



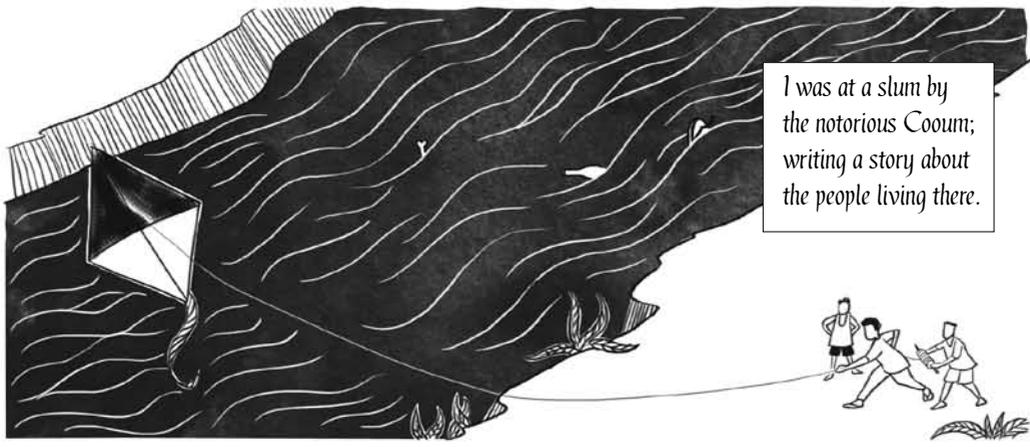
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Art | Aparajita Ninan

house to house from house to house

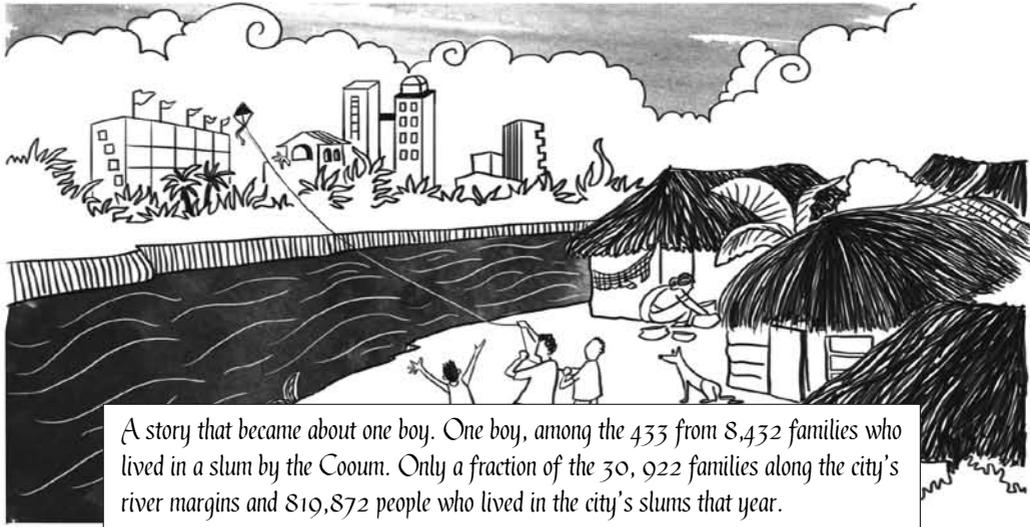
By the river

Chennai, Summer 2008

This is what I see in my head when I think of it.



I was at a slum by the notorious Cooum; writing a story about the people living there.



A story that became about one boy. One boy, among the 433 from 8,432 families who lived in a slum by the Cooum. Only a fraction of the 30, 922 families along the city's river margins and 819,872 people who lived in the city's slums that year.



You may know them as the 10% of the metro's population that washes your clothes, cleans your house or runs your small businesses and drives your public transport; that keeps the metro going.



This is the story of a boy named Robin.

Arun

Ajit

I wish I could go away somewhere but they say I'm too old for hostel. I don't know where to go.



This is why I brush my teeth, drink my coffee and leave first thing in the morning. No one likes getting yelled at. Especially not when you're 14.



We have to go to school tomorrow. Otherwise my grandmother will kill me.

We finished Class 8 at the nearby Corporation school, but now we need to go to the school in Aminjikarai and there is a gang in the class there which picks on us.

They know how to read and write well so the teacher always supports them. That's why we've been avoiding school for the past few weeks.



I'm seeing a trend - grandmothers here are the disciplinarians.



Sanjay, Robin's cousin



Why are you boys snickering?!

He's going to blow....

I find this means he's going to smoke weed.



The boys want to show me something and take me through the slum, which expands in ways I didn't think possible.

This is where we come to catch fish when the dam opens - the fish only lasts for a day so we hurry to catch them.

Look at this place... We fly kites, play, and it's so free... We can even swim in the water in the summers.

I suspect the last is a boast - the water looks vile.

The boys are talking about their dreams.

Mostly I just want enough money to get some alcohol at the end of the day.

Nah...I want to do something for other people... maybe become a doctor...

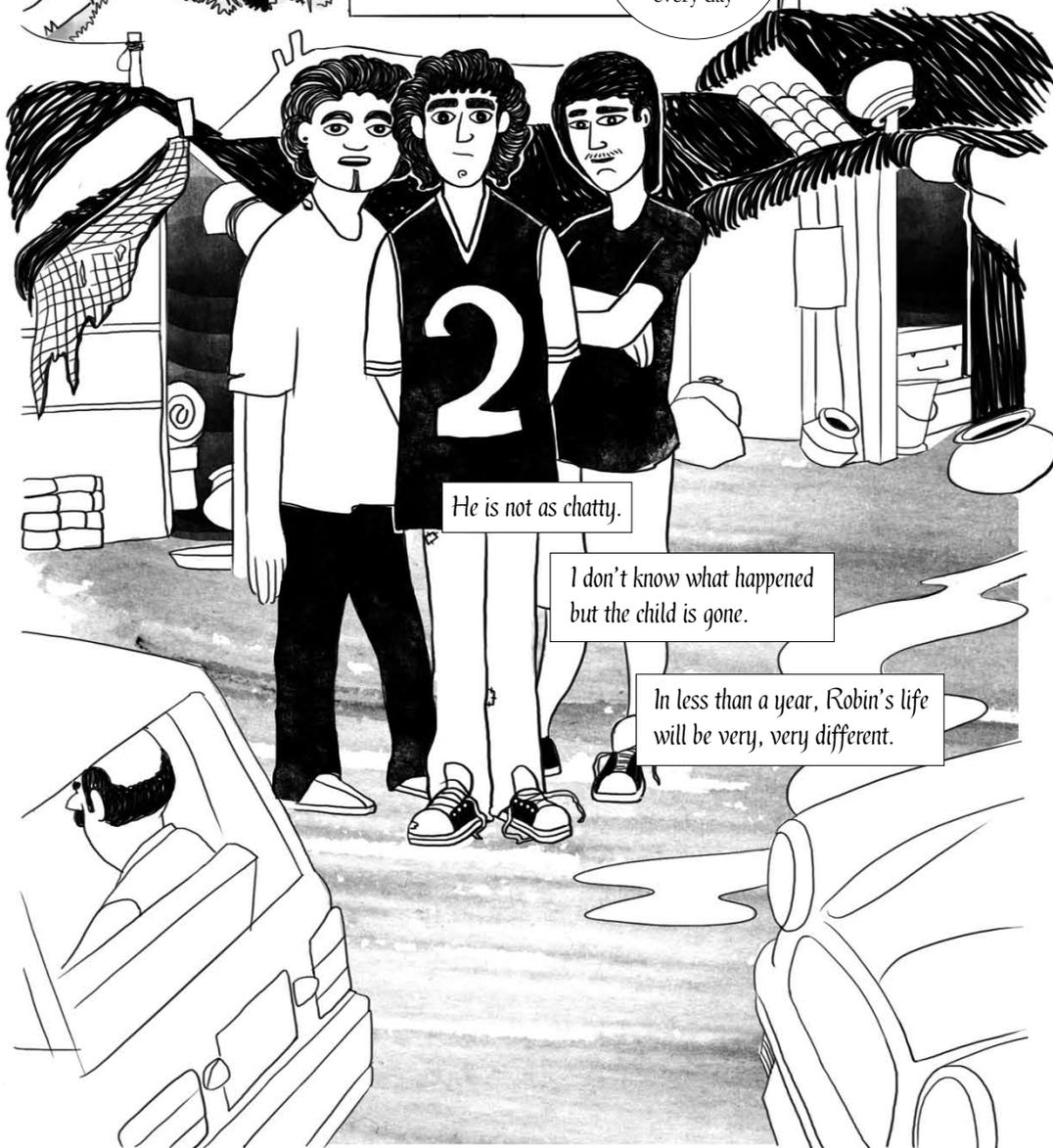
Robin is 14, and seems on the verge of dropping out of school. And he is still a child, who can dream. In a fairer world he would still be able to live that dream...but



Months later...



No I don't go to school any longer... I work odd jobs every day

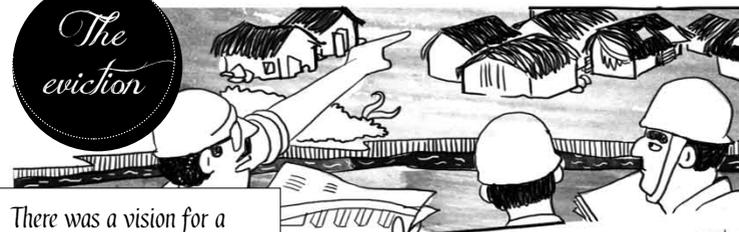


He is not as chatty.

I don't know what happened but the child is gone.

In less than a year, Robin's life will be very, very different.

The eviction



There was a vision for a slum-free Chennai by 2013.

In Chetpet, the slum was to be replaced by an elevated highway connecting the city's port to Maduravoyal. And of the people?

I was driving to work when I saw the women fighting the cops.



Give us more time - the children have half yearly exams.

Where are we going?

Will we all get homes?



They told us they were coming a week earlier.

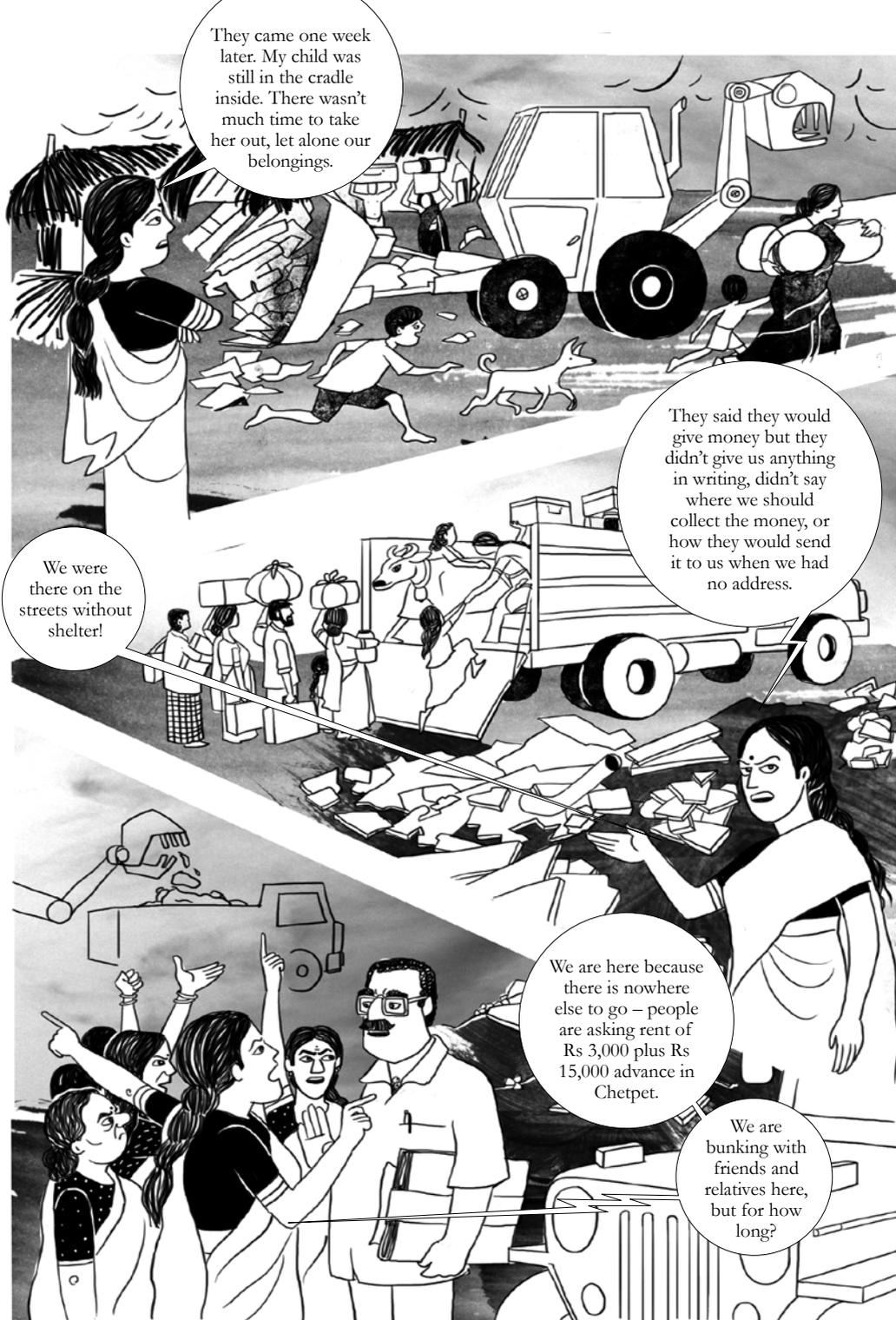
I needed to find out what was happening - these people were not strangers to me. So I went with them to the Slum Board office a week later. Just as well, because no one would meet them.



We lost one day's wages and waited and waited but no one came!

I walk into the office. Each official sends me to another, before I can find someone who will respond to what I have heard.

We saw that it was raining, so on humanitarian grounds, we decided to evict them later.



They came one week later. My child was still in the cradle inside. There wasn't much time to take her out, let alone our belongings.

We were there on the streets without shelter!

They said they would give money but they didn't give us anything in writing, didn't say where we should collect the money, or how they would send it to us when we had no address.

We are here because there is nowhere else to go – people are asking rent of Rs 3,000 plus Rs 15,000 advance in Chetpet.

We are bunking with friends and relatives here, but for how long?



We went to Kannagi Nagar. The bus fare to work and for my three children to school in Chetpet was so expensive, only my husband can afford to work now.

The bus ticket to Kannagi Statue is Rs 6 per head. From there we had to take a bus to Chetpet at Rs 4.50 per head.

My husband's daily wage just about covered the bus fare for five of us and we couldn't afford to eat for three days.

My children have stopped going to school.

I have sent someone to collect the petitions but this is not our job. We don't handle the evictions.

Once they are resettled then we enter the picture to make sure they have all the facilities in Kannagi Nagar. We deal with livelihood issues.

Robin? That boy Robin? He hasn't come here.

Robin has been on my mind through the years. I want to know what happened to him.

Finding Robin



I drive back to Kannagi Nagar, one Sunday afternoon. My only hope of finding him here is based on knowledge that years after their evictions, people still are grouped by where they came from.



Robin?

Oy kids, do you know any Robin from Chetpet?

Why don't you show his house?



The one boy sent to guide me made me stop and pick up several of his friends. They have colonised the car, and are telling me about school.

We go to school at Santhome.

There are buses to take us and bring us back.

You mean Pigeon Robin right?

Why are you looking for him?



Robin is there?

Where is Robin?

Someone has come to see him.



Aunty Latha

Robin is here.

Paati



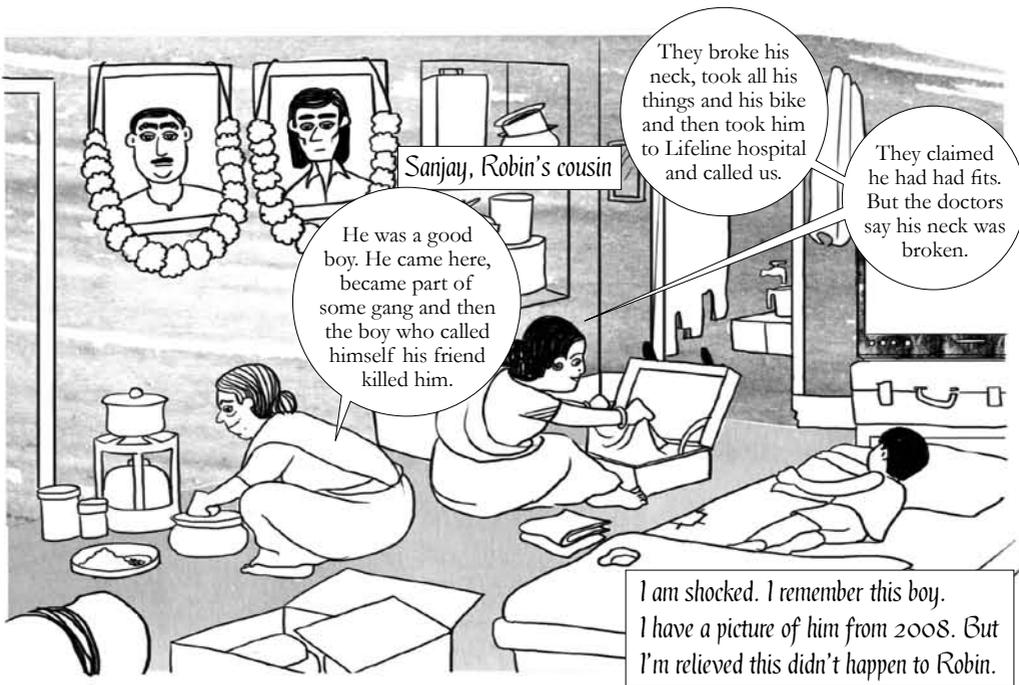
You? Oh.

How did you find me?

What are you doing here?

He is not upset, just surprised to see me.

I wanted to know how you were doing.



Sanjay, Robin's cousin

He was a good boy. He came here, became part of some gang and then the boy who called himself his friend killed him.

They broke his neck, took all his things and his bike and then took him to Lifeline hospital and called us.

They claimed he had had fits. But the doctors say his neck was broken.

I am shocked. I remember this boy. I have a picture of him from 2008. But I'm relieved this didn't happen to Robin.



He was a good boy. He didn't do drugs or anything. The boy who killed him used to live in the same building.

Latha's room filled with pictures of Sanjay who died at the age of 24.



I didn't go back to school for a year. Then my cousin put me in Class 9 but I got bullied so I stopped going.

I went to Shoppers Stop. They thought I would be too young so I prepared...

I was 16, so I used a blunt blade to shave to make the hair grow and then went back...

I was Assistant Superintendent earning Rs 3500 a month. Ask anyone there, even now. If you say Robin, they will all know me.

He recalls the eviction and with it a glimpse of the Shoppers Stop complex across the road in a completely new light.

I worked there for a year and a half. I was very happy.

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It was very scary, there was no police station those days. These gangs would come with knives, terrorising us. We would lock ourselves in here. When they heard the dog bark, they would leave.

Robin's brothers



Shahila, Robin's mother



So I asked him to come join me doing painting work.

There it was all fun, we used to be jolly. Here it is different.



If you are a young boy the cops will pick you up now and then. I have been taken by the cops a few times and beaten up as a warning.

Someone complained that Robin had hit someone and they took him in and wouldn't release him.



She broke her arm so about a year ago, they asked me to come here.

I didn't know what to do with myself.



A neighbor with AIADMK party contacts came and got him out.

We get paid Rs 330 for a day's work. A mason comes and picks a bunch of guys to work. Arun: Sometimes we travel out of town and work for three days at a stretch for Rs 1000 with food and tea - I've been to Kodaikanal and Bangalore but Robin won't come.



He refuses to take work out of town because of his pigeons.

I have 40 pigeons.

So that explains "Pura Robin"

Go on introduce us!

This is...

Omar

Karna

Sadai

The tape is to prevent them from flying too high.

I spent Rs 8000 for the first round of birds I bought.

We spend Rs 700 on their feed. What can we do, that's all these people give us..

We used to let them fly but once a bigger bird caught a pigeon and killed it.

These big birds, they grab the pigeons by the throat and rip off their heads...



Other than pigeons we like football and b-boying. We wanted to have a football tournament among all the 'areas' but no one is willing to join.

What is b-boying?

It's a hip hop dance. There is a guy who teaches classes here, but we cannot afford it so we sneak peeks at the classes and practice on our own.

See them dancing with the funeral procession. If we go and join them, there will be a fight.

Because they are from a different 'area'.

Better step back. If there is a crowd here the police will come and ask questions.

Why did you come back?

I wanted to know how you were doing.

Is it all right if I write about you again?

Ok.

And then I sense I have intruded on his evening. It is time to leave.