



*Hi, I'm Sadam Hanjabam from Manipur.
My journey with accepting myself enabled
me to not only save my life, but also set
up the first registered youth and queer
led-focused organization called Ya_All in
the North-Eastern region of India.*

Can you imagine worrying that something bad could happen at any moment, all the time? Growing up in Imphal, we saw violence and death at our doorstep routinely.



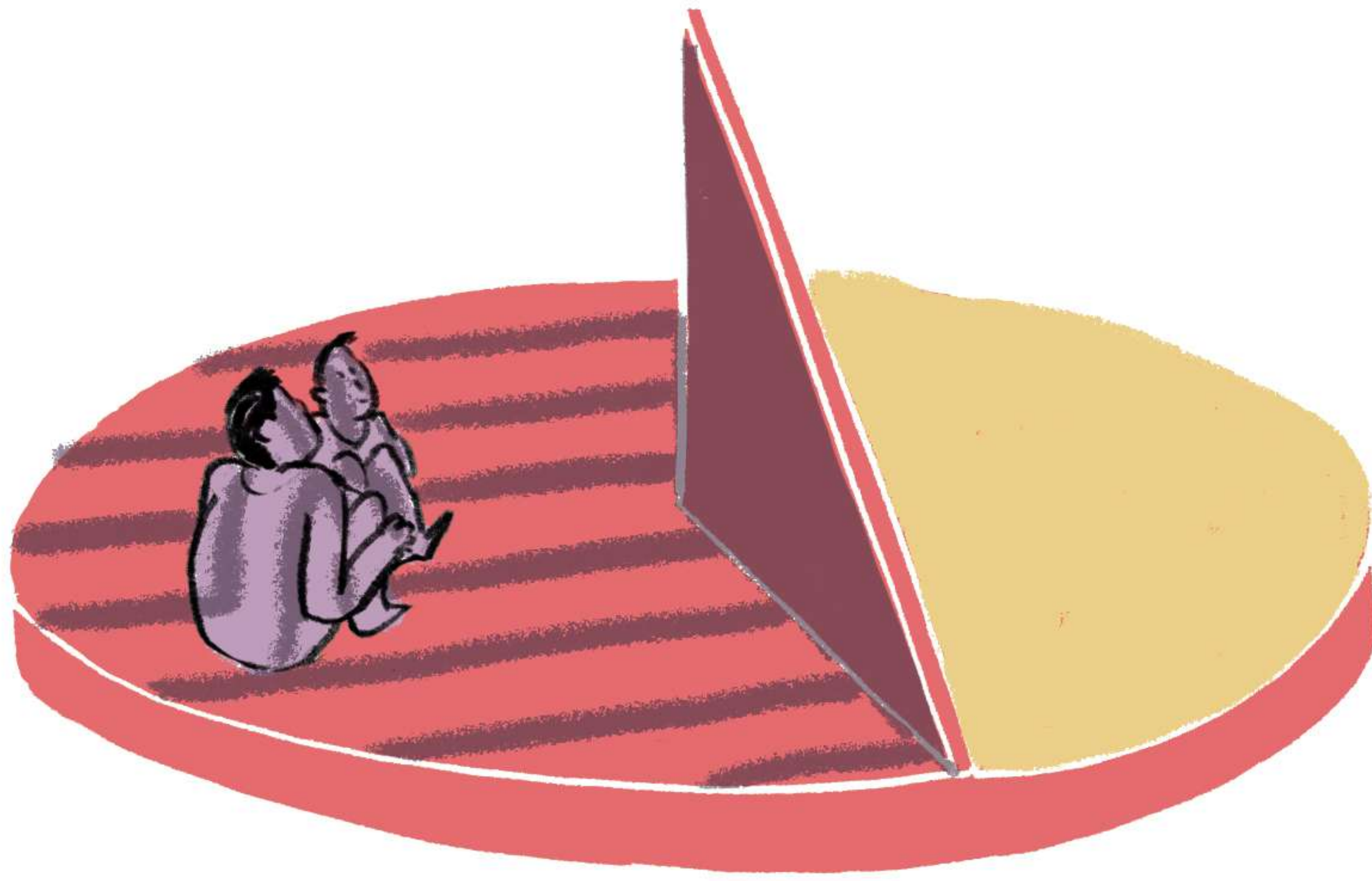
STAND IN A LINE!



Don't worry nanao (little one). They take all the men out for questioning. Pabung (father) will be fine, you'll see, he'll be back before you know it. They are looking for the underground people who caused the blast yesterday in the market.

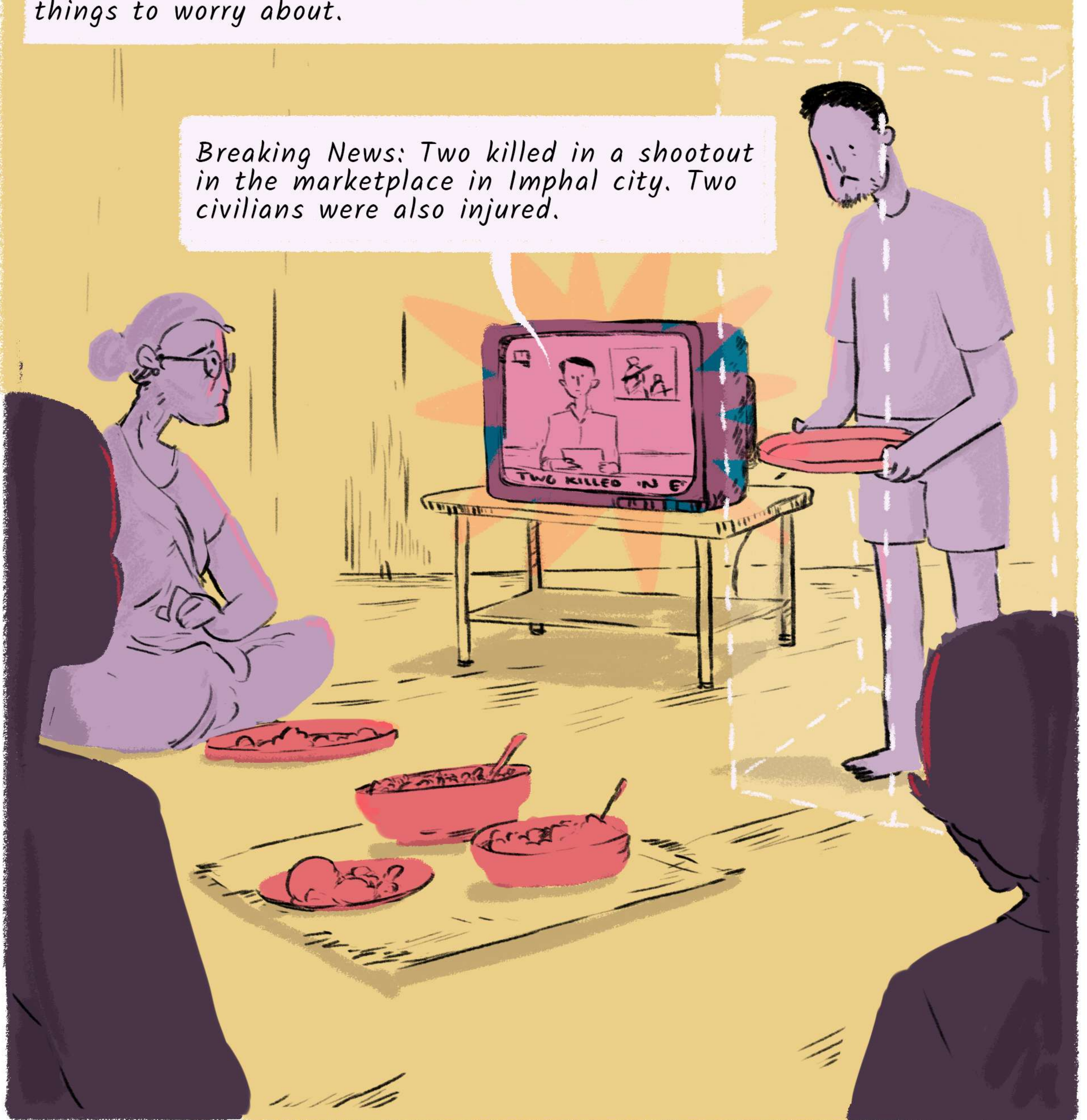


In Imphal, for half the day it isn't really safe to be outside. So we were stuck inside after dark. Only half the day belonged to us. In my case, I grew up not just afraid of the violence outside, but also fearful of turmoil I was going through on the inside.



Recognizing I was queer when I was a young person wasn't made easy because I knew I could never really tell anyone. I told myself there were always more important things going on, bigger things to worry about.

Breaking News: Two killed in a shootout in the marketplace in Imphal city. Two civilians were also injured.



I never felt safe around the police, and would usually turn and go a different way if I saw them around.



One evening in August, when I was studying in college in Assam, I was making my way back to Imphal for the holidays. I made a pitstop for some drinks with my friends in the evening when we had almost reached. It happened to be the eve of Independence Day, a national holiday. In Imphal, the day before a national holiday is usually a "bandh" or lockdown. We got caught in the rain as we were leaving.



Let's take shelter here! I told you we should have brought umbrellas man. How will we get home now? My mother is going to be so angry with me!!

As we waited for the rain the stop, we ducked under a bus stop for shelter. Just our luck... a police van approached us and stopped. As the police got out they started yelling at us, asking us if we were there trying to plant a bomb.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?! HUH??



QUIET!!

Not..not..not doing anything, sir. We are just waiting for the rain to stop so we can go home.

We could tell that they were drunk, as they began to hit us.



Will you tell us or not why you are really here?



When I felt the cold muzzle of the policeman's gun to the back of my soaking head, I really thought that was it for me.



The police put us in lock-up over night, not even allowing us to call our families. Thankfully, a different officer who arrived in the morning was more kind to us, and let us leave without too much hassle. I had always heard about things like this happening, but the experience was much more frightening than I could have imagined.



If you want to make something of your life, to find a safer life, you have no option but to leave Manipur. I left Manipur first to study in Assam, then Kerala, and finally in Mumbai. I had always dreamed of going to Mumbai. I grew up watching television shows and films set in this huge city, and felt like I knew it well before ever visiting it. But once I got there, I quickly realized that people in Mumbai know very little about people from the North East of India. I constantly wondered whether I was really safe there either.

Because I'm brown, people would ask me if I'm from Nepal. I was not "Chinky" enough to be from Manipur because I am not fair and my eyes are a little wider. Ultimately, I was still not Indian enough.



CLASSIFIEDS

Hi Saddam, I have some bad news. The owner of the flat was drafting the lease agreement, but he realized you are a Muslim, because of your name. Unfortunately...

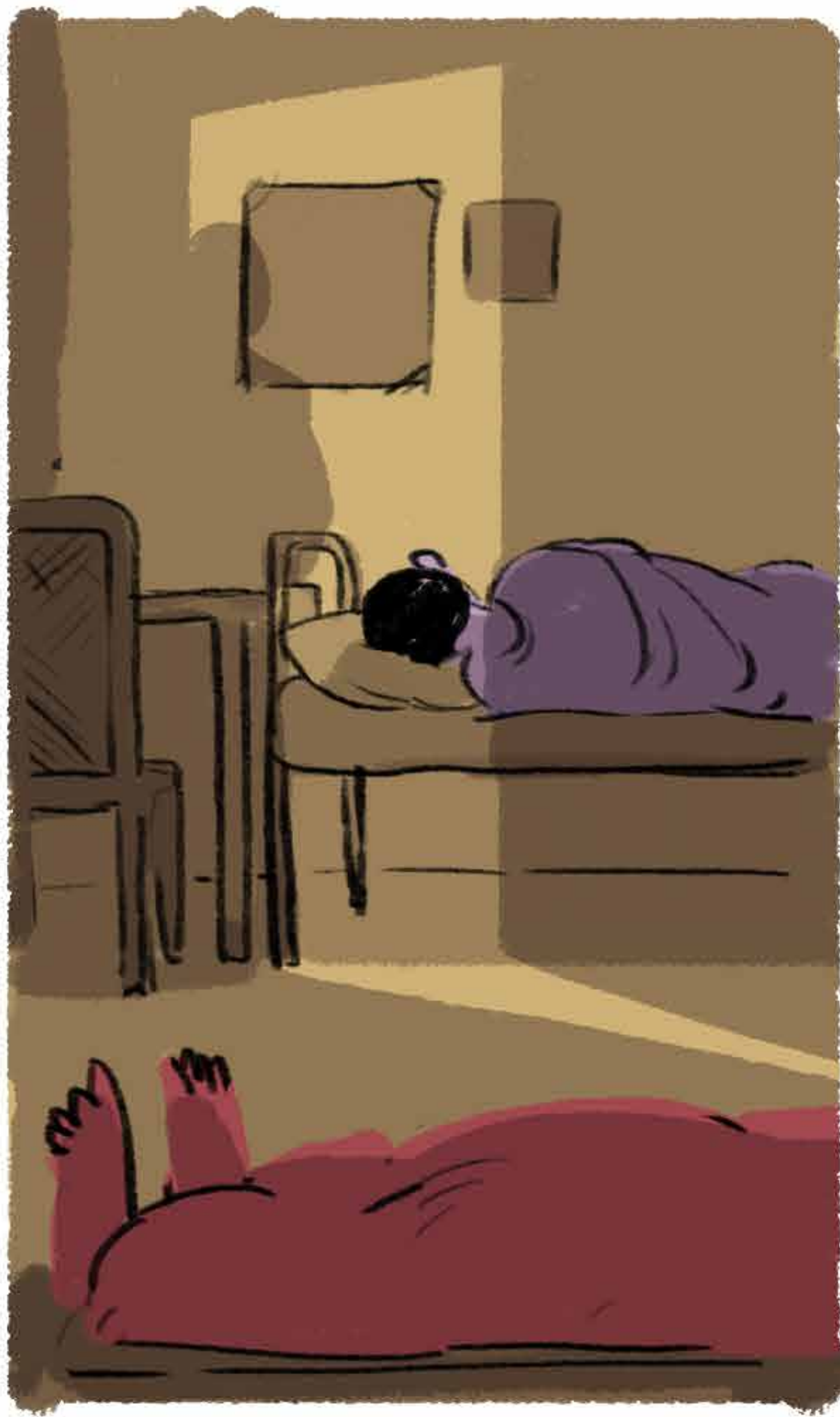
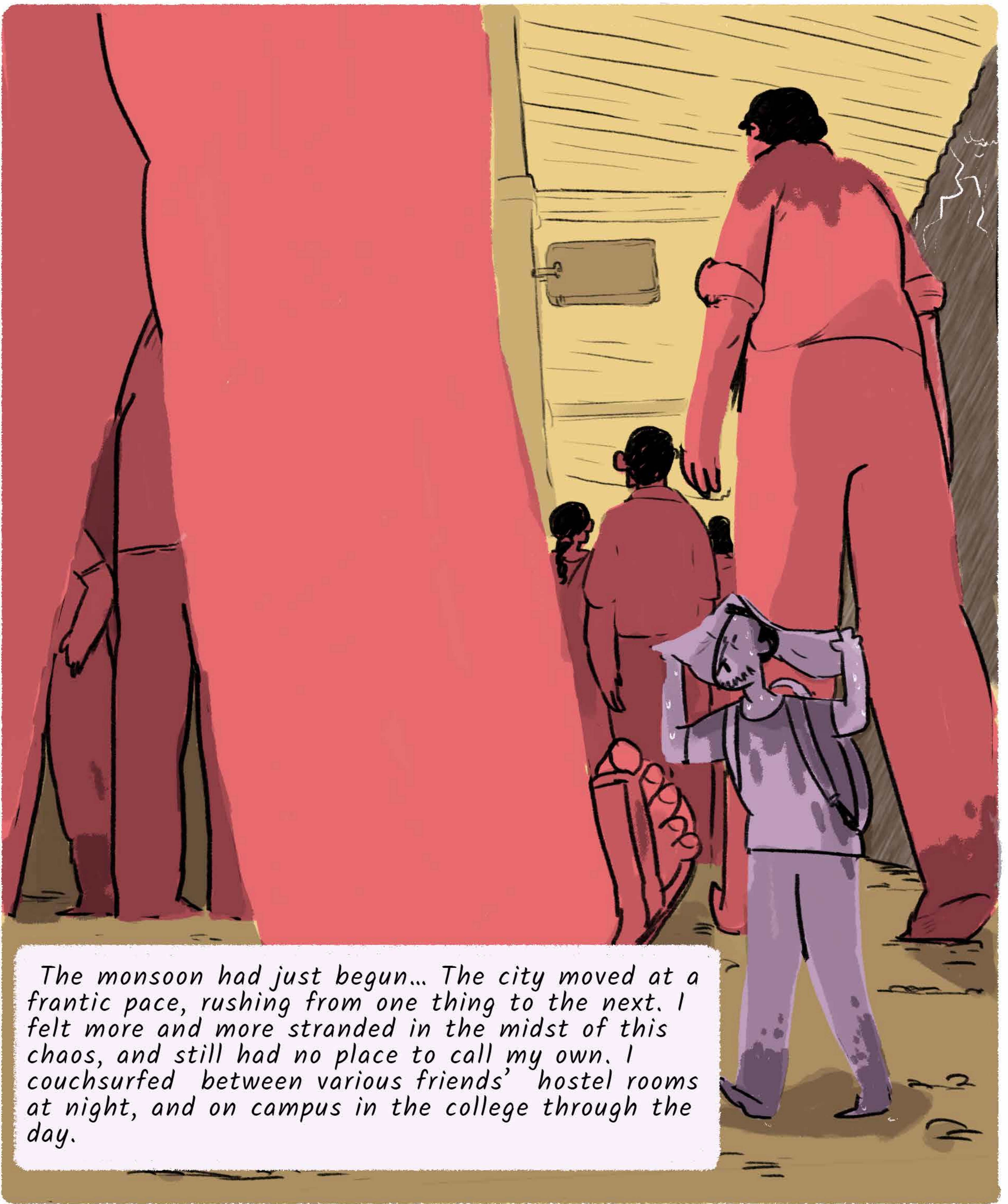
What? Are you serious? THIS is the reason I couldn't rent a room all this time?



I had been there five months and I was still looking for a flat! I spent my days on campus and in the library.



Library is closing! All students, please leave.

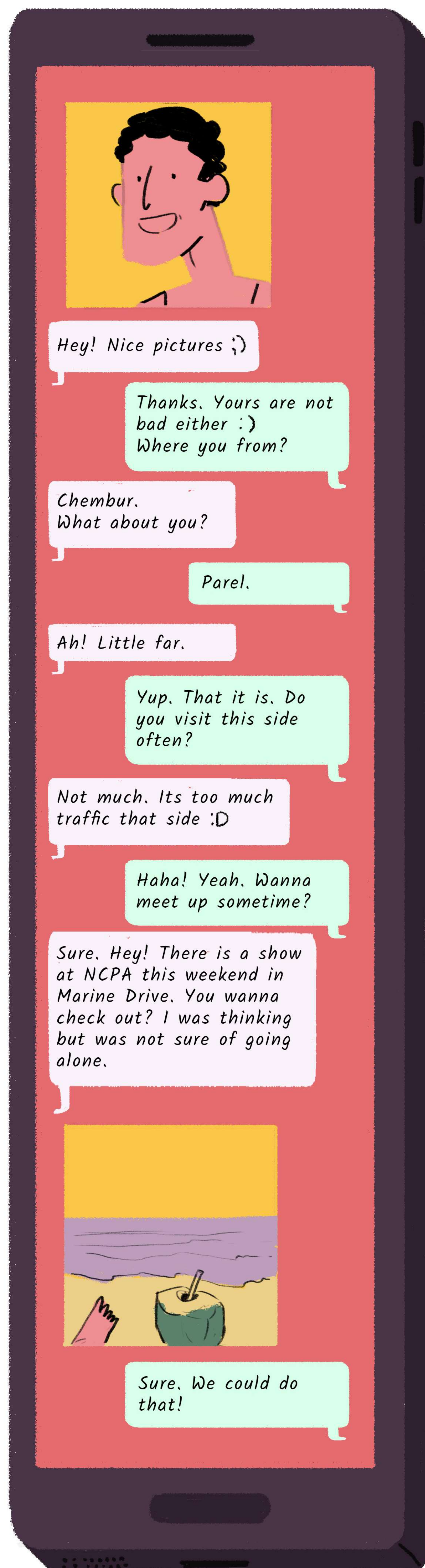
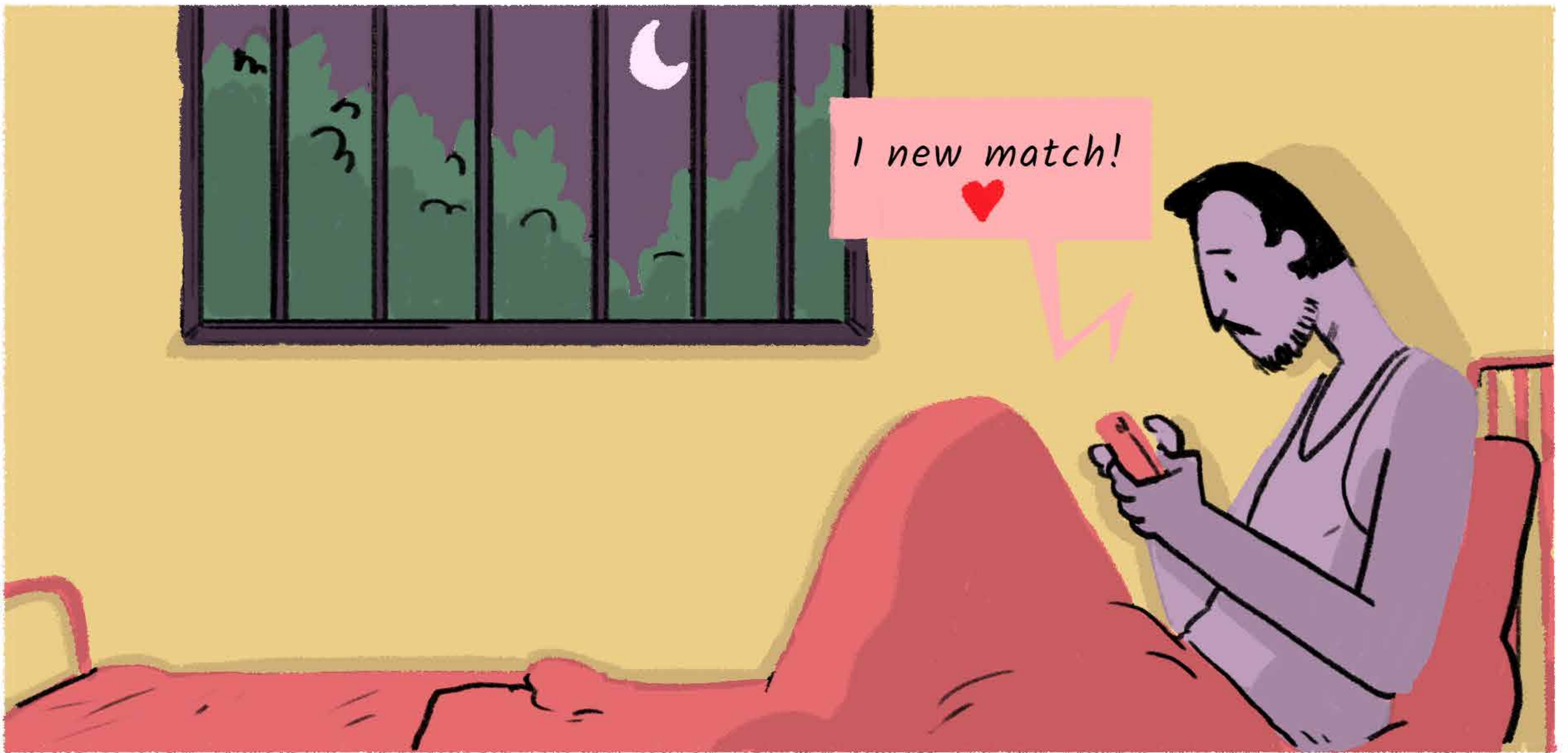




Finally, I managed to rent a room in Navi Mumbai. I had to change my name for the paperwork, using "Sharma", my father's name. If only someone had told me this was part of the problem I could have tried this months ago!! My mother had a sense of humour and laughed when I told her about it. In reality though, it wasn't so funny.

I experienced a strong sense of rejection in Mumbai, and had tried so hard to fit in. I had always been shy anyway. After I completed my MPhil in development studies at a prestigious university, I stayed on to begin a PhD because I was awarded a fellowship. I didn't really want to stay, but I felt as if I had to. Not accepting it would mean going back to Manipur.



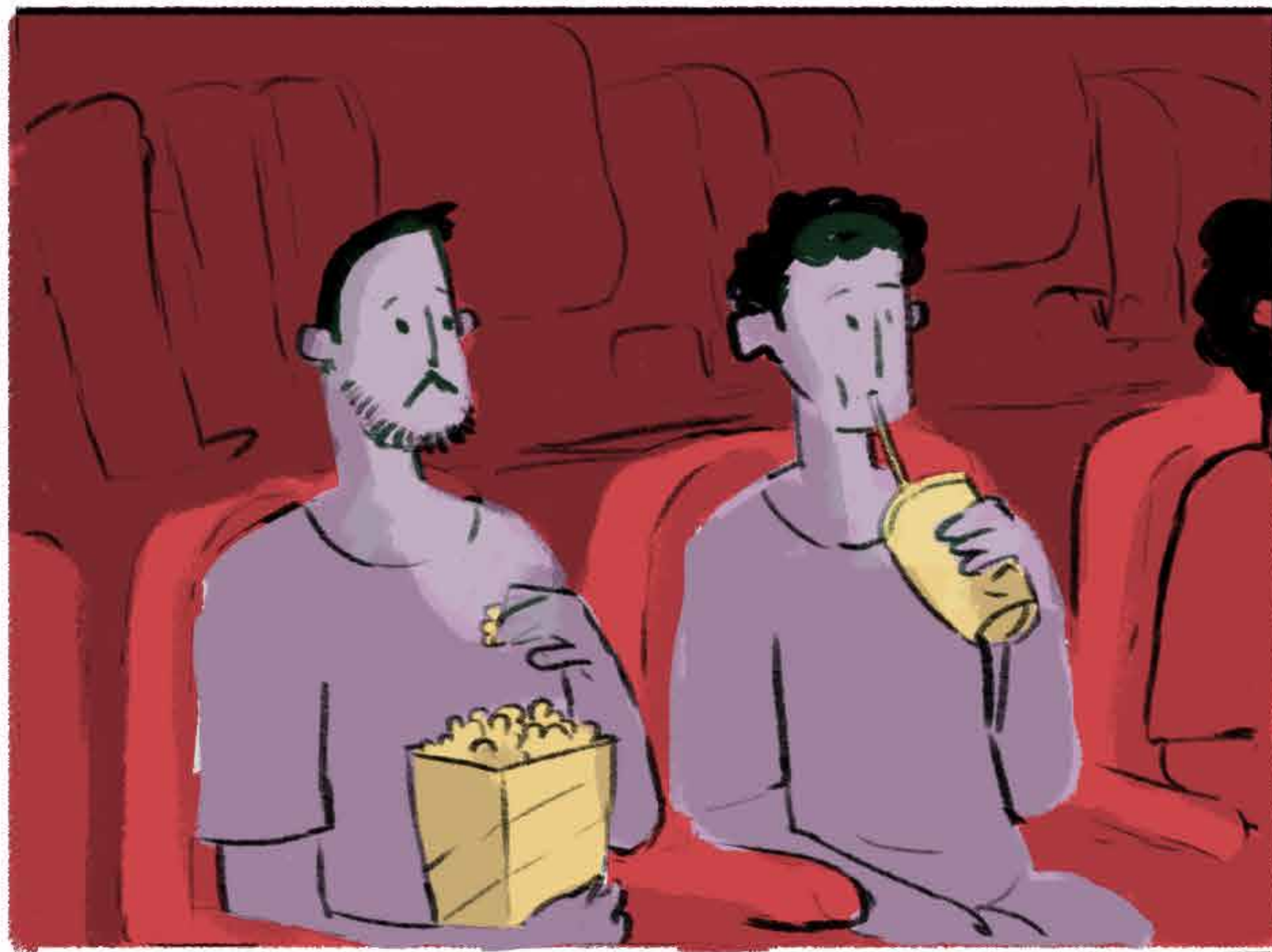




In most ways while Mumbai was a real struggle, it was also the first place I was able to express, and even celebrate, being queer.

That was a part of my identity I had to hide away everywhere else that I had lived. For the first time, I began to use dating apps and meeting men, going on dates, and was able to meet many other people from the queer community there..





*I'm having a great time this evening!
It's been amazing to meet you.*

Me too!

A friend of mine is hosting a party this evening, I was planning to go, would you like to come with me? It's just around the corner from here... It's a party with a lot of people like us, you know... don't make me say it already! People who are queer. It'll be fun!! Come on.







It began so innocently, at a party. I never imagined that I could be addicted in just a few short months. Using drugs began as a way to stop feeling rejected or lonely, even if for just a little while. But those feelings quickly took me down a dark tunnel...

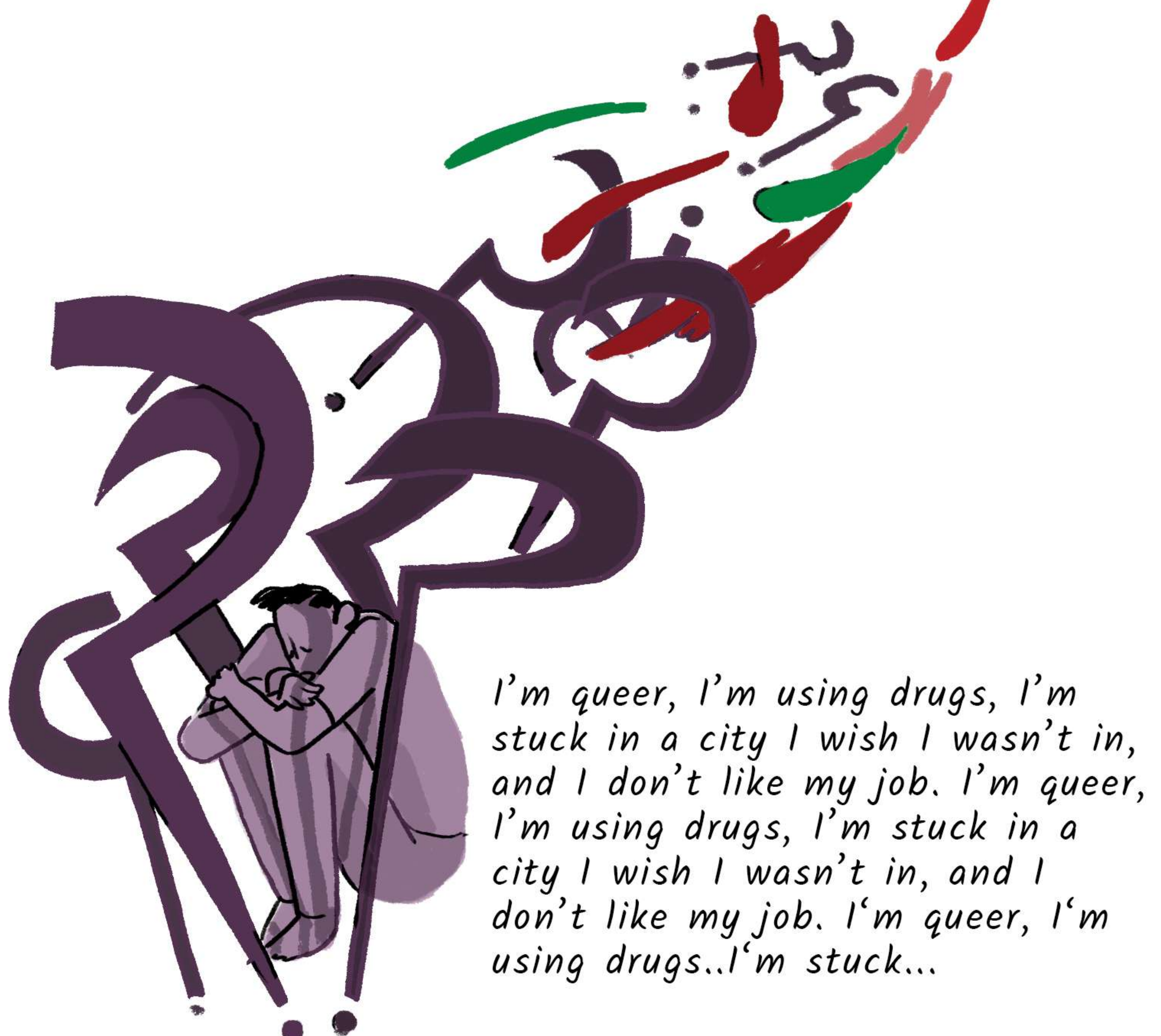


*I'm queer, I'm using drugs, I'm
stuck in a city I wish I wasn't in,
and I don't like my job. I'm
queer, I'm using drugs. I'm... I'm...*

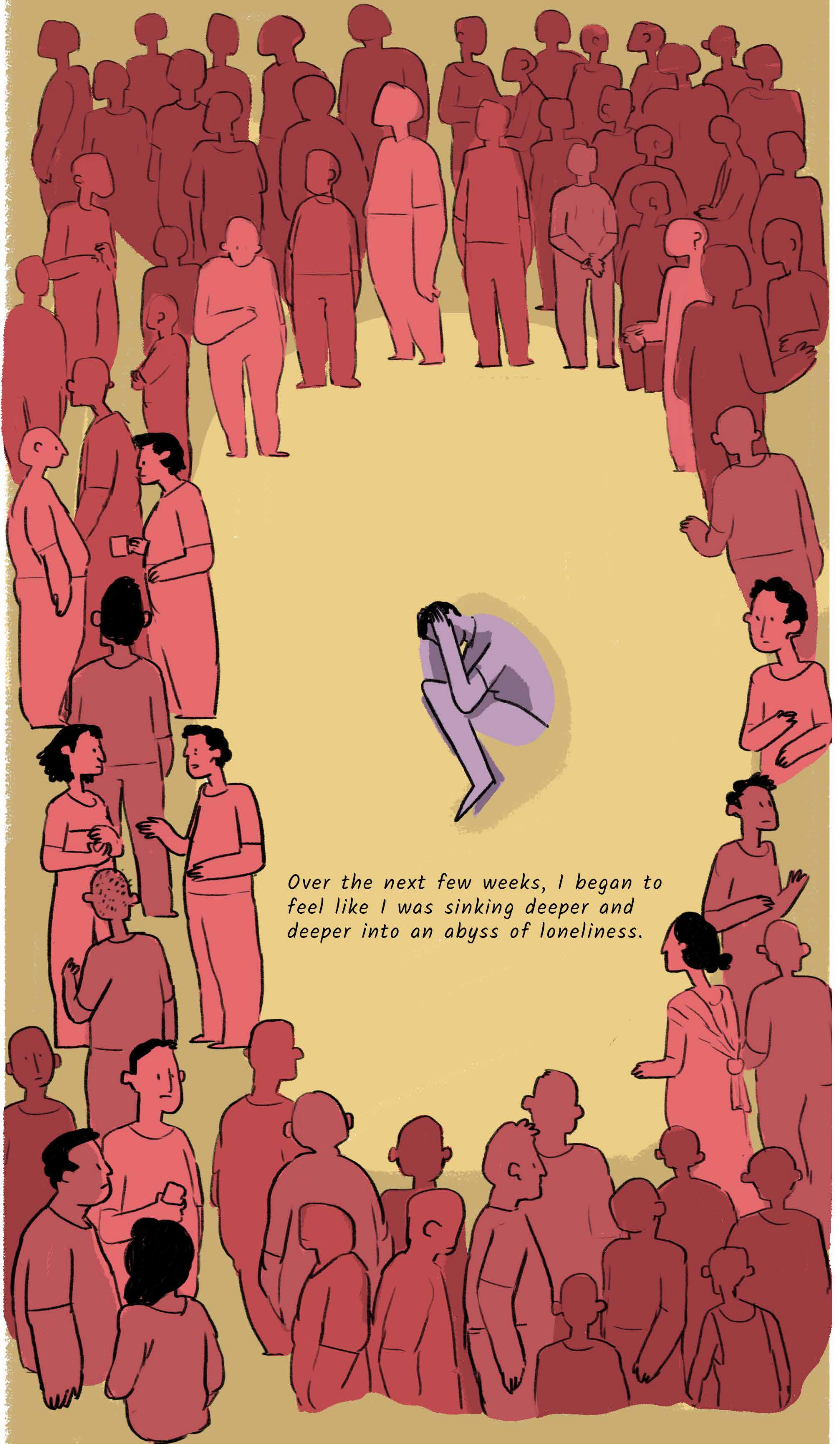


I wish... If only...

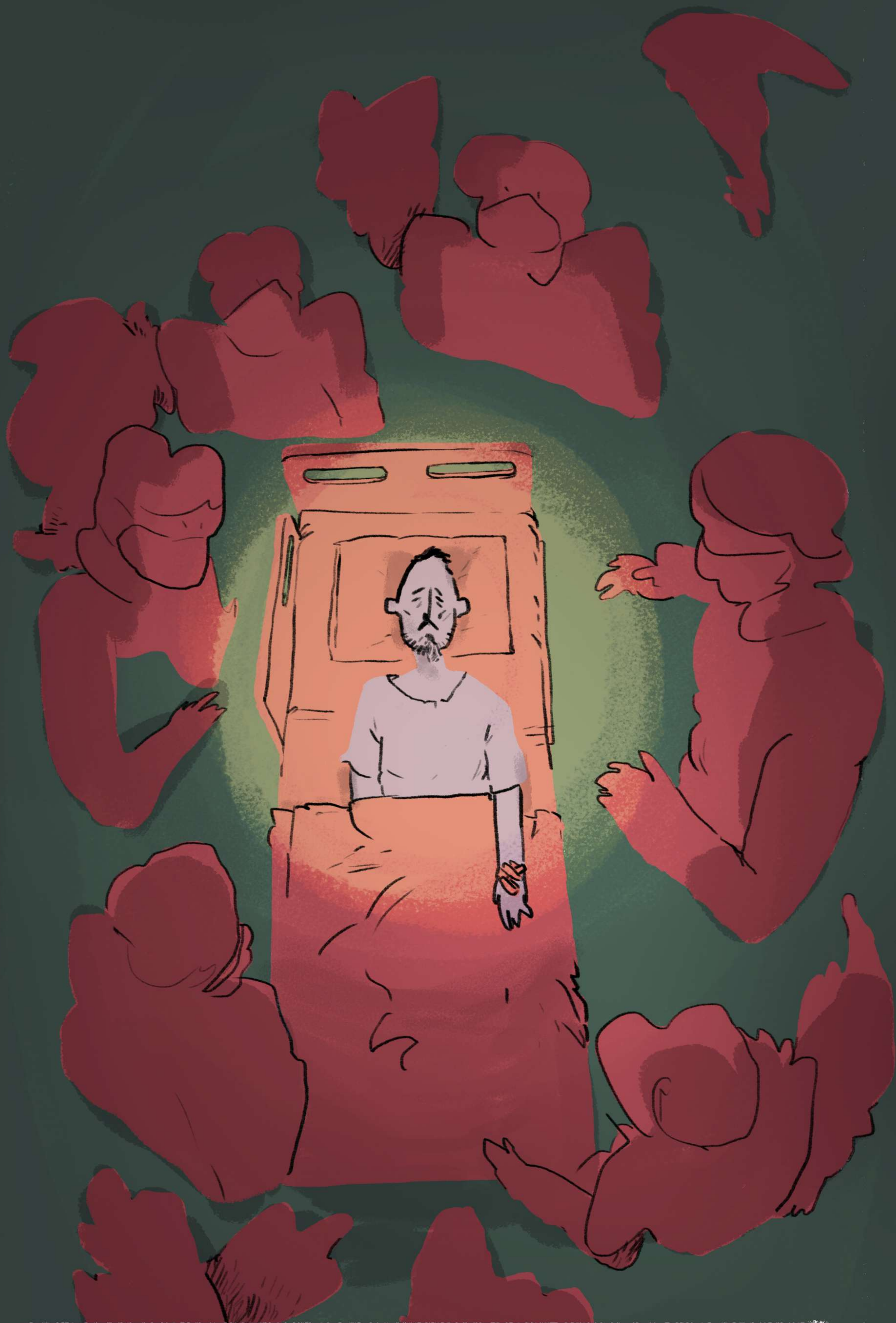
I just can't...



*I'm queer, I'm using drugs, I'm
stuck in a city I wish I wasn't in,
and I don't like my job. I'm queer,
I'm using drugs, I'm stuck in a
city I wish I wasn't in, and I
don't like my job. I'm queer, I'm
using drugs.. I'm stuck...*



Over the next few weeks, I began to feel like I was sinking deeper and deeper into an abyss of loneliness.



When I was taken to hospital the first time, having survived an attempted overdose, I was told that the doctors mocked me. They even refused to begin my treatment until the police arrived to register my “attempt” as a criminal case.

I was sedated for days, maybe a week, and when I was well enough to be discharged my brother had arrived to help me return to Manipur..



My recovery journey after being discharged marked one of the most difficult and dark phases in my life.

In Manipur, I was confined to my room for months, heavily medicated.

I was taken to consult the best psychiatrists locally available, but all they did was prescribe more medication to treat my substance abuse symptoms.

About six months later when I thought I was finally better, I returned to Mumbai.

What have I become...

Within a month of being back in Mumbai, I experienced a relapse. Something felt really wrong, and the medication didn't seem to have helped. Even my friends were terribly afraid to leave me alone, worried I would harm myself. My second attempt at an overdose landed me in another hospital. I was admitted to the psychiatric ward which was more like a prison. I was locked in a barred cell during my treatment. At that point, I felt so much despair that I was almost convinced that it was easier to not be alive than face the conversations I would have to have with my family back in Manipur when I returned.




I had been too afraid to trust the doctors, to tell the truth. What would they think of me? The risk felt too big, and I had a feeling no matter what I told them they would just prescribe some medication anyway! But everything changed when I learned that one of my friends who was also using drugs had died from an overdose. I was suddenly very aware that that could have just as easily been me. I had barely escaped death again. That's when I realized I had to be honest and tell the doctors, it was my only chance.

Finding a safe space to openly talk about myself was my first step towards real recovery.

I put aside my fears and opened up to the doctors in the hospital. They gave me the space I needed to discuss not just my physical symptoms, but also how I was really feeling inside. So many of my worries gushed out as I spoke to them. I told them about my PhD, how I wasn't sure I wanted to be doing that at all, about my struggles fitting in, and about how I was a queer man.

Your sexuality, gender, understanding of yourself, they don't go away with medicines. I needed support from people who would listen to me as "me", with whom I could be honest about myself.





My experiences in hospital were pivotal in showing me that the need for a safe space where people can speak up without any fear is really critical. The absence of these spaces leads to so many unnecessary struggles, and deaths too. In my case, my inability to speak openly for decades almost killed me twice over.

It's critical to have spaces where you can be honest, express how you feel, and be accepted. This is much more difficult to do as a queer person, because most people don't know or understand what we go through.



I began to finally access appropriate help, including meeting with a queer-affirmative counsellor. I began my journey of accepting myself, all my vulnerabilities and my strengths included.

I spent my whole life being afraid. Wondering, "What if they find out about me?", or, "What will they think?"



Having been in the closeted for the longest time, I was afraid of accepting my sexuality. Admitting it to others openly meant exposing my deepest vulnerabilities to them. And so, I suppressed the desire to talk about it for a long time.

In fact, I only opened up to my friends about it as a way of explaining to them why I had turned to substance abuse in the first place, rather than "coming out" exactly. I had grown so anxious that my friends would think I was some sort of drug addict that I found I was distancing myself from them.

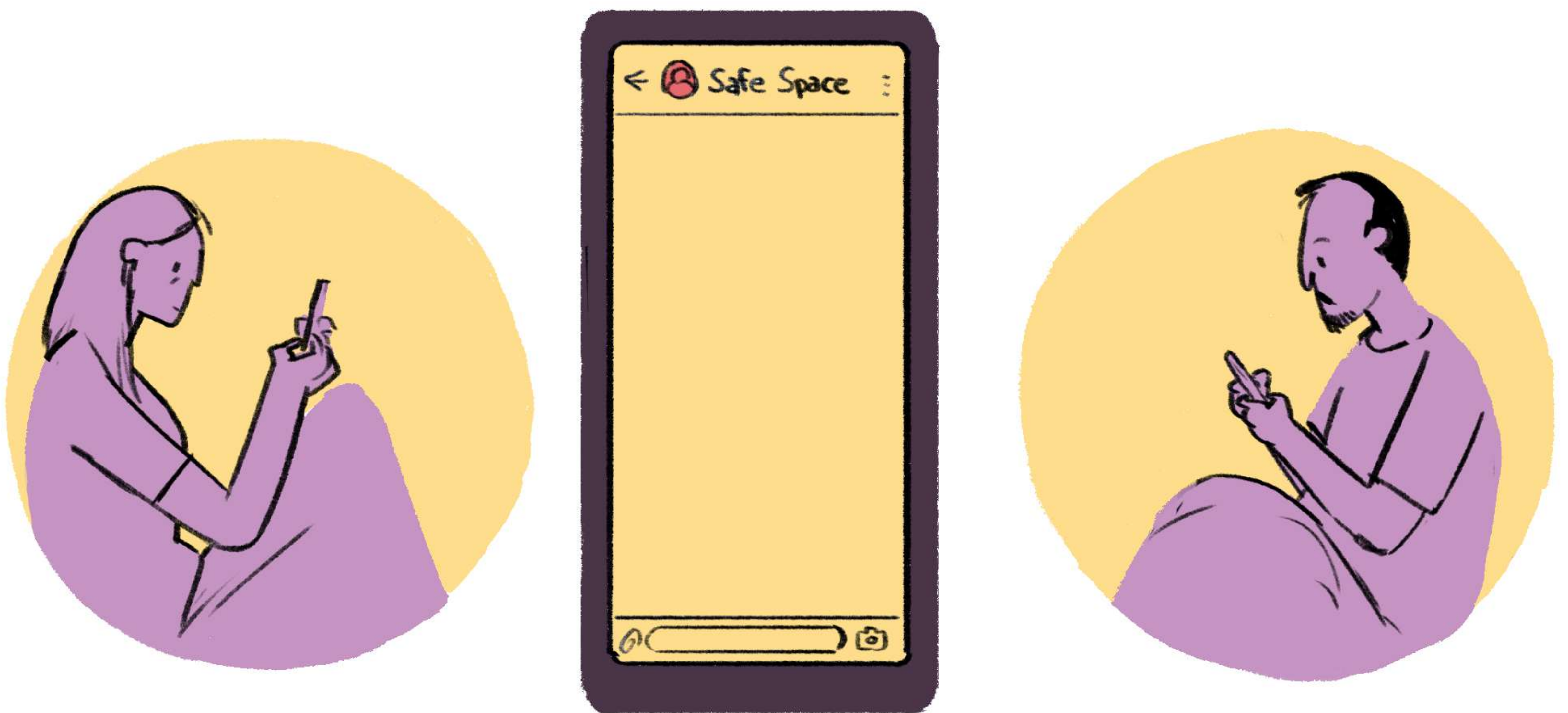
I gathered all my courage together, and wrote an article that was published by a prominent media website. It explained my experience with substance abuse, and my struggle with keeping my sexuality hidden. I was very worried when I finally submitted it, not sure what people, especially those who knew me from Manipur, would think.



Once it was published, however, the relief I felt was amazing. I felt relieved for two reasons. First, because countless people from all over the country began to reach out to me expressing their encouragement, accepting my story, accepting me. And second, because while telling my story meant admitting my “weakness”, my story itself seemed to be giving strength to so many others.

In the North East, young people are systematically excluded from so many development initiatives. Through my studies in Mumbai, I learned more about the real extent to which the North East was marginalized in India.

It all began with creating a simple WhatsApp group to get a conversation going with a few people I knew. We began to discuss how we could get together to improve the situation in Manipur, and hopefully, other parts of the North East too.



I began to notice the huge gap in organizations and services in Manipur for other young people like myself, especially queer people, to access education or information about gender and sexuality, and therefore help break down the stigma associated with people who are queer.

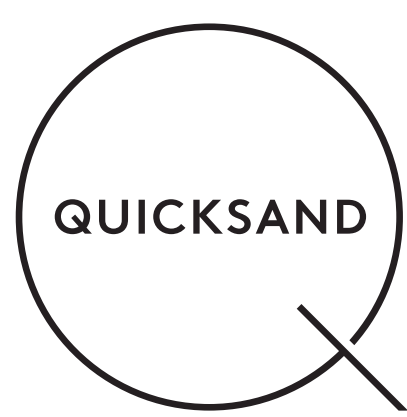
I tried to reach out to bigger organizations for projects, but it generally didn't amount to much. That's why I decided that even if nobody else wanted to do this work, or fund it, I would do something about it myself.



I created Ya-All in Imphal in 2017. Ya-All is an effort to create a safer environment for the queer youth of Manipur, while battling stigma and discrimination. By setting up safe spaces Ya-All is also helping serve the mental health and well-being needs of many young people.



I want you to know that sometimes, it's okay to be vulnerable, and it's a huge step to accept our vulnerabilities. They are a part of who we are. Once we do this, we can find ways to turn them into our biggest strengths.



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