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About this capture

The Bite That Changed My Life

More than a decade in the making, Emil Ferris's stunning graphic novel, *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, will be released on February 14.

PUBLISHED WEDNESDAY AT 11:09 A.M.

Writer and illustrator Emil Ferris has always had an affinity for stories about outsiders. Growing up in Uptown in the 1960s, Ferris was part of a diverse community of people who she says “operated outside the system.” Her neighbors included black migrants who traveled north during the Great Migration, white Appalachian miners living in abject poverty, and thousands of Native Americans who left their reservations in the wake of relocation programs. “There was an incredible beauty,” says Ferris. “These were people who suffered, but were strong. They were survivors.”

One reason Ferris was drawn to those on the fringe was because she herself was a loner. Born with scoliosis, Ferris was immobile for much of her childhood. “I was also severely hunchbacked, which is why I loved monsters,” says Ferris, who also characterizes her younger self as very wolf-like. “I had this vision of this little wolf girl, enfolding in the arms of this tall handsome cut-apart Frankenstein character.”

Ferris uses those early experiences as a loose backdrop in her stunning debut graphic novel, *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*. Set in 1960s Uptown, *Monsters* is told from the perspective of a 10-year-old's diary as she attempts to solve the murder of her mysterious upstairs neighbor. The book, which is haunting, ambitious, and altogether remarkable, took Ferris more than a decade to complete. The story behind its creation is as astounding as the book itself. Here, in an exclusive piece for *Chicago*, Ferris details her own stranger-than-fiction saga. — *Elly Fishman*

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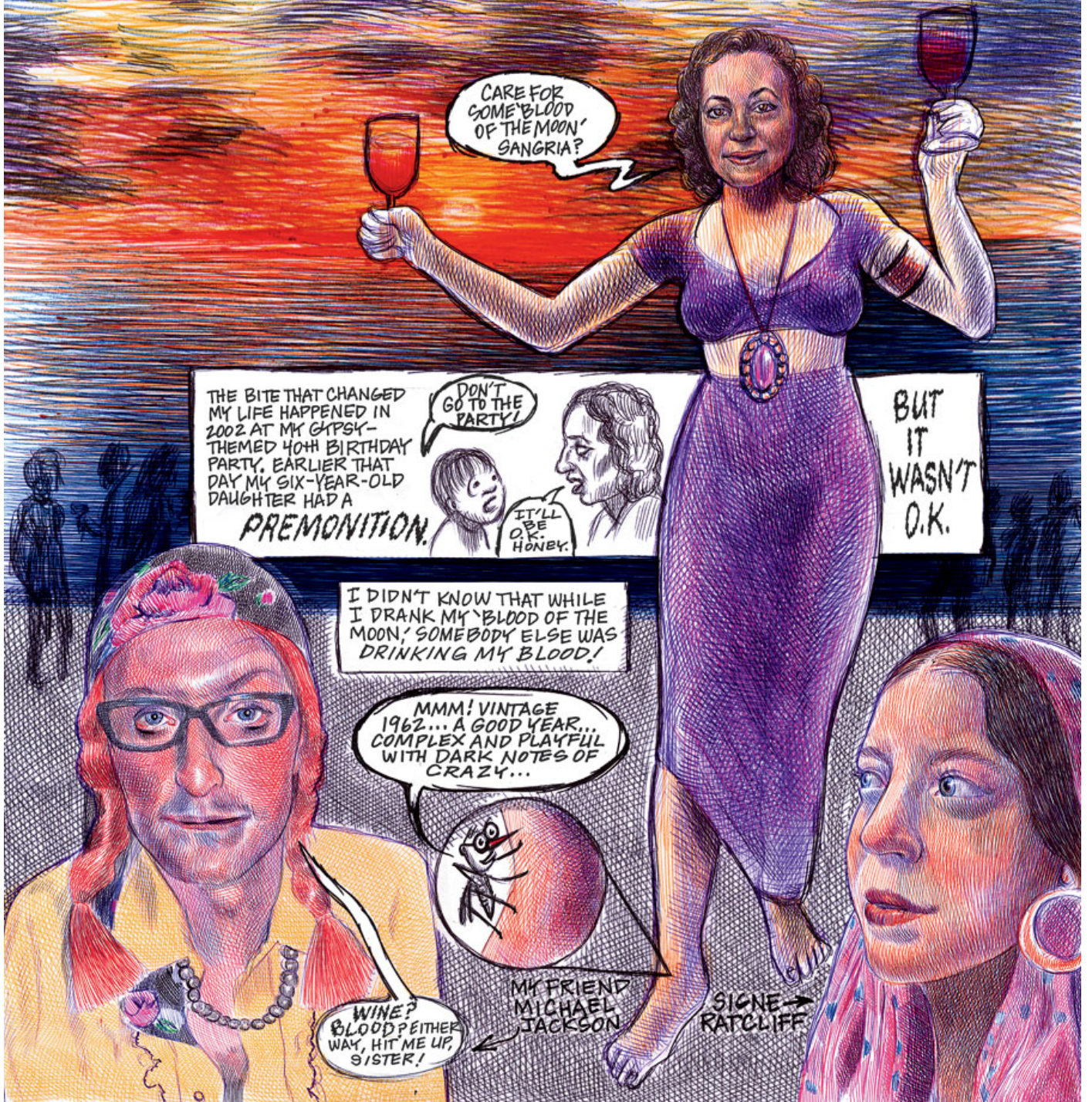
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THE BITE

THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

BY EMIL FERRIS



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About this capture

THREE WEEKS LATER...
DURING A LONG PERIOD
OF DELIRIUM...

I FOUND MYSELF IN
THE HOSPITAL...
HAVING BEEN DIAGNOSED
WITH WEST NILE VIRUS,
MENINGITIS, AND
ENCEPHALITIS...

ONE NIGHT

I FELT A PRESENCE
IN THE ROOM WITH ME.
MAYBE I WAS DELIRIOUS
BUT I FELT IT WAS THE
ANGEL OF DEATH...

(IT LOOKED LIKE A 1940S
ISSUE METAL FILING
CABINET.)

THE 'ANGEL'
HAD ONLY ONE
QUESTION
FOR ME.

IT WAS OFFERING ME
THE CHOICE BETWEEN
LIFE AND DEATH AS
THOUGH IT WAS MERELY
A MATTER OF GOOD ACCOUNTING.

I THOUGHT
OF MY DAUGHTER...

I'M IN.

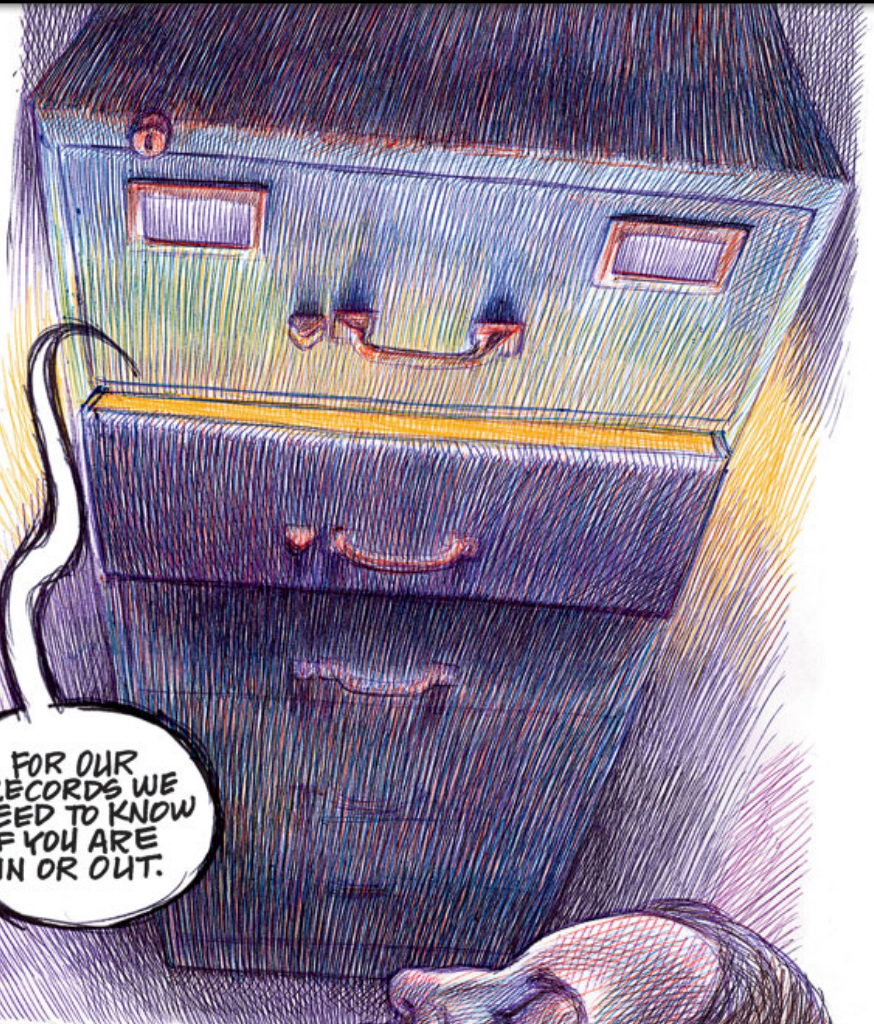
THEN A PHYSICAL
THERAPIST CAME IN
AND TOLD ME THAT
IF I TRIED TO STAND,
I WOULD FIND THAT

**I WAS PARALYZED FROM
THE WAIST DOWN...**

I WAS BARELY ABLE TO TALK.
I'D HAD EXTENSIVE BRAIN DAMAGE.
FOR MONTHS AFTERWARDS THE PAIN FELT
TO ME LIKE RACCOONS GNAWING ON
MY WITHERED LEGS...

THE NEUROLOGIST TOLD ME I WOULD
NOT WALK AGAIN, BUT AS AN ARTIST
THE WORST REVELATION WAS ABOUT MY

RIGHT HAND...



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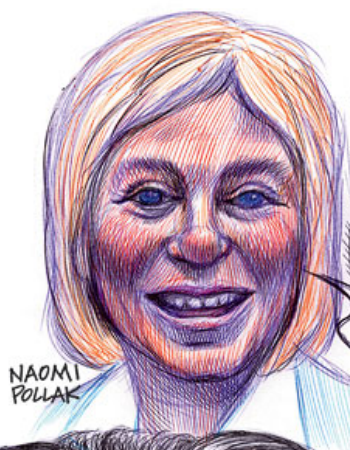
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BY TAKING ILLUSTRATION JOBS LIKE THIS ONE, WHERE I DREW THE MOST MANIACALLY HAPPY TOILET IMAGINABLE... BUT NOW - WITH A HAND THAT SHOOK AND WAS TOO WEAK TO HOLD A PEN - I COULD NO LONGER DRAW.



WE'LL MAKE A STREET WALKER OF YOU YET!

MY MOTHER ALLOWED ME TO MOVE MY HOSPITAL BED AND WHEELCHAIR INTO THE DINING ROOM OF HER HOME. ALTHOUGH THE DOCTORS WERE CERTAIN I WOULD NOT WALK AGAIN, THE STRONG WOMEN IN MY LIFE ENCOURAGED ME TO HAVE HOPE AND WORK LIKE HELL!

MY AMAZING PHYSICAL THERAPIST, NAOMI, IS ORIGINALLY FROM SOUTH AFRICA, SO I'M PRETTY SURE SHE DIDN'T KNOW THE MEANING OF THE EXPRESSION.



GET YOUR CRIPPLED ASS UP! WE'RE GOING OUT FOR SWEDISH PANCAKES.

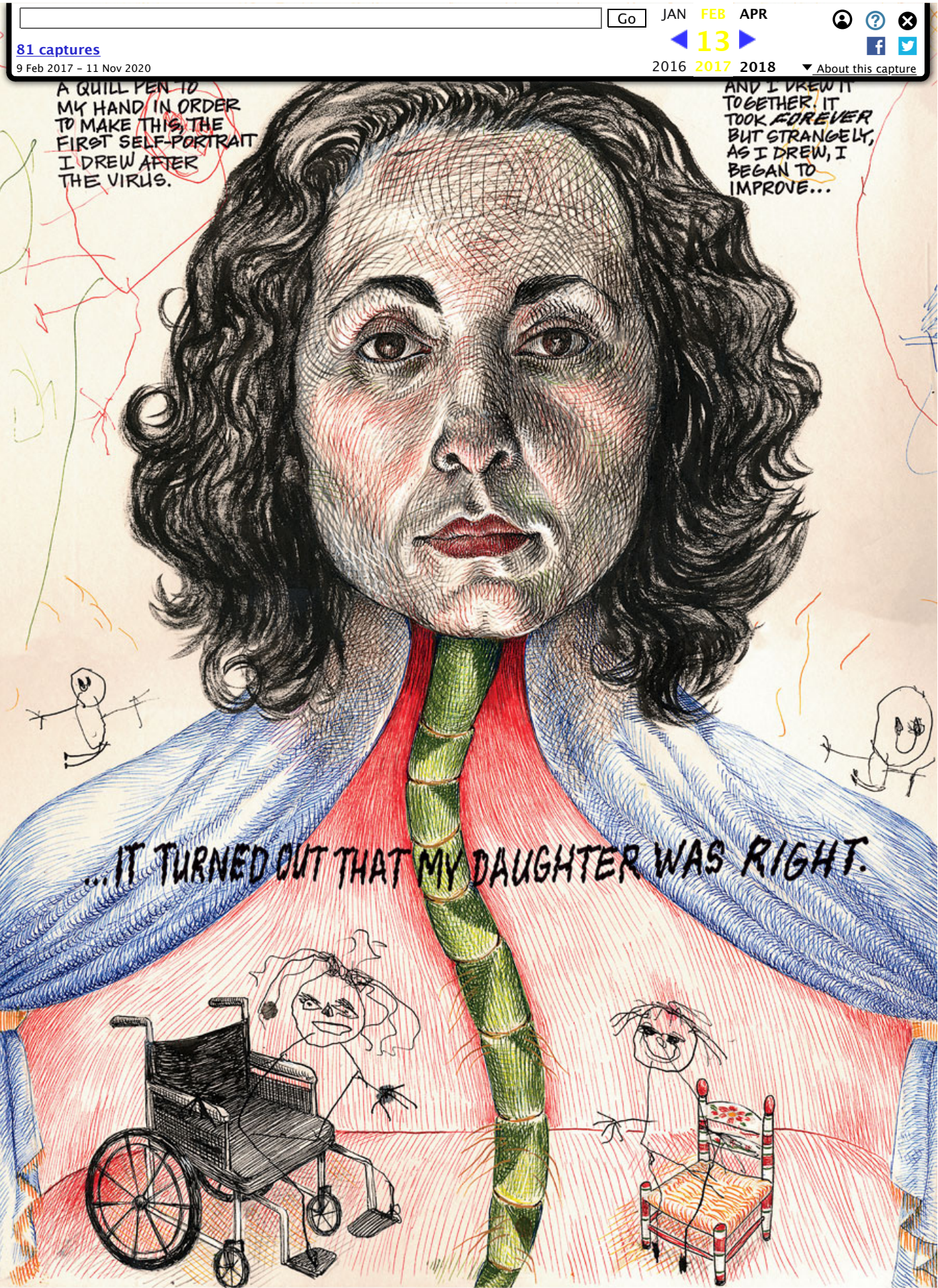
MAMA, I DREW YOU GETTING UP FROM YOUR WHEELCHAIR BECAUSE...

MARGARET BRABHAM

DON'T YOU DARE GIVE UP!



...I BELIEVE YOU'LL WALK AGAIN.



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OF CHICAGO. ALTHOUGH I BEGAN COLLEGE IN A WHEEL CHAIR, I GRADUATED WALKING WITH TWO CANES BECAUSE ART IS HEALING!

I LOVE ART!

WHICH ART ARE YOU TWO TALKING ABOUT?

ART IS FANTASTIC!

DURING SCHOOL I STUDIED THE GREAT VISUAL STORYTELLERS OF OUR TIME. AMONG THE GREATEST OF WHICH IS ART SPIEGELMAN. WITHIN HIS BOOK 'MAUS' I EXPERIENCED A PROFOUND AND TIMELESS BEAUTY THAT EMBOLDENED ME TO MAKE MY OWN GRAPHIC NOVEL.

MY GRAPHIC NOVEL, TITLED 'MY FAVORITE THING IS MONSTERS', IS ABOUT A KID (KAREN REYES) WHO MUST SOLVE THE MYSTERY SURROUNDING A NEIGHBOR'S DEATH. LIKE ME AS A KID, KAREN LOVES HORROR MAGAZINES AND CREEP SHOWS. THE ONLY THING KAREN WANTS TO BE WHEN SHE GROWS UP IS A MONSTER. WORKING ON THE BOOK REQUIRED SIX YEARS AND MANY SACRIFICES. FOR INSTANCE, I GOT QUITE GOOD AT 'AVAILING' MYSELF OF THE FREE SAMPLES AT MY LOCAL GROCERY STORE.



MY BOOK TAKES PLACE IN 1968.

THAT UNCOMFORTABLE MOMENT WHEN A BANK TELLER WATCHES ME LEAVE THE BANK WITH A SOUP POT FULL OF COMPLIMENTARY BANK COFFEE.



AT SOME POINTS I SLEPT IN RENEGADE SPACES, SUCH AS THE STUDIOS OF MY EQUALLY POOR ARTIST FRIENDS.



So...uh... Hi... How's it going?

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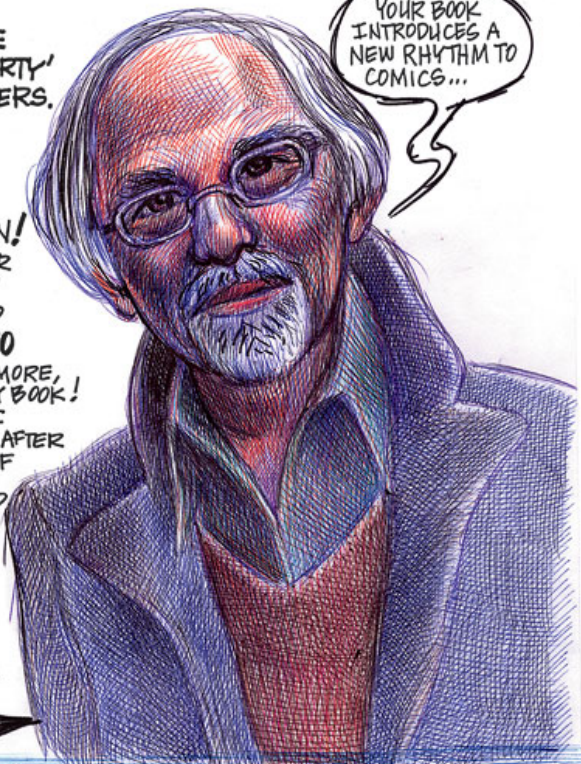
HALLOWEEN - WAS IMMINENT AFTER YEARS OF SACRIFICE, BUT JUST A FEW WEEKS BEFORE IT WAS TO BE RELEASED, I RECEIVED NEWS THAT THE COPIES OF MY BOOK WERE...
LOST AT SEA!

MY PUBLISHER WAS ABLE TO LAY HANDS ON ENOUGH COPIES THAT I COULD MAKE AN APPEARANCE AT THE MIAMI BOOK FAIR. AT A FANCY BAYSIDE 'AUTHOR PARTY' I WORE MYSELF OUT HUNGRILY CHASING APPETIZERS.

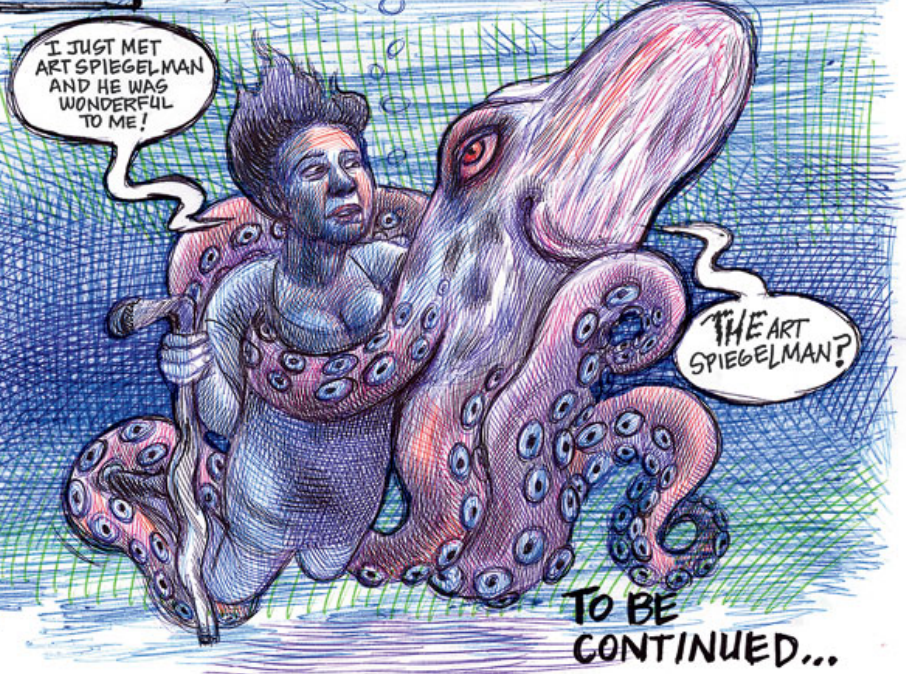
YOUR BOOK INTRODUCES A NEW RHYTHM TO COMICS...



IT WAS **ART SPIEGELMAN!** THE FATHER OF MODERN COMICS AND MY HERO AND WHAT'S MORE, HE LIKED MY BOOK! ALTHOUGH I ADMIT THAT AFTER THE YEARS OF ISOLATION EXPERIENCED WHILE CREATING MY BOOK, HIS KIND 'KVELLING' MADE ME A LITTLE NERVOUS...



ONE OF THE GUESTS WAS A DISTINGUISHED BEARDED GUY WHO LOOKED LIKE A MEMBER OF THE CULTURAL INTELLIGENTSIA OF WEIMAR BERLIN.



TO BE CONTINUED...

This article appears in the February 2017 issue of Chicago magazine. [Subscribe to Chicago magazine.](#)