

Collaborative Features of Graphic Narratives:
Research for *Lovely, Satisfied, Indifferent Eyes*

by

Brigid Fitzpatrick

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Lisa Jarrett, M.F.A.

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Introduction

In high school, I decided I wanted to be a graphic novelist, without having actually read any graphic novels, or knowing anything about the theory, technique, and history surrounding the medium. It was the obvious solution in my mind to the conflict I'd had since childhood about whether I should be a writer or an artist. Graphic novels, using both image and text, were the more "serious" versions of the Sunday comics I used to pour over whenever I went to my grandfather's house, who stockpiled them for me between visits. The only work of graphic narratives my parents had in my home was one collection of Gary Larson's *The Far Side* comics. I grew up avidly reading novels, but there was nothing graphic about them. A barrier I had between myself and graphic narratives was my inclination to reject the gatekeeping I observed in the communities surrounding comics.

I wasn't concerned about my lack of experience with graphic narratives until I began college, where I came to understand the importance of knowing one's discourse community and the art history of one's medium. I dipped my toe into the discourse community of graphic narratives when I took "The Graphic Novel," an Honors seminar. We read a selection of graphic novels by Alison Bechdel, Art Spiegelman, Chris Ware, and the writer/illustrator duo Frank Morrison and Dave McKean. I began to learn how graphic narratives function as storytelling experiences. The course confirmed my interest in becoming a graphic novelist and began to legitimize it academically. I started to identify potential ways in which I could contribute creatively to the graphic narrative medium.

For my Honors thesis, in conjunction with my BFA Final Project, I wrote and illustrated a graphic novelette, *Lovely, Satisfied, Indifferent Eyes*. This novelette demonstrates the techniques I learned through studying scholarly research and reading graphic narratives. In my novelette, I focused on four features– the gutter, visual voice, braiding, and temporal representation (time)– to give the reader agency. These features actively involve the reader, making comics, as Marshall McLuhan put it, “A highly participational form of expression.”¹ I present my research findings along with examples from my graphic novelette. Throughout this project, I was trying to figure out the “correct” way to write and illustrate a graphic narrative. I eventually determined that there isn’t a single, perfect approach; it depends on the aims of the project in question. My goal was to enhance the role of the reader– to enrich the experience of the graphic narrative by focusing on the potentials that arise through the virtual “collaboration” between reader and writer innate within the experience of reading graphic narratives.

Clarifying Terminology

Comics are a form of sequential art, made up of multiple panels that contain a combination of images and text that work in tandem to communicate a story or idea.² They differ from other illustrative arts like picture books or illustrated novels because the image to text relationship is not one-to-one; the drawings are not limited to exclusively depicting what the text describes. Will Eisner was the first to use the term “graphic novel” when he wanted to, “emphasize the literary qualities,” of his graphic narrative book *A Contract With God*, in order to convince publishers that it could sell like “regular books.”³ Traditionally, the label “graphic

¹ Hillary L. Chute, *Why Comics* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017), 23.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

novel” is used to promote marketing.⁴ The term appeals to consumers because, as graphic narratives scholar Hilary Chute explains, “Many people assume, for instance, that ‘graphic novel,’ a description that seems to confer a certain bookish sophistication, is preferable to something baser like ‘comics.’”⁵ The graphic narrative discourse community continues to debate the distinction of comics/comic books vs. graphic novels.⁶

The term I prefer to use when referring to comics and graphic novels is “graphic narratives,” following the example of Chute. “Graphic narratives” is a more inclusive term and can refer to works beyond what the literary canon typically considers “novels.”⁷ I feel that it also removes the distancing from comics that the label of “graphic novel” has done in the past, which erases history and creates a hierarchy of prestige. Both graphic novels and comics can fall under the umbrella of “graphic narratives.”

I started calling my project a “graphic novelette” before I researched the history behind these terms. From what I know now, I believe I was trying to lend that “bookish sophistication” to my project by calling it a term that suggested a mini “graphic novel.” Beyond this, claiming my work as a graphic novelette supports and suggests a non-typical, reliant-on-the-reader, narrative structure that is so important to my project. I engage the reader and extend the story beyond what I wrote and drew by activating graphic narrative formal features, including the gutter, visual voice, braiding, and temporal representation (time).

⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁵ Chute, *Why Comics*, 19.

⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁷ Hillary L. Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3.

The Gutter

Figure 1. *Lovely, Satisfied, Indifferent Eyes*, page 5.

The space between the panels, or the gutter, is just as narratively relevant as the panels and the information within them, and ripe with opportunity for the reader to step into a directly interactive role with the comic. In his book *Making Comics*, Scott McCloud explains the gutter as the site of “panel to panel” transitions. He presents the many different ways a comics artist can

play with time and reader inference through the gutter.⁸ For example, McCloud's Panel-to-Panel Transition #4, "Scene-to-Scene," includes a large jump of time and space within the story.⁹ It is up to the viewer to infer what happened in between what is depicted by the creator. Chute describes the role of the gutter, saying, "In graphic narrative the spectator is a necessarily generative "guest" [...] constructing meaning over and through the space of the gutter."¹⁰ The gutter allows the viewer to contribute to the narrative. Chute describes the reader's act of filling in the space of the gutter as the reader "participating imaginatively in the creation of the story."¹¹ In the mind, the reader is able to create parts of the story, just as the author (artist) literally did, creating a conceptual collaboration between the two. Every moment of action does not need to be conveyed explicitly on the page, because the reader can infer what happened in the gutter between panels. For example, in my own work I used a panel-to-panel gutter transition strategy allowing the reader's intuition to picture how the woman went from talking to Eilish to dancing (Fig. 1). The important point of action can be presented solely, emphasizing its purpose and creating more of an impact because it is not lost in unnecessary detail.

⁸ Scott McCloud, *Making Comics* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 15.

⁹ McCloud, *Making Comics*, 15, 17.

¹⁰ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 9.

¹¹ Chute, *Why Comics*, 23.



Figure 2. *Lovely, Satisfied, Indifferent Eyes*, pages 7 and 8.

Another example from *Lovely, Satisfied, Indifferent Eyes* is when Eilish visually falls into the gutter, as illustrated by the cropping of her hand by the border (Fig. 2). On the preceding page, the last panel is of Eilish sitting on a bridge. To represent how Eilish is falling more into the reader's control, her fall from the towers of her city is simultaneously depicted as a fall into the ambiguous space of the gutter. Did Eilish fall accidentally, or jump on purpose? The filling in of this gutter is up to the reader, and their interpretation dramatically changes the story.

Visual Voice

When drawing my novelette, I established my visual voice, or style, by making aesthetic choices that allow the reader to fill in the details. I like to think of artistic style as the visual "voice" of the artist, much in the way that "voice" can be conveyed in a written piece through the

author's patterns of vocabulary and syntax choices. I primarily used black and white, leaving the reader to imagine the true colors of what I drew. I utilized silhouettes to depict most of the buildings and some of the figures, and I mostly described the environment through text instead of image. It is as if the visual voice is whispering and suggesting rather than shouting and demanding. I invite the reader, through their imaginative interpretation of the style choices present in my novelette, to join the conversation and create a unique reading experience, rather than simply consume a static story. Graphic narratives innately rely on the reader, who must comprehend and interpret the images, participating in the act of storytelling started by the author. Eisner posits that, "Comprehension of an image requires a commonality of experience" for images in graphic narratives.¹² This quote suggests that images are a place of interaction between viewers, where comparison generates meaning. The locus of meaning is placed not innately within the image, but outside of it, as a subjective experience. What if the goal of the image-maker is not comprehension, or the understanding of a certain message, but communication, the opening of conversation and active interpretation?

¹² Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 7.

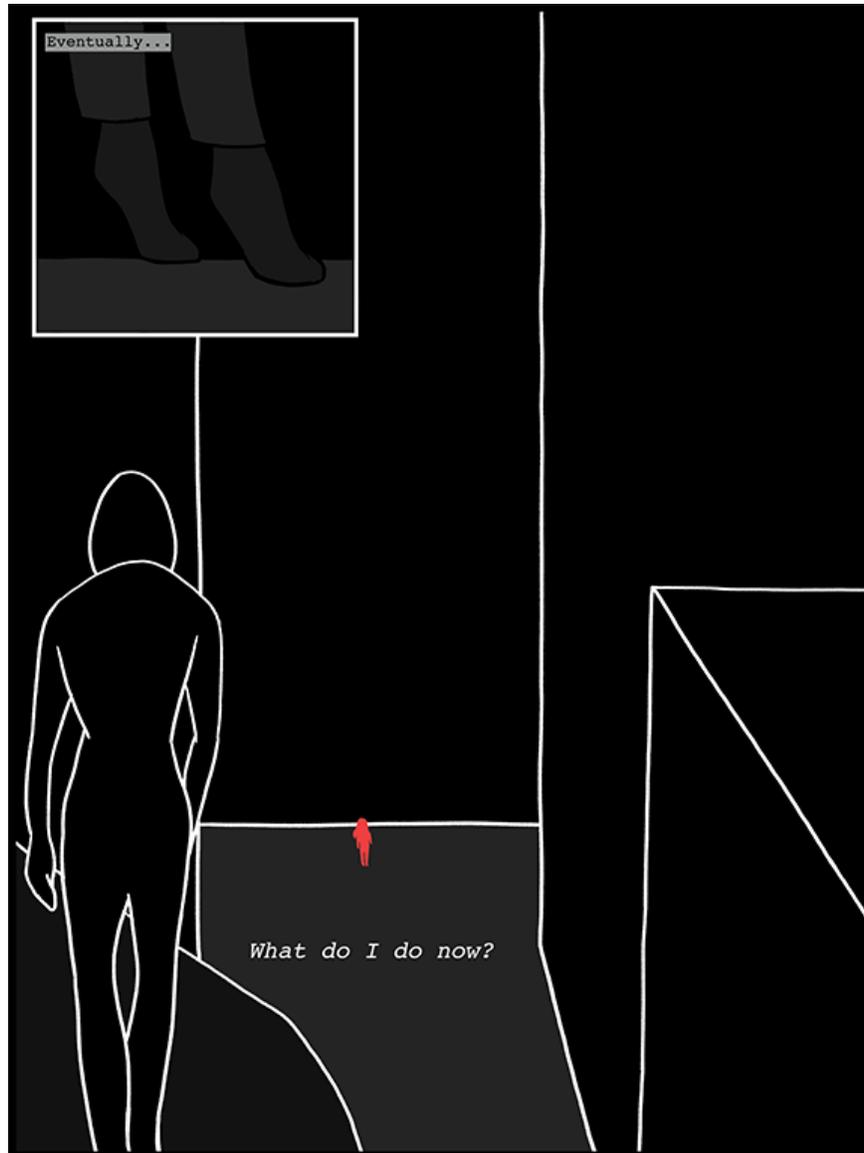


Figure 3. *Lovely, Satisfied, Indifferent Eyes*, page 12.

The final page of my novelette exemplifies the role of silhouettes in the work (Fig. 3). Eilish has reached the street level, the unregulated and unknown part of her world, and everything has been reduced to silhouettes. Like the rest of the story, the details of the streets (and who lives there) are up to the reader. “Commonality of experience” is not necessary when

image comprehension is not the goal. Instead, diversity of experiences improves the work because varied visions of the narrative extend and enhance the conversation.

Braiding

Due to the appeal of comics to younger audiences, graphic narratives were initially regarded by academics as a simplistic narrative form, but as Eisner points out, “Comics can be ‘read’ in a wider sense than that term is commonly applied.”¹³ The experience of reading a graphic narrative is a highly involved process of decoding both text and image, and interpreting the different relationships that arise between them. Braiding, as defined by the scholar who coined the term, Thierry Groensteen, is the creation of a “network [of] features or fragments” that extends over two or more separate panels in a comic, establishing supplementary themes that can be traced throughout the entire work.¹⁴ In other words, braiding is a form of “self-citation,” in which recognizable element in a panel can be identified in another, with or without variation, and thus linking these panels together.¹⁵ With braiding, new associations and readings of a comic through these panel networks allows the reader to establish panel relationships independent of sequentiality.

Braiding is supplementary, and unnecessary to recognize in order to understand the primary narrative of the piece.¹⁶ It enriches existing themes, suggests new themes and interpretations, draws in the reader through the satisfaction of its recognition and the resulting, more dimensional reading of the work.¹⁷ Braiding is not unique to comics and it emerges in fine

¹³ Ibid., 1.

¹⁴ Thierry Groensteen, “The Art of Braiding: A Clarification,” *European Comic Art* 9.1 (Spring 2016): 89-90, doi:10.3167/eca.2016.090105

¹⁵ Groensteen, “The Art of Braiding: A Clarification,” 91.

¹⁶ Ibid., 93.

¹⁷ Ibid., 94.

arts, including the assemblages of Robert Rauchenberg. I believe that assemblages like Rauchenberg's could be considered a form of art to graphic narratives because of their use of panel-like compositions and blend of text and image (and found comics were often incorporated into them!). Johnathan Katz shows how Rauchenberg used coded visual references that would be legible to a gay audience, but not to the mainstream, in his works of assemblage¹⁸. These references, only understandable to a portion of the viewers, are like a form of braiding. They create a thematic thread that is not plainly evident to each "reader" of the work and enrich the piece. They add more to the story. Therefore, due to the layers of potential meanings (the decoding of which is dependant on the readers themselves), different layers of comprehension, and "communication" with the author, are possible.



Figure 4. *Lovely, Satisfied, Indifferent Eyes*, panels from pages 3, 10, and 11.

Figure 4 is an example of braiding that spans throughout my graphic novelette. In each panel, an object and a part of the body are paired by the red coloring and by the way they touch,

¹⁸ Jonathan D. Katz, "'Committing the Perfect Crime': Sexuality, Assemblage, and the Postmodern Turn in American Art," *Art Journal* 67, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 38-53.

or are implied to have been touching. This braiding establishes a relationship between disparate characters presented on separate pages and visually supplements broader themes of the story.

Temporal Representation (Time)

The high level of temporality in graphic narratives is often overlooked due to the static nature of the medium, but it presents another powerful opportunity for reader interpretation. The panels on the page act as “boxes of time,” and the arrangement of the panels affect the overall shape of time in a comic.¹⁹ When the reader encounters a page of a graphic narrative, their manner of reading controls the aspect of time in the narrative. McCloud explains, “Comics is the only form in which past, present, and future are visible simultaneously [...] Your perception of the present moves across [the page].”²⁰ The act of reading puts time into motion for the narrative. Already, the reader is given responsibility in the narrative. The way a reader chooses to look at a page can change the narrative. Unlike traditional novels, a linear reading is not imposed.²¹ It is the usual habit for a Western reader to read left to right, top to bottom, but in graphic narratives, that habit is challenged. Often, a graphic narrative author creates space for flexibility, allowing the reader to choose their own path through the panels. Chute explains, “In comics, reading can happen in all directions; this open-endedness, and attention to choice in how one interacts with the pages, is a part of the appeal of comics narrative.”²² In *Quimby the Mouse*, Chris Ware’s intensely complicated compositions of panels, with their flexible, non-linear readability, exemplify this feature.²³

¹⁹ Chute, *Why Comics*, 24.

²⁰ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 8.

²¹ Chute, *Why Comics*, 25.

²² *Ibid.*, 25.

²³ Chris Ware, *Quimby the Mouse*, Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2003.

The juxtaposition of text and image in comics gives one the opportunity to present “layering temporalities and narrative positions,” which invite additional temporal interpretations from the reader.²⁴ For example, in Alison Bechdel’s graphic novels *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?*, Bechdel tells her story by pairing narration from her adult self with drawings of her childhood memories.²⁵²⁶ The text’s temporality is the implied present, coming from the adult Bechdel, while the images depict the past. They occur simultaneously in the panels. Another great example of this phenomenon is Richard McGuire’s *Here*, a work in which the author pairs drawings of the same space over centuries, with images and words that occurred in the space from different times superimposed onto the pages.²⁷

²⁴ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 5.

²⁵ Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2006.

²⁶ Alison Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2012.

²⁷ Richard McGuire, *Here*, New York: Pantheon, 2014.

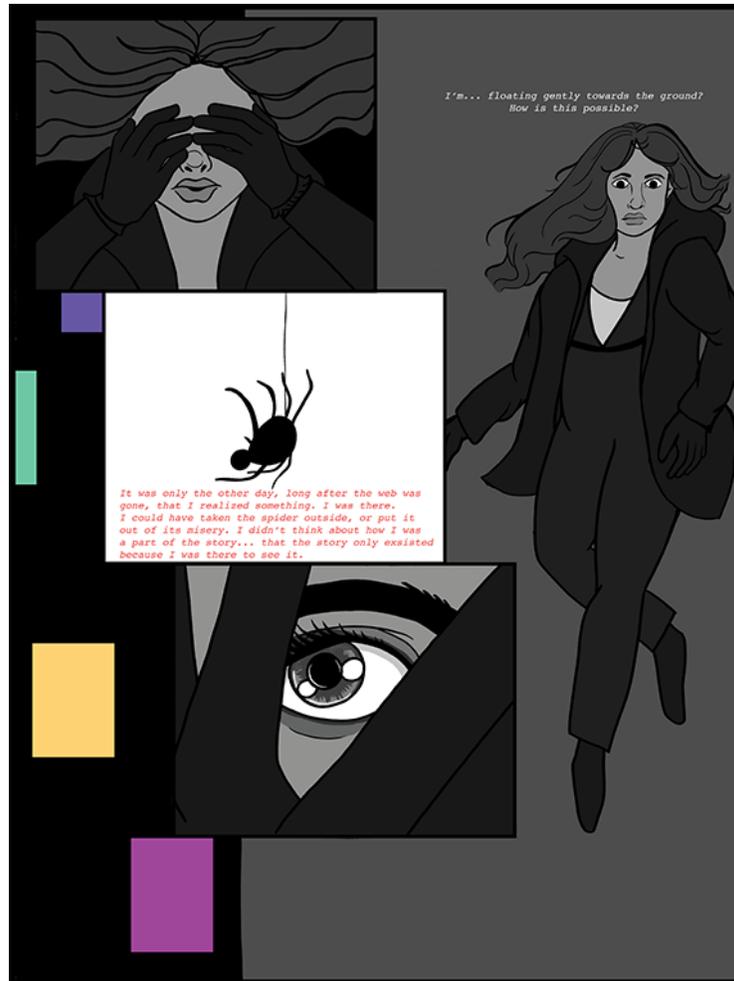


Figure 5. *Lovely, Satisfied, Indifferent Eyes*, page 9.

In *Lovely, Satisfied, Indifferent Eyes*, a memory about a spider, implied to be told by Eilish, weaves within the panels of the main narrative (Fig. 5). It disrupts the temporal flow of the panels and blends the past with the present, both in the text and image. It interjects first person narration by Eilish into the work and introduces an awareness of how the story is functioning on a meta level. Depending on the readers, it can be interpreted to create varied timelines for the story, adding additional structure to the narrative.

Who Controls the Narrative?

Because of my interest in increasing the power given to the reader of graphic narratives, I also confronted the role of the author. When I describe my role as a maker of a graphic narrative, I often use “author” and “artist” interchangeably. However, my role in this project is that of “the auteur.” The term “auteur” is applied when one person does both the drawing and the writing for a graphic narrative.²⁸ Interestingly, Chute suggests that the term is not appropriate, as auteur is the French term for a film director, and auteur-style graphic authors have complete control over the work while directors have to work with a team.²⁹ She claims that a graphic narrative produced by an auteur is representative of a singular vision.³⁰ I think that auteur, with its connotations of a director-like role, is an excellent term for a graphic narrative creator. Because of the agency of the graphic narrative reader, and the direct interaction with the reader through conceptually collaborative features, the graphic narrative author-as-director, facilitates the creation of an artistic vision based on their goals but dependent on collaboration with a team, in this case the readers.

Roland Barthes, in his 1967 essay “The Death of the Author,” describes how the reader is the true holder of meaning in relation to a written work. Barthes explains, “the true locus of writing is reading.”³¹ The idea of the Author as the originator of fixed meanings, all discoverable and finite by the reader, and all based upon the Author, is modern, with its roots traceable to the belief in the “human persona” that emerged around the Enlightenment.³² Through disregarding

²⁸ Chute, *Why Comics*, 16.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

³¹ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” trans. Stephen Heath, *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 5.

³² *Ibid.*, 2.

the Author, while reading, “structure can be followed, ‘threaded’ (like a stocking that has run) in all its recurrences and all its stages, but there is no underlying ground; the space of the writing is to be traversed, not penetrated.”³³ There is a clear similarity between this idea of “threaded” possibilities of meaning and braiding. Further, the idea of “traversing” through the narrative is in line with the way in which I allowed the reader to explore the possibilities of meaning in my novelette.

Due to social media-driven contemporary reading strategies, there are opportunities for collaborative reading experiences that were impossible back in 1967. Barthes wrote when generally the only means of communication between author and reader, and thus the only moment when the author’s and reader’s interpretations confronted one another, was the piece of literature in question. Today, dialogues between readers and authors are constantly had through social media, where there can be a back-and-forth between reader and writer. Alternative interpretations and the author’s intended meanings gain attention and spark conversation. Vast communities of readership form and these groups passionately work together to generate new theories and analyses. Contemporary writers should purposefully engage with their readers, and validate reader contributions, in order to evolve the author’s role. The evolution of the reader’s role is already in progress due to increased communication opportunities.

My novelette is complete, but it is only the beginning of the story. The story continues after my work ends, carrying on in the imagination of the reader. It extends the conceptual collaboration that has taken place between myself and my reader to the point in which I leave the reader to continue the story based on the potential pathways of meaning I laid out in my graphic

³³ Ibid., 5.

narrative. I recognize that a community of collaborative readers can only be formed when a work has a following and the author has credibility, so I mean to present my novelette as a model of the type of story that could be successful as a virtually collaborative graphic narrative and not as a full example of the phenomenon.

Conclusion

Informed by the research of graphic narratives, I utilized the features of the gutter, visual voice, braiding, and temporal representation (time) in order to create a conceptual and collaborative relationship between my work and my readers. I surrender my novelette to the interpretation of the reader, in order to better understand how graphic narratives deconstruct the traditional roles of reader and author.

I initially struggled to get into reading graphic novels, in part because I believed an exclusionary culture surrounded them. I worried that because I did not read them as a child, I would not be able to get into them as an adult. I lacked extensive knowledge surrounding the medium and its stories, so I believed I would be judged, and struggle to read them, if I did not recognize popular works and references. This was not the case because of the very nature of their reading. By focusing on the formal features of graphic narratives that create an active reading experience, one can cultivate a readership that is collaborative, open to diverse backgrounds, and eager for innovation over upholding tradition. There's no "right" way to read my novelette; each reader's personal interpretation is validated and encouraged, for the work is made all the better with each new read. When graphic narratives are crafted based on this aim, there is no need for each reader to hold all of the answers. The consumption of the full story is not a solitary act; it is based in a community of readers, all sharing what they think happened in the gutter, what they

saw in the illustrations, what braided references they identified, and what layers of time they interpreted. Likewise, as the author, I do not need to have all of the answers, and I am not alienated. When more than one mind contributes, the outcome will always be better.

Graphic narratives make rich artistic experiences possible through their emphasis on communication and collaboration. Due to the internet, vast networks of communication have allowed people to interact like never before. “Fandoms,” or communities of fans that come together to discuss their shared interests, produce art, writing, and theories, and even interact directly with creators, are a huge presence on the web. The internet also facilitates in-person fandom connection, like conventions, on scales never before seen. Due to the increased accessibility of communication, artistic and literary forms that give the reader/viewer an active role can be pursued and explored more easily. Because of its features of collaboration, graphic narratives are a perfect medium to facilitate this exploration. One project that I am interested in pursuing in the future based on my work for this thesis is creating a graphic narrative in the form of Instagram or Twitter. On both platforms, one can create a sequence of text and images, making a user’s profile a viable form of graphic narrative. Eisner predicted that, “The modern acceleration of graphic technology and the emergence of an era greatly dependent on visual communication make this [serious consideration of sequential art] increasingly inevitable.”³⁴ I want to explore this relationship between the world of technological communication and graphic narratives. Basing the project on a social media platform greatly increases the potential audience, and thus, due to conceptual collaboration, greatly enriches the artistic content for author and reader alike.

³⁴ Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, xiii.

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Lovely,
Satisfied,
Indifferent
Eyes

Brigid Fitzpatrick

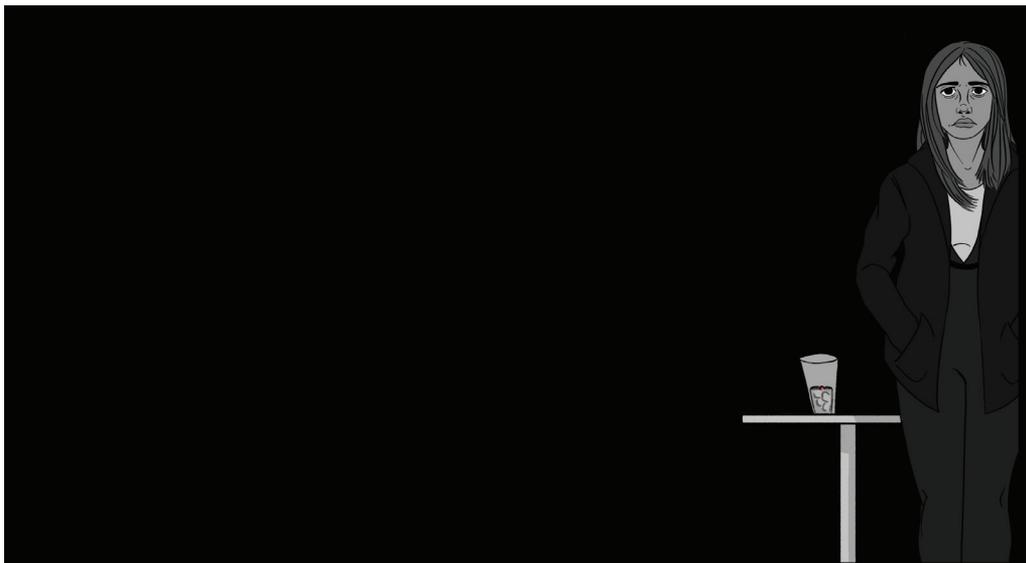
Welcome to the city of Garden-Home. We visit this metropolis long after the beginning of the vertical development that replaced earth and streets with bridges and elevators. Skyscrapers have evolved to form one interconnected mass, an immense web of glass, steel, and neon. The wealthy elite dwell above the clouds, free to roam all levels of the city, but pleased to remain close to the stars and among their fellows. The further down the towers one goes, the worse it gets, and the abandoned ground floors have been left to fester. Those unlucky enough to fail to afford a place in this city's towers must brave the wilds of the streets.

Eilish, a resident of the penthouse level of the city, has gone against her natural inclinations and accepted an invitation to meet some friends a few levels down at The Laughing Gym, a nightclub.

On this, the longest night of the year, our story begins.

When the moon's full those creatures of the full
Are met on the waste hills by country men
Who shudder and hurry by; body and soul
Estranged amid the strangeness of themselves,
Caught up in contemplation, the mind's eye
Fixed upon images that once were thought,
For separate, perfect, and immovable
Images can break the solitude
Of lovely, satisfied, indifferent eyes.

-W.B. Yeats, *The Phases of the Moon* (80-88)



...Oh?



It's the Solstice! You can't be sad on the Solstice!

Oh, goodness, I'm okay!

Come on! I can help!



Maybe there's a reason I was dragged to this place and ditched. Maybe I was supposed to be alone tonight. Of course I'm going to follow her!

I've been waiting so long for this!



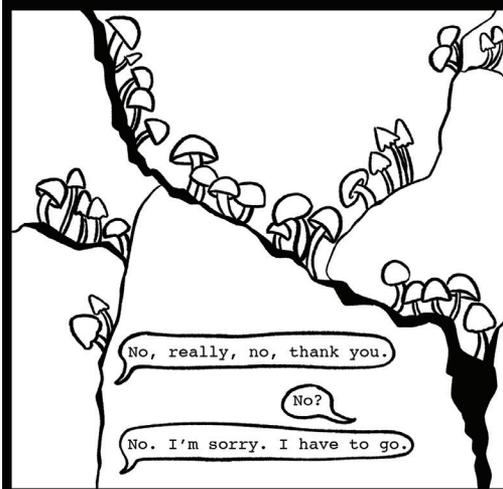
Here you go!
Just choose one!



Oh.



"This is what you do!
I'll show you!"



What's wrong with you?

What's wrong with you?

A while ago,
when I was taking a shower
....

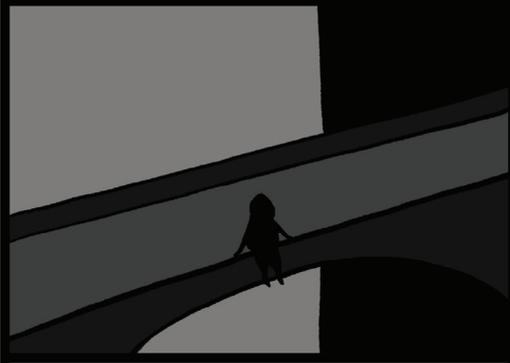


I noticed a
little spider.



What's wrong with me?





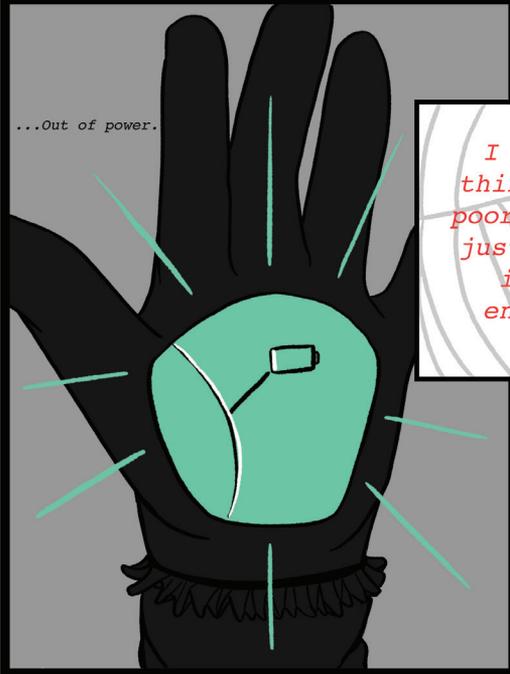
There are no flies in my house, much less my shower. The spider was surely going to starve, or drown.



New handshake detected. Add new contact?

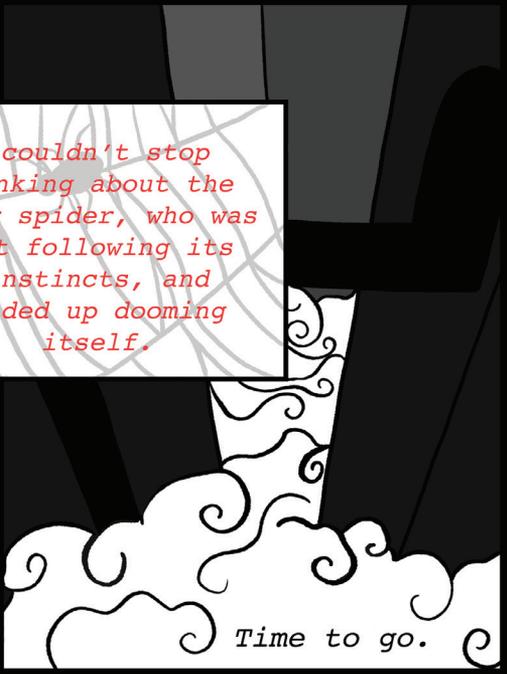
New contact deleted.

I better message my friends and tell them I-



...Out of power.

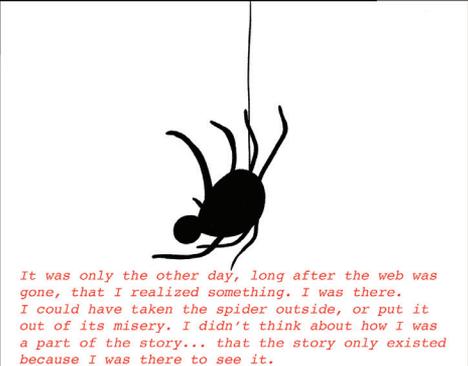
I couldn't stop thinking about the poor spider, who was just following its instincts, and ended up dooming itself.



Time to go.



*I'm... floating gently towards the ground?
How is this possible?*

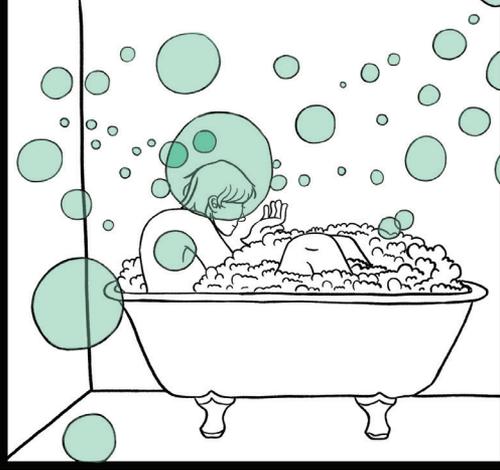


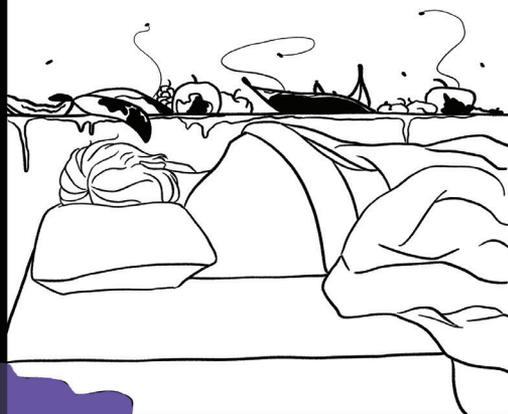
It was only the other day, long after the web was gone, that I realized something. I was there. I could have taken the spider outside, or put it out of its misery. I didn't think about how I was a part of the story... that the story only existed because I was there to see it.





I wonder what's going on in there.





This is so embarrassing!

Eventually...



What do I do now?