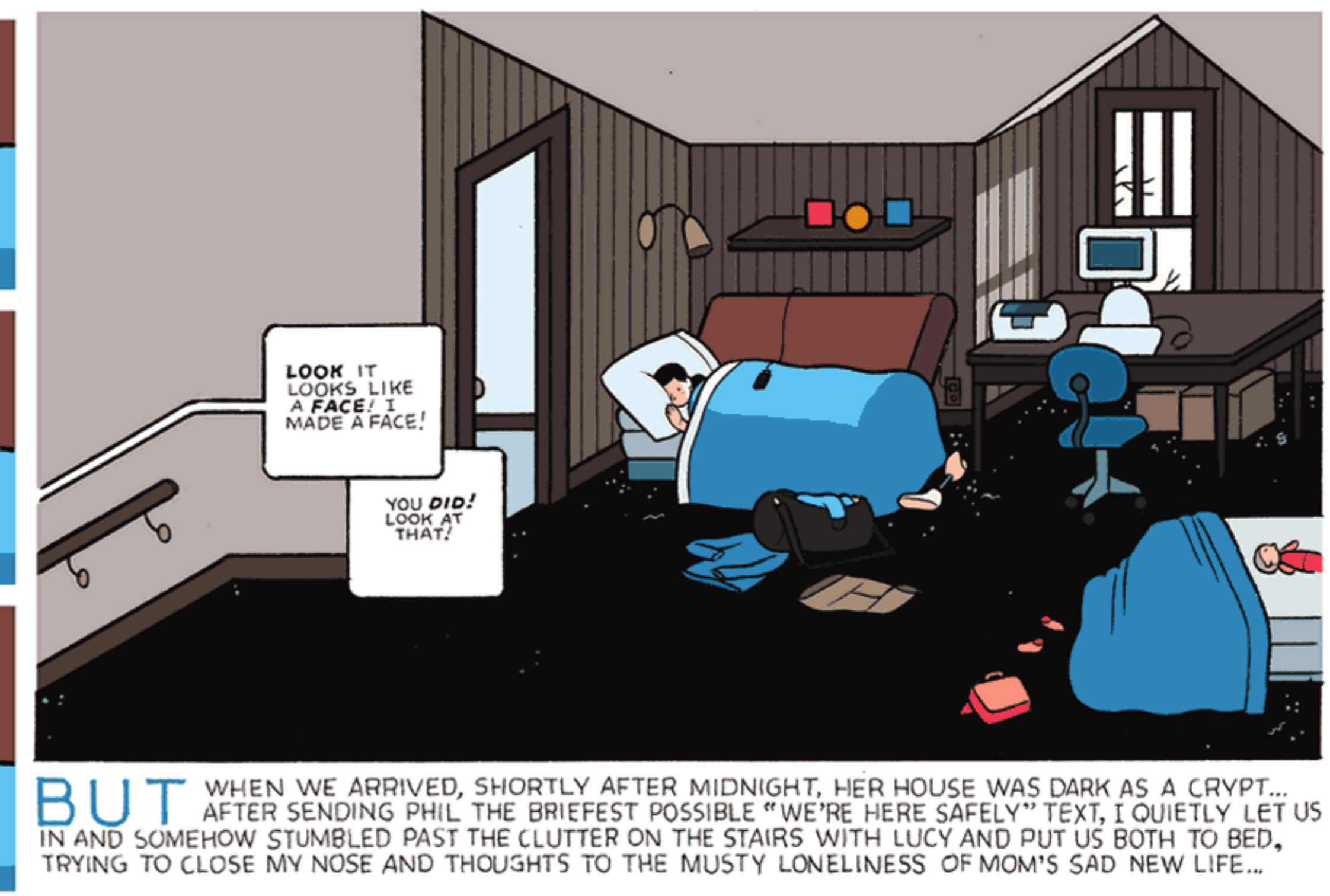
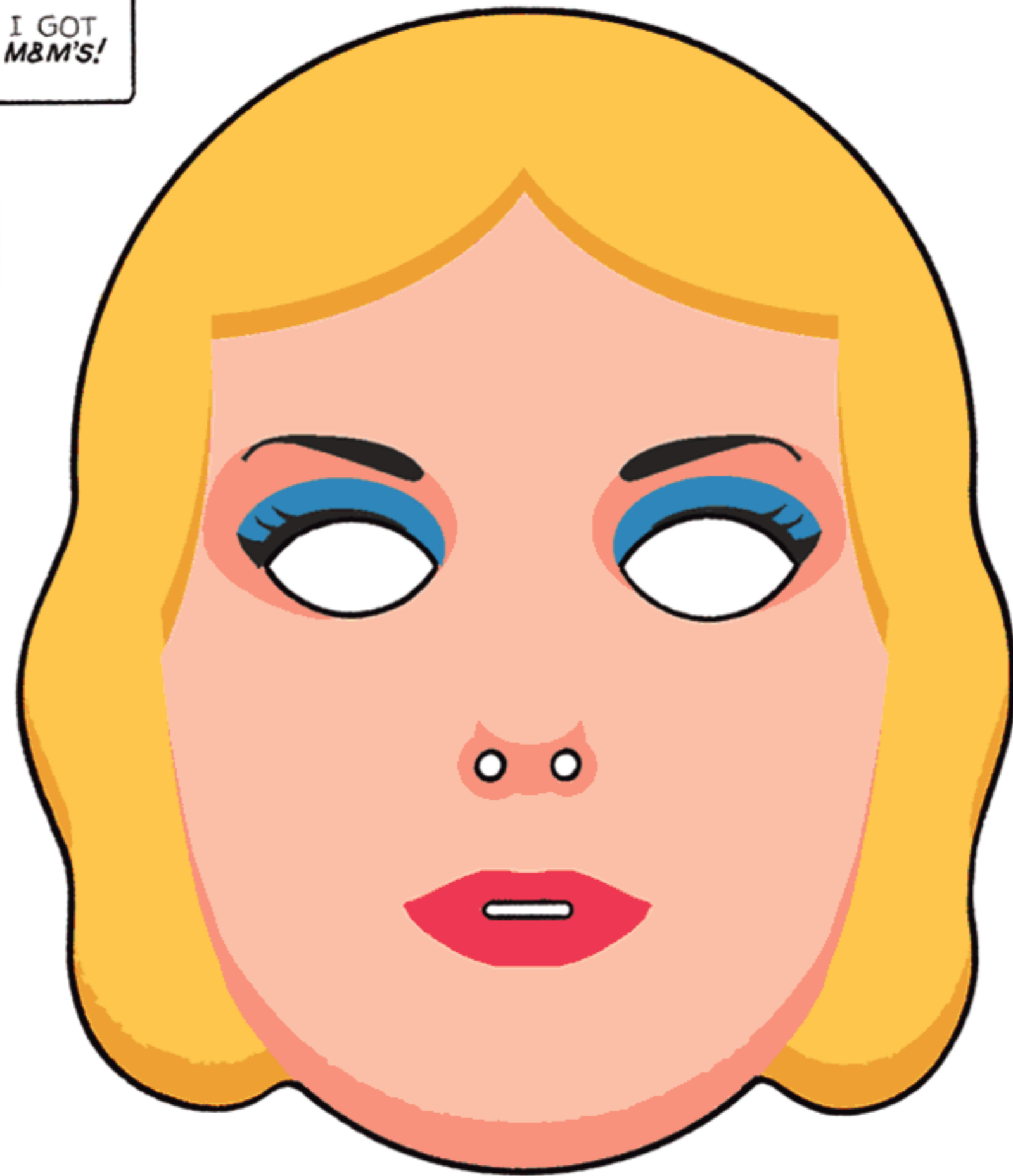


**I WAS SO MAD** I COULD HARDLY TYPE... HOW MANY HALLOWEENS DID HE SUPPOSE HE'D HAVE WITH HIS FOUR-YEAR-OLD?

**I THINK** MOM COULD TELL SOMETHING WAS UP WHEN I CALLED TO SAY WE'D BE ARRIVING EARLY... SHE CAN ALWAYS SEE RIGHT THROUGH ME...



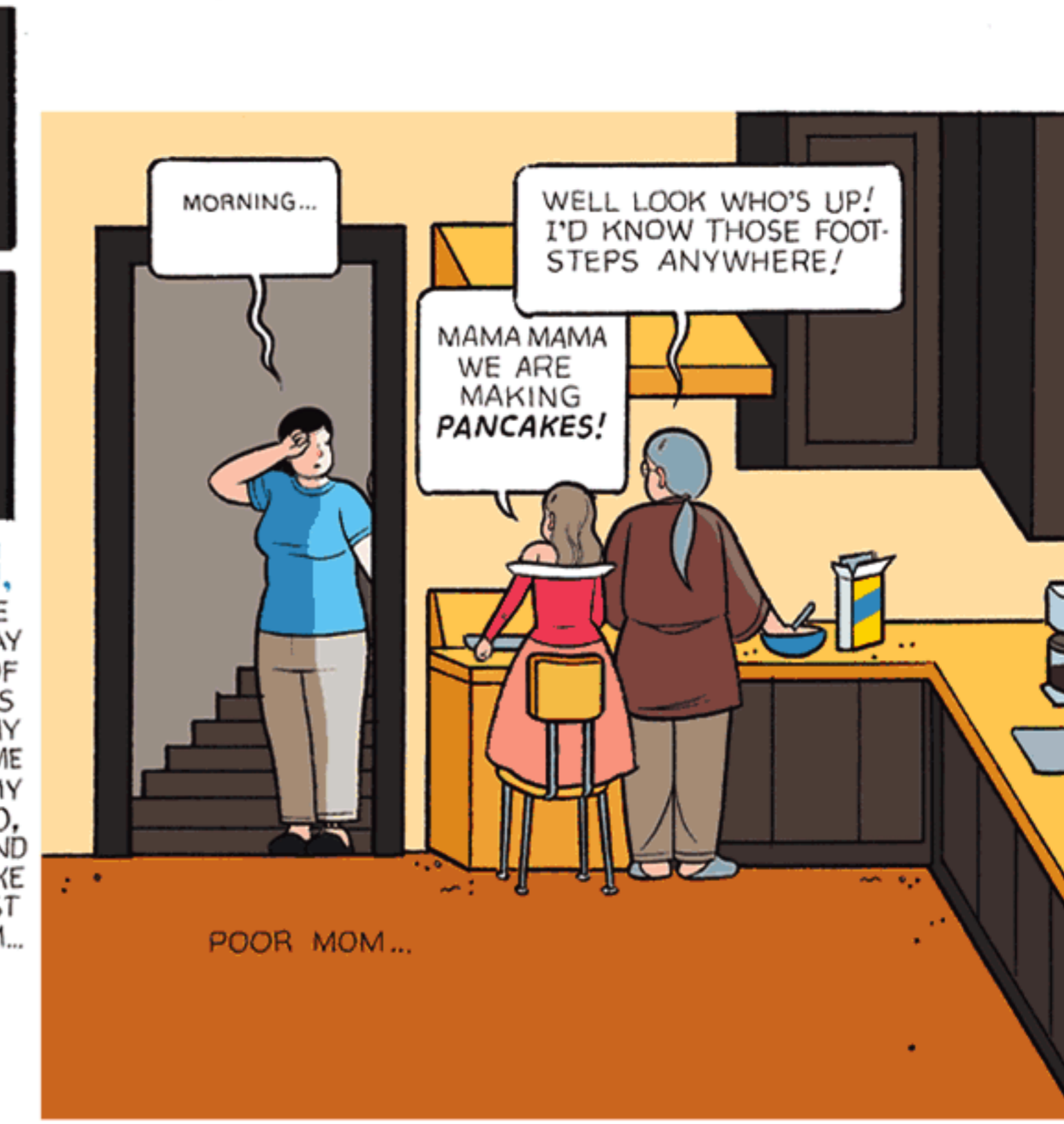
**THE LAST** THING I WANTED WAS FOR MOM TO BE WAITING UP FOR US... EVER SINCE DAD DIED IT'S LIKE I DIDN'T NEED A LATE-NIGHT HEART-TO-HEART RIGHT NOW...



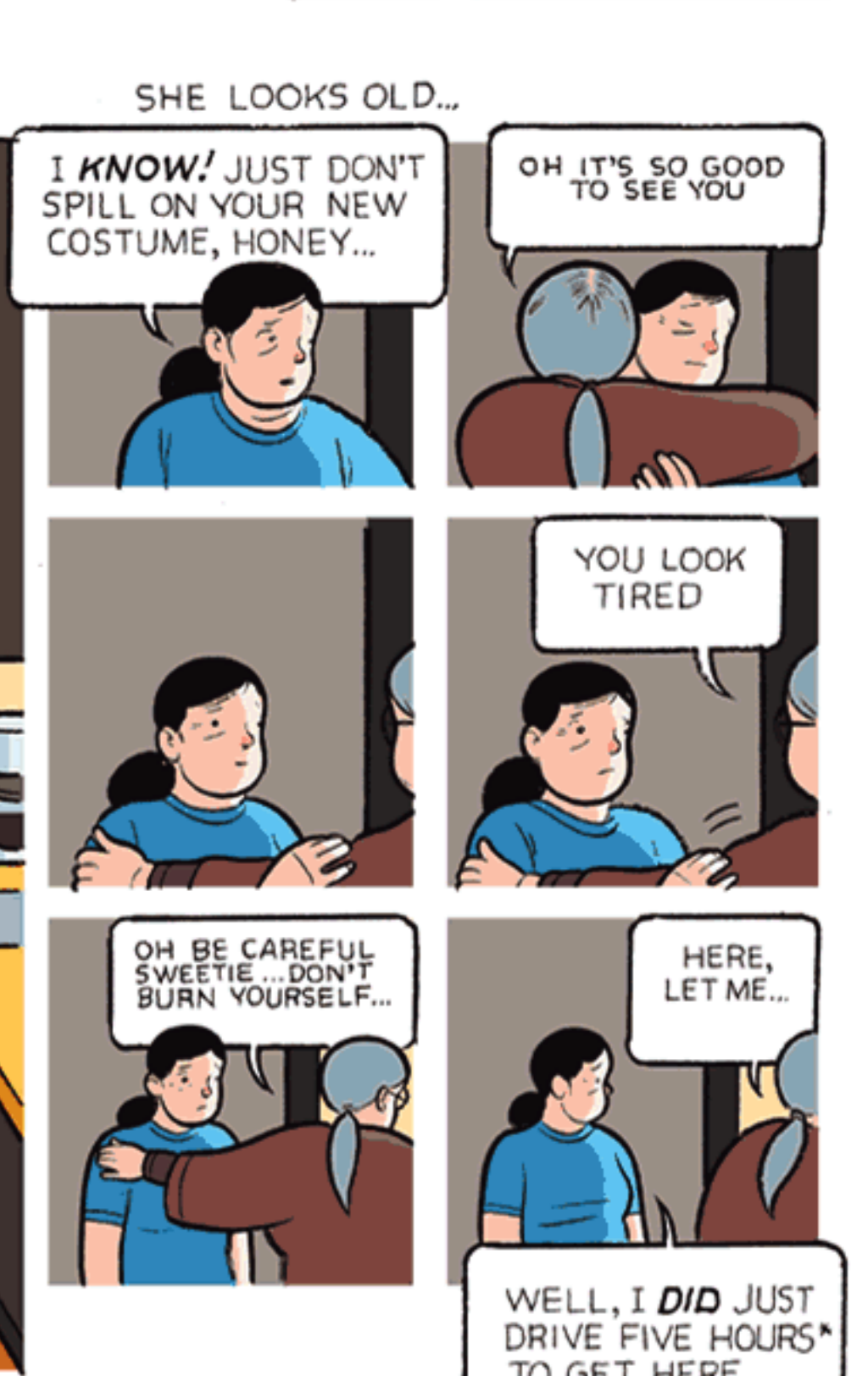
**BUT** WHEN WE ARRIVED, SHORTLY AFTER MIDNIGHT, HER HOUSE WAS DARK AS A CRYPT... AFTER SENDING PHIL THE BRIEFEST POSSIBLE "WE'RE HERE SAFELY" TEXT, I QUIETLY LET US IN AND SOMEHOW STUMBLED PAST THE CLUTTER ON THE STAIRS WITH LUCY AND PUT US BOTH TO BED, TRYING TO CLOSE MY NOSE AND THOUGHTS TO THE MUSTY LONELINESS OF MOM'S SAD NEW LIFE...



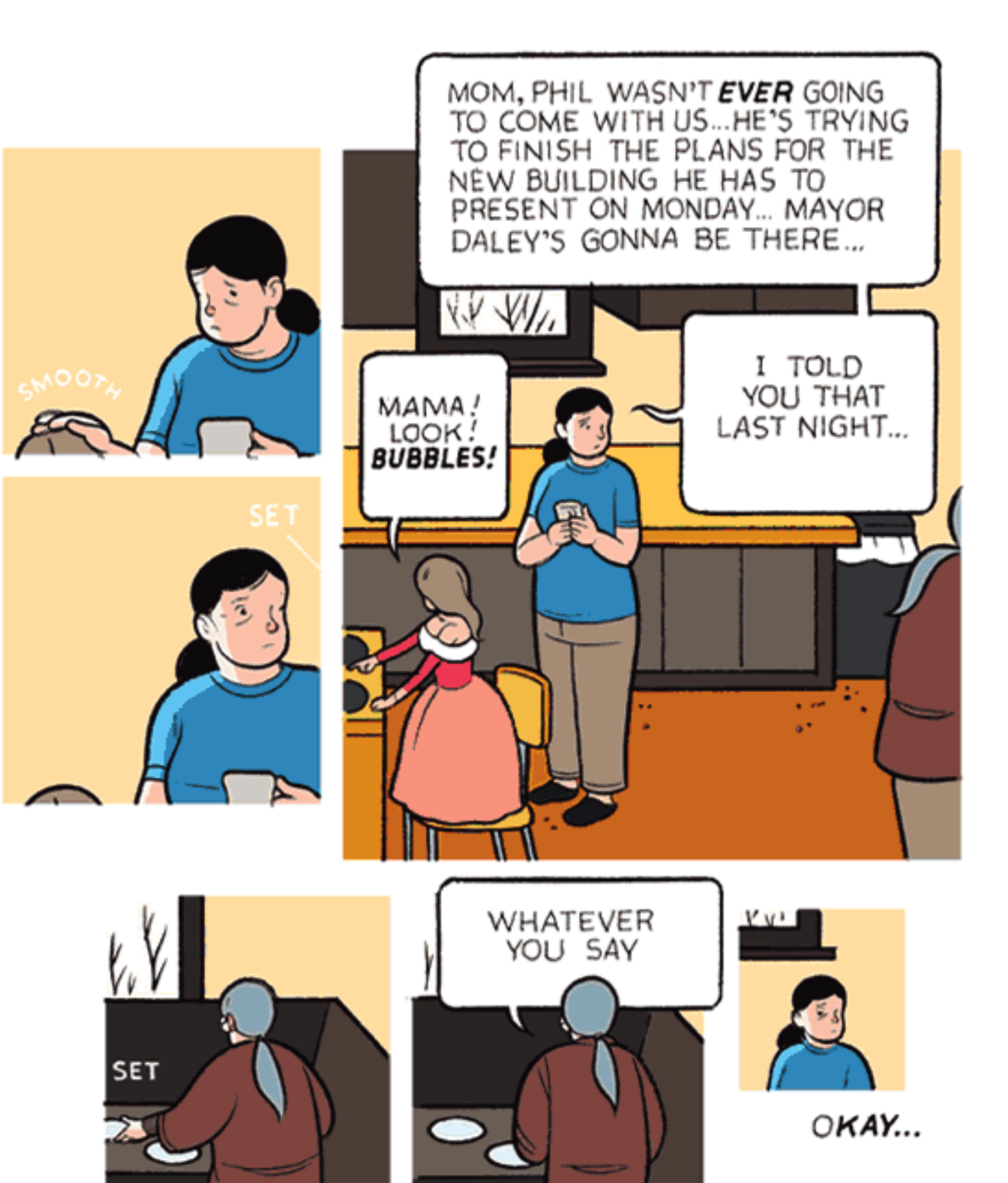
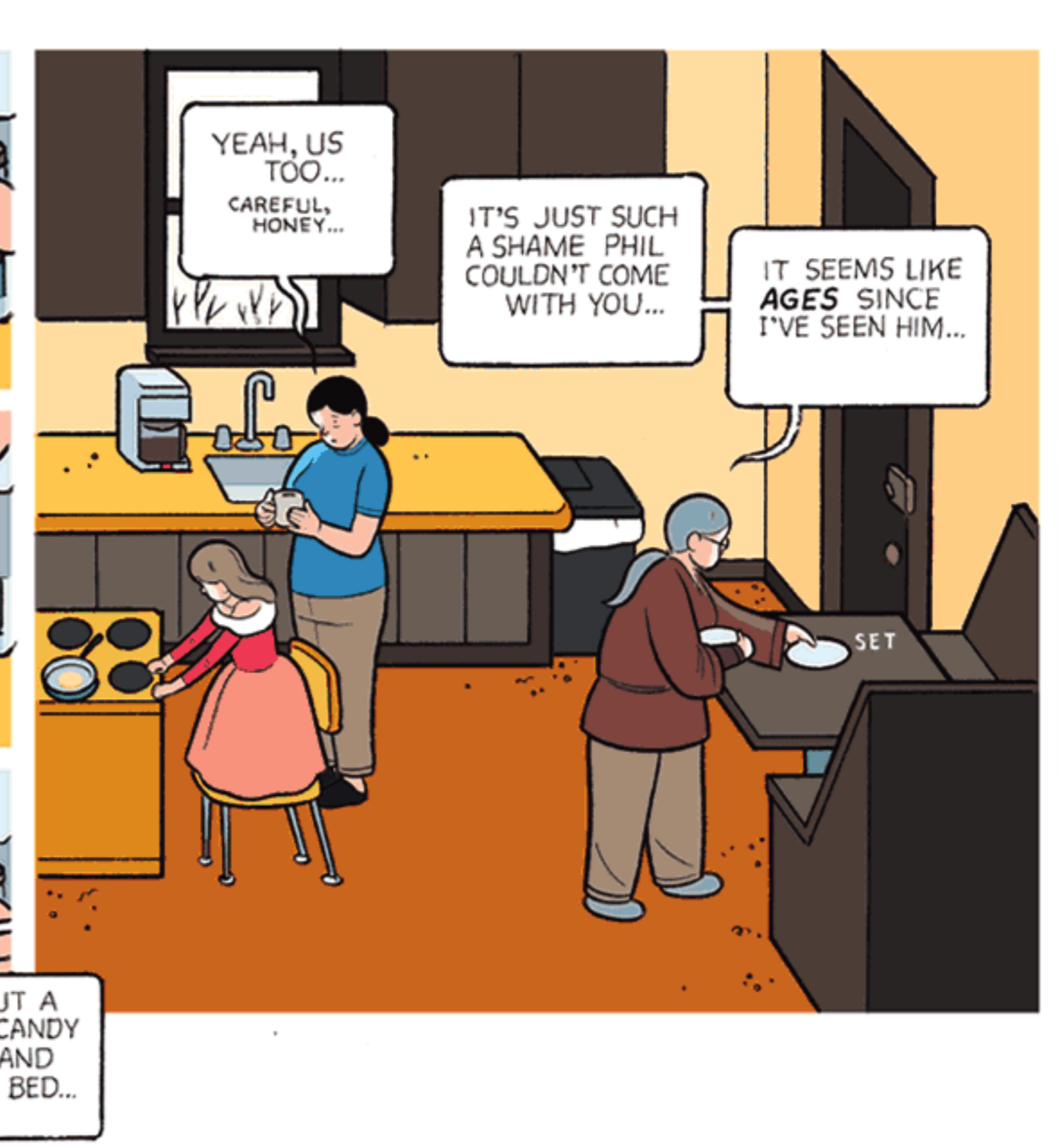
**SOON,** THOUGH, THE SUNNY SUNDAY SMELL OF PANCAKES DISPELLED MY FUNK, TAKING ME BACK TO MY CHILDHOOD, WHEN DAD AND I WOULD MAKE BREAKFAST FOR MOM...



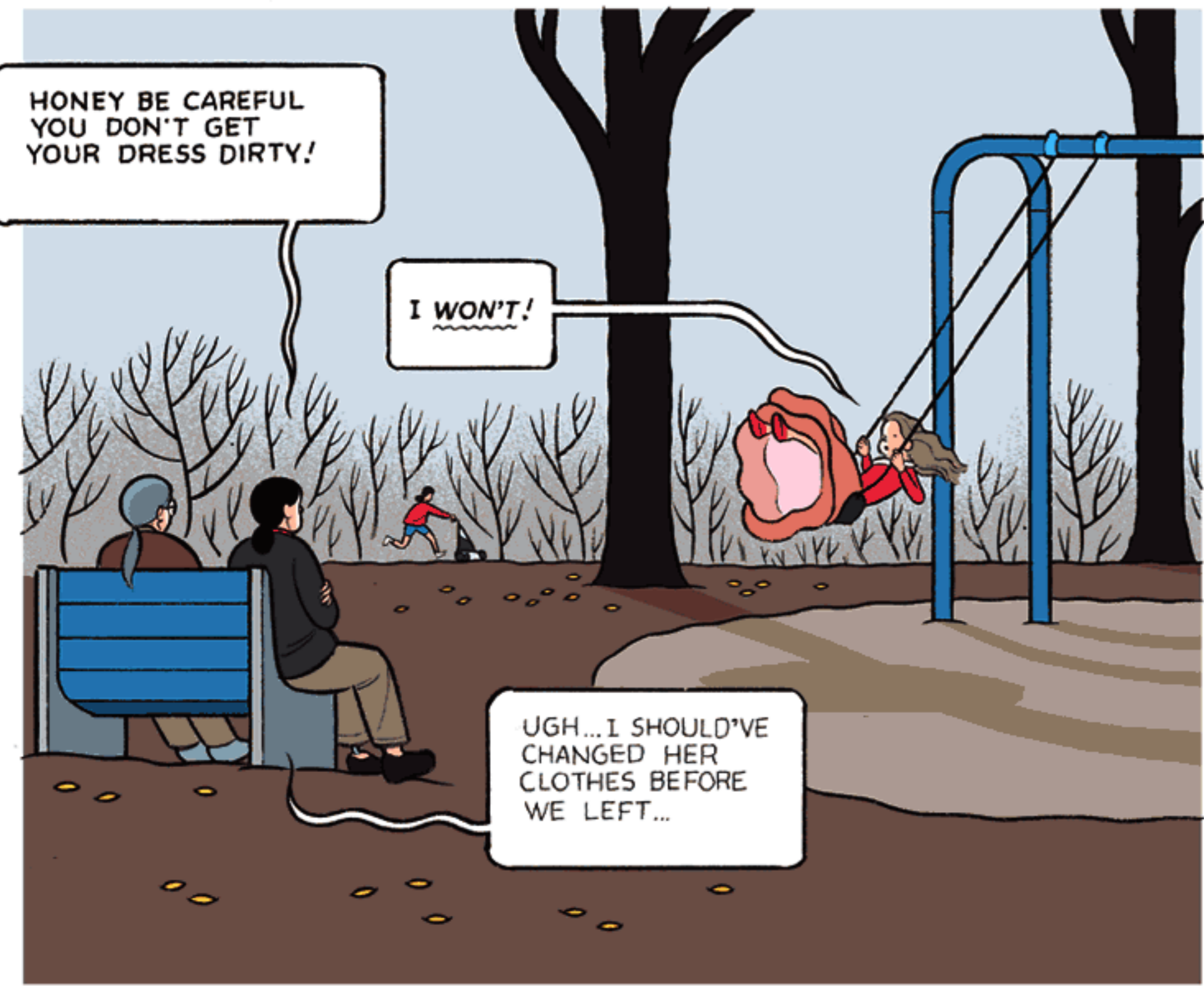
...SHE'D PRETEND TO BE ASLEEP WHILE HE AND I WOULD SNEAK DOWN TOGETHER... I'D MAKE THE BATTER AND HE'D LET ME SPOON IT INTO THE PAN...



\* FOUR AND A HALF, ACTUALLY



**FOR MOM** TO BE PUSHING MY BUTTONS SO EARLY IN THE VISIT WAS WEIRD... SOMETHING WAS OBVIOUSLY BUGGING HER... BESIDES, PHIL HAD JUST COME UP TO VISIT IN JUNE WHILE WE WERE ON OUR WAY TO STAY WITH HIS PARENTS AT THEIR LAKE HOUSE, SO WHAT WAS SHE TALKING ABOUT? SHE ALWAYS SEEMED TO HAVE IT IN FOR HIM... ANYWAY, I TROD CAREFULLY THROUGH BREAKFAST AND THEN WE ALL WENT FOR A WALK...



HONEY BE CAREFUL YOU DON'T GET YOUR DRESS DIRTY!

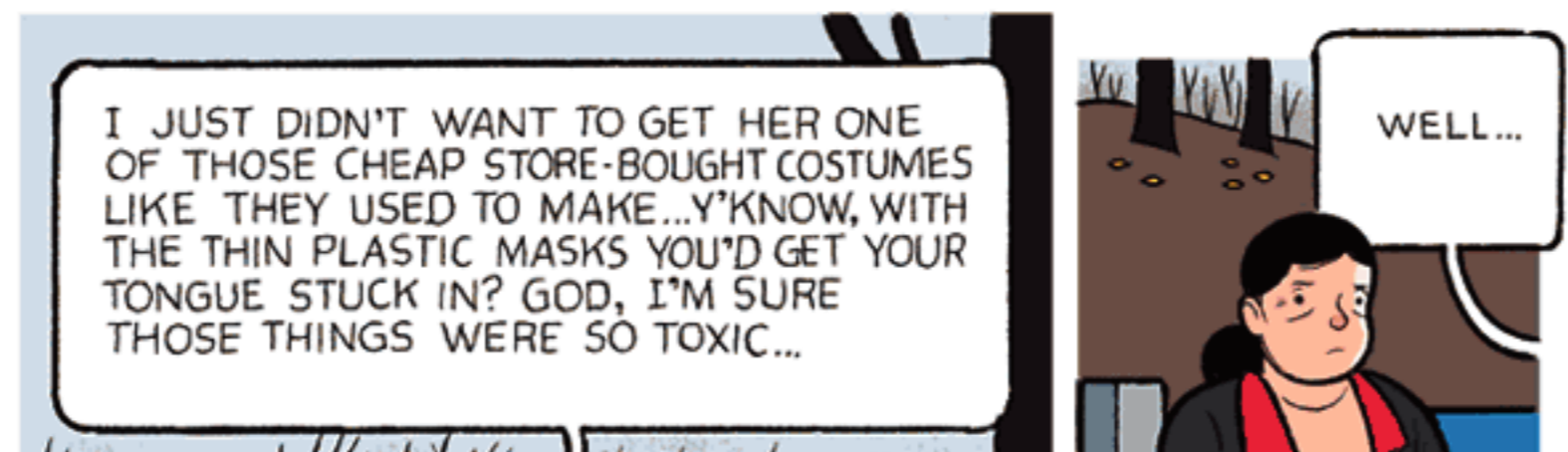
I WON'T!

UGH... I SHOULD'VE CHANGED HER CLOTHES BEFORE WE LEFT...



OH RELAX, HONEY... LET HER BE A KID...

WELL IT'S NOT EXACTLY A PLAY DRESS... I SPENT A LOT OF TIME ON IT...



I JUST DIDN'T WANT TO GET HER ONE OF THOSE CHEAP STORE-BOUGHT COSTUMES LIKE THEY USED TO MAKE... Y'KNOW, WITH THE THIN PLASTIC MASKS YOU'D GET YOUR TONGUE STUCK IN? GOD, I'M SURE THOSE THINGS WERE SO TOXIC...

WELL...



WE DID WHAT WE COULD WITH THE MONEY WE HAD...

WHOOOPS...

AND WHEN ARE YOU GONNA COMPLIMENT ME FOR IT, BY THE WAY?

**"IT WAS THE '70s..."**

GOD, WHAT A CLICHÉ... AS IF A DECADE COULD EXCUSE BEHAVIOR! TO ME, AFFAIRS WERE LIKE MURDERS -- THEY ONLY HAPPENED IN MOVIES AND BAD NOVELS... AND MAYBE IF THERE WEREN'T SO MANY FILMS AND BOOKS ABOUT INFIDELITY, PEOPLE WOULDN'T FEEL LIKE THEY WERE MISSING SOMETHING... BESIDES, SEX IS SO OVERRATED... PHIL AND I GO FOR MONTHS WITHOUT IT AND IT'S NO PROBLEM AT ALL...

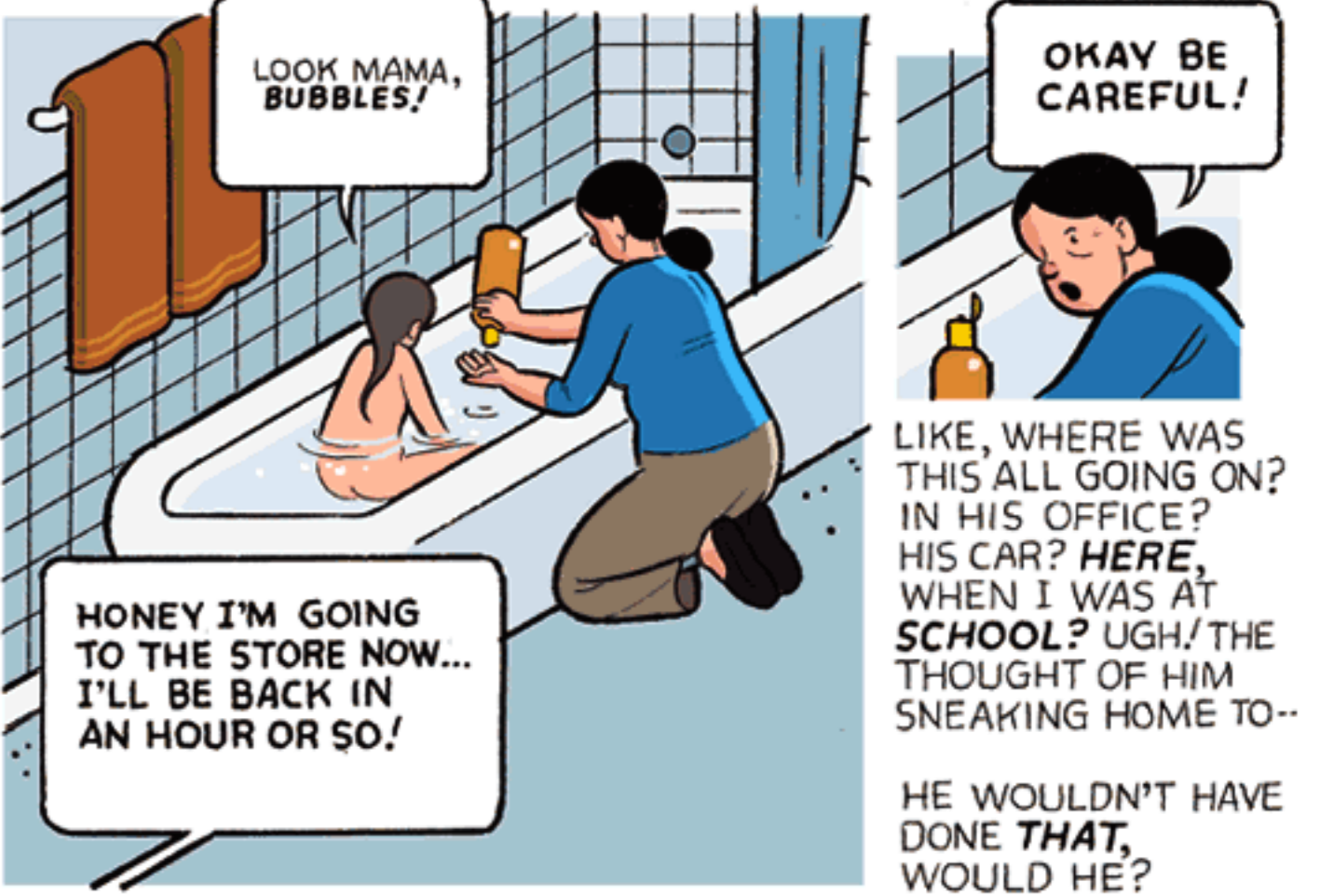
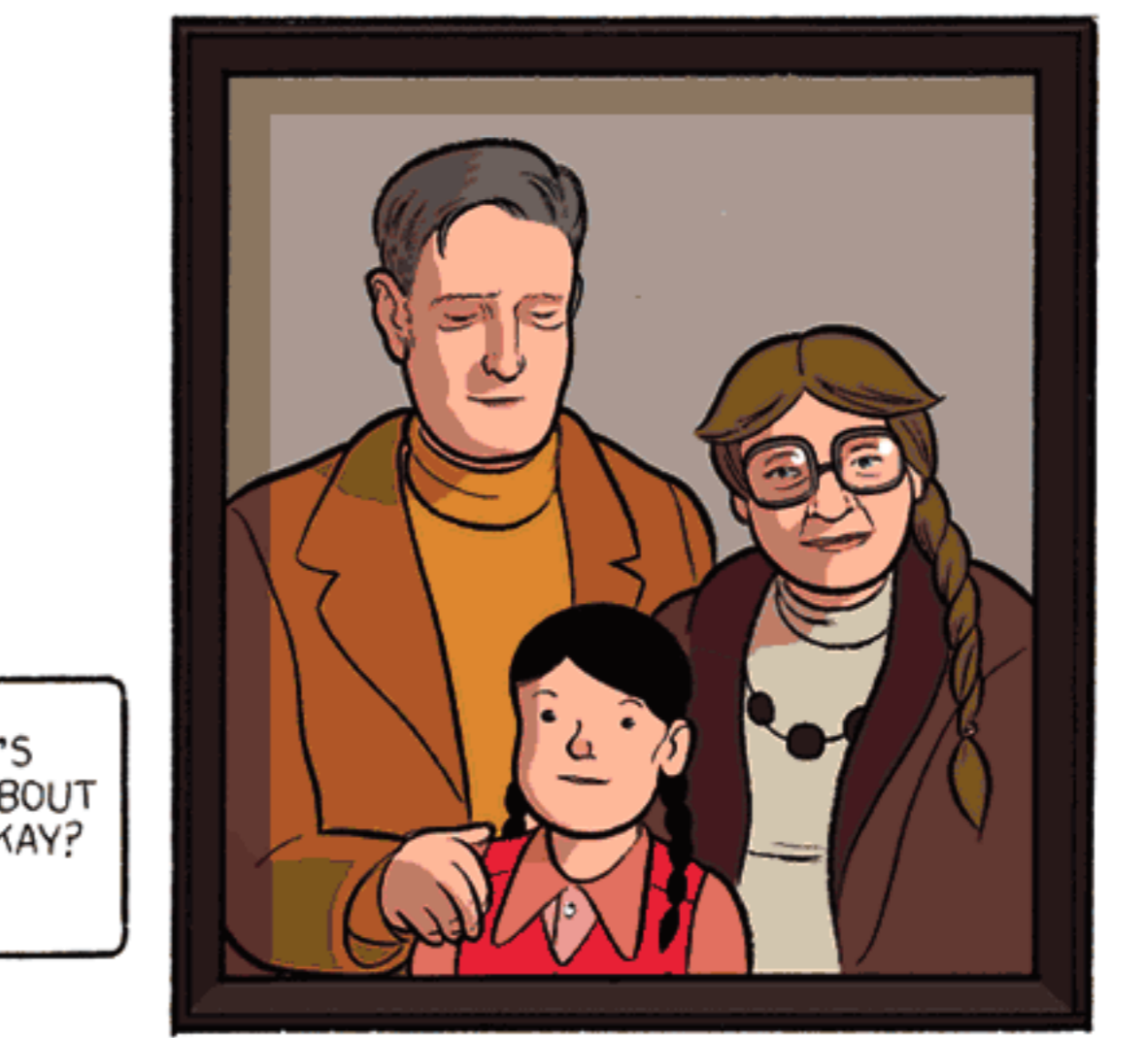


YOU... SHOULDN'T THINK IT HAD ANYTHING TO DO WITH YOU, MOM...

RIGHT... WELL...

LET'S... LET'S JUST TALK ABOUT IT LATER, OKAY?

**HOW COULD I EVER LOOK AT HIM THE SAME WAY AGAIN? HOW COULD EVERY MEMORY I HAD OF HIM NOW NOT BE REFRACTED THROUGH THIS ONE ACT OF DECEPTION? ALREADY, HE FELT DIFFERENT...**



LOOK MAMA, BUBBLES!

OKAY BE CAREFUL!

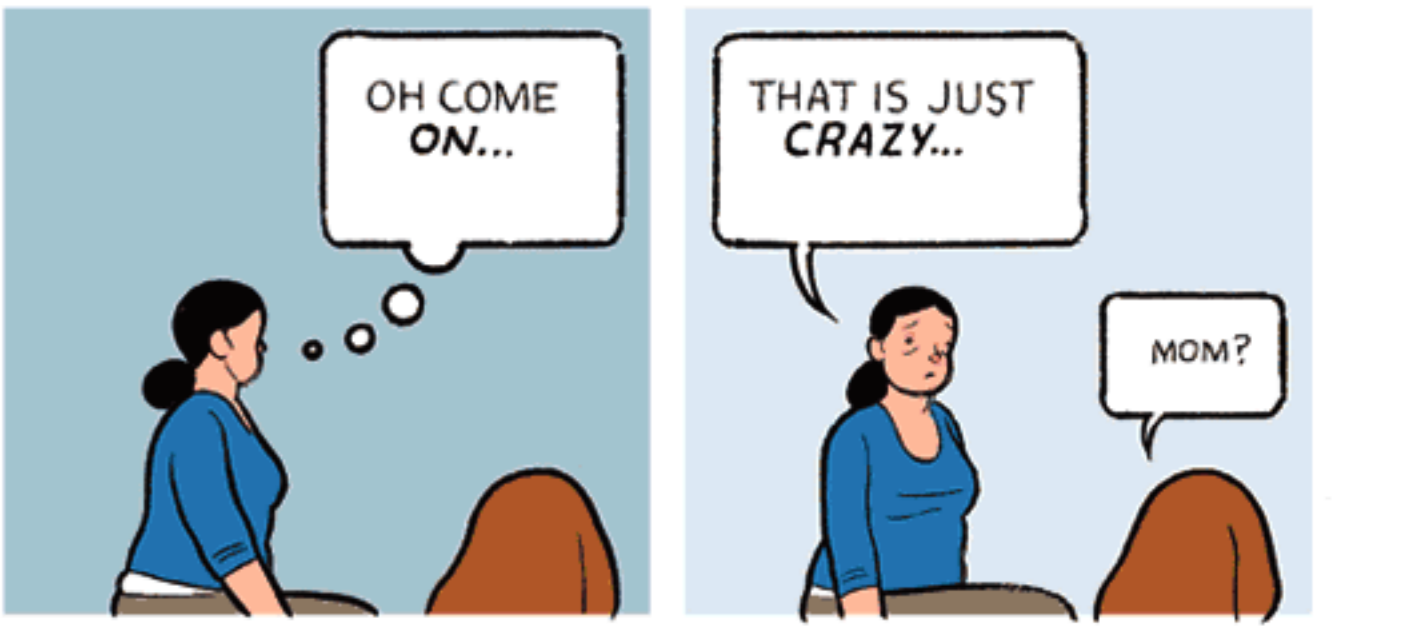
HONEY I'M GOING TO THE STORE NOW... I'LL BE BACK IN AN HOUR OR SO!

LIKE, WHERE WAS THIS ALL GOING ON? IN HIS OFFICE? HIS CAR? HERE, WHEN I WAS AT SCHOOL? UGH! THE THOUGHT OF HIM SNEAKING HOME TO--

HE WOULDN'T HAVE DONE THAT, WOULD HE?



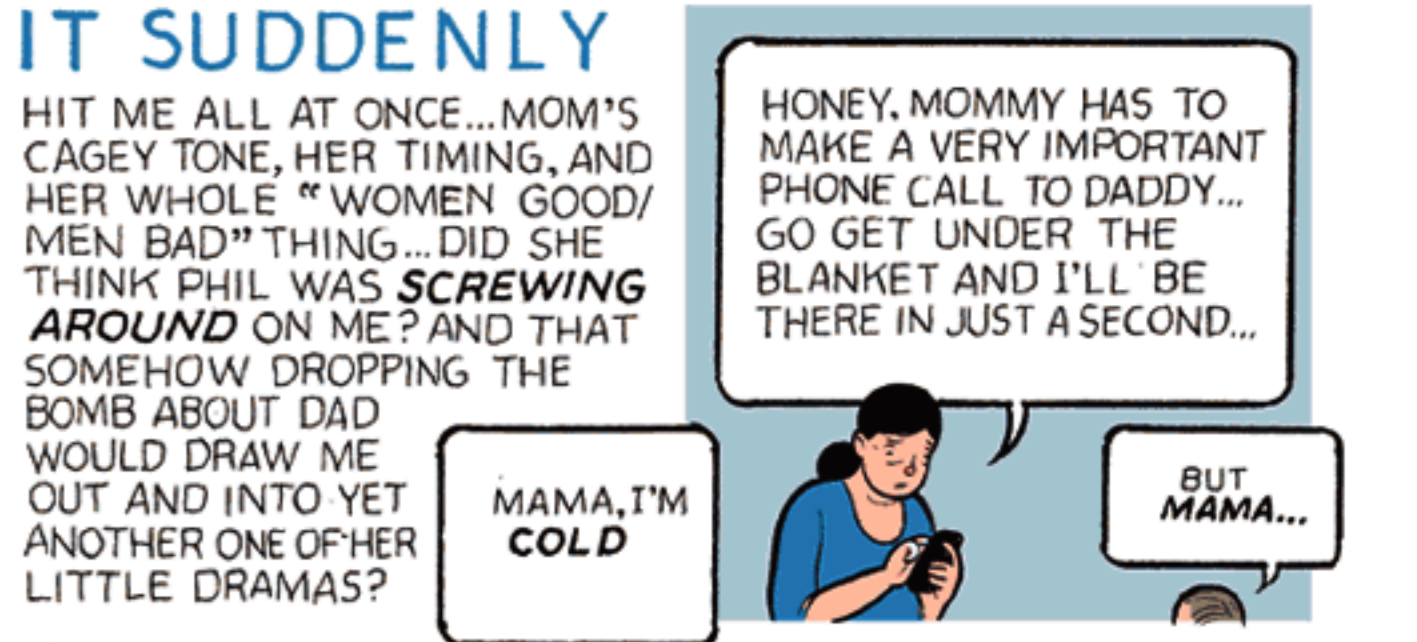
NO, IT MUST'VE BEEN AT HIS OFFICE... AND COME TO THINK OF IT, THERE WERE NIGHTS WHEN HE DIDN'T GET HOME UNTIL--



OH COME ON...

THAT IS JUST CRAZY...

MOM?



**IT SUDDENLY** HIT ME ALL AT ONCE... MOM'S CAGEY TONE, HER TIMING, AND HER WHOLE "WOMEN GOOD/MEN BAD" THING... DID SHE THINK PHIL WAS SCREWING AROUND ON ME? AND THAT SOMEHOW DROPPING THE BOMB ABOUT DAD WOULD DRAW ME OUT AND INTO YET ANOTHER ONE OF HER LITTLE DRAMAS?

HONEY, MOMMY HAS TO MAKE A VERY IMPORTANT PHONE CALL TO DADDY... GO GET UNDER THE BLANKET AND I'LL BE THERE IN JUST A SECOND...

MAMA, I'M COLD

BUT MAMA...



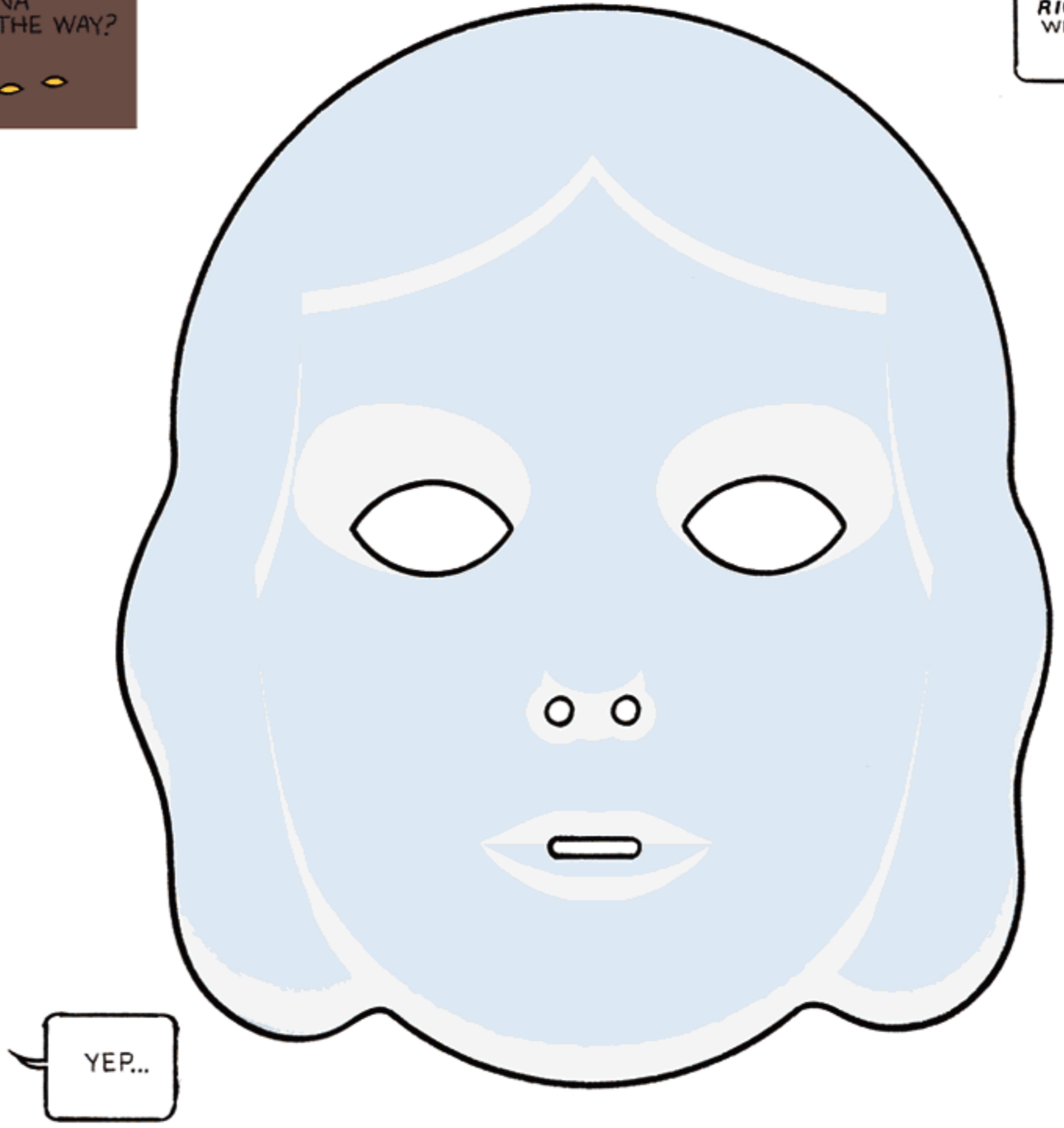
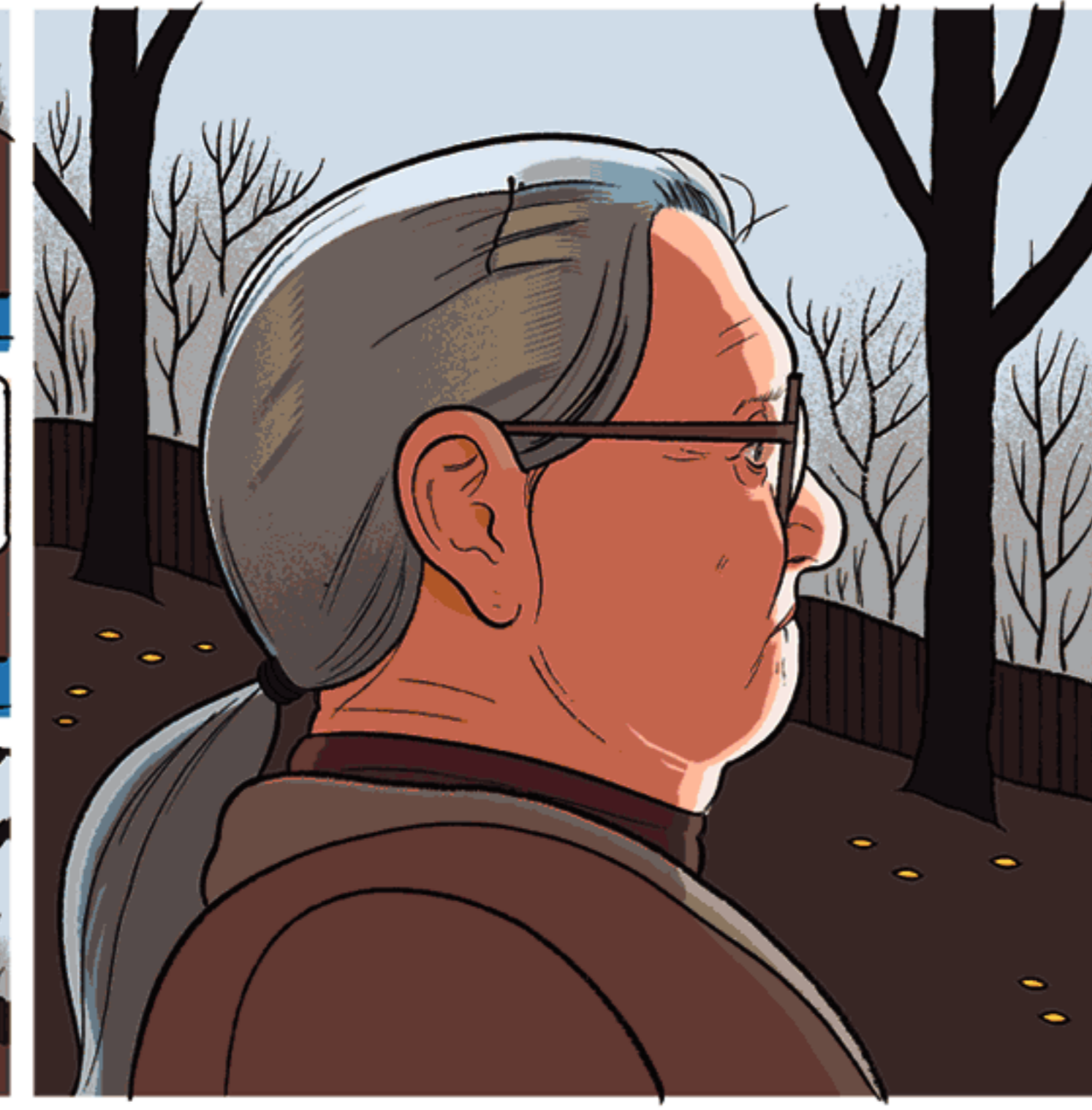
SHHH

HEY

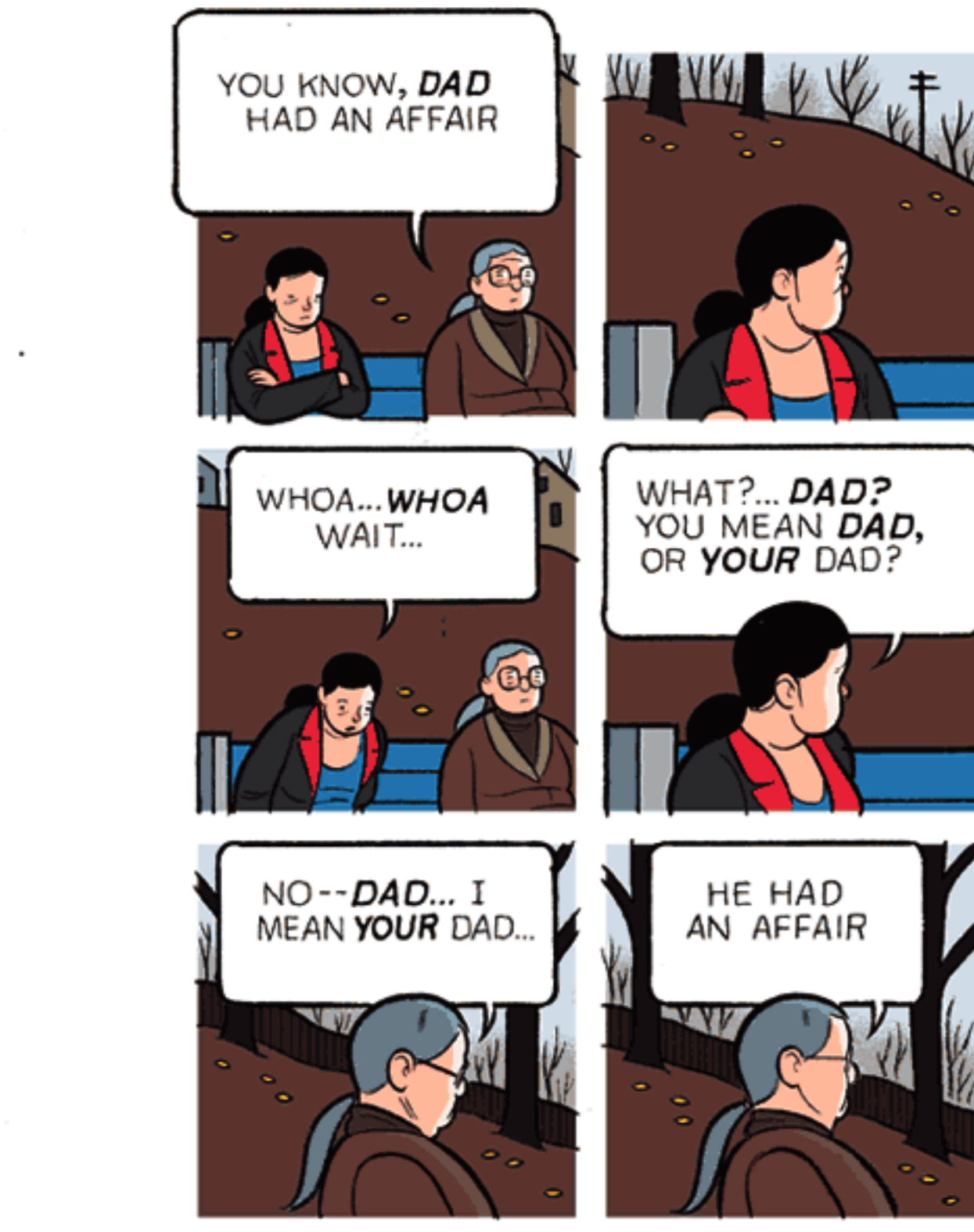
RRRGGH STOMP STOMP

PHIL ANSWERED, STRETCHING... HE MUST'VE WORKED LATE...

**LOOKING** AT HER SITTING THERE, I FELT THE GAP OF THE MORNING CLOSE BETWEEN US AS SHE FORCED A SMILE THROUGH BITTEN LIPS...



YEP...



YOU KNOW, DAD HAD AN AFFAIR

WHOA... WHOA WAIT...

NO -- DAD... I MEAN YOUR DAD...

WHAT?... DAD? YOU MEAN DAD, OR YOUR DAD?

HE HAD AN AFFAIR

I MEAN, IT WAS A LONG TIME AGO...

I WASN'T EVEN SURE IF I SHOULD TELL YOU... BUT YOU'RE A BIG GIRL, AND--

OH MOM... I'M REALLY REALLY SORRY...



**THE WORST PART**

WAS THAT SHE'D BEEN KEEPING THIS FROM ME ONLY SINCE DAD'S DEATH, IT ALL HAVING COME TO LIGHT IN A PACKET OF OLD LETTERS FROM A TEACHING ASSISTANT OF HIS SHE'D FOUND IN A FILE MARKED "BUSINESS"...



I DON'T BLAME HIM, ACTUALLY...

NO, REALLY... WE HAD OUR PROBLEMS BACK THEN...

...PLUS IT WAS THE '70s...

HEY... I WAS JUST ABOUT TO CALL YOU--SO YOU GUYS HAD AN OKAY TRIP LAST NIGHT?



LISTEN, YOU ARE NOT GOING TO BELIEVE THIS...

SO I TOLD HIM THE WHOLE THING, START TO FINISH, ENDING UP WITH THE IDEA THAT MOM CLEARLY THOUGHT WE WERE HAVING MARITAL PROBLEMS, EVEN THOUGH I KNEW IT'D MAKE HIM MAD TO BE SUBJECT TO SUCH AN ACCUSATION, ESPECIALLY COMING FROM HER...



I GUESS I FORGOT I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE MAD AT HIM, ACTUALLY... BUT THAT WAS ALL JUST SILLINESS, NOW THAT I THOUGHT ABOUT IT...

I'D ONLY WANTED HIM TO SEE LUCY'S DRESS... BUT THAT COULD WAIT...

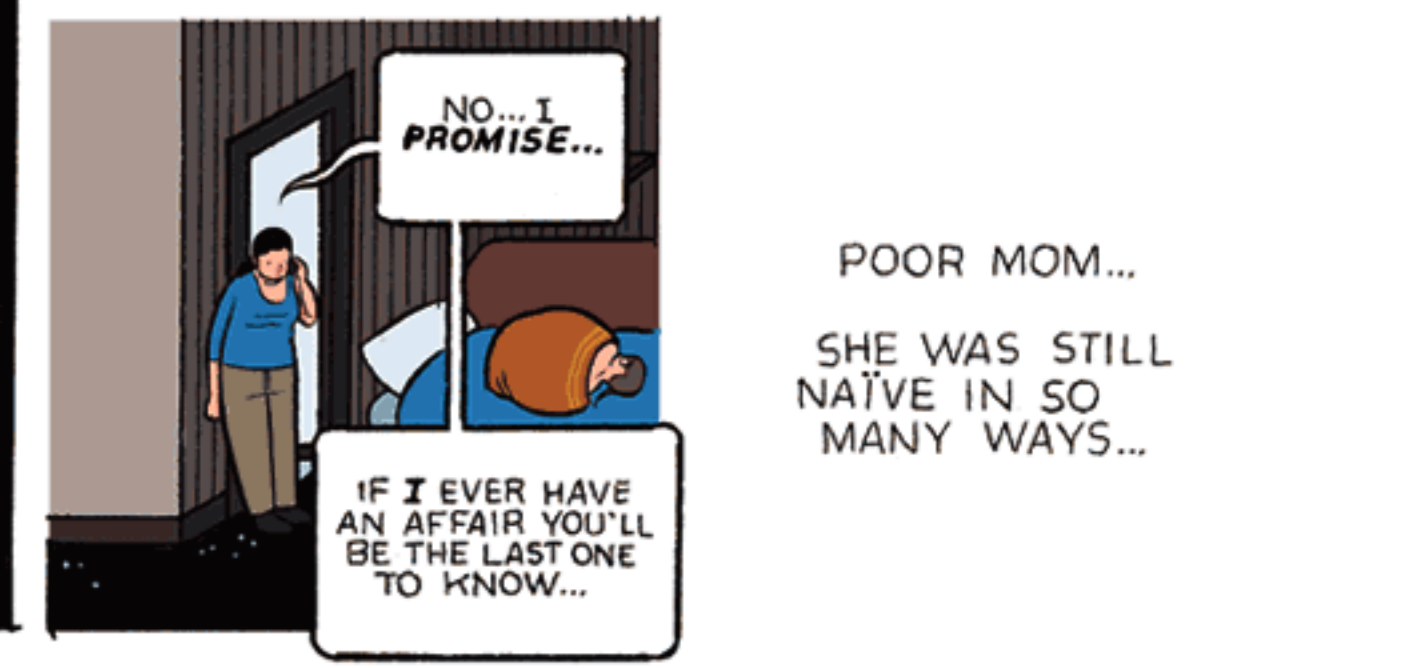
SHE WAS SO SWEET, HUDDLED ASLEEP THERE IN HER TOWEL...

GOD, I LOVED HER AND PHIL SO MUCH AT THAT MOMENT...



IT'S WEIRD, BUT IF THERE WAS ANYTHING GUARANTEED TO BRING US TOGETHER FASTER AS A FAMILY IT WAS MUTUAL ANGER AT MY MOTHER...

HA HA



NO... I PROMISE...

IF I EVER HAVE AN AFFAIR YOU'LL BE THE LAST ONE TO KNOW...

POOR MOM... SHE WAS STILL NATIVE IN SO MANY WAYS...