



पुष्पा  
पंचदोह



LORRI FRANDSEN



# 1. memories

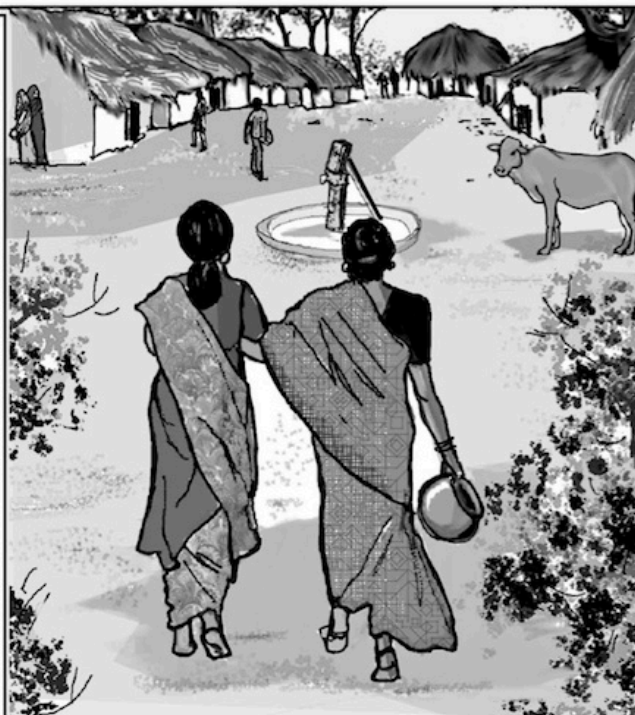




As a little girl growing up in Orissa, India, I'd wait every day for the morning mist to settle over our valley like a veil. I loved the way it draped over the mountains and shimmered across the fields. As the sun rose higher on the horizon, streaking the sky with purple and gold, the veil of haze would be whipped away to make way for the celebration of a new day. I'd watch the scene unfold before my eyes and imagine myself wearing the colors of the dawn with a veil of silvery mist floating around my shoulders... I'll always remember that about the place where I grew up, although I have many other memories of my valley and what it was like to live there.



Most of the people in our valley were tribals who lived close to the forests and farmed small plots of land. Some were rice farmers while others worked in the rock quarry a few miles away. Every day started out with dogs barking and roosters crowing. Then it was time for the women to gather their pots and go to the well to fetch water.



The bore well was at the end of the main street. It supplied the entire village with water and it was also the place where many people gathered to gossip and exchange news. Our village was very small so everyone knew each other.



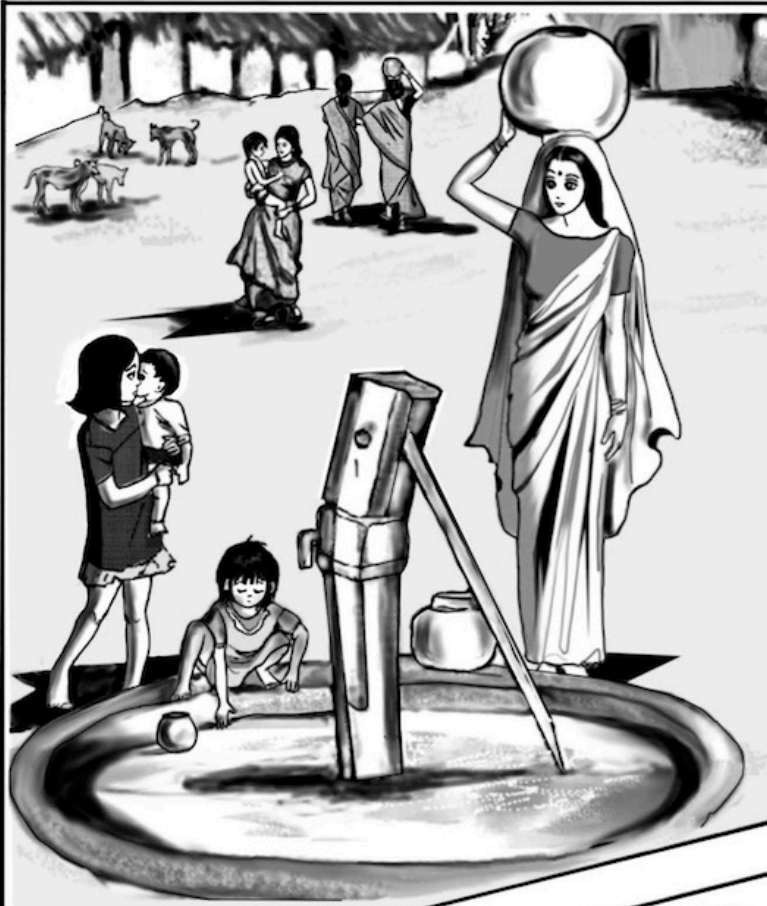


All the houses looked the same. The walls were made of mud mixed with cow dung and the roofs were thatched. There was usually one door and one window with iron bars to keep out animals and intruders. Inside there would be a small room or two with a rope bed, a clay oven built into the wall, and a few shelves for storage. No one had a bathroom or running water. We used the fields and roadsides for our bathroom needs. Our village didn't have dependable electricity so everyone used candles at night. Few of us had ever seen a TV and we didn't even know about computers.

Water from our well was used for drinking, for washing clothes, for bathing, and for watering gardens. I still remember the women pumping at the well, lifting the handle up and down, over and over again, until their pots were full. It took a long time and sometimes you had to wait in line for over an hour until it was your turn. Men rarely fetched water because it was considered a woman's job.







We also went to get water early every morning. Mummy balanced a big pot on her head which was very heavy when it was full. She had to carry it all the way back to our house at the end of the street. Anita, my 9 year-old sister, carried baby Kumari, and I, Pushpa, was only five so I just filled a little jar. I always liked to play in the water that spilled from the well. Mummy would remind me not to get my dress dirty. I only had 2 dresses - one for every day and one for dressup - so I tried to be careful. But sometimes I got mud on it and then Mummy would have to wash it when we got home.

Anita often helped Mummy by taking care of Kumari.



I just mostly played.







We had to hurry home so that Mummy could fix breakfast for Daddy. Mummy sometimes scolded me because I dawdled.



Daddy would just be getting up as we returned with the water.



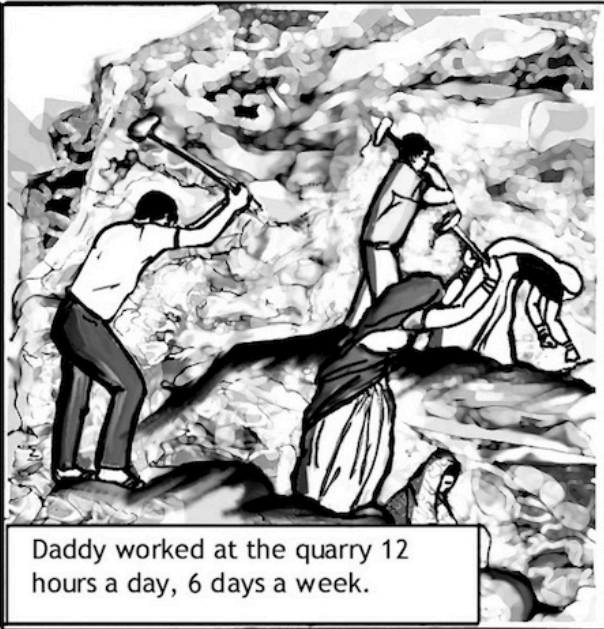
Bye Pushpa. Be a good girl.

Anita played with Kumari while Mummy cooked at the oven. We all loved Mummy's idlis and chapattis.

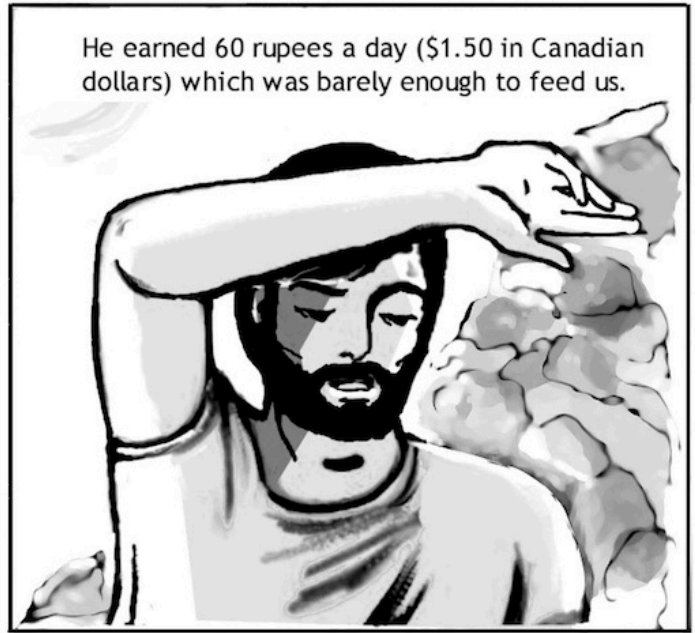


\* Idlis are rice balls and a chapatti is fried bread made from wheat

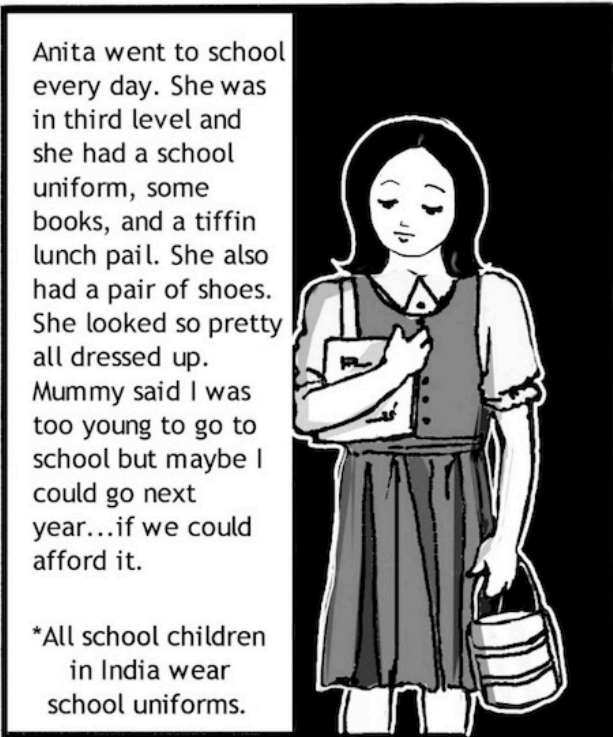
After breakfast Daddy went to work at the rock quarry. He had to walk 2 miles to get there so he always took a tiffin lunch pail with him.



Daddy worked at the quarry 12 hours a day, 6 days a week.

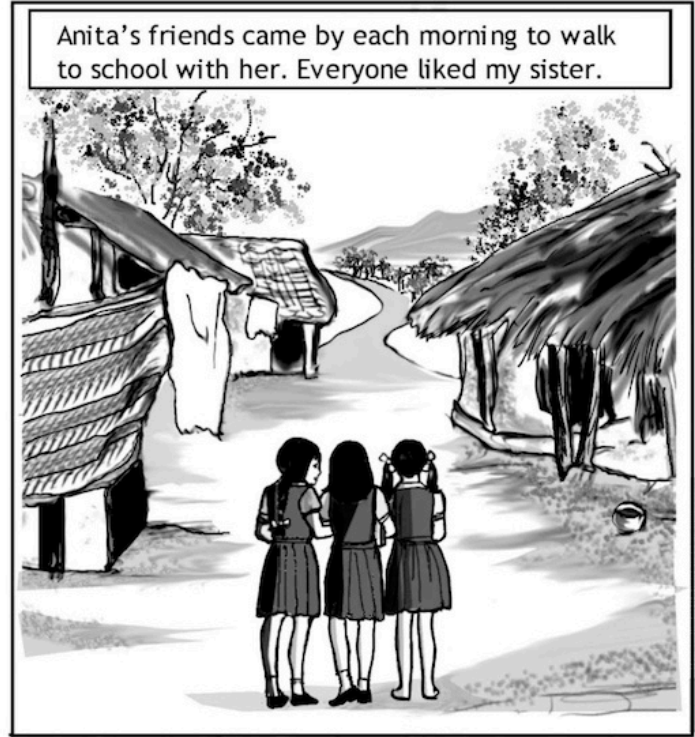


He earned 60 rupees a day (\$1.50 in Canadian dollars) which was barely enough to feed us.



Anita went to school every day. She was in third level and she had a school uniform, some books, and a tiffin lunch pail. She also had a pair of shoes. She looked so pretty all dressed up. Mummy said I was too young to go to school but maybe I could go next year...if we could afford it.

\*All school children in India wear school uniforms.



Anita's friends came by each morning to walk to school with her. Everyone liked my sister.



I wish I could go to school so I could learn things too.



Pushpa, school isn't the only place to learn. The whole world can be your teacher. There are many interesting things to discover right here at home.



Mummy was right. There were many interesting things to learn right where we lived. She said I should ask questions because that was the best way to find out about things. Mummy sometimes laughed at my questions but she always tried to give me an answer.



Mummy said I was an exceptionally curious child.





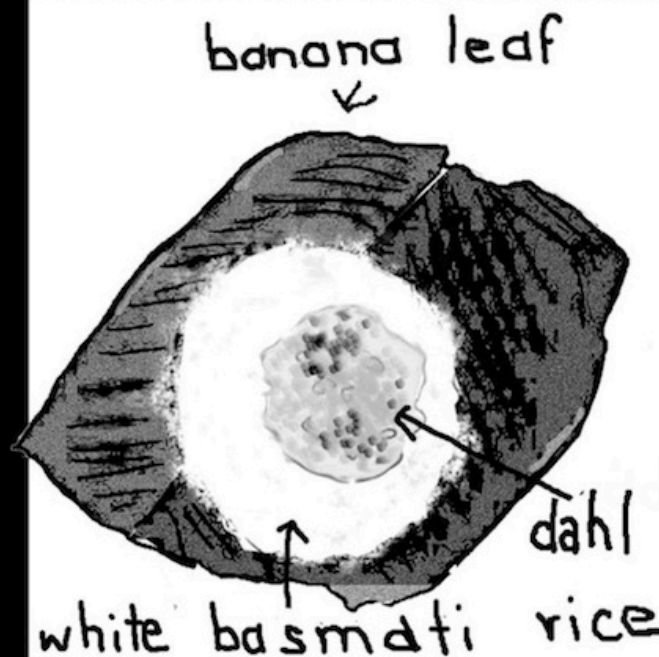


I think I loved Mummy so much because she was gentle and kind. She was beautiful too. She loved to sing when she combed and braided my hair and I loved to listen to her. Sometimes she told me funny stories about when she was a little girl. Being with her made me forget that I couldn't go to school like I wanted. We did so many fun things together.



We were a poor family so we hardly ever ate chicken, and we never ate beef because Hindus don't eat cows, (except for water buffalo). Once a week we had eggs. Usually we just ate rice and dahl.

\*Dahl is a thin soup made from lentils. It is poured over rice like a gravy.



We used banana leaves for plates and we ate with our fingers. We only used our right hand because in India it is considered very rude to eat with the left hand. Mummy taught me how to scoop up rice into a ball and pop it into my mouth. After we finished eating, we threw the leaves outside for the cows to eat.





Daddy was gone from early morning til late in the evening. When the sun began to go down we knew he would be home soon. He always looked so tired when he walked through the village.





Sometimes Mummy and Daddy whispered in bed and I could hear them

I don't see how we can survive on my low wages at the quarry. There's never enough money for the things we need.

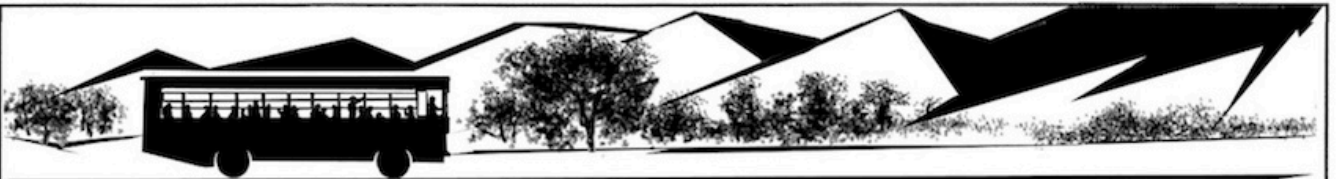
I know. I'm worried that we won't be able to get more medicine for Kumari if she gets sick again.

What scares me is that the boss has been talking about laying off some of the workers.

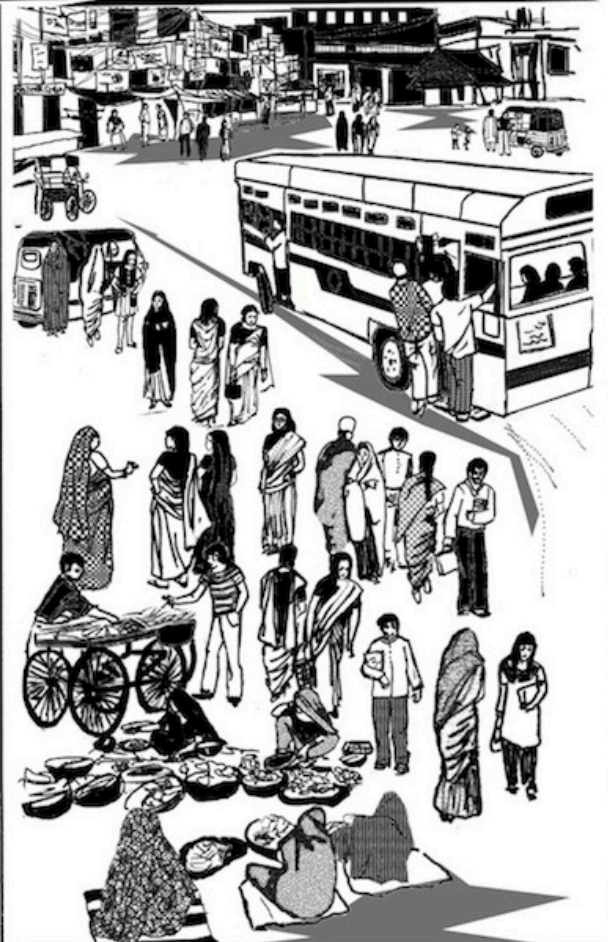
Do you think I should go to the town temple to do puja?

Usually we prayed to the Hindu gods in our house or at the shrine in the village. We only traveled to the temple in town for special holy festivals, when we wanted to ask the gods for big requests. I knew Mummy and Daddy must be very concerned if Mummy was thinking of going there. After Daddy went to sleep, Mummy was still awake and I heard her crying.

Two days later Mummy and I took a bus into town. Mummy asked a neighbour to look after Kumari while we were gone. Sabita, an old woman from our village, traveled with us.



It was a long 2 hour ride. Every time the bus stopped, more people got on until the bus was completely full. We were lucky to have seats so we didn't have to stand up the whole way.



Finally we arrived at the market square where people were selling all sorts of things.



Mummy bought flowers and fruit for the Durga puja\*. Mummy said that Durga's energy would be inside her image and if we gained her attention, and if she was pleased with our gifts, the goddess might show us favor and grant our prayer requests.

\*Puja is the worship of Hindu deities through prayers, songs, and rituals.



Pick this banana, Mummy.

These orange flowers will please the goddess.



You don't think the child will be frightened?

She was alright the other times I brought her.

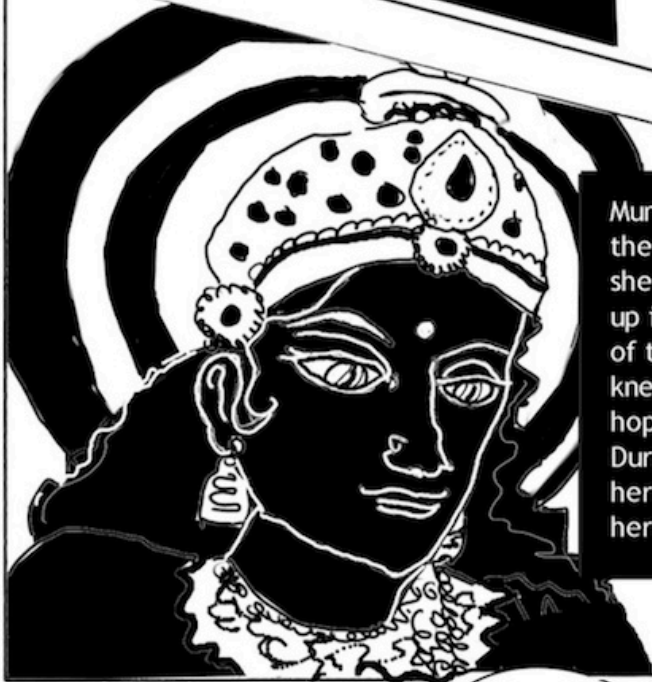
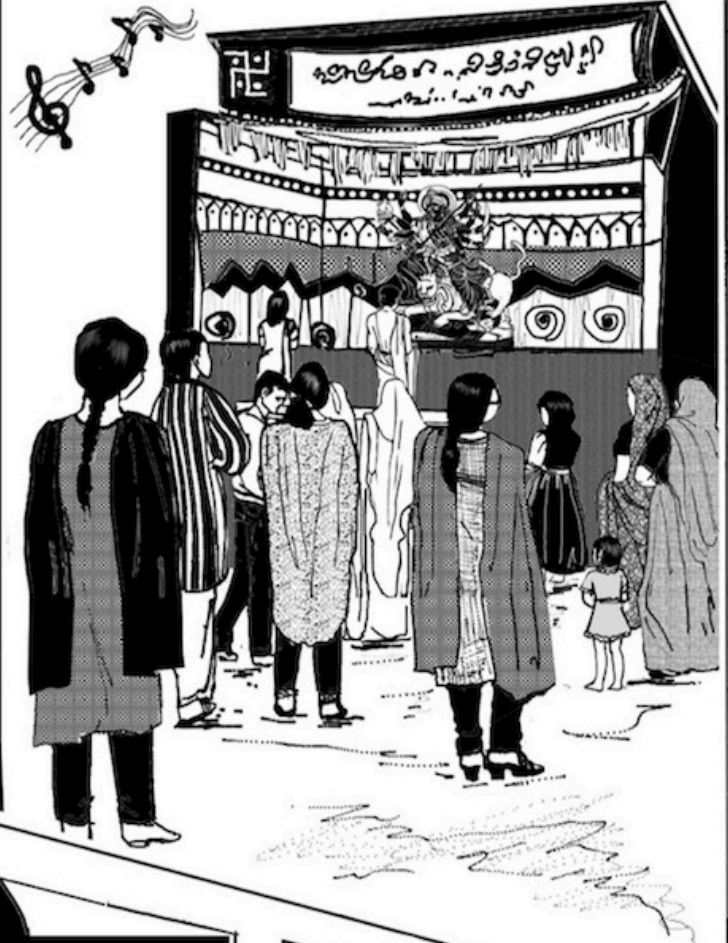
Hindus believe that Durga is a great warrior goddess who is ferocious and very powerful. Her images represent her fury.



She must be a brave one then.

I wasn't really so brave because Durga can be very frightening to look at. I was especially afraid of her eyes which Mummy said could see right through a person.

When the drumming began, many worshippers gathered around the temple. We stood in the front so Mummy could give her offering to the goddess. Durga's statue showed her painted black with ten arms waving around. She was sitting on a lion and her foot was on the head of a demon. The demon was being eaten by the lion. Whenever someone wanted to do puja, they had to take off their shoes and climb the stairs to the top where they rang a bell so the goddess would notice them. Everyone was chanting and some people danced in circles. There was a strong smell of incense everywhere. Mummy finally got her turn to give the priest her offering and he put it on the altar.



Mummy climbed the stairs and she looked right up into the eyes of the goddess. I knew she was hoping that Durga would see her and answer her prayers.



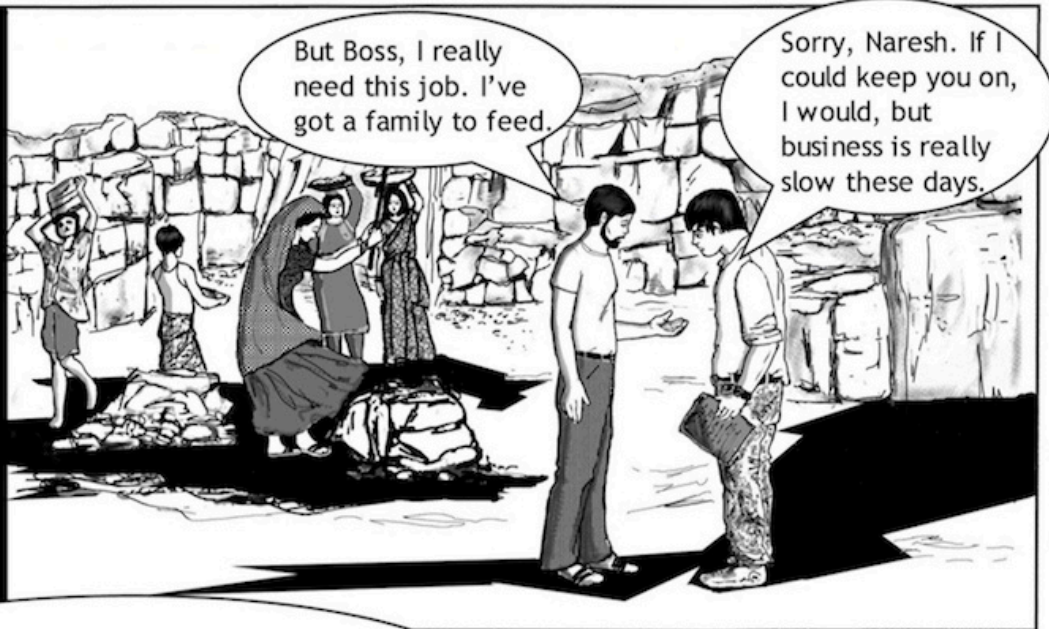
Please make Kumari strong and healthy and please bring prosperity to our family.

I was glad when puja was over and we could go back to the village.





The puja to the goddess didn't work because things didn't get better for our family like Mummy had hoped. In fact, the following week they got a while lot worse.



But Boss, I really need this job. I've got a family to feed.

Sorry, Naresh. If I could keep you on, I would, but business is really slow these days.

Kumari is terribly sick. She won't eat and I can't get her fever to come down. We've got to do something for her! Look at how flushed she is.



What am I supposed to do, Lalitha? I don't have a job anymore and there's no money for more medicine! There's nothing I can do!



I heard the neighbours talking



What rotten karma! No job and a sick baby. I feel so sorry for them.

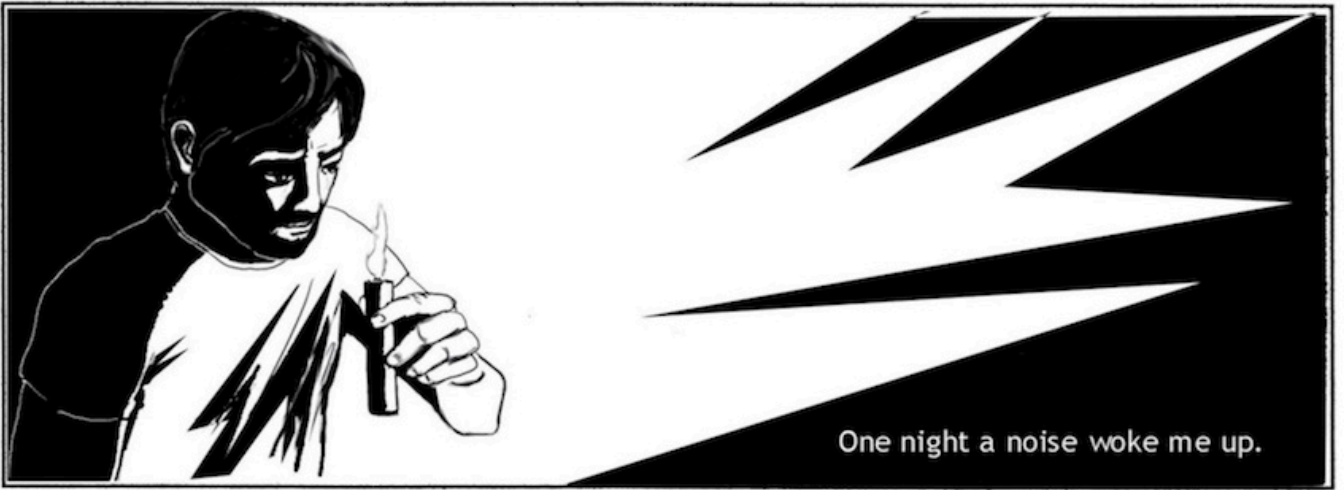
That's not their only bad luck. They have 3 daughters and no sons. Girls are of no use to a poor man. He will never be able to get dowries for them all.

And with no son, he has no one to carry on his name or perform the burial rites when he dies. What a hopeless situation!

That's life I guess. But its their duty to suffer and gain as much good karma as possible. Then they can have a better life next time around. I'd like to help them but I'm afraid to do too much. If I take away their suffering, they will have to go through this all over again. That would really be too bad.







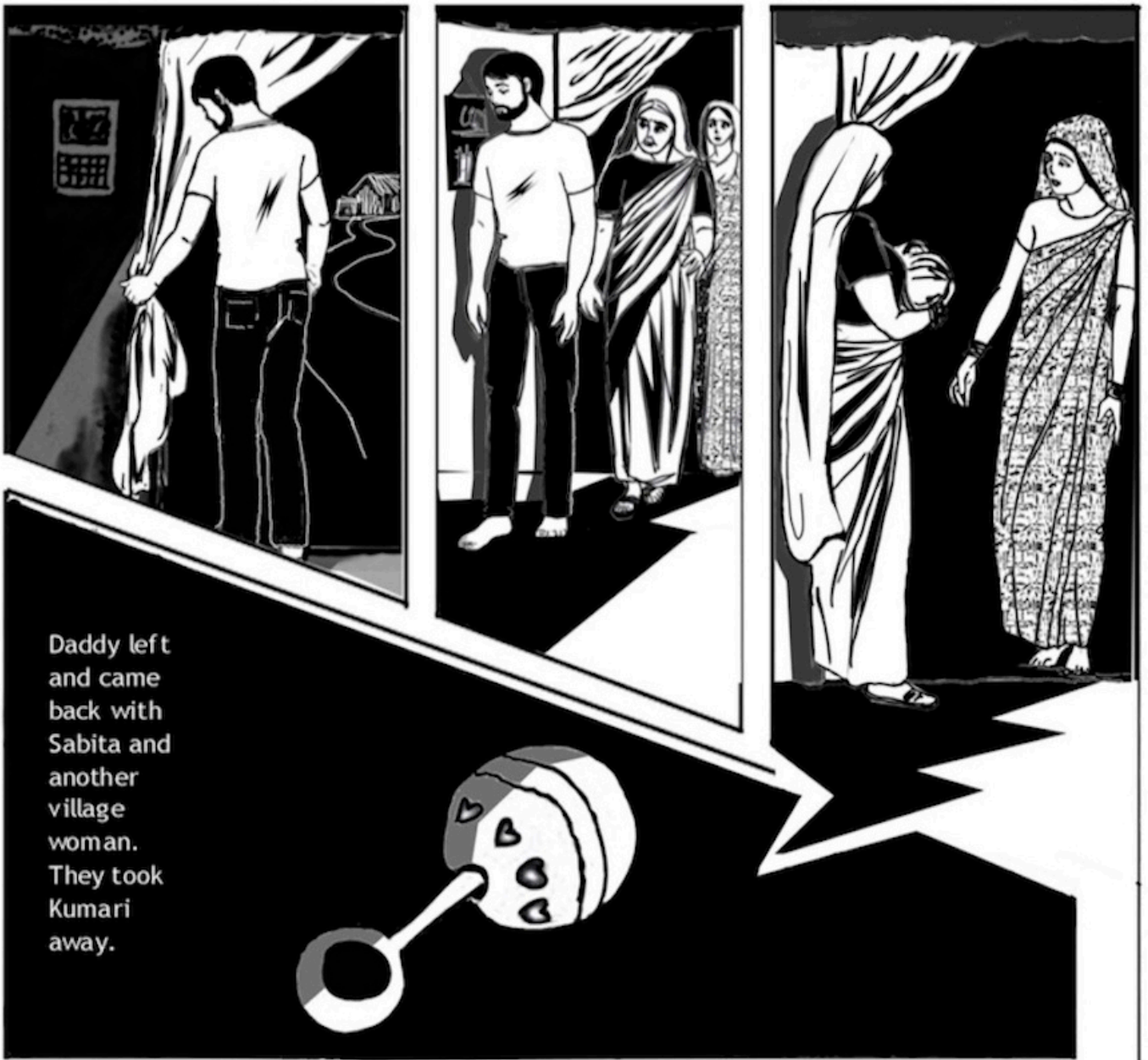
One night a noise woke me up.



**OH NO!..NO...  
my baby...**



Kumari was still and cold.



Daddy left and came back with Sabita and another village woman. They took Kumari away.



I never saw her again.



Sabita washed Kumari's body and prepared her for burial. She was too little to be cremated so Daddy dug a grave for her in the forest. Mummy took some pretty orange and yellow flowers and put them on the grave.



During the next few days Mummy stayed by Kumari's grave most of the time. Sometimes she would talk to Kumari as if she were still alive. Other times she would just cry until she had no tears left .

Mummy wore a white saree because white is the color of mourning in Hindu tradition.



Our neighbors were getting ready for Diwali, the Hindu New Year. Many Hindus do good deeds during this 5 day festival and so, even though a death in our family made us impure and we were not supposed to receive gifts, some kind village women brought food and put it on our doorstep.

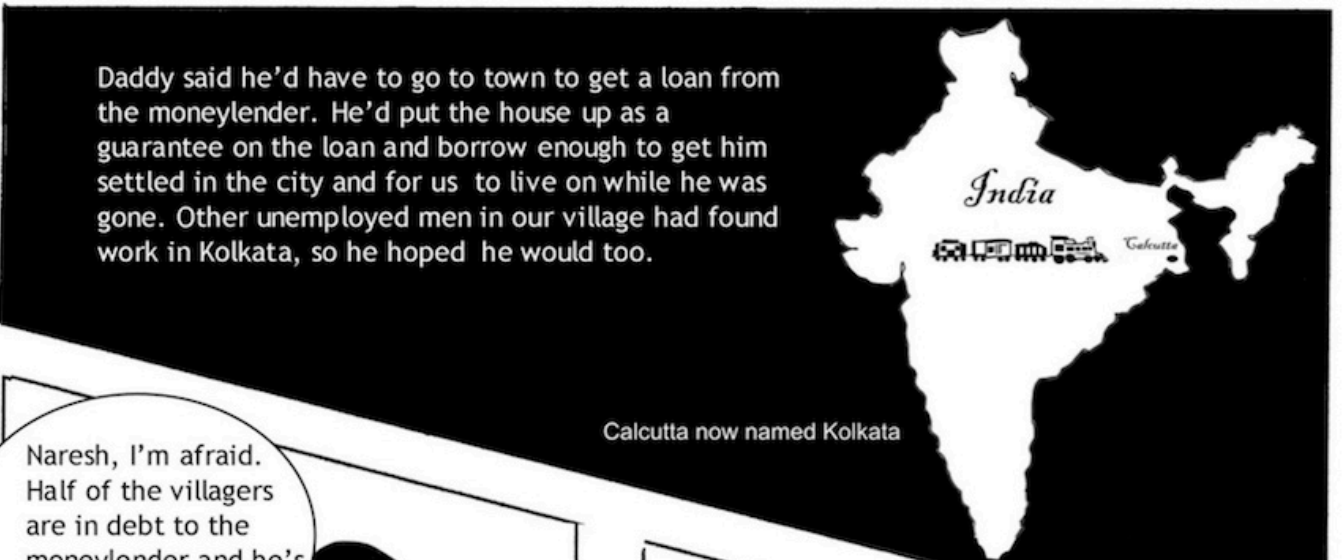
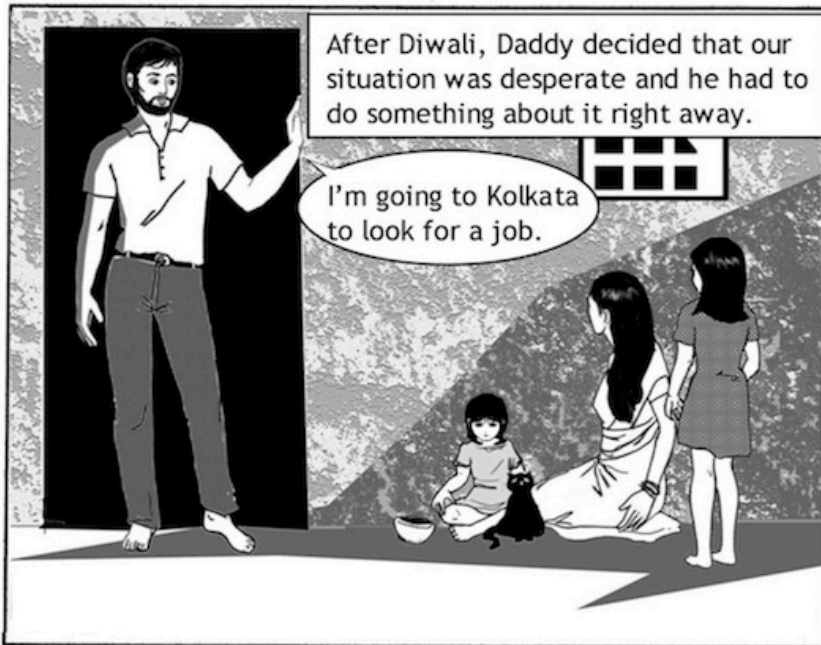


Diwali is a very special celebration signifying victory of good over evil. Hindus get ready for it by drawing rangoli patterns on the ground and lighting oil lamps so that the goddess Lakshmi will approach their door and bring good fortune. They also dress in new clothes, visit neighbors, and give gifts of nuts and sweets to one another. Everyone in our village was happy and excited...

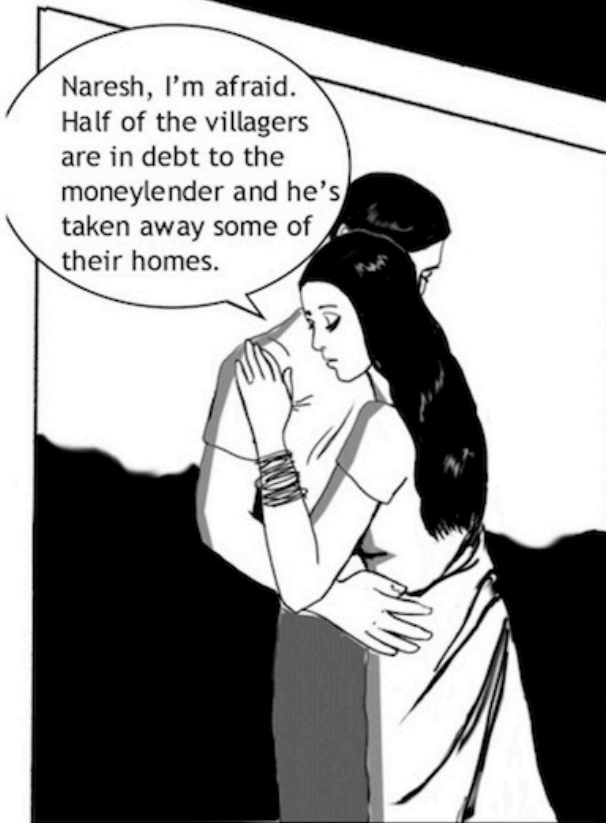


...except for our family. We didn't light candles or celebrate the Festival of Lights in any way. For us, Diwali was a reminder of sorrow and death in the loss of our little Kumari.





Calcutta now named Kolkata



The next day Daddy took the bus to town.



Krishna Das, the moneylender, gave loans to people who needed money for such things as dowries or weddings, funerals, seed for crops, medicine, or an education for their children. He charged very high interest and many were never able to pay back their debts. When that happened, they had to give their land and houses in exchange for what was owed. Mr. Das had become a very wealthy man by collecting on his debts in this way. He lived in one of the nicest houses in town and had many servants and bodyguards.



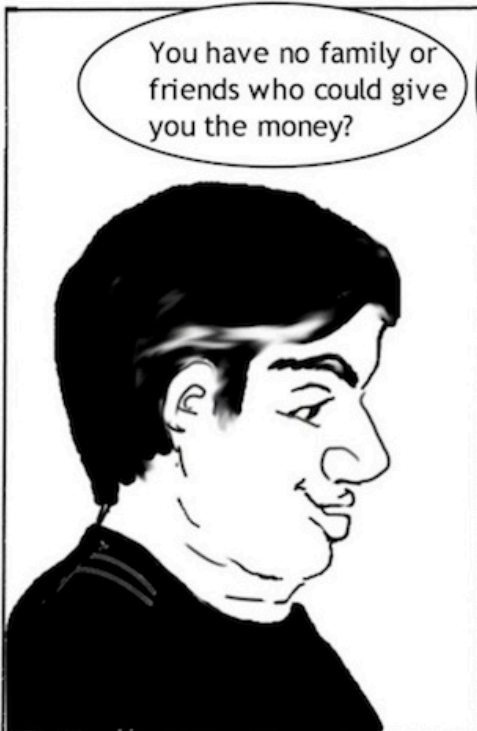
So you need a loan of 8000 rupees? \*

\* \$250

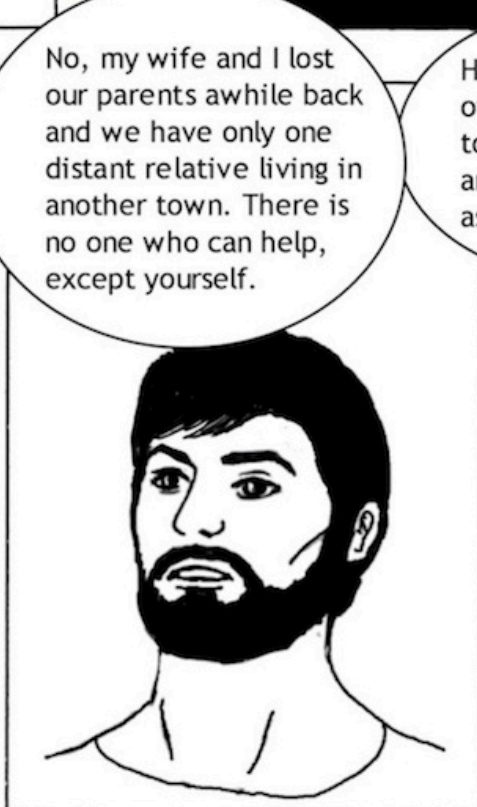
Yes sir. I hope to get a job in Kolkata and then I'll pay back everything I owe. It should only take a few months.



You have no family or friends who could give you the money?



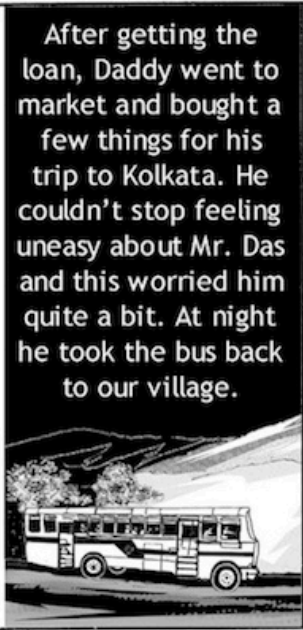
No, my wife and I lost our parents awhile back and we have only one distant relative living in another town. There is no one who can help, except yourself.



Hmmm... You realize of course that I have to charge 30% interest and take your house as collateral?







Mummy packed Daddy's shirt and pants in a sports bag and put some chapattis and fruit into his tiffin pail. It was a long bus trip to the city and he would need to eat along the way.



I didn't want Daddy to go to Kolkata. I was afraid he would never come back. Something inside my heart told me that I would never see him again if he left our village.

Don't cry Pushpa. It's only for a little while. I'll come back as soon as I can.



Anita, try to help Mummy around the house as much as possible, okay?



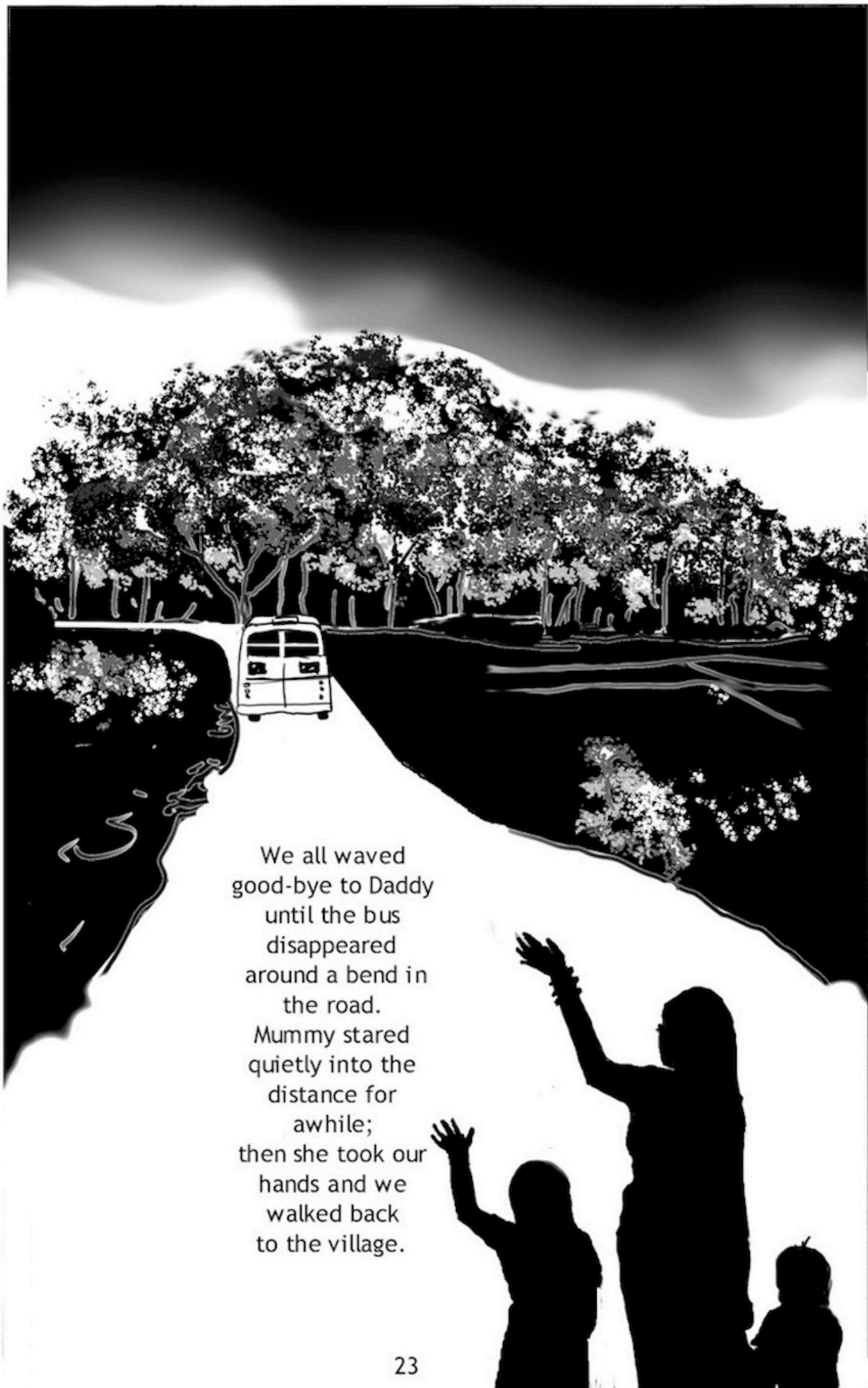
Here's 6000 rupees. Buy whatever you need. I'll send more after I get a job. And don't worry about Mr. Das. I'll send payments to him each month.



Daddy hugged us extra hard before getting on the bus. Anita and I cried and tears slid down Mummy's cheeks too. Daddy took a seat at the back of the bus and waved out the window at us. He looked so sad.







We all waved  
good-bye to Daddy  
until the bus  
disappeared  
around a bend in  
the road.  
Mummy stared  
quietly into the  
distance for  
awhile;  
then she took our  
hands and we  
walked back  
to the village.

## Pushpa Explains

### Sons and Daughters

The village women were talking about karma and how the deeds from past lives can affect one's current existence on earth. One of the women mentioned that part of my family's bad karma involved having three daughters and no sons. In India, especially in the rural areas and in more backward states like Orissa, daughters are seen as a burden, particularly if the family is poor like mine. This is because daughters require dowries if they are to be married - and they must marry because no woman is considered complete if she does not have a husband. It is the father's responsibility to provide dowries for his daughters, after which they become a part of their husband's family. Often they will hardly ever see their parents afterwards, except when they return home to give birth to their first child. So daughters take finances out of the home when they marry, whereas sons bring added wealth into the family through their brides' dowries. My father would have had to provide three dowries for three daughters which almost certainly guaranteed bankruptcy and lifelong enslavement to debt. This was one of the reasons why the village women felt that our family was cursed with bad luck.



### Funerals

The village women mentioned that sons were necessary to see that they received proper burials. In the Hindu religion sons must perform the funeral rites that are believed to prevent the souls of parents from being hindered on their journey to the next world. Hindus believe that cremation allows the spirit to move into its next incarnation and therefore nearer to heaven.

Kumari was under 2 years of age and therefore she was not cremated. Hindus do not usually cremate small children but bury them instead. People who are very poor and have no caste are also often buried rather than cremated.

### Moneylenders



Obtaining loans from moneylenders is a means by which the poor in rural India obtain finances. Banks won't lend to the poor and illiterate so they have no other recourse. The moneylenders are often unscrupulous opportunists who charge exorbitant interest and keep their victims indebted to them for life. When the borrower defaults on a loan, the moneylender moves in to take away houses and land. Although this is illegal, the poor tribals in Orissa can do nothing to stop them as they do not know their legal rights and are easily intimidated. Some moneylenders will use violence to terrorize and subjugate their victims. Widows and the aged are prime targets for these abuses.



## 2. Ashes



A month went by and still no news from Daddy. Mummy often stood at the door, hoping she would see him walking down the main street of our village. She waited for the postman to bring a letter from him, but none came. She got more and more worried as time went by.



If you ask me, I don't think he's ever coming back. She's had no word from him in a long while. It doesn't look good. I wonder what's happened to him.

Maybe that was his idea all along - to get away and never come back.

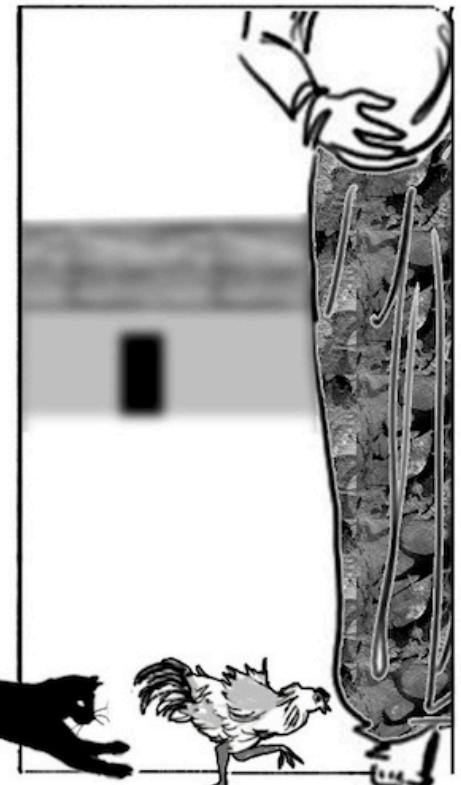






Do you really think he planned to leave them for good?

He might have. He wouldn't be the first from our village to make a new life for himself in the city.



Hmm... you could be right, especially if Naresh found another woman. I guess you can't blame him with all his bad luck lately.

It seems to be the way some men think. When things get rough, they run from all responsibility.



Exactly so. Still, I always thought Naresh was different. Guess I was wrong. It's really too bad, isn't it?

Yeah.



Sometimes I hated the people in our village. They could be so mean.



Daddy had told Mummy to get what she needed with the money he gave her. 6000 rupees was a lot of money for a poor villager but it had to last until Daddy could send more from the city. Mummy was very careful how she spent it. One of the first things she did was hire men from the village to put new thatch on our roof. The rain had been coming through in several places, making the mud floors slushy. The new roof was expensive but it sure was nice not to have to put pots all over the floor and walk through mud.



Mummy also bought a mother goat and her baby. The mother's milk fed her baby and there was enough left over to sell to the people in the village. We built a pen for them so that the wild dogs couldn't get at them. Anita looked after the baby goat and Mummy did the milking every day. Mummy said that when the baby grew up, we would sell her for money and buy some more goats. Eventually we would have a whole bunch of goats. I liked the baby because she was sweet and gentle. I wanted to name her but Mummy said I shouldn't because we were not going to keep her for a pet. I didn't tell anyone but I named her Lakshmi after the goddess of wealth because I hoped that one day we would be able to sell this little goat for lots of money.

We went to town and Mummy bought some new clothes - a saree for herself, and pretty new dresses for Anita and me.

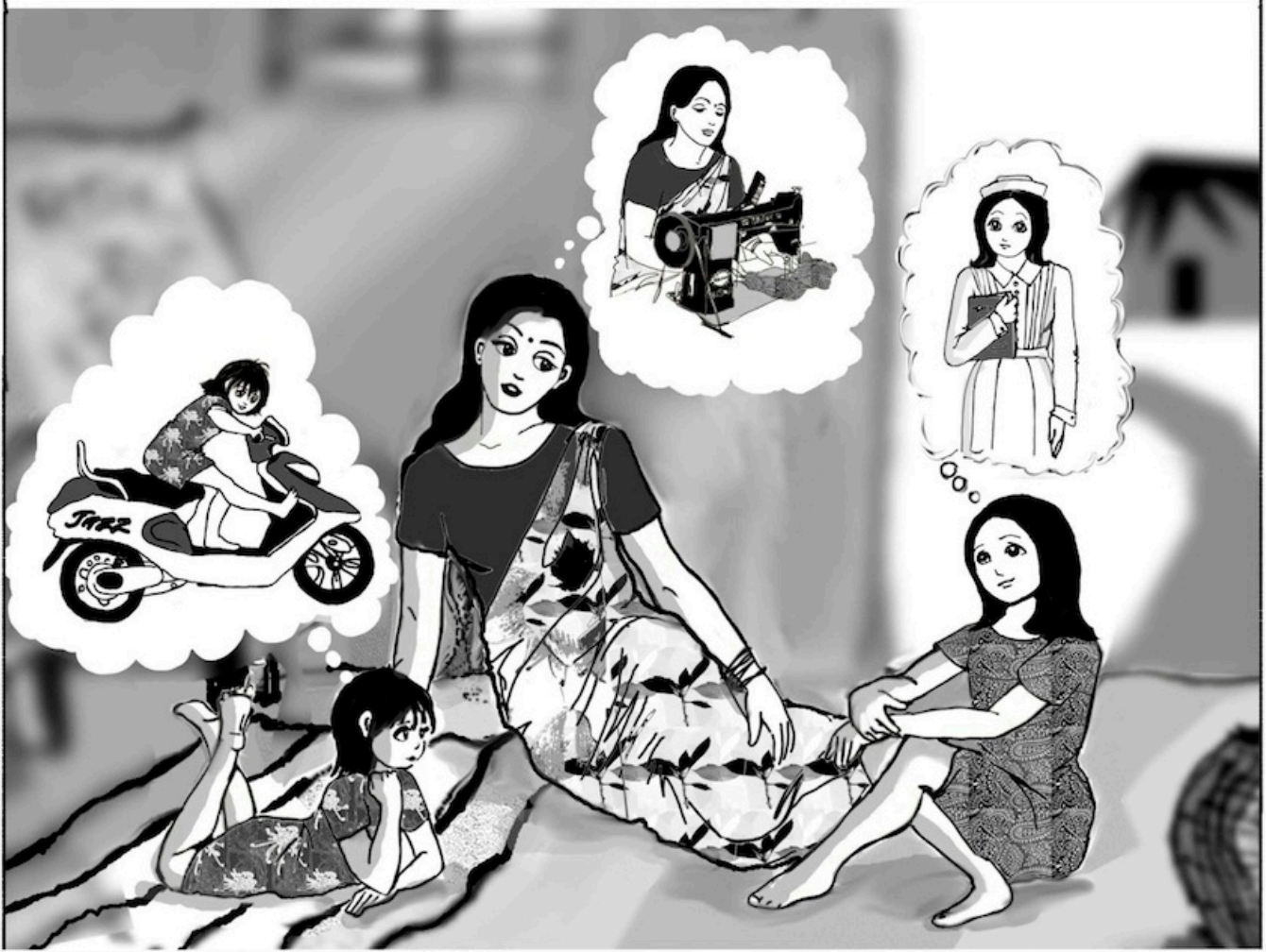


We also had to get some chickens because Pinky ate the others we had. Mummy said it was my job to make sure he didn't eat any more.

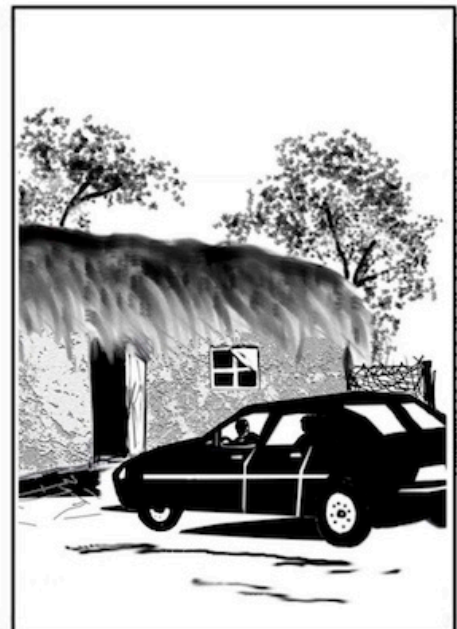




One day we were talking about the dreams in our hearts and Mummy said she would like to get a sewing machine so she could start up a tailoring business. Anita said she wanted to go to college one day and become a nurse so she could look after Mummy and Daddy when they got old. I told my dream of getting a shiny red 'scooty' that could go really fast on the roads and take me wherever I wanted to go. Mummy and Anita laughed when I said that, but I was totally serious.



Mummy told us that there must be a very good reason why we hadn't heard from Daddy yet. I didn't tell her what the neighbours were saying because I knew it wasn't true and it would only upset Mummy. I knew Daddy would find work in Kolkata and take care of us and then all our dreams would come true...but that was before the arrival of an unwelcome visitor.





As soon as I saw the big man and his driver standing in the doorway, I suspected something bad was going to happen. It turned out that the big man was Mr. Das, the moneylender. He had a gruff, gravelly voice and eyes like cold black stones. When he looked at Mummy they glowed like Pinky's did when he was chasing chickens. I could tell Mummy was scared of him.



Mummy quickly covered her head with a veil and greeted her visitors.

Namaste.



Mummy went to the money jar and took out all that was left of the loan. She gave it to Mr. Das.

I'll try to pay more as soon I can. Please give me a bit more time.



I'm here to collect on the loan I gave your husband last month. Your payment is overdue and that's a breach of contract. I can take your house if I don't get my money.

'Course I'd hate to do that to such a pretty little lady.





Mr. Das took the money from Mummy's hand but he didn't let go of her. An evil look came into his eyes as they roved over her from head to toe. Mummy was trembling and trying to pull away.



You know, I think we can work out some kind of arrangement with the loan. Let's face it, your husband split on you, and you won't be able to pay back the money on your own, especially not with the added interest. And I really don't want to see you and your girls without a roof over your heads. How about you come back to town with me and we can discuss some possible options - some way that will mutually benefit us.



Mummy was filled with fear. I knew I had to rescue her.





You'll be sorry you didn't take up my offer.

The moneylender was enraged when I hit him with a broom. For a minute or two, it looked like he was going to hit me back but Mummy stepped in between us. He had such a bad temper that his face turned purple and his voice got real loud as he threatened to take away our house and land if Mummy didn't pay up at the end of each month. Mummy pleaded with him to be patient, promising to get his money to him as quickly as possible. She told him that she expected to hear from Daddy any day now. But Mr. Das laughed in her face. He told her to face facts and quit dreaming. Then he and his driver got into the shiny black car and drove away. We were so relieved when he was gone.



I want 3000 rupees at the end of each month...or else.



How will she ever get so much money?







That night Mummy had a very bad dream. She was tormented by fear for the future and the possibility that Daddy might not return to us.

She dreamt that Mr. Das was the lion at Durga's feet, ready to pounce on her. The faces of goddesses mocked her and whispered threats. Durga took off her head and blood spurted everywhere. Mummy woke up tired and depressed and Anita got her to tell us about her nightmare. It must have been horrible to dream all that!



Mummy prayed to our house god, Ganesha, who is supposed to be able to remove obstacles. She hoped he would show us favour and bring good luck.

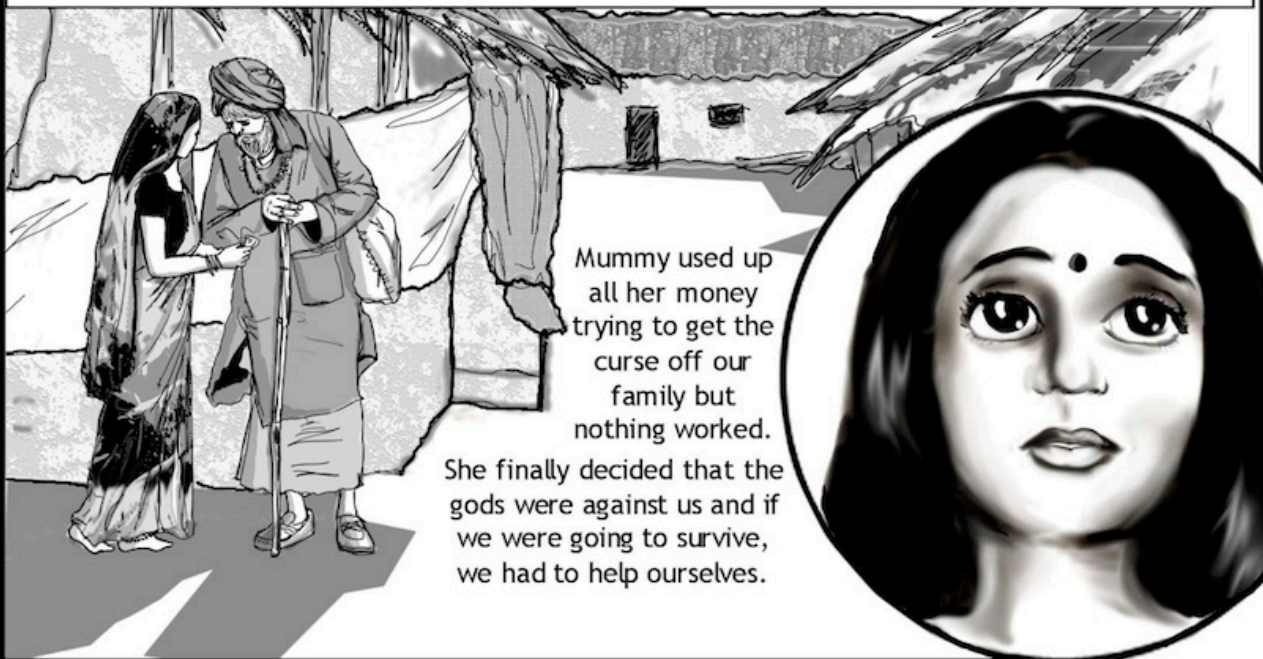


Some of our neighbours were animists who believed that the tree at the end of the village had powerful spirits living in it. The villagers believed that if you offended these spirits, they could do bad things to you. Mummy brought offerings in case they were the reason we were having such unfortunate times.



The local shaman was reputed to be very powerful. Everyone feared him because he could put curses on people (and remove them) if you paid him enough rupees. Mummy sold the baby goat so she could pay him to remove the curse over us. She asked him to bless Daddy, wherever he was, and to bring him back home to us. The shaman said he would use his magic but a very powerful evil spirit was causing all the trouble and he might need to use his most powerful magic - and that would require more rupees.

A sadhu lived in the mountains and sometimes passed through our village. Mummy gave him the last of her money because some people said he could remove the evil eye and bring blessing if you gave him a donation. Other people said he had no powers at all and just used the money to buy drugs.



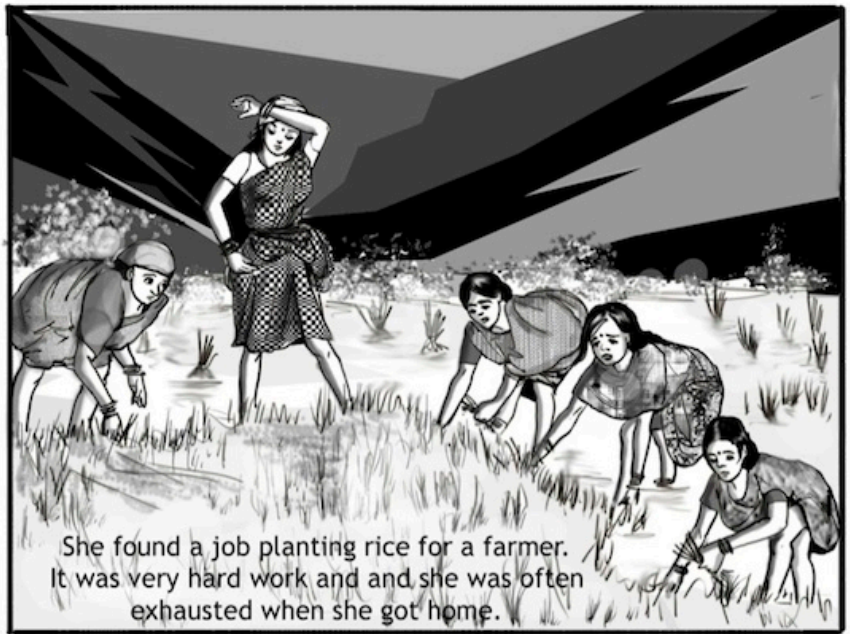
Mummy used up all her money trying to get the curse off our family but nothing worked.

She finally decided that the gods were against us and if we were going to survive, we had to help ourselves.





Mummy told us we needed to make some changes that would involve sacrificing our dreams, at least for the time being.



She found a job planting rice for a farmer. It was very hard work and and she was often exhausted when she got home.



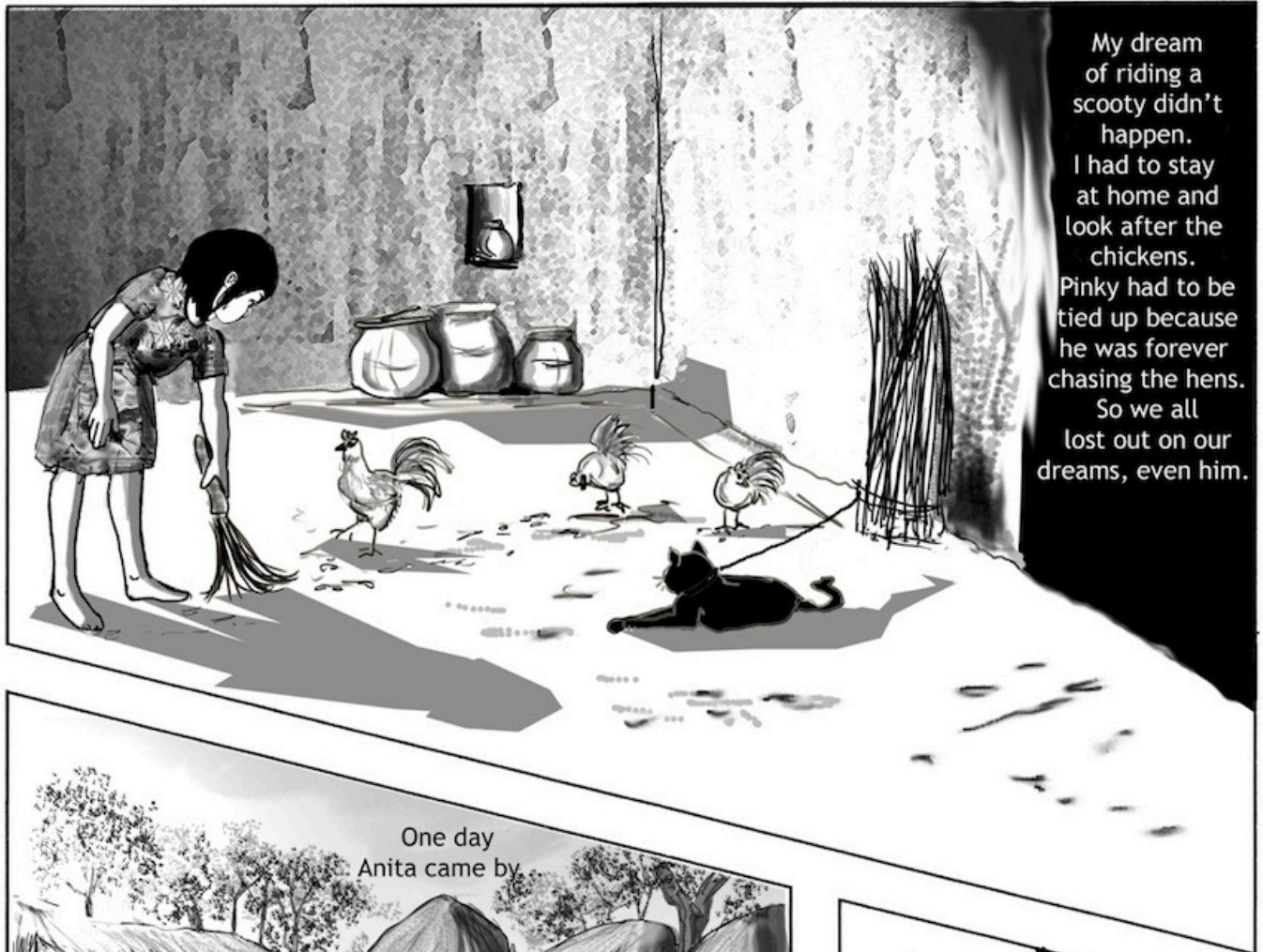
The hardest change was for Anita. She loved school and was at the top of her class. But Mummy couldn't afford to buy new school supplies and a uniform. Mummy said that even though Anita was still a child, her labor was needed to help out at home. She would have to leave school for awhile until Mummy could pay off the loan, or until Daddy returned from Kolkata. Anita cried when she heard the bad news. Next day she said good-bye to all her friends and everyone was sad. Even the teacher had tears in her eyes.



Anita got work looking after our neighbor's cow. She had to feed it and take it to the river every day. She was often very bored.







My dream of riding a scooty didn't happen. I had to stay at home and look after the chickens. Pinky had to be tied up because he was forever chasing the hens. So we all lost out on our dreams, even him.



One day Anita came by.

Mummy isn't well.



I didn't need her to tell me that. I could see that Mummy was getting very thin. She had no appetite and her head often hurt. Sometimes she had trouble getting out of bed in the morning. I was terribly afraid that she might die like Kumari, but I didn't tell Anita my fears. I thought that if I spoke them out loud, they might happen.







I tried to help Mummy by getting water from the well each day...

...but I wasn't very strong and sometimes I dropped the pot and all the water spilled out.



Anita tried to cook supper for Mummy ...but not with much success.

Mummy was always kind when we made mistakes. I loved that about her. I wanted to be just like her but I didn't have her gentle spirit.

It's okay, Anita.  
You'll do better next time.  
It takes time to learn new things.

Yech...  
burnt chappattis  
for supper!





Mummy was sick and very weak but next day she went to work in the rice fields anyway.



Later in the day we saw one of the field workers come running into the village

We knew something was wrong because the woman had a scared look on her face. She said something to the other village women and they looked worried and upset too. We wondered what was disturbing them.

Sabita was there and her expression was grim as she listened to the woman. A sad look came into her eyes.

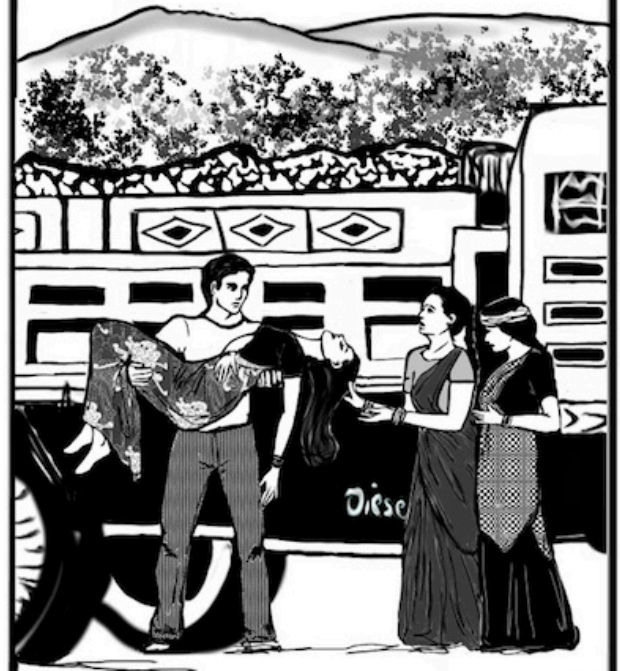




Sabita told us that Mummy had collapsed in the rice field. Some of the workers rushed to help her.



They flagged down a passing truck and asked the driver to take Mummy to the town hospital. She was very pale and hardly breathing at all.



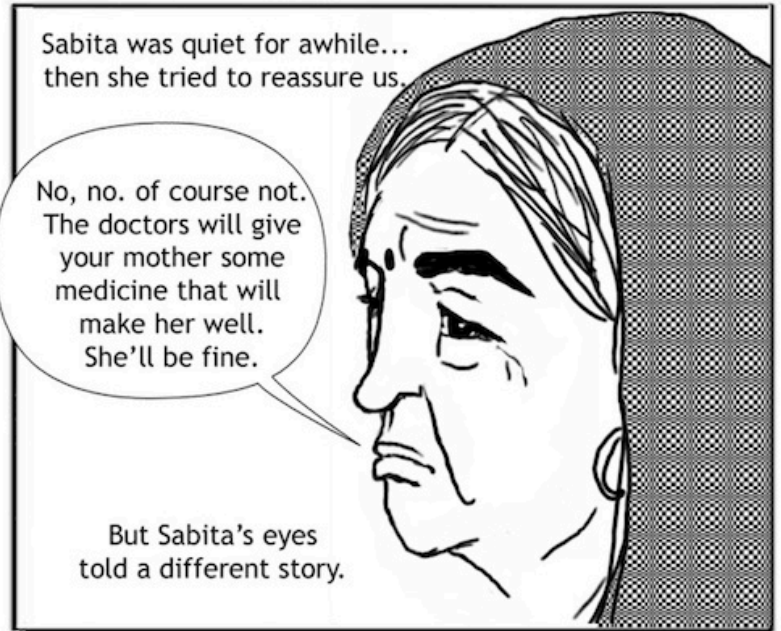
I can take you to town to see your mother. You'll need to pack some things for her.

Pack for yourselves too. We might have to stay overnight.

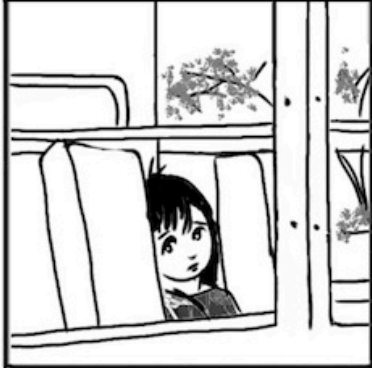
Poor children. They've been through so much already ... now this. What will happen to them if Lalitha doesn't make it? Who will take care of them? I certainly can't and I doubt that anyone in the village will want two extra mouths to feed.







On the bus ride into town I thought about what would happen if Mummy didn't get better. Already I had lost my baby sister, and Daddy had not returned to us. One bad thing after another was happening to our family.



Why?! What had we done to deserve all this? Why did rotten people like Mr. Das live in fine houses while good people like Mummy were poor and suffered so much? It wasn't fair!!!



The Hindu gods were supposed to be great and strong, but even though Mummy had given them lots of offerings and prayed every day, they had done nothing for her. As our bus entered the town square I promised myself that if Mummy died, I would never pray again. Never! Ever again!



We finally found the hospital where Mummy was taken. It was very crowded and it smelled bad. When we saw Mummy in her room, we were shocked!





Mummy didn't wake up when I touched her arm. Sabita said that was because Mummy was in a coma and couldn't wake up. We would have to wait until she was well enough to open her eyes.



A nurse came by to check on Mummy's condition. She straightened the bed and felt Mummy's pulse. She was very gentle and seemed concerned.



Your mother is unconscious now but I spoke with her when she was first admitted. She could wake up at any moment.

Her doctor will tell you more.



Dr. Bhaskar came to speak to us. He said Mummy was in serious condition and needed medicine.



I'm afraid I have bad news for you. Mrs. Patna has a serious heart condition that requires medicine and possibly surgery. It will be very expensive.



But we have no money for treatment. We are from a poor village. And her husband is away and can't be reached. There is no one to help.





Outside it was getting dark and Sabita said we should find a hotel for the night. She said we'd come back tomorrow and Mummy would be awake by then. Right now she didn't even know we were there. I hated to leave her but Anita promised we'd come back early in the morning. I asked Sabita how we would get money for Mummy's medicine. She said she would think of something.



We got a bicycle rickshaw to drive us.



I didn't hear the noise of the traffic at all. All I could think about was Mummy.





We found a hotel on the outskirts of town that wasn't too expensive. I had never stayed in a hotel before. It wasn't like our house in the village. It had concrete floors instead of hardened mud, and there were two beds - one for Sabita and one for Anita and me. They were soft and much nicer than our rope bed at home. I liked the hotel but I was missing Mummy. Sabita said she would phone the headman of our village next morning to see about getting money for medicine. She promised to check on Mummy afterwards. Then she would come and take us out for some breakfast before we all went back to the hospital.



Next day Sabita was gone for several hours.

She came into the room with a paper bag in her hands. She had a strange look on her face and she didn't say anything at first. I was afraid of what she was going to say.







I just came from the hospital...

Your mother...

She ...

...she died in the night.  
They couldn't do anything  
for her.



She was awake for  
an hour...  
even talked with  
the head nurse for  
awhile. Then...

she was gone...  
just like that.

I'm so sorry.

I brought back  
her things...  
her clothes.



Her words crashed into my soul, shattering it into a million pieces.





My head was spinning...  
I could hardly breathe.  
It couldn't be true...  
but the look on Sabita's  
face told me it was.



Everyone I loved was being  
taken away from me...  
Kumari...  
Daddy...  
and now Mummy.

Everything I trusted in  
was crumbling to nothing.  
Was it all my fault?  
Was I being punished  
for something?



I felt a slow, burning anger  
fill my heart and mind.  
I was mad at the doctor  
for not making Mummy better.

I was angry with Sabita because  
she said Mummy would get well.  
She had lied to me...just like Daddy  
lied about coming back to us.  
I was angry at him too.



And the gods - they were the  
worst. They never did anything  
no matter how hard one prayed.  
What good were they if they never  
helped when you needed them?

I felt like there was a black hole inside where my heart should be.

**IT FELT LIKE DEATH!!!!!!**



I cried until I had no more tears inside.

Anita and I hugged each other tightly. We didn't say any words...our hearts were too full of pain and fear.



Sabita opened the package and held it out to us... Mummy's clothes and bangles.



And something strange...?



Sabita said the nurse had given the Christian cross to Mummy after they had prayed together to the God, Jesus. Sabita said maybe Mummy was trying out a new god to add to all the others. Some Hindus did that to be on the safe side.



Hindus worship over 330 million gods, including Bollywood actors and sports heroes.

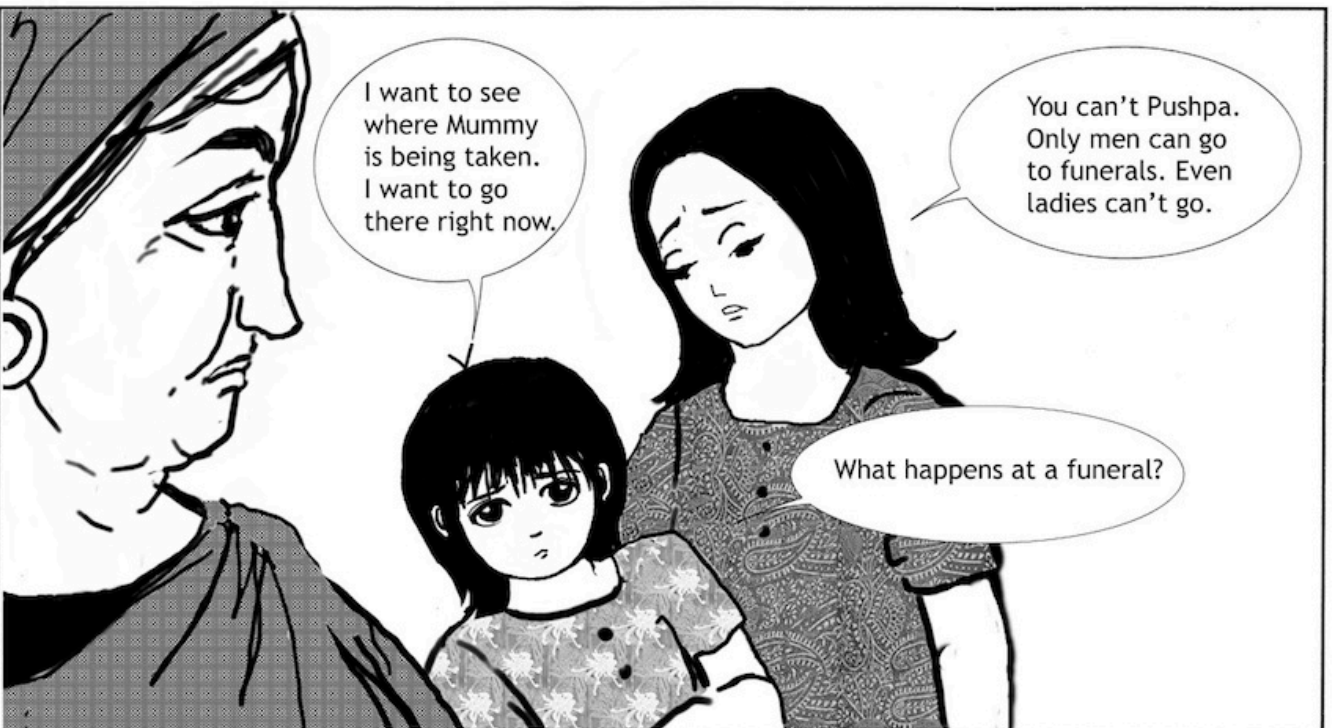




Sabita was probably right. Mummy could have added another god to her list - but if she had, then this new god was no better than all the rest. After all, he had let Mummy die after she prayed to him. Sabita said this god had let his own son die on a cross! Of what use could he be?



It seemed to me that everyone prayed to some god or other in India. In our own village there were countless shrines and altars and each god and goddess had a festival in their honor. Even movie stars were treated like idols because they could make life seem better and more hopeful. You could watch a movie and forget your troubles for an hour or two.

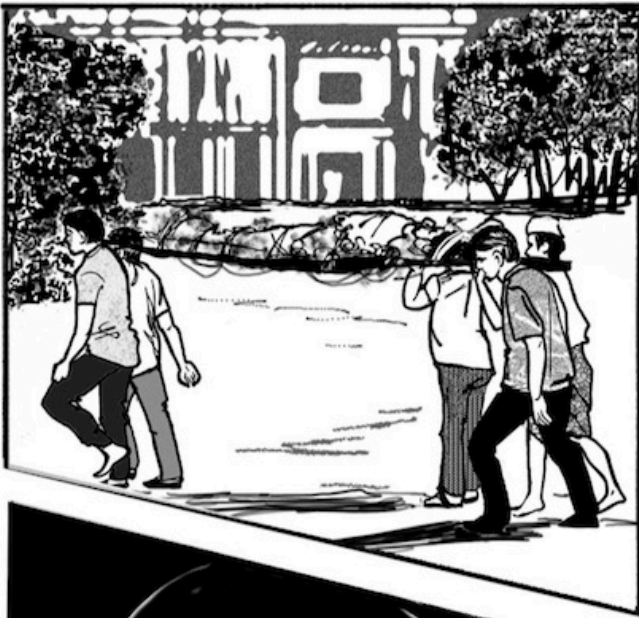


I want to see where Mummy is being taken. I want to go there right now.

You can't Pushpa. Only men can go to funerals. Even ladies can't go.

What happens at a funeral?





They wrap you up in cloth and decorate you with flowers all over. Then they take you to a place and set you on fire so your spirit can get free.

*I don't want them to burn Mummy!*







I didn't want Mummy's spirit to go away where I could never find her again! I wanted her with me like before! I wanted my family back so we could all be happy. I was so afraid of being all alone.

I didn't find out til later of course that the panchayat (village council) had sent some of our neighbors to go to the hospital to prepare Mummy's body for cremation. Funerals always happened soon after death in India, often on the same day. The body would be taken to a special place where it would be piled high with sandalwood and then set on fire. We were too poor to have sandalwood however, so cow dung and tree branches had been used on Mummy's funeral pyre. If the headman hadn't donated some of his own money, Mummy would have been thrown into the river. That's what often happened when those with no caste or money died.

Sabita said we would have to let the panchayat decide what our future would be.



Anita and I were orphans now so we had no other choice.

It rained all the way back to our village. I felt numb inside as I watched the droplets slide down the bus window, like sad tears. They were hypnotic to watch and I felt like I was in a trance. I wondered what would happen when I woke up out of this bad dream I was living. Would I ever be happy again? Right then I didn't see how that could ever be possible.



# 3. Hope





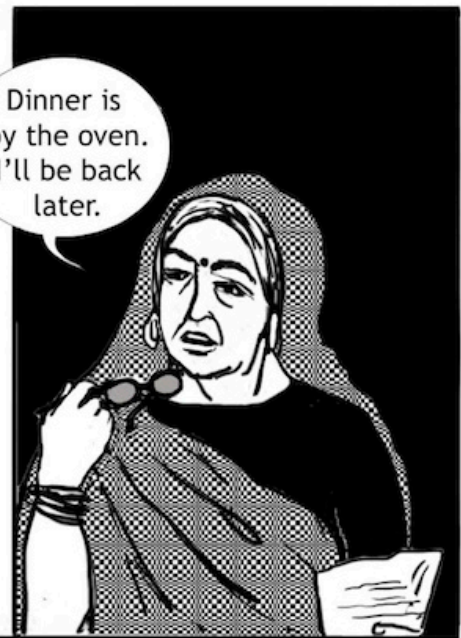
What's this?

Aunti Sabita was like our Amma now. She took care of us every day. She went through Mummy and Daddy's things, looking for papers that might lead to some information about distant relatives who could take us in. She wanted to adopt us herself but her family objected. They said they had enough mouths to feed.





I have to show this letter to the elders. They're calling a special meeting tonight to decide about you girls. I think this will be of interest to them.



Dinner is by the oven. I'll be back later.



Pushpa, come and have some rice. Dinner is getting cold.

Don't want dinner. I'm not hungry.

You have to eat something. you're getting so thin.

Don't care.

So what. She's not here. Doesn't matter what happens to me anymore.



Mummy would want you to eat.





Pushpa, don't talk like that.



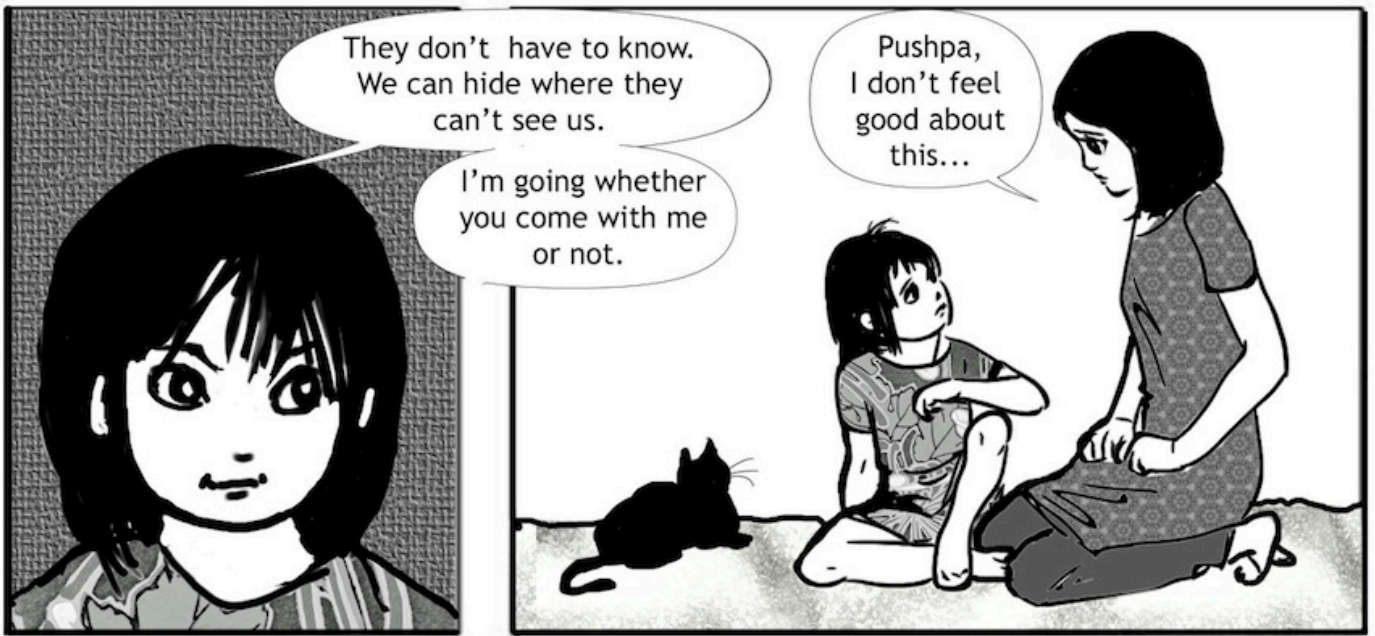
Lots of people care. I care. So does Auntie Sabita. And the village elders are having a special meeting because they care about what happens to us. Our neighbors have brought food for us to eat every day and Auntie said they are taking up a collection of money too. Tonight the elders will decide how to use the money to help us.

You can't, Pushpa! Only grownups are allowed at the meetings.



I want to go hear what they say.





They don't have to know.  
We can hide where they  
can't see us.

I'm going whether  
you come with me  
or not.

Pushpa,  
I don't feel  
good about  
this...



Naresh Patna signed this contract  
putting his house up as a guarantee.  
It's mine now and I want it empty by  
tomorrow night, or else!!



*It's Mr. Das!*

Mr. Das had heard about Mummy's death so now he was meeting with the elders so he could claim our house. He had a contract signed by Daddy which gave him that right. I hadn't expected to see him there and I was so shocked that I exclaimed out loud. He must have heard me because he immediately stopped talking and looked at the bushes where we were hiding.



Eeeeeek!!!  
Run Pushpa!



What's he doing?

There's something  
in those bushes.



Rotten little  
spies!



Look what I found  
snooping around in  
the dark.

Like I was saying,  
I want these two brats  
out of that house by  
tomorrow night.





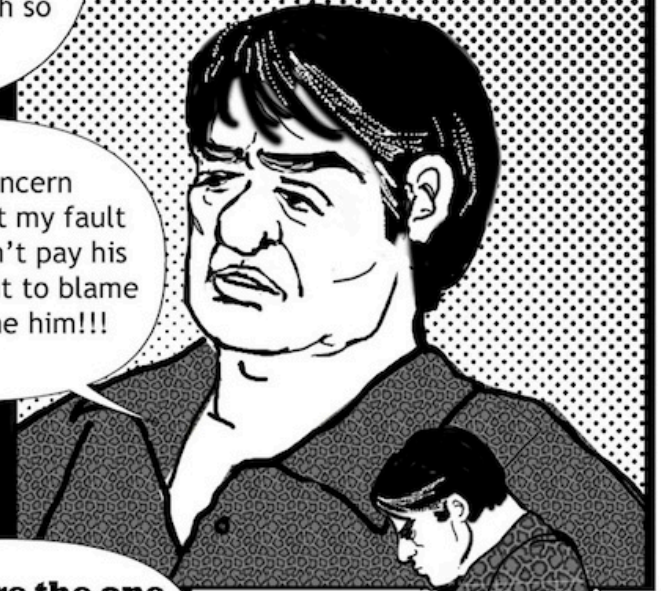
The village elders looked on, not sure what to think of the situation. Then Sabita came to the rescue and took us away from Mr. Das. She tried to convince him to let us stay in our house but I could tell he wasn't going to change his mind.



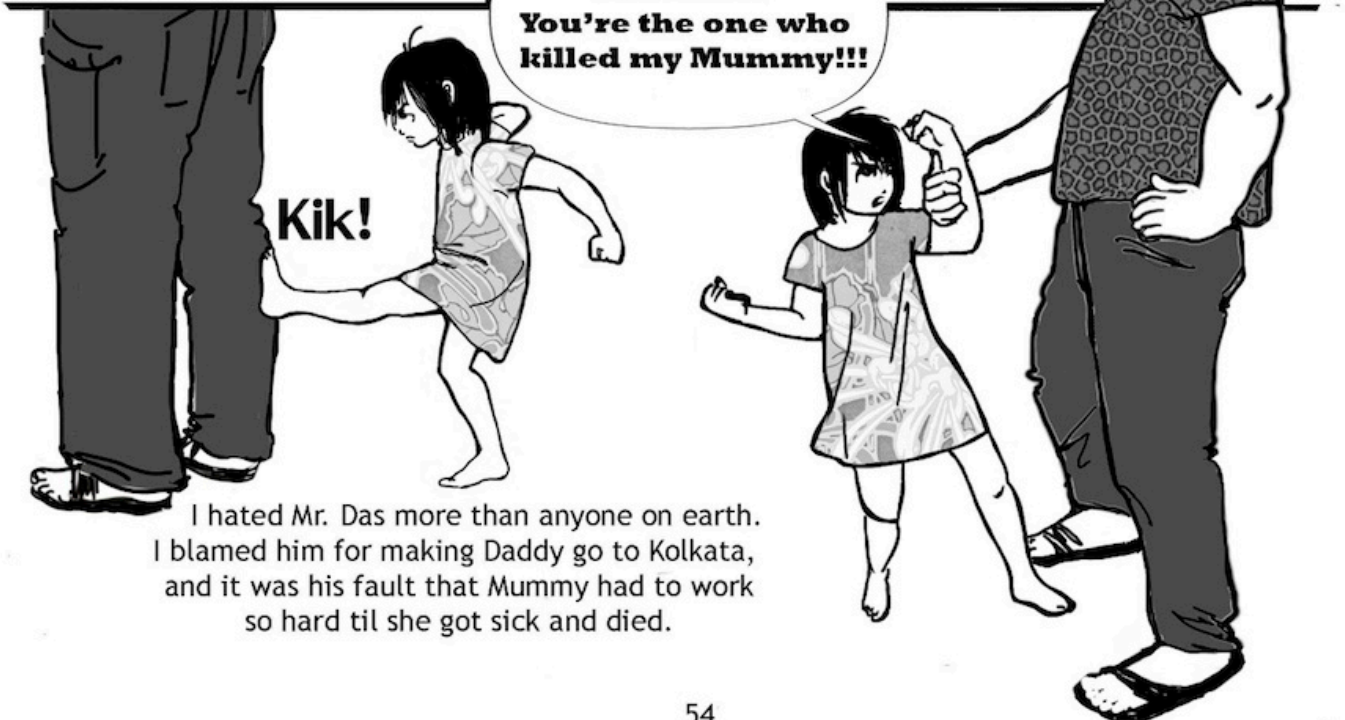
How can you take away their home? It's all they have left now that both their parents are gone. How will they survive? You can't want them to be destitute! And they've been through so much already.



That's no concern of mine! It's not my fault their father didn't pay his debts. If you want to blame someone, blame him!!!



**No, you're the one to blame!  
You're the one who killed my Mummy!!!**



I hated Mr. Das more than anyone on earth. I blamed him for making Daddy go to Kolkata, and it was his fault that Mummy had to work so hard til she got sick and died.



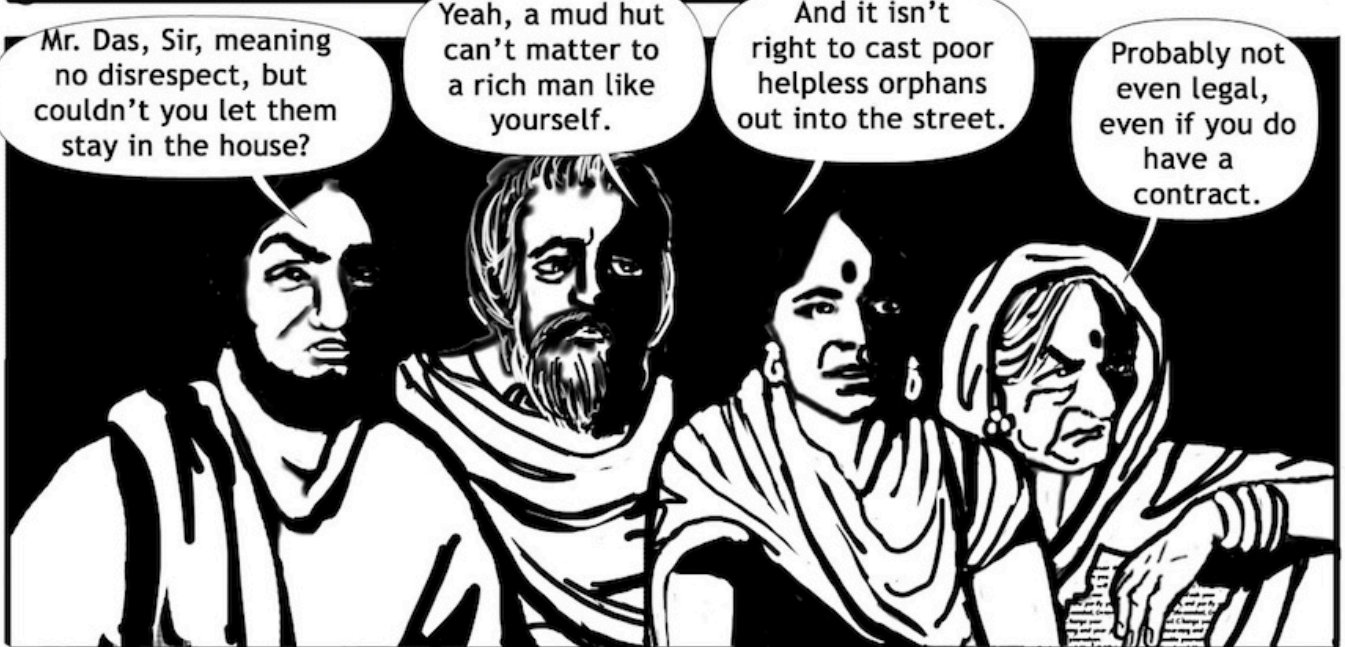


Pushpa,  
No!!!

That  
does it!!!



I've had enough  
of that little hellcat.  
She can go to the devil  
for all I care!



Mr. Das, Sir, meaning  
no disrespect, but  
couldn't you let them  
stay in the house?

Yeah, a mud hut  
can't matter to  
a rich man like  
yourself.

And it isn't  
right to cast poor  
helpless orphans  
out into the street.

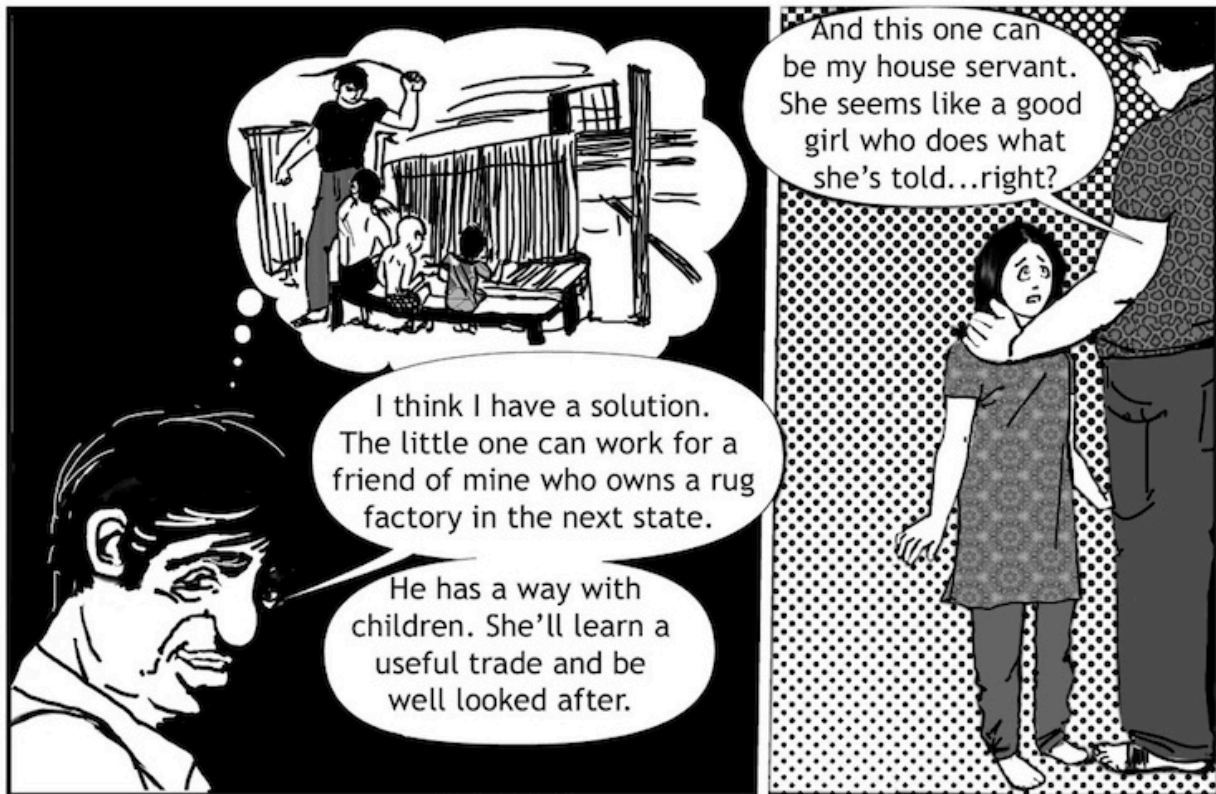
Probably not  
even legal,  
even if you do  
have a  
contract.



Uh-oh...can't have them  
doubting the contract. Luckily they  
don't have a clue about the laws  
protecting tribal lands. But I'll need to be  
very careful. Hmm...  
if I could just get rid of those kids.

Yeah! I got it!  
The perfect place  
for that pesky little  
brat! It'll serve  
her right too.





I think I have a solution. The little one can work for a friend of mine who owns a rug factory in the next state.

He has a way with children. She'll learn a useful trade and be well looked after.


And this one can be my house servant. She seems like a good girl who does what she's told...right?



Well, that sounds fine, Mr. Das. Thank-you for doing this.

I don't like it. The girls have lost their parents and now you're suggesting that they be separated. That'll be too hard on them.

I guess you're right. What other choice is there?



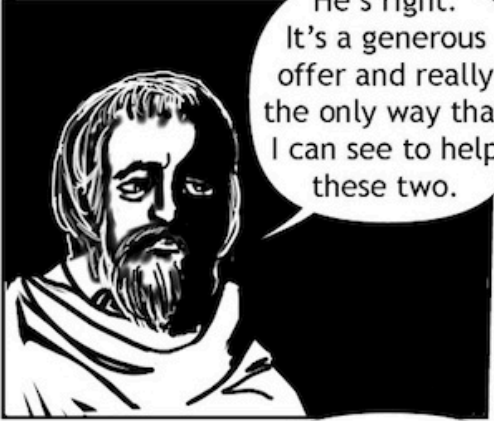
So they`ll just have to adjust. They`ll have jobs and a place to live. What more do you expect !

The oldest woman in our village was an elder well known for her wisdom. Now she spoke up for Anita and me.




I`ve heard about such factories.. little kids get beaten and starved...made to work 12 to 16 hours a day ...no school..chained up at night so they can`t run away. They`re hellholes and the children are virtual slaves!!


And I doubt that working for you, Das, would be any better... in fact, it might be worse.



He`s right. It`s a generous offer and really the only way that I can see to help these two.



Not so fast!!

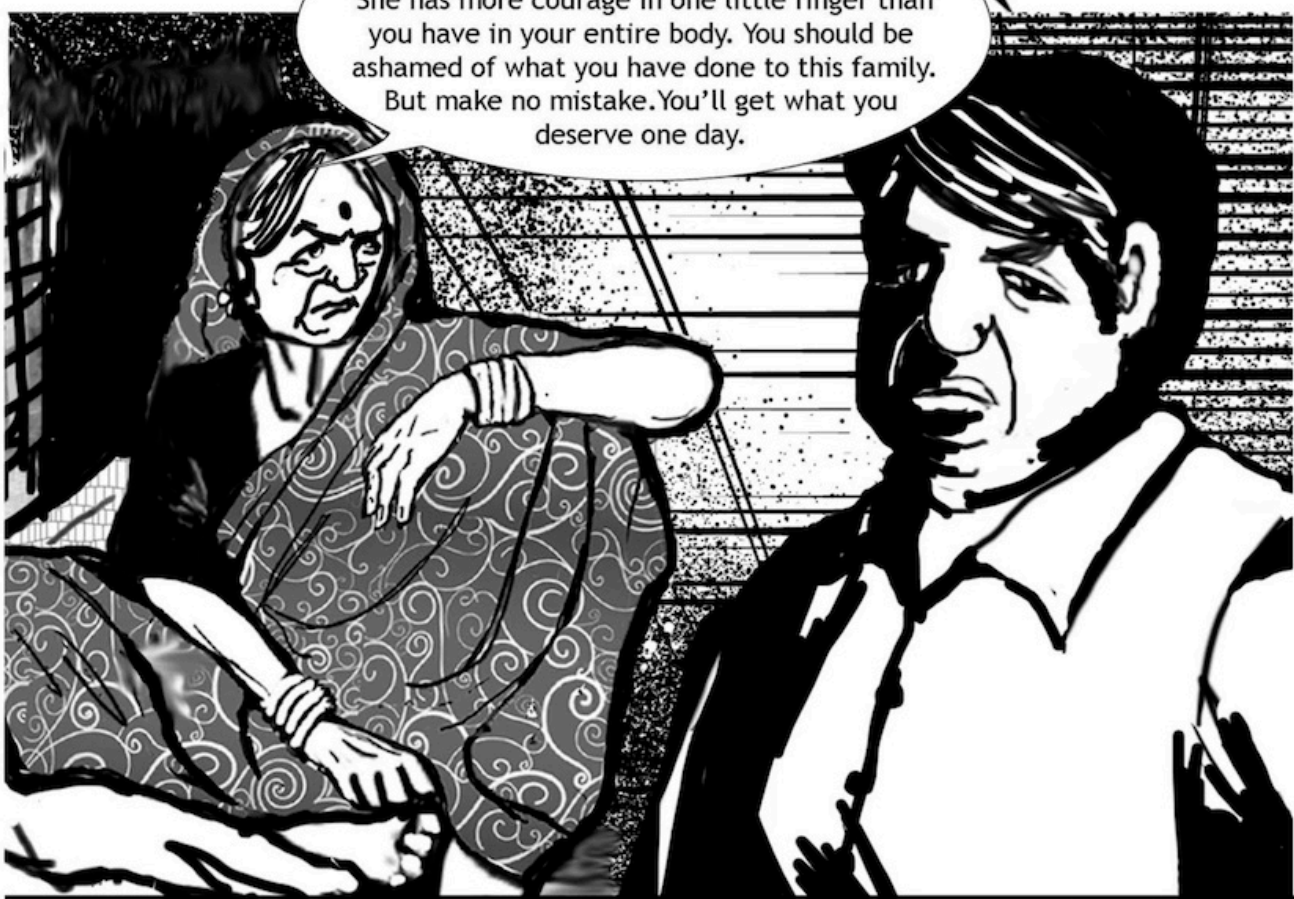


You might fool the others but you don`t fool me, Das. You couldn`t care less about these children. All you care about is money and how to get more of it. Well, we don`t need your `help` with these kids. We can find a home for them ourselves. It just so happens that Sabita found a letter giving the address of an uncle up north. Until we can contact him, or find some other place for them, these two will stay in that house! And that`s final!!!





You know Das, you're a bully.  
All bluster and rage..pushing and shoving.  
But bullies get their power  
through fear, and I'm not afraid of you!



And neither is that little girl.  
She stood up to you and rightly accused you.  
She has more courage in one little finger than  
you have in your entire body. You should be  
ashamed of what you have done to this family.  
But make no mistake. You'll get what you  
deserve one day.

Mr. Das was enraged but he was also afraid of the old woman. He wasn't used to being challenged by those he was trying to dominate. He didn't know what to do with her. He scowled, and he growled, but he didn't make any more threats. He left the village in a huff, much to our relief.





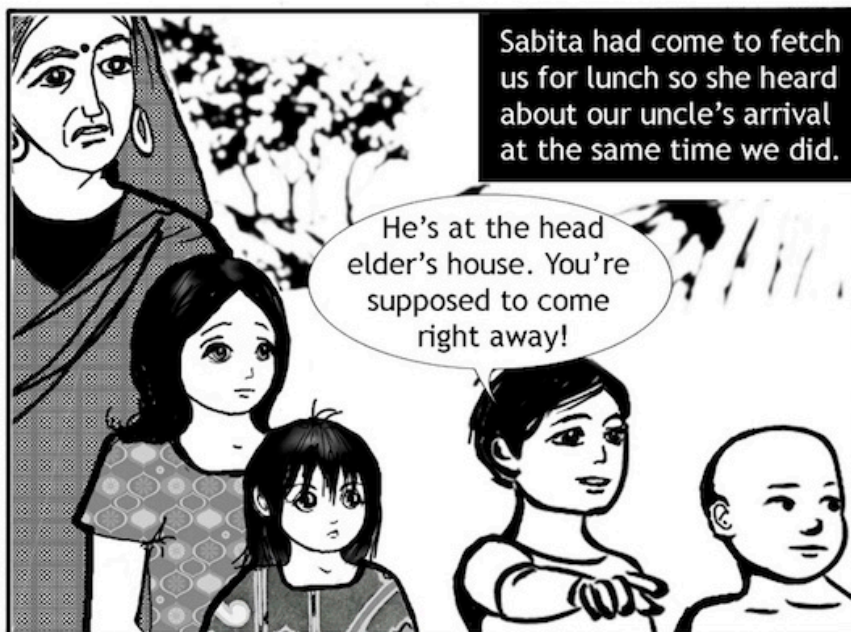
Several weeks passed by and life in the village went on as before. Although time seemed to crawl by slowly Anita and I were a year older now. Our birthdays were in the same month but they had come and gone without our even noticing. Anita was nine and I was six ... although I felt a lot older.

Our neighbors looked after us, bringing food and giving us whatever else we needed. They were all terribly poor and couldn't look after us forever, but until other arrangements were made, it was the only way we could survive. Sabita stayed with us at night but during the day she went to her own place. I was glad she came at night because I had lots of bad dreams and often awoke crying out for Mummy.

Thanks to the elders we were able to stay in our house for the time being. It was the only thing in our lives that hadn't changed. Sometimes I pretended that Mummy and Daddy were away on a trip and any day they might walk through the door. Then everything would be the same as before. I always felt like I was waiting for something, only I didn't know what. And then the day came when the waiting finally came to an end.







Sabita had come to fetch us for lunch so she heard about our uncle's arrival at the same time we did.

He's at the head elder's house. You're supposed to come right away!

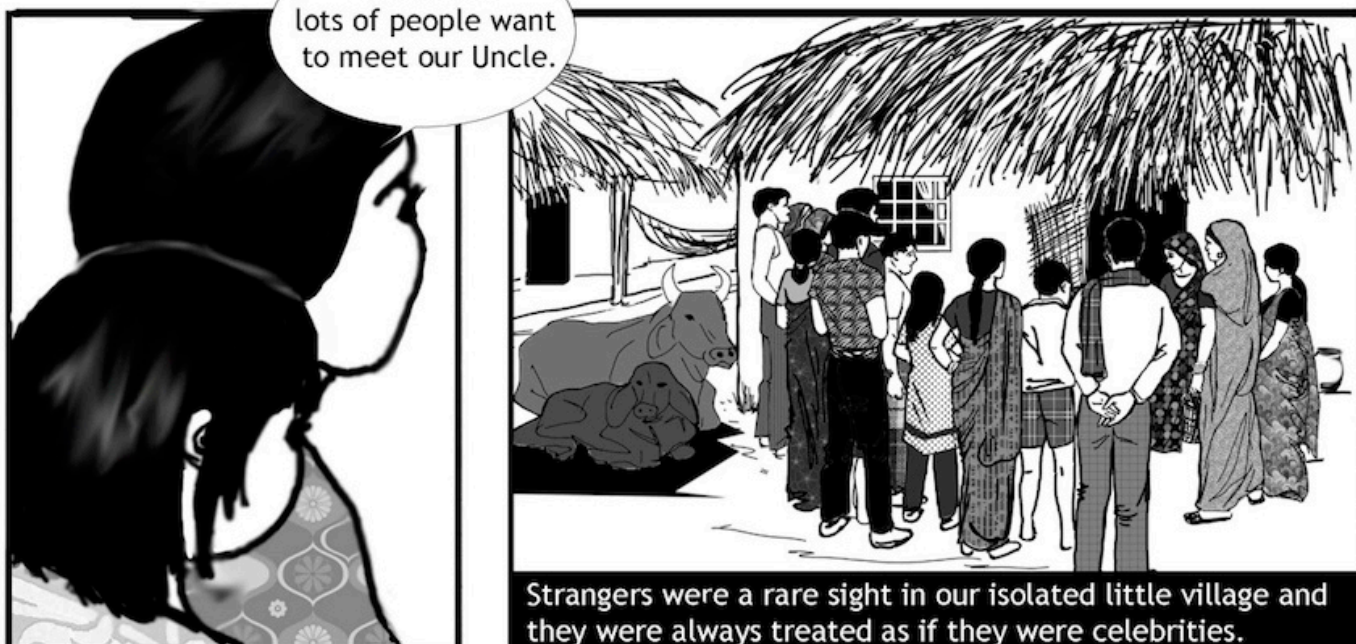


Hurry up!  
Lots of the neighbors are already there.

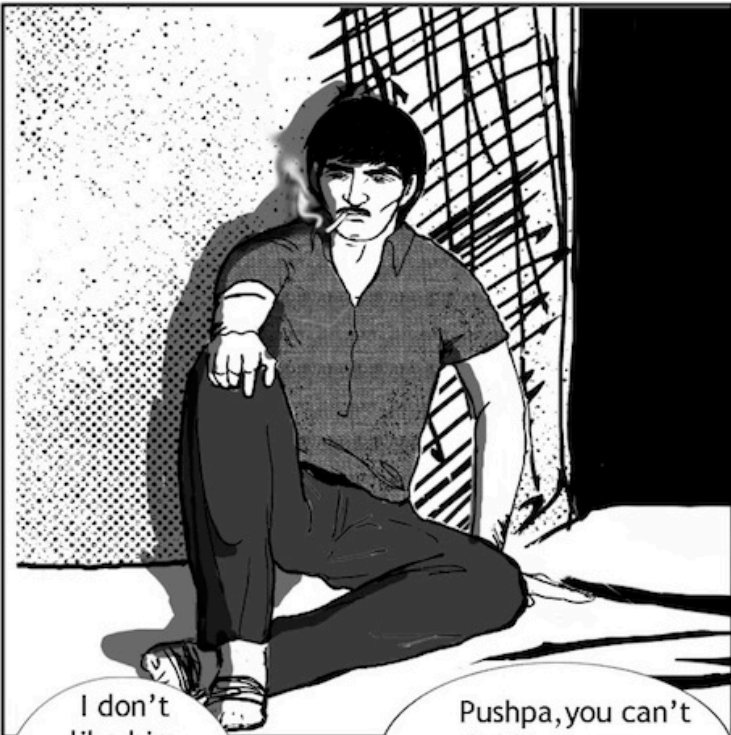
As we hurried along, Anita and I asked Aunt Sabita about our uncle. She said he was related to us through marriage to Mummy's sister, Gitanjali. Our Aunti Gita, as she was called, had left the village with her new husband Rupesh Nag soon after the wedding, and sadly she later died in childbirth. We never even got to meet her. Uncle Rupesh contacted our parents a few times over the years and Aunt Sabita had found one of his letters in Mummy's trunk. Fortunately it had an address on the envelope. The elders had sent one of the villagers to find our uncle but because he had moved around so much, they weren't hopeful of tracking him down. However he was here, so the messenger had obviously found him. Sabita explained that she hadn't told us any of this before because she didn't want us to be disappointed if he couldn't be found.



Looks like lots of people want to meet our Uncle.



Strangers were a rare sight in our isolated little village and they were always treated as if they were celebrities.



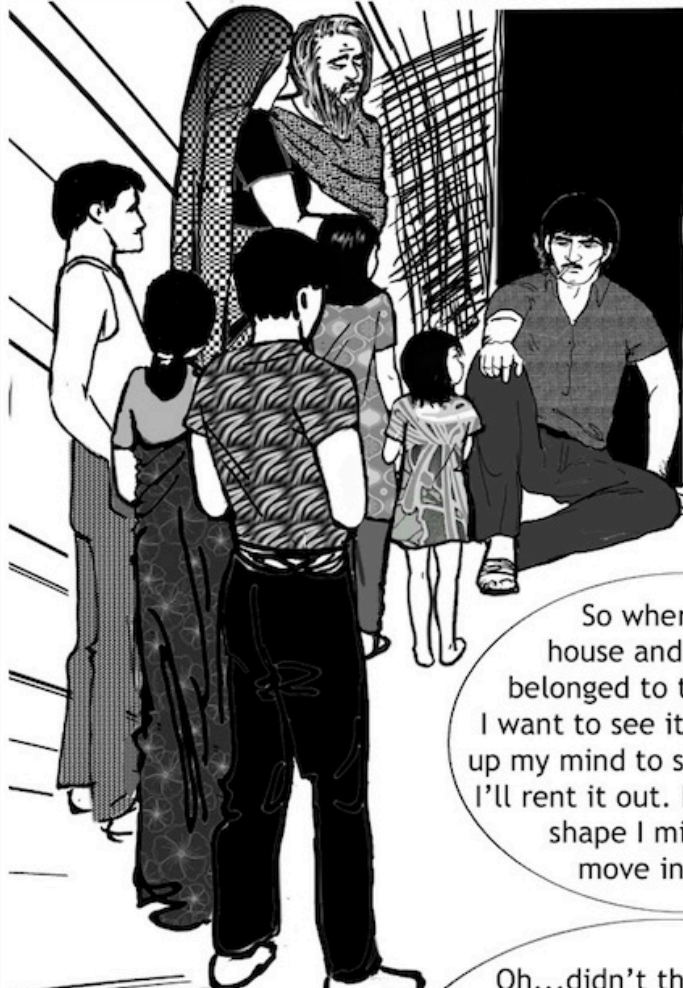
I don't like him. He has a creepy moustache.

Pushpa, you can't dislike someone because of their moustache!


I don't like his eyes either.








Our first impression of Uncle Rupesh was not favorable. He had stained teeth from smoking bidis and chewing too much betel nut, and he smelled bad from sweat and grime. I didn't like him at all and I think he felt the same way about us because when the elder introduced us, he frowned and grunted by way of greeting. I clung to Anita hoping with all my heart that we would not have to live with this man. Anita must have felt the same way because she clutched my hand tightly and moved closer to Aunti Sabita.




So where's the house and land that belonged to their parents? I want to see it before I make up my mind to sell it, or maybe I'll rent it out. If it's in decent shape I might even move in myself.



Oh...didn't the messenger tell you? I'm afraid the property is being taken over by the moneylender. Your brother-in-law owed him money and couldn't repay the debt. Mr Das ordered us to have the house empty as soon as you arrived.

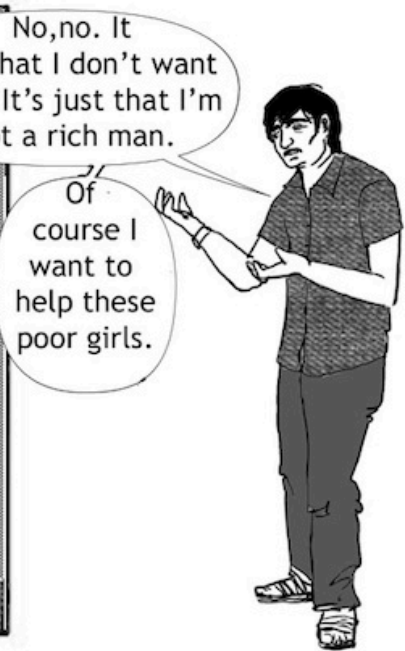
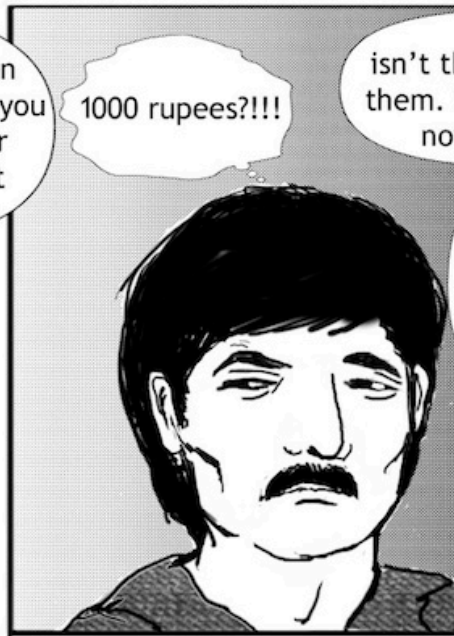
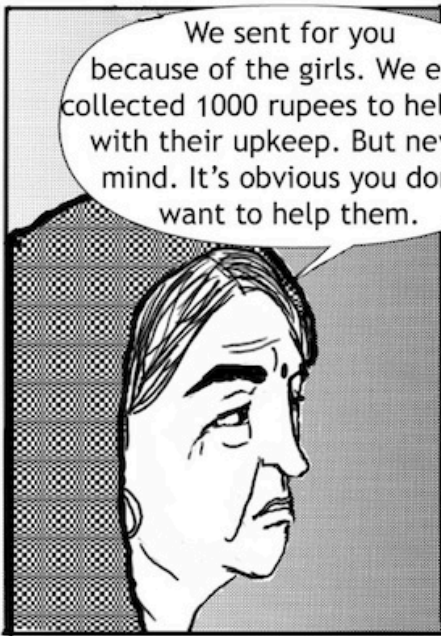
What??!!!



Why did you send for me then?!!  
I made this trip for nothing!!!

The elder was very embarrassed by our uncle's angry questioning. He thought Uncle Rupesh had come for us. Now it seemed that Mr. Rupesh Nag had his own interests in mind in answering the call to come to our village. He had never thought of coming to our rescue. Instead he had hoped to profit from our parents' property. The news that there was no house or land came as a big disappointment and he was enraged. I was glad because it was obvious that he wanted nothing to do with us. **We wanted even less to do with him!** But then he found out about the collection.





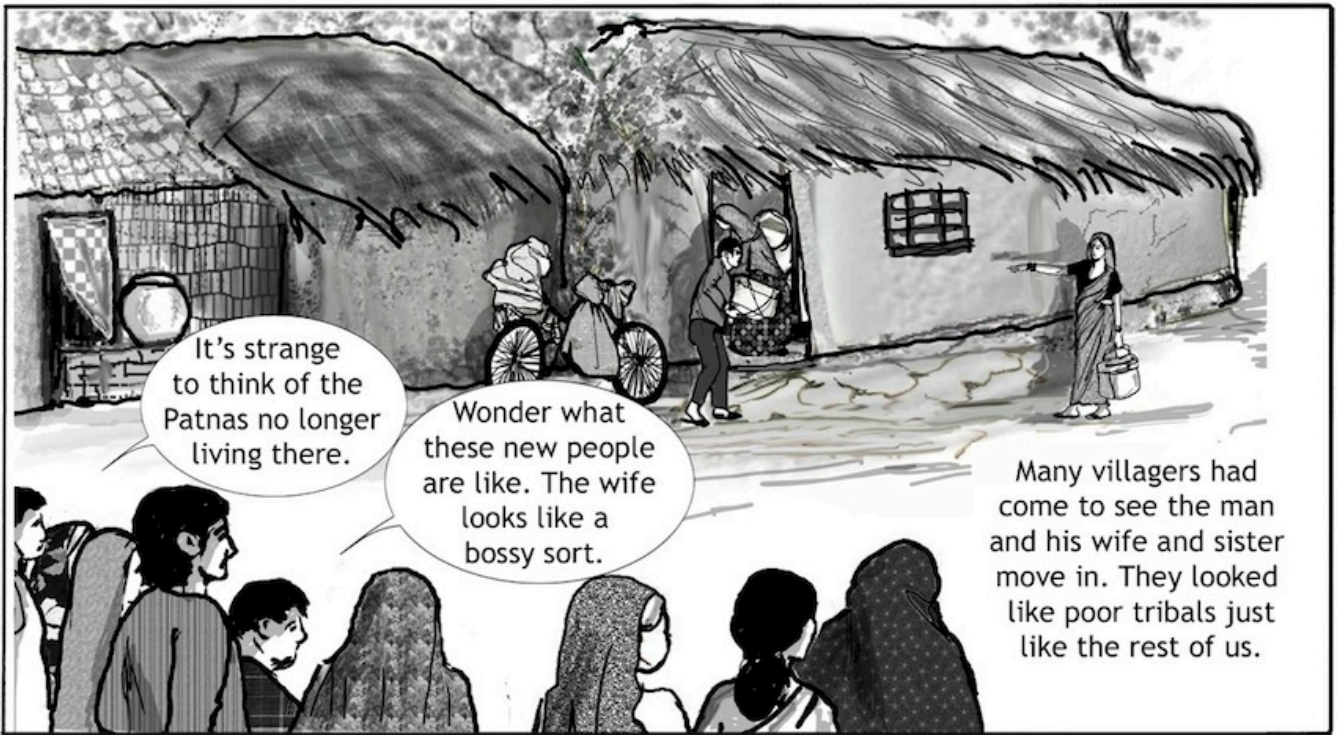
And so it was decided that we would go live with our Uncle Rupesh. We went home to pack up our belongings. There wasn't much to pack. Most everything had been sold.



But we had to leave right away because Mr. Das had sent renters to move in before we were even out of the house. They brought boxes and bags piled high on an old bicycle.



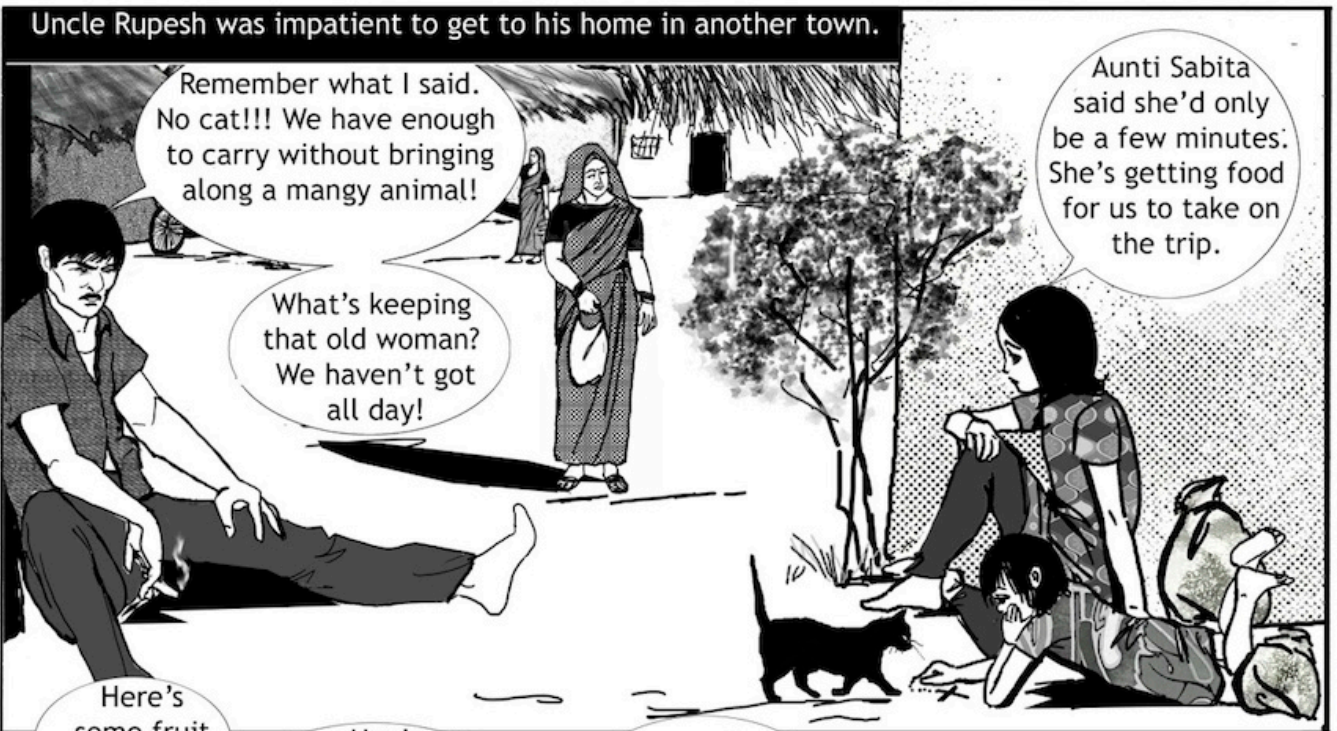




It's strange to think of the Patnas no longer living there.

Wonder what these new people are like. The wife looks like a bossy sort.

Many villagers had come to see the man and his wife and sister move in. They looked like poor tribals just like the rest of us.



Uncle Rupesh was impatient to get to his home in another town.

Remember what I said. No cat!!! We have enough to carry without bringing along a mangy animal!

What's keeping that old woman? We haven't got all day!

Aunti Sabita said she'd only be a few minutes. She's getting food for us to take on the trip.

Here's some fruit and biscuits.

Hey! Is that a gold necklace?! Let me see that!

No!!! It's mine!







Let her keep it.  
It belonged to her mother.  
It's all she has left to  
remember her by. It's just  
brass - not worth anything.

Hmmf!!!

Uncle Rupesh didn't like anyone to tell him what to do, especially a woman. He was like a lot of Indian men that way. He believed a woman's place was to be quiet and submissive - to always defer to a man, even if he was wrong and she was right. The ancient Hindu scripts taught that a wife should worship her husband and follow several paces behind at all times. She was not to eat until after he had finished his meal and she was never EVER to argue with him. Aunti had spoken out in my defence and Uncle resented her for it. He kept silent but gave her a dirty look.



Hide this cross so no  
one sees it. Your uncle might  
try to take it away from you  
if you don't. I think it might  
bring you good luck.

You see, I had  
a dream last night.  
I saw your mother.  
She was dressed in a  
shining white saree  
and she was smiling  
and waving. She had  
that cross around  
her neck. It's a sign  
you should always  
keep it with you.

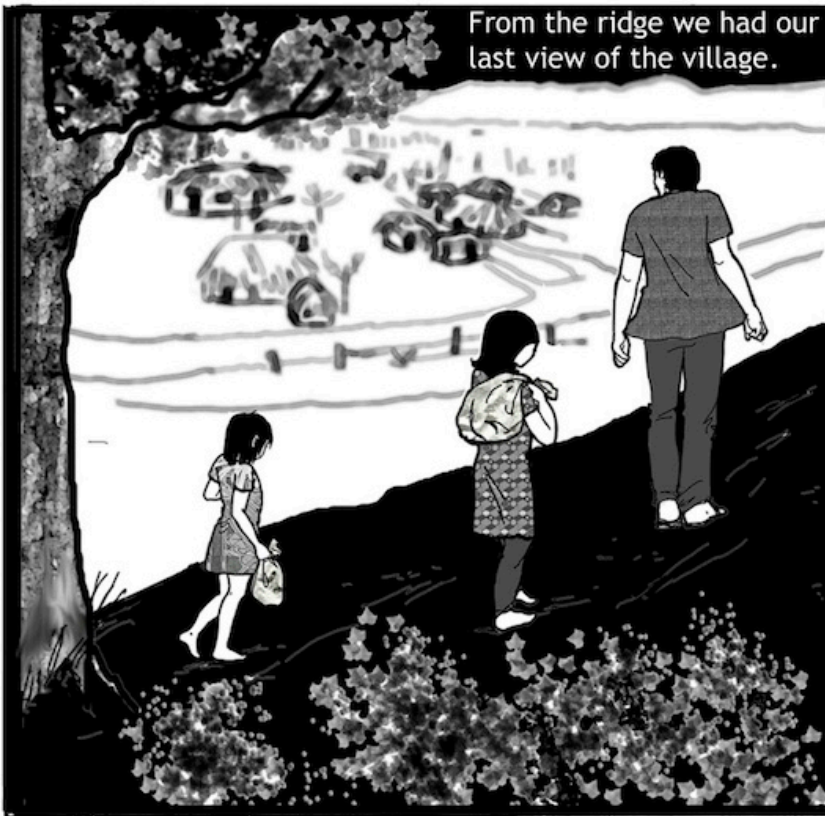
Sabita's words filled my heart with hope. Mummy was still Mummy. She hadn't turned into someone - or something - else. She was alive somewhere and the cross was a link to her.



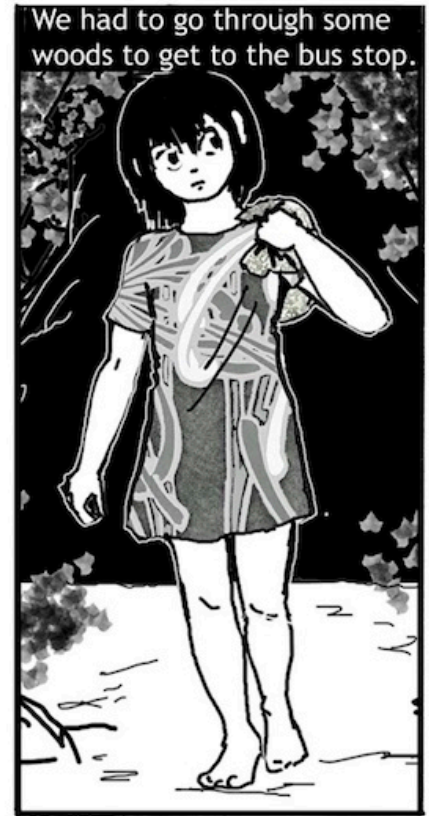


It was time to say good-bye to the villagers. They had been kind to us and I was sorry to leave them. I gave Pinky to one of the neighbors who needed a 'mouser'. I didn't know if Pinky was any good at catching mice, but he sure could catch chickens!



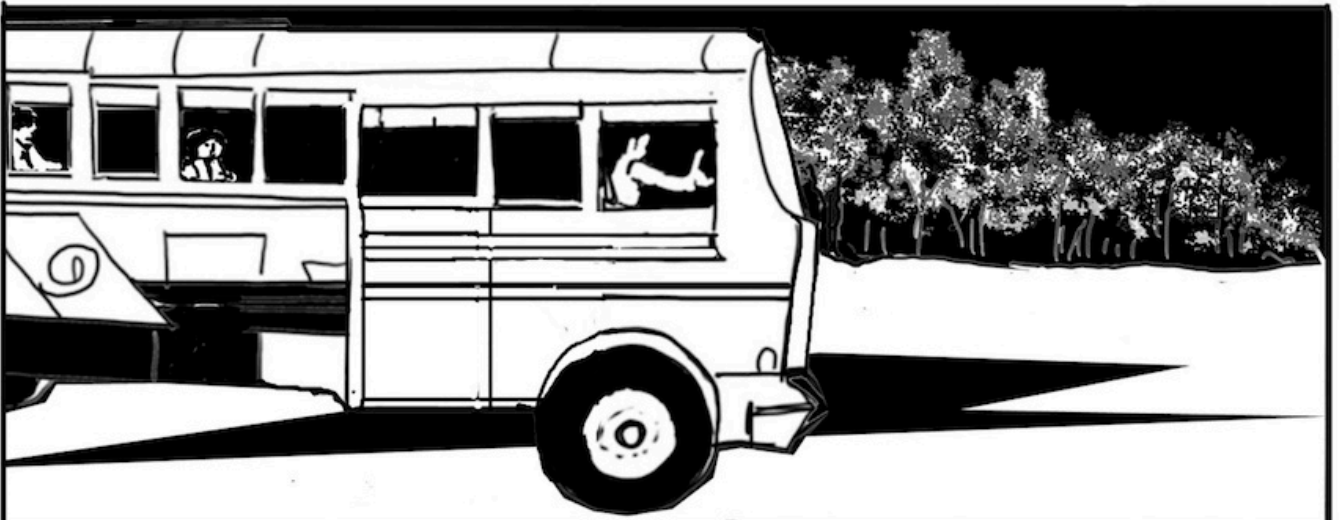


From the ridge we had our last view of the village.



We had to go through some woods to get to the bus stop.

The bus ride was very long and tiring and after a lunch of bananas and biscuits, we fell asleep.

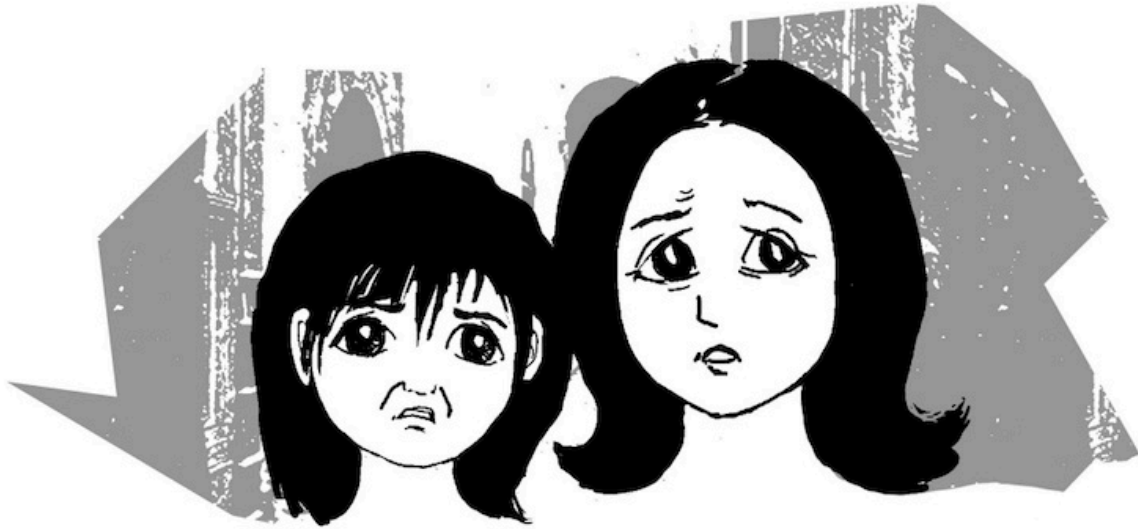


Finally after many hours we stopped at a dirty town with dilapidated buildings and lots of garbage everywhere. It was not unlike most of the towns we had passed through, but Uncle Rupesh told us to pick up our belongings because we were getting off here. This was where he lived.



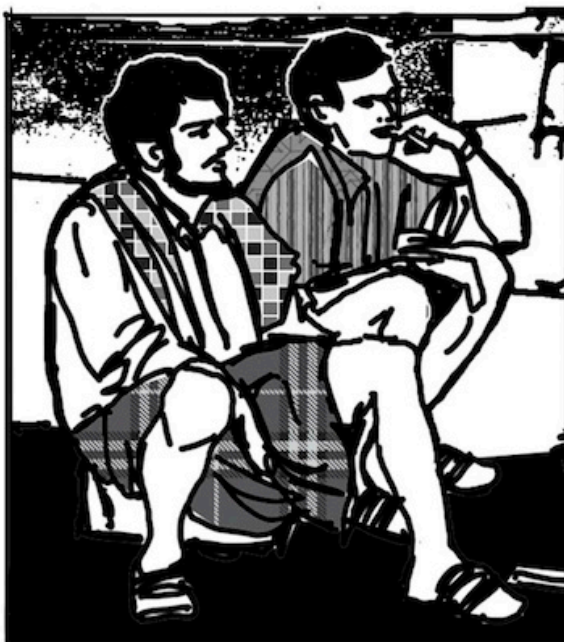


We walked down lots of streets til we came to a slum on the outskirts of town. Thousands of squatters had illegally settled here on a piece of Government land, building shacks and huts along the river's edge and wherever there was space. Most of the people were uneducated and very poor. They had long ago given up hope for a better life so many had sought escape in drugs and alcohol. Anita and I were repulsed by the squalor and disorder. This was our Uncle's home and unfortunately it was now ours as well.



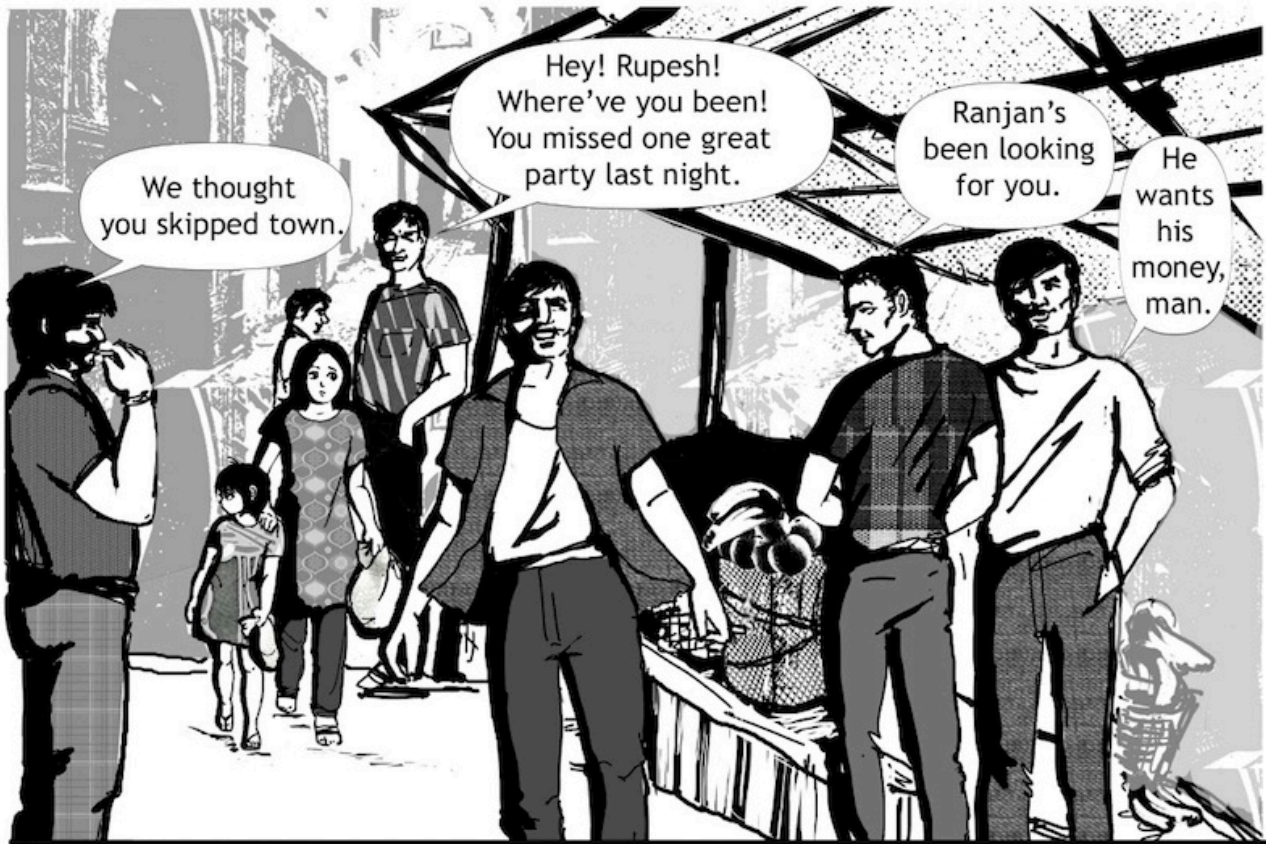
The huts were made of mud mixed with cow dung, and the roofs were either thatched or constructed with corrugated sheet metal. They were clustered close together so that there was very little privacy. Because there were few latrines, people used the open sewers as toilets. These ran through the streets carrying filth and disease and filling the air with stench. Garbage was dumped everywhere - in the lanes, around the houses, and in the river. Only a few wells existed so water was always in short supply.

The winding paths leading through the slum were so narrow that we had to walk in single file. It gave us a good idea of what daily life in the slum was like. We saw half-starved dogs scavenging in the garbage for something to eat; women doing their laundry in the corridors and hanging it up to dry on the roof; children fetching water from the well; and men sitting together smoking and people-watching. We found out later that most of the men never worked. Some of the women had small businesses like selling lemons door-to-door and some worked as day labourers cleaning houses for people who lived in town. Some begged on the streets. It was a sad place where one could see despair and hopelessness in many of the tired faces. Only the children seemed happy as they played in the dirty sewers and ran through the winding alleys.





Uncle Rupesh was well known in the slum and he seemed to have lots of friends, but they were a rough bunch. They swore and told nasty jokes and their smiles were ugly. Anita and I were afraid of them, especially when they stared at us with their hard eyes.



Anita and I didn't feel safe around Uncle's friends. There was something not nice about them. And the way they said the name 'Ranjan' made us feel uneasy too. We stayed close together, wishing that we could turn around and run back to our quiet, safe little village.



Uncle stopped beside one of the huts by the river. It was thatched and built from broken bricks.

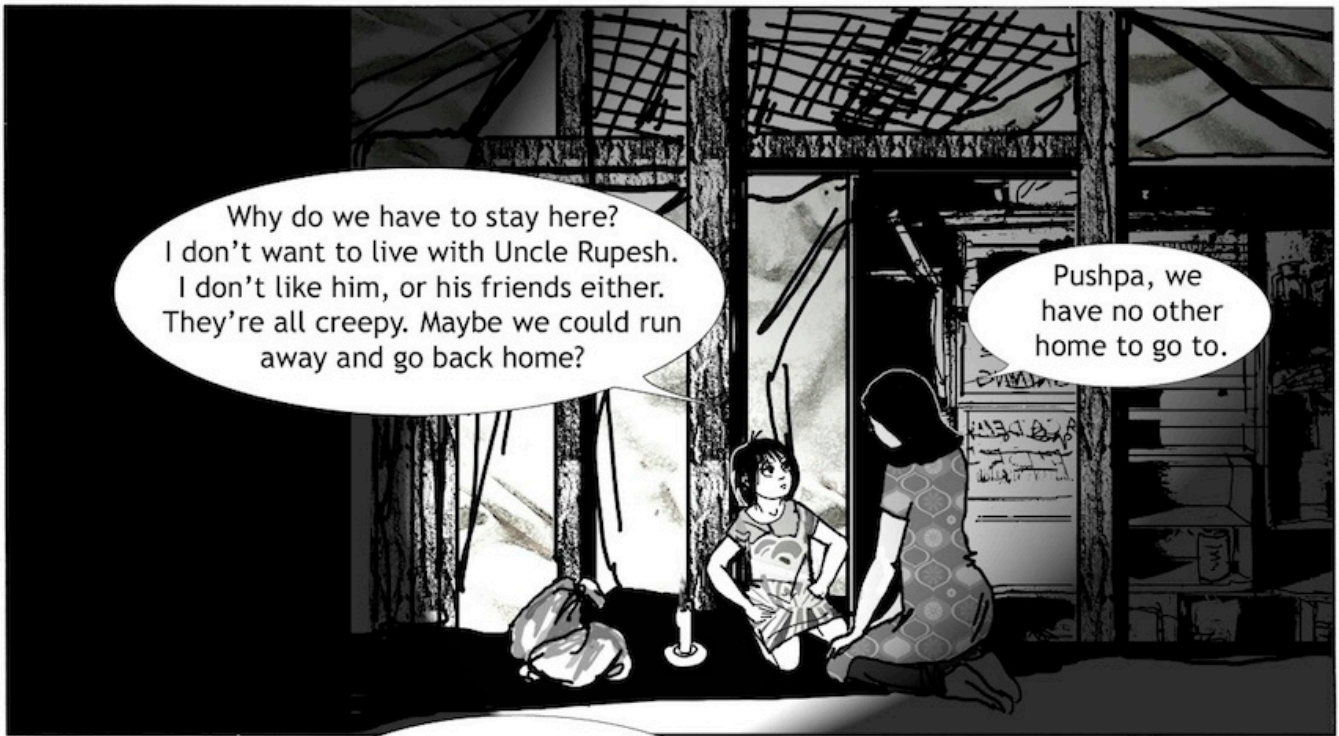


You can both clean up the place, and make some chai for when I come back. I'm going to get some groceries.

Oh yeah, and don't go outside. Stay in the house. I'll be back soon.







Why do we have to stay here? I don't want to live with Uncle Rupesh. I don't like him, or his friends either. They're all creepy. Maybe we could run away and go back home?

Pushpa, we have no other home to go to.



Well, this isn't a real home. Look at it! It's small and dark and dirty!

The hut Uncle lived in was cramped and it smelled of stale cigarettes and rotten food. There was garbage piled up in the corners, and the roof was full of holes. To keep out the rain Uncle had put up plastic tarps suspended over wooden beams. A rickety shelf held empty bottles of whiskey and beer. There were no windows so it was gloomy inside. The only light that came in was from the cracks in the brick wall. I couldn't see myself living here. It was bad enough now. What would it be like if it rained? I couldn't imagine! But where could we go? Anita was right. We didn't have a home anymore...just this place!



**It's not fair!!!**  
Why is everything so awful??!  
It just keeps getting worse and worse. Now we have to live in this terrible place and we don't even know anyone here.





Pushpa, it isn't all dark. Remember how the old elder defended us in front of Mr. Das?

It's because of her that we're still together. We still have each other, Pushpa, and that's the most important thing.

Look at this candle... It's so small and tiny but see how it makes all the darkness in this room go away? It's stronger than the dark. It's like hope. If we keep hope in our hearts, it will make the bad dreams and fears go away and things won't seem so terrible.

You know what, Anita? You're smart like Mummy.





The hope in my heart was no bigger than the candle's small flame, but it was there. Anita helped me to see that my life wasn't as bad as it could have been. There were people a lot worse off than me, especially in the slum. They had given up hope and had to grope in the darkness without any light to guide them. I didn't want to become like them. I knew I had to cling to the tiny flicker of hope in my heart or I would never survive. I had no choice but to face my new life with all the courage that was within me...and hope was my only weapon.



## CHILD LABOR



India's laws prohibit hiring children under the age of 14 for employment deemed "hazardous" such as for domestic work, restaurants, glass-making and embroidery work, but many Indians continue to employ children in the belief that they are doing them a favour by providing for their families. Poverty and lack of good primary education are seen as major causes of child labour. The most inhuman form of child exploitation is the age old practice of bonded labor wherein the child is sold to the loaner like a commodity for a certain period of time. Often cunning rich men procure them for small sums at exorbitant interest rates. Sometimes these children are enslaved for a life time, and they have to simply toil hard and depend on the mercy of their owners, without any hope of release or rescue.

## A WOMAN'S PLACE



In traditional Hindu society, Indian women are taught to regard chastity as their most precious possession, and the loss of it equal to the damnation of their soul. The performance of domestic duties, the management of her household, the rearing of children, and the economizing of the family means - these are a woman's proper place. The ideal of motherhood is especially lauded, for in training her children to be noble citizens, she renders a great service to the nation and national culture.

Duties of Women by Swami Shivanada (1887 - 1963)  
Divine Society, Rishikesh

"To a woman, there is no higher duty than service to her husband. She should worship him daily. She should take sole refuge in her husband. He is everything to her. He is her all-in-all. She should perform all actions to please him."

Manu says: "For a woman there is no other sacrifice. She who serves her husband with intense devotion and faith is honored even if the husband is not endowed with virtuous qualities; even if he is lustful; and even if he has no good conduct. The wife should not look to the defects of her husband...Even if he taunts and hates her, she should speak sweetly and gently to him...Even if the husband is unrighteous, she should be faithful to him...She should never retort...To a woman there is no greater Yoga, sacrifice, or act than of service to her husband."

From Tulsya Ramayana, Aranya Kanda, 5 A-B

"A woman is impure by her very birth, but she attains a happy state by serving her lord (husband)".  
"For a wife during her lifetime, the husband is both god and lord alike."

Many mothers in India dote on their sons because it is through them that they gain honor in their families and in society. As the mother lavishes love and affection on her son, the prevailing idea that he is superior to women and must be served and pampered takes hold and influences his character and behavior. Rupesh Nag is an example of this kind of mindset. He resented Sabita because in his eyes, she forgot her place and showed disrespect to him in telling him to let Pushpa keep the necklace.

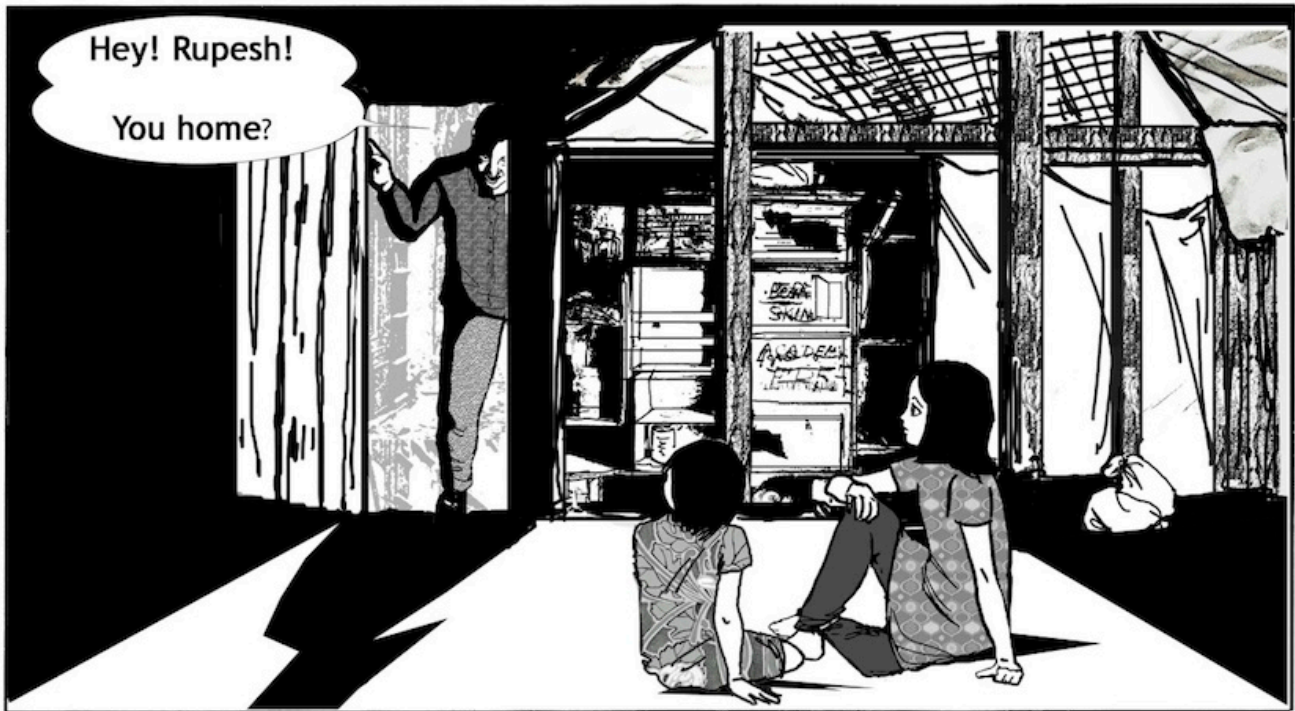


## 4. *Danger*







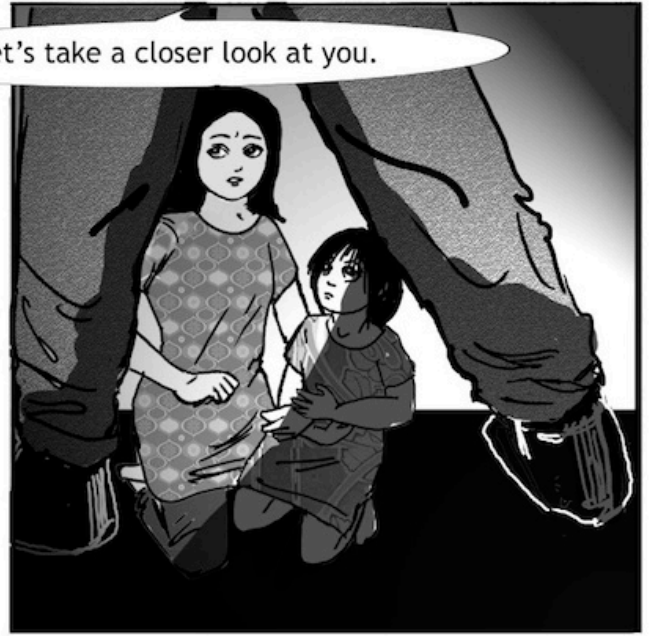
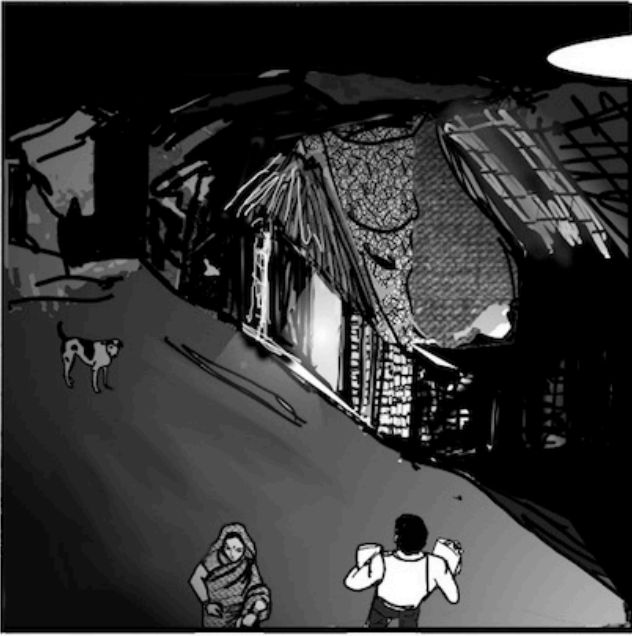


A big man came to the door and walked inside. He had a large nose and squinty eyes that were sharp and piercing. His voice was loud and gravelly as he called for our uncle. When he saw us, he was very surprised and just stared. Then he grinned in a way that reminded me of Pinky just as he was getting ready to pounce on a chicken. It was very frightening.





My my...  
What have we here?  
Where did you two little  
beauties come from?  
Don't be afraid. Ole Ranjan  
likes little girls, especially  
when they are as pretty as you.



Let's take a closer look at you.



Uncle!!!

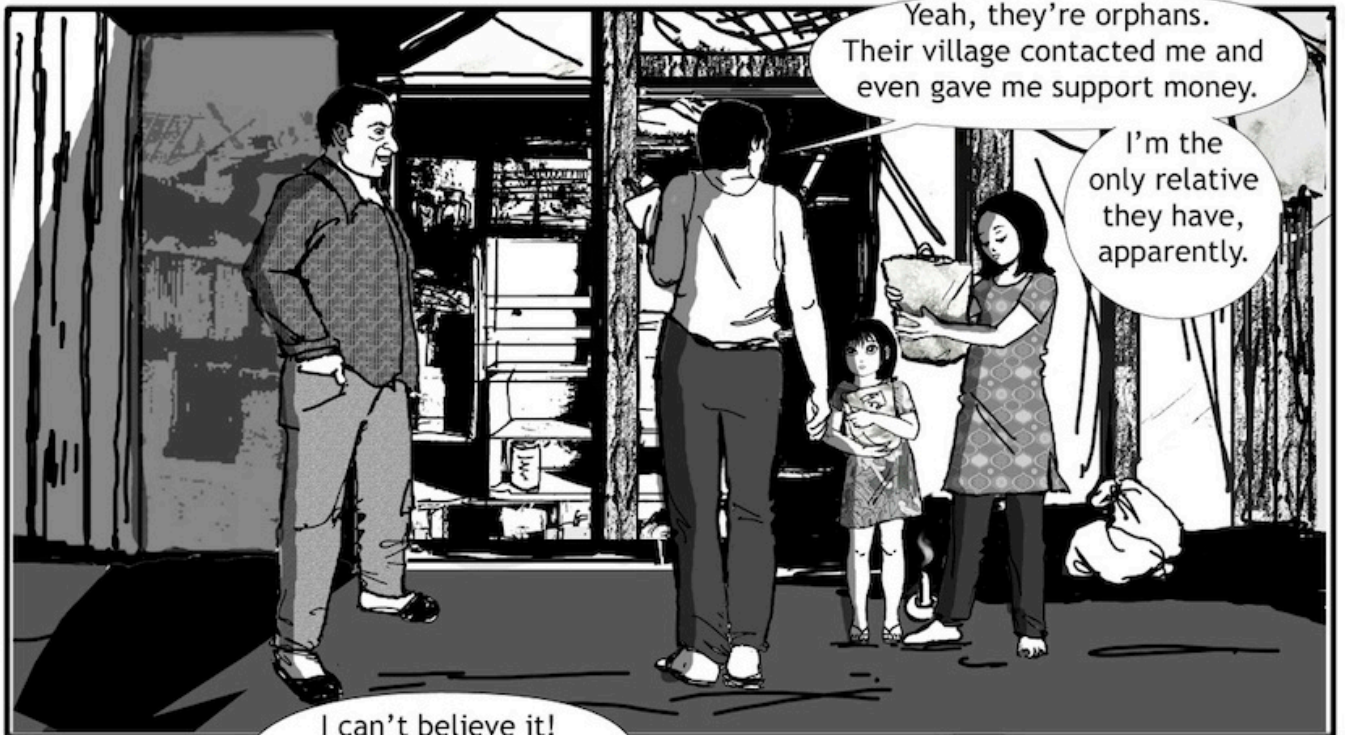
You came!!!





...??

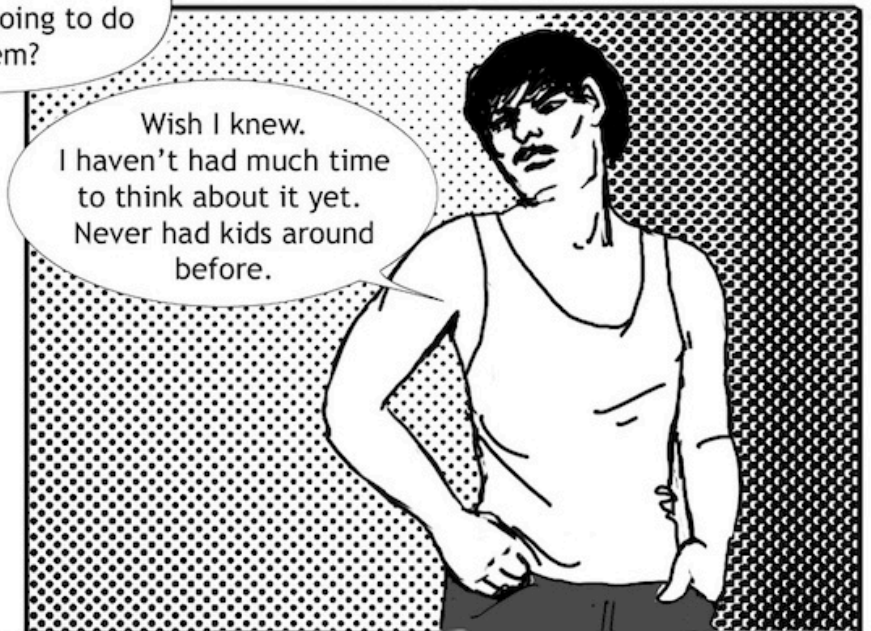
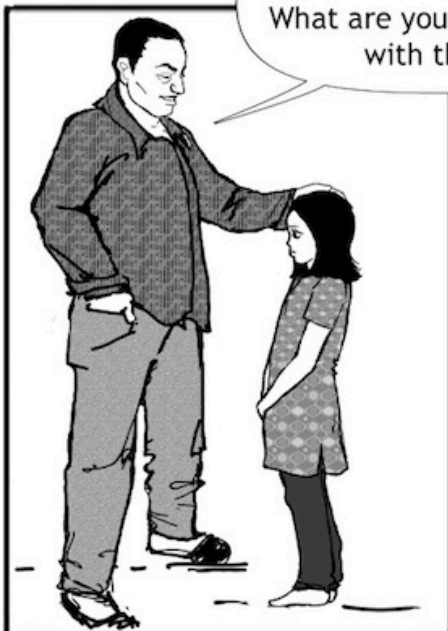
Uncle?!  
Is that for real?  
They're related to you?



Yeah, they're orphans.  
Their village contacted me  
and even gave me support money.

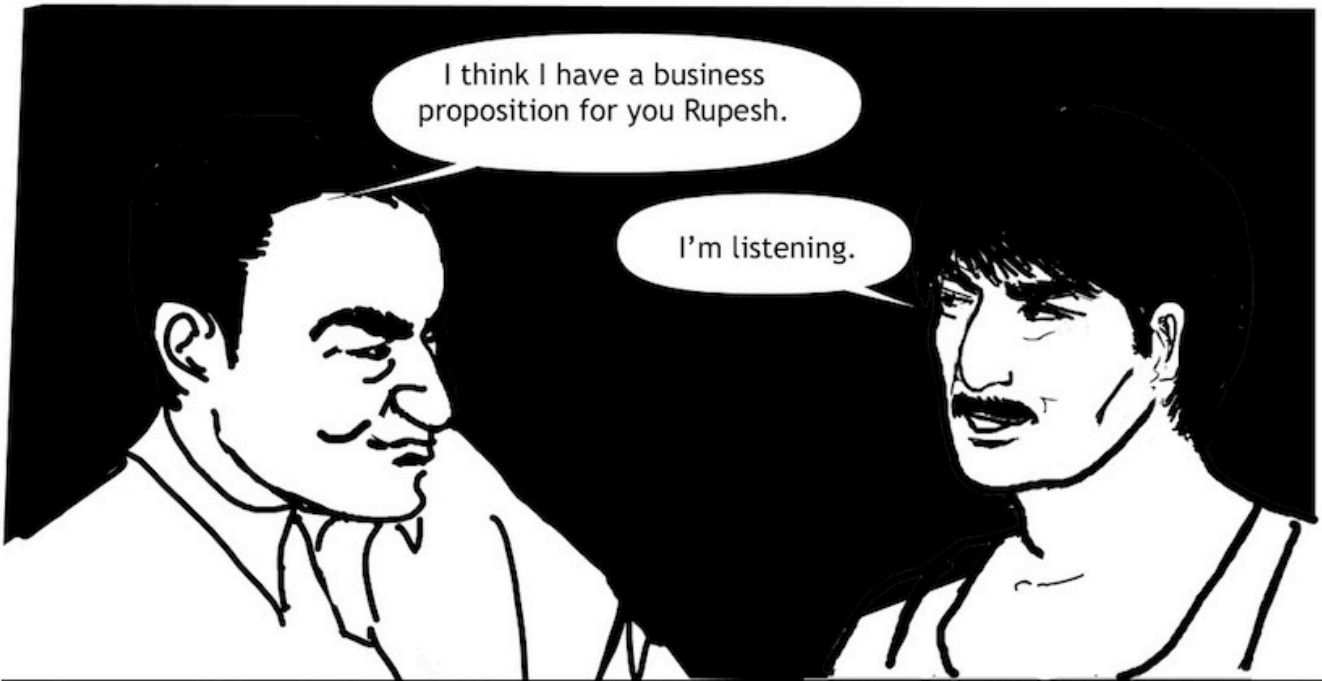
I'm the  
only relative  
they have,  
apparently.

I can't believe it!  
Why this one is gorgeous!  
What are you going to do  
with them?



Wish I knew.  
I haven't had much time  
to think about it yet.  
Never had kids around  
before.

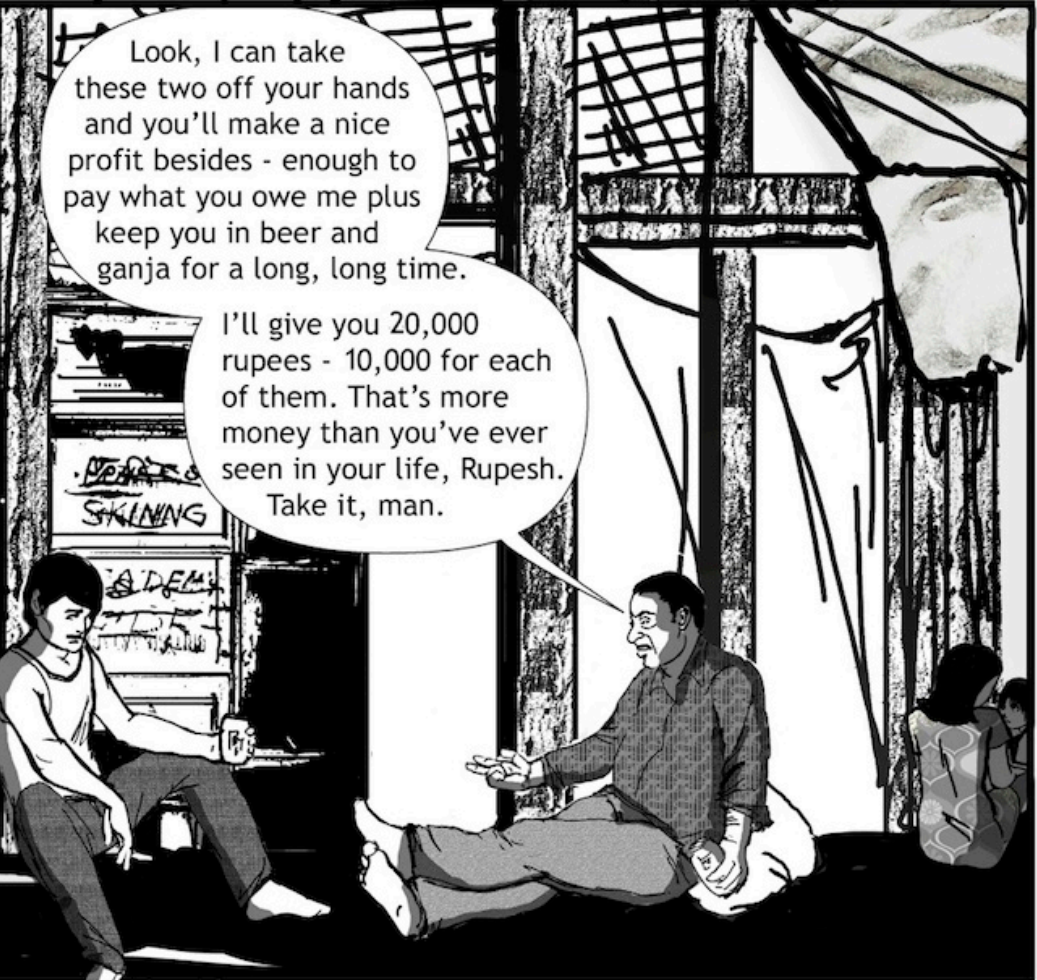




I think I have a business proposition for you Rupesh.

I'm listening.

The man called Ranjan told Uncle Rupesh that he was a lucky man to get his hands on such a gold mine, meaning us. He said we would fetch top dollar on the 'market' and he was interested in getting us for himself. He and Uncle talked all night.



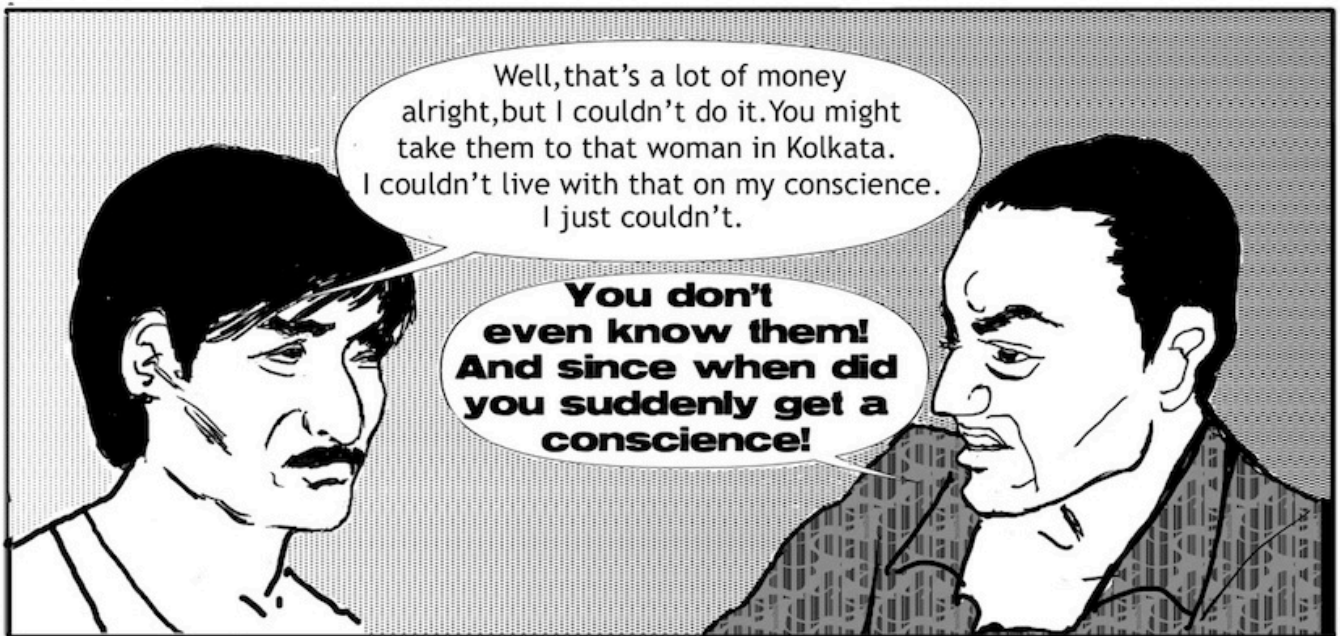
Look, I can take these two off your hands and you'll make a nice profit besides - enough to pay what you owe me plus keep you in beer and ganja for a long, long time.

I'll give you 20,000 rupees - 10,000 for each of them. That's more money than you've ever seen in your life, Rupesh. Take it, man.



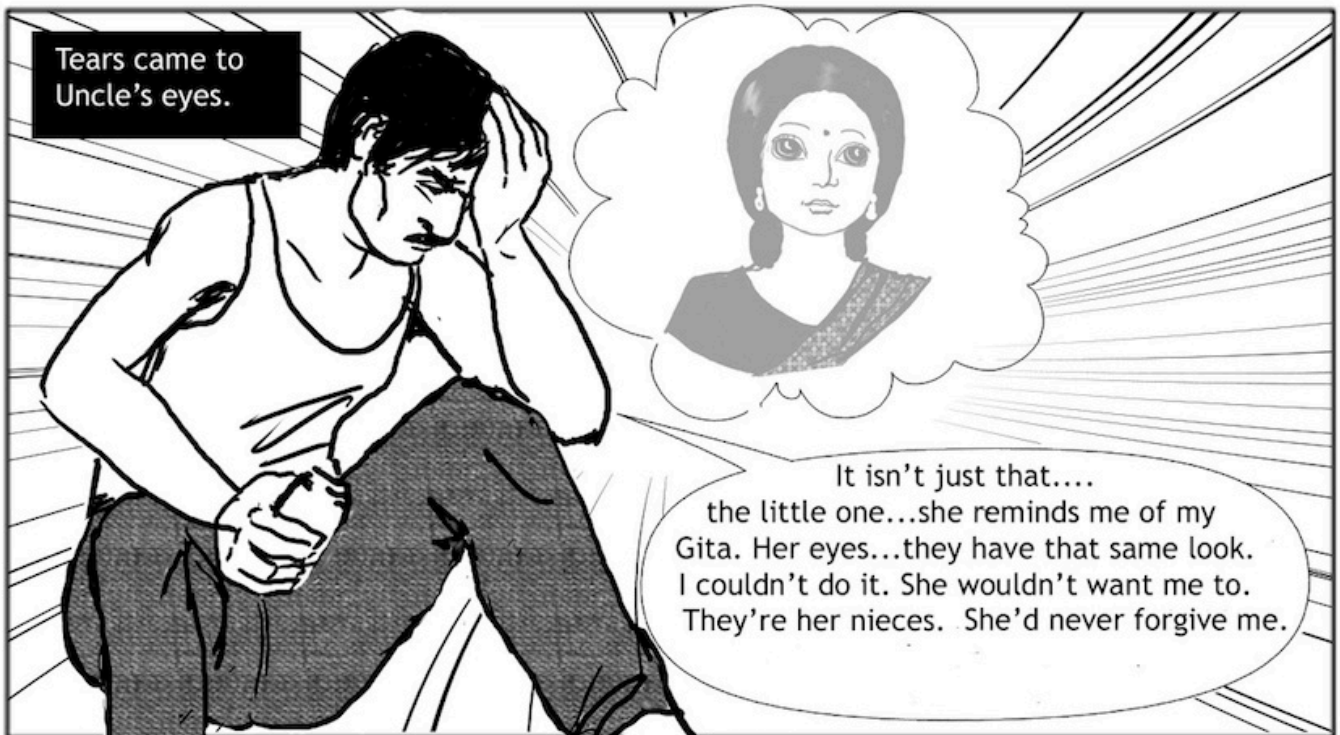
Uncle Rupesh thought about the offer and slowly his eyes grew hard with greed. It was a lot of money and he might never get such an offer again.





Well, that's a lot of money alright, but I couldn't do it. You might take them to that woman in Kolkata. I couldn't live with that on my conscience. I just couldn't.

**You don't even know them! And since when did you suddenly get a conscience!**



Tears came to Uncle's eyes.

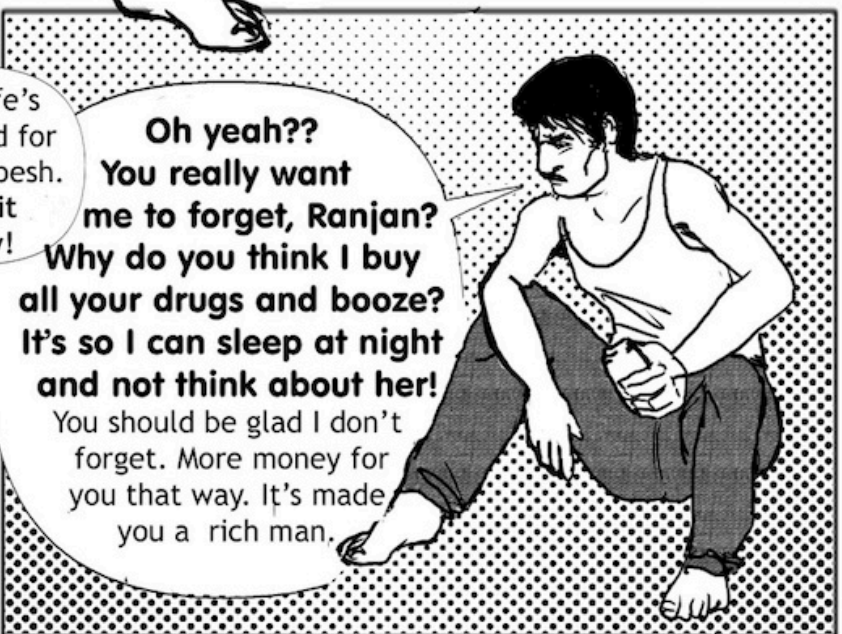


It isn't just that.... the little one...she reminds me of my Gita. Her eyes...they have that same look. I couldn't do it. She wouldn't want me to. They're her nieces. She'd never forgive me.



Your wife's been dead for years, Rupesh. Forget it already!

**Oh yeah?? You really want me to forget, Ranjan? Why do you think I buy all your drugs and booze? It's so I can sleep at night and not think about her!**  
You should be glad I don't forget. More money for you that way. It's made you a rich man.



He took his time thinking about how 20,000 rupees could change his life for the better.

20,000 rupees could buy alot ..  
Could maybe get me out of this dump...Find a new place to live...  
Help me forget the past..

You could tell he was struggling within himself.

He drank some more beer and sat down heavily, as if exhausted.

When am I ever gonna get an opportunity like this again? I'd be crazy not to accept. Maybe it's even Shiva's will. Everything happens for a reason.

Yeah, and I know just where they'd probably end up...poor kids...they'd be in hell...  
Ranjan is no fool. If he'd give me that much money for them, they must be worth alot more. Besides, what would Gita say? She'd haunt me worse than ever if I ever sold them into that kind of life.

After thinking things over, Uncle came to a decision. He swayed drunkenly but his mind was clear and his voice firm as he faced Ranjan.





Ranjan yelled some more at Uncle Rupesh, calling him some bad names and saying he was an idiot for not taking what the gods had offered. He said he was returning to Kolkata but would be back in a few weeks to discuss his offer again. He demanded payment for the drugs he had already supplied so Uncle gave him some of the money the villagers had collected for us. I didn't much like our uncle but he was lots better than Ranjan and I was very glad he hadn't sold us to him.



Gradually the noises of the night died away and we all went to sleep. A few dogs kept barking but after awhile they stopped. Twice I heard a rat scurry along the wood beams above. It all felt strange and I kept thinking of our house in the village. Finally I drifted off into troubled slumber.



Next morning I woke up to a dripping sound.

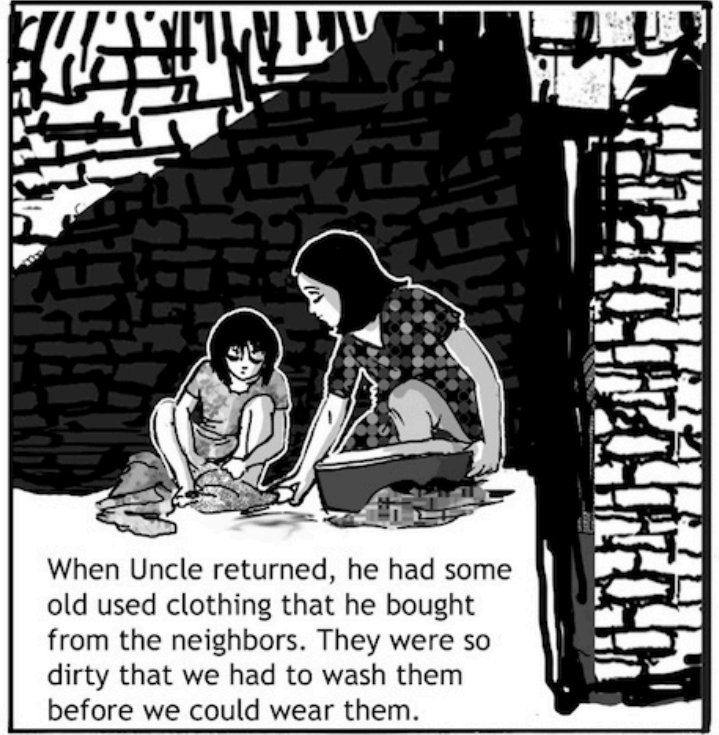
The rain came through the holes in the tarp.



The rain made everything muddy and slippery. Roofs leaked, the sewers overflowed, and everyone ran for cover. The already dismal slum was gloomier and more depressing than ever



After the rain stopped, Uncle Rupesh showed Anita where to get water. He said we needed some more clothes so he left to buy some. He told us to do the household chores in the meantime.



When Uncle returned, he had some old used clothing that he bought from the neighbors. They were so dirty that we had to wash them before we could wear them.

Uncle left saying he'd be back for dinner.



This was where I heard the rats scrabbling along the rafters.

The hut was filled with empty beer cans, whiskey bottles, crumpled boxes, and wrappers. It took most of the day to sweep it all up.

I threw the garbage over the fence where the dogs scavenged for scraps.



Anita bunt the chappatis like usual!!!

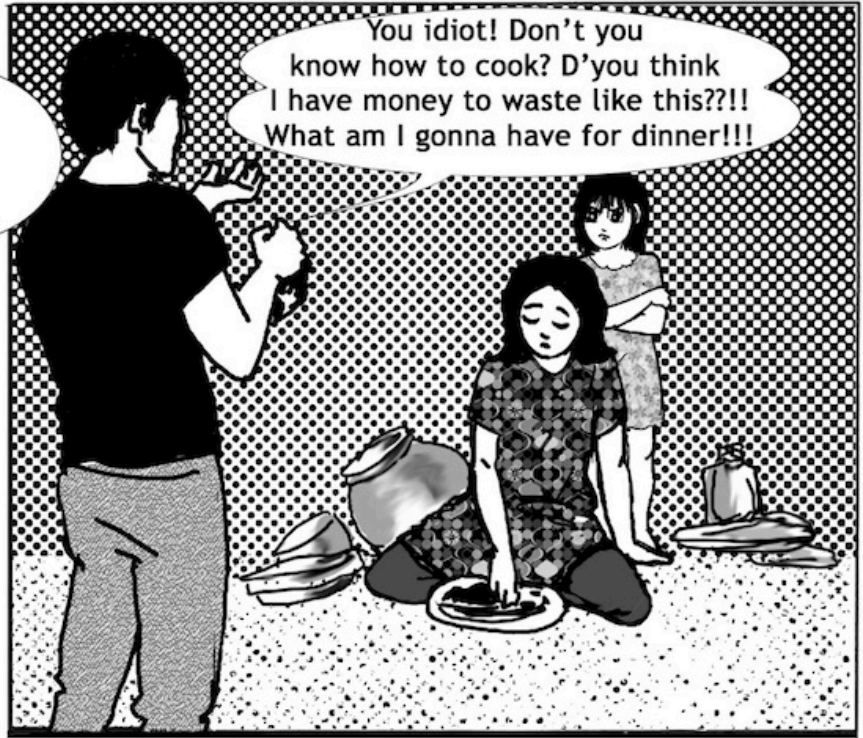




When Uncle came home for dinner, he was not impressed



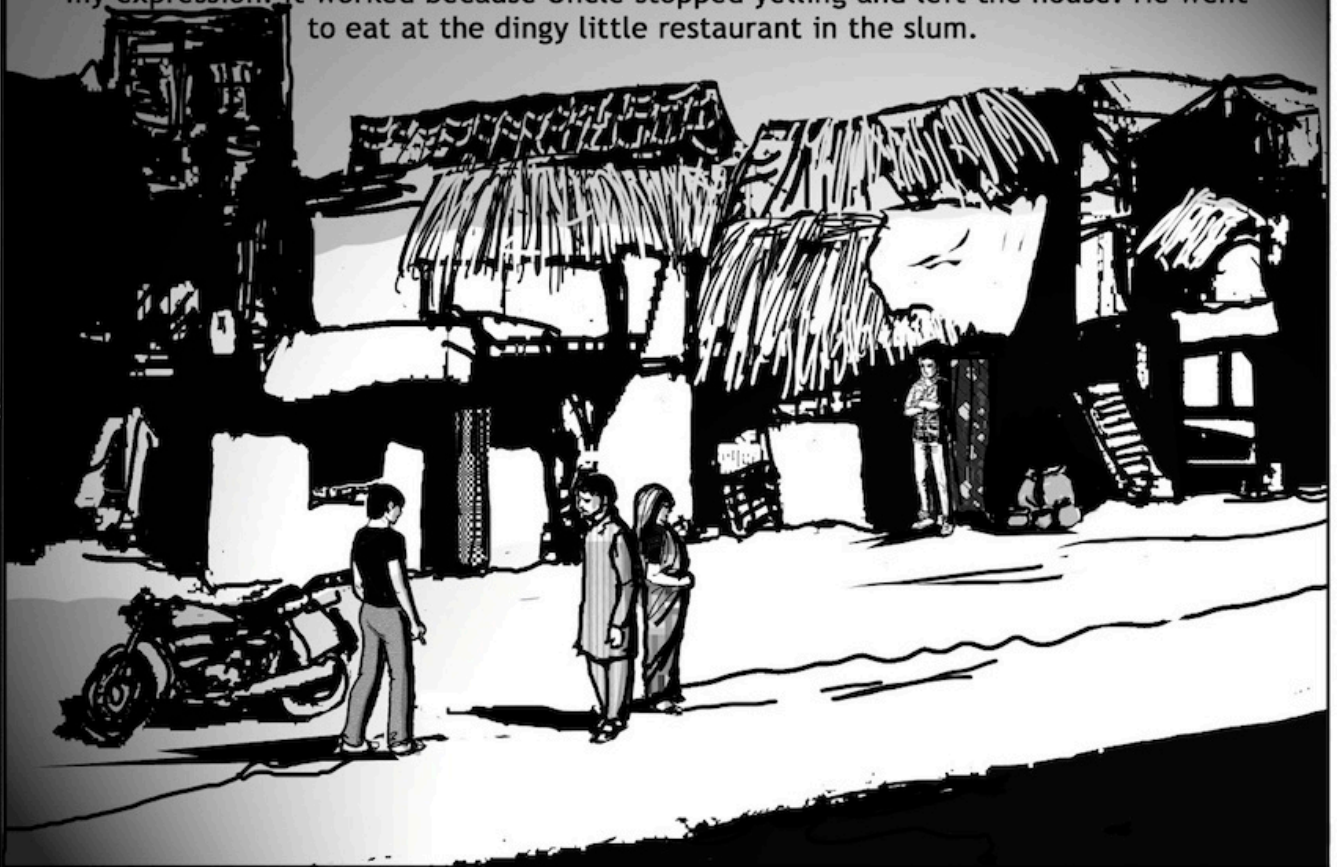
What is this supposed to be?!!



You idiot! Don't you know how to cook? D'you think I have money to waste like this?!?! What am I gonna have for dinner!!!



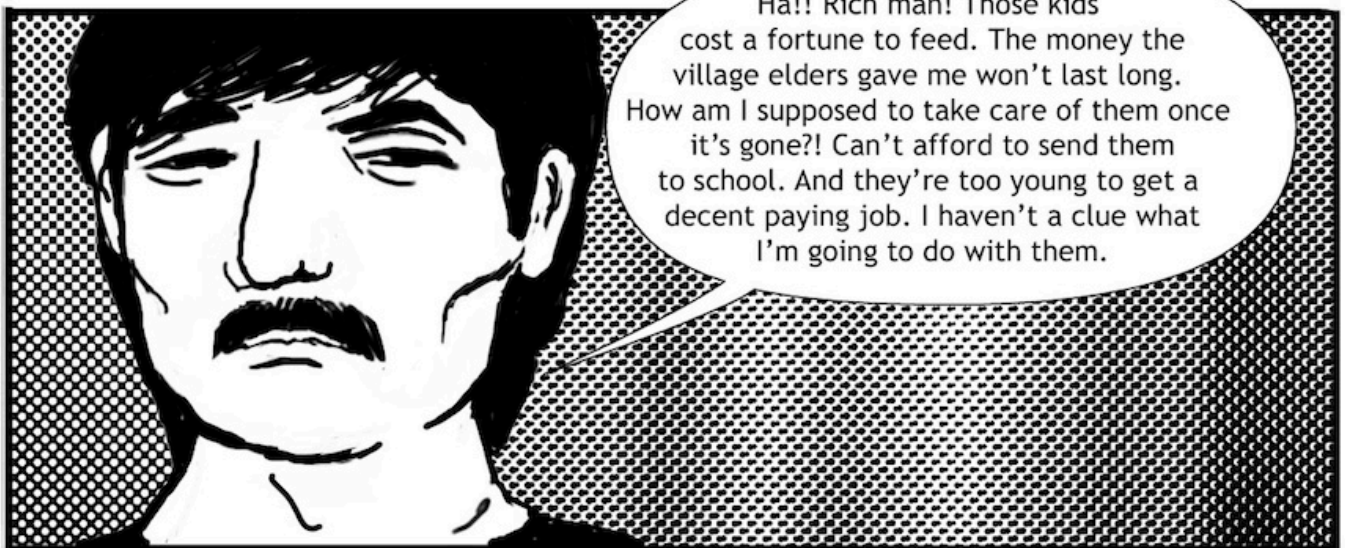
Uncle Rupesh's anger was matched by my own. I didn't like burnt chappatis either but no one called Anita an idiot. I didn't say anything but I let my feelings show through my expression. It worked because Uncle stopped yelling and left the house. He went to eat at the dingy little restaurant in the slum.







The restaurant was a favorite hangout for many of the men in the slum. It was really only an open area with a roof, a table or two, a clay oven, and some crates to sit on. The owner served greasy samosas, chappatis, and curry. He also sold beer and cigarettes and sometimes even ganja (marijuana). Uncle often went there to meet his friends and over the next few weeks he was there almost all the time, returning to the hut only to change clothes and to sleep.



Well, I don't feel sorry for you. From what you said, Ranjan made you a fabulous offer. I think you're nuts to refuse it.



No kidding! 20,000 rupees for 2 little brats! So what if they're relatives? I'd sell mine in a heartbeat if I was offered that kind of money - especially my mother-in-law.



No one would blame you, Rupesh. It's ridiculous to expect you to raise two kids on your own. They'll tie you down and make your life hell. I say sell them to Ranjan.



Oh man! I'm seriously tempted to do what they say. What have I become? I was a decent man once...decent enough for a good woman like Gita. Now I scabble for beer and cigarette butts...and all I can think about is where to find the next rupee!

But I'm not such scum that I'd sell those kids to an animal like Ranjan. If I had any sense, I'd take them back to the village where'd they'd have a decent chance..

except the elders would want the money back, and it's mostly spent.

There must be a way out of this mess!!





We didn't see too much of our Uncle but one day he came by with a lady and her 2 children. She wanted to join the party Uncle and his friends were having on the street, so Anita had to babysit.



The baby was named Malathi. She had marks on her face to make her look ugly so that evil spirits wouldn't notice her. Some said that pretty children made the spirits jealous and they would seek revenge by making the baby sick...like what happened to our sister Kumari.



Make sure you don't leave the house.



Help Anita take care of your sister, Kavi. I'll be back later tonight to pick you up.



After they left I took a peek through the door to see what was going on.



Everyone was acting wild and crazy. Some were dancing and laughing and others were fighting.







So what do you do in the slum all day?

Lots of stuff. I swim in the river and throw rocks at dogs. And I have play fights with the guys.

While the party went on outside, we had fun inside with our new friend Kavi. He was six, the same age as me, but he didn't go to school yet. He said lots of kids in the slum never went to school because their parents were too poor to afford uniforms and books. Anyway, sometimes the teachers didn't even show up because it wasn't expected that the no-caste kids from the slum would ever need much education. They would always be poor with no prospects in life. He said almost no one went past the 6th level. He had lots of stories to tell and he giggled just like a girl. He said that there were often parties in the slum and they sometimes went on all night long. He expected that this one would too. Anita played with Malathi mostly, feeding her and changing her diaper, and singing to her. I think she reminded her of Kumari.

Late at night I woke up when I heard whispering at the door. Kavi's mum was with a man I hadn't seen before. They were talking in low voices. Kavi's mother tried to shush the man so we wouldn't be awakened, but they both kept on laughing and hugging. The man said he had to get some sleep because he was supposed to be starting a temporary job next day. He said he needed at least four hours of rest or he'd be useless in the morning. Kavi's mum said he was useless anyway and they both burst into more laughter. Then they kissed for a very long time. They were so loud that I was surprised that they didn't wake the other kids.



Kavi...wake up.  
Your mum and dad  
have come for you.

Zzzzzzzz.





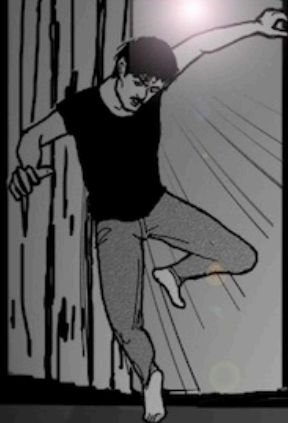
That's not my dad. It's just my mum's friend. Dad's out of town.



After Kavi and Malathi left with their mother, I tried to get some sleep...



...but Uncle came home drunk and tripped over the door sill.



X## !!  
zfmfm!!!!



Zzzz



Finally the street grew quiet, except for the occasional yipping of some pariah dogs outside our hut.





Next morning Kavi came by to ask us to play with him. He was all excited about taking us on a tour of the slum.

I know some neat places to show you.

You kids can take off. I'm not feeling so good.

Uncle was sick from all the beer he had at the party. He was glad we left so he could be alone.



mmmfff...



This is where me and my friends like to play. C'mon.



What's the matter? Why aren't you coming?

Kavi, it's a sewer! It smells awful! You can't swim in this!!!



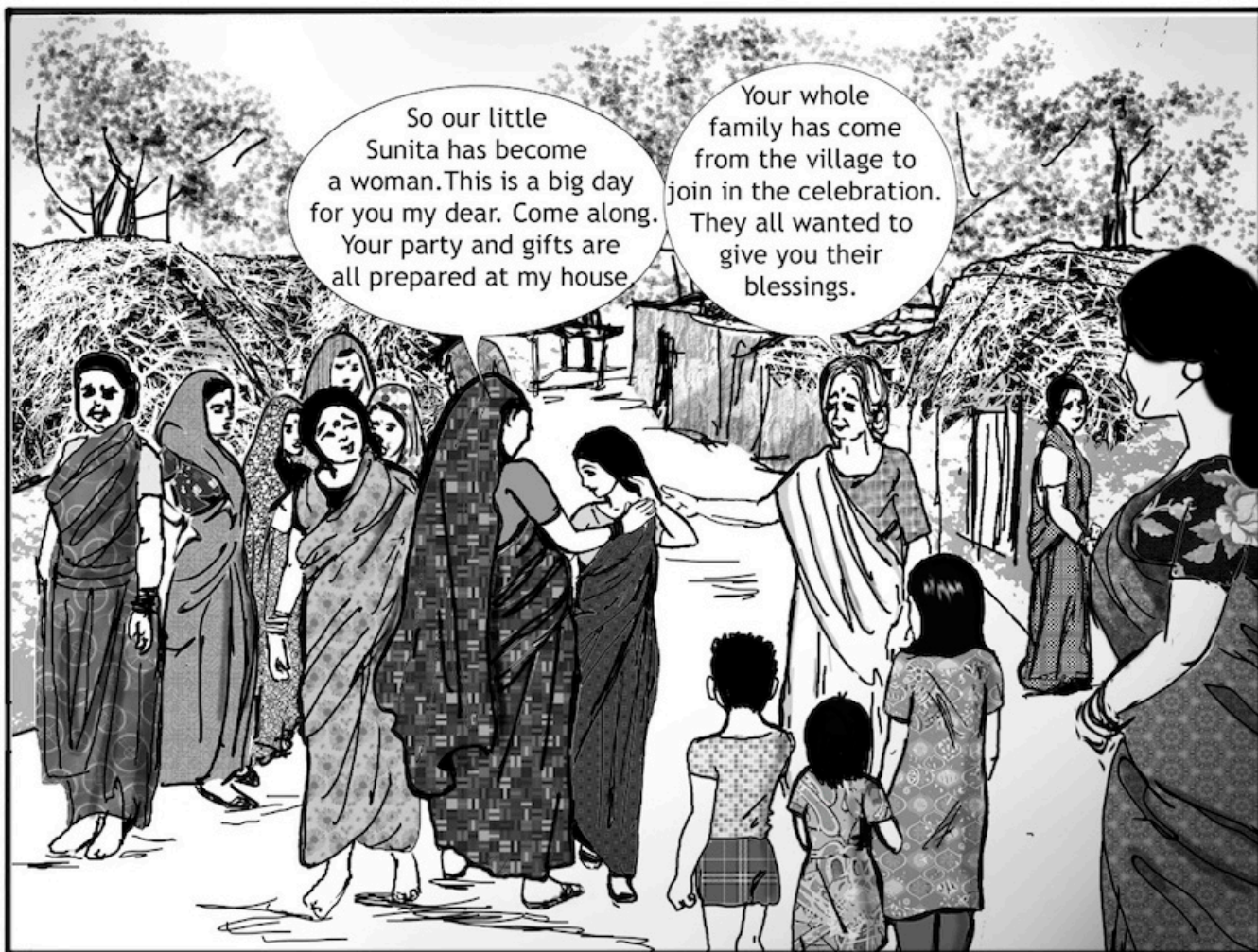
Anita and I told Kavi there was no way we were going to go near the sewers.



Okay okay. I know some other fun things to do. C'mon! Lets go to my house. My dad sent me a really cool toy car last week. He works in a big city where there's lots of neat stuff.







So our little Sunita has become a woman. This is a big day for you my dear. Come along. Your party and gifts are all prepared at my house

Your whole family has come from the village to join in the celebration. They all wanted to give you their blessings.



The girl called Sunita was celebrating her transition from childhood to womanhood. Family and friends gathered to give her gifts, to sing songs of joy, and to pass along their blessings for a bright future. This was also the day when she donned her first saree and wore gold jewelry.



Hey, this is good news. I've been waiting for this day. She's been on my mind for some time now.

Yeah, you and a lot of other guys in the slum. But I'm getting her first.



The slum was a dangerous place for a young girl. Rapes were common, as was incest. Boys were also vulnerable, often falling prey to gangs of young men who forced them into crime.

I hope Sunita has a better life than some of the other girls here. It's so unsafe for them in this awful slum.

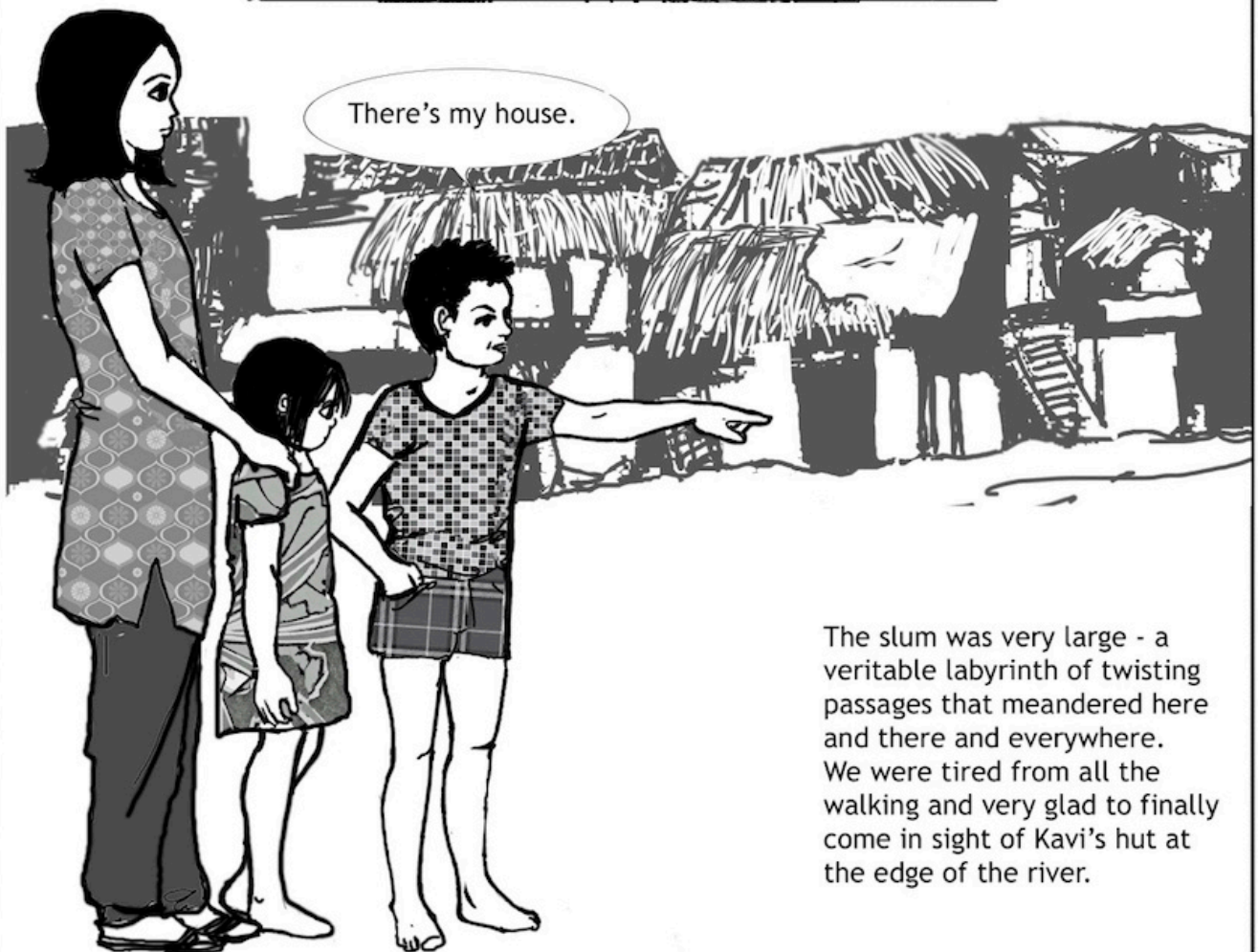
Being so pretty doesn't help either. In this place, good looks aren't a blessing.

She'll most likely get pregnant and have to raise a baby on her own, like so many of the other young girls here. It's such a shame.

But then again, what else can you expect? It's just the way it is, and it's never going to change.



There's my house.



The slum was very large - a veritable labyrinth of twisting passages that meandered here and there and everywhere. We were tired from all the walking and very glad to finally come in sight of Kavi's hut at the edge of the river.







Nobody makes a fool out of me!



We were just having a bit of fun... It was nothing more than that...

...C'mon. It's not worth fighting over. Let it go.

Don't do anything crazy, man.



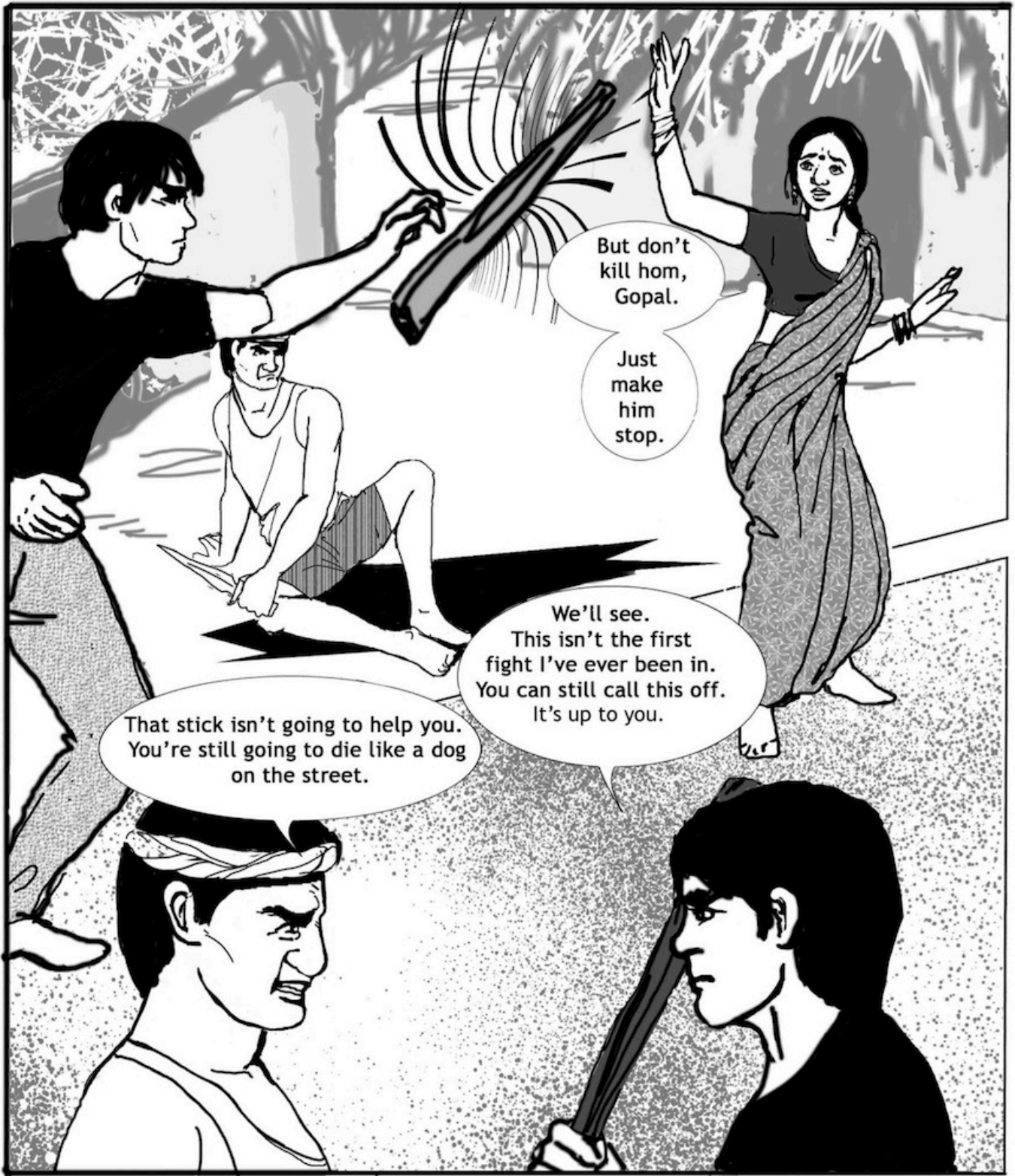
**Kavi!**  
Stay back!  
Don't come near!!

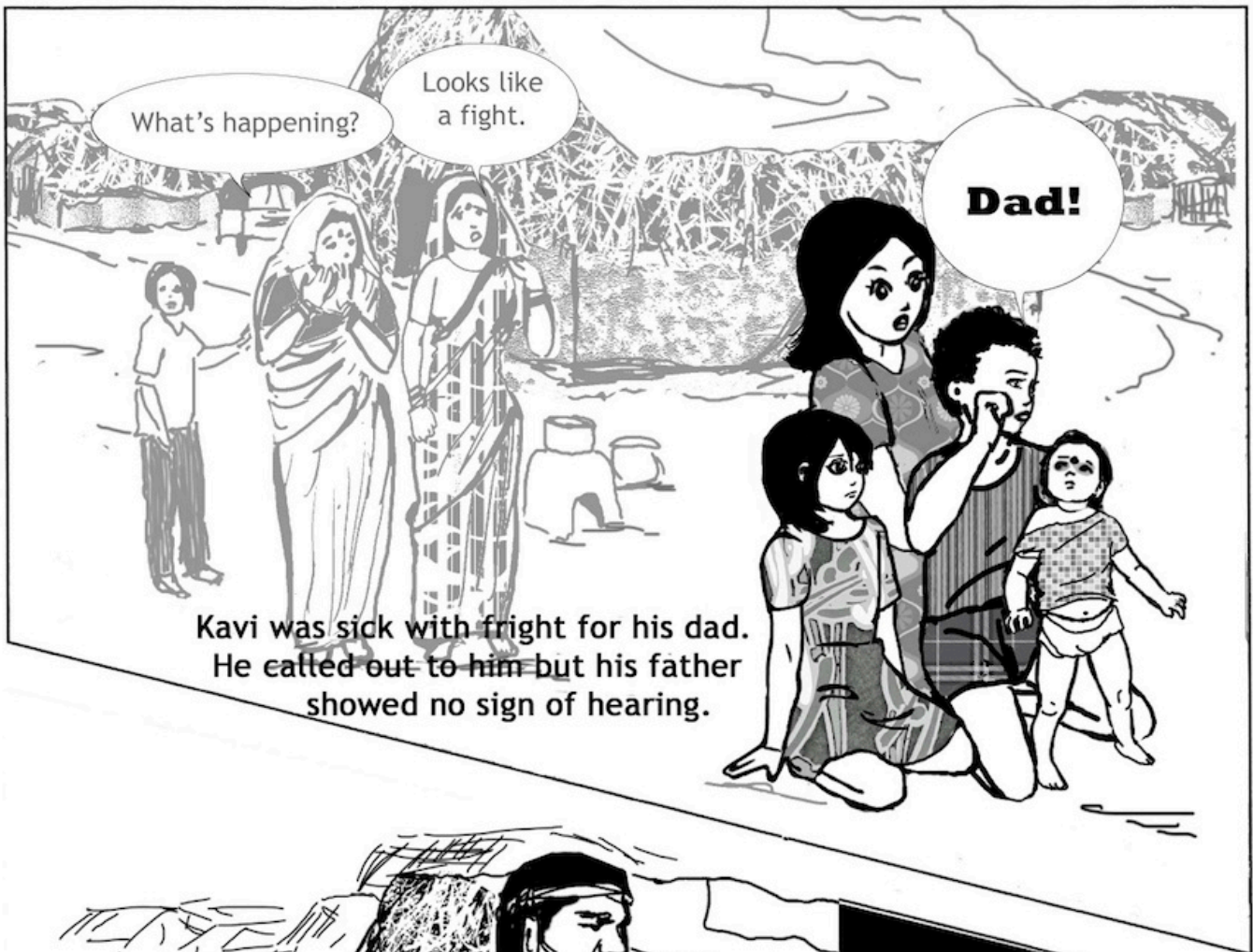
**Gopal!**  
Use this stick!

Here! Take Malathi! Keep her with you!









Kavi was sick with fright for his dad. He called out to him but his father showed no sign of hearing.

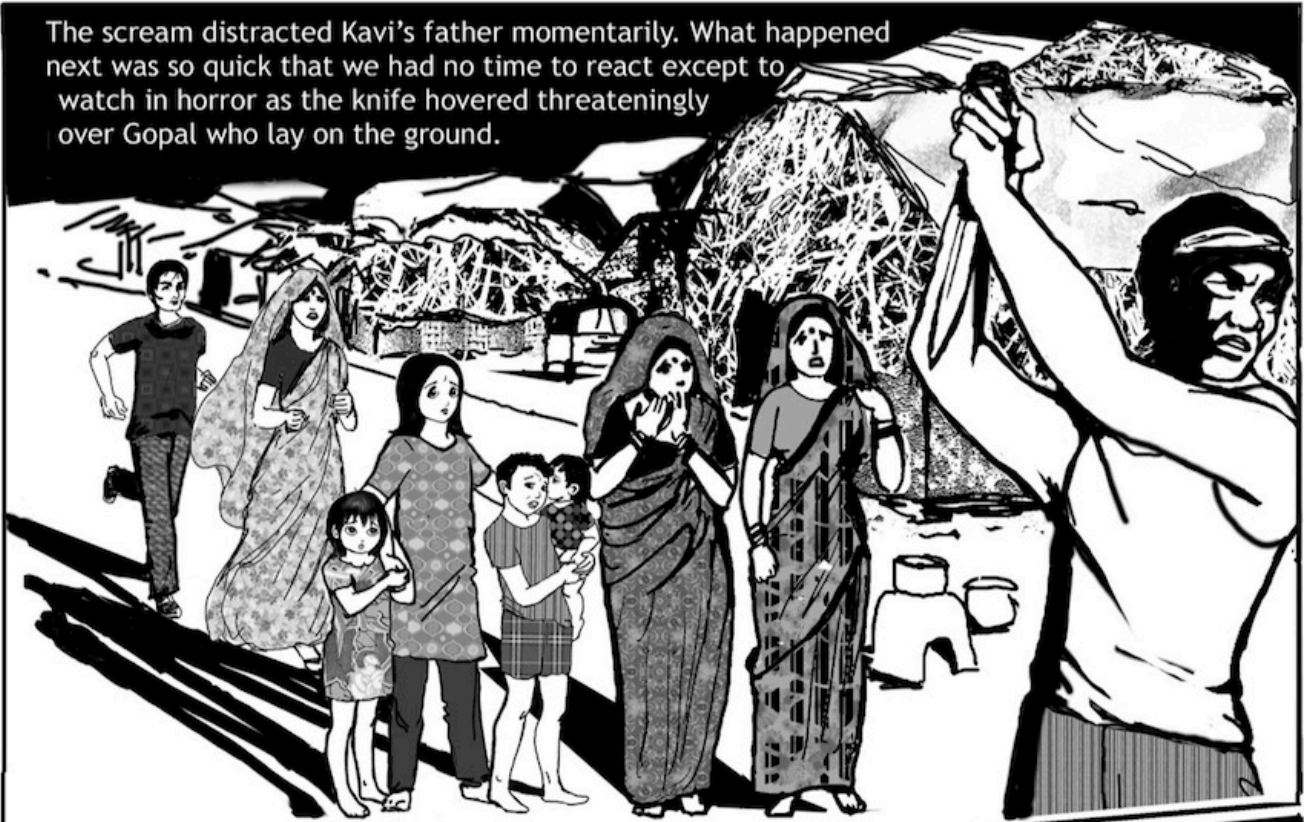


Kavi's father was older than the man called Gopal, but he was strong and muscular from pulling rickshaws in Kolkata. There were few jobs to be had around the slum so he had gone to the city to find work, just like our Daddy had done. He had worked there for several years, returning to the slum only occasionally, but he had regularly sent money to his wife and children so they would survive. He felt enraged that his wife had found a lover, and he was determined to exact revenge. After Gopal hit him with the stick, Kavi's father slowly got up and stared hard at Gopal. His knife lay on the ground and he seemed to debate whether or not to pick it up. Then a cold gleam came into his eyes and he smiled a cruel smile.





The scream distracted Kavi's father momentarily. What happened next was so quick that we had no time to react except to watch in horror as the knife hovered threateningly over Gopal who lay on the ground.



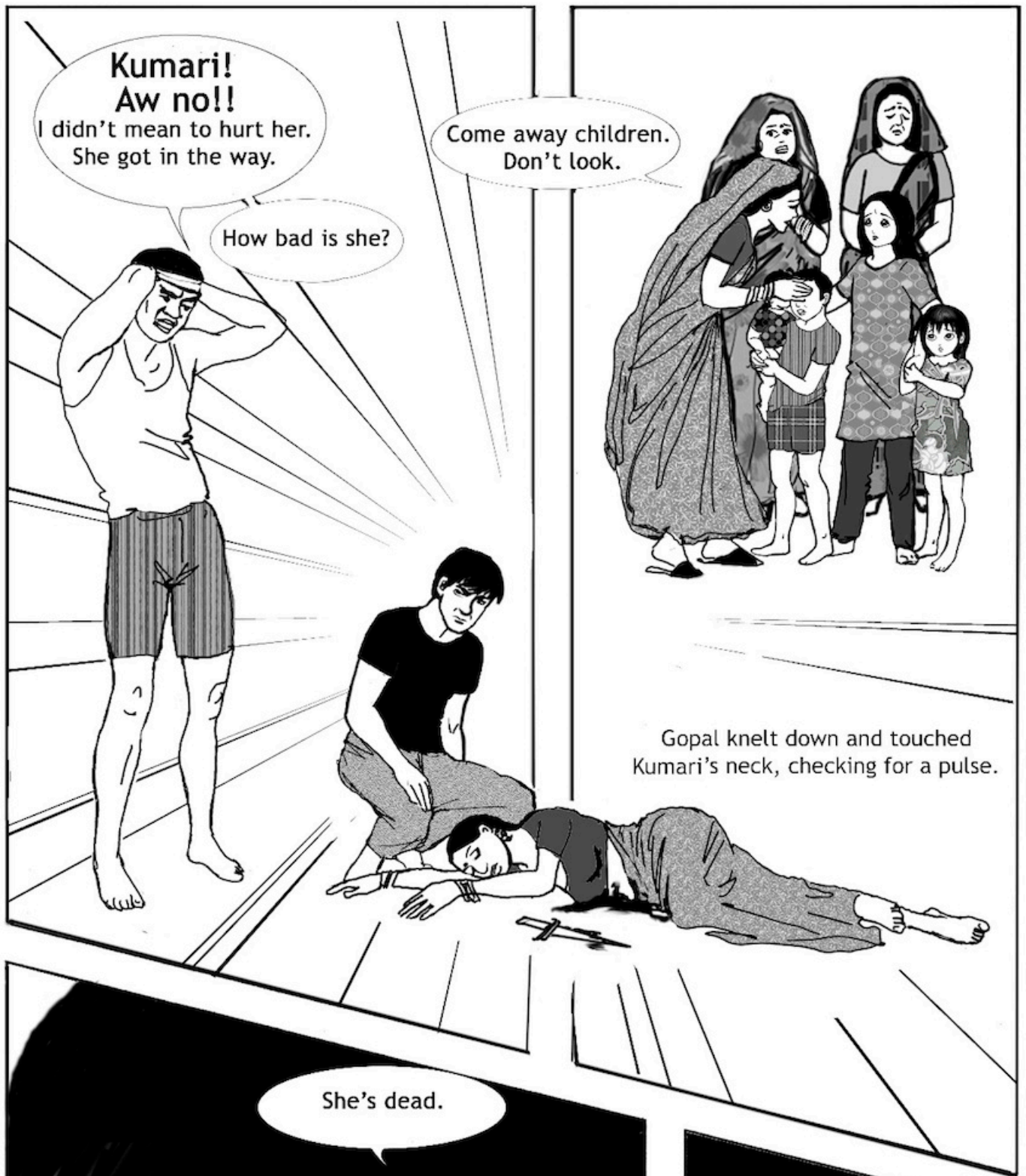
In the struggle, Kavi's mother was stabbed with the knife meant for Gopal.



Kavi's mother ran forward waving her arms to draw her husband's attention.







**Kumari!**  
**Aw no!!**  
I didn't mean to hurt her.  
She got in the way.

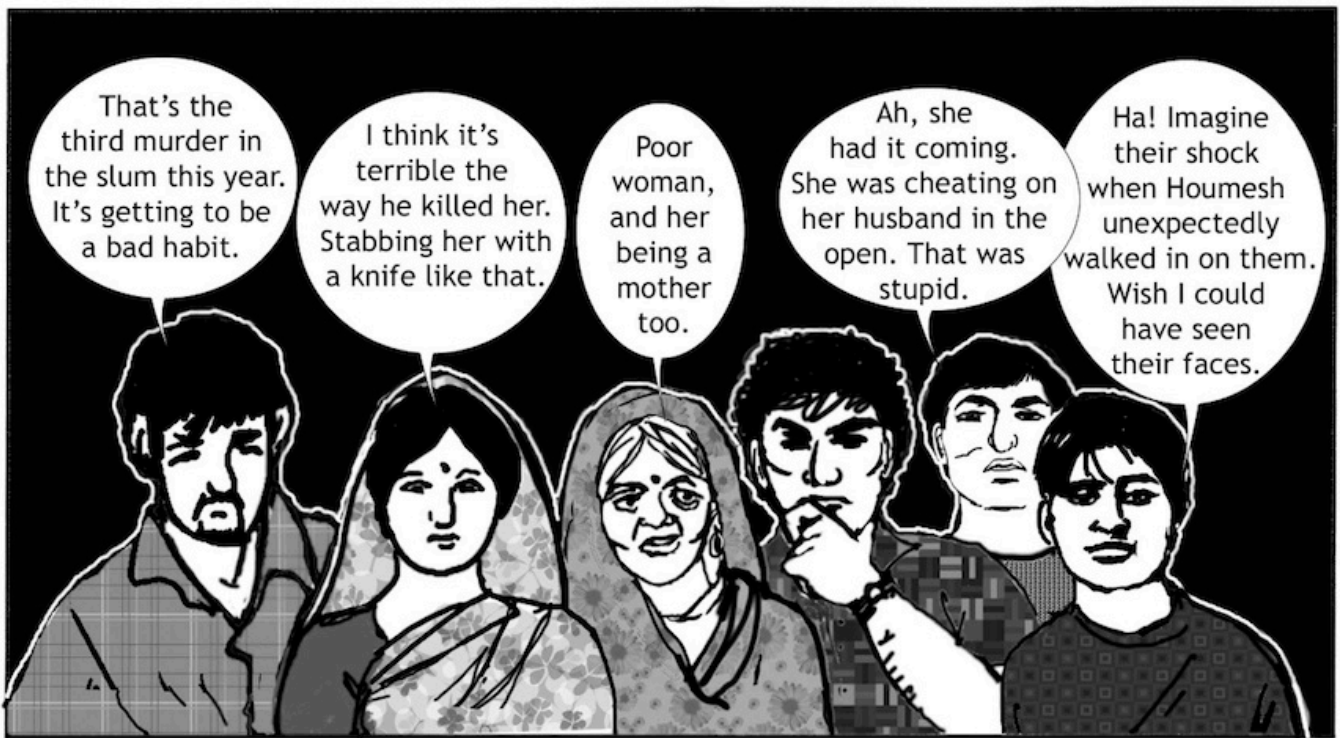
Come away children.  
Don't look.

How bad is she?

Gopal knelt down and touched Kumari's neck, checking for a pulse.

She's dead.

Some neighbor women stopped Kavi from seeing what happened to his mother but Anita and I saw. It was so horrible that we could hardly believe it really happened. It was the worst thing I had ever seen. Kavi kept trying to run to his mother but the ladies took us away to their house. As we left, we could hear some of the neighbors talking together.





Kavi's father was arrested that night and taken to jail. It was certain he would spend some time there. Murderers usually got several years in prison and sometimes never came out alive. Horrible things happened in Indian jails.



Why did you kill her? A good beating would have done just as well.

Now you'll be spending time in jail because of your stupidity.

Ha!Ha! You'll be getting a taste of some beatings yourself.

Gopal left town that very night, probably because he was afraid he would be arrested. He didn't tell anyone where he was going.



Mama?

What's to be done for these two?

Well, I guess we'll have to take them in. We're their family.



Malathi was taken in by her aunt and Kavi went to stay with his grandmother. She was a poor widow and couldn't provide for him from the few rupees she earned at her lemon stand. She would have to hire him out for work.

The neighbors told Kavi that his mother went back to her village but Kavi didn't believe them. He searched for her in the slum every night.

A few days later Anita and I were wandering through the slum, trying not to think of what had happened to Kavi's mother and father. We came upon a hut that had some



I think it's the god of that cross of yours. The words say 'Jesus'.

Whose picture is that, Anita?



That Jesus god looked ordinary, like a person...

Anita, do you think there's a god out there who cares about people.. and who's strong enough to keep bad things from happening to them?

...and who can stop bad people from hurting them?

I don't know, Pushpa. I guess everyone hopes so. There's lots of gods to choose from, that's for sure. I think a lot of people try them out one by one until they find the one they think is the best.

You sure have lots of nits, Pushpa. It'll take all day to get rid of them all.







Know what?  
I'm gonna try out  
the Jesus god!

Why him?  
Why not Durga,  
or Shiva, or Vishnu?

I don't know.  
I told myself I'd never pray again after  
Mummy died cause the gods never helped her  
...but the Jesus god had a nice face in the  
pictures. He looked kind.




I never told you, but  
Sabita said she saw Mummy in a dream  
and she was wearing a cross...and she was happy.  
I think maybe she's with the Jesus god.  
That's why I'm picking him.

Oh...well...I see...  
Then I guess you'll want to do puja. Uncle won't  
be home til late, so maybe you should do it tonight.  
I'll help you find an offering.




We found some pretty orange flowers that the flower-seller had left behind in the market and we put them on top of a box. I propped up the cross and lit one of Uncle's candles. It was my first puja that I made mostly myself and I was proud of it. I wished we had incense and maybe a coconut for the Jesus God but I thought he would be pleased with what was there.





Jesus god, I hope you can see me...  
I brought you some nice orange flowers.  
Next time I'll try to get a coconut cause I know gods  
like them. Umm...I was wondering if Mummy is with you.  
If she is, please be really good to her and take care  
of her, okay? I really miss her. I wish you could  
have healed her...but I guess maybe  
you couldn't do it.



Don't worry  
about it too much cause none of  
the other gods could do it either.  
I hope you can do smaller things  
though cause I need a favor.



Anita  
and I need you  
to get us out of  
this slum. Bad  
things happen  
here.

If it's not too  
big a job, please do it soon too.  
Then I'll bring you lots of flowers and  
coconuts and pray all the time...umm..  
I hope you're real...so...uh...I guess  
that's all for now.

I didn't know it at the time, but my prayer was  
already on the way to being answered, only not  
in the way I had hoped or expected. I was about  
to find out that there were places more  
frightening and dangerous than the slum...  
more horrible than I had ever imagined.





## Transition into Womanhood

In most parts of India, menarche is a time of celebration. The young girl is gifted with clothes and jewellery. The family feasts with friends and relatives and sing shouts of joy. In Andhra Pradesh a girl is attired in her first sari with traditional south Indian jewellery. This symbolizes her transition from girl to womanhood. Friends and relatives bless her for a bright future.

In the slum however, menarche was a mixed blessing for the young girls because it signalled their sexual availability and made them more vulnerable to harrassment and even rape from male predators in the slum. Rapes, sexual assault, and incest were all too common an occurrence.



## Evil Eye

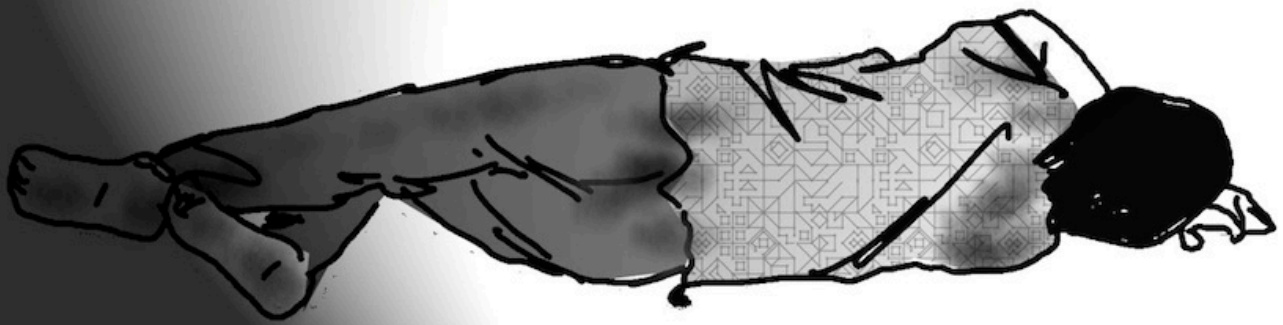
The evil eye belief is that a person can harm you, your children, or your possessions by looking with envy and praising them. In India, toddlers and young children are traditionally regarded as perfect and are likely to attract the evil eye. Often mothers will apply a spot of kohl on their children's cheeks or on the forehead to make the child imperfect and ward off evil eyes. A black cord is sometimes tied around the hip of young children for the same purpose. Sometimes shells or other amulets are attached to the cord.



## Lice

In India it is common to see women and children picking lice from each other's hair. Mothers will also look for nits (eggs) on their children's heads, especially their daughters who are likely to have long hair. (Long hair is a sign of feminine beauty and often a girl's hair is never cut). While lice can occasionally cause significant illness (typhus, relapsing fever and trench fever), a lice infestation is generally more of an itchy and embarrassing experience.

# 5. Netherworld







Our friend Kavi wasn't seen much in the slum now that he was living with his grandmother. She had lost no time in finding a job for him. Although small and underage, a restaurant owner in town had been willing to hire him for a few rupees a day. His hours were long and the work hard. He received one meal a day and two short fifteen minute breaks. The rest of the time was spent in gruelling drudgery. He was also beaten if he dropped dishes or made mistakes.



He had to walk a long way back and forth into town.



One evening Anita and I met him as he was returning home from work. His face was bruised as usual and his clothes were torn and ragged. He was also thinner than before. But as soon as he saw us on the street, his face brightened. He was happy to see us, especially as he had important news to tell us.

Hey!  
I have to tell you something!

Hi Kavi.  
We've missed you.  
Why don't you come to our house for dinner.





The Ranjan guy started talking about how he had a new deal for your Uncle.

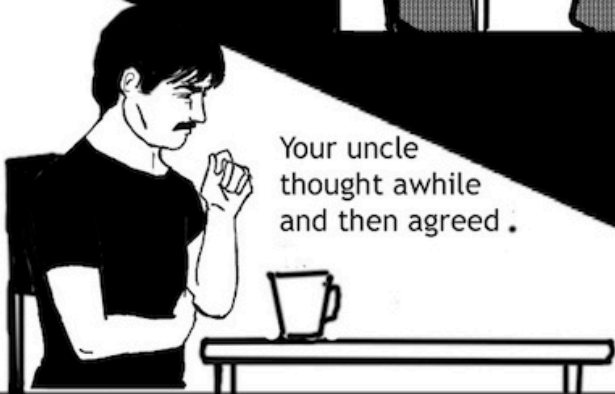


He said he could get you girls trained in 'street work' that would bring your uncle a regular income.



He said there were lots of tourists in Kolkata and that was the place to make money. Your uncle asked where he and you girls would be staying and Ranjan said he'd find all of you a place to live. He said he was taking the train to the city tomorrow.

He said he was in a hurry because he was going to take a young girl with him whose mother had agreed to let him have her for 3000 Rs, if he would get her a job in Kolkata. He felt the mother might change her mind if he waited around too long.



Your uncle thought awhile and then agreed.

That's all I heard because my boss got mad at me for not sweeping fast enough. But I'm pretty sure your uncle is going to take you away to Kolkata.



Anita and I didn't know what to say. I remembered my prayer about getting out of the slum but I hadn't expected it to happen so quickly. I couldn't help wondering if we would find my father in the city. If so, I couldn't wait to go there.

Suddenly we noticed our uncle standing in the doorway. He had come in so quietly that very likely he heard some of what Kavi had told us. We saw that he was gripping a large gym bag in one hand. His brows drew together in a frown and he glared at Kavi.



What's he doing here?

We invited Kavi for dinner, Uncle.



Oh yeah? Well he can eat at his own house.

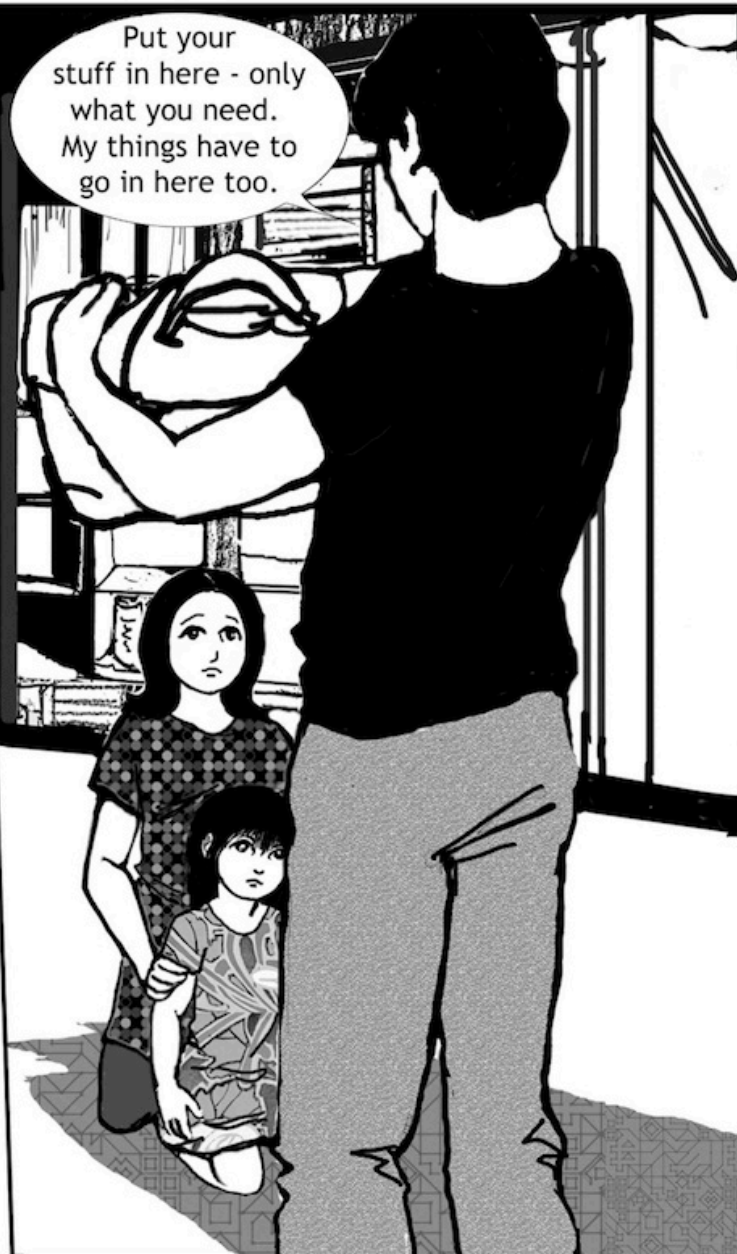
Go on.. get lost, kid.

Bye Anita, Pushpa.



Kavi looked so sad as he left. I think he knew we wouldn't be seeing each other ever again.

Put your stuff in here - only what you need. My things have to go in here too.



You two get packed. We're leaving for Kolkata in the morning.







Where will we stay?

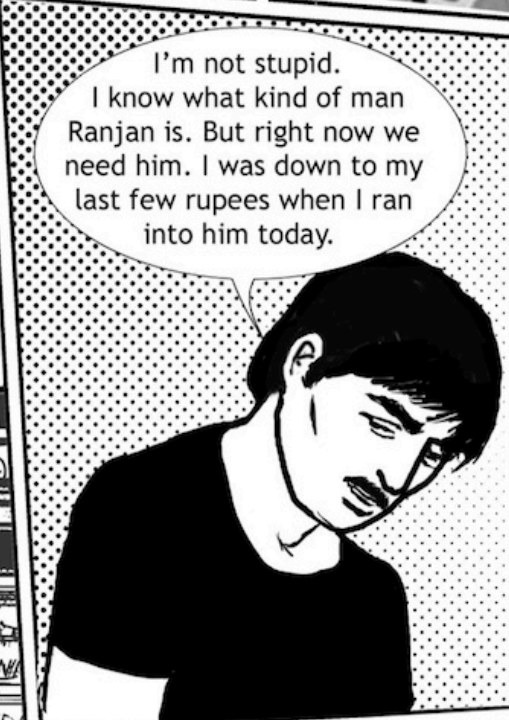
What will we do there?



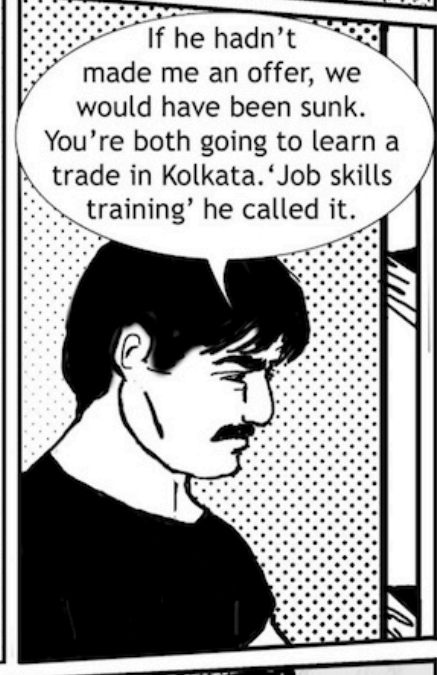
Why are we going with that Ranjan man? Kavi told us all about it. I don't like Ranjan. He's a scary bad person.



Pushpa, don't look at me like that.



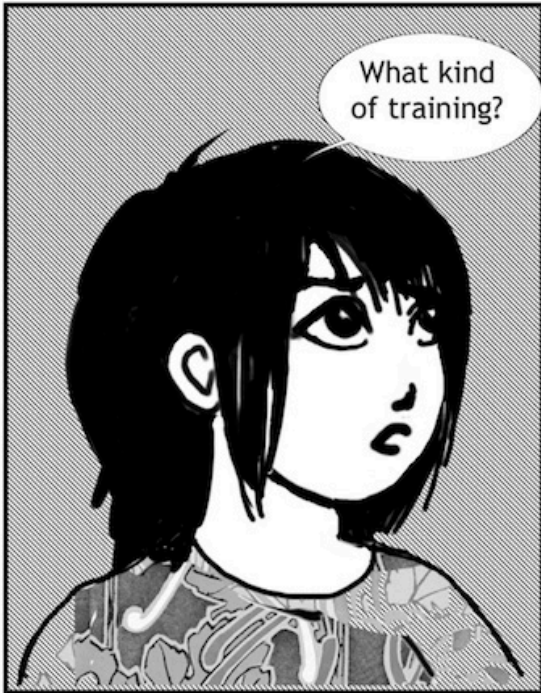
I'm not stupid. I know what kind of man Ranjan is. But right now we need him. I was down to my last few rupees when I ran into him today.



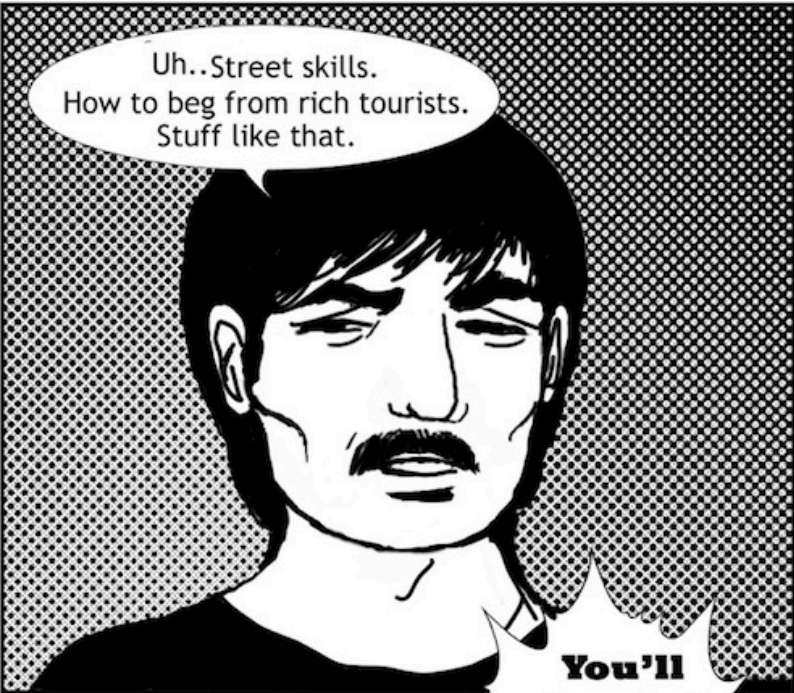
If he hadn't made me an offer, we would have been sunk. You're both going to learn a trade in Kolkata. 'Job skills training' he called it.



Now stop gabbing and get packing! You have work to do! Just do as I say and don't argue, and everything will be fine.



What kind of training?



Uh..Street skills. How to beg from rich tourists. Stuff like that.

**You'll do what you're told, Pushpa!**

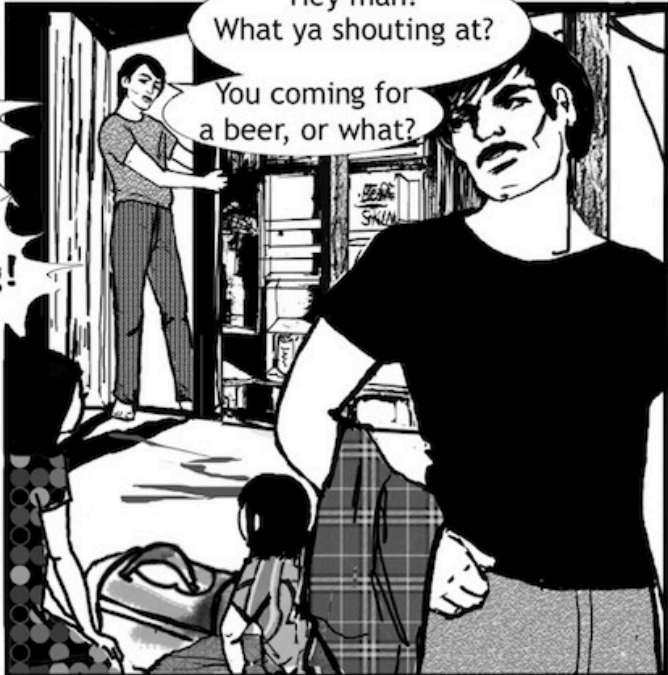


No way! I don't want to beg on the street! That's the lowest!



It's about time you both earned your keep around here!

No more freeloading!



Hey man! What ya shouting at?

You coming for a beer, or what?



Uncle Rupesh left to go drinking with his friends. He did it all the time and he never came back til very late. We heard his friend say that a bunch of guys were throwing a 'going-away' party for him. He said there would be ganga there as well. Uncle lost his bad mood immediately when he heard that bit of news.



I didn't want to go to the city and I tried to persuade Anita to make a plan to run away, but Anita said we had no place to go and we might end up in a much worse situation. I could see her point of view, so in the end I agreed that we had to do as Uncle said.



You should wear that cross under your dress so no one can see it.



Uh...I don't know, Pushpa. Kolkata is a pretty big place you know...

Anita, do you think we'll find Daddy in Kolkata?

It was strange to think that we were actually going to the city where Daddy had gone. My heart was full of hope that we would meet up with him and then of course, we would live with him instead of Uncle Rupesh. It was the only way I could bear the idea of going on a train with Uncle and Ranjan.



You should get some sleep.

Enough thinking for today, okay?

Later I heard Uncle come in and stumble around until he collapsed on the floor. Soon he was snoring away on his mat. I could smell the beer and ganga smoke on him. I hated that smell... I hated the slum...and I hated my life. Somehow I had to get away.

Next morning we left early. Uncle left the key for the next occupants.



The sun was just rising when we arrived at the train station. Despite the early hour, a crowd had already gathered. Car horns were blaring and people were rushing to and fro with bags and suitcases in tow.



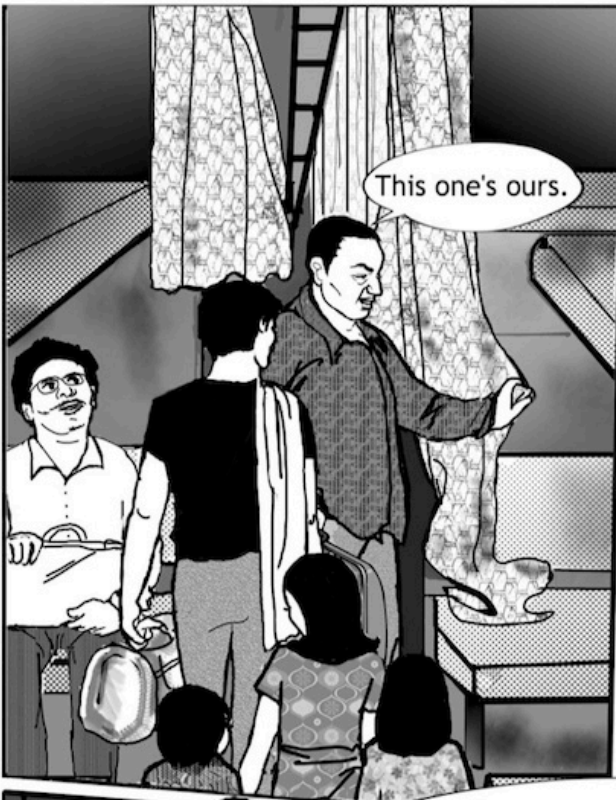
We saw Ranjan on the platform. He was looking at his watch and tapping his foot impatiently. Uncle Rupesh pushed past the people and told us to hurry up. As we approached, we noticed a young girl standing at Ranjan's side. Kavi had mentioned that Ranjan was going to take her to Kolkata with him. We were sure that his plans for her couldn't be good.



What kept you?  
The train leaves in  
15 minutes.







Ranjan always travelled middle class so we had an AC 2nd class compartment on the train. You could even order blankets and food for the trip, and the seats folded down into beds. It would have been wonderful except we had to travel with Ranjan. The girl he had with him was named Kalpani. Ranjan said she was half Indian and half Nepalese.



As soon as they left, Anita tried to make friends with Kalpani.



Kalpani was shy at first but soon she was telling Anita all about her family. She said her father was a coolie worker but he was fired because he was often too drunk to work. One day she found him sitting on the train tracks.



Kalpani said her father was often too drunk to find his way home and often spent the night sleeping on a railway bench or in an empty train car.



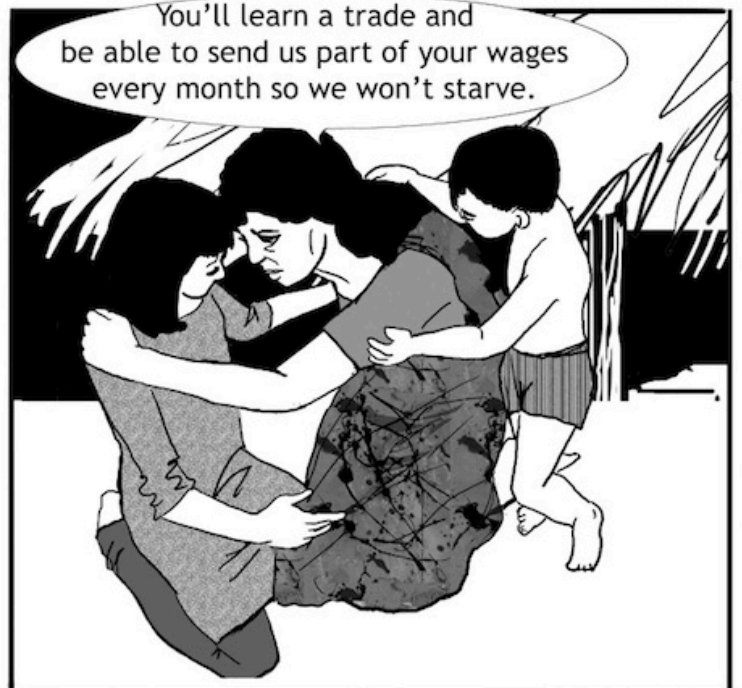
But that night he passed out on the tracks...



...and never woke up.

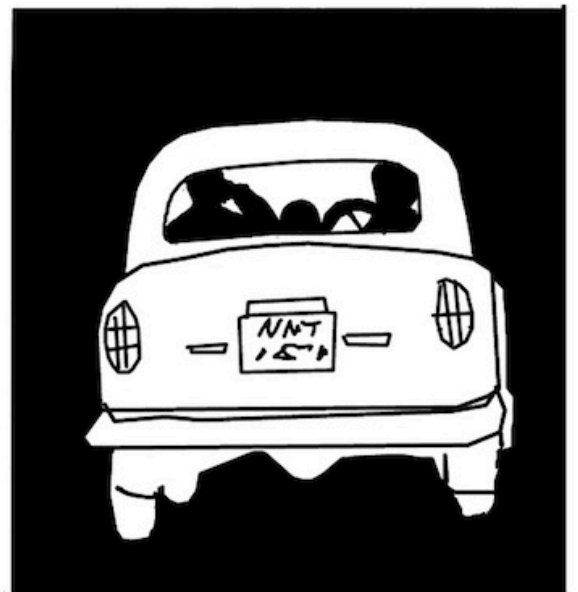


Kalpani's mother was heart-broken. Without her husband, she had no protection and no way of providing for her two children. Soon creditors began to call, demanding that she pay back the loans that her father had borrowed from them. The landlord began to threaten her with eviction if she didn't pay the rent on time. She was overwhelmed with sorrow and fear, not knowing where to turn. However one day Kalpani came home to find her mother strangely excited. One of the creditors had dopped by and made her an offer that would give her enough money to pay off all her debts, as well as provide a job for Kalpani in his friend's sewing factory in Kolkata.





Next day the man came to their house and paid Kalpani's mother three thousand rupees.





I think he's a nice man. My mama said he was.

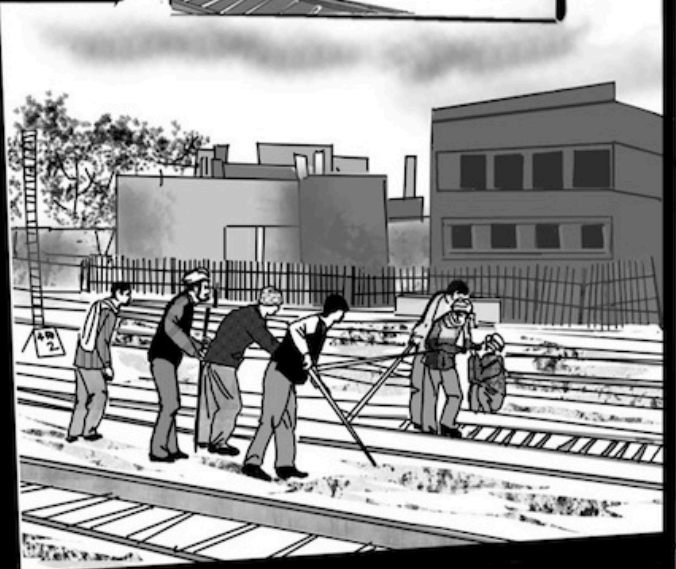
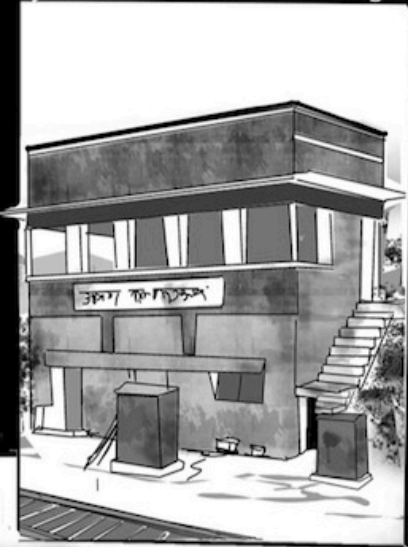


Teehee... Your sister is so cute and funny.





Ranjan came back to our compartment and promptly fell asleep. Anita and Kalpani stayed on the top bunk, gossiping and telling each other secrets, and I watched the world go by as the train slowly wound its way past fields and villages. Occasionally the train stopped at lonely outposts. Other times it passed by railroad workers repairing the tracks. In places, where the tracks had been abandoned, slums had quickly sprung up, using the railway ties for fuel and building material.



I saw that there were poor people everywhere, trying to find some spot to call their own. With over 1 billion people living in India, that wasn't an easy thing to do. I wondered what my next home would be like. I hoped with all my heart that it would be nicer than the hut in the slum.

Halfway through our journey the train made a stop on the outskirts of a big town.



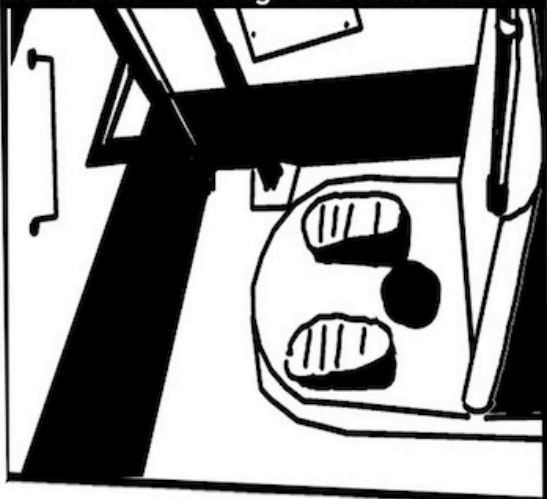
Just as we approached the lavatory, we heard a voice in the doorway of our train compartment. It was Ranjan talking to someone on his cell phone. He was so deep in conversation that he didn't notice us as we passed by.



I wondered what the word "zotik" meant. It was a word I had never heard before. And who was 'Sharvani'? Ranjan was obviously selling something of considerable value and I was curious to know what it was.



Anita waited outside while I used the lavatory. I could see the train's tracks down below through the toilet hole.



Suddenly the train began to move.



My foot slipped and almost went through the toilet hole and my hand landed close to a bug.



It was the biggest, ugliest cockroach I had ever seen!



Hindus don't kill anything, not even bugs, because you're supposed to let them live out their karma.

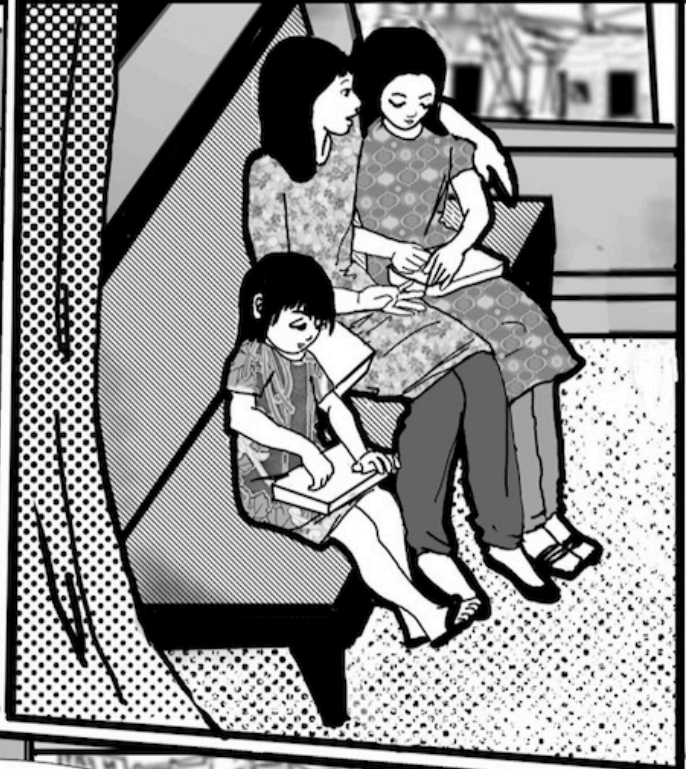


When we returned to our compartment, we saw that the train stewards were delivering our curry dinners. They smelled delicious!



Just put them over there

Kalpani and Anita began to whisper together. I couldn't hear exactly what they were saying but it sounded like they were making plans.



Uncle, we were wondering if Kalpani could stay with us. She could get trained to do the street begging and that way she'd earn her own way.



I'd work really hard.

Anita, it isn't up to me.

No, it isn't.

I have my own plans for Kalpani.

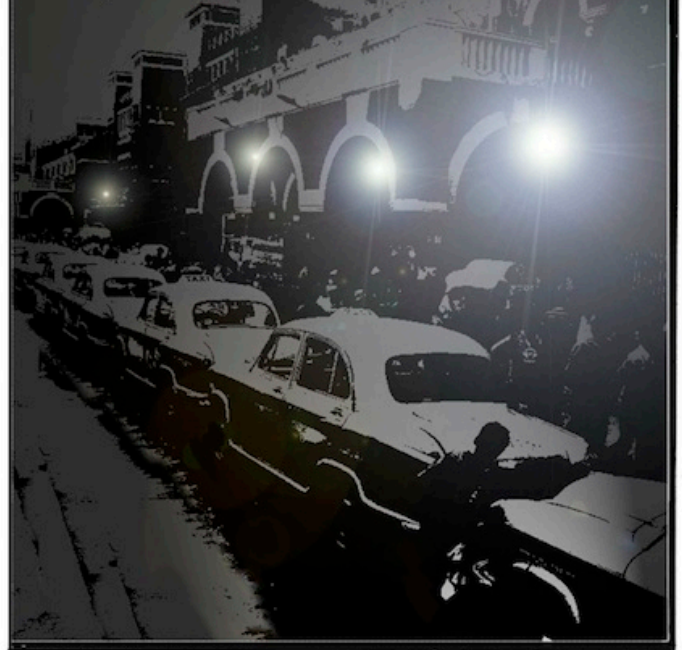




Kalpani needed help to walk because she was feeling dizzy from the drug Ranjan had given her. Her eyes also kept drooping shut.



At the entrance of the Howrah Station a long lineup of taxis awaited fares into the city.



Ranjan was rich so he had his own car and driver. The driver was named Saleem. He took our luggage and stowed it in the trunk while we got into the car. Ranjan checked the time and told Saleem that we would be making a stop in the Sonagachi or (Golden tree) district.

The traffic in Kolkata was wild and chaotic. Cars and auto rickshaws drove bumper on bumper and horns blared incessantly. Anita and I clung to each other in fear as our driver wove in and out, narrowly missing other vehicles.



Kalpani sat up front with Ranjan. She made some moaning sounds as the drug began to wear off. She was feeling sick from all the weaving back and forth in the traffic.



Anita and I had never seen so many people in one place. With a sinking heart I realized that finding Daddy would be a very difficult task in such a crowded city.



You know, Rupesh,  
I'm expecting repayment for that loan  
and all the other expenses of this trip.  
Have you thought about how you're going  
to repay me?

Oh...well...  
I thought I would just sell your liquor for you like  
I did in the slum. I could run errands maybe...

Ah Rupesh...so naive.  
Your debts are piling up faster than  
you think. And it costs a lot to live in Kolkata.  
I can use you on the streets to sell booze  
and drugs - that's a given- but it still won't be  
enough to live on comfortably, especially  
with those two girls of yours.

Well sure, but not  
right away. They have to be  
trained, and that will cost you too.  
I still think you'd do better to sell  
them to me and use the money  
to set up your own business.

Well, you might change  
your mind after you've lived in  
the city awhile.

But you said they  
would earn enough from  
begging to support themselves.  
You said they'd bring in a tidy  
little profit for me  
as well.

I can't do it,  
Ranjan. I told you that  
before we left.

I'm beginning  
to wonder if  
coming here wasn't  
a big mistake.



Our train finally pulled into the Howrah Train Station at nine that evening.





Kalpani was shocked by the hard calculating look in Ranjan's eyes.

Uncle...I want to go home.I miss my Mama too much.

I think she was beginning to see that Ranjan was someone to be feared. She began to cry more loudly until Ranjan went to his suitcase and took out some pills from a little bottle.

He mixed the pills into a drink and took it to Kalpani. He said it was medicine to make her feel better.

When she hesitated, he told her that if she was a good girl and did as she was told, he would take her back to her mother the very next day.

What is that stuff you're giving her, Ranjan? It's not what I think it is, is it?

Just something to take her to the place of sweet dreams. Now she'll be quiet for the rest of the trip.

This tastes really bitter.

Ha! She's out like a light! My supplier told me they'd work like a charm. Nothing like a little opium to quieten them down if they get noisy.

I'll have to let you try them some time, Rupesh.

Anita and I didn't like what we heard. And I knew he was lying about taking her back to her home. I didn't know what he was up to, but I had a real bad feeling. I was afraid for Kalpani, and I was afraid for us too. Ranjan was like a nasty spider busily spinning his evil web of lies.

So many people lived right on the street. Anita and I were shocked to see them sleeping on the side of the roads and in the alleys. Every available space was taken. Dogs and rats roamed about, sniffing here and there for food. Babies cried and children huddled close to their parents. The cars and motorbikes kept zooming past, spewing fumes into the air, which was already clogged with the smoke of coalfires. Some men smoked cigarettes in the doorways of closed shops, their faces momentarily revealed as they lit a match. The horns honked loudly but the clamor didn't awaken the sleeping figures who slept as though dead to the world. As I watched gaunt shadows furtively creeping along the sidewalk I felt I had entered a netherworld of desolation and utter despair - a place of the dead where no hope remained.



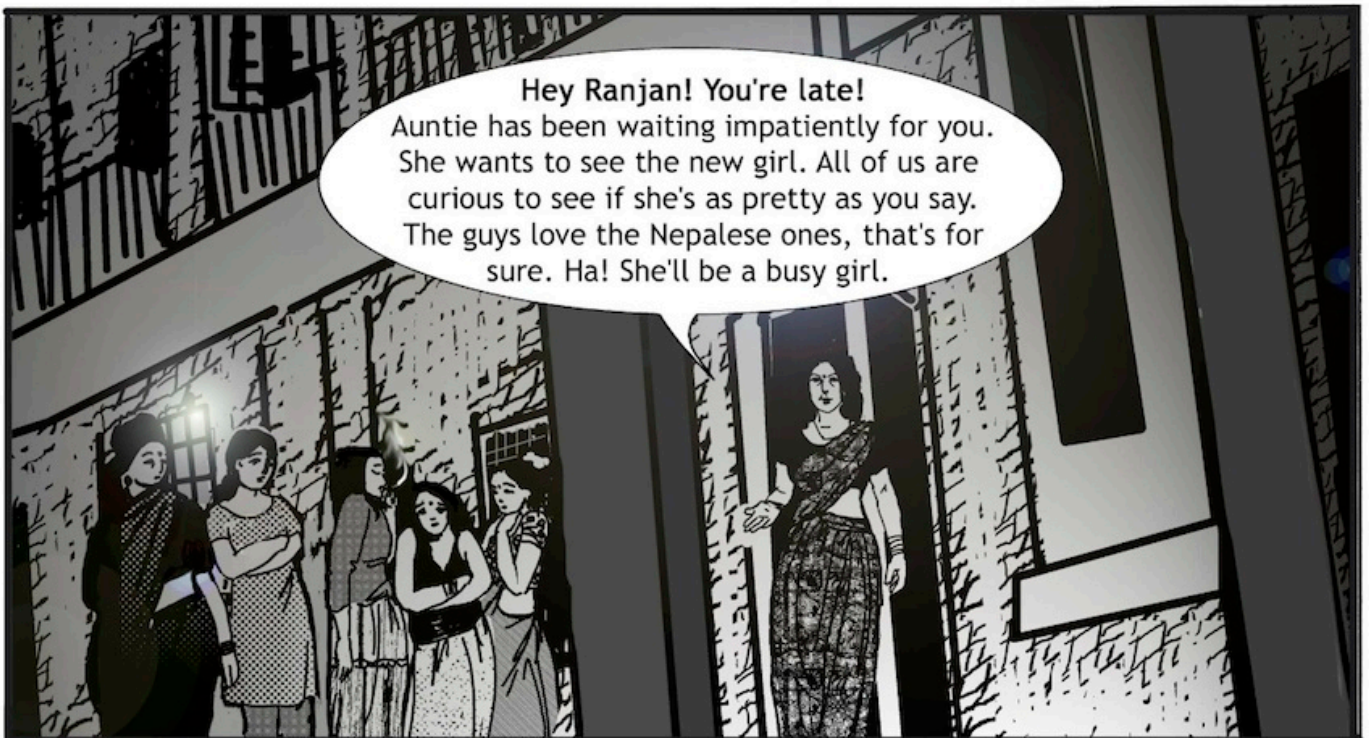
After a long while we began to approach a very busy part of the city. Ranjan told Uncle that this was the Golden Tree area where Kalpani would be making her new home.





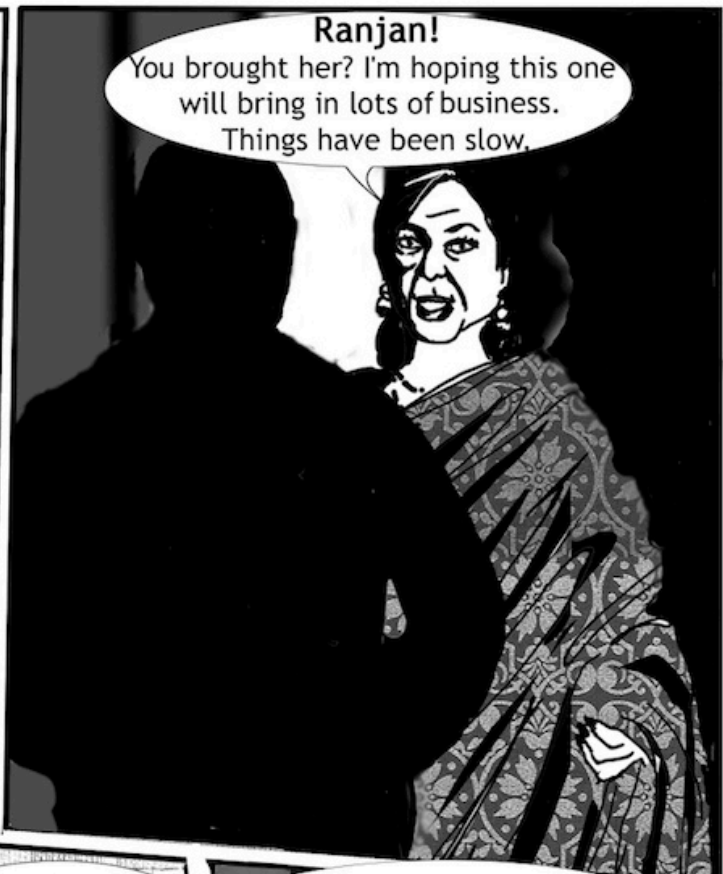


A woman came to our car with her hand outstretched, asking for money. She was wearing a ragged saree that was torn and very dirty. Her hair was straggly and matted. I felt so sorry for her. She was one of the walking ghosts of Kolkata. There were other ladies on the street who looked a lot better. They wore heavy makeup and colorful clothes, but they looked sad, their eyes stony and empty as they stared off into the darkness. It was only when a man came along that they smiled and giggled. If he walked past, their faces were once again glum. They stood in a line so I could see them one by one. Some were very young, not much older than Anita or Kalpani. They just leaned against the buildings like they were waiting for someone. Once in awhile a man would stop and talk to one of them. Then they would go into the building and disappear behind closed doors. I wondered what happened inside. Was a party going on? Would there be games and nice things to eat? If so, maybe Kalpani would like it here.





No doubt.  
She's a real beauty alright.  
I almost kept her for myself.  
Tell Sharvani I'm here.  
I have another stop to make  
so I want to wrap things  
up quick.



**Ranjan!**  
You brought her? I'm hoping this one  
will bring in lots of business.  
Things have been slow.



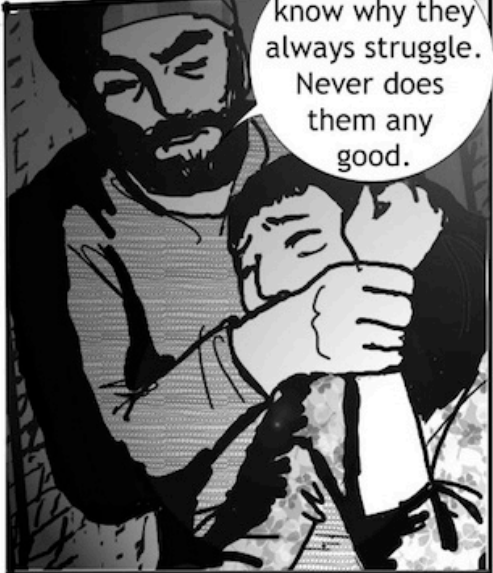
Bring her in  
Saleem. You know  
where the new  
ones go.



Okay little rabbit.  
You heard the boss. Let's go.



**No! I don't want to  
be here! I want to go  
home to my Mama!  
Uncle promised me!**



Don't  
know why they  
always struggle.  
Never does  
them any  
good.





EEEEEE!



Little fool!  
She'll have the cops  
down on us!



There'll be none of that  
Dearie. Shut your trap  
and do as you're told!



OH! That lady  
hit Kalpani! She's a  
bad person. We have  
to do something!



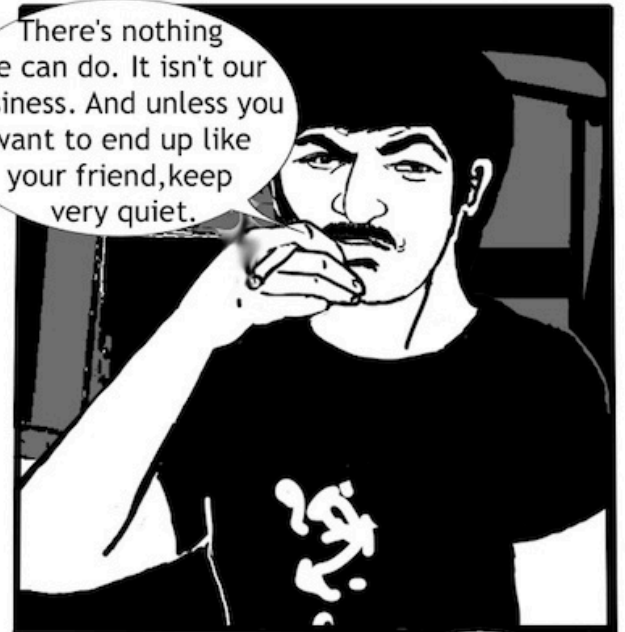
Looks like  
Sharpani is  
breaking in a  
new one.

Yeah.  
She'll soon  
be ready  
for you  
boys.

I can  
hardly  
wait.



Anita!  
Help me!!



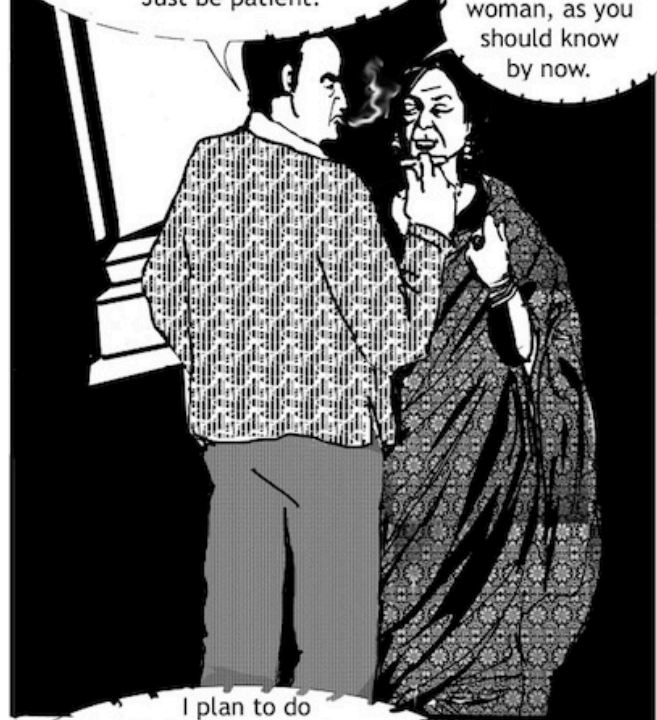




Shhh.  
Not one word,  
Pushpa.

Keep your voice down.  
The Uncle is hindering, but I'm  
working on it. It's just a matter of  
time before I get them for you.  
Just be patient.

But I'm  
not a patient  
woman, as you  
should know  
by now.



I plan to do  
just that. The uncle owes me  
money and he has a weakness for  
ganja. I'll capitalize on that.



The older  
one has the face  
of a flower.  
...and the  
the little one  
is an angel!

I MUST have  
them both!



I can't afford to be  
in this business. I have to  
satisfy my customers and  
they like them young. I want  
you to get me those two  
by whatever means  
necessary.



As we drove away, I could feel the brothel  
keeper's eyes following us. I knew she'd mistreat  
Kalpani and the thought made me sick at heart.

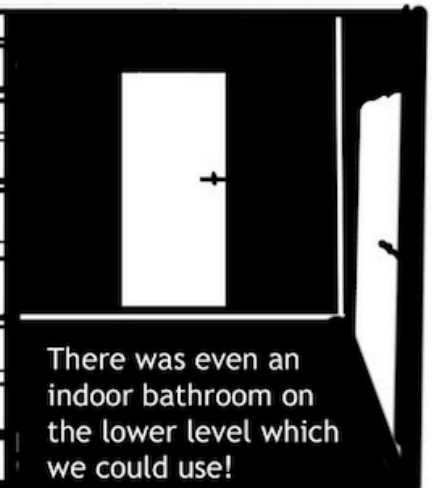
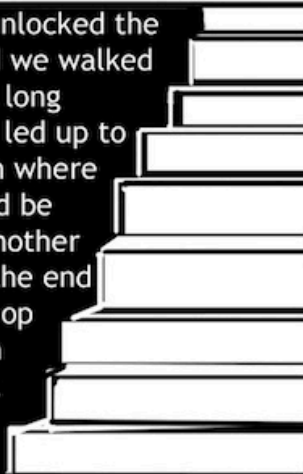
We didn't drive far before we came to the place where we were going to make our new home. Our apartment was in a building owned by Ranjan. He rented out most of it to shopkeepers except for one which he used as storage for what he called 'hot' merchandise. He said we would live in the upstairs of his shop and Uncle Rupesh would work as his 'distributor'.



All the shops were now closed for the night, their garage doors pulled down and tightly locked. Ranjan said they usually stayed open until ten or eleven. Because our place didn't have a kitchen, Ranjan had made arrangements with the tiffin shop owner next door to let us eat there. We would charge our meals and Ranjan would get billed. He would then take what we owed out of Uncle's wages.



Ranjan unlocked the door and we walked inside. A long stairway led up to the room where we would be living. Another door at the end of the shop led to an alley out back.



There was even an indoor bathroom on the lower level which we could use!





Our room was not any larger than our hut in the slum but it was way nicer. For one thing, it had a cement floor instead of mud and the roof looked like it had never leaked. We had an almirah (wardrobe) and a table with chairs. Those things were luxuries Anita and I had never known, but the greatest prize was the black and white television set! Ranjan said it only got 3 channels but we were astounded that we would be able to watch TV like the rich people did. We could finally see the Bollywood movies that so many posters advertised.

Uncle Rupesh slept on the bunk bed and Anita and I had a mat on the floor. We were used to sleeping on mats and the hard floor didn't bother us. We were very glad for the privacy afforded by a screen that divided the room. It was truly a wonderful place in which to live!



I couldn't get to sleep that night. It wasn't so much because we were in a new place, or because of the noisy traffic outside. I kept thinking about Kalipani and her having to stay with that mean woman. My Jesus God had got us out of the slum and into a nice place, so maybe if I did a puja for our friend, He would rescue her somehow.



I finally gave up trying to sleep and very quietly opened the door to the balcony. From up there I could look down on the busy street and watch the cars and people pass by. I wasn't sure what I thought of this Kolkata city. It was exciting and full of action but it also seemed cruel and frightening. I found so many things confusing - like why did so many people sleep on the street instead of in a house? Why did the women of Golden Tree have such sad, tired faces and what were they waiting in line for? Why was the Sharvani lady so mean to Kalpani? It didn't make sense. I longed for my quiet village where every day was exactly like the one before. I missed Mummy and Daddy. The whole time we were driving around Kolkata I had been searching for Daddy's face in the crowd. Was he even alive? Maybe he had an accident in the city and that was why he had never come back for us. It wasn't like Daddy to run out on us. I would never believe it of him. What had his life been like here? What had happened to him? And now the big question looming in my heart was 'What would happen to Anita and me here'? I felt Mummy's cross on my chest and felt strangely comforted. At least I had a god of my own who had heard my prayers. Maybe everything would be okay after all.





## Sonagachi (Golden Tree)

Sonagachi has been well publicized through the film "Born Into Brothels". It is the notorious red light district of Kolkata. Filthy stairs and narrow corridors wind their way to small cell-like rooms where the prostitutes work. Some of the sex workers are young children.

Many are from West Bengal, Nepal, and Bangladesh. They have found themselves here because of poverty, trafficking, or betrayal by family members or 'friends'. Although a few are there willingly, most are slaves to a madam who rules them with an iron hand. Beatings and torture are common for those who won't comply. These women and girls are often forced to service 10 or more men a night, enduring rapes and unspeakable depravity at the hands of their customers. Some of the men are tourists but far more are local. The police are often part of the problem, demanding bribes and using the girls themselves, clearly contravening their legal responsibility to stop this crime.

Young Nepalese girls are in special demand because their fair skin and exotic features are favored by the men. The highest prices are paid for very young girls (some no more than 7 years of age). Nepal is a very poor land and often procurers are able to convince parents to relinquish their young daughters in exchange for promises of finding jobs for them. The parents receive a cash payment (from \$20 to \$1500) and never see or hear from their child again.

When a sex worker contracts AIDS( which is common because many of the male customers refuse to wear condoms), she is sent back to her village or thrown out into the street to beg for a living. Those who return to their families and communities are shunned and rejected. No allowance is made for the fact that these women have been forcibly enslaved and often sold by their own parents. Ravaged by disease and suffering from repeated cruelties, many of these women and girls commit suicide or die from other causes. The life of a sex worker is often a very short one.

The Indian Constitution has clauses against brothels and trafficking, but these laws are difficult to enforce due to corruption.

In India, the federal police say that around 1.2 million children are believed to be involved in prostitution. It has been estimated that 40% of all India's prostitutes are children.

# 6. Pain





The next morning we awoke to the racket of Kolkata's chaotic street life.



An auto rickshaw pulled up in the alley in the back of Ranjan's shop. We could hear men talking and there were sounds of a garage door being unlocked and opened. They were making a delivery of some kind.





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Uncle went to the Tiffin shop to get some dosas for our breakfast. They're crepes made from rice and black lentils and you dip them in coconut curry. We had them with a lassi (yogurt drink).

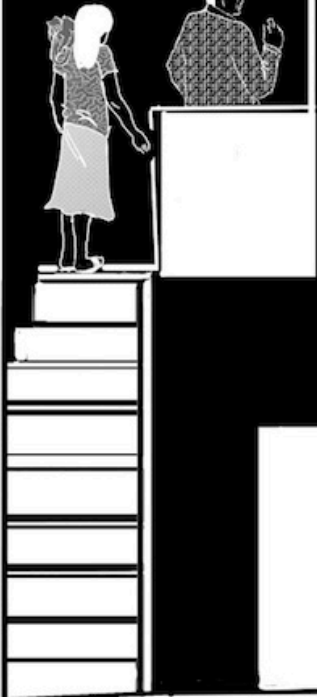


We didn't eat at the table or sit on the chairs because we were used to having our meals on the floor. It felt more comfortable to us.

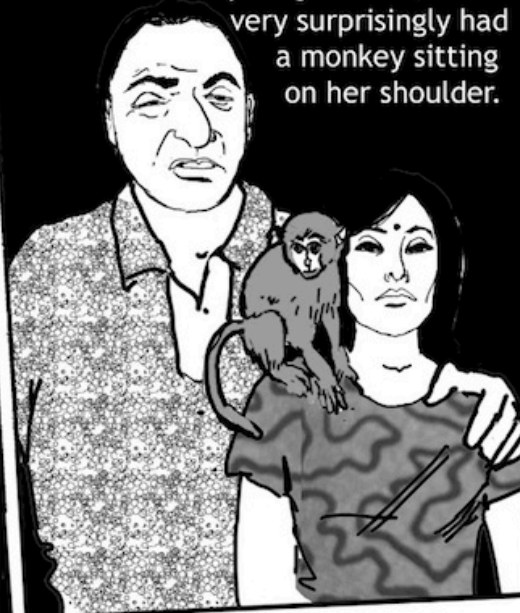
Mmmmm.  
I LOVE dosas!!!



KNOCK  
KNOCK



We opened the door to find Ranjan on our doorstep. He was with a young woman, who very surprisingly had a monkey sitting on her shoulder.



Weird...

Awesome!



The young woman was introduced as Kaliyah. She looked to be about 18 years old but her hard eyes made her seem much older. Her pet monkey was named 'Lucky'. He was full of energy, jumping from one shoulder to the next and chattering nonstop.





Uncle Rupesh was worried about piling up his debts so he talked to Ranjan about it.

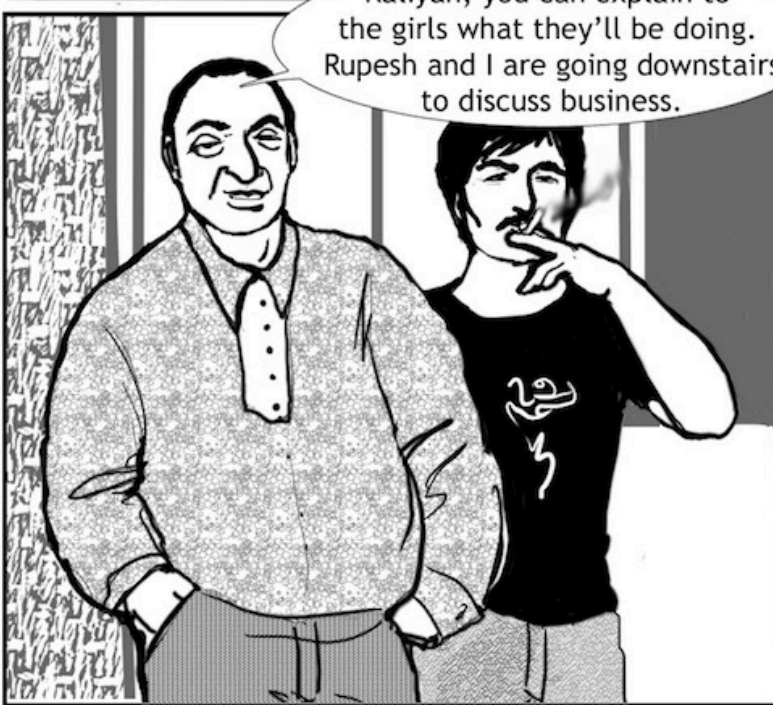
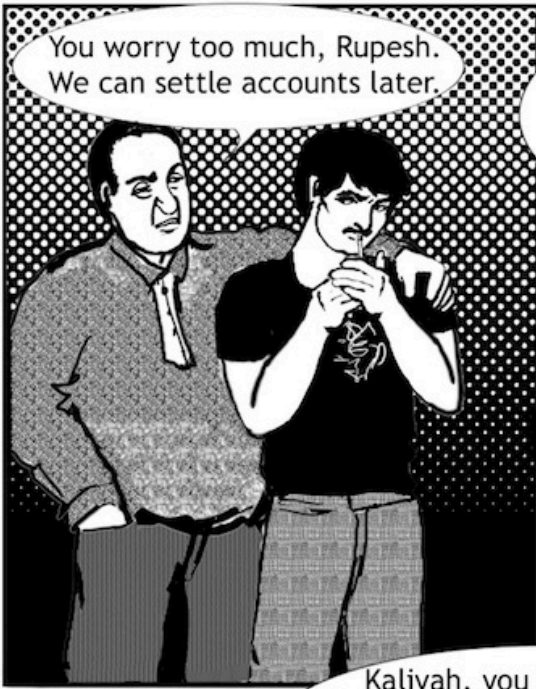
The Tiffin food is way more expensive than back home. I was thinking we could cook our own food out on the balcony.



Yeah, but this is all gonna cost me. What am I going to owe you for their training? And what are you charging for rent? How am I gonna pay for all this?









Isn't there a job that we could do instead of begging?



Sure, but if you're good at begging, you can make four times what a coolie earns.



But isn't pretending to be starving, when you're not, the same as telling a lie?



ooh... You are such a baby, aren't you.

But really, honey. Who cares if it IS lying...

..especially if it gets you what you want.



But lies are bad. And I'm NOT a baby!



On the street, Pushpa, you don't think about what's good or bad. You just think about survival.

I didn't argue with Kaliyah but in my heart I knew I couldn't live like that. I didn't want to be like Ranjan or Sharvani, or Mr. Das. They lived for themselves and hurt other people.

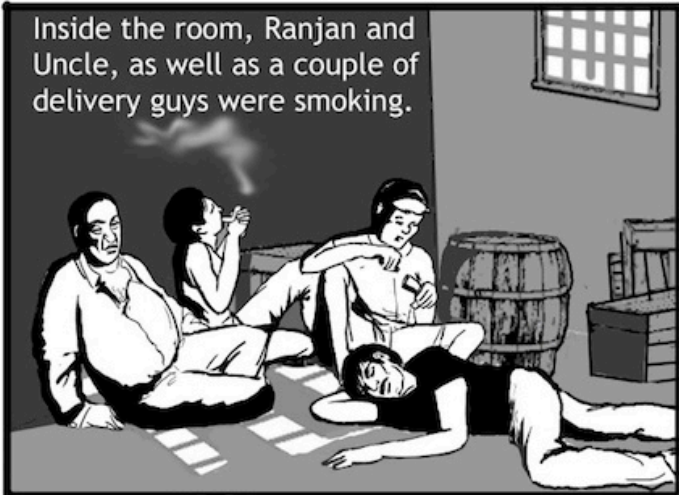




Kaliyah said she had to talk to Ranjan about getting an auto-rickshaw. One of the delivery guys was still at the house and his vehicle was in the alley.



We heard voices coming from the storage room downstairs and there was a strong, acrid smell in the air. It was the same smell that Uncle often had on him after he went to his parties in the slum.



Inside the room, Ranjan and Uncle, as well as a couple of delivery guys were smoking.



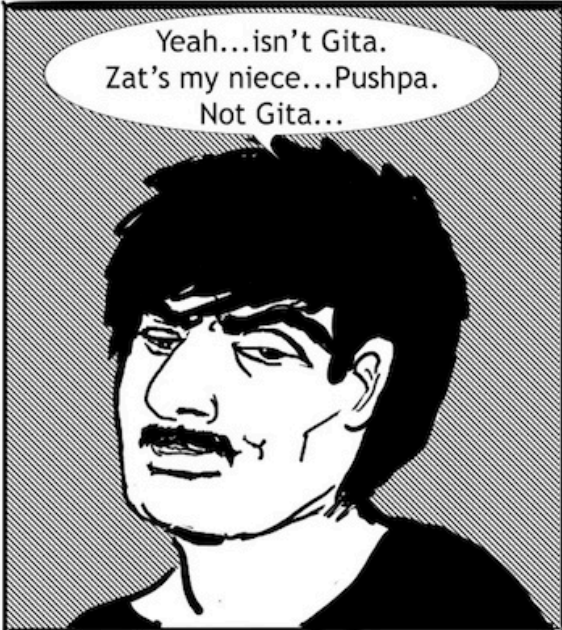
Uncle was groggy and his eyes were clouded.



Gita?  
Zat you?



It's your niece, you idiot!



Yeah... isn't Gita. Zat's my niece... Pushpa. Not Gita...



Can I get one of your boys to take us around the city?



Yeah, Satish will go with you. Just take good care of my girls.

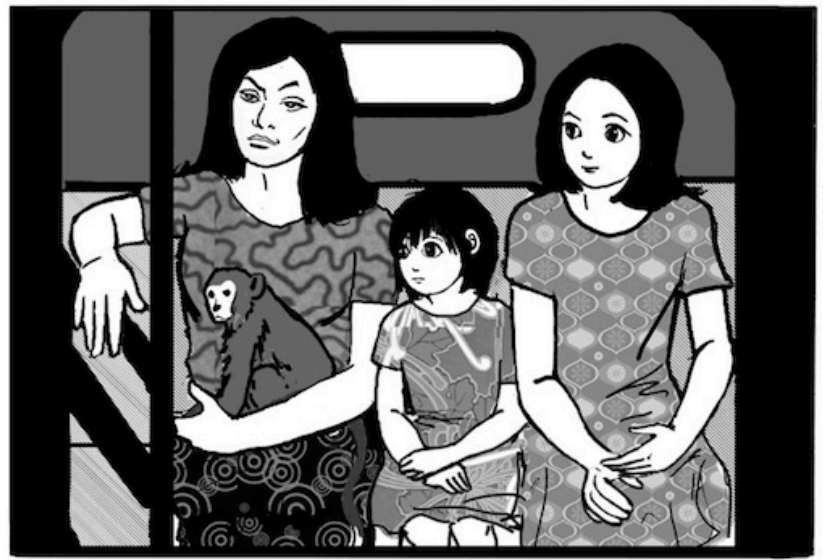


We're NOT his girls!

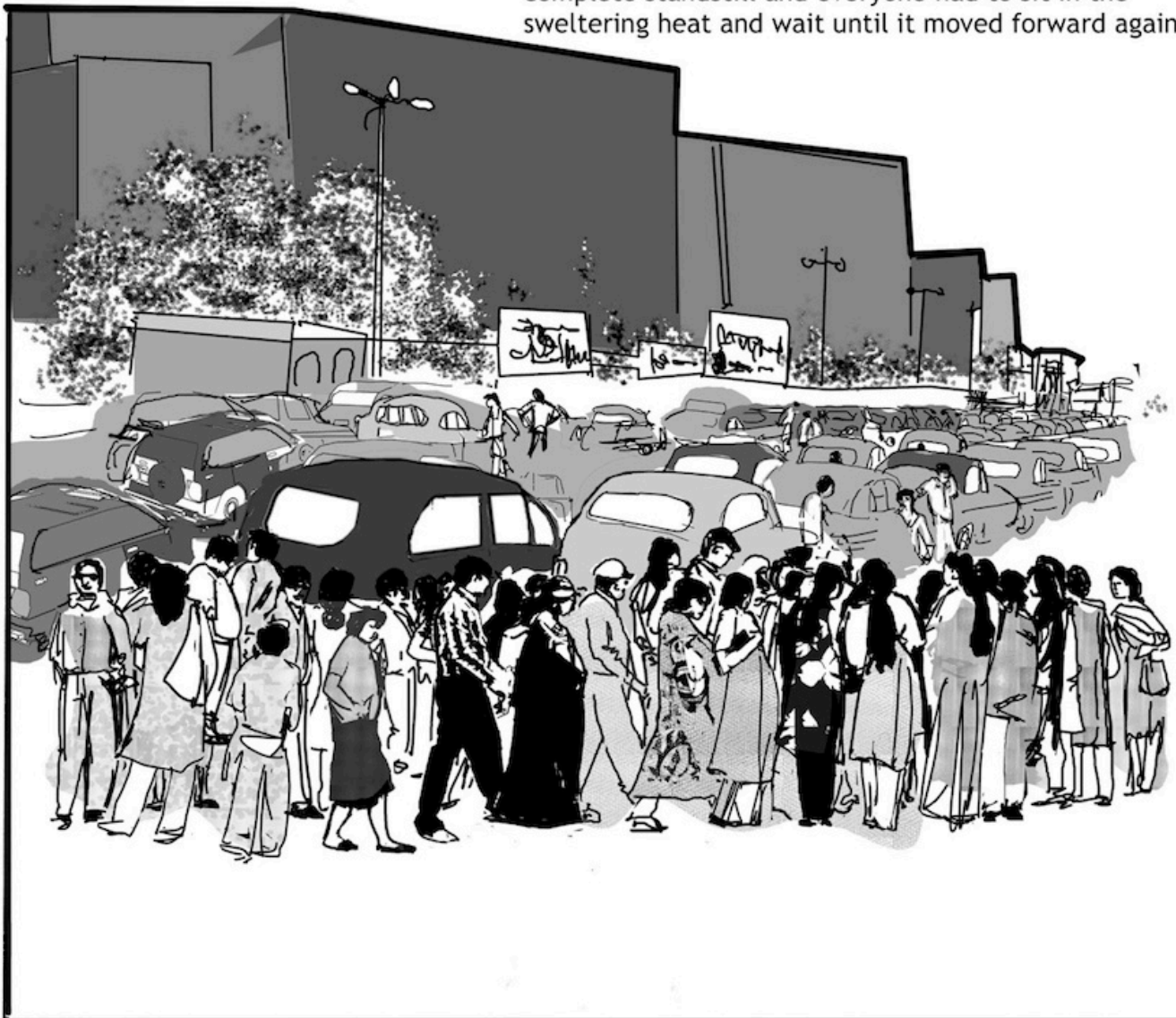


I wouldn't be too sure about that if I were you.

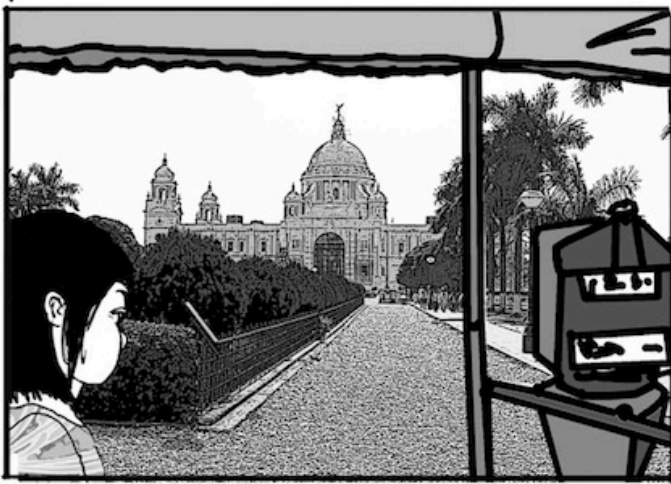




I felt uncomfortable with Kaliyah's last remark but there wasn't time to ask her what she meant. She was already telling Satish, the auto-rickshaw driver, that Ranjan wanted him to drive us around Kolkata. Our driver was a young man, about 16 or 17 years old, with a ready smile and a casual, laid-back manner. He was more than happy to take us on a sight-seeing tour. We all hopped into the rickshaw and headed out. The traffic was unbelievably chaotic, much more so than the night before. At times the traffic came to a complete standstill and everyone had to sit in the sweltering heat and wait until it moved forward again







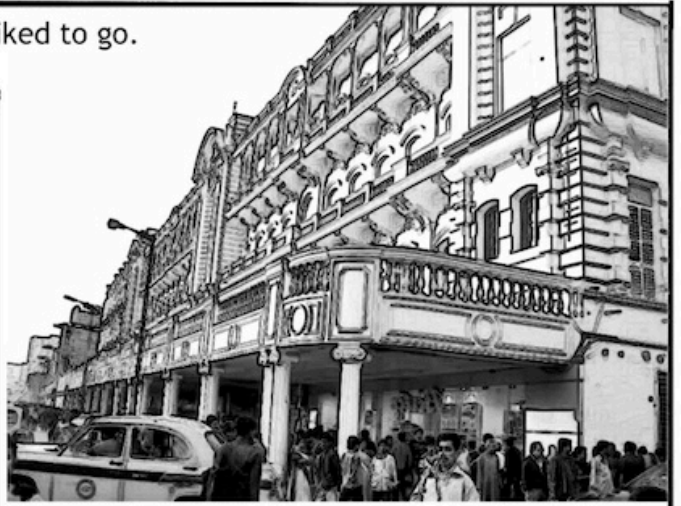
Kaliyah took us to the places where one could always find western tourists, such as the Victoria Memorial and the Howrah Train Station. These were some of the hot spots where beggars were likely to make the most money. Tourists, she said, were rich and could be made to feel guilty for having so much. It was not uncommon for them to spend as much on a meal in a fancy restaurant as a coolie earned in one month! The price of one of their cameras could feed a family for 2 years!



We climbed up the stairs of an old apartment building and looked down over the city. Kaliyah pointed out the tourists walking along Park Street. She also pointed out the Colonial graveyard where many British soldiers and their families were buried. She said that the graveyard had many interesting tombstones and tourists like to walk through it and read the inscriptions.



We also saw some other places where tourists liked to go.

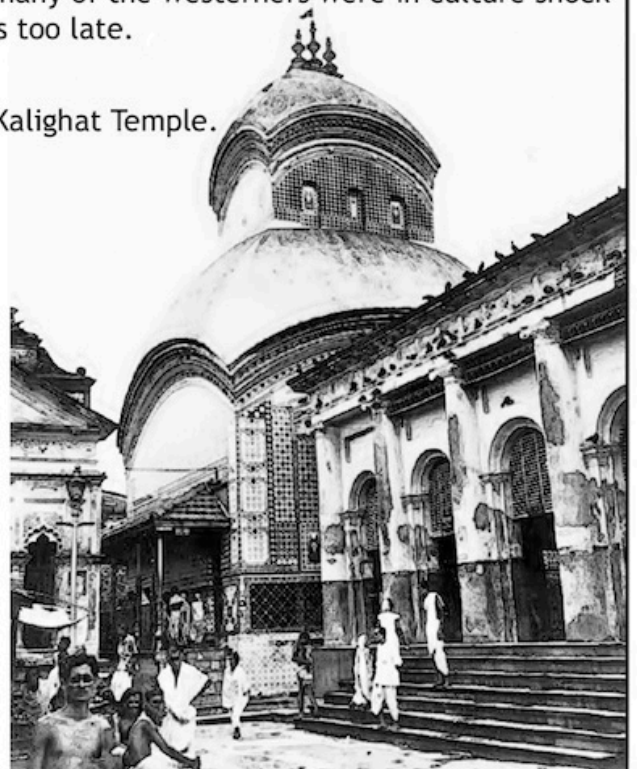
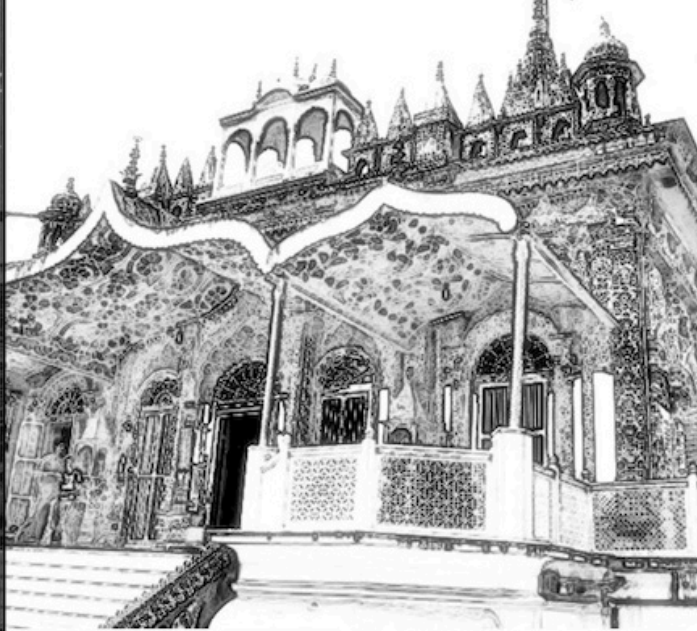


Many of the wealthier ones stayed at a hotel that looked like a raja's palace. Even the guards at the doors were dressed like rajas.



New Market was a favorite tourist site. Kaliyah said that it was often packed with shoppers which made it the perfect place to sneak up on tourists and pick their pockets. Some were very careless with their purses, slinging them over their shoulders so that thieves could easily snip the strap and disappear into the crowd without getting caught. So many of the westerners were in culture shock that they never knew what was happening until it was too late.

Tourists also liked to visit the Jain Temple and the Kalighat Temple.

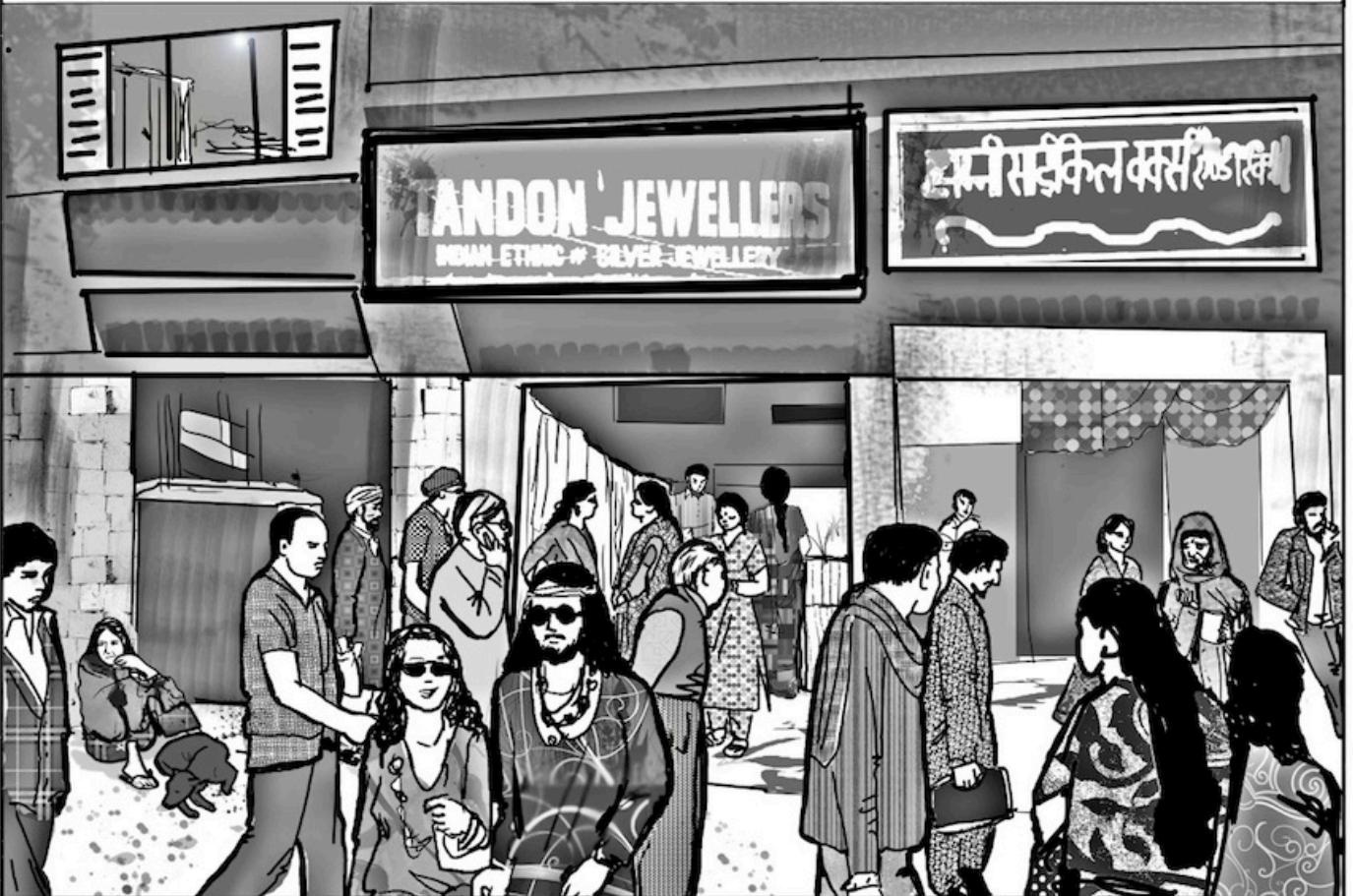




The most amazing sight was the South City Mall! It was the biggest store in the world! It had several floors of fancy shops filled with wonderful things that I had never seen before. It was very expensive!



Kaliyah believed that it was alright to steal from westerners because they would never miss a few dollars here and there. They were so rich that it was only right that they should share what they had with those who had less. As I looked at all the exorbitantly priced luxuries in the mall, I could see her point. Westerners, and rich Indians too, were spending thousands of rupees on frivolous items like cell phone jewelry, gold pens, cosmetics, and exotic perfumes.



Out on the street the shops weren't as elegant and the items for sale weren't as costly, but there were still lots of western tourists. Some carried backpacks and wore tight jeans with kurtas or loose flowing blouses. Their long hair was knotted in strands and their clothing was wrinkled and sloppy. Kaliyah said they were 'hippies'. Indians generally don't respect westerners of this type because they look poor. Every westerner, even the most wealthy, is considered to have no caste and is therefore at the bottom of society, but if he has money, it gives him at least a little favor.



Many of the people on the street were impoverished and destitute. Some had come to Kolkata from rural areas seeking work as our father had done, but good jobs were hard to find. Begging was one of the few options available to them if they hoped to survive. Eventually it had become a way of life - even a preferred way of life - for those who had become proficient at it.



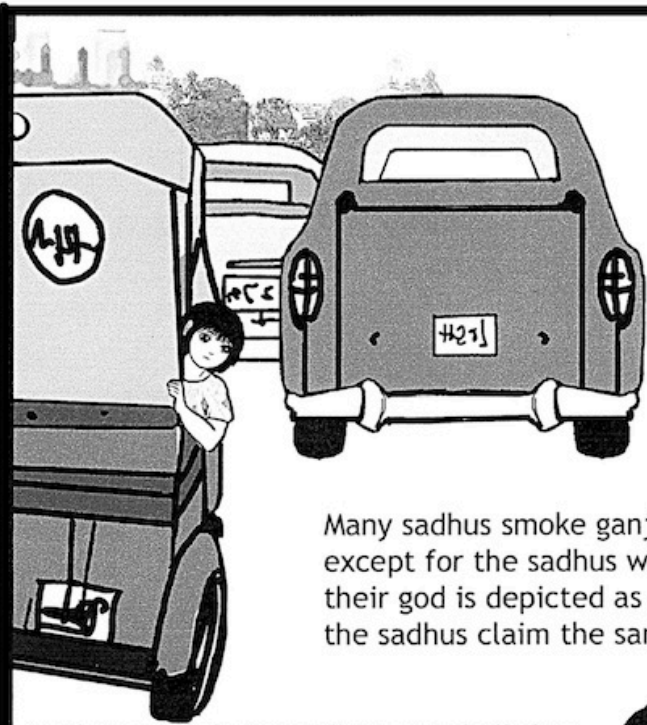
For others it was the only life they knew. There were families of beggars who had been living on the streets for several generations. Every newborn child was recruited into the 'profession' from day one, their mothers holding them in one arm while the other was outstretched entreatingly to passers-by. Begging had become so widespread that opportunistic crime lords had taken to extorting 'protection' money from the beggars, even charging 'rent' for sleeping on the sidewalks.



There were no public toilets so a gutter or wall served the purpose. Refuse lay everywhere. In these squalid conditions, disease was rampant and the mortality rate exceedingly high. Yet the number of beggars kept on increasing day by day.





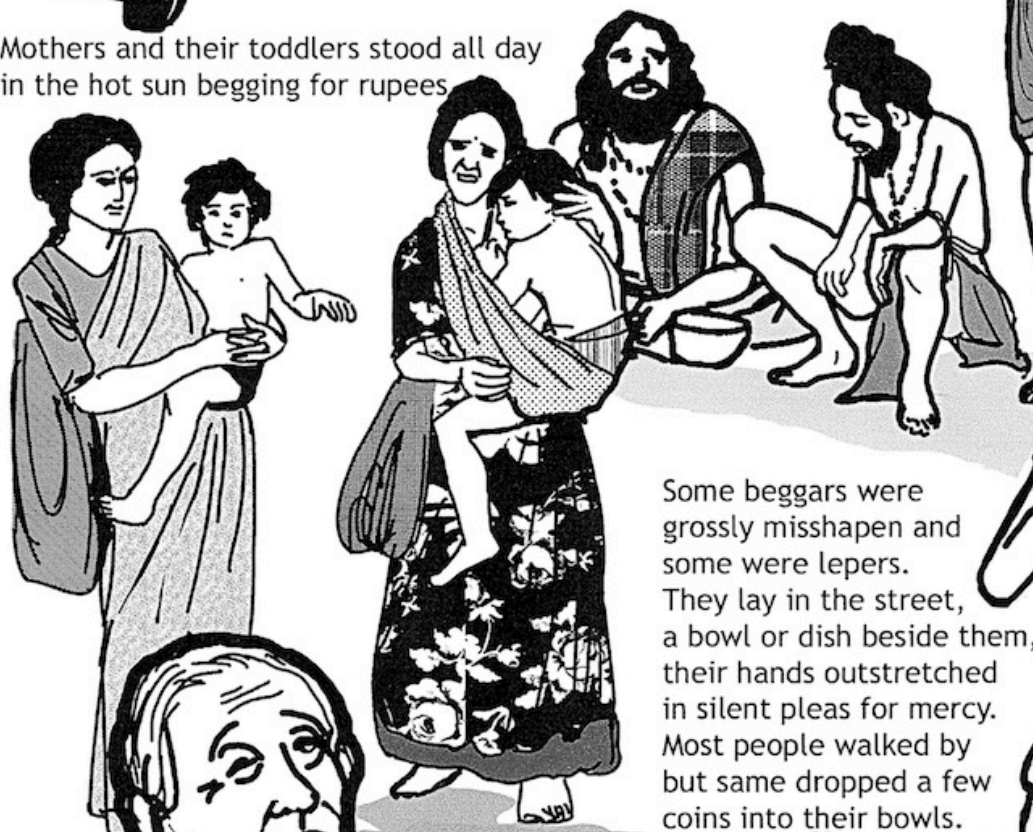


There were many sadhus with their begging bowls and saffron robes. Sadhus are supposed to meditate so as to become more united with Brahman, the great cosmic force of the universe. Hindu Sadhus renounce all worldly possessions and never stay in houses. But Kaliyah said there were many who were just fakes, maybe like the one I saw smoking an American cigarette and talking on a cell phone.

Many sadhus smoke ganja, which is illegal in India except for the sadhus who worship Shiva. Since their god is depicted as smoking it himself, the sadhus claim the same right.



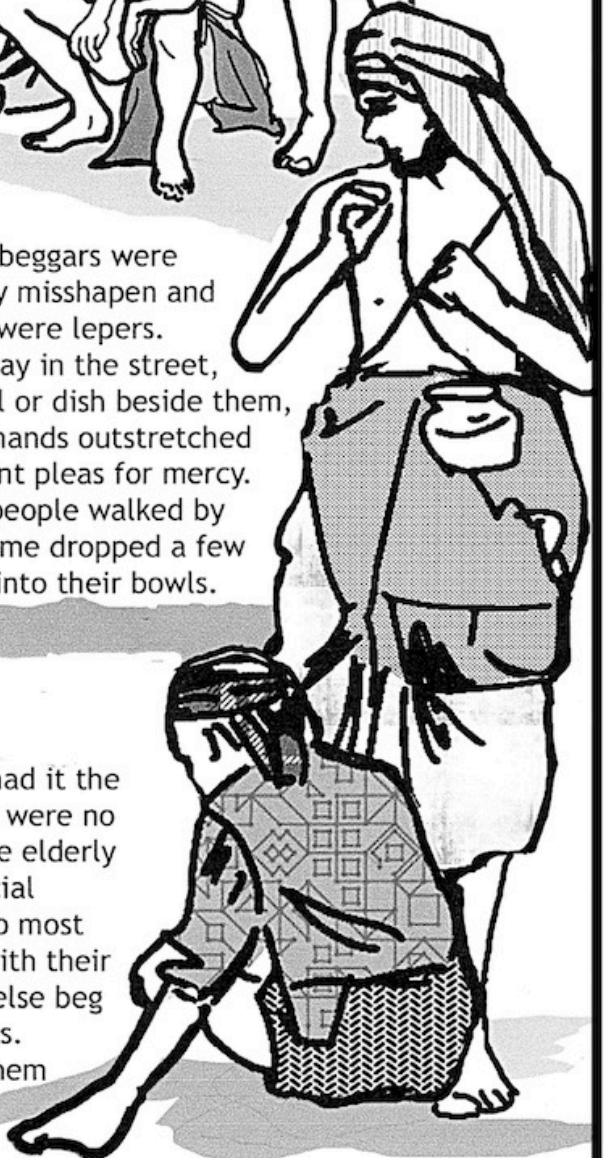
Mothers and their toddlers stood all day in the hot sun begging for rupees



Some beggars were grossly misshapen and some were lepers. They lay in the street, a bowl or dish beside them, their hands outstretched in silent pleas for mercy. Most people walked by but some dropped a few coins into their bowls.



Old widows had it the worst. There were no homes for the elderly and little social assistance, so most had to live with their children, or else beg on the streets. Hindus see them as cursed.



After all that sight-seeing, Kaliyah called for a break.

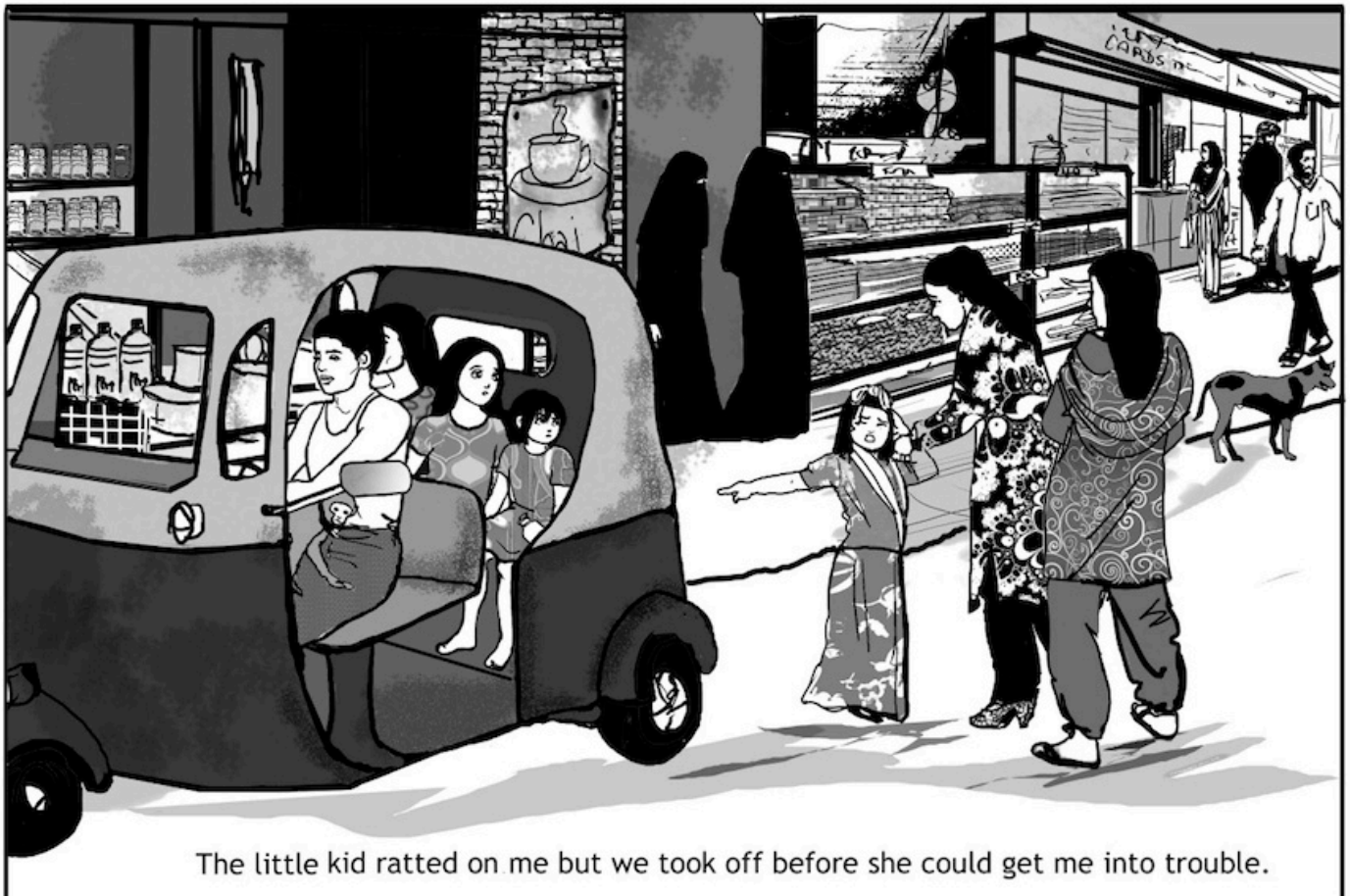


And you think I do? Don't forget, I know what it's like in Sonagachi. I know what that old she-devil, Sharvani, is capable of. Ranjan may be bad, but that old %&\*#@ witch is way worse. At least he got me out of there, and because I want to STAY out, I do whatever Ranjan wants, no questions asked. I don't dare cross him. So yeah, it's too bad if they end up in that hell house, but better them than me.

Anyway, let's get out of here. It's time to head back.



A really snotty, rich kid was standing near the rickshaw making faces at us. She acted all proud and superior, looking down her nose at the ragged dresses Anita and I wore. She was obviously high caste while we didn't have any caste at all. People with no caste couldn't even drink water from the same well as the higher castes. That's because casteless types were unclean and would pollute the highborn ones. Even our shadows weren't supposed to fall on a Brahmin. There were strict penalties for disregarding the caste laws and it brought very bad karma too.



I was amazed at how many people could ride on a motorcycle. I saw a dad with one child in front of him and a mother on the back holding a tiny baby, and no one wore a helmet. Even old grandmothers rode on the back of them.



Suddenly a man with a missing arm came up to us.



Hey! Ravi! Haven't seen you in awhile.

How're you doing?

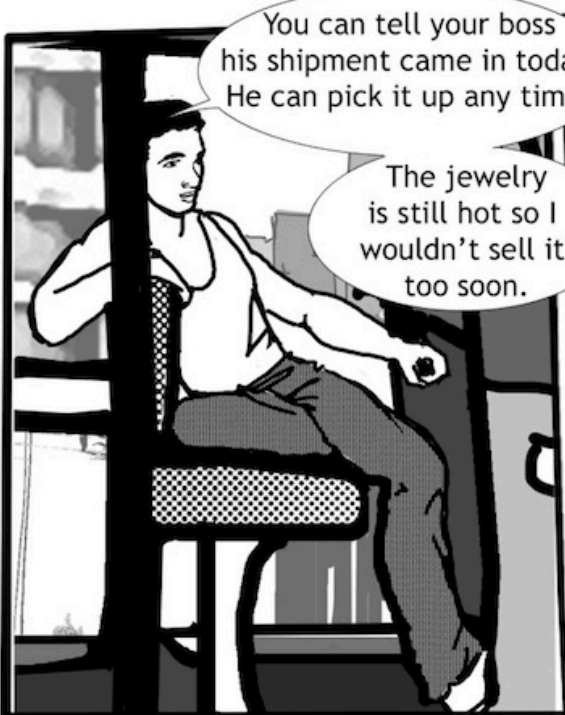


Not too bad, Kali. But it's been slow. Not many tourists lately.



You can tell your boss his shipment came in today. He can pick it up any time.

The jewelry is still hot so I wouldn't sell it too soon.



What happened to that man's arm?







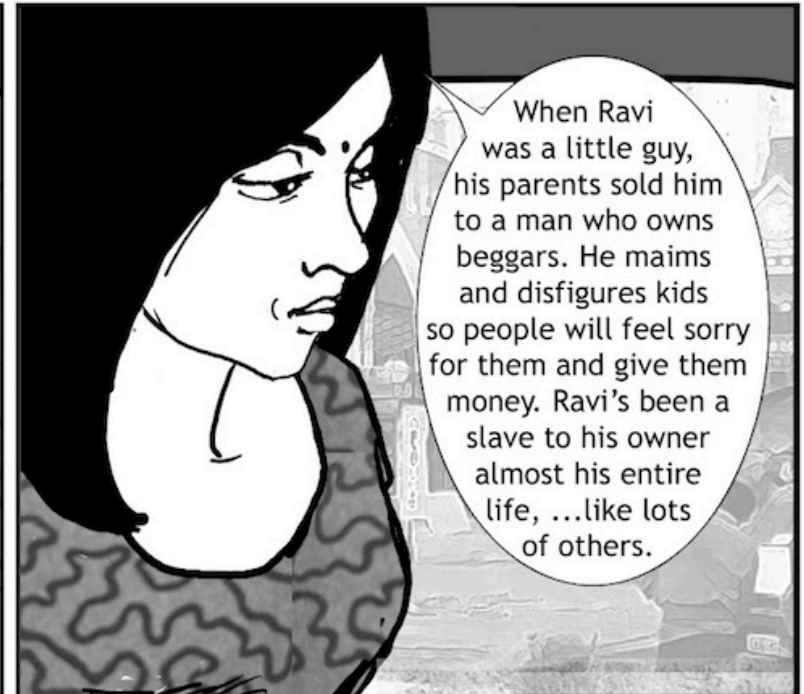
His owner thought that having 2 arms handicapped Ravi's begging prospects.



That is a sick play on words, Kaliyah.



What does 'prospeks' mean?



When Ravi was a little guy, his parents sold him to a man who owns beggars. He maims and disfigures kids so people will feel sorry for them and give them money. Ravi's been a slave to his owner almost his entire life, ...like lots of others.



At least he can't remember his life being anything else. It's really hell if you can.



A sneaking suspicion began to grow in my mind. What was Ranjan planning to do with us?



Is Ranjan going to cut off our arms?!!!



Nah! Don't worry, kid. Ranjan may be a lot of things, but he hasn't sunk that low. He doesn't do stuff like that.

He comes close though.



Is Ranjan the boss of you and Satish, Kaliyah?



You got that right!



And you'll soon find out that he's your boss too, Pushpa. And Anita's...and your uncle's.

Nothing you can do about it.

Nothing at all.



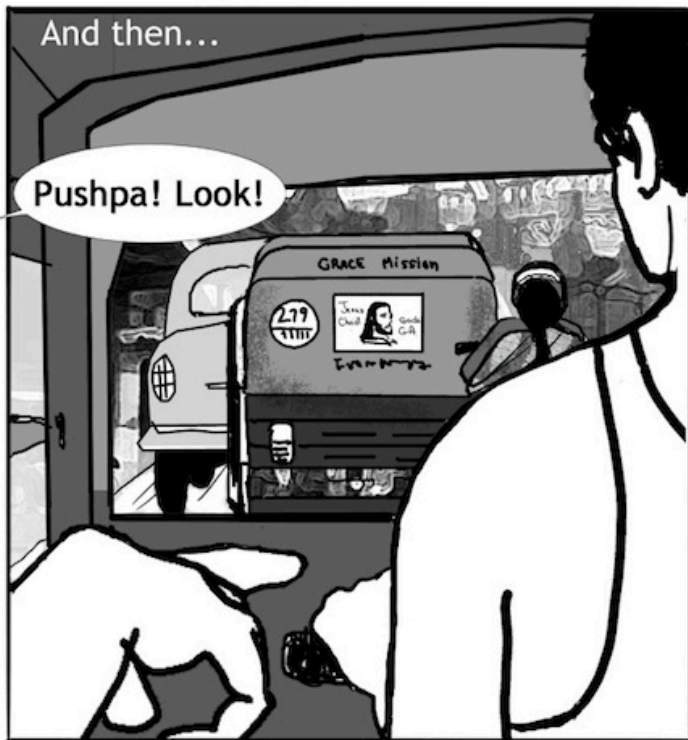


Kaliyah's words were like crushing weights on my soul. I had sensed a palpable evil upon our arrival in Kolkata, and I had seen it's influence in the lives of those around me, but I'd been too distracted by all the new sights and sounds to give it much attention. Now I was being reminded that I was destined to be it's next victim. The significance of that threat closed in on my mind, forming a bubble of terror that was slowly rising...ready to burst....



And then...

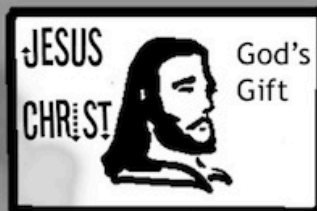
Pushpa! Look!



It was a picture of my Jesus god on the back of a rickshaw. Instantly my spirit calmed.

## Grace Mission

279  
9111



279 9111

The rickshaw stopped at a brick building that had a cross over the entrance.



A pretty westerner was seated inside the rickshaw.



She looked our way and gave us a friendly smile before going into the building.





I had a strong desire to follow the lady into the building. The cross over the door indicated that this was a place where people knew about my Jesus god, and since I knew hardly anything at all about him, I was eager to find out what was inside. I had liked the western lady's face and smile. She seemed like someone who would be kind and gentle. She was like a ray of light in this dark world I was discovering and I felt encouraged and hopeful that my god was watching over me.





I sure can't see any of them kissing your feet or worshipping you as a god, like Hindu wives are taught to do.

I didn't say I'd marry one... unless it got me a green card to America...

I meant they're just for fun. They like it that way. They're what you call 'insatiable' when it comes to guys.

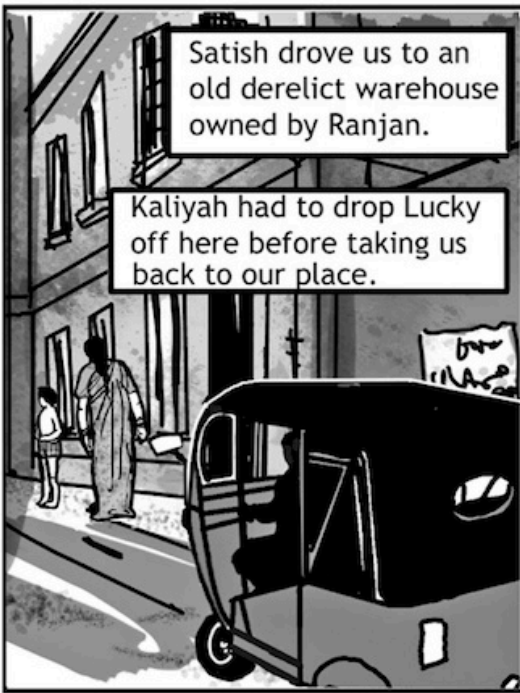
Do you even know what that word means?

Of course I know what it means! I'm not stupid, Kaliyah! I get my information from a very reliable source, you know.

Yeah? Where?

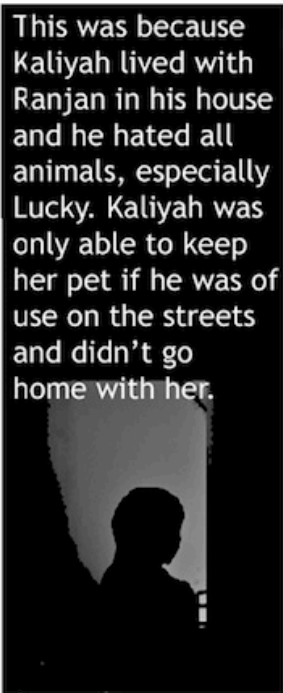
American movies, of course.





Satish drove us to an old derelict warehouse owned by Ranjan.

Kaliyah had to drop Lucky off here before taking us back to our place.

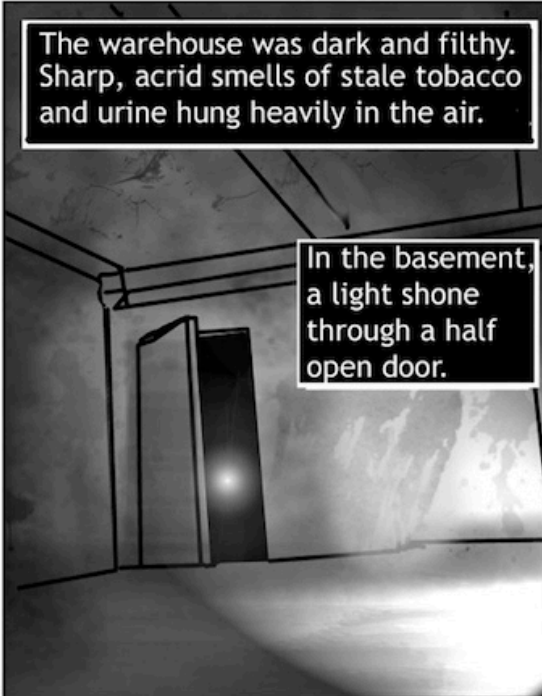


This was because Kaliyah lived with Ranjan in his house and he hated all animals, especially Lucky. Kaliyah was only able to keep her pet if he was of use on the streets and didn't go home with her.



Lucky lives here?!

Yeah. A street kid looks after him for me and uses him to beg on the streets. It's a tradeoff.



The warehouse was dark and filthy. Sharp, acrid smells of stale tobacco and urine hung heavily in the air.

In the basement, a light shone through a half open door.



As we entered the room, seven surprised faces turned our way. They looked at us suspiciously until they recognized Kaliyah.

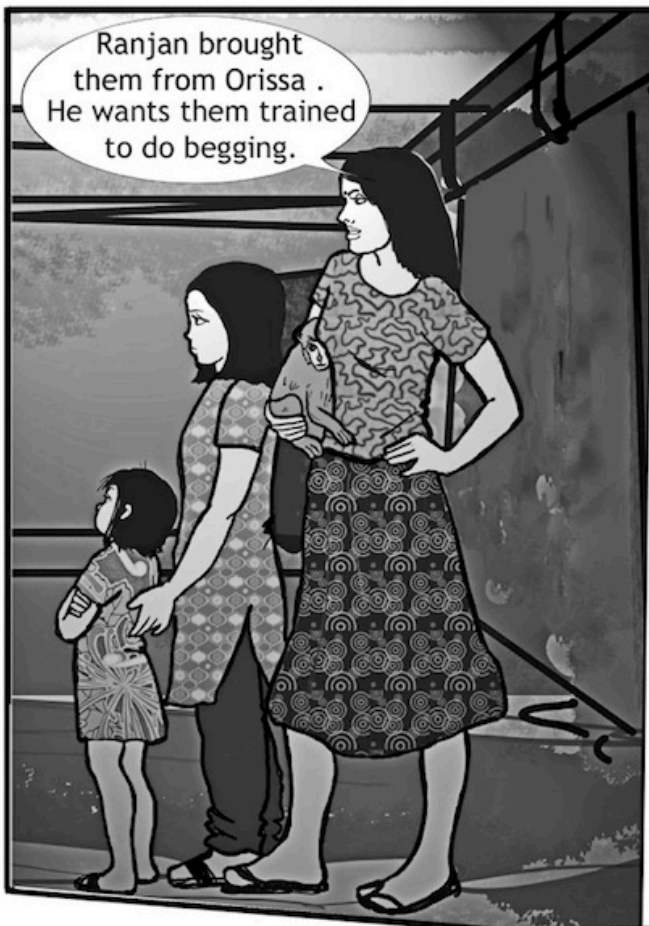
Hey Kali!



They didn't seem very friendly, but they were certainly interested in us, especially the one with the hard, cold eyes.



Who're your two friends, Kaliyah?

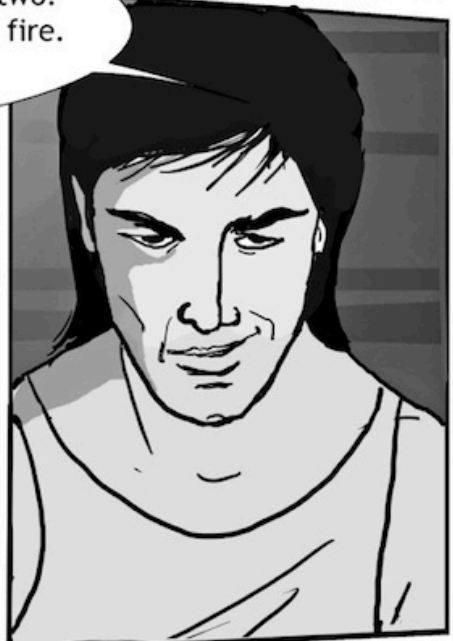


Ranjan brought them from Orissa . He wants them trained to do begging.



Hmmm.... I see lots of potential here.

Too much to waste on begging. I'll bet ole Ranjan has other ideas for these two. Ha! Look at the eyes of the little one. Full of fire. She'd make a nice addition to the gang, wouldn't she now?



They could be part of our pack.

Yeah, like in Jungle Book.

Oh no! Not that again! Wish they'd never seen that movie.







Leave him be, Jayanti. Kid has to learn to fight his own battles.

So what if Santosh is twice his size and fights dirty.

Yeah, you and Sumitra always baby him.

Shut up, Harley.



Well, I'll leave you to your family squabbles. I just came by to see Bindi.

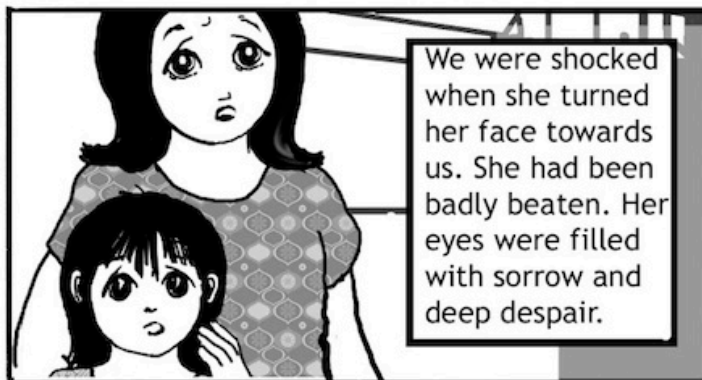
Is she around?

Yeah...she's around...but she's not talking to anyone today. Something bad happened to Bindi last night. She went out late by herself and a bunch of guys jumped her. They roughed her up pretty bad.

Ranjeet found her in the alley. He's the only one she's talked to, but she might tell you more of what happened. She's been up on the roof all day.









Who did this to you, Bindi?

A boy I met...and his friends. He seemed really nice, Kali. Said he wanted to take me to the movies.

I thought it would be okay, so I went with him...only he wasn't alone. There were four others....They held me down while he...and then the others...they all took turns...

It hurt so bad... I thought I would die...

I wish I had.

Bindi was slow to tell Kaliyah what had happened, especially as we were there, but after awhile she let down her guard and told Kaliyah the whole story. We found out that she had a very sad history. She had been abused by her uncle from the age of six, and when she told her parents about it, they wouldn't believe her. She ran away from home and managed to survive on the streets of Kolkata by begging and stealing. She took Lucky with her and between the two of them they made enough to live on. Unlike so many other street children, she had a roof over her head and the gang afforded some measure of safety, but young girls like her were often preyed upon by the ruffians roaming the dark alleys at night. She was indeed fortunate to even be alive.







At the time, I didn't know what a 'sex worker' was, but I knew that if it had anything to do with the creepy lady called "Madame Sharvani", then it had to be bad. Everybody seemed to be afraid of her. Bindi's words made me fear for Kalpani more than ever. And by the sounds of it, the wolfy-looking guy called Ajay was no better than Ranjan. He was obviously someone to stay clear of. What kind of horrible place was this Kolkata? So far I'd seen beggars with their arms torn off, starving kids living on the sidewalks, a little kid attacked by a bully, and a helpless girl beaten up by five guys. There was also lot of drugs involved. Ranjan made a business from it, and Satish and Ajay were involved somehow. Santosh had been sniffing something that smelled so bad, I thought I'd vomit. It was all scary and confusing and I wished Anita and I were anywhere but in this place!



I listened as Kaliyah suggested a plan to Bindi. Ranjan wanted us to learn to beg on the streets, so if Bindi could prove useful in helping in this capacity, it could possibly keep her from being sold to the madame - for a time at least. Kaliyah thought it would take a month or so for us to learn the tricks of the trade. By that time, another solution might have presented itself. It was Bindi's only chance and she hastened to accept.



Night was coming and the city was beginning to shroud herself in a cloak of mist from the choking smog of coalfires. Shadows had begun to creep like clawing fingers, reaching into crevices and stabbing into corners. It felt ominous, as did everything I had experienced in this city so far.

I thought back to Bindi gazing over the balcony at the street below. How sad and horrible her life was! She had seen death as a possible escape from her pain-filled world. Santosh sniffed glue to escape the agony of his existence, and our own Uncle lost himself in the stupor of alcohol and drugs so as to silence the inner voices haunting him. The experiences of the day had enabled me to see that others suffered as I did. Some a lot more. And I understood their need to escape. I wanted to escape too. But I felt...I HOPED...there was a better way than through drugs or suicide.

There had to be a reason for my being here... for any of us being here. If I could find that reason, I would have the answer to the riddle of suffering and evil, and it would give me the courage to live through whatever life threw my way. Everything depended on finding it. Otherwise there was no hope. And I knew I couldn't survive without that.







There are an estimated ten million children who live on India's streets, not counting those in the urban slums. They live under extremely harsh conditions that make them vulnerable to disease, starvation, drug addiction, prostitution, violence, and death. Many resort to petty crime in order to survive. As a result, they are often spurned by society and handled roughly by law enforcement officials. They sleep on the streets, or anywhere else they can find, and often travel in gangs for safety. Some have been abandoned or forced from their homes. Others are sent out to work and they return home at night to their families. Begging is a common means to survival but some children prefer to earn their living through selling cheap items, street sweeping, shining shoes, salvaging rags and plastic, etc.

Young girls disguise themselves as boys to escape rape, but both genders are susceptible to sexual assault on the streets. Most of the girls enter the sex trade before they reach adolescence. Criminal predators are always on the prowl, seeking to use and abuse these children, subjecting them to sometimes unbelievable cruelty and exploitation. It has been said that when a child from the rural areas arrives at Kolkata's Howrah Train Station, they will fall prey to procurers and mafia gangs within 20 minutes.

These children live without security, comfort, or even the most basic necessities of life, so it is small wonder that many give in to despair and seek to escape their world through drugs or suicide. Yet they are also amazingly resilient, often exhibiting a child's innocent delight in small pleasures such as sharing a joke or splashing in the water gushing from a broken water main. They have dreams and hopes like any other child but little hope of ever seeing them realized.

Exploited...uneducated...neglected...and rejected...

...they are India's lost children.

# 7. Streets









A crowd of revellers surrounded us and threw colored dyes and water at us. They were celebrating Holi, the spring festival. It's a time when everyone goes a bit nuts. People forget about caste and mingle in the streets to have fun and get into mischief. The holiday is named after Holika, a wicked character in a Hindu myth, who gets her just desserts when she is burned up. In a way, Holi represents the victory of good over evil. Hinduism doesn't really think of evil as being such a bad thing because it's necessary. It balances things out. The only really bad thing for a Hindu is not knowing that he is divine - that he comes from Brahman, the big force of the universe. If he did, he wouldn't get attached to things and think of himself as a person apart. He wouldn't try to get things for himself and do deeds that bring bad results (karma). Anyway, that's what Hindus believe...some of them. There are lots and lots of different ideas about it.



One of the partiers, an old woman, offered us a drink. By this time Anita and I had been in Kolkata for over a month so we weren't stupid. We knew the drink was a 'bhang thandai' made from milk mixed with cannabis.



Bhang was often drunk at Holi or eaten as a sweet. It was a very strong drug that made you act like you were drunk.



Anita was upset that her clothes were all messy with paint so we went back to Ranjan's warehouse to use the old water pump. Most of the dyes left stains that were impossible to get out.



I was glad we had a break from begging. I didn't like doing it. We had to put on sad faces and pretend we were hungry when we went up to the car windows. We were supposed to pester people in the car until they gave us some rupees, and if they did, we had to keep bugging them for more. Bindi and Lucky were good at it but Anita and I were too shy. Kaliyah, who often watched from a distance, scolded us for being too timid.



So when Bindi said we could do something we liked for a change, I was really excited. There had been one thing I had been wanting to do for a long time.





It wasn't too far to the mission so we decided to walk there. Along the way we ran into Ajay, Jayanti, and Sumitra. During the last few weeks, Anita and I had gotten to know them a bit, mostly from what Bindi and Kaliyah told us about them. They were an interesting bunch.



Sumitra was nice. She was 14 years old and lived at home with her mother and 2 sisters. She helped support them by salvaging water bottles, filling them with tap water, and carefully replacing the caps so they looked unopened. Then she sold them on the street to unwary western tourists.

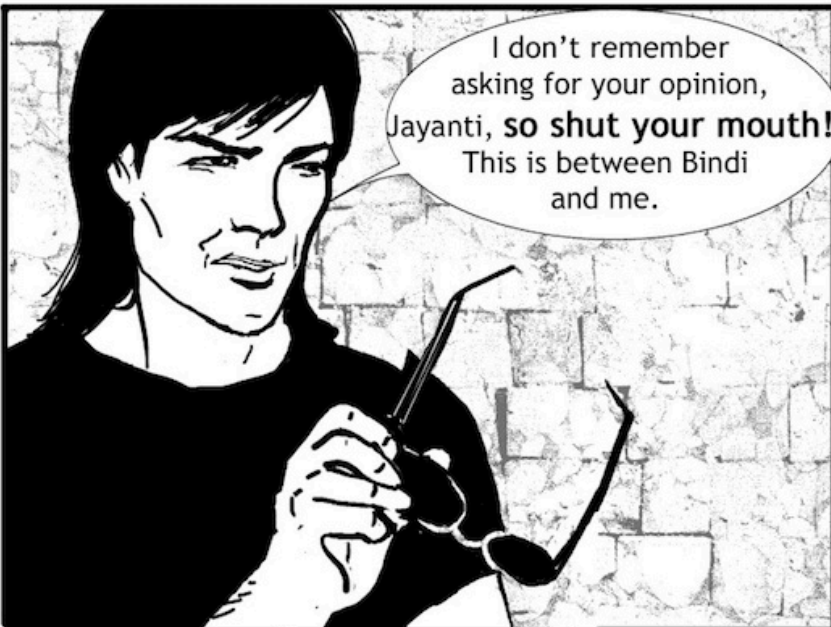


I felt sorry for Jayanti. She always looked sad. She was 17 and had been Ajay's girlfriend for 2 years. He had introduced her to ganga and alcohol and now she craved them all the time. She often sold herself on the streets so she and Ajay could buy drugs and the fancy western clothes they both liked.



No one knew anything about Ajay's past. He was 22 and worked for Ranjan pushing drugs and guarding the warehouse. Kaliyah said he was a mean street fighter who had taken down guys a lot bigger than himself. Ranjan hired him as a debt collector for loans that weren't paid on time.









Are you scared of Ajay, Bindi?

Yeah, I am.

He's been trying to get me to work for him for months.



I don't trust him. He might make me do it.



I think that party of his was a setup...to get me drunk so his friends could... Jayanti was trying to warn me.



A man had come up behind us as we were debating whether to go in or not. He introduced himself as Rajendra Thakur, or Raj for short. He worked at the mission and he invited us to take a look around.







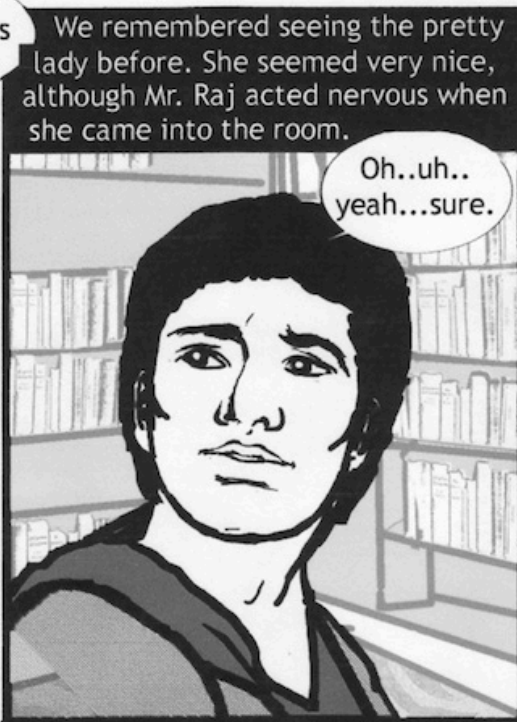


Mr. Raj looked like a Bollywood movie star. I liked his sparkly eyes and how they crinkled when he smiled - which was often. The little kids liked him too, and as soon as he sat down on the rug, they climbed all over him. He talked to us like a friend and asked our names and what we did on the streets - stuff like that. Then he told us all about the mission, how they helped street kids get into school and off drugs. He said that besides the medical clinic, there were dormitories for boys and girls upstairs where they could live until a foster home became available. He told us that some of the kids who had been on drugs were now in college! These were the ones who had stayed in the program, even though it had been tough adjusting to rules and a way of life so different from street life. Bindi's eyes lit up at his words and she began to ask lots of questions. She was especially curious about the girls' dormitory and asked to see it.



Ah, there you are! Pastor Deepak wants to talk to you.

He says it's urgent.



We remembered seeing the pretty lady before. She seemed very nice, although Mr. Raj acted nervous when she came into the room.

Oh..uh.. yeah...sure.



Rachel, while I'm gone, would you mind showing Bindi the girls' dorm?

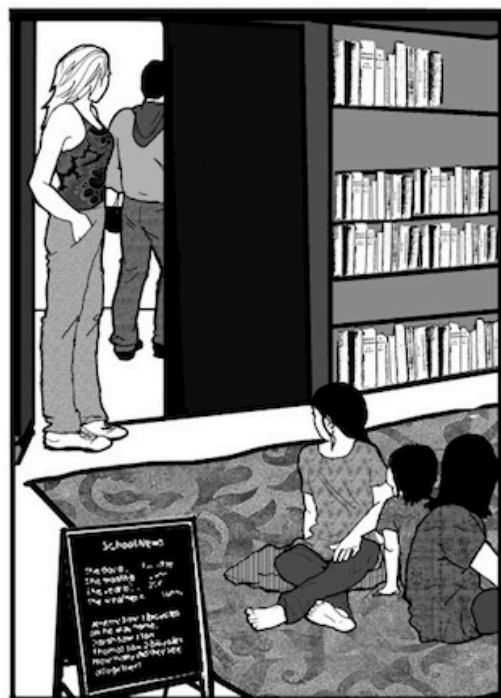




Sure, Raj.  
No problem.



Mr. Raj got this  
dreamy look in his  
eyes as he left.



So who wants  
to look at dorms?



Bindi went with Rachel while Anita and I stayed in the playroom reading books. I couldn't read so I soon got bored and decided to join Bindi.



She wasn't in the kitchen but  
it sure smelled good in there.



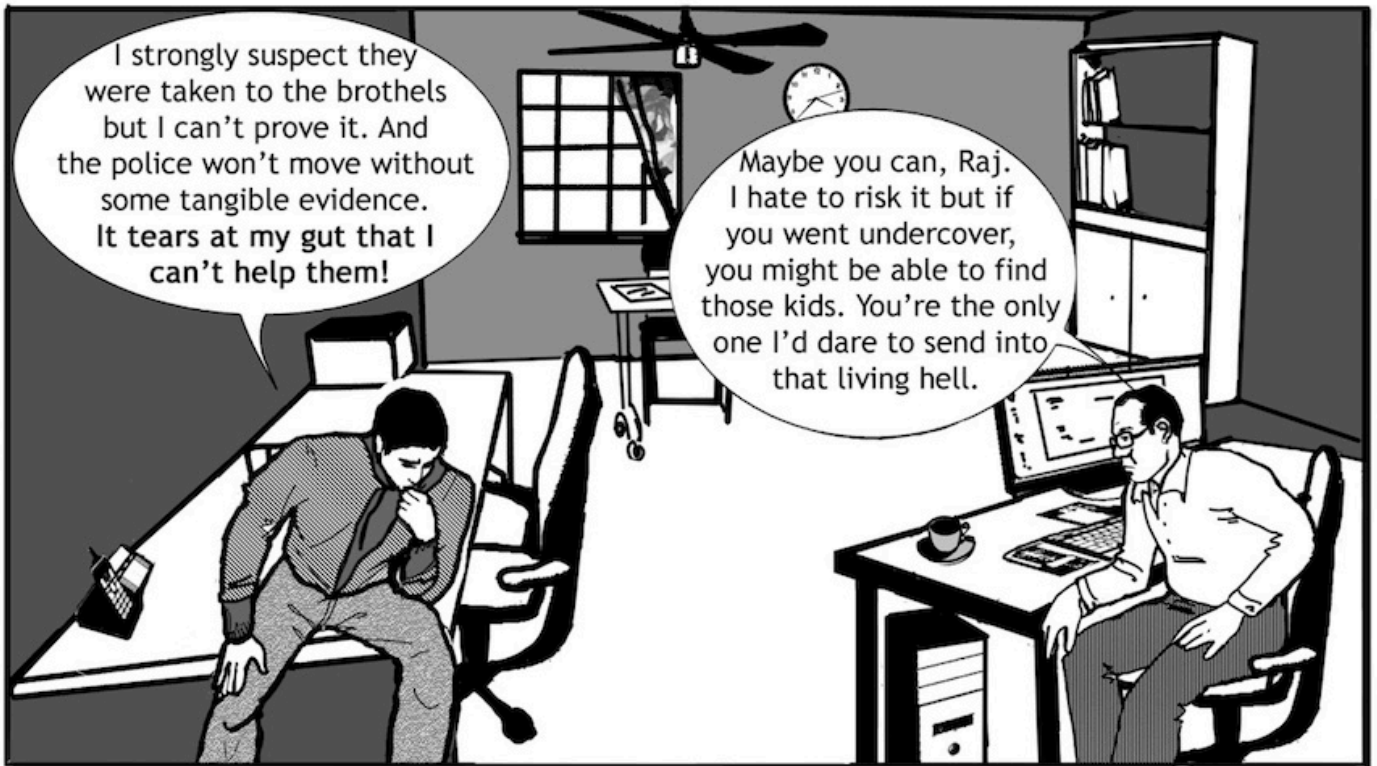
I found a courtyard where some kids were playing ball. I watched them for awhile and then resumed my search for Bindi.

I heard voices coming from an office.



I know all 3 kids who were abducted. They were starting to come to the mission.

I know. Have you any ideas where they might be?



I strongly suspect they were taken to the brothels but I can't prove it. And the police won't move without some tangible evidence. It tears at my gut that I can't help them!

Maybe you can, Raj. I hate to risk it but if you went undercover, you might be able to find those kids. You're the only one I'd dare to send into that living hell.



I'll need backup. Marcus and Janet arrived yesterday from Thailand. They have lots of experience with rescue work and I'm sure they'll help.







I finally came upon the stairs leading to the girls' dormitory.



Your situation sounds very desperate, Bindi. It's entirely up to you, but I think it would be best if you stayed here. You'll be safe and you can go to school and start a whole new life.



I really want that...sniff.... I'm so tired of feeling scared all the time... I just wanna be safe for once.



You'll be safe here, honey. I'll go and get you some new clothes. You can take this lower bunk as your own.



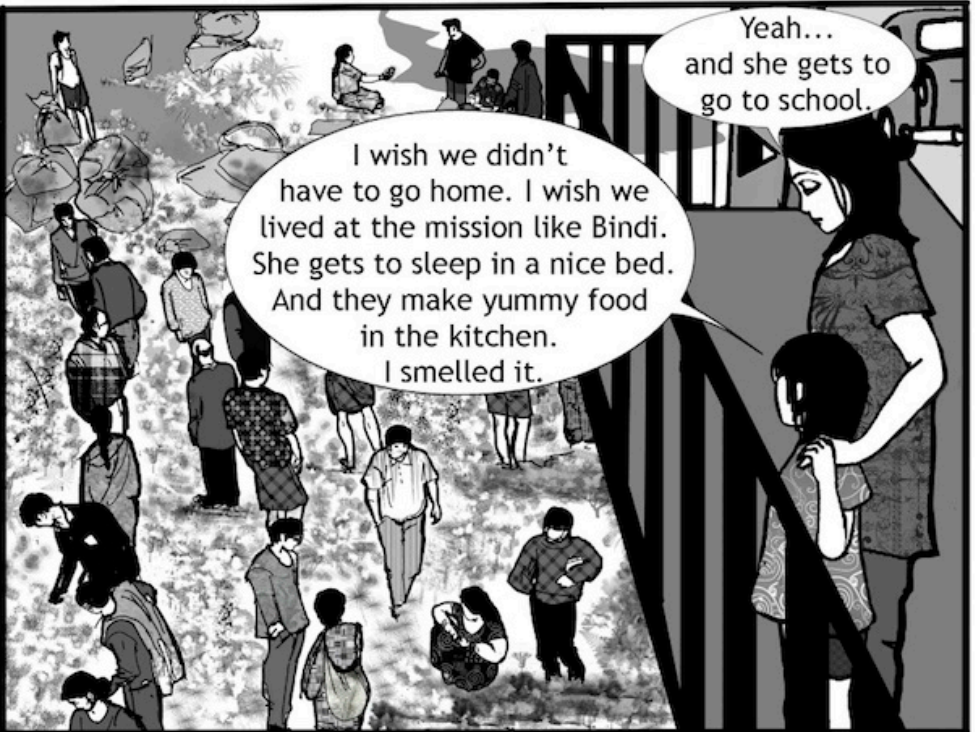
You and Anita can't tell anyone where I am. Promise you won't!



Come visit me, okay?



We were on the Howrah Bridge, gazing down at the flower market below. The ground was a riot of brilliant color and the heady perfume of jasmine and marigold hung in the air. The merchants were packing up their wares, discarding any flowers that were crumpled or faded, and bagging the rest to sell next day. It was sad to see such beauty wilt so quickly. Flowers always reminded me of Mummy and our baby sister, Kumari.





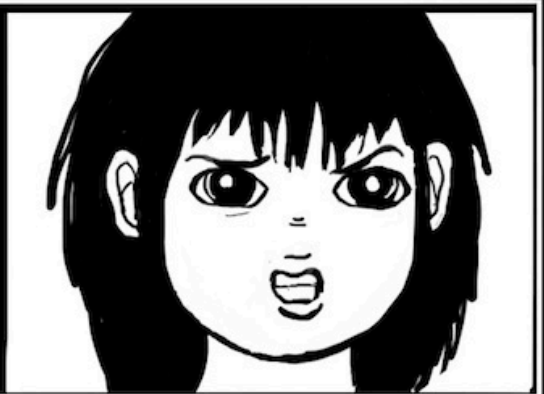
On the way home we saw some snake charmers with their cobras. Hindus worship snakes (nagas).



I don't like them. Their eyes are spooky and they have a creepy way of slinking along as they sneak up on their prey.

Some people remind me of snakes. Their bite is in their poisonous words and in the treacherous and deceitful things they do.

They hurt people and make the world a nasty place. I wanted to do something about it but I felt small and helpless...and that made me mad!!!



I wonder what will happen when they can't find Bindi.

Guess we'll soon find out.

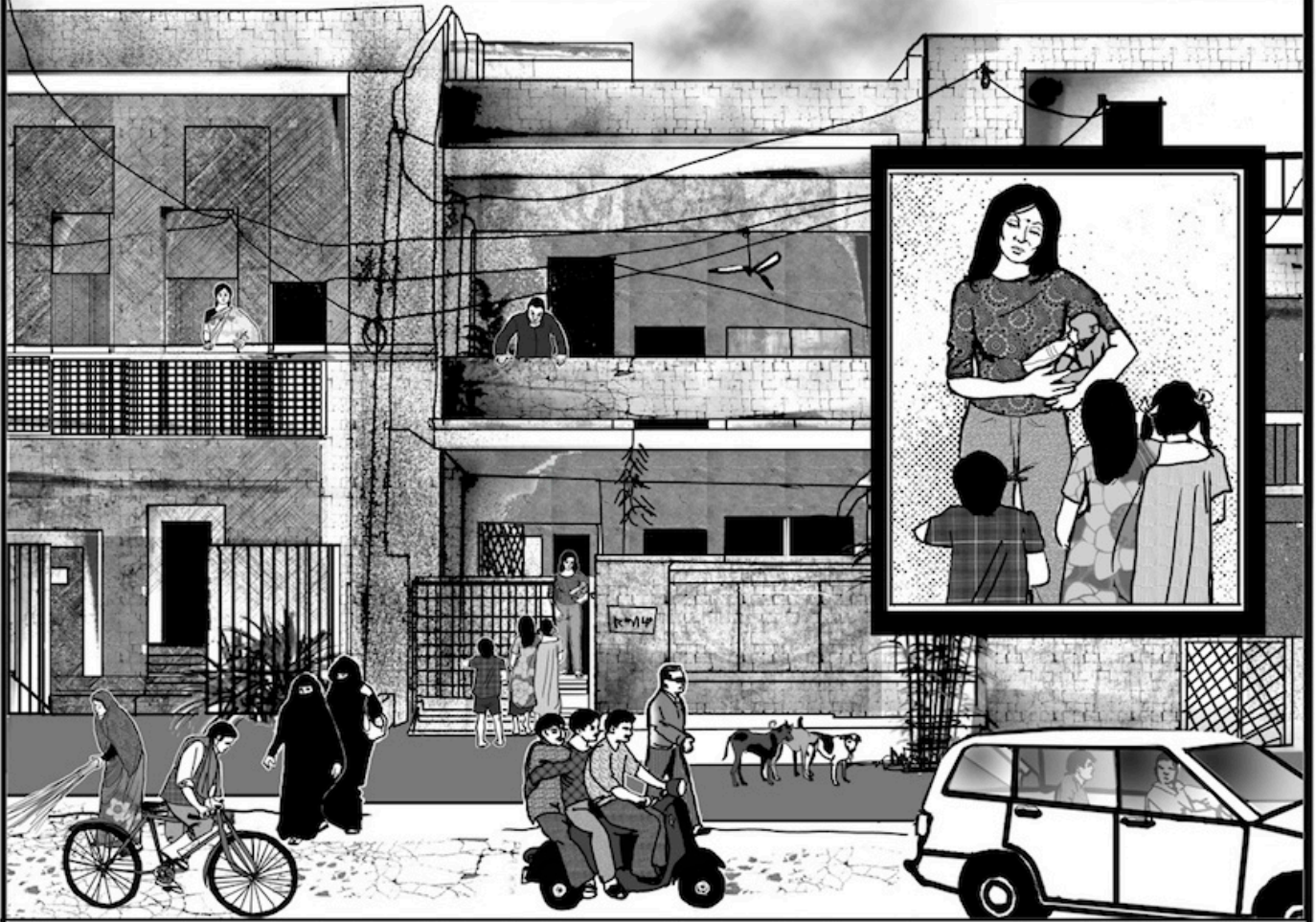
Anita was right. It wasn't long before Bindi's disappearance was noted. Because we were the last ones to see her, we were the first to be questioned. Ajay and Kaliyah came over to ask us if we had any information.



Kaliyah wasn't fooled. Her expression said it all. But even though she knew we were lying, she hadn't said a thing. I think she was glad that Bindi had escaped Ajay's clutches. And she was too smart not to guess where Bindi was hiding. I sure couldn't figure her out but I was beginning to like her.



Bindi's disappearance caused some changes all around. Ranjan threatened to poison Lucky if Kaliyah brought him back to the house where they lived. He owned a 2 story house in a nice part of the city and he was very proud of it. He didn't want any dirty animals messing it up. He must have been quite rich because he also owned some warehouses and other stuff. Anyway, Kaliyah gave her pet away to some street kids she knew and trusted. They were really happy to get him.



We now went with Ranjeet and Rakesh to beg on the streets. Ranjeet was a shoeshine boy while Rakesh collected plastic and rags to sell for recycling. Ranjeet watched over us to make sure we stayed out of trouble. That was on Kaliyah's orders. She said Ranjan didn't want us to get nabbed like Bindi was. Also the bigger boys on the street often preyed upon the more vulnerable younger kids, stealing their money and beating them up, or getting them hooked on drugs.





Sometimes Santosh took us out begging. We didn't like going with him though. He always wanted us to steal things and often took part of the money we earned for himself.



Santosh spent the money on what he called 'solution' which was supposed to be used to correct writing errors. Instead he poured it into a rag and then sniffed hard. He had a terrible cough because of it. He also sniffed petrol, diesel, and rubbing alcohol. Solution is the cheapest, about 22 rupees for 2 bottles. Santosh needed about 8 bottles a day which he sniffed throughout the day and night. I heard him tell Ranjeet that it made him feel dreamy and it allowed him to escape the loneliness he felt. His parents back in his village had been too poor to send him to school or even to feed him properly, so he had come to Kolkata to beg on the streets. Before long he became addicted to drugs. Sometimes the police caught him and beat him or put him in jail. He was usually the one caught because one of his feet was misshapen and that made it hard for him to run away. He didn't have many friends, except for Ranjeet and a few other sniffers like himself. Anita and I didn't like him but we felt sorry for him. We knew what it felt like to miss your parents.





One thing about Santosh though - he sure was a clever thief and beggar. He taught us the 'tricks of the trade' in the alley behind Ranjan's old warehouse. He liked to act out the manoeuvres we were supposed to learn, and sometimes he took us downtown to watch the experts at work.



We learned how to bandage our arms, or lean on a crutch, so it looked like we were hurt and desperately needed money for medicine.



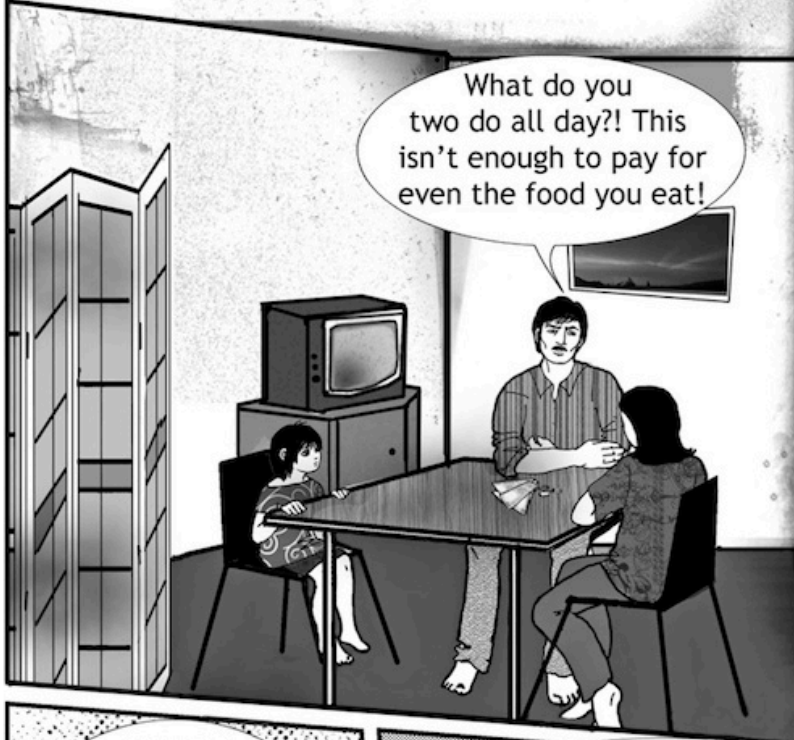
We also saw how to 'swarm' a tourist and trip her so you could grab her purse, camera, and jewelry.



Ajay would often come to watch Santosh teaching us, but I think what he really wanted to watch was Anita. His eyes were spooky. They reminded me of how he used to look at Bindi. Sometimes he would catch me glaring at him and he would give me a sly, wolfish smile. It felt evil.

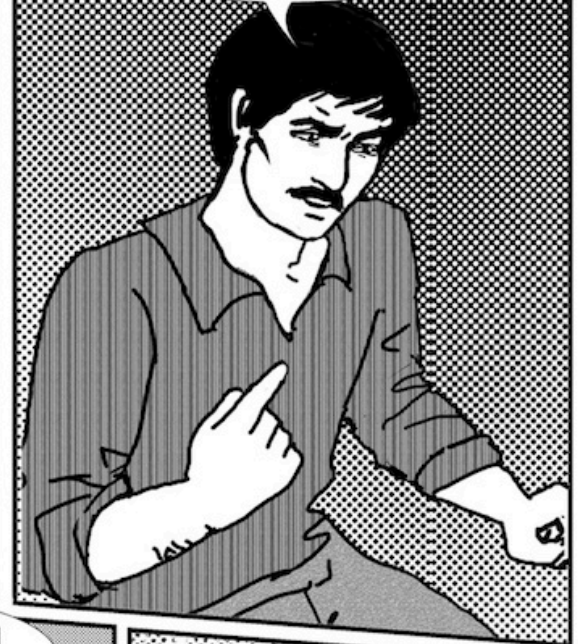


Although we did our best, Uncle Rupesh wasn't happy with the amount of money we were bringing in.



What do you two do all day?! This isn't enough to pay for even the food you eat!

Look, it's this way. I'm up to my ears in debt to Ranjan and he's starting to put pressure on me to pay up. This place is expensive but he insists we stay here.



Wish I'd never left the slum. And if I had the money I'd take you back to your village. You were better off there.



Would you really send us back to our village?



I would if I could but it's no use even talking about it. I'm flat broke. And I owe Ranjan more than I can ever pay back.



Pushpa, I was thinking....if we can't go back to the village, maybe we can go live at the mission.

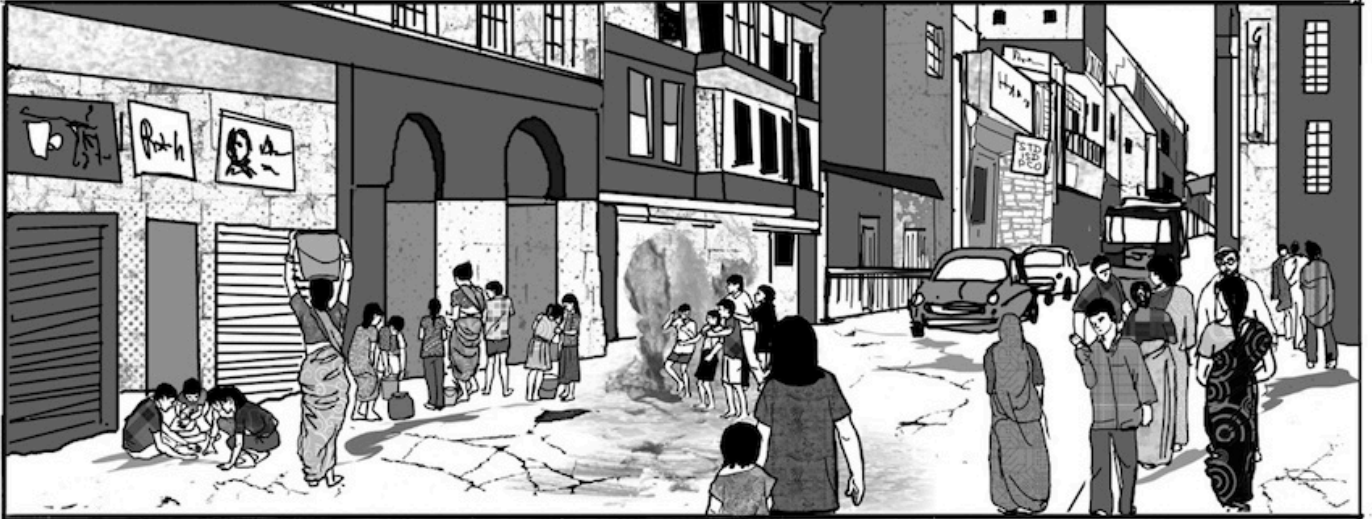


I was thinking the exact same thing. Uncle probably won't let us though. He needs the money we get from begging.

We could visit though...and forget to tell him about it.



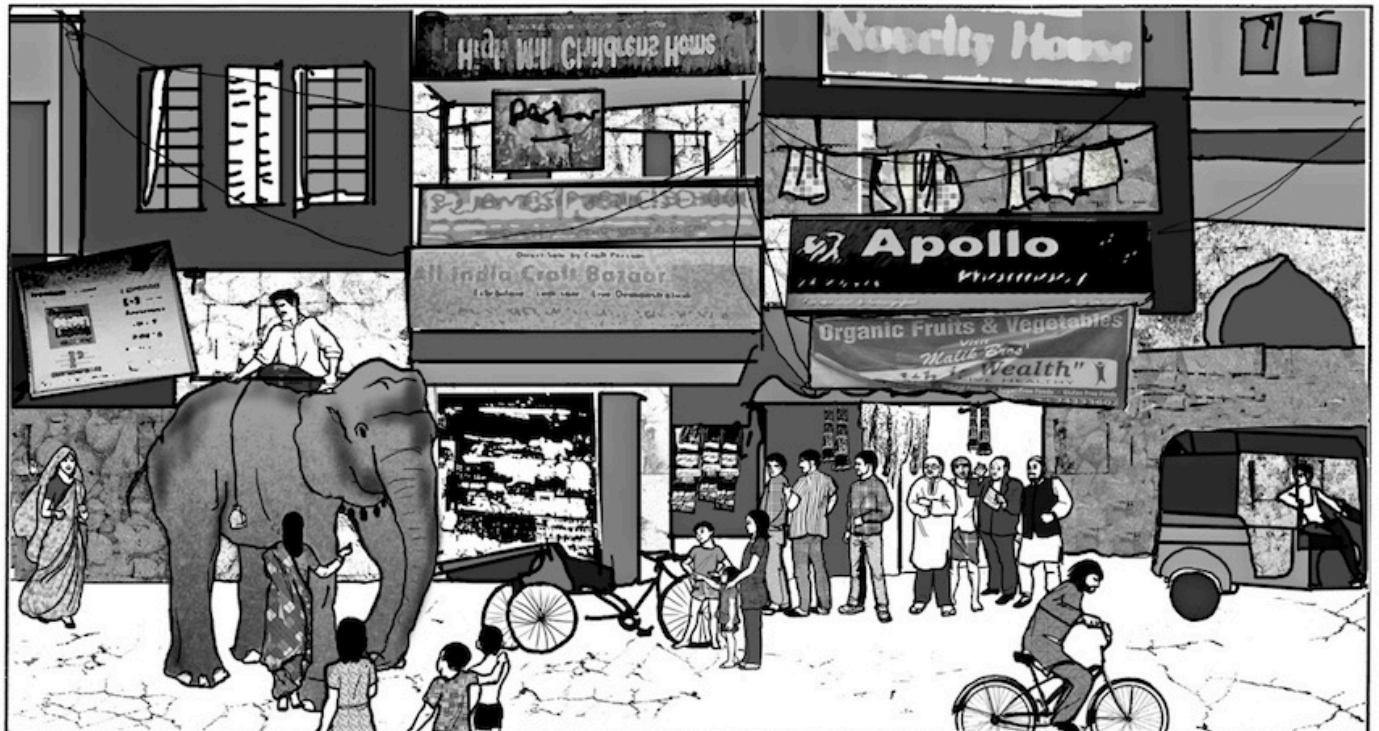
We had to put aside our plans to visit the mission for awhile because we were too busy begging. However it wasn't all work and no play. One day a water main broke on the street and people rushed to fill buckets with water while we kids got to play and splash in the puddles.



There was this boy who liked Anita and always gave us free apples and oranges. He reminded me of Uncle Raj cause he had the same goofy smile on his face.



We had a big surprise when an elephant came down the street, walking right in the middle of the traffic! The mahout let people touch his elephant but they had to pay 20 rupees first. Many Hindus worship elephants because they're powerful and because Ganesh, the elephant god, is a favorite.





We were just getting used to street life, and the freedom and excitement it offered, when something happened that reminded us how precarious such an existence really was. Ranjeet was cornered by some bullies in a back alley and beaten up badly. They also stole his shoeshine kit and all the money he had.



Ranjeet had always shunned begging, preferring to earn his own way. His shoe shine 'business' had been his pride and joy. Now he had lost everything. The blows to his pride left even deeper wounds than the physical ones he had suffered.



Ranjeet now joined us in our training sessions with Santosh, although he wasn't too enthusiastic about it, especially when Santosh told us we were to rob a tourist.



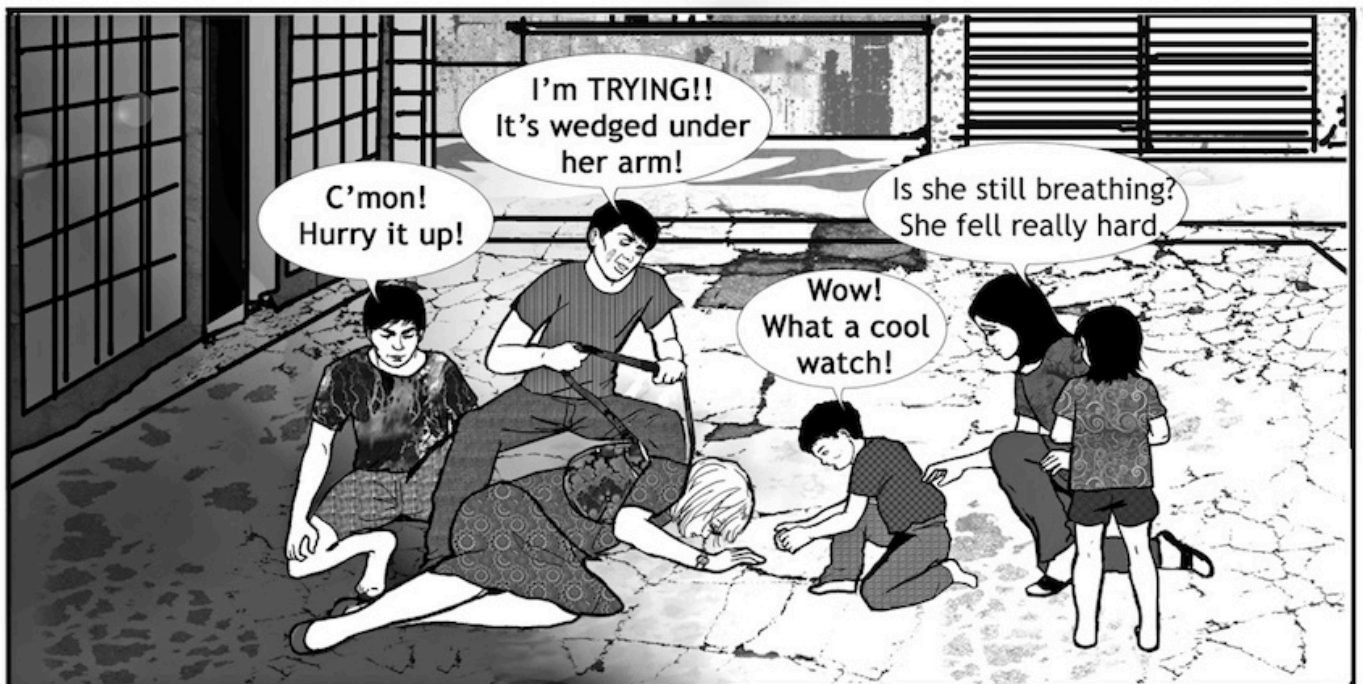
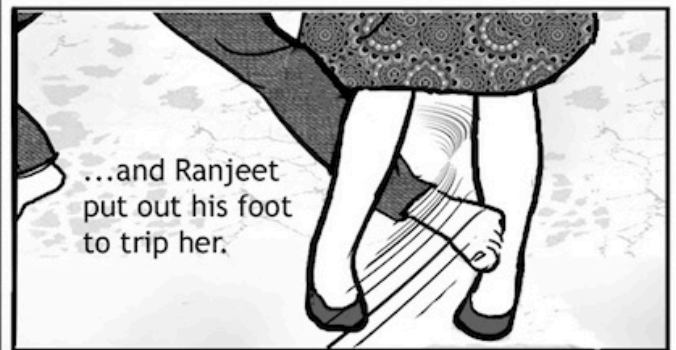
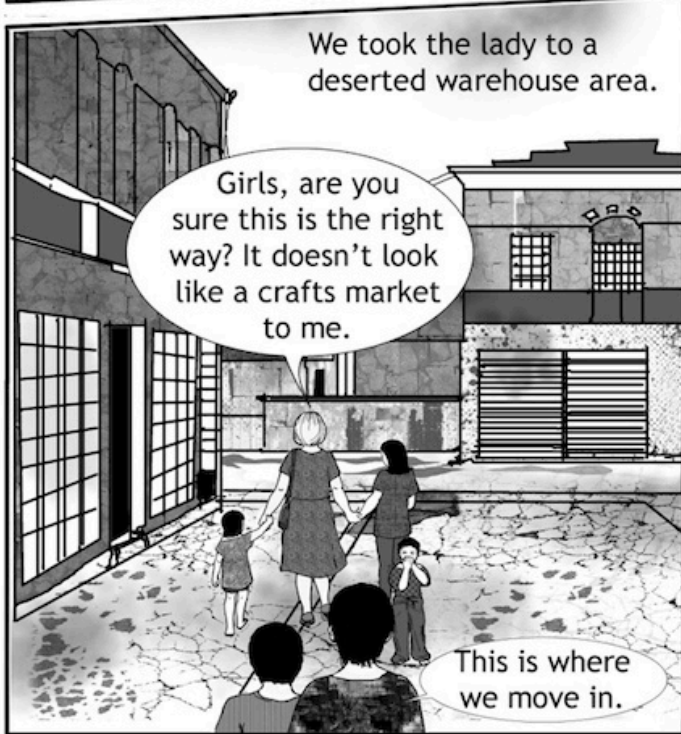
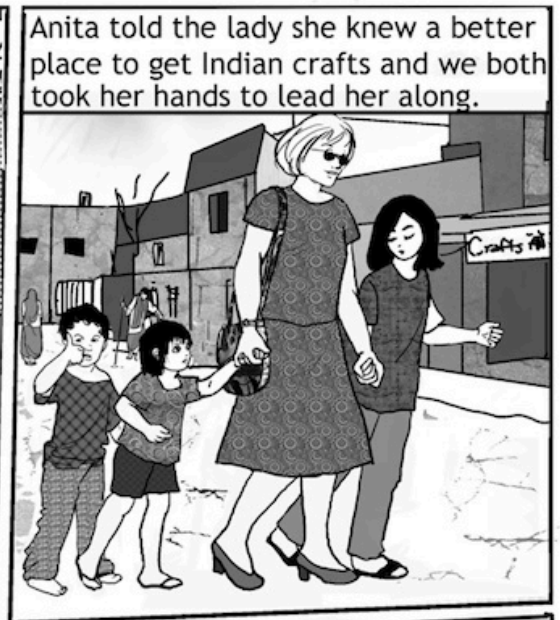
Santosh found the perfect target - an older woman traveling alone, obviously rich, and careless with her possessions.



Later, Anita and I discussed Santosh's plan, lowering our voices so the boys wouldn't hear our misgivings.









The purse strap broke and everything fell out.



Aw f#@!



Ranjeet! Get the twerp outa here! I'll clean up this stuff and take the girls with me. Move it! The old woman is waking up!



Nice haul. This'll keep me in ganja for weeks.



Santosh had planned it all perfectly and everything had gone as expected...

groan



Except for one thing!



Rakesh and Ranjeet almost ran into a watchman rounding the corner of an old building.



Immediately they changed direction and ran down a back alley. The guard was too stunned at first to do anything, which was a good thing because it was all the time we needed to make our own getaway. He yelled for us to stop but we were already ducking behind a crumbling warehouse.



Watchmen usually just blow their whistle to sound an alarm. They leave it to the police, who are armed, to catch the criminals.



Santosh knew the area well and he led us to an abandoned building that had lots of passageways where we could hide.

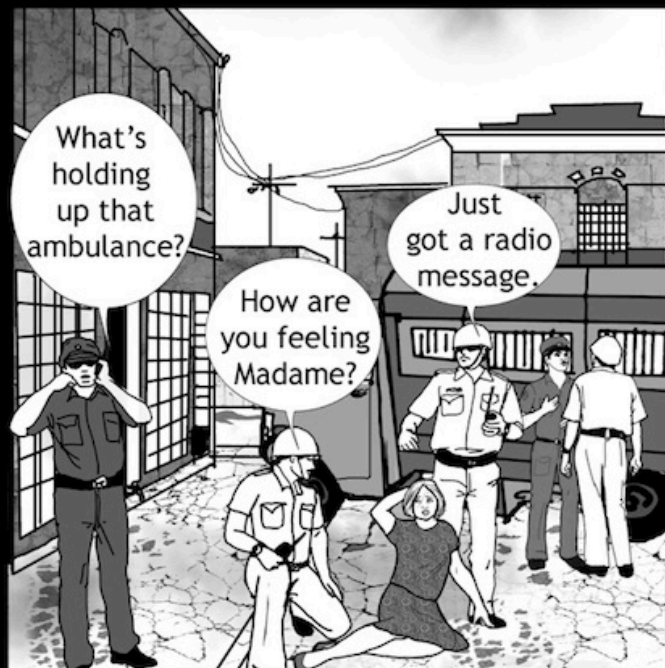


The building overlooked the square where we had taken the tourist lady.

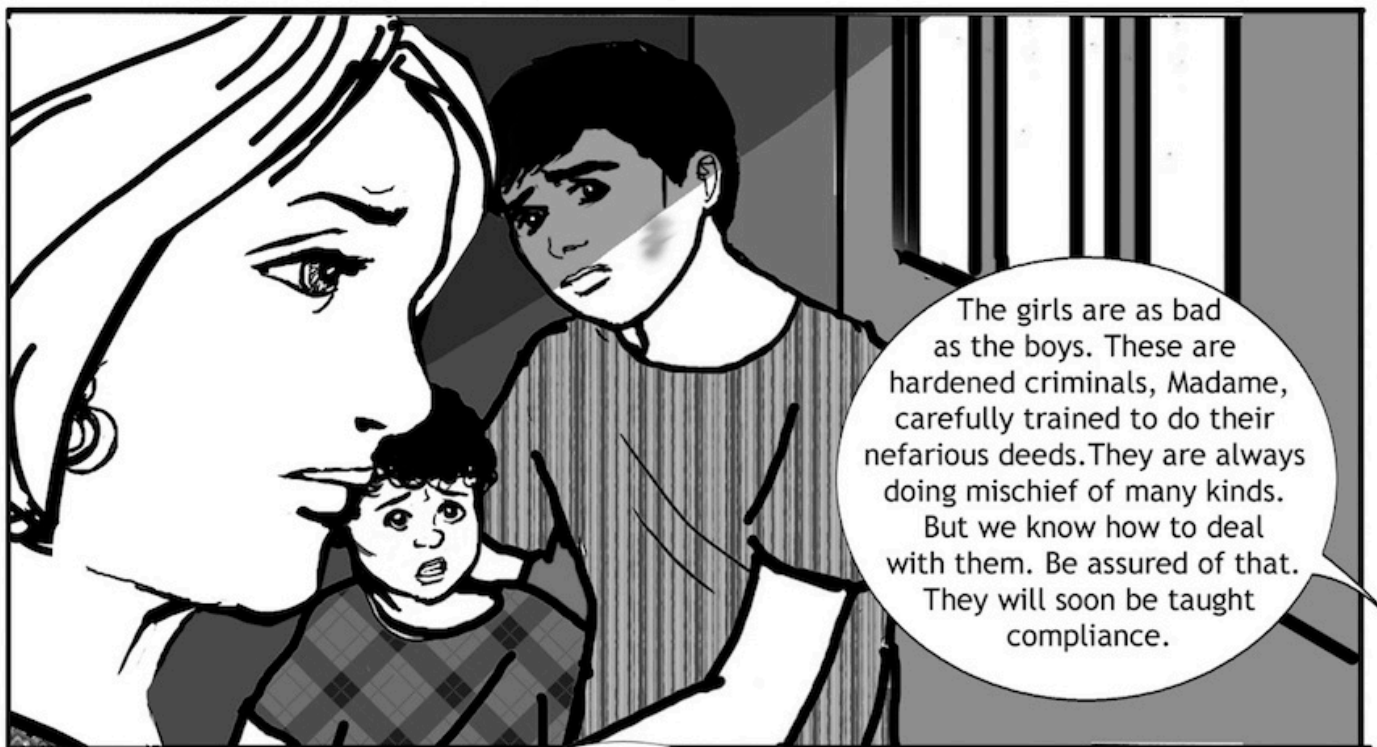




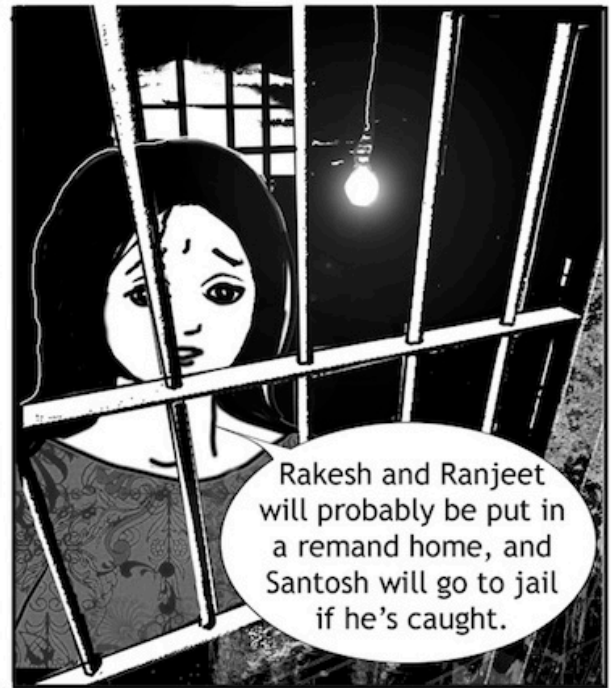
We saw a paddy wagon and many policemen milling about below. Thankfully the lady was now conscious, but she was still on the ground, holding her head and looking dazed.



The Kolkata police were often on the prowl for street kids, especially in the high tourist areas. It looked bad for the city to have a bunch of children begging on the streets, and when they robbed tourists, it was especially bad because it drew public censure. Muggings and assaults were exposed in the media and invariably the police system come under scrutiny. To mitigate this problem, the police would round up any kid that looked like an orphan or beggar and they would be placed in a remand home. These were detention houses that were run much like a prison. Every street kid's greatest fear was to be sent to one of them. If he was too old for the remand homes, a kid could end up in jail where he would be subjected to brutalities and assaults from police and inmates alike









I think maybe...

...we're gonna go back to our village.



## Drug Scene



Hinduism has long been associated with cannabis (marijuana) and it is cultivated nearly everywhere in India. Charas (hashish) is venerated by many sadhus as being one of the aspects of Shiva and they regularly smoke it as part of their worship. They are the only ones in India who are exempt from legal prosecution for possession of this drug. In British Colonial times, hash was sold in shops along with opium, and using these drugs was just a normal part of Indian life. Although illegal today, it is sought after by hippies and travellers.

A chillum is a conical pipe used by sadhus to smoke charas. The Hindu god, Shiva, is invoked with the ceremony and the smoker considers the spirit of Shiva to enter him as he inhales. Because of this association, the chillum is considered to be special. They are still sold in shops and can be made of clay or marble, or other materials. Often they are ornately set with gods or snakes.

Cannabis, hash, heroin, and opium are all sold in India and addiction is a real problem. Opium can be drunk, swallowed, eaten, or smoked and has been used habitually since the early 19th century. Infants were often given opium to calm them. Traditional Indian Ayurvedic medicine has also used opium in several of its tinctures.



There are 4 to 5 million sadhus in India today. They are revered for their holiness and feared for their curses. It is thought that their austere practices help to burn off their bad karma, and that of the community at large. Some go around naked (sky-clad), unshaven, with their hair in long, thick dreadlocks. Some carry swords. They often live in the open, favoring isolated places like the mountains, living on bananas or whatever else they can find in the wild. They may live in cemeteries and commune with ghosts. Sadhus often have little or no material comforts but they live free from worries and they can smoke all the charas they want. It is considered good karma to give alms to sadhus so they take their begging bowls wherever they go, living off the generosity of donors. Becoming a sadhu is the 4th phase in a Hindu's life, after studies, becoming a father, and a pilgrim. Some choose this way of life to escape family problems or financial situations.

Drugs are sold on the streets of India to children who become users as well as pushers. Many of the hardships facing young prostitutes stem from their dependency on drugs. The overwhelming majority of juvenile prostitutes admit to using drugs as part of their lifestyle, and an alarming number admit to heavy use or even addiction. Numerous studies find that male prostitutes are significantly involved in drug use.

8.

*Snake*





Anita and I didn't get home til late and Uncle Rupesh was mad, until we showed him the ring we took from the tourist. He said it was very expensive and he could get lots of money for it. He'd need to find a pawnbroker that he could trust and until then we had to keep the ring a secret. Uncle said it would mean trouble if Ranjan heard about it. He'd hide the ring until he made a sale, and then we would all board a train to take us back to the village. Uncle said he's staying in the village for awhile too cause it was the perfect hideout in case Ranjan sent his goons after him.



He probably wouldn't believe me if I told him it slipped off the lady's hand when she fell, and I held on to it cause I didn't want Santosh to take it.



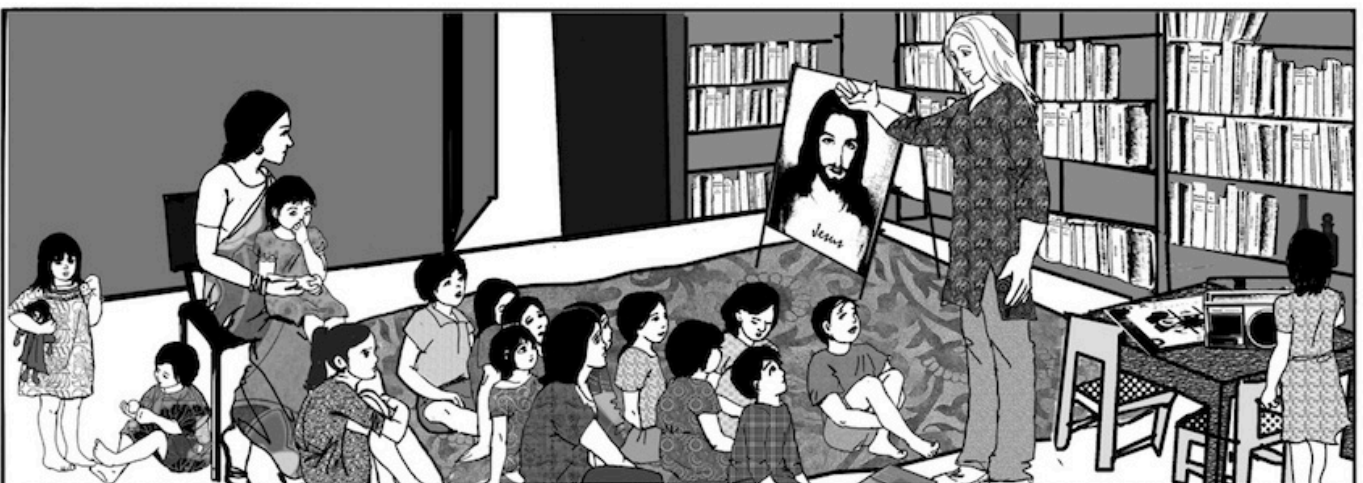
Santosh was supposed to take us out begging but he was always too stoned to bother about us. He'd become a rich man after selling all the stuff he'd stolen from the tourist lady, and the money was hidden away somewhere. Every day he bought ganja and smoked it with his friends at the train station. He had lots of friends now that he had money for drugs and alcohol. They all wanted to party with him. Anita and I were glad that we didn't have to train under him anymore.



Now that Uncle Rupesh had the ring, he wasn't worried about being in debt to Ranjan. He had absolutely no intention of paying back the money he owed. The plan was to quietly leave the city before Ranjan suspected anything and be long gone by the time he figured things out. Our Uncle was so sure of his plan that he didn't push us to go begging on the streets like before. He let us watch television all day if we wanted, or else we could go exploring. It was up to us.



Most of the time Anita and I went to Grace Mission to visit Bindi and play with the other kids. We liked hearing the Jesus stories that Auntie Rachel told us. I never grew tired of hearing them. They were unlike anything I'd ever heard or imagined ... and best of all...they were all true.





Some of the things I learned kind of agreed with Hindu teaching, like God being one. Hinduism thinks of God as the one reality - a cosmic force that exists in everything. Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are considered three expressions of that force, and they in turn are expressed through all the other gods and goddesses worshipped by Hindus.

Auntie explained that it's true that there is only one God, but the Bible says He is a personal Being, not a force. He is expressed as three Persons - the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - but He is never to be worshipped as three gods. He refers to Himself as the one true, living God; a Spirit having no beginning or end; who created everything that exists, both the things that are seen, and those that are unseen.

One of the first things God made were angels. They are spirits like God - very beautiful and very strong. They can zoom around the universe like flashes of lightning. They were created to be God's messengers and they hang around God's throne a lot singing songs and worshipping Him. They were there when God made the world and they sang about that too.



God spoke the world into existence, and the first thing He created was light out of darkness. He made planets and stars, the sun for the daytime, and the moon for the night. He made the air we breathe and the water we drink.

God made the seas and oceans and filled them with fish. He made trees and flowers, mountains and valleys; then He populated them with birds and animals of every kind. Everything He made was good and beautiful. All the animals lived together peaceably and there was no disease or pain or fear in this wonderful world. But God saved the best for last when He created a man named Adam and a woman named Eve. They were the highest of His creation because they were made in His image. They had physical bodies but also a soul and spirit that could communicate with God. They were His friends and they were put in charge of the garden that He made just for them. Every day they would meet with God in the garden and talk together.



Meanwhile, in heaven things weren't going so well. The greatest of God's angels, Lucifer, got the idea that he should be the boss instead of God. His heart had grown twisted with pride because he was very powerful and smart. He thought he was better than God and he convinced one third of the other angels to rebel against their Creator and follow him instead. The rebellion in their hearts was called sin and it spoiled the beauty and peace of heaven. God changed Lucifer's name to Satan, which means 'enemy'. Then a great war happened as the good angels on God's side fought against the rebel angels. God threw the bad angels out of heaven and they lost their beauty. Now they were called demons and their leader became known as the Devil. Sin had utterly destroyed them, inside and out, and they could never live with God ever again.



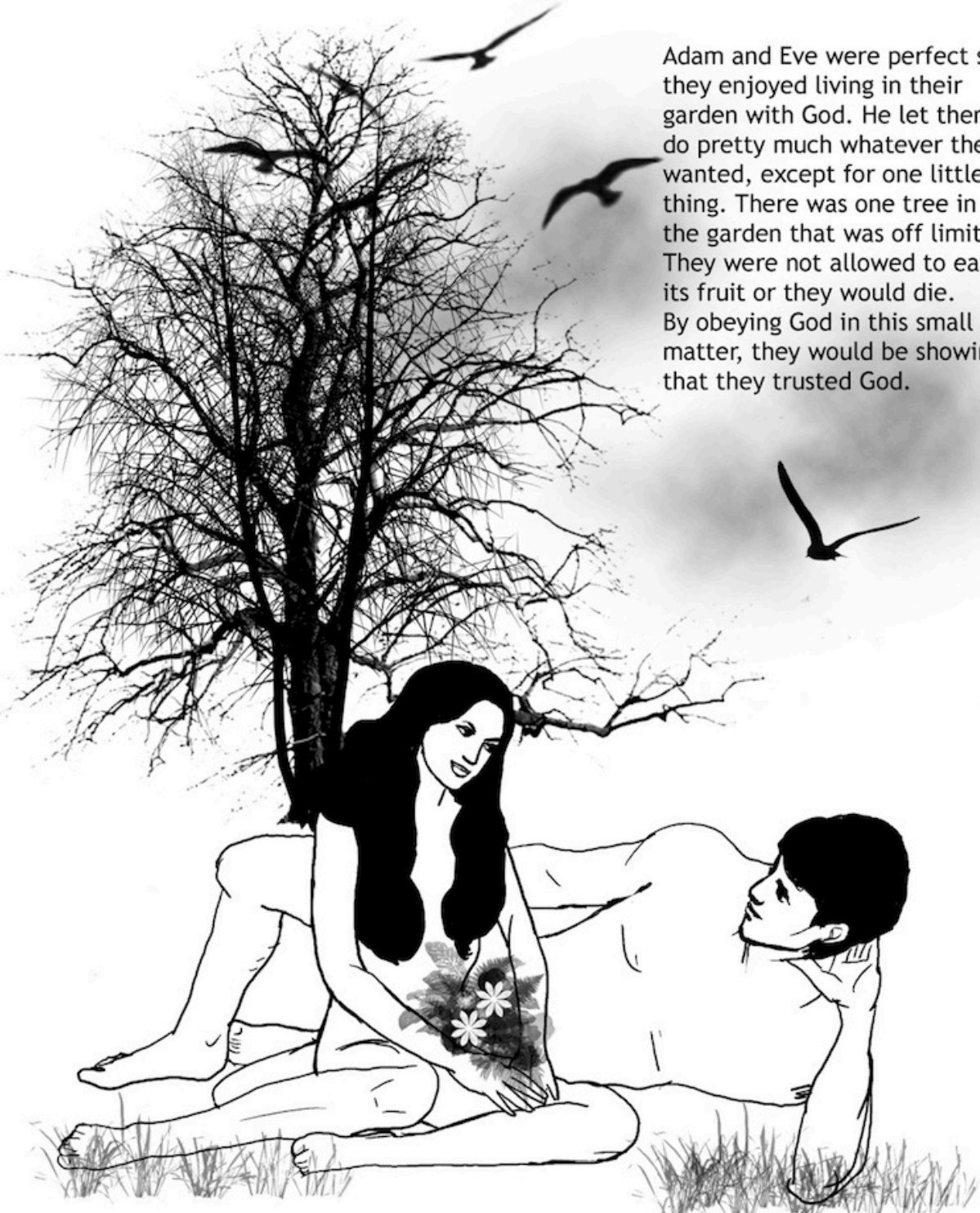


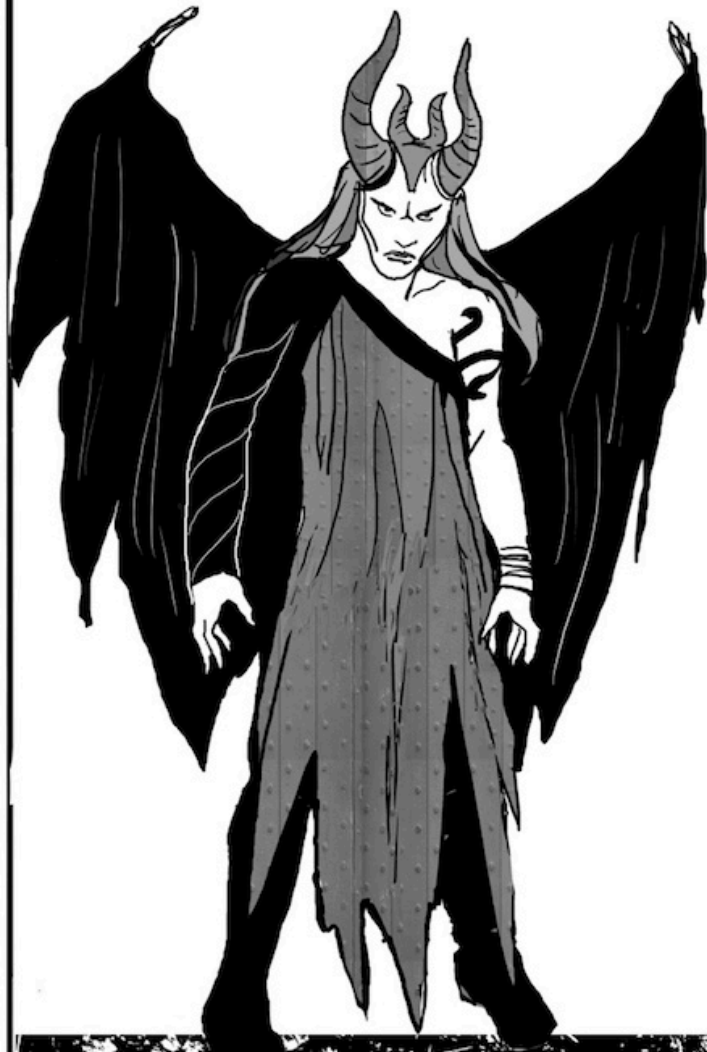
One of the kids asked Auntie Rachel where the bad angels went and she said God had to make a special place for them called the Lake of Fire. It's a sad place because God isn't there. It will be where the bad angels will have to live forever and ever.



You see, kids, God is perfect and only those who are perfect can live with Him.

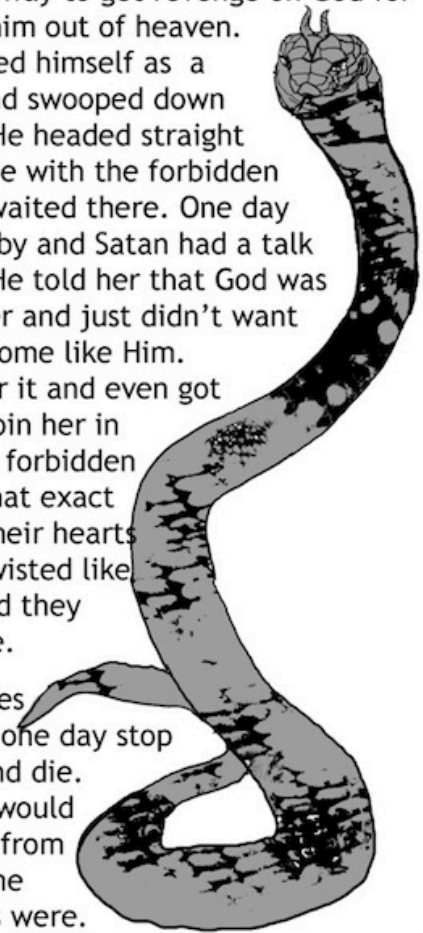
Adam and Eve were perfect so they enjoyed living in their garden with God. He let them do pretty much whatever they wanted, except for one little thing. There was one tree in the garden that was off limits. They were not allowed to eat its fruit or they would die. By obeying God in this small matter, they would be showing that they trusted God.





Satan watched Adam and Eve in the garden and saw a way to get revenge on God for throwing him out of heaven. He disguised himself as a serpent and swooped down to earth. He headed straight for the tree with the forbidden fruit and waited there. One day Eve came by and Satan had a talk with her. He told her that God was lying to her and just didn't want her to become like Him. Eve fell for it and even got Adam to join her in eating the forbidden fruit. At that exact moment their hearts became twisted like Satan's and they died inside.

Their bodies too would one day stop working and die. Now they would be cut off from God like the bad angels were.





Adam and Eve's sin would pass on to every person born into the world. Everyone would sin just like them, and they would suffer under the same curse of spiritual and physical death.

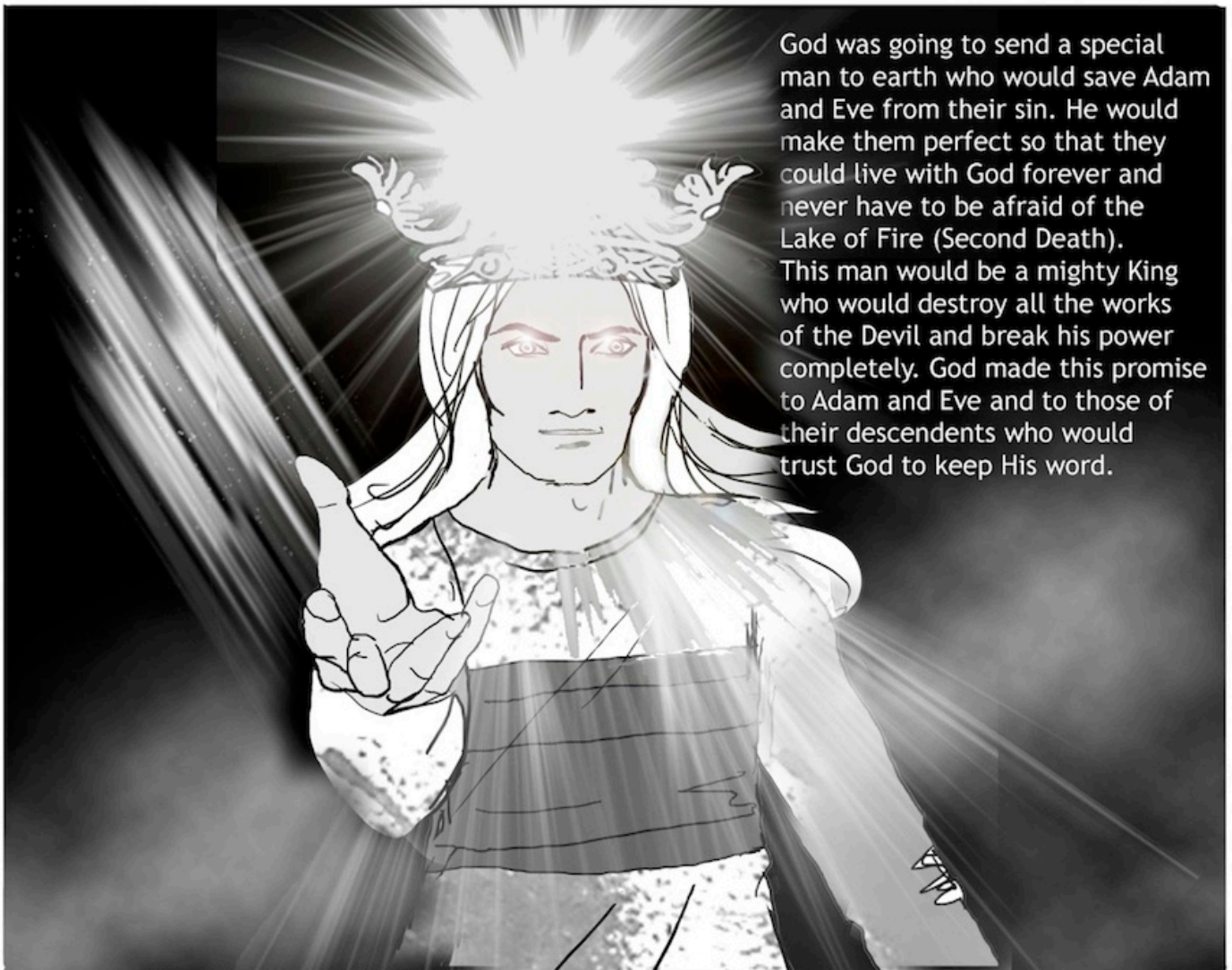


Spiritual death is having a spirit that can no longer communicate with God. It can't hear what He is saying and it can't understand His character or His ways. It is spiritually lifeless. If the story had ended there, Adam and Eve would have gone to live in the Lake of Fire along with Satan and the bad angels. And all the rest of us would have had to do the same.

But God really loved Adam and Eve and He didn't want them to go live with Satan. The surprising thing was that He had known all along what was going to happen, and He had a rescue plan all figured out even before He had made the world.



God was going to send a special man to earth who would save Adam and Eve from their sin. He would make them perfect so that they could live with God forever and never have to be afraid of the Lake of Fire (Second Death). This man would be a mighty King who would destroy all the works of the Devil and break his power completely. God made this promise to Adam and Eve and to those of their descendants who would trust God to keep His word.



The King 's arrival was in the future, so in the meantime people needed a strong reminder that they had to be rescued from sin and eternal death. They had to always remember that they needed the Rescuer King. Otherwise they would forget and ignore God, becoming more and more rebellious like the bad angels. The first thing God did was to kill a little lamb to show Adam and Eve that one day the King would sacrifice Himself for them and His blood would save them. The King would be as innocent and pure as that little lamb. It was the first time Adam and Eve had ever seen death and it must have horrified them. Sacrifice was a terrible thing, as it was meant to be, in order to show the horrific nature of sin.

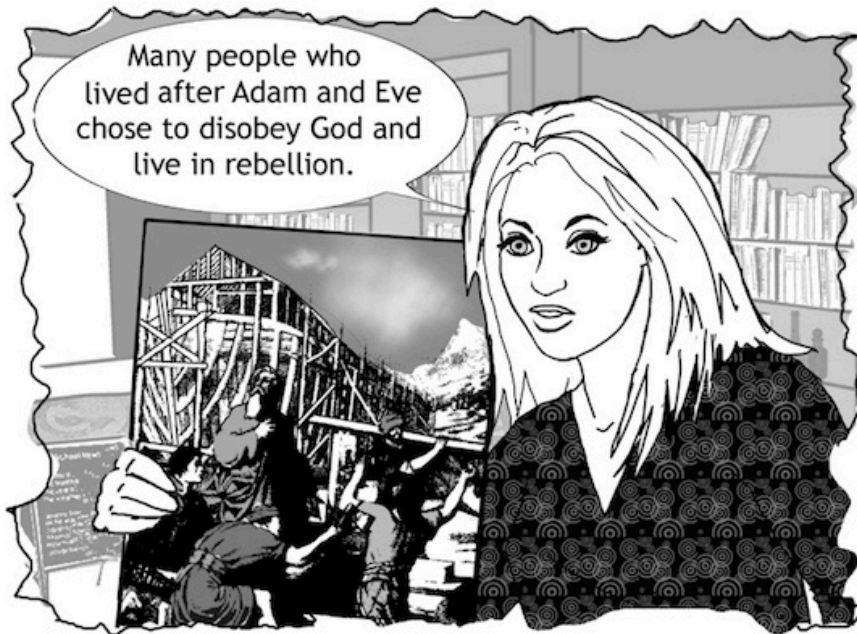


God dressed Adam and Eve in the skin of the sacrificed animal to let them know that they would be sheltered and hidden from God's angry punishment by the covering of the Savior King's own perfection. The King would die in their place, taking their punishment for them. God told Adam and Eve to regularly make lamb sacrifices to remind themselves of this and to indicate that they were trusting in God to keep His promise to save them. This would please God and He would keep back His angry judgement in response to their faith. Even if they died physically before the Savior King came, they would still be protected by their faith and trust in God's promise. They were to teach these things to their children so that they could be protected too.





Many people who lived after Adam and Eve chose to disobey God and live in rebellion.



Auntie Rachel held up a picture of a family building a big boat and explained how long ago they were the only family who still loved God. All the rest of the people had turned away from Him. The man's name was Noah and God used the boat to rescue him and his family, as well as two of every kind of animal and plant on the earth. It was a terribly sad time because everyone got drowned except for this one family. Afterwards God promised to never send a flood like that again.

Once again the earth was filled with many people and once again they turned away from God. Some knew of God's plan but didn't believe it. The idea of trusting God to make them perfect seemed too easy. They began to make up their own rules, deciding what was good and what was bad. They felt that if they kept their rules, God would be satisfied and they would be good enough to live in heaven with God. They didn't realize that they would have to be absolutely perfect to live in a perfect heaven with a perfect God.



To help them understand, God picked a man named Moses to write down His laws. These Ten Commands revealed God's perfection and showed the people they could never be good enough to get to heaven without a Savior. However many people were arrogant enough to think they could keep the laws and qualify for heaven on their own.



Gradually the people spread over the earth and formed tribes and nations. One such nation was Israel. They were lucky because they had God's Ten Commands and His written words. But many Israelites thought this made them special and better than other people. Only a few believed God would send a Savior for all the nations of the world.

The world certainly needed a Savior. Sin's curse brought pain and great anguish to everyone. All of creation was affected. To make matters even worse, Satan, the Enemy, now ruled over the human race. He and his cruel followers did all they could to cause harm to people. He used the same tricks he had used on Adam and Eve in the garden and he managed to get people to worship him and his demons as gods.



Under his influence, the people of the earth experienced every kind of evil, from murder and rape to famine and flood. Satan knew of God's promise to send a Savior so he blinded the people's minds and did all he could to harden their hearts



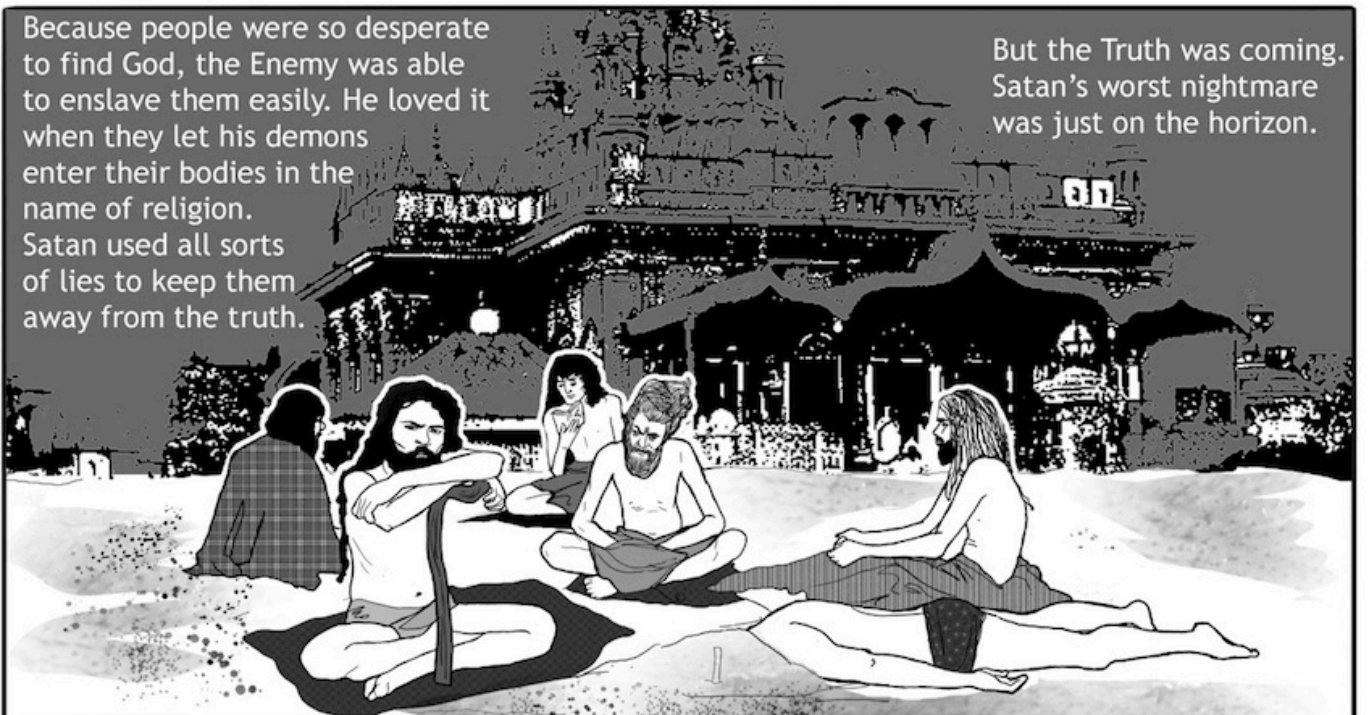
Satan knew his time was short. If God sent a Savior as He had promised, it would mean he would no longer be able to rule the world.

He would not be worshipped any longer and his power would be broken.



Because people were so desperate to find God, the Enemy was able to enslave them easily. He loved it when they let his demons enter their bodies in the name of religion. Satan used all sorts of lies to keep them away from the truth.

But the Truth was coming. Satan's worst nightmare was just on the horizon.







The Savior came quietly and in disguise. Only a few shepherds heard the angelic announcement that He had arrived at last. The little baby boy born in a stable was the long promised Rescuer, and incredibly - He was God Himself! God was still God, but now He also represented the entire human race! That was essential if He was going to rescue the world of people. He had to be one of us to save us. You would never have known He was anybody special though. He had a human mother named Mary and it was thought that her husband, Joseph, was the baby's father - only he wasn't. The Holy spirit had miraculously made the baby inside Mary's body. God was the real Dad and He had even picked out a name for His Son. He was to be called JESUS, which means "Lord of Salvation", because that's who He was.



*For unto us a child is born... a son is given...  
and He will be called Wonderful Counselor,  
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
Isaiah 9:6*

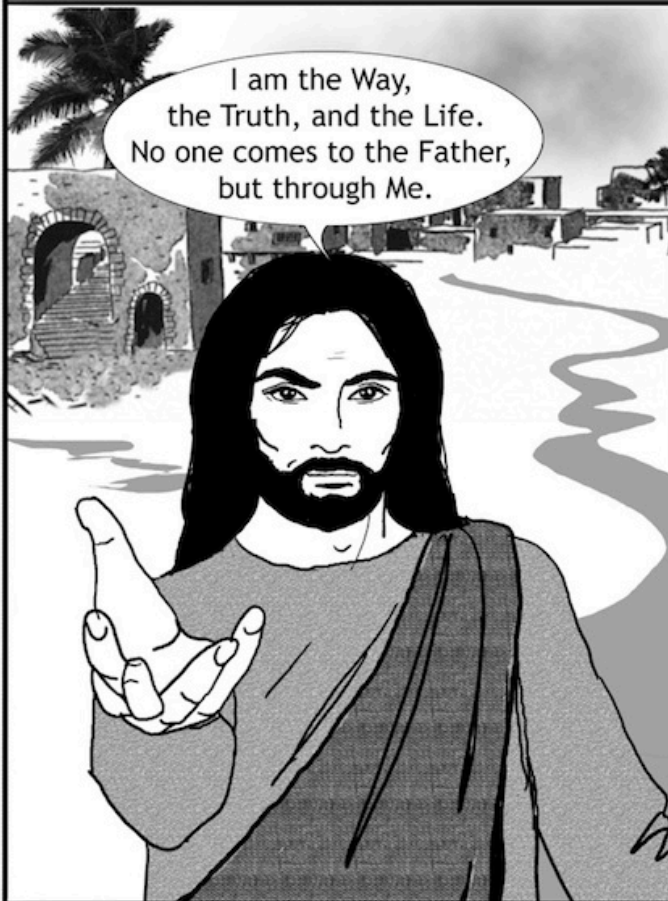


Satan tried to kill the baby by stirring up jealousy in the evil king of the land. King Herod had heard about the birth of a king who was talked about in the Bible. This King would one day rule the entire world. Herod tried to murder the little King but God sent warrior angels to warn Mary & Joseph and get them away to safety. Nothing could harm them because God was protecting them.

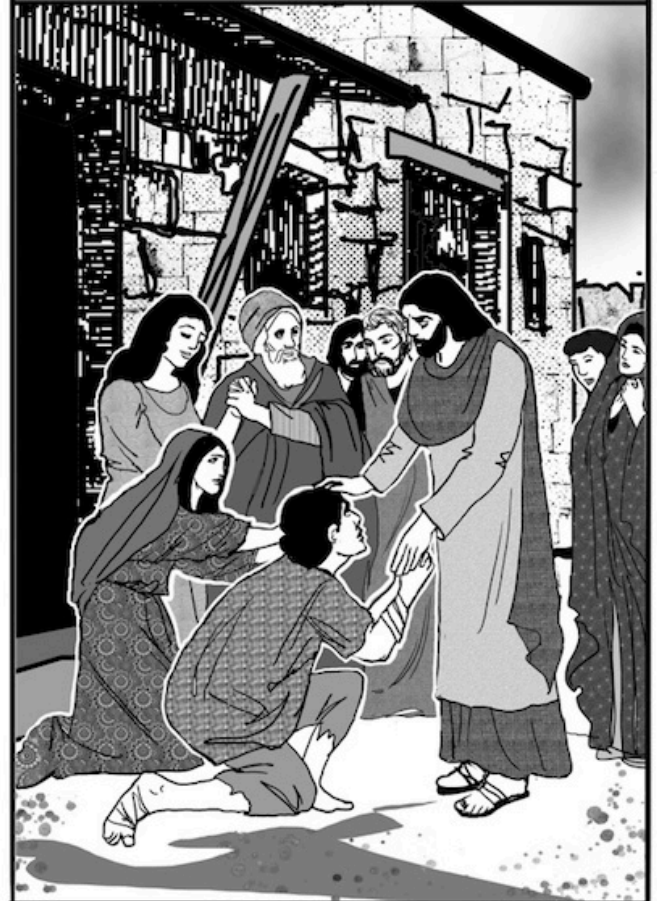




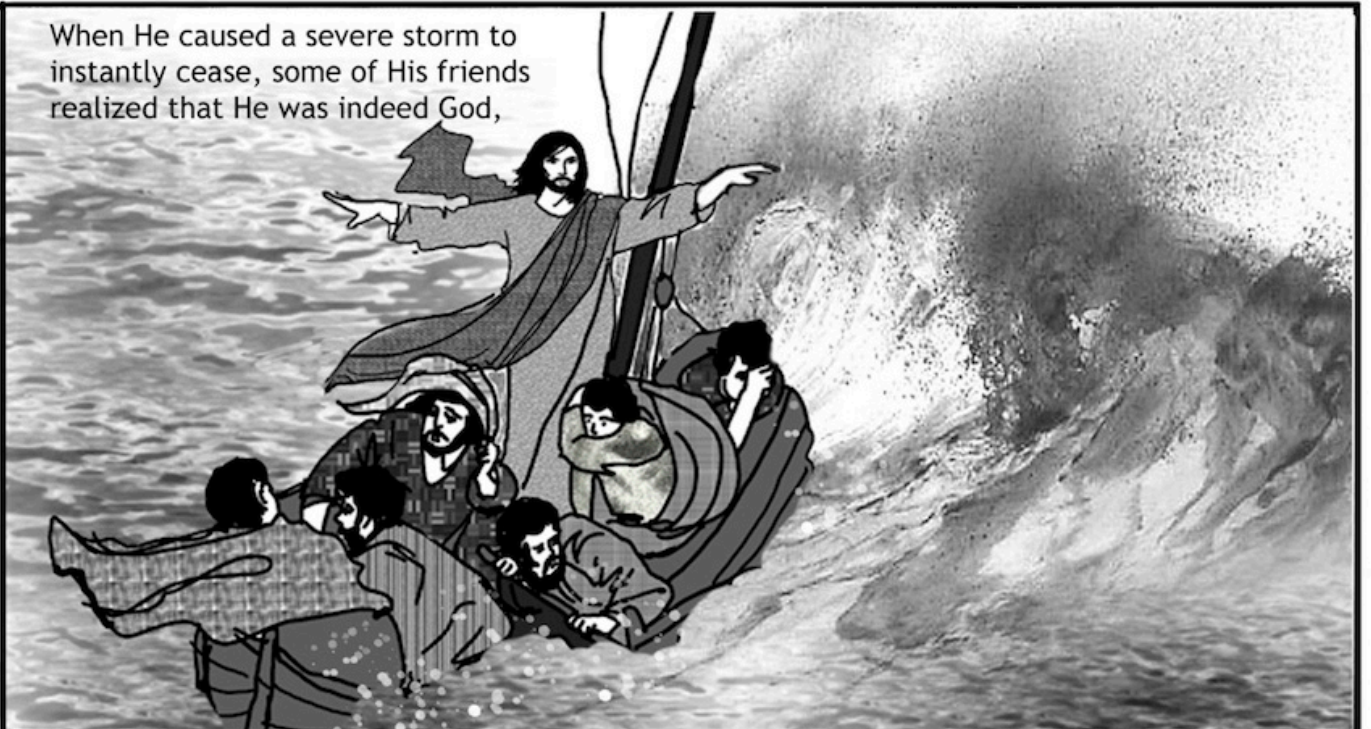
Jesus began His ministry on earth by calling people to turn away from their sin. He said that there was no religion that could make people perfect which is why they needed Him as their Savior. He told people that they had to forget about trusting in anything else to get them to heaven. He was the One and only Way to get there. He spoke with authority and He backed up His words by doing many wonderful miracles. Many of the people believed what He said.



Jesus could heal every disease and no one was ever turned away. He even restored the limbs of some lepers. He also raised several people from the dead. People from all over came to see Him. One time He fed thousands of people (who had come to hear Him teach) by multiplying a few fish and bread loaves. People were ecstatic! They loved that He could feed and heal them. He was also very popular for the great stories He told.

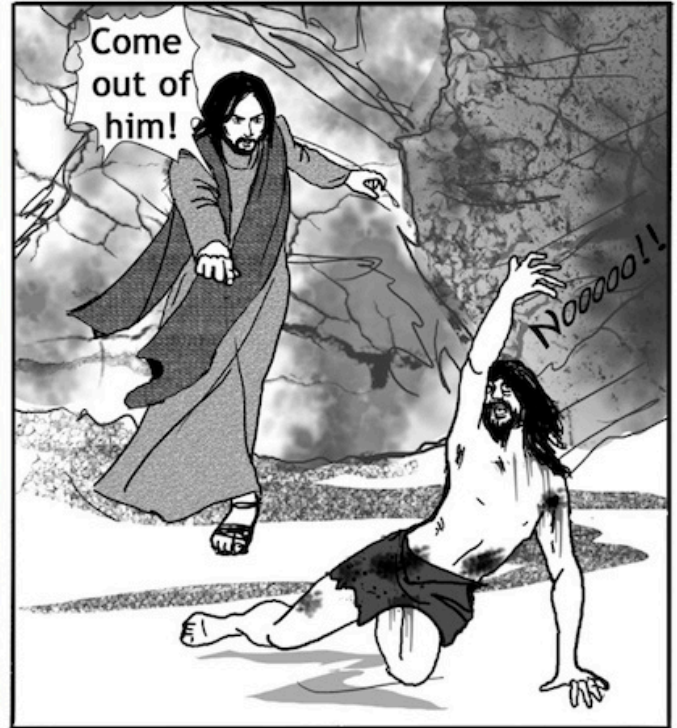


When He caused a severe storm to instantly cease, some of His friends realized that He was indeed God,

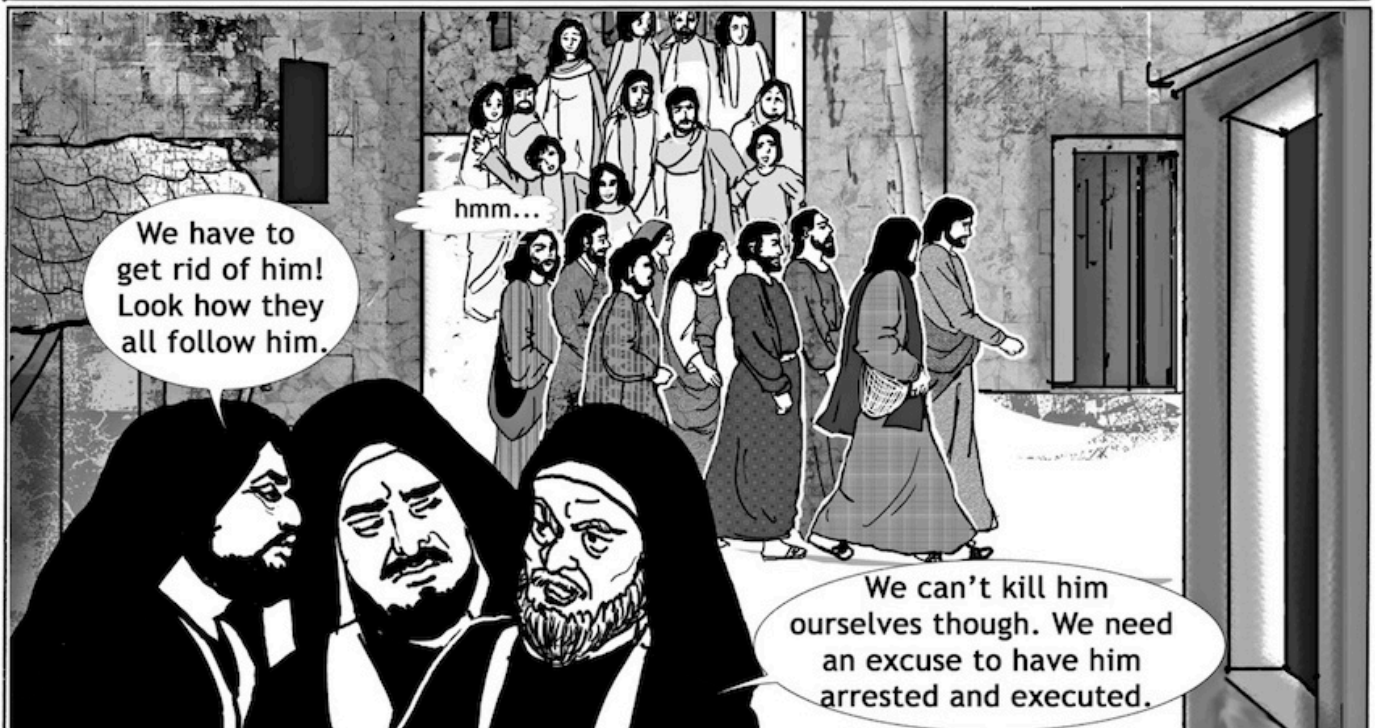




And if there was still any doubt, the fact that Jesus could raise people from the dead should have silenced any detractors. Who but God could make dead people become alive? And who but the Almighty could force demons to leave their victims? He cast them out with a single word of authority and they covered in fear before Him. No one but God had such power over the spiritual realm. For many people it was all the proof they needed.



But others weren't convinced. The religious leaders were jealous because Jesus was gaining many followers. They liked being the boss over people and they liked making lots of rules. People looked up to them and did whatever they said. Now Jesus was telling people that God was perfect and if anyone wanted to get to heaven by obeying God's rules, they had to obey them perfectly. Of course, no one could. Jesus said that's why they needed Him as their Savior. He called the religious rule-makers phonies and 'snakes'. That really made them mad! They spread rumors that Jesus was demon-possessed and a drunkard like His friends, many of whom were prostitutes and thieves. It was such people who hung out with Jesus because they knew they needed a Savior like Him. The religionists didn't think they needed anything but their rules. Some thought Jesus should overthrow the government and make Himself King. Judas, one of Jesus' friends grew bitter and angry when He wouldn't do it.





There was one group of people who trusted Jesus implicitly. Children were drawn to Him, and He to them. It angered Him when His friends thought He was too busy for them.



Children joyously hailed Jesus as the promised Savior as He rode into the city of Jerusalem.



Jesus said that entrance into the kingdom of heaven required the heart of a child, and He gave a strong warning against trying to subvert their faith.

*Make very sure that you don't despise little children. They are so highly regarded by My Father that their angels have special access to Him. Furthermore, unless you are converted and become like a child, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Those who are greatest in the kingdom are humble like a child and whoever receives a little child in My name, receives Me. But if you cause one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better if you had a millstone tied around your neck and you were drowned in the deepest part of the sea. Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! It's inevitable that they come, but woe to anyone through whom the stumbling block comes.*

*Matt 18:10; 3-7 Luke 9:48*



Jesus told His friends that He was going to die. He even told them exactly how it was going to happen. Some men would take Him and He would be beaten, and nailed to a cross. For 3 days He would be dead but He would come back to life after He had paid for the sins of mankind. Jesus said that one of His very own friends would betray Him. He knew exactly who would do it. In fact, He had known from the very first day when He had picked him to be a special friend, that Judas would turn against Him for the price of a few silver coins.



Jesus had come to sacrifice Himself for people but it still hurt Him greatly to know that one of His own friends would actually hand Him over to His enemies. The other friends didn't know anything about it. They were quite confused. They couldn't understand why Jesus was talking about dying. Even though they had been close friends with Him for 3 years, they still hadn't grasped God's plan. Like so many others, they couldn't see how a King who ruled over the kingdom of heaven could ever die. It just made no sense at all.

The religious leaders planned their strategy carefully. First they sent some soldiers to arrest Jesus, and then they questioned Him. When Jesus admitted that He was the Son of God and the King of God's kingdom, they got terribly angry. They twisted Jesus' words so that it sounded like He was rebelling against the Roman government. That was a very serious charge that brought the death penalty, which was exactly what the religious leaders wanted. It all worked perfectly according to plan. Jesus was taken to the Roman governor and accused of rebellion, and just as the religious leaders had hoped, the governor sentenced Jesus to death. First He was to be beaten with whips and then taken to a place where He would be nailed to a cross. It was a hellish way to die - the worst kind of torture - but it was no surprise to Jesus. This was why He had come to earth in the first place. It would be on that cross that He would take on Himself all the sins of mankind. Satan had heard all this but he was so sure that if he could get Jesus killed, that would be the end of Him. He was in for a BIG surprise!





They nailed Jesus to a cross early in the morning. His mother was there, along with a few of His friends. So were the religious leaders who hated Him. So was Satan. As Jesus took upon Himself all the sins of humanity, God, His Father, turned away from Him, causing the full punishment of sin to fall on Him. Jesus' agony was terrible - physically, mentally, and spiritually. He suffered all alone and He did it out of love for people. At any time He could have stepped down off the cross or called millions of angels to destroy His enemies. But He refused to do it. He suffered the torture of hell so that people wouldn't have to. The lambs which people had sacrificed for centuries would never have to be sacrificed again. The Lamb of God had come. A great darkness fell over the land, even though it was the middle of the day. Three hours later Jesus breathed His last breath and cried out in a loud, victorious shout, "IT IS FINISHED!"



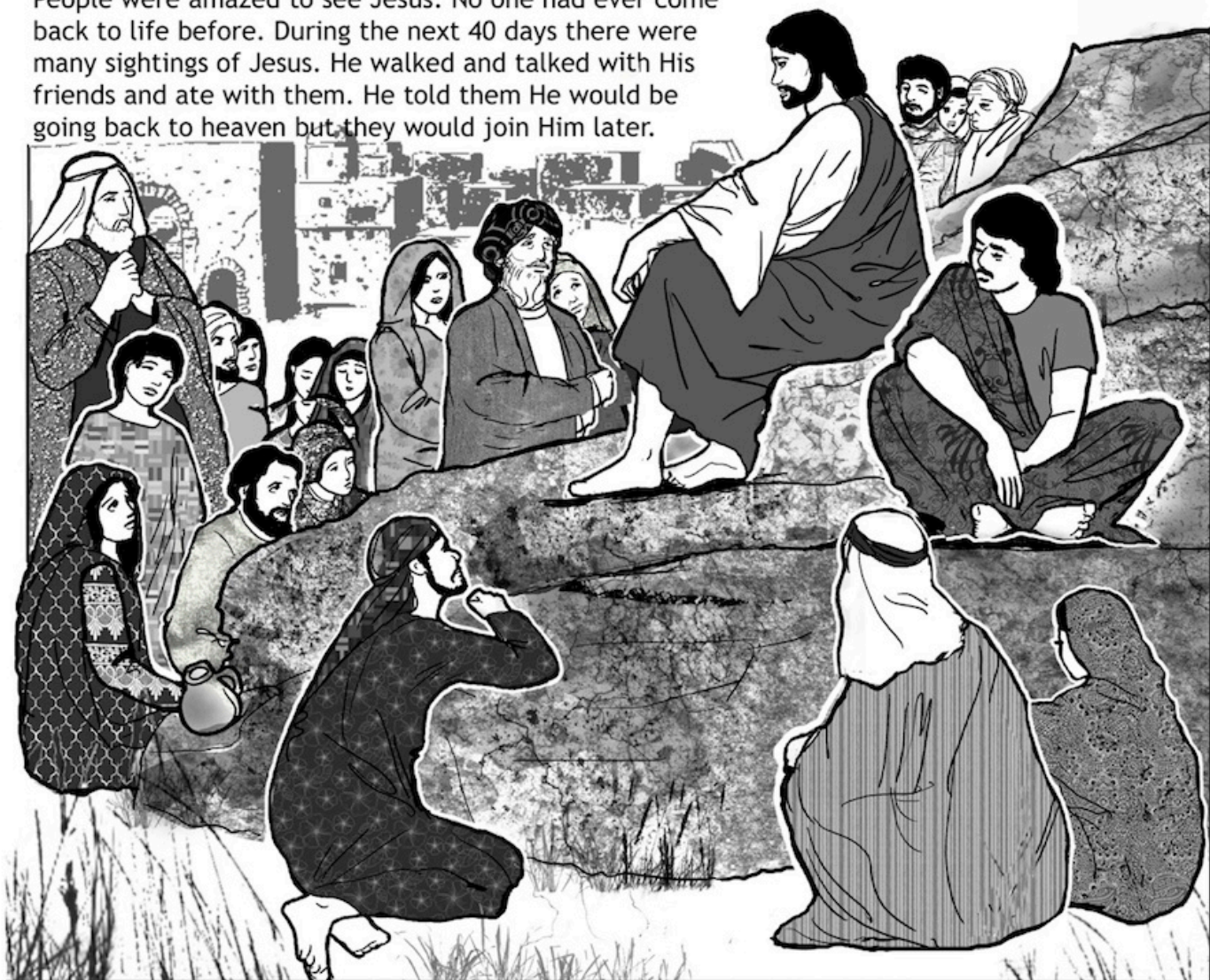
His body was put in a tomb that was sealed with a huge boulder. Jesus had told His friends that He would come back to life after 3 days, so the religious leaders got the governor to set guards around the grave. This was to prevent anyone from stealing the body and then saying Jesus had risen from the dead. No one believed such a thing could happen, not even Jesus' friends, but on the third day after His death, something very strange happened at the tomb.



A great earthquake shook the ground as an angel burst into the scene, paralyzing the Roman guards with fear. The angel moved the stone away and when the guards became conscious again, they saw that Jesus was gone. They ran off to tell the governor what had happened. Next morning Jesus' friends came to the tomb and were told by the angels that Jesus had come back to life.



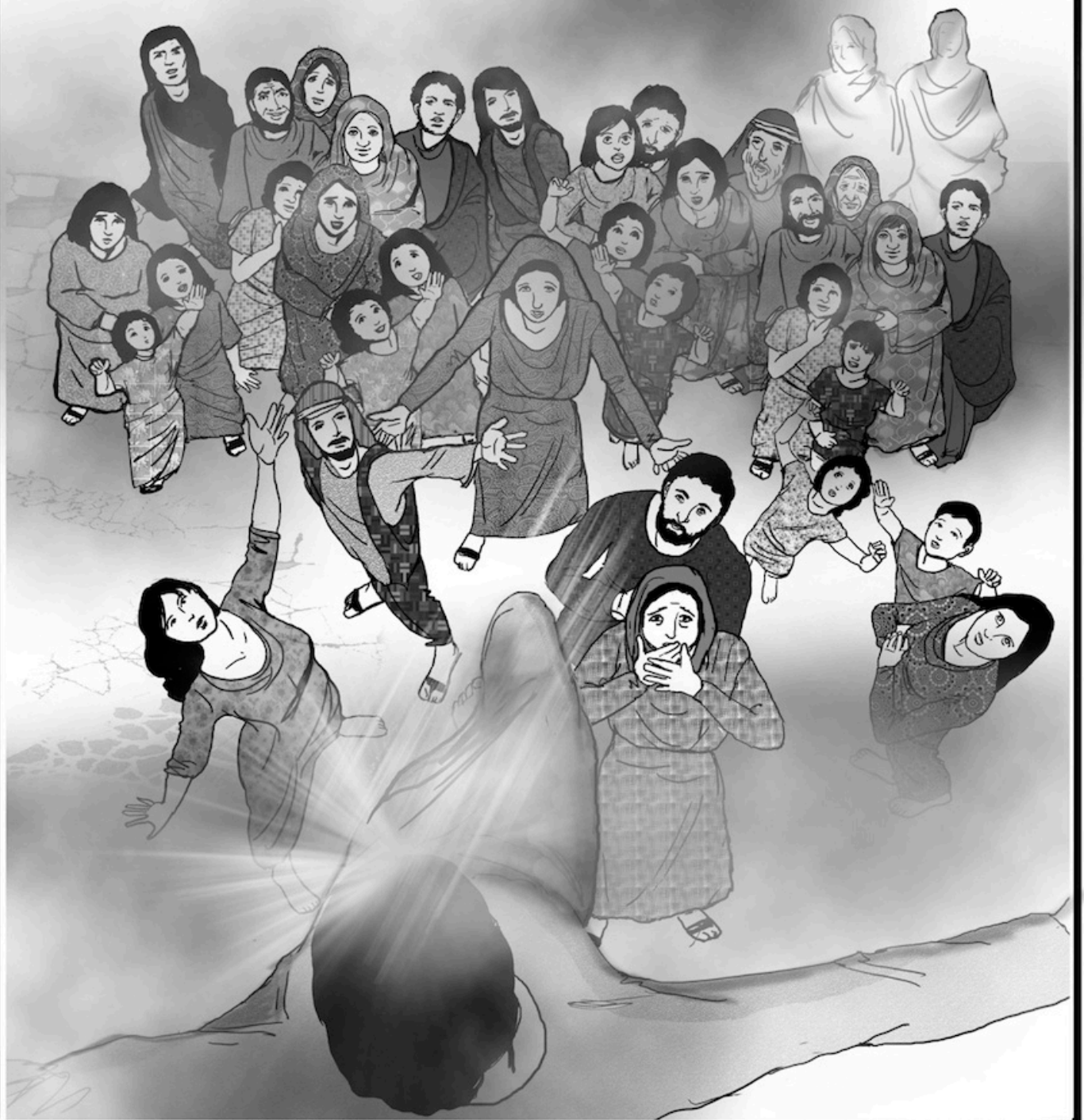
People were amazed to see Jesus. No one had ever come back to life before. During the next 40 days there were many sightings of Jesus. He walked and talked with His friends and ate with them. He told them He would be going back to heaven but they would join Him later.



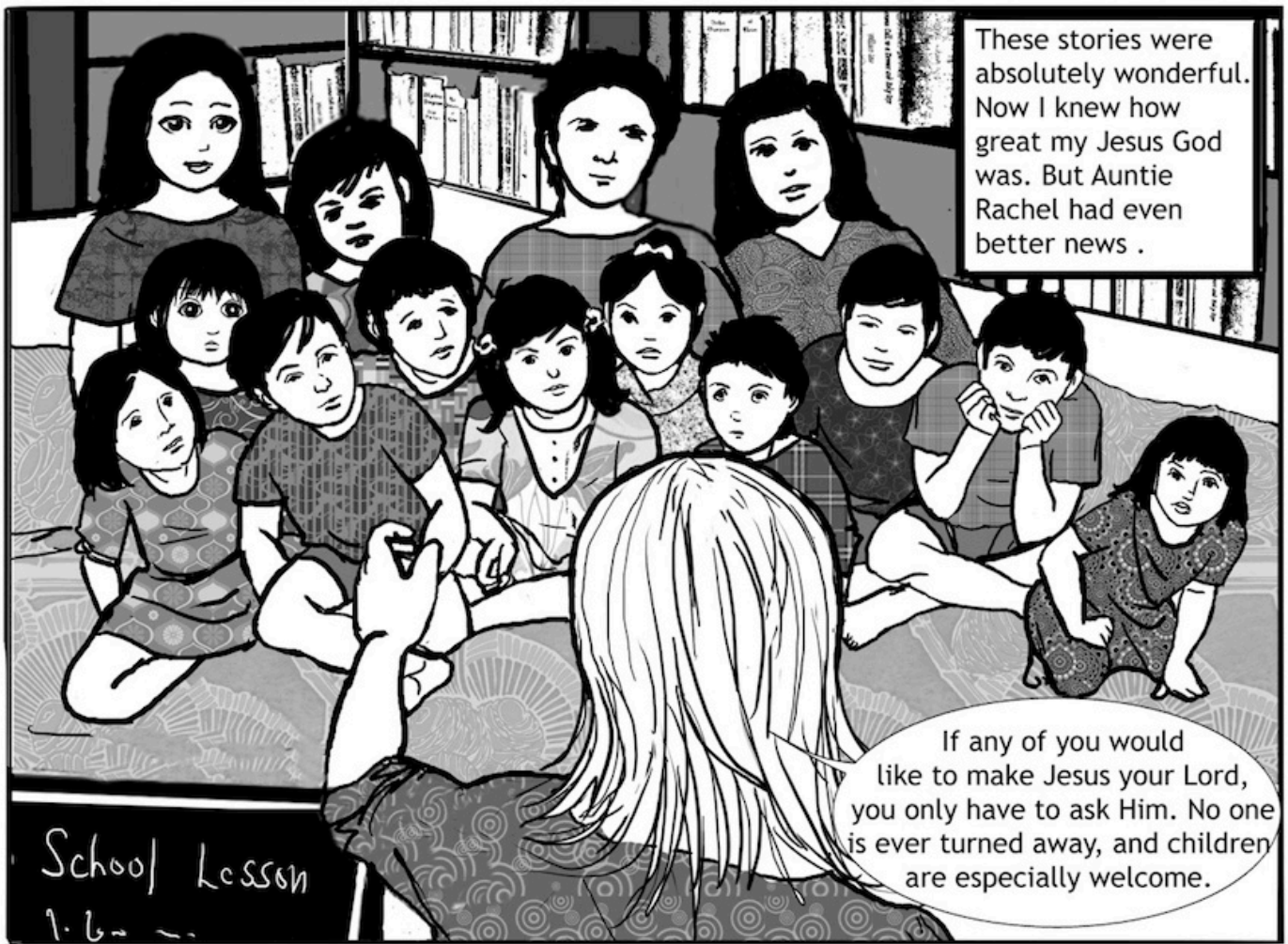


Best of all, He told His friends that they would never have to fear death anymore. The power of sin had been broken and the Devil had been judged. He was not in control of the earth any longer. The kingdom of heaven had come to earth and all who took Jesus as their King belonged to that kingdom. From now on they were called children of God because God was their Father. They'd rule spiritually with Christ in the heavenlies, and they were commissioned to bring the good news of salvation to everyone on earth so that all people could have a chance to become part of this powerful new kingdom. It was God's free gift to humanity and no one was turned away. If a person believed that Jesus was their Lamb; that He had taken away their sins; then they would be reborn as a new creature. They would be completely transformed inside, receiving a new heart that was filled with the life of God, in the Person of the Holy Spirit. God would actually live inside them forever as a Helper and a Comforter!

After Jesus had finished speaking with His friends, He was suddenly lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently at the sky while He was going, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They said: Why are you looking in the sky; This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.







These stories were absolutely wonderful. Now I knew how great my Jesus God was. But Auntie Rachel had even better news .

If any of you would like to make Jesus your Lord, you only have to ask Him. No one is ever turned away, and children are especially welcome.

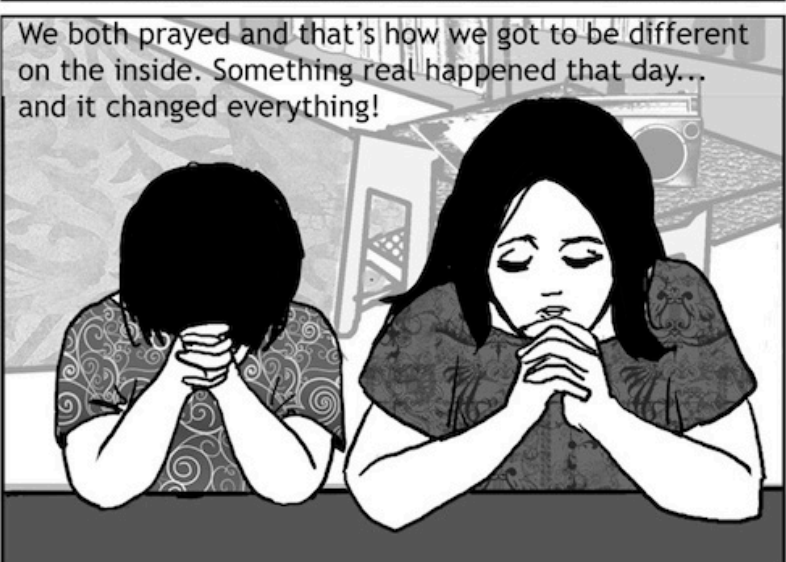
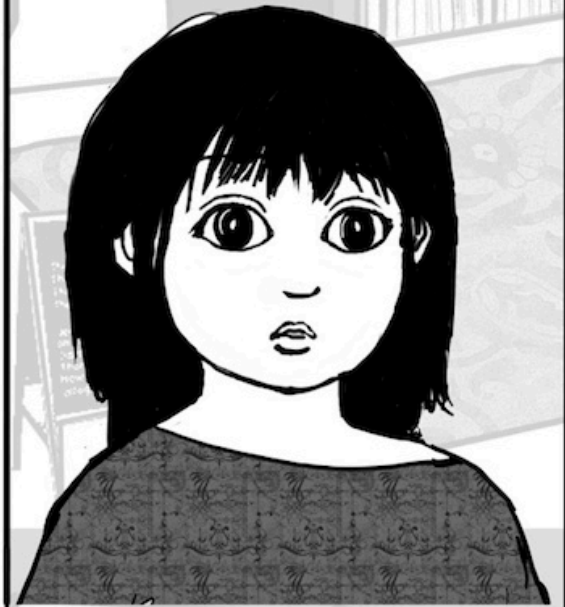
School Lesson  
1.6 - -

Auntie Rachel told us not to make Jesus our King unless we were willing to make Him our one and only God. Anyone who wanted to have Jesus in their lives had to believe He was the only true God and you couldn't add any others, or worship idols. That was hard for a Hindu to do because Hinduism teaches that you can have as many gods or goddesses as you like. It also teaches that if you're born a Hindu, you have to stay being one.



I wanna do it, Anita.

Me too.



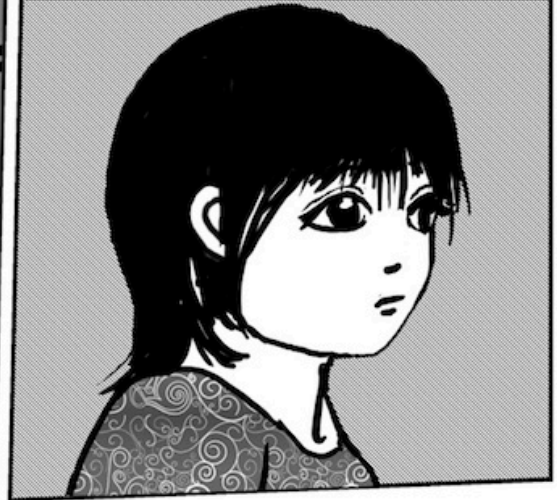
We both prayed and that's how we got to be different on the inside. Something real happened that day... and it changed everything!

For one thing, I couldn't stop talking about Jesus cause I was so excited about Him.

I talked to Bindi and her friend, Jyoti, and anyone else who would listen. Bindi had already asked Jesus to be her God but Jyoti was still thinking about it.



I couldn't understand why anyone would hesitate about making Jesus their God when He loved them so .



It was so amazing that the God who made the whole universe actually loved me and wanted me for a friend. It was really too wonderful for words and it quite took my breath away. One thing for sure, I never wanted to do things that made Jesus disappointed in me. No more lying, stealing, and tricking western tourists! Those things had never felt right and now they seemed especially wrong. Anita felt the same way. In fact, we thought alike about a lot of things. We both decided we wanted to live at the mission and go to school like Bindi was doing. There was nothing for us back at our village anymore. No family. No home, Nothing. It was here at the mission that we felt the love of family and friends.

Pastor Peter Deepak was like a kind, friendly grandpa who was never too busy for kids, even though he had a very busy schedule. He was like Jesus that way. Everyone loved him, even though he sometimes got tough if someone wasn't behaving well. He ran Grace Mission and he was also the pastor of an inner city church that he started.



Uncle Raj was lots of fun. He let me play on his motorcycle and even took me for a ride once. He had grown a beard and let his hair grow long because he was trying to blend in with the Sonagachi crowd. He was looking for leads on missing street children who were rumored to have been kidnapped and sold into the brothels there. It was terribly dangerous work.





Auntie Rachel was my favorite. She was the mission's counselor and children's worker and she was really good at her job. Anita and I told her all about Mummy and Daddy and Kumari and how we lived with our uncle now. She was sad that so many bad things had happened to us, but she said Jesus would take care of us if we trusted Him to do it. I really loved Auntie Rachel. I suspected that maybe Uncle Raj did too. His eyes lit up like stars when he saw how we dressed her up in Indian clothes. She looked beautiful!



There were 2 new people at the mission-Marcus and Janet Brook. They were good friends of Uncle Raj. They had come to Kolkata to help with rescue work. Uncle Marcus used to be a police officer in America and then a private detective. He met Janet in Thailand and after they were married, they started their own rescue operation in Nepal. They taught all us kids how to play soccer and I liked to watch their games. Auntie Janet was as strong as a boy and she even looked a little like one too.



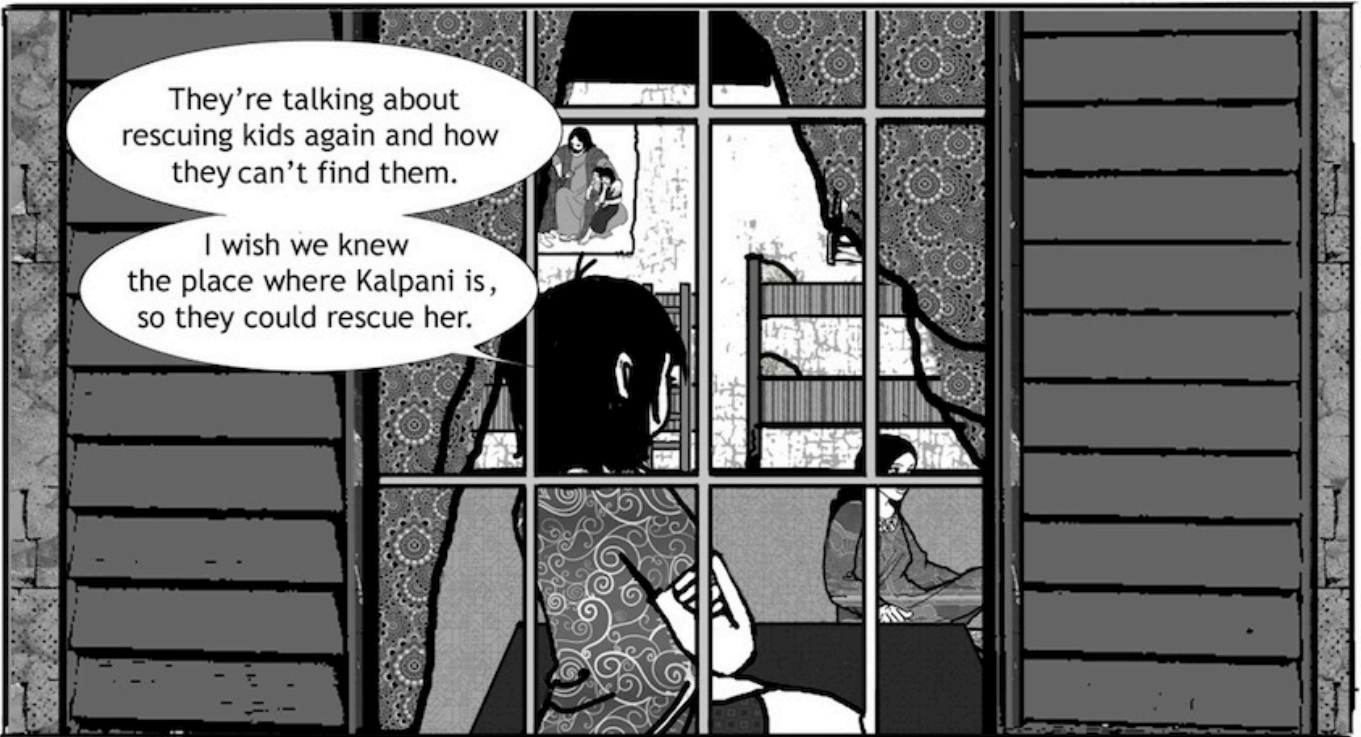
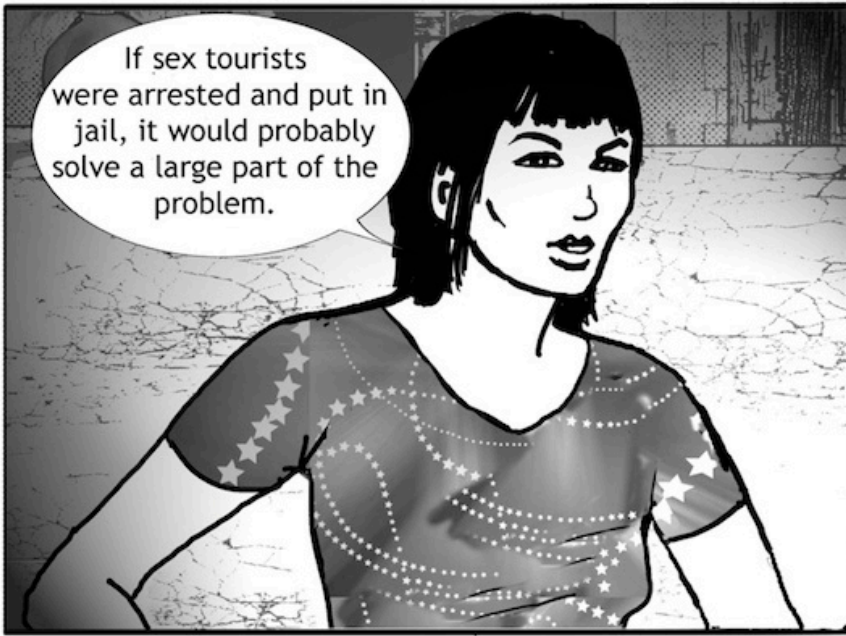


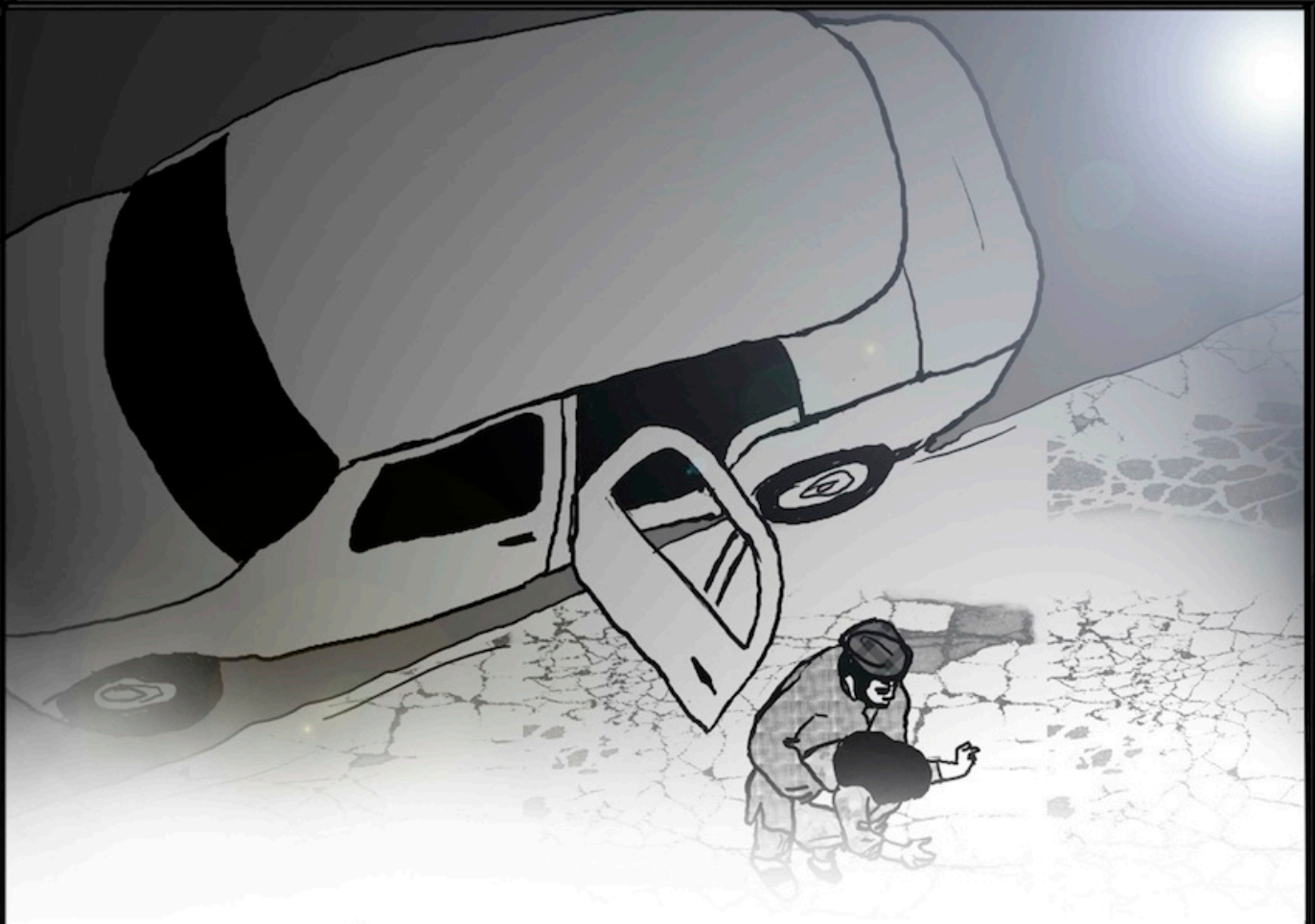
One evening, when the other kids were still downstairs, we played a game of snakes and ladders. I was bored of the game so I was looking out the window at the Brooks, Uncle Raj, and Auntie Rachel as they chatted around a table. They were laughing and joking as usual. Uncle Marcus said he liked Uncle Raj's new look - that it made him look so tough that he almost forgot what a wuss Uncle Raj really was. After awhile their conversation got really serious as they began discussing the sex slave trade that was carried on in the brothels of Sonagachi. Uncle Raj was doing undercover work that involved infiltrating the brothels in order to find out if there were any children there who had been forced into prostitution. He hoped to set up a rescue attempt to free them.



The trouble is there's so many brothels, and they're like rabbit warrens with secret passages and winding alleys and hidden trapdoors. And we don't know which ones are selling the young kids. The police say we have to have solid evidence. I met a sex tourist yesterday who might give me a lead - if I don't strangle him first. I don't know..guys like that.. I can hardly stomach him.







The man sold Kalpani to Madame, and his servant dragged her upstairs to our floor. He told my Ma to take care of her and to not let her go back downstairs. The little Nepalese girl ran to a window and looked down at the street below. She started crying real hard, so Ma took her into one of the rooms where the new girls always go, to try to calm her down...





A couple of days later Ma heard Madame talking in the hallway to one of her hired goons. A bunch of men were waiting there too.

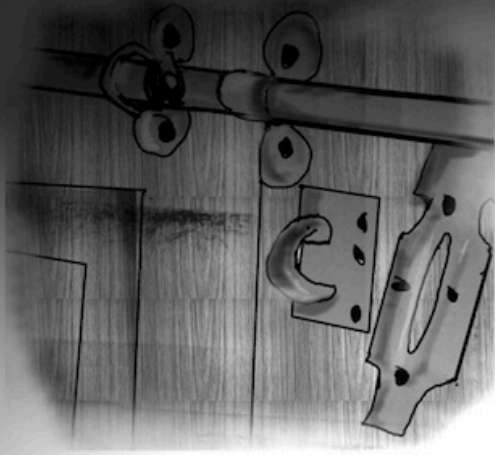
Madame sometimes allowed this man to have the new girls first. It was part of his pay for guarding the brothel and acting as a bodyguard for Madame. Everyone in the brothel was terribly afraid of him.



The men were all laughing and some of them were drunk. They were all wanting to 'try out the new one'. Kalpani was asleep in one of the little rooms where the girls serve their clients. She heard noises in the hallway and woke up...

My Ma felt really sorry for the little girl but there was nothing she or anyone else could do for her. She had been bought so she would have to work off her debt to Madame before she could ever leave the brothel. Many of the girls are never able to leave...

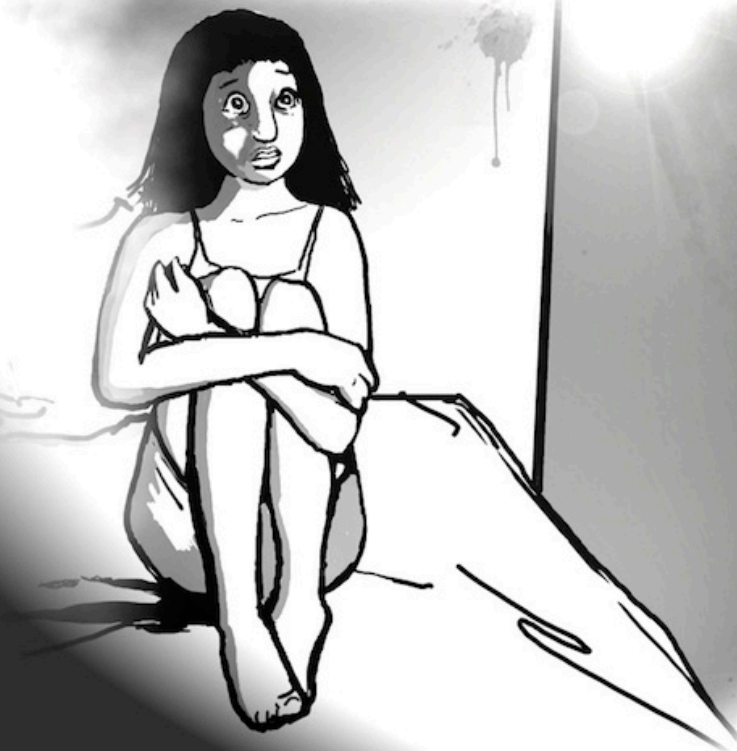




At first Kalpani screamed and screamed . We heard her all the way downstairs even though the door was closed...it was awful... The screams went on and on all night long...sometimes there were just moans and low groans... and then ... she didn't scream anymore... In fact she didn't even talk...



That was the last time I saw her because Ma brought me here. She said she was afraid Madame would do the same to me... force me to be a sex worker... because most of Madame's customers like the really young virgins...like your friend.







Jyoti shared her story with the grownups. They listened with grave expressions on their faces.







## CHILD SEX SLAVERY IN INDIA



The Indian police estimate that there are 1.2 million children enslaved in prostitution. Other surveys from women and child development agencies report that children make up 40% of all India's prostitutes. Clients for the brothels now prefer 10-12 year old girls, or even younger. Recently the Supreme Court of India stated that India is becoming a hub for large-scale child prostitution rackets. A soaring number of prostitutes are contracting HIV/AIDS.

Indian clients tend to favor the fair-skinned, exotic features of Nepali girls, especially if they are virgins. Every year 5000 to 7000 Nepalese girls are trafficked into the the red light areas of Indian cities. At least 200,000 have been trafficked thus far and many are barely 9 to 10 years old.

Child sex tourism is another factor in the child sex slave trade. Foreigners from other countries travel to Asia to exploit young children for sex, resulting in mental and physical consequences for the children, as well as disease, drug addiction, pregnancy, malnutrition, social ostracism, and death.

Often children are sold into sex slavery by their families to settle debts, or to raise money for gambling, drinking, or drugs. Even wives and sisters are sometimes sold to brothels.

The problem is compounded when there is police corruption, lack of enforcement of existing laws, and a general apathy from the government.

# 9. Mission



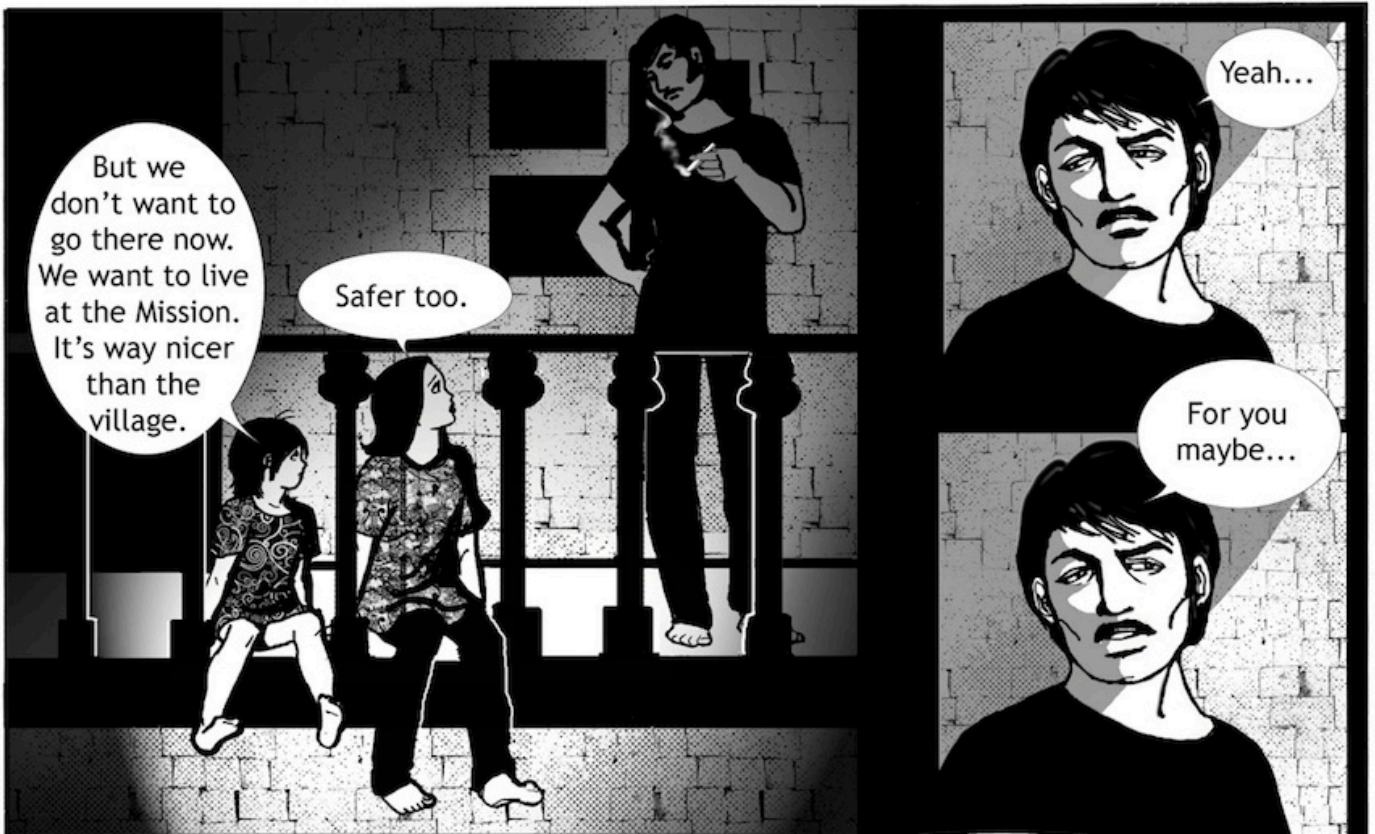


Uncle Raj drove us home in Pastor Deepak's car because it was getting late and the people at the Mission wouldn't let us go home alone. The streets of Kolkata were always dangerous for two girls alone at night - this night especially because there was another power cut and everything was pitch black. Uncle Rupesh let us in and we could tell he was angry that we were so late, but Uncle Raj introduced himself and was so friendly that Uncle Rupesh soon forgot about being mad.



What were you guys doing out so late?

We told Uncle everything we had learned about Kalpani. He was silent a long time, smoking his beedi and staring down at the dark street below. He didn't seem surprised by what we'd told him. He knew what happened in those kinds of places - where grown men hurt little girls for the fun of it. He said that Ranjan had been trying to get him to sell us to him for months. Lately he'd been pressuring our uncle to pay back all the money he owed. He was getting impatient and angry, constantly reminding Uncle that selling us to him would clear his debts. Uncle Rupesh said we'd have to leave soon for our village, where we'd all be safe. He said Ranjan wouldn't think of looking for us there.



But we don't want to go there now. We want to live at the Mission. It's way nicer than the village.

Safer too.

Yeah...

For you maybe...

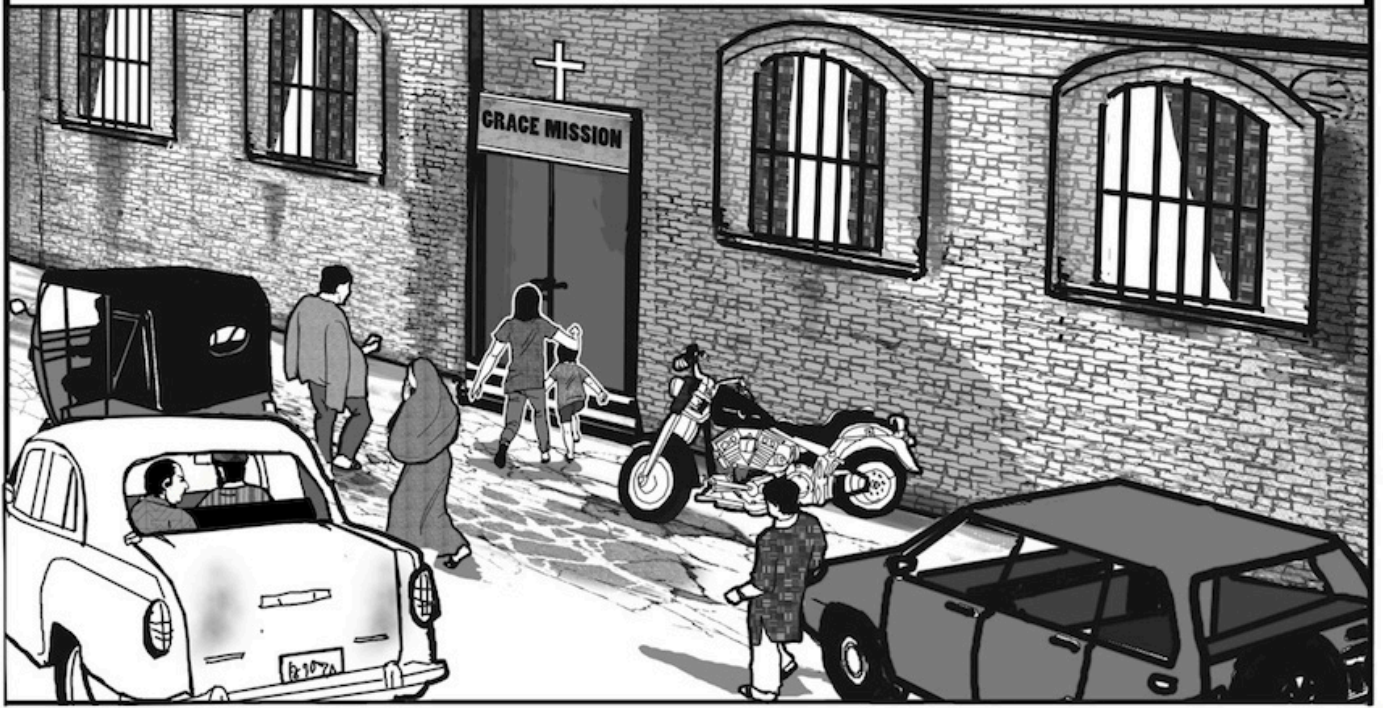


The elders of your village won't hide me if you're not with me. I know I never should have taken you from there in the first place, but I did, and now I'm trying to do what's best for all of us.

I sold that ring for a nice little sum that should keep us going for some time. In another few days we'll make a break for it. In the meantime we act like everything's normal... and **DON'T YOU DARE TELL ANYONE ABOUT OUR PLANS!!**

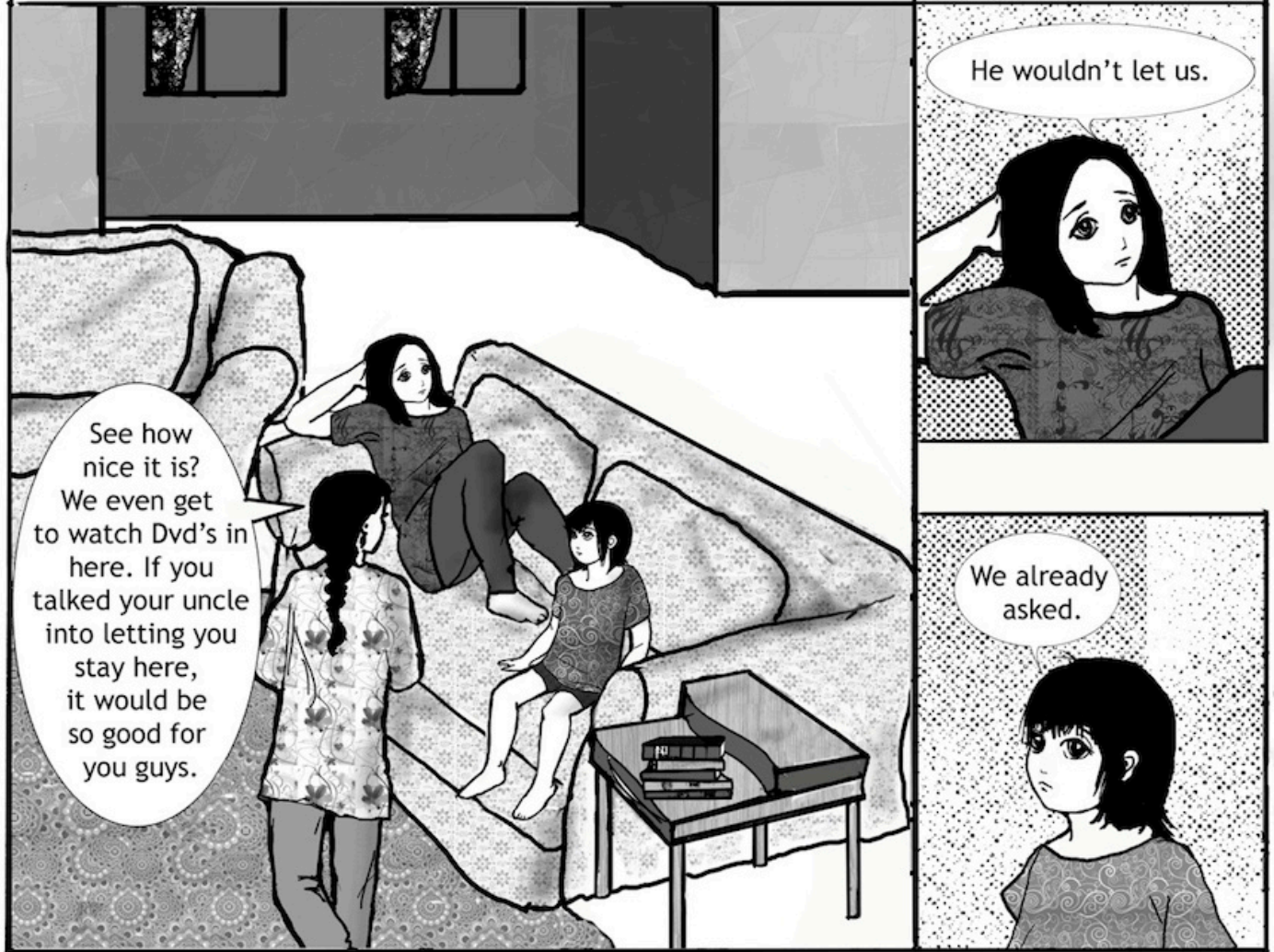


Next morning we went to the Mission, knowing that we would soon be leaving Kolkata and would likely never see our friends again. It was depressing to think that this might even be our last visit.

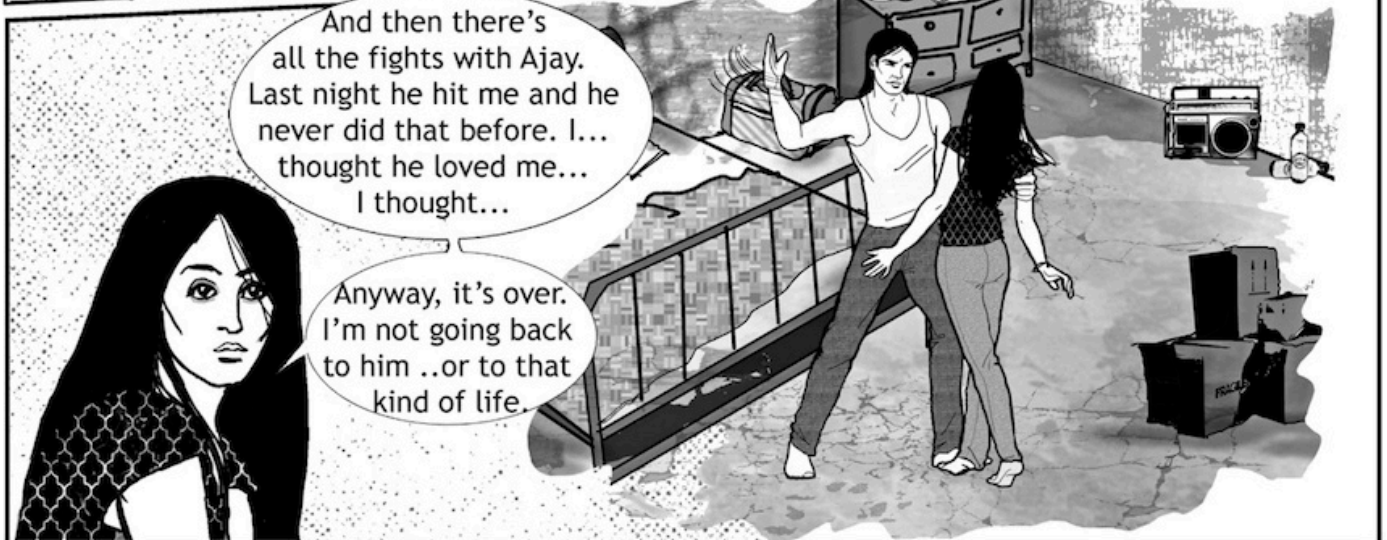
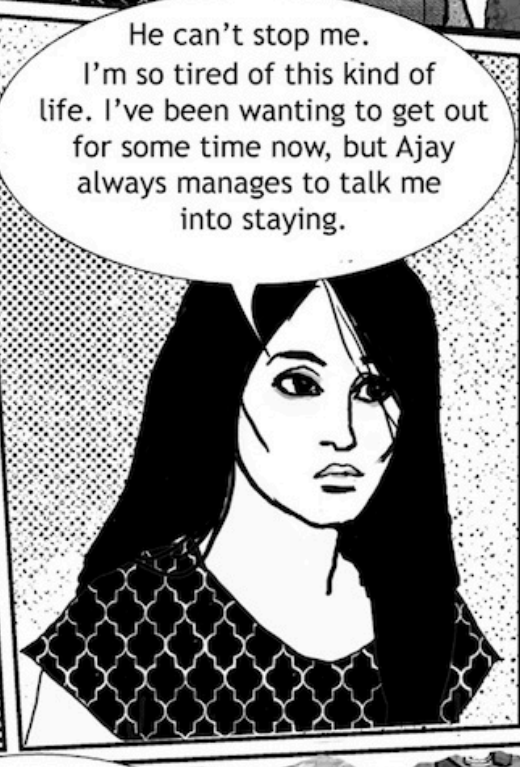




Bindi took us to the lounge where the mission staff came to rest and recuperate after a long day. It was also used as a conference and counseling room, and twice a month it served as a movie room for the kids living in the dormitories upstairs.





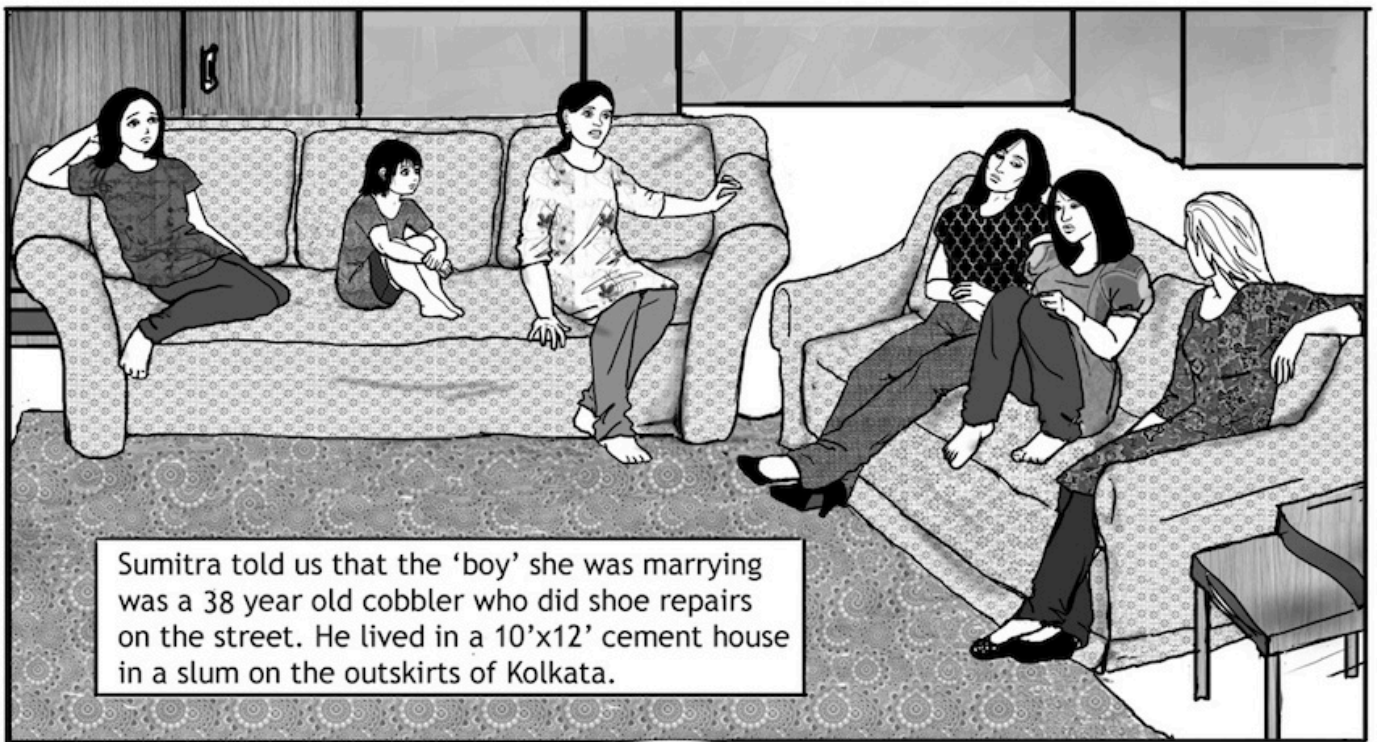




Auntie Rachel had us all sit down so we could have a chat.







Sumitra told us that the 'boy' she was marrying was a 38 year old cobbler who did shoe repairs on the street. He lived in a 10'x12' cement house in a slum on the outskirts of Kolkata.



But isn't he awfully old for you, Sumitra? You're only fourteen after all.

We tried to be happy for Sumitra but I sure wouldn't have wanted to marry such and old man! Still, she was happy with the arrangement so that was the main thing. Auntie Rachel suggested that Jayanti come to her office to sign some papers for the safe house.



We can pick up your things after we do the paperwork.



He's a bit old... but Mama says I can't be too fussy, especially as he's not asking for a dowry, and I'll be able to get off the street. I'll have my own house too... and he's not too ugly.

Sumitra was a wealth of information.  
She told us all the latest news on the street.



Harley (he had named himself after his favorite motorcycle) was now a mechanic fixing scooters. He hadn't hung out with the gang much because he and Santosh didn't get along.



Santosh had disappeared. No one knew where he had gone. Some said he had overdosed on drugs. Someone said he had been killed by a street gang. He had been flashing around a lot of money and that was never a wise thing to do on the streets.



Rakesh was going to be adopted by a couple who owned a hotel. Sumitra said they'd probably use the little guy as cheap labor. Indian adoptions were rare in the first place, and when they did happen, the kids usually ended up as family servants.



Ranjeet would probably be in the remand home until he was 18. Sumitra had heard from a former inmate that he was often picked on by the older boys. One had even poured boiling water over his arm. Sumitra said he'd probably be a very different person by the time he got out.



Poor Ranjeet.  
He was my favorite.



As I listened to the news about the kids I had come to know on the streets, I realized that I cared about them. I didn't want to leave them behind. At one time all I could think about was how horrible it was in Kolkata, and how much I wanted to be gone from this place. Now I wanted nothing more than to stay here and help my friends. I just couldn't figure myself out at all!!!



When Jayanti came back from the office, she asked Sumitra if she would do a favor for her.



I need to get my things from Ajay's, but Rachel thinks it isn't smart for me to go.

Your boyfriend might try to stop you from leaving if he sees you.



Sumitra agreed to go with Auntie Rachel to get Jayanti's possessions. Jayanti said it was a good time to go because Ajay was hardly ever home during the day. He was usually busy selling drugs on the street and doing errands for Ranjan. As they left, the rest of us went to the dining hall for lunch. The mission always let us eat there for free along with the kids living at the mission.



Mmmm. Smells like chicken biriyani.

I hope they have samosas again.

Must be great to live in this place. I hope the safe house is as nice.



Mmmmm. so good.

Wait til you taste dessert.



Uncle Raj came by our table and asked how we were doing. Anita introduced him to Jayanti and told him about her having to go into a safehouse because of Ajay.



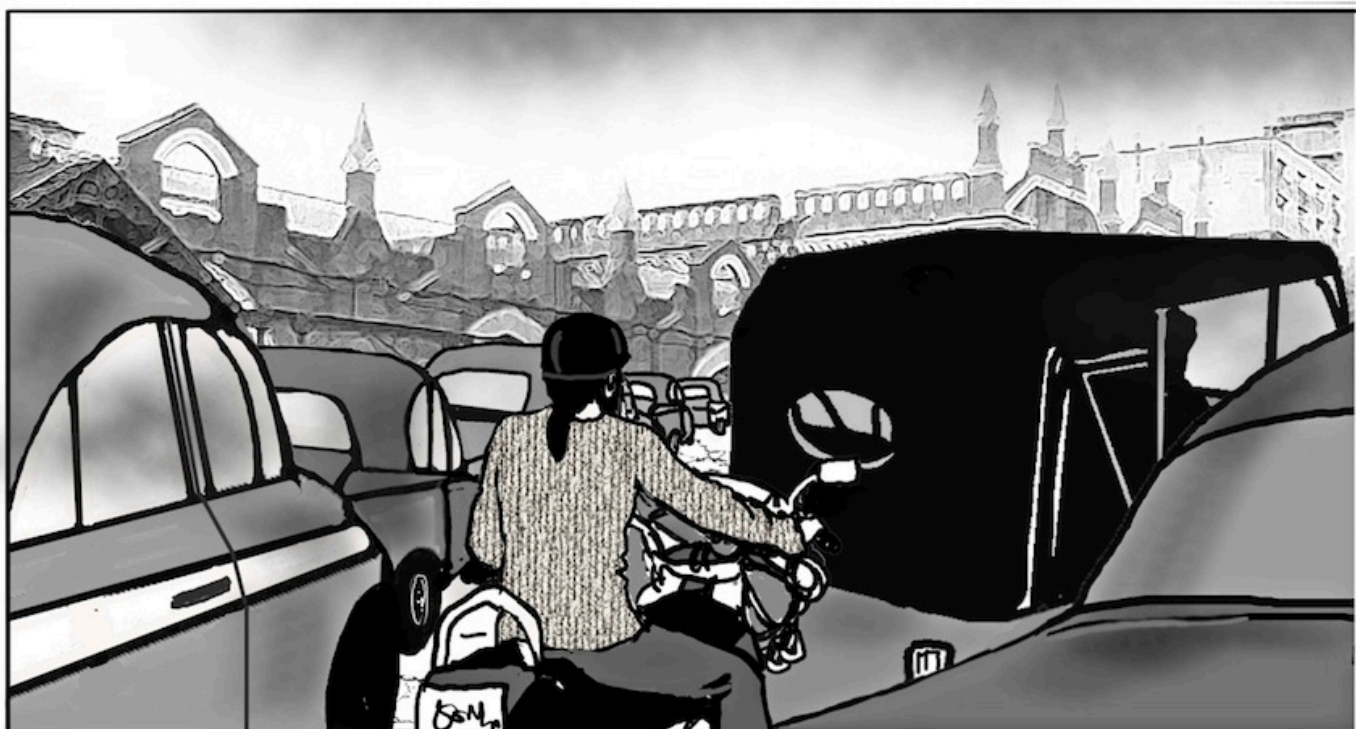
Then he left the lunch room really fast with a very determined look on his face.



Uncle Raj got real serious all of a sudden and he asked for the address where Auntie and Sumitra had gone.



That's weird.



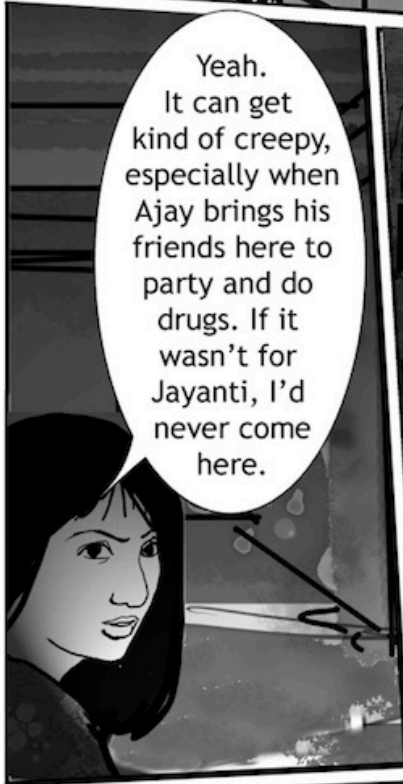




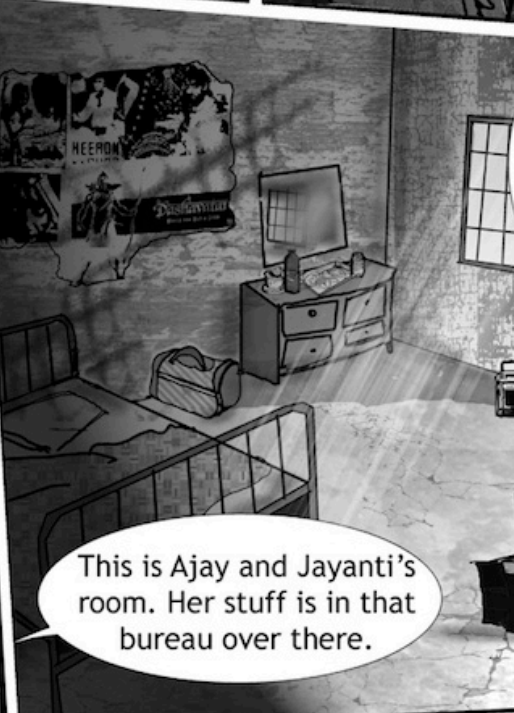
I told the driver to come back in an hour. We should be packed by then.



Wow! It's really dark in here. This place is like a maze...all these corridors and tunnel-like rooms.



Yeah. It can get kind of creepy, especially when Ajay brings his friends here to party and do drugs. If it wasn't for Jayanti, I'd never come here.



This is Ajay and Jayanti's room. Her stuff is in that bureau over there.



You can take that down and I'll just finish up the rest.



Sheesh! Now I'm good and lost. Ah! Finally! A door leading outside.



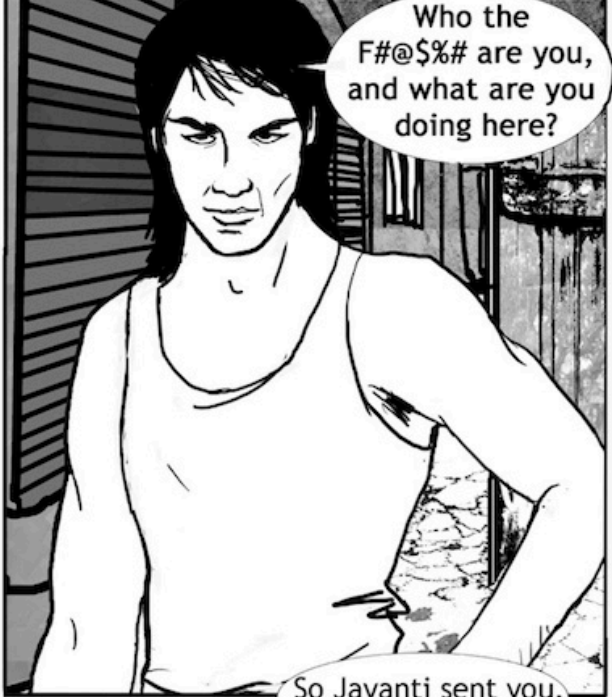
So how much you selling it for, Ajay?



Ho man! Will you look at that?!



Nice.



Who the F#@%\$# are you, and what are you doing here?



Uh..I'm Rachel Woods.. from Grace Mission? I'm here to collect Jayanti's things for her. She gave me the key. Um..you're Ajay I'm guessing.

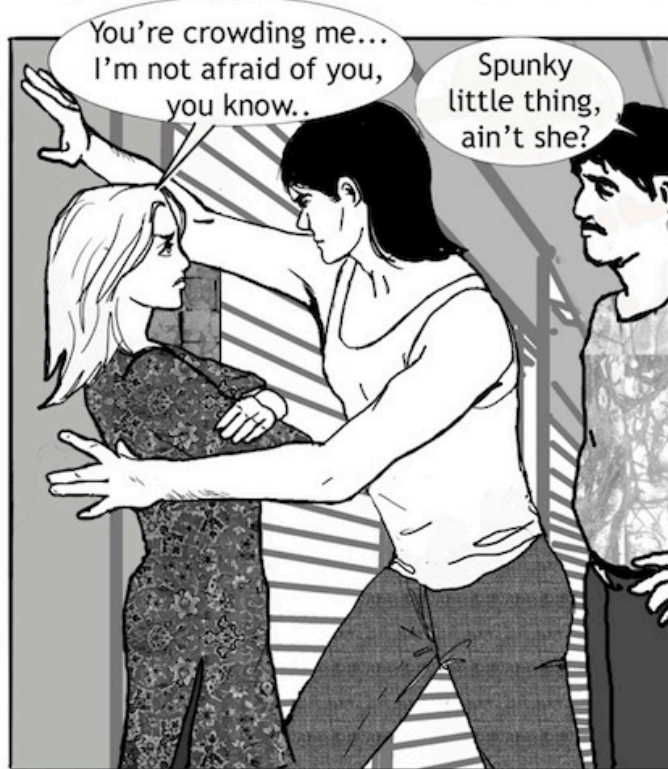


That's right sweetheart ..and Jayanti can get her things herself.



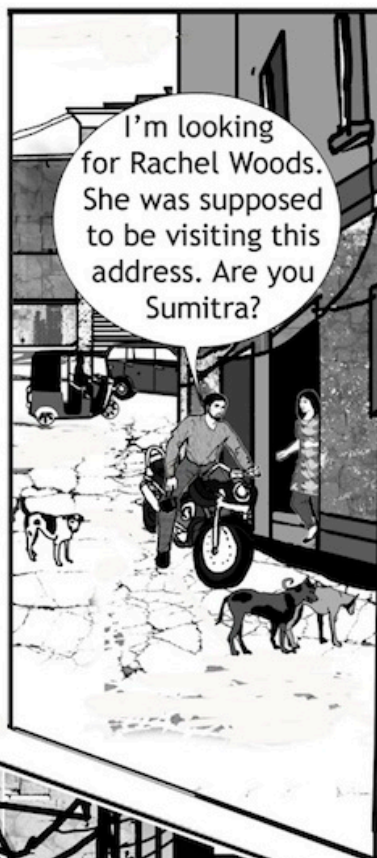
So Jayanti sent you, did she?







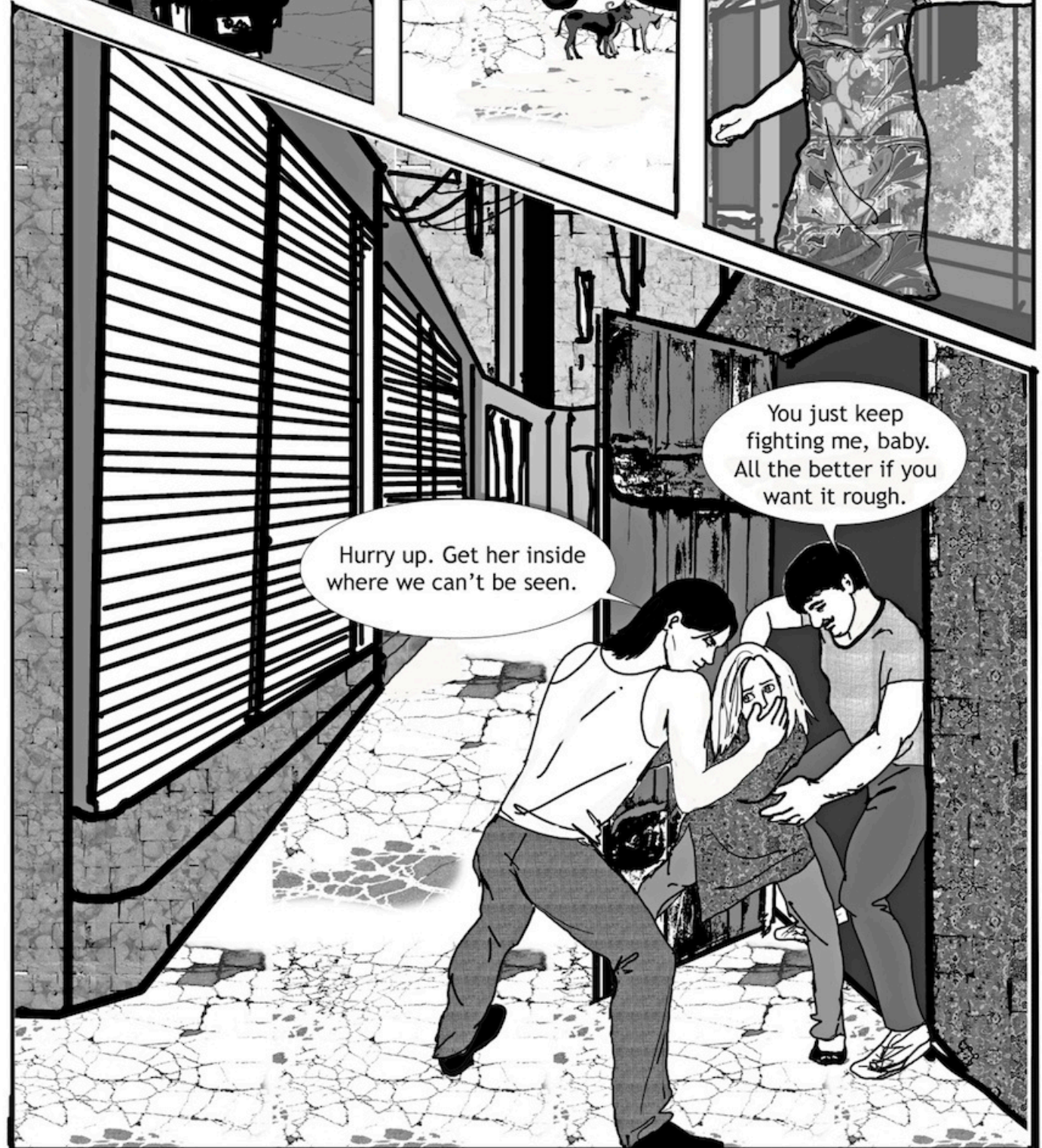




I'm looking for Rachel Woods. She was supposed to be visiting this address. Are you Sumitra?



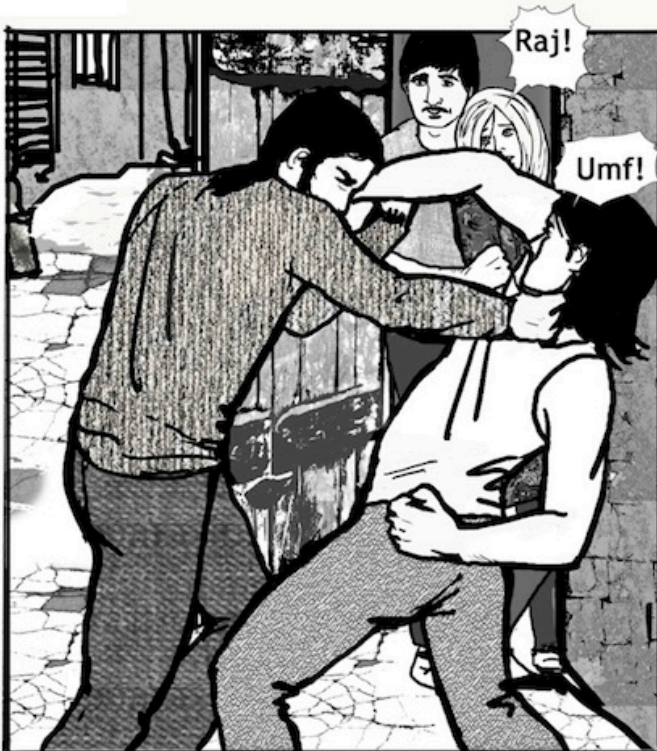
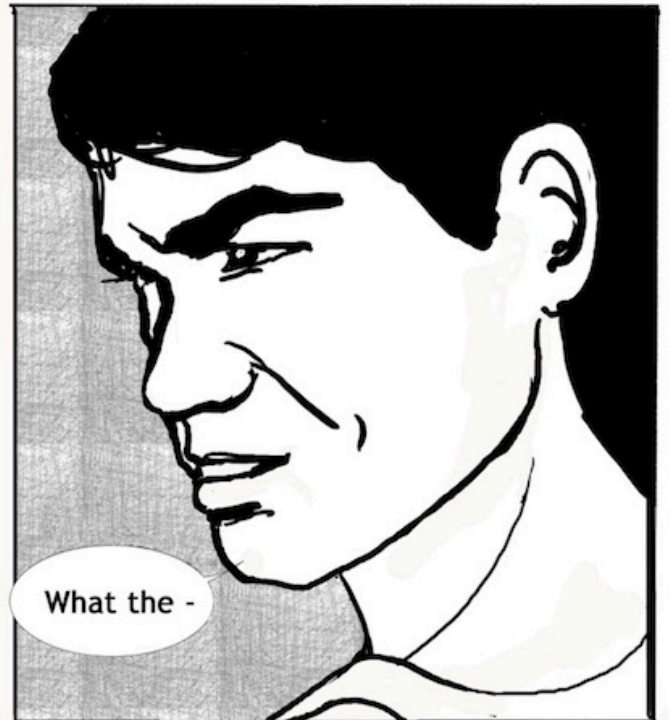
Yes! Yes! She's over there! Ajay has her! Hurry! I think they're going to hurt her!



Hurry up. Get her inside where we can't be seen.

You just keep fighting me, baby. All the better if you want it rough.





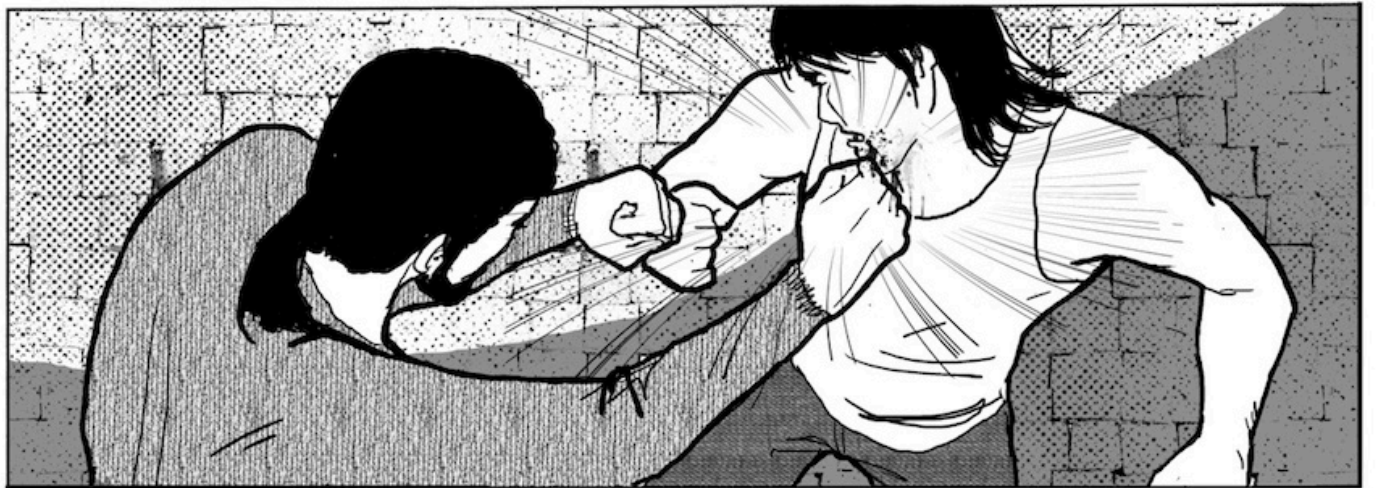




Uh!



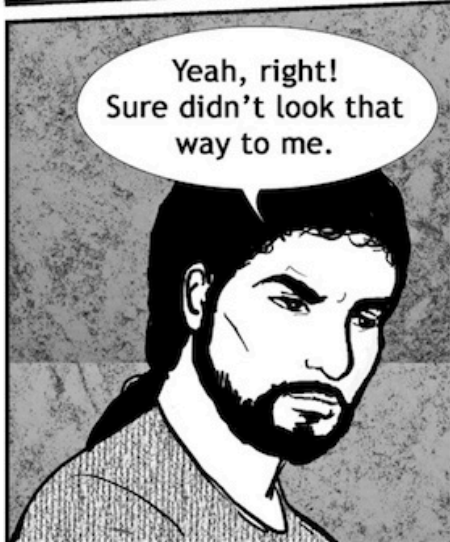
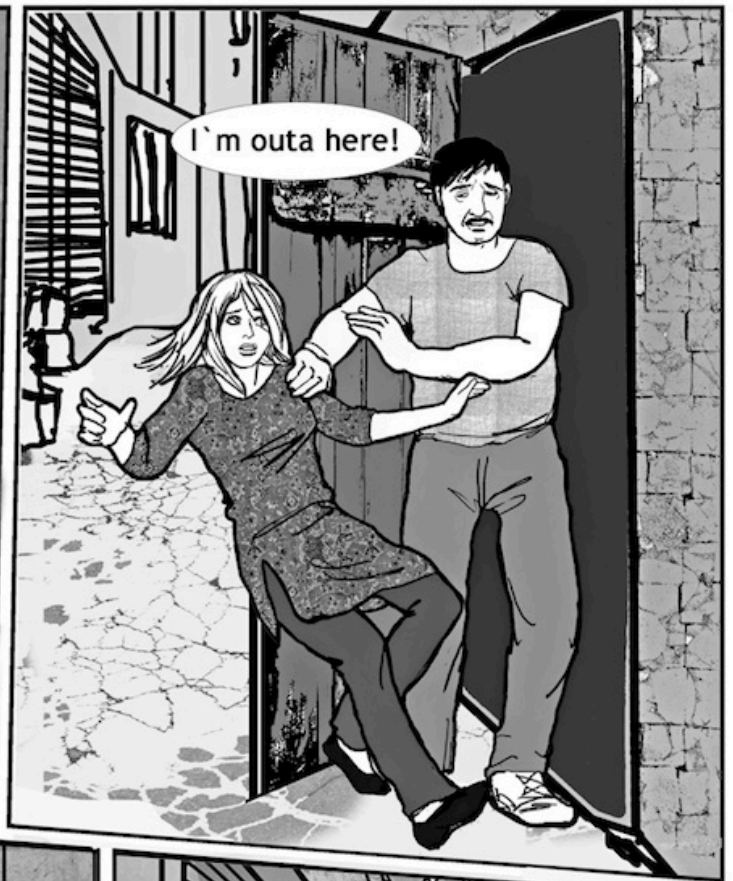
Ah, the hero wannabe. Looks like I have more than one lesson to teach today.

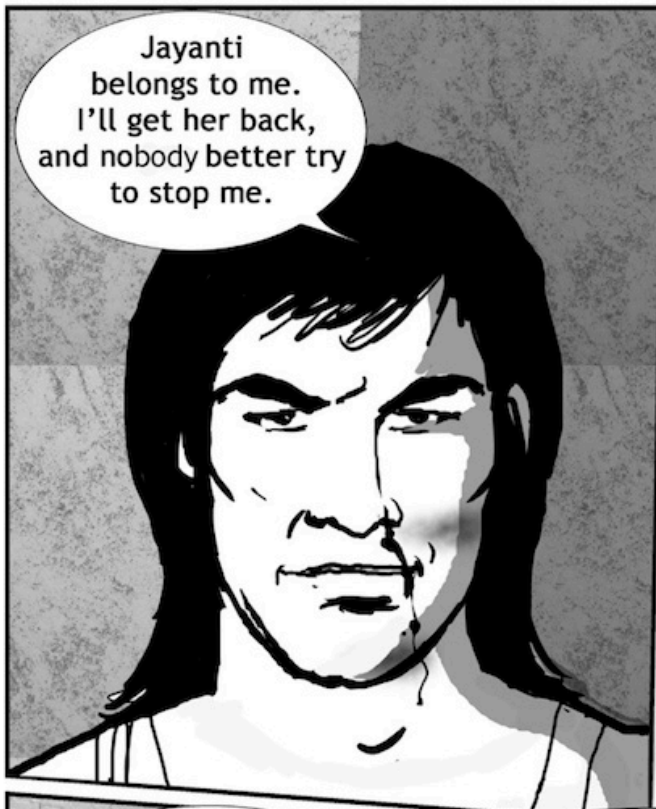


F##&#!

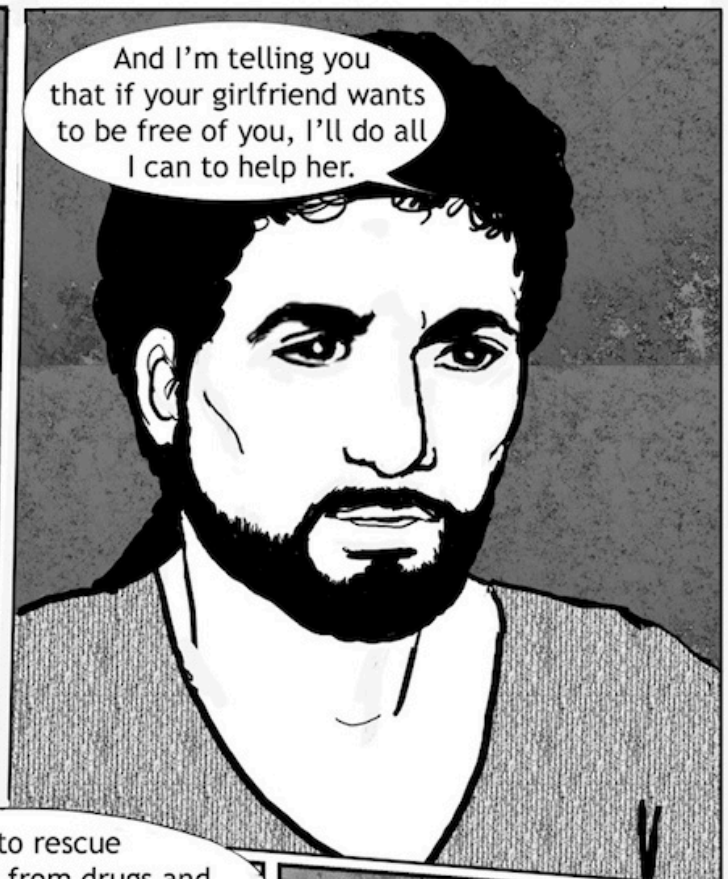




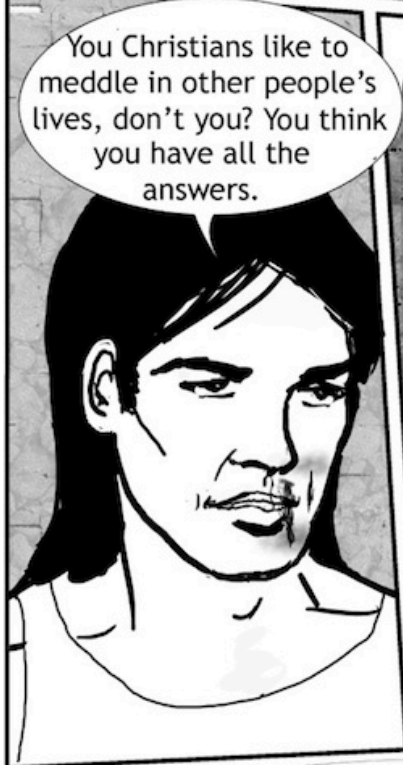




Jayanti belongs to me. I'll get her back, and nobody better try to stop me.



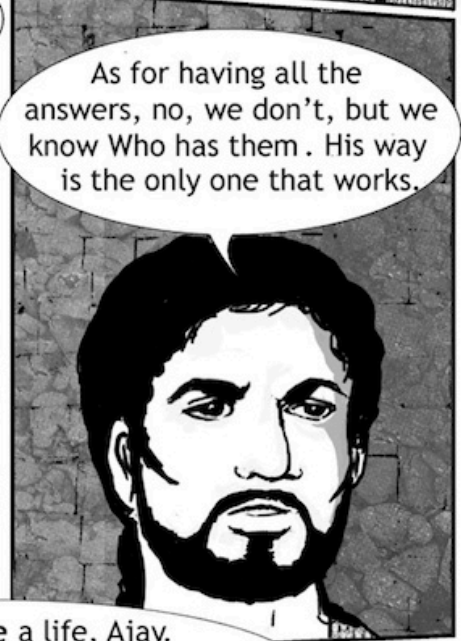
And I'm telling you that if your girlfriend wants to be free of you, I'll do all I can to help her.



You Christians like to meddle in other people's lives, don't you? You think you have all the answers.



If trying to rescue a young woman from drugs and prostitution is meddling, yeah, I guess we do meddle.



As for having all the answers, no, we don't, but we know Who has them. His way is the only one that works.

You don't have a life, Ajay. Maybe you'll realize that as you cool your heels in jail for awhile.

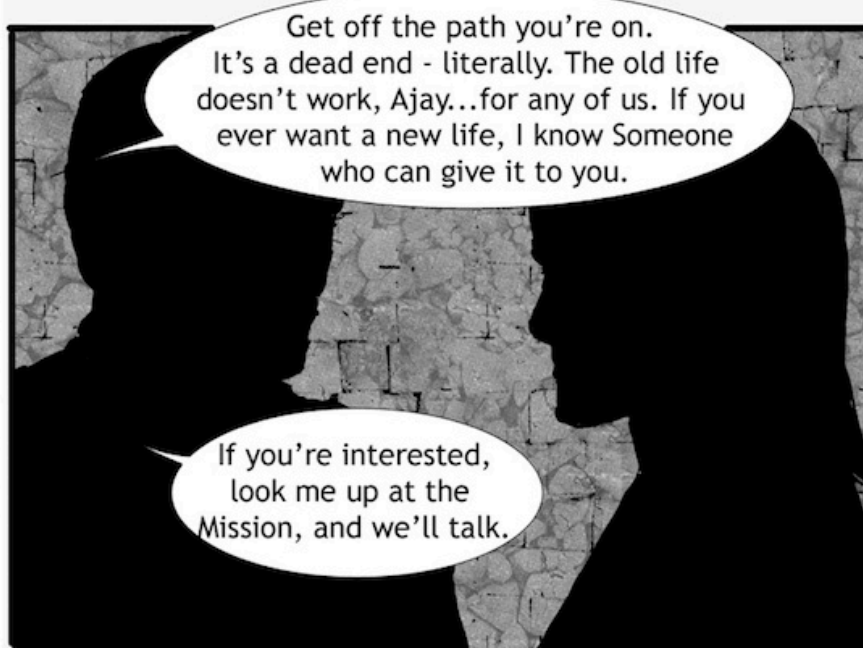


Yeah, whatever.

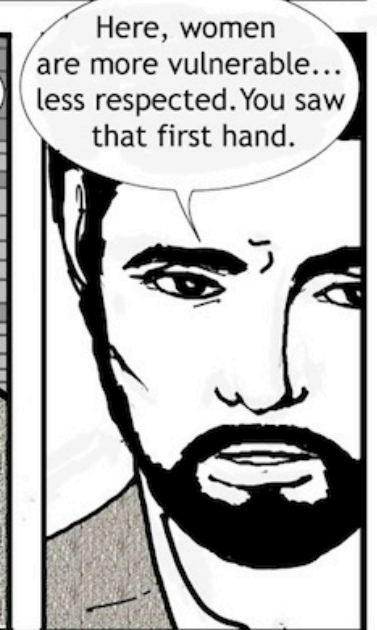
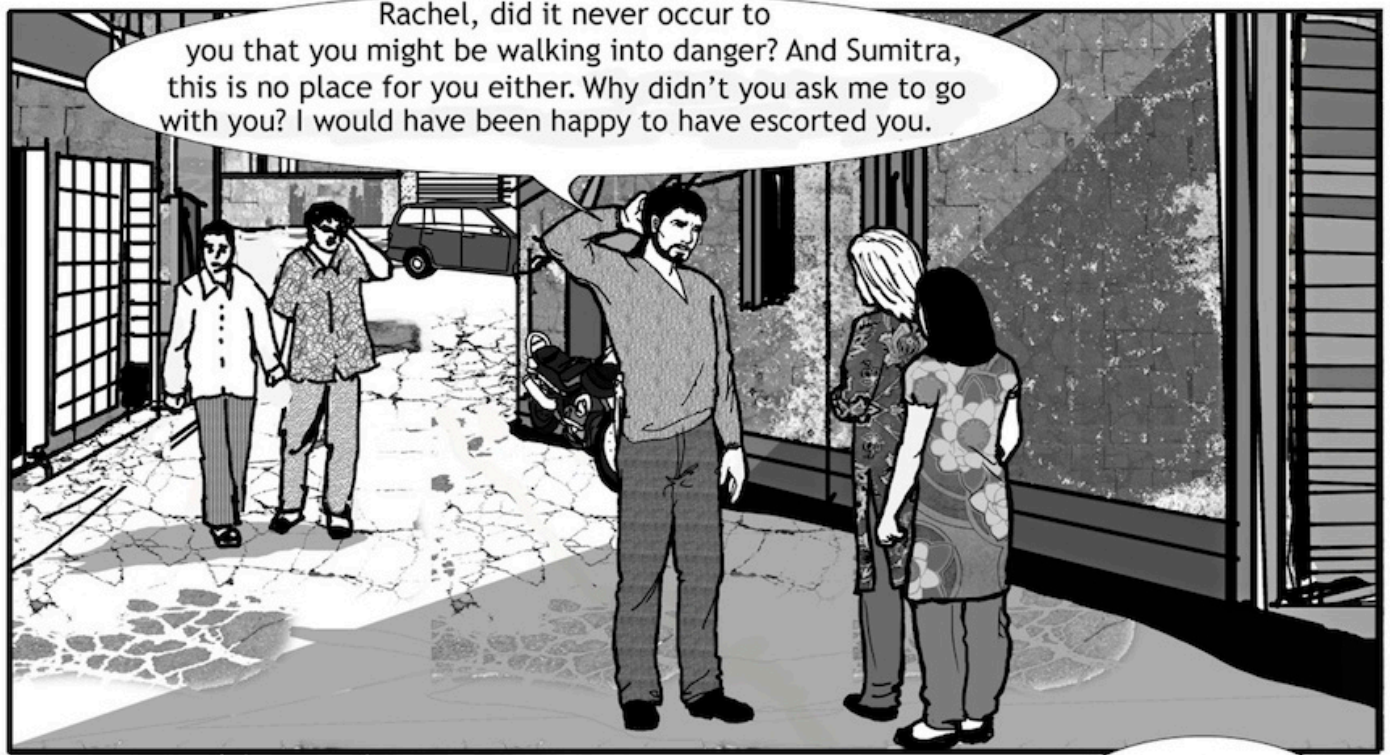
You just live your life and let Jayanti and me live ours.



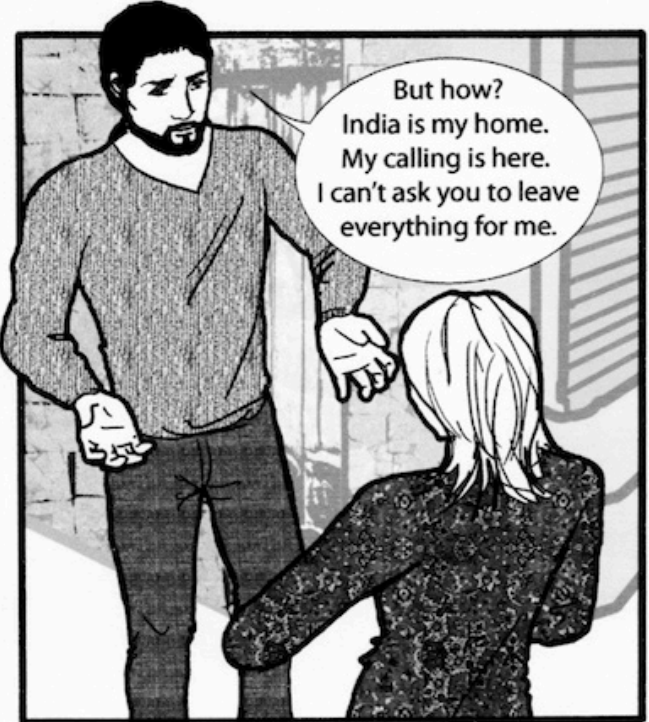
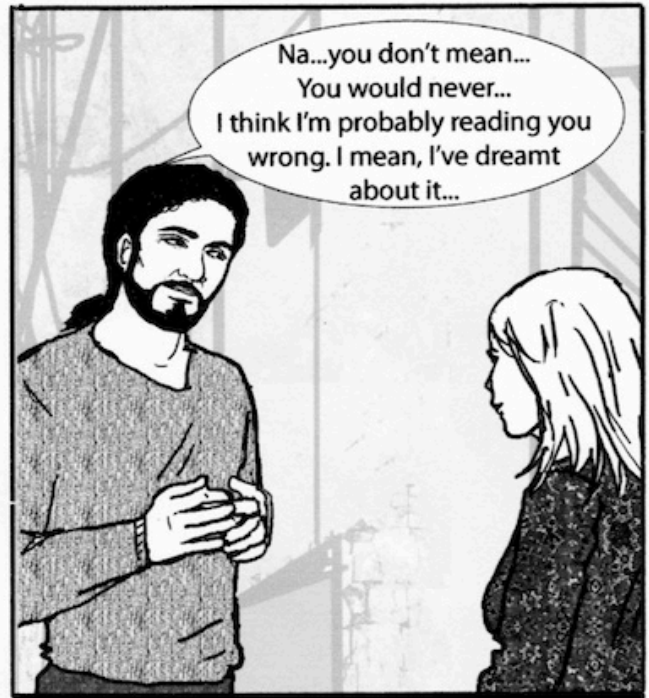


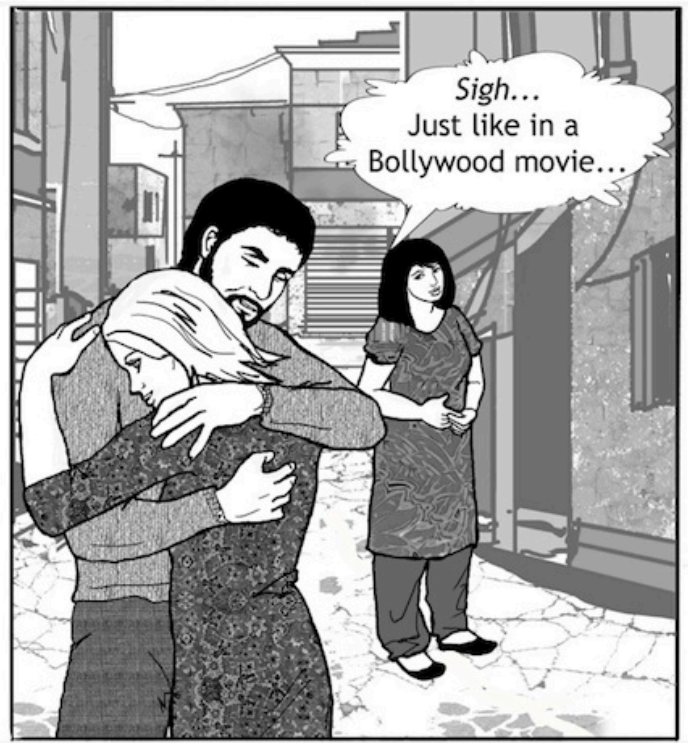






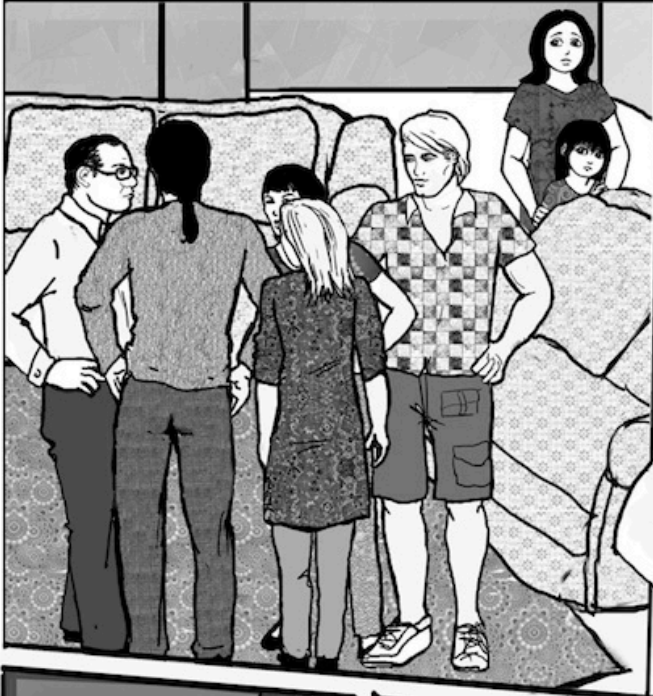




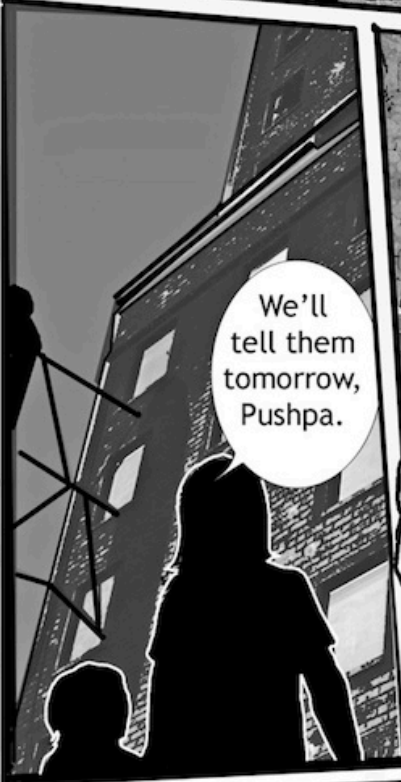
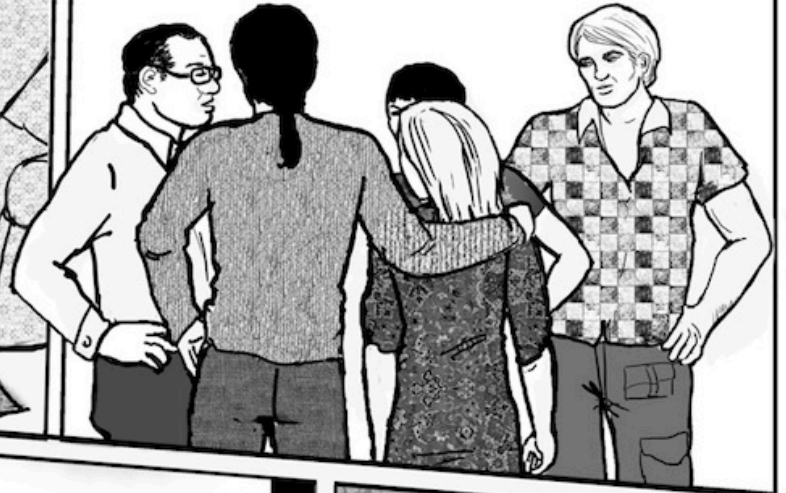




Anita and I had decided to tell our friends at the mission that we would soon be leaving for our village, but we never got the chance.



Everyone was talking about how Ajay had tried to hurt Auntie Rachel and how Uncle Raj had come to her rescue. I was so glad Auntie hadn't been hurt. I was also very happy that Jayanti was now in the safe house, away from danger. After awhile the adults went away to Pastor Deepak's office to discuss things. Kids weren't allowed in there when they were 'conferencing', so we decided we might as well head back home.



We'll tell them tomorrow, Pushpa.



It was a shock to see that Uncle Rupesh had packed all our things already. The tickets for the train were lying on the bed. We were to leave at 7:30 PM and we would arrive in Orissa around midnight. Uncle was very angry that we had been away so long. He had been afraid we wouldn't get back in time. He hurriedly packed us into a rickshaw and off we went.



Howrah Train Station was crowded with people. Garbled announcements were blaring over the sound system and everyone was pushing and shoving to get to their trains. It seemed they were all in a great hurry. Uncle Rupesh told us to stay close beside him so we wouldn't get separated and lost in the melee.



Okay, I think that's ours over there.



Is this the train leaving for Orissa?



Yeah, in 20 minutes

Although you won't be on it, Mr. Nag.



Huh?



Mr. Ranjan Sutar would like a few words with you.



We'll be most happy to take you to him.







The thugs packed us into a car and we drove off. Anita and I were crushed between two of them in the back seat and Uncle Rupesh sat up front with the other two.

We were just going to visit the girls' village for a few days. They were homesick.

Yeah, right.

Listen, I've got some money. You can have all of it if you let us go.

We were gonna take it all anyway, ya idiot!

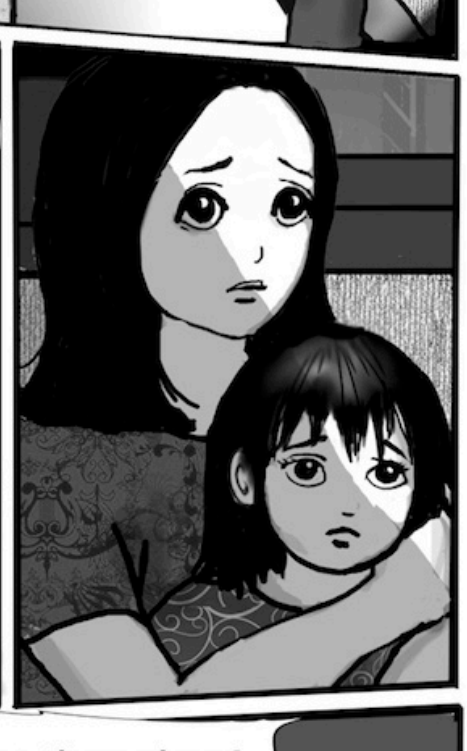
Where...where are you taking us?

You'll find out soon enough.



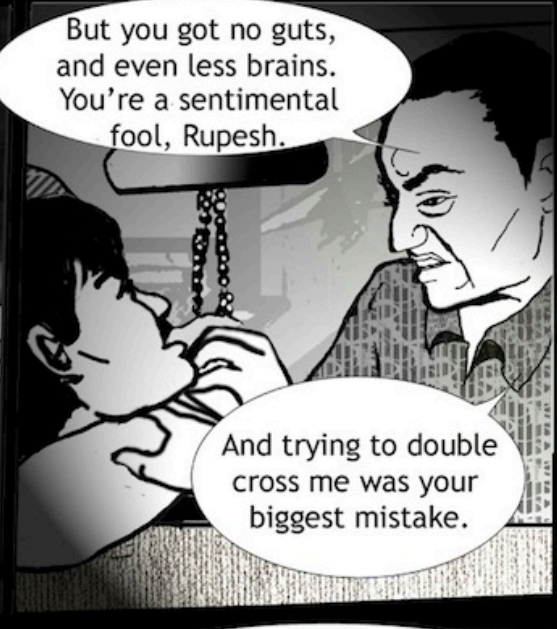
Our driver stopped behind a white Ambassador car parked in a dark, deserted alley. We had been driving for a long while and it was now dark, but beneath the glare of the street lights I could see Ranjan, his driver, and another person in the car. I huddled closer to Anita, great dread washing over me and paralyzing me with fear.







They're mine now, Rupesh. Payment for debts owing. You should have done things my way from the start.



But you got no guts, and even less brains. You're a sentimental fool, Rupesh.

And trying to double cross me was your biggest mistake.



What do we do with him?

He's of no more use to me.

Finish him.



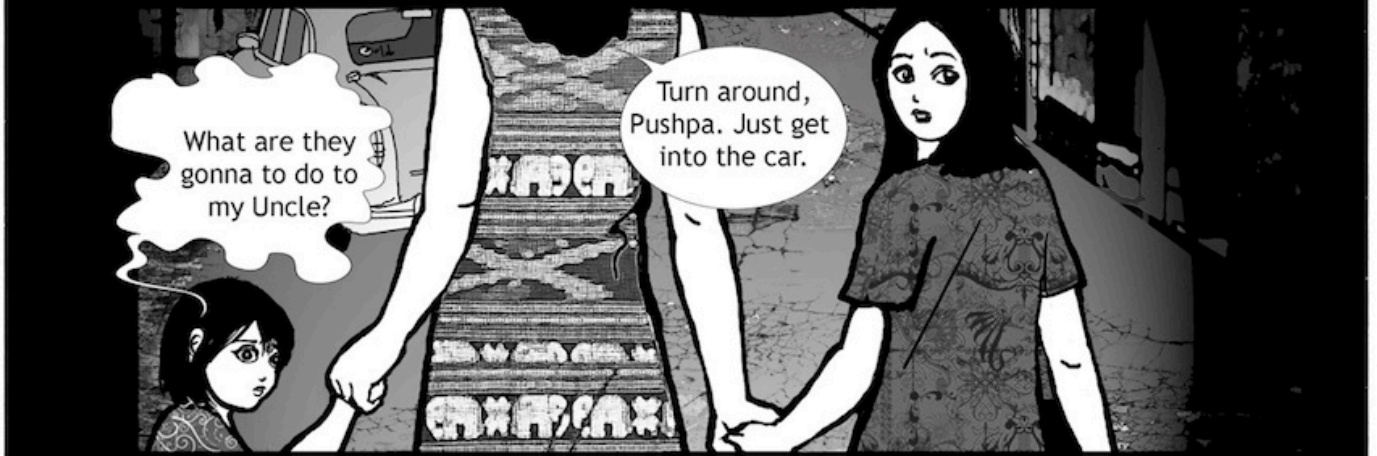
No!

Tools are in the trunk.





Hey...no...



What are they gonna do to my Uncle?

Turn around, Pushpa. Just get into the car.



Where to Boss?

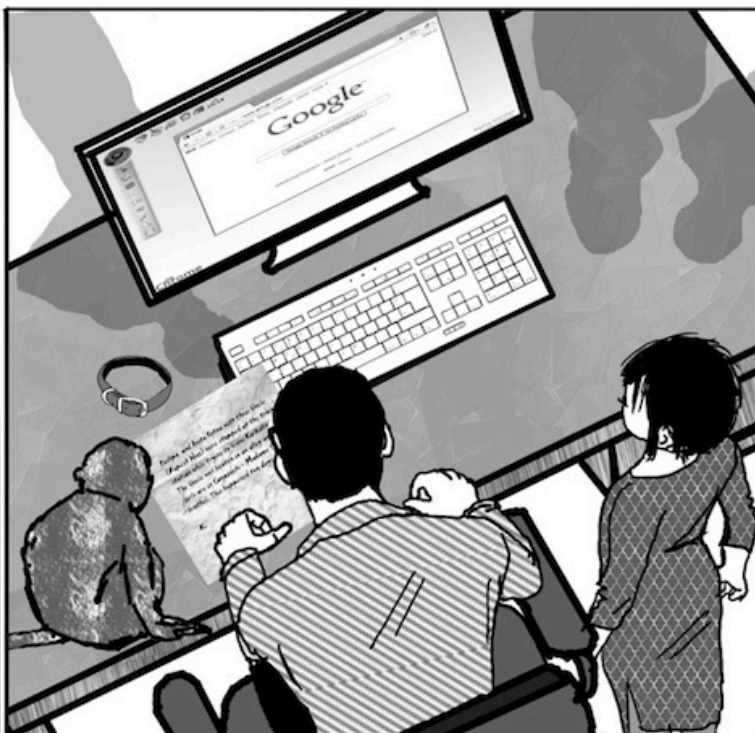
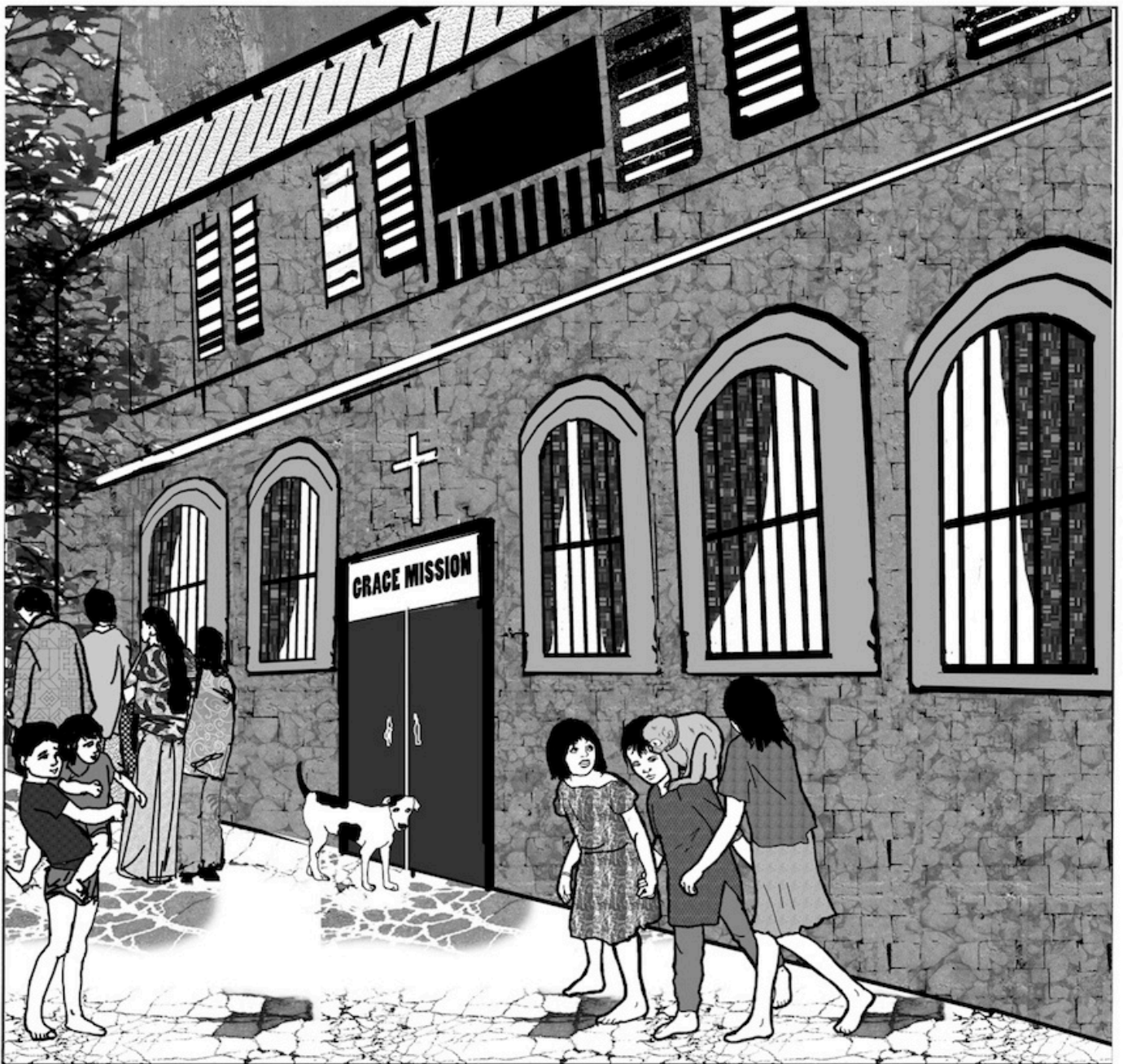
Sonagachi.  
Sharvani's place.





# 10. *Trapped*

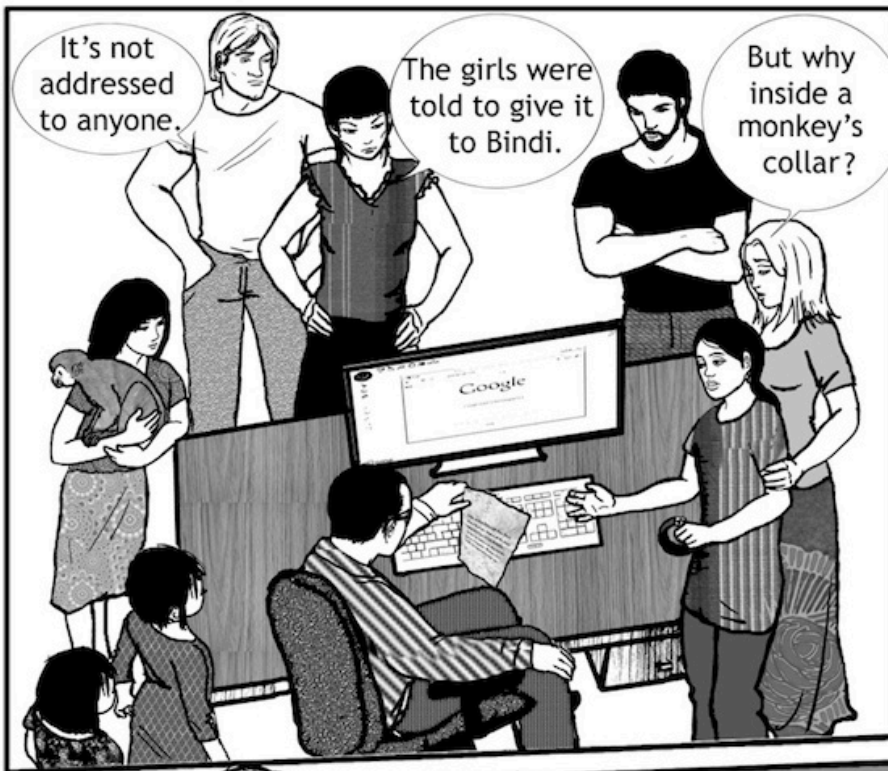




Pushpa and Anita Patna with their Uncle (Rupesh Nas) were stopped at the train station while trying to leave Kolkata. The Uncle was beaten in an alley and the girls are in Sonasachi - Madame Sen's brothel. This happened two days ago.

K.





It's not addressed to anyone.

The girls were told to give it to Bindi.

But why inside a monkey's collar?



Kaliyah knew it was safest there because Lucky only lets me and a few others touch him. She especially wanted to keep it out of Ranjan's sight.



And this Ranjan guy was also the one who sold the little Nepalese girl, right?

Yes, and Anita told me he had tried several times to buy her and Pushpa from their uncle.

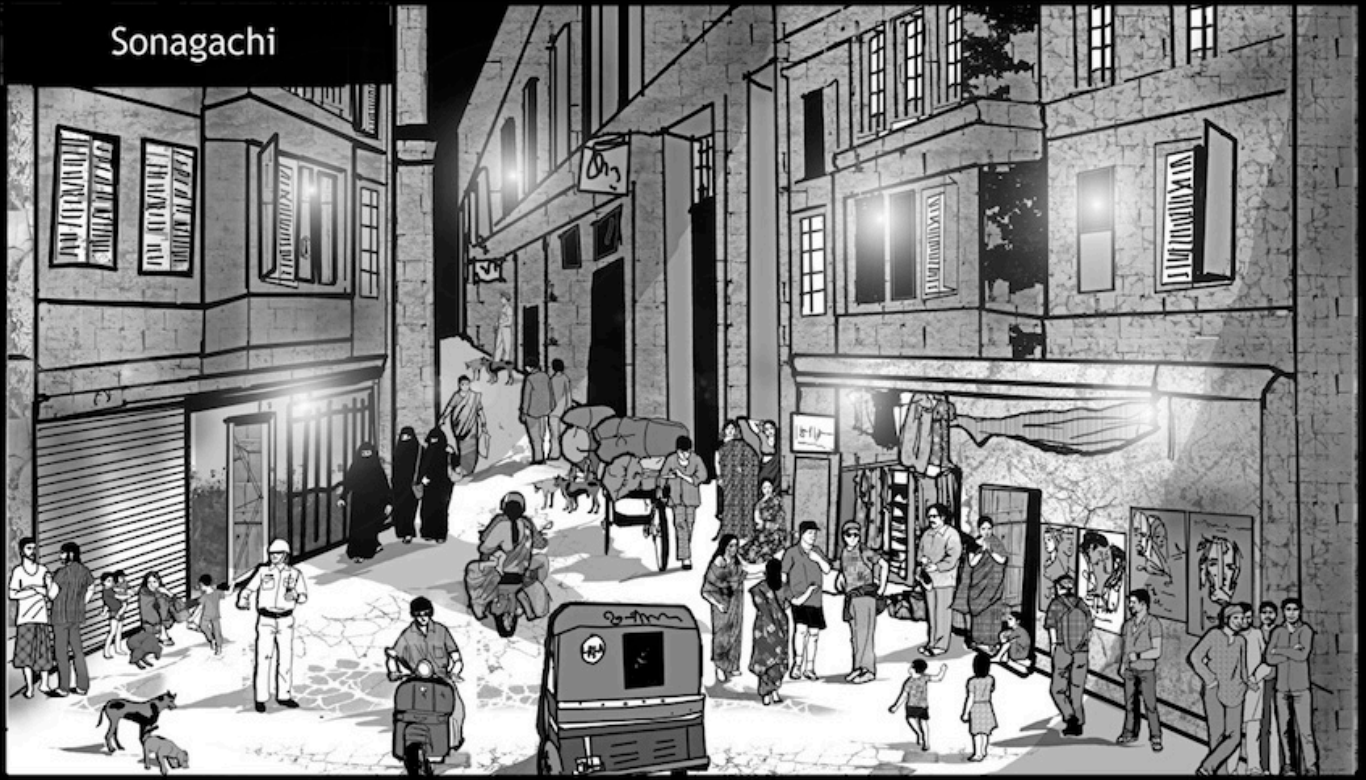


We'll have to move all our plans ahead... no time to lose.

I can't help thinking what they must be going through right now.



Sonagachi



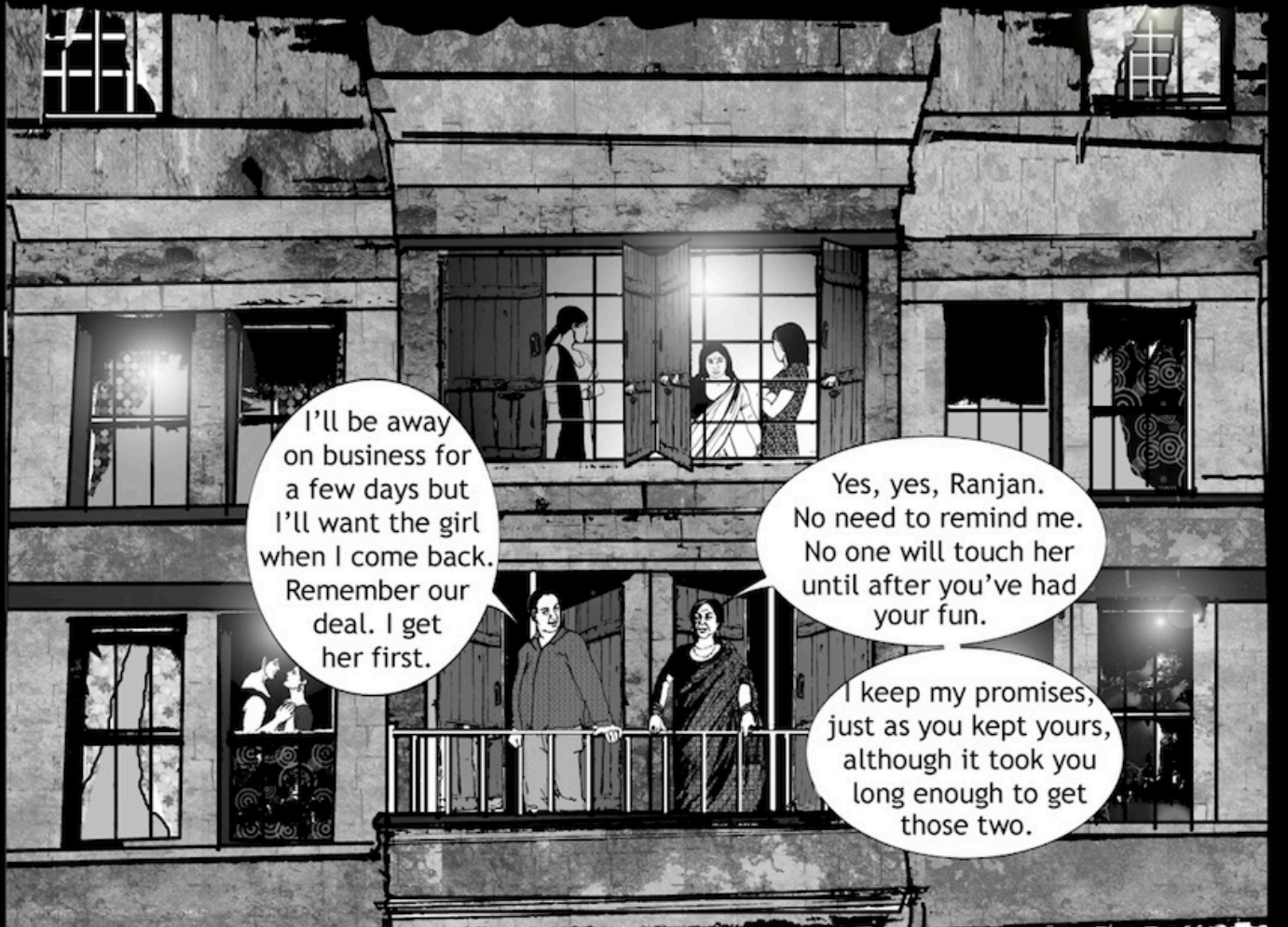









Sharvani Sen's brothel Thursday 8PM




I'll be away on business for a few days but I'll want the girl when I come back. Remember our deal. I get her first.

Yes, yes, Ranjan. No need to remind me. No one will touch her until after you've had your fun.

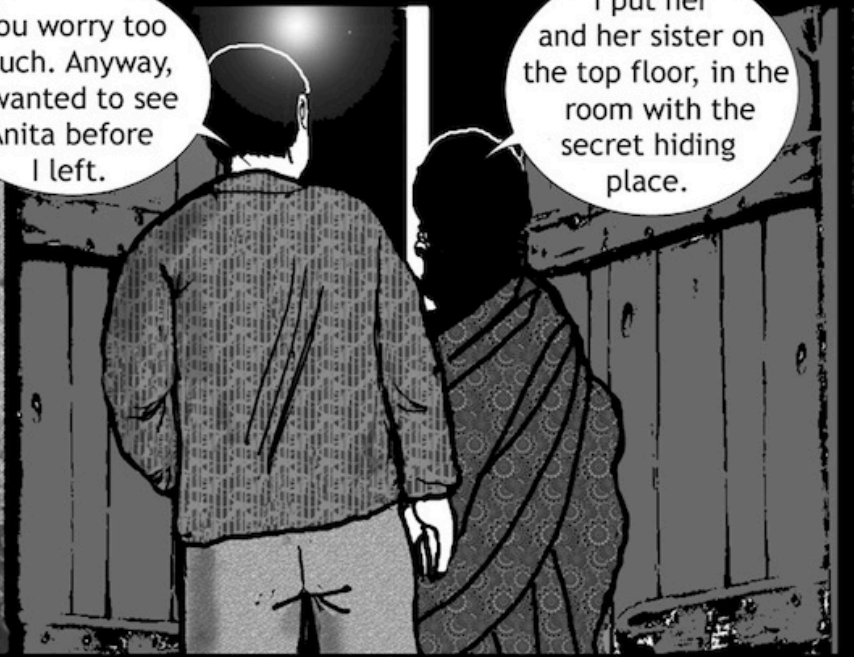
I keep my promises, just as you kept yours, although it took you long enough to get those two.



There were complications. The uncle gave me trouble. I had to... induce him to part with them. But don't worry. He won't be causing any more problems. I can assure you of that.




Good, because the cops have been snooping around here again. Most of them just want bribes but a couple of them make me nervous. They asked a lot of questions.



You worry too much. Anyway, I wanted to see Anita before I left.

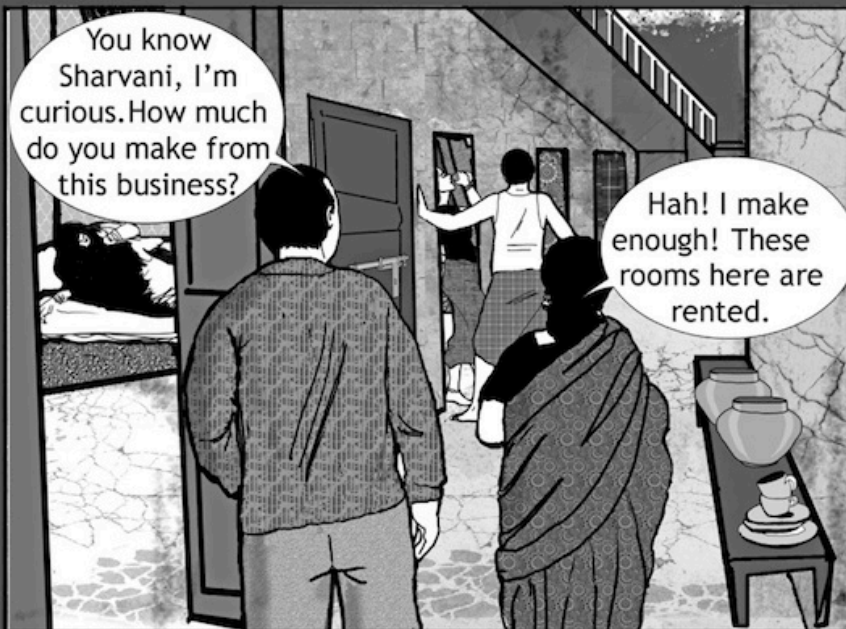
I put her and her sister on the top floor, in the room with the secret hiding place.



Well, I guess that's not a bad idea. If you're ever busted, nobody would ever find them there.

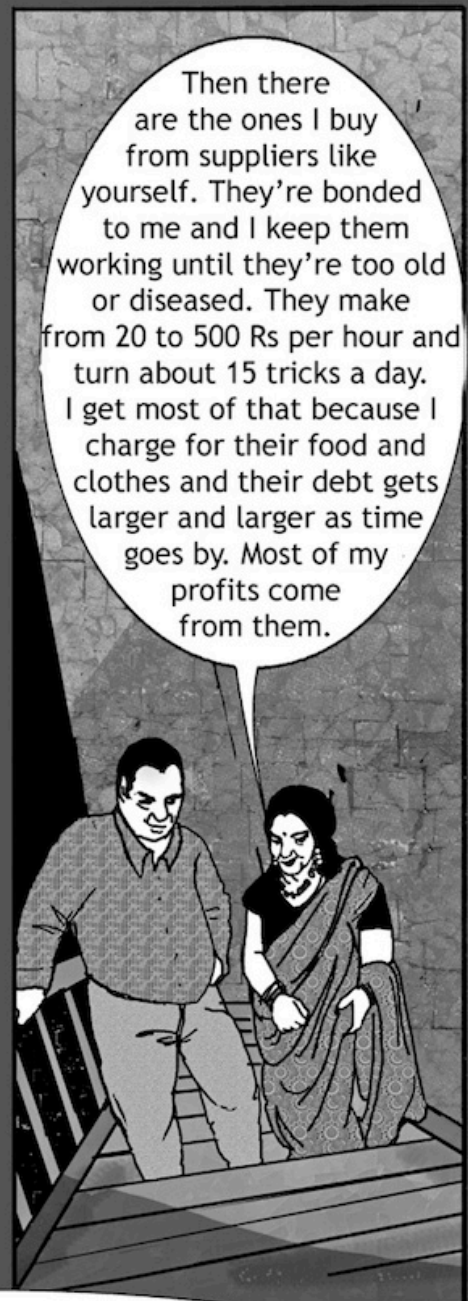
Exactly.



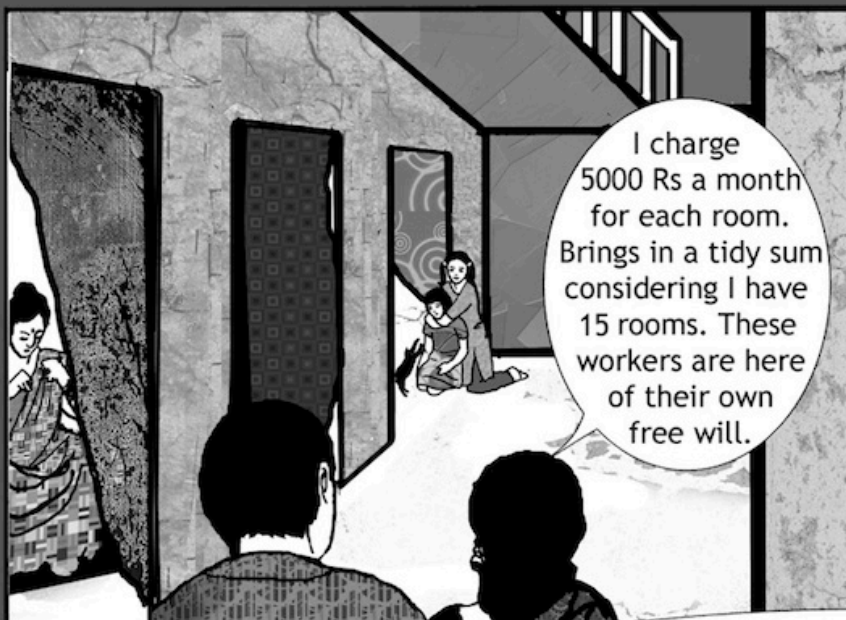


You know Sharvani, I'm curious. How much do you make from this business?

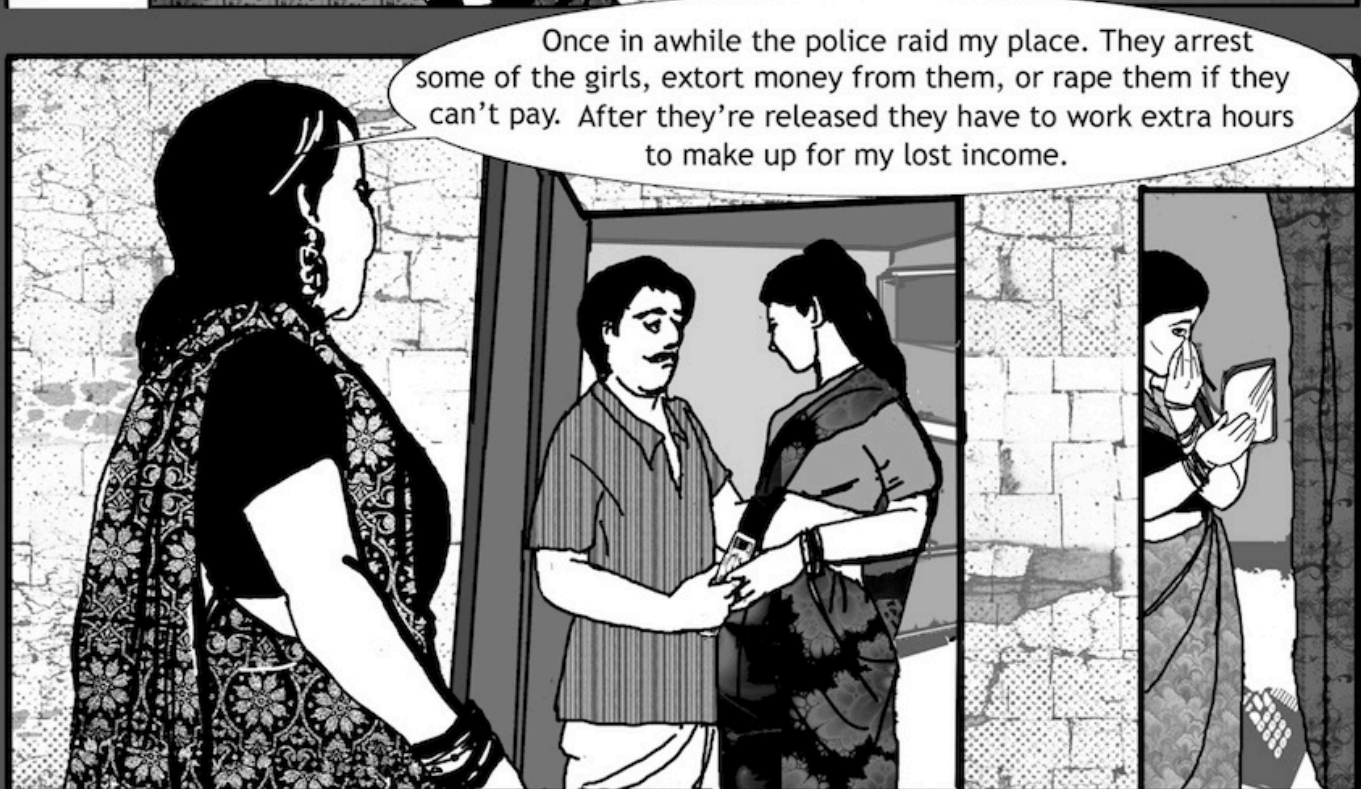
Hah! I make enough! These rooms here are rented.



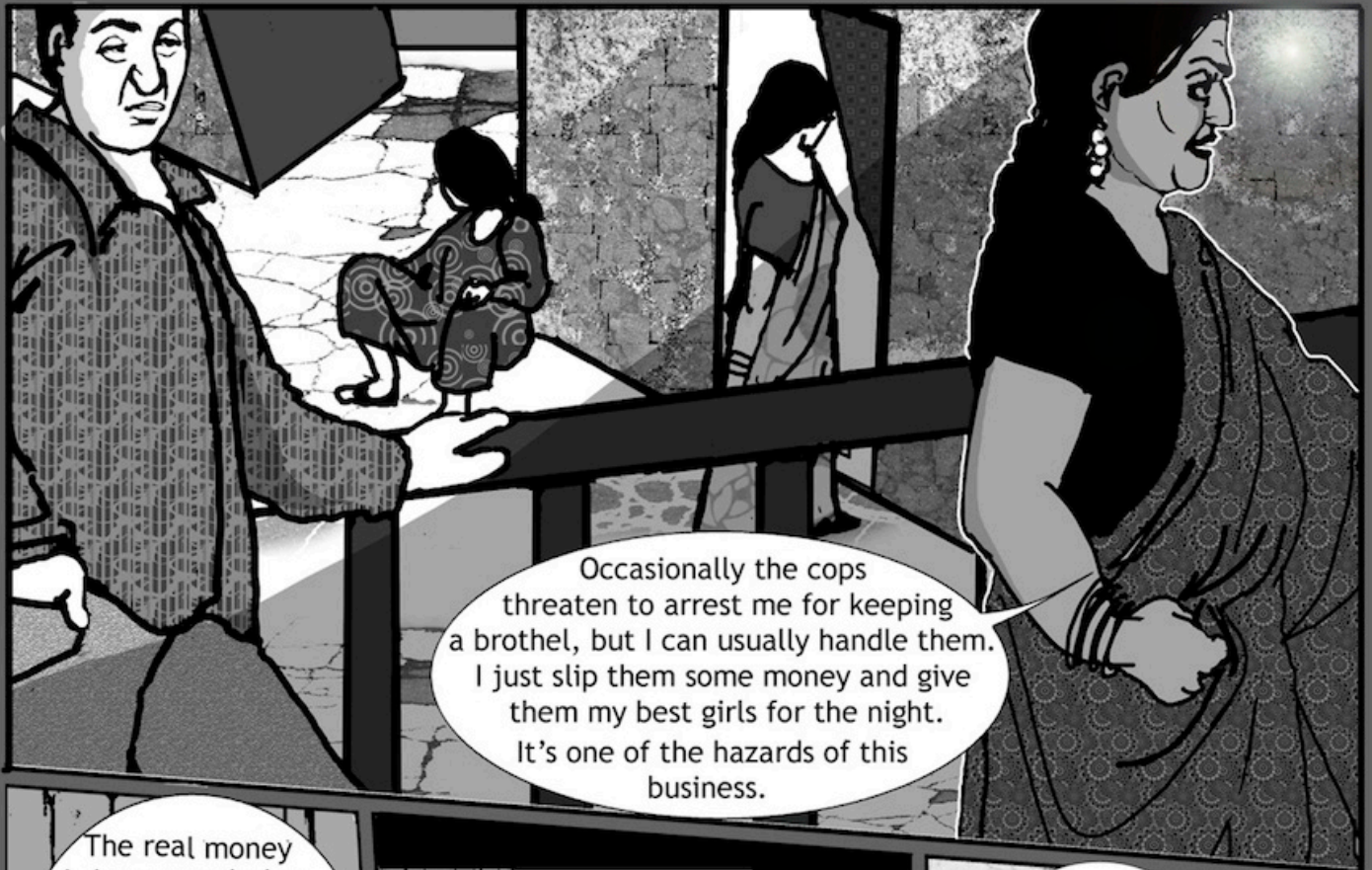
Then there are the ones I buy from suppliers like yourself. They're bonded to me and I keep them working until they're too old or diseased. They make from 20 to 500 Rs per hour and turn about 15 tricks a day. I get most of that because I charge for their food and clothes and their debt gets larger and larger as time goes by. Most of my profits come from them.



I charge 5000 Rs a month for each room. Brings in a tidy sum considering I have 15 rooms. These workers are here of their own free will.



Once in awhile the police raid my place. They arrest some of the girls, extort money from them, or rape them if they can't pay. After they're released they have to work extra hours to make up for my lost income.



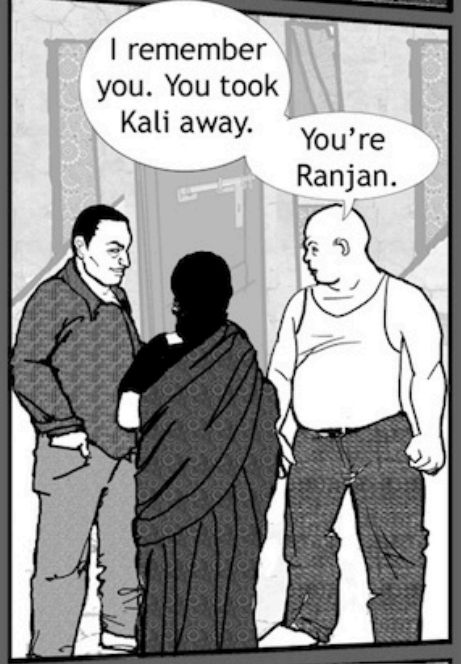
Occasionally the cops threaten to arrest me for keeping a brothel, but I can usually handle them. I just slip them some money and give them my best girls for the night. It's one of the hazards of this business.



The real money is in young virgins, but it's risky. If I get caught, I have to pay huge bribes to stay out of jail. That's why I keep them behind locked doors.



This is Kunda. You've met him before.



I remember you. You took Kali away.

You're Ranjan.



Kali stayed up here when she first came.





She used to keep running away and Kunda here broke her of her bad habit.



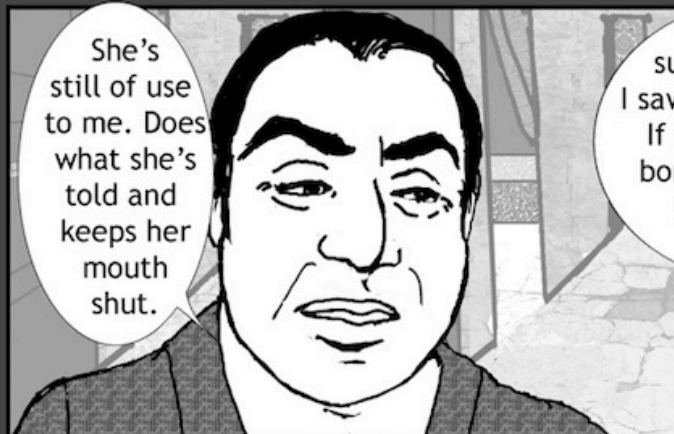
I liked Kali.



Is that right?



She's been with you awhile now. Not tired of her yet?



She's still of use to me. Does what she's told and keeps her mouth shut.



She's a survivor alright. I saw that right away. If you ever do get bored with her, I'll buy her back from you.

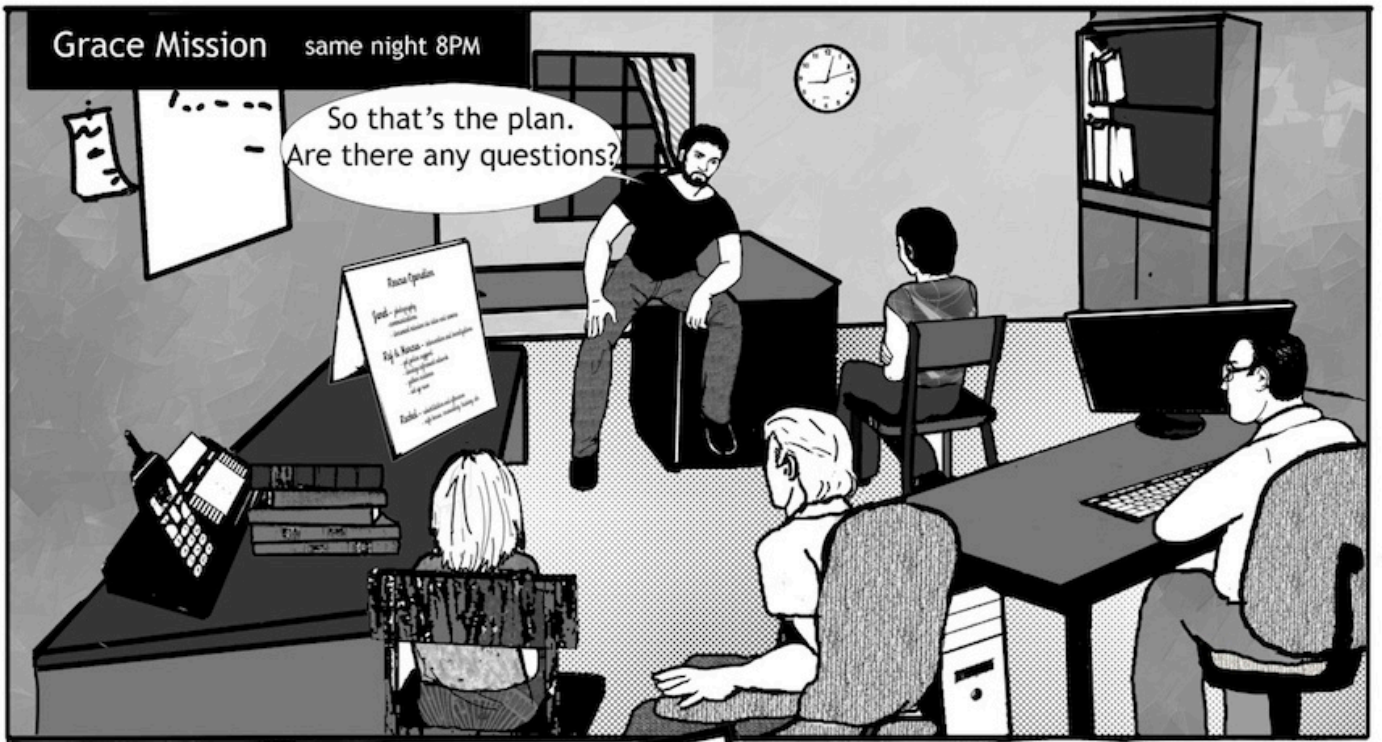
And now let's have a peek at the two new princesses. I gave them new clothes and I think you'll be especially pleased with Anita's transformation. I dolled her up with a bit of makeup.



You have a visitor, girls.







### Rescue Operation

Janet - photography

- communications
- document mission via video and camera

Raj & Marcus - intervention and investigations

- get police support
- develop informant network
- gather evidence
- set up ruse

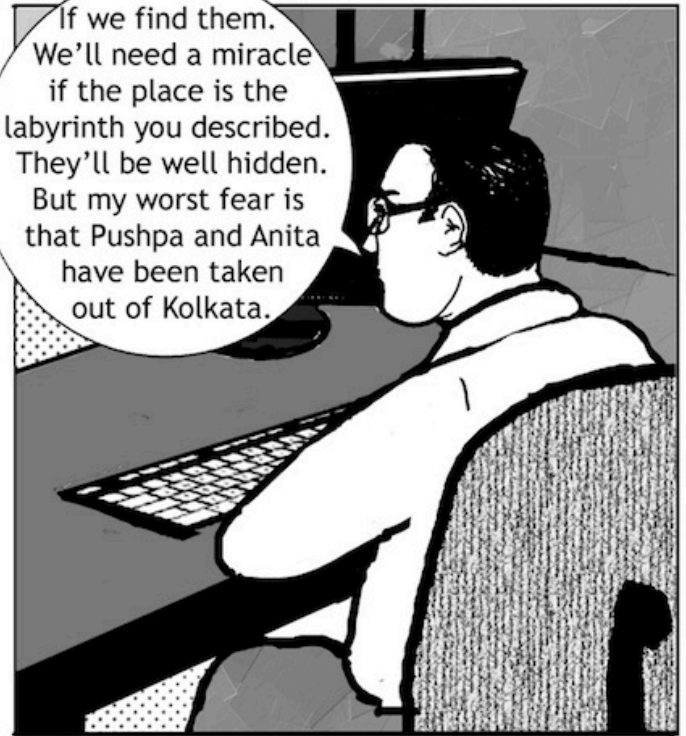
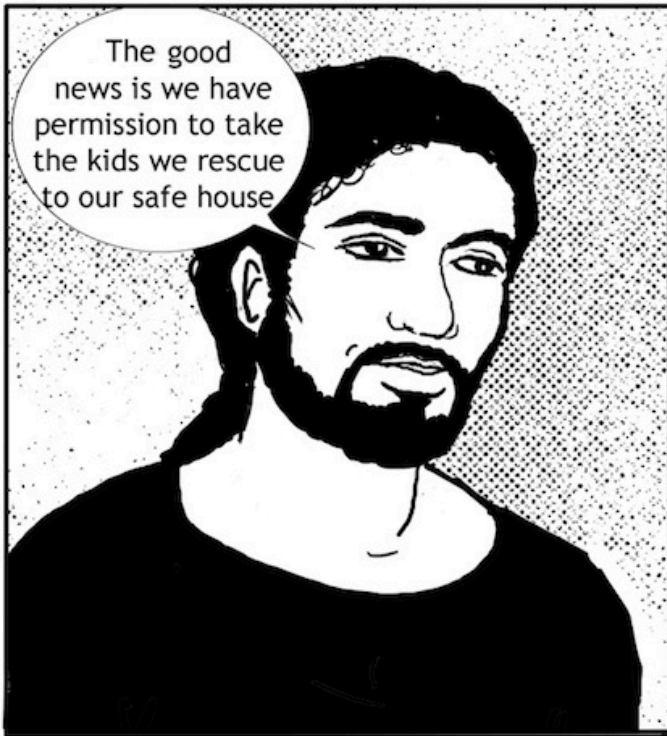
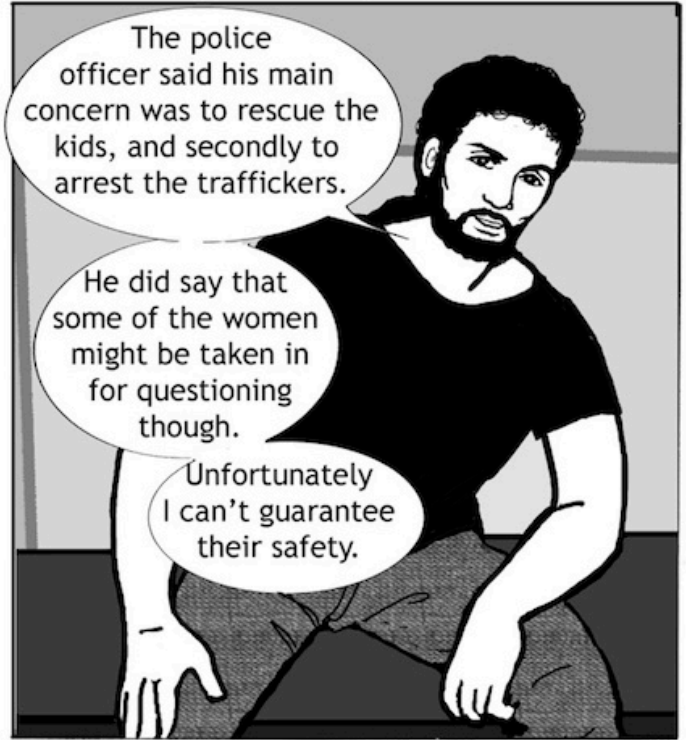
Rachel - rehabilitation and aftercare

- safe house, counselling, training, etc.



I believe he's upright. He moves slowly because he's methodical and cautious. He's hand-picking his team and all of them have strict orders to keep this under wraps. I guess we just have to trust him.







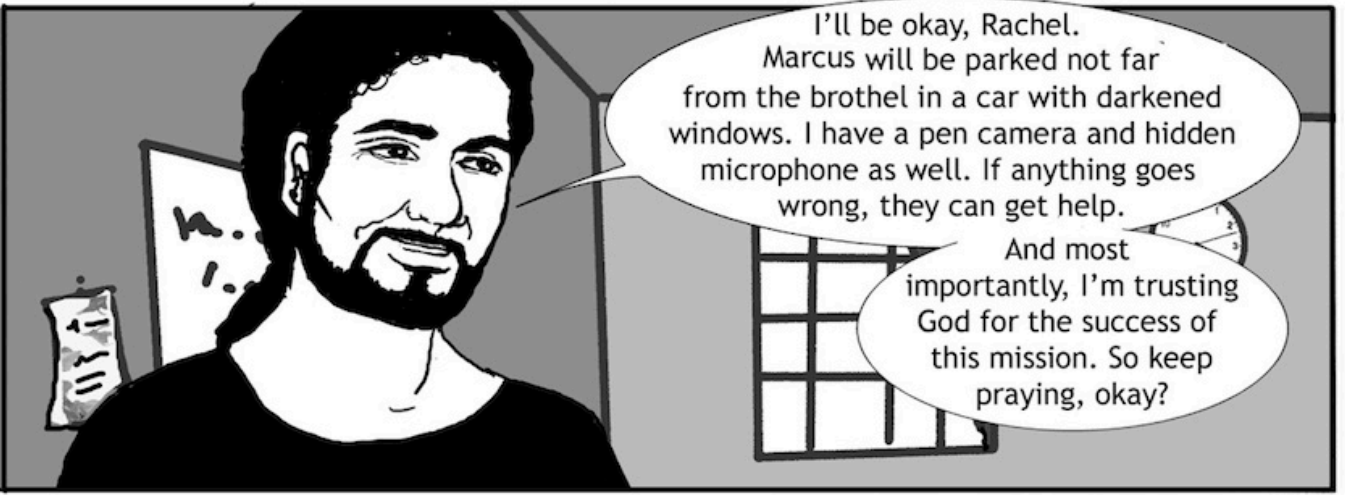


But Raj...  
that sounds terribly  
dangerous...especially if  
you go in alone. Can't  
Marcus go with you?



A 'gora'  
or white guy  
like me, would  
stick out a mile.  
Sonagachi is for  
the locals mainly.  
Not many  
foreigners  
go there.

But don't you  
worry. I'll look out  
for your boyfriend.



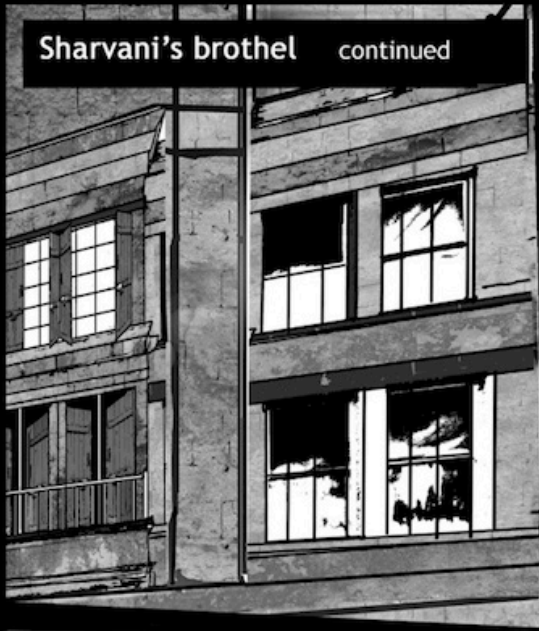
I'll be okay, Rachel.  
Marcus will be parked not far  
from the brothel in a car with darkened  
windows. I have a pen camera and hidden  
microphone as well. If anything goes  
wrong, they can get help.

And most  
importantly, I'm trusting  
God for the success of  
this mission. So keep  
praying, okay?



I've asked  
Janet to get Bindi's  
help in contacting the  
woman called Kaliyah.  
Maybe you could help  
with that, Rachel.

And we'll  
meet back here, to  
report, tomorrow  
night at 9:00PM.

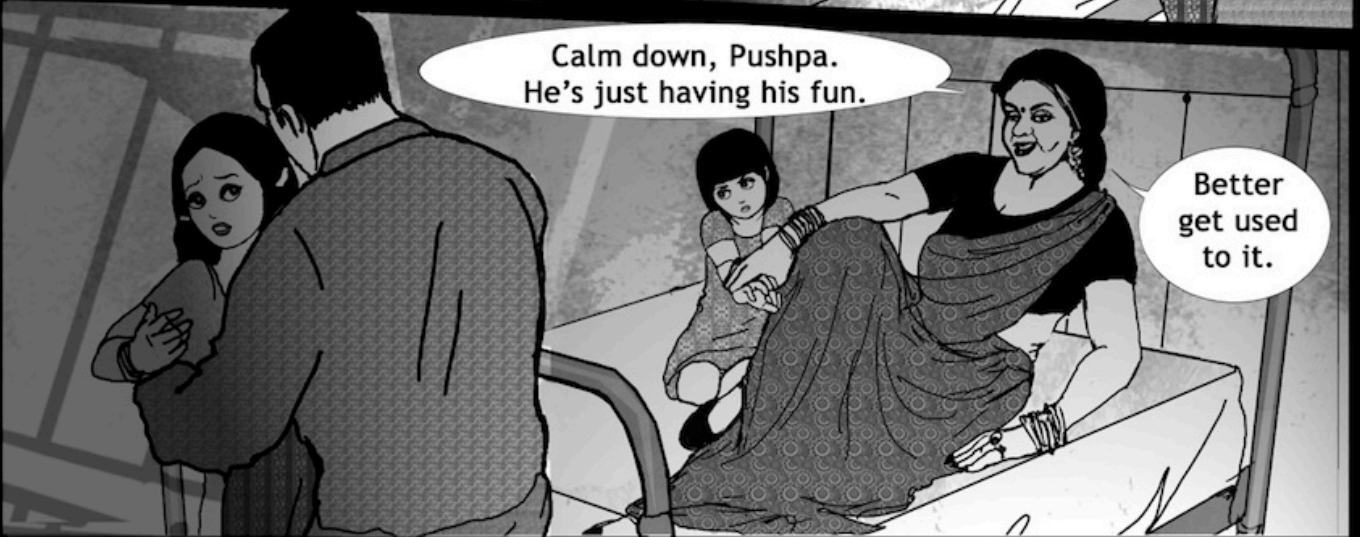


My! My! Just look at you.  
Wish I didn't have to go to Mumbai tonight.



Hey!

Calm down, Pushpa.  
He's just having his fun.



Better  
get used  
to it.

Don't look so  
sad, sweetheart.  
You'll like old Ranjan.  
I'll break you in real  
slow and gentle.



You'll be  
her favorite  
babu. Bring her  
a present from  
Mumbai.



I will.  
And make  
sure your  
goondas keep  
their hands off  
her in the  
meantime.







I'll see you in a few days.

She'll be ready and waiting.



Now you two get your beauty sleep. I want you looking your best for my customers. In a few days you'll be meeting my top clients and I want you to make a good impression.



We're not gonna do anything you tell us, and you can't make us!

HA! You're so cute. Of course I can make you. If you disobey me, I punish your sister in your stead, and vice-versa. You wouldn't want to see your sister hurt, would you? And I doubt that you have ever experienced pain on the level I can inflict.



Now don't look like such frightened little rabbits. I'm not such a bad person. I let you keep your mother's necklace, didn't I? If you don't cross me, you have nothing to fear. And tomorrow, if you're good girls, you can even see your little Nepalese friend. Wouldn't that be nice?

Now go to sleep. It'll soon be morning.

click!

She's gonna be sorry for hurting little kids. She should have a stone tied to her neck and then be drowned. That's what Jesus said.

He meant it would be better for someone to have that happen, rather than have to face His judgement for harming one of His children

Anita, do you think anyone knows where we are? We didn't tell anyone at the Mission. Only Uncle Rupesh knows.. and he..he might be..

sniff

Zactly! That's what I just said.





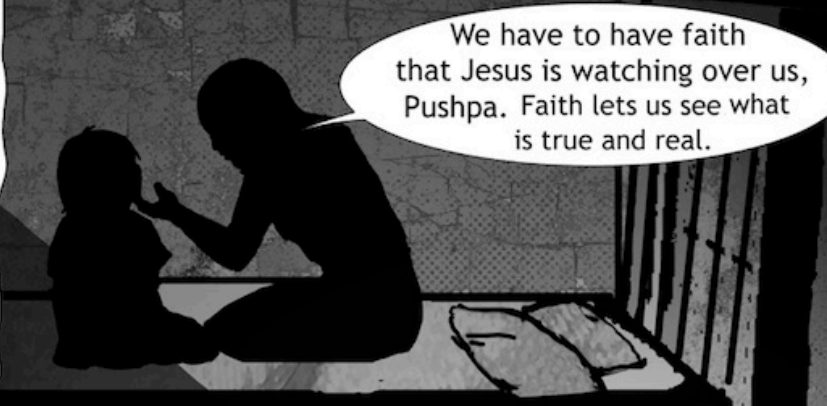
I feel like we're in hell.



Pushpa, remember the prayer that Auntie Rachel taught us? Let's make it our prayer tonight. Okay?

Okay. You say the words.

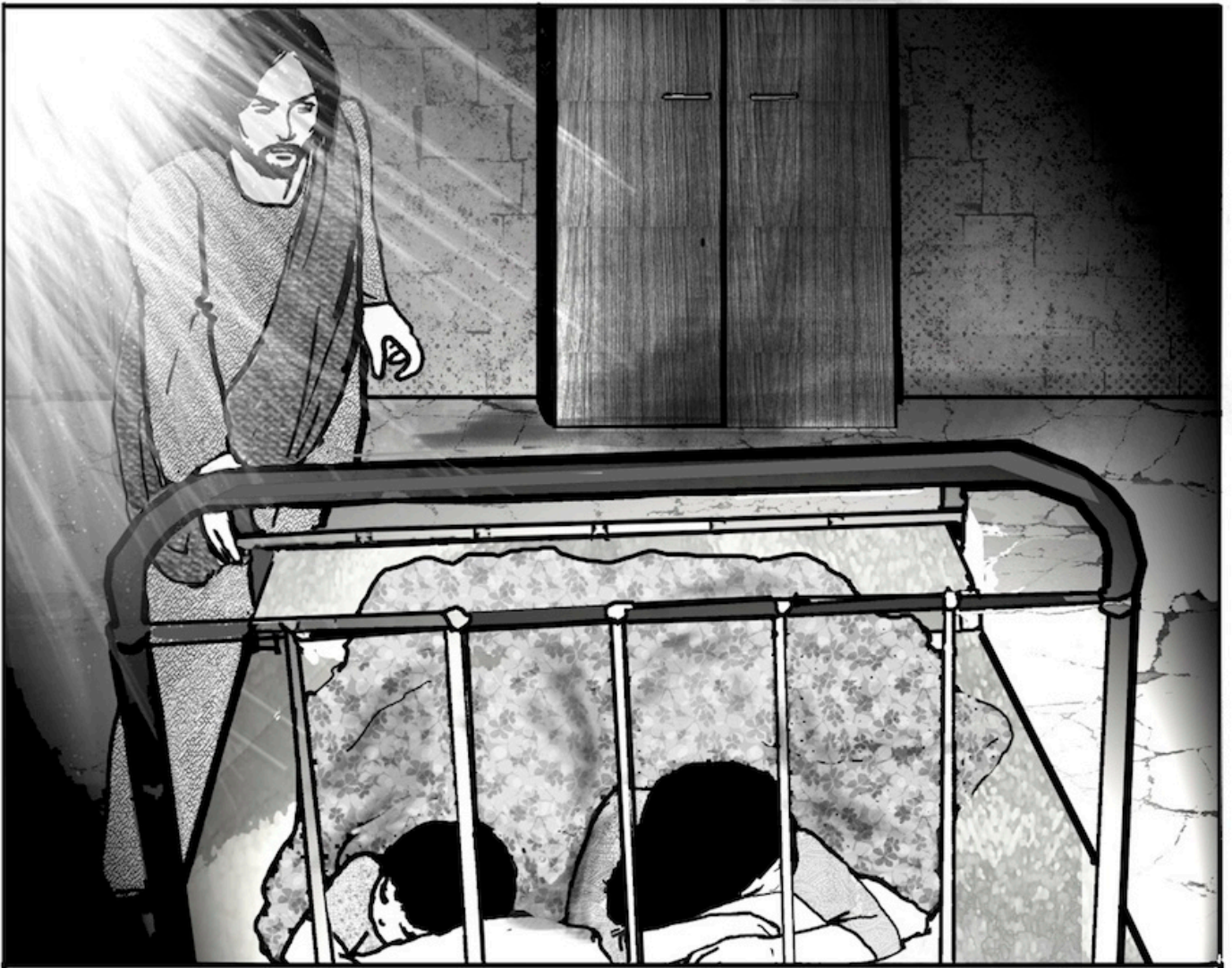
The Lord is my Shepherd,  
I have everything I need...  
Even when I walk through  
the valley of death,  
I will not be afraid,  
because You are close  
beside me...  
Your rod and staff protect  
and comfort me.



We have to have faith  
that Jesus is watching over us,  
Pushpa. Faith lets us see what  
is true and real.



Things aren't always  
what they seem.



Anita was right. I wasn't 'seeing' things properly. We weren't alone. Jesus was with us, whether we could see Him or not. I had to keep remembering that. At the Mission I had learned that I lived in another world now - an unseen, heavenly one that could never be destroyed. God was my Daddy and He loved me. He was lots stronger than Satan, his demons, or the people under his influence. Ranjan and Sharvani didn't stand a chance. They couldn't win. Not in the end, they couldn't. I went to sleep with that thought and never had a single bad dream that night.

Next morning one of the women came to wake us.

Rise and shine your Highnesses!  
Madame said you could visit your friend  
for half an hour.





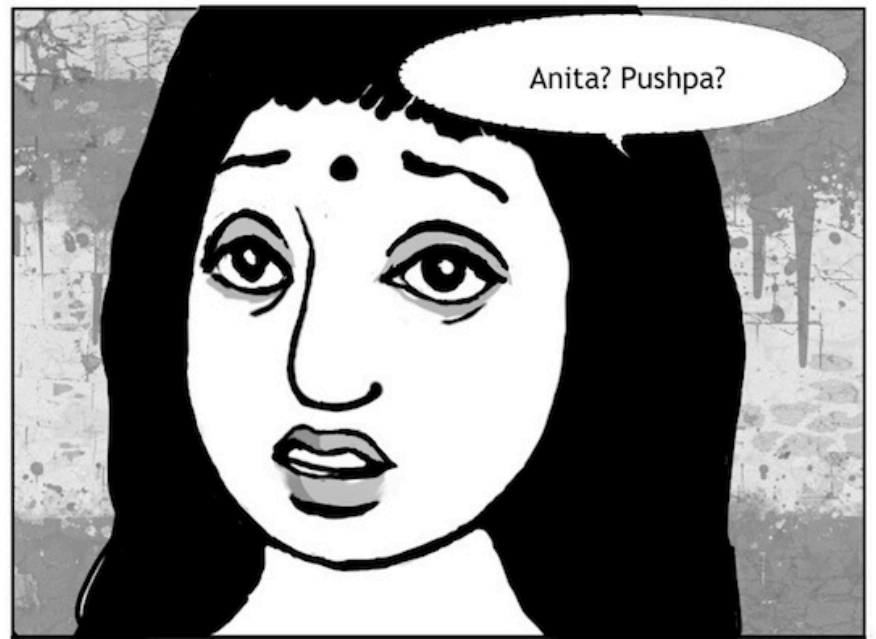
The woman led us down a hallway with doors on either side. Two young girls watched us somberly as we passed. They looked to be about Anita's age, but they seemed much older. The wariness in their eyes spoke of fear and distrust. I thought it probably had to do with the two big men standing at the end of the hallway. They were passing a bottle back and forth and laughing. Jyoti told us that one of Sharvani's goondas had hurt Kalpani. Other men had come and done the same. Jyoti heard the screams and they had gone on far into the night. Something very bad was being done to little girls in this place and I was scared. Anita was too, because she was trembling.



The rooms we passed were smaller than the one we had been given. Each one was the size of a closet with just enough room for one bed and not much else. Each cubicle smelled of mildew, urine, and cigarette smoke. Dirty dishes were piled in the hallway, adding to the clutter of the place. I wondered if the little girl staring at us ever got to go outside to play, or was she always stuck in this horrible prison?

Once I had heard Uncle Raj talking to Pastor Deepak about their suspicion that children were being kidnapped from the streets. I wondered if these were two of them, or maybe they were the children of the sex workers. Ranjan had taken Kalpani from a slum far away, so they could have been brought here by traffickers like him. Uncle Raj called it a sex slave trade. Now Anita and I were slaves too.







Kalpani showed us her back which was badly scarred. She said Sharvani beat her with heated rods whenever she was disobedient, always in places that the customers wouldn't see. The pain was so severe that she couldn't sleep for weeks afterwards.



Now I do whatever Madame says. I'm too scared not to.



OK Sugar. Girlie talk is over. Your customer is waiting.



Back to your room, princesses. But don't worry. Your turn is coming real soon.

Grace  
Mission  
Friday 9 PM

Let's be  
seated and  
begin.



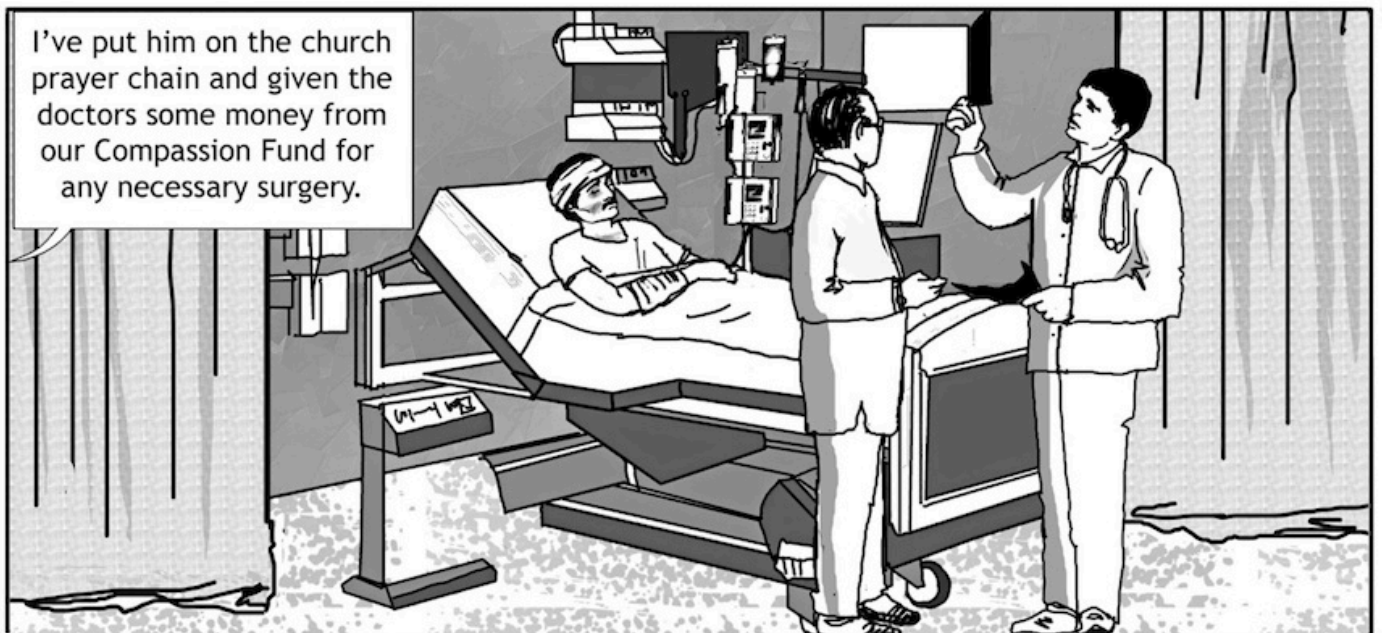
Well, we have a lot to cover tonight so I'll start by giving my report on the uncle, Rupesh Nag. Kaliyah's information was right on. He was badly beaten and left for dead in a back alley. I found him in one of the government hospitals...in a coma.

The doctors aren't holding out much hope that he'll make it. He has a concussion, broken ribs, internal bleeding.

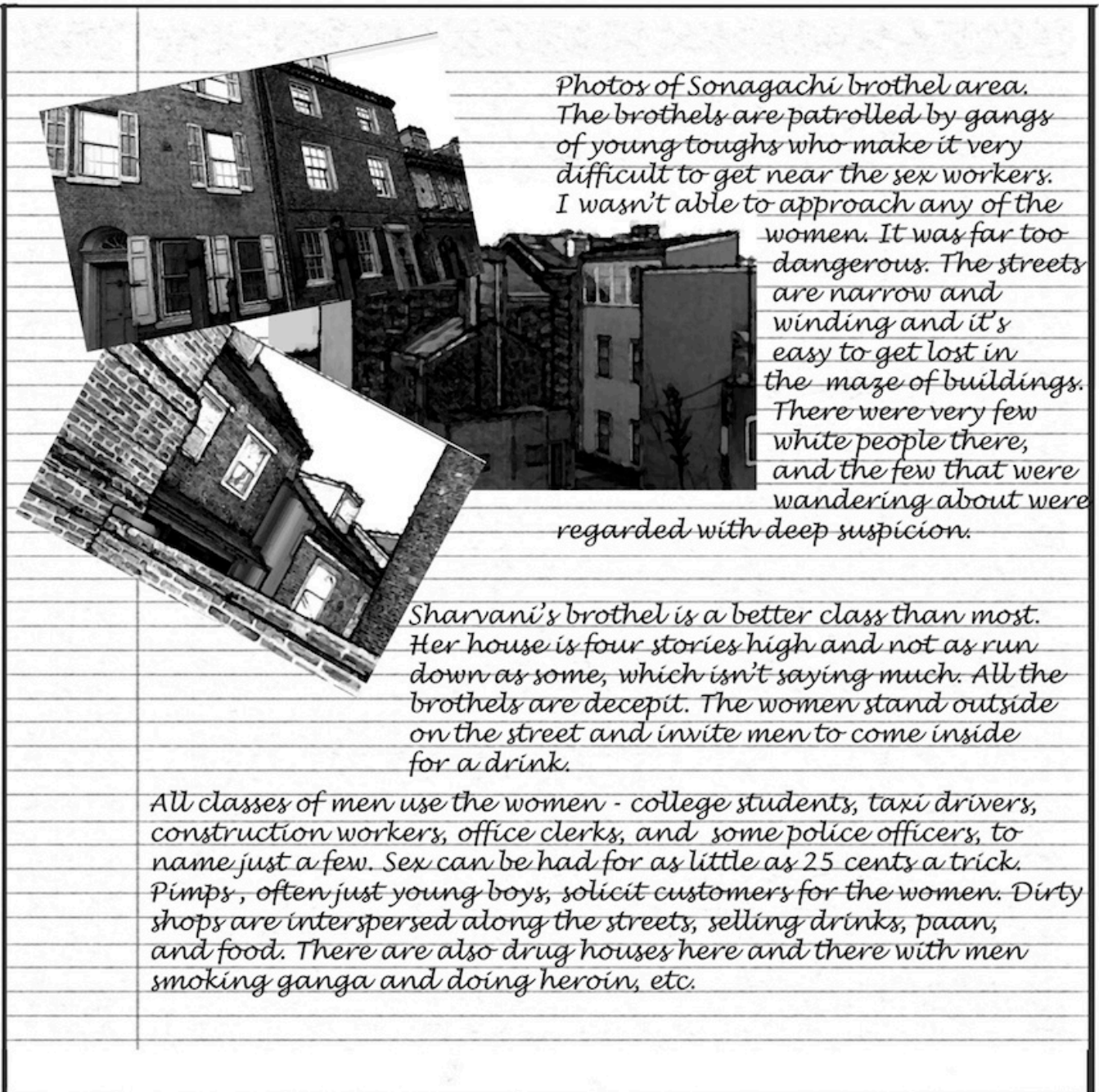
He needs a miracle.



I've put him on the church prayer chain and given the doctors some money from our Compassion Fund for any necessary surgery.











Some of the women are in the brothels because they choose to be. Others are forced into this work by their pimps or boyfriends. Some of the women have homes outside of Sonagachi and only come in to work during the day, after which they go back to their homes. Others rent cement, cell-like rooms to work out of, as well as to live in. These are dark, dirty cubicles with nothing more than a mattress on the ground and a saree slung across the doorway as a curtain. The rooms line the streets and alleys like an assembly-line. The men walk by, pick a girl they want to have sex with, go into a booth with her, and come out a short while later. While some of the girls I saw looked to be underage, it was hard to be sure because of the heavy makeup they wore.

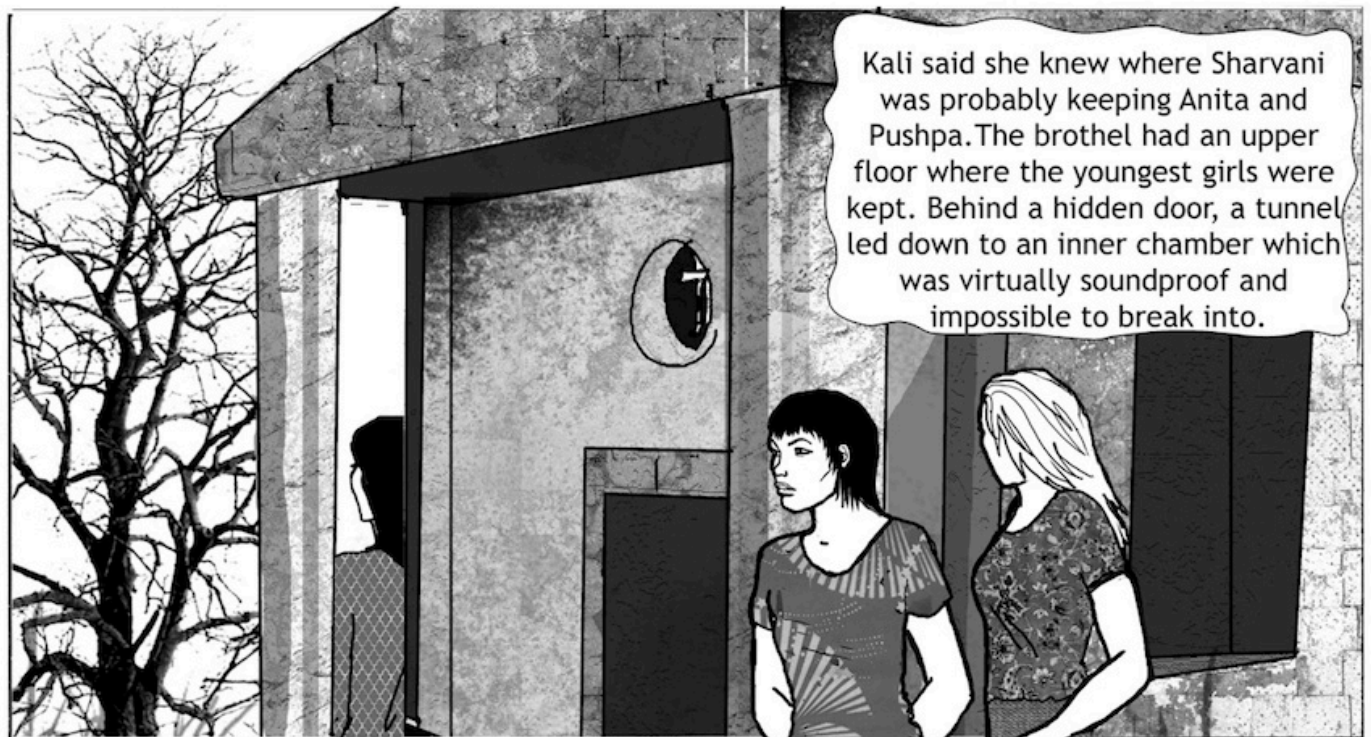
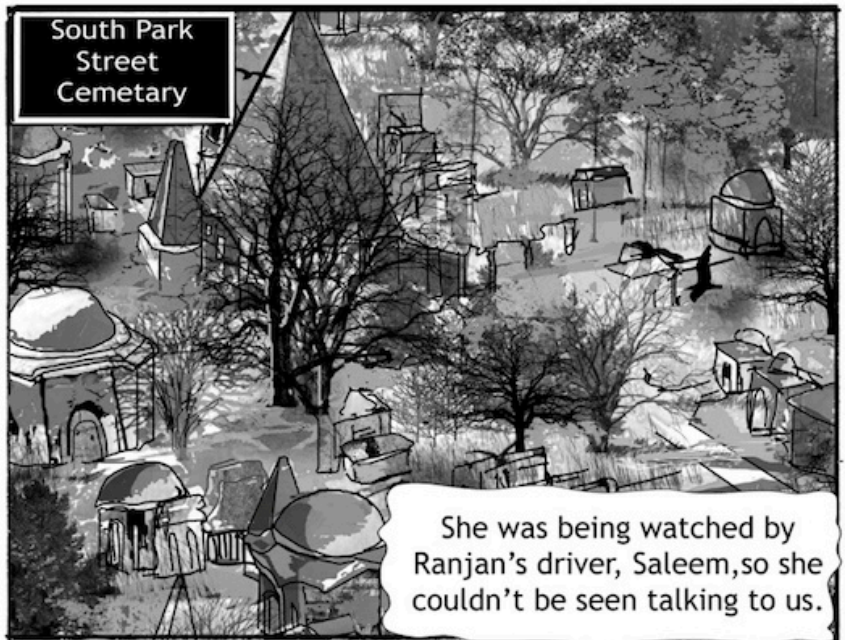
What really broke my heart was seeing the children of the sex workers slaving away at washing dishes, scrubbing clothes, or sweeping the streets.

They looked sadly neglected, wearing rags, their heads full of lice and scabies all over their thin little bodies.

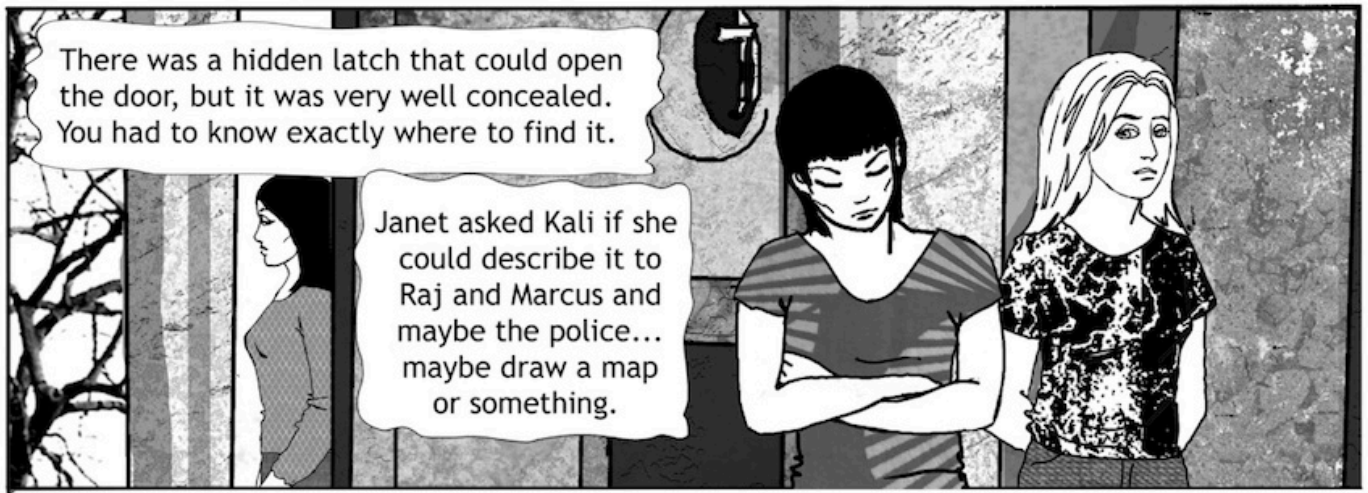
One poor little waif was tied to a metal ring with a telephone cord secured around her ankle. She wore a soiled diaper and had a cookie in her hand. She sat on the bare ground and hummed to herself, rocking back and forth while her mother serviced customers in her cubicle. I wanted so much to grab that baby and take her out of there, but of course I couldn't. The vibes of hostility and suspicion were getting very strong by this time, and I decided it was best for me to vacate the area as quickly as possible.

Marcus was with me while I took the photos, or I never would have dared to do it. He dropped me off at the Mission and went back to provide backup for Raj. I joined Rachel in attempting to contact Kaliyah. We asked Bindi to help us set up a meeting place, which she did through the little street kids and their monkey.









There was a hidden latch that could open the door, but it was very well concealed. You had to know exactly where to find it.

Janet asked Kali if she could describe it to Raj and Marcus and maybe the police... maybe draw a map or something.



Mentioning the cops was probably not a good idea, because she immediately walked away from us.



So it looks like we can't count on Kali helping us any more than she already has. She was taking a big risk as it was.



I don't think we have a chance of rescuing those little girls if we don't find that room.

And that means they'll be stuck in that rape factory forever.

That thought is more than I can bear.





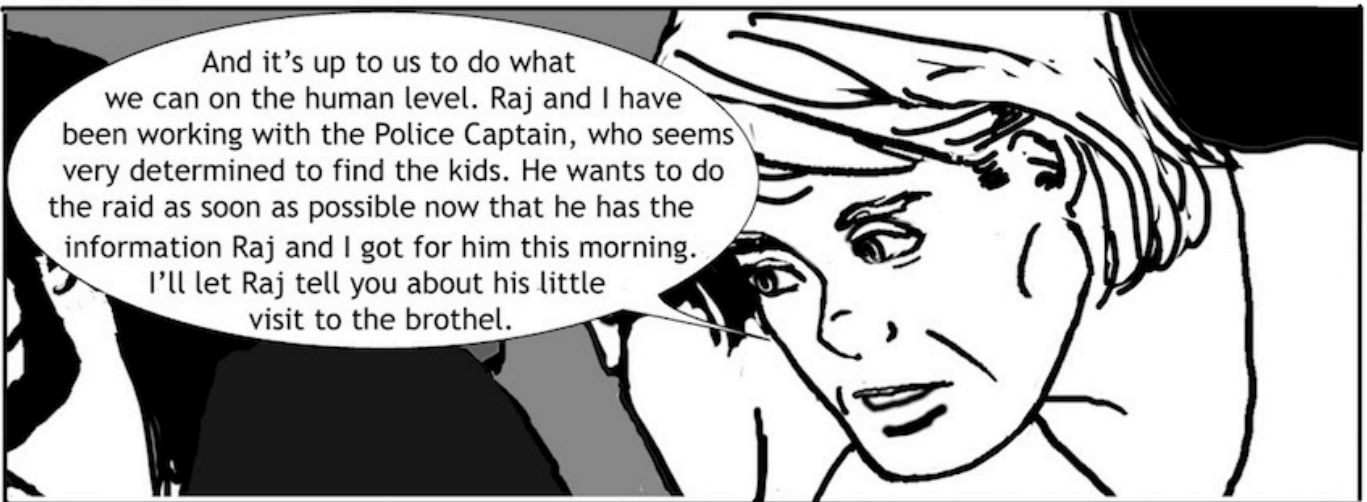
How can people be so wicked ... enslaving women... children?!!!  
...doing cruel, horrible things to them?  
Those photos show so much misery... so much pain.

I never imagined a place could be so... so God-forsaken.

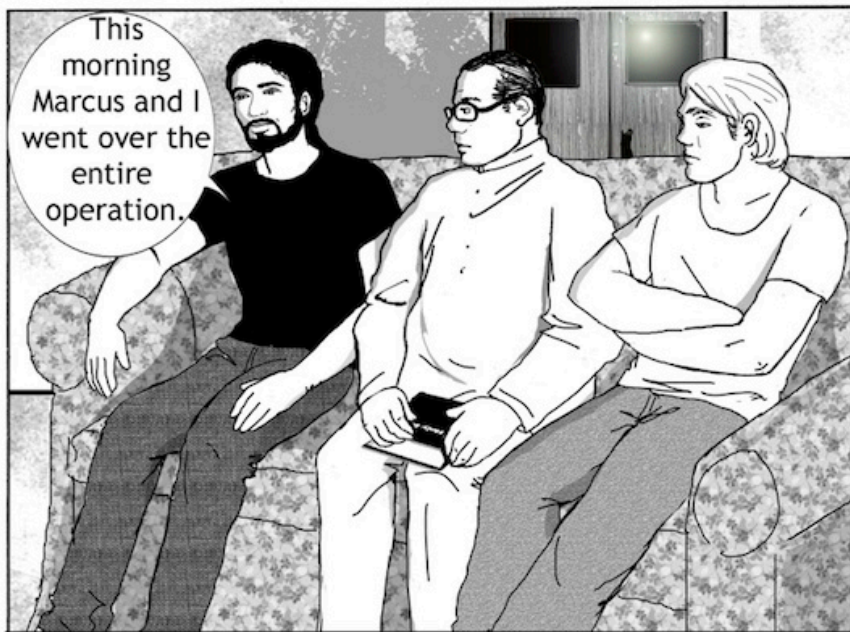


God hasn't abandoned those girls and He'll make a way for us to get to them.

The important thing is not to get discouraged, Rachel. This operation has been bathed in prayer from the start, and its up to Jesus to make it succeed.



And it's up to us to do what we can on the human level. Raj and I have been working with the Police Captain, who seems very determined to find the kids. He wants to do the raid as soon as possible now that he has the information Raj and I got for him this morning. I'll let Raj tell you about his little visit to the brothel.



This morning Marcus and I went over the entire operation.



We pieced together all our information and refined some of the details. Our main contacts have been 2 sex tourists from Europe who vacation regularly in India.



I wanted to find them because they were well known in Sonagachi and were some of the few westerners allowed to visit the brothels. They had credibility with the pimps and traffickers and I hoped to cash in on that by getting them to introduce me around. I still felt a little apprehensive on the streets, even though Marcus was parked nearby and I was rigged out with a button camera and microphone. We kept contact by cell and we devised a code that I would use if I ran into problems. I hoped I wouldn't need to use it, but anything can happen in that place. We also made sure the police captain was aware of what we were doing.



It was still early, so most of the pimps and sex workers were in bed, sleeping off the excesses of the night before, but some were moving about. It sure was a dismal place. The smell of the sewage was overpowering. I picked a street where I'd often seen the two tourists hanging out. I hoped fervently that they'd show up soon.



A few women came by trying to proposition me. Some offered themselves for as little as 25 cents. I hid my discomfort by acting bored and making the excuse that I was waiting for friends.



I was relieved when I saw my contacts approaching. I told them that I wasn't having any luck finding girls for my clients back in Mumbai. I was looking for very young girls but wasn't finding what I wanted. I hinted that I'd make it worth their while if they could provide me with leads.



I casually mentioned that I had heard of a place that might have very young girls.

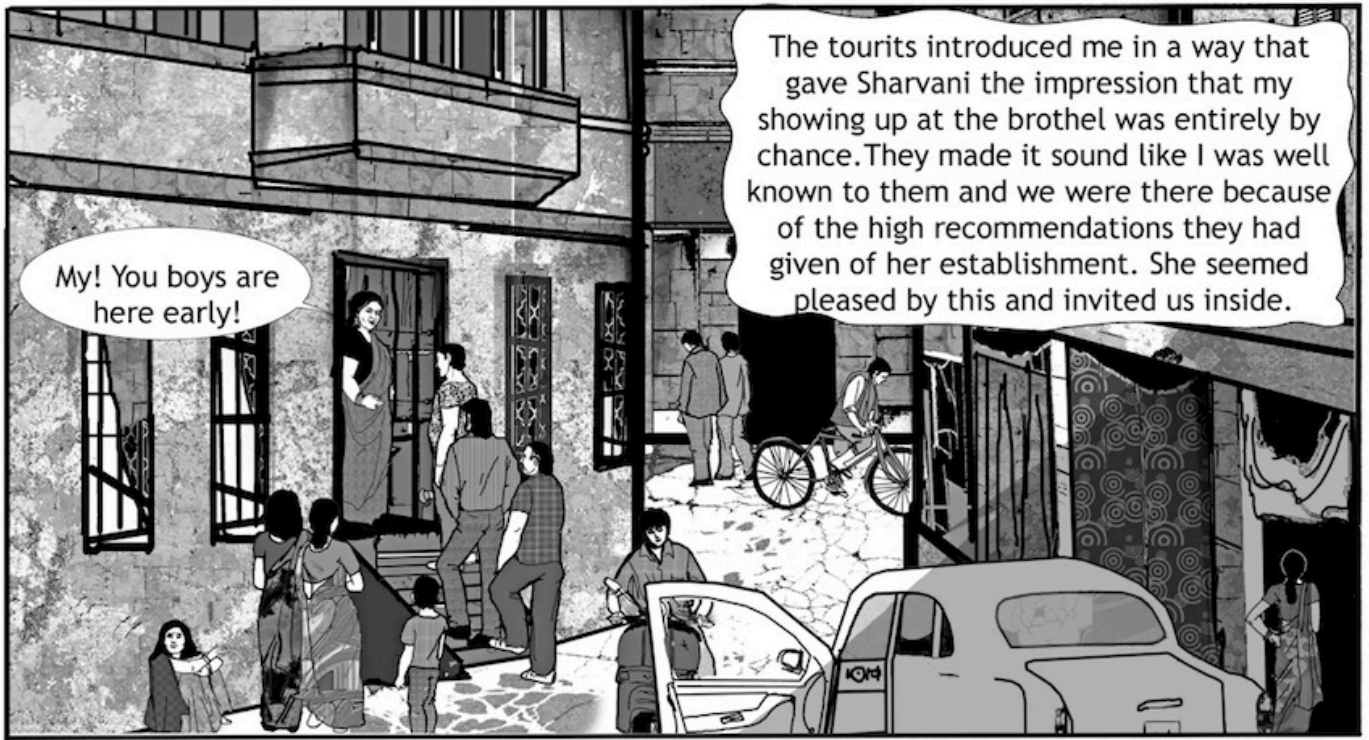


Sharvani's brothel? Yeah, we know that place. C'mon. We'll take you there.

Randal, the older guy, said he liked girls between 10 and 12, while Gabe preferred them as young as five. They bragged about the brothels they had just visited in Cambodia.

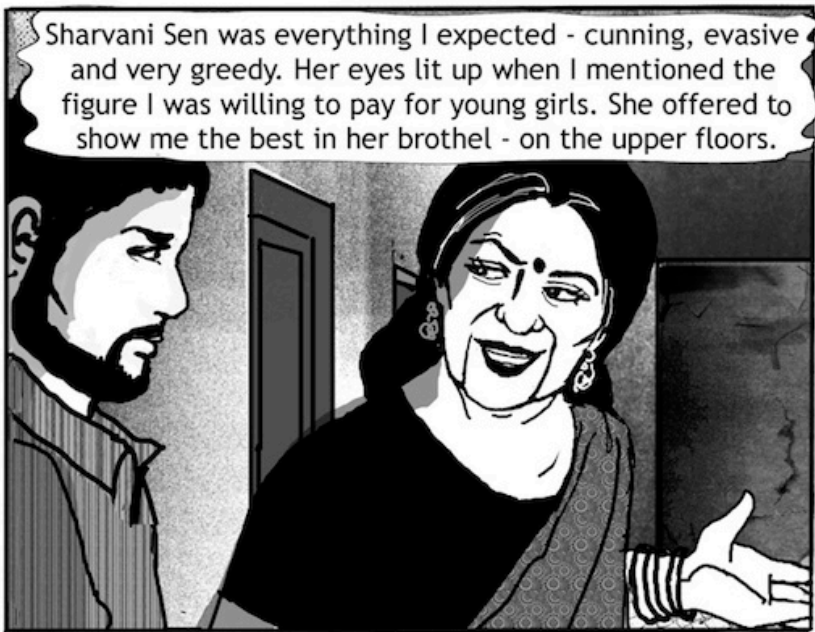






My! You boys are here early!

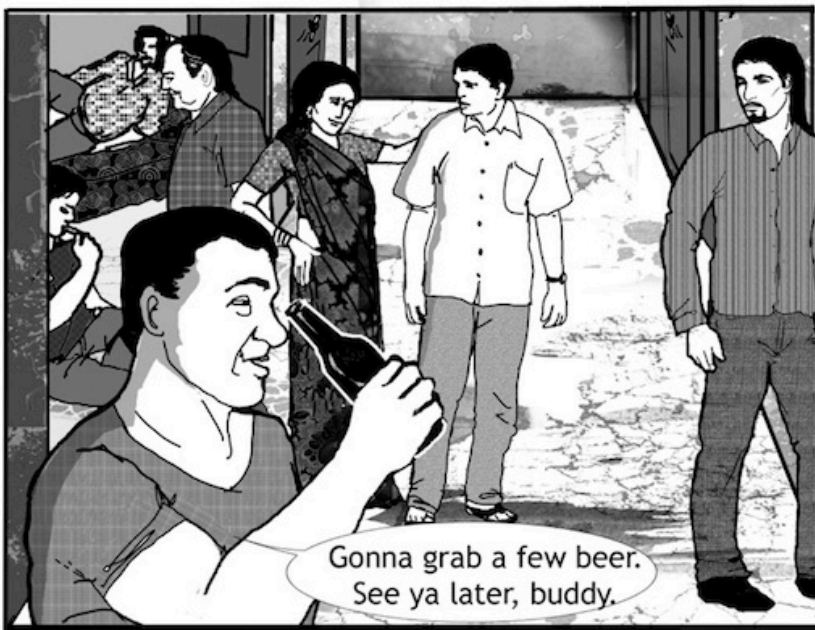
The tourists introduced me in a way that gave Sharvani the impression that my showing up at the brothel was entirely by chance. They made it sound like I was well known to them and we were there because of the high recommendations they had given of her establishment. She seemed pleased by this and invited us inside.



Sharvani Sen was everything I expected - cunning, evasive and very greedy. Her eyes lit up when I mentioned the figure I was willing to pay for young girls. She offered to show me the best in her brothel - on the upper floors.

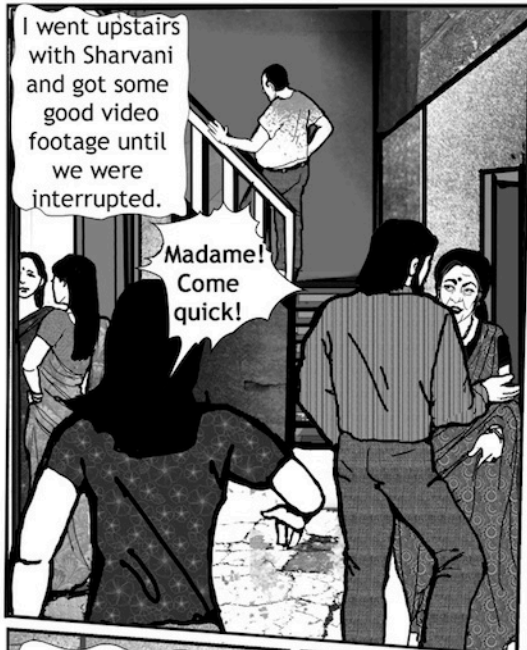


Sharvani used the lower floor for her own use and also for selling drugs and alcohol to the clients. Gabe and Randal said they'd stay downstairs and get into 'party mode' with the others.



Gonna grab a few beer. See ya later, buddy.





I went upstairs with Sharvani and got some good video footage until we were interrupted.

Madame!  
Come quick!



Ach! Not again!  
I'll skin them alive this time!

Two girls are fighting, M'am.  
They are loco.



Sharvani told me she'd be right back after she settled the matter. In the meantime I was free to look around on my own. I couldn't believe my good luck...



...until I heard a familiar voice at the end of the hallway.

Okay, dolls.  
Which room?



I ducked into the nearest room, hoping Ajay hadn't seen me.

Click



How do you want to do it?



With a condom, or without? It costs more without one.



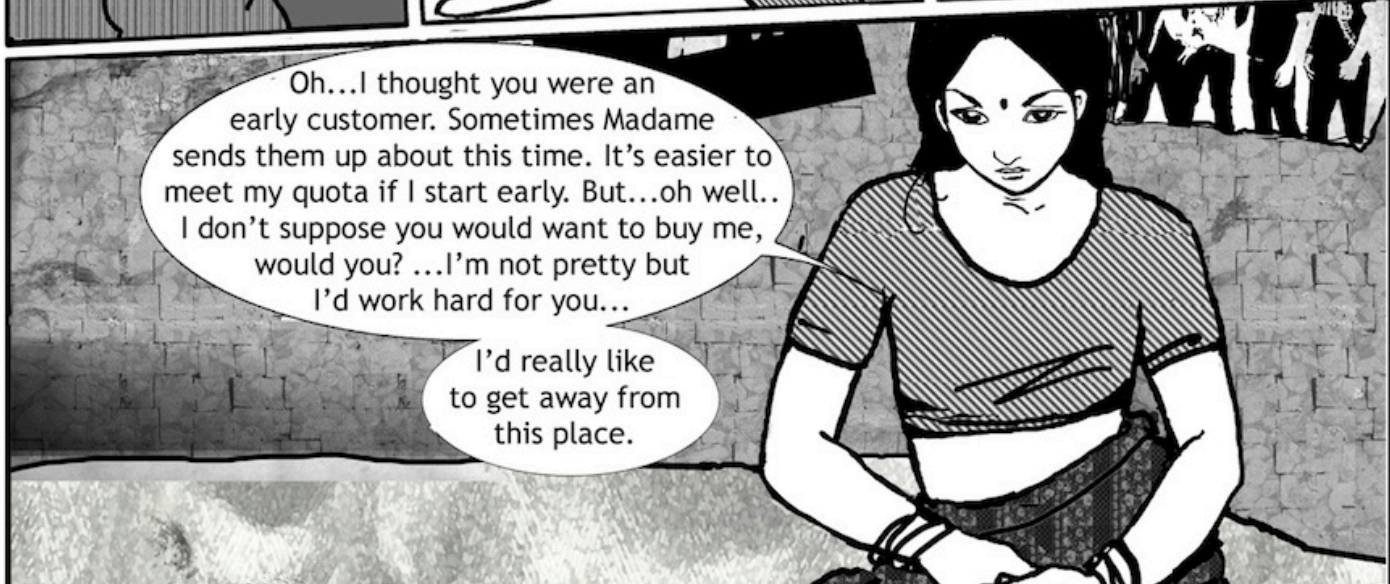
Huh?



But whatever you want is okay.



No, no, no... I'm not here for.. I mean.. I'm here to buy girls.. uh.. for my business... in Mumbai..



Oh... I thought you were an early customer. Sometimes Madame sends them up about this time. It's easier to meet my quota if I start early. But... oh well.. I don't suppose you would want to buy me, would you? ... I'm not pretty but I'd work hard for you...

I'd really like to get away from this place.

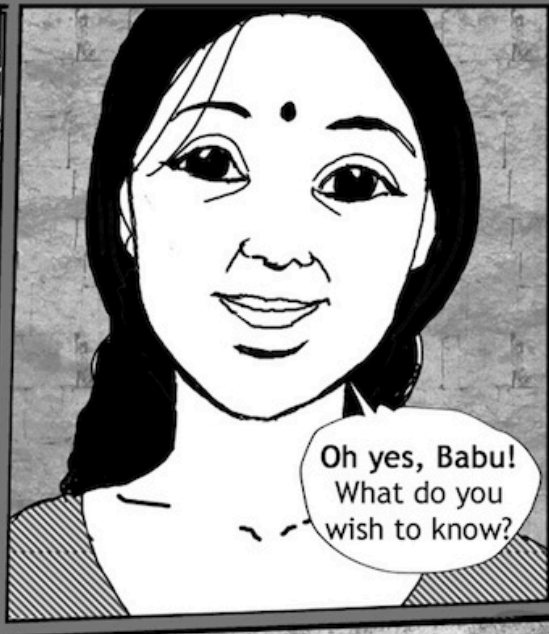




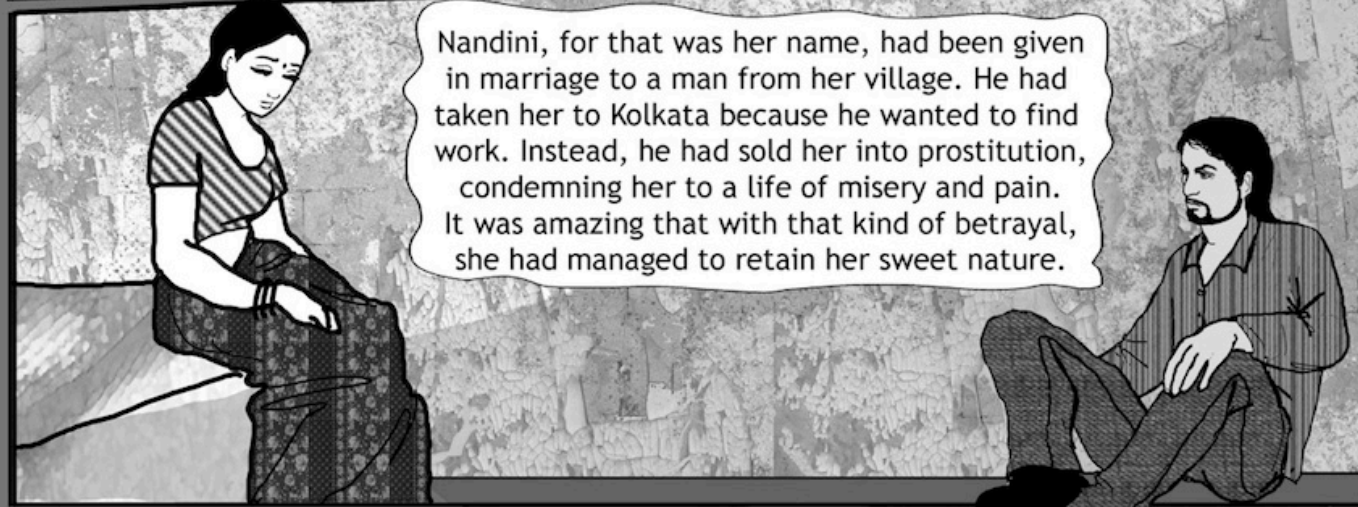
Uh..I'm looking for very young girls...

Maybe you could provide information.

I'd pay you for your time, of course.



Oh yes, Babu! What do you wish to know?



Nandini, for that was her name, had been given in marriage to a man from her village. He had taken her to Kolkata because he wanted to find work. Instead, he had sold her into prostitution, condemning her to a life of misery and pain. It was amazing that with that kind of betrayal, she had managed to retain her sweet nature.



She had been 16 when she started to work for Sharvani. That was 3 years ago. In all that time she had only been on the upper floor a few times, but she was definite about there being young children up there. She asked me why I wanted to buy such little girls for my brothel. It was all I could do not to confide in her, telling her the real reason I was searching for children. I hated the idea of her thinking I wanted to use them as she had been used. She said I had kind eyes, and that puzzled her. None of the pimps and madames in the sex trade had kind eyes. She again offered to work for me, promising to do her best to pay off whatever it cost me to buy her. I made some vague excuse about having to think about it, but I promised myself that when we did the rescue, she would definitely be on my list. I would get her out of this hell hole if it killed me! The idea of her being degraded night after night made my blood boil. I thought it best to leave before I said something I shouldn't. We'd been talking for over 20 minutes so it was probably safe to make my exit from the brothel.

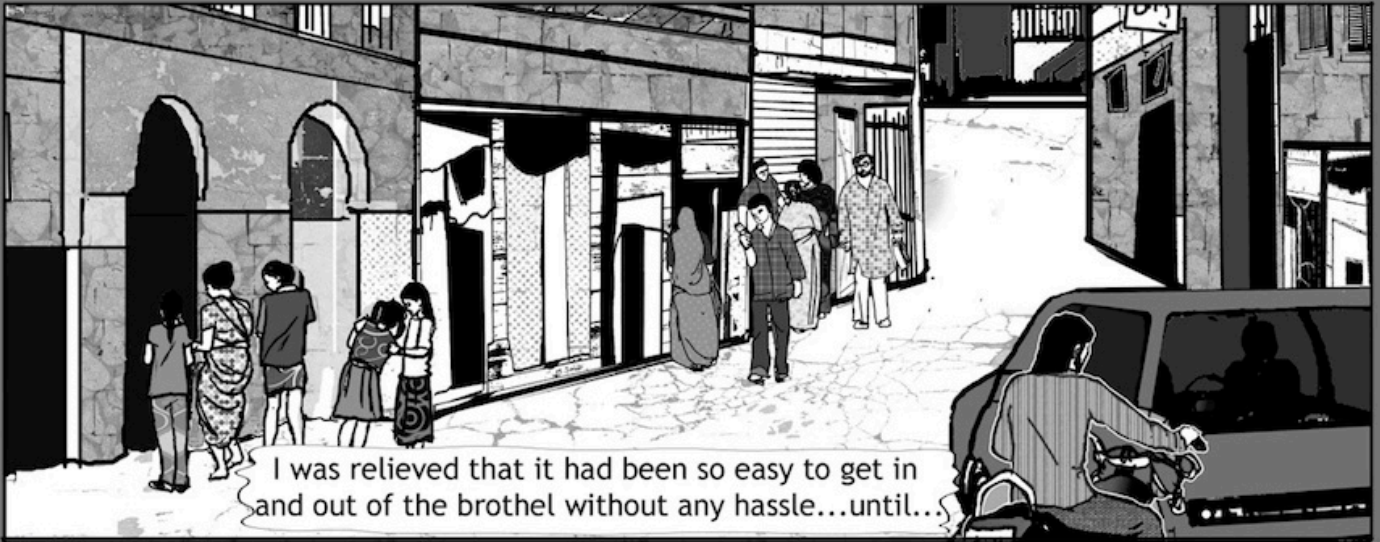


I felt nervous as I made my way downstairs, but thankfully I didn't see Ajay, or Sharvani, or even the two tourists along the way. I was especially glad that I didn't meet up with Gabe and Randal. It was extremely difficult to keep up my act around them. To hear them brag about their pedophile holiday in Asia sickened me. And after talking with Nandini, the horror of what these women and children were suffering was especially real, bringing up some strong emotions. It didn't help seeing the hardened, pain-filled gazes of the girls I passed on the way out of the brothel.

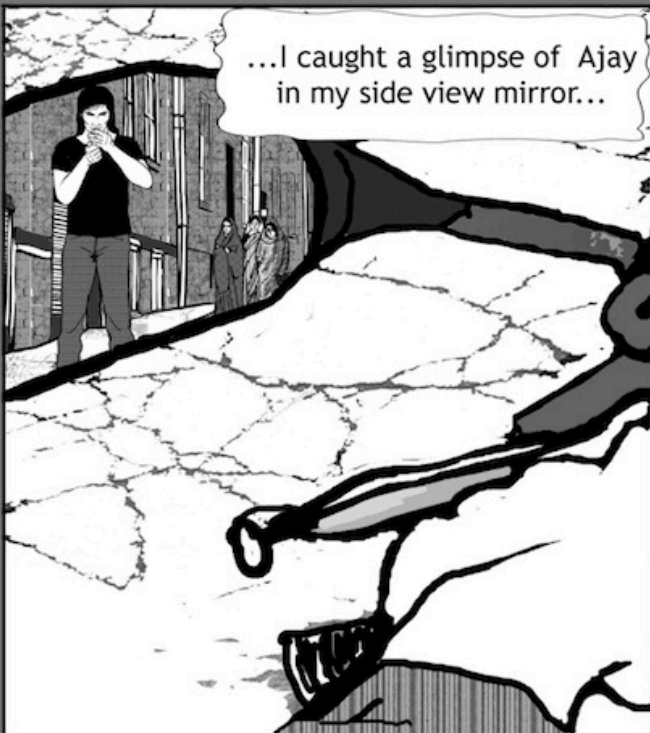
It was a short walk back to the main street where I had met the tourists. Marcus was parked behind my motorbike, in a car with black tinted windows. We didn't want to be seen together, so as soon as he saw that I was okay, he was supposed to drive ahead of me to the police station, where we would meet together with the police chief to examine the video footage I had taken.







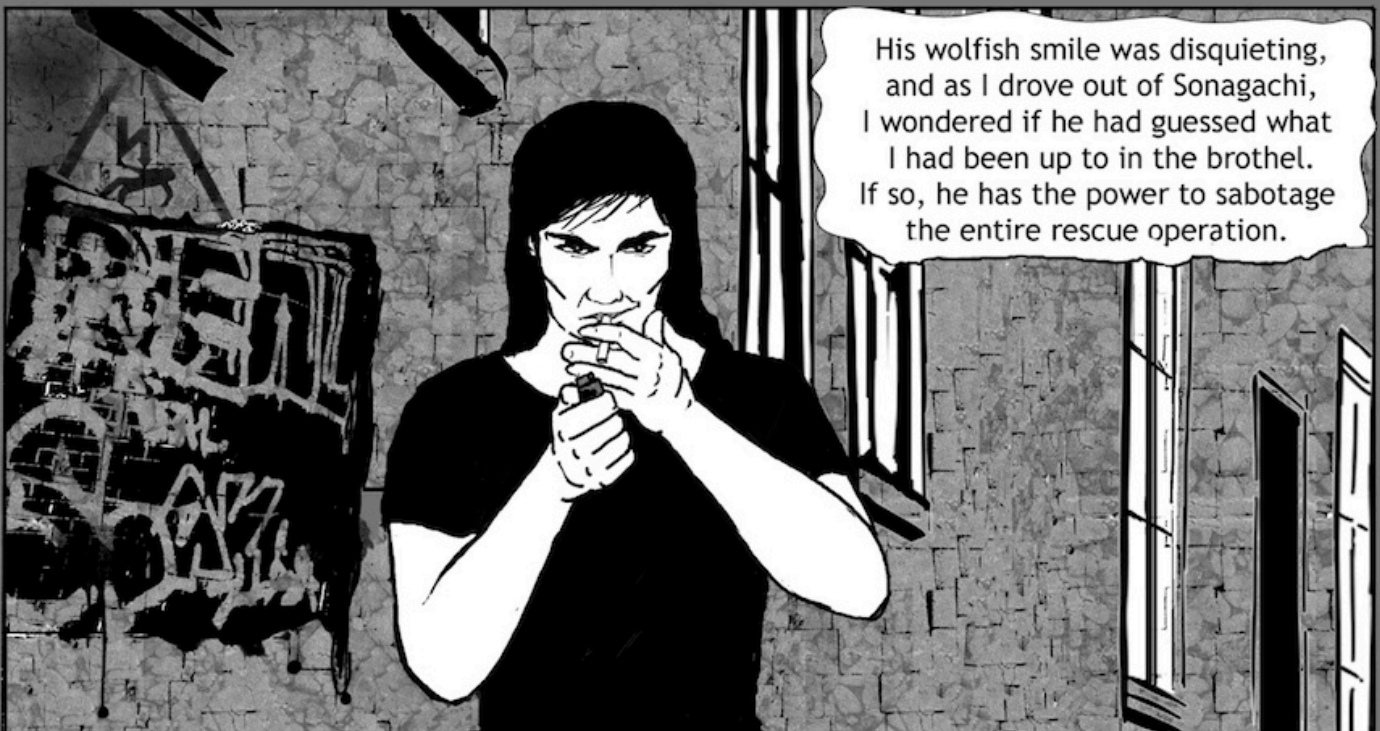
I was relieved that it had been so easy to get in and out of the brothel without any hassle...until...



...I caught a glimpse of Ajay in my side view mirror...



...looking straight at me.



His wolfish smile was disquieting, and as I drove out of Sonagachi, I wondered if he had guessed what I had been up to in the brothel. If so, he has the power to sabotage the entire rescue operation.





# 11. Raid



Saturday 7 PM



Rachel texted.  
She and Pastor are  
trying to contact Kaliyah  
for more information.  
They're having a hard  
time finding her though.  
If they do, she'll  
call us.



I'm surprised  
Captain Chowdhury decided  
to do the raid, especially  
since Ajay has probably tipped  
off Sharvani.



Sigh...  
Well, he said  
he didn't hold  
out much hope for  
finding the girls,  
but we had to try  
at least. I'm glad  
he was willing  
to take the  
chance.







POLICE!



Direct me to the owner of this brothel!



Madam is in her room, Sir.



She is taking rest. Come this way.



Why are you here again? You know I run a decent establishment.

We received a tipoff that you have minor girls who are working as prostitutes.

We have a warrant to search these premises.



BAH! This is the plot of crooked NGO's, always spreading lies so they can get more money from the west. There is no child sex work going on anywhere in Sonagachi. Certainly not in my place! I am insulted that you would accuse me of such a vile thing!



But that's not really why you're here, is it? So how much is this gonna cost me?

She's a real piece of work, isn't she?



Do you notice how no one seems too worried about this raid?

Yeah. They were obviously warned.

Hey!

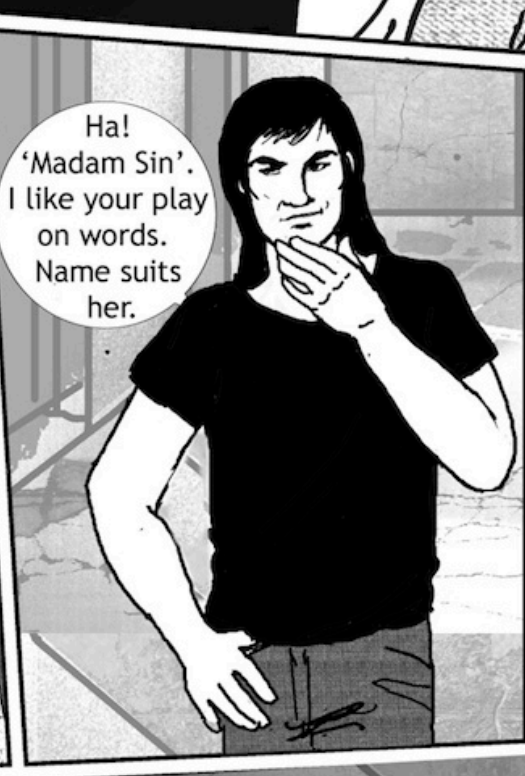




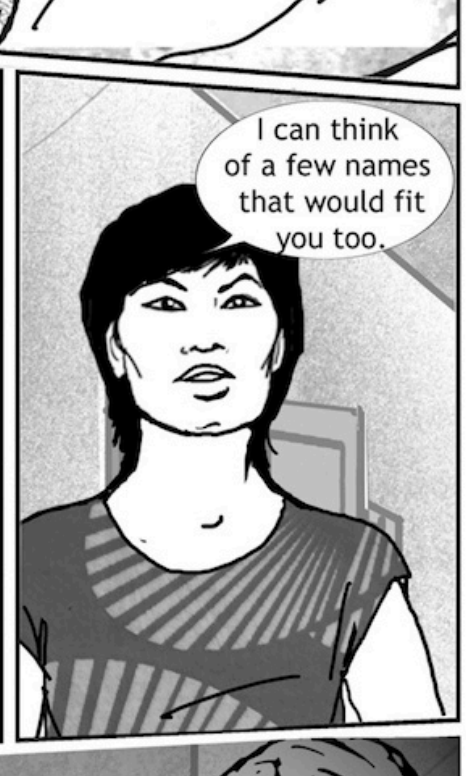
Hey! Welcome Preacher Man!  
You seem to really like this place.  
Nice of you to visit..again.



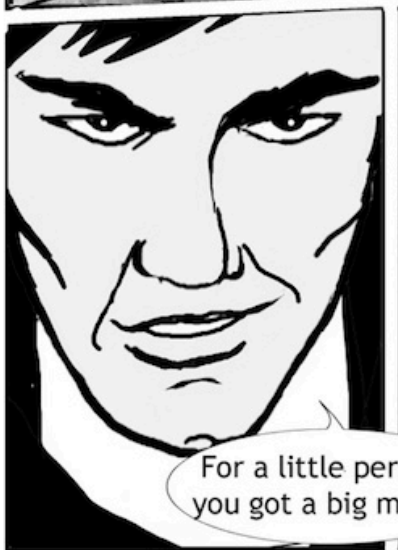
So you're  
the one  
who tipped  
off Madam  
Sin.



Ha!  
'Madam Sin'.  
I like your play  
on words.  
Name suits  
her.



I can think  
of a few names  
that would fit  
you too.



For a little person  
you got a big mouth.



Look who's talking.

C'mon Tiger.  
The cops are going  
upstairs.





What the -!

Both of you get dressed and step outside!



I'm taking you in. You don't look like you're 19.



Nandini?



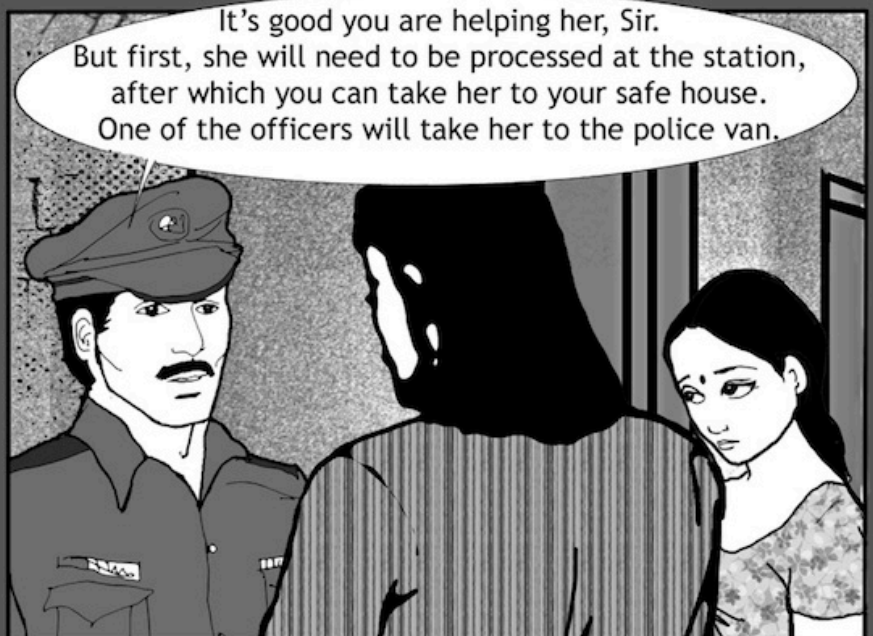
Oh Babu! They caught you too!

Actually I lied to you, Nandini. I'm sorry, but I had to. I'm helping the police rescue girls out of sex trafficking.

I can help you too, if you let me.

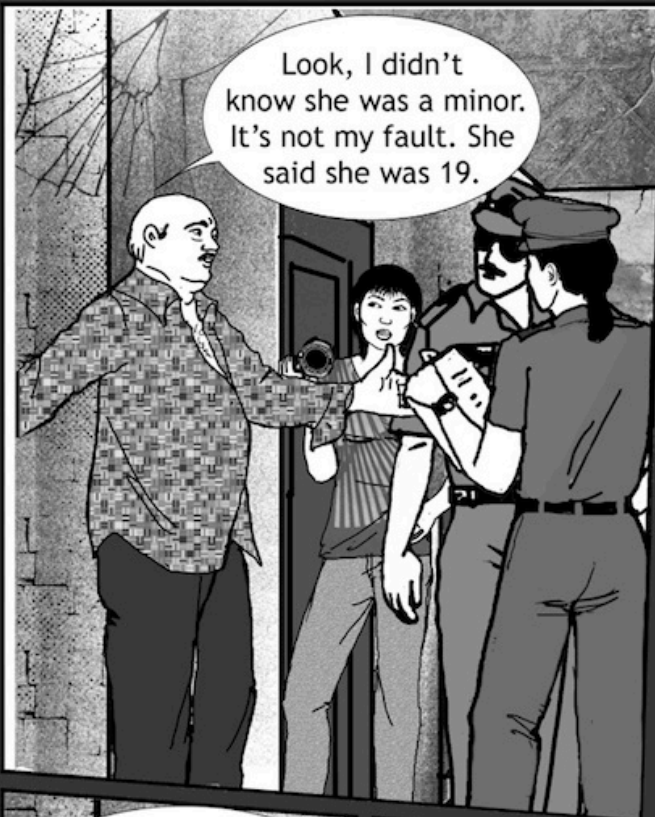


I knew it! Your face was too kind for you to be a babu. When you left ...I hoped you'd come back...for me.

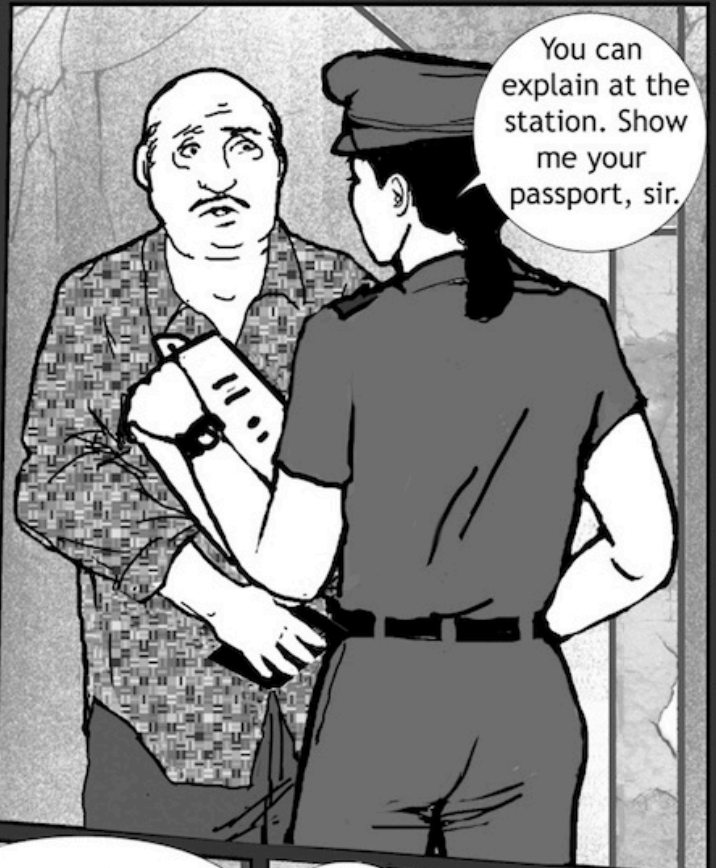


It's good you are helping her, Sir. But first, she will need to be processed at the station, after which you can take her to your safe house. One of the officers will take her to the police van.





Look, I didn't know she was a minor. It's not my fault. She said she was 19.



You can explain at the station. Show me your passport, sir.



Can't we settle this right here? I'll pay whatever you want.



Attempted bribery doesn't help your case ...sir.



He doesn't even feel guilt.

Don't fret honey. It does no good. Let God deal with it.



Ha! Ha!

Let's see what you got!





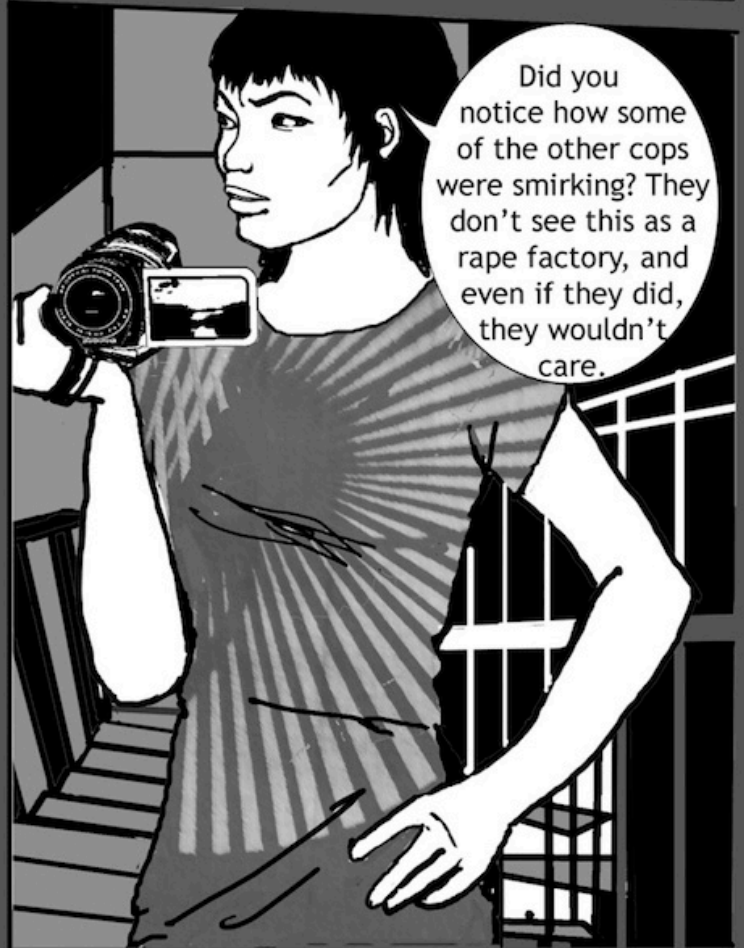


Man! Was the Captain ever angry with those 3 cops!

He said he's reporting them to the Chief.



Big deal! They'll get fined 500 rupees and be back next week to prey on some other woman.



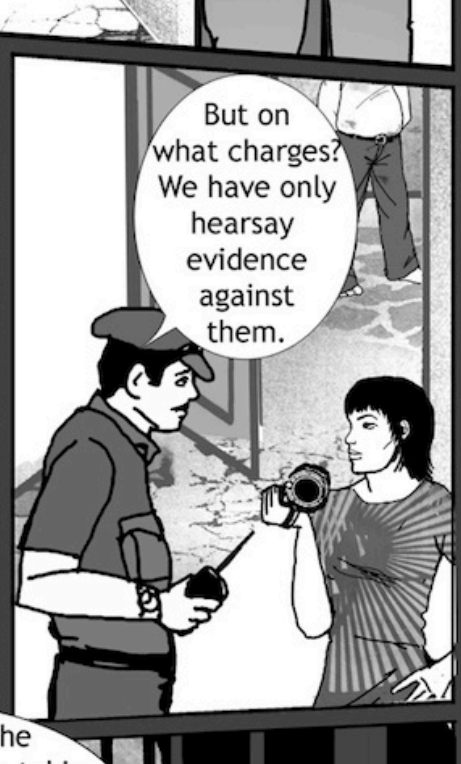
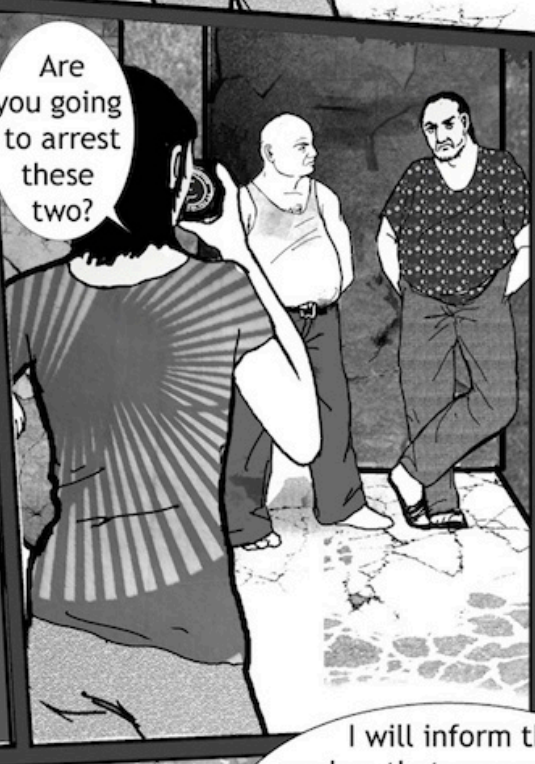
Did you notice how some of the other cops were smirking? They don't see this as a rape factory, and even if they did, they wouldn't care.



Chowdhury cares.

Can't tar them all with the same brush, Luv.

I guess.







If the girl, Nandini, does happen to be a minor, you could be in big trouble, Madam Sen. But even if she is of age, she has stated that she wishes to leave the sex trade. She will be handed over to the NGO people.



You can't do that! She owes me a lot of money! She has to work off her debt to me.



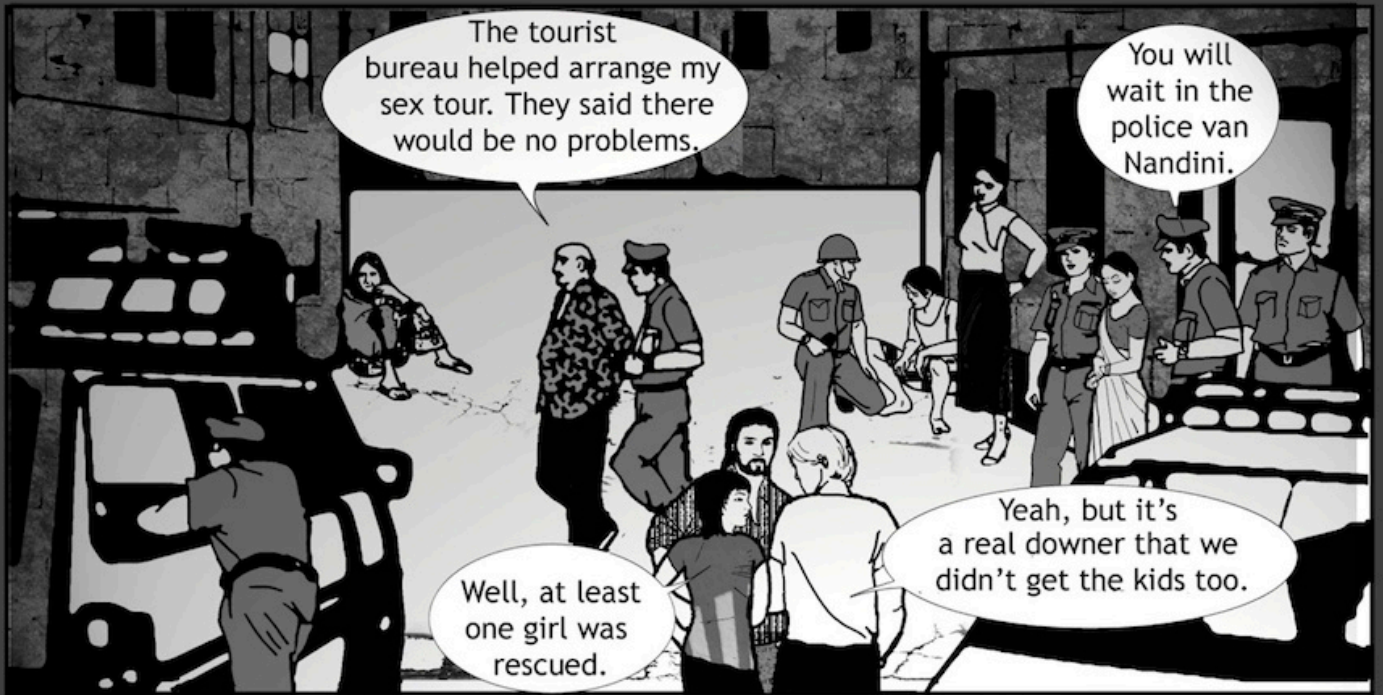
Article 23 of the Constitution prohibits debt bondage, as you well know.

Good-night, Madam.



We're finished here. Let's move out.





The tourist bureau helped arrange my sex tour. They said there would be no problems.

You will wait in the police van Nandini.

Well, at least one girl was rescued.

Yeah, but it's a real downer that we didn't get the kids too.



These people are very bad. So many times we have had complaints, but always they get tipped off and we come away empty-handed.



I know that you fear for the little ones who are known to you, but the fact that we were able to remove one girl from this place makes this raid a success.

You can follow me to the station and pick up Nandini from there.



Alright men! The raid is over!

Everyone back to the station!







That's because..



...you didn't know where to look.



I can show you.



How did you convince her to help?

It wasn't easy. She was tortured in this place. I told her that by helping the girls, she would be fighting back at the evil done to her, and turn it around for good. I also told her that the Mission would help her.





No one leaves this building! The raid is still in effect!



What are you cops doing back here? You already did your snooping around.



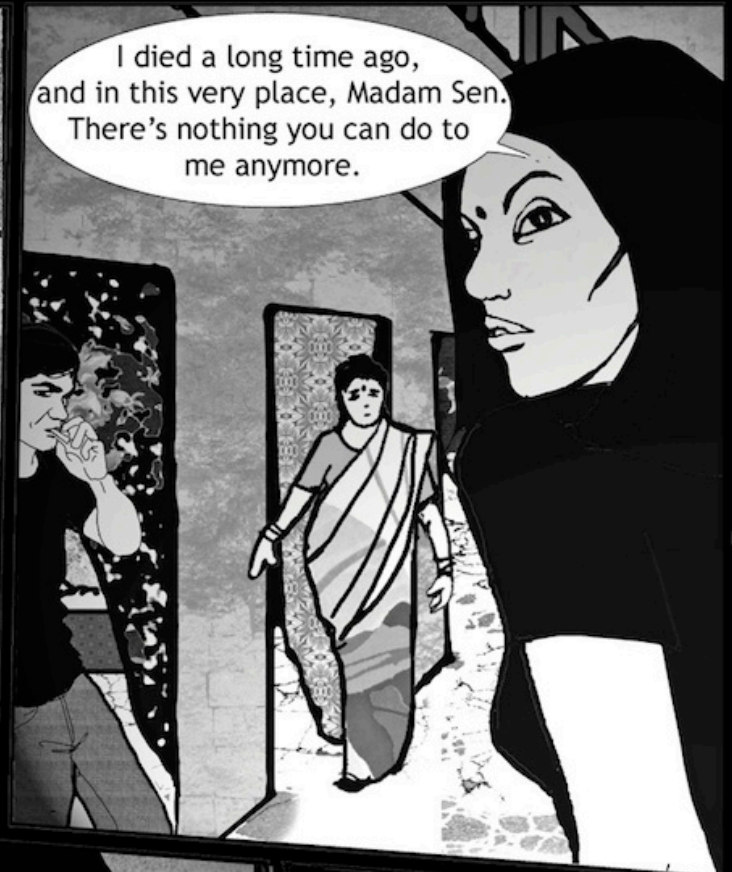
Kaliyah!



Hello Sharvani. Thought I'd take a peek at my old room.



You'll die  
for this, Kali!



I died a long time ago,  
and in this very place, Madam Sen.  
There's nothing you can do to  
me anymore.



We'll  
see about  
that!

















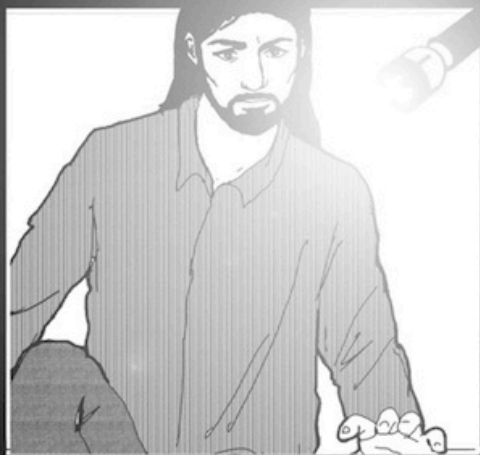










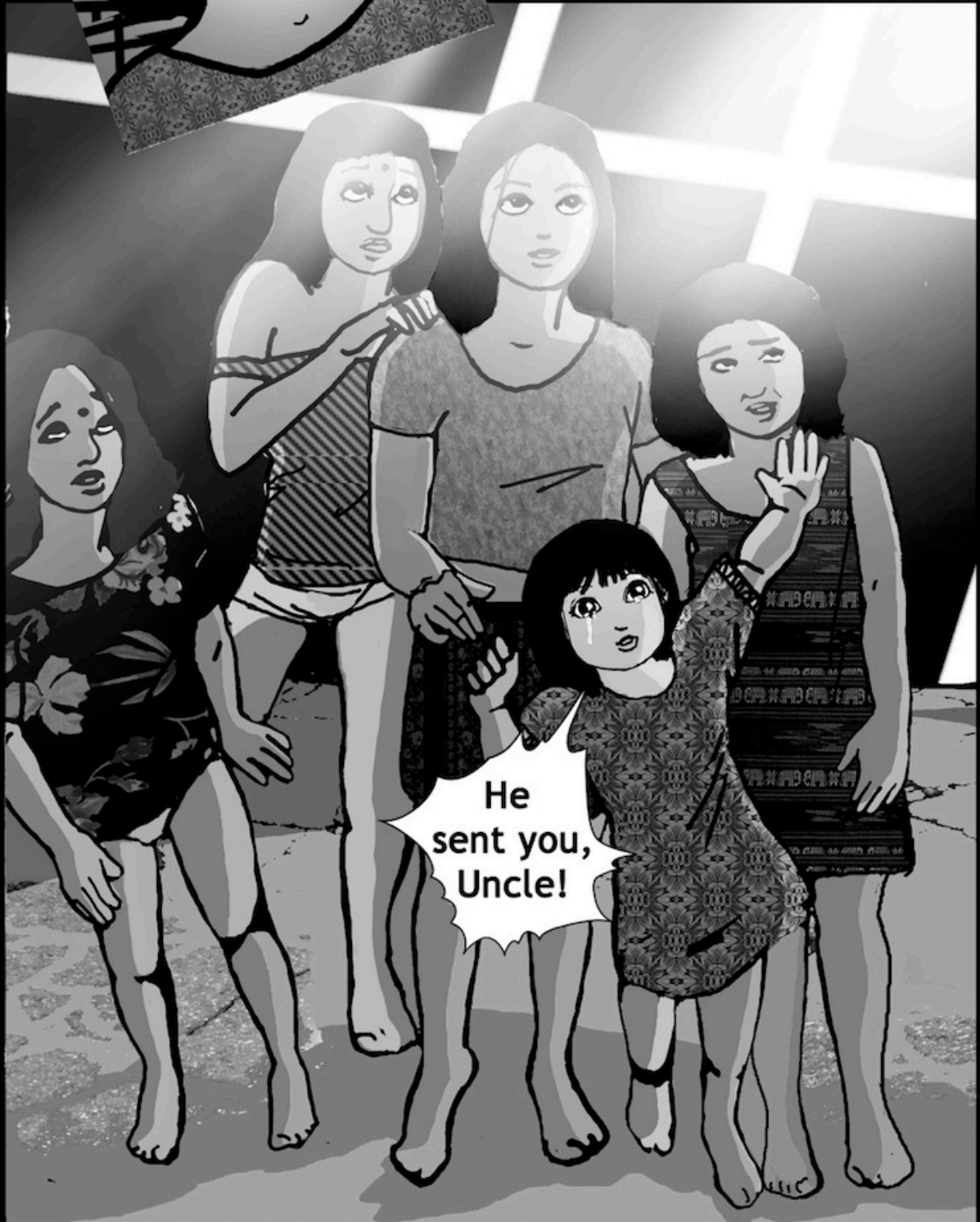


Jesus!  
You  
came!



Pushpa, it's me..  
..Uncle Raj.











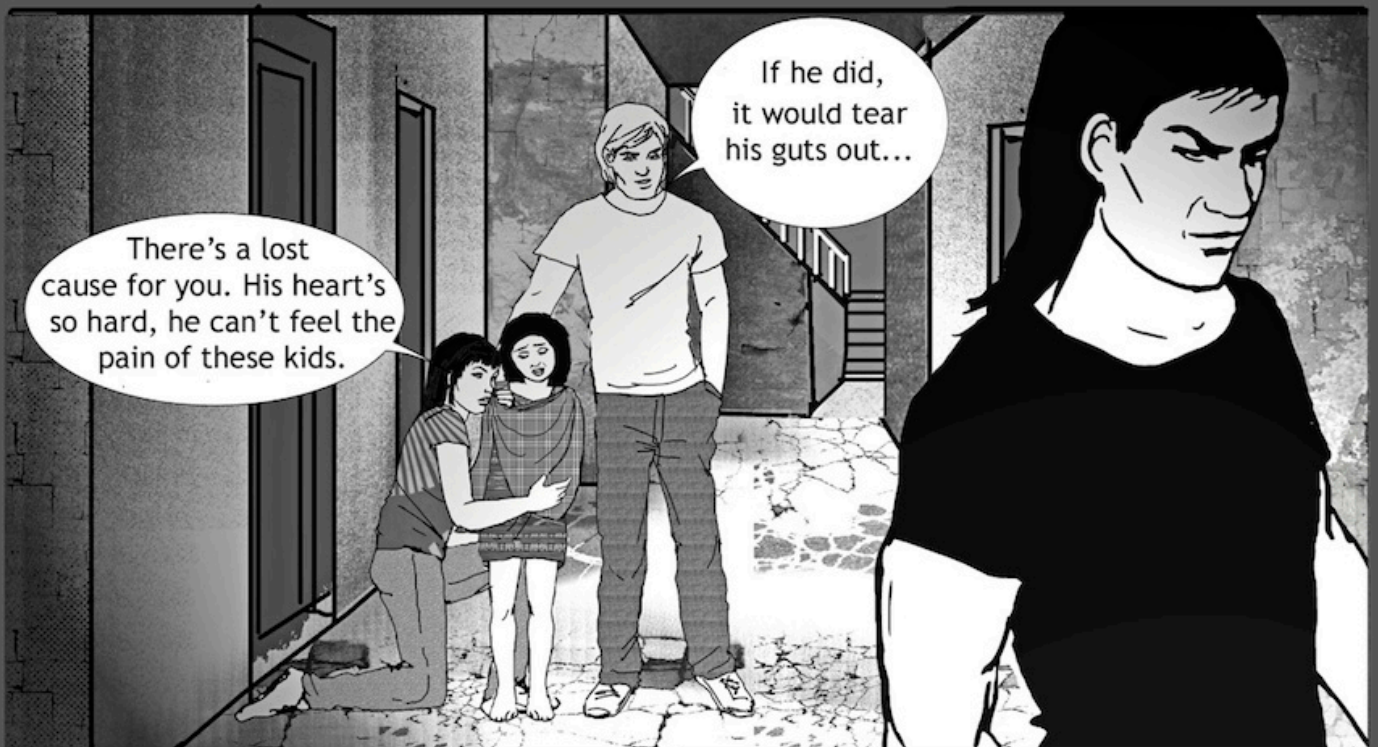
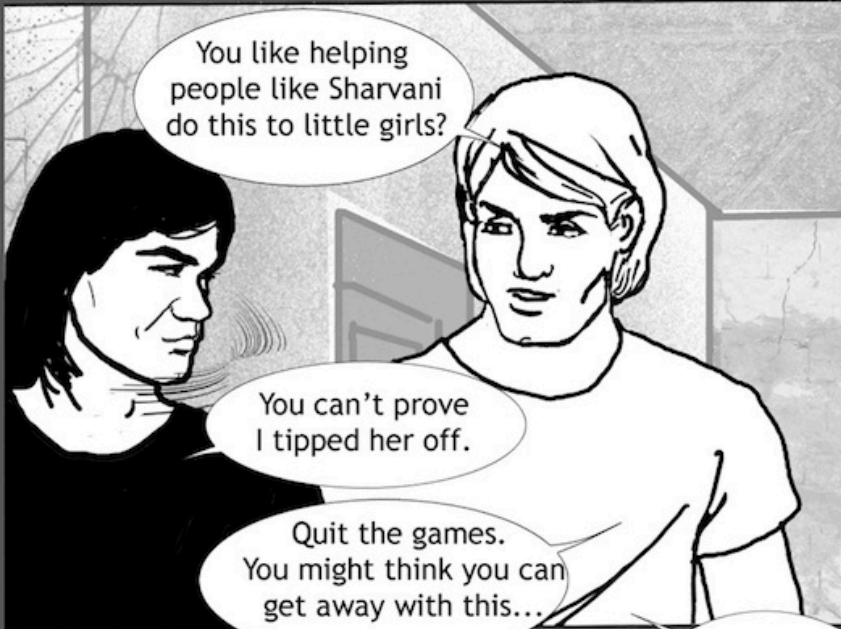
We were in the valley of shadows and death, Uncle.



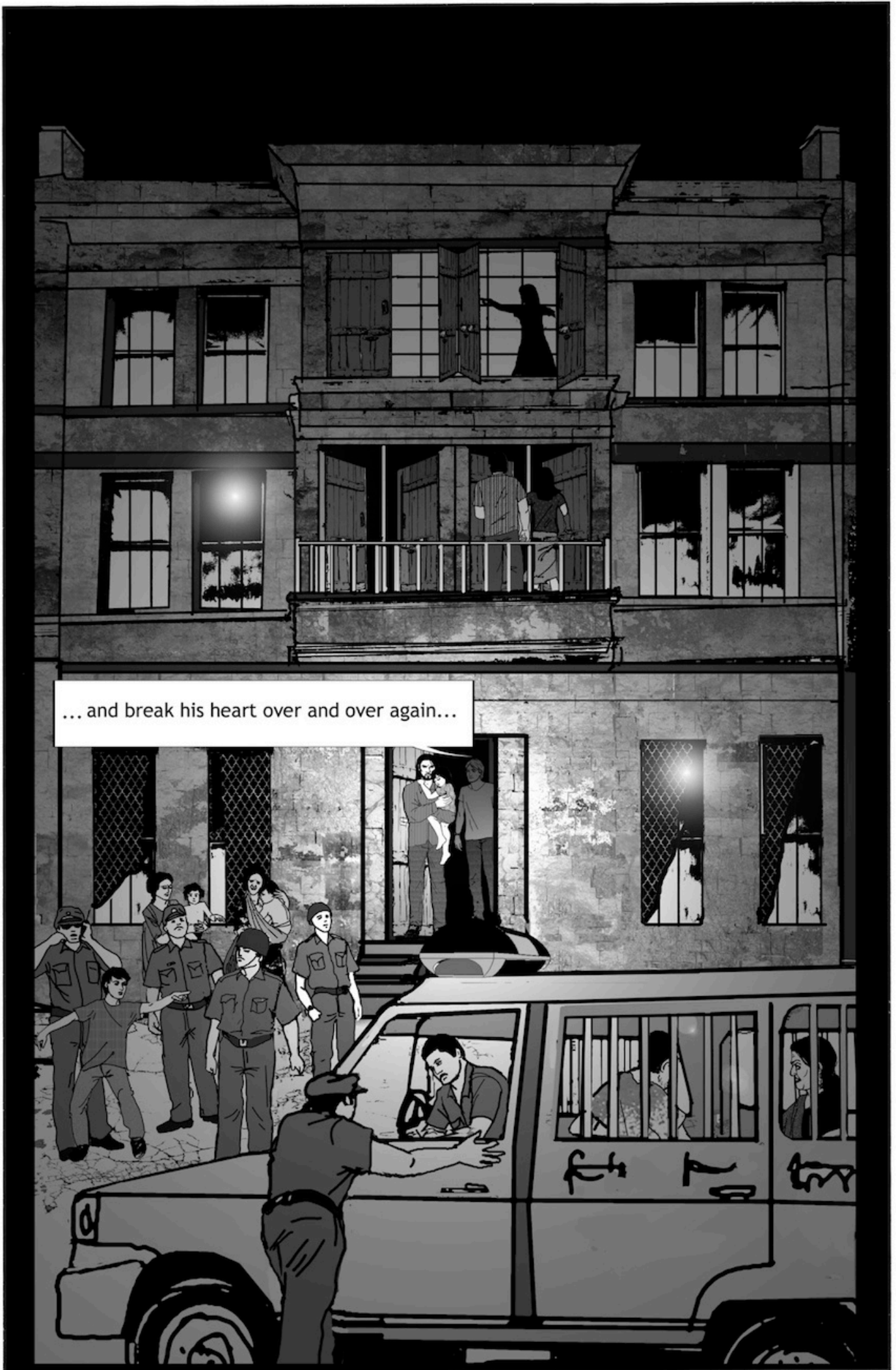
So Ajay, how do you stomach what goes on here?











... and break his heart over and over again...



...the way it does ours...

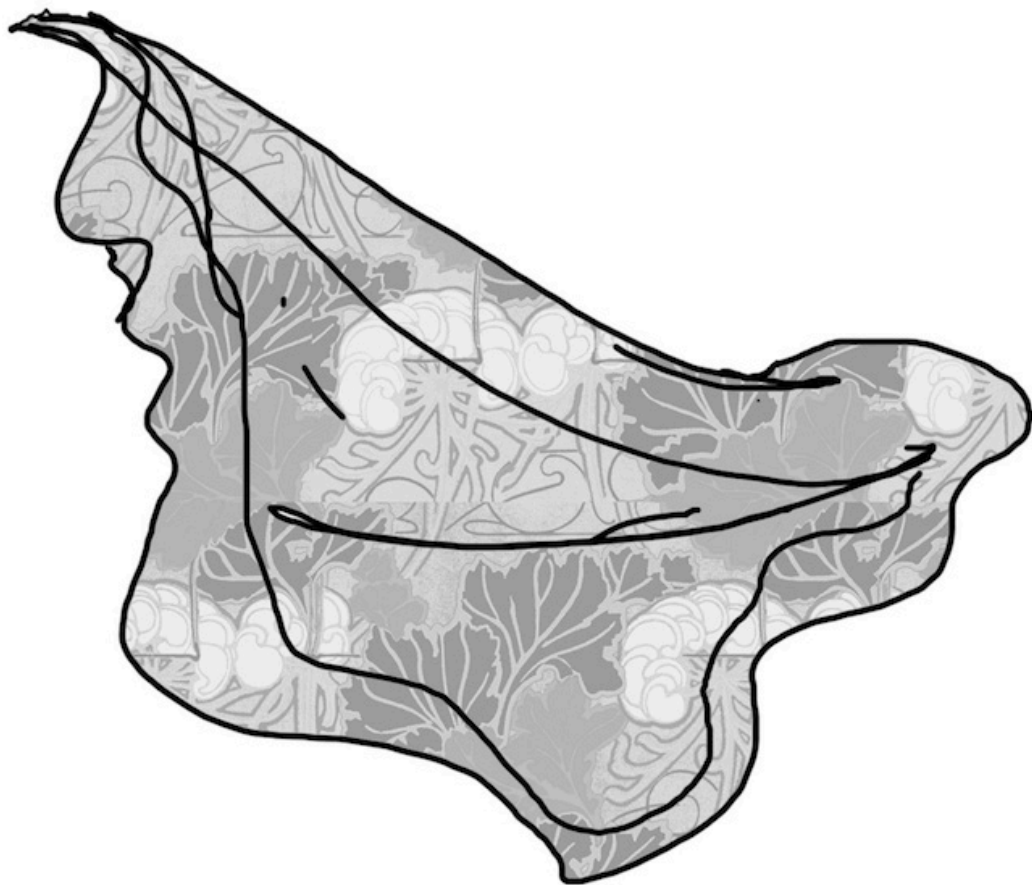


...the way it does God`s.

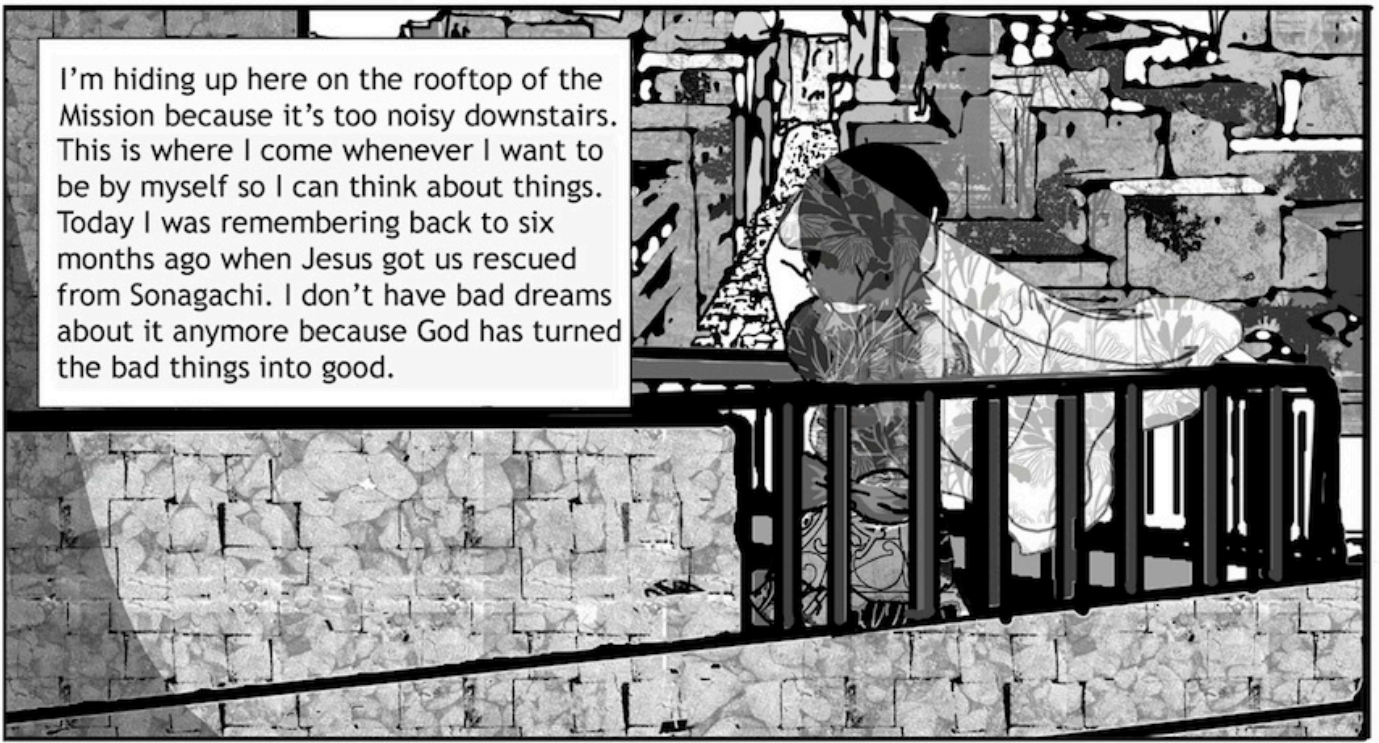




## 12. *Veil*



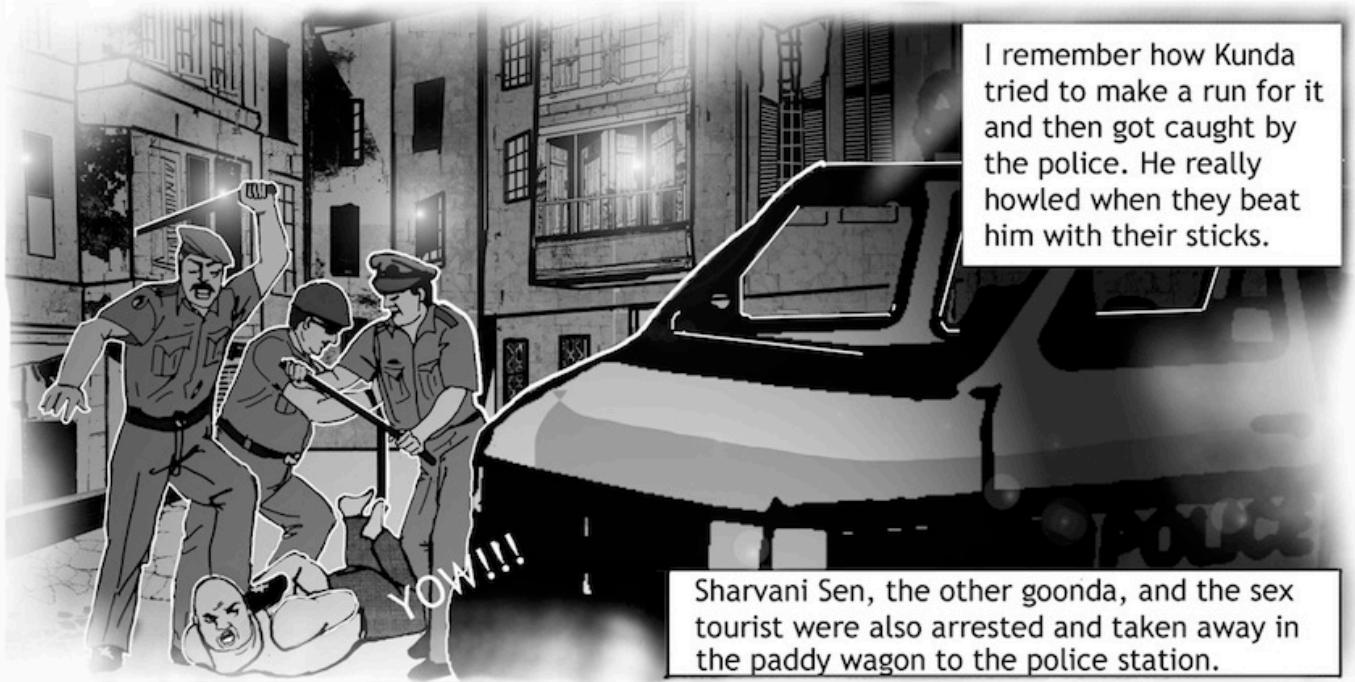
I'm hiding up here on the rooftop of the Mission because it's too noisy downstairs. This is where I come whenever I want to be by myself so I can think about things. Today I was remembering back to six months ago when Jesus got us rescued from Sonagachi. I don't have bad dreams about it anymore because God has turned the bad things into good.



I'll always remember seeing Uncle Raj looking down at us through the trap door and then being lifted up into his arms and taken away to safety. I'll never forget that...never. At first I thought he was Jesus, and then I realized that Jesus had sent him to get us. That was a good memory.







I remember how Kunda tried to make a run for it and then got caught by the police. He really howled when they beat him with their sticks.

Sharvani Sen, the other goonda, and the sex tourist were also arrested and taken away in the paddy wagon to the police station.



This won't go public, will it? I could lose my job ...and my wife would divorce me... and my grandkids... what would they think?

I heard Uncle Raj tell Pastor that Ranjan had been summoned to court on charges of trafficking, but he hadn't shown up. Now there was a warrant out for his arrest. He hadn't dared to go back to his house so other people had taken over all his properties. He was on the run from the police and Uncle said it was just a matter of time before he was caught.





It was sad saying good-bye to Uncle Rupesh. We had gotten used to him and he wasn't really such a bad guy. He signed guardianship of Anita and me over to Pastor Peter so now we have a new home at the Mission. We're both thrilled about that but it's too bad that Uncle had to leave. He had recovered from most of his physical injuries but he lived in constant fear that the three thugs who had tried to murder him might see him on the streets and finish the job. He said he also missed his drinking buddies back at the slum and he wanted to go back there. Pastor Peter paid his hospital bill and bought him a train ticket. He also offered him a job at the Mission but Uncle Rupesh wouldn't go for it. He said good-bye and took a night train back to his home town.



My first day at school was fun. Anita, Bindi, Jyoti, and me all go to the girls' private academy close to the Mission. I'm in 1st level. My favorite subject is recess.



Anita's dream to go to school so that she can become a nurse is finally coming true.



Kaliyah, Nandini, Kalpani, and the two other little girls who were rescued are all staying at Grace Mission's safe house. Jayanti is still there too. It's way out in the country and it has guards to protect the women and children inside. There are also trained counselors and other staff to make it a nice home for them. Sometimes Auntie Rachel takes me there to visit.



I like to play with their kitten and listen to Auntie Rachel tell us about God's love. We really need to hear that, because some people can be very cruel if they know you've been in the sex trade. It's even worse if they know you're sick, like Nandini is, with something called 'HIV positive'. She got tested at the Mission's medical clinic and that's when she found out she was sick. She has to take expensive medicine every day. I'm glad she belongs to Jesus because even if she doesn't live long here on earth, I'll see her every day in heaven.



Kali has to stay at the safe house because Pastor Peter and Uncle Raj believe her life could be in danger. She knows a lot of stuff about Ranjan that could send him to prison and they think he could have hired thugs to kill her. She sure changed after becoming a Christian. She smiles a lot now. Jayanti is also a believer and she's learning how to sew and use the computer. All the girls are learning cottage skills that will help them earn a living. Kalpani and the 2 little kids are getting counseling and later they might go back to their families, if Pastor Peter thinks it's safe. He wants to keep Kalpani though because he fears her mother might try to resell her.



It came as no surprise that Uncle Raj and Auntie Rachel got married. Uncle's family came all the way from Mumbai for the ceremony.



Uncle's sister was very beautiful and kind. She helped Auntie get a wedding gown.

Uncle's mum was also a very nice lady.

In India there are many stories about mothers-in-law who are mean and nasty to their sons' wives. The new brides are sometimes treated with cruelty, especially if the family is not happy with the dowry. It can get so bad that some brides will kill themselves. At other times the mother-in-law and her son will douse the bride with kerosene and then set her on fire. The brides almost always die from their burns and the family gives the excuse that the bride's saree accidentally caught fire while she was cooking over the gas stove. If the bride is from a lower caste, that can also be a problem. She may be treated as an inferior and made to work as a slave for the rest of the family. It isn't always merely custom that sees many Indian brides weeping on their wedding day. Uncle Raj's family wasn't like that though. They were strong Christians who followed the example of Jesus in treating all people in an equal manner. They were not proud or arrogant, even though they were well educated and wealthy. Mr. and Mrs. Thakur had taught all their children to care about the poor and oppressed and to do all they could to help others. They all loved Auntie Rachel on sight and did all they could to help make her feel welcome in their family.

Uncle's dad and older brother teased him about his beard and long hair, but Uncle has to keep them for his undercover work.







I was the flower girl at the wedding.

Uncle Raj looked as handsome as a king in his dress-up clothes. He was so impatient for the wedding to begin that he kept asking Pastor for the time every five minutes. Auntie Rachel took a long time getting ready.



Uncle Marcus and Bindi helped people find their seats. The whole courtyard was decorated with flowers and there was an arbor in the center with roses entwined around it. It was so gorgeous!

My job was to throw flowers on the ground for the bride to walk on. It was easy. Auntie Rachel's parents weren't able to come for the wedding because of health problems, so Uncle Marcus gave her away.



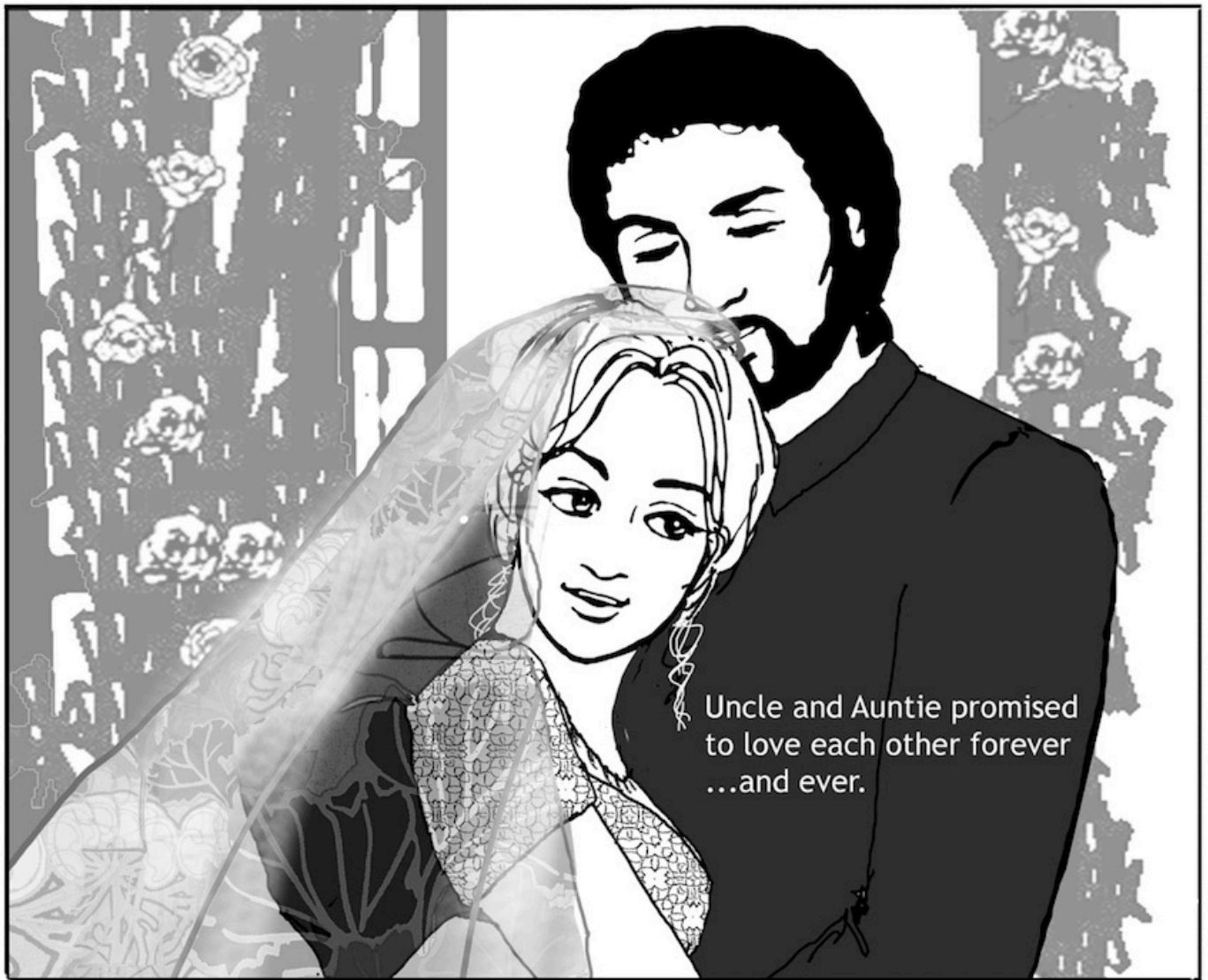
Auntie Janet was the maid of honor and she looked real pretty in a dress. You could tell she was a girl for sure. She walked behind me and then Uncle Marcus came with the bride as they played music.

Uncle Raj was stunned when he saw his bride approaching. Tears formed in his eyes and all the love and pride he felt for Auntie Rachel was there in his face for everyone to see.

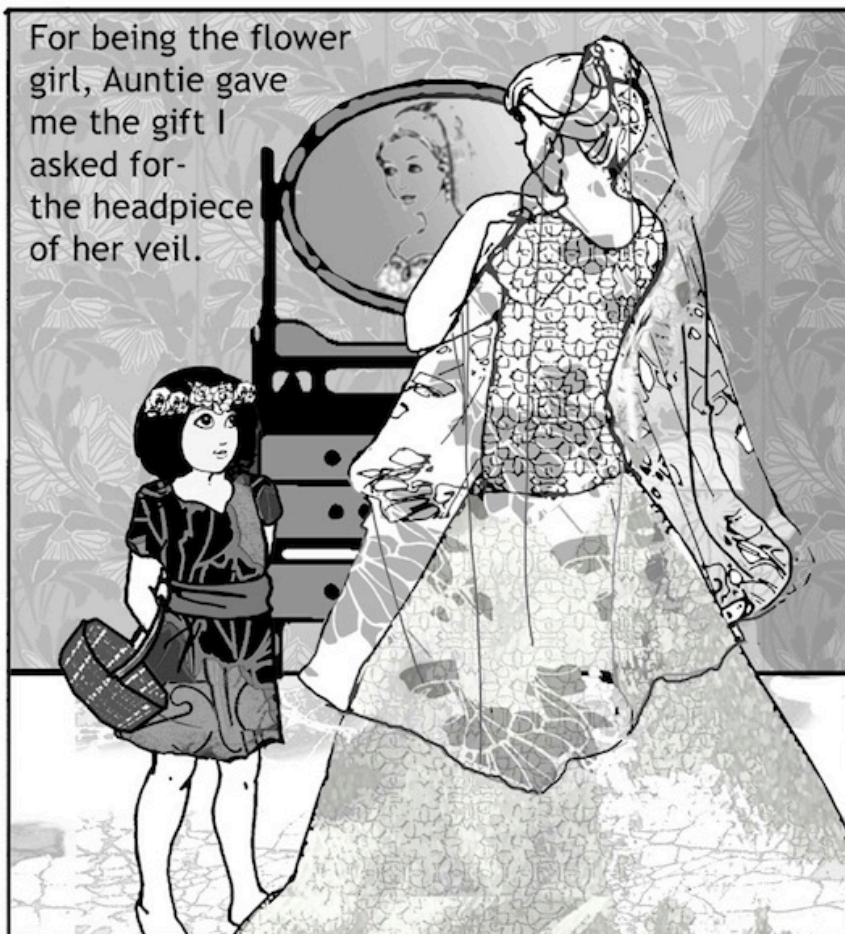


It was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen! I want to be looked at that way on my wedding day.





Uncle and Auntie promised to love each other forever ...and ever.



For being the flower girl, Auntie gave me the gift I asked for- the headpiece of her veil.

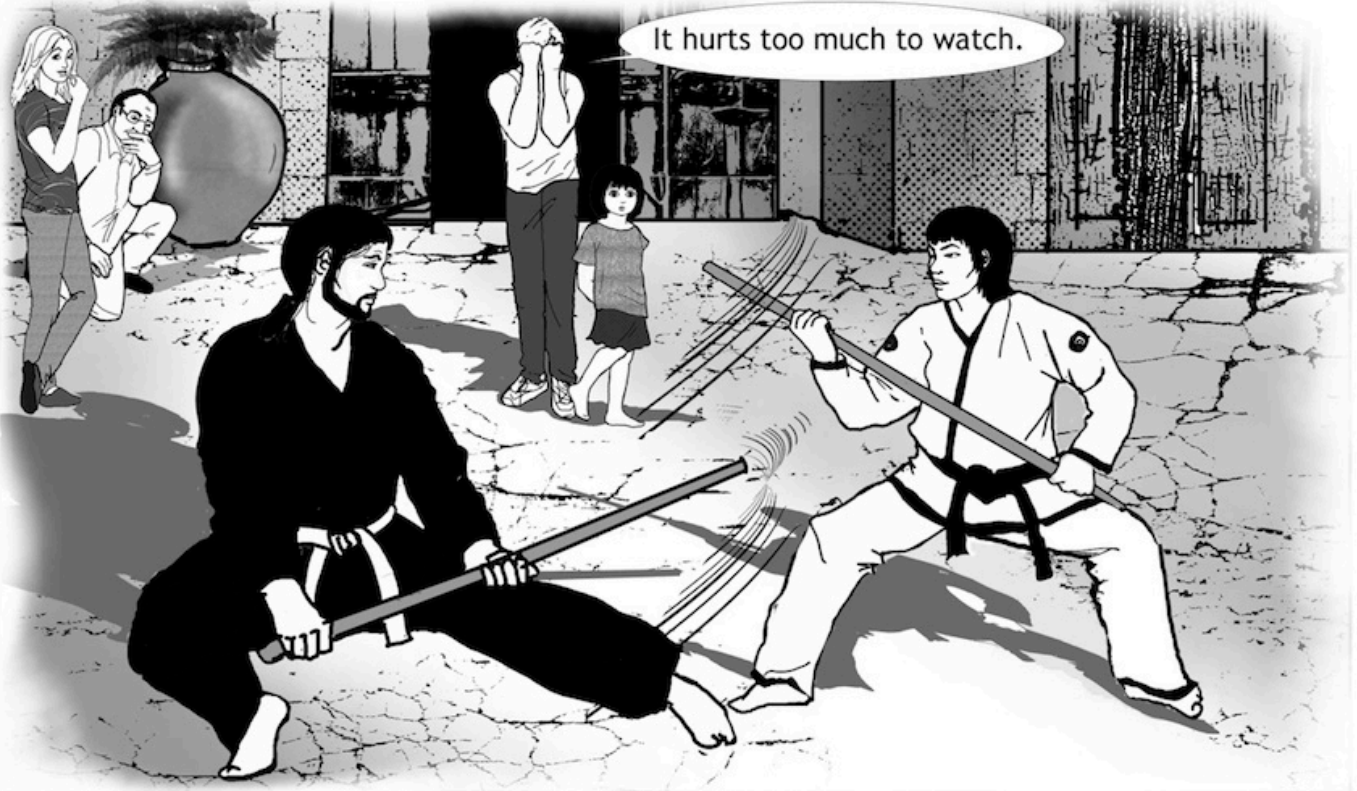


Your sister sure likes that veil.

She's pretending she's a bride.



Auntie Janet and Uncle Marcus went back to Thailand for a few months to run their own rescue mission there, but they came back to Kolkata again to help Uncle Raj. Auntie Janet knows some martial arts techniques that Uncle has never used before, and he asked her to teach him. She's really good at it. Uncle Marcus says she can even 'down' him in 10 minutes flat, no problem. I wish I was strong like that. Maybe I can learn some day. Pastor says it's not a bad idea to teach us kids some self-defence, especially the girls. One day we were all teasing Uncle Raj because Auntie kept tripping him over and over again with her quarterstaff...

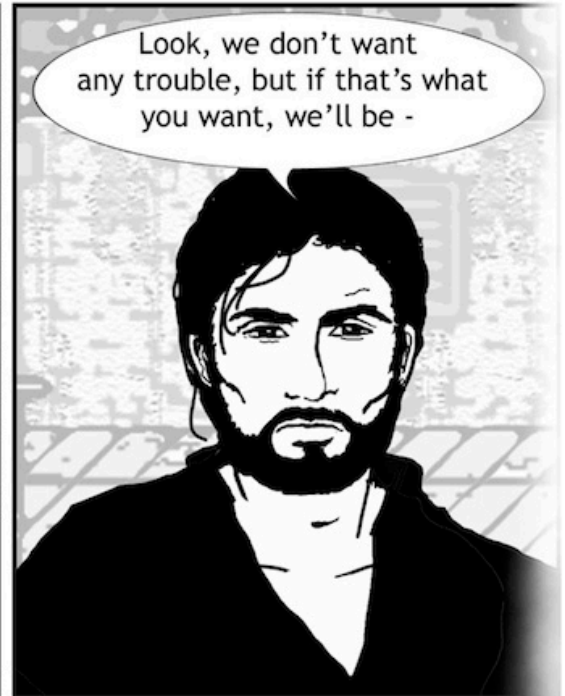


It hurts too much to watch.

...when an unexpected visitor approached the courtyard .



I'm looking for the Preacher Man.







So the “lost cause”, as Auntie Janet had called him, was not lost after all. I guess we don’t see the way God does, and that’s why we’re ready to give up on people just at the moment when God is working a miracle in the heart. Pastor Peter once said that the Bible describes people as having a veil over their minds so that they can’t see reality. They can’t see into the spirit world where God lives and so they don’t believe He even exists, or they misunderstand what He is really like. I guess I wore that veil for awhile before it was taken away and I ‘saw’ Jesus. That night I watched as Uncle Raj explained all that to Ajay, and I saw the veil being removed from his eyes. I was seeing the biggest miracle I could ever imagine! I mean, this was **Ajay praying!!**

I wish people didn't have veils over their hearts.  
I wish everyone could see Jesus for who He is.



He wants it that way too. That's why He came.  
There used to be a great big curtain in God's Temple.  
It was 4 inches thick, 60 feet long, 30 feet wide, and it weighed 4 tons!  
It took 300 men to hold it! It was a huge, heavy veil that kept God hidden from us.  
It had to be there because God is perfect, and we're not. We would have been burned to a crisp if we had seen Him face to face. But Jesus changed all that when He took away sin on the cross. Right after He yelled that the job was finished, the veil was torn from top to bottom! Wow! That must have been awesome! Now anyone who turns to Jesus can look right into God's face.







I can see You...

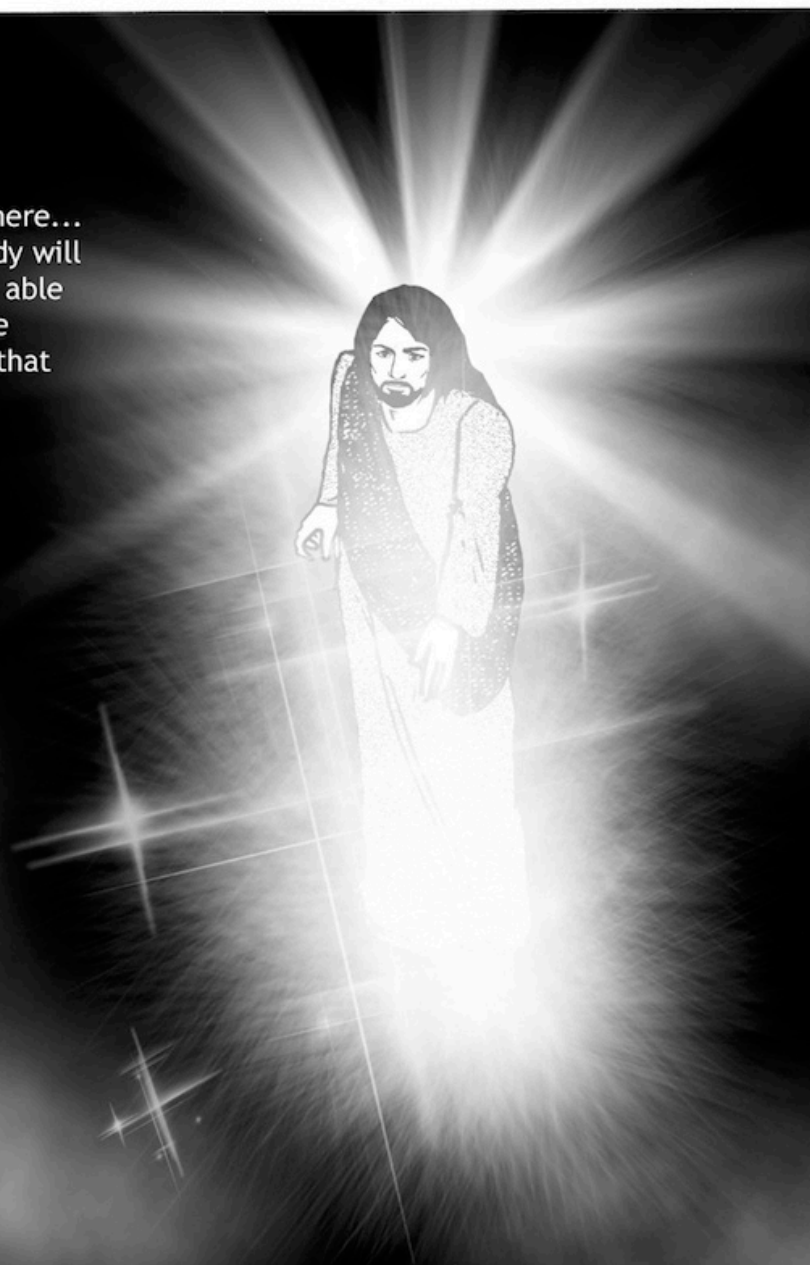


...through  
my faith eyes...

..and You said I'm even  
part of Your Bride...  
and we're going to have  
a big wedding party...  
and EVERYTHING!!!



And Mummy and Kumari will be there...  
and maybe Daddy too...and nobody will  
cry or be sad and nothing will be able  
to hurt us anymore...and You'll be  
there with that look in Your eyes that  
will say it all...





I'm already planning what I'll wear.

