Are You Home?

Megan Cork

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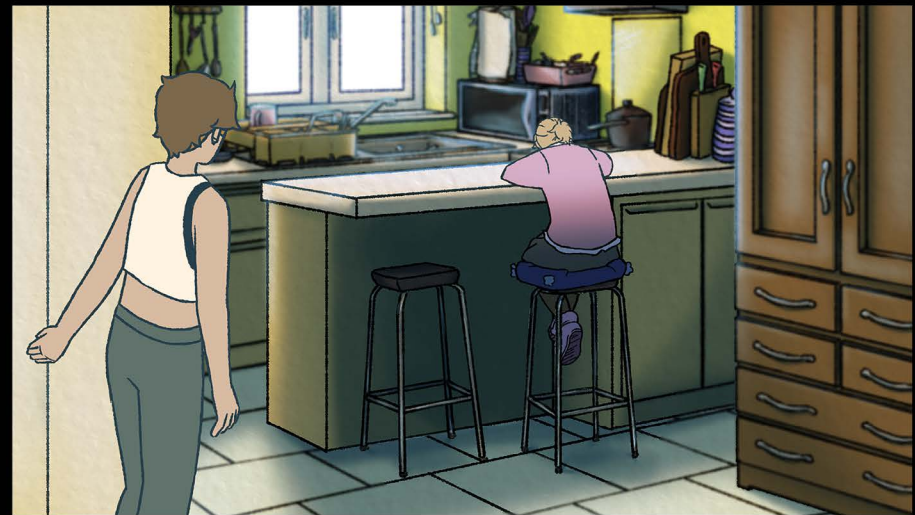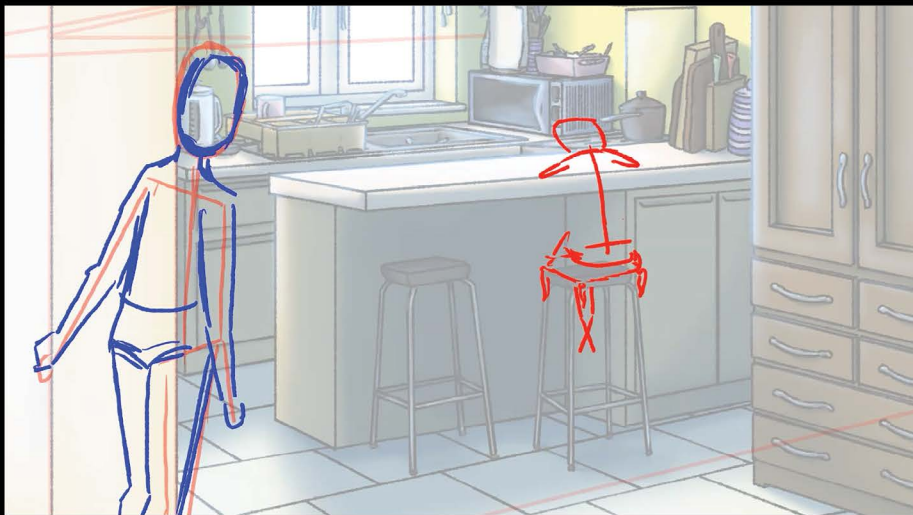
Overview

Title: Are You Home?
Created by Megan Cork
Length: 3:53
Format: 1920x1080p, 24fps
Software used: TV Paint, Photoshop, After Effects, Audition

Voice Acting
Lou: Mio Lobban
Sophie: Lyra Howerd

Production Process

For this project, I followed the 2D animation pipeline in order to complete each stage of my work as efficiently as possible.

Pre-production

I started with idea generation- sketching various scene or character ideas and creating mood boards and mind maps alongside them to help expand and further explore possible themes. Once I had a more solid idea of what I wanted to create, I then further developed my story, characters and scenes through sketches, notes and thumbnails, before moving on to character design, concept art, scripting, and storyboarding. Although my script was very rough, it did help me iron out what I wanted for my story and identify the key points of my animation so I could then effectively plan it out in the storyboard. With the storyboard completed, I then created an animatic and got the bulk of the audio completed using both my own foley and a range of SFX from Freesound.org. I also had a friend record me some lines to stand in until the final voice acting could be recorded with my actors later on.

Also in this time, I created two test animations to further explore my ideas. For the first I chose to do a simpler close-up scene of the point of view of one of my characters, Sophie so I could explore how her sensorineural hearing loss would pair with the visuals. For the second, I explored the contrasting lighting, and high tension of the climactic moment where my main character, Lou is eaten.

Production

With my animatic completed I was then ready to move on to production. I started with the backgrounds which ended up taking me a lot longer expected due to the level of detail I wanted to include- especially as I was still struggling with perspective!

I then began animating- starting with a rough version of each scene with very simple character shapes. I wanted to use these to work out the basic movement, timing, and animation techniques needed for each scene so I would not waste time agonising on getting the characters looking right only for it to end up not moving fluidly. After this I then moved on to the final tie downs, clean up and colour and compositing everything together. I also added shadows in After Effects under my character where needed- such as below Lou's feet in full body shots.

Post-production

During this stage of creating my animation, I finished compositing my work, ensured my audio matched up with the final animations and completed editing film as a whole. I also ensured my subtitles matched up to the final version of the voice acting for the accessible version of my film.

Story

Log line

When Lou is awakened to the sound of glass breaking, they go looking for answers, but in a seemingly empty home who could have broken it?

Plot

Lou- they/them pronouns.

Sophie- she/her pronouns.

Lou wakes to the sound of breaking glass. Assuming their sibling, Sophie has broken something and is hiding out of guilt, they look for her. They call out and look in various rooms to find the source of the noise. In the kitchen they find Sophie colouring, not wearing her hearing-aids. After checking on her, Lou abandons their search and returns to their room. In their bedroom doorway, Lou notices that it is pitch-black outside, but only in their bedroom window which has a long crack in the glass. In all other windows, there is daylight. An eye opens in the darkness as the creature outside shifts, leaning heavier onto the window. It cracks more and a black substance oozes inside. The creature pushes, shatters the window and seeps into the room. Lou slams the door shut and rushes back to the kitchen yelling for Sophie, but she is hiding from the creature. The creature rapidly covers the building, and as more windows shatter, Lou runs for the front door. As they throw it open, the whole house is plunged into darkness. The bright light past the door is blinding as they trip outside. Their eyes adjust, and the light fades into an orange glow coming from the back of the mouth they have fallen into. It snaps shut. Sophie is watching the monster in the darkness from inside a cupboard- after a long moment of shifting sounds in the dark, the same orange glows outside the cupboard doors.

Audience

The intended audience for my project is people who love horror and will be shown mainly on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr and TikTok. While there is no specific age range it will likely be most appealing to teens and young adults. It may also appeal to a LGBTQIA+ based audience due to having a non-binary main character. It is not obvious from the plot so I have included visual clues such as a pride flag, photos, and they are wearing a binder that can be seen around their loose t-shirt.

My animation is based in horror and leaves the audience with a cliff hanger- although what would have happened will be both obvious and inevitable. While the story ends in tragedy as both Lou and Sophie are eaten, I also wanted to create a sense of warmth and affection between the two siblings when they interact. This will help the audience empathise with Lou when they are unable to find Sophie at the end while running for their life. I really enjoy short horror stories that leave you desperate to know more, and I wanted to build that same sense of dread and morbid fascination.

Concept Art

I find horror an incredibly inspiring genre. The complex stories, characters, and environments that can be created fascinate me, and while many tales end poorly for their characters, I do find joy in watching them unravel- especially when they feature a well-crafted monster.

The concept of my animation grew to fit around one scene idea based off a dream where I, as the point of view of a camera, witnessed a character being pursued by attackers get eaten by a huge mouth disguised as a doorway. As with my final animation, the camera then zooms backwards down the hallway to reveal someone hidden and terrified.

I was inspired by a range of horror-based media, for example, indie games such as *Elevator Hitch*, *Inside*, and *Iron Lung*, works such as the podcast, *The Magnus Archives*, or books such as *The Twisted Ones* by *T. Kingfisher*. Other inspirations include the colour grading in *The Boys* (TV Series) and animation techniques from *Scissor Seven* (animated series). For my main character, Lou, I drew from the non-binary and alternative style people in my life. Lous sisters (based on my own little sister) hearing loss came about to solve a plot issue I was struggling with but has gone on to push me to improve the audio aspects of my film- where I can learn from films such as *The Blair Witch Project*.

Character Turnarounds

Lou
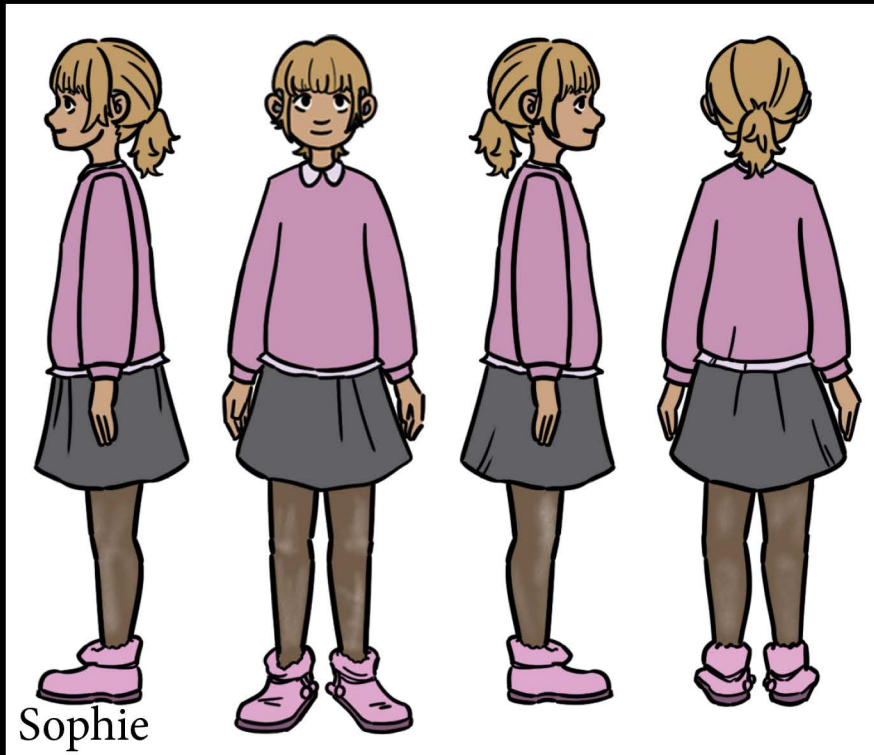
Sophie

Despite only being featured for a few scenes; Sophie was the character I struggled the most with. I find young characters more difficult to create- probably because I don't know any! Before this project I drew mainly adults and have spent a lot of time life drawing to learn anatomy, but I have spent so little time around children since leaving school that I really struggled with getting the proportions right. I had to use a lot of reference pictures and bothered many people desperately asking 'Please... is this a child?' before I was happy with her.

The significance of my production can be found in both my Queer character, Lou and myself. Openly Queer characters shown in a positive way- particularly in the horror genre was unachievable in the past due to bigotry, stigmatism, and societal norms supported by structures such as the Hays Code. Queer creators had no support and could be punished severely for not showing their characters in a negative way that both supported and affirmed views based in stigmatism by using stereotyping, character coding and tropes. While it may not be overt due to its irrelevance to the plot in the short story, Lou is an openly Queer character shown in positive light created by a Queer person in a time where media is starting to include good Queer representation, subvert dated tropes, and reclaim ideas rooted in Queer coding. Lou may not openly proclaim they have a girlfriend, but they have pictures up in their supportive families home. They do not specify that they're non-binary out loud, but there is a non-binary flag in their room, they're wearing a chest binder, and their character design is based in both my personal style and that of other non-binary people. Unlike damaging past works, while Lou does meet an awful fate, it is not as punishment for their identity, but a character shaped by mine. I want to create characters both I and my audience can connect to- to leave little hints about who they are outside of the story that are identifiable to those who are looking. While support for marginalised people still has a long way to go, it has produced a time where I am able to create Lou without punishment.

Connections

While I didn't come up with my project with any intentional connections to other creatives, I did take inspiration from a lot of different people and have definitely noticed some similarities between my work and the media I enjoy.

One of the first connections that comes to mind is an indie game I played from itch.io that I mentioned previously called *Elevator Hitch*- created by *racheldrawsthis*. The basic premise for the short horror is the main character gets stuck in a time loop in his new workplaces elevator and dies in a number of different and very strange ways before he is 'freed'. In one of these, when the door opens to a new floor it is pitch black, but he can feel a strange breeze. If you step forward, you are killed. Later in the game, you receive a lighter and can then use it to light the way- revealing that just past the doors is a very large mouth waiting to eat you. This is likely what inspired the dream I built my concept around. It was my favourite part of the game! It was such an interesting idea, and I really liked the concepts they produced.

Another game that helped inspire my creature was *Inside* by *Playdead*. At the end of the game, the main character finds what appears to be some sort of experiment in a laboratory. It is essentially a giant blob of human skin made up of a lot of people joined together with various limbs sticking out. The main character goes to it, becomes part of it, and it is then controllable as you orchestrate its escape. Parts of it fall off with every knock and it groans in many voices with its movement, but all the limbs work together to drag itself around and stumble on its unstable feet until it makes it 'outside'. The way the experiment moves itself around- dragging its immense and unwieldy weight was a useful inspiration for the way my creature will move, and I have taken inspiration from many aspects of it. My creature is made up of a different material, one that moves like a thick liquid inside a membrane, and it can redistribute its many sensory organs (specifically its mouth and eyes) to wherever they are needed. When it needs to move or travel, it must drag itself heavily with two huge arms. When it hunts, it moves more like a liquid that can slide forward quietly and morph itself to engulf buildings. This requires more energy, so it is reserved for when prey is available. The membrane covering the creature will morph, break, and reconnect as it goes, loosing pieces of itself with the movement or leaving black stains. The vocal noises my creature makes can be layered due to its multiple mouths that can echo and cry at the same time. Other connections to creative works behind the development of my creature can be found in the zombies from *The Last of Us II* by *NaughtyDog* such as where you fight a huge amalgamation of multiple zombies that grew and fused together to become a mound of very dangerous limbs also capable of splitting into multiple enemies, or another indie game called *Iron Lung* by *David Szymanski* that involves the huge eye of a very large monster staring into a submarine at the bottom of a sea of blood.

I have been inspired by a huge range of artists throughout my projects- from professional animators, illustrators, or mangakas to those with a small following on social media. I do my best to study the art I enjoy so I can learn from it and apply techniques to my own work. One connection I can make to this project as an example includes the work of *Junji Ito*- an expert horror mangaka. His art style requires a lot of detailed line work created using techniques such as cross hatching with a dip pen and ink that I enjoy emulating for my concept work and sketching. His work in creating monstrous characters and creating tension through page turners are also incredibly inspiring. Other artists and creatives from social media such as Instagram that I can connect my project to include *Selin Çinel* (*cavnine*) for their incredible use of colour and expression, *Gravemud* for their eye imagery and humanoid creatures, *outrunyouth* for his lighting, *Studio Heartbreak* for their colour and background design on their project *The Lovers*, and finally, *Michael Lotenero* (*nero_art_ink*), *arcano.xv*, and *James Hutton* (*stitching_a_laugh_to_darkness*) for the atmosphere of their works.
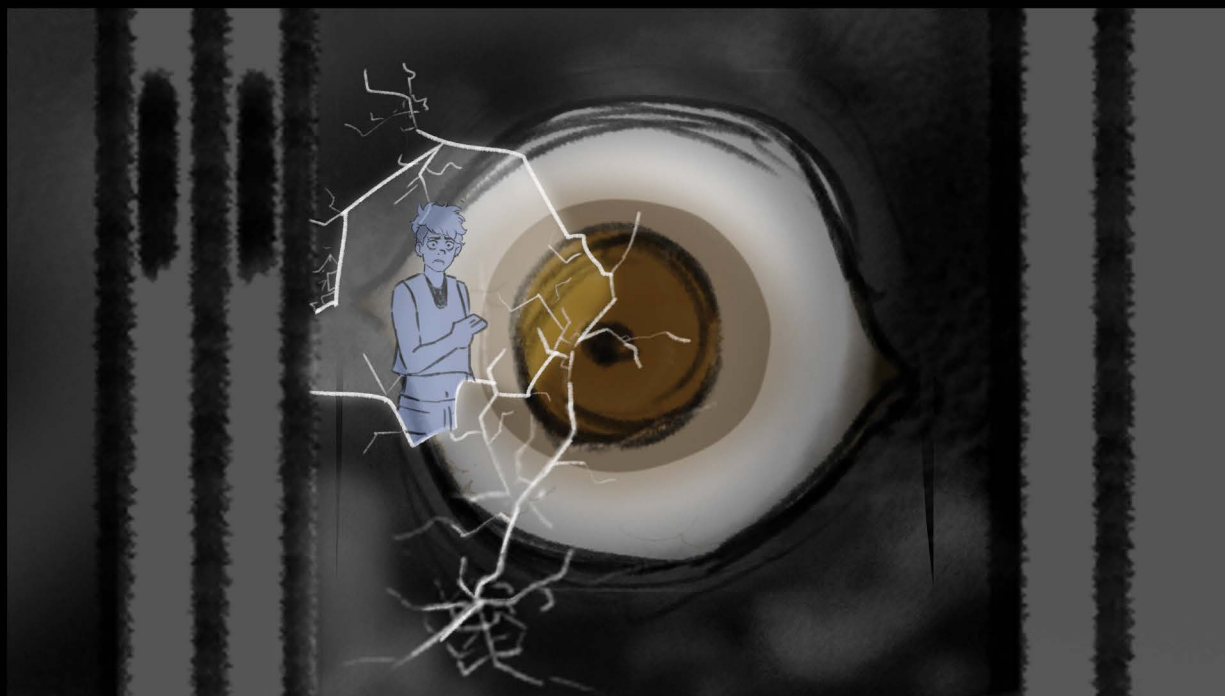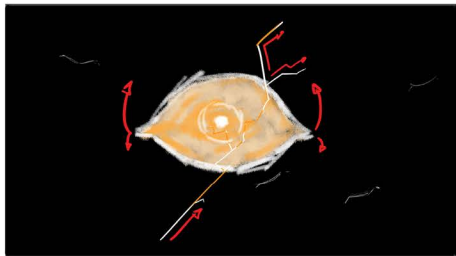
1 Opening- black background- eye opens wide, presses against the glass in front of it and a crack splits across the screen (fragment eye slightly from cracked glass). Closed eyes in background- more faded. Eye in slightly different art style. Audio- squelchy for when eye opens, crack for glass

2 Lou is startled awake, eyes wide, flinch.
Close up
Audio- atmospheric room, movement on bed

3 Pause- shot of empty hallway from the bed- natural light in hallway, dark room POV shot from bed

4 Closes eyes, scrunches up face tiredly, pull duvet around themself a tighter.
Audio: calls to Sophie: 'Sophie? Did you break something?'

5 No response- eyes open again,- resigned- relax grip on duvet, shoulder drops slightly, audio: sighs, 'not again'.
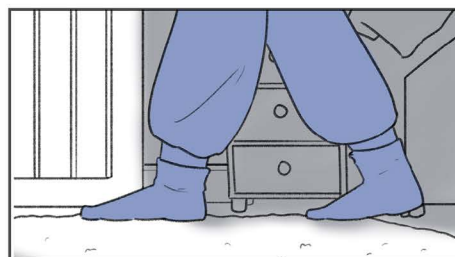
6 Swings feet off of bed, settle, walk away
Close up from floor
Audio: bed movement, footsteps

7 The eye- still in the slightly different art style- follows Lou as they get up and walk to the door.
Audio- room audio continues over it, no sound or very faint for eye moving.

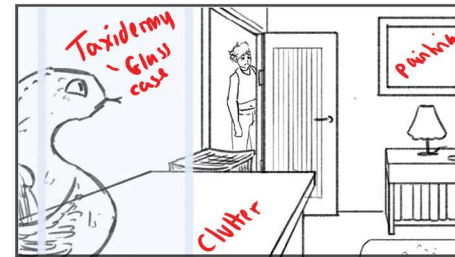**8** Lou reaches the doorway of their room yawning and rounds the corner to look into office.
Audio: 'Are you hiding?'

9 Lou POV shot from doorway- looking into the office- desk- window- daylight
Audio- atmospheric noise changes slightly from room to room- eg. add a clock in office

10 Lou POV- looking into office- close up of open book in sunlight- scientific illustrations

11 Office- fullshot through taxidermy case. Close up focus on taxidermy that switches to Lou in the background who leaves the doorway (goes down the hallway)

12 Shot from bathroom- under tap- drips- Lou walks past- glances in
Audio- tap dripping, footsteps, atmospheric

13 Over the shoulder shot- Lou pushing open the door to Sophies room, 'Soph? Did something happen?' looks back and forth but the room is empty.

14 Camera under Sophies bed- focused on a toy in the foreground, dust floating Lou (on their knees on the floor) pulls back the duver and looks under- camera focus switches to them. Pauses for moment, drop duvet, sigh
Audio: bedding movement, sigh, 'not again'
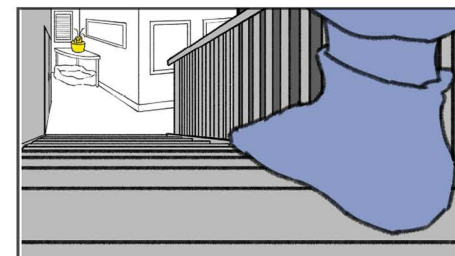
15 Top of the stairs- Lou steps over the camera and starts descending
Audio- footsteps going downstairs
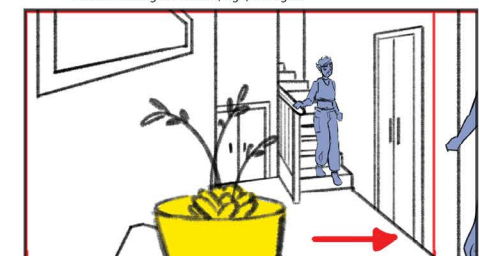
16 Bottom of the stairs- step off, nearly walk past, check Sophies cupboard- leaves open slightly. Wide shot- long background- camera pans to next scene
Audio- very quiet pencil scribbling, cupboard door opening/closing, footsteps

17 Lou, hears Sophies colouring pencils 'Soph?', and rounds the corner to see her in the kitchen- 'ah'.
Audio- colouring pencils, footsteps
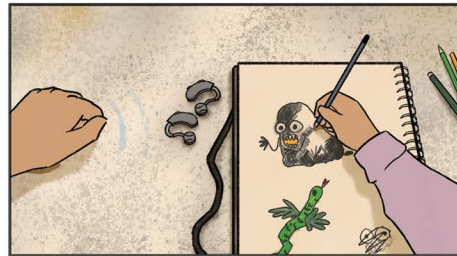
18 Sophies point of view- colouring- Lou knocks on the table next to her hearing aids- creates vibrations. Lou- take back hand.
Sophies hearing- sensorineural hearing loss- muffled, tinnitus/white noise

19 Mid shot- greets Sophie in british sign language (a wave) as she finishes putting in her hearing aids. Conversation- Sophie: 'Sorry, Pip was being loud- mums out walking her'

20 Lou: 'It's ok, silly- did something break? I heard a noise'
Sophie- scrunch up face in thought- look around 'I don't think so?'
Lou- 'Mm ok maybe I imagined it...' They ruffle Sophies hair and lean further further over her.

21 End of sceen- zoom out and fade out conversation- 'Tell me about your drawing...'.

22 Mid shot from the window- Lou returns to their room and reaches to turn on the light (room still dark from the creature covering the window)- glances at the window (double take) and pauses.
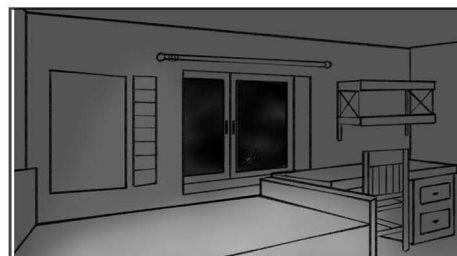
23 Full shot of dark window from doorway- Lou POV
Audio- atmospheric sounds get a little quieter, creature noises start fading in from very quiet

24 Mid shot- Lou's hand retracted a little from switch- confused- turns back hesitantly to office
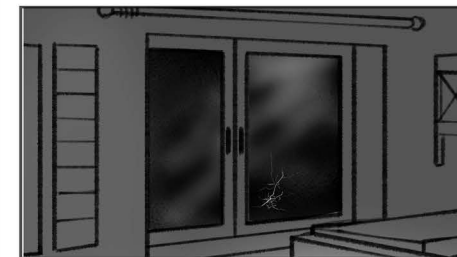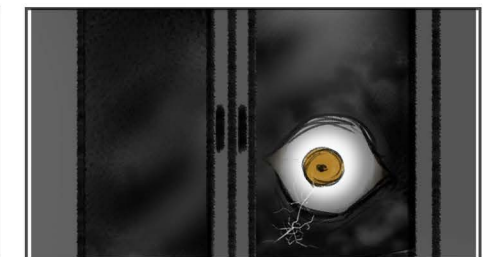
25 Over the shoulder shot- Lou looks at the office window (daylight)
Panning shot- one long background between 25 and 26

26 Over the shoulder shot- Lou looks back to the dark window
Panning shot- one long background between 25 and 26

27 Closer shot of window- Lou POV- slowly zooming in.
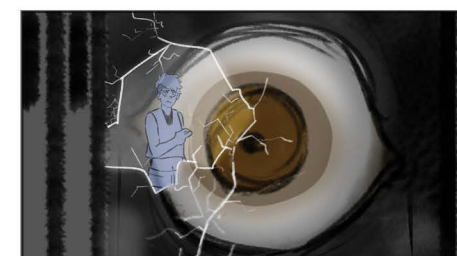Emphasise the crack in the window- reflect light

28 Eye opens- looking at the bed, then slides up to focus on Lou (camera)

29 Close up- Lou is terrified and frozen

30 Still zooming
The eye learn closer, pressing up against the window.
Audio- glass will begin cracking as it presses harder

31 Zoom pauses, glass cracks- Lou is reflected on big pieces- flinches
Audio- cracking glass sounds

32 Glass shatters- camera goes forward through the monsters pupil- camera flips and is rushing towards Lou with the monster- they slam the door shut which plunges room into darkness (screen goes back)
Audio- glass shattering, rushing liquid and white noise, door slam

33 Long hallway/kitchen background- Lou stumbles off the bottom of the stairs and scrambles towards the kitchen. Top of the stairs rapidly getting darker. Hallway cupboard is shut. Audio- rushing noises from the creature, running, Lou shouts for Sophie- 'Sophie! We've got to-', more glass breaking

34 Lou reaches the kitchen- Sophie isn't there. Monster is covering the windows and covered in smaller eyes that turn to look at Lou. Glass cracking noises 'No! Where-'

35 The windows smash in and the room gets darker as the other side of the house is covered (out of shot). Lou shrieks, ducks and hurls themself back into the hallway.

36 Yells for Sophie, crashing into walls as they run back towards the stairs- hallway to kitchen is dark. Creature starts flooding down from the stairs above.

37 Zooming hallway shot- Lou looks behind themselves briefly before continuing to run away. Hallway behind them getting darker Audio starts building up further- more intense rushing/footsteps, white noise/tinnitus gradually builds

38 Camera zoom stops as Lou reaches the door Monster rushes to cover the outside of the building- seen through the windows. Light source (outside) being blocked out- high contrast as the last of it is covered.

39 Lou flings open the door as the light from outside is completely blocked- high contrast light that turns the screen white as the door opens. Lou will step outside and fall into the creatures mouth unseen in the bright light Audio finishes building up, and drops out to hard of hearing version.

40 Bright light fades to orange glow from the bulb in the back of the creatures mouth that Lou is lying in- tripped up by the teeth.

41 The camera starts gradually pulling back, Lou looks up and moves to escape

42 Mouth snaps shut- darker but still lit by teeth from around the edges of the teeth. Camera starts panning back. Audio- continued hard of hearing, clack of teeth shutting paired with some sort of cinematic boom.

43 Camera pulling back- mouth starts melting in to the rest of the creature. Light will gradually fade from 43-46 as the teeth mouth disappears

44 Camera pulls back through the cupbpard doors of Sophies hiding place

**45** Camera switches- sibling side profile- light streak from open door on face- watching the door with tears in her eyes. Light still fading out as mouth disappears. Relatively high contrast light and dark in this scene- blue/black shadows, orange lighting over characters colour palette.
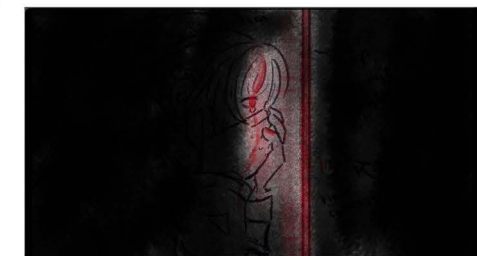
46 Light disappears- audio only- creature dragging itself closer, sibling in tears trying to be quiet

47 Creature reaches door, pause, maintain liquidy sounds, then mouth opening noises and light starts coming back in through the crack in the door
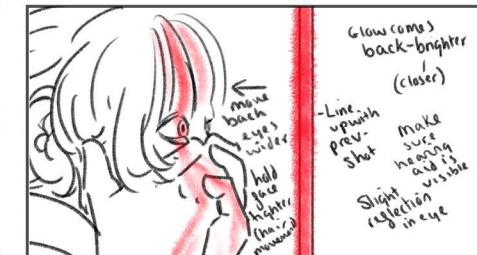
48 Mouth is open, sibling is lit up- close up- light streak from open door on face- has pulled back from the door a little but still watching- wide eyes, tears.

Storyboard: Are You Home? Page: 7 Frames: 49-52

49 End- cut to black and the title 'Are You Home?' with the sound of the teeth snapping shut again mixed with a cinematic boom. Return to tinitus noise immediately

50 Credits with eyes in the same style as in frame 1
Audio from 49 continues

An Animation by Megan Cork

51 Credits scene- Lou and Sophies mother staring at the house- wide shot- scene lingers and, fades out to black. Later in the day than before- daylight not as strong. Audio- Street, crashing/sloshing of monster attacking a different house in the background, though a little muted. Dog whines.

52 Screen faded out to black- after a moment, a more realistic eye opens
End of animation
Audio- eye noise

When I started making this story I didn't have any big themes in mind- I was focused on the events that would happen rather than the meaning behind them. However, as I have continued developing it, several themes began to make themselves clear to me. On the more obvious side, there are those surrounding death, such as dying before your time, the death of a loved one, and the terrible shock and grief that accompany someone you love meeting an awful fate. Similarly, I have explored how fear can affect people in different ways- despite the danger, Lou desperately tries to find Sophie before being forced out, but Sophie is scared into hiding- frozen in terror. I have also built upon themes of familial love and how your actions and interests can affect those around you- Sophie picks up her interest in creatures from her mother's fascination in her work, and Lou supports and inspires her further by actively taking the time to show an appreciation for her drawings. For the look and feel of the production, it starts off calmer and more true to life. Other than Lou's room which is dark due to the creature blocking the window, the scenes are lit by daylight. It has a calm atmosphere- Lou is not worried as they search for Sophie aside from being a little confused- it is nothing out of the ordinary for their home life and they are tired after their nap was interrupted. The animation goes through a range of colour palettes depending on the room- Lou's dark room is tinted in cooler colours such as greens or blues to hint that something isn't quite right, and as they walk through the house different rooms reflect the colour schemes of other characters such as blues for the mother and pinks for Sophie to make it feel more 'lived in'. In the second half of the animation after the creature begins its attack, it gets gradually darker as the suspense builds. As the tension reaches its peak and Lou is eaten, there is bright contrast in light as the last of the daylight is covered up with the windows, and then again when the door is opened. The blinding light from 'outside' fades into the orange glow coming from the light source at the back of the creatures mouth which mimics daylight to give its prey a false sense of security when they are blinded in the moment that they leave.

Worldbuilding

The creatures in my story's world are not all common to the characters everyday lives, but they are common knowledge. People study them extensively and seek this knowledge for a range of reasons including understanding the unknown, defending themselves against it, and personal gain. Lou and Sophie's mother seeks only to understand them out of curiosity and fascination. Because of her open interest, her daughter Sophie picked up this fascination from a young age and has an appreciation for them. Much like how a child in the real world may have plush animals or scientific posters for children of dangerous animals such as lions, Sophies room will feature friendlier versions of the creatures to set up her drawing them later on. Other rooms in the house also feature oddities- for example, the mothers office will have more accurate illustrations, pictures, and research style work, items that indicate her travels to observe creatures in their natural habitats, and even samples such as bones, fossils, and taxidermies of smaller creatures.

For dangerous creatures such as the one featured in my animation, there is only so much that can be done to protect people. This one in particular would be difficult to kill, and there are so few known that despite being incredibly dangerous it is considered endangered. There is a constant effort to contain them, but it is incredibly difficult due to their ability to contort their liquid-based bodies through small spaces (similar to how an octopus can escape through the smallest of openings). There are also plenty living out of containment- despite their slow speed and massive scale, they can be hard to track down and monitor due to their secretive behaviours and adaptations that align with their stealth-based hunting. The specific creature I featured is both untracked, wild and found the family's home entirely by chance. Despite the mothers study of the creature, she did not recognise the signs of an attack in time as a result of the creatures rarity- it was unexpected and there were no warnings from the systems put in place to alert people of its approach. An example of a sign of its attack that I included in my animation is the reason the mother left in the first place and likely the reason the creature was drawn to their house specifically. Pip, their dog, was barking at it. The creatures have adapted to hunt humans- due to their massive scale and slow movement that requires a lot of energy, they trap people inside their homes and either trick them outside using their light as a lure or force themselves inside to take them. The first option is more preferable as it requires less energy, and therefore they would need to hunt less. Of course, this creature eats any living thing it comes across, but due to most animals having better senses such as hearing (like Pip, who hears it approaching and is desperate to leave) they are harder to catch. Humans regularly stay in the same place, find it more difficult to hear them coming when they are hunting, and are easy to trap in their settlements- they are a much more convenient food source. Humans are also larger (and therefore a higher value target) than other wildlife depending on where in the world they are. The 'preys' only option is escape- that is, if they can get out before it covers the entire building and far enough away that the creature cannot reach them first. It cannot pursue due to its speed disadvantage, so despite their hunting methods being common knowledge, Lou tries to escape.

Other creatures in this world could be even more difficult to control due to having different abilities people have no way to counteract or be so dangerous there is no way to study them safely. Not all of the supernatural based creatures in this world are as dangerous- there are plenty that walk alongside ordinary animals or live amongst humans peacefully, but their different abilities, adaptations, mutations, behaviours, and intelligence mark them distinctly apart.

Events like that one that takes place in my animation would be regarded as an almost unavoidable tragedy- much like animal attacks or natural disasters in real life. Afterwards, there would be an effort to find and contain the creature and placative promises to do better, but to anyone other than the people it directly affected, it would fade into the horrors of history. Humans are out of their depth, fragile, and prone to both ignoring problems that are not in front of them and taking advantage of them for their own gain. Lou and Sophies mother would never recover from her loss but would go on to fight for a safer way of life- first by following societal rules and demanding better, and then by forcing changes herself through throwing herself into her work studying more and more dangerous creatures.

Backgrounds
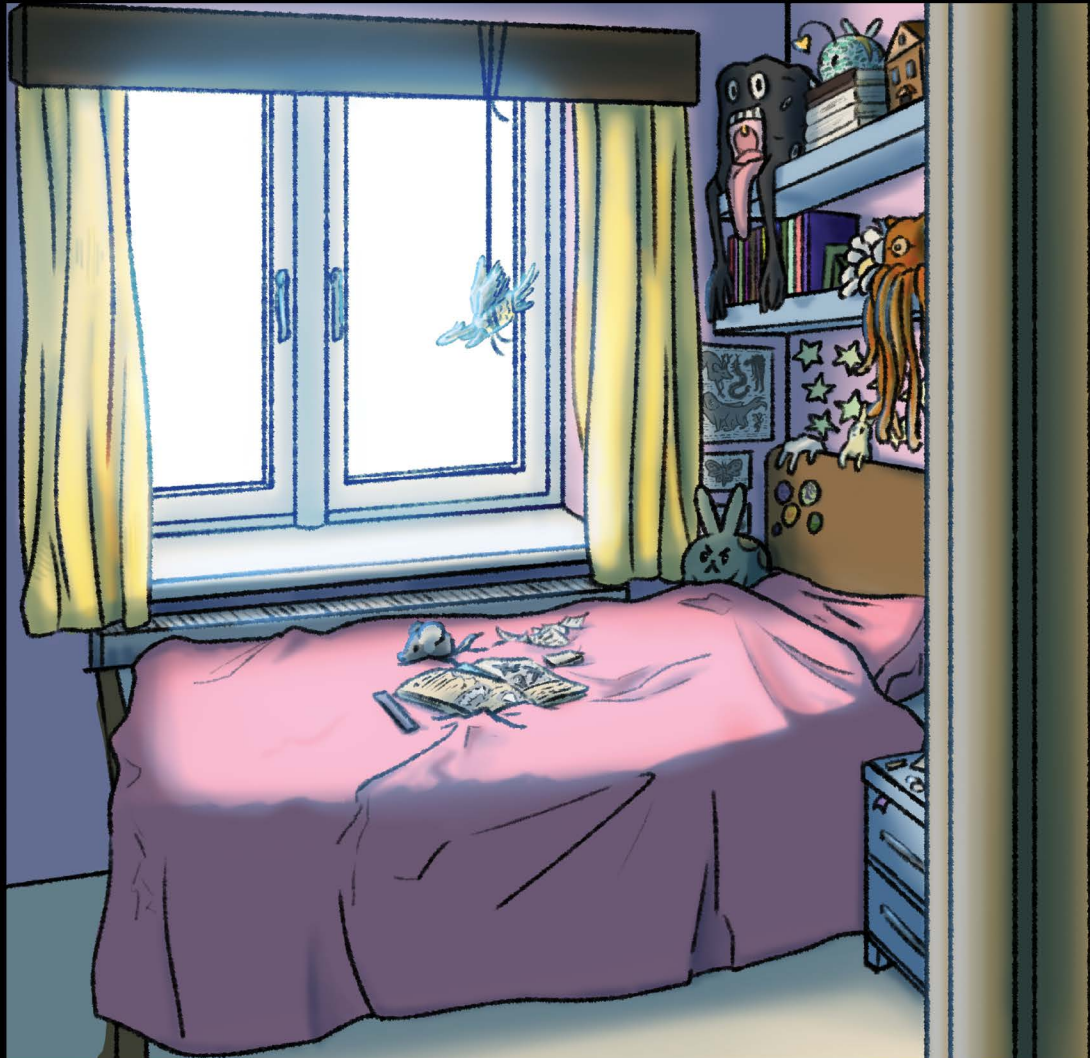
I included as much story in the background of my animation as I could in each scene, from hints to the relationships or backstories of my characters to world-building elements and creatures.

For example, Lou and Sophies Mother studies abnormal creatures, so her office features various books, fossils, taxidermies, and photos. This influences the rest of the house- although her children have more friendly versions. The main creature can be seen multiple times: as a plush in Sophies bedroom or drawn in her sketchbook, and twice in the Mothers office as a framed diagram and an open book on her desk. I also put the coloured pencil Sophie later mentions losing with this book to suggest she had been looking at it before starting her drawings. I also had fun with adding in hints to Lou's fate- they are placed in the mouths of creatures in the foreground and background long before they ever meet one large enough to hold them.

I wanted to give the a house a cosy, lived-in feel to contrast the later invasion from the creature so I included lots of detail and little objects- taking a lot of inspiration from my own home! There are plenty of photos hung up- such as Lou with their girlfriend, the Mothers adventures during her research, or a young Lou with their Dad!
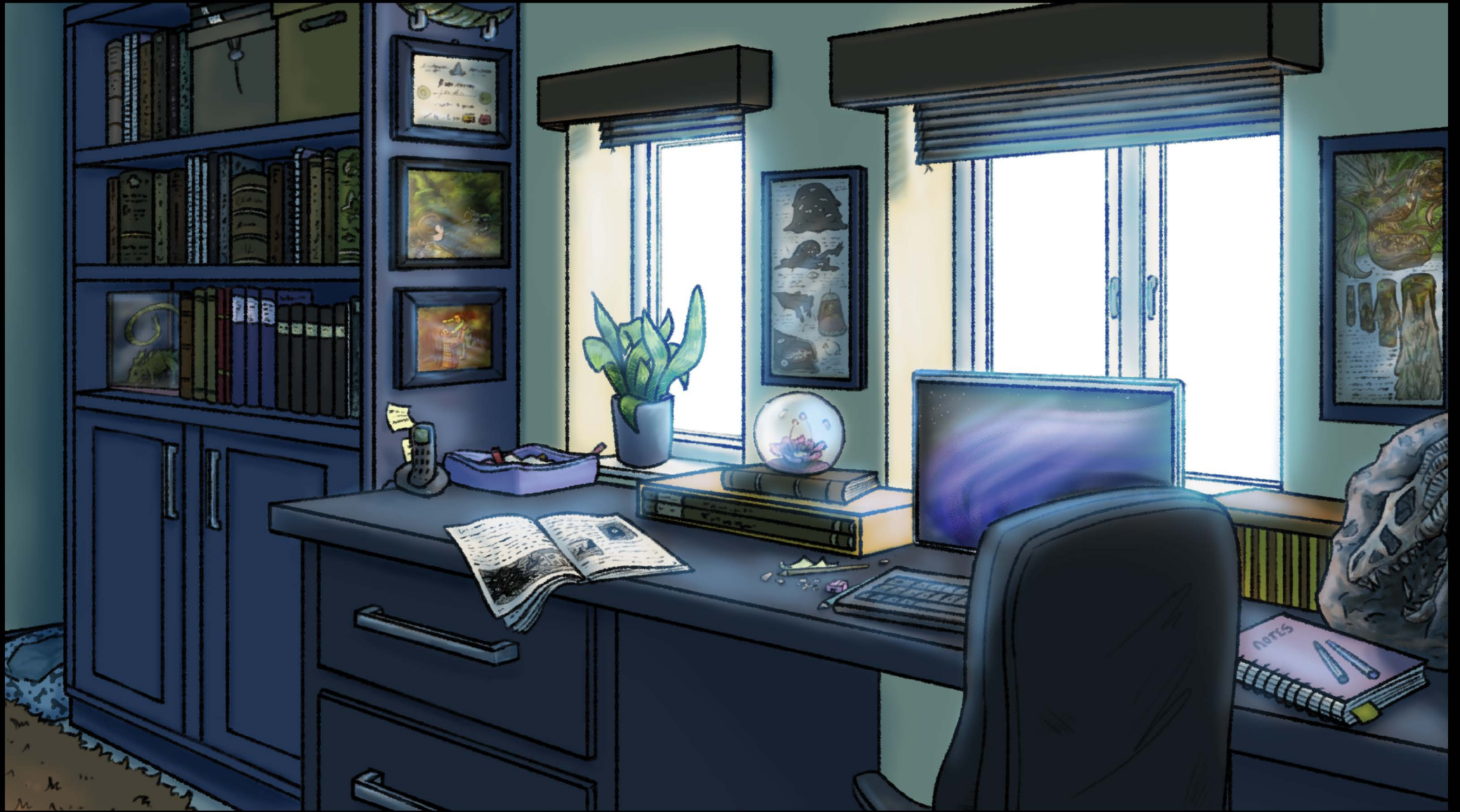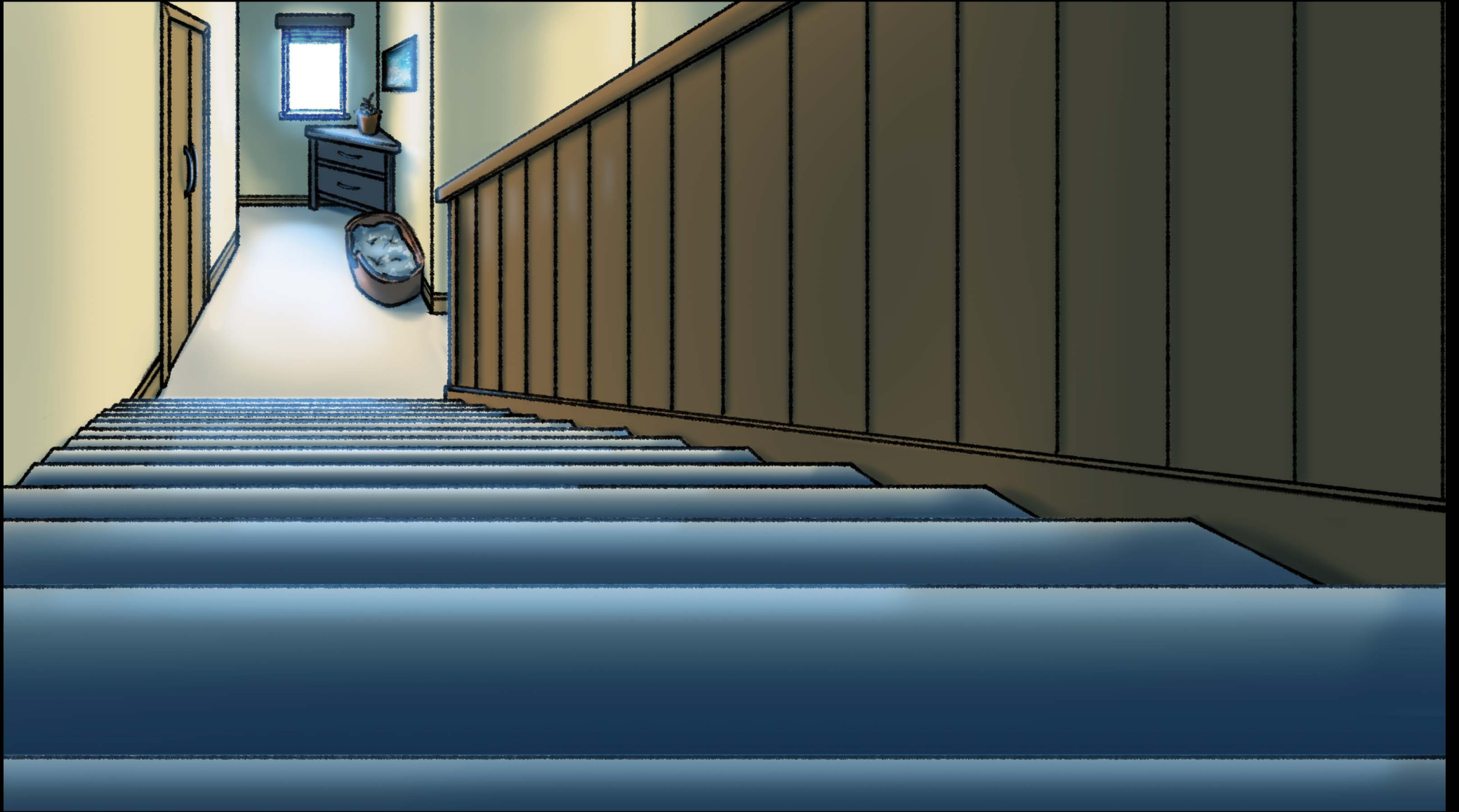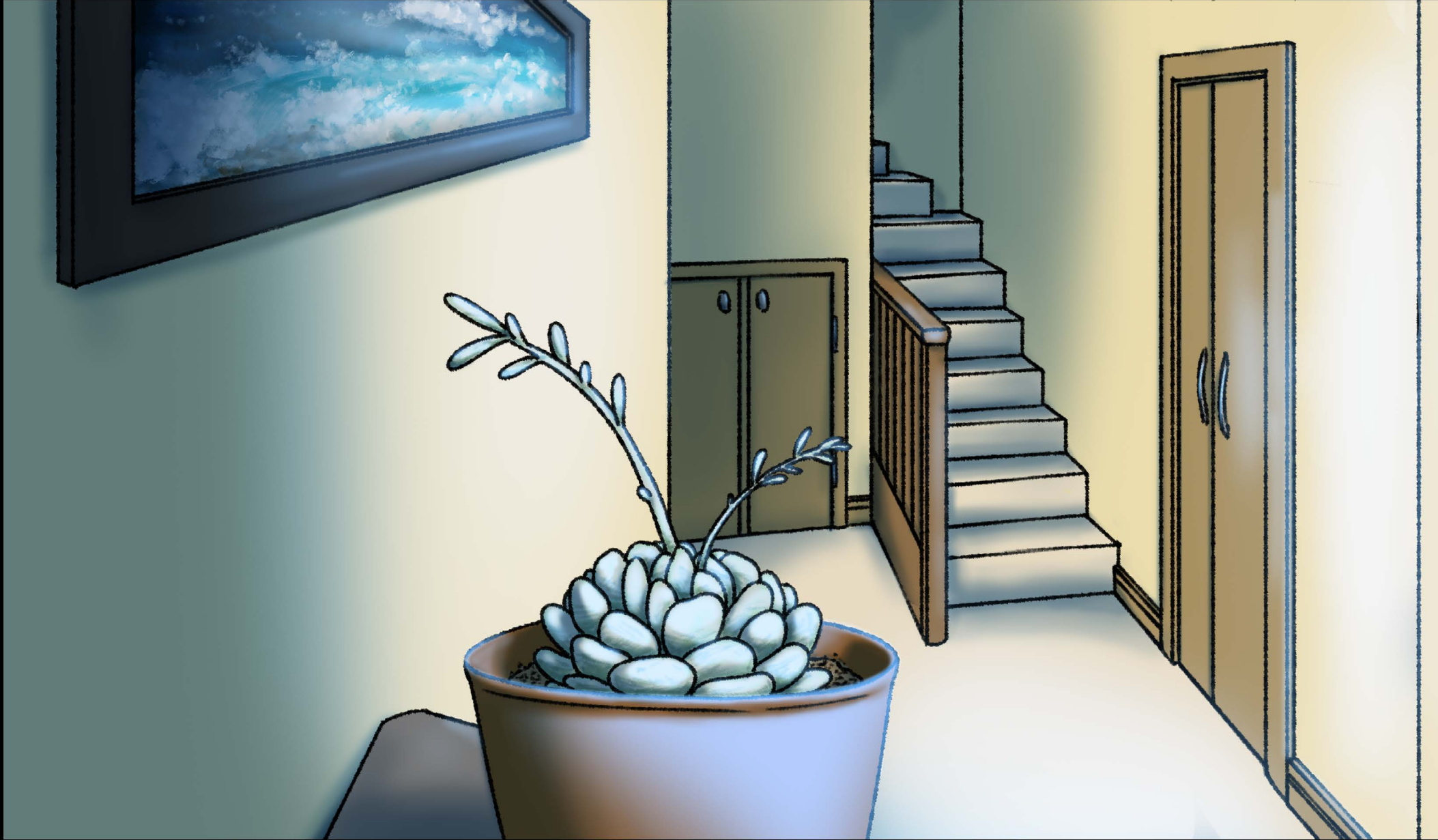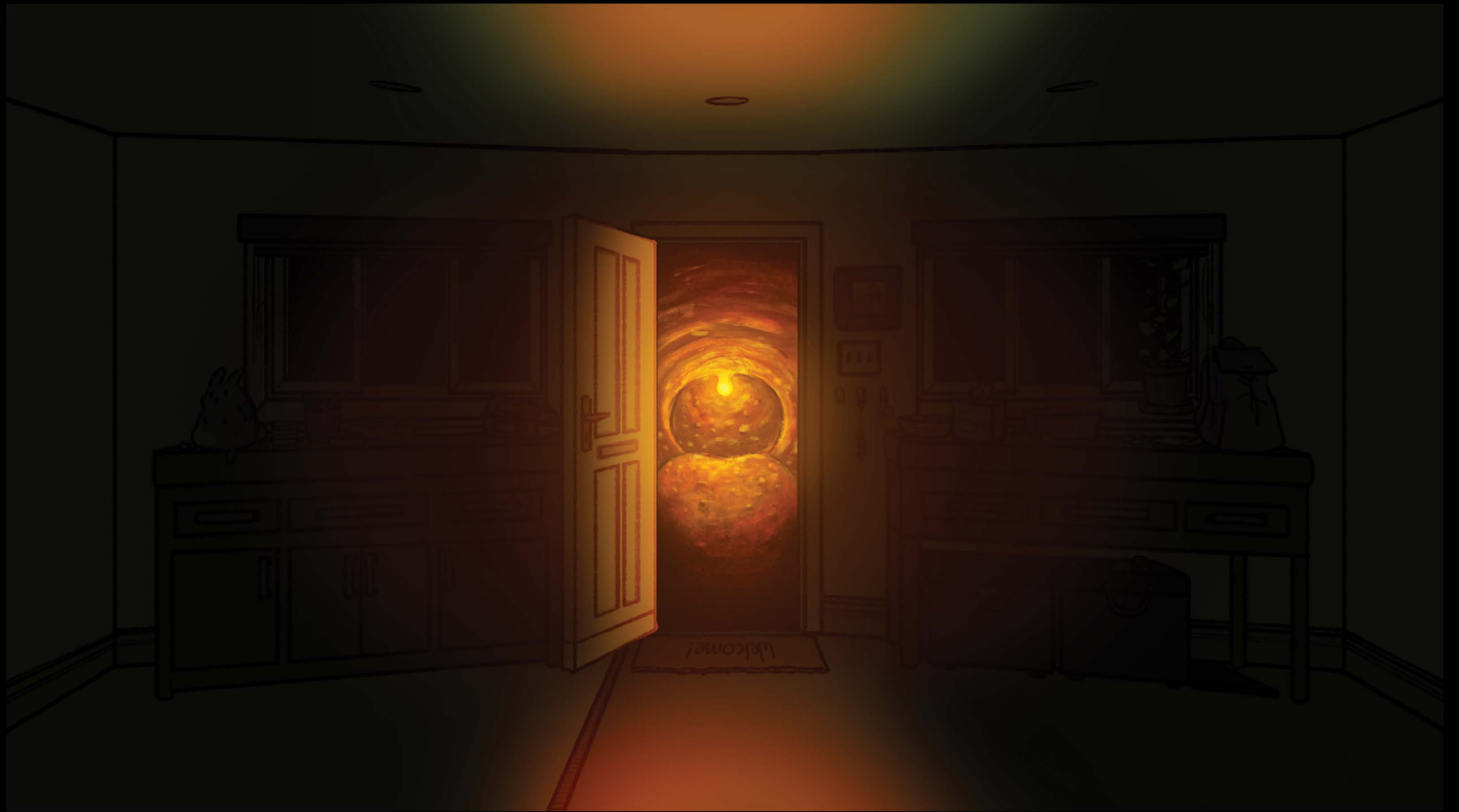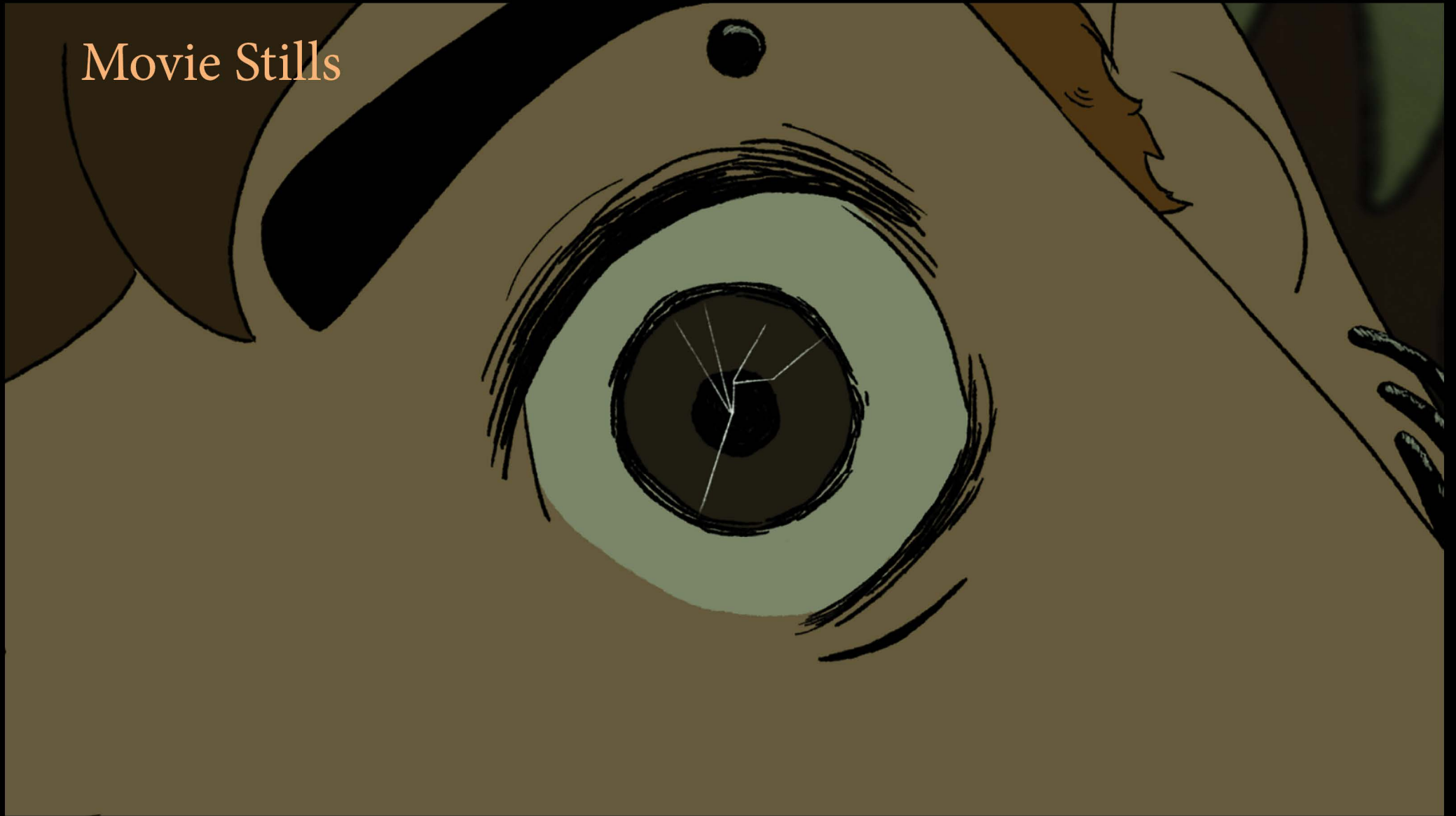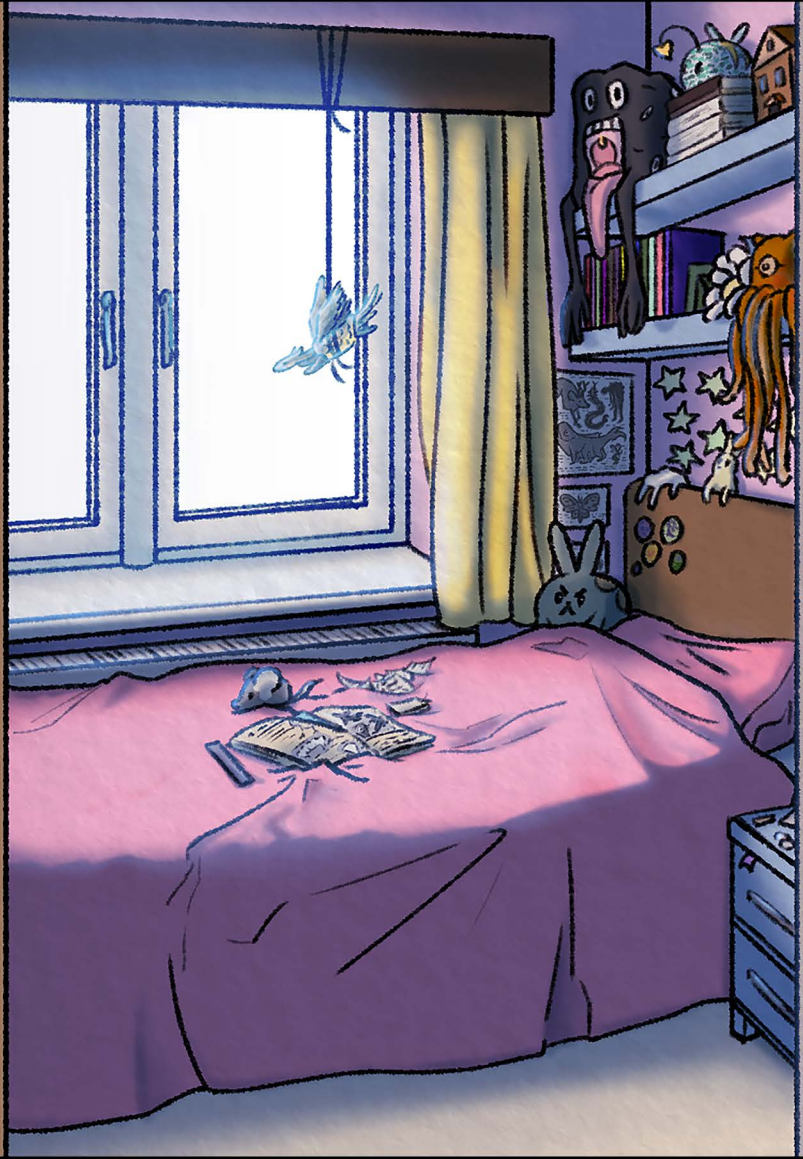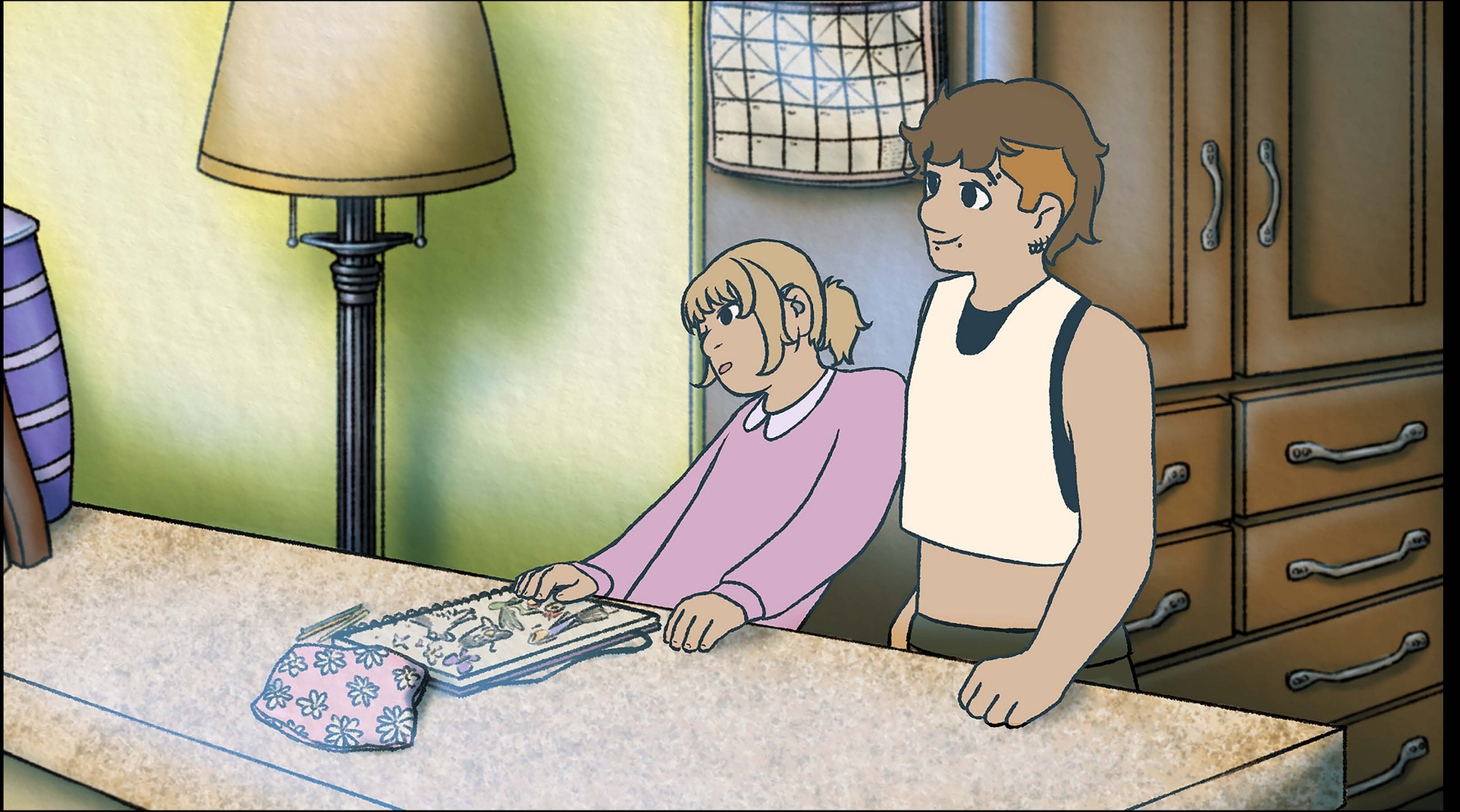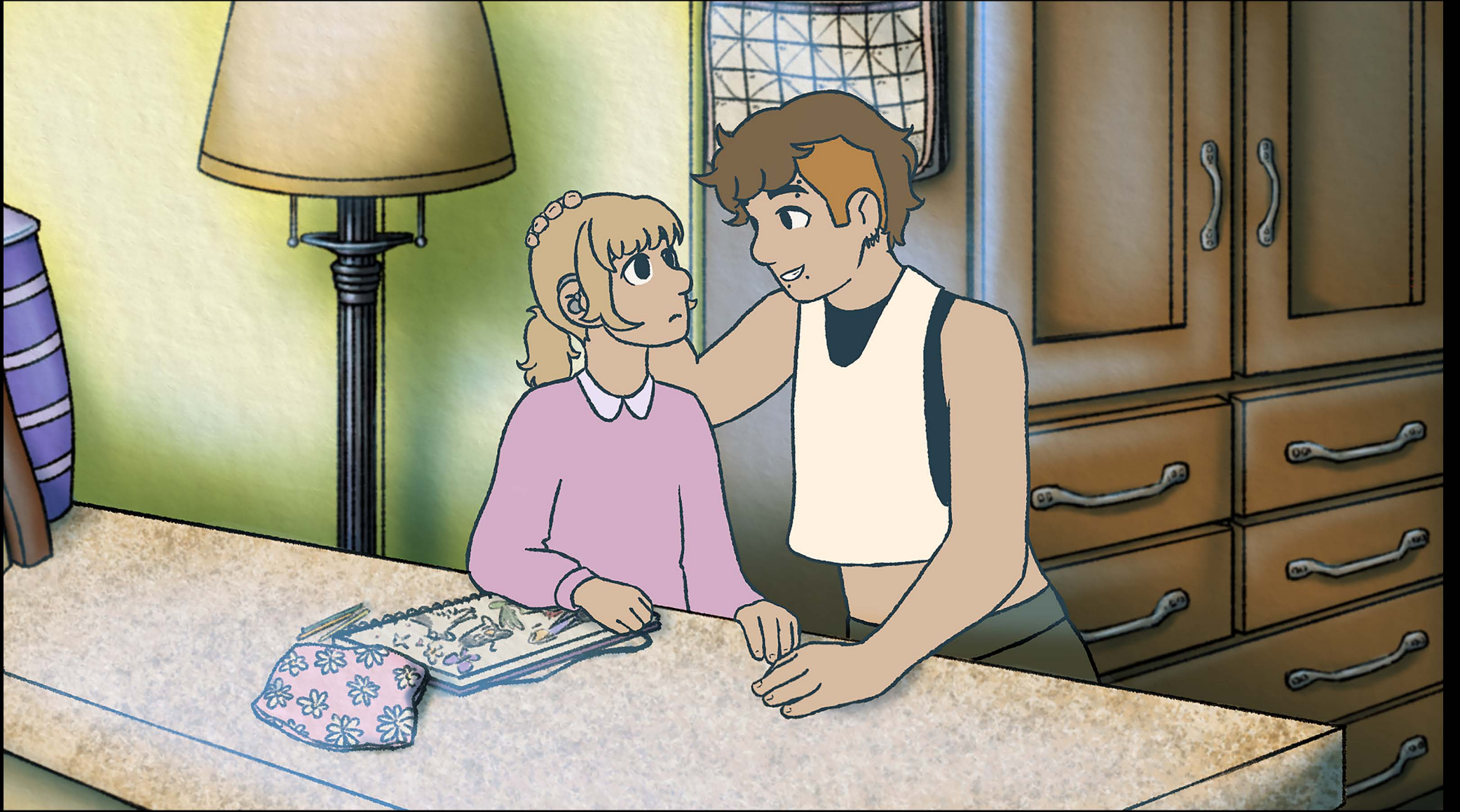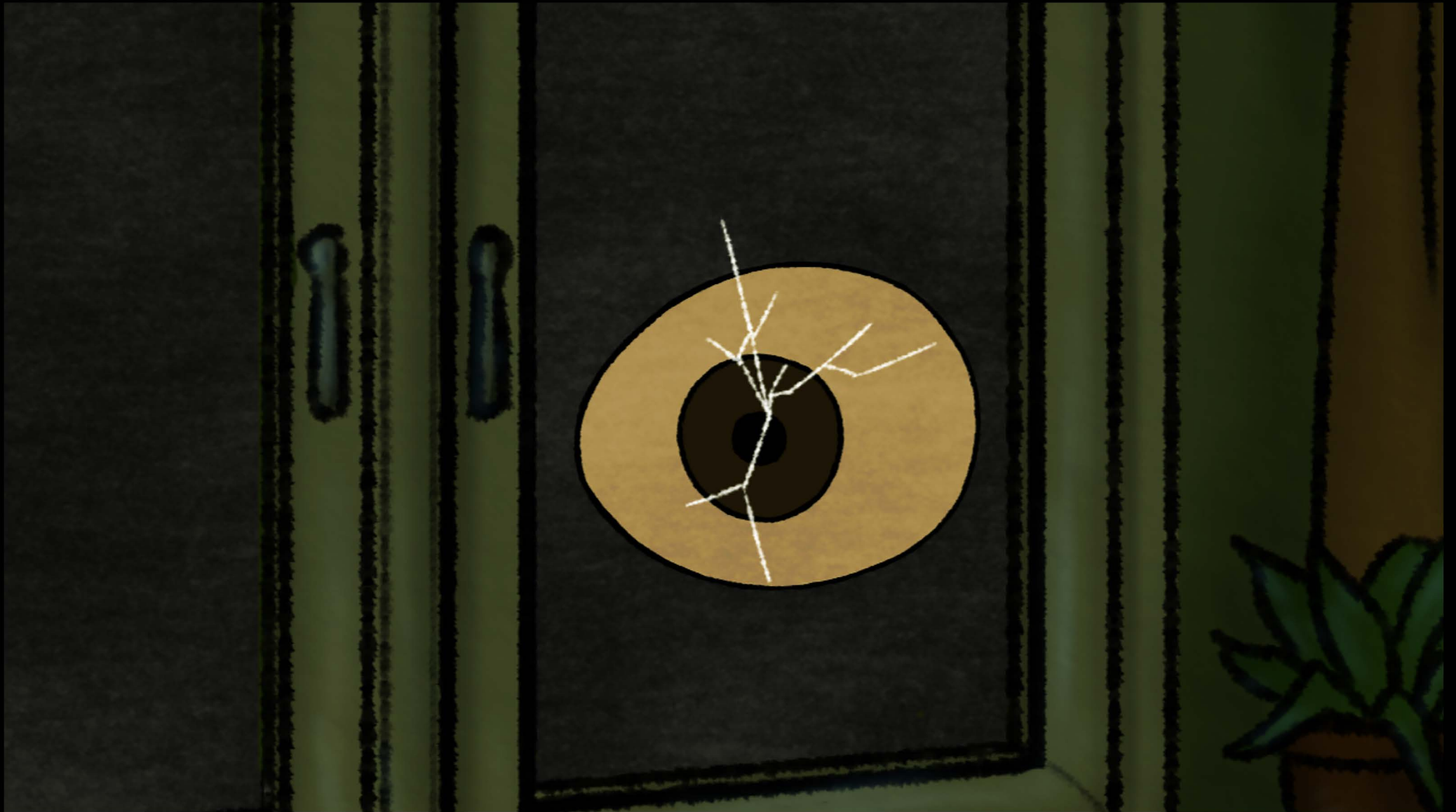
Movie Stills

When I started creating this film, I had no larger ideas surrounding it. I had no secret meanings behind why my plot unravels the way it does, I just wanted to see how much I have improved since I created my first animation. Ideas based in horror come easier to me than perhaps more emotional pieces, and I do enjoy a silly little scary story much more than any other genre. I find short horrors particularly fascinating- seeing how they unravel and the implications behind good cliff hangers that leave me thinking 'Wow! That was a really cool idea!' and I want to instil that same sense of joy in my audience.

I think by following my interests I ended up making a surprisingly personal project.

My character is openly Queer and has a good relationship with their family- which is something I am lucky to have and wish desperately to see more of in media.

I have explored a genre that means the world to me and already learned so much about its history and the techniques behind it.

And while I still have so much work to do to improve as an artist and animator, I am finally learning to appreciate how far I have already come.