



Stories That Haunt and Heal: Mental Health and Game Narrative

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GDC

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE

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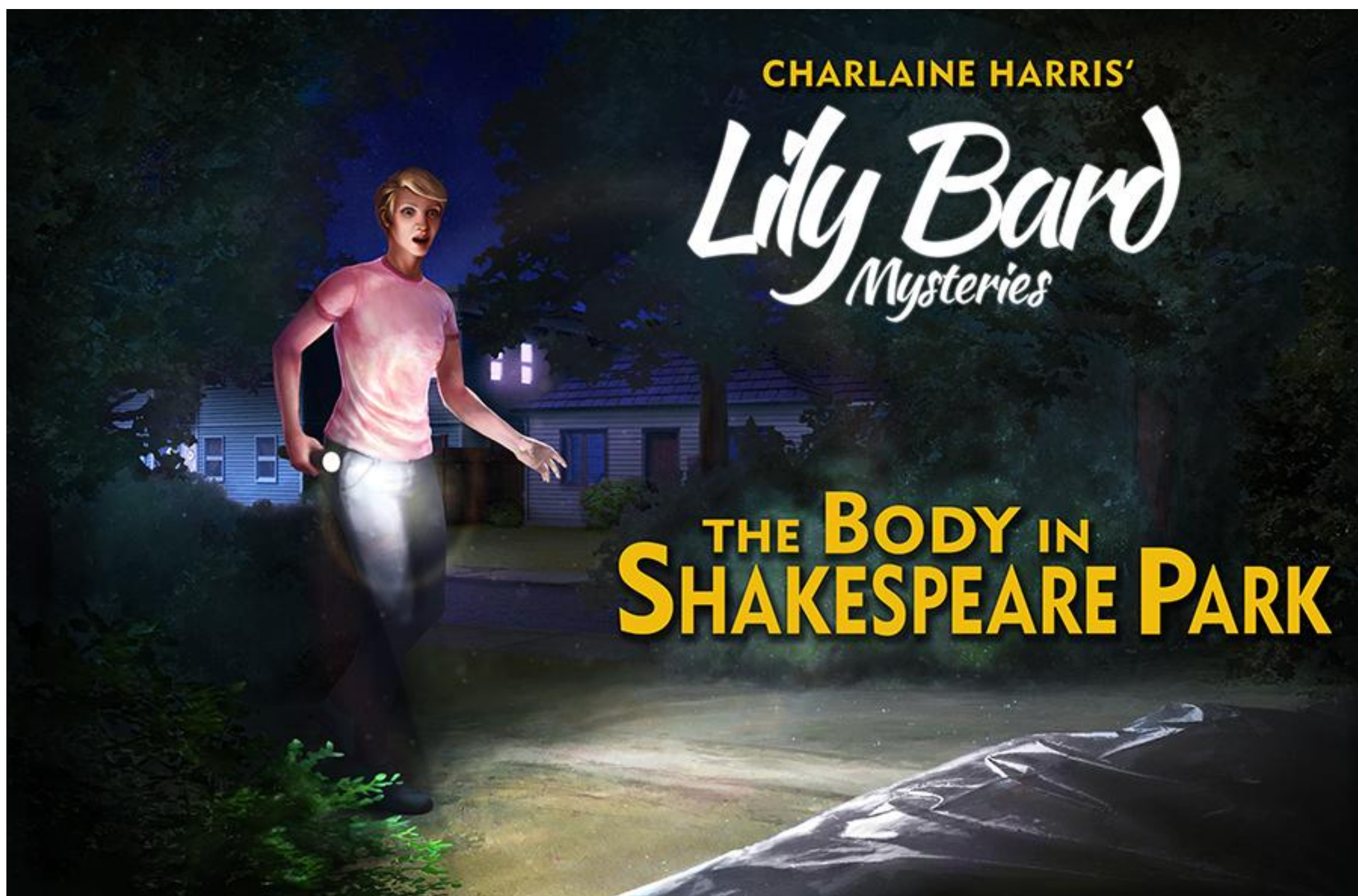
Warning:

This talk contains discussion and visual depictions of the following:

- Mental Health (mental illness)
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Domestic Abuse
- Disordered Eating
- Sexual Assault

Definitions:

- **Game** - derived from old English/Germanic roots GAMEN “Amusement or fun”
- **Serious Games** - Games with a primary purpose other than pure entertainment, often exploring atypical subjects



The Body in Shakespeare Park

“Nancy Drew meets The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo”

- Point and click narrative game
- Lily Bard - Sexual Assault Survivor
- Deals with PTSD, anxiety
- Secret Life
- Who writes this story?
- Elements within the game
 - Diaries
 - Relationships
 - Behaviours

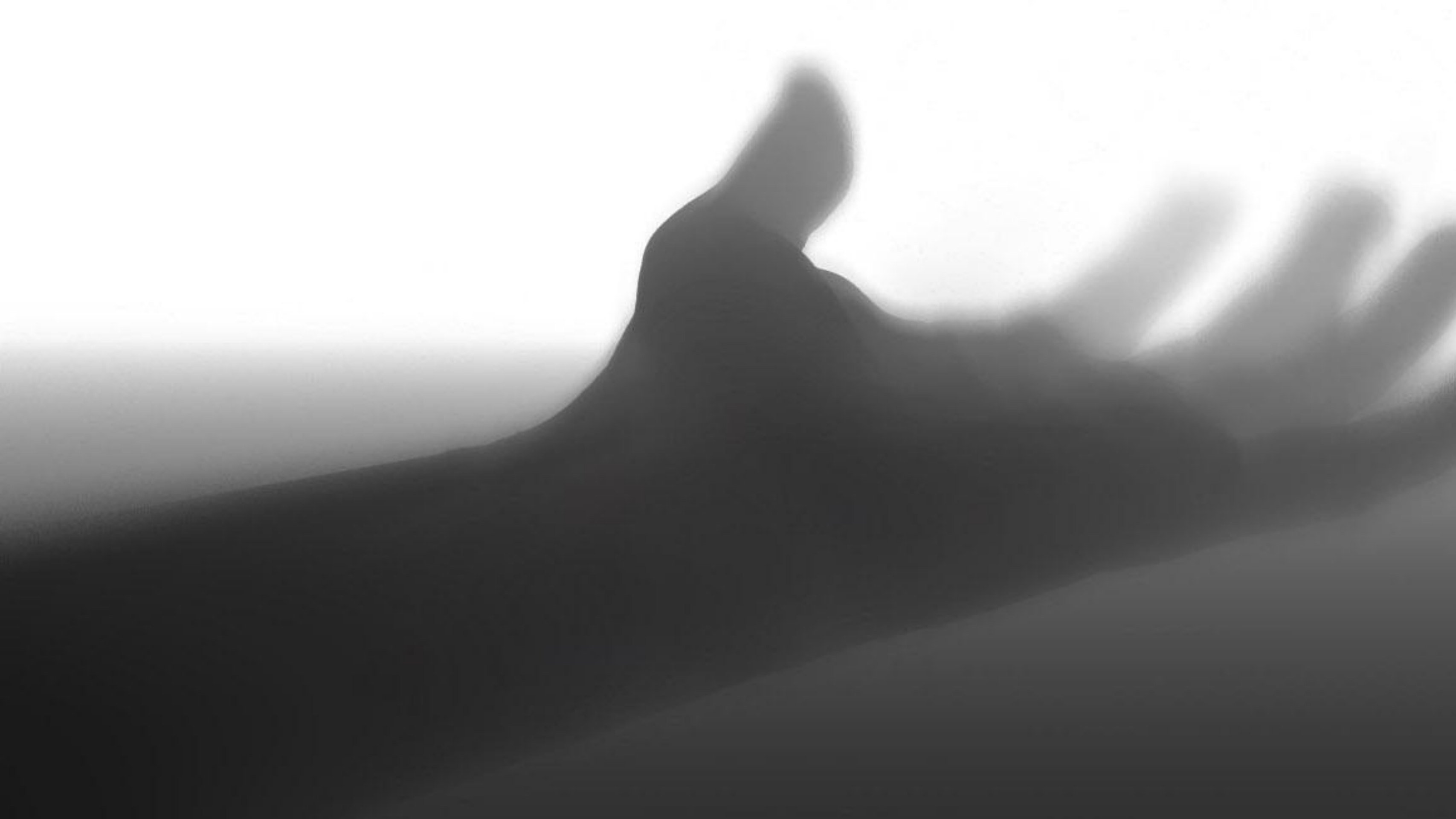
Designing the Aesthetic

- Artistic Approach

- Full colour world
- Use of monochromatic art for division of mental state
- Moved away from “horror” in initial concept for the PTSD flashbacks
- Intentional camera angle of trauma scenes
- Avoided showing depiction of rape, body scars from torture
- Audio and SFX




















Shrinking Pains

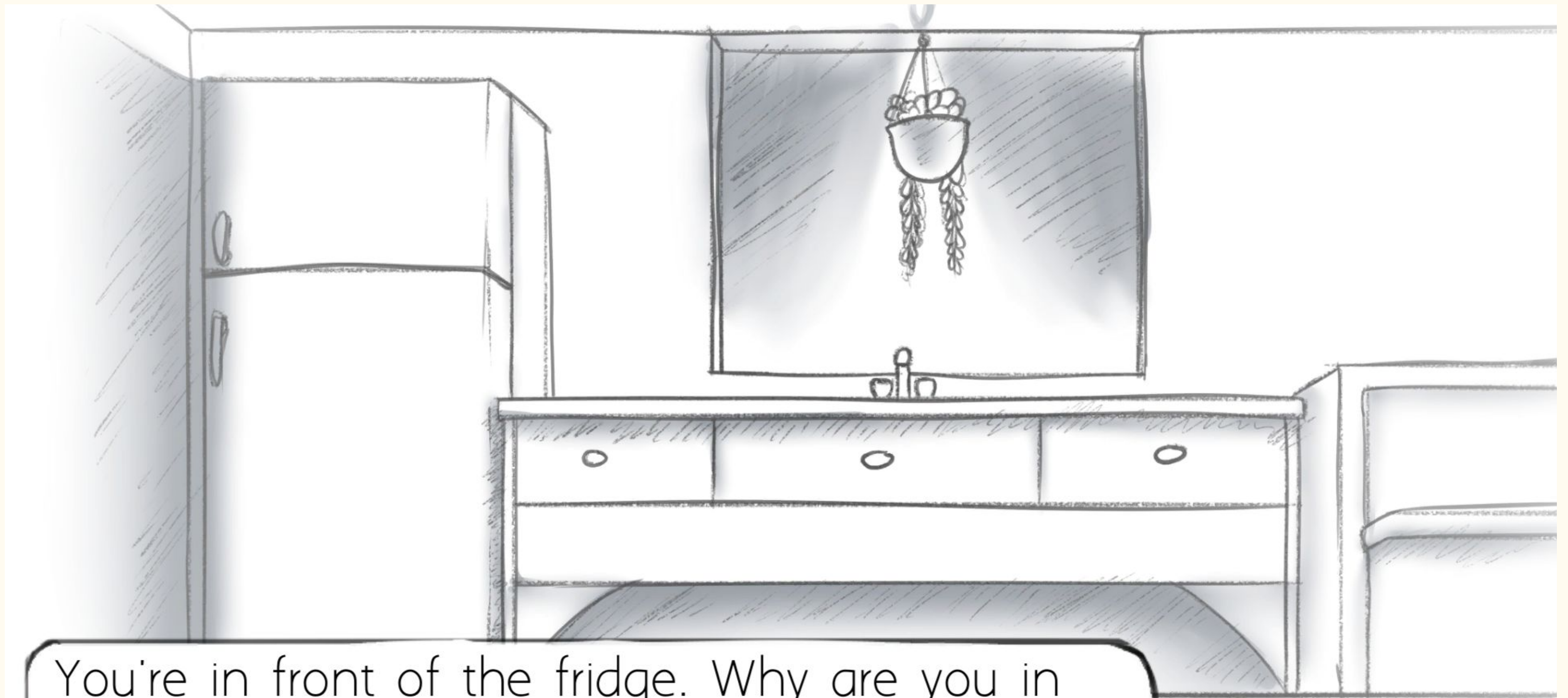
- Visual Novel
- Realistic exploration of anorexia and disordered eating
- Impact of mental illness on interpersonal relationships - not just one person suffering
- Snapshots, not sustained narrative

Designing the Aesthetic

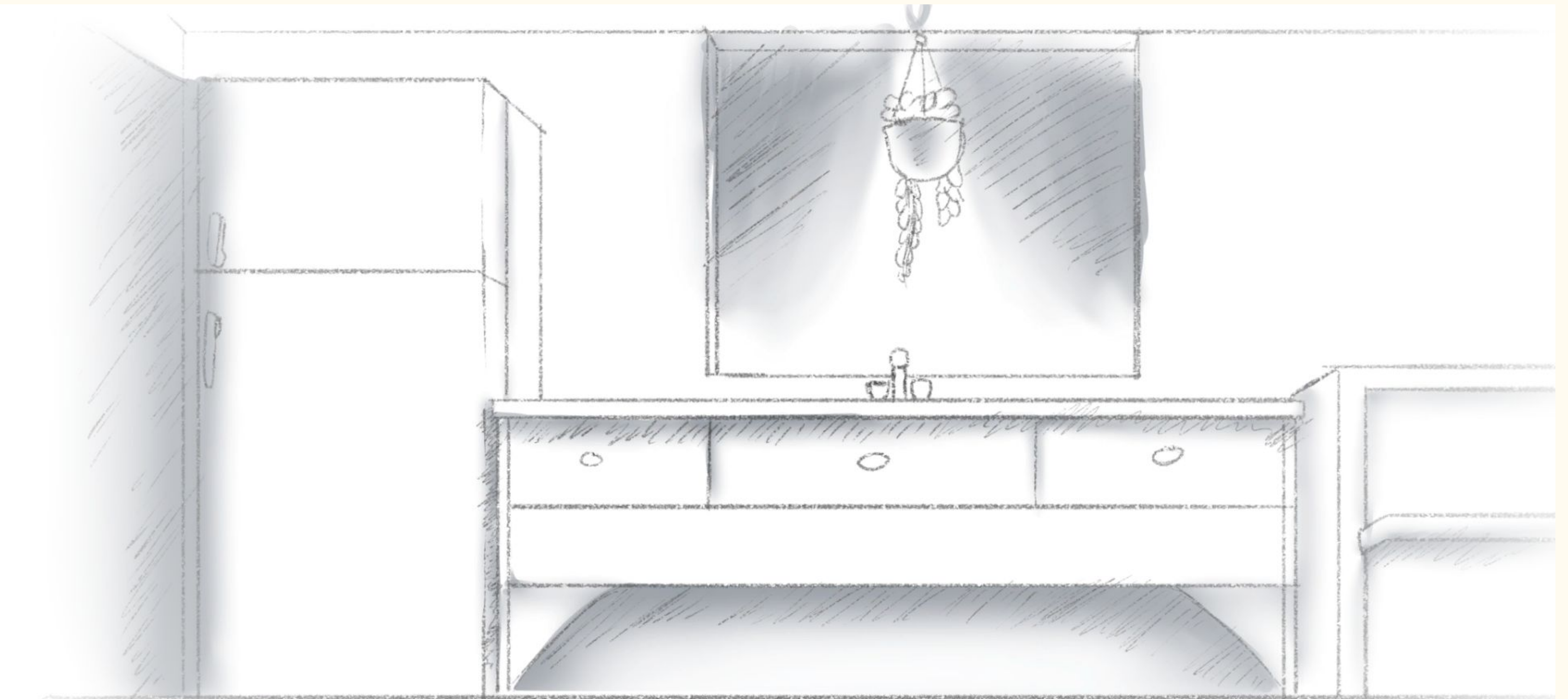
- Artistic Approach
 - Never show sufferer's body
 - Details of field of vision
 - Tunnel vision
 - Sound effects

A black and white sketch of a woman with curly hair, seen from behind, standing in a kitchen. She is wearing a striped long-sleeved shirt and a light-colored apron. She is looking out a window that has a small hanging pot with herbs in front of it. On the windowsill, there are some small plants. To the left of the window, there is a small calendar or notepad on the wall. Below the window, there is a countertop with two pots on it. The kitchen has a simple, rustic feel with a tiled wall and a wooden countertop.

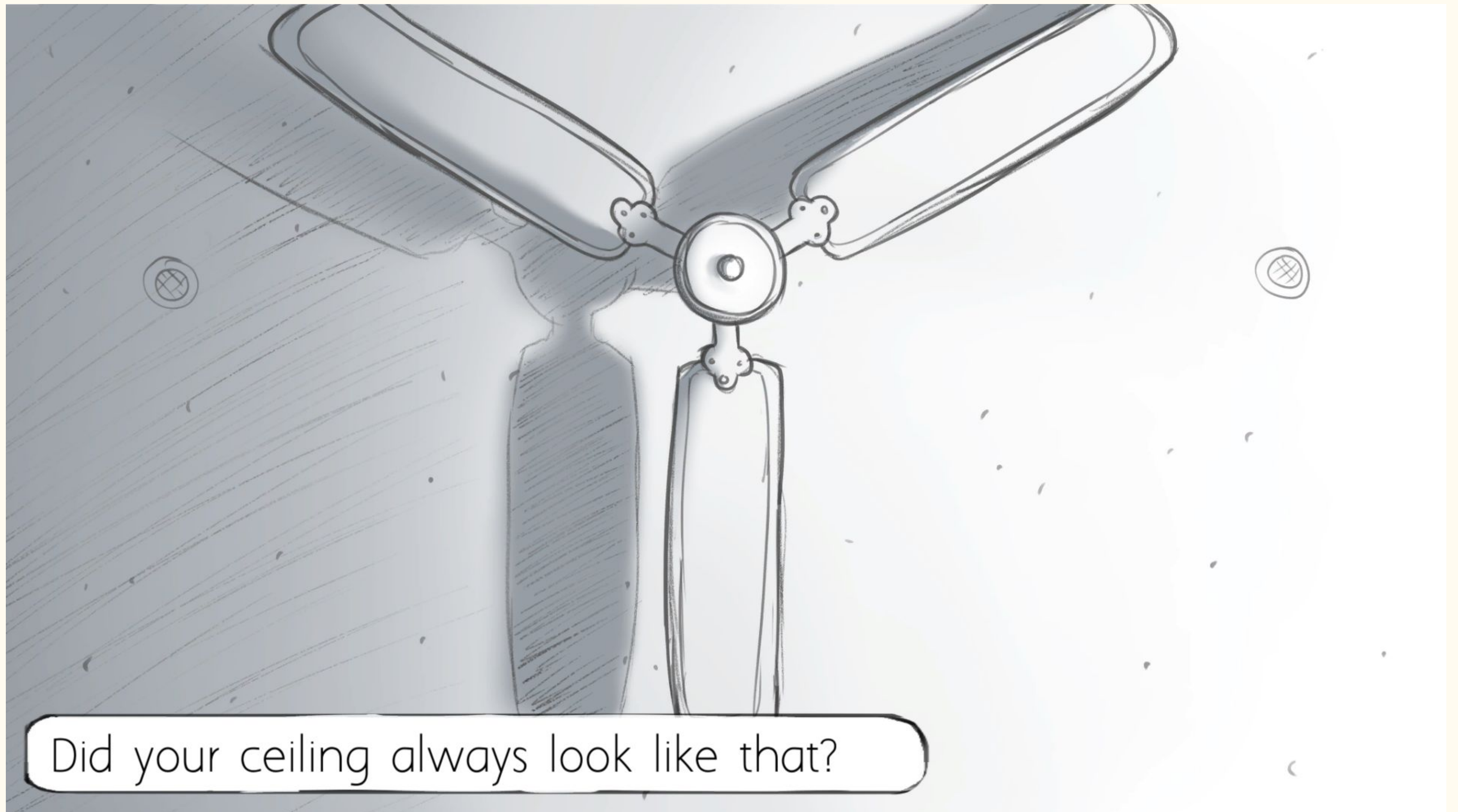
You're not
looking great.



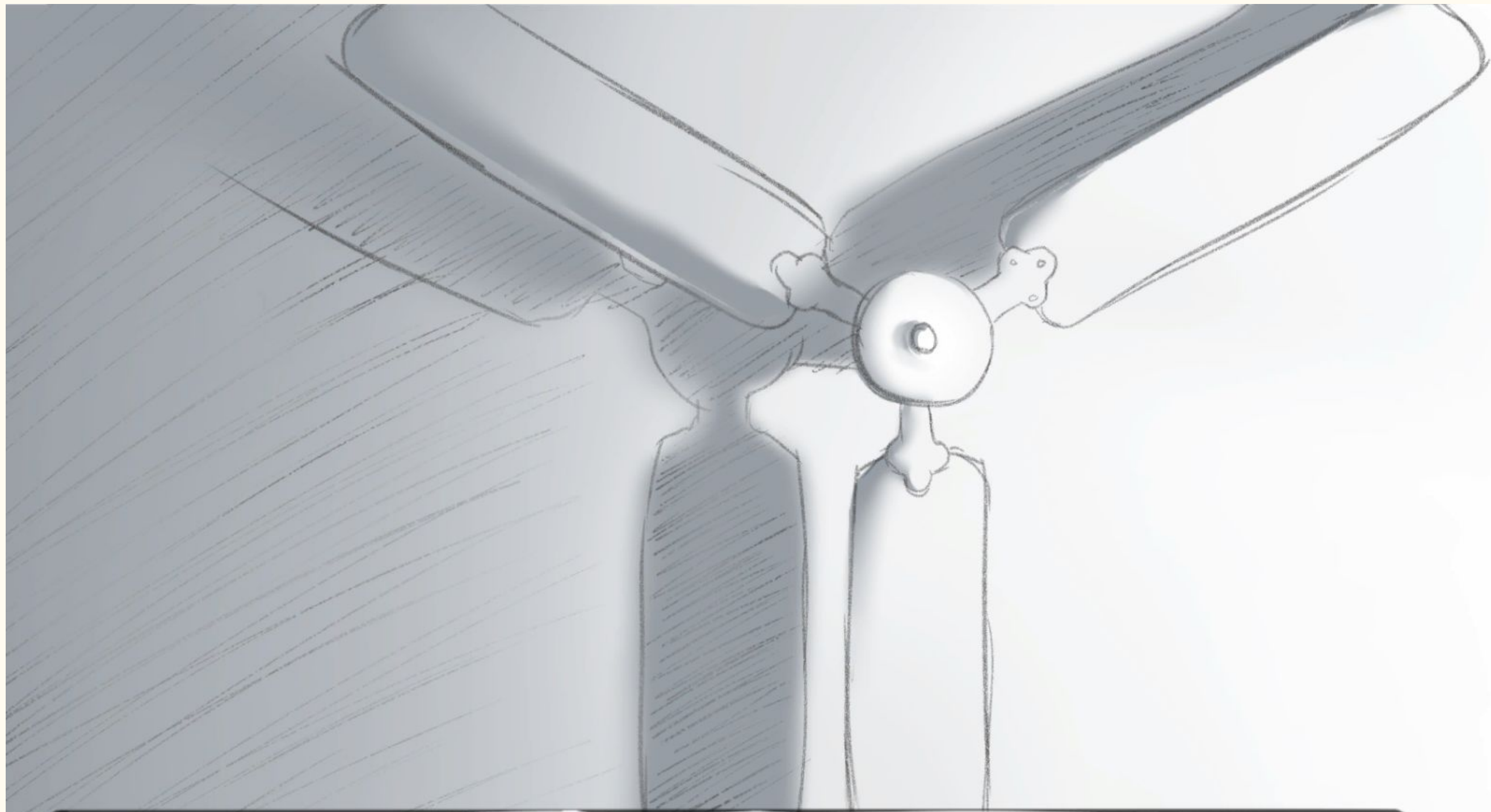
You're in front of the fridge. Why are you in front of the fridge? You can feel blood slide down your inner thigh. You're filthy.



You want to be nothing but skin,
bones and bare essentials.



Did your ceiling always look like that?



You spend a day seeing how many coins you can fit into the hollows above your collarbones.



You wonder how much smaller you can get.



You don't remember the last time your fridge was this full. You'd learnt your lesson the last time you binged, rice thins coated in expired condiments. You'd been sick for days.

Eat nothing.



— —

5 people found this review helpful



Recommended

0.3 hrs last two weeks / 0.3 hrs on record

Posted: 29 Apr @ 12:54pm

very short story bud damn does it hit me where it hurts, i have been together with a person suffering from anorexia and honestly i felt like i was in her shoes when i played this game. 9/10 would depress again

Was this review helpful? Yes No Funny

2 people found this review helpful



Recommended

0.2 hrs last two weeks / 0.2 hrs on record

Posted: 3 May @ 12:05am

Shrinking Pains is a visual novel showcasing captivating topics such as mental illness, tragedy, destructive behaviour and heartbreak to tell a story based on the experience of living with an Eating Disorder. It contains distressing and emotional themes but is definitely worth the short amount of gameplay as it gives you a feel of what those suffering with an Eating Disorder go through in their day-to-day lives.

1 person found this review helpful



Recommended

0.2 hrs last two weeks / 0.2 hrs on record

Posted: 3 May @ 2:01pm
Updated: 3 May @ 2:01pm

Realising this as a possibility is scary



Recommended

0.1 hrs on record



POSTED: 28 APRIL

The story is... interesting.

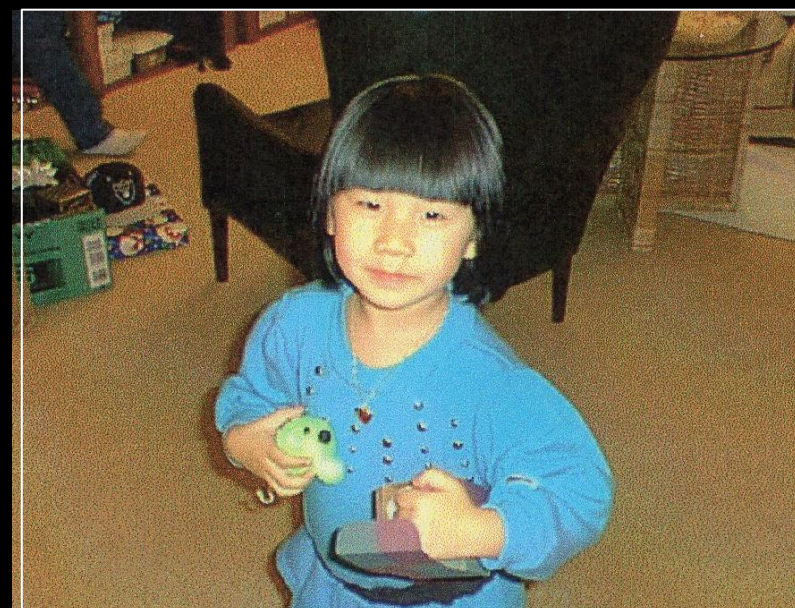
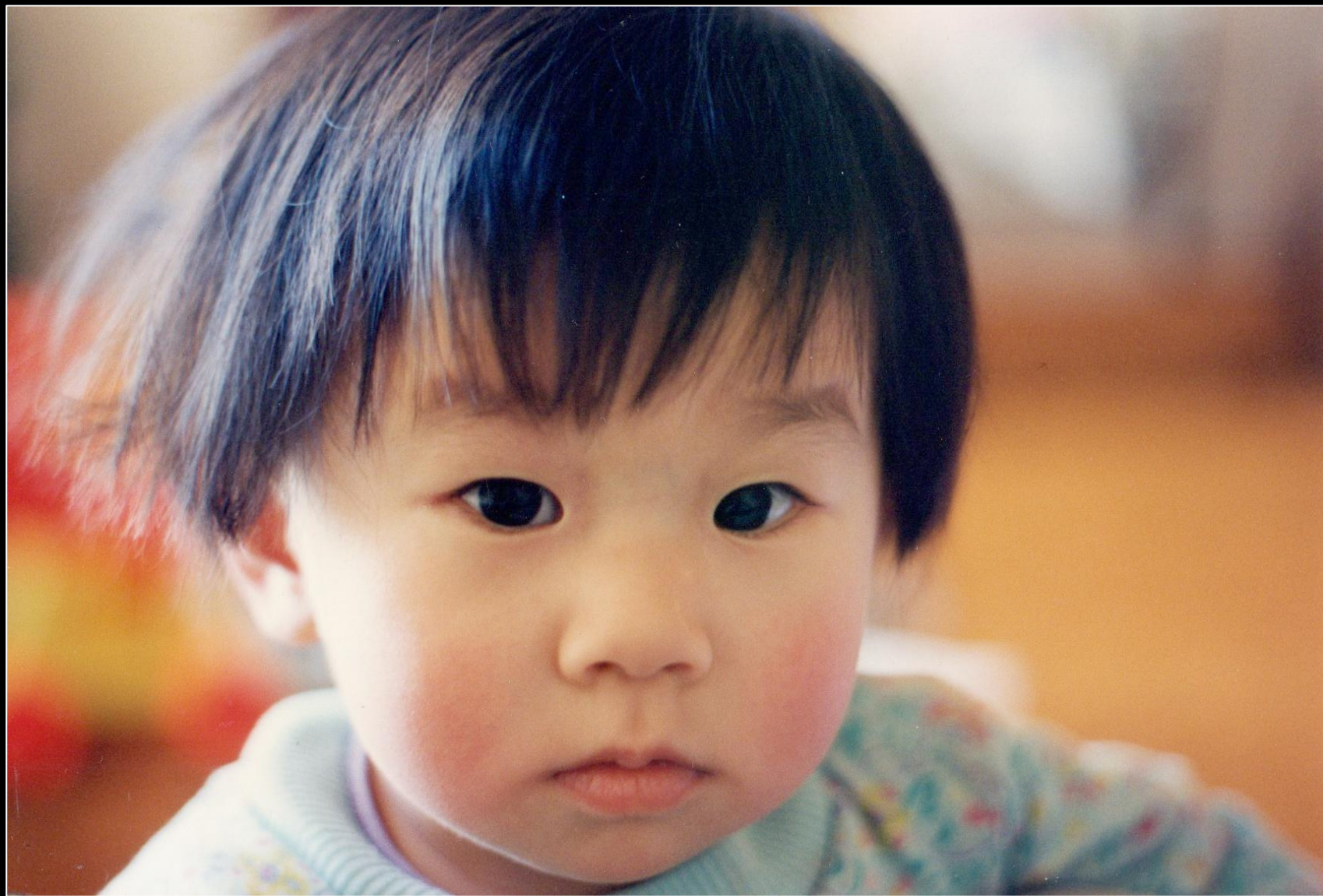
As someone who is mentally, socially and physically healthy, I couldn't really.. connect with the protagonist of the story. As someone who never had issues with talking to others, with eating disorders, this view from the perspective of someone suffering from such issues really opened my mind.

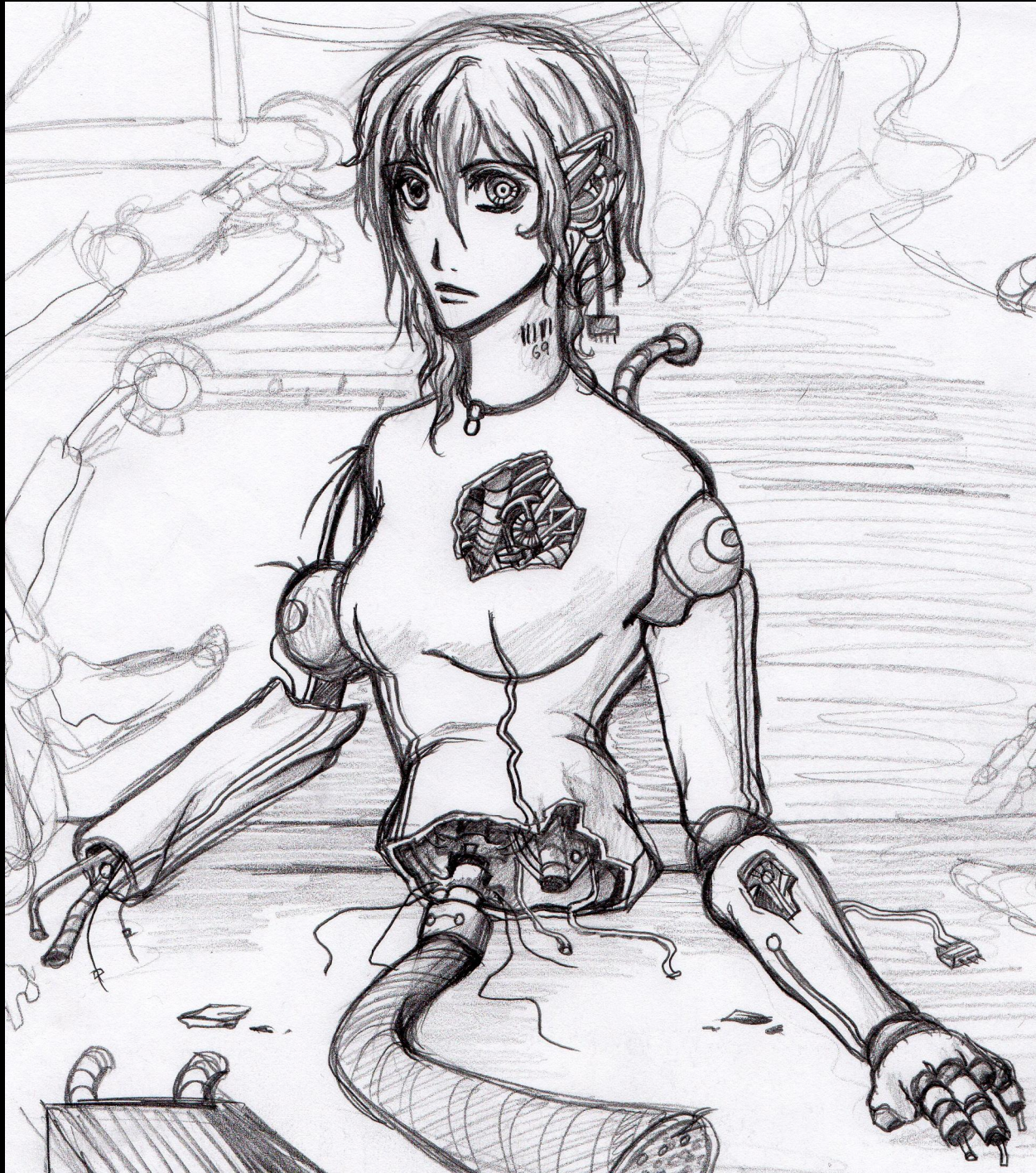
I played through the game about 3 times - took about an hour of my life. Through each playthrough, I've began to understand more of the story, slowly dipping myself into the shoes of each of the characters that appear only briefly on the screen. It felt distance, yet when I truly dove into the story, it felt so real. It felt like this could very much be happening to someone I've met in my life and I am completely oblivious.

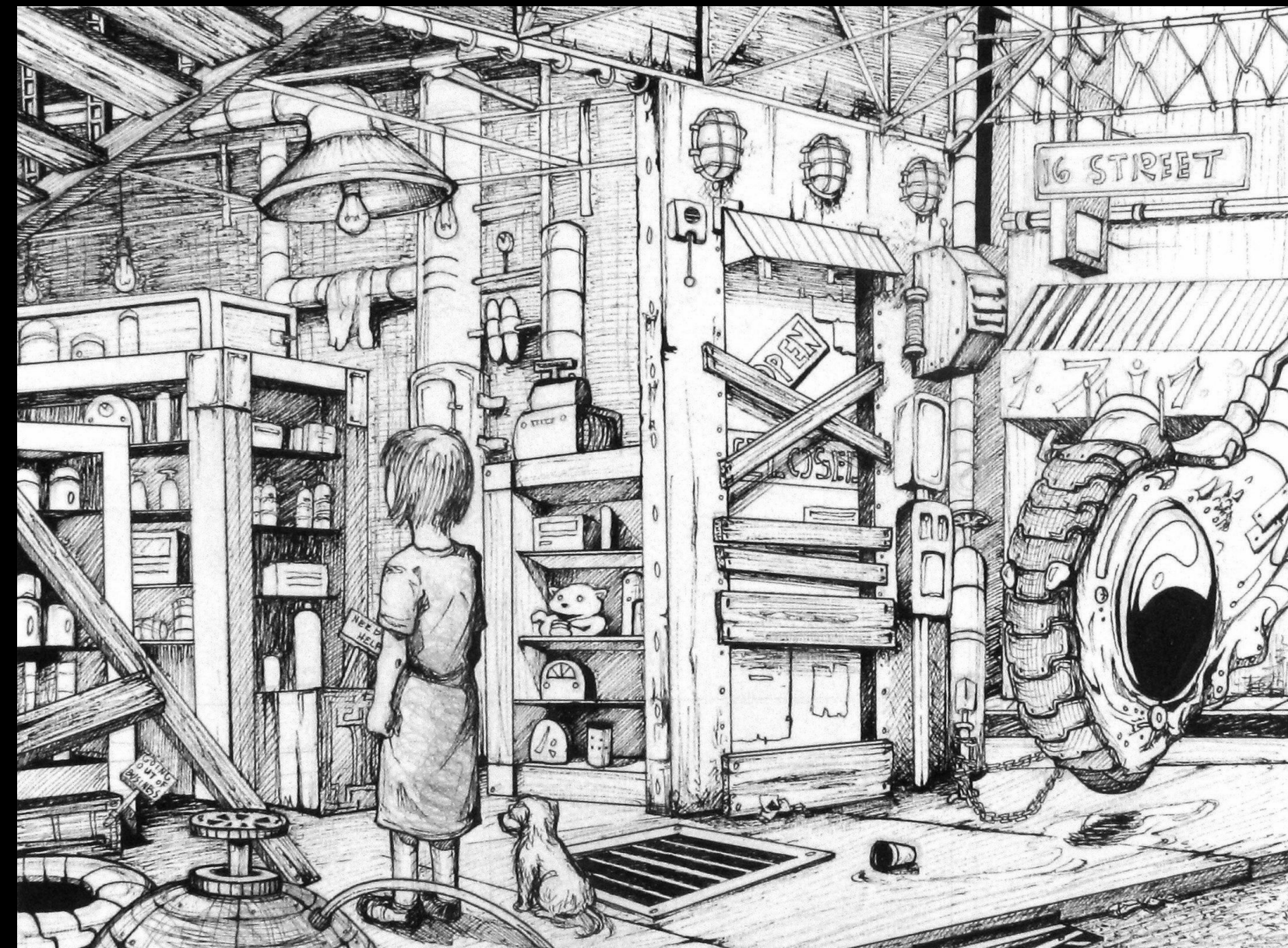
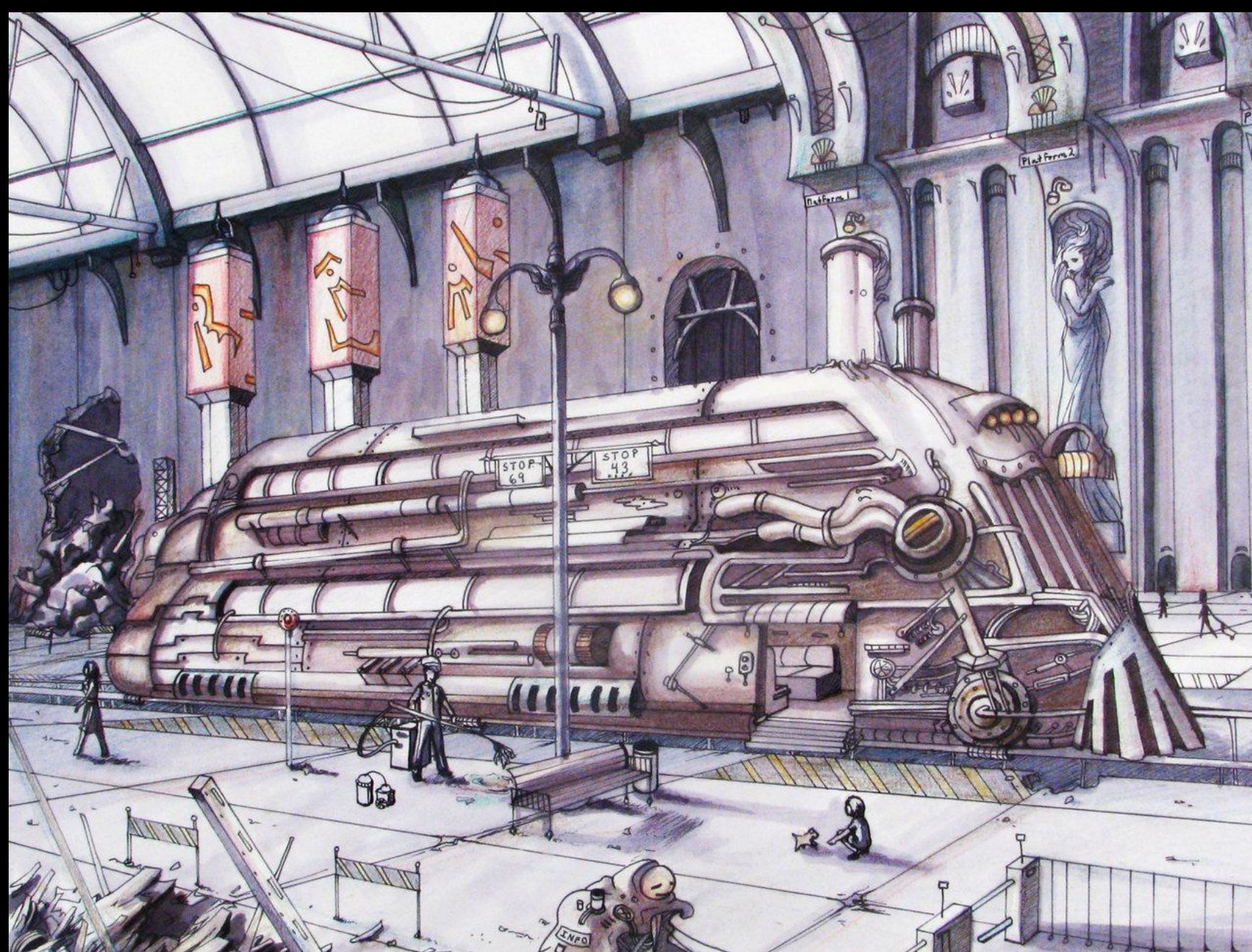
Amazing 48 hours spent building this game. Amazing 1 hour spent playing it.

The Impact on Players and Creators

- Built empathy in people without the disorder
- Became a tool for those that had an eating disorder to help their support network better understand the illness.
 - Held me publicly accountable for my experiences.
 - Helped with my own recovery.













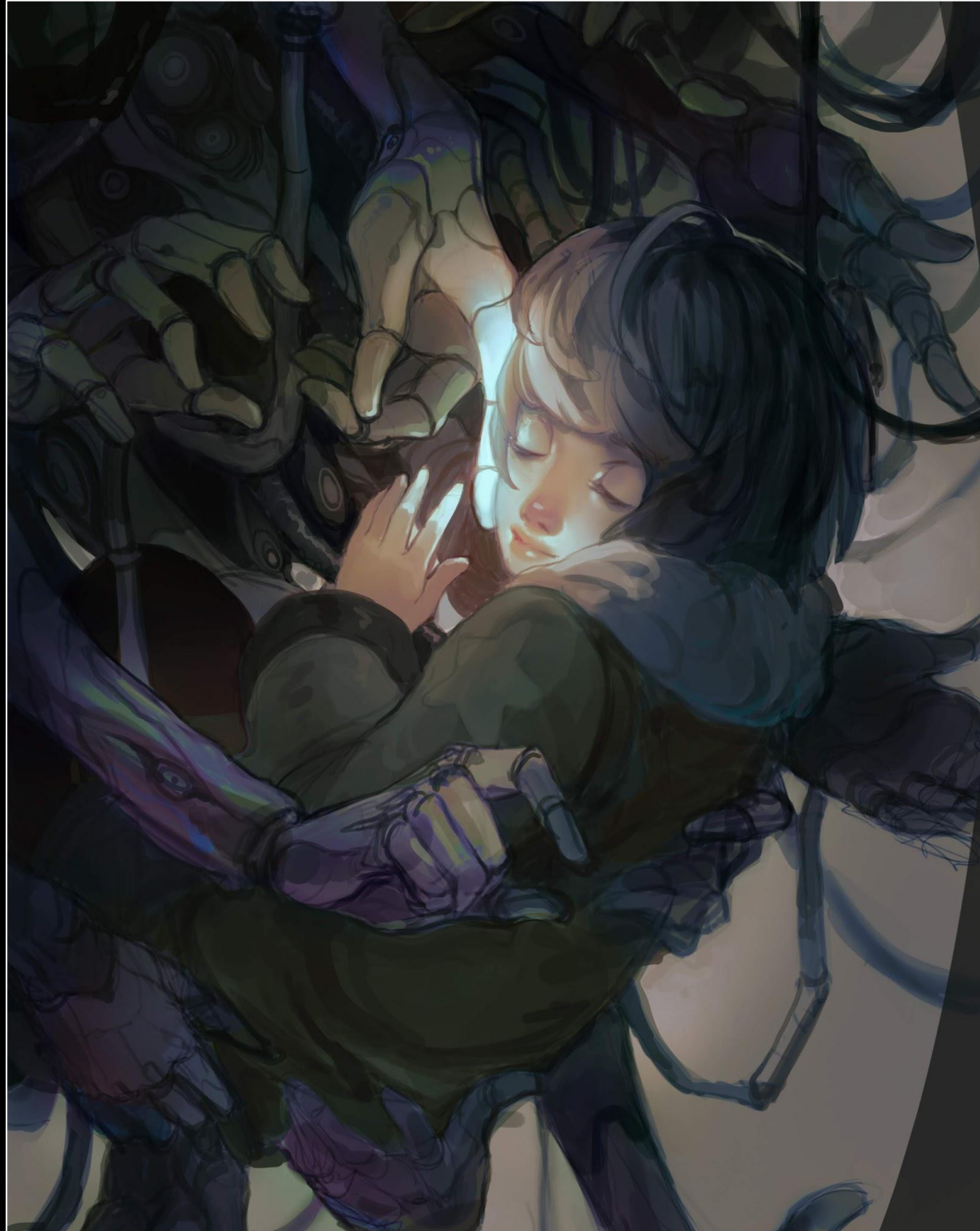


IN THE
Keeper's
Shadow

- The evolution of Emi
- Agency of character in depictions versus my own agency in life
 - Rehashing experiences versus transforming, evolving them
 - Knowing your story implicitly in the entire context of your life

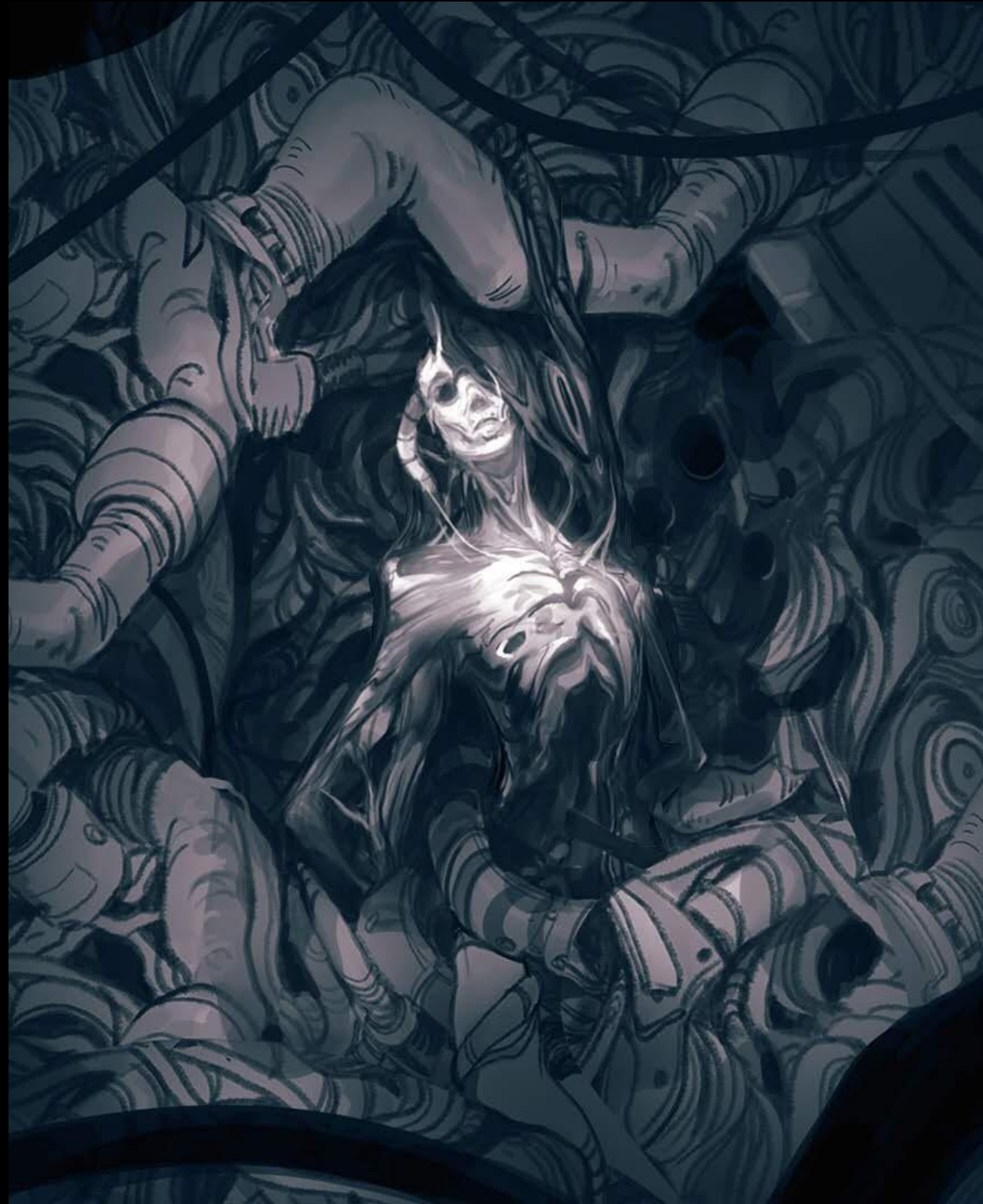


- No graphic depictions of violence to the main character



WORK IN PROGRESS

- Dark surrealism, pulling from Lovecraftian, folkloric, and cosmic horror.
 - “Terribly sublime” - Hovering between the beautiful and unsettling



- Gameplay mechanics and content tailored around narrative and symbolic context
 - Inspect/examination
 - Darkness and glowing moth



Creators and Players



Closing Thoughts

- The impact these games had on us as creators.
- Why it's important to make games with sensitive subject material, and the benefits of doing so.
- Pushing boundaries on what a game is, and when it is considered art.
- Ethics, Commitment to expression

Why Now?

- Rise of biographical games esp. in indie games
- #MeToo
- Mental Health awareness

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Shrinking Pains

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