

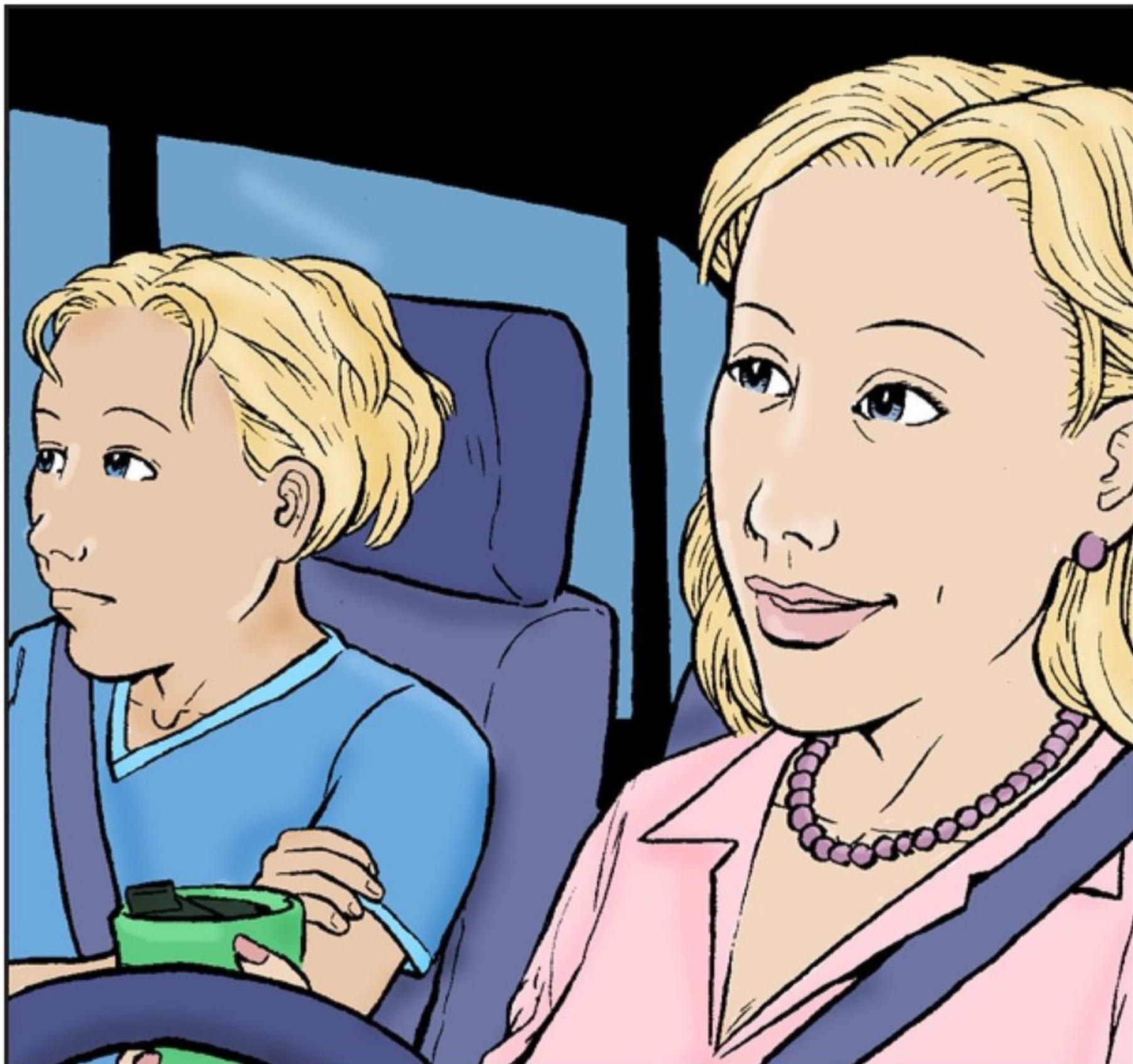
LEVELED Book • X

Talking to Each Other



Written by Kate Follett • Illustrated by Chris Baldwin

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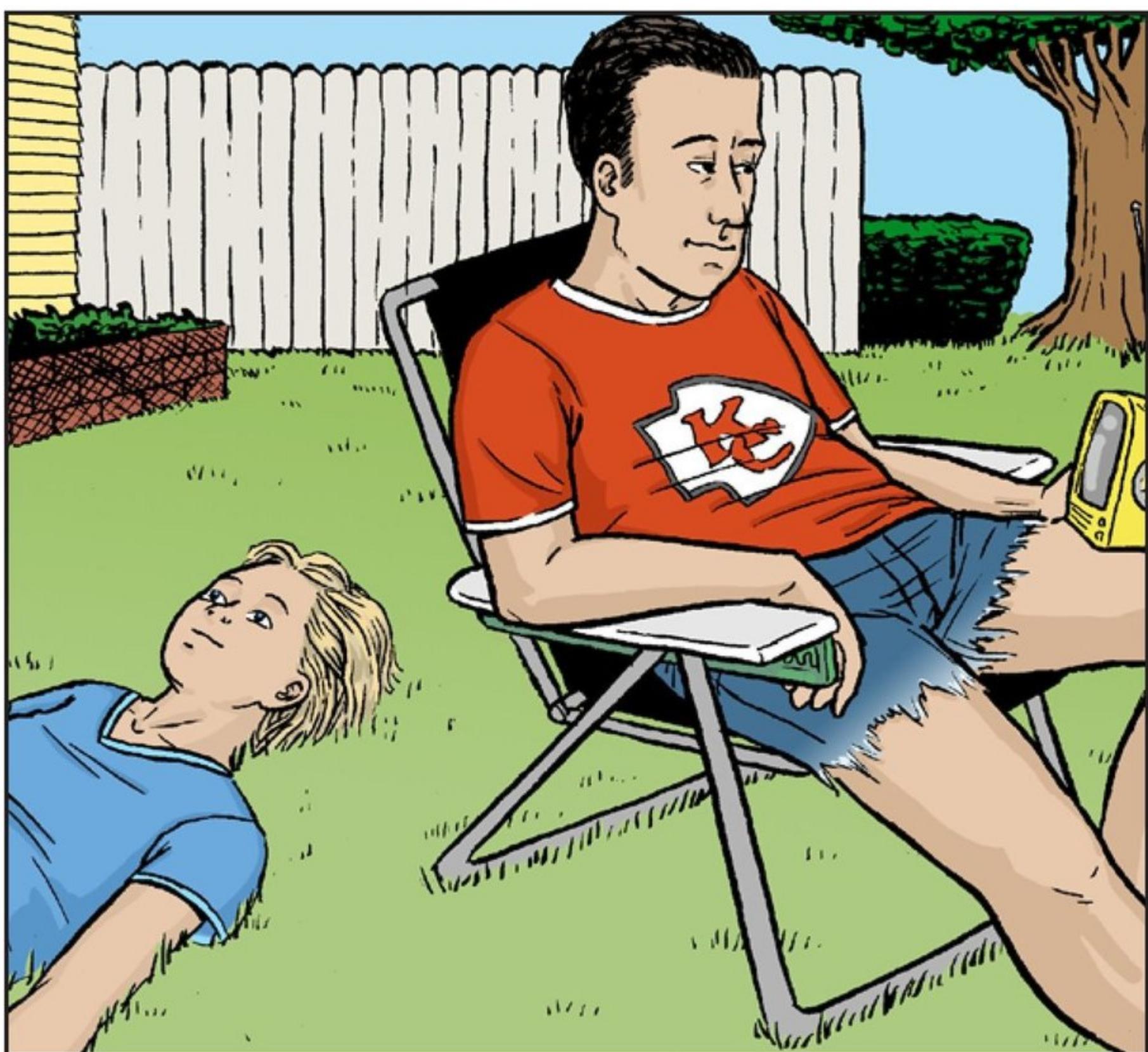
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Even though Chris and Amanda spent a lot of time together, they never talked. Amanda didn't mind this much. In her opinion, people talked too much. That went for the girls at school, commercials on television, and even Mom sometimes, though that wasn't a nice thing to think. She suspected that Chris thought people talked too much, too, which was why they let the silence lie when they were alone together.

"Amanda! Get your shoes on. We need to go shopping," Mom yelled from the back door.

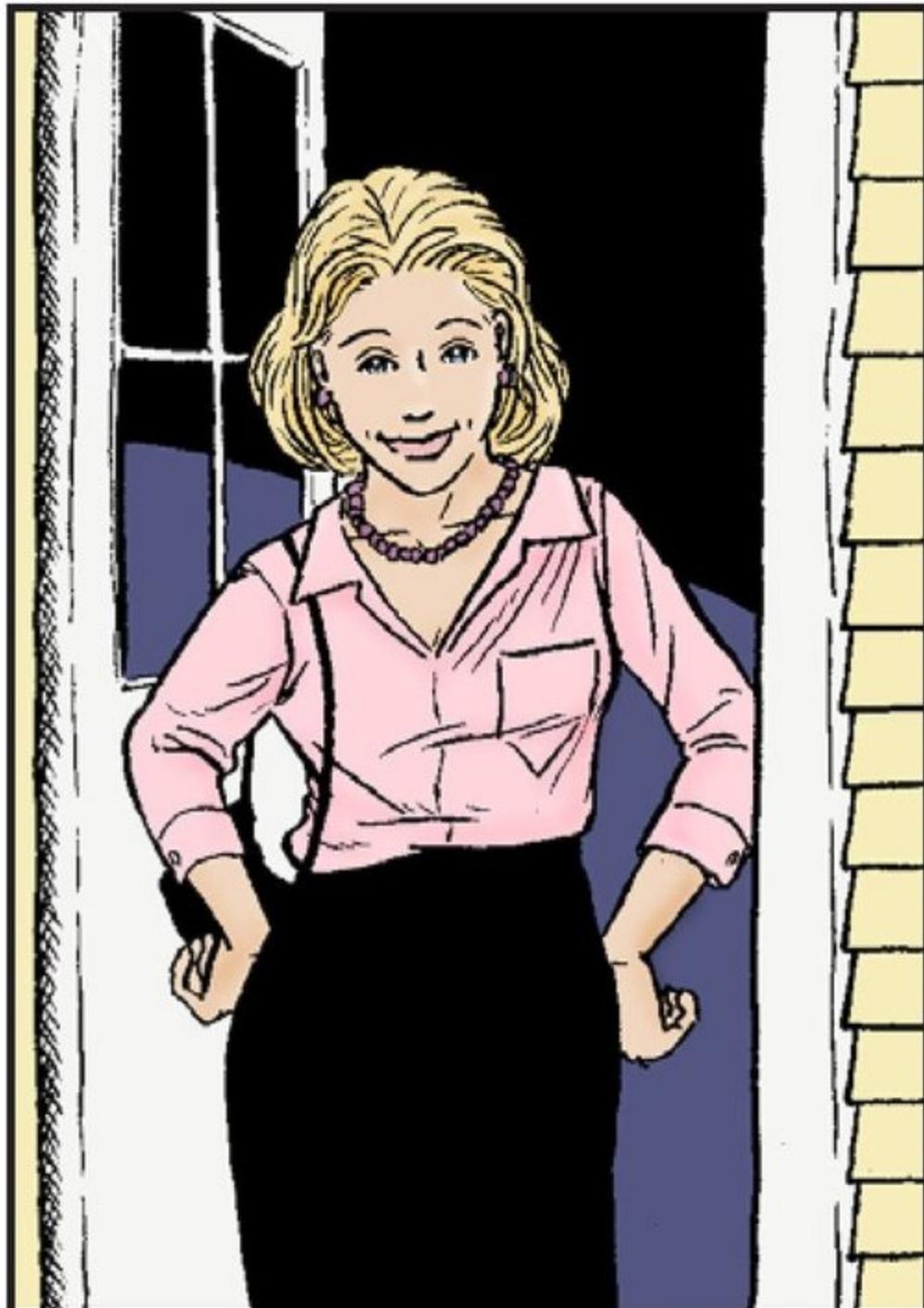
"Haaw . . ." Amanda groaned. She was lying in the grass, staring straight up at the treetops and imagining she was floating on her back in her very own swimming pool. Chris sat in a lawn chair near her, watching the football game on the little black-and-white TV with the rabbit ears and the twist-dial channel changer. Kansas City was losing but coming back strong, and Amanda didn't want to leave with ten minutes still on the clock.



“Did you hear me?”
Mom shouted again,
her voice coming
through the windows
along with the jingle
of her keys.

“I hate shopping,”
Amanda said.

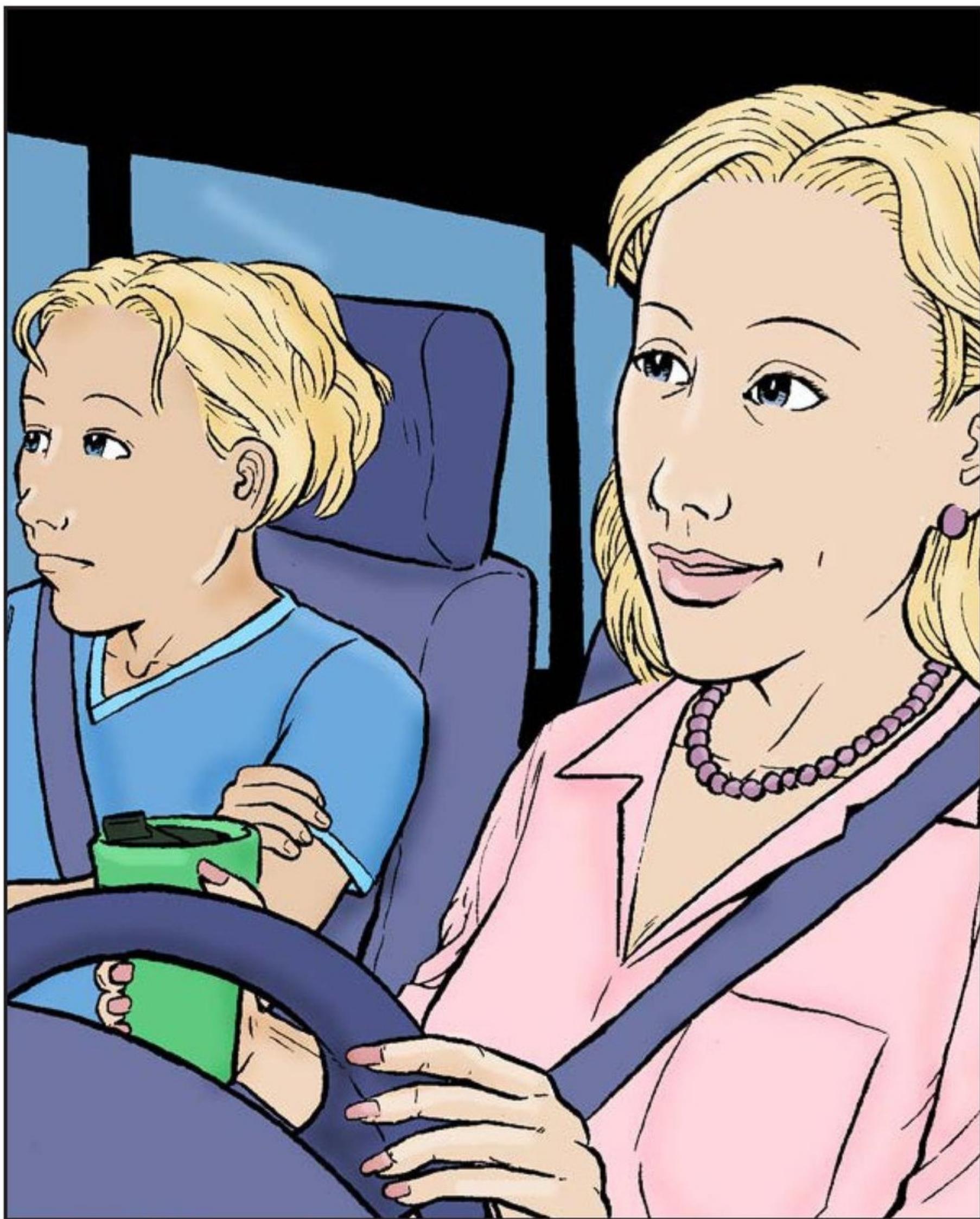
“You’ll hate starting
school in worn-out
clothes even more,”
Mom chimed back.



“I like my clothes. I’m just going to wear out
the new ones anyway,” Amanda said.

Amanda felt a nudge on her leg. Chris had tapped her with his sneaker. He nodded toward the house, letting her know that she should stop arguing and go with Mom. Amanda sighed, got up, and headed inside.

“I’ll let you know,” Chris said, meaning the score of the game. When he did talk, it was like that—short and direct, without a single extra word. She thought to herself that when she got home, it would be like that again. He’d say, “Twenty-one, fourteen,” without introducing it or explaining what he meant. But she’d get it.



In the car, Mom nervously sipped her iced tea. Then she started talking.

"What's up, baby doll? How've you been?" she asked. Amanda wasn't sure how to answer. She saw Mom after work every day. Was there anything new she should report? "How's your summer going?" Mom pressed.

“It’s going okay.”

“Are you disappointed that you couldn’t go to camp?”

“No.” Amanda had gone to Lake Pines Summer Camp for the past two summers, but Mom couldn’t afford to send her this year after she and Chris paid for their wedding. Amanda didn’t mind at all. For the past two years, her counselor had told her that the woodworking class she wanted to take was “just for boys.”

“Mom, is there something you need to tell me?”

Mom sighed. “I don’t know, honey. Things don’t seem to be going as I imagined.” She paused. Amanda knew that unlike Chris, Mom would always go on to explain what she meant, even if Amanda had already guessed. “I mean with Chris,” Mom said.

“I like Chris. I like having him around,” Amanda said.

“Well, I do, too, honey, but just being around isn’t enough sometimes,” Mom said. “You haven’t talked about this with him, have you? No, you guys don’t talk about anything,” she said, answering her own question.

"No. We don't really need to talk," Amanda said.

The car stopped at a light, and Mom took a deep breath in and out. "Well, I need someone to talk to. Another grownup. And Chris just . . . well . . ." Mom trailed off. Amanda felt bad about having thought that her mother talked too much.

"Are you getting a divorce?" Amanda asked. Amanda was very familiar with divorce. Mom and Dad had gotten one when Amanda was barely three years old—so young that she didn't even remember. Then there was Mom's boyfriend, Chuck, with his blonde mustache and all his action figures. He was fun, and even though he and Mom were never married, it still hurt like a divorce when he left. Even Gram and Gramps were divorced, though they lived in the same building and still shouted at each other from their porches the way they had when they were married.

Mom started to sniff a bit, and she didn't answer. They pulled into a space in the MegaMart parking lot, and Mom reapplied her makeup in the rearview mirror before they got out and went inside the store. They shopped for hours before heading back home.

"We lost," was all Chris said when Amanda and Mom got home. Their shopping bags were filled with new, itchy clothes. As usual, Mom had tried to get Amanda to try on the pink shirts with all the ribbons and ruffles, but Amanda insisted on plain colors—red, blue, and green, and nothing girly. Amanda was going to ask what the score was, but if they'd lost, it really didn't matter much. Across the street, she saw her neighbor Cameron on a big pile of dirt, planting a stick into the top like a flagpole on a mountain.



“Going out to play,” she shouted as she ran to join Cameron. The dirt pile had been left there when the town dug holes for new telephone poles, and the work crews had never come back to take it away.

“Where were you?” Cameron asked.

“School shopping,” Amanda said.

“Did you get any cool stuff?” Cameron asked.
“My mom said I could save my paper-route
money and get a graphing calculator.”

“No, just clothes.”

“Hmm.” Cameron started absentmindedly smacking the dirt pile with his stick. Amanda had had big plans for the dirt pile. She’d wanted to make a fort by hollowing out the inside and building a long, low window facing the street. Then she was going to plant junglelike plants all over the top to camouflage it. But Cameron never put up much of an effort, and he tore down half of what they’d done each time she went to Dad’s for a weekend.

“You’ll be going to Hogan Elementary, right?
Now that your mom and Chris are married, you’ll definitely be staying here and not going to your dad’s for the school year, right?”



"Who knows how long they're going to be married," Amanda said. She dug some loose dirt out of what had almost been the entrance to their fort, and started to reshape it.

"Are you serious?" Cameron asked.

"That's what Mom said. She said that it wasn't as she imagined, and when I asked if they were getting divorced, she didn't say anything."

Beside her, Cameron began carving out a long channel down the side of the pile. "Hey, don't be mad at me when I say this," he said. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I never really liked Chris all that much. Chuck was more fun. Remember when he got all those bottle rockets for the Fourth of July?"



"I guess he was sort of more fun," Amanda said. "But Chris and I are more alike. We understand each other."

"He seems kind of grumpy sometimes," said Cameron.

"Well, I do, too," said Amanda, now feeling kind of grumpy at Cameron. She didn't really hang out with him at

school—just during summers, when they were the only kids in the neighborhood.

"I'm going to get an ice pop," Amanda said, without even bothering to offer Cameron one.

"Finished your fort?" Chris asked when she stepped inside the house. He had the big TV taken apart all over the living room floor. It had been like that for a week now, but Amanda found that she liked watching Chris fix the TV almost as much as she had liked watching TV.

Amanda kneeled down next to the disassembled screen. "No. It never gets anywhere. It keeps changing shape."

Chris pointed at the big TV tube. "Radioactive," he said. "Can't put it in the trash."

"Dangerous?"
she asked.

"Not unless
it's broken. You
need help?"

She knew he
was talking about
the fort.

"Sure."

"Let's go,"
Chris said. And
out they went.





Cameron was creating some kind of battlefield in his yard. He looked up and watched them pass but didn't act as if he wanted to join.

Chris and Amanda worked on the fort all that day. By nightfall, the mound of dirt had changed shape again. From one side, it looked like a pile of dirt, but from another side, you could see a wall starting to form--and a room. Chris was packing the dirt wall down solid, so it wouldn't shift around. They worked on it every day. Chris didn't really talk about what he was doing. It was as if he knew just what she wanted. He found some old boards in the garage and built a skinny frame. By Friday, there was a long, narrow spy window looking out over the neighborhood.

Saturday morning, Amanda asked Mom if they could go to the plant store and buy some ferns and vines to plant all over the fort as camouflage.

“Absolutely not,” she said.

“But, Mom—”

“First of all,” Mom began, and Amanda rested her weight back on her heels in preparation for the lecture, “that dirt belongs to the city crew, not to us. Second, it’s not even in our yard. Third, plants are expensive, and we can’t afford to buy them as toys. Fourth, they’re just going to come along with bulldozers and smash the thing anyway.”

“But the pile’s been there for almost a year! Our fort’s almost done—it’s the coolest thing.” Amanda said.

“Don’t interrupt me. You’ve spent every day out there in the dirt, ruining the clothes we bought for school.”

Amanda stuck out her bottom lip. “We were making something. You didn’t even look at it. Chris may not talk a lot, but he sure knows me better than you do.”

As soon as Amanda said it, she waited for Mom to be furious and start yelling at her. But instead, Mom's mouth just opened a little, and she stared at Amanda with huge eyes. She didn't even cry.

"Go to your room," Mom said. Her voice sounded flat.





Amanda almost never cried, and she tried not to now, but there was already mud on her pillow—her tears had picked up dirt from her cheeks. She heard Mom moving pots around, getting ready to start dinner. She knew that Mom's mouth would be moving silently as she worked, as it always did when she was upset. Talking, talking, always talking. Every time Amanda thought about what she had said to Mom, she couldn't figure out whether she was sorry or whether she had just been telling the truth.

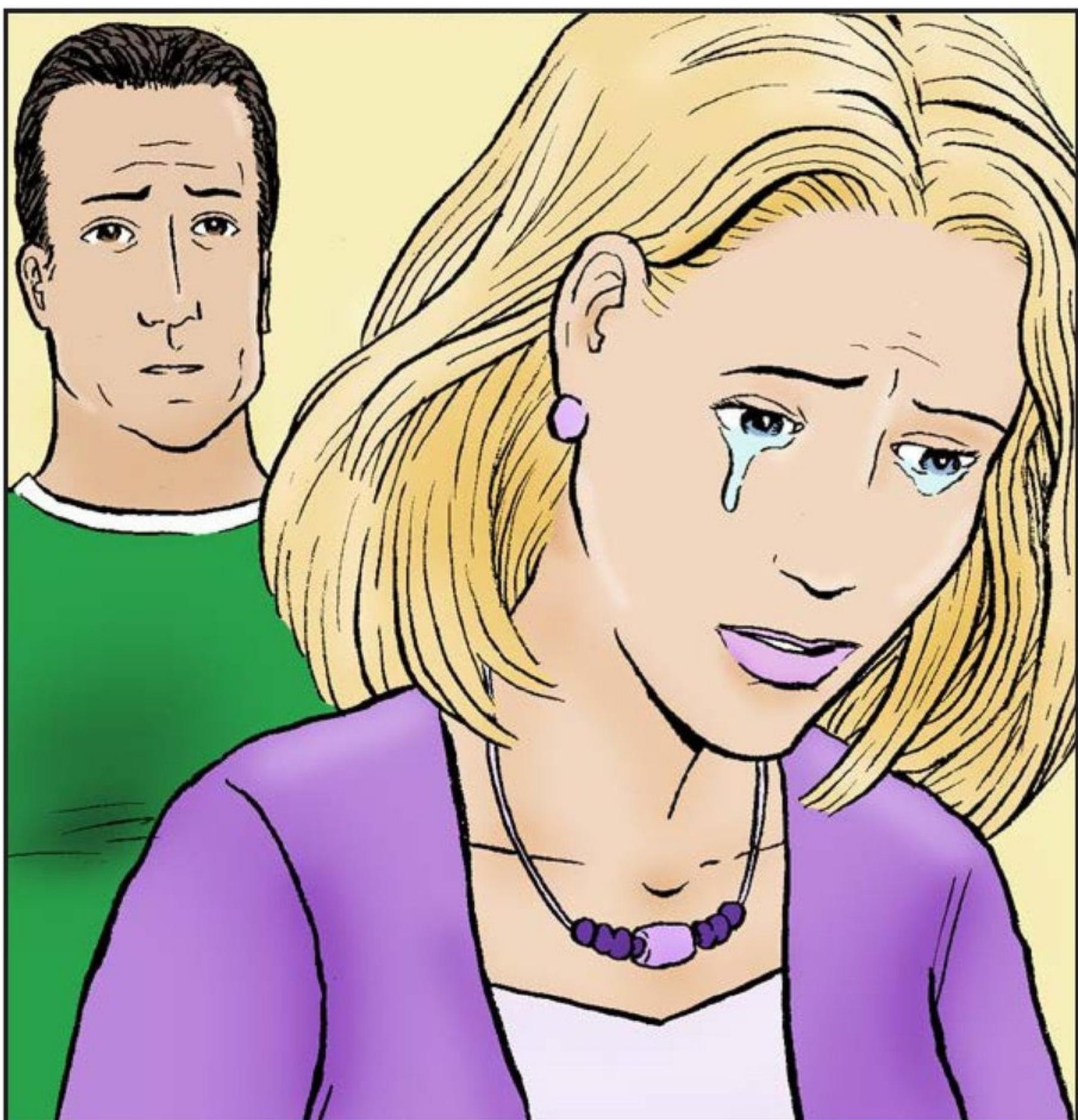
She heard Chris go around the side of the house, turn on the hose, and rinse the dirt off his hands. That was another way that Amanda and Chris were different from Mom, but like each other. Amanda and Chris were always getting dirty doing things like working on the car, fixing the water heater, or putting in a new back step. Mom was always complaining about dirty hands.

After the hose stopped, Chris's footsteps went around the house and inside.

"Where'd she go?" he asked.

"Who?" Mom said. There was another thing—Amanda and Chris always had to explain to Mom what they meant, but they always understood each other. Mom was always explaining things to them even after they got it.

"Amanda," Chris said.



Mom's voice got quiet, and Amanda couldn't hear what she said. They spoke back and forth for a moment, and then Chris's footsteps went down the hall to their bedroom. Amanda didn't hear anything but kitchen sounds for a while, so she figured that no one was going to come and talk to her after all. But then she heard the doorknob turn, and Chris came in.

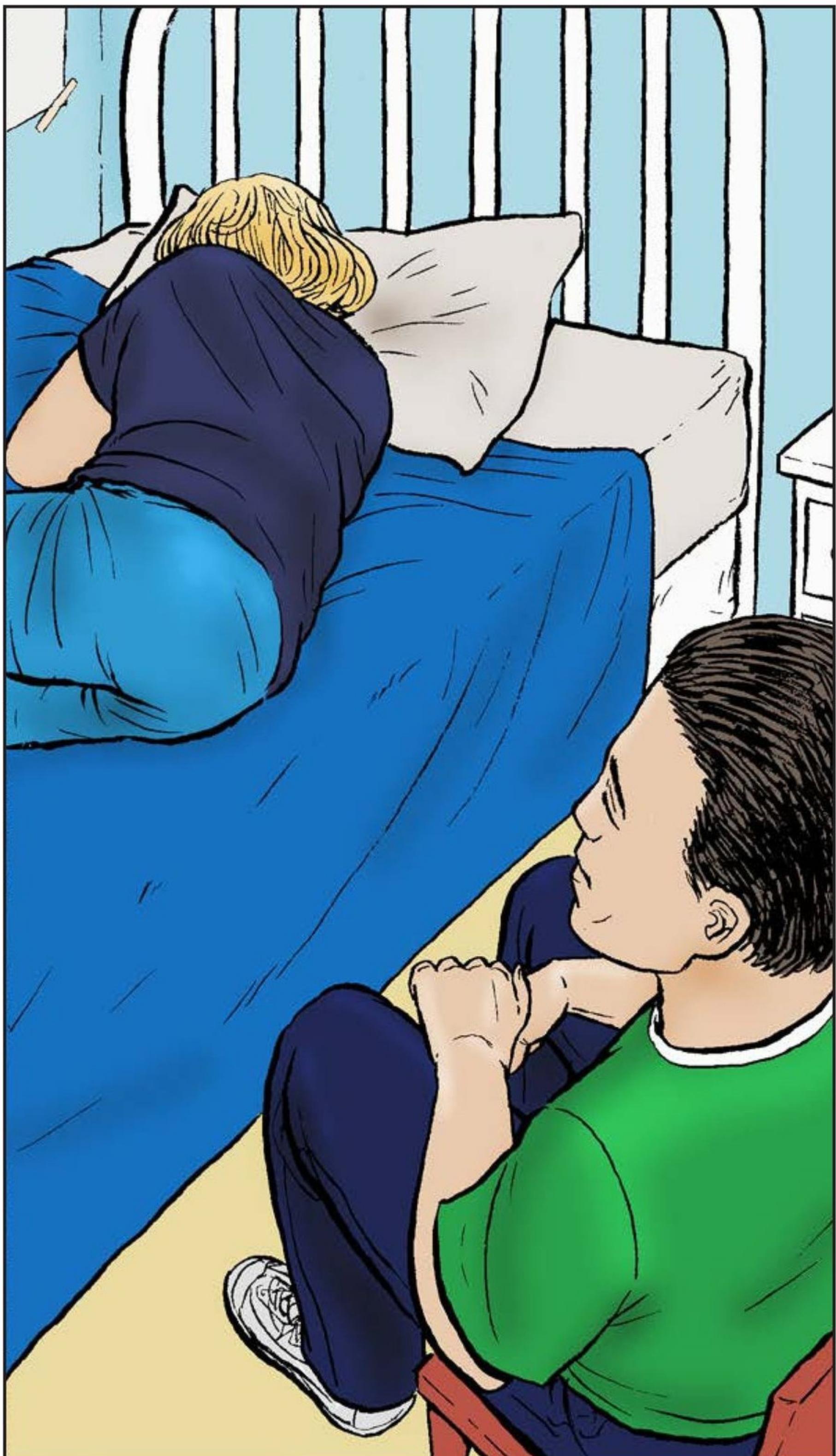
Chris didn't say hello or start asking her if she wanted to talk, as Mom always did. Amanda even found herself wondering why she couldn't just stay with Chris if he and Mom did get a divorce. He sat down in the chair by her bed. She didn't roll over to face him, and he didn't speak for a long time.

"You hurt your mom when you said that," he said. Amanda felt her tears start running down her cheeks again. She wiped them away, not wanting to get more dirt on her covers.

"She doesn't understand me," she said, whispering so that Chris wouldn't know she was crying. "She didn't even look at our fort."

"She knows what's best for you, and she loves you," Chris said.

"Then why can't she—"





"Sometimes people have a hard time talking to each other," Chris said. Amanda had to think about that for a minute. She knew it was true—she and Mom often did have a hard time talking to each other. She thought it was awfully strange that Mom, who talked so much, would find it difficult to talk to anyone.

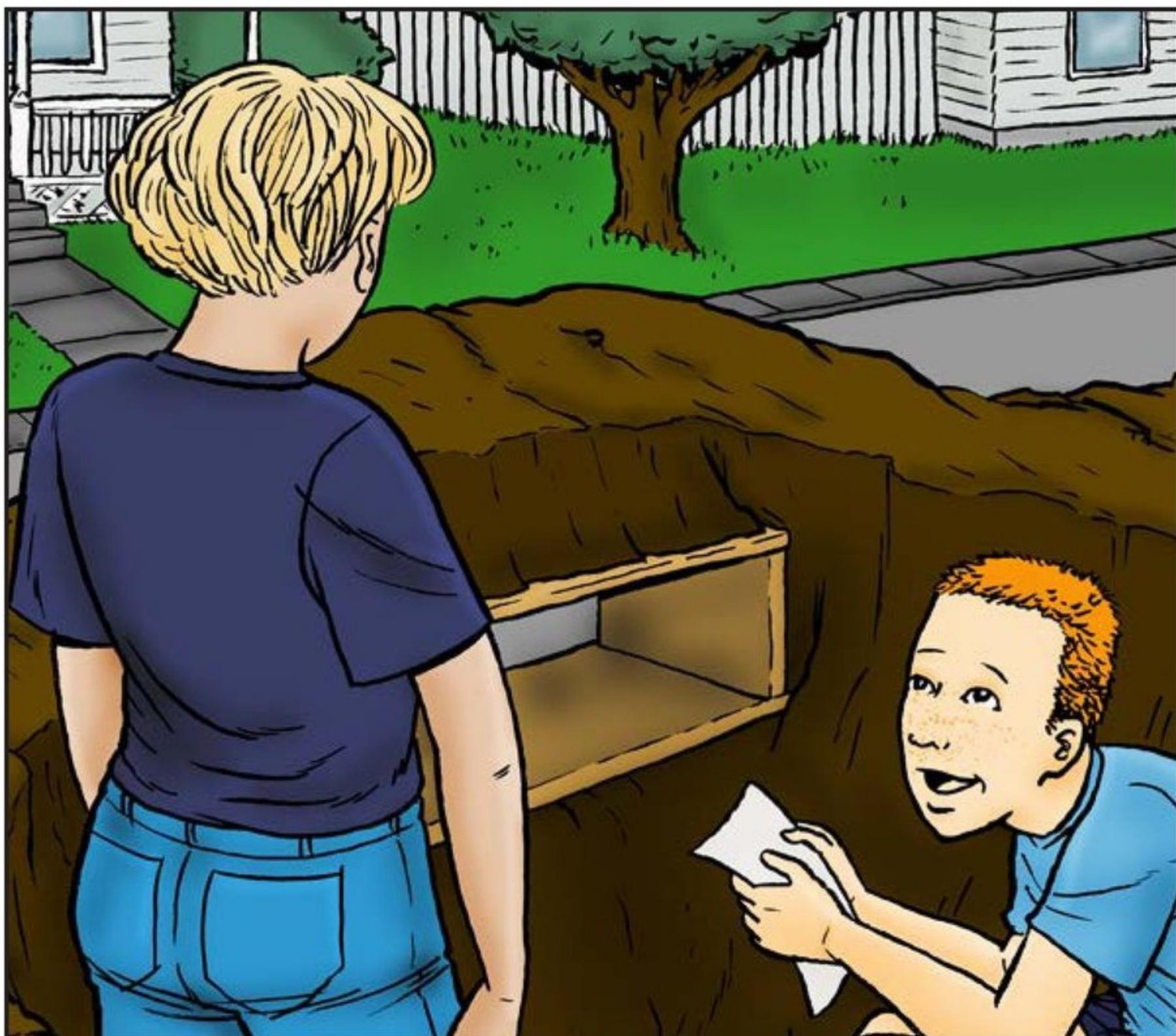
Suddenly Amanda began to understand something about Mom: maybe talking was her way of trying to figure things out. Whenever Mom was giving her a talk or asking her too many questions, she really just wanted to understand. Amanda had never thought that she was particularly hard to understand, but then again, maybe she was. She never really told Mom much of anything.

"I guess you understand Mom pretty well, don't you?" she asked Chris.

"I haven't been too great about it lately," he said. "She needs to get some feedback once in a while. And you need to apologize. Families have to work at staying together."

Amanda didn't nod or say anything. She knew Chris would realize that he had made his point. After a short time, he got up and left the room, closing the door behind him. Amanda sat up, blew her nose, and got ready to clean herself up to talk to Mom.





"Three pickup trucks, five cars, a telephone van, two dogs, and a snapping turtle," Cameron said, reading from a sheet of paper. "Those are all the things that passed by the fort window today, and not one of them knew I was behind here. This place is great! Where have you been?" he asked. Amanda had just arrived, and found Cameron.

"Mom and I went to get our nails done," Amanda said. "And we bought vines at the plant store."

"Really—where are they? Can we plant them? Or don't you want to mess up your pretty nails?"

"No, it's not that. I made a deal with my mom. She's bringing the vines and the hose for us. I said I'd go and have a 'salon day' with her if she came outside and helped us plant the camouflage on the fort this afternoon."

"No way!"

Suddenly, water showered on them from somewhere. They looked up to see Mom dragging the dripping hose across the road. She aimed the sprayer right at them. "You two had better run!" she yelled, laughing. Cameron and Amanda took off, screaming with muddy delight.



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Illustrated by Chris Baldwin

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