

**WOLF  
HUNT**

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Lorri Frandsen

# WOLF HUNT

story and illustration by

Lorri Frandsen





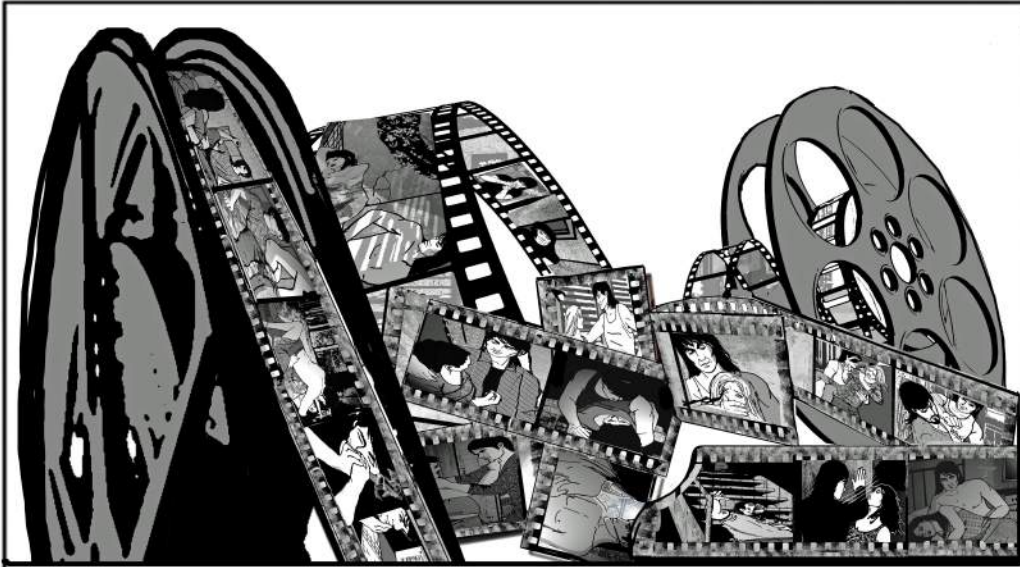
*for my husband, Kell, who made this book possible  
through his love and encouragement,  
and who shouldered many of my responsibilities so I could write.  
Thanks for being such a good friend.*

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### *Author's Note*

*'Wolf Hunt' is a work of fiction and thus names and incidents are drawn from my creative imagination. Any similarity to real people and events is purely coincidental. However allusions to street life, prostitution, and the underworld of Kolkata have some basis in fact, as do references to Francis Thompson, an historical figure who lived in the nineteenth century. Also, the main character's spiritual battle and inner struggle mirror my own experience in some ways.*

*For best effect, I recommend reading my first book, 'Pushpa Unveiled', as some of the characters and events in that story dovetail with this one, and make for a deeper understanding of all the characters.*

*I hope this story will be a source of entertainment and blessing to you.*

*Lorri Frandsen*

Chapter 1

# GRAVE





Yeah, this is the exact spot.  
Man, there were a lot of people that day.  
Seemed like all of Kolkata came out to see the spectacle.  
Guess it was a gratifying sight to see a bad man go down.  
Especially a two-bit pimp and pusher like Wolf.



He certainly deserved to die.  
There was nothing good in him. Nothing that counted.



I don't even like to think about all the stuff he did,  
although I guess sometimes it's good to remember what you were...



Funny how the moment I went under, my whole life flashed before my eyes,  
like they say can happen when a man faces death.  
I wasn't expecting that.



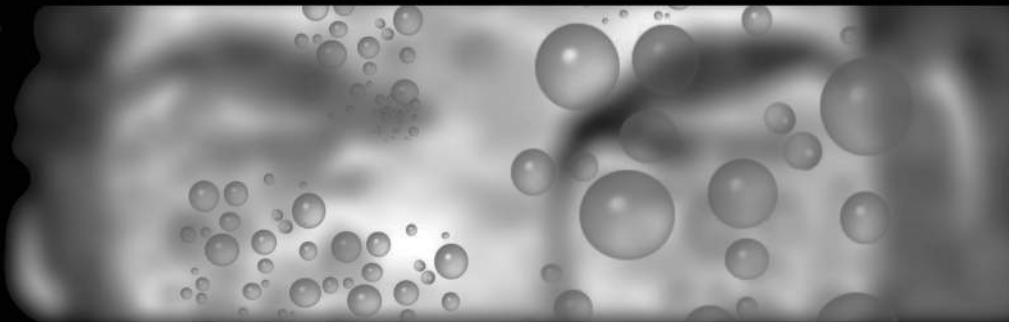
...or wanting it either.



Because some memories bring pain...



And I have lots of those.



I guess they never completely go away.  
They're locked in the brain.  
Not just the event itself, but also all the feelings that go with it.  
The worst are the ones that cut into your soul and tear at your gut.  
Those are the ones you never forget.

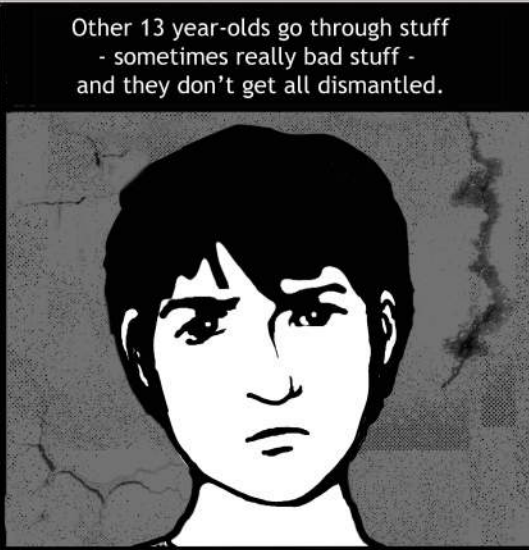




Like the one I thought of as I went under.  
It started with this fan whirring above my head.  
I was staring up at it, watching it go round and round and round.  
It had an hypnotic effect, numbing my brain so I couldn't think.  
And that's just what I wanted...to not think...or feel...anything at all.



Amma's words broke the spell.



But me...I don't know...something seemed to snap inside. When I saw all those people from church standing around my mother's coffin, I felt pain tighten my chest and pierce my gut like a knife. I felt I was dying. Maybe in a way I was, because my hopes and dreams died with Mom that day.



...and so did my faith.







Your mother has gone on to a better place, Adam.



We'll see her again some day, when we meet in eternity.

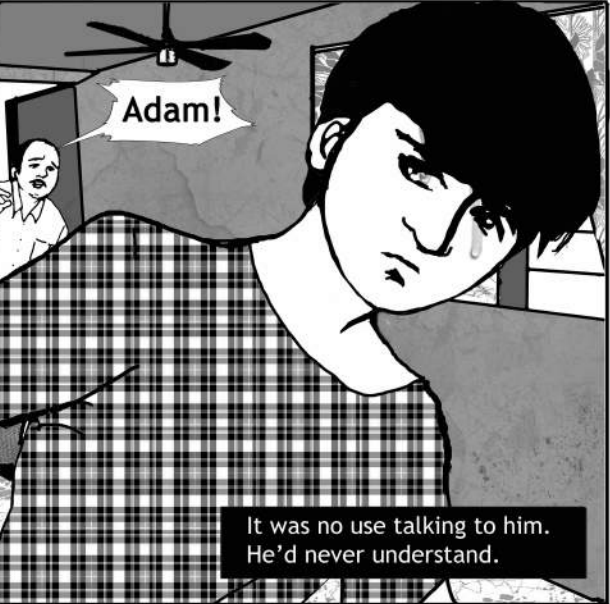
I didn't believe him.



What if we won't, Dad? What if there's nothing really out there?

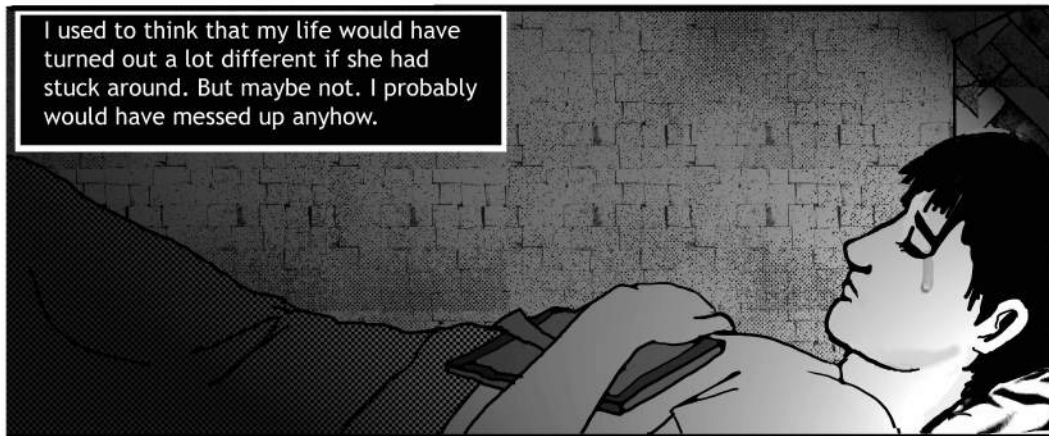
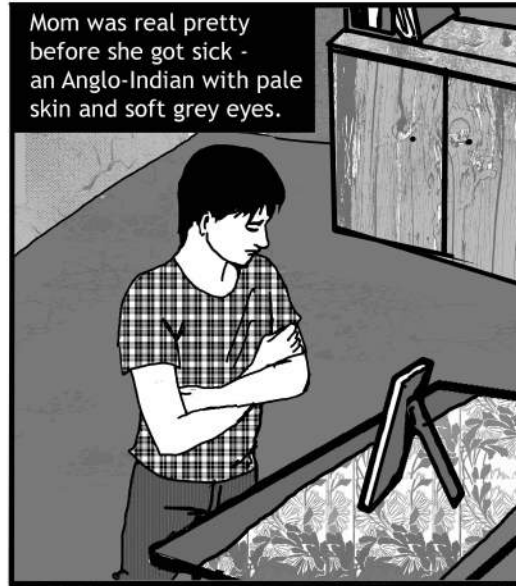


I knew from the look on Dad's face that he was shocked at the doubts I had expressed.



Adam!

It was no use talking to him. He'd never understand.



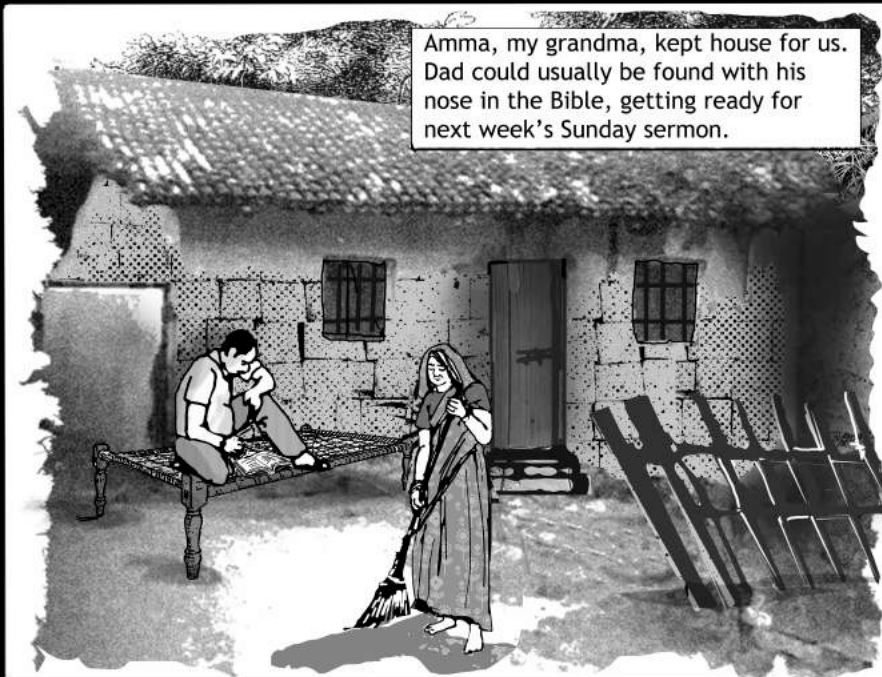
My hometown was in Odisha. The nearest big city was Kolkata, but that was a long way away. We never went to the city, which was a downer because our town was really boring. Every day was pretty much the same as the day before.



We lived on the outskirts of town, at the end of the main street.

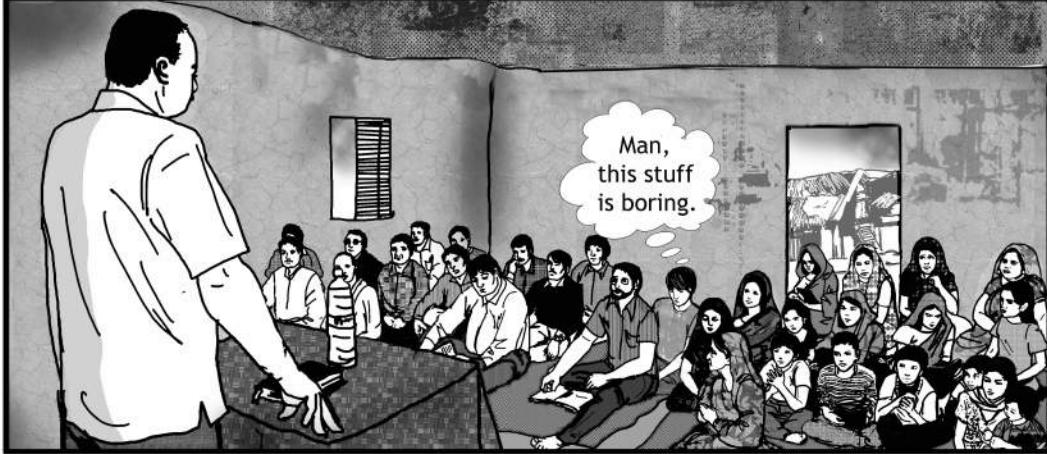


Amma, my grandma, kept house for us. Dad could usually be found with his nose in the Bible, getting ready for next week's Sunday sermon.





I went to the same church Sunday after Sunday, year after year, listening to Dad preach the same sermons over and over again. By the time I was 15, I knew them all by heart. I used to count the minutes to when Dad would give the benediction and close the service.



Dad had dreams of my going to college and becoming a pastor so I could help him with his church work. That was a real laugh!

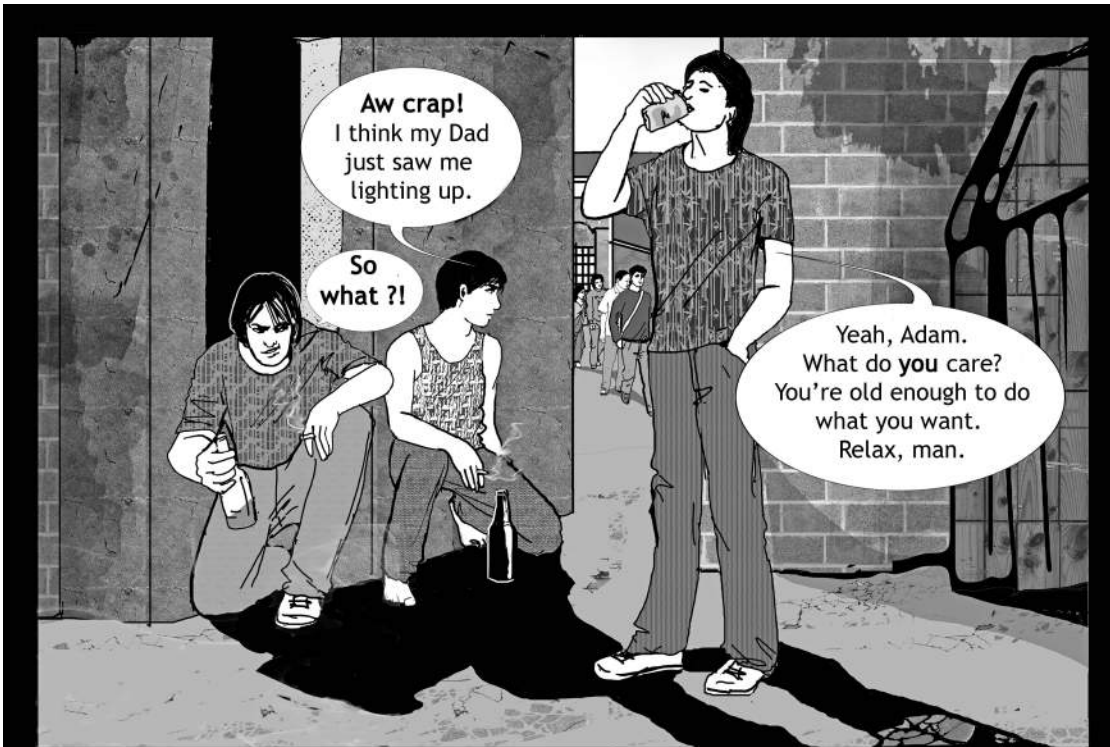


I didn't want anything to do with God. I could never forgive Him for ignoring my prayers and letting Mom die.



Of course I never let on what I was thinking inside. I hid my feelings from everyone, especially Dad...and pretty soon I was hiding a lot of other things as well.

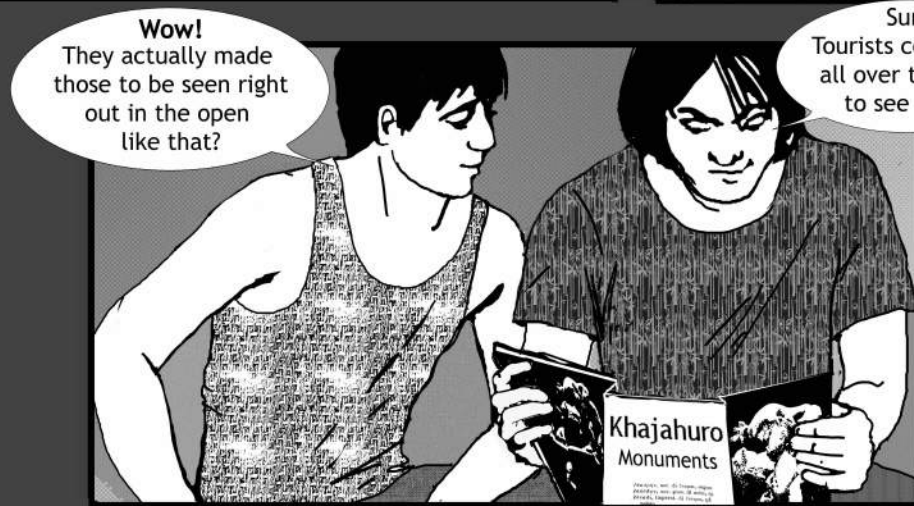




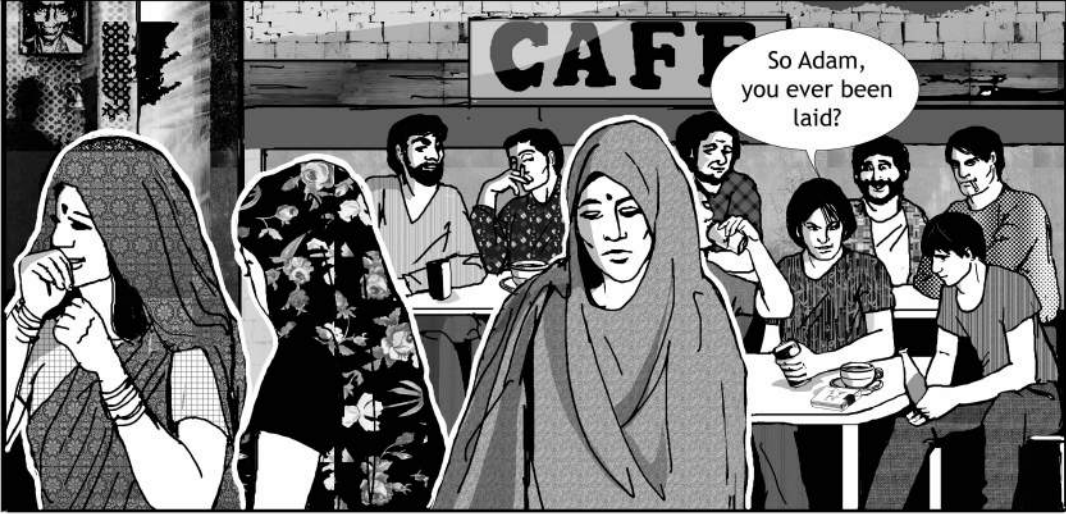
Achish and Sanjt were two friends from town. They were different from the kids at church. I liked that they felt free to do as they liked without feeling guilty about it, probably because they didn't carry around any religious baggage like I did. They were also older than me and more experienced in the ways of the world. Under their tutelage I learned stuff I'd never dreamed of.



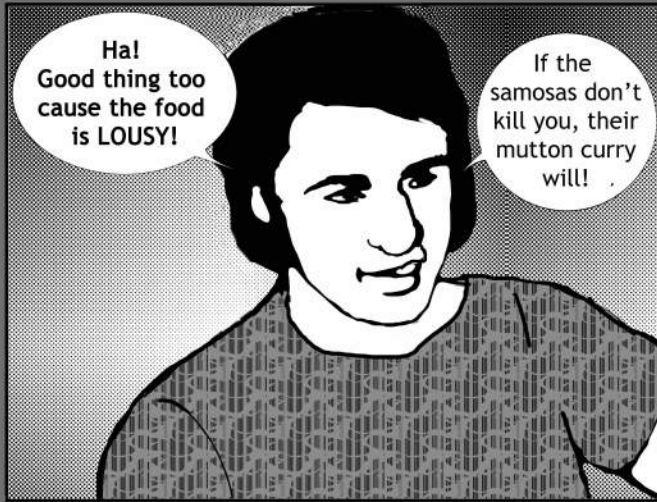
I discovered the 'secrets of conjugal bliss' within the pages of Indian classics like the Kama Sutra. Even travel brochures about historical monuments could be most instructive. And the booze, cigarettes, and drugs made it even more alluring and provocative.



All those new experiences made me wonder what other pleasures lay outside my limited knowledge of the world. As usual my buddies in town were quick to fill me in.







I didn't want to go to the trucker's stop but my friends got me so drunk, I didn't know what I was doing. Before too long, I was game for whatever they suggested.

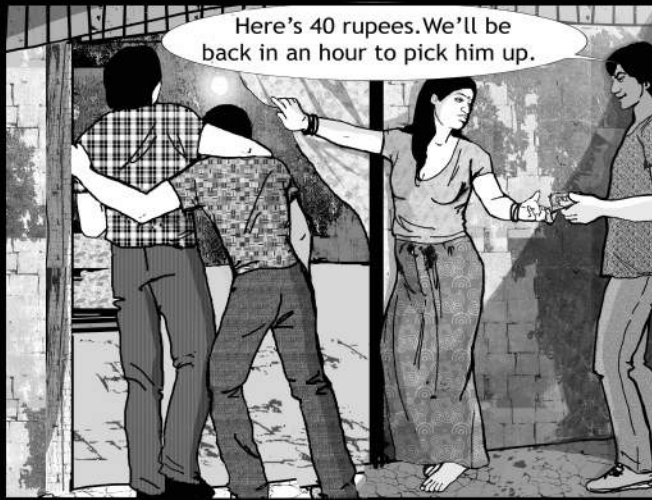


We walked down a dark alley littered with rubbish and smelling of urine. A single light bulb glowed above a curtained doorway.



Meena wasn't what I had expected. She wasn't a 'girl' like my friends said. I figured she was in her late thirties at least. And she wasn't all that good-looking either.









Next morning I woke up at my friends' place with no memory of how I got there.



My head hurt, my mouth tasted real bad, and I had aches all over. Worst of all, I'd been too drunk to go home last night. My Dad was going to kill me!



I wracked my brain trying to think of an excuse that would get me off the hook. None came to mind.



You really tied one on, kid. You were totally looped!

Yeah, you were wiped, man. Sanjit figured you'd want to sleep it off here before heading home.

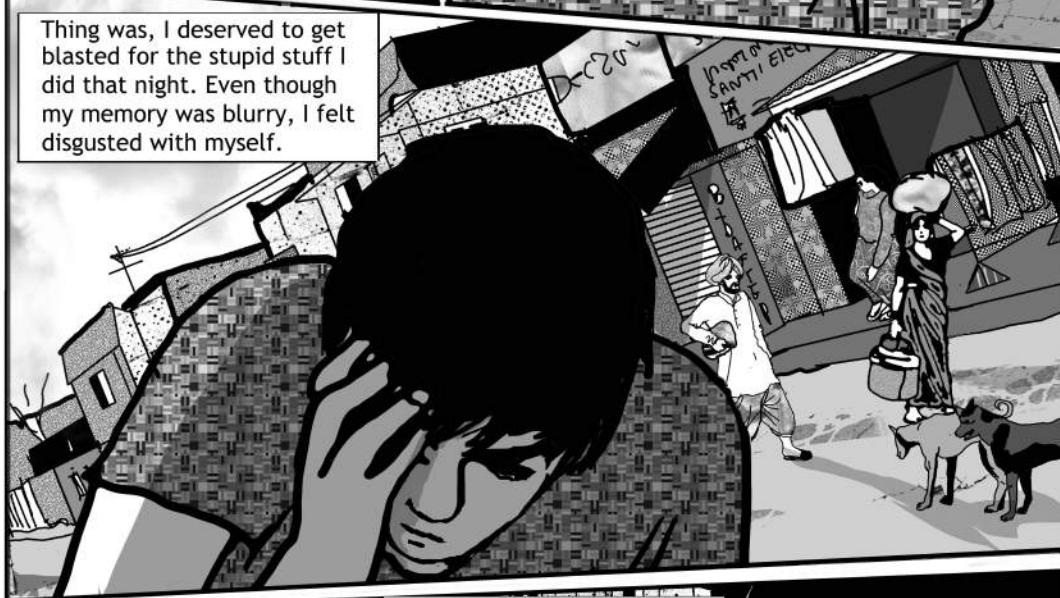
On the way home I thought about all the stuff I was doing behind Dad's back.



I knew if he found out, he'd freak. He rarely got mad, but I'd seen him explode in anger a time or two.



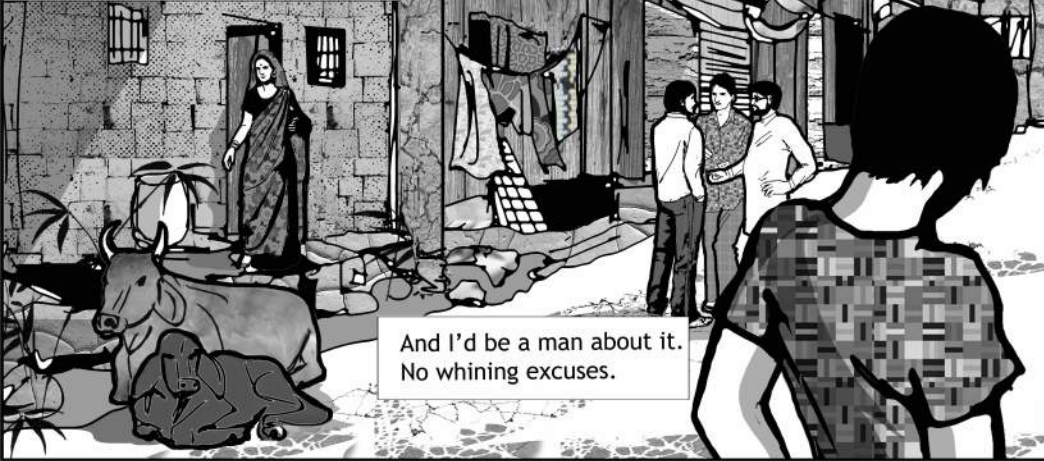
Thing was, I deserved to get blasted for the stupid stuff I did that night. Even though my memory was blurry, I felt disgusted with myself.



Mostly I hated myself for playing the hypocrite and being a weak coward. I was sick of pretending to be someone I wasn't.



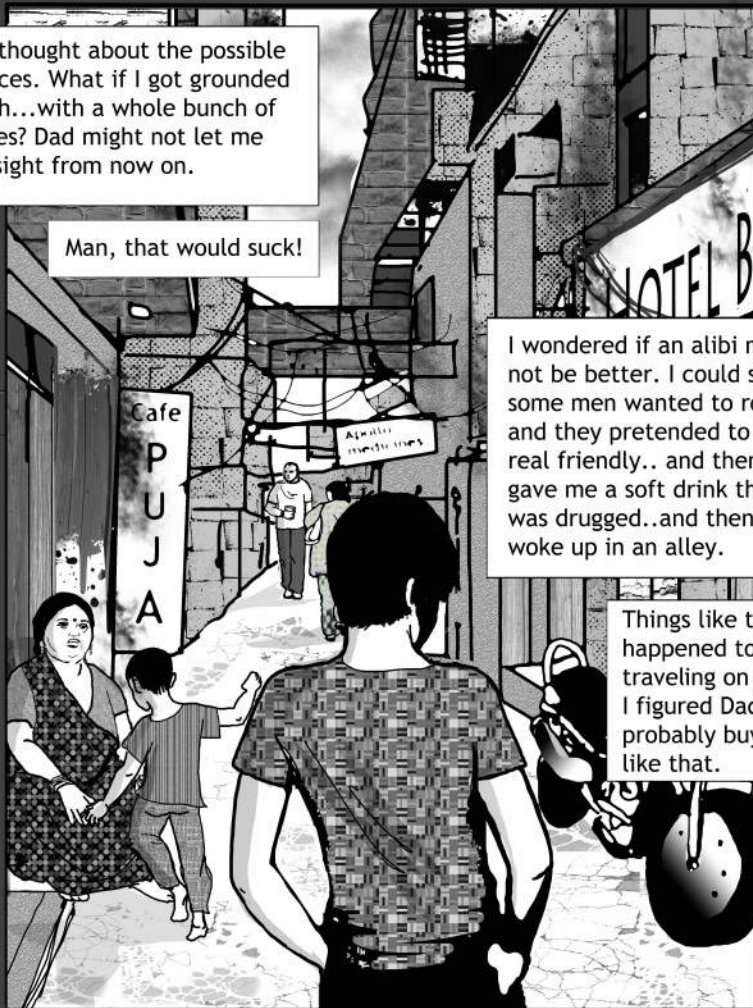
I decided to tell Dad everything. I'd be completely up front with him and take the consequences. It was time to stop living a lie.



And I'd be a man about it. No whining excuses.

But then I thought about the possible consequences. What if I got grounded for a month...with a whole bunch of extra chores? Dad might not let me out of his sight from now on.

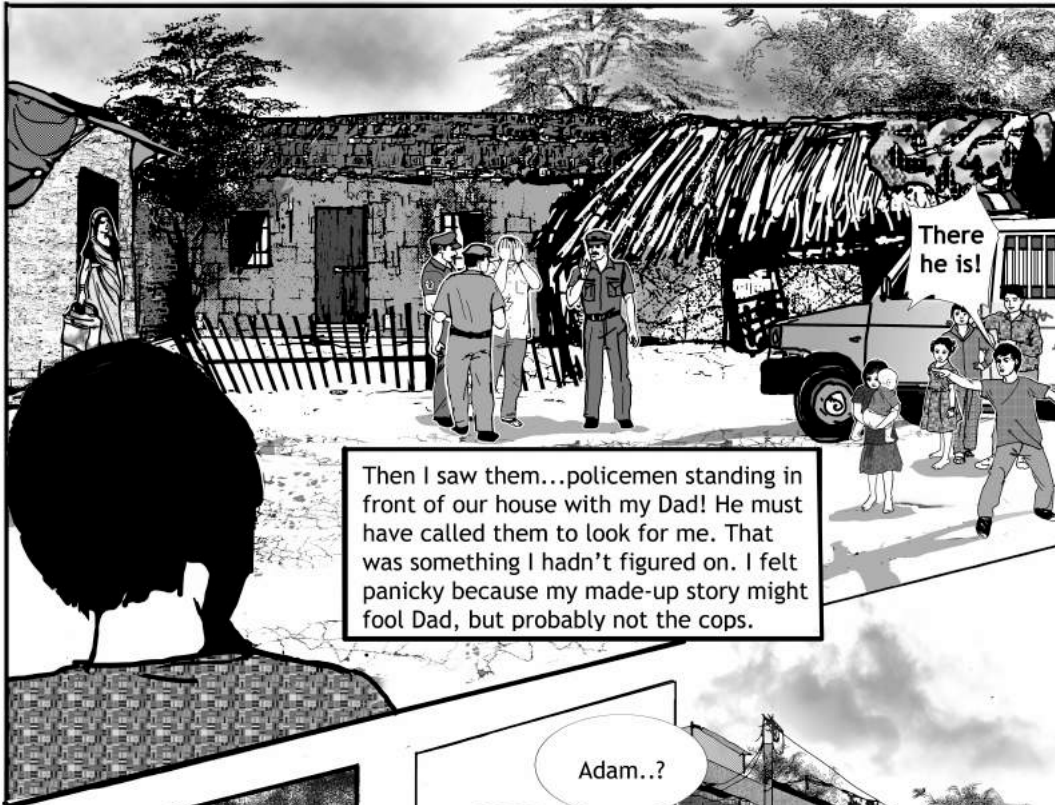
Man, that would suck!



I wondered if an alibi might not be better. I could say some men wanted to rob me and they pretended to be real friendly.. and then they gave me a soft drink that was drugged..and then I woke up in an alley.

Things like that often happened to people traveling on trains. I figured Dad would probably buy a story like that.

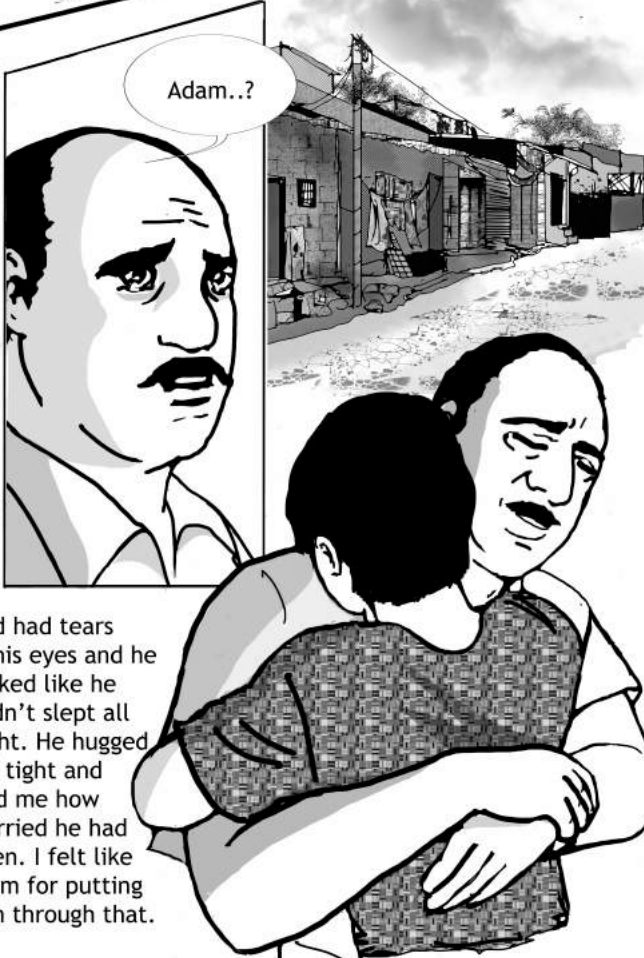




Then I saw them...policemen standing in front of our house with my Dad! He must have called them to look for me. That was something I hadn't figured on. I felt panicky because my made-up story might fool Dad, but probably not the cops.



Hey! Is that your kid walking over here?



Adam..?

Dad had tears in his eyes and he looked like he hadn't slept all night. He hugged me tight and told me how worried he had been. I felt like scum for putting him through that.





I was right about the cops.  
They didn't buy my story.



Neither did Dad.

How about starting  
over, only this time  
I want the truth.



The cops gave me hard stares  
and that got me all nervous  
and confused. I figured they'd  
drag the truth out of me if I  
didn't come clean.

So I told them everything.

Right away I regretted it. I remember thinking I was a fool not to have bluffed my way out. The cops finally left, leaving me alone with Dad. Neither one of us could make eye contact. We were both too ashamed.

We'll talk later, Adam.

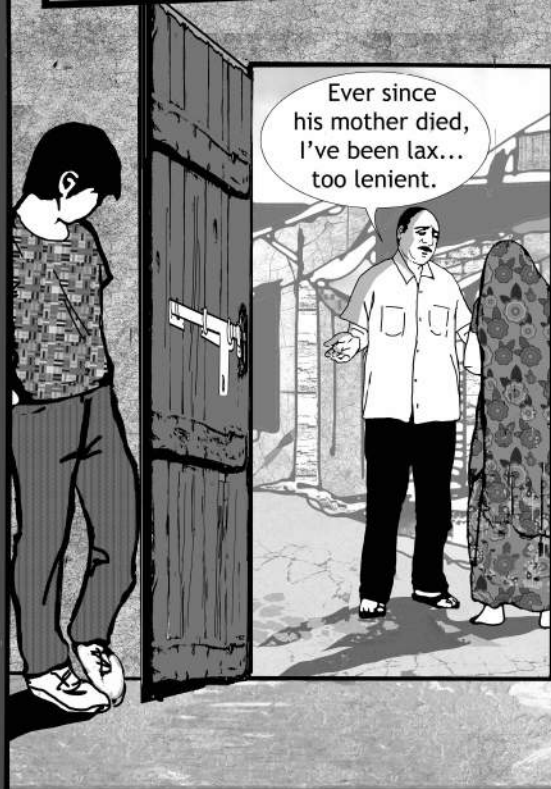


Amma was just returning from the market and she and Dad talked outside.

I've failed him, Amma.

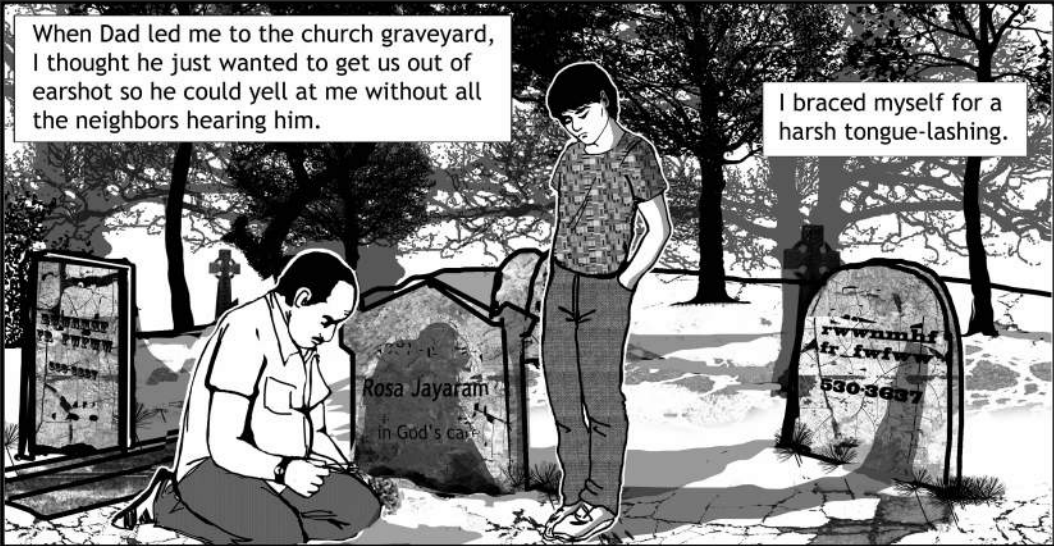


Ever since his mother died, I've been lax... too lenient.



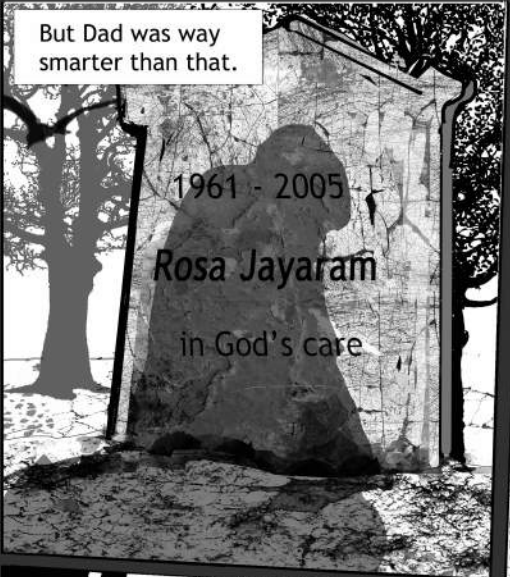
That has to change, I know. I've got to get Adam on the right path.. before it's too late.



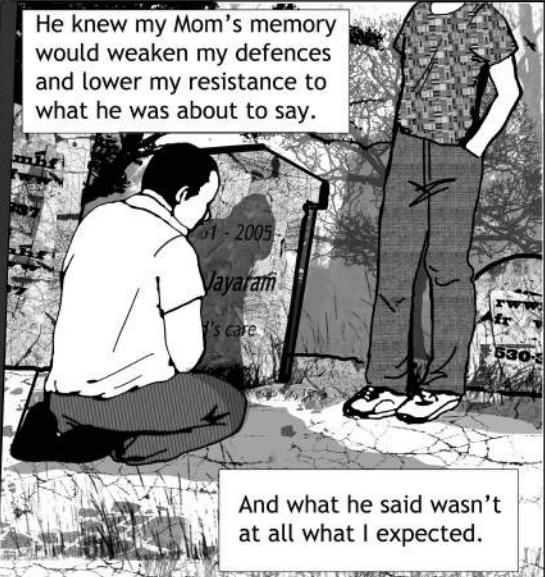


When Dad led me to the church graveyard, I thought he just wanted to get us out of earshot so he could yell at me without all the neighbors hearing him.

I braced myself for a harsh tongue-lashing.



But Dad was way smarter than that.




He knew my Mom's memory would weaken my defences and lower my resistance to what he was about to say.

And what he said wasn't at all what I expected.



Adam, I want to tell you a story - one my father told me a long time ago - about a great Irish wolfhound that hunted a fierce black wolf.

I remember thinking, "What does this have to do with anything?" but I was intrigued nonetheless. Besides, listening to my Dad's stories was way better than being yelled at, so I was happy to let him talk. Before too long the plot had me completely hooked.



Back then, Adam, there were a lot fewer people around than there are now. The land wasn't as developed and there was a lot more forest wildlife. Where my father lived, there were packs of wolves roaming about, and they were a special threat to the farmers because they killed cattle and goats, and even some of the little children in the village.

The villagers set traps and tried to catch the wolves but their leader was too cunning and always managed to lead the pack to safety. He was pitch black and much larger than the others. His howls were so eerie that the villagers were sure he had a demon. That made him even more fearsome in their eyes.

It was strange to think of there being a lot of wolves around because I had only seen one once, from a distance. He hadn't seemed so big or scary, but maybe wolves had more food to eat in the old days. However I had heard that wolves were very sneaky and at one time they had been responsible for many human deaths in certain parts of India.





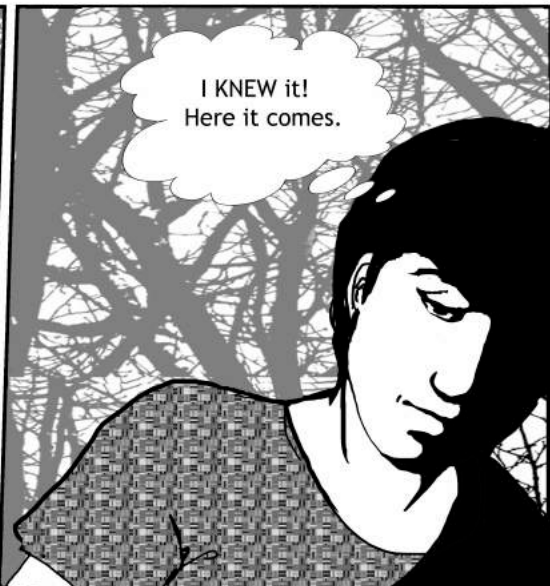
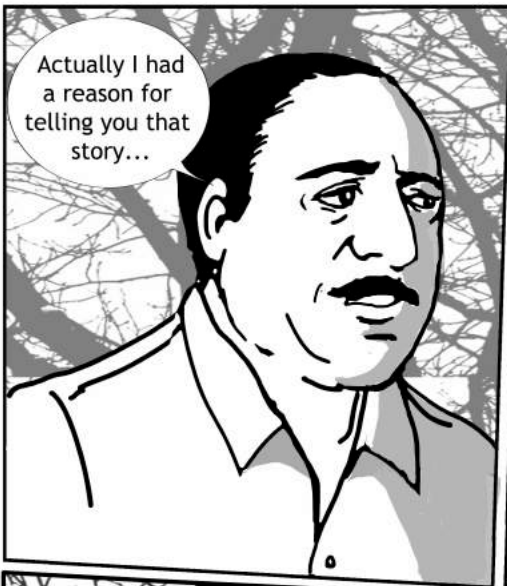
Dad said that eventually the situation in my grandfather's village grew so desperate that they sent out for a professional hunter - a British Raj - who was reputed to always catch his prey. Part of the reason for that was the huge Irish wolfhound he always took with him on his hunts. This hound was able to run to ground any wolf and kill it himself before his master even got off a shot. Because of its great size, the villagers were almost as terrified of the dog as they were of the wolves. They had never seen such a beast.



The hunter took his dog to the site of a recent goat kill and the hound immediately caught the scent of the wolves. The moment he was let off his leash, he bounded into the forest. It took only a few days for that dog to track and kill every wolf in the pack, except for the great black wolf. He was the last one left.

The lone wolf's howls of fury and grief could be heard long into the night as he tried to escape to his secret hiding places, but the hound never lost the scent and he kept up his relentless pursuit. Finally the wolf was so exhausted that he could hardly put one paw in front of the other. As he limped along, a sudden noise behind some bushes caught his ear and whirling about, he came face to face with his foe. The hound approached boldly and there was a brief scuffle, but it was no contest. The hound's teeth clamped over the wolf's neck and the black wolf was no more.





Dad said the hound's ancestry went way back to the Celts who used dogs in battle against invading armies.



The Romans were deathly afraid of them because they would attack the soldiers on horseback, dragging them from their mounts and ripping them apart with their sharp teeth.

Legends and poems were written about hounds. One in particular was called "The Hound of Heaven" written by a guy named Francis Thompson. I told Dad that sounded like a really weird title for a poem.

Dad said others thought so too because he was describing God as a hound.

Anyway this Francis guy was born in 1859 into a wealthy family. His dad was a doctor and Francis was supposed to follow in his father's footsteps, only he flunked all his exams.

He pretty much failed at everything he tried. He ran away to London and tried to become a writer.

He used to scribble his poems on sugar paper because he couldn't afford any proper writing supplies.

He didn't have much success and almost starved to death.

He sounded like a loser to me.







Thompson got terribly depressed when his work was continually rejected. He got addicted to opium and even considered suicide. He was always hungry and had to sleep on the street in an old battered box.

Finally it got so bad that he passed out and a prostitute who was passing by took him in for awhile.

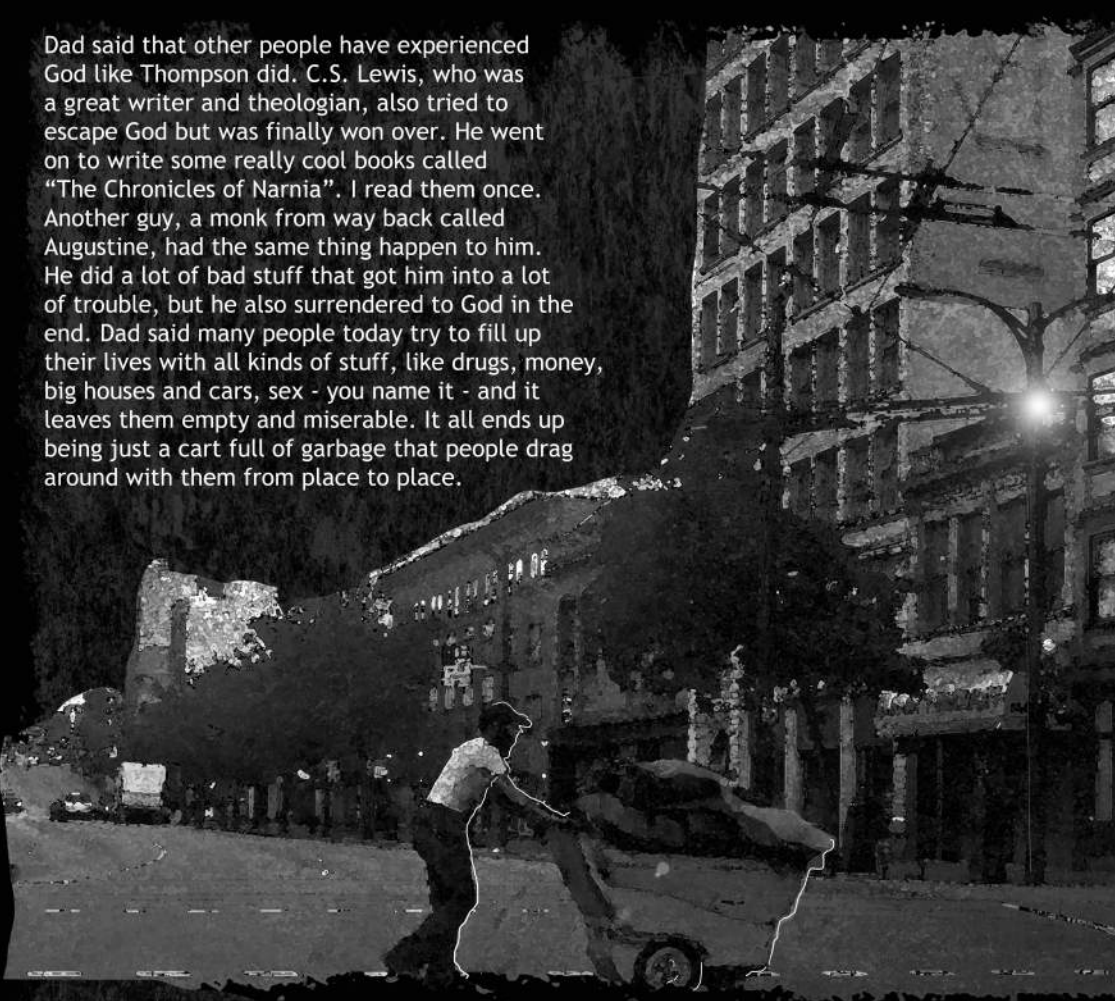
In his poem, "The Hound of Heaven", he wrote about trying to get away from God because he was afraid that if he made Jesus Lord of his life, he'd have to give up everything else. He tried to escape by trying to find meaning in friends, his work, and anything else he could think of, but it didn't work.

He felt alone and empty, and he kept hearing God calling to him, telling him that nothing would satisfy him except His love. It seemed God was on his trail like a great hound of heaven, and nothing would stop Him from patiently pursuing the object of His affection until He had him in His grasp.

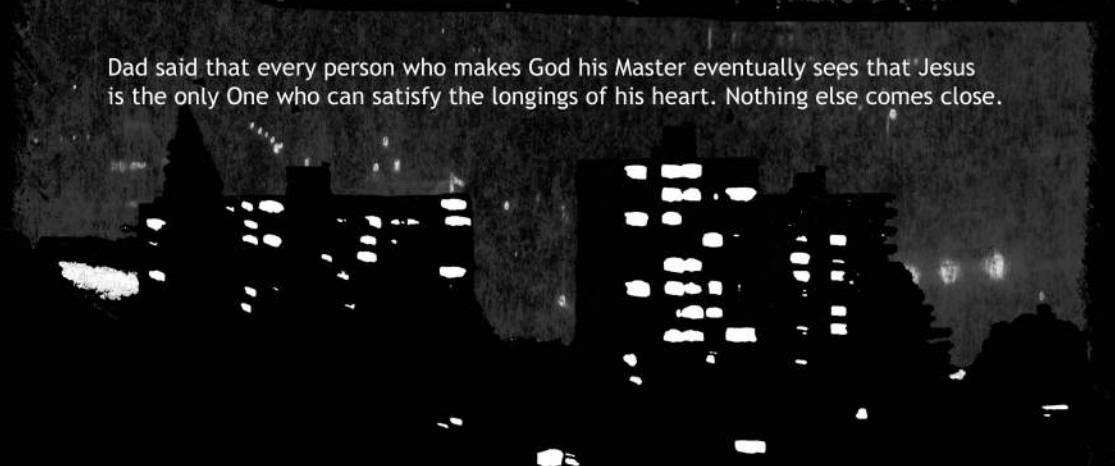
Eventually God did win his heart but Thompson's health was so bad after a lifetime of drugs that he died soon after in a hospital.

I fled Him down the nights  
and down the days;  
I fled Him,  
down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him,  
down the labyrinthine ways  
Of my own mind;  
and in the midst of tears  
I hid from Him, ...





Dad said that other people have experienced God like Thompson did. C.S. Lewis, who was a great writer and theologian, also tried to escape God but was finally won over. He went on to write some really cool books called "The Chronicles of Narnia". I read them once. Another guy, a monk from way back called Augustine, had the same thing happen to him. He did a lot of bad stuff that got him into a lot of trouble, but he also surrendered to God in the end. Dad said many people today try to fill up their lives with all kinds of stuff, like drugs, money, big houses and cars, sex - you name it - and it leaves them empty and miserable. It all ends up being just a cart full of garbage that people drag around with them from place to place.



Dad said that every person who makes God his Master eventually sees that Jesus is the only One who can satisfy the longings of his heart. Nothing else comes close.

It didn't take a college degree to tell that Dad was trying to turn me around... to get me on the right path so that I would be a good Christian kid who obeyed all the commandments, went to church every Sunday, stayed away from drugs and cigarettes, and certainly never made night visits to girls like Meena.



Dad and I talked late into the night. I told him I was sorry for all the bad stuff I had been doing, and I'd try to do better from then on. I meant it too. He was greatly relieved at my decision and asked if I wanted to pray, and so, because I loved my Dad and didn't want to disappoint him, especially after all the trouble I'd given him, I said yes. He led me in a "sinner's prayer", the kind where you confess all your bad deeds and ask God for forgiveness. He said the words. I just followed along. Afterwards he was all happy and seemed to think something big had happened to me on the inside, but I didn't feel any different really. I guess it didn't take. When I told Dad that, he said I couldn't go by feelings. Faith was the important thing. He said I just had to keep on believing and the feelings would come later.

We walked back home and I remember feeling like I was the biggest hypocrite in the world because Dad was thinking I was one of Jesus' sheep -and I was going along with it...

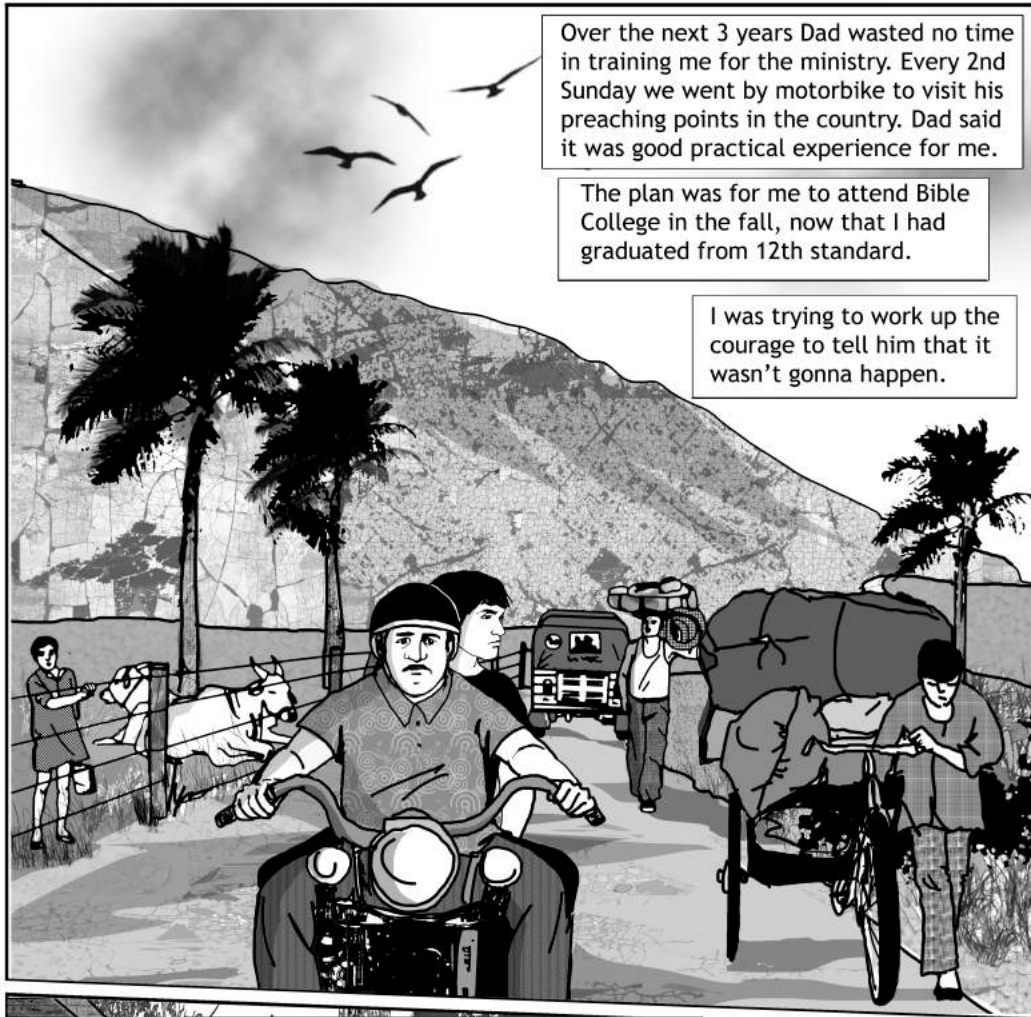
...but on the inside I was still that black wolf running from the Hound.



Chapter 2

# OUTCAST

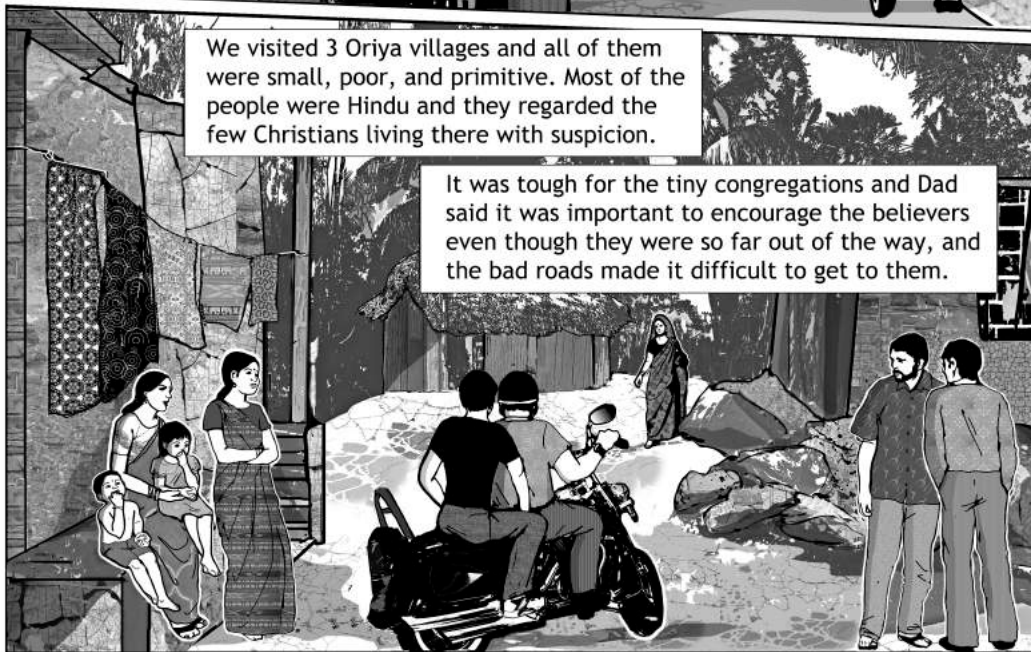




Over the next 3 years Dad wasted no time in training me for the ministry. Every 2nd Sunday we went by motorbike to visit his preaching points in the country. Dad said it was good practical experience for me.

The plan was for me to attend Bible College in the fall, now that I had graduated from 12th standard.

I was trying to work up the courage to tell him that it wasn't gonna happen.

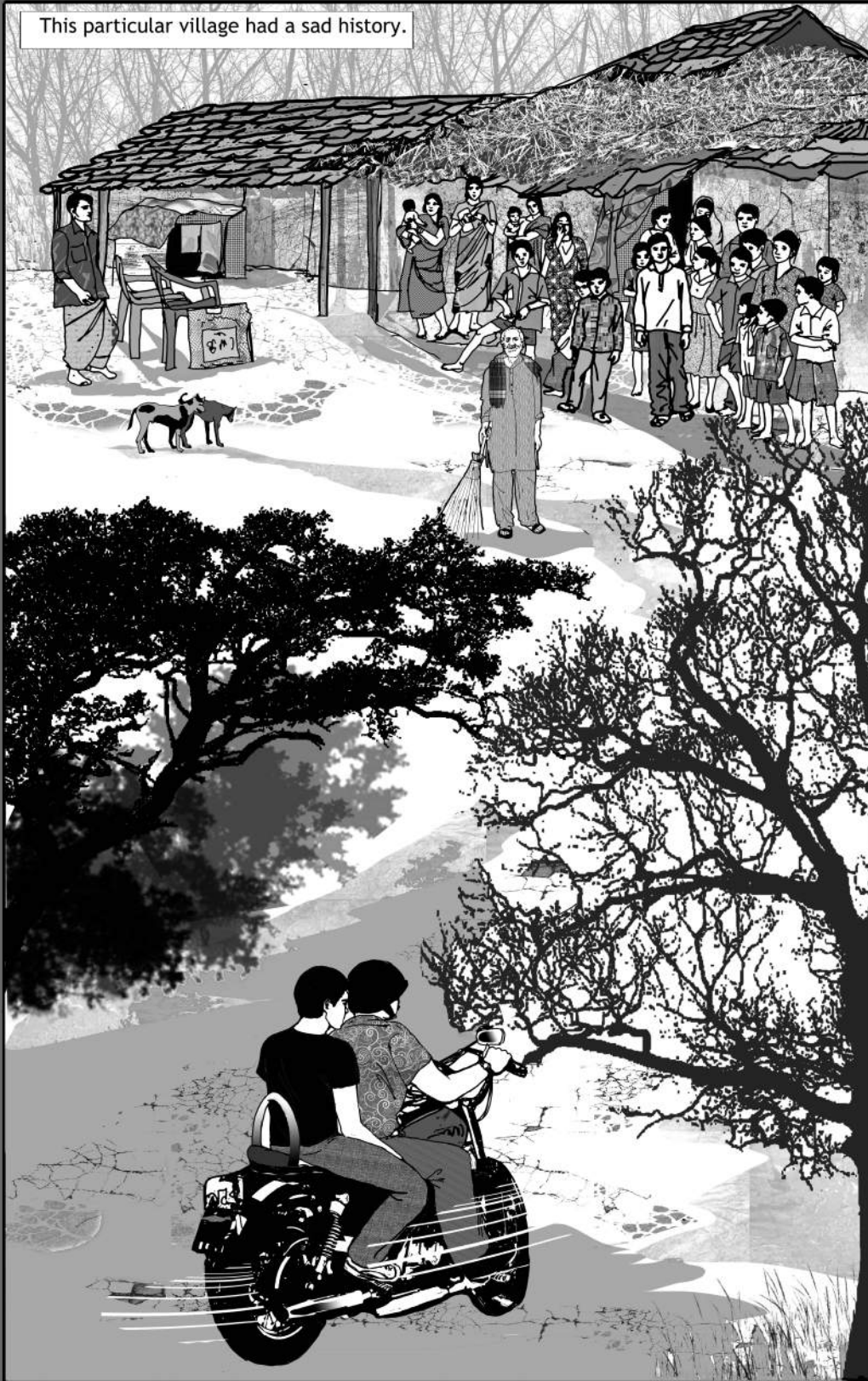


We visited 3 Oriya villages and all of them were small, poor, and primitive. Most of the people were Hindu and they regarded the few Christians living there with suspicion.

It was tough for the tiny congregations and Dad said it was important to encourage the believers even though they were so far out of the way, and the bad roads made it difficult to get to them.



This particular village had a sad history.





### Christians Persecuted in Orissa

Violence in the Khandamal area of Orissa broke out against Christians, killing 4 people and destroying 730 homes and 95 churches. Hindu nationalists were directly involved and were also to blame for inciting many Hindu villagers against their Christian neighbors.

December 2007

By *Stewart Jones*

Associated Press

KINGSTON, Jamaica —

Belva Blythe, a mild-mannered

experienced by her, became

a national soccer player by

on her seven failures and other

future opponents.

From the beaches of San

And to the high

600,000.

from terror and pain to the

last thing British soldiers in

the Caribbean.

Modern leaders also have

been nicknamed — including

President Lincoln — including

worldhistory.com

The game has

been played in games

including France

Jack Agnew's "The

Group History" and

monthly "write" and

1994-2004 of

*The conditions in the refugee camps are very bad. There is not enough food and the tents are leaking. The blankets are threadbare and there is much sickness. Many are in complete despair.*



*A few of the Christians have been able to rebuild their homes with the help of government aid, but most still languish in the refugee camps..*

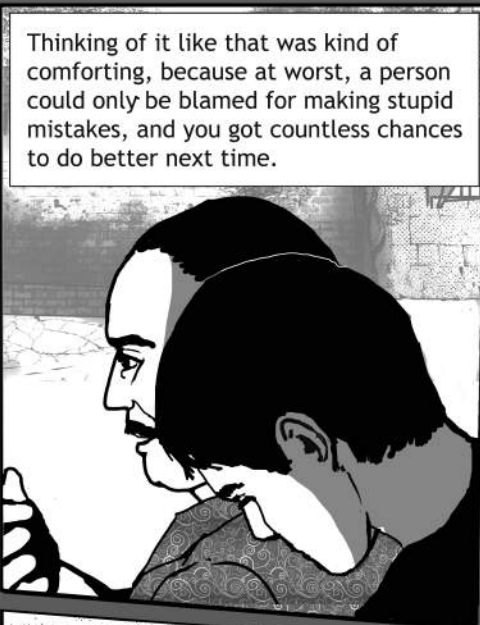


There had been no loss of life in this village due to the persecution, but many of the Christians had lost their homes and all they owned. It was hard to forget the terror of that time, and so distrust of the Hindus was strong.

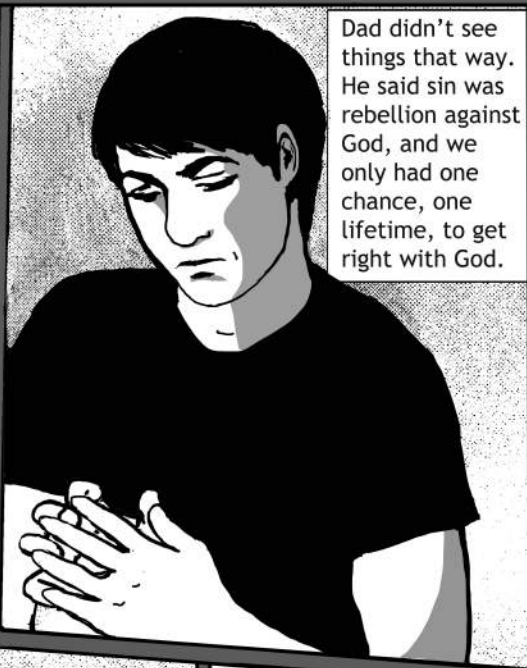
It didn't help that some of the Hindu men would stand in the background, listening to what Dad was preaching. Their eyes were cold and calculating as they stood there, watching us. Occasionally they would mutter among themselves. I was always uneasy at these times, fearing that something Dad might say would set them off again, and they would break out in violence against us.



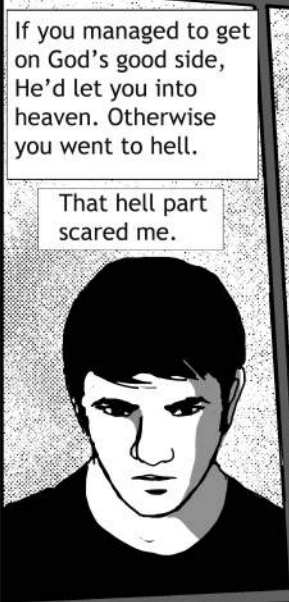
Dad didn't seem to be afraid though, which was either because he was very naive, or else he was very courageous. I wasn't sure which it was. I'd listen to him explain how everyone was a sinner in need of salvation and I'd cringe inside. Hindus don't believe in sin. They think people are all messed up because of ignorance, and the cure for that is repeated reincarnations until we all get it right.



Thinking of it like that was kind of comforting, because at worst, a person could only be blamed for making stupid mistakes, and you got countless chances to do better next time.

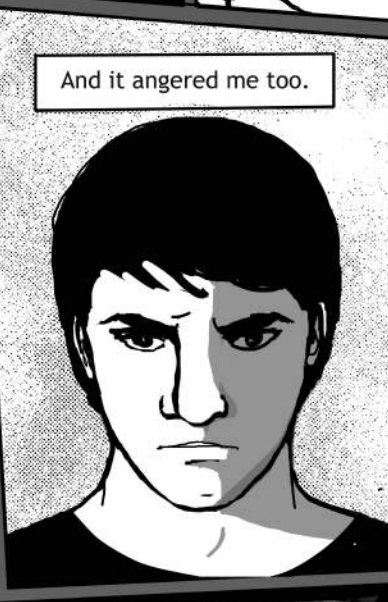


Dad didn't see things that way. He said sin was rebellion against God, and we only had one chance, one lifetime, to get right with God.



If you managed to get on God's good side, He'd let you into heaven. Otherwise you went to hell.

That hell part scared me.



And it angered me too.



Because I knew it was real.

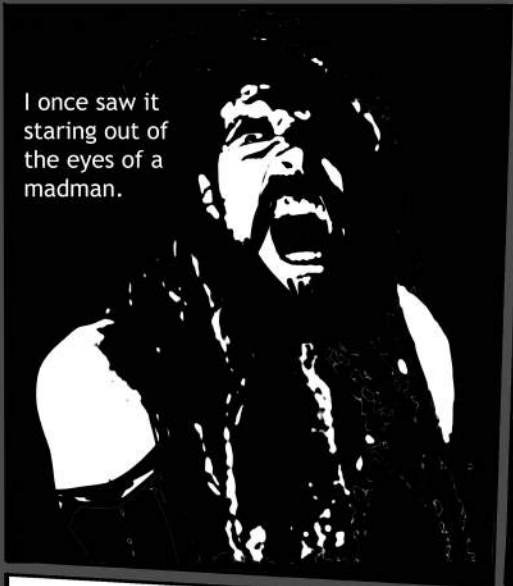


I'd seen it in my nightmares.

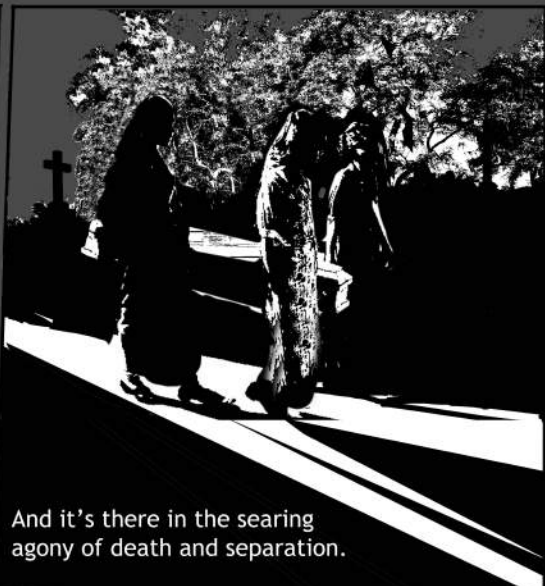




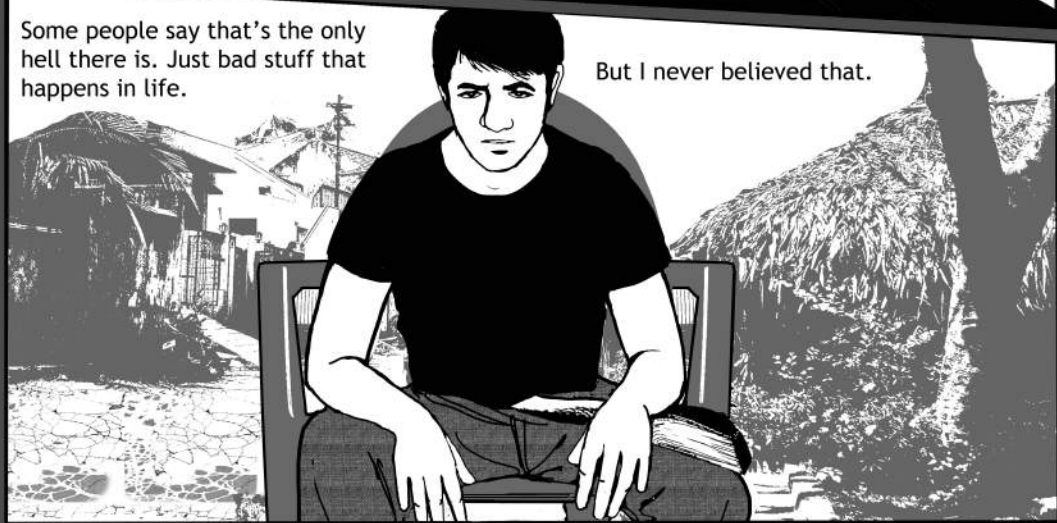
I've seen it in the evil things people do to one another.



I once saw it staring out of the eyes of a madman.

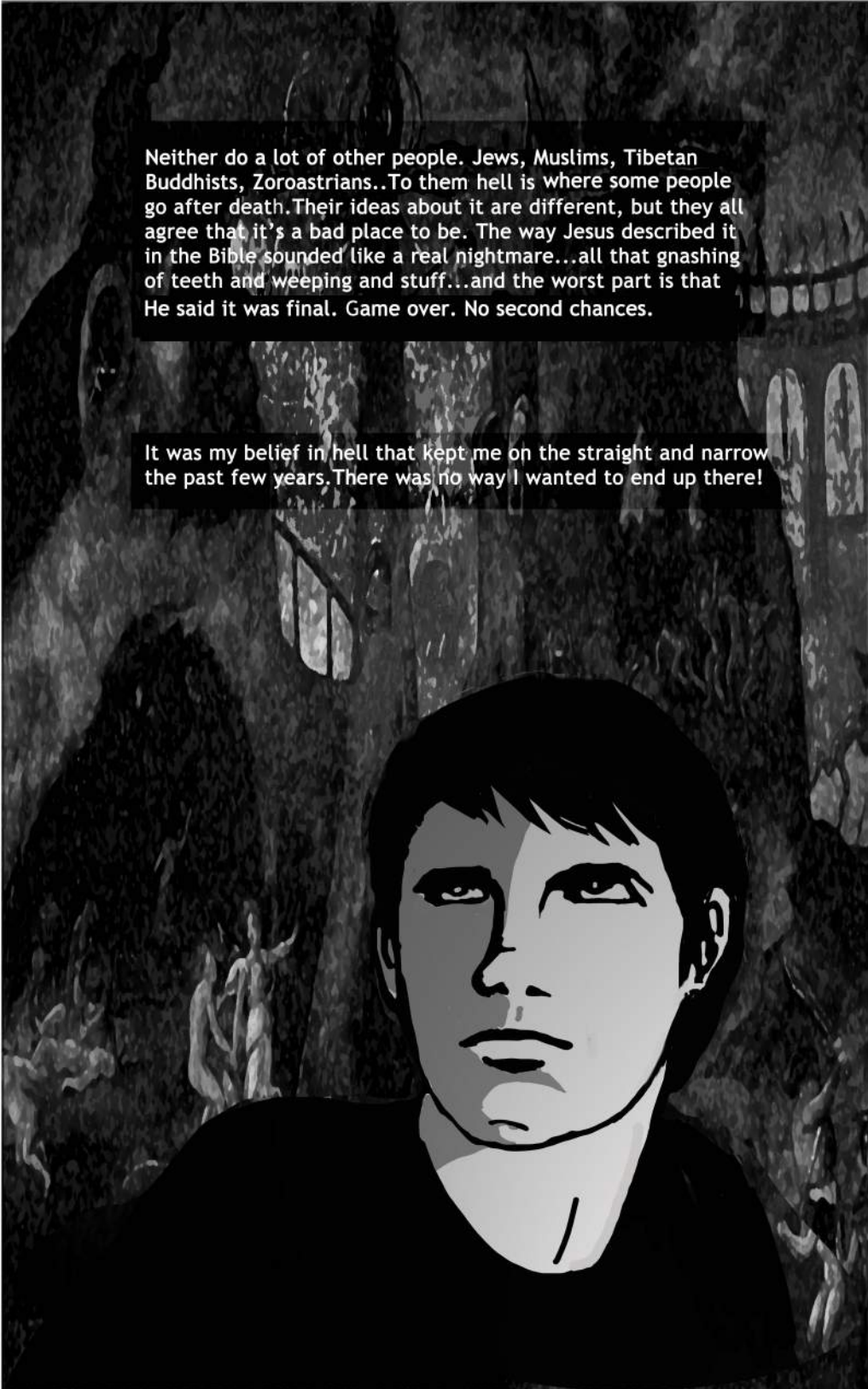


And it's there in the searing agony of death and separation.



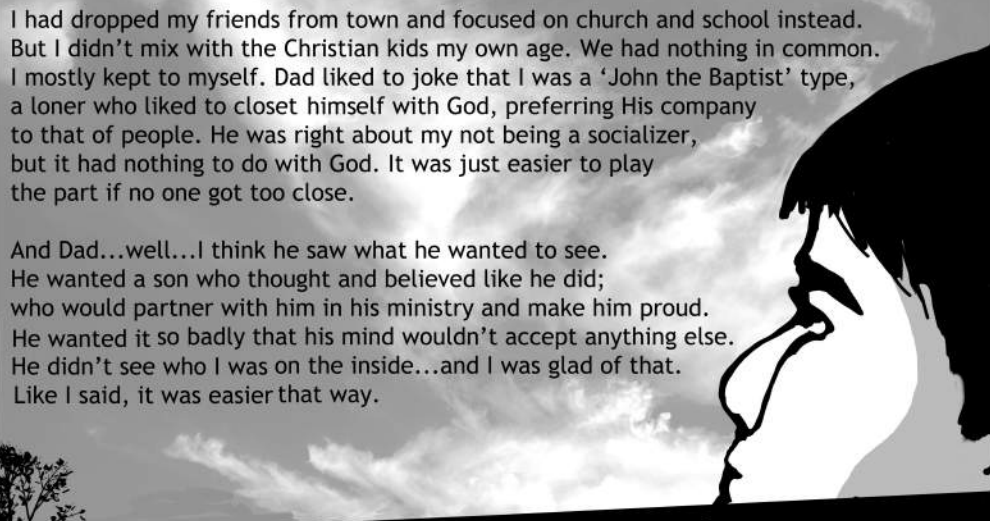
Some people say that's the only hell there is. Just bad stuff that happens in life.

But I never believed that.

The background is a dark, textured illustration of a hellish landscape. In the foreground, a man's face is shown in a high-contrast, stylized manner, looking upwards and to the right. The background features jagged, rocky terrain, a large, dark, winged figure in the upper left, and several smaller, pale, skeletal figures in the lower left and right. The overall tone is somber and ominous.


Neither do a lot of other people. Jews, Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, Zoroastrians..To them hell is where some people go after death. Their ideas about it are different, but they all agree that it's a bad place to be. The way Jesus described it in the Bible sounded like a real nightmare...all that gnashing of teeth and weeping and stuff...and the worst part is that He said it was final. Game over. No second chances.

It was my belief in hell that kept me on the straight and narrow the past few years. There was no way I wanted to end up there!

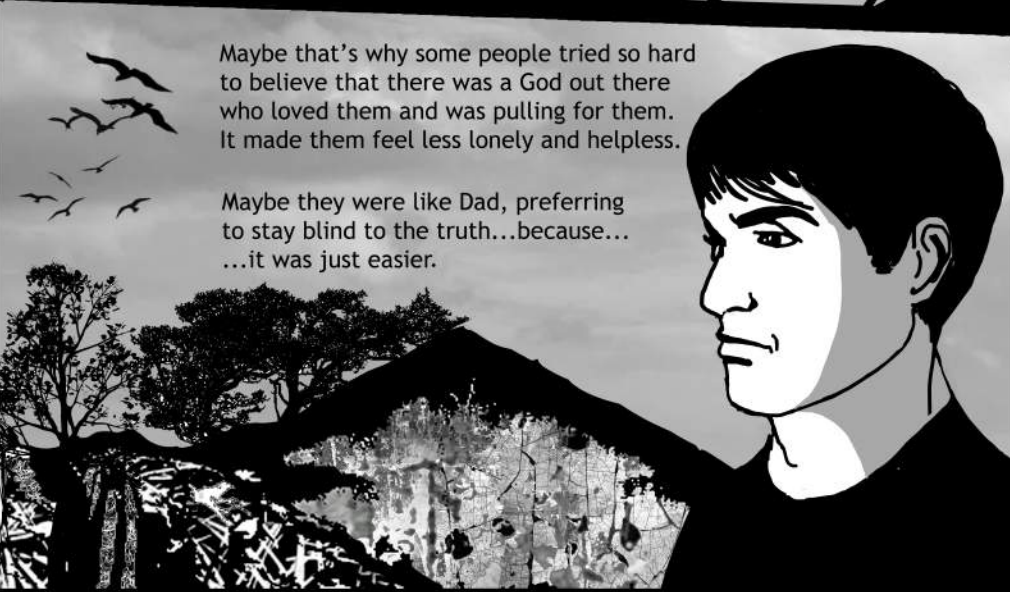


I had dropped my friends from town and focused on church and school instead. But I didn't mix with the Christian kids my own age. We had nothing in common. I mostly kept to myself. Dad liked to joke that I was a 'John the Baptist' type, a loner who liked to closet himself with God, preferring His company to that of people. He was right about my not being a socializer, but it had nothing to do with God. It was just easier to play the part if no one got too close.

And Dad...well...I think he saw what he wanted to see. He wanted a son who thought and believed like he did; who would partner with him in his ministry and make him proud. He wanted it so badly that his mind wouldn't accept anything else. He didn't see who I was on the inside...and I was glad of that. Like I said, it was easier that way.



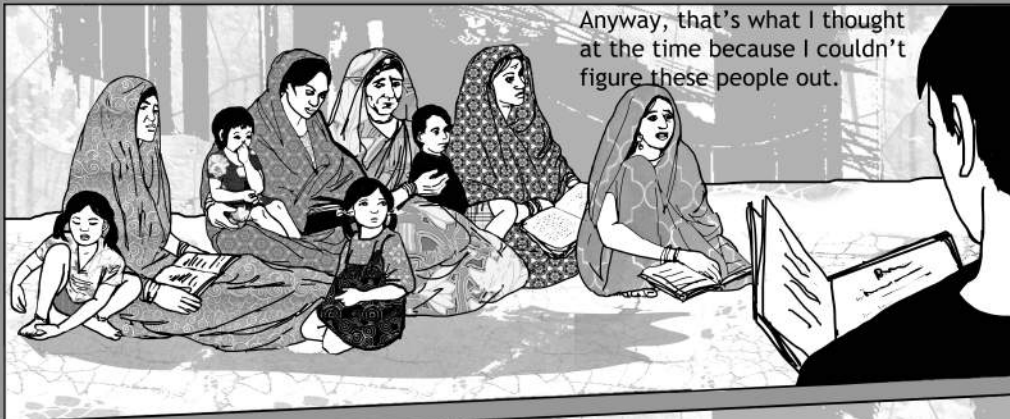
Sometimes it got real lonely though.



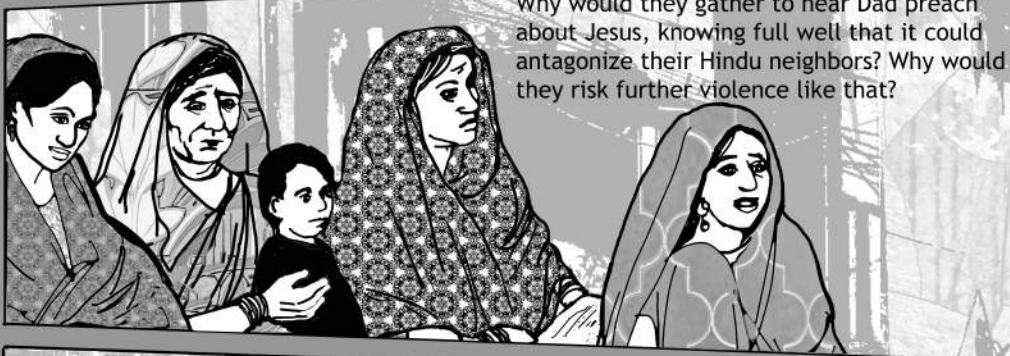
Maybe that's why some people tried so hard to believe that there was a God out there who loved them and was pulling for them. It made them feel less lonely and helpless.

Maybe they were like Dad, preferring to stay blind to the truth...because...  
...it was just easier.

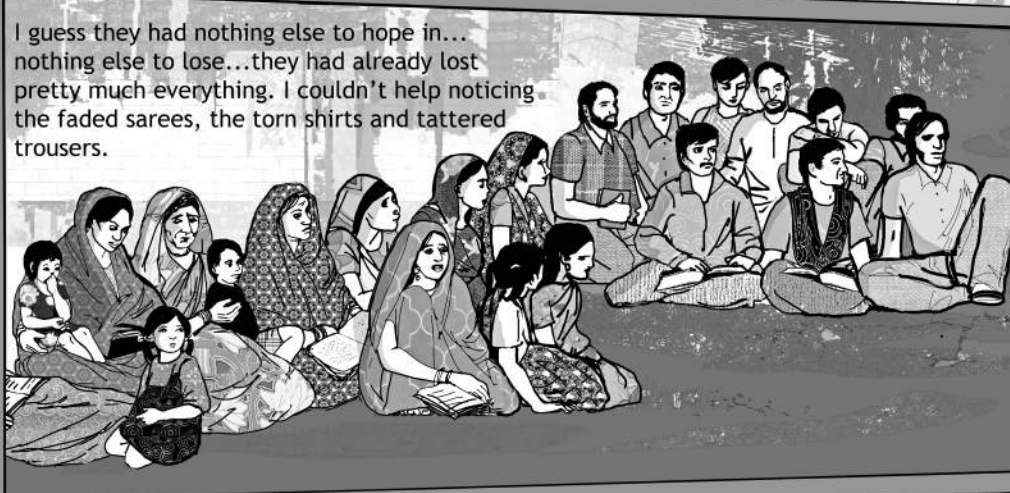




Anyway, that's what I thought at the time because I couldn't figure these people out.



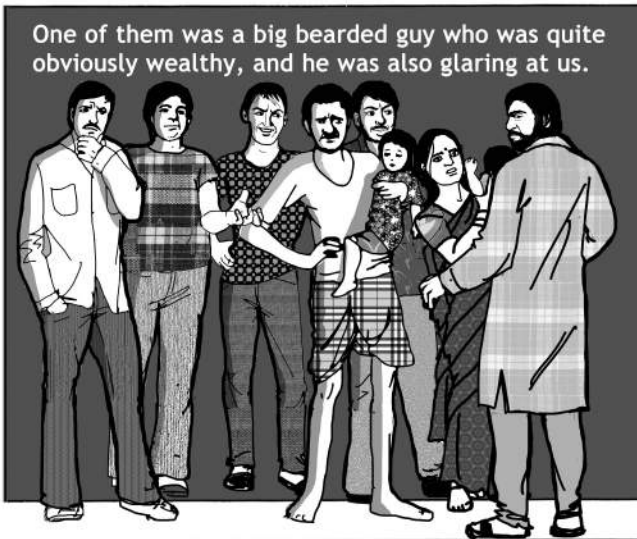
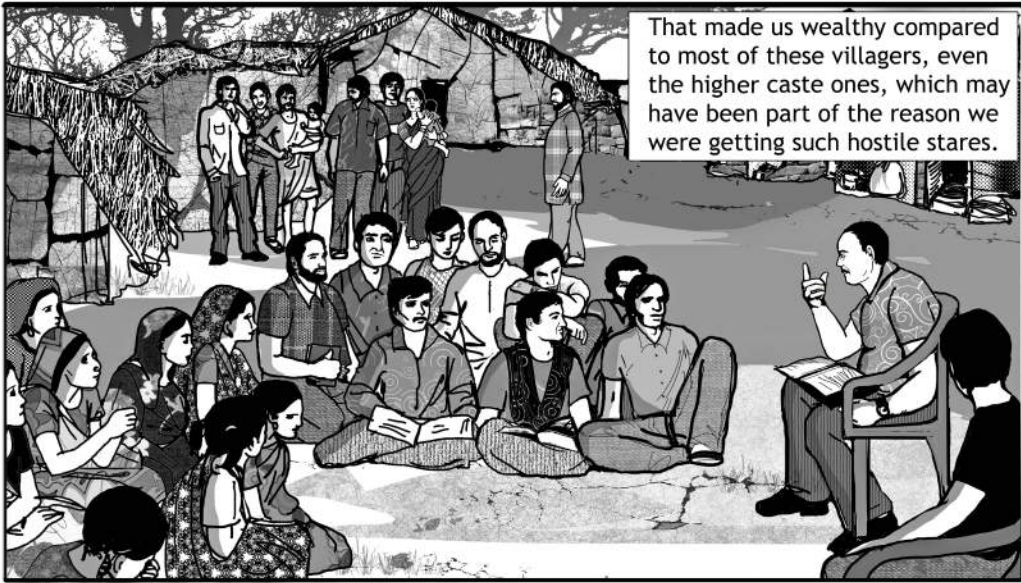
Why would they gather to hear Dad preach about Jesus, knowing full well that it could antagonize their Hindu neighbors? Why would they risk further violence like that?



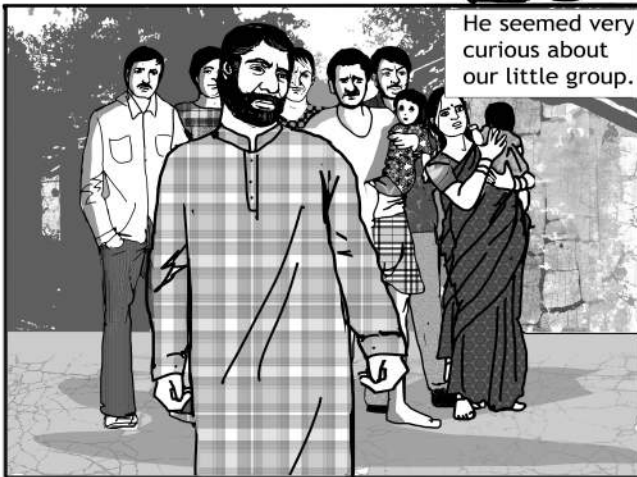
I guess they had nothing else to hope in... nothing else to lose... they had already lost pretty much everything. I couldn't help noticing the faded sarees, the torn shirts and tattered trousers.

They were poor tribals, or Scheduled Castes, as they were now called. Some preferred the term "Dalit" which means "oppressed one" and they were certainly all of that. Their homes were made of mud and thatch and some farmed tiny plots of barren land while others did road construction, or worked on the fields of the local landlord. They were lucky if they made 40 rupees a day - about one American dollar - barely enough to feed a family of four on rice for one day. In comparison, Dad and I had it pretty good, and although we were from a backward caste, and regarded as having no social significance beyond that of the tribals, we lived in town in a cement block house with a tiled roof, and we were well educated by Indian standards. We ate 3 meals a day and wore good clothes, and owned a black and white television set. I even had my own radio and Dad was thinking of getting a cell phone once the prices came down. We even had an old motorcycle that got us around!

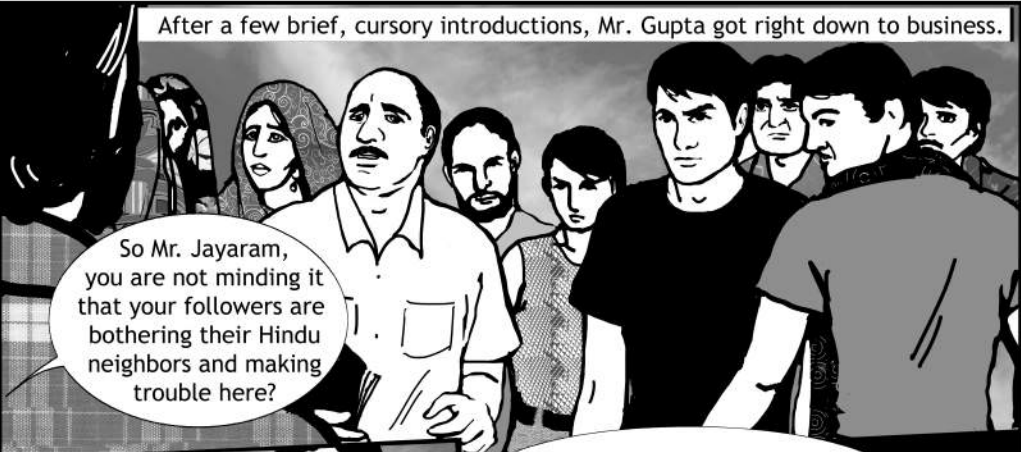





When the church service ended, he headed our way. One of the church members whispered in my ear that he was Mr. Mohan Gupta, the local landlord who owned most of the property in the area. He lived in town but came periodically to the village to settle accounts with the tenant farmers. The entire village seemed to be in awe of him and his manner suggested that he saw this as his due. He was obviously used to giving orders and having them obeyed.



After a few brief, cursory introductions, Mr. Gupta got right down to business.

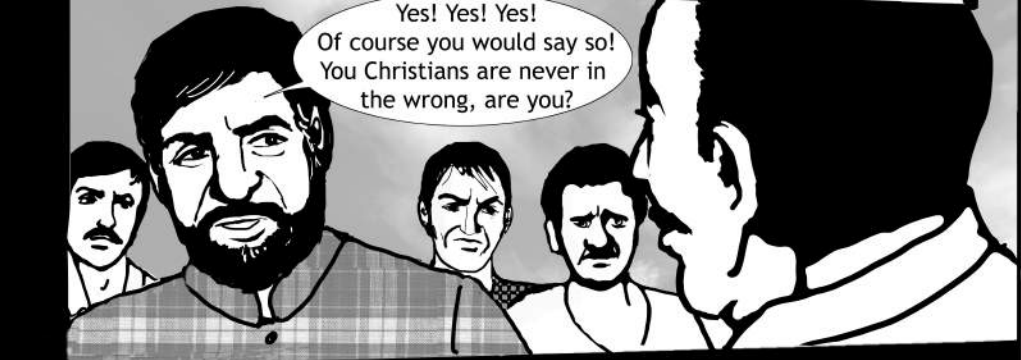


So Mr. Jayaram, you are not minding it that your followers are bothering their Hindu neighbors and making trouble here?




We just wish to follow our faith in Jesus Christ. We have done no wrong to anyone.

But they are the ones.. we made no trouble..



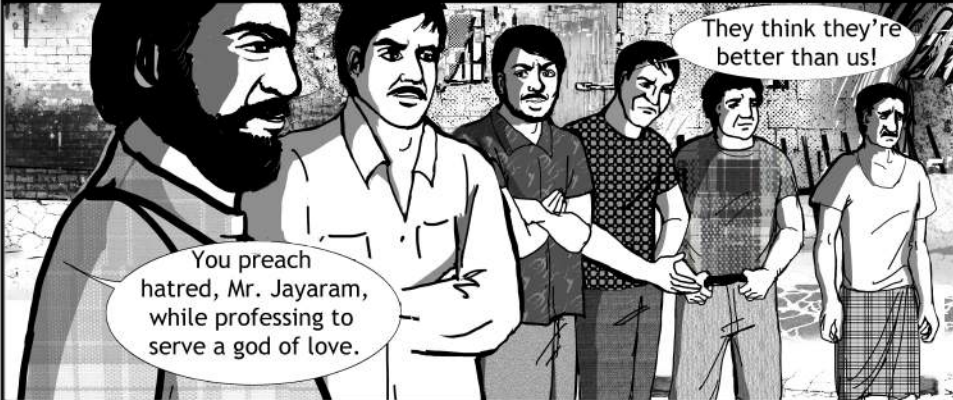
Yes! Yes! Yes!  
Of course you would say so!  
You Christians are never in the wrong, are you?



Always on the right path. The **ONLY** ones on the right path! I know full well how you cause trouble, trying to force your religion on the rest of us! You have no **RESPECT!** Not for Hindus! Not for other faiths! If we can accept your Jesus as a great teacher - avatar even - why do you reject us as pagan idol-worshippers!? Why do you purposely try to antagonize with your preaching?



The villagers were closing in and the mood was getting ugly. Mr. Gupta's hostility was projecting on to the others and I'd seen enough mobs to know that they could quickly get out of hand. You could never predict what would happen when emotions ran high.



You preach hatred, Mr. Jayaram, while professing to serve a god of love.

They think they're better than us!

Let the west keep its own religion! We don't want it!

They just wanna make us #\$\$%^ slaves like the British Raj did!

Well, NO WAY! We're a Hindu nation and you Christians aren't gonna change that!



You see, Mr. Jayaram, you are not wanted here. So leave these fine people alone and preach your hate doctrine elsewhere!

The guy was plainly losing it. His voice had risen several decibels and it appeared he was just getting warmed up. I was thinking of grabbing my Dad and making a break for it - the motorcycle was close by - but then something strange happened.





If so, then I was looking at the angel He sent.



And I liked what I was seeing!

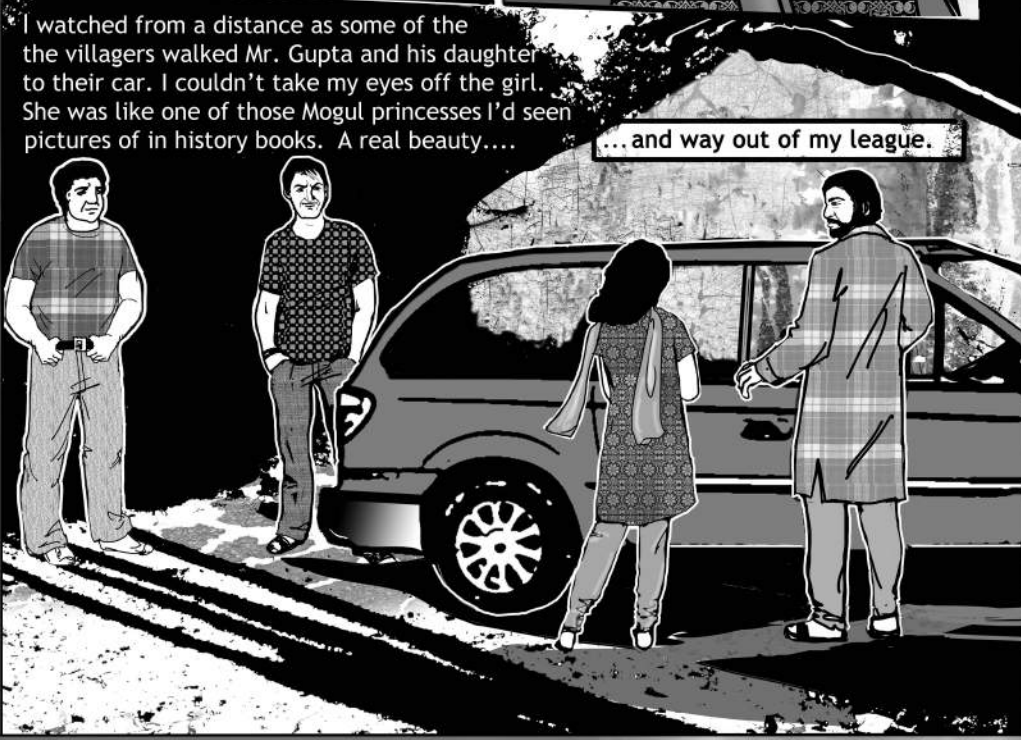


And maybe she did too.



I watched from a distance as some of the the villagers walked Mr. Gupta and his daughter to their car. I couldn't take my eyes off the girl. She was like one of those Mogul princesses I'd seen pictures of in history books. A real beauty....

... and way out of my league.



It didn't take a lot of brains to see that she was from a wealthy, upper-caste family. Her father's car alone was worth a fortune. I figured she probably lived in a big fancy house with dozens of servants and every western convenience you could think of. I could only dream of what her life was like. She epitomised all I wanted in life ...and couldn't have.



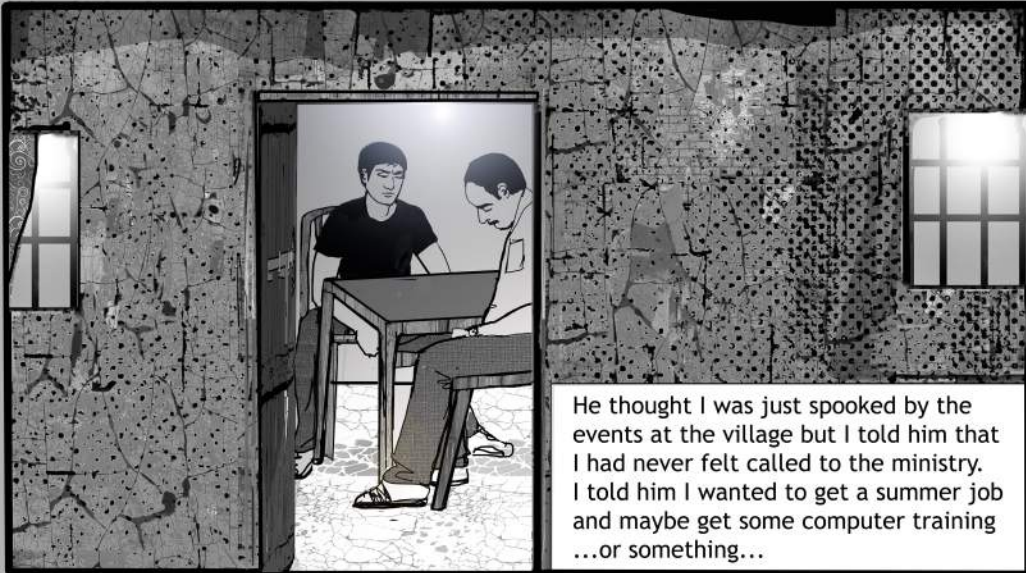
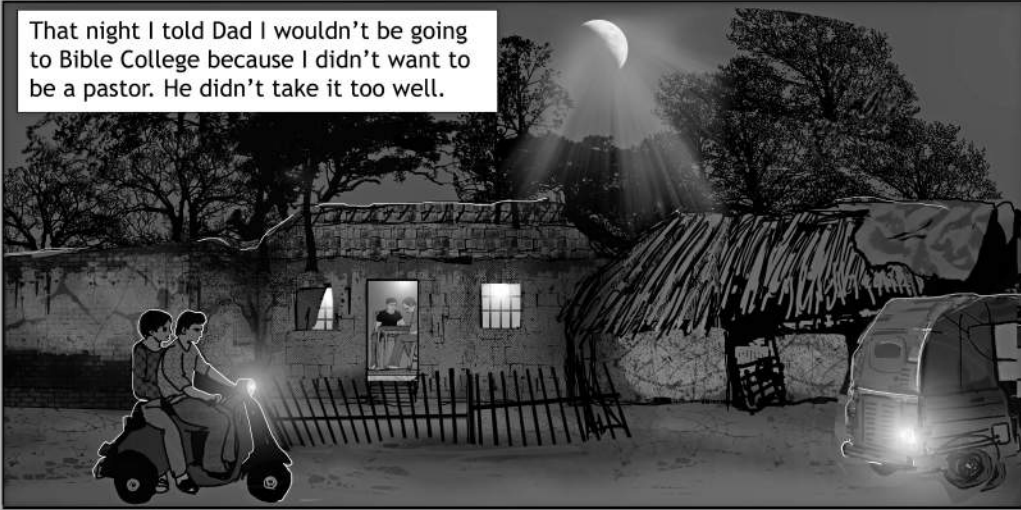
There was no point in torturing myself so I started to turn away, but then she glanced at me out the car's back window. My heart must have been pumping a mile a minute and I couldn't have moved if my life had depended on it. I felt like an idiot standing there in the middle of the road staring after the car like a love-sick calf. It was a relief when the car was finally out of sight.



Her father had called her 'Priya'. A Sanskrit name meaning 'beloved'. Pretty name for a real pretty girl. I walked away, wondering if I'd ever see her again.

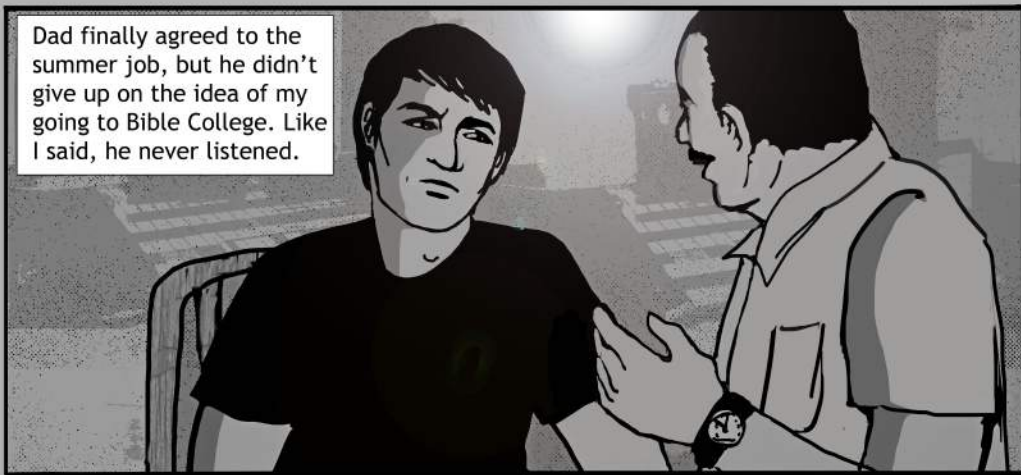


That night I told Dad I wouldn't be going to Bible College because I didn't want to be a pastor. He didn't take it too well.



He thought I was just spooked by the events at the village but I told him that I had never felt called to the ministry. I told him I wanted to get a summer job and maybe get some computer training ...or something...

Dad finally agreed to the summer job, but he didn't give up on the idea of my going to Bible College. Like I said, he never listened.





Next morning I woke to the smell of chai and dosas. Amma made the best masala dosas in all of India, I was sure of it! And a cup of hot sugary chai was just what I needed.



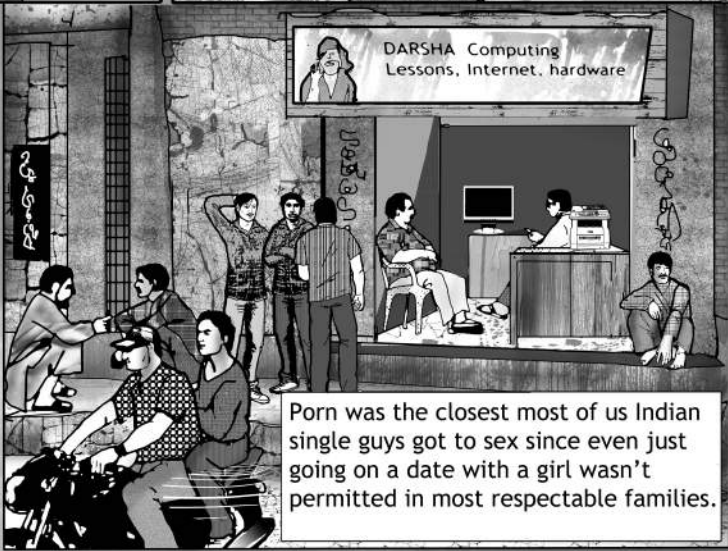


That really ticked me off.



I could very well find my own summer job!

I would have liked a job at Darsha Computing. I didn't know all that much about computers but I knew enough to work the internet. Most of the guys from my school had gone there to download porn. They told their parents that they had to do research for an assignment. Their folks never guessed what kind of 'research' was really going on. Of course Mr. Darsha knew, but he just turned a blind eye because he downloaded it himself.



Porn was the closest most of us Indian single guys got to sex since even just going on a date with a girl wasn't permitted in most respectable families.



Platonic crushes on other guys was considered okay however.



But it wasn't the same.

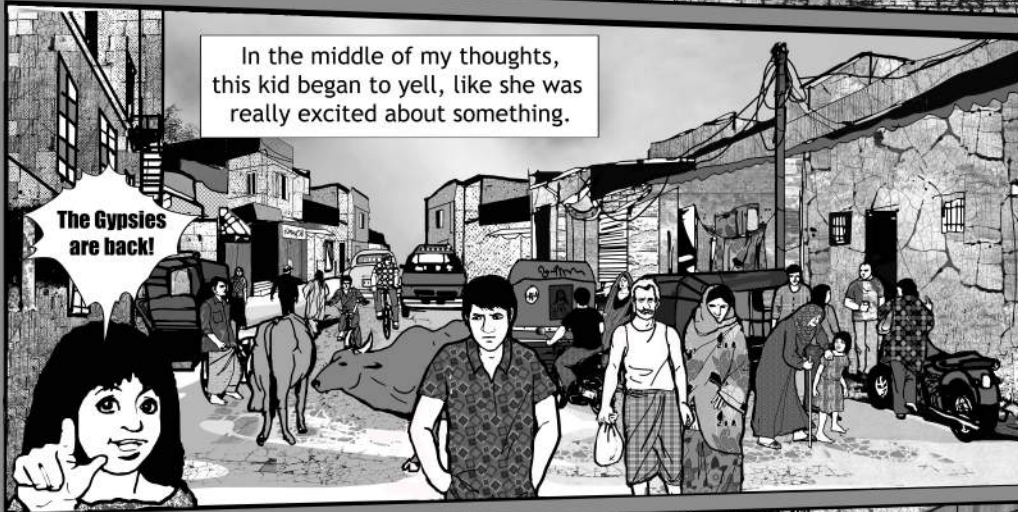




Anyway, there were lots of jobs I could have tried for, but the truth was I didn't know what I wanted to do.



Mostly I just wanted to get out on my own and live my own life.

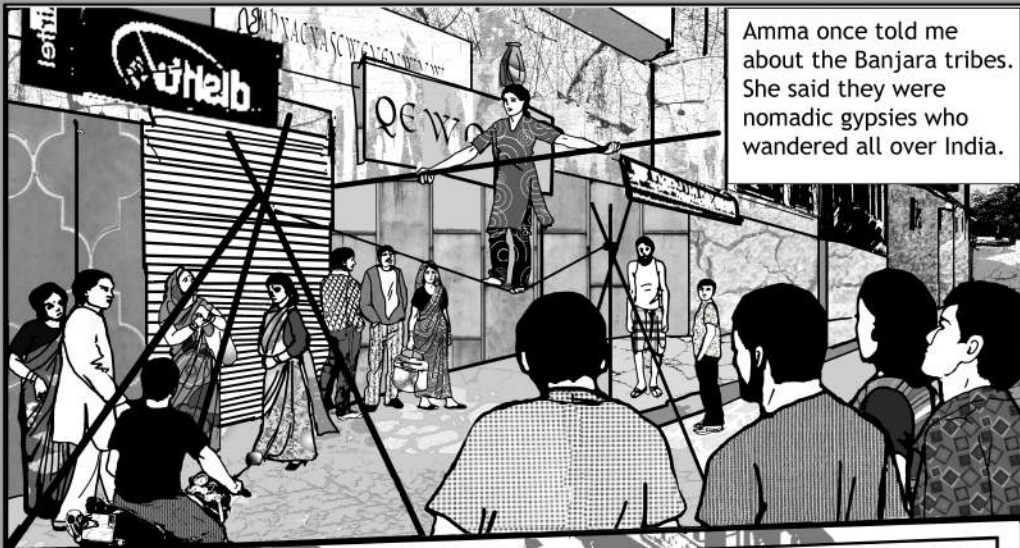


In the middle of my thoughts, this kid began to yell, like she was really excited about something.



She was right. A Banjara caravan had arrived in town, complete with dancers and musicians.





Amma once told me about the Banjara tribes. She said they were nomadic gypsies who wandered all over India.



Many of them had a bad reputation for stealing, and even kidnapping. Dad said the Banjaras welcomed runaways into their groups, and that was probably why they were thought to be kidnapers. He said you couldn't really generalize about gypsies because they were so diverse. Amma disagreed however. She said they were a wild bunch who were always looking for mischief, and they couldn't be trusted.



She said the Nat and Bedia tribes even sold their women as prostitutes. I didn't know what tribe these gypsies were, but the flashing black eyes of the women, their swirling skirts emblazoned with tiny mirrors, and the jangling silver ankle bells had me totally enthralled.

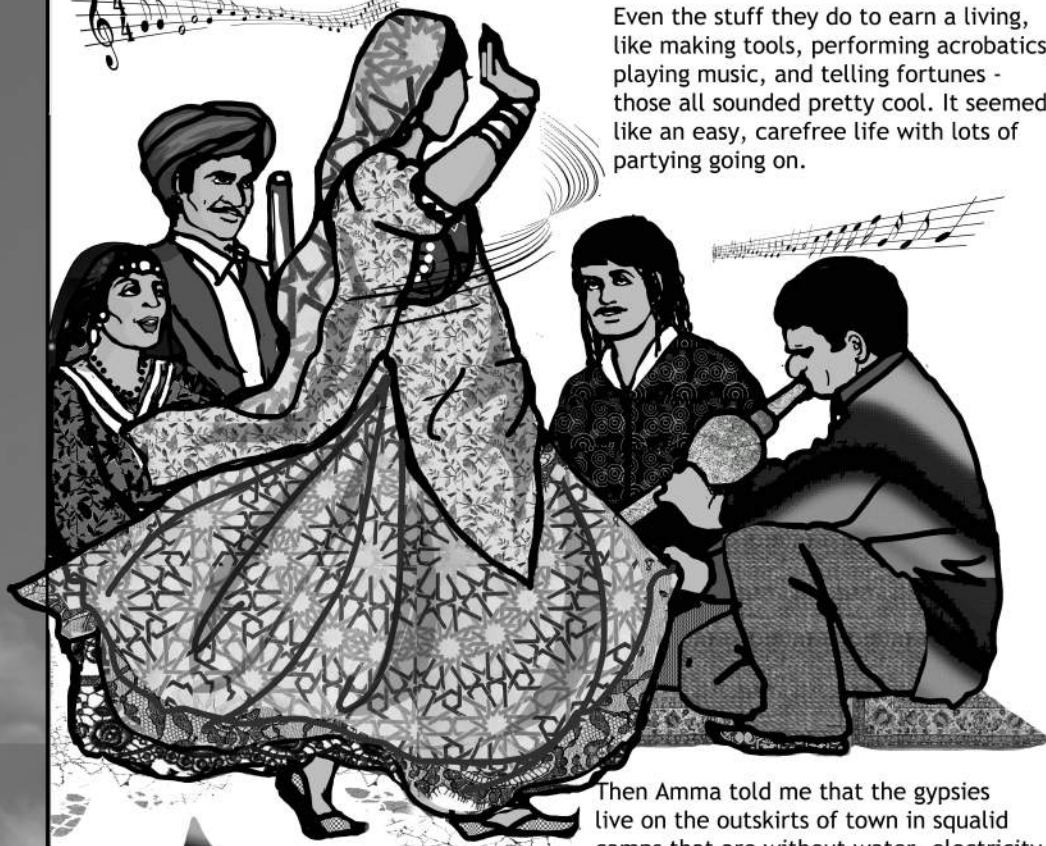




I often wondered what it would be like to live with the gypsies, never having to attend school, never staying in one place for very long, and never having to live by society's rules.



Even the stuff they do to earn a living, like making tools, performing acrobatics, playing music, and telling fortunes - those all sounded pretty cool. It seemed like an easy, carefree life with lots of partying going on.



Then Amma told me that the gypsies live on the outskirts of town in squalid camps that are without water, electricity, or toilets. Their tents are often nothing more than plastic sheets strung over wire.



They also get raided by the police when things like cattle go missing, and then they're forced to leave the area. Sometimes they get beaten up.

I couldn't imagine myself living like that. They had it as bad as the Christian Dalits in some ways. They were rejects of Indian society, despised by their neighbors, treated with suspicion and distrust, disdained as lesser creatures, and often violently misused. Their lives were hard, and even though the gypsy lifestyle had its allure, if you don't have caste in India, you're nothing...unless you have money...LOTS of money. Riches could open doors where caste barred the way.



I'd seen it happen with westerners. According to Hindu thought, they have no caste, but I saw them go into the finest restaurants and hotels, and they always got polite service. I liked the way the foreign women dressed and how free and bold they were in manner and style. They could hire a chauffeur-driven car for the entire day and think nothing of the cost. Everything about them suggested the good life. That's what I wanted for myself - lots of money so I could live in a big house and drive a fast sports car, dress in cool western clothes, and attract beautiful women. I figured that being wealthy was even more important than caste and social background. Money was protection, security, and most importantly for me, it was freedom.





Man, that would be so cool! I could picture it all in my mind - even the girls. I'd live like a real Bollywood star in a mansion in Mumbai. And I'd be the sharpest dresser around. My car would be a Lamborghini...or maybe a Ferrari...in red. And I'd eat out every night at an upscale restaurant and hang out with movie stars at Cafe Coffee Day.

What I couldn't see was how a dead-end job at Agarawal's Home Goods store was going to fit into that picture!

Then again, it didn't look like I had any other options at this point.

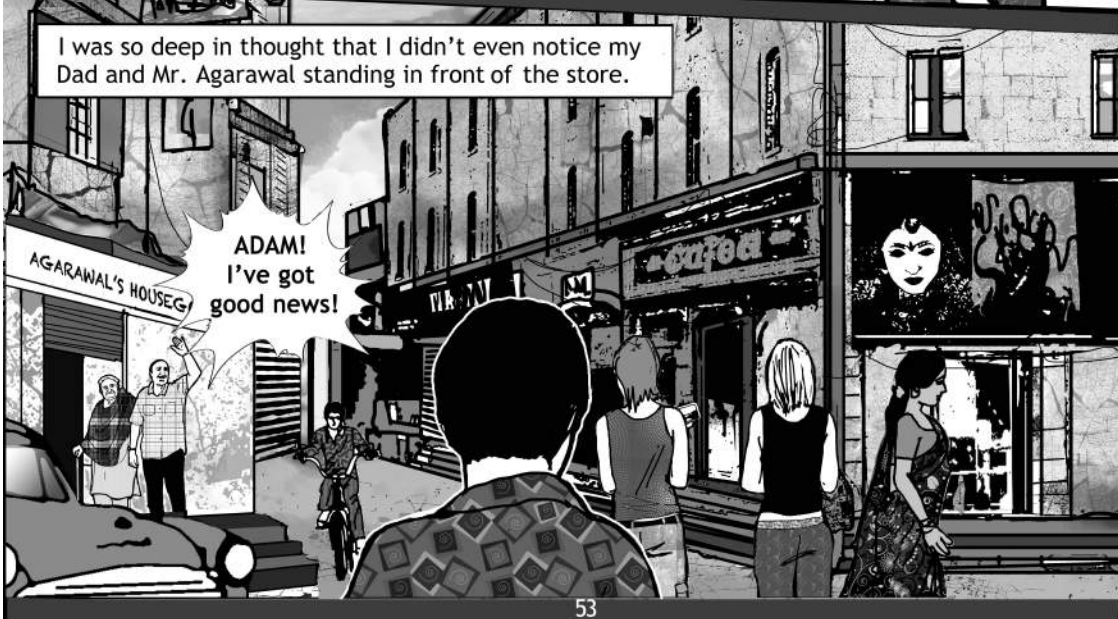




If I made too much of a fuss, Dad might insist on the college idea.



And that definitely wasn't where my interests lay.



I was so deep in thought that I didn't even notice my Dad and Mr. Agarawal standing in front of the store.

ADAM!  
I've got good news!

Dad and Agarawal were talking as I came up so I heard what they were saying.

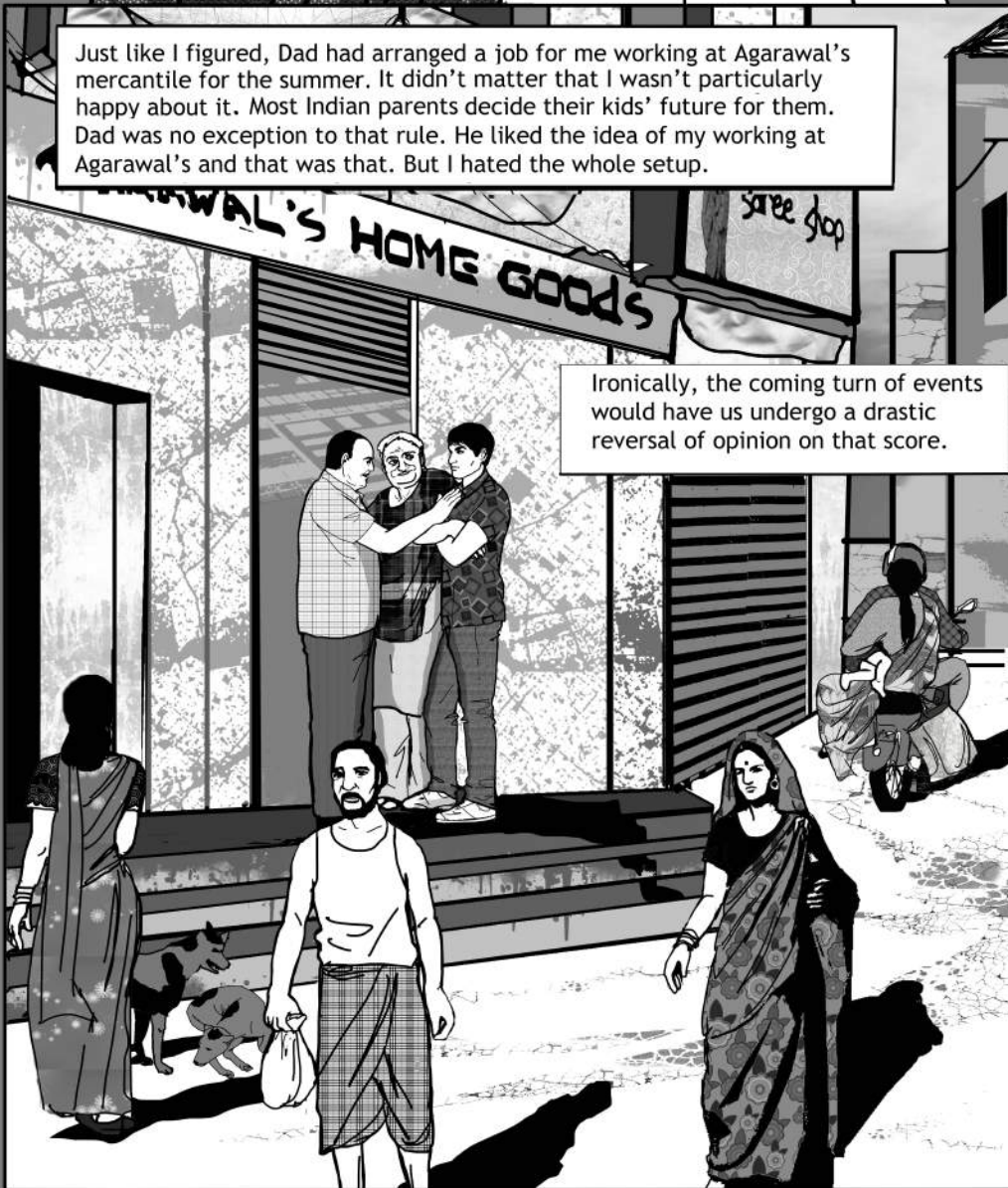
Oh ho!  
Looks like  
your boy has  
an eye for  
the foreign  
ladies.  
Better get  
him a bride  
soon.



I will...in a  
couple of years,  
when he finishes  
Bible School. I'll  
arrange a marriage  
then.



Just like I figured, Dad had arranged a job for me working at Agarawal's mercantile for the summer. It didn't matter that I wasn't particularly happy about it. Most Indian parents decide their kids' future for them. Dad was no exception to that rule. He liked the idea of my working at Agarawal's and that was that. But I hated the whole setup.



Ironically, the coming turn of events would have us undergo a drastic reversal of opinion on that score.



Chapter 3

# FORBIDDEN





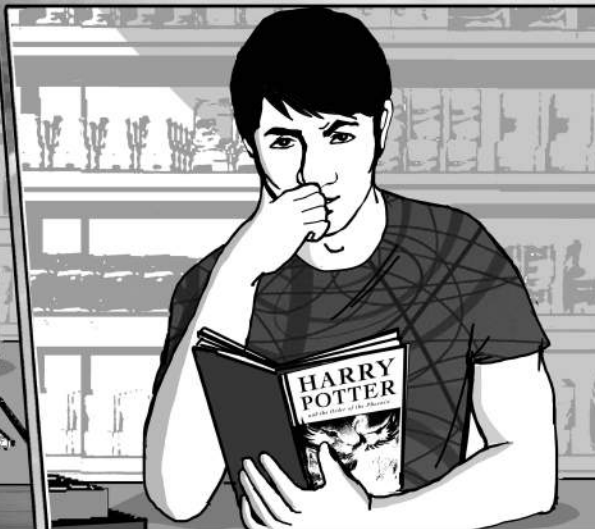
Working at Agarawals' store had its compensations. For one thing he always went home for lunch and a nap during the hottest time of day when there weren't many customers. I secretly bought a pack of cigarettes and started smoking on the sly. He also sold a few books - mostly for children - but they weren't bad, and I killed some time that way.



That's not to say that I liked it, or anything like that. I was nothing but a lowly shop assistant who swept floors, stocked shelves, took sales, and made a few home deliveries. That's about all I did day after day after day. Not exactly the kind of stuff dreams are made of. It sure didn't pay much either - 100 rupees a day - about 2 American dollars. I guess I should have been glad I wasn't a coolie breaking rocks all day under the sweltering sun, but I wasn't feeling grateful at the time. However that certainly changed on the day a certain customer visited the store.



I was so engrossed in a book I was reading that I didn't immediately look up when I heard footsteps approaching...until I heard a familiar voice that I knew could only belong to the 'Angel Princess'.



It was her alright - Priya Gupta - and she seemed as surprised to see me as I was to see her. Her companion, whom I guessed to be her grandmother, was also surprised by my presence, but she seemed greatly annoyed as well, glaring at me with hard, obsidian eyes.



Who are you, and where is Mr. Agarawal? I want to talk to him.



I'm Adam Jayaram, the new shop assistant, and Mr. Agarawal is taking lunch at his home..

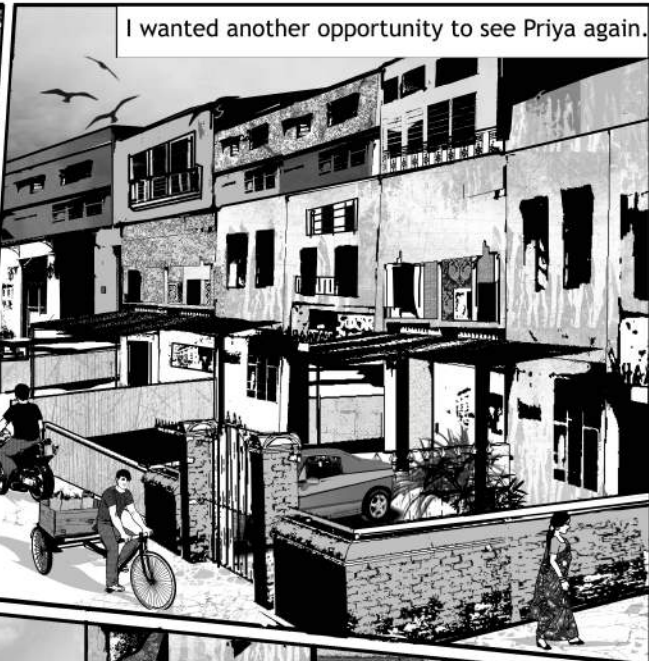




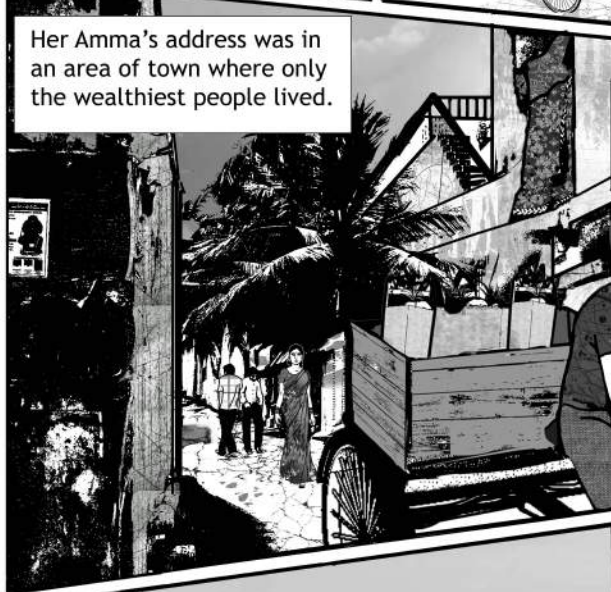




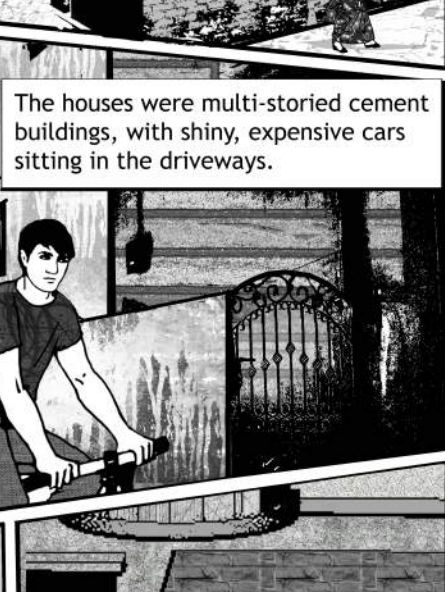
I had never been so eager to do deliveries as I was on that day.



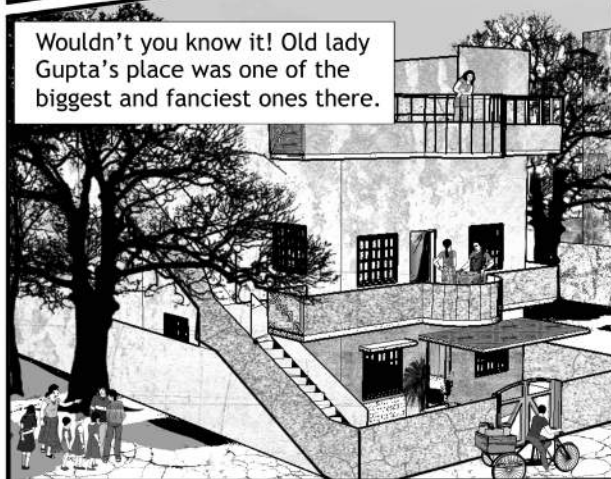
I wanted another opportunity to see Priya again.



Her Amma's address was in an area of town where only the wealthiest people lived.



The houses were multi-storied cement buildings, with shiny, expensive cars sitting in the driveways.



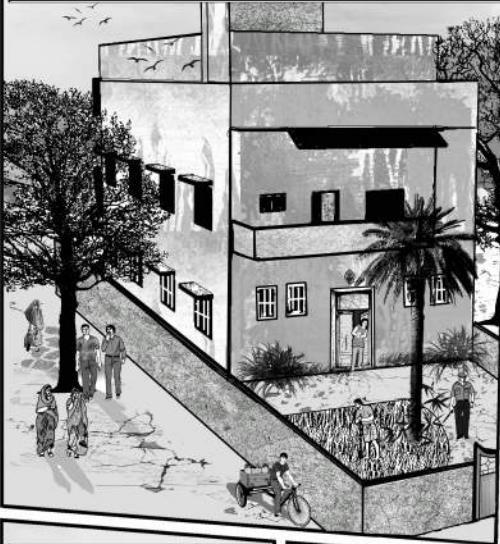
Wouldn't you know it! Old lady Gupta's place was one of the biggest and fanciest ones there.



The guard told me to go around to the back and he'd let me in.



As I drove to the back gate, I was surprised at how clean everything was - no garbage lying around and no stray animals.



When the guard let me in, I was even more surprised to see Priya standing at the back door...almost like she was waiting for me.

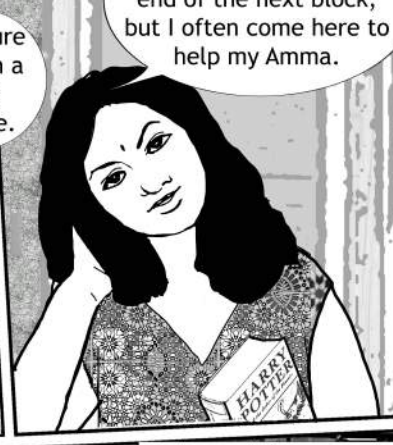


I was nervous because I wasn't used to talking to girls, so I just spoke the first thought that came to mind.



You sure live in a nice house.

Actually I live with my parents at the end of the next block, but I often come here to help my Amma.



Oh.. um...where does she want these?

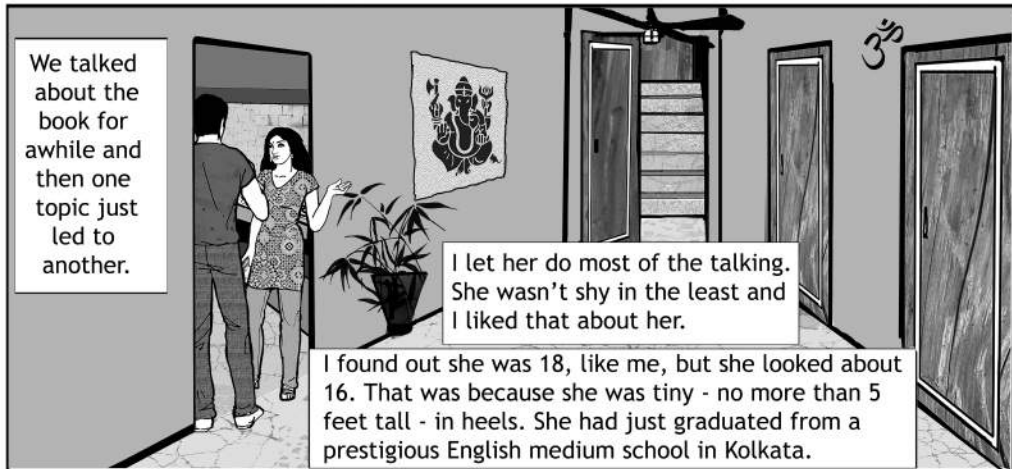


I dumped the groceries on the kitchen counter and that's when I noticed the book Priya was holding.



Hey! I'm reading Potter too.

I know. I saw you reading it in the store.



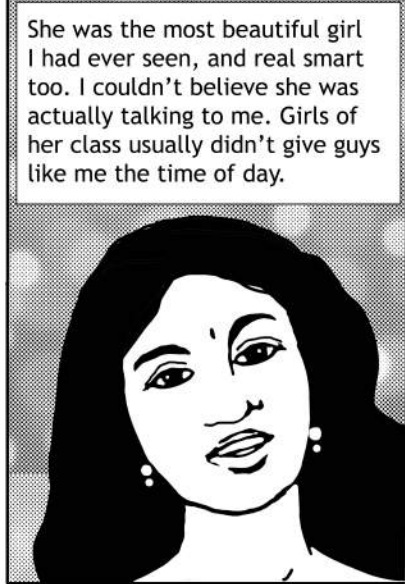
We talked about the book for awhile and then one topic just led to another.

I let her do most of the talking. She wasn't shy in the least and I liked that about her.

I found out she was 18, like me, but she looked about 16. That was because she was tiny - no more than 5 feet tall - in heels. She had just graduated from a prestigious English medium school in Kolkata.



She had one older brother who was away at University, studying to be a doctor. Most of her family were in some kind of profession or other. Her father, besides being a big landowner, also ran a computer software company out of Kolkata. Even her mother worked at an advertizing firm before she married. Priya said she wanted to get training in computers so she could help her father in his business. She said she'd been playing on laptops since the age of ten.



She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, and real smart too. I couldn't believe she was actually talking to me. Girls of her class usually didn't give guys like me the time of day.



Then she floored me by offering to lend me the 2nd book in the Harry Potter series.

Just don't tell anyone, okay? Amma wouldn't approve.





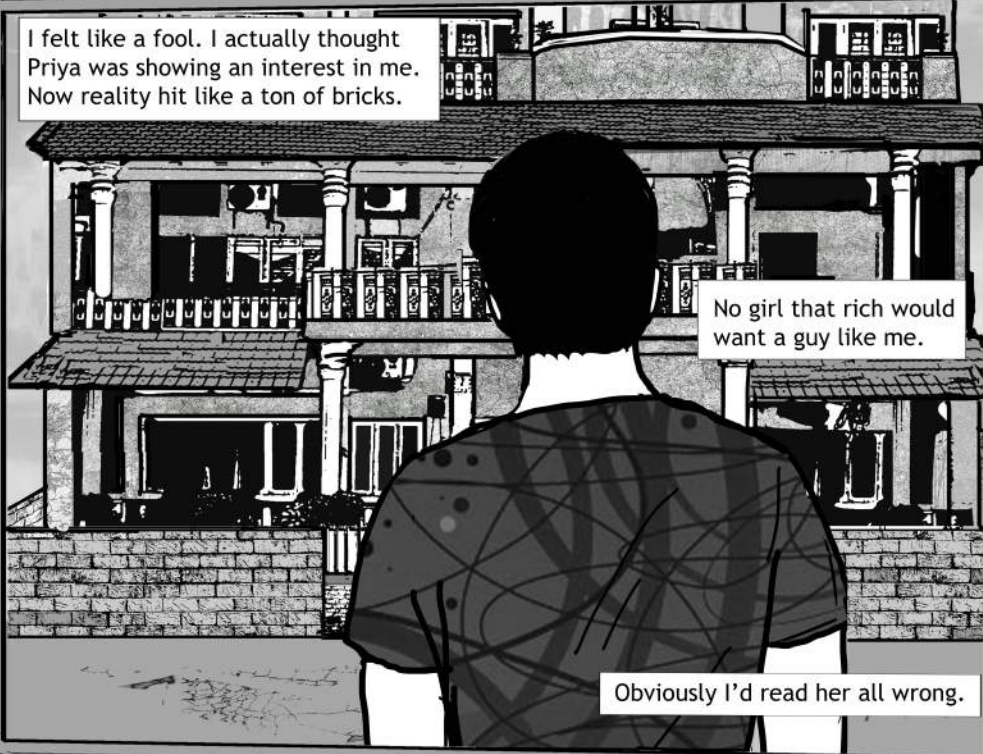
Priya seemed afraid of her grandmother seeing us together, so I left immediately. Besides, I didn't really feel like running into the old lady again. She had an air of disdain about her that made me feel like scum. I left through the back gate before being seen, not even having time to sneak a peek at what Priya had written inside her book. I was intensely curious about that, but first I decided to take a route that would take me past the house where Priya lived.



I wasn't prepared for what I saw. The house was HUGE - even bigger than the Amma's place. It was astounding.



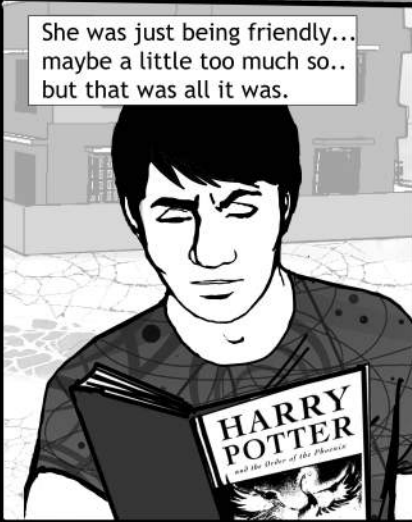
I felt like a fool. I actually thought Priya was showing an interest in me. Now reality hit like a ton of bricks.



No girl that rich would want a guy like me.

Obviously I'd read her all wrong.

She was just being friendly... maybe a little too much so.. but that was all it was.

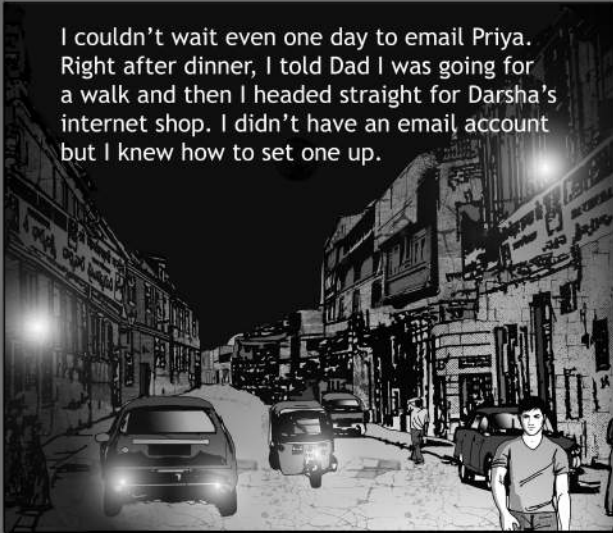


Then again...

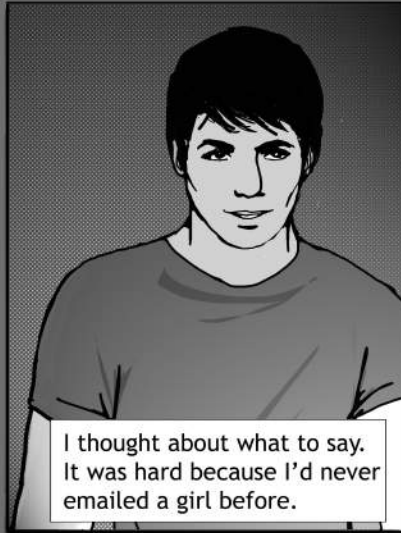
...maybe not.



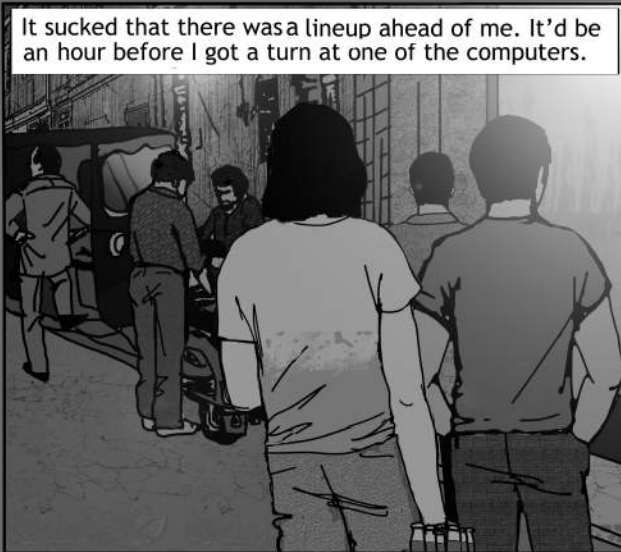




I couldn't wait even one day to email Priya. Right after dinner, I told Dad I was going for a walk and then I headed straight for Darsha's internet shop. I didn't have an email account but I knew how to set one up.



I thought about what to say. It was hard because I'd never emailed a girl before.

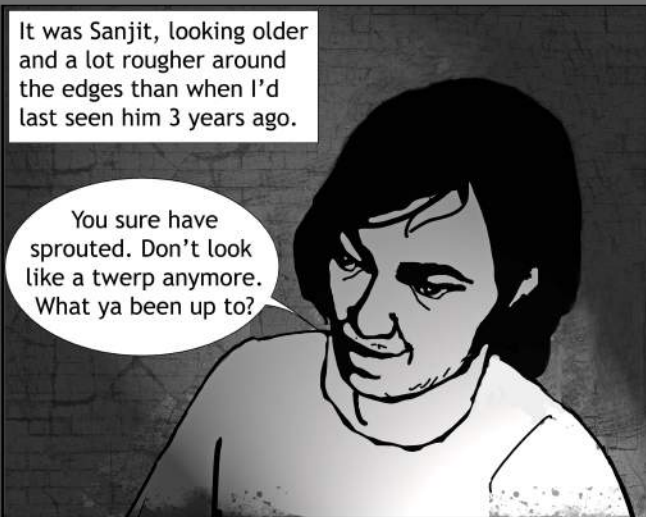


It sucked that there was a lineup ahead of me. It'd be an hour before I got a turn at one of the computers.



While I waited, someone jabbed me in the back.

Hey bud. How ya doin?



It was Sanjit, looking older and a lot rougher around the edges than when I'd last seen him 3 years ago.

You sure have sprouted. Don't look like a twerp anymore. What ya been up to?

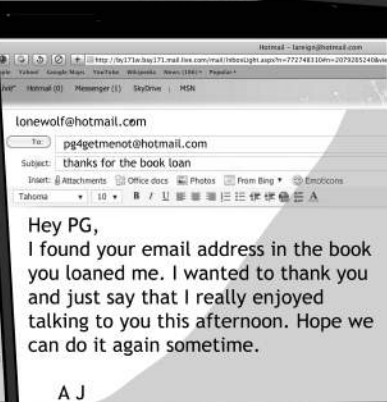


I wasn't thrilled to see Sanjit but he seemed eager to talk. He told me he was working as a trucker now and knew all the best trucker stops for getting drugs and prostitutes. His routes took him across Orissa and West Bengal. Twice each month he made deliveries in Kolkata, which meant party-time. He said he liked the carefree lifestyle and would never give it up. He said I should come to his place for a beer and we could talk over old times...maybe roll a joint or two. I told him I'd think about it but I had no intention of taking up his offer.





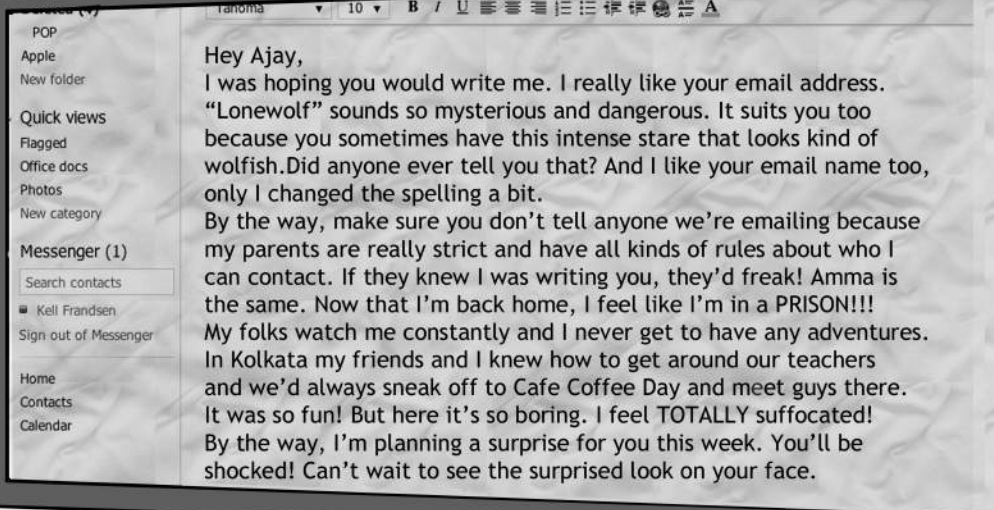
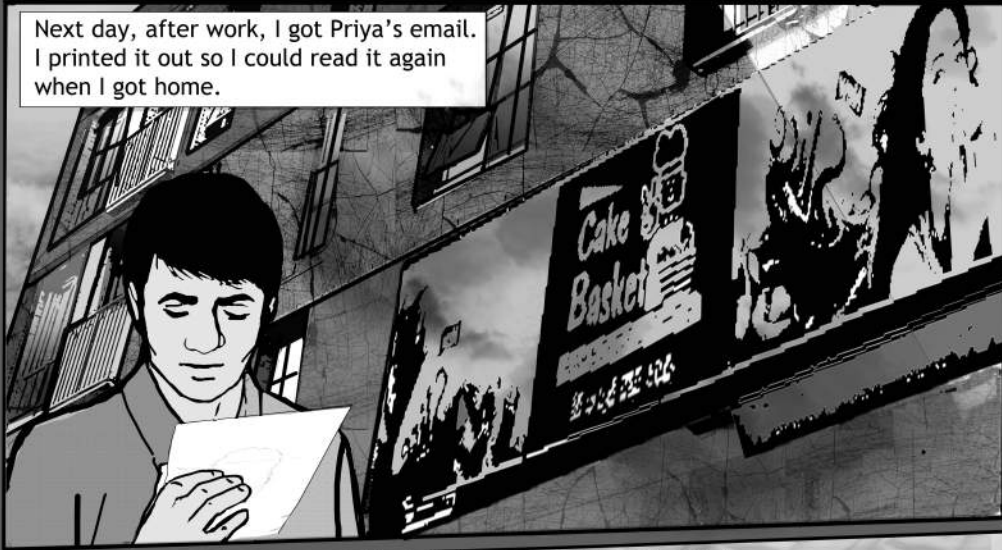
It took me awhile to figure out what I should call myself. I asked Darsha if he had any ideas and he suggested picking my favorite animal and just using that. Sounded good to me.



On the way home I kept wondering what Priya's response would be to my email. I felt all wound up...nervous and excited... and fearful too. What if she told me to get lost.. to never dare contact her again?

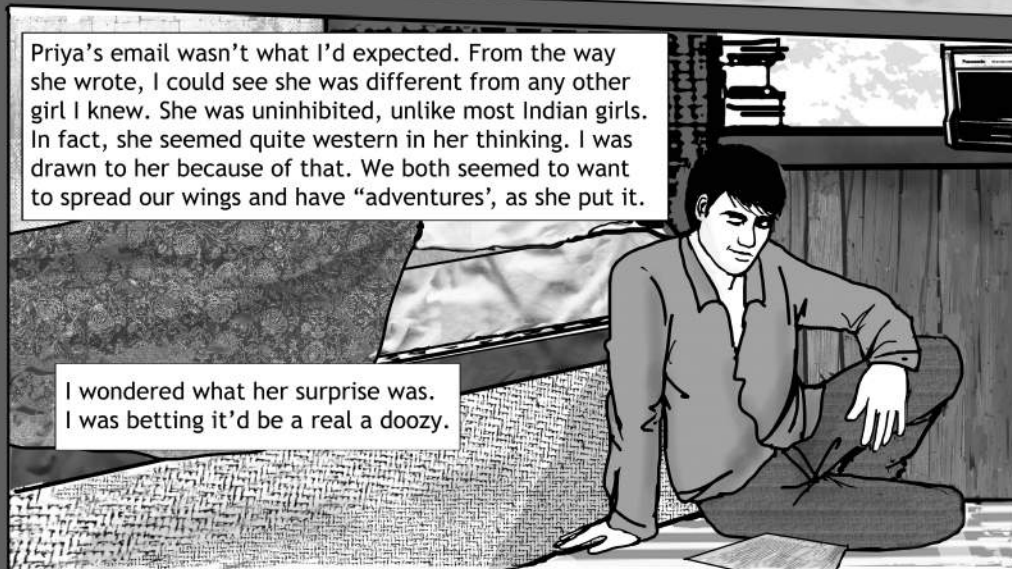


Next day, after work, I got Priya's email. I printed it out so I could read it again when I got home.



Priya's email wasn't what I'd expected. From the way she wrote, I could see she was different from any other girl I knew. She was uninhibited, unlike most Indian girls. In fact, she seemed quite western in her thinking. I was drawn to her because of that. We both seemed to want to spread our wings and have "adventures", as she put it.

I wondered what her surprise was. I was betting it'd be a real doozy.

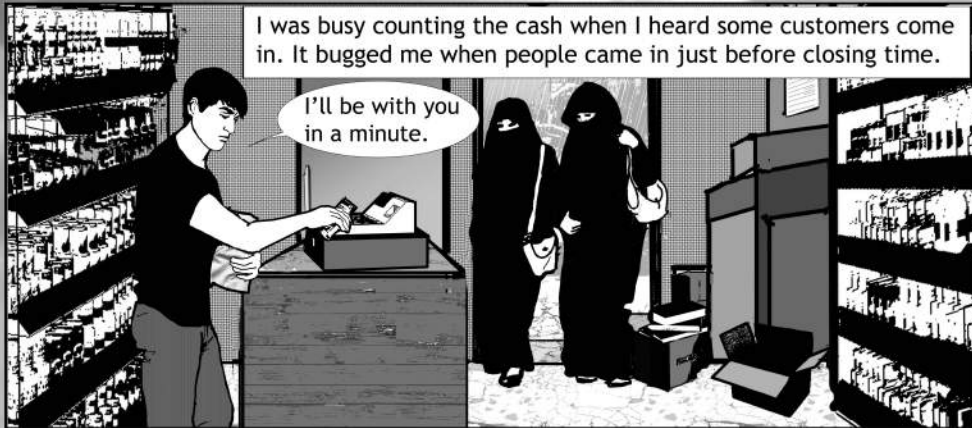




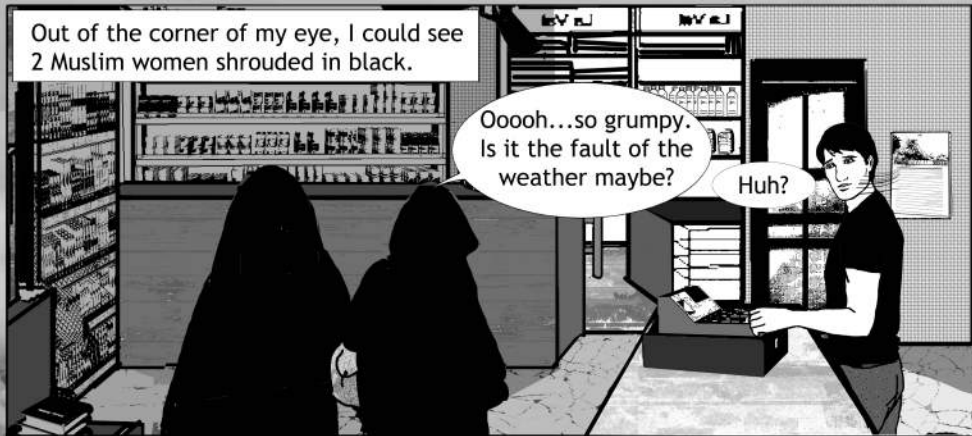
Next day a monsoon shower swept in from the east and everyone in the street ran for cover. The monsoons were welcomed by the farmers but the first rains were often torrential and unpredictable. I stood outside and breathed in the cooler air. I knew business would be slow because of the weather and Agarawal would probably stay at home and let me close up shop at the end of the day. I decided to do the till early.



I was busy counting the cash when I heard some customers come in. It bugged me when people came in just before closing time.



Out of the corner of my eye, I could see 2 Muslim women shrouded in black.





Ta da!  
Surprise  
Ajay!

Priya?  
No Way!

Ha! Told you I'd shock you!  
Pretty neat disguise, huh? What better  
way to go around incognito?



PRIYA!

So this is why  
you wanted to wear  
Muslim dress..so you  
could meet a boy!



What would  
your parents say if they  
knew about this?

They won't  
know about  
it, Safiya...if  
you don't tell  
them.



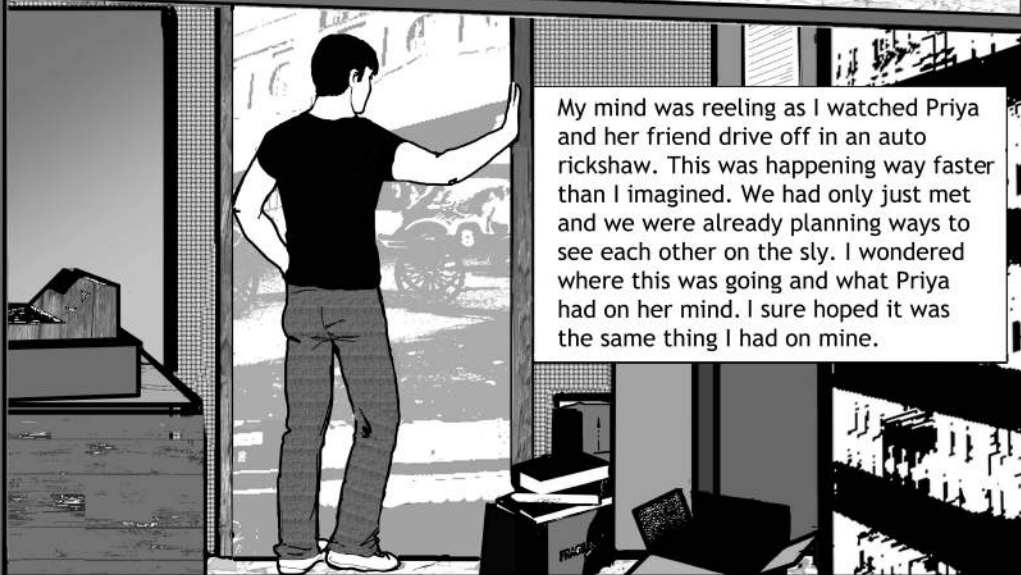
You are shameless, Priya!

What if someone walked in right now?!



Well it was worth a try. She used to be my 'partner in crime' when we were in school together..before she converted and got married.

Guess we'll have to think of some other way to meet secretly.



My mind was reeling as I watched Priya and her friend drive off in an auto rickshaw. This was happening way faster than I imagined. We had only just met and we were already planning ways to see each other on the sly. I wondered where this was going and what Priya had on her mind. I sure hoped it was the same thing I had on mine.



For romantic inspiration, nothing beats a Bollywood movie. They last about 3 hours and they have everything - music, dancing, drama, comedy, adventure, and lots of violence - and every plot is virtually the same. Two star-crossed lovers go through hell to stay together and in the end they prove triumphant over all obstacles, proving that love truly does conquer all.



That's something everyone wants to believe in, I guess. Anyway, I ended up at the local movie theater because Agarwal had a wedding in his family and he closed the shop for the day. I wanted to kill some time and the movies seemed the perfect way to do it.

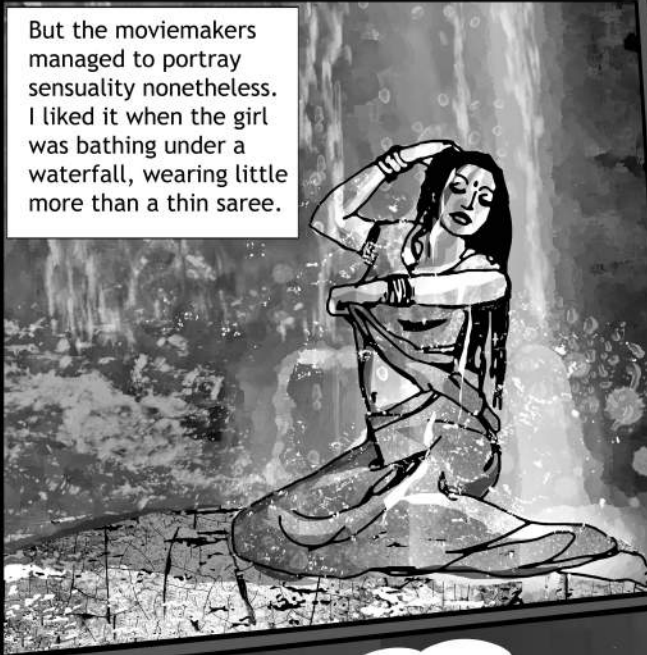


I also thought I might get some ideas about how to romance Priya. I knew almost nothing about dating. I'd never been on one. Kids my age were expected to wait until their honeymoon for their initial contact with the opposite sex. We weren't even supposed to hold hands until the wedding ceremony.



Even Bollywood movies seldom showed a couple kissing.

But the moviemakers managed to portray sensuality nonetheless. I liked it when the girl was bathing under a waterfall, wearing little more than a thin saree.



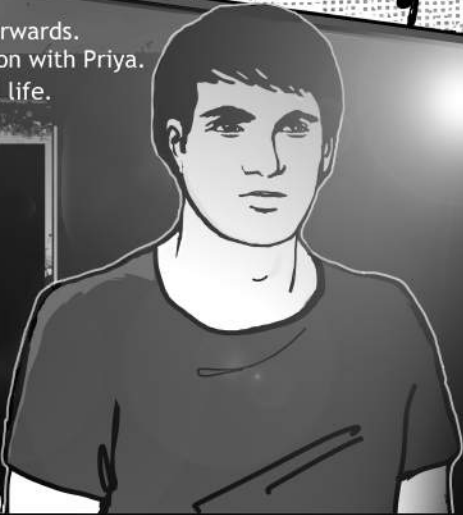
Man, you didn't need much of an imagination to envision what was underneath! The guys watching showed their appreciation with wild whistles and loud catcalls.



That is one HOT chick!



The movie was pretty good and I felt charged afterwards. Plus I got a few ideas to help me out in my situation with Priya. I could hardly wait to see their effect on my social life.



Another boon to my social life was the cell phone I got for my 19th birthday. I'd been pestering Dad to get one for months and he finally came through.



He even got one for himself. He said it was a good idea to have one when we visited the tribals.



The cell made it much easier to contact Priya, who was never without hers. We still emailed several times a week, but both of us preferred hearing each other's voice. Pretty soon a day never went by when we didn't have a conversation together.



I was learning lots about Priya and slowly I began to let down my barriers and share things about myself that I had never revealed to anyone. For instance, I told Priya that, like her, I was also interested in computers and thought of getting training in the future. I thought this would make it easier for her father to accept me as a son-in-law, but it was too soon to tell Priya that part. We hadn't discussed anything like marriage yet. But I did open up about my feelings for her.





I just told her the same stuff the actor in the movie had said to the female lead, things like how beautiful she was and how she filled his world full of color. I wasn't lying when I said it. I only borrowed the lines because I wasn't good at putting my thoughts into words. Priya was class and I knew you had to treat girls like that with extra special attention.



I knew I had impressed her when she said she wished we could go out on a date like couples did in the west. She said she was going to watch for an opportunity for us to meet in private. I didn't see how that was going to happen any time soon, with her parents always watching her every move. But then one day, we got our lucky break.

It's perfect, Ajay! Amma has to go see her heart specialist in Kolkata and Mummy is taking her. Papa is away on a business trip, and they couldn't get anyone to house-sit last minute. So it's just me and the servants.



I'll tell them at our house that I'm staying the night at Amma's, and I'll tell them at Amma's that I'm sleeping over at our house. Isn't it clever? We can finally meet somewhere, only it has to be very private because we can't be seen together.

Everything went according to plan. I told Dad I wanted to take the motorbike for a spin and he was okay with that. Priya got the key to the back gate and met me there. I almost laughed at her effort to disguise herself. She was wearing dark sunglasses..at night.





There was only one place I knew of where you could be private without any people around, but it was a bit morbid for a rendezvous. I mean, what girl would think the woods next to a church cemetery would make a great date setting? I hesitated to suggest the idea to Priya, but as usual, she surprised me. She said she thought it was a cool idea. She seemed game for anything that was new to her, like riding on the back of a motorcycle, which she said she'd never done before. She kept urging me to go faster. So we drove through town at a clip way too fast for safety, but just right to please the little daredevil holding me tightly by the waist, and laughing as the wind whistled by.



We found a secluded spot under some trees and settled down on a dry patch of leaves. Priya had brought along a couple of glasses and half a bottle of cognac from her father's liquor cabinet, claiming he wouldn't miss it among all the other bottles of booze he owned. She said it was very expensive and tasted wonderful in coffee. I liked it. I'd never had it before. As we were talking, we kept filling up our glasses until it was all gone. By that time Priya was pretty high and I was feeling good too. I couldn't stop looking at her, she was so beautiful and sexy-looking. I wanted to kiss her, and that desire became stronger and stronger as the evening wore on.





Ajay, when you look at me that way ..you remind me of a hungry wolf... waiting to gobble me up.

I AM hungry, Priya... so hungry, I can hardly stand it.



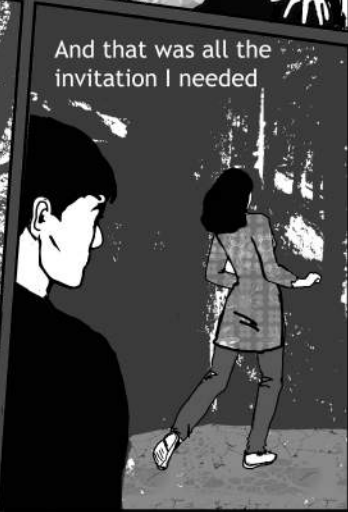
Uh... this isn't going to get ugly, is it?

She looked startled and a bit uneasy when I told her that.



C'mon, Priya! I don't do date rape! If we play, it's because we both want to.

Good. I like to play...but you'll have to catch me first.



And that was all the invitation I needed





You can run, Priya,  
but you can't hide.



Told you.

EEEK!



Gotcha!



You can't  
escape me.

Only because  
I'm not trying to.





Hey Dad.  
Yeah...uh..I'm at the ...  
the cemetary.

Just wanted to be  
private...you know.  
to think...

Mom's grave?  
yeah..sure, that's  
why I came.

No. I 'll  
be home soon.  
Yeah.

Sorry about that.  
That was the parent checking up on me.  
I guess I should take you home.



Couldn't we stay a little longer, Ajay? We were just starting to have fun.

I should have taken her home. Dad's call had acted as a reminder to do the right thing, but she was so tempting sitting there, that the small voice of conscience didn't stand a chance.



So I turned off my cell and then one thing....



...just led to another.



I love you Ajay.



Those words were the green light I was hoping for. We were on the brink...I mean, I was almost there...





We have to stop, Ajay.



What for?



My marriage night. I have to stay pure til then. A husband expects that.



Well, I don't.

But my husband most probably will.



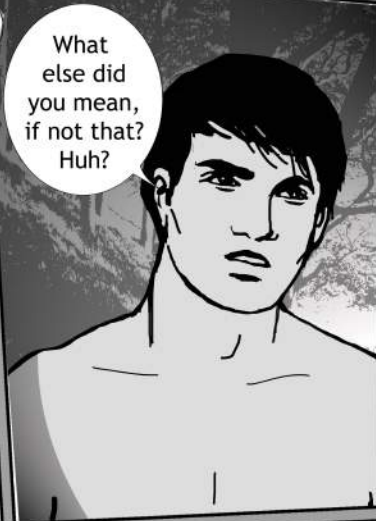
Well, since it's me you're gonna marry, what's the difference if we do it now or later?



What are you talking about, Ajay? Where did you get the idea that we were getting married?



I assumed it when you were moaning in my ear and telling me you loved me.



What else did you mean, if not that? Huh?



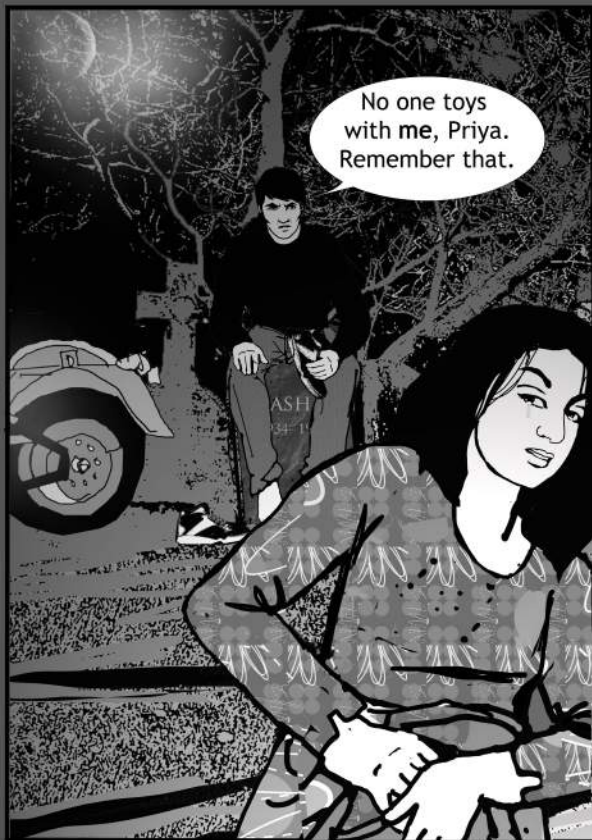
I just meant I like you..a lot...but marriage? How could you even think that?



What are you playing at, Priya? What were all those emails and phone calls about? Why this secret meeting, if you're not interested in me?!

Of course I'm interested in you! As a **BOYFRIEND!** Not a husband!







I was so pissed off I kept my words to a minimum so I wouldn't say something I'd regret later.

Get on.



After dropping Priya off at her place, I stopped at the local liquor store for a beer. I didn't feel like going home yet. I needed to cool off first. I was on my third cigarette before I was calm enough to wrap my mind around what was going on inside me. Priya's rejection had stung my pride, that was a given, but I was also angry at myself...angry and also scared...



...scared that I'd screwed things up...that I'd lose Priya..not just because she was beautiful and I desired her, but because she was the gateway to my dream of making something of my life. I was petrified that I might lose what might be my one and only big chance. I had obviously misjudged her. I'd gone too fast...come on too strong. I would have to fix things ...and soon.

Over the next few weeks I tried calling Priya's cell but she wouldn't pick up.

I wrote several emails apologizing for my behavior, but they also went unanswered.



All I could think of was Priya and getting back with her...



...but her lack of response made me suspicious that she was wanting to call it quits.

Still, I couldn't just let go, not knowing for sure.

Then one day at work I got a jolt.





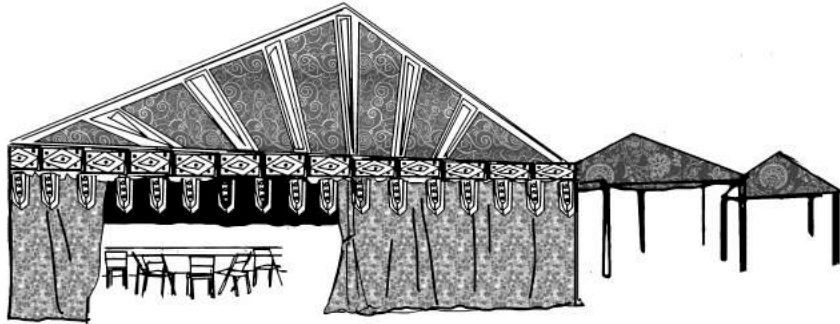


He was right! I recognized Gupta's phone number in the ad. Priya's folks were putting her on the marriage mart! There was no time to lose. I had to persuade Priya to run away with me. Once we were married...maybe in some other state.. her parents would have to resign themselves to the fact. But how to convince Priya?!



Chapter 4

# WEDDING



Agarawal's shop was a busy place. This was due to the coming wedding season which was typically from November to March. It was only September but most Indian weddings required a great deal of preliminary planning, such as placement of matrimonial ads, seeking out astrologers and matchmakers, rental of halls, purchasing sarees, jewelry, flowers, and a host of other tasks and activities deemed necessary for a Hindu wedding celebration. The next few months would see many frenetic shoppers visiting the various businesses on the street. I had been hired for the summer only, but I asked Agarawal if I could stay on as his assistant for a bit longer. He had been quick to grant my request. Dad had been resistant, once more pushing me to start Bible School in the fall, but I'd stood firm and he had reluctantly backed off...for the time being at least. My purpose for keeping my job was to enable contact with Priya in some way. Every day I waited for my chance. She had blocked my cell number, and since all my emails came back undelivered, I knew she had blocked my email address as well. That angered me but there was little I could do about it except wait to meet her face to face when she made an appearance in town. It was unlikely that she would ever visit Agarawal's store, but because it was in the better part of town where all the best shops were, she was bound to show up some time. I had taken to watching the street from the front step whenever there were no customers demanding my attention. Then one day I saw a familiar car pull up at the saree shop across the street and I recognized Priya and her grandmother as they got out.



I lost no time in scribbling a note to Priya. I wasn't concerned about diplomacy at this point. I just wanted to get a message to her. It may have sounded a bit forceful, but that couldn't be helped. I had a limited time frame to work with. I figured she and her grandmother would be in the saree shop for a short while before moving on, so I had to get it to her while they were still there. I wasn't sure how to proceed exactly but I figured an idea would come to me on the way over there.

I wrote another notice on a larger piece of paper to hang on the door of Agarawal's shop to cover for the time I was away. I could always tell Agarawal that I'd had to use the latrine in the back alley if he questioned me on it later.



Both Priya and her grandmother were in deep discussion with the saree shop owner, so they didn't hear me enter the store, thereby giving me the advantage of surprise.

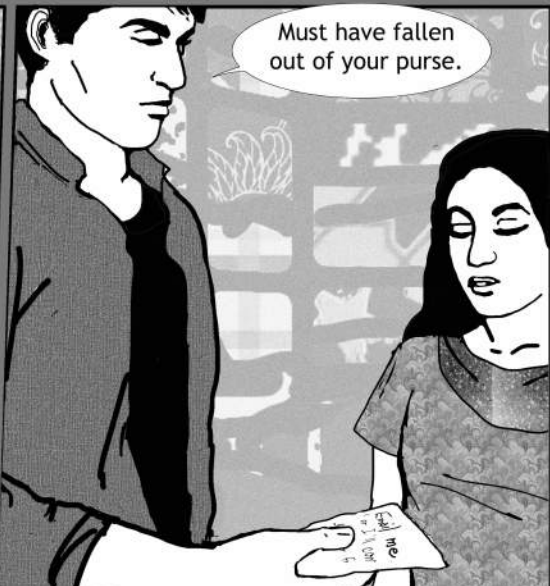




Excuse me, Miss.  
I think you dropped this.



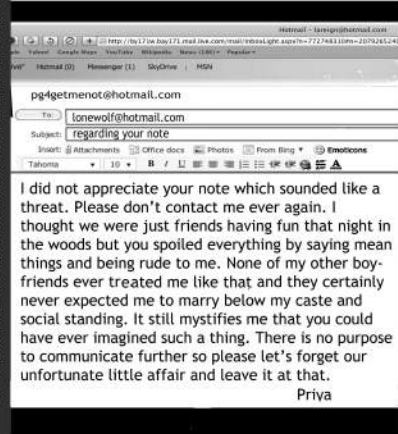
Huh?



Must have fallen  
out of your purse.



I was pretty sure Priya would contact me that same night. She had always been so concerned that no one ever see us together. She would definitely not want to risk having me show up on her doorstep. I knew I was forcing her hand, and she wouldn't like that, but I could see no other way. So when I went to Darsha's after work, I wasn't surprised to see her email waiting in my inbox...only her response wasn't at all what I'd hoped for.



Priya's words cut into me like a knife. She had played me for a fool and now she was making it sound like it was all my fault that things had ended badly. "Unfortunate little affair" she called it! That's all it was to her. I had warned her not to toy with me but it seemed she hadn't taken me seriously. She hadn't taken ANYTHING about our relationship seriously...but I would show her that she had made a big mistake.



Aw crap! My Dad WOULD have to show up at this moment when I was mad enough to spit nails!



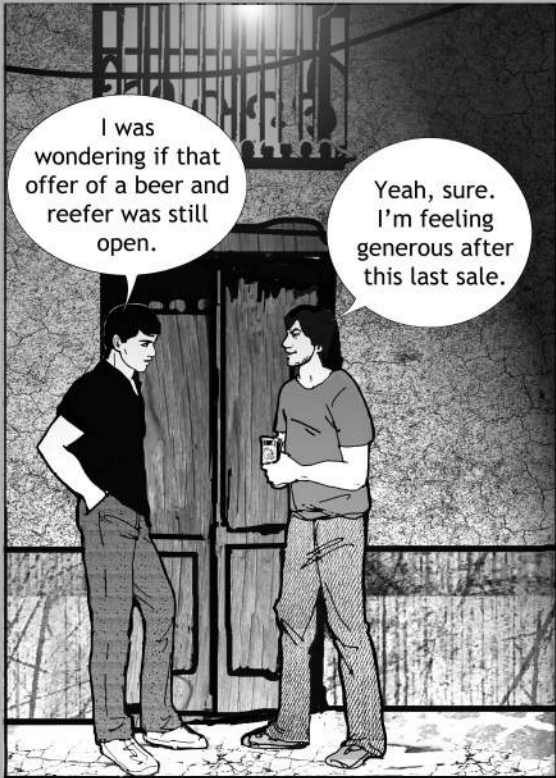
I'd have to brush him off and make some excuse for it later.



I felt like getting high. Plain and simple, my head was a mess and I needed some relief. Something was going on inside that I couldn't explain. I felt like a volcano about to erupt and the fear of losing control scared the heck out of me. Sanjit was the only guy I knew who used drugs so I headed towards his place. I found him talking with some guys in the alley outside his apartment.







I was totally stoned and it felt so good to have my head in another space. Nothing seemed heavy anymore.



With the Indian music playing in the background, I felt like I was in another world.. ..no...same world...only a whole lot better. Everything was more colorful, more alive, more 'real'. My troubles kind of floated away and I started to laugh out loud. I couldn't stop. It was all so freaking hilarious....

...for awhile anyway. The trouble with getting high is you have to come down eventually. Once the euphoria dissipates, you have to deal with the same crappy world you tried to escape. You still have to face the demons you were running from. Mine were staring me right in the face, figuratively speaking. Humiliation and embarrassment over Priya's rejection pointed mockingly at my naivety and presumption. I pictured Priya writing that email, disdain etched in every feature as she typed the words that would cut into my soul and shred my confidence. How could I have thought a guy like me, with the intelligence of a knot hole, could ever hope to marry a high-class girl like her? No wonder she couldn't fathom that kind of stupidity. I was such a loser!



Funny because I'd considered Sanjit a loser, and I still did. He cut a pathetic figure - living in squalor, unshaved, dirty, filling his mind with porn and getting drunk or stoned every chance he got. But maybe he and I were actually in the same camp. That possibility sure added to my misery, especially when I considered that he might be a step or two ahead of me in the game. After all, he lived his life without apology or compromise. He was what he was and he didn't hide it from anyone, whereas I lived the secret life of a hypocrite. I couldn't even be honest with Dad for fear I'd lose his acceptance. Man! What a resume! A loser. A coward. And a hypocrite. You couldn't get much lower than that.



I decided I'd had enough self-revelation for one night, as well as enough of Sanjit's company.

Sure you don't wanna watch this porn flick? It's a sizzler.

Maybe some other time.



Well, drop by whenever. I'm here til the end of the month when I do my run to Kolkata. If you need any dope, I'll give you a good deal. Weed, hash, you name it. I can get it.



I was glad to get out of there, especially as the drugs were wearing off anyway.

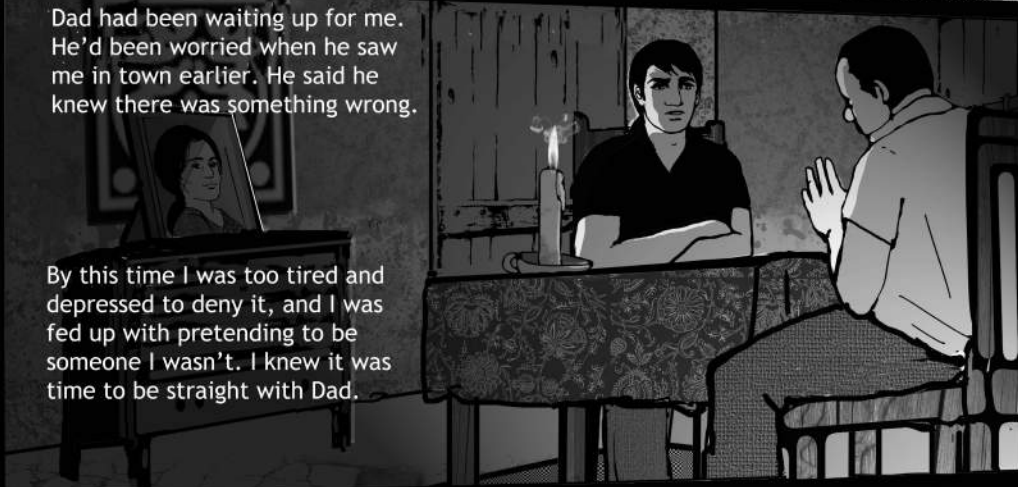




On the way home a power cut plunged the town into darkness. The electric companies regularly rolled back power when the system was overwhelmed and supply couldn't meet the needs of a particular area. It was a real nuisance but because it was very late most everyone was asleep anyway. I had to walk back home by the light of the moon.



I was surprised when I saw the candle through the window.

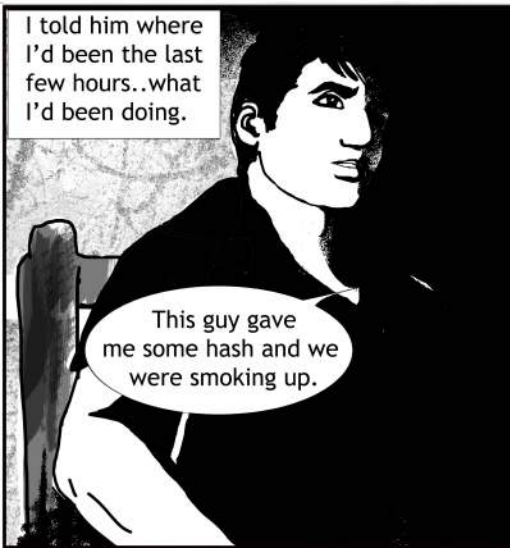


Dad had been waiting up for me. He'd been worried when he saw me in town earlier. He said he knew there was something wrong.

By this time I was too tired and depressed to deny it, and I was fed up with pretending to be someone I wasn't. I knew it was time to be straight with Dad.

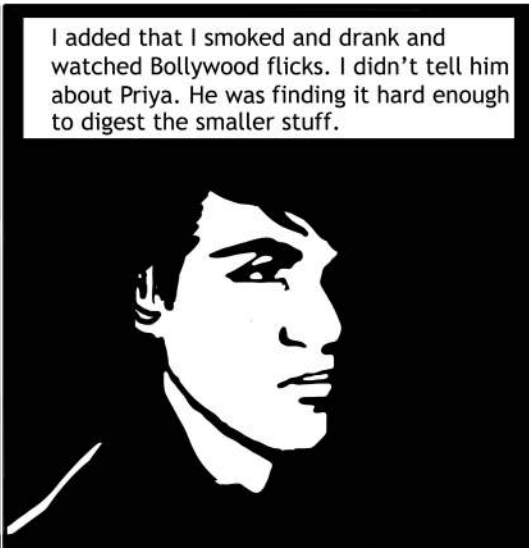


Actually, Dad, there is something wrong...I should have told you before. I've been meaning to... but I didn't know how to go about it. I didn't want to disappoint you.



I told him where I'd been the last few hours..what I'd been doing.

This guy gave me some hash and we were smoking up.



I added that I smoked and drank and watched Bollywood flicks. I didn't tell him about Priya. He was finding it hard enough to digest the smaller stuff.



I'm not who you think I am, Dad. My life has been a lie for a very long time now and I don't want to pretend anymore.

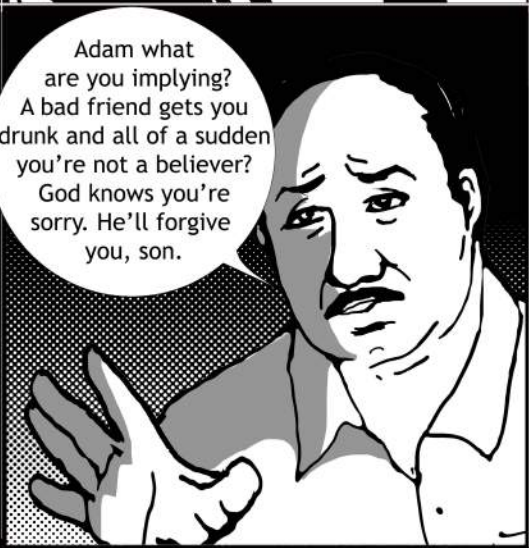


But you're a Christian, Adam. Surely you know what you're doing is wrong.



Maybe for you. Maybe for a Christian..

..which I'm not.



Adam what are you implying? A bad friend gets you drunk and all of a sudden you're not a believer? God knows you're sorry. He'll forgive you, son.



No Dad. That's not...  
I didn't say ...(sigh)...  
You're not getting it, Dad.



I could see that if I was going to make  
him understand, I'd have to be blunt.

Remember that  
time when we were  
talking beside Mom's  
grave....



...You told a story  
about a wolf being tracked  
by a big dog...and a guy  
called Francis...  
...and we prayed  
together and I said I was  
sorry for the bad things I was  
doing...?




Of course  
I remember!  
That was the night  
you became a  
Christian.  
It was one  
of the happiest  
moments of  
my life.




But it  
wasn't real,  
Dad.






I didn't really believe all that stuff you told me.




I just went along with things.




I'm not saying I don't think He exists.. I just don't see Him like you do...all loving and powerful...

In all honesty, Dad, I don't even want Him in my life. I've been doing all that Christian stuff...

..for you.



Not for me. Not because I wanted to.



It was all a sham.

Dad was visibly shaken by what I was telling him. A lot of his assumptions were being shattered.

This is hard to hear, Adam.  
Very hard.

I knew you struggled  
in your faith sometimes...  
but many Christians do.

Trials of faith aren't  
unusual. But what you're  
saying is different.

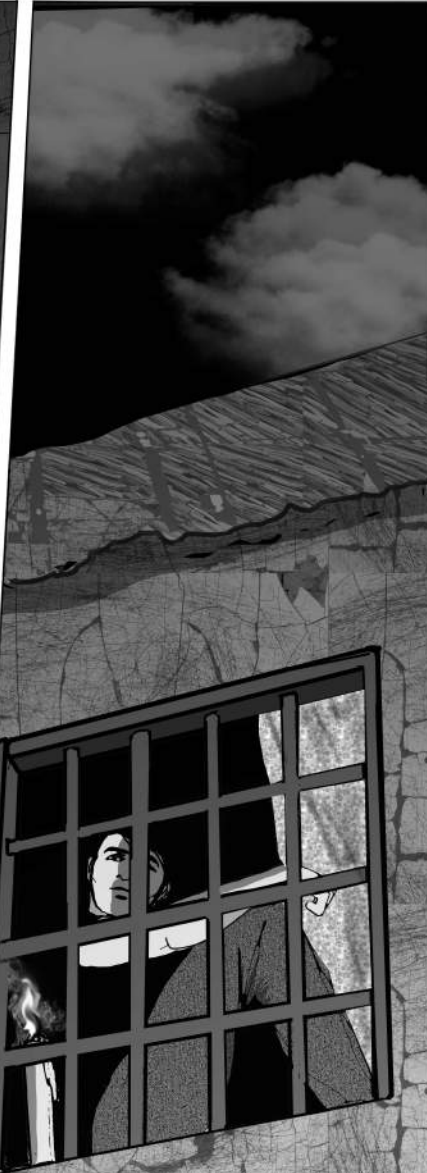
To not have faith  
in God ...when you've  
been brought up in the  
church...to reject all that...  
and...and I had so many  
dreams for you...

Ah Adam! I don't know what  
to think right now.

I don't know  
what to say to you.

He left the room without  
saying another word.

I sat alone for awhile, wondering if I should have kept quiet and just let things lie. It was too late now though. What was done was done, and although I regretted making Dad unhappy, I felt a sense of relief that I'd been upfront with him and hadn't acted the coward.



Everything tonight - Priya's email, the downer while at Sanjit's, the talk with Dad - all of it had scraped me to the bone. I felt raw inside, and naked too. I'd learned more about myself in one day than I had in the last 19 years, and a lot of it had been hard to swallow. But in the process I'd broken free in some way. And that I didn't regret at all.

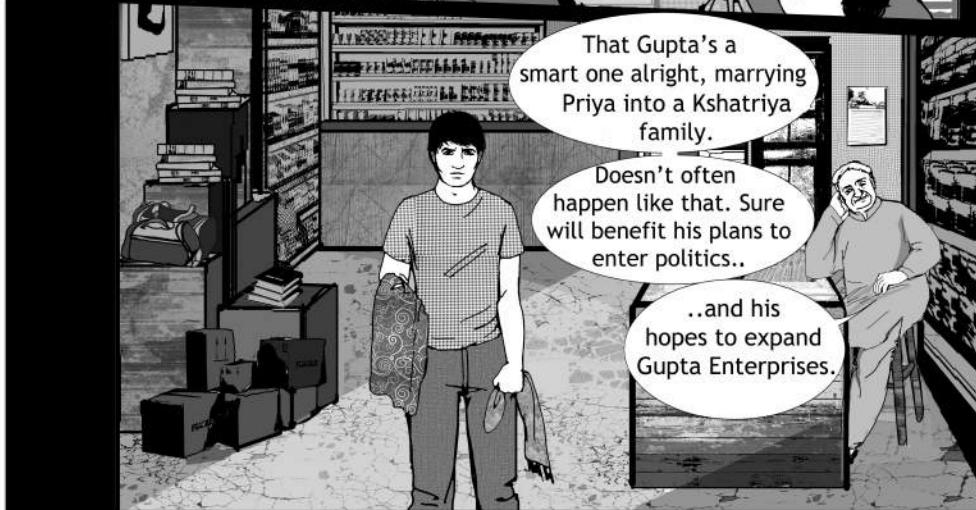
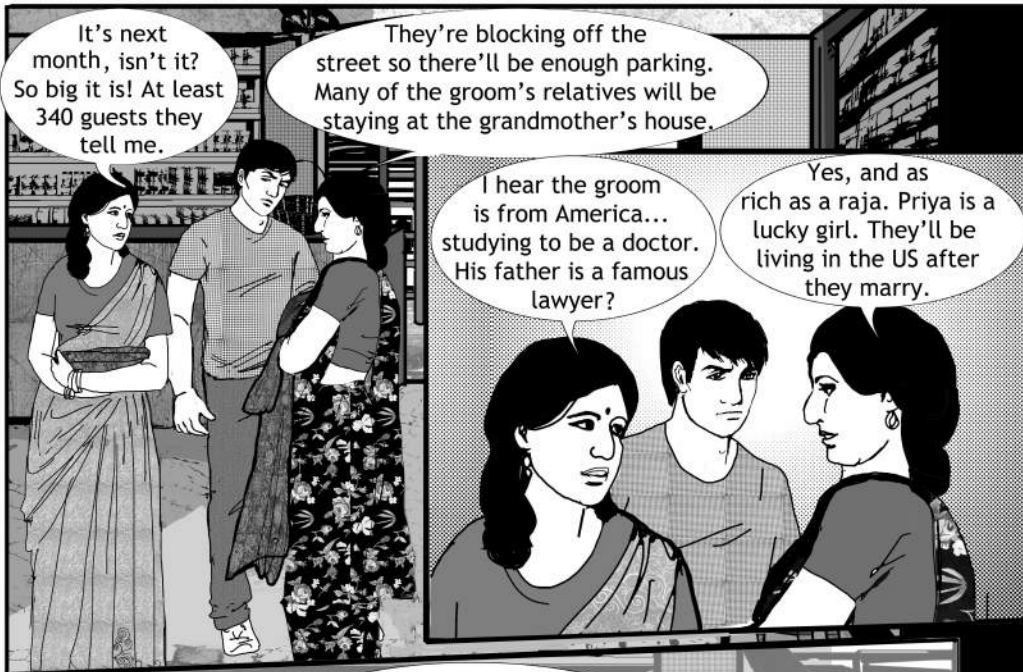




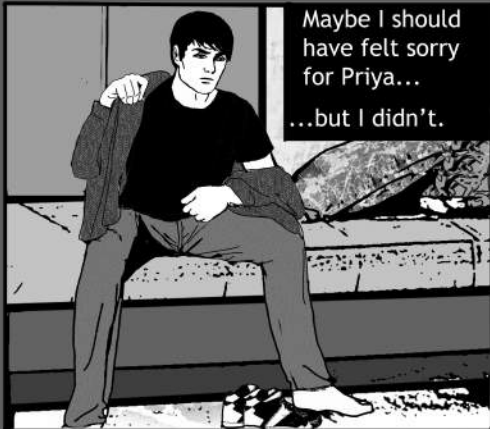
Things changed between Dad and me after that night. We were both awkward around each other and our conversations were stiff and constrained. We had never shared many interests in common in the first place, but now that Dad realized our values and beliefs were widely divergent, there was even less to talk about. Amma knew there was a problem and she would look on helplessly as we muddled through each day trying to relate to one another. But it was no use. We were drifting further apart and we both knew it, even though neither of us wanted it that way. I began to look forward to Sundays when Dad and Amma left for church and I had the house all to myself. I never went to church with them now and they didn't seem to expect it. I could spend the day listening to Indian pop music, watch endless reruns of *The Terminator* on TV, or just lounge about with no one to tell me what I could or couldn't do. This was how I wanted to live all the time. I began to think of ways I could make that happen.

Most Indian kids live with their parents, even after they get married and have kids of their own, but that wasn't for me. I planned to get a place of my own as soon as I found a better paying job. Then I could come and go as I pleased without having to answer to anyone. I thought I might even get married some day, but not for a good long while - not until I could get past the fiasco with Priya. I was trying to put that behind me and I thought I had almost succeeded until that day at Agarawal's.





Agarawal's words reminded me that Priya's marriage was fundamentally a contract between families, somewhat like a business merger where the assets of each party are weighed and assessed to determine what mutual benefits can accrue from a union. Agarawal suggested that Priya was a pawn to her father's business and political aspirations. That wouldn't be unusual. It happened all the time. Arranged marriages weren't entered into because of love or romance. If love came after the wedding, you were lucky, but there was no guarantee that it ever would, and divorce was out of the question.

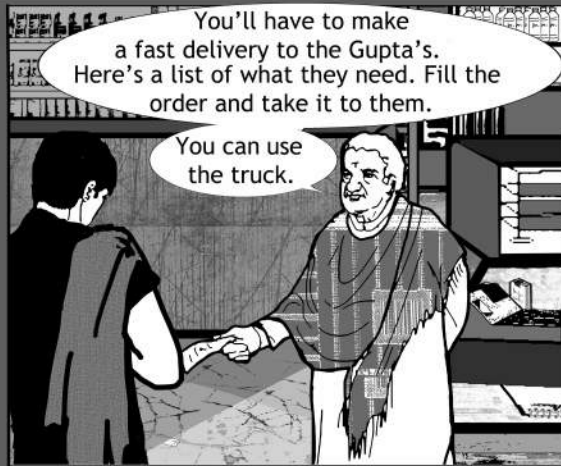


Maybe I should have felt sorry for Priya...  
...but I didn't.

I figured she had it coming for playing games with guys like me. I hoped she never found love and romance in her marriage. Maybe then she'd know what it felt like to be rejected. Over the next few weeks my anger and resentment simmered into a slow boil.



I was in a particularly black mood on the day of the wedding as I mulled over past wounds on my way to work. Then as I entered Agarawal's, the unthinkable happened.

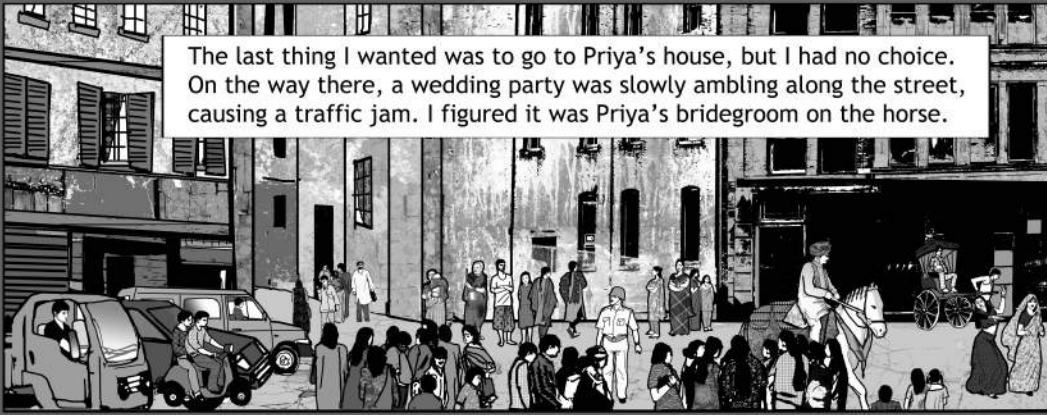


You'll have to make a fast delivery to the Gupta's. Here's a list of what they need. Fill the order and take it to them.

You can use the truck.



The last thing I wanted was to go to Priya's house, but I had no choice. On the way there, a wedding party was slowly ambling along the street, causing a traffic jam. I figured it was Priya's bridegroom on the horse.



I was curious to see what the guy looked like.



Hindu bridegrooms often ride a white horse to their wedding, accompanied by an entourage of drummers, musicians, and well-wishers. Members of his family follow along, laughing and clapping, as was happening now. I wondered if Priya had even met him yet. If this was a traditional Hindu wedding, she may not have had more than one or two prior meetings with him. She would be marrying a total stranger, trusting her parents to have made a wise choice for her. Yet knowing Priya, I suspected that she had some say in the decision... although he didn't look like someone a spirited girl, with a head filled with romance, would pick. He was heavysset and short. A real doughboy...a rich, pampered doughboy who had the world at his fingertips.

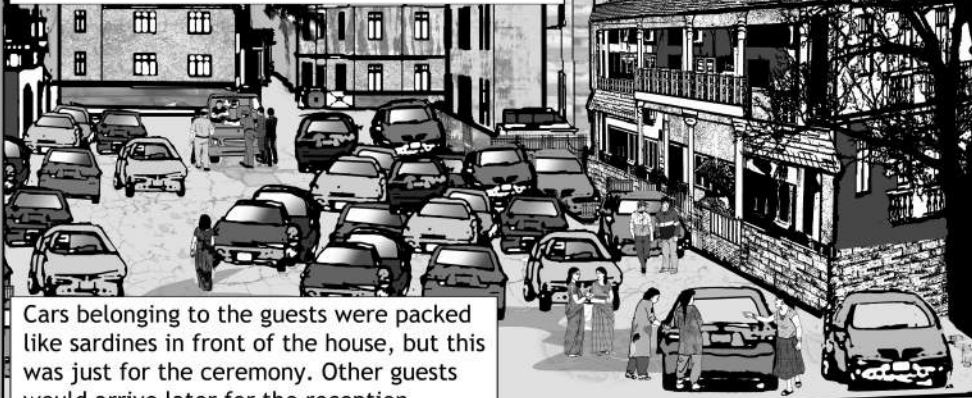
I had to get ahead of the wedding parade somehow or I'd never get the groceries to the house before the ceremony. Luckily I was able to turn around and make a detour down another street.



Gupta's street was blocked by security.



Only those invited to the wedding could get in, but I was allowed to pass when they saw that I was making a special delivery.

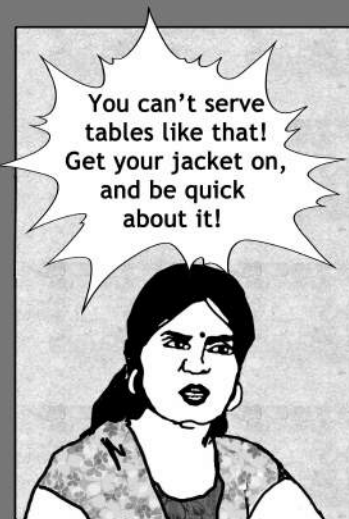
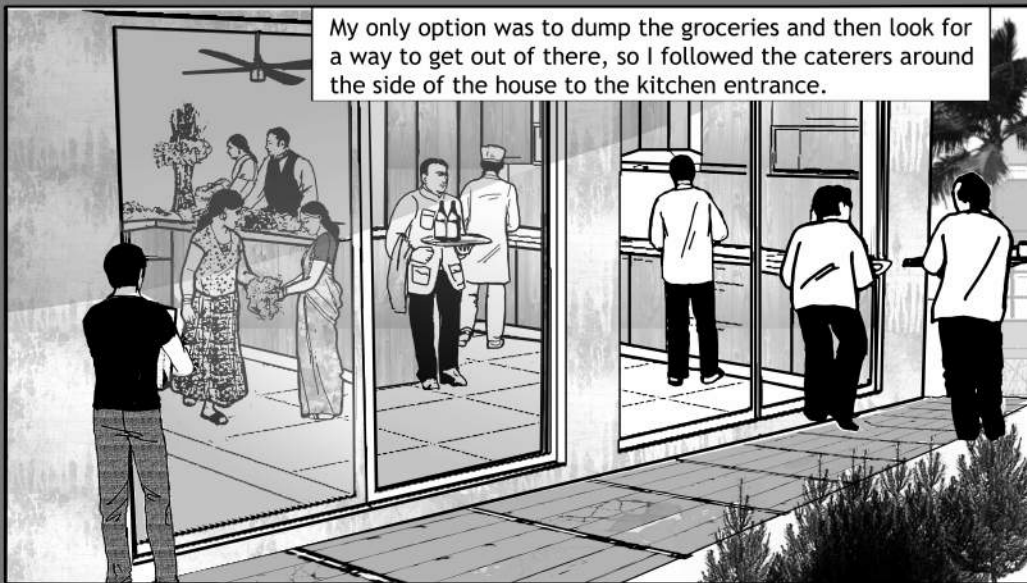
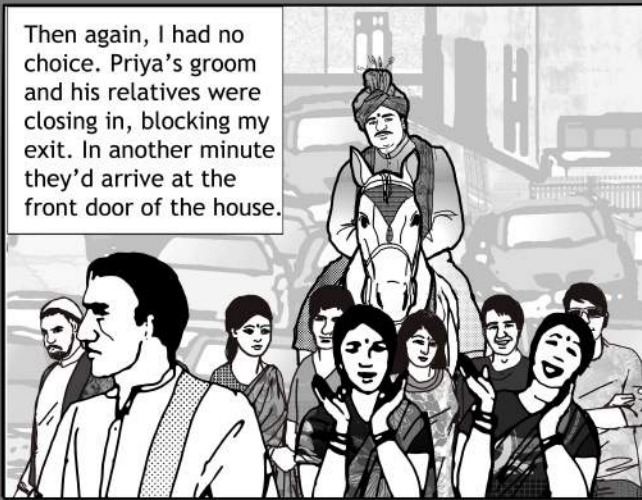
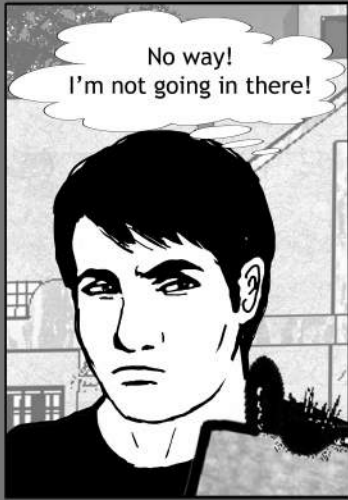


Cars belonging to the guests were packed like sardines in front of the house, but this was just for the ceremony. Other guests would arrive later for the reception.

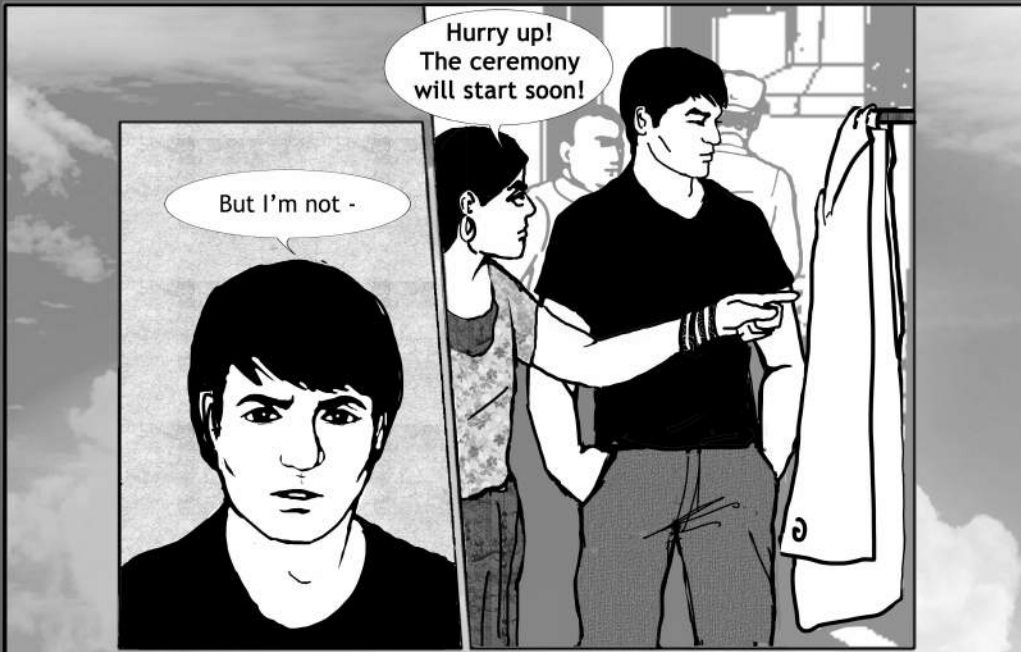
The catering crew came out to pick up the supplies.









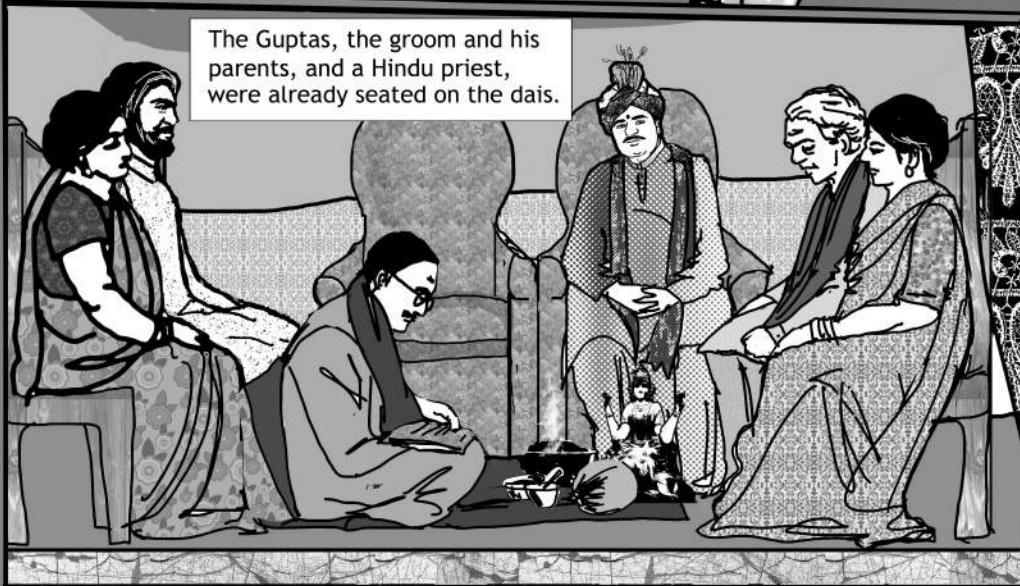
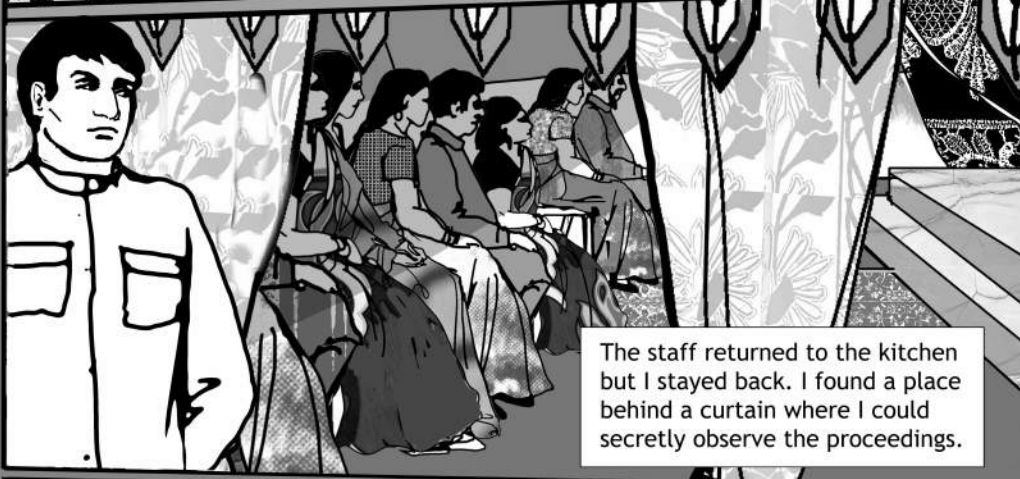
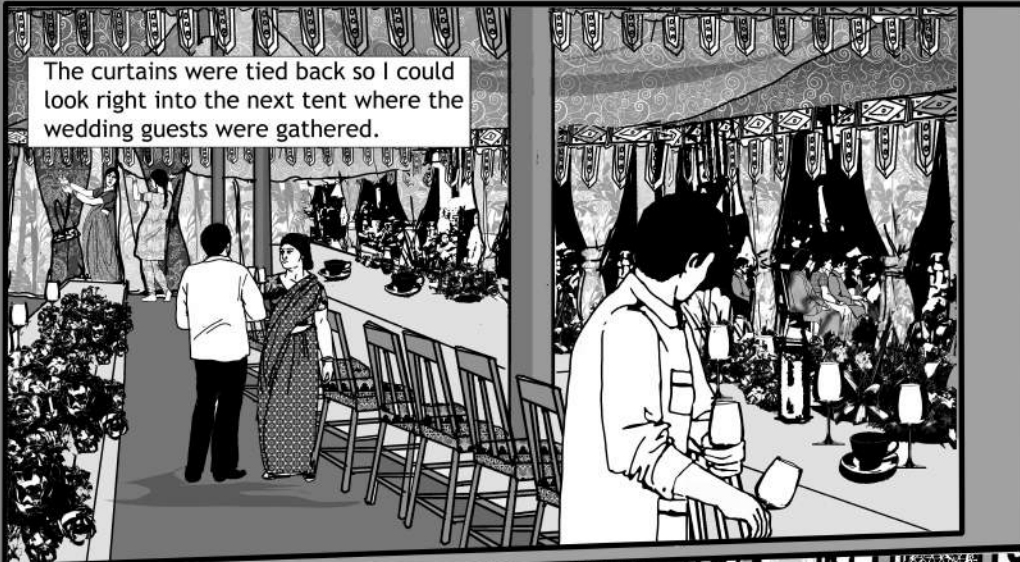


I don't know why I did what I did next. Maybe it was because I couldn't move the truck anyway, so there was no chance of an immediate exit. Maybe I wanted a glimpse of Priya. I don't know...but suddenly I found myself playing the part of a busboy!

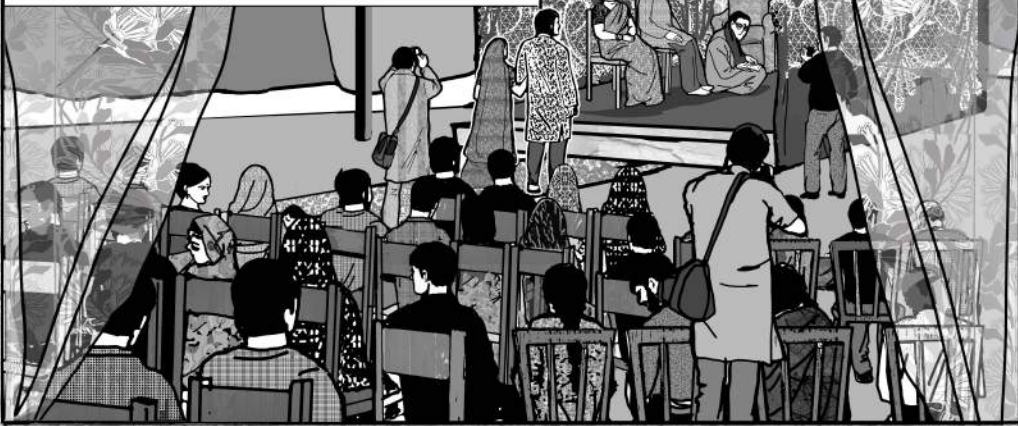


There were 2 tents - one for the ceremony and the other for the dinner reception.





The guests hushed as Priya made her entrance on the arm of her maternal uncle.

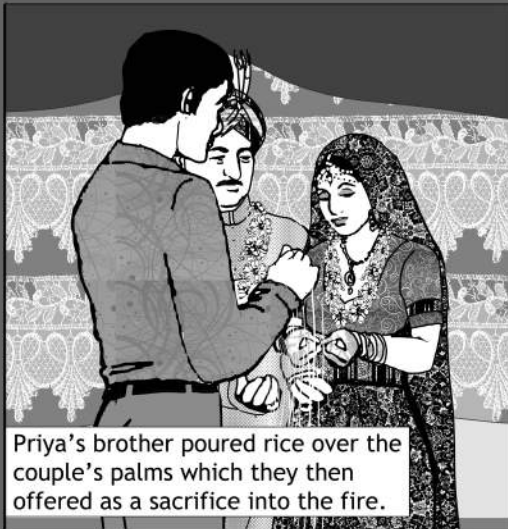


She looked incredible - just like Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess she was supposed to represent. The groom, however, didn't look anything like the pictures I'd seen of Vishnu.

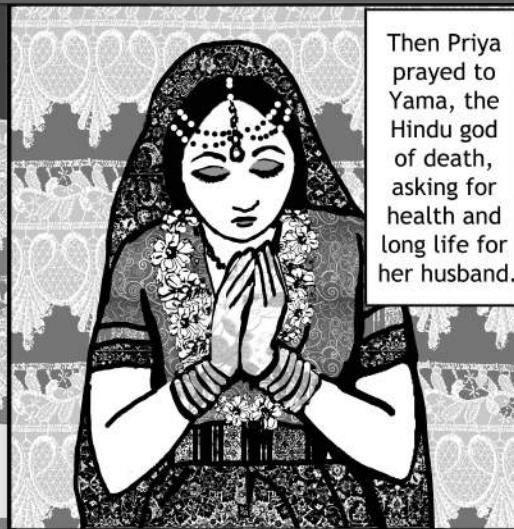


The bride and groom exchanged garlands and invoked Agni, the god of fire, to witness their union.





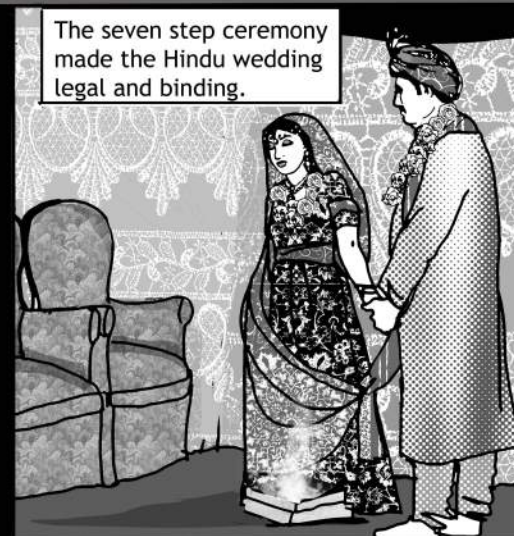
Priya's brother poured rice over the couple's palms which they then offered as a sacrifice into the fire.



Then Priya prayed to Yama, the Hindu god of death, asking for health and long life for her husband.



The priest tied Priya's saree to the groom's scarf and had them walk around the fire seven times, promising loyalty, fidelity, and steadfast love to one another. This act signified the beginning of their journey through life together. Their souls would be bonded in this life, and up to seven future reincarnations. Their families were also committed in this alliance which is why the parents were always included in Hindu weddings as important participants.



The seven step ceremony made the Hindu wedding legal and binding.



Priya's groom tied a mangalasutra around her neck. It's black beads supposedly had divine powers to protect from the evil eye.

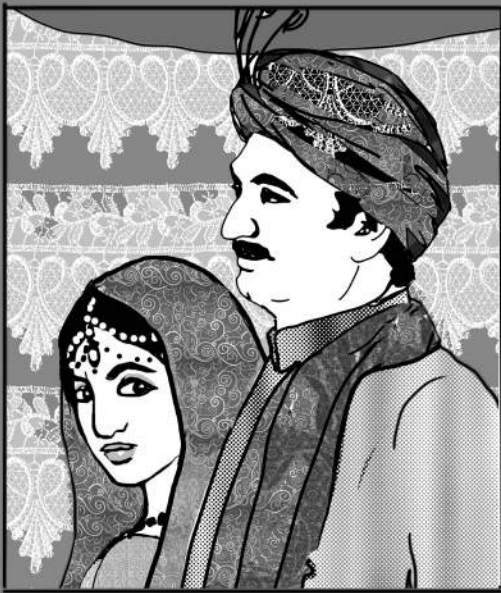


The ceremony ended with the priest's blessing.





I should have left right then. Seeing Priya all dolled up like some rani just made me want her all the more, and knowing I couldn't have her was killing me. The whole scenario was insane, but my brain was on fire and I couldn't seem to tamp down my emotions. So I kept feasting my eyes on her, seething with jealous rage whenever 'Doughboy' touched her. The intensity of what I was feeling must have projected to her, maybe some sixth sense picking up signals...because all of a sudden she turned in my direction and looked straight into my eyes!



My heart stood still as I watched her expression transition...



... from shock...to annoyance...to disdain.



I think I truly hated her at that moment.  
I wanted to wipe her from my mind and memory forever.



And I knew just where I'd begin.

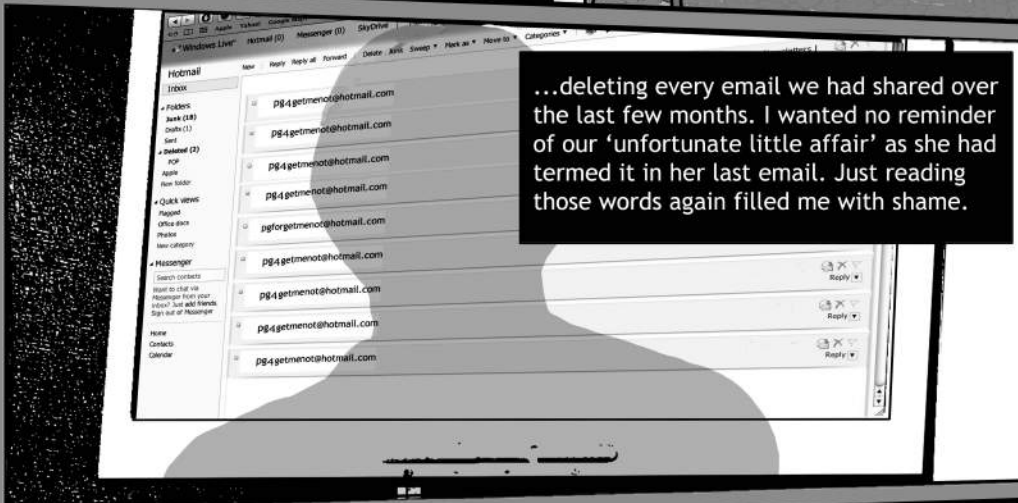




Which is why I ended up at Darsha's...



...in front of a computer...



...deleting every email we had shared over the last few months. I wanted no reminder of our 'unfortunate little affair' as she had termed it in her last email. Just reading those words again filled me with shame.



My hand rested over the mouse, finger poised to click the 'delete' key...when I had a thought.



Why Should Priya get away with making a fool out of me? Hadn't I warned her that no one toyed with me and got away with it? I had in my possession the perfect means to make her pay for her arrogance - and her father's too. I wasn't forgetting about *him*. I could get back at Gupta for giving Dad a dressing down in front of the villagers, and if he ever opened his mouth again, breathing threats against the church people... well, I could make some threats of my own. Going public with Priya's email would expose her loose morals, humiliate her in front of her husband and in-laws, and most likely impugn Gupta's reputation, thereby jeopardizing his business and political prospects. Appearance was everything in Indian society and any slur on a family's honor could bring disgrace and irreparable disrepute. Ha! I could bring them down with a flick of my finger! But for now, I wouldn't go completely public. I'd just give Gupta a warning of sorts and make things mighty uncomfortable for Priya. I felt powerful as I looked up Gupta's web site and found a contact email address. I typed in "wedding present" for the subject and then pressed the 'forward' option, sending Priya's email to her dad's address.



I felt good as I logged off...not one iota of remorse. Not then, at any rate. Of course I didn't know that I'd just set off a time bomb that would blow up in my face and cause my life to come crashing down all around me. For the moment though, revenge was sweet indeed.



Chapter 5

# BLOW-UP

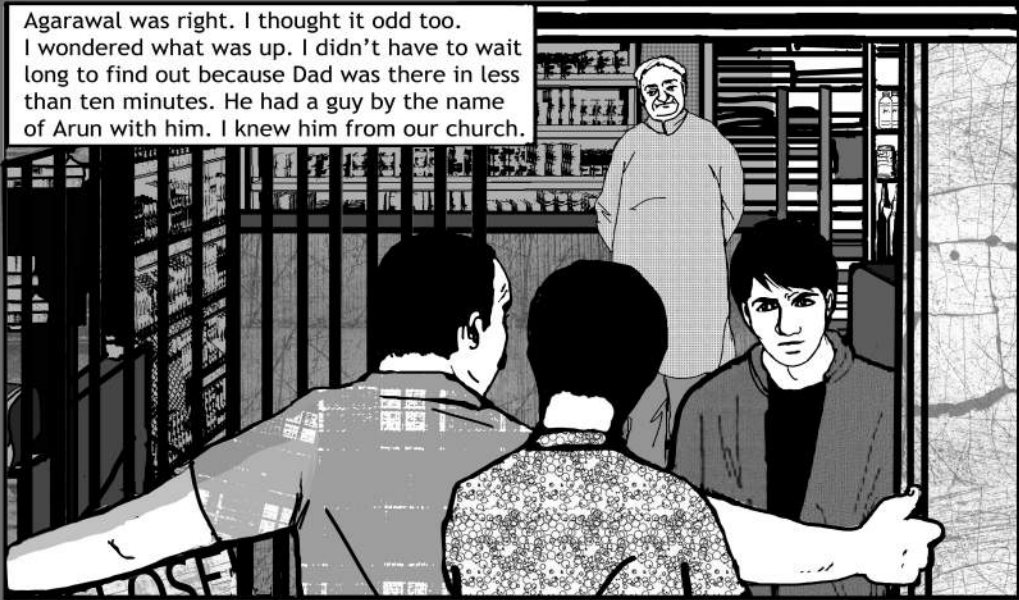




The next week passed without event and I was able to put Priya out of my mind. Somehow retaliating with that email had evened things up between the Guptas and me. I felt that now I could go on with my life, confidence restored and pride intact...only it wasn't to be.



Agarawal was right. I thought it odd too. I wondered what was up. I didn't have to wait long to find out because Dad was there in less than ten minutes. He had a guy by the name of Arun with him. I knew him from our church.



**ADAM!**  
Thank God you're still here!



You're in terrible trouble!



Man! He wasn't kidding! As we sat in Agarawal's back room, Arun commenced to tell us exactly what kind of trouble I was in. His story was so weird that I had a hard time believing it. It sounded like the plot from a gangster movie. I shouldn't have been surprised that Gupta was involved. From the little I knew of him, he could definitely be ruthless, but it still came as a shock to find out just how far he would go.

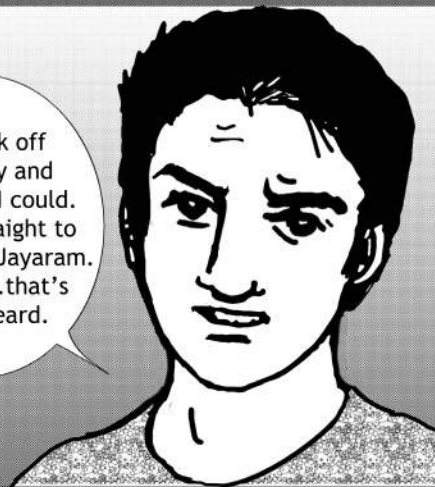
So like I told Pastor, I had just finished some carpentry work at Mr. Gupta's house and I wanted to present my bill. One of the servants directed me to Gupta's office upstairs but when I got there, I heard him talking to someone. The door was open a crack and every word was loud and clear. I was going to leave and come back later but just then he said Adam's name in a loud, angry voice, so I stayed in the hallway listening. After awhile I realized it was a one way conversation. He was telling someone on the phone that Adam had dishonored his name and he wanted him 'silenced'. He mentioned he'd pay 300,000 rupees once the 'job' was done.



At that point I could hear him pacing around the room and I was scared he'd come to the door and see me there.

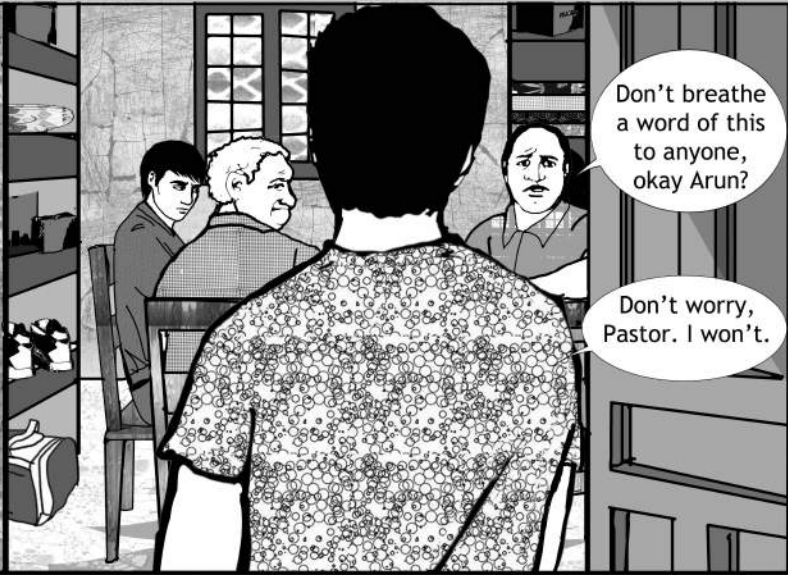


So I took off as quickly and quietly as I could. I came straight to you, Pastor Jayaram. And well...that's what I heard.





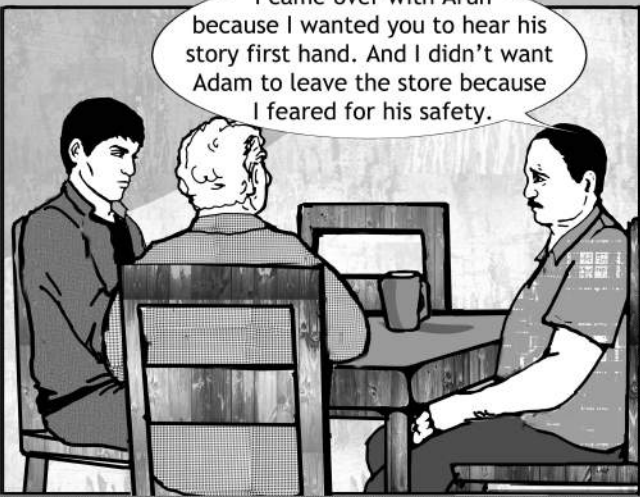
We were all silent for awhile. What do you say when you discover someone wants to kill you? It blows the mind. Was Gupta even serious? Arun seemed to think so. Dad did too by the sounds of it. He thanked Arun for coming to him right away and then he sent him home.



Don't breathe a word of this to anyone, okay Arun?

Don't worry, Pastor. I won't.

I came over with Arun because I wanted you to hear his story first hand. And I didn't want Adam to leave the store because I feared for his safety.

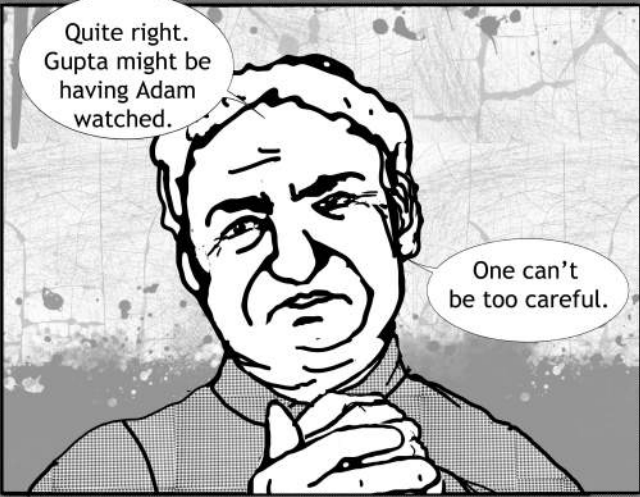


You don't think Arun might have been exaggerating, do you? I mean...it seems so far-fetched. I can't believe Gupta would actually put out a contract on me.



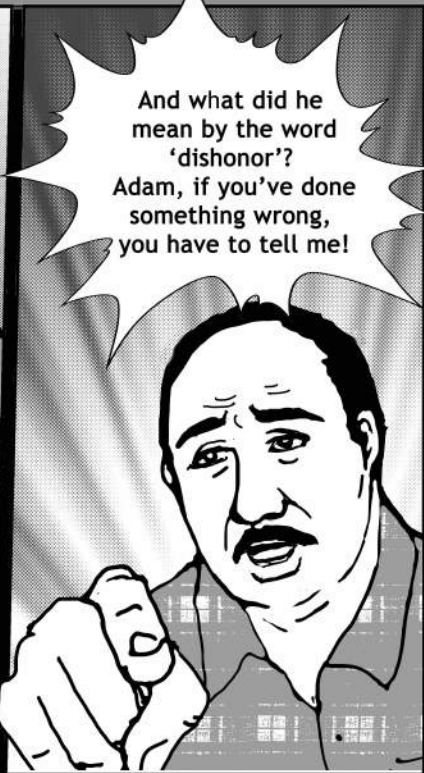
Quite right. Gupta might be having Adam watched.

One can't be too careful.





BUT IT SEEMS HE HAS, ADAM!



And what did he mean by the word 'dishonor'? Adam, if you've done something wrong, you have to tell me!



It has to be a mistake... why would he.. what could you have done to make him so angry?



It's a long story, Dad.

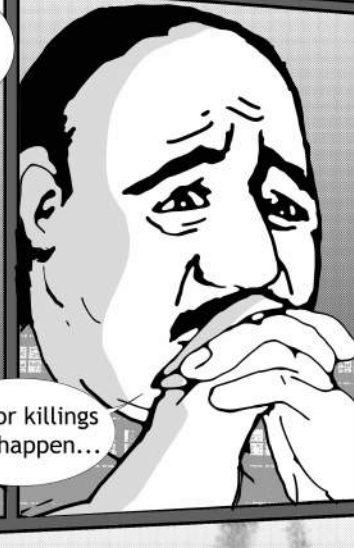
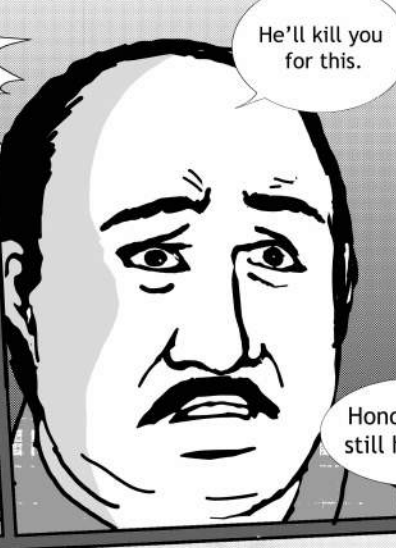


And we have all night, boy, so answer your father!



I had no choice really. I had to tell them about Priya, and our soured relationship, and the email her dad was so steamed about.

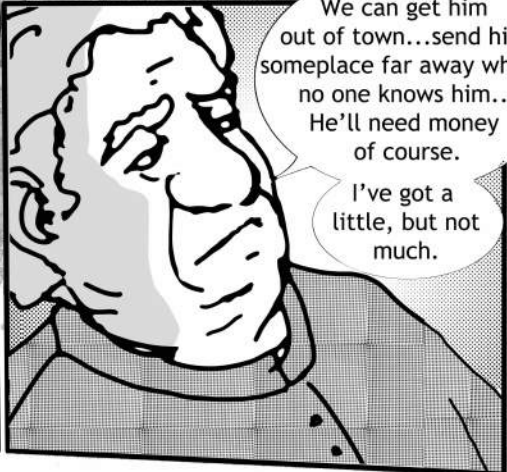
As I told my story, their faces registered increasing dismay. Until then I hadn't seen my actions as being so bad, but their horrified expressions made me reconsider...as did the outburst that followed.







Don't worry, David. You won't lose Adam. God will protect him. And it's not like we can't take measures of our own.



We can get him out of town...send him someplace far away where no one knows him... He'll need money of course.

I've got a little, but not much.



**THE BIBLE SCHOOL FUND!**

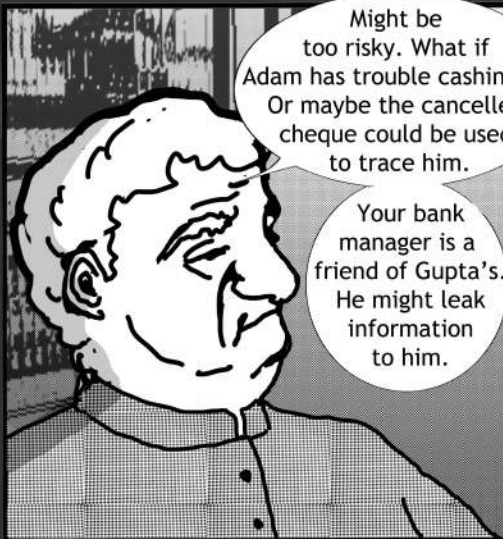
Years ago Rosa received an inheritance from her parents and we decided to put it into savings for Bible College for Adam. We can use that! I'll send him to Visag..I know the College dean there...I'll ask him to help Adam get settled. I'm sure he'll do it.

But can't I just give Adam the cash I have at the house and write a cheque for the rest? That's a lot of money to carry around loose like that.



You'll have to withdraw it from the bank as soon as possible then.



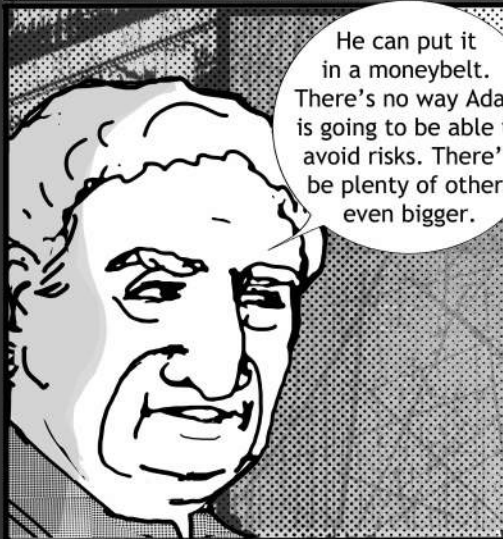


Might be too risky. What if Adam has trouble cashing it? Or maybe the cancelled cheque could be used to trace him.

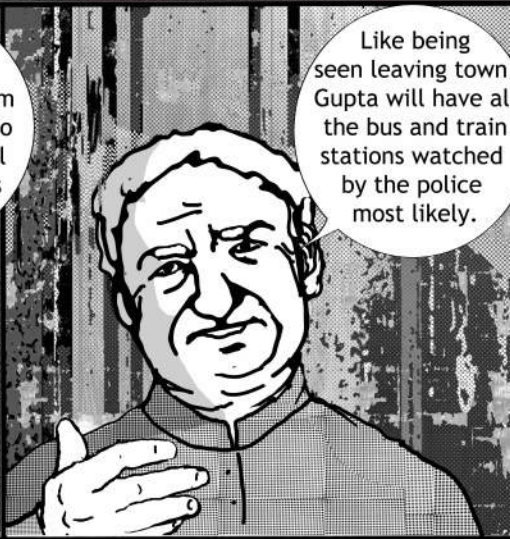
Your bank manager is a friend of Gupta's. He might leak information to him.



I hadn't thought of that. But carrying around 1500 American dollars seems risky too.



He can put it in a moneybelt. There's no way Adam is going to be able to avoid risks. There'll be plenty of others even bigger.



Like being seen leaving town. Gupta will have all the bus and train stations watched by the police most likely.



How to sneak him out of town... I just don't know.



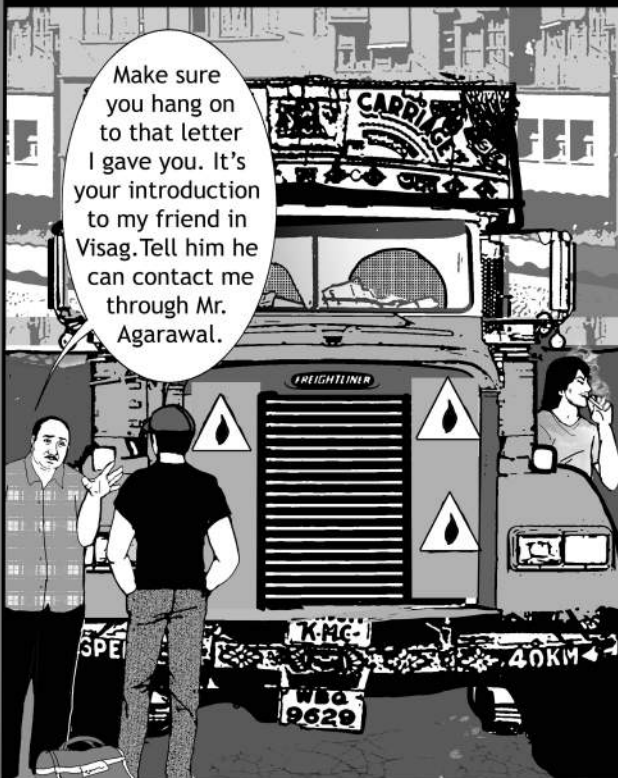
I think I do.



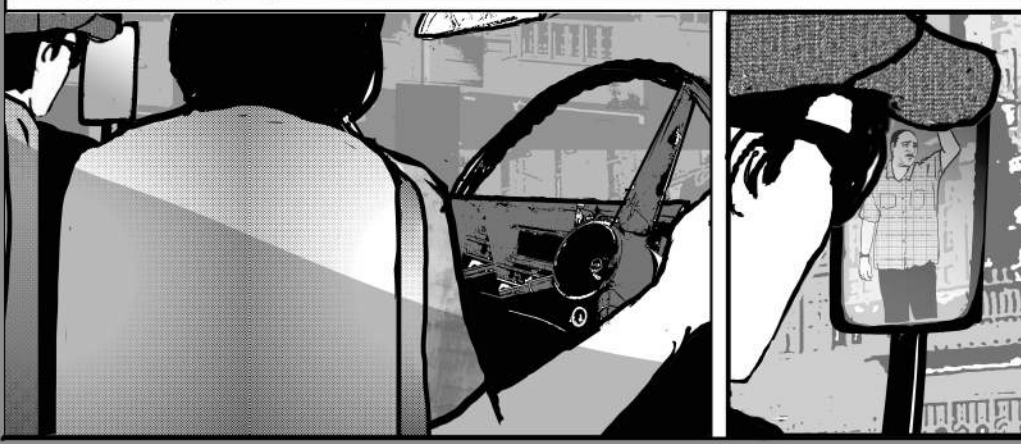
I called Sanjit that night and found out he was leaving for Kolkata next day. I offered him money to take me on as a passenger, and he was glad to do it. The plan was to get dropped off at the next town, from where I'd board a bus or train for Visag. Next morning Dad and I took a long, circuitous route by motorbike to the trucking company where Sanjit worked, hoping that we hadn't been followed by any of Gupta's goondas.



Dad had reservations about Sanjit and he wasn't happy about my traveling with him, even for a short while, but as there was no other option, he resigned himself to the idea. Saying good-bye was especially hard for him - and me too. We knew we wouldn't be seeing one another for a very long time until it was safe to do so.









As I watched Dad disappear from sight, I felt strangely ambivalent, the ache of separation warring with the excitement of starting a new adventure. I was looking forward to what lay ahead, but I was leaving behind everything that had been my life for the past 19 years, and I had no idea when I'd be able to return. But then the fact that I had fifteen hundred bucks at my disposal was pretty awesome, especially as Dad said I didn't have to use it for Bible College...which was just as well, since I had no mind to go that route.



It was a long way to the next town, so I used the time to make some plans.



Sanjit couldn't understand why I wanted to go to Visag instead of Kolkata, and I couldn't very well tell him there was a guy who wanted me dead, who also owned a business there. After hearing about all the parties and nightclubs however, I began to rationalize that maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea. What were the chances of running into Gupta in a city of over 14 million people?! At the very least, I could make a detour to Kolkata (a city I'd always wanted to visit) and then go to Visag later on if I wanted. I'd have to contact that friend of Dad's to let him know the change of plans, but it didn't have to be right away.

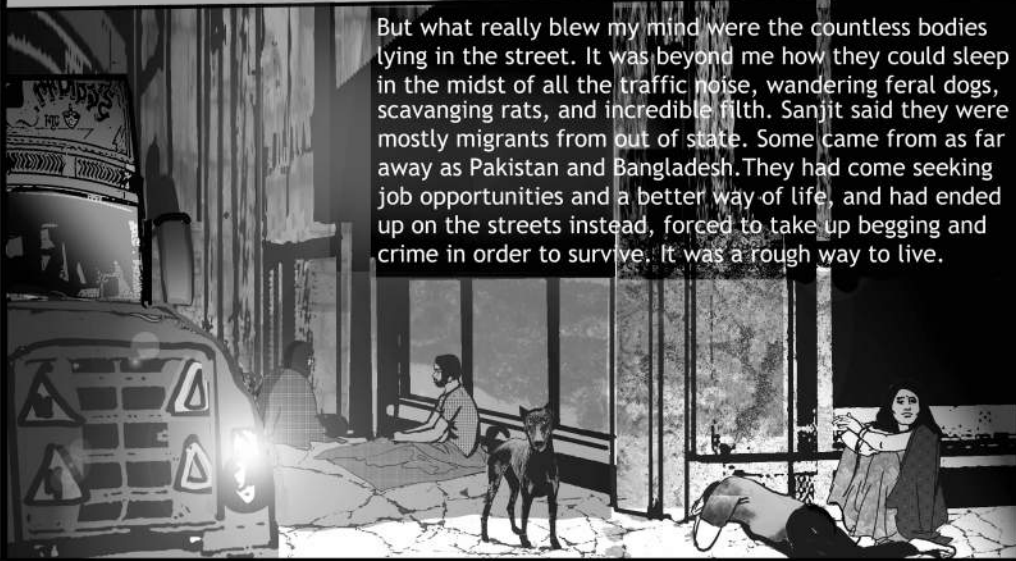




The first thing I noticed was the the thick, suffocating smog from all the coal fires.

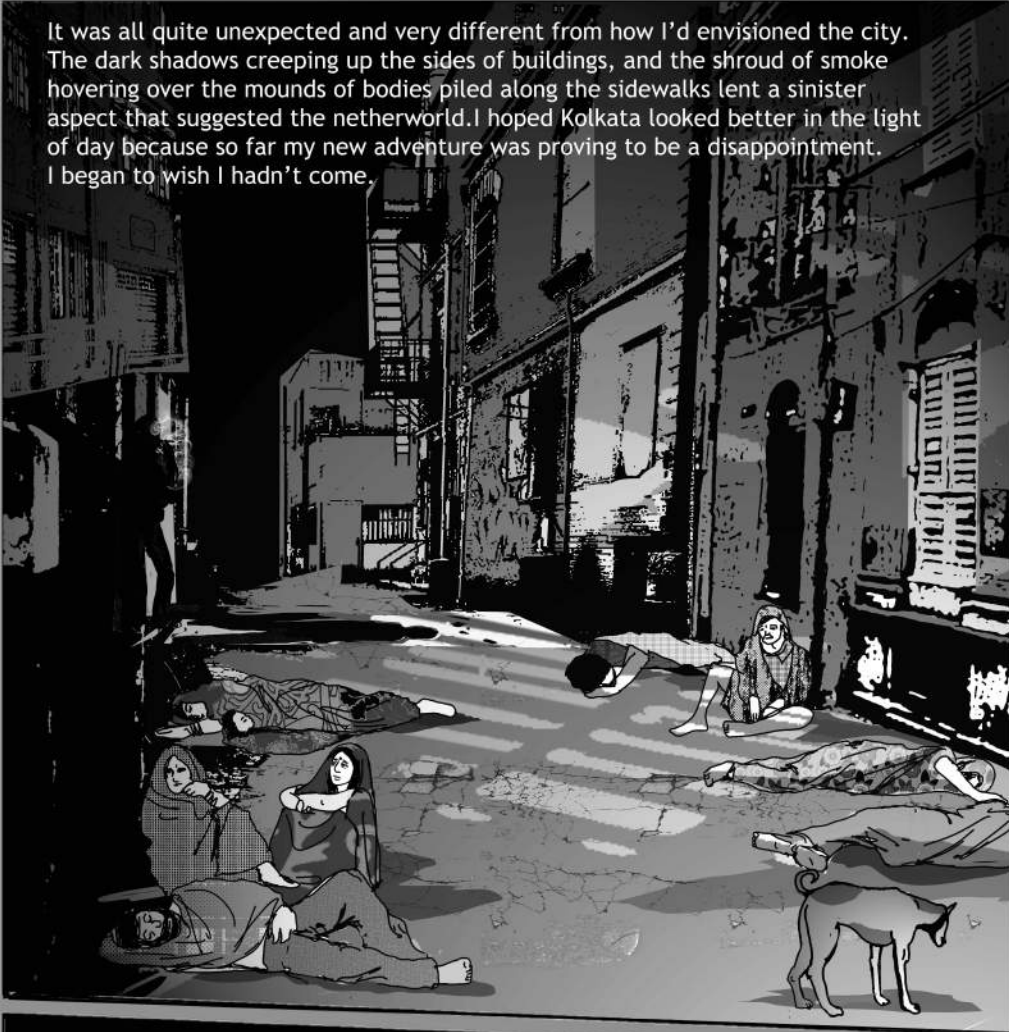


The sharp, acrid smells from rotting waste were impossible to ignore.



But what really blew my mind were the countless bodies lying in the street. It was beyond me how they could sleep in the midst of all the traffic noise, wandering feral dogs, scavenging rats, and incredible filth. Sanjit said they were mostly migrants from out of state. Some came from as far away as Pakistan and Bangladesh. They had come seeking job opportunities and a better way of life, and had ended up on the streets instead, forced to take up begging and crime in order to survive. It was a rough way to live.

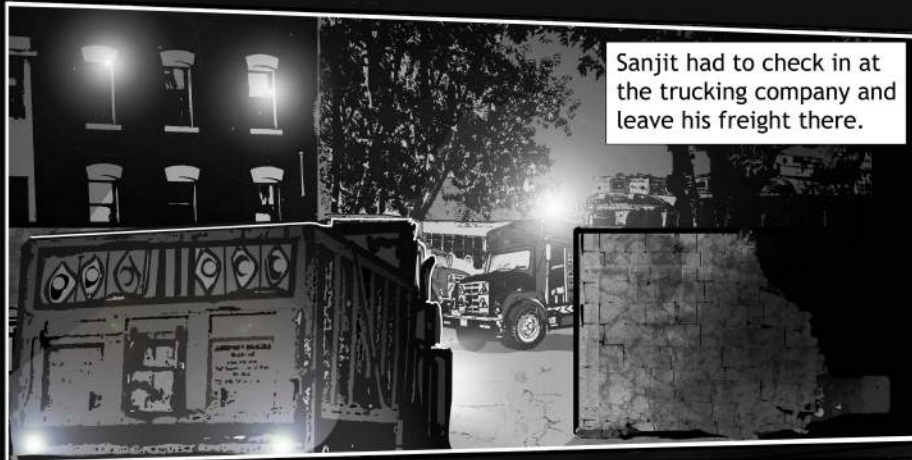
It was all quite unexpected and very different from how I'd envisioned the city. The dark shadows creeping up the sides of buildings, and the shroud of smoke hovering over the mounds of bodies piled along the sidewalks lent a sinister aspect that suggested the netherworld. I hoped Kolkata looked better in the light of day because so far my new adventure was proving to be a disappointment. I began to wish I hadn't come.



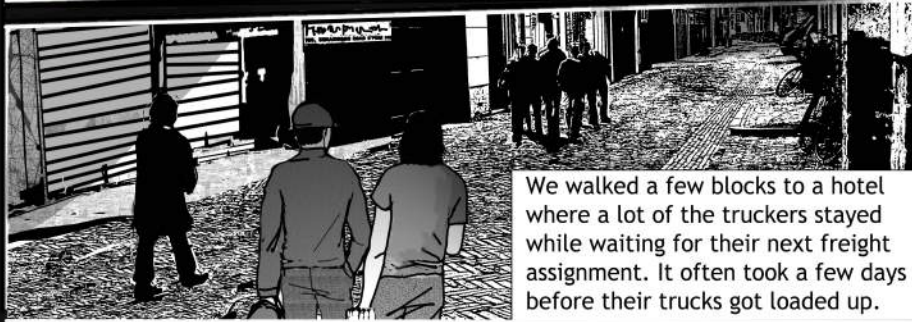
Man! Am I ever beat!  
Sure looking forward to  
crashing at the hotel.  
How far is it from here?

Not far,  
but I gotta park  
this rig first.





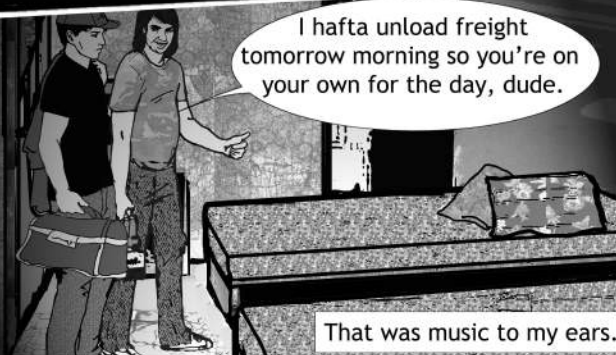
Sanjit had to check in at the trucking company and leave his freight there.



We walked a few blocks to a hotel where a lot of the truckers stayed while waiting for their next freight assignment. It often took a few days before their trucks got loaded up.



By this time Sanjit was getting on my nerves with his incessant chatter. All he ever talked about was booze, girls, and smoking up. It had been a real drag listening to that hour after hour on the road.



I hafta unload freight tomorrow morning so you're on your own for the day, dude.

That was music to my ears.



I awoke to the sound of a million blaring horns bombarding my ear drums. Unexplainedly a bubbling excitement welled up within me, an emotion at great odds with what I was feeling last night. I wondered if my earlier perceptions of Kolkata would be altered this day.



After eating breakfast at the hotel, I ventured out to explore my surroundings. I thought I'd hire an autorickshaw and get the driver to show me around.





Name's Satish.  
What's yours?

Uh...Ajay.

F%#@%!  
You stole  
my fare!

The kid was as good as his word. He bartered like a pro and got us a rickshaw for 200 rupees for the day.



There's New Market,  
where all the foreigners go for  
crafts and junk...

...or there's the British Raj  
stuff. You're Anglo, naw?  
I can tell by how you talk, and no  
fairness cream could get your skin  
that pale, so you had to have  
been born with it.

Bet you'd dig  
the Vicotoria Memorial  
and the Park Street  
Cemetery. Or we could  
just drive around til  
you see something  
interesting.



So what  
do you want  
to see first?



Satish was a great talker and over the next few hours I learned a lot about him. He told me he was fourteen, lived in a slum on the outskirts of the city with his widowed mother and 2 younger sisters, and worked for a guy named Sutar, running errands and doing odd jobs. He didn't seem to like his boss but the job paid well, and since he was the sole provider of his family, he had few other options. His dream was to drive an autorickshaw in a couple of years. You had to be 20 to drive commercially but he said his boss would help him get a falsified driver's license. I began to wonder about the kind of work Satish did for a living.

We passed by New Market but I decided against visiting it when Satish told me that a lot of thieves hung out there looking for foreigners and other rich shoppers to rob. I didn't want to take any risks with all the money I was carrying on me.



Kolkata had some Raja style buildings like the Oberoi Grand Hotel. Satish said he'd never been inside but he had heard it had a courtyard with palm trees, a great big pool, marble floors, and luxurious furniture. Only the very rich could afford to stay there.



We got out in front of the Victoria Memorial and followed a long path leading up to it. By this time I was beginning to appreciate the charm and fascinating character of this city.







The inside of the memorial was filled with opulent furnishings, art figurines, old paintings, and exotic artificats from the last century. I found it fascinating, not so much because I enjoyed looking at old stuff, but for another reason entirely.



I wanted to see how the British Raj used to live because Mom had been Anglo and I was hoping to somehow sense her presence by soaking up the atmosphere. I was afraid I was forgetting her...what she looked like...how she talked...her smile. I thought all this British memorabilia would sharpen my recollection. I didn't want to forget her, especially as I'd always identified with her more than with Dad, maybe because I looked like her and we had some of the same mannerisms. In fact, I had assumed I was Anglo until the day when Dad told me that Anglos descended patrilineally so I was technically Indian. Some people said I was half-caste. It was all mixed up...just like I was.



We went through the whole place and it was interesting alright, but it didn't help me remember Mom any better. Satish suggested we go to Park Street Cemetery next. I was hesitant because memories of Mom's grave were not the kind I wanted to recall.

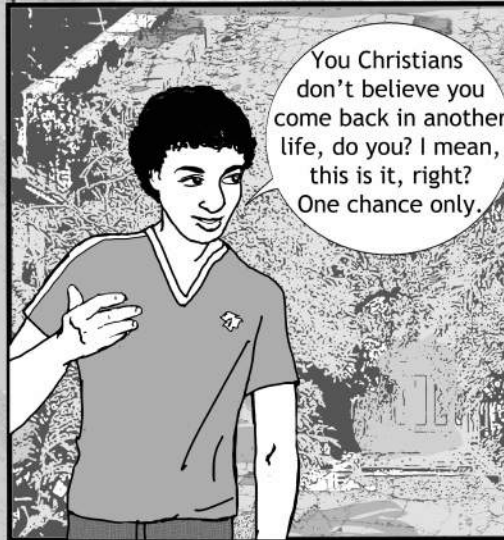
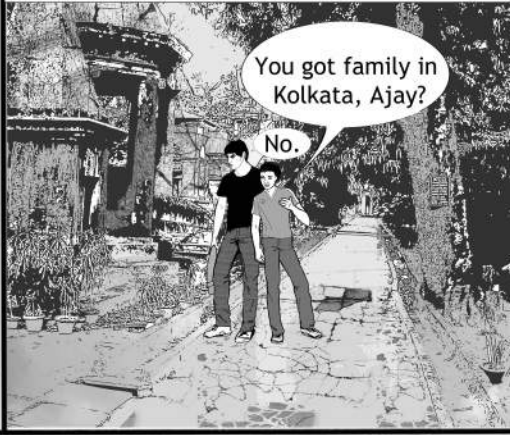


Still, he talked me into it, saying this particular place was really popular with the foreigners and it had some really cool monuments.





As we walked around the grounds, Satish started asking about my background. I thought it best to say as little about that as possible.







A guy like me needs a trillion chances. My mother says I'm collecting so much bad karma, I'll probably come back as a cockroach.

My own MOTHER, she says this!

How about you? Think you'll go to be with your god after you die?



I seriously doubt it.

Why? Did you do something bad?

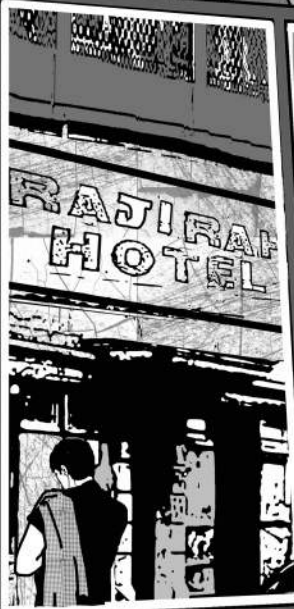
Look... Can we talk about something else?

Better yet. Let's get out of here. I've had enough of this graveyard.



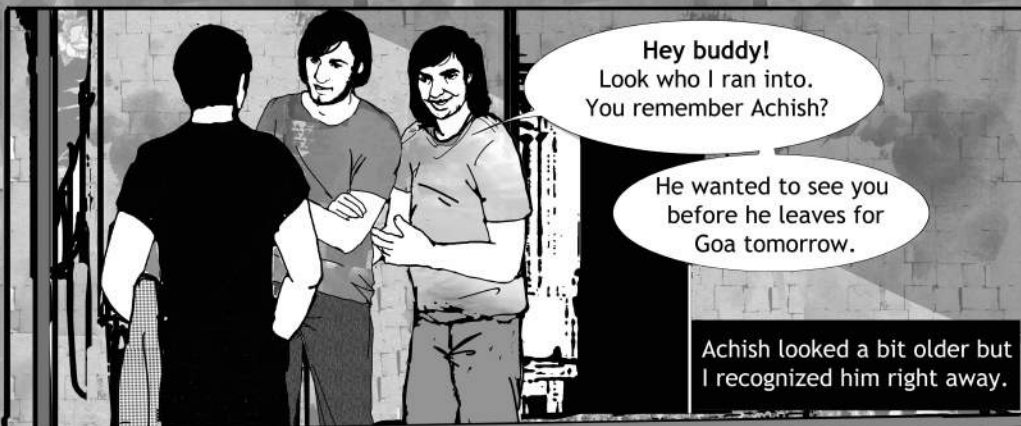
The cemetery had been a bad idea. It was a lonely place filled with decaying monuments to people who were gone forever. Some had been so young when they died...like Mom. Seeing their tombstones had reminded me of the day she died. I'd felt so all alone. I still felt alone. Over 14 million people milling around like ants, and I was feeling **alone!** How was **that** for irony?!

The driver dropped us off behind the Rajira Hotel. I paid him the 200 rupees and gave Satish a fat bonus for playing tour guide. He'd done a good job and I liked the kid. I told him to buy his mother and sisters something nice. I joked that it would help even out his bad karma.



I heard voices coming from  
behind the door of our room.



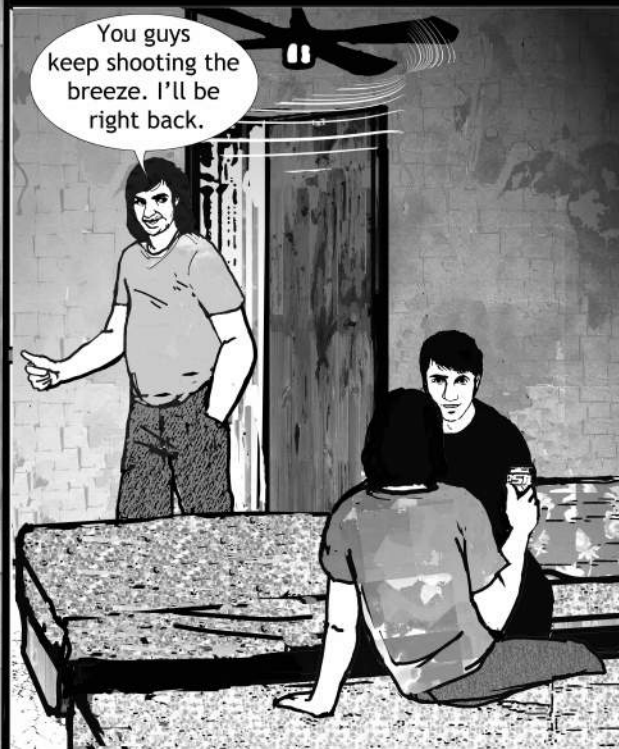


Hey buddy!  
Look who I ran into.  
You remember Achish?

He wanted to see you  
before he leaves for  
Goa tomorrow.

Achish looked a bit older but  
I recognized him right away.

We talked about old times and Achish filled me in on what he'd been up to the past few years. He traveled a lot it seemed, mostly between Kolkata and Goa. In fact, this would be his fourth trip this year. From the conversation between him and Sanjit, I got the sense that they were both in the same line of business - drug dealing - with Achish being the main supplier.



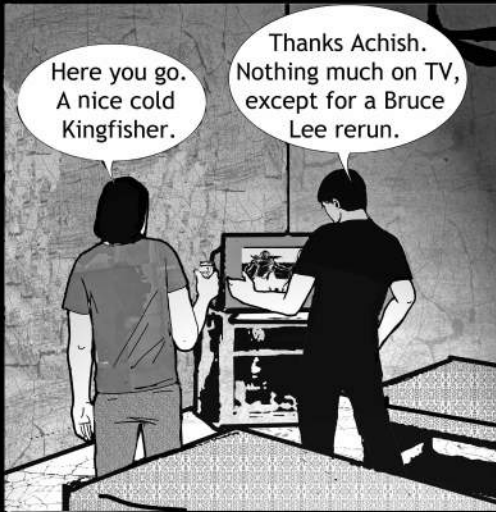
You guys  
keep shooting the  
breeze. I'll be  
right back.

Sanjit left to get some takeout food from the hotel. He suggested we eat in and then later hit some of the local bars and clubs and 'tie one on'. He was in party mode and after my depressing time at the cemetery, I was all for the idea.



Why don't  
you see  
what's on  
TV while  
I get us  
another  
beer.



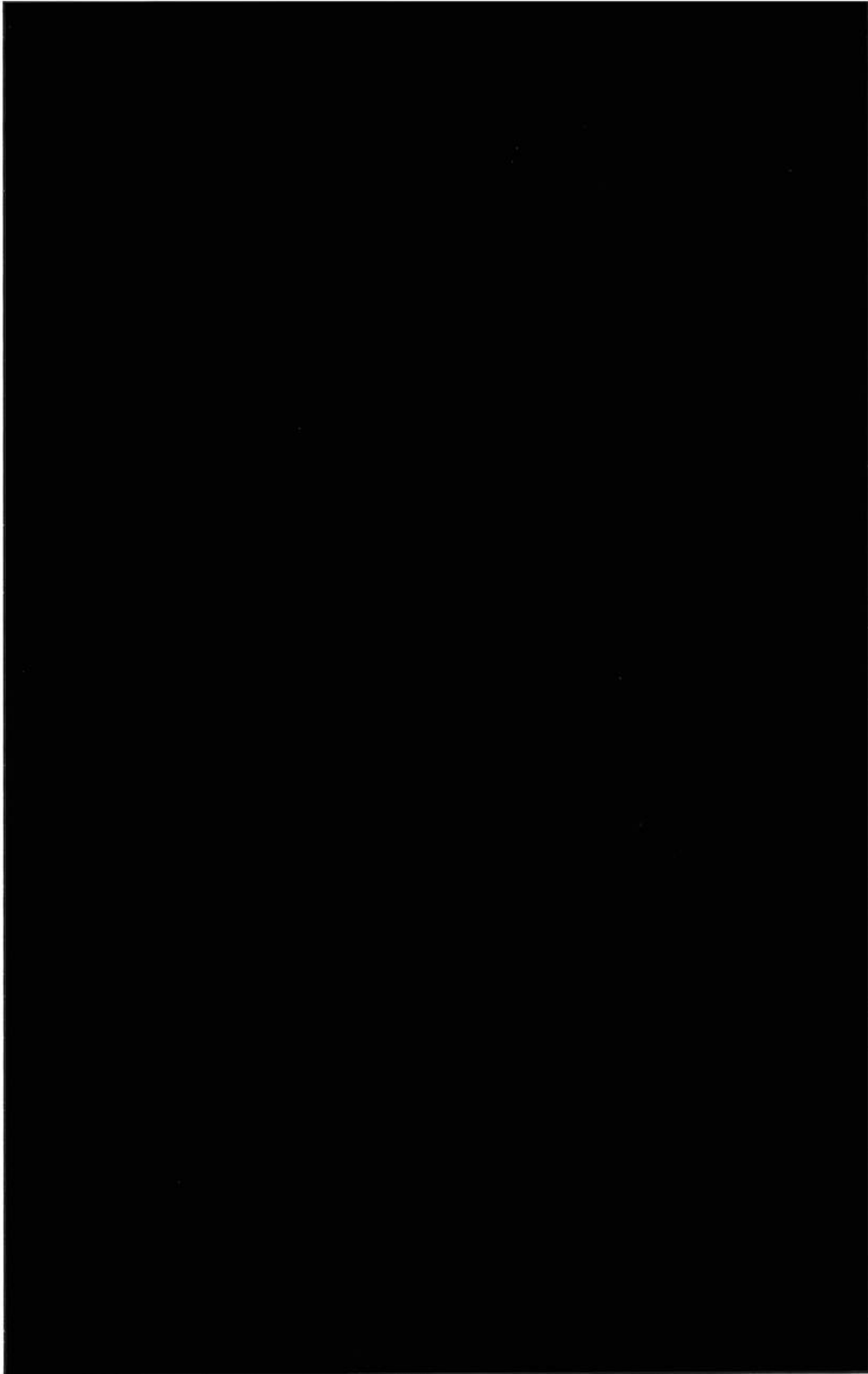


The beer tasted funny ...kind of bitter.



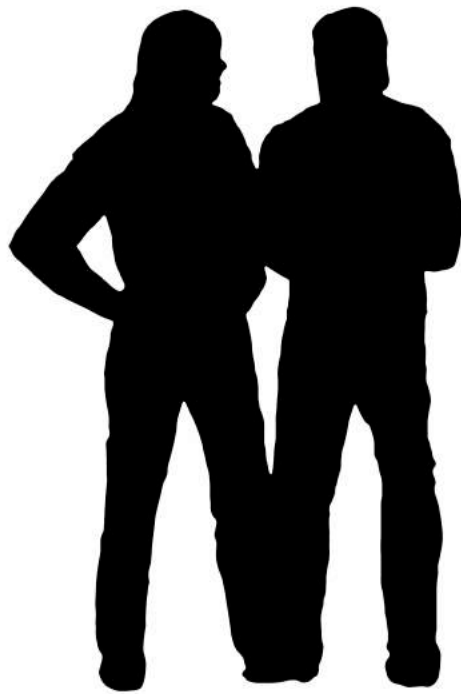
All of a sudden I couldn't see straight...





Chapter 6

# THUGS

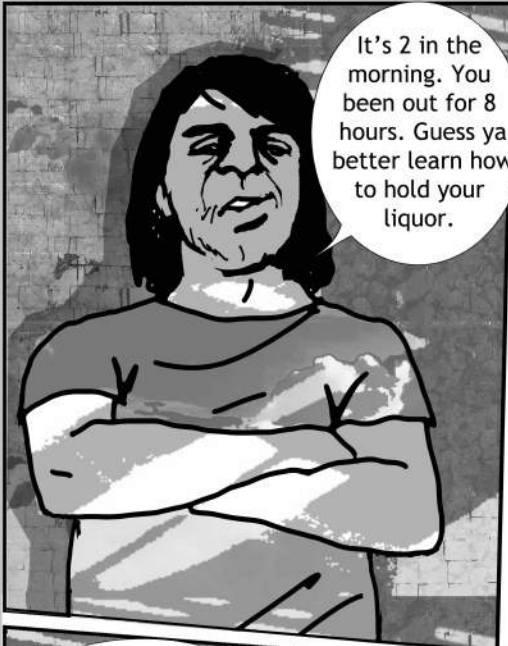






I woke up with the light from the hotel's neon sign shining through the lattice, making crazy patterns on the walls.





It's 2 in the morning. You been out for 8 hours. Guess ya better learn how to hold your liquor.



I didn't think I drank all that much...but I don't know... maybe I did.

Where's Achish?



Don't know. When I got here, you were passed out and Achish was gone.

Something must have called him away...maybe business.



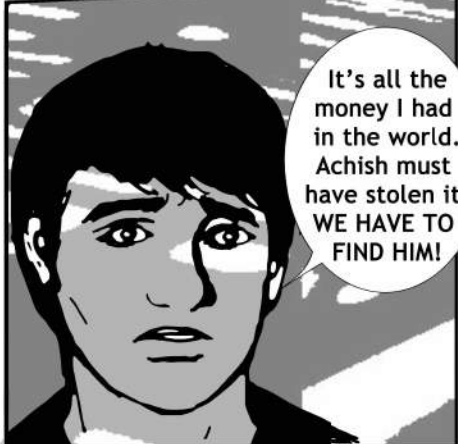
Yeah... I guess.



AW NO!  
My moneybelt!  
It's gone!



What moneybelt?



It's all the money I had in the world. Achish must have stolen it. WE HAVE TO FIND HIM!





Whoa pal. Achish is probably half way to Goa by now. And he's hard to track down...stays with stoner friends mostly... no fixed address. If he took your dough, might as well kiss it good-bye.

But what will I do now.. with no money.?

Can't you get more from your dad?

How did you know he's the one who gave it to me?

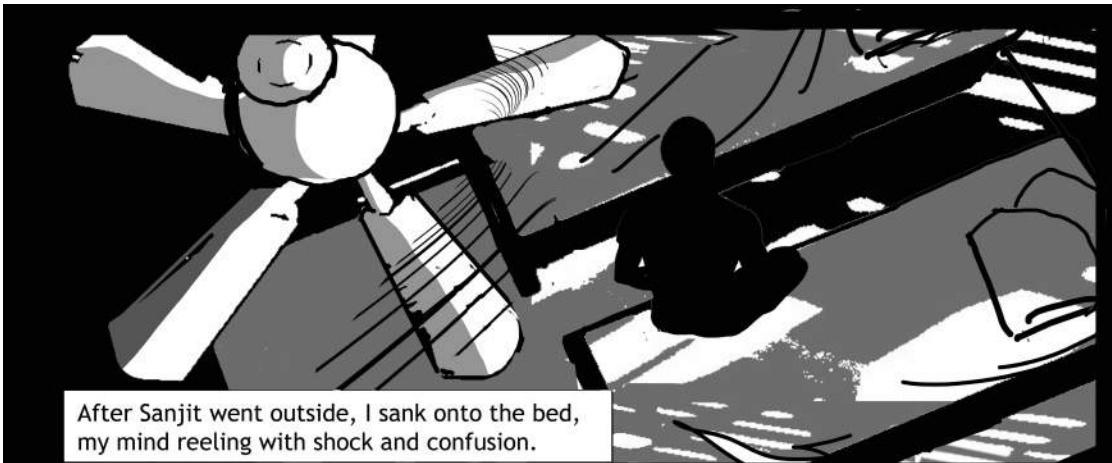
No, it's all he had.

I didn't...just a lucky guess.

Hey. Why don't I phone around and see if Achish is still in town...maybe we can nab him.

I'll go outside... reception is lousy in here.

Oh, and uh..I've been using your cell. My charger broke.



After Sanjit went outside, I sank onto the bed, my mind reeling with shock and confusion.



That's when I saw something lying at my feet.

Gamma-hydroxybutyric acid- GHB. I had heard of it before. It was a knockout drug often used in robberies and date rapes.



So that's how it is!

A vague memory surfaced of Sanjit and Achish whispering to one another as I walked into the room...and then there was another even more faint recollection of them both standing over me just as my mind was going blank. **What a couple of dirty, rotten lowlifes!** I'd find them and bust their teeth for what they did! First, I'd get Sanjit and make him give back my money. Then I'd go after Achish. After I was through with them, they'd be real sorry for messing with me!



But Sanjit wasn't in the hallway...



... or even in the hotel...



... neither was he on the street.







I tore down several back alleys but he wasn't in any of them. Then I came to an old section of the city with tall, crumbling buildings and derelict warehouses. There was no one about and I began to feel nervous about my surroundings, so I decided to head back to the hotel. That's when I saw him heading down a dark, winding alley, completely oblivious to the fact that he was being followed.



I wanted to beat him to a pulp right there, but he was talking to someone on my cell, and the conversation sounded real interesting.



Yeah, he freaked when he saw it was gone... Naw, he didn't suspect nothin...



Heh, heh. I'm wearin it. Yeah...I let him think it was you who took it.

Well, that was the deal, man. You take the heat for one third of the takings.





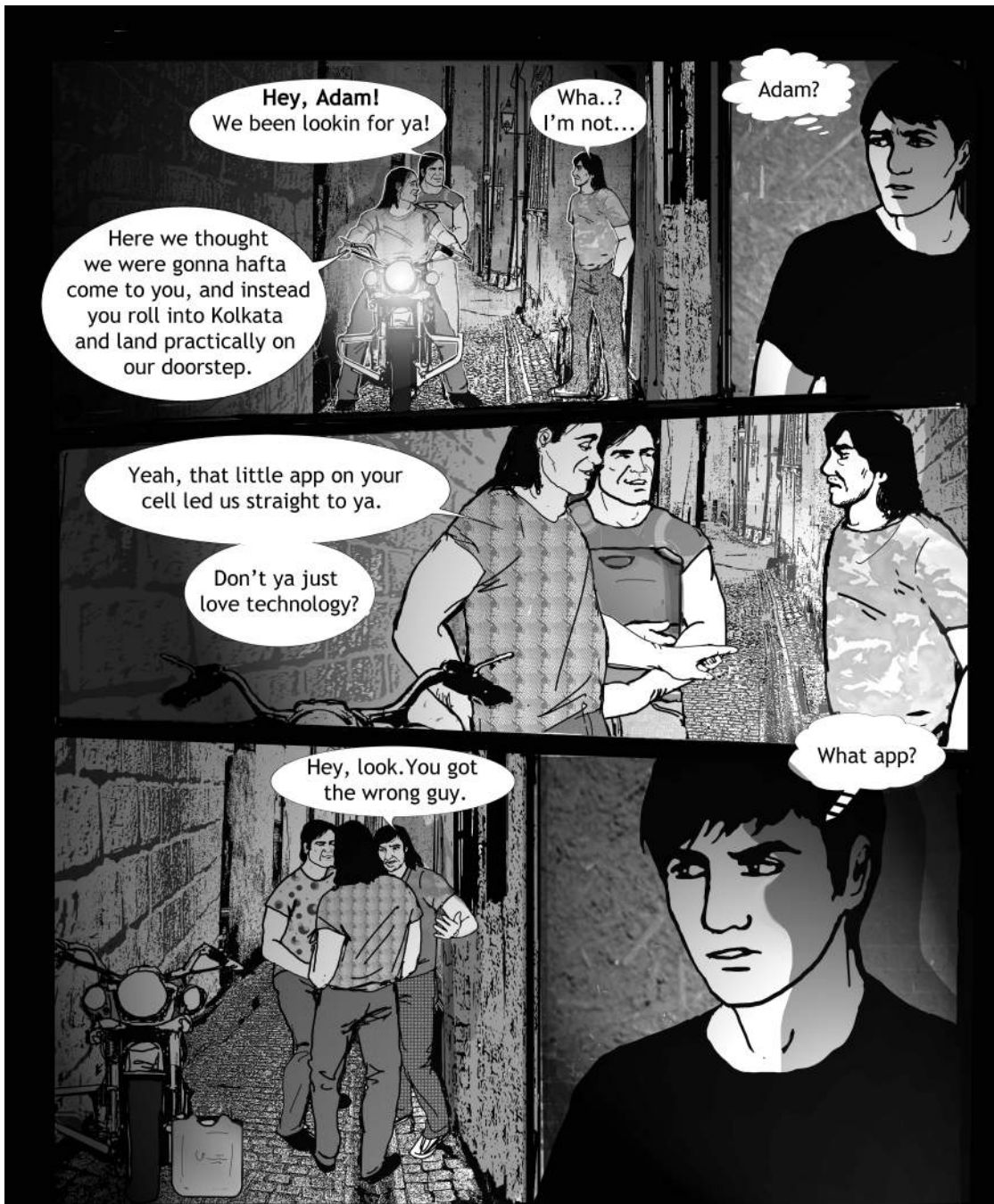
It was the perfect setup. Sanjit's back was to me, and him being 'occupied' as he was, I could easily get the jump on him. He'd be too surprised to make a break for it and I'd get in the first punch. I was just going to make my move when I heard a motorcycle approaching. I didn't want any witnesses to our fight, so I held back, waiting impatiently for the motorbike to drive by.

Only they didn't seem to be in any kind of hurry, because as they got closer, they slowed down. Sanjit quickly zipped up and tried to step back into the shadows, but it was pretty hard to miss him, standing in the middle of the alley like that.

I caught a quick glimpse of two big guys with hard faces and bulging muscles, and I thought immediately of my moneybelt tucked under Sanjit's t-shirt. It wasn't unusual to get mugged in Kolkata, especially at this time of night...and we were in a deserted alley behind some empty warehouses.

I stayed out of sight, hoping I was worrying about nothing, but I was as tense as a loaded spring. I knew that if the two guys tried anything, I'd have to step in and join the fray - not to defend Sanjit, but to protect my own interests. I'd come expecting to fight for my money, only I preferred if it wasn't with the likes of these two!





Then I remembered. When we were still seeing one another, Priya and I had downloaded an app on our cell phones that enabled us to see each other's whereabouts on a Google map. It had been a fun way to keep tabs on one another. Someone must have got a hold of Priya's cell phone - probably Gupta himself, and he had contacted these thugs and given them the co-ordinates to track me...or rather my phone...to this part of the city. It had acted as a homing device, leading these guys straight to this place! A shiver of fear trickled down my spine. These weren't just thieves looking to roll an unwary victim for a few rupees. These were murderers for hire! And they were looking for ME!

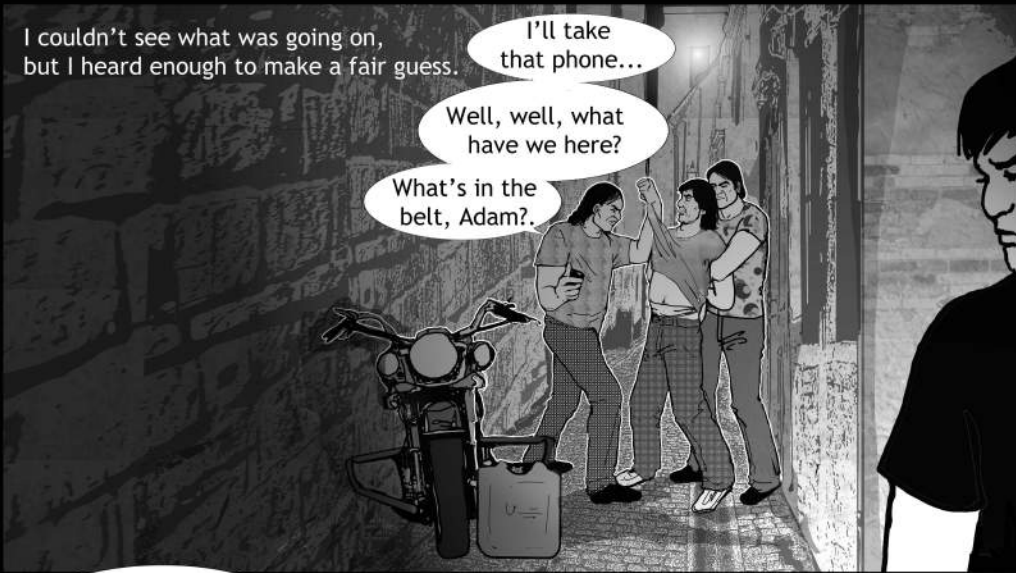


I couldn't see what was going on,  
but I heard enough to make a fair guess.

I'll take  
that phone...

Well, well, what  
have we here?

What's in the  
belt, Adam?.



I'll be taking that  
too, pal.

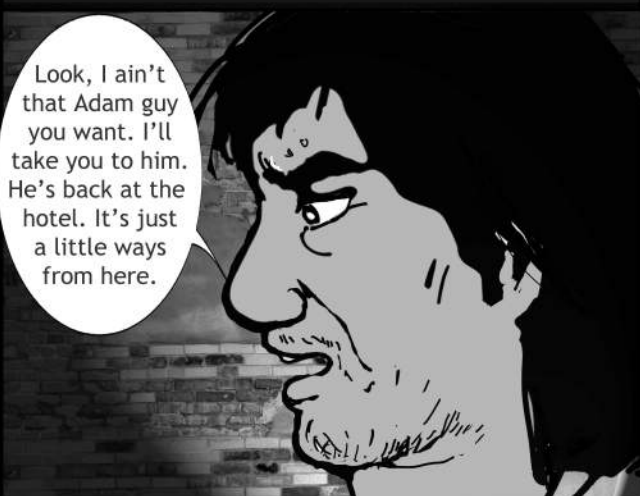
Hey!  
That's  
mine!

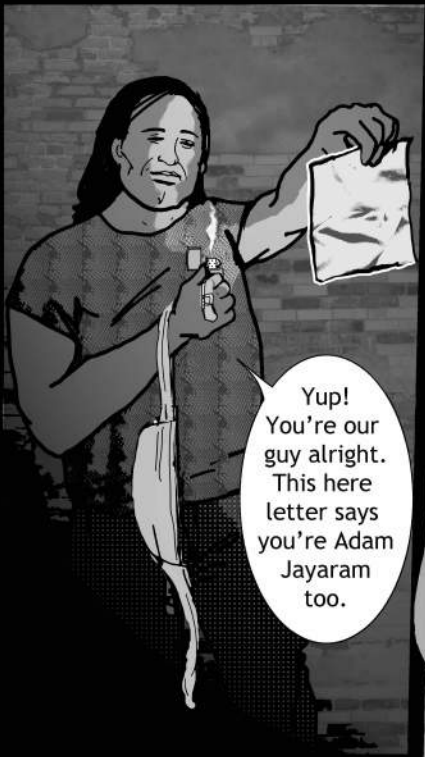
Not anymore.



Phone  
says  
you're  
Adam.

Look, I ain't  
that Adam guy  
you want. I'll  
take you to him.  
He's back at the  
hotel. It's just  
a little ways  
from here.





Yup!  
You're our  
guy alright.  
This here  
letter says  
you're Adam  
Jayaram  
too.

leaving today so he  
should be arriving soon.  
I would be very grateful  
if you could help my son,  
Adam, get settled in Visak.  
I look forward to hearing  
from you,  
David Jayaram



F\*&%\$#!  
Will ya look at that?!  
Must be close to 900  
greenbacks in here!  
Man, we're strikin'  
paydirt with  
this job!

Guess that's  
our bonus  
on top of the  
reg'lar fee.



See Adam,  
there's a nice fat price  
on your head. Someone  
wants ya taken out real bad  
and he's payin' megabucks  
to get it done.

And now we  
even get a  
tip.



I'm telling you  
I ain't him!



Let's get this over with before someone hears him squawking.

Ack



Yeah, all this dough has me feelin generous.

We'll make it quick, pal.



glug



Nooo...





OK. Douse him with the kerosene. Ranjan's client is the nervous type...wants no evidence. He doesn't want the body to be recognizable.



Oh God.. oh God...

I could smell the kerosene as they poured it over Sanjit's body. I knew they'd soon be leaving the alley and most likely they would head right past me. In the light of the fire, I'd be completely visible to them. I thought I might be able to make it to the street but it was highly doubtful they wouldn't notice. They'd give chase on their motorbike and I'd be a goner. I looked around desperately for some sort of cover and saw a pile of garbage lying in a corner. It was my only chance.



My heart was beating so hard I could hear it drumming in my ears. At any moment I expected the killers to look in my direction, but they drove right past without seeing me. As the sound of the motorcycle died away, I crept out of my hiding place.



The smell of kerosene and burning flesh was so nauseating that I almost vomited. I couldn't look at the body. I was afraid the horror of seeing it would cause me to go into shock.



I hot-footed it back to the hotel room, locking myself in and peering out the window at the street below, terrified that the goondas might have seen me and followed me to the Rajirah.



I tried to think...to make a plan...but my mind kept replaying what I'd seen and heard in the alley. Sanjit was dead - murdered in cold blood- but it was me the killers had been after. What if the cops were able to identify Sanjit's body? It'd be in the newspapers and the thugs would read it...and ..and they'd come looking for me!



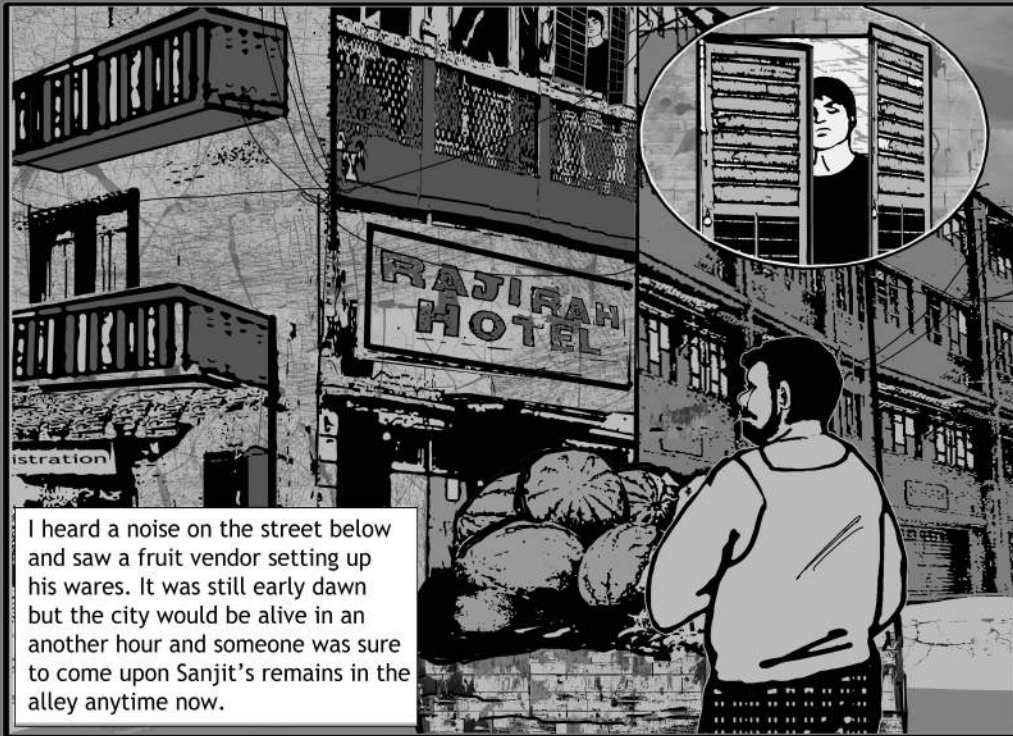
Then I thought that maybe the cops wouldn't be able to identify the body. Maybe..wait...Sanjit checked into the hotel but he wouldn't be checking out...and his boss would wonder why he didn't show up for work. There'd be questions.. ..they'd know it was Sanjit in the alley. They'd figure it out.



Oh man! What if someone at the Rajirah saw me with Sanjit? They'd tell the cops and then I'd be wanted for questioning. I'd have to tell the cops about the goondas ...AND THAT WOULD GET ME KILLED FOR SURE!!!

The more I thought about it, the more panicky I got. I wished for the hundredth time that I had done what Dad wanted. I'd be safe in Visak by now. But I was here... and I didn't know what to do. It was like I was paralyzed...I couldn't move.





I heard a noise on the street below and saw a fruit vendor setting up his wares. It was still early dawn but the city would be alive in another hour and someone was sure to come upon Sanjit's remains in the alley anytime now.



As soon as that happened, the cops would be called in and there would be an immediate investigation. That thought finally galvanized me into action. I had to get away from the area and FAST! I changed my clothes, grabbed my bag, and quietly slipped out of the hotel. I was pretty sure no one saw me leave, although I could hear some of the hotel people already moving around. Another few minutes and I might not have gone unnoticed.



I walked for hours, not knowing where I was headed, constantly looking over my shoulder to see if I was being followed.

I had nothing with me but a gym bag full of clothes, my Mom's Bible, and 256 rupees - all that remained of the money Dad had given me.



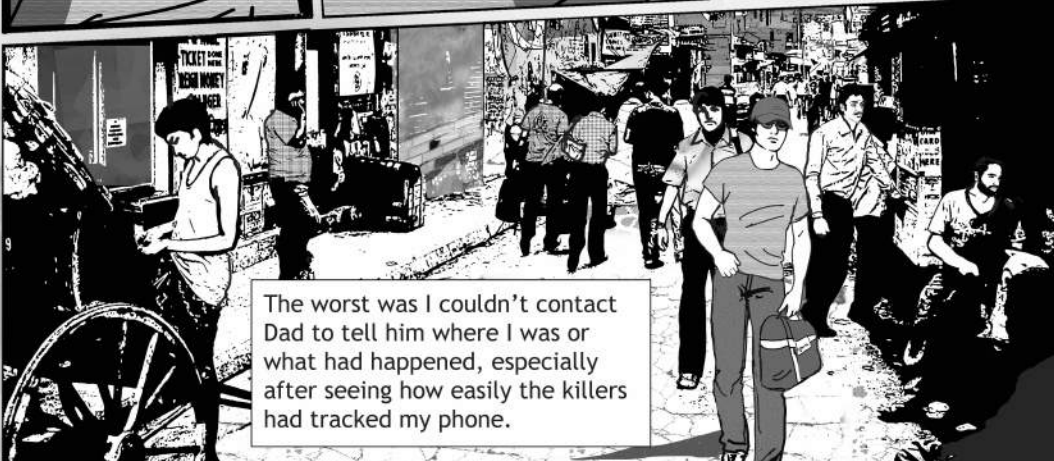
My whole life was screwed up.



I'd come to Kolkata craving adventure and excitement, and 24 hours later I was longing with all my heart for the safe monotony of my old life with Dad and Amma...



...wishing I was anywhere but here, in this city teeming with threats and dangers of every kind.



The worst was I couldn't contact Dad to tell him where I was or what had happened, especially after seeing how easily the killers had tracked my phone.



I didn't dare take any chances, even though I knew Dad would be worried sick when he discovered I wasn't in Visag. And poor Amma. She'd been told I was just visiting some of Dad's friends for a few weeks, but she couldn't be deceived forever. Eventually she'd suspect something. I wondered if I'd ever see her again.

By noon I was pretty exhausted, so I stopped for a glass of chai and a samosa at a greasy little dhaba. I used the time there to figure out what my next move should be. I probably had enough money for food and lodging for a couple of days, but that was about it. I had to find some kind of job, and right away, or I'd end up on the street like so many others.





My brain was still all scrambled and I had a hard time focusing. I kept thinking of Sanjit lying in that alley. I didn't feel anger towards him anymore even though he'd stolen my money. He'd more than made up for that by unwittingly becoming the killers' target in my place. No one, no matter how rotten, deserved to die like that! I couldn't help feeling sorry.



For the rest of the day I wandered around looking for a job. I asked around at a construction site, a restaurant, and a few shops, but no one was interested in hiring me. I wasn't too discouraged though. I still had some money left and I could always try again tomorrow.



In the evening I started looking for a cheap room to rent and came upon a flophouse in a crummy part of the city. It was a real dump but it was all I could afford.



...I didn't get much sleep.





No!

Please  
No!



It's a mistake.  
Please!

I'm not who you  
think I am...  
not who you think...



HELP  
ME!



Ha!  
Ha!  
Ha!

They  
see  
you.

They're after  
you, Adam.

You  
can't  
hide  
forever.

That's him!  
That's the real Adam.



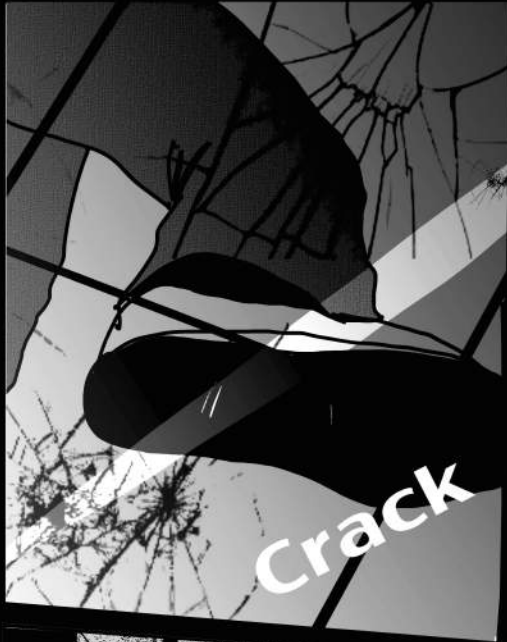
The GPS leads  
right here,  
but I don't  
see him.

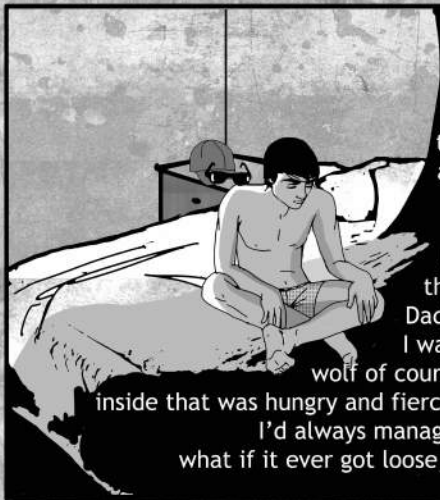
Where did  
he go?

THERE!









What a nightmare! It had seemed so real too...Sanjit's screams, the thugs chasing me... and the wolf. That part particularly bothered me. I'd identified with that black wolf from Dad's story ever since I was a kid - not a real wolf of course - but something inside that was hungry and fierce and wild like one. I'd always managed to rein it in but what if it ever got loose, like in my dream?

I didn't want to think about that though. I had other more immediate concerns, like where I was going to find a cheap breakfast. I'd hardly eaten anything in 24 hours and my hunger pangs were fierce.



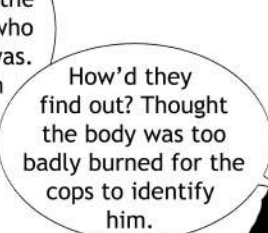
Fortunately there was a place nearby where I got toast and a cup of chai.



Any more news about that mystery murder?



Says they finally found out who the guy in the alley was...or who they think he was. Name's Adam Jayaram.

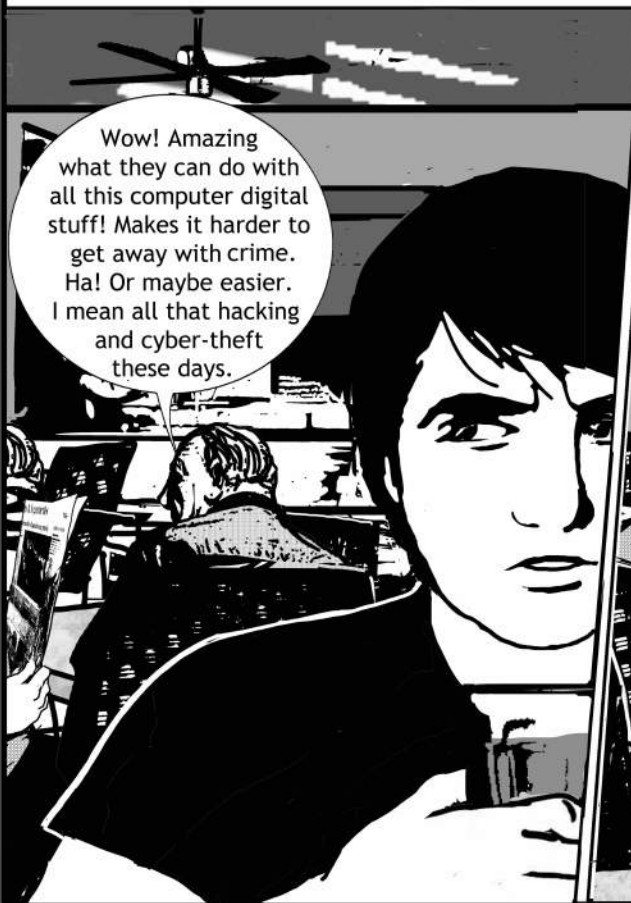


How'd they find out? Thought the body was too badly burned for the cops to identify him.

Yeah, but they found some shards from a cell phone nearby and figured it was his ...thought he might have made a call before he died...Here.. I'll read what it says.

"The badly charred remains of a murder victim were discovered in the district of S----- early Monday morning. Though the body was too badly burned to make a positive identification possible, police found a broken cell phone near the body. Suspecting the phone might have belonged to the victim, the police made inquiries at local cell towers. After checking cell site data, the police verified that a call had been made from the spot where the murder took place from a phone registered to Adam Jayaram, age 19, from J---- town, Orissa.

Police have no leads at the moment but are continuing their investigation. Anyone with information concerning the dead man and the murder incident are asked to notify the authorities immediately."



Wow! Amazing what they can do with all this computer digital stuff! Makes it harder to get away with crime. Ha! Or maybe easier. I mean all that hacking and cyber-theft these days.

I was floored! This solved my biggest problem. Gupta and the thugs wouldn't be coming after me anymore. They would think I was dead. EVERYONE would! As far as Adam Jayaram was concerned, he was no more. I could start a completely new life, reinventing myself entirely.





I thought about it long and hard. What kind of person would I have to become in order to survive in a city like Kolkata? I'd been here only a few days, but already I'd witnessed a brutal murder and been robbed of all my money. I was 48 rupees away from utter destitution. Soon I'd be joining the jumble of humanity that slept on the streets and lived hand to mouth amid the filth and rubble. The very thought sickened me.

One thing was certain. Out here it was all about survival of the fittest. Gupta and the psychopathic thugs had reinforced that idea loud and clear, but I saw proof of it all around me as well. The weak begged in the dirt while the strong took whatever they wanted by force or cunning. It was obvious that if I was going to make it in this place, I would have to join the ranks of the takers.



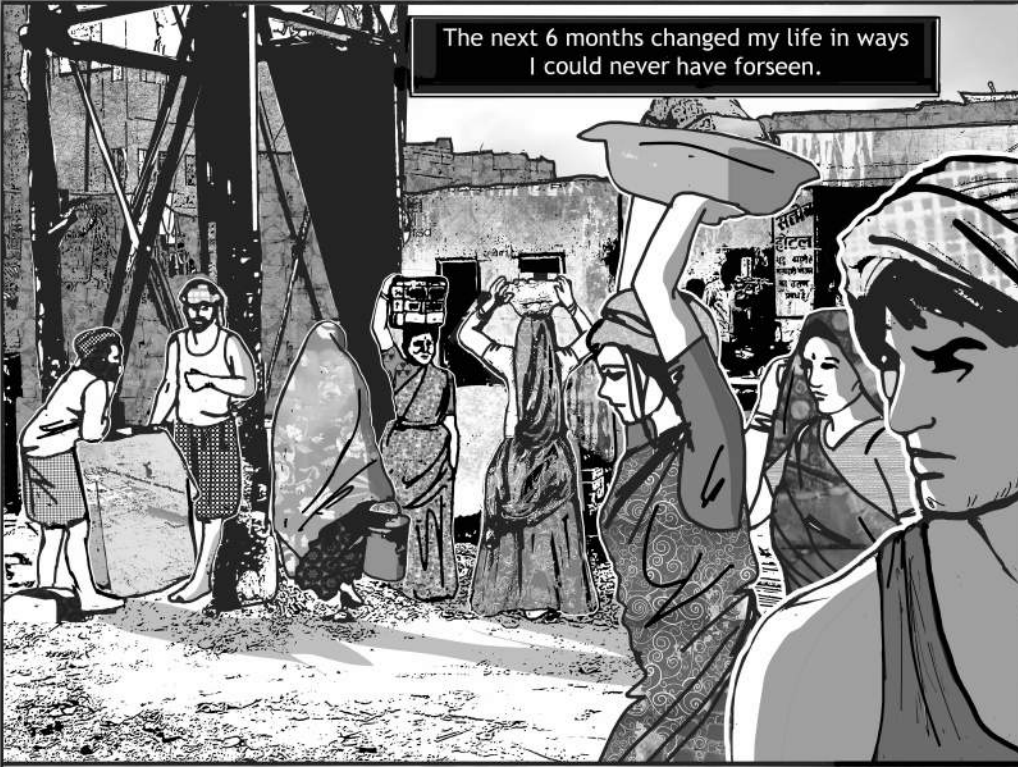
Unbidden thoughts of Dad and Amma intruded, weakening my resolve. It troubled me that they would think I was dead and I couldn't tell them different. They'd be heart-broken. I didn't want them to suffer because of me, but there was no other way. I had to stay 'dead' in the minds of everyone if I was to stay alive. One call home could alert Gupta if Dad's phone was being tapped. As I continued to mull over the precarious state of my existence, the memory of my dream clawed its way to the surface and something stirred restlessly in a dark corner of my soul. It was the answer to my survival...but once unleashed...it would kill Adam Jayaram for real. I wasn't sure I wanted to risk it.

## Chapter 7

# Money



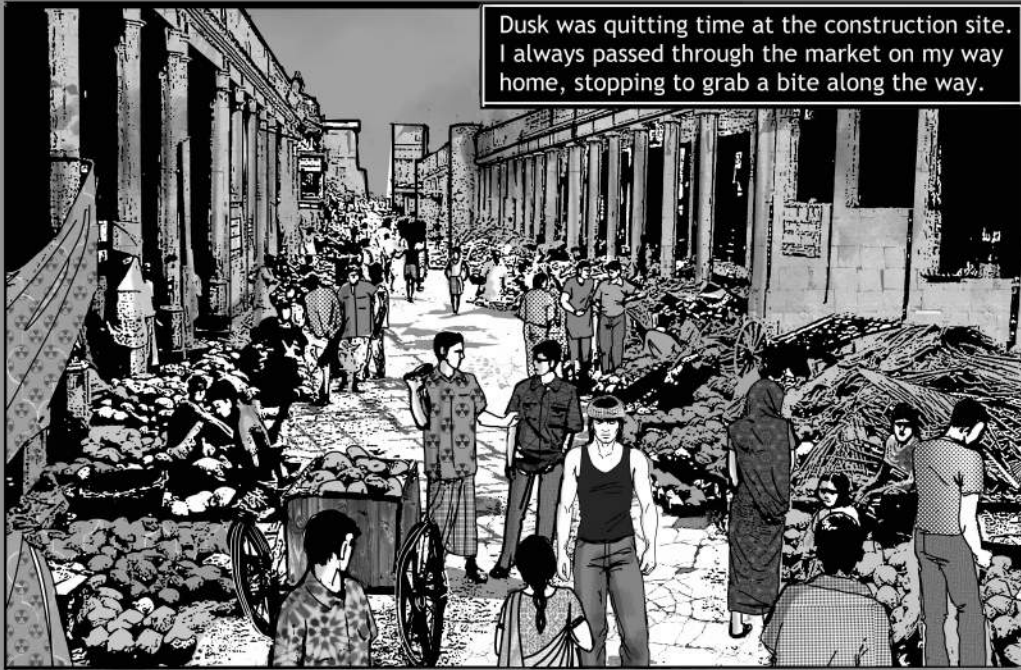
The next 6 months changed my life in ways I could never have foreseen.



For one thing, I discovered what it was like to scrounge on the streets like a beggar, and for the first time in my life I became a thief, stealing food from vegetable carts. After a few weeks of that, I finally managed to find work as a coolie at a construction site - something I'd always considered beneath me, but by that time I wasn't too fussy. I took whatever I could get, even though hauling cement and stacking bricks was back-breaking labor and paid peanuts. Still, it was enough to keep me from starving and that was all I cared about. My 20th birthday came and went and I'd never felt so lonely in all my life! I missed Dad and Amma. I had no friends because at my job I kept to myself so the other workers wouldn't ask questions. They knew me as 'Ajay' and that was about all I told them.







Dusk was quitting time at the construction site. I always passed through the market on my way home, stopping to grab a bite along the way.



The streets were dangerous at night so I found a cheap 6'by 8' room to rent at the back of a mechanic shop.



I was lucky to have a place out of the sun and rain. Others weren't so fortunate.

Those who had it the worst were the kids. There were thousands of them throughout the city, sleeping in open drains, parks, and on the sidewalks.



They travelled in groups and often had a dog along for protection against the cops and gangsters.



A lot of them were runaways who took to the streets to escape from abuse at home. Some had day jobs shining shoes or collecting plastic bottles; others begged or stole for a living.



They'd sit together huffing solvents to get high.



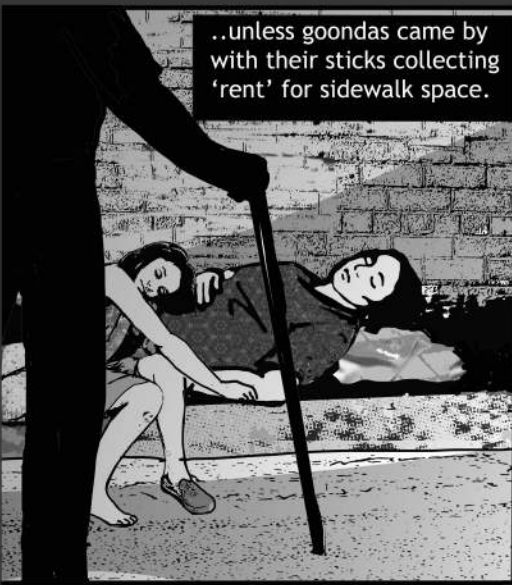
Any ledge or corner served as a resting place for the night.



The rats scurried past, foraging for scraps, and no one stirred...



..unless goondas came by with their sticks collecting 'rent' for sidewalk space.



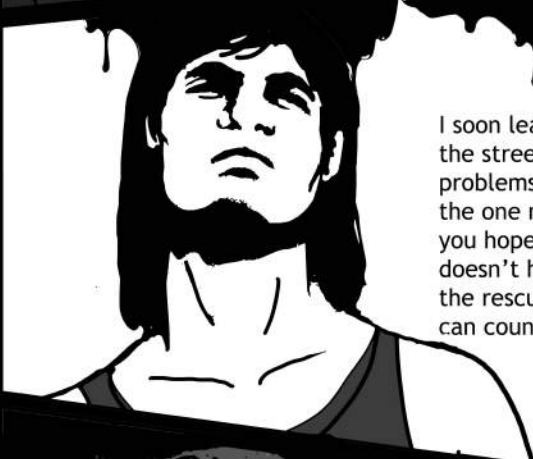
Sometimes screams tore into the night when someone was being beaten or raped, adding to the nightmare.



It happened often enough so that I wasn't surprised anymore, even though it made me feel sick inside. I knew I couldn't let it get to me. What was the use?



Call the cops? Not Likely. They were often the ones doing the raping and beating in the first place.



I soon learned that one of the first rules of survival on the street was to never get involved in other people's problems. Of course that sounds fine...until YOU'RE the one needing a helping hand. Then all of a sudden you hope to heaven there's someone out there who doesn't hold to that creed...someone who'll come to the rescue and not put himself first ...not that you can count on that. Hardly ever happens on the street.

I figured the only one I could count on...  
...was ME.



I had to be like Schwarzenegger in ERASER and PREDATOR, a guy who was tough and didn't need anyone; who could take on the world single-handedly. I went to the movies every payday so I could study fight scenes, committing the hero's moves to memory in case I was ever in a situation where I needed to make use of them. I'd bulked up from working at the construction site so I was pretty confident I could hold my own if attacked, but until I actually got into a fight, I wouldn't know for sure.

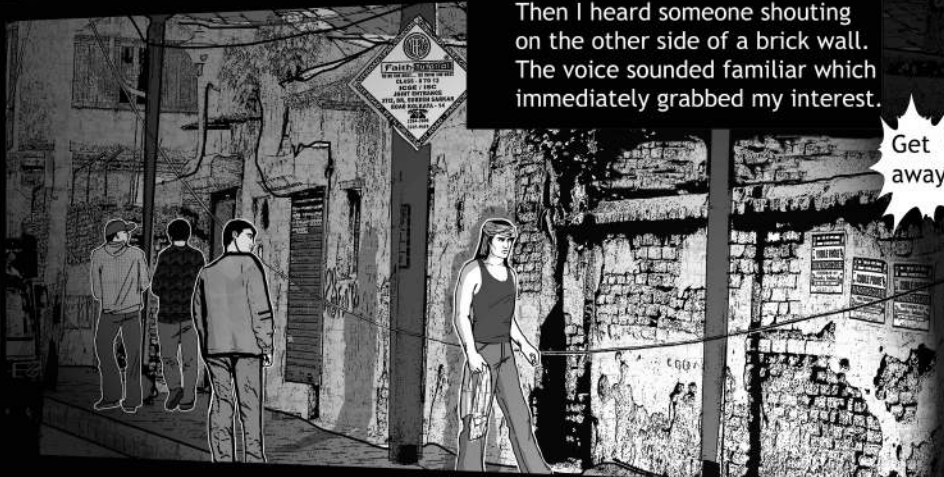
Then one night, I got the chance to find out.

I'd gone to the movies right after work to see Stallone's latest RAMBO picture, and I was feeling pretty pumped as I headed towards home.



Then I heard someone shouting on the other side of a brick wall. The voice sounded familiar which immediately grabbed my interest.

Get away!



We know you were at the jeweller's on business for your big boss.

Yeah. What did you do with the cash?

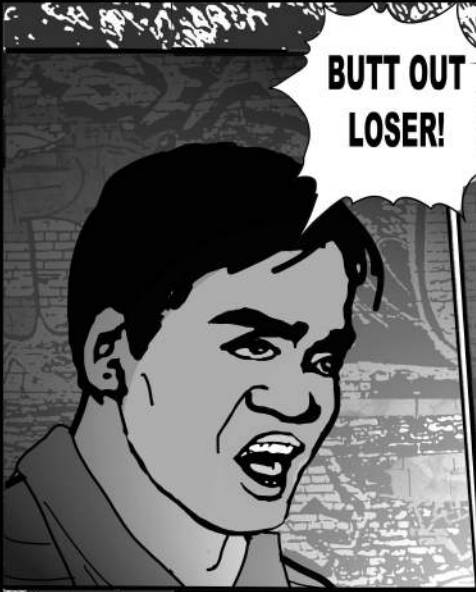
We saw you with a bag when you left the shop, and then all of a sudden it's gone. Ya better tell us what ya did with it.



I recognized the little guy being pushed around as Satish, the kid who had played tourist guide on my first day in the city. He didn't stand a chance against the three toughs, so I decided to even the odds a bit.







**BUTT OUT  
LOSER!**



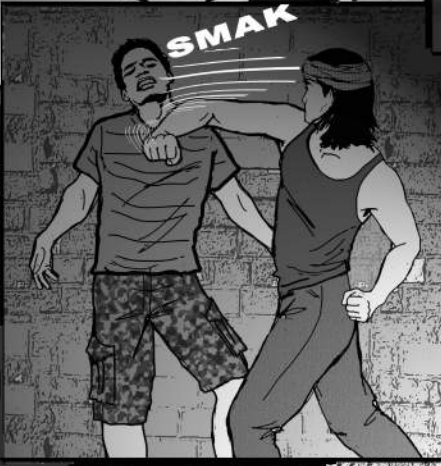
**Or we'll beat ya to a pulp  
along with your little buddy!**



What did you  
just call me?



**You heard  
me!!**



**SMAK**





You f#@#!#  
knocked out  
my tooth!!



The big guy was down for the moment, leaving me free to deal with the weasel who'd sneaked up from behind. He was a lightweight, but surprisingly wiry and strong. I tried to remember every move I'd seen in the action films I'd watched, and I copied the various techniques, but what really stoked me was the anger coursing through me. It's force packed my every punch with a power that made me feel invincible. I was drunk on the feeling. For the first time in my life I felt anything but a 'loser'.



I glanced over to see how Satish was doing and saw that he was handling his end pretty well.

He fought dirty like a real streetfighter, almost biting off the poor guy's nose.



I got the drop on the weasel.



Then the big guy tripped me...



...and got the advantage for awhile...



...but only for awhile.



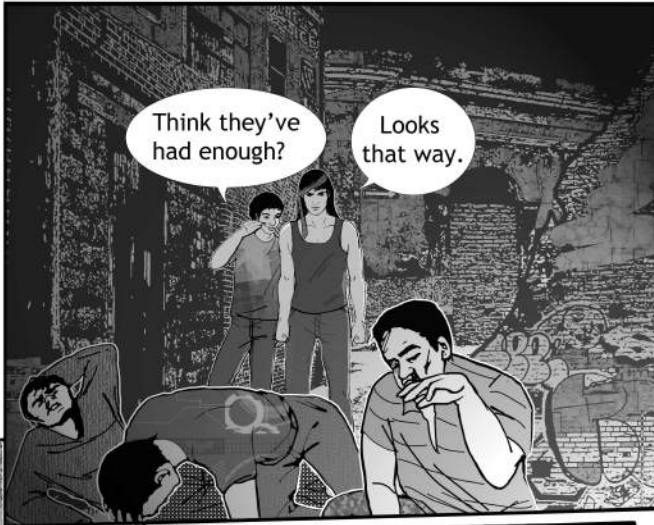
Yowww!!!



A few good slams to the head, and it was all over.



I was halfway sorry about that. I'd enjoyed the skin to bone contact and the rage release it afforded. As my breathing returned to normal, the wild part of me got back in it's cage...reluctantly. I saw that the 3 toughs were lying on the ground, moaning and groaning, yet surprisingly I'd come out with hardly a scratch, and Satish had a cut on his face, but it was minor. We'd both done well.



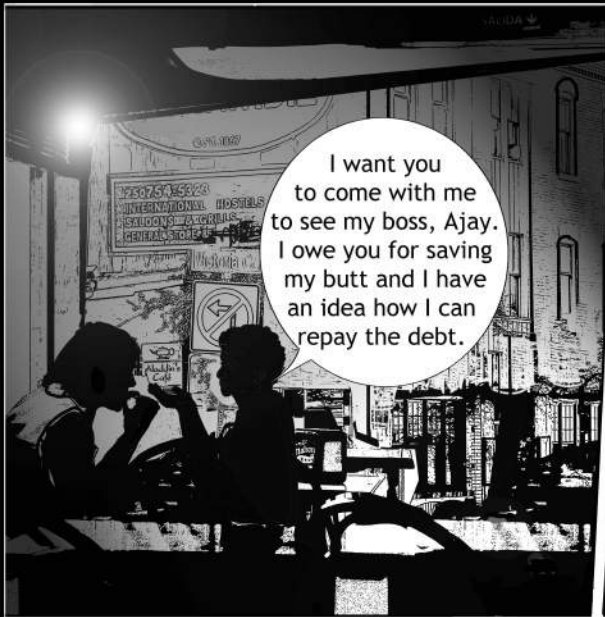
Satish stopped to retrieve the bag full of money he'd managed to hide just before his attackers had pounced on him.



He had been making a delivery and pickup at a jeweller's shop - fenced items that his boss bought from thieves and then sold to retailers at a profit - and after winding up his business, he went outside to meet up with his driver. (He never made these kinds of 'business trips' without a driver.) But when he got outside, his driver was nowhere to be seen (probably taking a leak in an alley or something) so Satish went looking for him. That's when he noticed the 3 toughs tailing him. He outran them until he came to the demolished old building, pausing just long enough to stash the money behind some crumbling bricks.

Satish was real grateful that I'd jumped in when I had. He had been sure of getting a bad beating, not only from the thugs, but also from his boss, who had a very low tolerance for mistakes, apparently. Satish spotted a dhaba across the street and suggested we stop there so he could phone his driver to pick him up, and grab a coffee while we waited.



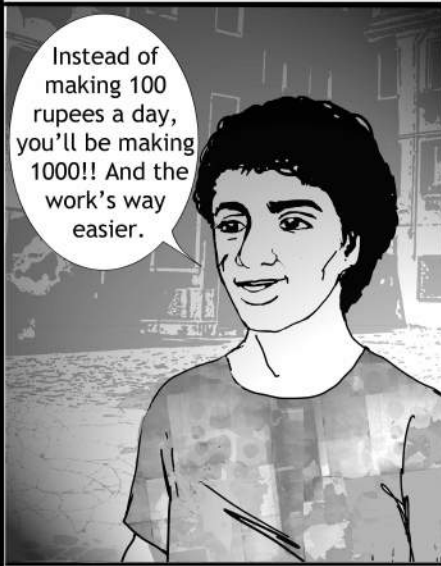


I want you to come with me to see my boss, Ajay. I owe you for saving my butt and I have an idea how I can repay the debt.



There's no debt.

No, no. There IS! Look. Do you want to be a coolie for the rest of your life? I didn't think so. But maybe you don't have to be, if I can work it out so my boss hires you.



Instead of making 100 rupees a day, you'll be making 1000!! And the work's way easier.



That got my attention, but I wasn't sure I wanted to get involved with anything that wasn't legit.

Satish assured me that his employer was into 'diversification' and had all sorts of projects, some of them even legal. By putting in a good word for me, like how I helped protect Satish, and by association, his boss's financial interests, I might gain the guy's favor and possibly get on his payroll. I had to admit, the idea was mighty appealing.



By the time the driver showed up, I'd decided to check things out. After all, what could it hurt?





A beautiful woman answered the door at Satish's knock, her piercingly cold eyes looking right through me.



Satish told her I was a friend and he wanted to drop off some money for his boss. She just nodded and led the way to the second floor. As she ascended the stairs, I couldn't help noticing the way she moved...like a cat...all lithe and sinewy...and real sensuous.





Sounds of music and laughter drifted our way. Apparently a party was going on.

Wait here.

Aw man!  
Hope we get invited.

There's always ganja, booze, and sexy women. All top quality.

Like the boss's lady, huh?

Ha! Exactly!  
She's the boss's lady, and off limits, but the others are all first class callgirls and they're on offer to the guests. If we get invited to stay, we'll have our pick.

The woman, Kaliyah, returned after a few minutes.

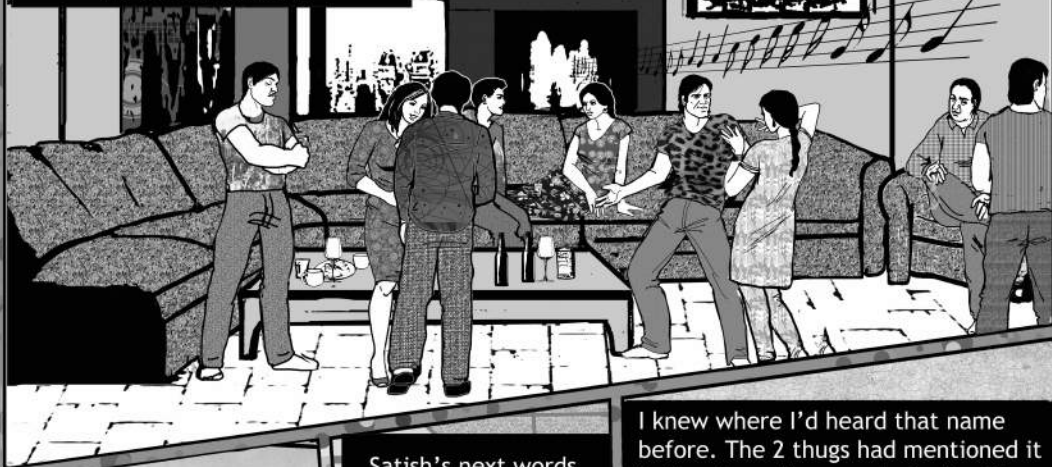
You can both come in.



As I glanced around the room, I took in the large flat screen TV, state-of-the-art stereo system, expensive furnishings, and beautiful women, and I was reminded that this was how I wanted to live. This was my dream! What I wouldn't give to have all of this!



Then my attention shifted to a guy dancing with one of the girls. He looked familiar.

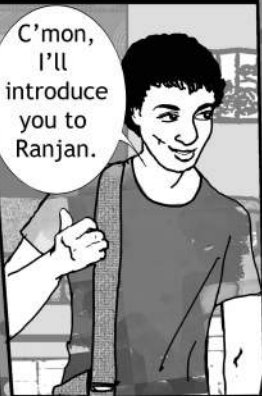


And so did the one with his back to me, at the other end of the room.



Satish's next words confirmed my worst fears.

C'mon, I'll introduce you to Ranjan.



I knew where I'd heard that name before. The 2 thugs had mentioned it in the alley after murdering Sanjit. I was in the same room with the guys who had been hired to kill me!

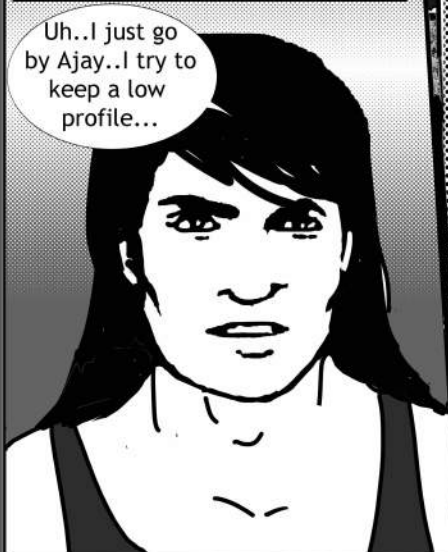





My first impulse was to bolt, but fortunately my better sense prevailed. I couldn't let on that I'd ever seen any of these guys before. I had to act normal, even though I felt like I was Daniel in the lion's den. Satish didn't help matters any. He began telling Ranjan about the fight with the 3 thieves and how I'd come to his aid, praising me like I was some kind of hero. I wanted to shut him up, especially when everyone in the room began to pay close attention. That really made me nervous! I could have strangled Satish when he mentioned I was looking for a job. **The last thing I wanted was to work for this bunch!** The boss man, Ranjan, just listened, silently sizing me up as Satish continued to run off at the mouth. It wasn't easy maintaining my composure as those hawkish eyes bored into mine. When he finally spoke, it was to ask the question I'd been dreading.



I could have given a phony name, but if he wanted to hire me, he might have asked for ID, so I tried a different maneuver.




I read somewhere that you can always tell if a person is lying by their body language. Liars have a hard time looking you in the face when they're trying to put one over on you. I figured this Ranjan guy would know that, so I made a supreme effort to stare right into his eyes as I attempted to dupe him.



Yeah...  
on account of I'm  
wanted by the cops on  
several charges...

..for theft  
and..uh...  
..assault.



Hmmm..  
Street fighter  
and thief, huh?

Maybe  
I can use  
your 'skills'.  
How good a  
predator  
are you?

I didn't like where this was headed,  
but for the time being I had to play  
along, and make it convincing.

Well...  
I can play the wolf...  
when need be.

HA!  
I like that.

I think I'll try you  
out for awhile,  
'Wolf'.

That was how I got the street name 'Wolf' and ended up in the employ of a criminal whose portfolio included fencing stolen property, drug dealing, murder for hire, and who knew what else. I pretended I was grateful for the offer, but I had no intention of actually working for the guy...that is...until he mentioned that he'd start me out at 12,000 Rs a month. Then it wasn't entirely pretense any longer. The money kind of clinched matters. I told myself that I could always walk away later if I had to. If I kept my identity a secret, it would be alright. After all, the job sounded easy - keep watch over one of Ranjan's warehouses, take in deliveries, and manage merchandise. I'd also collect debts from 'defaulters'. I knew I would be walking a tightrope but my only other option was coolie work, and to my mind, that was no option at all. I couldn't say no to the money...so I didn't.

Just as Satish had hoped, Ranjan invited us to join the party, urging both of us to help ourselves to anything we wanted - booze, ganja, food, and women.



Hey, if you're worried about getting into trouble with the cops..you know.. working for the Boss..well.. don't be. He has most of them in his pocket..I'll bet he could even get those charges dropped that you mentioned.

But..there's something you should know, okay? Don't ever cross Ranjan. Some have tried to, and... well, just don't ever do it.

And you should be careful of those guys over there.

Satish pointed out the big guy coming out of a bedroom with one of the girls. His name was Giri. I remembered him real well!

The two talking to Ranjan were Jagan and Malik. Malik I'd seen before.

The little guy was Prabodh, more often called Snake...

..because that's just what he was.

They were all part of Ranjan's inner circle - his henchmen - who did his dirty work for him. And from what I'd seen first hand in that back alley, there was no job too dirty for them.





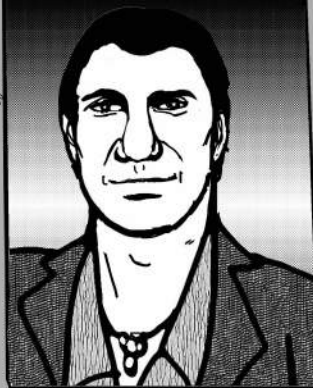
The party began to heat up, with more and more drinking and drugging, and more frequent trips to the bedrooms with the call girls. Sometimes several guys went with one girl and they didn't come out for a long time. When they did, the girls looked exhausted and ready to collapse. I couldn't understand how they could stomach having those goons' hands all over them, but I guess the money was good. Satish said these particular girls didn't ever walk the streets. They were too high class, being educated and from middle class homes. One was even a Bollywood starlet. They had a pimp who managed their business for them and they were dropped off for parties or worked out of their apartments. In fact, their pimp was due to arrive soon to collect the girls and their earnings for the night.



When he arrived, he looked pretty much like how I thought he would...



..sharp dresser, confident swagger, brash voice, and gold dangling from his neck...



I watched him collect his money from Ranjan - \$100 for each girl - \$400 in total. Satish told me that his take would be 60%. That worked out to 12,000 Rs, as much as I'd be making in a month working for Ranjan! Each girl only got 1600 Rs for being mauled all night. It didn't seem fair, even when Satish explained the pimp's expenses; web site to maintain for advertizing, rental apartment, bribe fees to the cops, fancy clothes to maintain the high class image...





No, I still didn't think it was fair, but I'd learned enough in the last few months to know that it often worked out that way. The strong always dominated the weak. At least these women didn't have it as bad as some. According to Satish, this pimp rarely used force to control his women. He didn't have to. He was a master at psychological manipulation and had his girls eating out of his hand. They did whatever he said and gave no trouble. Part of me was repulsed by it all, although that didn't stop me from envying the pimp, who seemed to be living the life of a raja.

As we left the party, Satish shared his boss's slant on things.



Ranjan says it's really just a business like any other. He says the girls are sex workers, not prostitutes, and the guys who turn them out are merely business entrepreneurs.

You buy that?



Hmm..maybe.  
Sounds better, naw?



Guess so.  
Anyway, it's their business  
what kind of work they  
choose to do.



These ones maybe **do** have a  
choice. But others..not so much.  
Especially the ones in the  
Sonagachi brothels.



You sure seem to  
know a lot about this  
stuff, kid.



Hey, I know a little about everything... AND everyone!

Oh yeah? Then what's the story on Kaliyah?

She a sex worker, or Ranjan's girlfriend?



Well, the Boss bought her out of a brothel, so she's not exactly a girlfriend, but she's too exclusive to be a sex worker.

I guess she's the Boss's property, since he paid for her.

Seems like Ranjan buys people like he buys furniture. Does he buy everyone who works for him?



Ha! Just about Bro! He bought you and me, didn't he?!

...uh... I guess...he did at that.



Chapter 8

# CAGE



3 months later at some rundown tenements on the outskirts of Kolkata.





Hold it right there!

Please! Give me a bit more time!

Time's run out, bud. Mr. Sutar wants his money and he wants it NOW!

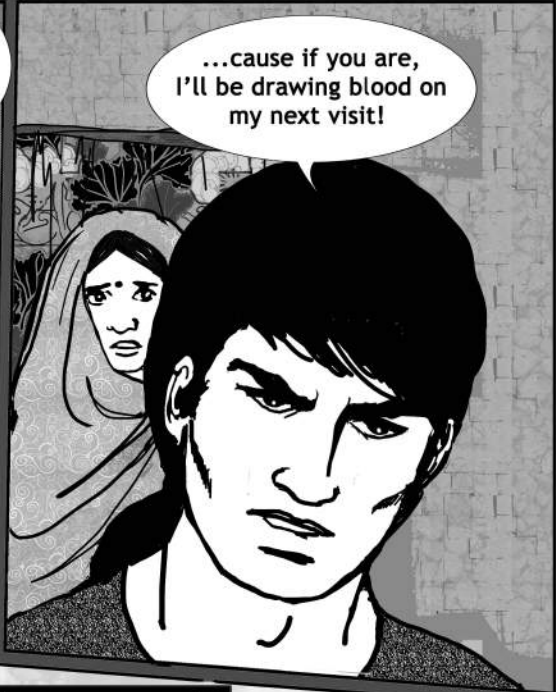
Mamma?





I'll get it, I promise. I just need time. I'll have it by tomorrow.

You have 24 hours. And you better not be screwing me around...



...cause if you are, I'll be drawing blood on my next visit!

Working for Ranjan had its perks, but roughing up poor saps who couldn't pay back their loans wasn't one of them. The only good thing about being an enforcer was that it got me respect.



Hey, let's roll that guy.

Are you nuts?! That's Wolf, Ranjan's new pet. A real mean son of a %\$#!

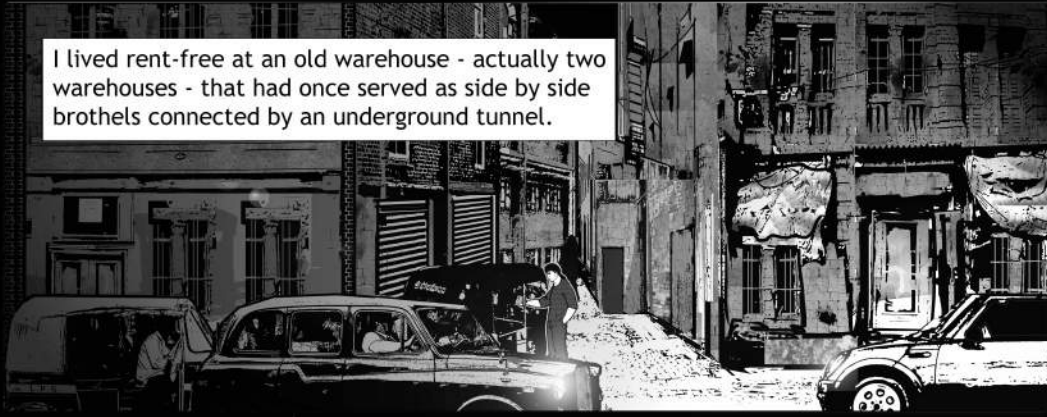
No kidding. Last week he put my cousin in the hospital. Believe me, he's a guy you don't wanna mess with.



Ranjan lent me one of his phones so I would be on call whenever he needed a job done or an errand run. He had about a dozen auto rickshaw drivers in his employ, so whenever I needed to go somewhere on business, I just called up one of them and they took me wherever I wanted. It was a good way to get around, but it enabled Ranjan to keep tabs on me. I knew his minions were reporting back to him on my activities. I felt like I was under constant surveillance. Satish had been right when he'd said Ranjan had bought me, especially when I learned that no one left the Boss's 'employ' until (and unless) he said so.



I lived rent-free at an old warehouse - actually two warehouses - that had once served as side by side brothels connected by an underground tunnel.



The tunnel had been used as an escape exit when cops came to call.



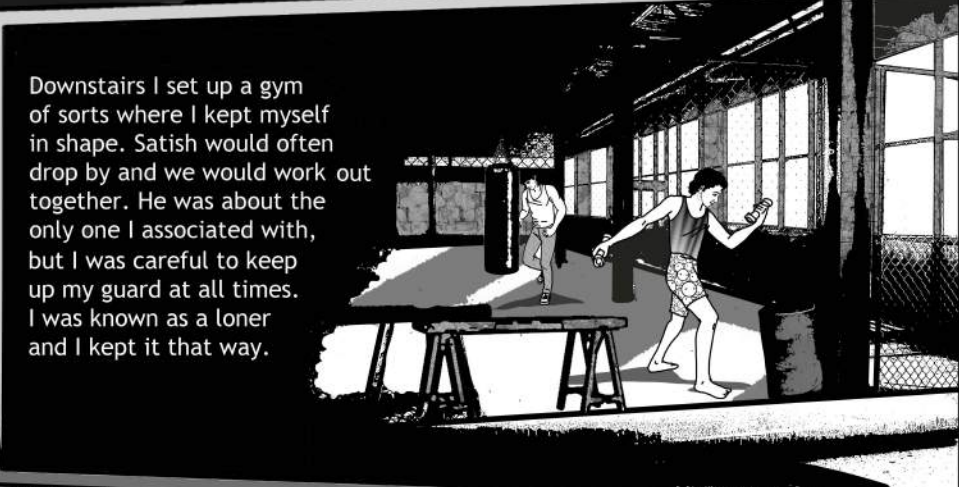
Ranjan stored his stolen merchandise behind the false walls and under the hidden trapdoors in the buildings.



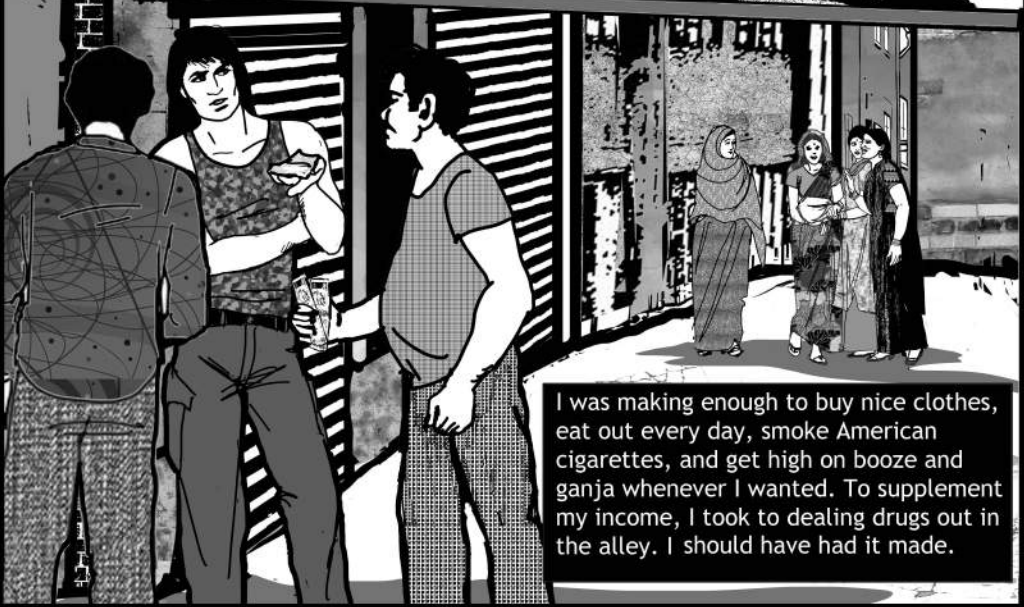
I took in deliveries, kept records, and collected payments at all hours of the night, when there was less chance of being observed. Even though Ranjan had deals with the cops to overlook certain 'suspicious' behavior, he still wanted things to remain discreet. I often didn't get to bed until 3 or 4 in the morning, and had to be on call early next day.



I picked a room on the upper floor of one of the buildings to live in. It wasn't much but it had everything I needed.



Downstairs I set up a gym of sorts where I kept myself in shape. Satish would often drop by and we would work out together. He was about the only one I associated with, but I was careful to keep up my guard at all times. I was known as a loner and I kept it that way.

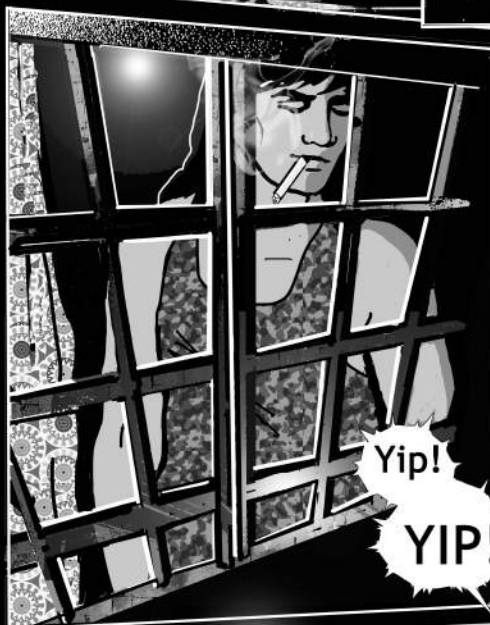


I was making enough to buy nice clothes, eat out every day, smoke American cigarettes, and get high on booze and ganja whenever I wanted. To supplement my income, I took to dealing drugs out in the alley. I should have had it made.





But I felt empty...and bored. At night I'd start thinking about Dad and Amma and wonder what they were up to. I longed to know how they were doing. Being alone all the time, with no one to talk to, really sucked.



Yip!  
YIP!



Maybe that's why I did what I did on the night of the dog fight.

Fricken mutts!

Grrrrr



I wanted to scare the dogs off so I wouldn't have to hear their high-pitched howling all night.

yap! yap!

snarl

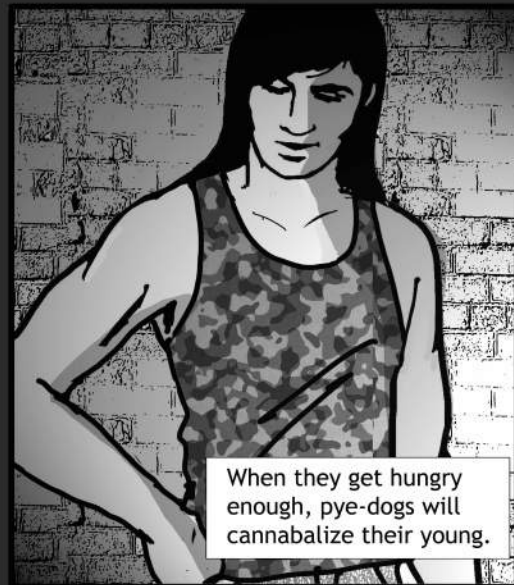
grrrrr

HEY!

I hated Indian dogs. They're feral scavengers, often dirty and diseased, and many are rabid. Every Indian kid is taught to stay away from them, and many boys use them for target practice.

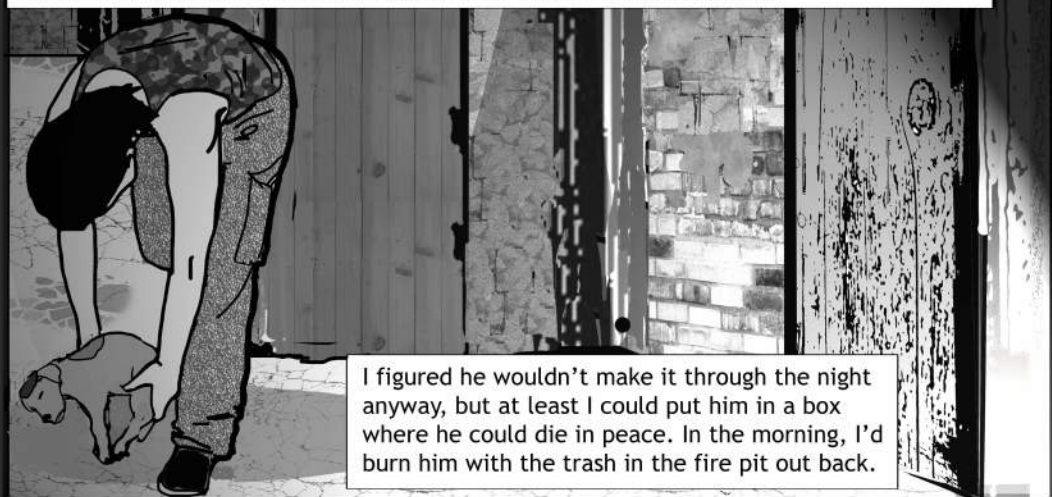


Then I saw what they had been fighting over.



When they get hungry enough, pye-dogs will cannabalize their young.

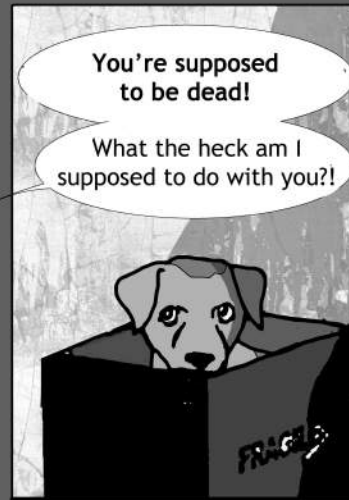
The pup was hardly breathing and as good as dead, but he didn't have any open wounds. He must have passed out from hunger. I should have left him where he was, but the idea of the dogs coming back and eating him alive didn't sit well with me.



I figured he wouldn't make it through the night anyway, but at least I could put him in a box where he could die in peace. In the morning, I'd burn him with the trash in the fire pit out back.



Only that's not what happened.



You're supposed to be dead!

What the heck am I supposed to do with you?!



Ugly little mutt!  
There's no way you're staying here!



Not a chance.



I named him Lazarus - Laz for short - after that guy in the Bible who was dead and then got raised to life by Jesus. Like him, Laz had seemed a gonner too.



But he turned out to be full of life.



He followed me around like a shadow.

And he kind of grew on me.



Besides that, he was really good at keeping the rats down.



Even helped me guard the place at night.



All in all I wasn't sorry I took him in.  
For one thing, it sure was a lot less boring  
with him around.



And thanks to Laz, I changed my opinion  
about pye dogs being worthless.



They could be intelligent and obedient...



..loyal and affectionate...



..even good listeners.

I swear, Laz. Sometimes I think  
you understand everything I say.



By the time he was 6 months old, Laz was already bigger than a lot of the full grown dogs in the area.

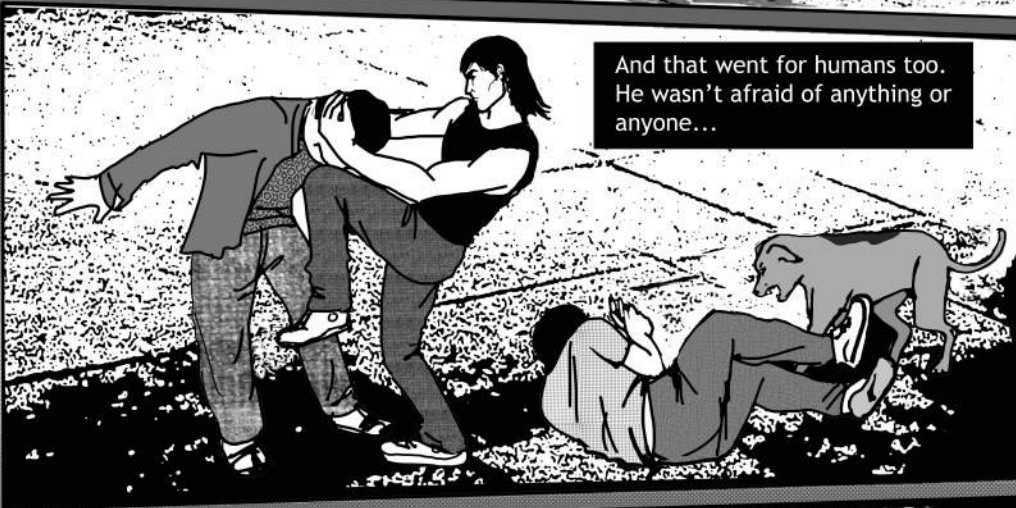


He could take down any one of them.

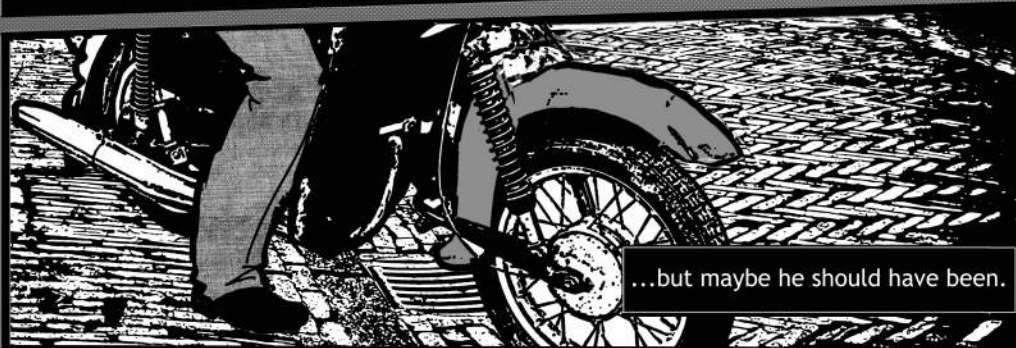
Grrrr...



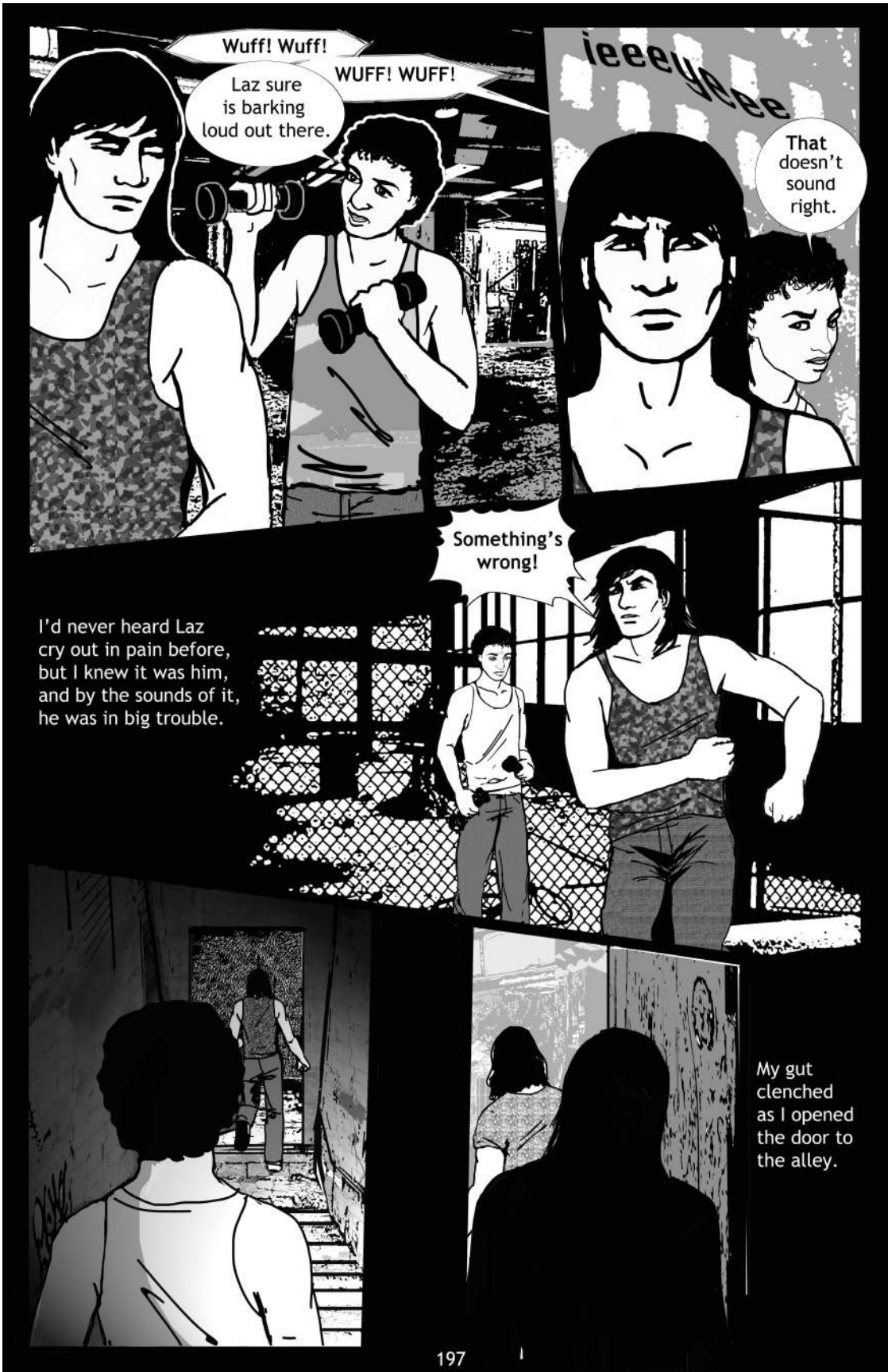
And that went for humans too. He wasn't afraid of anything or anyone...



...but maybe he should have been.







Wuff! Wuff!

Laz sure is barking loud out there.

WUFF! WUFF!

ieeee yeee

That doesn't sound right.

Something's wrong!

I'd never heard Laz cry out in pain before, but I knew it was him, and by the sounds of it, he was in big trouble.

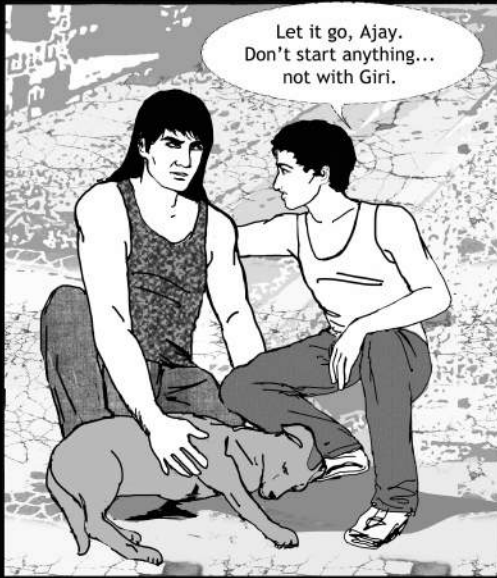
My gut clenched as I opened the door to the alley.



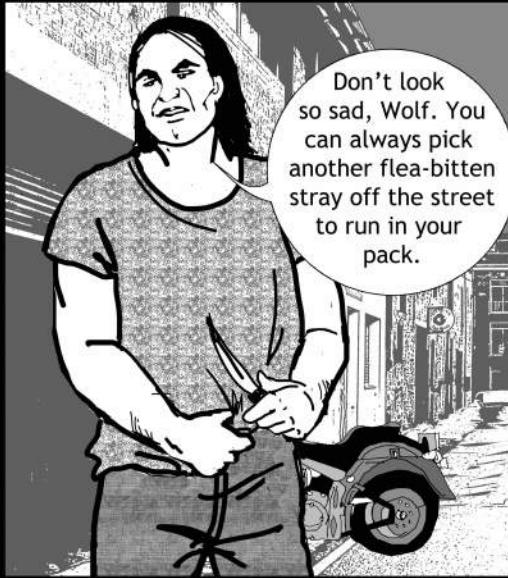


He's gone.

Yeah, well it serves him right for lunging at me.



Let it go, Ajay. Don't start anything... not with Giri.



Don't look so sad, Wolf. You can always pick another flea-bitten stray off the street to run in your pack.



By the way I need the key to the storage room. The Boss wants some stuff out of it.

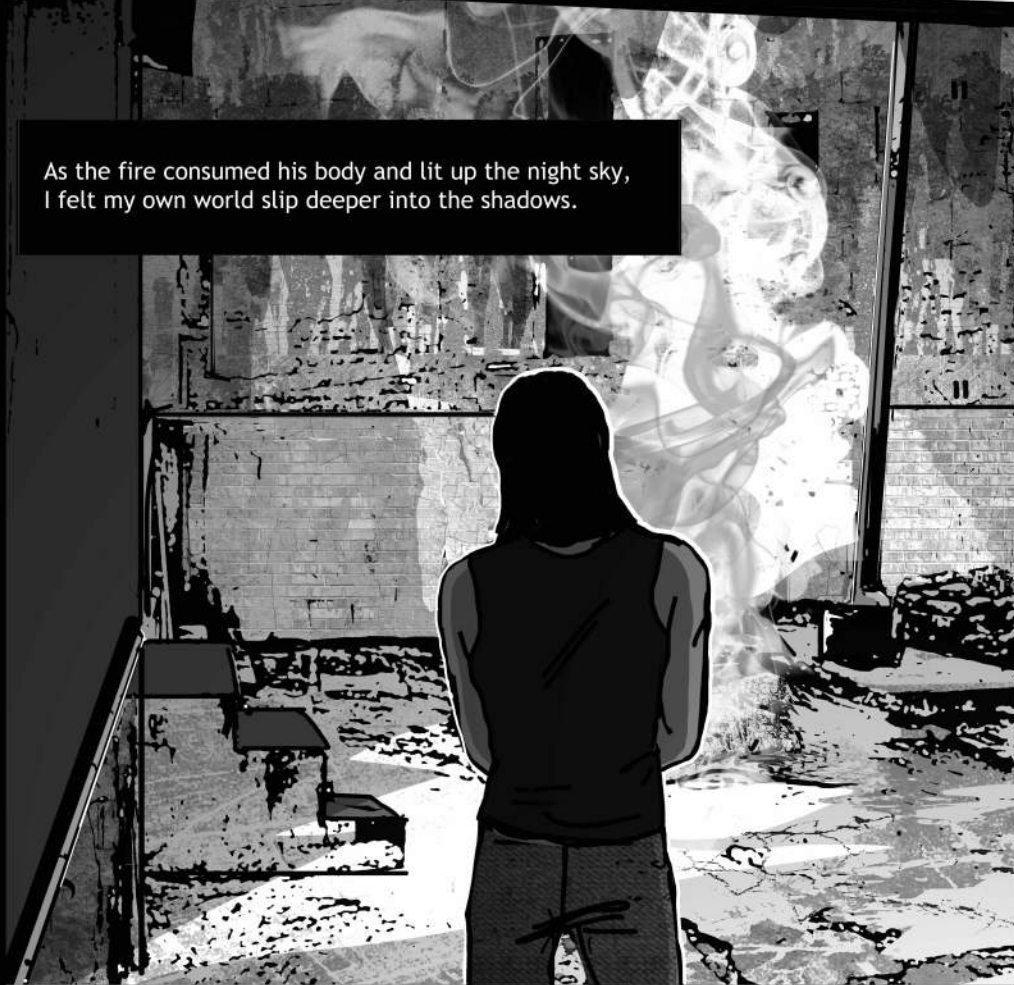
...and oh yeah, you owe me for the jeans.



Laz ended up on the trash heap out back...  
Guess it was his destiny all along.



As the fire consumed his body and lit up the night sky,  
I felt my own world slip deeper into the shadows.



A festering hatred for Giri simmered on the back burner of my mind, intensified by the aching loneliness I felt after losing Laz. Evenings were the worst because that was when my mind churned with schemes for revenge. A lot of nights I'd sit on the roof and chain smoke til dawn, envisioning bloodthirsty scenarios, all culminating in Giri's violent death.



Ranjan and some of the others figured in my plotting as well, but inevitably I'd scrap all these crazy ideas at daybreak. The morning light always brought a fresh reminder that I was caught in a trap from which escape was impossible...unless I counted death as a viable exit, which I didn't. I wanted to live, just not as a slave to these lowlifes. Somehow I had to break their hold over my life or I'd go under.



All that sleep deprivation was causing slip ups. I was making little mistakes, losing my cool for no reason, and I wasn't as quick or alert when my 'collection calls' for Ranjan called for rough handling.

A few times I came away from a fight the loser with cracked ribs and a broken nose. In my occupation, that spelled disaster. If I lost my intimidation factor, I'd be useless to Ranjan and thus expendable.



Distraction was what I needed...something to divert my thoughts and shift my focus.



And I knew just where to find it.

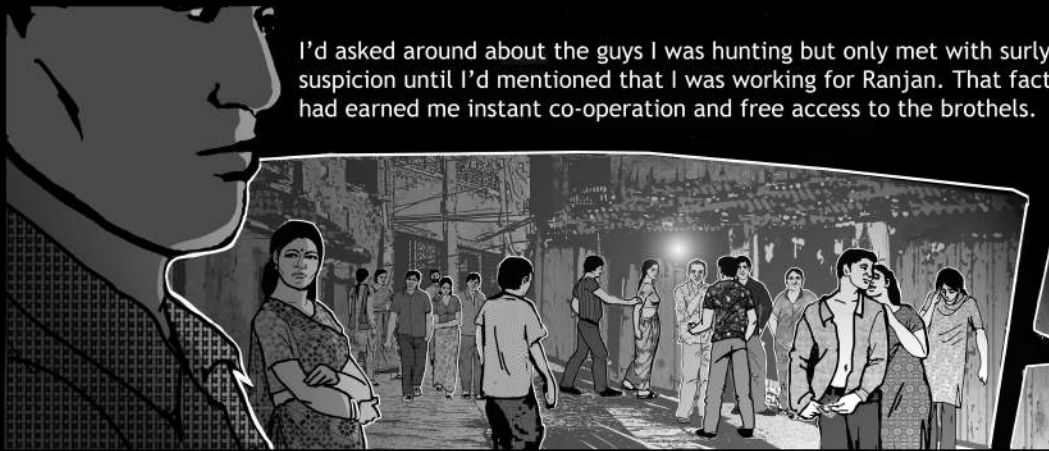




I'd been to Sonagachi before when looking for some guys who had screwed Ranjan on a drug deal. My hunt had led me straight to the brothel area and I could see why the deadbeats had chosen that place to hide out in. It was a veritable rabbit's warren with dark alleys and passageways twisting every which way, a real dangerous hellhole filled with underworld characters who'd kill you if you looked at them the wrong way.



I'd asked around about the guys I was hunting but only met with surly suspicion until I'd mentioned that I was working for Ranjan. That fact had earned me instant co-operation and free access to the brothels.



I got all the information I needed to corner the rats and exact retribution. Mukesh, one of the pimps, had been particularly helpful at the time. Now he came over to the rickshaw and reintroduced himself.

Hey Wolf!  
Ya here on business,  
or is this a pleasure  
visit?





Hey man, we got it all! What's your preference?

Pleasure I guess, if I find something interesting.

You like em thin or fat? Fresh or experienced? Hey! For a price, I can even get you a virgin! Ten years old! Came on the market yesterday. One of the whores here sold her kid to a pimp I know.

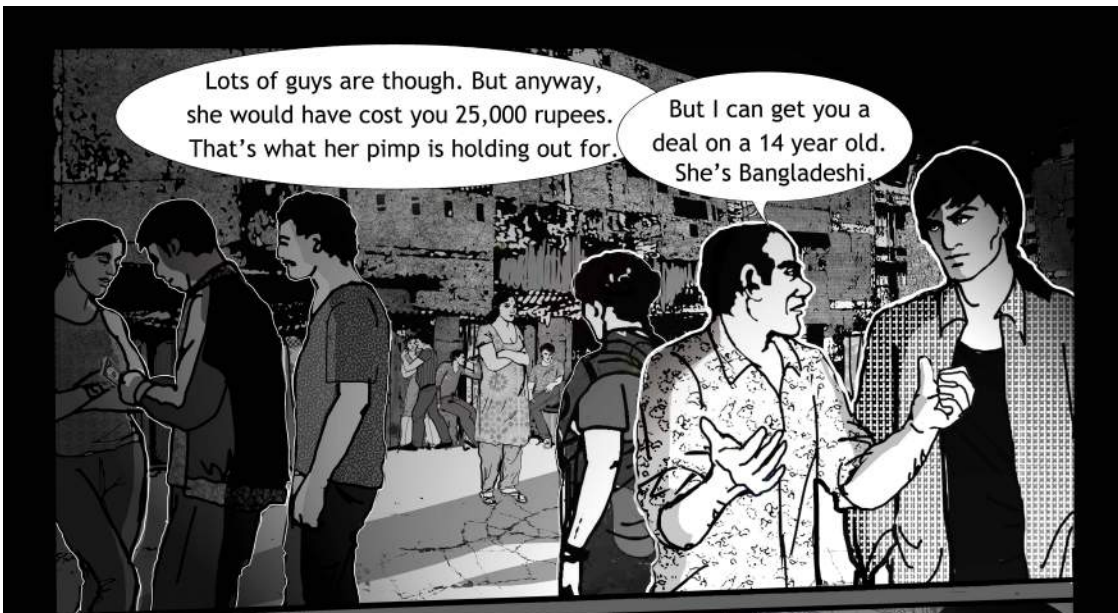
And sex with a virgin can even cure AIDs. Did you know that?!!

I couldn't believe the idiot acutally believed that old myth.

But I wasn't about to discuss it with him. He sickened me.

I'm not into doing kids.



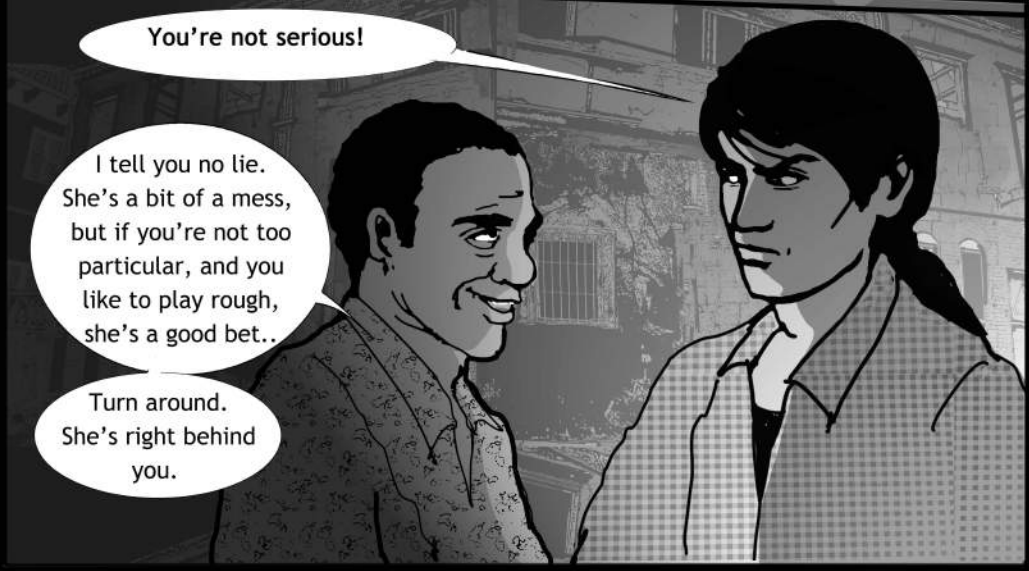


Lots of guys are though. But anyway, she would have cost you 25,000 rupees. That's what her pimp is holding out for.

But I can get you a deal on a 14 year old. She's Bangladeshi.



She hasn't even been broken in yet. Her pimp's having problems with that, so he'll give you a discount. Stupid b#@\$%# tried to run away 3 times. The guy had to beat the soles of her feet bloody so she could hardly walk, and she STILL tried to escape. Finally had to use cigarettes on her, but the burns don't show where it counts. You won't even notice.



You're not serious!

I tell you no lie. She's a bit of a mess, but if you're not too particular, and you like to play rough, she's a good bet..

Turn around. She's right behind you.





The scumbag was right. She was indeed a mess, and trapped in a cage much worse than my own..



I was referring to more than the stench but Mukesh didn't catch on.



Yeah, it's a dump, alright, but where else can ya get a whore for 2 bits? Ya get what ya pay for.

No... please

And ya sure can't expect much from these lazy cows. A lot of times ya hafta force them to work.

Stupid b#\$#\$ are always complaining and whining.

But I know a place you're sure to like. It's clean and doesn't smell so bad.

The whores are clean too. Even get checked regularly at a medical clinic. You're supposed to use condoms though, but slip the girls a few extra rupees, and they'll forget the rules.

The old madam who runs the house even has party rooms where you can buy liquor, hash, and ganja. Course the girls cost more, but in my opinion, they're worth it.

Your boss often goes there. Sharvani Sen is a friend of his. Matter of fact, he bought that fine-looking piece he lives with from her.

That bit of news was of interest. So that was where Ranjan found Kaliyah. I was suddenly curious about this Madame Sen and her brothel, so I agreed to check it out.





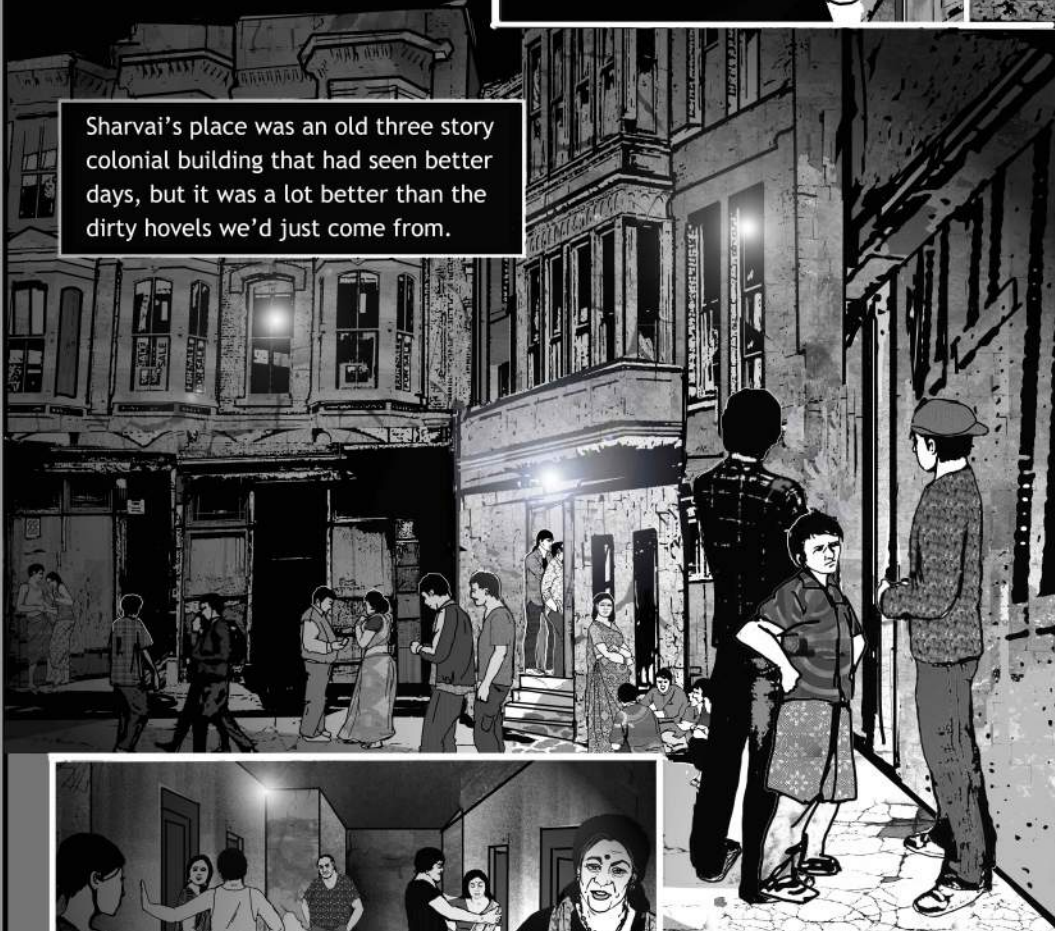
Brought you a new customer, Sharvani.

Name's Wolf. He works for Ranjan.



Ah yes. I've heard of you.

Sharvai's place was an old three story colonial building that had seen better days, but it was a lot better than the dirty hovels we'd just come from.



You'll like this place, Wolf. We aim to please so whatever you want, you just have to ask, and we'll be sure to get it for you.





Mukesh left after collecting his commission from Sharvani for bringing in a new customer- me. I was glad to be rid of him. He was no more unsavory than any of the other characters down there, but he made my skin crawl, especially the way he took pleasure in describing the cage girl's torture. It was all I could do not to deck him right there, but that would have caused problems I didn't need. So I forgot about him and gave my attention to Usharanya, my cute little tour guide. She'd been in the sex trade for 6 years, mostly working for Madame Sen, so she knew the ins and outs of the business. She pointed out the 2 goondas, Kunda and Behram, standing in the background, who kept order in the place and acted as bouncers if clientele got out of hand. They reminded me of Giri.



I told her I wanted to down a few beers, smoke a little ganja, and just spend some time with her before hooking up. She protested that she got paid by the trick so I could only have half an hour...unless I wanted to pay for the whole night. That was fine by me, so we went to one of the party rooms to relax and get acquainted.



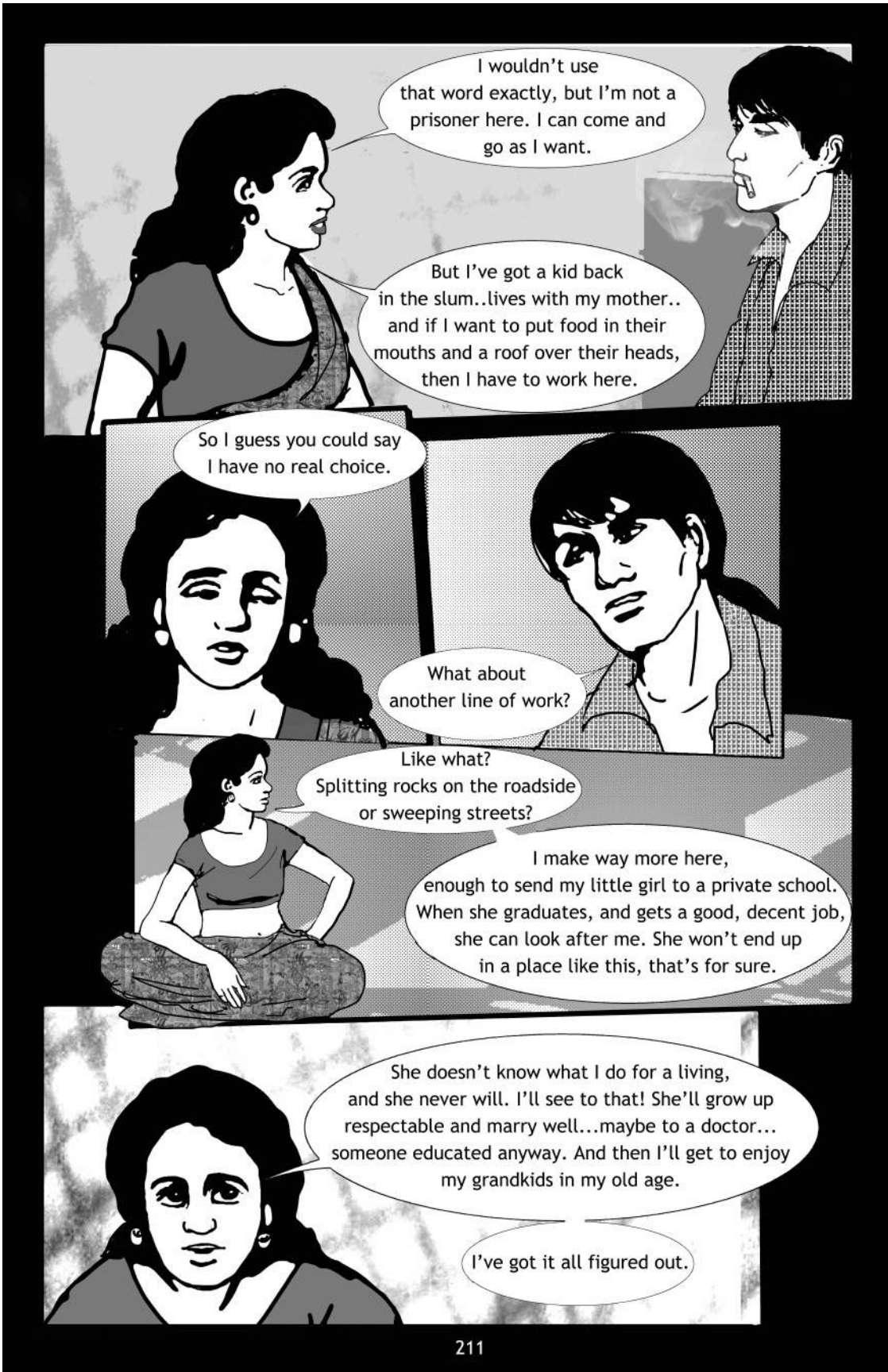
A bunch of johns were hanging around the party room, smoking, drinking, and gambling away their money. They didn't fit any stereotype. Some were old; others were college kids. Coolies mixed with government clerks. Married men who had families back in their home villages lined up along with the single guys, all looking for a night of paid sex. I watched a couple of cops come in, still in uniform, and after a few words with Sharvani, they too disappeared into a room with one of the girls. Usharanya explained that this was a common practice, insuring that they would continue to look the other way and not arrest Madame Sen for running a brothel. They numbered among the other regulars who came by weekly, and even daily, to use the prostitutes' services.

After a few beer I loosened up and began asking Usharanya about her life.



I especially wanted to know if she was in the trade by choice. I didn't like the idea of forced sex. The image of the caged girl was still fresh in my memory.





I wouldn't use that word exactly, but I'm not a prisoner here. I can come and go as I want.

But I've got a kid back in the slum..lives with my mother.. and if I want to put food in their mouths and a roof over their heads, then I have to work here.

So I guess you could say I have no real choice.

What about another line of work?

Like what?  
Splitting rocks on the roadside or sweeping streets?

I make way more here, enough to send my little girl to a private school. When she graduates, and gets a good, decent job, she can look after me. She won't end up in a place like this, that's for sure.

She doesn't know what I do for a living, and she never will. I'll see to that! She'll grow up respectable and marry well...maybe to a doctor... someone educated anyway. And then I'll get to enjoy my grandkids in my old age.

I've got it all figured out.



Her naivety startled me, but I never said anything. If she wanted to believe in fairytales, so be it. By this time I was feeling pretty high.



I suggested we finish the night in private, so Usharanya led the way upstairs to the 2nd floor.



The bonded girls work here, but we get to use some of the rooms as well.

Bonded?

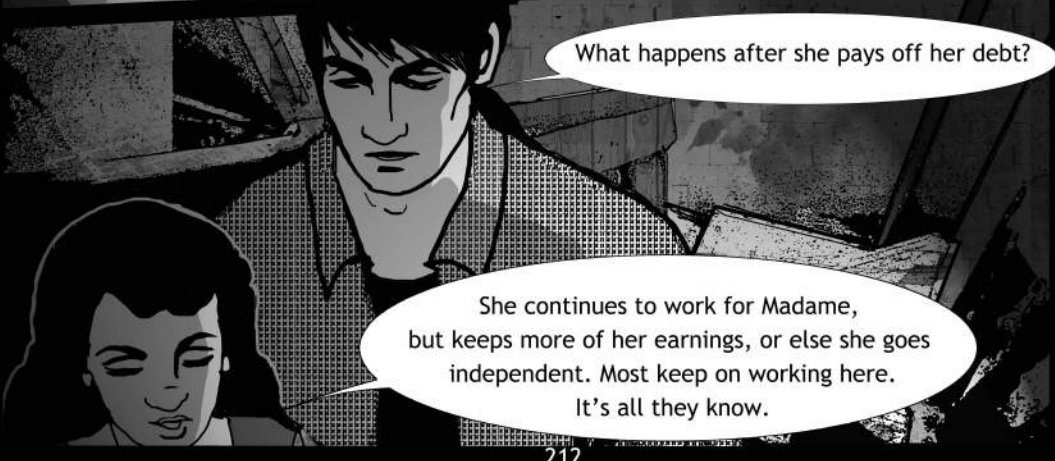
Yeah. They owe Madame money because she bought them.



Sometimes a family is so poor and has so many debts, that they sell their daughter to pay off their loans. The girl has to work for Madame until she pays off all that is owing.

It can take many years because she also has to pay back expenses, like clothes, food, make-up, medicine, and even fines from the police if she gets arrested.

What happens after she pays off her debt?



She continues to work for Madame, but keeps more of her earnings, or else she goes independent. Most keep on working here. It's all they know.

We found a room at the end of the hall that wasn't being used. As we headed towards it, I felt guilt wash over me, but I pushed the feeling aside. I told myself that it wasn't wrong to help a young mother provide for her family.



By paying for sex, I was actually helping to keep her daughter in school. And besides, sex work was just a job like any other. Women like Usharanya had to earn a living some way, and if they wanted to sell their bodies, that was their business. Who was I to judge?

As I left the brothel, it dawned on me that my logic was sounding a lot like Ranjan's. Actually I was changing my views on a lot of fronts, but the process was so gradual that I'd hardly noticed.



That didn't sit well with me. The last thing I wanted was to morph into a Ranjan..or a Mukesh. Hanging around those lowlifes was rubbing off on me.



It was real late so I called up my ride.



Yeah..same place you dropped me off. I'll be there in 15 minutes.. Gotta do something first.





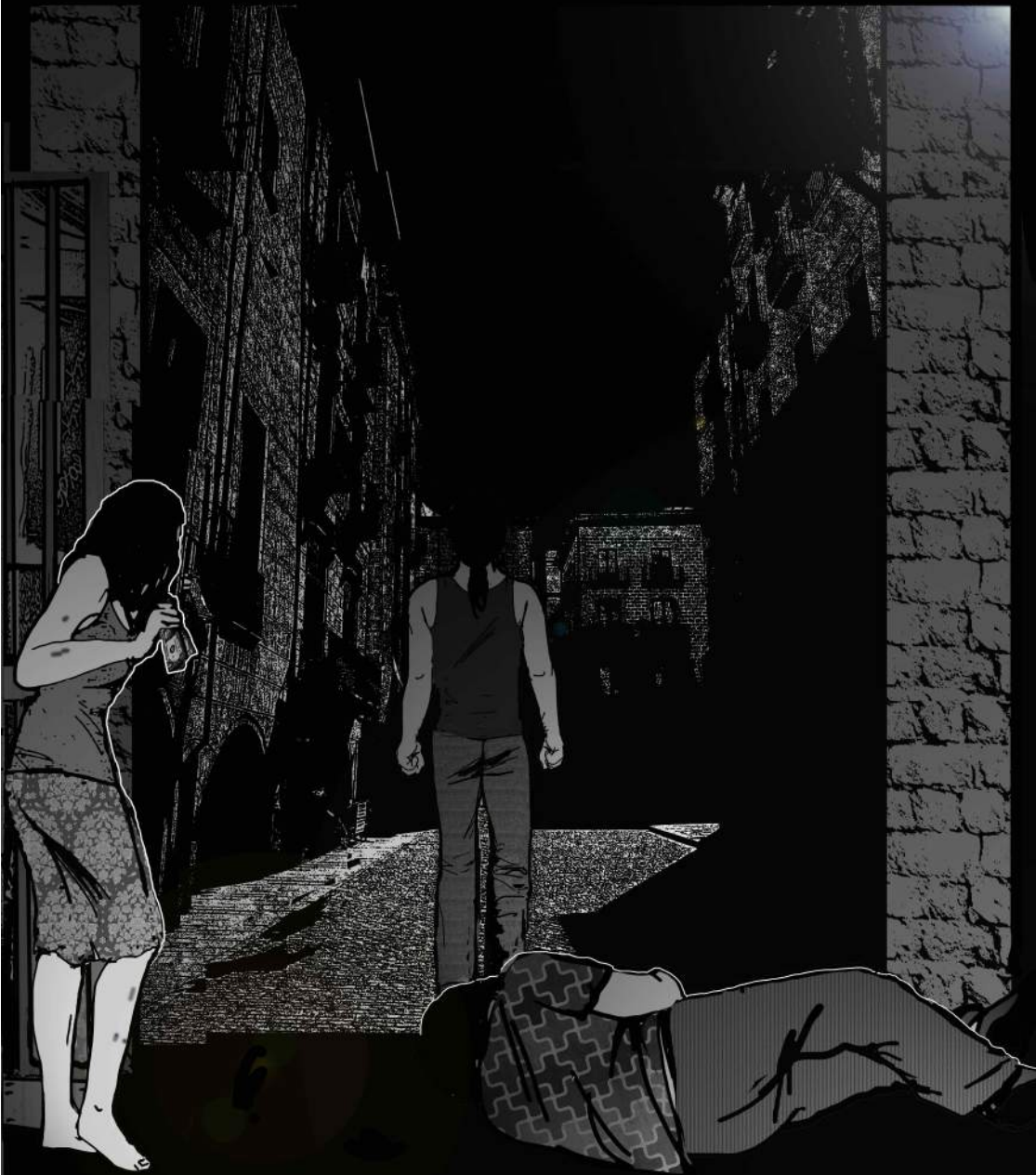


I'm letting you live, ya f\$#@%!! Which is more than you deserve!



Quite a stash here, fella.

And I'll be taking this too.



I don't know why I did that. Probably did no good anyway. The slaver would just hunt down that poor kid and torture her all over again...maybe worse than before. I could have upped her chances by killing the guy, but I hadn't sunk that low yet, and didn't want to. There were no regrets about fighting dirty and showing no mercy though. That's what he had been dishing out every day ...would do him good to sample a taste of that himself. Sure did me good to mess him up a bit, even if down the line it didn't change things...even if it made no real difference in this filthy, scum-ridden world. At least I was able to prove - if only to myself - that I wasn't part of the slime...at least not entirely...and because I identified with her, all beaten and bloody in that cage, I had to set her free, not just for her sake ...but for mine.

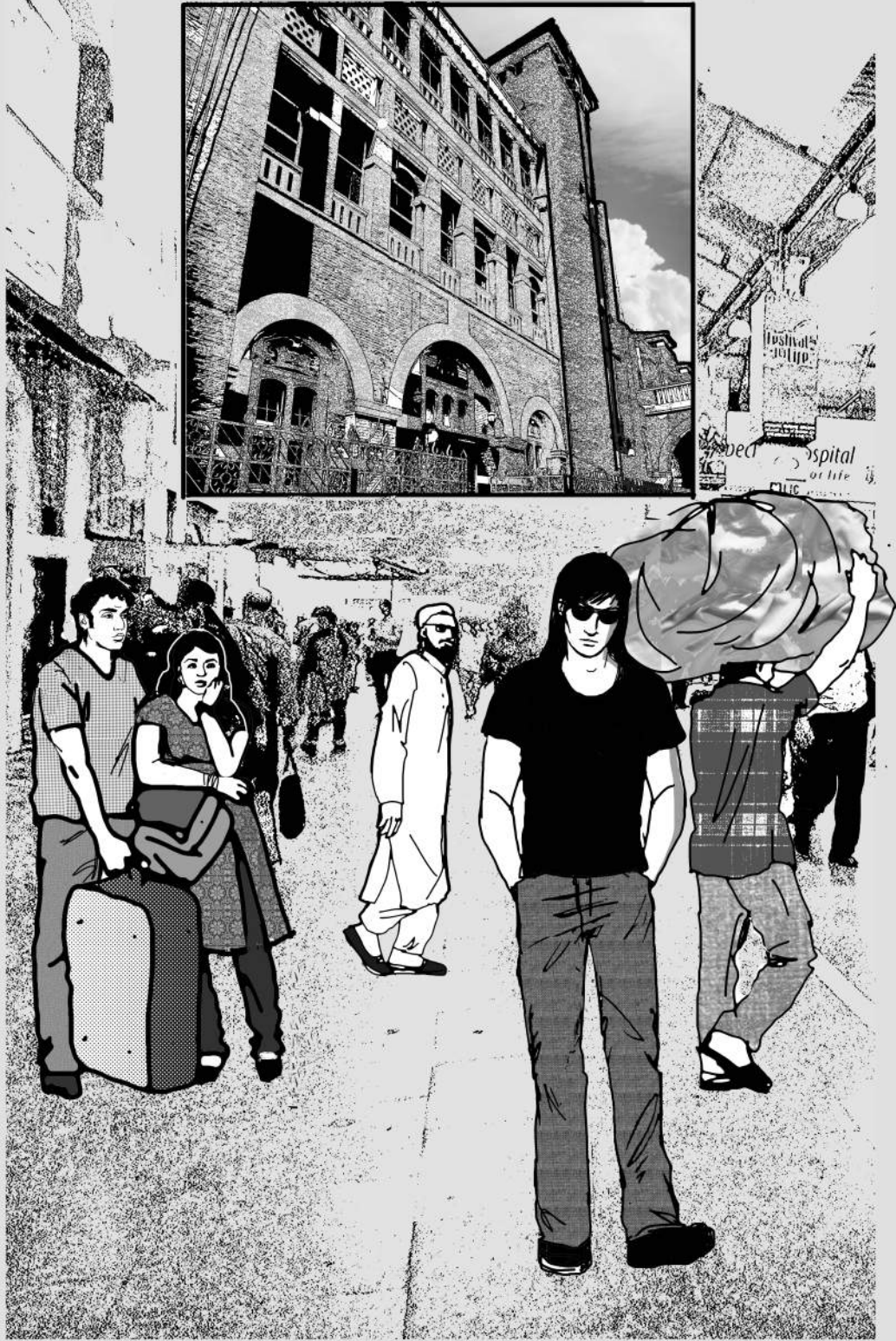


Chapter 9

# JAYANTI



Howrah Railway Station





It was business as usual, hunting deadbeat lowlifes in trouble with Ranjan. My quarry this time was a guy named Amit Singh, and according to an informant, he was here at the Howrah Train Station, planning to catch the one o'clock train to Hyderabad. It was my job to see that it didn't happen.

I had his description - middle-aged, short, overweight, and sporting a small goatee and moustache. He would be easy to spot.



He'd screwed Ranjan on some kind of deal and the Boss was livid. I didn't want to think about Mr. Singh's future. It was sure to be of short duration with a painful end.

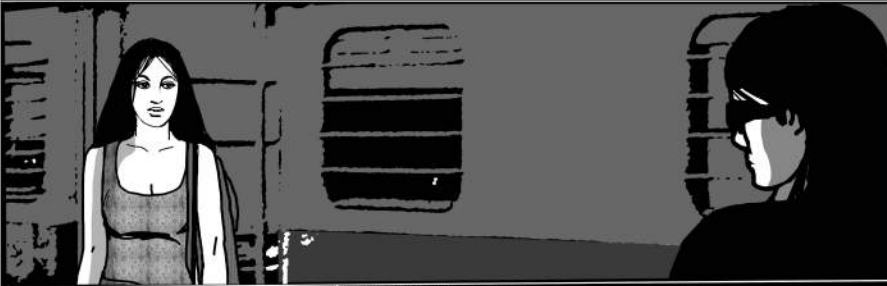


I spotted him just as the girl crossed my line of vision, and suddenly my focus faltered.





She looked to be traveling alone and she was young, maybe 15 or 16 at most, and drop dead gorgeous. I couldn't take my eyes off her as she stepped down on to the platform.

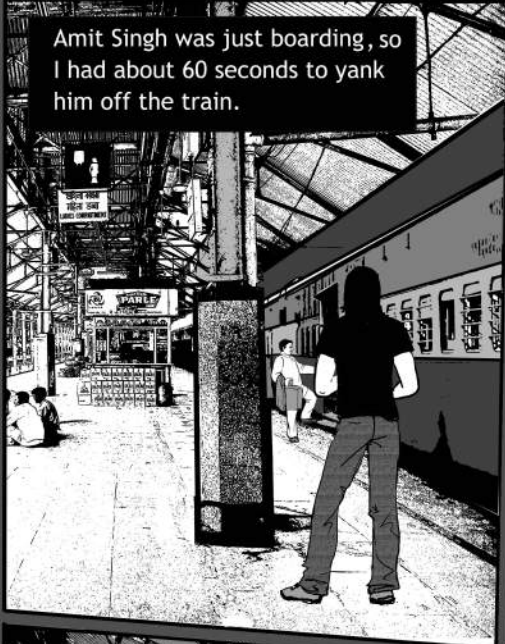


Our eyes met and I saw that the attraction was mutual. But what to do?



If I nabbed Amit, I'd blow any chance of meeting her, especially if she was truly alone and unprotected. I could already see the usual predators hanging around the station. Some were pimps looking for fresh meat for their prostitution rings. I recognized a few mafia types lurking around too. She'd likely be trafficked within the hour.





Amit Singh was just boarding, so I had about 60 seconds to yank him off the train.



However what happened next decided me against it.

I can get a taxi for you, Miss, and help you with your luggage.

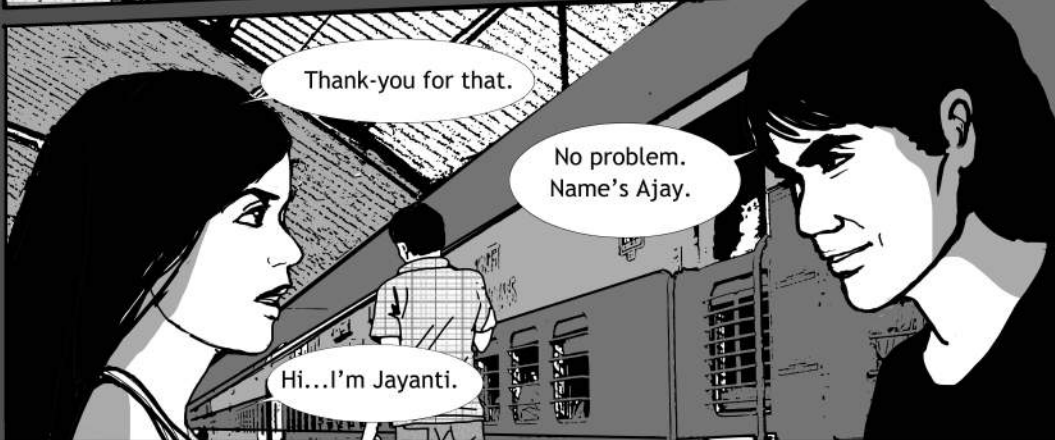
No thanks. HEY! Let go of my suitcase!

I recognized the girl's aggressor. I'd seen him around Sonagachi a few times. There was no time to lose. I had to act fast.

She said she didn't want your help. SO SCRAM!



You heard the lady.



Thank-you for that.

No problem. Name's Ajay.

Hi...I'm Jayanti.



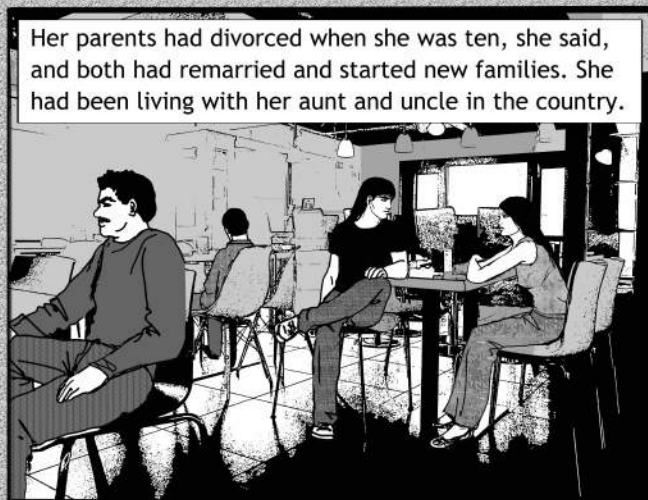
Jayanti was new to the city and had no hotel booking. I suggested we go for a coffee so we could discuss the best lodging for her. She didn't hesitate to accept my offer. She seemed to trust me, maybe because I had come to her rescue, or perhaps she was just the trusting sort. At any rate, she let down her guard completely and told me all about herself. I could have listened to her talk all day long.



She had a soft, slightly husky voice and a surprising air of confidence for one so young. (I had guessed her age correctly. She was barely sixteen.)



Most importantly, she was all alone in the world.

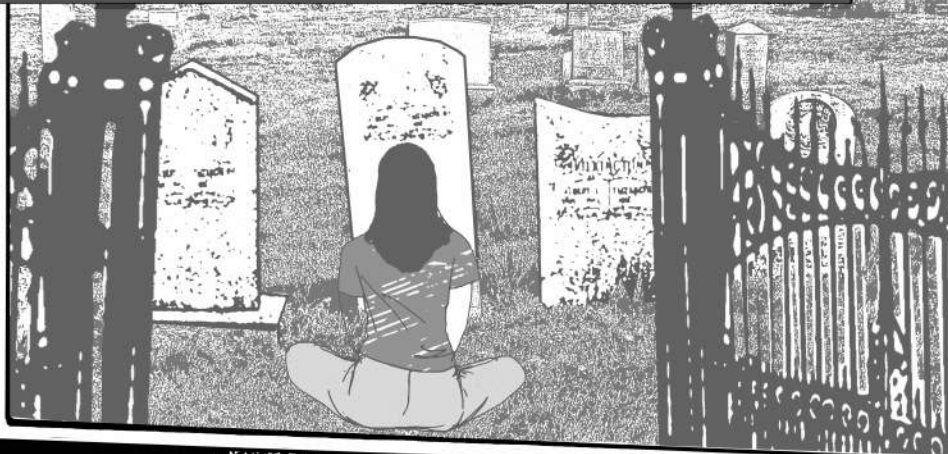


Her parents had divorced when she was ten, she said, and both had remarried and started new families. She had been living with her aunt and uncle in the country.







They were an older couple with no children of their own, so they doted on Jayanti, indulging her whims and catering to her every demand.




Then the uncle died of a heart attack shortly after Jayanti's 14th birthday. The aunt was struck down a year later with malaria, leaving her meagre savings to Jayanti in her will. The house, however, was rented so Jayanti was, in effect, without a home. Her mother came for the funeral and offered to take her in but mother and daughter had been separated for 5 years and Jayanti regarded her as a stranger. She had looked upon her aunt and uncle as her real parents. With them gone though, Jayanti saw herself as an orphan, and though she grieved for her loss, she also recognized an opportunity for greater self-reliance and freedom now that she was on her own. She had often found life with her 2 aging relatives too constricting.




They were so out of touch, you know? I couldn't even look at a boy, or Auntie would throw a fit. She never knew that I've had boyfriends since I was 12. I don't know what she would have done if she'd known that.




It was so suffocating! And I hated school. I mean, why study maths and science if you plan to be a fashion model?



Or an actor. I haven't made up my mind exactly which I'm going to be.



Do you think I'd have a chance in Bollywood?

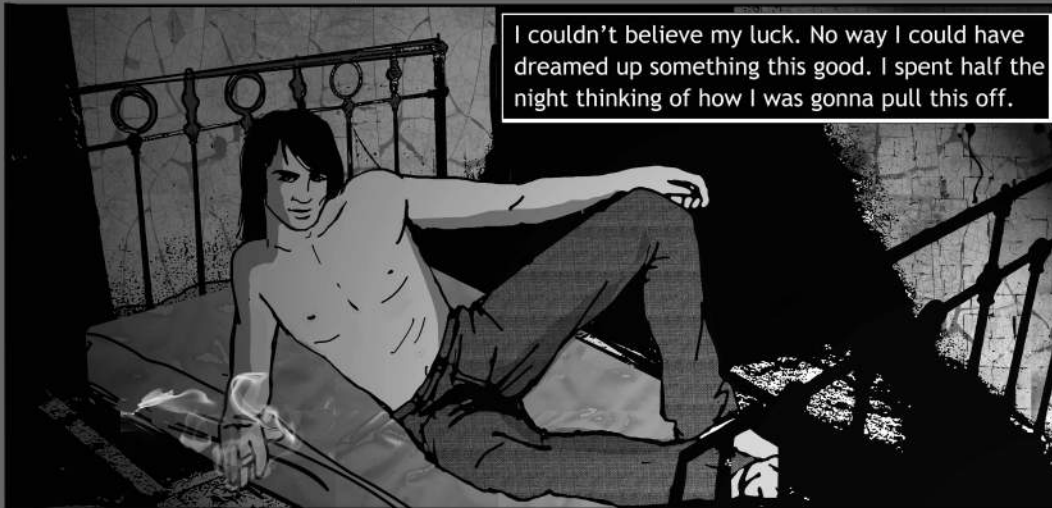


Oh yeah.

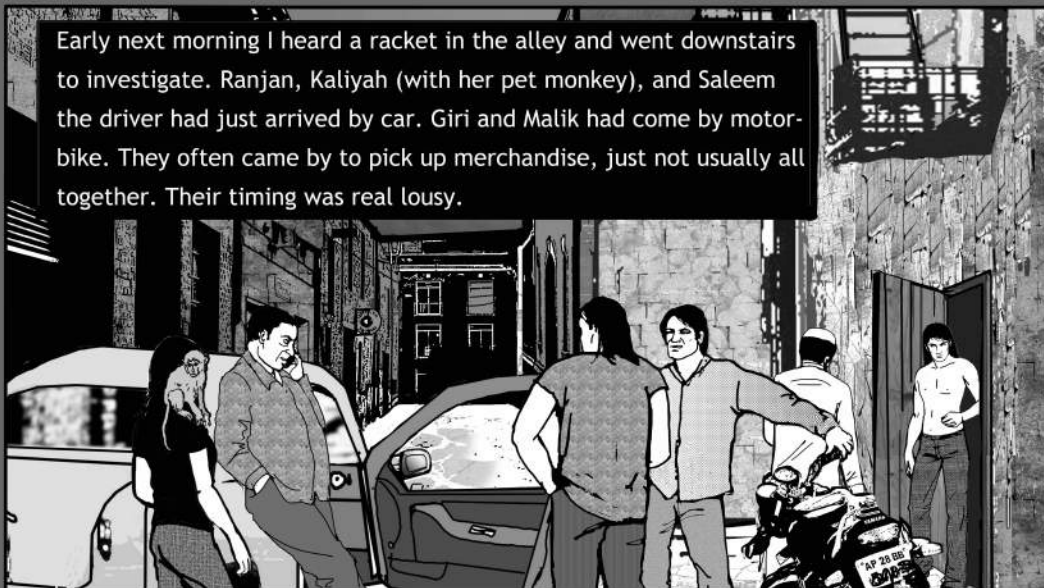
She had the looks for it alright, but she was as naive as a baby. There were predators all over the city, waiting to scoop up someone like her for the sex trade. She'd be so easy to dupe. She had very little money as well, which meant she would probably stay in some cheap hotel, making her even easier prey. Lucky for her that I'd seen her first.

I finally convinced her to stay at my place (no strings) and I promised to help her find a job. I told her that it just so happened I had some contacts at a fashion agency, which of course wasn't true, but Jayanti bought it and eagerly agreed to go home with me.

Jayanti may have been naive, but she wasn't exactly inexperienced when it came to guys. Like she said, she'd had boyfriends since she was twelve, and I doubt that they were all of the grade school variety. For one thing, she wasn't shy around me, and that told me a lot. I figured I could get her into bed by the end of the week, if not sooner. For now though I'd have to be patient. I told her I'd set up a cot in the next room and sleep there.



Early next morning I heard a racket in the alley and went downstairs to investigate. Ranjan, Kaliyah (with her pet monkey), and Saleem the driver had just arrived by car. Giri and Malik had come by motorbike. They often came by to pick up merchandise, just not usually all together. Their timing was real lousy.





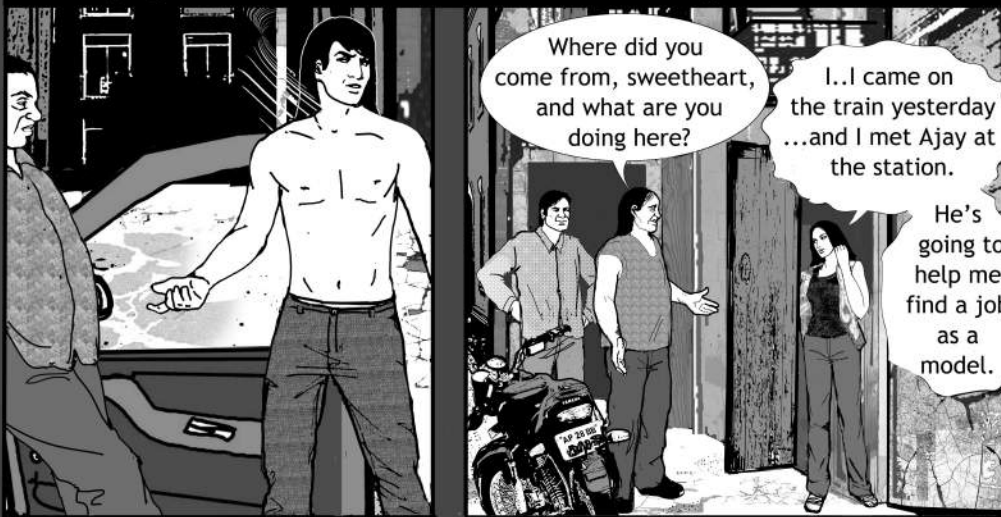
I had plans for the day and didn't want to waste my time with these characters, but I had little choice. Ranjan was the boss and he wanted to discuss some drug shipments.



Then Giri gave a loud exclamation.

Whoa Baby!

I whirled around and saw Jayanti stepping into the alley. She'd been asleep when I'd passed by the bedroom, but the noise must have awakened her and drawn her down to the alley. I groaned inside when I saw Giri make a beeline straight for her.



Where did you come from, sweetheart, and what are you doing here?

I..I came on the train yesterday ...and I met Ajay at the station.

He's going to help me find a job as a model.



Izzatso?  
Well, you can model for me anytime, honey, and I know just the place where you can strut your stuff.

Girl with your style can go real far.



I knew it would come to this. I knew there'd come a day when I'd face Giri in a fight and one of us would come off badly. The moment had finally come and there was no way I was backing away. I'd take him down or die trying. Luckily I got in the first blow, taking him by surprise.





I'd watched Giri in fights before so I anticipated some of his moves and I managed to get in a few good punches. However he weighed about 40 pounds more than me, and all of it was muscle. He was the Indian version of the Hulk - big, mean, and nasty.

I summoned up every dirty street-fighting trick I could think of, and used my greater agility to advantage. I was holding my own and the contest could have gone either way, when Giri suddenly decided to tip the scales in his favor.



The sight of the knife brought ugly associations to mind.



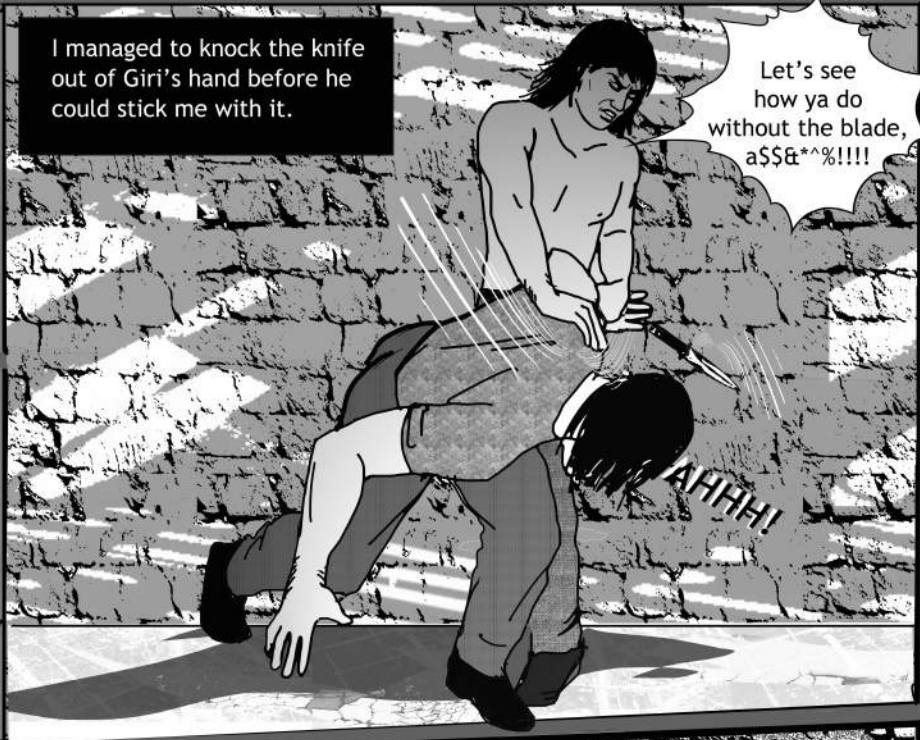
It also set something off deep inside me - an explosion of rage and hate so powerful that I shook with the impact. It infused my muscles with a toxic rush of adrenaline and filled my mind and heart with murderous intent. From that moment on I knew the fight would go my way and I was determined to see it through to the end - Giri's end.



I managed to knock the knife out of Giri's hand before he could stick me with it.

Let's see how ya do without the blade, a\$\$&\*^%!!!!

AHHH!



Hatred can be more deadly than any knife, and peirce more deeply....



UGHH!

creating a hunger so intense that only blood will satisfy.





It had come to a point where it was no longer enough to just knock Giri down and win the fight. The added humiliation of being beaten in front of his boss and peers didn't satisfy me either. I wanted Giri gone and I fought violently to that end, punching away at him as he became more and more dazed and confused.



When he sagged to the ground, I hauled him up against the wall and kept pounding. Each blow was retaliation for the horror I'd felt in that back alley hearing Sanjit gurgling in his own blood, and later seeing Laz lying dead at Giri's feet, his life's blood soaking into the pavement. This scum deserved to die and I'd be doing the world a favor by killing him. No one would miss him.







Then the Boss got involved.

gukkk



Okay, Wolf. You proved your point. We don't want a crowd of witnesses.

Let him go.



Take Giri to the hospital. You can use the car. Then come back for Kali and me. And if anyone asks, he fell down a flight of stairs.



You're a real berserker when you get going, huh Wolf?



What's that?



They were legendary Norse warriors who fought like you - wild and out of control.

Not that I mind. Your talents can come in useful.

Just don't go killing off my staff.



Saleem returned to pick up Ranjan and Kaliyah, and after they left, I turned to face Jayanti. Her expression said it all. Fear and horror mixed with confusion, were all there mirrored in her eyes. I didn't blame her for being shaken. I'd lost complete control, like a rabid animal rending it's prey to shreds. "Beserker" Ranjan had called me. Sounded about right because a killer instinct, ravenous and all-consuming, had possessed me in that fight until all I could think of was murdering Giri. Whoever Adam Jayaram had once been, he was now gone forever. Sad thing was, I was afraid I'd probably scared Jayanti off.



Guess you're afraid to stay here now. Don't worry. I wouldn't hurt you.

But that ape would have.

You were protecting me, then?



Yeah ... but there's more to the story.

Well, I was scared, but I think it's kind of romantic. No one ever fought over me before.

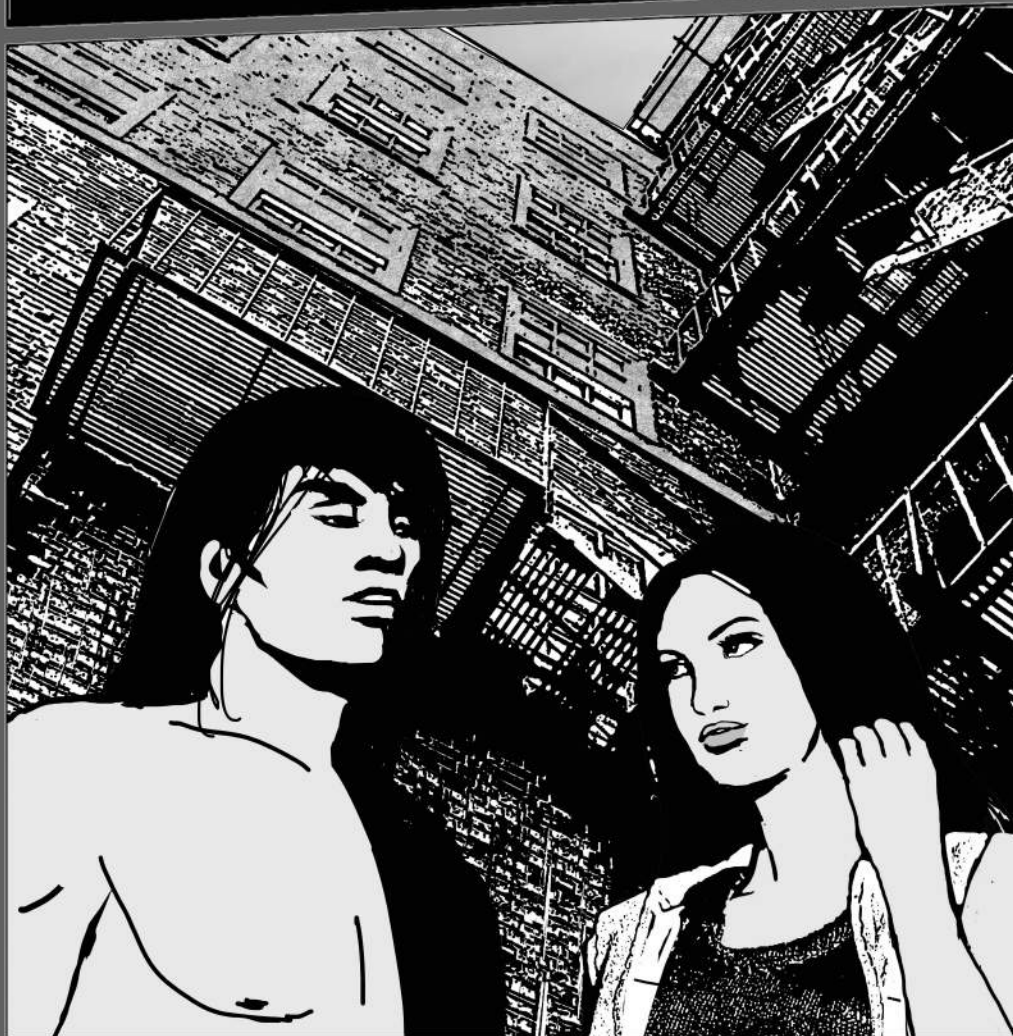


She thought 2 guys trying to kill each other was 'romantic'. Go figure. Right there I decided to wise her up a bit. Her blind trust had me feeling guilty.

I'm no hero, Jayanti. Not even close.



They say confession is good for the soul. Maybe so, but in this case, it also got me what I wanted - favor with Jayanti. After admitting that I lied about knowing people in the fashion industry, I half expected her to angrily collect her things and stomp away. Instead she asked me why I had deceived her. So I told her the truth; that I'd wanted her to come home with me: that the guy who accosted her at the train station was a pimp; and that I'd wanted to get her away from danger any way I could. I saw from her expression that my 'romantic' image was now indelibly fixed in her mind. In her eyes I had somehow morphed from insane Berserker to Sir Launcelot. I knew chicks could be weird and hard to figure out, so I didn't bother to try. I just accepted my good fortune and let her believe that I was the noble type. Her trusting face almost had me believing it. When she asked me if she could stay a few days until she found a job, I began to think maybe there really was a God. Finally something was going my way. I told Jayanti she could stay as long as she wanted and brushed aside her protestations that she was imposing. I assured her that I really didn't mind in the least sleeping on a cot in the next room for a few days .Yeah. Right! What I didn't tell her was that she was the best thing that had happened to me in a long while and that I had every intention of getting her to stay indefinitely...AND that we wouldn't be sleeping in separate rooms for long.







That night I took Jayanti to a nice restaurant and really poured on the charm. We talked about a lot of things over dinner, and then walked to a liquor store for some wine. I also had some ganja back in my room and she was eager to try it. She was new to drugs and had never even taken a drag from a cigarette. A real innocent she was, but that would change. I planned to introduce her to a lot of new experiences as soon as we got back to my place.

By the end of the evening we were both feeling pretty mellow, and sex just followed naturally...



..fulfilling every fantasy I'd entertained the night before.



Ironically it wasn't just Jayanti who had been introduced to new experiences that night. For the first time in my life I'd made love to a woman who wasn't a prostitute and it was an entirely new kind of high for me, one I wanted to experience over and over again. I wanted this woman badly and I was determined to keep her with me any way I could.



So next morning I told her that she needn't bother about a job. I would look after her. I figured if she was dependent on me, she'd be more likely to stick around.



She hesitated at first. It was hard for her to give up her dream of becoming a model, but I told her I'd keep her in high style and she could model all the clothes I'd be buying for her.



I soon found out that Jayanti's 'style' was anything but cheap. She had a penchant for expensive western clothes, shoes, and hand bags - preferably brand name. She soon ferreted out every shopping mall in Kolkata and dragged me along with her to visit them all. She also liked to party and consequently we went out a lot, visiting bars, clubs, and restaurants whenever possible. All of it was costing and I had to step up my drug business just to keep up. But I didn't complain. Jayanti was worth it.



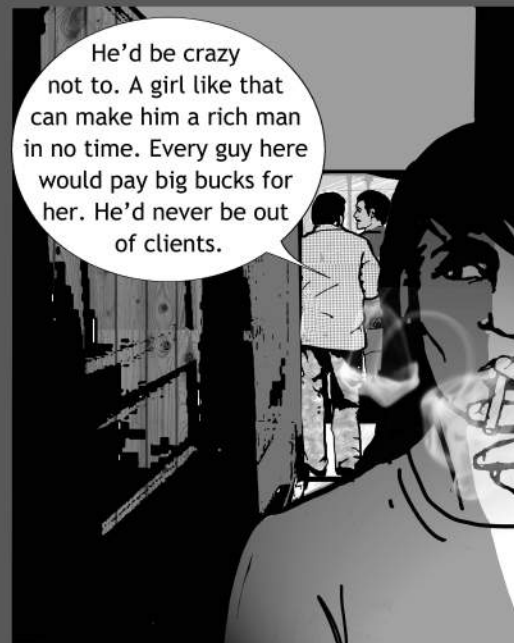
I was a loner by nature, habit, and necessity. Jayanti was the opposite. She craved social contact, so for her sake, I cultivated a set of friends I didn't need or particularly like. Most of them were associated with Ranjan's network of pimps, drug dealers, and crime operators of one kind or another.

Jayanti was a real hit with them. I couldn't blame them for the lustful stares they directed her way whenever she entered a room. She was a real stunner alright. And the best part was she belonged to me. That was pretty much understood by everyone, including Giri, who now gave us a wide berth whenever our paths crossed. After he got out of the hospital, I had no more problems with him. I think Ranjan had something to do with that. Said he didn't like 'his boys' fighting with one another. It was bad for business. That was fine by me. I'd gotten my revenge. If Giri stayed out of my way, I'd do him the same favor. Otherwise...well...he wouldn't be walking away from the next fight, if there was one. And if any of the other guys had ideas of hustling my girl, they'd get some of the same. Not that I could stop them from thinking about it...as I found out at one of the parties we attended.



How did Wolf get a goddess like that? Man! I'd pay 200 bucks for just one night with her!

You think he'll pimp her out?



He'd be crazy not to. A girl like that can make him a rich man in no time. Every guy here would pay big bucks for her. He'd never be out of clients.



Jayanti and I lived together for 6 months before the strain of our lifestyle caught up with us. By that time we were both drinking heavily and smoking up a lot, and when we were sober, we fought. Usually we argued about money. Jayanti hated where we lived, and it really bugged her that we didn't have wheels and had to depend on auto rickshaws to get around. I complained about her spending. Sometimes we went for days without speaking to one another. At those times I'd find her on the bed, poring over fashion and movie magazines, dreaming of a better life under the bright city lights of Mumbai or Delhi.



I knew she was dissatisfied and that angered me, especially when she started going out during the day without telling me, and forgetting to turn on her cell phone.



She'd slip out while I was out doing jobs for Ranjan and be gone for hours. Usually she was all dolled up so at first I thought she was job hunting and didn't want me to know it. She'd tell me she had gone for a walk or had been shopping, but I didn't believe her for a minute. She was up to something.

I began to suspect that she was fooling around with another guy. That thought ate away at my brain like cancer. Jayanti belonged to me and the idea of some jerk taking what was mine filled me with murderous rage. But I didn't have proof so the next time she stepped out, I followed her and saw her go into a coffee shop downtown.





How did you - ?

Know your friend was a hooker?

Mandy's an escort.

Same diff. How'd you meet her?

We ran into one another at the mall. We meet here for coffee sometimes.

I meant to tell you before, Ajay, but I thought you might not like me hanging out with her.

I don't.

?!

You're not to see her again, Jayanti.

I choose my own friends, Ajay, just like I choose my boyfriends.

And Mandy's fun to be with. When I told her I was looking for a career, she told me about the escort business. It sounds real interesting. After talking to her, I'm seriously thinking of trying it.



Just like that she said it. Right out of the blue. A two by four across the side of the head couldn't have hit me harder.

YOU WANNA BE A WHORE?!!!

See? That's the kind of response that shows you know nothing about it.

Escorting isn't the same as streetwalking.

It's high class sex work.

You can make big money at it, choose your own hours, and even pick your clients. Lots of girls do it.. housewives, college students, movie stars... It's a real career opportunity.

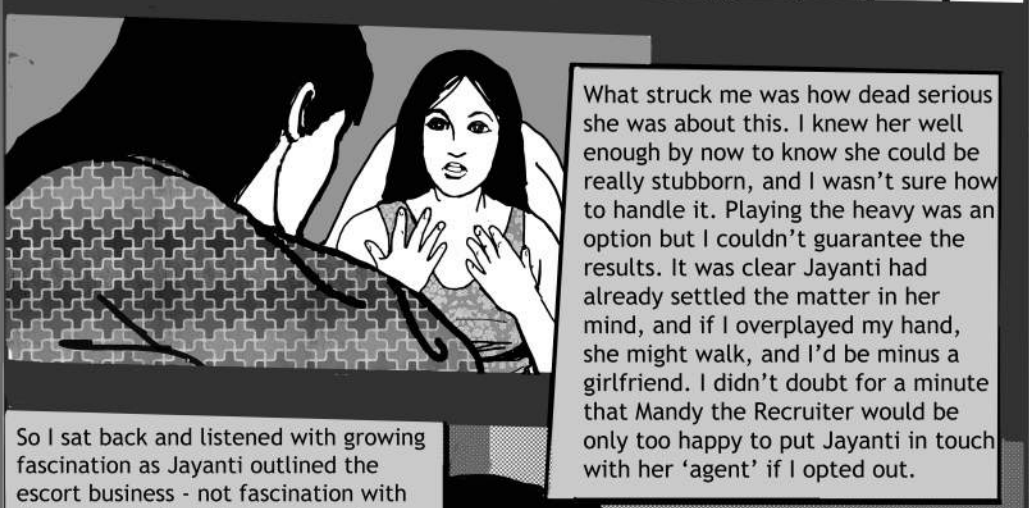
She sounded like a TV ad, parroting the spiel her new hooker friend had probably given her. I'd heard it all before, and seen it first-hand at Ranjan's party. So yeah, I had to agree it was a 'career opportunity' alright, but not one that many guys wanted for their wives and girlfriends. And Jayanti had no idea what was really involved, whereas I, on the other hand, wasn't fooled for a minute.

Is Mandy recruiting you for her pimp, or does she run her own house?

Neither. She works as an independent. She and 2 other girls share an apartment and their manager does all the organizing.

Uh huh. Sounds like a pimp's stable to me.

He's not a pimp. He's like an agent. He handles security, transportation, sets up client visits..



So I sat back and listened with growing fascination as Jayanti outlined the escort business - not fascination with the content of what she was saying (I knew more about escorts and call girls than she did), but I was enthralled with her powers of persuasion. On her lips, the tired old arguments somehow became convincing. She was careful with her wording, never referring to the escorts as prostitutes. They were 'sex care providers'. That made it sound like a profession right up there with healthcare and community service. She introduced me to a few terms that were new, like 'girlfriend experience' where the escort pretended to be a wife or girlfriend, and 'porn star experience' which had fewer limits on the type of sex shared, and often without a condom.



'Incalls' were when the client visited the escort at her apartment or hotel, while 'outcalls' had the escort meet the client at his place.

Jayanti was doing a fair job of holding my attention, and maybe she read my silence as acquiescence, because all of a sudden she got right to the point.



Remember that guy at the party?

The one who said he'd pay \$200 for a night with me?



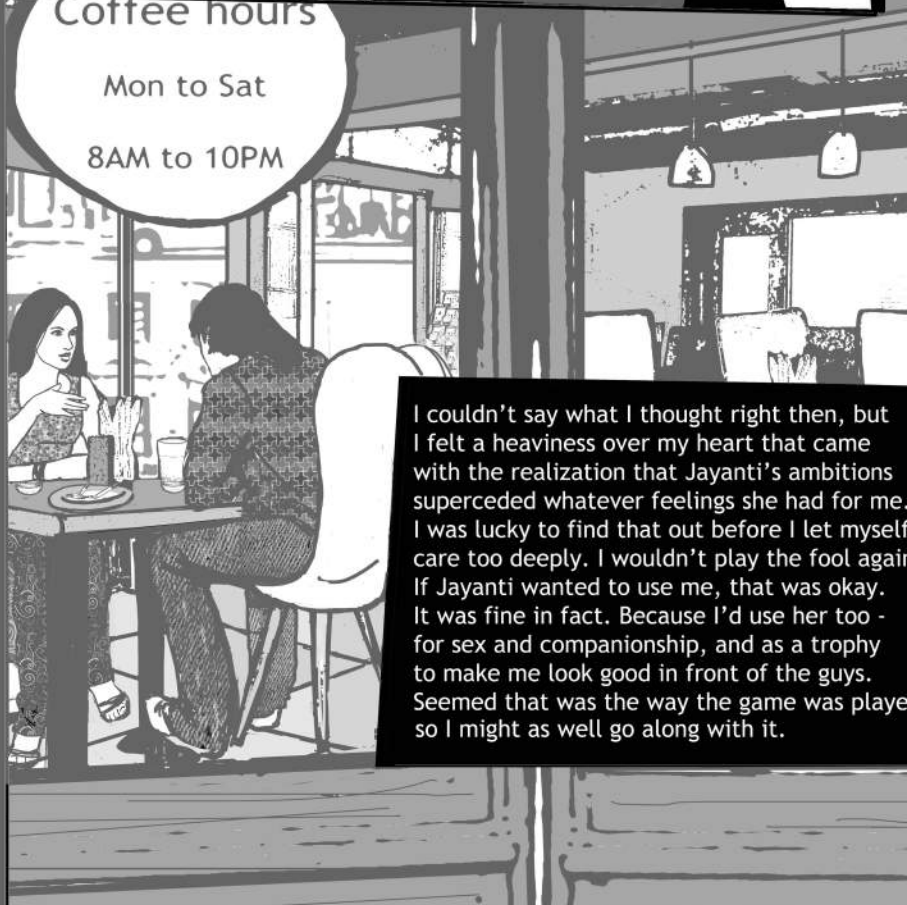
I remember.

Well, you could..  
..you know..maybe arrange an outcall for me... at that guy's place.  
What do you think?

Coffee hours

Mon to Sat

8AM to 10PM



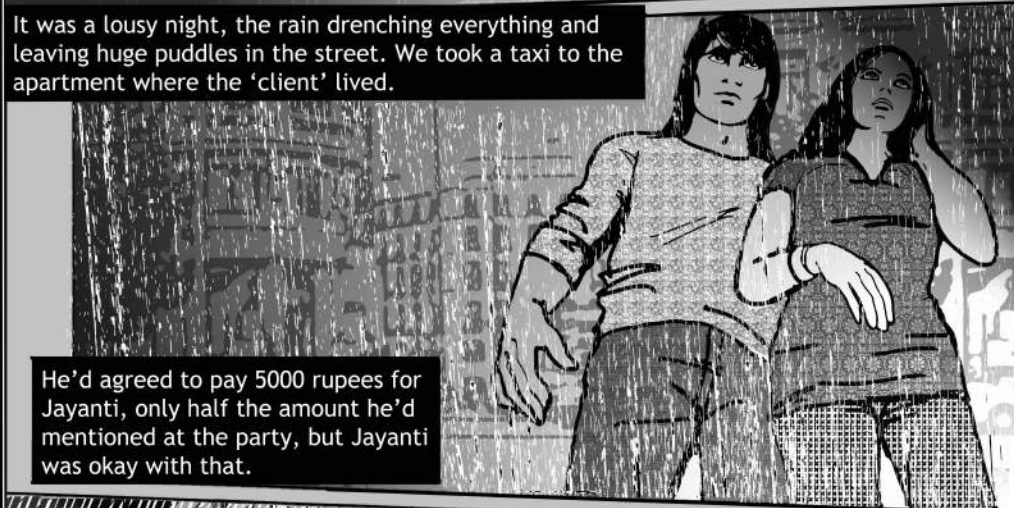
I couldn't say what I thought right then, but I felt a heaviness over my heart that came with the realization that Jayanti's ambitions superceded whatever feelings she had for me. I was lucky to find that out before I let myself care too deeply. I wouldn't play the fool again. If Jayanti wanted to use me, that was okay. It was fine in fact. Because I'd use her too - for sex and companionship, and as a trophy to make me look good in front of the guys. Seemed that was the way the game was played, so I might as well go along with it.



That week I approached the guy who had expressed interest in Jayanti at the party, and set up a date.

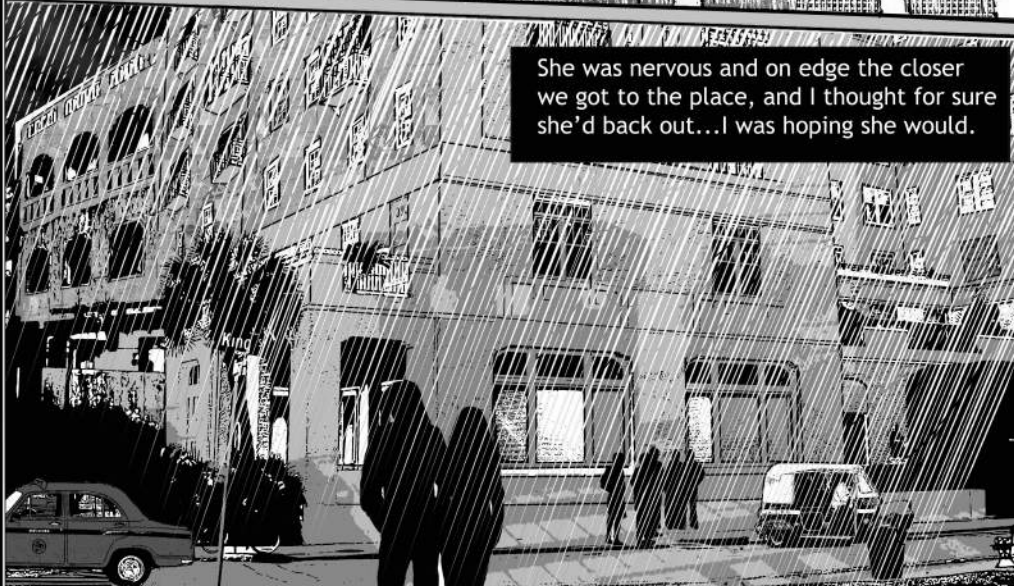


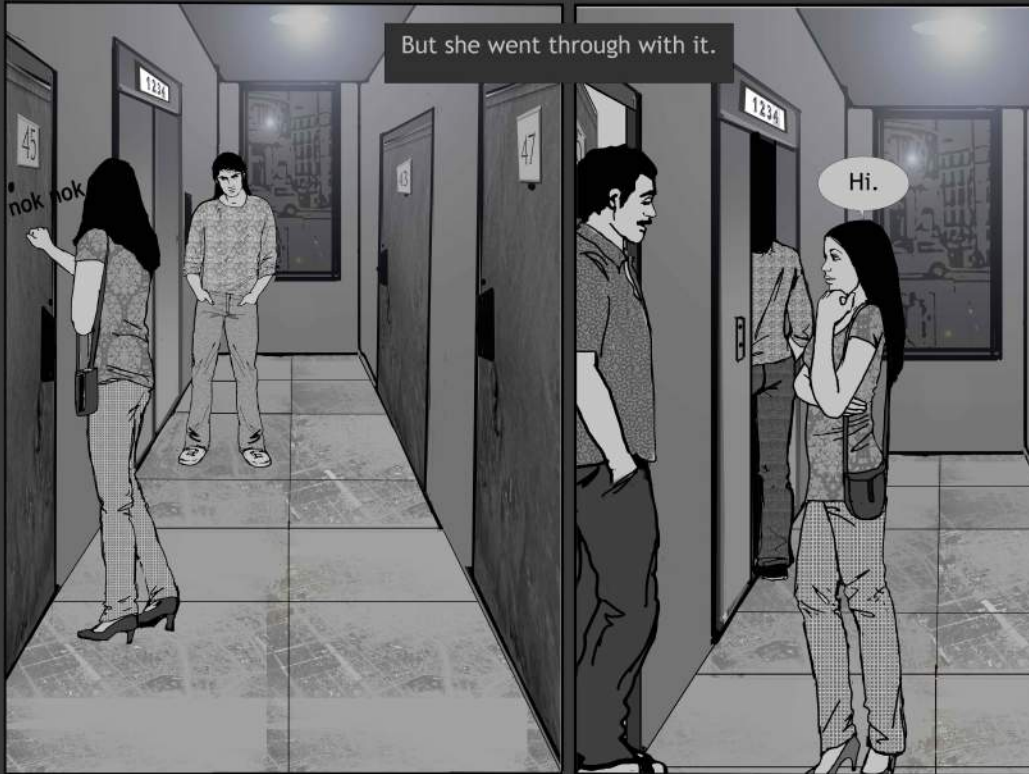
It was a lousy night, the rain drenching everything and leaving huge puddles in the street. We took a taxi to the apartment where the 'client' lived.



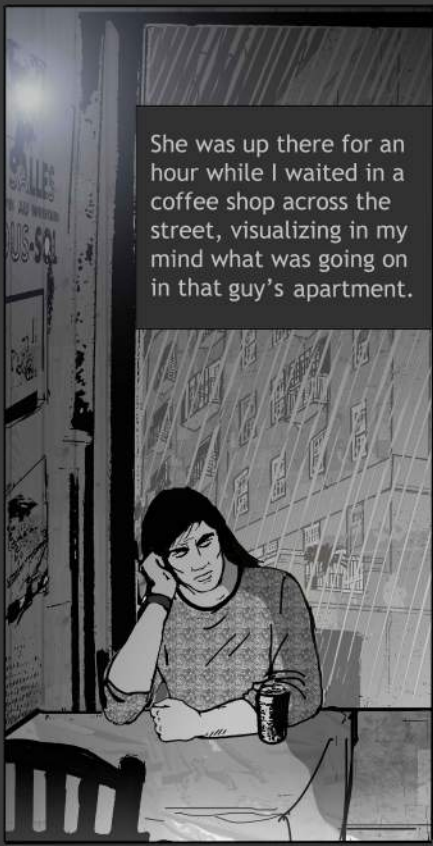
He'd agreed to pay 5000 rupees for Jayanti, only half the amount he'd mentioned at the party, but Jayanti was okay with that.

She was nervous and on edge the closer we got to the place, and I thought for sure she'd back out...I was hoping she would.





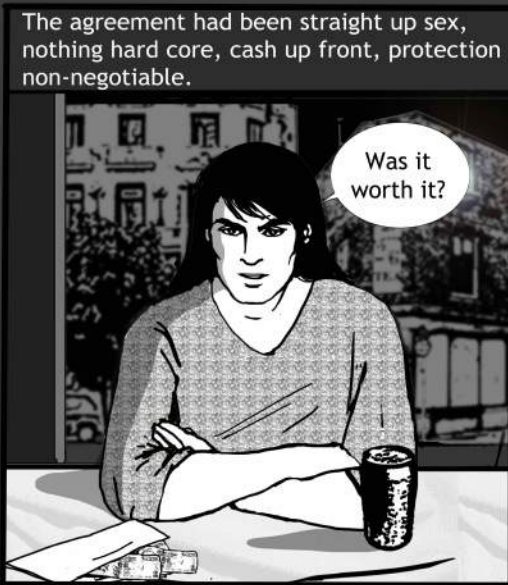
But she went through with it.



She was up there for an hour while I waited in a coffee shop across the street, visualizing in my mind what was going on in that guy's apartment.

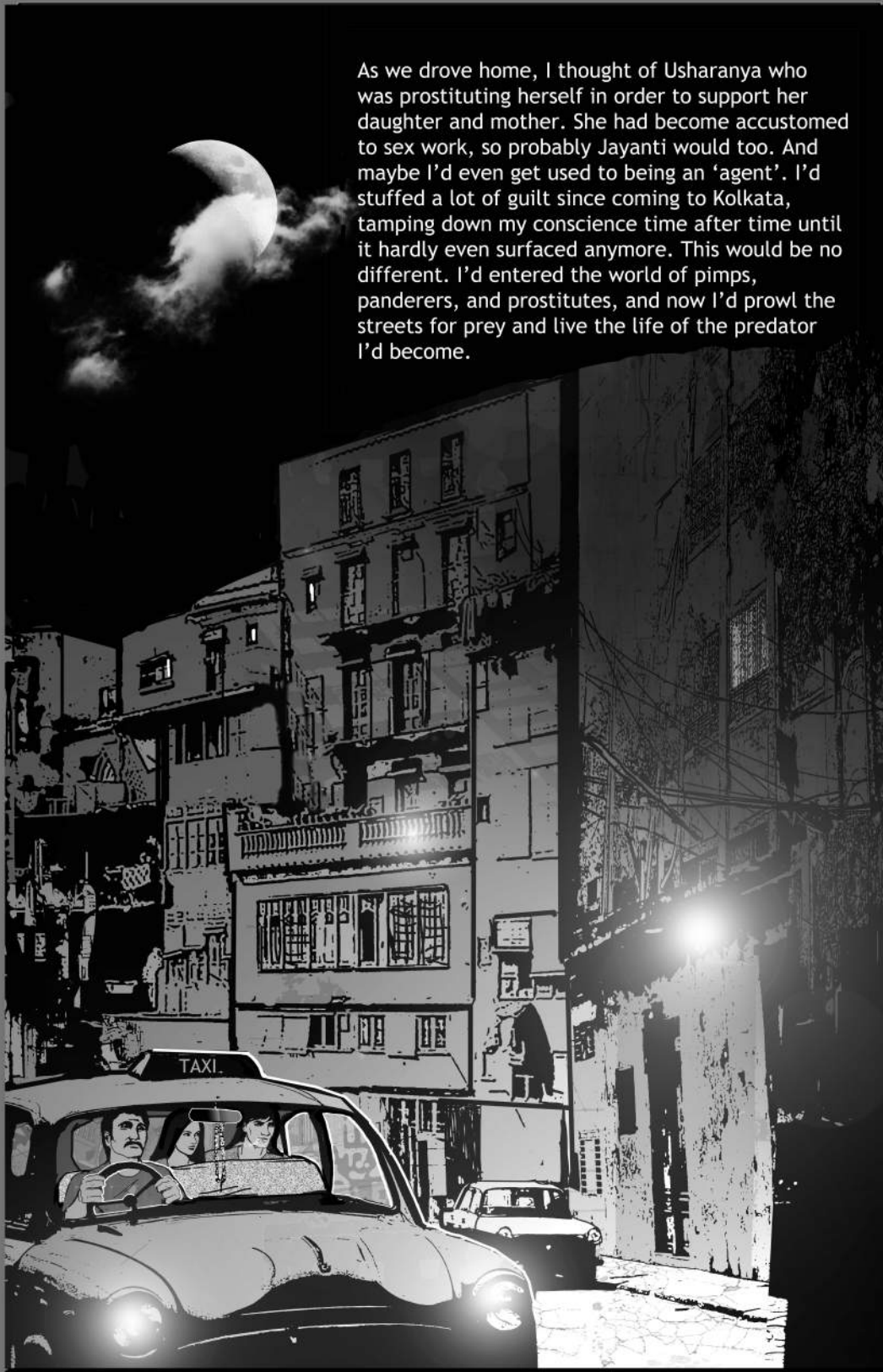


After Jayanti finished with her client she joined me in the coffee shop.





As we drove home, I thought of Usharanya who was prostituting herself in order to support her daughter and mother. She had become accustomed to sex work, so probably Jayanti would too. And maybe I'd even get used to being an 'agent'. I'd stuffed a lot of guilt since coming to Kolkata, tamping down my conscience time after time until it hardly even surfaced anymore. This would be no different. I'd entered the world of pimps, panderers, and prostitutes, and now I'd prowl the streets for prey and live the life of the predator I'd become.



Chapter 10

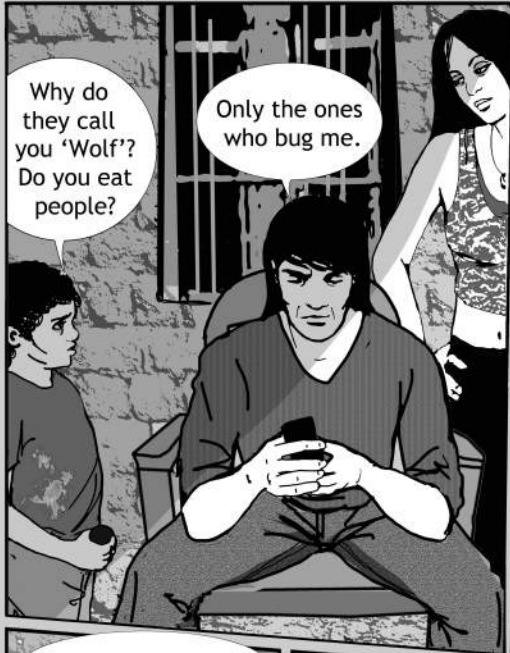
VENGEANCE



One year later.







Why do they call you 'Wolf'? Do you eat people?

Only the ones who bug me.



You shouldn't tease. He thinks you're serious.



Who says I'm not.



Yeah.. I need a ride.

I'm at the warehouse.



What do ya mean, you can't come for another hour? Just send a replacement.



He's a can.. CANNIBAL!



#\$#@ brats!  
How long is this bunch gonna be here? They're getting on my nerves.

I don't know.  
Kali arranged it with Ranjan. Guess it depends on them.

The last thing I wanted was a pack of street rats hanging around, but there was little I could do about it. Like Jayanti said, they were Kali's friends and she'd somehow persuaded the Boss to let them sleep at the warehouse at night. Apparently they'd once helped her out and she wanted to return the favor by keeping them safe. Didn't matter that it was cramping my style and bugging the heck out of me.

I'd given the kids strict orders to stay in the first building, but it hadn't taken them long to find the underground tunnel to the second one, and from there to our room on the top floor. What really burned me was that friggin monkey of Kali's. The kids took it along when they begged on the streets and they kept it with them when they went to bed. Occasionally it got loose and wandered around all over the place. No wonder Ranjan hated the thing and had agreed to have it stay at the warehouse.



There were 6 kids altogether. Rakesh and Ranjeet were both orphans.



Sumitra and Harley had families so only came by occasionally.

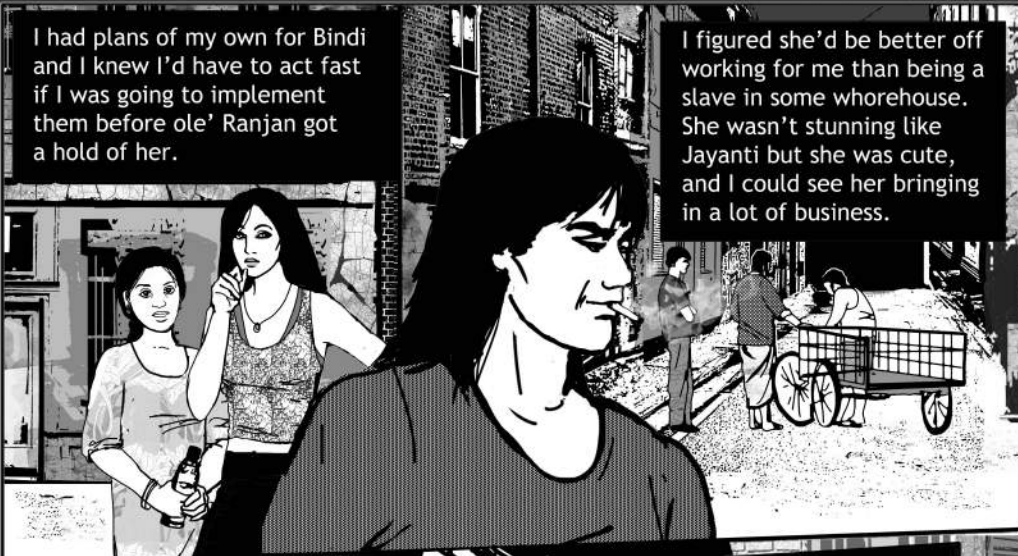


Santosh was an addict who would have sold his mother for a bottle of solution. I kept an eye on him at all times.

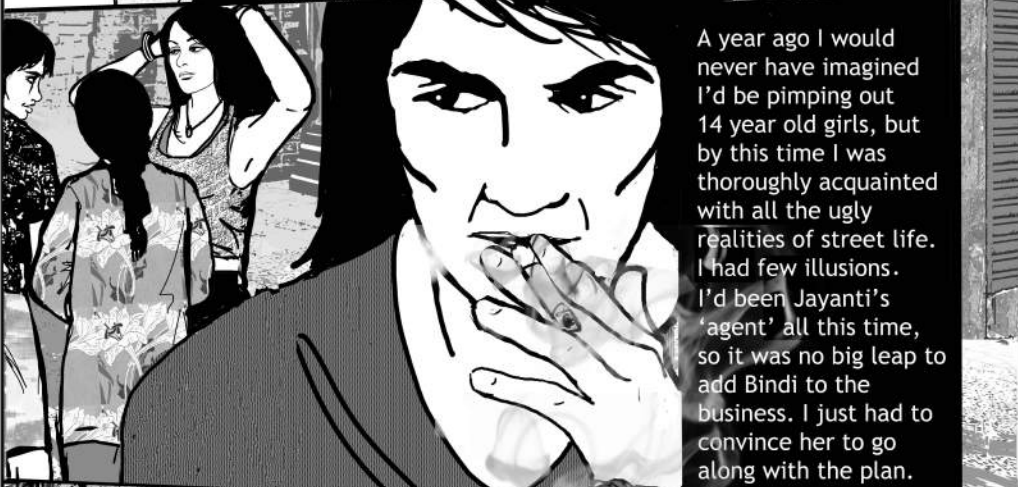
Bindi was 14 and would probably be in the sex trade real soon. Most of the girls on the street ended up in brothels once they turned 12. If she hadn't been Kali's friend, the Boss would probably have sold her to Sharvani long ago.

I had plans of my own for Bindi and I knew I'd have to act fast if I was going to implement them before ole' Ranjan got a hold of her.

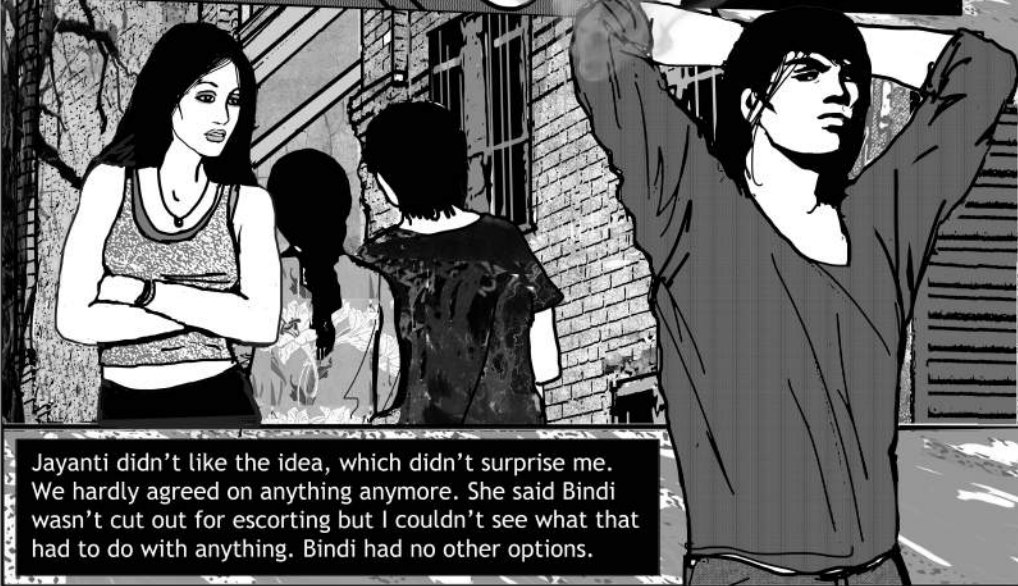
I figured she'd be better off working for me than being a slave in some whorehouse. She wasn't stunning like Jayanti but she was cute, and I could see her bringing in a lot of business.



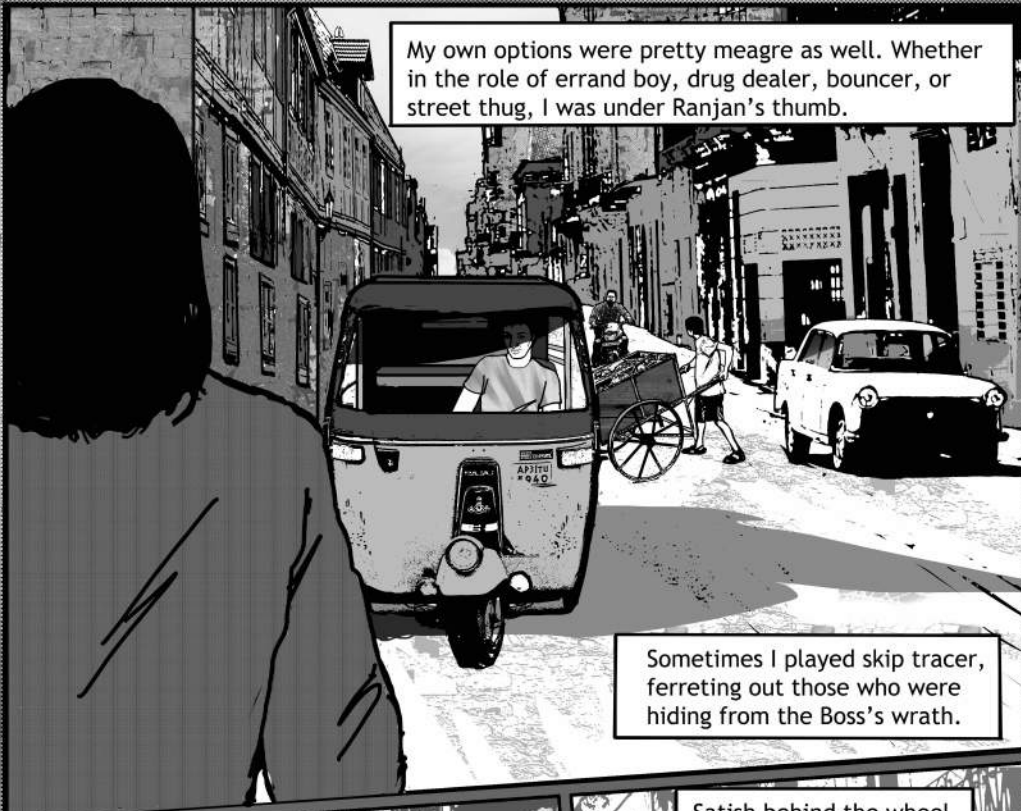
A year ago I would never have imagined I'd be pimping out 14 year old girls, but by this time I was thoroughly acquainted with all the ugly realities of street life. I had few illusions. I'd been Jayanti's 'agent' all this time, so it was no big leap to add Bindi to the business. I just had to convince her to go along with the plan.



Jayanti didn't like the idea, which didn't surprise me. We hardly agreed on anything anymore. She said Bindi wasn't cut out for escorting but I couldn't see what that had to do with anything. Bindi had no other options.

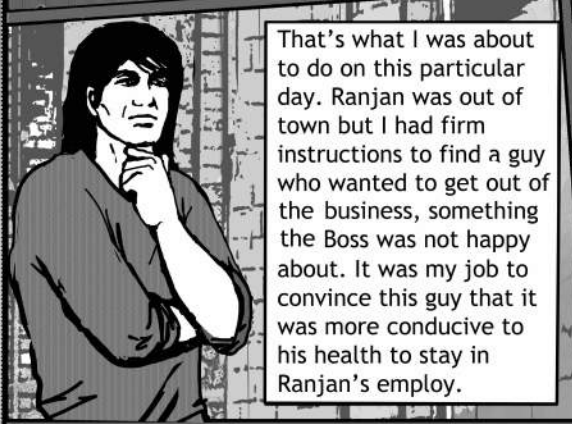




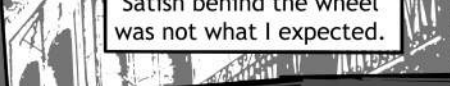


My own options were pretty meagre as well. Whether in the role of errand boy, drug dealer, bouncer, or street thug, I was under Ranjan's thumb.

Sometimes I played skip tracer, ferreting out those who were hiding from the Boss's wrath.



That's what I was about to do on this particular day. Ranjan was out of town but I had firm instructions to find a guy who wanted to get out of the business, something the Boss was not happy about. It was my job to convince this guy that it was more conducive to his health to stay in Ranjan's employ.



Satish behind the wheel was not what I expected.

What are you doing here, man?

Tell me you're not the replacement.



I was anxious to start the hunt and get it over with.

But I got a surprise when my ride showed up.





I sure am, Bro!  
Just got my license.  
Been driving for the Boss  
for 2 days now.

You're  
not old  
enough to  
drive.

The phoney ID  
the Boss got me says  
different.

So, where  
are we headed,  
Ajay?

Kalighat Temple.

Now I  
can also  
get into  
bars and  
hustle  
chicks.

Is that  
great  
or what?!

Who are you after?

Some guy who wants to go straight. He's been giving me the slip for weeks.

Got a tip that he was seen at Kalighat today.

Poor sap. He could get himself killed trying to duck out on Ranjan. Feel kinda sorry for him.

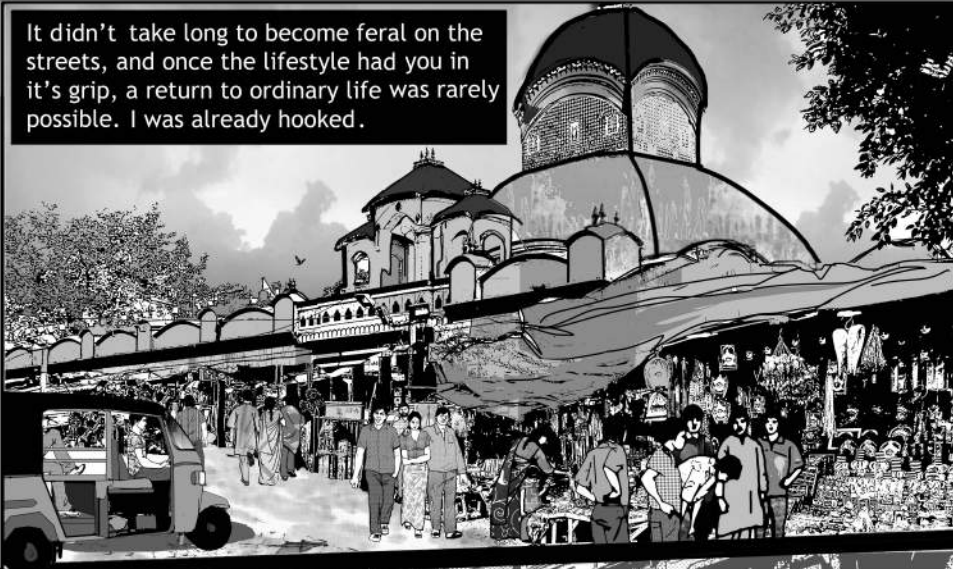
Good thing you're the tracker, and not Giri. Otherwise he'd end up dead in some alley.

You got that right, kid.

Some nasty memories immediately surfaced with that thought, but they didn't have the power to horrify as they once had. By this time I was inured to violence. It was part of the daily drama of street life - repellant, energizing, and altogether addictive.



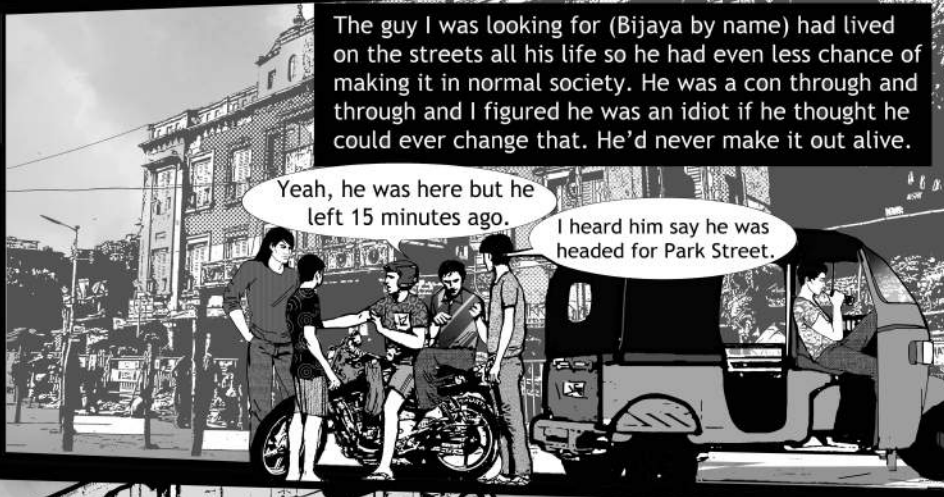
It didn't take long to become feral on the streets, and once the lifestyle had you in it's grip, a return to ordinary life was rarely possible. I was already hooked.



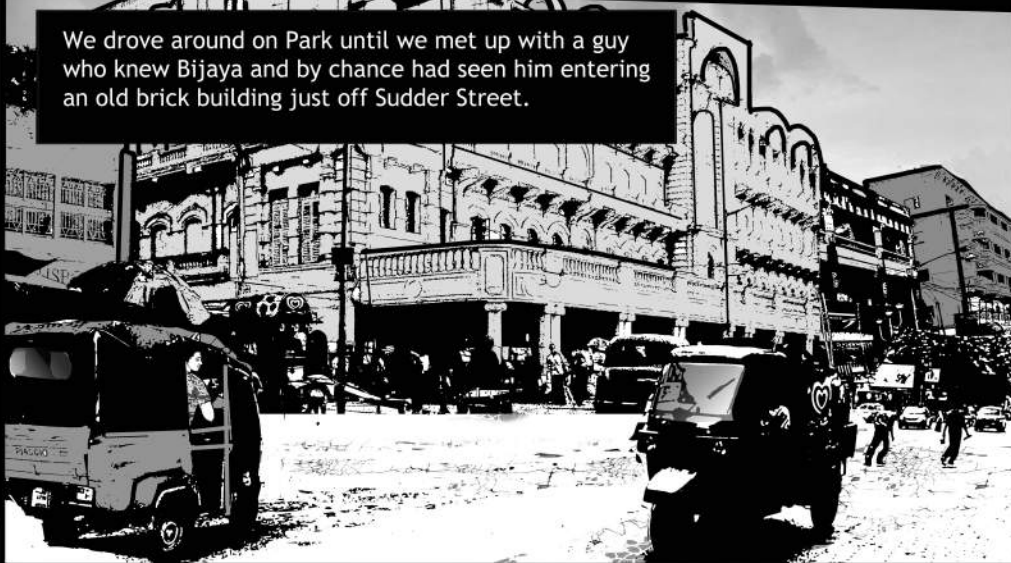
The guy I was looking for (Bijaya by name) had lived on the streets all his life so he had even less chance of making it in normal society. He was a con through and through and I figured he was an idiot if he thought he could ever change that. He'd never make it out alive.

Yeah, he was here but he left 15 minutes ago.

I heard him say he was headed for Park Street.



We drove around on Park until we met up with a guy who knew Bijaya and by chance had seen him entering an old brick building just off Sudder Street.

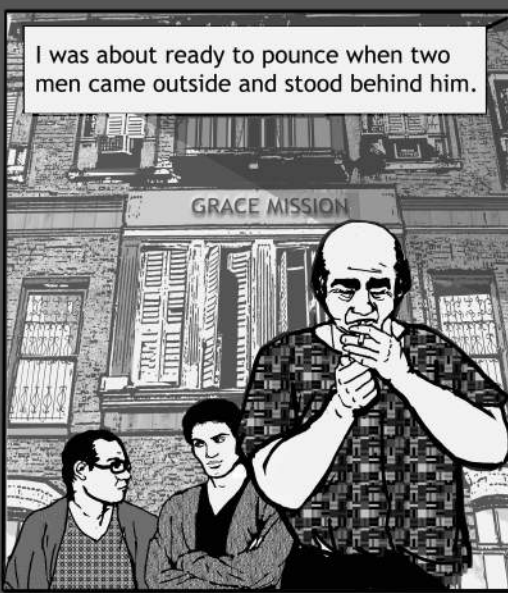




Satish thought he knew the place - a Christian mission that fed and clothed the homeless and dispensed free medicine to the poor.



I couldn't believe my luck when I saw Bijaya lighting up in front of the mission.

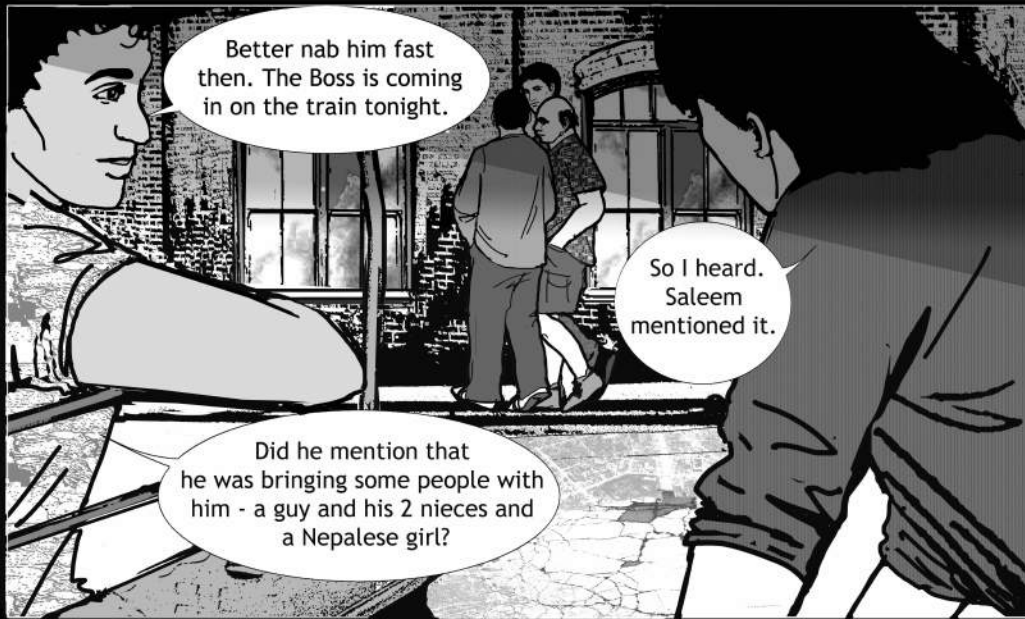


I was about ready to pounce when two men came outside and stood behind him.



Looks like your guy found himself religion. What do you wanna do now?

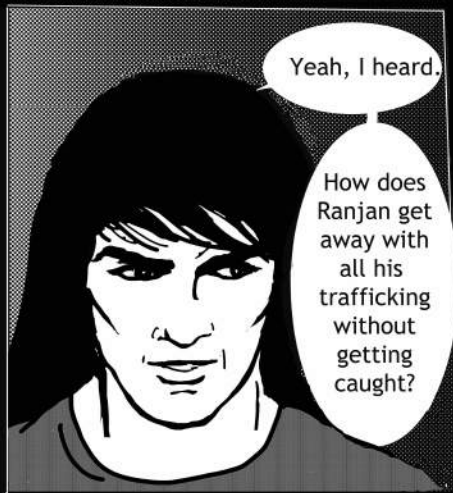
Wait til he's alone..for as long as it takes. Ranjan wants this one real bad.



Better nab him fast then. The Boss is coming in on the train tonight.

So I heard. Saleem mentioned it.

Did he mention that he was bringing some people with him - a guy and his 2 nieces and a Nepalese girl?



Yeah, I heard.

How does Ranjan get away with all his trafficking without getting caught?

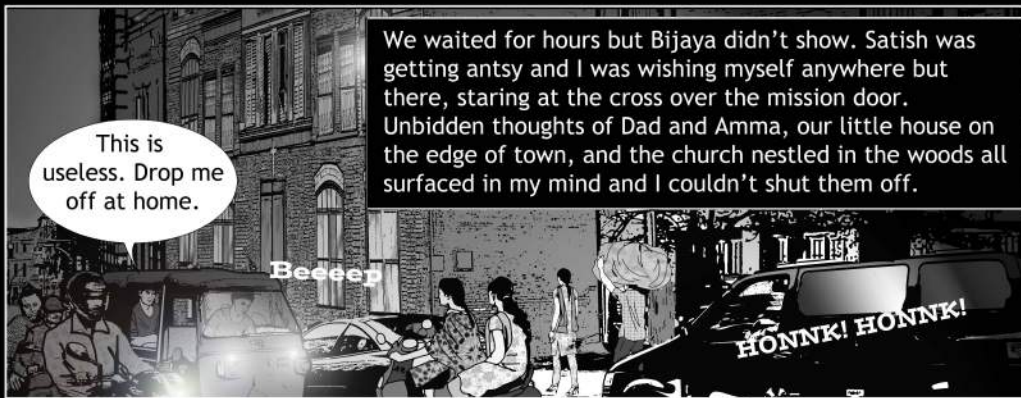
Ranjan did a brisk trade out of the rural areas of Odisha. He was an experienced procurer who kept the Sonagachi brothels well stocked with new girls. His connections put him in contact with all sorts of lowlifes who provided him with a steady pool to choose from. He had no conscience. Didn't matter how young the girls were - virgins were highly prized and the most lucrative - and the more destitute the parents were, the better, because then he could drive down the price. I was in no doubt that the people coming with him on the train were some of his newest victims. Not that it mattered. There was nothing I could do about it, even if I was so inclined, which I sure as heck wasn't. I valued my skin too much to risk Ranjan's wrath - something this Bijaya idiot would do well to learn before it was too late.



Oh he gets caught alright, but he has lots of money and he knows how to bribe his way out of trouble.







This is useless. Drop me off at home.

Bebeep

We waited for hours but Bijaya didn't show. Satish was getting antsy and I was wishing myself anywhere but there, staring at the cross over the mission door. Unbidden thoughts of Dad and Amma, our little house on the edge of town, and the church nestled in the woods all surfaced in my mind and I couldn't shut them off.



See ya later, man.

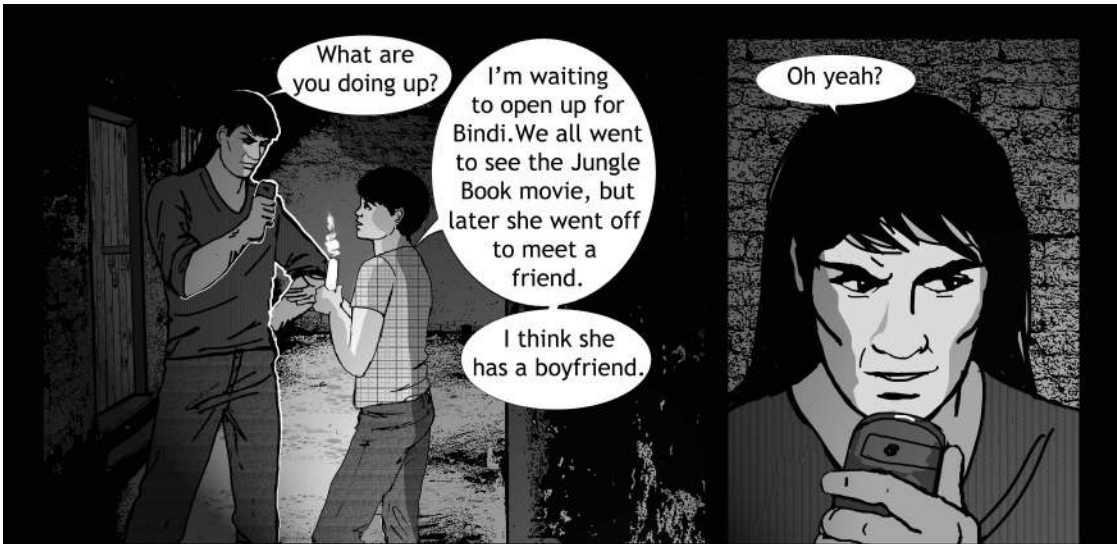
I was in a foul mood by the time I got back home. I'd wasted my time on a scumbag loser when I could have been smoking pot or playing pool, or engaged in a myriad other more diverting activities. But that wasn't even the worst of it. Watching Bijaya with the mission people reminded me of what my dad had once told me about people trying to fill up their lives with drugs, money, and sex, and just being miserable and empty anyway, because they didn't have God in their lives. Was that why Bijaya was trying to go straight - to escape his dead-end existence through religion? And why did that possibility bother me so much? Maybe because I knew that I was no different from Bijaya in the loser department, just as empty and miserable, but without the guts to escape my condition. Not that I believed Bijaya would find any real answers at the mission. He might go through the motions of seeking God, but like me, his rotten nature would win out eventually. Leopards couldn't change their spots. I'd even read that in the Bible somewhere. Sooner or later, he'd revert to type and end up back on the streets where he belonged...and I'd be waiting.



I was surprised to see one of the kids - Ranjeet - lurking in the shadows just inside the doorway. Usually the whole gang was in by ten and fast asleep soon after. Jayanti was in charge of locking everything up.

Oh!  
It's you, Wolf.

Who else would it be?!



That snippet of information I didn't expect. A boyfriend would either pimp Bindi out, or keep her for himself, both of which would mess up my plans. I'd have to do something about that.

I headed for the underground tunnel and did my usual rounds, checking on the Boss's merchandise. I only had the light from my cell to guide me but I knew the place inside out so that was no problem. For anyone else though, the warehouse was a minefield because of the crumbling walls and holes in the flooring - especially if you tried to navigate in the dark.



She never even looked up as I entered the room.



Must be good, what you're reading.

Then I recognized the book she was holding and groaned inwardly. Not her too!!

Yeah. It really is.



I love these stories. My aunt and uncle's neighbors used to take me to church with them when I was little.



And they even gave me a little New Testament.



How come you kept the Bible in your old gym bag?



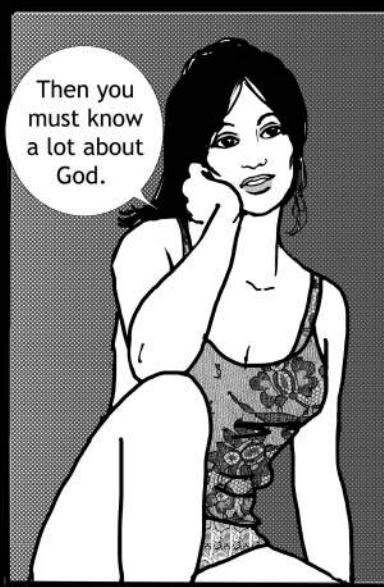
I'd never have known about it if I hadn't decided to clean out the almira.



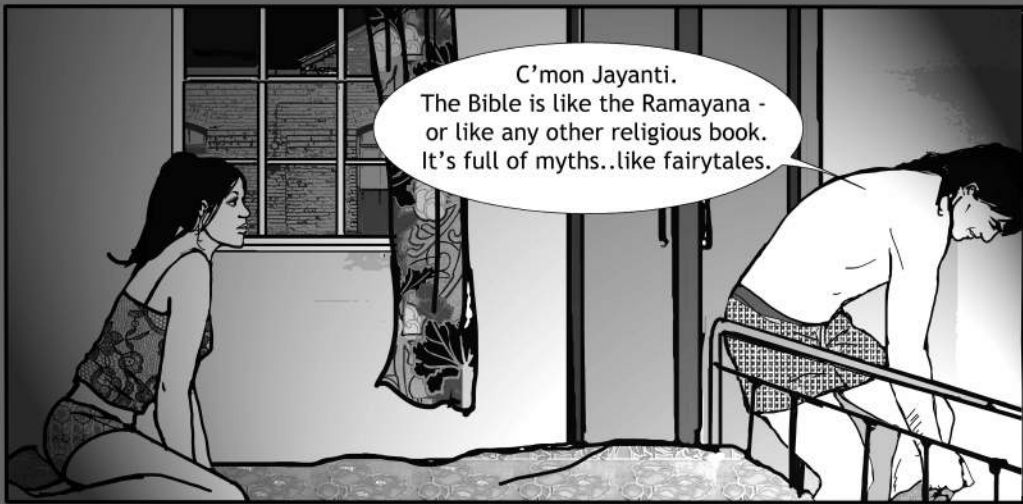




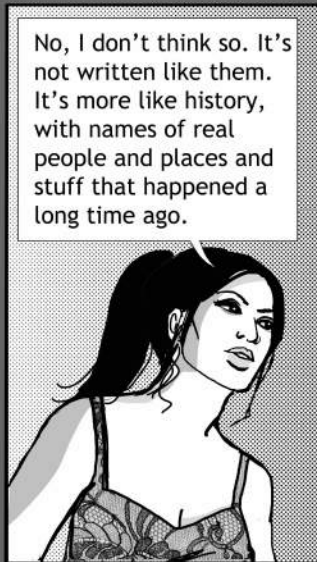
That stopped me cold, but then I breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't likely that my mom's maiden name would be traced back to me, so there was no point in lying. I told Jayanti it was my mother's name and the Bible had belonged to her. I almost laughed out loud when Jayanti called me 'Ajay Raynor' and remarked that it had a nice ring to it. When she asked me about my family, I was as evasive as ever and she finally gave up. But she then turned her attention to the Bible itself and her curiosity was harder to deflect.



Then you must know a lot about God.



C'mon Jayanti.  
The Bible is like the Ramayana -  
or like any other religious book.  
It's full of myths..like fairytales.



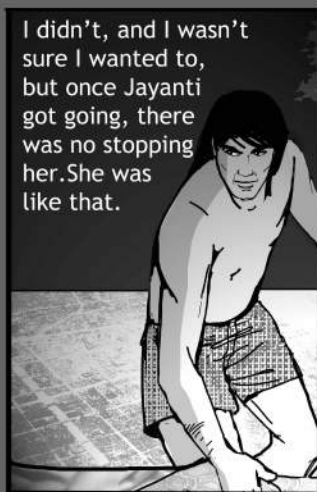
No, I don't think so. It's  
not written like them.  
It's more like history,  
with names of real  
people and places and  
stuff that happened a  
long time ago.



And this Jesus. MAN!  
The things He did!  
Walking on water and all  
those healings..and  
feeding thousands from  
some bread and a few fish



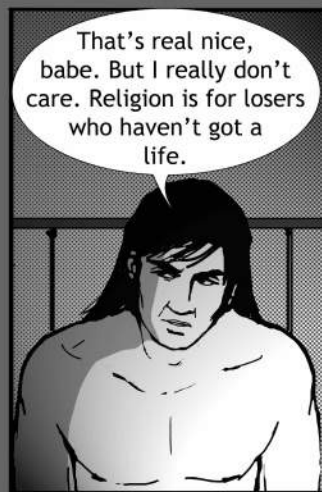
Know what I think?



I didn't, and I wasn't  
sure I wanted to,  
but once Jayanti  
got going, there  
was no stopping  
her. She was  
like that.



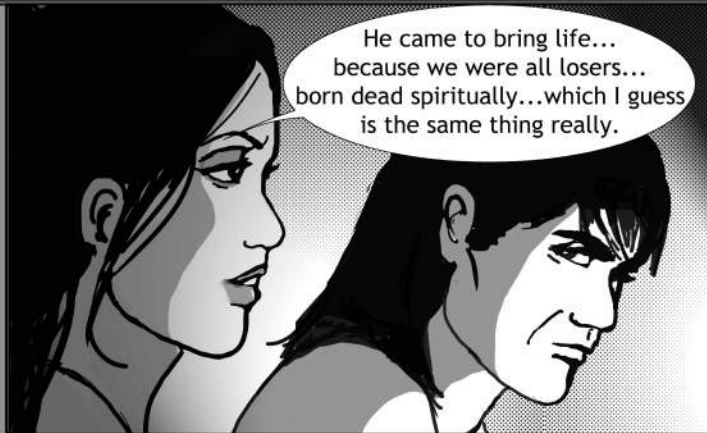
I think Jesus  
really IS God, and what  
He said in the Bible  
is all true.



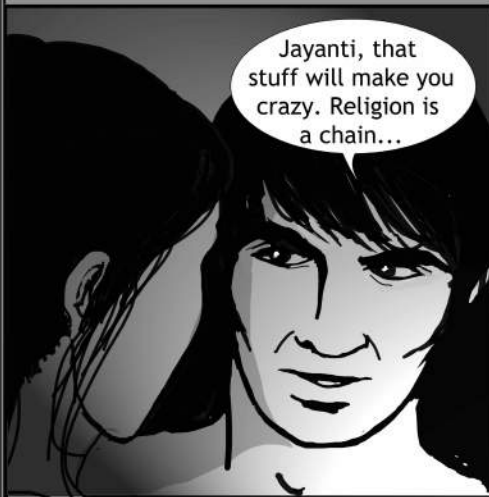
That's real nice,  
babe. But I really don't  
care. Religion is for losers  
who haven't got a  
life.



Yeah....  
That's what  
He said...



He came to bring life...  
because we were all losers...  
born dead spiritually...which I guess  
is the same thing really.



Jayanti, that  
stuff will make you  
crazy. Religion is  
a chain...



..and it doesn't work for people  
like us... for the poor cretin I was  
following today. Trust me. I know  
this for a fact.



Not to mention  
that it's boring as all  
get out. No partying.  
No smoking up. You can't  
do what you really want  
cause God is the Boss.  
It's a drag.



And what is this  
that we've got?

This isn't  
a drag?



I feel so dead, Ajay.



The conversation was getting way too heavy so I tried to distract her.

You're just down, Jay. Things will get better once we blow this dump.

And reading this doesn't help.

And besides, I know how to make you come alive...  
...REALLY alive...

...so your pulse will race...

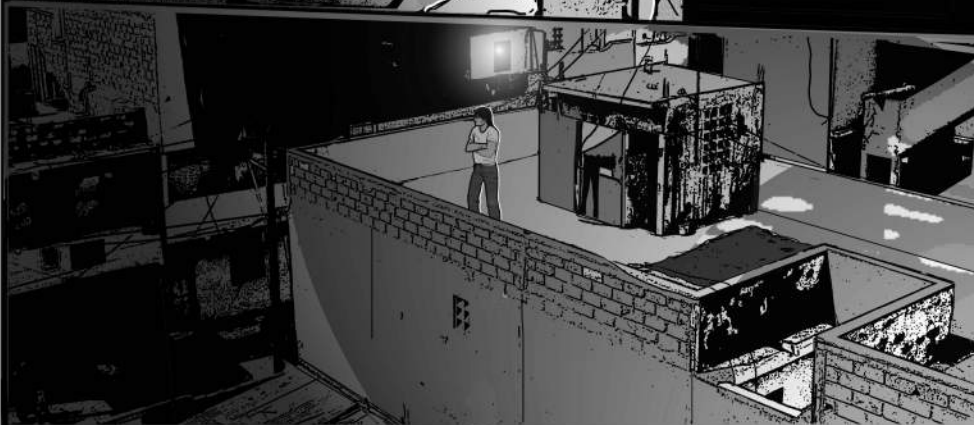
...and your heart will pound...

...and you'll forget all about feeling blue.

I went up to the roof for a smoke, something I often did when I couldn't get to sleep. It was late, so the night was relatively quiet, the still silence broken sporadically by a honking horn or a clanging bicycle bell. A few lights glimmered from behind barred windows, peeping through ragged curtains and latticed screens.



Up here alone, I'd let my mind wander, thoughts and memories tumbling about chaotically until fatigue forced them to drift away on the night breeze. Some nights I'd be up here for hours before exhaustion shut down my brain and brought relief in sleep. Tonight however, Jayanti's words haunted with a special ferocity, banishing all hopes of rest.



It was plain she was sinking and I blamed it on the sex work. It was getting to her. She'd been alright with it until she'd had a few bad experiences with a couple of clients. I'd followed up on that and both guys had broken bones and mashed faces in consequence, but Jayanti was unnerved to the point where she could no longer do the work without dulling her mind with drugs and alcohol. Now she was adding religion to the mix.

That was the last thing either one of us needed. I'd run from God most of my life and I didn't want Him anywhere near me...or Jayanti for that matter. I'd had enough of that religious stuff as a preacher's kid. The holy route was for good people like Dad and Amma...and my mother. They could maybe make it work for them, but I never could. And I didn't want Jayanti to try being a Christian either. She'd probably go through all the crap I did and that would really strain our relationship - like there wasn't enough pulling at it already.

What Jayanti needed was a change. I'd been thinking about how to get her out of escorting altogether. It had never been my idea in the first place. Jayanti had talked me into it and because we needed the cash, I'd gone along with it. But now I wanted her out before she cracked up. I figured I'd find a couple of girls who were headed for the sex trade anyway, like Bindi, and then Jayanti could train them as escorts. She could retire from servicing clients herself and I'd be the girls' agent, providing security and finding clientele. It made good sense to me and I was going to approach Bindi in the morning... only destiny played a crooked hand and messed with my plan.



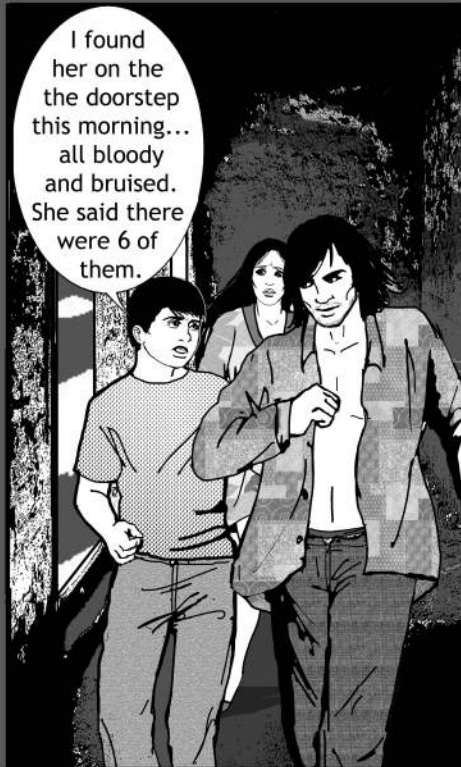




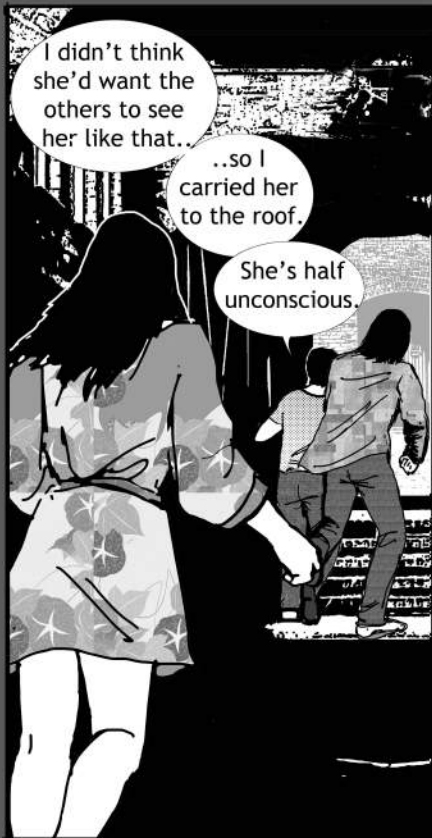


HURRY!

Wait up!  
I'm coming too.



I found her on the the doorstep this morning... all bloody and bruised. She said there were 6 of them.



I didn't think she'd want the others to see her like that.

...so I carried her to the roof.

She's half unconscious.

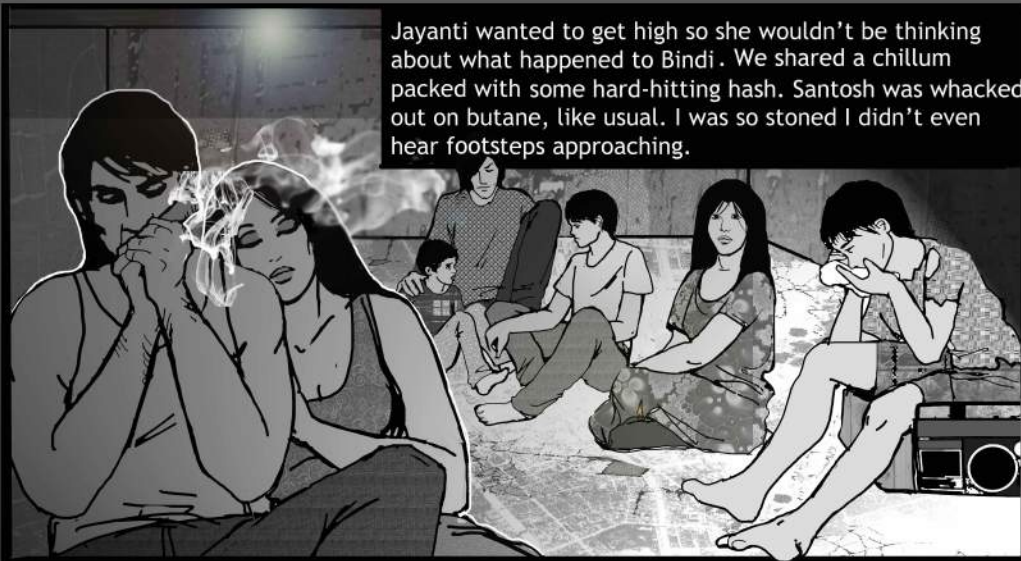


Oh God!





Jayanti spent most of the day up on the roof with Bindi. The kid was a real mess but she refused to see a doctor in case the cops got called in and started asking questions. If it was discovered she was a street kid, she'd end up in a remand home. She also refused to identify her attackers. They'd made threats and she was afraid of retaliation. Didn't matter because the other kids had seen her with a guy outside the cinema and I got a pretty good description of the bastard. He went by the name Shiva and sported a large dragon tattoo on his neck. He'd be real easy to find, and through him, I'd get the other five.



Jayanti wanted to get high so she wouldn't be thinking about what happened to Bindi. We shared a chillum packed with some hard-hitting hash. Santosh was whacked out on butane, like usual. I was so stoned I didn't even hear footsteps approaching.



It was Kaliyah dropping off the monkey for Bindi to take care of, now that Ranjan was back from Odisha. With her were the two kids he had brought back. Anita was the older one, (about twelve I figured), and her little sister Pushpa.



Knowing Ranjan, I was sure he had plans for these two.

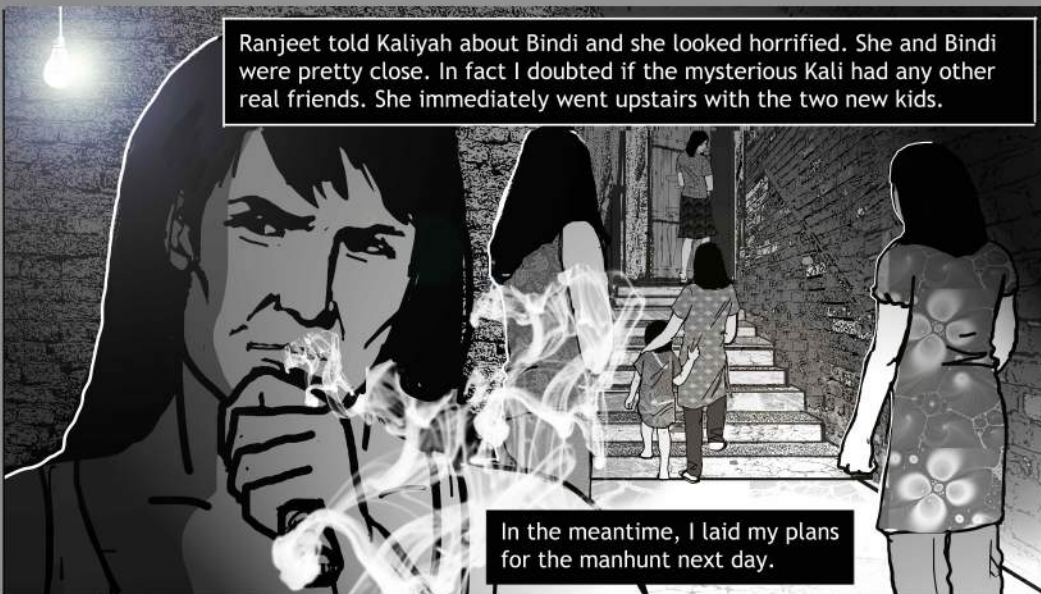


Kinda liked the little one. She had fire in her eyes.

A real fighter.



Ranjeet told Kaliyah about Bindi and she looked horrified. She and Bindi were pretty close. In fact I doubted if the mysterious Kali had any other real friends. She immediately went upstairs with the two new kids.



In the meantime, I laid my plans for the manhunt next day.



I considered the assault on Bindi a personal affront, especially as I already thought of her as my property - or at least she soon would be. No one touched what was mine and got away with it.

I began my hunt in an older section of the city (the seedy underbelly of Kolkata) and therefore a good place to sniff out criminal types. Cops were a common sight there and sure enough, there was a police checkpoint up ahead.

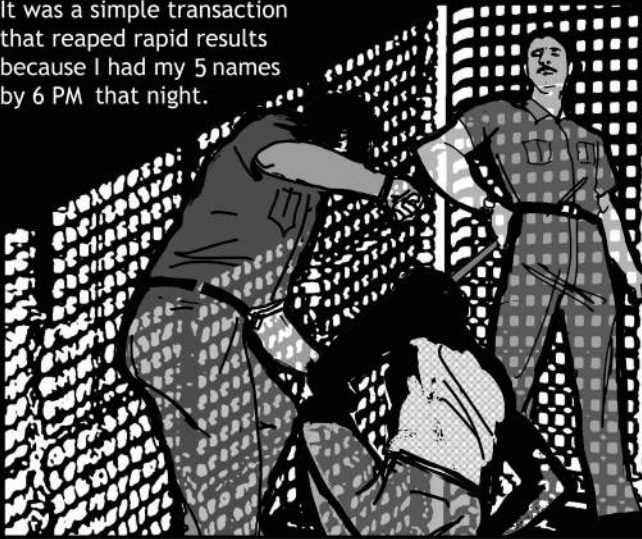


If there was one thing I avoided like the plague it was a cop - unless it was a crooked cop. Ranjan knew plenty of the corrupt ones and I'd learned to make use of them for jobs that, let's say, transgressed legal boundaries. Come to think of it, ALL my jobs fit that category.



I needed information on the Shiva guy and a cop I knew was very helpful once I slipped him a 500 rupee note. Unfortunately Shiva was temporarily out of my reach, having been thrown into jail for drug possession the night before. For another 5000 rupees I arranged for a police interrogation which would be followed by another 10,000 rupees if I got the names I wanted.

It was a simple transaction that reaped rapid results because I had my 5 names by 6 PM that night.

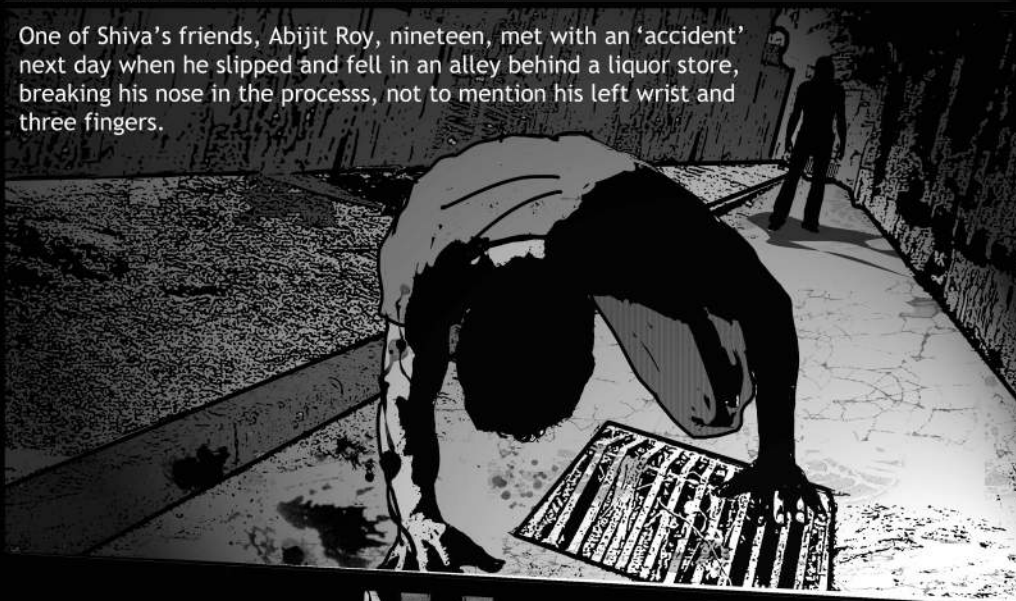


And Shiva had 2 cracked ribs, a broken hand, and multiple contusions...

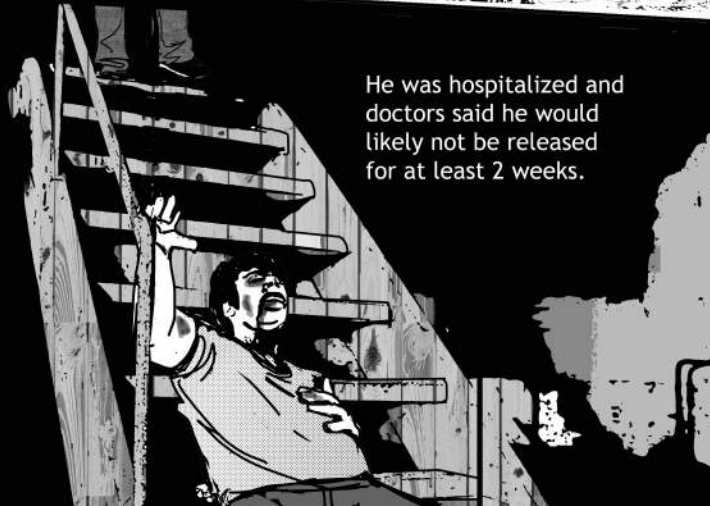


..attained in a fight with other inmates, according to police files.

One of Shiva's friends, Abijit Roy, nineteen, met with an 'accident' next day when he slipped and fell in an alley behind a liquor store, breaking his nose in the process, not to mention his left wrist and three fingers.

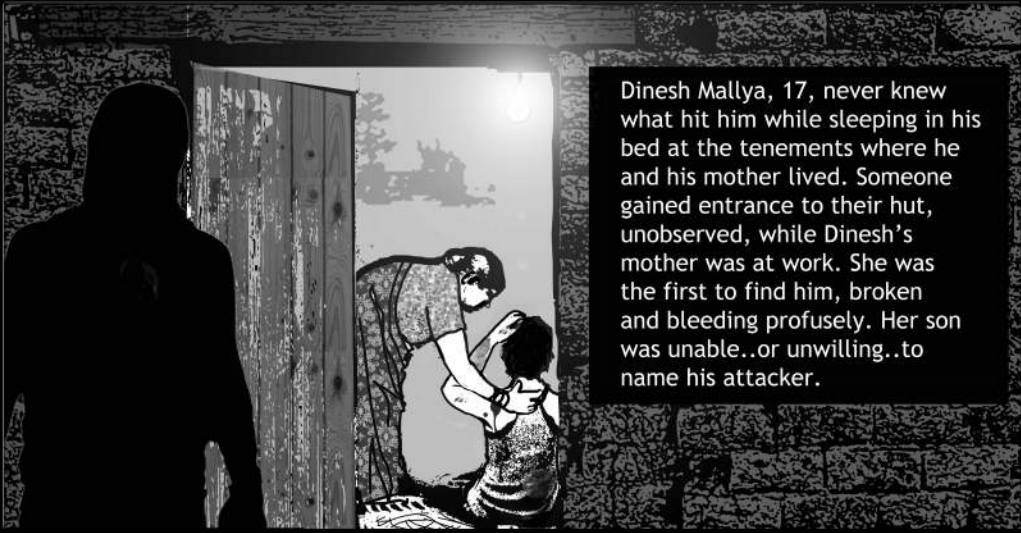


Sanjeev Pamar, 23, fell clumsily down a flight of stairs in a rundown apartment building. The other tenants said they heard some yelling before the fateful fall that earned Sanjeev a severe concussion and a crushed jaw.

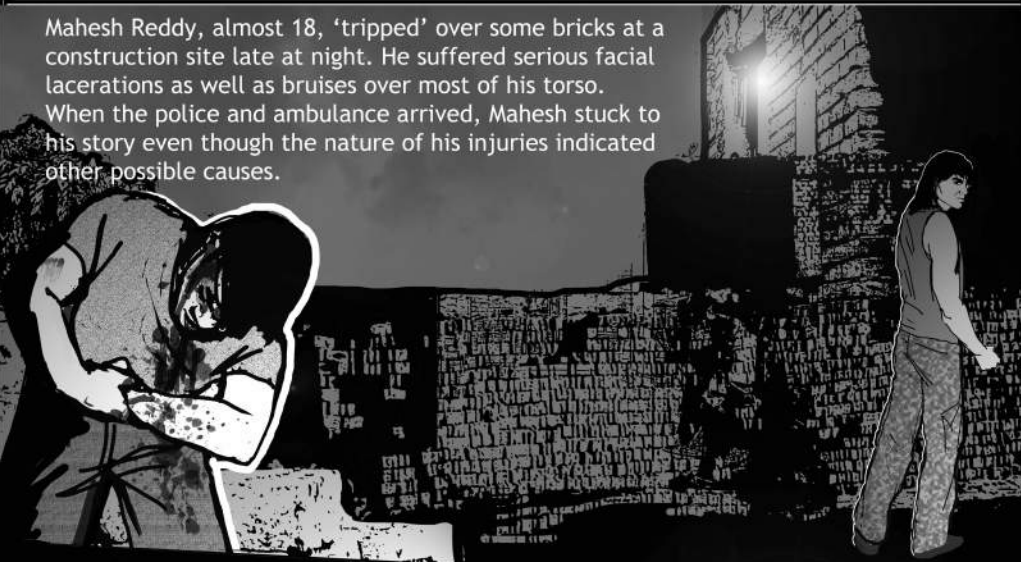


He was hospitalized and doctors said he would likely not be released for at least 2 weeks.

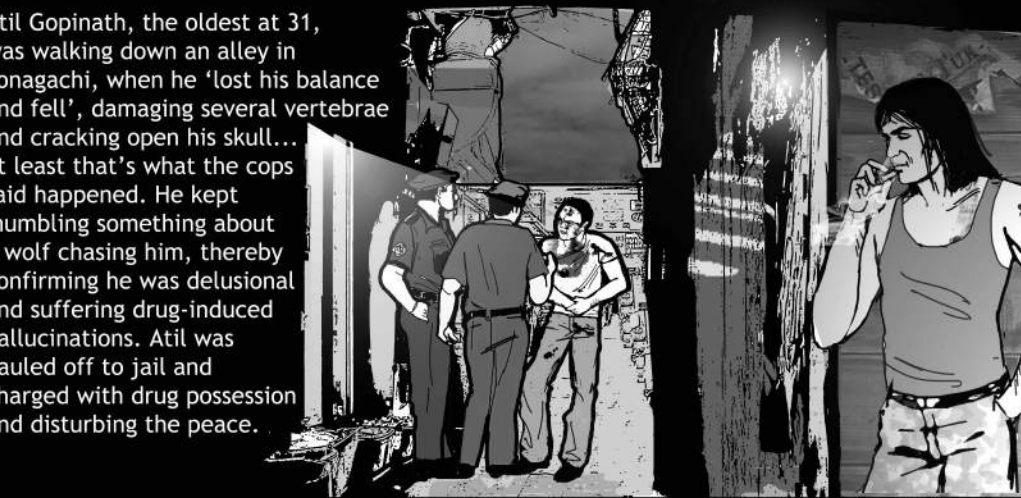




Dinesh Mallya, 17, never knew what hit him while sleeping in his bed at the tenements where he and his mother lived. Someone gained entrance to their hut, unobserved, while Dinesh's mother was at work. She was the first to find him, broken and bleeding profusely. Her son was unable..or unwilling..to name his attacker.

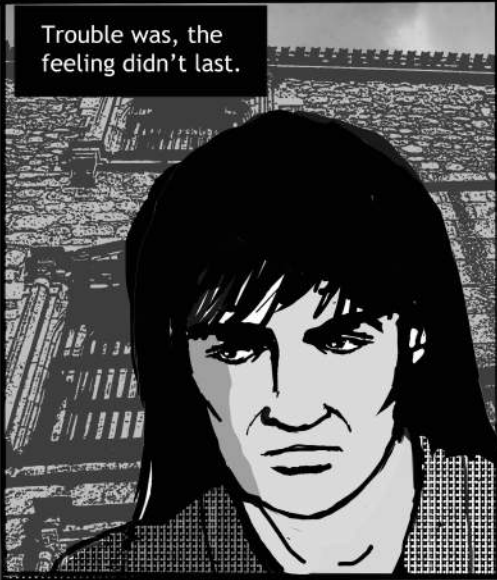


Mahesh Reddy, almost 18, 'tripped' over some bricks at a construction site late at night. He suffered serious facial lacerations as well as bruises over most of his torso. When the police and ambulance arrived, Mahesh stuck to his story even though the nature of his injuries indicated other possible causes.

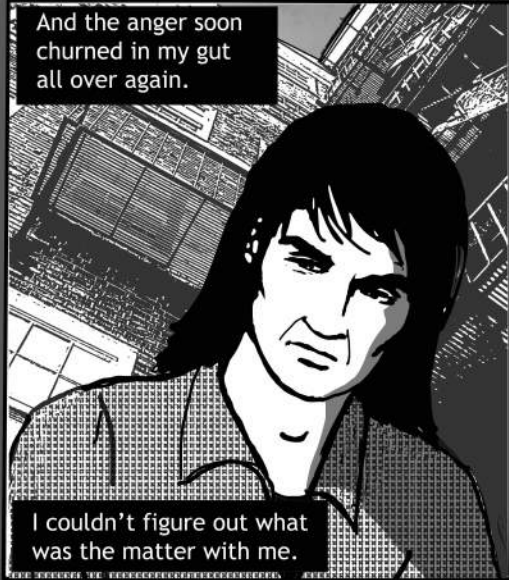


Atil Gopinath, the oldest at 31, was walking down an alley in Sonagachi, when he 'lost his balance and fell', damaging several vertebrae and cracking open his skull... at least that's what the cops said happened. He kept mumbling something about a wolf chasing him, thereby confirming he was delusional and suffering drug-induced hallucinations. Atil was hauled off to jail and charged with drug possession and disturbing the peace.

It had only taken a week to exact retribution, and I'd relished every crazed, adrenaline-filled moment. The sense of power and dominance assuaged the anger that had been building up inside me for some time - mostly frustration with the dead-end existence I was living and the inability to do anything about it. Slamming those guys had been ...you could almost say 'therapeutic'

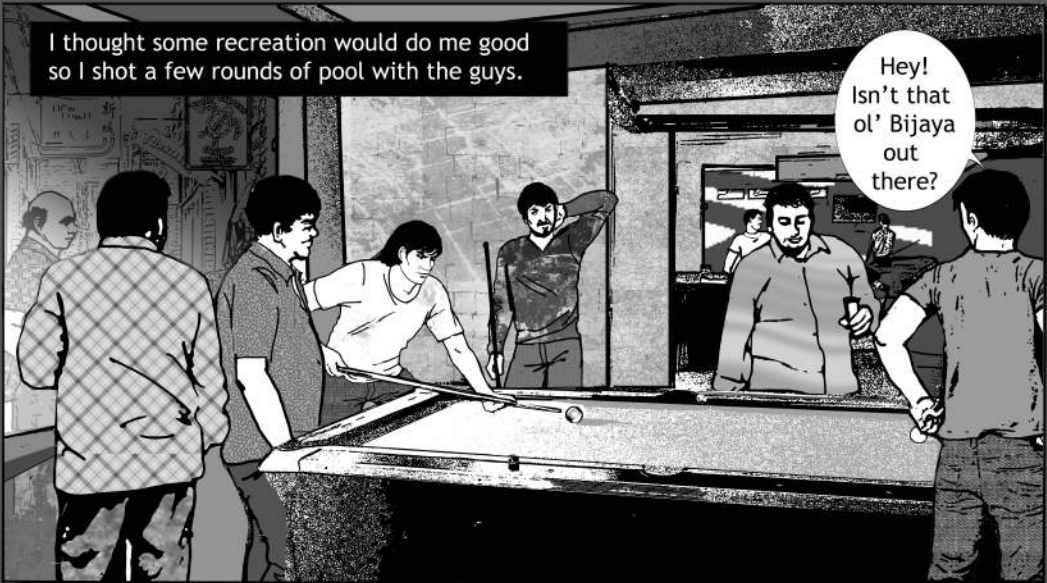


Trouble was, the feeling didn't last.



And the anger soon churned in my gut all over again.

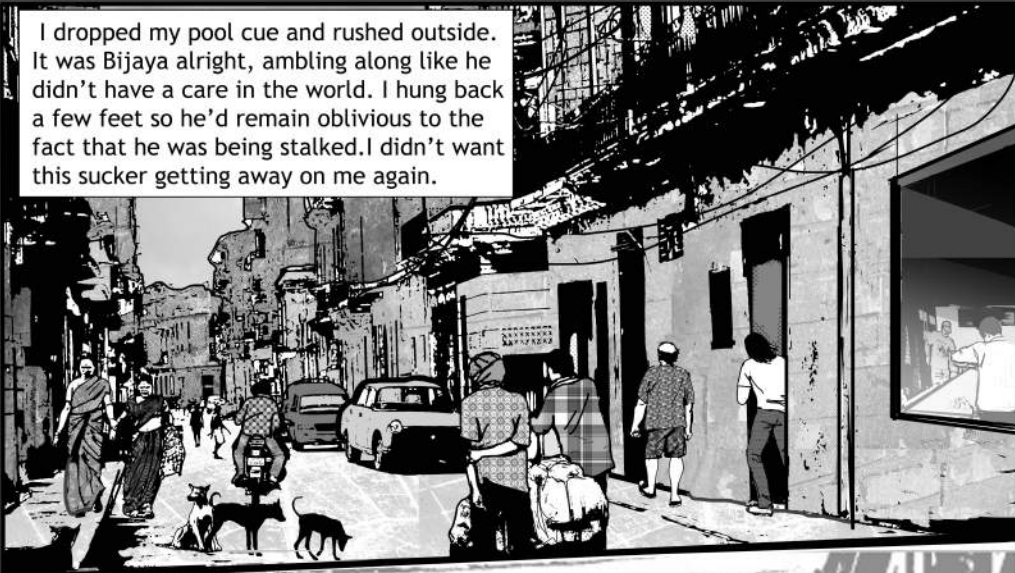
I couldn't figure out what was the matter with me.



I thought some recreation would do me good so I shot a few rounds of pool with the guys.

Hey! Isn't that ol' Bijaya out there?

I dropped my pool cue and rushed outside. It was Bijaya alright, ambling along like he didn't have a care in the world. I hung back a few feet so he'd remain oblivious to the fact that he was being stalked. I didn't want this sucker getting away on me again.



I waited until the crowd thinned and we got to a more deserted part of the city. Slowly I inched my way closer until I was right behind him.

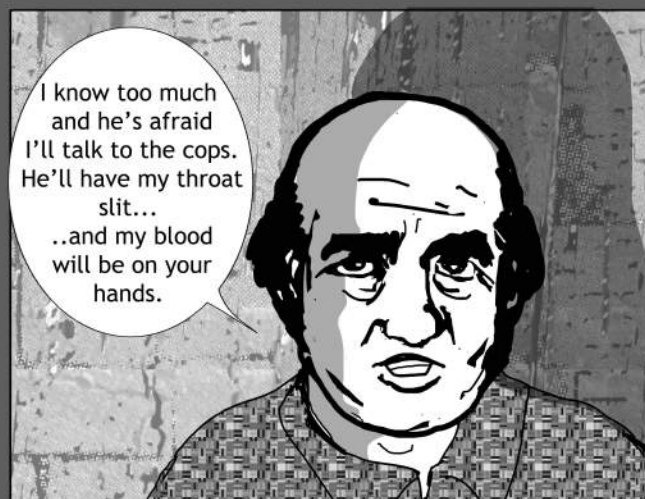
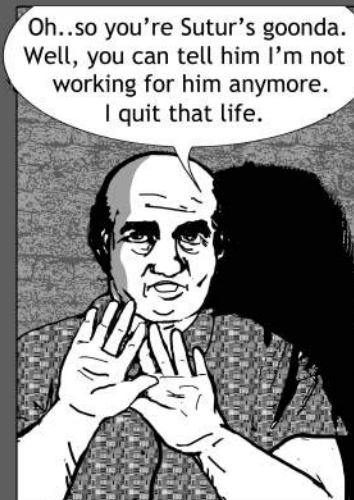
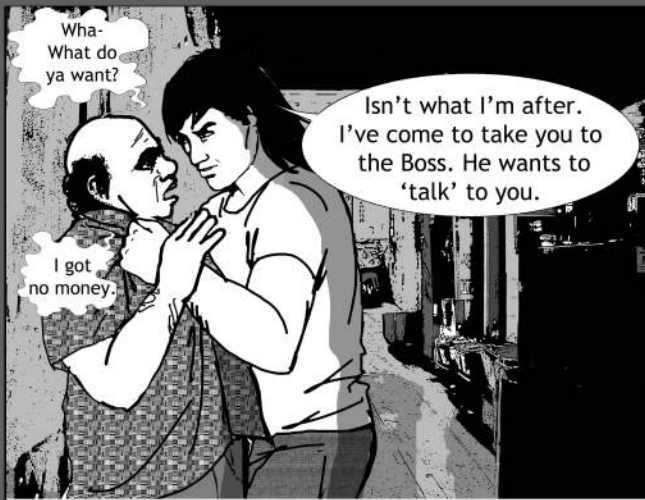


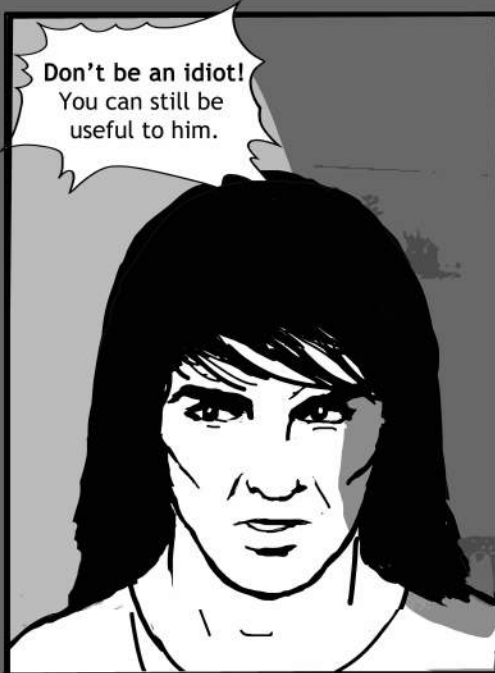
Then I pounced!

Huh??!

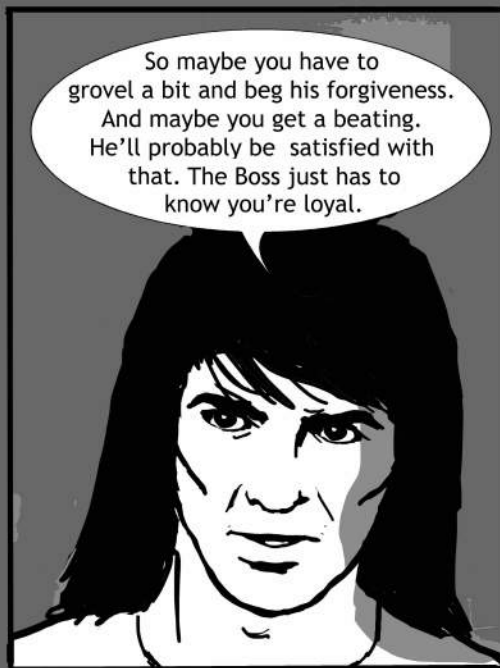




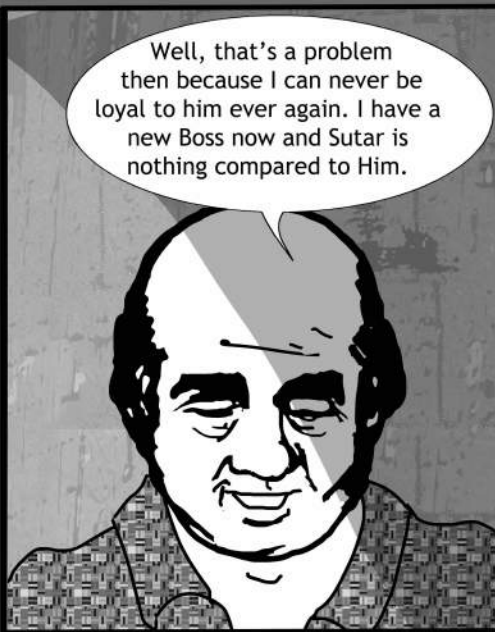




Don't be an idiot!  
You can still be  
useful to him.



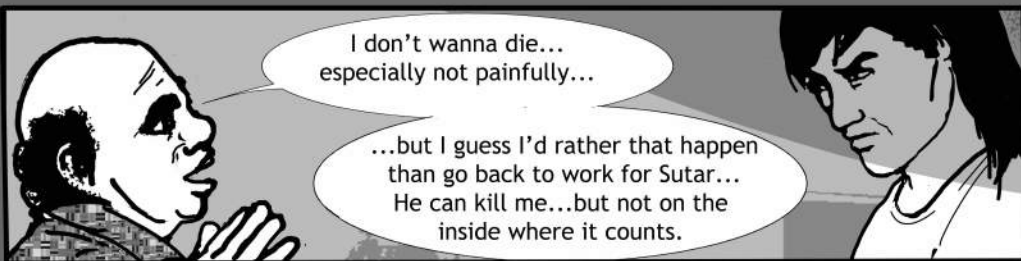
So maybe you have to  
grovel a bit and beg his forgiveness.  
And maybe you get a beating.  
He'll probably be satisfied with  
that. The Boss just has to  
know you're loyal.



Well, that's a problem  
then because I can never be  
loyal to him ever again. I have a  
new Boss now and Sutar is  
nothing compared to Him.



HaH! You mean God,  
don't ya? Those religious types  
at the Mission really got to you,  
didn't they? That garbage they  
fed you is going to get you  
killed, man!

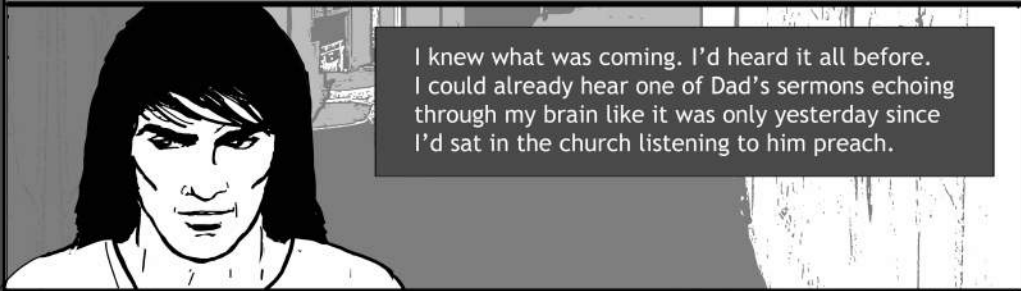


I don't wanna die...  
especially not painfully...

...but I guess I'd rather that happen  
than go back to work for Sutar...  
He can kill me...but not on the  
inside where it counts.



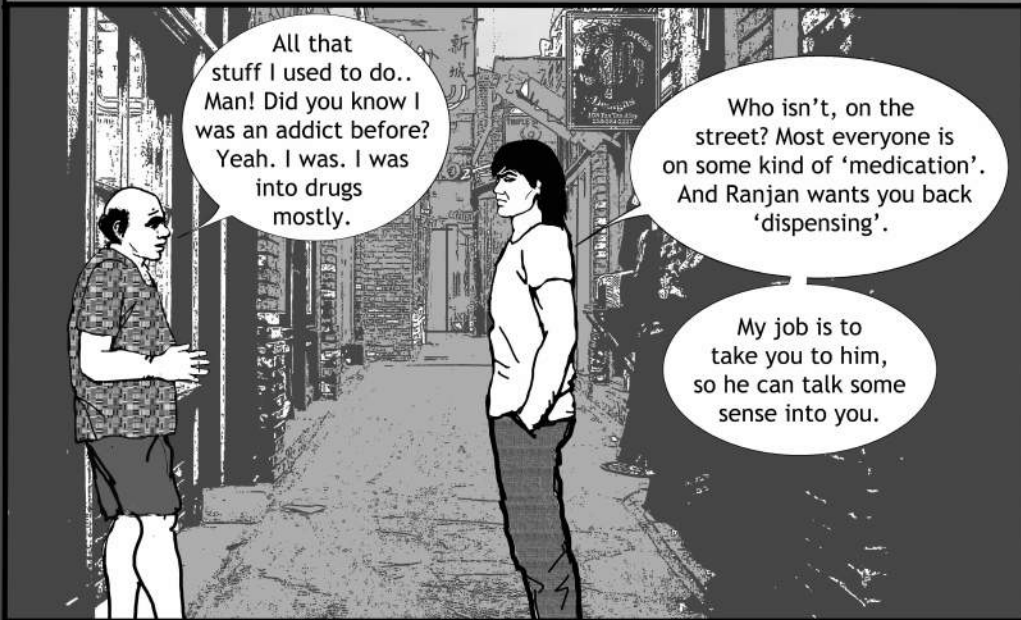
I'm a Christian now. Jesus gave me eternal life. I was once separated from God, but not anymore.



I knew what was coming. I'd heard it all before. I could already hear one of Dad's sermons echoing through my brain like it was only yesterday since I'd sat in the church listening to him preach.



He made me a King's kid. I have no identity with my old life.

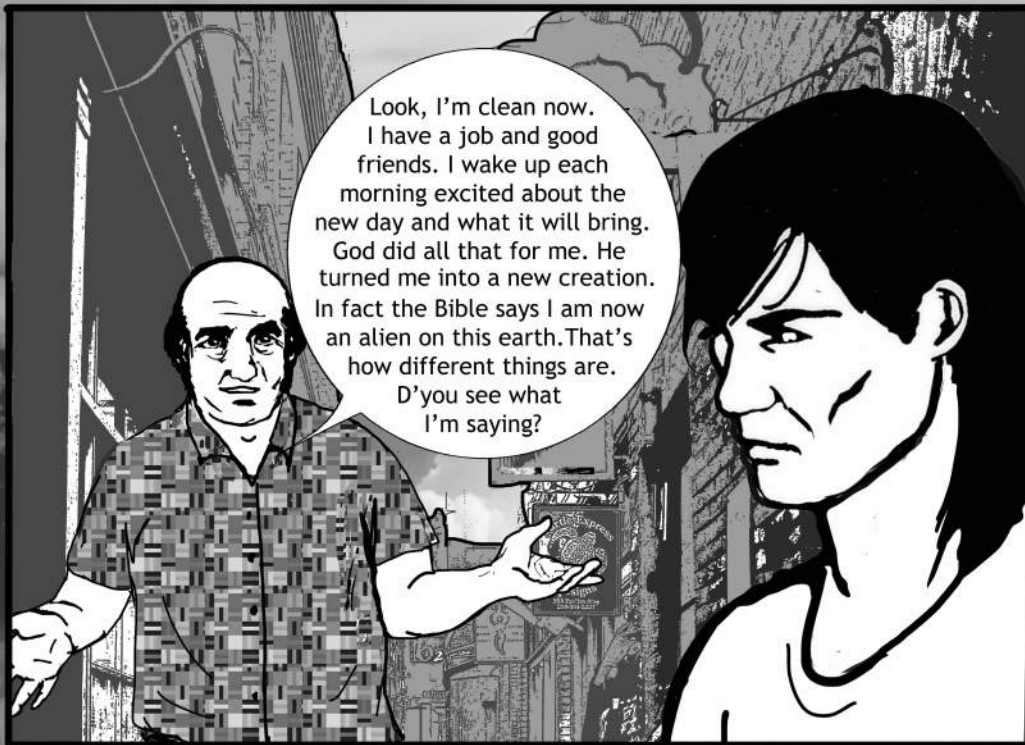


All that stuff I used to do.. Man! Did you know I was an addict before? Yeah. I was. I was into drugs mostly.

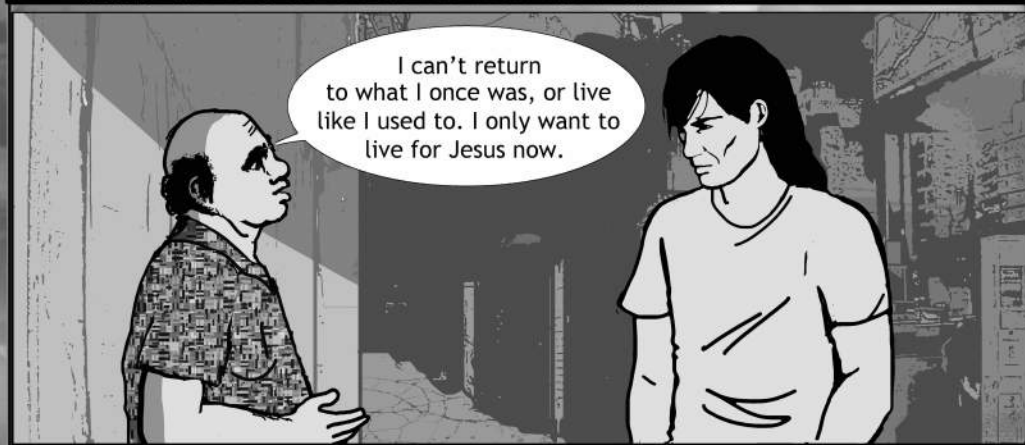
Who isn't, on the street? Most everyone is on some kind of 'medication'. And Ranjan wants you back 'dispensing'.

My job is to take you to him, so he can talk some sense into you.





Look, I'm clean now. I have a job and good friends. I wake up each morning excited about the new day and what it will bring. God did all that for me. He turned me into a new creation. In fact the Bible says I am now an alien on this earth. That's how different things are. D'you see what I'm saying?



I can't return to what I once was, or live like I used to. I only want to live for Jesus now.



I was hoping I'd have a few years left to tell other people about Him and what He's done for them.. but I'm not afraid to die..

Dying would just be going home to heaven. So, if you want to take me back to Sutar...well.. I'm ready. I'll gladly die for Jesus.

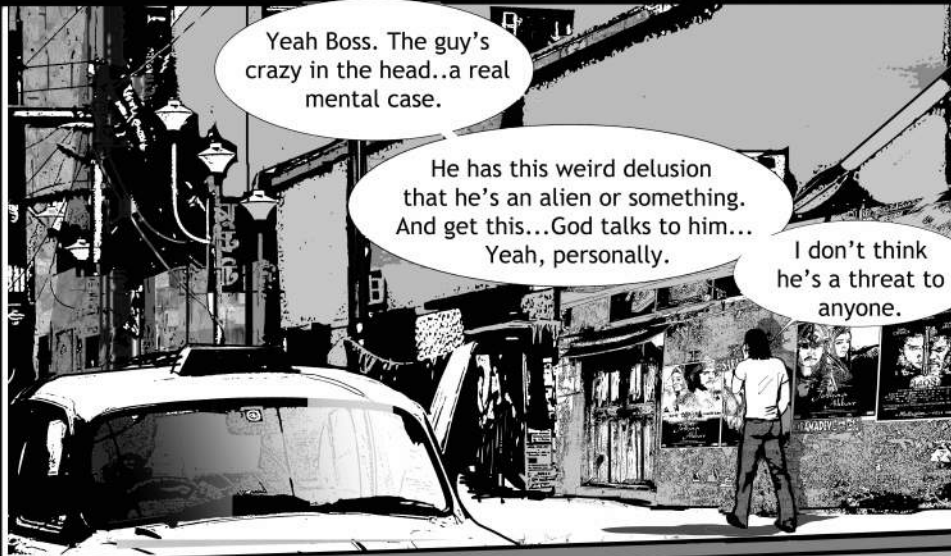


I didn't get it. All my life I'd heard this kind of talk and I still didn't get it. This 'new creation' idea had always been incomprehensible to me. Turning over a new leaf I could understand. It just involved reforming some bad habits, if your will was strong enough. But becoming someone different? Having a 'relationship' with God? I'd have said this guy was crazy if it hadn't been for Dad, Amma, and my mother. My folks weren't nutcases and they subscribed to these beliefs. But they were good people and always had been. So how did a two-bit dope dealer and street snitch suddenly become all righteous?

How did Bijaya understand this stuff and even become willing to die for it? He didn't look all that bright, and he certainly didn't strike me as the brave hero type. Yet here he was, standing up for his faith in spite of what it could cost him - like those Christians in that Orissa village who had been persecuted and still met out in the open to learn about the Bible. One thing was certain. I now identified Bijaya with that group and I was doubly loathe to drag him off to his execution. He seemed sincere in his beliefs...like my Dad...and I couldn't do it. However I had no other choice ...unless... An idea hit. A long shot, but worth trying.



Which is why I left Bijaya standing in the alley, unharmed, as I went off to make a quick phone call to Ranjan.



Yeah Boss. The guy's crazy in the head..a real mental case.

He has this weird delusion that he's an alien or something. And get this...God talks to him... Yeah, personally.

I don't think he's a threat to anyone.



No, I didn't beat on him...It would have looked weak and vindictive, you know? Beating up a retard like that.

I didn't think it would reflect well on you. Seeing someone that pathetic as a threat might have given the wrong message.



Yeah, a crowd was starting to gather too...Yeah sure. I'll hold off for awhile and keep an eye on him. I know where to find him...Whatever you say, Boss.

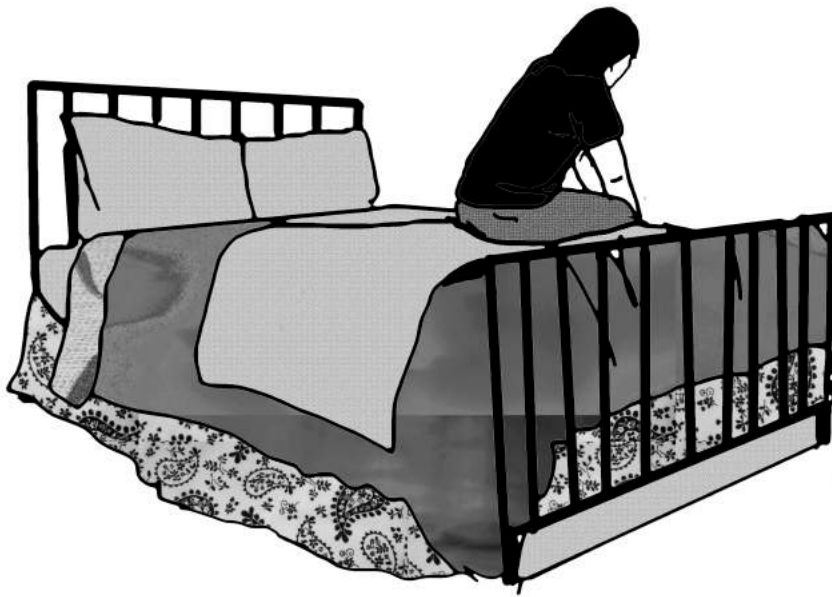


I felt surprisingly light as I headed back home,  
not just because I'd helped an underdog,  
but because I'd managed to put one over on Ranjan.  
Maybe it was a small victory ...  
a minor revenge...  
but it felt good nonetheless.  
Whoever said revenge was sweet knew what he was talking about.  
Striking back, in whatever form, felt like justice...  
And I could get used to a taste like that.

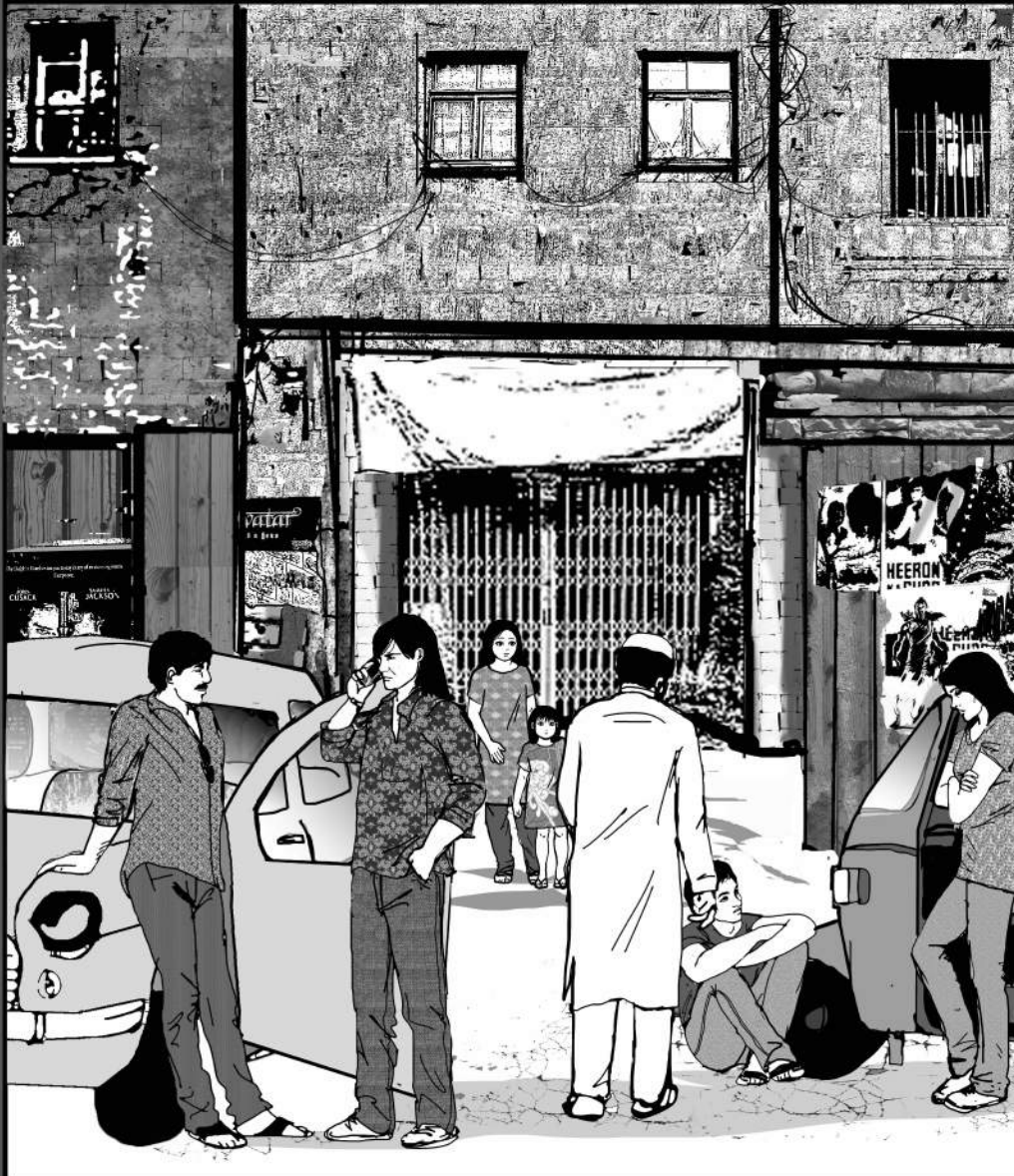


Chapter 11

# LOSS



Ranjan owned an old building not far from Sonagachi. He used it as a warehouse for stolen items that were later fenced to retail outlets at 'discount' prices. He'd hired Rupesh Nag, uncle to Anita and Pushpa, to act as watchman. They all lived in a room on the second floor. I'd gone there several times to pick up drugs or to meet contacts, but on this particular day Kaliyah and I were on a mission to find Bindi. She had disappeared. No one had seen her for several days, and since she was last seen with the Odisha girls, we were there looking for clues.



On the day she disappeared, she had left the monkey with Kaliyah and taken Anita and Pushpa with her to beg on Sudder Street like usual. I had been looking for her to let her know I'd dealt with the thugs who'd attacked her. Bindi didn't know it yet, but word was out on the street that she was under my protection and would be working for me from now on. My vengeance on her rapists underscored the fact that she had become my property.





Only I couldn't find her anywhere. Anita and Pushpa weren't much help either. They said Bindi had dropped them off as usual but failed to pick them up at the end of the day.

There were a couple of possibilities as to what may have happened to Bindi. She could have been picked up by the cops and put in a remand home, or else some pimp might have kidnapped her and sold her into a brothel. In either case, her life would be hell right about now. It angered me that she had slipped through my fingers like that.



Serves the little fool right for refusing my offer. I asked her several times to come work for me so she wouldn't have to become a slave in some Sonagachi whorehouse.



I fail to see the difference.



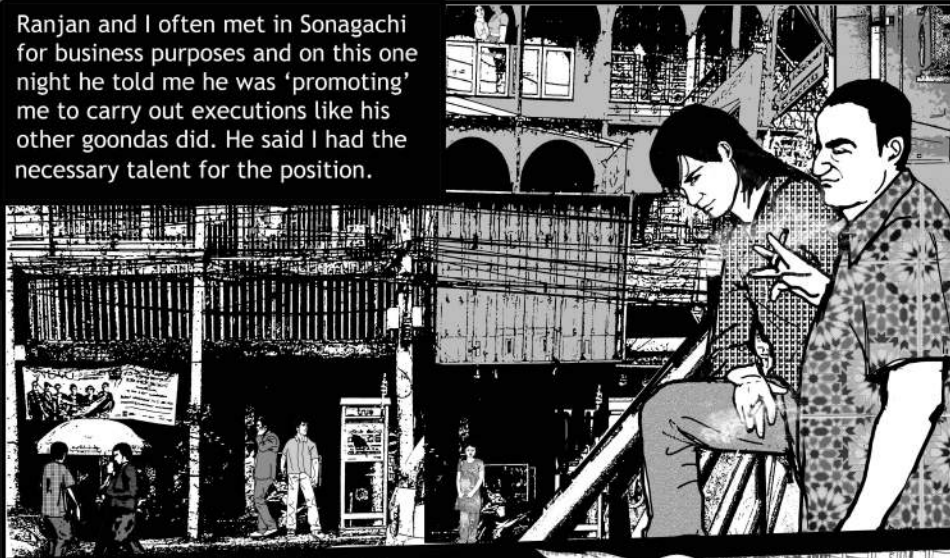
Kaliyah's comment rankled. Living with Ranjan I knew she'd seen a lot to disgust her, but I seem to have earned her disdain as well, like I was no better than the psycho she lived with. Maybe she didn't realize that I was trying to survive just like she was, and that meant doing things I didn't necessarily want to do, like pimping and dope dealing. But to equate me with the Sonagachi pimps was way out of line. Instead of judging me, she should have seen that we both served the same slave-master and did what we had to in order to stay alive.

Not everyone on the street was a criminal by choice. Take the 2 Odisha girls - orphaned and dependent on an alcoholic uncle - they had to beg on the streets and con unwary tourists. Neither one of them had chosen that career and they were ill-suited to that kind of life, but they had no other options. In a few years they would become hardened to street life and fit right in. With Bindi gone, Santosh got the job of educating them and he'd make sure they learned every lowdown trick in the book. It was really too bad because they were good kids at heart. I took to watching them go through their begging routines in the alley, partly because it was downright entertaining to see them bumble through their drills. But they also reminded me of myself at that age. Watching them made me realize how far I had wandered away from whom I'd once been. And I wondered what they would be like in the future. Probably completely unrecognizable from what I was seeing now.



Anita, the older one, was headed for Sonagachi, according to Satish. Ranjan planned to get her away from her uncle and sell her to Sharvani Sen. Satish had heard this from Kaliyah who knew these things. She saw and heard a lot, living with the Boss. Kali was probably the only one who could sway Ranjan to some small degree when it came to getting his favor. She had done it for the street kids and I suspect she had done it for others as well. But she walked a fine line at all times and had to be very careful to never oppose the Boss. No one opposed Ranjan...not if they had any brains. Kaliyah HAD brains and a strong survivor instinct as well. I admired her for that, which is probably why her opinion of me mattered. But like I said, I had no real choice in deciding my life... Ranjan pushed the buttons and I just followed orders...some of which were now threatening to make my already hellish existence far worse.

Ranjan and I often met in Sonagachi for business purposes and on this one night he told me he was 'promoting' me to carry out executions like his other goondas did. He said I had the necessary talent for the position.



I don't think I'd be able to kill anybody, Boss.

Is that so? Maybe you wanna rethink that.



You work for me, you follow orders. No options! No exceptions.





I was careful to make my response to Ranjan's demands as noncommittal as possible, without actually agreeing to them. But I knew that he wouldn't give up until he got his way. He'd probably force me to get involved in a murder somehow, and maybe blackmail me with some false evidence...or put me in a situation where my life would be on the line if I didn't comply. I'd seen it happen to some other guys.

The next few weeks were hell. I couldn't eat or sleep because of the mental torture. Thoughts of becoming another Giri ate away at my brain, coupled with the crippling fear of Ranjan's retribution should I try to make a run for it. Ranjan had contacts everywhere and I couldn't think of a single place where I'd be safe. I'd also have Jayanti with me and that would make escape even more difficult.

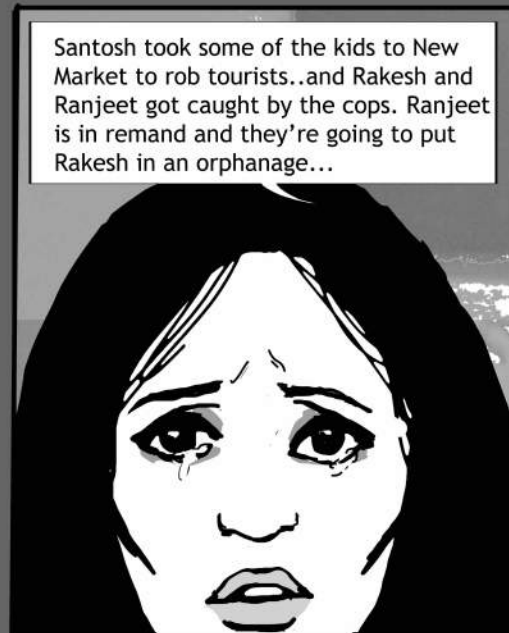


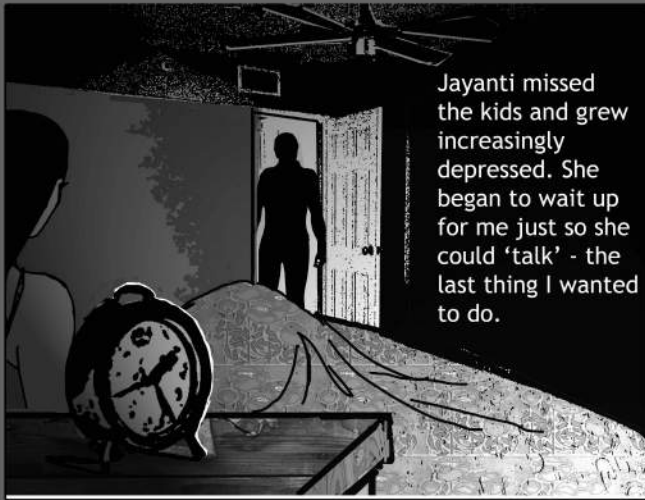
To make matters worse, I couldn't tell Jayanti what was bothering me.

I couldn't tell her the details of my predicament.. or my fears. It would only endanger her - and me - if she knew my true identity and what I was facing with Ranjan. A slip of the tongue could mean disaster. So I kept silent and when she began asking me why I was so moody, I began hanging out with the guys, drinking, smoking up, and playing pool till all hours of the night.



Jayanti complained about my late hours and I couldn't blame her. I was gone a lot. That meant she couldn't continue her escort business, which was no real loss anyway. She'd lost interest in sex work long ago and we'd both figured out she wasn't cut out for it. So with all that extra time on her hands, Jayanti grew bored and restless. At least the street kids were there in the evenings to keep her company. She especially liked hanging out with Sumitra and Ranjeet, and she favored the little guy, Rakesh. Then one night, while we were having drinks in a bar with some acquaintances, Jayanti got a call that brought bad news.





Jayanti missed the kids and grew increasingly depressed. She began to wait up for me just so she could 'talk' - the last thing I wanted to do.

I hadn't told her much about my past, and what I did tell her was mostly lies..like my parents had died when I was young and I'd been raised on the streets. Some of the stuff I made up didn't jive and she knew it. She kept digging into my life and I kept retreating. I felt like crap for always pushing her away but I didn't know what else to do. I had never been able to share myself with anyone. So things went from bad to worse in our relationship.



Jayanti, you can't read all night.

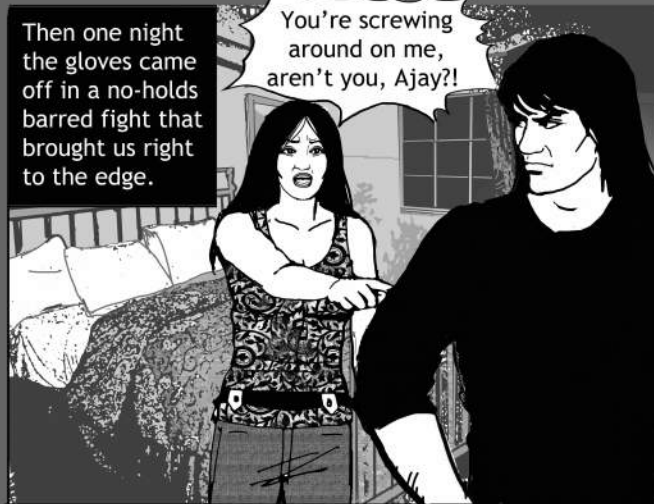
Why not? You stay out all night.

So I can read all night if I want to.

She began to defy me on every front in retaliation for my neglect. I'd hidden my mother's Bible downstairs but somehow she found it and began reading it constantly because it bugged me. Not only that, but she stayed up with the lights on so I couldn't get to sleep. I'd get mad and she'd snap back some smart remark until we were both yelling at full decible. It was all pretty childish but neither one of us knew how to handle our frustration.

Then one night the gloves came off in a no-holds barred fight that brought us right to the edge.

You're screwing around on me, aren't you, Ajay?!







That's why you don't get home til 2 and 3 in the morning. You visit some little whore in one of the brothels!

Knock it off Jay! I told you I work late because it's the Boss's orders.

And just what kind of work does Ranjan have you doing that takes all hours of the night?

Just drop it ok? I'm really tired.

**YOU'RE tired?!**  
What about me?  
I'm tired too..tired of staring at these 4 walls day after day, waiting for you to give me a few minutes of your precious time!  
I'm not waiting anymore, Ajay.

What are you saying here?

I'm saying that when 2 people love each other, they talk. They spend time together. They don't live separate lives like we do.

It's just for awhile... til we have enough saved so we can blow this place.



And how are you going to do that if you spend all your money on drugs and beer? And whores.

Oh that's great coming from you! The only whore I've been spending money on is YOU!

Cheap shot, Ajay. A comment like that just shows how much you're becoming like your pals. In another year you'll look in the mirror and find Ranjan's or Giri's face staring back at you.

F\$#@% you, Jayanti! I'm nothing like them and never will be!

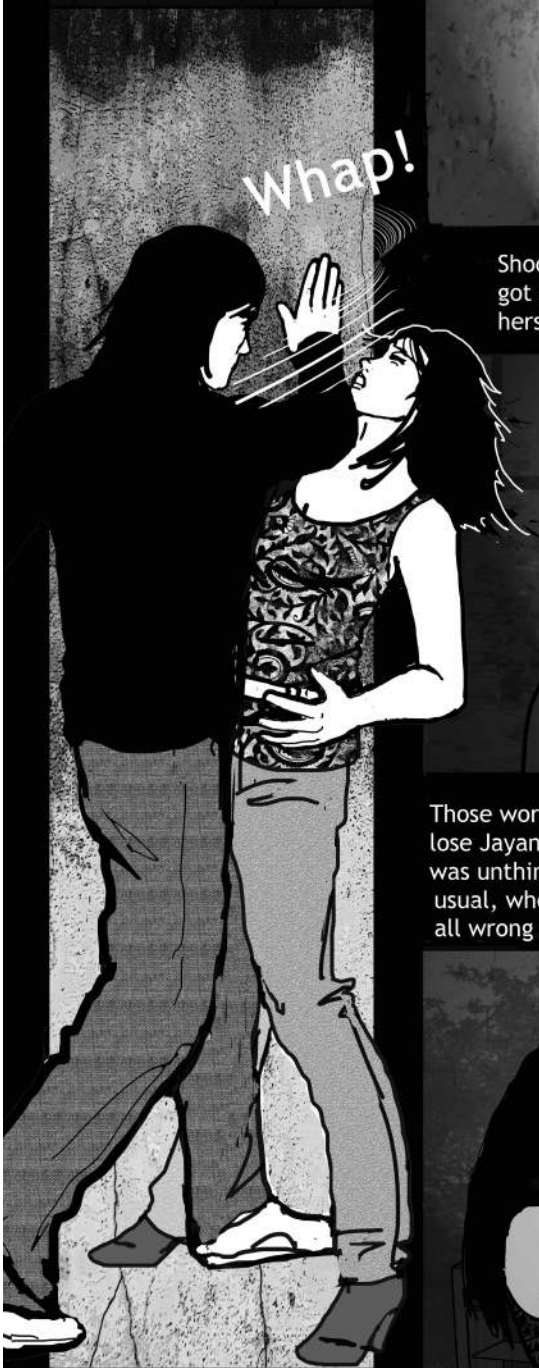
Yeah you will, Ajay. I can already see the resemblance.

You better shut your mouth, okay.

No! I won't shut my mouth! I'm tired of living with a Mafia street thug who only cares about himself! You're so pathetic, Ajay!

I don't know why I hit her. In all our other fights I'd never lost control. Maybe it was a combination of pressure from Ranjan, lack of sleep, and too many beers that did it.

I instantly regretted striking her, but her horror-filled expression told me the damage was done.



Shock and hurt gave way to anger, and then her eyes got this real distant look...like she was retreating into herself...and building walls between us.



I..I hoped it wouldn't end this way.

Those words sliced through my heart like a knife. I couldn't lose Jayanti! She was all I had. The idea of her leaving me was unthinkable and I was desperate to prevent it. So like usual, when it came to handling Jayanti, I went about it all wrong and made things worse.



You're not going anywhere! You belong to me and you're staying right here!

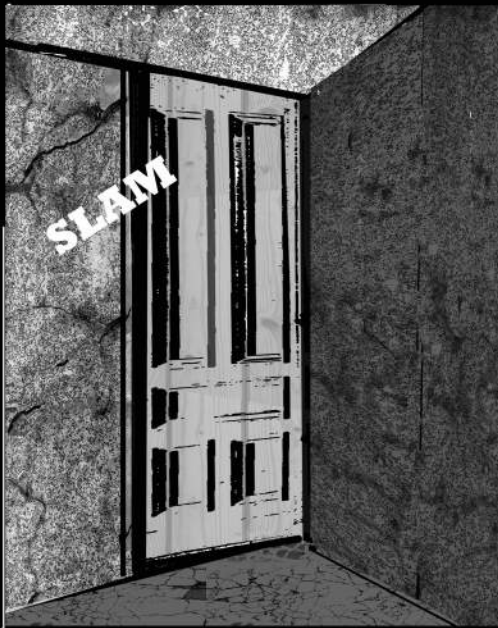
Try to run and I'll find you and drag you back!



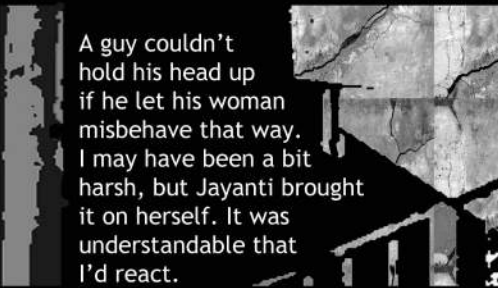
Women never fight fair when they use tears, and Jayanti was no stranger to the strategy. She threw herself on the bed and began to sob into her pillow, while I stood in the middle of the room, feeling like a total louse.



I decided to beat a hasty retreat, but I couldn't let her think she had the upper hand, so I delivered a parting salvo.



I had a smoke on the fire escape while I thought things through. I decided not to apologize to Jayanti for getting rough. After all, she had been out of line, mouthing off like that and showing disrespect.



When I got in, Jayanti was konked out, and not for the first time I noticed how vulnerable she looked while asleep.



Her face was all tear-streaked and I couldn't help feeling a twinge of remorse and uncertainty seeing her like that. But then I told myself that come morning, things would be better. I'd have a talk with her, lay down the law a bit, then smooth things over by spending some time with her..maybe take her to a restaurant and go shopping or something. I wasn't too concerned about her talk of leaving. We often said things we didn't mean when we were angry. I was sure this would blow over like all the other times...It was just the look on her face after I slapped her that bothered me. I'd never seen that before.



Like something inside her was broken...

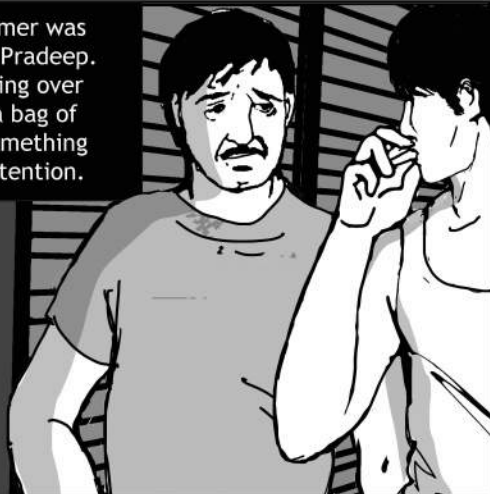
The new day brought unexpected developments and not a few nasty surprises, the first one being Jayanti's absence when I woke up in the morning. Her purse was missing from the almirah, which meant that she had her cell with her, so I called her number. No response. Unbidden memories of our fight resurfaced and words I'd wanted to forget now echoed loudly in my brain - words like "street thug" and "pathetic".



I began to consider the possibility that Jayanti HAD meant what she'd said. Otherwise why wasn't she here? That thought inflamed my mind, filling me with bitter rage. The more I thought about it, the angrier I became. It was Priya all over again. I wanted to go looking for Jayanti right then, but first I had to do some drug dealing out in the alley.



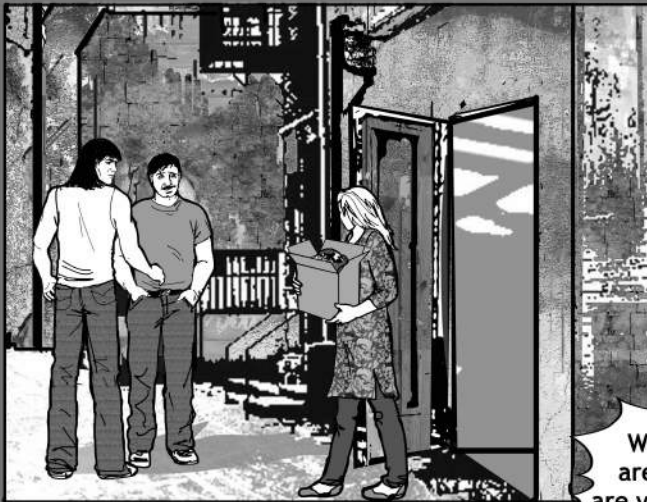
My last customer was a guy named Pradeep. He was haggling over the price of a bag of hash when something caught his attention.



Ho Man!  
Look at  
that!

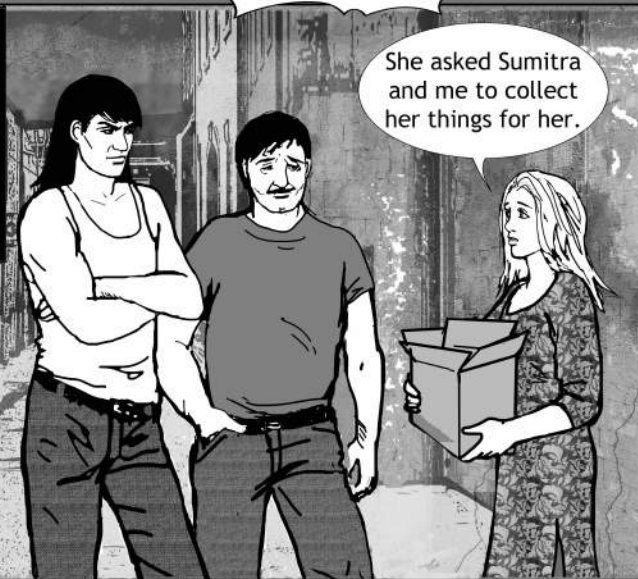




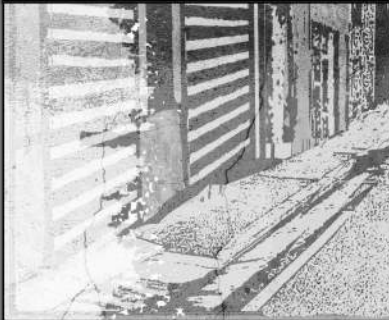


Who the f### are you, and what are you doing here?!!!!

The little blonde nervously introduced herself as Rachel Woods, a counselor with Grace Mission. She announced that Jayanti and Sumitra had come to the mission that day and Jayanti had signed herself into the Mission's safe house program.



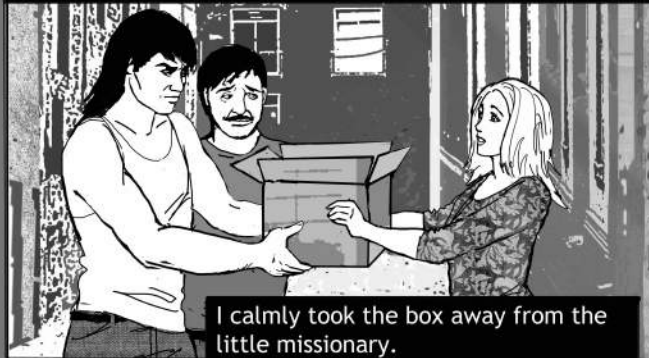
She asked Sumitra and me to collect her things for her.



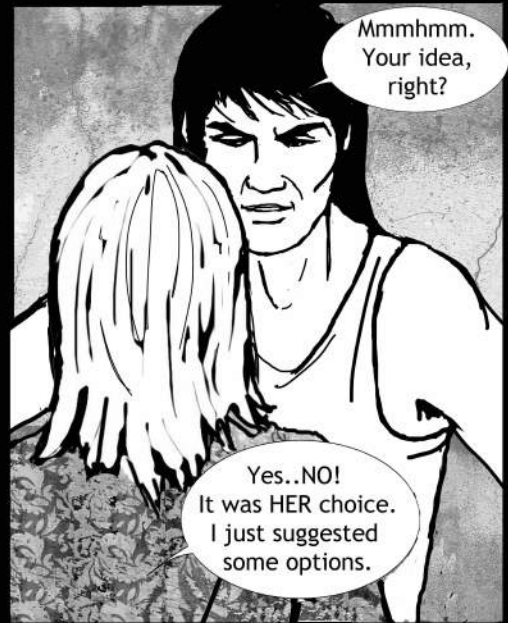
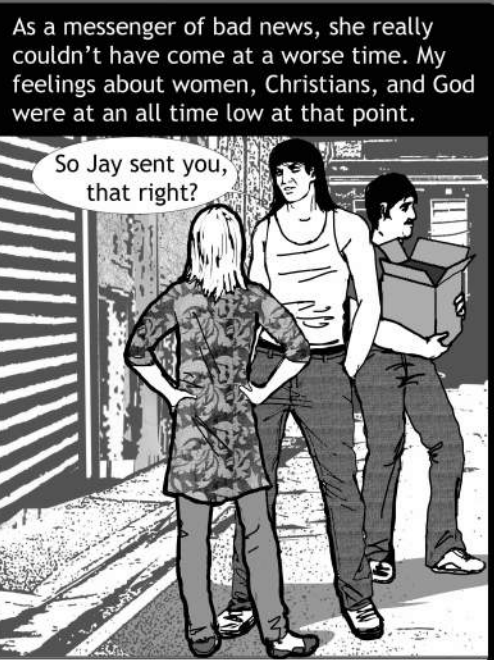
Sumitra is upstairs packing..I went ahead with this box..but I got lost.. I was looking for the tunnel... Uh, you're Ajay I'm guessing.



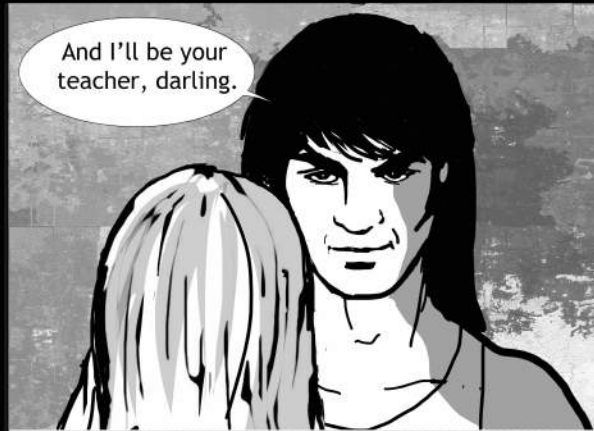
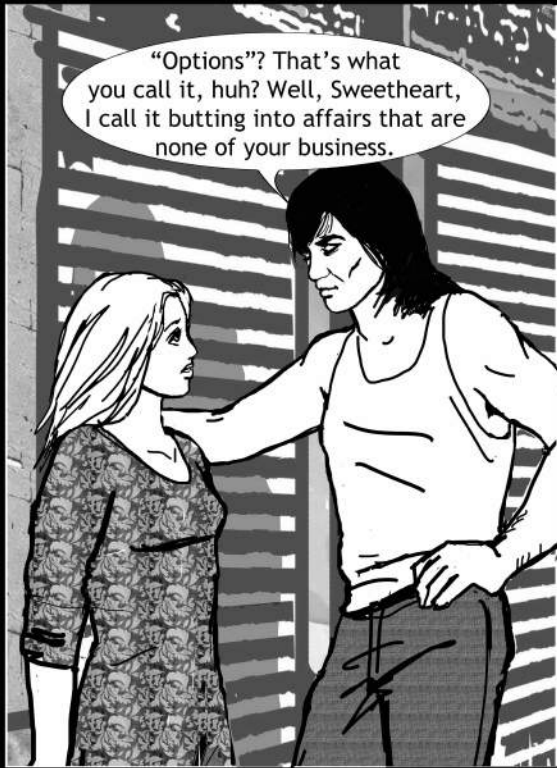
I was floored by what she told me about Jayanti but I never let on, and I tamped down the rage that was kicking in at full gear. But my control was hanging by a hair's breadth. I knew it wouldn't take much to push me to the edge.



I calmly took the box away from the little missionary.



A lot of conflicting emotions were seething inside and I couldn't even identify most of them. But there was no mistaking the cruel urge to retaliate that bubbled to the surface like molten lava, waiting to incinerate whoever stood near. In this case...Rachel. I moved in close to my quarry, taking silent satisfaction at the flicker of fear I saw in her eyes. I wanted her to fear me. She was instrumental in taking Jayanti away from me and she would have to pay for that. She had invaded my life, not to mention my home, as if she had every right to do so, disrupting my existence and stealing what was mine. I was sick and tired of having what I held as precious taken from me!

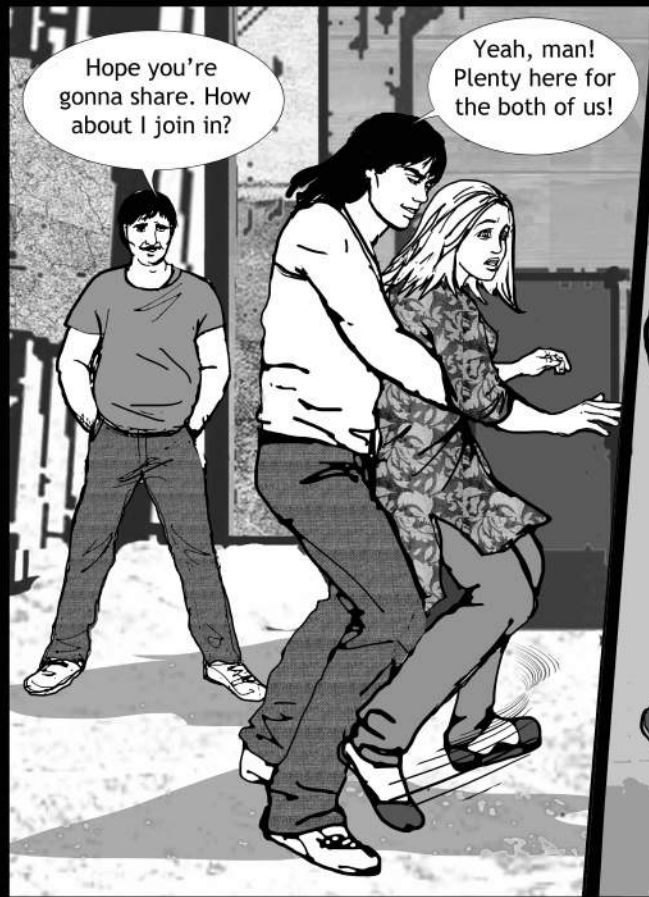






Where ya goin, babe?  
We're not through.

GET HER WOLF!



Hope you're  
gonna share. How  
about I join in?

Yeah, man!  
Plenty here for  
the both of us!



Oh baby!  
We are gonna  
have SO much  
fun!





Would I have hurt her? I honestly don't know. In the beginning, in spite of my anger, I just wanted to scare her...make her sorry for luring Jayanti away and for messing with our lives. But then she said she wasn't afraid and I took that as a challenge. And when she ran, I don't know...the chase fanned a flame inside, heating my blood, and arousing a predator instinct. The thrill of the hunt overrode everything else. I enjoyed chasing her and I liked the feel of her struggling in my arms. Her fear excited me and made me feel powerful. Besides she was a pretty little thing. Real cute. But things might still have been different if Pradeep hadn't been involved but because he was, I couldn't just back down. It would have looked bad. So there really was no turning back. So yeah, I guess I would have sunk low enough to rape the little blonde...if it hadn't been for Sumitra.

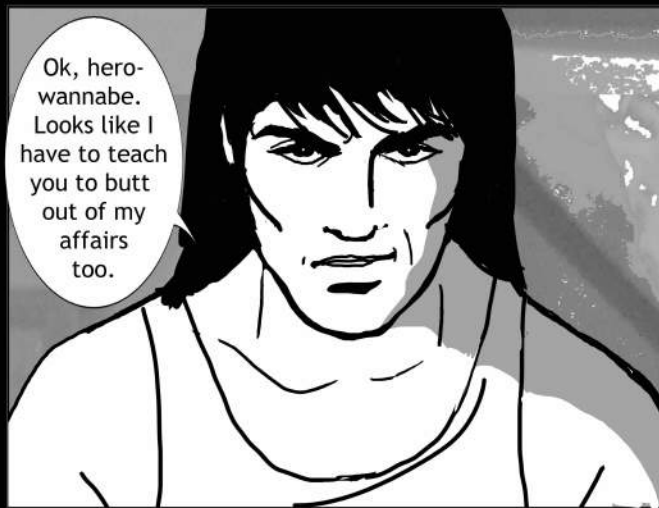


She'd been upstairs talking to Jayanti on Rachel's cell, getting instructions on what to pack. She'd stepped out onto the fire escape to get better phone reception and she'd seen us in the alley. She told Jayanti what was happening, who then informed her that help was already on the way. Apparently one of the men who worked at the Mission hadn't liked the idea of Sumitra and Rachel going to the warehouse unescorted, and when he heard they'd left, he had gone after them. Sumitra ran through the tunnel to the first building to meet up with him as soon as he arrived, so she could point him in our direction.





I recognized the guy as the one who had spoken to Bijaya outside the Mission, although he now sported a beard and long hair.



The last thing I expected was a mean left hook out of the blue. The guy didn't even give any warning or anything. Just WHAM! Right in the face, holding nothing back. Like a street fighter.





His first punch had felt like a blow from a jackhammer, a jarring jab delivered with calculated precision. I recognized some kind of martial art in his style and figured him for a black belt, but it was evident he was also an experienced boxer, well trained in the art of self defence.



I managed to get in a few pretty good shots.



But he rallied fast and delivered a sharp jab to my neck that left me dazed.

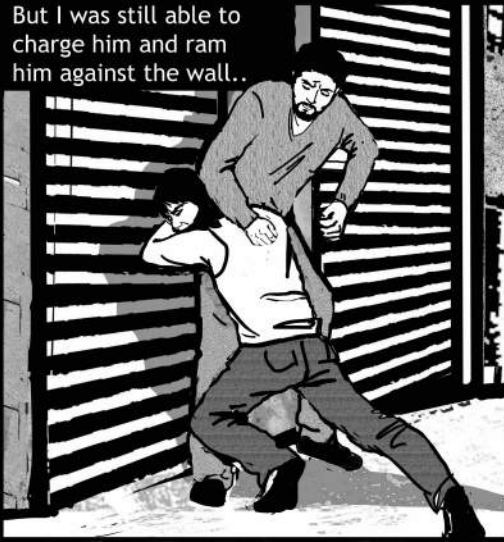


I thought it was going my way.

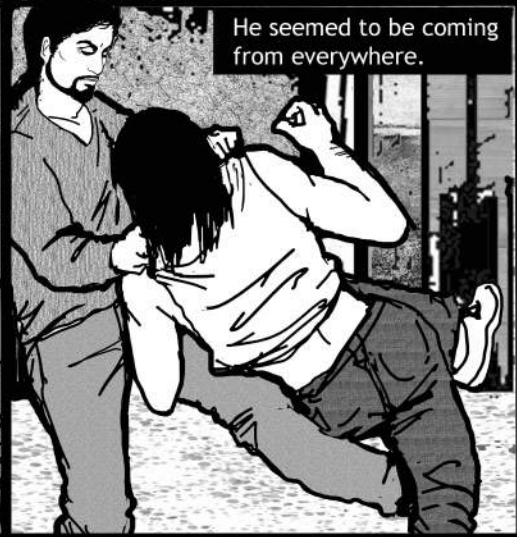




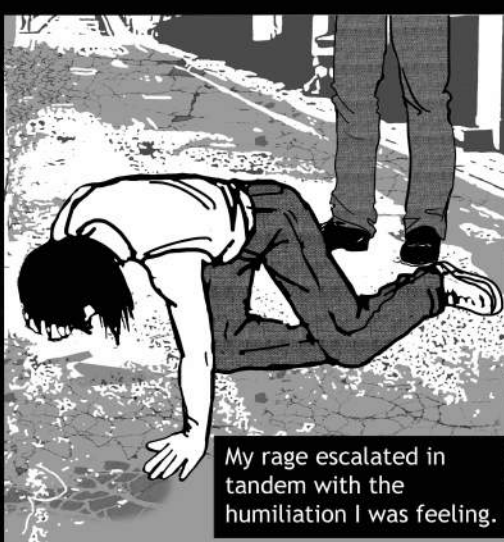
But I was still able to charge him and ram him against the wall..



..which is when he kneed me right in the gut.



He seemed to be coming from everywhere.



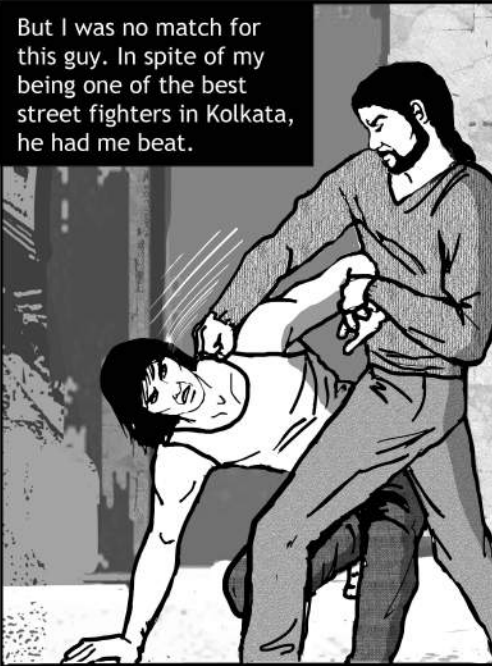
My rage escalated in tandem with the humiliation I was feeling.



Heh.. heh. Way to go, Wolf!

oomph!!

But I was no match for this guy. In spite of my being one of the best street fighters in Kolkata, he had me beat.



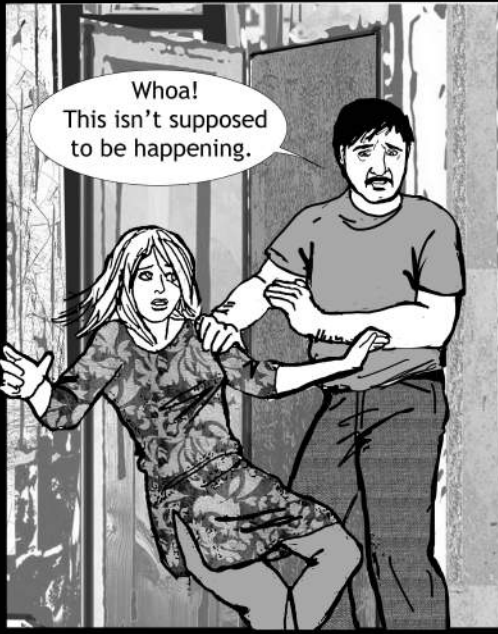
A real hard-hitter, and he never seemed to tire, whereas I was getting seriously winded.



A fierce face punch took me down and I knew it was game over. Blackness dimmed my vision and I was too dizzy to stand. Every muscle in my body ached and I wasn't sure that my nose wasn't broken.



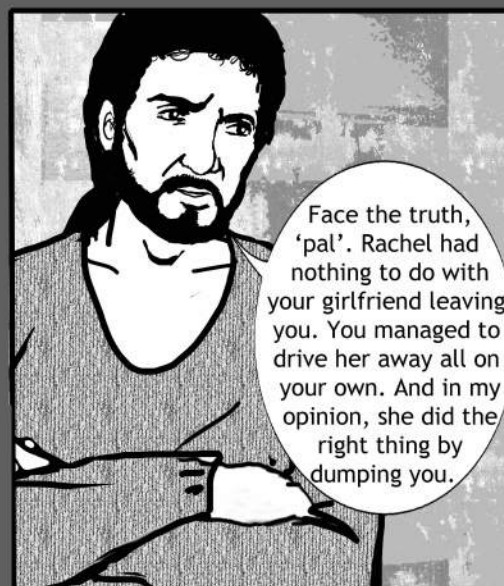
Whoa!  
This isn't supposed to be happening.



Pradeep, being the cowardly weasel he was, took off as soon as he saw that I was down for the count. He tossed the blonde to the ground and streaked off down the alley, leaving me in no doubt that he'd take the news of my defeat to Ranjan and anyone else who'd listen.



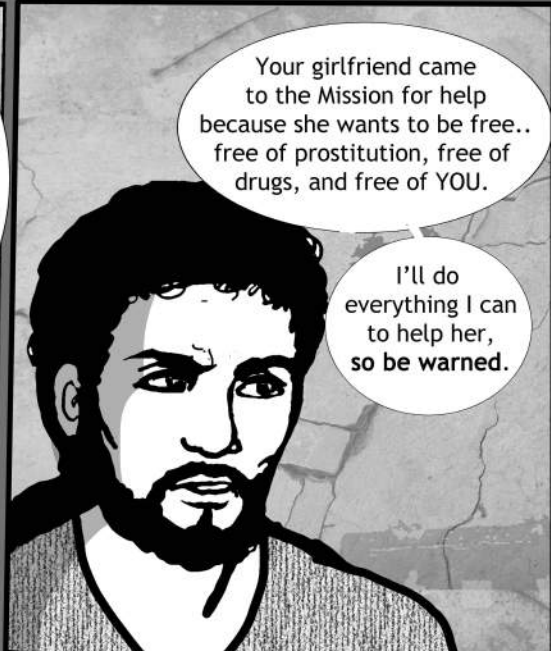
It was partly true. I wanted to scare the little meddler alright, and I definitely had succeeded in that regard, but I knew it might have turned into a rape if the boyfriend hadn't shown up when he did. I'd never imagined myself ever going that far, and I was still trying to come to terms with what had almost happened, but there was no way I was going to let the boyfriend see me back down. The best defence was always an offence, so I shifted the blame to the girl. And I wasn't in the least intimidated by his threat to call the cops. If I got arrested, Ranjan would have me out within the hour, and because no real damage was done, it wouldn't even go to court. I was way more worried about my reputation on the street once it got out that I'd been beaten up by a preacher!







Who the f#@%&\* cares what your opinion is! Jayanti belongs to me and I'll get her back! And nobody better get in my way!



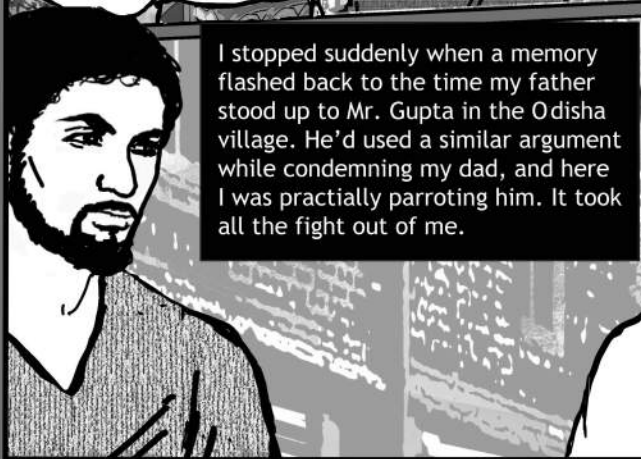
Your girlfriend came to the Mission for help because she wants to be free.. free of prostitution, free of drugs, and free of YOU.

I'll do everything I can to help her, so be warned.



And I'm warning you to butt out of our lives. You Christians think you have all the answers and everybody else has to think and act like you do.

Well, no thanks. You can shove your morality down someone else's throat.



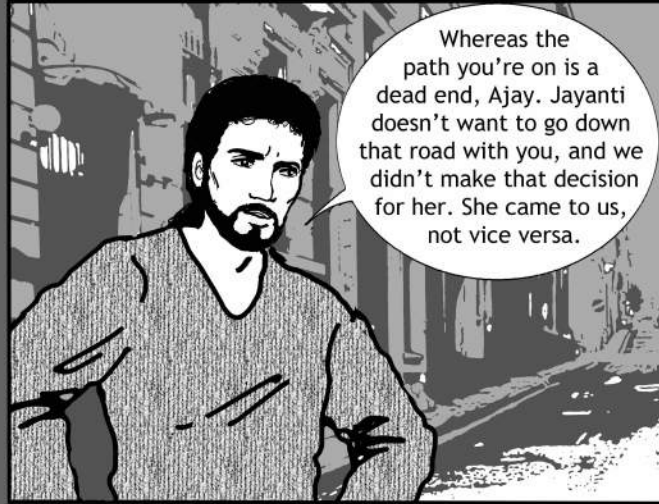
I stopped suddenly when a memory flashed back to the time my father stood up to Mr. Gupta in the Odisha village. He'd used a similar argument while condemning my dad, and here I was practically parroting him. It took all the fight out of me.



However this Raj guy was just warming up.



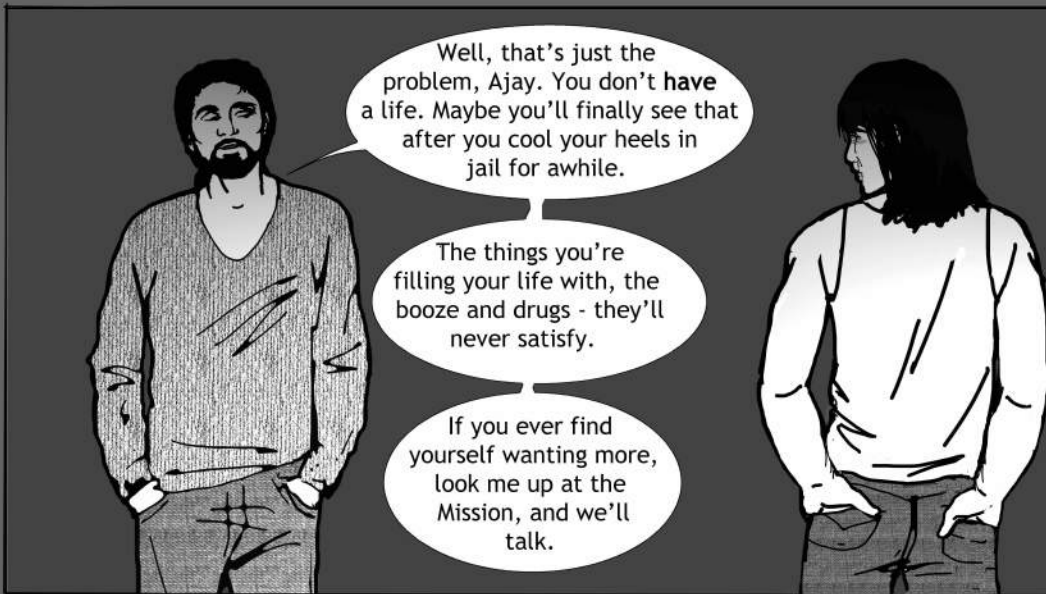
We don't have 'all the answers', but we know Who has them. His way is the only way that works.



Whereas the path you're on is a dead end, Ajay. Jayanti doesn't want to go down that road with you, and we didn't make that decision for her. She came to us, not vice versa.



Yeah, whatever, preacher man. How about you go live your life and let Jayanti and me live ours.



Well, that's just the problem, Ajay. You don't have a life. Maybe you'll finally see that after you cool your heels in jail for awhile.

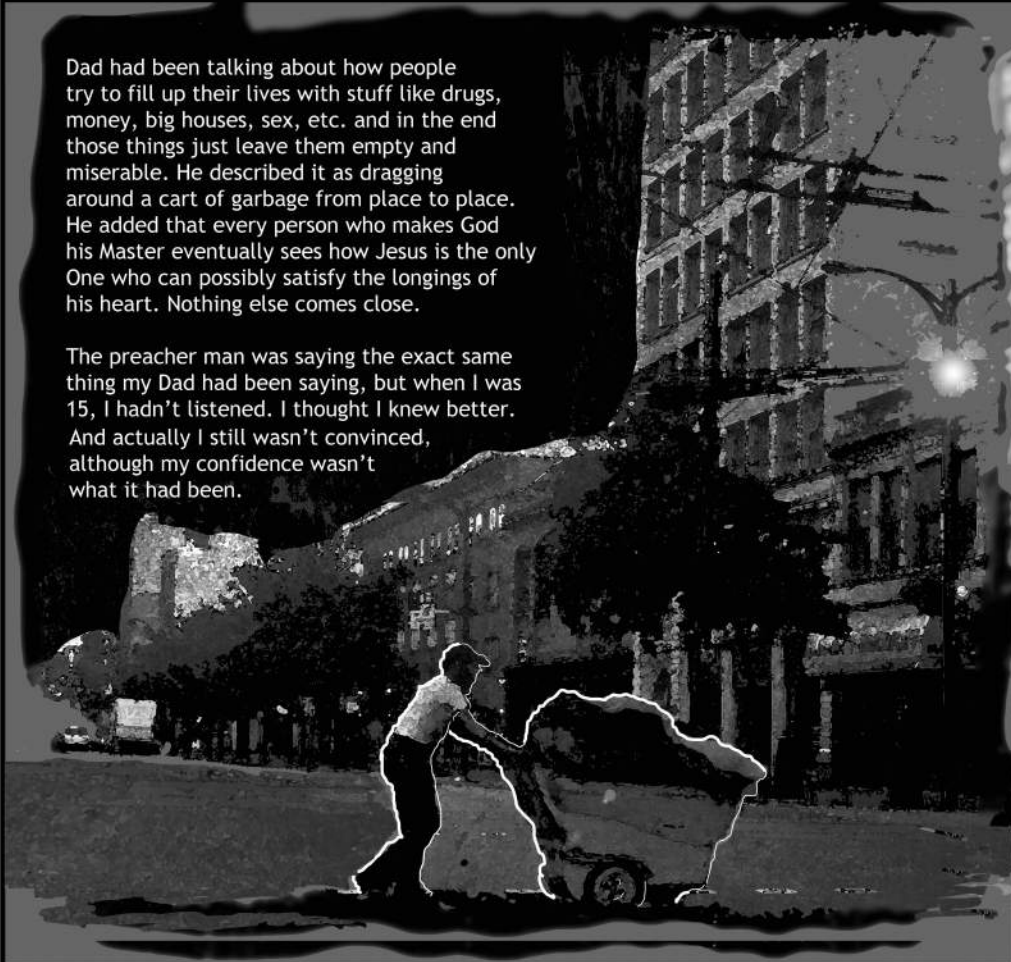
The things you're filling your life with, the booze and drugs - they'll never satisfy.

If you ever find yourself wanting more, look me up at the Mission, and we'll talk.

Another memory surfaced of my dad talking to me as we stood over Mom's gravesite.

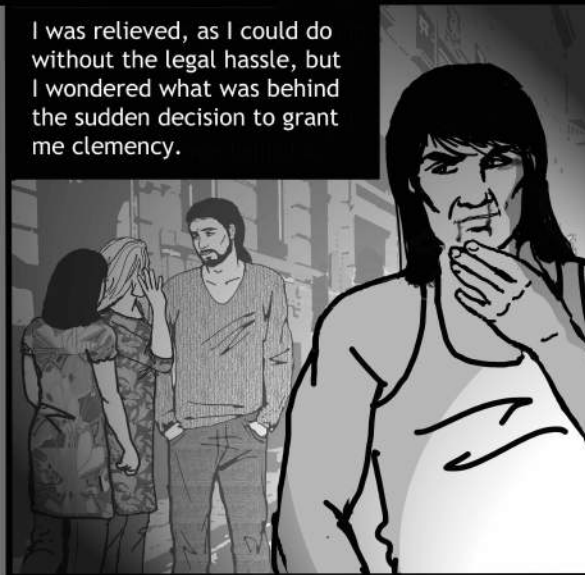
Dad had been talking about how people try to fill up their lives with stuff like drugs, money, big houses, sex, etc. and in the end those things just leave them empty and miserable. He described it as dragging around a cart of garbage from place to place. He added that every person who makes God his Master eventually sees how Jesus is the only One who can possibly satisfy the longings of his heart. Nothing else comes close.

The preacher man was saying the exact same thing my Dad had been saying, but when I was 15, I hadn't listened. I thought I knew better. And actually I still wasn't convinced, although my confidence wasn't what it had been.

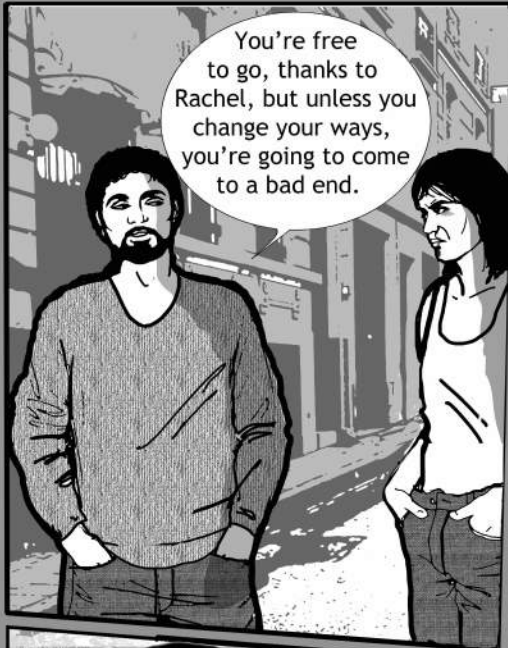


At that point Rachel stepped forward and pulled her boyfriend aside. I could hear her dissuading him from calling the cops, but I could only catch a word here and there as they whispered together.

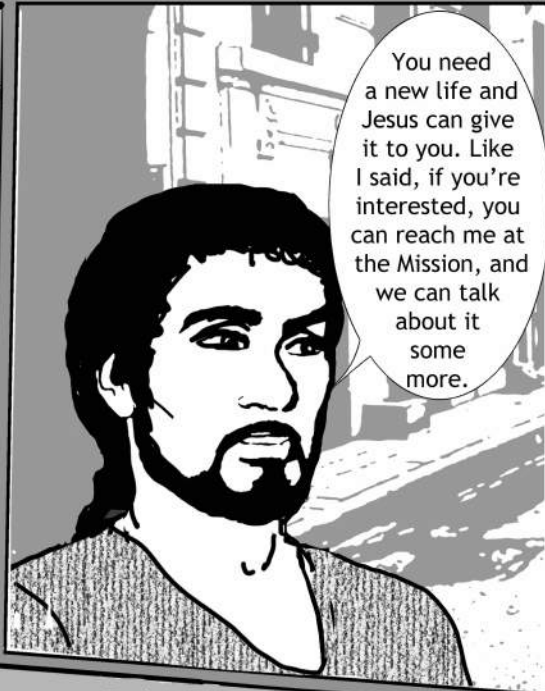
I was relieved, as I could do without the legal hassle, but I wondered what was behind the sudden decision to grant me clemency.







You're free to go, thanks to Rachel, but unless you change your ways, you're going to come to a bad end.

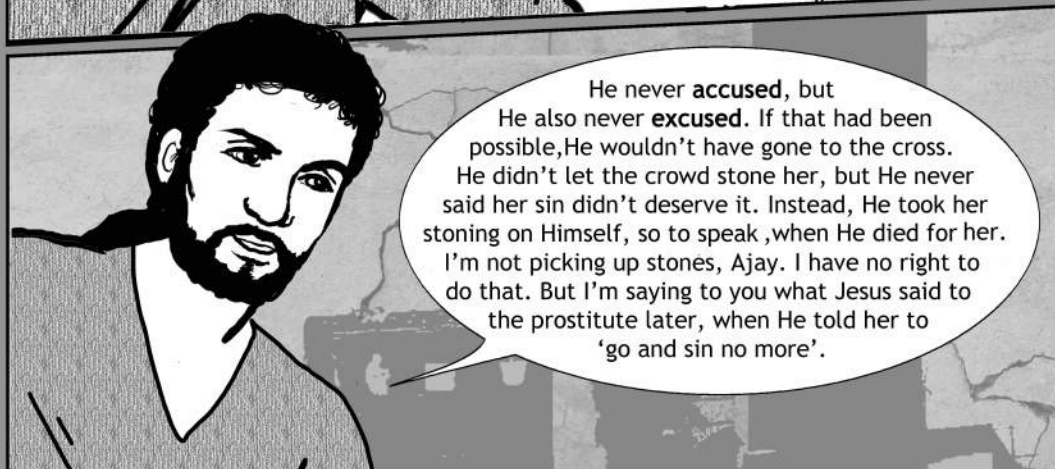


You need a new life and Jesus can give it to you. Like I said, if you're interested, you can reach me at the Mission, and we can talk about it some more.



Know what, preacher man? I can take your gut punches, but I never could stomach sermons. Besides, who are you to pick up stones if I wanna live life my way?

Even your Jesus never accused the prostitute.

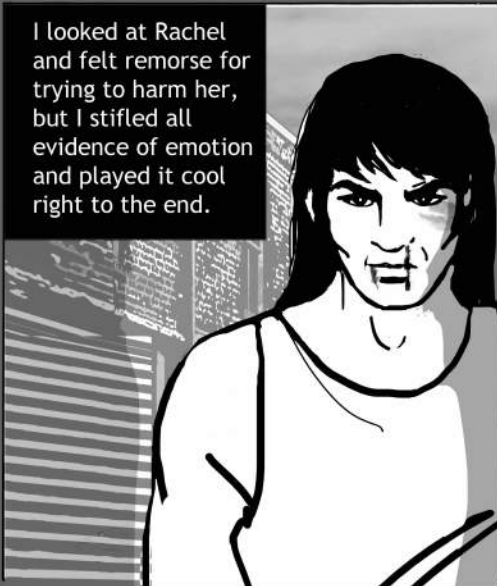


He never **accused**, but He also never **excused**. If that had been possible, He wouldn't have gone to the cross. He didn't let the crowd stone her, but He never said her sin didn't deserve it. Instead, He took her stoning on Himself, so to speak, when He died for her. I'm not picking up stones, Ajay. I have no right to do that. But I'm saying to you what Jesus said to the prostitute later, when He told her to 'go and sin no more'.

I had no reply to that and I'd heard it all before anyway. I just wanted to get away from the preacher as fast as possible.

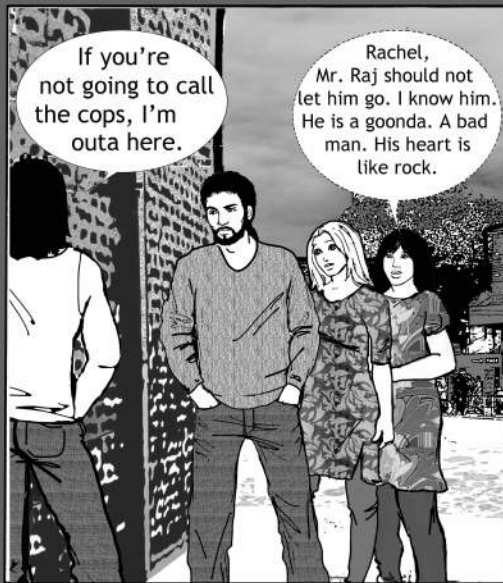


I looked at Rachel and felt remorse for trying to harm her, but I stifled all evidence of emotion and played it cool right to the end.



If you're not going to call the cops, I'm outa here.

Rachel, Mr. Raj should not let him go. I know him. He is a goonda. A bad man. His heart is like rock.

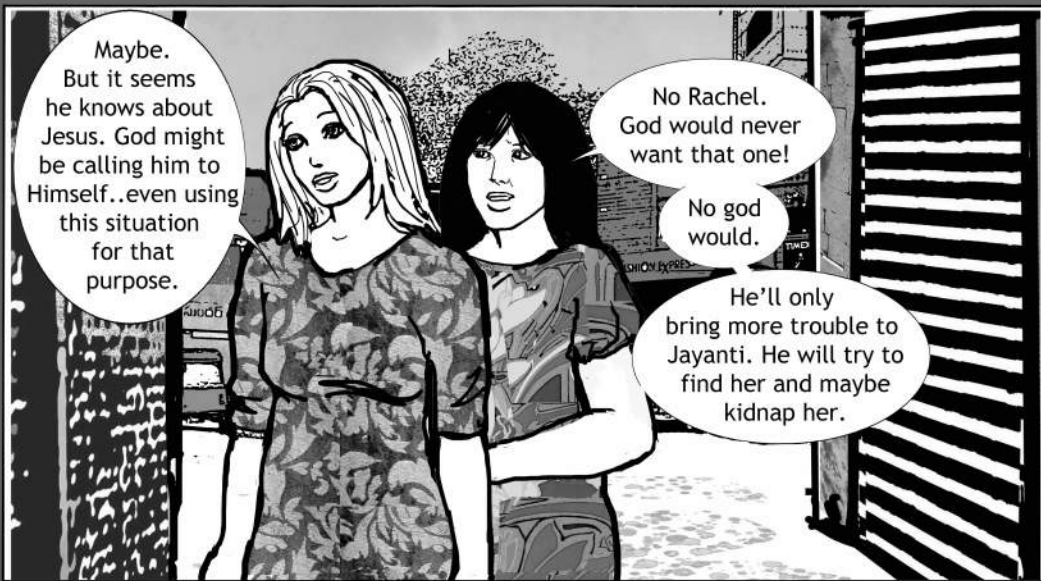


Maybe. But it seems he knows about Jesus. God might be calling him to Himself..even using this situation for that purpose.

No Rachel. God would never want that one!

No god would.

He'll only bring more trouble to Jayanti. He will try to find her and maybe kidnap her.





I was turning away and was about to shut the door, when I overheard something real interesting.

Did you get all of Jayanti's things? And also the stuff Bindi wanted?

Yes, all here. I'll take it in the rickshaw.



So that was where Bindi had disappeared to! My anger really burned now! It was a double insult, first luring Bindi away and now Jayanti. I watched as they flagged down an auto rickshaw and packed all the boxes into it. Sumita left in the rickshaw, while Rachel and her boyfriend took his motorcycle.



I'd forgotten how lonely my life had been before Jayanti had entered it. Now I missed everything about her, even the things that used to aggravate me. I didn't see how our last fight could have been totally responsible for her leaving. It had to be the fault of those Christian busybodies putting ideas into her head. One thing I knew. I didn't want to live alone anymore. I had to get Jayanti back somehow. The first thing was to find out where she was.



Rachel had mentioned a safe house where they were planning to take Jayanti, and since Sumitra often went to the Mission, I assumed she'd know where the hideout was. It was highly likely that she'd visit Jayanti, so all I had to do was stalk Sumitra for awhile and eventually she'd lead me straight to my girl. Except that wasn't what happened. Sumitra kept hanging out at the Mission, but never went anywhere else. I was getting increasingly frustrated. It was time to employ more drastic measures. So I had Satish wait outside the Mission one day until Sumitra came out.



I waited til she walked by a quiet street, and then I grabbed her.



I shoved her inside the rickshaw so we could have a little 'discussion'.



Where is she, Sumitra?



In a safehouse.  
But I don't know  
where it is.

**You're lying!**  
I don't want to get rough with you, girl,  
but I will if I have to.

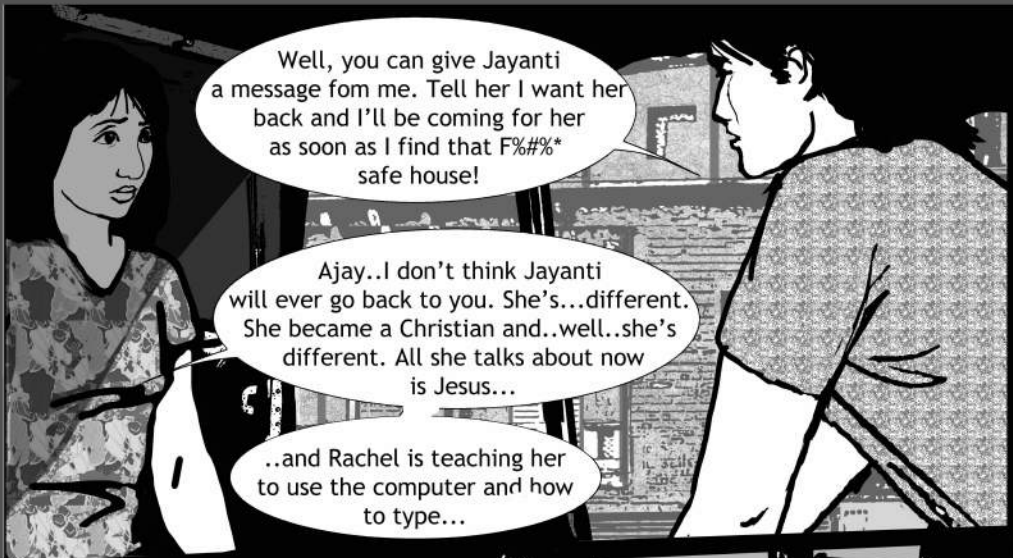


No  
Ajay.  
It's  
true.

No one's allowed  
there except staff. Only they  
know where it is.

Jayanti and I  
pass messages  
through Rachel.





Well, you can give Jayanti a message from me. Tell her I want her back and I'll be coming for her as soon as I find that F%#%\* safe house!

Ajay..I don't think Jayanti will ever go back to you. She's...different. She became a Christian and..well..she's different. All she talks about now is Jesus...

..and Rachel is teaching her to use the computer and how to type...



She'd never fit into your world anymore.

My heart felt heavy because I knew she was right. If Jayanti had become religious, we were definitely on divergent paths.

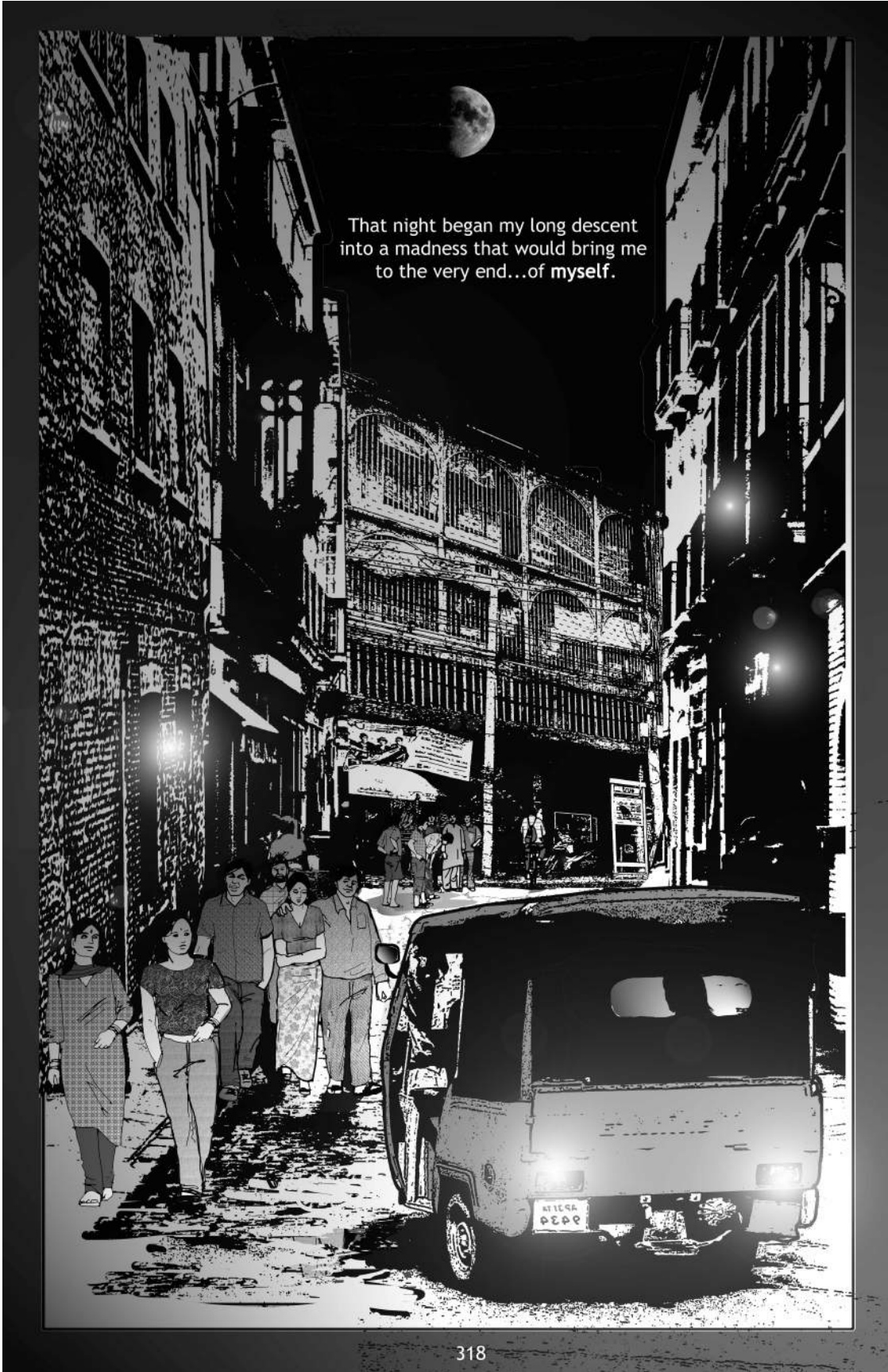


Go on!  
Get outa here!



I knew what religion would do to Jayanti. She'd be impossible to live with. Actually that wasn't even a likelihood because Christians weren't supposed to marry or be in partnership with unbelievers. That disqualified me right there from ever getting back with Jay. I felt as though God had pulled another fast one, snatching away the one woman I wanted. He'd already taken away my mother, my home and family - even my dog. I blamed Him for all of it. After all, He supposedly had the power to prevent bad things from happening, yet my life was one disaster after another. He was probably laughing up in heaven right now, plotting another way to hound me and make my existence more miserable than it already was...although I didn't see how it could get much worse. But whatever He brought my way, I'd NEVER let Him win. I'd live my life MY way and to hell with what He wanted!





That night began my long descent  
into a madness that would bring me  
to the very end...of myself.

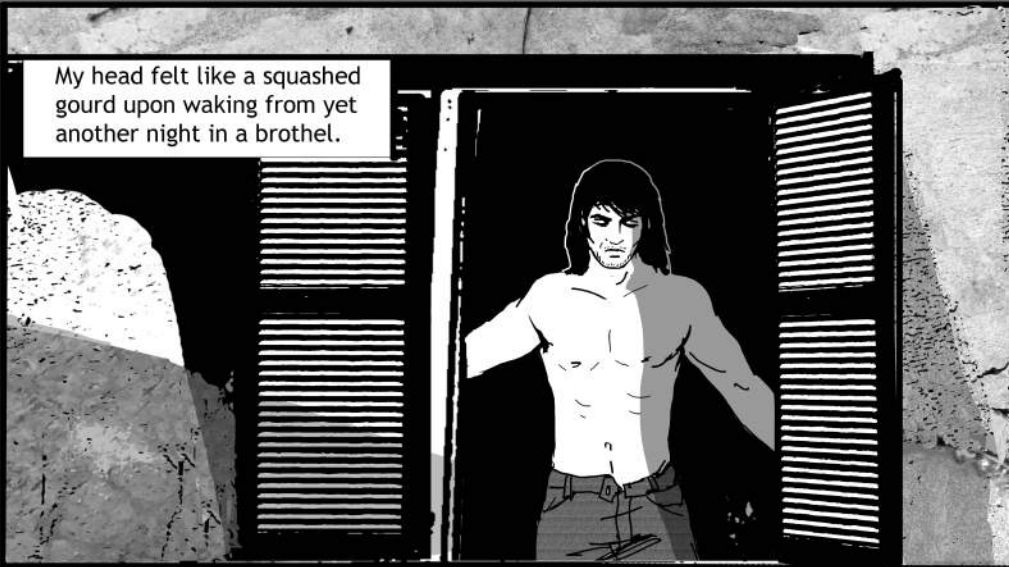
Chapter 12

# DESCENT

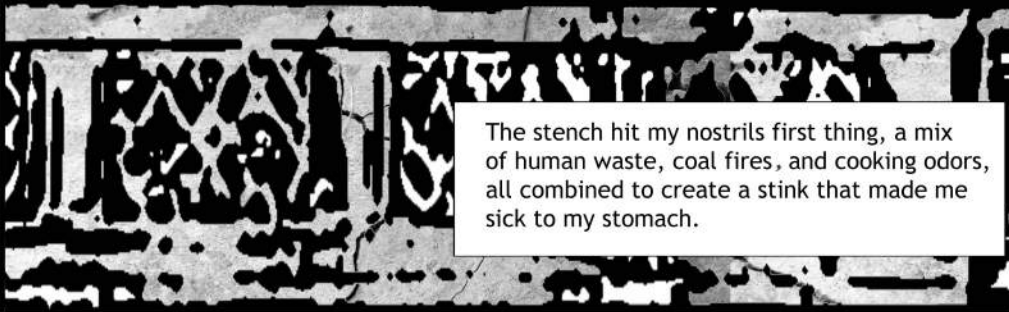




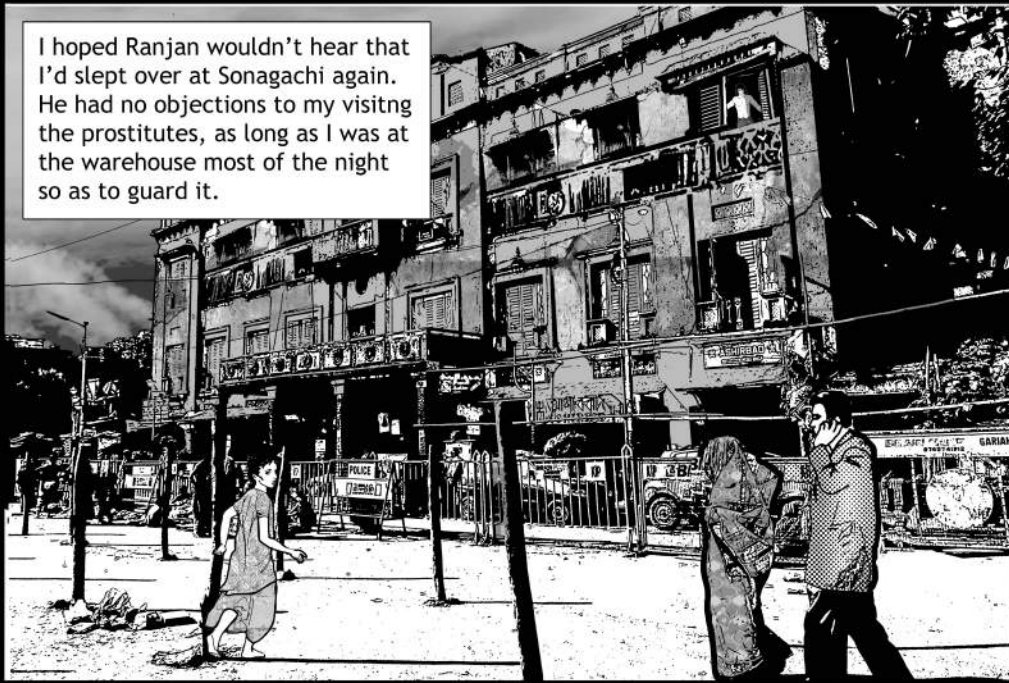
My head felt like a squashed gourd upon waking from yet another night in a brothel.



The stench hit my nostrils first thing, a mix of human waste, coal fires, and cooking odors, all combined to create a stink that made me sick to my stomach.



I hoped Ranjan wouldn't hear that I'd slept over at Sonagachi again. He had no objections to my visiting the prostitutes, as long as I was at the warehouse most of the night so as to guard it.





I was already out of favor with the Boss, especially after he got wind of my ignominious defeat at the hands of the preacher. A few vicious bar fights had been necessary to re-establish my alpha dominance on the street, but Ranjan still wasn't entirely mollified.



I glanced over at my partner for the night. I'd been so drunk yesterday that I couldn't remember which of the whores I'd slept with. They were all beginning to look alike anyway.



Ah yes. This one was Rani. I remembered now.

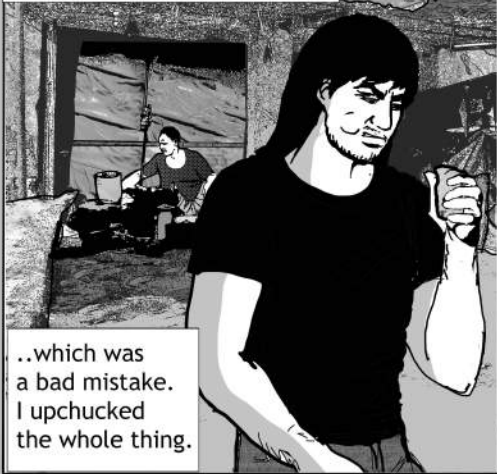
There had actually been two, but the other one had gone to service another customer after me. Our little orgy brought no pleasant memories. Rather the opposite. I wished I was home in bed, by myself, or rather with Jayanti. It was because of her that I visited Sonagachi so often. I really missed her, and the whores and parties helped me forget her for awhile. But the lonely ache always returned with a vengeance the morning after.



That day I decided to hang out in Sonagachi, although it wasn't a pretty sight, especially in broad daylight, without the night's darkness to cloak its seamy atmosphere.



Breakfast was a greasy samosa from one of the dirty little dives lining the road.



..which was a bad mistake. I upchucked the whole thing.



I needed a shave so I visited a street barber.

Most of the girls were still sleeping off the excesses of the night before, but some of the pimps were already moving about.





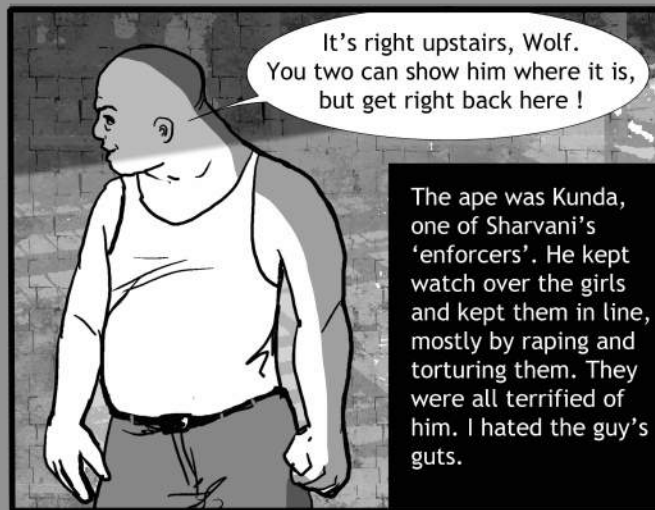


They would spend the day gambling, drinking, and bragging of the previous night's profits and how much they hoped to rake in the coming night. Business didn't start until 3 PM, so they had a lot of time to kill. They were a rough bunch. Fistfights broke out sporadically over perceived insults and offences. Once in awhile there was a stabbing. I'd taken to carrying a blade myself. There'd been a few close calls when I'd had to take on a few of them and barely escaped with my life. A few of them I knew personally and all of them seemed to know me, maybe because I was becoming a regular fixture around the place. In the midst of it all kids played and fought, using the same language their parents did. Innocence had a short shelf life in Sonagachi.



That afternoon I got a tip about a hash party at Sharvani Sen's establishment. I knew the guy who was hosting, so I was pretty confident of an invite once I got there.

However there were pros and cons to going to that place. Sharvani's girls were clean, had regular medical checkups, and they used condoms - standards that most of the other brothels didn't have. The only problem was that Ranjan often visited Sen's establishment. He was one of her main suppliers of trafficked girls and women. I didn't want to risk running into him. So far he hadn't ordered me to execute anybody, but I knew it was only a matter of time before he ordered a hit and gave me the contract. I wasn't looking forward to that so I avoided him as much as possible. I dreaded the day I'd have to take a life. I'd sunk about as low as I could get, but murder would put me in the class of Giri, Malik, and some of the other henchmen. Still, it was early and Ranjan probably wouldn't be there at this time. Besides, the hash party was a real drawing card. I needed the distraction. A few hours of mindless oblivion would offer escape from the raging thoughts in my head.



The ape was Kunda, one of Sharvani's 'enforcers'. He kept watch over the girls and kept them in line, mostly by raping and torturing them. They were all terrified of him. I hated the guy's guts.

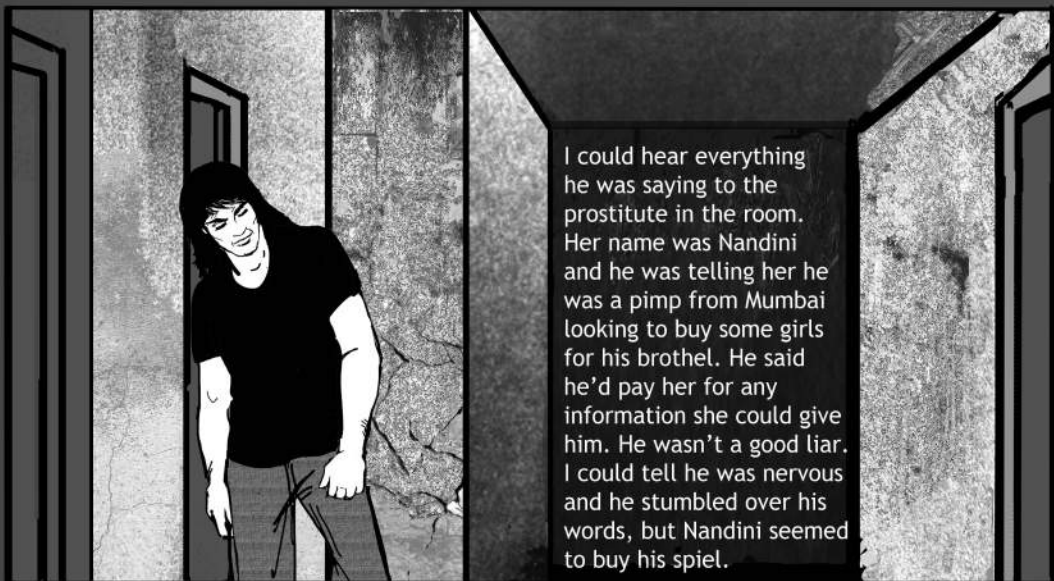
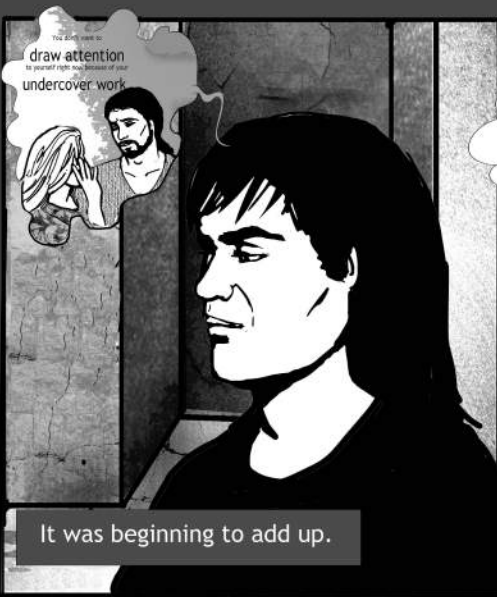
We reached the second floor where the party was, when I noticed movement from out of the corner of my eye. It was only for a split second, but I could have sworn it was the preacher man I saw standing in the hallway, staring at me with a shocked expression on his face.



But what would the preacher man be doing here at the brothel...other than the obvious? Something just didn't jive. He didn't strike me as the kind to frequent such places.



Then I remembered something Rachel had said after the fight in the alley.





I waited for him to come out and then tailed him.



I suspected Preacher Raj was part of an 'undercover' sting to catch traffickers and Madame Sen was the target.



But we'd see about that.

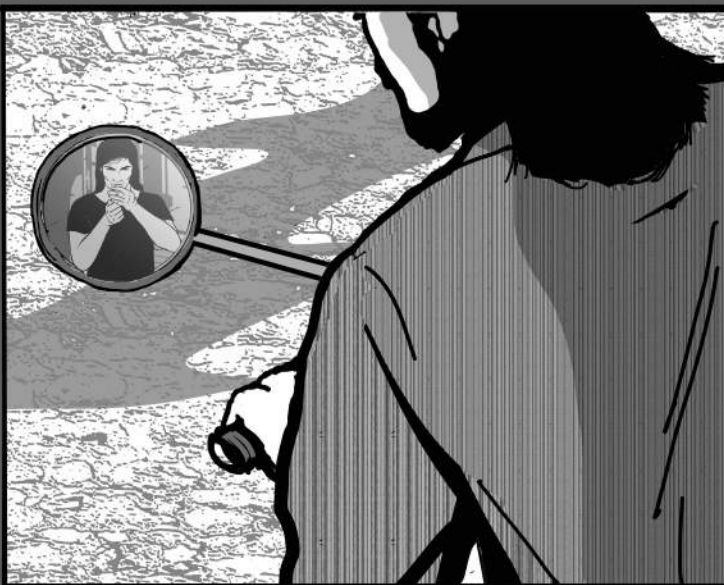


The preacher's motorbike was parked behind a black Hyundai minivan. I saw him give the driver a slight nod, which must have been the signal for him to leave because the car took off down the street right after. Then the preacher got on his bike and gunned the engine.





That's when I stepped out in sight of his rear view mirror, letting him get a good look at me. I wanted to make him sweat; to let him know that I was on to him and had the power to sabotage his little scheme.



I wasn't entirely sure just what his plans were, or if he was working on his own or with the cops, but it was plain he was up to something, and he wasn't happy about being found out. He stared into the mirror for a long moment, without turning around, not saying a word or giving any indication that he had seen me. But I suspected he had because his back went stiff and his hand curled tightly around the throttle.



It was a small victory, but one I savored as I watched him roar off down the street behind the car, leaving a trail of dust in his wake. As soon as he was gone, I headed back to the brothel to implement some plans of my own.



Interesting.

Tell me more, Wolf.

I owed no loyalties to Sharvani. She provided services through her girls and I was a customer. That was it. So my warning her about the preacher had nothing to do with friendship. But it had everything to do with revenge. The humiliation I'd suffered in the back alley festered like an open wound, oozing poison into my brain. If I'd taken a moment to analyze my motives, I might have seen that there was more to my animosity than mere wounded pride. I would have recognized that the malice infecting my heart was jealousy, pure and simple. Preacher Raj was everything I wasn't, and he had shown me up for the lowlife I'd become. That was something I wasn't about to forgive, and so I acted impulsively and stifled the guilt that was niggling away at my conscience as I aided and abetted the forces of evil by providing them with my information.

She was accustomed to police raids. Her staff was always on high alert, especially Kunda, her gorilla meathead, who patrolled constantly. She had devised a system of protection that included bribing the cops and hiding the underage girls in secret rooms and cupboards. In a matter of minutes, any incriminating evidence could be spirited away with no one the wiser.

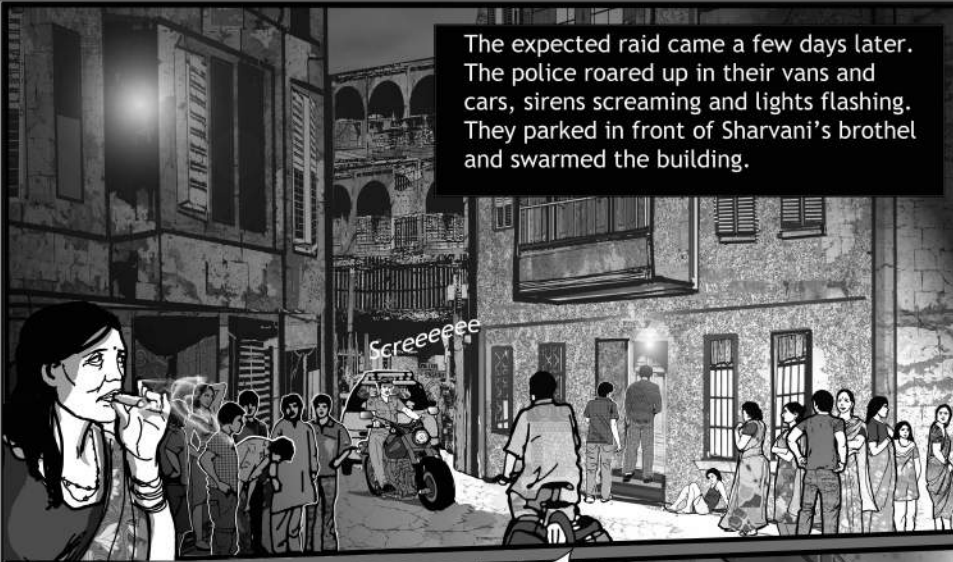


But Sharvani wasn't overly concerned with the news I brought her.



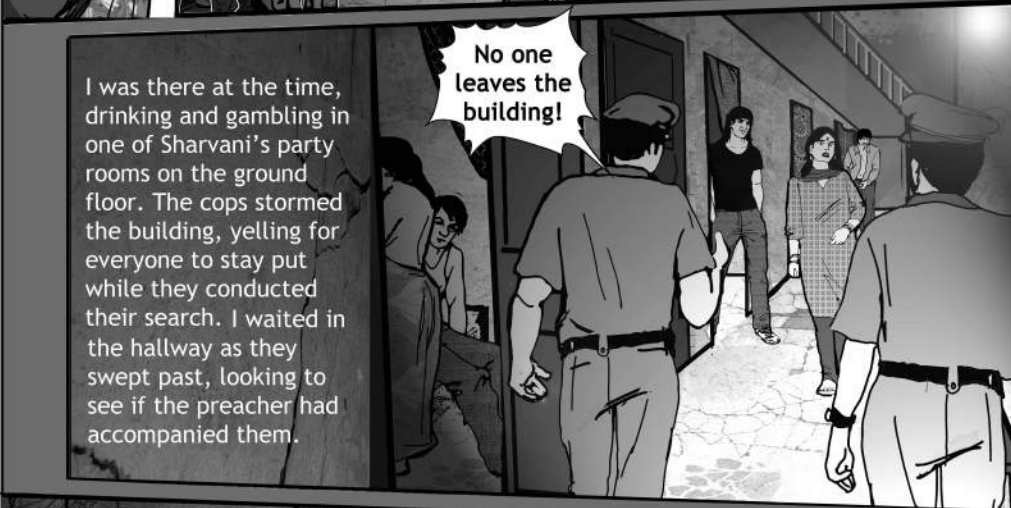


The expected raid came a few days later. The police roared up in their vans and cars, sirens screaming and lights flashing. They parked in front of Sharvani's brothel and swarmed the building.

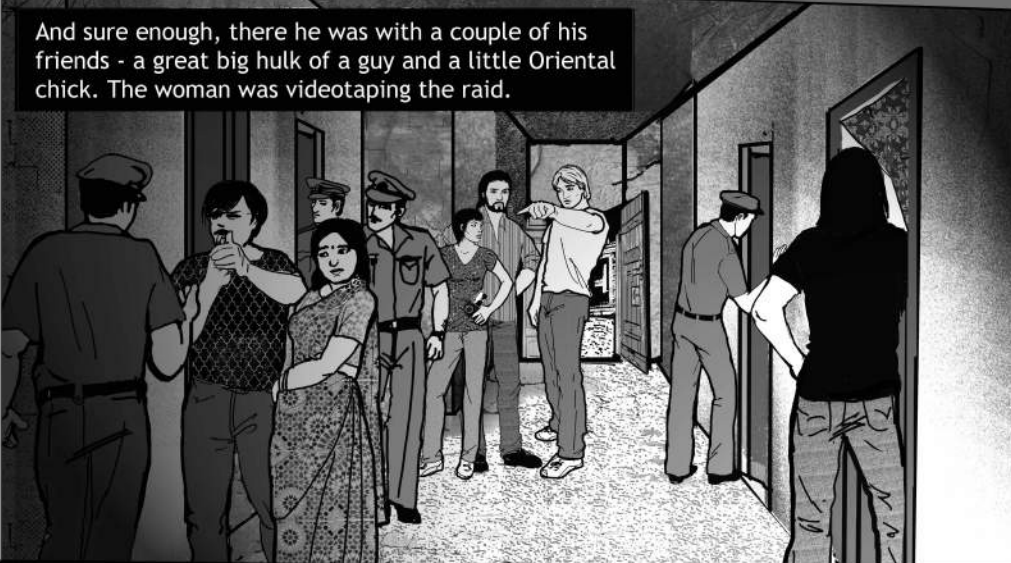


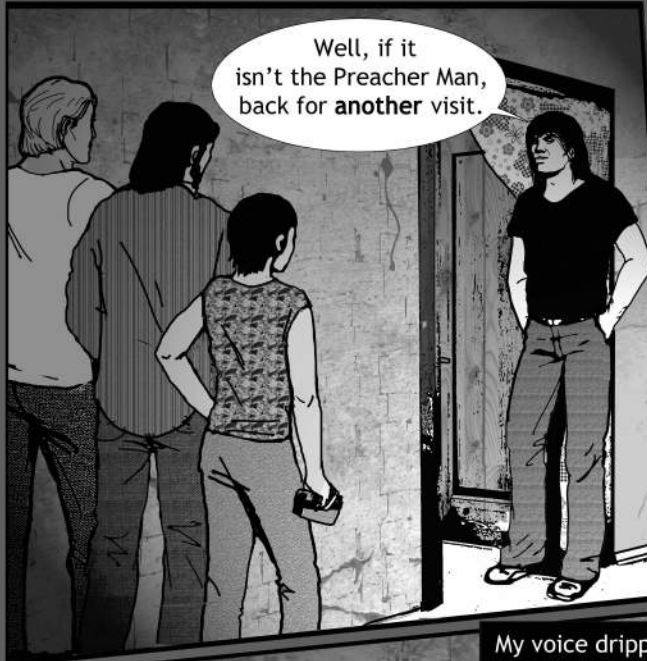
I was there at the time, drinking and gambling in one of Sharvani's party rooms on the ground floor. The cops stormed the building, yelling for everyone to stay put while they conducted their search. I waited in the hallway as they swept past, looking to see if the preacher had accompanied them.

No one leaves the building!

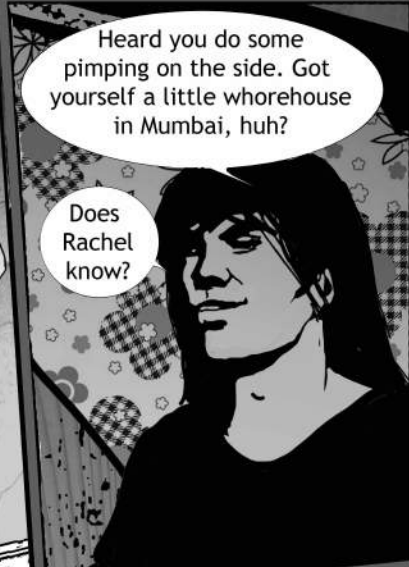


And sure enough, there he was with a couple of his friends - a great big hulk of a guy and a little Oriental chick. The woman was videotaping the raid.





Well, if it isn't the Preacher Man, back for **another** visit.



Heard you do some pimping on the side. Got yourself a little whorehouse in Mumbai, huh?

Does Rachel know?



My voice dripped with sarcasm. I was trying to get a rise out of Raj, but it was the little gook who gave a rejoinder.

So you spied on Raj and then ratted to Madame Sin, right?



I tilted her play on words, but I didn't appreciate her lippy attitude.



She had no fear of me, staring me down with her glittery black eyes. I told her she had a big mouth and she shot back that I was one to talk. With the blonde hulk standing there beside her, I decided not to pursue the conversation.

Raj and his pals followed the cops upstairs. A thorough search was being conducted and every nook and cranny was closely examined. No one could leave the premises and everyone was questioned. I knew they'd find nothing. Sharvani was too cunning an old warhorse to leave anything to chance or to allow any breach in her defences. After a couple of hours, the cops had only one girl in custody whom they suspected might be underage.



It was Nandini, the Nepalese prostitute who had spoken with Raj on his earlier visit.



Sharvani had her birth certificate, indicating she was 19, but the cops suspected it was forged, and took her anyway.



The police officer in charge told Sharvani that Nandini wanted to leave the sex trade and the cops would arrange shelter for her with Grace Mission. Of course Sharvani was livid and insisted that the girl had to work off her debt first, to which the sub-inspector replied with a quote from the Constitution forbidding debt bondage. He was a real tough guy, the righteous kind, who brook no opposition to the law - something Sharvani was unfamiliar with. In the end there was nothing she could do but fume silently and curse him under her breath as he led her slave away.





The female cop escorted Nandini outside to a waiting police car. Everyone else had to stay inside and give their names and addresses. Since no one was stupid enough to carry ID in a whorehouse, most of the information was false - except for this one fat, balding tourist who had been with Nandini when the lady cop walked in on them. He had his passport on him and he was told he had to accompany the police to the station for further questioning. He was sweating bullets, let me tell ya. If Nandini turned out to be underage, he was in deep trouble and he knew it. He wasn't able to talk or bribe his way out either, although he tried.



However he wasn't the only one in hot water. Three cops who hadn't been in the know about the planned raid, got caught with their pants down - literally. Their private party with one of the hookers suddenly got very public, especially when the little gook videotaped them through the partially open door as they were having their fun. Man! The sub-inspector really tore into them! They left the building in disgrace and probably faced a stiff fine and temporary suspension on top of the reprimand, although next week they'd probably be back at it again. It was my experience that once a dirty cop, always a dirty cop.



Eventually the cops all left and the rest of us began laughing and congratulating Sharvani on having duped them once again.

Madame sure showed up them idiots!! Ha!

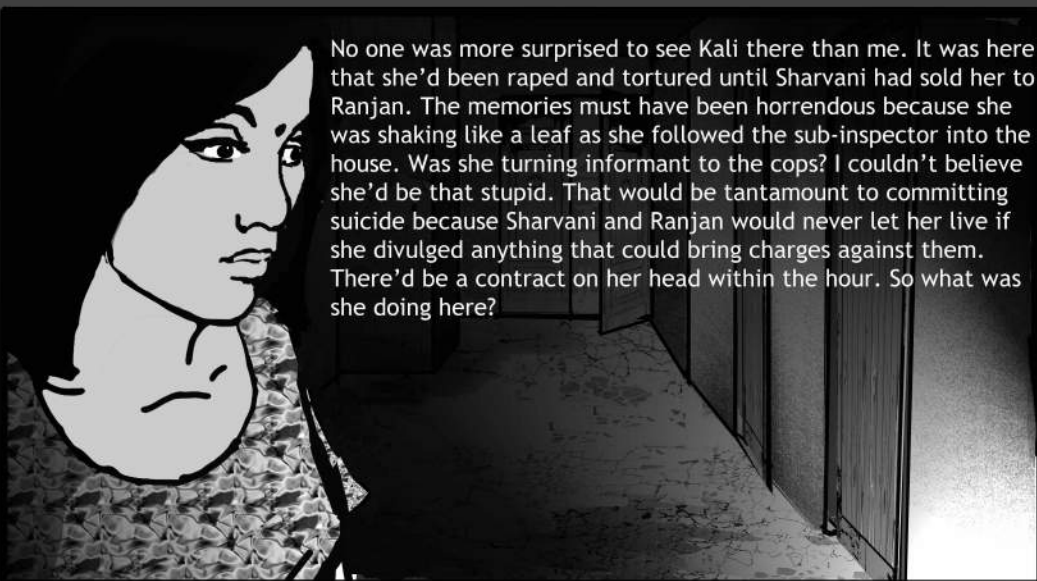


Then suddenly the door crashed open.

NOBODY MOVE!  
THIS RAID IS  
STILL IN  
EFFECT!!!!



And in walked the last person I expected to see at Sharvani Sen's brothel.



No one was more surprised to see Kali there than me. It was here that she'd been raped and tortured until Sharvani had sold her to Ranjan. The memories must have been horrendous because she was shaking like a leaf as she followed the sub-inspector into the house. Was she turning informant to the cops? I couldn't believe she'd be that stupid. That would be tantamount to committing suicide because Sharvani and Ranjan would never let her live if she divulged anything that could bring charges against them. There'd be a contract on her head within the hour. So what was she doing here?

Whatever the reason, Sharvani saw her as a threat and went after her with talons extended. Kali backed off in fear but the little gook stepped right in front of the old bat and grabbed her wrist in mid-strike. Seeing she was half Sharvani's weight and several inches shorter, I expected she'd soon be mincemeat.



Several cops were there, including a bunch of Grace Mission people, so altogether there was quite a group watching the cat fight. I thought Raj would step in and come to his friend's rescue, but he was like the rest of us - too stunned to move as we watched the little tigress take down her opponent.

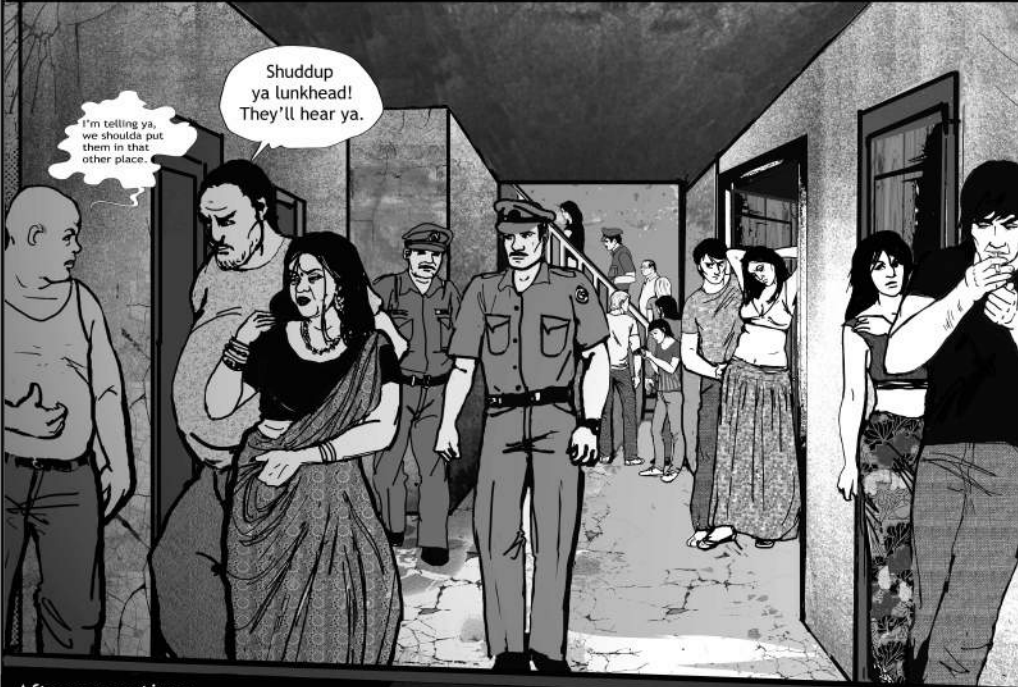


She moved like Jackie Chan and it was all over in a few minutes.





The sub-inspector put Sharvani and her two goondas under police supervision, and then everyone followed Kaliyah upstairs to the fourth floor where she had once been imprisoned. Rachel and the Mission pastor had brought Kali to the brothel so they went up with the rest of the group. All of them were up there for a long time and I wondered what they'd find, if anything. Sharvani and her thugs were certainly nervous about something, as if they were harboring a guilty secret of some kind. I figured Sharvani had probably hidden a couple of underage prostitutes up there and she and her accomplices were worried the police would find them. A criminal act like that could land the three of them in jail for decades if charged and convicted, although there were plenty of ways to beat the system. Sharvani would undoubtedly exploit every trick in the book and find some loophole somewhere.



After some time, I heard footsteps on the stairs and turned to see the cops and Mission people coming down.

And then I saw who was with them.

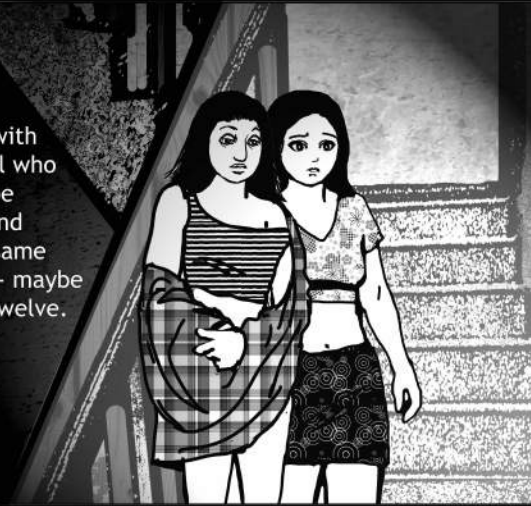
I swear I never expected to see that.



Young girls - some of them just little kids- were coming downstairs, and the worst of it was I recognized two of them.



Anita was with another girl who looked to be Nepalese and about the same age as her - maybe eleven or twelve.



Two were no older than seven or eight.

Then Raj walked by with Pushpa in his arms, her large eyes glazed in shock, lips trembling, her small arms tightly wound around her rescuer's neck. He glanced my way as he passed, the fire of his anger unmistakable and searing hot as he walked out of the building. The big blonde guy paused on his way out, giving me a hard look before calling me down.





One day you'll answer to God. He's sickened by evil, and this is about as wicked as it gets! Joining forces with the likes of Sharvani makes you as guilty as she is.

I was feeling pretty sickened myself but I didn't let on. I knew what I'd done was wrong and could even land me in jail, but no one could prove I'd tipped off the old battleaxe. And I didn't need the holy Hulk to pass judgement on me either.

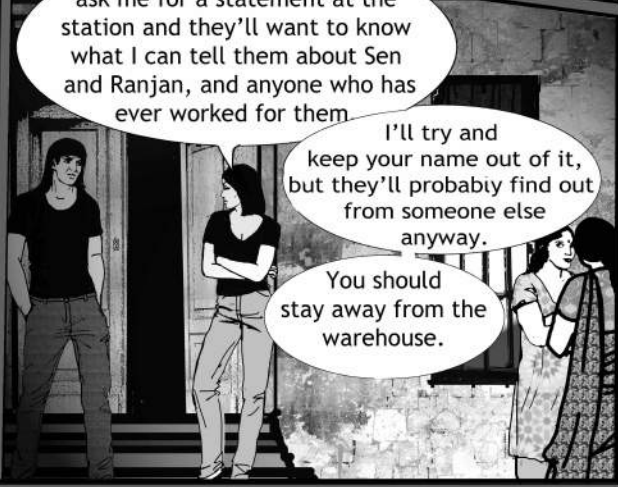


YOU CAN GO F%\$#\* YOURSELF!!!

I went outside to watch the cops cart Sharvani and her gang off to the cop shop. Kunda tried to make a break for it but the cops caught him and gave him a beating. It was like a crazy circus out there!



Kali looked my way and withdrew from the melee to walk over to where I was standing.



The police will ask me for a statement at the station and they'll want to know what I can tell them about Sen and Ranjan, and anyone who has ever worked for them.

I'll try and keep your name out of it, but they'll probably find out from someone else anyway.

You should stay away from the warehouse.



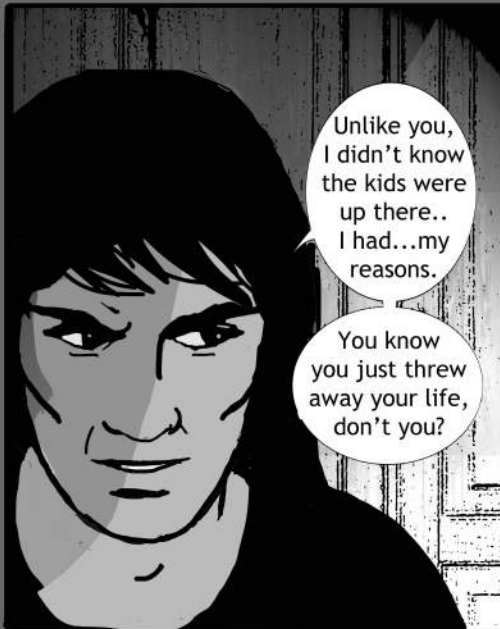


How'd you know they were there? The girls...  
...Pushpa and Anita?



I was with Ranjan when he kidnapped them and had his goondas beat up the uncle. He brought them here and sold them to the witch.

The Mission people said you tipped off Sen. I didn't figure you for that kind of lowlife.



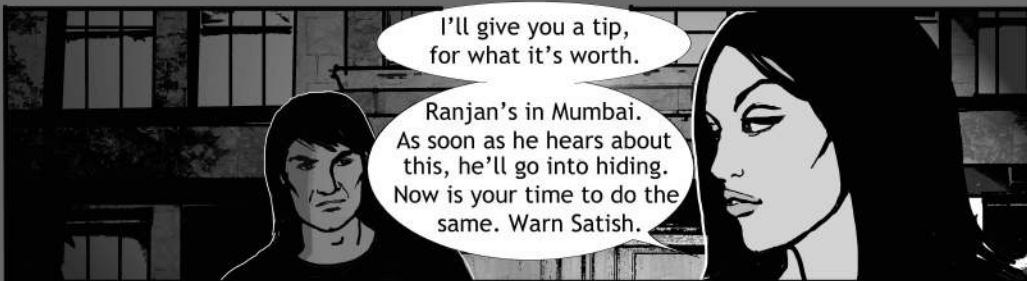
Unlike you, I didn't know the kids were up there.. I had...my reasons.

You know you just threw away your life, don't you?



You think so, Ajay?

I don't know.. ..maybe I just found it.



I'll give you a tip, for what it's worth.

Ranjan's in Mumbai. As soon as he hears about this, he'll go into hiding. Now is your time to do the same. Warn Satish.

Sharvani's arrest had a ripple effect throughout the city's underworld. Ranjan was one of her main suppliers and so came under immediate investigation, as did other operators working within Sonagachi. Like Ranjan, some went into hiding. The Boss was facing several charges because a search of his properties turned up all sorts of contraband. Besides sex trafficking, he was also wanted for drug dealing, suspicion of murder, assault & battery, etc.



I'd taken Kali's advice and cleared out of the warehouse as quickly as possible, taking only a gym bag packed with clothes, some personal items, and all the cash I had on hand. It felt like deja vue all over again, being on the run and living hand to mouth while dodging the cops.

I'd warned Satish, as Kali had instructed, He was lying low at the slum where he lived with his mother and sisters. He planned to sell the rickshaw as soon as he found a buyer and then he and his folks would live off the proceeds for awhile. Since we both dumped our cell phones so we couldn't be traced, I lost touch with him, but I knew he'd do okay. He was a survivor who knew how to dodge trouble and use every opportunity to advantage. I was more concerned about how I would survive.



I hopped from hotel to hotel, never staying long in any one place. Rumor had it that the cops wanted me for questioning, but no charges had been laid. I wanted to keep it that way, so I avoided all my old haunts.

I watched a lot of television in my hotel room, eating in, and going out only after dark. After a few weeks of that, my funds were running low and I needed to replenish my supply. Trouble was I didn't have many options, and the few I had were all risky.

The real problem was that I was too well known throughout the city. Working at a job was out. I could be recognized too easily. I crossed off one possibility after another until it came down to the one I was least happy with, but which would possibly meet my needs the best. I decided to mug some unsuspecting victim, rob him of his valuables, and disappear down some dark alley. I was used to shaking down guys, pulverizing them if they gave resistance, and making them hand over their money. It had never greatly bothered me while enforcing for Ranjan, but lately I was feeling differently about the things I'd done while working for him. I kept hearing the Hulk's voice over and over again in my head, about having to answer to God one day for all the bad things I'd done. I couldn't switch him off. He was like a ghost haunting me. And the picture of Raj with Pushpa never left my mind either. I liked that little kid. It hit me hard that I had played a part in her enslavement..as well as the other kids. The sight of them coming down those stairs..the rage in Raj's eyes...they wouldn't go away. I'd think about it all day and at night I'd dream about it. Maybe I was losing my mind. It sure felt that way sometimes.

Eventually I was so strapped for cash that I had to put aside my reticence and hit the streets in search of my first victim.



I found the perfect spot near the end of a bus route where passengers had to pass by an old abandoned building.



My mark got off the bus and passed right by me. I was lucky. It was late; he was alone; and he didn't look like he'd be able to put up much of a fight. I planned to use my knife to frighten him, but I hoped I wouldn't have to use it.



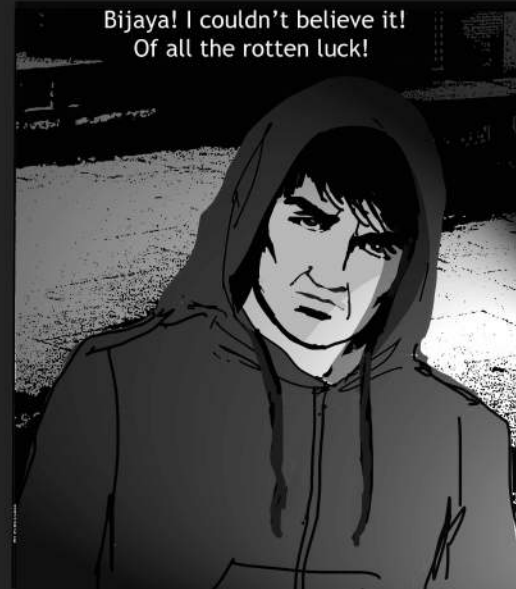




Unfortunately some 6th sense must have warned him of my presence.



**HO! It's YOU!!**  
Ajay, right? or Wolf?  
Man! I've been hoping to run into you!  
I never forgot what you did for me that  
time when Ranjan was after me. I found  
out your name from some old pals  
of mine and I've been praying  
for you ever since.



Bijaya! I couldn't believe it!  
Of all the rotten luck!



In fact, I was  
praying for you on the  
bus just now, and here  
you are!

I think God wanted  
us to meet. I think He wants  
to bless you.

And I'll bet He wants  
to use me to do it. That  
would be so cool!

I thought "What a sucker!".  
But I was quick to grab at  
the opportunity.



Well, why don't we just talk about that..pal.

We went to a restaurant to talk and Bijaya informed me that he was aware of what had gone down at Sharvani's place. His old dope-dealing buddies had told him that Ranjan was being hunted by the cops, and anyone associated with him was wanted for questioning. The cops had even turned up at the Mission to grill Bijaya, but fortunately his pastor had put in a good word for him and they'd left without arresting him.



They're looking for you too. They asked me if I knew you, but I didn't tell them much. I just said you were a good guy who did me a favor once.

Thanks for the vote of confidence.



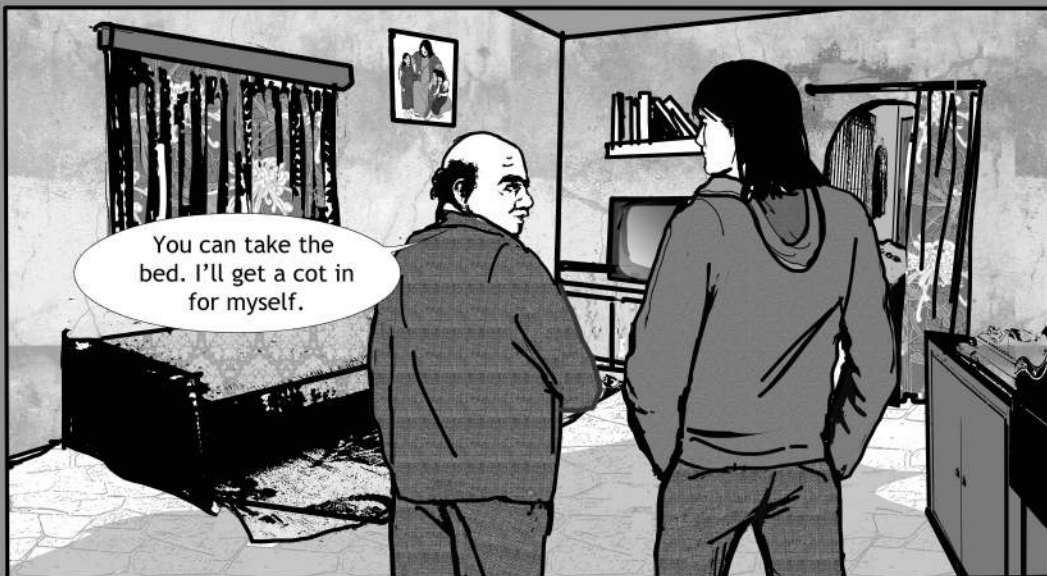
I mean it, man!  
I owe you, and if I can ever repay you in some way, just let me know.

So I did. I told him I needed a place to lay low for awhile, where the cops wouldn't think of looking for me. I also mentioned that I was strapped for cash. Bijaya was eager to accomodate. He said I could hang at his place, no problem. The Mission people had found a couple of rooms for him to rent in a quiet neighborhood where the neighbors kept mostly to themselves. His landlady was an old widow who hardly ever came around but if she did ask about me, Bijaya said he could slip her a little extra rent money and she'd be fine with that. It sounded like the perfect setup for a guy like me. I had a hard time believing how everything was falling into place so perfectly. Here I'd been ready to mug the guy and steal his money, and instead he was handing me everything on a silver platter. If you were the praying kind, like Bijaya, it was enough to make you believe in miracles.

The house where Bijaya lived was in a quiet neighborhood, situated at the end of a cul de sac with a vacant lot beside it.



The house had an addition built on the back - just one room with an attached bath - but Bijaya found it adequate for his needs.



He told me he'd be gone most of the time because he worked at the Mission from 8 AM to 9 PM. He said he hoped I didn't mind being on my own. Heck! I didn't mind! The less I saw of him, the better...just as long as he brought home the groceries.



But oddly enough I felt differently after a month of living there. Bijaya's spartan living space had few diversions to distract my mind or ease my boredom. I actually found myself looking forward to his return each evening, not because I sought his company, but because of the news he brought back from the Mission. He worked as a handyman there so he was all over the place, fixing this or building that - sometimes even helping out in the kitchen. He knew a lot of what went on, such as the wedding plans for Raj and Rachel, Marcus and Janet Brooks teaching martial arts to the kids and staff, Pastor Deepak's new daycare opening in Sonagchi...What most interested me was the upcoming wedding. I figured Kali and maybe Sumitra would be attending and I hoped to get a message to Jayanti through them, if possible. With all the free time on my hands, I had plenty of opportunity for contemplation, and Jayanti was always uppermost on my mind. She had most likely heard of the attack on Rachel and my tipping off Sharvani. Maybe she even knew about all the whoring I'd done. I'd made a royal mess of things and she probably detested me right about now. I didn't blame her. I detested myself. I'd been an idiot to treat her like I had. She'd been the only light in my dark world and I'd done everything possible to extinguish it. If I was her, I'd never go back with me, but of course I hoped she would, however unlikely that prospect. I just needed to see her one last time.. just to talk to her..maybe ask her forgiveness. Maybe I could even persuade her to give me another chance.



There were other things I thought about as well. I kept remembering my home..Dad..Mom.. Amma...Was Dad still preaching in the villages? Was Amma still alive? How had they handled my supposed murder? What would they think of what I'd become, if they knew me now? These thoughts weren't new. They had repeatedly surfaced over the past few years, but now they came with a new urgency and persistence. I was looking at myself as I imagined they'd see me, and the picture was anything but pretty. I could imagine the revulsion and shock - even horror. Then one night I got a glimpse of how God saw me.



I don't know if it was a dream or what some people call a vision, but one minute I was sitting on the divan in Bijaya's apartment, and the next I was suspended over a yawning abyss that stretched out into an ever deepening darkness. Some force was pulling me along and I had this sense that it was my spirit that was floating over the yawning void...which meant that ..  
I WAS DEAD!

In the distance I saw a glowing light and could vaguely distinguish a group of people walking around, singing, doing whatever. The light was emanating from one particular person in the center, and without being told, I knew I was seeing the figure of Jesus. Slowly I was drawn more deeply into the night, and an overwhelming fear and panic seized me as I saw the light become a tiny speck in the blackness engulfing me. I couldn't speak or shout or do anything, except helplessly drift along into nothingness.

And then the dream...or whatever it was...was gone, and I was back in the room, sitting on the divan, too terrified to move.



After the shock wore off and my heart rate returned to normal, I thought about what I'd just experienced. It could have been a panic attack, although it didn't fit that description. It was unlikely that it was a dream because I was pretty sure I hadn't been asleep. Whatever it was, it left me with the absolute conviction that I was headed for the dark side of eternity, or what Christians termed 'eternal separation from God'. I hadn't seen any hellfire or brimstone, but that didn't mean it wasn't waiting somewhere at the bottom of that black pit. At any rate, the desolation I felt as I was being pulled away from the light terrified me. I'd never felt so alone, so helpless and forsaken. And the worst of it was, I couldn't justify, rationalize, or blameshift my way out of the condemnation I felt at that moment.

A litany of events unfolded before my mind's eye like a filmstrip detailing various episodes in my life - a lurid replay of every despicable, self-centered, cowardly act I'd ever committed.



By the time the replay ended, dejection and despair settled over me like a shroud. It didn't lift either, not that day or the next one after that. If anything, life got worse in the following weeks. I got back into drug dealing so I could buy groceries, ganja, and booze. I was still staying at Bijaya's place, but he was getting increasingly uncomfortable with me there, especially as he suspected I was into drugs again. I only smoked up when he wasn't around, but he wasn't as stupid as he looked. I knew I was wearing out my welcome and it was just a matter of time before I'd have to relocate.

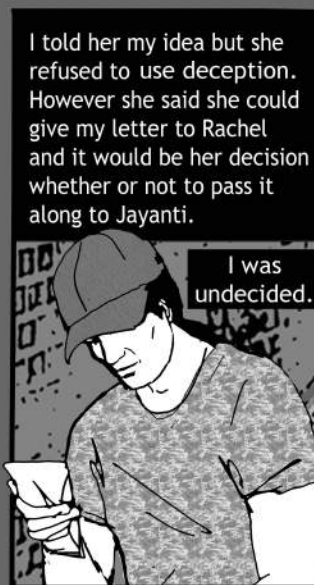
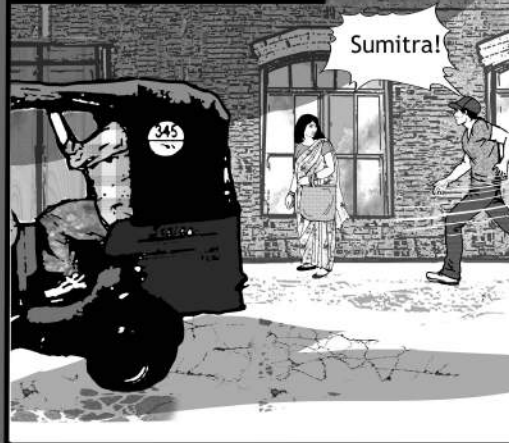


Before that happened, however, I hoped to glean as much useful information from him as possible. Through careful inquiry, I had already gained some useful knowledge. For instance, Bijaya had heard that Kali was enrolled in the Mission's Safe House program in order to protect her from Ranjan. The House was heavily guarded and only authorized staff and a handful of visitors were allowed anywhere near the site. Bijaya had no idea where it was and I was careful not to appear too interested. If anyone at the Mission heard I was sniffing around for the address, they'd be on high alert and I'd never have a chance to contact Jayanti. I wanted to get a letter to her but I had few options. Rachel worked as a counselor at the Safe House, but after attacking her, I had little or no chance of getting her co-operation. However, Sumitra had mentioned that she and Jayanti sent messages to each other through Rachel. If I could persuade Sumitra to enclose my letter with hers when she next wrote to Jayanti - without letting Rachel know - I stood a chance of making contact. And Jayanti could send back a reply to me through a letter addressed to Sumitra. Rachel wouldn't be any the wiser. It was do-able, but a lot hung on my being able to convince Sumitra to help me. She didn't owe me any favors, but she was my only hope. It was worth a try anyway.

On the day of Raj and Rachel's wedding, I waited at a spot where I could watch the arrival of guests from both directions.



Then I spotted her walking towards the Mission.



Finally I agreed, but I didn't like it.

It's sealed, so it's for Jay's eyes only. If Rachel decides not to pass it along, I want it destroyed.. unopened.

I don't know if Rachel will give it to her, but if she does, and if Jayanti wants to give a reply, where does she send it? You're not at the warehouse anymore, are you?

I move around a lot so I have no mail address.

Oh. Well, they don't let the girls use phones at the Safe House, so how does she contact you?

She can give you the message. I'll check by your house in a week's time.

My mom and brothers don't like you. I'll have to warn them off before you come.

Especially my brothers. They might try and fight you.

No need to warn them. Unless it's for their sake.

HA! Actually I wouldn't mind a good knock-down brawl right about now.

The following week was one of the longest in memory. So many questions milled through my mind. Had Jayanti read my letter? If so, would she write back? Or would she throw it out? I worried that it was too short - just one paragraph expressing regret for having mistreated her and asking forgiveness for having made such a mess of things. I added that I missed her and I told her that I loved her, although she probably wouldn't believe that part. After all, the last time we'd communicated, I'd slapped her face and yelled at her. Then I'd hung out at Sonagachi with all the whores. No, my credibility wasn't exactly at an all-time high.

But I had to know if she cared, even a little bit.  
Then I would have something to work with.  
It was my only hope.

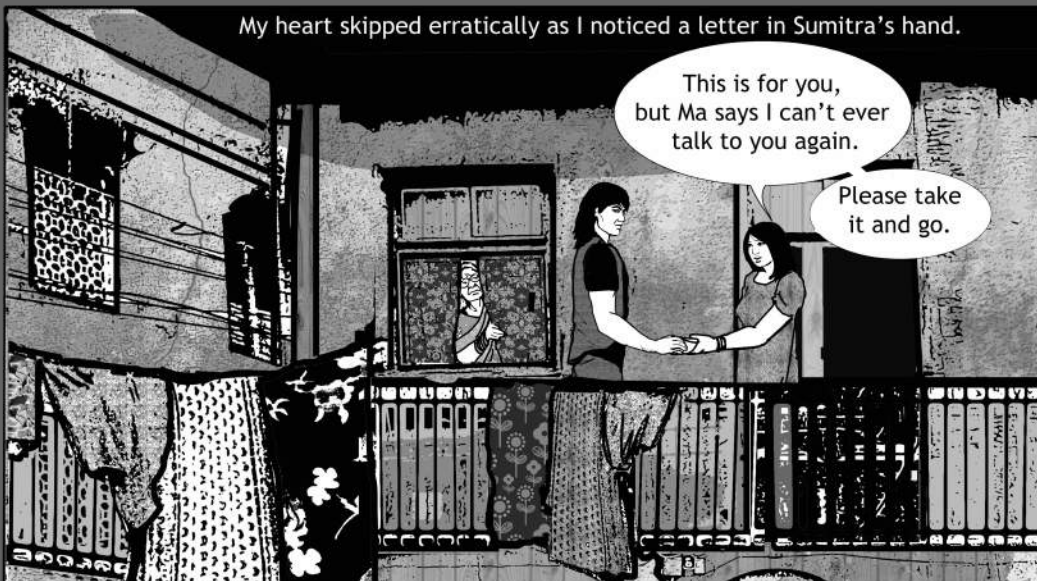
Sumitra and her family lived in one of the oldest parts of the city. I'd been there once before so I was able to navigate the meandering streets and alleyways.



It was a rough neighborhood. Girls like Sumitra were married off as young as possible, before they got raped or pregnant, or trafficked off to the brothels.



My heart skipped erratically as I noticed a letter in Sumitra's hand.





I went to a nearby bar to read her letter.

*This is really hard to write, Ajay. I wish we could just talk face to face, but it probably isn't a good idea to meet. It's not because I have anything against you, (I've forgiven you a long time ago), but I'm a Christian now and I wouldn't fit into your world anymore. Remember how we used to talk about God and stuff? Well, I found Jesus and I have a whole new life that He gave me. I'm not who I was before. I really like my new life here at the Mission and I have made some wonderful friends. One of them is Kaliyah, who also became a believer and is now my sister in Christ. We are both learning so many new things. Rachel is teaching us both on the computer and I love it. By the way, I know that you tried to hurt Rachel and I know what you did at the brothel. I didn't think you would ever do something like that. You need to make that right with God, Ajay. I'm not condemning you, because God will forgive any sin of those who repent and call on His name, which I hope you will. I'm praying for you, and so is Kaliyah and others in our Bible group. Bless you, Ajay.*

*Jayanti*

*P.S. It's best if you don't contact me again. It wouldn't change anything.*

Whatever I'd expected, her response wasn't it. There was no rancour or anger in what she wrote, but she made it clear it was futile for me to try to pursue a relationship with her. She'd cut me loose and I was now adrift and alone. Whatever we'd once had was well and truly gone...at least it was on Jayanti's side. Me? I didn't know if I'd ever get over her.



If Jayanti had railed and ranted, expressing hatred and contempt for me, I would have been encouraged. Wasn't hate just the flip side of love? It would have indicated that she cared at least. Her negative emotions could have been channeled into positive ones eventually. But the controlled finality of her wording gave me no hope. It was the letter of someone who had irrevocably made up her mind.

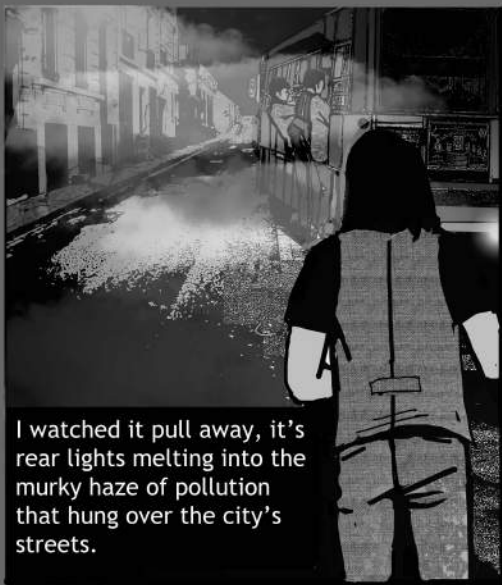


There was a bitter irony in the situation. I'd only loved 2 women in my life and both had been taken from me by the same Adversary. My mother was in the next world, and thus unreachable, but Jayanti, although alive and breathing, was just as lost to me as Mom, her heart surrendered to One I could never hope to defeat. I felt like cursing God but that was pointless. It wouldn't bring back my mother and it wouldn't change things with Jayanti. I'd lost them both, and along with them, any hope of wholeness. I was empty and there didn't seem to be any light at the end of the tunnel. I didn't want to dwell on that depressing realization so I kept ordering drinks, trying to anaesthetize my brain so it couldn't think. I don't remember how many I had but it was late when the barkeep said he was closing up.





I missed the bus by a few seconds.



I watched it pull away, it's rear lights melting into the murky haze of pollution that hung over the city's streets.

Walking to Bijaya's place was out of the question. It was too far away and I was too drunk for the trek. I thought about sleeping on the street somewhere, but the possibility of getting mugged or picked up by the cops was too probable. I kept to the shadows, ducking down alleys and side streets while trying to come up with a plan. It was while passing by some motorcycles parked at a curb that I got the idea to find one with the key still in the ignition, or barring that, hotwire one. I'd done it before, plenty of times, when I lived at home and forgot the key to my dad's old bike. It was extremely easy to do, but I would have to find one that wasn't out in the open where I could be observed. Luckily it was getting close to midnight so there weren't too many people about.



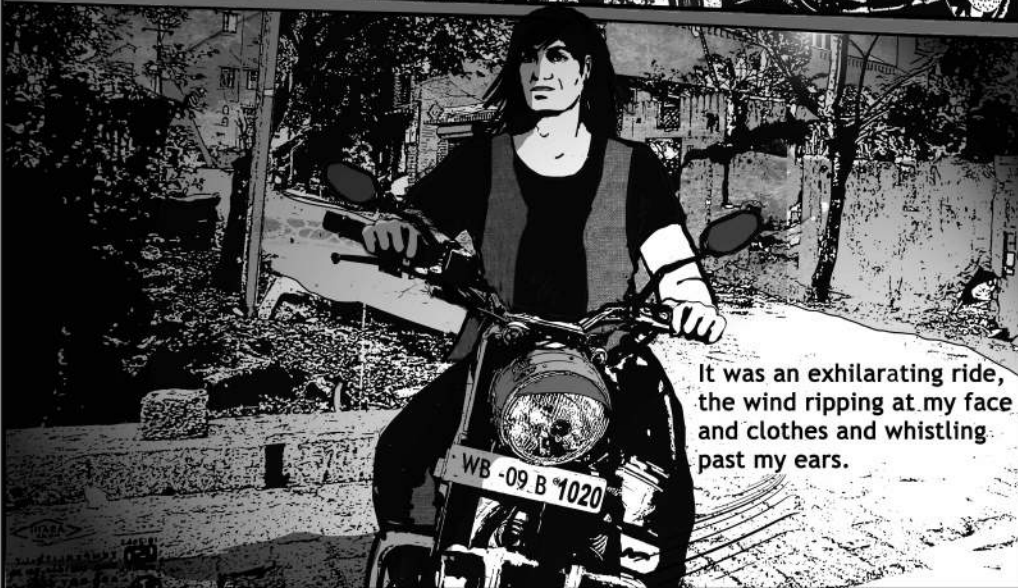
After digging around a TV repair shop, I found a piece of electrical wire and targeted a motorbike in front of some houses that were dark inside. I worked as quickly and quietly as possible and in a matter of seconds the engine turned over and sputtered to life.



I shot full tilt down the road.



I hadn't been on a motorcycle for a long while but it all came back to me.



It was an exhilarating ride, the wind ripping at my face and clothes and whistling past my ears.

It began to rain and in minutes I was soaked to the skin. It was a real deluge and I found it increasingly difficult to maintain speed and keep the bike upright at the same time.



I took a corner too fast and the bike hydroplaned and careened wildly. I could feel it spinning out of control but I was helpless to do anything about it. Besides, my reflexes weren't too sharp after all the beer I'd consumed earlier in the evening.



When the motorbike hit the edge of a curb, the impact broke my grip on the handlebars and I was catapulted into the air, landing hard on the wet pavement.

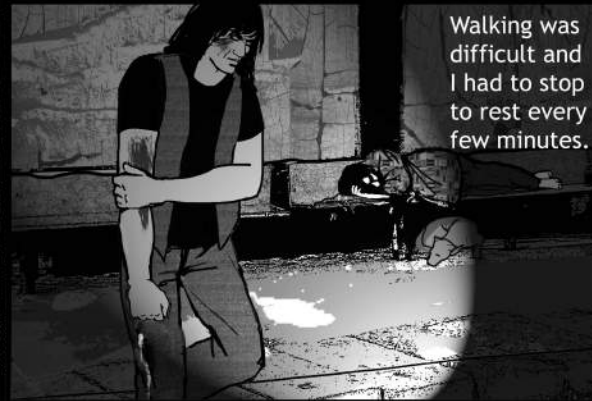






When I regained consciousness, the rain had stopped . It took me a few minutes to remember where I was and what had just happened. My head was spinning and I felt sick to my stomach. I figured I probably had a concussion. I saw that I was a real mess with cuts to my face and arm, and a deep gash in my right thigh, not to mention the head to toe bruising. The pain was wicked, but at least I didn't have any broken bones. The bike wasn't too mangled but there was no way I'd be able to lift it upright in my condition. I'd have to make the rest of the way to Bijaya's on foot. Thankfully it wasn't too far.

The street was quiet. The heavy rain and late hour meant that most people were indoors asleep and I doubted that anyone had even seen the accident. Still, I had to get out of there, as far away from the stolen bike as possible, before someone came along and called an ambulance - or worse - the police.

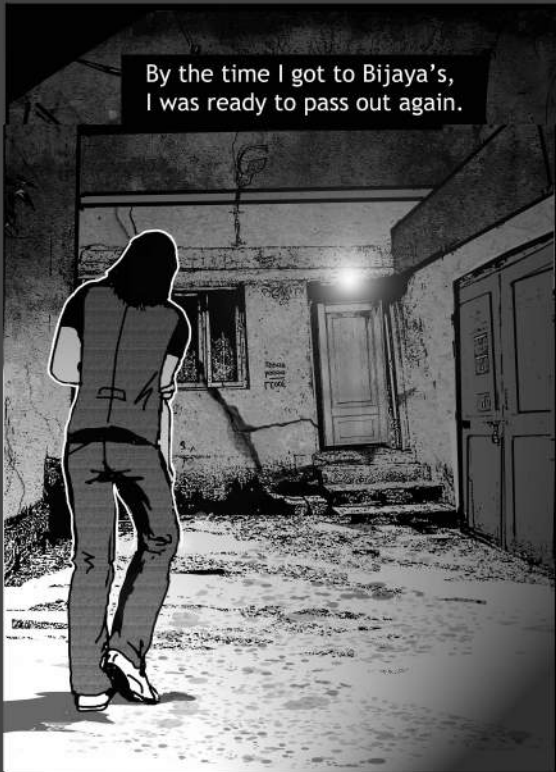


Walking was difficult and I had to stop to rest every few minutes.

One time I heard sirens behind me and had just enough time to duck behind an alcove before a cop car whizzed past.





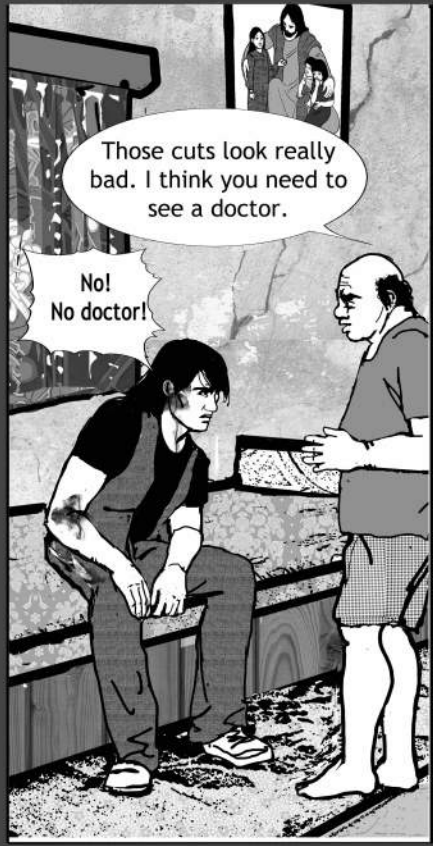


By the time I got to Bijaya's, I was ready to pass out again.



AJAY!  
What happened?!

A few loud raps on the door brought Bijaya out, just in time to catch me before my knees gave out completely.



Those cuts look really bad. I think you need to see a doctor.

No!  
No doctor!

I was hurting like hell but there was no way I was going to go for medical help. There would be too many prying questions and if the doc got suspicious, he might even call in the cops. They could easily put two and two together once they discovered the stolen motorcycle and heard about my injuries. But I couldn't tell Bijaya that, so I told him I'd been in a fight and since I hated hospitals and doctors, I'd just have to heal on my own. He didn't like it, and I felt he didn't totally believe my story, but he promised not to tell anyone. He helped me get cleaned up and into bed.



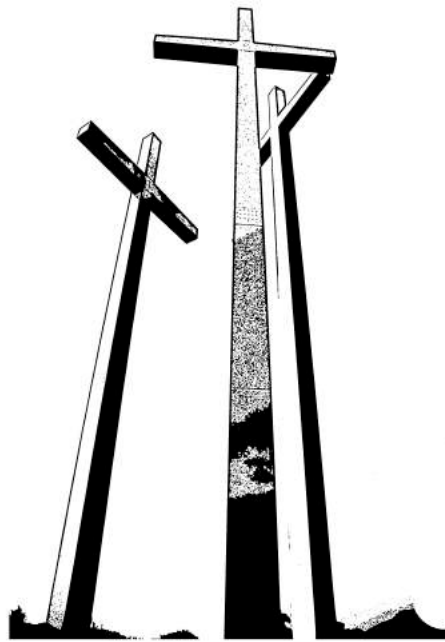
I took enough painkillers to knock me out for the night.



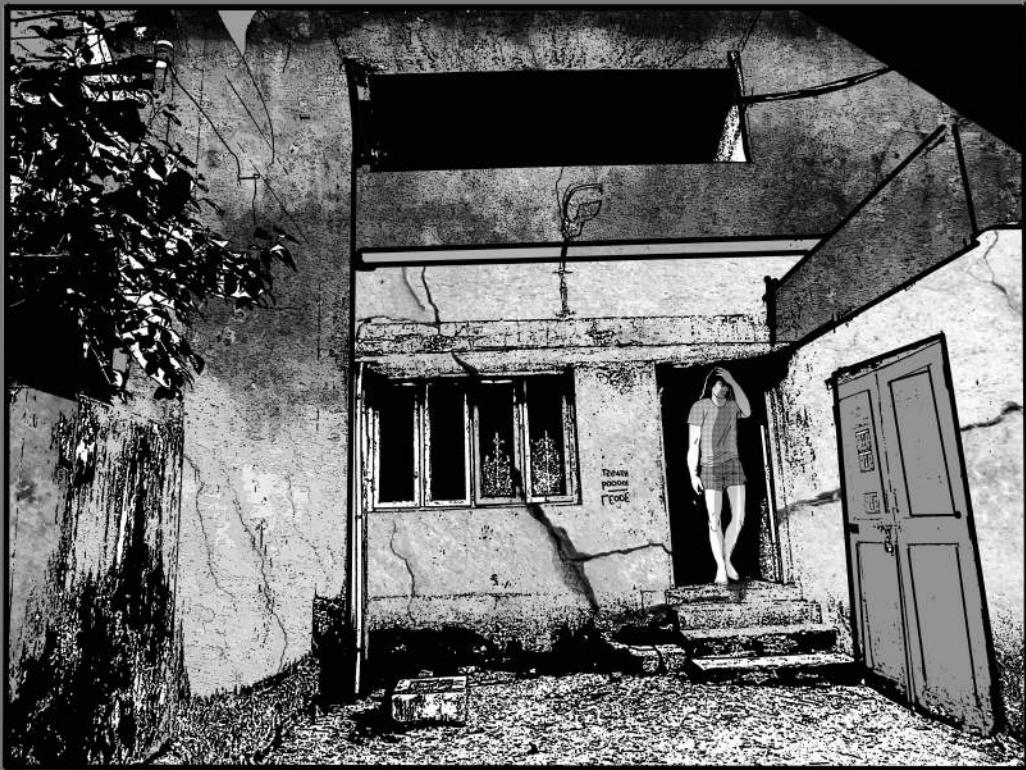
But sleep brought no rest.

Chapter 13

# THIEF



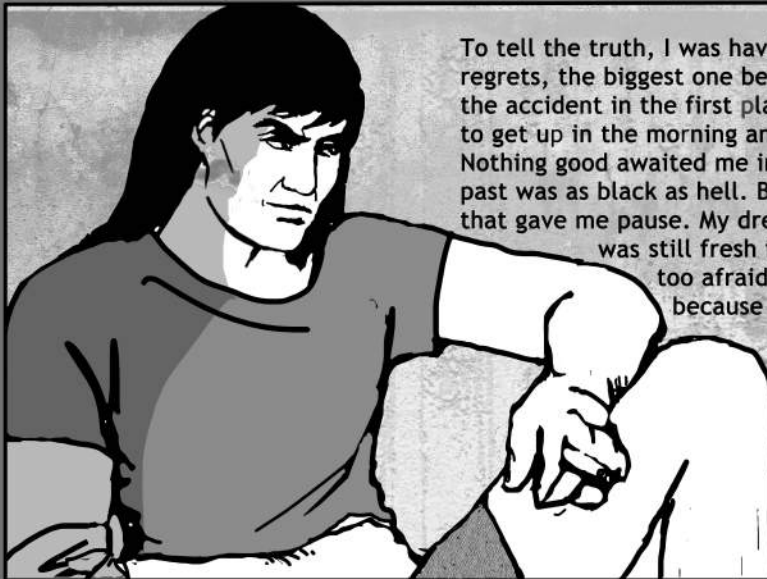




A week after the accident, I was still wearing bandages and fighting pain. To make matters worse, I wasn't getting any sleep either. And then there was Bijaya. The guy really bugged me...for lots of reasons.

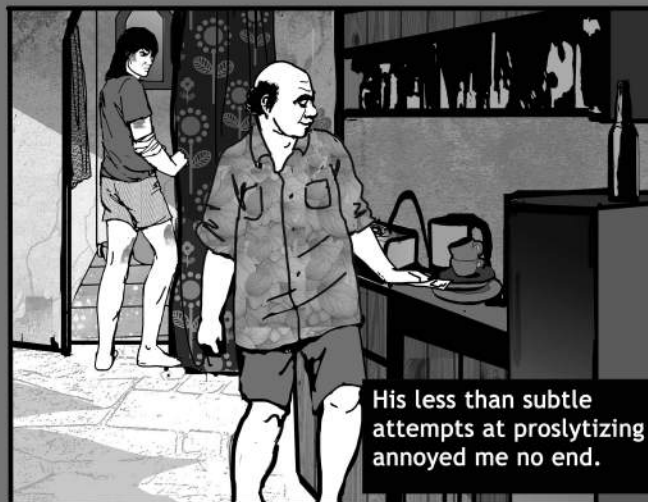
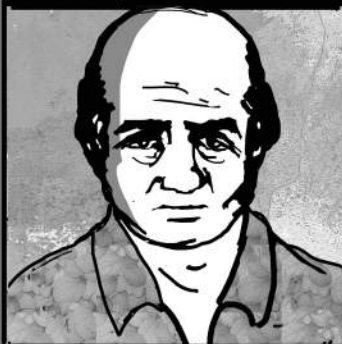


I didn't mind his help and concern during the first few days when he stayed home to make me comfortable and cook for me, but after that I wanted him gone. Instead he hung around like a mother hen with its chick, making conversation so I wouldn't get bored. But since most of his conversation revolved around God and religion, I was very, VERY bored! I wanted to be left alone to indulge in my depression and steep myself in regret over losing Jayanti.



To tell the truth, I was having a whole lot of regrets, the biggest one being that I'd survived the accident in the first place. I had no reason to get up in the morning and face a new day. Nothing good awaited me in the future and my past was as black as hell. But it was that thought that gave me pause. My dream, or vision, of hell was still fresh in my mind and I was too afraid to take my own life because of it. I'd always been afraid of the very real possibility of a dark side to the afterlife. Nevertheless, the idea of ending it all was a tempting thought.

Bijaya noticed my sombre mood and was worried by it. He tried to cheer me up by leaving religious tracts all over the place.



His less than subtle attempts at proslytizing annoyed me no end.

One day, after he had 'praised the Lord' for the umpteenth time, I got fed up and decided to rattle his naive, fairytale world a little by taking down his faith. He was a new believer, whereas I'd been brought up on the Bible, so I had an unfair advantage, which suited me fine.

So Bijaya, if God is good and kind like you say, why did He kill off almost the whole world in the flood? And why did He order the genocide of the Canaanites, telling His people to waste women and little kids? How does that fit in with your idea of a loving God?



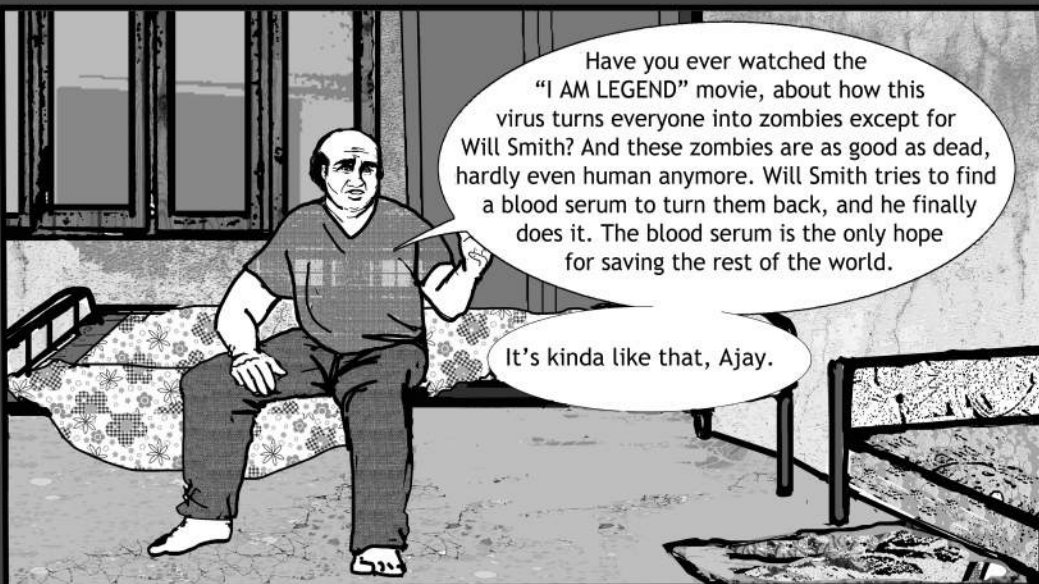
He had to chew on that one for awhile.



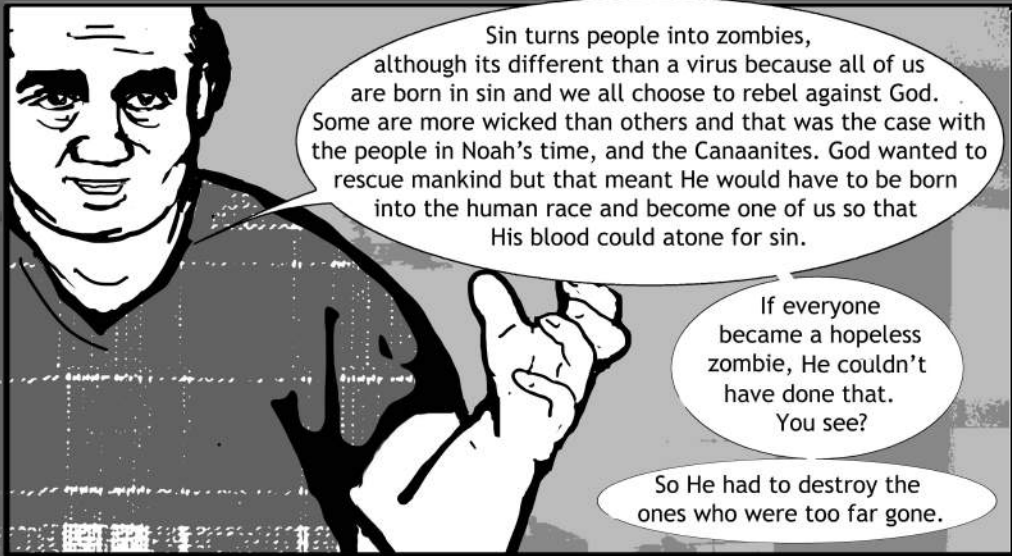
Well...

Have you ever watched the "I AM LEGEND" movie, about how this virus turns everyone into zombies except for Will Smith? And these zombies are as good as dead, hardly even human anymore. Will Smith tries to find a blood serum to turn them back, and he finally does it. The blood serum is the only hope for saving the rest of the world.

It's kinda like that, Ajay.





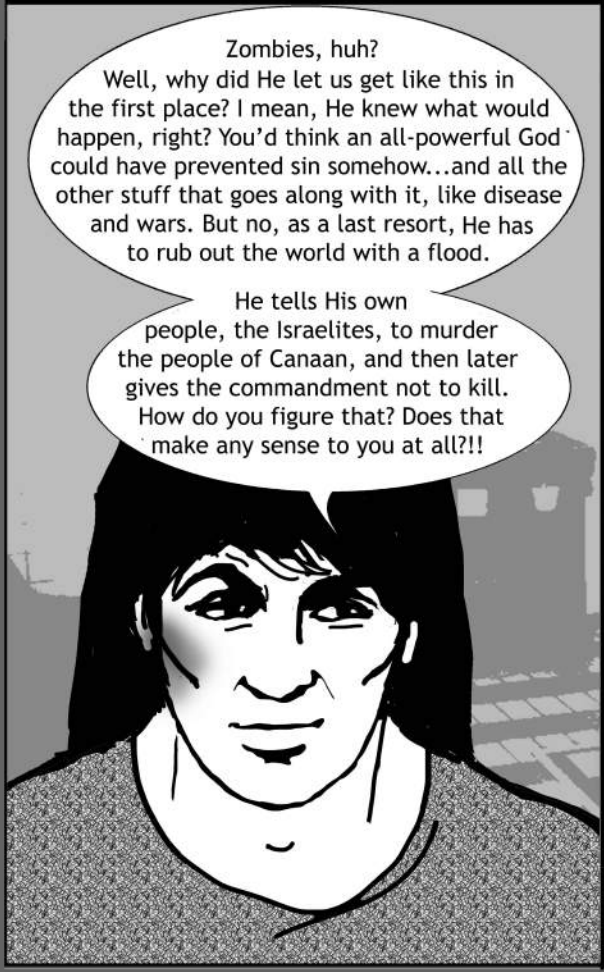


Sin turns people into zombies, although its different than a virus because all of us are born in sin and we all choose to rebel against God. . . Some are more wicked than others and that was the case with the people in Noah's time, and the Canaanites. God wanted to rescue mankind but that meant He would have to be born into the human race and become one of us so that His blood could atone for sin.

If everyone became a hopeless zombie, He couldn't have done that. You see?

So He had to destroy the ones who were too far gone.

The guy was weird, there was no doubt about that, but I thought I'd play along to see where this went.



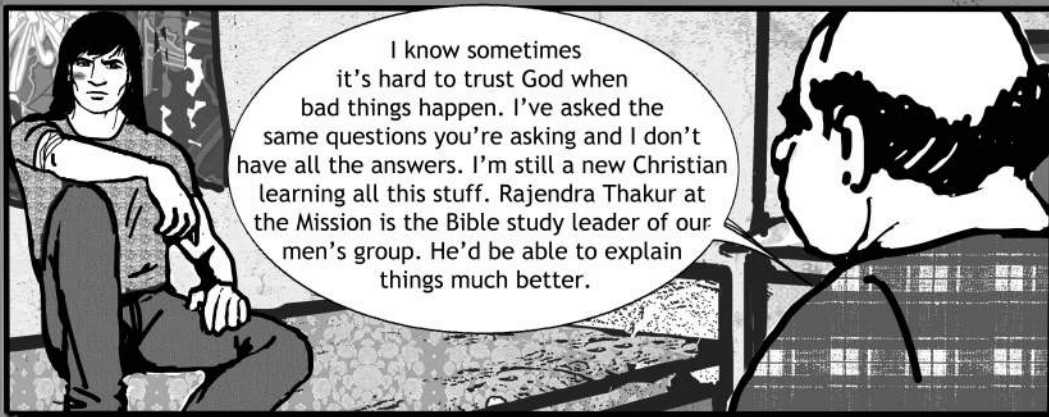
Zombies, huh?  
Well, why did He let us get like this in the first place? I mean, He knew what would happen, right? You'd think an all-powerful God could have prevented sin somehow...and all the other stuff that goes along with it, like disease and wars. But no, as a last resort, He has to rub out the world with a flood.

He tells His own people, the Israelites, to murder the people of Canaan, and then later gives the commandment not to kill. How do you figure that? Does that make any sense to you at all?!!

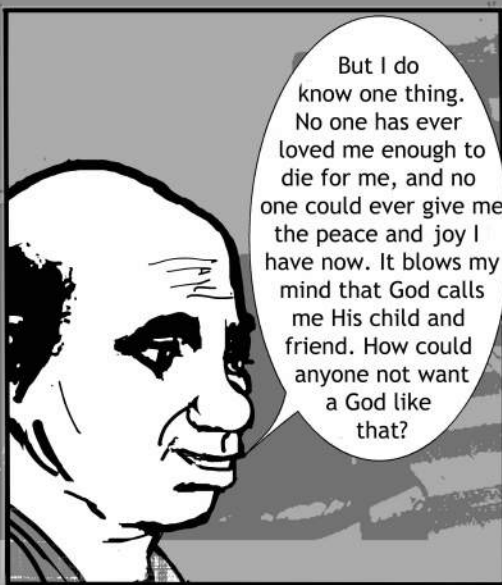


But maybe it's not that suprising after all. It kinda explains why He ignores all the sickness and suffering in the world and why this life is nothing but a load of crap..especially for the suckers who think He loves them.

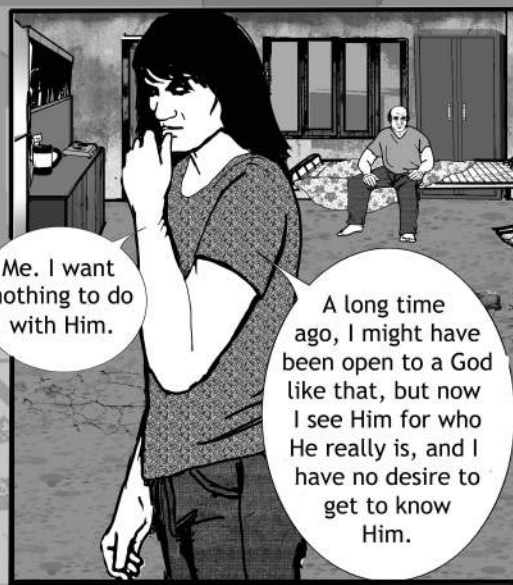
God..if He DOES exist... is NOT a God of love.



I know sometimes it's hard to trust God when bad things happen. I've asked the same questions you're asking and I don't have all the answers. I'm still a new Christian learning all this stuff. Rajendra Thakur at the Mission is the Bible study leader of our men's group. He'd be able to explain things much better.

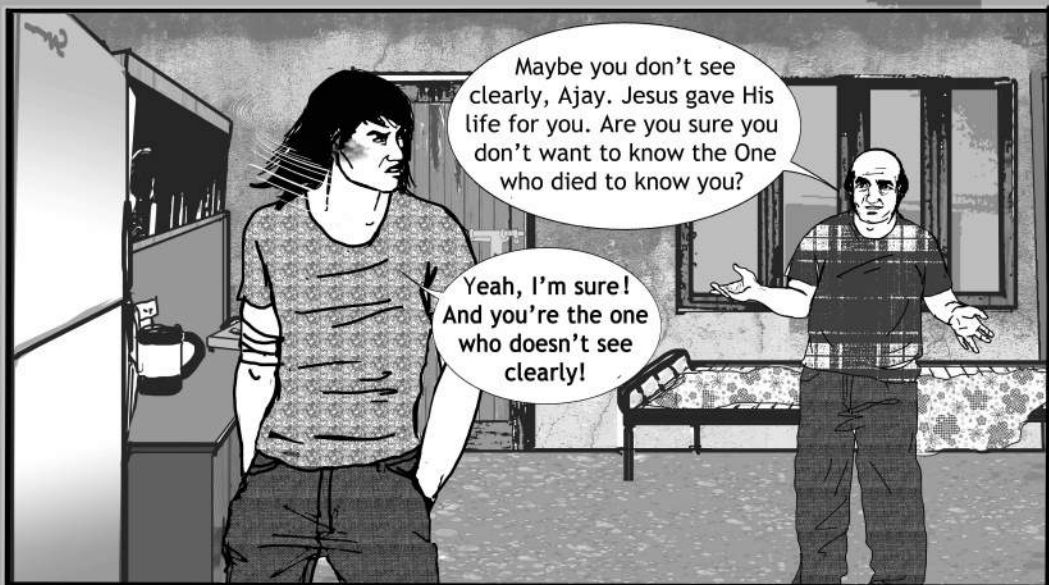


But I do know one thing. No one has ever loved me enough to die for me, and no one could ever give me the peace and joy I have now. It blows my mind that God calls me His child and friend. How could anyone not want a God like that?



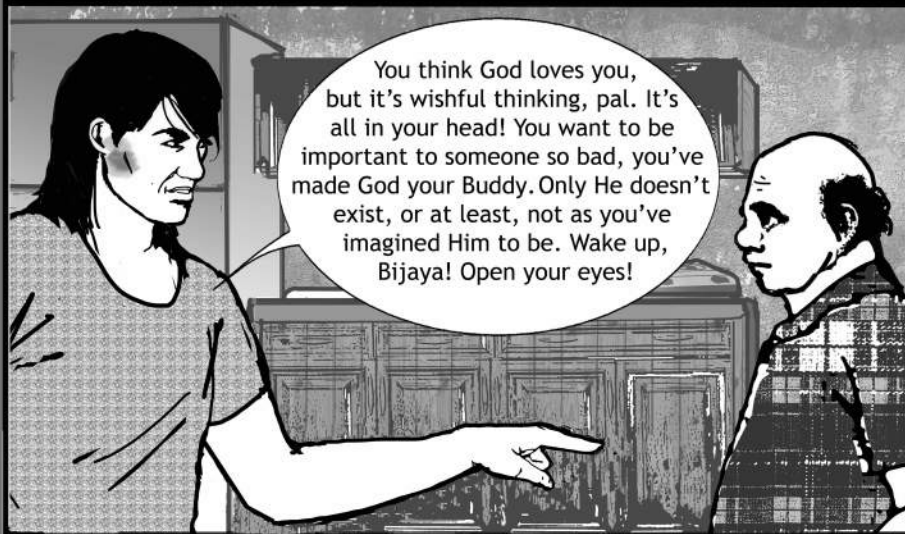
Me. I want nothing to do with Him.

A long time ago, I might have been open to a God like that, but now I see Him for who He really is, and I have no desire to get to know Him.

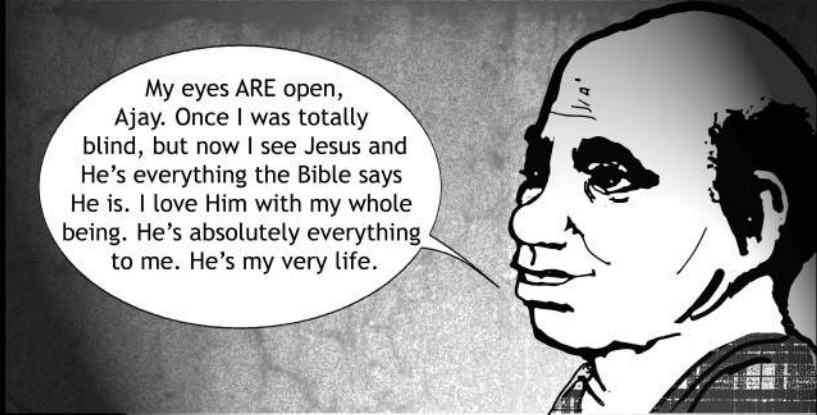


Maybe you don't see clearly, Ajay. Jesus gave His life for you. Are you sure you don't want to know the One who died to know you?

Yeah, I'm sure! And you're the one who doesn't see clearly!



You think God loves you, but it's wishful thinking, pal. It's all in your head! You want to be important to someone so bad, you've made God your Buddy. Only He doesn't exist, or at least, not as you've imagined Him to be. Wake up, Bijaya! Open your eyes!



My eyes ARE open, Ajay. Once I was totally blind, but now I see Jesus and He's everything the Bible says He is. I love Him with my whole being. He's absolutely everything to me. He's my very life.



Yeah, well you're welcome to Him!



I'd had enough of the conversation and went outside for some fresh air. I was feeling unusually disturbed inside and wanted to clear my head and calm my breathing.



It was dusk and people were coming home from work or heading downtown to shop. I saw a group up ahead and decided to aimlessly follow them.



I ended up in front of a typical Hindu temple. Worshippers were going in to do pujas, and many were carrying trays of flowers and coconuts to offer to their gods.



Hindu myths often depicted the gods as violent, with lots of blood-letting and gore. Ganesh was said to have been decapitated by Shiva who later replaced his head with that of an elephant.



Constant pujas were necessary to placate, impress, and cajole the gods into giving their favor and blessing, especially as they were said to be easily angered and unpredictable.

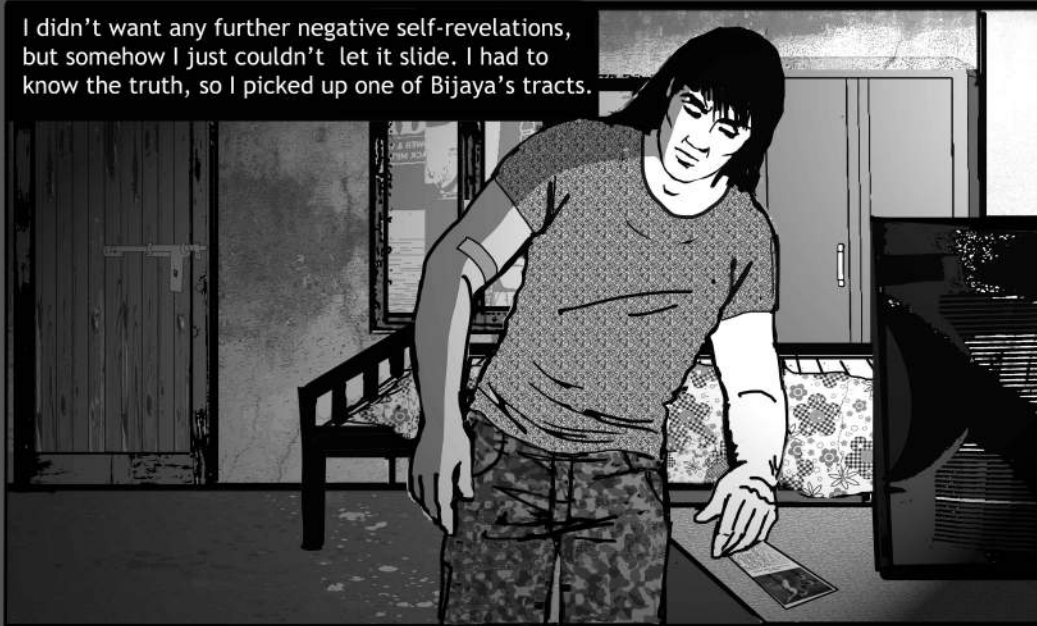


As I headed back to Bijaya's place, it struck me that all religions were the same. They were all about people trying to stay on the right side of an angry and vengeful God.



Bijaya and I didn't talk about God after that night. He seemed to know to back off, although that didn't stop him from planting his tracts all over the place and humming hymns to himself. Far from being rattled by our theological discussion, he seemed annoyingly at peace. I was the one who'd been unnerved, not because Bijaya had provided persuasive arguments but because there was something compelling in the way he had spoken about his devotion to Jesus. His eyes had glowed and his voice had softened like someone deeply in love with his God. It had made me very uncomfortable and doubts had assailed my mind that I might be mistaken in my take on God, life, and reality. Maybe God wasn't the tyrant I had imagined, and after watching the Hindus at their pujas, I suspected I wasn't the only one with wrong ideas. None of us knew what God was like. It would explain why the world was in such a mess. Not knowing God meant not knowing how to live as His creation. I'd once heard my Dad say that no one really knew God or wanted to, at least not on His terms. That was certainly true in my case. As a boy growing up with big dreams for the future, God had cramped my style. I'd kept my frustration locked inside until I'd lost my mother. Then I had accused God of cruelty, justifying my rebellion and turning my back on my Christian upbringing. But what if I'd just been looking for an excuse all along to reject God? That thought creeped me out because it was a whole lot easier to face myself if I was the victim and God was the bad guy.

I didn't want any further negative self-revelations, but somehow I just couldn't let it slide. I had to know the truth, so I picked up one of Bijaya's tracts.





I knew about this scripture. One of the thieves who was crucified with Jesus had recognized Him for who He was and had asked to be remembered. Jesus told him He would be with Him in paradise.

As I was staring at the picture, a weird thing happened. The thief's face suddenly morphed into MINE!



I blinked twice but for the space of a few seconds, it stayed that way.

Then the picture returned to normal.



I thought, 'Oh no! I've finally cracked!'

The pressure must have been too much and I'd lost my mind.



Then I told myself it must have been the fault of the lighting..or maybe it was just my imagination playing tricks on me.



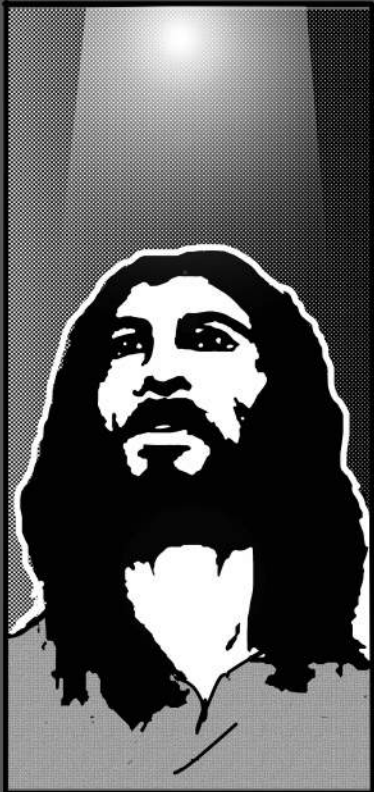


Then there was the possibility that this was a God happening, but I wasn't ready to consider that...quite yet.



But something was happening for sure. For one thing I was intrigued by the pardoned thief. He was a criminal like me, but all he did was take Jesus as his Lord and all the past was instantly forgiven. It was that easy.

42 Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."  
43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."



Would it be that easy for me too? Would God forgive me just for the asking? The God I'd read about in the Old Testament seemed so wrathful and vengeful when it came to dealing with sinners. But Jesus...with that thief.. As God's Son, Jesus had been involved in the creation of the world, but He'd also been responsible for the many judgements against various nations as listed in the Bible. I didn't know how to reconcile that with a Savior who defended prostitutes and thieves, even sacrificing Himself on a cross for them. If God never changes, like Dad always preached, why did He seem so schizophrenic?

There was only one way to find out. My mother's Bible.





I started with the Old Testament, and just as expected, it said a lot about God's wrath and anger. But the Bible justified it on the grounds that the world was plagued by violence, which seemed evident from the start go. There was murder, genocide, gang rape, decapitation, dismemberment, infanticide..you name it.



Cain committed the first murder when he killed his brother Abel out of jealousy.



Actually, it was kind of amazing that God put up with all that craziness for as long as He did, especially when His chosen people, the Israelites, started behaving as badly as the pagans. And they weren't the first to go off the rails either. God had problems with His angelic creation prior to making humans.

The one at the top, Lucifer by name, had everything going for him until he got a swelled head and rebelled against His Creator. He must have been persuasive because 1/3 of the angels followed him as their leader.



Bad choice. God kicked them out of heaven. Lucifer became Satan and his followers became demons.



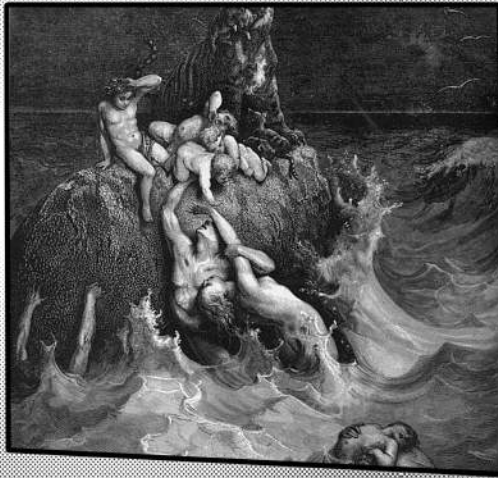
They descended on planet earth to ruin the entire human race, starting with Adam and Eve. I thought it pretty weird how Satan came to them as a talking snake, but things were a lot different back then...

..especially after Adam and Eve sinned and had to leave Eden.



There was a strange mixed race of angels and humans called Nephilim in those days, and they were gigantic in size. Also people lived almost a thousand years! They had no laws and did pretty much what they wanted, which must have made them a pretty wild bunch. They all spoke one language and they built a big city and ziggurat with plans to become a world power.





Like Bijaya said, the situation got so bad that God was sorry He had ever made the human race. He sent a flood to wipe them all out, except for Noah and his kin. God instructed Noah to build an ark and that's what saved them when the waters swept over the earth. Once the land became dry, the human race had to start all over again. Now humans lived less than a hundred years instead of a thousand.



Still, things didn't get much better after that. People went their own way and ignored God for the most part. But He did have one friend, a guy by the name of Abraham. God promised to make this guy's descendents His chosen people. They eventually became the nation of Israel. They got special treatment, like laws to civilize them, protection from enemies, prosperity, and a promise that they would one day become a powerful, never-ending kingdom.

God also promised to send a Redeemer through the Israelite nation who would bring blessing to the whole world. But before He came, the Israelites had to offer animal blood sacrifices to cover their sins so as to keep on God's good side. Otherwise they were in deep trouble. Sin demanded judgement and it carried a death penalty in hell. The blood sacrifices were necessary to buy the Israelites temporary immunity until God sent the Savior.





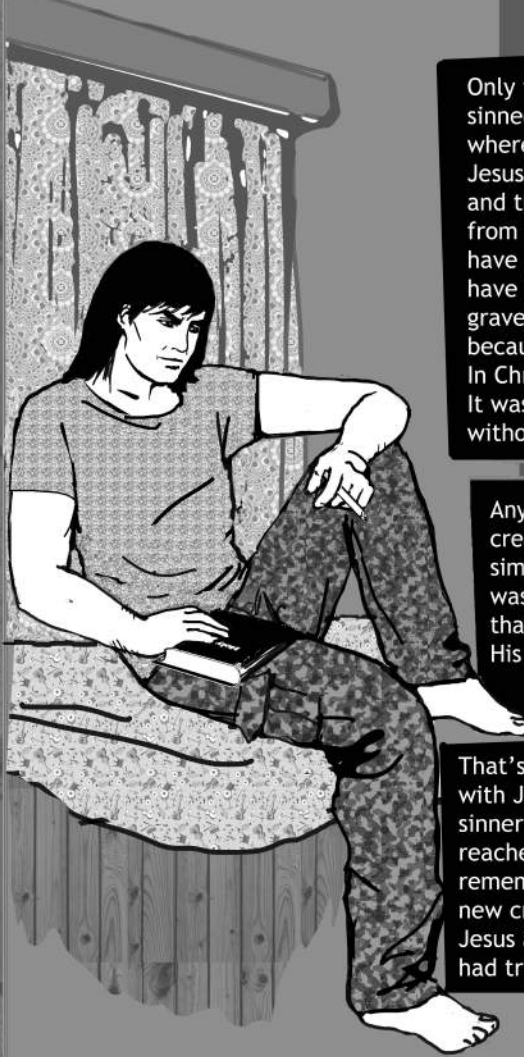
So after about 5000 years, give or take a few thousand, the Savior made His entrance into the world in the Person of Jesus Christ. Although born of a woman, God was His Father, and always had been. He'd existed within the Triune Godhead forever and had created the world to begin with. And this wasn't the first time He'd visited planet earth. He'd appeared in human and angelic form several times before, only this time He'd come as a true human being, an important distinction that was directly linked to the whole purpose of His mission.

That mission wasn't a very enviable one. He was born specifically to die. Redeeming mankind from sin necessitated becoming the ultimate blood sacrifice to which all earlier lamb sacrifices pointed. Further, it required that He be a human being so that His sacrifice would be effective for the human race. It was such a closely held secret that even Satan had not foreseen what God had been planning all along. Couched in mystery and figurative language, hints had been dropped throughout the ages, specifically to the Israelite people, but few had caught on what was going to really go down. Contrary to Jewish ideas, Jesus had no intention of becoming a political leader of a physical nation. His kingdom would be spiritual and it would encompass all races, not just Israel. A large part of Jesus' public ministry entailed announcing this heavenly mandate and showing His divine credentials (mostly in the form of miracles) to back His authority.



From what I could gather, Jesus was like a figurehead representing all of mankind. The first Adam had been one too, responsible for what would become of the human race through his actions. He had put us all under the axe, so to speak, because through his sin we all pass into spiritual death the moment we get born and take our first breath.

That's where Jesus was different. Although He was also a Representative for mankind, He never sinned, not even once. And here's where it got real interesting. When Jesus went to the cross, He took us all down (spiritually) to hell with Him where justice was satisfied.



Only the grave couldn't hold Him. He had never sinned and besides, He was also divine. This is where Satan had miscalculated. If he'd known that Jesus' death was the predetermined plan all along and that it would actually result in freeing humans from the penalty of death, I doubt Satan would have been so eager to see Him murdered. He must have been shocked to see Jesus rise up from the grave after 3 days. That was Satan's downfall because when Jesus arose, so did the human race. In Christ, a new reborn humanity came into being. It was an entirely new creation, a perfect one without sin and free from all condemnation.

Any human could get born into that new creation and become a new creature in Christ by simply believing that Jesus was who He said He was, and did what He said He did. If you believed that He could save you from your sin and give you His eternal life, then it was yours for the asking.

That's what the thief who was crucified with Jesus had done. He knew he was a sinner and deserved hell, but he had reached out to Jesus, asking to be remembered when Jesus came into His new creation kingdom. He had recognized Jesus as the promised Redeemer and he had trusted Him to rescue him.



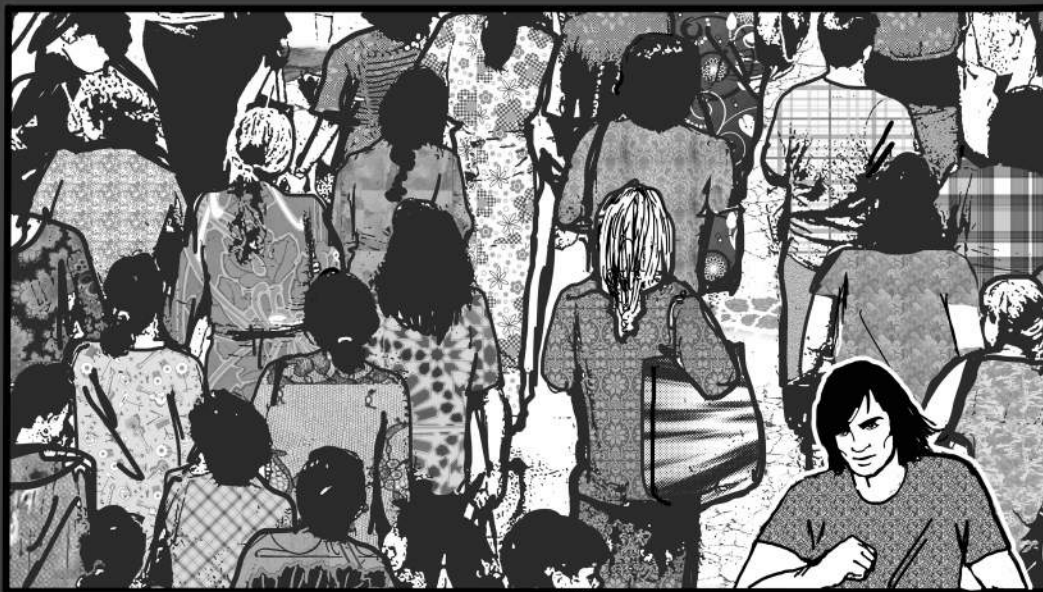


So it really was that easy; easy for the thief that is. For Jesus, not so much. He'd gone through hell, literally, after being tortured, condemned, rejected by His Father, and left to die. It hadn't been easy for His Father either, who'd come up with the plan in the first place, and then had to watch His much loved Son go through all that. And God had done it all for people like that thief on the cross..for people like ME. All of a sudden He didn't seem like such a cruel, vengeful God as I'd always imagined.

I shut my mother's Bible, overwhelmed by what I'd discovered. Had my Dad preached this? Probably, but I had been too blind to get it.



I got up to go out. There was something I had to do and it couldn't wait.





I'd never been inside the Mission before. It had a cafeteria, medical center, and lots of counselling rooms off to the side. A lot of street people were there for the free food coupons and medicine.



I was there for an entirely different reason, but I had to get directions from one of the women there.



Raj and the female Jackie Chan were jousting in the courtyard when I walked in. Everyone instantly stopped what they were doing and stared at me with uncertainty.



No, man. I'm not here for that. I came about that new life you mentioned.



We talked for hours in that courtyard. Raj wanted to make sure I understood what the new life entailed. I guess he was finding it difficult to believe that I was really serious about giving up my life in exchange for the Lord's.





At one time I would have flatly rejected the idea of losing who I was in order to become a different kind of person with a new spirit.



To be unrecognizable on the inside, with new desires that would be continually reshaped in conformity with Christ's life operating within, would have been as welcome to me as the idea of turning into a zombie or robot.



But by this time I saw that it was sin that had turned me into a zombie slave, as Bijaya liked to put it. The life of Christ now sounded highly preferable, especially if it could make me like Him. I was sick to death of who I was and what I'd become. So I was quite ready for the old me to die so I could finally live, and I told Raj so. He suggested that I tell Jesus what was on my heart in my own words.



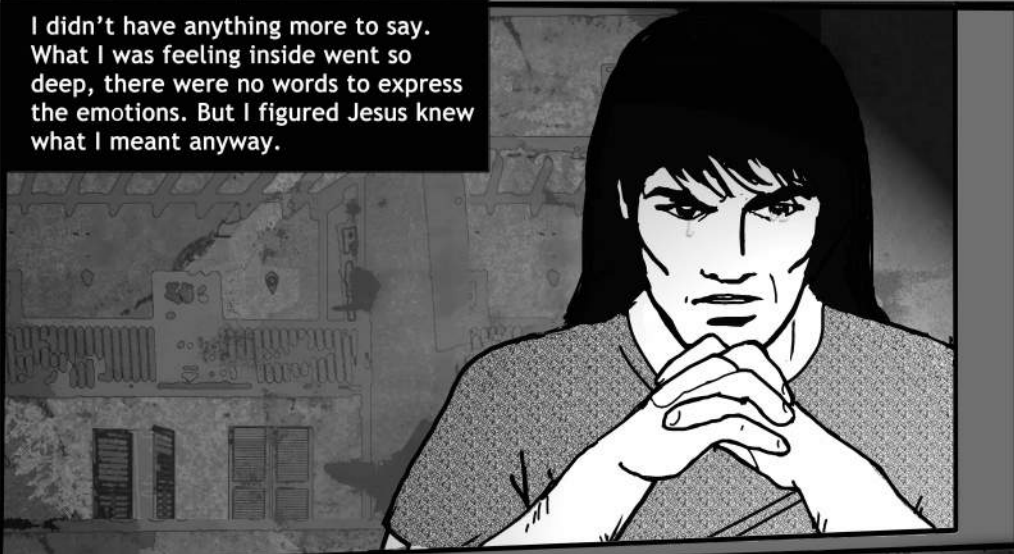
It felt strange at first.

But after a few faltering attempts, the words came naturally, from deep inside my heart.

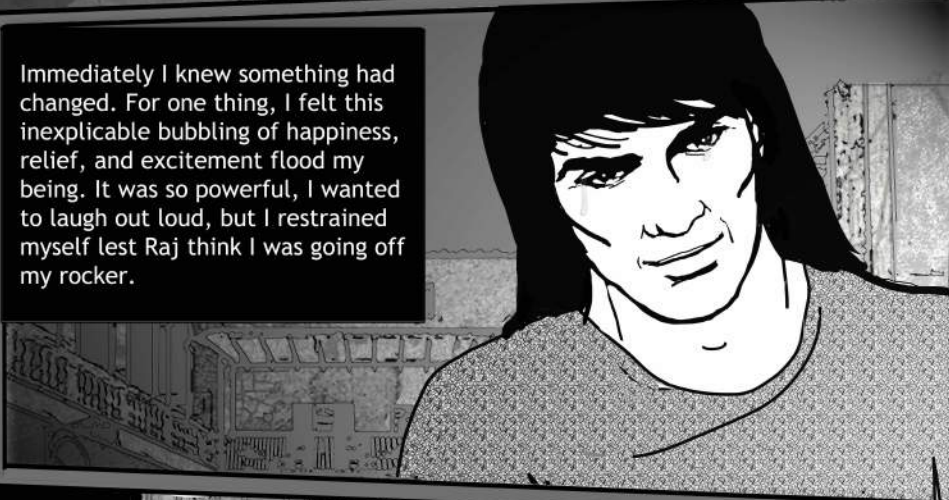


Jesus...  
like that thief...I'm the same.  
I deserve hell, but I believe You already went there in my place to pay my debt. So now I'm asking You to forgive me and give me Your life.  
I'm no prize...but I want to belong to You.

I didn't have anything more to say. What I was feeling inside went so deep, there were no words to express the emotions. But I figured Jesus knew what I meant anyway.



Immediately I knew something had changed. For one thing, I felt this inexplicable bubbling of happiness, relief, and excitement flood my being. It was so powerful, I wanted to laugh out loud, but I restrained myself lest Raj think I was going off my rocker.



Although he seemed to know what was happening to me, because he had this little smile on his face as he watched me.

I guess everyone who's been there, knows what I'm talking about.





Raj introduced me to my new 'family'. It felt somewhat strange to suddenly be an insider.



Never thought we'd be shaking hands as brothers.

Yeah. You're one of us now.

There was one person who had every right not to be so welcoming.



Rachel, I'm really sorry about what .. what I tried to -

I forgive you, Ajay. That's all in the past now. God doesn't condemn you, and neither do I.



Raj and the others left so I could have a few moments alone..



..with my God.



Chapter 14

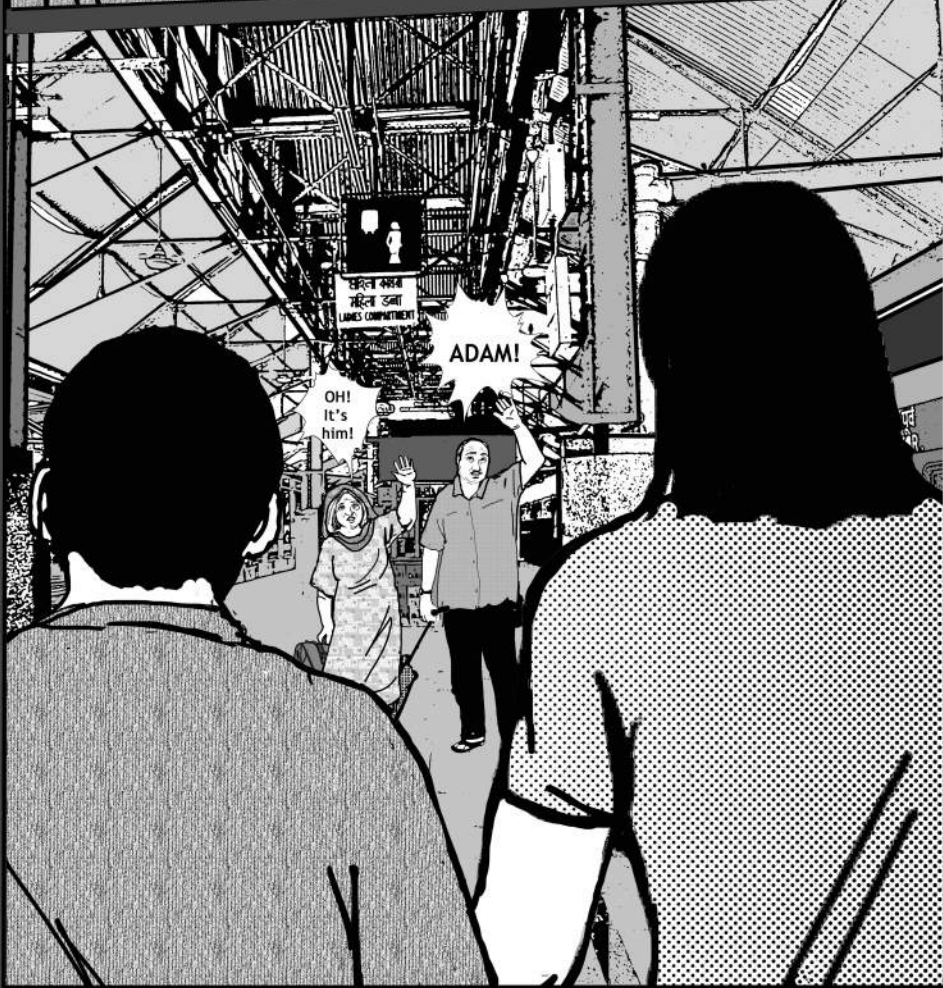
REAL

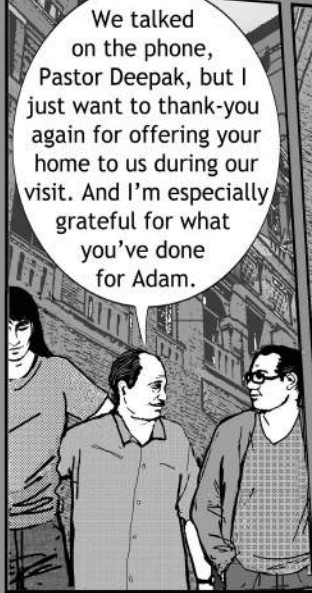


Howrah Train Station











Dad and Amma seemed to have aged a lot since I'd last seen them. I was looking at them differently - maybe really 'seeing' them for the first time. Funny, at the train station I hadn't been able to find the meddlesome, domineering parent in my dad's tear-filled eyes staring at me from a face etched with careworn wrinkles. I'd just seen a father's deep love and joy over seeing a son he thought was lost to him forever.



And Amma.. I'd treated her as a servant most of the time. Did I even know her?

I was seeing a lot of things differently all of a sudden..like how God had given me a godly family to love and protect me as a kid.

And I'd been too blind and ungrateful to appreciate them.

But it wasn't too late.

Hey Dad.  
How about I show  
you and Amma  
around tomorrow?

Sure, son.

One thing I wasn't looking forward to was telling them what I'd been doing the last 3 years. They'd definitely ask and I didn't want to lie, but there was no way I could tell them everything. If Amma knew I'd been a pimp and goonda for a mafia figure, she'd die on the spot. I wouldn't mention the drugs or stolen motorbike either. I wasn't lying. I just wasn't sharing unnecessary information.





Next day I took my folks to the Fairlawn Hotel, a place built in 1783 and operating as a hotel since 1936. It has a real old Calcutta feel that Amma especially liked.



Dad liked the Park Cemetery which was rich with Anglo-Indian history.

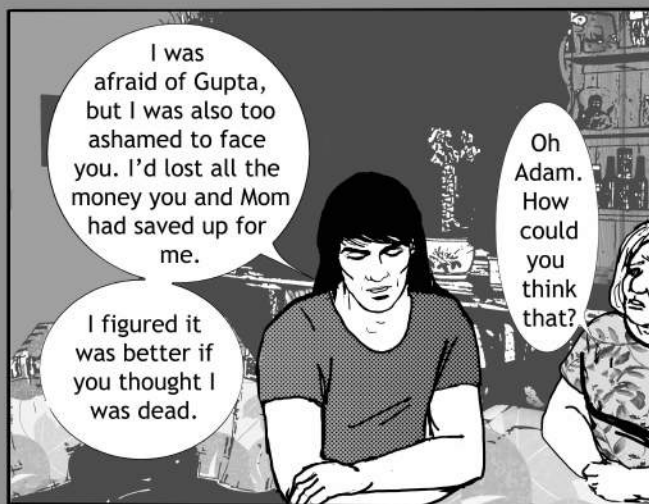


We stopped by a little bistro for coffee.

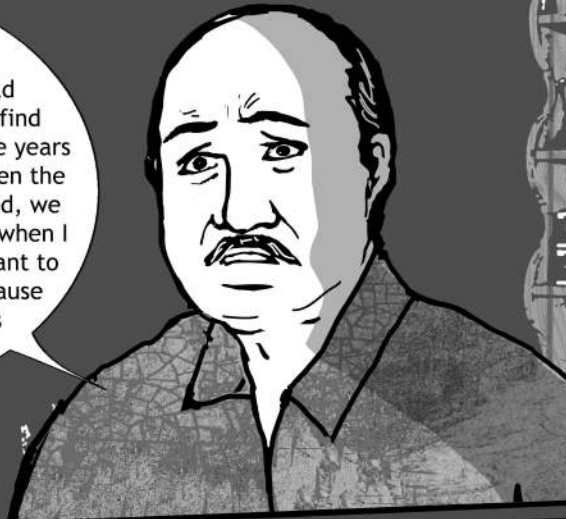


Then came the dreaded conversation with all the questions.

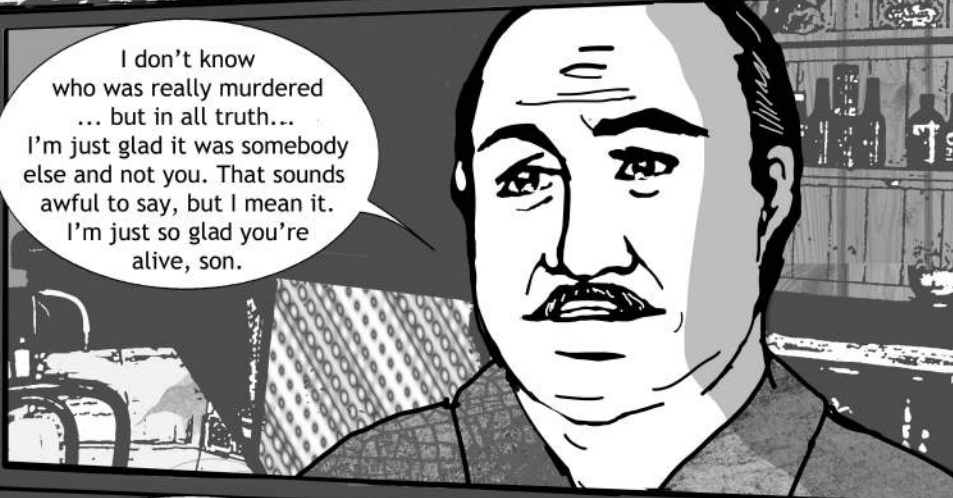
They wondered why I had never called in 3 years. If I had, Dad said, he would have told me that Gupta was no longer a threat. He'd hung himself the year before. After entering politics, he had made some enemies who threatened him with exposure for corruption. He also had many business failures and faced bankruptcies. The entire family was in disgrace. I wondered how Priya would take that, and unexpectedly I felt no sense of satisfaction, only sorrow for her and her family.



What does the money matter?! It's YOU we care about! Nothing could have made us happier than to find you were alive and well. All these years we've been grieving for you. When the police told us you were murdered, we couldn't believe it at first. Even when I read it in the papers, I didn't want to accept it. Finally I had to because the police were sure it was you in that alley.

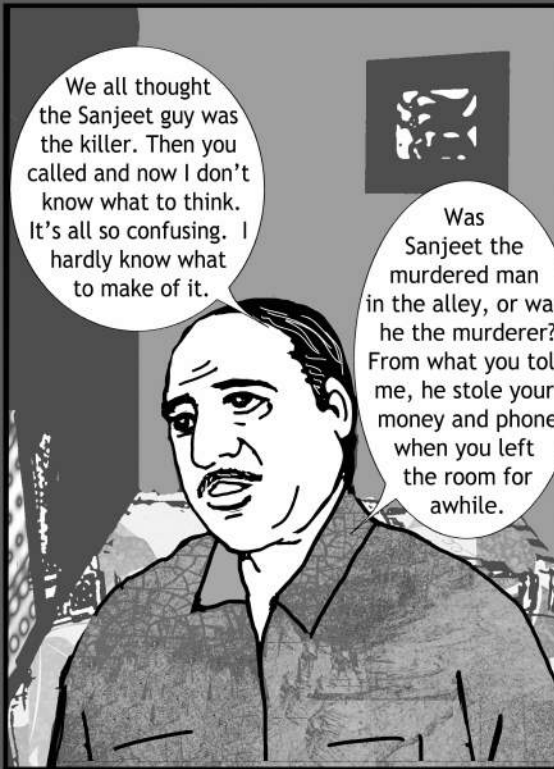


I don't know who was really murdered ... but in all truth... I'm just glad it was somebody else and not you. That sounds awful to say, but I mean it. I'm just so glad you're alive, son.



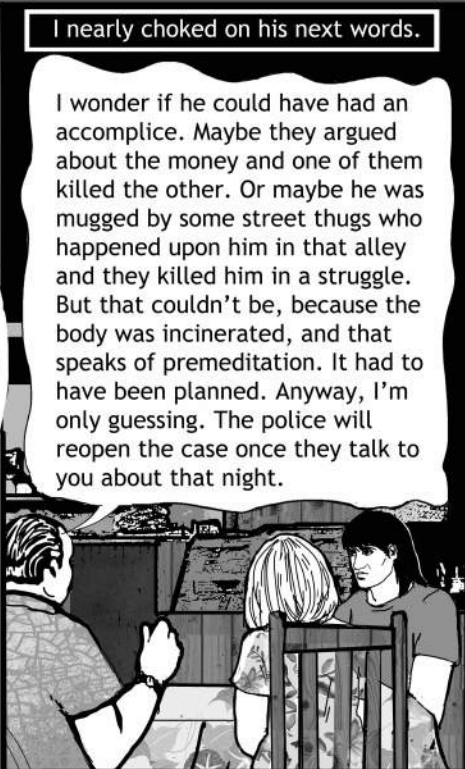
And I do hope, of course, that the police find out who the poor victim was and who it was who killed him. I wondered so often about what happened that night. All I knew was what the police told me; that you and that trucker who brought you to Kolkata were signed into a hotel; that your cellphone was found in the alley next to some charred remains that they said were yours; and that the trucker had disappeared.





We all thought the Sanjeet guy was the killer. Then you called and now I don't know what to think. It's all so confusing. I hardly know what to make of it.

Was Sanjeet the murdered man in the alley, or was he the murderer? From what you told me, he stole your money and phone when you left the room for awhile.



I nearly choked on his next words.

I wonder if he could have had an accomplice. Maybe they argued about the money and one of them killed the other. Or maybe he was mugged by some street thugs who happened upon him in that alley and they killed him in a struggle. But that couldn't be, because the body was incinerated, and that speaks of premeditation. It had to have been planned. Anyway, I'm only guessing. The police will reopen the case once they talk to you about that night.

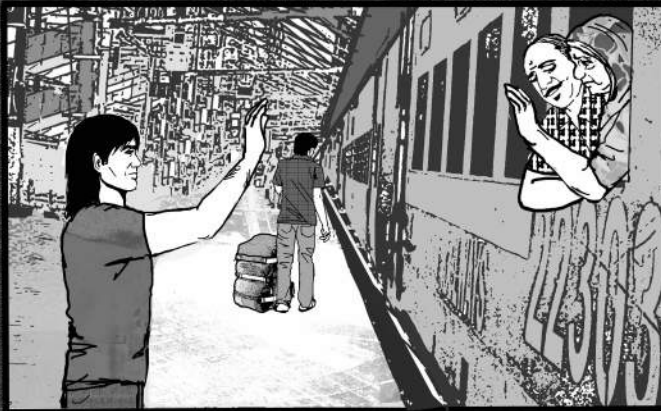


Let's talk about something else, okay? I find this terribly depressing.

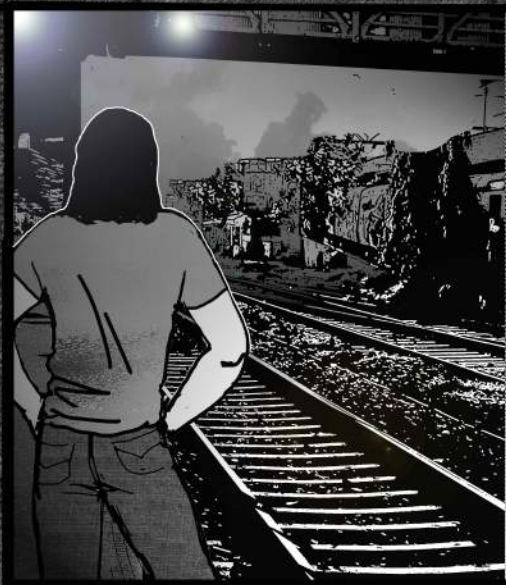
I could have hugged Amma for changing the subject right then. Dad was getting too close to the facts with all of his surmising and I didn't want to tell him any more lies. I had misled him about the robbery and I'd told him that I'd notify the cops, but I had no intention of doing so. I had no alibi for that night and no proof that would incriminate Giri and Malik. It would just be my word against theirs. I hoped that if I kept quiet, an obscure murder case that was three years old would just go away. I wanted my past to stay dead and buried forever so I'd never have to think about it again. The old adage of letting sleeping dogs lie seemed particularly appropriate under the circumstances.





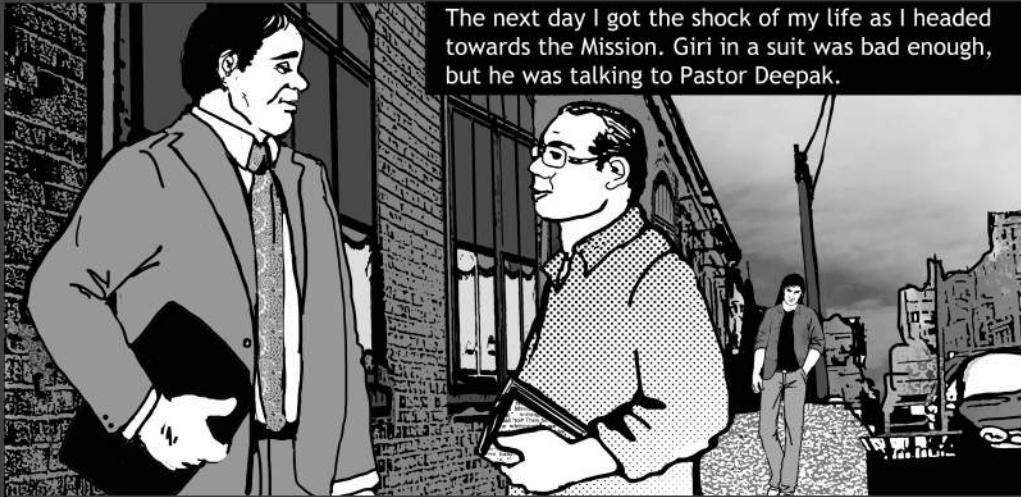


Dad and Amma's week-long visit came to an end all too quickly. I saw them off at the station and Amma wept the whole time we were saying our good-byes. She couldn't understand why I wasn't going back home with them. However Dad understood that I had my own life to live and had chosen to stay in Kolkata to work at the Mission.



I headed back into the city, thankful that God had restored my family to me, and completely unaware that I would shortly face my biggest challenge since becoming a Christian.





The next day I got the shock of my life as I headed towards the Mission. Giri in a suit was bad enough, but he was talking to Pastor Deepak.



Do you know that was?

Yes. He's a security consultant for the government. He helps organizations like ours that deal with sensitive information.

The government is offering new encryption software to us.



That's no government security consultant. Probably here to do some hacking into your computers.

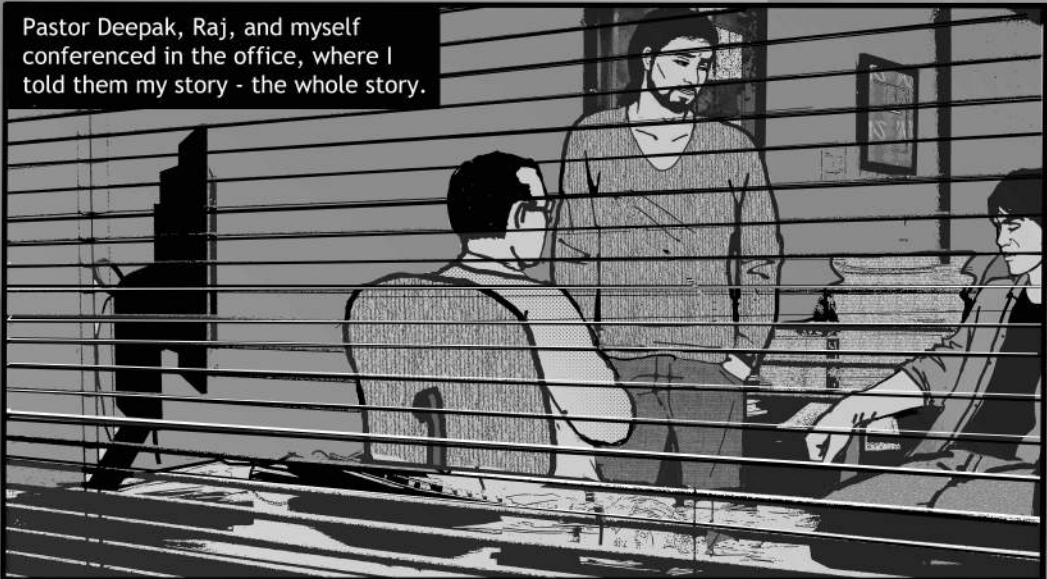
How do you know? His identification looked authentic, and he seemed to know what he was talking about.

He's coming back tomorrow to set up the software.

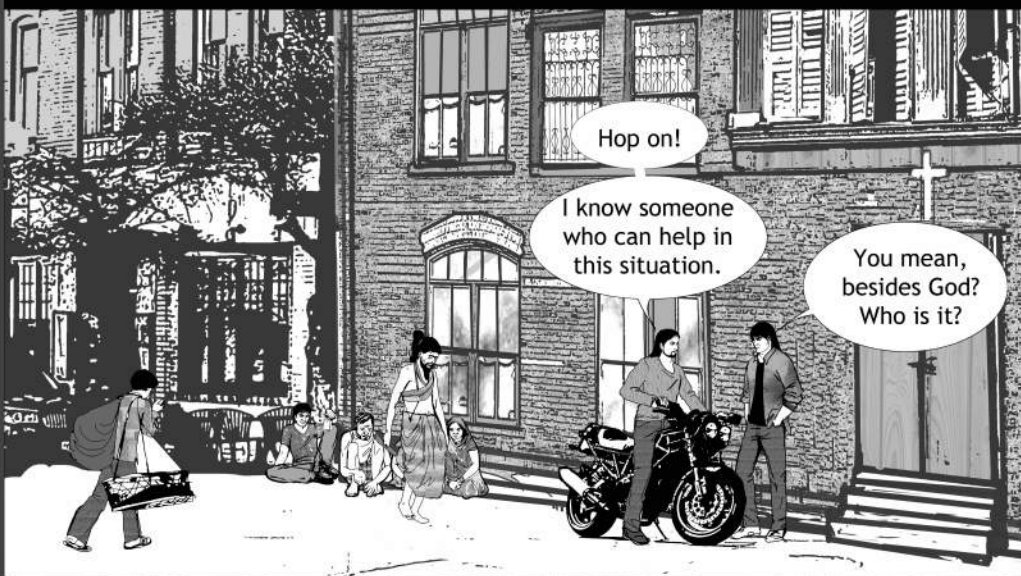




I thought I had a pretty good idea what Giri was doing at the Mission. The cyber ploy was probably an attempt to get information from Pastor Deepak's computer that would reveal the location of the Safe House where Kaliyah was staying. If my guess was right, then Ranjan probably wanted her dead and had put a contract out on her. Giri was undoubtedly the one hired for the job. I knew I had to warn Deepak and explain the situation if I wanted to protect Kali. So far the people at the Mission knew my real name and that I'd been involved in drugs and stuff, but they didn't ask for details and I had never volunteered any. Now I'd have let them know about the drug lords and killers I'd consorted with over the past few years. I wasn't looking forward to making those disclosures but I had to do it.







I had a feeling this was where we'd be headed.



As I walked up the stairs to the cop shop, I felt all my old fears closing in on me.



You ok?  
You look pretty pale.



I wasn't ok. I resented Raj for taking me to the cops without asking me, and I even resented God for allowing me to be in this predicament.



I'd been all brave back at the Mission, but now I was having second thoughts. I could end up in jail if the cops didn't believe my story, and Indian jails were notorious for brutality. I was a good fighter but no one had a chance when outnumbered. And there would be a contract out on me for sure. Jail was like a death sentence. I couldn't expect a rich boy like Raj to understand. He'd probably never had to struggle in his entire life, and he wouldn't even know what it was like to be on the wrong side of the law. What would he know about the world of gangsters and how they never let go? It had been unrealistic of me to think Pastor Deepak and Raj could provide some sort of solution that wouldn't get me killed.





That's what happened when you put your trust in people. They always eventually let you down for one reason or another, even if unintentionally. Even the Bible said that... Then I paused... It also said that God was the only One Who was completely faithful and deliverances were His specialty (or something like that). Suddenly the air went out of my lungs. Where was I going to go anyway? How was I going to live my life? Like before? That was a total dead end. I'd bet my entire life on Jesus and there was no going back. If He didn't come through for me.. then...well... then He didn't. I'd rot in a prison or get killed. Wasn't so bad. I'd be with Him anyway. And there was the chance that He just might pull off a miracle for me. He'd done it countless times for others and I belonged to Him now. He said He loved me and had proven it by going through hell for me. If He wanted me to do the same...then so be it. A weight seemed to lift from my soul and I relaxed. I could do this.. With Jesus, I could do this.

He'll see you now.



First surprise. We were seeing a high ranking officer.



Good to see you, Raj.

Second surprise. He and Raj were pals.



You met Ajay at the brothel raid but I can vouch for this man.

I trust your judgement of character, Raj.

Third surprise. He was a Christian who had no problem believing that God could change a person on the inside - even me.



We were in there for over an hour. Now that I realized where I had seen this officer before, I was amazed he would even listen to me. He would have heard that I was the one responsible for trying to sabotage the raid at Sen's place, and he had every reason to distrust me. Yet because of his shared faith with Raj, and their friendship, I was being given the benefit of the doubt. To me, that was no minor miracle.



I found it difficult at first, but eventually I opened up and told the cop about Ranjan, Giri, Malik, and the others - the murder in the alley, the drugs, prostitution, and all their other sordid dealings. I told him of my own involvement too. I suspected it would all probably come out one way or another anyway. Chowdhury suggested that I could turn state's evidence by testifying against these underworld characters and get off without any sentence for my involvement. He was also certain he'd be able to persuade the owner of the stolen motorcycle to drop charges if I paid all damages (and a little extra). Then he focused in on Giri. He was keenly interested in his appearance at the Mission and his appointment to access Pastor Deepak's computer the following day. This was the breakthrough he'd been waiting for. So far the police had been unable to nab Ranjan or his gang, but this new development could change that.

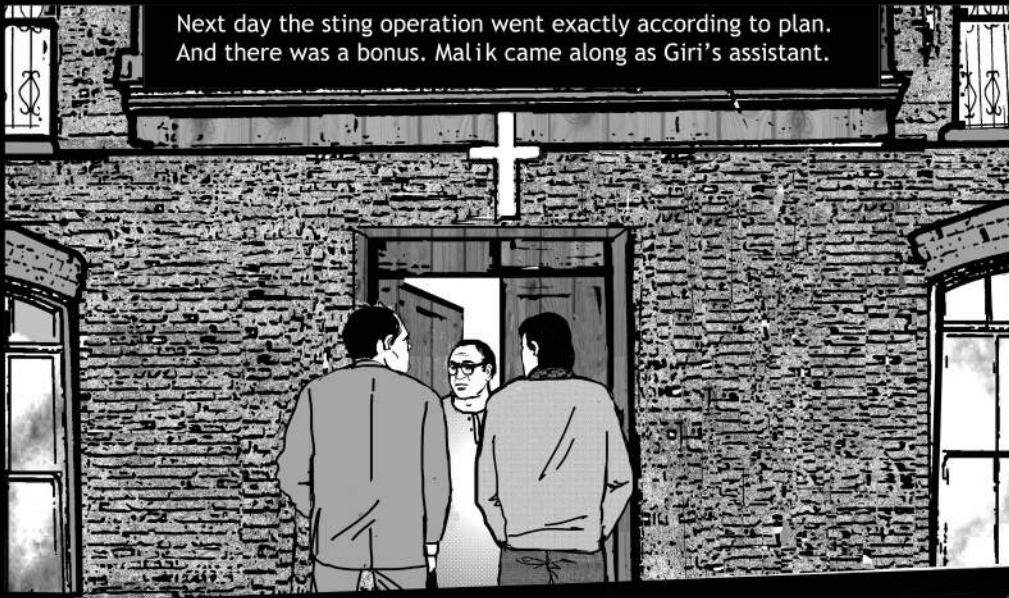
As we left the cop shop, I had a euphoric moment.



I was free and clear, but if Chowdhury's plans came to fruition, the bad guys would soon be locked up - hopefully forever. When Giri showed up at the Mission on the morrow, the police would be there, (hidden but ready with guns at the hip), to pounce on him. Once in jail, they could work on him to extract a confession. The cops were good at that. Indian cops can be corrupt and brutal, but they can also be very effective in getting prisoners to talk. That could be a good thing, if the cop was righteous and wanted the truth. I'd met a lot of the other kind who only cared about lining their own pockets. Fortunately Chowdhury was a good cop, and the Lord had made sure that he was the one dealing with my case. I was extremely thankful for that, and I felt bad for having doubted Raj in that waiting room. He was a good friend and obviously I needed to learn to trust people more. That had never been easy for me.



Next day the sting operation went exactly according to plan.  
And there was a bonus. Malik came along as Giri's assistant.



This way, gentlemen.



For the safety of the people at the Mission, Pastor Deepak lured them to some empty Sunday School rooms at the back of the building, indicating that his office was located there.

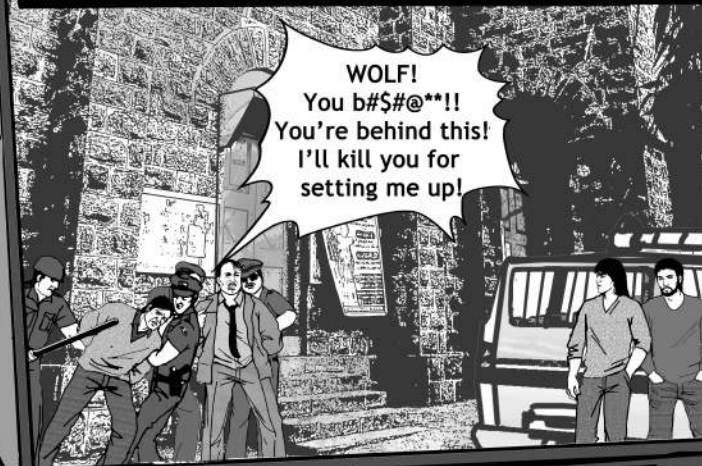
But when they entered the 'office', the cops sent by Chowdhury jumped them before they could even reach for their concealed weapons. Giri and Malik didn't know what hit them, it happened so fast. Both of them struggled briefly but the cops were every bit as big and tough as they were, so it was no contest. You could hear their foul-mouthed expletives and howls of rage all the way to the foyer. They had to be dragged kicking and screaming down the hallway and out of the building to the waiting police van that was parked out back.



Giri got a surprise.



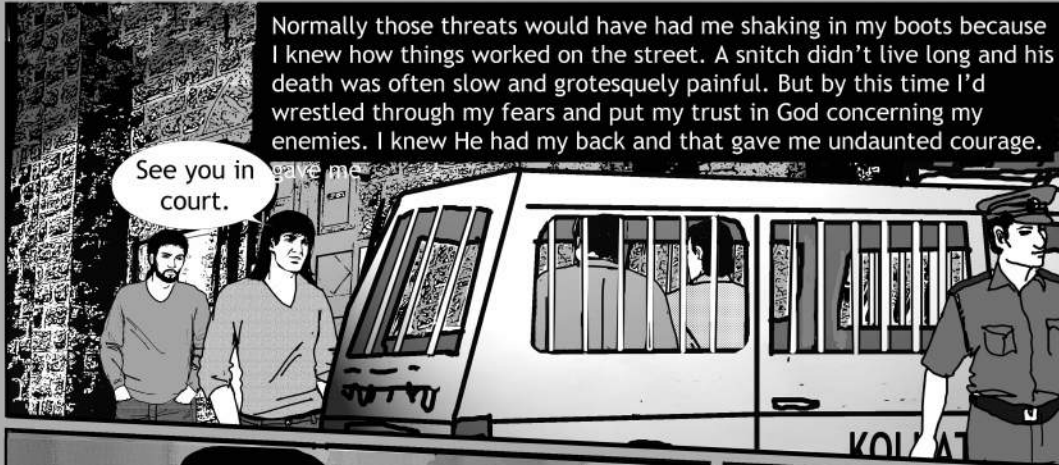
I was waiting with Raj in the back when they brought them out.



You won't last a week ya ASS%##!!







See you in court.

Normally those threats would have had me shaking in my boots because I knew how things worked on the street. A snitch didn't live long and his death was often slow and grotesquely painful. But by this time I'd wrestled through my fears and put my trust in God concerning my enemies. I knew He had my back and that gave me undaunted courage.



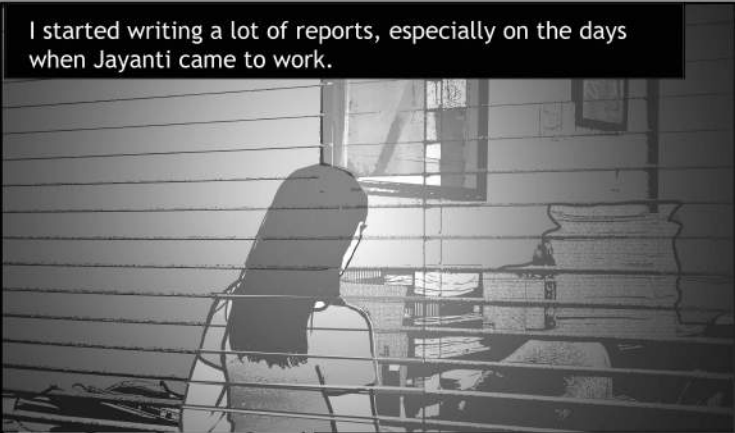
That's great, Inspector. Yes..we'll be careful. Thanks for everything.

A few days after the arrest, Chowdhury called Raj to let him know that Giri and Malik had opted to plea bargain. They'd given a full confession and told the cops the whereabouts of Ranjan and some of the other goondas in exchange for a lighter sentence. The police had rounded up the "Boss" and some of his cronies shortly thereafter. This was great news to all of us and needless to say we were all jubilant.

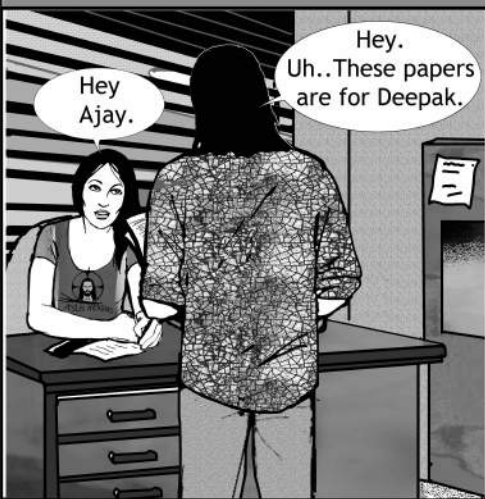
This meant that the threat to Kaliyah, although still existant and not to be minimized, was not as imminent. She could now leave the Safe House for short visits to the Mission.



And Jayanti, because I was no longer a threat to her, was able to come regularly to work as a receptionist for Pastor Deepak. Since I was working at the Mission too, we saw each other almost every day. Usually we ran into one another in the office when I had a report to file or some other paperwork to do.



I started writing a lot of reports, especially on the days when Jayanti came to work.



Hey Ajay.

Hey. Uh..These papers are for Deepak.



You.. look great, Jay.

I took a chance telling her that because her walls were always way up. She was invariably polite and distant and that bugged me no end. But I tried real hard not to come on as pushy.



You look great too. Umm..Congratulations on becoming a Christian. I was surprised.



Finally we were making progress.

Not more than me, I'll bet. I'm still pretty new at it.

But I'm learning.



That's great, Ajay. ..I guess ..I should get back to work.

One step forward and 2 steps back. I was getting nowhere. I'd watch her whenever I thought she wasn't looking. The pastor's office and staff conference room provided the perfect opportunity to cast furtive glances her way.



But that's about as far as I got.



A dozen times a day I asked myself how I could have been such a jerk with her. I'd pimped her out, for heaven's sake!



What kind of guy does that to his girlfriend??! Not someone a girl like Jayanti would want to spend the rest of her life with, that's for sure!



But that guy didn't exist anymore. All I needed was a chance to show her who I was now...



..before it was too late.





I needed some expert advice and Raj was my choice for a mentor. I'd been watching him with Rachel and he seemed to know what he was doing.

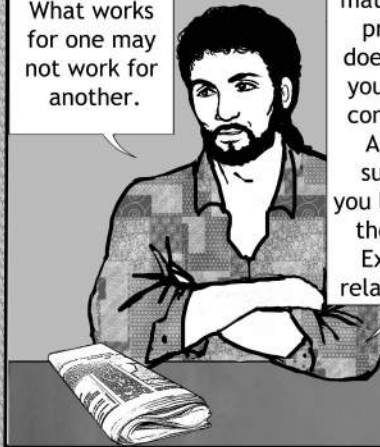


So one day after a staff meeting, I asked to speak with him in private and told him of my predicament with Jayanti.



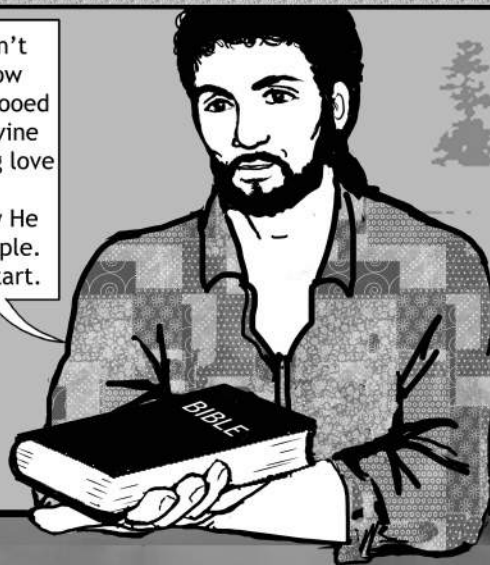
I was hoping for some tips based on his own experience in male/female relationships.

I don't know. Dynamics are different for each couple. What works for one may not work for another.



Your history with Jayanti complicates matters. She probably doesn't trust you, or your conversion. All I can suggest is you learn from the Master Expert on relationships.

Jesus won your heart, Ajay. You weren't an easy conquest, yet He knew just how to reach you. Think back to how He wooed you to Himself. Every salvation is a divine love story. In fact, the Bible is one big love story between God and His Bride, the Church. Look in here and find out how He does it, and then just follow His example. The Love Chapter is a good place to start.



The Bible can be a depressing book if you don't know how to take it. For instance, I read the 'Love Chapter' Raj told me about, and right away I got in the dumps. Who could live up to those standards? Patient. Kind. Humble. Unselfish. Protective. Truthful. Trusting. Persevering. Faithful. Full of hope. Only God could live up to all that. And then I got it. Exactly!

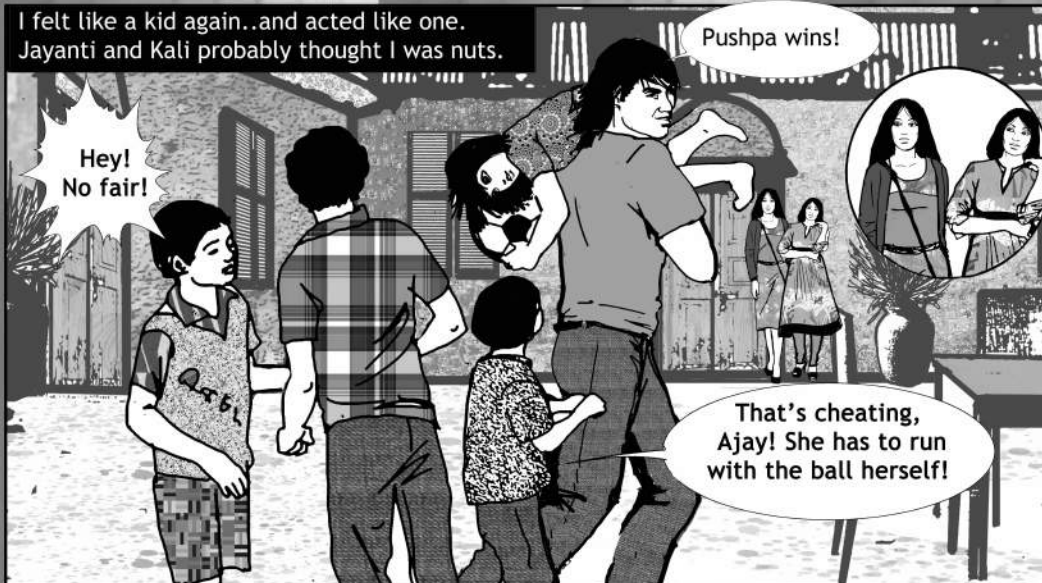


I was reading a description of the new nature - the one I'd received at rebirth. I also had God's Holy Spirit residing inside and He was working out that new nature in me so that it permeated my thoughts, inclinations, desires, and actions. Nothing in life was more important than God's love! Nothing! That was what had drawn me to Jesus and that could win Jayanti over.

But a funny thing happened during all this research I was doing. It was like Jesus was telling me all over again how loved I was by Him. Suddenly that superceded everything else. I WAS LOVED BY THE MAKER OF THE UNIVERSE! It couldn't get any better than that. I was so overwhelmed by that fact, that I was finally able to put Jayanti into perspective. My life belonged to God, and so did Jayanti's. If He wanted us together, He'd work it out. If that wasn't His will, then so be it. I owed Him my life and I trusted Him. An enormous weight slid from my shoulders and my faith climbed to exhilarating new heights. The sense of freedom spilled over like a bubbling elixir that was more intoxicating than any booze or ganja high. I never wanted to come own!



I felt like a kid again..and acted like one. Jayanti and Kali probably thought I was nuts.





What Jesus had done for me was too good to keep to myself, so I shared it with everyone who would listen. I was becoming a regular Bijaya.



The cesspools of Kolkata were no longer black holes of temptation for me, although I wasn't stupid enough to go there alone. Now I accompanied Raj and Marcus on holy missions to rescue trafficked women and children. Sometimes we posed as customers and then called in the cops as soon as we found underage girls or women held against their will. I knew the places to go and sometimes I was even able to trade on my past reputation to get us into some of the brothels. It was dangerous work but nothing could beat setting these captives free. That had been Jesus' mission, and it was now mine. It felt great to finally be doing something honorable with my life.

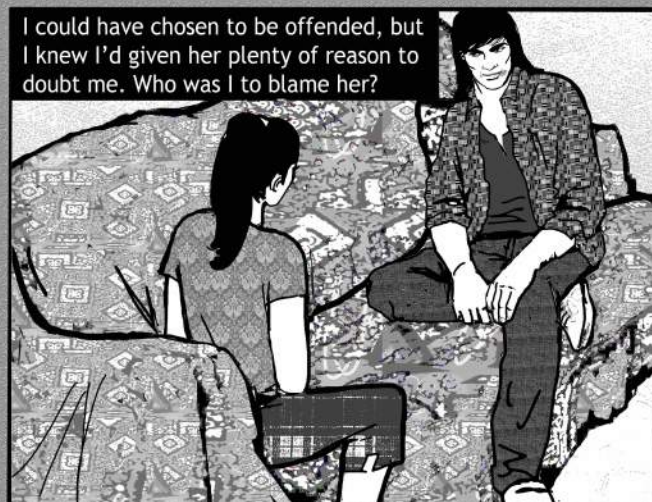


One night we managed to get two prostitutes off the street. It had been touch and go for awhile when the girl's pimp had got involved, but he took off when the cops arrived. Chowdhury released the girls to Grace Mission so they could be placed in the Safe House program. Pastor Deepak and the others planned to take the girls there right away.



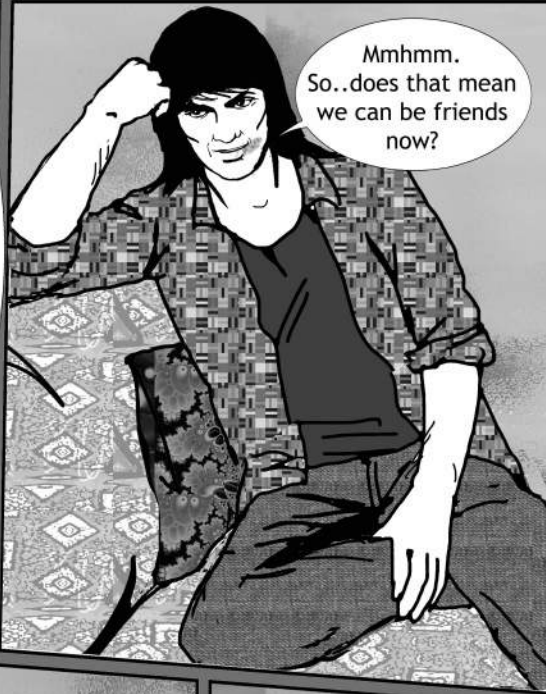
I was dog tired and aching in several places. The pimp had been a mean fighter and I had all I could do to keep his knife away from my gut. Thankfully Raj and Marcus had come on the scene when they did. I was glad it was over, but I would do it all over again just to rescue that girl. It felt especially great that I could also lead her to Jesus. A complete rescue - body, soul, and spirit. A good night's work. I felt like catching 40 winks before Raj and the others came back from the Safe House. Then I'd get Raj to drop me off at Bijaya's and my place. I was just about to nod off when I had a feeling like there was someone else in the room.







I thought you might be shamming your Christianity. But then I saw you around the Mission.. and I realized you love Jesus just like I do. That you're sincere.



Mhmm. So..does that mean we can be friends now?



Yes.



ONLY friends?



... For now.



I prayed so hard you'd find God.

More like He found ME.

As we talked, it was as if we were discovering each other for the first time.



In the Bible it says that God gives you the desires of your heart if you trust Him to do it, but sometimes that doesn't happen until after you surrender the dream.

Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on the altar because God asked him to. It looked like the death of everything he had dreamed of, but he trusted God to give him what He had promised.

Abraham passed the test.

I guess I did too.



# EPILOGUE



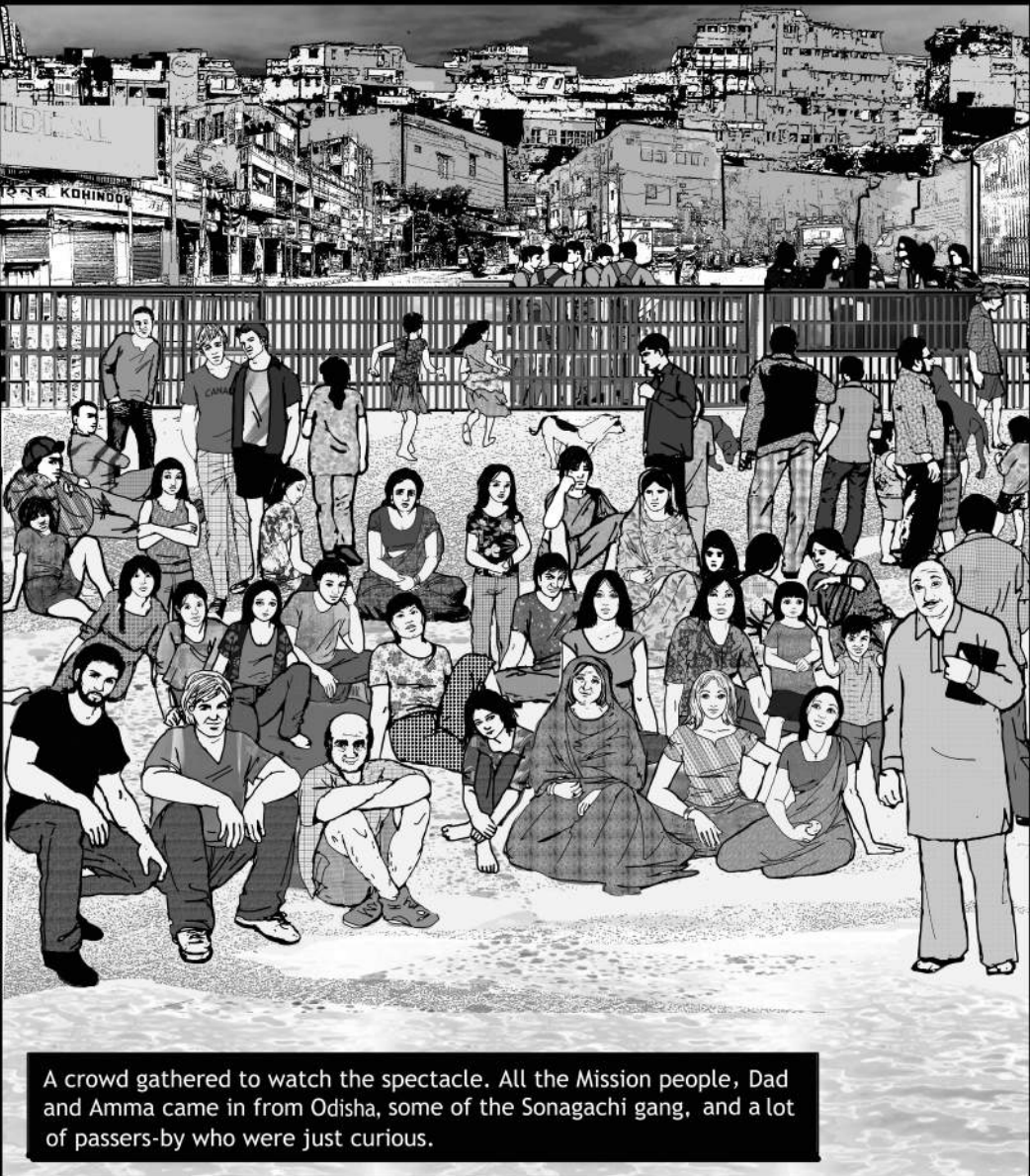
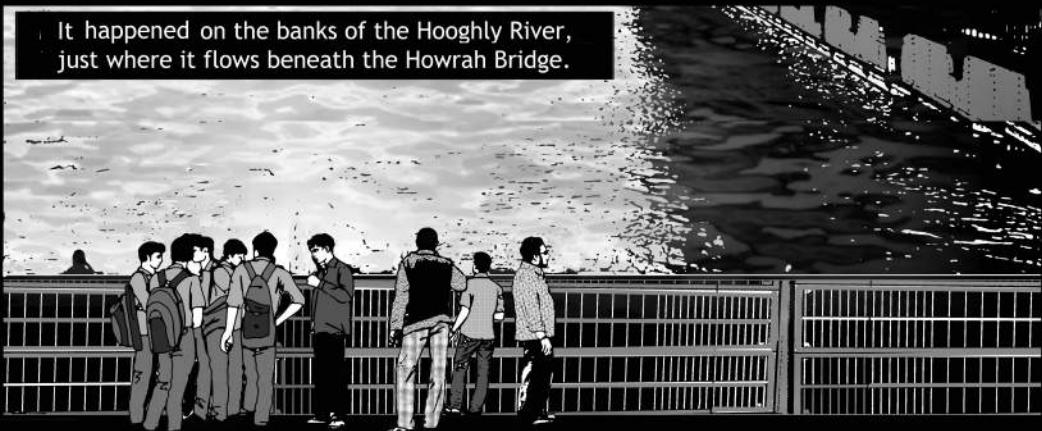
The day came that I'd been waiting for so expectantly.

It was the day I proclaimed my death.

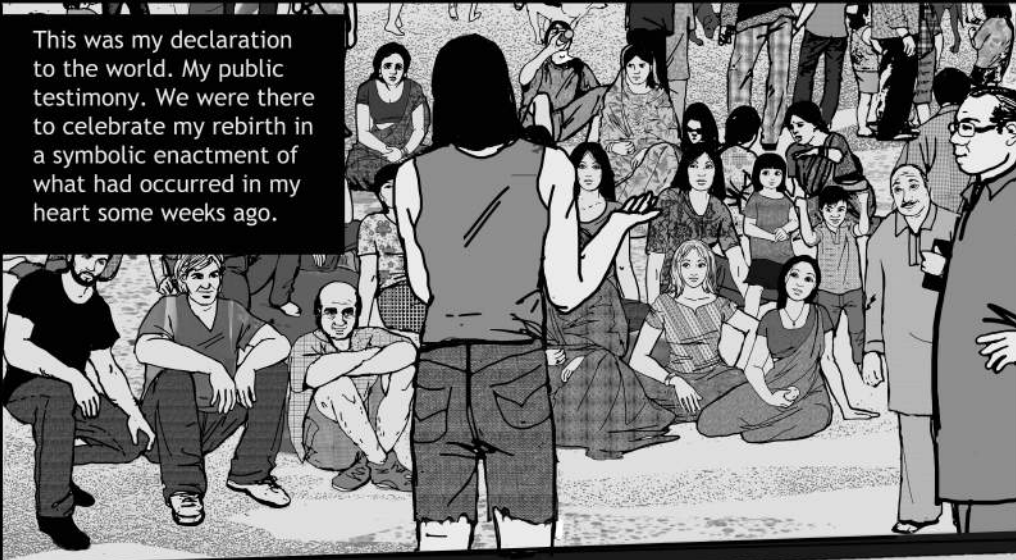
The day I declared life and freedom!







This was my declaration to the world. My public testimony. We were there to celebrate my rebirth in a symbolic enactment of what had occurred in my heart some weeks ago.

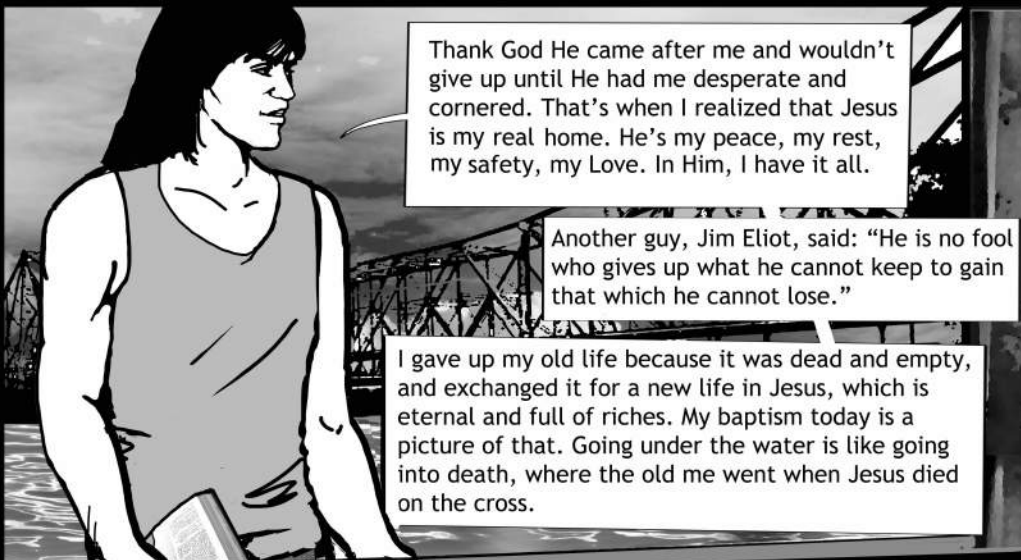


Some of you know me as 'Wolf' and I guess that was a good name for me, because I was a predator. I was involved in some pretty bad stuff. Hell was my home. By the grace of God, though, it became my gateway into life. Kind of like this guy my dad told me about, name of Francis Thompson, who lived about a hundred some years ago and ran from God. He tried filling his life with all sorts of things, but nothing satisfied.



Eventually he was broken in mind and body and that's when he realized that in wanting to be loved, but driving God away, he was driving away what he most desired. He wrote a poem about it called 'The Hound of Heaven', likening God to a heavenly hound in pursuit of his soul. Well, my life's been like that too. God called me to Himself, and I ran, thinking He would take from me all that I most valued. Like the Thompson guy, I got involved in all kinds of crap that led me deeper into hell, until finally one day, I saw that I was trying to escape the One Person who could satisfy the restless discontent and longing for love in my soul. I was trying to find home by running in the opposite direction.

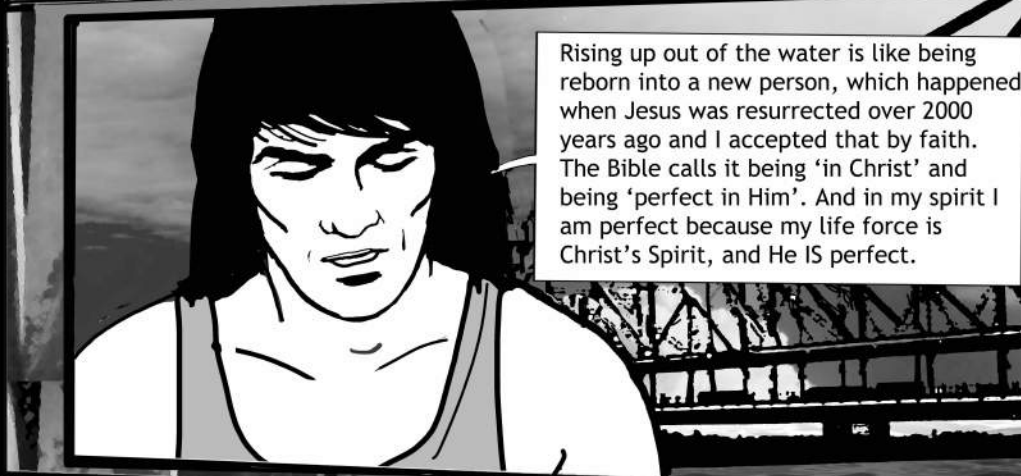




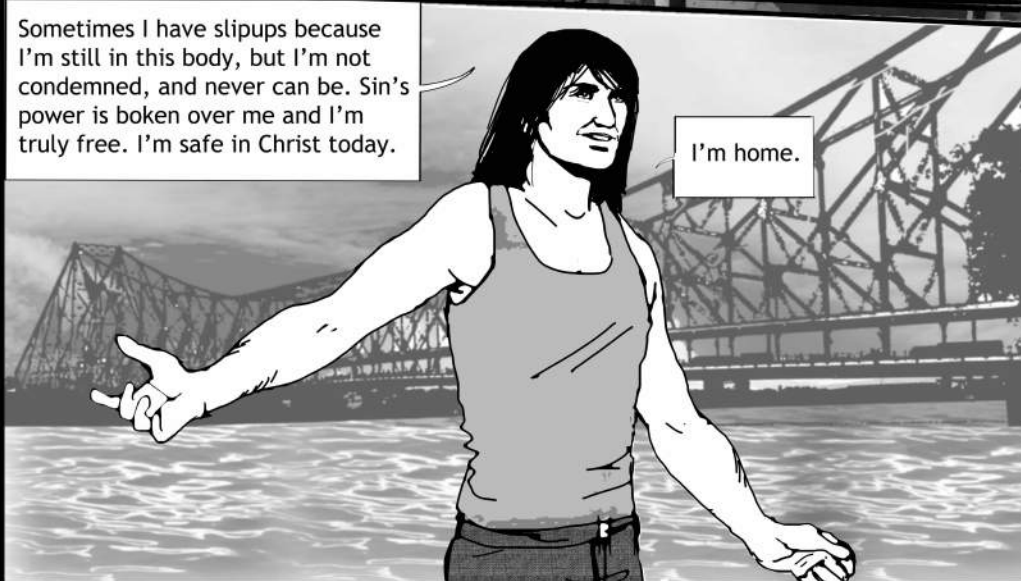
Thank God He came after me and wouldn't give up until He had me desperate and cornered. That's when I realized that Jesus is my real home. He's my peace, my rest, my safety, my Love. In Him, I have it all.

Another guy, Jim Eliot, said: "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

I gave up my old life because it was dead and empty, and exchanged it for a new life in Jesus, which is eternal and full of riches. My baptism today is a picture of that. Going under the water is like going into death, where the old me went when Jesus died on the cross.



Rising up out of the water is like being reborn into a new person, which happened when Jesus was resurrected over 2000 years ago and I accepted that by faith. The Bible calls it being 'in Christ' and being 'perfect in Him'. And in my spirit I am perfect because my life force is Christ's Spirit, and He IS perfect.



Sometimes I have slipups because I'm still in this body, but I'm not condemned, and never can be. Sin's power is broken over me and I'm truly free. I'm safe in Christ today.

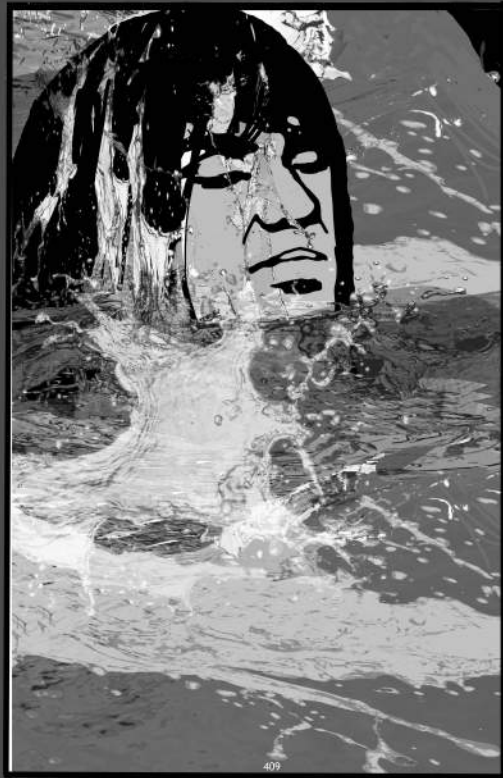
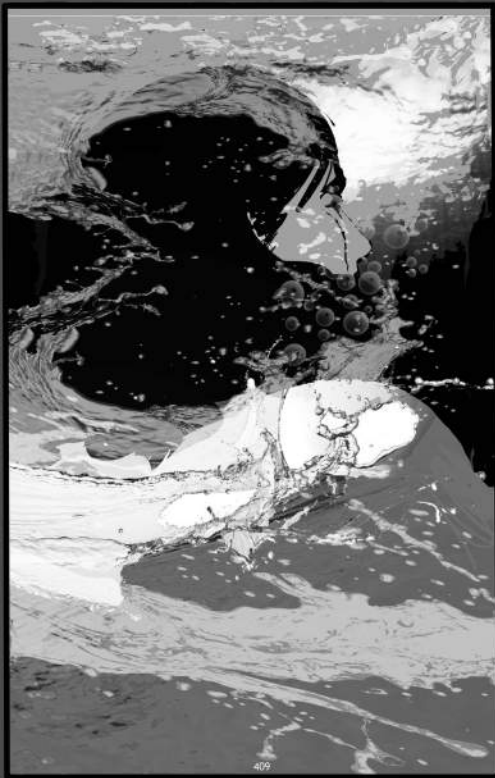
I'm home.



It was an emotional moment when I confessed Christ and my love for Him.



Then my life flashed before my eyes, like I was really facing death.  
Didn't know that could happen when you're baptized.



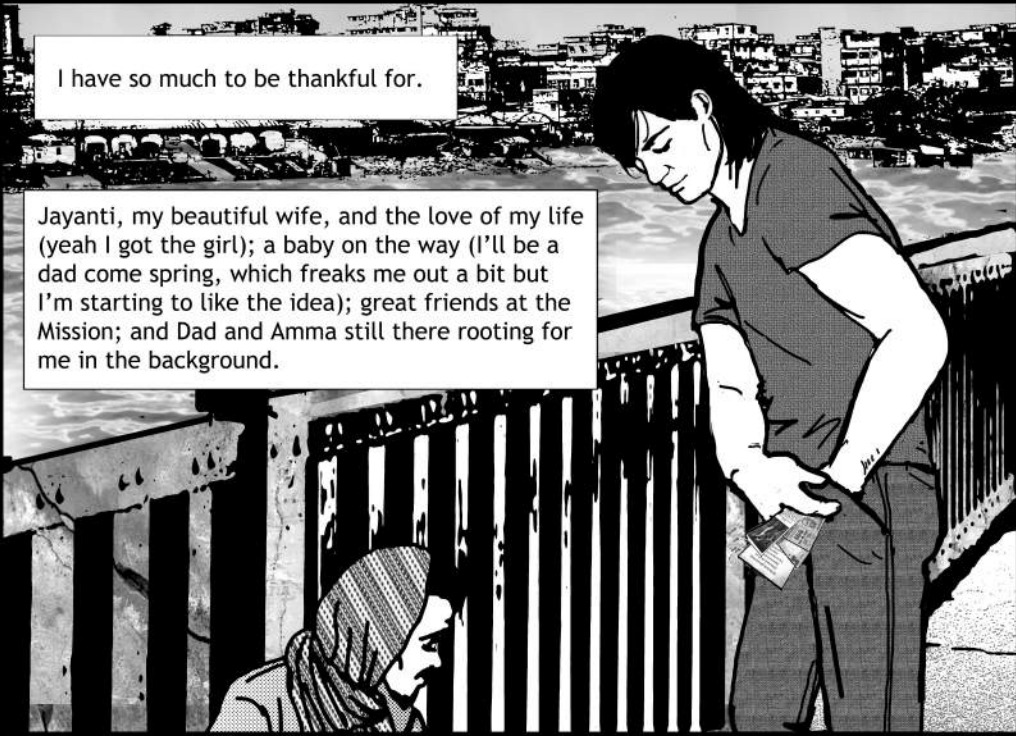






Hard to believe that a whole year has passed since that day.



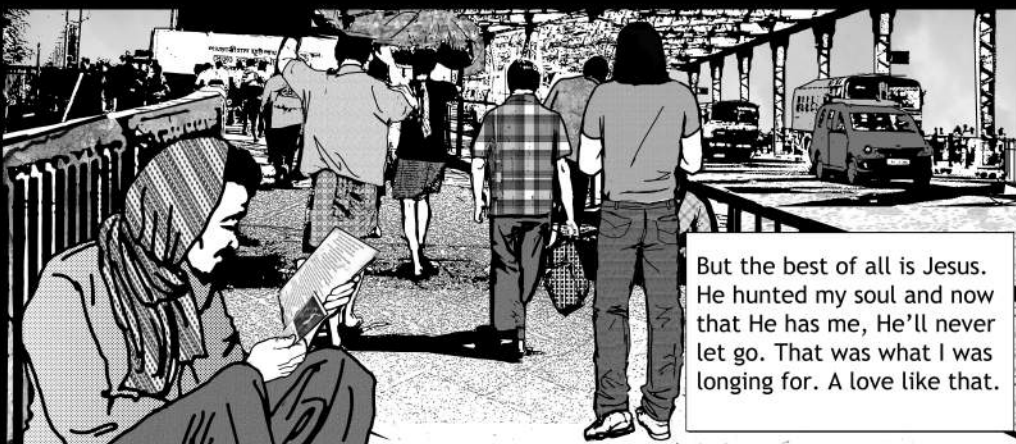


I have so much to be thankful for.

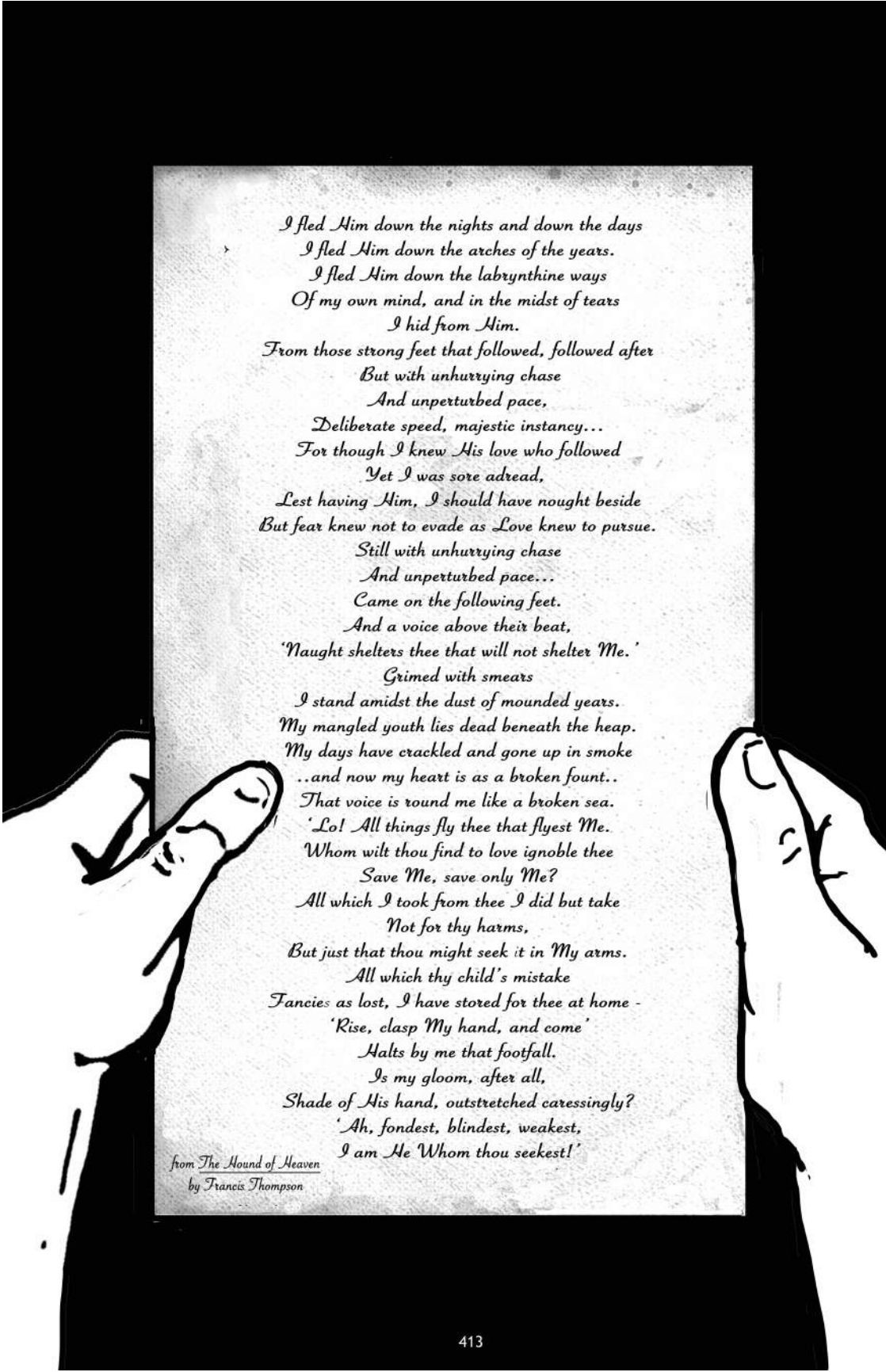
Jayanti, my beautiful wife, and the love of my life (yeah I got the girl); a baby on the way (I'll be a dad come spring, which freaks me out a bit but I'm starting to like the idea); great friends at the Mission; and Dad and Amma still there rooting for me in the background.



On top of all that, I get to do Kingdom work. God sure wasn't kidding when He promised abundant life.



But the best of all is Jesus. He hunted my soul and now that He has me, He'll never let go. That was what I was longing for. A love like that.



*I fled Him down the nights and down the days  
I fled Him down the arches of the years.  
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways  
Of my own mind, and in the midst of tears  
I hid from Him.  
From those strong feet that followed, followed after  
But with unhurrying chase  
And unperturbed pace,  
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy...  
For though I knew His love who followed  
Yet I was sore adread,  
Lest having Him, I should have nought beside  
But fear knew not to evade as Love knew to pursue.  
Still with unhurrying chase  
And unperturbed pace...  
Came on the following feet.  
And a voice above their beat,  
'Naught shelters thee that will not shelter Me.'  
Grimed with smears  
I stand amidst the dust of mounded years.  
My mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap.  
My days have crackled and gone up in smoke  
..and now my heart is as a broken fount..  
That voice is round me like a broken sea.  
'Lo! All things fly thee that flyest Me.  
Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee  
Save Me, save only Me?  
All which I took from thee I did but take  
Not for thy harms,  
But just that thou might seek it in My arms.  
All which thy child's mistake  
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home -  
'Rise, clasp My hand, and come'  
Halts by me that footfall.  
Is my gloom, after all,  
Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?  
'Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,  
I am He Whom thou seekest!'*

*from The Hound of Heaven  
by Francis Thompson*





THE SEQUEL TO  
PUSHPA UNVEILED

Adam Jayaram never in his wildest dreams thought he'd end up as a pimp and drug dealer while working for a mafia don in Kolkata, India. An idea like that would at one time have seemed completely demented, especially considering his Christian upbringing and his morally upright family. Yet his destiny has led him straight to the brothels of Sonagachi, trapping him in a lifestyle that he finds both repugnant and yet seductive at the same time. Working as a goonda certainly isn't the ideal job opportunity, and it entails becoming the predator that his street name 'Wolf' suggests, but then again the money's good and he gets respect. Besides, he's got enemies who want him dead and his 'career' as a thug provides some safety. Survival is uppermost on Adam's mind and he's learned some pretty impressive street skills along the way....if only he could evade the biggest threat - the divine Hunter who haunts his dreams and dogs his every step, threatening him in an entirely different way. It's a hunt to the finish for the Wolf of Sonagachi..with a startling finale.

Writer and artist Lorri Frandsen works with her husband Kell in India through the NGO they founded in 1994. Grace Life Ministries is dedicated to bringing hope and opportunity to disadvantaged children and their families in Andhra Pradesh and encouragement and practical aid to tribals in Odisha. Lorri's love for the people of India and her interest in their life and customs is reflected in her novels which enable readers to experience a little bit of India for themselves.