

## THE VISUAL METAPHOR OF DISABILITY IN SARAH LEAVITT'S GRAPHIC MEMOIR *TANGLES: A STORY ABOUT ALZHEIMER'S, MY MOTHER, AND ME*

Renata Lucena Dalmaso\*  
Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina  
Florianópolis, SC, BR

### Abstract

Borrowing George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor theory, and its implications for the study of visual metaphors, this article seeks to investigate the representation of the disabled body in the graphic memoir *Tangles: A Story about Alzheimer's, My Mother, and Me* (2012), by Sarah Leavitt. The genre of comics, as a cross-discursive medium, is prolific in the use of visual metaphor as a narrative technique and Leavitt's graphic memoir, in particular, employs visual metaphor in the depiction of her mother's experience of Alzheimer's, as someone slowly distancing herself from her family. This article points to ways in which Sarah Leavitt's graphic memoir explores the potential of visual metaphor as an empowering narrative device in terms of representing disability.

**Key words:** disability; visual metaphor; comics; graphic memoir; Alzheimer's.

Borrowing George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor theory, and its implications for the study of visual metaphors, this article seeks to investigate the representation of the disabled body in the graphic memoir *Tangles: A Story about Alzheimer's, My Mother, and Me* (2012), by Sarah Leavitt. The genre of comics, as a cross-discursive medium, is prolific in the use of visual metaphor as a narrative technique and Leavitt's graphic memoir, in particular, employs visual metaphor in the depiction of her mother's experience of Alzheimer's, as someone slowly distancing herself from her family. This research is focused, then, on the use of visual metaphor as a form of representation of disability in Leavitt's autobiographical work. My questions here are: how does visual metaphor impact the experience of representing others with disability? How does the portrayal of disability in others complicate the idea of *self*-representation and disability? In what ways is visual metaphor employed to reinforce the stigmatization of those characters and in what ways is it used to subvert it?

### Visual Metaphor

The concept of visual metaphor is seen differently by critics in the fields of linguistics, semiotics, and film studies, and, as such, the following section of this article shall explore some of the definitions by scholars in these fields and how best such definitions can be used in the study of visual metaphor in the context of graphic memoirs. Most authors associate visual metaphor with the "main tenets of conceptual metaphor theory," which involve instances where metaphoric thought occurs (El Refaie "Understanding visual metaphor" 80-1). Mostly, these studies stem from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's theory that metaphor pervades our daily lives, "not just in language but in thought and action" (Lakoff and Johnson 3). Basically, they argue, "human thought processes are largely metaphorical," in the sense that human experience is itself formed through the understanding of one thing in terms of another, which is the basis of metaphor in their definition (5-6).

\* Renata Lucena Dalmaso has recently obtained her doctorate in English at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. Her research interests include graphic memoirs, autobiographical writing, and representations of disability. E-mail: rldalmaso@gmail.com.



Although Lakoff and Johnson use problematic terms such as “universal” to describe experiences associated with the formation of what they call “primitive metaphors,” their model for conceptual metaphor is particularly relevant to this research (258). They establish a correlation between the use of metaphor, bodily experience, and physical interaction with the environment. Metaphors, they argue, “are shaped and constrained by our bodily experiences in the world, experiences in which the two conceptual domains are correlated and consequently establish mappings from one domain to another” (247-8). Bodily experience and culturally based frames, thus, inform the construction of conceptual metaphors (258). Thus, if graphic memoirs depict disability in metaphorical terms, in what ways is this connection being explored? More specifically, for the purposes of this article, in what ways is metaphor being visually laid out within the narrative? Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of conceptual metaphor pertains, primarily, to the study of verbal metaphors and, although some scholars see visual metaphor as belonging to the same structure and rules, others focus on seeing visual metaphor as its own phenomenon.

Noel Carroll differentiates visual metaphor from verbal metaphor through what he refers to as “homospaciality,” or, in other words, a fusion of ideas within the same space (190). In visual metaphor, he argues, two “discrete elements coexist in the same space, [...] and call [...] to mind different concepts or categories” (191, 193). Another element of visual metaphor, for Carroll, is that the image at hand must be “physically noncompossible,” which means that the viewer should understand those elements in the same space not as “a representation of a physically possible state of affairs, but as an opportunity to regard one of the categories as providing a source for apprehending something about the other category” (199). In sum, he understands visual metaphor as the fusion of two distinct images (or ideas) that on their own should not be interpreted at face value, but as a clear use of visual metaphor on the part of the artist. Visual metaphors are, for him, therefore, highly contextual, both in terms of production and reception.

This particular aspect of visual metaphor in critical texts, its deliberate noncompossibility, is somewhat problematic as we move to the study of literature, for it inevitably incurs in the intentional fallacy of assuming what the author, or in this instance the image-maker, has in mind when designing her art. Carroll states, for example, that “in determining whether the elements in an array are physically noncompossible, [...] we need to consider the context in which the image is presented and *the intentions of the image-maker in presenting it*” (208, my emphasis). Other scholars seem to follow the same logic.

Charles Forceville, who has written at length about pictorial metaphor, understands it as a phenomenon in which a visual replacement of expectations occurs (El Refaie “Understanding visual metaphor” 80). For him, context is also highly relevant, but in terms of the management of expectations, both from artist and reader: “For a pictorial representation to be called metaphorical, it is necessary that a ‘literal,’ or conventional reading of the pictorial representation is felt either not to exhaust its meaning potential, or to yield an anomaly which is understood as an intentional violation of the norm rather than as an error” (64). As Forceville lays out his model of pictorial metaphor, he establishes that it “is important to be able to assess with a fair degree of certainty what is the *intention* of the maker of a pictorial metaphor,” which, for his research, implies “a corpus of *non-artistic* ‘texts,’ namely advertisements” (Forceville 65, original emphasis). The emphasis on the author’s intentions is, therefore, intrinsic both to Forceville’s model of visual metaphor as well as Carroll’s.

Despite having pronounced the author as dead, Roland Barthes, in “Rhetoric of the Image,” chooses to work with advertisement images because of their “undoubtedly intentional” signification as well (33). Barthes’ theory on visual language is focused, in its turn, on what he calls anchorage and relay (38). As images are polysemic, the reader must choose between a “floating chain of signifieds,” a choice facilitated by the linguistic message which acts as an “anchorage” (38). The stability of the linguistic message prevents the multiplication of connoted meanings and effectively (and ideologically)

“directs the reader” to the preferred readings (40, original emphasis). “Relay” is the other function seen in interaction between verbal and visual language, and “cartoons and comics strips” are genres prolific in it (41). In the relay, visual and verbal language “stand in a complementary relationship [...] and the unity of the message is realized at a higher level, that of the story,” with one or the other taking precedence as detainers of the “informational charge” (41).

While all three authors mentioned underline the necessity of understanding the author’s intentions when dealing with visual metaphor and visual language, they point to different analytical models of iconography. A point of contention among scholars is the rate in which concepts about verbal metaphor could be transferred to the study of visual metaphor.

Francisco Yus, for example, in an article about political cartoons, defends that “interpreting visual metaphors does not differ substantially from verbal metaphor comprehension” (167). His analysis indicates that the reader has to decode the image in a number of “subsequent interpretive steps” similar to the “kind of conceptual adjustment that takes place in the interpretation of verbal metaphors” (168). Also writing about political cartoons and visual metaphor, Elisabeth El Refaie argues, on the other hand, that

because of the logo-centric history of the study of metaphor, many researchers still tend to assume that theories from the domain of linguistics can be applied to visual metaphors in a simple and straightforward way. This assumption is often based on the idea that images are fundamentally representational, which would imply that the visual can be seen simply as expressing the same meanings as language, albeit in a more imprecise form. (“Understanding visual metaphor” 84)

El Refaie concludes her text asserting that while theories on verbal metaphor may offer some insight into the study of visual metaphor, it is, however, important that researchers in this field be aware of the “thoughts or concepts that appear to underlie it” (90). The differentiation between an image seen as literal and an image seen as metaphor will be, therefore,

highly contextual and will depend on the discourse of a certain culture (90).

Going back to the basis of Lakoff and Johnson’s Conceptual Metaphor Theory and its alleged universality of embodied experiences in relation to the construction of metaphors, El Refaie explores, in a later study, the extent to which social and cultural contexts impact a reader’s comprehension of visual metaphors in political cartoons. She argues that

Conceptual Metaphor Theory is based on the proposition that metaphor derives from our bodily experience and is thus an essential part of our everyday patterns of thinking. This suggests that most instances of metaphor will be understood in similar ways by all members of a language community. But in fact it is becoming increasingly clear that the choice and interpretation of metaphors is partly dependent upon the participants’ social and cultural background [...], as well as on the specific contexts. (“Metaphor in political cartoons” 174)

Despite the evident contributions of Conceptual Metaphor Theory to the understanding of metaphor in our daily lives, therefore, the inadequacy of conceiving any type of human experience as universal becomes clear as individual responses to visual metaphor are explored.

Without incurring in the universalist aspect of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, therefore, I propose an analysis of visual metaphor that takes into consideration bodily experience as part of the construction of that metaphor. Most of the studies brought forth in this brief review of literature about verbal and visual metaphor focus on its more formal qualities and tend to choose objects of study based primarily on the clearness of their authors’ intentions (advertisements are intended to sell, whereas political cartoons are geared towards political commentary, for example). In this respect, I must agree with Roland Barthes (in “Death of the Author,” that is) when he argues that the effort to “decipher” a text, to search for the author’s intentions, is “quite futile” (147). As such, I will not pretend to grasp any of the author’s intentions in the analysis that follows. I do not intend to follow one specific model of visual metaphor, but rather

keep this dialogue in mind when analyzing depictions of disability in the selected graphic memoir.

The work chosen for analysis in this article is what G. Thomas Couser refers to as “somatography,” or, an autobiographical narrative that deals with disability related to a close person to the author and not the author herself (*Signifying Bodies* 2). In other words, it is a graphic memoir of experiencing disability through a proxy, i.e. a third party perspective. This choice of corpus is deliberately done in order to complicate the idea of *self*-representation in graphic memoirs about disability. If we see the phenomenon of “some body memoirs”—Couser’s term for memoirs about living with a certain kind of body—as a way for people to represent their own experiences with disability and appropriate the discourse that is usually used to stigmatize them, as Couser argues, narratives about somebody else’s disability raise some relevant questions (18). If, on the one hand, these works may bring visibility to important issues related to disability, on the other they may appropriate someone else’s experience in the process.

Couser appears to regard somatography as a memoir *of* the person with disabilities, written *by* a close family member or partner, and, consequently, his concerns with the dangers of exploitation and the distinction of these subjects’ rights versus their interests guide his writing on the topic (19). While I share those concerns, I see *Tangles* more in the perspective of a memoir of someone that had to deal with disability in her life, albeit not first-hand.

*Tangles: A Story about Alzheimer’s, my Mother, and Me* is not the story of the author’s mother, told through the author’s perspective, as Couser’s concept of somatography would imply. It is an account of her own experiences as the daughter of someone with Alzheimer’s, with no pretense to speak for her mother, or to be her mother’s voice as dementia progressed.

## Tangles

As the title of Sarah Leavitt’s graphic memoir indicates, *Tangles: A Story about Alzheimer’s, my Mother, and Me* revolves around Midge, the author’s mother, and her discovery and subsequent development of

Alzheimer’s. The work starts with an introduction in prose, in which the narrator explains the reasons for choosing to write about her mother’s disability and how it impacted the family:

I’ve always had a really bad memory. So when my mother got Alzheimer’s disease, I knew that I had to record what was happening to her and to our family. I wanted to be able to look back over my notes and remember all the moments of craziness, beauty, and tragedy—and not lose any of them. (7)

By starting her text with an allusion to her own memory issues, the narrator is already signaling to the reader that the story is as much about herself as it is about her mother. At the same time, her initial remarks also question the stability of memory in her own autobiographical account. She further emphasizes this point in the final paragraph of the introduction: “This is the story that I have pieced together from my memories, my notes, and my sketches. Other people in my family *may remember things differently*. In the end, this is only *my* story: the tangled story of my mother, and me, and Alzheimer’s” (7, my emphasis). Leavitt’s graphic memoir, thus, unsettles some traditions of the autobiographical genre by contesting an implied ownership of the truth in her narrative.

The dilemma of writing about someone else’s disability is also foregrounded in the introductory chapter:

I often felt like Harriet the Spy, or, in darker moments, *like a vulture* hovering and waiting for Mom to say or do something that I could record and preserve, even as she slipped away from me. Sometimes she would pull on the page or grab my pen as I tried to write. The pen would skid and make a mark and I’d label the mark: ‘Mom moved my pen.’ I wanted to keep every trace of her. (7, my emphasis)

This description places Sarah in a predatory position, as a metaphorical vulture, while assigning the role of prey to her mother. By acknowledging the possibility of objectifying the mother through this type of

autobiographical impulse, the narrative advances some of the ethical problems inherent in this scenario, such as the appropriation of someone else's story of disability in favor of their own perspective.

The importance of visual discourse in Sarah's account is evidenced in her commentary of choice of medium:

During Mom's illness, I started using some of my notes to write stories and essays about what was happening. I imagined writing a book. [...] I chose a small number of drawings and notes, compiled them into a booklet, and made a few colour copies. I realized that instead of writing prose about my mother I wanted to do a graphic memoir, and I spent the next four years writing and drawing this book. (7)

The specificity of visuality is brought to the fore, as it appears to be paramount in her choice of graphic memoir versus prose. As such, the ways in which visual metaphor is employed in the narrative is particularly of interest to this research.

The first relevant use of visual metaphor in *Tangles* occurs in the frame where her mother's doctor is seen presenting Sarah and her father, Robert, with her mother Midge's diagnosis (Figure 1). As seen from the quoted page, Leavitt's style is very minimalistic, with an abundance of empty space in the frames, what Ian McGills calls "deceptively sophisticated" (McGills). Her style also stands out for a lack of balloons in her dialogues and for an absence of gutters, or empty space between frames. The page in question is divided into eleven frames. The upper part of the page, with its six symmetrical frames, portrays the family anxiously interacting with the doctor. As father and daughter are asked to leave, they are depicted as shadows, alone in the frame. The following two frames recreate this loneliness and the sense of time taking a long time to pass, as well as the range of emotions going through them: from disappointment, to anger, to sadness. The biggest frame of the page is dedicated to the visual metaphor of the ground crumbling beneath their feet as they hear the confirmation of their worst fears in the doctor's announcement.

The line representing the ground does not go all the way to the end of the panel, which, along with a lack of gutters in the visual narrative, tricks the reader into thinking the frame is actually smaller than it is. It is only by following the line until the end that one realizes it does not represent the border of the frame. It is, rather, the ground on which the characters should be standing. Except that father and daughter are not, in fact, standing on that ground. In comparison with the doctor, whose feet are firmly placed on the ground, they are slightly above, as if suspended in disbelief.

The visual metaphor of the ground crumbling stems from the known verbal metaphor of the same content. Lakoff and Johnson's definition of conceptual metaphor and its relation to bodily experience is fitting here, for the idea of losing one's ground seems directly related to that of falling down unexpectedly in a hole, for example. This particular instance of visual metaphor is centered on the other family members' experience with Alzheimer's, rather than Midge's. They are the ones to receive the diagnosis, whereas the actual subject of that diagnosis is absent from the frame altogether. The image suggests that the ground crumbles for the family of a person diagnosed with Alzheimer's, while not necessarily for the person herself. This is emphasized by the contrast with the frame directly below, with Midge unaware of the drama of the situation, smiling after the appointment. In her perspective, the narrative suggests, the stability of the ground is not an issue (it does not even figure in the frame), and she is simply glad the doctor was so nice. The implication of that visual metaphor is misleading, however, since the person with Alzheimer's, though not always aware of the situation, does comprehend the severity of the illness as it progresses. Midge is portrayed, for example, several times showing frustration with the illness: "I hate what's happening to me," she says (42). The visual metaphor seen on the quoted page is a good example of the potential problems in appropriating someone else's story of disability. As the perspective shifts from the person with disability to the person telling the story, so does the focus, which could lead to a silencing of the former's experience in favor of the latter.

The visual metaphor of receiving the diagnosis in *Tangles* is closely associated with the historically constructed myth and stigma surrounding Alzheimer's. The historicity of the perception of Alzheimer's is the main topic of Jesse F. Ballenger's book, *Self, Senility, and Alzheimer's Disease in Modern America: A History* (2006), for, as he points out, "[...] it is ironic that our public discussion of a disease that robs individuals of their memories proceeds with so little appreciation of its past" (3). Through the process of retracing that past, one could see how in the eighteenth century, for example, dementia and old age were not the subject of the nightmare they eventually came to be in the late twentieth century (4). Despite having been officially "discovered" at the turn of the twentieth century, it was only during the 1980s, Ballenger states, that Alzheimer's emerged as "a major disease entity and public issue," frequently described as an epidemic for an increasingly aging population (8). Around that time, through a series of government, mass media, and advertising campaigns, the idea of old age became disconnected from that of senility or dementia in favor of a glorified concept of retirement (9). This shift had the paradoxical effect, however, of "intensif[ying] the stigma of senility. As the meaning and purpose of old age was reduced to maintaining one's health and activity levels, disease and dependency grew even less tolerable" (9-10). In this rather utilitarian capitalist model, the work force had to be continually replaced, making the golden years supposedly the best period of one's life, when one could enjoy the rewards of a lifetime of hard work; senility, in its turn, represented the opposite of the ideal surrounding the retiree's context (9). In this scenario, an aging body was not supposed to entail an aging mind, gerontologists affirmed (9).

The idea of the senile person struggling with dementia, was at odds with the independence expected of modern times and of this modern old age (9). The notion of selfhood was also tied to the expectations of the times:

Selfhood was no longer an ascribed status but had to be carefully and willfully constructed by every individual [. . .] In light of these changes,

the loss of the ability to independently sustain a coherent self-narrative—a loss that dementia entails—has come to be considered the most dreadful of all losses. (9)

Medical and popular discourse, then, constructed the anxiety around old age that culminated with the panic of senility, dementia, and, finally, of Alzheimer's.

As Susan Sontag argues, "nothing is more punitive than to give a disease a meaning," and Alzheimer's seems riddled with it (58). Sontag focuses primarily on what she calls "master illnesses," such as cancer and tuberculosis, in which the illness is not only fatal, but also surrounded by mystery, granting it a quasi-mythical aura (61, 72). She states that

[a]ny important disease whose causality is murky, and for which treatment is ineffectual, tends to be awash in significance. First, the subjects of deepest dread (corruption, decay, pollution, anomie, weakness) are identified with the disease. *The disease itself becomes a metaphor*. Then, in the name of the disease (that is, using it as a metaphor), that horror is imposed on other things. The disease becomes adjectival. Something is said to be disease-like, meaning that it is disgusting or ugly. (58, my emphasis)

These master illnesses are constructed, then, as reflections of a socio-economical context in which the individual is in crisis with society, "with society conceived as the individual's adversary. Disease metaphors are used to judge society not as out of balance but as repressive" (73). Surrounded by mystery since its "discovery" in 1901, Alzheimer's disease has become a metaphor in many ways.

With Alzheimer's, meaning has been culturally constructed around the metaphor of losing one's mind, of "losing one's selfhood," as a "synonym of *losing control*" (Johnstone 26). A study about metaphors and Alzheimer's disease collected data from news media, film, documentaries, and professional and academic literature and separated in three categories the metaphors most commonly used, following Sontag's model: epidemic metaphors, military metaphors, and predatory thief metaphors (Johnstone 33). In

the study, Megan-Jane Johnstone concluded that Alzheimer's disease has "primarily been conceptualized and represented in a *metaphorical* rather than a literal way in public and professional debate [. . .]" (24, original emphasis). Drawing on the works of Lakoff and Johnson on metaphor and of Susan Sontag's on illness as metaphor, Johnstone argues that the Alzheimer metaphor influences the way people think about the disease, and, most importantly, the way people dehumanize and affect constructed "notions of personhood" of people living with it (24).

Throughout *Tangles*, the trope of losing one's sense of personhood is visually depicted in the drawings of Midge's eyes and expression. At the beginning of the narrative, Midge is portrayed as her regular self, always composed and interacting with the other members of the family in a familiar way. She is drawn always with her glasses on, and those become an emblem of her state of mind as the narrative, and Alzheimer's, unfurls. As episodes of dementia become more and more frequent, visual narrative suggests that the character is distancing herself from her family through the portrayal of a blank expression: Midge's glasses are still on, but no discernable expression is seen on her face. Midge's visual characterization is taken over by a sort of blank stare that dehumanizes her, stripping her of subjectivity and playing into the metaphor of "losing one's identity" frequently associated with Alzheimer's. The prosthesis of the opaque glasses becomes the signifier of Alzheimer's in her character, visually indicating her deviance from the norm.

An example of this transition into the blank stare can be seen in the following page (Figure 2), taken from the chapter "Cut My Life Into Pieces." The first half of the page is marked by the handwriting of the narrator's journal, signaling the archival aspect of the text accompanying the images and setting it apart from the narrative up to that point. The division between frames on the top part of the page also differs from the rest of the narrative, with wavy lines instead of the usual straight ones. The excerpt from her journal begins by situating the context of its writing: "Dec 21, 2001. Waiting for Mom to finish in the bathroom, so I'm just writing for a while... Like I ever wanted to be so familiar with her body, her bad breath, her smelly

underarms, her skinny body huddling in the bath as she looks at me wide-eyed" (85). The frustrations of having to deal with the corporeal needs of her mother are illustrated by the portrayal of Midge as particularly vulnerable, uncertain, and in need of assistance in even the most common bath routine procedures. The loss of personhood is not only characterized through Midge's depiction, but it is a phenomenon clearly noted by her caregiver and narrator:

It gets hard to see someone as a person when they've become a list of needs: BATH, CLOTHES, BRUSH TEETH, WALK, FOOD, ETC. If you just think about that list, then you're not as sad... until one night you're giving her pills and she starts pretending to be a monster... and she's a person again and you don't only love her, you like her. (85)

In her lucid moments, Midge is seen as a person again, according to the narrator's journal excerpt. In those moments, exemplified here by frames seven and nine, when Midge reclaims her personhood from Alzheimer's, her expression is clearly conveying some sort of emotion and she is seen obviously interacting with an interlocutor. Frame eleven, on the other hand, depicts a completely different Midge.

Devoid of any status of personhood, Midge is portrayed as an empty self: her expression is empty, her eyes kept hidden behind the glasses. In a powerless position, unable to lift herself up from the toilet, she is reasserted and essentialized as a person with Alzheimer's, instead of the person she was just two frames earlier in the narrative. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, in *Staring: How We Look* (2009), argues that staring is part of how we communicate in our daily lives:

Staring affords a spontaneous moment of interpersonal connection, however brief, during which two people have the opportunity to regard and be known to one another [. . .] Staring, in other words, makes things happen between people. (33)

The blank stare, on the other hand, is classified as an "improper" way of looking, one that entails an alienation

characteristic of society's outcasts (22). In our scripted social interactions, the blank stare becomes unreadable, shutting the person out and making her the subject of stigmatization (34). The depiction of the blank stare as a visual mark of the progression of Midge's Alzheimer's effectively situates her as an improper person, someone outside the domain of the subject.

The quoted page shows the distinction between both statuses, as Midge appears in her familiar self—lovingly returning her daughter's gaze and interacting with her, as her daughter remembers it—and her constructed Alzheimer's self directly below it, blankly staring and unresponsive. The juxtaposition of the two reinforces the dichotomy of personhood and non-personhood in the narrative. The visual metaphor of the empty stare works, therefore, as a visual signifier throughout the text of the progression of the illness that slowly removes Midge from the midst of the family and corroborates the common verbal metaphor of “losing one's identity” due to Alzheimer's.

The visual clue of the blank stare emerges only after a certain point in the narrative. For a while, in the early stages of her illness, Midge is still having lots of lucid times, interacting with her family, and they are just starting to notice some of the signs classically associated with Alzheimer's. During those parts of the narrative, she is still depicted with a familiar expression in her eyes, without the blank stare that would accompany her later on. Other visual metaphors are used, then, to convey the repercussions of Alzheimer's within the narrative. The quoted page (Figure 3), from the chapter entitled “Taste and Smell,” illustrates the visual metaphors employed to represent the trope of the distancing of mind from body, noticed by the narrator in her mother.

The chapter starts with a description of what the family later came to realize was one of the first symptoms of Midge's Alzheimer's:

One of the first things that happened to Mom when she got sick was that she lost her sense of smell. This can be a sign of Alzheimer's. But that was before we even suspected something serious. She just couldn't smell. Of course later we realized: it was one of the first steps *in her separation from the world*. (59, my emphasis)

Visually, Midge is represented as a silhouette within a confined black space, with clear borders separating her from the rest of the frame. She does not have the blank stare that eventually characterizes her in the narrative, so the reader can infer that she is still lucid, as the written text confirms. Nevertheless, she appears locked within this space. In the fourth frame, Midge is portrayed again inside the black space, only now making a motion to leave, touching its borders, while outside a whole world of smells and tastes tempts her, apparently unreachable. The seventh frame of the page portrays the breaching of those walls.

Midge, mimicking a reptilian tongue, is depicted as breaking the barrier of the confining black space with the help of sugar: “But as her sense of smell diminished, she seemed to discover the pleasure of sweetness of the tongue. She began to grab at sugar” (59). For those watching her, such as her daughter, the attitude seemed uncharacteristic, since Midge had a history of healthy eating that did not go hand in hand with the intake of large amounts of processed sugar. The discrepancy between the *idea* of the loved one and the reality being witnessed generates a crisis for the narrator. Visually, the more the two notions of Midge clash, the more the character appears dehumanized in the narrative. Following the frame where Midge grabs at sugar with a reptilian tongue, she is represented as someone torn in two, head on one side and body on the other, with each of the parts trapped in its own black confining space. The written narrative corroborates the split imagery: “Mom forgot more and more of herself. She didn't know that she thought sugar was evil. She only knew it tasted good. I used to hide candy so I wouldn't get in trouble. Now I hid it so she wouldn't eat it all” (59). The visual metaphor suggests that Midge's subjectivity is concentrated in her head, which is being kept apart from her body, now in charge of her actions. Midge's actual self, as her daughter saw it, was locked away in a black space, unable to access the reality everybody else seemed to share. The metaphor of the split body would later in the narrative conjoin with the metaphor of the blank stare into composing the notion that Midge as someone with Alzheimer's was inherently disconnected from the person Midge.



As Johnstone argues, “situating persons with Alzheimer’s disease as being ‘non-persons’, ‘already dead’, ‘not human’, and so forth, is not innocent” (43). The use of such metaphors “risk[s] negatively influencing the way people behave and think about the disease and its treatment options, including the administration of pre-emptive and pro-active euthanasia” (48). It is not the purpose of this research to debate the ethics of euthanasia or its moral justifications, but rather to point out the problems of discussing the value of life or the quality of life when the lives of those subjects are being systematically dehumanized through discourse. The consequences of such dehumanizing discourse in people with Alzheimer’s can be seen throughout the narrative, but specially in the chapter entitled “Unreal” (Figure 4).

The chapter begins with the account of an acquaintance’s suicide and the indication that it might have been related to Alzheimer’s. The first five frames are dedicated to that story and illustrate, in a very static fashion, the deceased, the method, and the alleged reason for it: “She was a wealthy, elegant old lady. They found her in her car in the closed carport with the engine running. She had left a medical book on her coffee table. It was open to the chapter on Alzheimer’s” (67). The detached, almost journalistic, tone of these first frames is contrasted with the rest of the chapter, which has a much more intimate and domestic atmosphere. The remaining part of the chapter portrays telephone conversations between Sarah and both her parents that occurred on the day she heard about the suicide and on the following day. One frame stands out in the page, with a complaint Midge makes to her daughter: “I’m not a real person anymore!” (67). The jagged lines of the balloon indicate the intensity of the statement, at least for the listener, and the blackness surrounding it suggests that it was enough of a shock to block everything else from sight for Sarah. The juxtaposition of the two stories, the acquaintance’s suicide and Midge’s complaint, establishes a connection between them, while, at the same time, placing in evidence the metaphor of ‘losing oneself’ or ‘losing personhood’, commonly associated with Alzheimer’s. Throughout the chapter, with the exception of the suicide account

in the first few frames, the visual narrative focuses primarily on the narrator’s perspective: her side of the conversation is the only one being portrayed, for example. In the following page of the chapter (Figure 5), Sarah discusses the repercussions of her mother’s confession with her father, again over the telephone.

On this page, one particular frame stands out in the same manner as in the previous page: black space filling the panel, jagged lines contouring the balloon. It presents the culmination of a conversation between Sarah and her father, where he concludes: “I think she wants to kill herself but she isn’t capable of it now” (68). The connection between these two frames further corroborates the construction of the notion of non-personhood associated with Alzheimer’s and euthanasia as the supposedly logical conclusion for those with that status. Johnstone states that “whereas Alzheimer’s disease has emerged as a synonym for *losing* ownership and control, euthanasia has emerged as its antonym, that is, it has come to symbolize *gaining* ownership and control” (145, original emphasis). Apparently a part of the discursive phenomenon described by Johnstone, the chapter “Unreal” is riddled with assumptions about suicide and Alzheimer’s. Despite the absence of a suicide note, the narrative suggests a direct causal relation between the wealthy lady killing herself and the book opened to the chapter on Alzheimer’s on the coffee table. Later, during their telephone conversation, Rob indicates his suspicions about Midge’s thoughts of suicide, a conjecture based only on his own reading of her actions. Actually, as far as the narrator informs us, Midge’s explicit complaints were very specific and related the way she was being treated like a child by her husband, as well as the desire to be on her own (67). Midge has to deal with the social stigma related to Alzheimer’s, even in her own family, and internalizes the metaphors of the disease, as evidenced by the statements “I’m a nobody” and “I’m not a real person anymore!” (67). Rob and Sarah, on the other hand, jump to conclusions about her complaints (and about the old lady’s suicide) based on their own notions of personhood and agency in relation to Alzheimer’s.

Throughout the narrative, the marked representation of Midge with Alzheimer’s competes and shares space

with the more familiar Midge. The latter, however, begins to slowly disappear from the account, replaced by the former. Up until a certain point in the narrative, the two doubles coexist, in a balance of some sort. At one moment, however, a shift occurs and the balance between the two Midges eschews. The marked Midge, who at first appeared only episodically, begins to completely eclipse the familiar Midge. The turning point occurs in the chapter entitled “Bird Brain” (Figure 6).

The one-page chapter recounts a particular episode between Sarah and her mother, in which the latter tries to call the attention of her daughter to the birds at the feeder. Midge is portrayed trying to interact, but unable to elaborate on her thoughts, something that frustrates Sarah. The episode has no date to contextualize it and, at first, appears to be just another anecdote of Midge's Alzheimer's. The chapter, however, marks a turning point in the narrative: it is the representation of the moment Sarah loses track of whom she considered to be her mother. From that moment on in the narrative, Midge is depicted predominantly as the subject of Alzheimer's.

The visual metaphor puts Midge out of reach, her daughter's or anybody else's, flying away oblivious to any other mundane concerns. For Sarah, it symbolizes the moment of letting go, mostly of the *idea* of her mother. The narrator writes: “I had a vision of myself as a child, trying to grasp her leg as she fluttered away to join the birds. I couldn't hold her here on earth with me, no matter how hard I tried” (73). While the metaphor of the blank stare corroborates a lot of assumptions surrounding Alzheimer's, as previously argued in this article, the visual metaphor of the bird flying away from reach goes against that grain. Johnstone concludes her argument about the implications of Alzheimer's metaphors on the discourse of euthanasia suggesting the necessity for

a new language and new metaphors [to be found, in order to] enable the constructive representation of the complex issues associated with the increasing prevalence of Alzheimer's disease and the need to appropriate resources to be provided to ensure and enable that those diagnosed with the disease are properly cared for from diagnosis to death. (48)

In this sense, *Tangles* portrays the two sides of the debate. It depicts the person with Alzheimer's as a non-person in a lot of ways. The written narrative establishes this in Midge's own words, while the visual narrative portrays Alzheimer's as a dehumanizing feature through the blank stare, the reptilian tongue, the self divided from the body, and so on. On the other hand, the visual metaphor of the bird flying away, which marks a turning point in the narrative, makes use of a different symbology, one that is not dehumanizing, in spite of its non-human characteristics. The bird metaphor suggests that, although out of reach, flying away from her daughter's grasp, Midge maintains some of her subjectivity, albeit in a different self.

If, as Tobin Siebers argues, “aesthetics tracks the emotions that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies,” the employment of visual metaphor as a trope to represent disability is a deliberate attempt to evoke such emotions in the reader (“Disability Aesthetics” 542). George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, on their turn, define metaphor precisely through its sensory effects on the body (235). For them, metaphors help people coherently create connections between each other, a process that is not merely a question of intellect or language, but one involving individuals' common-ground connection with the material dimensions of the world and its sensory-motor domains (232-3, 235, 245). Visual metaphor of disability in *Tangles*, therefore, surfaces primarily as a catalyst of these emotions and senses.

One of the catalyzed responses brought forth by the visual metaphor of disability in the graphic memoir is the impetus to stare. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson defines, the stare is the individual's response to the unfamiliar, that which is out of the ordinary, illegible (3). In the graphic memoir, the disabled body is, thus, discursively emphasized through visual metaphor in a process that reinforces the staring often associated with deviant bodies. The stare performed through graphic memoirs is one that can be done anonymously by the reader, without concern for reciprocity or judgment from others, allowing an unabashed scrutiny of someone else's deviancy (68). Garland Thomson comments on the two-way nature of the stare, as it is “as inauspicious to starers as it is to starees, both of whom stand to

lose status in the exchange” (71). Specifically due to the graphic memoir’s visuality, the narrative plays on the potential of this forbidden stare. The non-fictional status of graphic memoirs also adds to the spectacle being offered. If manuals of etiquette discourage the stare, specifically of people with disabilities (71-2), these visual portrayals of disability seem to invite it.

In *Tangles*, the act of staring assumes a central role in the narrative, most notably through Midge’s portrayal of the blank stare. As Garland Thomson defines, the blank stare is a type of vague look that suggests a lack of mental faculties for the person who bears it (22). As such, the blank stare is often used to characterize people with disabilities and, visually, it is employed as a marker of deviance, functioning as a sign of “visual impotence” for the character in a given narrative (23). In *Tangles*, Midge is portrayed, through her blank stare, as someone deprived of agency, as the previous analyses have pointed out. The progression of Alzheimer’s is directly related to the blank stare, which becomes a permanent fixture in her portrayal in the later stages of the illness. It is possible to conceive the impact of staring in Midge’s representation as twofold: first, as the blank stare characterizes her as a subject inherently deviant, visually impotent; second, as she herself becomes an object of staring, seeing that the narrative invites the reader to focus in the ways in which she slowly loses legibility as Midge.

The page quoted from the chapter entitled “Taste and Smell” (Figure 3), for example, portrays Midge as a staree within the narrative. In the bottom six frames, Midge is shown under the scrutiny of the narrator, who seems to invite the reader to join in on the inspection of the many symptoms affecting her mother, such as the odd choice of clothes, the sweating, the bad breath (59). The thirteenth frame of the page, in particular, where Midge is presented carrying a shoe in her hand after getting dressed, is revealing of this invitation to stare. In that frame, visual narrative assembles a list of oddities for the reader to linger on. A number of arrows point to Midge’s body, visually substantiating her deviance in the narrative:

- Accessories and footwear carried around until abandoned

- Dressy office skirt
- Guatemalan hat almost always
- Messy hair
- Turtleneck even when hot (59)

Ultimately, in *Tangles*, the visual narrative mimics the staring process. The positioning of arrows literally points to the ways in which Midge deviates from the norm, inviting the reader to dwell on the frame in order to take in all of the information. The final frame of the page is emblematic in this regard, as it portrays the young Sarah pointing at her mother in shame: “I was so embarrassed. It reminded me of when I was a teenager and I wouldn’t walk with her at the mall because she dressed weird” (59). The reenactment of the self-conscious embarrassment of her teenage years in the last frame suggests a more critical view of the staring being performed in the earlier frames. Or, at least, it indicates the narrator’s awareness of the, perhaps unavoidable, process of putting her mother in the position of staree.

Besides this questioning, *Tangles* offers some alternatives of representation that do not engage in a type of staring that objectifies the staree. The visual metaphor of the flying bird (Figure 6) appropriates the blank stare that marks Midge as a subject of Alzheimer’s in a liberating way. As a bird flying away, Midge is still an object of her daughter’s stare and is still portrayed bearing the recurring blank stare characteristic of her illness in the narrative. Unlike other depictions throughout the story, however, in this particular frame she does not appear constrained by that stare. In comparison, the frame at the bottom left of the page presents a more ‘realistic’ portrayal of the event, for the narrator, and in that frame Midge is seen staring down, with a sad countenance—a representation confined to the limits of her blank stare. As both types of portrayal are juxtaposed, one can see the potential of visual metaphor as an empowering narrative device in terms of representing disability.

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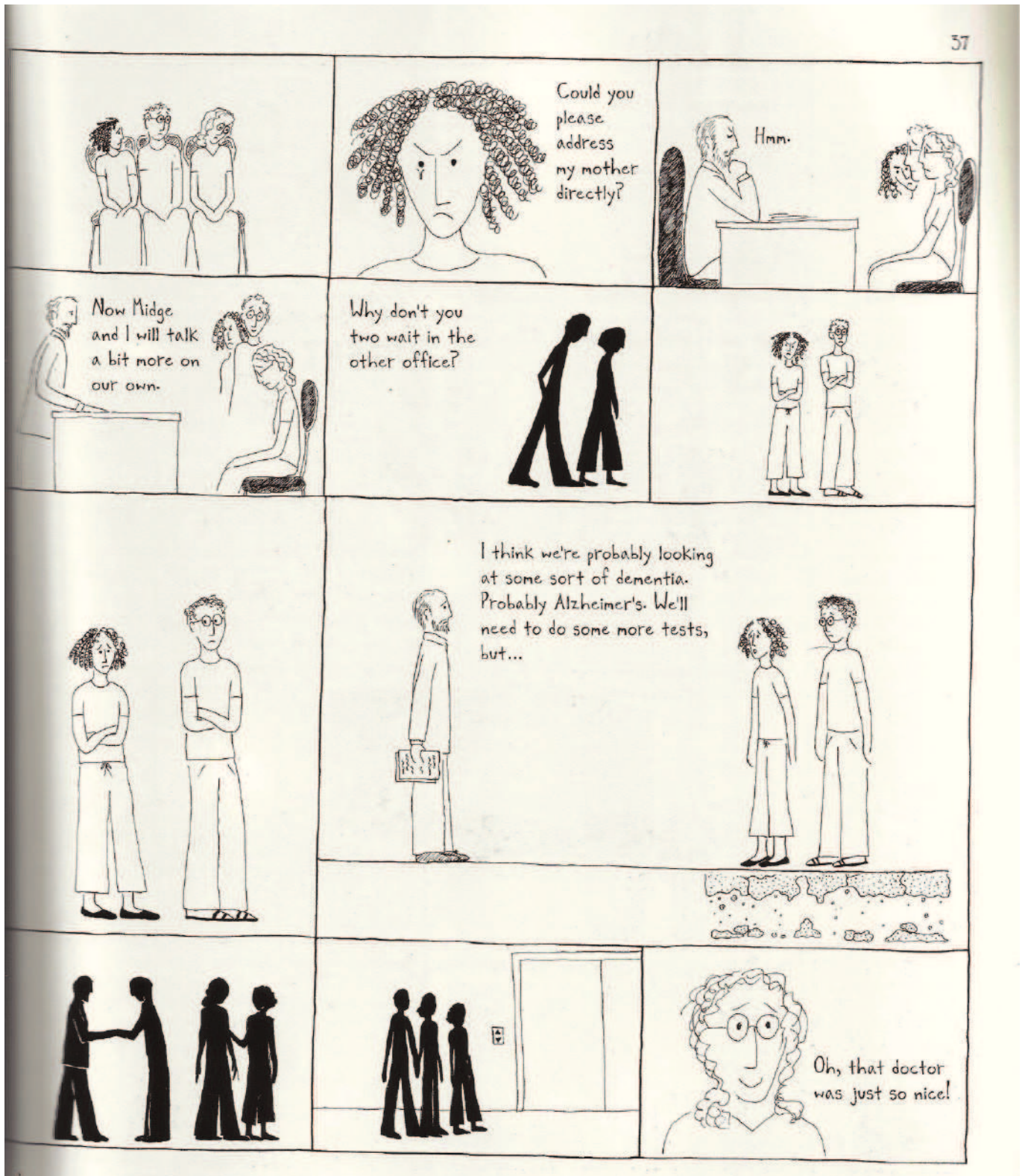


Figure 1: *Tangles* (37)





Figure 2: *Tangles: A Story about Alzheimer's, my Mother, and Me* (85)



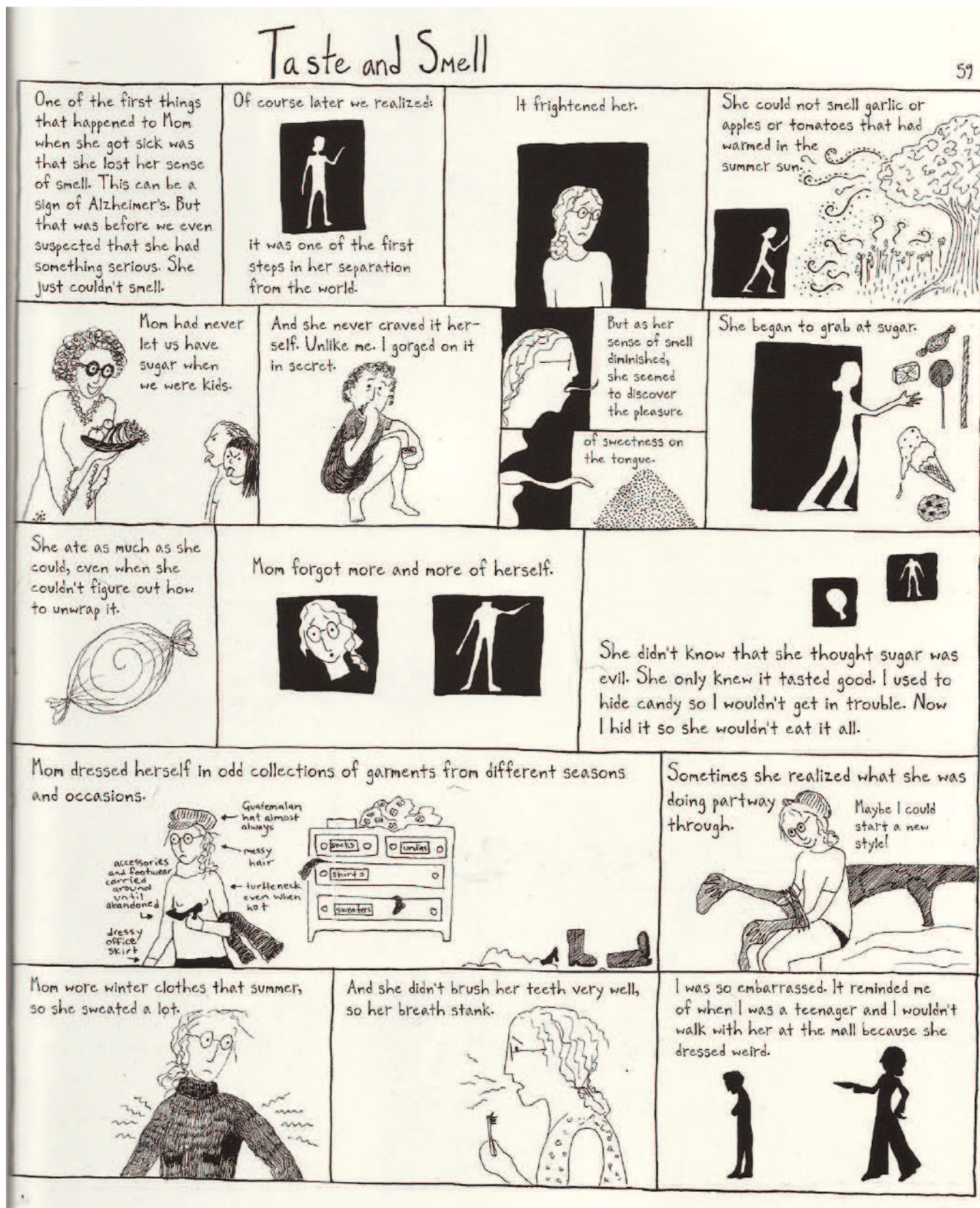


Figure 3: Tangles: A Story about Alzheimer's, my Mother, and Me (59)



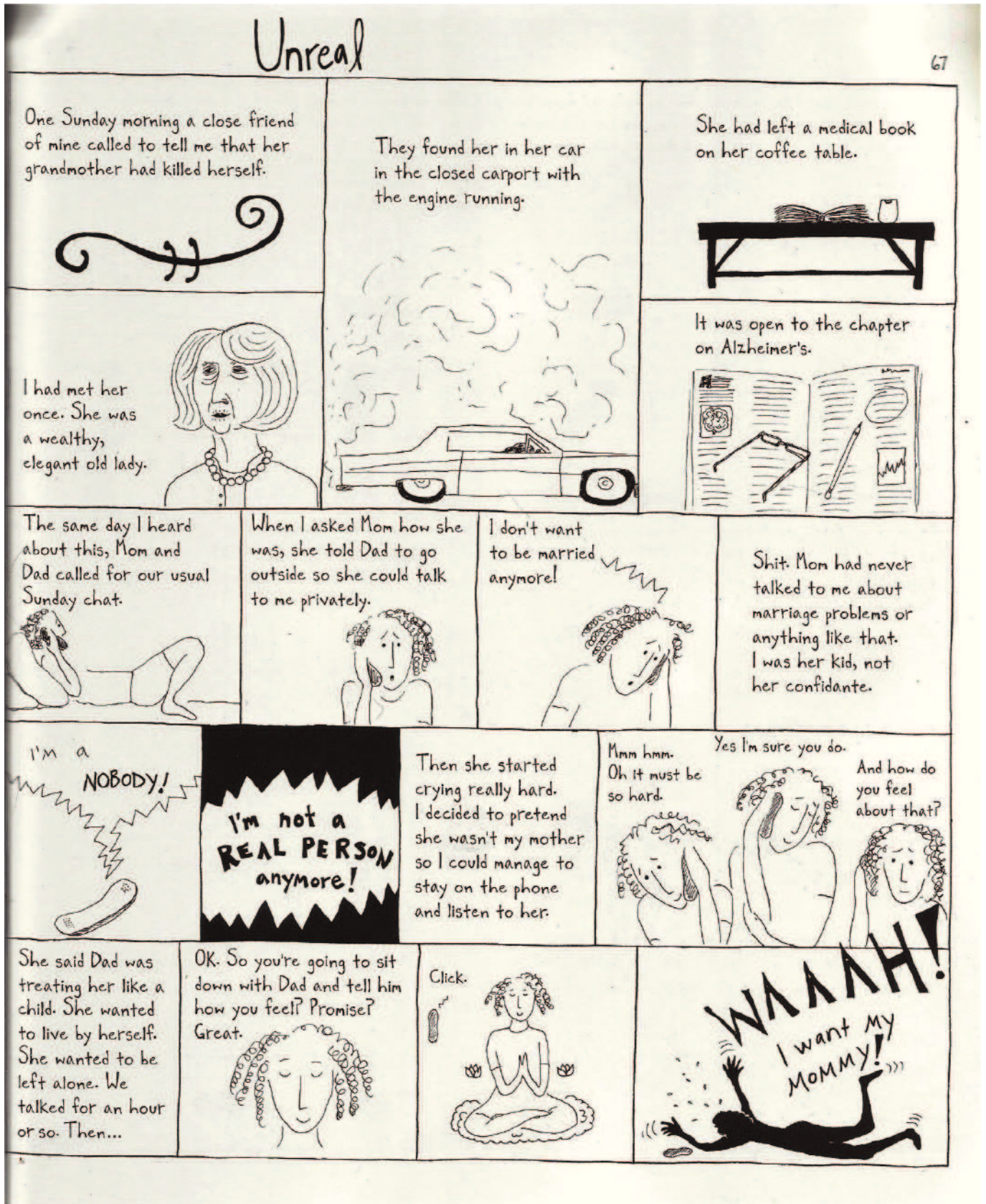


Figure 4: *Tangles: A Story about Alzheimer's, my Mother, and Me* (67)



68



Figure 5: Tangles: A Story about Alzheimer's, my Mother, and Me (68)



Figure 6: *Tangles: A Story about Alzheimer's, my Mother, and Me* (73)