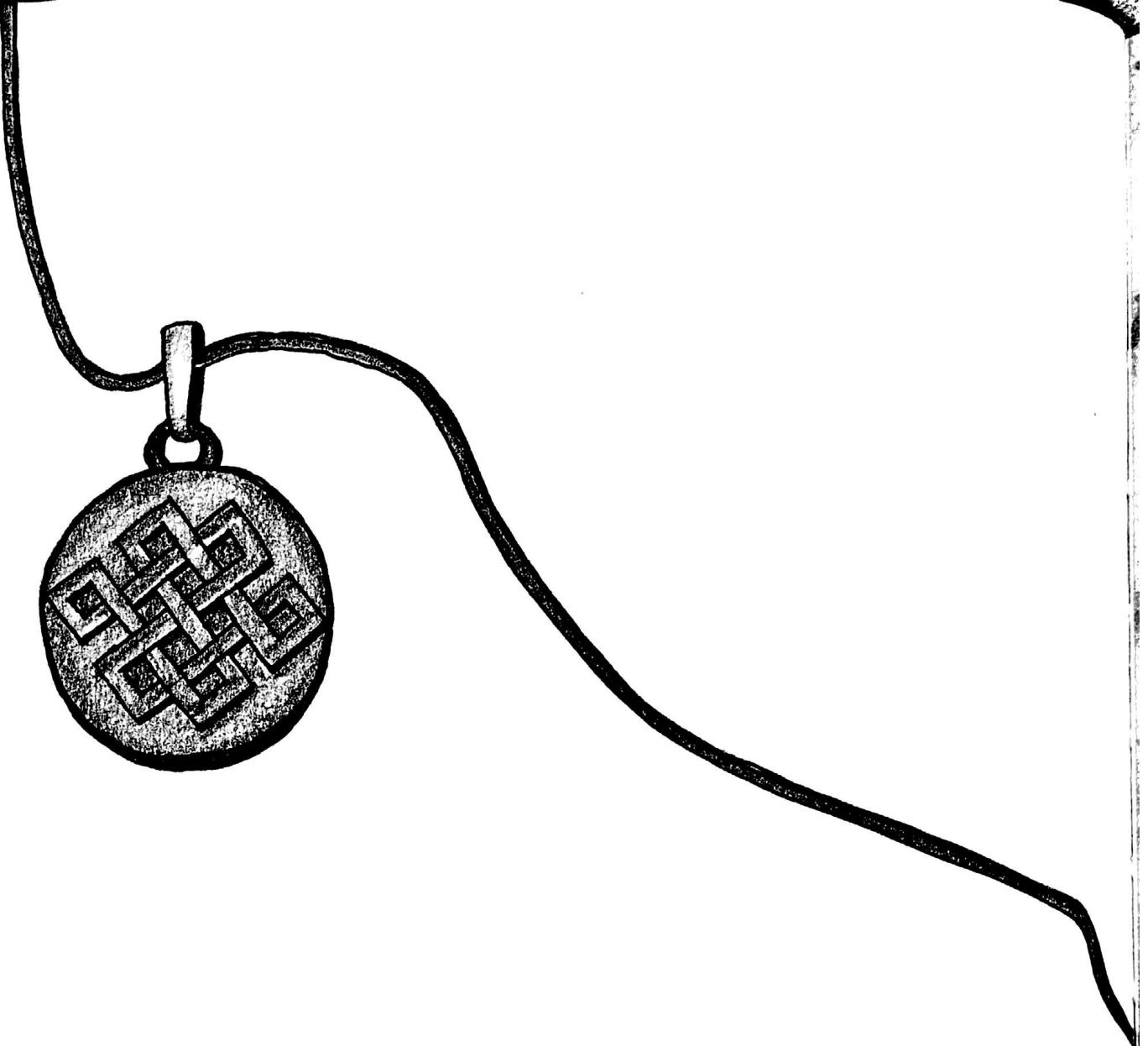


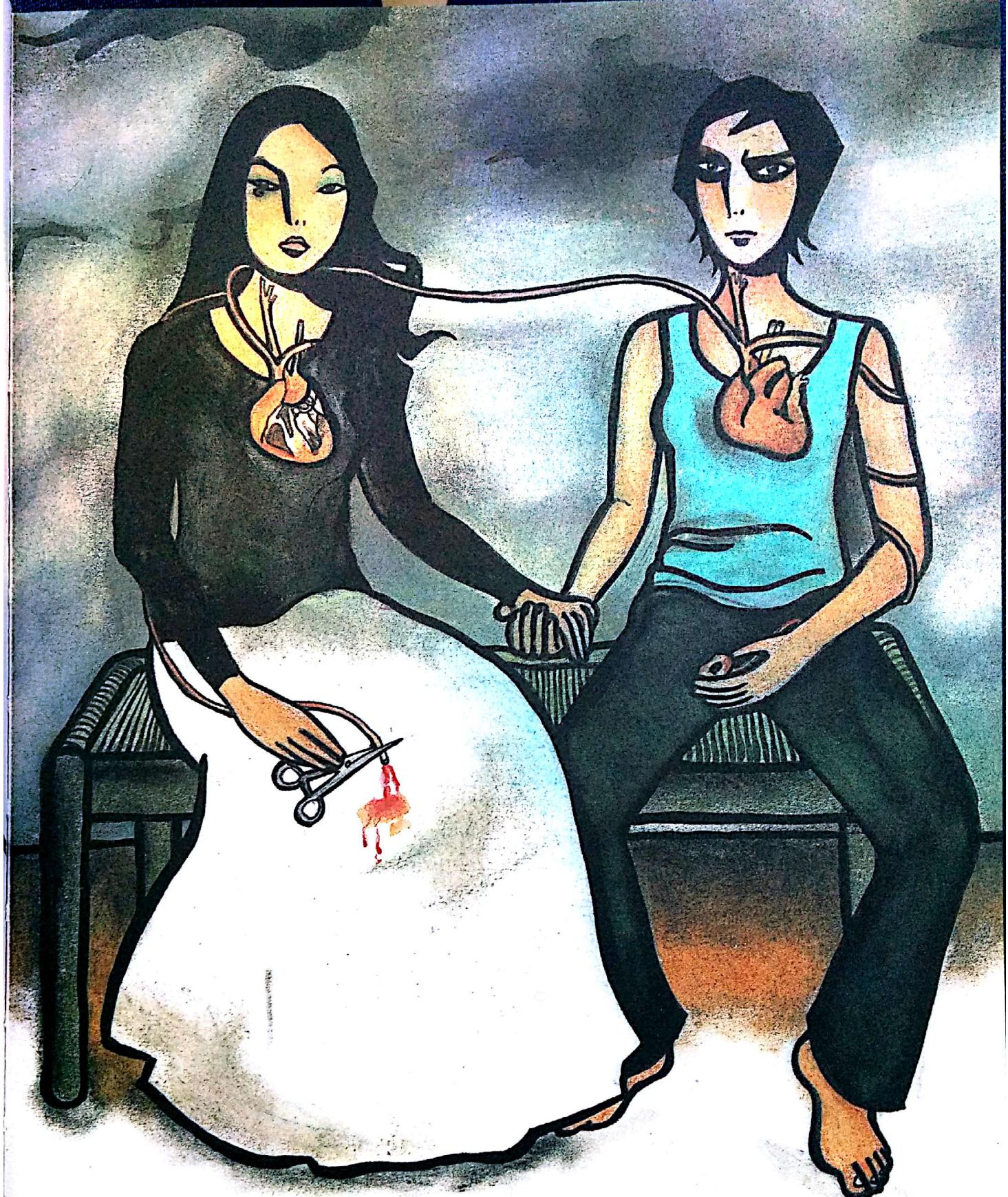


amruta patil



THE DOUBLE SUICIDE





There are two of us, not one.
Despite a slipshod surgical procedure, we are joined still.

On Thursday, day of Jupiter, she called.



I looked up, and there she was, way across, billowing on the ledge of the building. As soon as Ruth met my eye, she stepped off the ledge. A few seconds too late, but better a few seconds late than never, phone still in hand, I followed her.

It is okay if I am a second place also-ran in this race towards death. It is important to set the record straight: I am the one who loved her most in the world too.

The body rights itself midair, aligns itself heaviest part first. It is with the head, then, that I must meet death, though it was the heart that willed it.

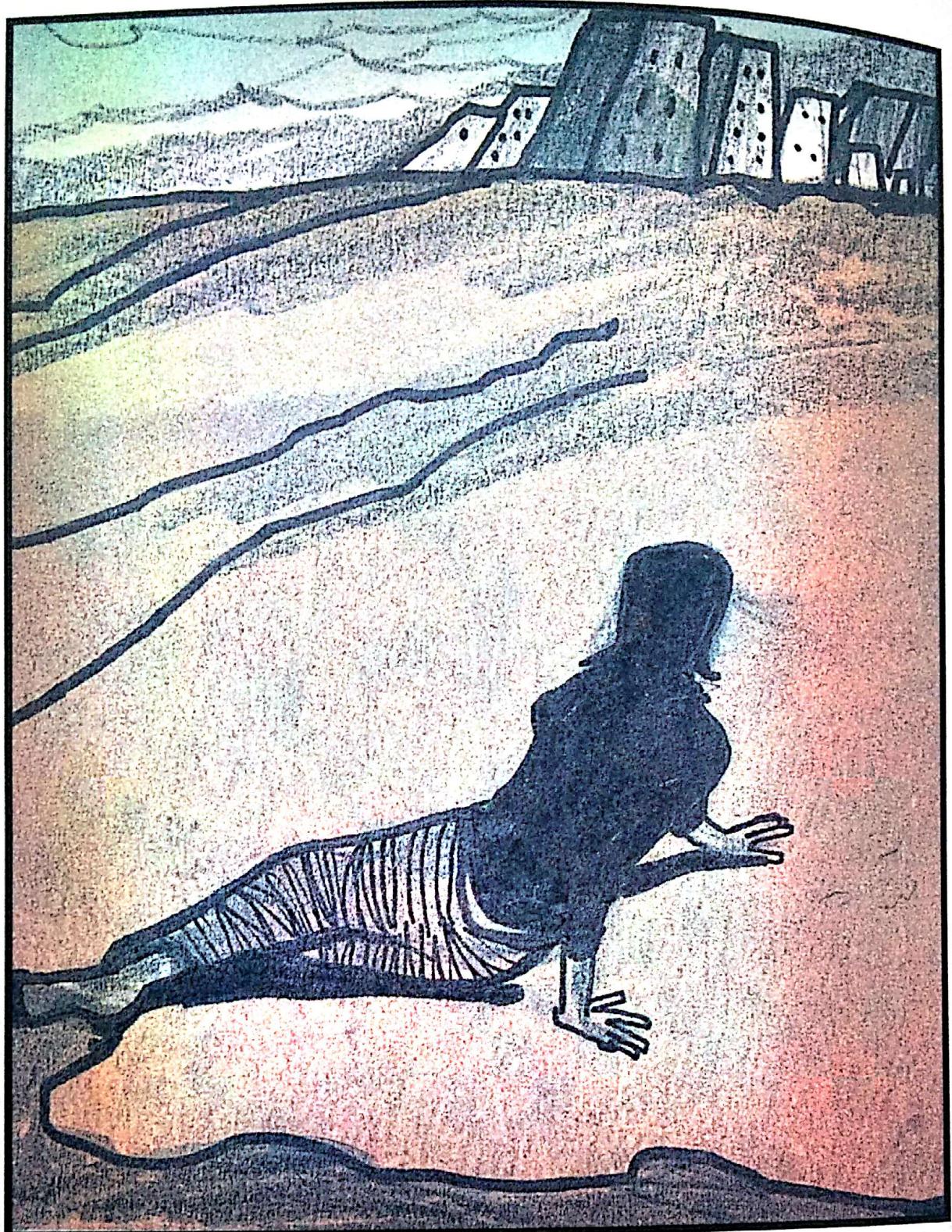
Free falling, I pass by a mesh. A mesh with her in it, bouncing up and down, held within a protective cradle. Your building had a safety net, Ruth; mine had none.







Ruth's fall was broken by a safety net. How typical. Saved, she got into a plane and left. Her last memory of the city must be an aerial one. Dark and ablaze with fistfuls of light. The airport was a ford, and she crossed over.



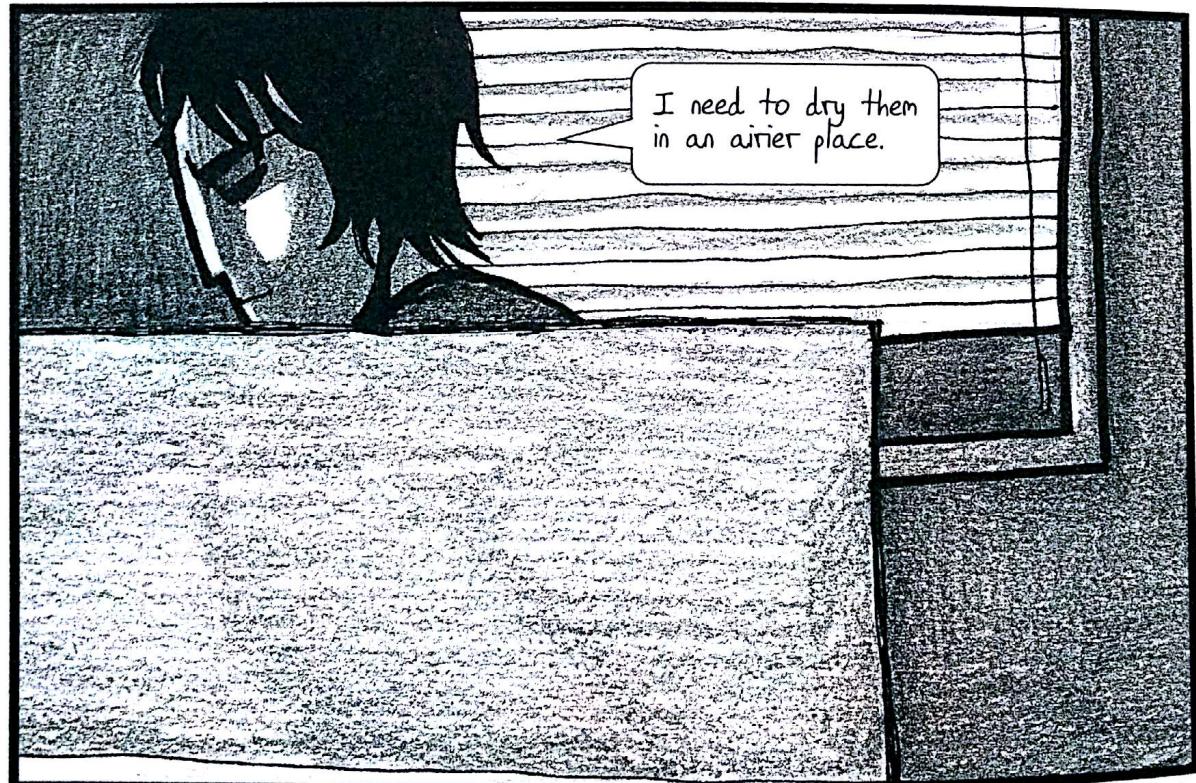
Some people are lucky enough to be saved by the Light, no such luck for me. I was saved by a sewer, by the stinking river of effluents that snakes past our neighbourhood, the one our buildings avert their faces from. I should have lingered within its loving coils and allowed it to drown me. Instead I crawled right out into the fray.

Out of the sewer and into a landfill.

Not only have I survived the fall intact, I even have me some kind of a Trinity outfit in PVC.

FAIRYTALE HAIR

Still trailing the sewer, I staggered into office because I could think of no place else to go.

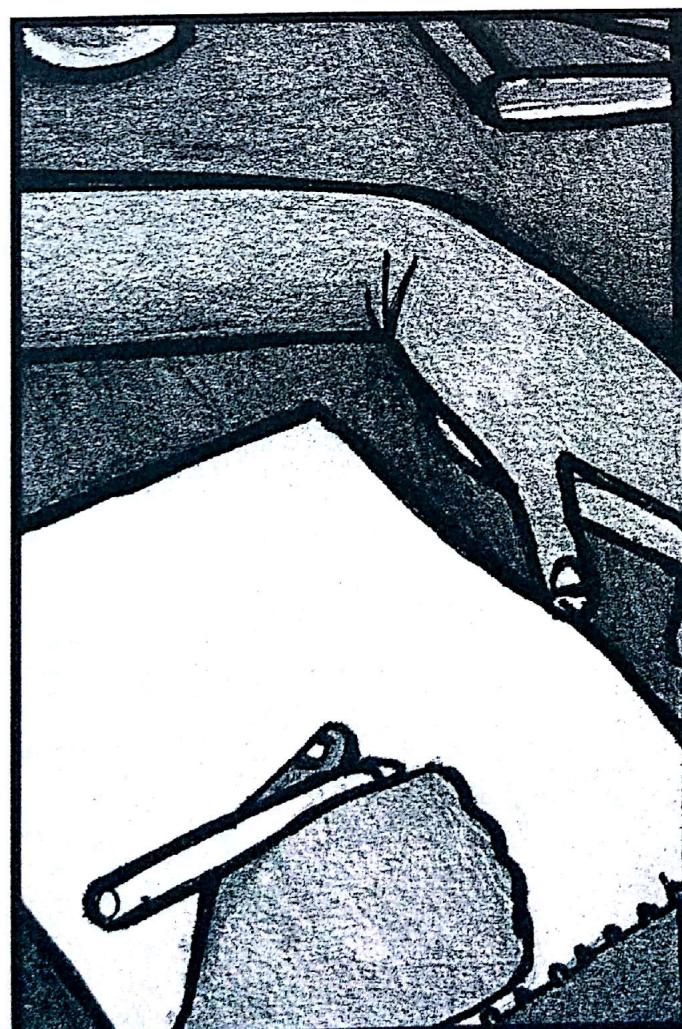
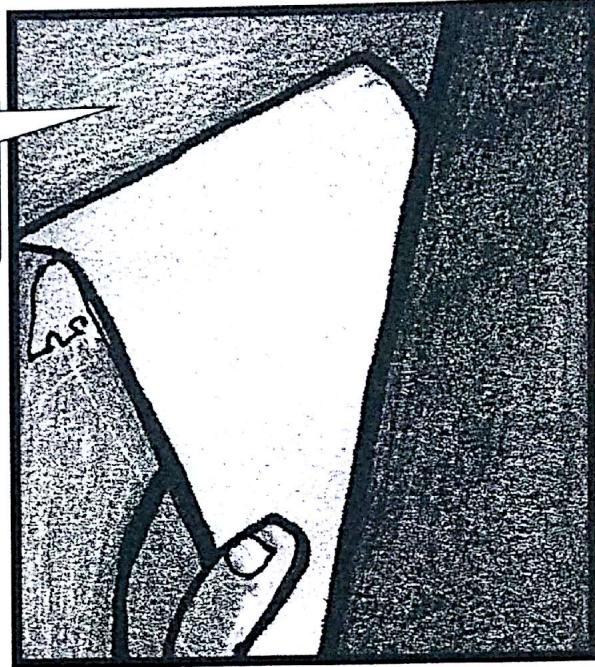


The thought of home is oppressive. Hushed voices and careful conversation. The girls would be a little scared of me if they knew. If a person can try to snuff herself out, there is nothing she won't do. A failed suicide is death still, because no one emerges from it unscathed.

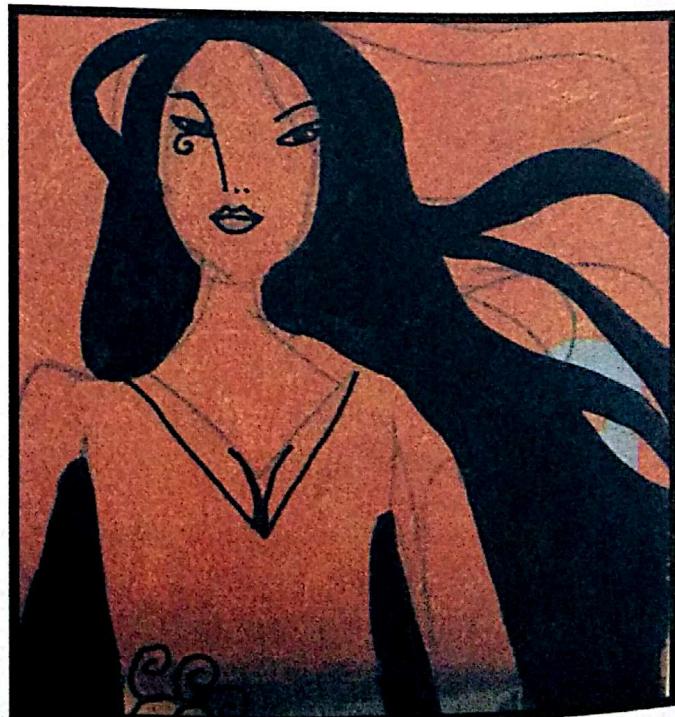
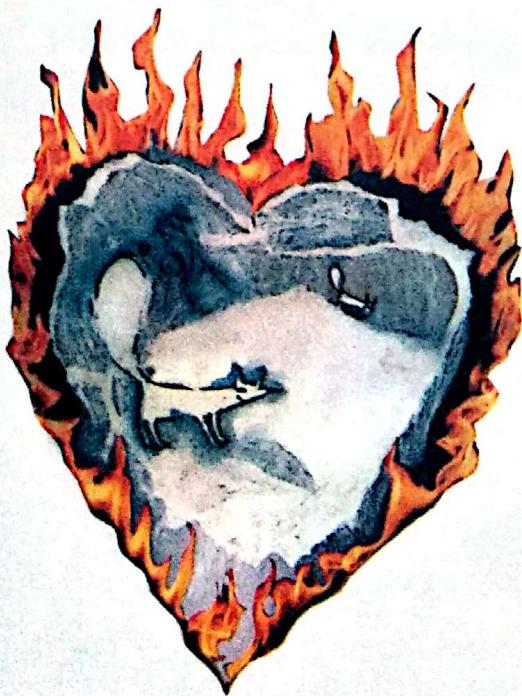
Work, on the other hand, is unaffected by the waxing and waning of personal moons.

On the day Ruth and I died a death apiece, I clung to sanity by hiding in the ad agency cubicle and writing headlines for Fairytale Hair. The ad is into its thirty-sixth rewrite. My tone has changed from sincere to outrageous, but the headlines all meet the same fate: rejection.

Bearded Man, custodian of paycheque and professional growth, tells me to bring in the sex, bring in the glamour, and discover my inner fox.



The fox was beautiful, and white as snow. The Princess walked o'er hills and dales to find him. East o' the sun she walked, and west o' the moon. The further the Princess walked, the further the fox ran - always on the horizon.



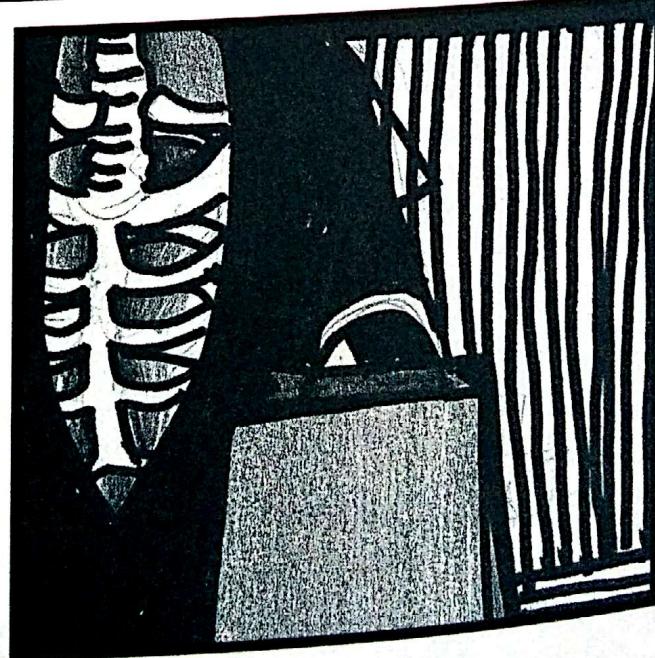
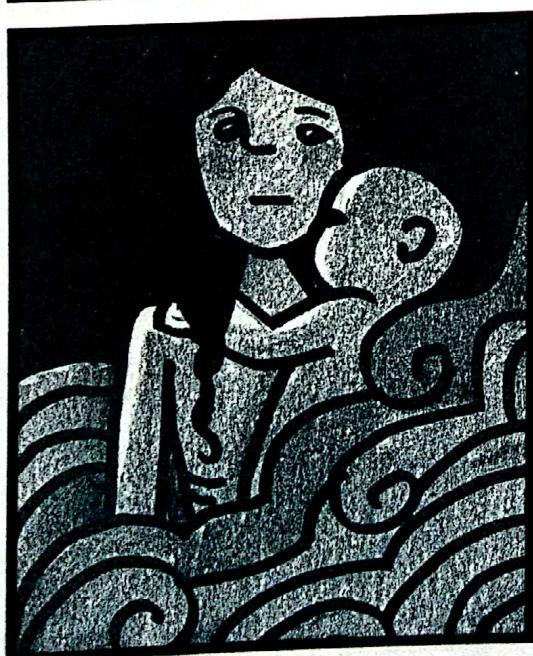
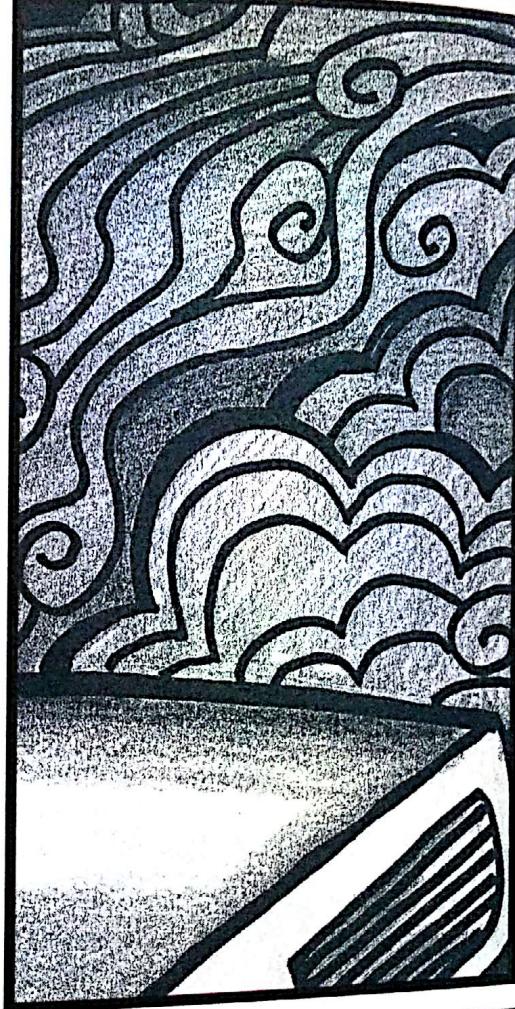
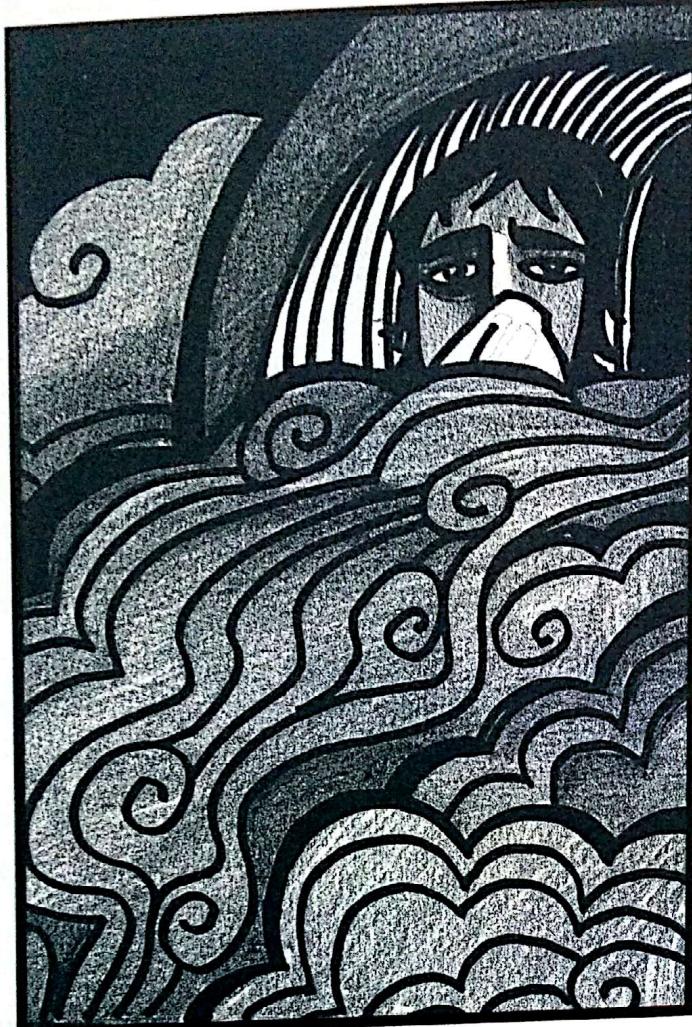


Trainee copywriters and art directors always eat scraps off the table. My career thus far has revolved around a table piled with substandard underwear. These chaddi-baniyans are to be made essential to the functioning of the modern world. Which suited me just fine.

Of late, because the agency is understaffed and no one else wants a New Year's Eve deadline, Lazarus (the trainee art director) and I have been promoted to the impossible glamour of an international hair-product brand called Fairytale Hair. They figure that by the time they are back from their holidays, they can make some high-profile hires and ease us off the account.

On my way back home, like on any other day, I try to breathe as little as I can to prevent smog city from choking me. I wish I could detach my lungs. Every day, the city seems to be getting heavier, and her varicose veins fight to break out of her skin. Soon we must mutate - thick skins and resilient lungs - to survive this new reality.

A city alters when a person leaves. It drops drawbridges, grows new roads, looks hairy at dusk. Since Ruth left, I don't think I have walked the same road twice. Every day I wander into strange backyards and junk heaps and miraculously find my way out and back to work or home again. I give my days to the ad agency, work like a fury and sleep like the dead.

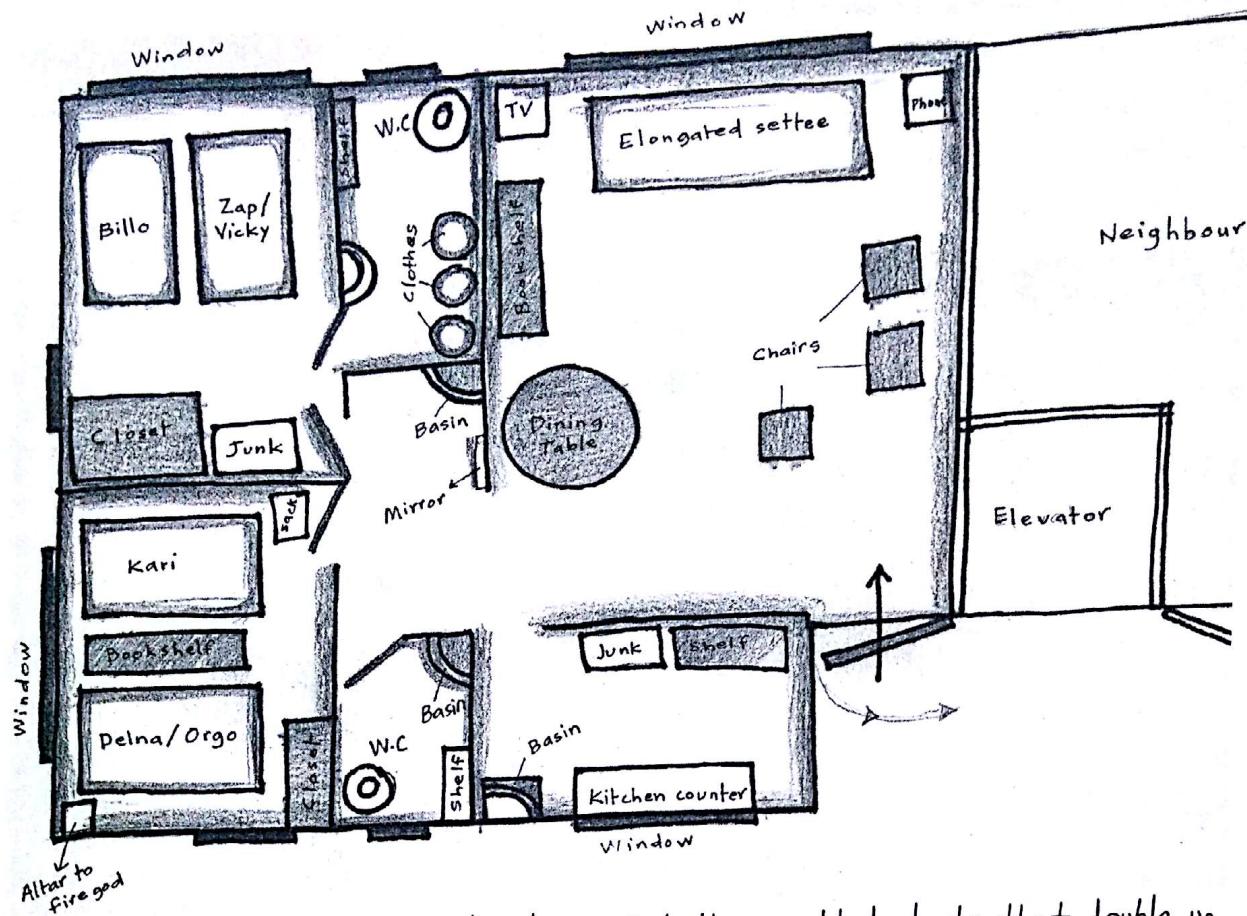


While I sleep, Ruth must be striding towards a flame-coloured calling.

CRYSTAL PALACE

Crystal Palace is my chorus. The only part of the song familiar enough for me to sing along with, the only part that inevitably repeats itself, whether I care for the words or not. Interesting that my postal address in smog city sounds like a pit stop in a fairytale. Where gold trees with silver boughs bear pomegranates with real ruby seeds. Floors of marble, ceilings of brocade. Place where twelve dancing princesses dance through the night until the soles of their shoes wear out.





No gold trees here at Crystal Palace. Just three potted plants that double up as ashtrays. We do have two dancing princesses though, plus two permanent houseguest princes who go by the superhero names Orgo and Zap.



Too broke to take our private lives any place else, we bring them into this shared 2 BHK. But the reality of three bodies squeezed into an 8' by 10' room will make a psychopath of a good human being. The bookshelf is the dam that keeps our tempers from running amok. I try and imagine different worlds on the other side of the bookshelf.

You would imagine that with so much clutter, the one thing you wouldn't miss was company. But that isn't true. When I first came here I had expected walk-in sisterhood. Head massages and face packs and fusion, end-of-the-day comparing of notes. This warbling Little Women camaraderie is a badge that must be painstakingly earned.



Other places are equally busy. Three racks, for example, shared by three women and two permanently visiting houseguest men. All five share the top of the cistern. Five people have six soapdishes, five loofahs, eight razors, four bottles of shampoo. Two towels, three pyjamas, a bridal bra, talc on the floor. Strands of conditioned hair on the drain cover, novel tucked away in the blinds, a paper-covered something someone forgot to throw away.





The only person who always wants to talk to me is Mamma. Every Friday, at 10 p.m., is the long call home. Mamma talks, I listen. When I get back home, the silence has teeth again. My bed feels as large as a football field.

The diva of Crystal Palace is Billo. Sulking, smouldering, gathering a cache of admirers at every street corner. There is a lurking danger about Billo, the promise of a betrayal that men can never resist. She is Empress, and Delna is her humble minister. Delna is a pretty girl, but in the presence of Billo she seems to be rendered sexually null and void. Both of them are at peace with this.

Zap, Billo's boyfriend, is Delna's ex. Orgo, Delna's boyfriend, is Billo's ex. This shared history, far from being divisive, has meshed them incestuously close. Now the four of them are a single-cell organism with not much room for strangers. Mostly. With Billo, an occasional mutation is always possible.



Billo's story fell into place when I met her mother.

Imagine this: 1) Billo, 7 years old, making scrambled eggs so she can wake mum from her stupor at 11 a.m. 2) Billo, 9 years old, worshipful of mum's varnished plum-coloured nails, covering up for mum's public white lies. When I imagine this, I always want to give Billo a tight squeeze, but I don't dare. She is too beautiful - in an unhinged sort of way.

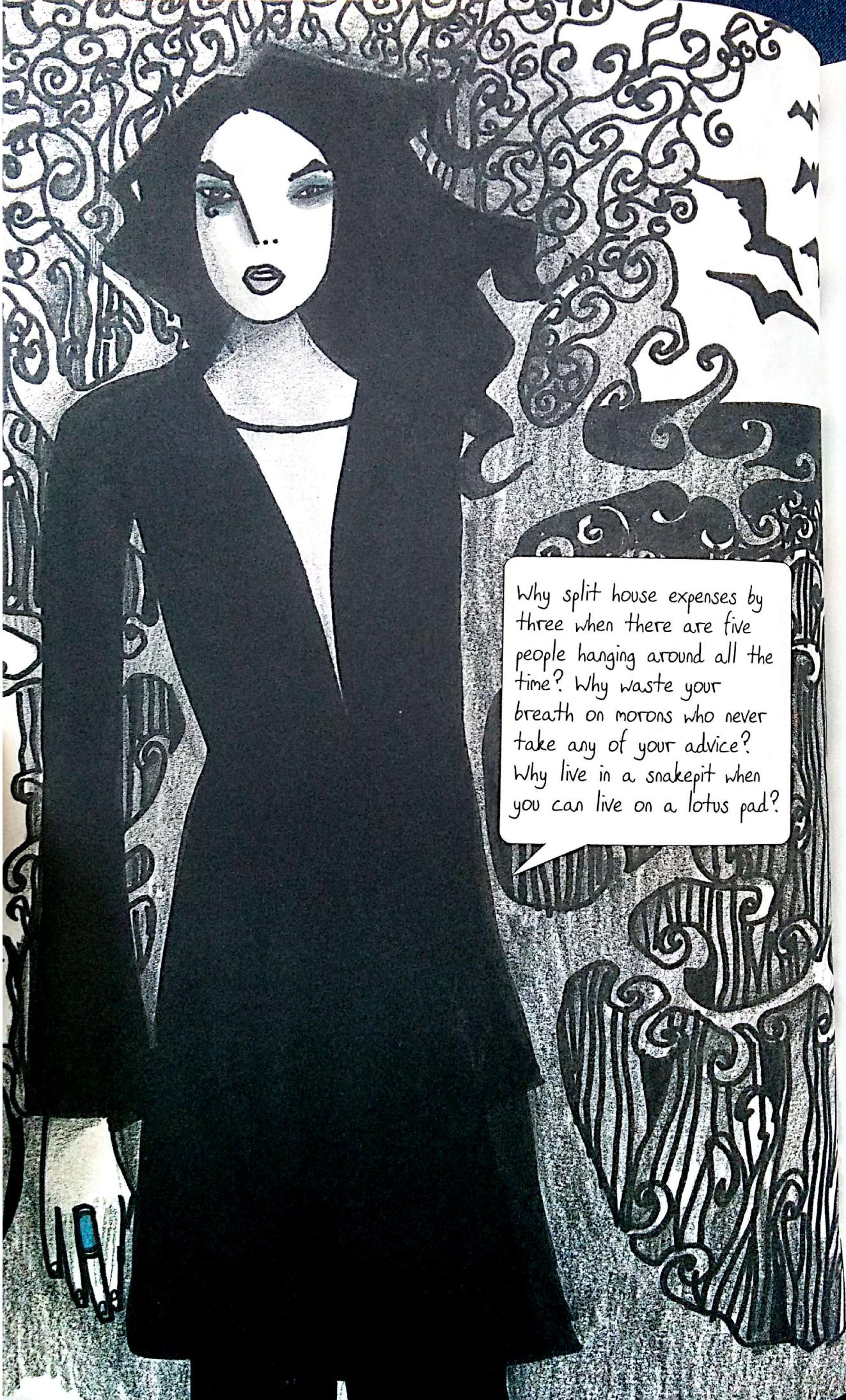
I share my room with Delna. She came to the city three years ago - ran away from a father who beat her mother. She wanted to be an actress but ended up being a Hand and Foot stand-in.



What sounds like a bovine disease is actually this: lady in the commercial is some reigning celluloid goddess, but in close-up shots, when she pours the lotion or steps over a threshold as a coy Hindu bride, the hands and feet you see are Delna's. She always has interesting stories about the celebrity calluses, corns, bitten fingernails and ugly toes she stands in for.

Although I am not part of the organism, they like me well enough. I am non-threatening and non-intrusive. And women of the world adore tousled boygirls. They all want to be Wendy to my Peter Pan. The more my roommates grow to like me, the more vehemently they dislike Ruth.

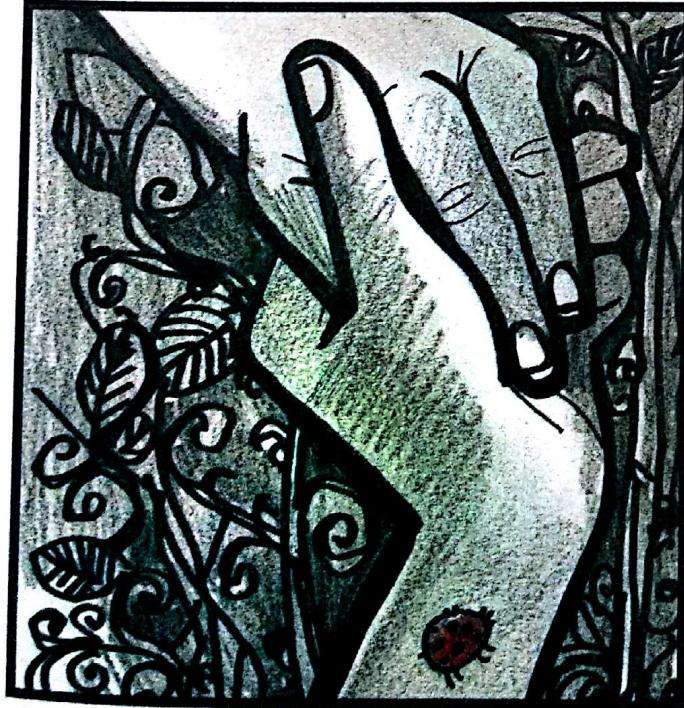
Nobody could be Wendy to Ruth. She'd wallop Wendy's whiny homebody ass. In any case, Ruth's heart only has room for that which is useful, and governed by the head. It has no room for the single-cell organism.

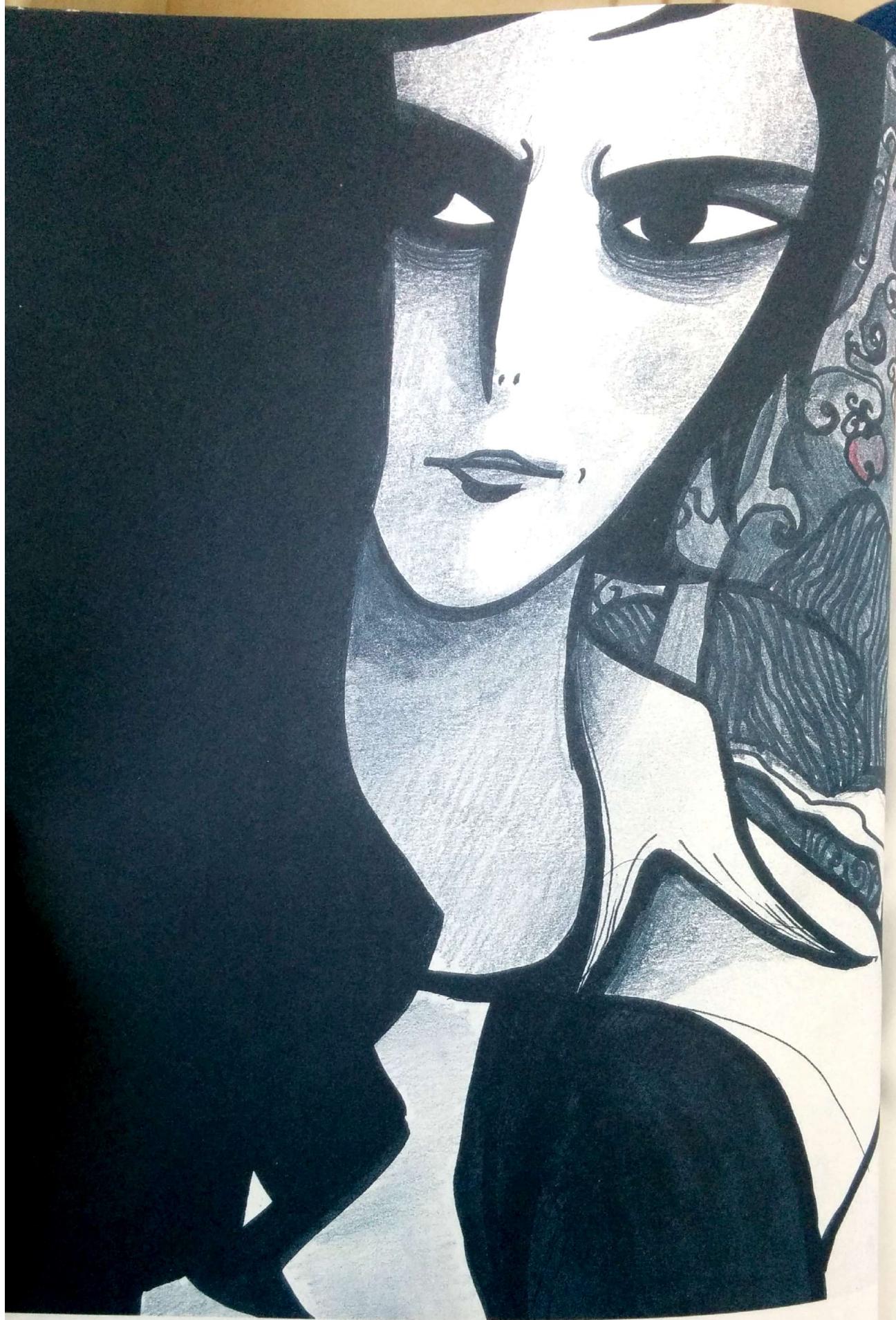


Why split house expenses by three when there are five people hanging around all the time? Why waste your breath on morons who never take any of your advice? Why live in a snakepit when you can live on a lotus pad?

Such questions I have trouble answering.

Anyway. So Ruth inhabited Crystal Palace only when the princesses were out a-dancing. She'd billow in from her own tidy lotus pad in the building across, throw out hardened leftovers and junk and processed food, and walk me, her hand in mine, into the secret lives of ginger, cardamom, basil and anise.

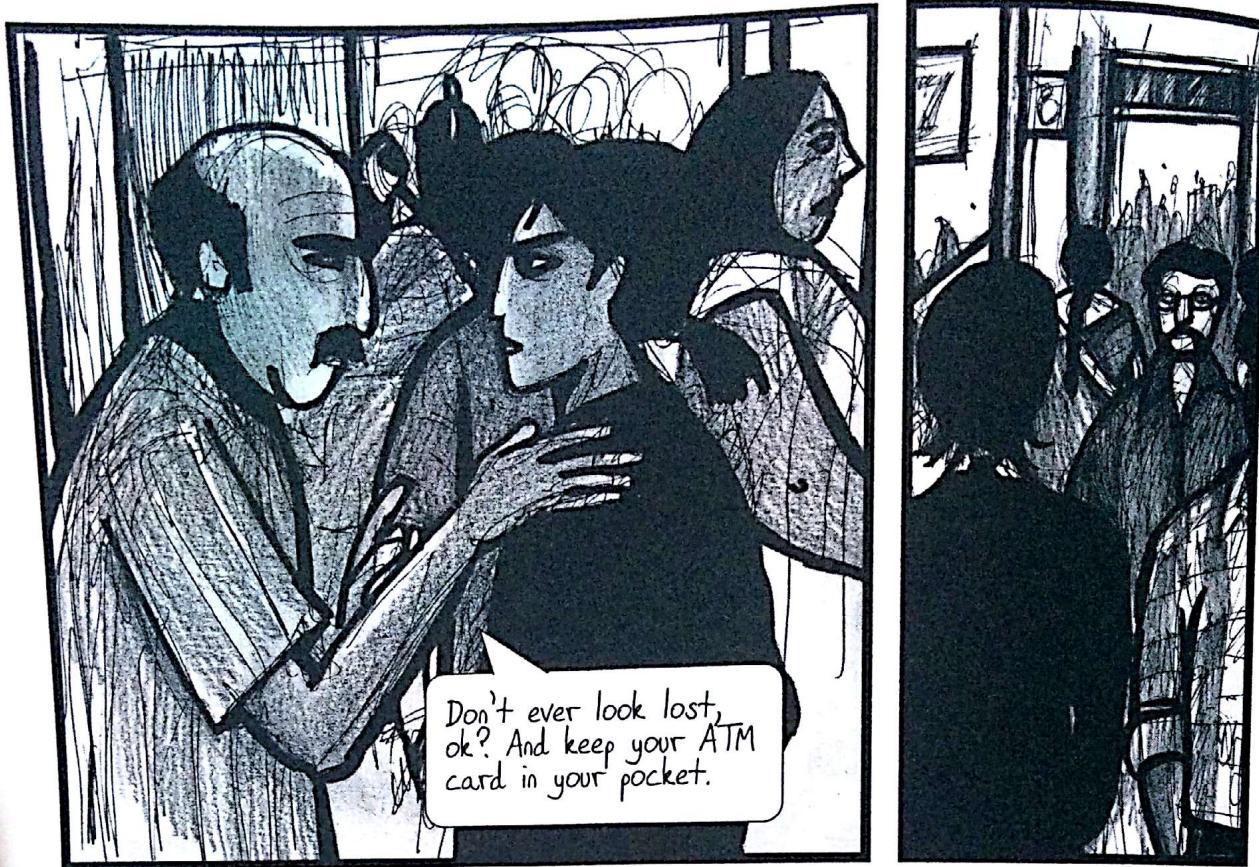




No one else could call a colt a flower. And no one was such a flame-thrower acrobat with pans and knives as was Ruth. The grotty kitchen turned into a secret garden around her. The house fit her perfectly, like a crystal slipper.

THE VISITATIONS

Flashback to when I first came to smog city:

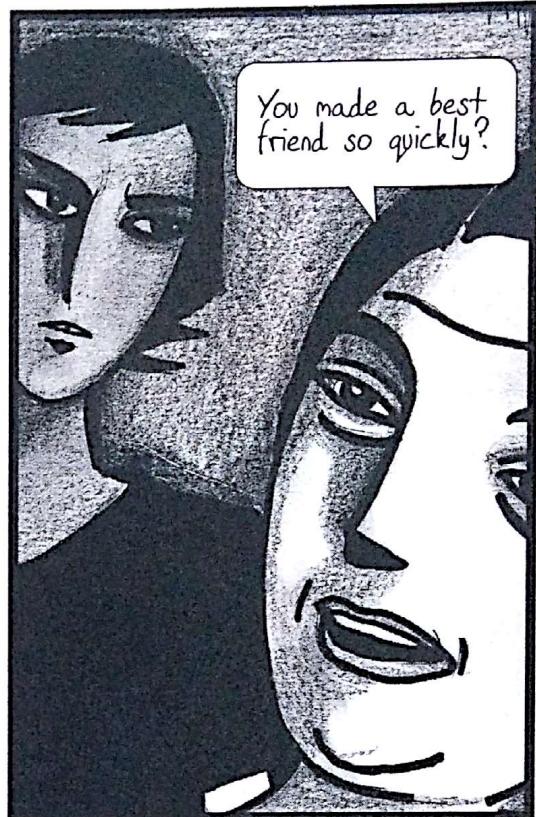


When I saw Baba recede into the distance, I thought my heart would break. It was my time to fly solo, but all I felt like doing was curling up and dying, or going back home. I've always wanted to tell Baba that his advice has been my golden charm in smog city, but I never have.

My parents visited Crystal Palace once. Not long after I fell into Ruth. The chorus was affable, but they had forgotten how to be appropriate.



From then on, everything is downhill. In 1.5 seconds, Mamma's eagle eye takes in, braless dress, lit cigarette, and the location of the young man's head in Delna's lap. In the next three days, she takes in other things as well.



For the next ten days, until they leave, I try to distract them with movie outings and cuisines that they are unfamiliar with and don't care for.



I know she is not ok. My mother cannot pretend.
To avoid further sensing-feeling details, I talk nonstop. The two of them are chillingly quiet. In some inexplicable, definite way, I have let them down again.

I wait to watch their train leave just as I waited to watch their train pull in. I wait until they have disappeared. Until the next train pulls in. I have temporarily regressed to being a guilt-ridden and miserable child.

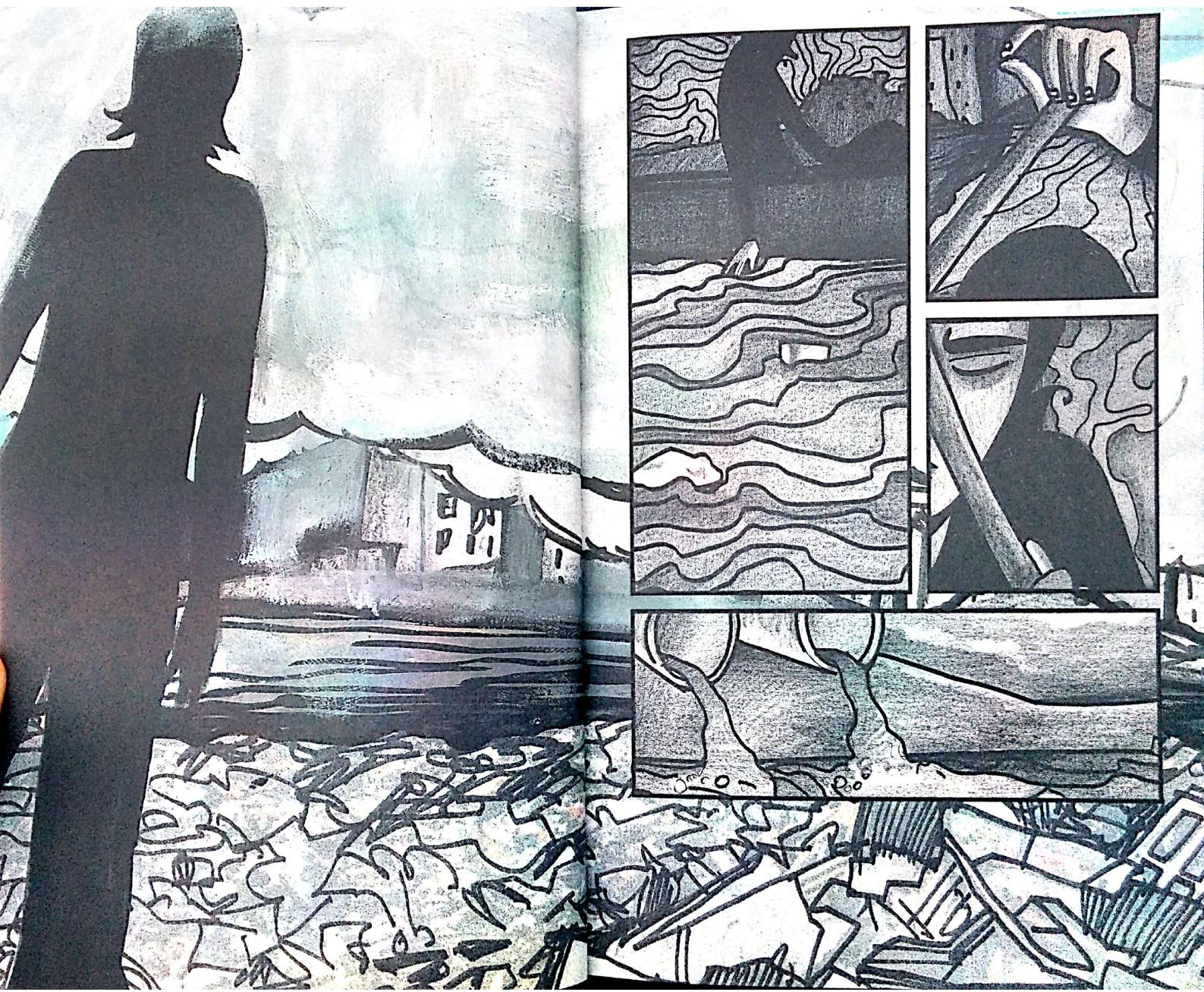
The call comes two days later. Mamma's concern has percolated into complete hysteria. I am glad that the assault happens in the form of a dismembered voice. 'This is not how I raised you,' says Mamma. 'Of all the people in such a big city, you pick the smut and the degenerates.'

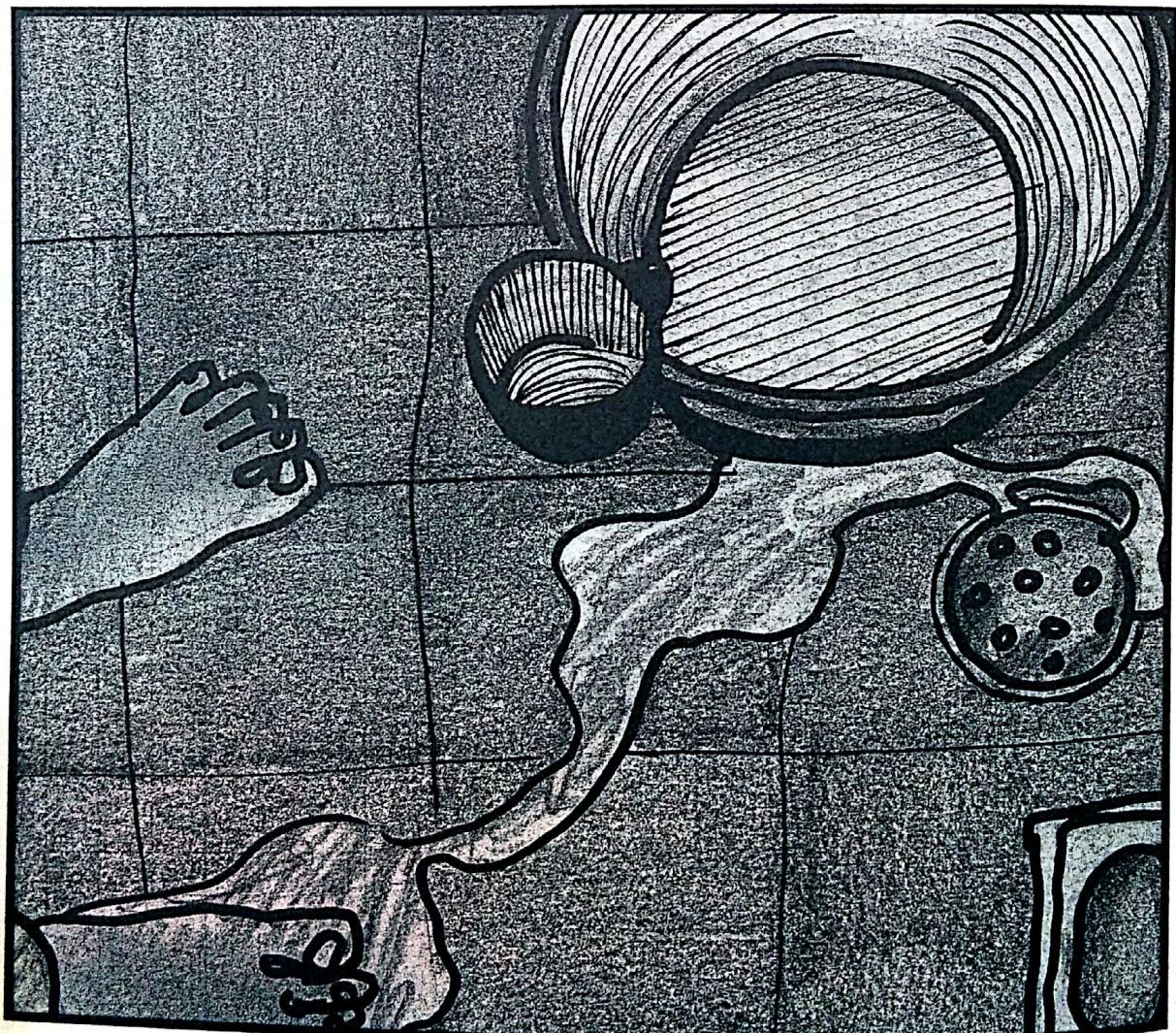
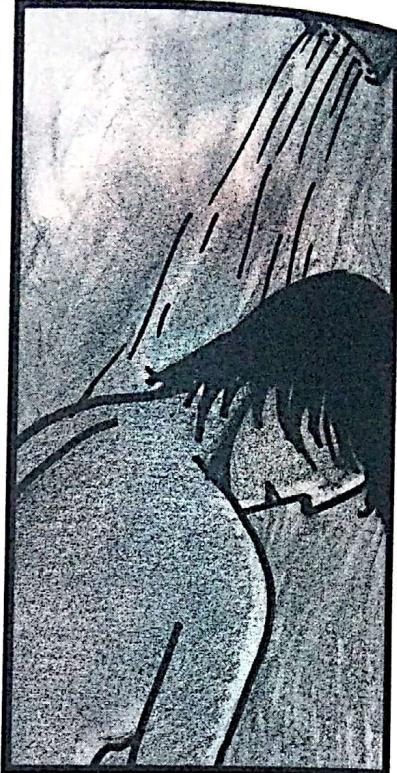
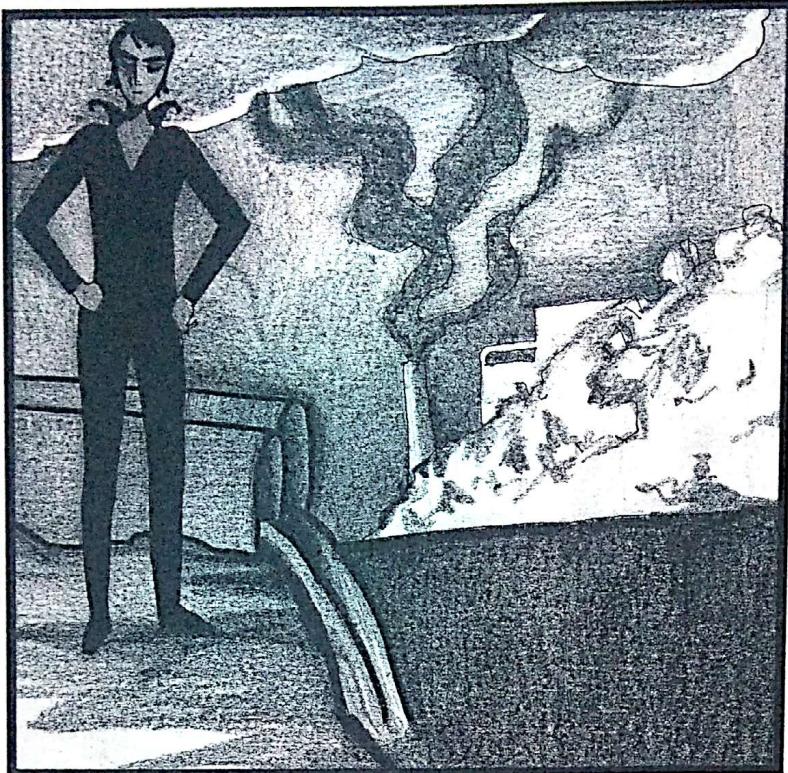


Forgot to mention. The day I hauled myself out of the sewer - the day of the double suicide - I promised the water I'd return her favour. That I'd unclog her sewers when she couldn't breathe.

I earned me a boat that night.

As a boatman, you learn to row clean through the darkest water.





Washing the stench off my body when I get back home is a ritual. I can see the stench, eager as mercury, rush into the drainhole to join the mother bog.

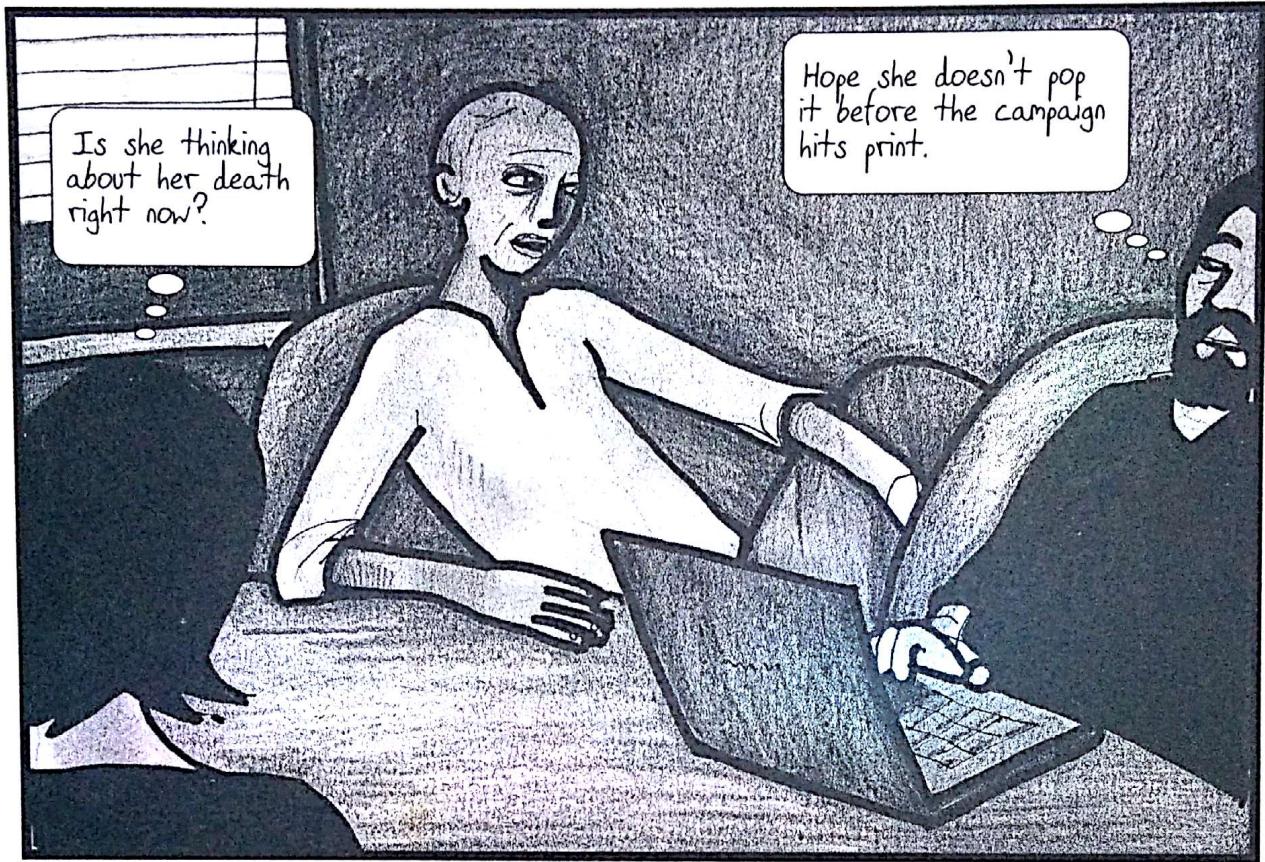
ANGEL ON THE CORNICE

In the meantime, my friend Angel continues to die. Flashback to when Lazarus and I were promoted to the Fairytale Hair account. I, who remove not one hair from my body voluntarily, and Lazarus, who believes that real men don't look at mirrors: creative team made in heaven. Five minutes before the Fairytale Hair briefing:



Of course I know that our tickers have been ticking since the day we were born, but Angel was the first actively dying person I'd met in my life. It's as potent a connection as first love.

Angel's status as the dying woman supercedes everything else in people's eyes. When she speaks, we listen with rapt attention. As if there's something ominous and beyond these shores in everything she says. We are constantly awed by the shelf life of her skin.



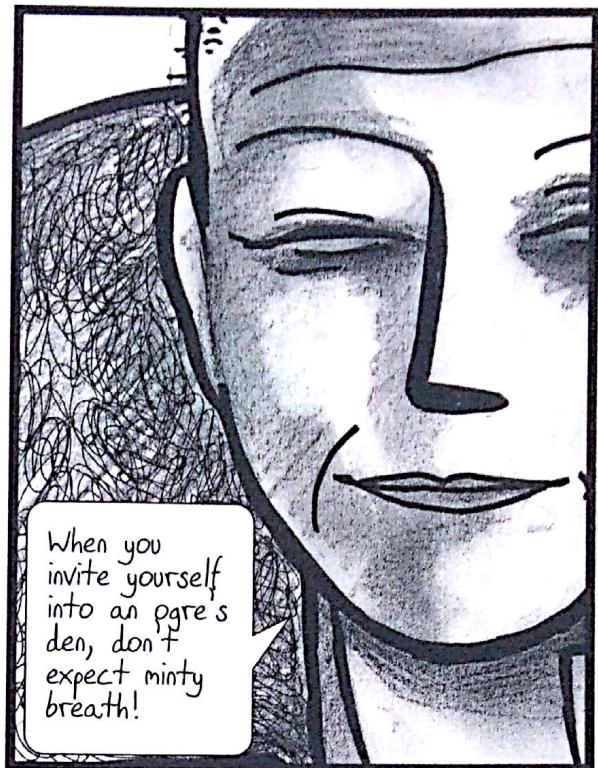
I am as guilty of this as anybody else. I am madly drawn to her dying. Forces beyond the ordinary pull me to her doorstep one Sunday.



Don't know why you are here, but you should know two things. One, I am bald because I am sick, not because I am butch.

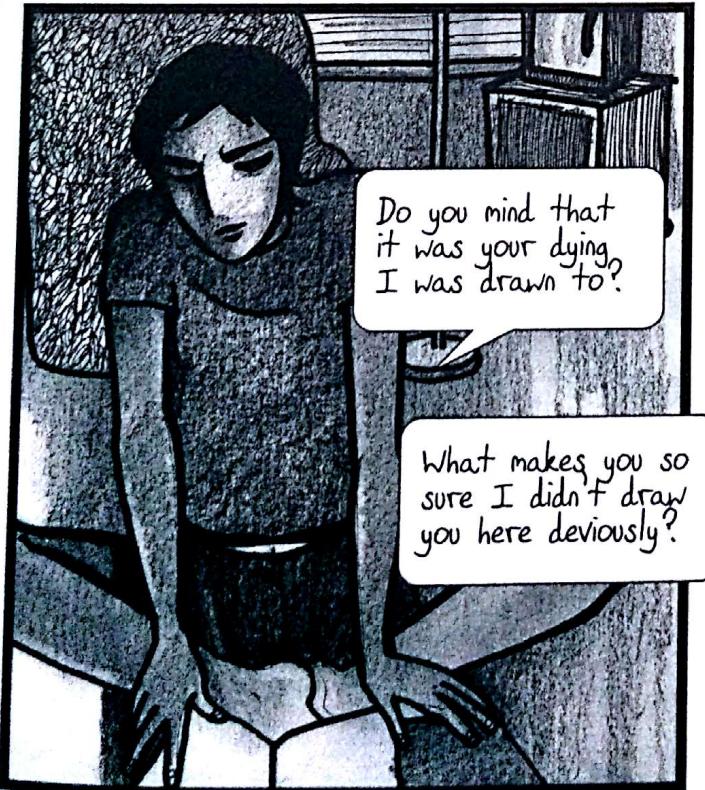
And two, all that I own will soon be gone on hospital bills.

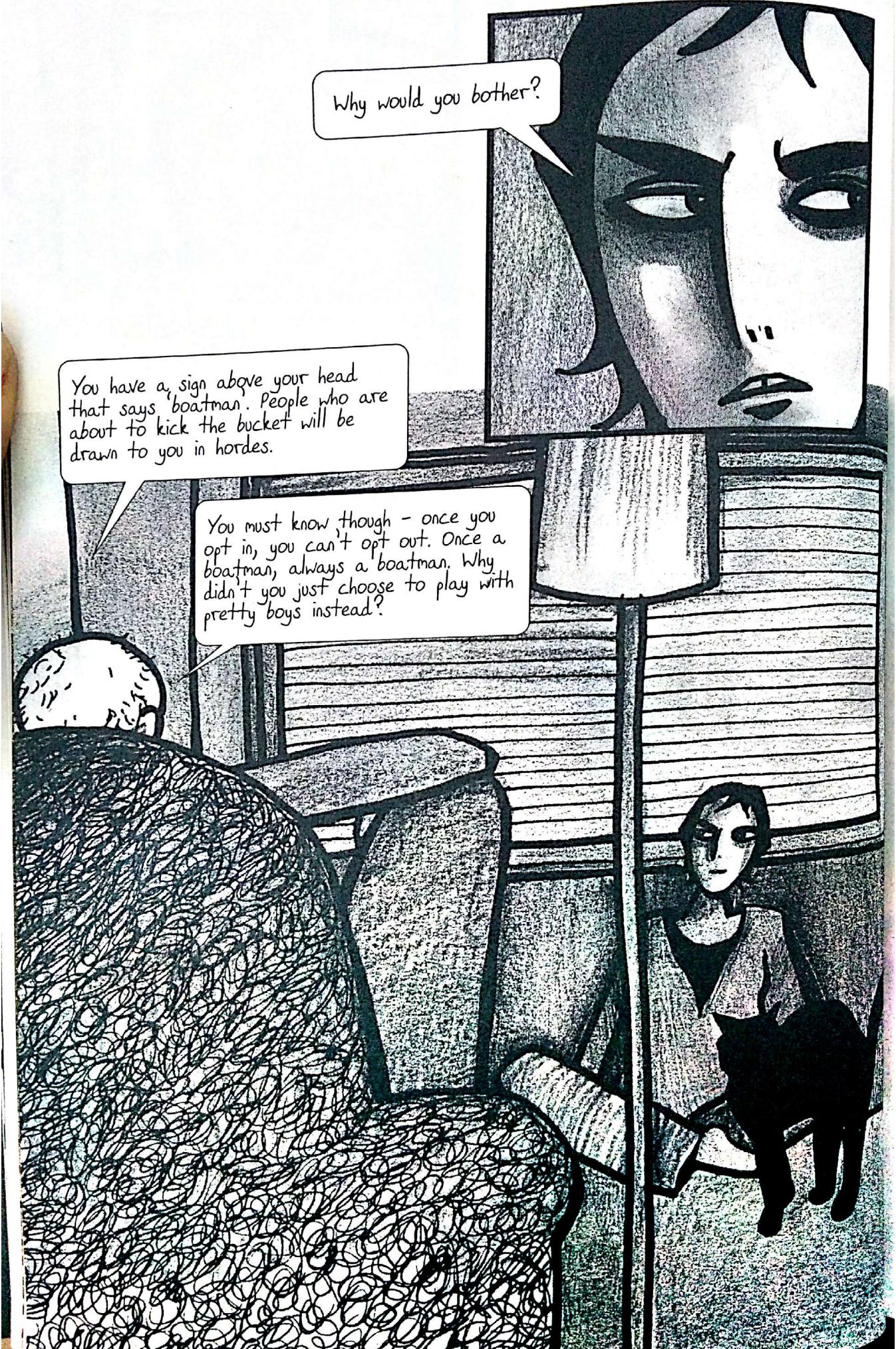
Not all relationships have a logical beginning, growth and consolidation.
Some begin like this, without preamble.



The day I met her for the first time was the last time she ever went to work. Next morning set in the pain that couldn't be controlled by morphine patches; the rumbling stomach noises and flatulence she was too vain to carry into company. Soon fatigue would leave her immobilized.

Pain is the chorus to Angel's song. Physical pain is a given. She does not even mention it any more, though it is of a magnitude that most of us feel only in pangs and only a few times in our lives. Angel has forgotten what a body feels like without pain.





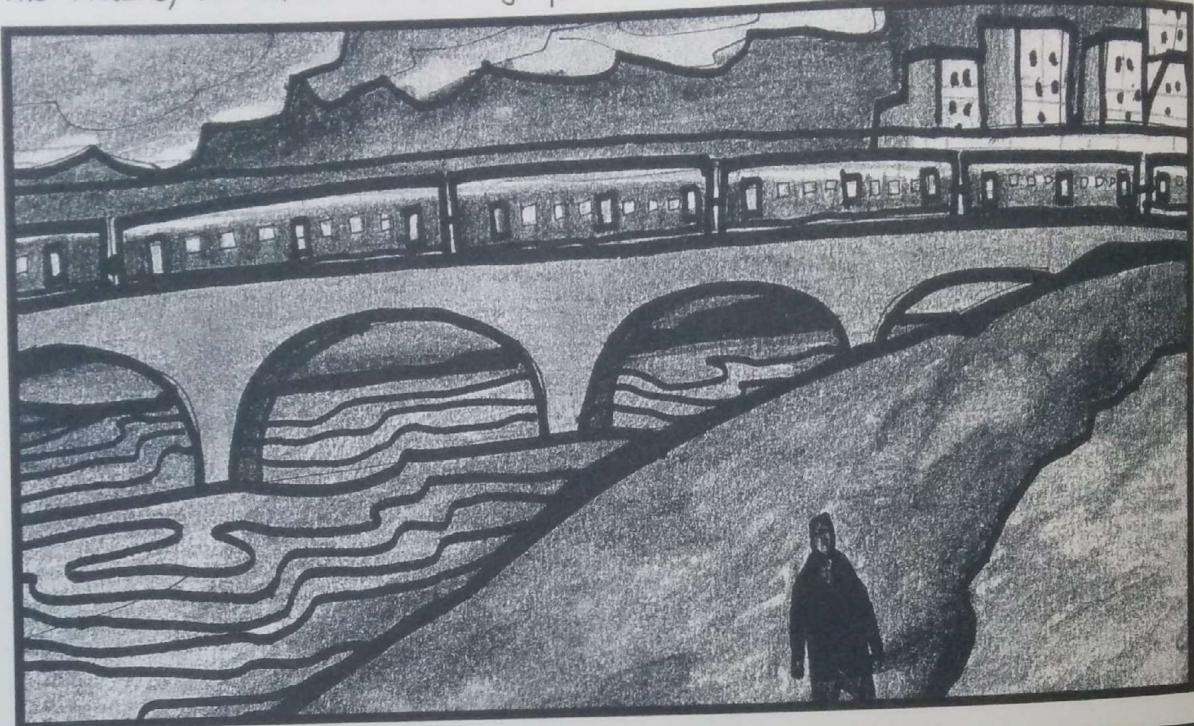
On my way back from work, the stench is a cheerful greeting. Hello, grins the sewer, I am still here. It's hard to fathom the exact composition of the smell. It must have something to do with the city's digestive system. When a digestive system is unwell, it poisons the body with toxins of its own making.

People who travel this route every day stop smelling the sewer over the years. People who live here become oblivious to the smell in a matter of days. And yet, I assure you it is most vile. I, Kari, twice-born, who trawl the drains dream after dream, can smell the sewer everywhere. My thoughts keep returning to the city's lower intestine. To the gutters and hastily dug out canals that empty her bladder and swell her arteries with clean blood.

I catalogue smells for entertainment.



This morning, I am yet another jostling shoulder in the railway python. Like on any other morning, we travel in silence. In this city, no one talks. Everyone guards their sanity against the grief of strangers. We see a dismembered body on the tracks, but after the first gasp, no one utters a word.



The Airlines lady who travels in the same compartment as us day after day, has bruises on her arms and face today and her eyes keep welling, but no one asks her why. Our eyes dart towards her, but we go back to travelling in too much proximity. Two inches from one another and expressionless.

Arabian Sea

Taj Mahal

Mahalakshmi

Byculla

Mumbai
Central

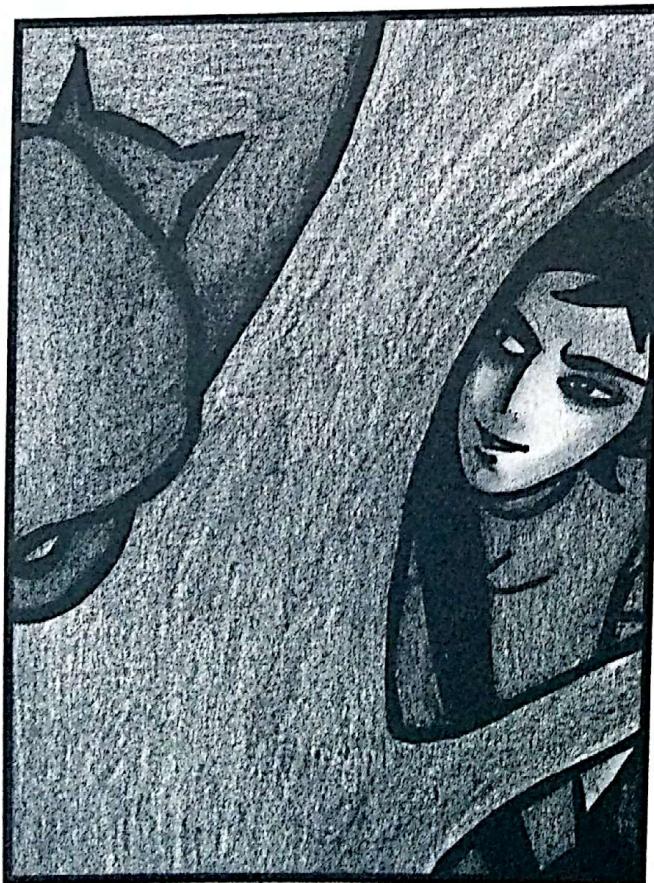
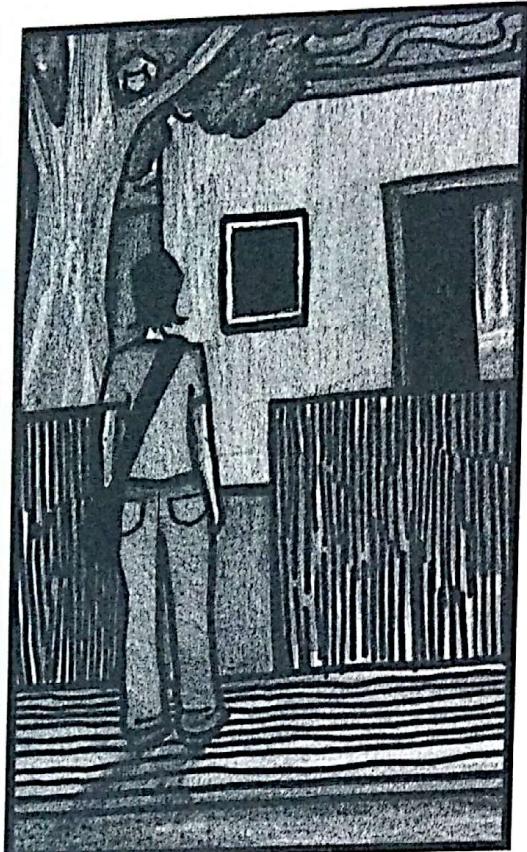
Worli

Parel

Dada

An unfamiliar road, tender offshoot to the tar, has appeared today and it tempts me to walk it. I have walked from the railway station to the ad agency almost every single day for one entire year and never seen this road before. It must have grown anew last night.

Wedged between a wall and a sidewalk is a house that ought to have been bought out by real-estate sharks a long time ago. In front of the house is a tree. On the tree is a large orange-eyed tomcat, yawning and blinking in the sun.



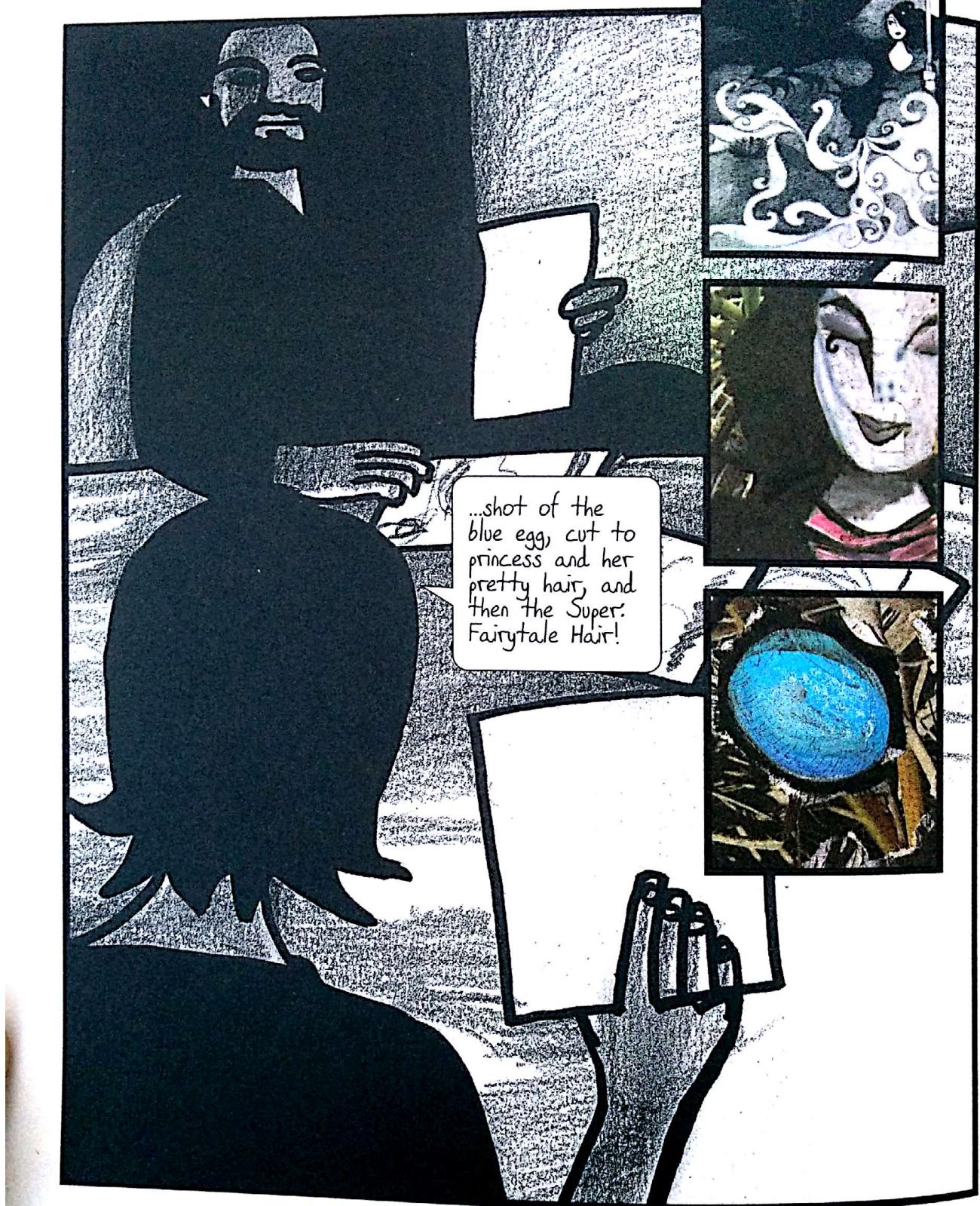
Alexa feeds the orange-eyed cat in the tree every day; he likes to be where there is a bird's-eye view.

There are more cats in Alexa's backyard.

They are all very dusty, the whites turned sooty, the gingers turned grey. None as beautiful as Bostiao in the tree, but beautiful nonetheless. Because of Bostiao, I get to meet Alexa and her husband, Manuel, who is blind and plays the violin like a particularly haunting dream. I have scrambled eggs in their balcony and talk about Goa, where Alexa and Manuel's ancestors lie buried.

Needless to say, I am very late getting into work. But there is a happy buzz in my heart that will surely turn into a small blue thing in Ruth's palm. Bead, maybe. Or bauble or marble or egg.





Bearded Man grunts, and we know that grunts are at a premium.

'Great TV possibility,' he says. Then he gives us an immense hug each. 'I have great regard for you two bloody jokers.' Laz and I are both blushers and we duly blush. We have cracked Fairytale Hair.

It needs to be mentioned that when I looked for the road to Alexa and Manuel's house the next morning, it was not there. I have seen it since, once or twice, but I can never be entirely sure when I will find it next.

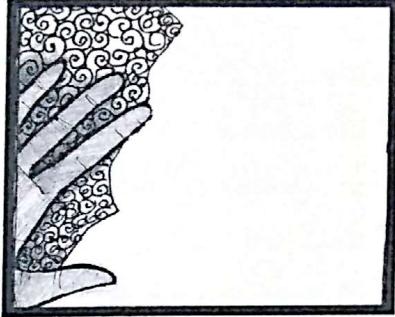
THE SNOW GLOBE

On my bedside table is a snow globe with a winterscape inside. Church, park bench, girl standing shin-deep in snow. Tip the snow globe over and a blizzard of slow snow falls over church and bench and girl. What is it about snow globes that makes them fascinating and terrifying at once?



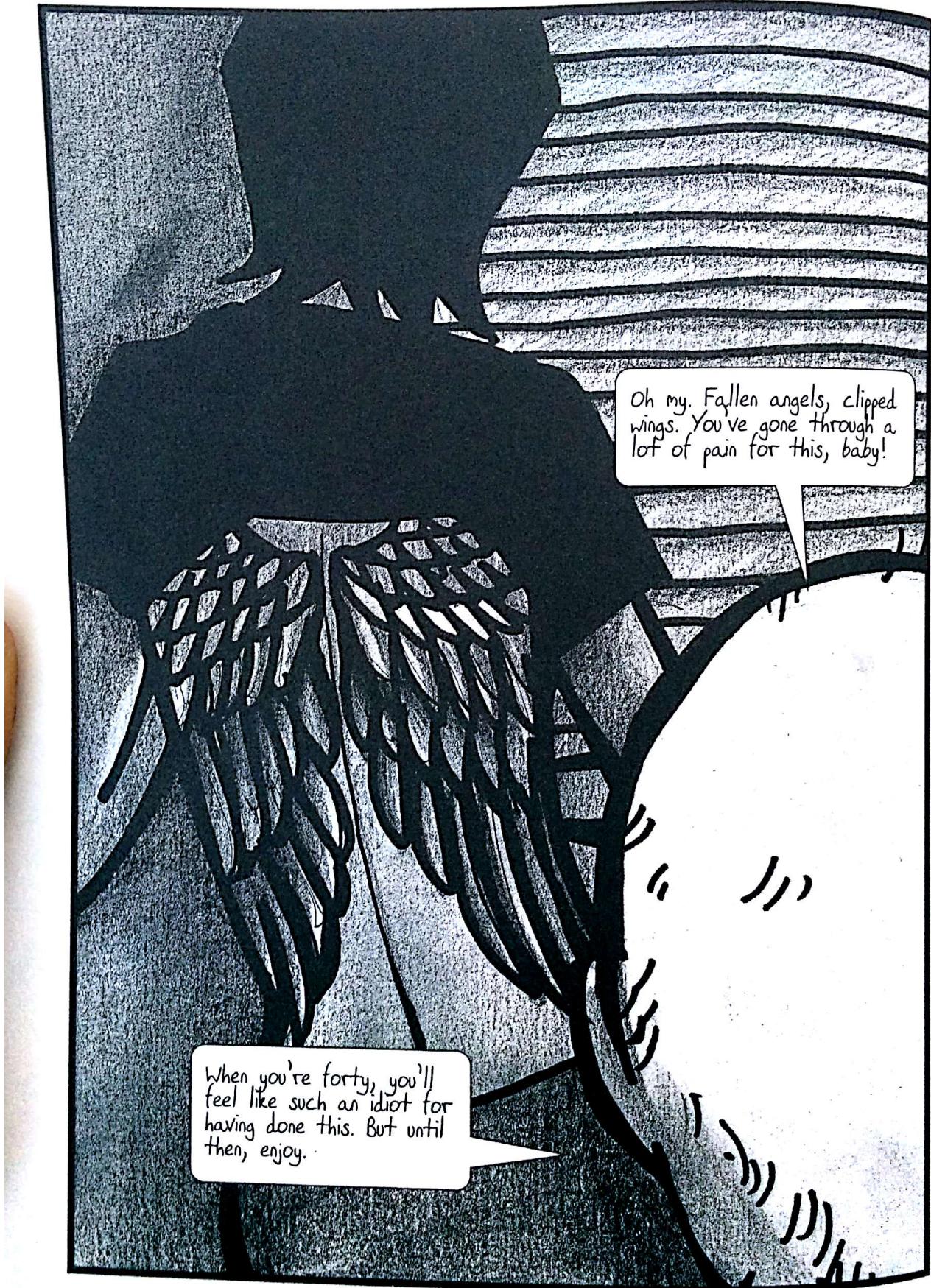
My heart lurches at the thought of the snow-globe girl waiting endlessly, with only the hope of a new snow blizzard to settle on her mantle when the next person tips her snow-globe world over. Not a gust of breeze may ruffle her skirt, not a bird may perch atop the steeple. The only way out of a snow globe is by shattering the glass dome that is its sky.

For some people, one coupling is all their hearts can hold. They mate for life, like Blue-footed Boobies. Others mate as beautifully with one as with another. In Ruth's new city, I know that people couple and move on, couple and move on with ferocity. It is too cold for limb and heart to be alone seven months of the year. When every walk down the street is a war waged against a frozen sidewalk, the least you can ask for at the end of the day is a generous fuck.



The Princess sat sewing in the snow, and her needle darted in and out of the cloth. Suddenly its tip pierced her forefinger, drawing a drop of blood. As the blood fell to the snow, there grew a vine with the most exquisite red rosebuds. Soon the snow was a carpet of roses.

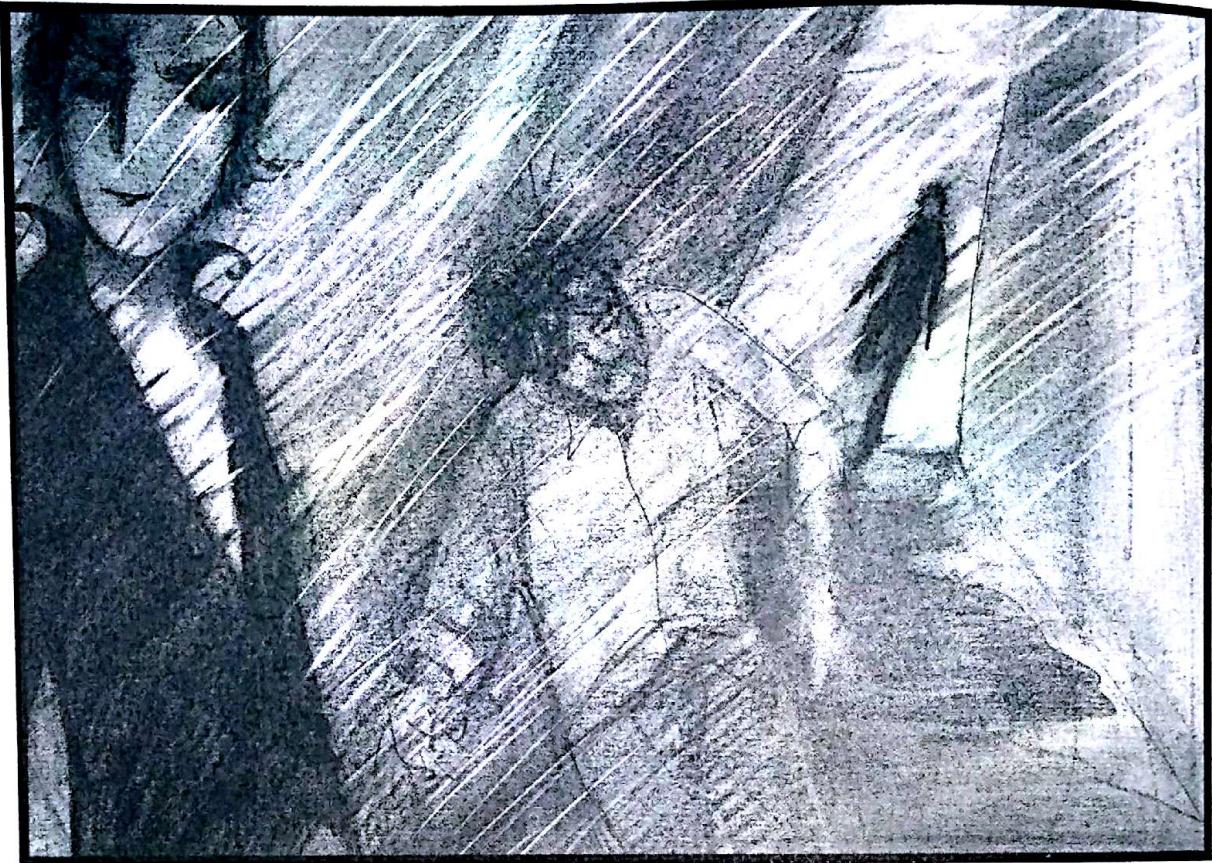
I show Angel the bloody cavern of my heart and she is unimpressed. 'Ruth seems like such a gasbag,' she says, 'I'd much rather hear about you.' Bristling with outraged loyalty, I show her my tattoo instead. This time she is more impressed.



In return, she shows me how to attach and detach prosthetic breasts.

THE ARK

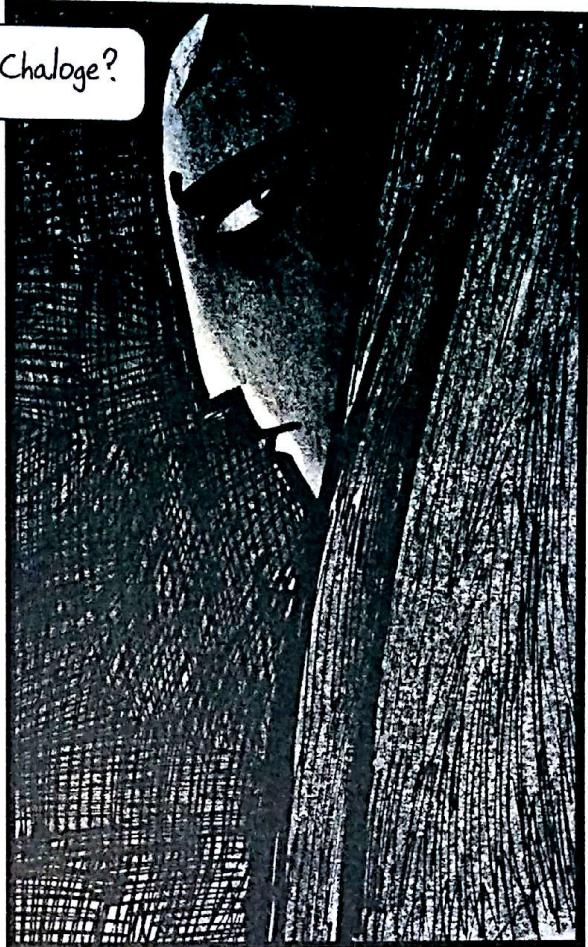
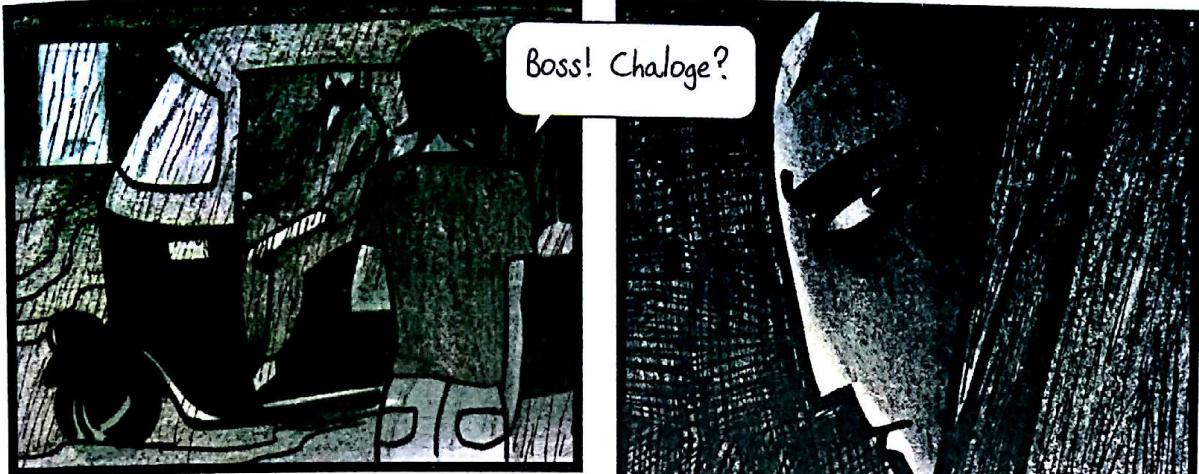
First rains! Toes curled in say don't pull us out, we are happy in here. Storms charge in and knock things over, leave cracks in the ceiling and rivers in the corridor and in your soul. Road and sewer are one. This is just the kind of weather when you should be in a trench coat and in a hurry. A deal, a squabble, a double-crosser in a dingy hotel room.



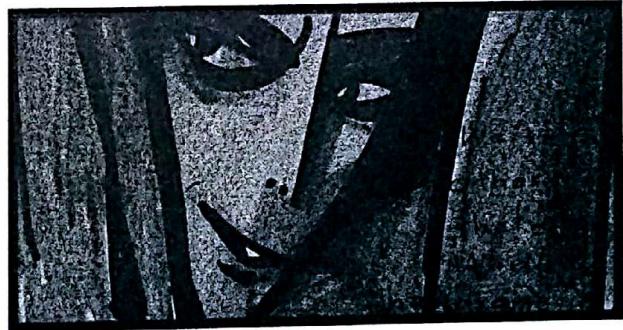
The trick is to forget about the composition of the water, to do what schoolboys do: not curl your toes away from the wet. You can go home and wash your feet. It's harder to go home and play in rainwater puddles.

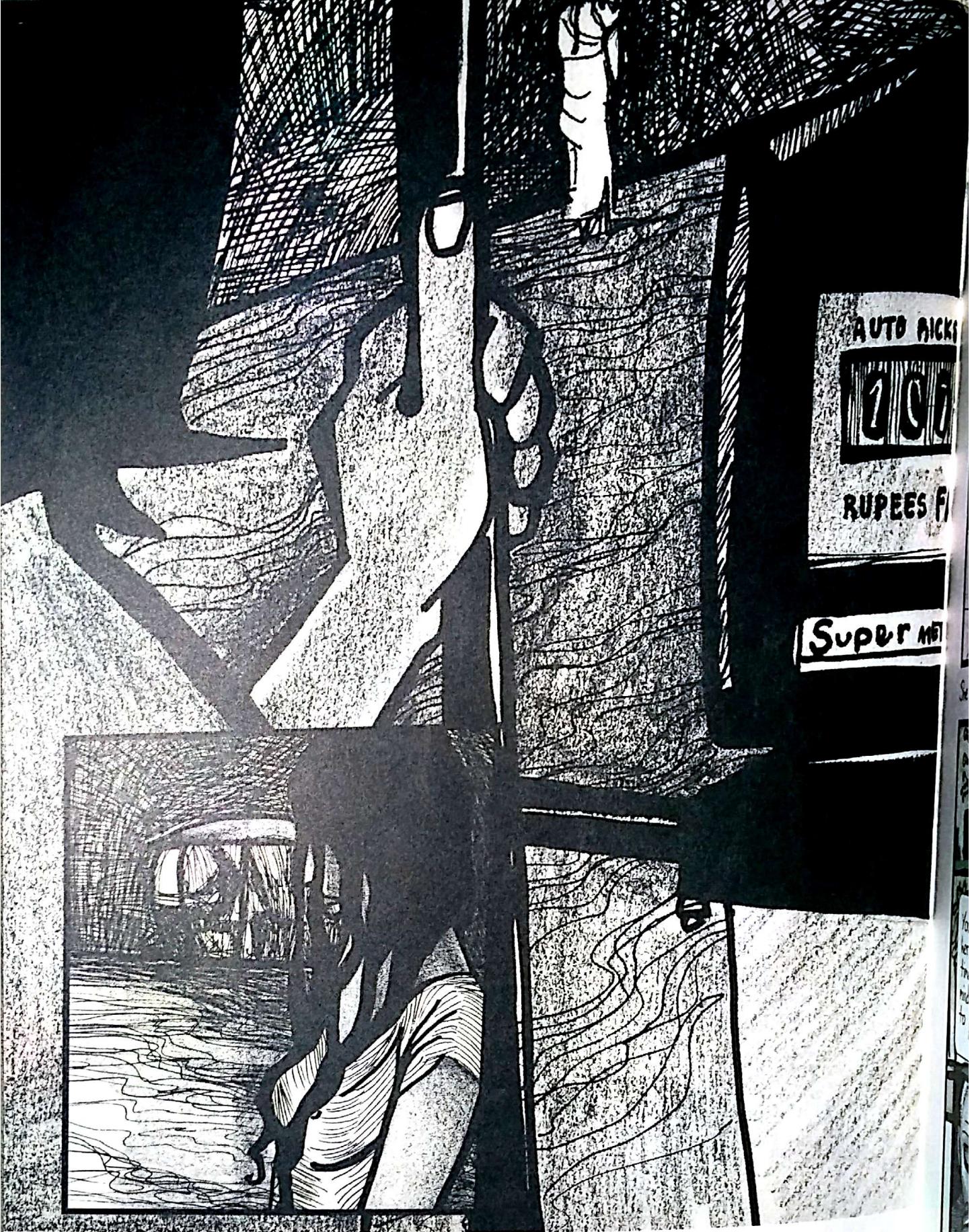
The ad agency, like the rest of the city, is closed because the railway tracks are flooded. Late into the afternoon, water continues to pour into smog city. Are we on the verge of some biblical levelling of sin by water? 3 p.m. feels like dusk. The girls and their boys watch 'F.R.I.E.N.D.S' at wall-reverberating volume.





The autorickshaw splutters and wheezes. Needless to say, my brave ally and I are soon stranded. The subway is utterly flooded, water sloshing wall to wall and headlights bouncing off raindrops. Dark silhouettes make their way towards us - a gaggle of urchin boys with rubber slippers on their hands. Laughing spiky-haired crows. 'Ten rupees, we push!' When they are done pushing us through the worst, hanging onto the sides of the autorickshaw, they hitch a ride to the next broken-down vehicle.





On the way, the autorickshaw whines past flooded houses, past a man with a cement burlap on his head, past a drenched girl on the sidewalk. Should I stop and give her a ride? Would she fall in forever love with me and never leave? In this rain, in this city where nothing makes much sense anyway, how bad can considering be?

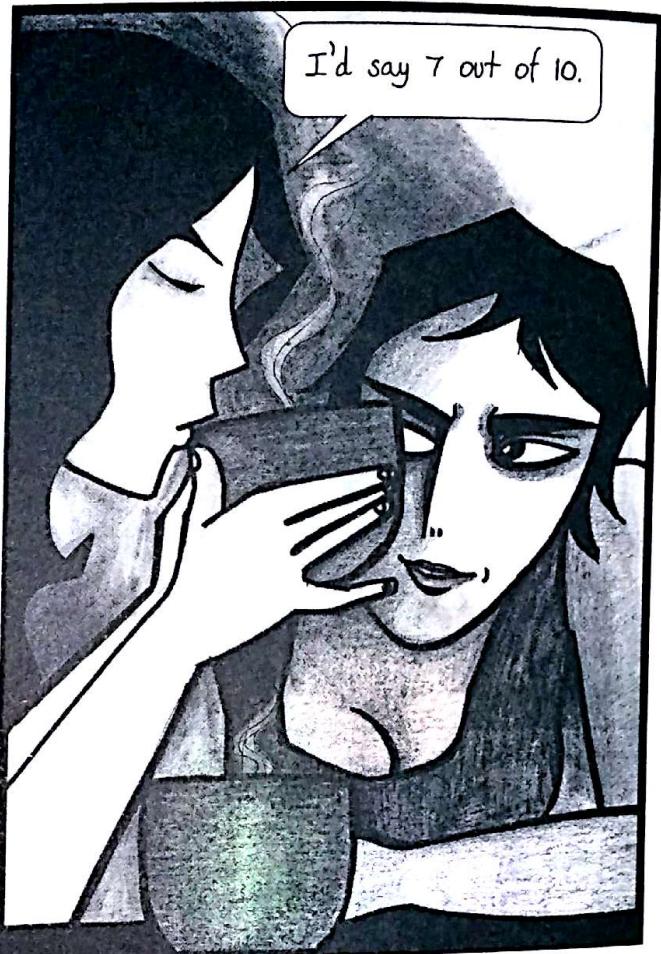
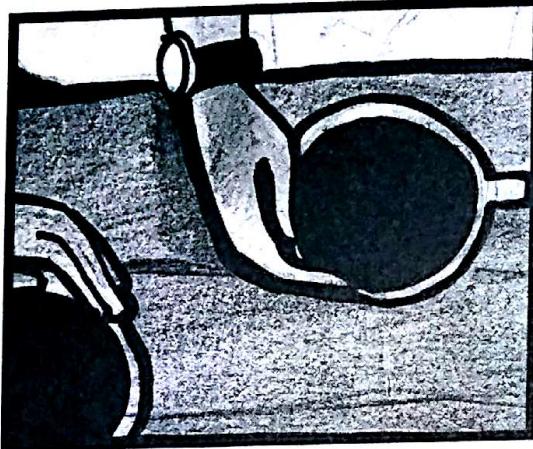
Angel must have been sleeping all day. I let myself in and play with Polydeuces. At 7 p.m., I wake her up. Not from too close, from respectfully afar.



She wakes up smelling of violent gastric juices.



There passed between us a moment when I could have drowned in tenderness, walked over and kissed her. But Angel's no lapcat, and neither am I. I think we were both grateful that we let the moment pass. Instead we peered at our cups. We like watching light play in the golden brew. It was Ruth who taught me that tea is serious business, and that FTGOP is not NKOTB.*



In my dreams that night I rowed home after an evening with the drenched girl on the street. I rowed towards the House of the West, where the dead sleep. Furiously, the sewer flowed. So violent was the grey water that it cracked my canoe in half. No matter where you are headed, or how nobly, you can sink without a trace.

* FTGOP - Fine Tippy Golden Orange Pekoe NKOTB - New Kids On the Block

SMOKESCREEN

Some people I know had promised to stop doing something.

I'm sorry, Del.

What's Kari sorry about?
She doesn't even smoke.



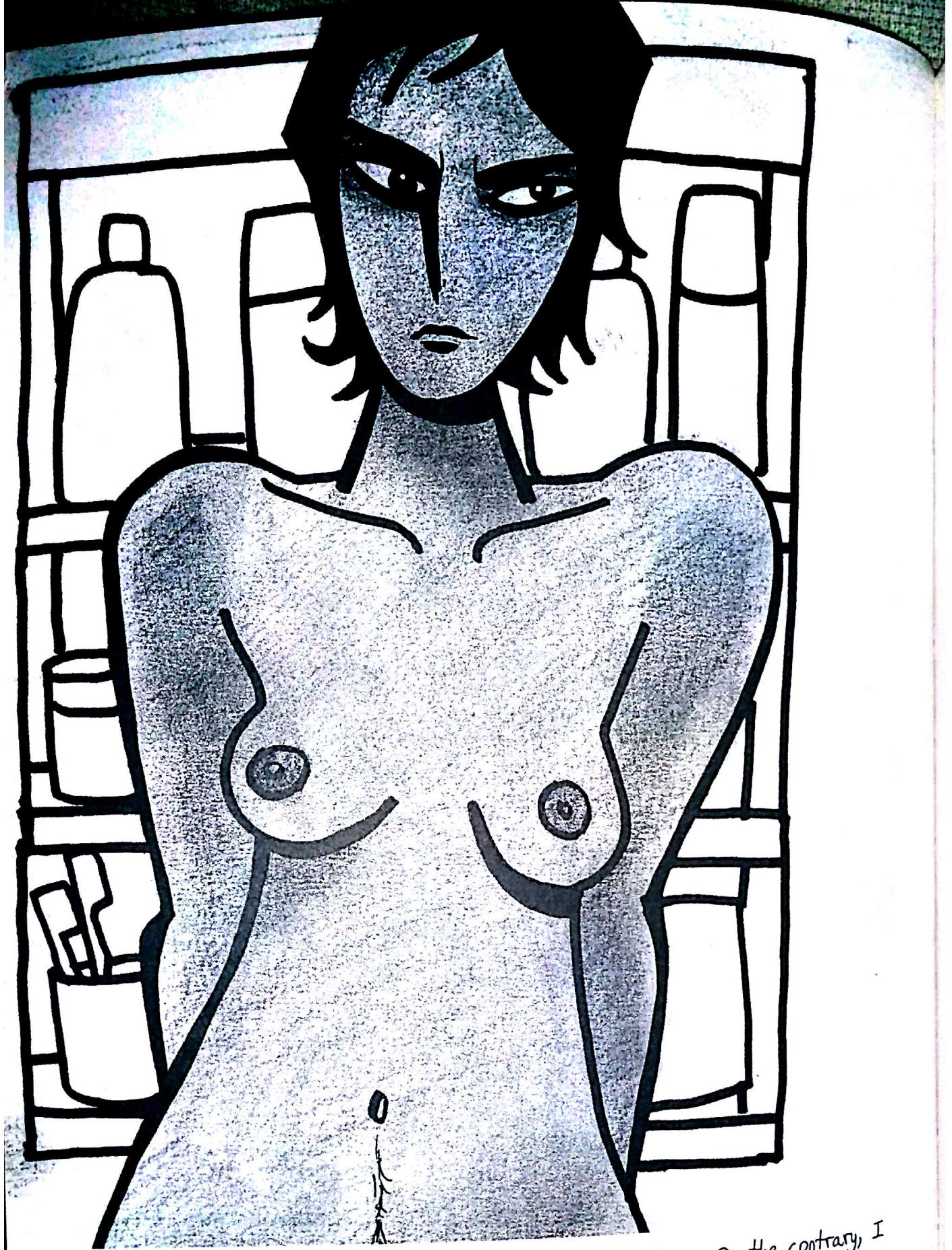
I have thought about this hard.

Why smoke at all? Why burn your money? Why turn pink lungs black? Why make your mouth taste like a wet garbage heap? There's only one answer: the desire to have a glowing flame between your fingertips is primeval, like a caveman wanting to control fire. Oft have I fantasized about sitting in moody light with a cigarillo, smoking with splayed fingers like a gangster's moll. I cannot reliably tell apart fact from fiction.

Today is one of those rare hearty suppers at Crystal Palace - without Orgo and Zap attached to the girls' body parts. I love it when the boys aren't around. The girls are a lot cheerier, and a lot more interested in one another. I can smell the peaches of Billo's perfume, Delna makes chicken in Coke and stir-fried spinach. On such days, the conversation wanders along a familiar track. Food, gossip, the occult, and then the moot-issue talk that ends either in a head massage or in (Delna's) tears. The other thing that happens during these suppers is that the girls mother me and shamelessly flirt with me in turns.

Make no mistake - there is no such thing as a straight woman.





It's not that I have a bad relationship with the mirror. On the contrary, I think mirrors are splendid, shiny things that make great collectibles, whether whole or in smashed bits. Problem is, I just don't know what they are trying to tell me. These things can be troubling. The girls are outside the door telling me to wear kohl, and here I am wondering why I ain't looking like Sean Penn today.

SECRET LIVES OF FRUIT

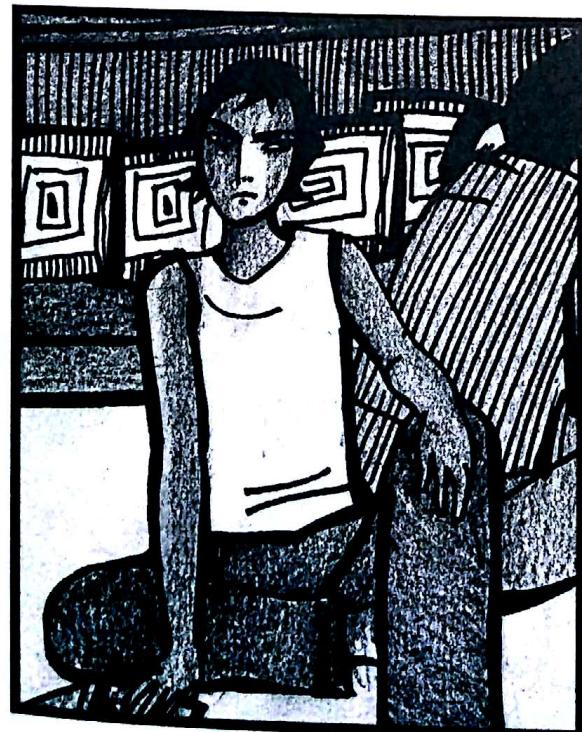
There are settling girls, and there are unsettling girls. The ones who seem to have it in them to be flyers are the ones who want to snuggle into settling. The ones that look as settled as old housedogs want to twist their way into flying. Necessarily, you must be defensive about being a settling sort of girl. I come home from Angel's to find Delna moping in our room.



I consider pointing out the wifely absurdity of her statement, but let it pass. Turns out that Delna wants to dump Orgo and marry her twenty-seven-year-old boss. Of course I cannot let that pass without due investigation.

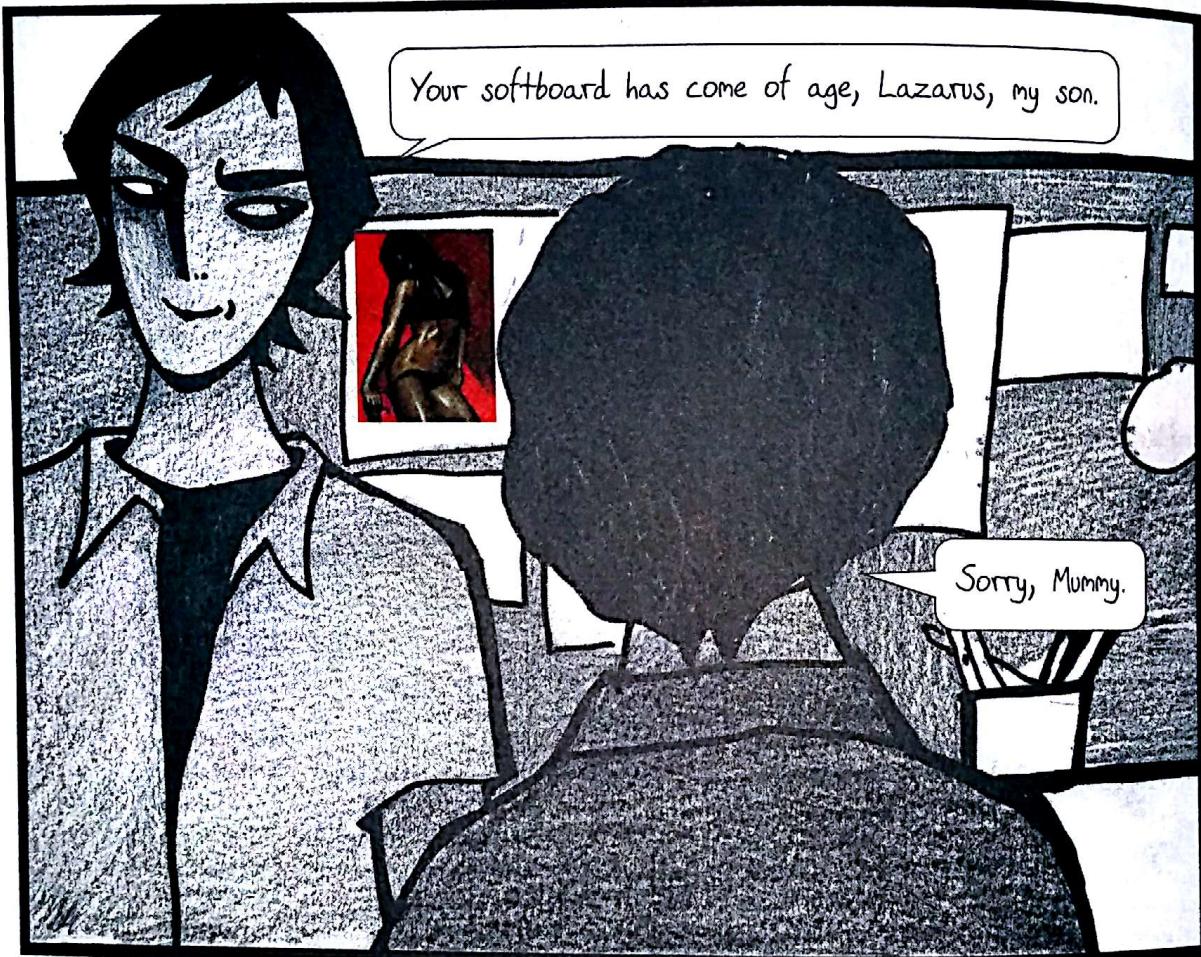


On my own time, I wonder if I am ageing into a hysterical male-basher. I wouldn't want Delna to go home to a man who beats her up. The in-house equivalent of a wife-beater is Billo. About three times a week, Zap grovels at the foot of her bed. Men seem to like their women sulky and demanding. They routinely take on projects too hot for them to handle. And then they stop by for simplistic advice from girls who never learnt to play.



Away from Planet Crystal Palace, things happen. Fairytale Hair have appointed a replacement for Angel; this one's from the head office in NYC. The most interesting thing about her? Her name: Susan Lush. It doesn't affect anyone else much, but my heart is an expanse of green grass at the sight of the name. Susan Lush! It makes me very happy.

Can you see her the way I do? Susan, Lush against watermelon walls. Susan, Lush against Grecian blue or white. Susan, Lush and tan on a bone-white beach. Susan, Lush and succulent, all salt, all sun.



In my secret mind, the shiny lady on Lazarus's softboard is Susan Lush. I am terrified of meeting Susan Lush. The odds are too high that she may not live up to her name.

With the stout work ethic of the Home of the Brave, Land of the Free, Susan Lush is in our mailboxes every evening, and on the phone line every other day. She is our pacesetter, and Bearded Man, Lazarus and I wheeze along on the running track.

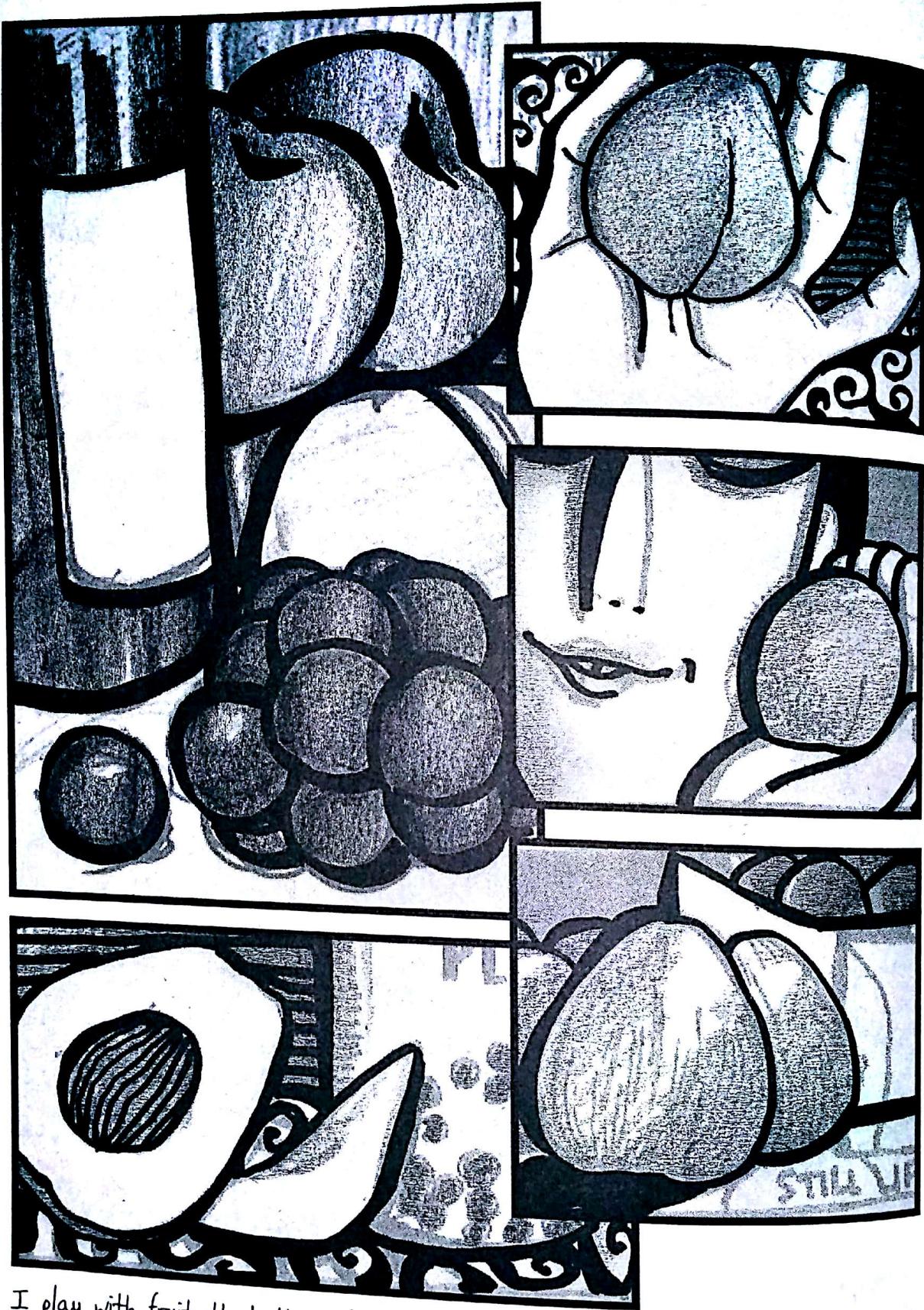
Fairytale Hair moves into its first round of auditions. The office is busy with rubbernecks taking extra coffee breaks. Urban princes, princesses, handmaids and stepsisters start trickling in. It's odd and heartbreaking to be partially responsible for meting out fame or oblivion to these people.



Dinner is at Soul Fry with Lazarus and Angel.

She never turns down dinner when there is a young gentleman involved. Staring at the guppies and tetras in the lobby, I can see that they are all blind in at least one eye. Some are blind in both eyes. They will fight until there isn't a single seeing eyeball in the fish tank. Or until there is just one fish alive. Lazarus, who is normally enthralled by tetras, is distracted today.

After dinner, Laz and I stop at Angel's house for coffee and fruit. Angel's kitchen gathers fruits solely for their seductive display possibilities. She doesn't care for roughage, so when they are done looking like a Flemish still life, the fruits go into the garbage bin. I intercept and eat them every time I visit.

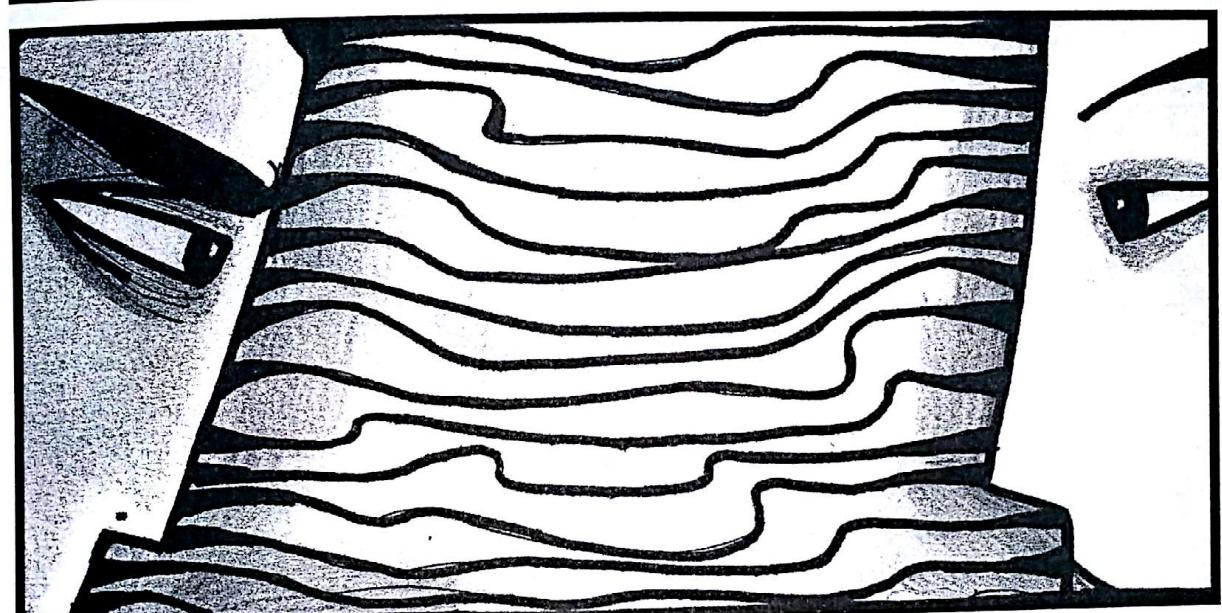
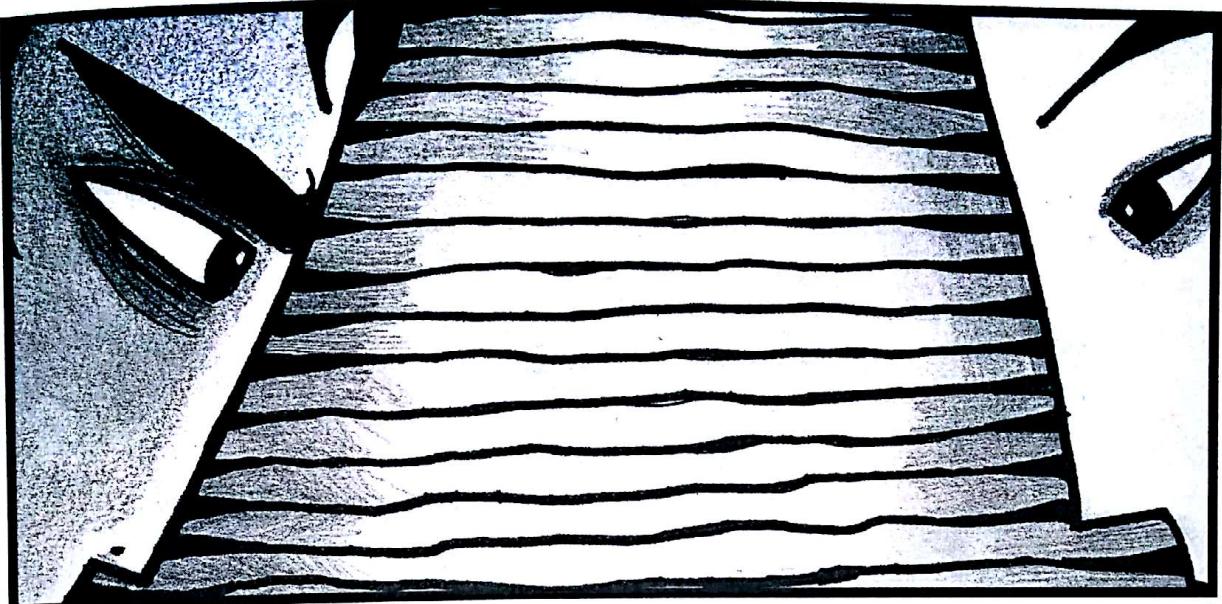


I play with fruit that the girls and I are too broke to buy. Avocado, kiwi, mangosteen. There are some fruits you do not want to venture into alone. A peach, for one, creature of texture and smell, sings like a siren. A fruit that lingers on your fingertips with unfruitlike insistence, fuzzy like the down on a pretty jaw. Figs are dark creatures too, skins purple as loving bruises. A fig is one hundred per cent debauched. Lush as a smashed mouth. There, I said it again: Lush.

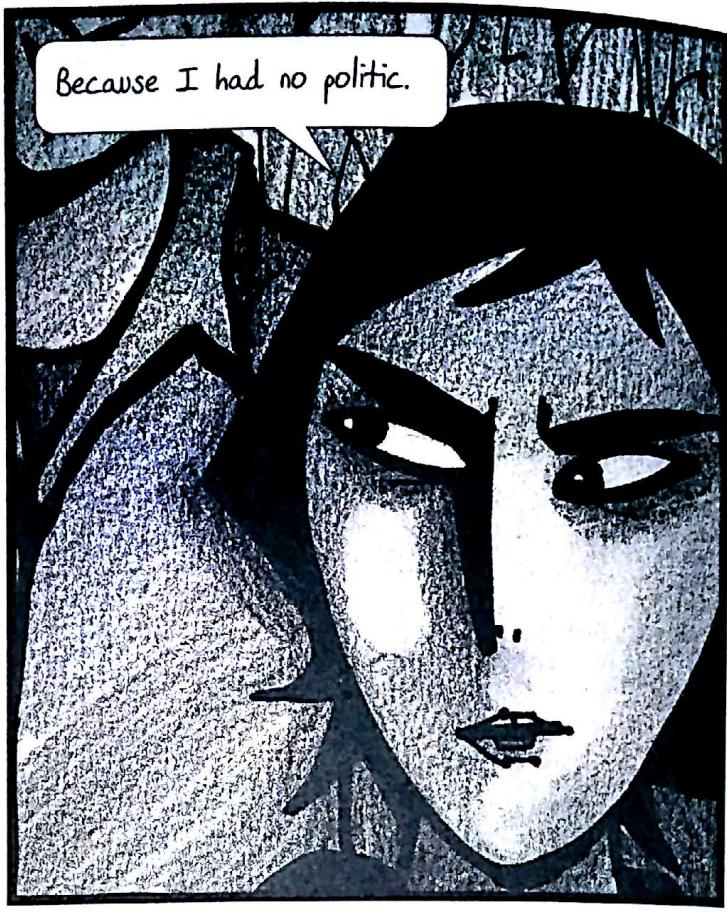
THE VIGIL

This is the place where Ruth passed by me for the first time in my life.





Whatever love laws have to be broken, the first few seconds suffice.
After that everything is a matter of time and incident.



Means, I have no Burning Issue. Blurring genderlines? Bigotry? Cultural genocide? Dying planet? I can't pick. My favourite form of movement is 'float'. I stand for nothing. I espouse nothing but Ruth.

My lover needed more roughage than coupledom could ever bring.

Anyway. Cut to now.

Lazarus and I are on our way to the Tea Centre to meet Bearded Man. This is about the TV commercial we are going to shoot next week. Fifteen minutes into an already erratic discussion, our work lunch is interrupted by the entry of a gargoyle. Walrus mouche and rotten teeth, the rolling laughter that is the trademark of the rich and famous. Everyone in the room turns to look, faces scrunch into smiles of recognition. For the next two hours, the commercial is forgotten. Story after story follows, each cleverer and more lurid than the one before. Unlike women, loud men do not dislike other loud men. In fact, they laugh at each other's jokes and quite adore each other.



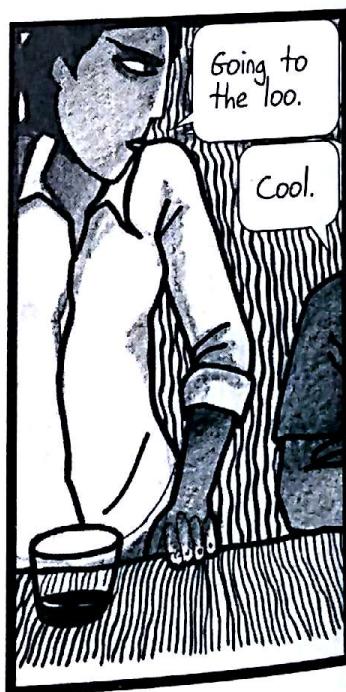


Later in the evening, I try to invite myself over to Angel's. She is brusque and dismissive on the phone, like she always is.

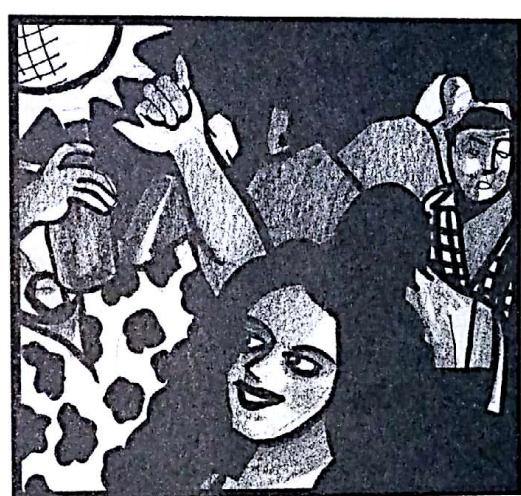
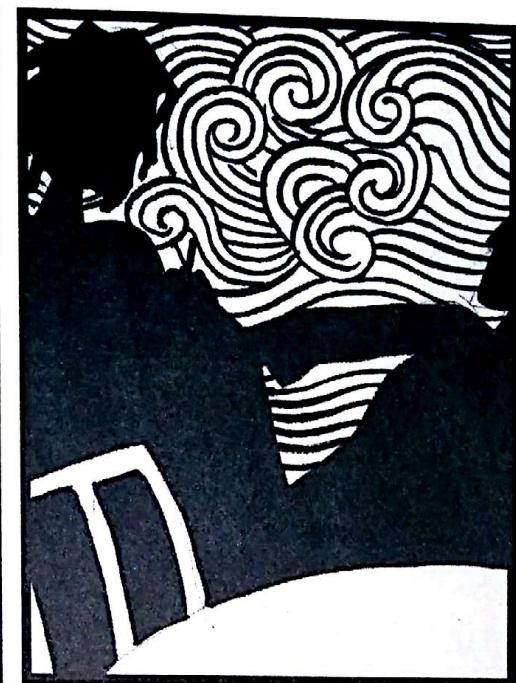


PLAYING

The girls are eager to make me their project. They endeavour to couple me up so as to make life livable. At the table on one such evening are Delna, Billo, Orgo, Zap, a Vicky I have never met before who keeps making hot eyes at Billo when Zap isn't looking, and a random other man who conveniently 'happens' to be single. Single man and I spend the rest of the evening in silence, trying to be inconspicuous and not eavesdrop on the amorous.



Ever has it been that two odds do not an even make. And so I stage my escape from disinterested single man. Cafe Mondegar is a feast. In any crowded social situation, there are two women with 'Rescue Me' written on their faces. One has a proprietary male paw crushing her shoulder. Another is with a man she doesn't really know and by now is quite sure she doesn't want to. The third woman in the room is an adventuress.



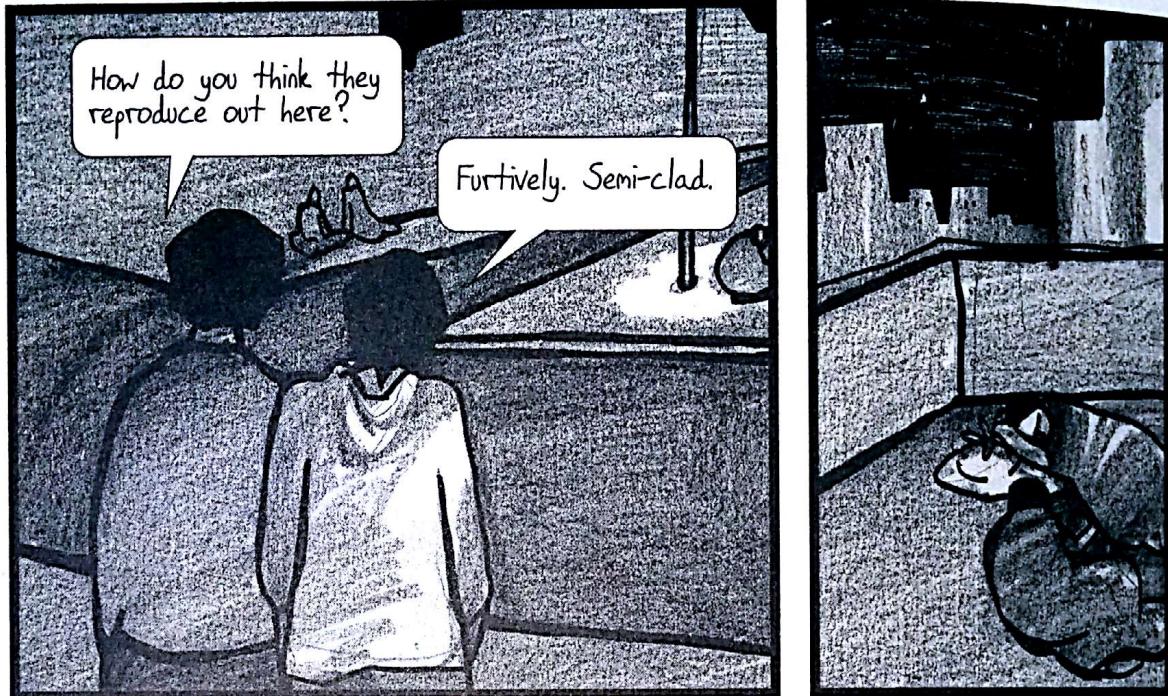
She wasn't my kind of woman and that's why, that night she was. This wine is the Blood of Christ. Brings the truth out of a woman sooner than any confession box does. Makes you trust a stranger with your life, your car keys, your best-guarded secret.



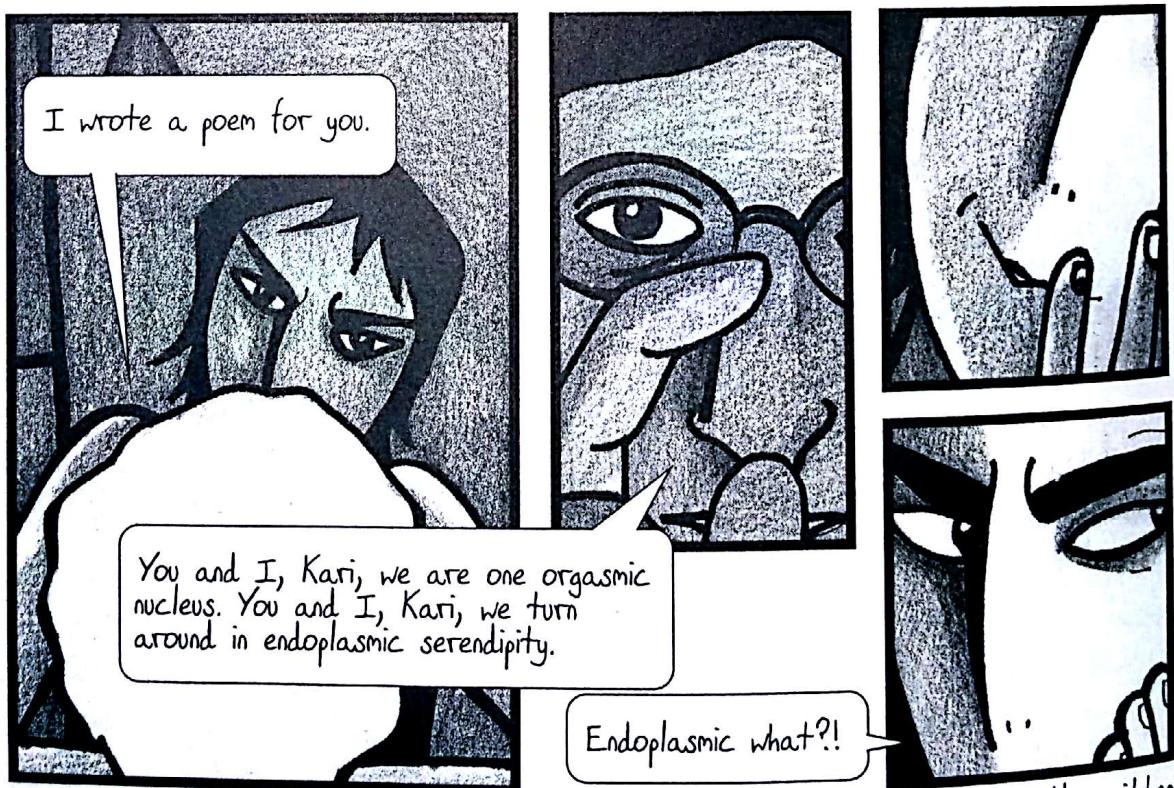
After a night out in town, the car becomes a snake pit of entwined arms. There are more people squeezed in here than we left home with. The Vicki who was making hot eyes at Billo has one hand on her thigh while she snogs the unsuspecting Zap on her other side. I wonder if it is ethical to be the only one who's stone-cold sober and watching them say and do things that will be forgotten tomorrow in collective amnesia. All that is inconceivable by day is easy by night. I have tried. Once or twice, maybe thrice. Joined the snake pit of arms, let enquiringly lustful, missionary fingers touch my face, the small of my back. If they kiss, I kiss back. But if they probe, I close. I am not revolted, I am simply disinterested. Why would I bury my face in dyed gladioli and faded asters when I have unfurled the flower of Eden?

LOVE SONG

Laz and I have been walking around the city at night, camera in hand, watching homeless people deep in slumber. They sleep on roadsides, under carts and benches, on platforms. Arms holding bodies, legs under legs, a defensive ball against the threats that whiz past at night. It is an appalling thing, this watching. If our subjects were wealthier, we'd be arrested for being peeping toms. As it is, our walk makes for arty b&w pictures of grim urban life.



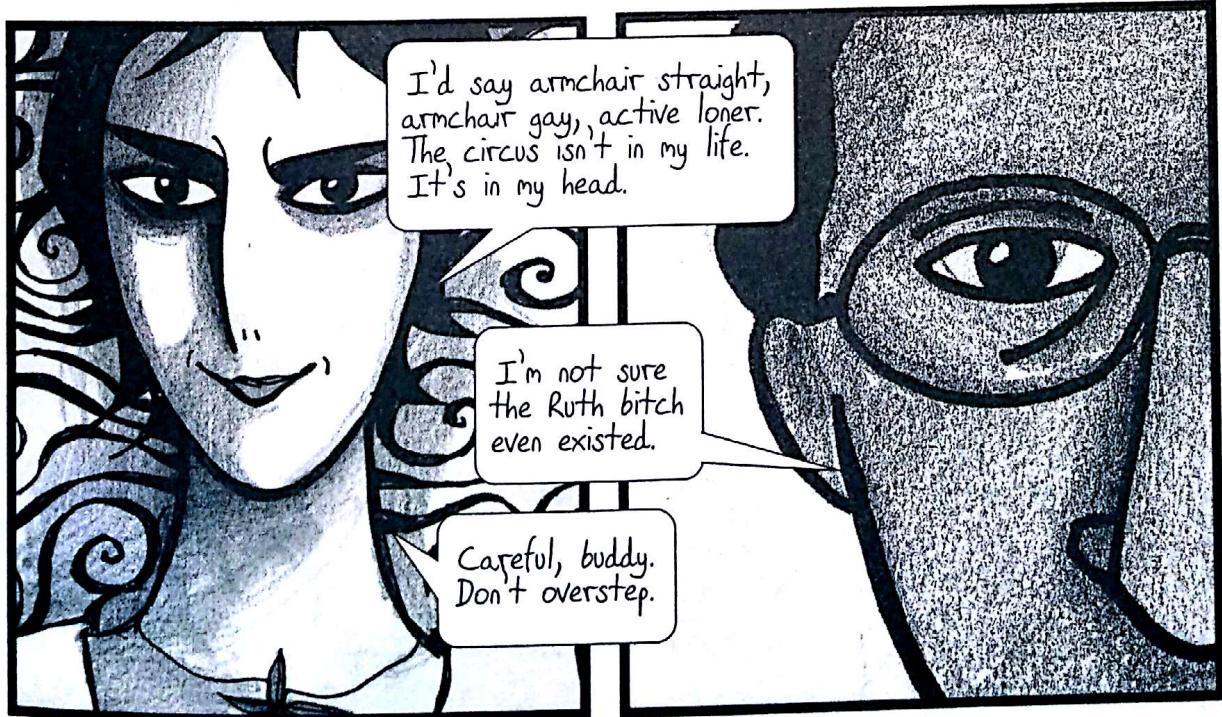
At the end of our arthouse voyeurism, there is the inevitable dinner with the tetras and the guppies. The fish are incredibly depressing, but it is cheap dining.

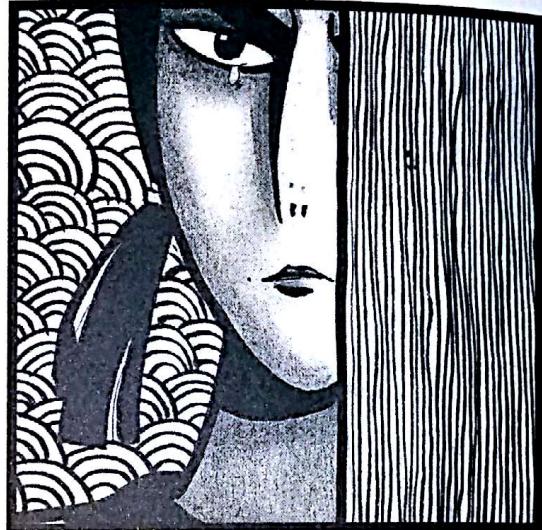
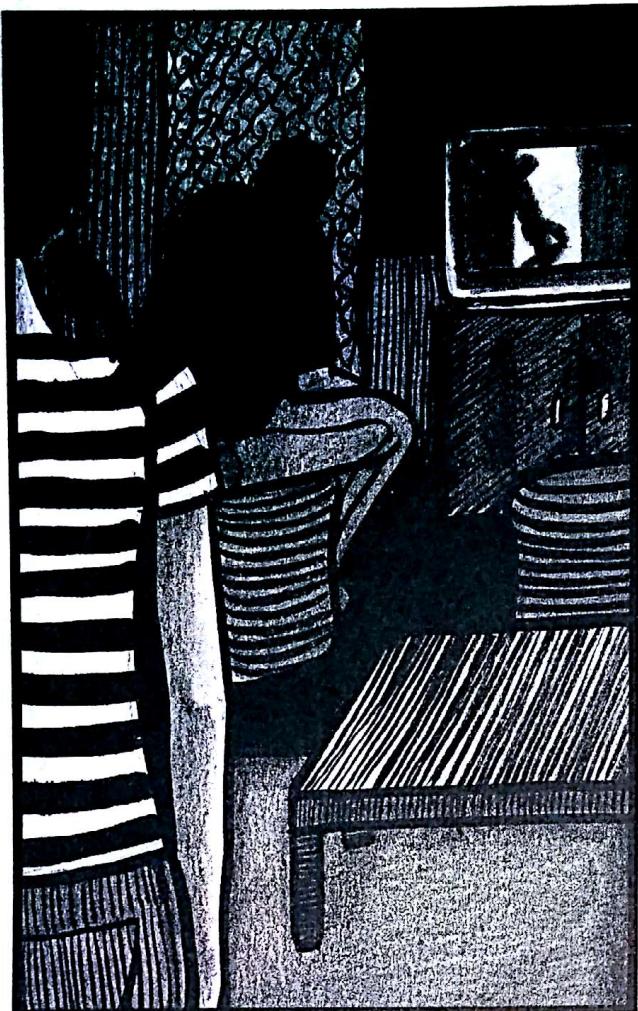


Love poems are dodgy enough to begin with, and then there are the badly written ones. Oh boy.



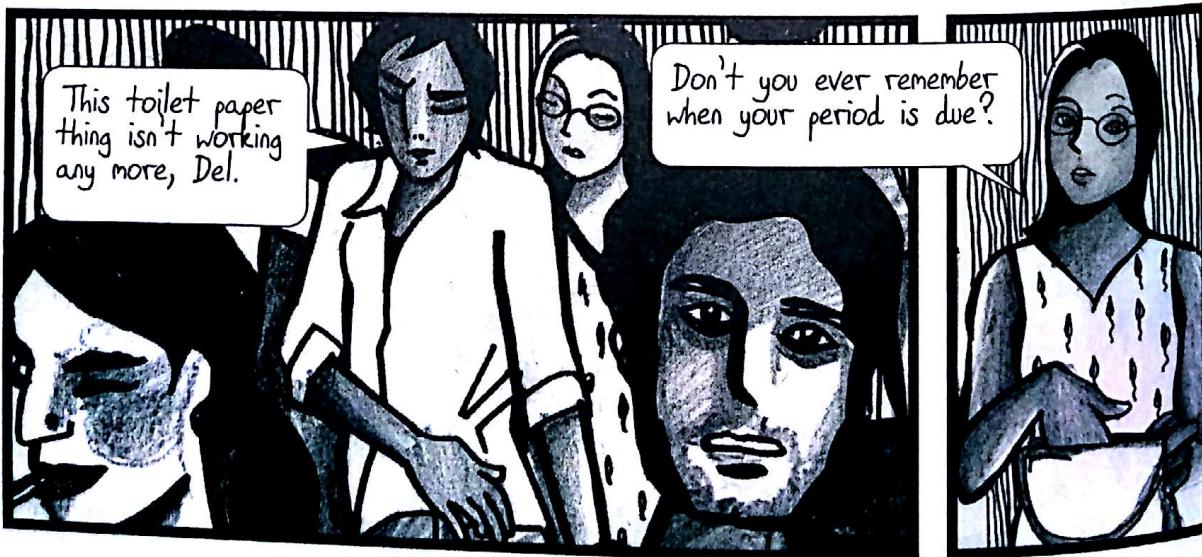
I roll the word 'lesbian' in my mouth and it feels strange there. Sort of fleshly, salivating, fresh off the boat from Lesbia, and totally inappropriate.



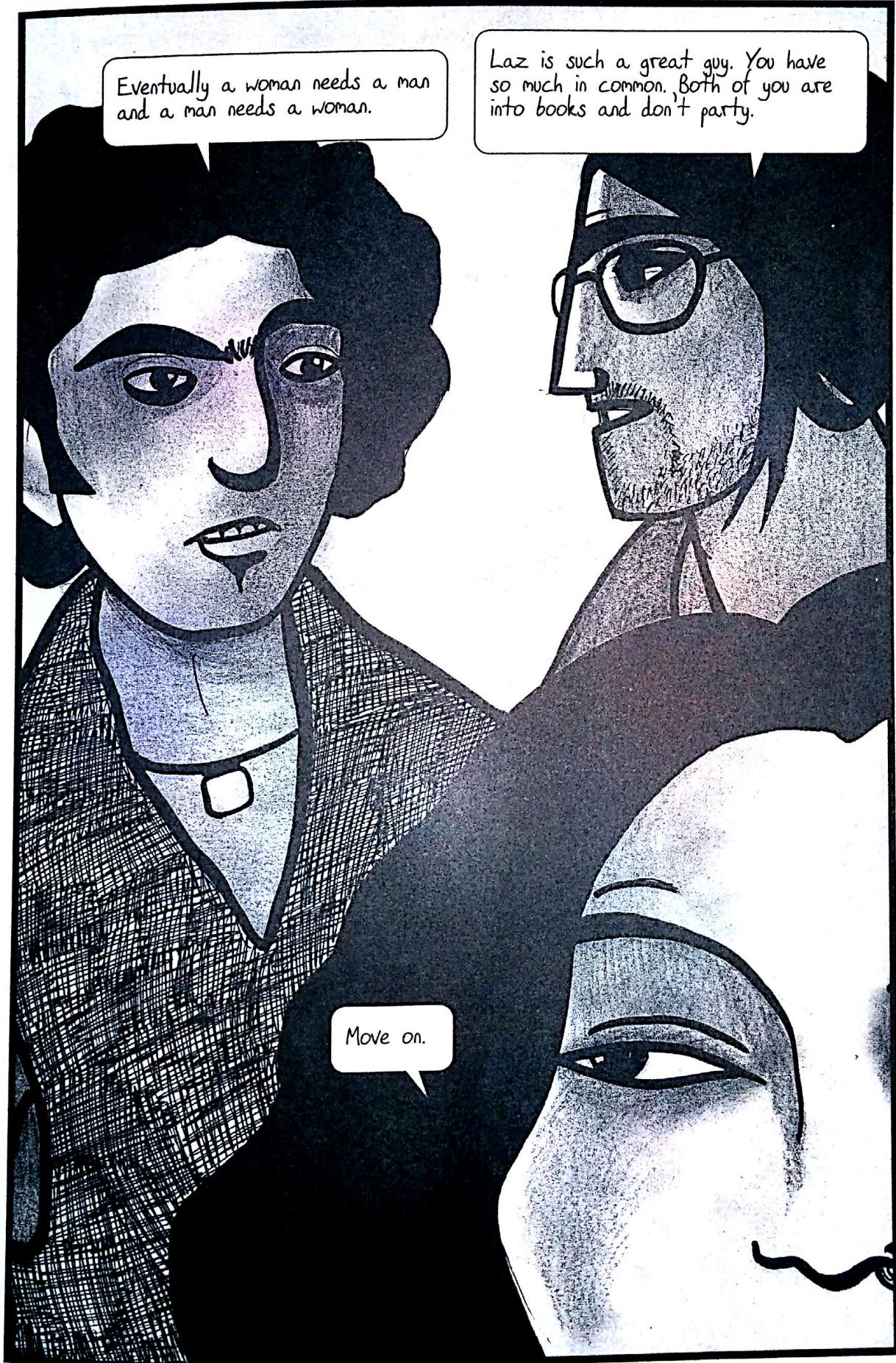


I remember the day I saw kd lang for the first time. On TV. Grammy Awards 1997. She was handsome, preening. Me, I was mute, with no way to explain myself to myself or to anyone else. What kind of creature was this, this genderless one, and why did she make me feel this way? All I knew was that if I ever stood in a room across a creature such as this, my heart would be in serious peril.

Ruth put my heart in serious peril too. She is still a bullet in my stomach, and I nurse the gore she left in her wake. Month after month, I bleed.



The well-meaning chorus at Crystal Palace understands nothing but plies me with advice. Jewels from the mouths of the interchangeable gentlemen and Billo:



Angel, as always, was attentive but unemotional.



We went horse-riding that evening.

The horses at Juhu beach have film-star names: Sait, Akshay, Salman. They are mules really, not horses, but that is a technicality. Angel loves to ride, and she weighs next to nothing, so she does not cause saddle bruises on the bony beasts. She rode till she was winded and motion sick. I ran along, and we laughed like no one else has seen either of us laugh. Then we fed the mules gram and watched Juhu beach turn windy and magical because of our happiness.



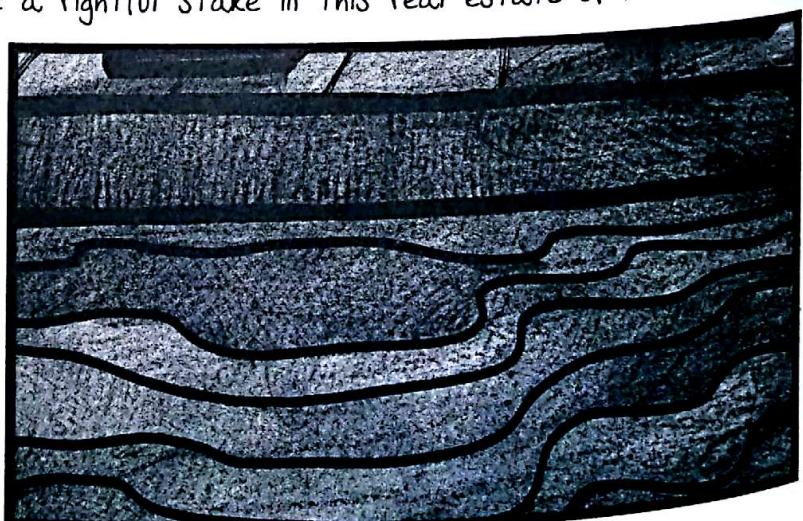
FISH

The sea was in my dreams last night. I have wasted so much time missing the untainted sea off my hometown, when all along it's been an altar in my heart. I am twenty-one years old this morning. I have completely blown any chance of being a child prodigy or teen sensation. Now there is only the overcrowded world of adults to affect.

These are the things deposited in my fold: envelope with a cheque from Mamma, a book from Lazarus. Old letter from Ruth wishes me happy birthday again. So many feverish words. Billo and Delna of course forgot my birthday completely.



Grinning like a monkey, I am compensated. On my way to work, a new offshoot road leads me to the Public Pool, where I gift myself a four-month membership. For two thousand rupees, I have an Olympic-size tub to plough through. I share it, of course, but I have a rightful stake in this real estate of water.

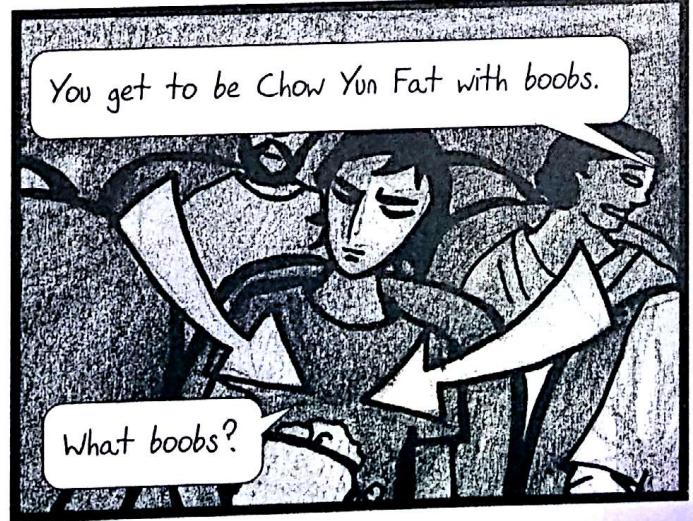


Coy and harem-like, a separate Ladies Lane. Here ladies of every shape, size and skill level thrash about. Some in robust backstroke, some in freestyle, some doing lengths, some doing breadths, some giving up altogether and opting to float in the middle of the pool. Navigation is of the essence here; a concussion is always close at hand.



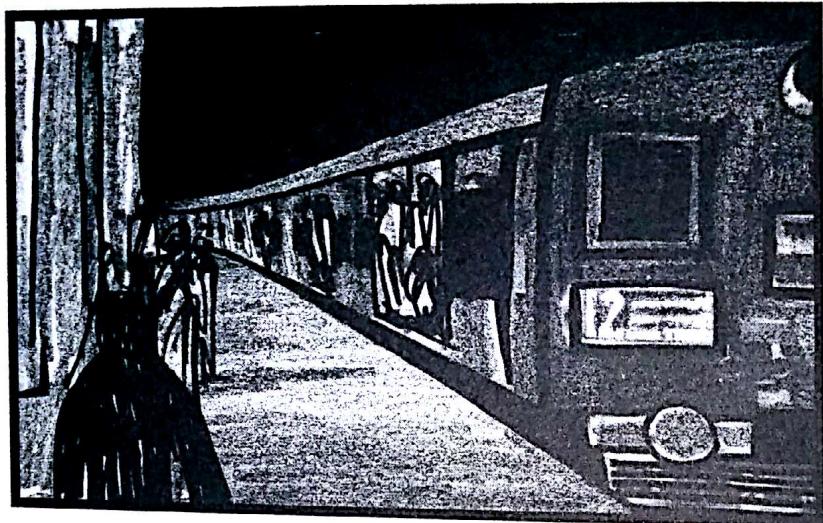
I can see every suspended particle and hair curling in this chlorine clogged habitat. If there were little fish within a mile, I would have smelled them out. Wherever they are, they must be trembling in relief that they aren't in my path. I am a treacherous, dangerous fish. I have smooth fins and very sharp teeth. I know exactly what goes on in the mind of an aquarium shark. Round and round, cutting through the water silently. Only the sound of exhalation can break the stillness. Fins propel me faster and cleaner to avert cloudy secretions. I move in stealth, arms by my side.

Lazarus took me to see a Chinese martial art flick as a birthday gift.



Sure enough, I'd grown boobs. I fought them all evening.

I travelled back alone in the Ladies Compartment of the train. Made my way to Angel's house to collect my birthday blessing.



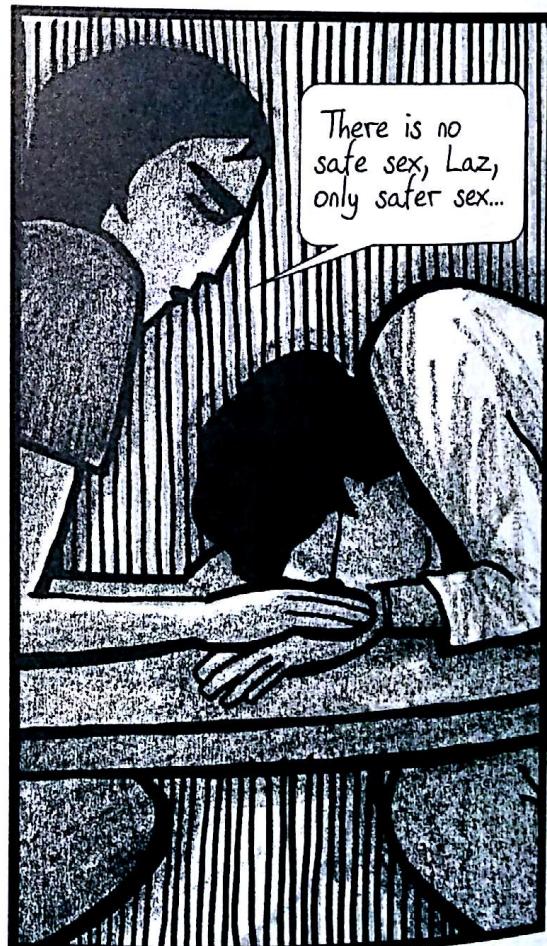
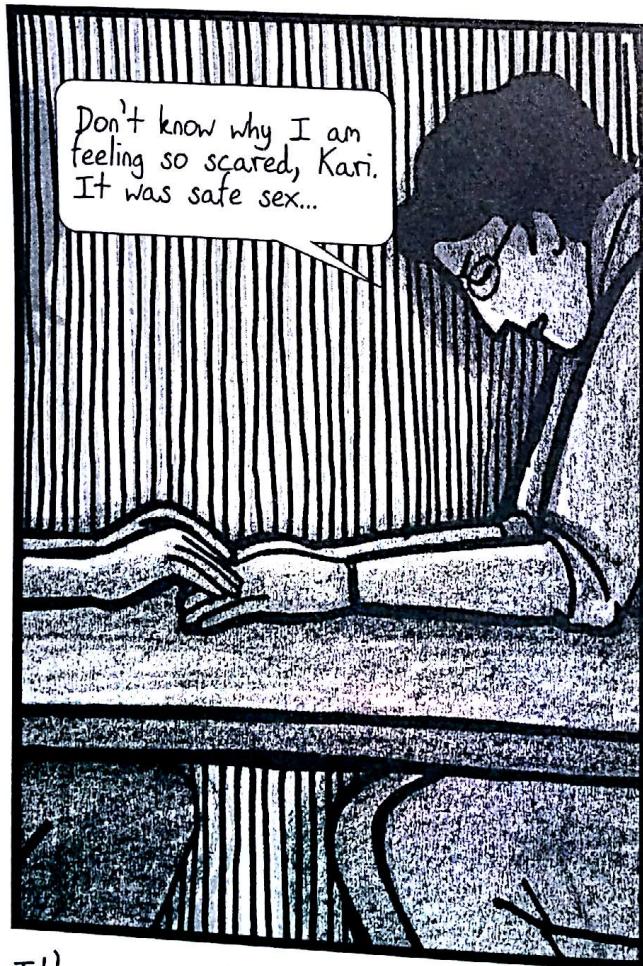
THE UMBILICAL

For some strange reason, the Fairytale Hair ads are a raging success. The campaign is nominated for Campaign of the Year. Lazarus and I are lifted, like brides, over the threshold of oblivion. People who used to look right through us now lean on the cubicle to make small talk. All this should have been right after Laz's heart. He is one of the biggest closet celebrities I know after Ruth. But Laz is grim as a thundercloud.

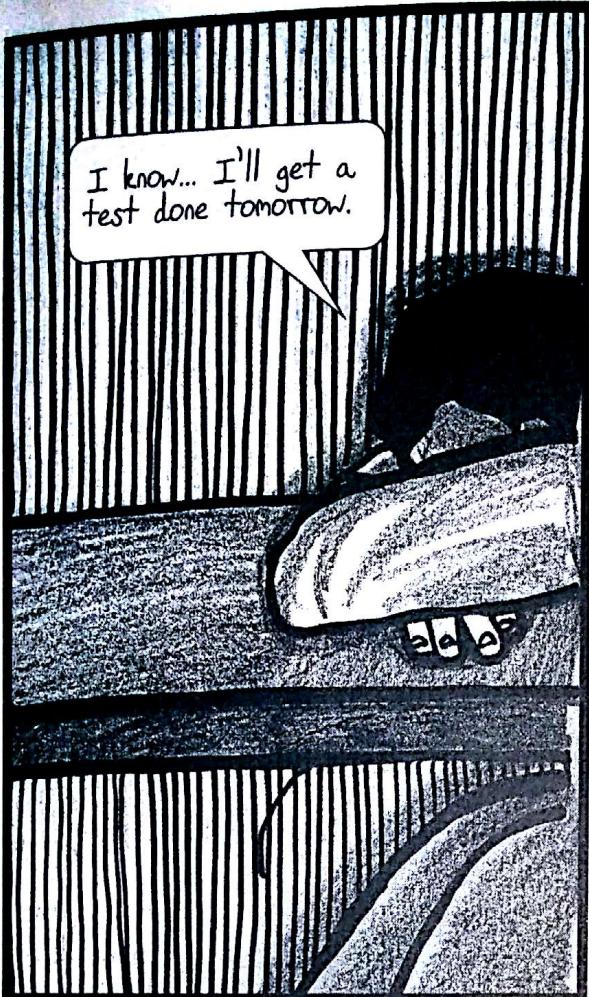
We go to Soul Fry for dinner and find the fish tank replenished with fish whose eyeballs are intact. What did they do with the blind fish? The waiter smiles benignly and does not reply. The blemish-free fish make me even more claustrophobic than the old warhorses did.

'I need to talk to you,' says Lazarus.

Tina lurks in his mind like a worm. Prostitution is legalized in Tina's country. Beautiful girl, smiling and sweet, not a ghost, not a sad shell, waiting for him at the nightclub in the evening. I wait for him to finish talking. When the person in front of you is scared, you must speak carefully and calmly. Always the truth. Reassure, but never lie.



It's amazing that my pedantic brochure voice relaying information is actually helpful to him. He listens with rapt attention. He ought to have thought about all this a long time ago. Like a lot of us ought to, but don't. It's amazing how long we can block out knowledge that is unpleasant.

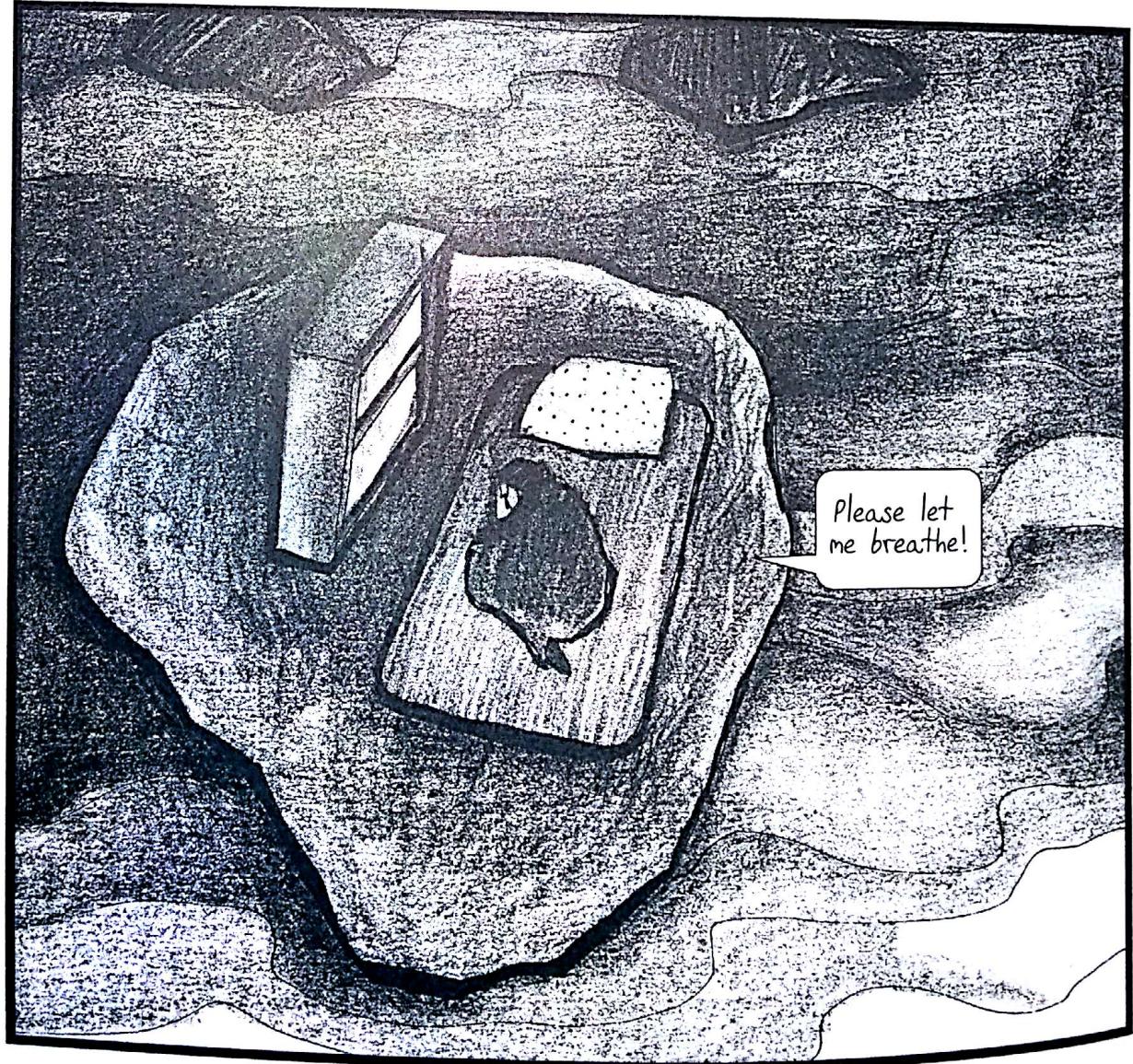
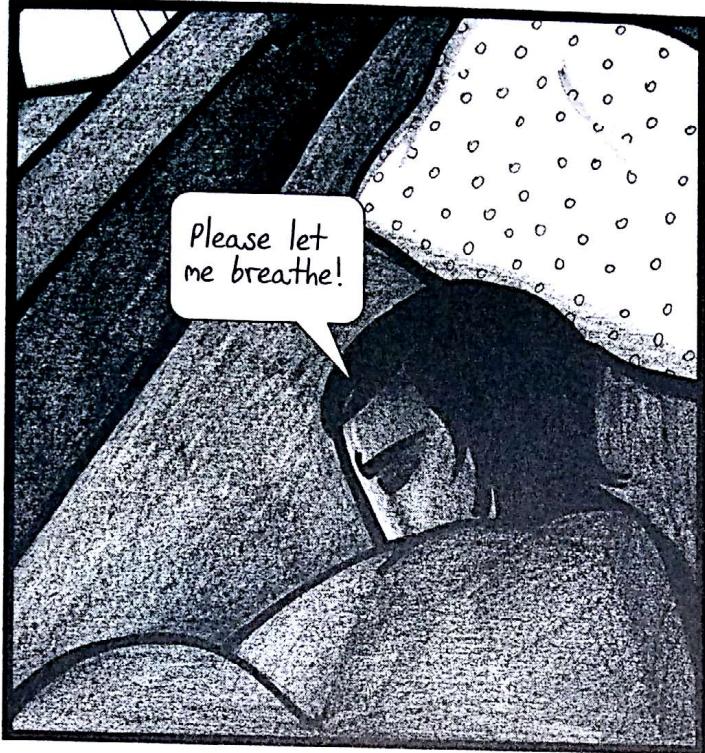


When he leaves, I can feel the unmistakable wrench of an umbilical cord. I return to spend three hours on the water tank of Crystal Palace. This is where I retreat when I don't want anyone to psychoanalyze my silence. The water tank's surface is rough and uneven and it embosses patterns on my bottom.



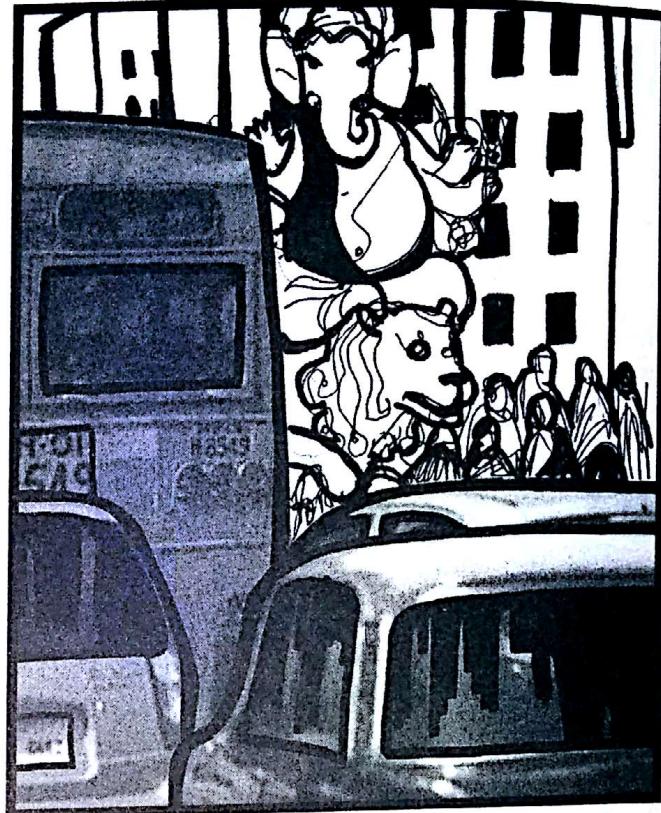
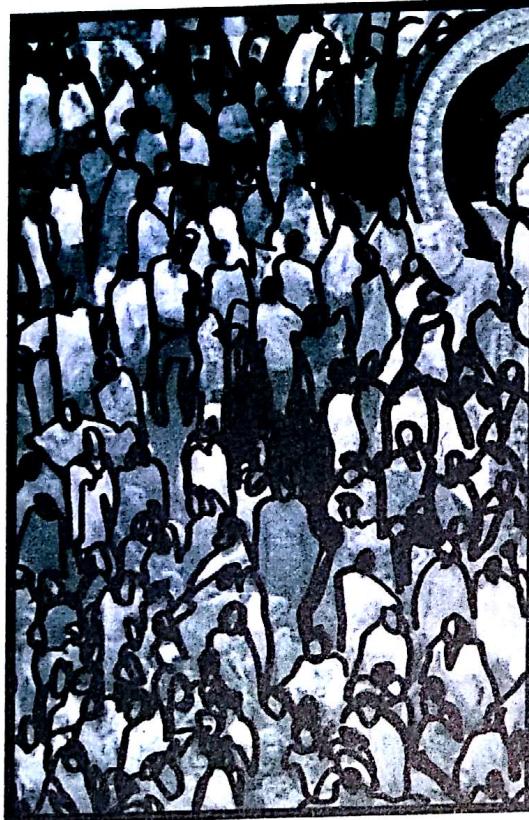
Others' lives are beautifully peopled. Storyboard lighting up dark windows. Children at cluttered study tables. Husbands in lungis. Phone conversations, food on the table. Wandering pets. If I knocked on the door, would they take me in?

I have an anxiety attack that night. At such times, a hug is oppressive. Anxiety attacks are not allayed by touch.

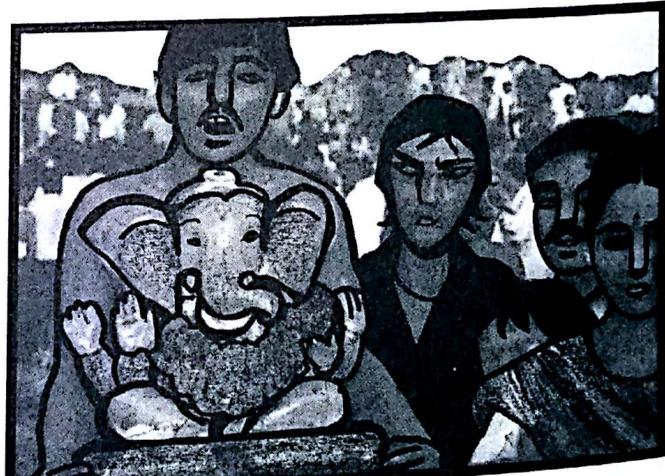
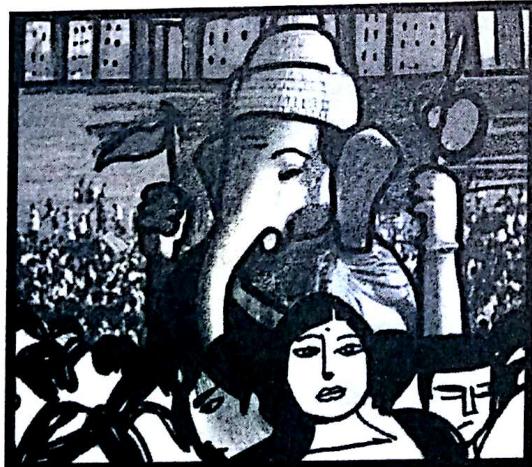


GANESH COUNTRY

Mamma asks me to humble myself before Ganesh. Says it will clear the cobwebs in my brain and remind me that there is more to life than my foolish problems and roommates. So I join the bloodstream of devotees, in time to immerse the gods.



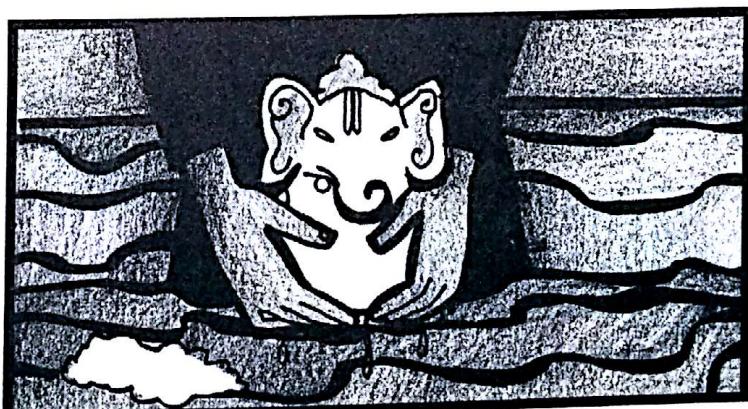
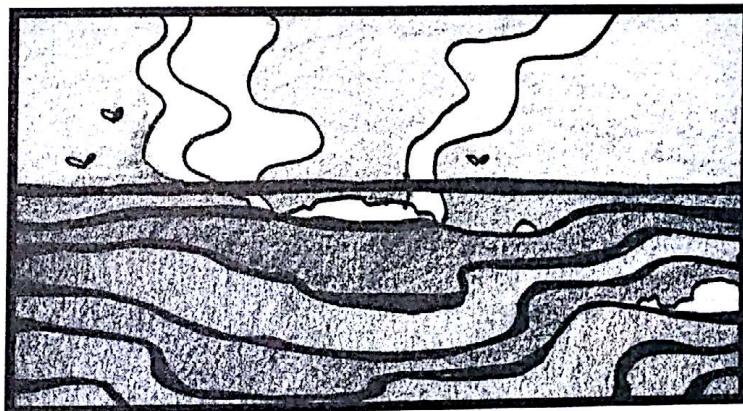
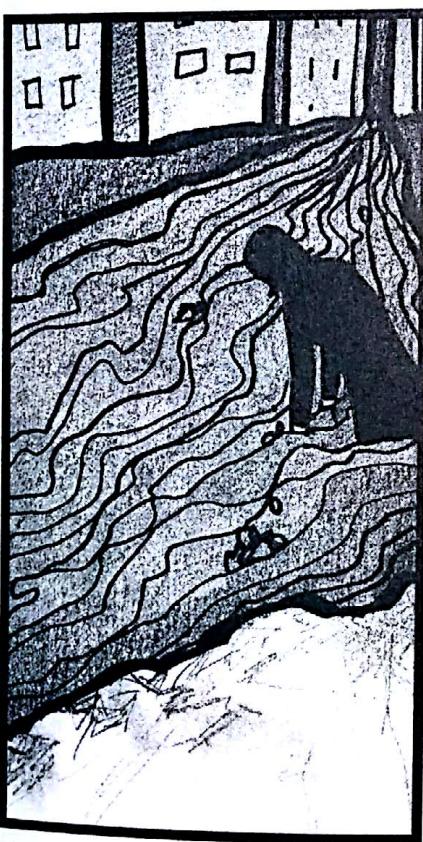
The sea snarls, she is ready to swallow anything, mortal or not, that is lowered into her. The colossal drums sound, and people are in a trance. Sharp smell of liquor on strangers' breaths. The unwanted proximity of strangers' bodies. Ganesh is oblivious to the clamour.



The lack of human features gives him a clean, somewhat expressionless serenity. Calm-eyed idols, swaying with the heaving throngs that pull them along. I have no problem humbling myself before Ganesh. I've always liked being under his gaze. Strange eyes, steady and of an upward slant. Eyes of wide-set beauty, brown and clear, always a little lacquered with moistness, kind eyes that ask for no familiarity. You can look at him from a distance, but you cannot sit in Ganesh's lap.

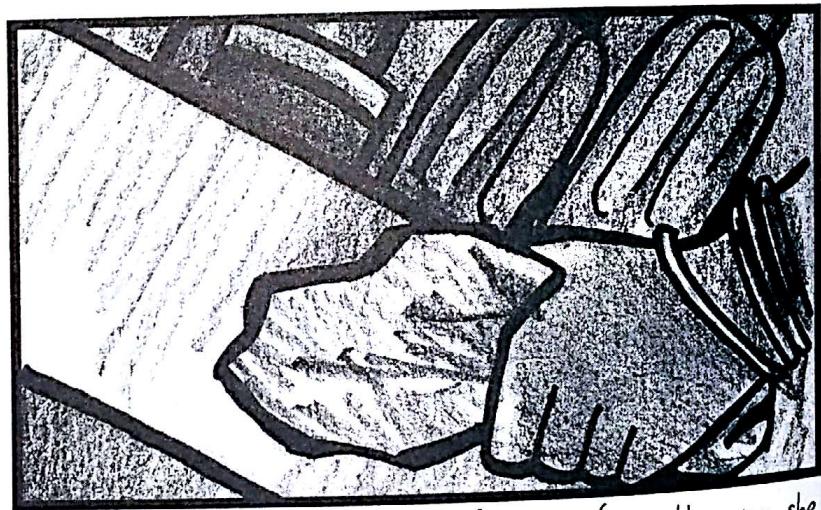


The morning after the immersion, the beachfront is a massacre ground. Broken trunk with baby folds. Delicately pink fingertips clasping a lotus. In the landlocked parts of the city, amputated plaster limbs have clogged pipelines with silt and toxic paint. The gods are poisoning the water.



My canoe is a knife. I navigate through the narrowest veins, steering clear of obstacles to get to where the idols clog the sewer. And then I step in. Bundles of carcasses and plastic bags. This is grey skin, not grey water, the ageing unwanted body of the teeming city above. If I run my fingers over it, it shivers in disbelief. If I run my fingers through it, maybe the furrows will be branded on my skin, maybe my skin will corrode. Taking no chances, I row back like the best of oarsmen do. Not a splash, not a sound cuts the thick grey.

Significant development. There is a furtive new addition to our Crystal Palace chorus. On the evenings that Orgo and Zap aren't here, Vicky is courtier to Empress Billo. Delna, the loyal minister, will never let on. I don't, either. Don't know how Billo can meet Zap's eye when even I have trouble doing that. It's disappointing that they have not let this remain a case of wrong timing. The only one who is ferocious in her disapproval is Kusumtai, household-help and dragon. She guards Crystal Palace and prevents this estrogen swamp from imploding.



Kusumtai's rules are wordlessly firm; you can gauge the firmness from the way she disentangles clothes from their death knots. She is the reason why the girls empty out the ashtray at dawn. She is the reason why current love interest is kicked out from the double mattress to a single mattress on the side.



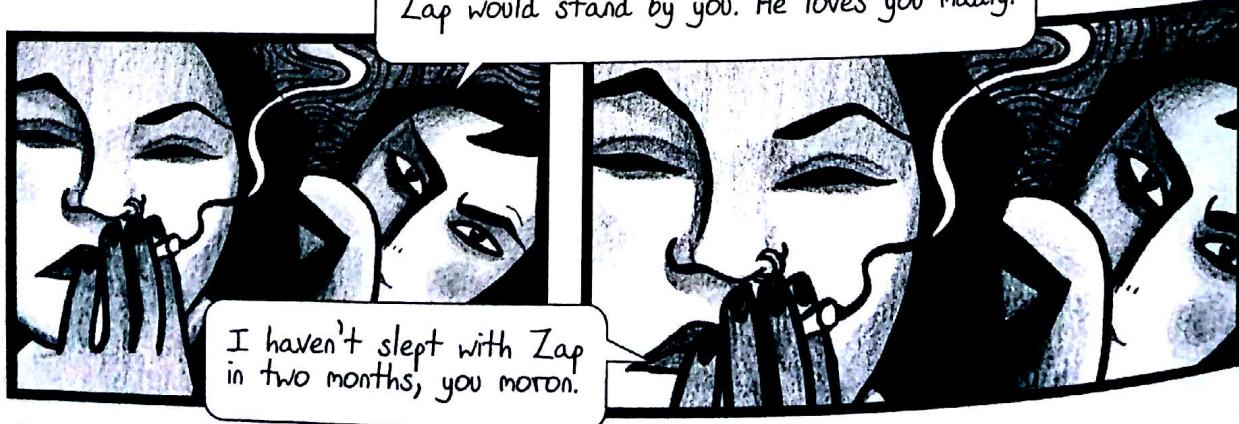
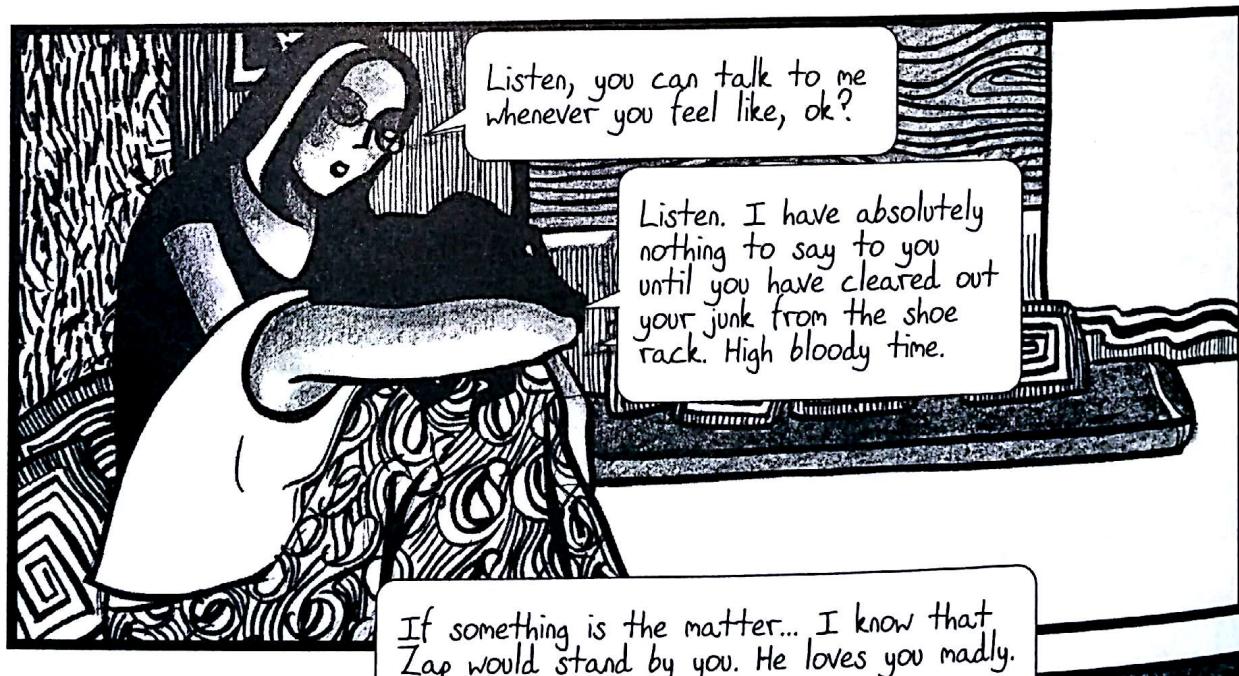
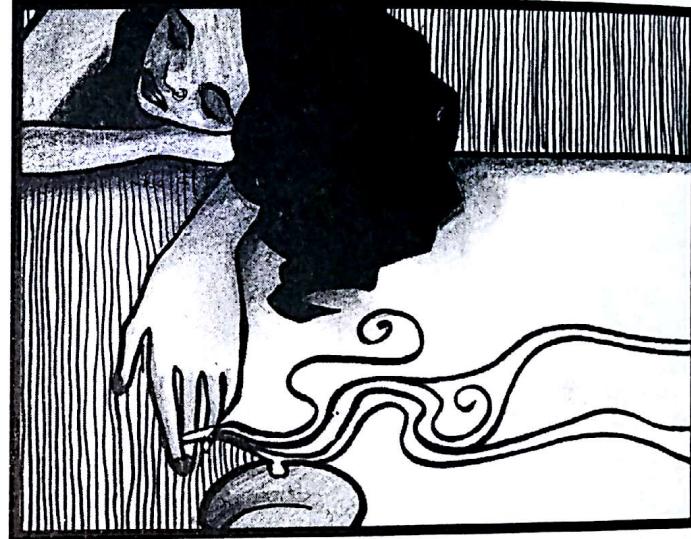
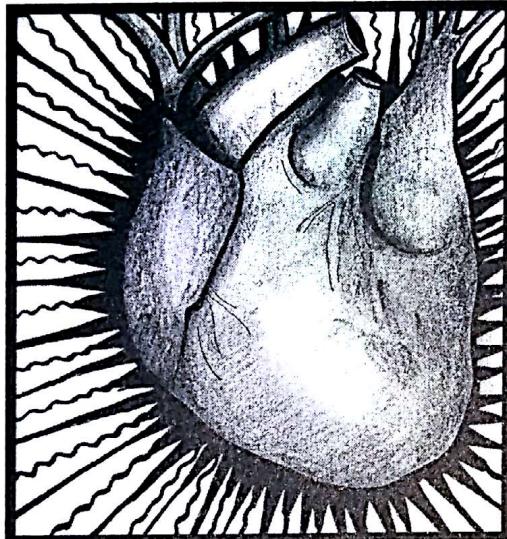
Billo and Del bend over backward trying to win Kusumtai's favour. But gifts, raises in salary and philanthropic queries make no headway. Kusumtai is a one-track big dog who recognizes only one master and no chewie baits. And, for some bizarre reason, the object of Big Dog's adoration and loyalty is me. This makes for some embarrassing displays of bias.



The interesting thing is, I know that if push comes to shove, Kusumtai will continue to be my big dog. She'd believe in a Ruth more than any of the others.

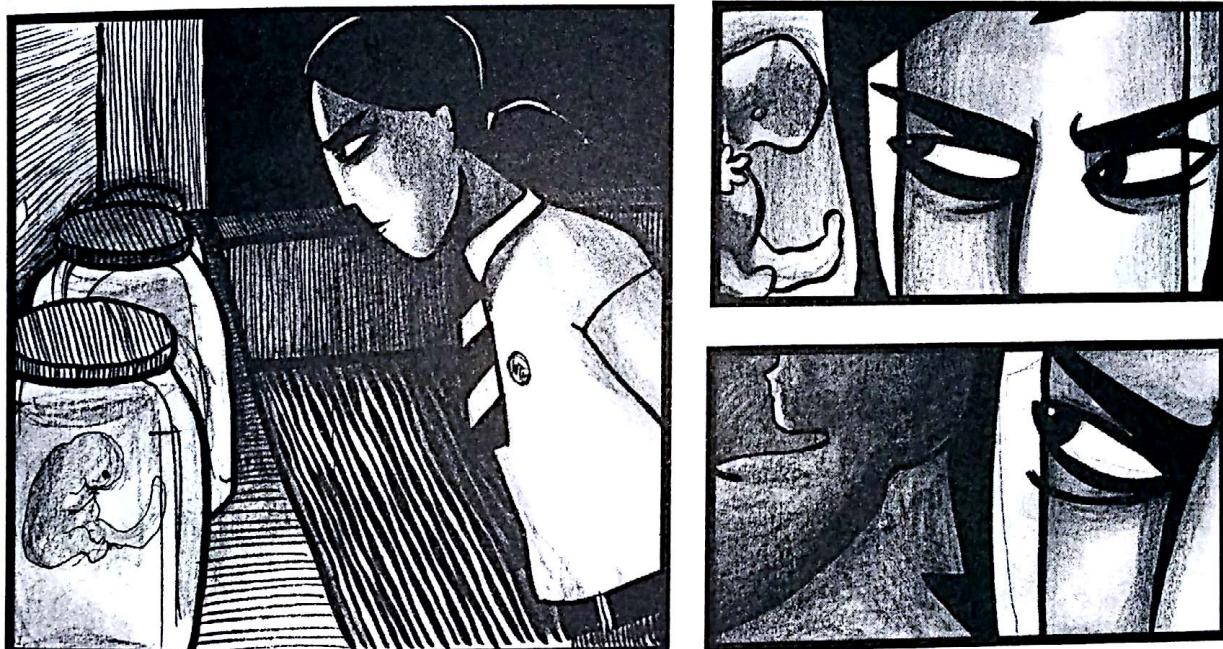
About a month later, I come home to find Billo in mourning. It happens every now and then, and it is not a pretty sight. Her hair is uncombed, her mouth droops at the corners in a sulk, and she is very likely to turn Delna's best coffee mug into an ashtray.

Delna tells me in hushed tones that it is about a broken heart and a pregnancy scare. I'm not so sure about broken hearts. Most of the time, what people call a 'broken heart' could well be the discomfort of heartburn or a suppressed burp.



After a while, there is some talk and some proactive action about 'dropping the baby' and that's the last I hear about it. The girls know better than to involve me in this brand of bonding, but I am left profoundly uneasy. More by the term 'drop the baby' than by anything else. It sounds so innocuous. Drop the baby... to the creche.

When I was younger, strange forces pulled me to the biology lab where rows of pickled lungs and hearts and waxen foetuses stood in jars. The tiny foetuses, so tadpole-like, it was easy to forget their connection with human beings. The larger ones, babies that almost made it, fingers and eyes closed on some frozen thought, lungs filled with yellow. Can palmists read the grooves on a formaldehyde baby's palm?

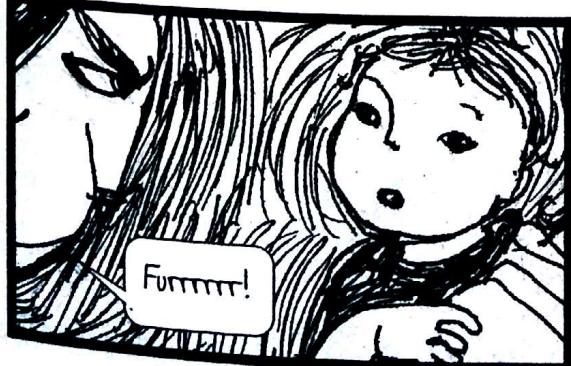


A dark clot lodged in the bogs keeps screaming, throwing sleep into disarray. Tonight I have left my canoe behind to enter the water, defenseless. Nothing survives long in this sludge. Caught in a grey anemone is Billo's tweezed out baby.





On a slightly unconnected note, I am sorry to report that babies, as a collective species, are largely oblivious to my charms.





THE BOATMAN

Thursday, day of Jupiter, at 1 a.m., Lazarus called to tell me two things, that his ELISA test was negative and that we won Campaign of the Year at the AAA awards and that he was going to Singapore to wrap up some important matters that he could not tell me about. Thursday, 3 a.m., Angel called.



Caught a cab at 3:15 a.m. to Angel's house to help her sleep. The only sound in the house was that of the refrigerator and of Angel's drowning breath. Forty minutes since our call, words had been erased from her already. So there were no last words, only an enormous sigh as Angel slipped away.

I put my face to her cheek until I was sure she was gone.

The paperwork was immaculate. Every bill paid, every drawer sorted out, the cat bowl filled, envelopes sealed and marked out in different names, the fridge emptied out. I gathered Polydeuces into the cat carrier, and pulled the door shut. Dr Fali would be stopping by for a routine check in four hours' time.





I did not ever revisit Angel's street. There was no funeral. Her body was donated to the LMJ Medical College, not far from the ad agency I work in. Angel found it vastly entertaining that young medical school boys would be experimenting with her. ('At my age, you take what you get.')

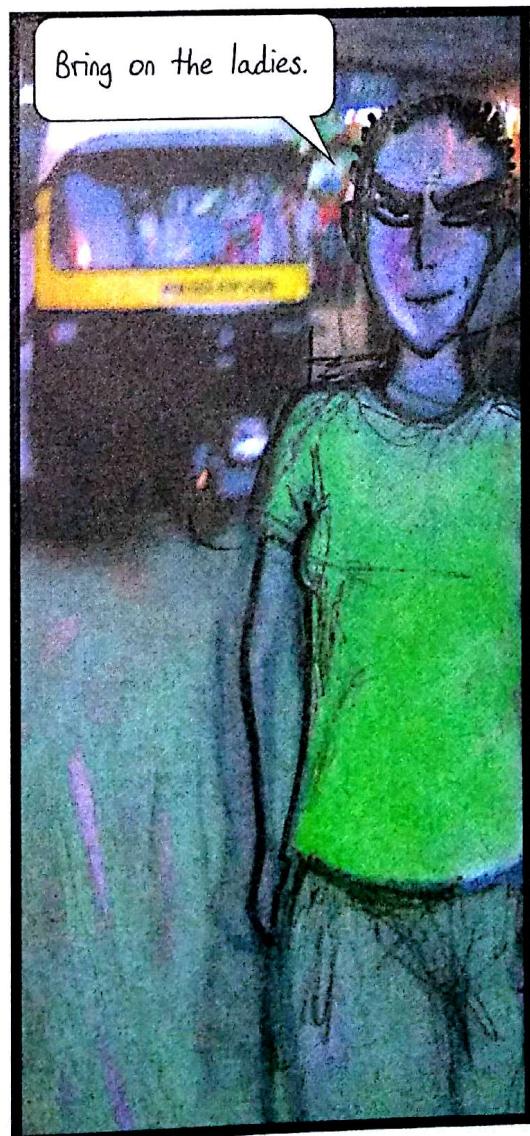
More than anything else, I find it hard to quote my friend in closed brackets.

THE AWARDS CEREMONY

I make my way to MR Hair Dressers that evening to get ready for the AAA awards ceremony. A little like Oscar night. MR Hair Dressers is a Barberia. As opposed to a hairstyling salon. That makes it 400 rupees cheaper and far less supercilious. MR Hair Dressers does not have too many women coming by.



I consider lying to the man that I am auditioning for a film about the Indian Army - people like being aides to celluloid history - but I am too lazy to begin. As it is, scissorman is neither happy nor convinced. Why would someone choose to be a shorn sheep when she could be earth mother or rumpled siren instead? The answer is that, increasingly, my hair makes me feel like a drag queen.



The walk home is three times as long as the walk to MR Hair Dressers. Smog city looks even more anaemic in the sun. Left to itself long enough, everything in the world withers, wastes, fades away to brown and grey. Tarpaulin and trash. Cinders and ash. Vegetables turn to potty. Red curtains turn colourless. Add to this, streams of men and women, like robots and slaves, in equally tired colours. We are scared of too much colour.

At the ceremony, I stand somewhere between a wide pillar and the dessert table laden with fruit. The waiter here is the least threatening, he does not take it personally when I divest each platter of its carefully arranged kiwi, then move on to the mango. When that is done, I take on much of the pineapple and watermelon as well. I bypass the chalky melons, and eat through the succulent, water-based, translucent citrus. I eat fruit all night long so there is something to do with my hands and feet. Other than that, I stare at men and women change from elegant and upright to fawning and drunk.





This is where I will be in eleven years, right? Rich and There. With an appropriate spouse, and no qualms about buying my way anywhere. My name on award nominations, I will mingle with men and women with expensive hair, ambiguous sexual affiliations, cigars, and vocabularies that embrace the cuisines and ways of the world. I will eat and drink and be driven home in a black alligator of a car. A call from the stage nudges me out of my hiding place.



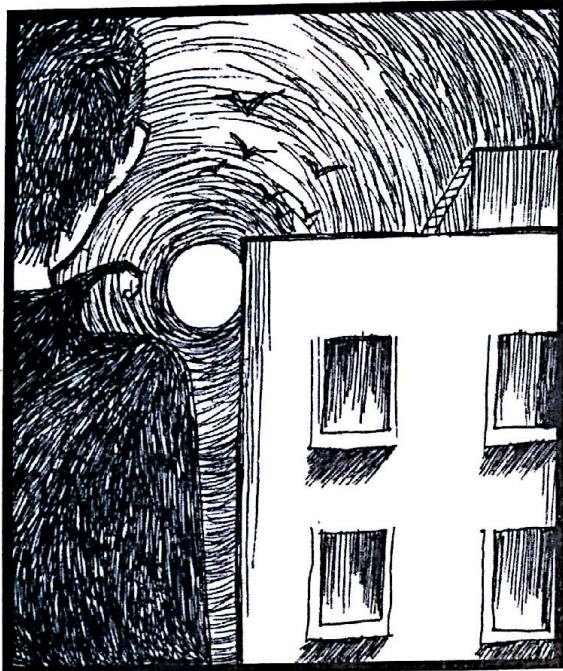


The girls have mingled so heartily, I cannot even discern them in the crowd any more. Laz is swimming like a natural, a media koi. It is obvious that he is not shy of an imminent celebrity future. At that moment, the last umbilical cord severed, I know as clear as water what I must do: I need to get the hell out of here. Now.

THE EXIT ROUTE

At 6 a.m., I am on the terrace still.

Sitting on the water tank is always an exercise in fighting the desire to jump off the ledge. The longer I fight the feeling, the stronger I become, but the desire to jump will never leave. I guess everyone has a bird urge when they look down heights, a desire to jump, without wing or buoyant sail. Fear of heights is fear of a desire to jump. The sky is stirred by the slap-slapping of wings. Birds from every corner of smog city converge midair and alight on the building opposite ours.



Girl from the fifth floor, who feeds the birds every day, climbs up to the water tank and jumps off.

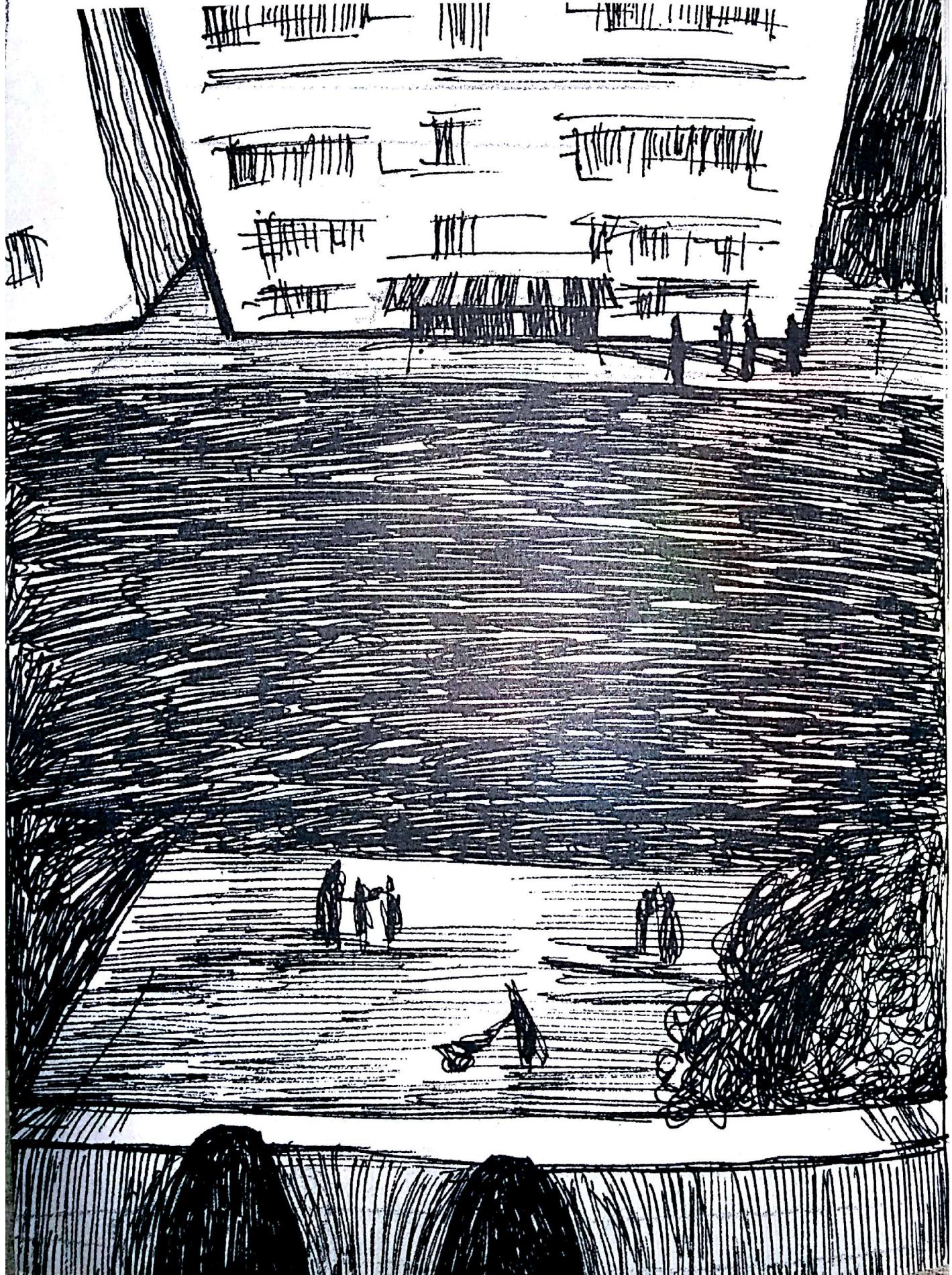


I see her body on the road below, and feel absolutely nothing. Maybe because I expect her to get up and walk off. In a story, the birds would have joined forces in a show of gratitude and broken her fall, carried her to a faraway land of safety. As it is, they just gurgle foolishly and confer about the no-show of breakfast.

I imagine myself in Pigeon Girl's place - a split open bag of skin on tar.



There are so many ways to exit towards the Light, but with my luck, I'd be the one electrocuted by Diwali lights. Or the one who cracks her head falling off a footstool. I'd still be a jester, leaving the audience with a stitch in their sides.



It is around the time that the paramedics scrape Pigeon Girl off the tar that three things become apparent to me: 1) I feel no bird urge. 2) I want to step back, not step off. 3) I still love Ruthie more than anyone else in the world, but I won't be jumping off ledges for anyone any more.





In a faraway city where the palette was pure and bright, Ruth stirred in her sleep, and smiled.

To be continued.

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