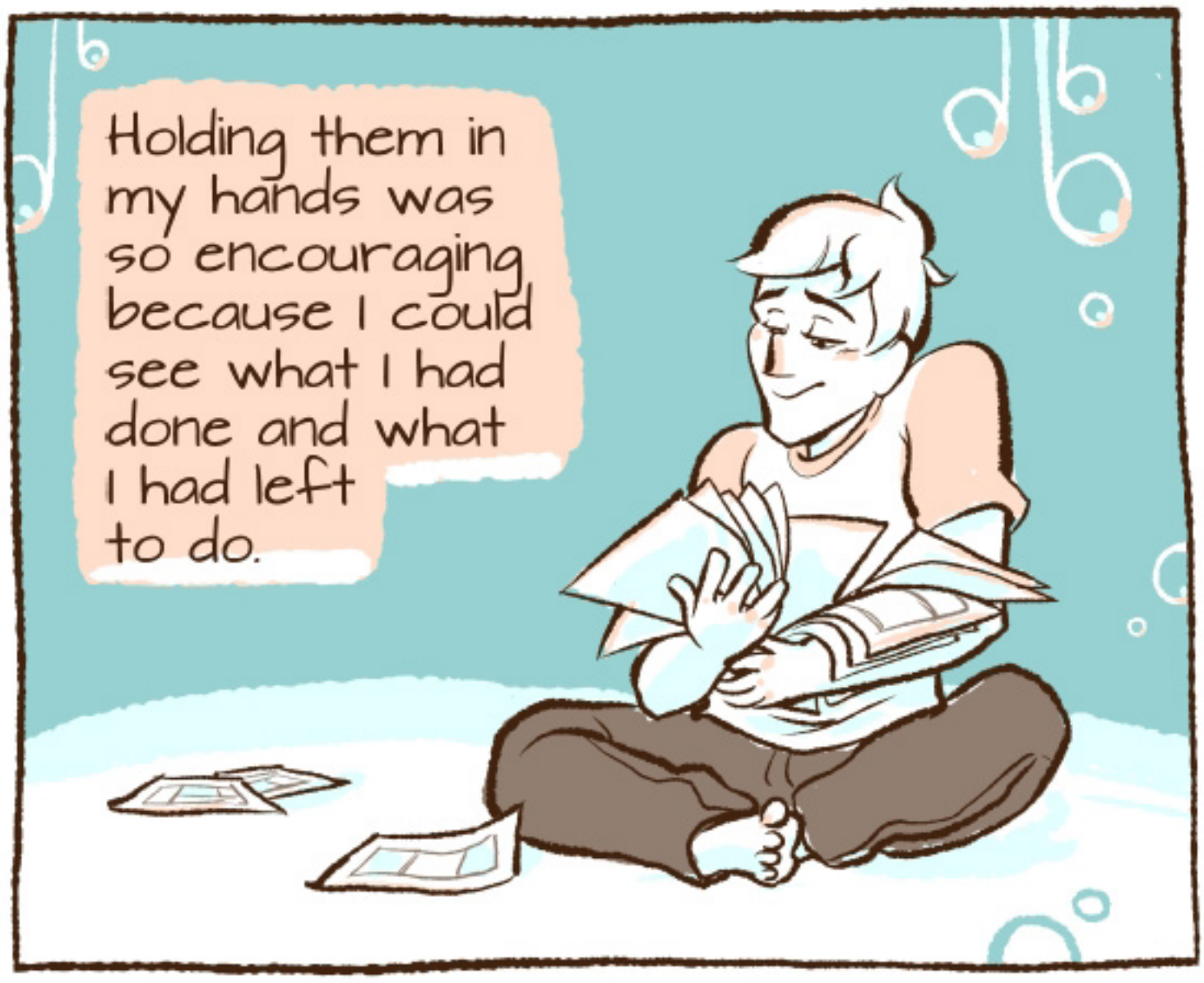
1 Specific Rules



The more specific your plans are, the more motivated you will be!

2 Real-Time Feedback





By making my progress tangible, I had tapped into the power of real-time feedback.

In a game, a scoreboard makes progress tangible by tracking the points.

Athletes need only glance at the scoreboard to see how close they are to winning.

Build some kind of scoreboard to track how close you are to reaching your goals.

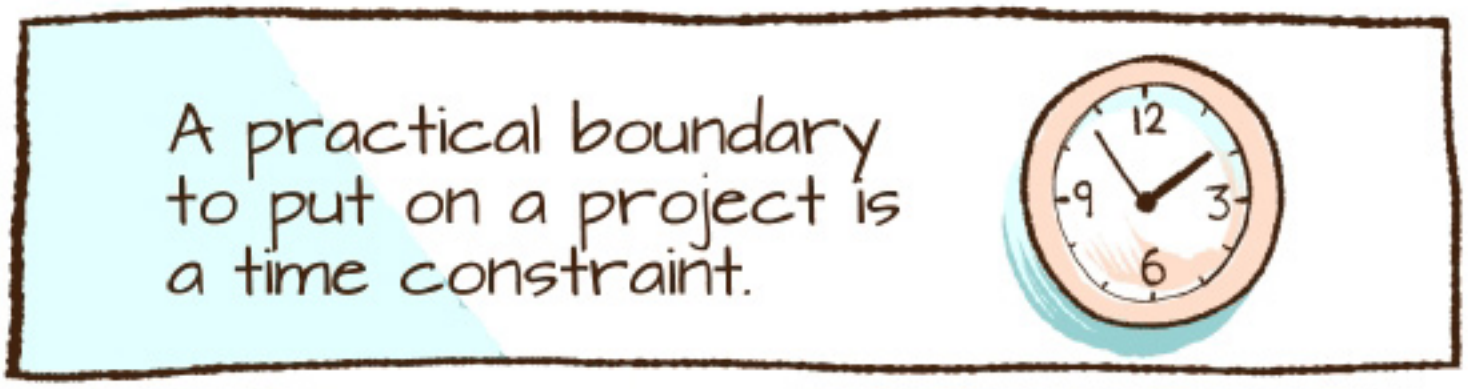
Updating a log, chart or excel sheet can give you real-time feedback on your progress and be quite encouraging!

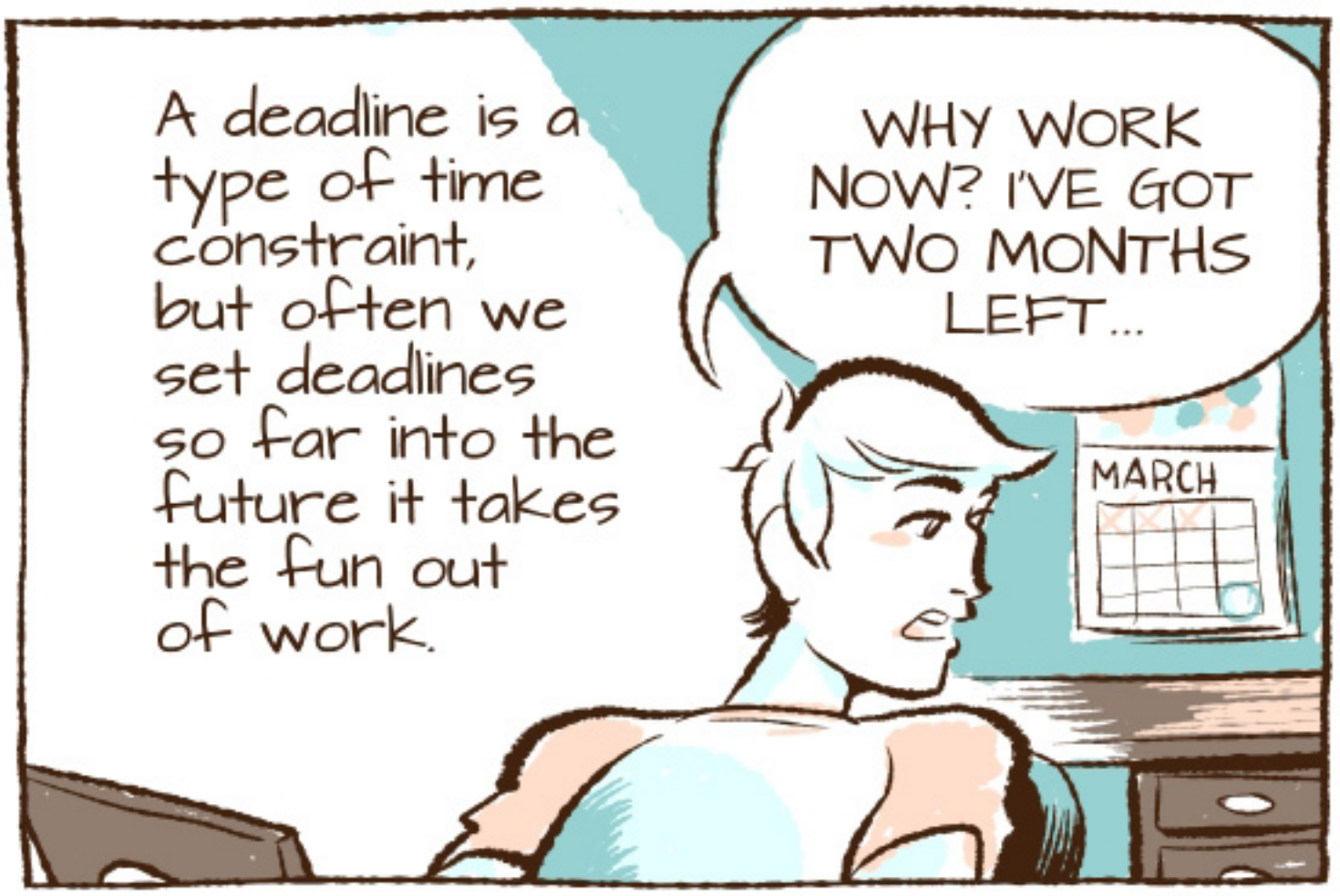
9/2/2013 – 3 PAGES %51 complete!

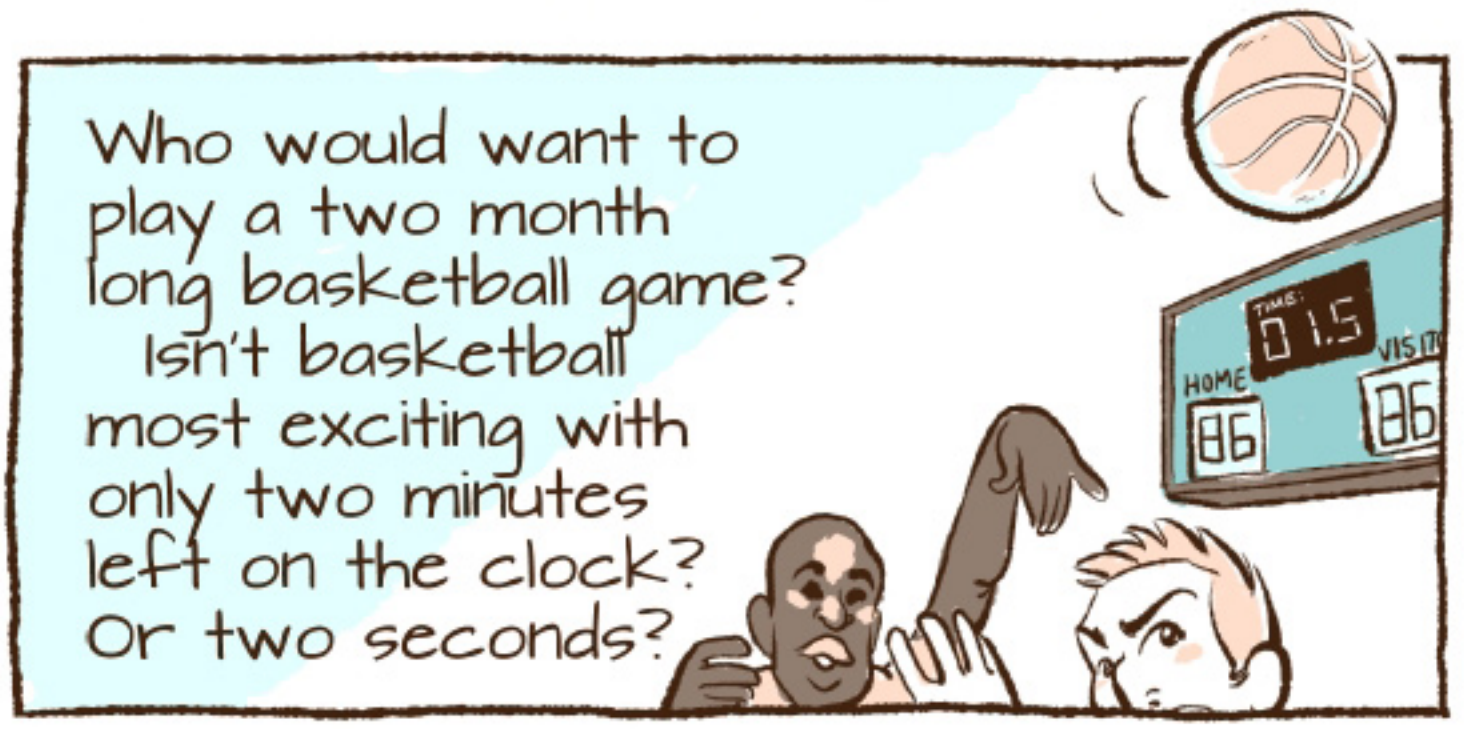
9/3/2013 – 2 PAGES PF %56 complete

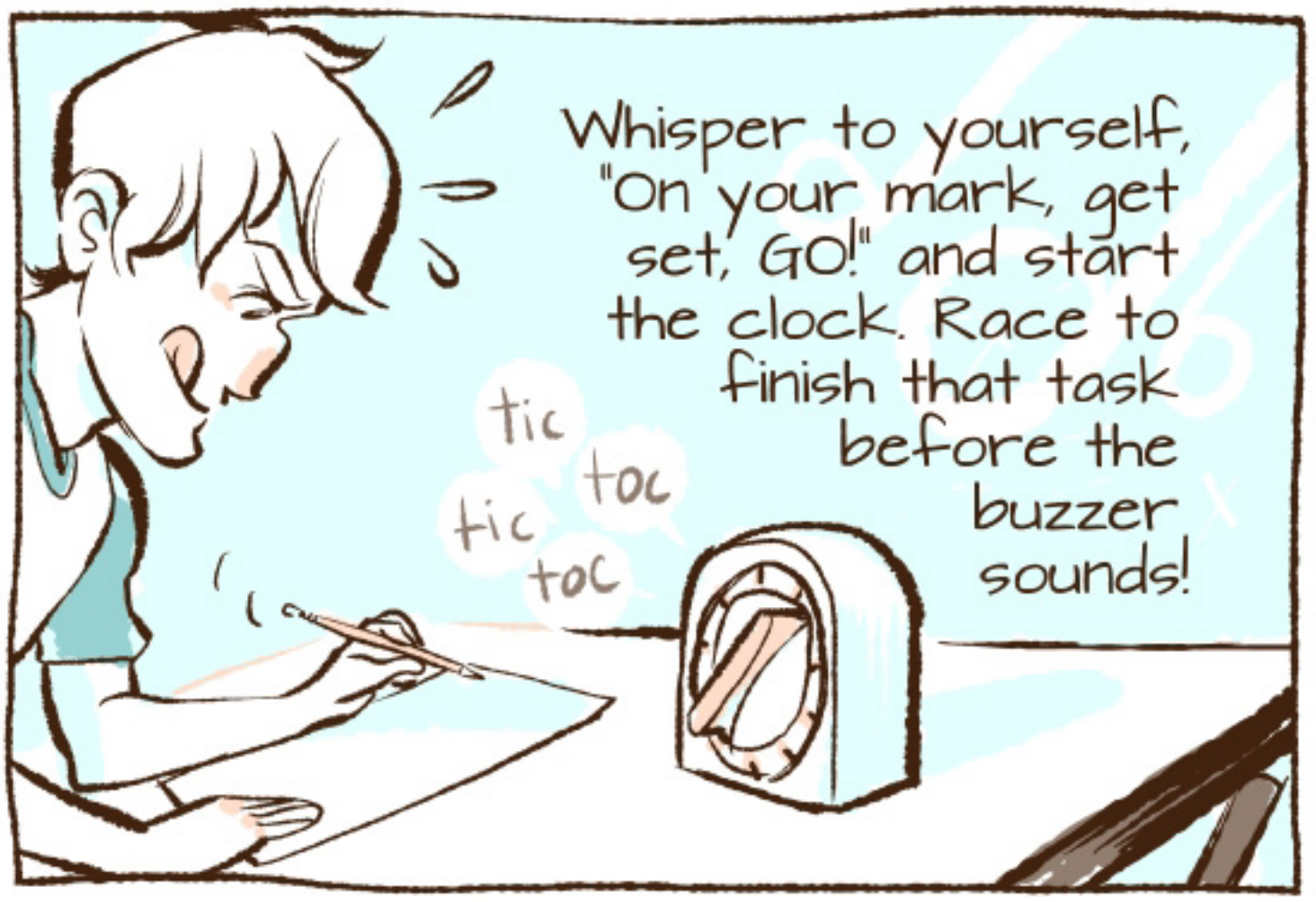
9/4/2013 – 6 PAG

3 Clear Constraints



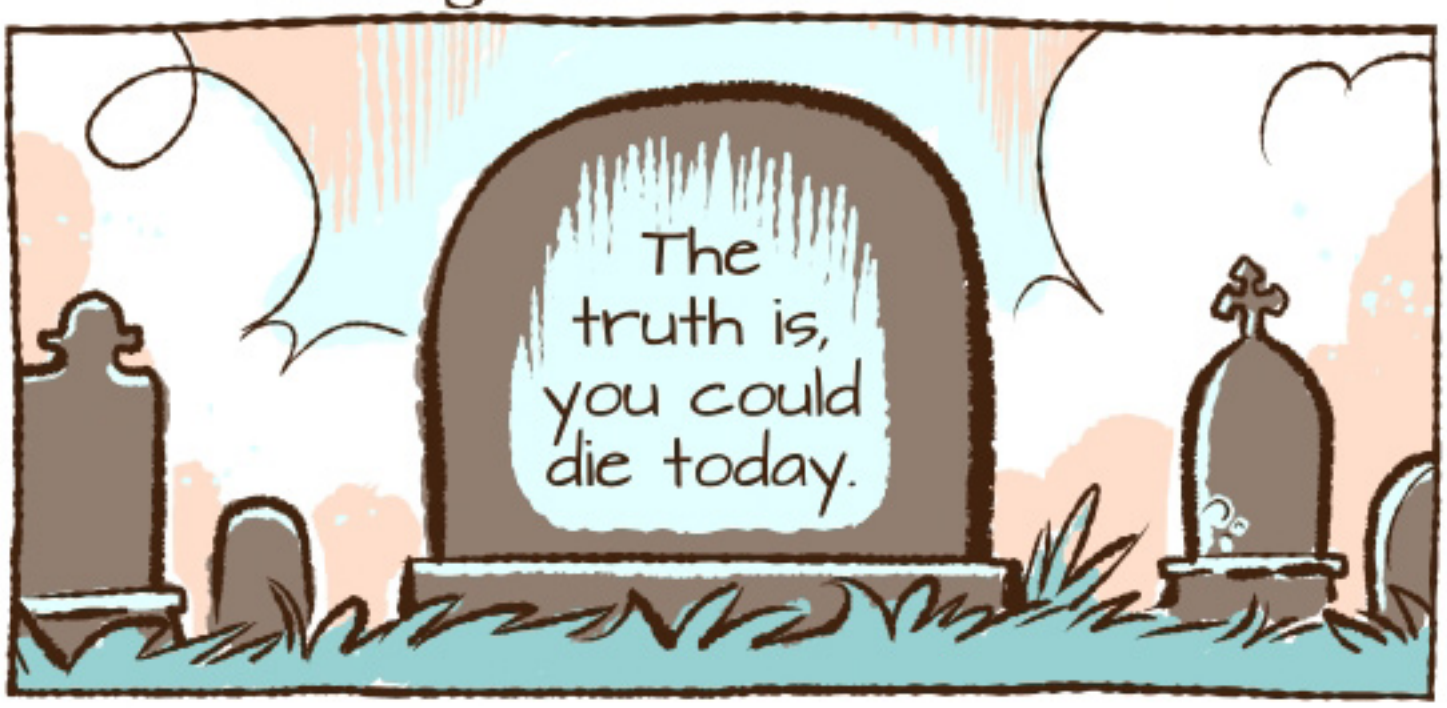






Then pick another step, set your timer and do it again! In this way, you will win the game of work.

On Avoiding Internet Distractions



As such, I feel a real sense of loss when I wake from an internet trance and realize I've unintentionally spent the afternoon watching viral videos and reading top ten lists.

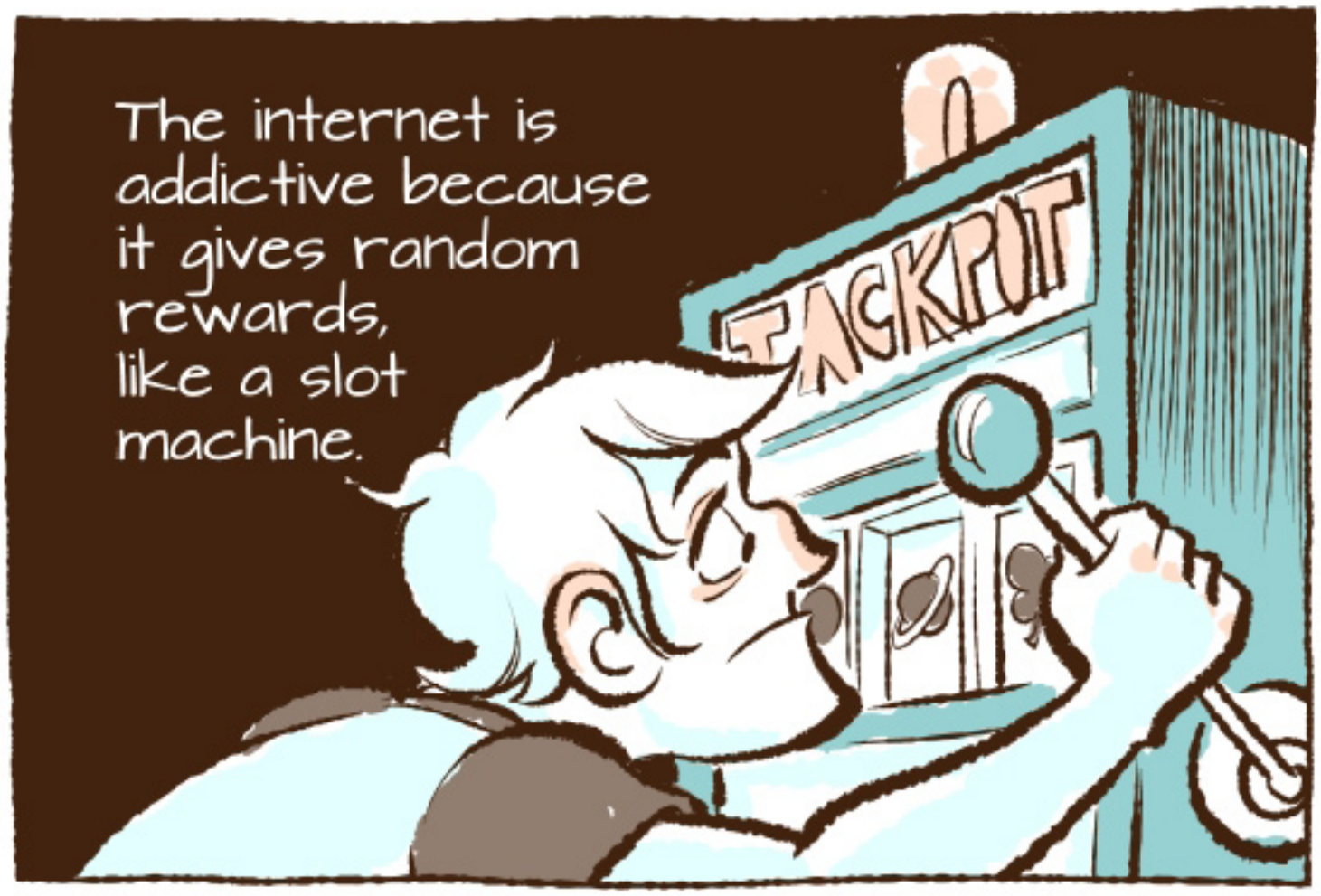
I have things to do before I die, goals to achieve, dreams to make reality.

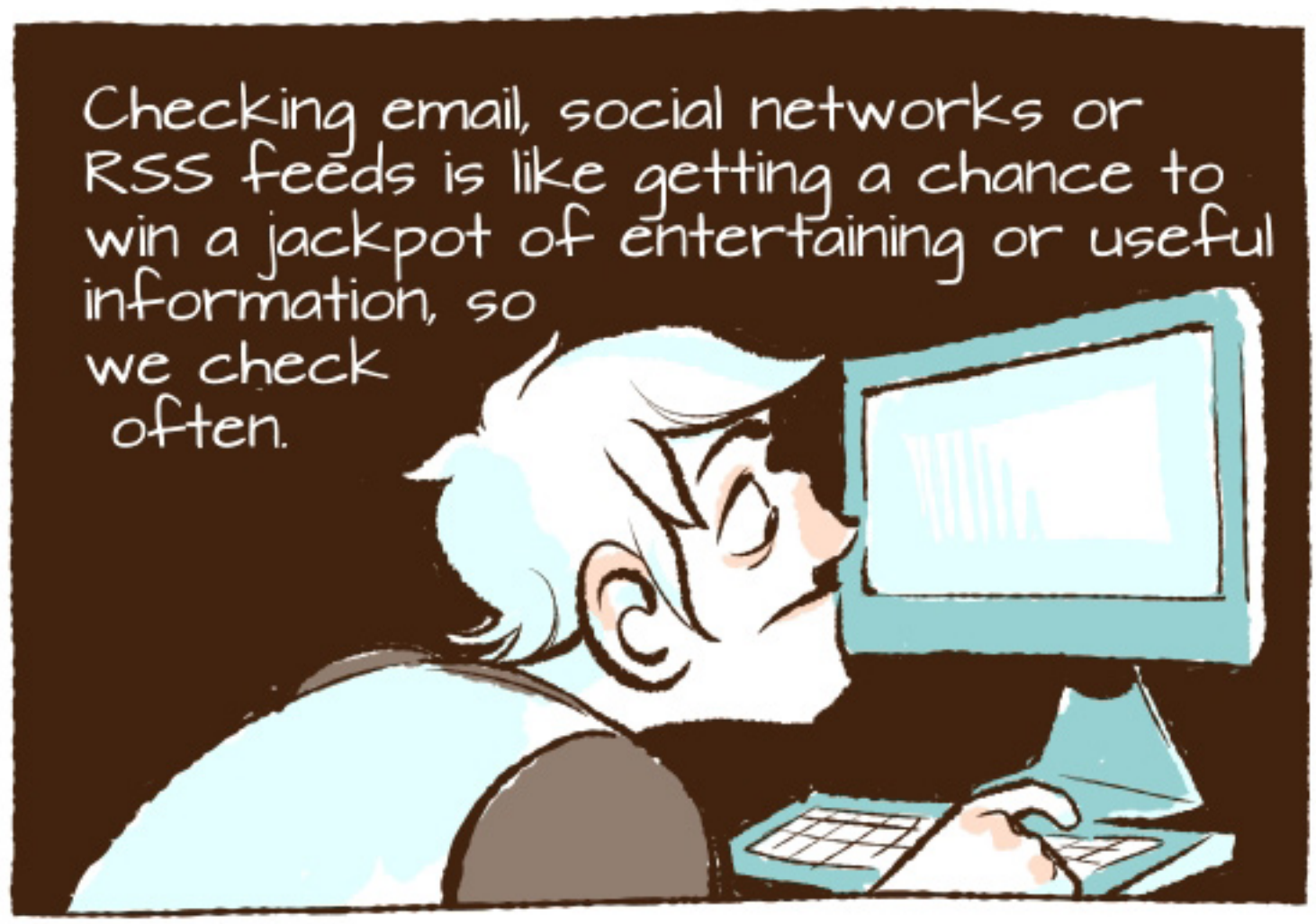
But first I need to...

...watch this...

...baby platypus video.

To stop the internet from eating our life away, we need to change our consumption habits.



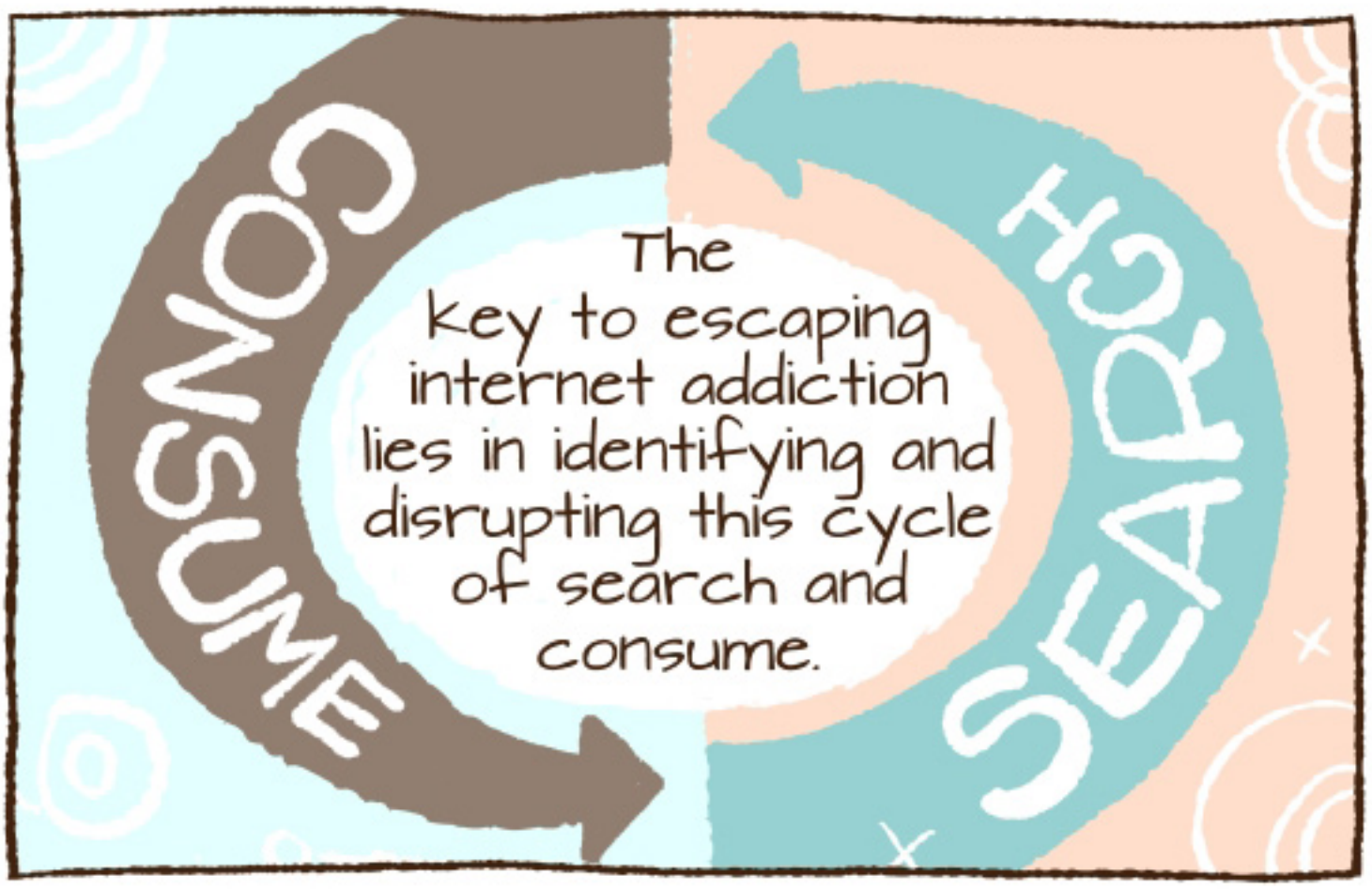


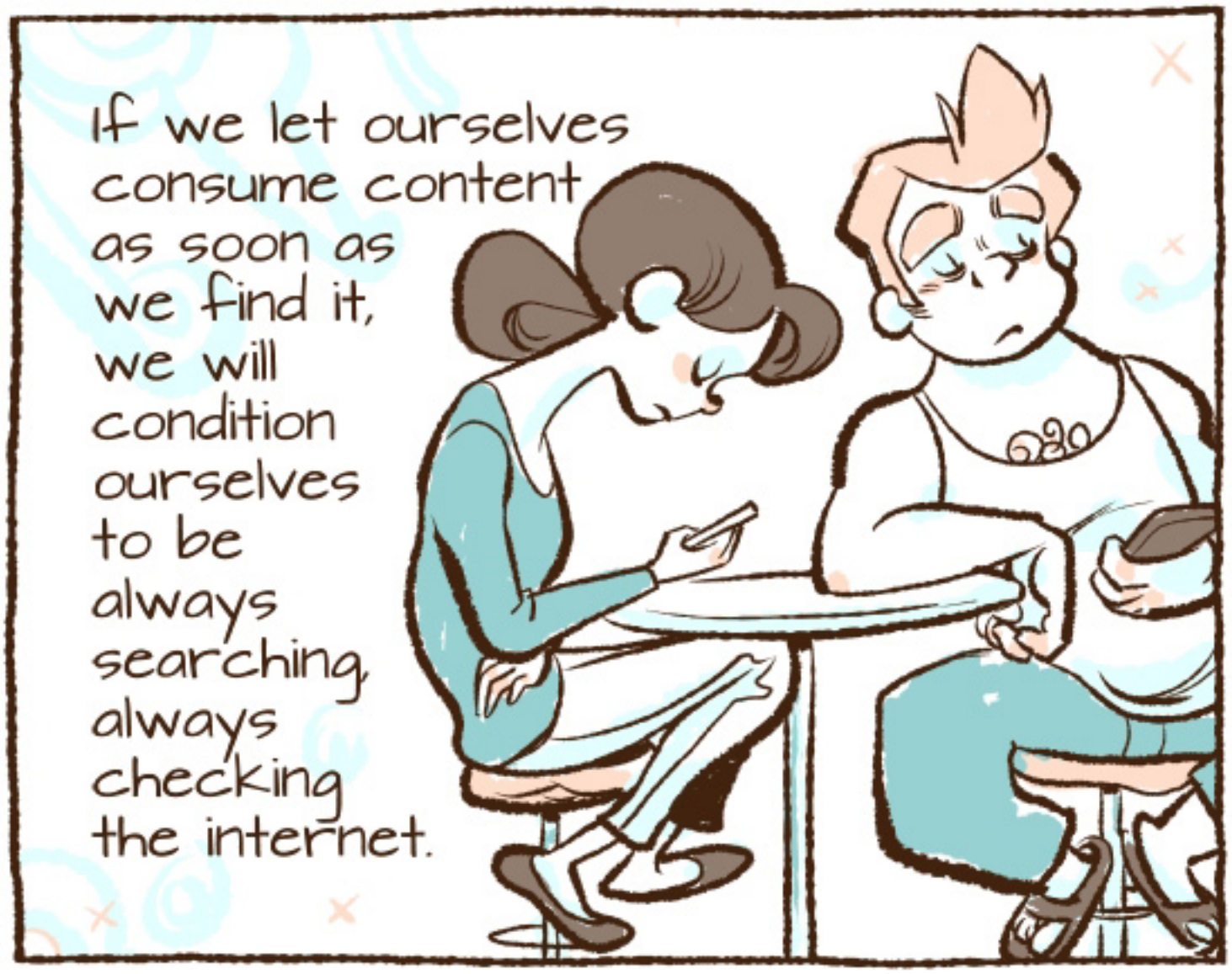
The problem is, every internet jewel we find requires digging through hundreds of links, updates and articles that usually aren't worth our time.

click click click click click

And, by immediately consuming the tasty content we find, we inadvertently reward ourselves for listlessly searching about the internet, and so, strengthen the habit.

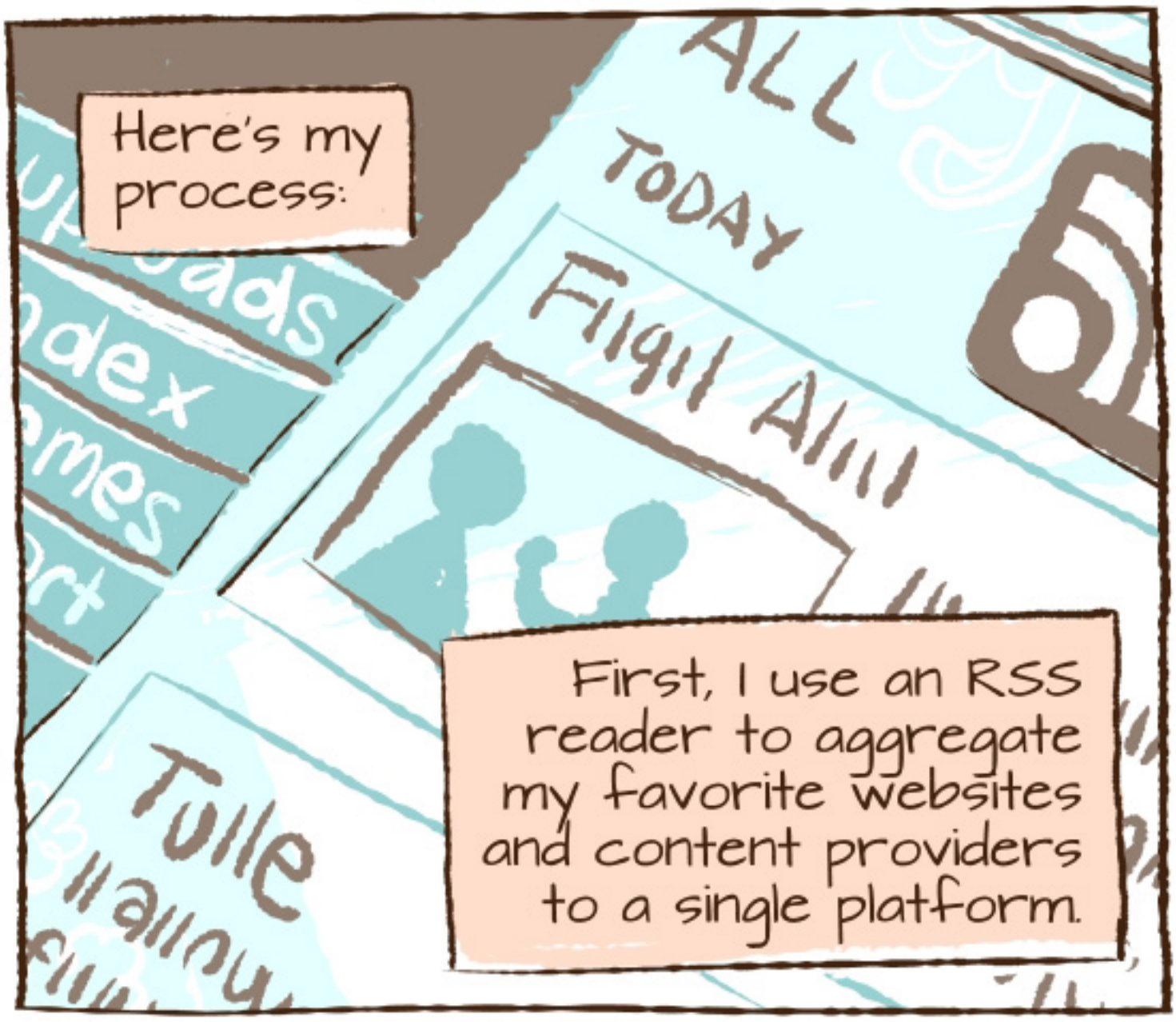
CLICK CLICK CLICK



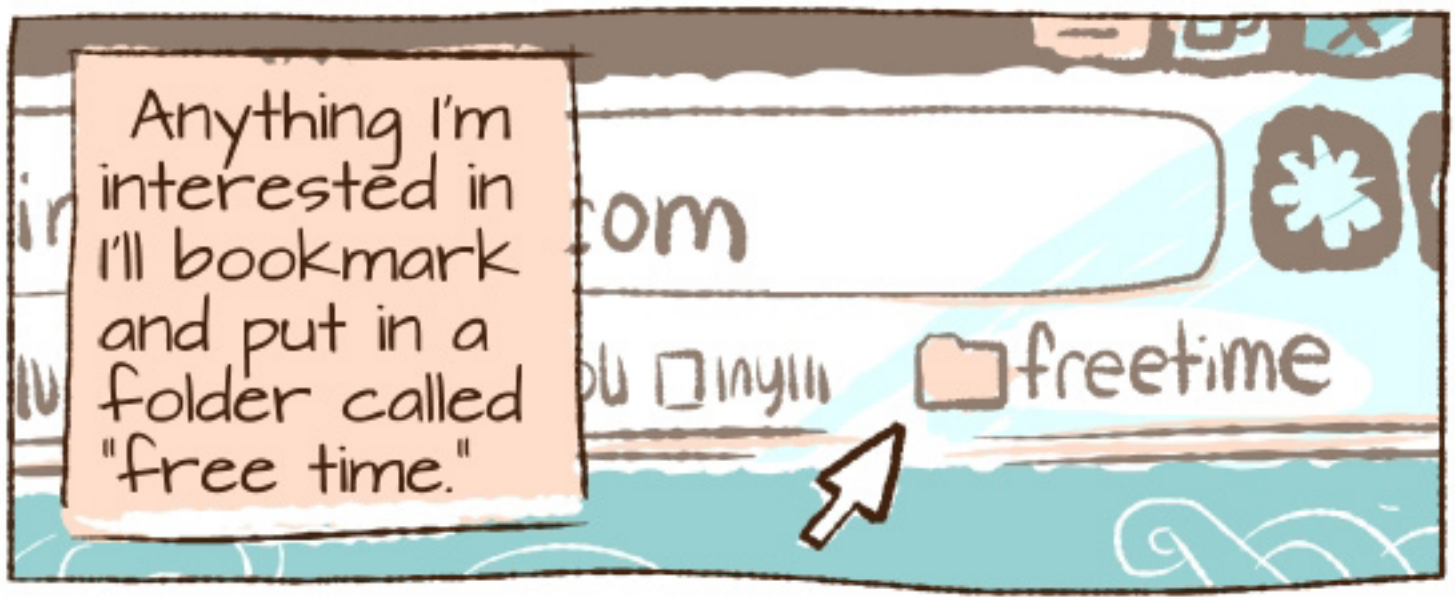


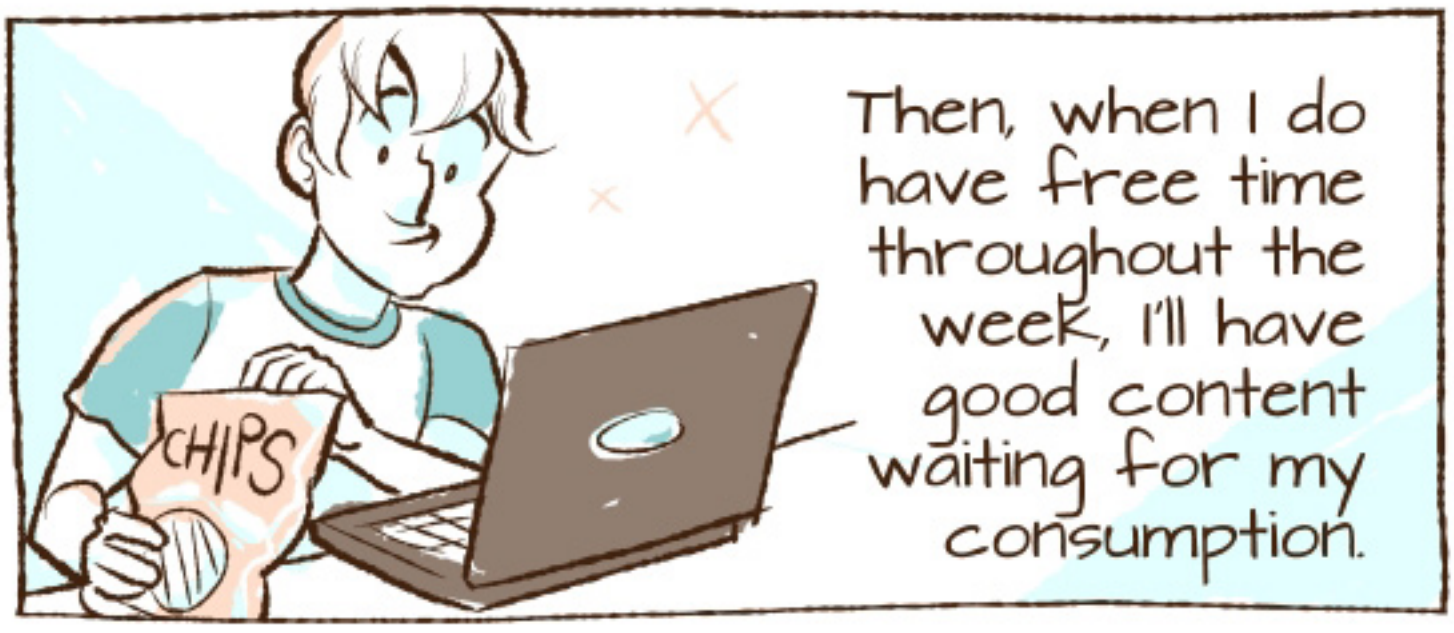
Conversely, if we delay consumption, the habit will wane.

This can be done many ways, so tailor a system specific to your needs.



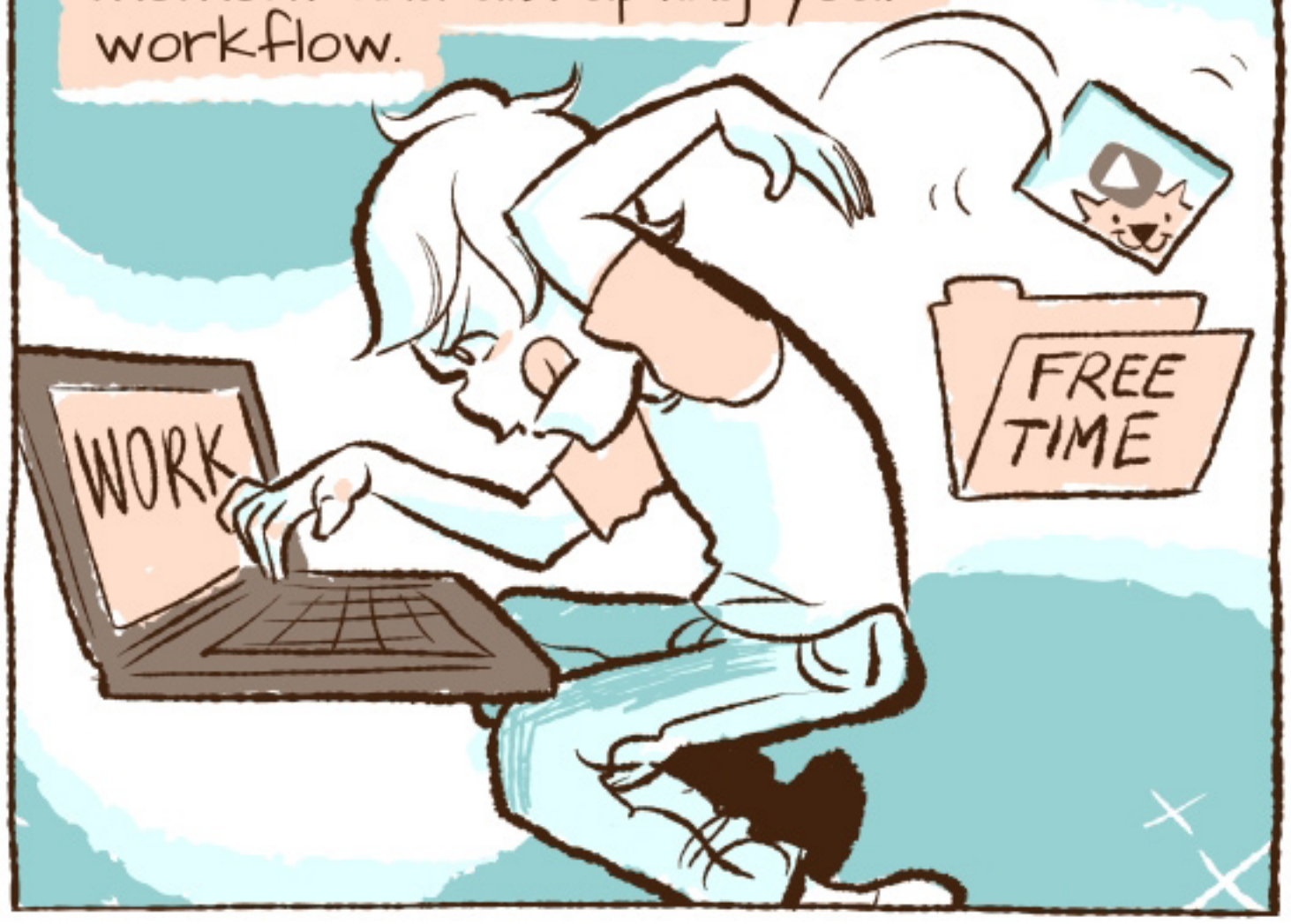
Once a week I'll stop by my feed and sort through the new content.

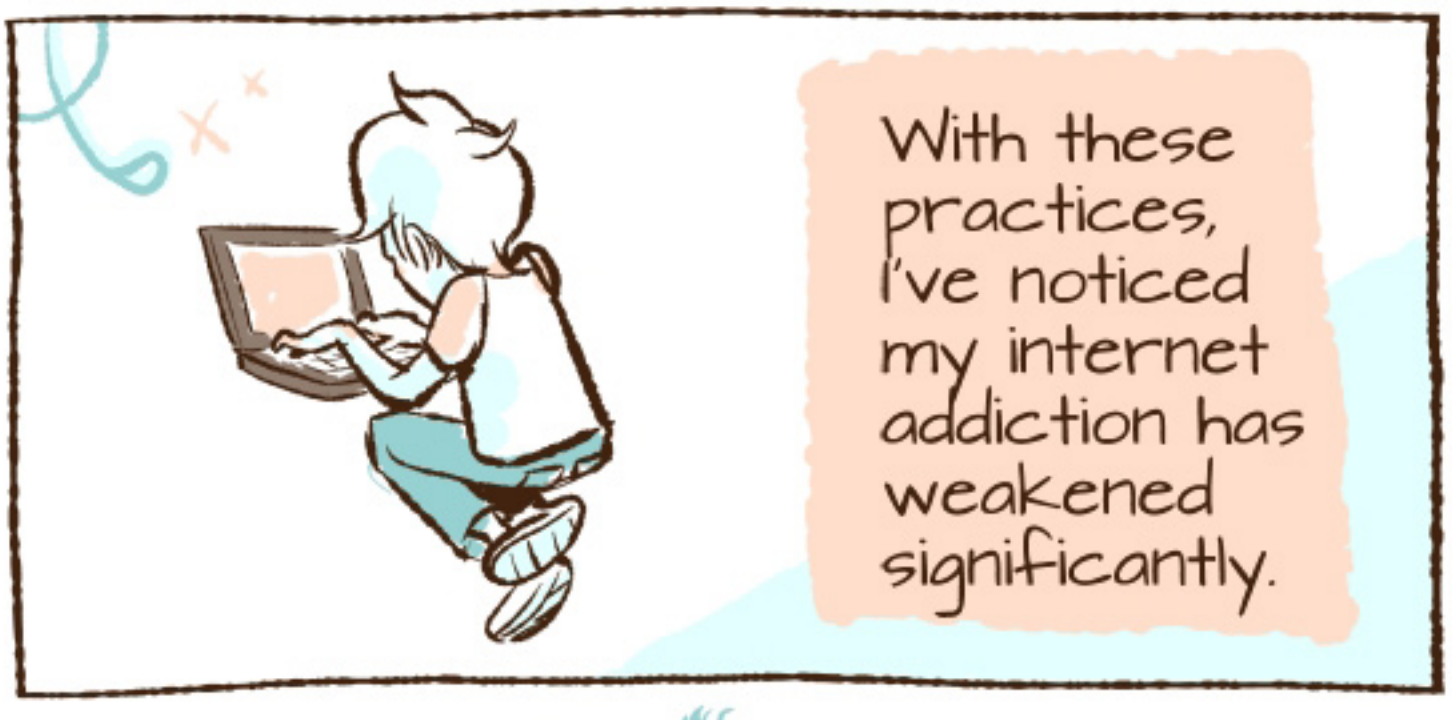

Anything I'm interested in I'll bookmark and put in a folder called "free time."
freetime


Then, when I do have free time throughout the week, I'll have good content waiting for my consumption.
CHIPS

When I'm done with a bookmark, I delete it.
freetime

The free time folder is handy because if you happen upon a choice piece of content while working, you can bookmark it to enjoy later instead of consuming it that moment and disrupting your workflow.





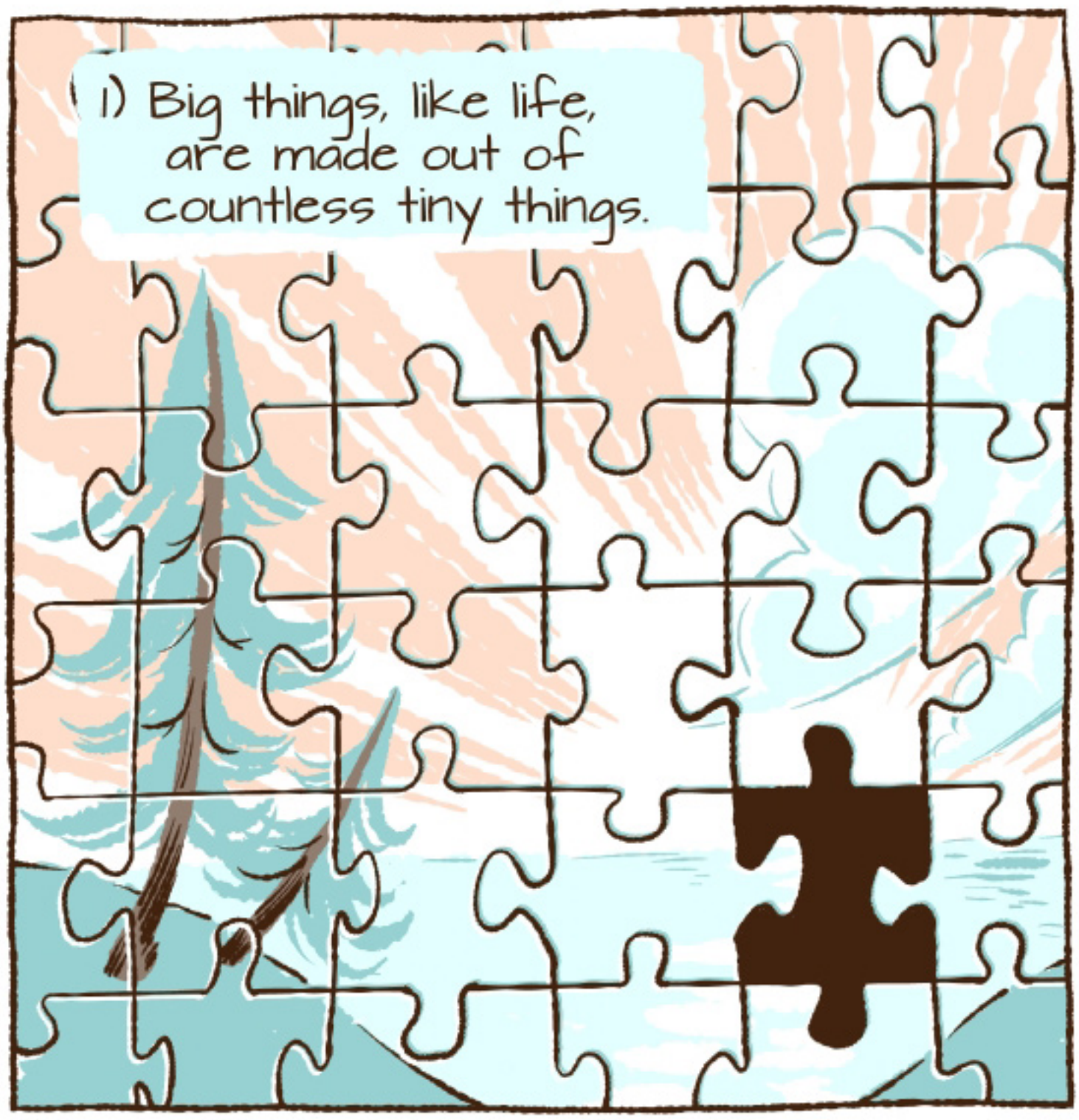
Divide and Conquer

You want to live a great life?
Try my two step plan!

Step One: Live a great minute.

Step Two: Repeat step one until you die.

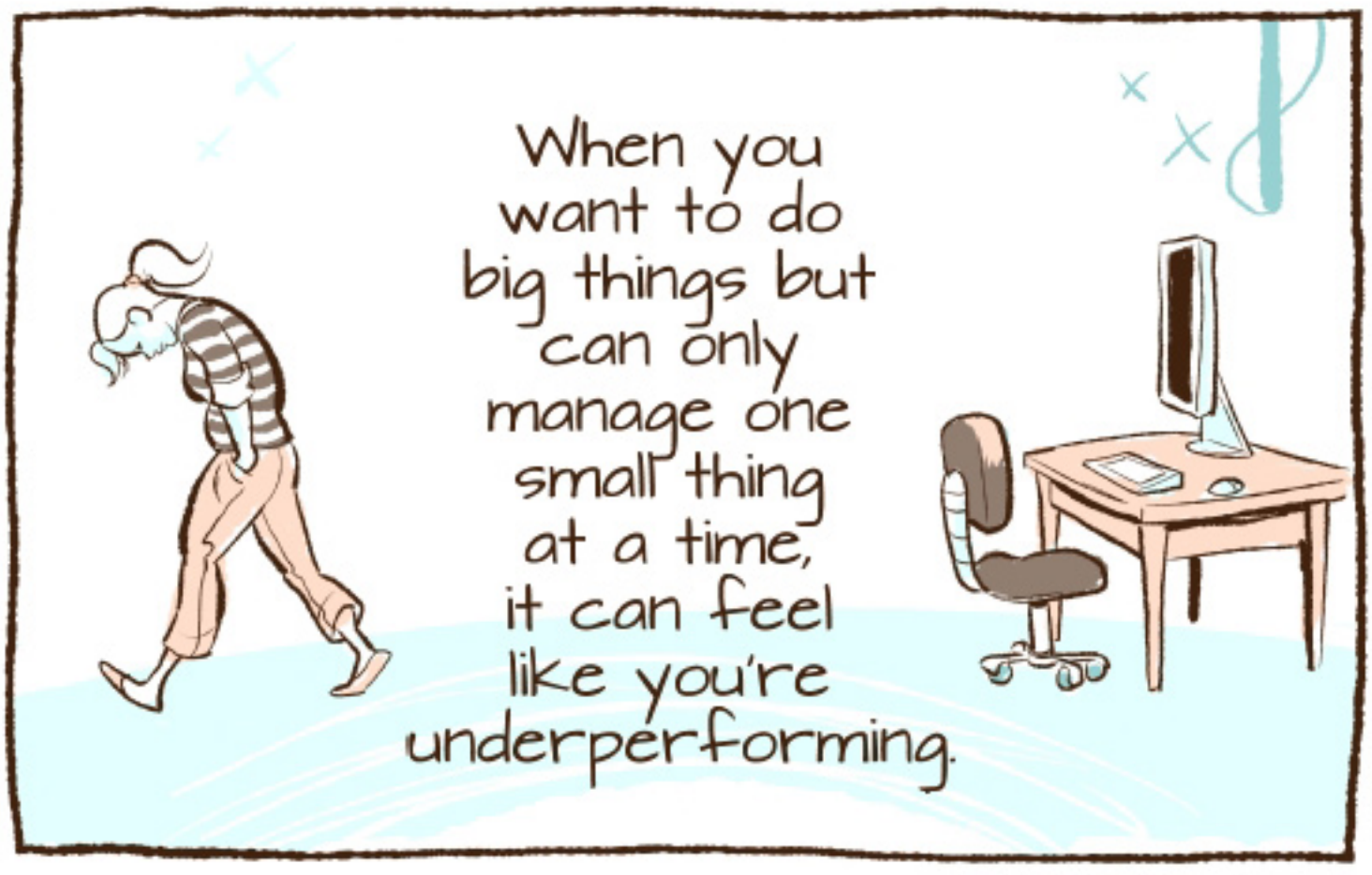
Okay, maybe my plan is a bit silly, but I still like it because it takes into account two powerful truths:



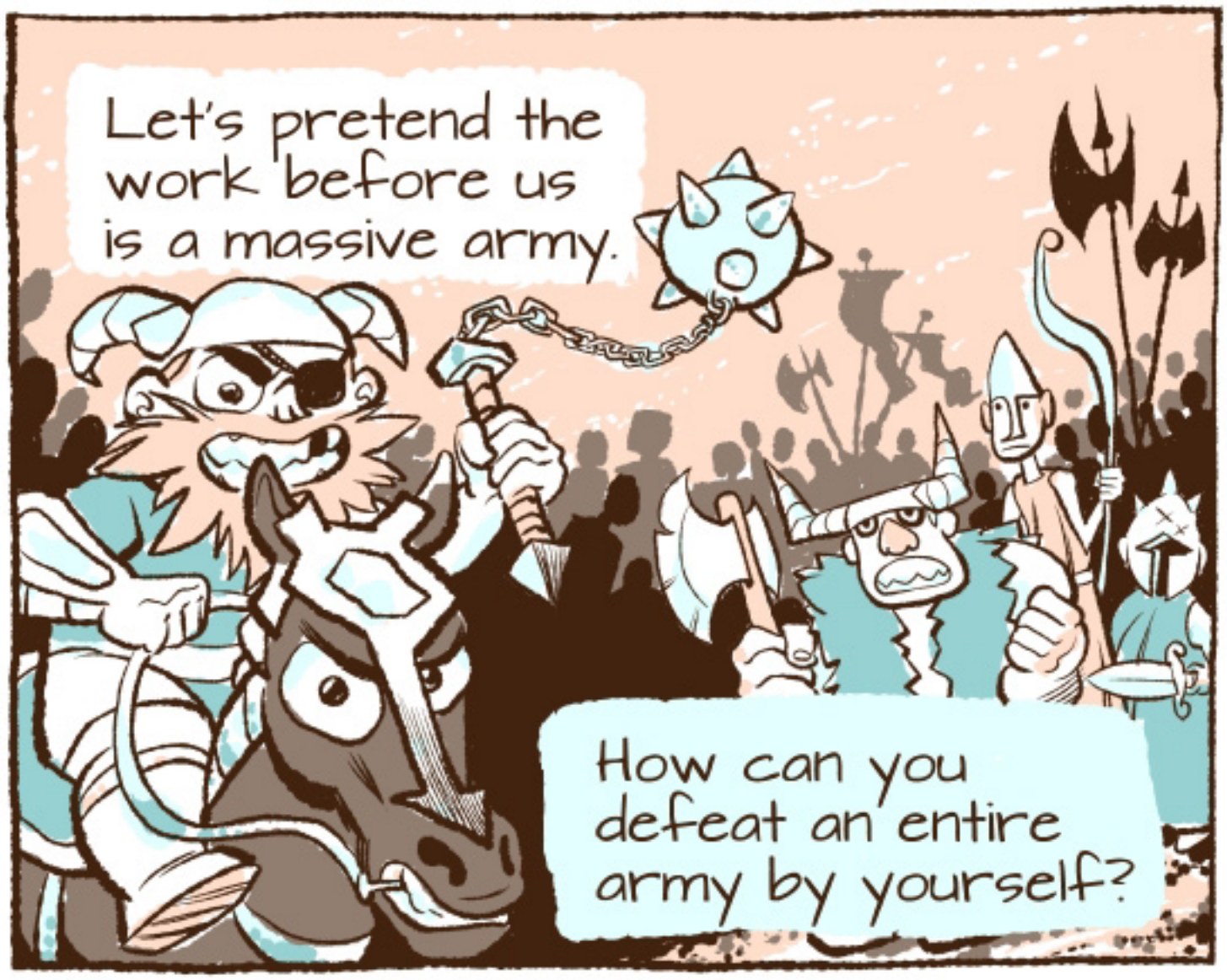
2) You are only capable of doing one tiny thing at a time.

These truths are hard to understand because many of us suffer from a blindness towards tiny things.

This blindness makes working towards your dreams difficult.



To escape this pitfall, we must cultivate an eye for tiny things.



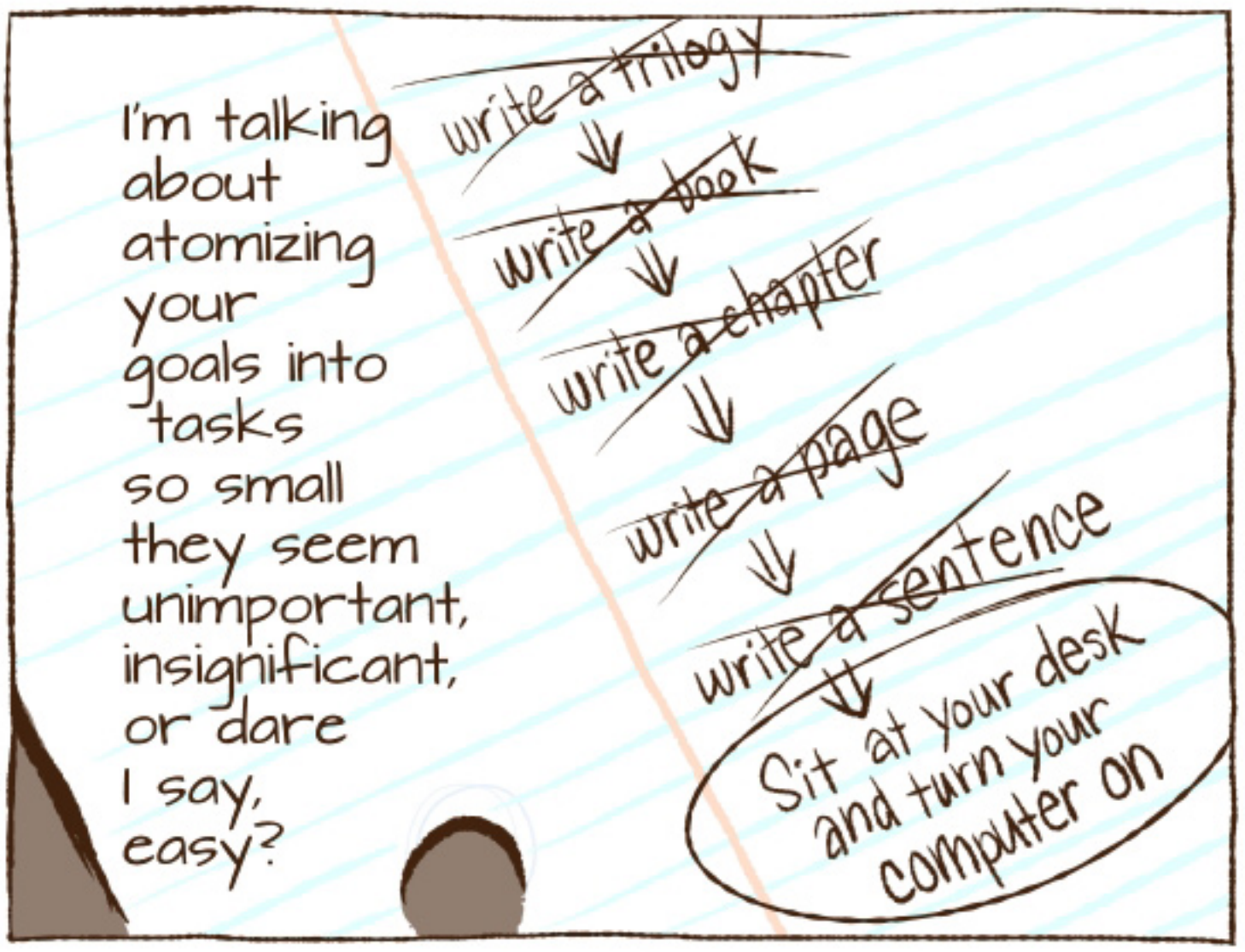
In earlier essays, I covered this soldier by soldier, brick by brick approach to breaking down your goals into smaller tasks.

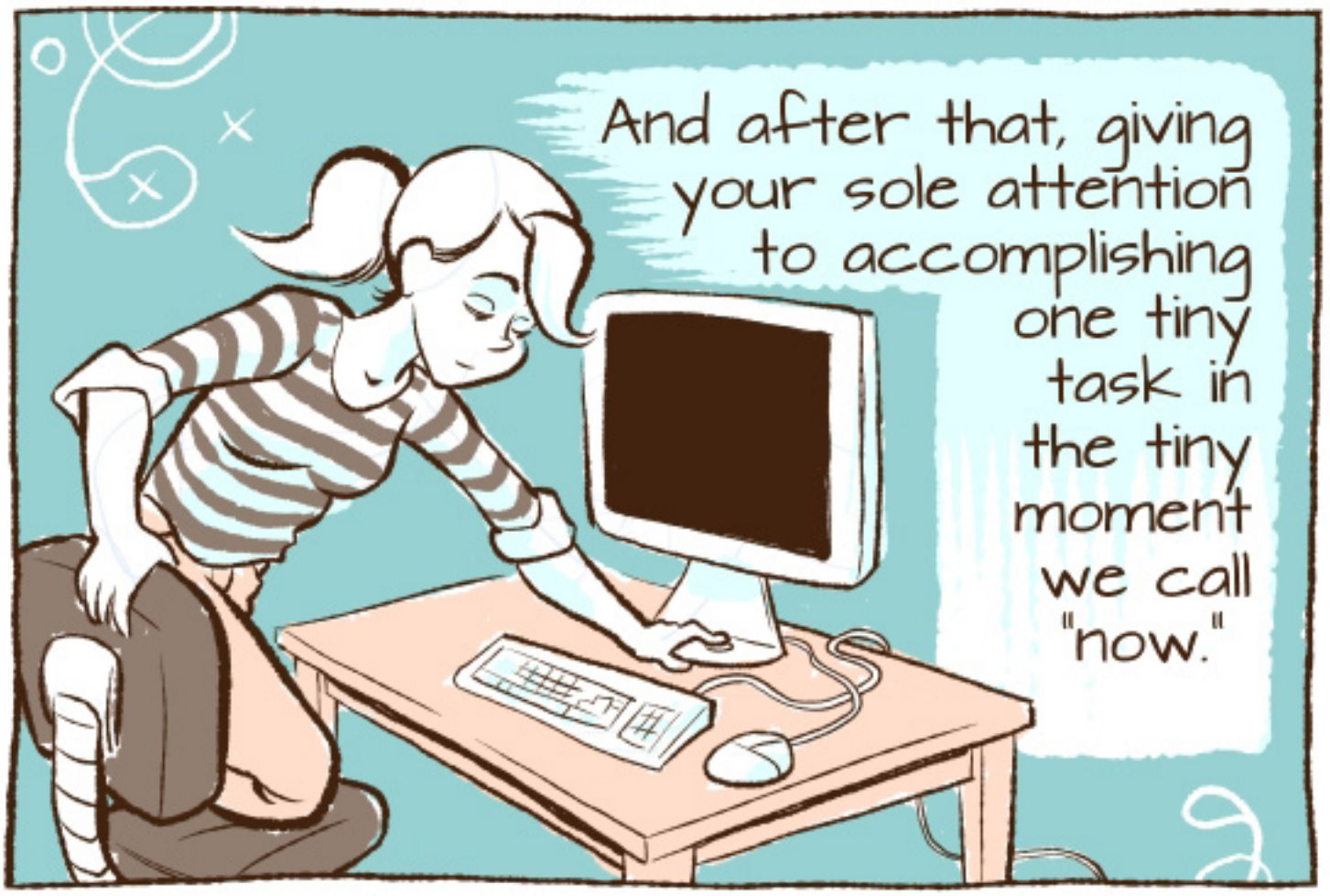
But let's take it further-- what if you only had to fight one of the soldier's arms?

What if you only had to fight a single finger?

GRRR!

This is how far we must go to gain a "tiny things" mentality.



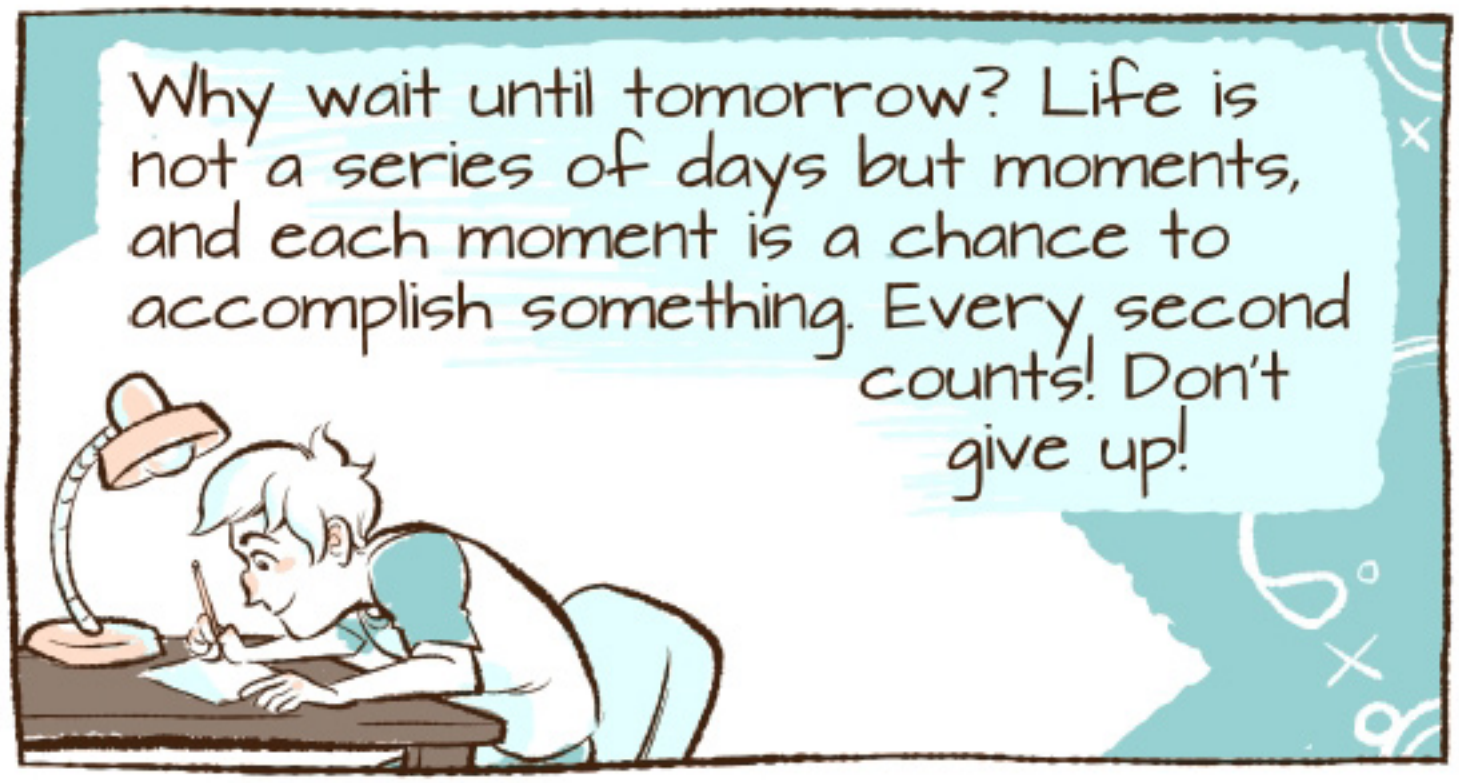


Here are three practical ramifications of this approach...

1
In any given moment you need only ask yourself:
WHAT'S THE LEAST I CAN DO RIGHT NOW TO MOVE FORWARD?

Don't expect yourself to paint a masterpiece, focus on touching the canvas with the brush.
You can do a small thing like that!

2 If things don't go as planned, you don't need to declare the day lost!

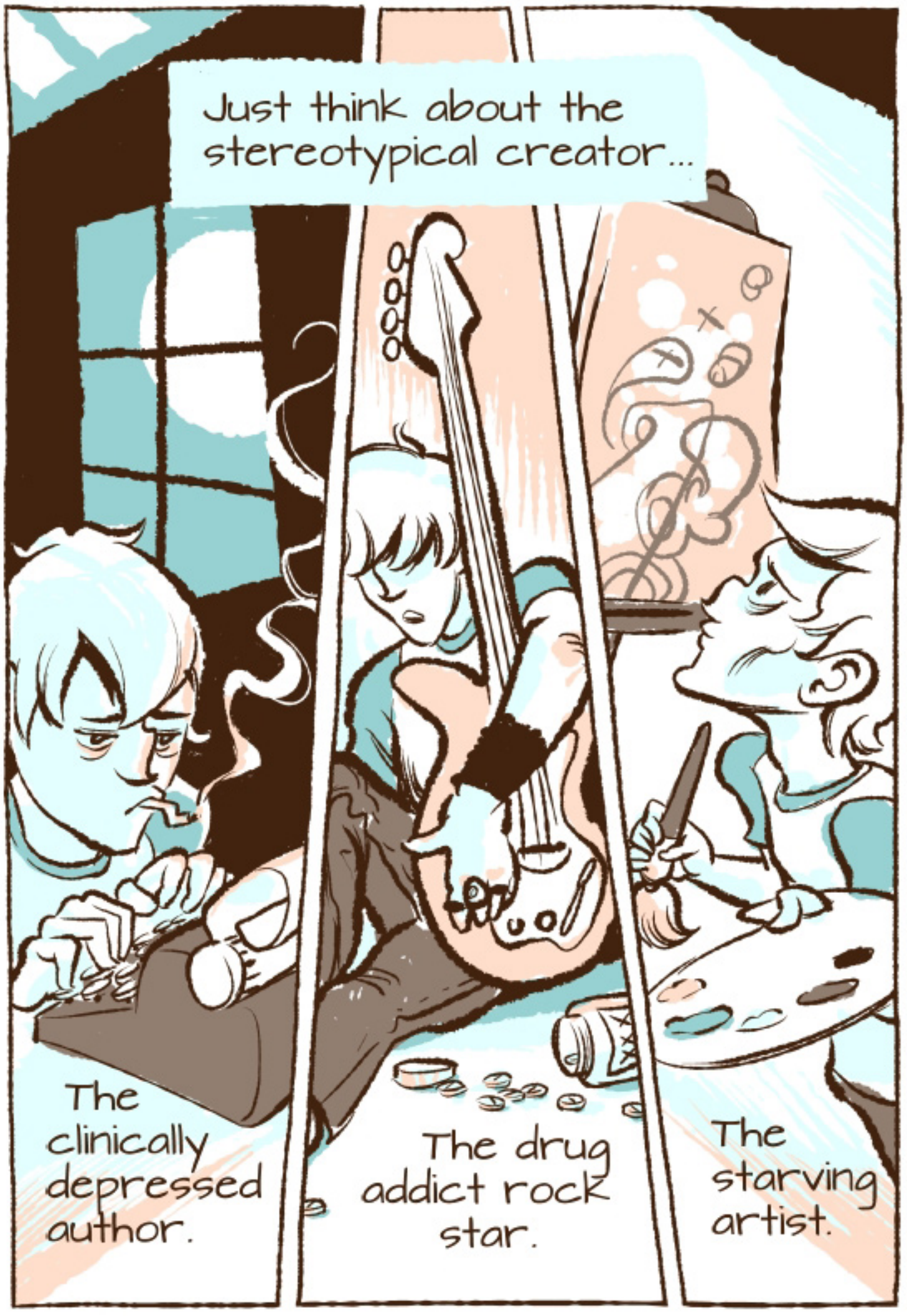


3

A small things mentality frees you to focus on progress, instead of completion.

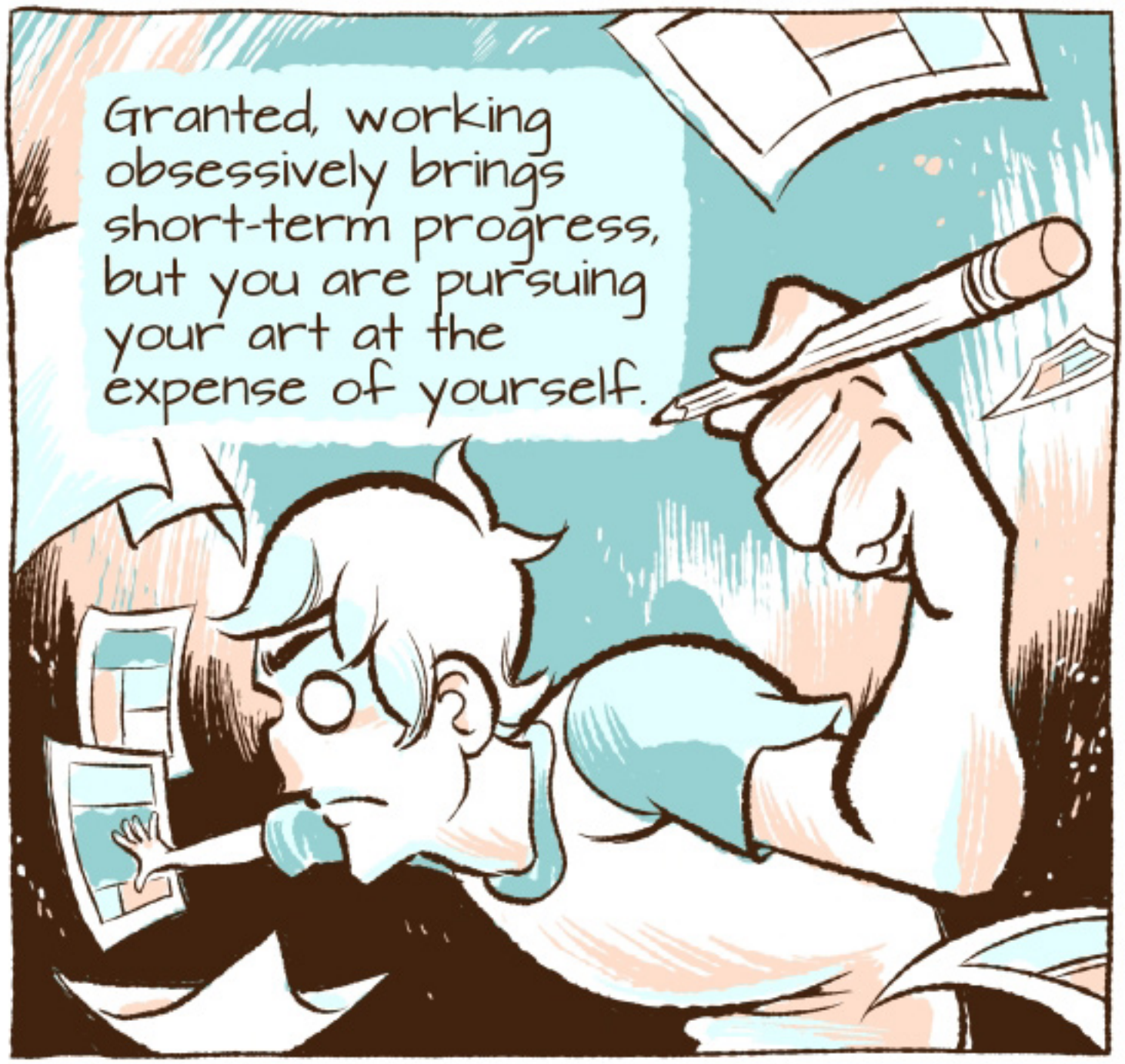
Work to Work

I want to warn you now, being creative is dangerous.

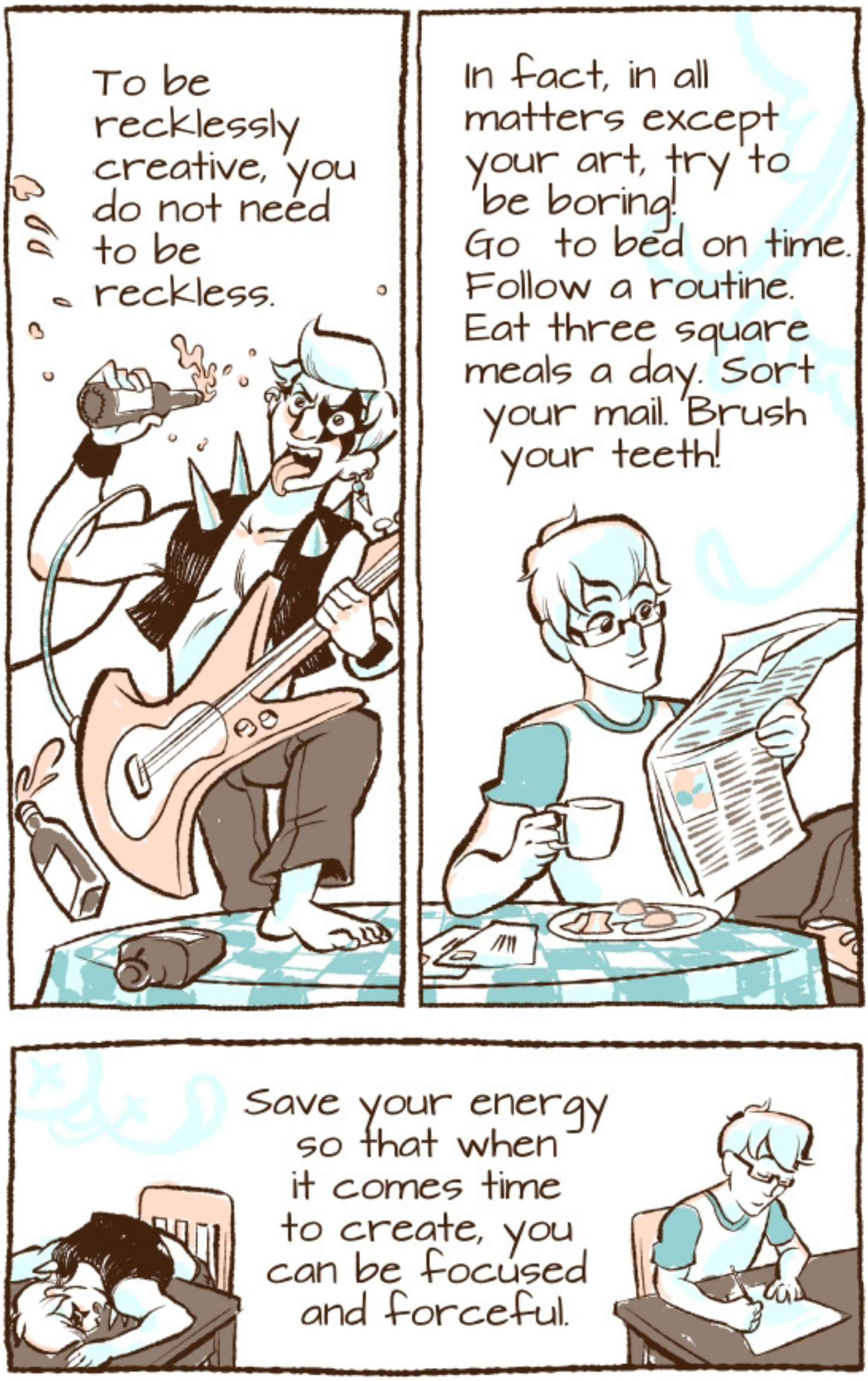


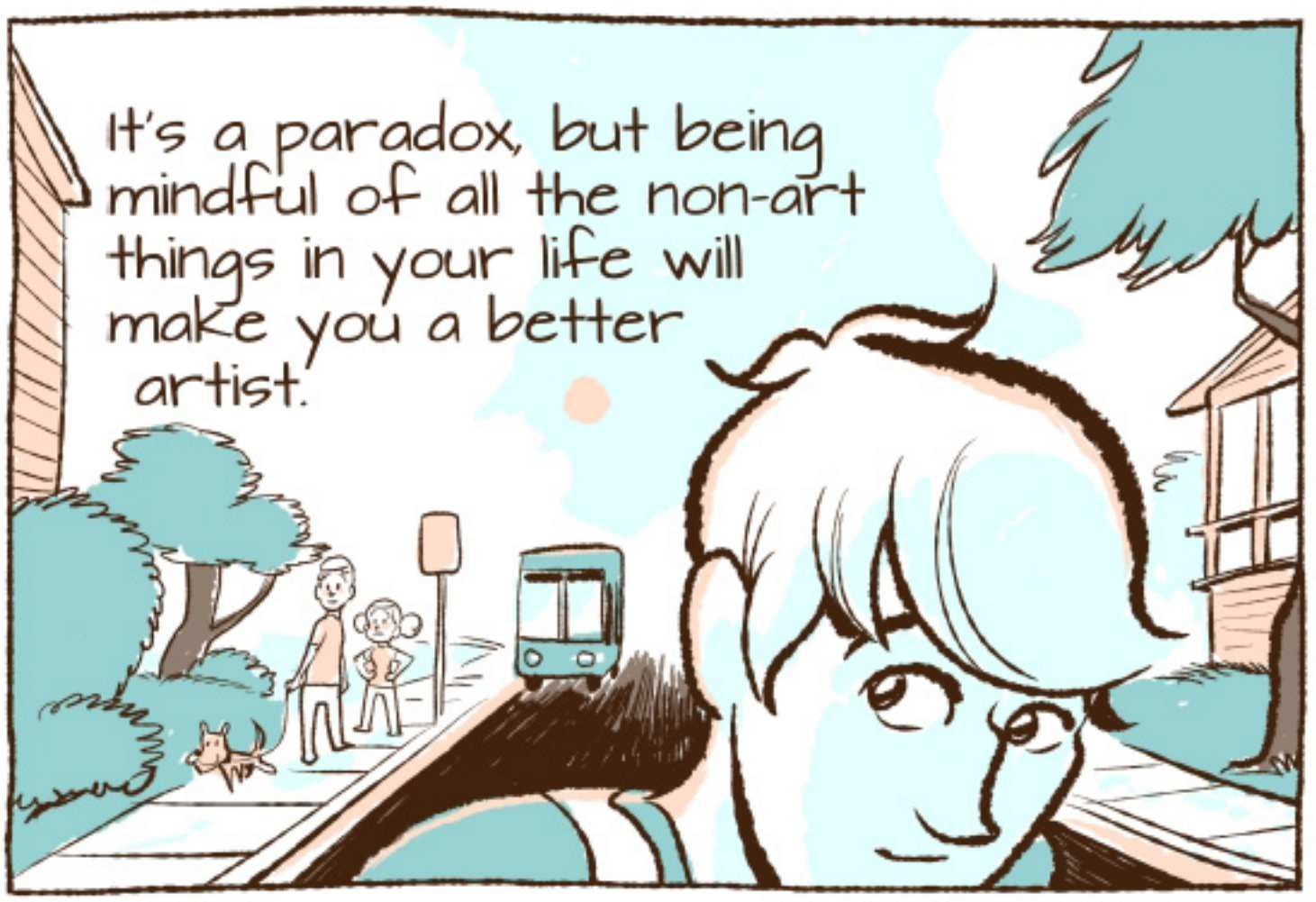
None of us aspire to become these stereotypes, but it can happen when our passion for art turns into an obsession that steals our life away.
CEREAL
I have seen it in myself before, when drawing comics becomes more important to me than eating, or sleeping, or spending time with people.

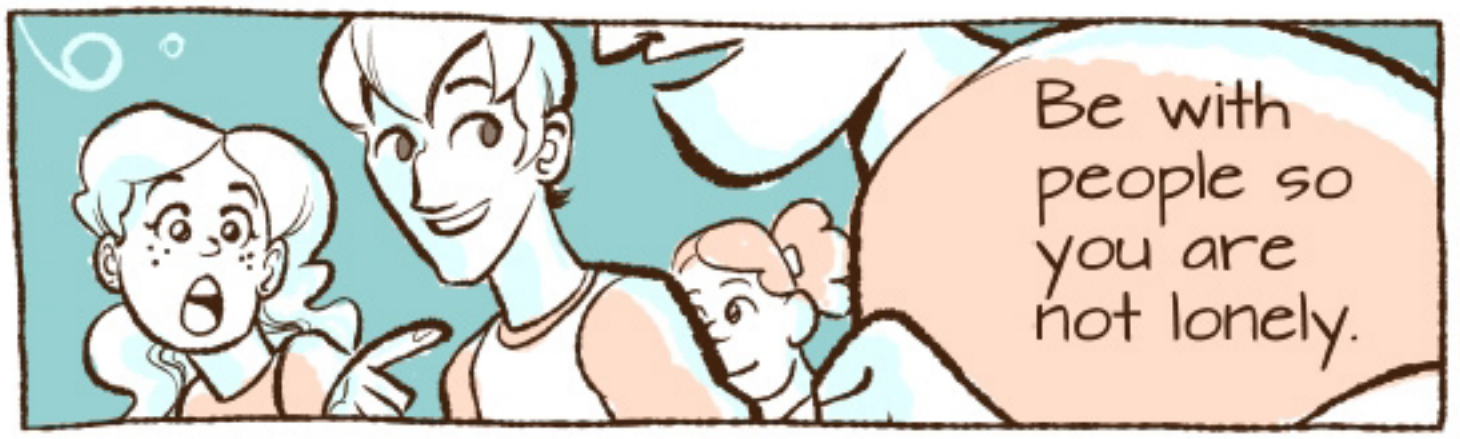
You know you're obsessed with art when every moment you're not working feels like a waste of time.



If you want a creative practice that lasts a lifetime, you must think more holistically.


To be recklessly creative, you do not need to be reckless.
In fact, in all matters except your art, try to be boring! Go to bed on time. Follow a routine. Eat three square meals a day. Sort your mail. Brush your teeth!
Save your energy so that when it comes time to create, you can be focused and forceful.



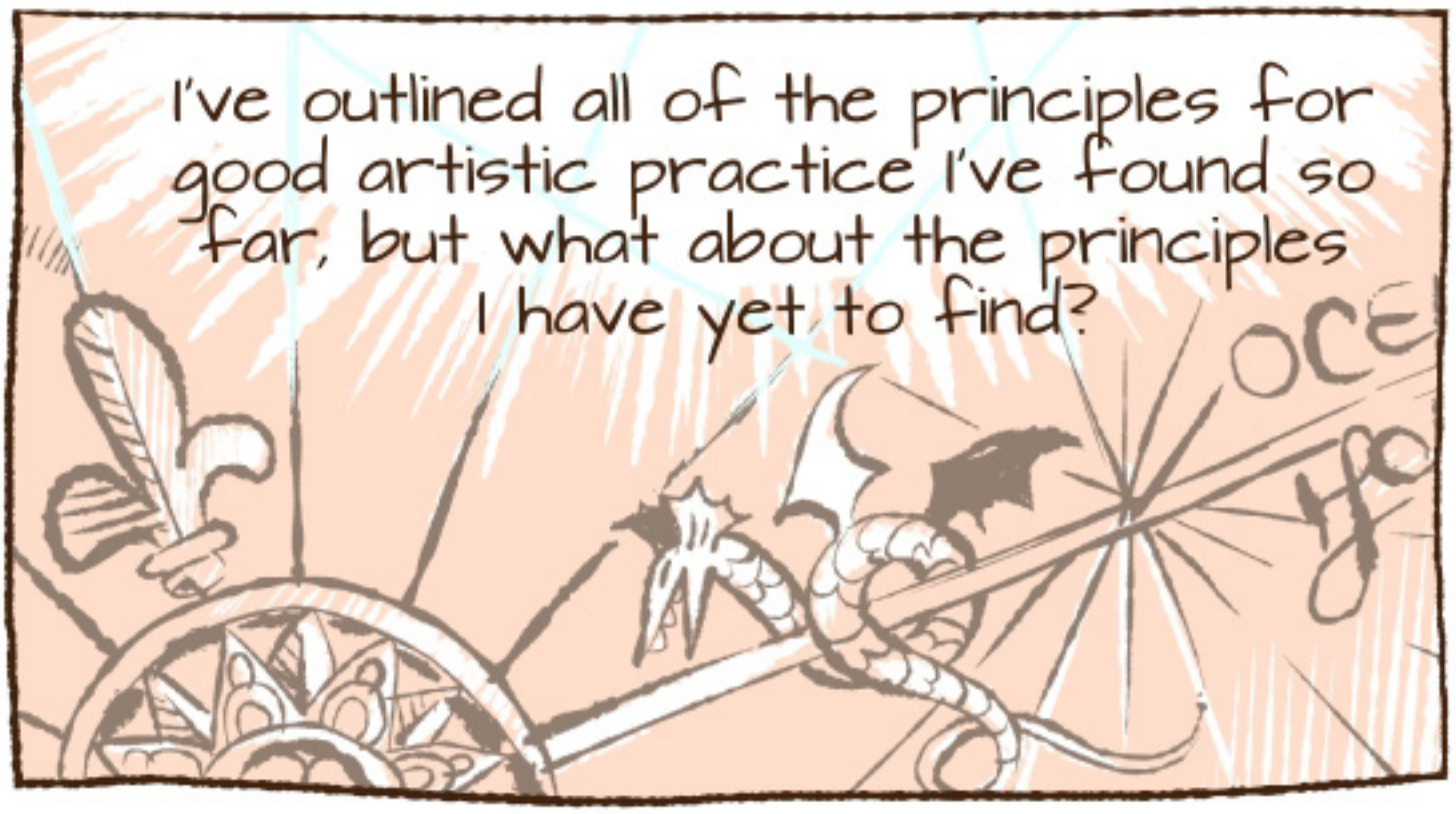


Taking care of yourself is not a waste of time.

CONCLUSION

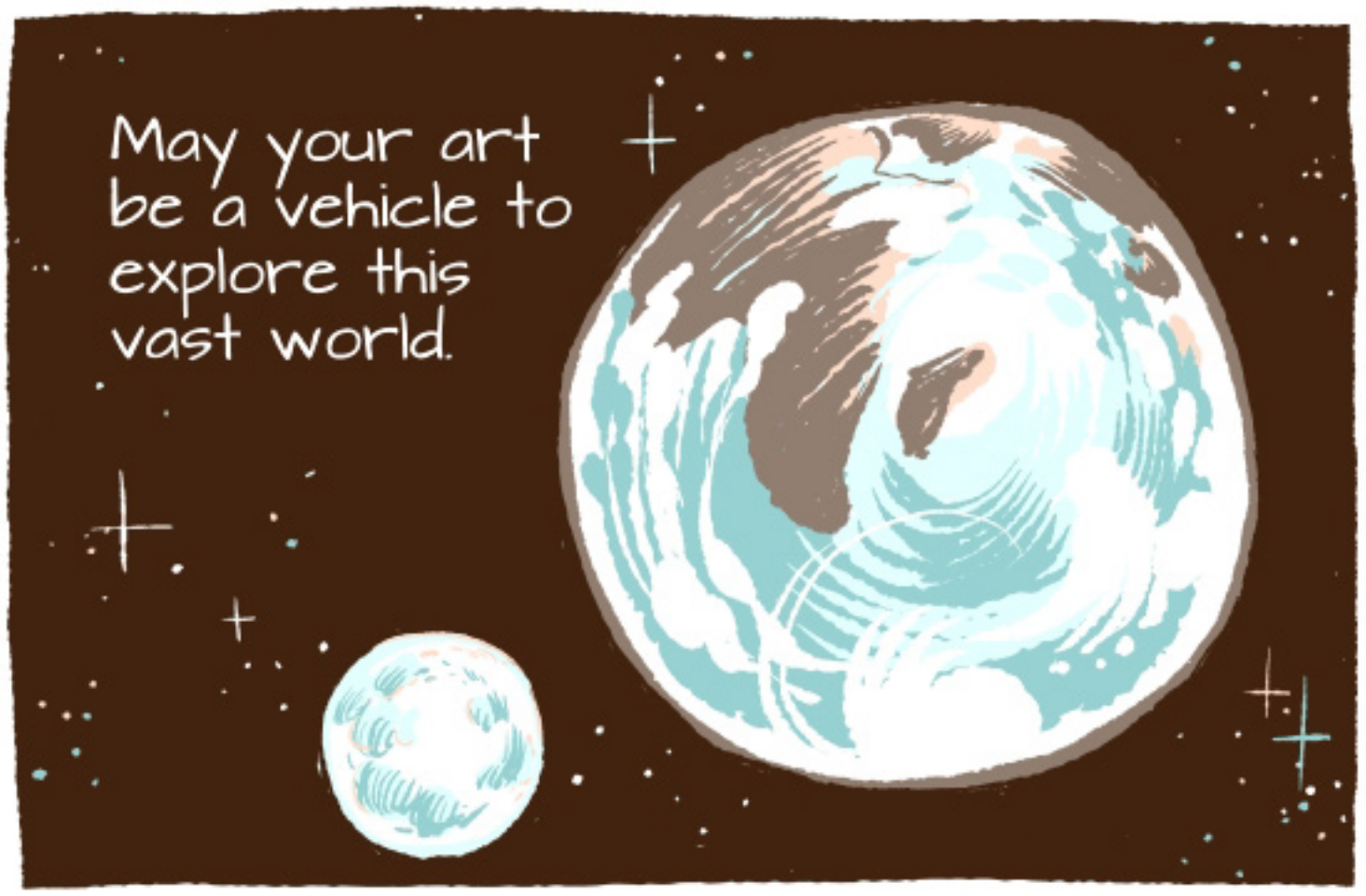
To my fellow artists,

As I draw the final pages of this book, I am struck by how much remains to be said.


I've outlined all of the principles for good artistic practice I've found so far, but what about the principles I have yet to find?

My journey as an artist is far from over. There is so much left to learn and discover.

And yet, it is my sincere desire that this book was helpful to you.



Copyright 2013
Stephen McCranie
for more essays, visit:
doodlealley.com