

galgenhumor

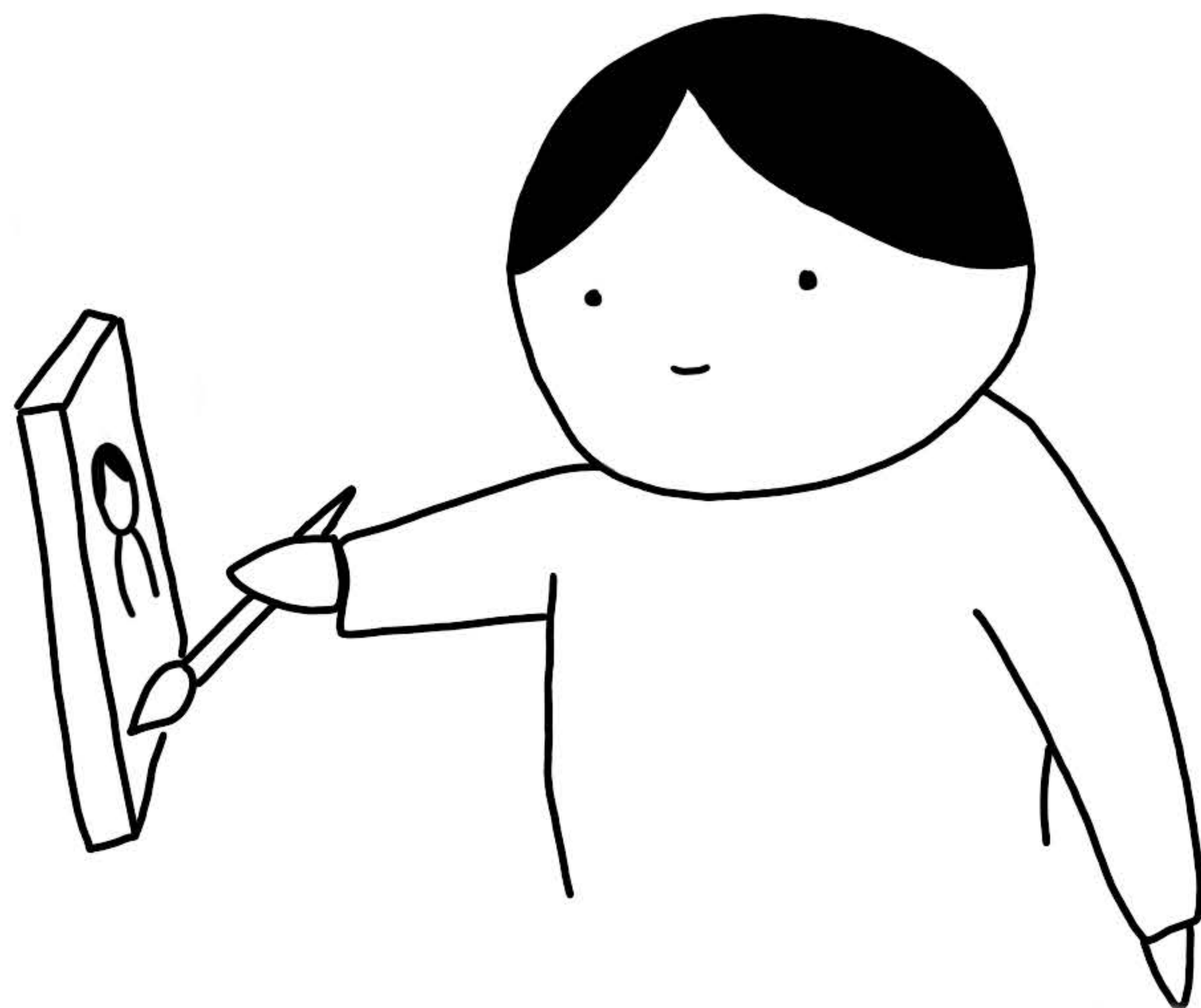
as a coping mechanism

by zivi

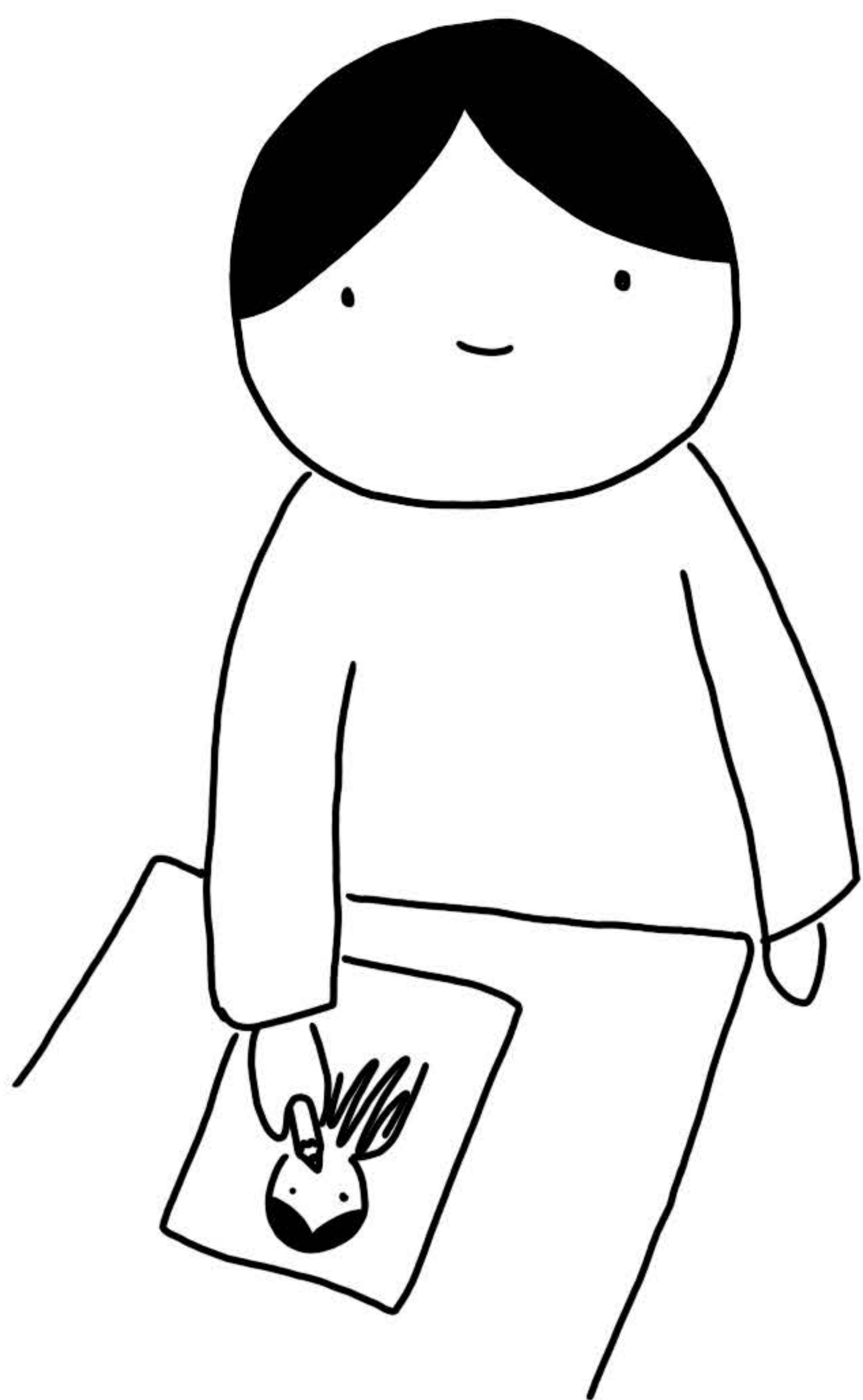




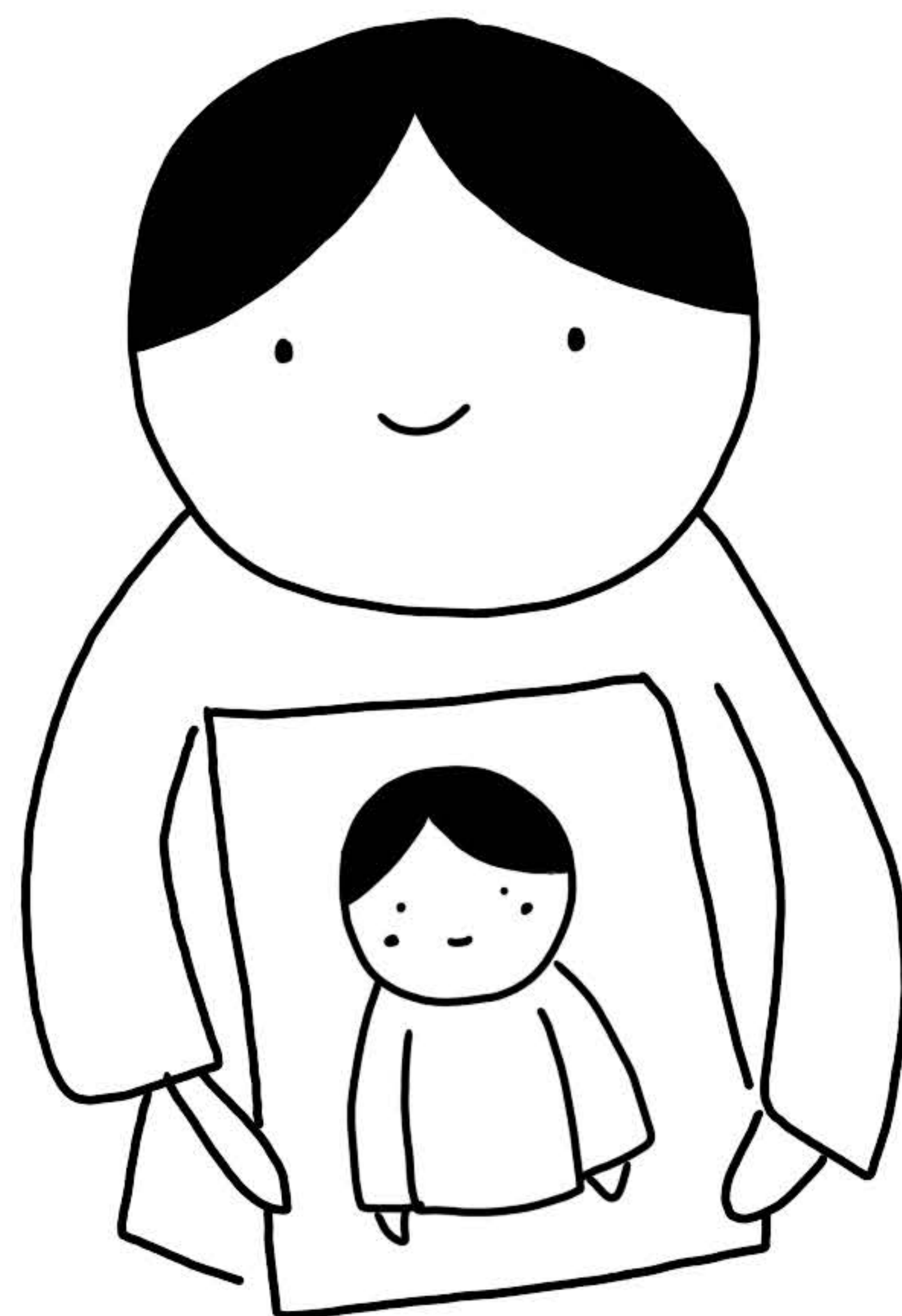
i like art.



*i can make everything
that i touch pretty.*



and maybe if i do it enough



i can make myself pretty too.

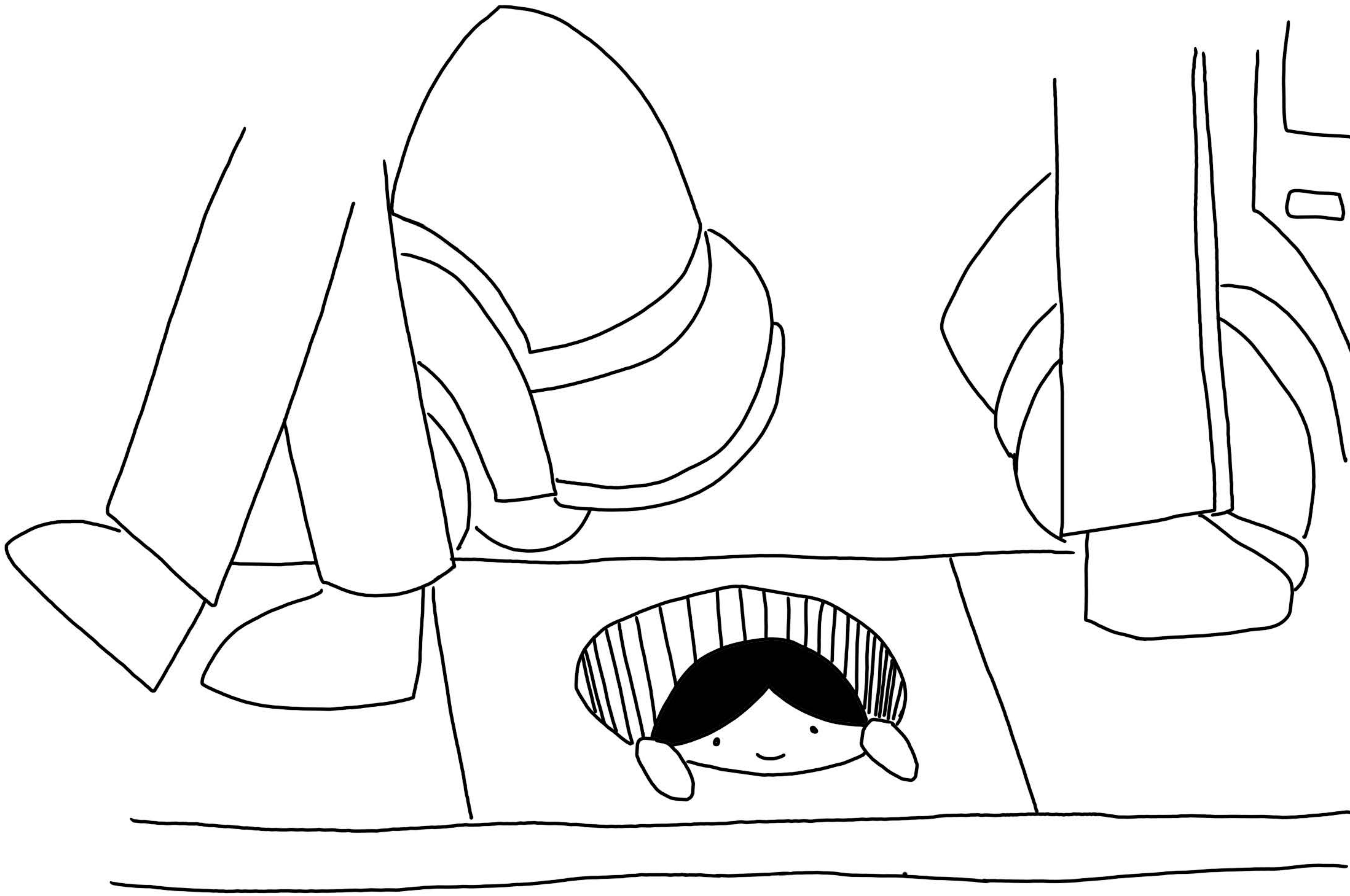
SEROTONIN INFUSED COFFEE

- twitch throughout the day!
- bean juice, makes u zoom



*"We don't know what you'll feel,
but you'll feel something,
and that's definitely a step up from before!"*

HIDE AWAY FOREVER



IN YOUR NEW
SAFETY HOLE™!

i want to work on myself.



i am going to legitimately better myself and my flaws

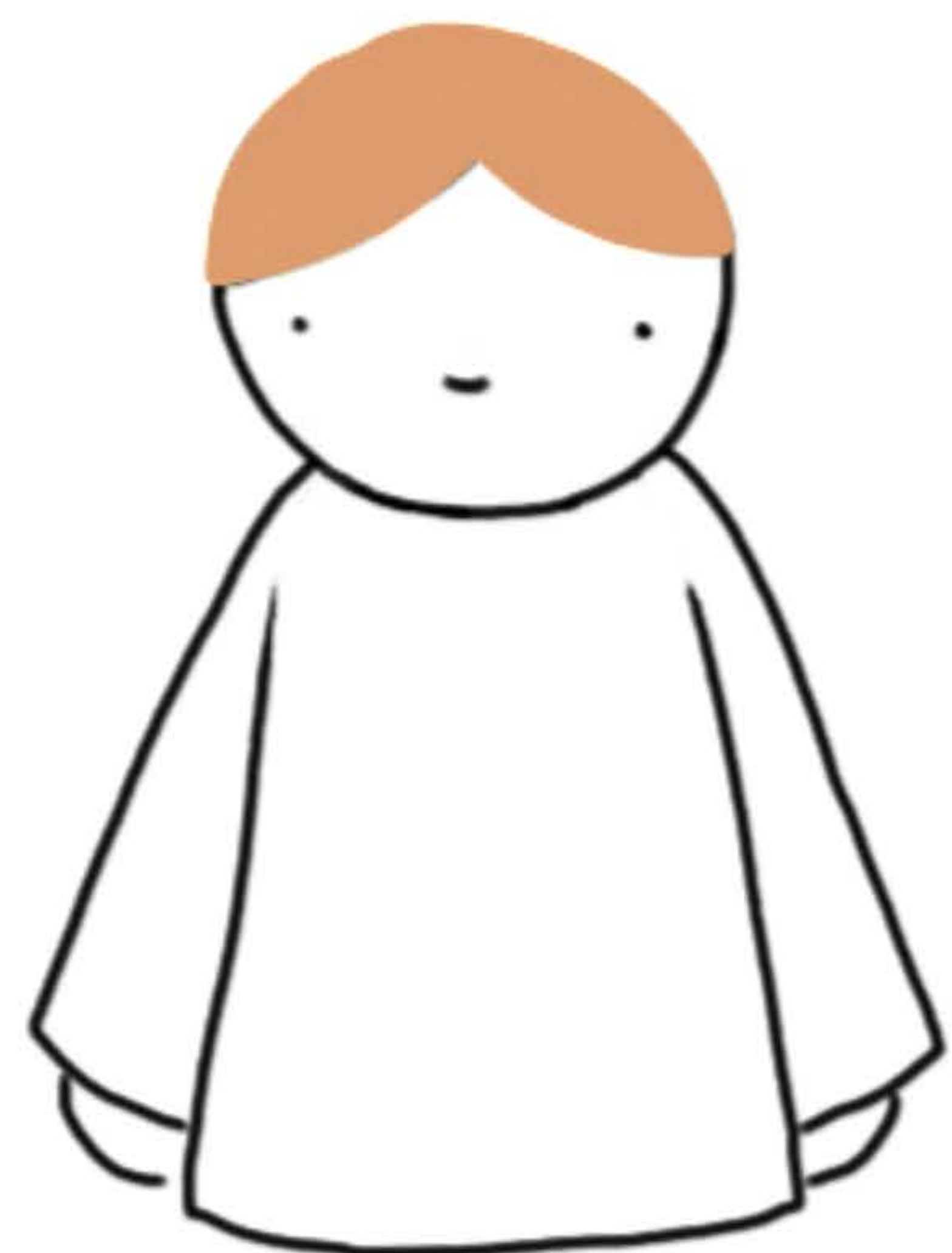


OR,,, i could just,,,



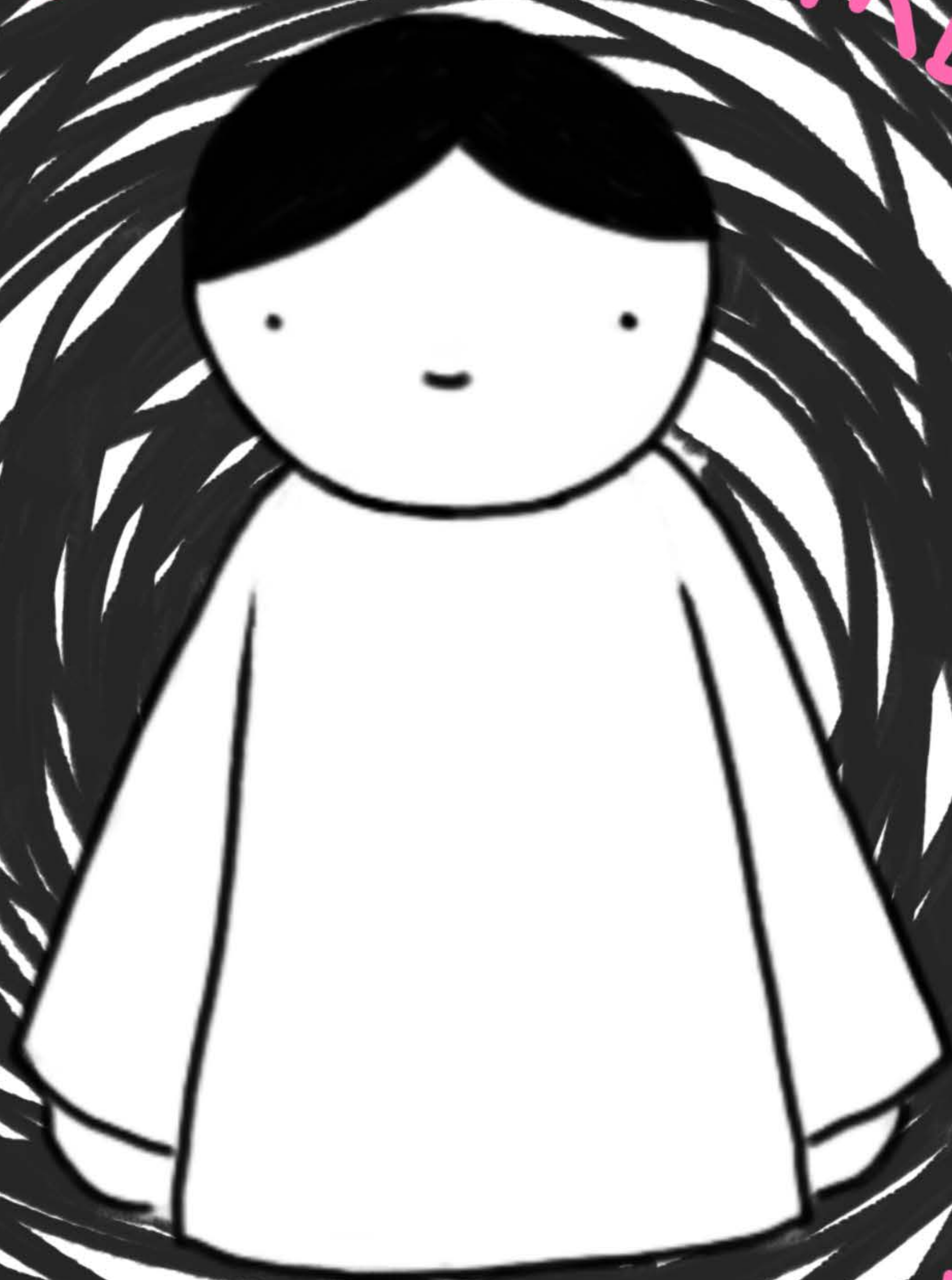
dye my hair,,, no,,,

bam



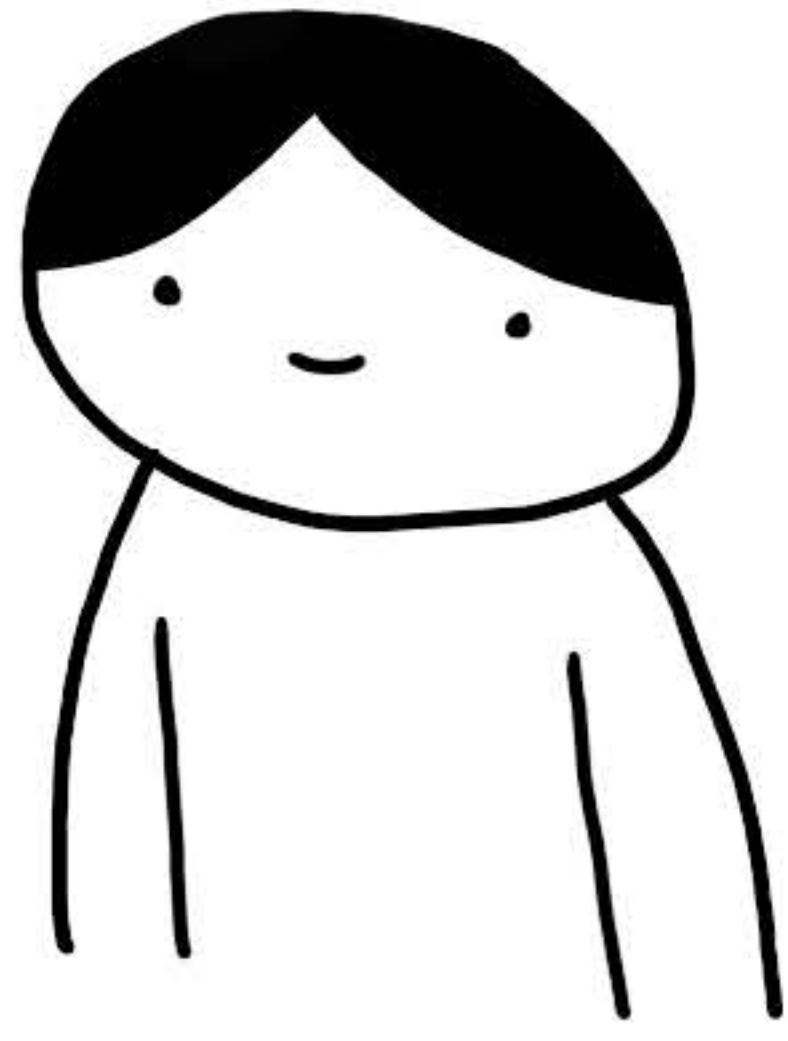
whole new person

MAYBE IT'S A
MENTAL BREAKDOWN



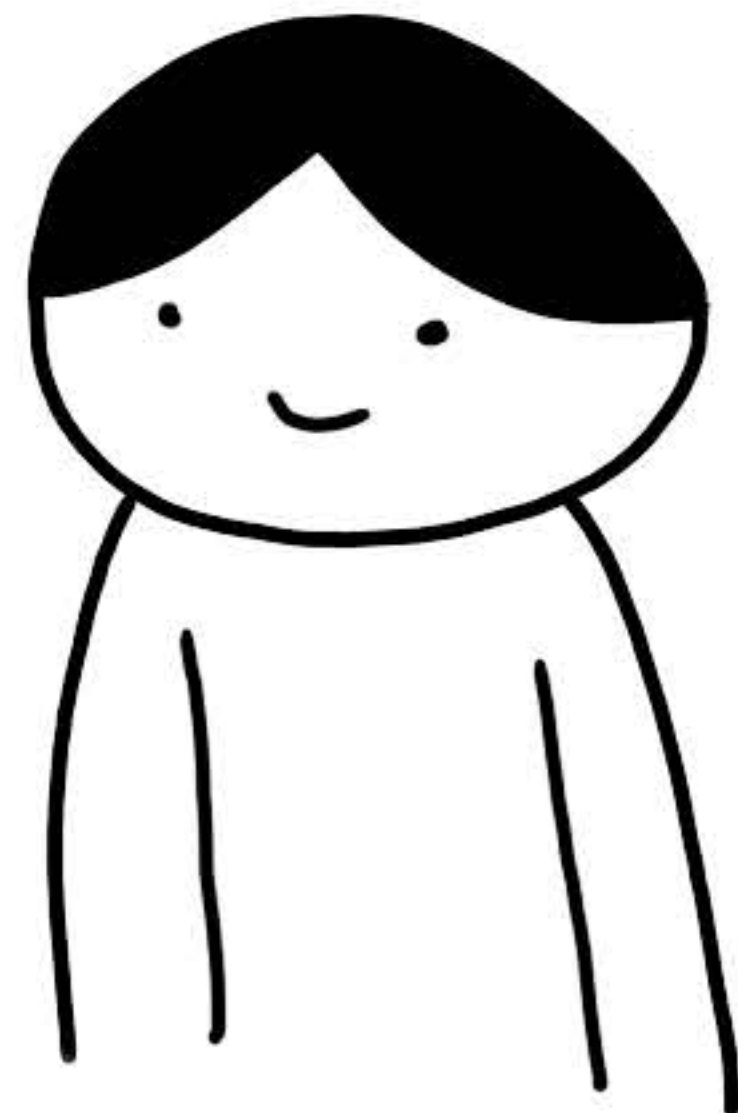
MAYBE IT'S
MAYBELLINE

*i was born
to save my
parent's marriage*



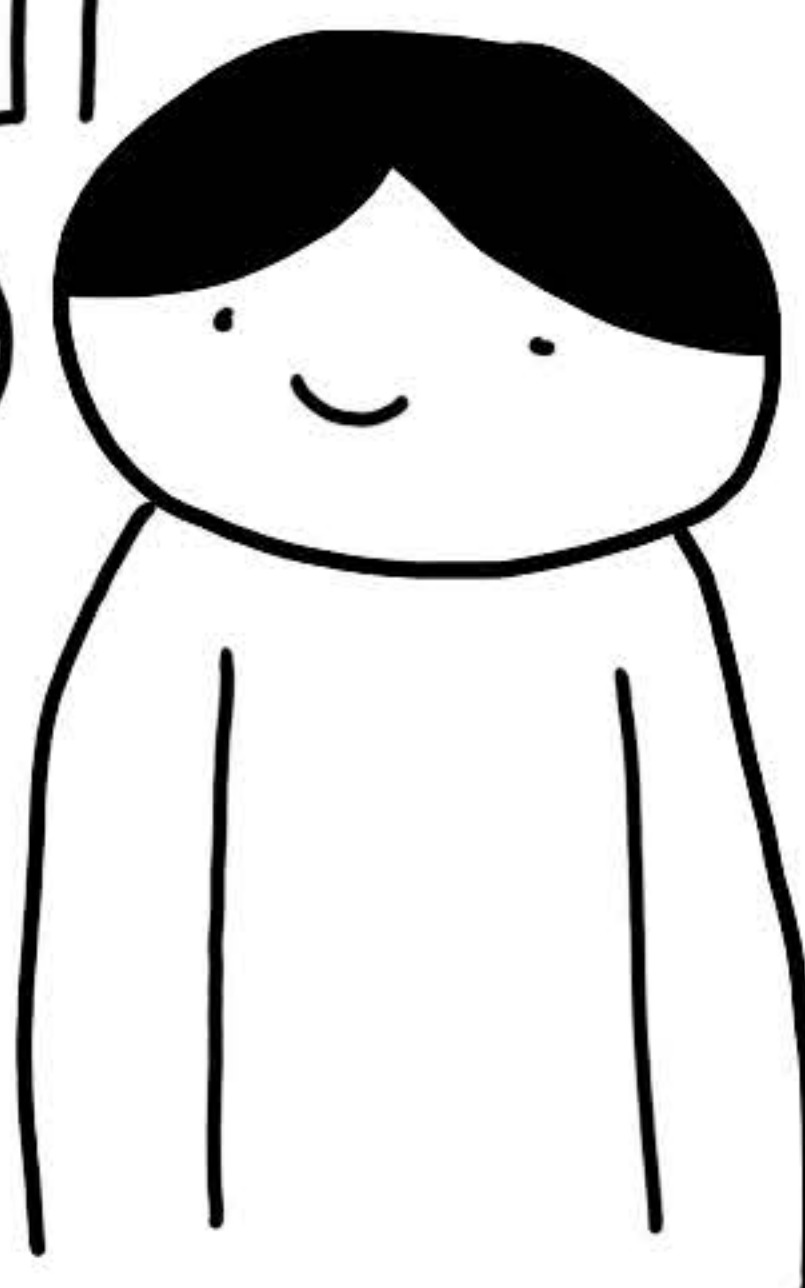
*but i have
a younger brother*

*so i guess
i've been
a failure*

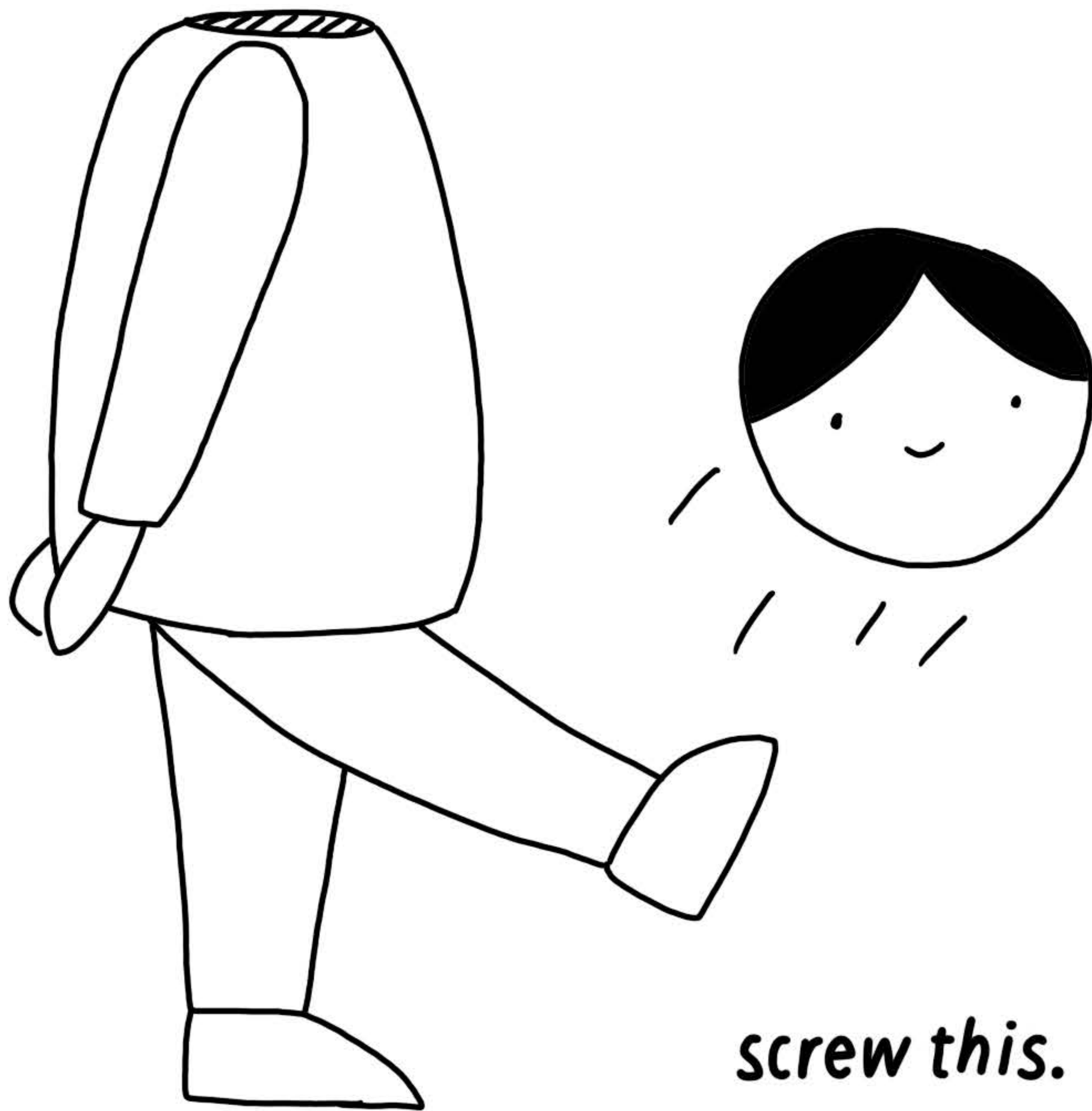
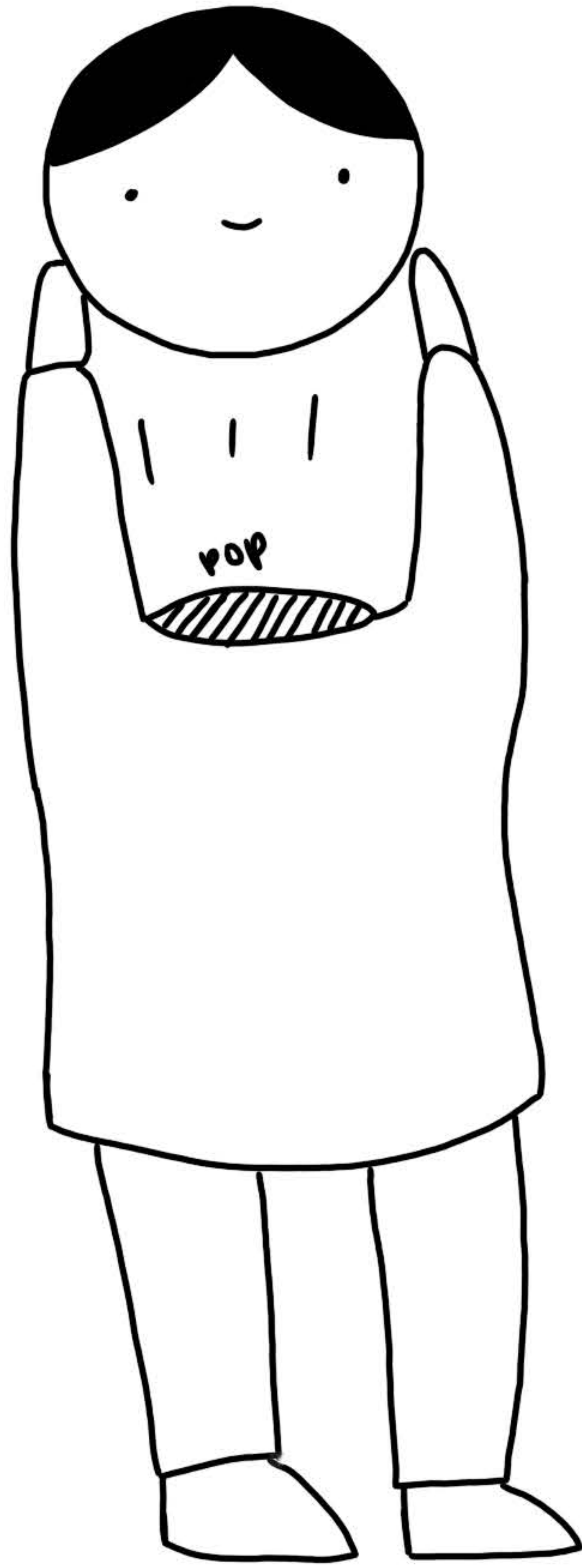


*since around
the age of four*

*anyways
can i have a
10 pc nugget
with*



*medium fries
and a diet sprite?*



screw this.

DUMB BITCH

magazine
may/june

5 REASONS WHY
HE'LL ONLY LIKE YOU
IF YOU'RE PRETTY

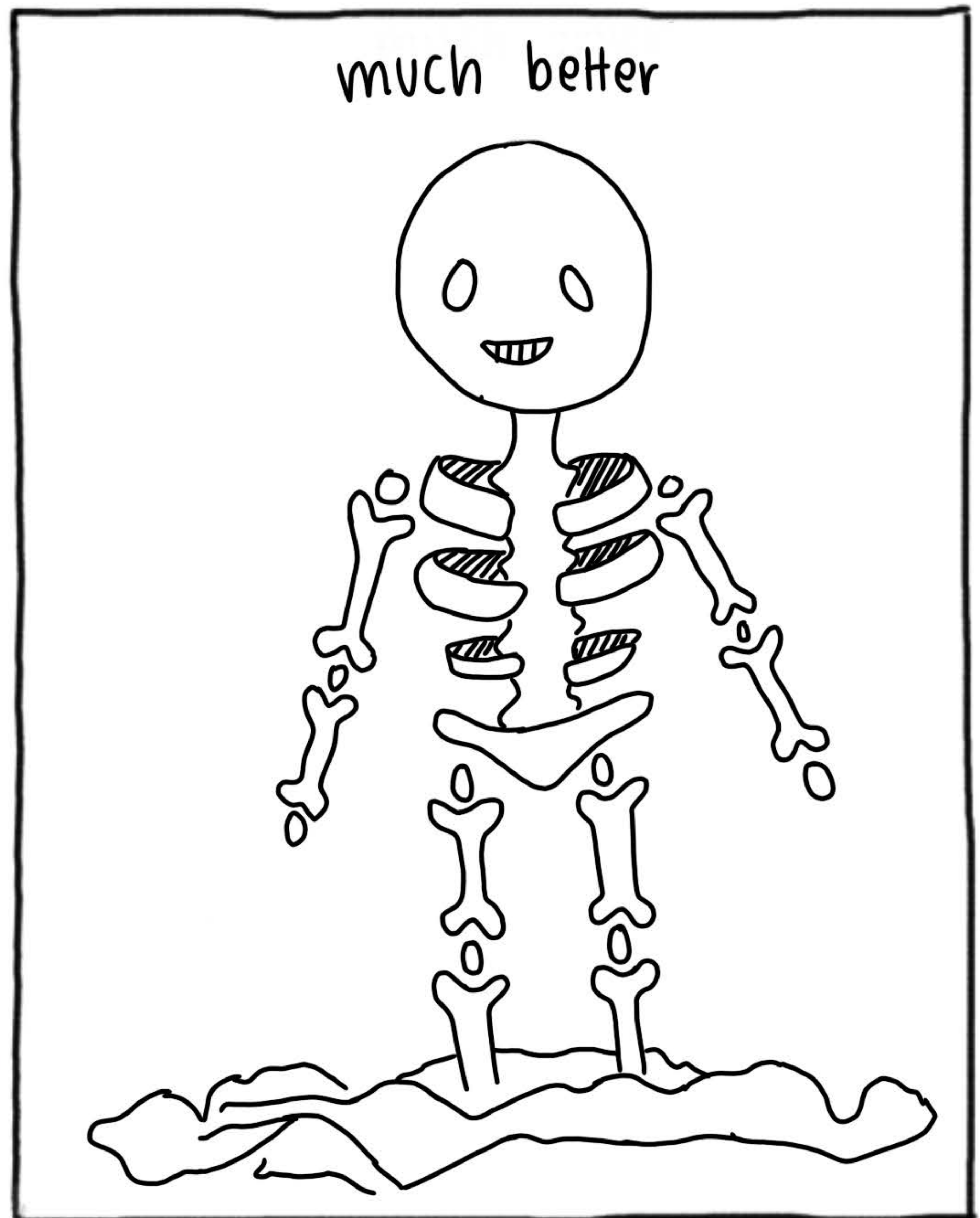
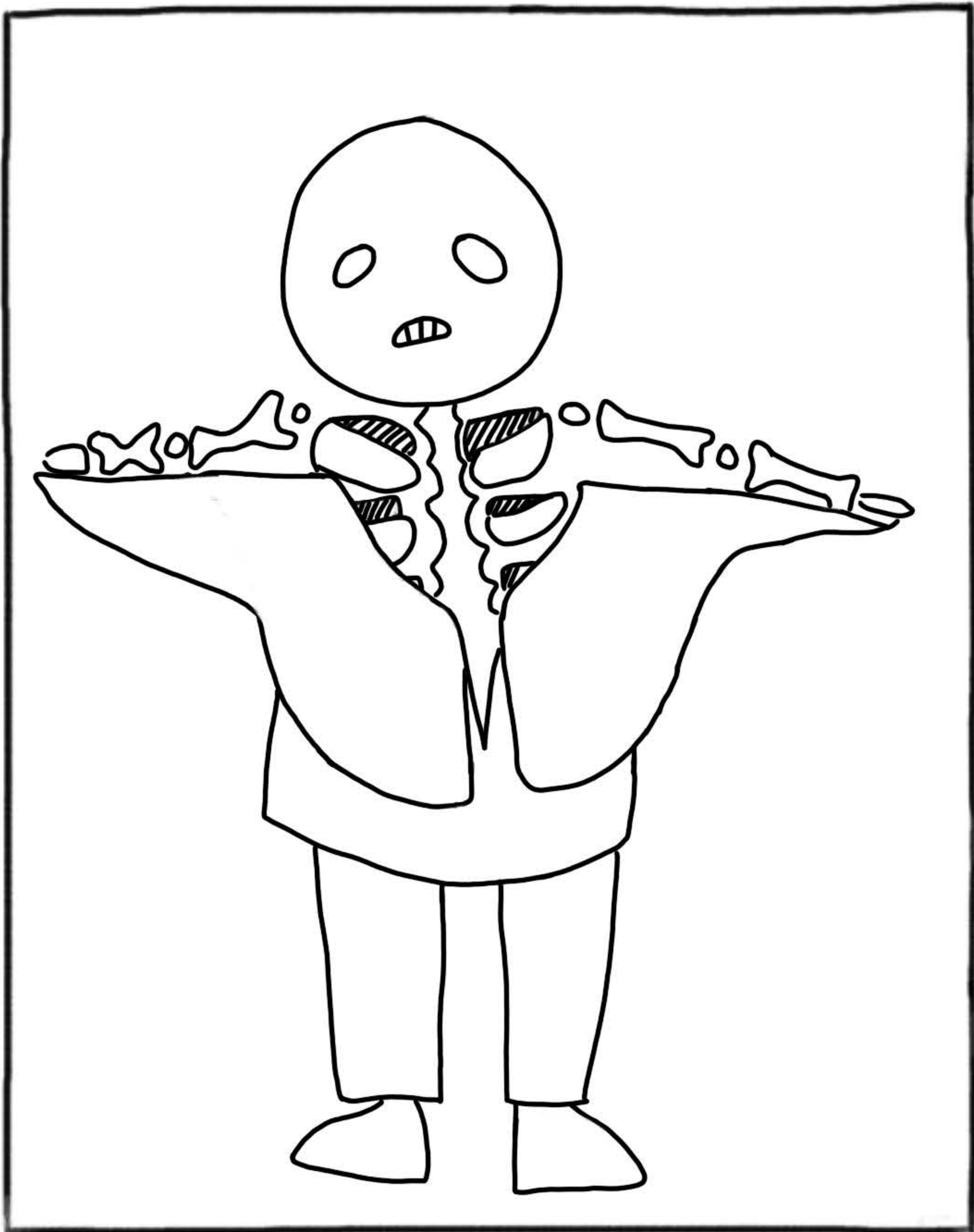
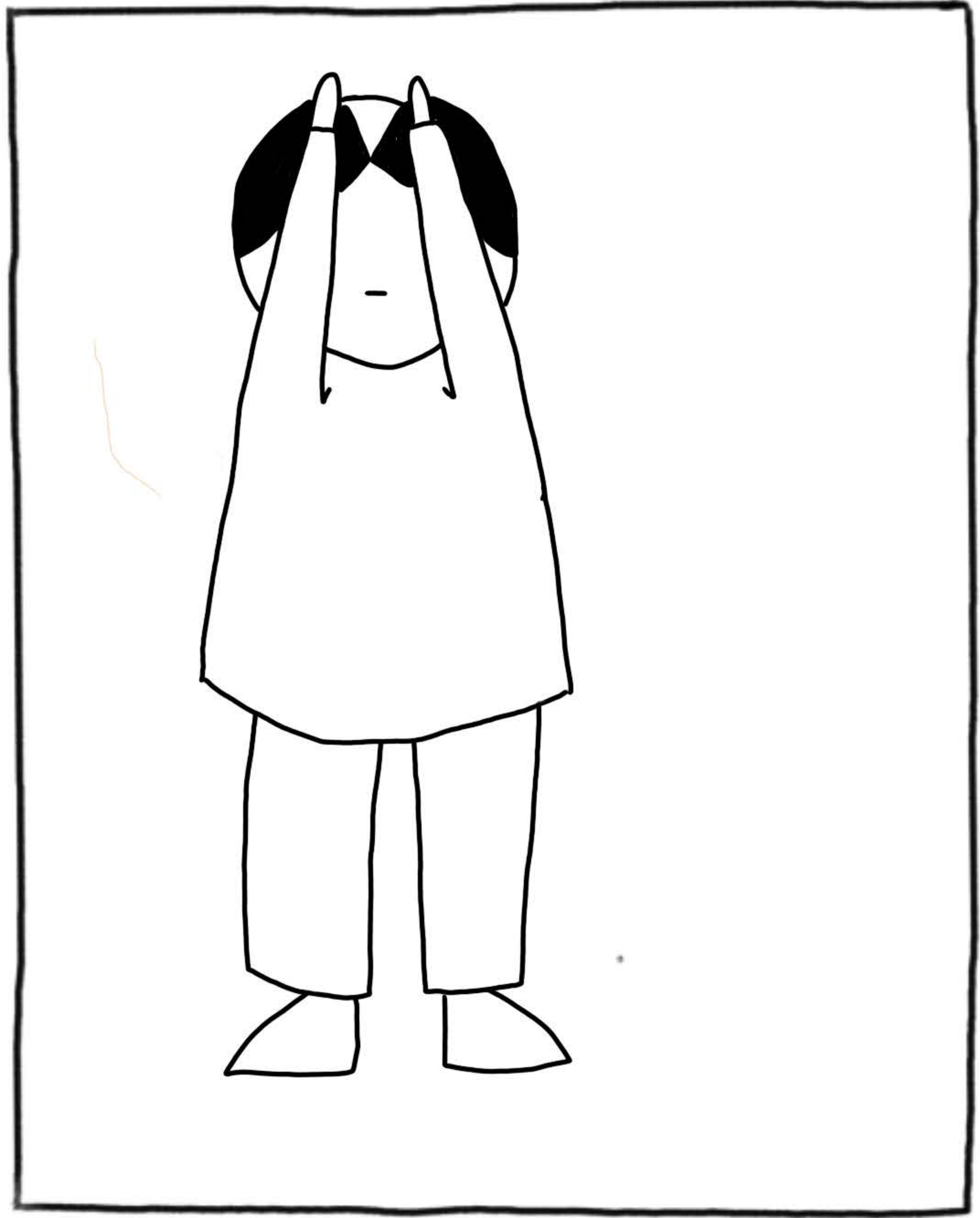
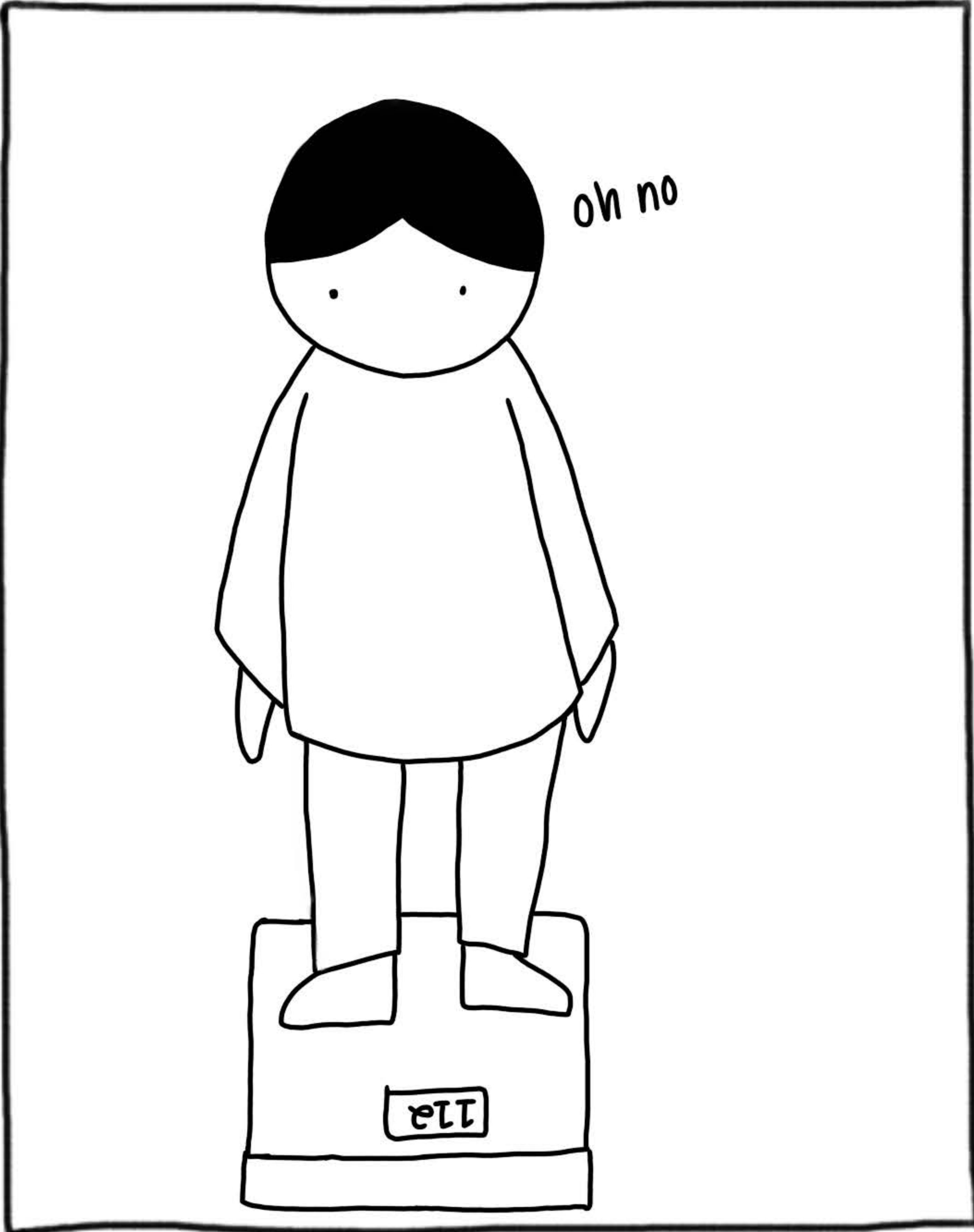
*DIET PLANS
FOR NEGATIVE
CALORIE
DEFICITS*

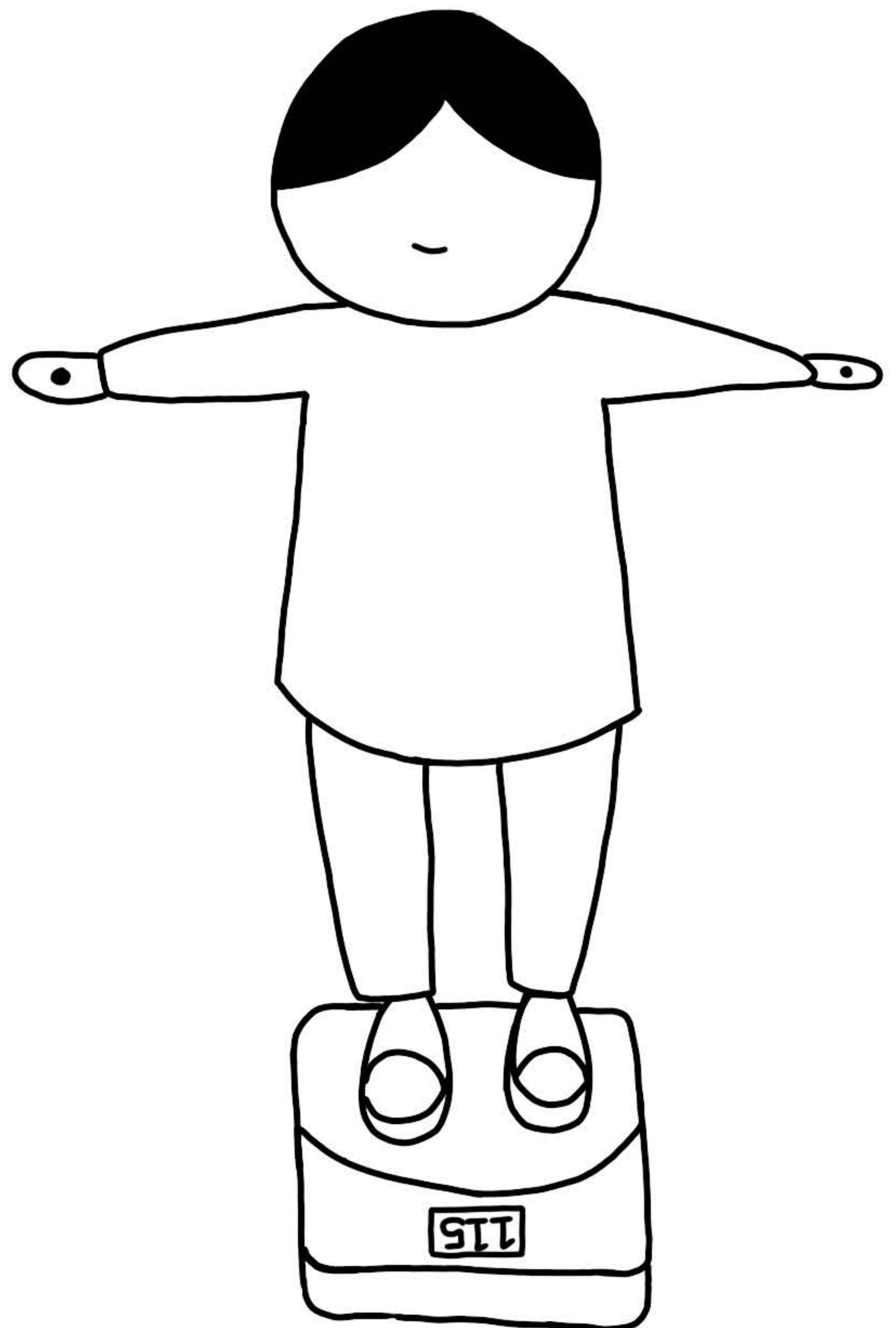
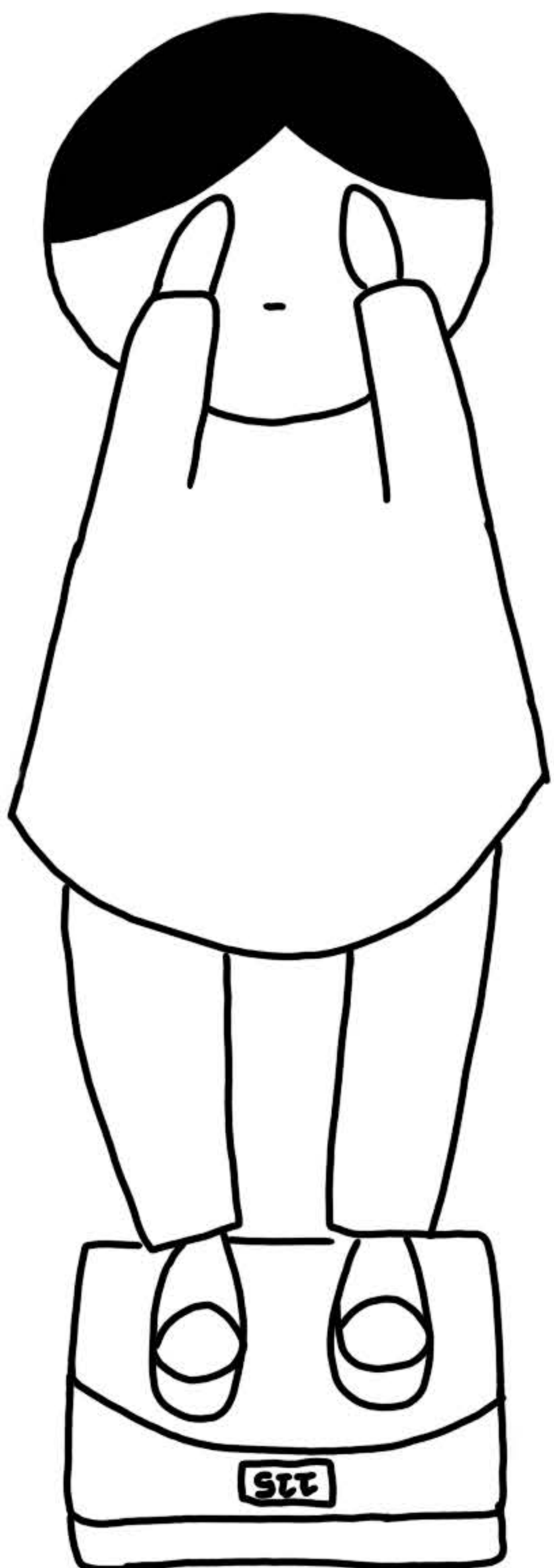
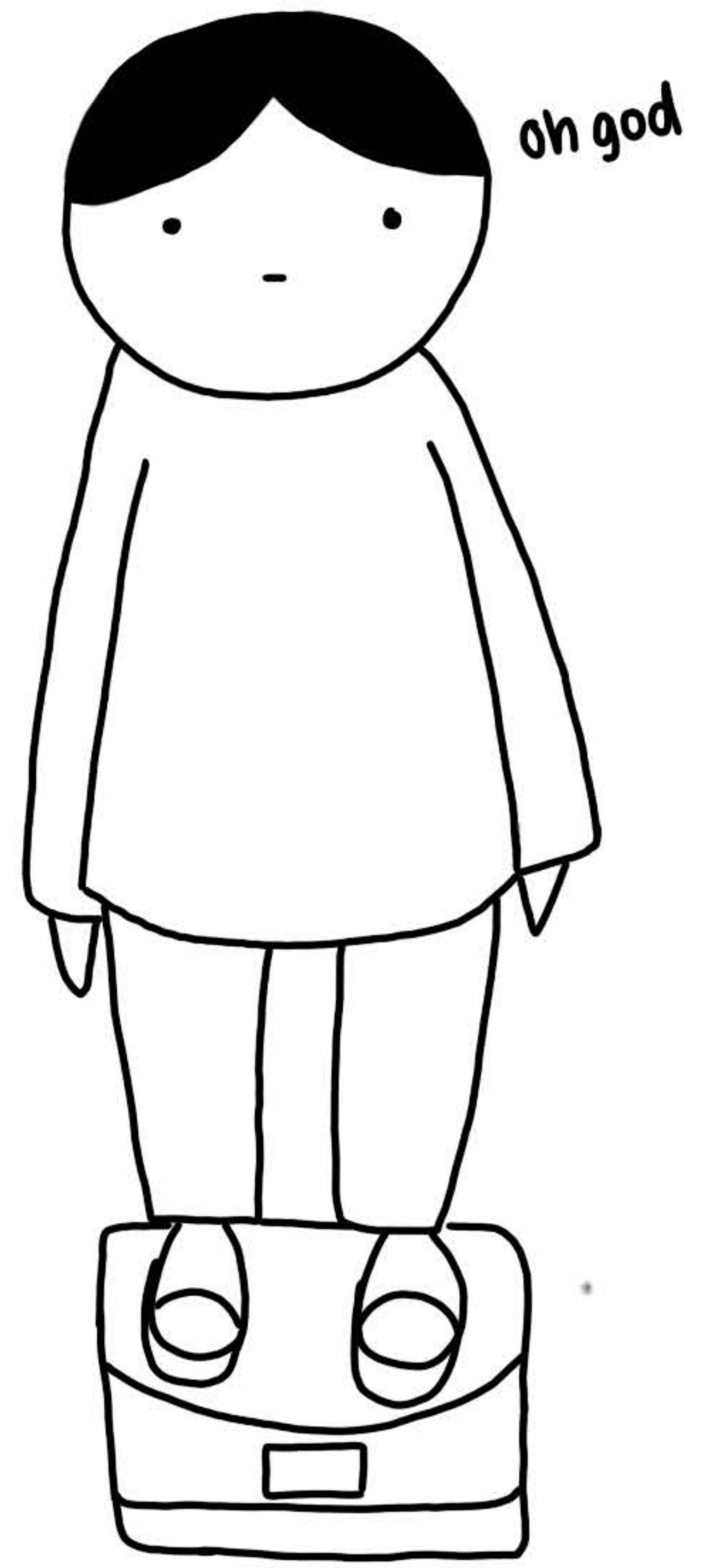
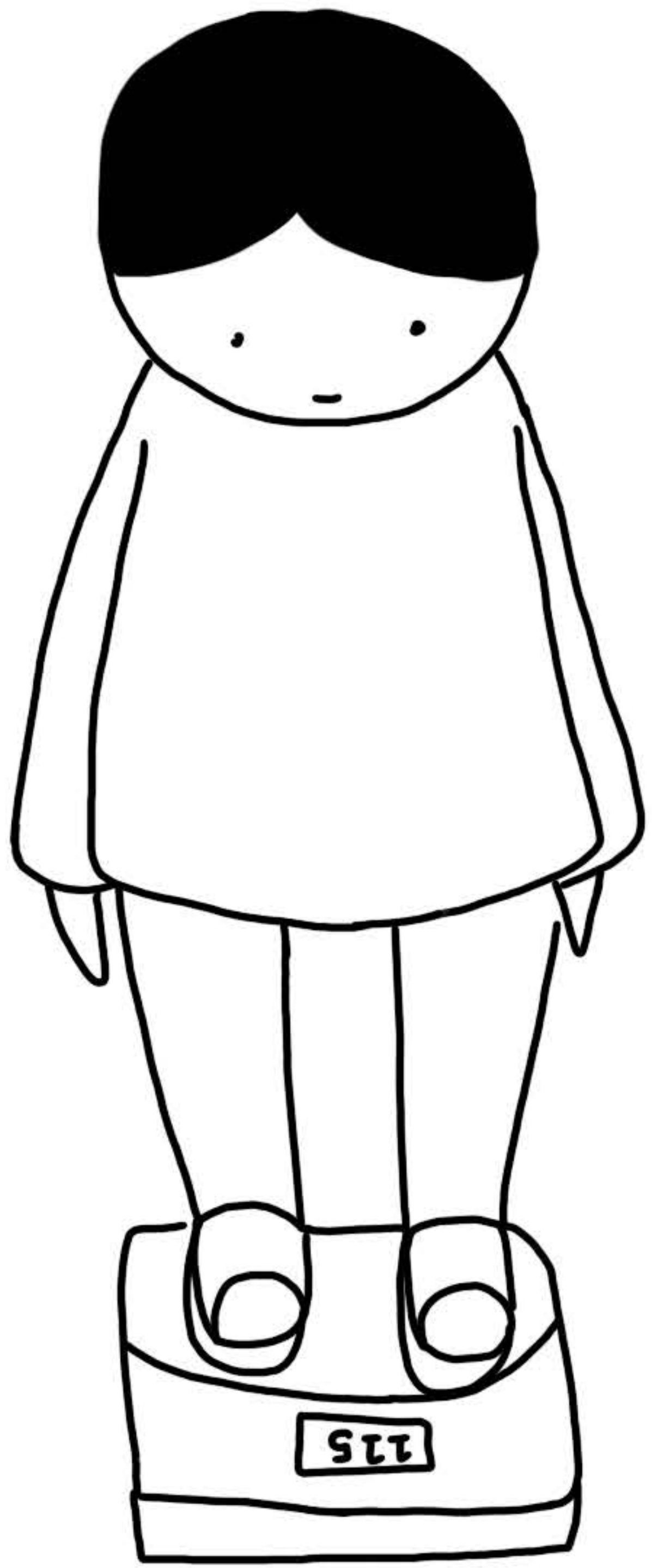
BECAUSE DEAD GIRLS
ARE SKINNIER :)

THE SCOOP ON BMI
WHY IT'S ONLY ACCEPTABLE
IF IT'S IN THE SINGLE DIGITS

**HOT
TAKE:**

YOU DON'T NEED FOOD TO SURVIVE







**HAS QUARANTINE MADE YOU
EMOTIONALLY NUMB?**

**DO YOU JUST WANT TO FEEL
SOMETHING AGAIN?**

TRY

**TAKING YOUR
ADHD MEDS**



WITH

RED BULL!



**SURE, IT FEELS INCREDIBLY BAD
BUT YOU HAVEN'T EXPERIENCED
A REAL EMOTION IN DAYS!**

YOU'RE NOT IN A POSITION TO BE PICKY :)

Galgenhumor as a Coping Mechanism

Zivi H.



In this paper, I will outline the three sources of psychological stress that people use humor to deal with: a weapon to combat outside or external stressors, a shield to deflect from them or a coping mechanism to either accept or overcome psychological/physical hardship. Often called *galgenhumor* or gallows humor, writer Antonin Obrdlik marks it as “an index of strength or morale on the part of oppressed peoples”, and often shows up amongst groups of people in high-stress situations. Whether it be those with psychological disorders such as depression or anxiety, people with possibly traumatic jobs (typically in the medical field) or throughout history, presenting itself in groups of oppressed or persecuted people.

Firstly, gallows humor is used to combat outside or external stressors. Often used by people in extremely high stress situations to cope with situations in a satirical way, many jokes are primarily made in order to make fun of life-threatening, disastrous, or terrifying situations. There is a good deal of writing and research conducted on the implementation and usage of humor in medicine, and most of it is fixated primarily on the interaction between the patient and the clinician, or made to pose a benefit for the patient through humor.¹ On the other hand, there is a considerably smaller amount of available writing on specifically gallows humor in medicine. However, in the few works published, it is made clear that gallows humor exists almost solely between physicians; this is true for all the other groups that implement it. Gallows humor is used specifically by people going through the exact same hardship- instead of a tool to bridge the gap between a doctor and patient or captive and captor, it is used specifically to help people going through the same experience. Gallows humor is not often a feel-good, or barely edgy SNL kind of humor- sometimes it’s barely palatable. However, it is not necessarily cruel humor either. The difference between gallows humor and derogatory humor is outlined in Delese Wear’s *Derogatory and Cynical Humor Directed Towards Patients: Views of Residents and Attending Doctors*. As described by one physician, the difference between gallows humor and derogatory humor can be considered "the difference between whistling as you go through the graveyard and kicking over the gravestones."² The way that gallows humor is developed by groups of people in the same stressful situation and then used as a weapon to combat those stressors is similar to how an inside joke is formed amongst friends, which is what sets it apart from humor that might span across different relationships or experiences; a type of backstage humor, if I may. This is essentially what makes gallows humor itself. Because many people in stressful situations develop it, it is often not meant to be understood, reciprocated or entertaining to outsiders. It is there as a way to provide a sense of comfort or community amongst those who are going through

¹ M. McCreddie and S. Wiggins, "The Purpose and Function of Humour in Health, Health Care and Nursing: A Narrative Review," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 61, no. 6 (2007): 584–95; and R.T. Penson et al., "Laughter: The Best Medicine?" *The Oncologist* 10 (2005): 651–60.

² D. Wear et al., "Derogatory and Cynical Humor Directed Towards Patients: Views of Residents and Attending Doctors," *Medical Education* 43 (2009): 34–41, at 39.

a rough situation.³ Humor is often what happens when people are told a hard-to-swallow truth quicker than what they can deal with or process. For instance, a joke made by a senior neonatologist, overheard by Katie Watson and rewritten in her essay, *Gallows Humor in Medicine*⁴:

A group of medical professionals and ethicists were considering the case of a neurologically devastated newborn. The discussion focused on the medical facts for an extended period of time (but what about this test, what about that test, how can you predict A, B, and C ...) until Bill ended the debate by saying, 'Look. He's more likely to be second base than play second base.'

Obviously, I do not always condone jokes about things this severe; however, these are things that some doctors deal with every single day, and it's not reasonable nor healthy to expect them to be able to simply move on or even not process the situation in front of them. Doctors have to process every part of the situation in order to help their patient recover or even figure out what happened to them at the expense of their own mental health- it comes to no surprise that something so mundane would require a mundane coping mechanism in return.

I myself have used less extreme versions of this type of backstage humor with my friends who deal with the same/similar trauma or insecurities as myself. For instance, at one point this year I had an eye infection that caused my top and bottom eyelid to swell dramatically, and because I am horrendously shallow and base a lot of how I feel about myself on how I look, I put a medical adhesive eyepatch over it (similar to an eye bandage) and pretended like it never happened until it healed. I am hard of hearing as well, so I took this opportunity to make a joke about this (in my opinion, very funny) turn of events with an instagram post of me and my eyepatch, captioned "partially blind, partially deaf and all the way dumb: a novel by me". Instead of the comments or jeers that I had gotten previously (I've had to wear an eyepatch for an eye injury once before) I was met with indifference- or if I did get rude comments, I would laugh right along with the person and make an even darker joke. A boy in my grade made a remark in the cafeteria about how "girls will fake anything for attention these days" and my "fetty wap lookin' ass", I responded with a quip about how if i'm going to be compared to disabled celebrities, I would much rather prefer Helen Keller as my hearing is also on the way out. He went silent because jokes about Helen Keller are typically considered not okay and I went on with my day and laughed about it later with a friend who poses some of the same disabilities as Helen and I (mine hearing, hers blindness). I base an unhealthy amount of my self worth on my looks, and making jokes did help to combat the incoming insecurities that accompanied feeling ugly or less of a person as a result of not looking my best. Despite its origin being shallow, I

³ E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.J.: Anchor-Doubleday, 195).

⁴ K. Watson, "Gallows Humor in Medicine," *The Hastings Center Report*. 2011;41(5):37-45.

have come to terms with the fact that I will probably always feel at least a little bit bad about myself. However, I am a firm believer in the fact that I should be able to control the severity of what is said to me as a result of my flaws; if they are something that will always be here and will always be noticed by other people, I should at least figure out how to make jokes about them and I should definitely be the best at making jokes about them. Humor, specifically gallows humor as a weapon, is something that can manifest itself on a level of different scales and people as a result of trauma. Trauma doesn't discriminate and neither does the accompanying coping mechanism; as a result, gallows humor as a result of trauma can happen in many different instances and regardless of experience, age or job.

Secondly, gallows humor is commonly used to deflect from the situation at hand. This is different from the previous instance; while it can be used to soften the blow of a situation, dark humor can also be used to distract from a situation altogether. In a grim instance, in middle school, both me and a friend at summer camp suffered from eating disorders, both rapidly losing weight over the course of the summer as a result of our habits going largely unchecked. As we both sat in the nurses' office during dinner after our counselors noticed we weren't eating with large, untouched plates of food in front of us, I remarked to her "Try not to resort to gluttony, I know it's tempting. It'll be *so hard* to catch you in cheer tomorrow!", to which she responded "Totally easy. Piece of cake." While interactions like these are horrifying to every physician, therapist and other person with normal eating habits I have mentioned it to, my friend and I laughed at this joke for the rest of the summer. We would follow up on it with sarcastic comments, or whenever a food-based issue was presented- which was all three meals and two snack periods daily; a constant stressor in our lives. During an activity about healthy cooking called 'Food for Thought', she would lean in and whisper to me "Oh god, how many calories are in food for thought?" or when prompted to stop by our counselor, "It's best you didn't *weigh* in on the situation". During meals spent sitting and stressing in front of plates of untouched food, jokes often posed as a distraction from the mental turmoil that accompanied eating. Gallows humor was used as a way to escape the blow of our collective eating disorders, and while it was not appreciated by the nurses and counselors who wanted us to take it seriously, it was a sought refuge from an otherwise very serious battle.

Lastly and on a much more serious note, gallows humor can be used as a means of coming to terms with a situation, and in time, overcoming it. It creates solidarity between those in a stressful situation and gives them an opportunity to laugh at their oppressors⁵, a cohesive function of sorts. This concept has been further studied and supported by research that, as mentioned earlier, looks at how emergency medical service providers cope with seeing morbid and traumatic things on a daily basis. ⁶ By using gallows humour as a coping mechanism, it can

⁵ Morreall J (1997) Humour in the Holocaust: Its Critical, Cohesive and Coping Functions. www.holocaust-trc.org/humor-in-the-holocaust/

⁶ Felton J (1998) Burnout as a clinical entity—its importance in health care workers. *Occup Med* 48(4): 237–50. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/48.4.237>

often present a fresh (or at the very least) less dire outlook on the world⁷ and can act as a method of defiance; a refusal to give the oppressor the upper hand. A prime example of this is seen in interviews with Holocaust survivors. In the book *Hitler's Death Camps: The Sanity of Madness*⁸, philosopher and Auschwitz survivor Emil Fackenheim put it simply: 'we kept our morale through humour'. In a separate instance, on interviewing a Holocaust survivor, interviewer and researcher Chaya Ostrower⁹ was told: "When I was interviewed for Spielberg and they asked me, what I thought was the reason I survived, they probably expected me to answer 'good fortune' or other things. I said that I thought it was laughter or humour." It is, however, crucial to me that one point on this is made- by bringing up the use of humor during the Holocaust, I am in no way stating or suggesting that it reduced the objective horror of the atrocities committed against people who were Jewish or possessed other characters that went against the specific racial, ideological political and behavioral standards that Hitler set up for Europe. However, as demonstrated in Ostrower's studies, it *subjectively* reduced them, therefore facilitating a coping mechanism that eventually helped many people overcome, combat or deal with the hardships presented to them. According to many survivors interviewed by Ostrower, humour served as a stress reducer and was one of the methods people developed to cope. Humour helped the oppressed and victimised to get through their suffering and face the reality of their predicament without going insane¹⁰. This is supported by Thomas L. Kuhlman in his article *Gallows Humor for a Scaffold Setting: Managing Aggressive Patients on a Maximum Security Forensic Unit*¹¹. In his article, Kuhlman states that humor 'proposes an illogical, even psychotic, response to irresolvable dilemmas and offers a way of being sane in an insane place.'

All in all, galgenhumor is something that has become a coping mechanism for many people in many different situations throughout history. It has been implemented in many different ways. Whether it be as a coping mechanism to deflect external stressors, a method to distract from them or as a coping mechanism to overcome psychological and physical hardship, it has been shown to work on many different levels as the brain's way of rationalizing the mundane or unacceptable. Humor, specifically galgenhumor is a natural, and in most cases, healthy response to things that are hard for us to process or deal with, and something I, as well as many others throughout history have used on a daily basis.

⁷ Morreall

⁸ Feig K (1979) *Hitler's Death Camps: The Sanity of Madness*. Holmes and Meier, New York

⁹ Ostrower C (1998) Humor as a defense mechanism in the holocaust.

<http://web.macam98.ac.il/~ochayo/absract.html>

¹⁰ Morreall

¹¹ Kuhlman T (1988) Gallows humor for a scaffold setting: managing aggressive patients on a maximum security forensic unit. *Hosp Community Psychiatry* 39(10): 1085-90. doi:

<https://doi.org/10.1176/ps.39.10.1085>

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