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DEP 405

B.Des Design Project- 1

Exploring narratives depicting morally ambiguous decisions

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Declaration

I declare that this project report is based on my work carried out during the Autumn semester of 2021 at IDC School of Design, IIT Bombay. I declare that this written report represents my own ideas, communicated in my own words and where others' ideas or words have been included, I have adequately cited and referenced the original sources.

I also declare that I have adhered to all the principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not falsified, misinterpreted or fabricated any idea, data, facts or source in my submission.

I understand that any violation of the above will be the cause of disciplinary action by the Institute and penal action from the source in the case the work has not been incorrectly cited or if permissions have not been taken where necessary.



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Approval

The B.Des Design Project- 1 titled “Exploring narratives depicting morally ambiguous decisions” by Nidhi Deshmukh, Roll Number 18U130019, is approved, in partial fulfilment of the Bachelor in Design Degree at the IDC School of Design, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay.

Project Guide

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Abstract

I often get into discussions and arguments with people where I try to understand the motivations behind everything the person says and does- especially when it's a person with completely opposing views.

This project started as a similar exercise to see if I could justify some behaviour that goes against my personal beliefs— to see if it was possible to understand and empathise with a character making unhealthy decisions because of their circumstances.

This story treads the dangerous path of moral ambiguity, of what is acceptable and what isn't in difficult situations. It makes the reader ponder over the uncomfortable decisions the characters must take when pushed into a corner and forced to take desperate actions.

In this project, I attempt to break away from my usual visual style and create an immersive illustrated short story.

Introduction

This story takes place in a mystical shop where you can buy or sell any article, being or abstract idea and emotion. It is a place where people go to get rid of items that haunt them. The story explores the emotional turmoil felt by the customers as they debate with themselves and the shopkeeper on whether they can come to terms with selling whatever they're there to sell.

A young mother, unable to cope with the stress and anxiety of childbearing and that she cannot help her sick child and feels that she's out of options, goes to this mystical shop to get rid of her troubles. And the source of her immediate problems happens to be her sick child. We then dive into what circumstances exactly led to this seemingly drastic decision. We explore her backstory and the emotional turmoil she feels before making the decision—whether or not to actually sell the child.

We think about how great motherhood is, the immense responsibility to raise another human and the sacrifice that comes with it. It is expected of parents to sacrifice anything for their children. And although I think that is a moderately fair expectation, I think sometimes we forget that they are also regular people. They do not always know what to do, and we can't always expect them to be selfless. So, what happens if someone fails to bear that responsibility? What of people who cannot cope and end up making bad decisions because of this?

Intentions

My intentions for this project topic were to try to generate empathy for someone we would generally deem as 'unforgivable'. I do not expect these characters to be forgiven but to be understood. Everyone cannot make perfectly moral decisions all the time. Things that go against our morals make us uncomfortable, and that either causes people to ignore it or get outraged. Although this is an understandable reaction, I wonder if it actually helps solve the problem.

So I intend to take one such morally ambiguous situation and just show all the sides of the story to see how it started. I want the audience to rethink their initial biases and judgement and try to find where, in its preliminary stages, some guidance or interjection could've changed the way this story ends.

The setting

The initial idea from which I developed this story was about a mysterious shop that opens in the middle of a street late at night. In this shop, one could buy or sell absolutely anything, real or abstract. Here arose a question: In a place where you could sell anything at all, what would people go to get rid of? It must be something that they cannot sell anywhere else because of various reasons. For e.g. If the item to be sold has no monetary value, is intangible, taboo or generally frowned upon.

This shop, I imagined, would look something like a reselling store that'll fit right in the Chor Bazaar— with trinkets, goods and boxes of materials filling the shelves to the brim. Grey and old metal shelves held together by wobbly screws, an aluminium rolling shutter for the door and old dusty tables.

Initially, the shop looks quite mundane, nothing out of the ordinary, but when you look closer, some things don't make sense. There are some objects you wouldn't expect in a shop like this and some that you can't recognise at all. The further you go into the shop, the weirder it gets. The far end, the back of this shop, what it is and what it contains, we cannot fathom.

Value system

The first step was to set up a value system for the goods being bought and sold in this shop. These would impact the character's decisions, and my intentions were to make it more difficult for her to easily get rid of her troubles.

The lowest in the hierarchy are trinkets and regular things that we may find in a thrift shop. All physical things would not have a lot of value by themselves. However, physical objects with heavy emotions or memories are the most valuable. Individual thoughts, feelings and memories would fall in the middle of this spectrum.

The Characters

Mother

The protagonist of this story is the mother. Her first child was born sick. There is no cure within her reach. She is out of resources and options. Her life is a mess that she's barely able to hold together. Every day is spent in fear of impending loss and frustration over the fact that she can't help her child.

A person can't stay long in these sort of intensely stressful situations before they take drastic measures to get out of it. For her, this culminates in wanting to get rid of anything that causes her distress, which according to her reasoning, is the child.

Child

The sick child of the main character is a mostly passive character and only has minor interactions in the story. He is around one year old and has a cardiovascular disorder making it difficult for him to survive without constant medication.



Shopkeeper

The shopkeeper is a nice, quiet 60yr old man. He does not own this shop; he is just a regular person who is just working at the counter of this very weird reselling store. Initially, he was supposed to voice the thoughts of confusion and outrage that the audience and literally anyone else witnessing this situation would think of. So, he needed to be a regular person and not a mystical person that owns this mystical shop.

However, this character went through a lot of changes later in the process and turned into someone who would be unfazed by anything. His readiness to go ahead with this transaction then makes the mother hesitate even more.

Owner

The owner of this shop is a mystical entity that we do not actually see in the plot. He was separate because the shopkeeper must be a regular human.

Customer

We only see one other customer of this shop. A young man who is haunted by the memories of a late loved one and comes to the shop to sell that memory.



Developing the plot

Research

For research, I mainly read short stories and some illustrated narratives. To understand layered storytelling, I studied a few stories like **'The ones who walk away from Omelas'** by Ursula K. Le Guin and **'Funes the Memorious'** by Jorge Luis Borges.

I found it quite interesting how the story describes Omelas. Initially, we only see the people celebrating, living a quiet and peaceful life. But there is always a subtle implication of 'they have this peace at some high cost'. As the story progresses, we then slowly understand the entirety of the situation and how the entire city normalises locking up a child for the sake of their happiness. At this point, many things about this city start making sense; we see the people's guilt and the way they justify their own harmful actions, and finally, those who choose to walk away from this. I wanted to use a similar method to unveil the shop in my story.

In her talk **'Have you met a monster'**, journalist Amy Herdy says that "It is human nature to distance yourself from someone like him (in this talk, criminals), label him as a monster, and dismiss him as evil. We don't want to have anything in common with such a monster because then, it could mean that we too are capable of monstrous things... ..because then we wouldn't believe that the monster could be a neighbour, a co-worker, a trusted friend..."

This made me think about how difficult it is to notice if someone close to you could be making dangerous decisions. I had watched this video years ago, and I recently rewatched it for this project. Amy talks about her interviews with a serial rapist, and, on principle, I refuse to try to justify that. But on a milder level, if we label everyone making dangerous decisions as dumb or irrational, we would not notice the little things people around us do that has the potential to lead to something far worse, and we wouldn't notice places where we could interject to help make small changes.

I also watched various talks about human connection that talk about understanding a person by connecting to some primary human emotion that we all feel underneath all the complex circumstances and perspectives. In this story, I wish the reader could understand that underneath all the moral questions and dilemmas, the mother is just another person who is tired, scared and desperate to get out of her situation.

I studied various illustrated narratives mentioned in my bibliography to understand their varied visual styles and tried to find inspiration. It was most interesting to see the way the authors used empty space on the page to pace the story. I was initially hell-bent on making a graphic narrative, and studying these books helped me consider alternate methods of representing a story.

I also had discussions with my peers about feelings on anxiety and escapism as a coping mechanism. I draw heavily from these discussions towards the end of my story in the way the climax is illustrated.

Backstory

The backstory of the mother was to be simple- her child is sick, and she has no resources to help. Her family is supportive, to the best of their abilities. She is not in some absolutely irrecoverable circumstances. But the routine of stress can still be difficult to handle.

I intend to show the mother, who is desperate for help, out of options and just tired and scared- to communicate that those feelings are valid; we are allowed that moment of weakness, but the behaviours and actions taken following these feelings still need justification. And the consequences of those behaviours cannot be escaped.

Possibilities

While developing the plot, I explored the possibilities by trying to answer the questions that arose from the premise and initial idea. A few questions that arose regarding the storyline were:

In this shop that buys and sells anything, who are the weird things being resold to?

Since this is a mystical shop, I have considered the possibility of some 'mystical' customers from the other side who could buy things in this shop. I never really worked further on this possibility, but it still exists.

Other than that, regular people visiting the shop to sell something can exchange their goods for the wares in the shop, or they can just buy the goods, there are all sorts of things in the shop.

What would happen to the child if he/she were sold?

There are a few possibilities regarding what could happen to the child. They can be taken in by the shopkeeper or the mystical owner of this shop, or they may be taken by another customer.

If the shop buys anything, real and abstract, why did the mother not ask to sell her emotions, the fear or anything other than the child?

In one of her visits, the mother would ask to sell her emotion— the feelings of fear of loss and anxiety that make it difficult for her to

cope with the problems in her life. This transaction, however, cannot solve her problem because the main stressor in her life that triggers these feelings is still there, so she just ends up generating more of those emotions.

And the main question: Is the child is actually sold by the end?

The end of the story had the following possibilities: she could either sell the child, and we could explore what relief and guilt she feels after making that decision. Or she won't as she understands that it isn't really the child's fault and it's unfair to the child that she sells him over her feelings, no matter how unbearable.

Since I want the audience to mull over her decision and make their own conclusions and judgements, I decided to leave the ending up for the audience to ponder over. We see this debate showing the conflict the mother feels, we understand her backstory and reasoning, and her final decision will be left for the audience to interpret.

Initial dialogue

Initially, the story was to be told in the form of a back and forth between this mother and the shopkeeper of the shop. They represent two opposing views and at the same time, the two sides of the dilemma that the mother faces and is debating with herself. If the story had been conveyed completely through dialogue, it

would highlight the opposing views, and that would provide the necessary tension. However, this would make it difficult to fully express the backstory of the characters as we would miss out on a lot of descriptive metaphors of the thoughts of the characters. It is possible, of course, but when I started writing the first draft, I personally felt more inclined towards a descriptive style as it helped me convey more abstract feelings and thoughts of the character.

(A haggard looking middle aged lady)

My child is sick.

We've looked for specialists and shamans and all.

Nothing can be done.

I'm tired.

I'm scared.

I beg you, take the child away!

What a horrible parent!
You wish to get rid of your child?

Please.

I do not wish for this child to suffer any more pain
because of my inability.

Is that the noble idea you tell yourself
to justify your selfishness?

Call it what you will.

But my child doesn't deserve this suffering.

And I don't know what else to do.

The initial bit of dialogue with which I started the project

Food for thought

I want the audience to mull over the very uncomfortable decision the mother must make. A woman who is tired and scared and is pushed to get rid of her child, not out of malice, but because she is too emotionally and mentally spent. Not to condone the behaviour, but to understand that this is just another human being in a very difficult situation.

Feedback

I shared the drafts of my story with my guide and profs as well as some of my friends and family to look for possible plot holes, confusing parts and to see how they interpreted the end of the story. I also asked if they could emotionally connect with the character and her experiences. Based on the feedback that I got, I edited some parts of the draft to make it more cohesive. The most common feedback were:

The climax of the story felt confusing as the description of where the character was walking wasn't clear.

I rewrote the climax and changed the locations that the character walked through. I did not make any major changes as I believed that the scene would make sense in the final story as it would be conveyed mainly through visuals.

Most readers feel sympathy for the main character, but there wasn't as much outrage over the premise as I would have liked.

A surprising amount of people were okay with selling children in stories, so I worried if the gravity of the situation wasn't properly conveyed. This may be because the child is a passive character, and we don't interact with him much. So I edited the end of the story to make the child a bit more real.

Since the child is a passive character, it feels like he is almost treated as an object.

While I do not intend for the child to have no presence, I had always planned for this story to be about the mother's decisions and all the mess she creates in her own head. I did not want to add a lot of characters and backstories but focus on her mental state and how it gets worse because of her dilemma. The child ended up being a bit too passive because of this.

As the ending of the story is vague and stops before the mother makes the final decision, some readers believed she finally sold the child while some thought she didn't.

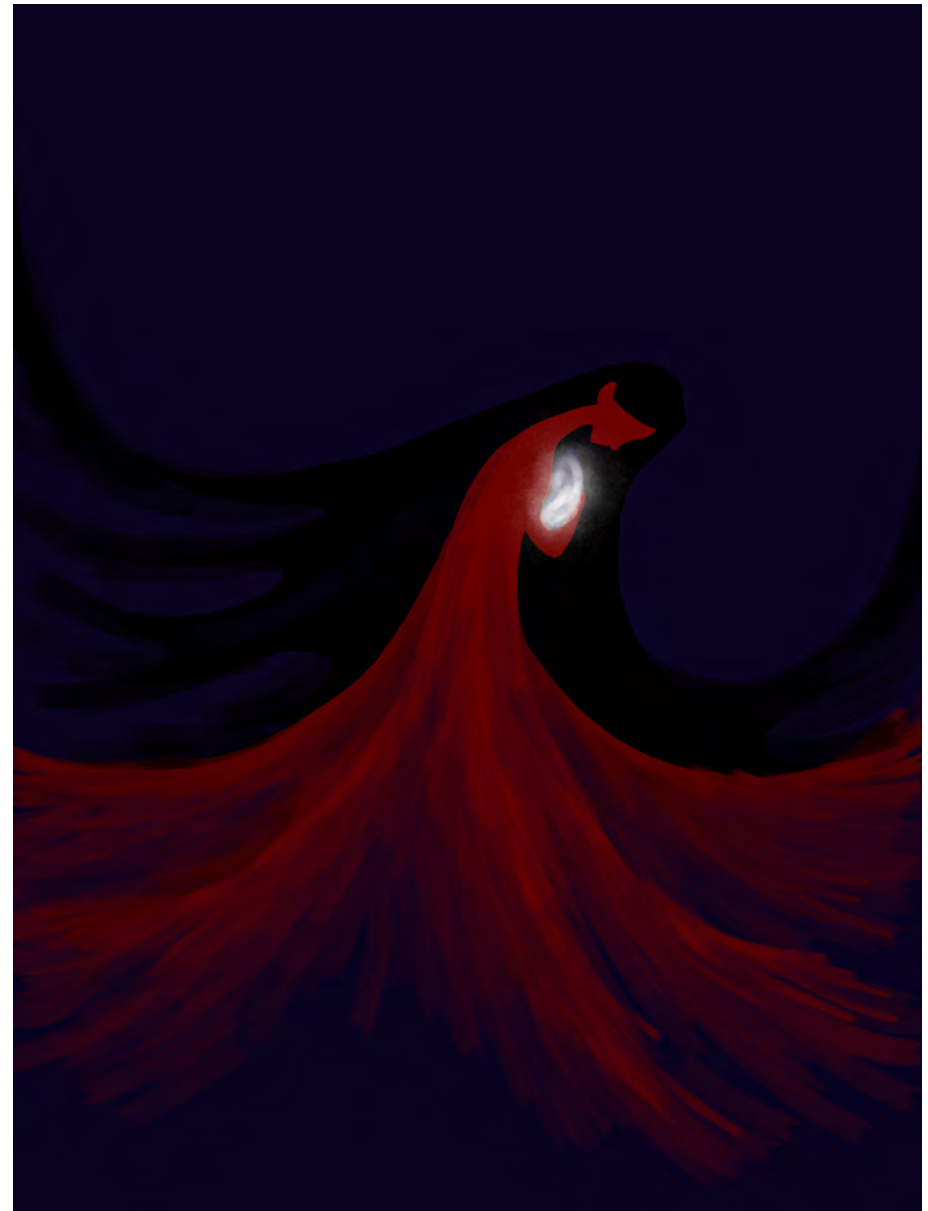
I intended to leave the ending up to the readers to interpret, so this feedback was very welcome.

Visual Style

Initial explorations

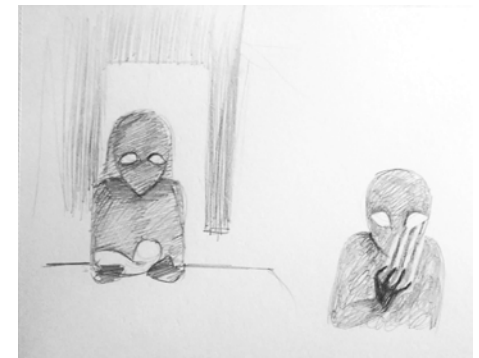
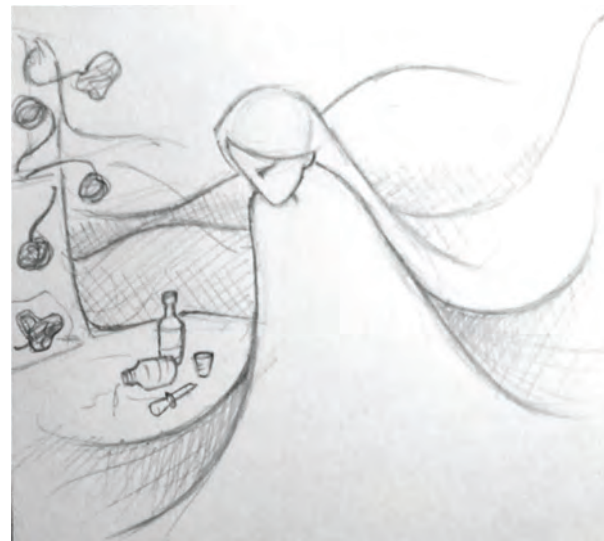
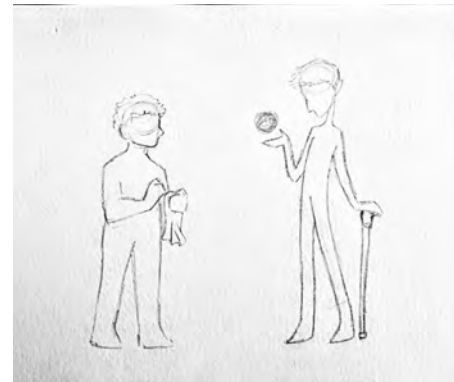
For the first exploration phase, I mostly tried to sketch out how the characters, mainly the mother would look. The idea was that she must seem cold and empty at first glance.

Since the story is from the mother's perspective, I tried to see what she would look like through the shopkeeper's eyes as an exercise.



This was followed by explorations of how customers who come to the shop burdened with heavy thoughts and emotions would be depicted.

I also explored how to express emotions through the posture of the characters.



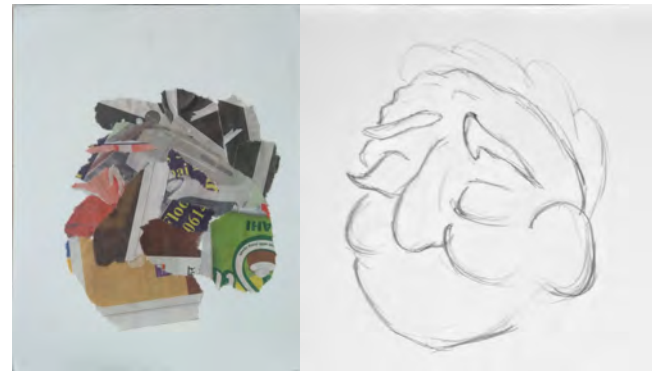
Exploring with materials

I tried to make characters with various materials as I was not satisfied with the way they looked and we suspected that using the pencil was limiting how openly I explored the form of the characters.

I tried out two materials: paper cutouts and charcoal to design the characters.

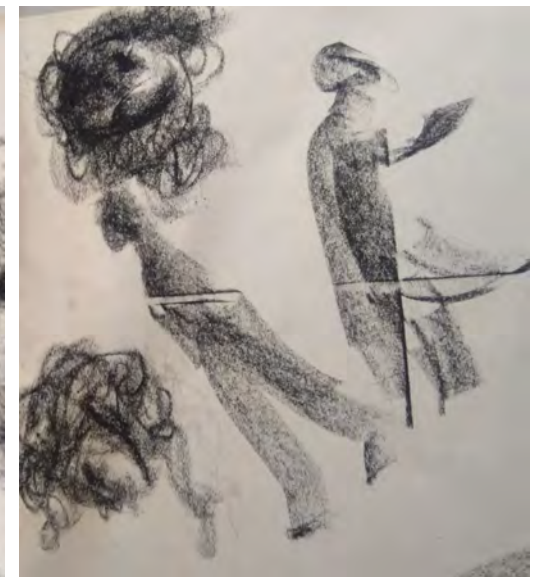
Working with paper cutouts:

While working with paper cutouts helped me break out of my usual style and try something bold, I wasn't very satisfied with this style either. However, it prompted me to try more postures and to express emotions through the postures of the characters.



Working with charcoal:

To say the least, I had a lot of fun with this. I then developed the characters based on my explorations with these materials.



Finalish things

I had problems associating with the character of the mother, and my drawings of her felt very impersonal in the initial stages of this project. But based on the explorations and exercises, I finalised the mother's design and general style of my artwork for this story.

The mother has this empty look because of the mask she wears. As the story progresses, we see the mask crumble, and all the feelings and thoughts she's trying to hide are visible. We do not see the mother's actual face closely in the illustrations. This was done because the entire written story is from the mother's perspective, so I decided to show her in illustrations only where necessary.

Graphic novel attempt

Initially, I planned to convey this story in the form of a graphic novel. But after the draft was completed and I tried to sketch out a few pages in this format, it did not seem to do justice to the story and I was unfamiliar with it. So, the final output was changed to an illustrated short story.



The Final Short Story

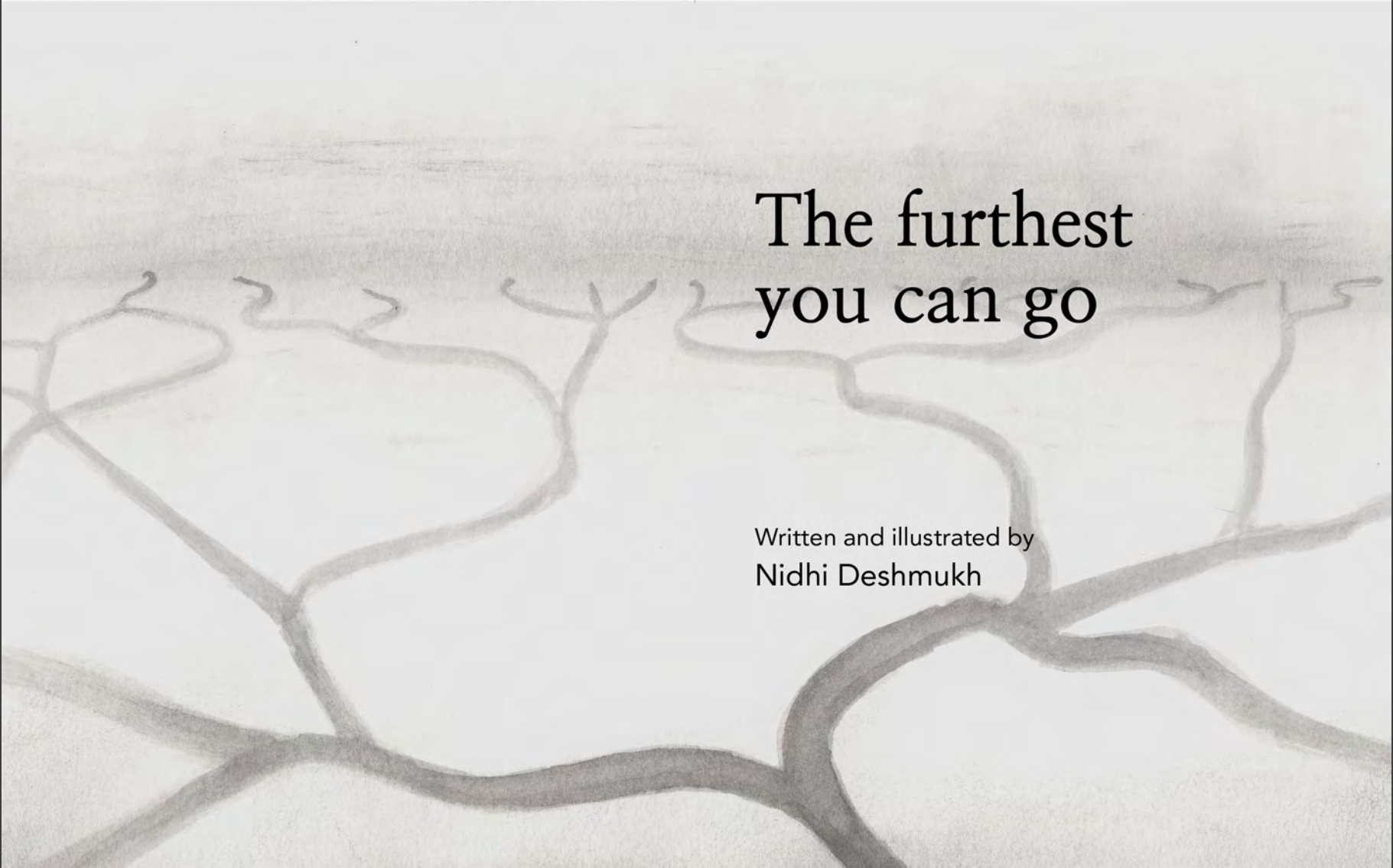
The final output is titled “The furthest you can go”, referencing the mother going deeper into the shop with every visit and finding worse thoughts and parts of herself.

The dimensions of the book are 15cm*12cm as that seemed like a comfortable size to hold and read. It also gave me a more expansive spread to sketch on.

The illustrations are hand-drawn with watercolours and soft pastels. I then edited them in Photoshop to fit the page and not disturb the text.

I used the font “Fira sans”. Initially, I had chosen a serif font, but that did not seem to fit the mood of the story, so I changed it to a light sans serif font.

Here, I have attempted to use empty space, illustrations and formatting to deliberately pace the story and add pauses where I wish the reader would stop to think.



The furthest you can go

Written and illustrated by
Nidhi Deshmukh

Tall metal shelves, a rusted shutter for a door and an odd assortment of trinkets, this shop looked so ordinary, you wouldn't notice it if you weren't looking for it.



"Are you here to buy anything, ma'am?" the old man at the counter smiled.

"Not really", the mother sat her child down on a chair beside the shelves.

"To sell something, then?"

She looked over at him.

"What all do you buy?"

"Anything at all... old things, trinkets, memories, fears..."

She turned away to examine a shelf.

The shopkeeper left his counter to pat the child.

She picked up a small box and turned it over.

"Memories, you say..."

"Why yes, the more precious your memory, feelings or things, the higher their value."

"What of precious children...
do you accept those?"
she chuckled.

"Well, the owner of this shop
did say that there isn't
anything we cannot accept"



She turned to face the shopkeeper.

“Heh, you won’t stop me if I walk out of this shop right now, alone?”

“Ah, that would be abandonment, not sale. But if you do complete the transaction, I would have no reason to stop you”

He returned to the counter, rearranging a pile of papers on it.

The mother looked at her child. It was pulling on its sweater sleeves. She smiled, it does get cold easily. She returned the box to its place on the shelf and ventured further into the shop.

Umbrella, half a teapot...

a small yellow stuffed bear.

They had those at the paediatricians. She had seen it so many times. Her baby quite liked that one so she bought a similar bear for it. What a shame, it got drenched in antibiotics—the stain and smell won't wash away.



A clock somewhere in the shop chimed.

One

two

three

four...

4 o'clock, almost time for the afternoon medicine.

She picked up her child from the chair.

"Won't you buy anything, ma'am"

"No, not yet"

The shelves outside were empty the next day. Maybe someone bought its contents. That shelf had quite an array of different things.
Odd, how all of them got sold together.

The mother stepped into the shop.
“Not here with the baby today?” the shopkeeper called from his station at the counter.
She smiled a quiet, sad smile.
“No, not today. Can’t take it out of the room today”
The shopkeeper’s eyebrows raised slightly.
“Just today, is it?”
The mother sighed and her shoulders hunched ever so slightly.
“No, I don’t know how many days it’ll take this time”
She straightened up and took a step away.
“Do you mind if I explore the shop a bit?”
“Certainly not, be my guest”

She walked past the first few rows of shelves. So many things... What use would these be to a reselling store?



At the far end of the shop, a lock clicked shut. Could this shop have another door? But that end won’t open into any street...

“I... really can’t keep living like this”

...a barely audible voice said at the counter.

The mother turned and slowly walked
to the front of the shop.



She paused behind the last shelf.

A young man placed an intricate wooden box on the counter.

"I wish to sell this..."

"Who does this belong to?" the shopkeeper asked.

The man seemed taken aback by this question.

"I don't see how that is relevant..."

"Indulge me"

"It... it is currently in my possession but... it belonged to my mother."

"And why do you wish to sell her precious keepsake?"

As the conversation at the counter continued, her mind wandered.

Ah how fitting, a son here to sell his mother's keepsake.
Did that mother deserve this?
For her son to want to get rid of her important things.

How unforgivable could her deed have been?

"No, god no!" the man exclaimed.

The shopkeeper stopped mid-sentence.

"She was the only one I had. No one else in my family cared, I was an unwanted child—but she was the only reason I survived. And now she's gone, and all that's left with me is this box."

He sighed, "I don't want it. I don't want to remember any of it... I can't... I can't live like this"

"You don't wish to remember the painful memories..."

"No, I don't wish to remember any memory of her"

"That's quite harsh"

"If I could sell these memories, I would"

The shopkeeper looked at this person, burdened and tormented by what should've been a comforting memory. He sighed sadly.

"If you wish to sell your memories... We can buy them"

The mother took a step back into the rows of shelves.
How unfortunate, for someone to be so troubled by
happy memories. She wondered how her child would
think if it became an adult.

She didn't hate it. Nor did her husband or their parents.
But when you wake up thrice every night afraid that
you'll lose your loved one any second, it makes you wish
they never existed.

It was not always that bad, though, there were so many
good memories. She used to love going to the park with
her baby, she loved sitting together for dinner with her
family, just chatting and playing around; she loved her
little family.

But she couldn't enjoy that anymore. There were days
the baby couldn't leave the room, much less visit parks.
They hardly ever had dinner together, if they talked for a
bit longer than usual, they would get into disagreements.

How could her family fall apart so easily? And she had
thought they would stick together through thick and thin,
sickness and death. She had tried,

after
all...

she

really

had...

But

then

how—

"See something you wish to buy, ma'am?"

The shopkeeper peered at her.

"Not so much..." she smiled stiffly.

The shopkeeper walked past her and placed a jar filled with a blue liquid on one of the shelves. Submerged in this liquid was an intricate wooden box.

"That box..."

"It was sold by the young man"

"So he left it behind, huh"

She couldn't blame him. Some would say it was cowardly or disrespectful, but...

Just how much of yourself do you have to spend
before you're allowed to be selfish?



"It is so much easier to abandon things than to let it haunt you every day, isn't it?"

The shopkeeper turned to face her.

"Oh? You think it is easy to leave precious things behind?"

She looked at him.

His expression was still calm and kind.

And that she did not like.

"I just wonder which is worse; the pain of enduring or the guilt of abandoning"

"Does one of them have to be worse?"

She didn't reply. It was getting unsettling.

"Well... um... I'll be on my way now"

She muttered as she hurried towards the door.

"Won't you buy anything, today?"

"No, I won't"

The shelves outside the shop were filled again two days later. This time they had brass vases of many different shapes and sizes.

Without sparing much attention to them, the mother stepped into the shop.

The shopkeeper smiled at her in greeting.

"Do you have... a chair or stool I could rest on?"

"Oh yes, of course"

He hurried around the counter with a small chair.

The mother sat down.

"The baby not allowed out of the room yet?"

"No... I wonder if it'll still be there when I return"

"Why is that?"

Her face crumpled.

"He's not well... it's been like this since he was born.

Some days he's fine, as if this never existed but some days... .."

The shopkeeper waited. His silence giving her room to gather herself.

"I can't help him. There's nothing I can do. And I don't know which moment will be the last time I see him. I cannot believe that all this is worth it. Any of it"

"Why do you say it like that? Do you regret loving him?"
"What's the point? My love can't heal him. It's useless."

"Hmm... that is what you're always told, isn't it?
'You are a mother, you exist to ensure your child's wellbeing.' But your helplessness doesn't mean you or your love for your child is useless."

The mother rested her forehead on her hands.
"Then what do I do with all this shame, fear and anxiety that tells me otherwise?"
"Well, you are in a shop that buys anything..."

She looked up.
The shopkeeper smiled sadly.
"Please buy these emotions"
He nodded, "Come"

He walked to the counter and pulled out a small slip of paper. He handed it to her.

"Fill this form consenting to the sale, please"

The mother held the paper in unsteady hands. She took the pen he offered.

Name: _____

Age: _____

Properties of the goods:

1. Contains mass- No...

2. Contains emotional weight- Yes...

3. Occupies large area- probably...

Goods taken as payment: _____

Signature

"I don't know what to take in return..."

"That is fine, look around and see if anything interests you. I can fill that in for you later"

The shopkeeper placed three containers on the counter, two small and one a bit larger.

The mother signed the form.

The containers began to fill with murky looking smoke.

"What..."

The shopkeeper labelled the containers.

"Those are your emotions"

He took the form and added it to his pile of papers.

"Just like that? I thought there would be more to this process..."

The shopkeeper looked up and chuckled,

"You agreed to sell it, right? That's all we need"





The mother touched one of the bottles hesitantly.
"So many emotions... who even buys these from you?"
The shopkeeper smiled quietly.
"You'll be surprised by the things people do"
She watched him rearrange the containers on the shelf
to make room for hers.
"Why would anyone want to buy fear?"
"A healthy amount of fear would keep you cautious
and rational, no?"
"You make it sound so simple"

She walked backwards, observing the shelves. The
keychain wasn't at its place anymore, nor was that
umbrella... things changed quite often, though she had
seen very few people in this shop...
The stuffed bear was still here. She wondered who had
left it there... Why?
She picked it up.
Whatever memories the bear brought back, that wasn't
its fault.
"Do you think I can take this in return for the emotions?"
She called out.
The shopkeeper peeked from behind the shelves.
"Yes, of course."

A lock clicked at the back of the shop. This was followed by soft murmuring conversation. The shopkeeper glanced behind. He placed all the containers in the shelves and wiped the dust off his hands. He turned to her and smiled gently. "I will now go and attend to them, ok?" He pointed to the back of the shop. "Yeah... okay..." the mother nodded. With a slight bow of his head, the shopkeeper turned and walked to the shelves at the far end of the shop.

The mother looked at the bear in her hands. She wondered what her baby would think when he sees it. Would he think the replacement was not worth the same affection as the first one? She turned around and walked out of the shop.



A week was enough time for the shelves outside to be almost unrecognisable.

The mother took a hesitant step into the shop.

The shopkeeper appeared from behind a shelf. He smiled at her in greeting then his eyes rested on the child in her arms.

"Is he better now?"

The mother didn't reply. She placed her kid on a chair beside the counter.

The shopkeeper watched her every move.

"You don't look so well..."

She turned away from the child and walked past the shopkeeper into the numerous rows of shelves.

The shopkeeper reached out to pat the child.

Trinkets, artefacts, purses... The mother stopped in front of a shelf full of jars. She picked up a container with murky grey smoke.

It's still here. The anxiety she had sold. That time she had felt lighter. It was supposed to be gone.

But then why...

She heard quiet footsteps behind her.
"Tell me..."
She turned to look at the shopkeeper,
"What happened to that young man?
You bought his memories"
"Yes, so he will not recollect any of
those"
"Will he forget all about his mother?"
"He sold the memories he had of the
things he experienced with his mother.
He won't forget her existence—more
like he can't, but he will not remember
the specifics."
"Will he remember that he sold those
memories?"
"Of course"
"Can that memory come back on its own?"



"What? No... Things you sell here, you can only get back if you buy it back."

"What of emotions?"

"Ah... Don't you worry, the emotions from the last visit that you sold here won't return to you"

The mother stared at him.

He looked honest enough.

He wouldn't trick her, right?

"Those specific emotions won't return.

But you must know... you're human, you will generate more emotions. This won't be easy but you must try to—"



She turned away and walked briskly further into the shop.

No he hadn't lied, but that didn't make this any better.

Just how many times would she have to sell her emotions
just to be able to live?

As she walked further, the shop seemed to change. The
metal shelves soon changed to ornate wooden ones.
They were much taller than before. The compartments
were larger. The rows seemed to converge.

At the far end of the aisle, she could make out a door
frame at the corner of the wall—one half on the adjacent
wall. The door was slightly ajar and as she watched, it
closed and a lock clicked shut.

Silence fell

It felt heavy

She stood there waiting for it to lighten.

It wouldn't.

She took slow steps forward.

A few steps in,
soft sounds to her left caught her attention.

Anything was better than the silence.

She tuned towards the sound.

What could it be... she couldn't recognise it.

Her steps quickened.

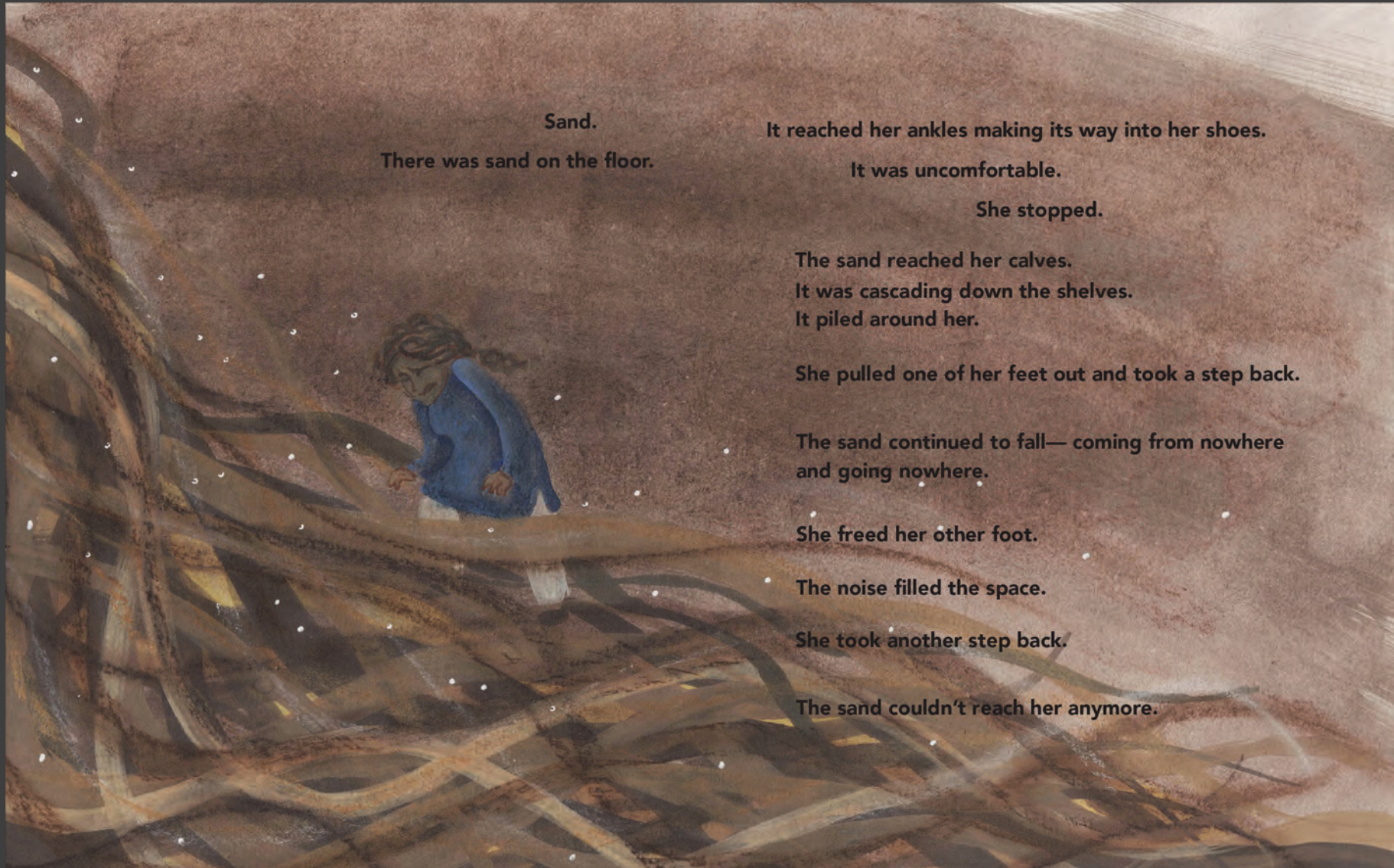
The sound grew louder.

She walked further and further into the row until her
foot sunk into the floor.

The next step sunk further.

She had reached the end of the shelf.

She could see the wall of the shop.



Sand.

There was sand on the floor.

It reached her ankles making its way into her shoes.

It was uncomfortable.

She stopped.

The sand reached her calves.

It was cascading down the shelves.

It piled around her.

She pulled one of her feet out and took a step back.

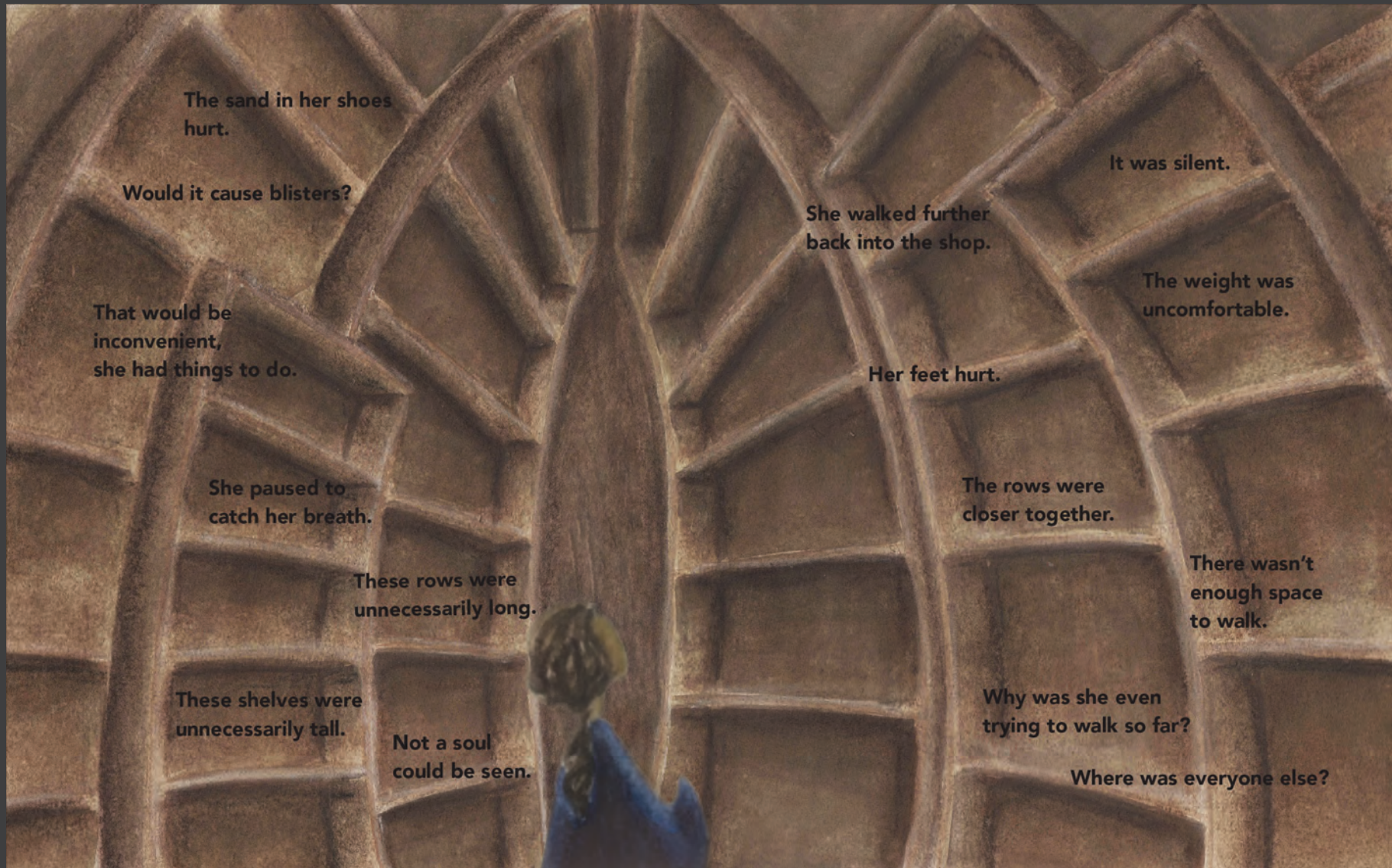
The sand continued to fall— coming from nowhere
and going nowhere.

She freed her other foot.

The noise filled the space.

She took another step back.

The sand couldn't reach her anymore.



The sand in her shoes
hurt.

Would it cause blisters?

That would be
inconvenient,
she had things to do.

She paused to
catch her breath.

These rows were
unnecessarily long.

These shelves were
unnecessarily tall.

Not a soul
could be seen.

She walked further
back into the shop.

Her feet hurt.

The rows were
closer together.

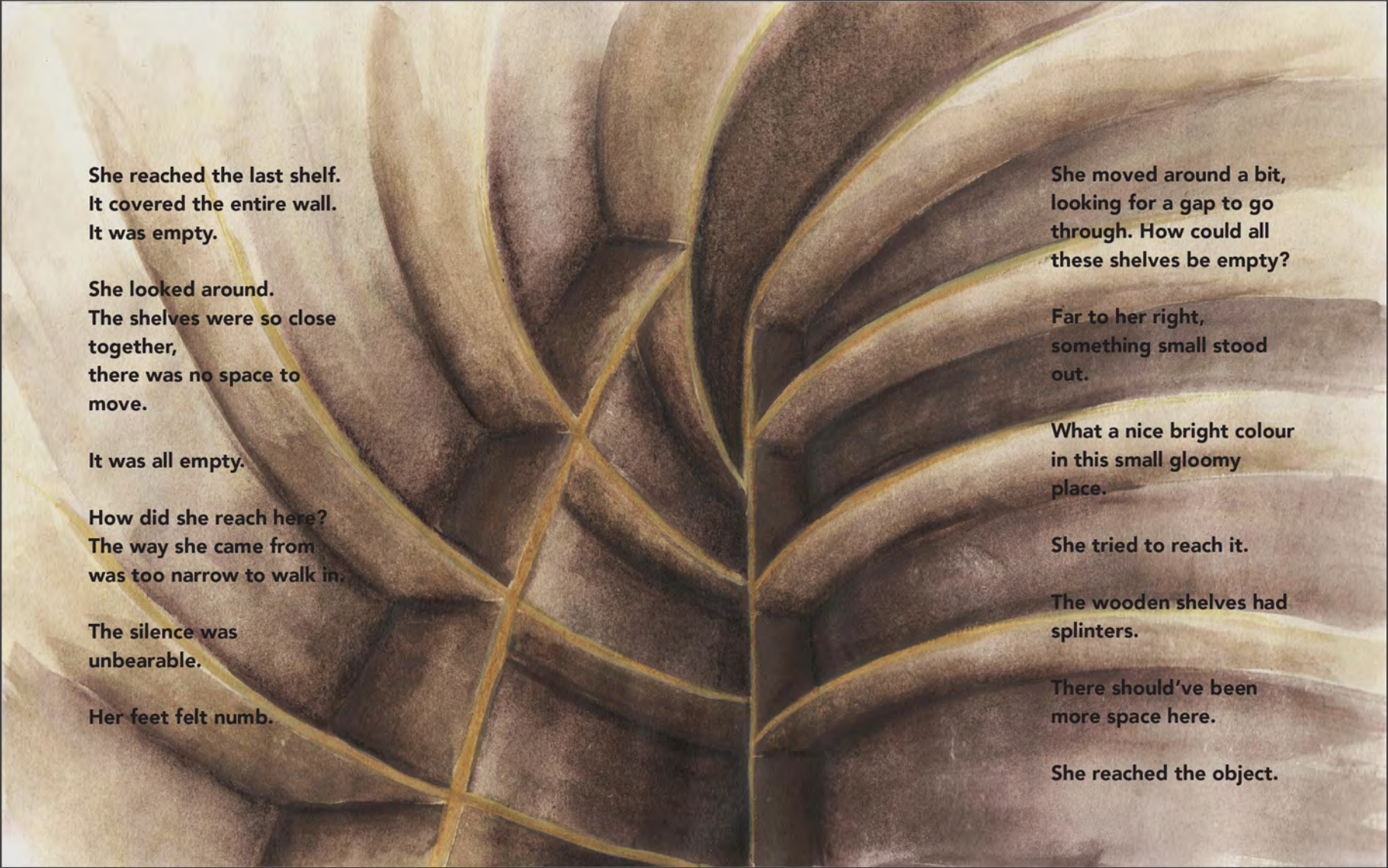
Why was she even
trying to walk so far?

Where was everyone else?

It was silent.

The weight was
uncomfortable.

There wasn't
enough space
to walk.



She reached the last shelf.
It covered the entire wall.
It was empty.

She looked around.
The shelves were so close
together,
there was no space to
move.

It was all empty.

How did she reach here?
The way she came from
was too narrow to walk in.

The silence was
unbearable.

Her feet felt numb.

She moved around a bit,
looking for a gap to go
through. How could all
these shelves be empty?

Far to her right,
something small stood
out.

What a nice bright colour
in this small gloomy
place.

She tried to reach it.

The wooden shelves had
splinters.

There should've been
more space here.

She reached the object.

**It was a small yellow
stuffed bear.**

Of course, it was.

She whirled around and walked
back. Back past the shelves. Back to
the front.
She stopped at the counter.

The shopkeeper looked up.
She picked the child from the chair
and placed him on the counter.

"What are you doing?"

"I... really don't know what I should
be doing"

The child looked up at his mother,
clutching the ends of her sleeves.

Precious. How precious.

"I'm really sorry"

"Do you apologise for what you did
or what you wish to do right now?"

"I wonder which is worse"

Disclaimer

The characters, places and incidents portrayed in this story are completely fictitious. Any similarities to actual persons, living or dead, or actual places and events are purely coincidental.

This story intends to provide a scenario to contemplate and debate. The story does not intend to normalise the events or any social issues implied in it.

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