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The Board and the Body: Material Constraints and Style in Graphic Narrative

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This article traces the development of grief memoir told in the language of comics. The autobiographical comic called *Toormina Video* is an occasion to investigate the role of the moving body in the process of creating graphic narratives. Cartooning can be seen as a performative mode of handwriting in which material rules and practical decisions constrain the drawing body and have a significant influence on the poetic and literary outcomes. The article demonstrates how graphic style in the comic book is in part the result of an antagonism between the literary impulse and the material restraints that structure the author's workflow. The comic under discussion is available to read online. Are we able to include a link to the work to enrich the experience? Toormina Video – http://www.patgrantart.com/toominavideo/toorminavideo.html. Blue – http://www.boltonblue.com/.

DAY ONE of PRODUCTION

I've been having a strange dream.

In the dream I am a little kid, and I am waiting in the car park for my dad to come out of the pub. The dream has disturbed me a little bit, so I have put aside some time to make it into a comic.

The comic will be a short one. 16 pages. No big deal. I'd be crazy to spend more than a few days on it, but experience has taught me to be cautious about the decisions I make at this early stage of a new project. The little projects often grow big enough to eat me. I have to set some boundaries to make sure that things don't get out of hand.

Firstly I decide on the size of my comic book.

It's going to be a tiny thing. Small enough to fit into a cheap envelope. Then I decide on the size that the original art will be drawn. I cut out sixteen small rectangles of Bristol Board. These cards are about the size of the old index cards you might find in a library, and each one of these will have a finished page drawn on it.

– From studio notes 4.2.1. July 2012 – Edith St Studio, Sydney

Fences, Walls and Cages

Art Spiegelman has referred to himself as a 'structuralist who keeps losing his moorings' (2011: 175). In discussion of his working processes for his book *Maus* he describes the way he creates rules for himself early on in each comics project:

I give myself an absolutely mathematical set of rules and then find that I'm not quite able to make my things work within the set of rules, so I poke at the edges of the rules and then violate them until I come up with something that does the job (2011: 174).

In 2012 I started working on an autobiographical comic called *Toormina Video* (Grant 2013) which would change my life. In the first few minutes that I worked on the story I made what was, for me, an unusual workflow decision: I decided to draw the comic on extremely small pieces of Bristol board. This article investigates the implications of this decision. I will examine how the development of style in comics is related to the layering of practical 'policy' like that which Spiegelman describes. I will describe the embodied experience of writing and drawing a grief narrative and trace the poetic and stylistic repercussions of practical and material rules in a cartooning project.

The story-space of a comic book can be seen as a built environment. The cartoonist, like the manager of a construction project, must make practical decisions regarding how, when and in what order things are to be done. On the building site, decisions made about digging trenches lead to decisions about laying footings which

in turn lead to decisions about building walls. A characteristic of this kind of workflow is that decisions made early in the build are often irreversible. The built environment is the result of many practical decisions layered upon each other. Similarly, the author of a graphic novel or a comic book must build and carefully police grids, frames, borders, fences and cages, both literal and conceptual, in order to get on with the job.

In other writings I have shown how style in comics can be an extra semantic charge woven into the lines by the hand of an author (Grant 2014) but here I want to show how the style can be the result of the cartooning body struggling to move and work under the regime of self-imposed rules and constraints.

Making comics/Making Knowledge

During the Period between 2010 and 2014 I drew and published a graphic novel called *Blue* (2012) and a mini-comic called *Toormina Video* (2014). While working on these books I set out to find a scholarly mode of speaking and writing about what it was like to make comics. 'If making comics is also a way of making new knowledge,' I asked, 'then what are the epistemological foundations of this new knowledge? How does an author and an artist know what they know about the intuitive and embodied business of writing and drawing?' Under the guidance of my mentor Kate Rossmanith (2008, 2009) I developed a methodological framework for recording what goes on in the studio based on the ethnographic method of Andrew Jackson (1996) and Clifford Geertz (1978, 1983). The method largely involved a kind of auto ethnographic reflection and an in-the-moment writing practice that is based on the 'Thick Description' of Geertz (1978). The studio notes that pepper this article are examples. In this instance they can be used to peer-in upon the artists making decisions at the drawing table and in this instance they can show how small practical decisions manifest in the finished work as something we call the 'style' of the work.

This particular comic is unique not because it deals with grief but because it traces the process of grief in 'real time' because five days into production my father, the subject of my story, passed away.
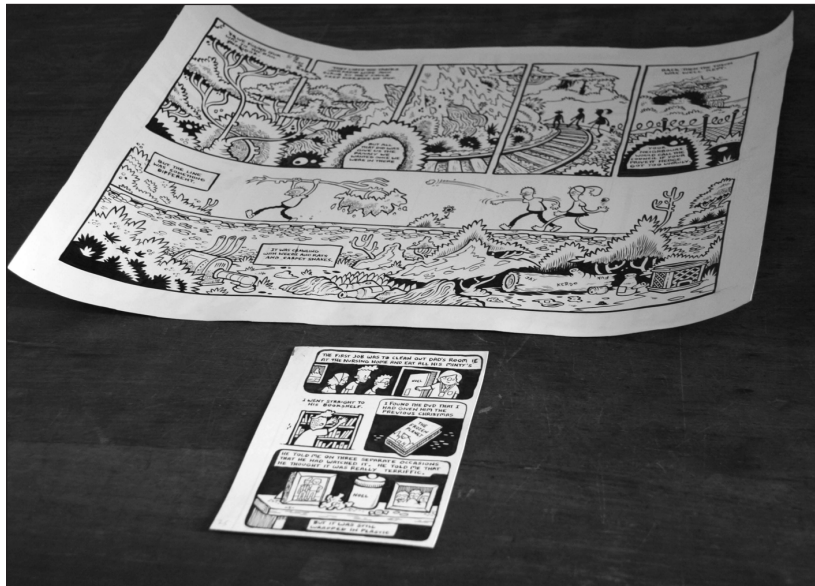
DAY FIVE of PRODUCTION

It's the early hours of the morning. The phone rings by the side of the bed. I pick up. It's mum. She's got bad news: Dad just died.

   — From studio notes. July 2012, Edith Street studio, Sydney

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Five months has passed since the funeral. The comic is still not finished. The small rectangles of Bristol Board are still spread out on my drawing table. Dust is gathering on them and the corners are curling up. I make regular attempts to finish the story, but each time I sit down to draw I find myself writing. The story is no longer a throwaway thing about that dream I had. It's a story about death and parenthood. It's not simple. It's confusing and complex. It's not about a single moment in my childhood anymore; it's about all the moments. I need a thousand pages to tell this story but all I have is 16 little cards.

   — From studio notes. November 2012, Edith Street studio, Sydney

Figure 1: The image shows one of the boards from my previous book *Blue* alongside one of the boards from *Toormina Video* demonstrating a stark difference in workspace. The size of these smaller boards was a very unusual choice for me at the time.

The Board and the Page

During the Renaissance large pieces of plasterboard or heavy paper were commonly used as design documents in the painting of frescoes and murals. These boards were called *cartones*. Over time the preparatory ink drawings that were made on them came to bear the same name as the material on which they were drawn (Petherbridge 2010). Thus the word cartoon has the same etymological root as the word *carton.* Before the cartoon was widely understood as a specific kind of reproducible ink drawing in which line has primacy over tone, it was understood simply as a square or a rectangle of stiff board. The material origins of the cartoon are still demonstrated in the practice of any cartoonist working with traditional media, as each comic book page is traditionally drawn onto an individual piece of card that, for the sake of clarity, I will refer to as simply the board.

Over the course of my fieldwork visiting the works-spaces of other graphic storytellers I have observed the vast difference in the size and dimension of the boards used by different cartoonists. Paul Pope draws on enormous boards because he likes the freedom to move his whole arm in the movement of the brush. Craig Thompson, on the other hand, cuts boards only slightly larger than the page is to be printed. I once spoke to Dustin Harbin at a convention and was shocked to find that his original drawings seemed smaller than his reproductions. Some artists, like Simon Hanselmann have worked for years on exactly the same size board, while others, like Michael Fikaris, use boards of different size and thickness for each new drawing. I have seen artists like Ben Hutchings draw a new board for every panel, and others working with a laptop and graphics tablet creating comics with no boards at all.

Whatever the case, the decision regarding the size of these boards is usually made early in the project workflow, but this decision creates an enduring influence on any given project. The board may seem to be simply blank, limitless in its possibilities, but it has edges. It has proportions. It is made of stuff. It provides the material conditions for the arrangement of marks that mesh together to become the comics page. In comics created using traditional media one of the most influential rules of the workflow is enforced with a pair of scissors or a box cutter.

DAY 234 of PRODUCTION

I have finally found a way around the impasse. I draw a draft of the story in scratchy thumbnails on different material, this time it's yellow printer paper. Each page of this new draft is A5 size, actually larger than the finished drawing will be.

Once the thumbnails draft is done I can read the new story through. It is far longer than 16 pages but it seems to work. It is time to go back to the little cards again. As I start to pencil the new pages I find that I have to omit details and tweak the composition to allow the breakdowns to function graphically on the smaller rectangles of Bristol board.

The updated story is full of scenes from my childhood. I am careful to make sure that architectural and spatial details are correct. The panels expand to accommodate the details but then they bump up against the edges of the page. As always, when recreating scenes from the past, the act of drawing activates spatial memories that were lost to my conscious mind. Little details of the house and the town come back into focus through the reconstruction. I remember the texture of the pebbles on the rendered wall outside the video store; the city services manhole made of concrete and iron that broke up the front lawn of our suburban plot; the paintings on the walls of our living room. I am compelled to include more of these little details as a way of preserving these memories that are newly recovered. But the pages are small. They were cut that size to force me to omit all but the most essential details. These boards will only allow me to fit so much of my childhood in each tiny box.

As I ink the little pages the movements that my body make in drawing with the brush feel restrained by the board. Conceptually the story seems enormous to me. It is like a dark liquid that fills me up, stretching my skin and making my head throb. To get the story out I feel the need to make big melodramatic gestures. My impulse is to wail and thrash. I want to spatter ink in violent streaks. But the marks of dark liquid must be released through a set of miniature movements. There is only 10cm of lateral movement and 15 cm of vertical movement on the boards. I cannot change the proportions of my body and neither can

I change the proportions of the little cards. My whole body clenches. I make delicate traces over the pencil lines with the tip of the brush moving only my fingers and wrists.

*Mistakes are rife. Even the slightest wobble is amplified. A moment of poor judgement drastically changes the nature of the symbols in the little panels. Sometimes the faces are so clumsily drawn that the features bleed together. My hands keep brushing over the wet ink and smudges and streaks all over the cards (**Figure 2**).*

— From studio notes. February 2013 — Edith Street studio, Sydney

Framing Drawings/Fencing Bodies

To cartoon is to make marks that are locked within a nest of cages. Some of these cages are created by the author. Some are created by the conventions and idioms of the visual language. Some are created by the practical restraints of the workflow. Either way, the friction between the cartooning body and the walls of these cages is an essential component of style. A cage is nothing if it is not a device for controlling the movement of bodies.

Figure 2: The material struggle to tell this story in tiny images is most apparent in this one haunting panel of my father smoking alone outside the nursing home.

The relationship between the cartoonist and the board is tactile. In Chute (2010), Alison Bechdel describes how in the creation of *Fun Home* she was required to 'touch every millimetre of the page' (199). The fibres of the board record the struggle as a cartoonist gropes around the blank space for the appropriate movements to make with the stylus, and the domain of the board frames this exploration. The boards were so large on some of the double page spreads of *Blue* that they would hang over the edges of the drawing table. In comparison, the boards cut for *Toormina Video* were only marginally larger than one of my hands (**Figure 1**). The tactile sensation of working on the vast canvas of *Blue* differed from the sensation of working on the small canvas of *Toormina Video*, but in addition, I want to suggest that the difference in the physical experience of drawing on these pages forces the visual language to be performed in a different register.

The board creates the domain of activity and therefore regulates the range of movement possible to the cartooning body working on a page. In my studio notes above I describe the discomfort I felt in exploring such monumental grief on such small pages. I describe the disparity in the movements inspired by the conceptual content of the piece and those allowed by the area of paper on the drawing table. In this situation the rules of the workflow forced me to perform the story using the muscles of my hand and wrist rather than those of my torso and arms. In a very real sense, it is the board as much as the story that guides the cartoonist's movement.

DAY 402 of PRODUCTION

It's 13 months since the funeral. I'm at a printer picking up the proofs of 'Toormina Video'. This is the first time I've had a chance to see the story printed on paper.

Looking at proofs is usually a startling experience. More than a year earlier when I first looked at the proof pages of 'Blue' there was a moment of profound confusion. These were drawings that I knew intimately but when printed at a different size they felt as though had been drawn by someone else; an impostor who actually knew what they were doing. The marks of a bumbling idiot on the leaves of Bristol boards are somehow processed, tightened. They are transformed into the marks of a storyteller with purpose.

The clerk at Officeworks hands me the proofs of 'Toormina Video' and I quickly leaf through the pages. This feeling is entirely new. The lines in Toormina Video yell out at me with a voice that is thick and clumsy. This comic is wonkier than anything I've done for years. The lines are ragged and unrehearsed, yet they somehow feel like an honest expression of my body. The chambers and frames in the comic that seemed so small to my drawing hand now seem huge to my reading eyes. The compositions are filled with plain spaces, most of them black. They are empty. They echo.
– From studio notes, August 2013 – Officeworks, Sydney

Board: Page – an Important Ratio

As well as regulating the gestural movement of drawing body, the size of the board and the extent to which the drawing must be scaled up or down to be printed, has an important poetic and stylistic influence on the finished comic book.

In his aesthetic reading of original comic book art, Molotiu writes: 'Original art displays the drawn marks at the scale at which they were created, therefore emphasising the indexical relationship between the draftsmanship and the hand and body of the artist.' (2010). For Molotiu a nuanced reading of a comic page is possible when marks are viewed at the exact size they were created. It is almost always the case that original drawings are reduced considerably in size when reproduced for the finished comics page (McCloud 2011, Abel, Madden 2008). Spiegelman explains why this is a common part of the production workflow for most cartoonists:

> *Drawing large and reducing the art for publication tightens it up. It makes the art look more crisp and "professional" (Spiegelman 2011: 174).*

To employ Peirce's influential taxonomy of signifiers (1974), in this context the reduction in size of the comic book page through reproduction serves to distance the symbolic and iconic content of the sequence from the indexical trace of cartooning body.

In the last section we saw that the board can govern how a comic is drawn through the performance of marks and gestures. Here we see another of its structural

functions: the difference in size between the board and the printed page can govern the extent to which the marks are reduced through reproduction, and therefore the potency and presence of the artist's hand in the text. In the studio notes I wrote about my first sighting of the printed pages of *Blue*:

> *It felt like the comic had been drawn by someone else; an impostor who actually knew what they were doing. The marks of a bumbling idiot on the leaves of Bristol boards are somehow processed, tightened. They are transformed into the marks of a storyteller with purpose.*

In scanning, designing and printing *Blue* the pages were reduced to 20% of the size of the board. In this transaction the marks on the board became more delicate, and spaces between them shrank. The result is an impossible image; a mosaic of uncanny images that *look* drawn but that could not have conceivably been produced at that size by a moving human body.

By contrast, in *Toormina Video* the pages were printed at almost the size at which they were drawn, that is, like *Maus* the board/page ratio was almost 1:1. In my studio notes I write:

> *The brush lines in Toormina Video yell out at me with a voice that is thick and clumsy. This comic is wonkier than anything I've done for years.*

Here the voice of a flawed human hand and a troubled moving body is processed differently. A reading such as the one that Molotiu describes is far more likely in the reproduction of *Toormina Video* than it is in *Blue* and this is a direct result of the board to page ratio. The index of the drawing body can never be removed from the comic book page by rescaling alone, however it is clear that the proportional relationship between board and page can amplify the voice of cartoonist's body in the thickets of marks.

Deep in the graphic novel canon is a superb demonstration of this process. Years before he began working on the famous graphic novel about his father's experience of the Holocaust (2003), Art Spiegelman drew a shorter version of the same story,

Figure 3: Selected panels from the 1972 version of 'Maus' (left) as compared with corresponding panels from the graphic novel version of 'Maus' (right). Note the different 'acoustic' experiences created by the arrangement of the marks in these two examples. (Images © Art Spiegelman 1974 and 2003).

one that was only three pages long (1972). Both comics are called *Maus* (**Figure 3**). The earlier version was drawn in black ink using processes well established among underground cartoonists by 1972 (Rosenkranz 2002, Estren 1993). It was drawn at a large scale and reduced in reproduction to fit the standard American comic book page. The graphic novel version of *Maus*, however, is widely recognised as a departure from this countercultural tradition; the harbinger of the new comic book form that we know as the graphic novel. I want to suggest that this departure is evidenced as much in the radical concept of the long form graphic memoir as it is in the peculiar rules and procedures that Spiegelman set for himself in the cartooning workflow, specifically, those regarding the relationship between the size of the material drawing space and the printed page. Spiegelman writes:

> I decided to work (at the) same size as publication: the drawings that you see
> in the book are in exactly a one-to-one ratio to the size they're drawn. It affords
> a degree of intimacy, an "I-thou" kind of moment, that doesn't allow me to
> take refuge in the minimizing of one's hand tremor and possible lack of skill

that comes with the common practice of drawing upsize… Reproducing one's own mark – offering a facsimile of one's own handwriting – makes it more like looking into an actual journal, like Anne Frank's or like Alfred Kantor's notebook drawings on Auschwitz. This approach let me abandon most of my art supplies for Maus, to work on typing paper. Using stationery store supplies, bond paper, typewriter correction fluid and a fountain pen made it more like writing, like offering up a manuscript, something made by hand (Spiegelman 2011: 174).

Here we see clear examples of Spiegelman as a structuralist, setting up rules for this graphic novel like those described earlier in the chapter. The decision to use a 1:1 board to page ratio was a deliberate move toward a more intimate autobiographical voice than was common in the underground comics of his contemporaries. This technique of working at a board/page ratio of 1:1 or close to 1:1 has become more common among Spiegelman's antecedents working in autobiographical comics such as Jeffery Brown (2003), Vanessa Davis (2010) and Gabrelle Bell (2014), and those working in fictional graphic novels such as David Mazzucchelli (in Auster, Karasik, and Mazzucchelli 1994) and Dash Shaw (2013). It has become one of the stylistic signifiers of the autobio form. The emergence of comics as a literary form can, in part, be attributed to this production quirk, this small procedural decision. The intimate authorial voice of cartoonists like Spiegelman and Shaw is amplified through the apparent clumsiness of their marks. As Chute writes:

What feels so intimate about a comic is that it looks like what it is… *The subjective mark of the body is rendered directly onto the page and constitutes how we view the page (2010: 11).*

In my studio notes earlier in the chapter I wrote about how it felt to see the reproduced pages of *Toormina Video* for the first time:

The chambers and frames that seemed so small when I was drawing the comic now seem huge to my reading eyes. The compositions are filled with plain spaces, most of them black. They are empty. They echo.

I want to examine the board/page ratio in this context, particularly its ability to produce this 'echo' within (not between) the frames of a comic. The 1972 version of *Maus* presents more delicate marks arranged in a tighter weave whereas the graphic novel presents thicker, clumsier marks that seem to mesh together more haphazardly. Moreover the illusion of depth – the z space – in the diegetic realm of the 1972 version is deeper and more complicated, whereas the z-space is more stylised in the graphic novel version. This is what I mean when I use the term echo: a visual acoustics of frame and mark. These two comics exhibit very different acoustic qualities in both the diegetic and extra-diegetic space that, I would argue, are largely the result of a decision made with a box cutter or a pair of scissors. These comics are drawn about the same autobiographical moment, with the very same hand, yet there is an unmistakable poetic and stylistic difference that must be attributed to the proportional relationship between the board and the page.

The Board and the Narrative

So far I have shown how the material properties of the board can restrict the range of movements possible in the gestural performance of drawing. I have also shown how the resizing of drawings on the board through reproduction can influence the indexical trace of the author's body and the acoustic properties of the page. These are both largely poetic concerns for readers of the finished comic book, however in this last section I hope to show how decisions about the size of the board can influence the narrative content of a story. This piece of stiff card can influence not only how cartoon images are to be drawn and reproduced, but what should be drawn and where.

In an interview with Robin McConnel, the cartoonist Dash Shaw describes the process by which he created his book *New School* (2013). Each page of the comic was drafted several times by Shaw, and each draft was drawn at a different size. Explaining the rationale behind this unusual technique Shaw describes what appears to be a direct challenge to the material constraints of the boards:

> When you draw things at 18 inches by 24 inches. You'll put a lot in there. You'll draw all these buildings in the background or something. But then if you

scan that drawing and print it out at eight and a half inches by eleven and redraw it (at that size). That's when you realise that there's all this stuff that you can leave out. You'll realise "oh I didn't need that building back there". This character's stubble doesn't have to be these little dots each time instead they can be drawn in strong single strokes. When you're drawing small with a thick pen … it becomes a kind of a cleansing of the material to get the composition down to something you feel is strong and appropriately dramatic (Shaw in McConnel 2012 23: 08).

This is an example of a set of rules and constraints built into the workflow that allows the symbolic and iconic content of a graphic narrative to bounce between multiple boards as a way of distilling or 'cleansing' the story of superfluous compositional elements. Shaw demonstrates how the different material domains provided by the different boards in the iterative drafts guide him in deciding what information to include in each frame and what to omit. In a comic book, the content of the panels becomes the content of the story; therefore the decisions regarding the proportions of the board have broader narrative implications on a work of graphic literature.

Toormina Video is a true story about some events that occurred in the past – in the early 1990s – but it is also about things that happened in the present. I had drawn only a fraction of the book when my father died. The story changed after his death, but there was already a thick pastiche of rules and constraints that structured the project. To revisit the builder's analogy, the foundations for the construction of this comic book had already been poured and had dried out and hardened along with the ink of those early pages, even though the design for the project and its future uses underwent drastic change. The content of *Toormina Video* simply began to outgrow the cage that I had built to contain it. The story expanded in two important ways: the number of pages grew from 16 to 36, and the size of the printed book expanded to the size of the boards. Those little cards, however, could not stretch in width nor height – their dimensions were fixed by rules that I had created at a time when my father was alive. In rewriting the story

and taking stock of the material that I hoped would go into the updated version, it became clear that the biggest limitation was the space available to me on the boards. The story had become an important exercise in recollection through drawing, and I felt the impulse to recreate scenes from my childhood in forensic detail, but the boards would not accommodate this impulse. As I wrote in the above studio notes, I could only fit so much of my past life into each tiny box. The spatial limitations and the physical struggle of creating cartoon elements that would fit inside these tiny frames forced me repeatedly to privilege simplicity over complexity in graphic representation. This echoes the process of 'cleansing' that Dash Shaw describes above.

The decisions made around the dimensions of the board influenced not only the performance of mark making, but the arrangement of content of the panels, the arrangement of panels in the page and, in turn, the narrative content of the story. Had *Toormina Video* been a prose project then I imagine that a short story would have turned into a novella or a novel the medium — which is to say the 'place' where the narrative is performed — would have stretched to accommodate my changing desires and my changing life. I could have obscured my early intentions through rewriting and readers would have been none the wiser. But the comics workflow does not function in the same way as that of prose or poetry. Cardboard does not stretch. Cartoonists, like builders, often have to live with the misguided decisions of the past.

Rattling the Cages

Toormina video was published online on Fathers Day in 2013. It had more than 10,000 readers in the first two hours it was up online. Three weeks later I was up on stage at the Sydney Opera House reading the piece to a packed theatre. A year later the story was reproduced in a literary journal. It remains the most read and remarked upon work I have ever done. It was a huge struggle to make this comic under the unique circumstanced that is was created, and I am certain that the response to the work has been so strong because this complex struggle of grief has found a graphic and material form.

For Hatfield (2008) comics is an art defined by tensions between the various frames and structures that constitute the comic book. One of the key tensions he describes is that between the experience of reading and the experience of the text as a material object. This chapter points to a similar tension, one of many found in the back-end of a comic book or graphic novel: a power struggle between the creative impulses of an author, the rules that structure the project, and the materials in the studio. As Hatfield suggests of *Maus* the depiction of true events in the language of comics is 'the result of a continual renegotiation between the artist, his materials and his audience' (ibid: 151). *Toormina Video* demonstrates how a little piece of stiff card can have its own opinions on the stylistic and narrative outcomes of a cartooning project. The edges of the board create one of many cages in the cartooning workflow that can contain language, narrative and the drawing body. Much of what we understand as style in comics is what happen when the storyteller rattles these cages.

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