

# COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

Vol 3 | No 1 | 2020

## Excerpt from *The King of Bangkok*

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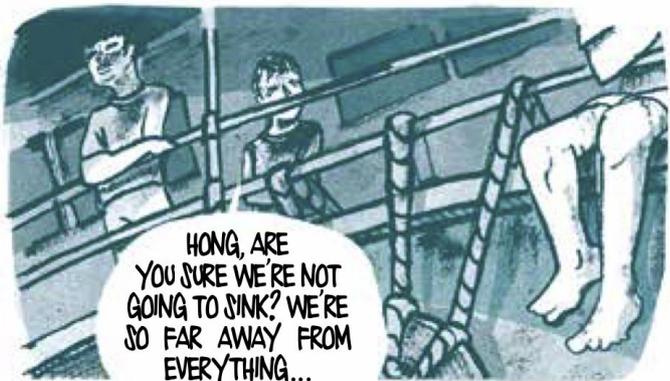
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**ABSTRACT** | This is an excerpt from *The King of Bangkok*. Originally appearing in Chapter 3, the section we present is a flashback that follows the book's protagonist, Nok, on his journey to the island of Koh Pha-Ngan in the Gulf of Thailand. Nok has secured work on a construction site there during the height of the country's economic boom. The section demonstrates how opportunity and precarity, excitement and devastation are fundamental forces animating and shaping the experiences of migrant workers like Nok.

**Keywords:** Anthropology; Graphic Novel; Visual Ethnography; Migrant Labour; Thailand



ISLAND OF  
KOH PHA-NGAN, 1993.



HONG, ARE YOU SURE WE'RE NOT GOING TO SINK? WE'RE SO FAR AWAY FROM EVERYTHING...



I THOUGHT THE SAME THE FIRST TIME I WAS AT SEA.

STOP WORRYING. LOOK HOW RELAXED THESE FARANG ARE.



THE ECONOMY IS BOOMING.

YOU'LL SEE. THE JOB WILL PAY WELL AND WE'LL PROBABLY END UP PARTYING WITH TOURISTS.



BROTHER, I DON'T CARE ABOUT THE FARANG. I HAVE A KID AND A WIFE TO FEED; I JUST HOPE THERE'S WORK FOR ME.

YOU SPENT TOO MUCH TIME UP IN THE VILLAGE, YOUR BRAIN IS SHRINKING. YOU NEED TO EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS!



ПРИВЕТ  
РЕБЯТА, ХОТИТЕ  
ТАНЦЕВАТЬ? У  
НАС ВОДКА!



WHAT DID  
SHE SAY?

NO IDEA,  
BUT WHO  
CARES?



LOOK AT HER...  
I'M GOING.

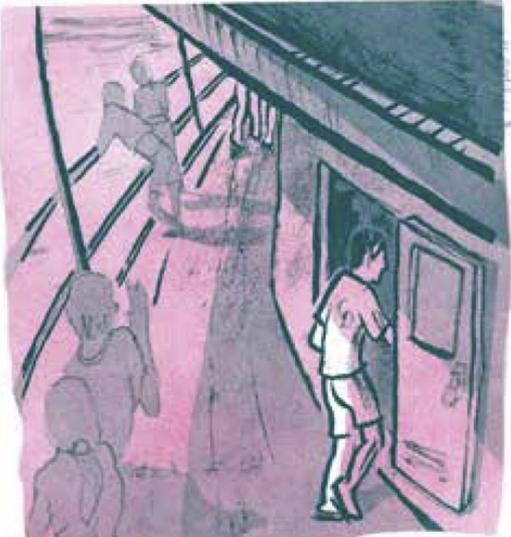
SURE, GO  
EXPAND YOUR  
HORIZONS...

I'LL BE INSIDE.  
THESE PEOPLE  
ARE COOKING  
THEMSELVES IN THE  
SUN LIKE SAUSAGES.  
I DON'T WANT TO  
GET DARKER OR  
EVERYONE IS GOING  
TO TREAT ME LIKE A  
FARM BOY.



SUIT  
YOURSELF...

I WAS A FATHER NOW AND I HAD TO BE  
CONSIDERATE, PUT MY HEAD DOWN  
AND MAKE MONEY.



BUT I HAD MISSED HONG AND OUR ADVENTURES.



THIS BOOK IS AMAZING!

FOR CRITICIZING THE KING...



IT'S A SHAME  
SULAK HAD TO FLEE  
FROM THAILAND...

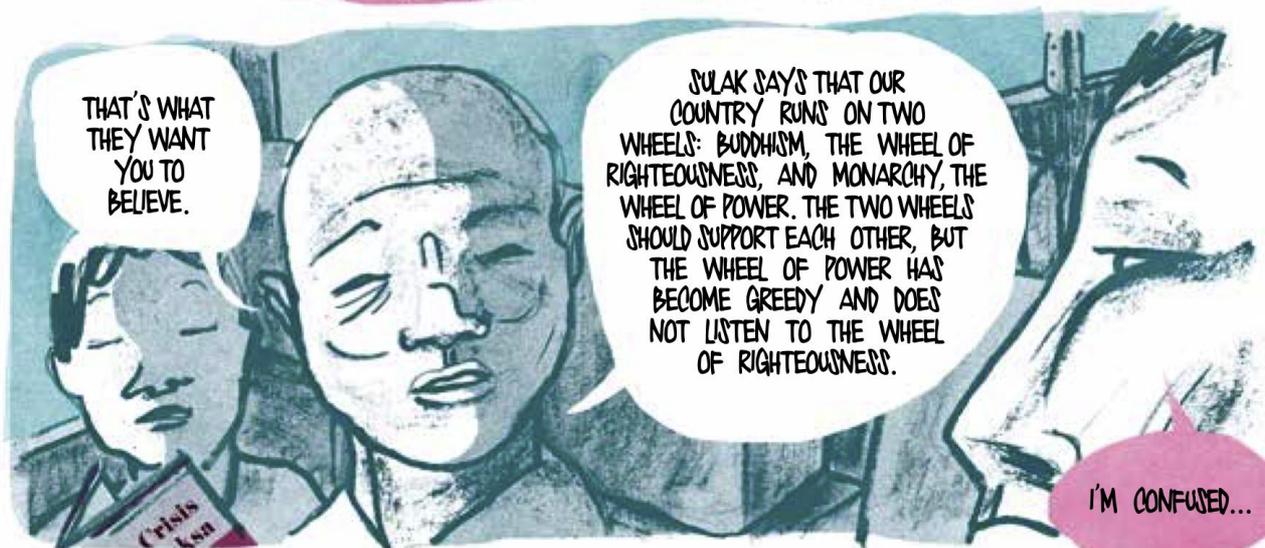


CRITICIZING  
THE KING??



HOW CAN ANYBODY  
CRITICIZE THE KING? HE  
SAVED OUR COUNTRY AND GAVE  
US DEMOCRACY...

THAT'S WHAT  
THEY WANT  
YOU TO  
BELIEVE.



SULAK SAYS THAT OUR  
COUNTRY RUNS ON TWO  
WHEELS: BUDDHISM, THE WHEEL OF  
RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND MONARCHY, THE  
WHEEL OF POWER. THE TWO WHEELS  
SHOULD SUPPORT EACH OTHER, BUT  
THE WHEEL OF POWER HAS  
BECOME GREEDY AND DOES  
NOT LISTEN TO THE WHEEL  
OF RIGHTEOUSNESS.

I'M CONFUSED...

LOOK AROUND YOU: HALF-NAKED TOURISTS DRINKING, LOUD MUSIC PLAYING EVERYWHERE, THAI YOUTH RUNNING AFTER THEM... GLOBALIZATION MAKES US FEEL STRONG AND RICH. BUT WHAT ARE WE LOSING IN THE PROCESS?



THIS BOOK SAYS WE ARE LOSING OURSELVES, WE ARE LONELY, AND FILLED WITH HATRED...

WE ARE LOSING OUR CULTURE AND TRADITIONS, AND NO ONE NOTICES.

SO... IF GLOBALIZATION IS SO TERRIBLE, WHY ARE YOU GOING TO AN ISLAND FULL OF TOURISTS?



WELL...



I LIKE TO SWIM...



WHAT THE GUY SAID MADE SENSE TO ME. I'D SEEN WHAT THE CITY COULD DO TO PEOPLE. BUT NO MATTER HOW TURBULENT THE SEA WAS, WE ALL WANTED TO SWIM.



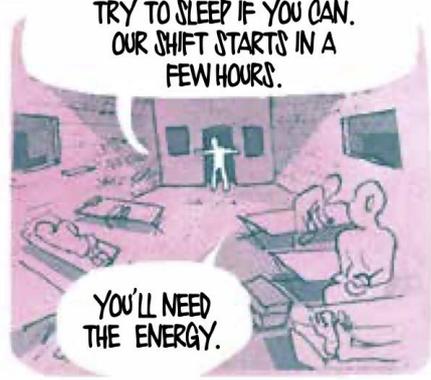


HELLO, WE'RE LOOKING FOR LEK.



HONG!!

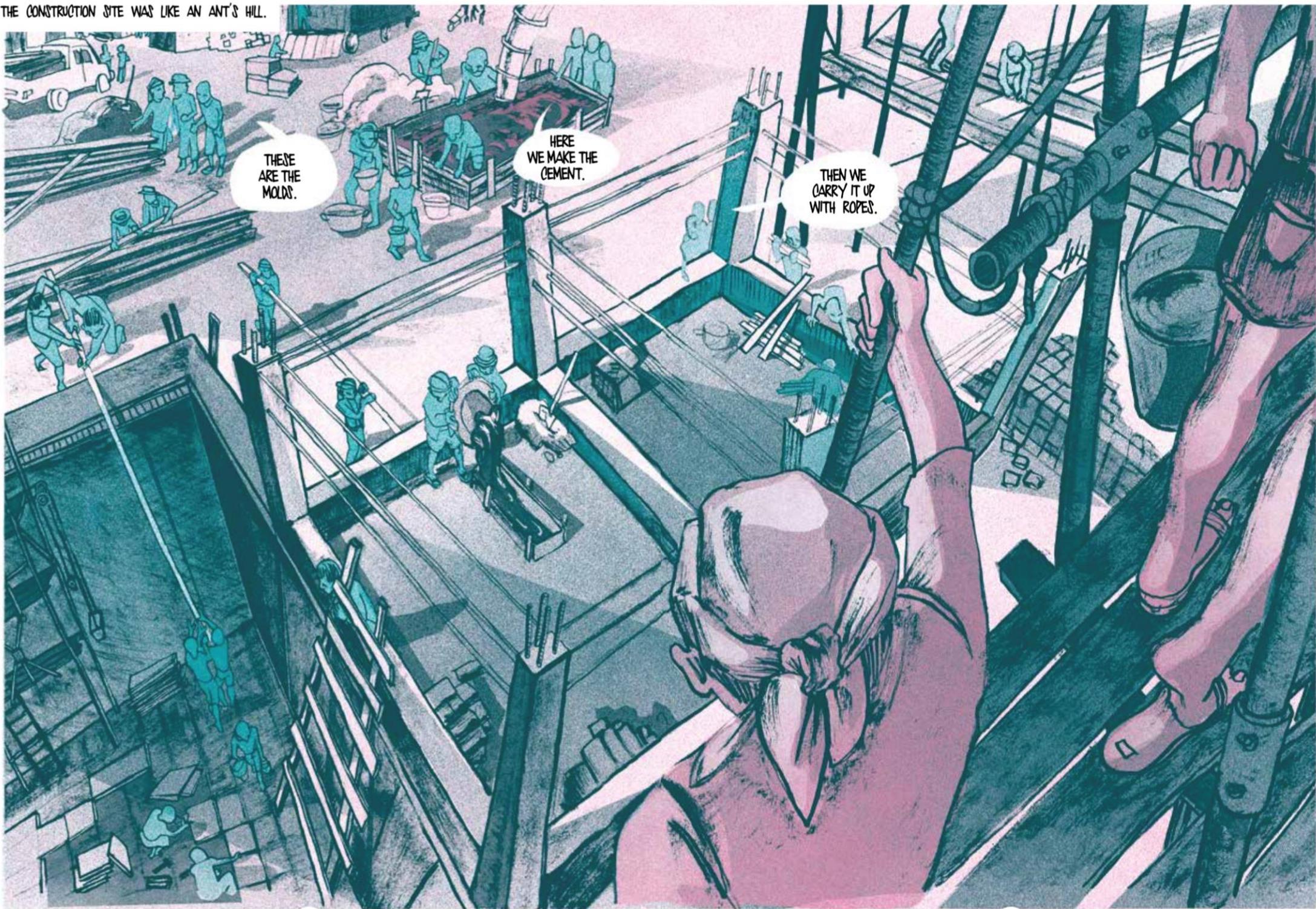
YOU GUYS FINALLY ARRIVED!



TRY TO SLEEP IF YOU CAN. OUR SHIFT STARTS IN A FEW HOURS.

YOU'LL NEED THE ENERGY.

THE CONSTRUCTION SITE WAS LIKE AN ANT'S HILL.



IN A FEW MONTHS, WE BECAME ANTS TOO.



LEK, EXPLAIN SOMETHING TO ME.

WE'RE BUILDING ONE RESORT AFTER ANOTHER...

HOW MUCH MONEY DOES THE BOSS HAVE?

YOU'RE SUCH A COUNTRY BOY...  
NOWADAYS NO ONE SPENDS THEIR OWN MONEY,

IT'S ALL INTERNATIONAL LOANS, FOREIGN INVESTMENT, STOCK MARKET.  
HOLD ON, YOU'RE TELLING ME HE IS BUILDING ALL OF THIS WITH SOMEONE ELSE'S MONEY?

AND WHAT HAPPENS IF HE CAN'T REPAY THEM? I'VE SEEN SO MANY PEOPLE BACK IN THE VILLAGE GO INTO DEBT AND LOSE THEIR FARMS...



THE VILLAGE... WE'RE NOT IN THE VILLAGE HERE. THIS IS MONEY FROM AMERICA, FROM JAPAN, FROM INTERNATIONAL BANKS, FROM THE IMF...

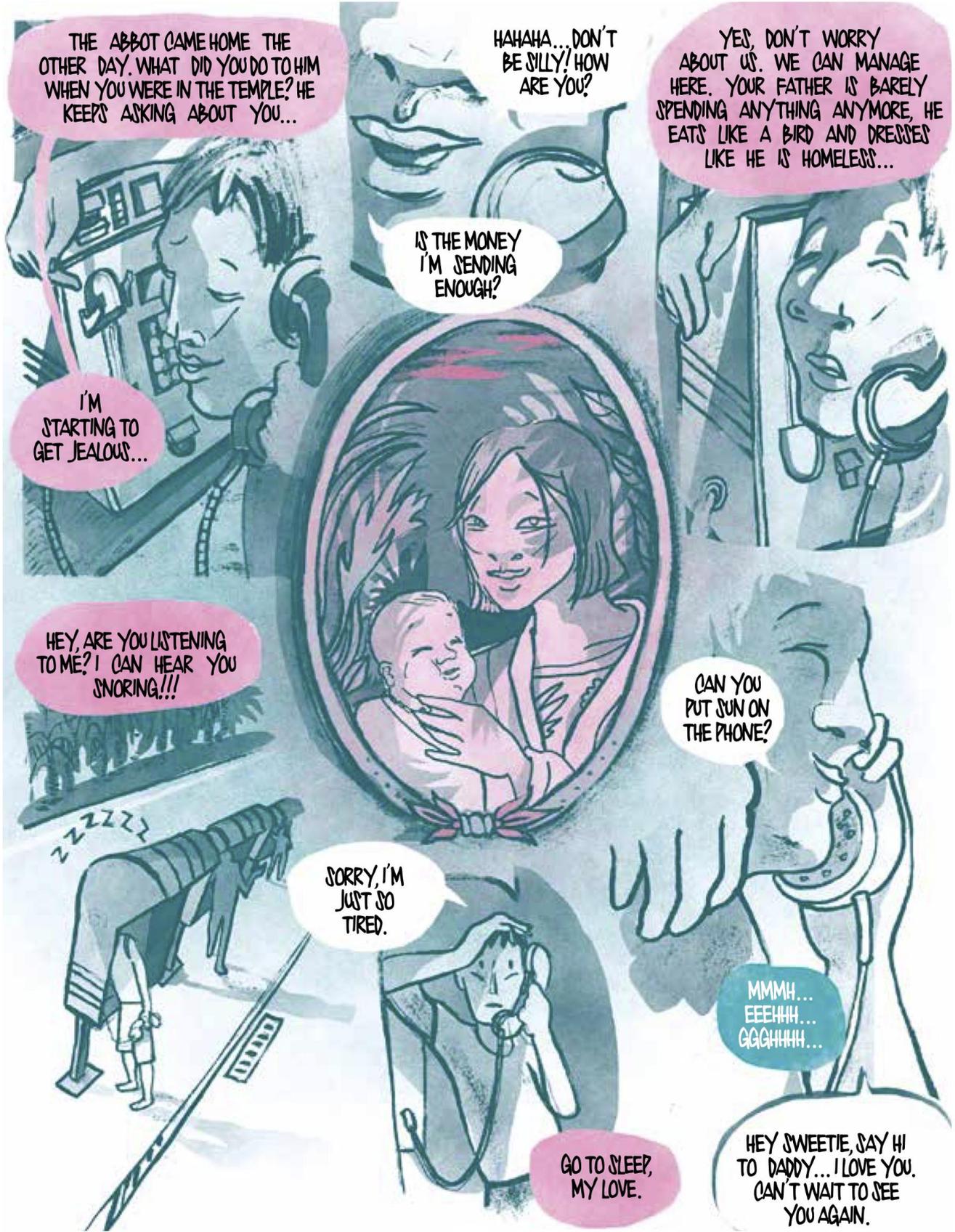
WHAT THE HELL IS THE IMF?  
...THE IMF YOU KNOW?

IT'S LIKE... LIKE...

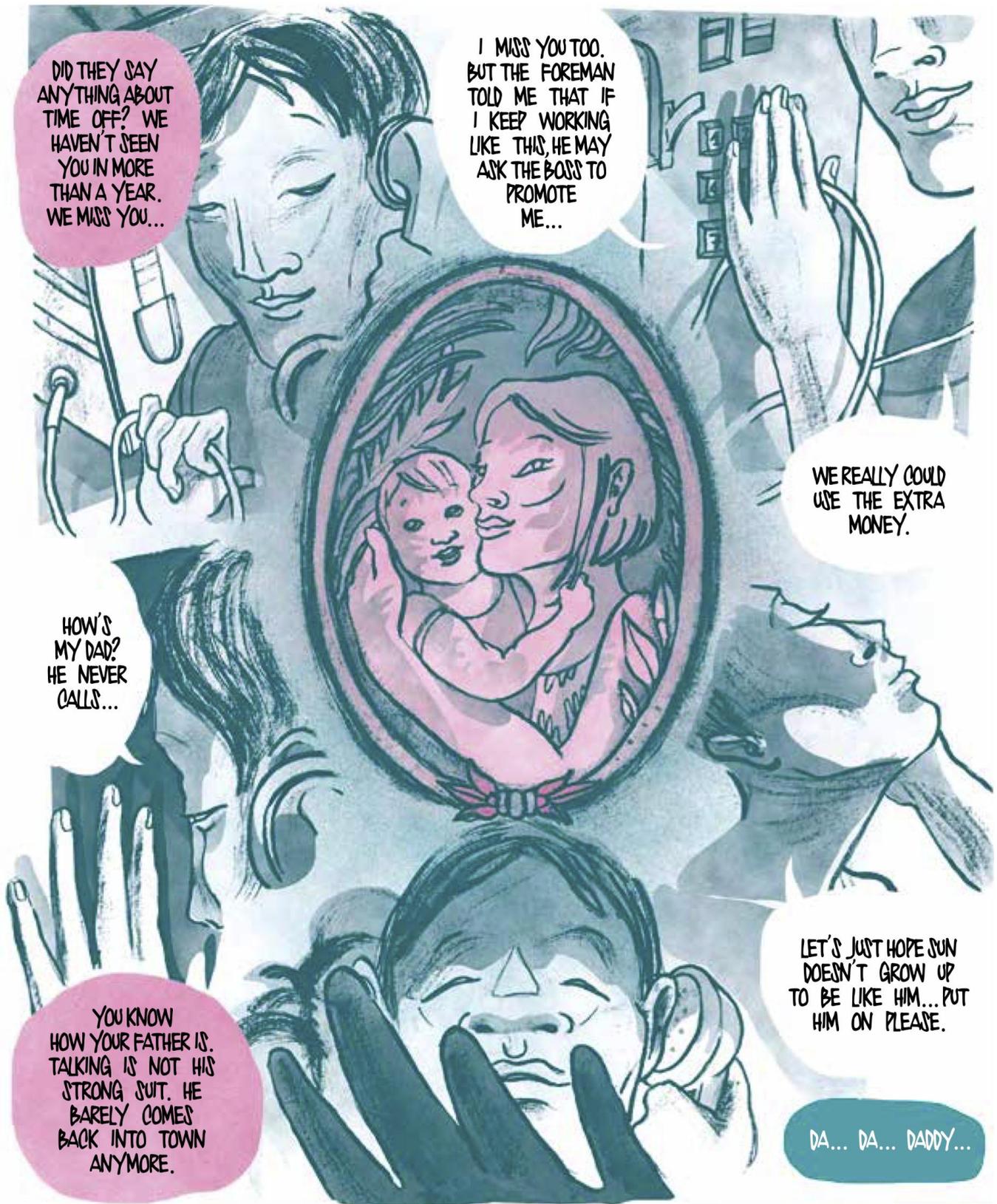


\*"KONG DERM" BY ASANEE WASAN, FROM THE ALBUM "SAPPAROT." (1990).

AFTER ONE YEAR WORKING ON THE ISLAND, THERE WAS SO MUCH I STILL DIDN'T UNDERSTAND, BUT IT DIDN'T MATTER. THE PAY WAS GOOD. IT CAME ON TIME. I WOKE UP, I WORKED; I CALLED GAI EACH NIGHT.







I MISSED SUN AND GAI, AND I OFTEN ASKED MYSELF IF WORKING MY ASS OFF LIKE THIS WAS REALLY WORTH IT. THE CONVERSATION ON THE BOAT KEPT BUGGING ME. EVERYBODY SEEMS TO WANT MORE, BUT THE MONK WAS CLEAR: THESE DESIRES MAKE US SUFFER. HAD I FALLEN INTO A TRAP WITHOUT REALIZING IT?

WE'VE JUST RECEIVED TERRIBLE NEWS FROM NAKHON RATCHASIMA.

INSIDE THE BUILDING AT THE MOMENT OF THE ACCIDENT...



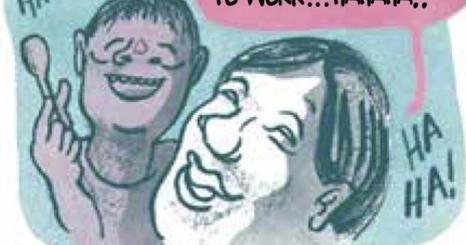
THE ROYAL PLAZA HOTEL HAS COLLAPSED, IT SEEMS DUE TO A STRUCTURAL PROBLEM. ABOUT 300 PEOPLE WERE...

HEY NOK, YOUR FRIEND IS A REAL PARTY ANIMAL...

BUT I HAVE...

HA HA!

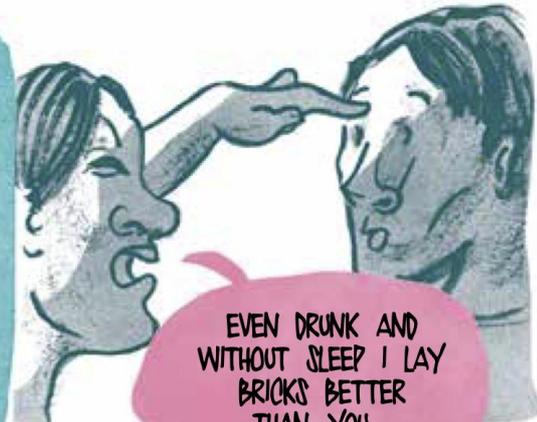
...A BABY AND I NEED TO WORK... HAHHAH!!



YOU SHOULD LEARN FROM HIM. SINCE YOU GOT HERE YOU'VE NEVER GONE OUT...



LAUGH, LAUGH. YOU HEARD THE RADIO, I BET THE PEOPLE WHO BUILT THAT HOTEL WERE OUT PARTYING EVERYDAY LIKE THE TWO OF YOU...



EVEN DRUNK AND WITHOUT SLEEP I LAY BRICKS BETTER THAN YOU...

CALM DOWN THE TWO OF YOU. I HAVE A TERRIBLE HEADACHE. THE FULL MOON PARTY IS TOMORROW. PEOPLE FROM ALL AROUND THE WORLD COME HERE FOR IT AND YOU'VE NEVER BEEN. YOU'RE COMING!

YOUR WIFE IS NOT GOING TO RUN AWAY IF YOU DON'T CALL HER JUST ONCE...



ALL RIGHT, I'LL COME WITH YOU! NOW LEAVE ME ALONE!







NO, SERIOUSLY. I'M SWEATING ALCOHOL. HOW DO YOU DO IT?

HAHAHA... SEE THAT WATER DOWN THERE, THE BUCKET UNDER THE STAIRS. THE BOSS PUTS YA-BAA INSIDE IT SO WE CAN KEEP WORKING. THAT'S HOW WE DO IT!



UGH... THAT MUSIC IS STILL RINGING IN MY EARS. I FEEL HORRIBLE.



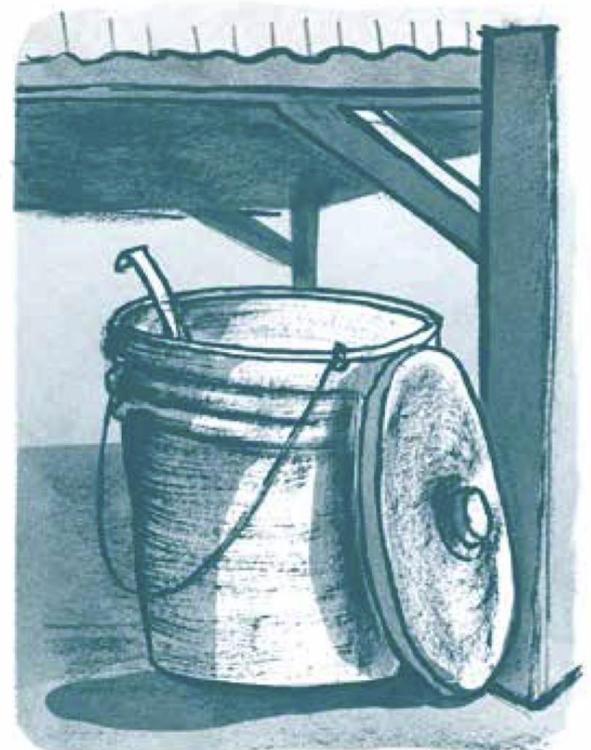
I HAD NO IDEA WHAT YA-BAA WAS, BUT AFTER A FEW SIPS THE PAIN AND THE HEADACHE WENT AWAY.



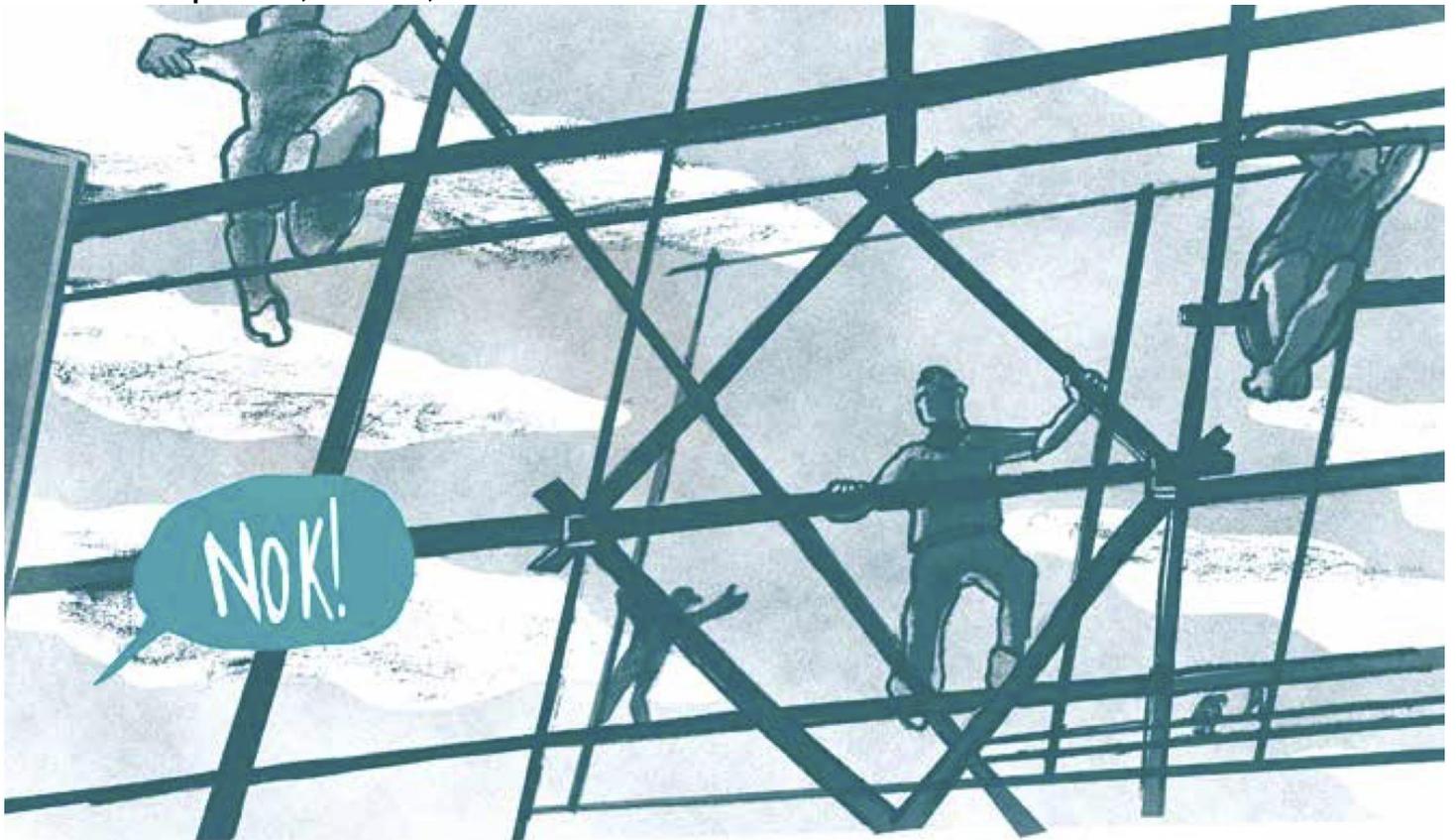
BROTHER, WHAT IS THAT SHIT? WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME BEFORE? I'VE BEEN BREAKING MY BACK AND YOU HAD A MAGIC POTION...

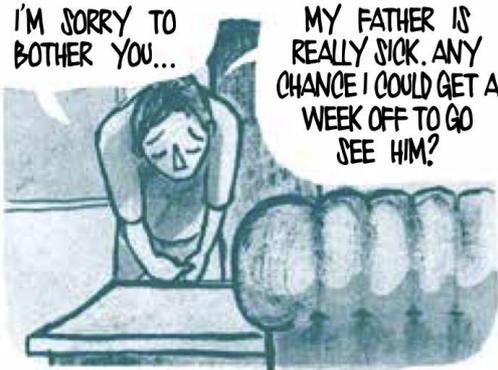
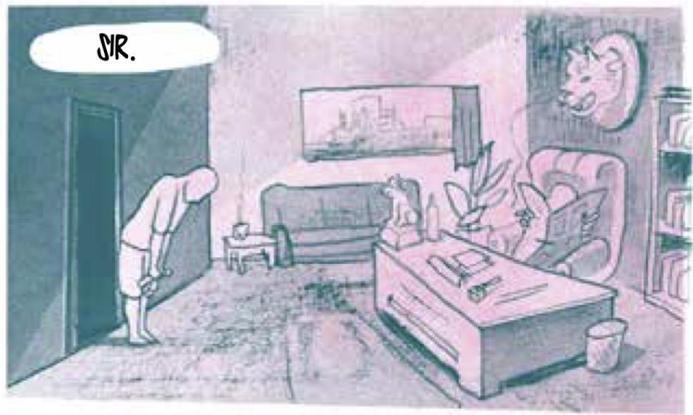
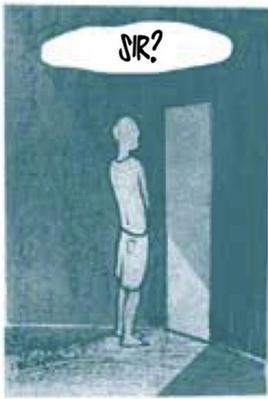
IT'S CALLED YA-BAA, CRAZY MEDICINE. IT CURES ALL THE PAIN BUT IT CAN MAKE YOU LOSE YOUR MIND.

BETTER BE CAREFUL WITH IT.



HONG WAS PROBABLY RIGHT, BUT FROM THAT DAY, WHENEVER I FELT TIRED, I JUST CLIMBED DOWN AND TOOK A SIP.





THE BOSS TREATED ME LIKE PEOPLE IN BANGKOK USED TO, AS IF I WAS AN ANIMAL. BUT MAYBE HE WAS RIGHT ABOUT THE MEDICINES. I HAD COME TO THE ISLAND TO SUPPORT MY FAMILY AND NOW THEY NEEDED MY MONEY MORE THAN EVER. THANKFULLY YA-BAA KEPT ME GOING.



I'M GOING TO ASK HIM IF I CAN WORK MORE HOURS, MAYBE 3-4 MORE EVERY DAY...

DON'T WORRY, I'VE FOUND A WAY TO WORK MORE.

HOW? YOU ARE ALWAYS TIRED ALREADY. YOU CAN'T KILL YOURSELF.

HOW? WHAT'S GOING ON?

STOP ASKING QUESTIONS!

I'M THE MAN AND I'M TELLING YOU I'LL SEND MORE MONEY!

IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I HAD EVER SHOUTED AT GAI. UNFORTUNATELY IT WASN'T THE LAST.



THE ECONOMY WAS SLOWING DOWN, MY FATHER WAS SICK, AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH GAI WAS GETTING TENSER AND TENSER. I PUT MY HEAD DOWN AND WORKED. AFTER A FEW MONTHS THE PAINS CAME BACK. THE WATER WAS NOT ENOUGH. LEK TOLD ME THAT I COULD GET YA-BAA PILLS. YOU CRUSH THEM, SPRINKLE THE DUST ON ALUMINUM FOIL, LIGHT IT UP AND SMOKE IT WITH A MAKESHIFT PIPE. THE PAIN IMMEDIATELY DISAPPEARED, BUT SOON I COULDN'T EVEN GET OUT OF BED WITHOUT SMOKING.





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