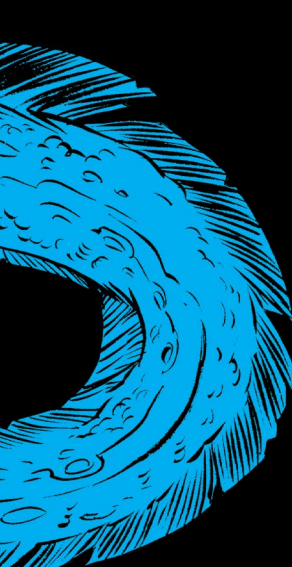




ARCHAIC™



EXTRA! SUMBERG and SULLIVAN
VANDERBEEK and LAY



ARCHAIC

MELISSA F. OLSON
SALLY CANTIRINO
GAB CONTRERAS
ROB STEEN

WRITER
ARTIST
COLORIST
LETTERER

CREATED BY
MELISSA F. OLSON

BUDGETARY SHORTCUTS MAGAZINE PRESENTS HEDDE'S CASES: LIABILITY- FREE ADVICE FOR THE REALITY-AVERSE AND EXCESSIVELY THRIFTY

CHRIS SUMBERG
AMEILEE SULLIVAN

WRITER
ILLUSTRATOR

DO YOU WORK HERE?

KIRK VANDERBEEK
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VARIANT COVER
DESIGN
LOGO AND PRODUCTION
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JUST OUTSIDE KILL DEVIL HILLS, NC

HEY, I *TRIED* TO PAY FOR THE COORDINATES, BUT THE ASSHOLE REFUSED! I HAD TO GRAB HIS PHONE WHEN HE WASN'T LOOKING.

THE TOWNIE MORON DIDN'T EVEN HAVE A PASSCODE.

BUT WE GOT THE PICTURE, SEE?



WHAT'S THAT BEHIND HIM?

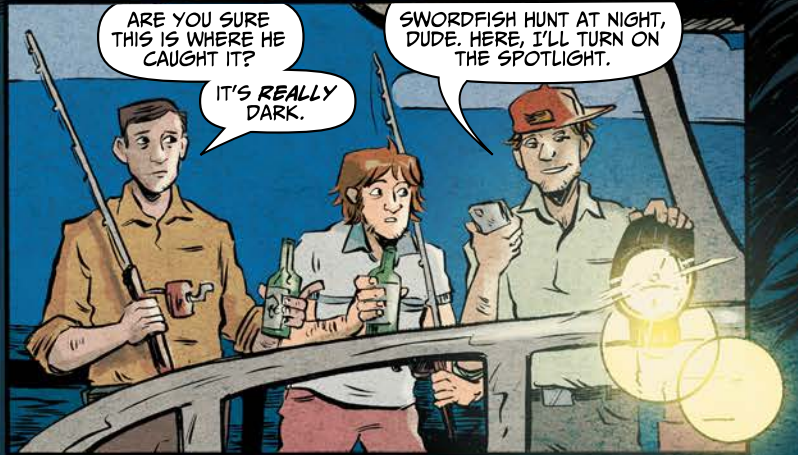
A STORM CLOUD OR SOMETHING. THE PHONE'S FRICKIN' ANCIENT.



ARE YOU SURE THIS IS WHERE HE CAUGHT IT?

IT'S REALLY DARK.

SWORDFISH HUNT AT NIGHT, DUDE. HERE, I'LL TURN ON THE SPOTLIGHT.



...WHOA.



TELL ME WE'RE NOT GOING INTO THAT STORM.

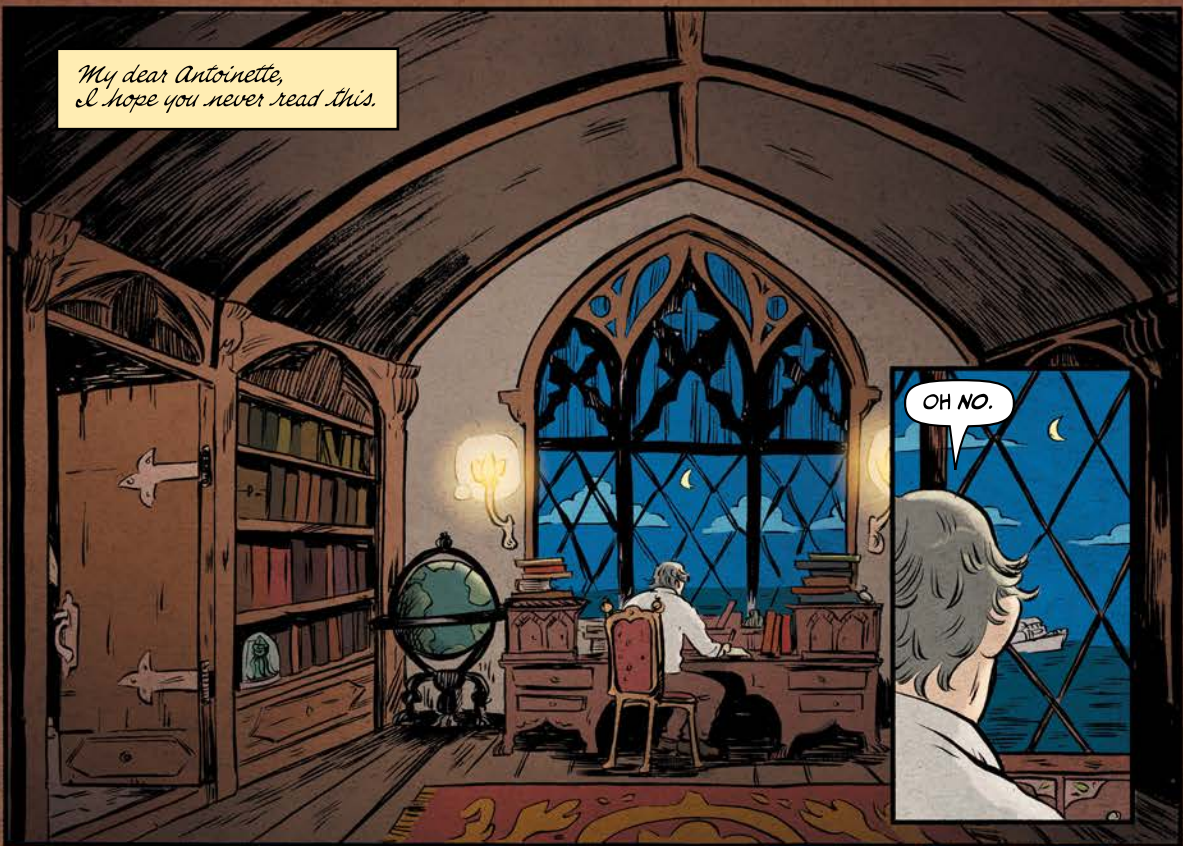
SORRY, MAN. BUT IF IT HELPS...

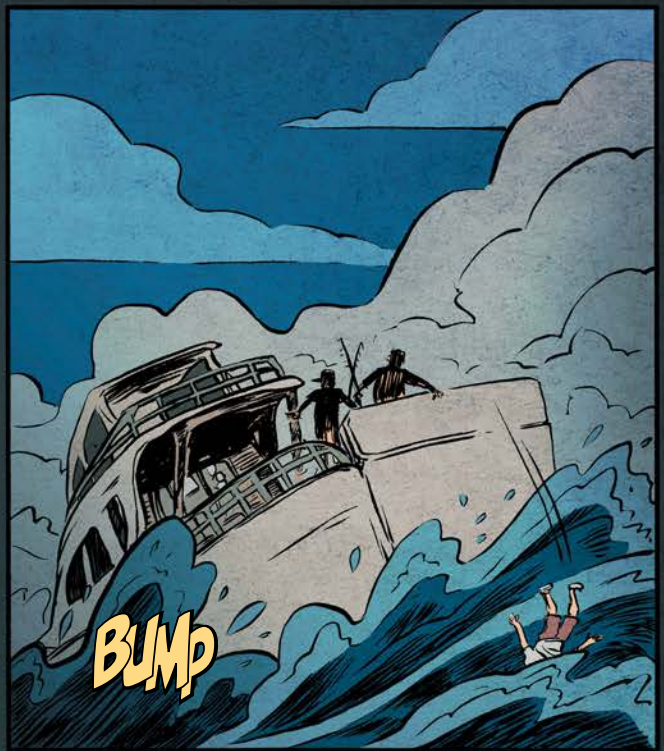


...I DON'T THINK IT'S A STORM.



*My dear Antoinette,
I hope you never read this.*







TOO LATE.



MY FAULT.
OLD AND SOFT.



YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HERE. WHO ARE YOU?

AAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!



IS THAT WHO I THINK IT IS?

THREE MONTHS LATER. CHICAGO.



SHE USED TO BE THE GOVERNOR'S WIFE, RIGHT? TESS OR TISH SOMETHING.

YUP. THE BOSS KNEW HER BACK IN THE NAVY. IT'S A PITY GIG.

WELL, SHE DOES LOOK PITIFUL.



NICE DIGS.

REMINDS ME OF WHERE YOU HAD YOUR WEDDING.



SHOOT.



SORRY, TESS, THAT WAS A DUMB THING TO SAY.

IT'S FINE. I REALLY APPRECIATE THE WORK. IF YOU HAVE MORE HOURS--



UH-OH. MIGHT WANT TO HOLD THAT THOUGHT.

YOU WILL NOT CRY JUST BECAUSE SOME BRIDEZILLA THOUGHT YOU WERE TOO DISTRACTING TO SERVE HER MINI-QUICHE. YOU HAVE A LITTLE CASH AND FOOD FOR THE KIDS. FOOD. KIDS. NO CRYING.



OKAY, NO CASH. SAME PLAN:
FOOD. KIDS. NO CRYING.

THE BOSS
IS SICK OF THIS, TESS.
HE WANTS KEVIN AND
THE HALF MILLION.

AND YOU THINK
I'VE GOT IT? DID THE
PATÉ BODY WRAP GIVE
ME AWAY?

YOU SHOULD SHOW
MORE RESPECT. I DOUBT
ANYONE BUT KEVIN CARES
WHAT WE DO TO YOU.
CALL HIM.

HIS PHONE'S
DISCONNECTED,
REMEMBER? I TRIED
LAST TIME.

SO THIS TIME
WE'LL PUT YOU IN
THE HOSPITAL,
SOMETHING THAT'LL
MAKE THE NEWS.

SO... BRUISES?
MAYBE A SPRAIN? I DON'T
HAVE INSURANCE; GIVE ME
A BALLPARK.

INTENSIVE
CARE.

THE FOOD!

I'M
SICK OF
THIS.





WHY ARE YOU OUTSIDE? IT'S COLD.

I'M SICK OF PBS KIDS. DID YOU BRING DINNER?



DINNER HAD AN ACCIDENT.

JESUS, TESS.

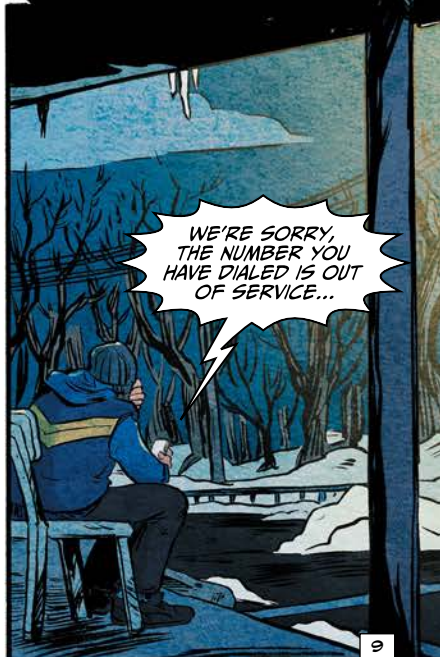
CAN YOU CALL FOR PIZZA? WE'RE GONNA EAT IN THE CAR.



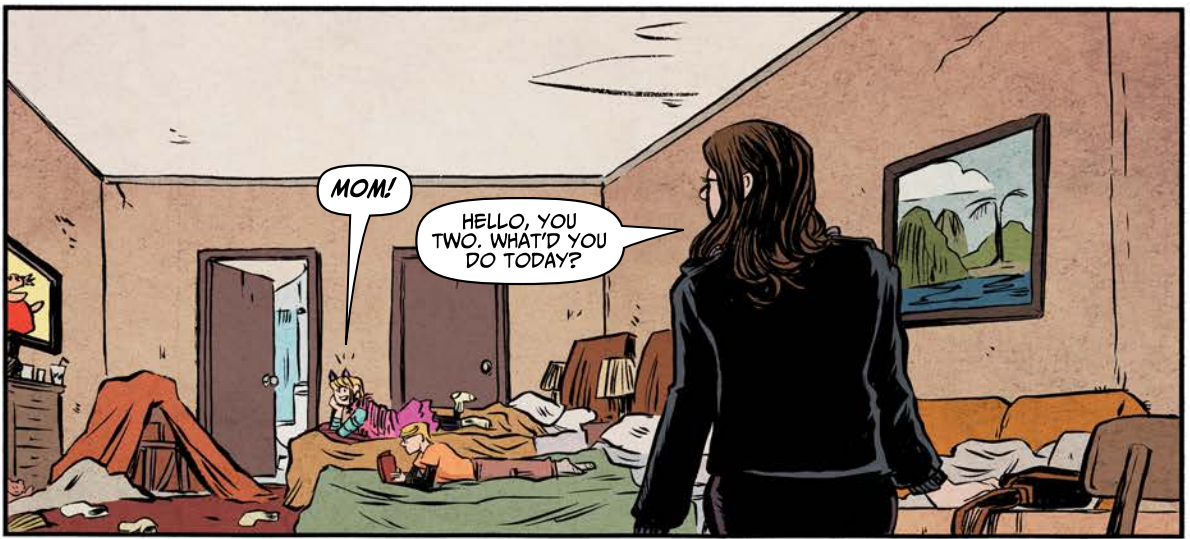
THEY FOUND US AGAIN?



HAVE THE PIZZA PLACE DELIVER THIS TIME. THEN COME IN, OKAY? IT'S NOT SAFE.

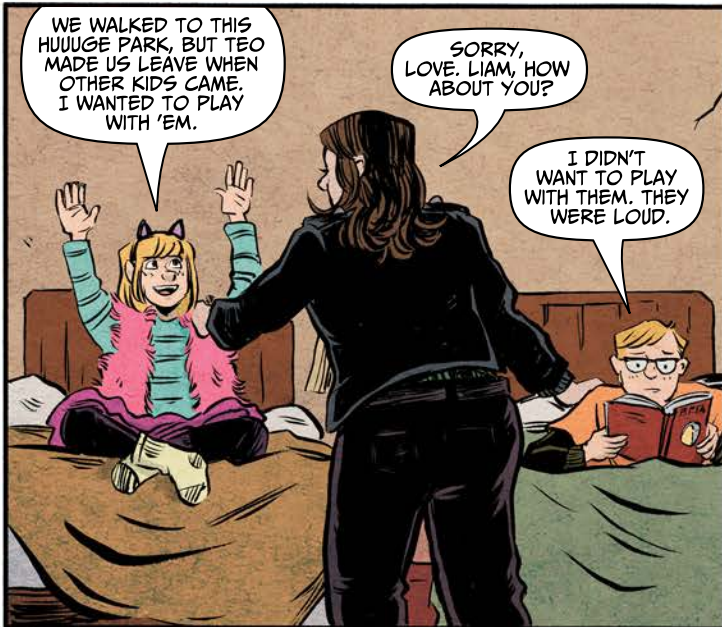


WE'RE SORRY, THE NUMBER YOU HAVE DIALED IS OUT OF SERVICE...



MOM!

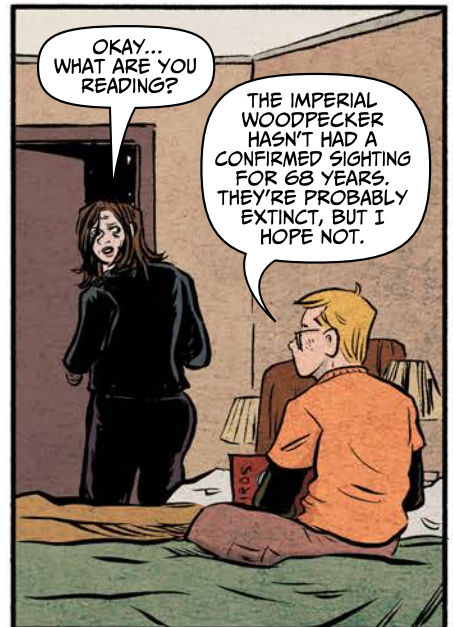
HELLO, YOU TWO. WHAT'D YOU DO TODAY?



WE WALKED TO THIS HUUUGE PARK, BUT TEO MADE US LEAVE WHEN OTHER KIDS CAME. I WANTED TO PLAY WITH 'EM.

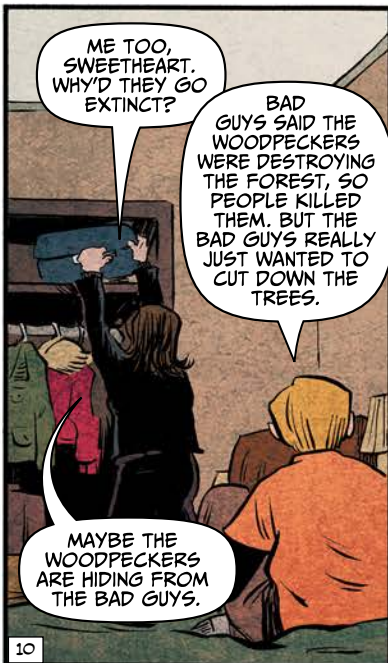
SORRY, LOVE. LIAM, HOW ABOUT YOU?

I DIDN'T WANT TO PLAY WITH THEM. THEY WERE LOUD.



OKAY... WHAT ARE YOU READING?

THE IMPERIAL WOODPECKER HASN'T HAD A CONFIRMED SIGHTING FOR 68 YEARS. THEY'RE PROBABLY EXTINCT, BUT I HOPE NOT.



ME TOO, SWEETHEART. WHY'D THEY GO EXTINCT?

BAD GUYS SAID THE WOODPECKERS WERE DESTROYING THE FOREST, SO PEOPLE KILLED THEM. BUT THE BAD GUYS REALLY JUST WANTED TO CUT DOWN THE TREES.

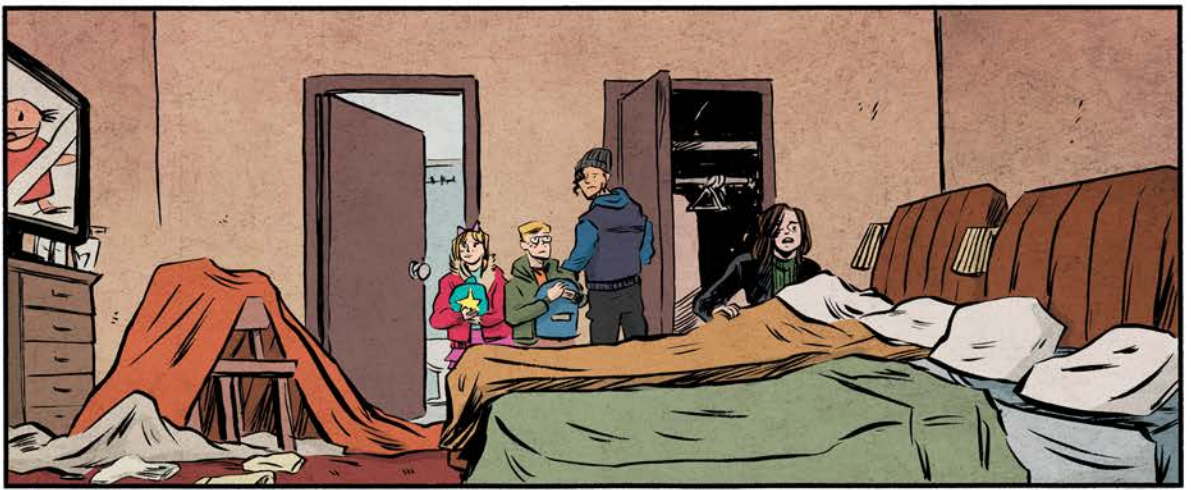
MAYBE THE WOODPECKERS ARE HIDING FROM THE BAD GUYS.



LIKE US?









MOM?

NO ONE KNOWS THAT NAME.



WHAT'S GOING ON?

THE DOOR IS JAMMED OR SOME--

ANTOINETTE MARGUERITE ROCKFORD!



WHO'S ANTOINETTE ROCKFORD?

GO BACK AND WATCH THE--

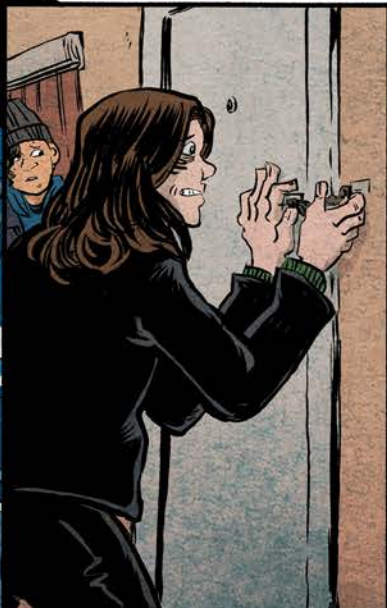


WHO ARE YOU?

YOUR FATHER HAS DIED. YOUR BIRTHRIGHT IS WAITING.

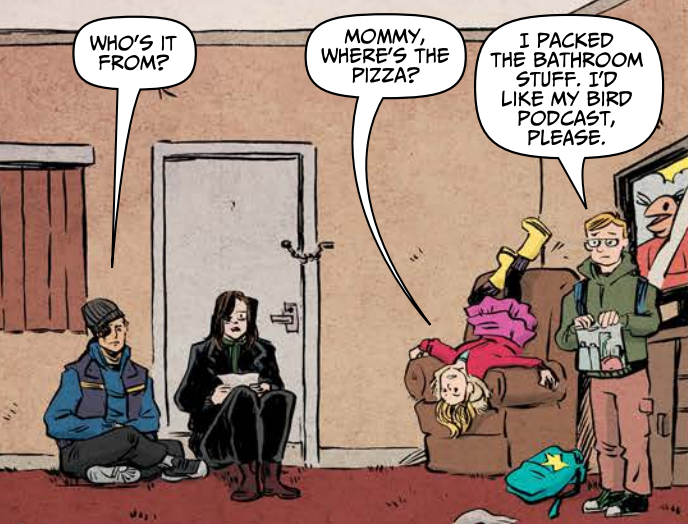


NO TRACKS...?



THAT'S ONE IMPRESSIVE MAILMAN.

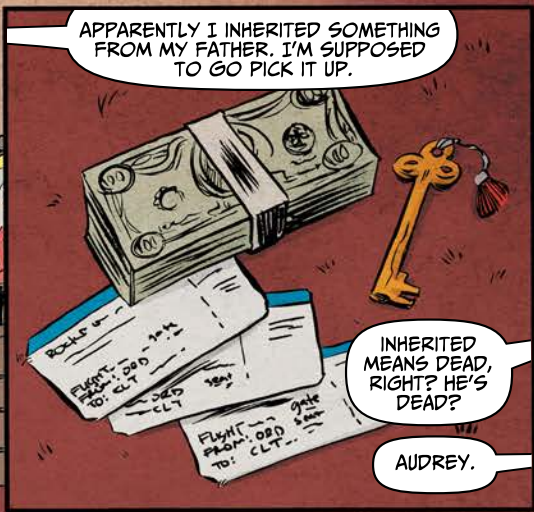
THAT'S NOT FUNNY.



WHO'S IT FROM?

MOMMY, WHERE'S THE PIZZA?

I PACKED THE BATHROOM STUFF. I'D LIKE MY BIRD PODCAST, PLEASE.



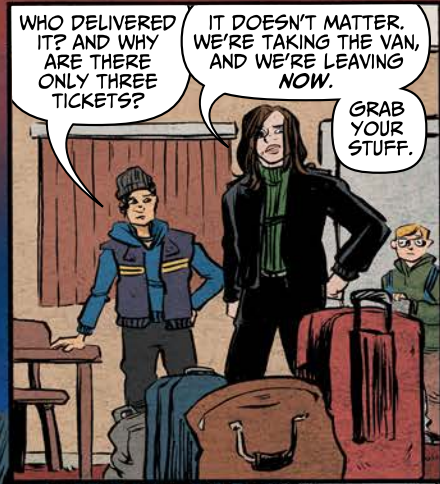
APPARENTLY I INHERITED SOMETHING FROM MY FATHER. I'M SUPPOSED TO GO PICK IT UP.

INHERITED MEANS DEAD, RIGHT? HE'S DEAD?

AUDREY.



IT'S OKAY; I NEVER MET HIM. MY MOM DIDN'T EVEN TELL ME HIS NAME BEFORE SHE DIED.



WHO DELIVERED IT? AND WHY ARE THERE ONLY THREE TICKETS?

IT DOESN'T MATTER. WE'RE TAKING THE VAN, AND WE'RE LEAVING NOW.

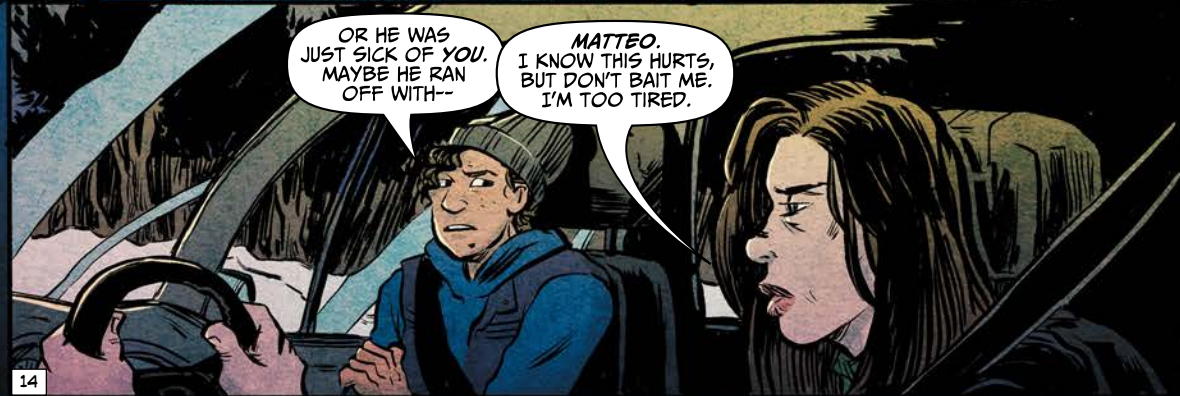
GRAB YOUR STUFF.



OKAY, THEY'RE SLEEPING. TESS, DO WE HAVE TO GO? WHY CAN'T DAD--

WE'VE BEEN OVER THIS, TEO. I CAN'T REACH DAD.

I'M SURE HE THOUGHT IF HE WAS GONE, THEY'D LEAVE US ALONE.

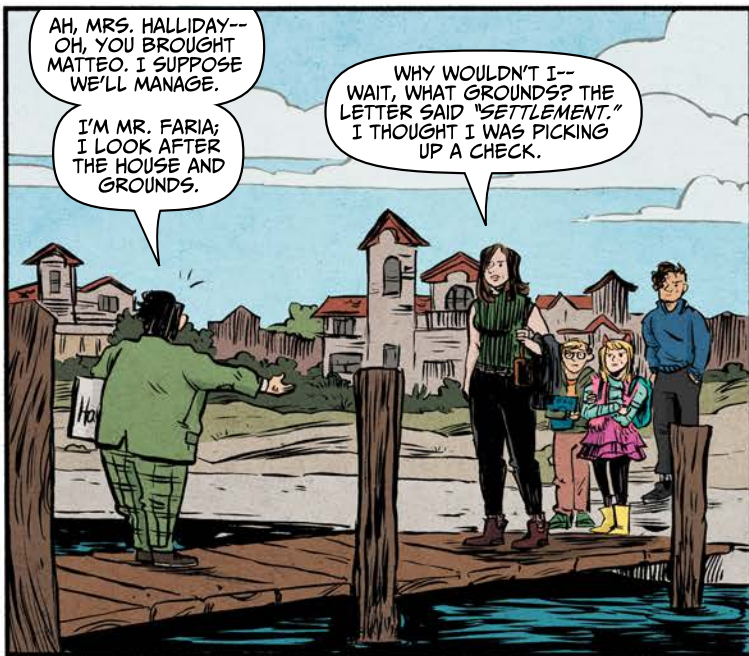


OR HE WAS JUST SICK OF YOU. MAYBE HE RAN OFF WITH--

MATTEO. I KNOW THIS HURTS, BUT DON'T BAIT ME. I'M TOO TIRED.

HATTERAS, NORTH CAROLINA
FOURTEEN HOURS LATER





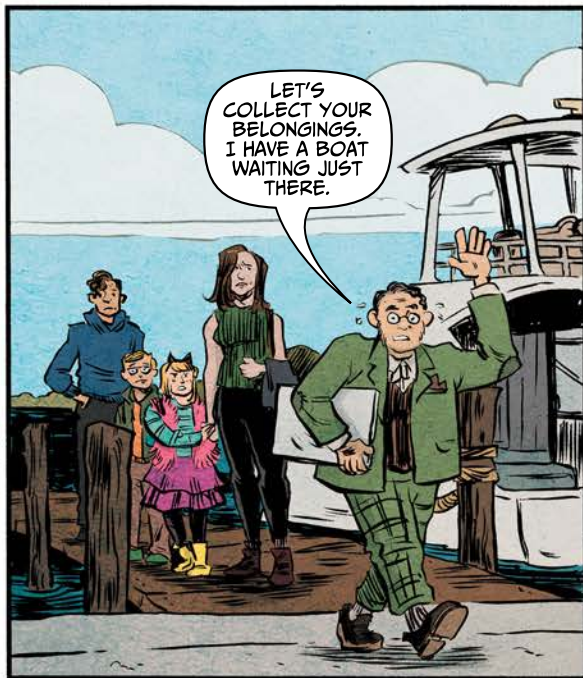
AH, MRS. HALLIDAY-- OH, YOU BROUGHT MATTEO. I SUPPOSE WE'LL MANAGE.

I'M MR. FARIA; I LOOK AFTER THE HOUSE AND GROUNDS.

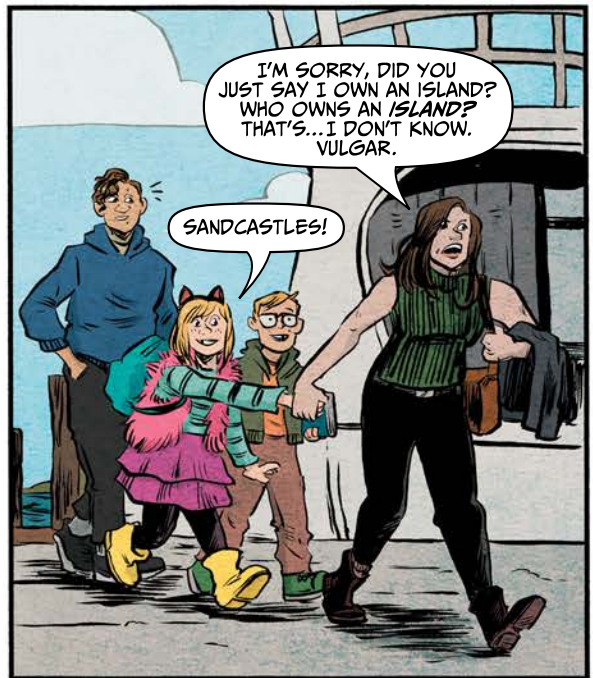
WHY WOULDN'T I-- WAIT, WHAT GROUNDS? THE LETTER SAID "SETTLEMENT." I THOUGHT I WAS PICKING UP A CHECK.



I APOLOGIZE; THE TRUST IS AN ACTUAL SETTLEMENT, ON AN ISLAND. WITH A BEACHSIDE MANOR.

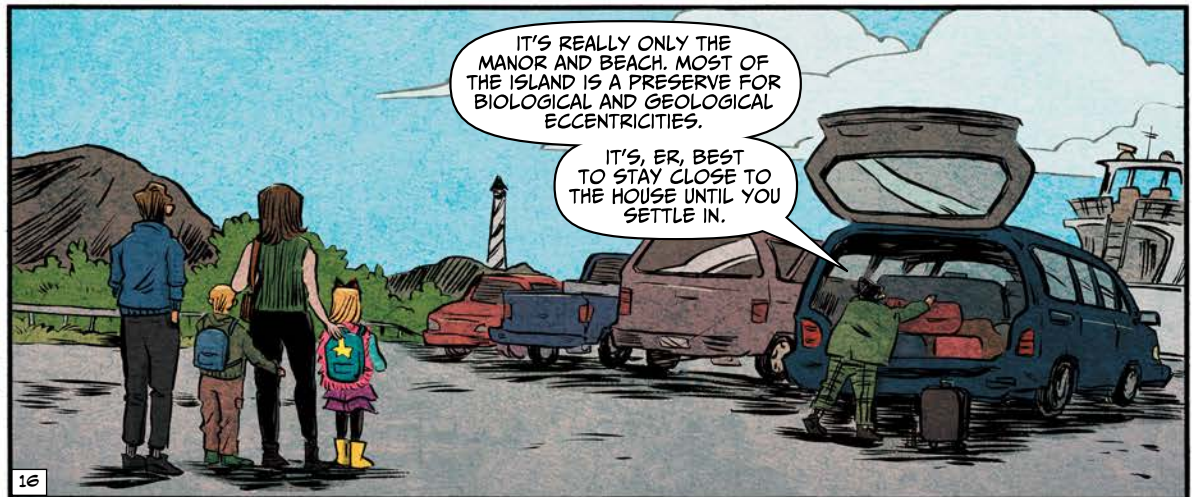


LET'S COLLECT YOUR BELONGINGS. I HAVE A BOAT WAITING JUST THERE.



I'M SORRY, DID YOU JUST SAY I OWN AN ISLAND? WHO OWNS AN ISLAND? THAT'S... I DON'T KNOW. VULGAR.

SANDCASTLES!



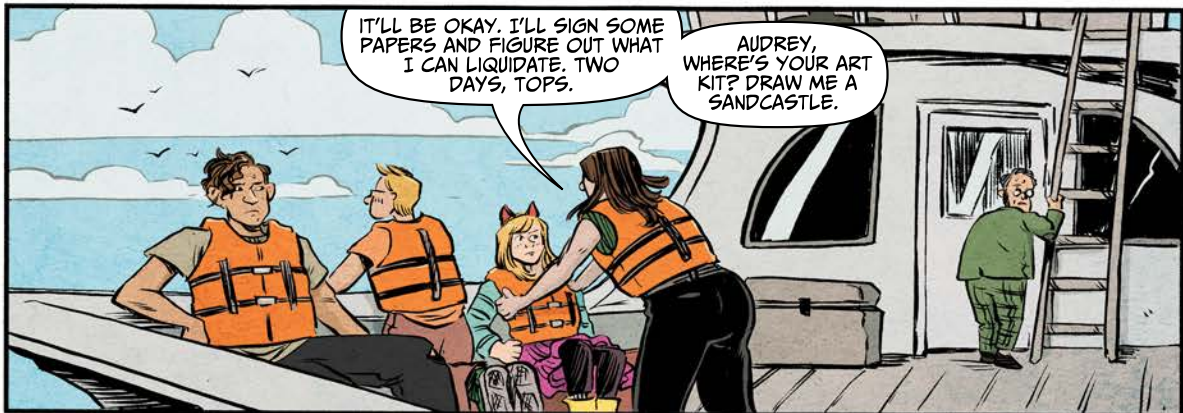
IT'S REALLY ONLY THE MANOR AND BEACH. MOST OF THE ISLAND IS A PRESERVE FOR BIOLOGICAL AND GEOLOGICAL ECCENTRICITIES.

IT'S, ER, BEST TO STAY CLOSE TO THE HOUSE UNTIL YOU SETTLE IN.



WE'RE NOT
SETTLING IN. RIGHT,
TESS?

WHAT'S A
BIOLOGICAL
ECCENTRICITY?



IT'LL BE OKAY. I'LL SIGN SOME
PAPERS AND FIGURE OUT WHAT
I CAN LIQUIDATE. TWO
DAYS, TOPS.

AUDREY,
WHERE'S YOUR ART
KIT? DRAW ME A
SANDCASTLE.



FARIA, WAIT!
I HAVE A THOUSAND
QUESTIONS, LIKE HOW
YOU FOUND ME IN
CHICAGO.

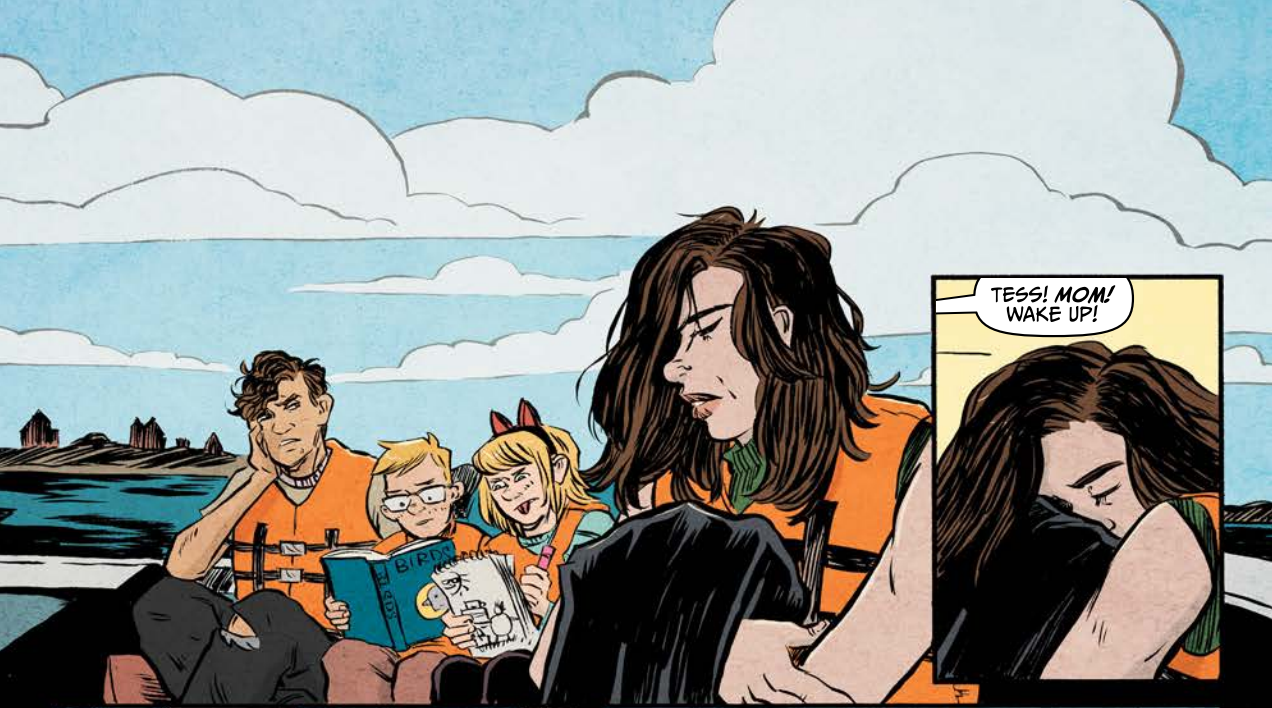


I'M AFRAID I MUST CONCENTRATE;
MY NAVIGATION SKILLS ARE A BIT
RUSTY. MASTER PHILLIP LEFT
DIARIES AND NOTES FOR
YOU AT THE MANOR.

UH-HUH.
AND HOW MUCH
FARTHER IS THIS
ISLAND?



NOT FAR
AT ALL.



TESS! MOM!
WAKE UP!



WHAT IS THAT?
WHY AREN'T WE
TURNING?!

WHAT ARE
YOU TALKING
ABOUT?

LOOK AT
THAT!

WHAT? ALL
I SEE IS SAND,
A DOCK, AND
A HOUSE.

WE'RE
GOING INTO
A STORM!

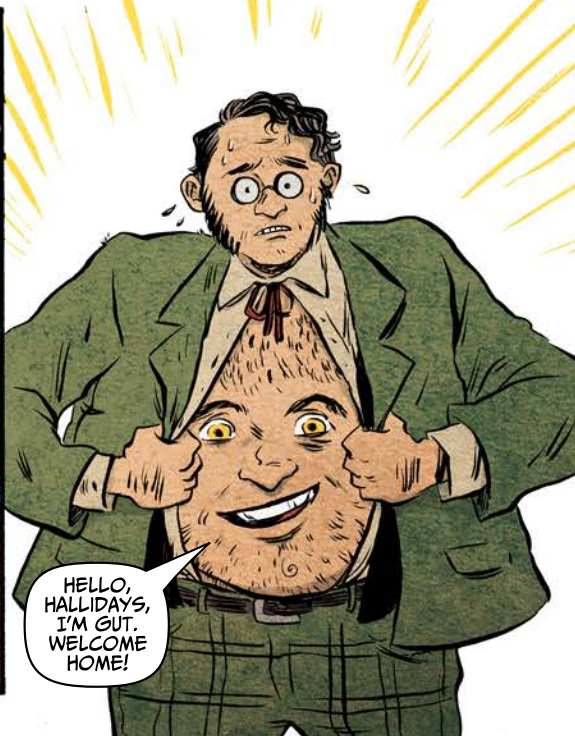
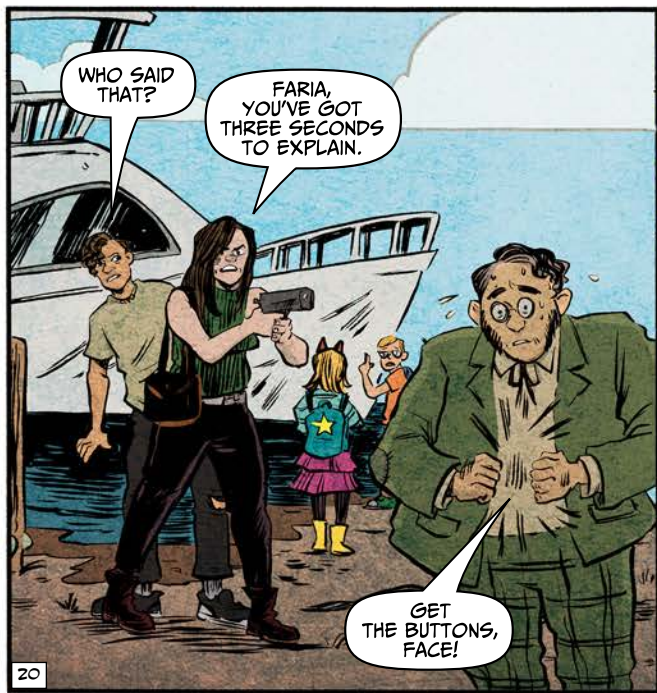


TEO, IT'S
CLEAR, SEE? SEE
THE DOCK?

MAMA, IS
TEO SICK?

I DON'T
KNOW.





COMING AHOY-TRACTIONS

Hello, dearest readers, and welcome to the weird, wonderful, warm world of *ARCHAIC*. I am beyond excited to have this book come out. Why, you may ask? Because it is about families: found, chosen, born, and everything in between. From Tess's family to the creatures on the island of Demonde, this book covers it all. Plus, Tess is a single mother trying to make it work for her kids, and as the product of a single mother (hi, ma), I am fairly certain that it isn't easy.

Another reason I'm so thrilled about this book? The team. Seriously, I know I say this all the time, but this team is just the best. I love being able to work with super talented, super kind people. And while, yes, there are many of them in this industry, only sometimes do the stars align and I get to work with them. Sadly, the stars did not align last month, and I did not get to meet our star colorist Gab Contreras, but that's all part of comics. You work with people you have never met but until one day you do, and it's great!

Speaking of . . .

This is Melissa F. Olson's first comic series. Her first comic story, "Tall Tale Tour," appeared in *PROJECT: CRYPTID* #5. She was introduced to me by Paul Cornell, although I have to say, Melissa really needs no introduction. She is as outgoing and kind as anyone I've met in comics. Truly, I don't think there is anyone who doesn't speak her praises. In fact, before she started working on her short story for me, we not only did a video call, but she sent me a letter. A real letter, handwritten and everything, with a hodag sticker! And if you don't know what a hodag is, let me once again refer you to *PROJECT: CRYPTID* #5. But this is far from the first thing Melissa has written. She's a prolific novelist, and you should (after reading this series, of course) run right out and check out her Old World series. You won't regret it.

And so, when she spoke to me about this project, which definitely encompasses all the things I find fascinating, and THEN told me that Sally Cantirino was involved, I was like, yes, definitely, let's do it, but first let me confirm with Hart and Tom. Because that is pretty much what I always do. I hadn't worked with Sally before, nor did I know her, but her reputation and talent preceded her, so I knew all about her. Plus, we have a lot of mutual friends, and I absolutely trust their opinions. And let me tell you, she is making this book sing. Really, between her and Melissa, I'm just a bystander watching this book come together. It's a delight. Plus, because Sally lives in New Jersey, I'm lucky enough to meet up with her when I'm in New York.

Sally is the one who suggested Gab Contreras. And let me tell you, I am so glad she did. Gab's colors are off-the-charts gorgeous. They really bring Melissa's words and Sally's art to life.

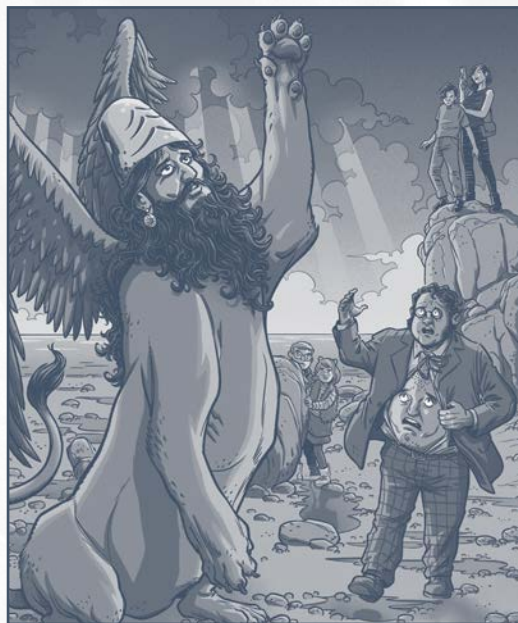
I really love this book. Working at AHOY means getting to work on projects you feel strongly about, and this is one of them, for me. I hope you, my favorite reader, enjoy reading it as much as we all enjoy working on it.

THE WRONG EARTH: DEAD RINGERS #5 (Writer: Tom Peyer; Artists: Jamal Igle, Juan Castro; Cover: Jamal Igle)—Conclusion of the only multiverse book you need! Copycat, that demonic dean of dastardly and difficult-to-detect disguises, escalates his crime spree—but a terrible tragedy has robbed Earth-Alpha's caped crimefighters of their motivation to care. In stores **December 11!**

THE TOXIC AVENGER #3 (Writer: Matt Bors; Artist: Fred Harper; Cover A: Fred Harper; Cover B: Matt Bors; Cover C: Sophie Campbell; Cover D: Fred Harper bagged with exclusive trading card by Ben Clarkson)—Continuing the hit reinvention of the classic film/animation series! In the wake of the catastrophic chemical spill in Tromaville, the corporation responsible dispatches its private army, the armored Radiation Rangers, to violently contain the PR damage—until Toxie uncovers the soldiers' frightening secret! In stores **December 11!**

BABS #5 (Writer: Garth Ennis; Artist: Jacen Burrows; Cover A: Jacen Burrows; Cover B: John McCrear)—More sword-and-social-satire action from the acclaimed Ennis/Burrows team! In the depths of Tiberius Toledo's diamond mine, Babs and her allies toil in captivity until an escape plan forms—involving the libidinous Head Guard and a shocking sacrifice of virtue! In stores **December 18!**

Next issue:



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EDITOR'S NOTES



THE TOXIC

AVENGER



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F. HARPER

DECEMBER 11th!





BARBS



DECEMBER 18th!



I ♥ ORC-A



BUDGETARY SHORTCUTS MAGAZINE PRESENTS HEDDE'S CASES: LIABILITY-FREE ADVICE FOR THE REALITY-AVERSE AND EXCESSIVELY THRIFTY

by CHRIS SUMBERG

Dear Doctor Hedde,

My son, Bug-Eye, is going through an awkward stage. I have a sneaking suspicion the kids at his school may be picking at him. Could this have something to do with his name (which I think is quite edgy, unique—and, of course, descriptive, I mean, To. A. Tee.)? Although we have supplied him with the finest electric vermillion / shocking-green harlequin school clothes/costume available in the tri-state region (and, yes, curly-toe booties with bells on the tips are included, thank you), he seems unappreciative. In fact, I've never seen him so moody. Can you help?

With visible concern,

Elaine Pigge

My dear Ms. Pigge,

Certified therapeutic counselors—amongst whose number I do not count myself—all seem to agree: adolescence is a difficult time. Perhaps Bug-Eye's classmates at Chandless Middle School (corner of 12th and Tomari, Middlevine, New Hampshire 04335) will come around. As certified therapeutic counselors have noted in the past: Time is a great healer. While I'm not prepared to go that far, clinical evidence seems to suggest that time, indeed, may have some bearing upon the healing process.

I hope this comforts you—if, in fact, you feel that comfort is required in this situation.

With tentative optimism tempered with a hard-earned fatalistic long view,

“Doctor” Chip Hedde

Dear Doctor Hedde,

My wife and I think that my dad, Bug-Eye, is suffering from acute splenic logorrhoea coupled with blepharospastic conjunctivitis. With this in mind, we are afraid that his health provider will learn of the situation and withdraw his coverage. Currently, we are forging his medical records and have, in fact, involved several sympathetic health professionals in our cause. Any advice would be welcome.

Sincerely,

Fearful for the Farm

Dear Fearful For The Farm** [**Actual names, Pastors Tom and Linda Squittruck, Rural Box 17, Route 6, Ilvin, Minnesota 55676],

Not knowing too-too much about the situation, I cannot offer you much more than this simple but possibly timeless advice: One's later years can be difficult. Saying this, it seems to me that your accomplice in insurance fraud, Dr. Maureen Tedley of Chiro-Psychotherapeutic Intensive Services, Lompox Springs, Minnesota, may need to approach HellthCareLLC (www(dot)hell-llc(dot)



net) and make a case for your father. In fact, extrapolating from Bug-Eye's Social Security number (000-00-0011), which you were good enough to mention in your letter—and which is, rest assured, tucked safely away in our fire-proofed Mental Shortcuts Intimate Letters Vault—I have a hunch that he may have accumulated sufficient Medicare benefits to address this problem. Don't hold me to that, however. You see, my other hunch is that revelations of past insurance fraud may bar your father from future benefits.

Hope this helps. It could. (But if it doesn't, that's okay, too.)

Including you in my denominational, nondenominational, and poly-denominational meditations,

"Doctor" Hedde

Dear Doctor Hedde,

My stupid dog, Bug-Eye the STUPID BASSET HOUND, says I'm NUTS! NUTS! How can I be NUTS if I have a THIRD BASSET-EYE, HUH?! HA! (STUPID DOG!) NO, DOCTOR HEAD, NO-NO-NO! NO! NO, my actual problem is that I AM A WEE LITTLE BIT TENSE! (SO I LIKE ESPRESSO! SO WHAT?! LOTS OF PEOPLE DO!) I have sent you several hundred letters about this, DOCTOR Head! SEVERAL HUNDRED LETTERS! YOU HAVE NOT REPLIED!! YOU! HAVE! NOT! RE!! PLIED!! (Bug-Eye says YOU SUCK!! YOU SUCK!! YOU SUCK!! ARF-ARF-YOU SUCK!! NO, I DO NOT WANT TO LET GO OF THE ESPRESSO MACHINE! GET AWAY FROM ME, YUH PUSHY-ASSED BARISTA! AWAY!!)

I challenge you to help me, MISTER SO-CALLED HOLY-DOCTOR SO-CALLED HOLY-DOCTOR HEAD-CHEESE! (SO-CALLED HOLY-DOCTOR HEAD-CHEESE!!!)

Containing myself so Bug-Eye stops barking, ARF-ARF-ARF, in my HEAD,

Yours,

Anonymous CONTAINED—I said I'm CONTAINED, BUG-EYE!—MMNNN, YUM, CAN I GET MORE CREAM WITH THIS?!—Person

Dear "Friend" of Bug-Eye the Basset Hound,

In the considered words of my therapist: "Hm." That said, as a nontherapeutic counselor, I'm not sure that I can add any more to your situation than what has been offered by the sterling Bug-Eye the Basset Hound. I will say this, however: As obsessive-compulsives, amongst whose number I count myself (and amongst whose number I may or may not include yourself), often are concerned with cleanliness, I'm impressed that you have taken a filthy, drool-spattered basset hound as a confidante. Perhaps this is a hopeful sign? Yes? No? Maybe? Perhaps not? (It's your call.)

By the way, "Friend" of Bug-Eye the Basset Hound, please note: I cleaned this letter several times before mailing it. I also held it with tongs and sprayed it with vinegar. While I did not also spray it with oil, do keep it away from any window with a southern exposure, as the proximity of oiled or non-oiled legally nonbinding, nontherapeutic documents to such windows can lead to spontaneous combustion! (Or so claims a possibly reliable Internet site that I came across the other day. Sorry, lost the address.)

I hope my analysis proves helpful. If you don't feel that it has been helpful, well, okay, then. ("Friend" of Bug-Eye the Basset Hound, Apartment 666, Levner, New Jersey, Tel: 204-123-1111, Fax: 204-123-1112; SecretTalkingBassetGuy(at)shush(dot)net, you're the boss!)

Speaking SOFTLY and KINDLY inside YOUR HEAD—but only if that image pleases you,

"Doctor" Hedde

P.S. Far be it from me to tell you what to do with your own, and I quote, "Friend" of Bug-Eye the Basset Hound, "STUPID cherry bombs," but, and this is a very subjective call, "Friend" of Bug-Eye the Basset Hound, really, just a nontherapeutic, nonbinding opinion: If you didn't explode them, it might be nice.

Once again, "Doctor" Chip Hedde wishes to remind Mental Shortcuts readers that sanity, basic fact-checking, simple common sense, and their polar opposites (as well as their near-polar and polar-adjacent opposites, semi-opposites, and all related offshoots, opposites or otherwise), could be meaningless social constructs. Or maybe not. It's your call.





DO YOU WORK HERE?

by KIRK VANDERBEEK

You walk into the store, a link like any other in the popular retail chain, dressed in pressed khakis and a red polo shirt. You don't even make it past the rows of greeting cards before someone asks you where they can find scented candles. She's in a hurry, this curious woman, and although you can't imagine a scenario in which the need for a scented candle could be anything close to pressing, you decide to help her. You are familiar with the floor plan, after all. Three aisles over, amidst a dizzying cloud of citrus and lavender and vanilla, you gesture to the candles. She scans the available offerings with mounting distress then asks where all the candy cane scented candles are. Unable to be more helpful, you apologize and she asks you to please check the back of the store. You consider telling her the truth, that you don't actually work here, but now you've already led her to the scented candles. You're in too deep. Her eyes search your red polo for a nametag, confusion growing. With a promise that you'll be just a moment, you walk towards the stockroom. She follows. You speed up, hoping to lose her as you approach the din of the electronics department. She matches your pace. At the threshold to the stockroom you hesitate for only a second before pressing your way through dangling strips of thick but flexible plastic. A tattooed, teenaged employee looks your way as you enter a cavernous, backstage-like warehouse. He turns his disinterested gaze back to the stacks of boxes

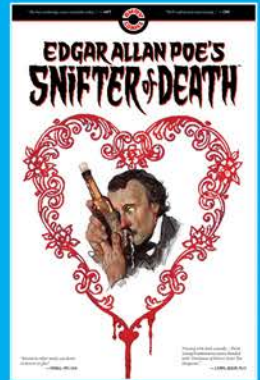
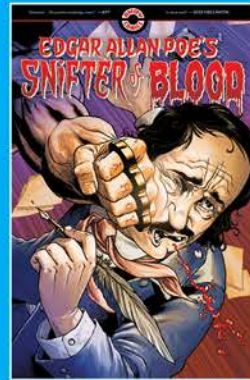
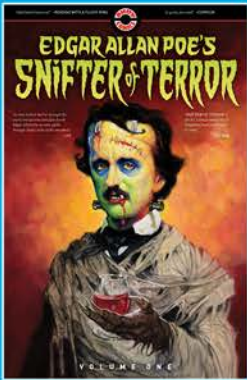
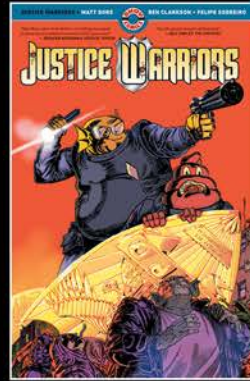
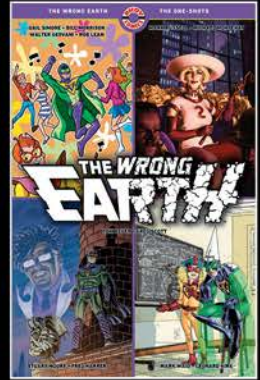
piled on the pallet beside him. You wander aimlessly, hoping to find another exit through which you can slip, passing a series of windowed offices along the way. A blue glow illuminates the glass of a small conference room, flickering as a person wearing pressed khakis and a red polo shirt flips through the slides of their presentation. Noting your approach, they nod and gesture for you to enter the room. You shake your head but they insist. You enter the room and apologize for being late to the half-dozen faces that turn to watch as you grab an empty seat. The presentation continues and the half-dozen faces turn back to the front of the room to observe the parade of slides, figures, and corporate tactics. At meeting's eventual end you pluck the sole remaining donut from an otherwise empty box and take a bite, your mouth filled with salty dough and sweet chocolate, eager to make your exit as you're asked by a man in a suit if you could offer any feedback. With your mouth as good as glued shut you nod along—occasionally shrugging—as questions are fired your way. You're making an impression, a good one. It's evident in the raised eyebrows of your monologuing interlocuter. By the time you've finally finished the donut and the meeting has dispersed you're halfway down the hall, surrounded on all sides by higher-ups. The decision-makers. Asked if you'll be joining them at the next consultation you nod, unsure how else to respond. *The*



caravan pulls out in fifteen minutes, someone jokes, don't get left behind. You make your way back through the stockroom, pulling a black blazer from a disheveled rack of returns. It's a surprisingly decent fit. So too is the tie you find and cinch around your neck with a clumsy half-Windsor, price tag tucked discreetly into tie loop. Disguised with the hope that, should she still be wandering the store, the woman from before will no longer recognize you, you return to the harsh fluorescence of the shop floor. You're surprised to find her still waiting—impatient but relieved to see you, grateful for the seeming exhaustiveness of your search, disappointed that you don't have better news. She walks beside you, puzzled by your change in attire, until your paths bisect at the bathrooms. You duck into a stall and wait silently for twenty minutes before stepping out to wash your hands and face at a sink. Outside of the bathroom a friendly voice calls out to you, joking that you damn near missed the caravan. You find yourself hustled out amidst genial corporate camaraderie to the waiting cadre of sedans outside. In the back of a jet-black luxury SUV, you drink freely from the rattling rack of bottles your cohorts storm with relish. Your head swims with whiskey and secondhand cigar smoke by the time you're whisked, stumbling, through the echoing hangar of a private airfield. The seat you settle into on the jet is warm and cozy as a womb. You doze as you taxi down the runway, asleep

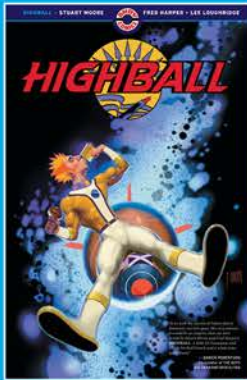
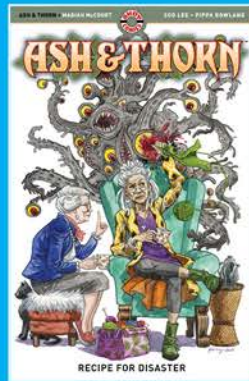
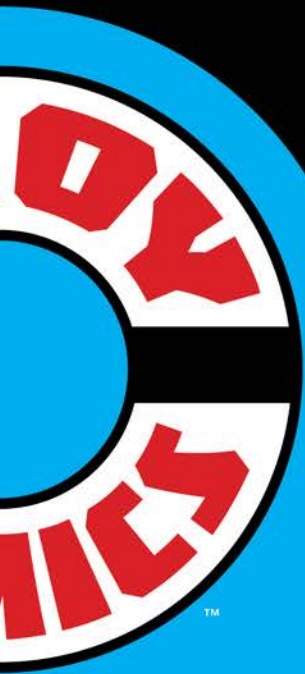
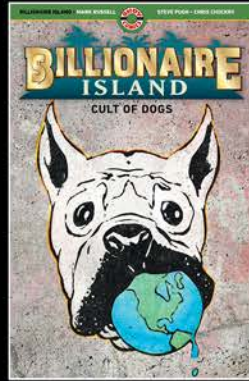
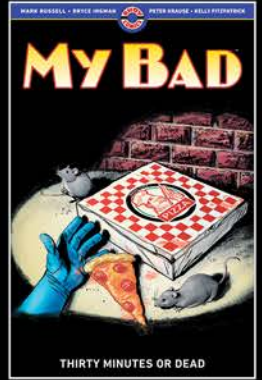
before tires have left tarmac. By the time you wake up the party is in full swing. A pulsing techno song shrieks through reedy speakers. A glassy-eyed flight attendant snorts a line of coke off your khakis. Someone babbling chaotically about mergers and synergy and commodities hands you a small glass filled with bronze liquid that swirls like a phosphorescent oil slick. Parched, you swallow it down in one go, grimacing at the bitter taste that coats your palate. Your mind expands. Your limbs stretch out to seek the outer limits of your potential. Your body begs. For everything. More to drink. More to eat. More to feel. A bottomless bucket of hedonistic revelry. The world provides. As the jet descends you raise a goblet to your lips and as the limousine accelerates you lower it to your lap and as the elevator ascends you feel your sated stomach sink and as the automatic blinds descend your head hits the pillow and you rise into a dream. You float through a world of light and shape, surrounded on all sides, yes, even the inside, by a distinct feeling of emptiness. You wake, room phone blaring with a wake-up call, late for another meeting. You stumble out into the lobby and back into a stylish shuttle that glides toward a glass-fronted pyramid. Inside, the immense monolith is segmented into rooms stacked upon rooms—conference; board; bath. In a mid-sized meeting room labelled *BIG PICTURE THOUGHT SHOWER* you recognize some faces. People you were with yesterday. Was that yesterday? People from the store, the plane, the lobby of the expensive hotel. The roundtable discussion spins, making its way to you. The room goes silent. You've been asked something. But what? All the eyes are on you, waiting for an answer. You say the first thing that comes to mind. *Scented candles . . . Candy cane scented candles.* The effect is divisive. Keys click as someone types a note. Hm, someone says. You can't remember if you brushed your teeth last night. Or this morning. The meeting drones on and you seem to fall back asleep, enveloped once again by that bright, colorful feeling of nothing. You wake to a thunderous round of applause as the entire pyramid celebrates the results of a record-breaking fiscal quarter. You burp and the bitterness of yesterday's celebration rises in your throat. Your eyes cross and you're lost once again in the corporate shuffle. Bodies moving left and right, forward and back, surging as one. The next meeting begins, ends. Night brings another flight. A fancy one. You lose yourself somewhere in the clouds. In the morning: a new hotel, another meeting. The same the next day. Time goes on like this for months (for minutes?), for millennia, meetings interrupted by steak dinners, swallowed sniffers, popped pills. Cash flows. So too does the champagne. You float away on the bubbles, looking down on the clouds, the rest of the world, as the plane descends once again. Somewhere tropical. You find yourself separated from the group. Where have all the other suits gone? You wander a beach, confused, wrinkled blazer stifling in the heat. Up above, a jet streaks a hot pink trail across the sky, backlit by the setting sun. You toss your threadbare blazer into the sand beside your tie and press on. For days (decades?) you wander, aimless but not. Forward, always forward. The seasons seem to change around you. Your red polo shirt fades to a shade of salmon. Blisters form and burst and form again. You find yourself in a familiar parking lot, facing a familiar storefront. You stagger inside. You pass rows of greeting cards. You walk three aisles further, following your nose. You smell citrus, lavender, vanilla . . . and peppermint. So much peppermint. You come to a stop before a substantial display of candy cane scented candles. *Buy three, get one free.* You reach out, trying to remember what you even came into this store for when a gentle voice asks you if you work here.

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