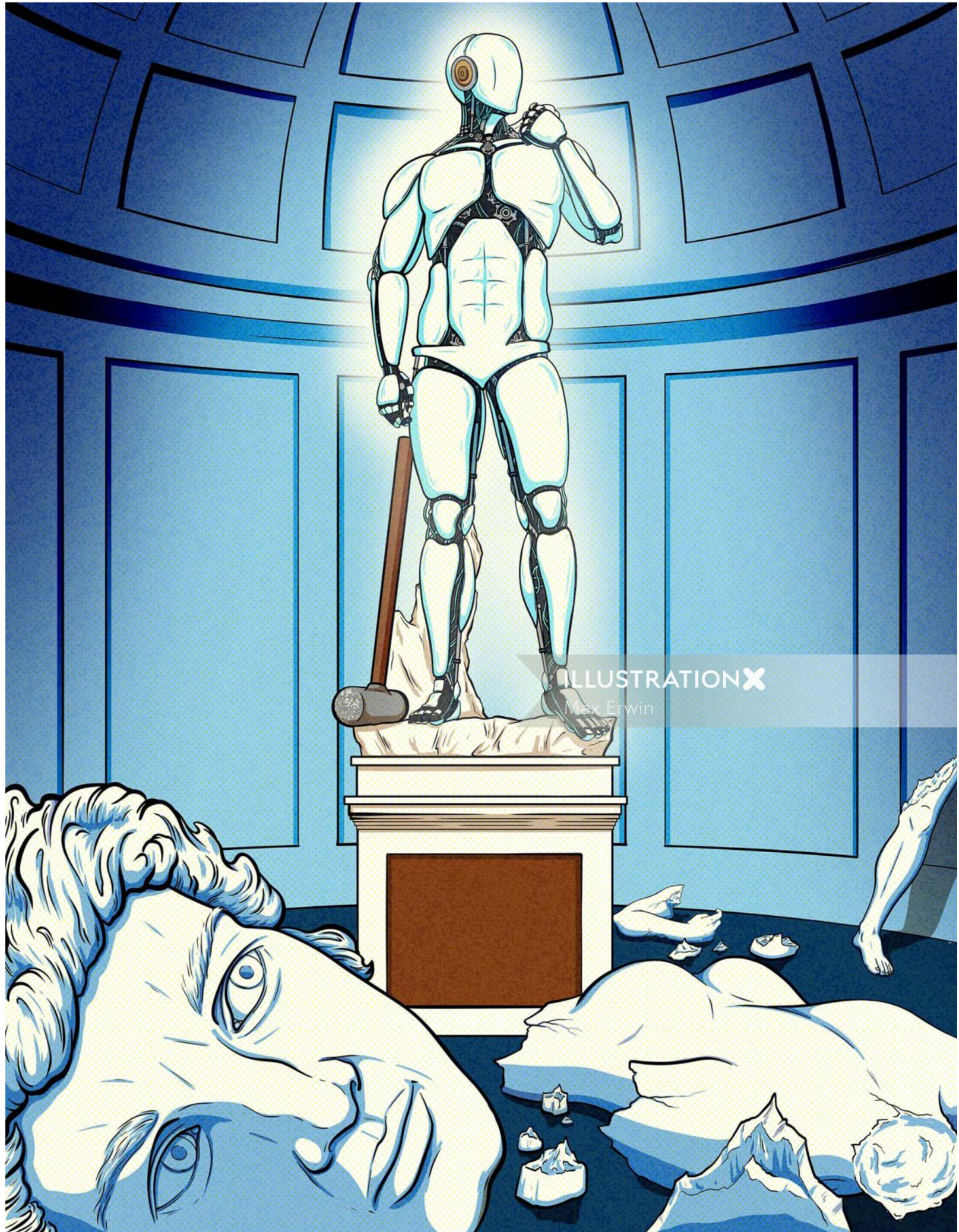


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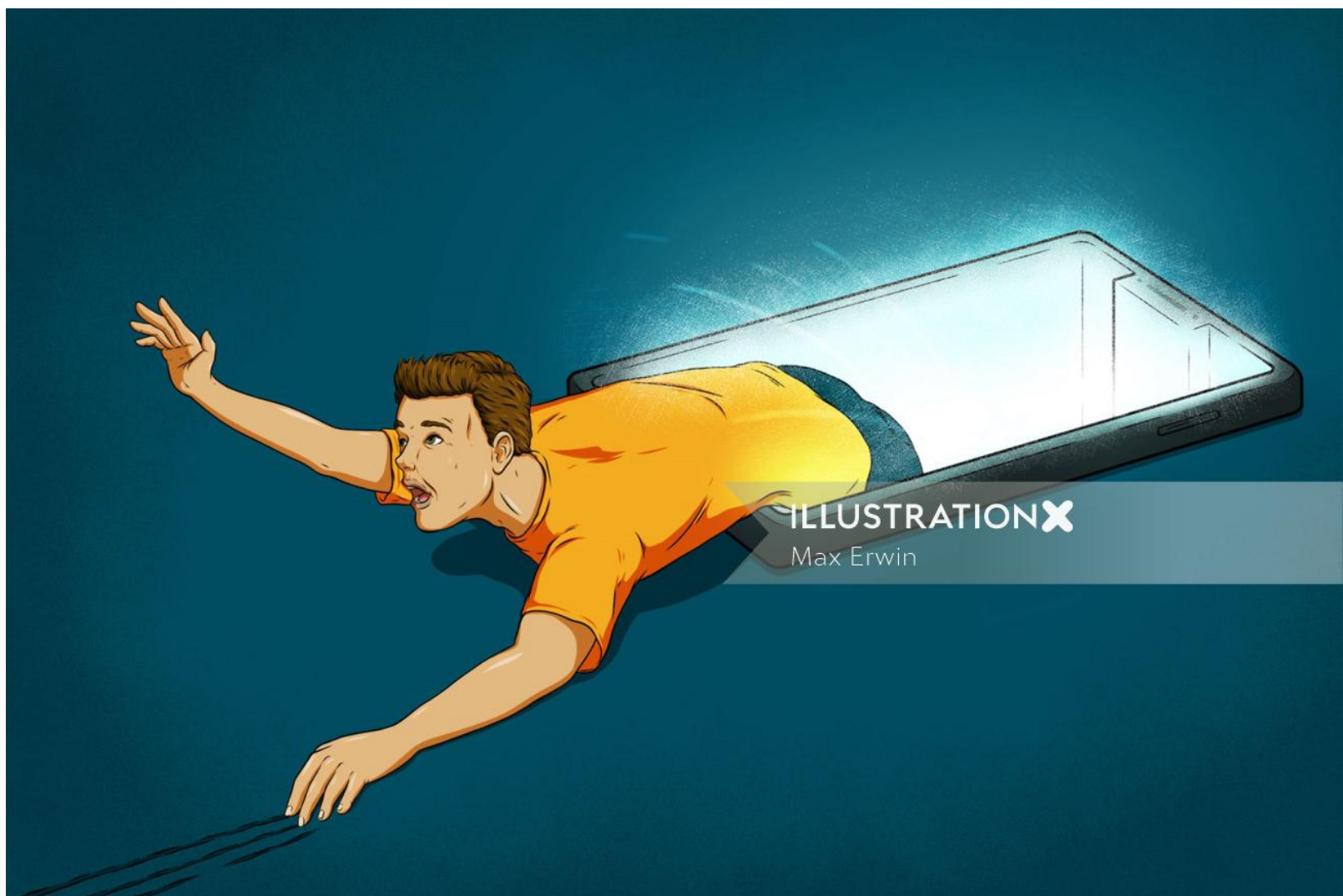
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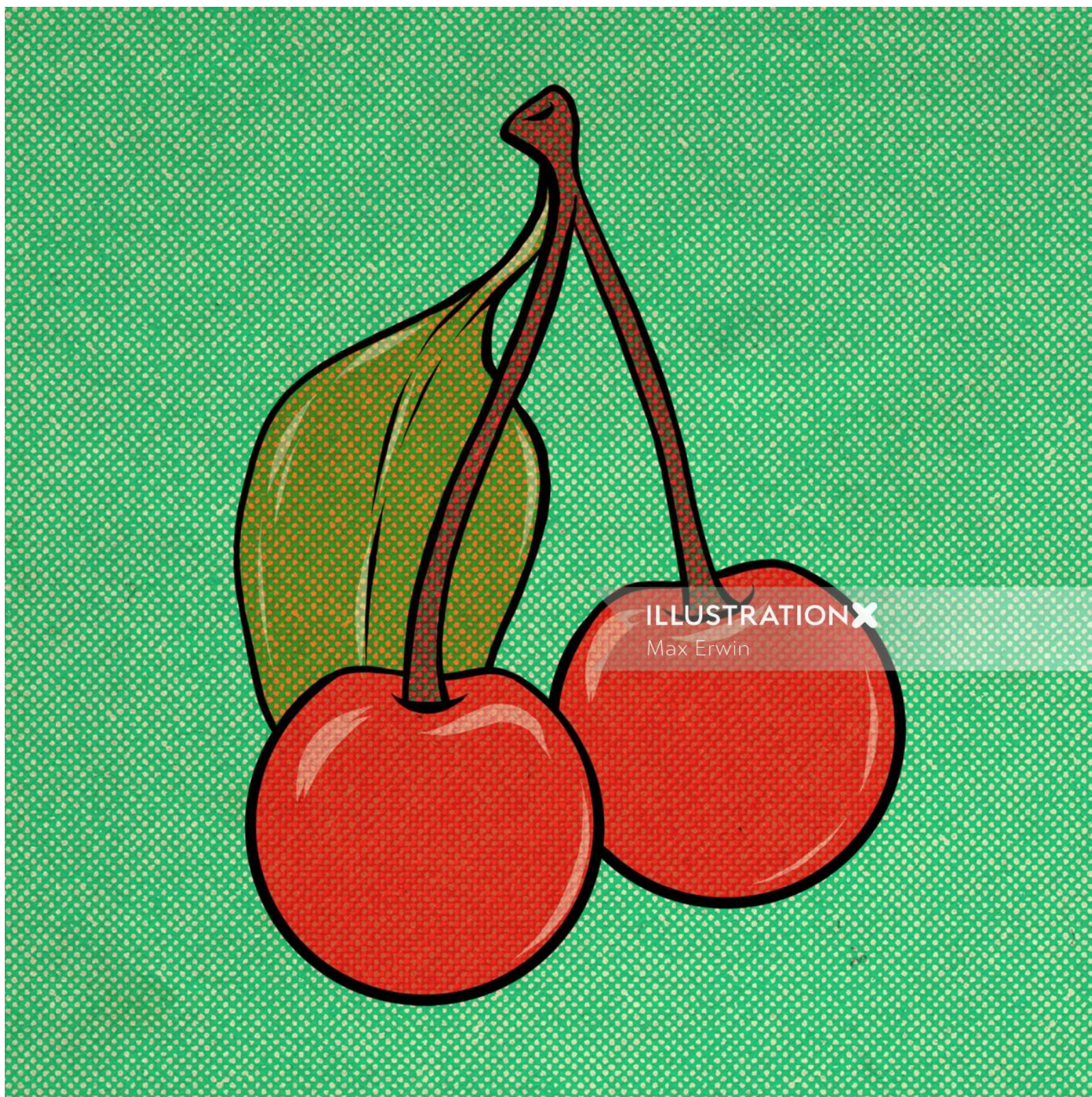
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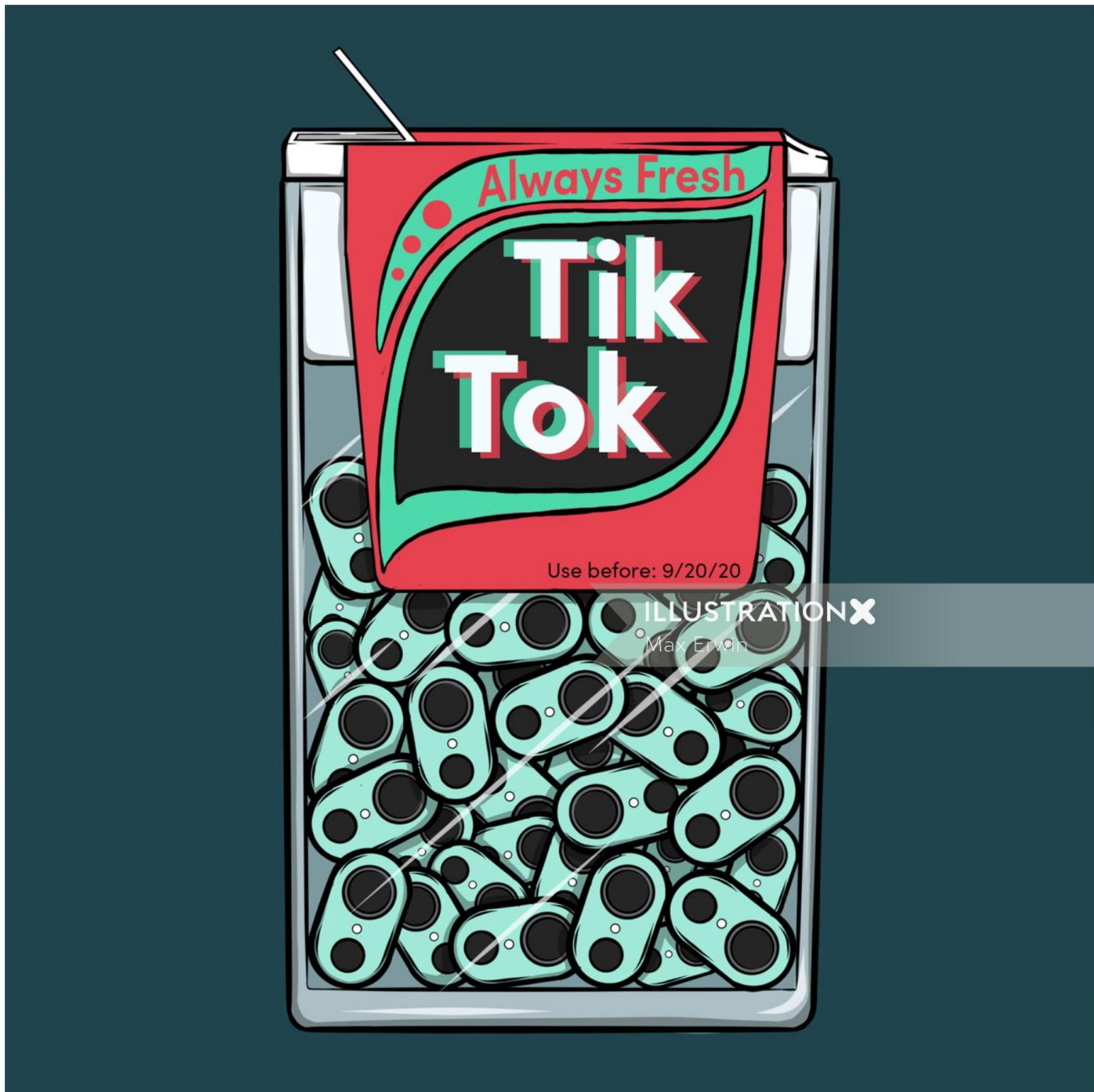
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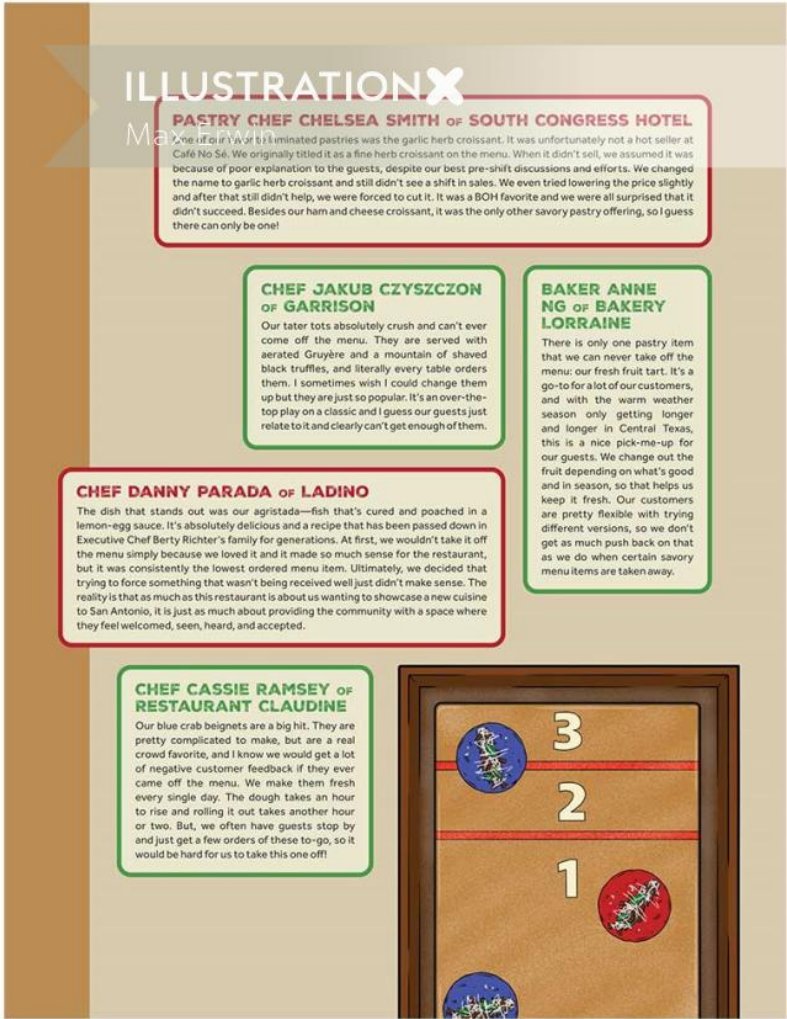
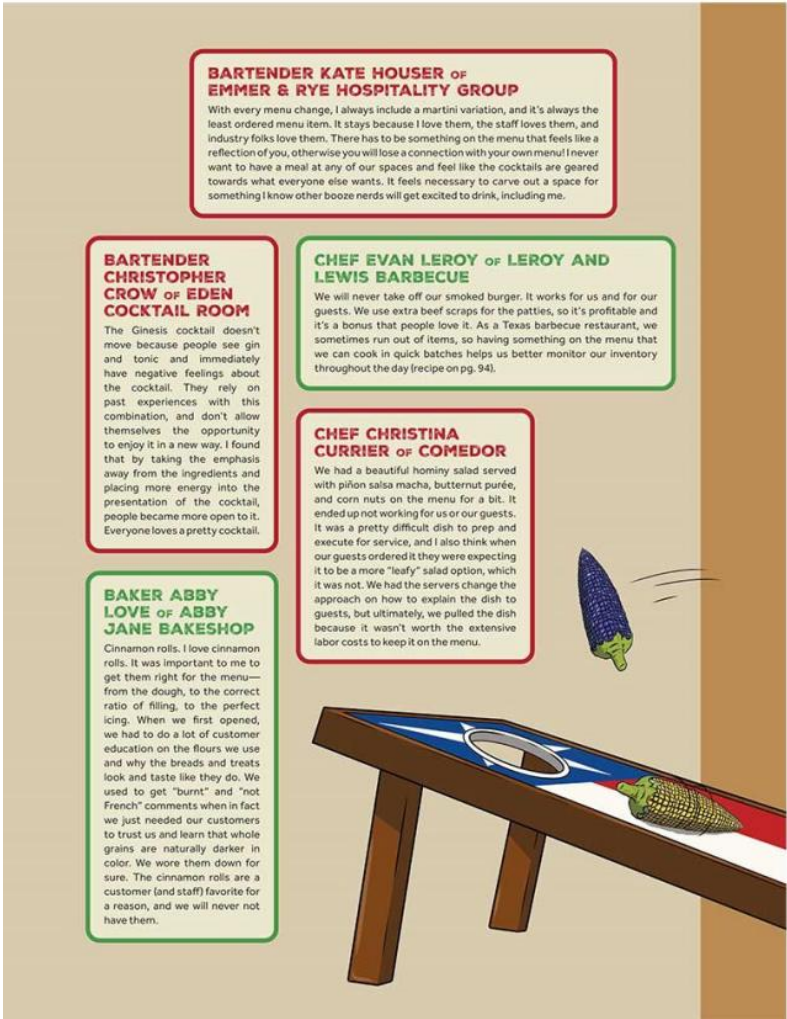
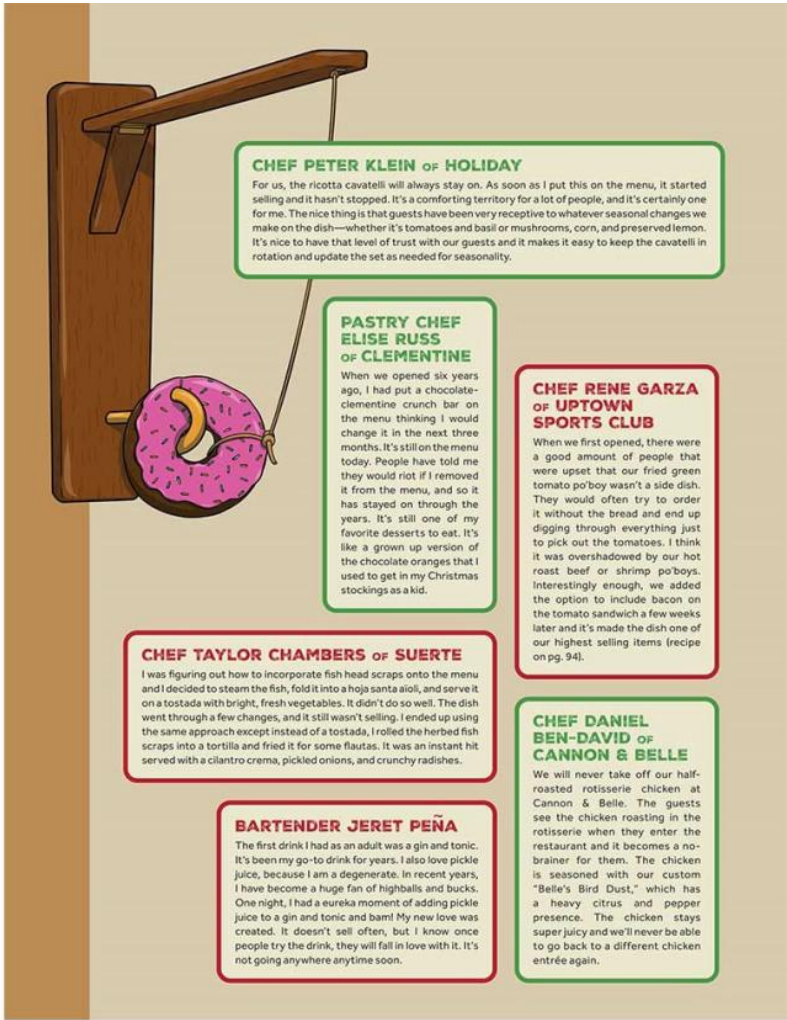
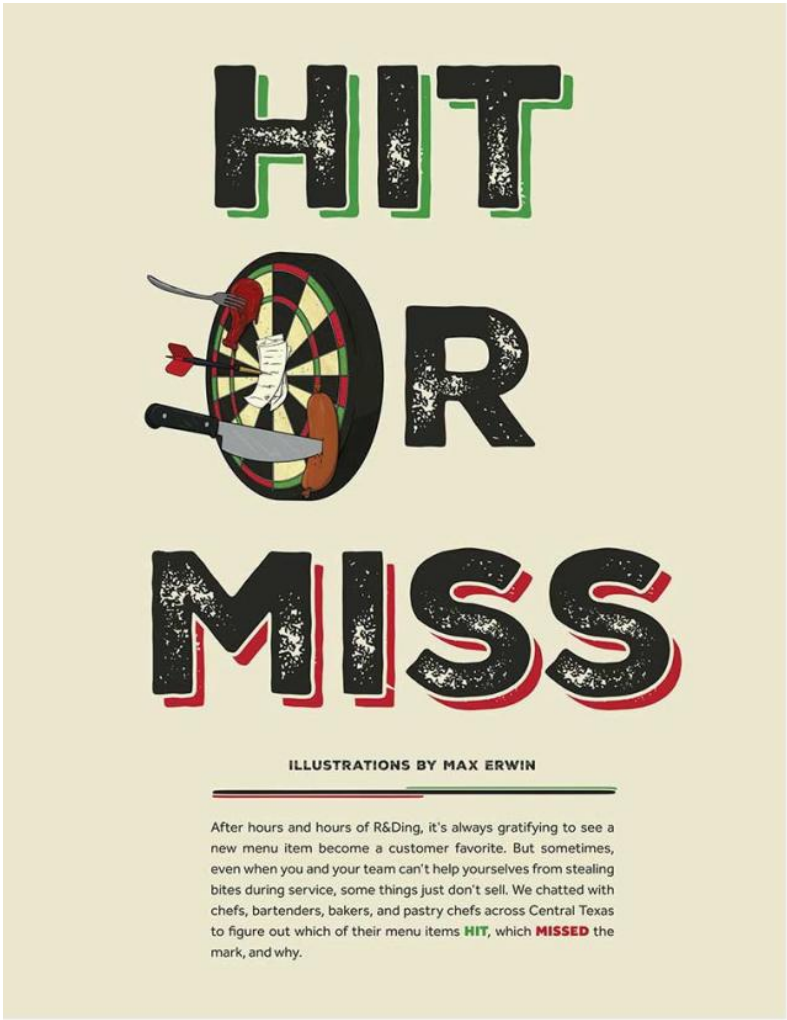
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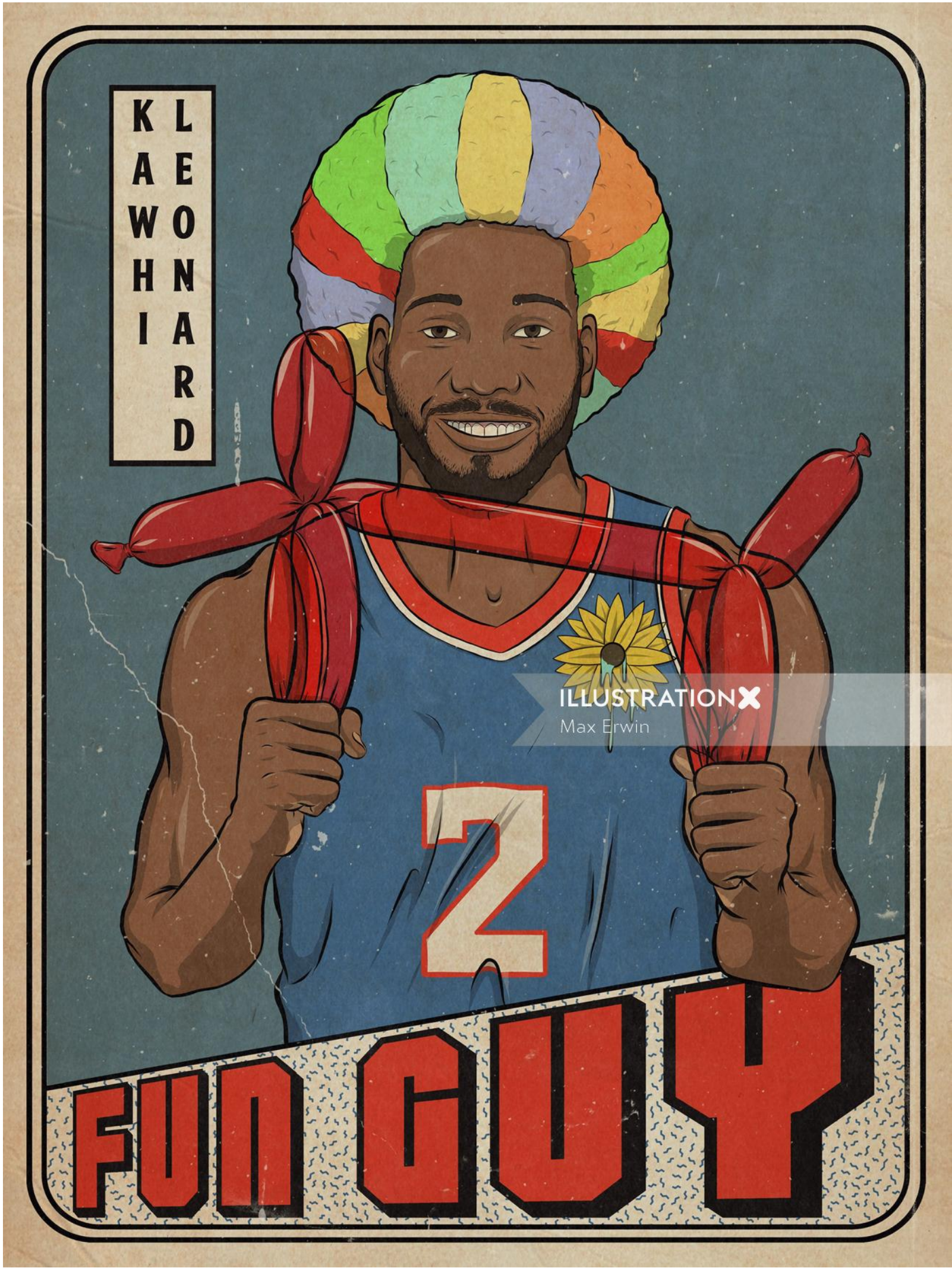
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THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER | SUNDAY, APRIL 30, 2023

LIFE & CULTURE

Act IV (New Act I)

"The swallow has returned to her nest." Mini and Rodolfo have now split up. But she comes back to him, and when she does she is gravely ill. The artists sell their belongings to buy Mini medicine. Musetta sells her earrings, and Colline, the philosopher, his overcoat, which he bids farewell to in a famously short, sad aria, "Vecchia zingarra."

Act III (New Act II)

"We will part when the flowers bloom!" Rodolfo has left Mini, and claims that she has been a flirt with other men. But soon he confesses the truth: that he loves her and it is her illness that pushed him away. In a stretch of emotionally ambiguous music the two agree to stay together, but only until spring.

Act III (New Act II)

The sound of glasses clinking. In the frigid morning, Puccini scores the music with an unusual instrument: wine or drinking glasses, clinking in time to a chorus of women from a nearby tavern. Mini sings of her difficult life with Rodolfo, who has become unduly jealous. "Sometimes at night I pretend to sleep, and I feel him trying to spy on my dreams."

Act IV (New Act I)

Every opera has its dying heroine. Not quite, but nearly so. In this death scene, the orchestra rages and sobs when Rodolfo realizes that Mini has died, and it is devastation in sound. But the moment of her death is actually announced to the listener a few bars earlier by a single, lonely double bass note held long as four sweet, muted violin voices signal that Mini's spirit is gone.

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Act I (New Act IV)

"They call me Mini, I do not know why." When Mini and Rodolfo meet in the first act, they share their stories in two arias. He is a poor poet, but with the soul of a millionaire. She is a seamstress, a loner but happy. Her candle has gone out, and a search for a lost key prolongs her visit to his apartment. The human need for intimacy in these two famous arias propels the story of La bohème, but the vocal writing that emerges here does double duty: It hits newbies with its astonishing power, and draws in operaphiles who hear it as a test of vocal talent.

Act I (New Act IV)

Every opera needs its high note. Mini has an extremely difficult one at the end of Act 1 — a soft high C as she is heard wailing away in the arms of Rodolfo. His part is scored for the E below, which isn't too tough. But some tenors go for the high C here, a feat that makes for a beautiful high-wire moment — if the singers are secure. Which version will the tenor take in this production?

Act II (New Act III)

Pies and candy, roasted chestnuts and toy horses. It is Christmas Eve in Paris' Latin Quarter and Puccini sets spinning in many little dramas this scene goes by like a series of flash-vignettes. Mini, Rodolfo, and their artist friends are carrying on, and Puccini scores the joyous humanity with an offstage band, an overexcited children's chorus, a group of scolding mothers, and amused townsfolk.

Act II (New Act III)

"Musetta's Waltz" Musetta has layers that emerge later in the opera, but in this famously flirty aria Puccini captures a superficial Musetta in a seductive but slightly ridiculous slow waltz. The coquettish aria ends after Musetta screams; her shoe is pinching her foot, and she sends her rich elderly suitor to buy her new shoes while wooing back her former lover.

A new perspective on 'La bohème'

Puccini's "La bohème" is opera's great on-ramp. It sets the human and relatable story of a group of poor, struggling artists to vocal and orchestral writing so vivid and emotionally direct it anticipates film music.

Director Yuval Sharon has devised an unusual concept for Opera Philadelphia's production, reversing the order of the acts. The story is stitched together with the narration of a new character, the Wanderer, and the opera is slightly cut and performed without intermission.

"It's a perfect date night. If you're seeing it for the first time, you're so lucky," said Sharon of "La bohème," one of the genre's most performed titles. But he also hopes the unexpectedness of the reverse order of the acts might surprise veteran listeners.

"This really offers a brand new perspective. If you are someone that has seen it a hundred times, if you come with an open mind to it, I think you'll discover so many things that you might have completely overlooked."

By Peter Debutin, classical music critic. Illustration by Max Erwin

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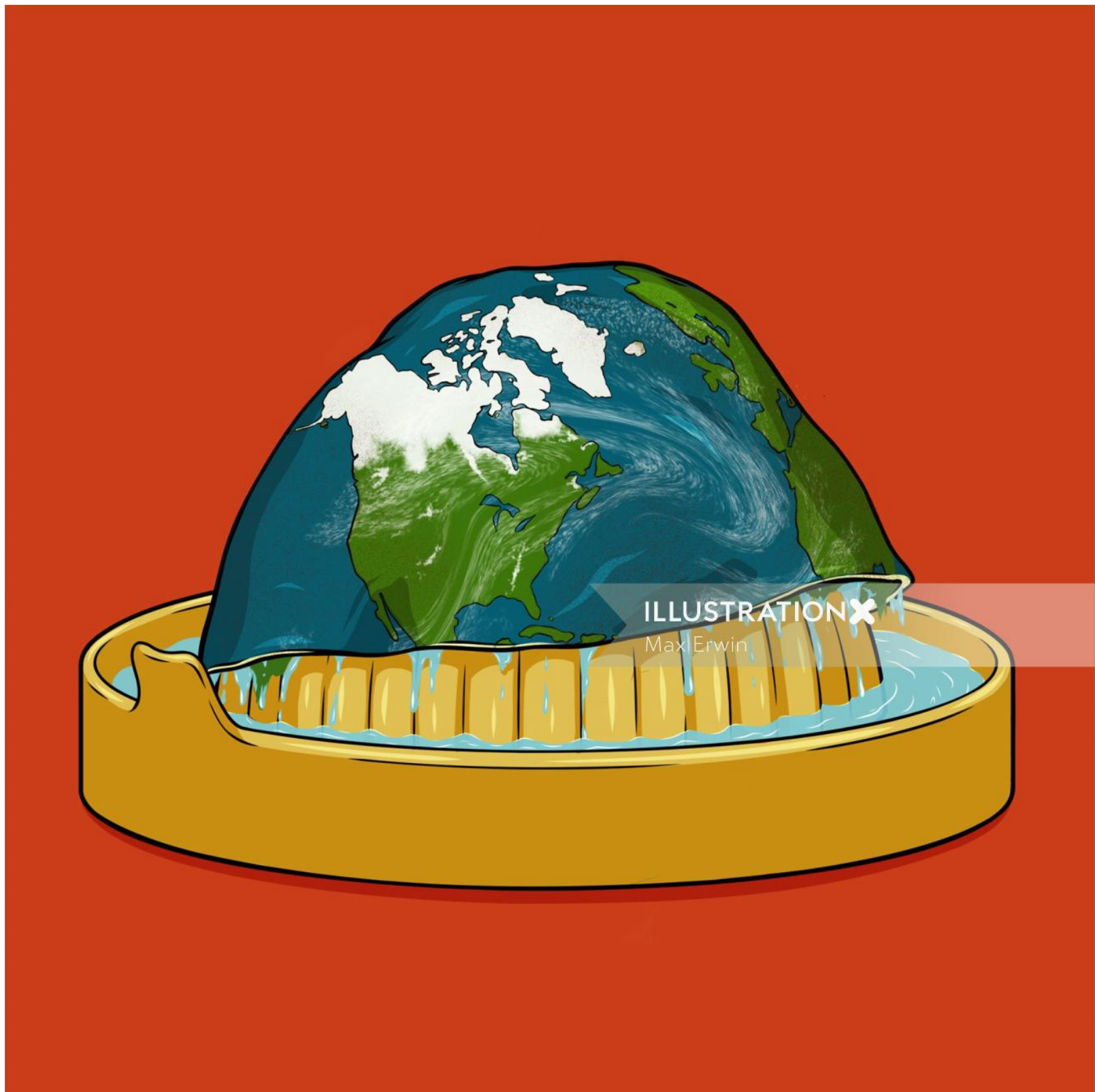
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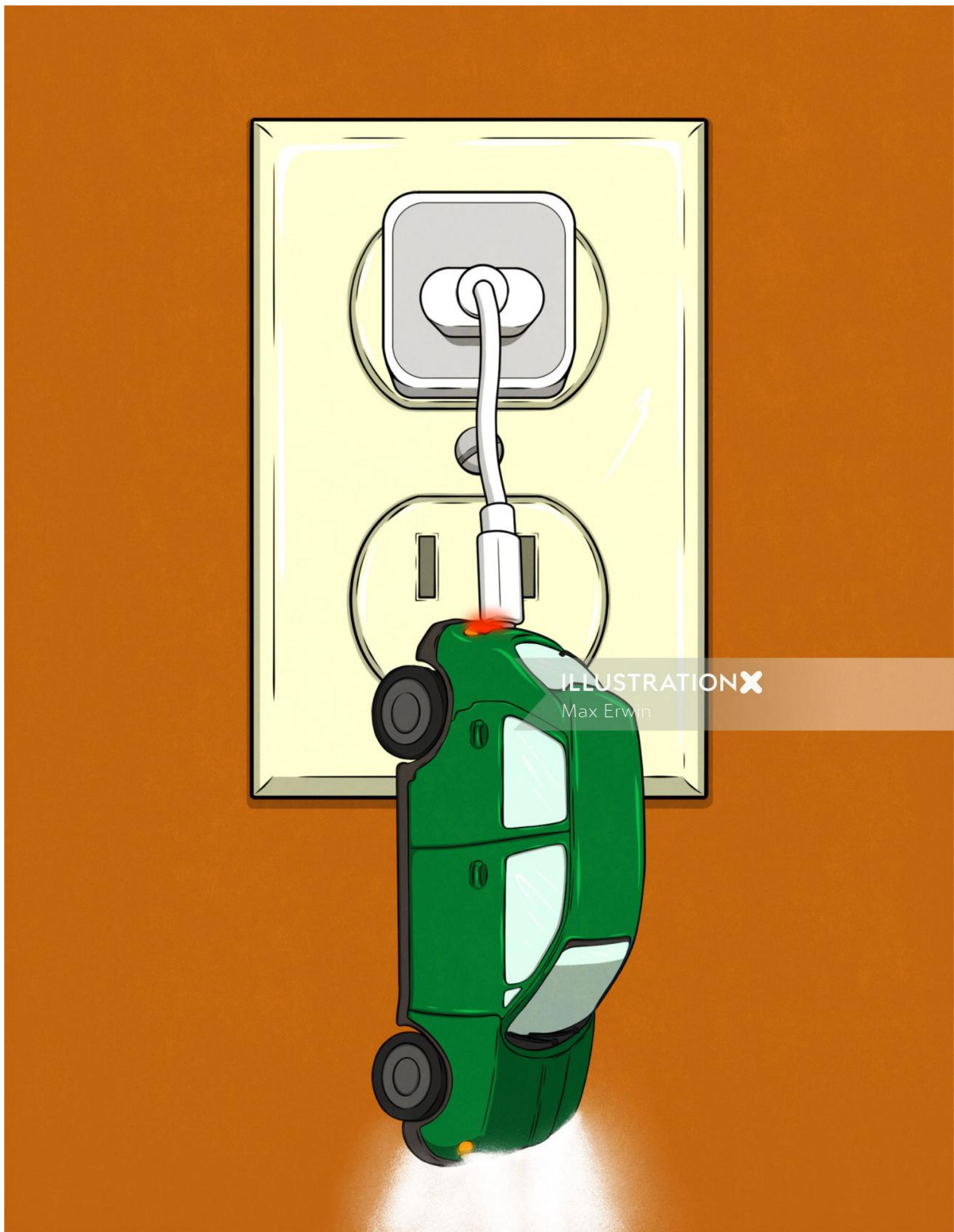
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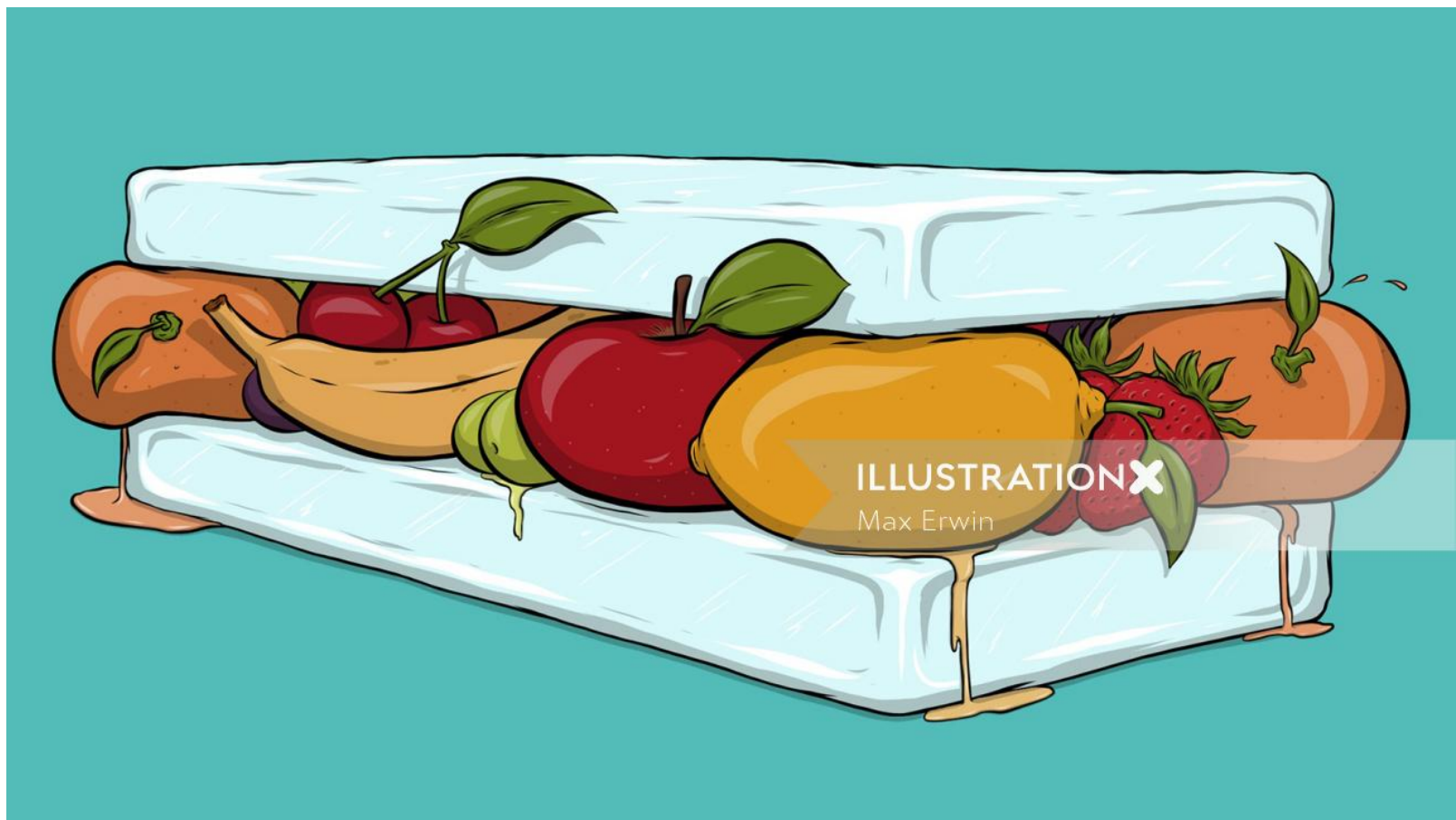
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