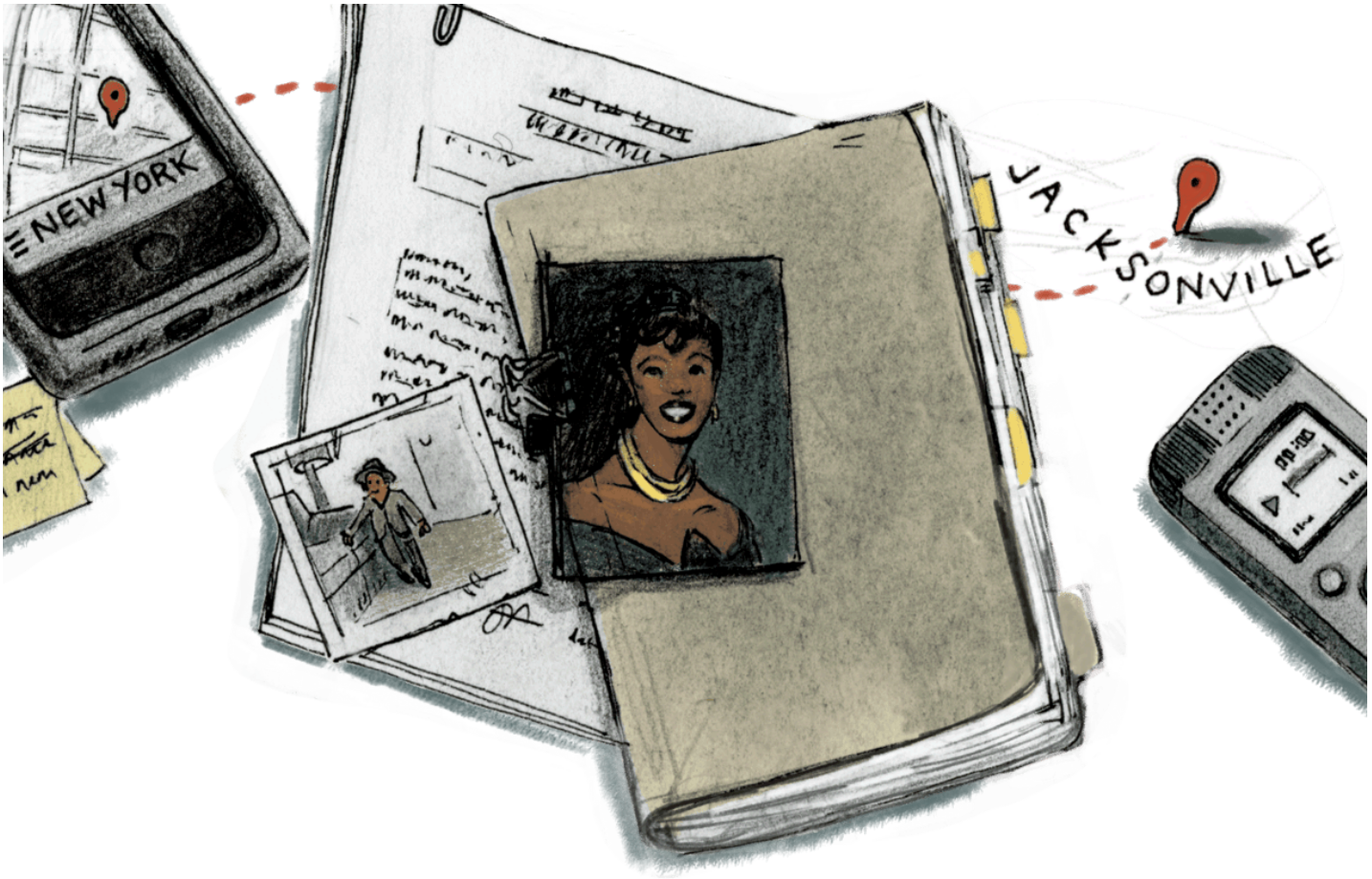

NEW YORK
JACKSONVILLE



Her mission was to save him from death row
— by telling the story of his life.

Reported and written by MAURICE CHAMMAH
Illustrated by JACKIE ROCHE
Development by KATIE PARK



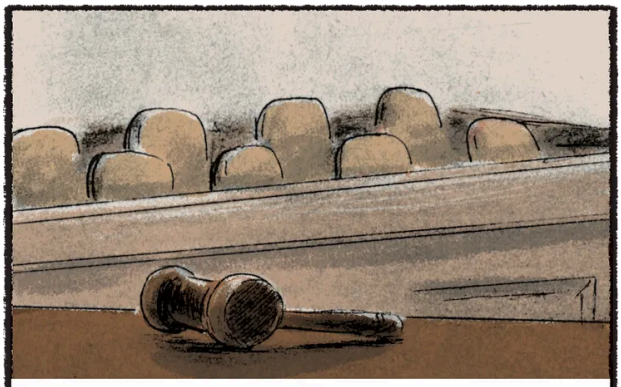
In 2019, Sara Baldwin told me she'd joined the defense team of James Bernard Belcher, who was facing the death penalty in Florida.



Her job as a "mitigation specialist" was to find reasons why a jury should spare his life – by researching the story of that life.

Jennifer Embry's 1996 rape and murder was solved when DNA at the scene matched Belcher's. He had already gone to prison for sexually assaulting another woman.





But changes in the law led Florida courts to overturn dozens of death sentences, and now a new jury would decide his fate.

In the 1970s, the Supreme Court said juries had to assess peoples' individual histories when considering the death penalty.

Mitigation specialists emerged to research their lives, and played a big role in the drop from more than 300 annual death sentences in the mid-1990s, to fewer than 30 in recent years.

As a journalist, I wanted to see this process in action, and asked to tag along.

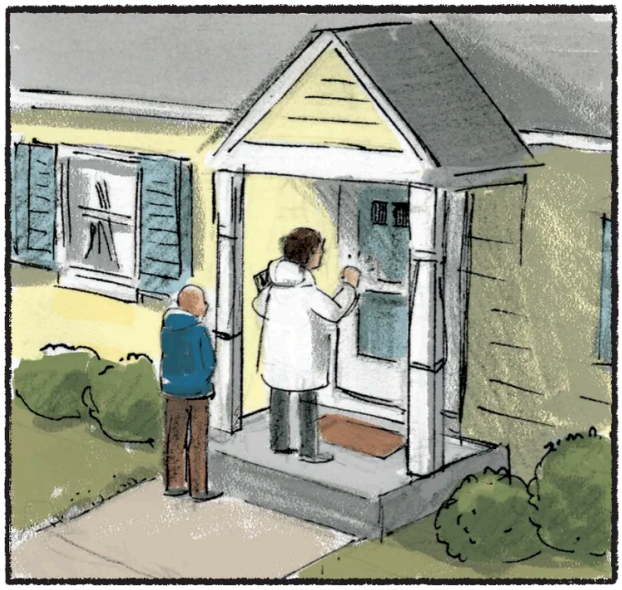


Baldwin and I spent long days driving around New York and Florida, looking for people from Belcher's past.

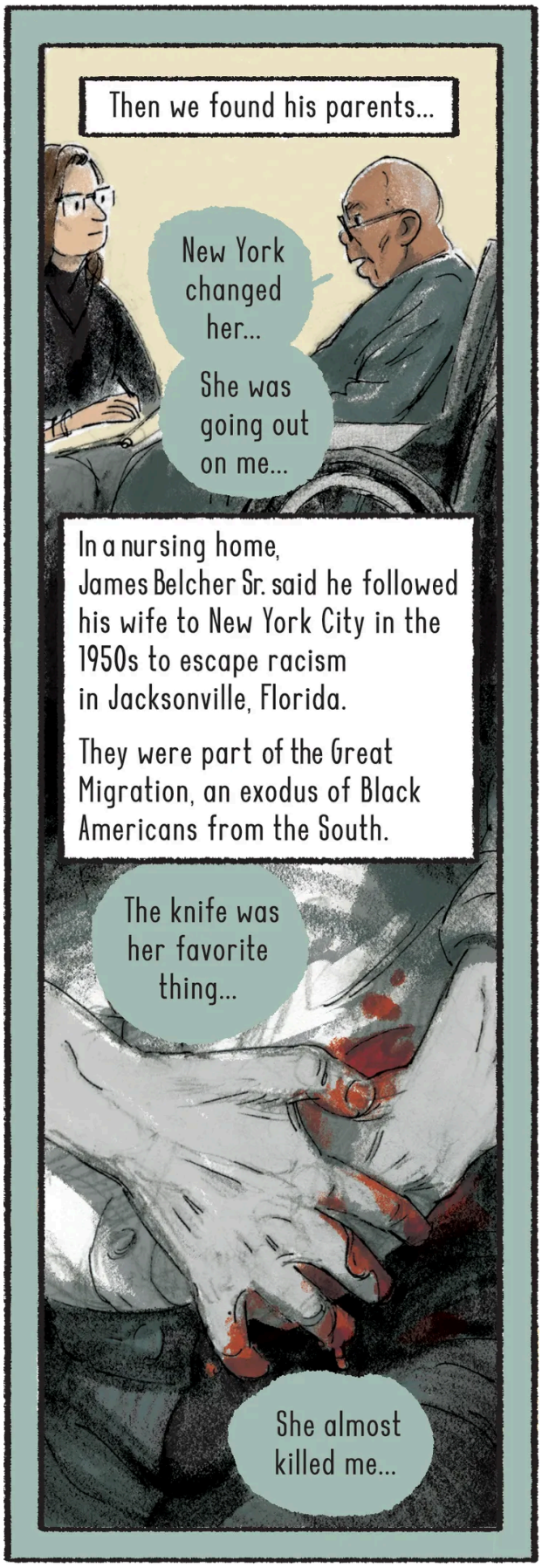
Many wanted nothing to do with her.

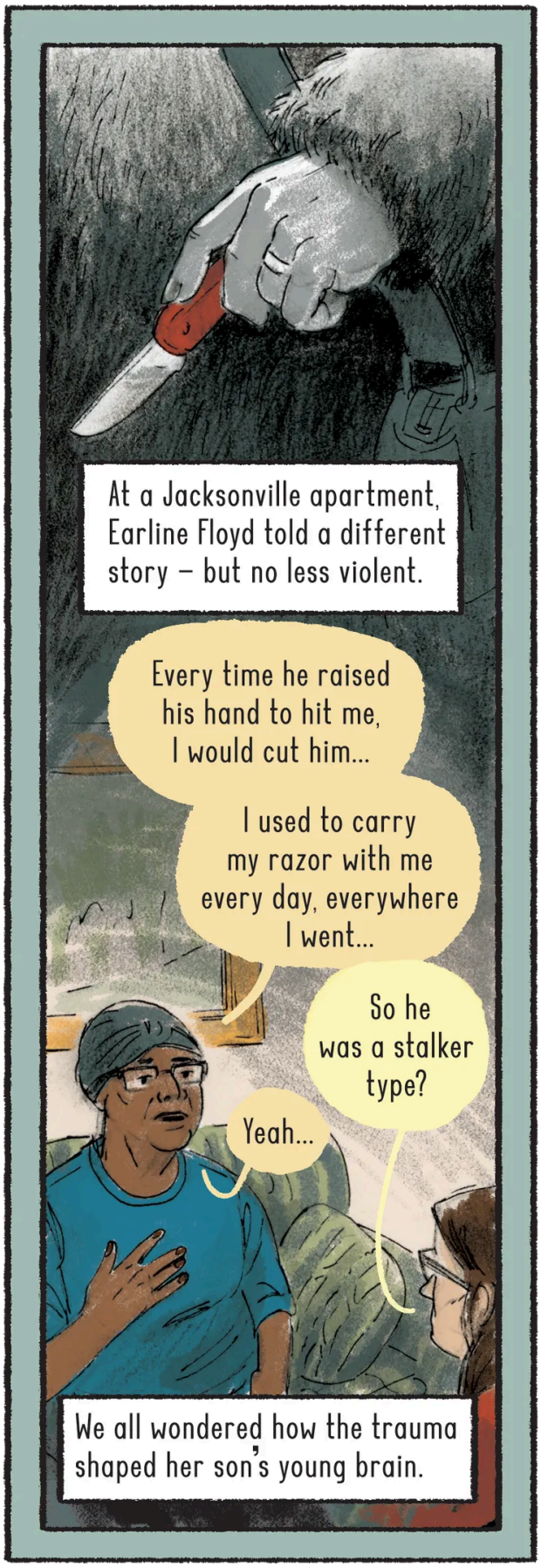









Then we found his parents...
New York changed her...
She was going out on me...
In a nursing home, James Belcher Sr. said he followed his wife to New York City in the 1950s to escape racism in Jacksonville, Florida.
They were part of the Great Migration, an exodus of Black Americans from the South.
The knife was her favorite thing...
She almost killed me...


At a Jacksonville apartment, Earline Floyd told a different story – but no less violent.
Every time he raised his hand to hit me, I would cut him...
I used to carry my razor with me every day, everywhere I went...
So he was a stalker type?
Yeah...
We all wondered how the trauma shaped her son's young brain.

After their divorce, she raised her son in Brooklyn, amid rampant violence:



In 11th grade, he saw a security officer shoot his friend, and spent the rest of the day with his blood on his pants.



His escape was basketball. A cousin told us he could land 100 jump shots in a row.

To buy new clothes, Belcher turned to stealing at 16.

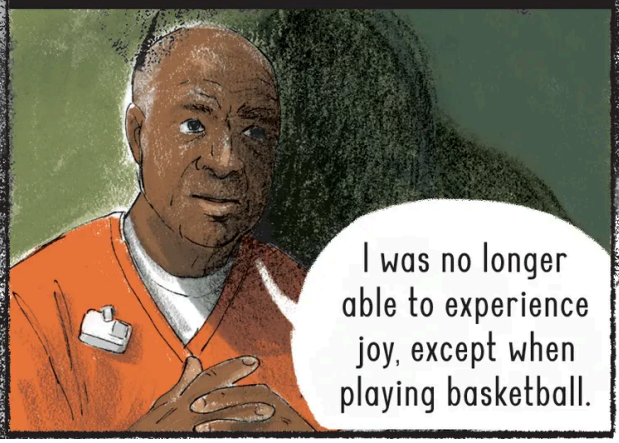


He was sent to a jail on Rikers Island and upstate prisons, surrounded by rape and other horrors,

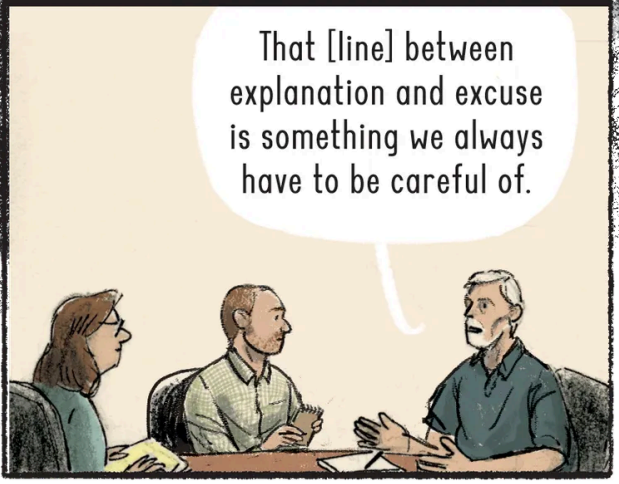


but also mentored younger prisoners as a basketball coach – encouraging them to leave crime behind.

In between stints behind bars, he suffered from flashbacks, and his own crimes escalated.



His lawyers and I wondered whether a jury could sympathize, given what he'd done.





In September 2022, Baldwin and I watched jurors take in testimony from Embry's family.

"I felt more pain than I have ever felt in my life," her brother said.

Another woman spoke about being assaulted by Belcher.

I remember laying there and saying, "I didn't want to die like this."

I didn't want to be found.

But the jury also heard from the people Baldwin had interviewed. Their New York accents stuck out in the Florida courtroom.

Rikers was a terribly toxic world for a 16-year-old to grow up in.

Ex-New York City corrections commissioner, Vincent Schiraldi

He's a model tragedy in Black American history.

Belcher's cousin, Wayne Deas

The lawyers sounded like philosophers, with arguments about trauma and free will.

Think about what he did...

Doesn't that really define who he is?

Prosecutor Bernie de la Rionda

Can he continue to contribute to the human family from inside prison?

Defense attorney Alan Chipperfield

After several hours the jurors returned.



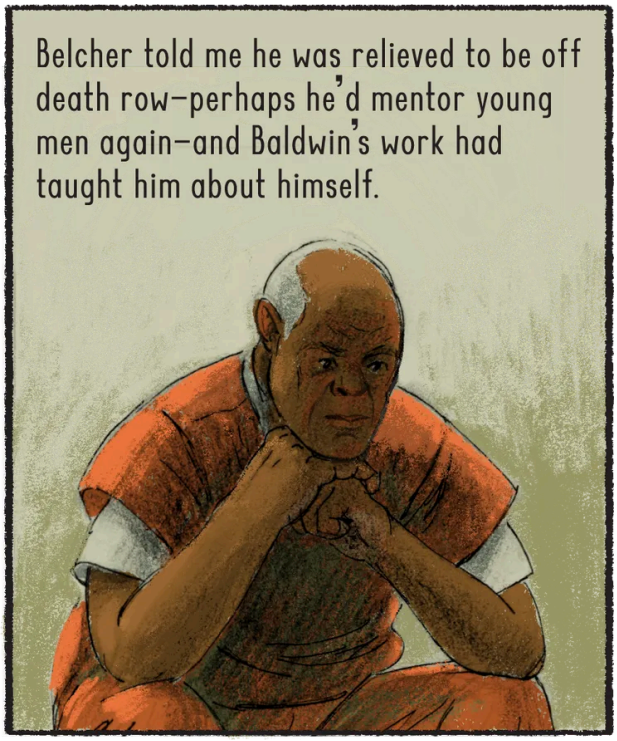
Enough of them were convinced that Belcher's life had value, despite his crime.

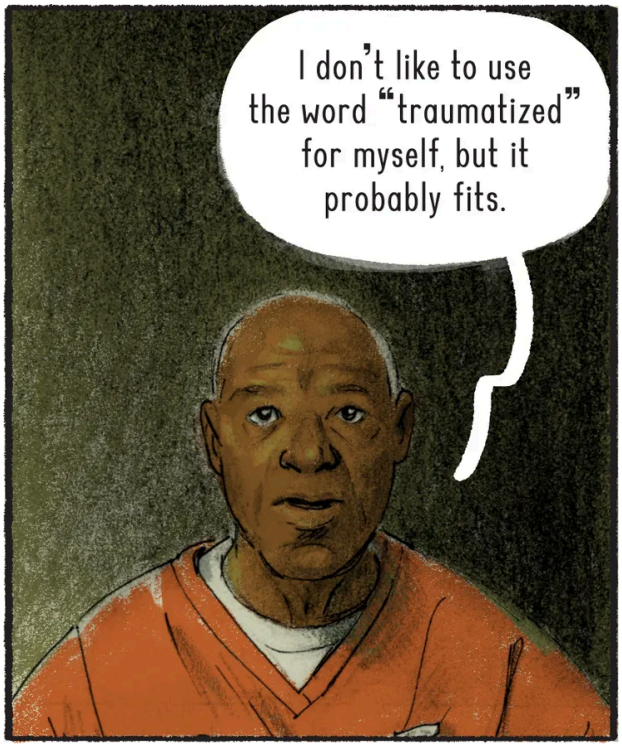


One juror told me, "It was his personal decision to do what he did, but society has some responsibility for making him who he was."



Belcher told me he was relieved to be off death row—perhaps he'd mentor young men again—and Baldwin's work had taught him about himself.





He said the hardest part of the trial was seeing the Embry family's pain.

He still didn't understand why he killed her. I realized perhaps nobody would have a satisfying answer.





But Baldwin's work forces us to ask, When we consider that void, do we see a monster or a soul in torment?



CREDITS

EDITORS

Raghuram Vadarevu, Meredith Rizzo and Akiba Solomon

PRODUCTION COORDINATOR

Mara Corbett

COPY EDITOR

Ghazala Irshad

Maurice Chammah

Staff Writer

I write about the death penalty, forensics, art and music behind bars, and more.

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