

MARGARET ATWOOD



THE
HAND
MAID'S
TALE

THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

ART & ADAPTATION | RENÉE NAULT



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NAN A. TALESE
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First Edition



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I
NIGHT

The Red Centre.

We slept in what had once been the gymnasium.

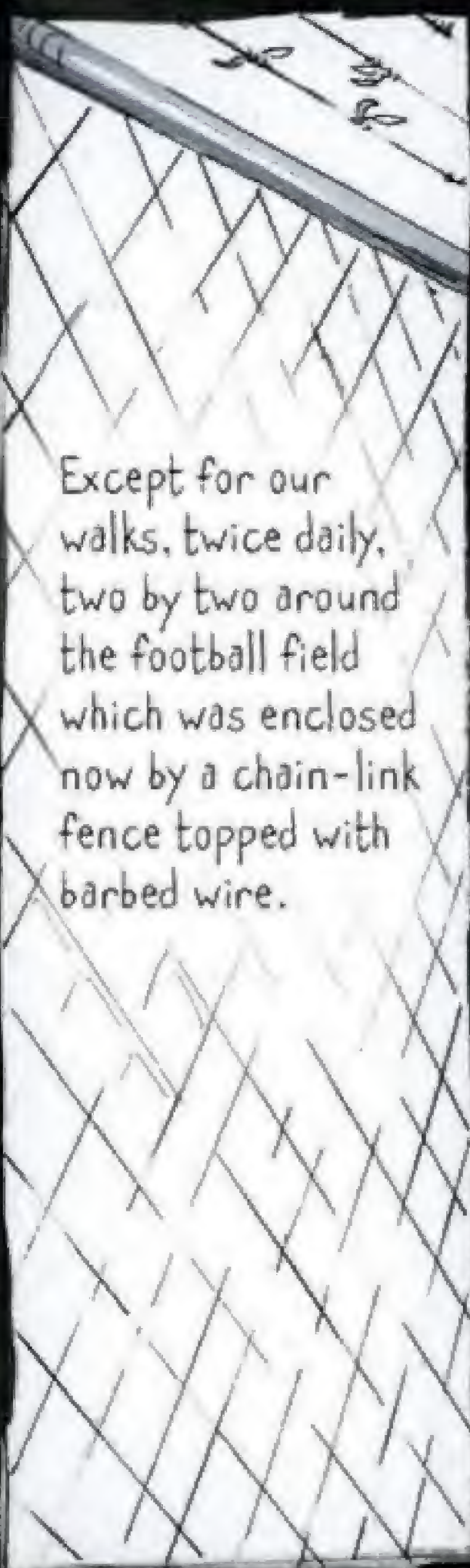
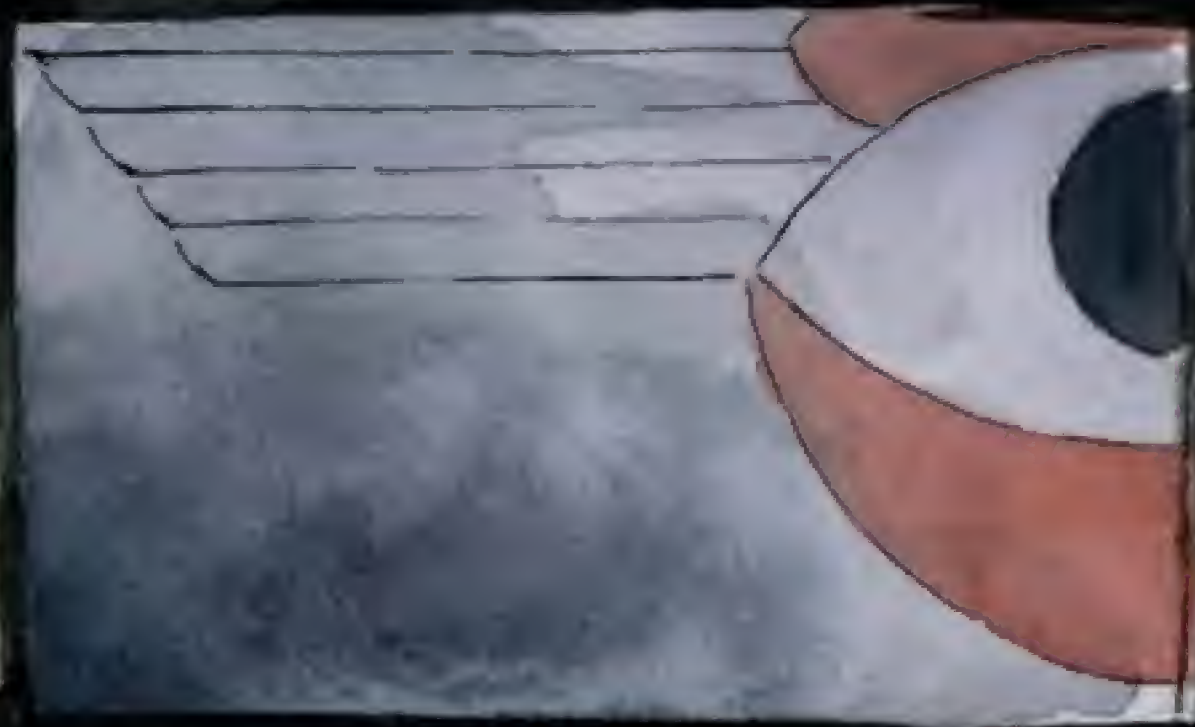
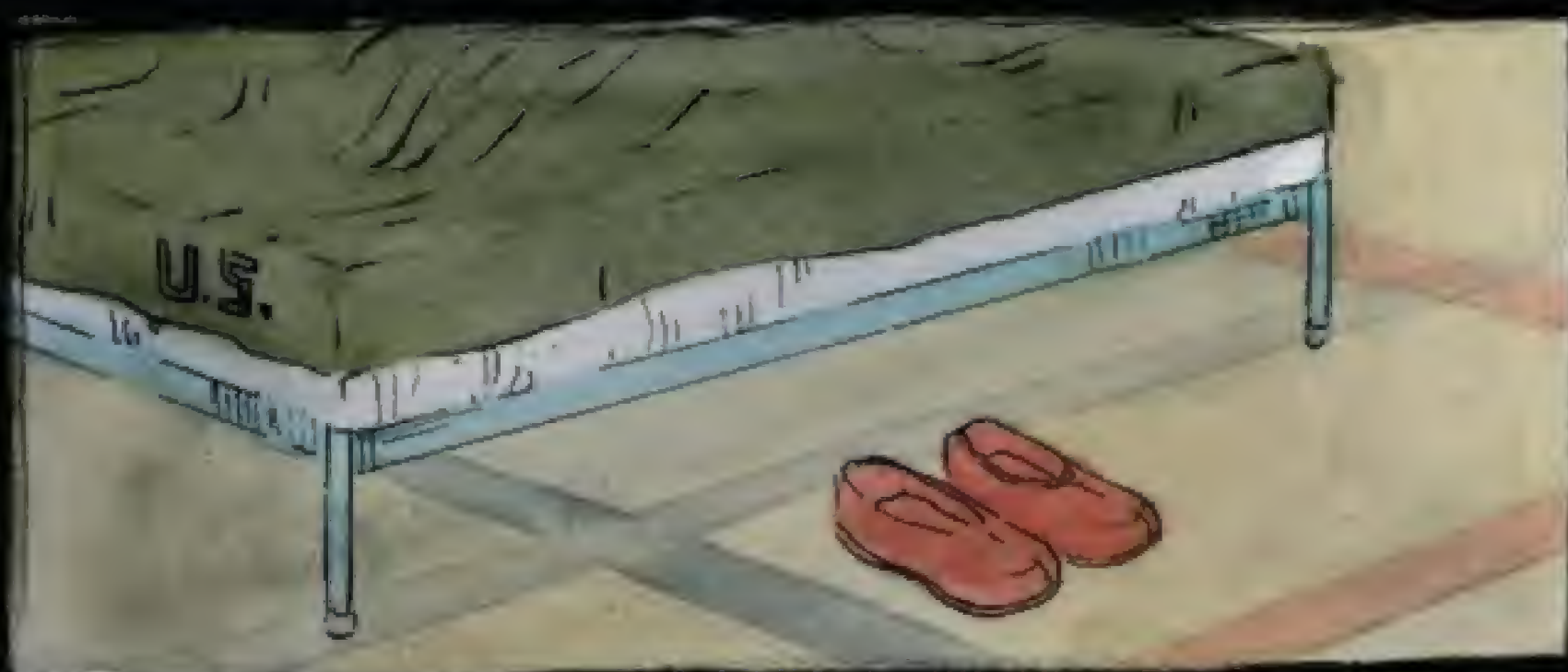
The Aunts patrolled.

They had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts. No guns, though, even they could not be trusted with guns.



Guns were for the guards, specially picked from the Angels. The guards weren't allowed inside the building, and we weren't allowed out.





Except for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire.



The Angels stood outside it with their backs to us.



We learned to whisper almost without sound.

In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space.



We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed:

Alma.

Janine.

Dolores.

Moirá.

June.



SHOPPING



The Commander's House.

My name is Offred now, and here is where I live.

A chair,

a table,

a lamp.


Above, on the white ceiling, a relief ornament in the shape of a wreath, and in the centre of it a blank space, plastered over, like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out. There must have been a chandelier, once. They've removed anything you could tie a rope to.

The door of the room – not my room,
I refuse to say my – is not locked.
In fact it doesn't shut properly.

There's a rug on the floor,
of braided rags. This is the
kind of touch they like: folk
art, archaic, made by women,
in their spare time, from things
that have no further use.

A return to traditional values.
Waste not want not. I am not
being wasted. Why do I want?

I have another name, which nobody uses
now because it's forbidden. I tell myself
it doesn't matter, your name is like your
telephone number, useful only to others;
but it does matter. I keep the knowledge
of this name like something hidden, some
treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day.
I think of this name as buried.



Does each Handmaid have the same print, the same chair, the same white curtains, I wonder? Government issue?


Think of it as being in the army, said Aunt Lydia.

I know why there is no glass, in front of the picture of blue irises, and why the window only opens partly and why the glass is shatterproof.

It isn't running away they're afraid of. We wouldn't get far. It's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge.

But a chair, sunlight, flowers: these are not to be dismissed. I am alive, I live, I breathe.

Where you are is not a prison, but a privilege.



Everything Handmaids wear is red:
the colour of blood, which defines us.

The wings too are
prescribed issue.
They keep us from
seeing, but also
from being seen.

I never looked good
in red, it's not
my colour.





Go to the Colonies. They have the choice.

With the Unwomen, and starve to death and Lord knows what all? Catch you.

Anyways, they're doing it for us all, or so they say. If I hadn't of got my tubes tied, it could of been me, say I was ten years younger.

It's not that bad. It's not what you'd call hard work.

Better her than me.



I'm just heading out to do the shopping...



I'll get the tokens!

Tell them fresh, for the eggs. Not like last time. And a chicken, tell them, not a hen.



Tell them who it's for and then they won't mess around.



The garden is the domain
of the Commander's Wife.



Many of the Wives have such gardens,
it's something for them to order and
maintain and care for.

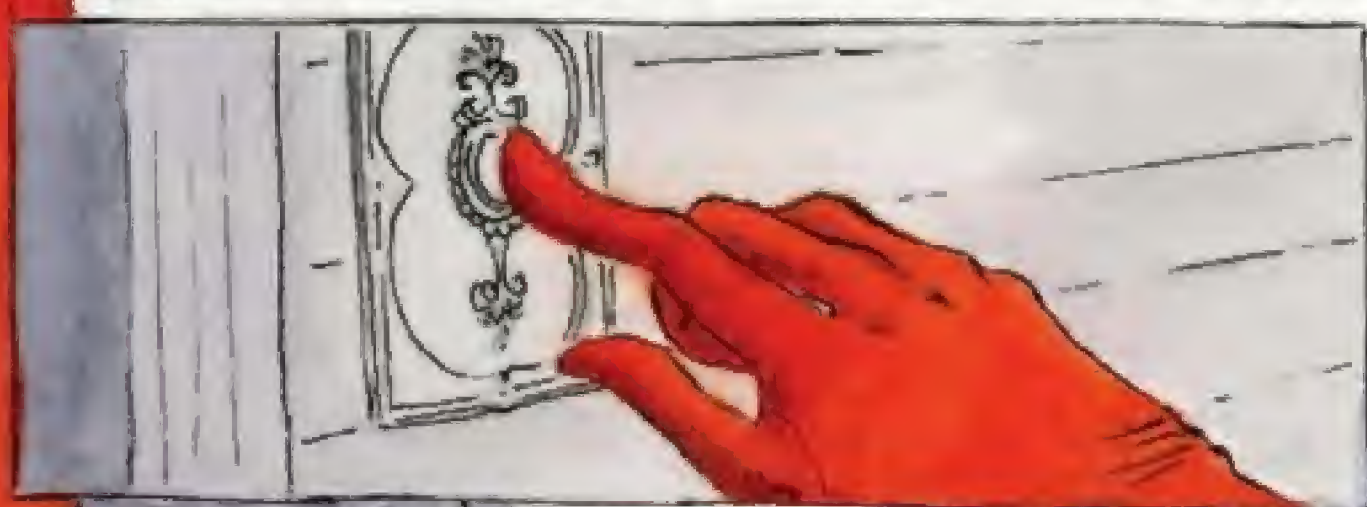


She doesn't speak to me,
unless she can't avoid it.

I am a reproach to her;
and a necessity.



We stood face to face for the first time five weeks ago, when I arrived at this posting...



So, you're the new one.

Yes.

You might as well come in. Shut the door behind you.



It's best not to speak unless the Wives ask you a direct question.

Try to think of it from their point of view. It isn't easy for them.







I want to see as little of you as possible. I expect you feel the same way about me.

I've read your file. You proved yourself in the time before. You had a child.

An Unmarriage. My husband had been married before. He committed divorce.

I see.

As far as I'm concerned, this is like a business transaction. But if I get trouble, I'll give trouble back. You understand?


Yes, Ma'am.

Don't call me Ma'am. You're not a Martha.

As for my husband, he's just that. My husband. I want that to be perfectly clear. Till death do us part. It's final.


Yes, Ma'am.






It's one of
the things we
fought for.


Suddenly I knew where I'd seen her before.




It was
when I
was little
— eight
or nine.



Sometimes when I couldn't find any
cartoons on Sunday morning I would
watch the *Growing Souls Gospel Hour*,
where they would tell Bible stories
for children and sing hymns.



One of the women
was called Serena
Joy. She was the
lead soprano.



She could smile and cry at the same
time, one tear or two sliding gracefully
down her cheek, as if on cue, as her
voice lifted through its highest notes,
tremulous, effortless.

The woman sitting in front of me was Serena Joy. Or had been, once.

So it was worse than I thought.



I know his name: *Nick*.

He lives here, in the household, over the garage.
Low status: he hasn't been issued a woman,
but he acts as if he doesn't
know this, or care.



He's just taken a risk,
but for what? What if
I were to report him?

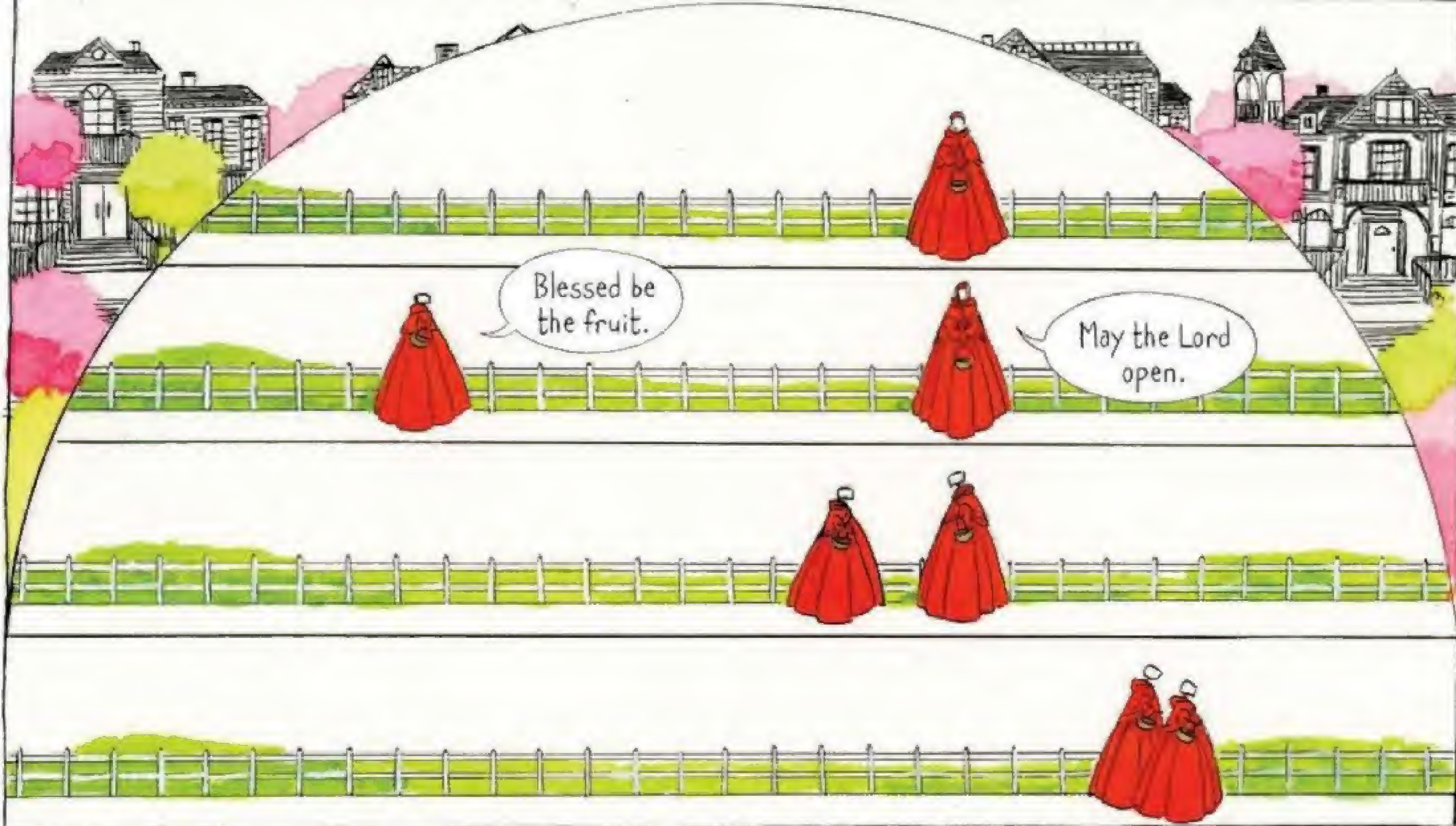


Perhaps he was merely
being friendly.

Perhaps it was a test,
to see what I would do.

Perhaps he
is an Eye.





We aren't allowed to go out except in twos. This is supposed to be for our protection.



The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers.

This woman has been my partner for two weeks. I don't know what happened to the one before. Her name is Ofglen, and that's all I know about her.



The war is going well, I hear.

Praise be.

We've been sent good weather.



I think of her as a woman for whom every act is done for show. She does such things to look good.

They've defeated more of the rebels, since yesterday.

Praise be.
What were they?

Baptists. They had a stronghold in the Blue Hills. They smoked them out.

Praise be.

But that is what I must look like to her, as well. How can it be otherwise?



The Guardians of the Faith.

They are supposed to show respect, because of the nature of our service.



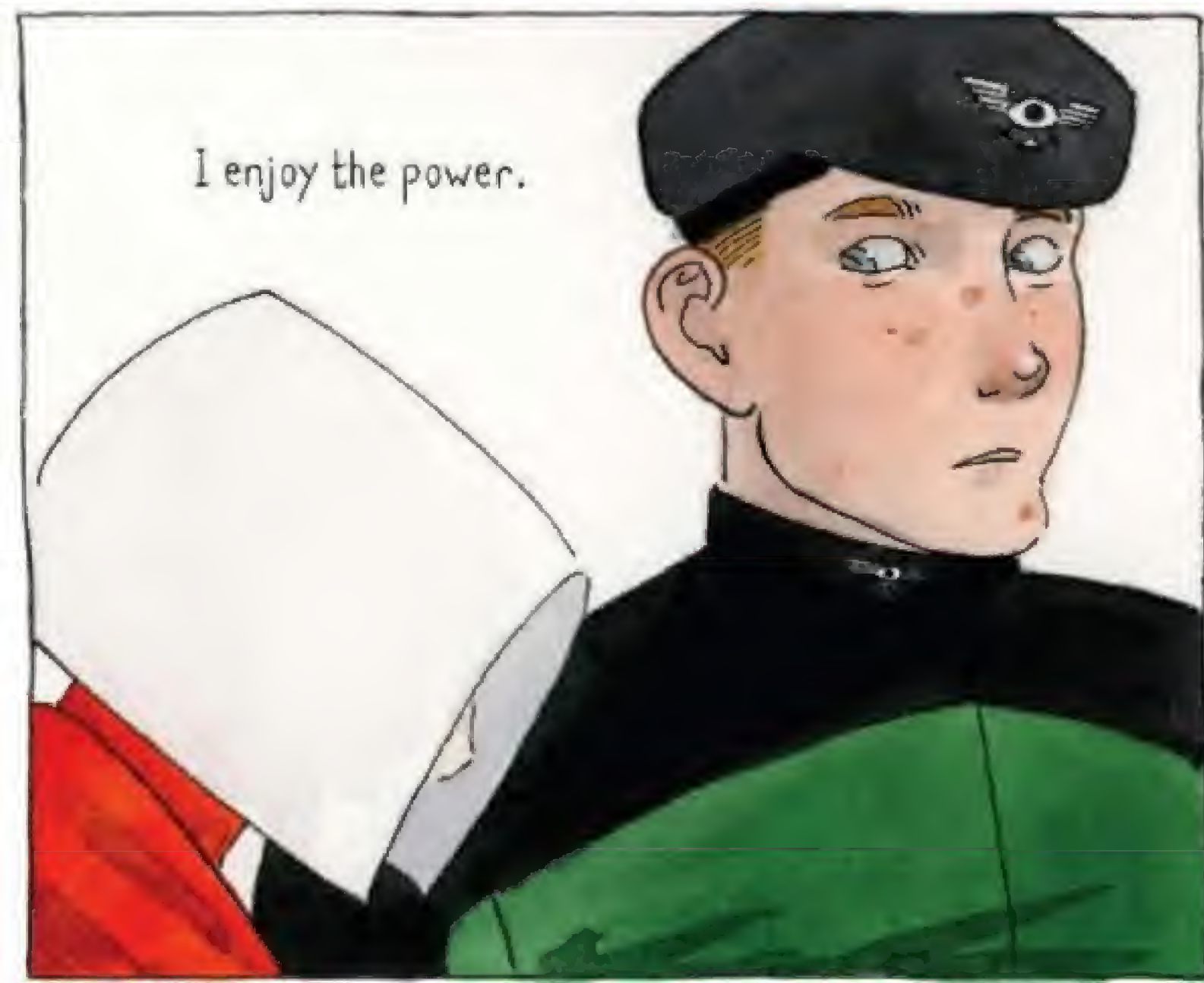


They aren't yet permitted to touch women.



They touch with their eyes instead.

I move my hips a little as we pass.



I enjoy the power.



This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren't sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks; but this is the centre, where nothing moves.

The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you.

Doctors lived here once, lawyers, university professors. There are no lawyers any more, and the university is closed.

Luke and I used to walk together, sometimes, along these streets. We used to talk about buying a house like one of these, an old big house, fixing it up.



On the main street, there are other women with baskets.



Handmaids wear red.



Dull green is for the Marthas. They wear the veil too, but only when they're outside – I suppose nobody much cares who sees the face of a Martha.

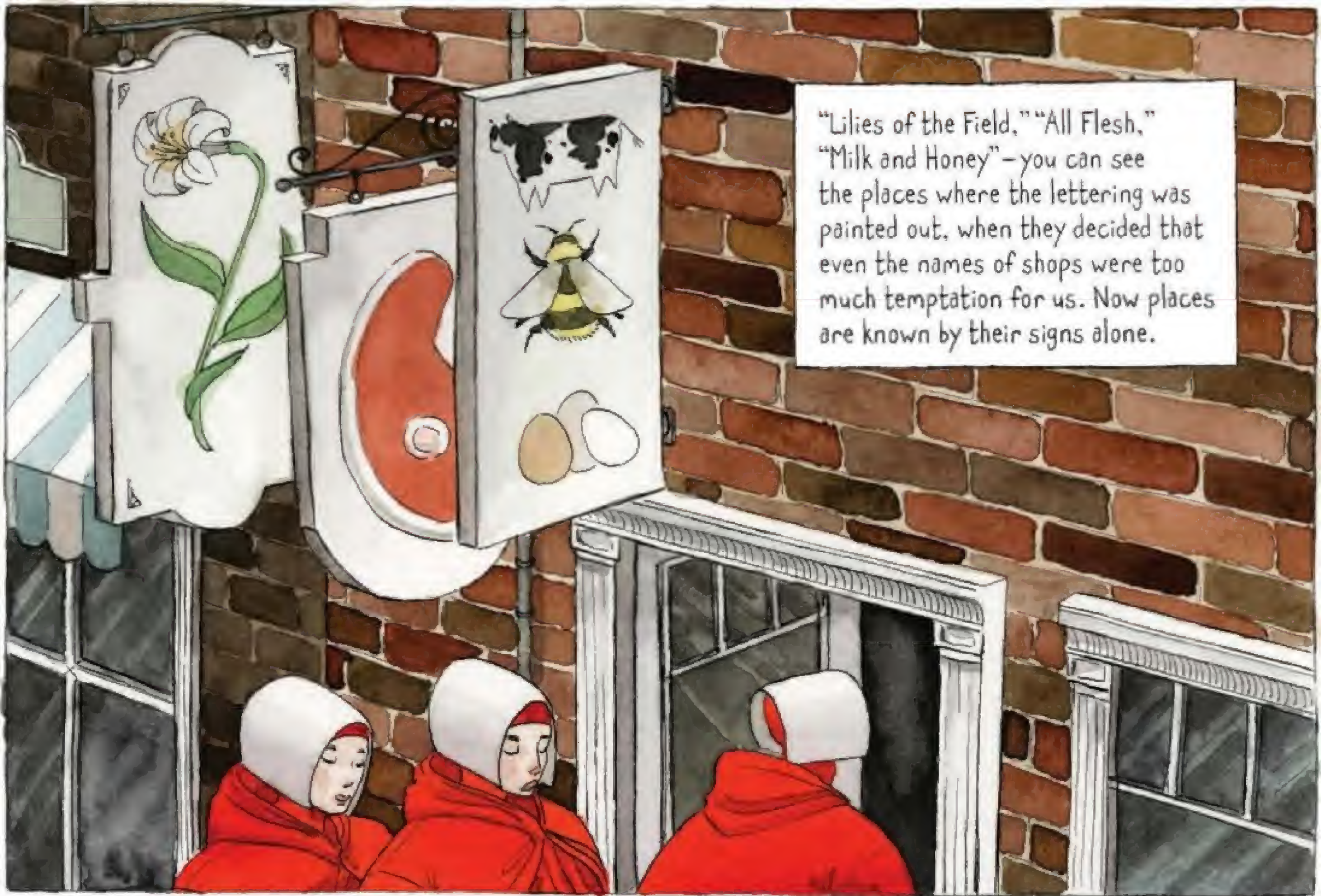


The cheap and skimpy striped dresses mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they're called. These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything.

Sometimes there is a woman all in black, a widow. There used to be more of them, but they seem to be diminishing.



You don't see the Commanders' Wives on the sidewalks. Only in cars.



"Lilies of the Field," "All Flesh,"
"Milk and Honey"—you can see
the places where the lettering was
painted out, when they decided that
even the names of shops were too
much temptation for us. Now places
are known by their signs alone.



Nobody talks much, but our heads move
furtively from side to side. Shopping is
where you might see someone you've known
in the time before, or at the Red Centre.



If I could see Moira, just see her,
know she still exists. It's hard to
imagine now, having a friend.



Who is it?

Ofwayne.
No, Ofwarren.

Show-off.



A pregnant woman is a magic presence
to us, an object of envy and desire.
She shows us what can still be done:
we too can be saved.

I know who she is. She was at the Red Centre with me, one of Aunt Lydia's pets.

Her name, in the time before, was Janine.

I never liked her.

A woman that pregnant doesn't have to go out.

...Blessed are the meek, for theirs is the Republic of Gilead.

Blessed are the silent, for they shall hear God...

She doesn't need the walk. She should just be doing the floor exercises.

She's come to display herself.



A group of tourists,
from Japan it looks like.



Ofglen and I can't
help staring.



We are fascinated,
but also repelled.



They seem
undressed.



Then I think: I used to dress
like that. That was freedom.

It has taken so little time
to change our minds,
about things like this.



Excuse me. They're
asking if they can take
your picture.

Westernized, they used to call it.



I know better
than to say Yes.

Modesty is invisibility.
Never forget it. To be seen - to be seen -
is to be penetrated. What you must be,
girls, is impenetrable.



幸せですか？

Excuse me.
He asks, Are you
happy?

Yes, we are
very happy.

What else can I say?

We take the long way back.

Ofglen would like to
pass by the church.

I know what she's really after.

The Wall.



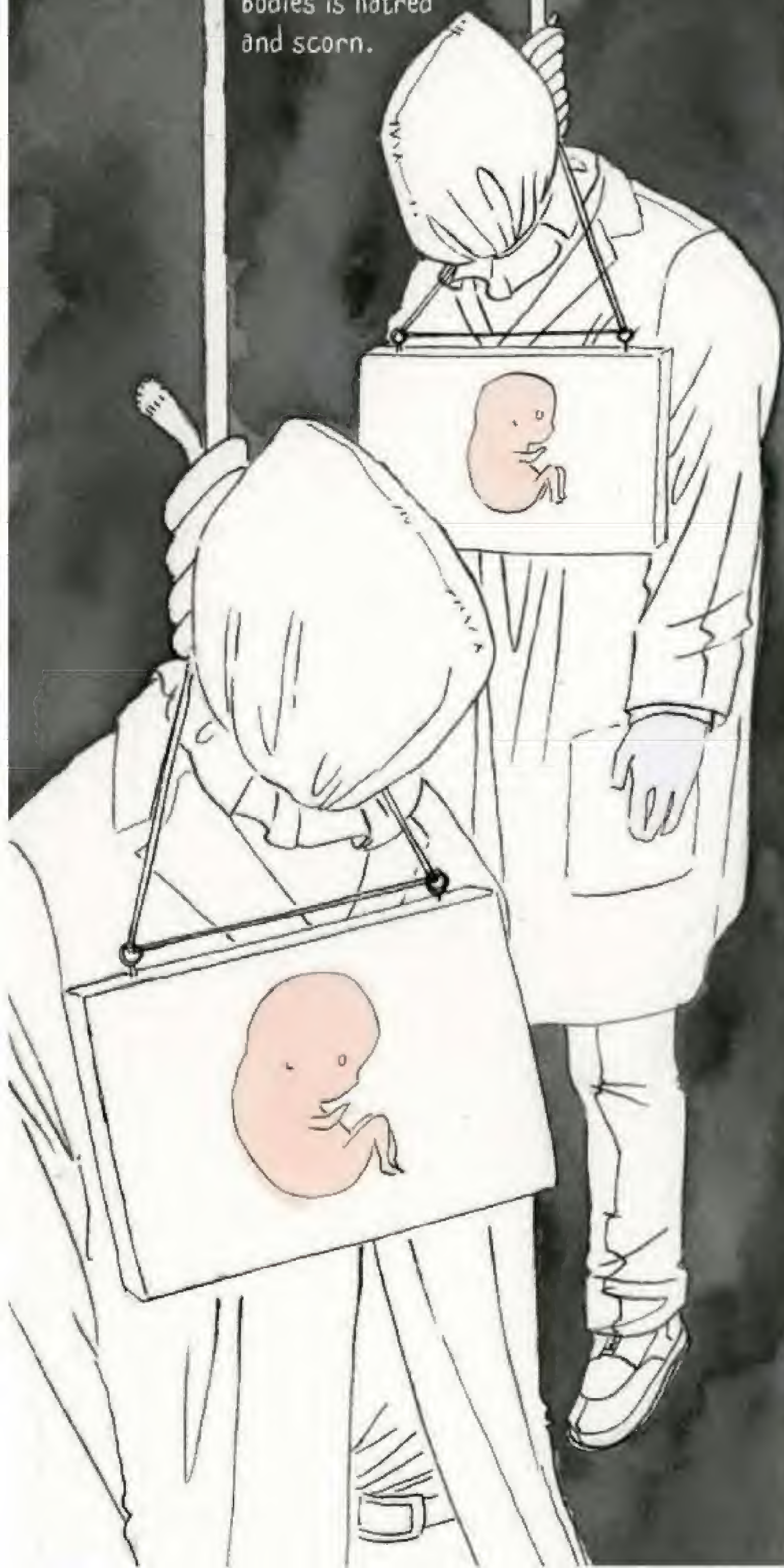


It doesn't matter if we look. We're supposed to look:
this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall.

Sometimes they'll be there for days, until there's a
new batch, so as many people as possible will have
the chance to see them.

They were doctors,
then. These men,
we've been told, have
committed atrocities,
and must be made
into examples. It's
no excuse that what
they did was legal at
the time.

What we are supposed
to feel towards these
bodies is hatred
and scorn.



What I feel towards
them is blankness.



What I feel is
that I must
not feel.

What I feel is
partly relief,
because none
of these men
is Luke.



Ordinary is
what you are
used to.


This may not seem
ordinary to you now, but
after a time it will. It will
become ordinary.




III

NIGHT





The night is mine, my own time,
to do with as I will, as long as
I am quiet. As long as I don't move.
As long as I lie still.



Where should I go?

Let's go for
a beer.

Moina, you're
getting ashes
in my bed.

If you'd make it
you wouldn't have
this problem.

I've got a whole
essay to write...

Sure, you could do
that. Or we could just
go get drunk - I know
which I'd pick...

How much time
do we have?

Just an hour.

Seriously?

Think, soon we
won't have to sneak
around like this, we'll be
together forever...

I know, but it's
just for now.

But then what happens, but then what happens?

I know I lost time.

There must have been needles, pills, something like that. I couldn't have lost that much time without help. You have had a shock, they said.



You are unfit, but you want the best for her.

Don't you?

I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling.



I need to believe it. I must believe it.

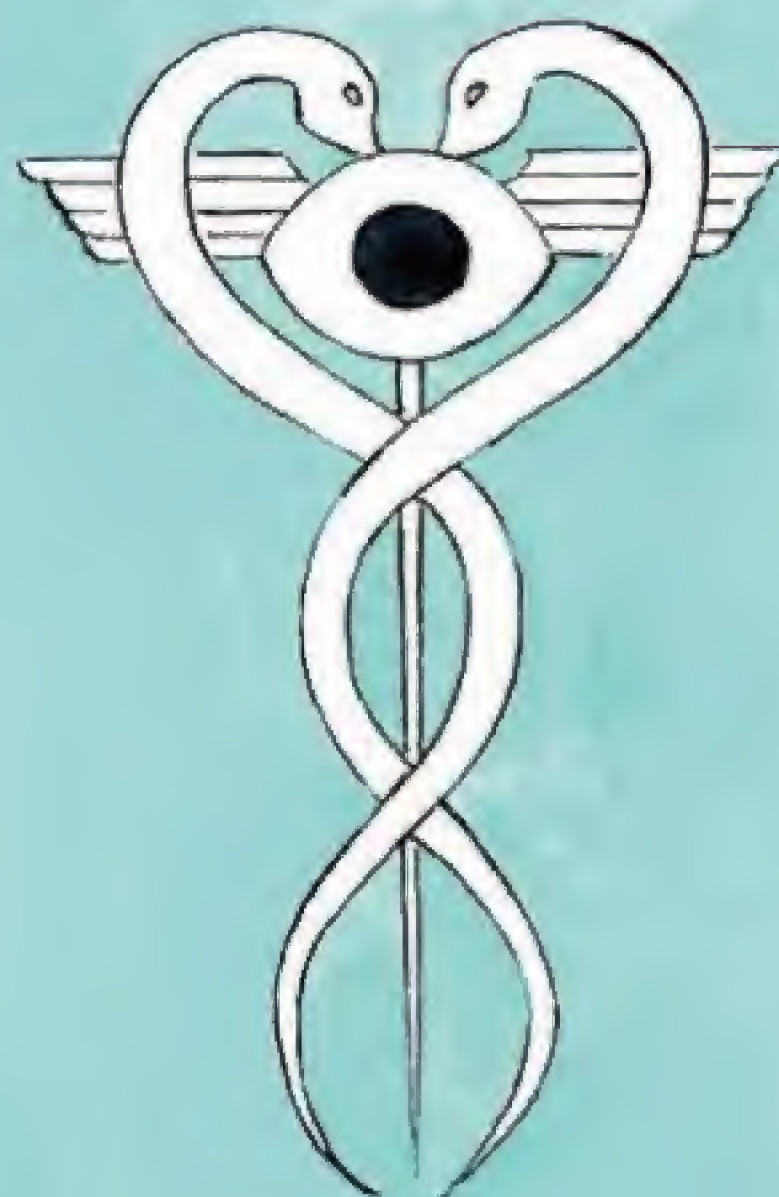
If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, and real life will come after it.

This isn't a story I'm telling.



IV

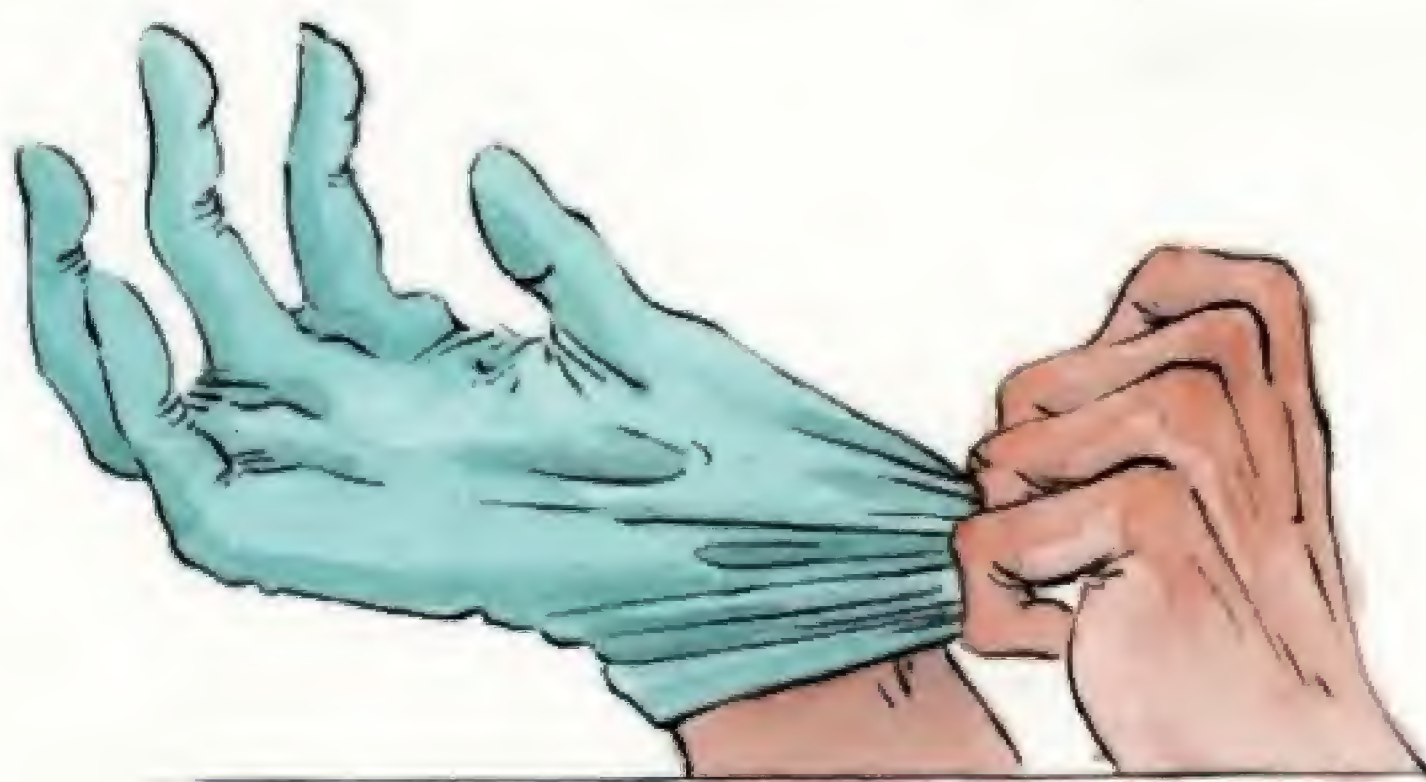
WAITING ROOM



I'm taken to the doctor's once a month, for tests:
urine, hormones, cancer smear, blood test; the
same as before, except that now it's obligatory.



But this doctor is talkative.



How are we getting along?

Open up now, honey.

Nothing wrong with you. Any pain, honey?

No.

I could help you.

What?

Shh. I could help you. I've helped others.

Help me? How?

How do you think?



The door's locked.
No one will come in.
They'll never know
it isn't his.

Most of those
old guys can't make it
any more. Or they're
sterile.

He's said a forbidden word,
Sterile. There is no such thing
as a sterile man any more, not
officially. There are only women
who are fruitful and women who
are barren, that's the law.

Lots of women
do it. You want a
baby, don't you?

Yes.

*Give me children,
or else I die.*

There's more than
one meaning to it.



You're soft.
It's time. Today or
tomorrow would do it,
why waste it?

It'll only take a minute,
honey. I hate to see what
they put you through.



It's too dangerous.
No. I can't.

The penalty is death.

Think
about it.

I've seen your
chart. Third
posting, isn't it?

You don't have
a lot of time left.
But it's your life.



There are three new bodies on the Wall. One is a priest, still wearing the black cassock. The two others have purple placards hung around their necks: Gender Treachery. Their bodies still wear the Guardian uniforms. Caught together, they must have been.



It's a beautiful May day.

Yes. Praise be.

Mayday used to be a distress signal, a long time ago, in one of those wars we studied in high school.

Do you know what it came from? Mayday?

No. It's a strange word to use for that, isn't it?

It's French. From *M'aidez*.

Help me.



Nice walk?


He isn't supposed to speak to me. What is he thinking?



All flesh is weak. Of course some of them will try. They can't help it. God made them that way, but He did not make you that way. He made you different.

It's up to you to set the boundaries. Later you will be thanked.





Serena Joy,
what a stupid name.

It was never her real name,
not even then.



Her real name was Pam.
I read that in a magazine.



She wasn't singing any
more by then, she was
making speeches.

Her speeches were about the sanctity of the
home, about how women should stay home.
Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made
speeches instead, but she presented this
failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making
for the good of all.

Around that time, someone
tried to shoot her and missed.





Someone else planted a bomb in her car, but it went off too early.

Though some people said she'd put the bomb in her own car, for sympathy. That's how hot things were getting.

She doesn't make speeches any more. She has become speechless.



She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her.

How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word.





...stabbed her with a knitting needle, right in the belly. Jealousy, it must have been, eating her up...



Bath day.

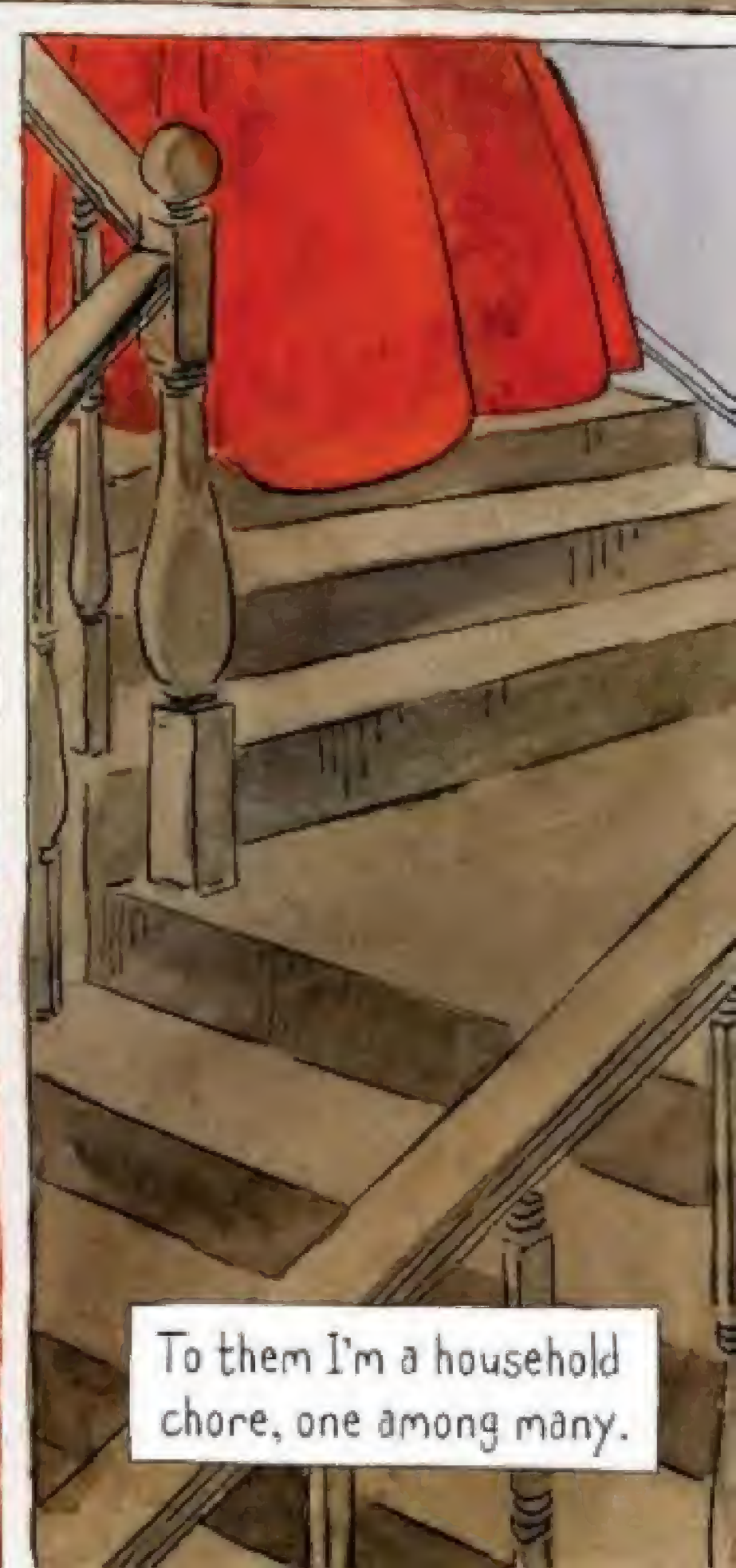
Yes.



Who's doing the bath?

I'll do it later. After the dusting.

Just so it gets done.



To them I'm a household chore, one among many.

There's someone standing near
the door to the room where I stay.



It's the Commander.

He isn't supposed
to be here.

He is violating custom,
what do I do now?

Something has been
shown to me, but what?



Was he in my room?
I called it *mine*.

I'm waiting, in my room, which
right now is a waiting room.

First for the bath.
Then for dinner.

Then for the Ceremony.

They also serve who
only stand and wait,
said Aunt Lydia. She
made us memorize it.

Not all of you will
make it through. Some of
you will fall on dry ground or
thorns. Some of you are
shallow-rooted. Think of
yourselves as seeds...

Someone has lived in
this room, before me.

I discovered it three days
after I was moved here.

I had a lot of time to
pass. I decided to explore
the room. Not hastily.
I wanted to make it last.

I saved the cupboard
until the third day.

There it was, scratched with a
pin or maybe just a fingernail.

I didn't know what it meant,
or even what language it was in.
I thought it might be Latin.



Still, it was a message, and it
was in writing, forbidden by that
very fact, and it hadn't yet been
discovered. Except by me, for
whom it was intended.

It was intended for
whoever came next.

It pleases me to think I'm communing
with her, this unknown woman.
Sometimes I repeat the words to
myself. They give me a small joy.

I wonder who she was or is,
and what's become of her.

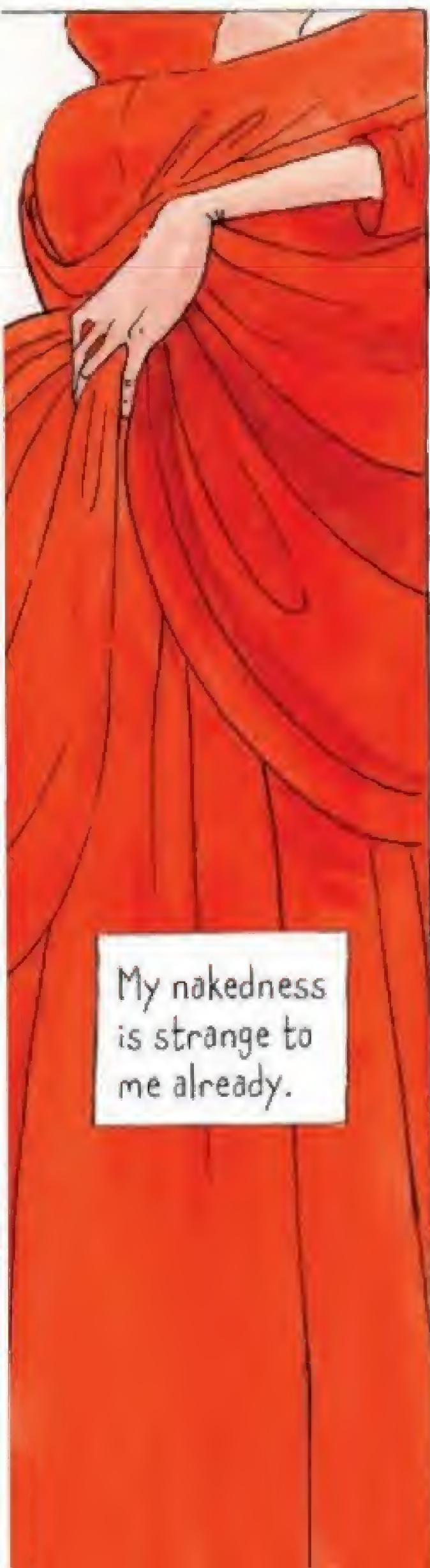
NOLITE TE
BASTARDES
CARBORVNDORVM





Cora has run the bath. She sits on a chair outside in the hall, to see that no one else goes in.

The bath is a requirement, but it is also a luxury.



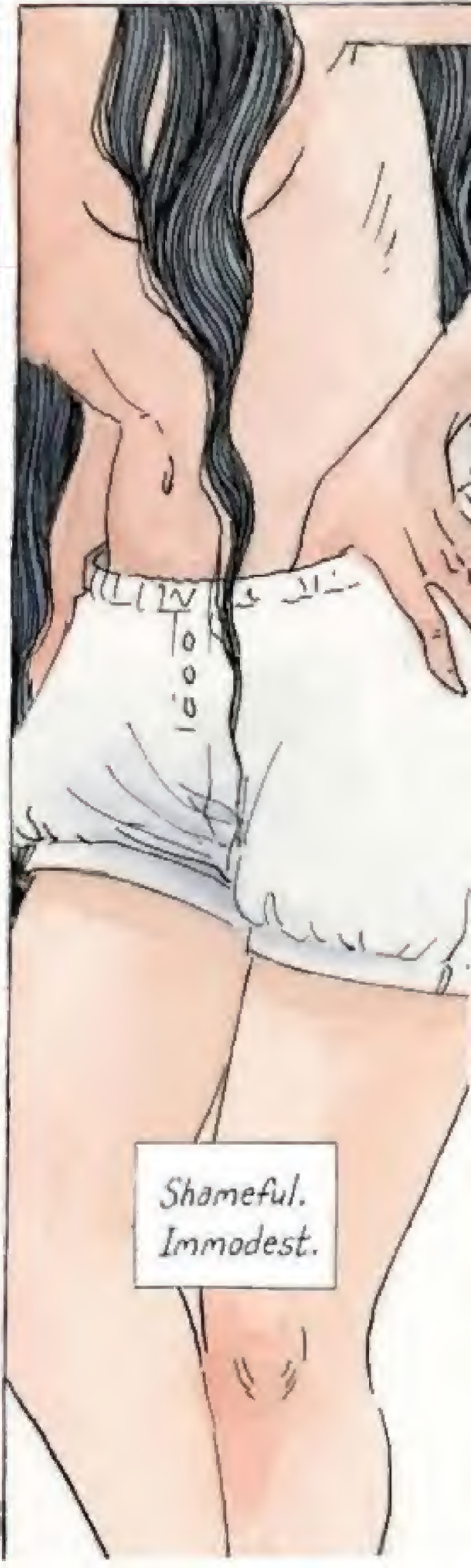
My nakedness is strange to me already.



My body seems outdated.



Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach?




Shameful. Immodest.

I avoid looking down at my body,
not so much because it's shameful
or immodest but because I don't
want to see it.

I don't want to
look at something
that determines
me so completely.

I am a national resource.



A watercolor illustration of a woman with long, dark, wavy hair washing a young child's hair in a white bathtub. The woman is wearing a red and white striped shirt and is leaning over the tub. The child is sitting in the water, holding a small blue fish and a yellow toy. Pink bubbles are floating around the child's head. In the background, a large, faint, blue-toned image of a woman's face with long dark hair is visible, suggesting a memory or a ghostly presence.

I close my eyes, and
she's there with me.

Suddenly, without
warning, it must be
the smell of the soap.

She comes back to me
at different ages.

This is how I know she's
not a ghost. If she were
a ghost she would be the
same age always.

She fades, I can't keep her here with me, she's gone now.
Maybe I do think of her as a ghost, the ghost of a dead girl,
a little girl who died when she was five.

They must have told her I was dead.
They would say it would be easier
for her to adjust.

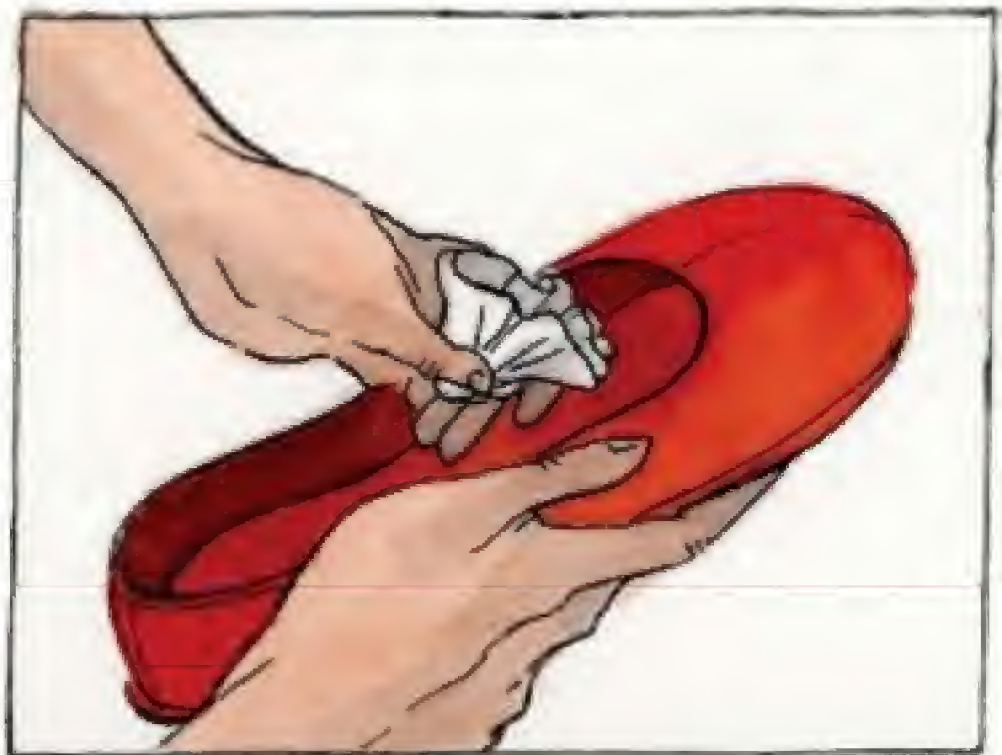
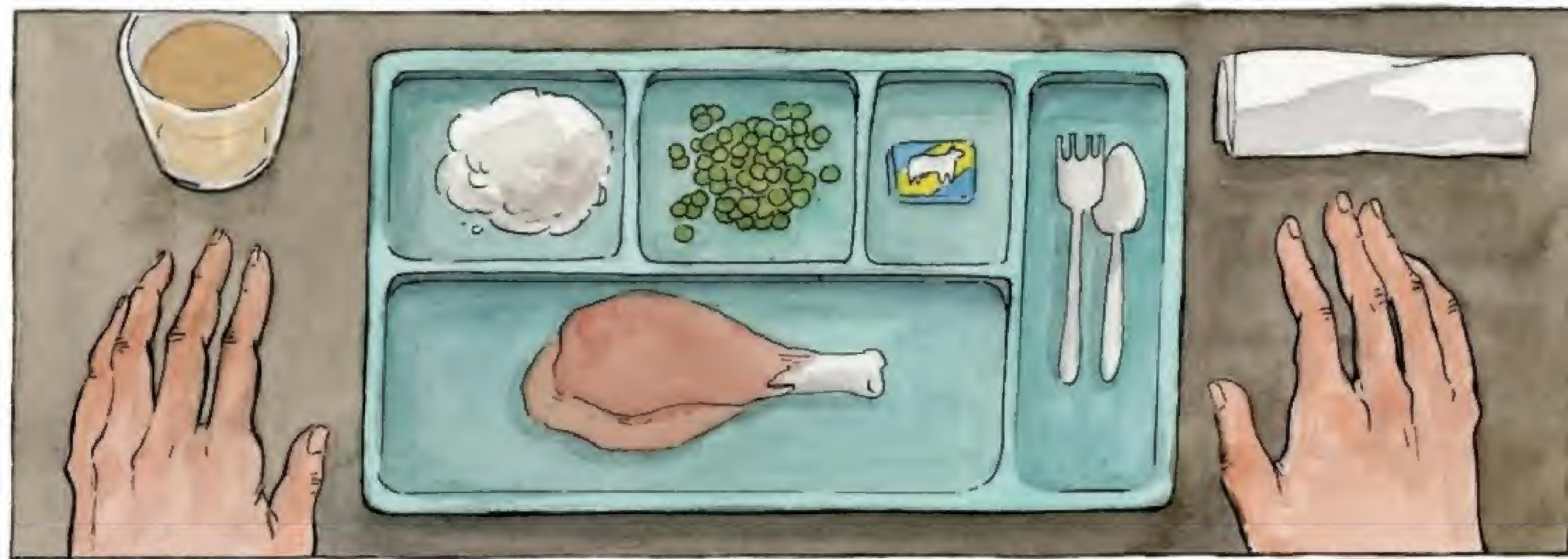


Eight, she must be now.
I've filled in the time I lost.
I know how much there's been.

It is easier to think
of your children as dead.
You don't have to hope then,
or make a wasted effort.

Why bash your head
against the wall?





V
N A P

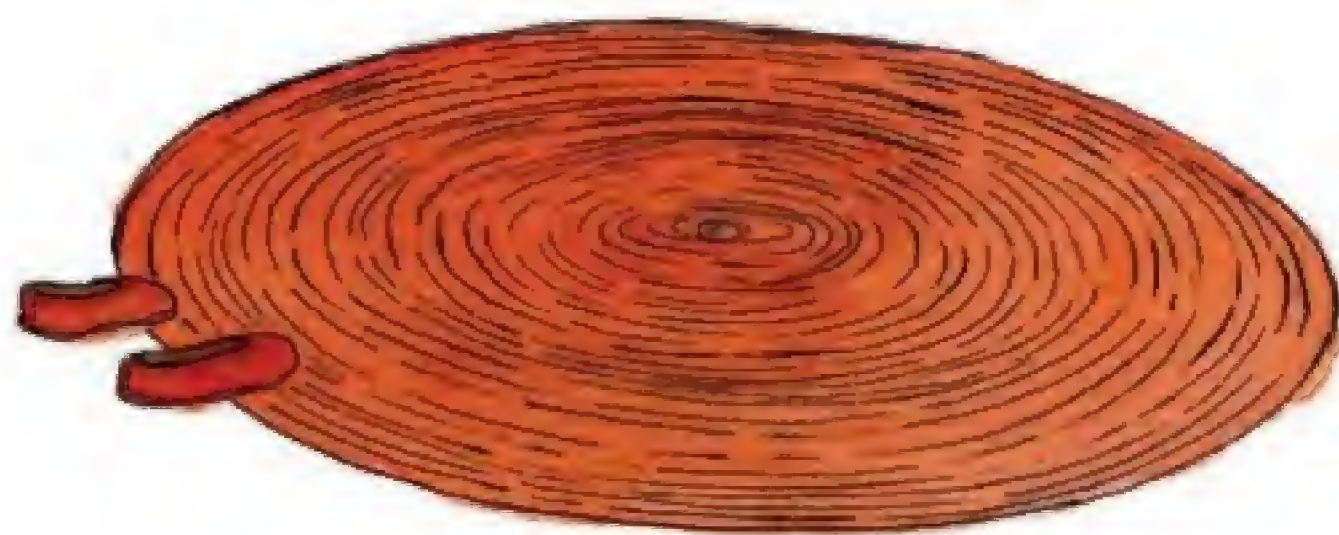
I wait,

washed,

brushed,

fed,

like a prize pig.



There's time to spare.
This is one of the things
I wasn't prepared for – the
amount of unfilled time, the
long parentheses of nothing.



You can always
practise.

Several sessions
a day, fitted into your
daily routine.



Arms at the sides,



knees bent,



lift the pelvis...



...roll the
backbone down.
Tuck. Again.

Breathe in to
the count of five,
hold, expel.

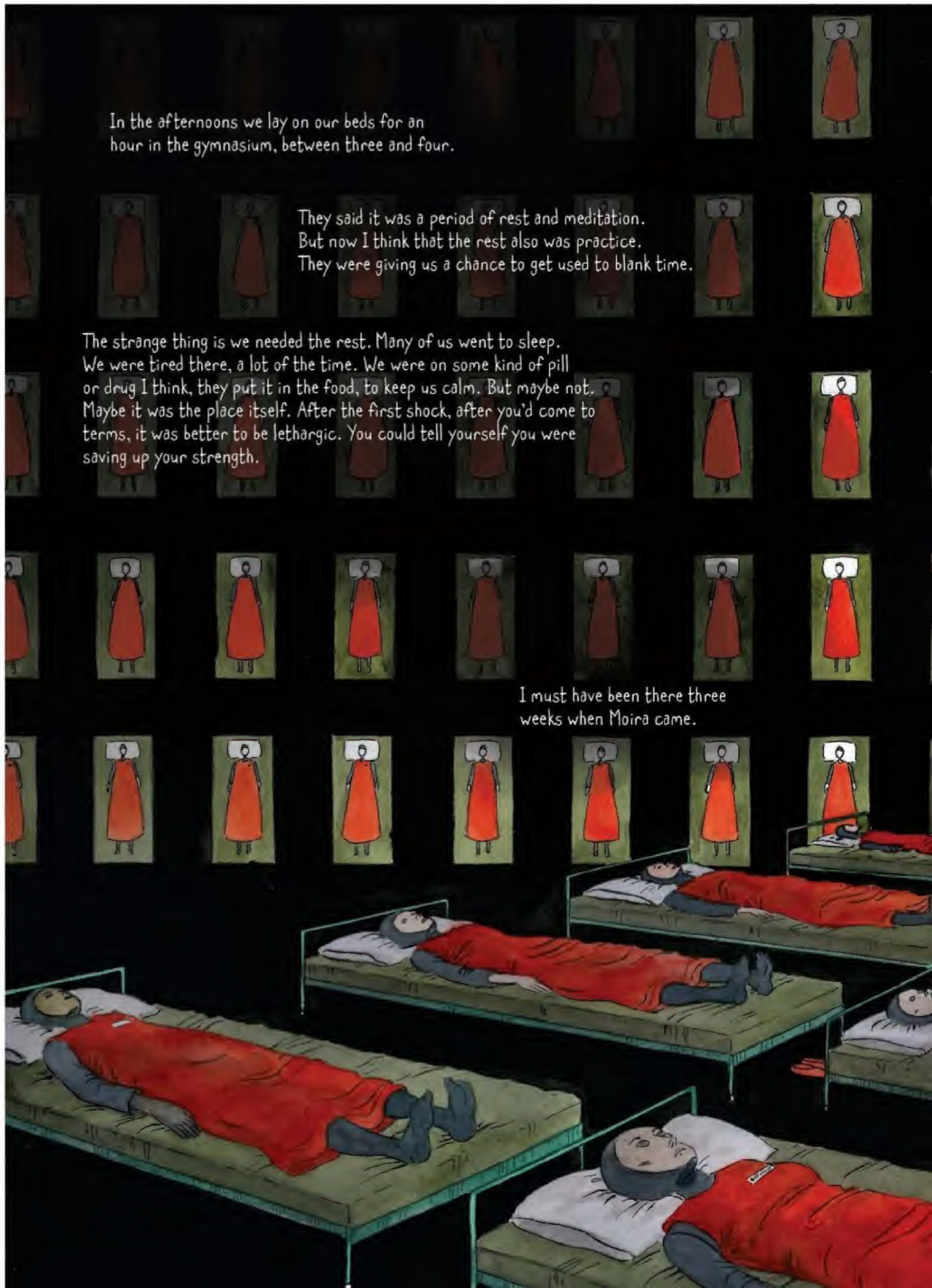


In the afternoons we lay on our beds for an hour in the gymnasium, between three and four.

They said it was a period of rest and meditation. But now I think that the rest also was practice. They were giving us a chance to get used to blank time.

The strange thing is we needed the rest. Many of us went to sleep. We were tired there, a lot of the time. We were on some kind of pill or drug I think, they put it in the food, to keep us calm. But maybe not. Maybe it was the place itself. After the first shock, after you'd come to terms, it was better to be lethargic. You could tell yourself you were saving up your strength.

I must have been there three weeks when Moira came.





I couldn't talk to her
for several days.
Friendships were
suspicious, we
knew it.



On the fourth day she was beside me during the walk, two by two around the football field.



We weren't given the white wings until we graduated, so we could talk, as long as we did it quietly and didn't turn to look at one another.



This place is a loony bin.



I'm so glad to see you.

Where can we talk?



Washroom.
Watch the clock.
Two-thirty.

Two-thirty comes during Testifying.

Your turn, Janine. I believe you have a testimony for the group?

I...

Go ahead.

I committed abortion.

I was raped.

But whose fault was it?

**HER FAULT HER FAULT
HER FAULT**

I was fourteen. A group of men...

Who led them on?

SHE DID SHE DID SHE DID

Why did God
allow such a terrible
thing to happen?

TEACH HER A LESSON
TEACH HER A LESSON
TEACH HER A LESSON
TEACH HER A LESSON
TEACH HER A LESSON
TEACH HER A LESSON
TEACH HER A LESSON



CRY BABY
CRY BABY CRY BABY

I used to think well of myself.

I didn't then.



It was my fault.
It was my own fault.
I led them on. I deserved
the pain.

Very good,
Janine. You are
an example.

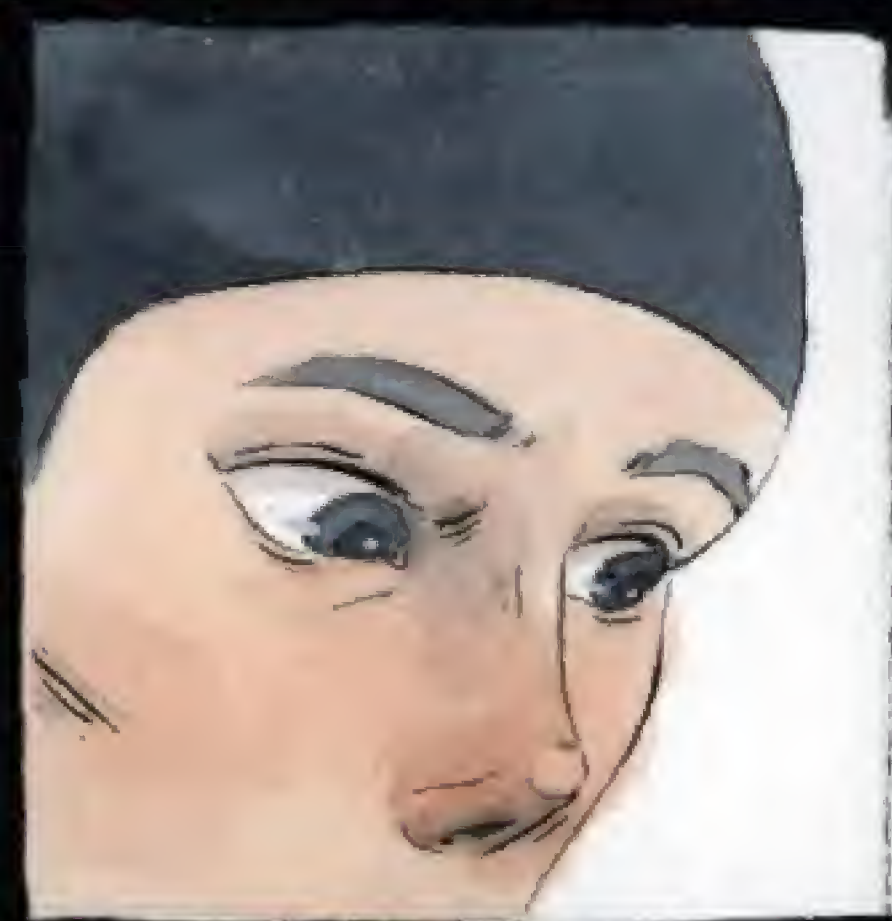




I have to wait until this is over before I put up my hand.



The stalls are wooden. Of course there are no longer any locks.





In the wood there's a small hole. Everyone in the Red Centre knows about this hole; everyone except the Aunts.



VI

HOUSEHOLD



The sitting room, in which I never sit, but stand or kneel only. The household has assembled. They all need to be here, the Ceremony demands it.



I would like to steal something from this room. I would like to take some small thing, hide it in the folds of my dress or in my zippered sleeve.



Every once in a while I would take it out and look at it. It would make me feel that I have power, though that would be an illusion.



Late as usual.

Nick is so close that the tip of his boot is touching my foot. Is this on purpose?






...reporting from
the front lines. The
Appalachian Highlands,

where the Angels of the
Apocalypse, Fourth Division,
are smoking out a pocket of
Baptist guerillas, with air support
from the Twenty-first Battalion
of the Angels of Light...


This is the one good thing about the evenings of
the Ceremony: I'm allowed to watch the news.



A tank is shown moving through a forest, leaving a trail of smoke and debris. The scene is depicted in a stylized, hand-drawn manner with a limited color palette.

... underground espionage ring has been cracked by a team of Eyes working with an inside informant.

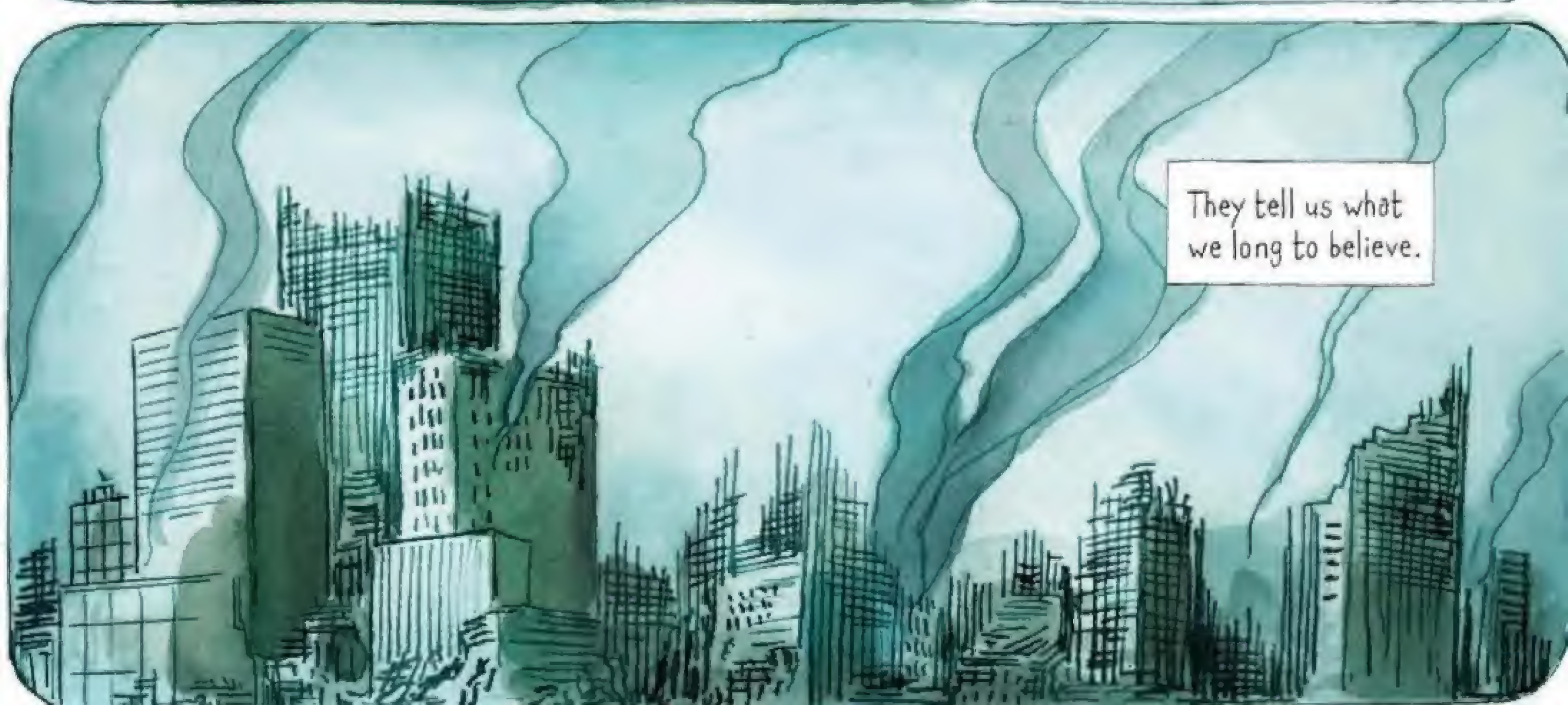
Who knows if any of it is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked. But any news, now, is better than none.

A close-up portrait of a middle-aged man with short, light-colored hair, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and a striped tie. He has a slight, knowing smile.

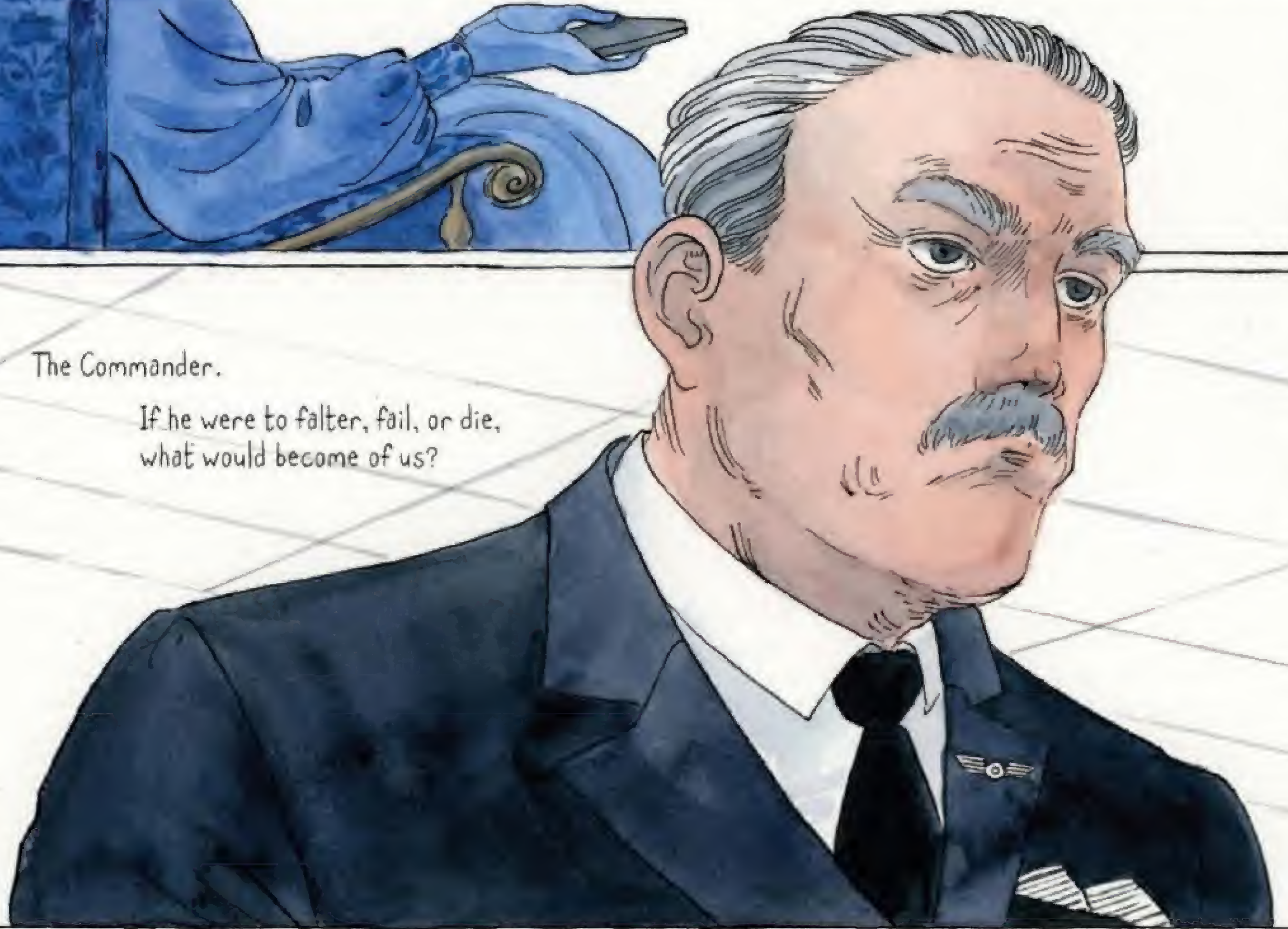
The ring has been smuggling precious national resources over the border into Canada. Five members of the heretical sect of Quakers have been...



They show us only victories, never defeats. Who wants bad news?

A stylized illustration of a city skyline with several tall buildings. The sky is filled with large, billowing clouds or smoke, creating a dramatic and somewhat somber atmosphere.

They tell us what we long to believe.



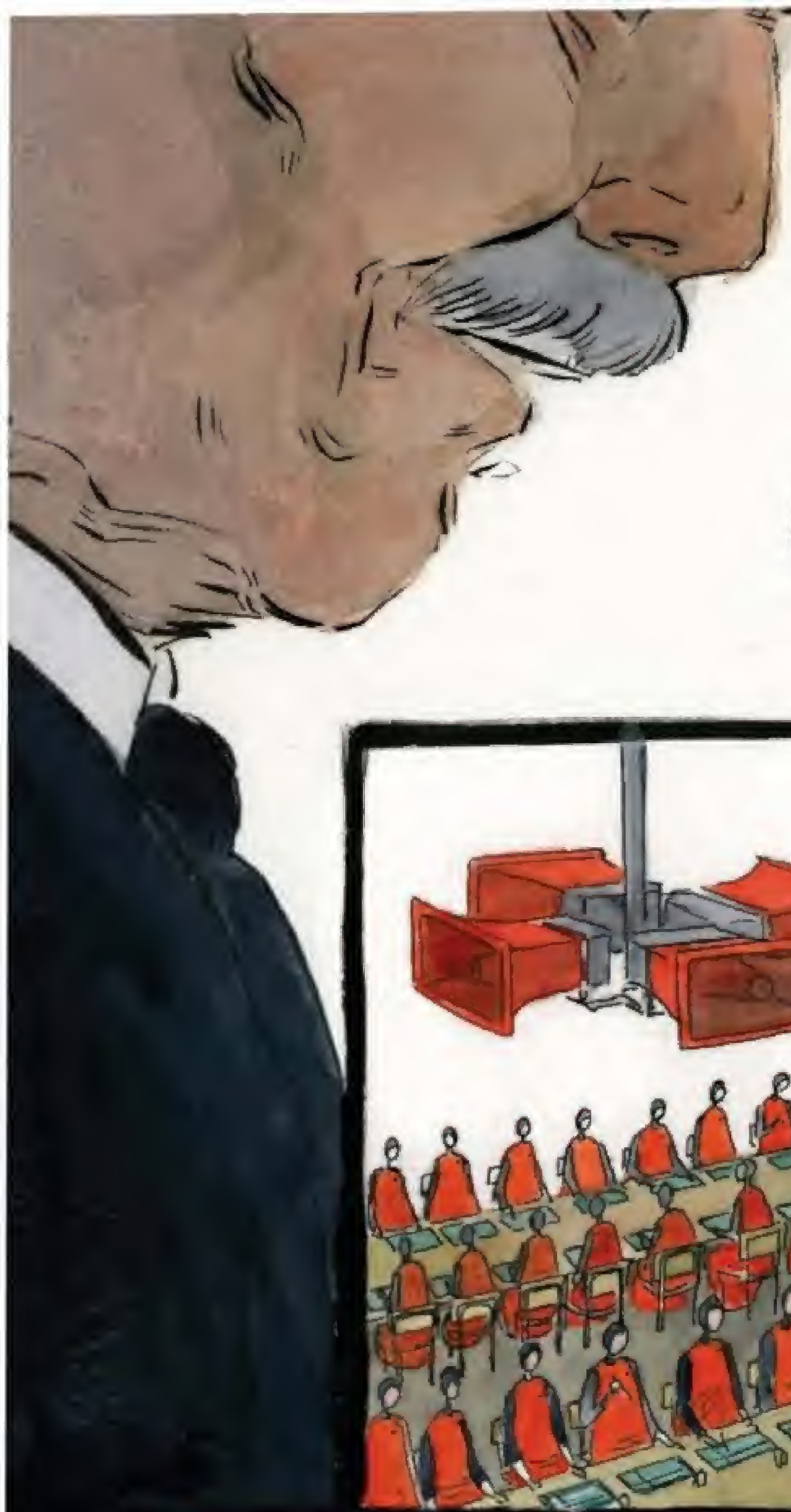
The Commander.

If he were to falter, fail, or die,
what would become of us?



The Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept
tea locked up, so the servants wouldn't steal it. It is
an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it,
if we ever got our hands on it? We can be read to
from it, by him, but we cannot read.

Our heads turn towards him, we are expectant,
here comes our bedtime story.



Ahem...

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.

... And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?

And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.



I've got to get out of here, I'm going bats.



No! No, Moira, don't try it. Not on your own.





I'll fake sick.
They send an ambulance,
I've seen it.



...And Leah said,
God hath given me my hire,
because I have given my
maiden to my husband.



She always does this.

≡ Sob ≡



How she must hate me.

Now we will have a moment
of silent prayer. We will ask for
a blessing, and for success in
all our ventures.

≡ Sob <
> Sob <

I pray silently:

*Nolite te bastardes
carborundorum.*

I don't know what
it means, but it
sounds right.

When I imagine
the woman who
wrote it, I turn
her into Moira.

I saw her go out,
to the ambulance,
on a stretcher,
carried by two
Angels. A fever.



*...Blessed be the poor
in spirit, for theirs is the
kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are the merciful.
Blessed are the meek.*



*Blessed are the silent.
Blessed be those that
mourn, for they shall
be comforted...*





They took her into the room that used to be the Science Lab. It was a room where none of us ever went willingly.

Afterwards she could not walk for a week, her feet wouldn't fit into her shoes, they were too swollen.

It was the feet they'd do, for a first offence. They used steel cables, frayed at the ends. After that the hands. They didn't care what they did to your feet and hands, even if it was permanent.





I am still praying but what I'm seeing is Moira's feet, the way they looked after they'd brought her back.

Her feet did not look like feet at all.

They looked like drowned feet, swollen and boneless, except for the colour.

They looked like lungs.

Oh God, I pray.
Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.
Is this what you had in mind?

For the eyes of the Lord
run to and fro throughout the whole earth,
to know Himself strong in the behalf of them
whose heart is perfect towards Him.

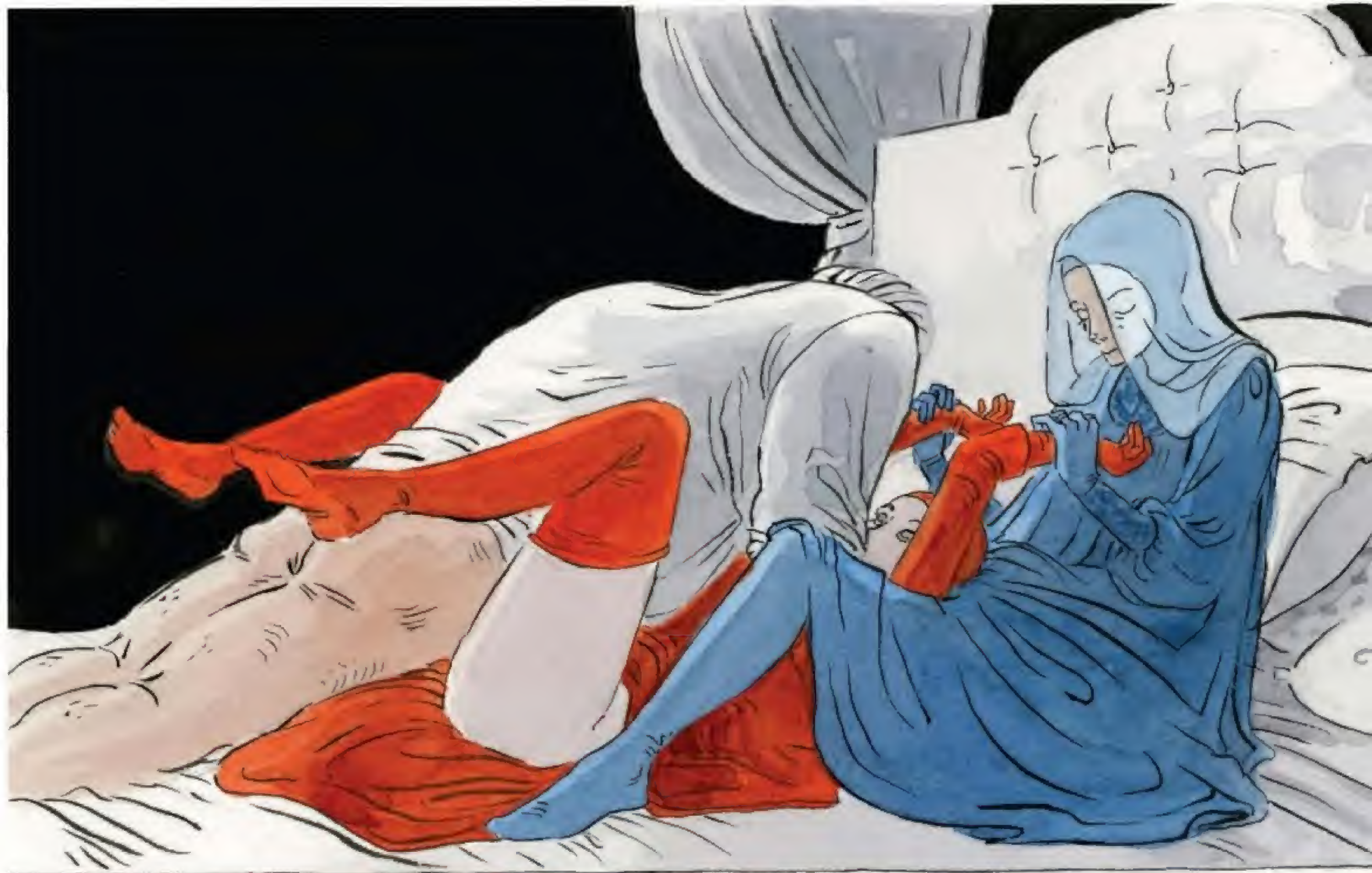
Amen.

Amen.

Amen.

The Ceremony goes as usual.







You can get up now.

Get up and get out.

GET OUT!



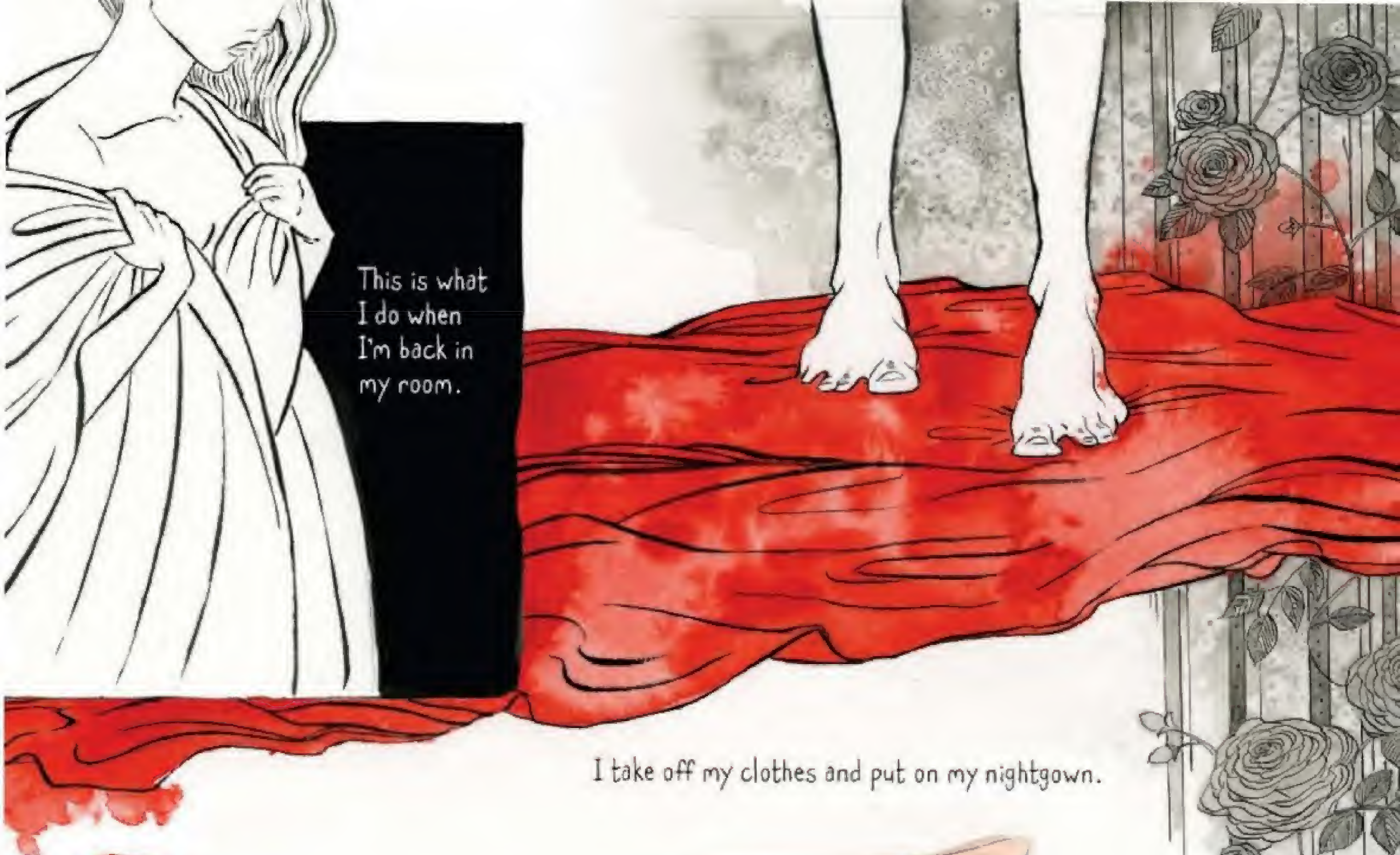
She's supposed to have me rest, for ten minutes, with my feet on a pillow to improve the chances.

This is meant to be a time of silent meditation for her, but she's not in the mood for that.



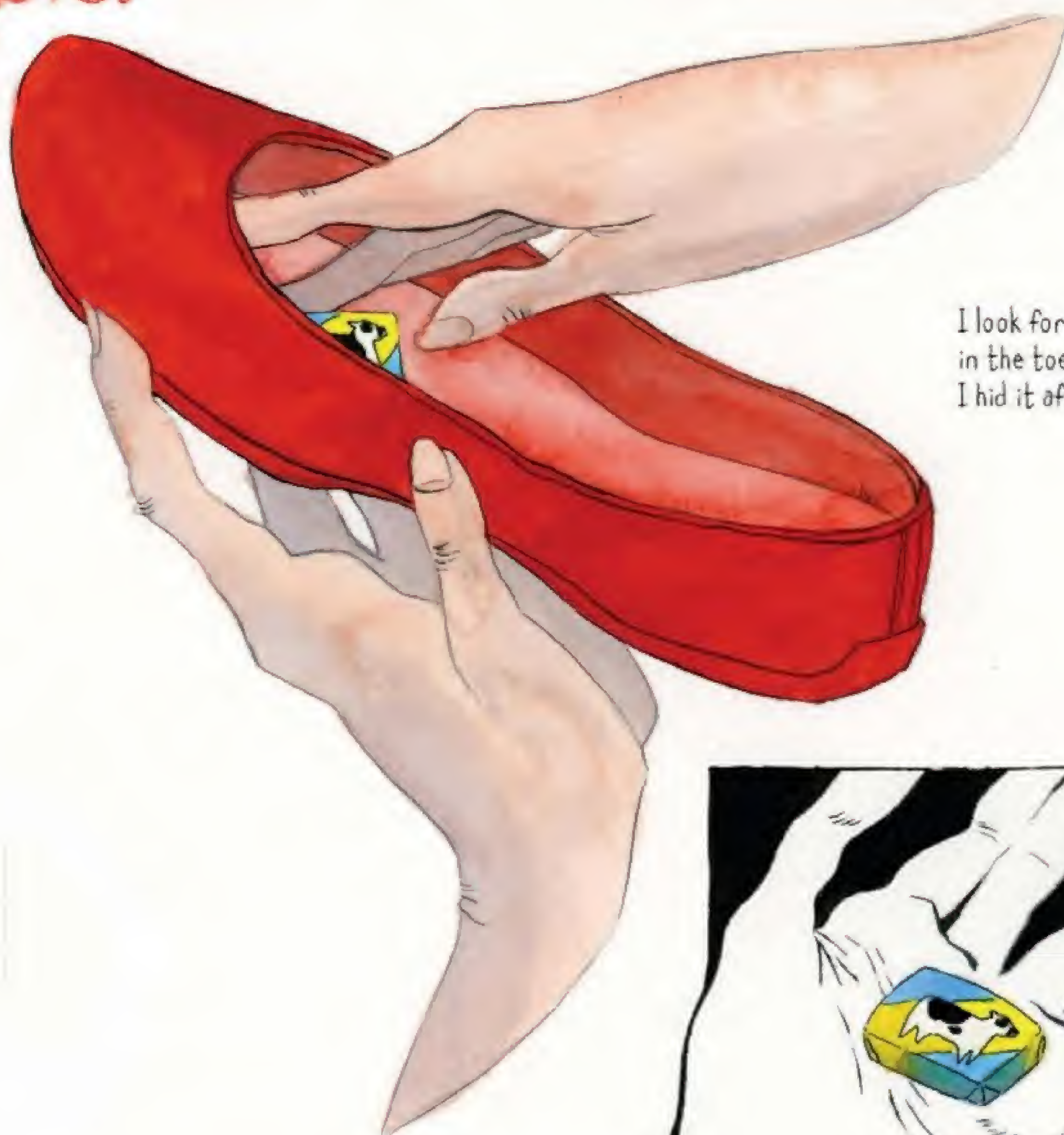
Which of us is it worse for, her or me?





This is what
I do when
I'm back in
my room.

I take off my clothes and put on my nightgown.



I look for the pat of butter,
in the toe of my shoe, where
I hid it after dinner.



Whenever there
is butter or even
margarine, I save
some in this way.



I rub the butter over my face,
work it into the skin of my hands.

There's no longer any hand lotion or
face cream, not for us. Such things are
considered vanities. We are containers,
it's only the insides of our bodies that
are important. The outside can become
hard and wrinkled, for all they care,
like the shell of a nut.

My predecessor in this room must
have done this too. We all do it.

As long as we do this, butter
our skin to keep it soft, we
can believe that we will some
day get out, that we will be
touched again, in love or desire.

We have ceremonies of
our own, private ones.



To such devices
have we descended.

VII

N I G H T

Buttered, I lie on my bed, flat, like a piece of toast.

I can't sleep.

In the semi-dark I stare up at the blind plaster eye in the middle of the ceiling, which stares back down at me, even though it can't see.





I want Luke here so badly. I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable.

I want to steal something.

I like this. I am doing something, on my own. The active tense.

Tensed.



What I would like to steal is a knife, from the kitchen, but I'm not ready for that.



What should I take?



Something that
will not be missed.



Don't scream.
It's all right.



What are you
doing in here?



It's so good, to be touched by
someone, to feel so greedy.



Luke, you'd understand.

But it's too dangerous.



Too much trust, too much risk, too much already.

I was coming to find you.

Why?

He told me to.
He wants to see you.
In his office.

What do you mean?

Tomorrow.



VIII

BIRTH DAY





WHEEEEEOOOOO WHEEEEEOOOO



Hurry!
The Birthmobile
won't wait all day.



From above I can hear the chanting of the women who are already in Ofwarren's room.



The Wives massage the tiny belly of the Wife of Warren, just as if she's really about to give birth herself.



...oh, but you've been so lucky. Some of them, why, they aren't even clean.

And won't give you a smile, mope in their rooms, don't wash their hair, the *smell*. I have to get the Marthas to do it, almost have to hold her down in the tub...

I had to take stern measures with mine, and now she doesn't eat her dinner properly.

As for the other thing, not a nibble, and we've been so regular.



That's two in a month. Praise be! Ofrobert —

No. It was a shredder.

To go through all of that and then...



The chances are one in four, we learned that at the Centre.

The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules.

Not to mention the exploding atomic power plants, along the San Andreas Fault, during the earthquakes, and the mutant strain of syphilis no antibiotic could touch.

Some did it to themselves, had themselves tied shut with catgut or scarred with chemicals.

How could they have done such a thing?



We didn't know what would happen to the babies that didn't get passed, that were declared Unbabies. But we knew they were put somewhere, quickly, away.

What will Ofwarren give birth to? A baby? Or an Unbaby, with a pinhead or a snout like a dog's, or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet?

There's no telling. They could tell once, with machines, but that's now outlawed. What would be the point, anyway? You can't have them taken out; whatever it is must be carried to term.





Expel, expel,
expel.

Hold,
hold.

Breathe,
breathe.

Breathe,
breathe.

Hold,
hold.

Expel, expel,
expel.

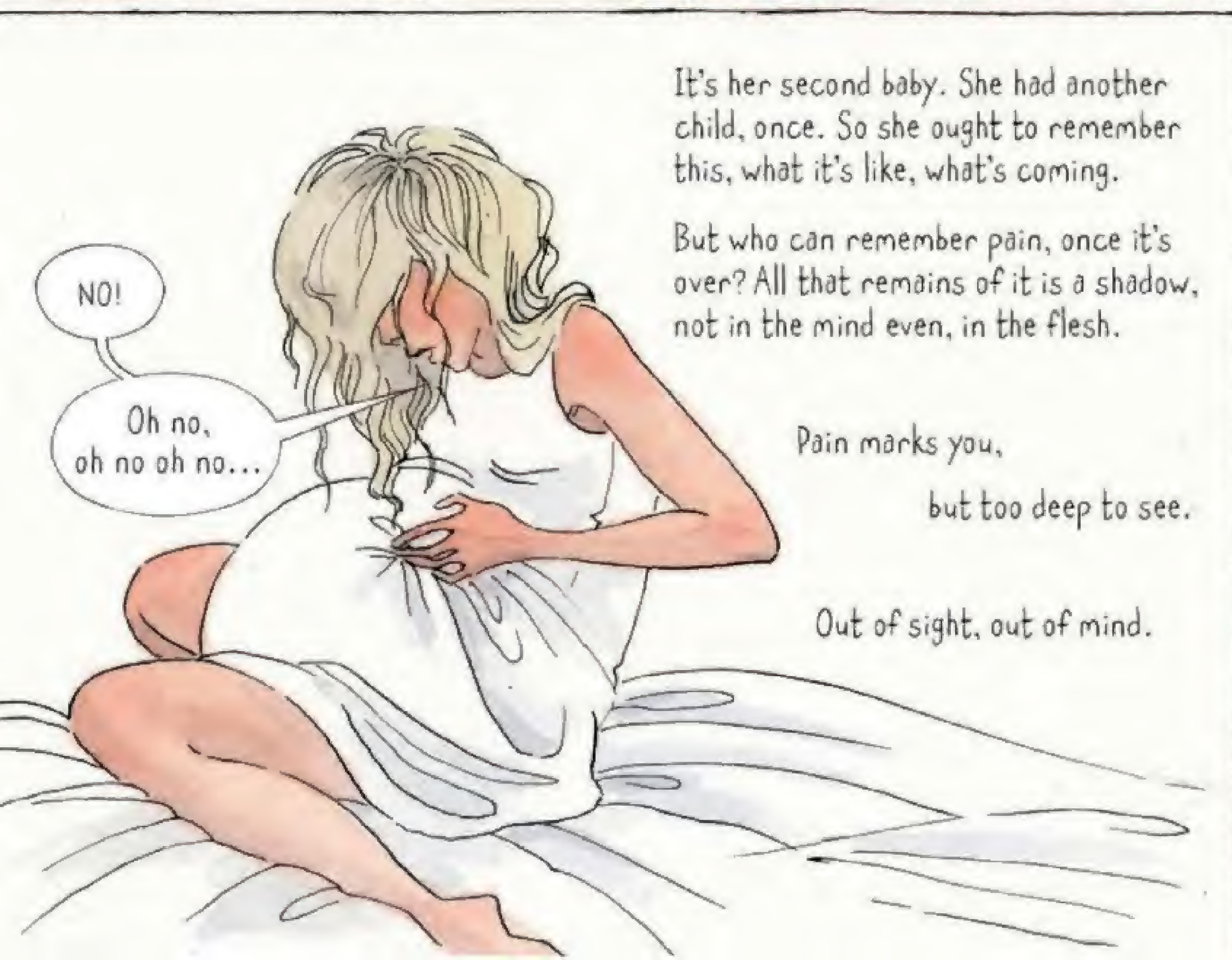


Sometimes you can find things out, on Birth Days.



There is no point in asking about Luke.

He wouldn't be where any of these women would be likely to see him.



It's her second baby. She had another child, once. So she ought to remember this, what it's like, what's coming.

But who can remember pain, once it's over? All that remains of it is a shadow, not in the mind even, in the flesh.

Pain marks you,
but too deep to see.

Out of sight, out of mind.

Someone has spiked the grape juice. It won't be the first time at such a gathering.

We too need our orgies.

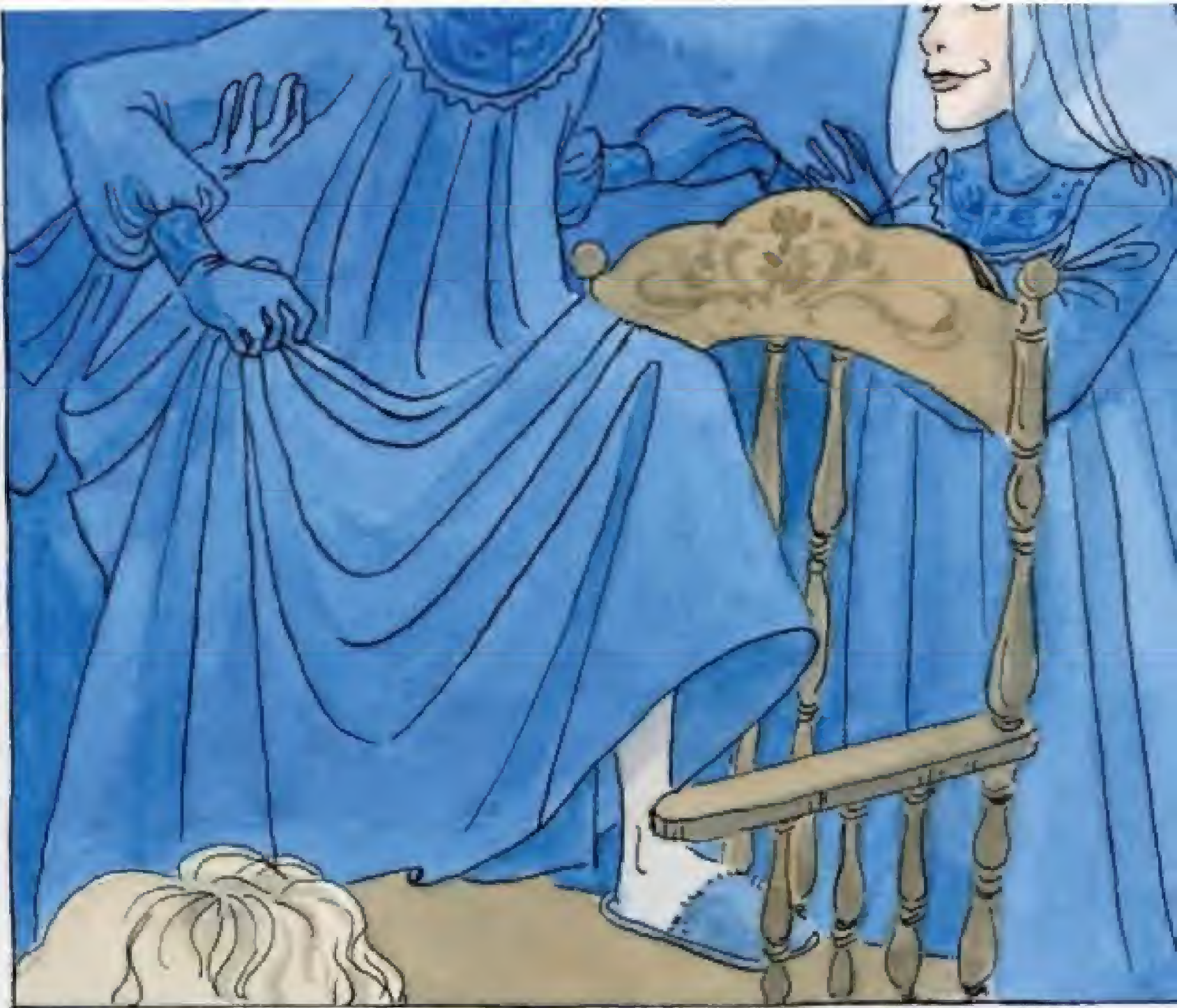




Dim the
lights.

Move her to the
Birthing Stool.

Tell the
Commander's Wife
it's time...





Push,

push,

push.

Relax.

Pant.

Push,

push,

push.



A girl, poor thing, but so far so good, at least
there's nothing wrong with it, that can be seen.

Hands, feet, eyes, we silently count,
everything is in place.



Angela.



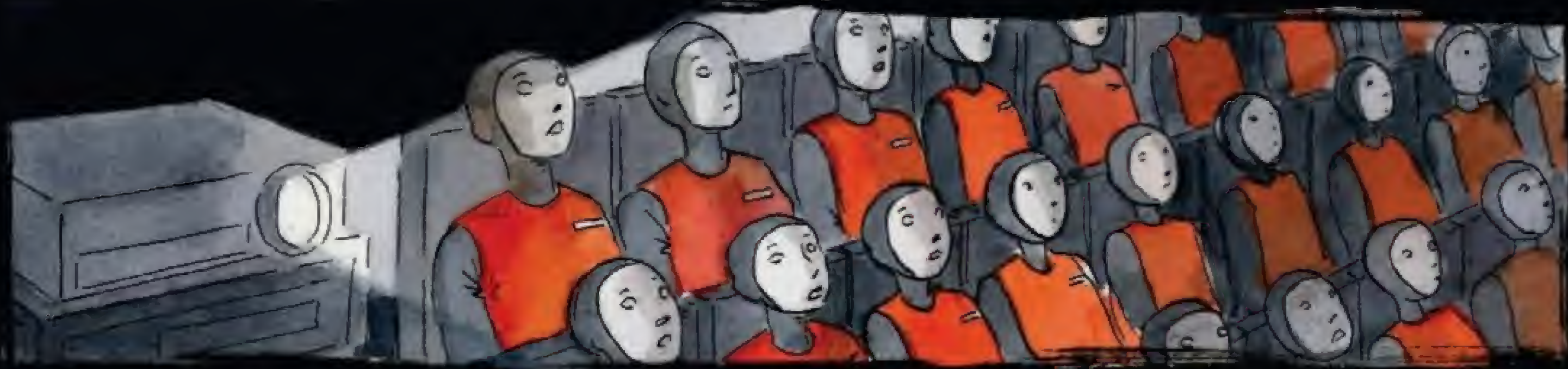


For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts.

You are a transitional generation. It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make.

She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way.

She said: Because they won't want things they can't have.



Consider the alternatives.
You see what things used to be
like? That's what they thought
of women, then.



There is more
than one kind of
freedom.

Freedom *to* and
freedom *from*.

In the days of anarchy
it was freedom *to*. Now you
are being given freedom *from*.

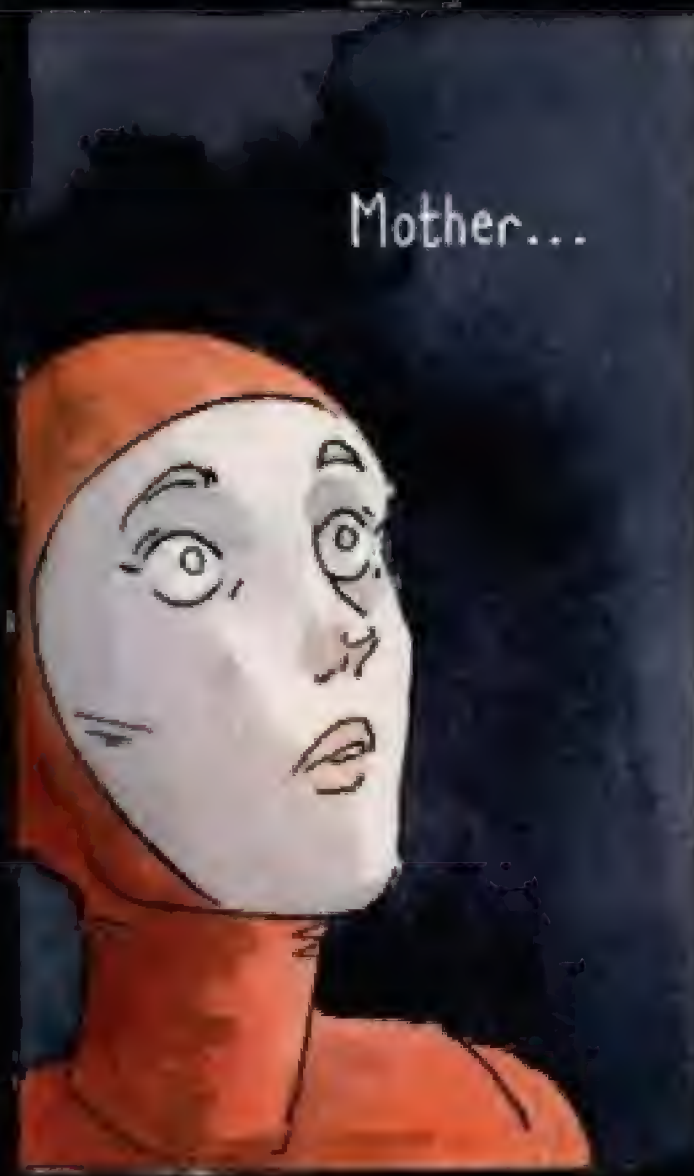
Don't underrate it.





Imagine. Wasting their time like that, when they should have been doing something useful.

Back then, the Unwomen were always wasting time.



Mother...



I had you when I was thirty-seven. It was a risk, and did I get shit from some quarters!

"Birth defect rate goes up after thirty-five" and "It's so hard to be a single parent."

Fuck that shit. I told them.



...knees bent,
lift the pelvis, roll
the backbone down.
Tuck. Again.

Breathe in to
the count of five.
Hold. Expel.
Arms at the sides...



Remember:

*I will greatly multiply thy
sorrow and thy conception;
in sorrow thou shalt
bring forth children.*

In the time before,
they drugged women, induced
labour, cut them open.
Doctors - men - used to be
in charge of births.



But *now*, now you will
help your sisters in their
time of sorrow, as they
will help you in yours.

Mother, wherever you may be. Can you hear me?
You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there
is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists.
Be thankful for small mercies.



Did you
hear?

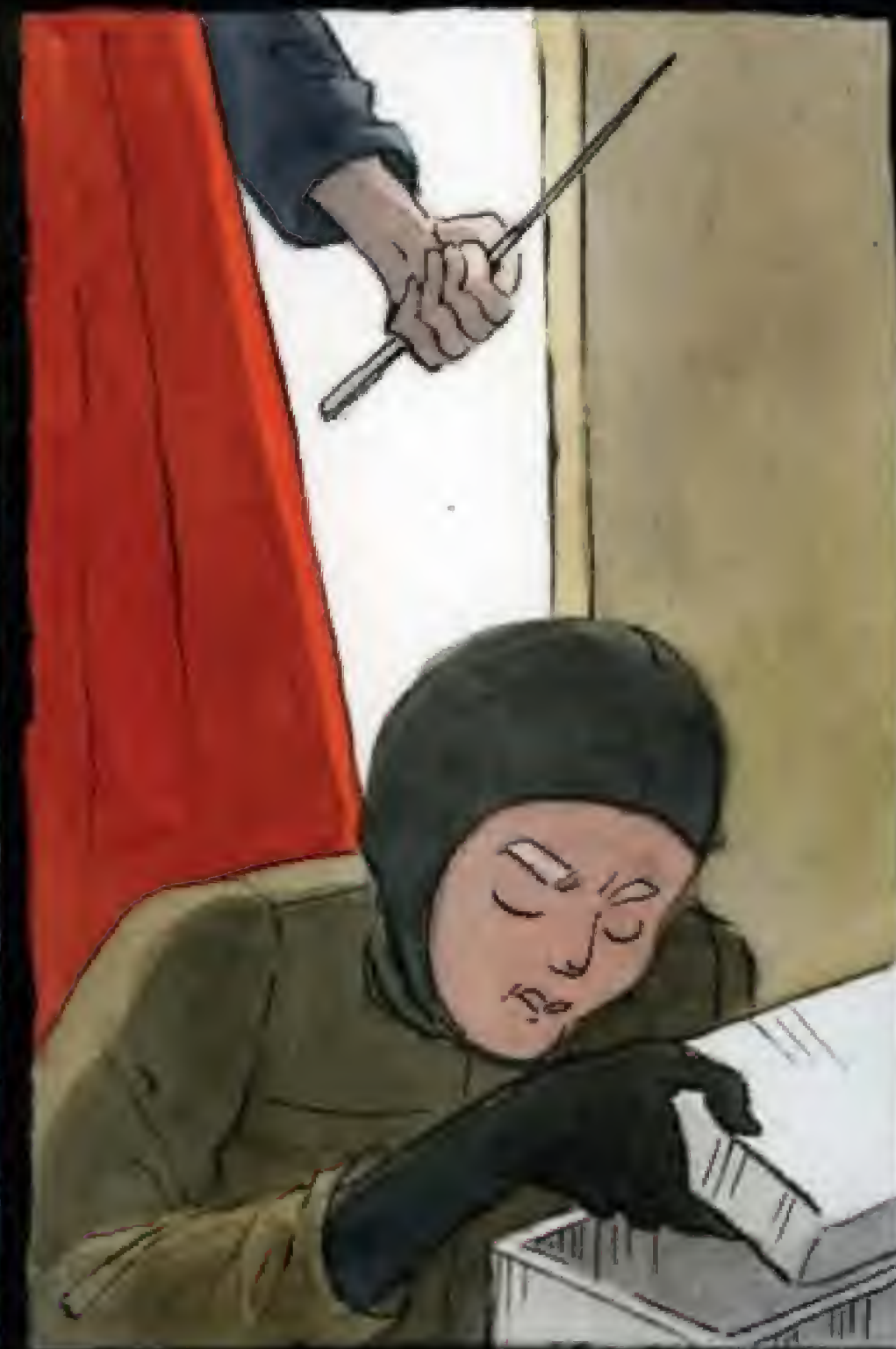
About
Moirá?

I heard it
from Janine...



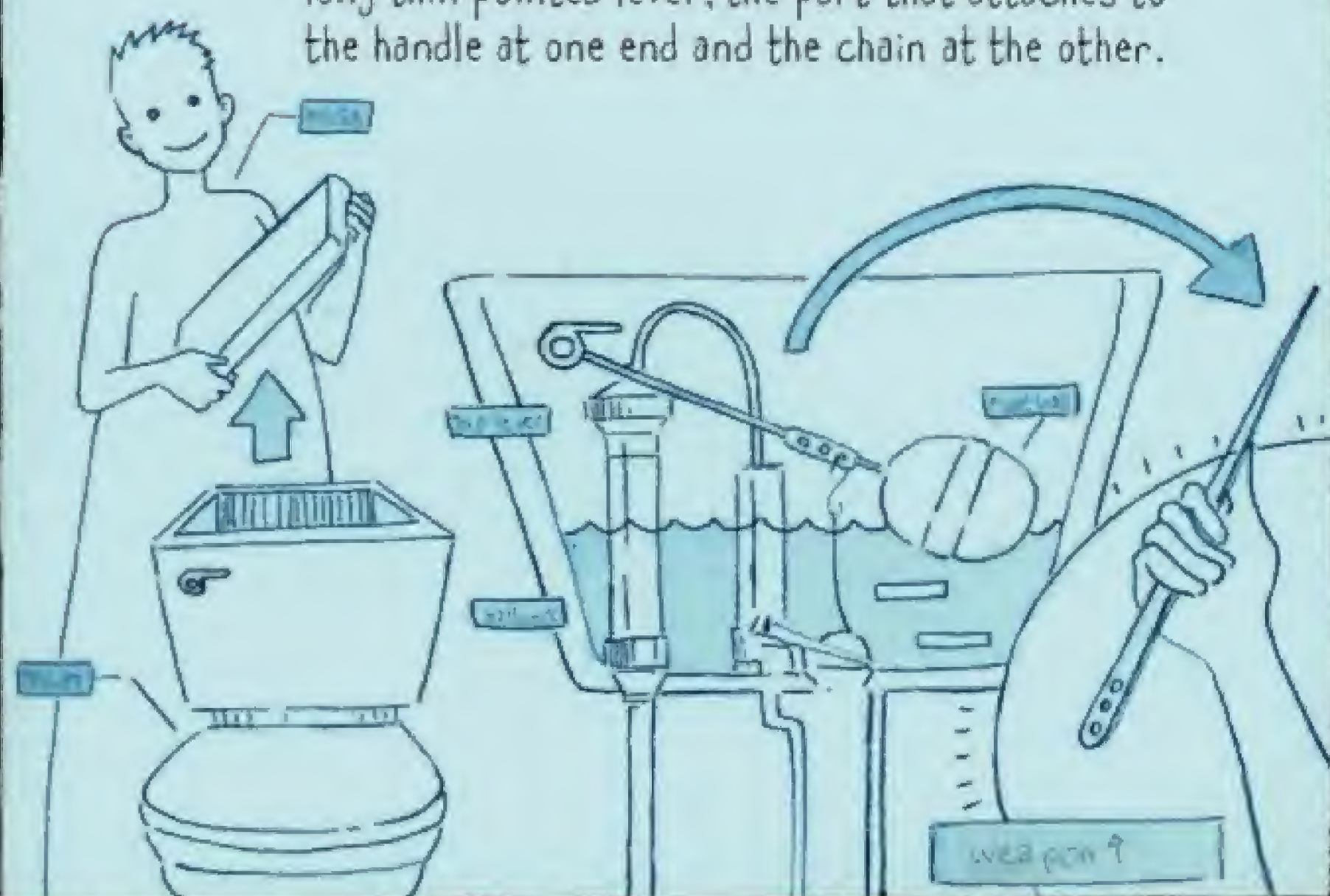
The story passed among us that night, under our breath, from bed to bed. Moira had raised her hand to go to the washroom, during Exercises...

Umm...The toilet's overflowing. Can someone come fix it?



Don't move, or I'll stick it all the way in. I know where. I'll puncture your lung.

They found out afterwards that she'd dismantled the inside of one of the toilets and taken out the long thin pointed lever, the part that attaches to the handle at one end and the chain at the other.



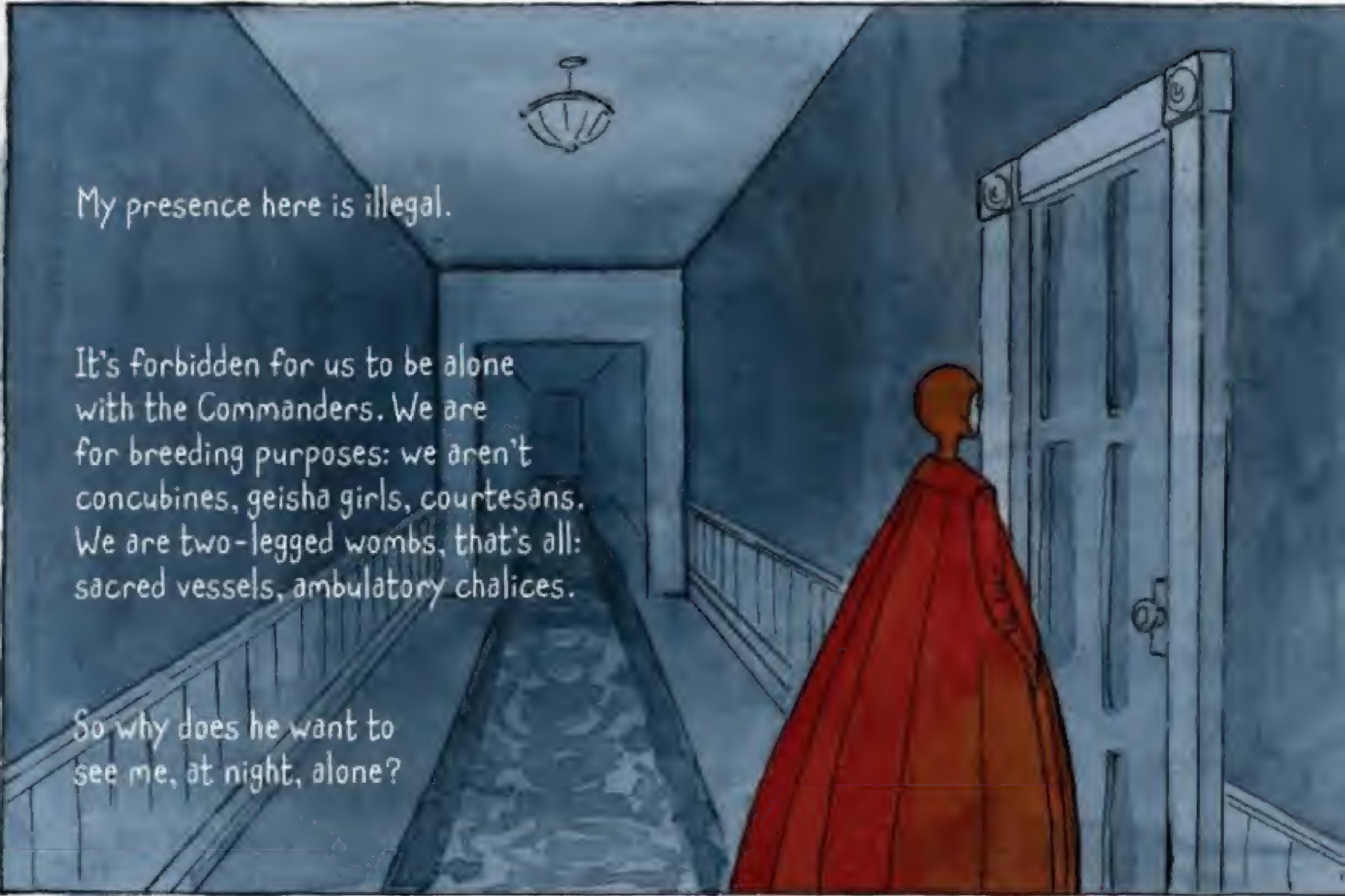
Aunt Elizabeth knew Moira meant what she said; Moira had a bad reputation.



Moirra was like an elevator with open sides. She made us dizzy. Already we were losing our taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure.

Nevertheless Moirra was our fantasy. We expected her to be dragged in at any minute, as she had been before. We could not imagine what they might do to her this time. It would be very bad, whatever it was.

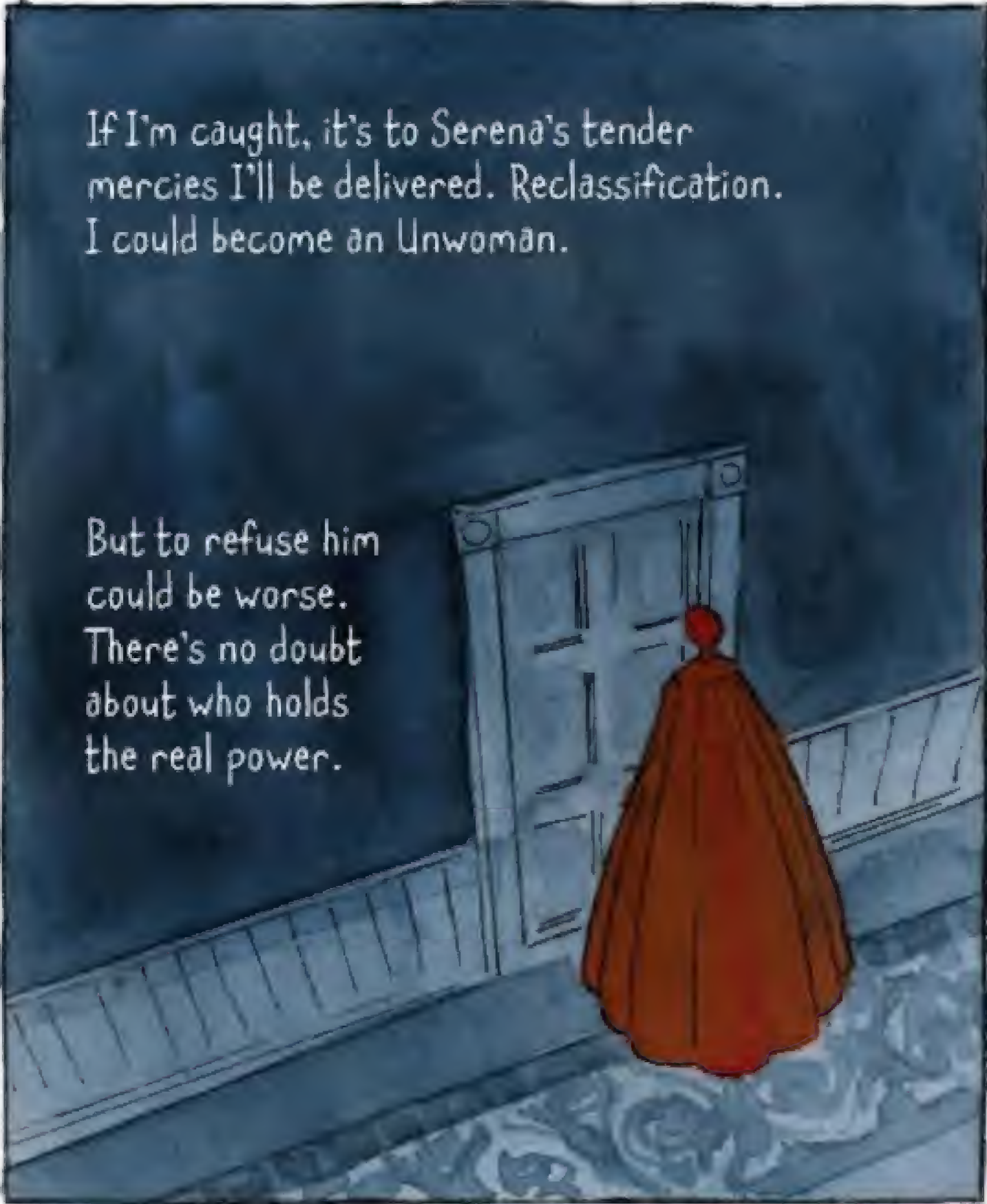
But nothing happened. Moirra didn't reappear. She hasn't yet.



My presence here is illegal.


It's forbidden for us to be alone with the Commanders. We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices.

So why does he want to see me, at night, alone?




If I'm caught, it's to Serena's tender mercies I'll be delivered. Reclassification. I could become an Unwoman.

But to refuse him could be worse. There's no doubt about who holds the real power.



But there must be something he wants, from me.


To want is to have a weakness. It's like a small crack in a wall, before now impenetrable. If I press my eye to it, this weakness of his, I may be able to see my way clear.



I want to know what he wants.







This was once the game of old women,
old men, in the summers or in retirement
villas, to be played when there was nothing
good on television.

Now, of course,
it's something different.
Now it's forbidden, for us.
Now it's dangerous.

Now it's indecent.
Now it's something
he can't do with his Wife.

The counters are like candies,
made of peppermint, cool like that.

This is freedom, an eyeblink of it.



I would like to put them into my mouth. They would taste also of lime. The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious.

I win the first game, I let him win the second: I still haven't discovered what the terms are, what I will be able to ask for, in exchange.



I guess it's about time for you to go home.

To your room, that is.



Thank you.
For the game...



This is like being on a date.

This is conspiracy.



I want you
to kiss me.



All right.





IX
NIGHT

Something has changed.
Circumstances have altered.

I need to take it seriously, this desire of his.
It could be important, it could be a passport,
it could be my downfall.



He wanted me to play
Scrabble with him.



And kiss him
as if I meant it.



I can ask for
something.



Possibly not much;
but something.



HA!





Why did she write it?
Why bother?



There's no way out of here.

X

SOUL SCROLLS







I'll have to bring another one. Such a waste. What was you doing on the floor like that?



I must have fainted.

It's one of the early signs!

No, it's not that. I was just dizzy.



It did give me a turn...

At first I thought it was just clothes, like. Then I said to myself, What're they doing on the floor?

I thought maybe you'd...

That's why she screamed.

So it was Cora who found her.

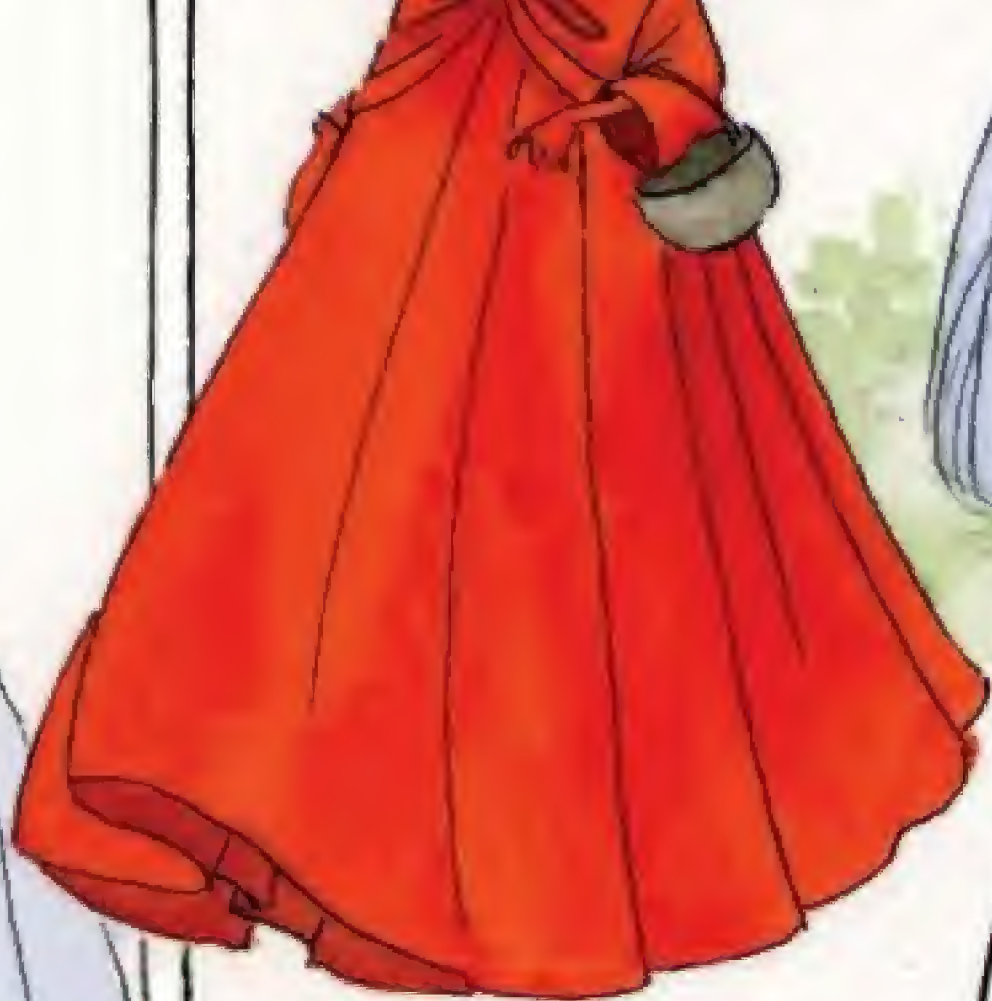
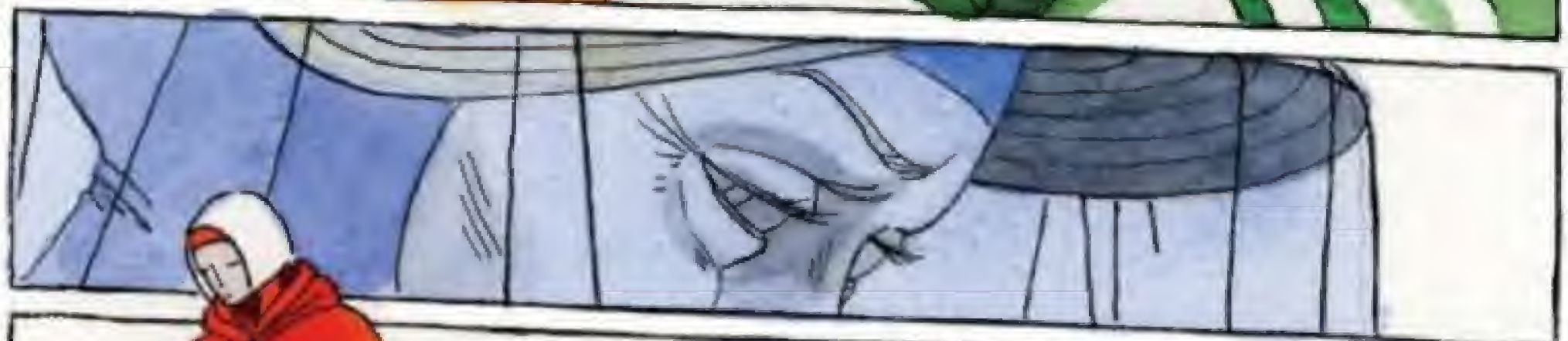


That was in May. Spring has now been undergone. The tulips have had their moment and are done, shedding their petals one by one, like teeth.



The Commander and I have an arrangement.

I visit him two or three nights a week, always after dinner, but only when I get the signal.



The signal is Nick.
If his hat is on
askew, then I go.





I have a little present for you.



It's an old one. A curio of sorts. I thought you might like to look at it.

It's not permitted...


In here, it is.

I felt the Commander watching me as I turned the pages. I knew I was doing something I shouldn't have been doing, and that he found pleasure in seeing me do it.



Why do you have this?

Some of us... retain an appreciation for the old things.

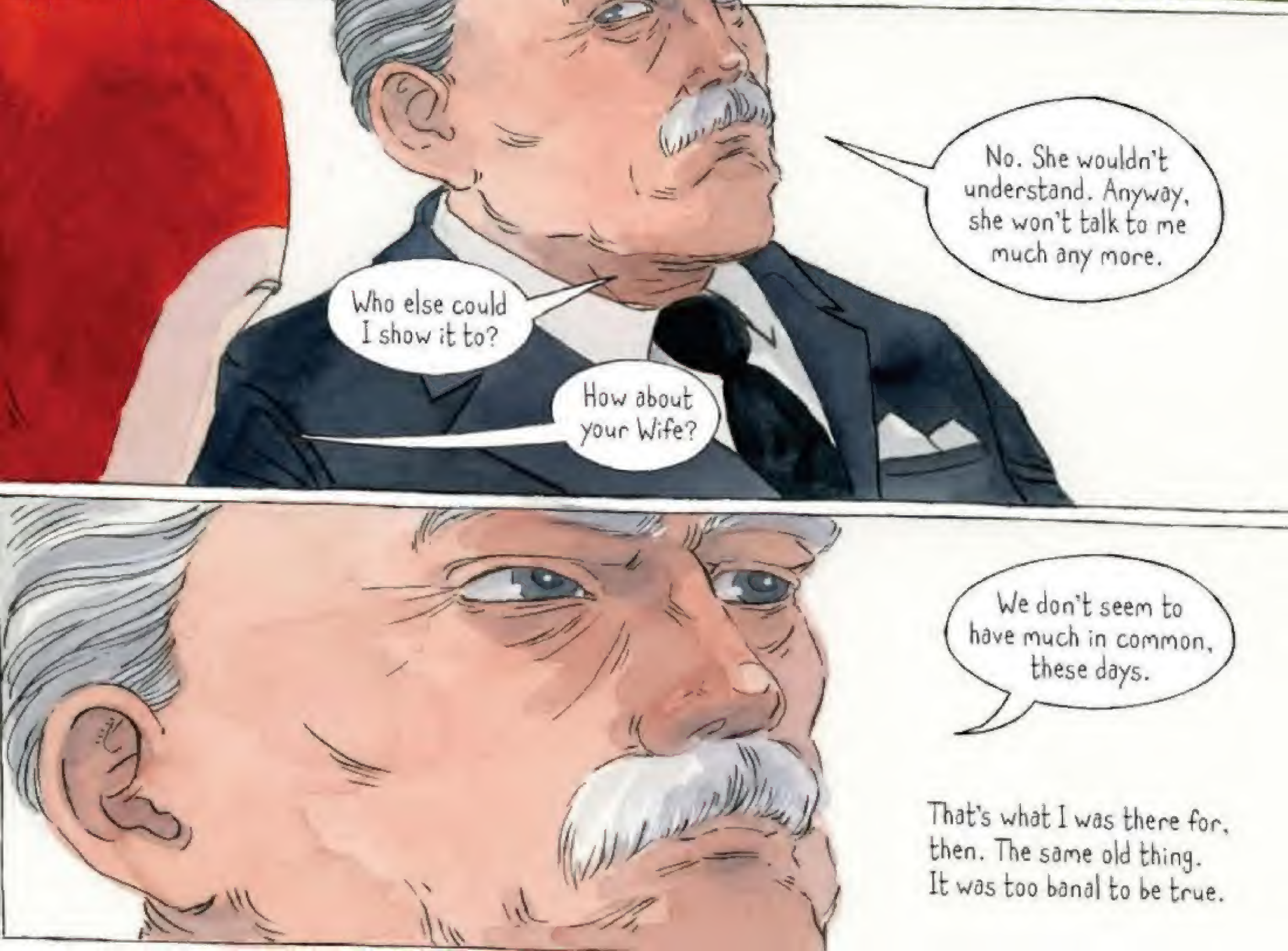


But these were supposed to have been burned. There were house-to-house searches, bonfires...

What's dangerous in the hands of the multitudes is safe enough for those whose motives are...

Beyond reproach.

But why show it to me?



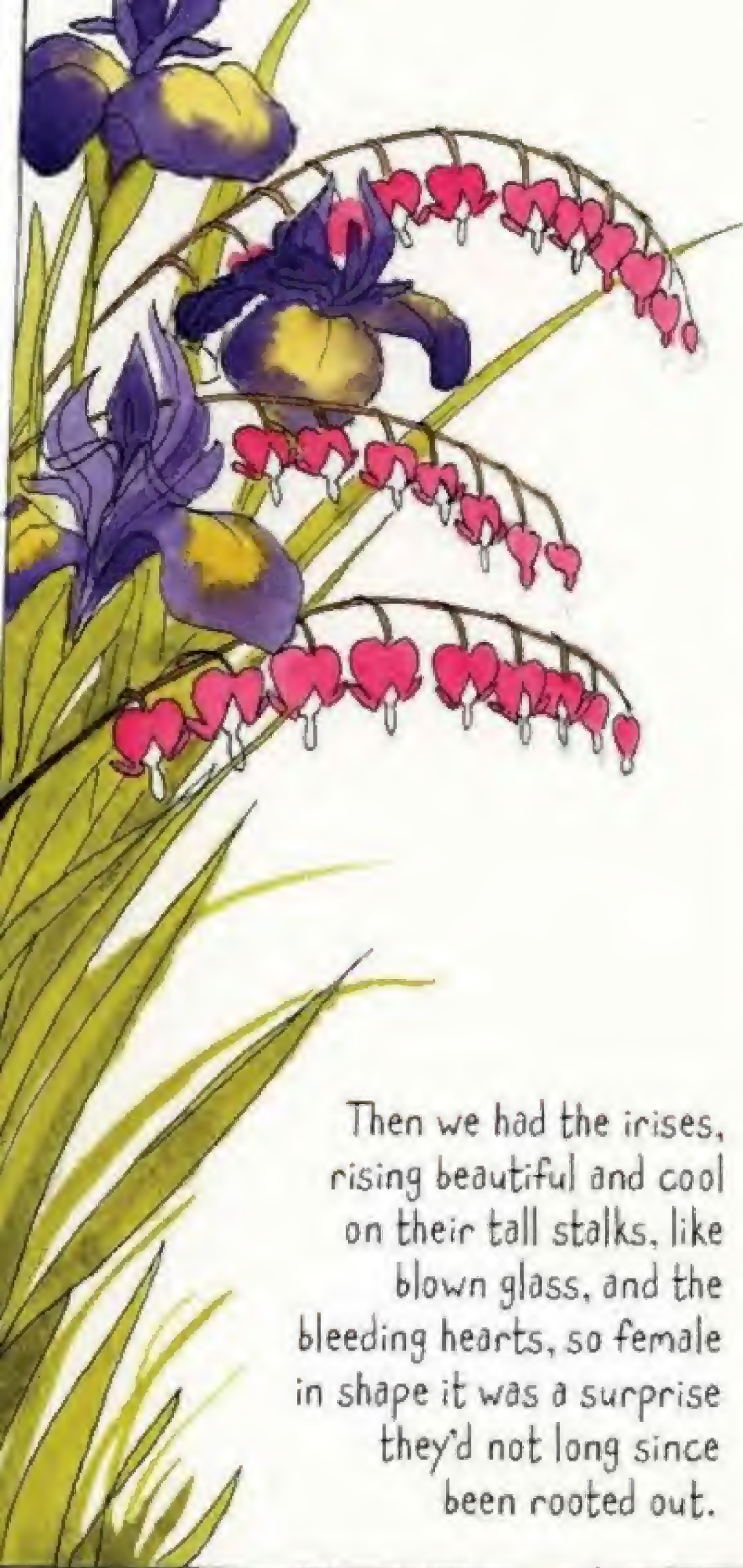
Who else could I show it to?

How about your Wife?

No. She wouldn't understand. Anyway, she won't talk to me much any more.

We don't seem to have much in common, these days.

That's what I was there for, then. The same old thing. It was too banal to be true.



Then we had the irises,
rising beautiful and cool
on their tall stalks, like
blown glass, and the
bleeding hearts, so female
in shape it was a surprise
they'd not long since
been rooted out.



Some what?

Hand lotion.
Or face lotion. Our
skin gets very dry.

Dry?
What do you do
about it?

We use butter.
When we can get it.
Or margarine. A lot of the
time it's margarine.



Butter.
That's very clever.
Butter.



I think I could
get some of that.
But she might smell
it on you.

I'd be careful.
Besides, she's never
that close to me.





Try to touch me like that, when we're... when she's there.



Did I?



You could get me transferred! To the Colonies. You know that. Or worse.



I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. But I find it...

What?




Impersonal.



How long did it take you to find that out?







Ofglen and I are more comfortable with one another now, we're used to each other.

Now and again we vary the route; there's nothing against it, as long as we stay within the barriers.

A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze.



Nothing on the Wall today, they don't leave the bodies hanging as long in summer as they do in winter, because of the flies and the smell.



Somehow the Wall is even more foreboding when it's empty like this. When there's someone hanging on it at least you know the worst. But vacant, it is also potential, like a storm approaching. When I can see the bodies, the actual bodies, when I can guess from the sizes and shapes that none of them is Luke, I can believe also that he is still alive.



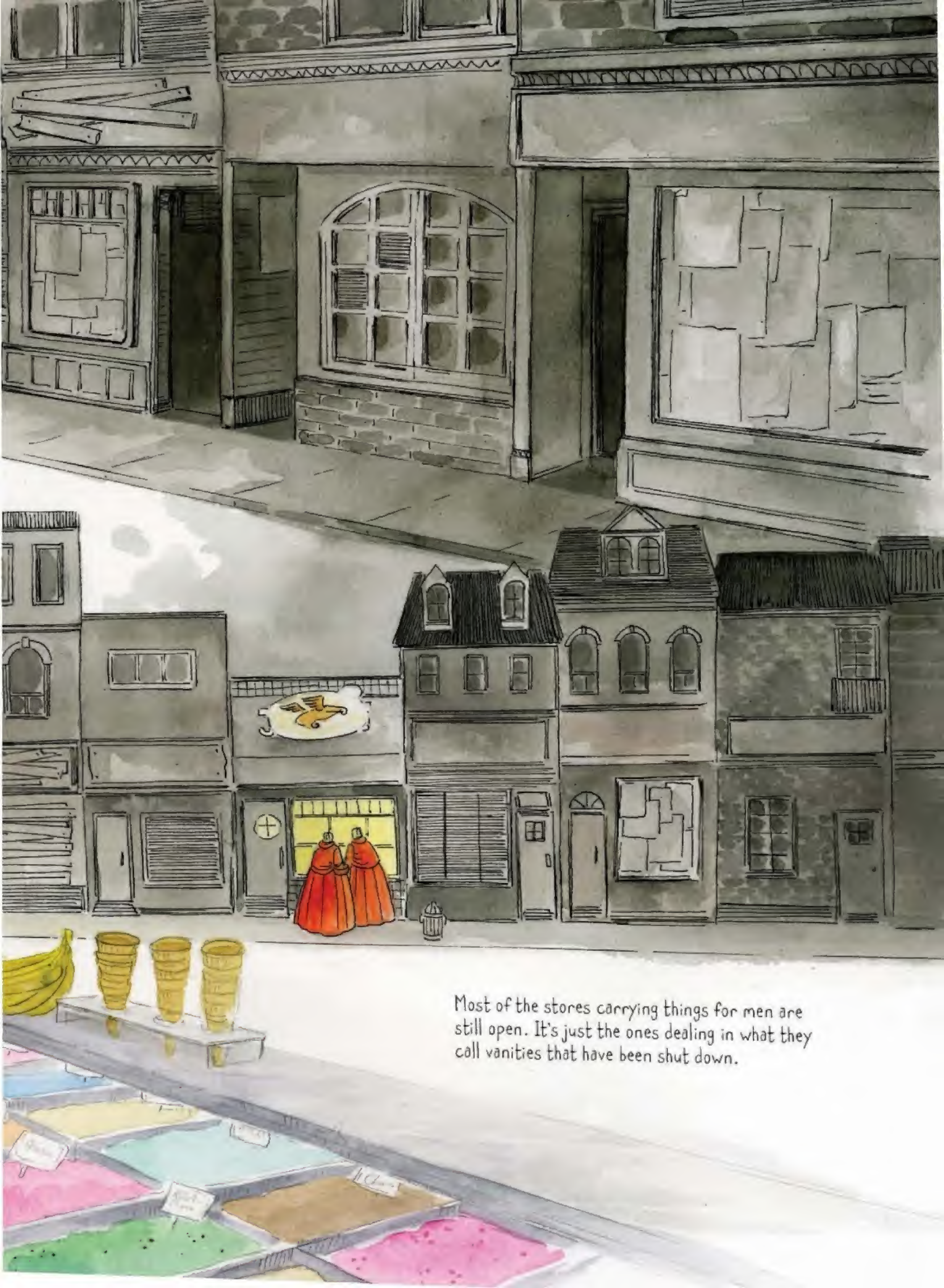
There used to be an ice cream store on this block.

You could get double scoops. If you wanted
they would put chocolate sprinkles on top.



I'd read the names to her so she could choose.

She wouldn't choose by the name, though, but by
the colour. Her dresses and overalls were those
colours too. Ice cream pastels.



Most of the stores carrying things for men are still open. It's just the ones dealing in what they call vanities that have been shut down.

Soul Scrolls.

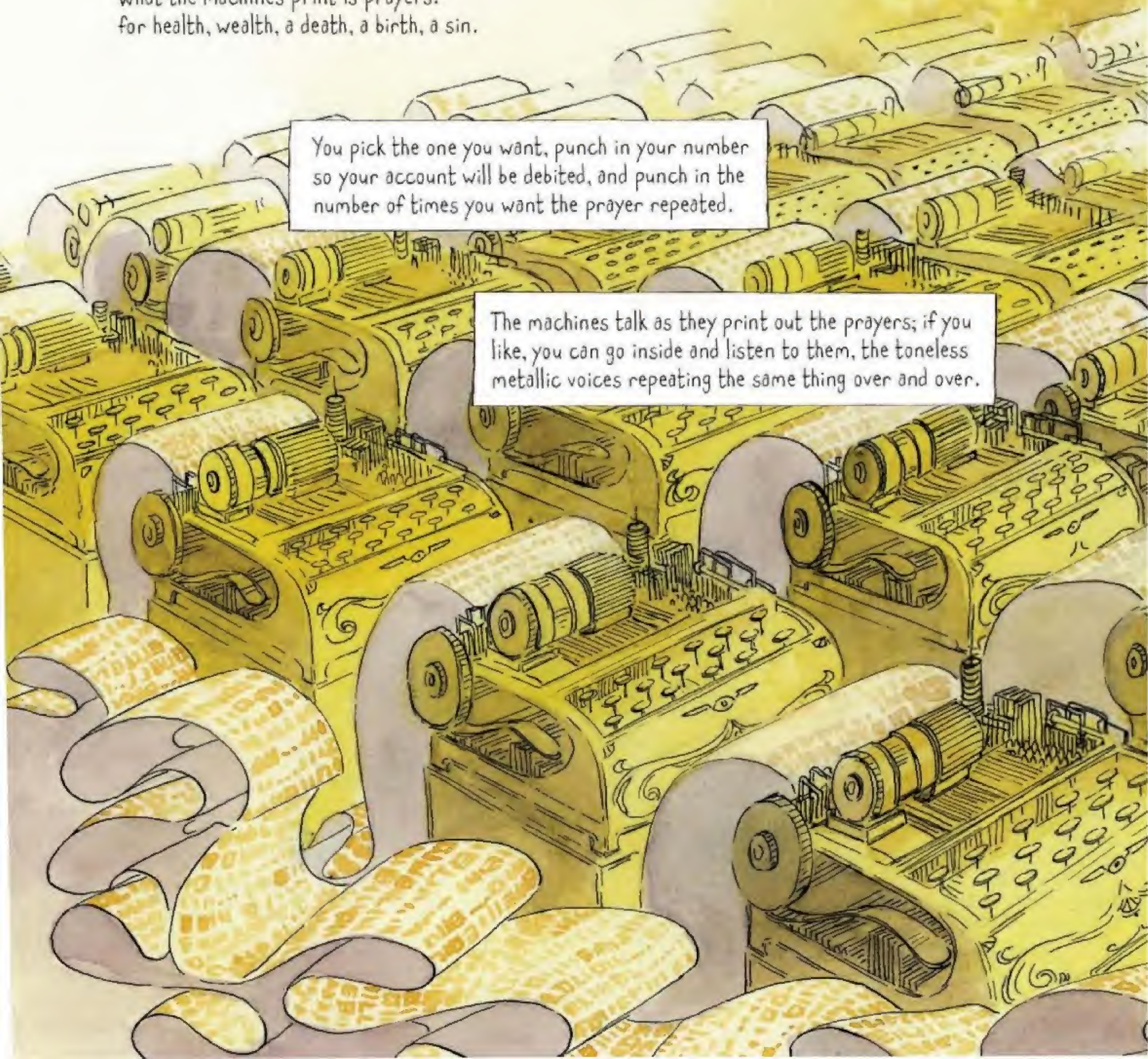
It's a franchise:
there are Soul Scrolls
in every city centre,
in every suburb, or
so they say. It must
make a lot of profit.

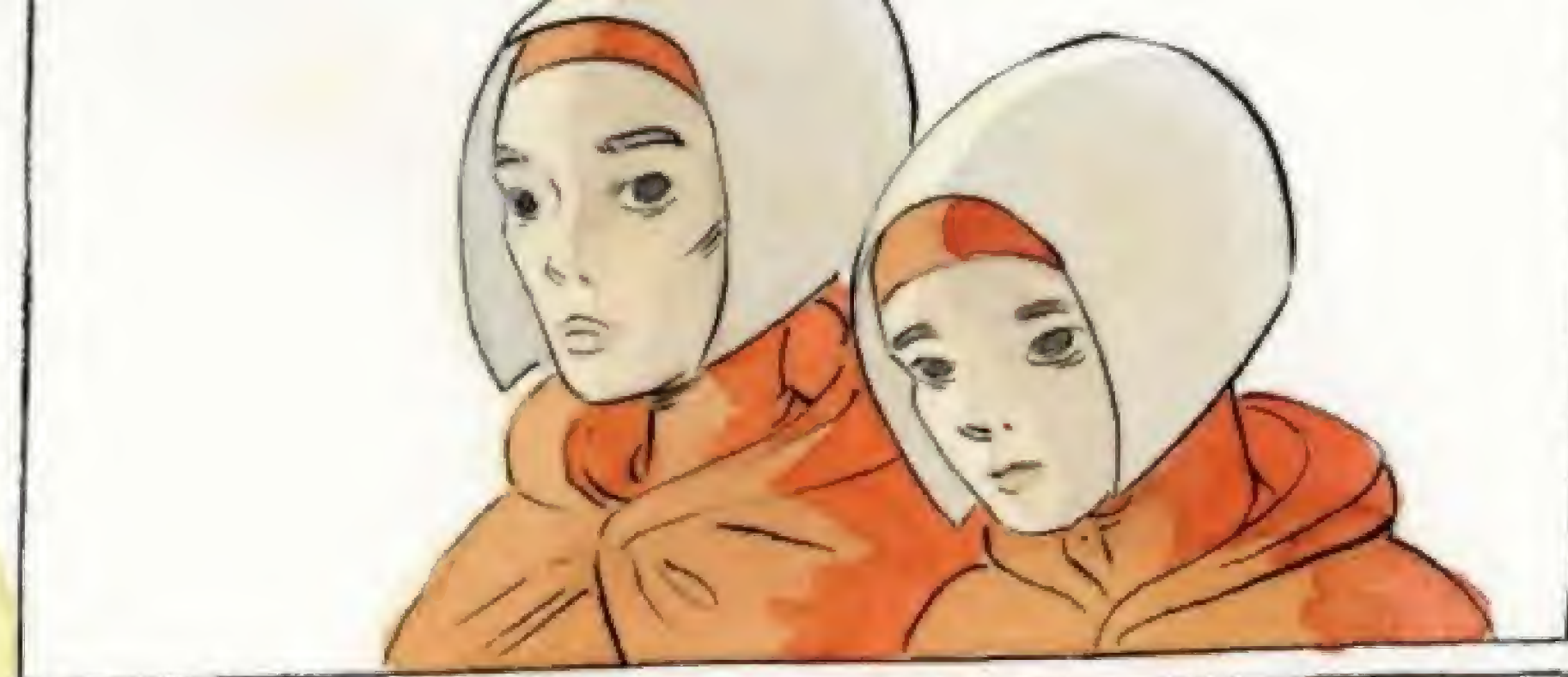


What the machines print is prayers:
for health, wealth, a death, a birth, a sin.

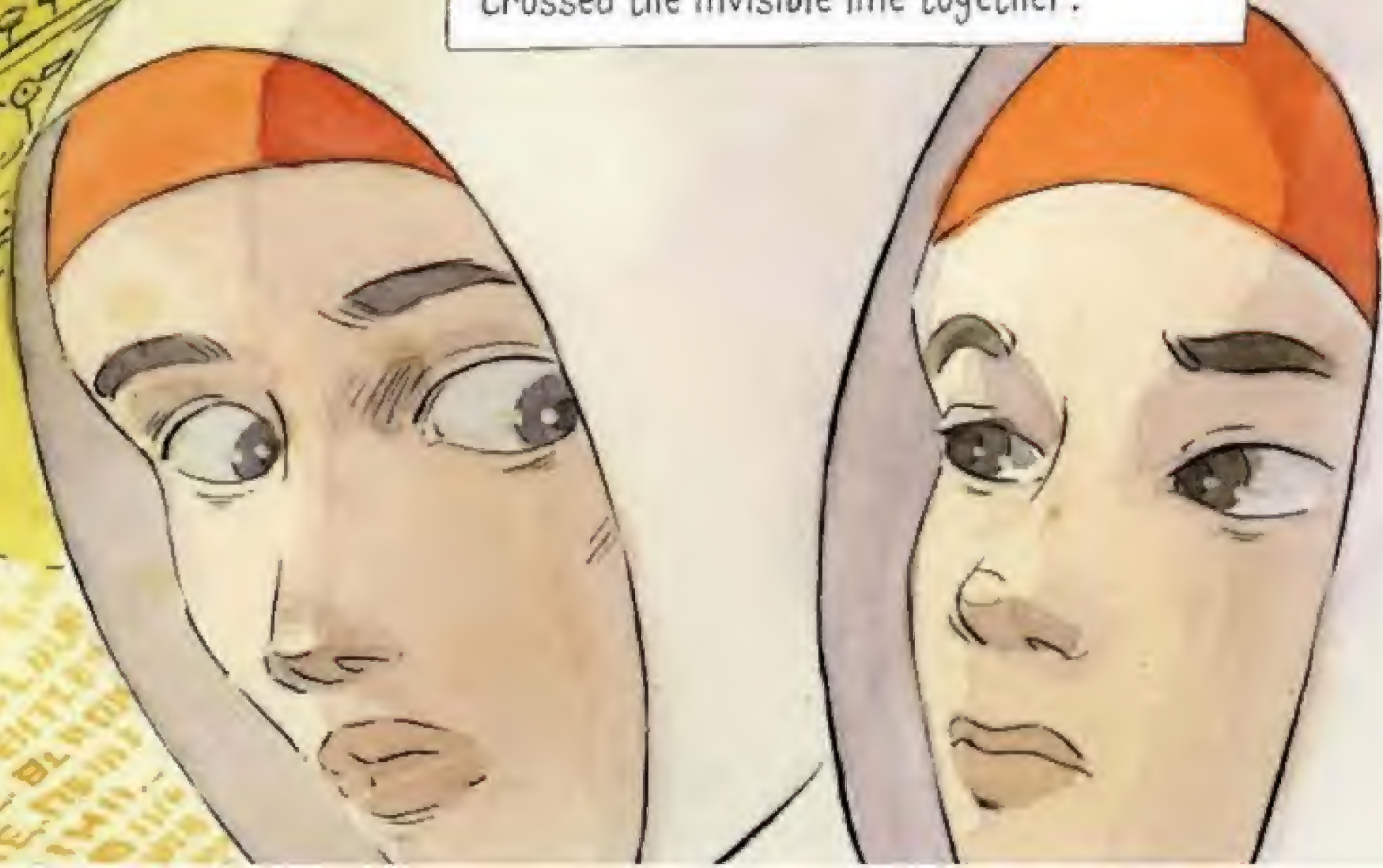
You pick the one you want, punch in your number
so your account will be debited, and punch in the
number of times you want the prayer repeated.

The machines talk as they print out the prayers; if you
like, you can go inside and listen to them, the toneless
metallic voices repeating the same thing over and over.





In the past this would have been a trivial enough remark. Now it's treason. We have crossed the invisible line together.





Is it safe here?

I figure it's the safest place. We look like we're praying, is all.

You're always safest out of doors, no mikes, and why would they put one here? They'd think nobody would dare.

But we've stayed long enough. There's no sense in being late getting back.

Keep your head down as we walk. And lean just a little towards me. That way I can hear you better. Don't talk when there's anyone coming.

I thought you were a true believer.

I thought you were.

You were always so stinking pious.

So were you!

You can join us.



Us?

You didn't think I was the only one.











What I feel is relief.
It wasn't me.



If you disapprove,
just say it.

Well, yeah,
matter of fact
I do.

You're poaching on another
woman's ground, that's
what you're doing.



Luke isn't a fish!
Or a piece of dirt either.
He's a human being. He can
make his own decisions.

You're
rationalizing.

I'm in love!

That's
no excuse.

Of course you don't
have this problem any more.
Seems you don't have any scruples
about stealing women - or
borrowing them - whenever
you feel like it.

Different situation.
The balance of power is equal
between two women, so sex is
an even-steven transaction.



In those days I worked transferring books to computer discs. Discers, we called ourselves. We called the library a discotheque, which was a joke of ours.


All those women having jobs: hard to imagine, now, but thousands of them had jobs, millions. It was considered the normal thing. Now it's like remembering the paper money, when they still had that.

My mother kept some of it, pasted into her scrapbook along with the early photos.

It was obsolete by then, you couldn't buy anything with it.

By the time I was nine or ten most people used plastic cards. I guess that's how they were able to do it, in the way they did, all at once, without anyone knowing beforehand. If there had still been portable money, it would have been more difficult.





It was after the catastrophe, when they shot the President and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency.

They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics, at the time.

PRESIDENT ASSASSINATED

The New York Times

Army Declares State of Emergency

That was when they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn't even any rioting in the streets.

Keep calm.
Everything is
under control.

CHANNEL
3
UPDATE



People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction. There wasn't even an enemy you could put your finger on.



Newspapers were censored and some were closed down, for security reasons they said. The roadblocks began to appear, and Identipasses. Everyone approved of that, since it was obvious you couldn't be too careful.



Did you see? They've shut down the Pornomarts! We've been fighting to get those shit holes banned for ages.



Right result, wrong reason. And it's not stopping there, you can count on it.

They're scanning Identipasses at all the bridges now. They're saying there was another bomb scare, or something...

Listen, Luke, can you drive her to school tomorrow? I know the School Pool's supposed to do it, but there've been so many disappearances...

Yeah, of course I will.

...that new elections will be held, but a government insider we spoke to said that it would likely take some time to prepare for them...

That sounds reasonable to me, Bob. What many people don't understand about planning something at this level is that...



Hear about the Pornomarts?
Gone. The Feels on Wheels vans
and Bun-Dle Buggies too.

Yeah. Good
riddance.




'Course they probably
just moved them off
somewhere else.

Trying to get rid of it
altogether is like trying to
stamp out mice, you know?










I'm sorry.
But it's the law.
I really am
sorry.




For what?




I have to let
you go.

It's the law,
I have to. I have to
let you all go.




We're being
fired? But
why?




Not
fired. Let go.

You can't work
here any more,
it's the law.




You can't
just do that.




You don't understand.
Please go, now. I don't
want any trouble.

If there's trouble
the books might be lost,
things will get broken...



They're
outside.

If you don't
go now they'll come
in themselves.



Since none of us understood
what had happened, there was
nothing much we could say.

We looked at one another's faces and saw dismay,
and a certain shame, as if we'd been caught doing
something we shouldn't.

What was it about this that
made us feel we deserved it?



Tried getting anything on your Compucard today?

They've frozen them. Mine too. Any account with an F on it instead of an M. All they needed to do was push a few buttons. We're cut off.



But I've got over two thousand dollars in the bank!

Women can't hold property any more. It's a new law. Turned on the TV today?

Luke can use your Compucount for you. They'll transfer your number to him, or that's what they say.

Husband or male next of kin.



But what about you?



I'll go underground.



But...why?

Why did they?



They had to do it that way. The Compucounts and the jobs both at once. Can you picture the airports, otherwise?

They don't want us going anywhere, you can bet on that.



I heard. On the car radio, driving home. Don't worry, I'm sure it's temporary.

Did they say why?

Mommy!

We'll get through it.



You don't know what it's like. It's like somebody cut off my feet.

It's only a job.



I guess you get all my money. And I'm not even dead.

Hush. You know I'll always take care of you.

Already he's starting to patronize me.



Already I'm starting to get paranoid.





What's the matter?



I don't know.



We still have...

We? No one's taken anything from you, that I'm aware of.



I'm sorry. I didn't mean...



No, I'm sorry.

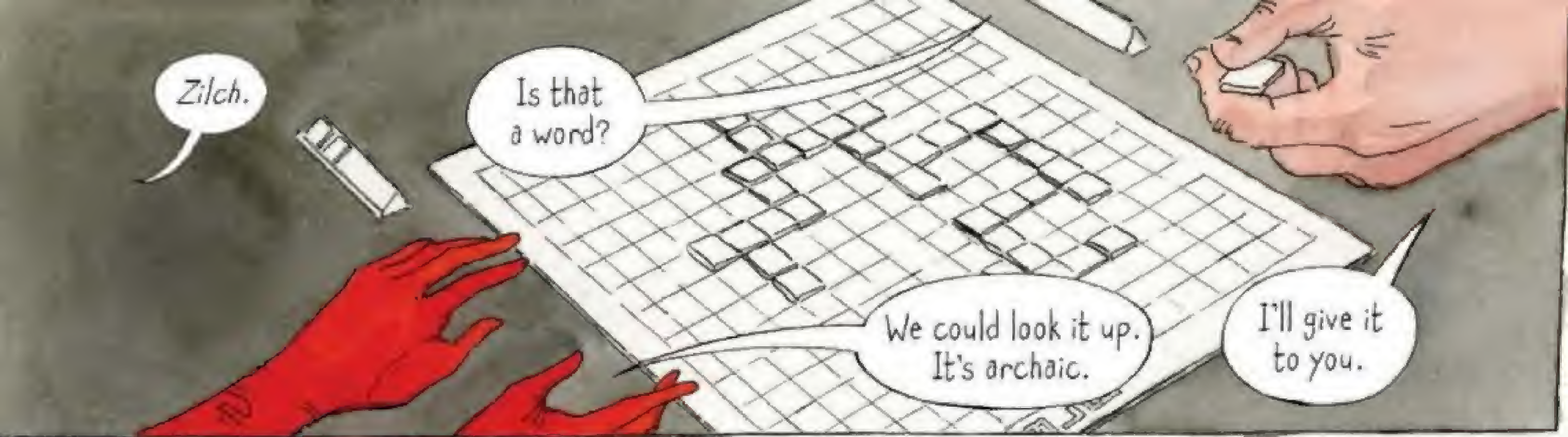



We still have each other.

But something had shifted, some balance. I felt shrunken, so that when he put his arms around me, gathering me up, I was small as a doll.

He doesn't mind this, I thought. He doesn't mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's, any more. Instead, I am his.


So Luke: what I want to ask you now, what I need to know is, Was I right? Because we never talked about it. By the time I could have done that, I was afraid to. I couldn't afford to lose you.





It's sort of hard to explain why it's funny unless you know Latin. We used to write all kinds of things like that - you know how schoolboys are.

But what did it mean?



Oh, it meant, "Don't let the bastards grind you down." I guess we thought we were pretty smart, back then.

I can see why she wrote that, in the cupboard, but I also see that she must have learned it, here, in this room. Where else? She was never a schoolboy.

I have not been the first, then.

What happened to her?

Did you know her somehow?

Somehow.

She hanged herself.

That's why we had the light fixture removed. In your room...

Serena found out.

As if this explains it. And it does.

If your dog dies, get another.

XI

NIGHT

That's where she was swinging,
just lightly, like a pendulum;
the way you could swing as a child,
hanging by your hands from a branch.





Maybe she's still in here, with me.

I feel buried.

XII

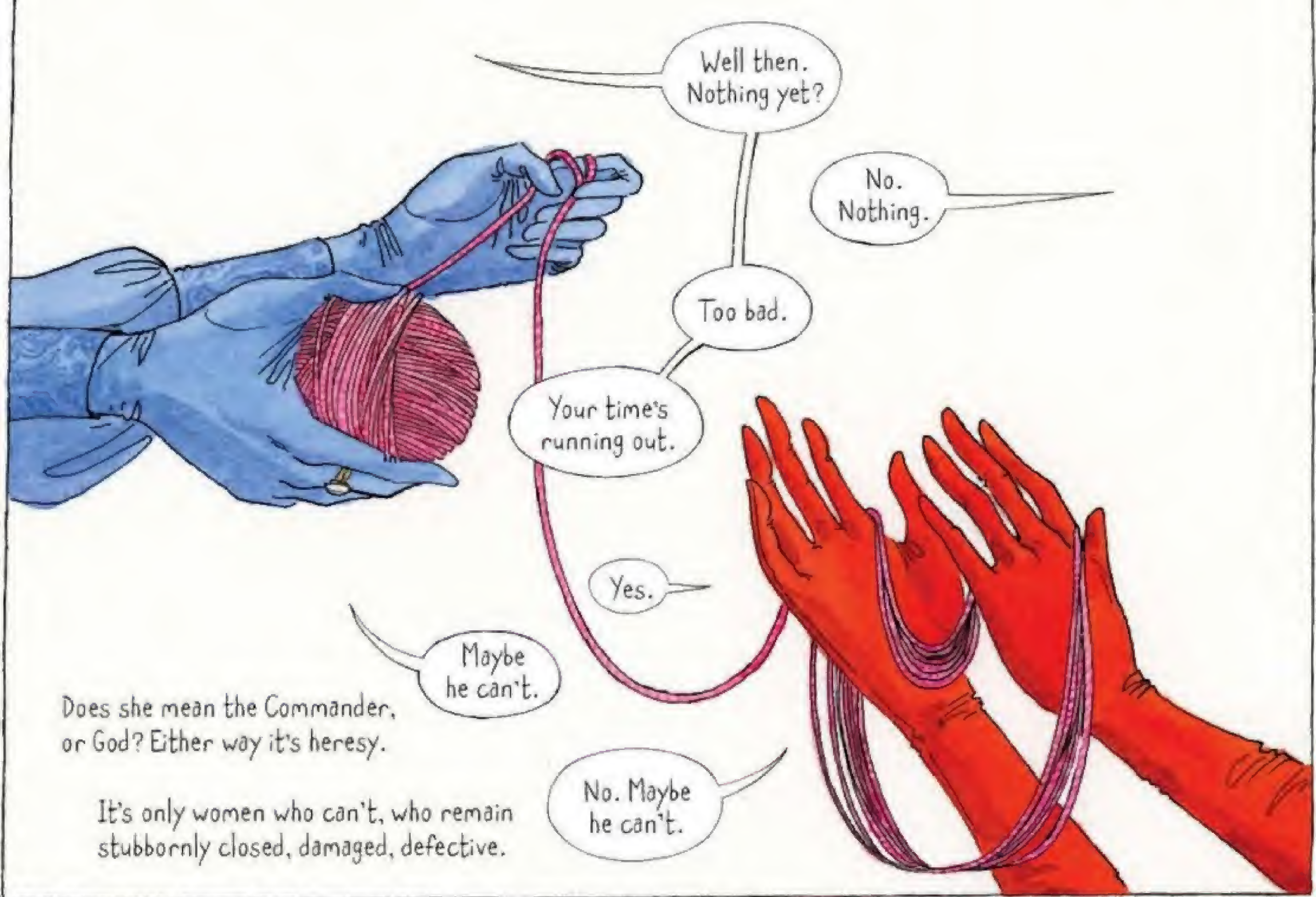
J E Z E B E L ' S



Every night when I go to bed I think, In the morning I will wake up
in my own house and things will be back the way they were.

It hasn't happened this morning, either.







Yes. I know
you can't officially.
But it's done.

Women do it frequently.
All the time.



With doctors,
you mean?

Some do that.
That's how Ofwarren
did it. The Wife knew,
of course.

But it doesn't have
to be a doctor.

It could be
someone we trust.



Who?

I was thinking of Nick.
He's been with us a long
time. He's loyal.

I could fix
it with him.

But what about
the Commander?

Well. We just
won't tell him,
will we?



Maybe I could get
something for you.
Something you want.

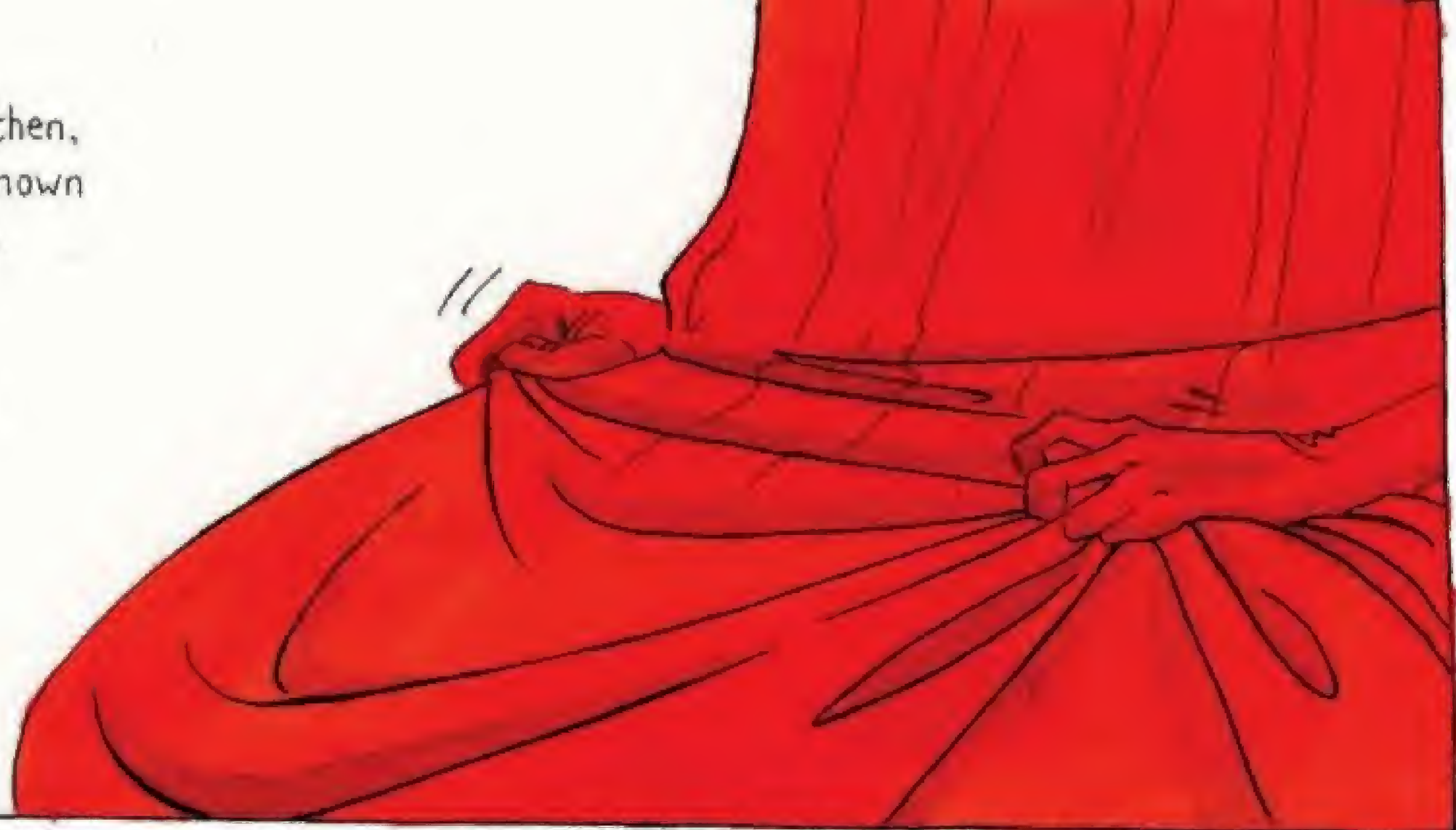
A picture.
Of her.

Your little
girl.

She knows where they've put her then,
where they're keeping her. She's known
all along. The bitch, not to tell me,
bring me news, any news at all.
Not even to let on.

But I can't say this.

I can't let go of this hope.



All right.
Yes.

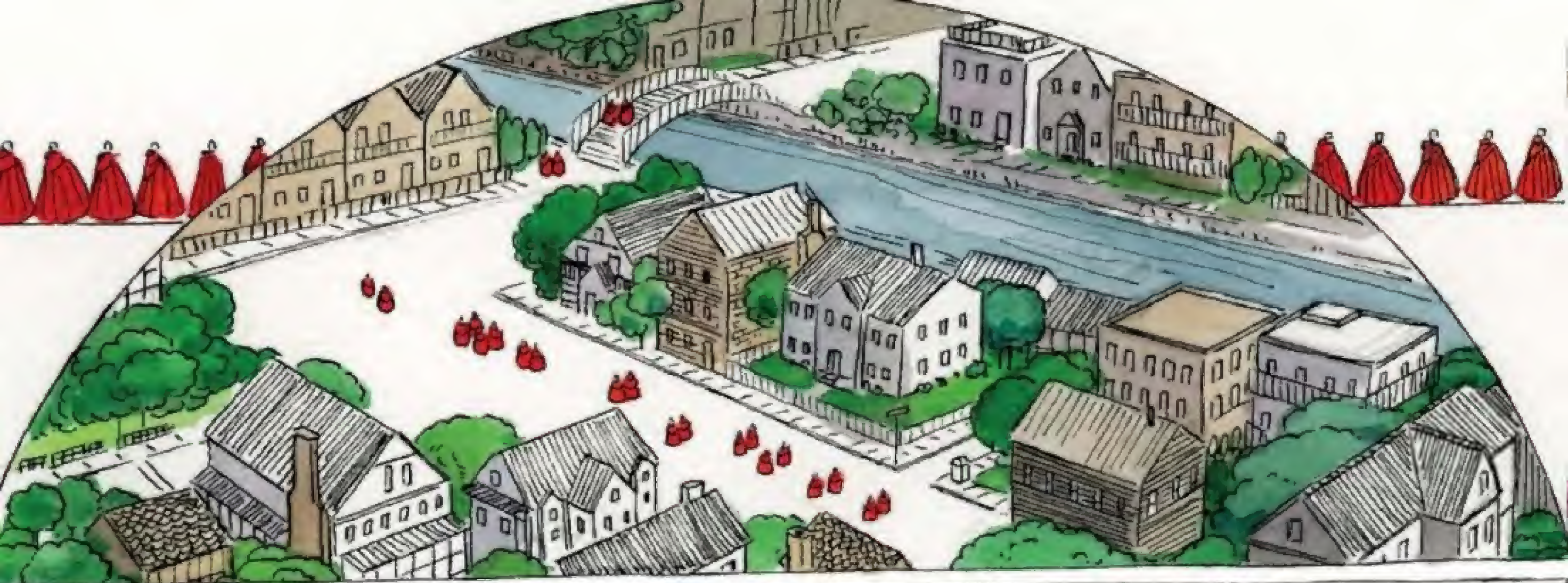


Find yourself a match.
They're in the kitchen,
you can ask Rita for one.
Tell her I said so.

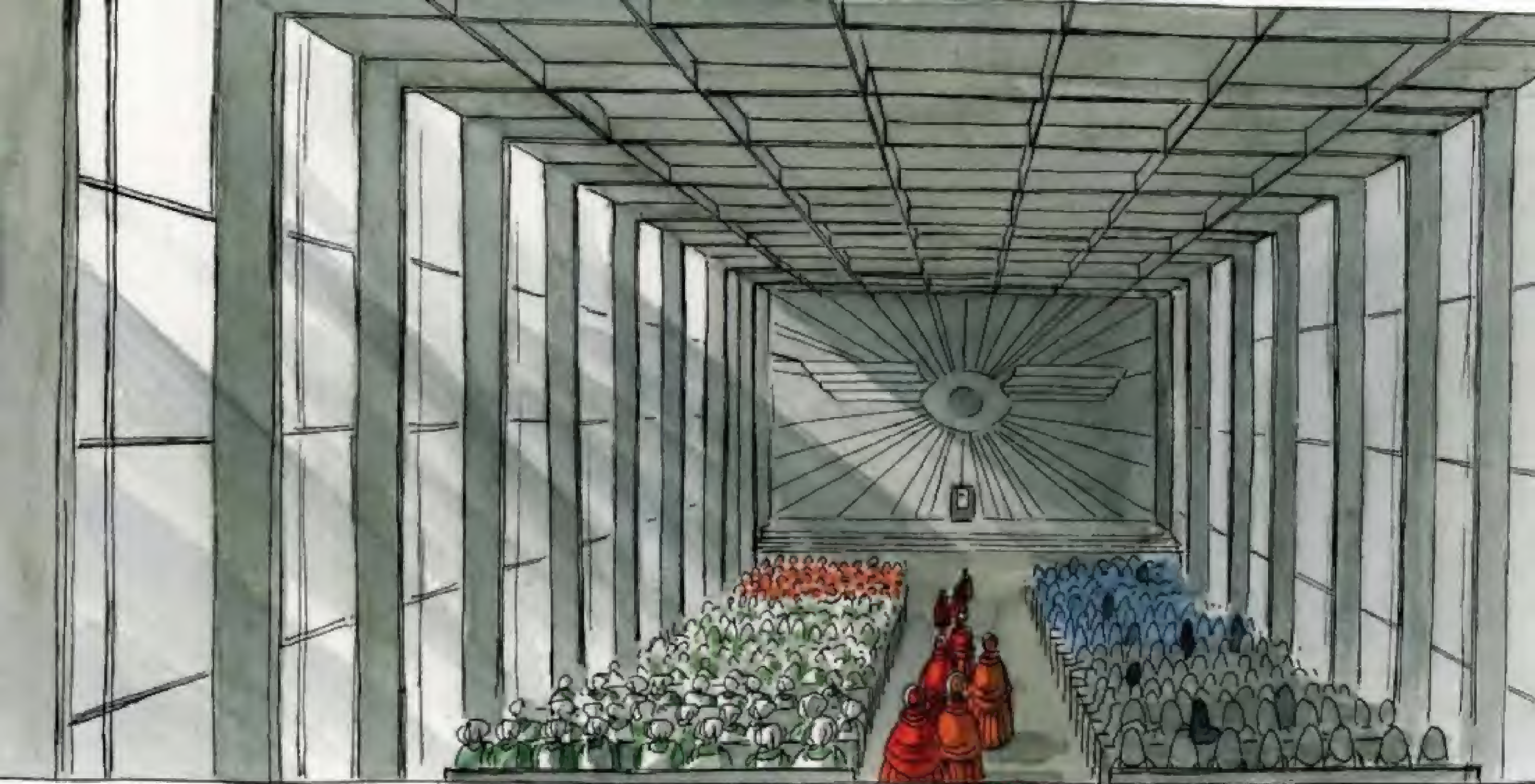


Only the one,
though. We don't
want to ruin your
health!











Today is a day of
thanksgiving. A day
of praise...

Look.

Isn't it too early?
She should be
home with -

It was no good.
It was a shredder
after all.

My God.

It's her
second.

Not counting her own,
before. She had an
eighth-month miscarriage,
didn't you know?

She thinks it's her
fault. Two in a row.

For being
sinful.

Janine?
Janine?



Hello...my name's Janine...
I'm your waitperson for this
morning...can I get you some
coffee to begin with?





You can't stay there,
you aren't there any more.
That's all gone.

What did you hit me for?
Wasn't it good? I can bring
you another. You didn't
have to hit me...



Look at me.

My name is
Moirra and this is
the Red Centre.

Look at me.



They won't send you to the
Infirmary, so don't even think
about it. They won't mess around
with trying to cure you. They
won't even bother to ship you
to the Colonies.

You go too far away and they
just take you up to the Chemistry Lab
and shoot you. Then they burn you up
with the garbage, like an Unwoman.
So forget it.



I want to
go home.



Jesus God.

That's enough. She'll be here in one minute, I promise you. So put your goddamn clothes on and shut up.



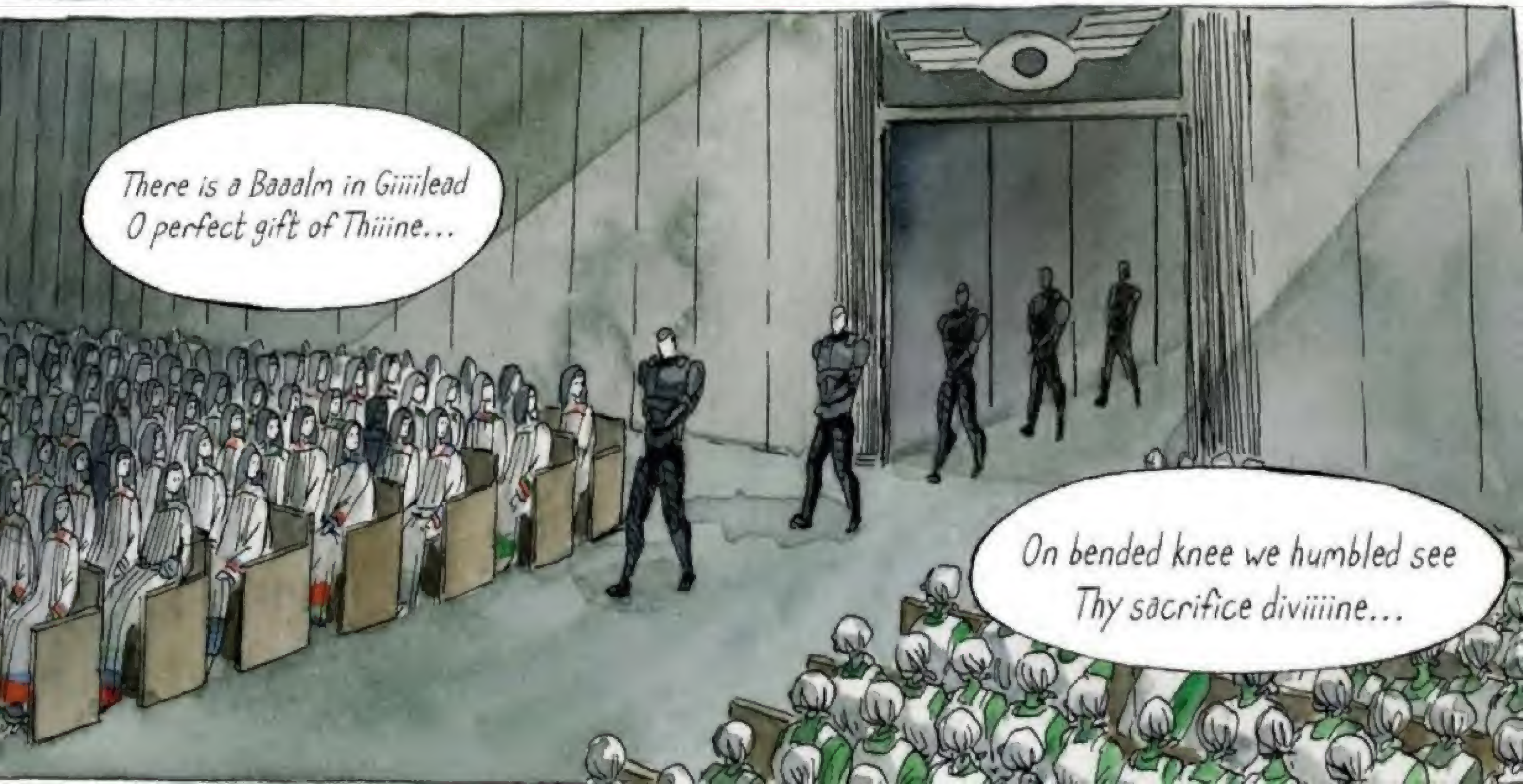
She does that again and I'm not here, you just have to slap her like that. You can't let her go slipping over the edge.

That stuff is catching.



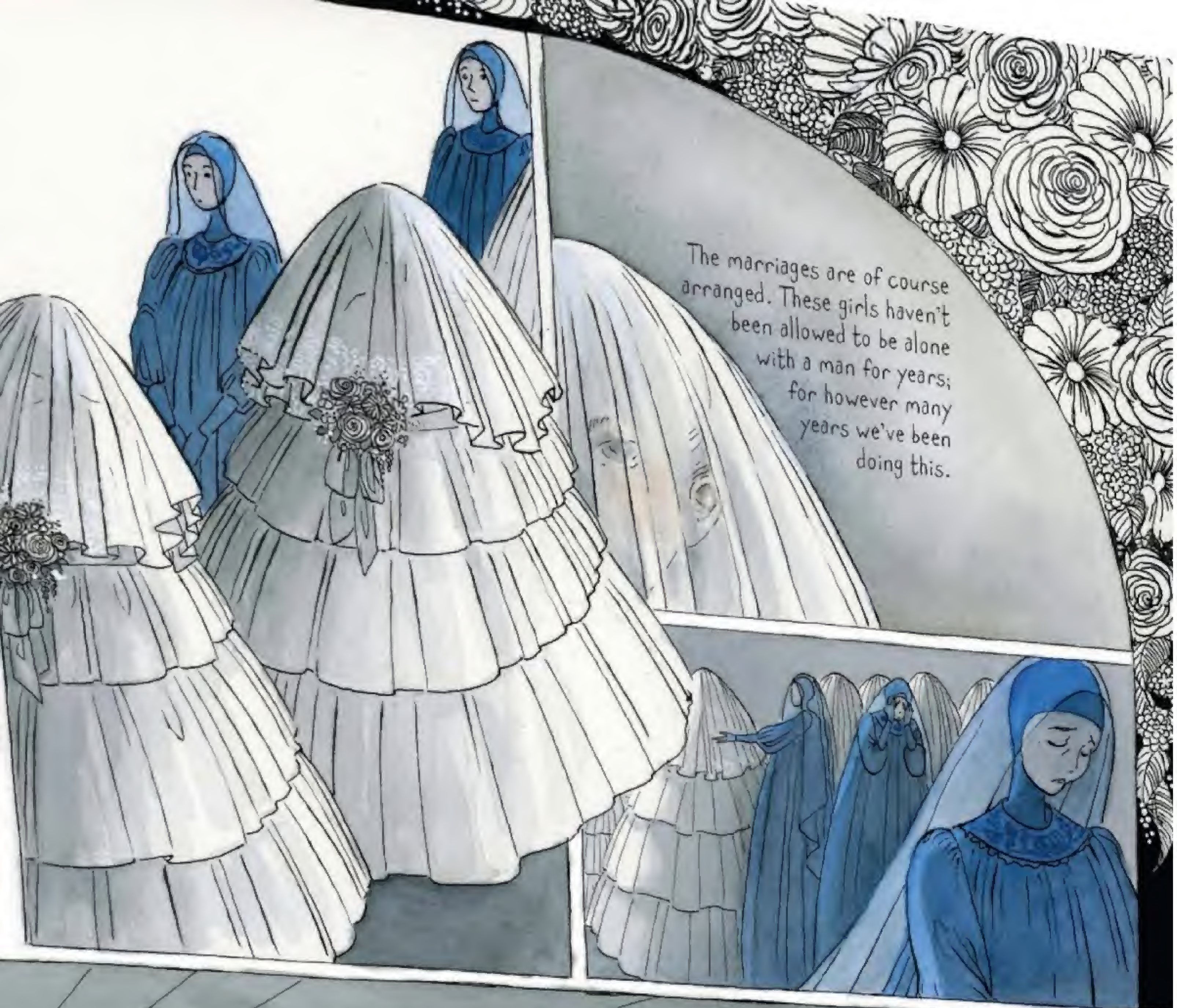
Join me now in singing Hymn 734:
"There is a Balm in Gilead."

*There is a Baaalm in Giilead
O perfect gift of Thiine...*



*On bended knee we humbled see
Thy sacrifice diviiiine...*





The marriages are of course arranged. These girls haven't been allowed to be alone with a man for years; for however many years we've been doing this.



*I will that women adorn themselves
in modest apparel, with shamefacedness
and sobriety; not with braided hair, or
gold, or pearls, or costly array...*



The problem wasn't
only with the women.
The main problem was with
the men. There was nothing
for them any more.

Nothing? But
they had...

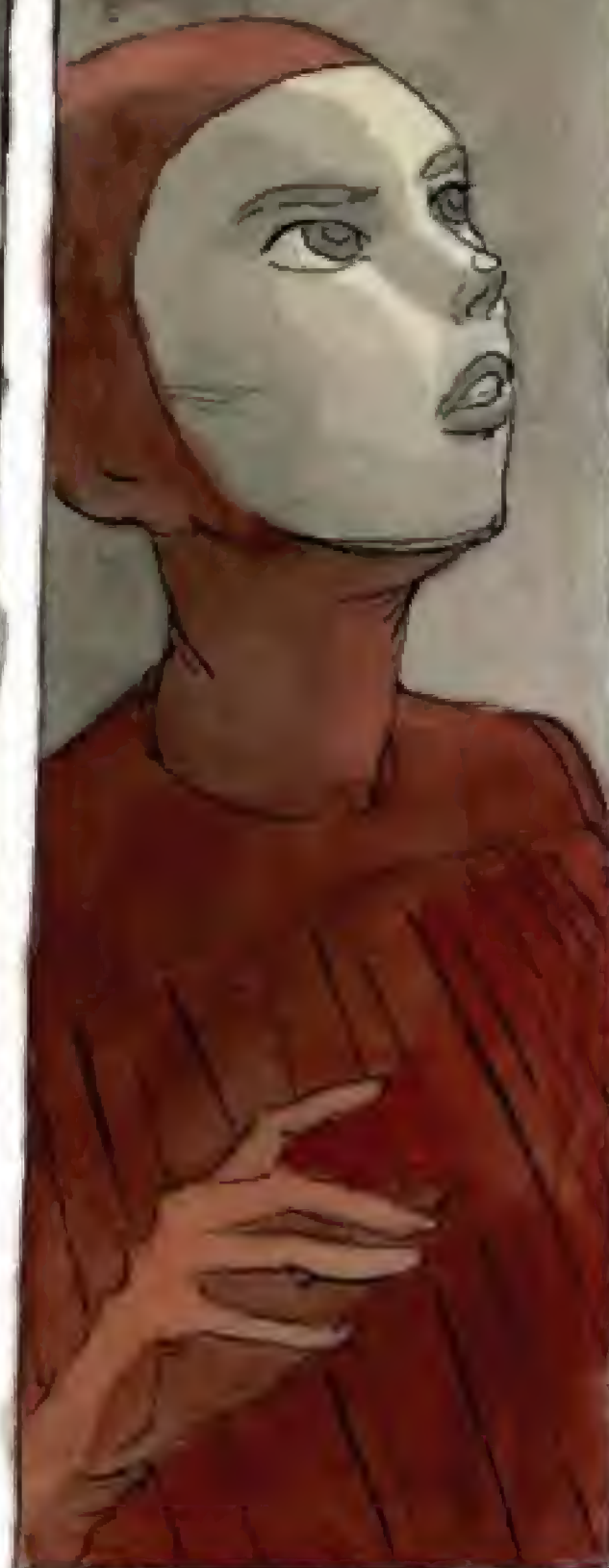
There was
nothing for
them to do.

They could
make money.

It's not enough.
It's too abstract. I mean,
there was nothing for them
to do with women.

What do
you mean?

What about all the
Pornycorners, it
was all over the
place, they even
had it motorized.



I'm not talking about sex.
That was part of it, the
sex was too easy. Anyone
could just buy it. There
was nothing to work for,
nothing to fight for.



We have the stats from
that time. You know what
they were complaining about
the most? Inability to feel.

Do they
feel now?

Yes.
They do.




*...But I suffer not a woman
to teach, nor to usurp authority over
the man, but to be in silence. For Adam
was first formed, then Eve. And Adam
was not deceived...*

Are they old enough to remember
anything of the time before, playing
baseball, in jeans and sneakers, riding
their bicycles? Reading books, all by
themselves? Even though some of them
are no more than fourteen - *Start them
soon is the policy, there's not a moment
to be lost* - still they'll remember.

And the ones after them will, for three
or four or five years; but after that they
won't. They'll always have been silent.





We've given them more than we've taken away. Think of the trouble they had before. Don't you remember the singles bars, the meat market?

Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off.

And if they *did* marry, they could be left with a kid, two kids, the husband might just get fed up and take off, disappear.

They got no respect as mothers. No wonder they were giving up on the whole business.

This way they're protected, they can fulfil their biological destinies in peace.

*Notwithstanding she
shall be saved by childbearing,
if they continue in faith and charity
and holiness with sobriety.*



I like to know
what you think.

What I think
doesn't matter.

Come now.
You're intelligent enough,
you must have an opinion.
What we've done. How things
have worked out.

I have no
opinion.

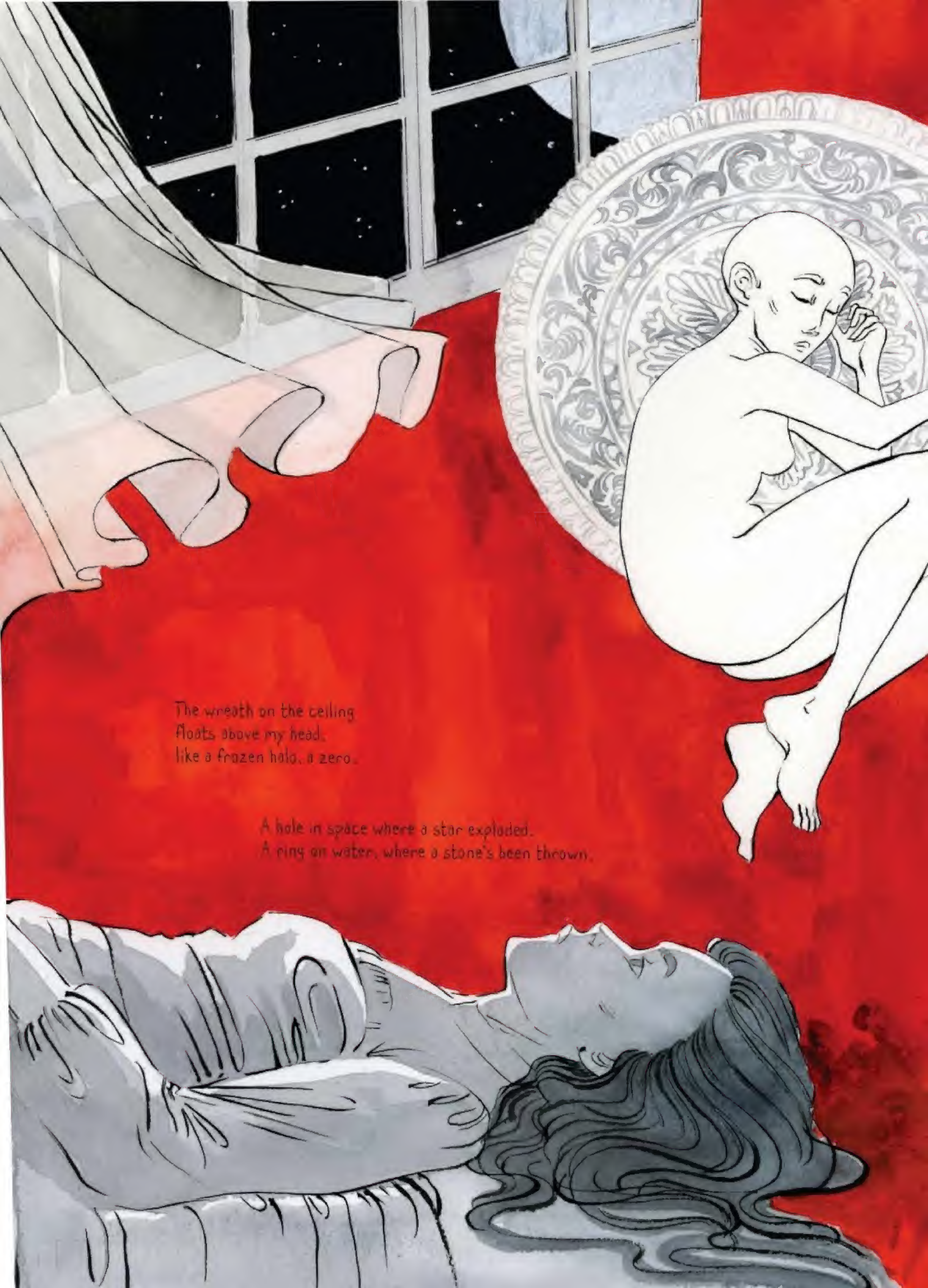
You can't make
an omelette without
breaking eggs.

We thought we
could do better.

Better?


Better never means better
for everyone. It always
means worse, for some.





The wreath on the ceiling
floats above my head,
like a frozen halo, a zero.

A hole in space where a star exploded.
A ring on water, where a stone's been thrown.



Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own.

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will.

There were limits but my body was nevertheless lithe, solid, one with me.

Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping.

Of all the dreams this is the worst.

It's a Saturday morning, it's a September.



We're going on a day trip,
that's what we are planning
to tell them at the border.



She thinks we're
going on a picnic,
that's what we told
her. We give her
a sleeping pill so
she'll be asleep
when we cross.

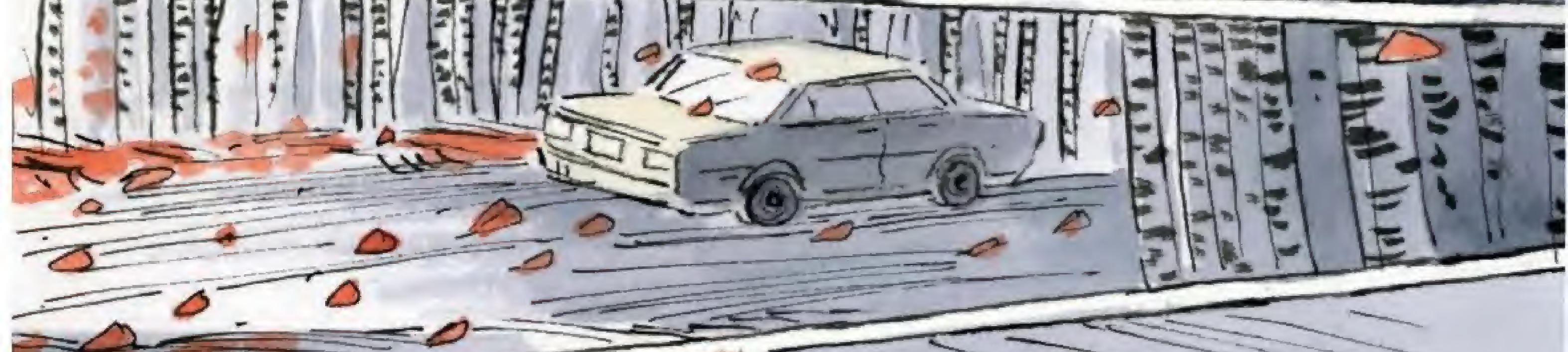
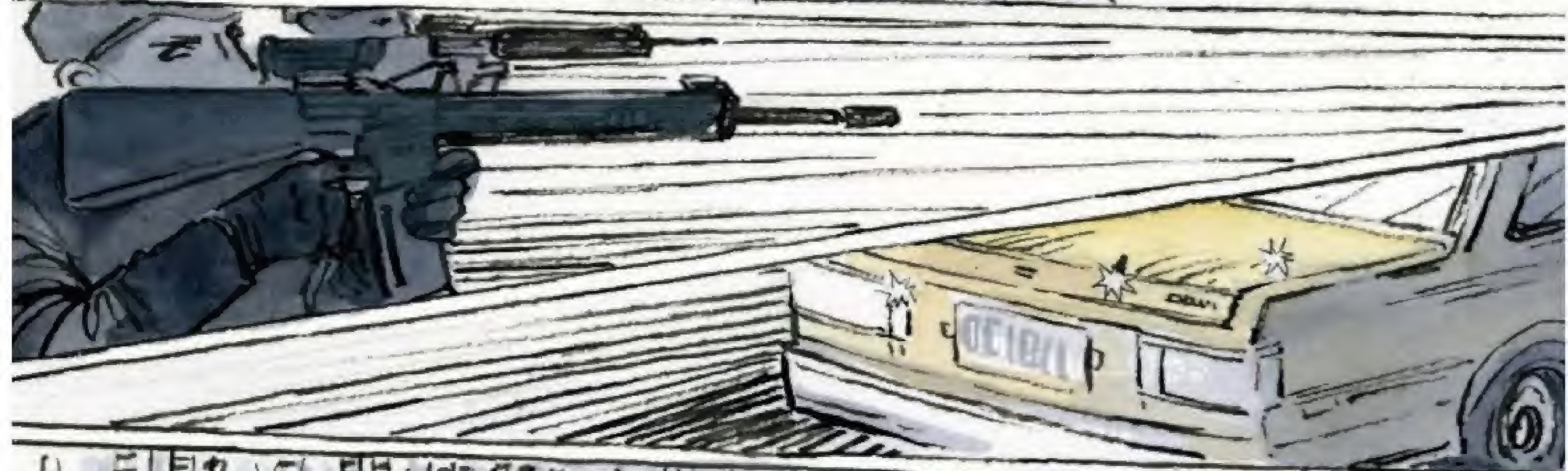


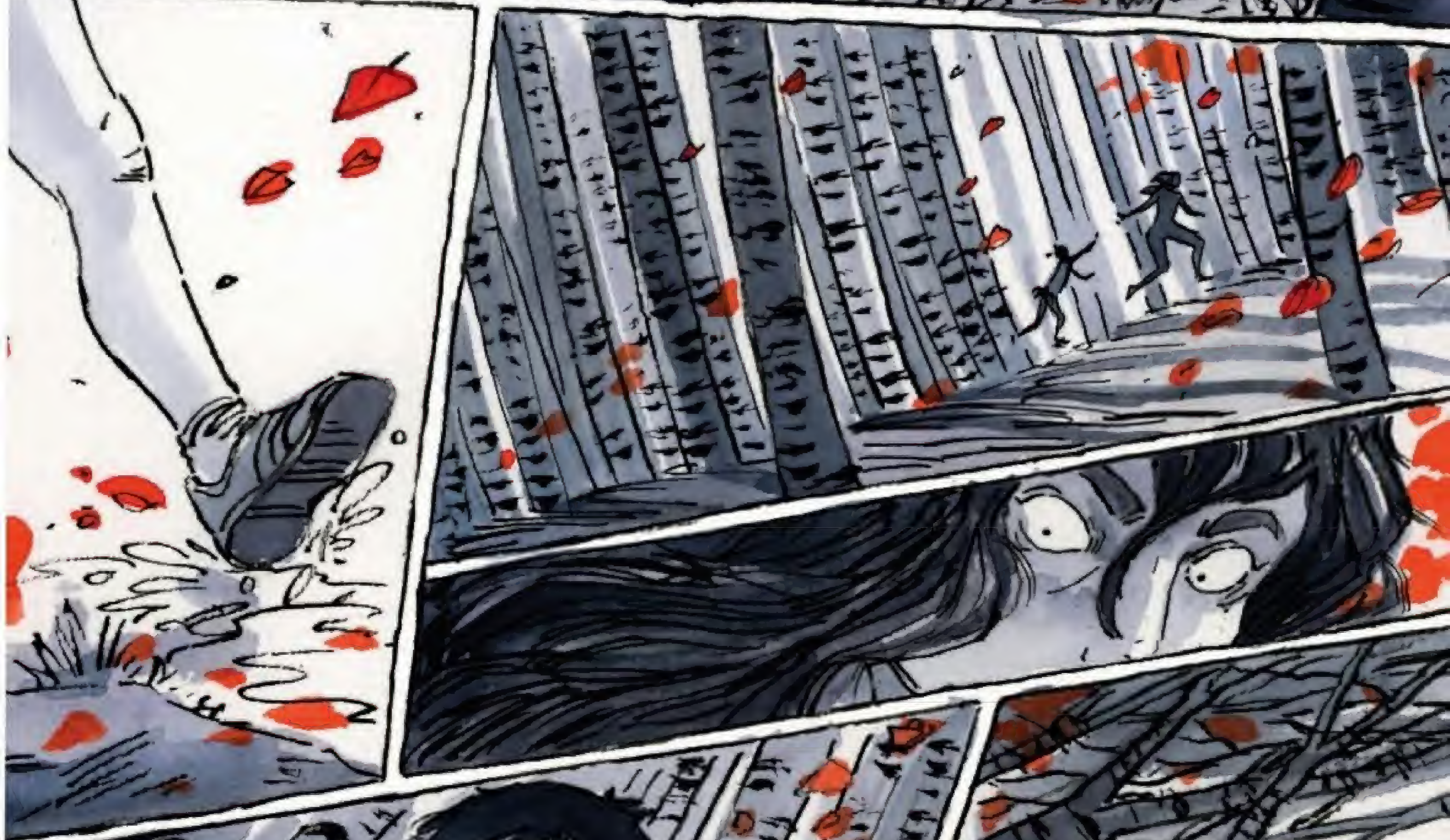
We have nothing with us, we
don't want to look as if we're
going anywhere permanent.

We have forged passports,
guaranteed, worth the price.













KNOCK

KNOCK



I've brought
it for you.

You can only have
it for a minute. I have
to return it, before they
know it's missing.



Time has not stood still.

It has washed over me, washed me away,
as if I'm nothing more than a woman of sand,
left by a careless child too near the water.

I am only a shadow now, far back behind the glib
shiny surface of this photograph. A shadow of
a shadow, as all dead mothers become.

You can see it in her eyes:
I am not there.













Now I'll have to ask
you to get down onto
the floor of the car.

Down?

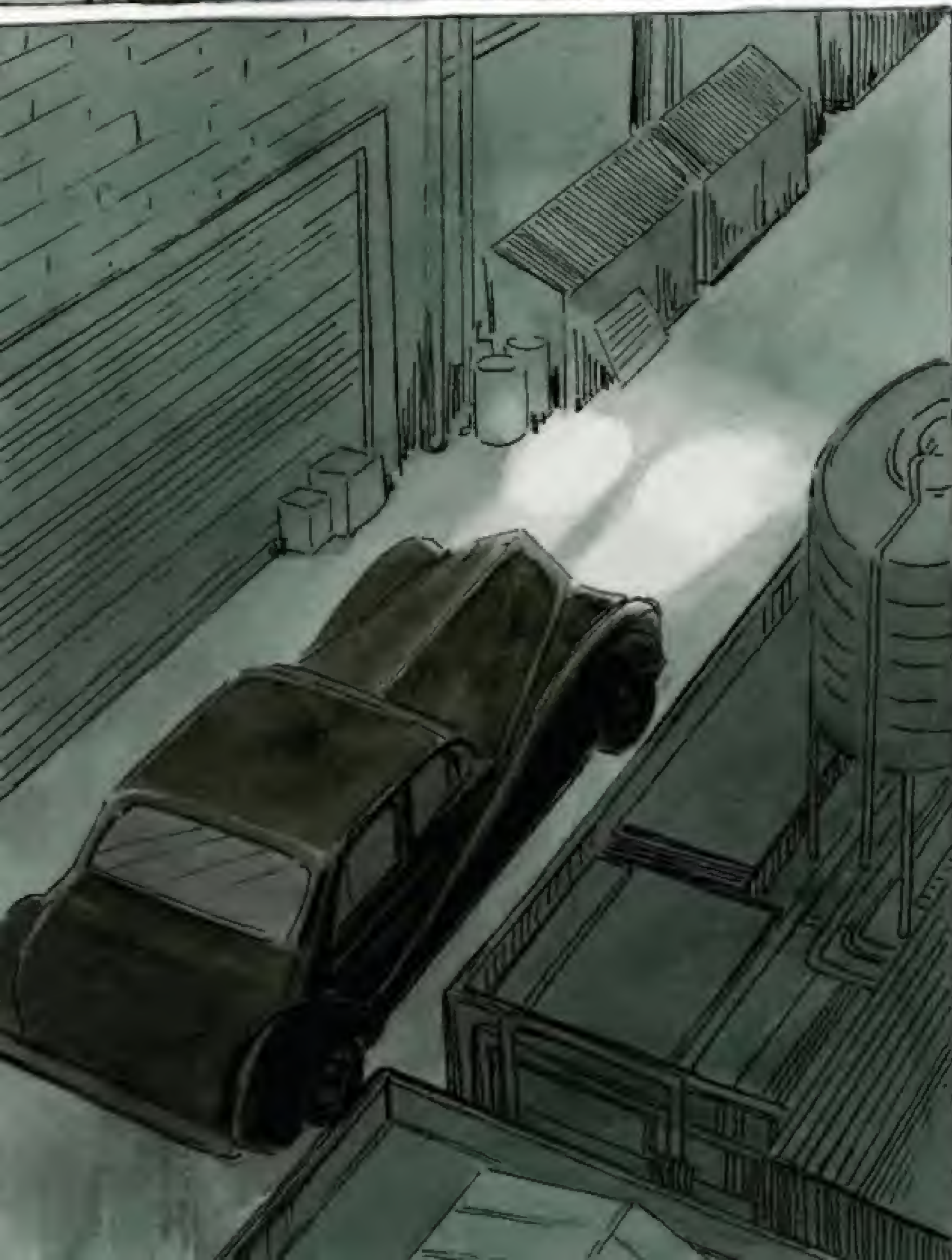
Wives aren't
allowed.



May I see your
pass, Sir?



Thank you, Sir.
Enjoy your evening.




We'll have to be
fast. This is a back
entrance.









It's like walking
into the past.
Don't you think?

Well? What do
you think of our
little club?

I thought this
sort of thing was
strictly forbidden.

Well, officially.
But everyone's
human, after all.

You can't cheat
Nature. Nature demands
variety, for men.

It stands to
reason, it's part of the
procreational strategy.

It's Nature's
plan.



Have a drink!
They've got everything
here. Imported.

Who are
these people?

It's only for officers.
And senior officials. And trade
delegations, of course.
It stimulates trade.



No. I mean
the women.

Oh. Well, some of them
are real pros. Working girls
from the time before.

They couldn't be
assimilated; anyway, most
of them prefer it here.

And the
others?

Well, we have quite a collection.
That one there, the one in green,
she's a sociologist. Or was. That one
was a lawyer, that one was in
business, an executive position.
They prefer it here, too.

Prefer it
to what?









What the hell are you doing here?
Not that it isn't great to see you.
But it's not so great for you.

What'd you do wrong?
Laugh at his dick?

I'm temporary.
It's just tonight.
He smuggled me in.



Some of them do that,
they get a kick out of it.

It's like screwing
on the altar or something:
your gang are supposed to be such
chaste vessels. They like to see you
all painted up. Just another
crummy power trip.




We don't have much time left.
Tell me everything.

What's the
point?



I almost
made it out.






The Underground
Femaleroad, you know?

They got me up as far as Salem, then
in a truck full of chickens into Maine.
I almost puked from the smell.

You ever thought about what it would
be like to be shot on by a truckload
of chickens, all of them carsick?



They were planning to get me across the border
there; not by car or truck, that was already too
difficult, but by boat, up the coast.



I don't know what happened. Maybe somebody got cold feet about it, or somebody outside got suspicious.

We didn't end up at the Red Centre, though, we went somewhere else. I won't go into what happened after that. I'd rather not talk about it.

All I can say is they didn't leave any marks.

When that was over they showed me
a movie. Know what it was about?
It was about life in the Colonies.




In the Colonies, they spend
their time cleaning up.

They're very clean-minded
these days. Sometimes it's
just bodies, after a battle.

The ones in city ghettos are
the worst, they're left around
longer, they get rottener.

This bunch doesn't like dead bodies lying around,
they're afraid of a plague or something. So the
women there do the burning.





The other Colonies are worse, though, the toxic dumps and the radiation spills.


They figure you've got three years maximum, at those, before your nose falls off and your skin pulls away like rubber gloves.

They don't bother to feed you much, or give you protective clothing or anything, it's cheaper not to. Anyway they're mostly people they want to get rid of.

It's old women, I bet you've been wondering why you haven't seen too many of those around any more, and Handmaids who've screwed up their three chances, and incorrigibles like me.

Discards, all of us.

I'd say it's about a quarter men in the Colonies, too. Not all of those Gender Traitors end up on the Wall.



I had my choice, they said, this or the Colonies.



So here I am.

They even give you face cream. You should figure out some way of getting in here.

You'd have three or four good years before your snatch wears out and they send you to the boneyard. The food's not bad and there's drink and drugs, if you want it, and we only work nights.

Moirra. You don't mean that.

Don't worry about me. I'm still here.

Anyway, look at it this way: it's not so bad, there's lots of women around.

Butch paradise, you might call it.

Here is what I'd like to tell.

I'd like to tell a story about how Moirra escaped, for good this time. Or if I couldn't tell that, I'd like to say she blew up Jezebel's, with fifty Commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her.

But as far as I know that didn't happen. I don't know how she ended, or even if she did, because I never saw her again.





I saw your mother.

Where?

There was a close-up, in that film they showed us. It was her all right. She was wrapped up in one of those grey things, but I know it was her.



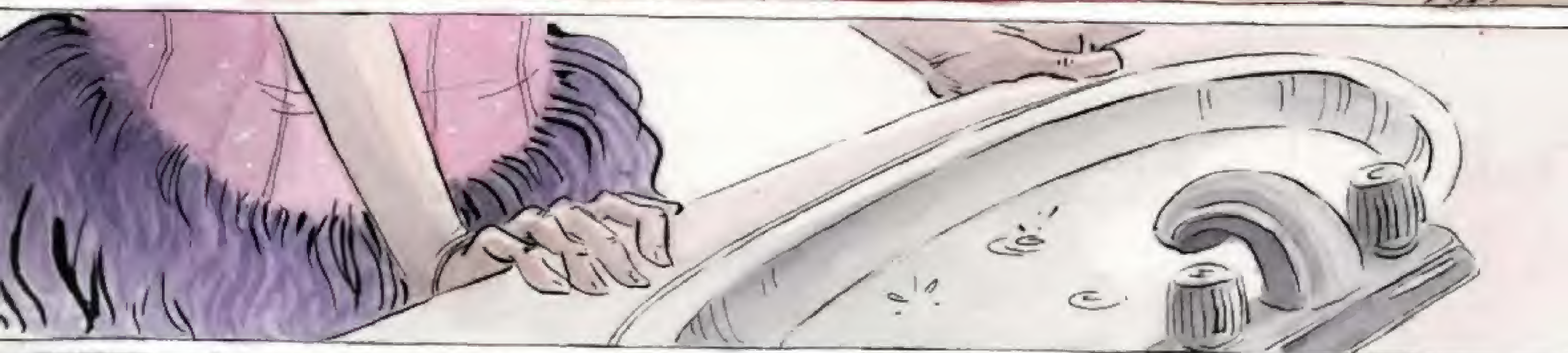


Thank God.

Why,
thank God?

I thought
she was dead.

She might as
well be. You should
wish it for her.

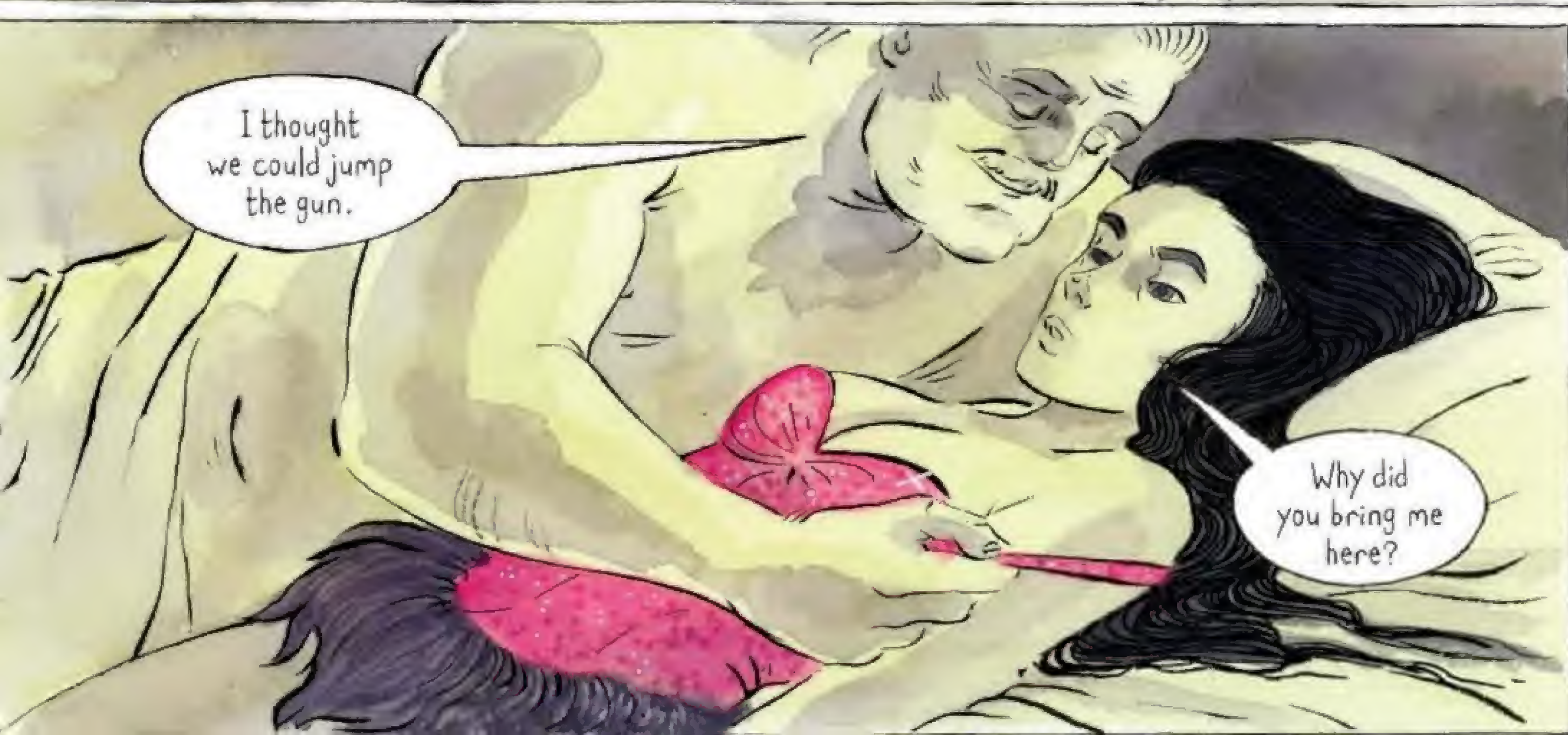
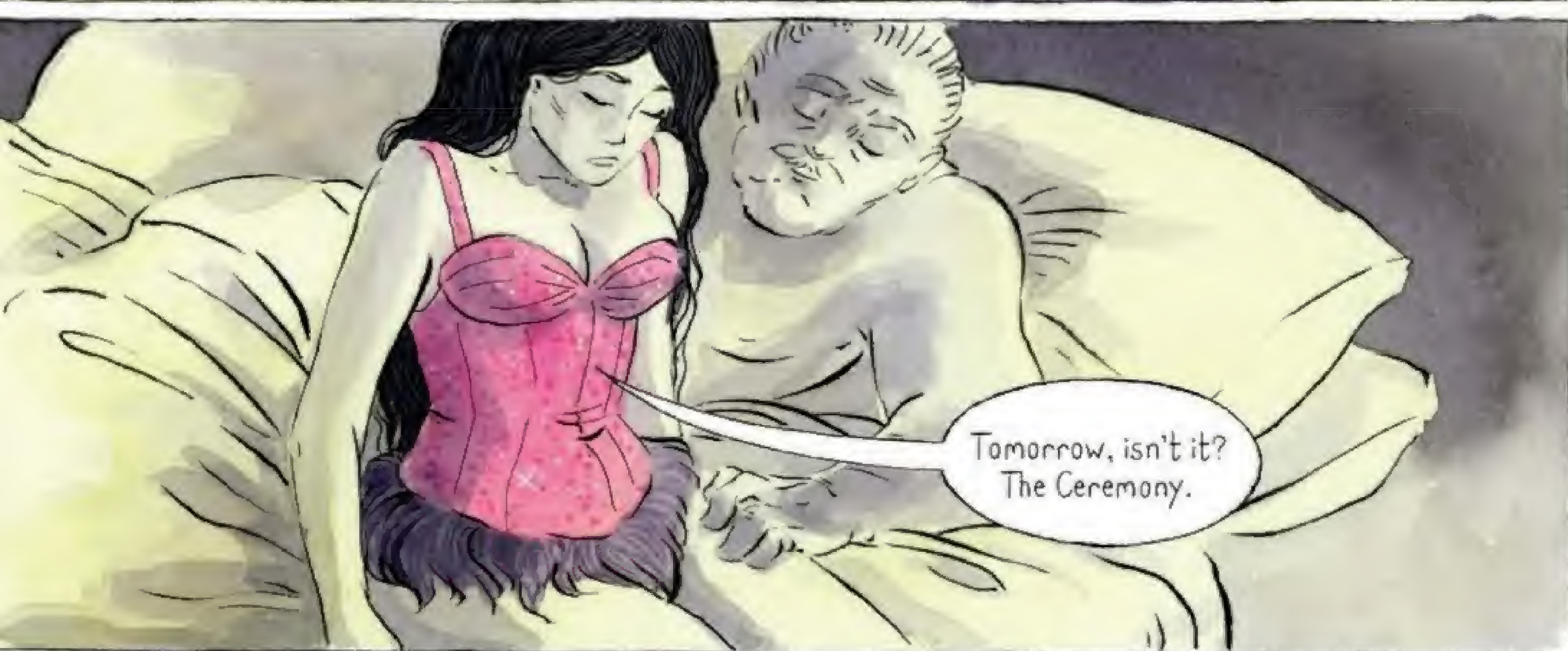


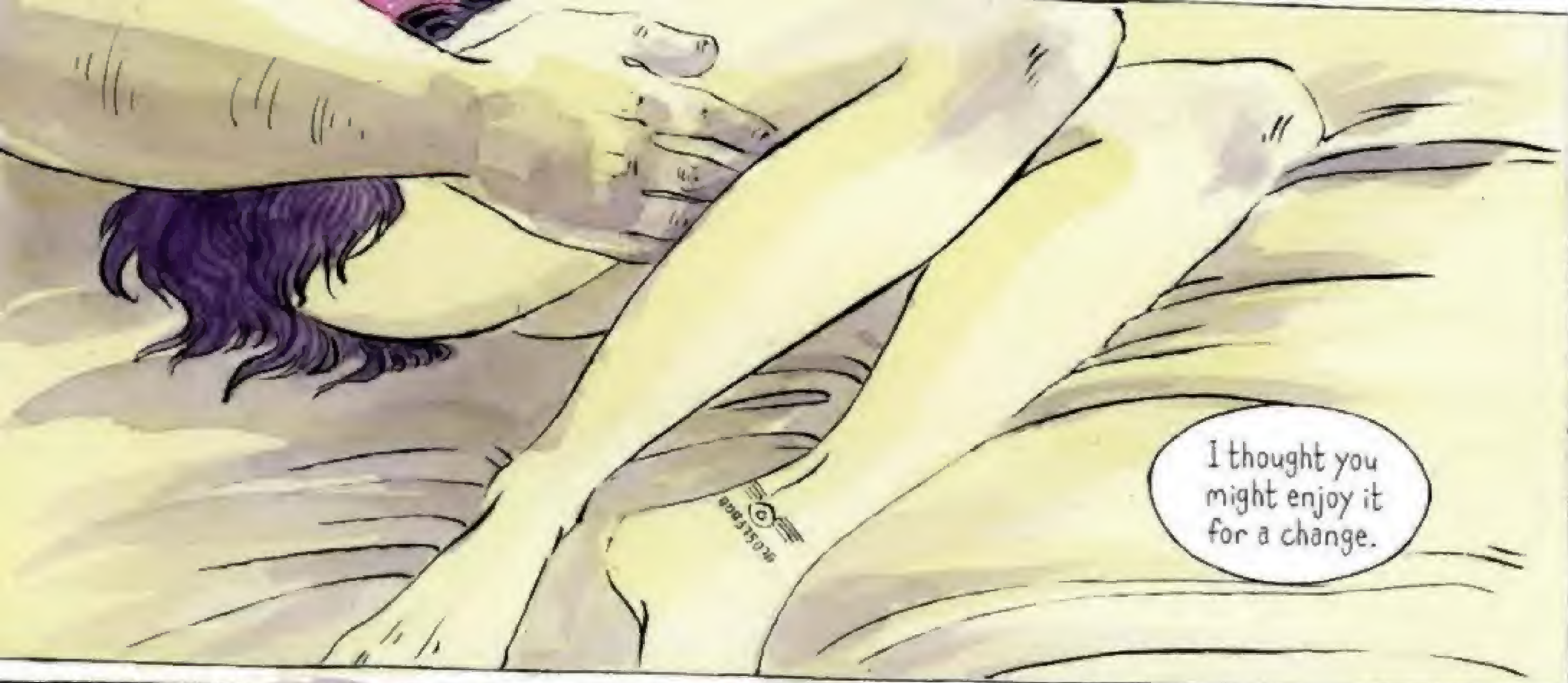
I think of my mother, sweeping up deadly toxins;
the way they used to use up old women, in Russia,
sweeping dirt. Only this dirt will kill her.

She will think of something.
But I know this isn't true.



I've mourned for her already.
But I will do it again, and again.





I thought you
might enjoy it
for a change.



I guess it was a
sort of experiment.



Maybe I should
turn the lights out.



XIII

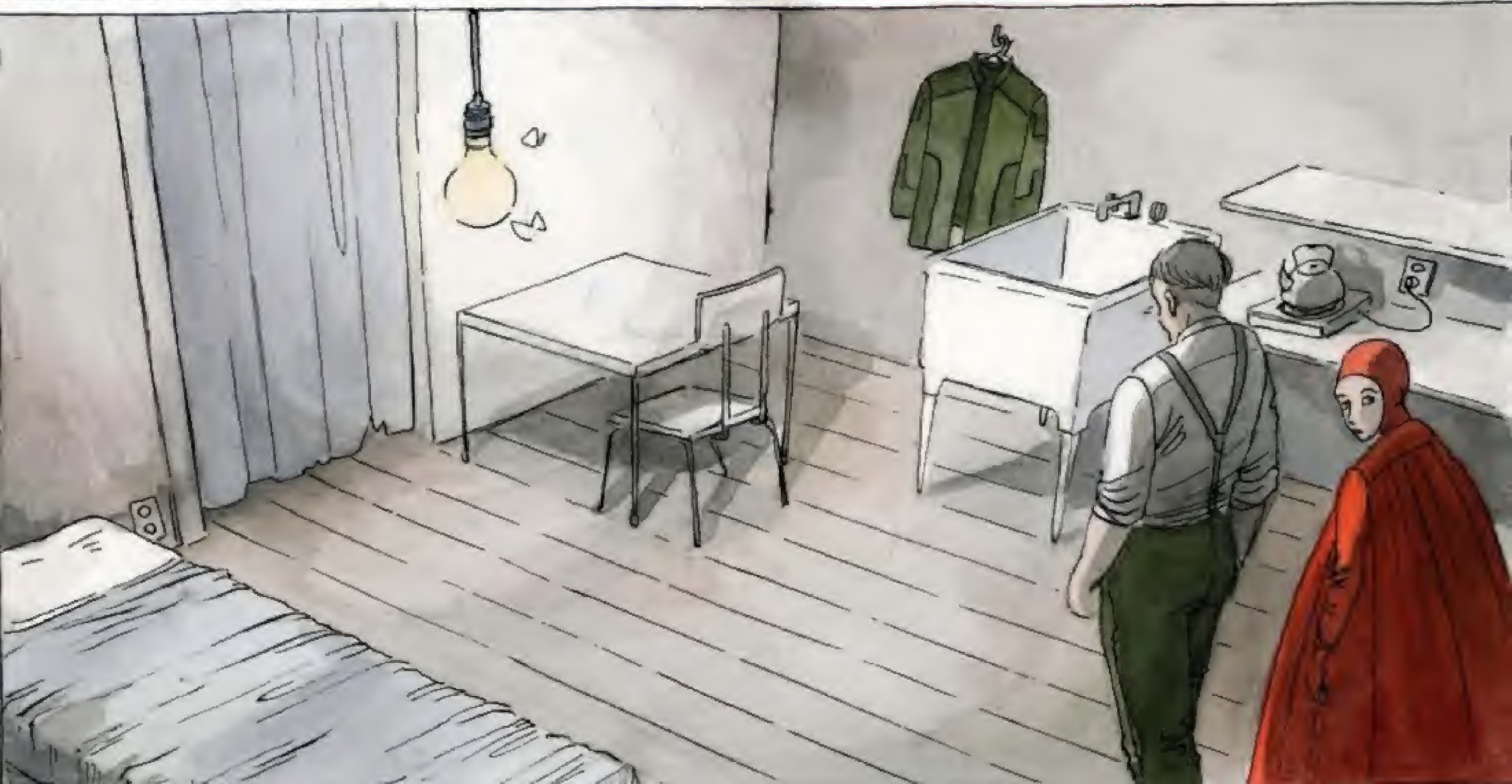
NIGHT



Serena Joy is here at midnight, as she said she'd be.

I have shed the spangles, scraped off the lipstick with toilet paper.
I hope nothing shows, I hope I don't smell of it, or of him either.









We're quoting from old movies, from the time before. And the movies then were from a time before that.


Not even my mother talked like that, not when I knew her.

Possibly nobody ever talked like that in real life, it was all a fabrication from the beginning. Still, it's amazing how easily it comes back to mind, this corny and falsely gay sexual banter. I can see now what it's for, what it was always for: to keep the core of yourself out of reach, enclosed, protected.



I'm sad now, the way we're talking is infinitely sad: faded music, faded paper flowers, worn satin, an echo of an echo. All gone away, no longer possible.



A man and a woman are lying in bed, facing each other. The woman is on the left, wearing a red dress, and the man is on the right, shirtless. They are both looking at each other with serious expressions. The man's hand is on the woman's shoulder.

No romance.
Okay?

That would have meant something else, once. Once it would have meant: no strings. Now it means: no heroics. It means: don't risk yourself for me.

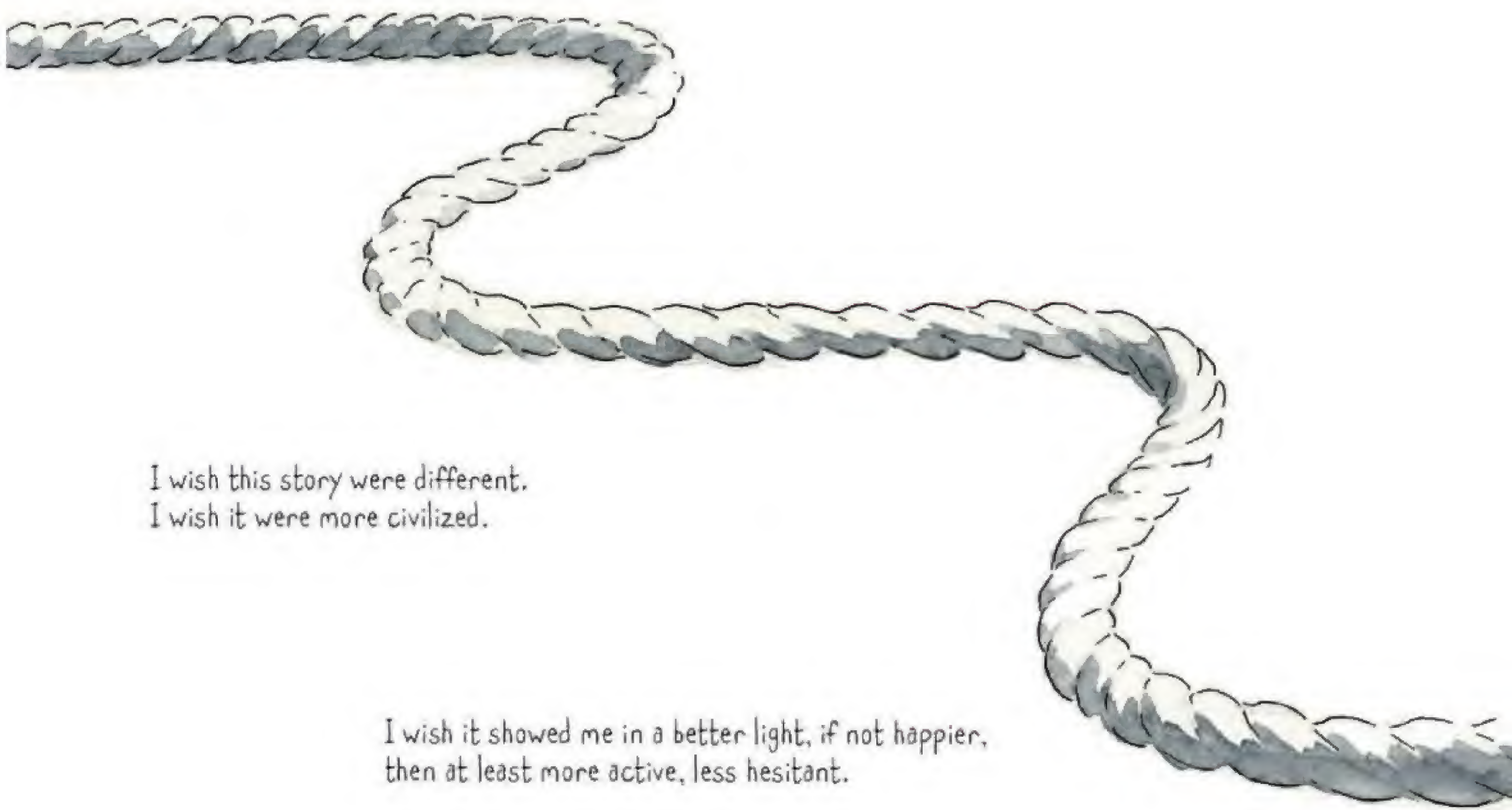
And so it goes. And so.

I thought afterwards: this is a betrayal.
Not the thing itself but my own response.
If I knew for certain Luke was dead,
would that make a difference?



XIV

SALVAGING



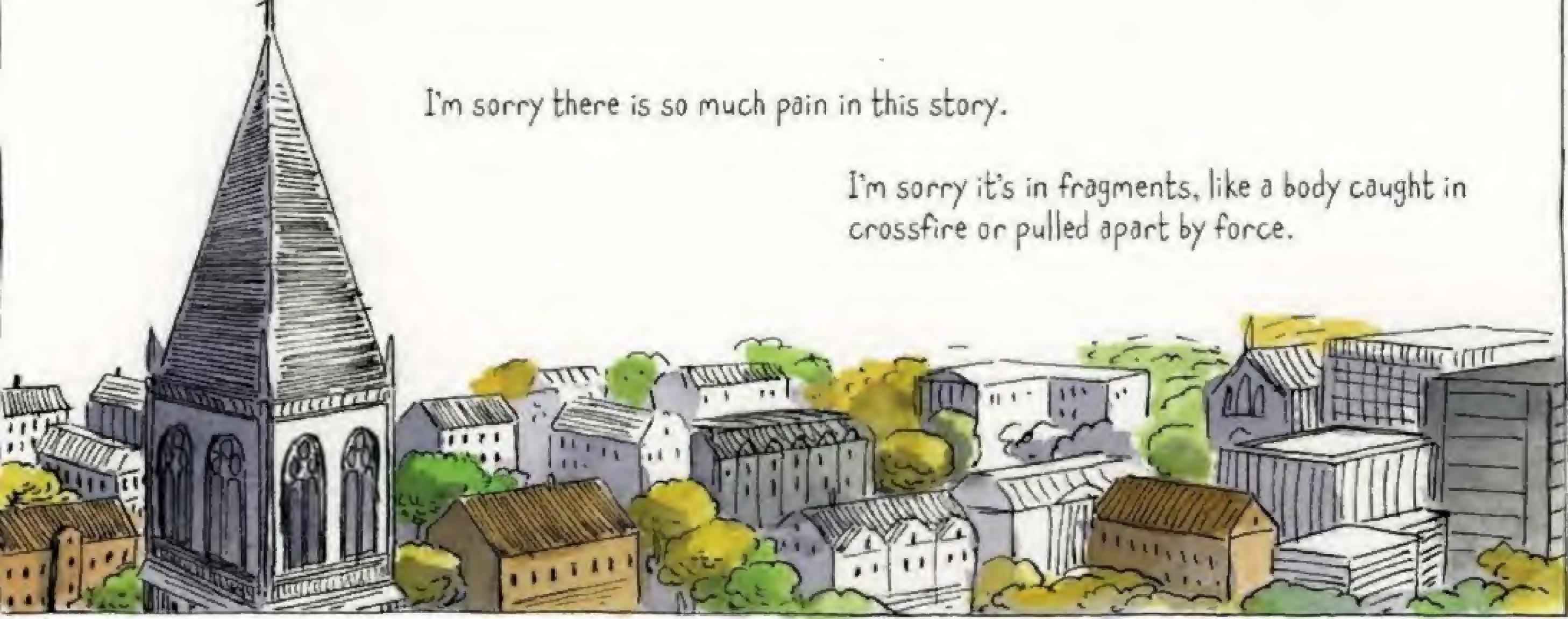
I wish this story were different.
I wish it were more civilized.

I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier,
then at least more active, less hesitant.

I wish it had more shape.

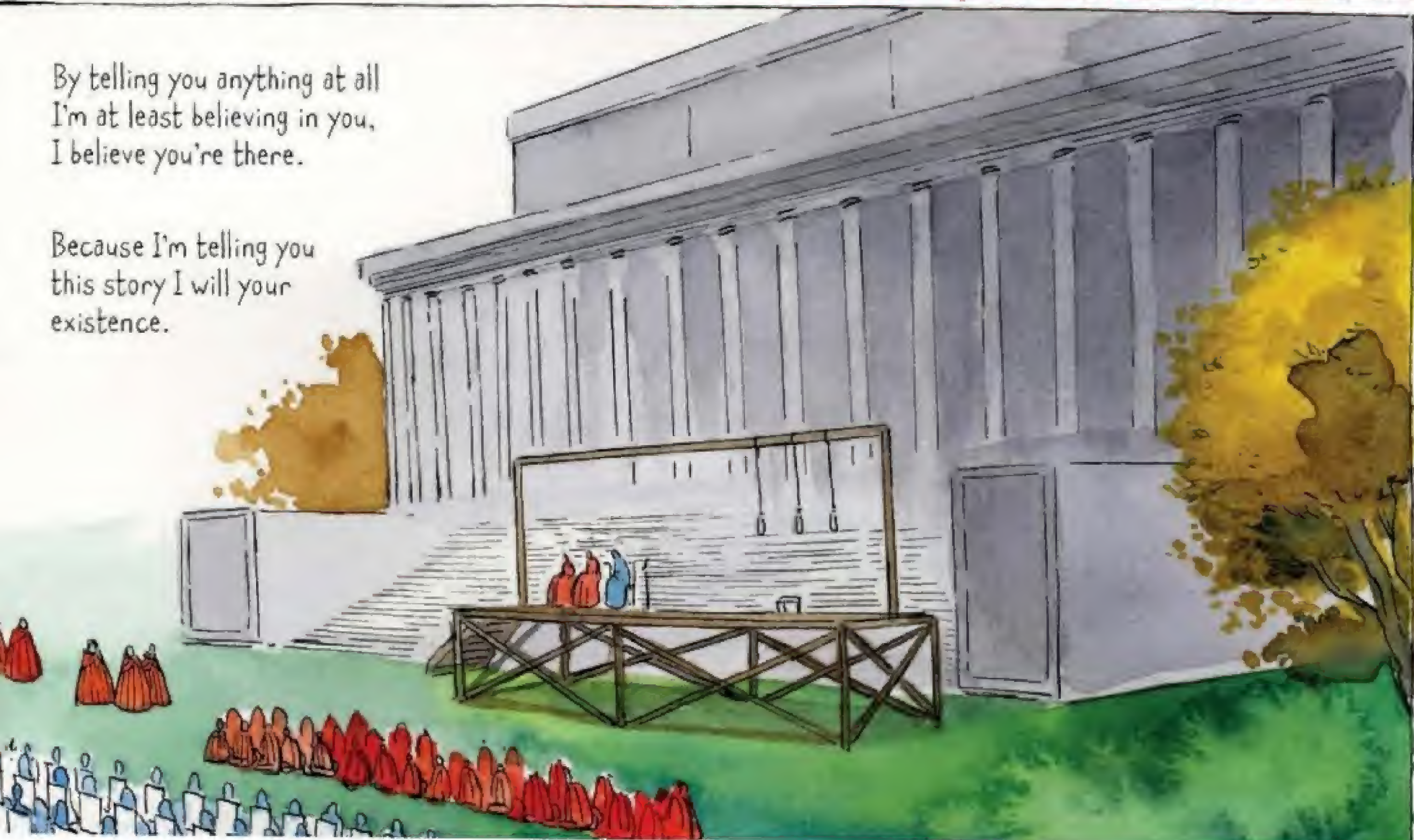
I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story.

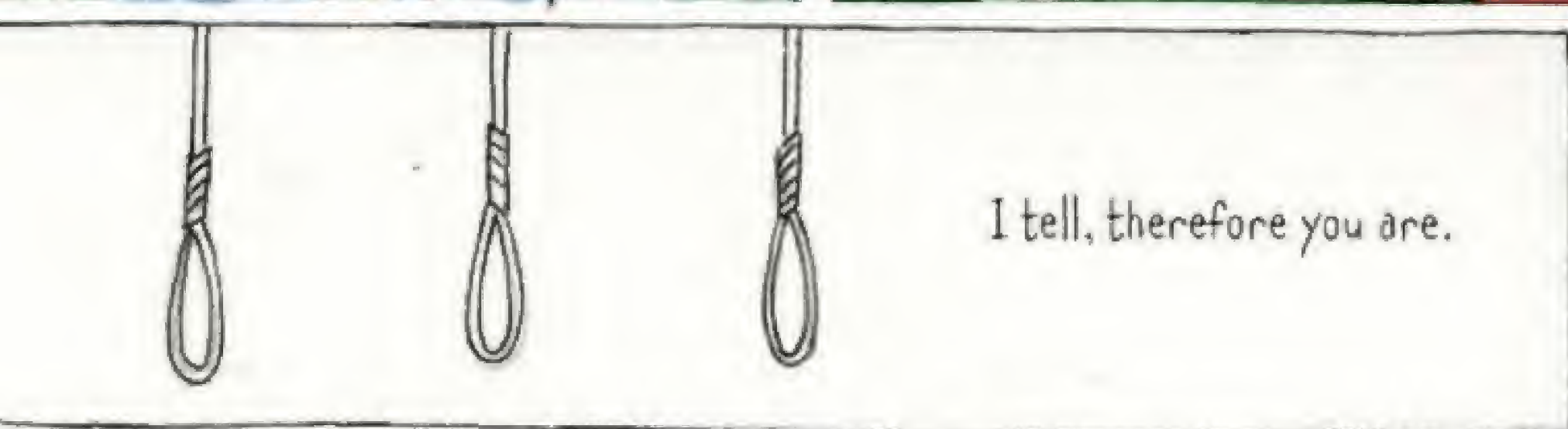
I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in
crossfire or pulled apart by force.



By telling you anything at all
I'm at least believing in you,
I believe you're there.

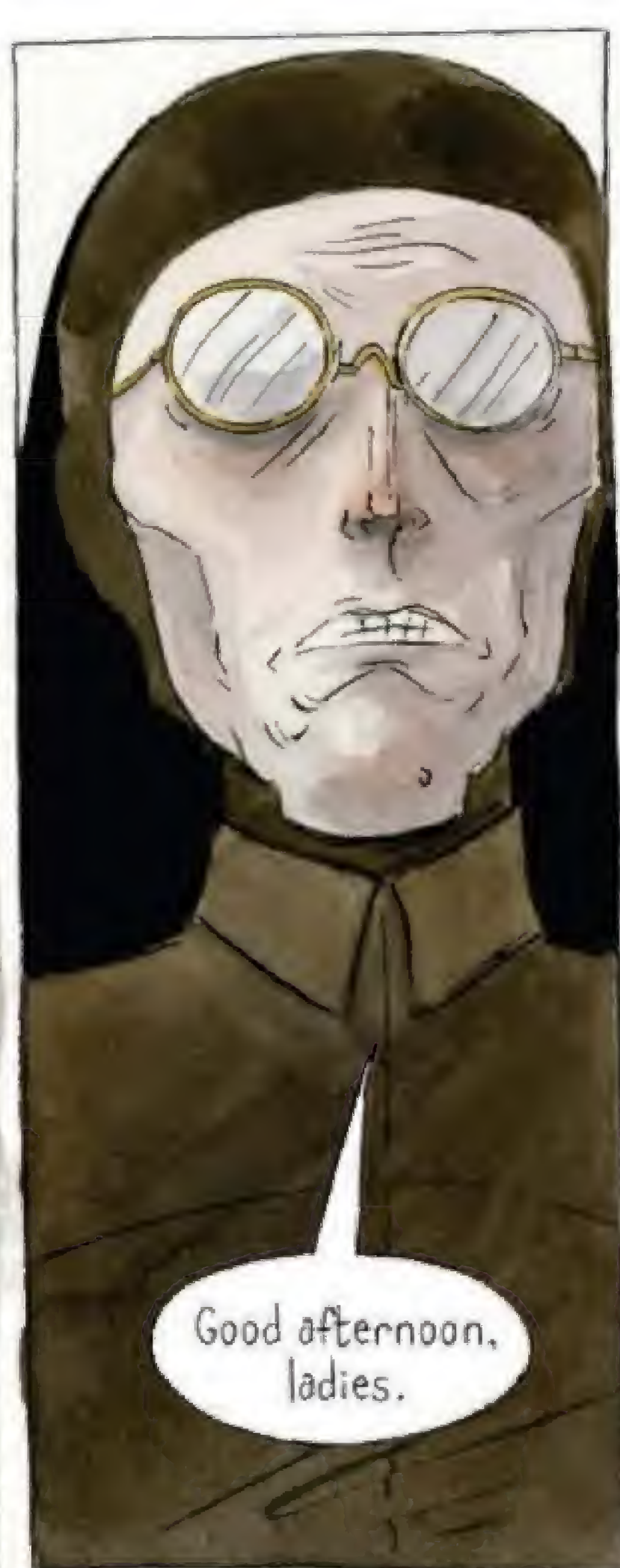
Because I'm telling you
this story I will your
existence.





I tell, therefore you are.





Women's Salvagings are not frequent. There is less need for them. These days we are so well behaved.



I don't want to be telling this story.





Today's Salvaging is now concluded.



I'd like to call upon the Handmaids now, to stand up and form a circle. Orderly, now.

You know the rules for a Particicution.

You will wait until I blow the whistle. After that, what you do is up to you, until I blow the whistle again.



Understood?





This man has been convicted of rape.

He was a *Guardian*. He has abused his position of trust.



I might add that this crime involved two of you and took place at gunpoint. It was also brutal.

I will not offend your ears with any details, except to say that one woman was *pregnant* and the baby died.



It is too much, this violation. The baby too, after what we go through.

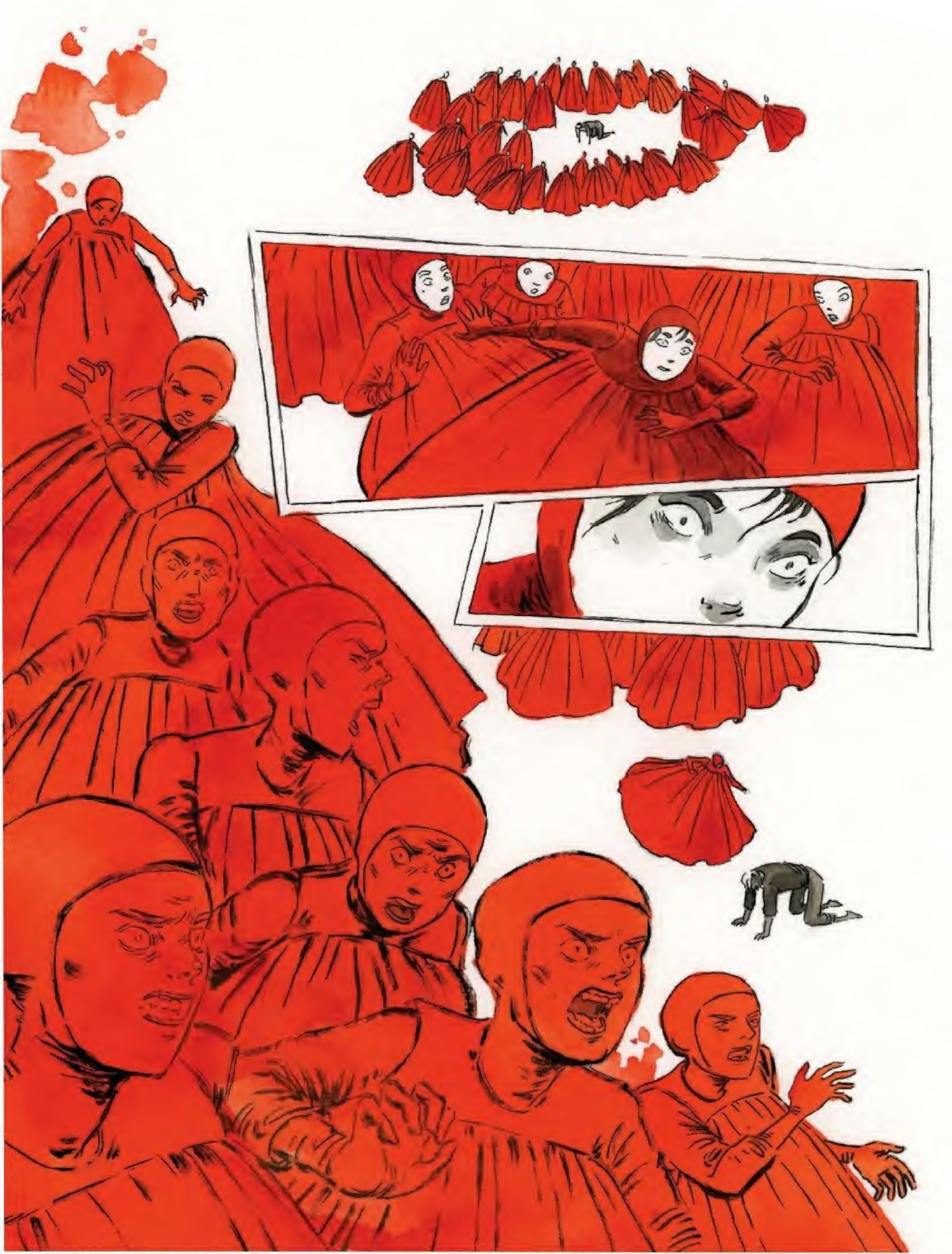


I didn't...



I feel my hands clench.









I saw what you did.
Why did you do that? You!
I thought you...

Don't look at me.
They're watching.



I don't
care.

Get control
of yourself!






Don't be stupid. He wasn't a rapist at all, he was a political. He was one of ours.



I knocked him out. Put him out of his misery. Don't you know what they're doing to him?



A comic book page featuring a woman in a red dress and two women in red hijabs. The woman in the red dress is on the right, looking towards the left with a slight smile. She has a speech bubble that says "Hi there. How are you doing?". The two women in red hijabs are on the left, looking towards the woman in the red dress. One of them has a speech bubble that says "Janine...". The woman in the red dress has a speech bubble that says "You have a nice day.". There is also a speech bubble that says "Easy out, is what I think." and another that says "I don't even feel sorry for her, although I should. I feel angry.". At the bottom, there is a speech bubble that says "I'm not proud of myself for this, or for any of it. But then, that's the point." and a small illustration of two women in white dresses.

Hi there.
How are you doing?

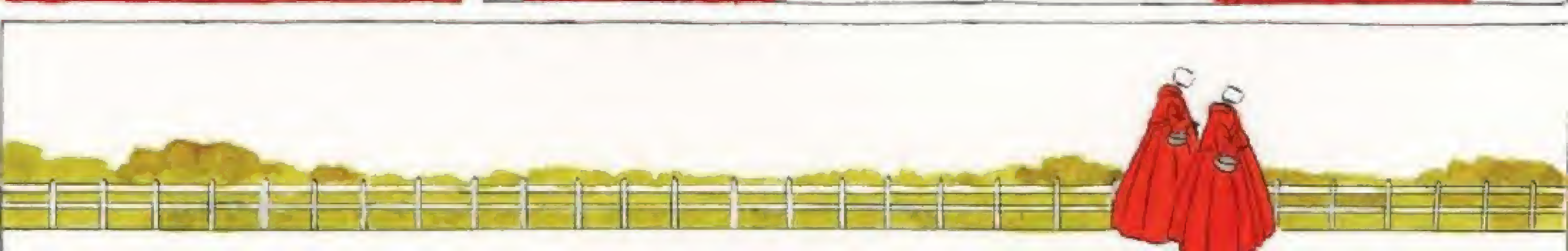
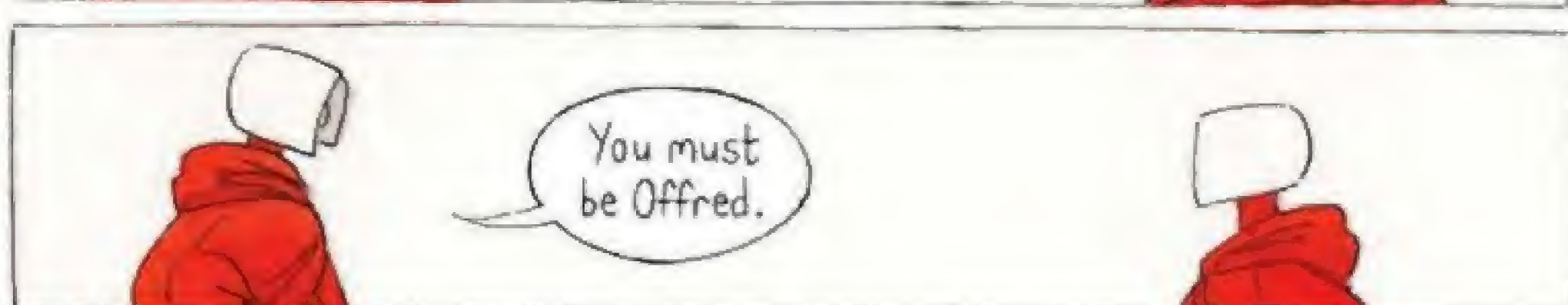
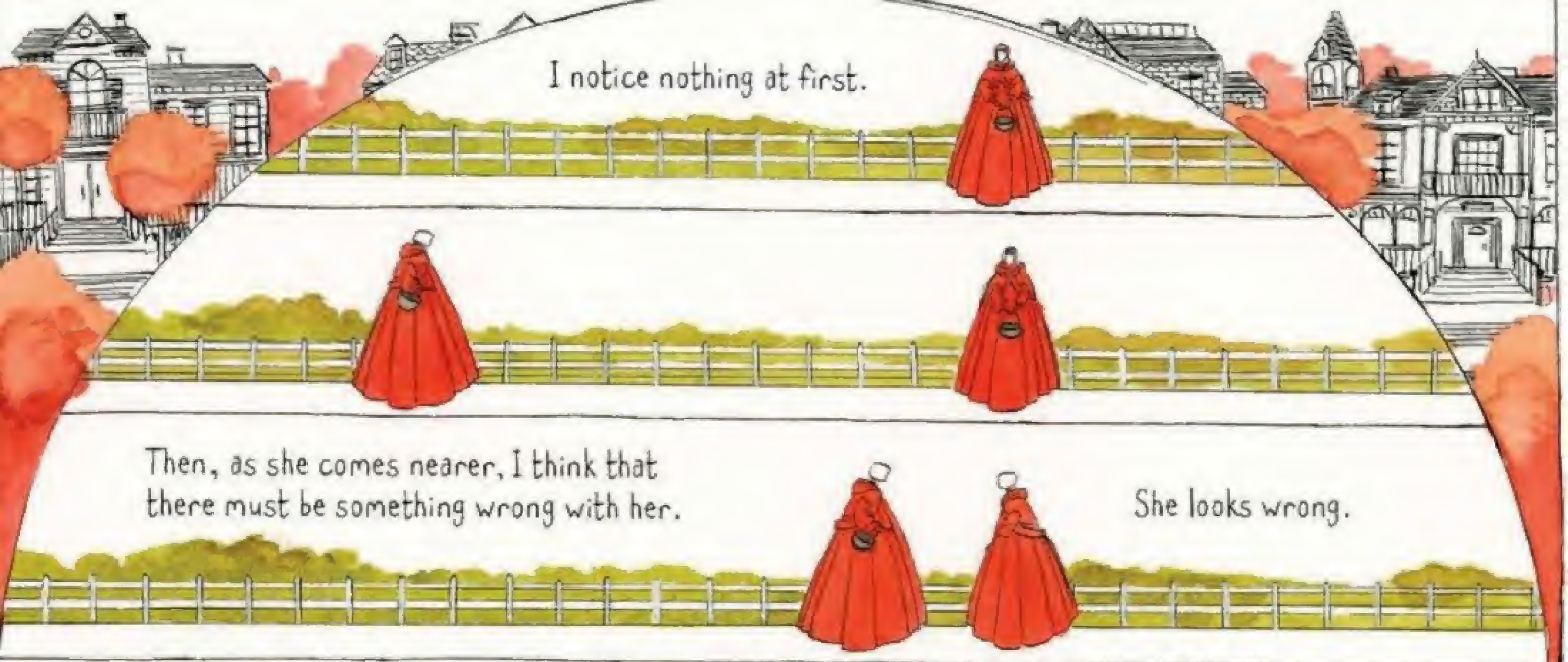
Janine...

You have
a nice day.

Easy out, is what I think.

I don't even feel sorry for her,
although I should. I feel angry.

I'm not proud of myself for this, or for
any of it. But then, that's the point.





Has Ofglen
been transferred,
so soon?

I know she hasn't. I saw
her only this morning.
She would have said.

I am Ofglen.



Let that be a
reminder to us.

Yes.



I didn't know Ofglen
very well. I mean the
former one.

Oh?

I've only known her
since May. Around the first
of May I think it was.



What they
used to call
May Day.



Did they? That isn't a term I remember. I'm surprised you do.

You ought to make an effort to clear your mind of such...echoes.



She isn't one of us. But she knows.

If Ofglen's been caught, she will talk. She won't be able to help it. But I haven't done anything! Not really.



All I did was know.

All I did was not tell.

They know where my child is! I can't bear to think what they might do.

Or Luke, or my mother, or Moira...

Dear God, don't make me choose. I'll say anything they like, I'll confess to any crime, I'll end up hanging from a hook on the Wall.



Under
His Eye.

Under
His Eye.



She hanged
herself.

After the
Salvaging. She saw
the van coming
for her.

It was better.





Dear God, I will do
anything you like.

I'll obliterate myself, if that's what you
really want; I'll empty myself, truly, become
a chalice. I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice.

I'll repent.

I'll abdicate.

I'll renounce.



I don't want to be a doll
hung up on the Wall,
I don't want to be a wingless angel.

I want to keep on living,
in any form.

I resign my body freely,
to the uses of others.
They can do what they
like with me. I am object.

I feel, for the first time,
their true power.

Offred.





I trusted you.
Tried to help you.



How could
you be so vulgar?
I told him...



Behind my back.
You could have left
me something.



Pick up that
disgusting thing and
get to your room.

Just like
the other one.
A slut.

You'll end up
the same.

XV

NIGHT



This could be the last time I have to wait.
But I don't know what I'm waiting for.




I am in disgrace, which is the
opposite of grace. I ought to
feel worse about it.

But I feel serene, at peace,
pervaded with indifference.

Don't let the bastards grind you down.
I repeat this to myself, but it conveys
nothing. You might as well say, Don't
let there be air; or, Don't be.

I suppose you could say that.





Behind me I feel her presence,
my ancestress, my double.

Turning in mid-air under the chandelier,
in her costume of stars and feathers,

a bird stopped in flight, a woman made
into an angel, waiting to be found.

By me this time.

How could I have believed
I was alone in here?

There were always two of us.



Get it over, she says.
I'm tired of this melodrama,
I'm tired of keeping silent.

There's no one you can protect,
your life has value to no one.

I want it finished.





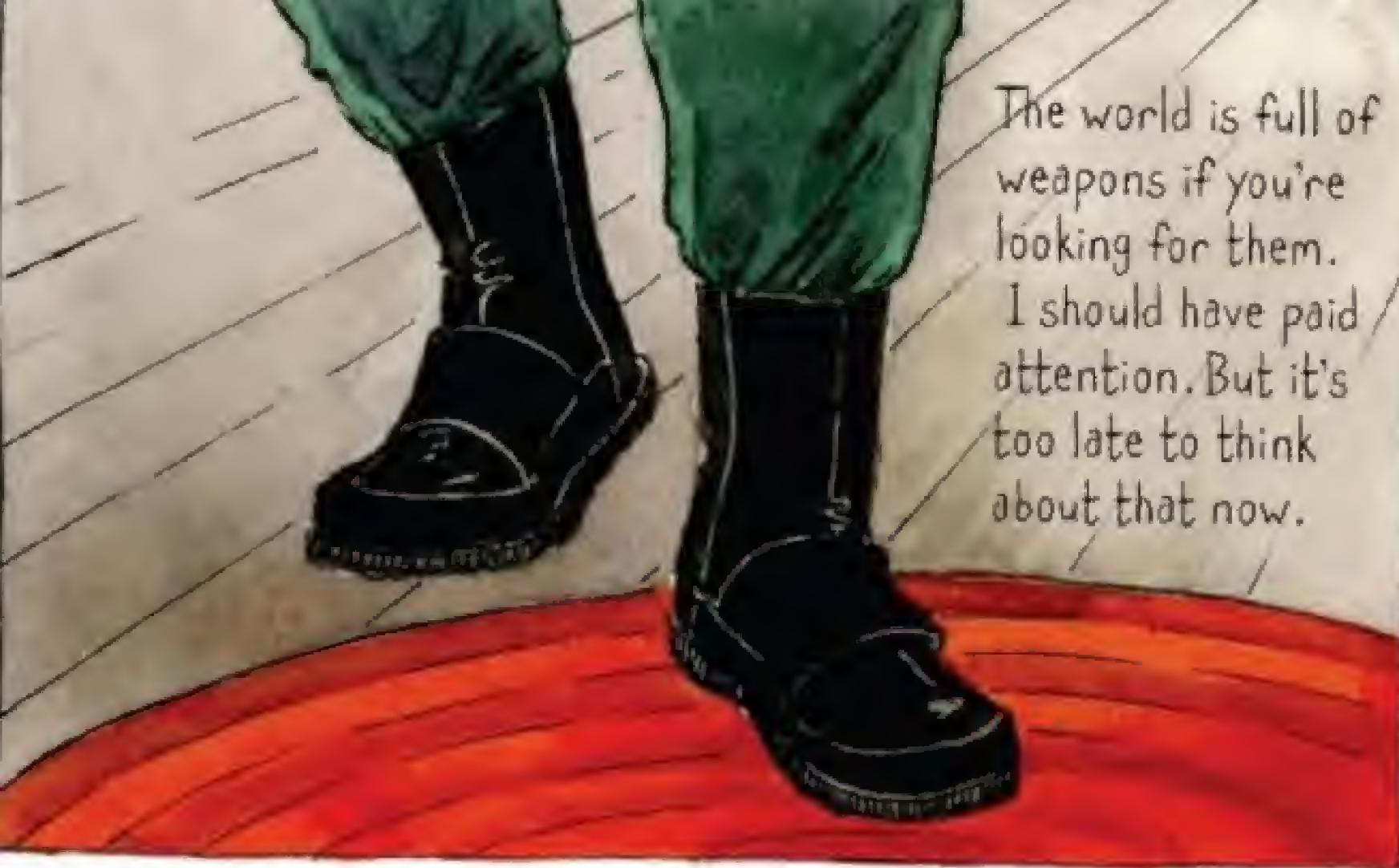
Worse is coming, then.

I've been wasting my time.



I should have taken things into my own hands while I had the chance.





The world is full of weapons if you're looking for them. I should have paid attention. But it's too late to think about that now.



It's Nick.



It's all right.
It's Mayday.

Go with them.

Why shouldn't he know about Mayday? All the Eyes must know about it; they'll have squeezed it, crushed it, twisted it out of enough bodies, enough mouths by now.

What has she done?

I need to see your authorization. You have a warrant?

But I snatch at it, this offer. It's all I'm left with.

Not that we need one, Sir, but all is in order. Violation of state secrets.

BITCH.

After all he did for you!





There have already been purges among them, there will be more.



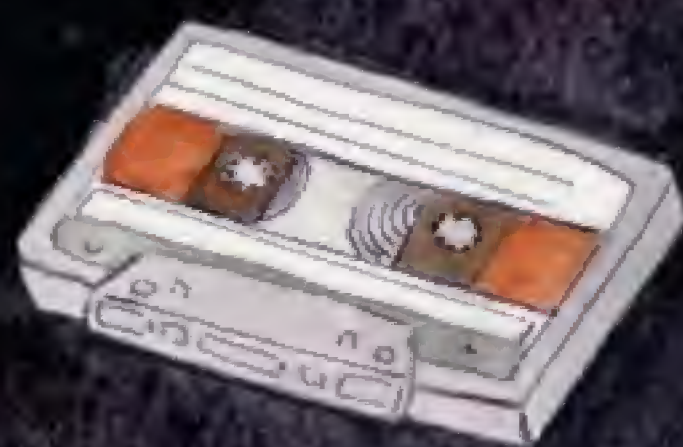
Whether this is my end or a new
beginning I have no way of knowing:

I have given myself over into the hands
of strangers, because it can't be helped.



And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light.

HISTORICAL NOTES



...This item was unearthed on the site of what was once the city of Bangor, in what, at the time prior to the inception of the Gileadean regime, would have been the State of Maine.

There were some thirty tapes in the collection, with varying proportions of music to spoken word. In general, each tape begins with two or three songs, as camouflage no doubt: then the music is broken off and the speaking voice takes over.

The voice is a woman's and, according to our voice-print experts, the same one throughout.

We held out no hope of tracing the narrator herself.



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ON
GILEADEAN STUDIES



She does not see fit to supply us with her original name, and indeed all official records of it would have been destroyed upon her entry into the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre.


"Offred" gives no clue, since it was a patronymic, composed of the possessive preposition and the first name of the gentleman in question.

The other names in the document - "Luke," "Nick," "Maira," and "Janine" - are equally useless for the purposes of identification, as these were likely pseudonyms, adopted to protect these individuals should the tapes be discovered.

If we could identify the elusive "Commander," we felt, at least some progress would have been made.

The evidence on the whole favours Frederick R. Waterford. We know, for instance, that he met his end in one of the earliest purges; he was accused of liberal tendencies, of being in possession of a substantial collection of heretical literary materials, and of harbouring a subversive.

Most likely this was "Nick," who, by the evidence of the very existence of the tapes, must have helped "Offred" to escape.




As for the ultimate fate of our narrator, it remains obscure.

Was she smuggled over the border of Gilead, into what was then Canada?

Did she reach the outside world safely and build a new life for herself?

Or was she discovered, arrested, sent to the Colonies or to Jezebel's, or even executed?

Our document is on these subjects mute. As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes.



Voices may reach us from it, but, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day.

Are there any questions?