

THE
ANNOTATED
GRAYLING
2016

arc 1

by arby k

In 2002 when I was nineteen years old and starting college, I began drawing a webcomic. I published it on the internet with webspace provided by my internet service provider. The comic was a side project to my cyberpet adoption agency. I was working with a lot of inspirations at the time. I had been watching anime like *Slayers* at a friend's house after school on Fridays, plus playing lots of video games that I had missed out on during the 90s.

Most relevant to the comic was my discovery of yaoi and shounen ai, which was slowly getting trotted out via such channels as doujinshi sales on ebay at the time, as well as a burgeoning western audience producing slash for stuff like *Harry Potter* and *Final Fantasy 7*. I was desperate to find LGBTQ media, and this all seemed very promising to me at the time. It was easy to get swept up in my friends' enthusiasm and excitement and I'm positive all of us were looking forward to this "renaissance" finally giving us the kind of media we'd always craved. Stories about queer folks, stories that weren't just the same heterosexual romance over and over again.

It was a weird time, with a lot of problems. I'm not sure I feel nostalgia for this time, because it wasn't altogether pleasant - it was hard to get your hands on things that weren't horrible, to be honest. Lots of yaoi/slash/BL material was, at their core, incredibly homophobic. Pedophilia was widely featured. Misogyny was bizarrely rampant. Most of my "yaoi friends" turned out to be also fatphobic and quite vocal about it. They were also self-loathing queers who dealt with their problems by abusing other queers, and it showed in their work. There wasn't really a full spectrum of queer representation at the time being produced by anyone - certainly there were no characters I could directly relate to myself. I realized that I was expecting way too much and became disillusioned with the idea that anyone would produce something I could engage with without being either insulted by it or totally embarrassed by it.

Fandom never felt particularly welcome to me, and I struggled to feel truly engaged with fanwork. I craved more freedom than fandom tended to offer. I wanted to work with characters were just factually queer, without question, without having to endlessly justify it - something that the slash and yaoi fandoms spent a great deal of time doing. It was fun, in a way, and nowadays I see people reveling freely in their head canons and such, and I think that's wonderful. But back then, the given trendy fanwork wasn't all that rewarding to make, and it felt very samey because of the constant retreading of "can queers even be characters?" I wanted something more, and I didn't want to deal with people bullying me for not representing characters the way they wanted them to be or for not naming my characters shit like "Raven Darkdirk" or whatever. So I decided to make my own story, with my own queer characters, and tackle various topics that had always interested me - like abuse, philosophical nonsense, and mythological things.

I don't really want to be too negative about fandoms. I know these are a positive experience for wide swathes of people. I know that a lot of queer people crave carefree and positive representation, so my comic, which has always been about fairly unpleasant and twisted queer people, doesn't really fulfill that need. But even now, I don't really see people talk about the problems unique to queer circles and the abuse that can occur within them. You have your call-out posts and such, but I'm talking about actual fictional works - dramas, tragedies, and

comedies - that explore the particular way problems occur within these kinds of communities. There still doesn't seem to be a lot of blunt talk about this stuff, because it's seen as "divisive of the queer community." I don't want to see stories where queer people tragically die for cishets to cry about forever, but I also feel like there is definitely a place for telling these stories as long as a lot of people are being silenced for the content of their experiences. It might seem ridiculous because Grayling is a fantasy story, but it was my way of indirectly representing a lot of experiences I had gone through myself, and exploring them in a safe way.

But! I also included a lot of the truly horrible yaoi tropes I was consuming at the time with extreme carelessness. I have to eat some crow when I write "I wanted to do something different" because I also produced something that was also the same old yaoi bullshit. But getting away from all that stuff was my goal with making a webcomic, and I believe that ultimately I succeeded to some extent. If Grayling was my ladder out of the yaoi sewer, then the lower rungs of that ladder are certainly smeared with muck.

A few people have written to me over the years about how reading my webcomic was a really fun experience for them, that it was an important or formative experience for their own queerness. It always gives me such joy to hear these things. Webcomics are truly wonderful in that they allow you to not only see a story grow, but the person behind it grow as well. It has been a truly precious experience, and I feel like writing these characters and feeling truly responsible to them made me a better author. It's just a work of fiction, but it allowed me to develop my own ethics and to establish and maintain my own standards at a time when I didn't have anyone to talk to about what I was going through. We had to find our own way, and I can only hope it continues to help other people out in some small capacity, even if it's just to entertain with its sheer weirdness.

I've annotated this arc with my comments and jokes, and tried to elucidate as much as possible what I remember of my choices for the comic. When I was 19, I was writing a lot based on my moods, so there are erratic and completely inappropriate mood changes in the plot. I was also making the story up as I went along, which might be why I would lean heavily on stupid yaoi tropes so often especially in the beginning. I'll try to impart more context for these instances as best I can to give a clearer picture moment to moment in the comic.

Thank you for reading, thank you for your continued support, and thanks to many of you who have been here for many years now. This annotated Grayling is dedicated to you!

All the best,

Arby

December 2016



I DELAYED IT AS MUCH AS I COULD..
I KNEW HE DIDN'T WANT TO BE DISTURBED
BUT I SIMPLY CANNOT WAIT ANY LONGER.
IT'S BEEN LONG ENOUGH. WE'RE NOT CHILDREN.

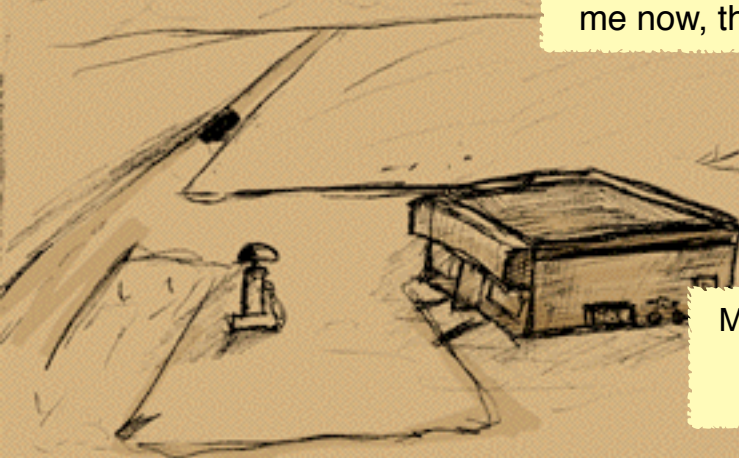
A strange beginning to the comic, but this is actually imagery I consider central to Fern's character.

He runs away and hides in remote and abandoned locations, because of his feelings about endangering others.

AND THERE'S BEEN ENOUGH
HIDE AND SEEK.

LEAVE THAT TO THE NECCOS....

Smoke narrating is very OOC to me now, though.



More OOC stuff to come!



I still like Smoke twirling his key ring around his finger...

QUITE A LOVELY SET UP YOU HAVE HERE, FERN.
VERY APPROPRIATE. INACCURATE BUT APPROPRIATE.

ISN'T LIVING IN A GAS STATION A LITTLE TOO MUCH FOR YOU TO RESIST?

The speech bubbles in these beginning pages are so primitive! I was scared and lazy about making "tails" on speech bubbles.

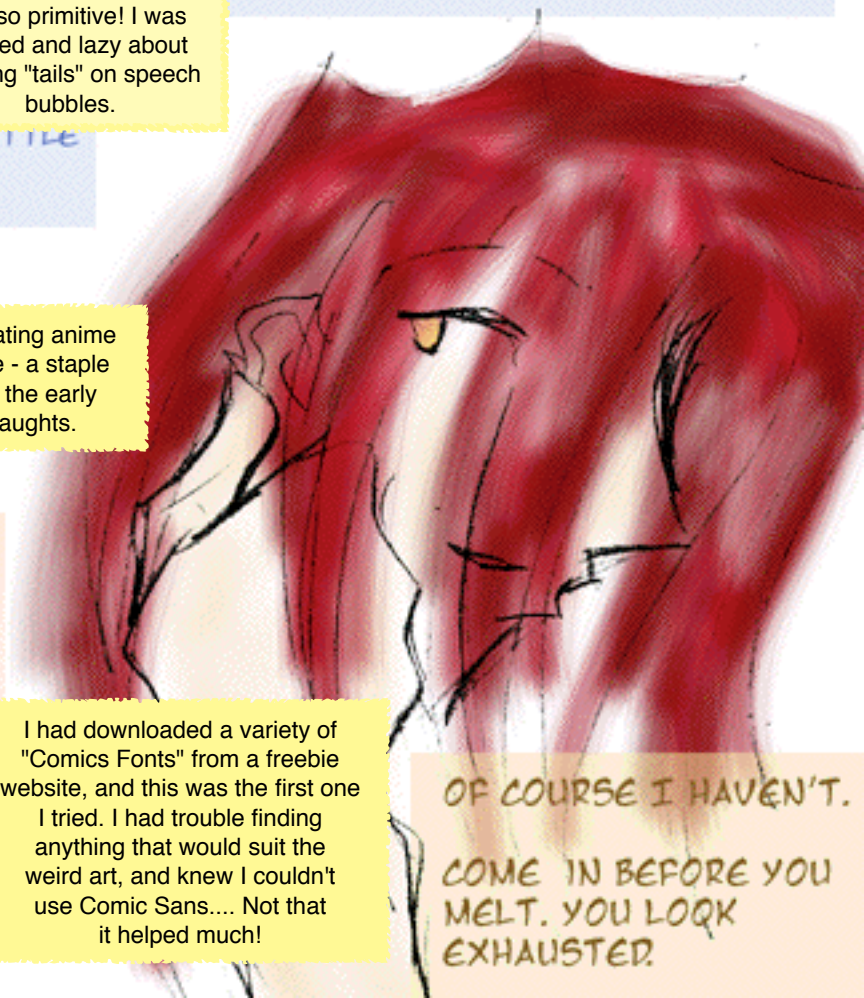
... AT LEAST I KNOW YOU HAVEN'T CHANGED AT ALL.



Floating anime eye - a staple of the early aughts.

JUST BECAUSE IT'S A GAS STATION DOESN'T MEAN THERE'S GAS. AND I DON'T RECALL INVITING YOU. EVER.

I had downloaded a variety of "Comics Fonts" from a freebie website, and this was the first one I tried. I had trouble finding anything that would suit the weird art, and knew I couldn't use Comic Sans.... Not that it helped much!



OF COURSE I HAVEN'T.

COME IN BEFORE YOU MELT. YOU LOOK EXHAUSTED.

I'M POSITIVE YOU DIDN'T COME OUT HERE JUST TO DRINK MY BEER. WHAT'S IN THE WORKS?

WELL...

YOU KNOW THERE'S ALWAYS SOMETHING. MID'S BEEN GONE ALMOST TWENTY YEARS. BEEN GONE WHAT, FIVE, SIX? IT'S BEEN QUIET. TOO QUIET. IN A WEEK, MID IS SCHEDULED TO COME.

These early pages were drawn in pencil, scanned, and then painted in Photoshop with a mouse. It shows, haha!

LET ME GUESS WE'RE ON THE VERGE OF ANOTHER CATASTROPHE?

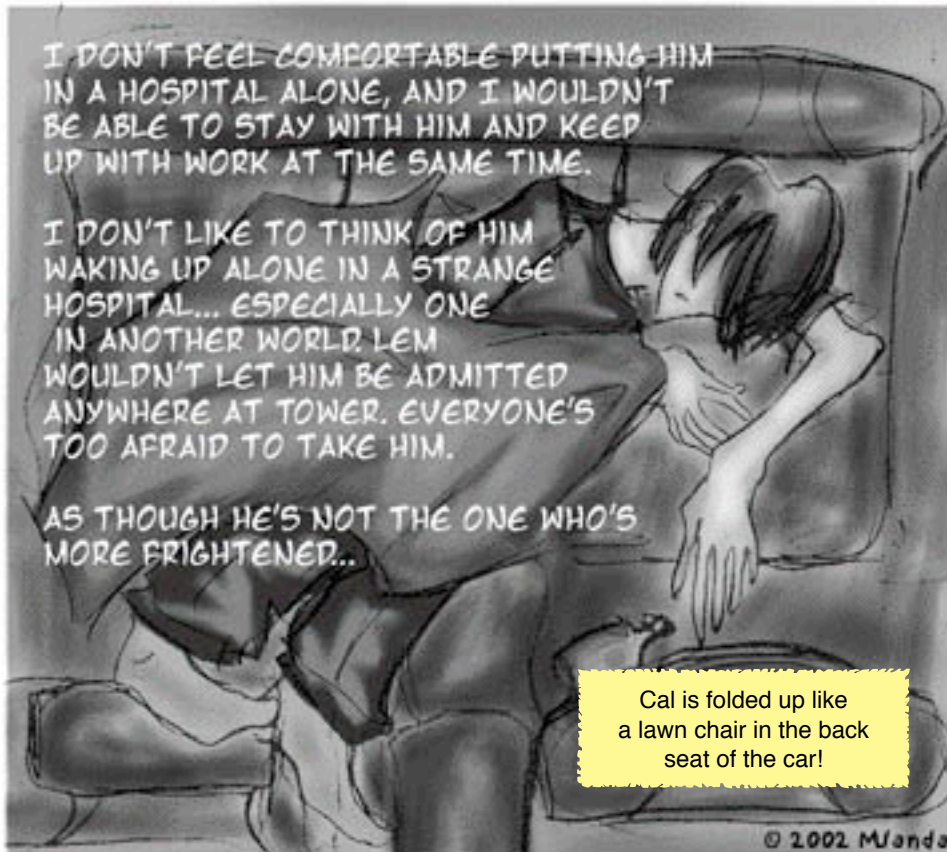
.... SOMETHING LIKE THAT.

CAL'S... BEEN ASLEEP. HE'S IN THE CAR RIGHT NOW... HE'S BEEN OUT TWO WEEKS OR SO.

THIS... DOESN'T SEEM LIKE NORMAL. I KNOW HE SLEEPS A GREAT DEAL, BUT THIS IS NEXT DOOR TO A COMA. HE DOESN'T STIRR. BARELY BREATHES. I THINK HE'S SERIOUSLY ILL.

COME ON... I'M SURE IT'S NOT THAT BAD. THEN AGAIN...

THEN AGAIN, IT COULD BE SOMETHING OF OVERWHELMING IMPORTANCE.




I DON'T FEEL COMFORTABLE PUTTING HIM
IN A HOSPITAL ALONE, AND I WOULDN'T
BE ABLE TO STAY WITH HIM AND KEEP
UP WITH WORK AT THE SAME TIME.

I DON'T LIKE TO THINK OF HIM
WAKING UP ALONE IN A STRANGE
HOSPITAL... ESPECIALLY ONE
IN ANOTHER WORLD. LEM
WOULDN'T LET HIM BE ADMITTED
ANYWHERE AT TOWER. EVERYONE'S
TOO AFRAID TO TAKE HIM.

AS THOUGH HE'S NOT THE ONE WHO'S
MORE FRIGHTENED...


Cal is folded up like
a lawn chair in the back
seat of the car!

© 2002 Mjanda



BUT DOES
HE REALLY NEED IT?
WHAT COULD A
DO, BESIDES POKE
HIM? MAYBE
JUST WAIT F
TO RUN ITS C

I had a lot of trouble back in these days
figuring out why godlike people who can
teleport would even need a car. I'm sure I
would change this scene significantly if I were
to do it now, but I was trying to introduce
magical ideas more gradually. I would jerk
between being too scared to introduce ideas
that I thought might be confusing, to being too
impatient and rushing through stuff with no
explanation. Pacing! It's important!



HE BAD
N'T JUST
E HOSPITAL
ST WATCH
WHILE WE
AID AND
ELSE.



DO YOU EVER
LISTEN?!
WHAT HAVE I
BEEN SAYING?!

WELL YOU KNOW HOW
YOU ALWAYS
EXAGERRATE!

~pure anime
magic~

AND SO THE INTREPID EXPLORERS SET OUT TO SEARCH FOR A FRIENDLY CITY. (IN OTHER WORDS, SOMEWHERE WHERE NOBODY KNOWS THEM) FACING SUCH CHALLENGES AS...

TRAFFIC JAMS...

happy because he likes car rides n_n

FERN'S POTENT
(NOT TO MENTION ILLOGICAL)
ROAD RAGE...

The narration font
may be comic
sans

THAT ASSHOLE JUST CUT US OFF!

FERN...
HE HAD THE RIGHT OF WAY...

DO YOU THINK I GIVE
A DAMN?! I'LL MURDER
THE BASTARD!

Fern wearing a headband was such a bizarre element of his design early on. I hated drawing it, I hated the way it looked, but headbands were such a thing in late 90s anime, I thought it was a good idea for some reason. I abandoned it quickly and never went back to it. It's actually funny looking at these early comics and realizing how quickly Fern's hair changed from one strange problem to another.

it's a car, really! ;.;

I KNOW YOU DON'T LIKE
THE IDEA, BUT THERE'S
A HOSPITAL RIGHT
NEAR HERE THAT
SEEMS GOOD
ENOUGH.

.....ALL RIGHT....

They casually go to Arduc in one panel! The car was supposed to be magic in some way, but I did not go into it at all. I wanted to quickly get to the yaoi boy hand-holding, or whatever I had in mind.

OR PARKING... WHERE
THE FUCK ARE
PARKING SPACES
IN THIS BURG?!

NOW
WHAT TO DO...
HE'S NOT VERY
HEAVY BUT I CAN'T
DO THIS
ALL NIGHT.

LOCATION IS
ALSO PRETTY
CONVENIENT

I remember being annoyed with this drawing of Cal, but keeping it because his hair came out nice.

NOT LIKE WE HAVE
A CHOICE AT THIS
POINT...

EVENTUALLY, THEY REACHED A SUITABLE DESTINATION IN A FOREIGN WORLD SMOKE RAN ACROSS THROUGH THE COMPUTER. ALTHOUGH ADVANCED, NO ONE IN THIS WORLD HAD ANY KNOWLEDGE OF FAIDIA.

In the subway...

WHAT A LOVELY GARBAGE PUMP THIS IS.
WHY DON'T YOU WAIT HERE WITH HIM.
I SAW ONE OF THOSE PHONE THINGS
AWHILE BACK. MAYBE I CAN CALL UP
A HOSPITAL OR WHATEVER.
NOT LIKE WE'LL BE ABLE TO FIND
IT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FUCKING
NIGHT...

YOUR SOUNDLESS
ENTHUSIASM GIVES
ME GREAT HOPE.
ENIGMA

EXIT
→

SIGH

I DON'T REMEMBER...
FEELING THIS TIRED IN A
LONG WHILE....

I WISH I COULD JUST..
SHUT OFF THE WORLD...

I think at this point I
downloaded some
Photoshop brushes to try
and give the comic more
texture.

Very wangsty
for Smoke...

JUST...
A FEW MINUTES...

WHILST SITTING THERE IN A GREASY, STINKY PHONE BOOTH, I GOT TO THINKING...GEEZ, I MUST BE REALLY EXACERBATING THIS SITUATION WITH MY IRRITATING BEHAVIOR. SMOKE REALLY DOESN'T DESERVE THIS, ESPECIALLY NOW WHEN HE HAS SO MUCH TO DEAL WITH...

I KNOW IT TAXES YOUR PATIENCE TO DEAL WITH ME CONSTANTLY... I DON'T MAKE SINCERE ATTEMPTS TO CURB MY OWN BEHAVIOR, WHICH I KNOW MUST BE FRUSTRATING..

BUT IF I HAD ANY IDEA THAT YOU WERE GOING TO **LOSE** CAL, I WOULDN'T HAVE **BOTHERED!**

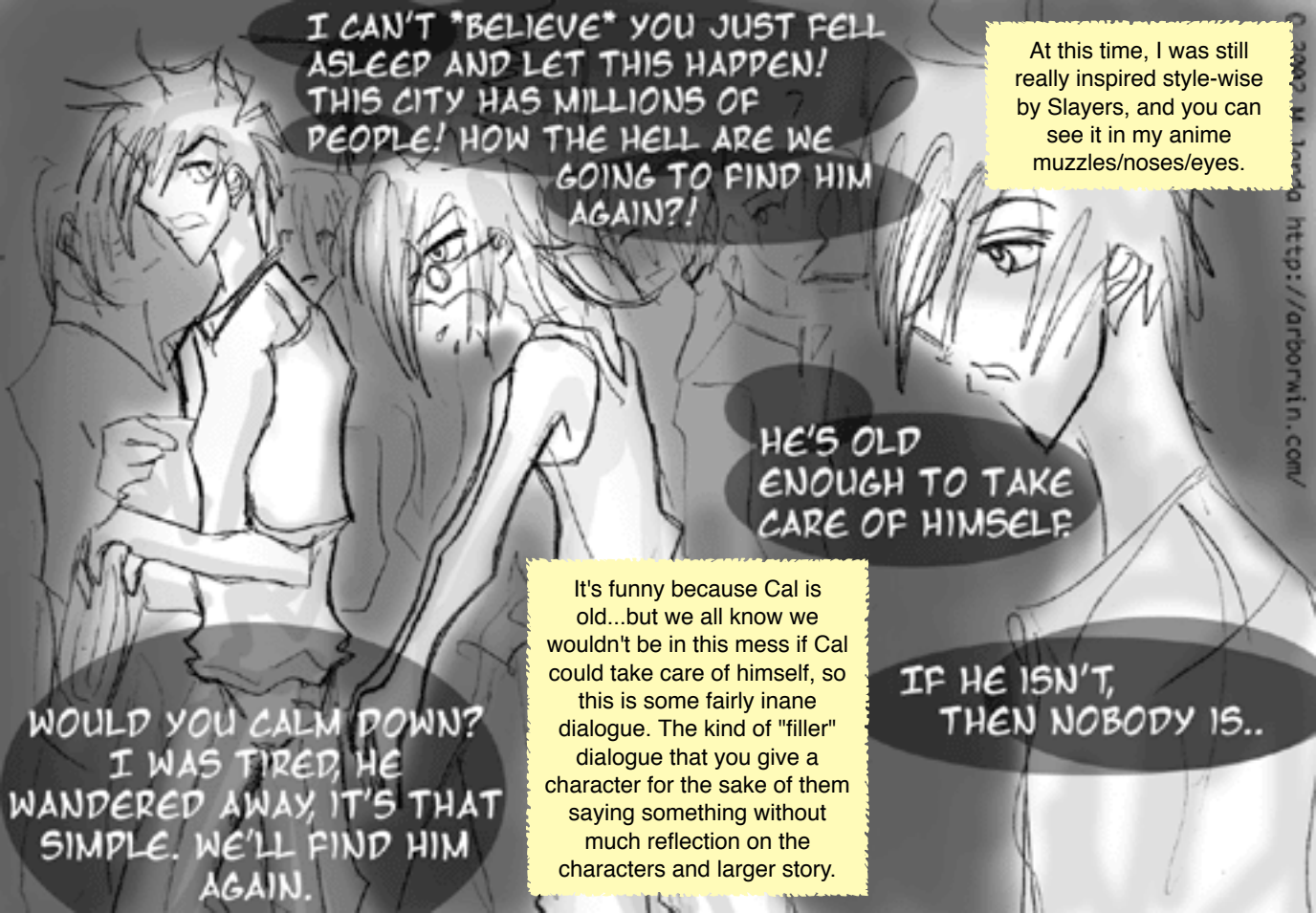
Grayling's first ... joke?

I was very attached to drawing the "popping vein" anime symbol on Fern's hand, because I wasn't drawing any foreheads in these days, and Fern had all that hair.

STOP BEING A BITCH AND HELP ME LOOK FOR HIM.

AND SO, AFTER GETTING OFF THE BANANA-SHAPED THING I USED TO TALK WITH THE HOSPITAL, I MADE A PERSONAL VOW TO APOLOGIZE TO YOU AND TRY MY VERY HARDEST TO BE HELPFUL AND KIND FOR THE REST OF THE TRIP

This notation in the corner is a credit for the PS brushes I used.



I CAN'T *BELIEVE* YOU JUST FELL
ASLEEP AND LET THIS HAPPEN!
THIS CITY HAS MILLIONS OF
PEOPLE! HOW THE HELL ARE WE
GOING TO FIND HIM
AGAIN?!

At this time, I was still
really inspired style-wise
by Slayers, and you can
see it in my anime
muzzles/noses/eyes.

HE'S OLD
ENOUGH TO TAKE
CARE OF HIMSELF.

It's funny because Cal is
old...but we all know we
wouldn't be in this mess if Cal
could take care of himself, so
this is some fairly inane
dialogue. The kind of "filler"
dialogue that you give a
character for the sake of them
saying something without
much reflection on the
characters and larger story.

WOULD YOU CALM DOWN?
I WAS TIRED, HE
WANDERED AWAY, IT'S THAT
SIMPLE. WE'LL FIND HIM
AGAIN.

IF HE ISN'T,
THEN NOBODY IS..

Meanwhile....

BOOKSTORE

"FROZEN TEARS:
LIFE AMONG THE
SUBURBAN SNOWMEN"
BY AMBER D. HEARTLONG.
OH, THAT'S
DEFINITELY A
MUST HAVE -IF I
WANTED TO KILL
MYSELF, THAT IS.

A knock-off
Daria? Oh
boy!

I did want Morse to be a relatively normal teenager, and grow in the course of the story. Her immaturity matches the elementals' at first, but because she's a mortal, she actually grows up.



...I'VE ONLY
BEEN HERE A
COUPLE OF
MINUTES AND IT
FEELS LIKE
SOMEONE IS
STARING AT
ME....

OH MY GOD
I'VE LOST
MY BAG! WHERE
IS IT?! I JUST
HAD IT A SECOND
AGO!

This panel of Morse
actually looks really
good! I kind of wish
I'd done more dot-
eyes back then, and
not embarrassed
myself so much with
the terrible big anime
googly eyes. But I
love anime, and was
bent on emulating it a
certain way at the
time.

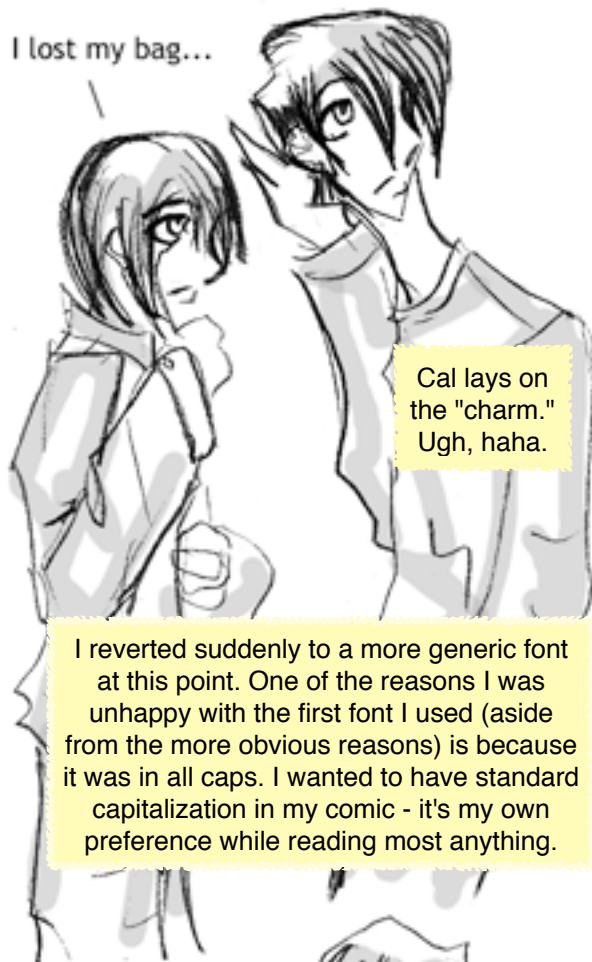
I MUST REMAIN CALM.
I HAVE EVERYTHING IN
THAT BAG. IT MUST
BE SOMEWHERE. I'LL FIND
IT. I WILL FIND IT. I WILL.

PARDON ME, YOUNG
LADY.. ARE YOU ALL
RIGHT?

It's funny looking back at
my own art at this caliber.
My faces are all the same,
and I can't even keep hair
lengths and styles distinct.
These would be problems
for a long while.

This much is still true - Cal loves
approaching people in
bookstores! This is how he met
Asne. He's "attracted" to Morse
here because he feels a magical
connection having to do with
Rhodes. He knows she has
something to do with Faidia.

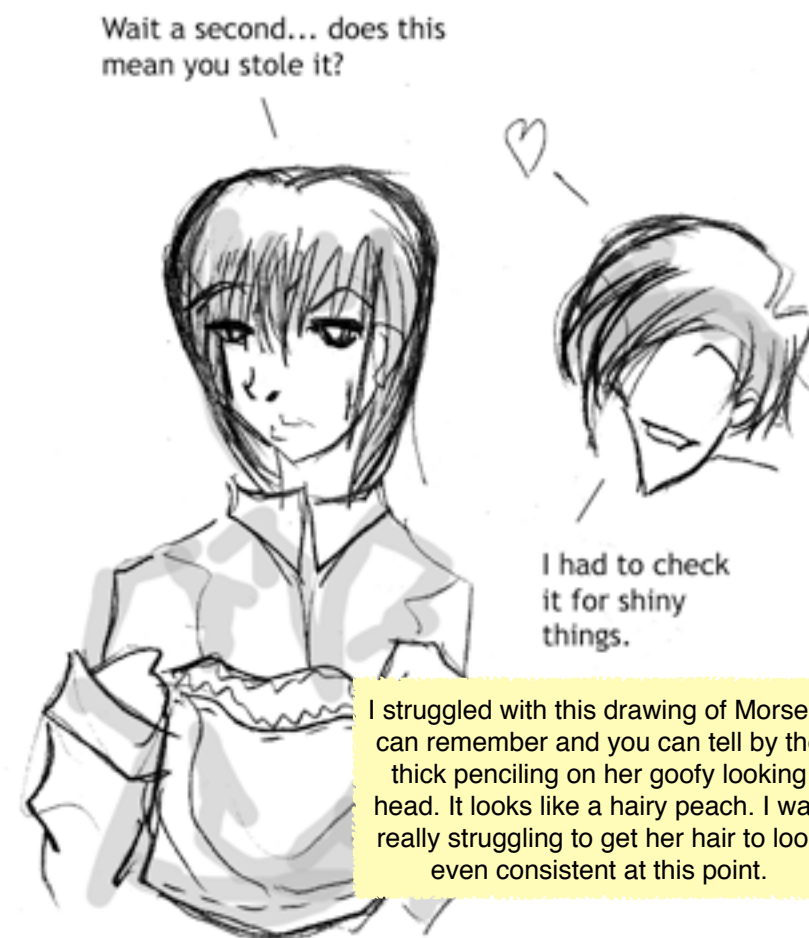
But also, Cal's a creeper. He doesn't
bother to think of a more appropriate
way to approach the situation.



I reverted suddenly to a more generic font at this point. One of the reasons I was unhappy with the first font I used (aside from the more obvious reasons) is because it was in all caps. I wanted to have standard capitalization in my comic - it's my own preference while reading most anything.



This goofy chibi of Morse actually always felt inspired by Calvin and Hobbes to me, and does to this day.

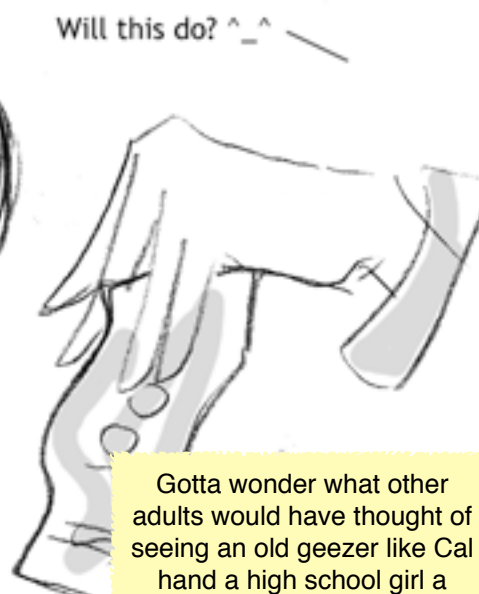


I struggled with this drawing of Morse! I can remember and you can tell by the thick penciling on her goofy looking head. It looks like a hairy peach. I was really struggling to get her hair to look even consistent at this point.



uh...normally people don't just take other peoples' things, you know

Er..well, I'll make it up to you... I think I have something in my pockets...



Will this do? ^_^

Gotta wonder what other adults would have thought of seeing an old geezer like Cal hand a high school girl a hundred dollar bill...



I can't believe you put all our travel money in Cal's pockets.

Ha! I still like this stupid joke.

I thought it would be best if we kept all our important things in one place...

I can't wait to get home and away out of this mortal-infested cess pool. These people can't even stifle their own natural putrid reek and here they make

machines to produce even more..

Fern's nasty remarks about mortals are not something I would repeat if I were to redo this scene, but the sentiment isn't entirely out of place. Fern has a lot of self-loathing that he would have expressed with some degree of anti-mortal sentiment. But, this is too vitriolic and not as subtle as I would have preferred. I was struggling to convey various attitudes elementals have about mortals (Fern wants nothing to do with them because he might cause them harm versus Cal actively wanting to toy with mortals to a certain degree, etc) and hadn't completely thought out Fern's "arc" yet. In the current comic you can certainly see how Fern saying these things contradicts his origins & initial attitude towards mortals!

Smoke is truly magical indeed if he can GO TO ANOTHER DIMENSION AND USE AN ATM. Some of these things are a bit tongue-in-cheek on the part of my younger self not fussing over every little thing, but I'm not sure this joke particularly lands if their circumstances are explained in a single panel like 5 pages ago...

Being around all these people gives me the heebie-jeebies. They live in these little cardboard houses and drive tincan cars and think they'll live forever through their fat, stupid, lazy progeny...

(he can go on like this for a while)

This dialogue of Fern's in particular reeks of the angsty, self-inflated, weebish teenage woes I had at the time. Tell it to Hot Topic, Fern.

I'm tired. Let's stop for the night.

Fern's parachute pants are slowly being born before our eyes in these pages.

Smoke having to be the "mature" one who takes care of the "uke" was definitely a silly yaoi motif I had absorbed at the time and thought was appealing, for some reason. It's true that Fern has a lot of executive dysfunction, but this isn't exactly written with that in mind.

I'm not going any further, and I'm not sleeping on the street. You'll sleep here and like it.

....No. I hate hotels.

Do you allow pets?

Settle down Fern.. I'm sure
he's in a safe place...

Unless he fainted again..
What if he's in the gutter somewhere..
Or someone hurt him or kidnapped him or
any MANNER of things...

Woof, this background
could have used some
TLC!

Sleep's not
going to be too good tonight...

Just a general
comment from
the tv stand.

can't you tell I love perspective? T_T;

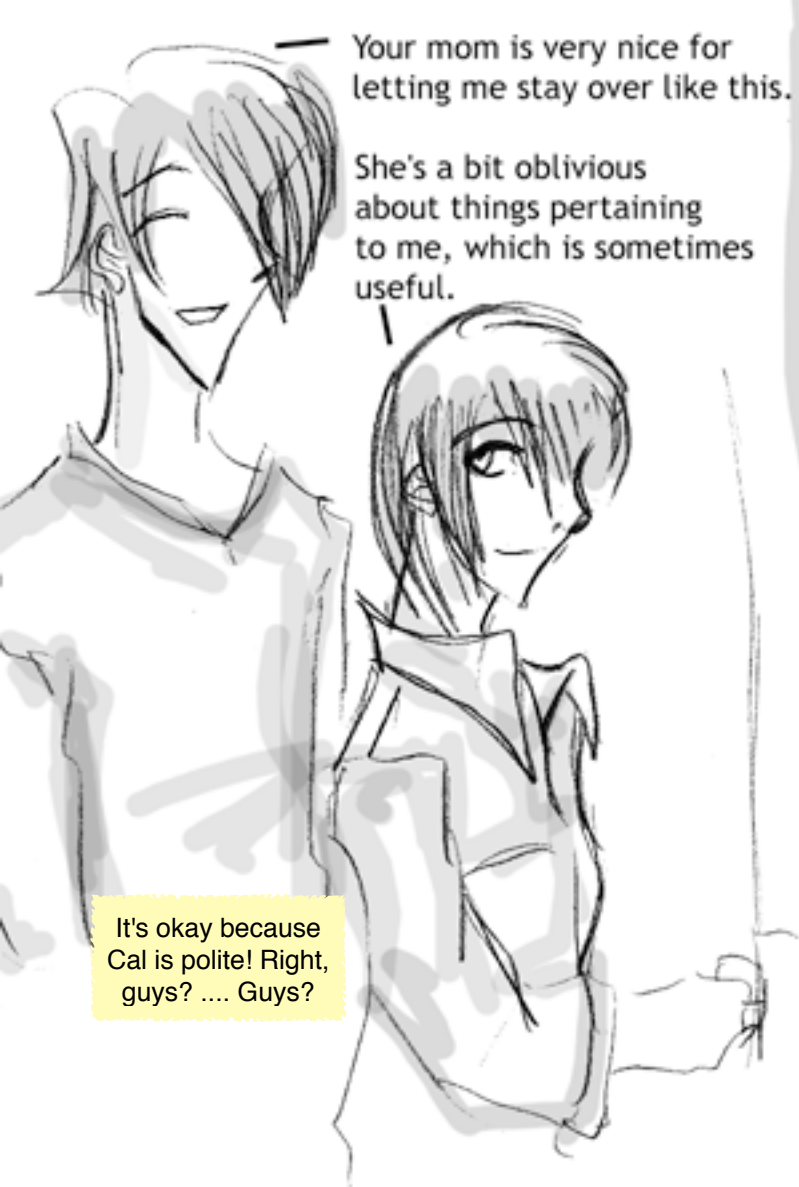
Mom, this is Cal, a random guy I met
in the bookstore who is willing to give
me lots of money for no particular
reason.

Very pleased
to meet you,
Morse's
mom!

Oh, and
he's nice
too.

It's been
so long
since Morse
made a new
friend!

Morse's Mom allowing the story to go on, for
some reason. This "gag" was intended to show
that Morse's family situation is not so hot, but I
was also just impatient to get to "the good
stuff," and parents were just so uncool and
annoying because I was 19 or whatever. Now
I'm like, "damn woman, do not let this strange
man come into your home." Might have been a
bit inspired by the Invisible Boy's dad in the
movie Mystery Men. I love that bit.



— Your mom is very nice for letting me stay over like this.

She's a bit oblivious about things pertaining to me, which is sometimes useful.

It's okay because Cal is polite! Right, guys? Guys?



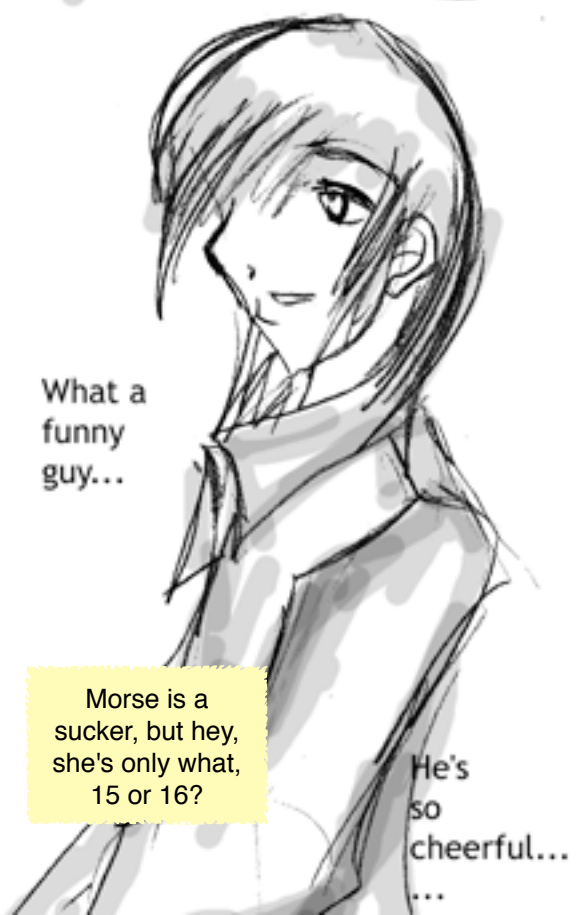
— Well, still, she's a very kind lady.

Uh huh. Here's the guest room, you can sleep here.



Good night!

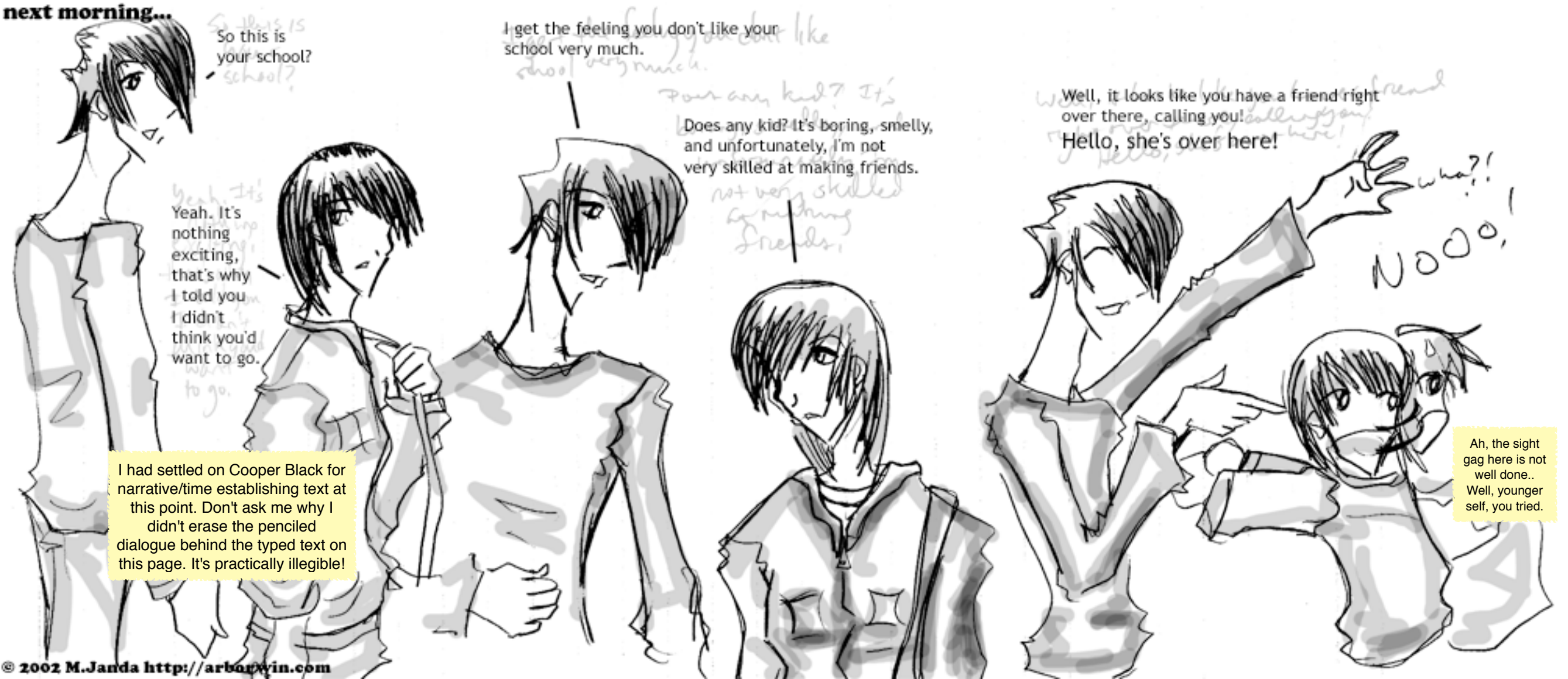
Night! — See you in the morning light!



What a funny guy...

Morse is a sucker, but hey, she's only what, 15 or 16?

He's so cheerful...
...



next morning...

So this is
your school?
- school?

I get the feeling you don't like
your school very much.
- school very much.

Does any kid? It's boring, smelly,
and unfortunately, I'm not
very skilled at making friends.
- Does any kid? It's
not very skilled
at making
friends.

Well, it looks like you have a friend right
over there, calling you!
Hello, she's over here!

Who?!
Nooo!

I had settled on Cooper Black for
narrative/time establishing text at
this point. Don't ask me why I
didn't erase the penciled
dialogue behind the typed text on
this page. It's practically illegible!

Ah, the sight
gag here is not
well done..
Well, younger
self, you tried.

Heavens, what's so bad about him?

Fletcher is a pathetic geek who thinks that because I don't completely ignore him like other girls, I'm his emotional toilet. He always comes to me with his stupid problems.

He is ALWAYS around, he never leaves me alone! And if I try to avoid him, he goes into a misogynistic rant about how all girls hate him. Like it's my fault he has such an annoying personality. He seriously needs to grow up. I don't know why he's so desperate for my company, anyway. He doesn't let me get a word in edge-wise.

Well, I can certainly see how that might be irritating. But surely he's not all that bad.. he must let you talk

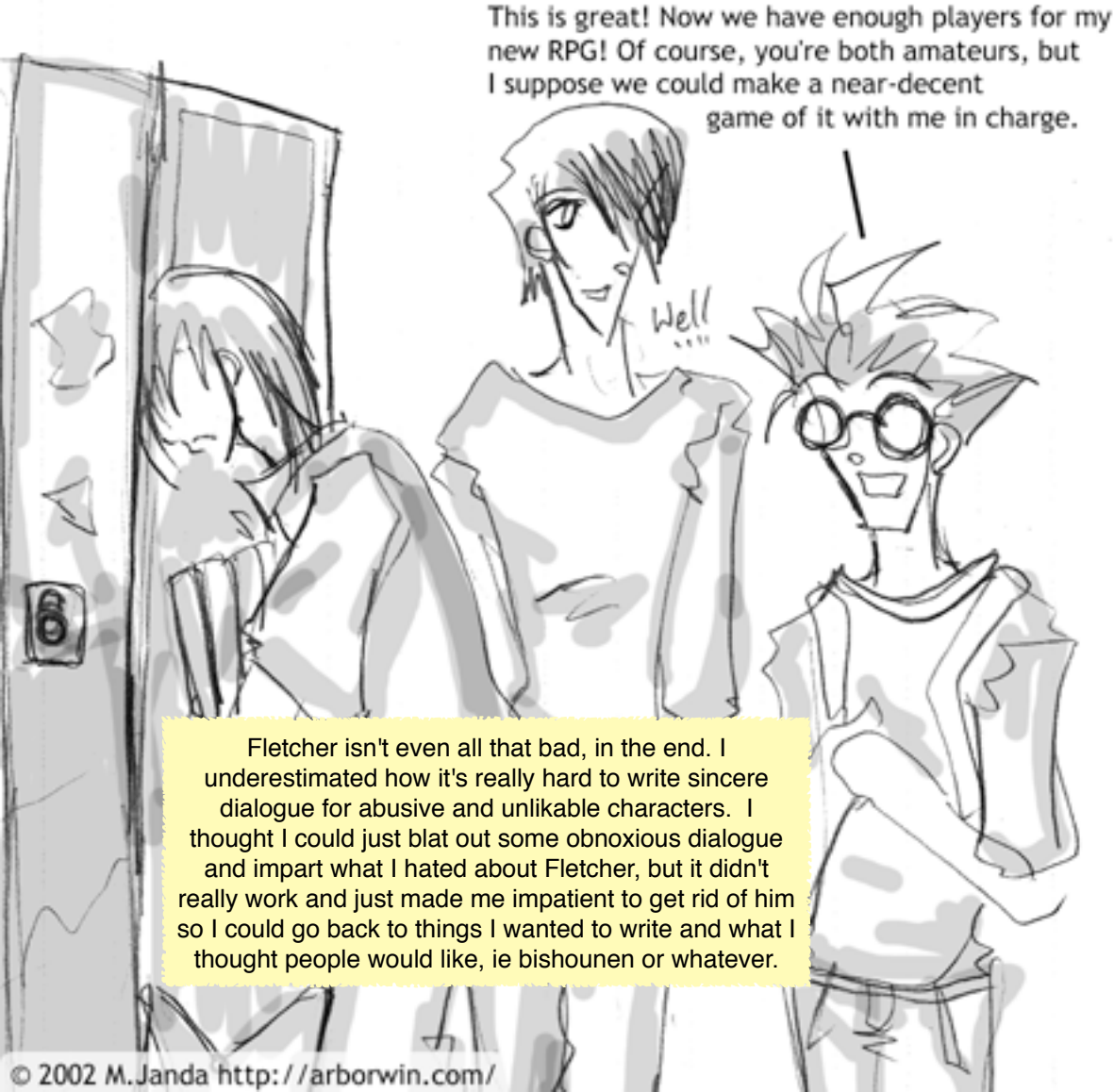
Yeah, but his usual response is "Why are you talking?" or an entire lecture about everything I had just said and stupid. As far as he's concerned he's the only person on the planet.

Fletcher the cringe machine.

Eating disorder "joke" is def not making a comeback.

Hi Morse!
Who's the anorexic guy?

This was before Tumblr & the internet in general was giving so much attention to feminism and misogyny. My comic was my only outlet for talking about these things! I couldn't even talk about it around my friends - we had to self-censor or face being cut out of social situations. It was a pretty bleak time. We make fun of The Discourse nowadays, but I would never go back to these times when I could only talk about these things by shoddily inserting a crap character into my story. I could have done a much better job depicting a villainous character like Fletcher, but I wasn't prepared to - I just wanted to make a personal rant and then move on quickly.



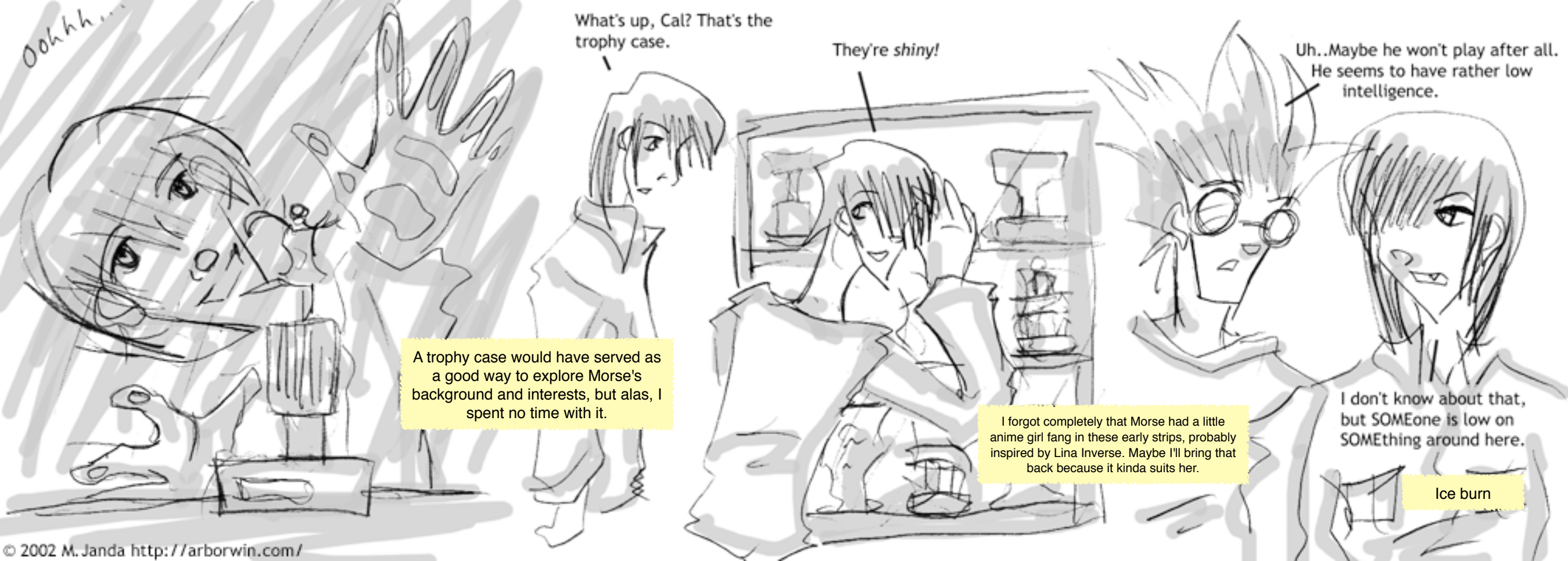
This is great! Now we have enough players for my new RPG! Of course, you're both amateurs, but I suppose we could make a near-decent game of it with me in charge.

I told you once and I'll tell you again, I'm not playing your stupid games anymore, and Cal isn't either.

Well I understand that you might be bitter about it because you're so bad at it but ...

Fletcher isn't even all that bad, in the end. I underestimated how it's really hard to write sincere dialogue for abusive and unlikable characters. I thought I could just blat out some obnoxious dialogue and impart what I hated about Fletcher, but it didn't really work and just made me impatient to get rid of him so I could go back to things I wanted to write and what I thought people would like, ie bishounen or whatever.

Now, of course, I relish drawing horrible characters, and capturing sincere abusive sentiments in dialogue. I look back on Fletcher and I can see how half-hearted my attempt was - my teenage self didn't want to think about "Bad Things," simply complain and move on to "the good stuff." It was indulgent and yet not indulgent enough.



Oohhh...

What's up, Cal? That's the trophy case.

They're shiny!

Uh..Maybe he won't play after all. He seems to have rather low intelligence.

A trophy case would have served as a good way to explore Morse's background and interests, but alas, I spent no time with it.

I forgot completely that Morse had a little anime girl fang in these early strips, probably inspired by Lina Inverse. Maybe I'll bring that back because it kinda suits her.

I don't know about that, but SOMEone is low on SOMETHing around here.

Ice burn

What do we do now?

Nothing. This is just homeroom. You're supposed to sit still and be quiet. Like I can't do this at home.

...Amazing ...I can actually *feel* my will to live being slowly leeched away...

An abrupt cut to the school room, with absolutely no forewarning, and fresh attempts at speech bubbles.

two hours later...

Your health teacher did not seem to appreciate my lecture on genetically altered cockroach zygotes.

This sequence doesn't make a whole lot of sense, but Cal IS trying to stay near Morse because of what he senses might be about to happen.

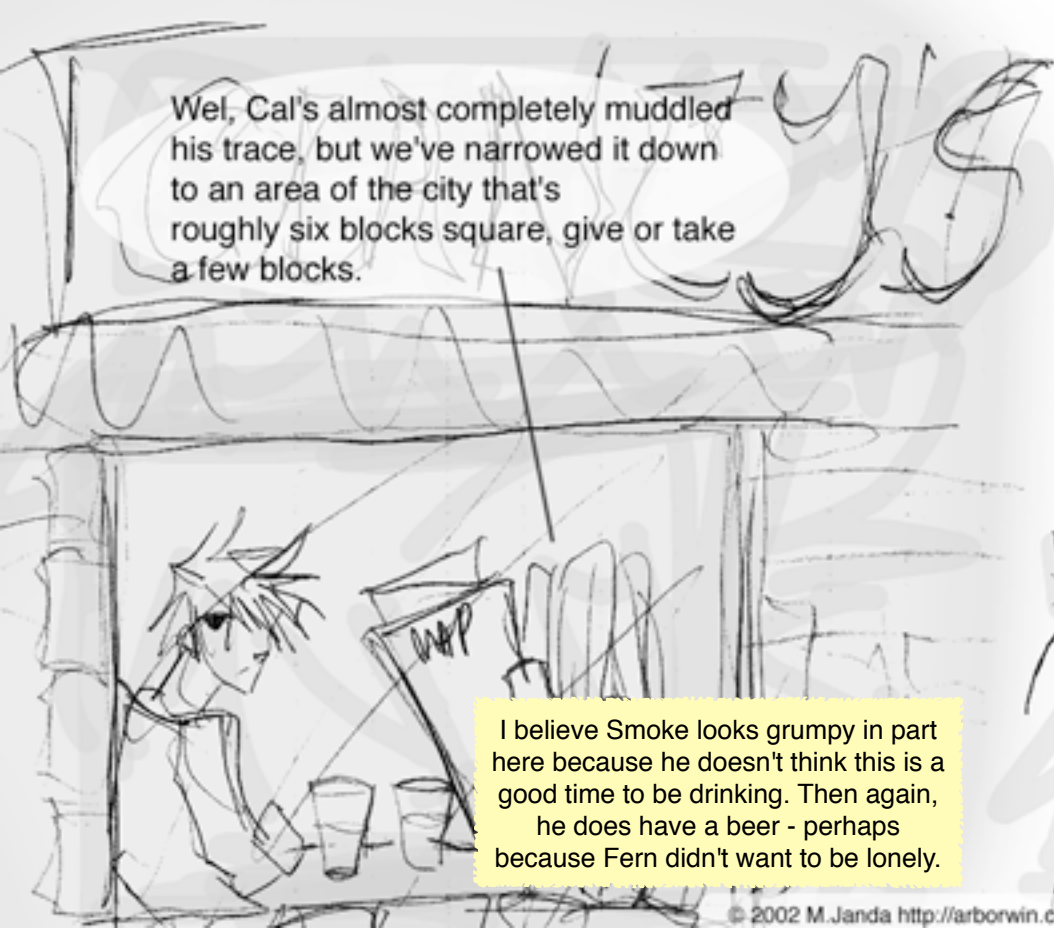
two more hours later...

Your biology teacher certainly got angry, didn't she? And just over a few frogs that came back to life! Where did she say we were going now? The principal's office?

My life is over.

Teachers should have been a lot more reluctant to let an adult man tag along to a school room, but whatever right? Cal is basically a fluffy anime mascot creature you can fit in a backpack!

Looking at this now, a very easy fix for this situation would have been to turn Cal into his crow form to tag along with her and hide in her bag. Boy, that would have worked great. Utilizing the elementals' animal forms is a huge weakness of mine.




Well, Cal's almost completely muddled his trace, but we've narrowed it down to an area of the city that's roughly six blocks square, give or take a few blocks.

I believe Smoke looks grumpy in part here because he doesn't think this is a good time to be drinking. Then again, he does have a beer - perhaps because Fern didn't want to be lonely.

It's fairly obvious he doesn't want to be found. We can't just go door to door and ask if he's there. There's thousands of people living in this one area.

But WHY doesn't he want us to find him is the question.. What the hell could he be doing in an urban residential area? There's nothing particularly interesting about it.

Well...you know Cal. It's normal for him to make absolutely no sense.



Mm hm.... Look, no hands!

..... I think you've had enough to drink...

Whacky! Zing! Duhoy!

dragging Fern home..
a formidable task
in itself

whheeeehehee... Shmoooke...

Mm.

D'you shee what I shee?

Mm?

This part definitely
starts to read like a
text roleplay log.

I think I could make Curtis' character work now, but I am frustrated with his existence in the old comic because for some reason I decided to give a lot of Fern's characterization and dialogue to him. At the time, I felt like creating and inserting a new character would let me get out information I was holding back, but instead it just meant I displaced it and took valuable time away from Fern's character. Oh well!

Enter Curtis the wasp boy, and a return to
"coloring" the comic.

Well, well. Callanerialians. I thought I
smelled something funny a moment ago.

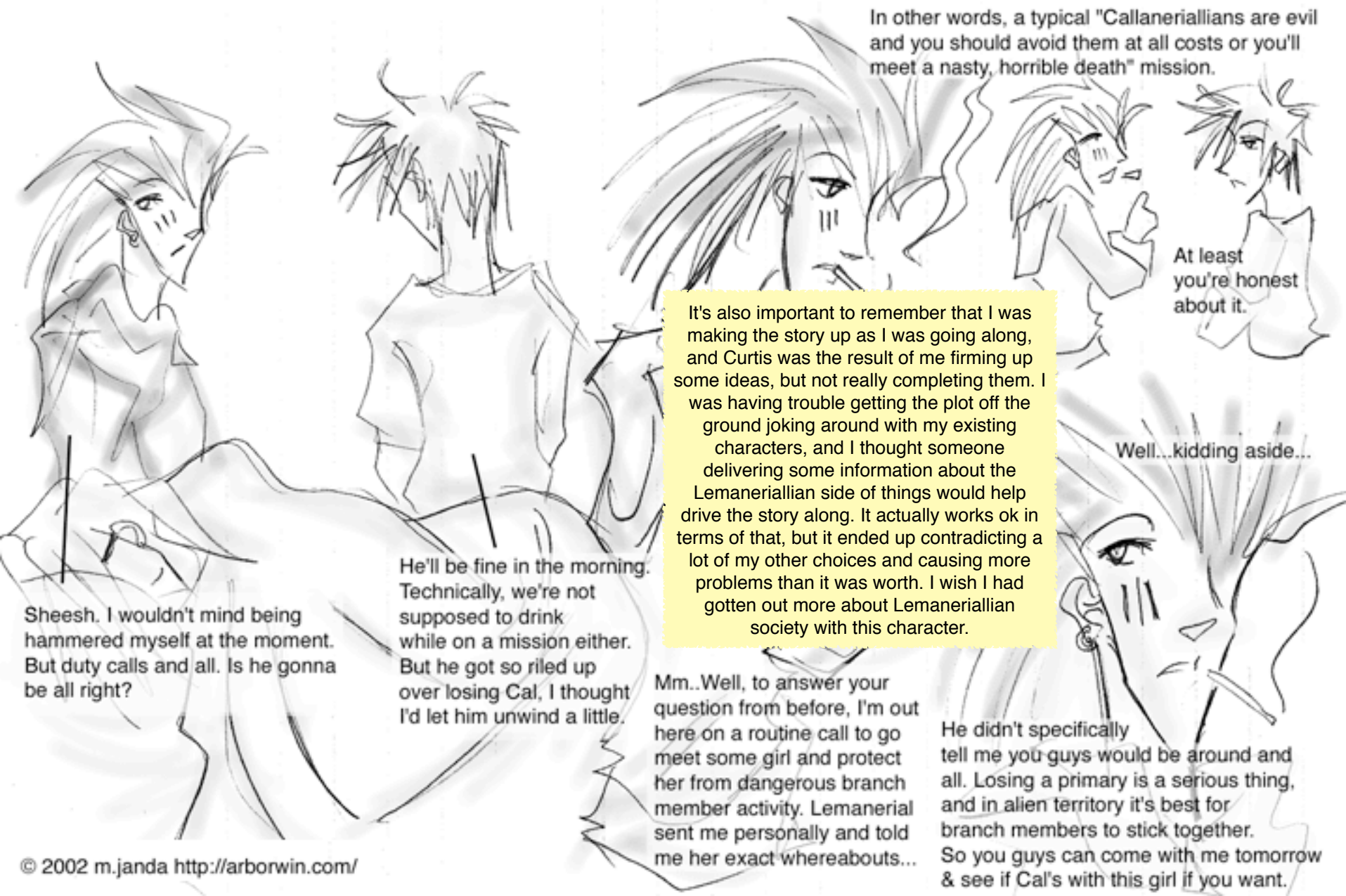
What brings you two losers to this
neck of the mortal woods?

Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm afraid Fern is
beyond provocation at the moment, Curtis.

hiiiiiiiiiiii
cuuuuurtiishhh.

Brace yourselves for lite
anime drunkenness. It's like
Fern drank a "can of juice"
and completely lost it.
Except you know it's been
like 8 beers and maybe a
whiskey or few

I'd get myself into trouble wanting to do anime tropes, but
also knowing what was wrong about them, AND being
incompetent at comedic timing and drawing in general, so
what came out could be truly bizarre.



In other words, a typical "Callanerialians are evil and you should avoid them at all costs or you'll meet a nasty, horrible death" mission.

At least you're honest about it.

It's also important to remember that I was making the story up as I was going along, and Curtis was the result of me firming up some ideas, but not really completing them. I was having trouble getting the plot off the ground joking around with my existing characters, and I thought someone delivering some information about the Lemaneriallian side of things would help drive the story along. It actually works ok in terms of that, but it ended up contradicting a lot of my other choices and causing more problems than it was worth. I wish I had gotten out more about Lemaneriallian society with this character.

Well...kidding aside...

Sheesh. I wouldn't mind being hammered myself at the moment. But duty calls and all. Is he gonna be all right?

He'll be fine in the morning. Technically, we're not supposed to drink while on a mission either. But he got so riled up over losing Cal, I thought I'd let him unwind a little.

Mm..Well, to answer your question from before, I'm out here on a routine call to go meet some girl and protect her from dangerous branch member activity. Lemanerial sent me personally and told me her exact whereabouts...

He didn't specifically tell me you guys would be around and all. Losing a primary is a serious thing, and in alien territory it's best for branch members to stick together. So you guys can come with me tomorrow & see if Cal's with this girl if you want.

**next
morning...!**

Hey. Question, professor. Why the hell is this asshole still around?

It was decided while you were incapacitated that we would go with him today with the possibility of finding Cal with his assistance.

I can't imagine why you think so negatively of me, Moranerial! Oh, perhaps it's how I always make sure to mention what a **LAME EXCUSE** for a secondary you are!

or how **ASHAMED** I would be if I had to even be in the same **BRANCH** as a smelly, drunk, irresponsible clod who slaughters innocent ch--

**SHUT.
UP.**

Gosh, this page is so forced and out of character for Curtis. Curtis was supposed to be low-class and coarse, but I didn't really know how to write him. He comes off as downright posh here. There's also threads of Final Fantasy 7's Zack about him, certainly. And for some reason, I thought it would be a good idea for him to flirt with Fern, even though I had no intention of that paying off, or even thought there was chemistry there. Weird.

Aww, short people are so cute when they're angry.

I don't care what so-called "information" he has, he annoys me and I want him to **GO AWAY**.

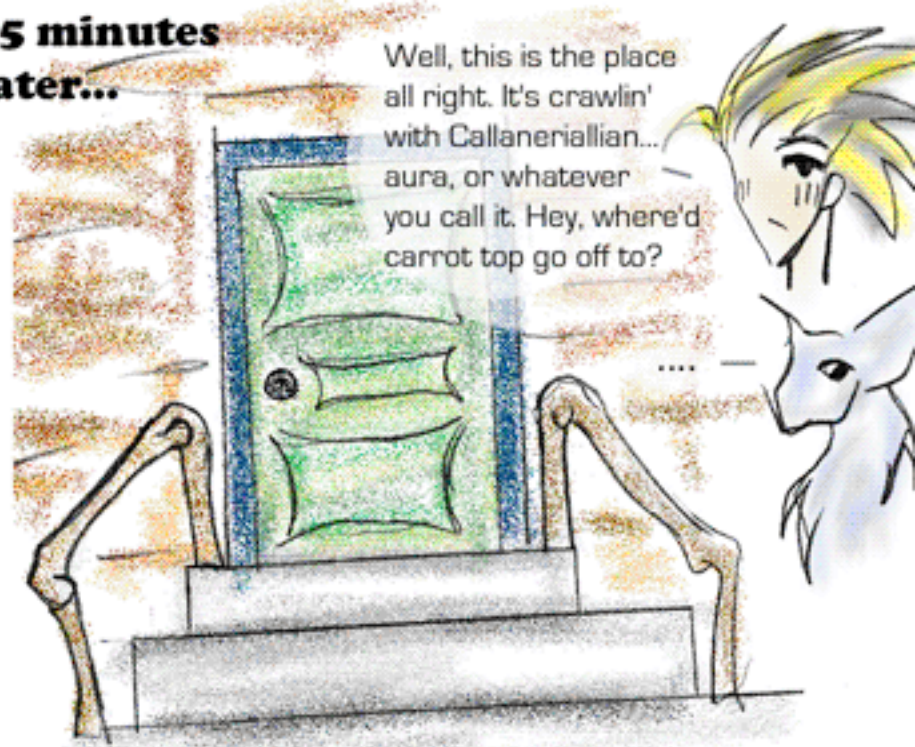
Smoke in his animal form, a melcey. He floats too! isn't he cute?
n_n

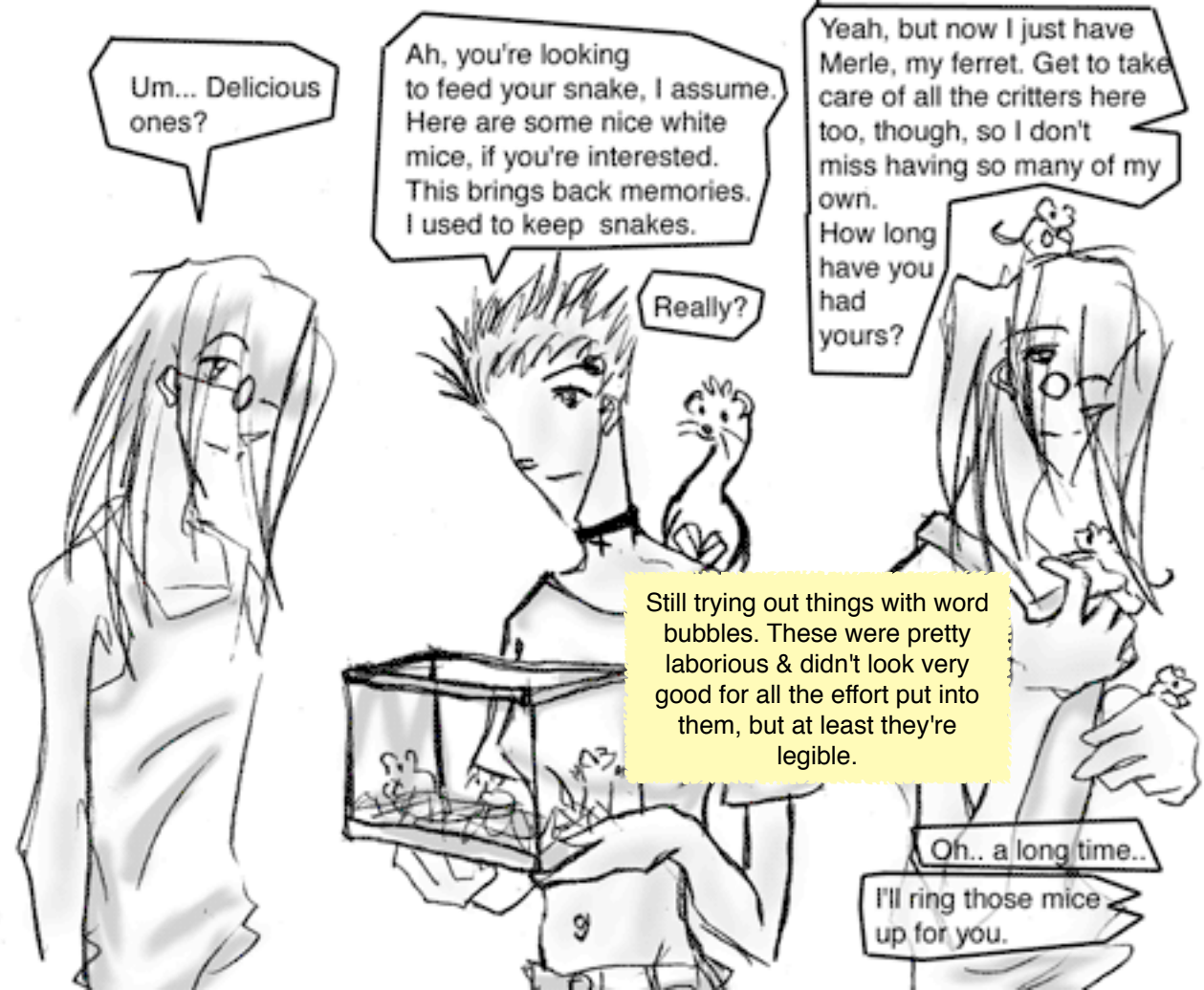
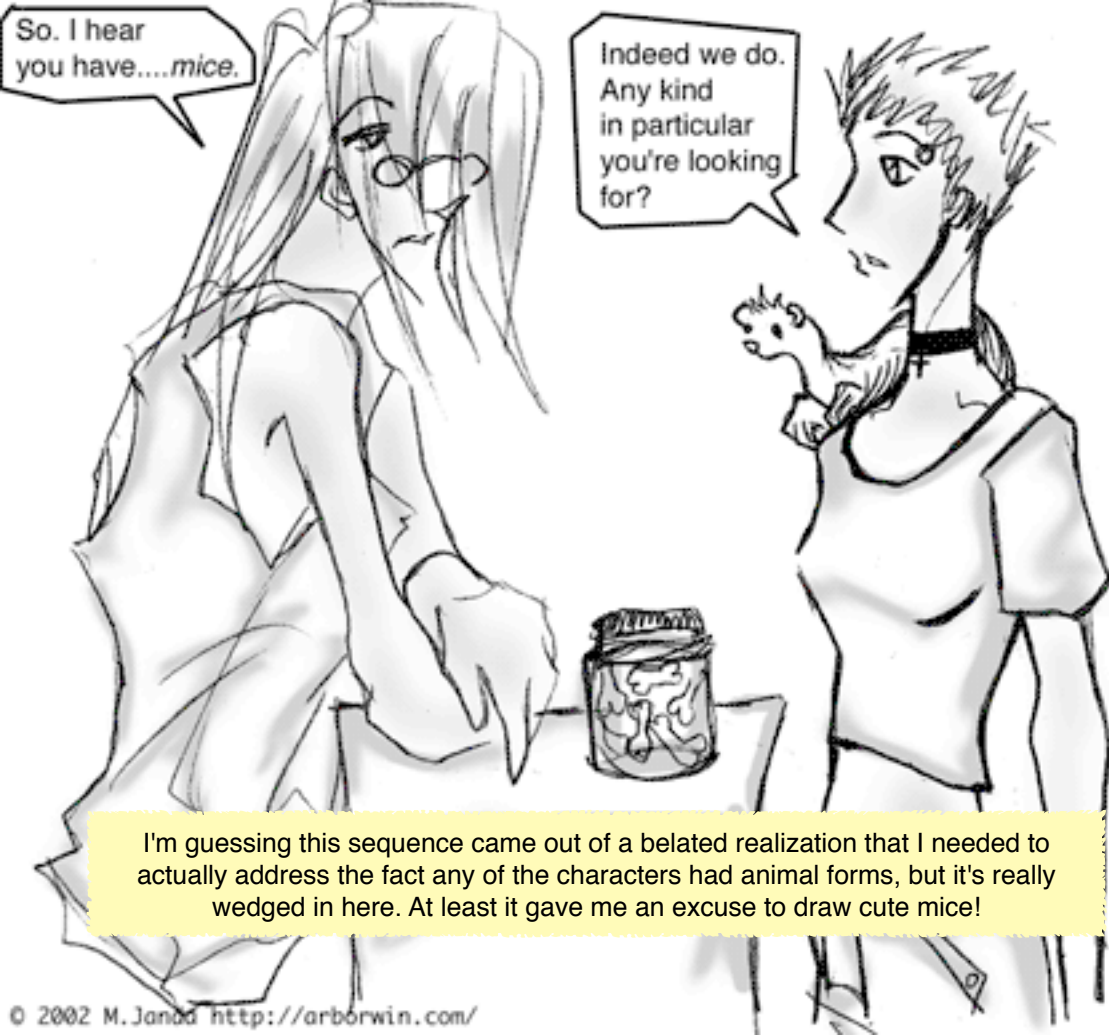
Be quiet.

When Fern is finished scattering your body parts, I'll be waiting over here.



**15 minutes
later...**





Well, that went better than I expected, for my first visit to the school office. The principal seemed mad at first but all of a sudden he went pretty quiet....

I thought he'd at least give me a lecture or whatever... He just said, "Go home."

I think this was supposed to hint that Cal exerted some kind of mind control over the principal, which is pretty insidious now that I think about it.

Maybe he didn't understand the problem.

What are we going to do now???

Well.. most of the time after school I go to the bookstore.. or the pet store.. it's right over there...

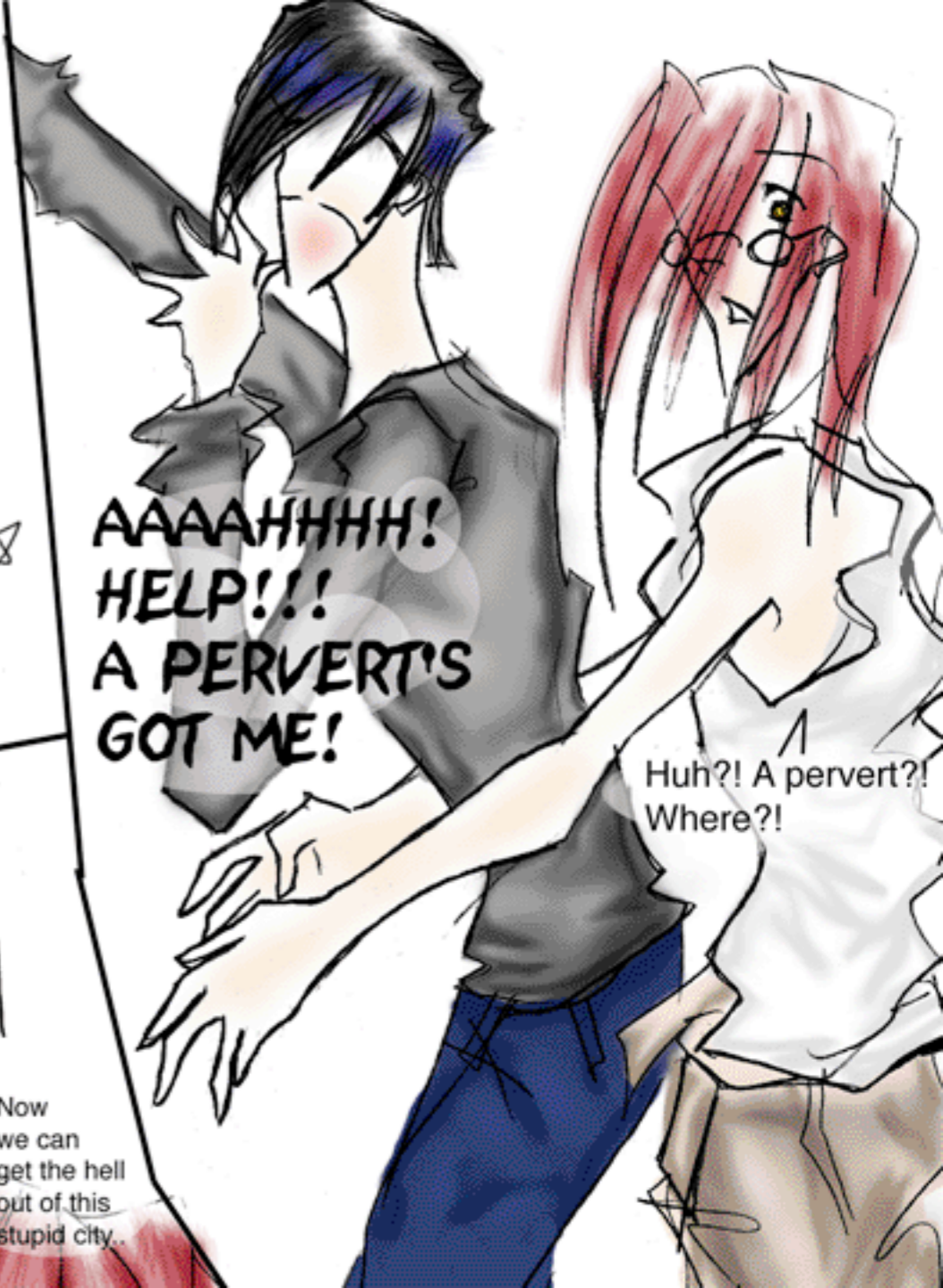
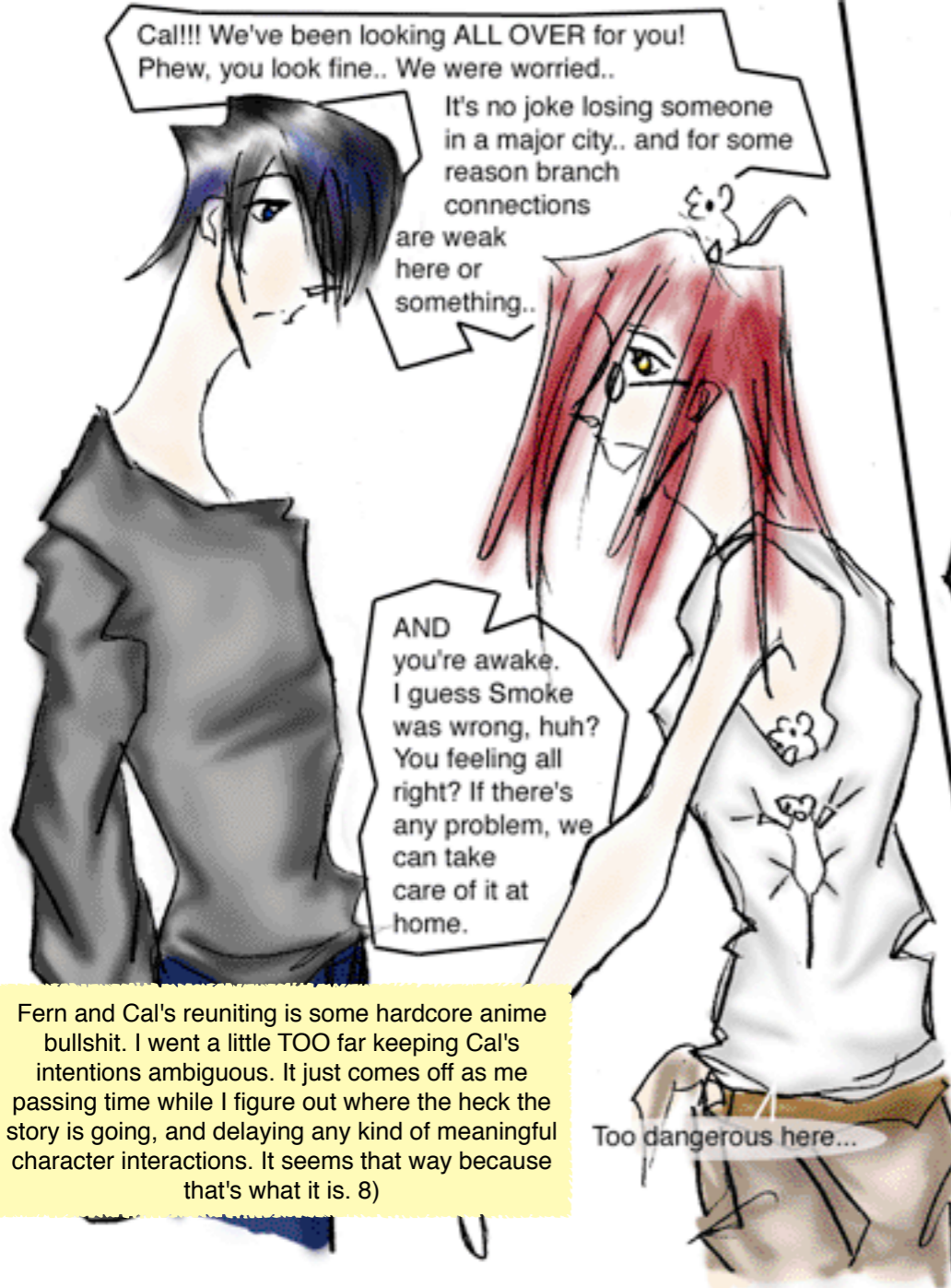
.....
Well I'll be damned. There he is, and he's headed straight towards me.

The game's afoot, Curtis.

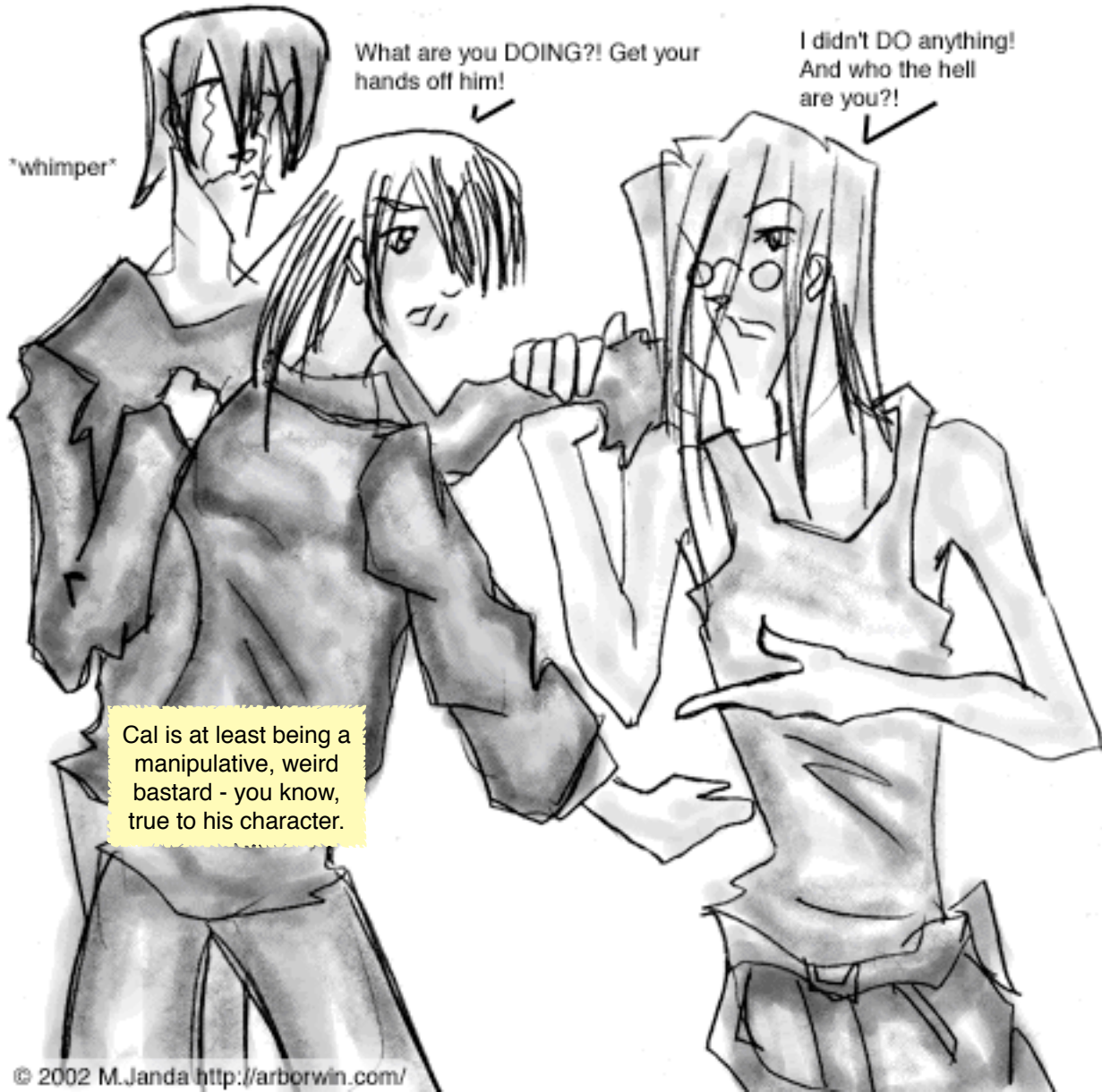
A Sherlock Holmes quote. Good.

Well what do you know! Everything comes together at the pet store!

Mm, I'm awake, I'm awake..



Fern and Cal's reuniting is some hardcore anime bullshit. I went a little TOO far keeping Cal's intentions ambiguous. It just comes off as me passing time while I figure out where the heck the story is going, and delaying any kind of meaningful character interactions. It seems that way because that's what it is. 8)

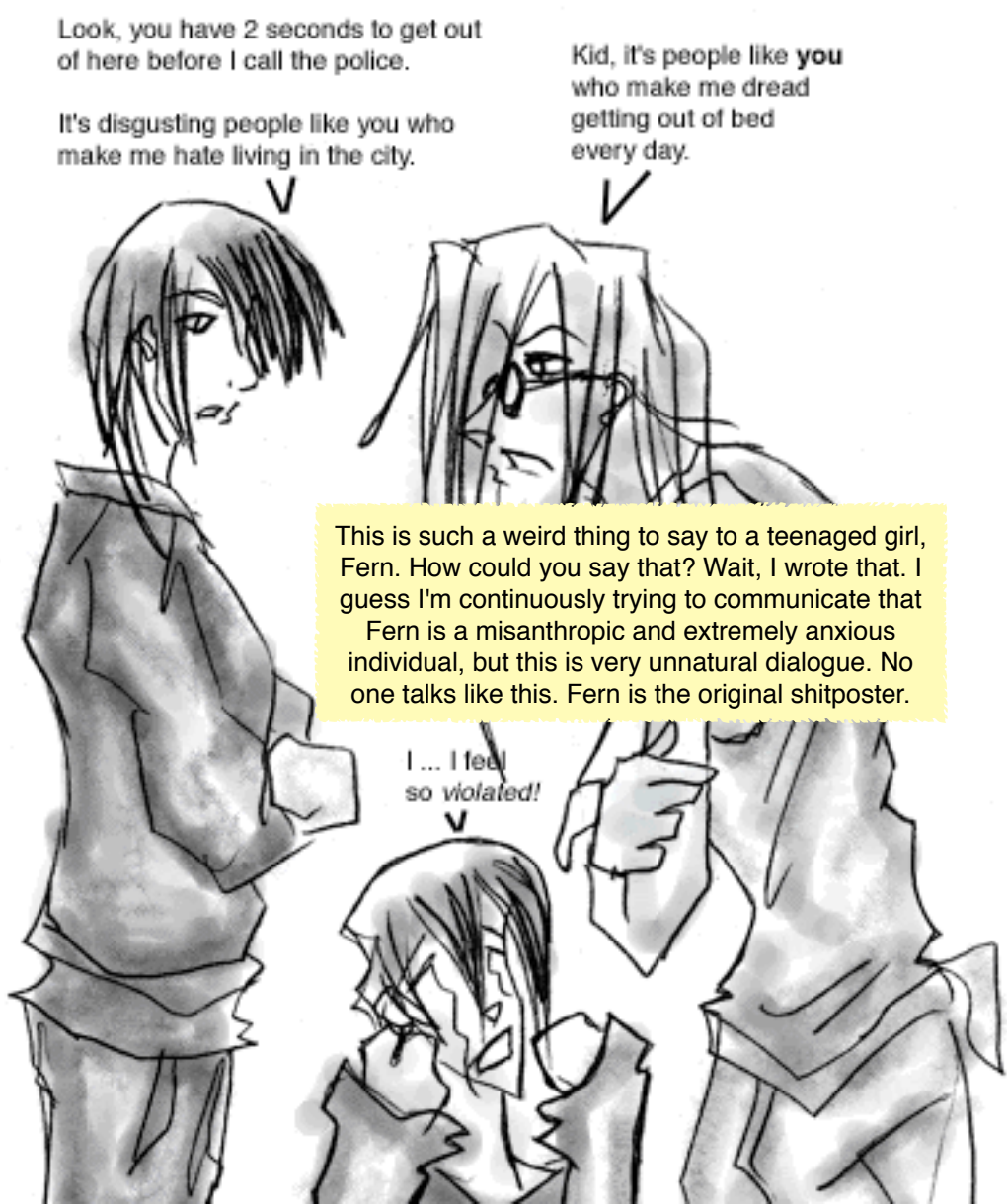


whimper

What are you DOING?! Get your hands off him!

I didn't DO anything! And who the hell are you?!

Cal is at least being a manipulative, weird bastard - you know, true to his character.



Look, you have 2 seconds to get out of here before I call the police.

It's disgusting people like you who make me hate living in the city.

Kid, it's people like **you** who make me dread getting out of bed every day.

This is such a weird thing to say to a teenaged girl, Fern. How could you say that? Wait, I wrote that. I guess I'm continuously trying to communicate that Fern is a misanthropic and extremely anxious individual, but this is very unnatural dialogue. No one talks like this. Fern is the original shitposter.

I... I feel so violated!

As far as everybody else is concerned, Fern, we're just a nooormal group of people, right? Take a deep breath. What's going on here?

This *jerk* was picking on Cal.

Watch who you call a jerk, *sweetie*, you might lose something important.

Well. Is this true, Cal?

SMOKE! I've been wondering where you were all this time. I want you to meet my new friend! I'm having a very good time with her, I think you'd get along famously.

A staple of Fern's character that I think still has a lot of value, and is expressed here, is that he's a prickly person who gets peoples' defenses up quickly. Even when he's not actually being angry and irritable, people tend to perceive him as weak, lazy, spineless, or having a poor attitude. I feel like this is a type of character that doesn't get represented often, even though I think it's an interesting "catalyst" to add to stories, to bring out different aspects of the cast. If a character like this IS represented, there tends to be a lot of other characters bending over backwards to make the grumpy character "happy" or whatever, and that doesn't tend to be what I'm interested in seeing out of those characters. Fern is a very troubled person with deep self-loathing, and it's interesting for me to reason out who will have patience to deal with him and who will not.

Cal's pulling a cute little game and pretending not to know us. This girl just popped out of nowhere. If you think I'm making it up, just try talking to him, Smoke. He won't even recognize you.

Cal, you jerk. Or one could say...you b-baka!

Man, that was cold. Did you do something to piss him off?

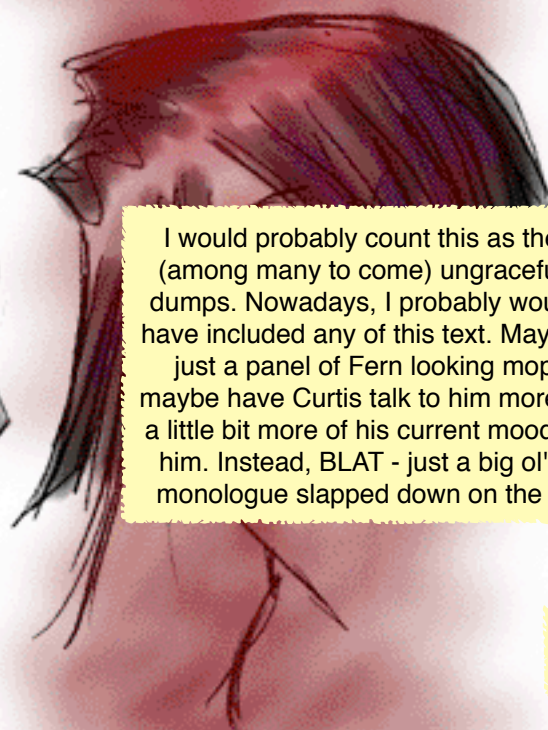
I don't know.



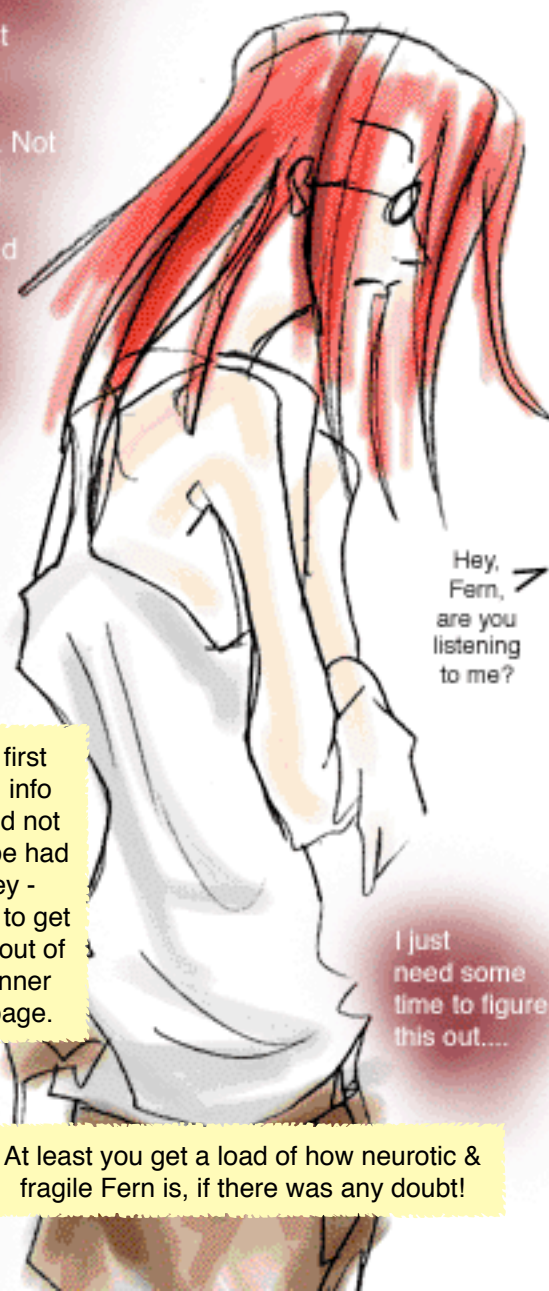
Elementals don't ignore their secondaries for no reason. There has **got** to be a reason. Some kind of plot of his. He just loves playing with my head when it comes to this sort of thing. Except I don't know what I did this time. Not at all. Why is he mad at me? IS he mad at me. Who the fuck knows. I don't know what's going on in that head of his. Look at him, smiling and laughing and talking like there's nothing at all the matter.

That's when you know it's bad...

whatever it is ...



I would probably count this as the first (among many to come) ungraceful info dumps. Nowadays, I probably would not have included any of this text. Maybe had just a panel of Fern looking mopey - maybe have Curtis talk to him more to get a little bit more of his current mood out of him. Instead, BLAT - just a big ol' inner monologue slapped down on the page.



Hey, Fern, are you listening to me?

I just need some time to figure this out....

At least you get a load of how neurotic & fragile Fern is, if there was any doubt!

Well, for the moment, it seems we can go no further with him. Why don't I stay here.. To keep an eye on things. You can go home, relax a bit, change your clothes.. Then go pick up Mid at the hospital.

Smoke: Fern, please go away.
Fern: Ok

Make sure you keep an eye on that scuzbag, Curtis. Lems never have a shred of sense when it comes to sensitive situations. Pah, I bet Cal is getting quite a kick out of this... It'll be nice to see Mid, though. I wrote him last week we were coming...

Meanwhile, several worlds away, at Annelcey's Mental Hospital for Faidian Minions...

Delye... you made Fern's letter into paper maché?

All that swearing is so much more appealing as a kitty!

A heckuva transition! Yikes! Not even an establishing shot!

So many ellipses! Apparently, this is when THAT annoying habit started. If only I'd made these mice a habit instead.

This joke is still ok with me. I forgot about it.

later, at Annelcey's Mental Hospital ^_^;

✓
bzzt Would Dr. Meerstrum please come to the front desk. Dr. Meerstrum, please come to the front desk.
bzzt



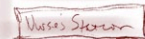
✓
bzzt Would all cafeteria staff report to the canteen. There has been a kool aid spill. I repeat, would all cafeteria staff report to the canteen. There has been a kool aid spill. *bzzt*



I would make derogatory statements about using anime emoticons, but what's the use - I still use those. Just not in my comics. I hope.

You have a big head. ➤

Just keep moving, kid. ➤



I clearly copy-pasted Fern, but I'm not sure how I added the kid. Might have drawn the different angles separately, and then crudely joined the lineart in Photoshop.

outside

Morse's house

Hey.. uh. Morse. If you don't mind,
I really need to speak to you in private.

sigh

For one thing, I don't even KNOW
you. Secondly, as tolerant as
my mom is, I think it would be pushing
it if I brought another random guy
home, especially one as weird as
you are.

I would say Cal is a lot
weirder than Curtis, but Cal
has that superficial charm
going for him, I guess.

Me? Weird? The man Cal
introduced to you *seconds*
ago just turned into a small
furry animal and I'm weird?

Thirdly,
you're wearing
bright yellow
pants.

.... okay. Okay.
Point taken.

Fwamp! Fashion! Zing!
God help me.

Ah, here's Mid's file! I knew it was..
someplace.. Ahem. It's good to see
you, Fern! How long has it been,
four, five years?

Hm...something like that.

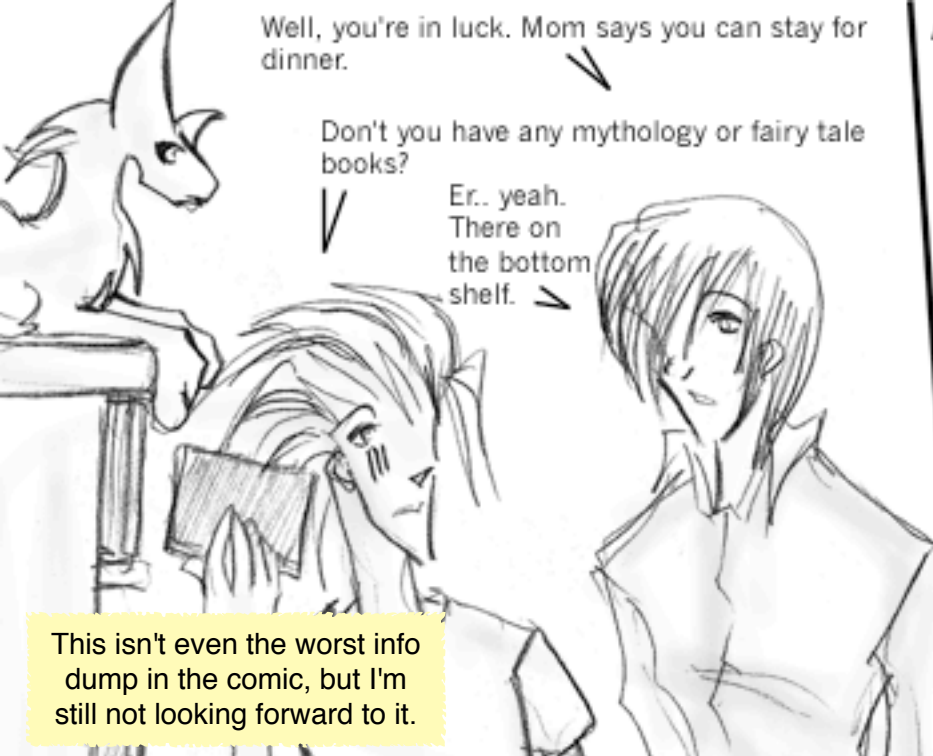
The other Best Grayling Character
besides Curtis, Fern's coat. The
initial design of the coat was really
ornate. It is, of course, some kind
of ridiculous Trigun knockoff. I feel
like I was also imitating a military
coat I had seen and admired.

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<http://arborwin.com/>

Another joke informed by
a bit from Mystery Men.

So um, do I need to fill out any
paperwork? Sign something?
Isn't there a paper with Mid's name
and "SANE" stamped on it in
big red letters involved?

Well, yes, but I'll have
to think of what we did
with the stamp... We
haven't used it in years,
you know. I wonder where
it got off to...



Well, you're in luck. Mom says you can stay for dinner.

Don't you have any mythology or fairy tale books?

Er.. yeah.
There on
the bottom
shelf.

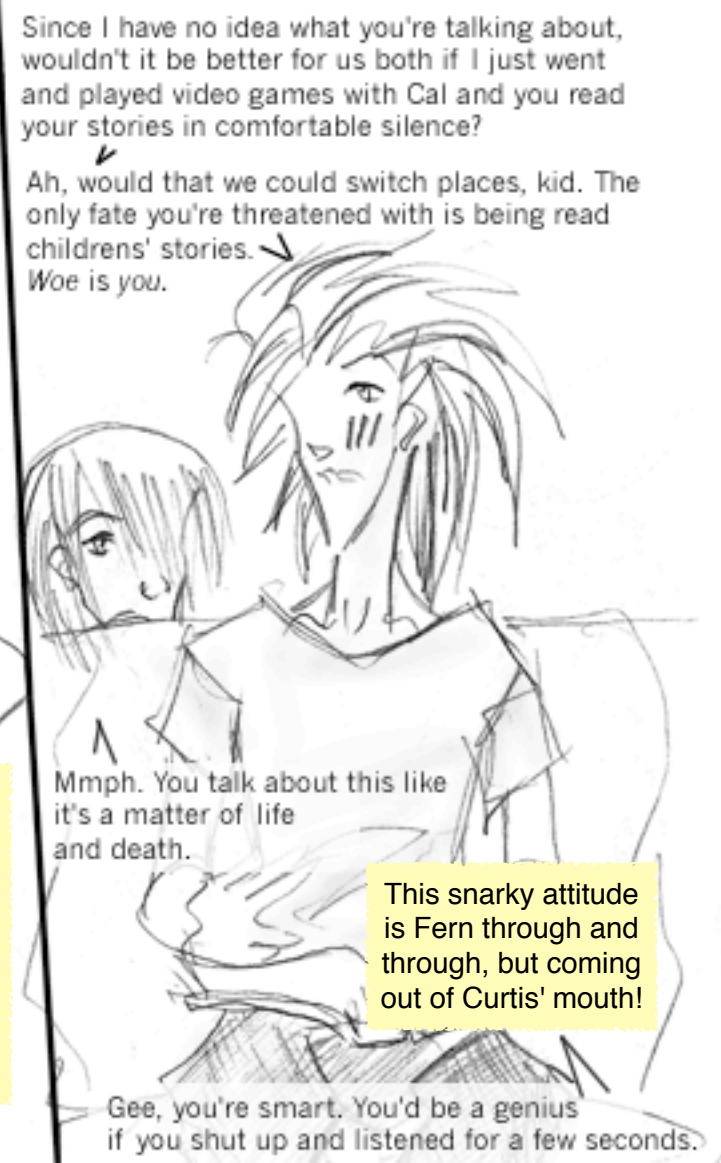
This isn't even the worst info dump in the comic, but I'm still not looking forward to it.



Ah, perfect. Come on, let's get this over with.

Uh. I'm a little old to have fairy tales read to me.

Not these kinds of fairy tales, kid. Shit, I'm tired. They need to make these damn things standard issue or something. I've never been able to jump right into it out of the blue. Doesn't work.



Since I have no idea what you're talking about, wouldn't it be better for us both if I just went and played video games with Cal and you read your stories in comfortable silence?

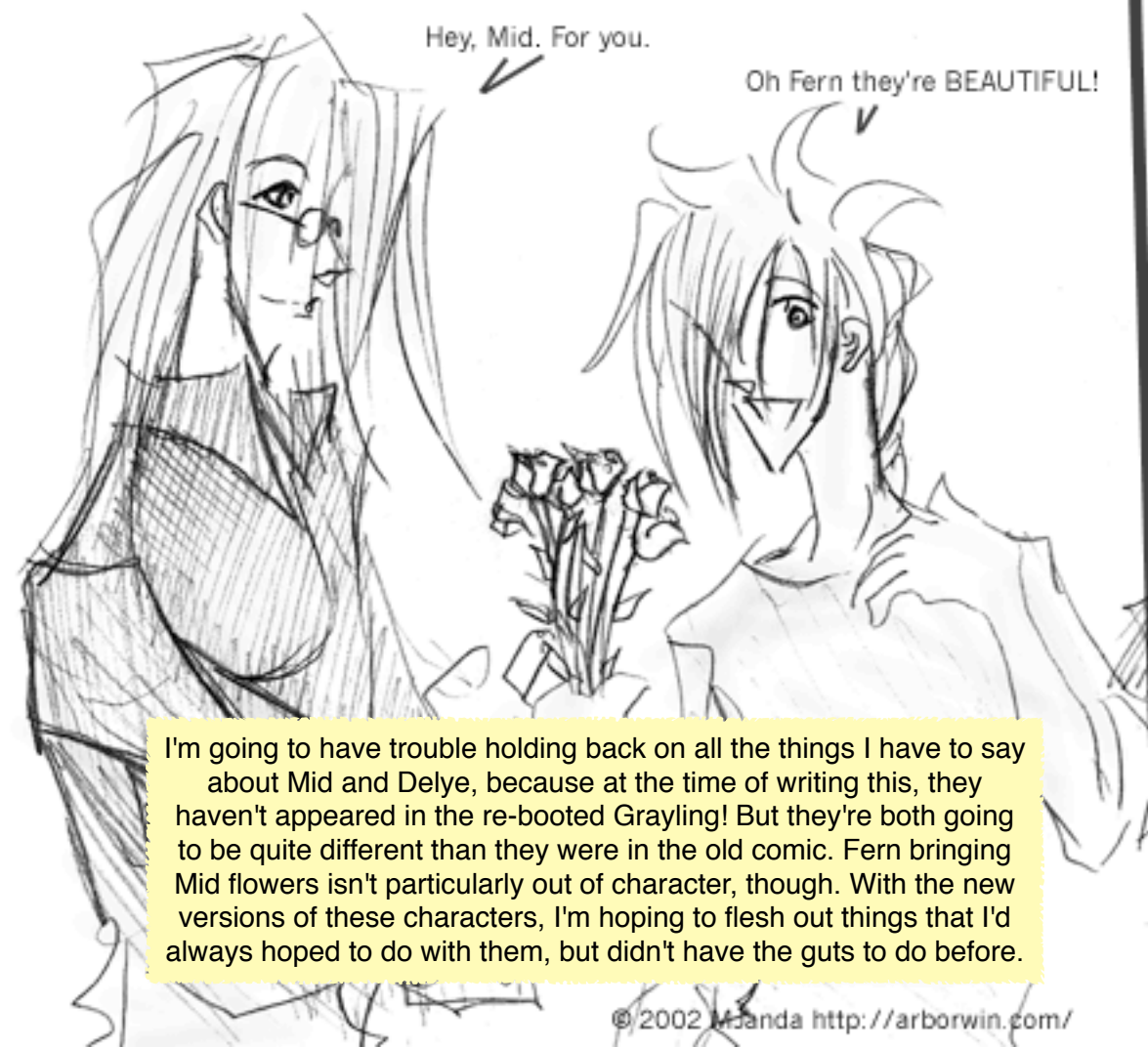
Ah, would that we could switch places, kid. The only fate you're threatened with is being read childrens' stories. Woe is you.

Mmph. You talk about this like it's a matter of life and death.

This snarky attitude is Fern through and through, but coming out of Curtis' mouth!

Gee, you're smart. You'd be a genius if you shut up and listened for a few seconds.

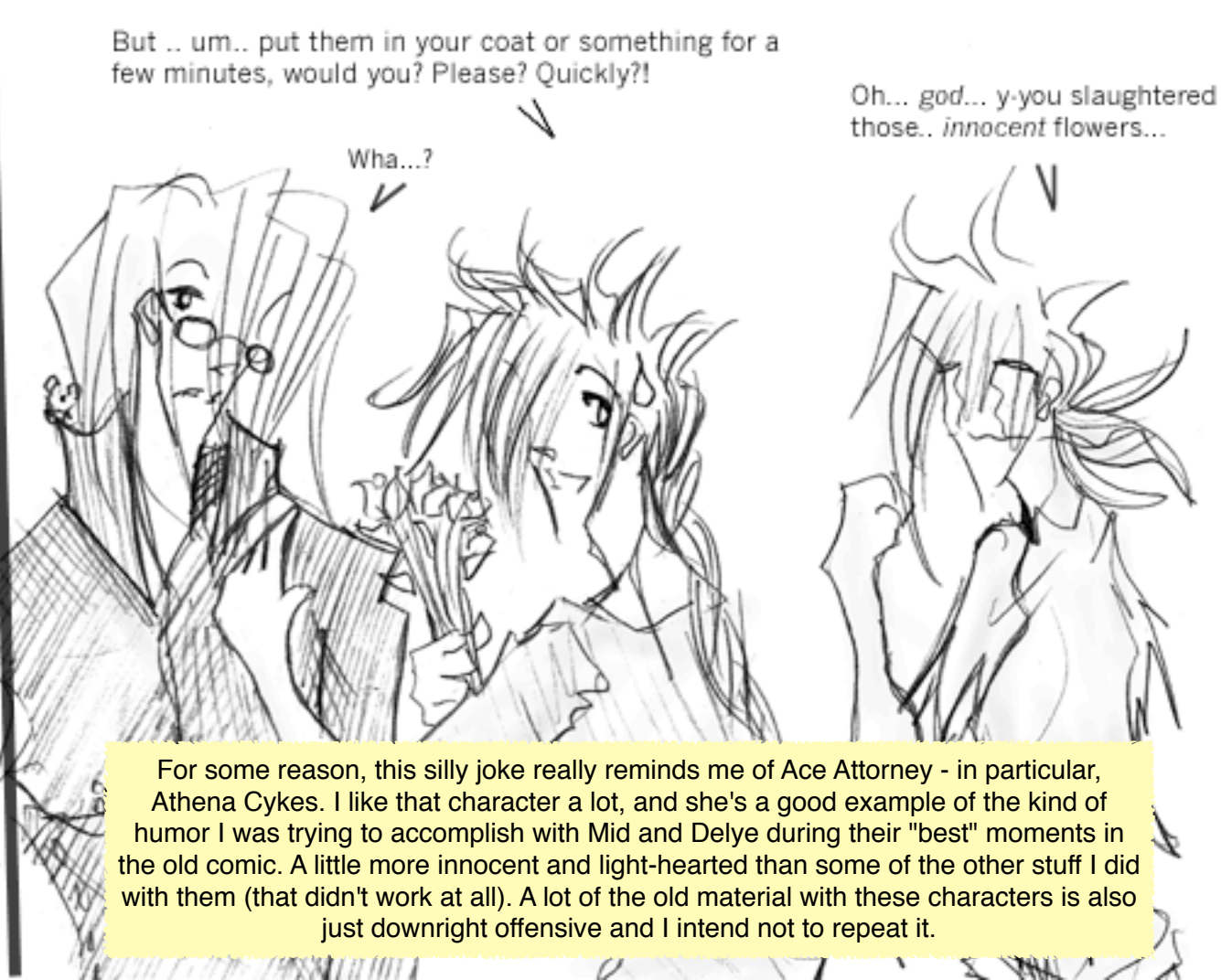
This scene demonstrates what I wrote earlier about how I gave Curtis Fern's role in the story. I should have had Fern explain this stuff, but I got caught up in excuses: It would have been out of character for Fern, Fern had no motive to do it, Fern was distracted, and so on. Curtis is a character I introduced with the express purpose of accomplishing this goal - I couldn't figure out how to "deliver" this information, so I forced it to happen. I could have definitely accomplished it with the cast I already had, but I didn't have the ingenuity to pull it off. This is why I feel negatively about Curtis - not so much because of the character himself, but the writing troubles he represents for me. I should have been more flexible, and developed circumstances to give Fern a motive to be closer to Morse.



Hey, Mid. For you.

Oh Fern they're BEAUTIFUL!

I'm going to have trouble holding back on all the things I have to say about Mid and Delye, because at the time of writing this, they haven't appeared in the re-booted Grayling! But they're both going to be quite different than they were in the old comic. Fern bringing Mid flowers isn't particularly out of character, though. With the new versions of these characters, I'm hoping to flesh out things that I'd always hoped to do with them, but didn't have the guts to do before.



But .. um.. put them in your coat or something for a few minutes, would you? Please? Quickly?!

Wha...?

Oh... god... y-you slaughtered those.. *innocent* flowers...

For some reason, this silly joke really reminds me of Ace Attorney - in particular, Athena Cykes. I like that character a lot, and she's a good example of the kind of humor I was trying to accomplish with Mid and Delye during their "best" moments in the old comic. A little more innocent and light-hearted than some of the other stuff I did with them (that didn't work at all). A lot of the old material with these characters is also just downright offensive and I intend not to repeat it.

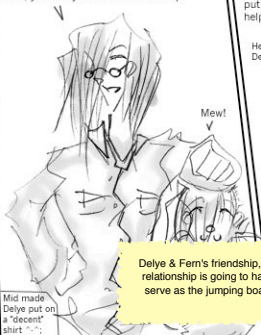
I thought you were over that flower thing. Are you still on that meat-only diet, or have you abandoned eating altogether?



Oh, Fern, you know my life has no meaning when you're gone!

How could I eat ANYthing when my love doesn't even stop by to visit me?!

Heh, you crazy kid. You'll never stop.



Mew!

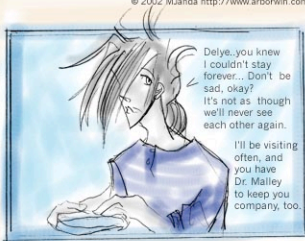
Mid made Delye put on a "decent" shirt ^-^;

As glad as I am to see you two "bonding," could you put your ruse aside for now and help me pack?

He's too smart for us, De.



Delye & Fern's friendship, however, is definitely going to stay in the new comic. In fact, this relationship is going to have a lot of significance. It's not a romantic relationship, but it will serve as the jumping board for an important ideological climax of the story that I'm really looking forward to doing.



Delye..you knew I couldn't stay forever... Don't be sad, okay? It's not as though we'll never see each other again.

I'll be visiting often, and you have Dr. Malley to keep you company, too.

Anyway....aren't YOU due for release in a couple of months?



I want to go NOOOOWWW!!!!



~::~; I thought you'd say that...

Don't worry, Delye...



I'll always be here for you, okay?

To some extent, this aspect of Mid & Delye's relationship is going to hold over, but it's going to be a lot more complicated than it's depicted here. This is just one stage in their friendship, an early one. They wouldn't still be interacting like this at this point of the timeline in the modern iteration of the comic. This seems really innocent and silly now, and of course it's very weebish and informed by shounen ai and yaoi tropes I was absorbing at the time.

Splat! There it is! I had literally just come up with these ideas, so I was just excitedly writing them down straight into the final product.. I don't think there's anything necessarily wrong with certain kinds of info dumps, they can be really interesting, but it's hard for me not to be embarrassed by my own examples. It's a sticking point for me that has only grown in significance with age. I feel like a lot of sci fi and fantasy stories get bogged down in things like this. Looking back, I was working too quickly and impatiently and not giving myself time to think up ways to couch all of this. A lot of it didn't even need to be in the comic.

All right! Here we go.
You might recognize this from one of your history classes or whatever.

Oh.. Yeah. These are famous. Nobody knows where they came from or something.

Heh.. It's funny. A bunch of old men in one world spend their lifetimes trying to understand what little kids in another know by heart.

...what do you mean?

These legends aren't from your world, kid. They're from mine.

About..er.. maybe six hundred or seven hundred years ago, your world experienced what you might call an exchange of owners.. The erm... "Beings" that control my world offed yours in a gratuitously violent fray and proceeded to lay claim to this world in order to increase their power/prestige/ what have you.

You with me so far?

Um...Yeah.
I think so.

You just don't believe a word I've said.

Pretty much.



Okay, how about this? It's a Faidian monster known as a 'halfling.' Half animal, half human, an abomination by our standards. Scary, eh? Not everyday you see something like this, right?

There are freaky things in every culture.



This is actually a pretty good page looking at it now, but once again, I could have done this with Fern instead of Curtis.

Asking to be squished is definitely still relevant dialogue.

How about the fact that my hair is striped bright yellow and black?

Bad taste & an expensive dying job.

.... All right, fine.

poik!

This is my last option. If this doesn't convince you, at least squish me so I won't have to deal with this stupid job anymore.

....Okay, changing into a bug is fairly convincing.





It's odd... It feels like I should be more excited than I am that you just turned into an insect.

That's because he's got you hypnotized, kid. I don't know if he even does this intentionally or not, but he messes with peoples' minds in a major way. Why do you think your mom let him stay without even a question?

So you're telling me the man in my living room weeping over Super Metroid is a million year old god of death and that I should kick him out as soon as possible because he's reading my mind and plans to do horrible, horrible things to me.



Not GOD. Elemental! Only weird sects call em gods...

Nice cover, Curtis.
Haha...It's all just ~magic~!

But yeah, that's the ticket.

If he can read our minds, why isn't he stopping you?

That's an excellent question. The likelihood is that he does, but he's so preoccupied at the moment that he doesn't miss much, believe it or not.

It's still a bit of a mess, but I am approaching my final form with word bubbles here.

be stoic and wear a big black cloak with a scythe or something?

Curtis...don't talk about that...

You watch too much anime.

I can't just tell him to go away. He's my friend. He's done nothing to deserve rejection from me.

I'm not disagreeing with you. But you should know who he really is.

I'm not feeling well again....

< "blahblahblahblah?"

< "Blah blah blah .."

< "BLAH!"

< "Blah blah blah blah bleh. Bleh! Haha >:D"

< "Blah .."

They're getting on so well... I can't bother them..

I wonder where.. Fern is...

I want Fern...

it hurts..

it hurts..

it hurts...

Things have finally started to happen! Almost!

tired.. want to go home...

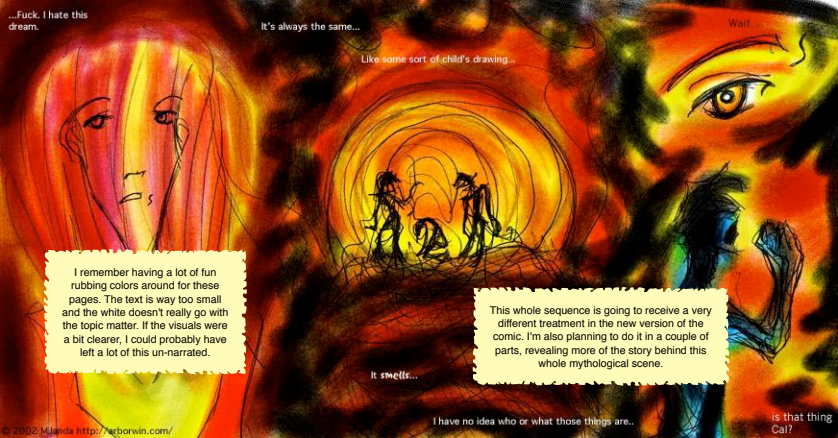
I'm so tired...

it hurts...



Another wasted opportunity for an establishing shot, showing Fern's bedroom. Fern takes a nap...floating in space!





...Fuck. I hate this dream.

It's always the same...

Wait...

Like some sort of child's drawing...

I remember having a lot of fun rubbing colors around for these pages. The text is way too small and the white doesn't really go with the topic matter. If the visuals were a bit clearer, I could probably have left a lot of this un-narrated.

This whole sequence is going to receive a very different treatment in the new version of the comic. I'm also planning to do it in a couple of parts, revealing more of the story behind this whole mythological scene.

It smells...

I have no idea who or what those things are...

is that thing Cal?

So much blood...

I can't move.. can't make a sound

I can just barely hear the screaming
pleading

I want to stop looking but I can't tear my eyes away

what are they
doing?

more importantly..
why... why
that's what he
keeps screaming

One of the "plot holes" here is why Rae and Lem even have weapons. At this point they weren't supposed to have much of a conception of violence, and they didn't need food or anything to survive, so it doesn't make any sense. But it's a holdover from my old childhood iteration of this story.

The "bestial" aspect of the characters here is definitely something I'd like to keep, though!

what have they done?

they tore his heart
out

they're like dolls

A new one... her color
is white

she took one of the monsters

and now
that one is broken

his chest
is flying apart

and is
going to
lock it away
inside
the broken
doll

the other
monster
ran away

taking his
heart with it

I've changed my mind about this sequence quite a lot over the years, but what has stayed consistent is that it's an unreliable narrative. No one is really in a position to tell the truth about what happened, and the curse involving Rae is only part of that.

.... but if that doll
was Cal....

I can't look anymore

who are the monsters?

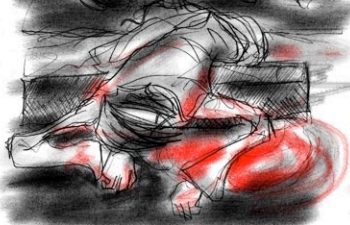
I'm in the wrong place...

I'm tired. I need to lie down.

just a little while...

I'm so tired...

This is when I was cross-hatching
everything badly in pencil, and drawing
a lot of angsty suffering pictures.

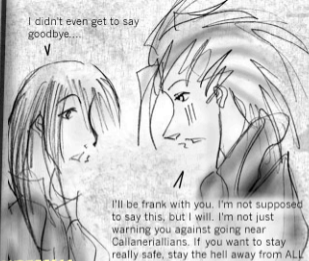


fern...



He's GONE! Do you think he heard us?

sigh
Well... I didn't wanna do it this way.. but it's for the best, kid, really.



I didn't even get to say goodbye....

I'll be frank with you. I'm not supposed to say this, but I will. I'm not just warning you against going near Callanerialians. If you want to stay really safe, stay the hell away from ALL of us. The branches are trouble. It may not seem like it at first. But it is. Cal'll understand if you don't want to be near him anymore. Think of us as a mafia family or something... trouble, and not much else appearances.



Well.. I don't know if I'll take your advice or not, Curtis. But thank you anyway.

Just doing my job, kid. Karien.

This is pretty good advice, except for the fact it's not really an option. I'm honestly not sure whether Curtis was supposed to be in the know or not. If he was, this is kind of a mean thing to say, since she can't actually avoid getting involved. It didn't occur to me to examine this issue at the time - I was just interested in making it clear that people on the magical side of things had disagreements on how to proceed.

"Karien" is just Faidian for goodbye. I guess I was trying to show how Curtis was trendy and foreign, but it just comes off like a bad anime sub.



This is still a fun page and I remember people liked it. The art of the comic was rapidly changing, though not particularly "improving" in terms of the line art. Bad cutesy anime was easing into bad "serious" anime. This page is a confusing mess, and it's really angsty and strange, but I was pretty happy with the scribbly red text for Rae. I wish I had used a similar effect for Cal's blue dialogue, it doesn't look as creepy so it doesn't match.

I'm surprised people understood what was happening in this page at all - it's only 3 panels for an entire transformation sequence! But at the time it did the job.

-END-



I DELAYED IT AS MUCH AS I COULD..
I KNEW HE DIDN'T WANT TO BE DISTURBED
BUT I SIMPLY CANNOT WAIT ANY LONGER.
IT'S BEEN LONG ENOUGH. WE'RE NOT CHILDREN.

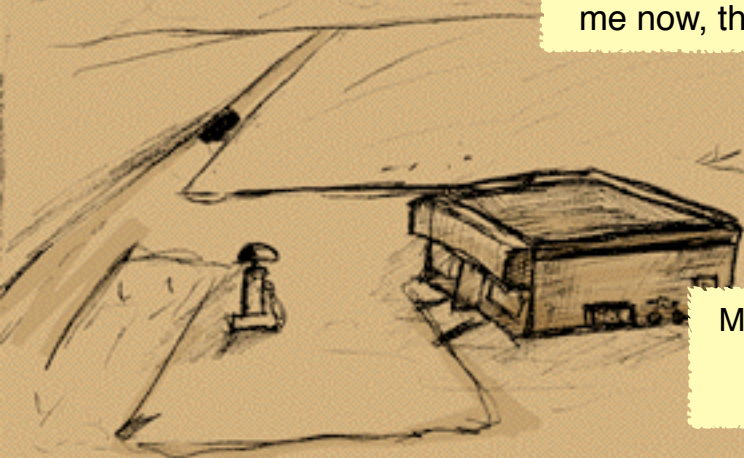
A strange beginning to the comic, but this is actually imagery I consider central to Fern's character.

He runs away and hides in remote and abandoned locations, because of his feelings about endangering others.

AND THERE'S BEEN ENOUGH
HIDE AND SEEK.

LEAVE THAT TO THE NECCOS....

Smoke narrating is very OOC to me now, though.



More OOC stuff to come!



I still like Smoke twirling his key ring around his finger...

QUITE A LOVELY SET UP YOU HAVE HERE, FERN.
VERY APPROPRIATE. INACCURATE BUT APPROPRIATE.

ISN'T LIVING IN A GAS STATION A LITTLE TOO MUCH FOR YOU TO RESIST?

The speech bubbles in these beginning pages are so primitive! I was scared and lazy about making "tails" on speech bubbles.

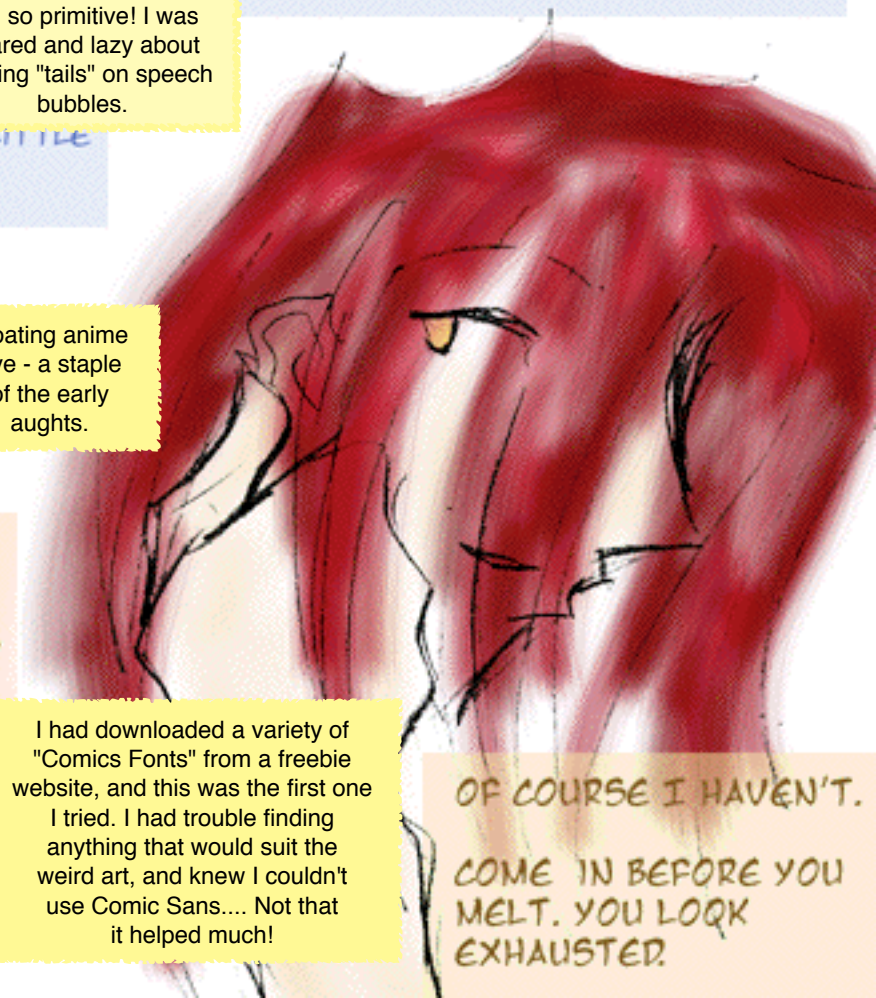
... AT LEAST I KNOW YOU HAVEN'T CHANGED AT ALL.



Floating anime eye - a staple of the early aughts.

JUST BECAUSE IT'S A GAS STATION DOESN'T MEAN THERE'S GAS. AND I DON'T RECALL INVITING YOU. EVER.

I had downloaded a variety of "Comics Fonts" from a freebie website, and this was the first one I tried. I had trouble finding anything that would suit the weird art, and knew I couldn't use Comic Sans.... Not that it helped much!



OF COURSE I HAVEN'T.

COME IN BEFORE YOU MELT. YOU LOOK EXHAUSTED.

I'M POSITIVE YOU DIDN'T COME OUT HERE JUST TO DRINK MY BEER. WHAT'S IN THE WORKS?

WELL...

YOU KNOW THERE'S ALWAYS SOMETHING. MID'S BEEN GONE ALMOST TWENTY YEARS. BEEN GONE WHAT, FIVE, SIX? IT'S BEEN QUIET. TOO QUIET. IN A WEEK, MID IS SCHEDULED TO COME.

These early pages were drawn in pencil, scanned, and then painted in Photoshop with a mouse. It shows, haha!

LET ME GUESS WE'RE ON THE VERGE OF ANOTHER CATASTROPHE?

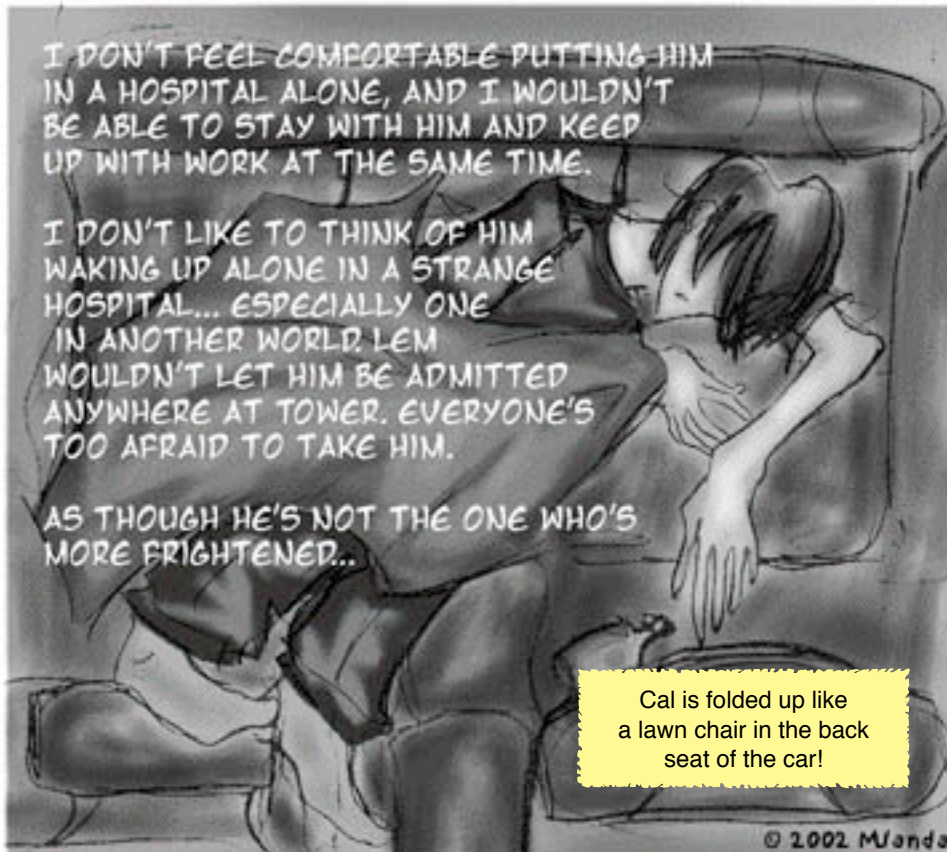
.... SOMETHING LIKE THAT.

CAL'S... BEEN ASLEEP. HE'S IN THE CAR RIGHT NOW... HE'S BEEN OUT TWO WEEKS OR SO.

THIS... DOESN'T SEEM LIKE NORMAL. I KNOW HE SLEEPS A GREAT DEAL, BUT THIS IS NEXT DOOR TO A COMA. HE DOESN'T STIRR. BARELY BREATHES. I THINK HE'S SERIOUSLY ILL.

COME ON... I'M SURE IT'S NOT THAT BAD. THEN AGAIN...

THEN AGAIN, IT COULD BE SOMETHING OF OVERWHELMING IMPORTANCE.




I DON'T FEEL COMFORTABLE PUTTING HIM
IN A HOSPITAL ALONE, AND I WOULDN'T
BE ABLE TO STAY WITH HIM AND KEEP
UP WITH WORK AT THE SAME TIME.

I DON'T LIKE TO THINK OF HIM
WAKING UP ALONE IN A STRANGE
HOSPITAL... ESPECIALLY ONE
IN ANOTHER WORLD. LEM
WOULDN'T LET HIM BE ADMITTED
ANYWHERE AT TOWER. EVERYONE'S
TOO AFRAID TO TAKE HIM.

AS THOUGH HE'S NOT THE ONE WHO'S
MORE FRIGHTENED...


Cal is folded up like
a lawn chair in the back
seat of the car!

© 2002 Mjanda



BUT DOES
HE REALLY NEED IT?
WHAT COULD A
DO, BESIDES POKE
HIM? MAYBE
JUST WAIT F
TO RUN ITS C

I had a lot of trouble back in these days
figuring out why godlike people who can
teleport would even need a car. I'm sure I
would change this scene significantly if I were
to do it now, but I was trying to introduce
magical ideas more gradually. I would jerk
between being too scared to introduce ideas
that I thought might be confusing, to being too
impatient and rushing through stuff with no
explanation. Pacing! It's important!



HE BAD
N'T JUST
E HOSPITAL
ST WATCH
WHILE WE
AID AND
ELSE.



DO YOU EVER
LISTEN?
WHAT HAVE I
BEEN SAYING?

WELL YOU KNOW HOW
YOU ALWAYS
EXAGERRATE!

~pure anime
magic~

AND SO THE INTREPID EXPLORERS SET OUT TO SEARCH FOR A FRIENDLY CITY. (IN OTHER WORDS, SOMEWHERE WHERE NOBODY KNOWS THEM) FACING SUCH CHALLENGES AS...

TRAFFIC JAMS...



happy because he likes car rides n_n

FERN'S POTENT
(NOT TO MENTION ILLOGICAL)
ROAD RAGE...

The narration font
may be comic
sans

THAT ASSHOLE JUST CUT US OFF!

FERN...
HE HAD THE RIGHT OF WAY...

DO YOU THINK I GIVE
A DAMN?! I'LL MURDER
THE BASTARD!

Fern wearing a headband was such a bizarre element of his design early on. I hated drawing it, I hated the way it looked, but headbands were such a thing in late 90s anime, I thought it was a good idea for some reason. I abandoned it quickly and never went back to it. It's actually funny looking at these early comics and realizing how quickly Fern's hair changed from one strange problem to another.

it's a car, really! ;.;

I KNOW YOU DON'T LIKE
THE IDEA, BUT THERE'S
A HOSPITAL RIGHT
NEAR HERE THAT
SEEMS GOOD
ENOUGH.

.....ALL RIGHT....

They casually go to Arduc in one panel! The car was supposed to be magic in some way, but I did not go into it at all. I wanted to quickly get to the yaoi boy hand-holding, or whatever I had in mind.

OR PARKING... WHERE
THE FUCK ARE
PARKING SPACES
IN THIS BURG?!

NOW
WHAT TO DO...
HE'S NOT VERY
HEAVY BUT I CAN'T
DO THIS
ALL NIGHT.

LOCATION IS
ALSO PRETTY
CONVENIENT

I remember being annoyed with this drawing of Cal, but keeping it because his hair came out nice.

NOT LIKE WE HAVE
A CHOICE AT THIS
POINT...

EVENTUALLY, THEY REACHED A SUITABLE DESTINATION IN A FOREIGN WORLD SMOKE RAN ACROSS THROUGH THE COMPUTER. ALTHOUGH ADVANCED, NO ONE IN THIS WORLD HAD ANY KNOWLEDGE OF FAIDIA.

In the subway...

WHAT A LOVELY GARBAGE PUMP THIS IS.
WHY DON'T YOU WAIT HERE WITH HIM.
I SAW ONE OF THOSE PHONE THINGS
AWHILE BACK. MAYBE I CAN CALL UP
A HOSPITAL OR WHATEVER.
NOT LIKE WE'LL BE ABLE TO FIND
IT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FUCKING
NIGHT...

YOUR SOUNDLESS
ENTHUSIASM GIVES
ME GREAT HOPE.
ENIGMA

EXIT
→

SIGH

I DON'T REMEMBER...
FEELING THIS TIRED IN A
LONG WHILE....

I WISH I COULD JUST..
SHUT OFF THE WORLD...

I think at this point I
downloaded some
Photoshop brushes to try
and give the comic more
texture.

Very wangsty
for Smoke...

JUST...
A FEW MINUTES...

WHILST SITTING THERE IN A GREASY, STINKY PHONE BOOTH, I GOT TO THINKING...GEEZ, I MUST BE REALLY EXACERBATING THIS SITUATION WITH MY IRRITATING BEHAVIOR. SMOKE REALLY DOESN'T DESERVE THIS, ESPECIALLY NOW WHEN HE HAS SO MUCH TO DEAL WITH...

I KNOW IT TAXES YOUR PATIENCE TO DEAL WITH ME CONSTANTLY... I DON'T MAKE SINCERE ATTEMPTS TO CURB MY OWN BEHAVIOR, WHICH I KNOW MUST BE FRUSTRATING..

BUT IF I HAD ANY IDEA THAT YOU WERE GOING TO **LOSE** CAL, I WOULDN'T HAVE **BOTHERED!**

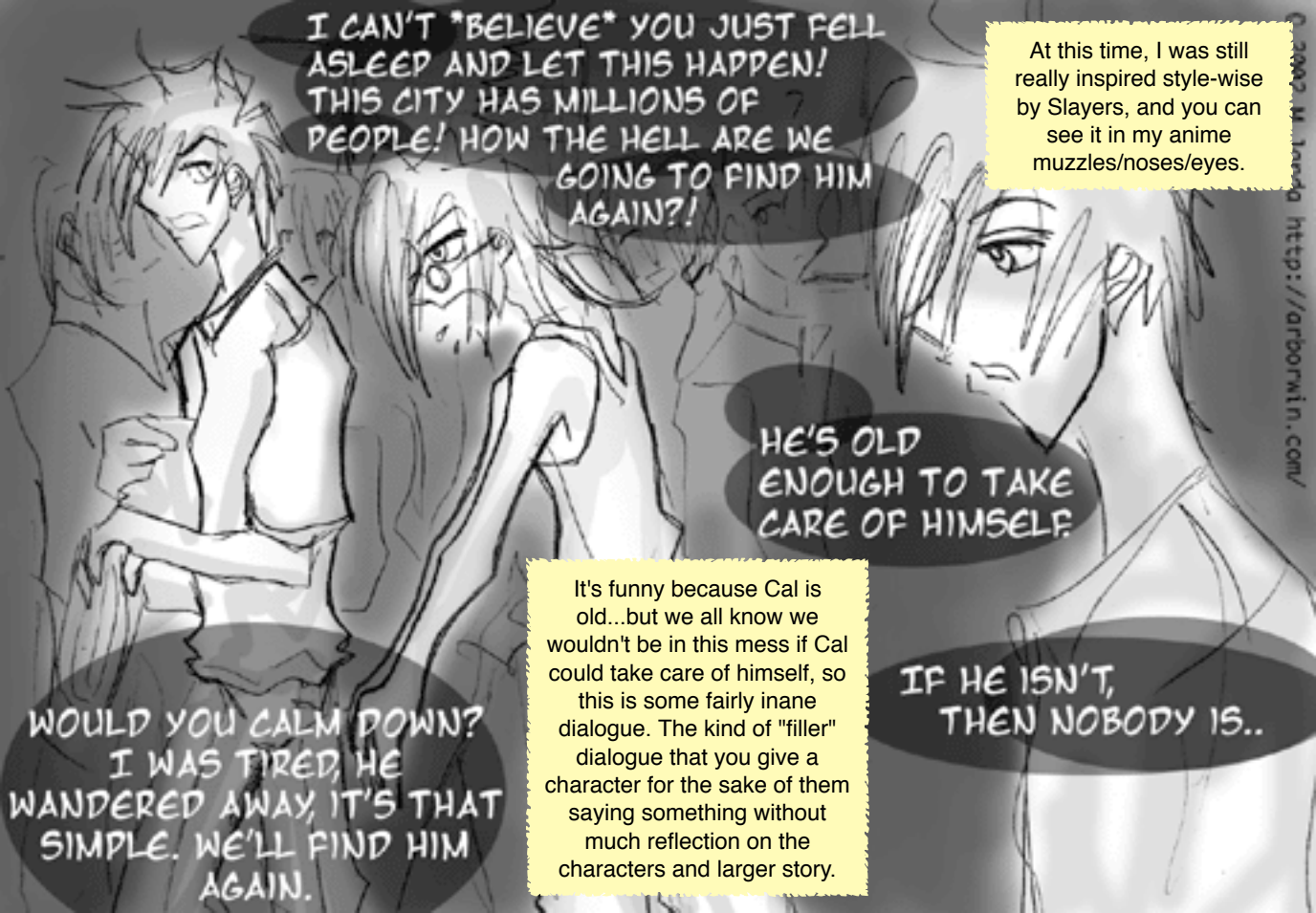
Grayling's first ... joke?

I was very attached to drawing the "popping vein" anime symbol on Fern's hand, because I wasn't drawing any foreheads in these days, and Fern had all that hair.

STOP BEING A BITCH AND HELP ME LOOK FOR HIM.

AND SO, AFTER GETTING OFF THE BANANA-SHAPED THING I USED TO TALK WITH THE HOSPITAL, I MADE A PERSONAL VOW TO APOLOGIZE TO YOU AND TRY MY VERY HARDEST TO BE HELPFUL AND KIND FOR THE REST OF THE TRIP

This notation in the corner is a credit for the PS brushes I used.



I CAN'T *BELIEVE* YOU JUST FELL
ASLEEP AND LET THIS HAPPEN!
THIS CITY HAS MILLIONS OF
PEOPLE! HOW THE HELL ARE WE
GOING TO FIND HIM
AGAIN?!

At this time, I was still
really inspired style-wise
by Slayers, and you can
see it in my anime
muzzles/noses/eyes.

HE'S OLD
ENOUGH TO TAKE
CARE OF HIMSELF.

It's funny because Cal is
old...but we all know we
wouldn't be in this mess if Cal
could take care of himself, so
this is some fairly inane
dialogue. The kind of "filler"
dialogue that you give a
character for the sake of them
saying something without
much reflection on the
characters and larger story.

WOULD YOU CALM DOWN?
I WAS TIRED, HE
WANDERED AWAY, IT'S THAT
SIMPLE. WE'LL FIND HIM
AGAIN.

IF HE ISN'T,
THEN NOBODY IS..

Meanwhile....

BOOKSTORE

"FROZEN TEARS:
LIFE AMONG THE
SUBURBAN SNOWMEN"
BY AMBER D. HEARTLONG.
OH, THAT'S
DEFINITELY A
MUST HAVE -IF I
WANTED TO KILL
MYSELF, THAT IS.

A knock-off
Daria? Oh
boy!

I did want Morse to be a relatively normal teenager, and grow in the course of the story. Her immaturity matches the elementals' at first, but because she's a mortal, she actually grows up.



...I'VE ONLY
BEEN HERE A
COUPLE OF
MINUTES AND IT
FEELS LIKE
SOMEONE IS
STARING AT
ME....

OH MY GOD
I'VE LOST
MY BAG! WHERE
IS IT?! I JUST
HAD IT A SECOND
AGO!

This panel of Morse
actually looks really
good! I kind of wish
I'd done more dot-
eyes back then, and
not embarrassed
myself so much with
the terrible big anime
googly eyes. But I
love anime, and was
bent on emulating it a
certain way at the
time.

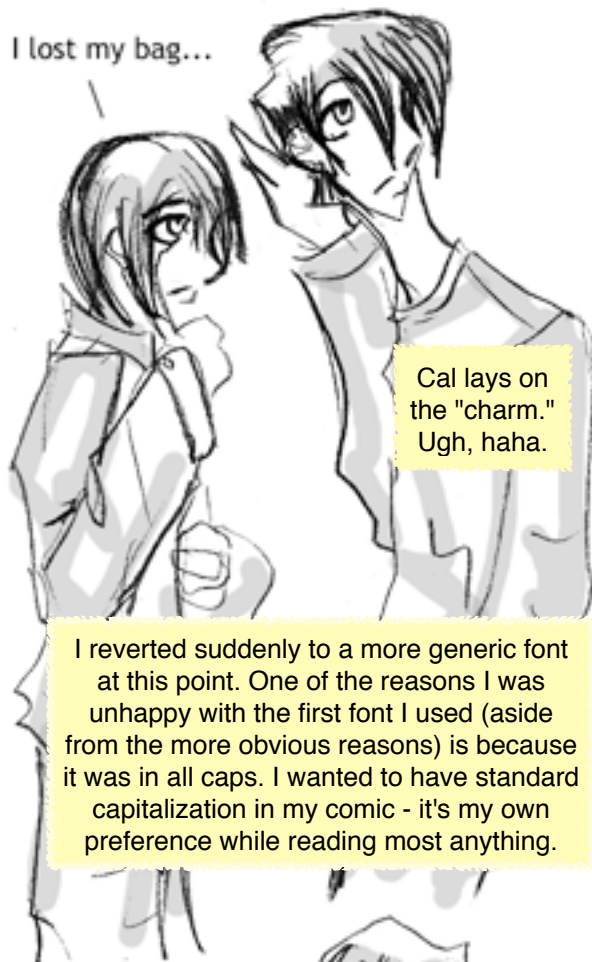
I MUST REMAIN CALM.
I HAVE EVERYTHING IN
THAT BAG. IT MUST
BE SOMEWHERE. I'LL FIND
IT. I WILL FIND IT. I WILL.

PARDON ME, YOUNG
LADY.. ARE YOU ALL
RIGHT?

It's funny looking back at
my own art at this caliber.
My faces are all the same,
and I can't even keep hair
lengths and styles distinct.
These would be problems
for a long while.

This much is still true - Cal loves
approaching people in
bookstores! This is how he met
Asne. He's "attracted" to Morse
here because he feels a magical
connection having to do with
Rhodes. He knows she has
something to do with Faidia.

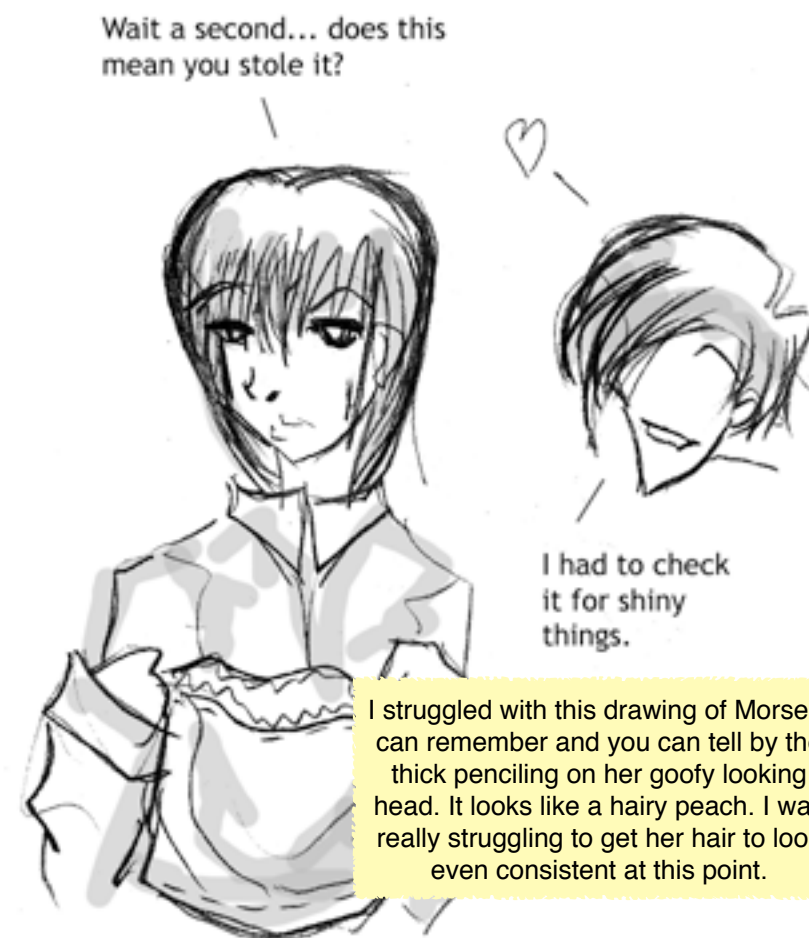
But also, Cal's a creeper. He doesn't
bother to think of a more appropriate
way to approach the situation.



I reverted suddenly to a more generic font at this point. One of the reasons I was unhappy with the first font I used (aside from the more obvious reasons) is because it was in all caps. I wanted to have standard capitalization in my comic - it's my own preference while reading most anything.



This goofy chibi of Morse actually always felt inspired by Calvin and Hobbes to me, and does to this day.

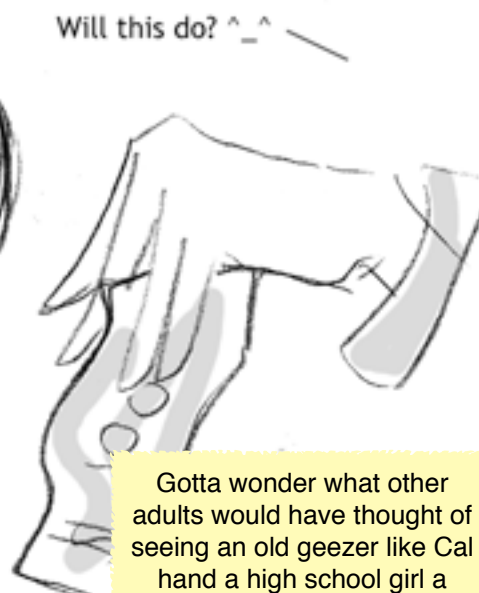


I struggled with this drawing of Morse! I can remember and you can tell by the thick penciling on her goofy looking head. It looks like a hairy peach. I was really struggling to get her hair to look even consistent at this point.



uh...normally people don't just take other peoples' things, you know

Er..well, I'll make it up to you... I think I have something in my pockets...



Will this do? ^_^

Gotta wonder what other adults would have thought of seeing an old geezer like Cal hand a high school girl a hundred dollar bill...



I can't believe you put all our travel money in Cal's pockets.

Ha! I still like this stupid joke.

I thought it would be best if we kept all our important things in one place...

I can't wait to get home and away out of this mortal-infested cess pool. These people can't even stifle their own natural putrid reek and here they make

machines to produce even more..

Being around all these people gives me the heebie-jeebies. They live in these little cardboard houses and drive tincan cars and think they'll live forever through their fat, stupid, lazy progeny...

(he can go on like this for a while)

This dialogue of Fern's in particular reeks of the angsty, self-inflated, weebish teenage woes I had at the time. Tell it to Hot Topic, Fern.

Fern's nasty remarks about mortals are not something I would repeat if I were to redo this scene, but the sentiment isn't entirely out of place. Fern has a lot of self-loathing that he would have expressed with some degree of anti-mortal sentiment. But, this is too vitriolic and not as subtle as I would have preferred. I was struggling to convey various attitudes elementals have about mortals (Fern wants nothing to do with them because he might cause them harm versus Cal actively wanting to toy with mortals to a certain degree, etc) and hadn't completely thought out Fern's "arc" yet. In the current comic you can certainly see how Fern saying these things contradicts his origins & initial attitude towards mortals!

I'm tired. Let's stop for the night.

Fern's parachute pants are slowly being born before our eyes in these pages.

Smoke having to be the "mature" one who takes care of the "uke" was definitely a silly yaoi motif I had absorbed at the time and thought was appealing, for some reason. It's true that Fern has a lot of executive dysfunction, but this isn't exactly written with that in mind.

Smoke is truly magical indeed if he can GO TO ANOTHER DIMENSION AND USE AN ATM. Some of these things are a bit tongue-in-cheek on the part of my younger self not fussing over every little thing, but I'm not sure this joke particularly lands if their circumstances are explained in a single panel like 5 pages ago...

....No. I hate hotels.

I'm not going any further, and I'm not sleeping on the street. You'll sleep here and like it.

Do you allow pets?

Settle down Fern.. I'm sure
he's in a safe place...

Unless he fainted again..
What if he's in the gutter somewhere..
Or someone hurt him or kidnapped him or
any MANNER of things...

Woof, this background
could have used some
TLC!

Sleep's not
going to be too good tonight...

Just a general
comment from
the tv stand.

can't you tell I love perspective? T_T::

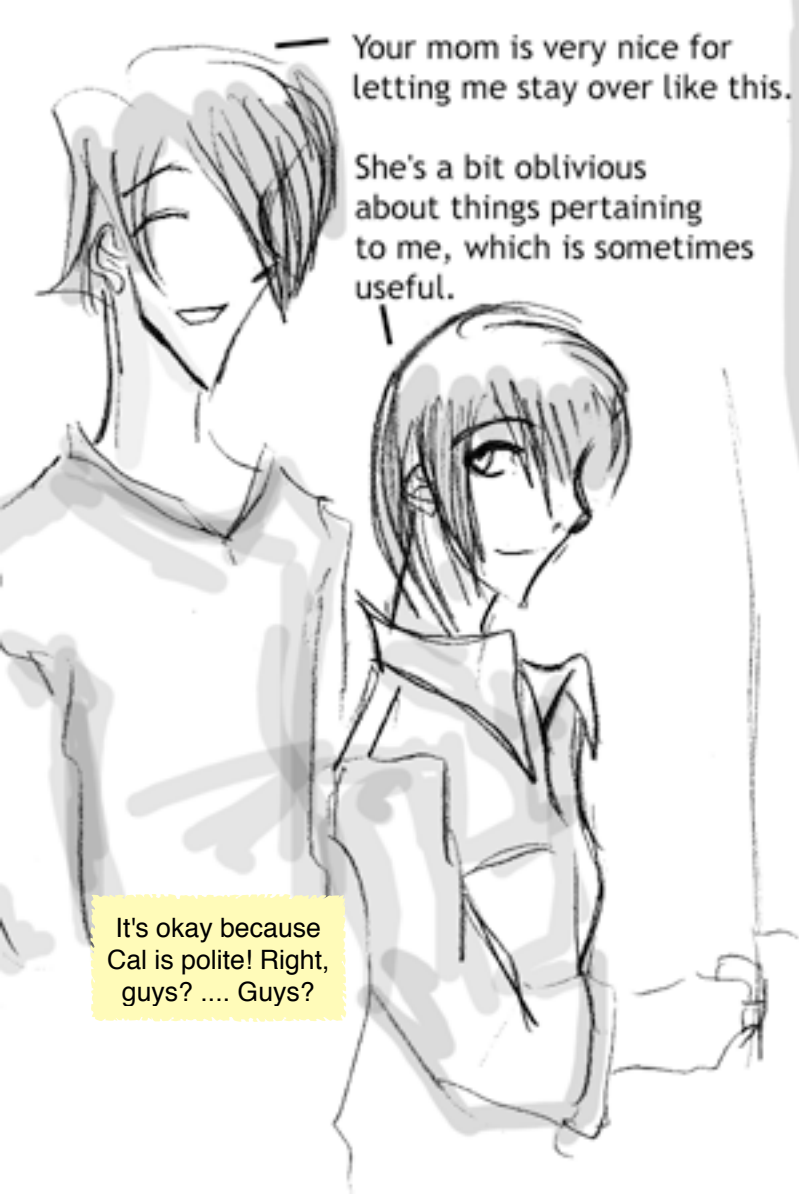
Mom, this is Cal, a random guy I met
in the bookstore who is willing to give
me lots of money for no particular
reason.

Very pleased
to meet you,
Morse's
mom!

Oh, and
he's nice
too.

It's been
so long
since Morse
made a new
friend!

Morse's Mom allowing the story to go on, for
some reason. This "gag" was intended to show
that Morse's family situation is not so hot, but I
was also just impatient to get to "the good
stuff," and parents were just so uncool and
annoying because I was 19 or whatever. Now
I'm like, "damn woman, do not let this strange
man come into your home." Might have been a
bit inspired by the Invisible Boy's dad in the
movie Mystery Men. I love that bit.



— Your mom is very nice for letting me stay over like this.

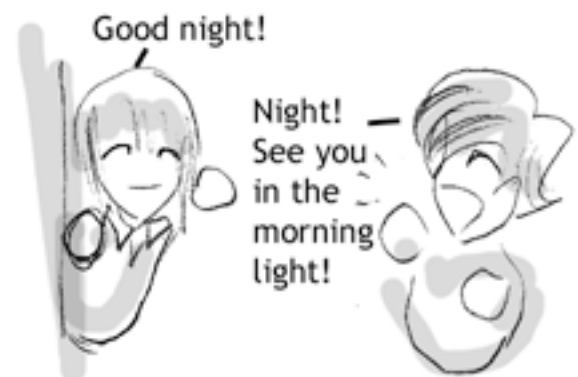
She's a bit oblivious about things pertaining to me, which is sometimes useful.

It's okay because Cal is polite! Right, guys? Guys?



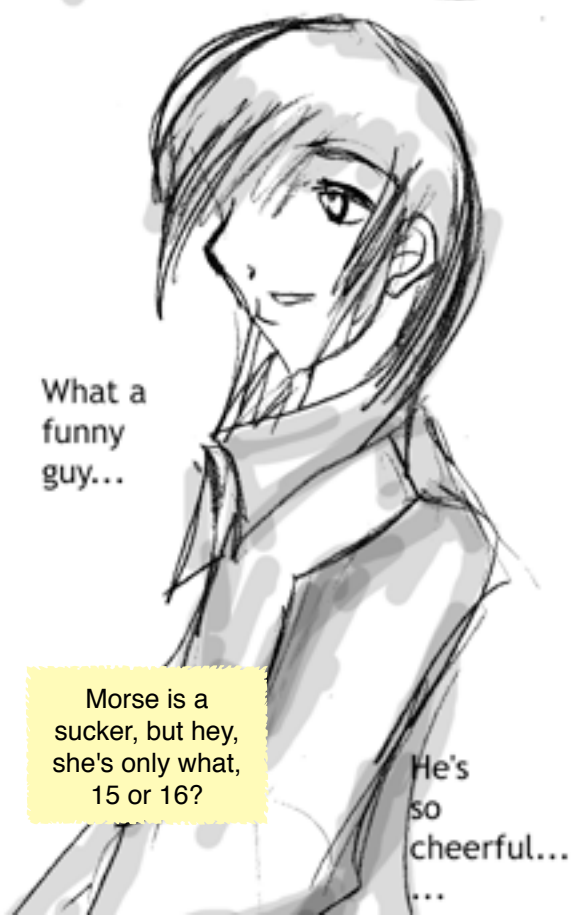
— Well, still, she's a very kind lady.

Uh huh. Here's the guest room, you can sleep here.



Good night!

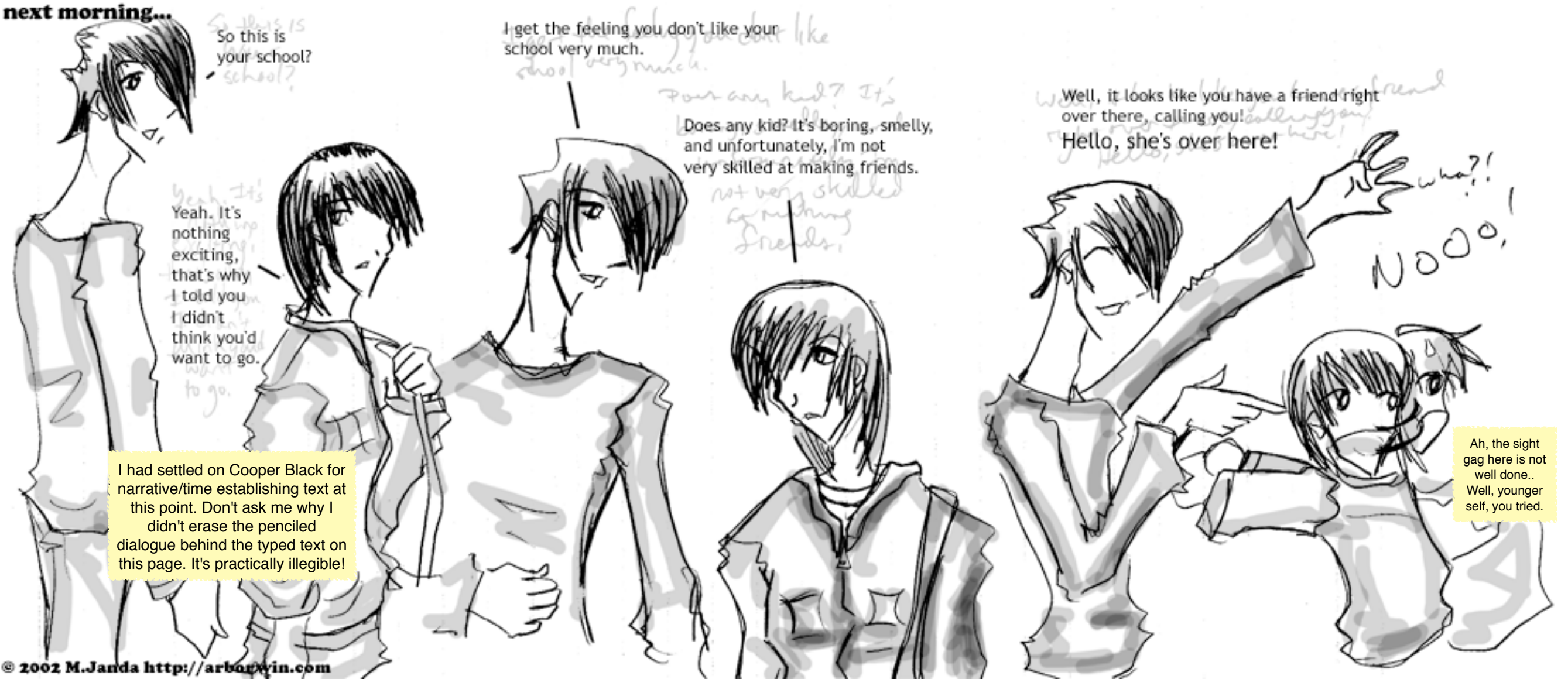
Night! — See you in the morning light!



What a funny guy...

Morse is a sucker, but hey, she's only what, 15 or 16?

He's so cheerful...
...



next morning...

So this is your school?

Yeah. It's nothing exciting, that's why I told you I didn't think you'd want to go.

I had settled on Cooper Black for narrative/time establishing text at this point. Don't ask me why I didn't erase the penciled dialogue behind the typed text on this page. It's practically illegible!

I get the feeling you don't like your school very much.

Does any kid? It's boring, smelly, and unfortunately, I'm not very skilled at making friends.

Well, it looks like you have a friend right over there, calling you! Hello, she's over here!

Ah, the sight gag here is not well done.. Well, younger self, you tried.

Heavens, what's so bad about him?

Fletcher is a pathetic geek who thinks that because I don't completely ignore him like other girls, I'm his emotional toilet. He always comes to me with his stupid problems.

He is ALWAYS around, he never leaves me alone! And if I try to avoid him, he goes into a misogynistic rant about how all girls hate him. Like it's my fault he has such an annoying personality. He seriously needs to grow up. I don't know why he's so desperate for my company, anyway. He doesn't let me get a word in edge-wise.

Well, I can certainly see how that might be irritating. But surely he's not all that bad.. he must let you talk

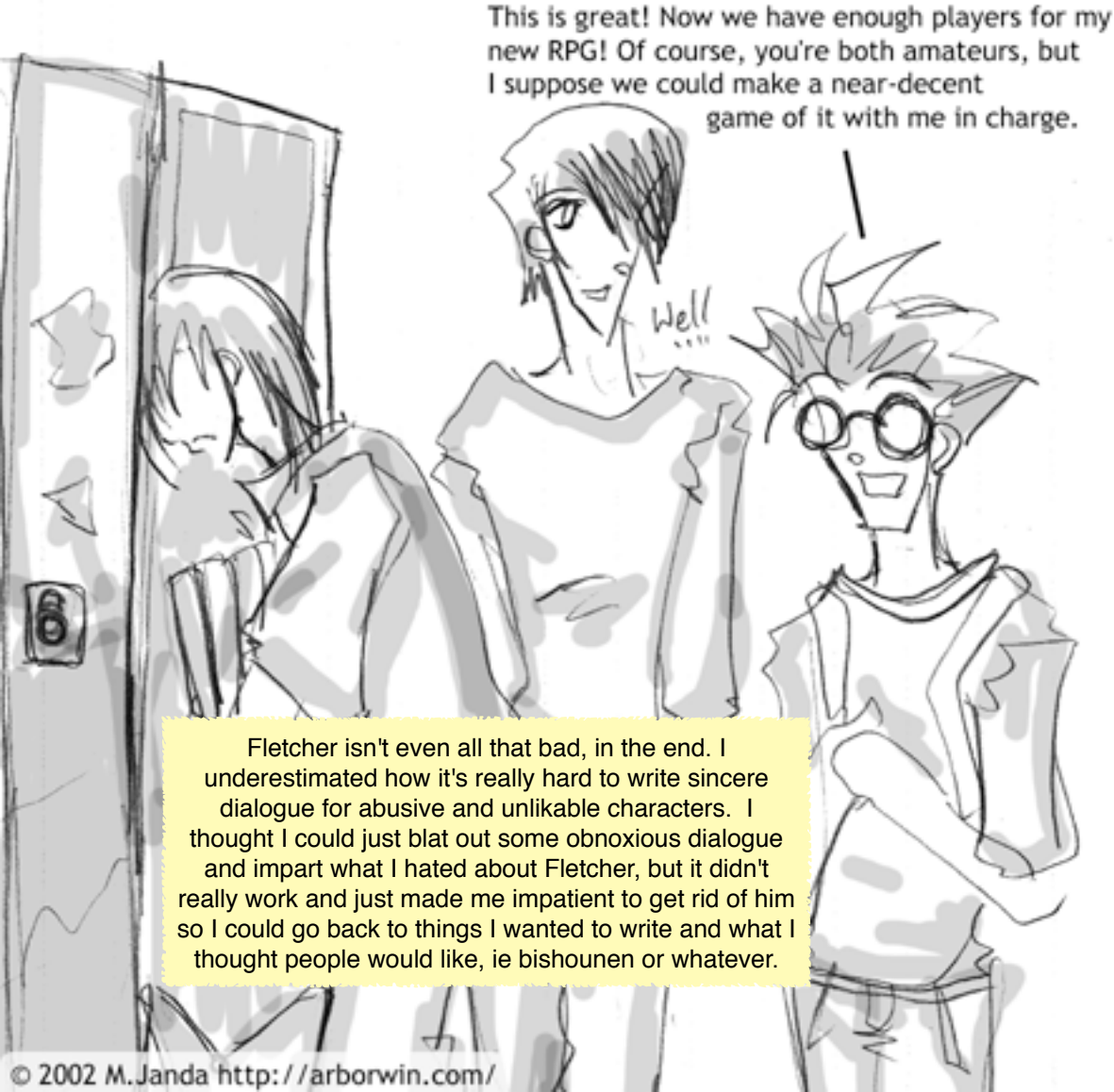
Yeah, but his usual response is "Why are you talking?" or an entire lecture about everything I had just said and stupid. As far as he's concerned he's the only person on the planet.

Fletcher the cringe machine.

Eating disorder "joke" is def not making a comeback.

Hi Morse!
Who's the anorexic guy?

This was before Tumblr & the internet in general was giving so much attention to feminism and misogyny. My comic was my only outlet for talking about these things! I couldn't even talk about it around my friends - we had to self-censor or face being cut out of social situations. It was a pretty bleak time. We make fun of The Discourse nowadays, but I would never go back to these times when I could only talk about these things by shoddily inserting a crap character into my story. I could have done a much better job depicting a villainous character like Fletcher, but I wasn't prepared to - I just wanted to make a personal rant and then move on quickly.

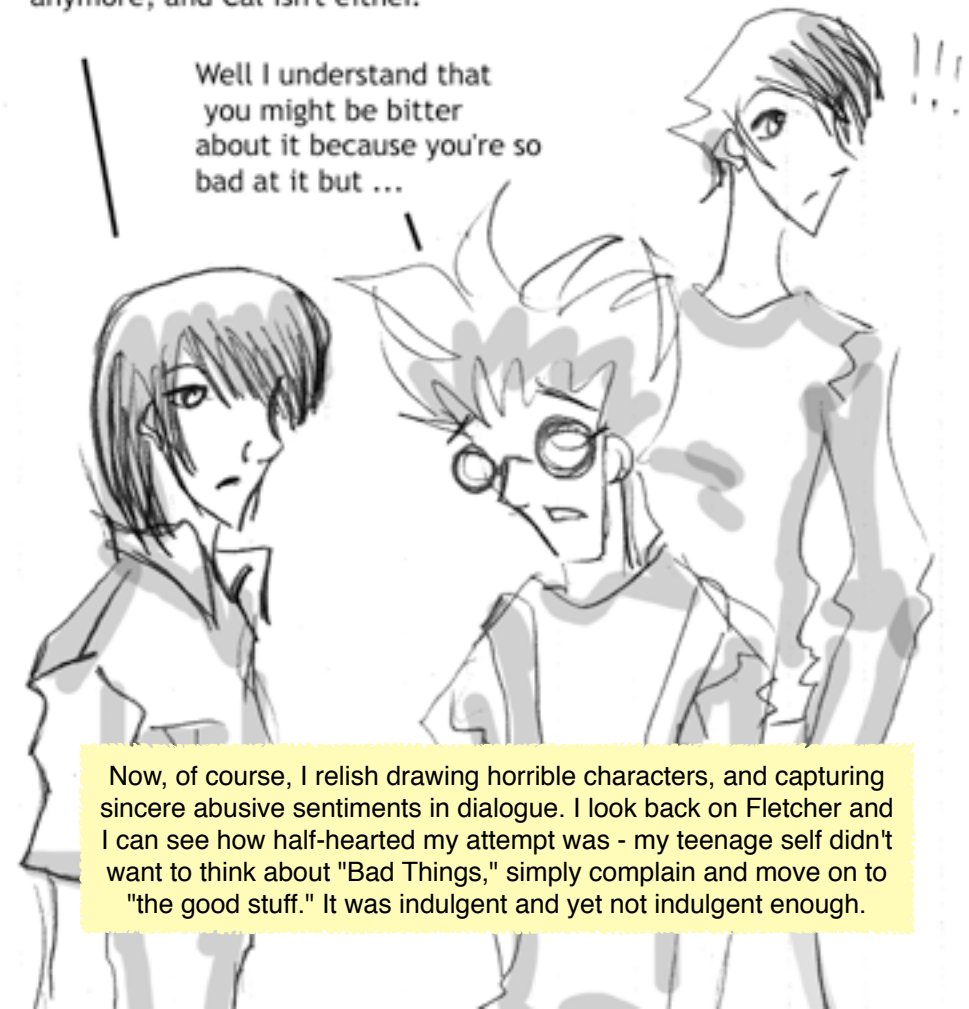


This is great! Now we have enough players for my new RPG! Of course, you're both amateurs, but I suppose we could make a near-decent game of it with me in charge.

Well...

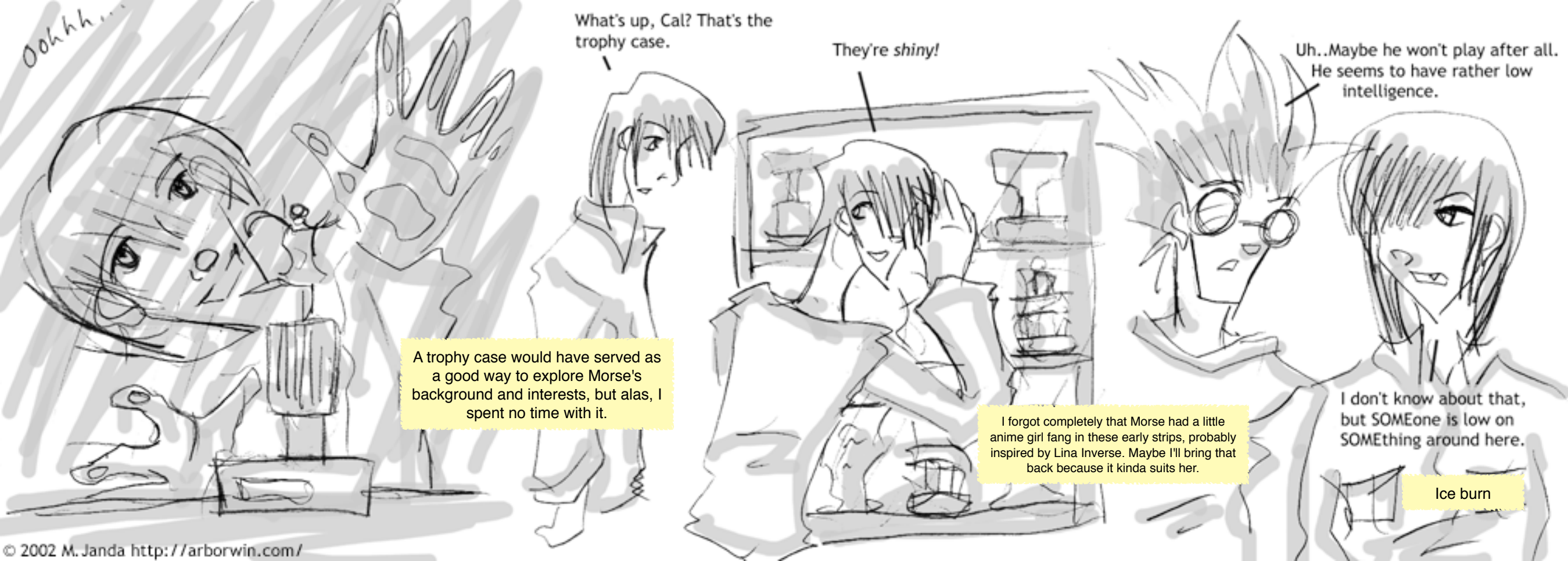
Fletcher isn't even all that bad, in the end. I underestimated how it's really hard to write sincere dialogue for abusive and unlikable characters. I thought I could just blat out some obnoxious dialogue and impart what I hated about Fletcher, but it didn't really work and just made me impatient to get rid of him so I could go back to things I wanted to write and what I thought people would like, ie bishounen or whatever.

I told you once and I'll tell you again, I'm not playing your stupid games anymore, and Cal isn't either.



Well I understand that you might be bitter about it because you're so bad at it but ...

Now, of course, I relish drawing horrible characters, and capturing sincere abusive sentiments in dialogue. I look back on Fletcher and I can see how half-hearted my attempt was - my teenage self didn't want to think about "Bad Things," simply complain and move on to "the good stuff." It was indulgent and yet not indulgent enough.



Oohhh...

What's up, Cal? That's the trophy case.

They're shiny!

Uh..Maybe he won't play after all. He seems to have rather low intelligence.

A trophy case would have served as a good way to explore Morse's background and interests, but alas, I spent no time with it.

I forgot completely that Morse had a little anime girl fang in these early strips, probably inspired by Lina Inverse. Maybe I'll bring that back because it kinda suits her.

I don't know about that, but SOMEone is low on SOMETHing around here.

Ice burn

What do we do now?

Nothing. This is just homeroom. You're supposed to sit still and be quiet. Like I can't do this at home.

...Amazing ...I can actually *feel* my will to live being slowly leeched away...

An abrupt cut to the school room, with absolutely no forewarning, and fresh attempts at speech bubbles.

two hours later...

Your health teacher did not seem to appreciate my lecture on genetically altered cockroach zygotes.

This sequence doesn't make a whole lot of sense, but Cal IS trying to stay near Morse because of what he senses might be about to happen.

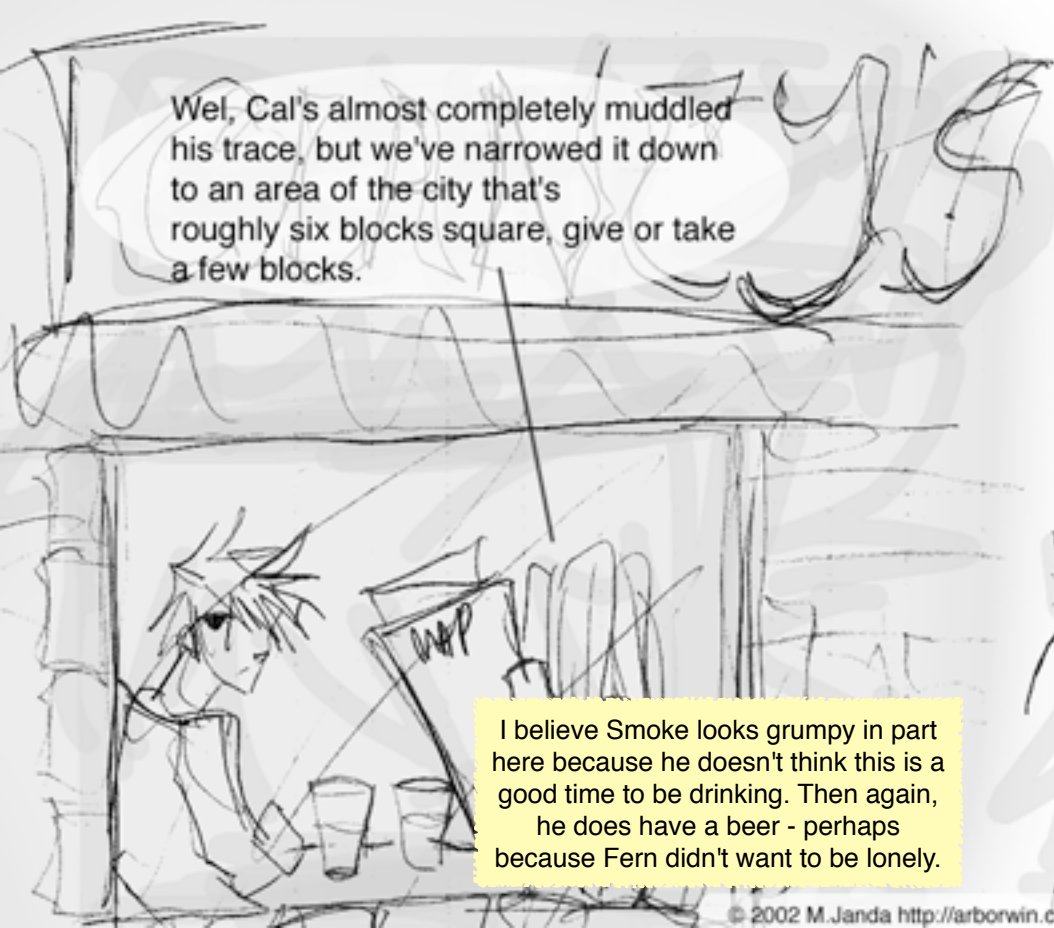
two more hours later...

Your biology teacher certainly got angry, didn't she? And just over a few frogs that came back to life! Where did she say we were going now? The principal's office?

My life is over.

Teachers should have been a lot more reluctant to let an adult man tag along to a school room, but whatever right? Cal is basically a fluffy anime mascot creature you can fit in a backpack!

Looking at this now, a very easy fix for this situation would have been to turn Cal into his crow form to tag along with her and hide in her bag. Boy, that would have worked great. Utilizing the elementals' animal forms is a huge weakness of mine.



Well, Cal's almost completely muddled his trace, but we've narrowed it down to an area of the city that's roughly six blocks square, give or take a few blocks.

I believe Smoke looks grumpy in part here because he doesn't think this is a good time to be drinking. Then again, he does have a beer - perhaps because Fern didn't want to be lonely.

It's fairly obvious he doesn't want to be found. We can't just go door to door and ask if he's there. There's thousands of people living in this one area.

But WHY doesn't he want us to find him is the question.. What the hell could he be doing in an urban residential area? There's nothing particularly interesting about it.

Well...you know Cal. It's normal for him to make absolutely no sense.

Mm hm....
Look, no hands!

.....
I think you've had enough to drink...

Whacky! Zing!
Duhoy!

dragging Fern home..
a formidable task
in itself

whheeeehehee... Shmoooke...

Mm.

D'you shee what I shee?

Mm?

This part definitely
starts to read like a
text roleplay log.

I think I could make Curtis' character work now, but I am frustrated with his existence in the old comic because for some reason I decided to give a lot of Fern's characterization and dialogue to him. At the time, I felt like creating and inserting a new character would let me get out information I was holding back, but instead it just meant I displaced it and took valuable time away from Fern's character. Oh well!

Enter Curtis the wasp boy, and a return to
"coloring" the comic.

Well, well. Callanerialians. I thought I
smelled something funny a moment ago.

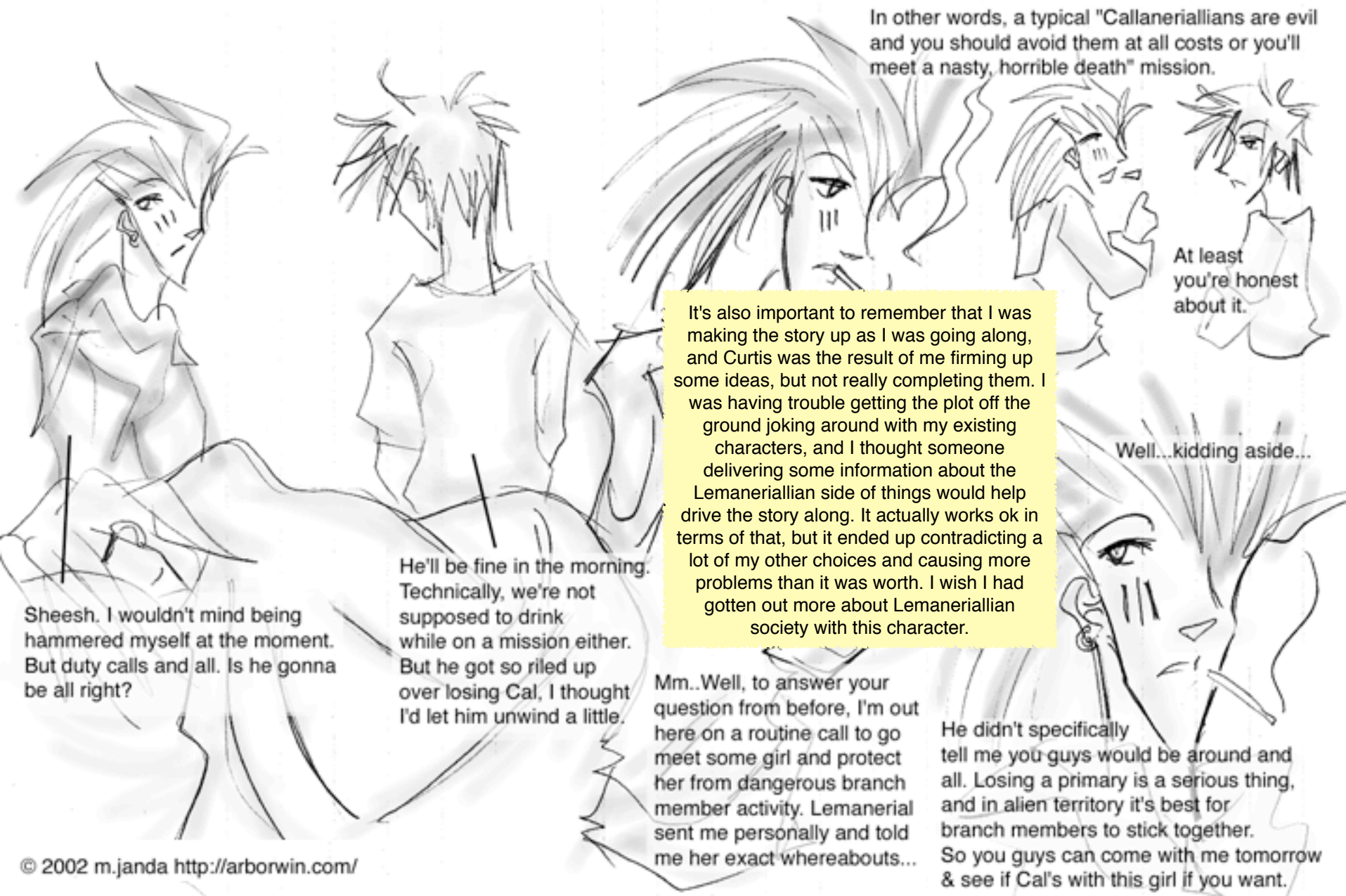
What brings you two losers to this
neck of the mortal woods?

Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm afraid Fern is
beyond provocation at the moment, Curtis.

hiiiiiiiiiiii
cuuuuurtiishhh.

Brace yourselves for lite
anime drunkenness. It's like
Fern drank a "can of juice"
and completely lost it.
Except you know it's been
like 8 beers and maybe a
whiskey or few

I'd get myself into trouble wanting to do anime tropes, but
also knowing what was wrong about them, AND being
incompetent at comedic timing and drawing in general, so
what came out could be truly bizarre.



In other words, a typical "Callanerialians are evil and you should avoid them at all costs or you'll meet a nasty, horrible death" mission.

At least you're honest about it.

It's also important to remember that I was making the story up as I was going along, and Curtis was the result of me firming up some ideas, but not really completing them. I was having trouble getting the plot off the ground joking around with my existing characters, and I thought someone delivering some information about the Lemaneriallian side of things would help drive the story along. It actually works ok in terms of that, but it ended up contradicting a lot of my other choices and causing more problems than it was worth. I wish I had gotten out more about Lemaneriallian society with this character.

Well...kidding aside...

Sheesh. I wouldn't mind being hammered myself at the moment. But duty calls and all. Is he gonna be all right?

He'll be fine in the morning. Technically, we're not supposed to drink while on a mission either. But he got so riled up over losing Cal, I thought I'd let him unwind a little.

Mm..Well, to answer your question from before, I'm out here on a routine call to go meet some girl and protect her from dangerous branch member activity. Lemanerial sent me personally and told me her exact whereabouts...

He didn't specifically tell me you guys would be around and all. Losing a primary is a serious thing, and in alien territory it's best for branch members to stick together. So you guys can come with me tomorrow & see if Cal's with this girl if you want.

**next
morning...!**

Hey. Question, professor. Why the hell is this asshole still around?

It was decided while you were incapacitated that we would go with him today with the possibility of finding Cal with his assistance.

I can't imagine why you think so negatively of me, Moranerial! Oh, perhaps it's how I always make sure to mention what a **LAME EXCUSE** for a secondary you are!

or how **ASHAMED** I would be if I had to even be in the same **BRANCH** as a smelly, drunk, irresponsible clod who slaughters innocent ch--

**SHUT.
UP.**

Gosh, this page is so forced and out of character for Curtis. Curtis was supposed to be low-class and coarse, but I didn't really know how to write him. He comes off as downright posh here. There's also threads of Final Fantasy 7's Zack about him, certainly. And for some reason, I thought it would be a good idea for him to flirt with Fern, even though I had no intention of that paying off, or even thought there was chemistry there. Weird.

Aww, short people are so cute when they're angry.

I don't care what so-called "information" he has, he annoys me and I want him to **GO AWAY**.

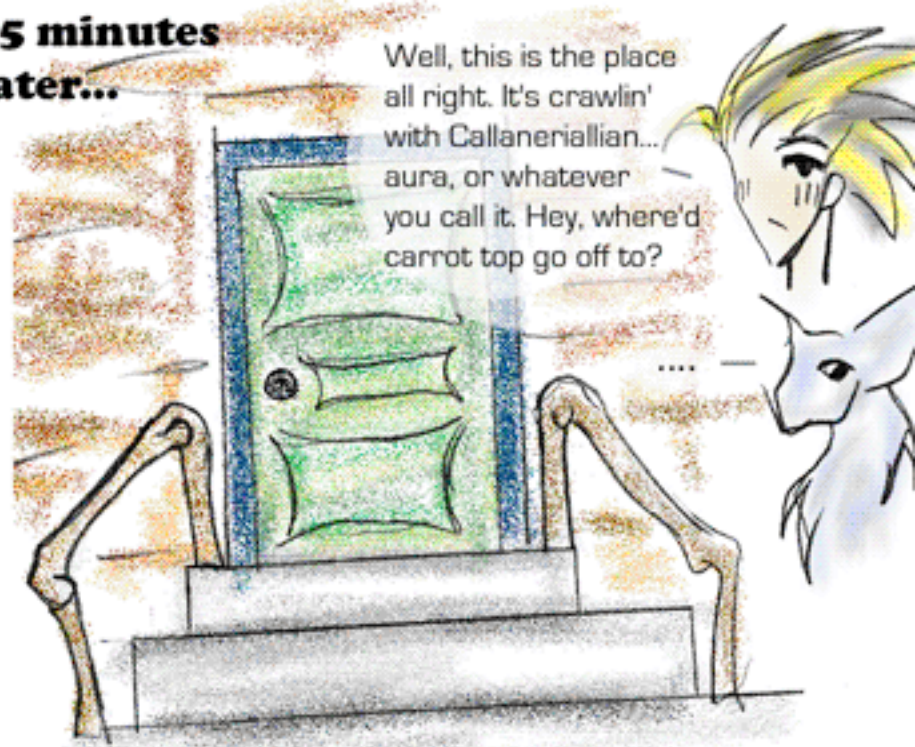
Smoke in his animal form, a melcey. He floats too! isn't he cute?
n_n

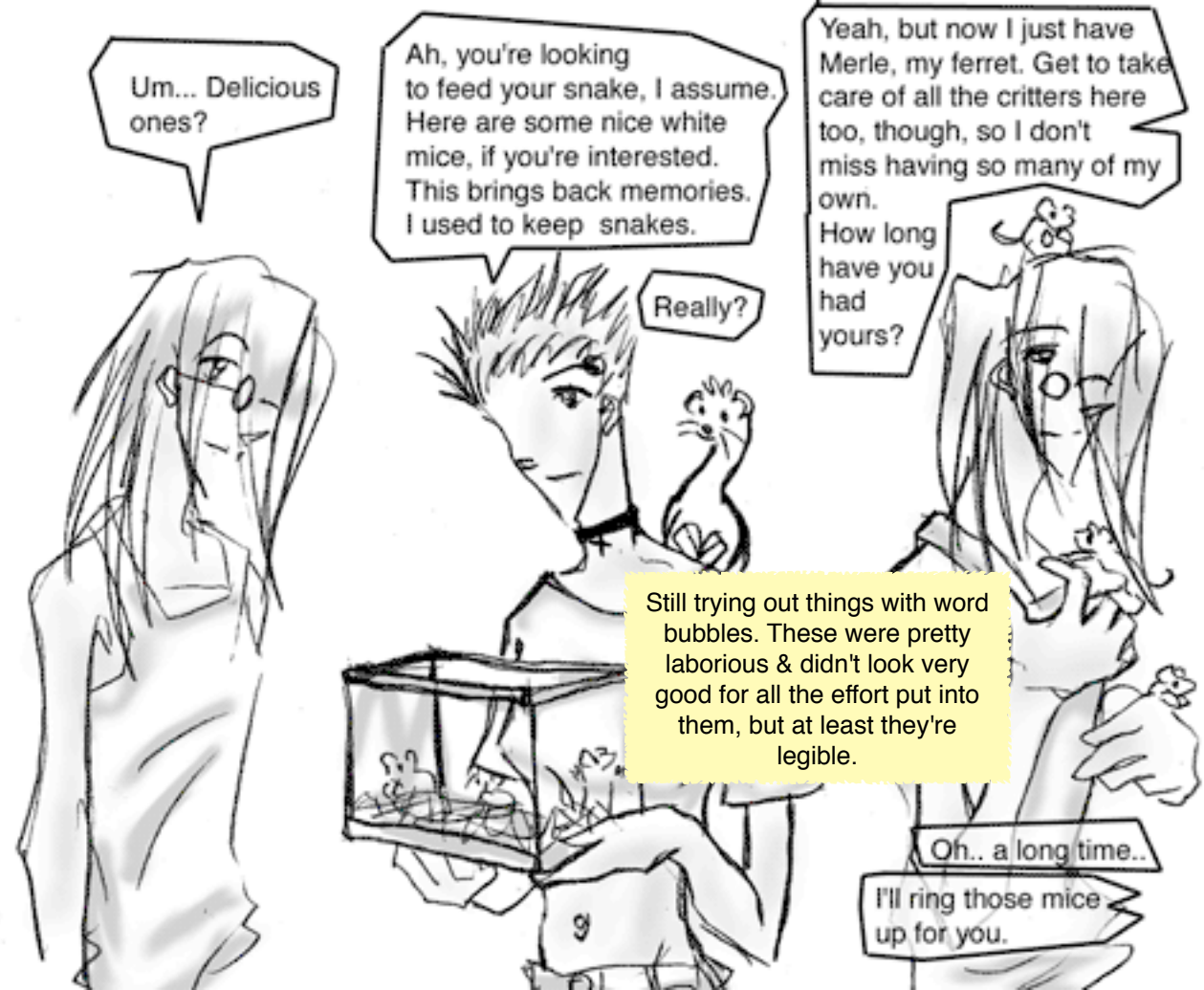
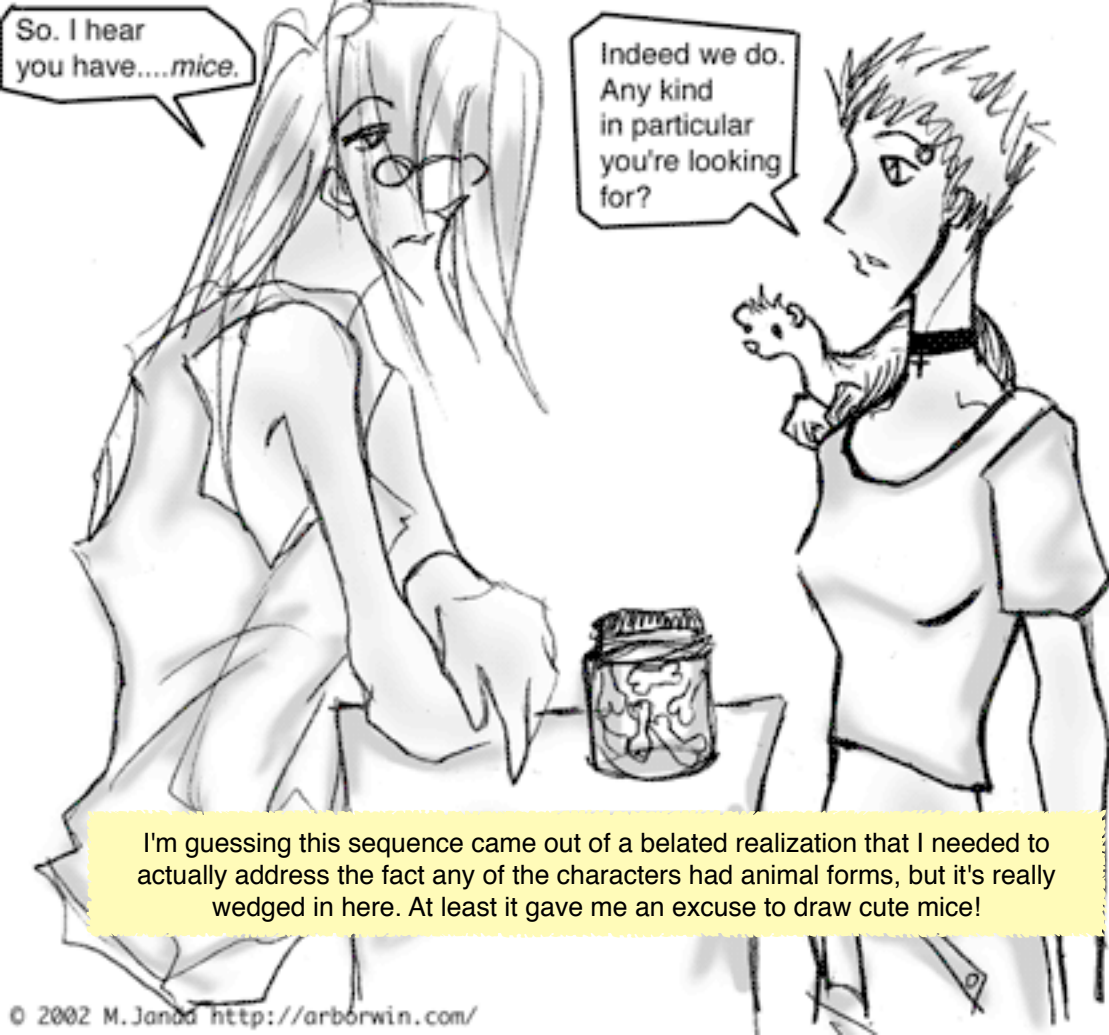
Be quiet.

When Fern is finished scattering your body parts, I'll be waiting over here.



**15 minutes
later...**





Well, that went better than I expected, for my first visit to the school office. The principal seemed mad at first but all of a sudden he went pretty quiet....

I thought he'd at least give me a lecture or whatever... He just said, "Go home."

I think this was supposed to hint that Cal exerted some kind of mind control over the principal, which is pretty insidious now that I think about it.

Maybe he didn't understand the problem.

What are we going to do now???

Well.. most of the time after school I go to the bookstore.. or the pet store.. it's right over there...

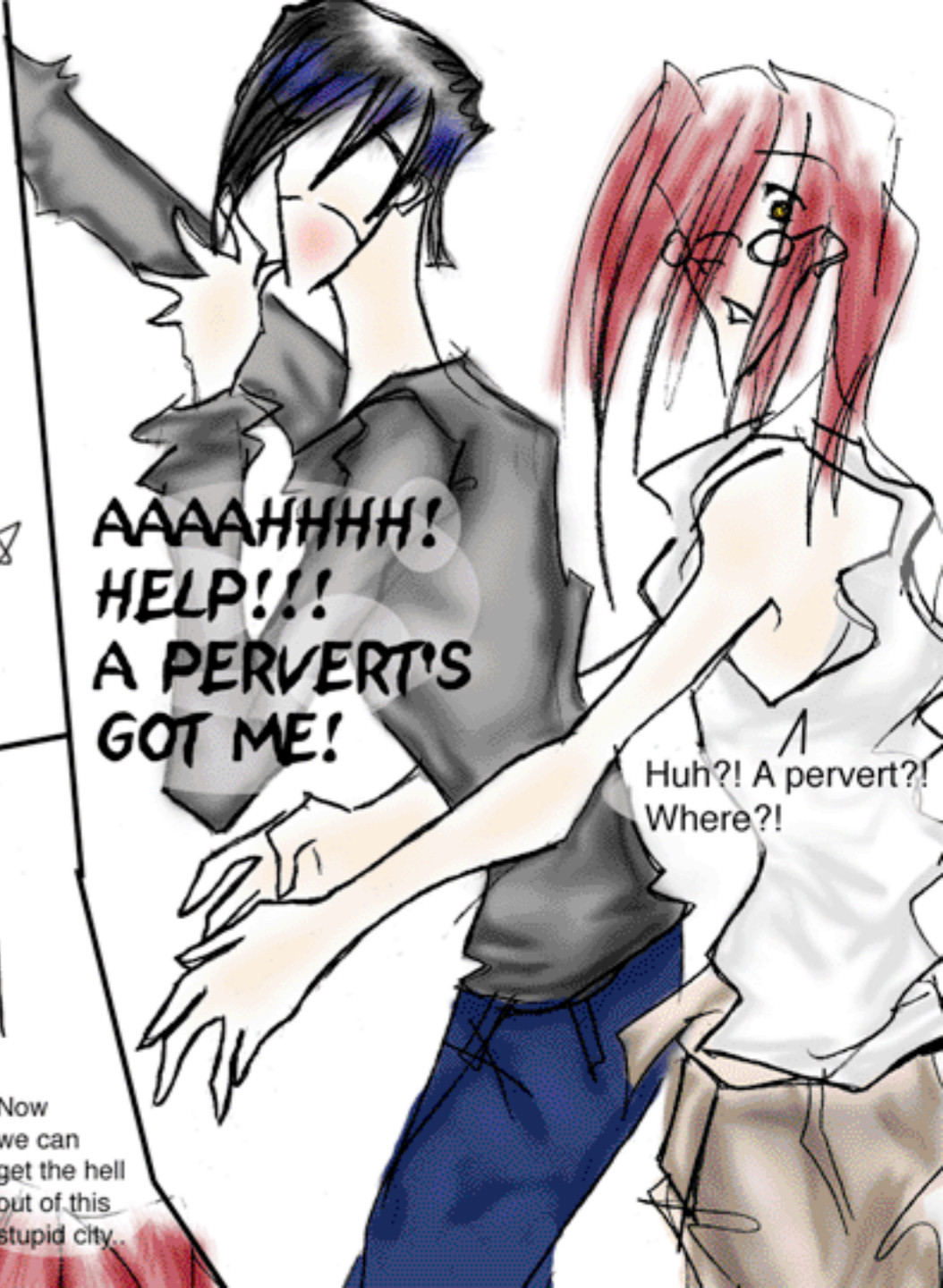
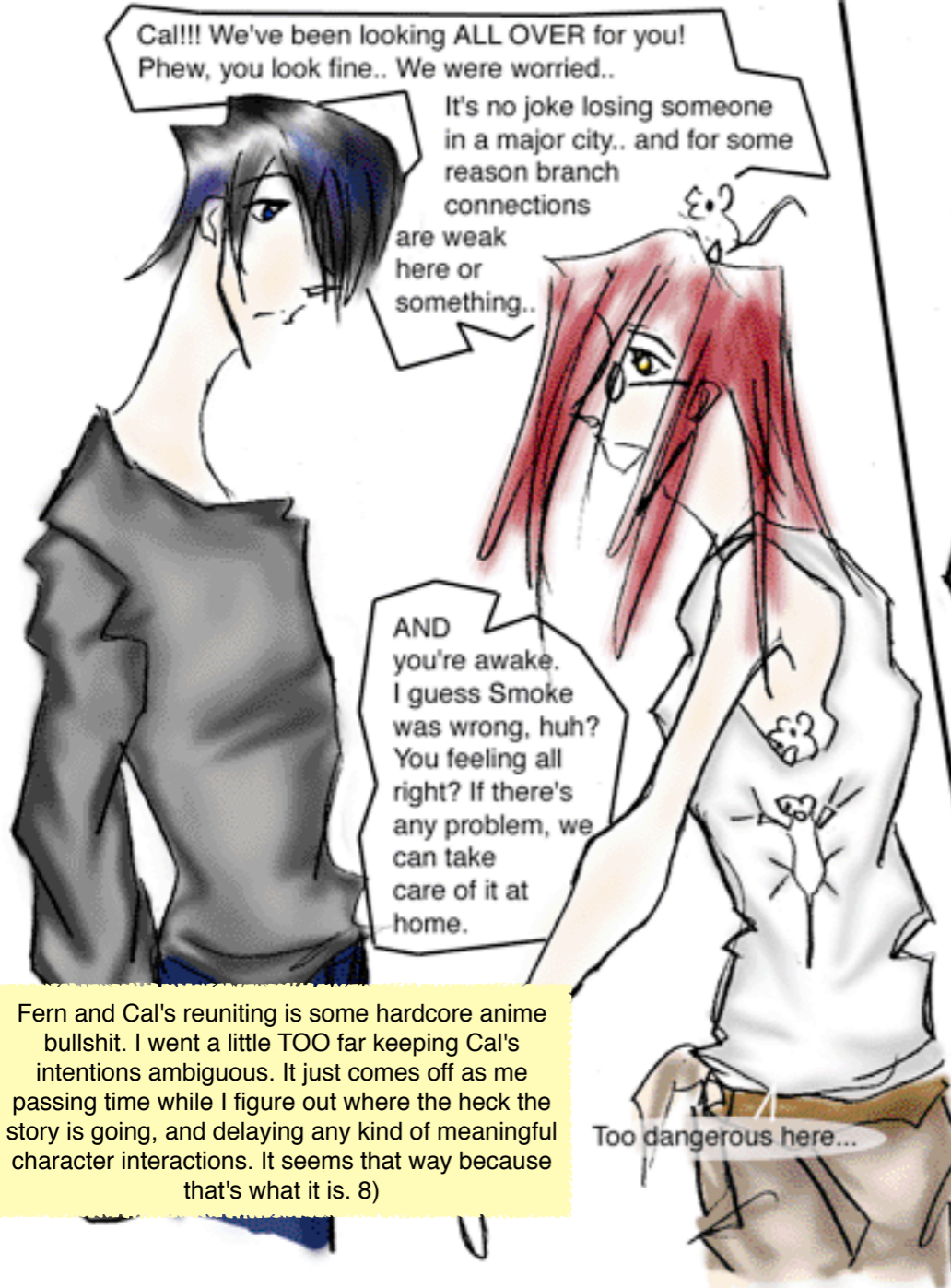
.....
Well I'll be damned. There he is, and he's headed straight towards me.

The game's afoot, Curtis.

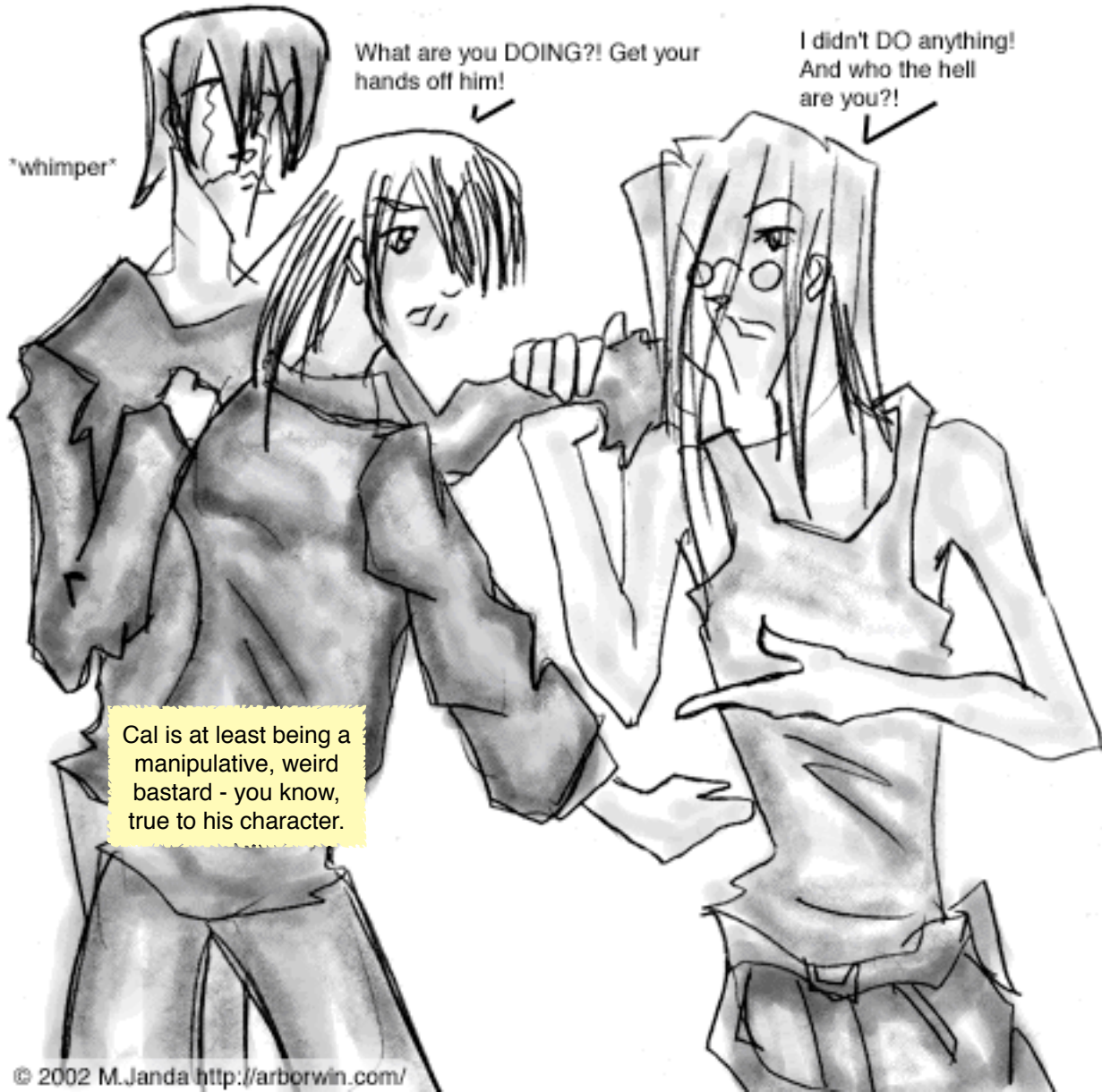
A Sherlock Holmes quote. Good.

Well what do you know! Everything comes together at the pet store!

Mm, I'm awake, I'm awake..



Fern and Cal's reuniting is some hardcore anime bullshit. I went a little TOO far keeping Cal's intentions ambiguous. It just comes off as me passing time while I figure out where the heck the story is going, and delaying any kind of meaningful character interactions. It seems that way because that's what it is. 8)

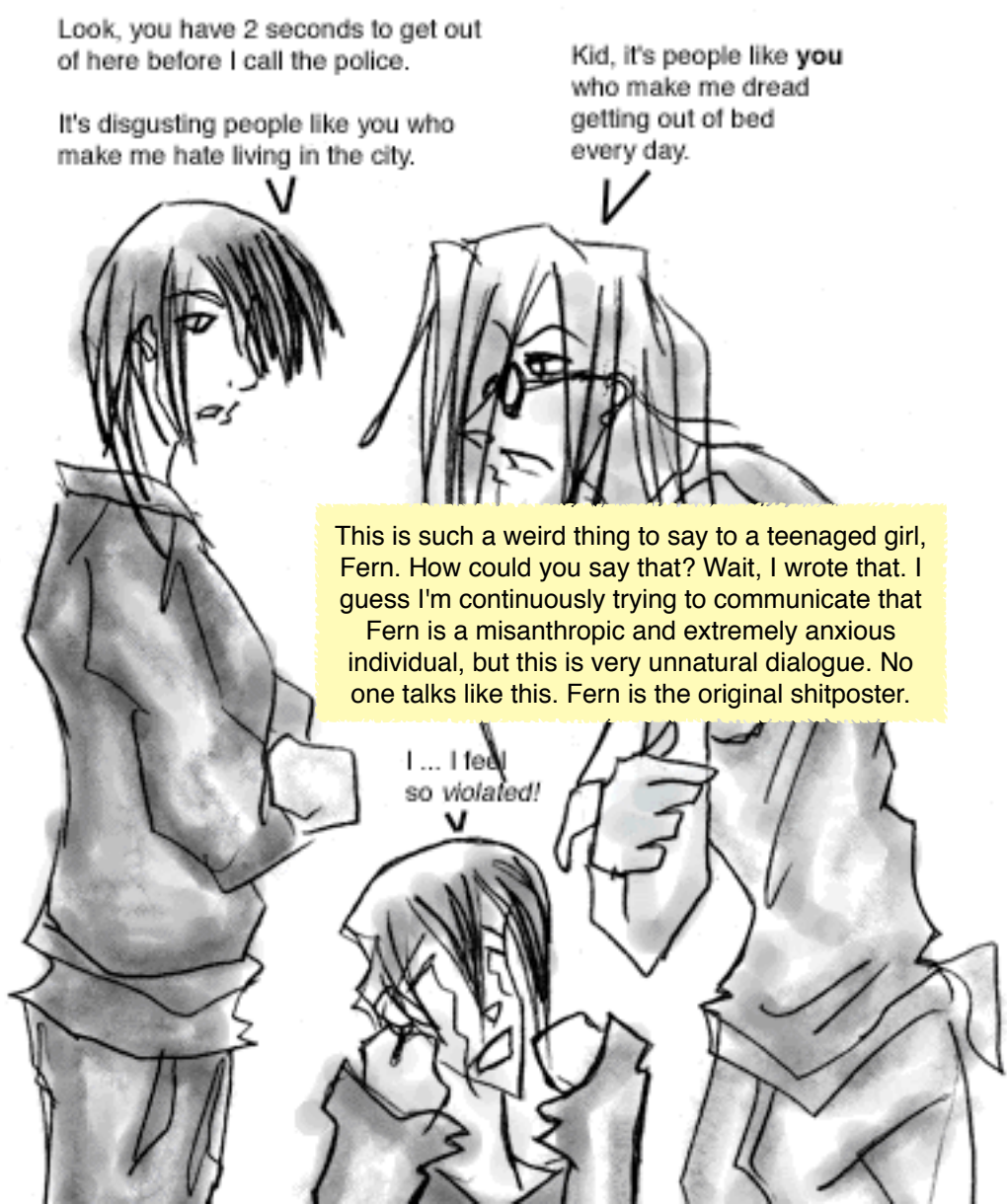


whimper

What are you DOING?! Get your hands off him!

I didn't DO anything! And who the hell are you?!

Cal is at least being a manipulative, weird bastard - you know, true to his character.



Look, you have 2 seconds to get out of here before I call the police.

It's disgusting people like you who make me hate living in the city.

Kid, it's people like **you** who make me dread getting out of bed every day.

This is such a weird thing to say to a teenaged girl, Fern. How could you say that? Wait, I wrote that. I guess I'm continuously trying to communicate that Fern is a misanthropic and extremely anxious individual, but this is very unnatural dialogue. No one talks like this. Fern is the original shitposter.

I... I feel so violated!

As far as everybody else is concerned, Fern, we're just a nooormal group of people, right? Take a deep breath. What's going on here?

Watch who you call a jerk, sweetie, you might lose something important.

Well. Is this true, Cal?

This *jerk* was picking on Cal.

SMOKE! I've been wondering where you were all this time. I want you to meet my new friend! I'm having a very good time with her, I think you'd get along famously.

Cal's pulling a cute little game and pretending not to know us. This girl just popped out of nowhere. If you think I'm making it up, just try talking to him, Smoke. He won't even recognize you.

A staple of Fern's character that I think still has a lot of value, and is expressed here, is that he's a prickly person who gets peoples' defenses up quickly. Even when he's not actually being angry and irritable, people tend to perceive him as weak, lazy, spineless, or having a poor attitude. I feel like this is a type of character that doesn't get represented often, even though I think it's an interesting "catalyst" to add to stories, to bring out different aspects of the cast. If a character like this IS represented, there tends to be a lot of other characters bending over backwards to make the grumpy character "happy" or whatever, and that doesn't tend to be what I'm interested in seeing out of those characters. Fern is a very troubled person with deep self-loathing, and it's interesting for me to reason out who will have patience to deal with him and who will not.

Cal, you jerk. Or one could say...you b-baka!

Man, that was cold. Did you do something to piss him off?

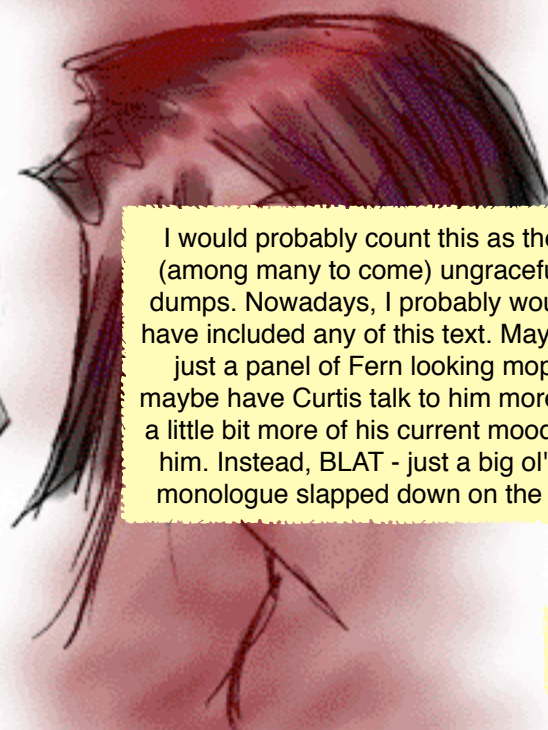
I don't know.



Elementals don't ignore their secondaries for no reason. There has **got** to be a reason. Some kind of plot of his. He just loves playing with my head when it comes to this sort of thing. Except I don't know what I did this time. Not at all. Why is he mad at me? IS he mad at me. Who the fuck knows. I don't know what's going on in that head of his. Look at him, smiling and laughing and talking like there's nothing at all the matter.

That's when you know it's bad...

whatever it is ...



I would probably count this as the first (among many to come) ungraceful info dumps. Nowadays, I probably would not have included any of this text. Maybe had just a panel of Fern looking mopey - maybe have Curtis talk to him more to get a little bit more of his current mood out of him. Instead, BLAT - just a big ol' inner monologue slapped down on the page.

Hey, Fern, are you listening to me?

I just need some time to figure this out....

At least you get a load of how neurotic & fragile Fern is, if there was any doubt!

Well, for the moment, it seems we can go no further with him. Why don't I stay here.. To keep an eye on things.

You can go home, relax a bit, change your clothes.. Then go pick up Mid at the hospital.

Smoke: Fern, please go away.
Fern: Ok

Make sure you keep an eye on that scuzbag, Curtis. Lems never have a shred of sense when it comes to sensitive situations. Pah, I bet Cal is getting quite a kick out of this... It'll be nice to see Mid, though. I wrote him last week we were coming...

Meanwhile, several worlds away, at Annelcey's Mental Hospital for Faidian Minions...

Delye... you made Fern's letter into paper maché?

All that swearing is so much more appealing as a kitty!

A heckuva transition! Yikes! Not even an establishing shot!

So many ellipses! Apparently, this is when THAT annoying habit started. If only I'd made these mice a habit instead.

This joke is still ok with me. I forgot about it.

later, at Annelcey's Mental Hospital ^_^;

✓
bzzt Would Dr. Meerstrum please come to the front desk. Dr. Meerstrum, please come to the front desk.
bzzt



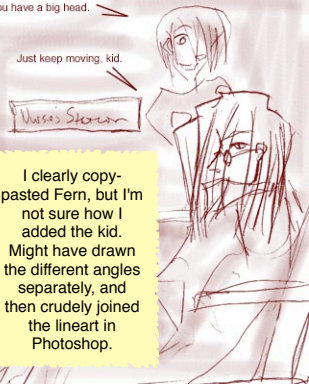
✓
bzzt Would all cafeteria staff report to the canteen. There has been a kool aid spill. I repeat, would all cafeteria staff report to the canteen. There has been a kool aid spill. *bzzt*



You have a big head. ➤

Just keep moving, kid. ➤

I clearly copy-pasted Fern, but I'm not sure how I added the kid. Might have drawn the different angles separately, and then crudely joined the lineart in Photoshop.



outside
Morse's house

Hey.. uh. Morse. If you don't mind,
I really need to speak to you in private.

sigh

For one thing, I don't even KNOW
you. Secondly, as tolerant as
my mom is, I think it would be pushing
it if I brought another random guy
home, especially one as weird as
you are.

I would say Cal is a lot
weirder than Curtis, but Cal
has that superficial charm
going for him, I guess.

Me? Weird? The man Cal
introduced to you *seconds*
ago just turned into a small
furry animal and I'm weird?

Thirdly,
you're wearing
bright yellow
pants.

.... okay. Okay.
Point taken.

Fwamp! Fashion! Zing!
God help me.

Ah, here's Mid's file! I knew it was..
someplace.. Ahem. It's good to see
you, Fern! How long has it been,
four, five years?

Hm...something like that.

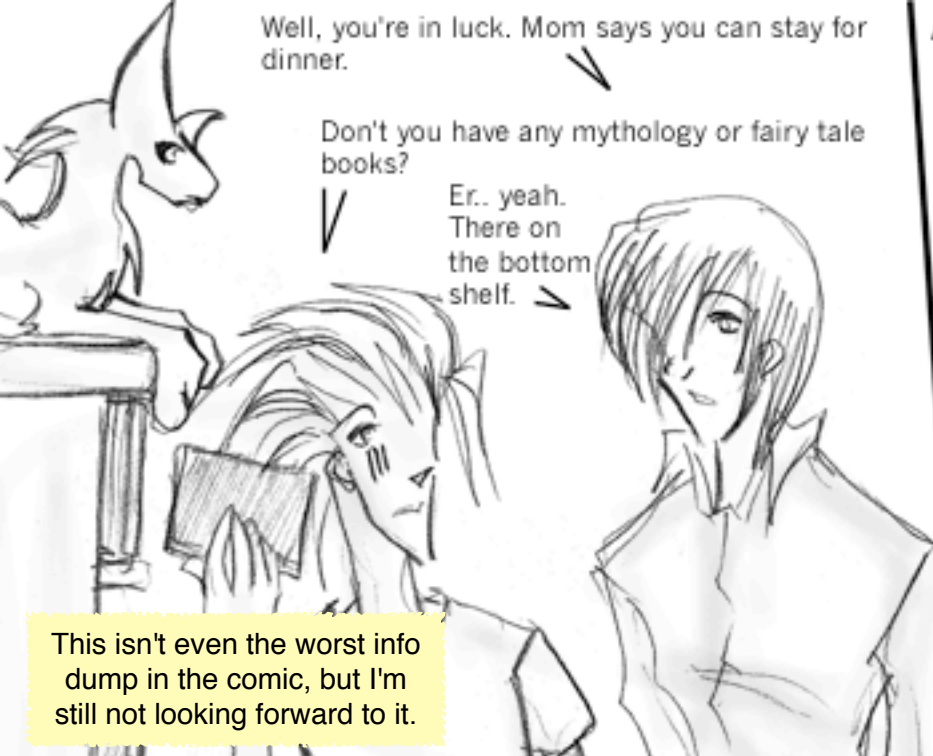
The other Best Grayling Character
besides Curtis, Fern's coat. The
initial design of the coat was really
ornate. It is, of course, some kind
of ridiculous Trigun knockoff. I feel
like I was also imitating a military
coat I had seen and admired.

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Another joke informed by
a bit from Mystery Men.

So um, do I need to fill out any
paperwork? Sign something?
Isn't there a paper with Mid's name
and "SANE" stamped on it in
big red letters involved?

Well, yes, but I'll have
to think of what we did
with the stamp... We
haven't used it in years,
you know. I wonder where
it got off to...



Well, you're in luck. Mom says you can stay for dinner.

Don't you have any mythology or fairy tale books?

Er.. yeah.
There on
the bottom
shelf.

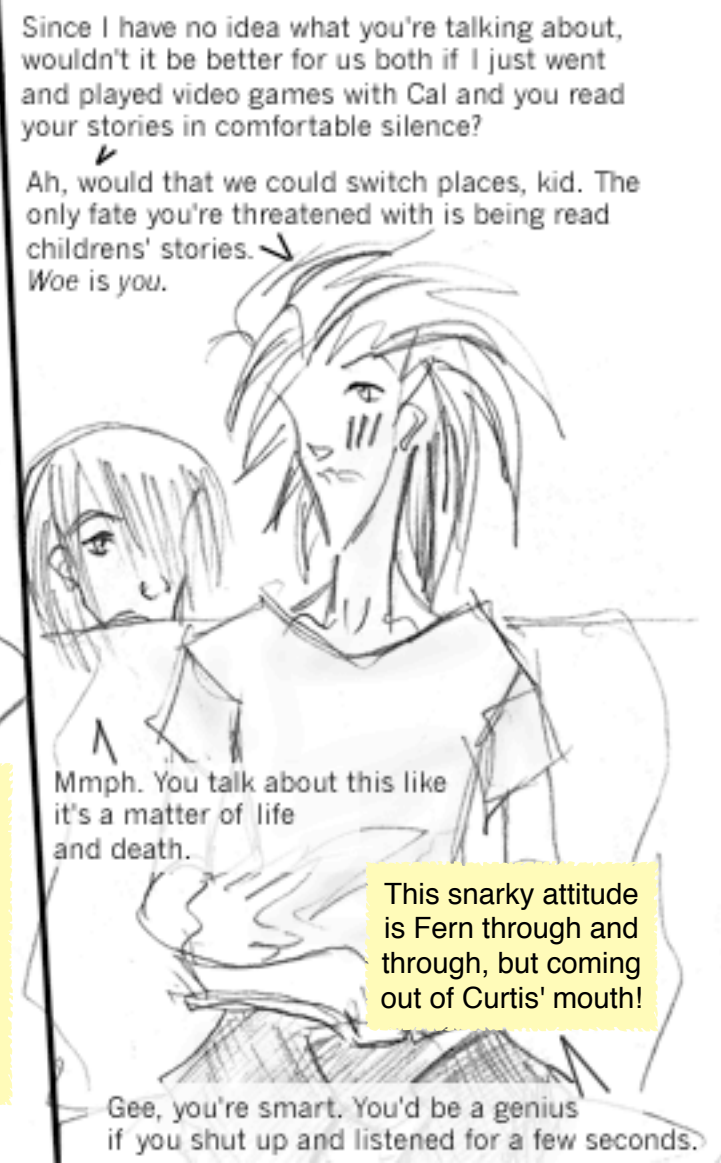
This isn't even the worst info dump in the comic, but I'm still not looking forward to it.



Ah, perfect. Come on, let's get this over with.

Uh. I'm a little old to have fairy tales read to me.

Not these kinds of fairy tales, kid. Shit, I'm tired. They need to make these damn things standard issue or something. I've never been able to jump right into it out of the blue. Doesn't work.



Since I have no idea what you're talking about, wouldn't it be better for us both if I just went and played video games with Cal and you read your stories in comfortable silence?

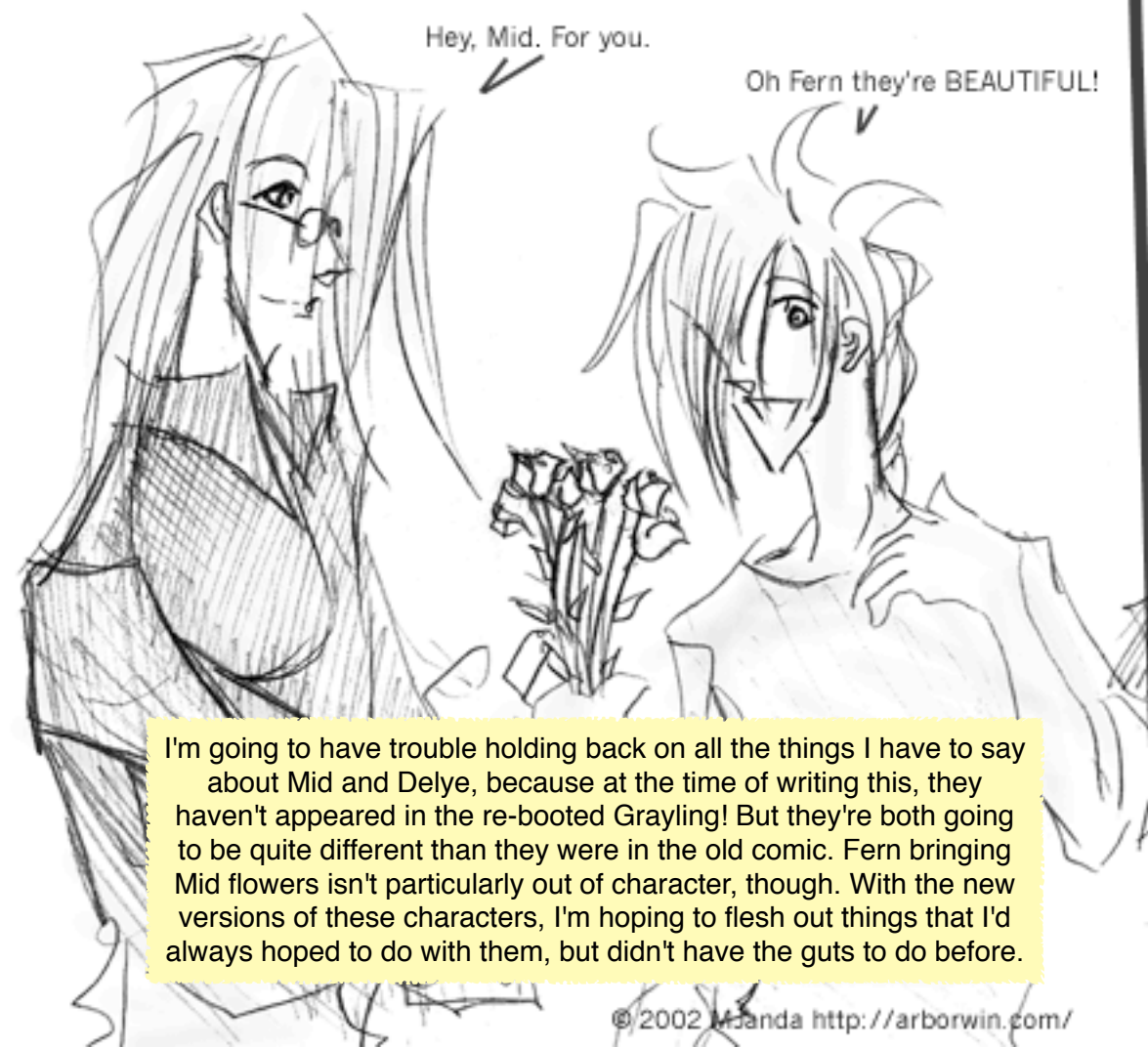
Ah, would that we could switch places, kid. The only fate you're threatened with is being read childrens' stories. Woe is you.

Mmph. You talk about this like it's a matter of life and death.

This snarky attitude is Fern through and through, but coming out of Curtis' mouth!

Gee, you're smart. You'd be a genius if you shut up and listened for a few seconds.

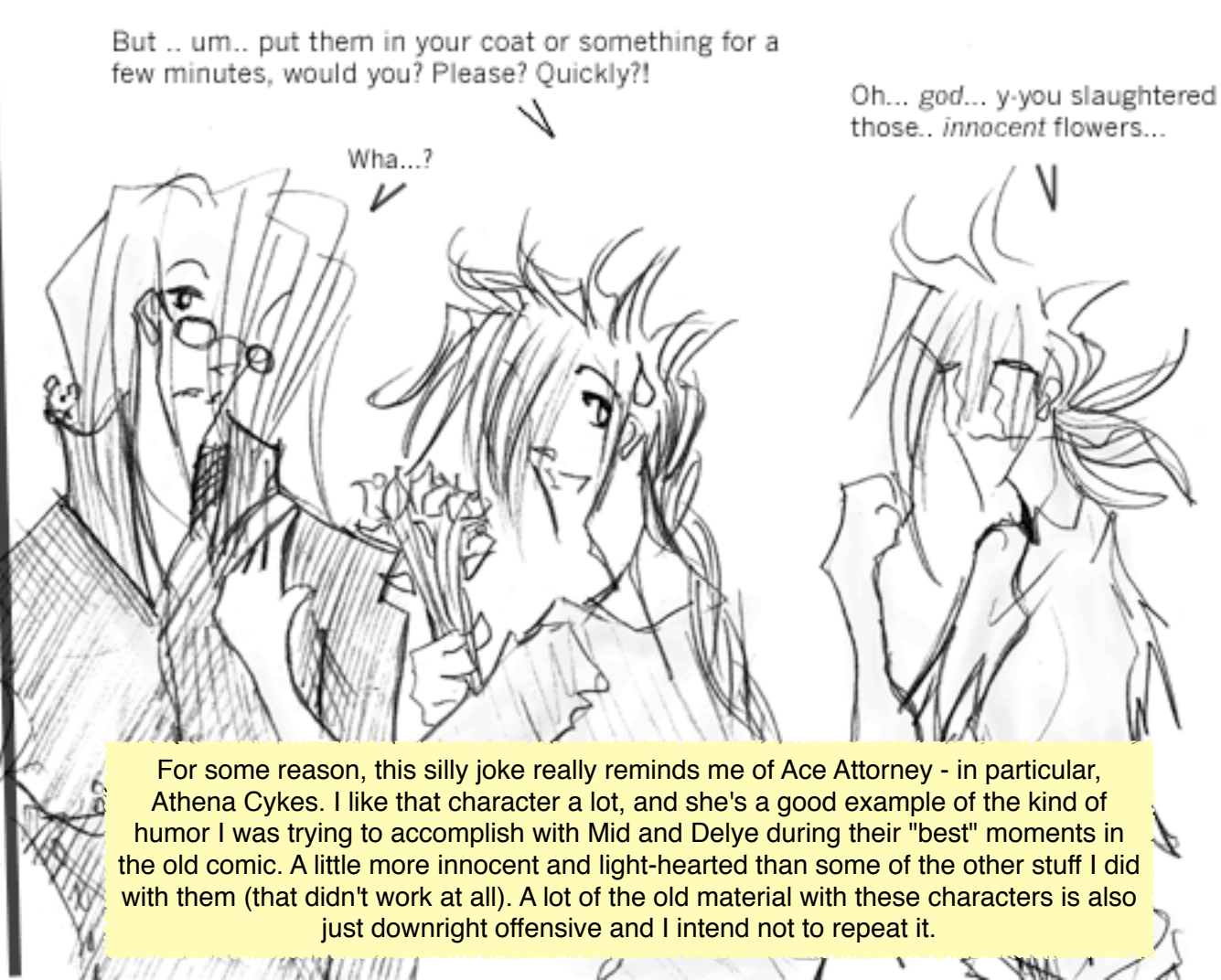
This scene demonstrates what I wrote earlier about how I gave Curtis Fern's role in the story. I should have had Fern explain this stuff, but I got caught up in excuses: It would have been out of character for Fern, Fern had no motive to do it, Fern was distracted, and so on. Curtis is a character I introduced with the express purpose of accomplishing this goal - I couldn't figure out how to "deliver" this information, so I forced it to happen. I could have definitely accomplished it with the cast I already had, but I didn't have the ingenuity to pull it off. This is why I feel negatively about Curtis - not so much because of the character himself, but the writing troubles he represents for me. I should have been more flexible, and developed circumstances to give Fern a motive to be closer to Morse.



Hey, Mid. For you.

Oh Fern they're BEAUTIFUL!

I'm going to have trouble holding back on all the things I have to say about Mid and Delye, because at the time of writing this, they haven't appeared in the re-booted Grayling! But they're both going to be quite different than they were in the old comic. Fern bringing Mid flowers isn't particularly out of character, though. With the new versions of these characters, I'm hoping to flesh out things that I'd always hoped to do with them, but didn't have the guts to do before.



But .. um.. put them in your coat or something for a few minutes, would you? Please? Quickly?!

Wha...?

Oh... god... y-you slaughtered those.. *innocent* flowers...

For some reason, this silly joke really reminds me of Ace Attorney - in particular, Athena Cykes. I like that character a lot, and she's a good example of the kind of humor I was trying to accomplish with Mid and Delye during their "best" moments in the old comic. A little more innocent and light-hearted than some of the other stuff I did with them (that didn't work at all). A lot of the old material with these characters is also just downright offensive and I intend not to repeat it.

I thought you were over that flower thing. Are you still on that meat-only diet, or have you abandoned eating altogether?



Oh, Fern, you know my life has no meaning when you're gone!

How could I eat ANYthing when my love doesn't even stop by to visit me?!

Heh, you crazy kid. You'll never stop.



Mew!

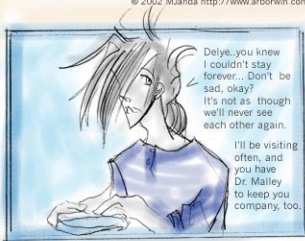
Mid made Delye put on a "decent" shirt ^-^;

As glad as I am to see you two "bonding," could you put your ruse aside for now and help me pack?

He's too smart for us, De.



Delye & Fern's friendship, however, is definitely going to stay in the new comic. In fact, this relationship is going to have a lot of significance. It's not a romantic relationship, but it will serve as the jumping board for an important ideological climax of the story that I'm really looking forward to doing.



Delye..you knew I couldn't stay forever... Don't be sad, okay? It's not as though we'll never see each other again.

I'll be visiting often, and you have Dr. Malley to keep you company, too.

Anyway....aren't YOU due for release in a couple of months?



I want to go NOOOOWWW!!!!



~::~; I thought you'd say that...

Don't worry, Delye...



I'll always be here for you, okay?

To some extent, this aspect of Mid & Delye's relationship is going to hold over, but it's going to be a lot more complicated than it's depicted here. This is just one stage in their friendship, an early one. They wouldn't still be interacting like this at this point of the timeline in the modern iteration of the comic. This seems really innocent and silly now, and of course it's very weebish and informed by shounen ai and yaoi tropes I was absorbing at the time.

Splat! There it is! I had literally just come up with these ideas, so I was just excitedly writing them down straight into the final product.. I don't think there's anything necessarily wrong with certain kinds of info dumps, they can be really interesting, but it's hard for me not to be embarrassed by my own examples. It's a sticking point for me that has only grown in significance with age. I feel like a lot of sci fi and fantasy stories get bogged down in things like this. Looking back, I was working too quickly and impatiently and not giving myself time to think up ways to couch all of this. A lot of it didn't even need to be in the comic.

All right! Here we go.
You might recognize this from one of your history classes or whatever.

Oh.. Yeah. These are famous. Nobody knows where they came from or something.

Heh.. It's funny. A bunch of old men in one world spend their lifetimes trying to understand what little kids in another know by heart.

...what do you mean?

These legends aren't from your world, kid. They're from mine.

About..er.. maybe six hundred or seven hundred years ago, your world experienced what you might call an exchange of owners.. The erm... "Beings" that control my world offed yours in a gratuitously violent fray and proceeded to lay claim to this world in order to increase their power/prestige/ what have you.

You with me so far?

Um...Yeah.
I think so.

You just don't believe a word I've said.

Pretty much.



Okay, how about this? It's a Faidian monster known as a 'halfling.' Half animal, half human, an abomination by our standards. Scary, eh? Not everyday you see something like this, right?

There are freaky things in every culture.



This is actually a pretty good page looking at it now, but once again, I could have done this with Fern instead of Curtis.

Asking to be squished is definitely still relevant dialogue.

How about the fact that my hair is striped bright yellow and black?

Bad taste & an expensive dying job.

.... All right, fine.

poik!

This is my last option. If this doesn't convince you, at least squish me so I won't have to deal with this stupid job anymore.

....Okay, changing into a bug is fairly convincing.





It's odd... It feels like I should be more excited than I am that you just turned into an insect.

That's because he's got you hypnotized, kid. I don't know if he even does this intentionally or not, but he messes with peoples' minds in a major way. Why do you think your mom let him stay without even a question?

So you're telling me the man in my living room weeping over Super Metroid is a million year old god of death and that I should kick him out as soon as possible because he's reading my mind and plans to do horrible, horrible things to me.



Not GOD. Elemental! Only weird sects call em gods...

Nice cover, Curtis.
Haha...It's all just ~magic~!

But yeah, that's the ticket.

If he can read our minds, why isn't he stopping you?

That's an excellent question. The likelihood is that he does, but he's so preoccupied at the moment that he doesn't miss much, believe me.

It's still a bit of a mess, but I am approaching my final form with word bubbles here.

be stoic and wear a big black cloak with a scythe or something?

Curtis...don't talk about that...

You watch too much anime.

I can't just tell him to go away. He's my friend. He's done nothing to deserve rejection from me.

I'm not disagreeing with you. But you should know who he really is.

< "blahblahblahblah?"

< "Blah blah blah . . ."

< "BLAH!"

< "Blah blah blah blah bleh. Bleh! Haha >:D"

< "Blah . . ."

I'm not feeling well again....

They're getting on so well... I can't bother them..

I wonder where.. Fern is...

I want Fern...

it hurts..

it hurts..

it hurts....

Things have finally started to happen! Almost!

tired.. want to go home...

I'm so tired...

it hurts...



Another wasted opportunity for an establishing shot, showing Fern's bedroom. Fern takes a nap...floating in space!





...Fuck. I hate this dream.

It's always the same...

Wait...

Like some sort of child's drawing...

I remember having a lot of fun rubbing colors around for these pages. The text is way too small and the white doesn't really go with the topic matter. If the visuals were a bit clearer, I could probably have left a lot of this un-narrated.

This whole sequence is going to receive a very different treatment in the new version of the comic. I'm also planning to do it in a couple of parts, revealing more of the story behind this whole mythological scene.

It smells...

I have no idea who or what those things are...

is that thing Cal?

So much blood...

I can't move.. can't make a sound

I can just barely hear the screaming
pleading

I want to stop looking but I can't tear my eyes away

what are they
doing?

more importantly..
why... why
that's what he
keeps screaming

One of the "plot holes" here is why Rae and Lem even have weapons. At this point they weren't supposed to have much of a conception of violence, and they didn't need food or anything to survive, so it doesn't make any sense. But it's a holdover from my old childhood iteration of this story.

The "bestial" aspect of the characters here is definitely something I'd like to keep, though!

what have they done?

they tore his heart
out

they're like dolls

A new one... her color
is white

she took one of the monsters

and now
that one is broken

his chest
is flying apart

and is
going to
lock it away
inside
the broken
doll

the other
monster
ran away

taking his
heart with it

I've changed my mind about this sequence quite a lot over the years, but what has stayed consistent is that it's an unreliable narrative. No one is really in a position to tell the truth about what happened, and the curse involving Rae is only part of that.

.... but if that doll
was Cal....

I can't look anymore

who are the monsters?

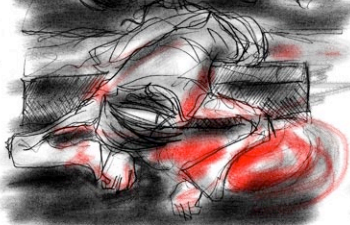
I'm in the wrong place...

I'm tired. I need to lie down.

just a little while...

I'm so tired...

This is when I was cross-hatching
everything badly in pencil, and drawing
a lot of angsty suffering pictures.

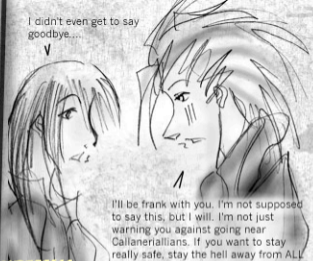


fern...



He's GONE! Do you think he heard us?

sigh
Well... I didn't wanna do it this way.. but it's for the best, kid, really.



I didn't even get to say goodbye....

I'll be frank with you. I'm not supposed to say this, but I will. I'm not just warning you against going near Callanerialians. If you want to stay really safe, stay the hell away from ALL of us. The branches are trouble. It may not seem like it at first. But it is. Cal'll understand if you don't want to be near him anymore. Think of us as a mafia family or something... trouble, and not much else appearances.



Well.. I don't know if I'll take your advice or not, Curtis. But thank you anyway.

Just doing my job, kid. Karien.

This is pretty good advice, except for the fact it's not really an option. I'm honestly not sure whether Curtis was supposed to be in the know or not. If he was, this is kind of a mean thing to say, since she can't actually avoid getting involved. It didn't occur to me to examine this issue at the time - I was just interested in making it clear that people on the magical side of things had disagreements on how to proceed.

"Karien" is just Faidian for goodbye. I guess I was trying to show how Curtis was trendy and foreign, but it just comes off like a bad anime sub.



This is still a fun page and I remember people liked it. The art of the comic was rapidly changing, though not particularly "improving" in terms of the line art. Bad cutesy anime was easing into bad "serious" anime. This page is a confusing mess, and it's really angsty and strange, but I was pretty happy with the scribbly red text for Rae. I wish I had used a similar effect for Cal's blue dialogue, it doesn't look as creepy so it doesn't match.

I'm surprised people understood what was happening in this page at all - it's only 3 panels for an entire transformation sequence! But at the time it did the job.

-END-



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A



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