Everywhere A Garden

by

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INTRODUCTION

Everywhere A Garden is a graphic memoir that explores the concept of identity and belonging across countries, languages, and cultures. The story revolves around my decision to pursue my undergraduate education abroad, far away from my hometown in the Philippines, and how this transnational, transcultural experience can forever shift one's sense of self and home. In it, I track the unexpected challenges I face as an international student in Connecticut, the pivotal but short-lived semester I spend in Seoul, and my many returns to Manila in between. My autobiographical character, through the long and arduous process of self-discovery, undergoes the experiences I have had: navigating my relationships with different native, heritage, and foreign languages, learning to reconcile the lives I lead in different places, and reflecting on the changes all these experiences allow me to undergo. Ultimately, this narrative is one about acknowledging one's roots as well as finding growth, even in a constant state of displacement.

My project is the result of a pervasive internal struggle that has been present over the course of my time in college. Born and raised in the Philippines, I came to America hoping to find a sense of belonging I did not feel in my home country. I was neither educated in an international school nor particularly shielded from Filipino society, but I *was* raised in a comfortable bubble of privilege and almost exclusively on the English language—two things that kept me from being able to claim my Filipino identity with confidence. On top of that, I am half-

Chinese, but have little familiarity with my heritage as a fourth generation mixed Chinese Filipino, besides biannual family gatherings for the Lunar New Year and the Autumn Festival. These two aspects of my identity played—at surface level—insignificant roles in my life, and I took my immersion in these cultures for granted growing up.

I only began to become aware of race and culture upon my matriculation at Wesleyan, where I began to spend time in a society less homogenous than the one I had known all my life. This new life in America brought about some changes, and I found myself for the first time culturally removed from the friends and family who understood and more or less shared my background and experiences. However, adjusting to my unfamiliar environment also emphasized parts of me that were grounded in my Filipino upbringing, making me not far *enough* removed from my home culture as to be able to relate to the new people around me in America. In short, I began to occupy a cultural space that was too foreign to both my loved ones back home *and* to my new peers, alienating me from both parties but not entirely.

Living in this liminal space was lonely but transformative, and allowed me to re-examine aspects of myself I had never thought about. This process, bolstered by my education under the College of East Asian Studies, raised several questions over the years, which I now aim to address in my thesis project. I wondered: What did it mean for me to aspire for—and believe in the fact that I could achieve—belonging in the United States? Could I consider myself or my creative work "diasporic" or "transnational," despite the fact that I was here temporarily and

expected to return to the Philippines after graduation? Most importantly, how did language, geography, heritage, and culture tie into one's identity and sense of belonging, and given my own shifting influences, how was I to define these for myself?

As my unique circumstance made me unable to share these particular worries with anyone else at the time, I was forced to find a way to make peace with such seemingly conflicting sides of my identity in solitude, working through it in pieces that eventually came together in this piece of work. I have reason now to believe I am not as alone in this confusion as I once believed, as other international students I have befriended over the years have expressed similar thoughts, but I know well that it can feel like a lonely process. My thesis project is largely motivated by the need to make sense of my transnational, transcultural experience through a narrative, but also acts as a letter to international students and other young people struggling to reconcile the multiple worlds they cross as well, in the hopes that this will serve in some way as a companion or reassurance that the process is not as solitary as it can feel.

This project, while mainly rooted in my personal experience, is also built on a foundation of works that precede my own. I have studied other graphic memoirs, postcolonial and autobiographical theory, as well as diasporic fiction and nonfiction alike, in order to strengthen the execution of my project and situate it within others of similar backgrounds and contexts. The following two sections discuss these resources, alongside both the transnational aspect of my narrative

and the medium with which I execute said narrative. The final section reviews my process in developing my project based on the former two discussions.

It is important to bear in mind that *Everywhere A Garden* is the product of a year's worth of creative immersion and engagement with research. However, it remains to be only the **framework** for a larger, more polished version, which would require a more intensive or lengthier process. This introduction serves to explain the project in its present state, as well as lay out plans for further creative development given the time and resources.

Postcolonial transnational narratives

In Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile*, he writes: "While it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement (173)." Estrangement from one's "home country" is the common denominator shared by all members of diasporic communities, regardless of the circumstances that led to their departure. In seeking a different life, one must agree to distance oneself from their original home—usually first physically, and then inevitably culturally as well. To the exile, the physical aspect is the most impactful. After all, their expatriation is forced onto them as the sole option, and not a choice they made willingly. The exile has no means of returning after their banishment.

By definition, my story cannot be categorized as one of exile: Moving away from my native country is something I decided rather than something that

was decided for me, and returning to the Philippines remains an option—or rather a requirement, at least by my student visa's terms. In Said's discussion of the distinctions among the types of exiles, ranging from refugees to émigrés, I would most likely fall under the category of *expatriate*, who "voluntarily lives in an alien country, usually for personal or social reasons (181)."

However, the shared experience of leaving "home" allows me to view my place of origin from a similar vantage point to the exile's. Up until leaving the Philippines, I understood the concept of belonging in a singular sense, having grown up only with one definition of home. Despite my detachment from my heritage on both sides of my family, I never questioned whether I was at "home" or if I "belonged" simply because I had not experienced anything else, so no other option existed. After spending my college years in America and South Korea, however, this level of certainty becomes more and more difficult to achieve again every time I return home, having discovered alternative means of belonging in the process of adjusting to new environments. Said writes that "anyone prevented from returning home is an exile (181)." Physically, the exile is unable to return home, and will forever be estranged from a place with which they once were intimately familiar. On the other hand, I am able to physically return to the Philippines, but can no longer revive the complete sense of belonging I felt with the country I grew up in, as it is no longer my only "home." In this way, I have shared in both the "triumphant episodes" and "sorrow of estrangement" that Said writes of an exile's life: By gaining a new perspective, one effectively loses a once-secure sense of identity.

Exiles who are or become artists and writers are not uncommon: Georg Lukács, in *Theory of the Novel,* argues that the novel is a form grounded in the experience of a changing society, in which the protagonist seeks to reconcile a new world with an old one left behind forever (Said 181). This issue tends to be the most important point of conflict in the diasporic narratives that influenced my own telling. The graphic memoirs I have read as part of my study for this project range from firsthand accounts of moving abroad by oneself (*Persepolis)* to one's experience as the child of immigrants (*I Was Their American Dream, The Best We Could Do)*. Regardless of the author's proximity to the physical act of emigration, each of these works draw on similar problems. *Persepolis* is a bildungsroman tracing author Marjane Satrapi's life from childhood in Iran to young adulthood flitting about in Europe. Satrapi illustrates both the lighthearted and disturbing moments of her childhood in Iran's political chaos of the time, her difficult transition into life studying abroad in Europe, and the conflicts that come with her shifting ideological values. *I Was Their American Dream* is the story of Malaka Gharib, a mixed Egyptian-Filipino American woman growing up in diverse California. Although Gharib's parents separate, both their cultures remain a strong influence on her upbringing, and she must move back and forth between her two sometimes conflicting heritage cultures while simultaneously attempting to develop her own American identity. And Thi Bui recounts the tumultuous lives of her Vietnamese refugee parents in *The Best We Could Do*, linking what she knows of their lives before, during, and after the war to her present day relationships with each of them. As an expectant mother, Bui writes to make

sense of both her parents' trauma and her own inherited trauma, in the hopes that learning from this will better inform the choices she makes as a parent in raising her first child.

These three stories are built on the common foundation of adjusting to changing worlds, whether directly or by proximity. My own narrative addresses some of the issues they discuss. Inspired by their examples, I reflect on the difficulties of my time starting as an international student in America in Part 1, show how I deal with deeply embedded cultural guilt while enjoying my time abroad in Seoul in Part 2, and observe the ways my transnational experience changes my relationships with loved ones in Part 3.

One feature that separates my narrative from theirs, however, is the final section of my novel. *Everywhere A Garden* was crafted to follow the overall narrative structure of an *autobiography of discovery*, which Tabachnick defines in *Graphic Subjects* as an autobiography "...in which the autobiographer discovers what he believes in and who he really is over the course of the autobiography itself, all the while painfully forcing the reader to see and even feel what he experienced with no inkling of how it all might end, until it truly does" (115). My story encompasses the four years I spend in college, inclusive of the present, and its ending reflects the incomplete state of this chapter of my life. The aforementioned graphic novels are finished, whole stories, hinting at the author's future or potential final destination beyond the end of the book, as the author presumably is already living or has already lived it. These memoirs, in line with Lukács' idea of the novel, are different modalities of immortalizing an exile's

loss—of an uncontaminated loyalty to one's home, of a childhood without cultural expectations, of a healthier, trauma-free relationship—whether or not what was lost was available to them to begin with.

While I have attempted to write a complete narrative arc, I realize *Everywhere A Garden* does not possess the same finality of its inspirations, leaving my next step after the end of the story as ambiguous to the readers as it is to me as I write it. According to Said, "what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both (185)." Over the course of my story, I discover homes in forms beyond the geographic and cultural ones in the above graphic novels, finding belonging in certain languages, time periods, and states of mind that I encounter. In learning that I have the ability be "home" in multiple ways, my story's loss is a loss of certainty in where to go from the end point, given the multitude of options and inability to choose all of them, which consequently predicts a larger loss of the futures with homes that I will inevitably not choose once I decide. The narrative's open ending is thus not only a result of its simultaneity with the present, but also a means to immortalize this loss in the way other diaspora narratives do, closing the story in a way that gives a "plurality of vision" to a life of exile that is denied a secure singularity of belonging (Said 186).

The graphic novel as a memoir medium

Having had an interest in writing and drawing from an early age, I have a broad range of creative influences. Both my narrative voice and artistic style are a product of American Sunday strips and graphic novels, Japanese manga, Korean

webtoons, artists from all over the world who post their work on social media, and both western and Japanese animation, all of which I grew up consuming. In a story about my cross-cultural experience, where the boundaries between the different lives I lead become blurred and I reconcile seemingly separate or conflicting experiences, I felt it was suitable to use a medium that, to me, has always been a natural combination of various different influences.

I also drew inspiration from Marjane Satrapi, who intended *Persepolis* as a graphic novel knowing that the use of images to tell stories would make her writing more accessible to a larger group of people. For this reason, the graphic memoir is a popular medium for members of diasporic or transnational communities: A narrative form less bound by language than traditional prose seems more than fitting for a story about crossing cultural, geographical, and linguistic boundaries. In conceptualizing *Everywhere A Garden,* I was compelled to tell my story in this medium for the same reason. Most people, despite speaking different verbal languages, can communicate and are conversational in visual language, using symbols or acting out with their bodies to convey a message to someone else. This universal language decreases the potential of becoming confused or lost in translation, which is especially important to my storytelling given the spatterings of different languages in this novel. The images also make a serious, difficult story seem more palatable to new readers who may be from different backgrounds, and helps eases the whiplash of shifting circumstances by grounding the reader in a language easy to interpret.

Most importantly, I intended the reader to be able to observe the changes in my character as the story progressed, and felt that sequential art as a medium best conveyed these changes. I structured *Everywhere A Garden* to follow that of an autobiography of discovery, "in which different aspects of belief and of the self are explored in each episode, but only after enormous travail does the authentic belief (the one most suitable for the situation of the autobiographer) emerge, along with an understanding of the self" (Tabachnick 102). I wanted the emotional impact to be as close to my own experience as I could express in my writing, in order to give the reader a similar one. While a traditional novel could possibly succeed at the intended experience, the visual narrative has greater potential to evoke the emotional effect I desired, using colors and motifs to move the subconscious.

My choices in doing so were influenced by writer-artists like Alison Bechdel *(Fun Home)*, Nagata Kabi *(My Lesbian Experience With Loneliness)*, and Vera Brosgol *(Be Prepared)*, whose visual styles lend their stories a stronger impact. Bechdel's faded mint green inkwash coloring style streamlines the plot of *Fun Home* and gives it a sense of stability and groundedness amidst Bechdel's verbose, philosophical narration and the tempestuous personality of the subject of the book, her father. Kabi inks her comics in a seemingly unpolished way to match her casual narrative voice, the thin pen lines growing scratchier in panels where she conveys more intense emotions of panic, anger, and depression. Her structure of four-panel pages (known in Japan as *4koma*) also allows her to tell shorter stories between longer narratives or break from scenes to explain her

emotional state, and the large amounts of negative white space paired with her conversational tone make the story feel lighthearted and easy to read, despite being a lengthy one about depression and anxiety. Vera Brosgol's soft and curved lines are fit for a narrative about a childhood summer camp, and, like the former two, she uses a singular hue to color the entire novel. The olive green color complements the subject matter, the color itself drawing out the nature background illustrations and the stark tone Brosgol uses emphasizing the characters' discomfort and disgust in certain scenes.

Everywhere A Garden is divided into five sections, inclusive of the prologue. The three middle sections each focus on an experience in a certain country or culture, represented by the country's national flower: the rose for America, 무궁화 (or the "rose of Sharon") for South Korea, and the sampaguita for the Philippines. What they mean in any given panel is left ambiguous and open to the reader's interpretation. In the same way it is difficult to tell what aspect of an experience has influenced one to be a certain way, readers can look at the flowers and attribute their growth or effect on the character to something different—such as language, culture, location, etc.

I chose not to unify the color scheme of the entire novel as the aforementioned artists have, but instead plan to color code each section of the narrative: The prologue is set to be in black and white, the final part in full color, and the three in between corresponding to the color of the flower that represents each part, in shades that match the intended emotional intensity of each shorter story. A preview of the assigned color coding can be found in the first two pages

of each section. This stylistic choice stems from the episodic structure of the autobiography of discovery, in which each section brings about a different issue or plot. In addition, color coding each chapter before ending on full technicolor emphasizes the complexity of having multiple homes, and the uncertainty in deciding on a future having seen the many given options. The loss of certainty, however, is one recognized in the narrative as ultimately positive, and the choice of full color fits with this ending realization, also giving the final section a sense of completion.

The development of Everywhere A Garden

Everywhere A Garden is the culminating output of a journey that began in high school, when I first decided to apply to universities abroad. Over the years, I have accumulated more than enough content for this story, but unfortunately had to choose the most pertinent ones to address in answering the question, "Where is home for me now?" and set aside many other issues and stories I could have included.

One I do not explicitly address in *Everywhere A Garden* is its postcolonial context. As I am a citizen of a country previously colonized by the United States, my choice to come to the States for "better opportunities" is politically, historically, and culturally loaded. While I do not choose to discuss this in full within the confines of my story, I am aware that my personal experience as a Filipino studying abroad in America in a postcolonial world is seated in a background beyond my narrative, and is significantly influenced by said background.

Another topic I planned to shed more light on is my Chinese heritage. While my family is not traditional by most standards, there are cultural cornerstones set in place by the older generations to keep our "clan" together, and in recent times I have developed a stronger interest in connecting with my heritage, given how much I was learning about it in my major. While this would certainly texturize a narrative dealing with multiple areas of belonging, it feels like a journey that is only beginning, and would likely not fit in a comprehensive story about a soon-to-end adventure.

Regardless, the resulting *Everywhere A Garden* is over one hundred and fifty pages worth of content, spanning the beginning of my life in "exile." It is divided into five sections that trace my journey through rediscovering my identity after entering a new world.

The *prologue* marks the beginning of my displacement, where I first entertain the idea of studying abroad. It sets up the overarching questions of the next three sections: What is my idea of home going to become, once I am displaced? How will I navigate taking on different identities? Will this experience change my relationship with where I am from, and how?

Part One, entitled *Everything's Coming Up Roses,* covers my arrival in America, and my first two years attending Wesleyan. In this section, I struggle with unmet expectations and must learn to bridge the cultural gap between myself and my new peers. This part introduces the conflict of warring identities by beginning the displacement narrative, and contemplates the possibility of merging two separate lives.

Part Two, entitled 무궁화 꽃이 피었습니다 or *The Rose of Sharon Has Bloomed*, is about the fall semester of my junior year, which I spend in Seoul, South Korea. Although I settle into enjoying my Seoul lifestyle almost immediately, this brings about feelings of guilt regarding my own heritage and relationship with my home. In this section, I learn new ideas of belonging and use this to tackle my ongoing identity crisis.

Part Three, entitled *Aking Paraluman Mutyang Sampaguita* or *My Muse, the Blooming Sampaguita,* spans every break period I spend home in Manila, but focuses particularly on the spring break of my junior year. I wrangle with the changes I have undergone since high school, and acknowledge some new personal truths about home. This part addresses a fear of change, which permeates through Parts One and Two, and attempts to reconcile my different worlds.

Part Four, entitled *Everywhere A Garden,* is the most contemporary narrative, spanning my present experience of my senior year at Wesleyan. Ending my time in college with a stronger core identity and sense of belonging, I reflect on my experiences to inform the possible futures I might pursue, now having acquired multiple options.

The book's epigraph is taken from "Postcards from Somewhere" by Florianne Jimenez, an essay assigned to me in my senior year of high school. At the end of my time in secondary education, I was almost sure I would be abroad by the same time the following year, and felt prematurely nostalgic reading a piece that contemplated displacement and the changes it brought to a person the way this one did. It was a sentiment I could not yet truly identify with, having no

other concept of home besides the one in which I grew up, but one I strongly empathize with today.

The following pages are my attempt to honor the beginning of what I consider to be a lifelong journey to and through different homes. While unsure about my status as a valid member of the diasporic community, my story is a reflection of time I spent traveling between countries, switching between languages, and adapting to different cultures, all of which find their roots in a single decision to leave home temporarily. While the displacement may not be permanent, its effects are long-lasting, the opportunity allowing one to expand their definitions of home and belonging beyond the ones provided to them by default at birth. In this visual narrative, I hope to have conveyed my transnational experience of self-discovery in a manner that seems to my readers as worthwhile as it has seemed to me.

Maxine Go

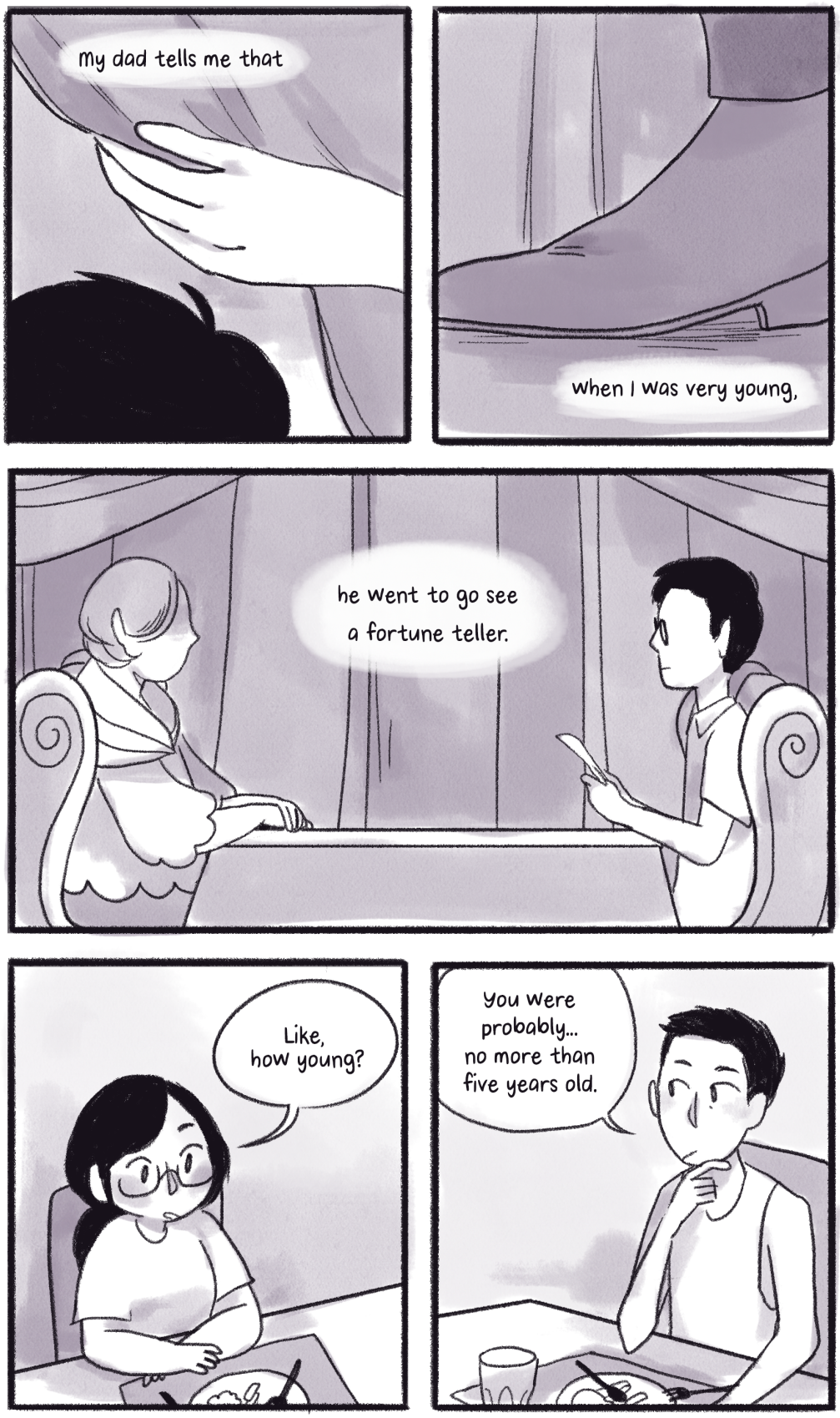
EVERYWHERE A GARDEN

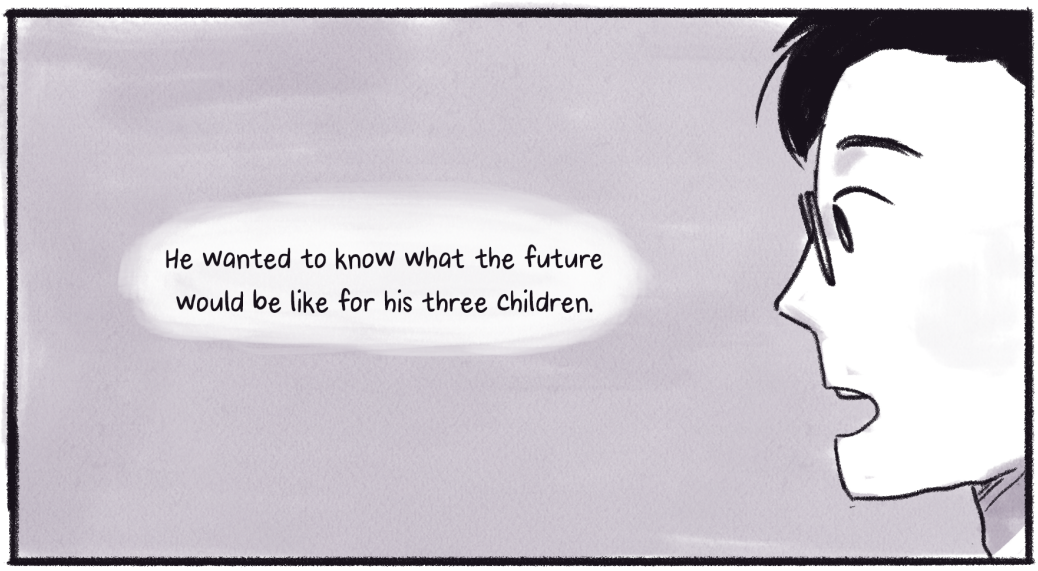
a graphic memoir

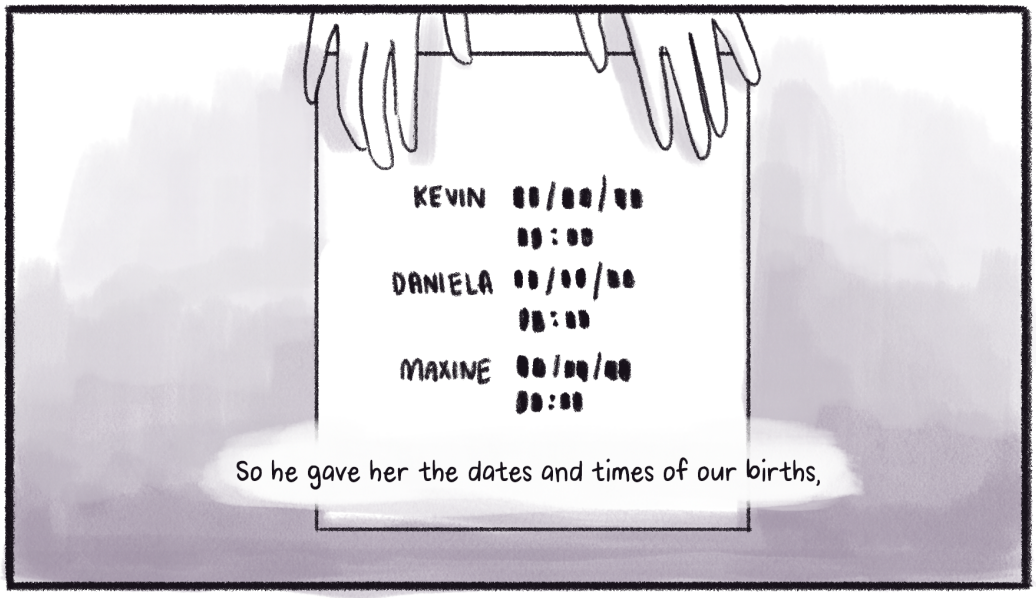
Home is singular in concept
but plural in reality,
and I am singular,
and what a pity that is.

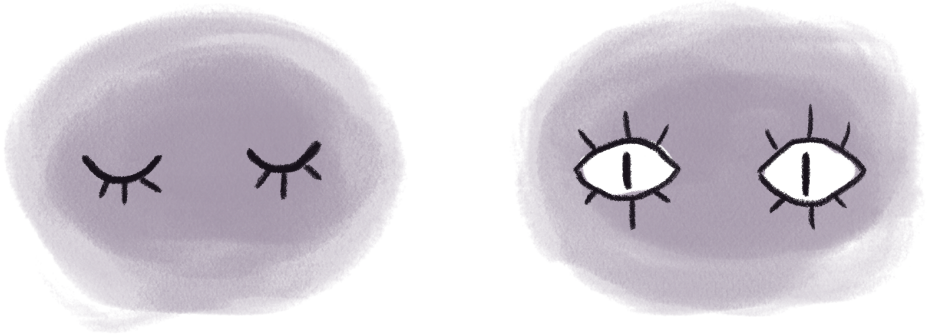
Postcards from Somewhere,
Florianne Jimenez

Prologue

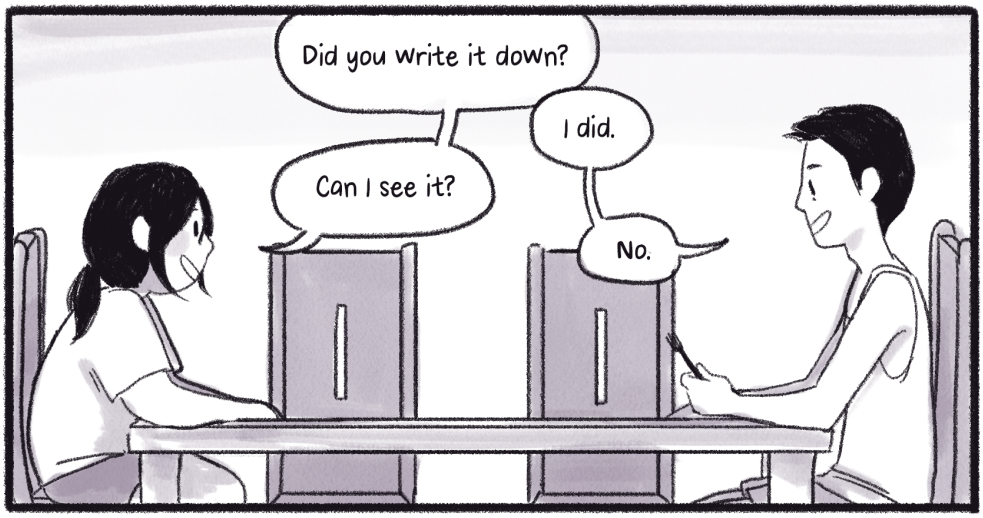

My dad tells me that
when I was very young,
he went to go see a fortune teller.
Like, how young?
You were probably... no more than five years old.







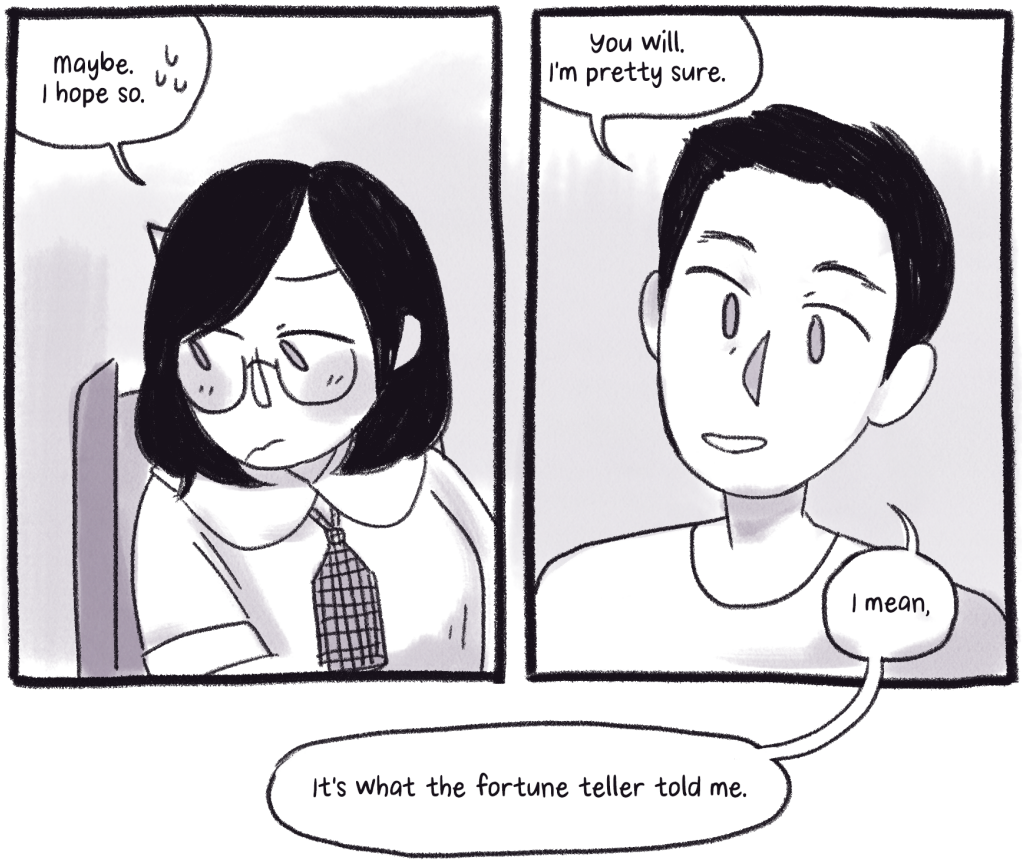
and she told him what she saw.


Did you write it down?
I did.
Can I see it?
No.

Why not?
I'll tell you them as they happen.

Some years later, when I start applying to colleges in America,

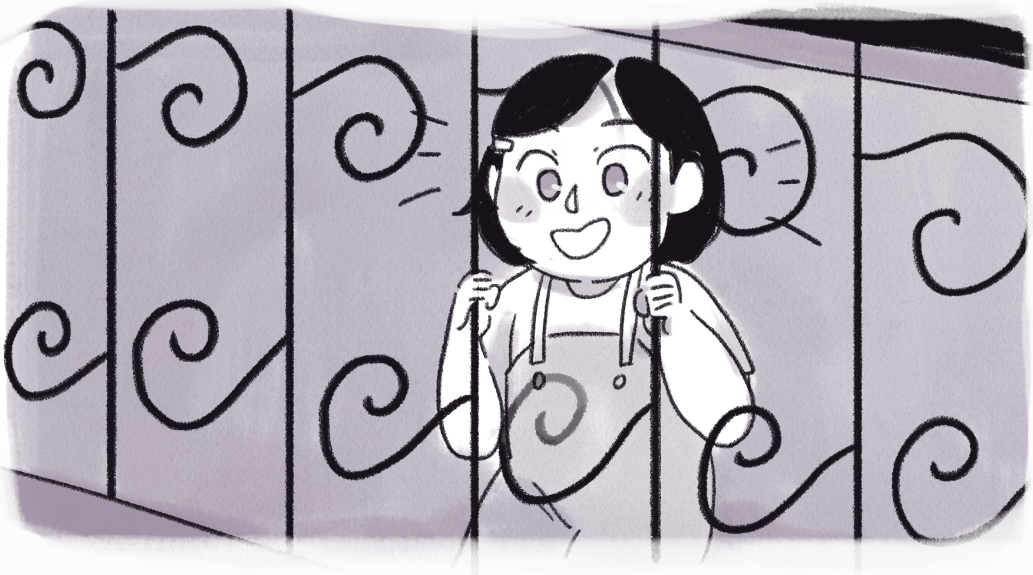
I receive the first of my predictions.
Ugghhhh.
These supplemental essays are
KILLING MEEEEE
How many more do you have to do?
A LOT
Kaya 'yan, Max.
Remember, this time next year, you'll be in the US.

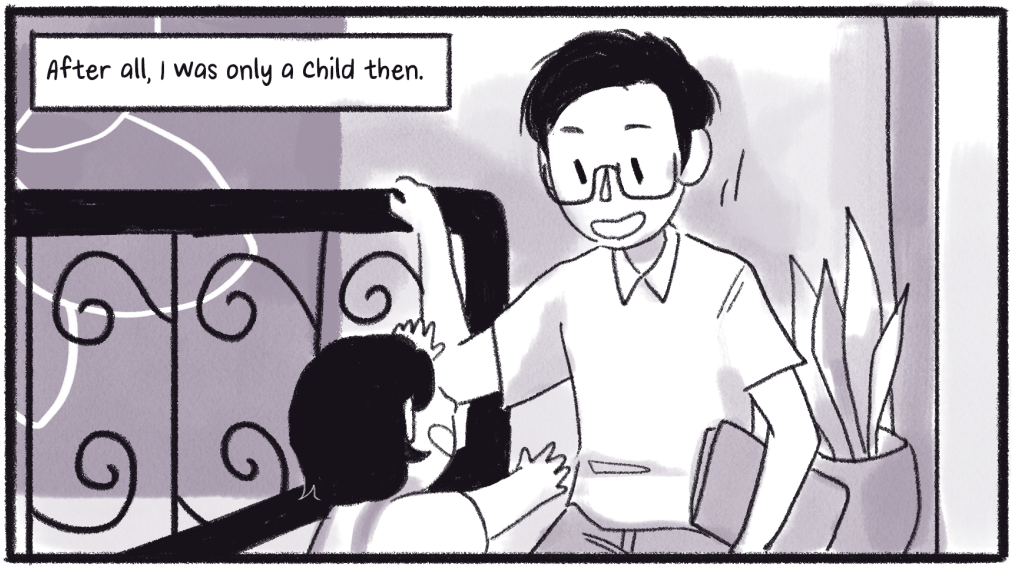

maybe.
I hope so.
You will.
I'm pretty sure.
I mean,
It's what the fortune teller told me.

Really?
What exactly did she say?
She told me that—
"The youngest will be the first to leave the nest."
Huh.

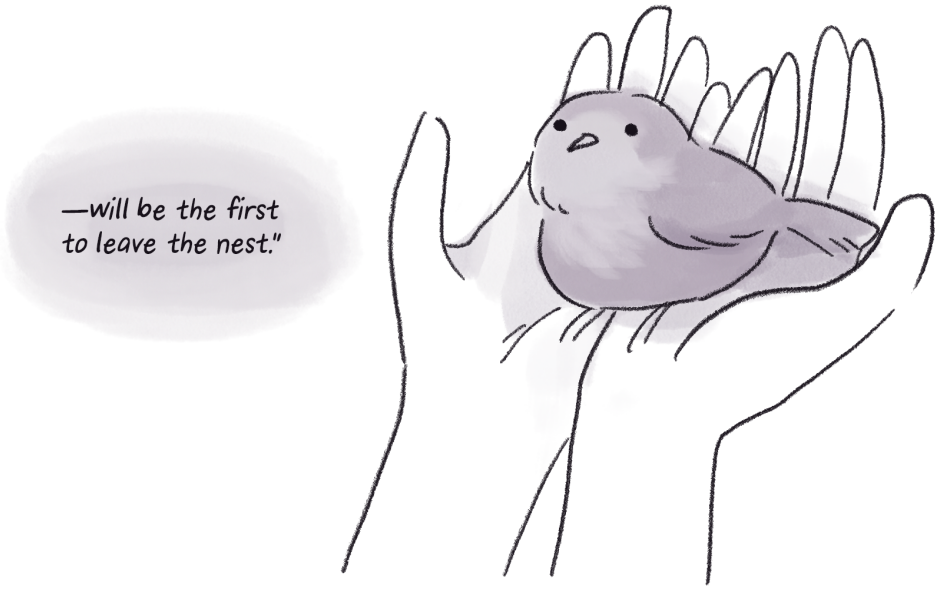
I wonder what my parents thought,

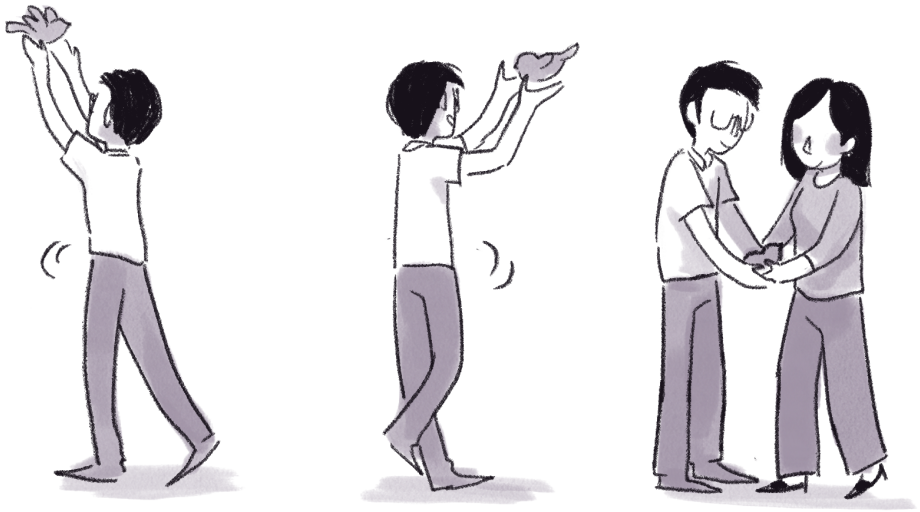
when they heard this for the first time.



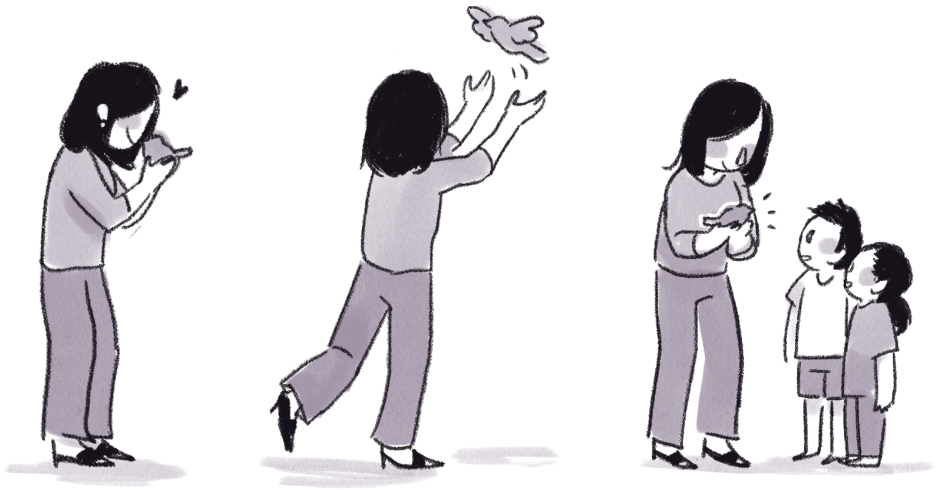

After all, I was only a child then.

"The youngest—

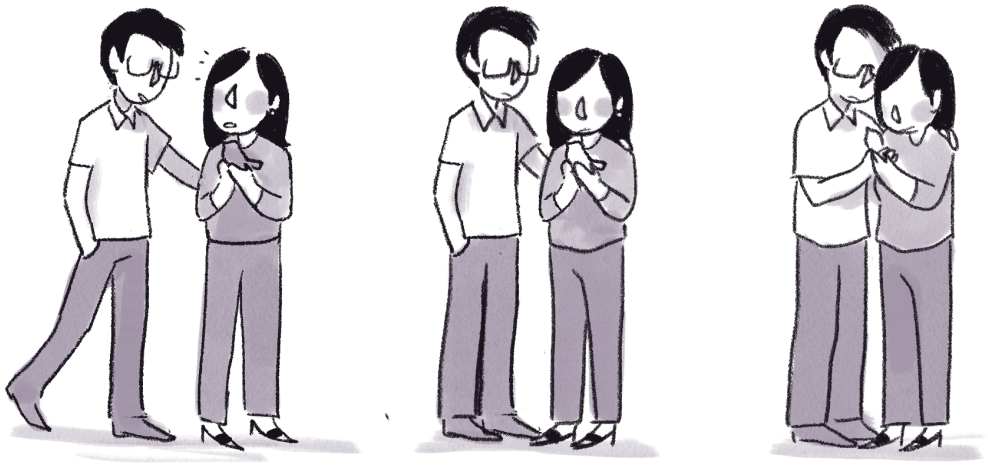

—will be the first to leave the nest."



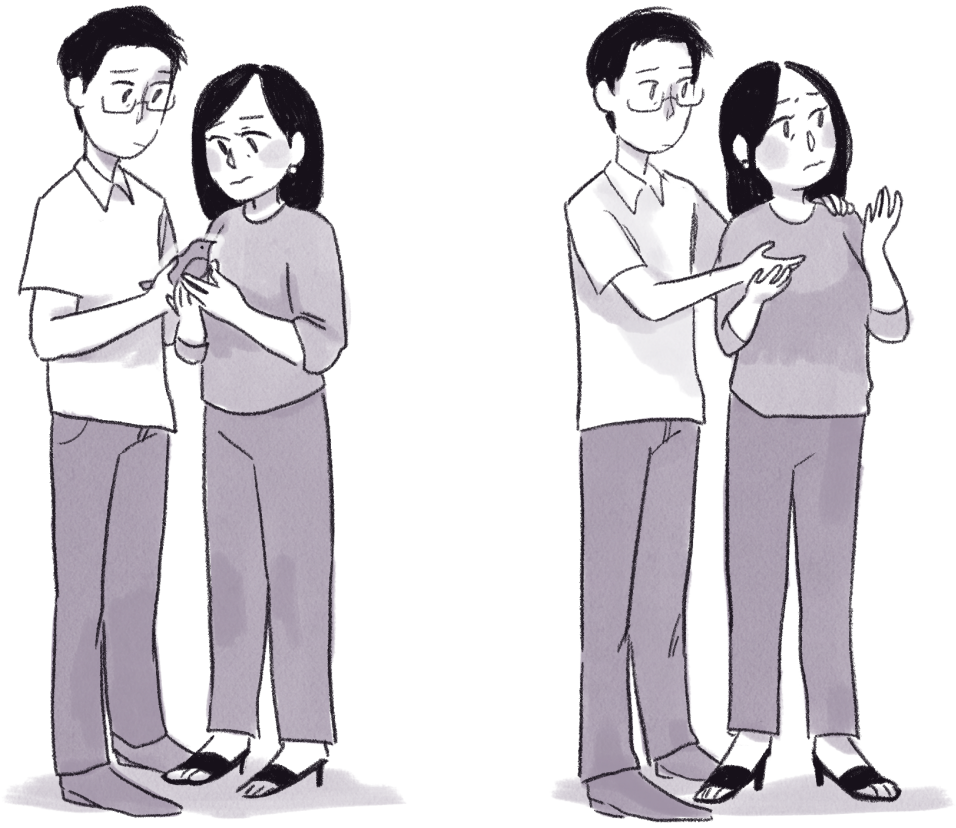
How could their baby girl



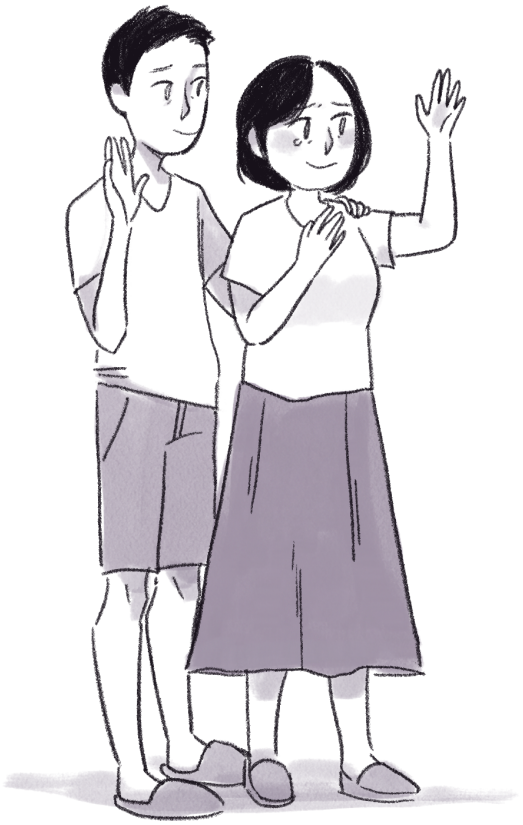
be the first to leave?



Where would she go?

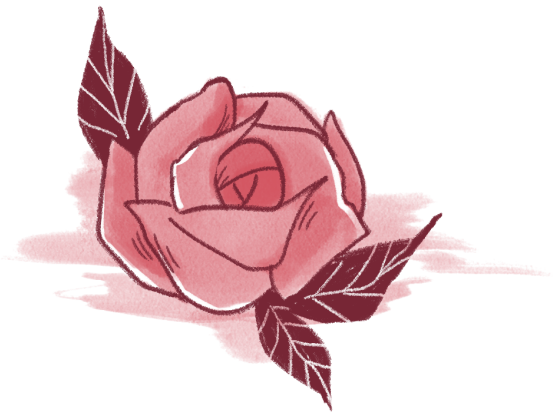


Would she come back?



Would she know how to?

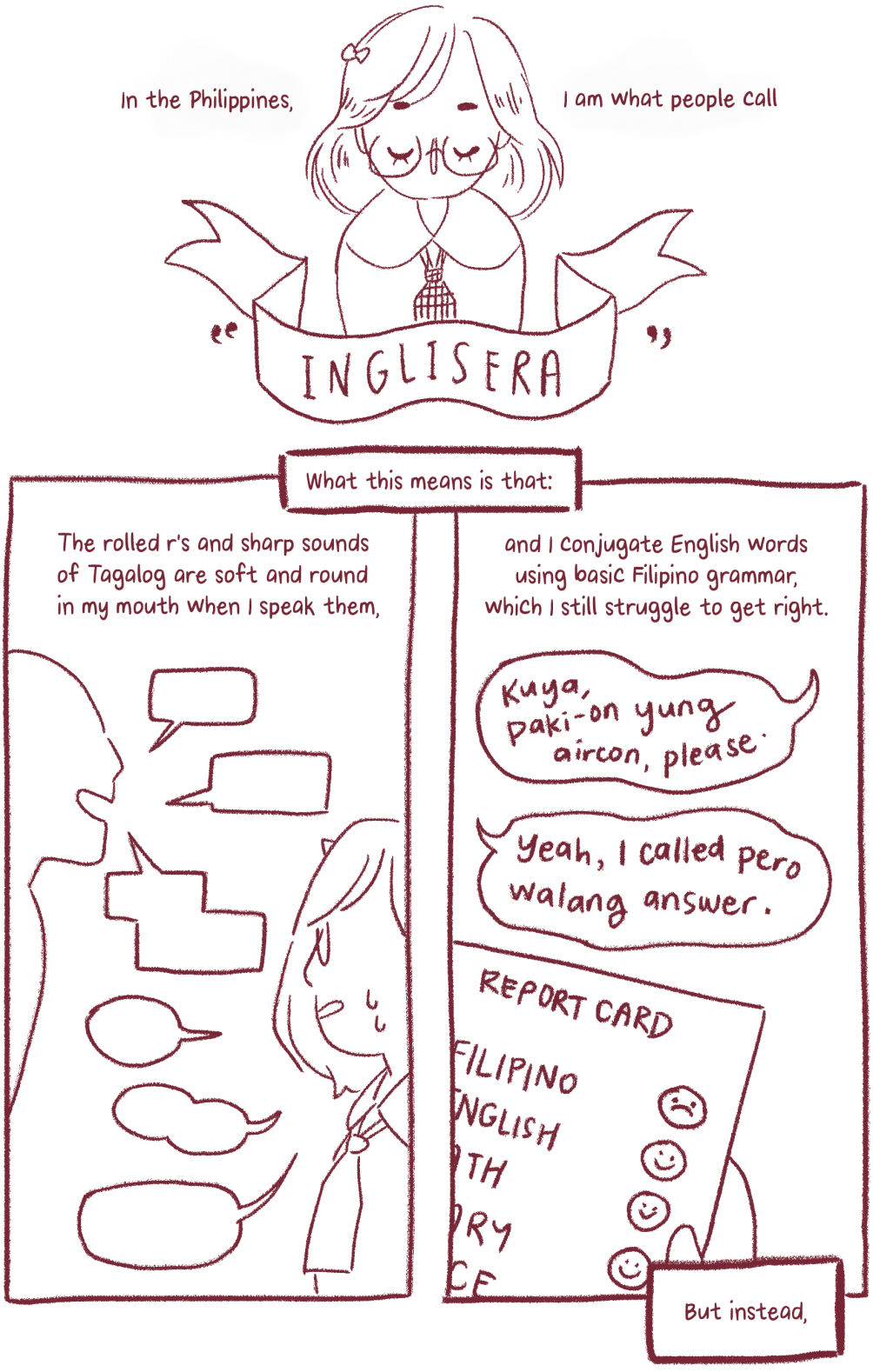
Part One:

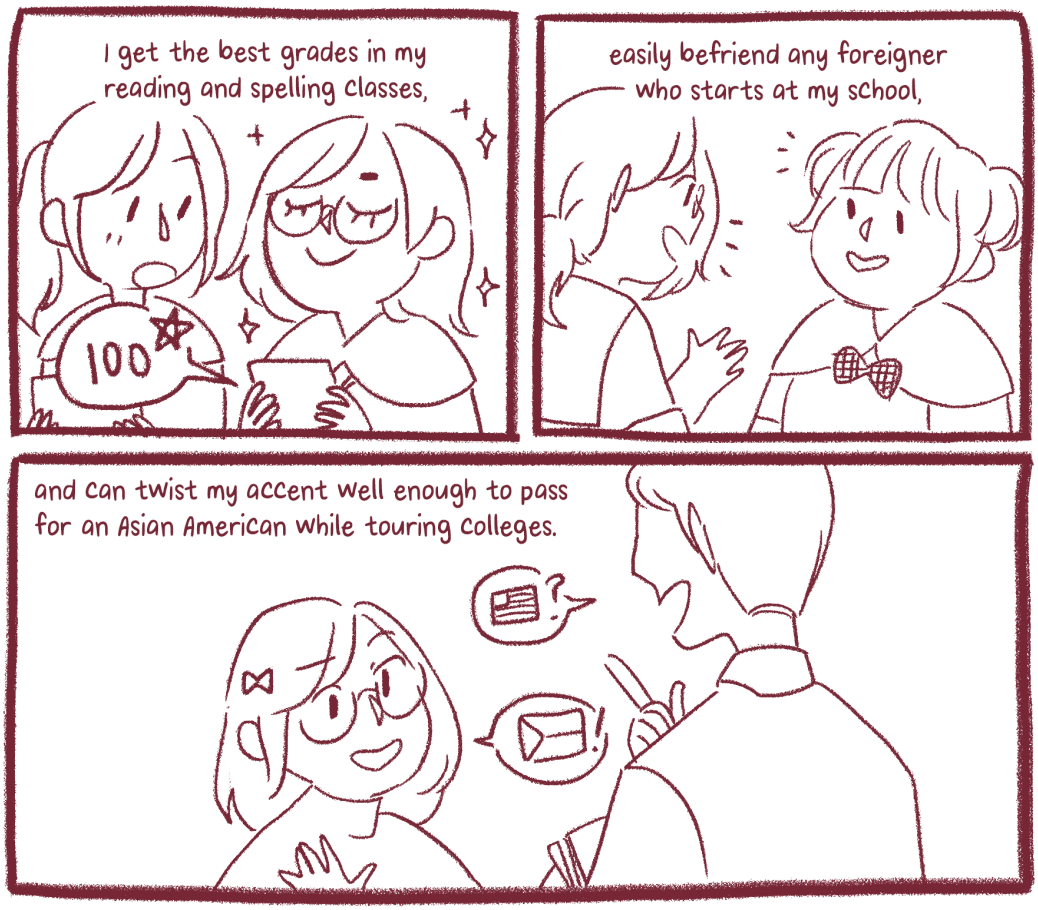


Everything's Coming Up Roses

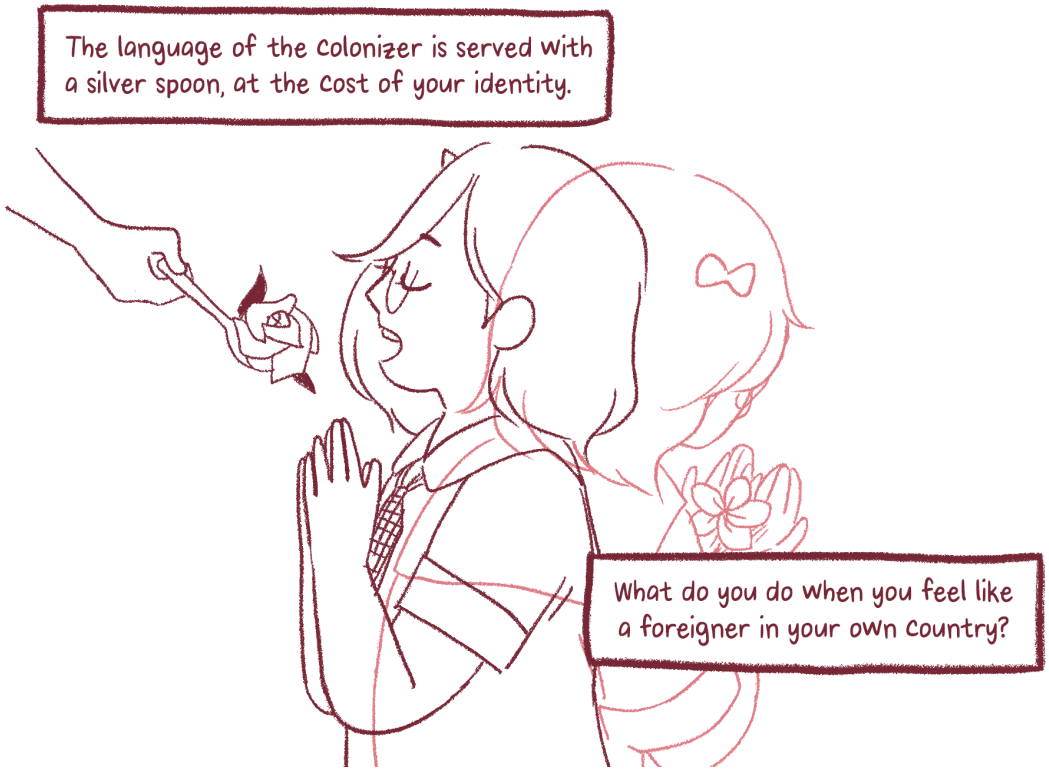
Marunong ka bang mag-Tagalog?
Do you know how to speak Tagalog?
Yes.
REC
what's your name?
Anong pangalan mo?

Yes.
haha
haha
haha
Ano nga ang pangalan mo?
I said, what's your name?
haha
haha
Yes!
Max, do you know what Mommy said?
What?
I asked you, what's your name?
Maxine!
Yes, Maxine!

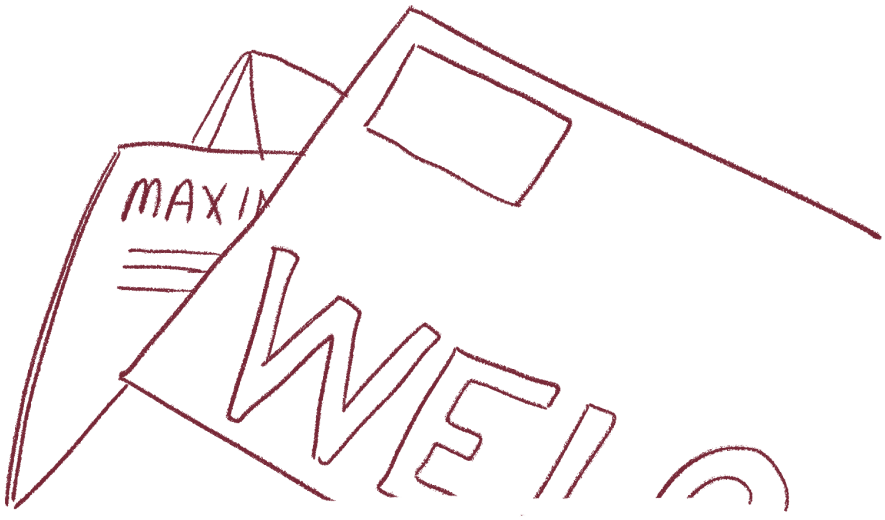

In the Philippines,
I am what people call
"INGLISERA"
What this means is that:
The rolled r's and sharp sounds of Tagalog are soft and round in my mouth when I speak them,
and I conjugate English words using basic Filipino grammar, which I still struggle to get right.
Kuya, paki-on yung aircon, please.
Yeah, I called pero walang answer.
REPORT CARD
FILIPINO
NGLISH
TH
RY
CE
But instead,



Inglisera is both a mark of privilege and of dishonor.



The acceptance letters come in April—
a way out, a solution of sorts.



My friends and family are not surprised in the least.
Preparing to leave is a team effort.
We look at classes,
fit my life into two suitcases,
and anticipate the adventure,
together.

On my eighteenth birthday,
a month before I fly out,
we hold a big party.

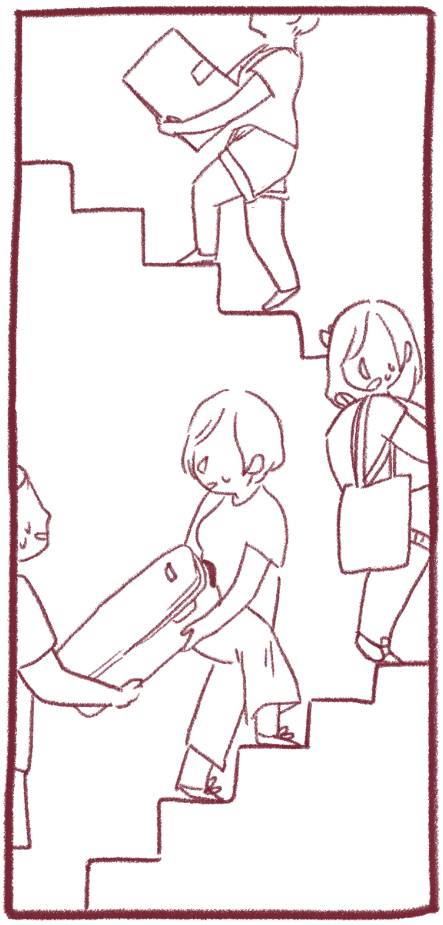
People give speeches,
sing songs,
take pictures.
In sparkling pink and surrounded by my loved ones,
I feel ready to take on a new world.

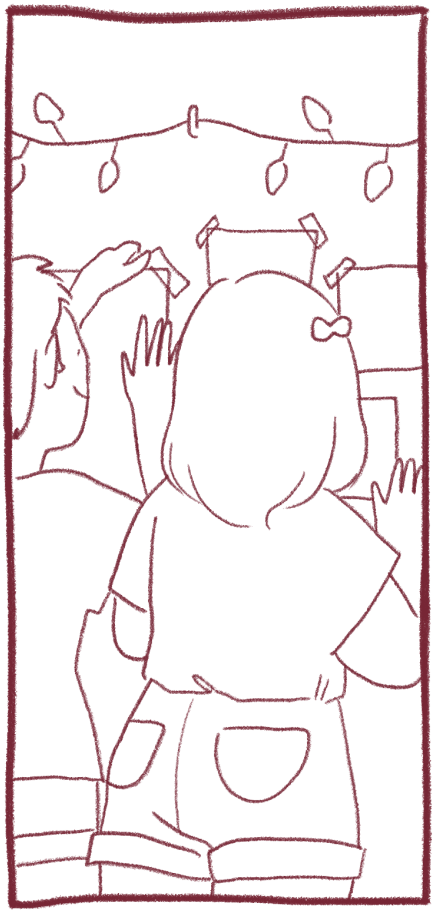
ARR
도착

NY → CT

I get to move in early as an international student.

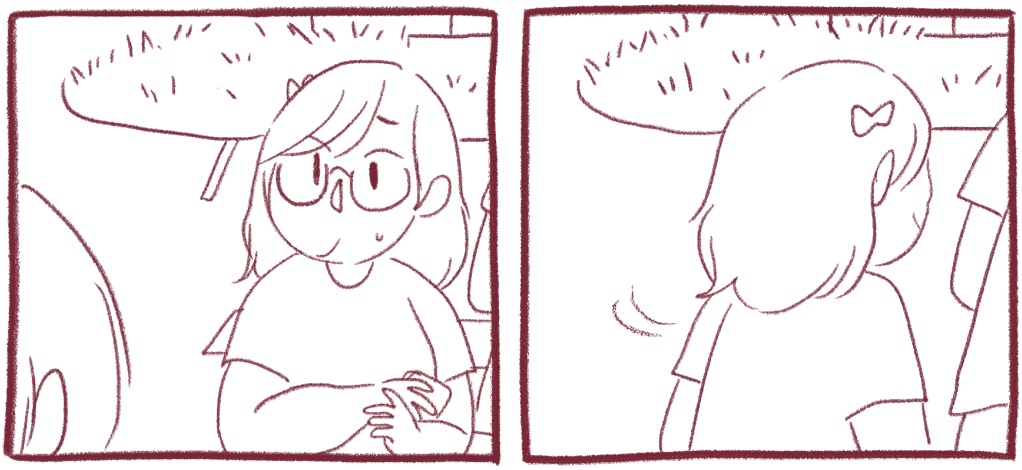
My mom, aunt, and uncle all help me settle into my dorm,





and we try to make my tiny single room seem bigger, homier.

We run into a few other international students,
but other than a handful of us, my dorm is mostly empty.
I try to picture the building full of people,
common areas occupied by new friends,
who I manage to click with instantly.

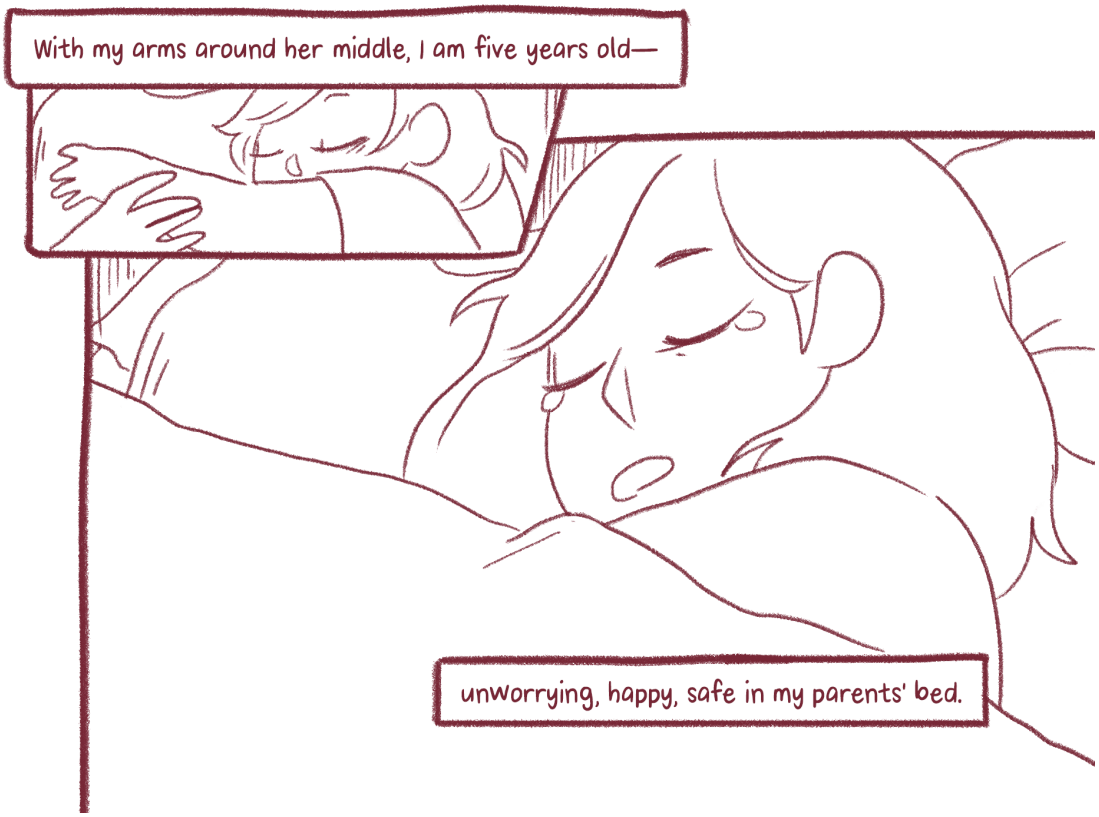


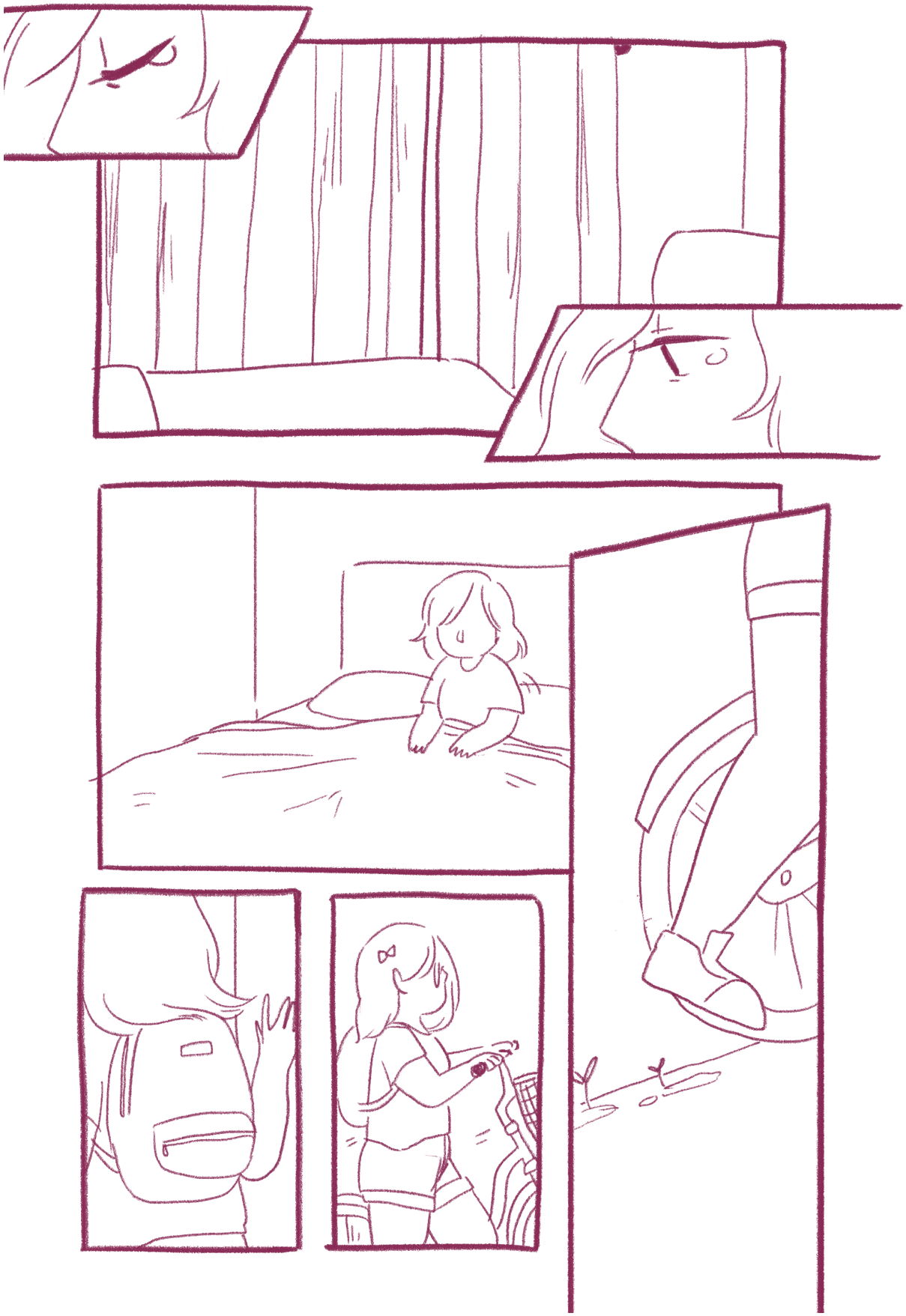
The fantasy keeps me from getting too sad for the day my mom has to fly back home.

Every day until she leaves,

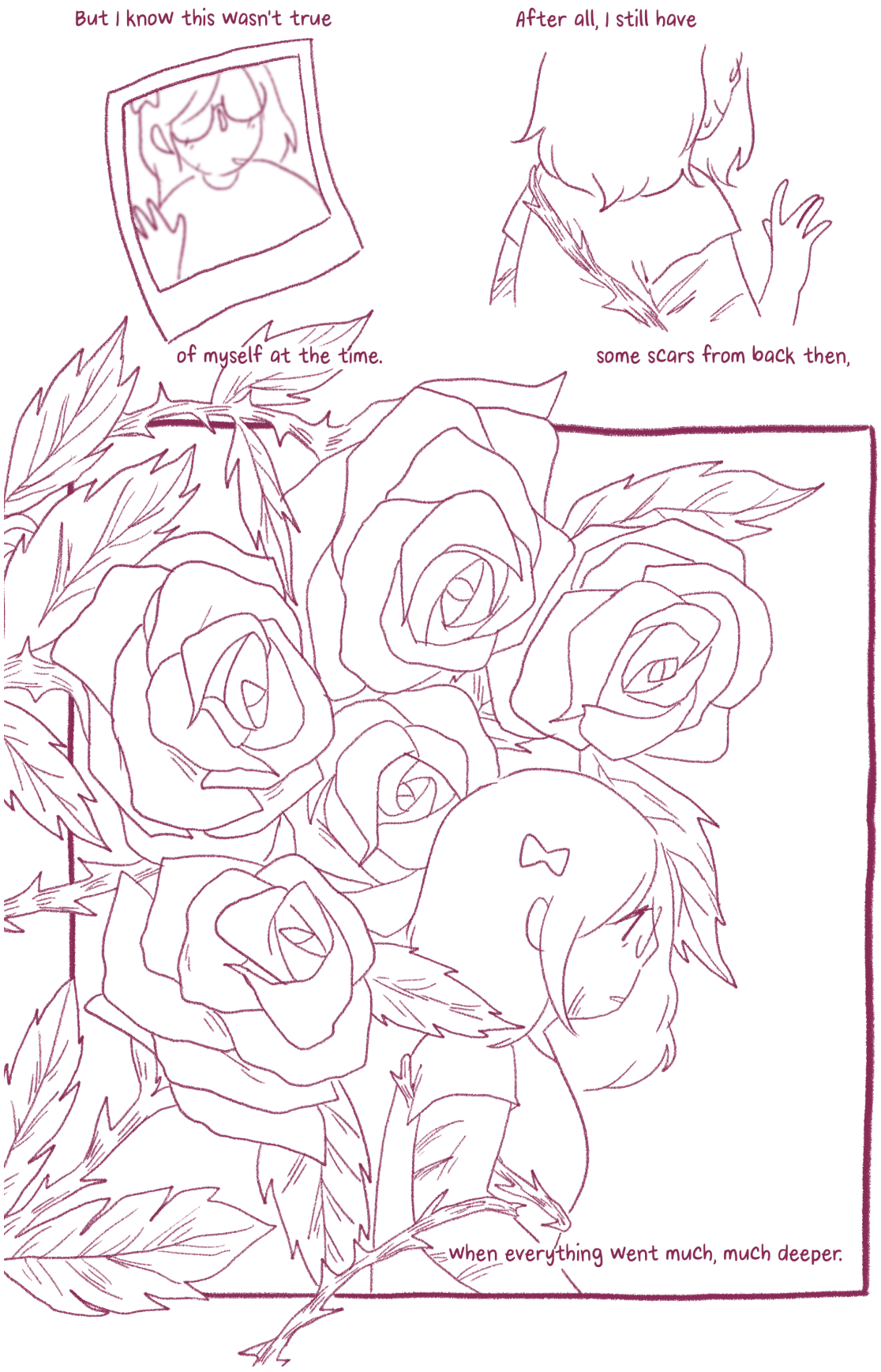
I bike down to stay with her in her hotel room.

We have two beds,
but on the last night,
we share hers.

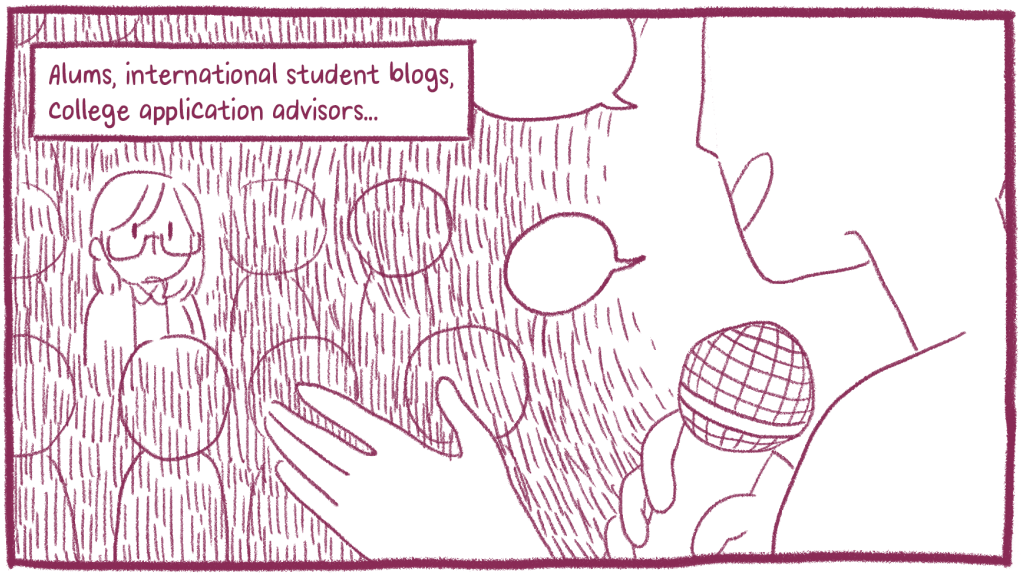

With my arms around her middle, I am five years old—
unworrying, happy, safe in my parents' bed.

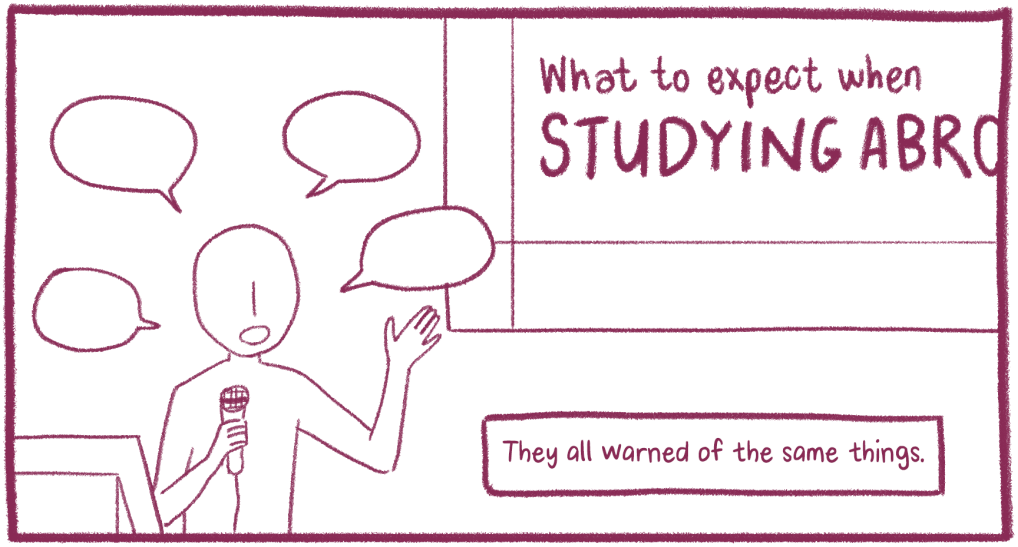


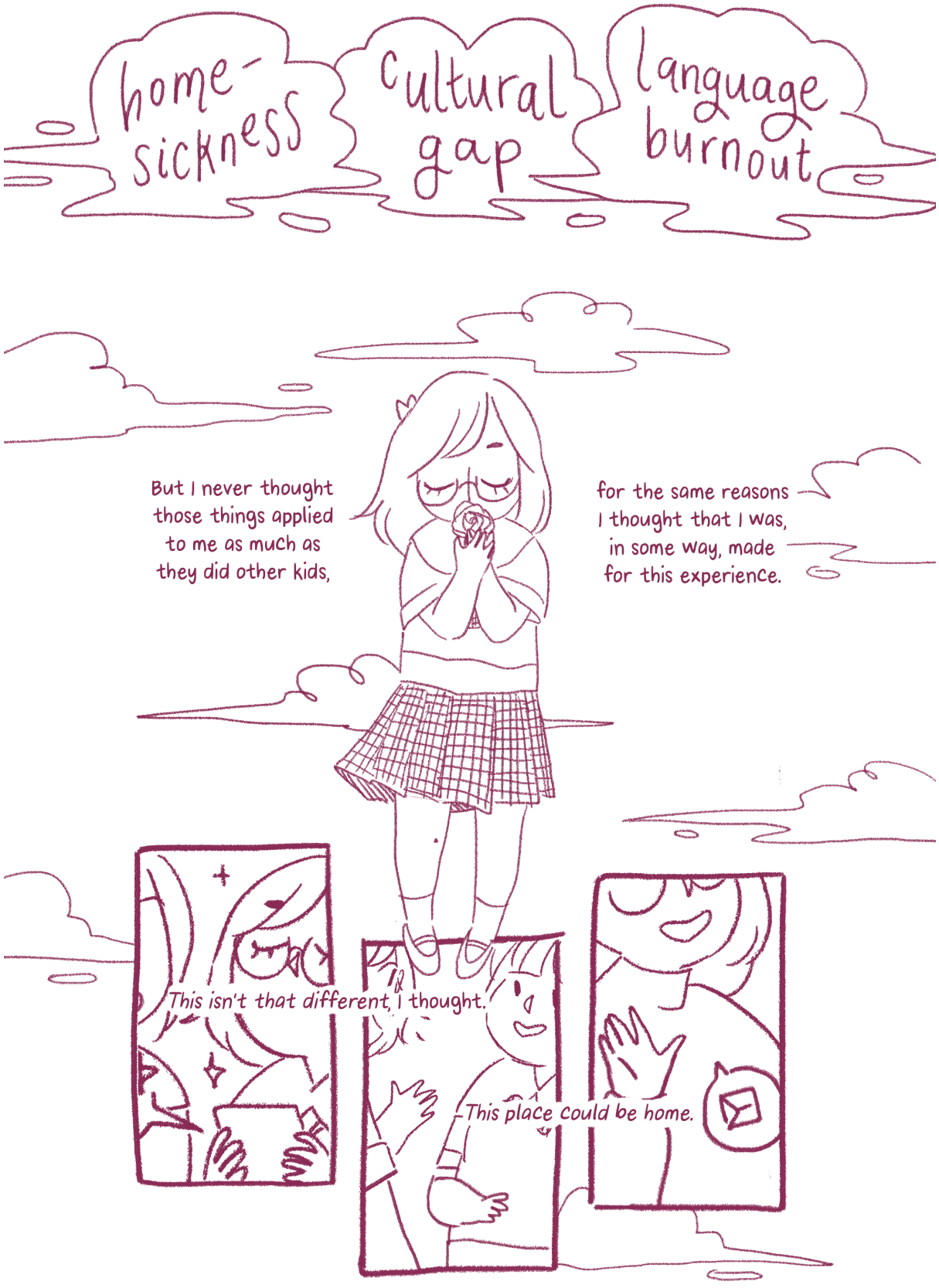
Memories of my first two years at Wesleyan
come to me now in blurry squares of film.
In my fourth year,
they only leave papercuts—
tiny little things, not even worth a bandage.


But I know this wasn't true
of myself at the time.
After all, I still have
some scars from back then,
when everything went much, much deeper.

Granted, I knew this was part of going to college abroad.






home-sickness
cultural gap
language burnout
But I never thought those things applied to me as much as they did other kids,
for the same reasons I thought that I was, in some way, made for this experience.
This isn't that different, I thought.
This place could be home.

I was right in some ways:

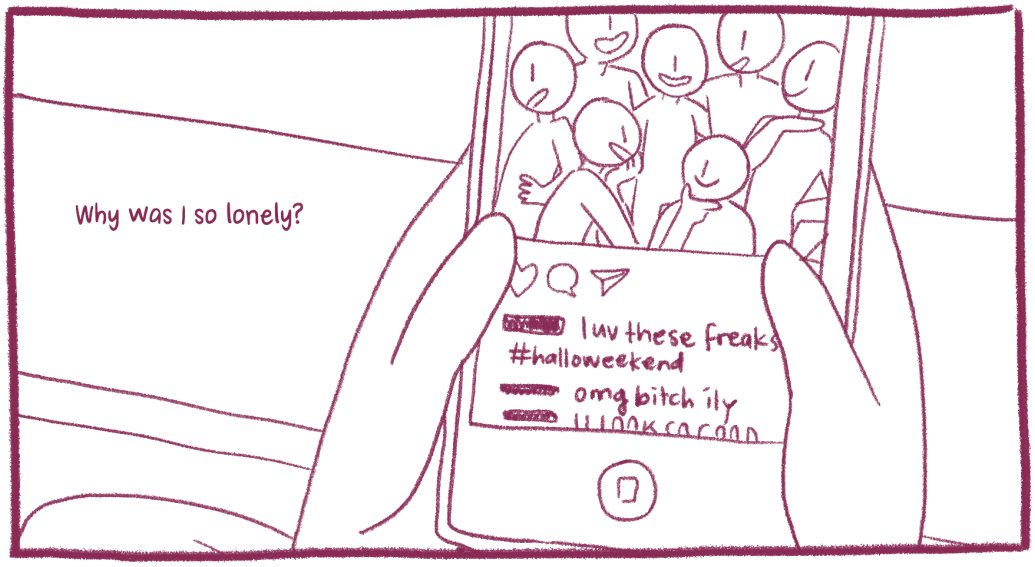
Talking came easily.

I did well in all of my classes.

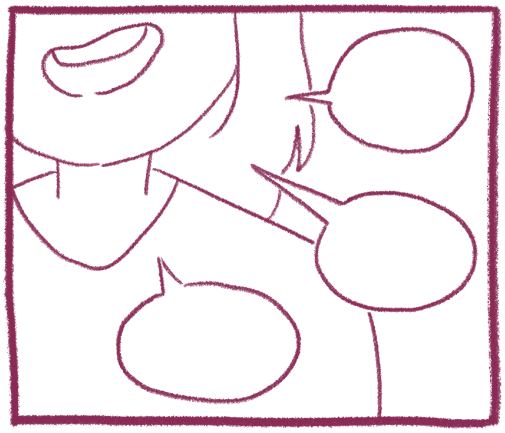
I made some friends.

But in many other ways,

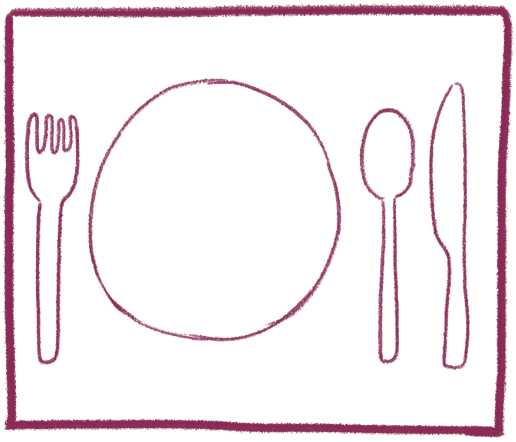
Hi, how's it going?
unused to small talk
Uh...
Actually think th
It's just like, so interesting, because...
Look, isn't this funny?
Wait, what? I don't really get it...
AHAHAHAHA
... WHAT
I'm from the Midwest, so I'm used to this weather.
Ahaha, yeah...
What?? Where's the Midwest????
I'm going home this weekend.
I'm going off-campus to see my boyfriend.
Nice...
my only close friends
Will be alone the entire weekend

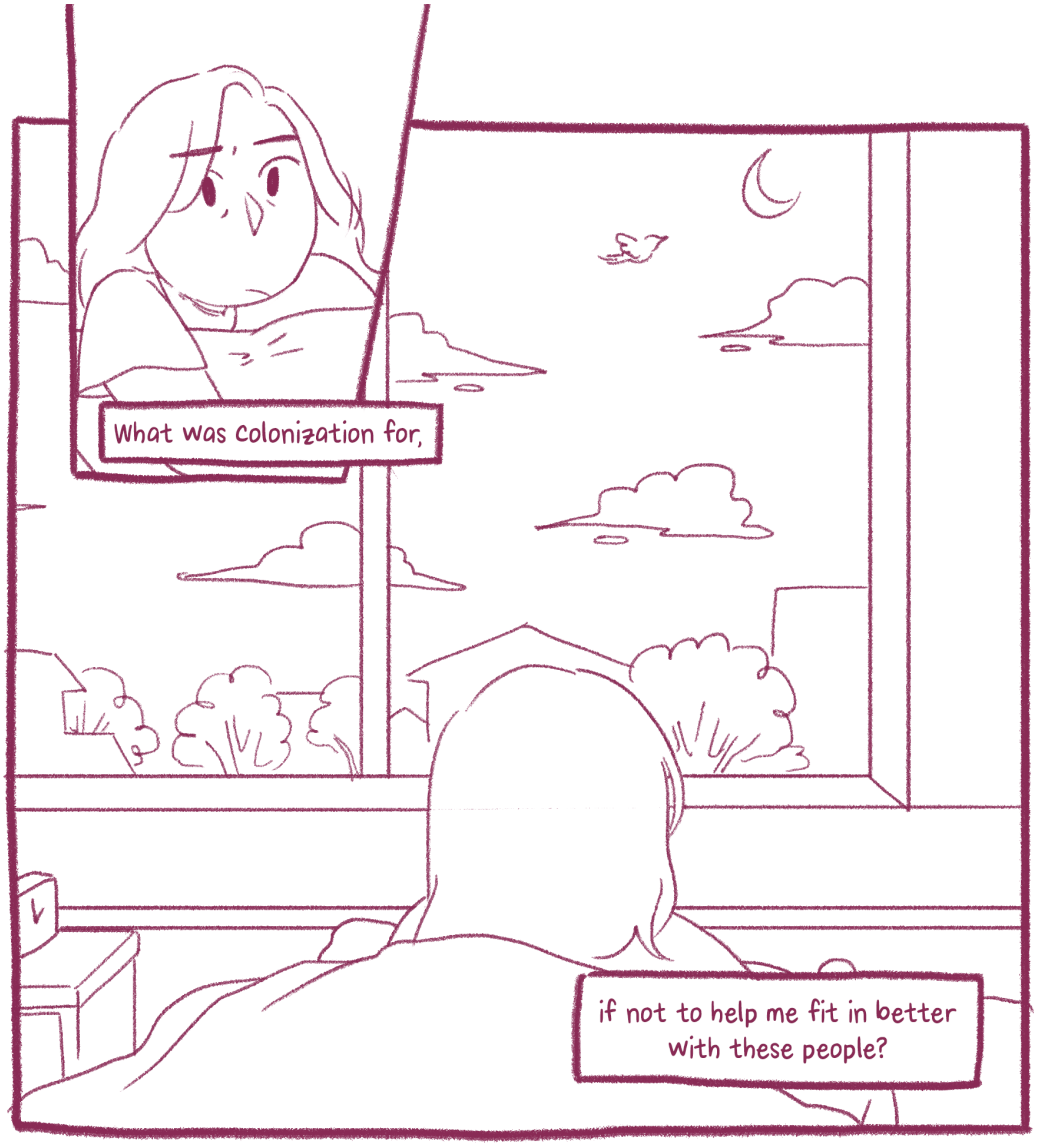


I spoke the same native language.

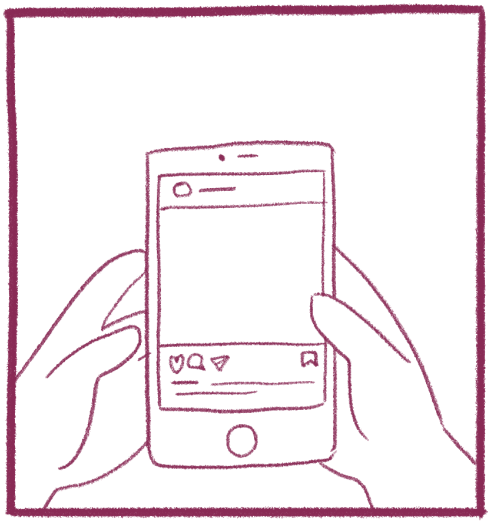


I ate with the same eating utensils.

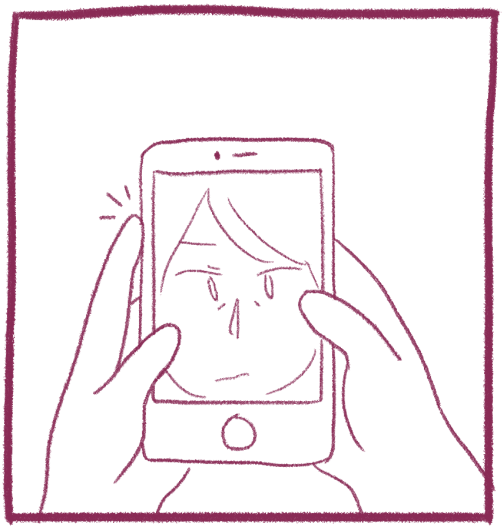




Being an *Inglisera* had turned out to be useless.



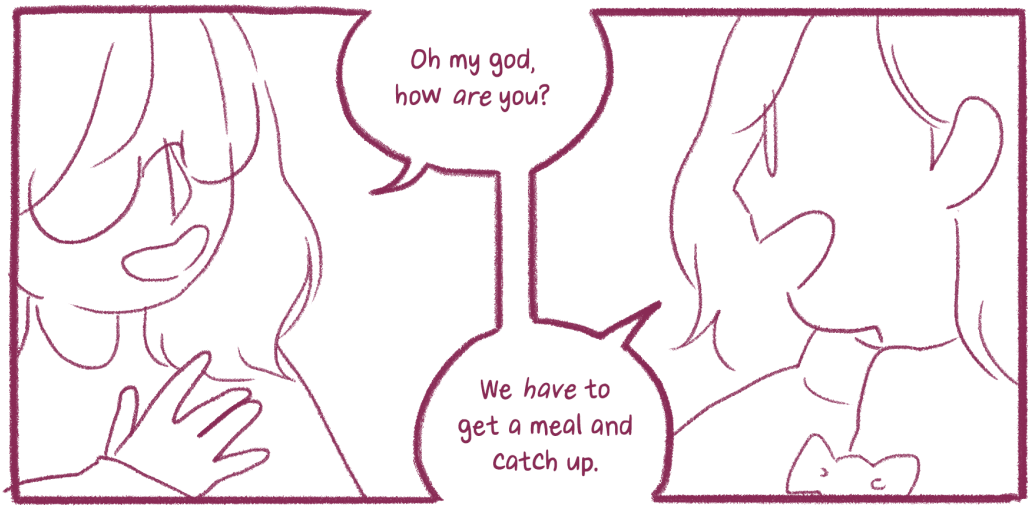
Because although the words and syntax were the same,

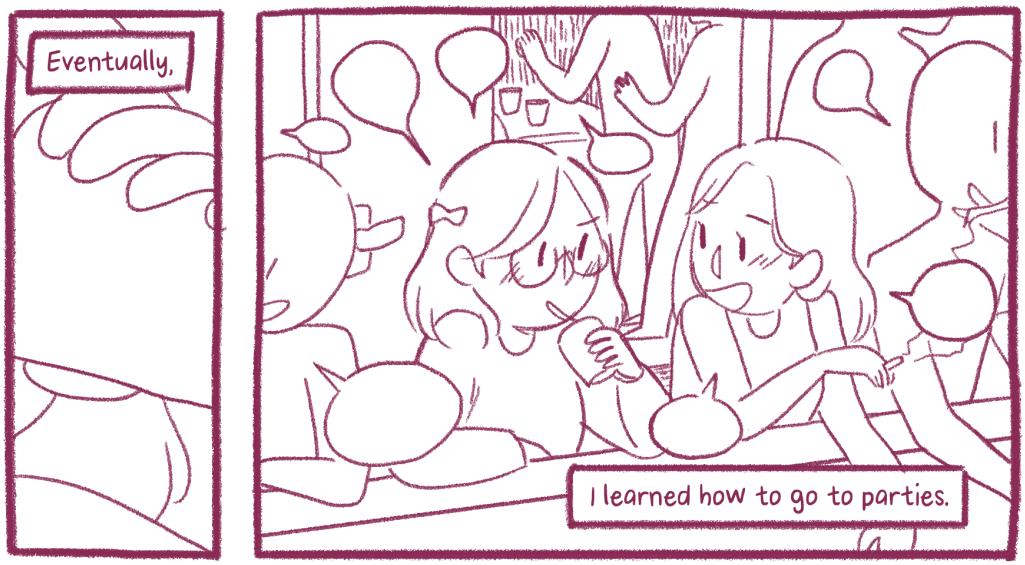


the language people spoke here was different from mine.
And no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't grasp that difference,
and that small gap created
a crippling, gaping loneliness.
On the other side, I could only watch—
so I did.

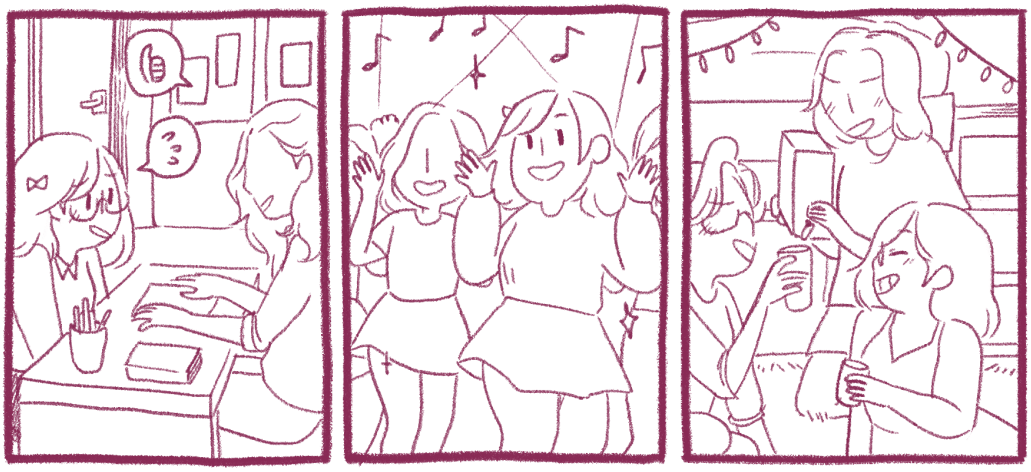
I observed what everyone who looked happy was doing,
and did my best to imitate them.

I talked the same way, learned to tell their jokes, laughed at the right times.



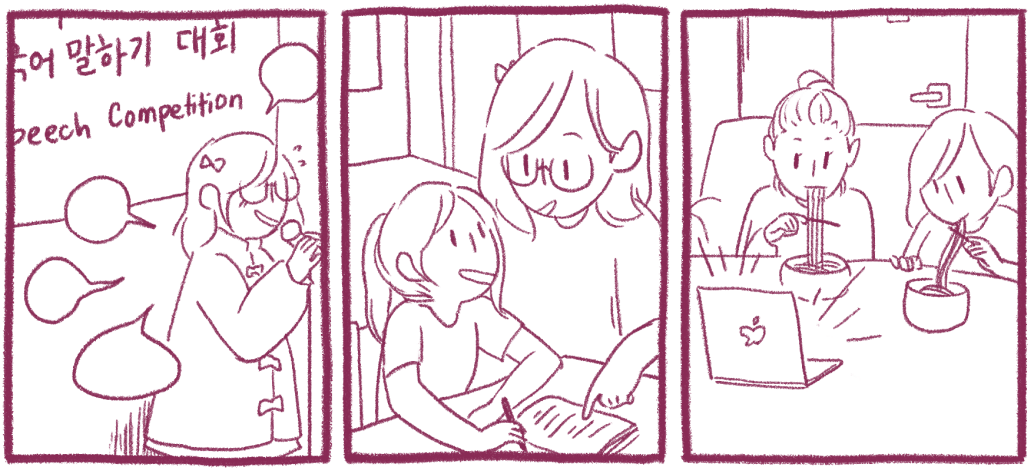


I dressed up.
IS THIS HOW THIS
WORKS?
I danced.
AM I
DOING THIS RIGHT?
I made face-value friends.
I had fun.
I was happy.
I was exhausted.
I was miserable.



But of course, it would be a lie to say it was all bad.

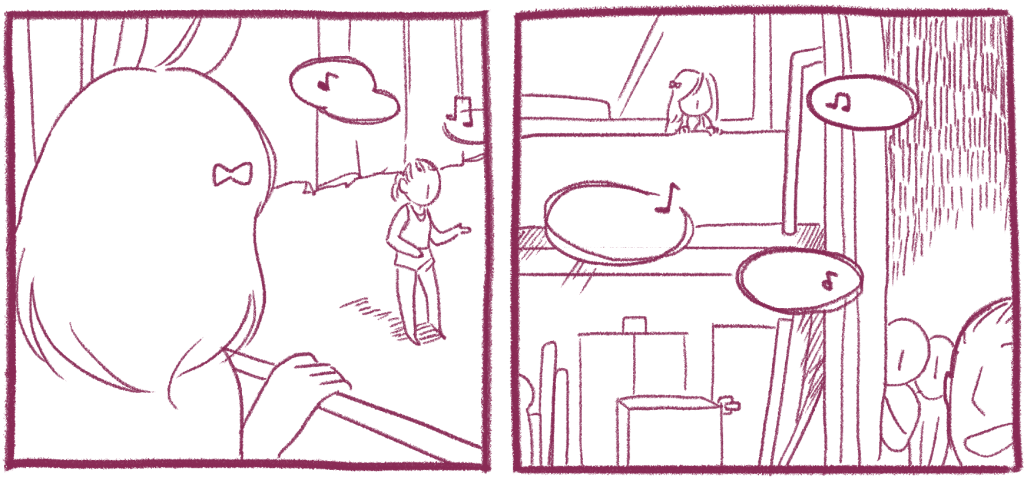
I met some great people, and got to do some incredible things.



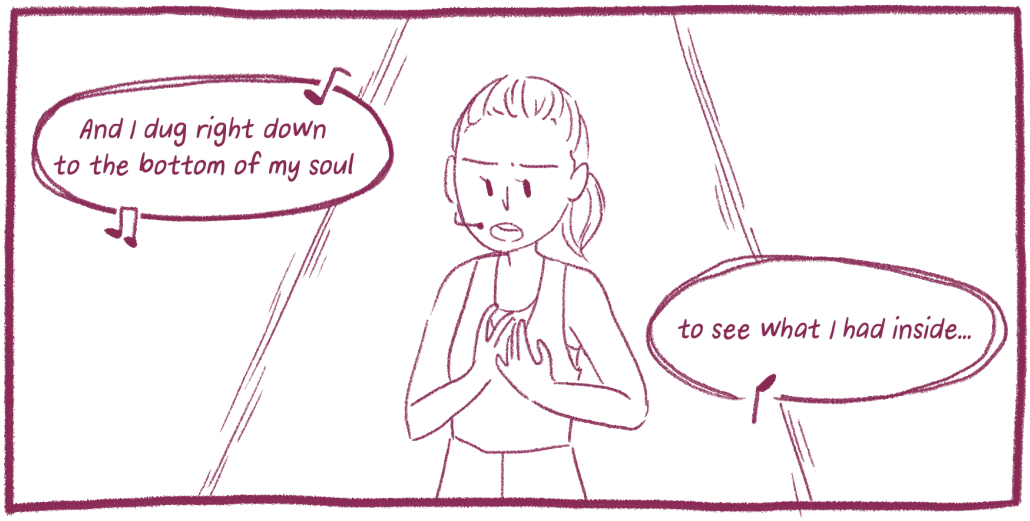
In the spring of my freshman year, I got recruited to help stage manage a production of the musical A Chorus Line.
The characters, all dancers desperately looking for work,
must reveal their lives and pasts as part of their audition
for a measly role in the dance chorus of a show.
Happy to be part of something and in love with musical theatre,
I went to as many rehearsals as I could...

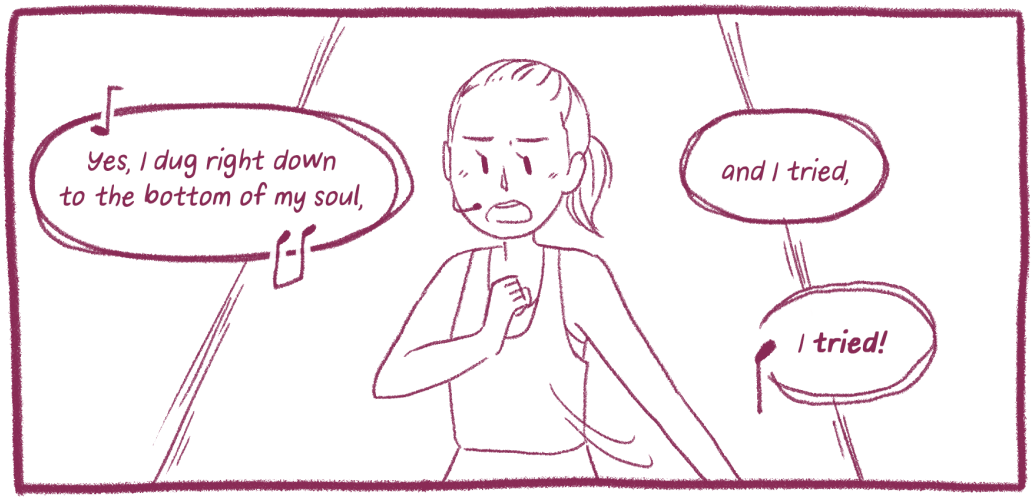
...especially when I knew they were rehearsing musical numbers.

My favorite of all the show's songs is a solo called "Nothing."



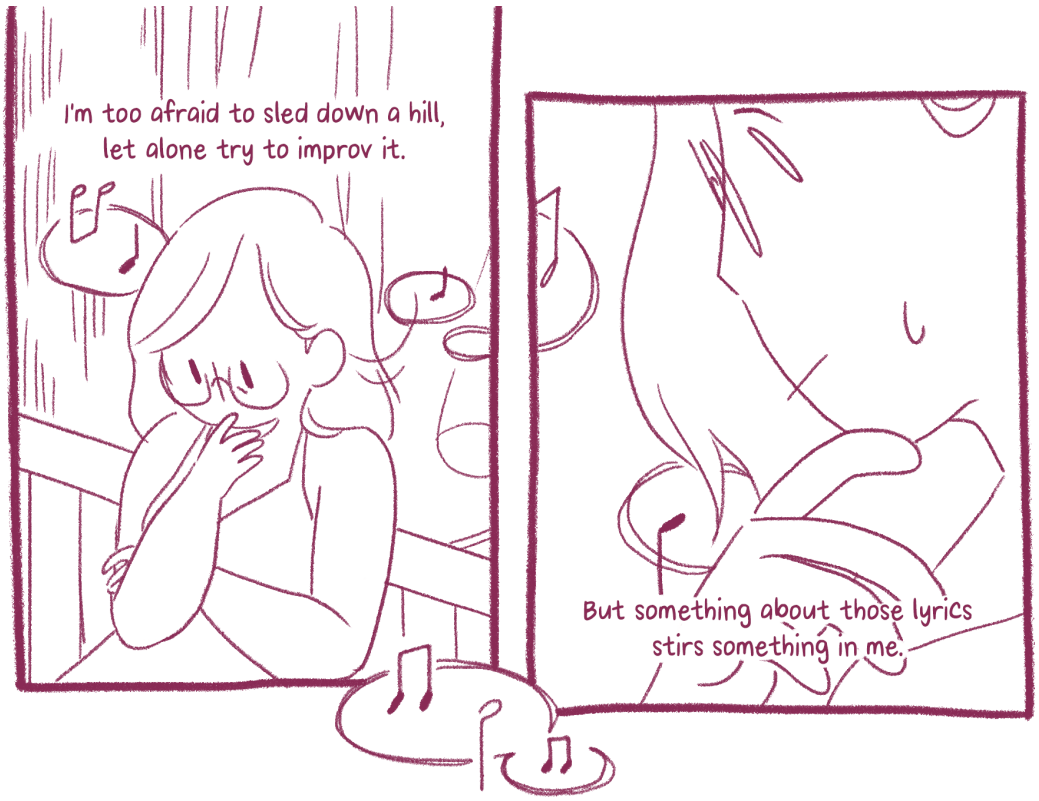
In the song, a character named Diana recounts a horrible improv class experience at her performing arts high school.



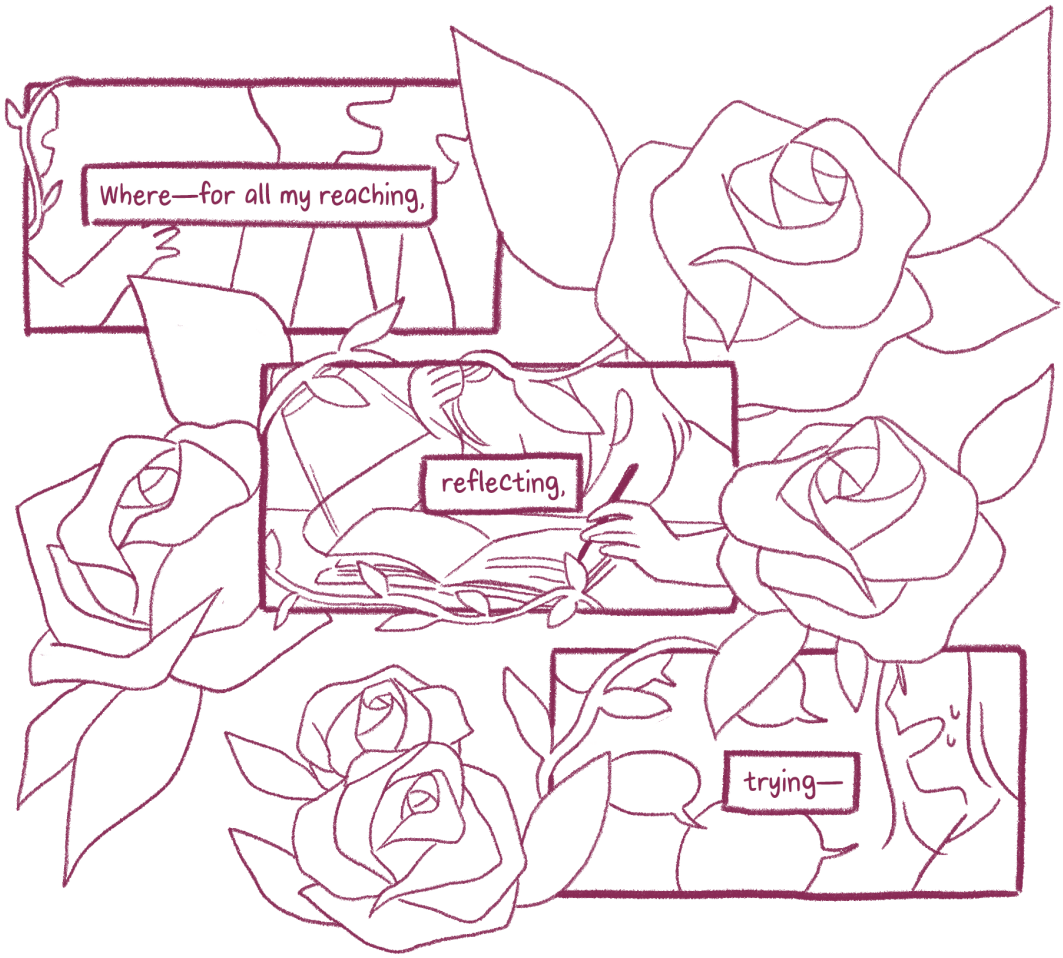


Our Diana is a girl named **Naomi**—
a freshman and fellow international student.
And everybody's going,
"Whoosh, whoosh!"
Watching from somewhere
beyond the wings,
I am spellbound.
"I feel the snow,"
"I feel the cold,"
"I feel the air!"
And Karp turns to me
and he goes, "Okay, Morales.
What did you feel?"
And I said—
Nothing.
I'm feeling
nothing.
And he said "nothing"
could get a girl
transferred!

They all felt something,
but I felt nothing—
HAHAHAHA
...WHAT
except the feeling that this bullshit was absurd.



It's years later when I realize that the song perfectly captures the feelings I had early on:

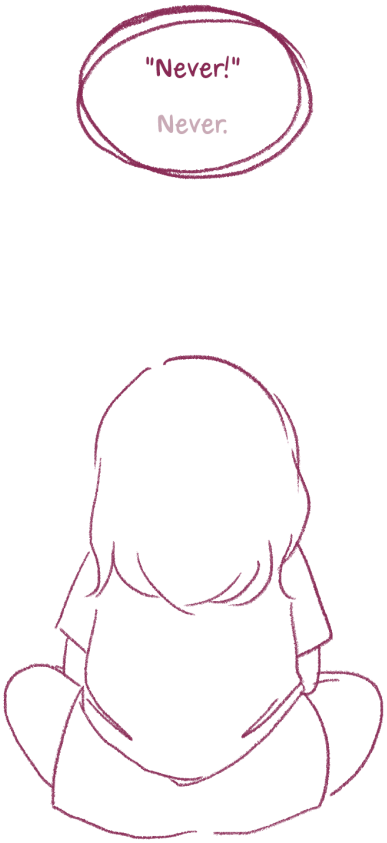

Where—for all my reaching,
reflecting,
trying—

there was nothing.

...and Karp turns to me and he says,

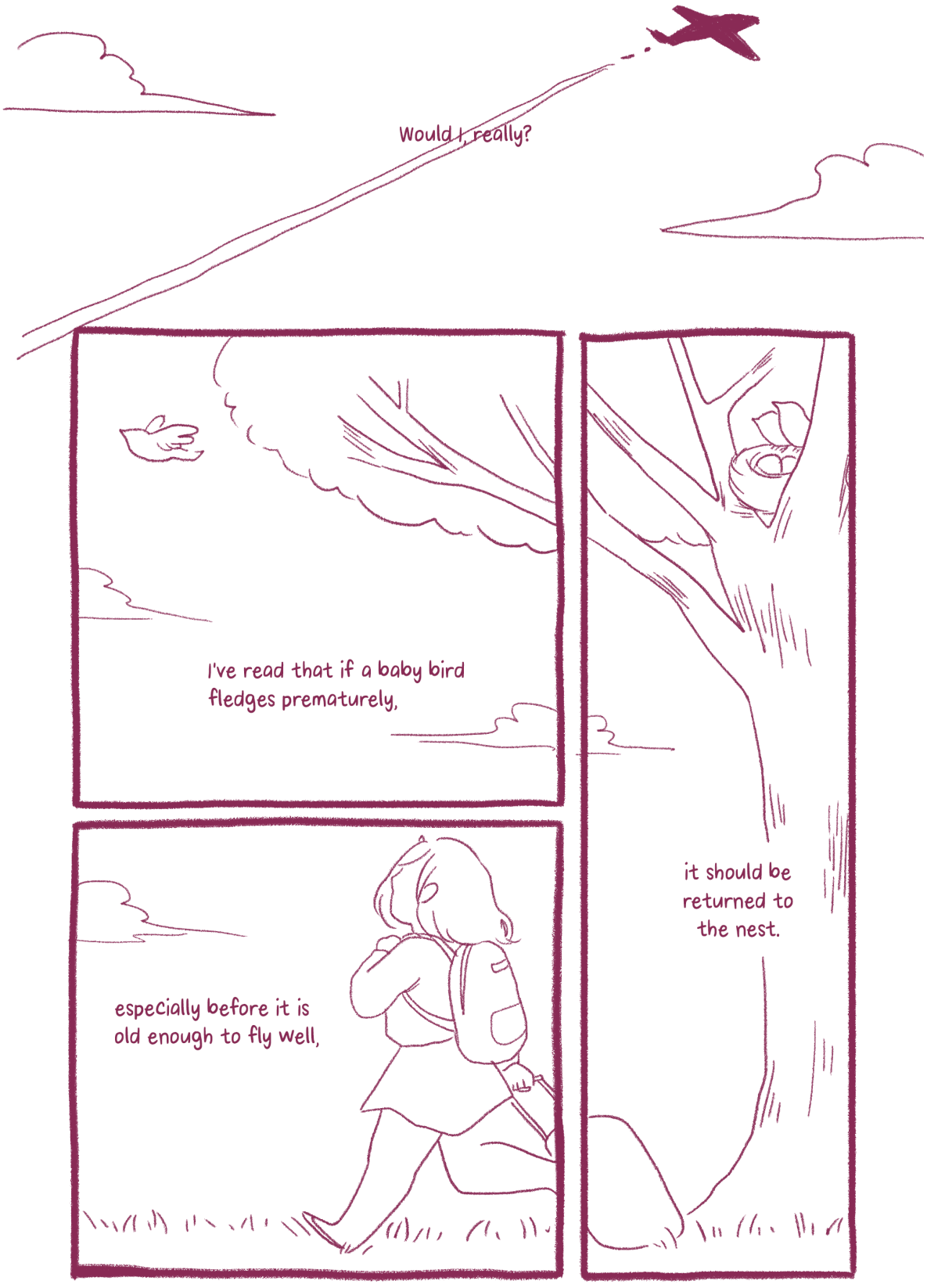
"Morales, I think you should transfer to Girls' High."
I think I should transfer literally anywhere else.

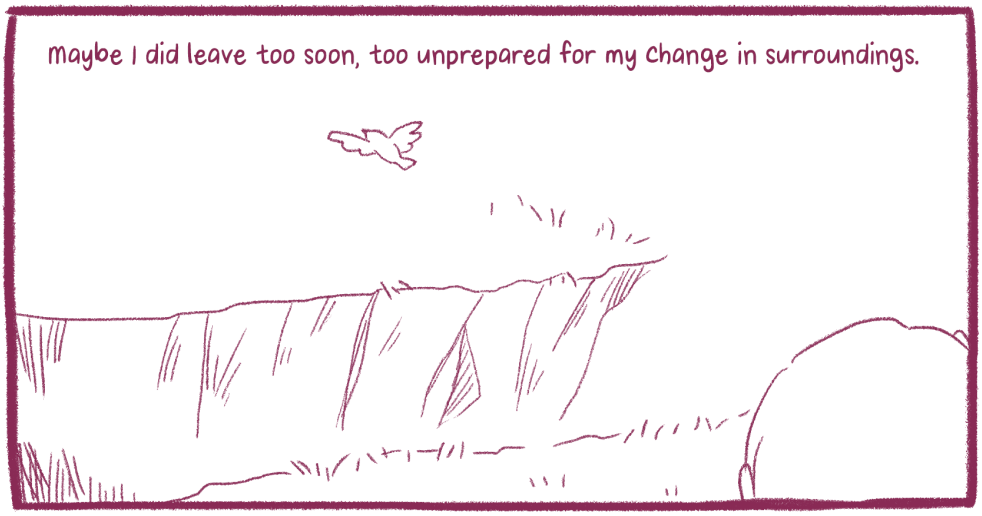
"You'll never be an actress."
I'll never really belong here.


"Never!"
Never.

Well,
why *don't* you transfer?
Do you want to come home, *anak*?
You can.

I realized I hadn't even considered the option until my mom brought it up.
I...
The look on her face says she's just as miserable seeing me have such a terrible time,
and that maybe, just maybe,
I'd be better off back home.


Would I, really?
I've read that if a baby bird fledges prematurely,
especially before it is old enough to fly well,
it should be returned to the nest.


maybe I did leave too soon, too unprepared for my change in surroundings.

But, though I don't notice it,
slowly,

I am changing, too.

The gap still exists, and I am still lonely.

But, without me knowing,
something is growing
between the crevices.

No, it's okay, Mommy.

I should stay.

"If a baby bird fledges prematurely,

It should be returned to the nest."

I think it has to be worth it, somehow.

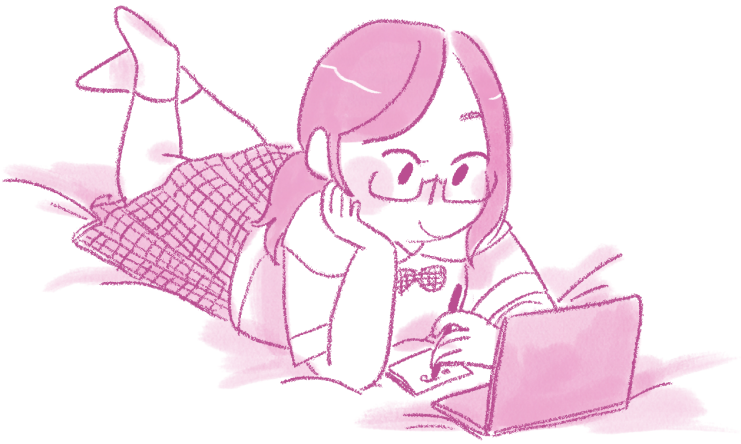
"Unfortunately,

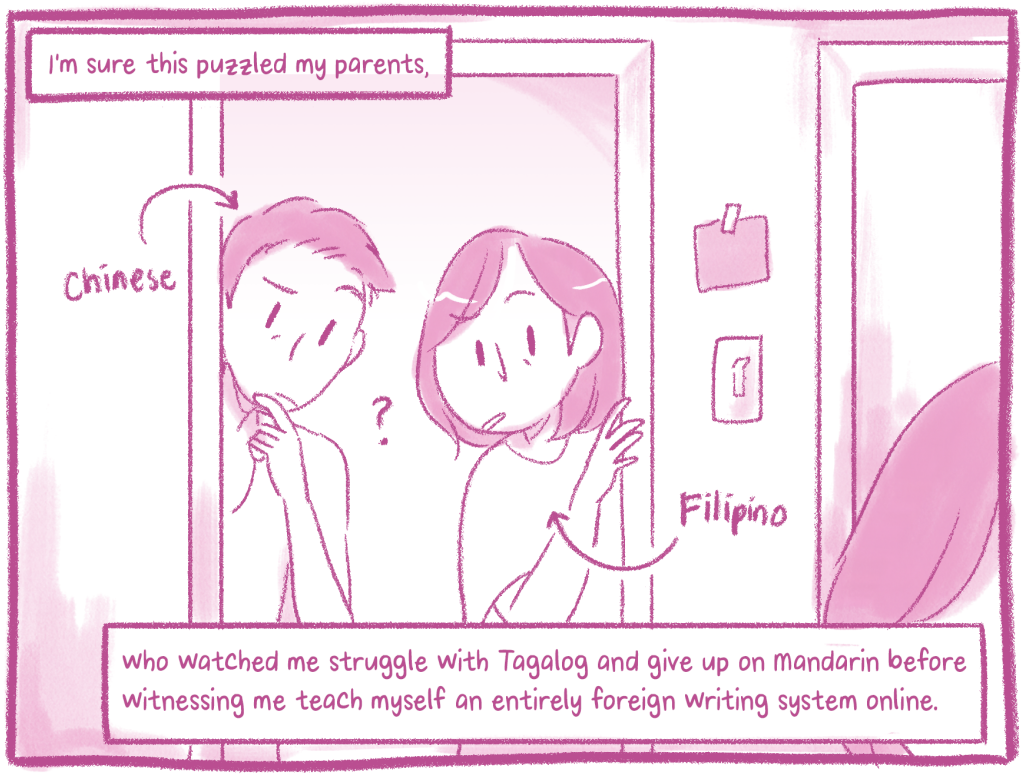
they often jump out again."

Part Two:

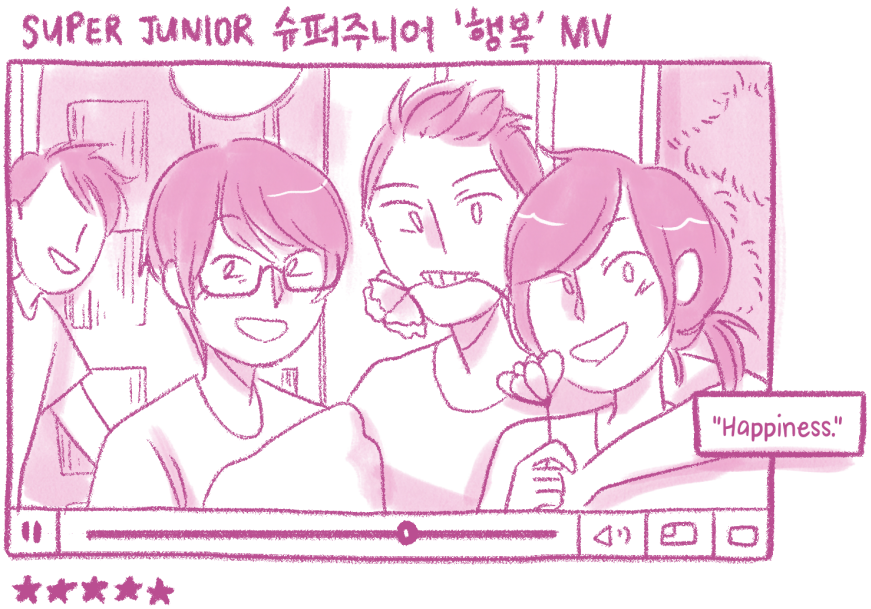
무궁화 꽃이 피었습니다

I started learning Korean in the fifth grade.



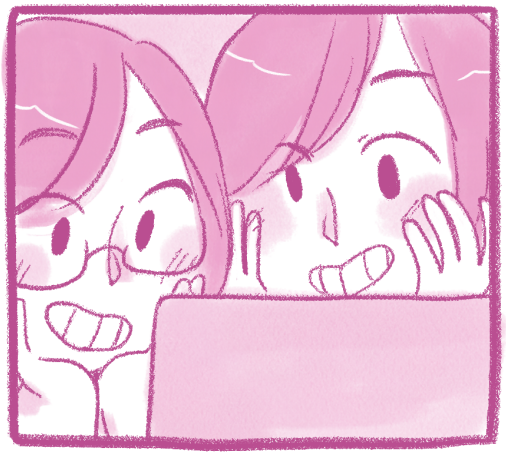


One of the first Korean words I learned was 행복.

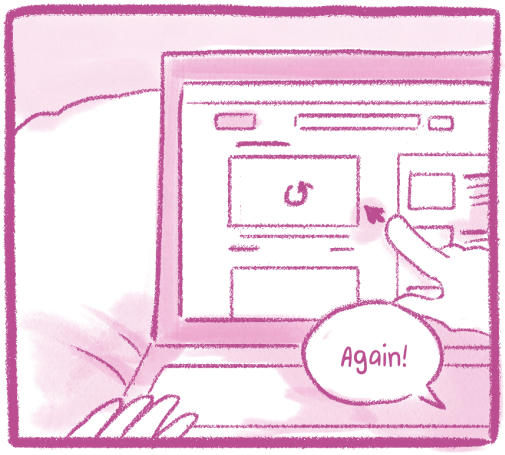


★★★★★

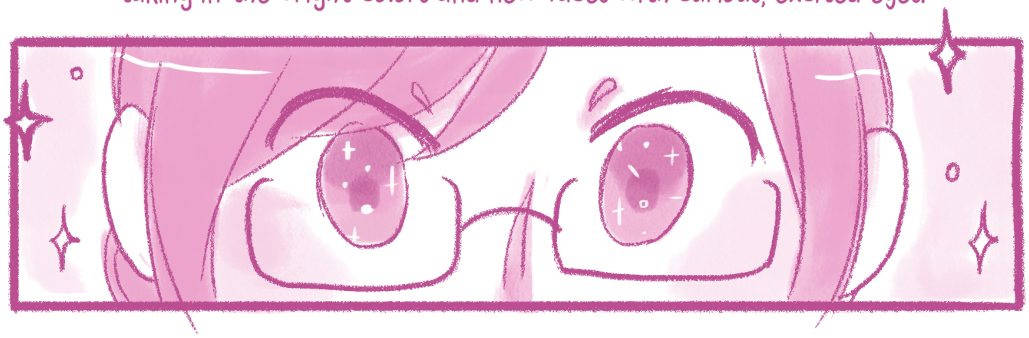
This song in particular was already a few years old by this time,



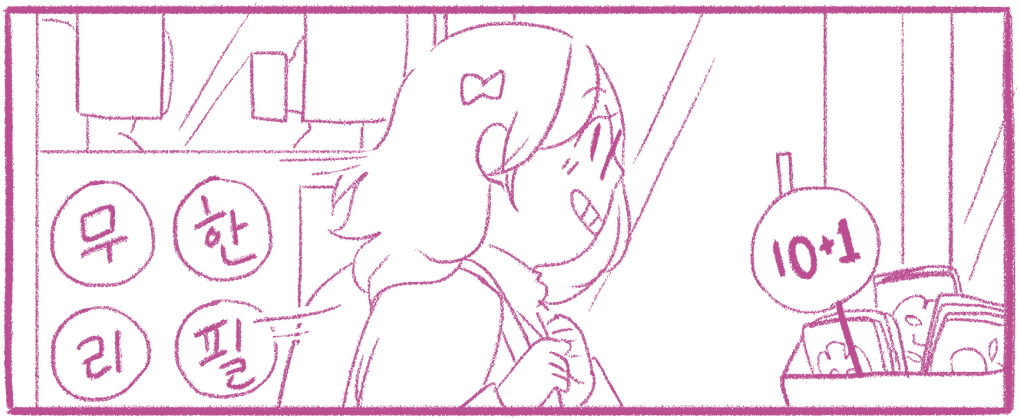
but my sister and I watched and rewatched the music video,



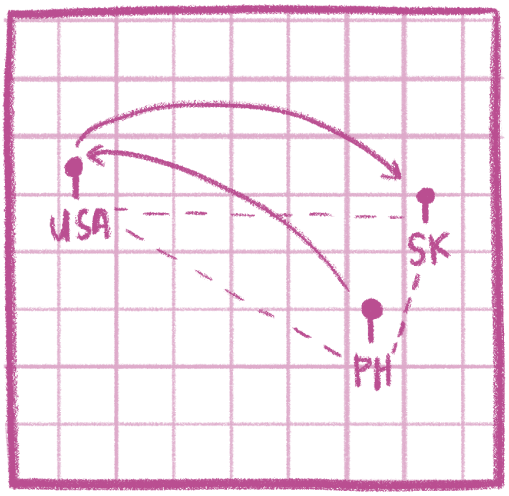
taking in the bright colors and new faces with curious, excited eyes.



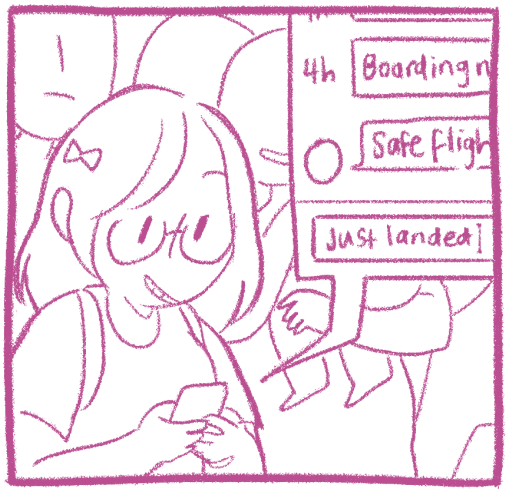
Walking the streets of Hongdae,
I take in the neon shop lights,
the people crowding around pastel-haired buskers,
and the seemingly endless cityscape,
with the same eyes when I come to Seoul in the fall of my junior year.



I explain my situation jokingly to friends and family by saying I am "*abroad* abroad,"



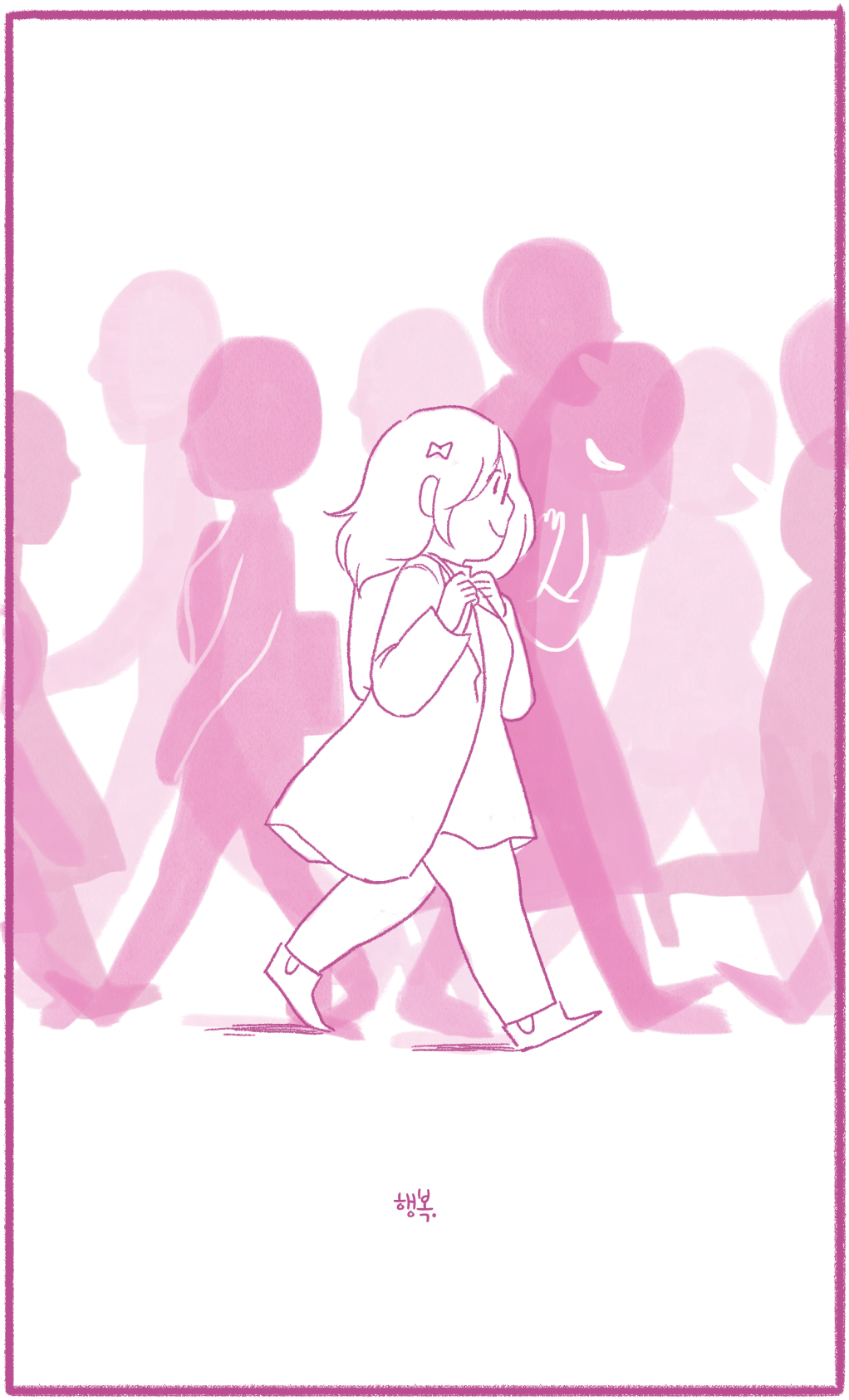
but my travel time to Korea is twenty hours less than my usual trip to the US.



To others, the essence of adventure might seem lost in the shorter distance.

But it doesn't feel that way to me.

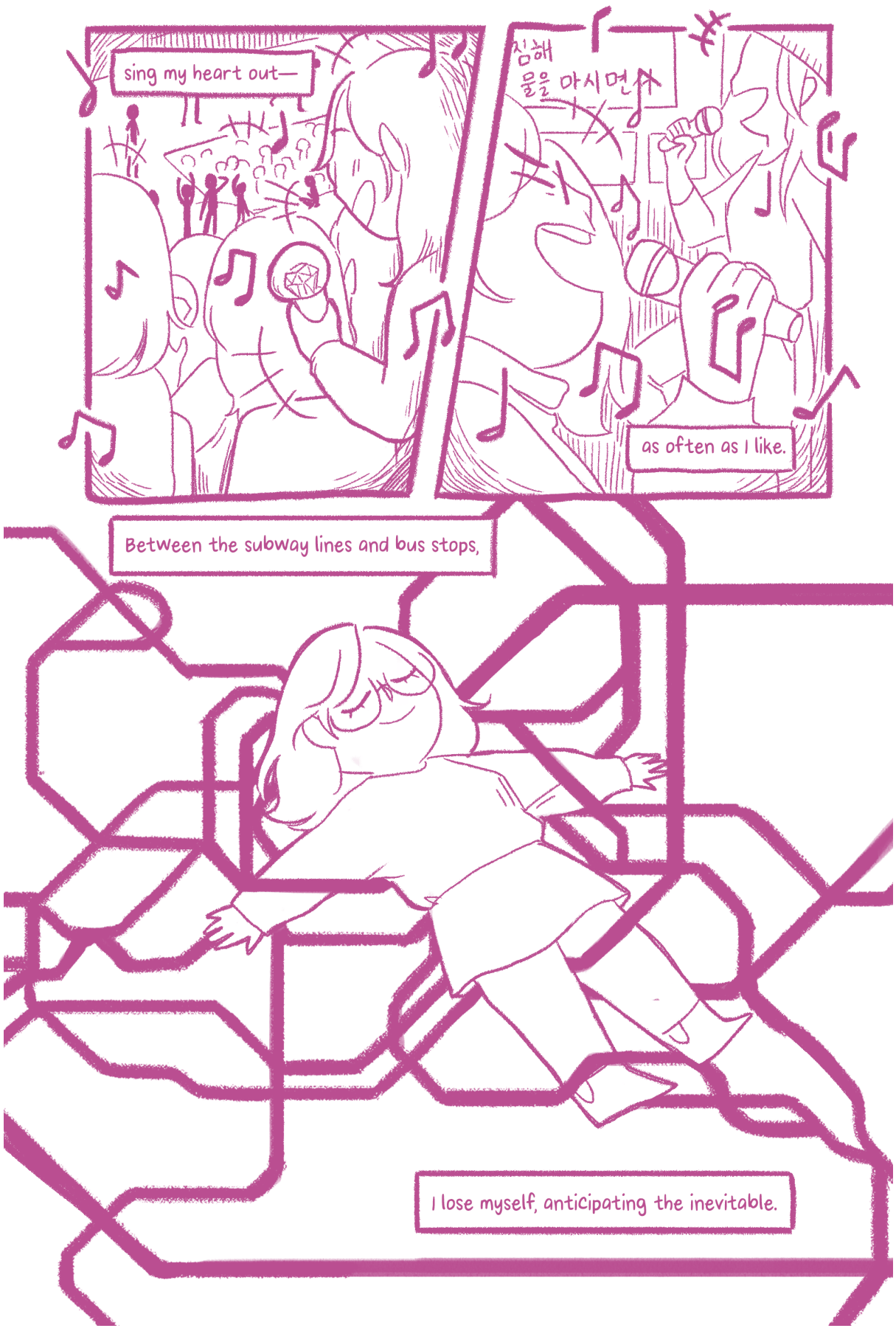
Only a short flight away from home, I lead such a different life here.
I drown in the conversations around me,
only half-understanding what I take in—
a solitary spectator in a foreign place.

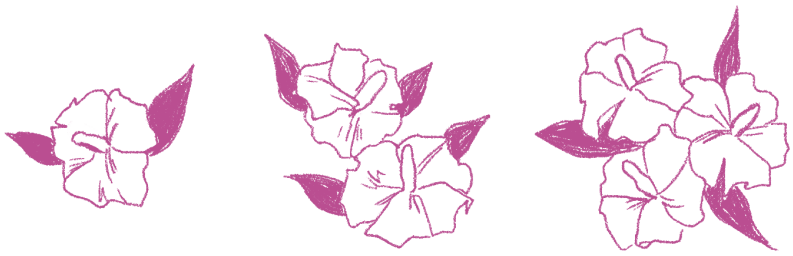

행복.

Before I leave the US the semester before, I attend an orientation for study abroad.
The facilitators caution us to manage our expectations,
and warn us about
cultural burnout
...especially in foreign language environments.

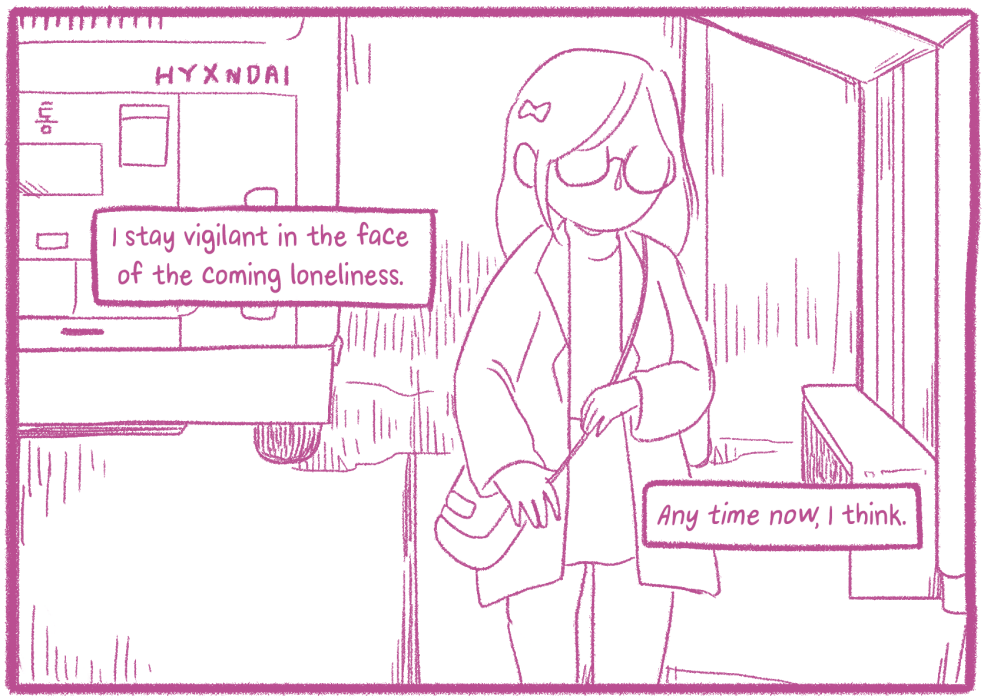
I know,
I know,
I know.
So I pass the days
watching my steps,
waiting for it to hit.

In the meantime,


sing my heart out—
심해
물을 마시면서
as often as I like.
Between the subway lines and bus stops,
I lose myself, anticipating the inevitable.



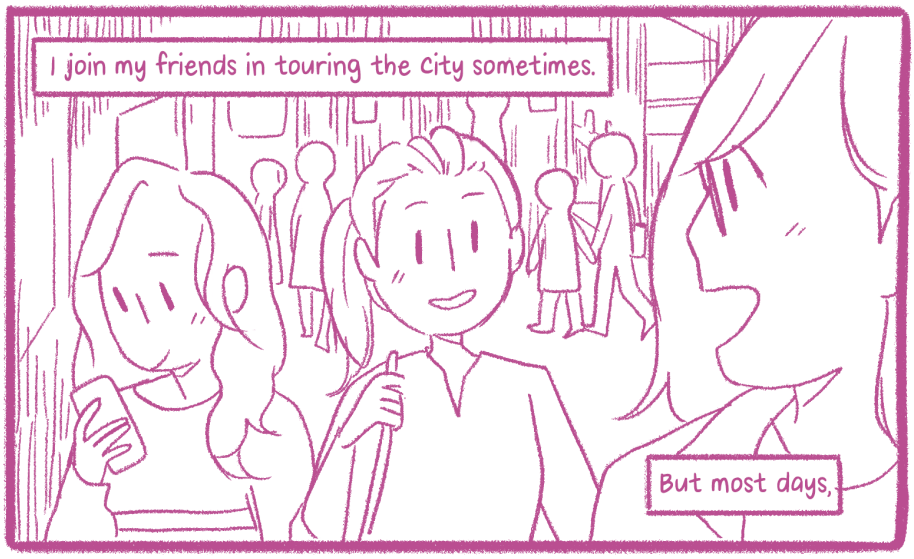
Days, weeks, months pass.



그 느낌 안 왔는데?
It's not hitting, though?

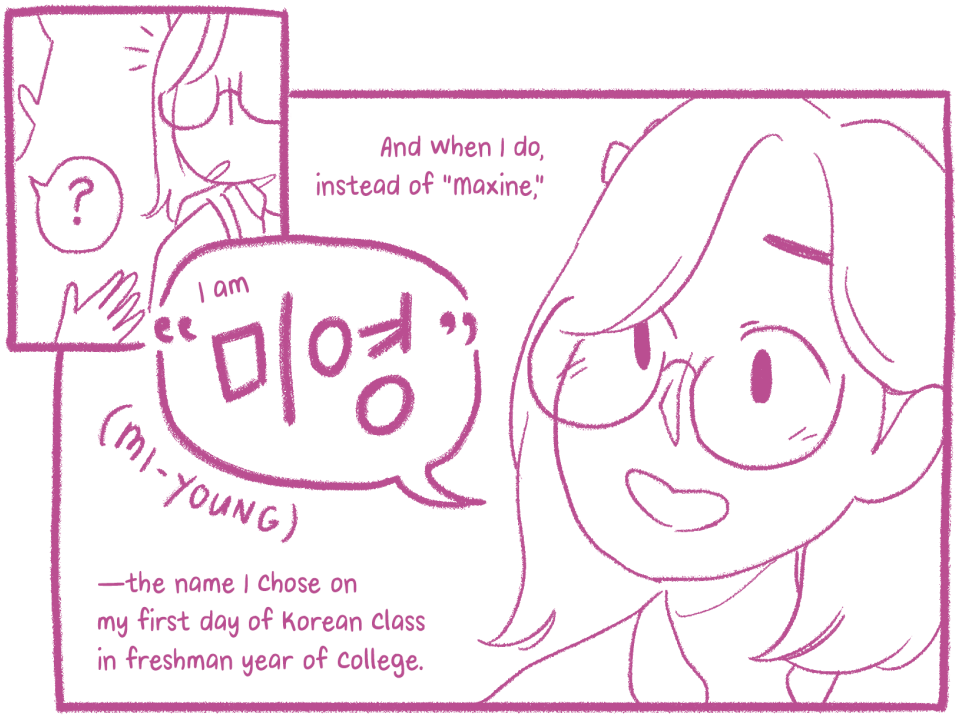
The air quality in Seoul is poor,
and I always see people walking around in masks.

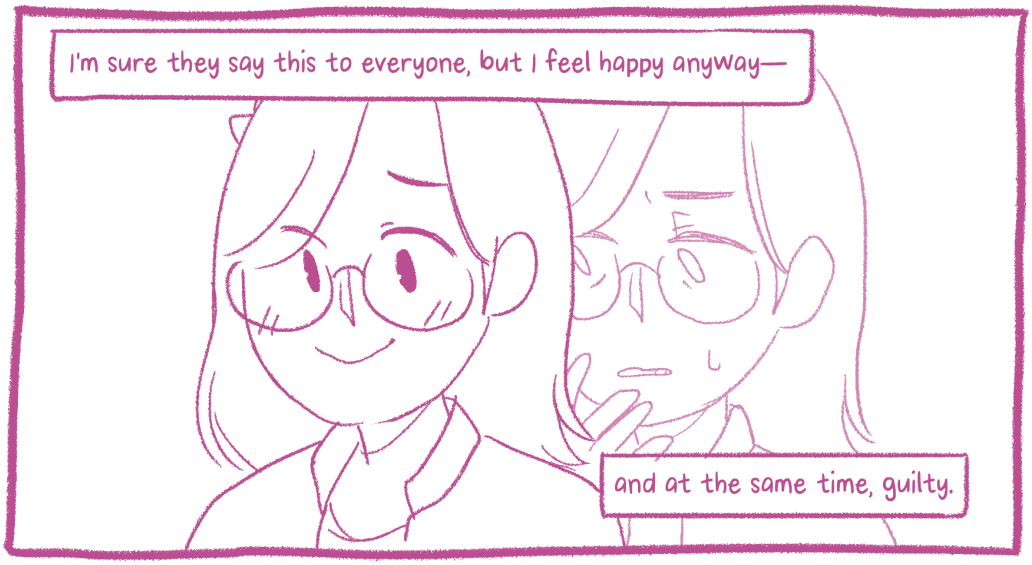
But I find that somehow,
I breathe easy here:
Easier than I do sometimes in Manila,
and all the time in Middletown.
Unlike in those places,
here, I usually travel alone.
But I am never lonely.


I join my friends in touring the city sometimes.
But most days,

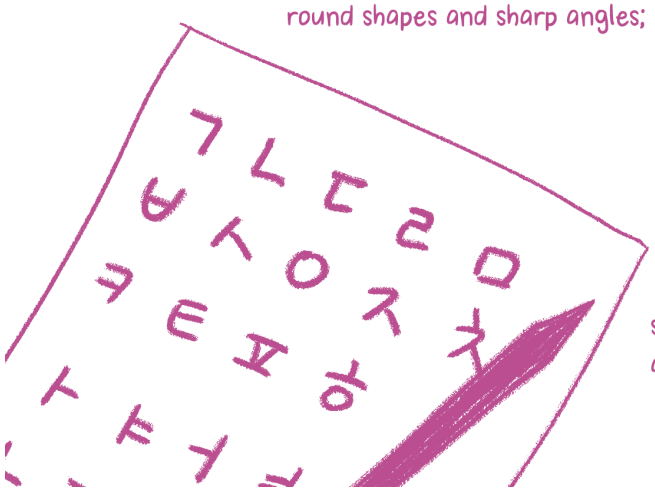
② 홍대입구 Hongik Univ. 弘大入口
홍대입구
I take advantage of how my face allows me to wordlessly blend into the busy local crowds.

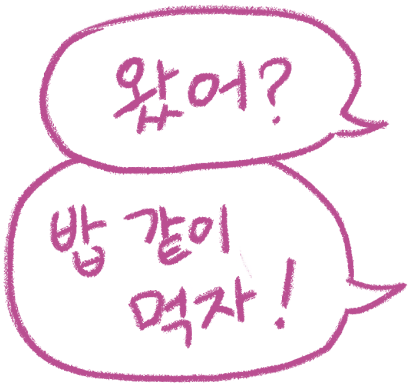
...but just another face in the crowd
until the next time I have to speak.





The way I see it, Hangul is round shapes and sharp angles;

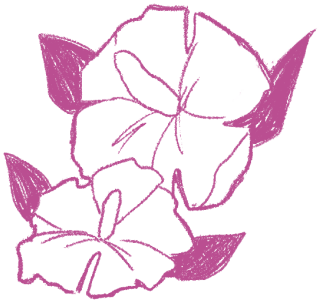




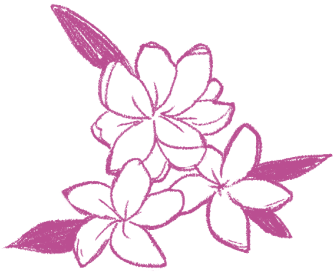
spoken Korean, soft vowels and strong consonants.

These contradictions trip up new learners, but I pronounce each syllable with ease—

After all,



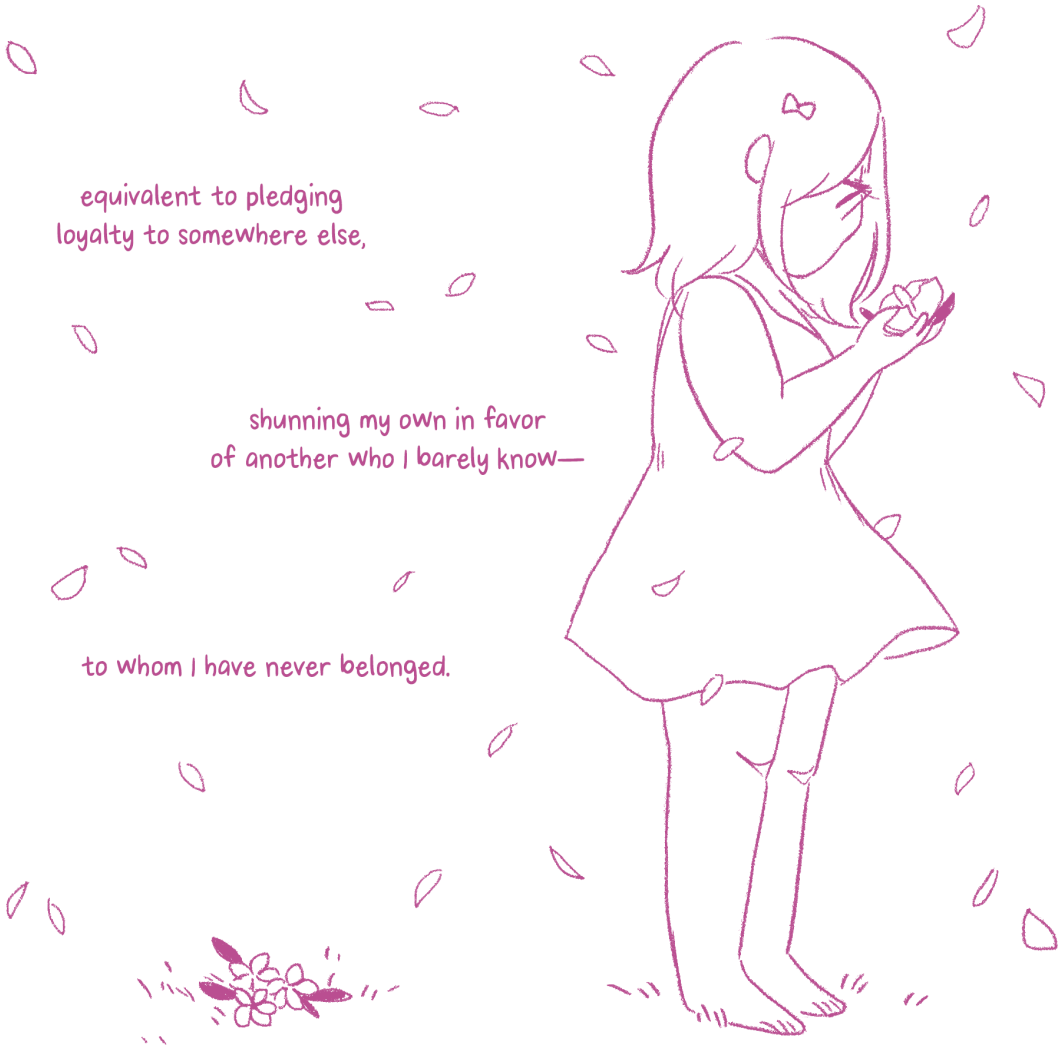
how shameful it is to know
your neighbor's language



better than the one that is
spoken in your own home—

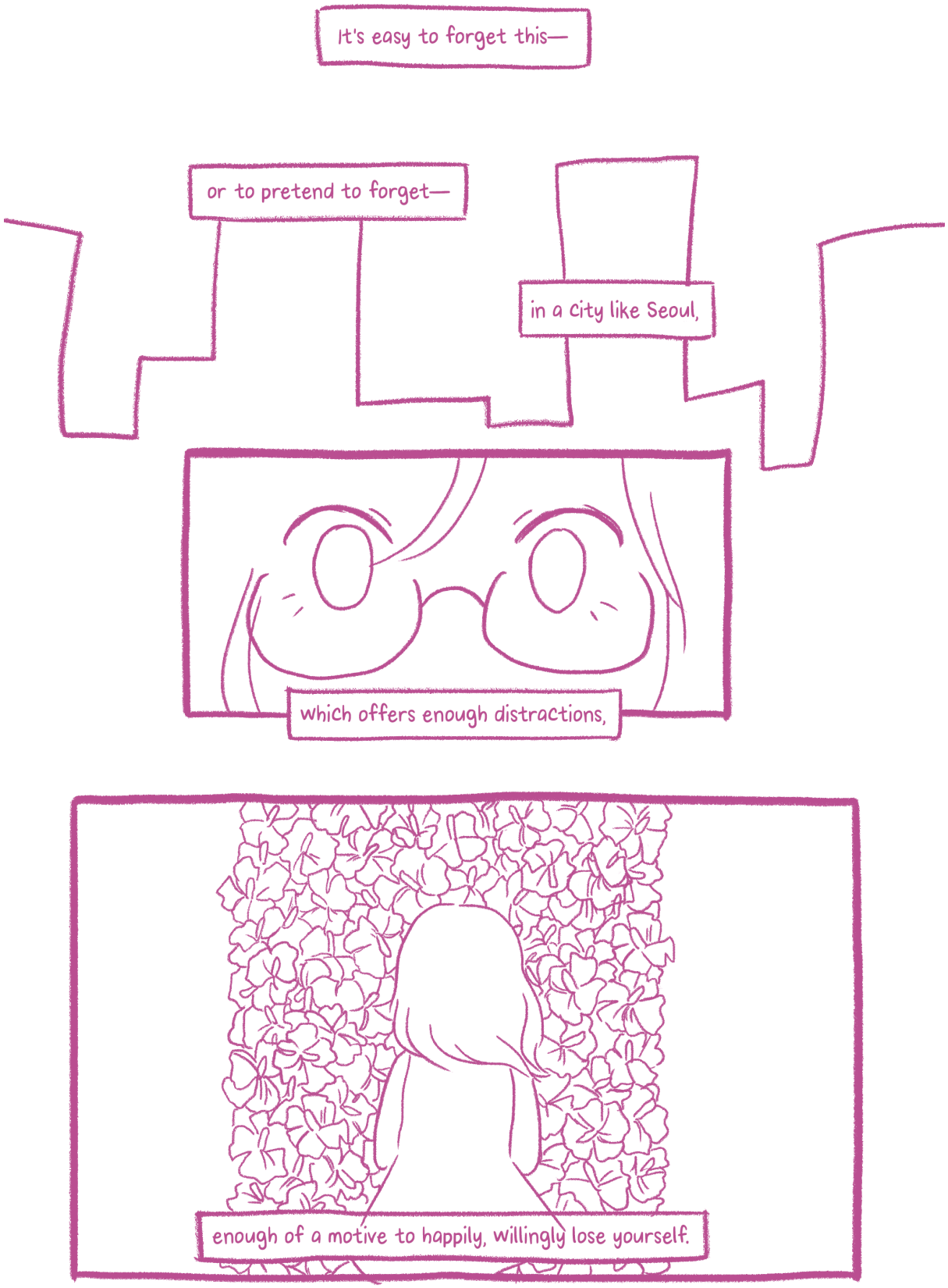
equivalent to pledging
loyalty to somewhere else,

shunning my own in favor
of another who I barely know—

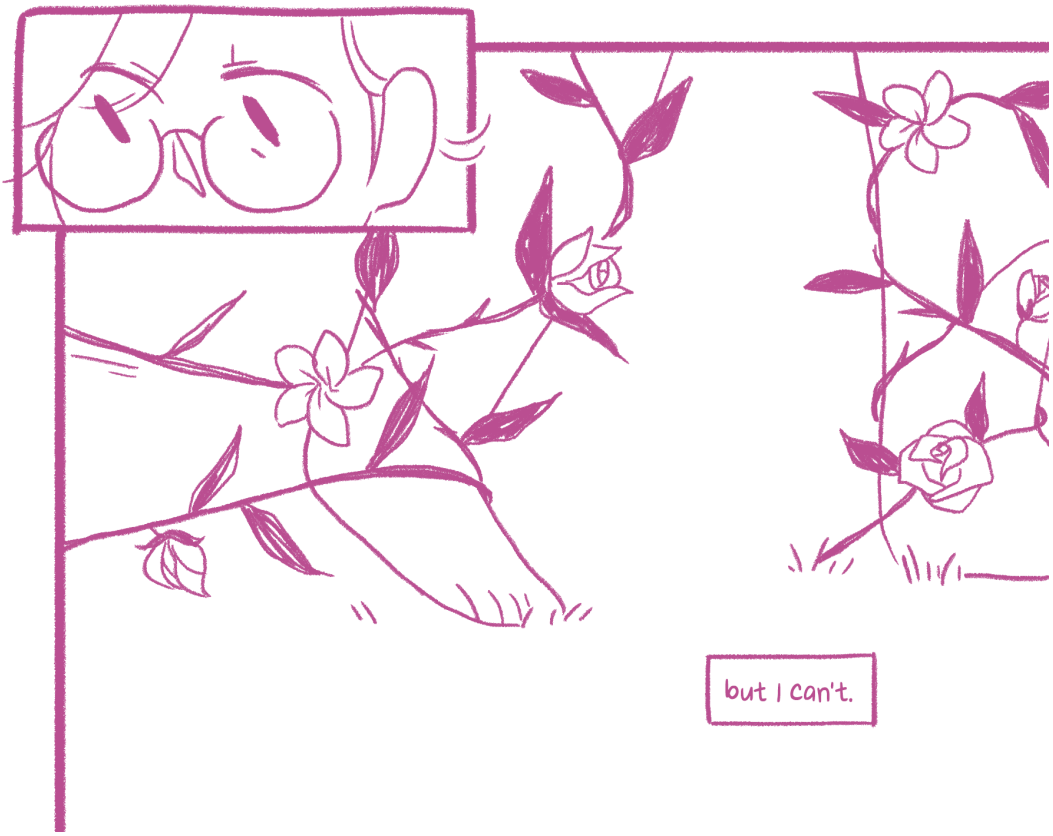


to whom I have never belonged.

And how shameful that is, too.

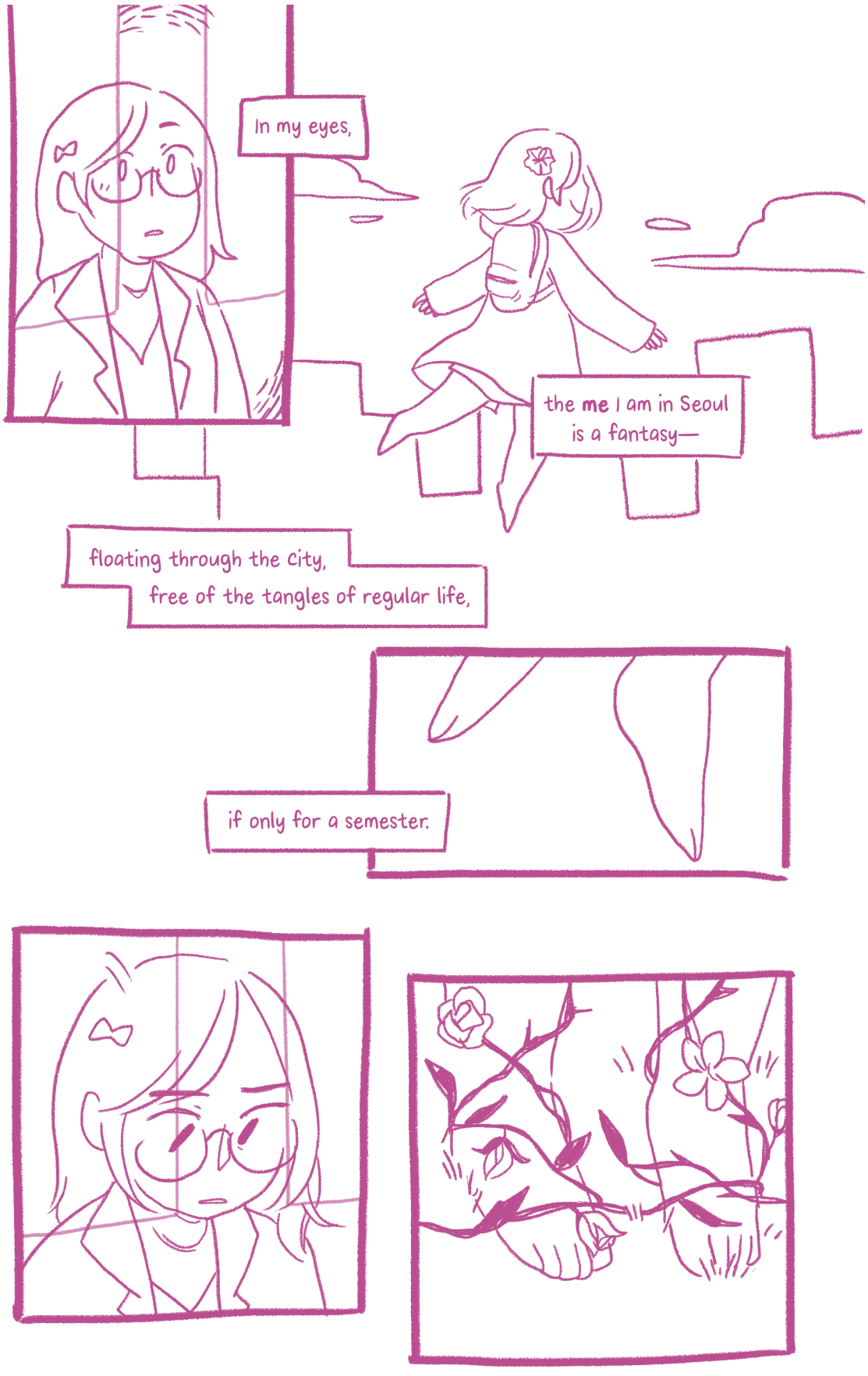

It's easy to forget this—
or to pretend to forget—
in a city like Seoul,
which offers enough distractions,
enough of a motive to happily, willingly lose yourself.

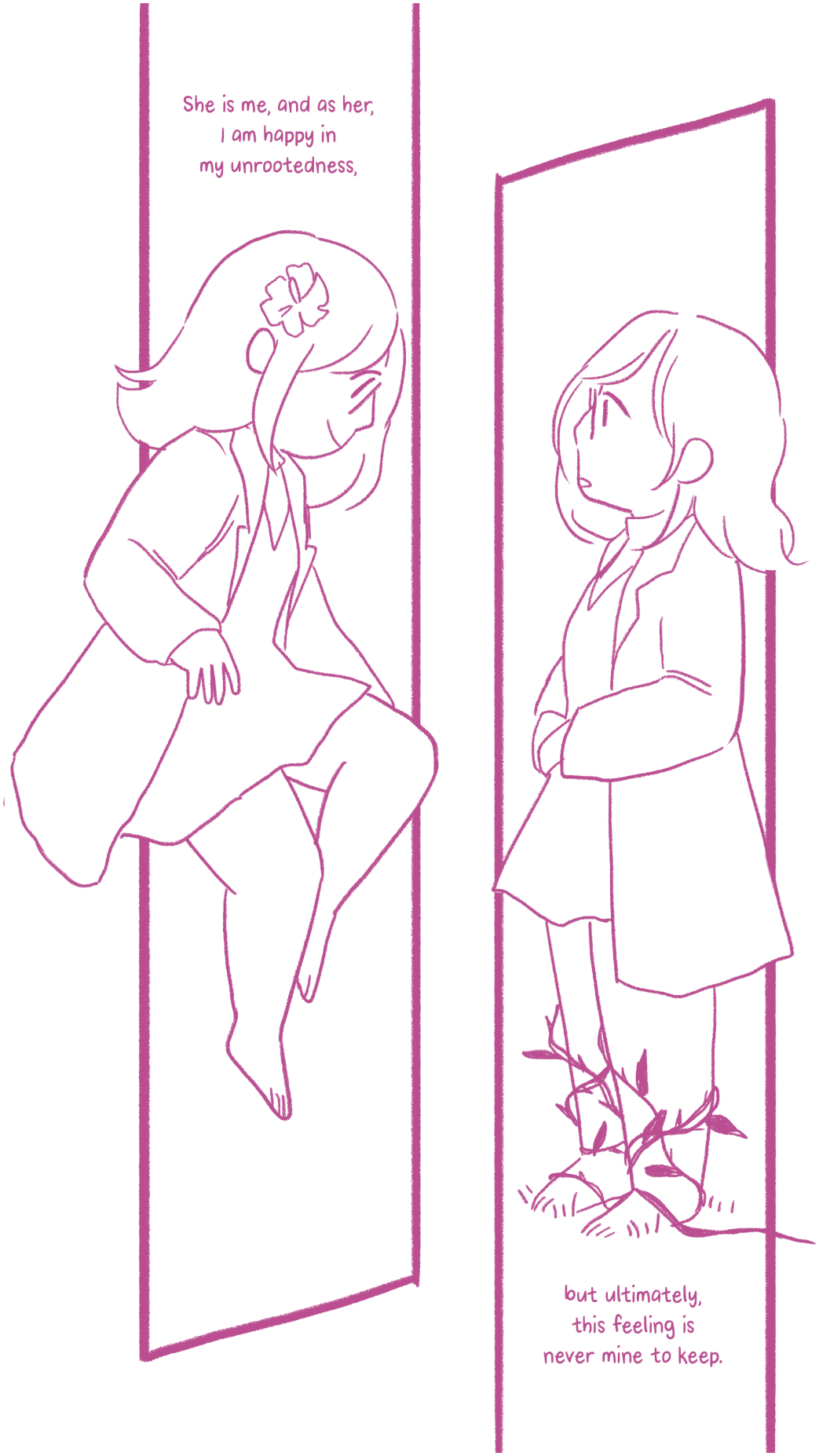
I almost let myself forget,



but I can't.

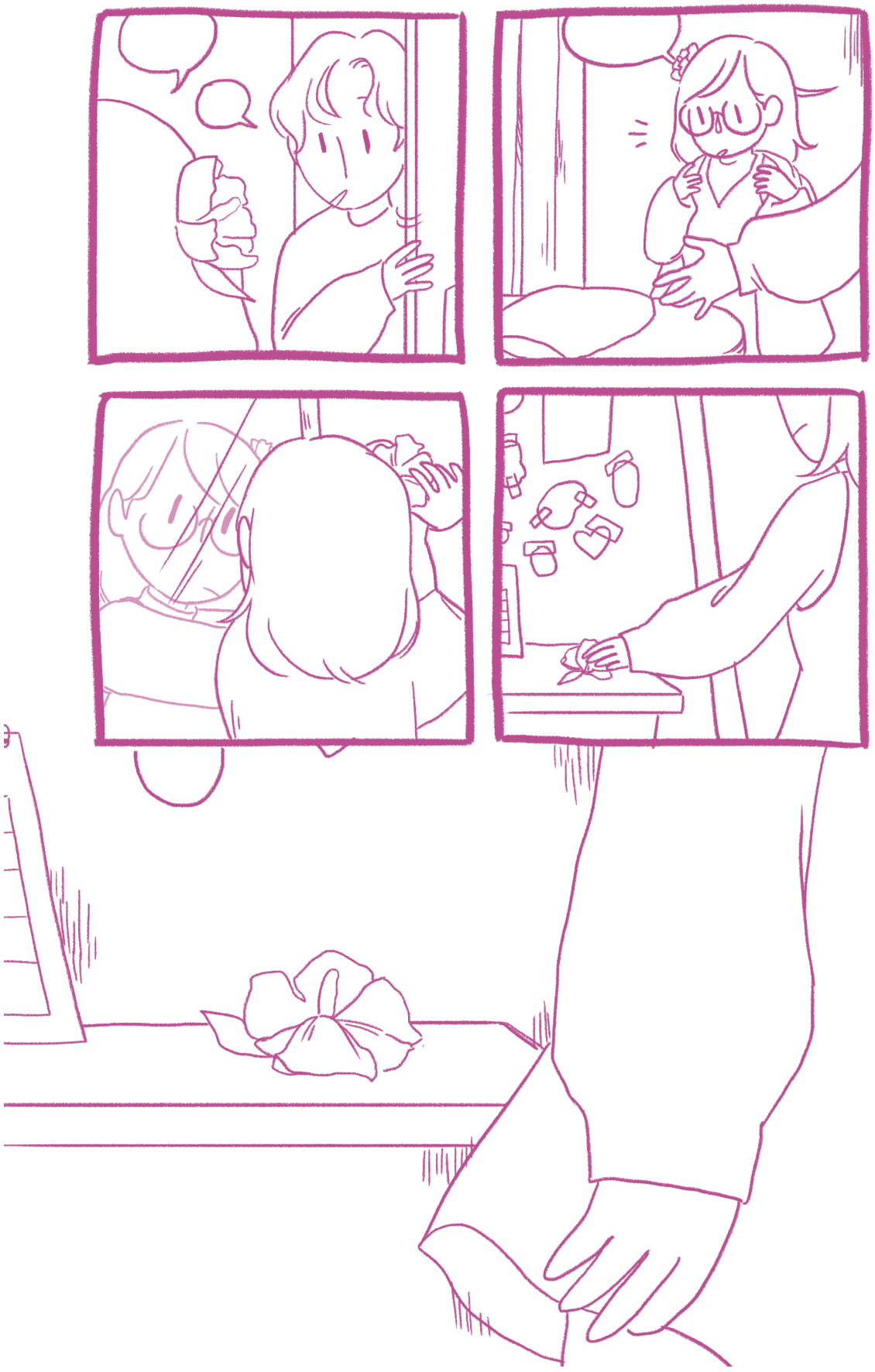
So when I introduce myself here, I make sure to make the distinction—
미영입니다.
I am "Miyoung."
미영이라고 합니다.
Call me "Miyoung."
as a reminder to myself that I am playing a role in the absence of a real identity.

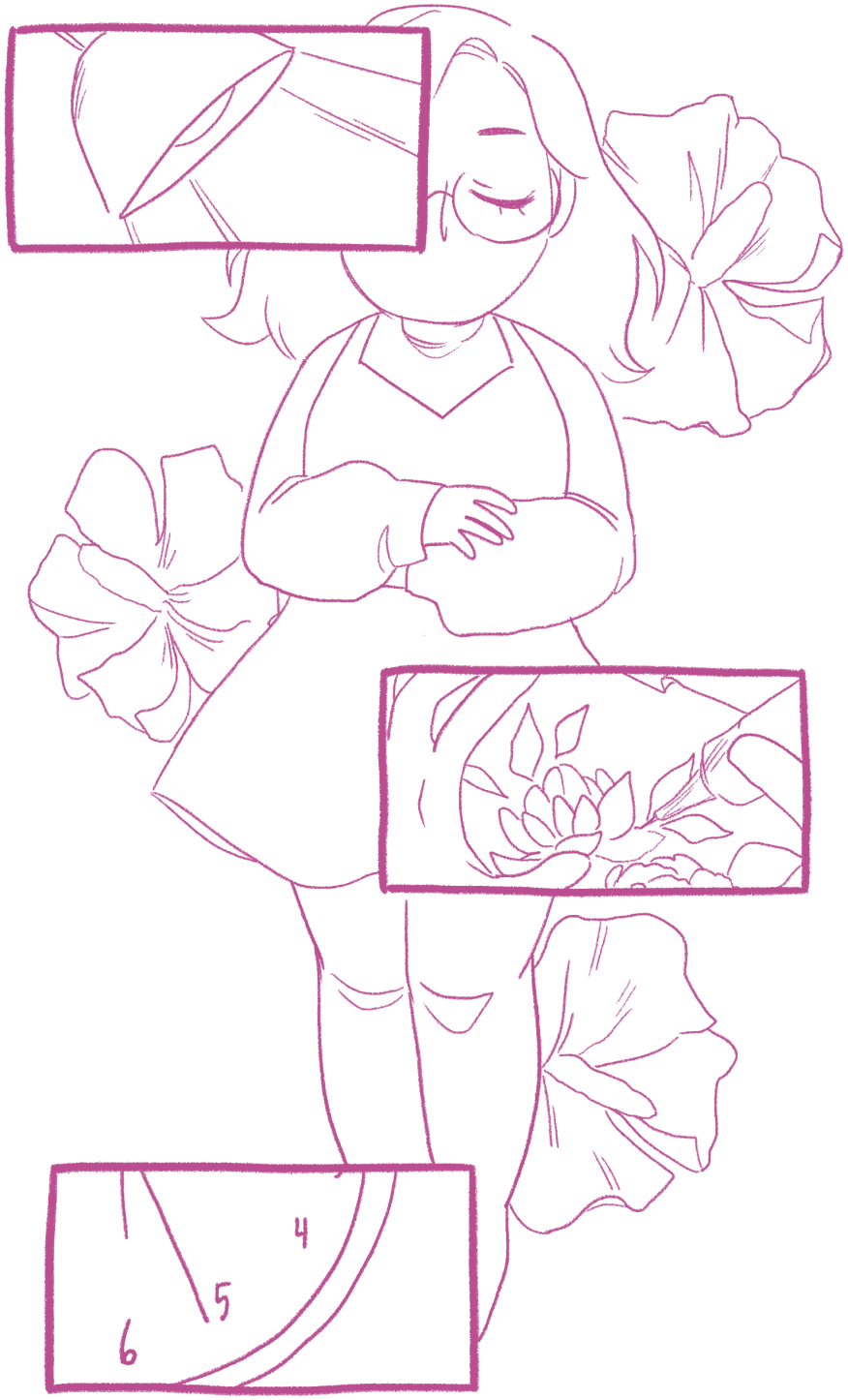

In my eyes,
the me I am in Seoul is a fantasy—
floating through the city,
free of the tangles of regular life,
if only for a semester.


She is me, and as her,
I am happy in
my unrootedness,
but ultimately,
this feeling is
never mine to keep.

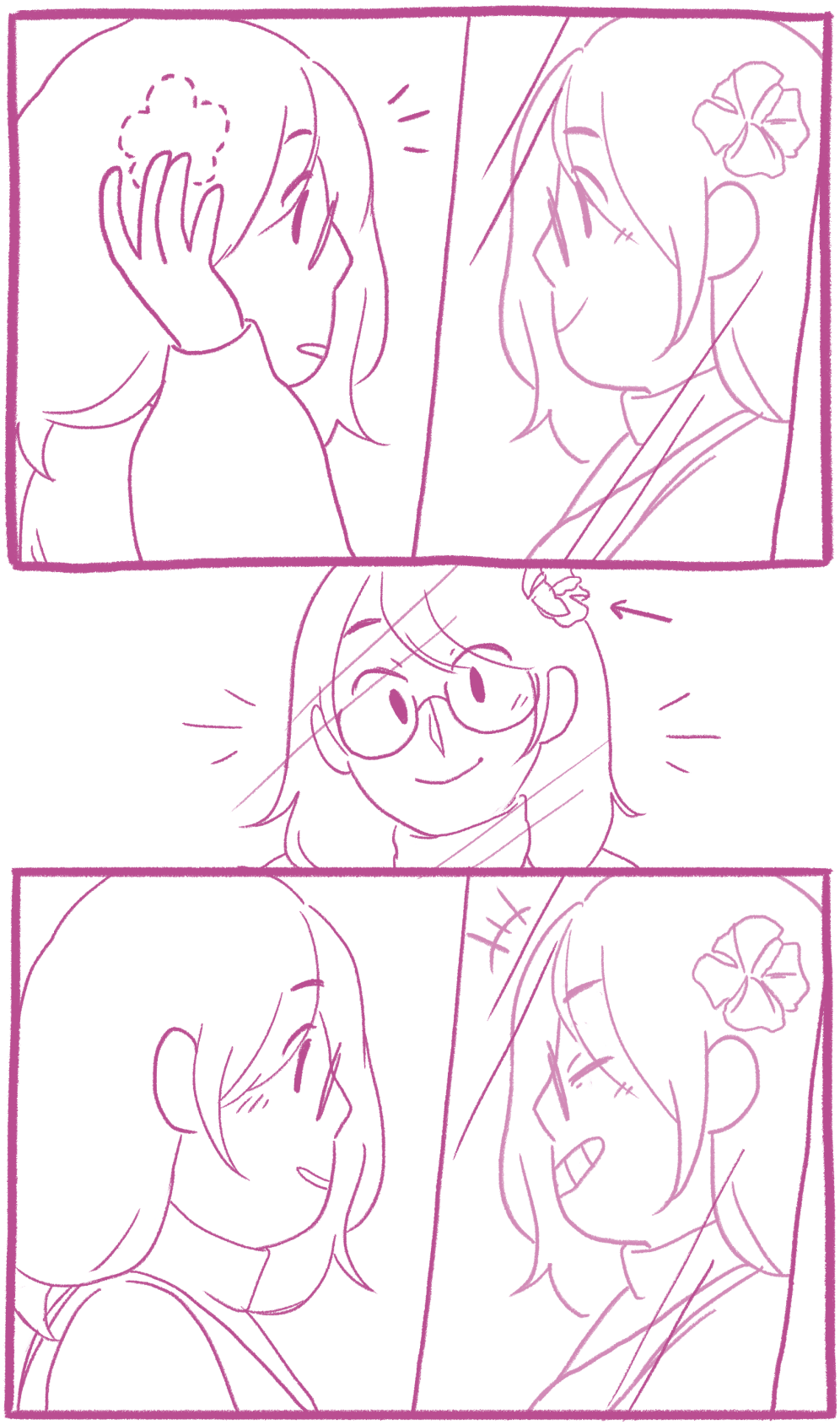
So I enjoy this me for as long as I can.

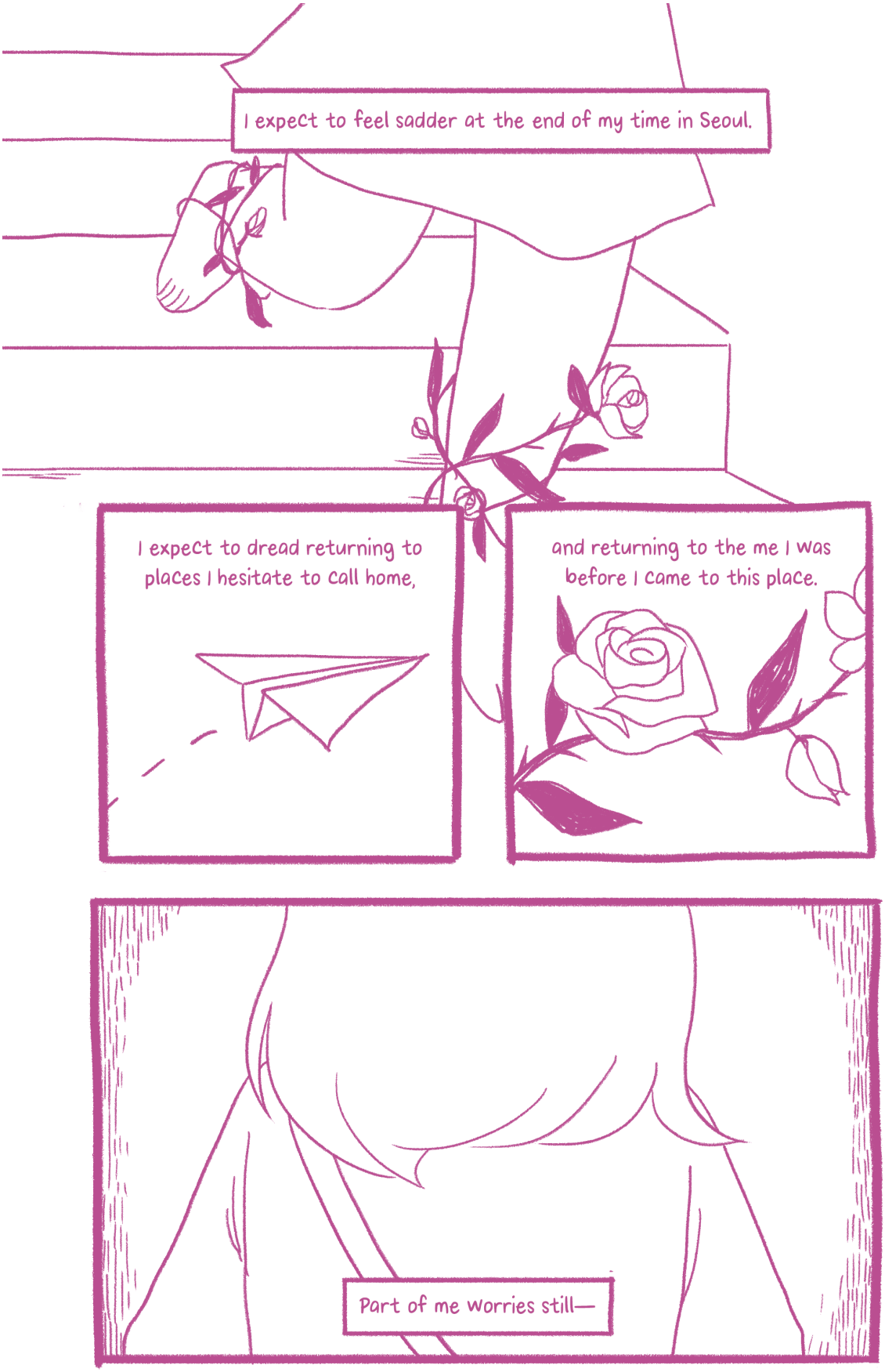
A few days before my flight back to manila,
I make one las stop.
2:30
DEC 14
GCAL
TATTOO

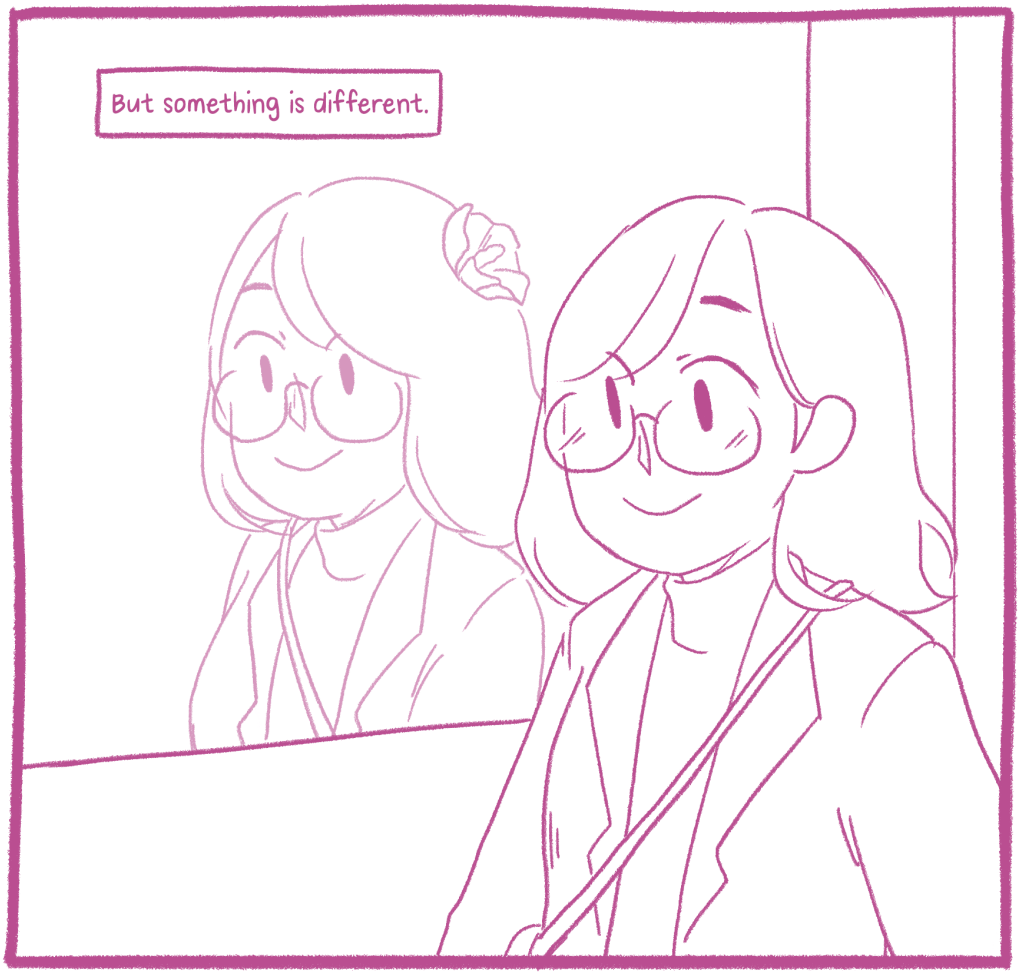



4
5
6

…고생
하셨어요.

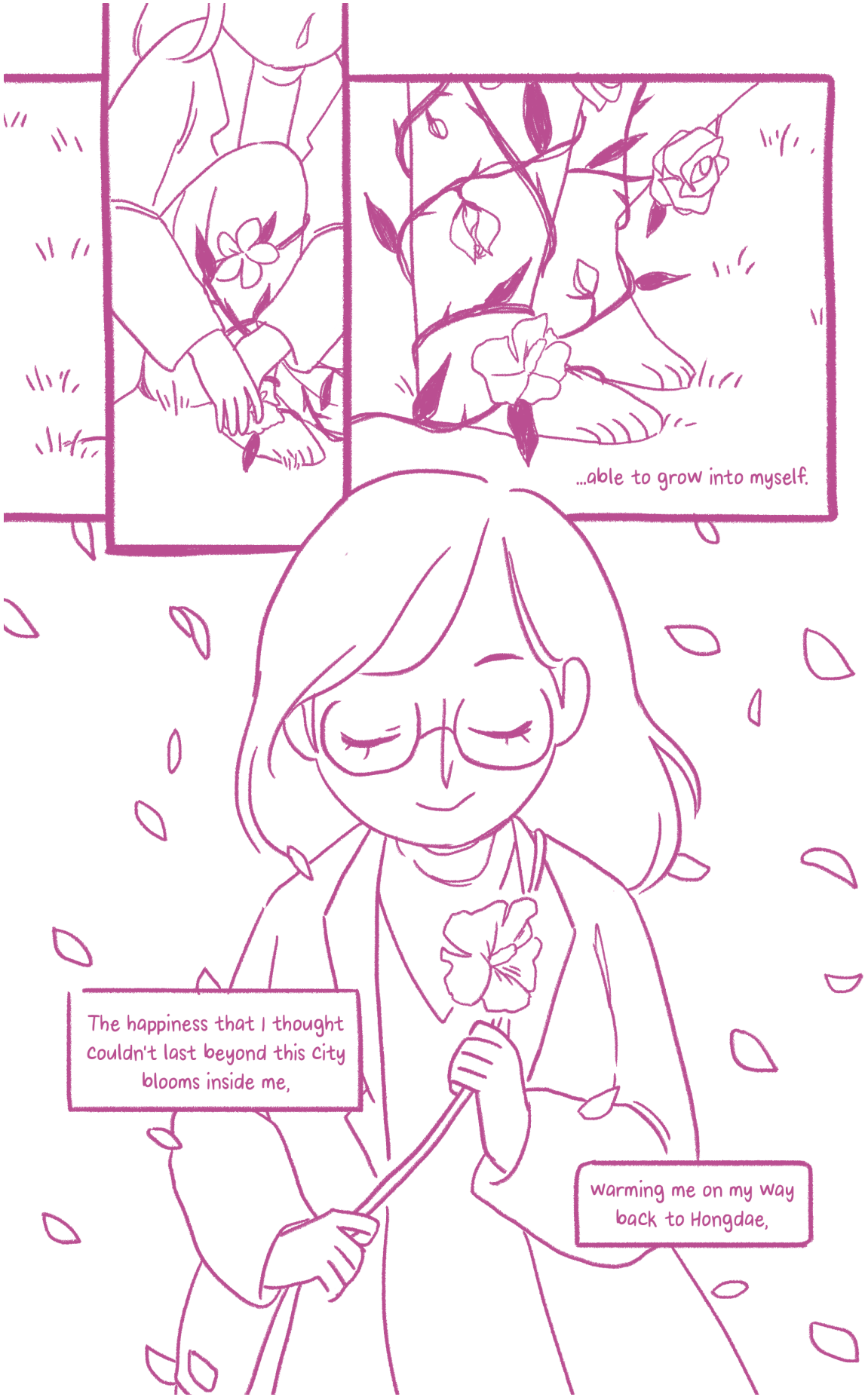


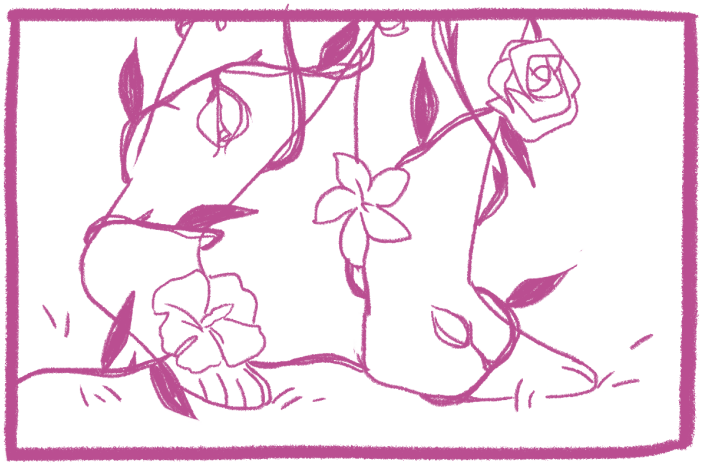

I expect to feel sadder at the end of my time in Seoul.
I expect to dread returning to places I hesitate to call home,
and returning to the me I was before I came to this place.
Part of me worries still—



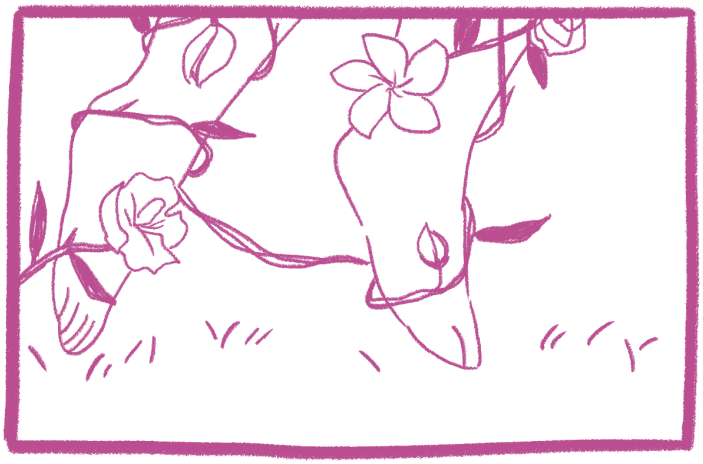
I am not someone I recognize in Seoul, but the person I am here is no fantasy.

Because this version of me, although temporarily uprooted, is rooted in me, too:
Not trying to be someone else,
but while somewhere else...


...able to grow into myself.
The happiness that I thought couldn't last beyond this city blooms inside me,
warming me on my way back to Hongdae,



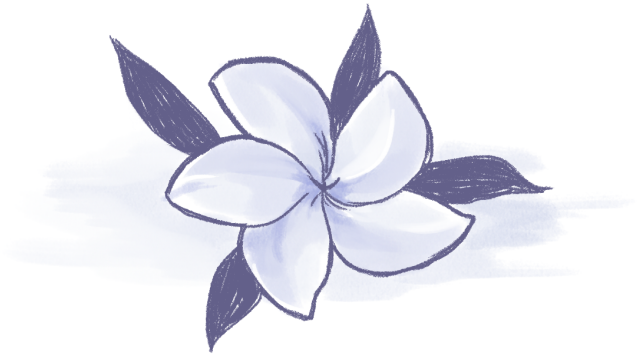
ready to accompany me on the day
I have to return home—



—wherever that is.

행복.

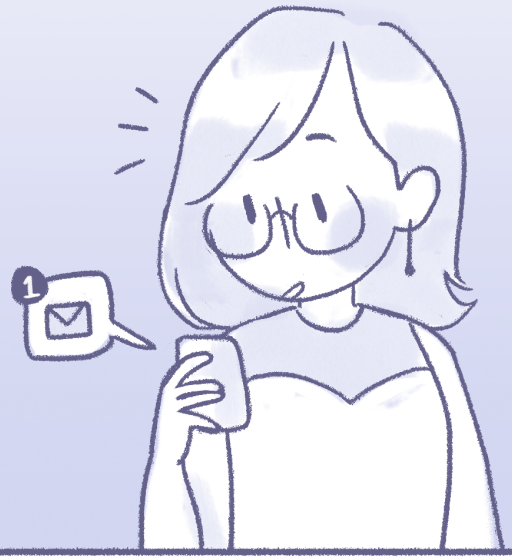
Part Three:



Aking Paraluman
Mutyang Sampaguita

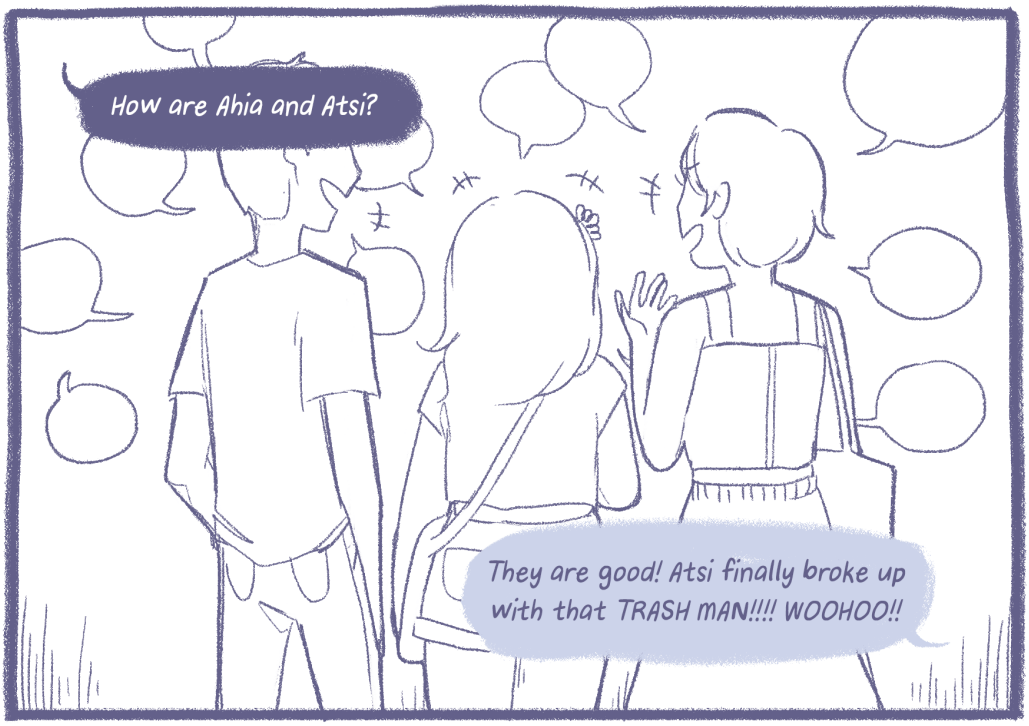
Every year on my birthday,
via email and an online service,

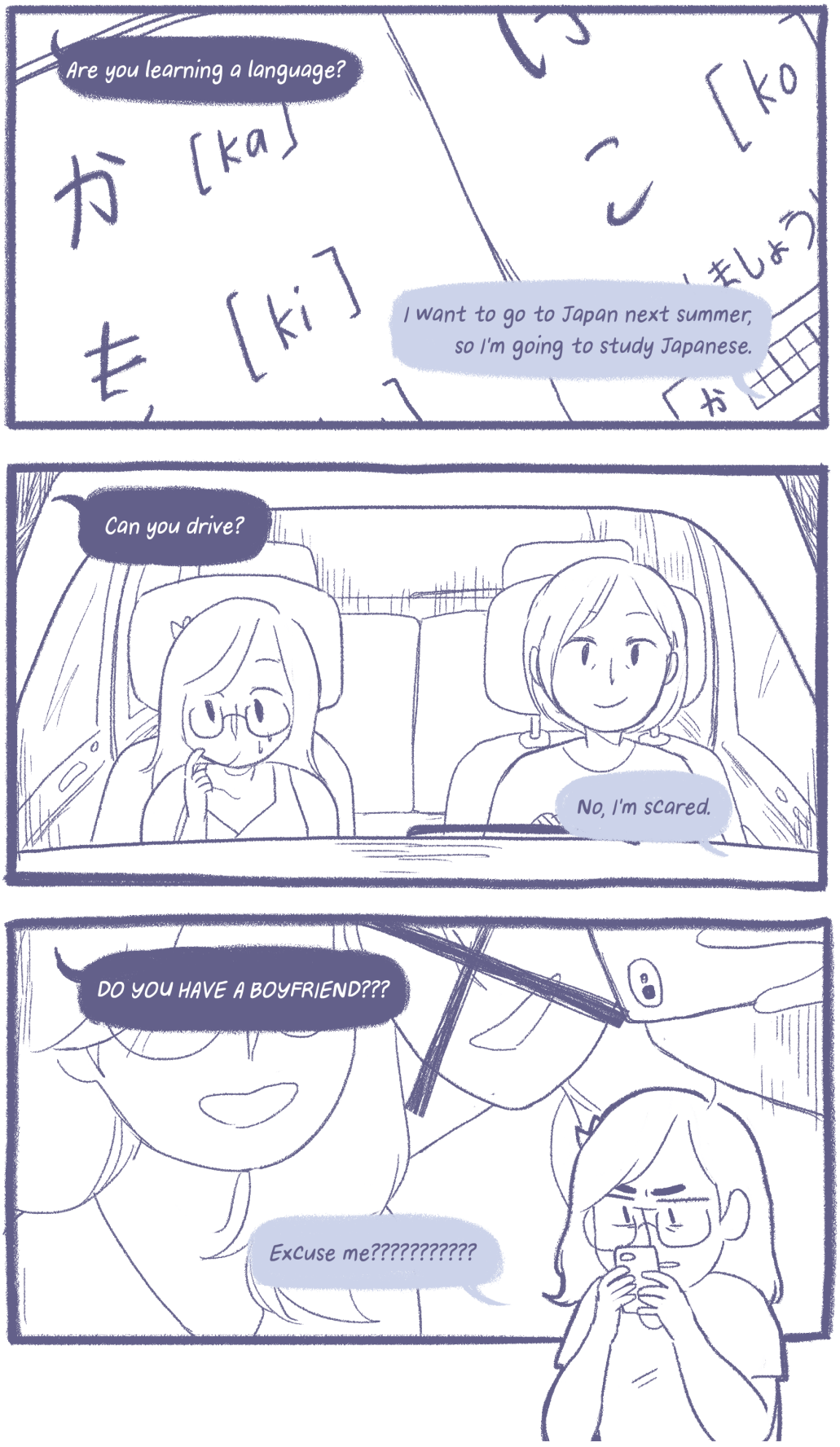
I get a letter from the past.



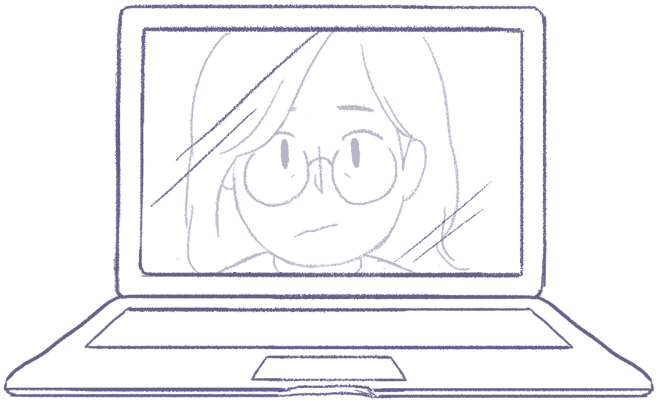
I've been writing to myself since I was thirteen.
Hey I'm in Scienc
and we aren't d
lol
Irene says hi bt
Anyway happy
The letters from back then are ridiculous and unreadable—full of live updates, jokes, and teenage emotions on high.
Eventually, something shifts.
The letters get longer, as I get more confessions, advice, wishes.

And, regardless of age,
there are usually questions for me to answer.

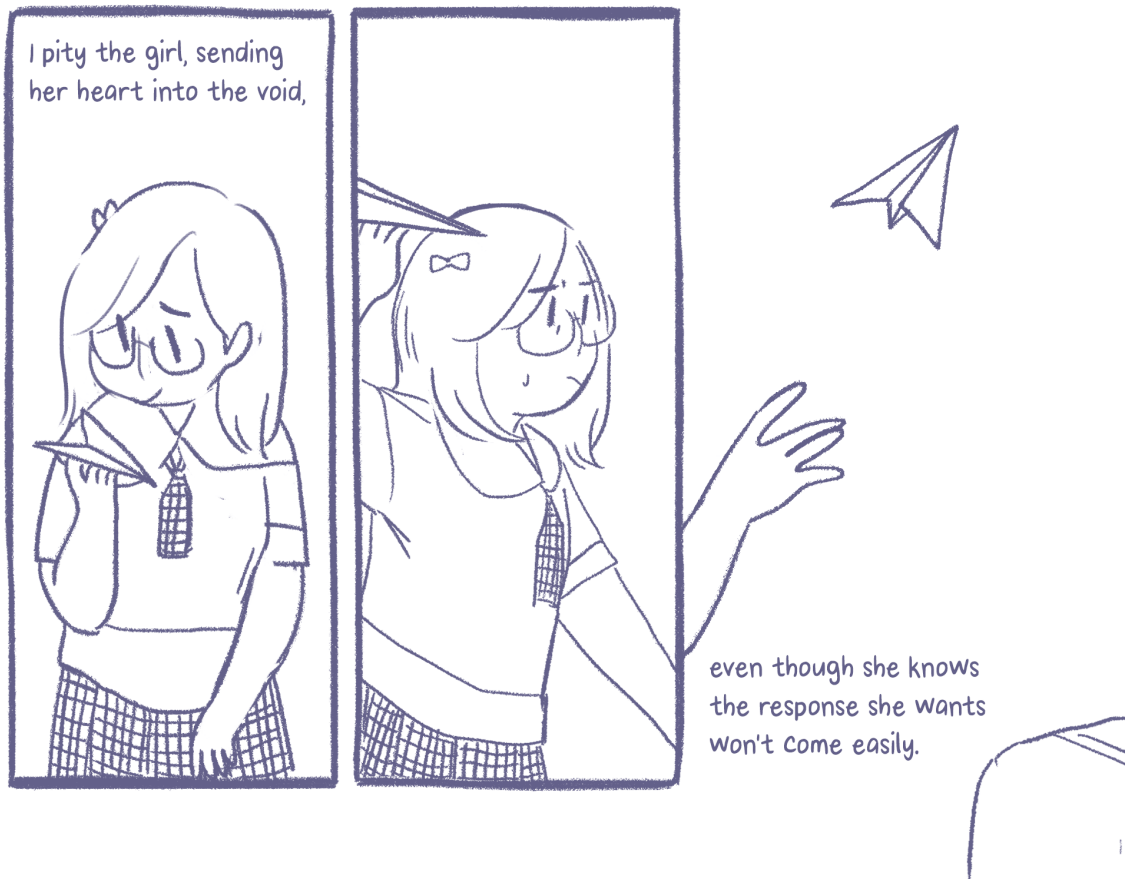



Are you learning a language?
か [ka]
き [ki]
こ [ko
I want to go to Japan next summer, so I'm going to study Japanese.
Can you drive?
No, I'm scared.
DO YOU HAVE A BOYFRIEND???
Excuse me???????????

I respond to them in the next letter,
to be sent into the future—



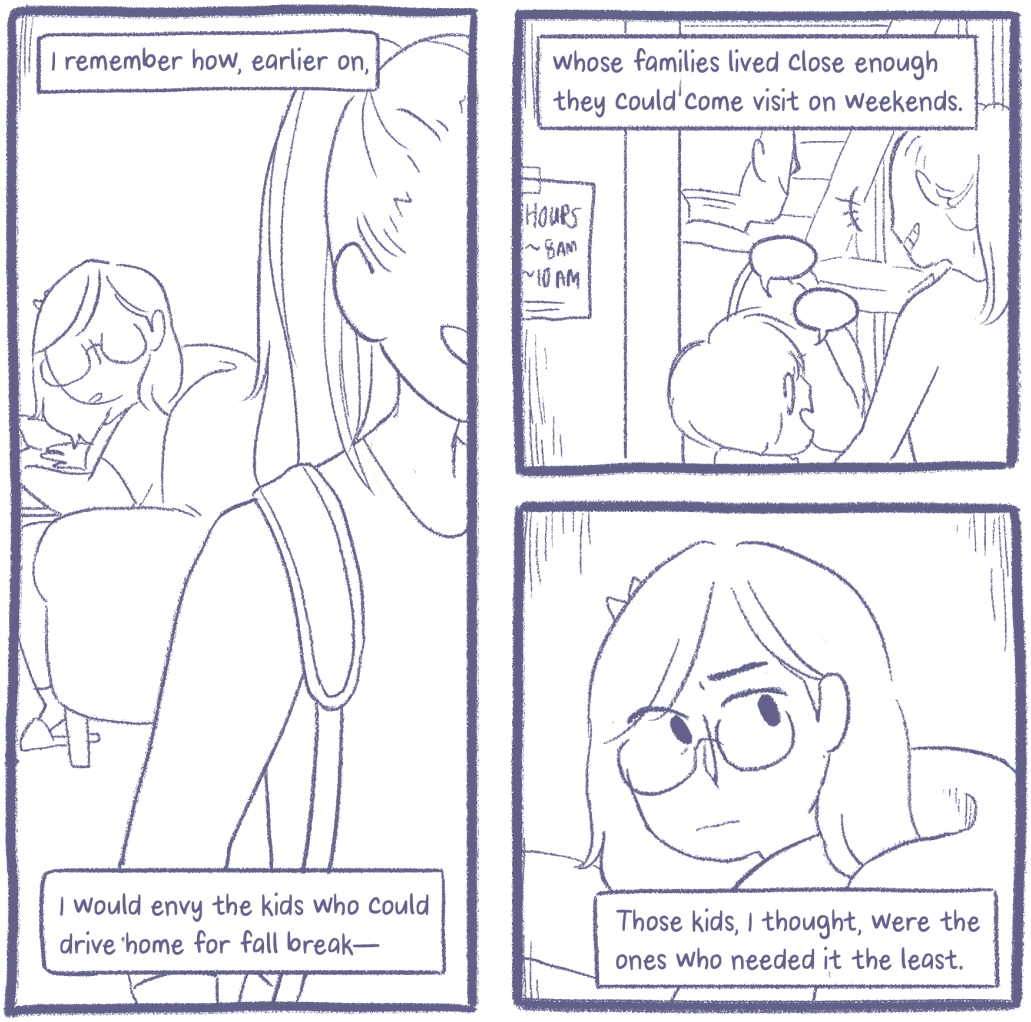
but there's something bittersweet about
never getting to give my past self her answers,
never telling her the outcomes of her worries.

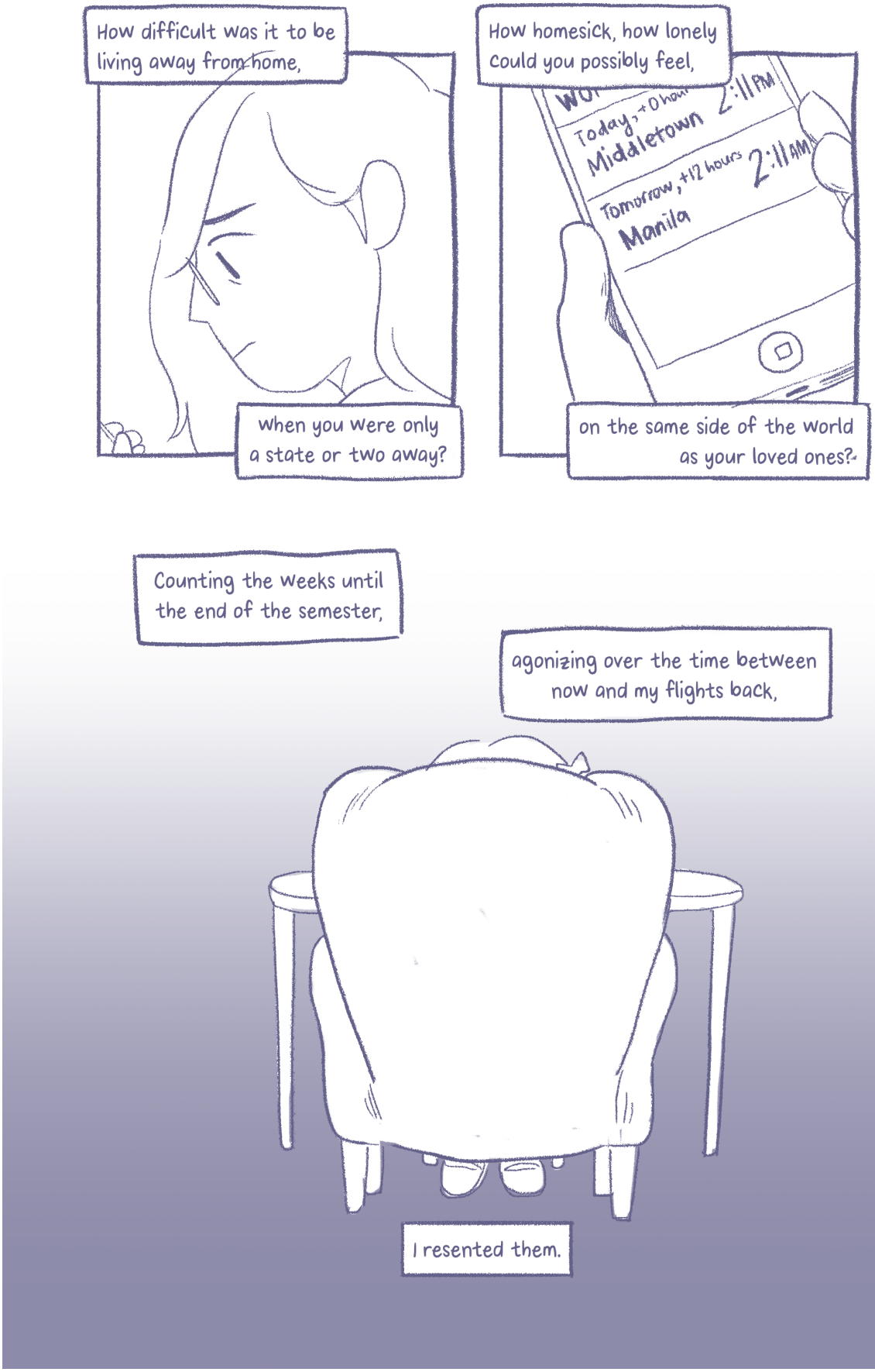


In a year or four,
by the time she finds out,
she will be a different person.

In the spring of my junior year,
I return to Manila for a two-week break.

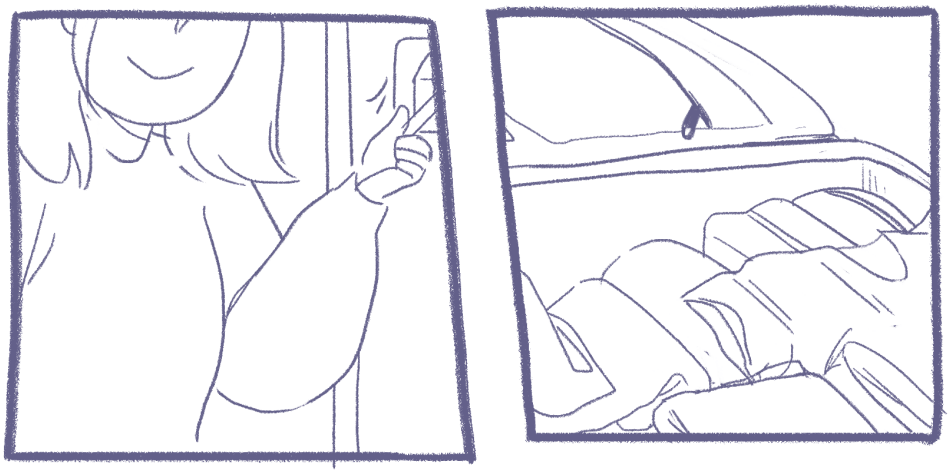
It's the first time I've been home
during any given semester.




How difficult was it to be living away from home,
when you were only a state or two away?
How homesick, how lonely could you possibly feel,
Today, +0 hours
Middletown
2:11 PM
Tomorrow, +12 hours
Manila
2:11 AM
on the same side of the world as your loved ones?
Counting the weeks until the end of the semester,
agonizing over the time between now and my flights back,
I resented them.

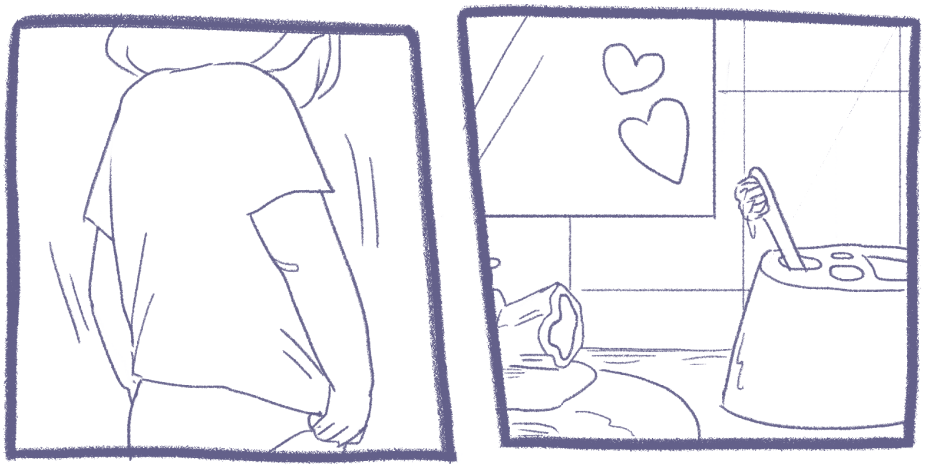
Thankfully,
I no longer feel this way.
The festering anger has drifted away with time,
leaving something sweeter in its place.
Things change for the better when I return from Seoul.
Someone is different.
Something is different.

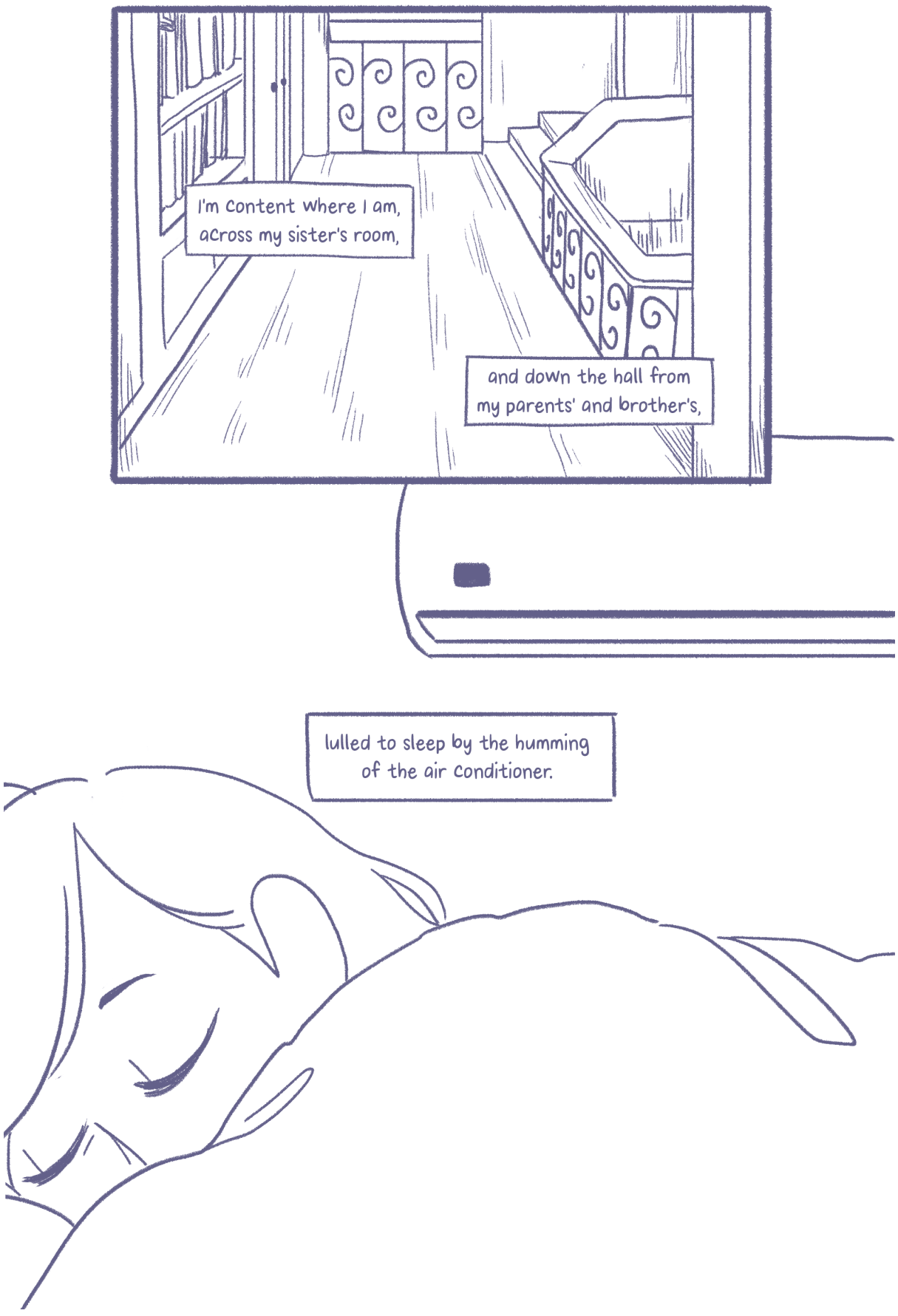
So while home for spring break,



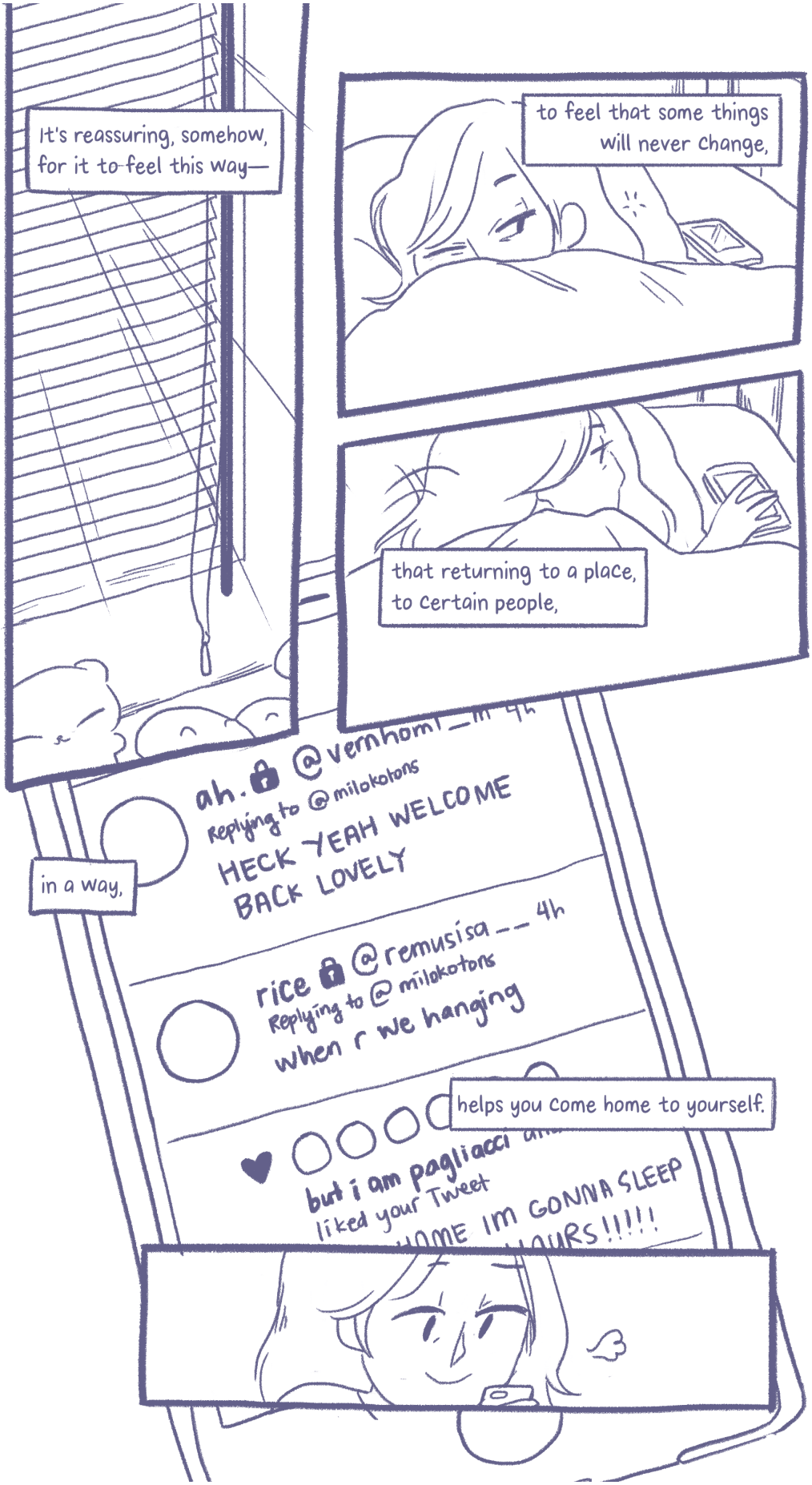
I am not desperately relieved to be away from college—

just happy to be back in my childhood bedroom.



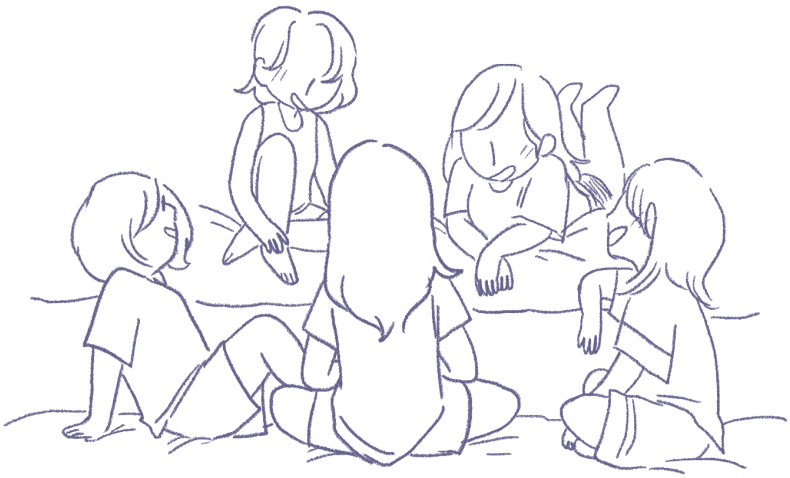

I'm content where I am,
across my sister's room,
and down the hall from
my parents' and brother's,
lulled to sleep by the humming
of the air conditioner.

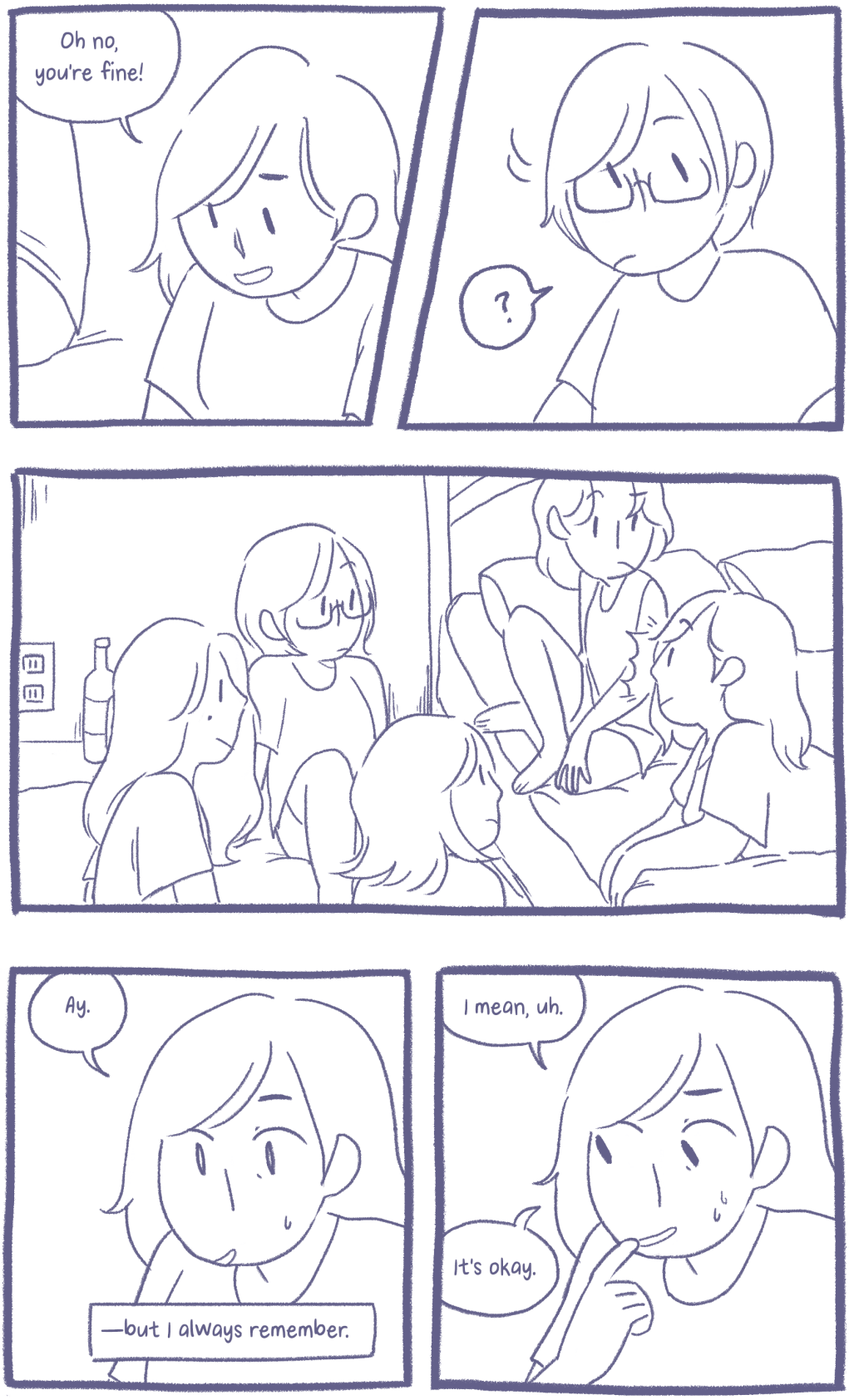
Home changes very little in the time I am away—
both the place,
and the people.
It feels as if time suspends itself here.
Retrospectively, I cannot distinguish between any two visits,
all my summers and winters coalescing into one memory of home.


It's reassuring, somehow, for it to feel this way—
to feel that some things will never change,
that returning to a place, to certain people,
in a way,
ah. @vernhom! — 4h
Replying to @milokotons
HECK YEAH WELCOME BACK LOVELY
rice @remusisa — 4h
Replying to @milokotons
when r we hanging
but i am pagliacci
liked your Tweet
HOME IM GONNA SLEEP
HOURS!!!!!
helps you come home to yourself.

In Manila, I pass my days the same way I spent my last summer before college:

...we talk and laugh like we're in high school again.

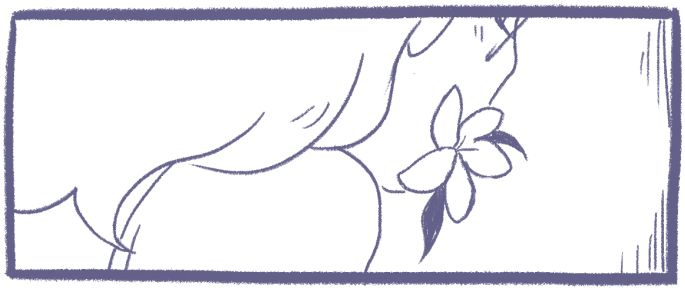



Oh no, you're fine!
?
Ay.
—but I always remember.
I mean, uh.
It's okay.

The difference is not slow to hit, but it is subtle,
What was that?
oH nO, yOu'Re FiNe!
HA
Haha, shut up!
growing in places where I least expect it.
It takes me a while to notice too:
How inflections of elsewhere color my speech and habits,
and belatedly, I realize how much this used to not be—

how, unknowingly, I had always been steeped
in the blooms of my upbringing,

tasting *home* in my mouth
whenever I spoke,



regardless of language.

but I worry that the newer, budding blossoms may one day rise above the old,
and I'll no longer be able to recall where I'd first sprouted.
Who would I be, then?

This wasn't something I feared when I was planning to leave.
The girl I was at fifteen,
sixteen,
seventeen,
was the master of her small but precious world—
tethered to home so intimately,
even when she longed to fly.

How could she fear something that would never happen?
Only some years later,
I am already forgetting what it's like to be that girl.

At twenty-one, I do not have the same conviction she does—

the consequence of an expanding world.

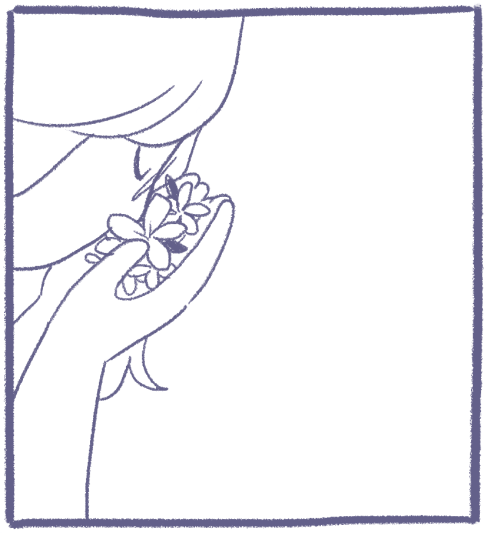
I am still tethered to where I grew up...

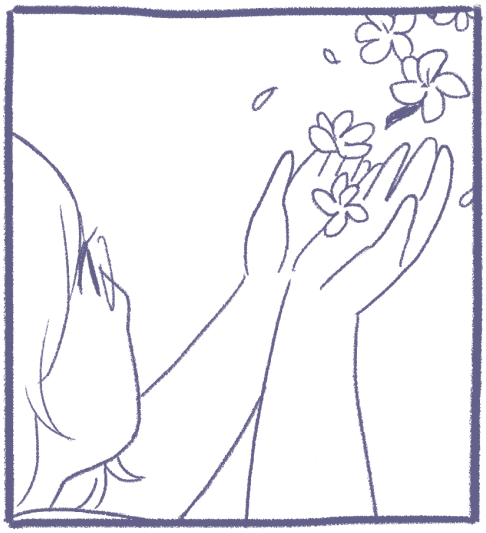
...but it looks different from this distance.

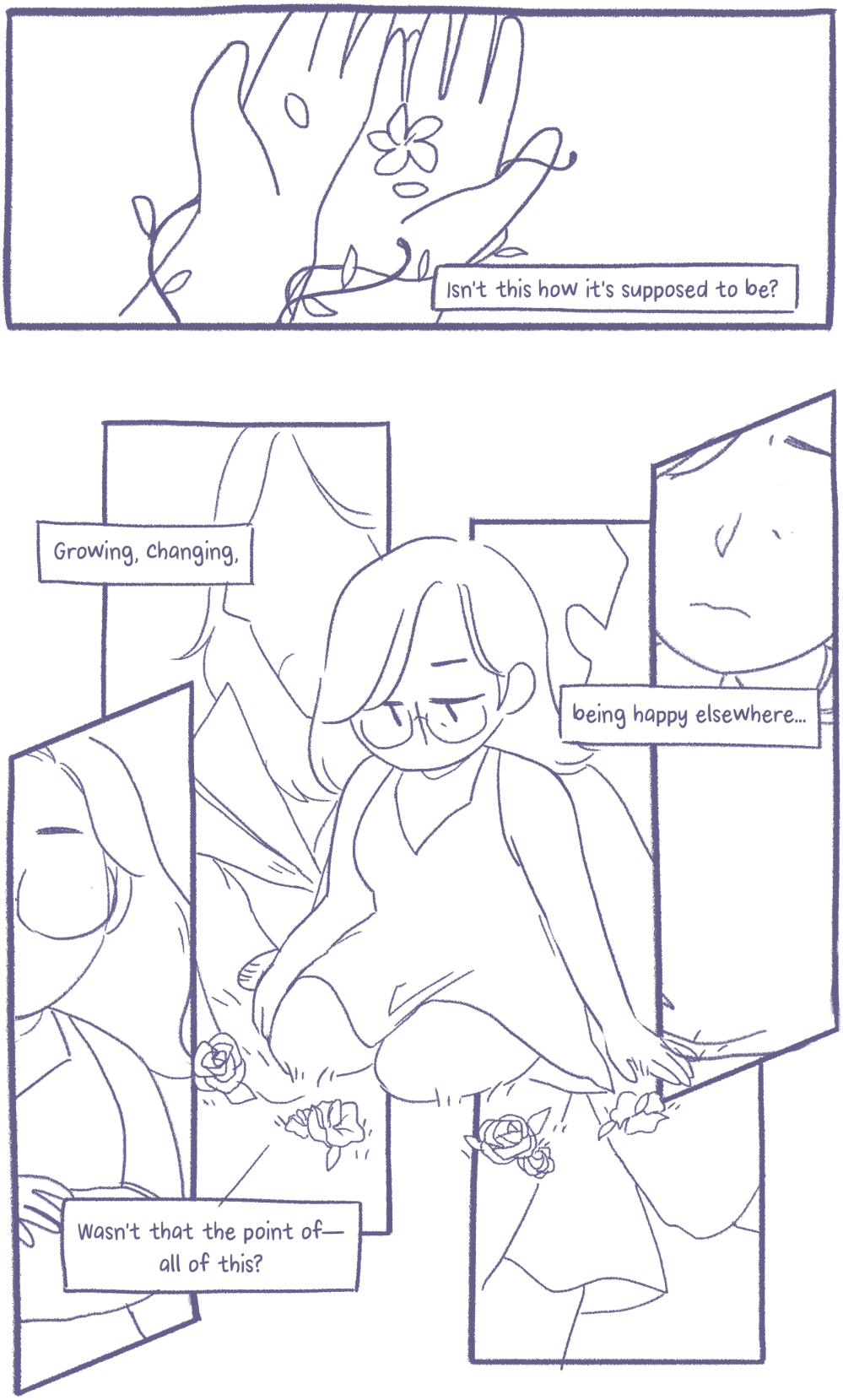
Part of me envies the version of me
that resented being in America,

wishing I was as horribly homesick, and lonely,
and sure about where I belonged, too.

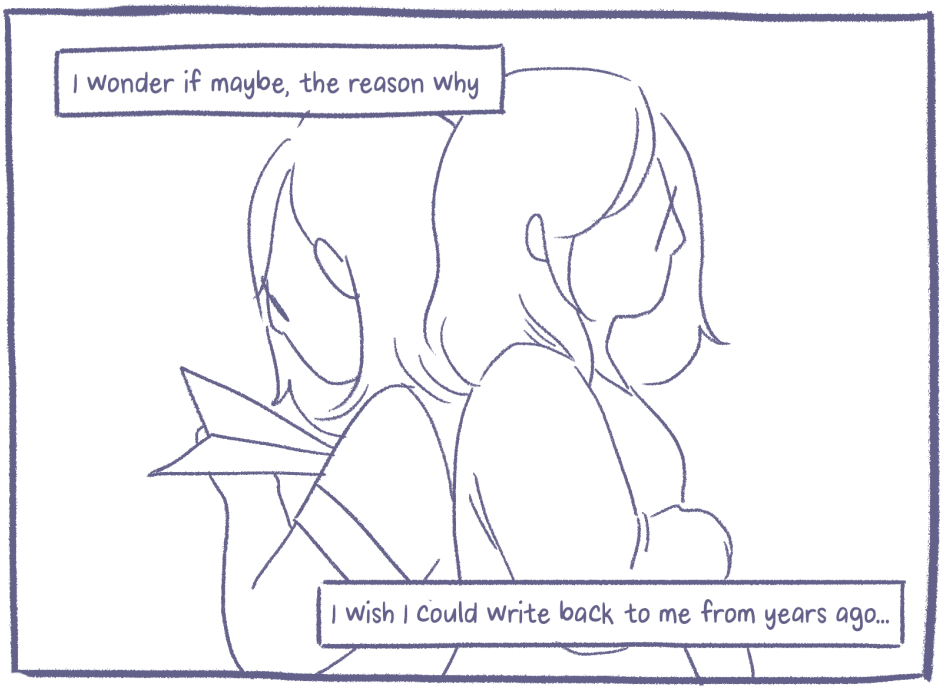
I savor my two weeks in Manila, but I no longer dread the day I have to leave again.



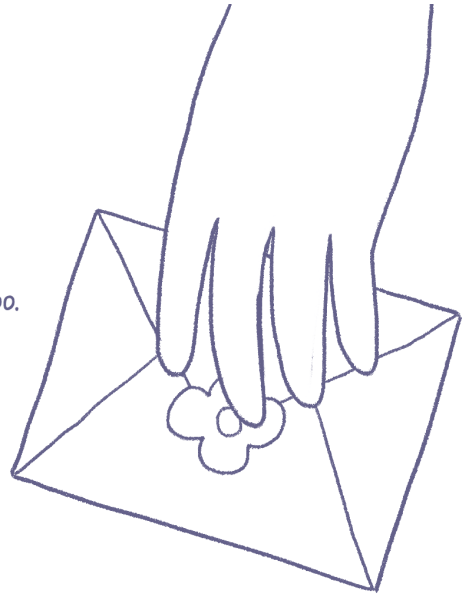



Isn't this how it's supposed to be?
Growing, changing,
being happy elsewhere...
Wasn't that the point of—
all of this?

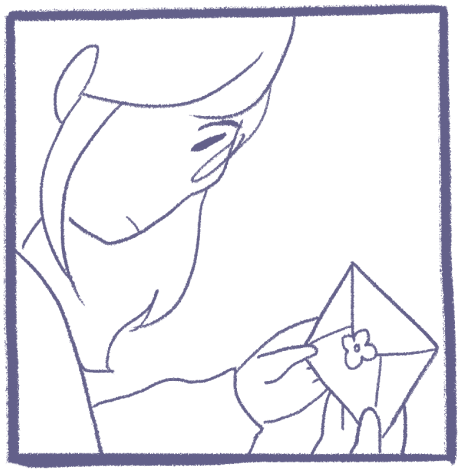
MAXINE GO
I'm the only one who can answer myself,
but hell if I know.

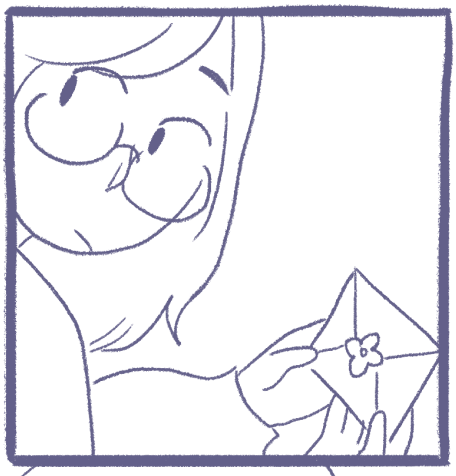

I wonder if maybe, the reason why
I wish I could write back to me from years ago...

...is because I wish that
a future me could write to me, too.



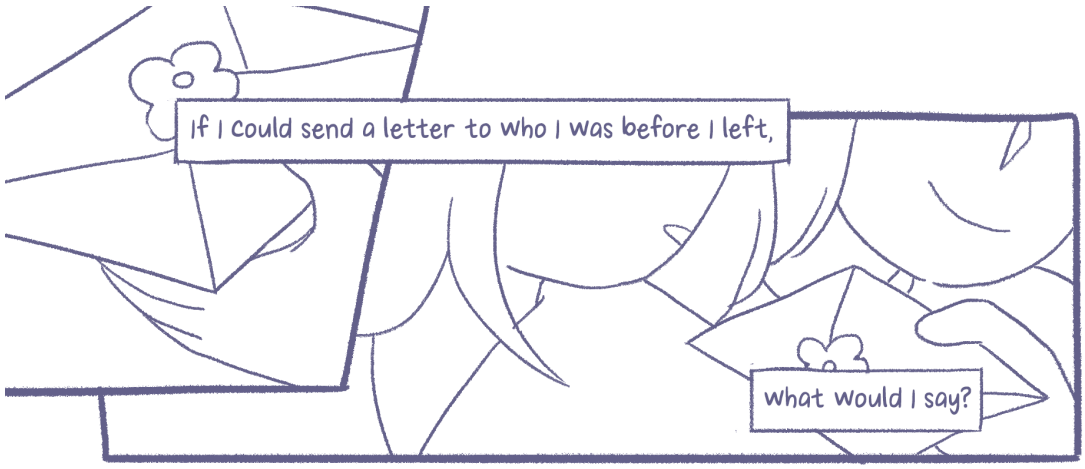
She would know much better,





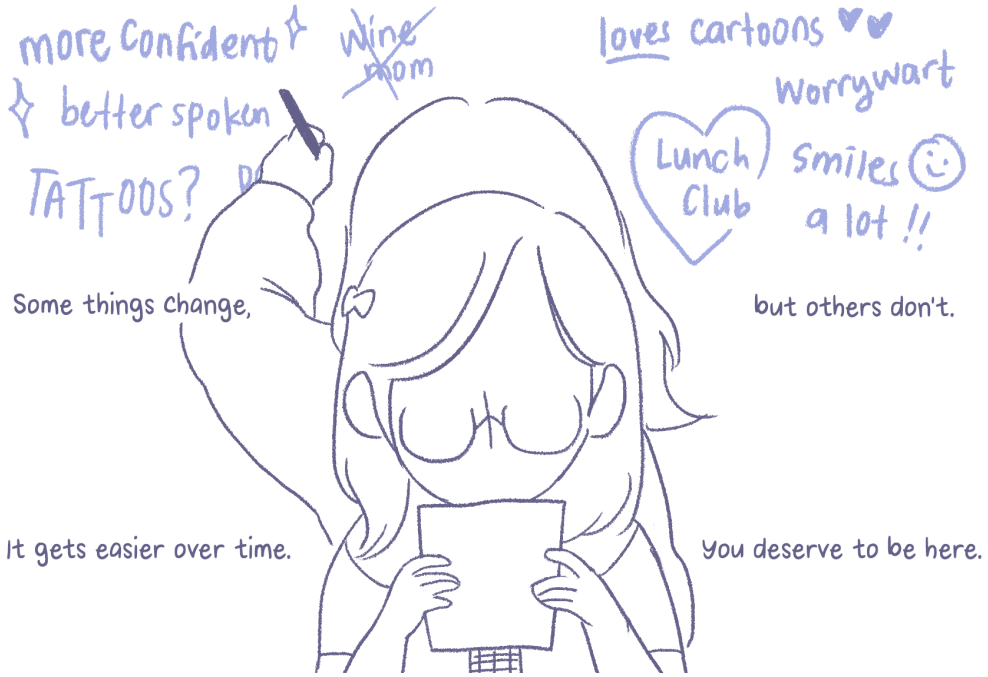
just like how I know that

I know better than the girl I used to be.



I could tell her that:

When you get drunk, you actually speak pretty decent Tagalog...
empty
!?
...but maybe calm down on your "drink away the anxiety" method.
Even if you study in America, some people will remain unimpressed...
Korean?
Study Mandarin!
...but you'll surprise yourself with what your studies help you achieve.

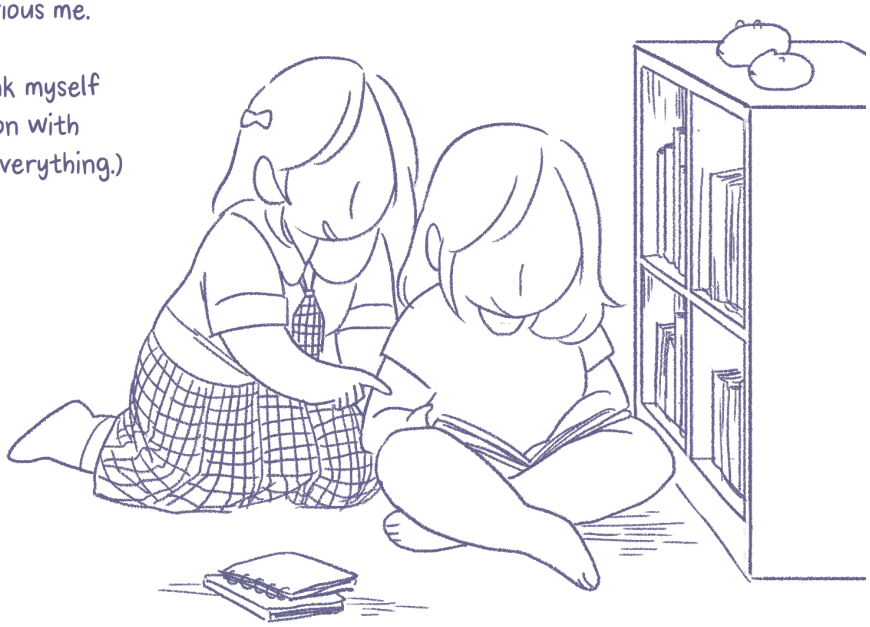

more confident
wine mom
better spoken
TATTOOS?
loves cartoons
worrywart
Lunch Club
smiles a lot !!
Some things change,
but others don't.
It gets easier over time.
you deserve to be here.

But speaking to my past self ultimately defeats my purpose.
tap tap
She will learn all of this herself anyway—
so rather than accelerate her transformation into me,
Red Apple NOTEBOOK
MAXINE GO VII-5 #34
I could stand to relearn a few things from her.

So while I am home for spring break,

I scour through old diaries,
ancient sketchbooks—
relics of a previous me.

(Silently, I thank myself
for my obsession with
documenting everything.)



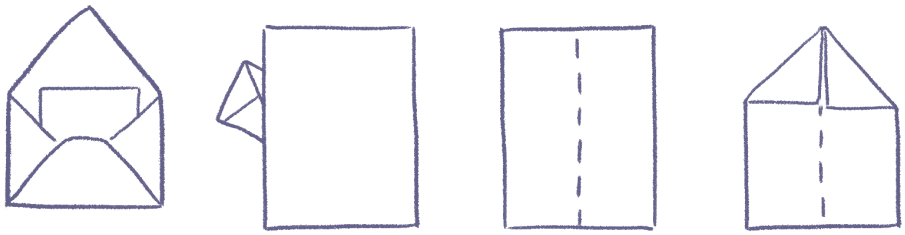
A voice from the past reaches into the present,
guiding me through the pages:

It sounds different from my voice now, but when I hear it,

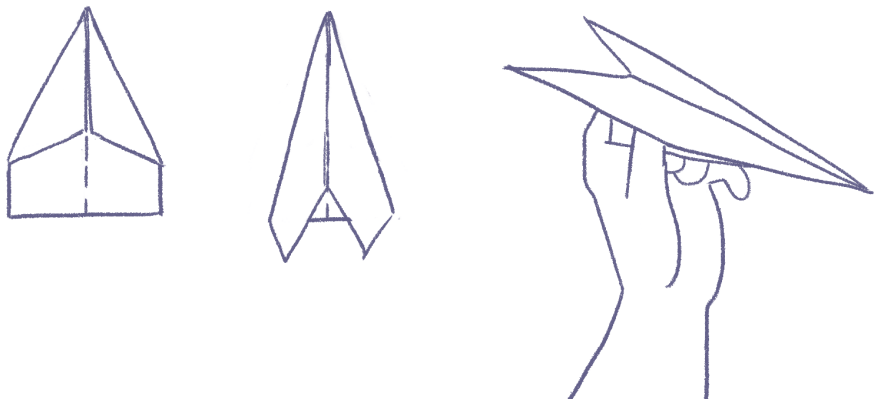
Home feels liminal nowadays, but I know—
that time passes, people change, and before I know it,
things will be different from what I remember.

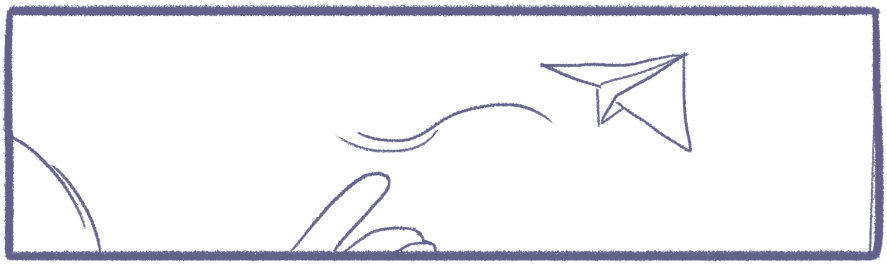
The person I am tomorrow will be different, too.
I don't know what she knows, what she does, what she likes—
and I might not recognize her, for all her changes.
But I also know that, like me,
she won't want to forget who she used to be.

This will not change.



packaging my hopes and anxieties in a carefully crafted email,





I send my heart into the future,

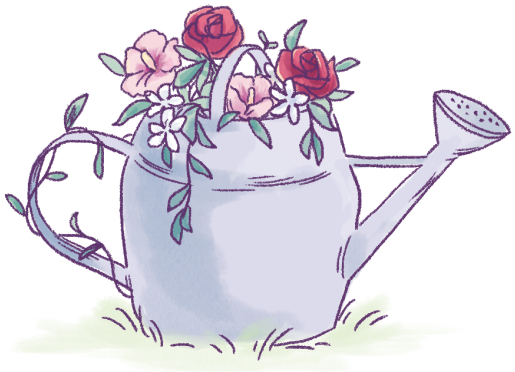
writing desperately,
with love:

Remember me.

Remember me.

Remember me.

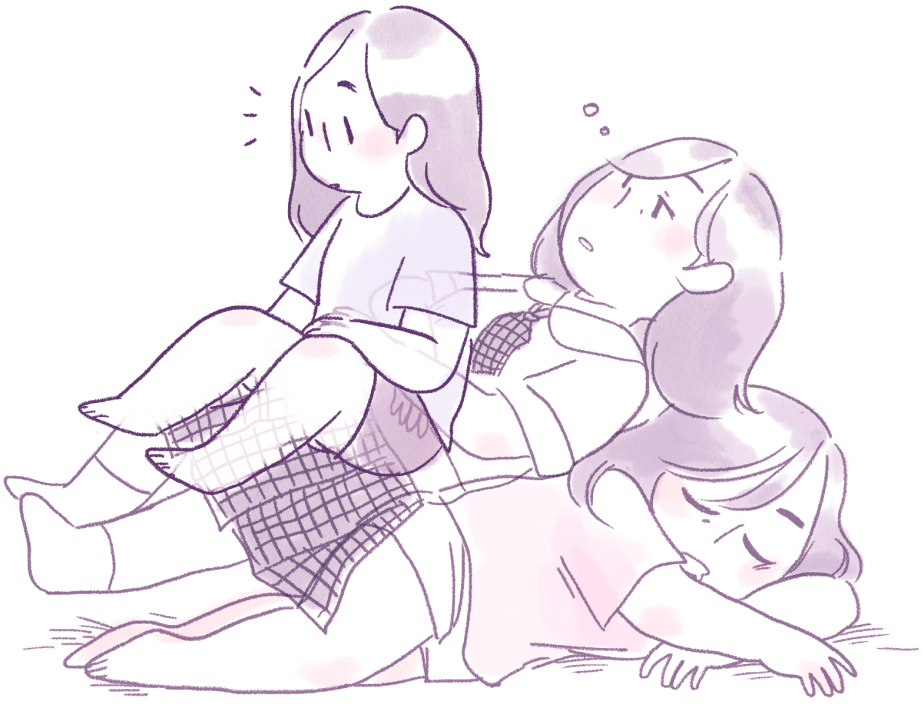
Part Four:



Everywhere A Garden

Every now and then,
when I am asleep somewhere else,

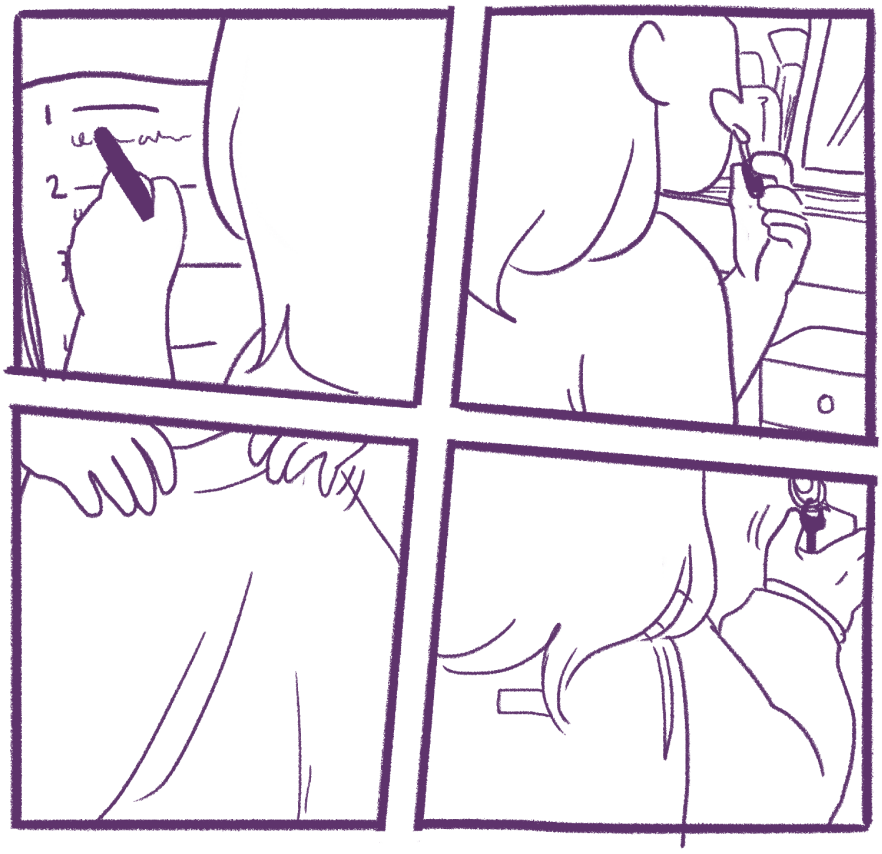
I find myself waking up in Manila.

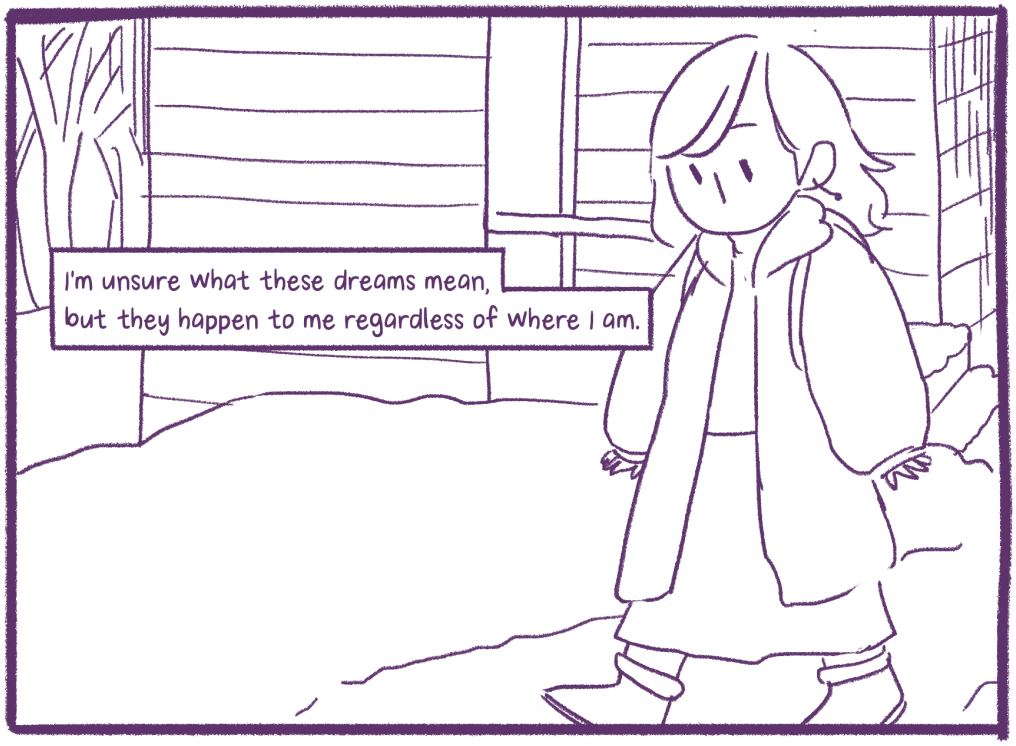


This time, I am ten years old,
taking a rare nap after school,
stomp
Stomp
and I wake to the footsteps
of Mom coming home from work.
Hi Max!

Stomp
stomp
Stomp
stomp
Stomp
Hi max!

Hi Binxin. Where'd you come from?
Took out the trash.
Ahh.
You have class?
Mhm, Chinese. I gotta finish my homework now.
好。
加油!
Haha!
谢谢你。



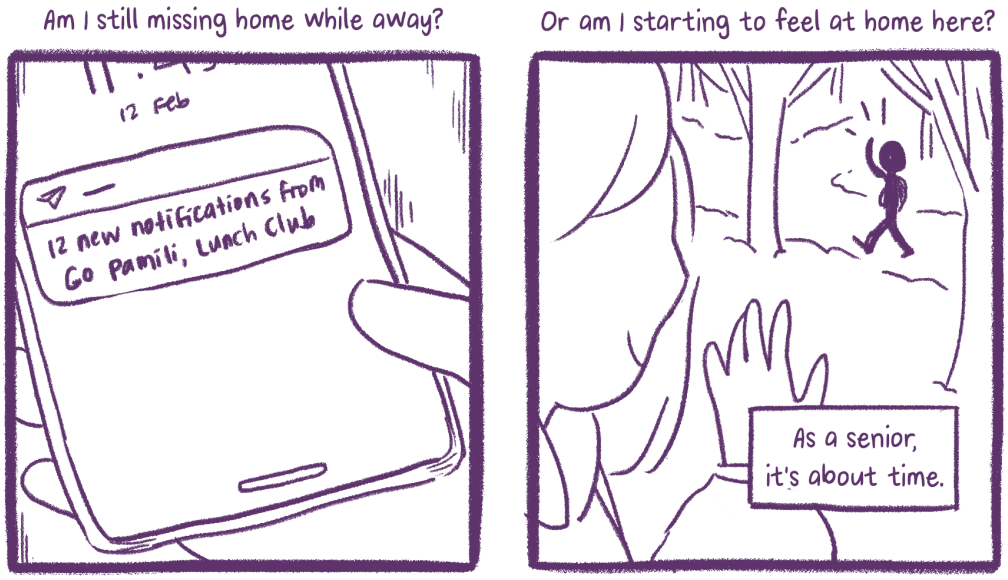

I'm unsure what these dreams mean,
but they happen to me regardless of where I am.

They used to upset me:

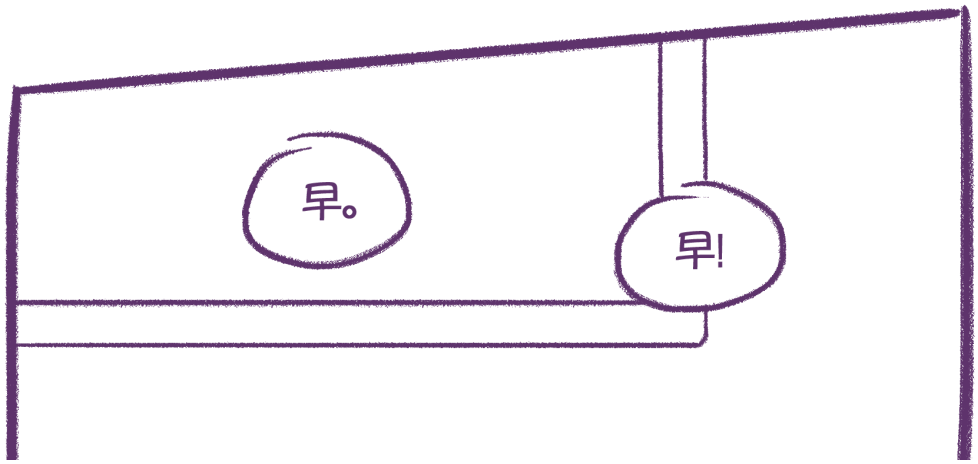
a subconscious reminder that
I was missing a place I called home,

pulling me out of my life here
to remind me of the better life
that I lived elsewhere.

I wonder why this is.


Am I still missing home while away?
12 Feb
12 new notifications from Go Pamili, Lunch Club
Or am I starting to feel at home here?
As a senior, it's about time.

Perhaps it's both.

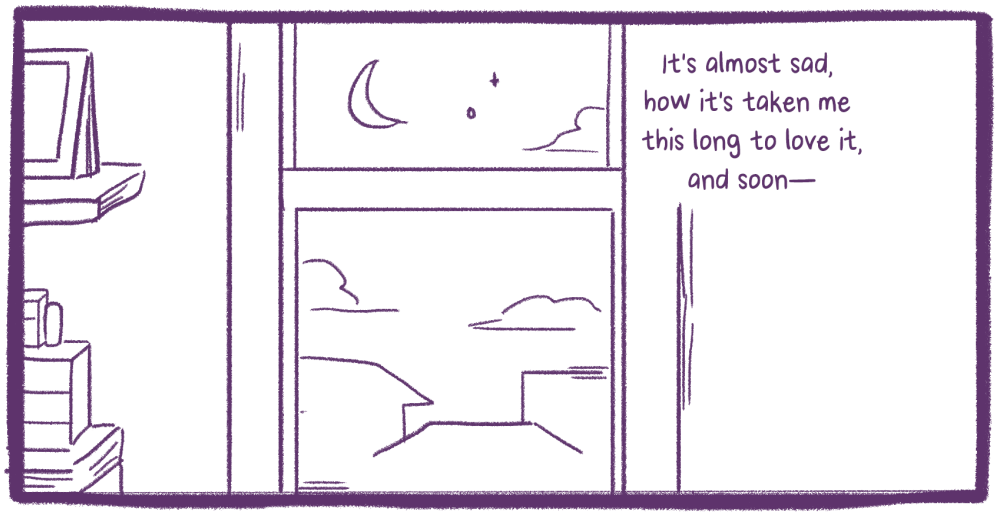

早。
早!

After three years, I've finished my school's Korean language program,
And instead of taking it easy, I decide to take another language.
Chinese meets every day.
是我说...
美心?
měi xīn
It is not easy for me in the least.
My tongue trips over the initials, and the tones feel foreign in my mouth.
我
wǒ
uh
我觉
wǒ jué
对!
But I don't feel guilty about it—not the way I would have felt years ago.

I'm sure in time I'll get used to it.
After all, I've done it before.
my senior year is otherwise relatively free—

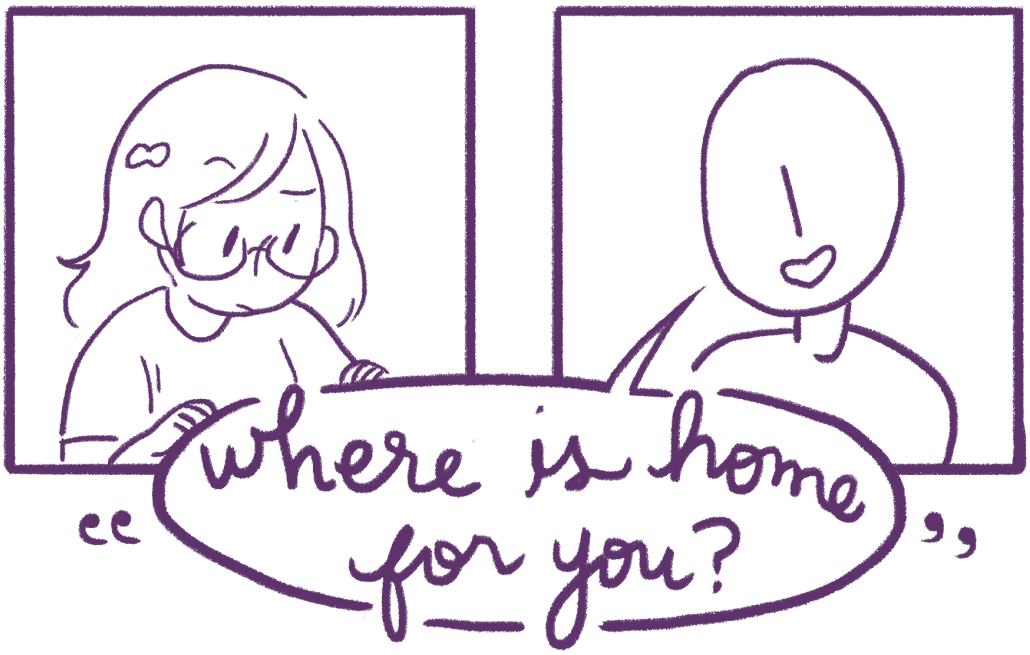
leaving me with time to
meet with friends over meals,
have dance parties with my housemates
in our tiny living room,
or just watch cartoons in my room
with a glass of wine.

I enjoy it with a peace
I couldn't have dreamt of
my freshman year.

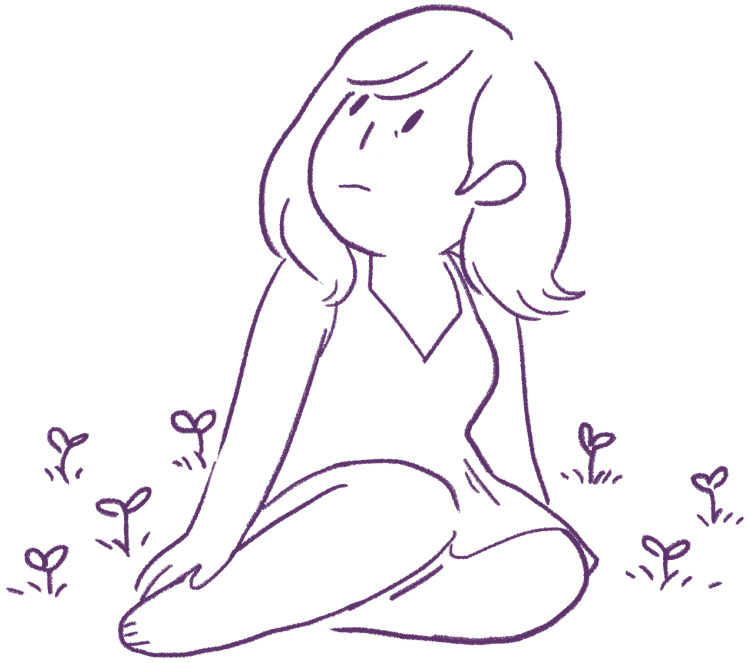

It's almost sad,
how it's taken me
this long to love it,
and soon—

it will be over.

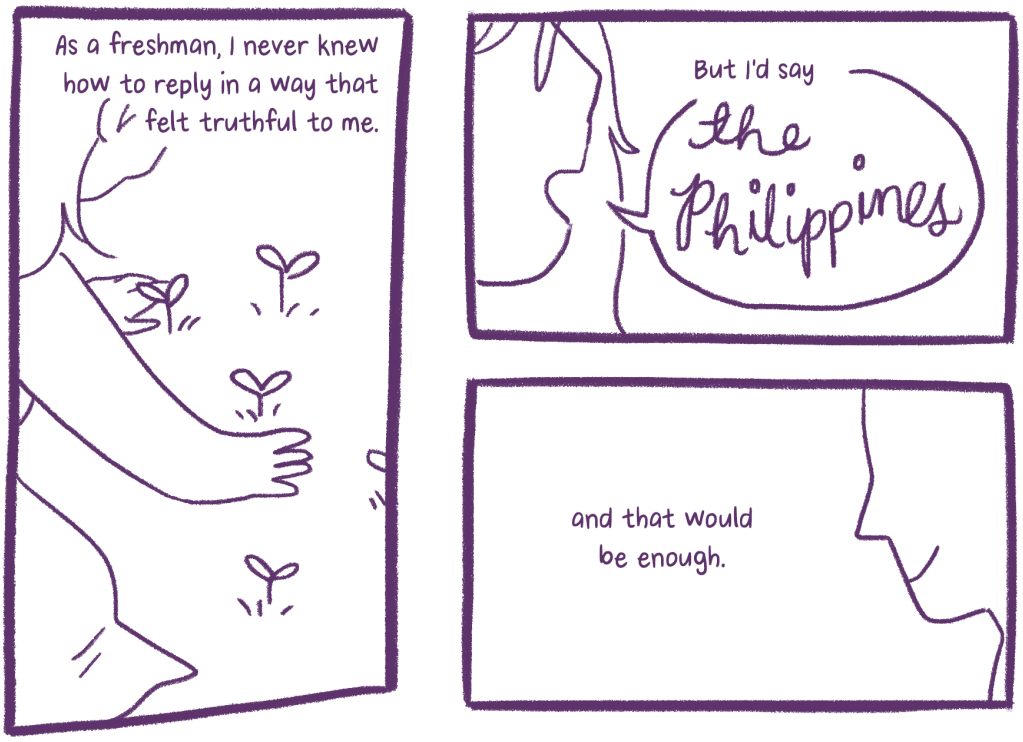
When I first came to college,
I noticed people had an odd way of asking after your background.



It's supposed to act as a substitute for the more potentially offensive *where are you from?*, but it didn't seem as simple to me.



For such a supposedly trivial or introductory question,
it was worded in a way that anticipated a deep, complex response.

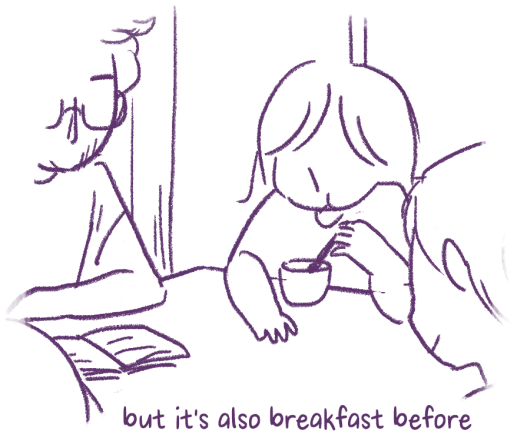


No one really asked for more than that.

Suspension of in-person classes for Spring 2020
mar 11
COVID-19
The abruptness of it is chaos for everyone.
But between sorting out living situations and saying reluctant goodbyes,
something that, perhaps, I'd already known for almost a year.
I come to realize something—
Where is home for you?

For me,

Home is midnight Jollibee runs with my siblings when we're all in Manila,

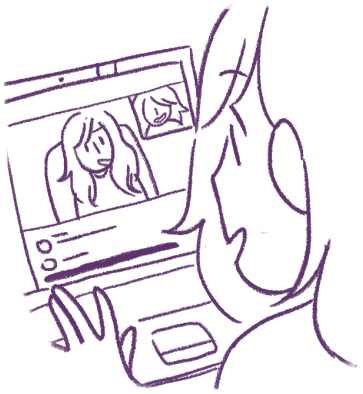


but it's also breakfast before class around the kitchen table.

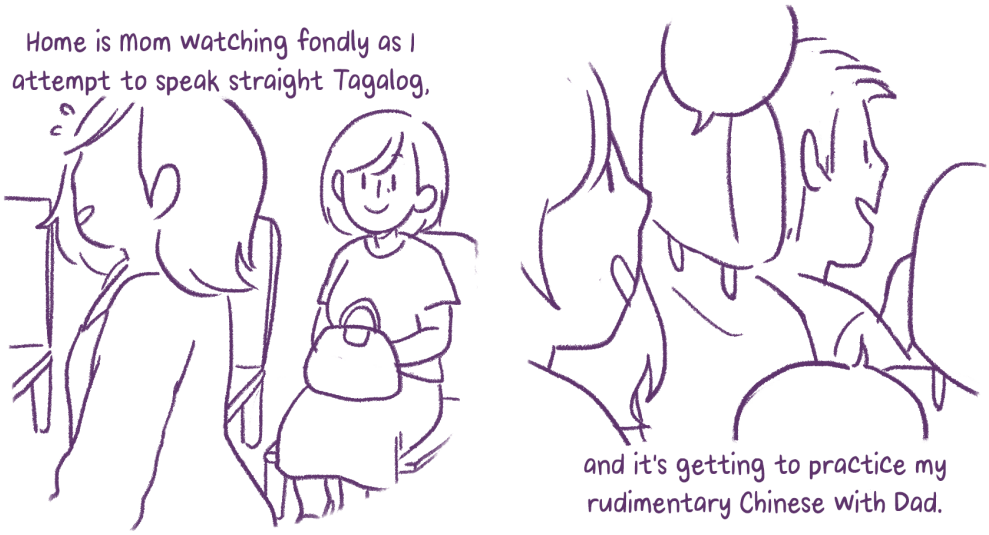
It's the code-switching between Tagalog and English that comes naturally to my tongue,

but it's also the people I've met only because I can stumble over a single sentence in Korean.

Home is every Facetime to a high school friend from a dorm room,

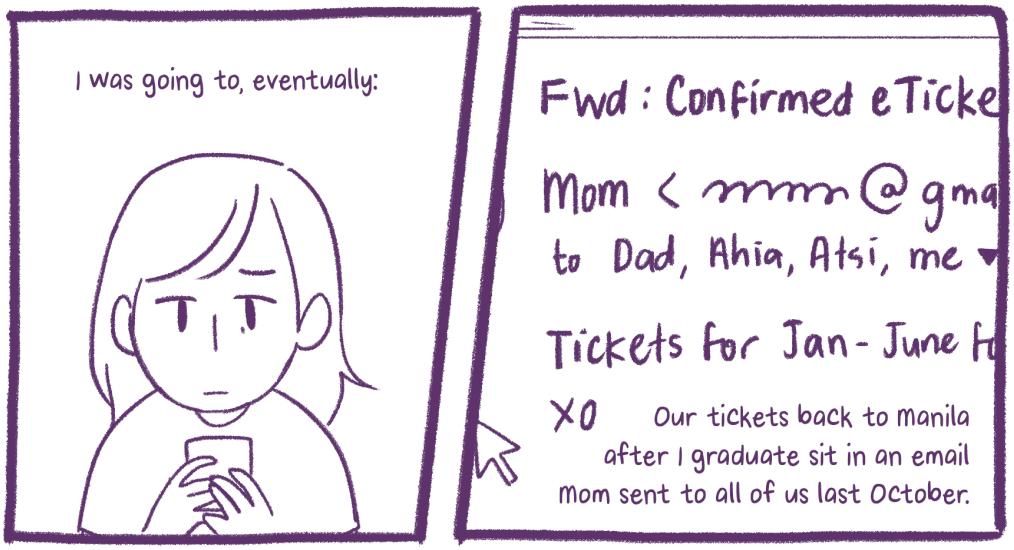


and to a college friend from my childhood bedroom.

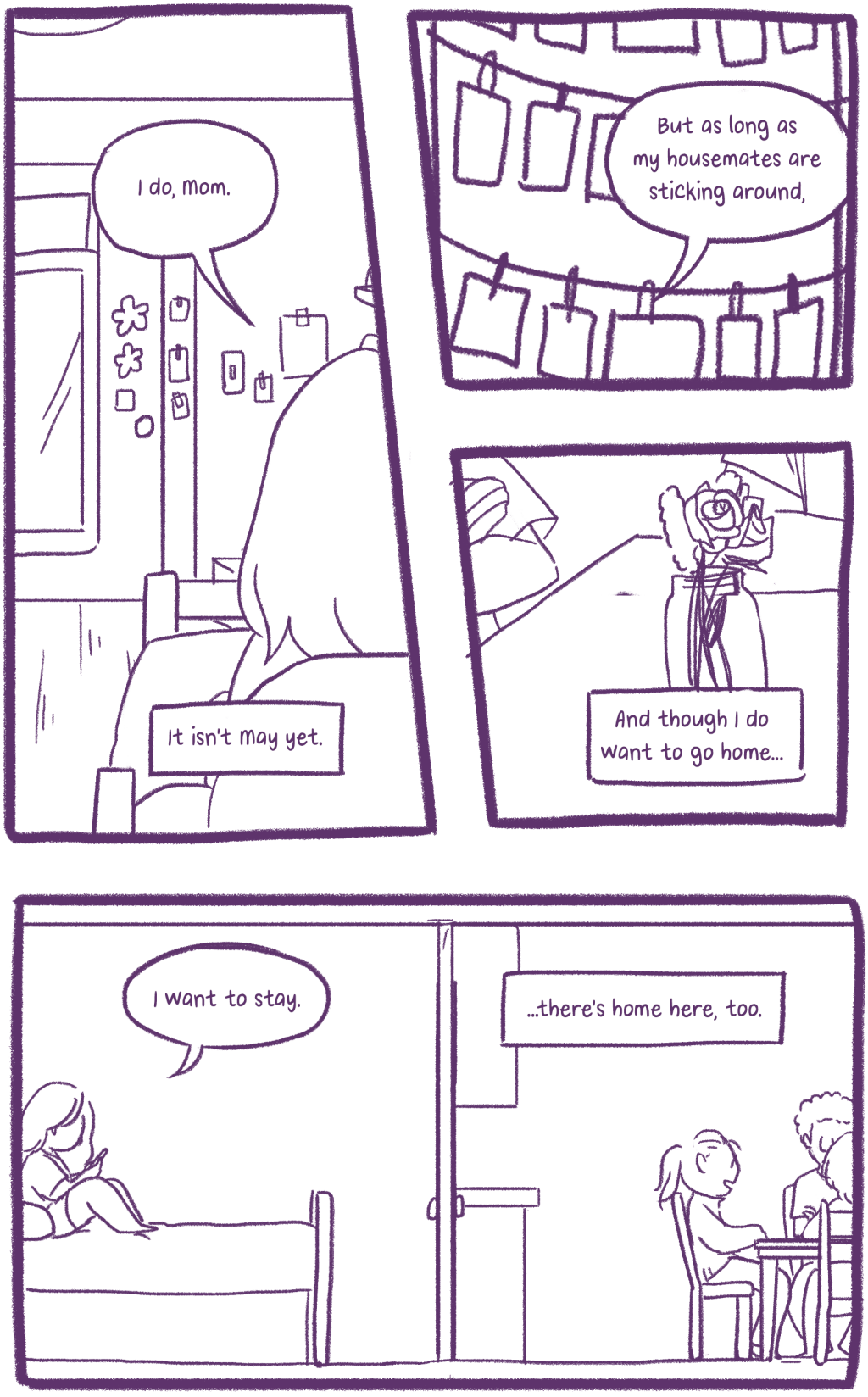

Home is Mom watching fondly as I attempt to speak straight Tagalog,
and it's getting to practice my rudimentary Chinese with Dad.

It might not be Seoul or Manila or Middletown,
but it's the streets of Hongdae,
my high school in Pasig,
the senior house I share with five friends.

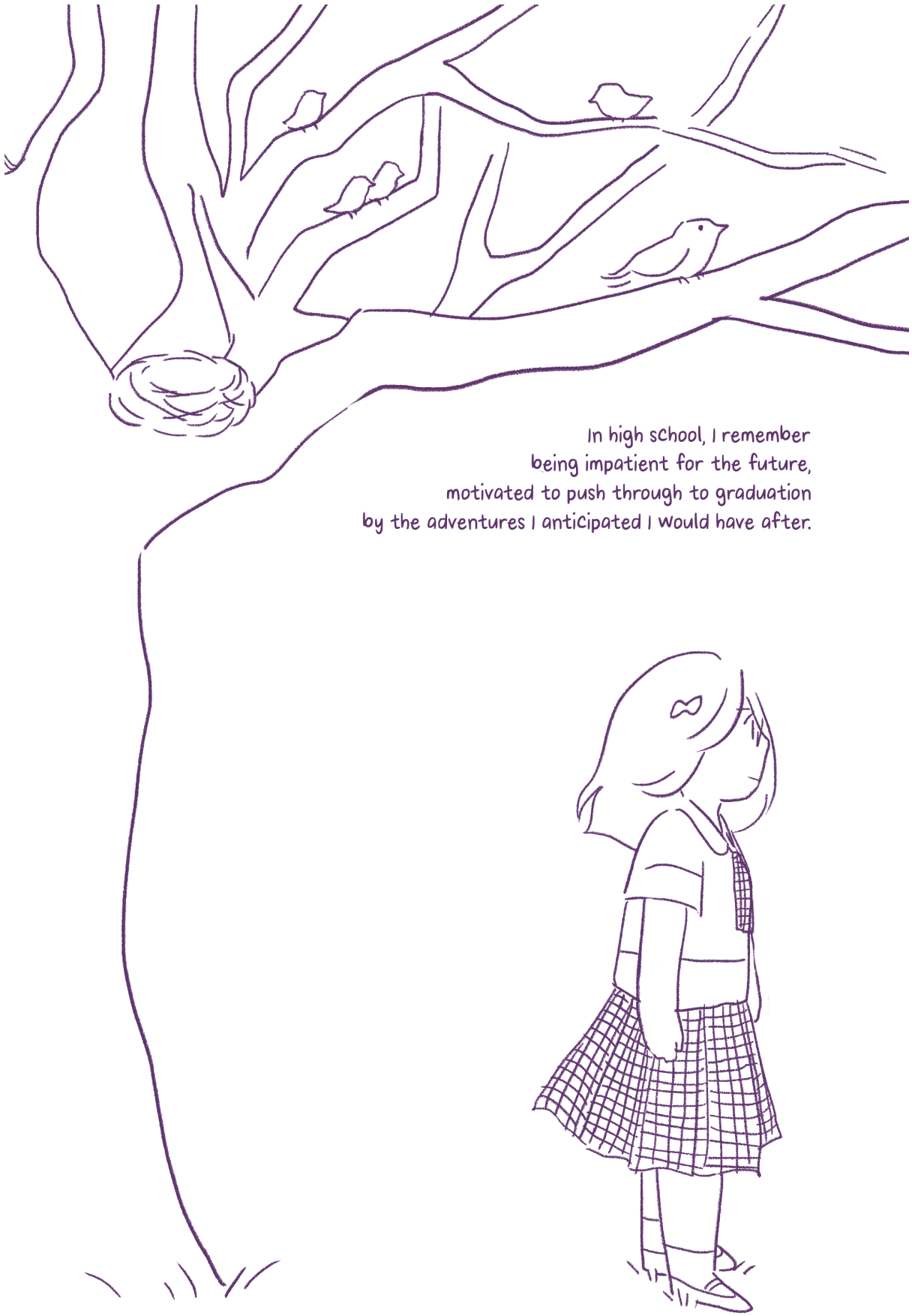
Home is there,
but after everything,
finally,
It's also here.
So when I tell my mom the news,
and she says—
Do you want
to come home, Max?
you can.
—I'm at a loss.



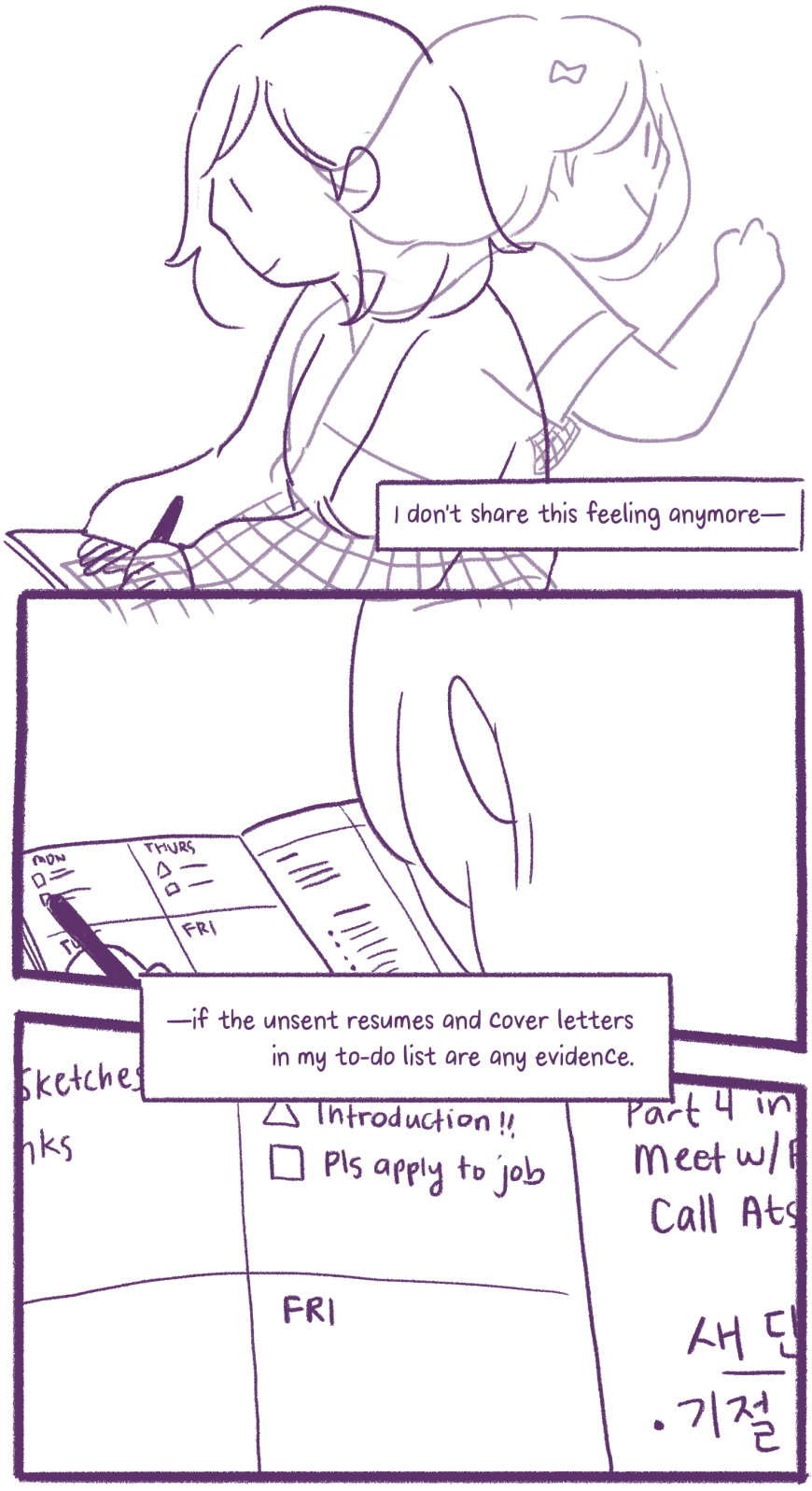
And among the international students that comprise my senior house,
I was the only one who wasn't planning to stay in America,


I do, Mom.
It isn't May yet.
But as long as my housemates are sticking around,
And though I do want to go home...
I want to stay.
...there's home here, too.

Okay, Max.
Call you again soon.
Take care. Love you.
Love you.


In high school, I remember
being impatient for the future,
motivated to push through to graduation
by the adventures I anticipated I would have after.

"The youngest
will be the first
to leave the nest."

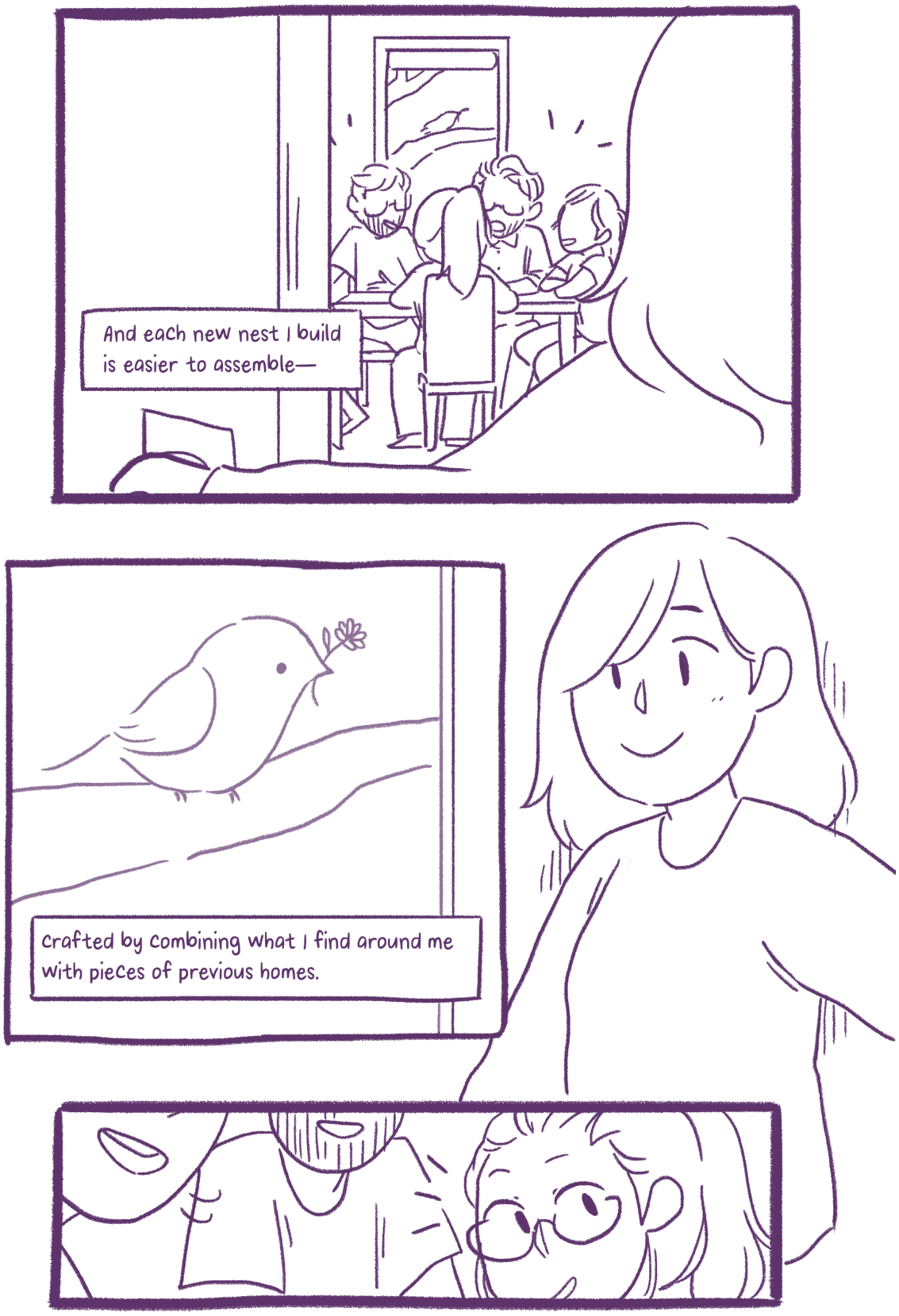

I don't share this feeling anymore—
MON
THURS
FRI
—if the unsent resumes and cover letters in my to-do list are any evidence.
Introduction!!
Pls apply to job
FRI
Part 4 in
Meet w/
Call Ats

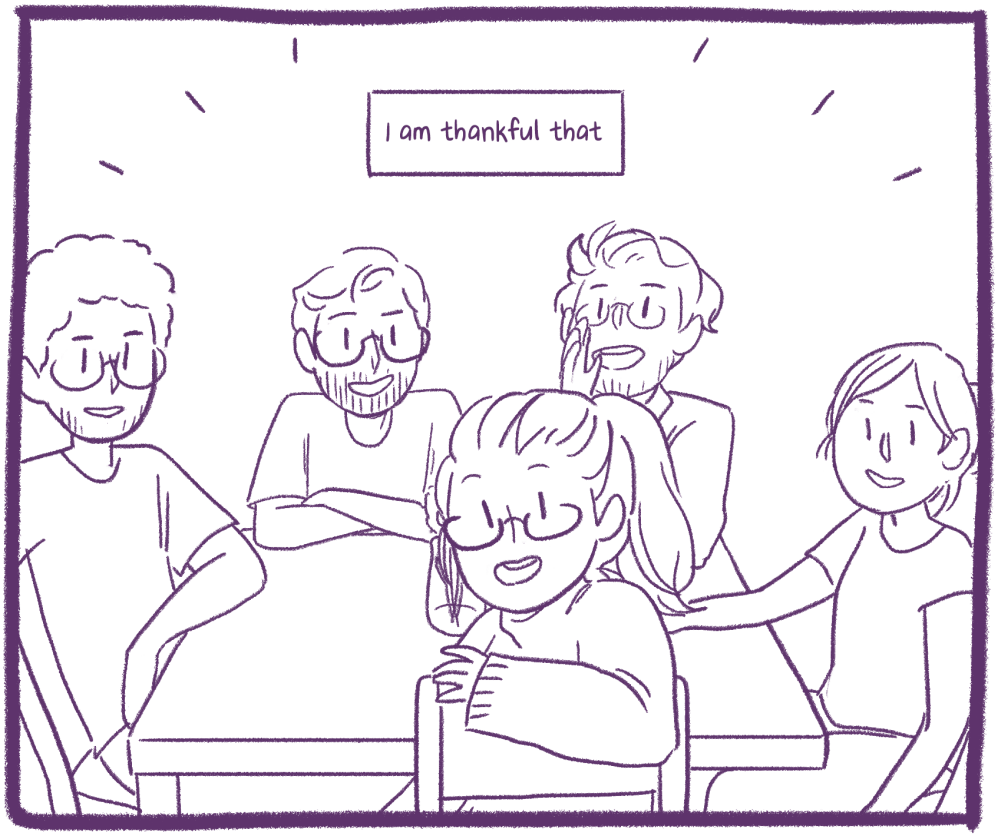
Of course I still anticipate the coming future:
It's hard to kick the habit,
when I've spent most of my life waiting and hoping and longing
for something, somewhere that isn't *here* and *now*.

Even in my sleep,
I dream of elsewhere.

But nowadays, I spend less time
thinking about where to go from here.

Four years out of the nest,
I'm finally getting the hang of it—

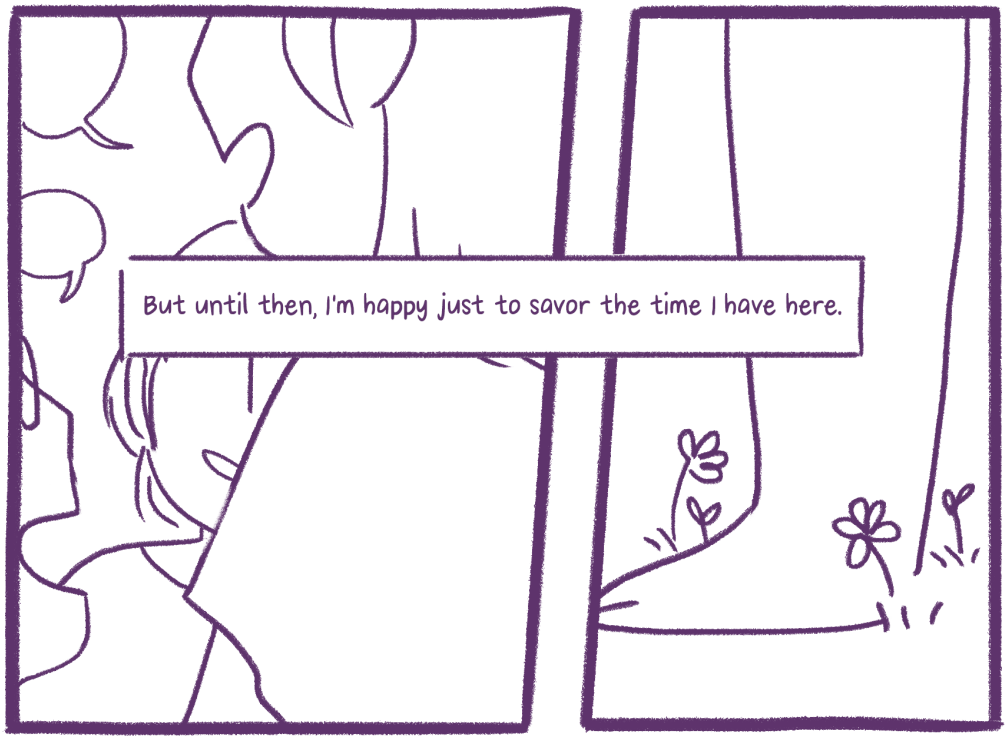

And each new nest I build is easier to assemble—
crafted by combining what I find around me with pieces of previous homes.


I am thankful that

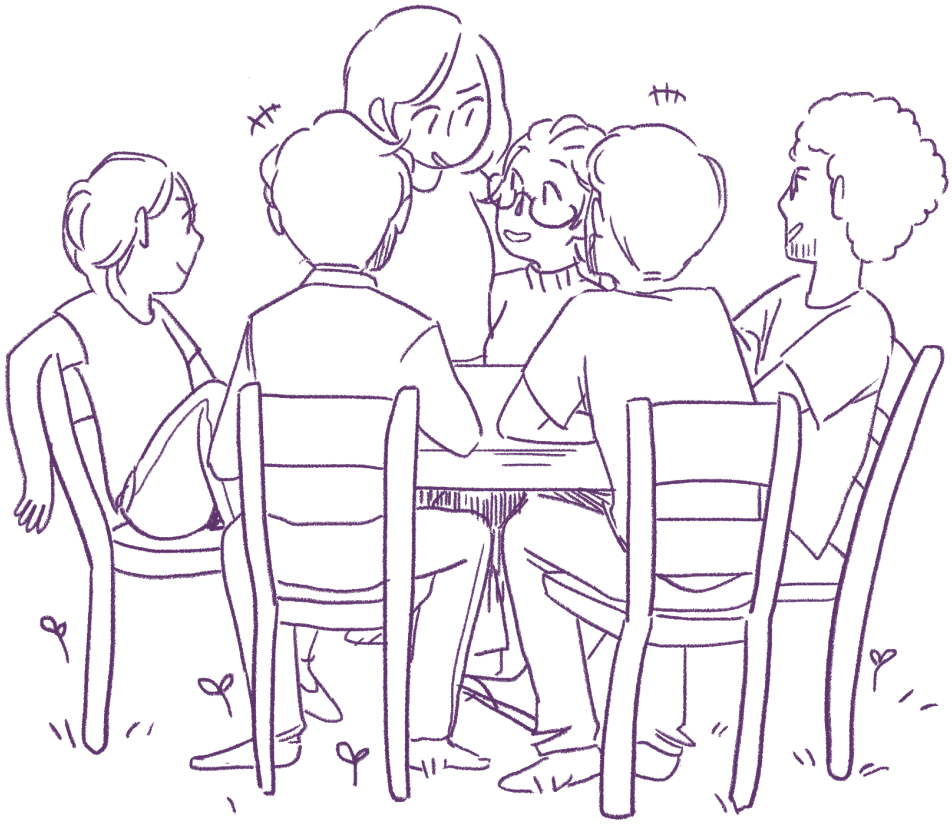
I never have to do it alone.

And yes, eventually,
I will leave this nest too,

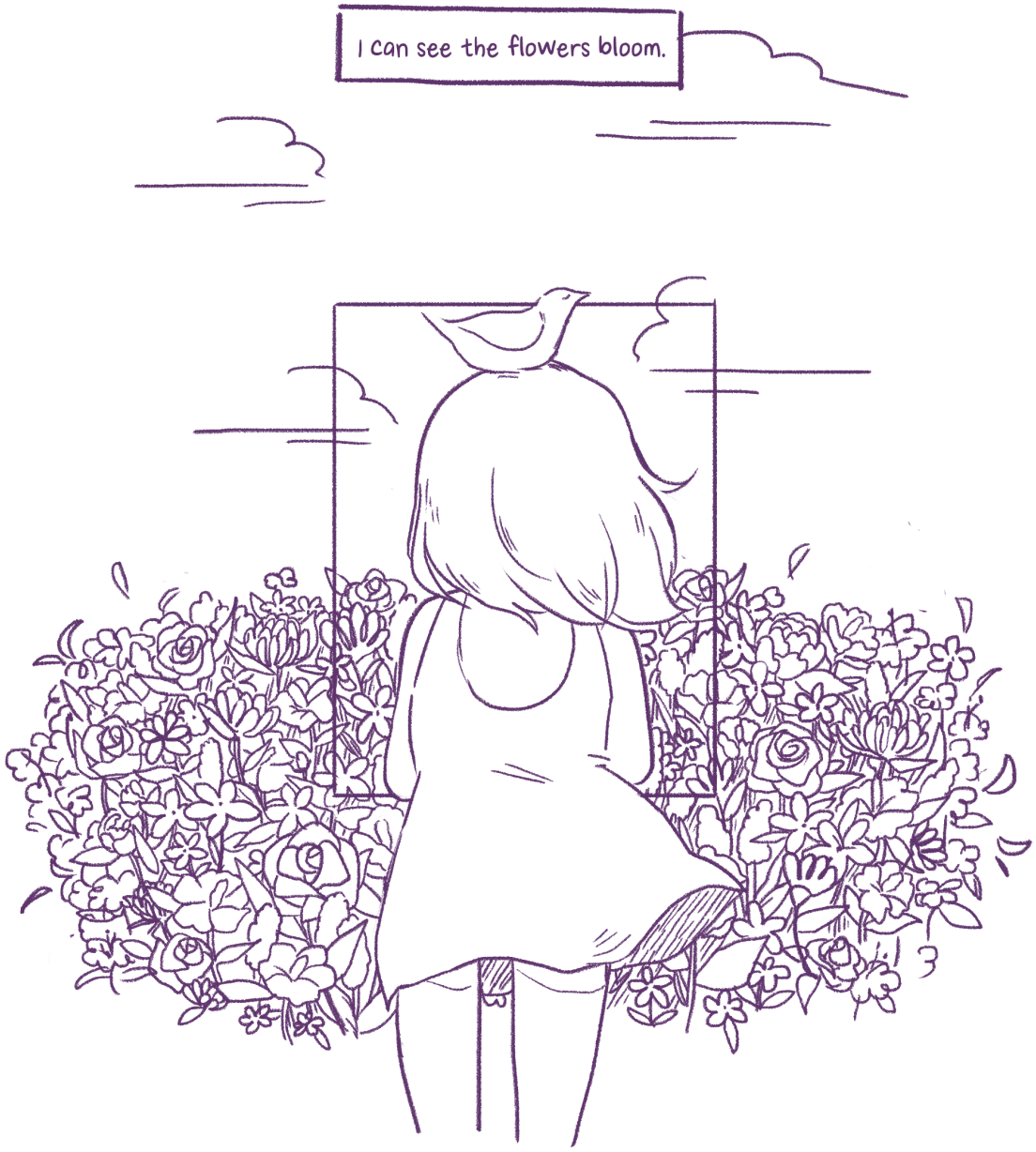
fly off and have to craft another—



From my vantage point
at where I am now,



among the people I love
in the home that we've crafted,


I can see the flowers bloom.

fin

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This completed (!) thesis would absolutely not have been possible on my own. I would like to acknowledge a handful of very precious people who have helped me in the process of piecing *Everywhere A Garden* together:

To **Prof. Yuting Huang**, who supervised my project (and more) over the past year: Thank you for listening to me ramble about stories that never made it to this book, assuaging all the worries I had going into the project, and above all, giving me the guidance I needed to make this story what it is. Every thesis meeting with you was a bright part of my week! I admire you greatly and can't express my appreciation for you enough.

To **Prof. Hyejoo Back**: 교수님이 저를 가르쳐주셔서 정말 감사합니다. 교수님 덕분에 제가 기회도 많이 있고 삶도 바뀌었어요. 미래에도 저는 한국어를 계속 공부하겠어요. 꼭 다시 만나요.

To all the teachers, professors, and mentors who have ever encouraged my creative work and made me feel like my ideas were worth pursuing, especially Professors **Takeshi Watanabe, Lauren Silber, Jason Katzenstein, Charles Barber**, and **Tiphanie Yanique**: Your faith in my abilities means the world to me.

To my best friends **Lolita** and **Dom**, who agreed to give my work another pair of eyes whenever I asked, and let me phone them at ungodly hours to destress: Thank you for going above and beyond, always. No one knows my work—or me—like you do, and I treasure our friendships.

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To **Ahia and Atsi**: They say the youngest sibling is nothing more than a knockoff of their older siblings. While this is a strong generalization, I admit I have you both to thank for who I am. Thank you for the passion for cartoons, drawings, anime, and comics that you inevitably passed down to me, and for the sibling calls that got me through this year.

To **my parents**: Nothing is possible without your love and support. Thank you.

And to anyone who has helped make any time or place we shared one where I felt I belonged: Thank you, from the bottom of my heart. I promise I'll pay it forward.

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