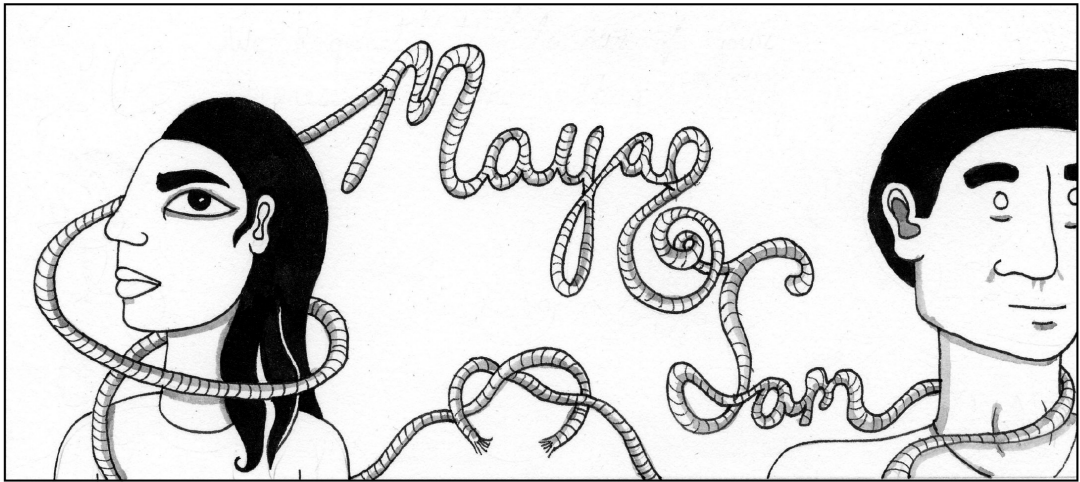




*It's My Choice:
Who, If, When to Marry*



THE WORST DAY OF MY LIFE WAS THE DAY I GOT MARRIED.



I WAS RAISED TO ALWAYS OBEY
AND TO NEVER QUESTION THE
'FAMILY DECISION!'



I TRUSTED THAT MY PARENTS
ALWAYS WANTED WHAT WAS
BEST FOR ME.



I HAD BEEN TOLD FROM A YOUNG AGE BY MY COMMUNITY THAT MY PARENTS WOULD BE INVOLVED IN CHOOSING WHOM I MARRIED, BUT I EXPECTED TO HAVE SOME SAY IN THE MATTER.



WHEN I WAS 17 AND IN MY LAST YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL, MY PARENTS INFORMED ME THAT I HAD REACHED THE RIGHT AGE FOR MARRIAGE.



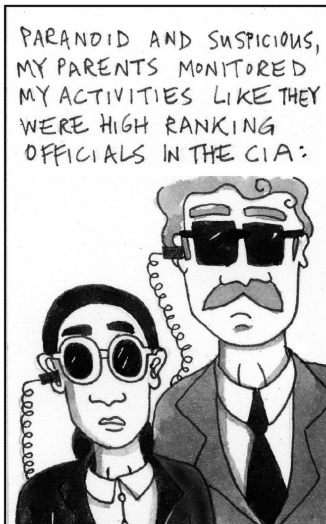
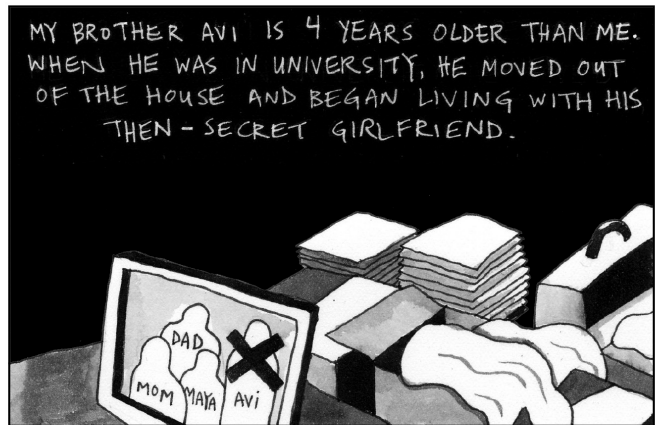
THROUGH AN AUNTIE IN OUR COMMUNITY, THEY FOUND A SUITABLE MATCH.



A SUITABLE MATCH MEANT THAT THEY HAD FOUND A FAMILY WITH A SON WHO WAS FROM THE SAME FAITH AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND AS OUR FAMILY.









MY BEST FRIEND IN THE WHOLE WORLD IS RITA. WE WALKED TO SCHOOL TOGETHER EVERY MORNING AND TALKED ABOUT EVERYTHING.

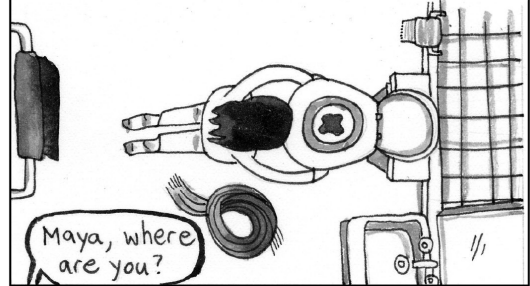




MY BROTHER AVI WAS FORCED TO COME OVER. HE SHOWED UP LATE AND LEFT EARLY.



THE WHOLE SITUATION WAS AWKWARD AND I WAS SICK TO MY STOMACH.



BEFORE SAM AND HIS FAMILY HAD ARRIVED, MY MOM HAD LECTURED ME ON HOW TO PREPARE THE TEA AND WHICH MEMBER OF WHICH FAMILY GETS SERVED FIRST.

First you serve his father. then your father then his mother...



AS I WAS PREPARING THE TEA AND SNACKS I OVERHEARD MY PARENTS IN THE LIVING ROOM SAYING:



She won't cause any problems in your family. We agree that she should marry your son. The sooner, the better.

Yes, we agree. The sooner, the better.





I FELT BETRAYED AND HURT. HOW
COULD MY PARENTS DO THIS TO ME?

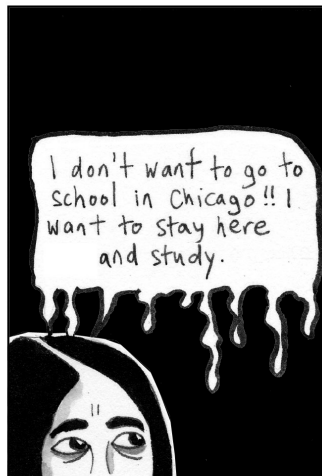
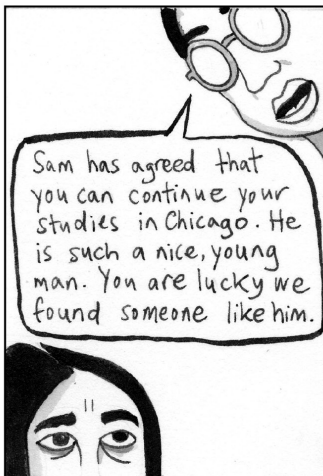
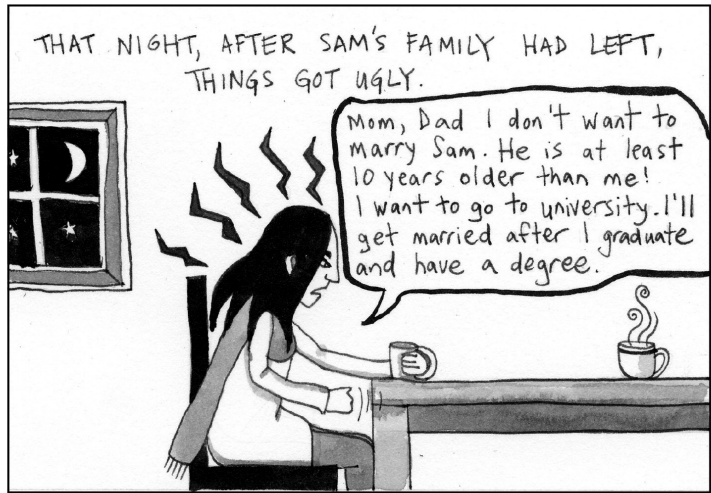
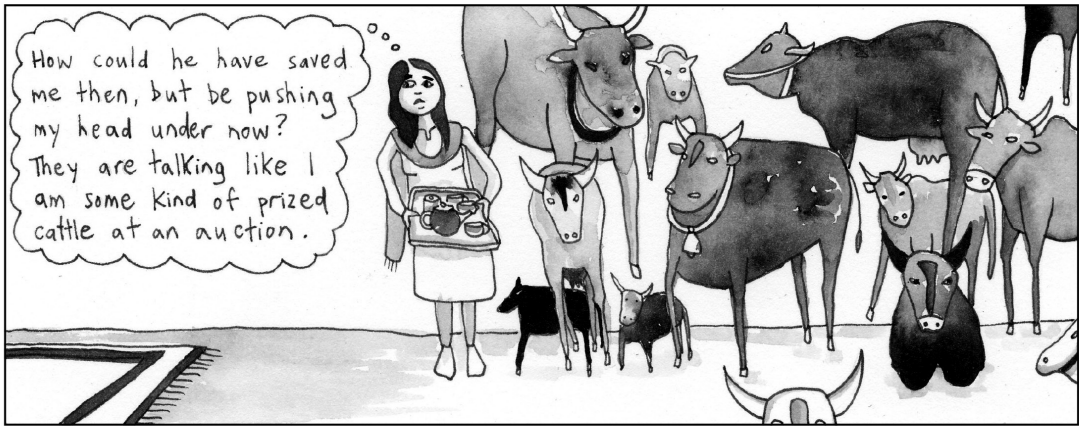


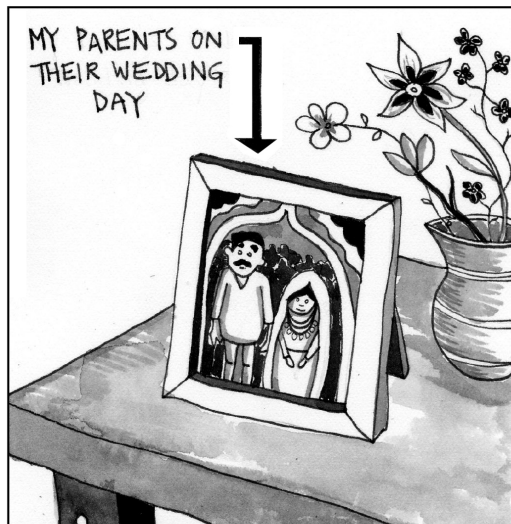
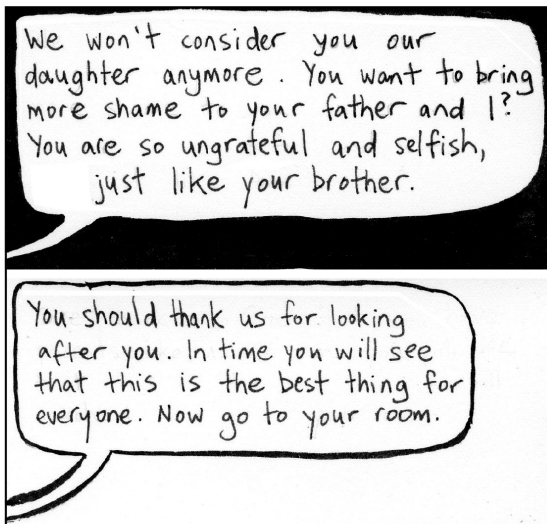
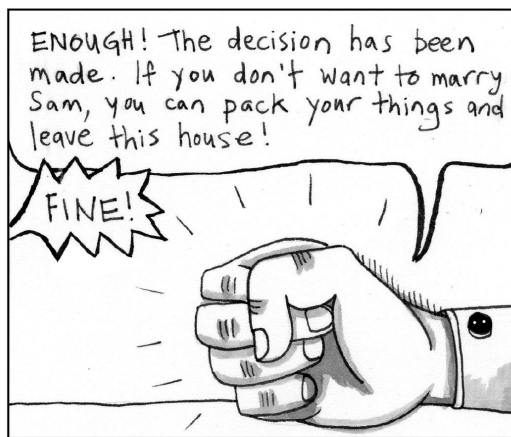
I REMEMBERED A TIME WHEN I HAD BEEN SWIMMING IN LAKE
ONTARIO AND HAD ALMOST DROWNED. THE PRESSURE OF THE WATER ON
MY CHEST MADE ME FEEL LIKE MY HEART WAS GOING TO EXPLODE.



MY DAD COULD BARELY SWIM, BUT HE JUMPED IN AND RESCUED ME. I
COUGHED UP A LITRE OF WATER THAT DAY AND HE STAYED WITH ME TO
MAKE SURE I WAS OKAY.







ON MONDAY MORNING I CALLED MY SCHOOL
PRETENDING TO BE MY MOM.

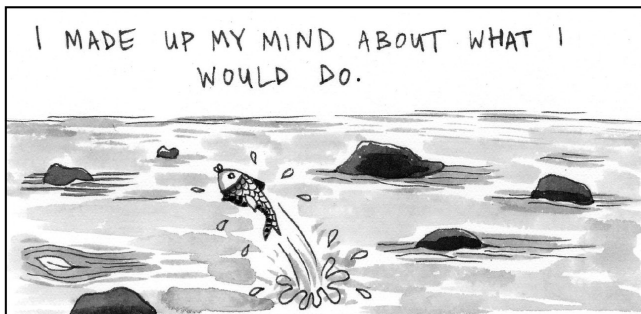


I HAD NEVER SKIPPED
SCHOOL BEFORE. I
NEEDED SOME TIME TO
CLEAR MY HEAD AND THINK.



THAT AFTERNOON I SAT BY THE RIVER AND THOUGHT ABOUT
ALL OF MY OPTIONS; I THOUGHT ABOUT MY PARENTS DISOWNING ME
AND MY COMMUNITY REJECTING ME, I THOUGHT ABOUT MY FUTURE
AND WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE TO BE MARRIED AND HAVE KIDS. I
THOUGHT ABOUT ENDING IT ALL OR RUNNING AWAY, BUT MOSTLY I
SAT QUIETLY AND WATCHED THE WATER GO BY WHILE I GRIEVED
THE LIFE I HAD DREAMT FOR MYSELF.





JULY 2010

IN THE SUMMER OF THAT YEAR, ON A HOT SUNNY DAY, SAM AND I WERE WED IN A RELIGIOUS CEREMONY IN A BIG HALL ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF TORONTO.



I LATER FOUND OUT THAT SAM HAD A GIRLFRIEND IN CHICAGO, WHICH IS WHY HIS PARENTS WERE SO ANXIOUS FOR HIM TO MARRY SOMEONE IN "THE COMMUNITY."



HIS FATHER THREATENED TO DISOWN HIM AND DIVORCE HIS MOTHER UNLESS SAM MARRIED A GIRL THAT HE APPROVED OF. SAM WAS TERRIFIED AND AGREED TO HIS FATHER'S DEMANDS.



IN THE END IT TURNED OUT THAT SAM AND I WERE CUT FROM THE SAME CLOTH. WE WERE BOTH TERRIFIED OF LOSING OUR FAMILIES AND WANTED TO PLEASE THEM EVEN IF IT MEANT GIVING UP THE THINGS WE WANTED FOR OURSELVES.



WE WERE NUMB, ISOLATED AND AFRAID. THIS WAS THE FOUNDATION THAT WE WERE EXPECTED TO BUILD OUR LIVES UPON.



ONE YEAR LATER



THE WORST DAY OF OUR LIVES WAS THE DAY WE GOT MARRIED.



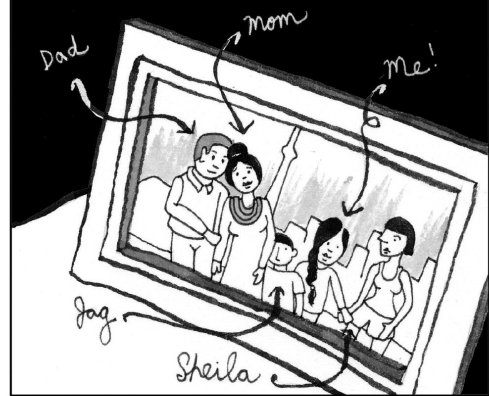
KARINE & SHEILA



MY PARENTS AND OLDER SISTER SHEILA WENT TO PAKISTAN TWO SUMMERS AGO FOR A FAMILY WEDDING. MY SISTER NEVER RETURNED TO CANADA FROM THAT TRIP.



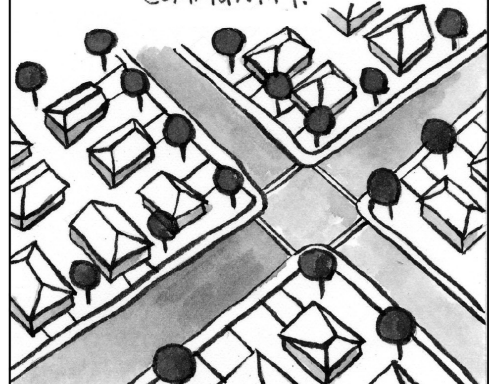
I AM FREAKED OUT THE SAME THING MIGHT HAPPEN TO ME.



MY PARENTS ARE FROM A SMALL TOWN IN PAKISTAN. THEY CAME TO CANADA IN THE 1970s. MY MOTHER'S BROTHER ROY WAS ALREADY SETTLED IN TORONTO WITH HIS FAMILY AND ENCOURAGED THEM TO IMMIGRATE.



HE TOLD THEM IT WAS AN ETHNICALLY DIVERSE CITY WHERE THEY COULD FIND JOBS AND PRACTICE THEIR FAITH IN AN ESTABLISHED COMMUNITY.



DESPITE BEING BORN IN CANADA, OUR PARENTS INSISTED THAT WE WOULD BE PAKISTANI FIRST AND CANADIAN SECOND.



SHEILA WAS ALWAYS GETTING INTO TROUBLE AND MY PARENTS FAVORITE THREAT WAS TO TELL HER THEY WOULD SEND HER 'BACK HOME'!



SHEILA MADE FRIENDS EASILY AND WAS VERY INDEPENDENT SHE HAD AN AFTER SCHOOL JOB IN A BEAUTY SALON.



I want to become a hairstylist, full-time.

You want to cut hair, are you an idiot?! No daughter of mine will cut hair to make her living!!!



AS WE GOT OLDER THE FIGHTS BETWEEN MY SISTER AND MY PARENTS ESCALATED. THEY FOUGHT ALL THE TIME ABOUT EVERYTHING AND ANYTHING: MAKE-UP, CLOTHES, BOYS, THE MALL, MONEY, TV, MUSIC, CURFEW AND AN ACCEPTABLE CAREER PATH.



SHEILA DIDN'T WANT TO GO TO UNIVERSITY AND CONSEQUENTLY OUR HOUSE BECAME A WAR ZONE.

You are disgusting, running around in those clothes and wearing that junk on your face.

You bring so much shame to our family. What will our people think, huh?! We should send you back home and marry you off to a boy from our town. That will keep you under control.



JAG AND I ALWAYS TRIED TO PROTECT HER.

Leave her alone!



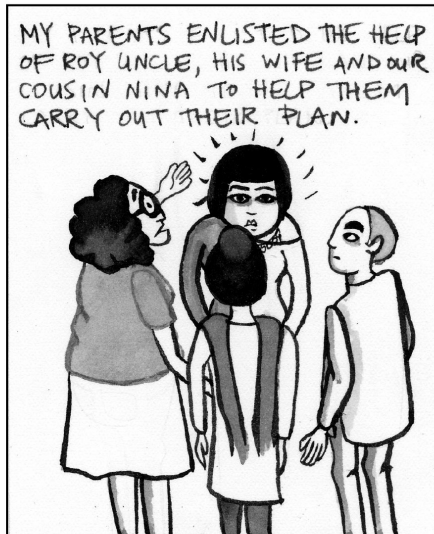
Why is our family so screwed up?! I wish I had been born into a different family.



THE JULY AFTER SHE TURNED 18 MY PARENTS TOLD SHEILA THEY WOULD BE TAKING HER TO PAKISTAN TO ATTEND A COUSIN'S WEDDING. SHE INSTINCTIVELY KNEW SOMETHING WAS UP AND REFUSED TO GO.



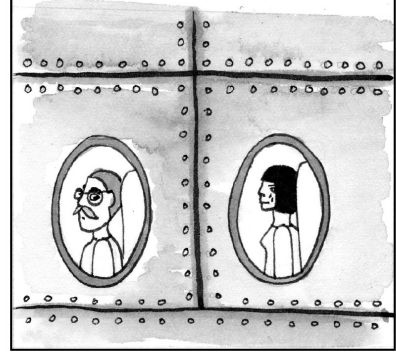
MY PARENTS ENLISTED THE HELP OF ROY UNCLE, HIS WIFE AND OUR COUSIN NINA TO HELP THEM CARRY OUT THEIR PLAN.



SHEILA WAS ADAMANT THAT SHE WOULD NOT GO. IN PROTEST SHE STOPPED EATING AND RAN AWAY FROM HOME. SHE WAS ONLY GONE ONE NIGHT BEFORE ROY UNCLE BROUGHT HER BACK.



THEY LEFT FOR PAKISTAN ONE WEEK LATER.



LATER, MY COUSIN NINA TOLD ME THAT SHEILA WAS CONFINED TO THE HOUSE OF A RELATIVE AND WAS FORCED TO MARRY A MAN FROM THE VILLAGE.



SHE CRIED THROUGH THE WHOLE CEREMONY.







HAVE A CALLING CARD AND/OR CARRY ENOUGH CHANGE TO MAKE AN EMERGENCY PHONE CALL;



CARRY ENOUGH CASH TO CALL A CAB AT A MOMENTS NOTICE;



ARRANGE FOR ALTERNATE TRANSPORTATION AND ACCOMMODATION IN CASE OF EMERGENCY.



I am also going to refer you to a social worker. they will talk with you and help you deal with some of the emotions you might be experiencing such as fear, anxiety, anger and sadness.



The lawyer said if things get really bad at home and my parents try to force me into a marriage, I need to have a safety plan. Can you help me?

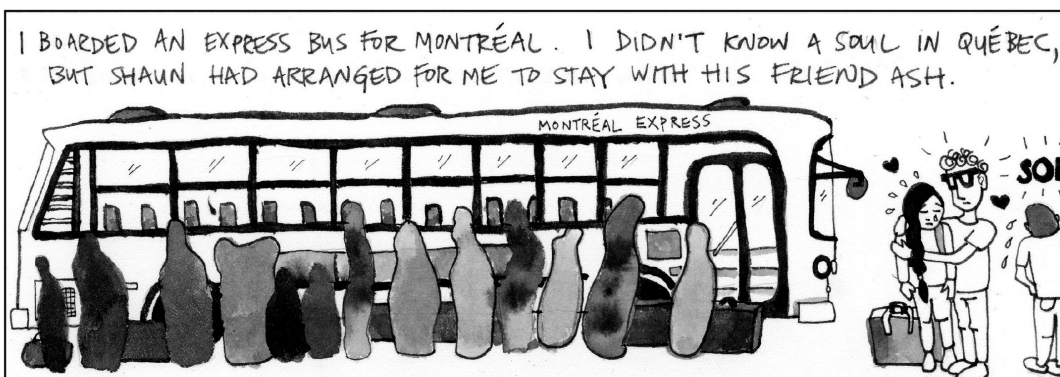
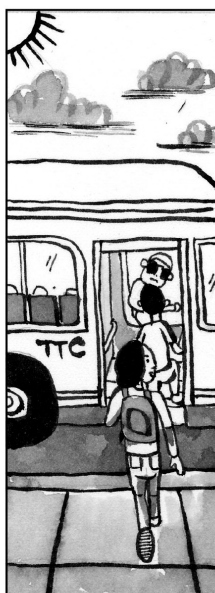


AS THE WEEKS WENT BY, MY PARENTS WERE BECOMING INCREASINGLY MORE CONTROLLING. THEY WOULDN'T LET ME TALK ON THE PHONE AND THEY WOULDN'T LET ME LEAVE THE HOUSE UNLESS JAG ACCOMPANIED ME.



AS A RESULT KAL AND I STARTED FIGHTING MORE AND COMMUNICATING LESS AND OUR RELATIONSHIP FELL APART.





SHAUN TOLD ASH ABOUT MY SITUATION AND HE SAID HE WOULD HELP ME GET SETTLED IN MONTRÉAL.



I ARRIVED IN MONTRÉAL IN THE EVENING. IT WAS A HOT SUMMER NIGHT AND THERE WERE SO MANY CHARACTERS HANGING AROUND THE BUS STATION.



THE ENTIRE BUS RIDE I FELT SICK TO MY STOMACH. I WAS OVERCOME WITH PARANOIA AND I KEPT LOOKING OVER MY SHOULDER TO SEE IF I RECOGNIZED ANYONE MY PARENTS MIGHT KNOW.



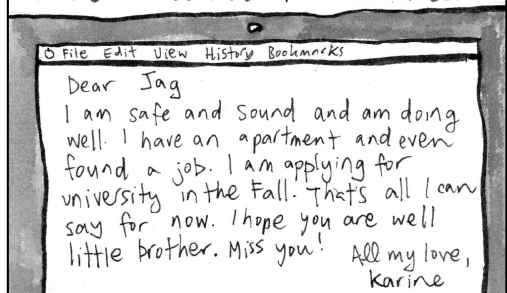
ALL OF IT SCARED ME AND I WAS SICK WITH WORRY AND FEAR - I HAD NEVER BEEN SO FAR FROM HOME ON MY OWN BEFORE. A YOUNG MAN APPROACHED ME...

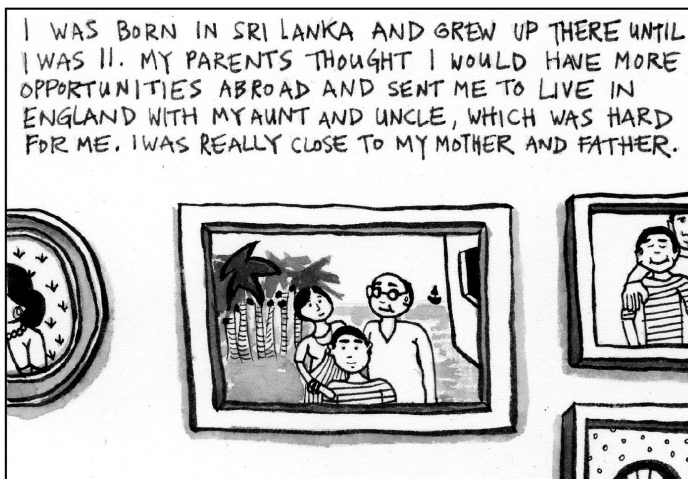
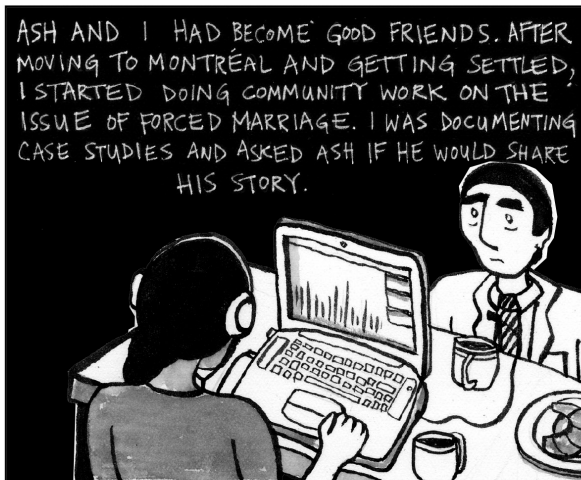
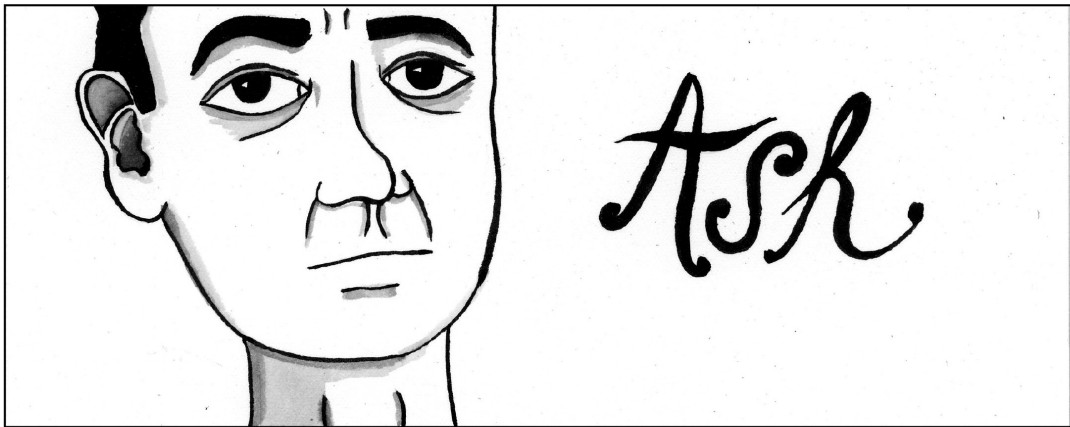


HE TOOK MY SUITCASE AND WE WALKED TO HIS APARTMENT IN THE OUTREMOINT.



THAT WAS THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF MY LIFE. THE HELP THAT I GOT FROM FRIENDS, THE LEGAL CLINIC, COUNSELLORS AND SOCIAL WORKERS SUPPORTED ME TO MAKE THE BEST DECISION FOR MYSELF.





ONCE I GOT USED TO IT, I LIKED LIVING IN ENGLAND. I WAS A SENSITIVE BOY AND MY AUNT AND UNCLE WERE BOTH VERY LOVING AND SUPPORTIVE. THEY HAD NO CHILDREN OF THEIR OWN.



I AM AN ONLY CHILD AND MY PARENTS WEREN'T WEALTHY. IT WAS A BIG DEAL TO THEM THAT I GET AN EDUCATION. I WAS THE FIRST ONE IN MY FAMILY TO ATTEND A UNIVERSITY.



AFTER I WAS DONE SCHOOL I DIDN'T WANT TO STAY IN ENGLAND OR GO BACK HOME SO I LOOKED FOR JOBS IN NORTH AMERICA. ALTHOUGH I LOVED THEM VERY MUCH, I NEEDED TO HAVE SOME PHYSICAL DISTANCE FROM MY FAMILY. LUCKILY I GOT A JOB OFFER IN MONTRÉAL.



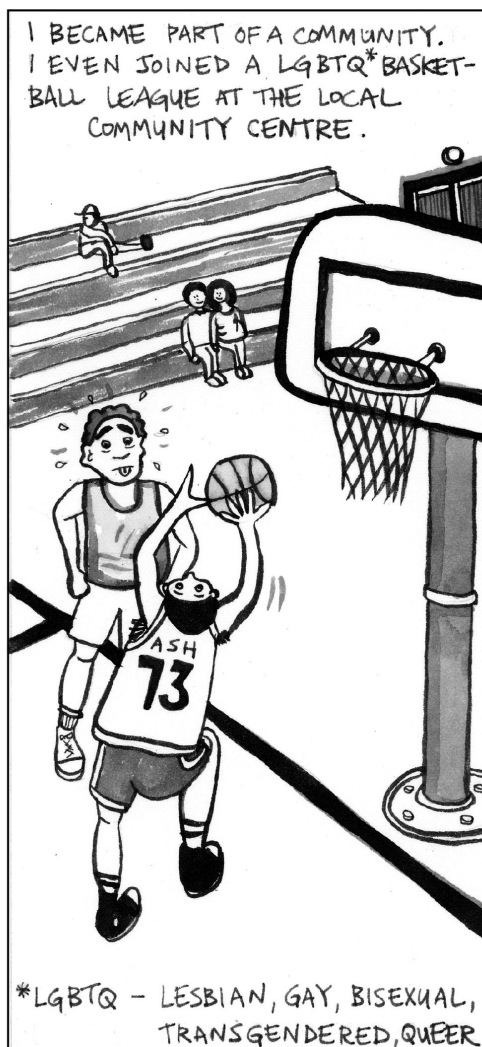
Why did you need distance from them?

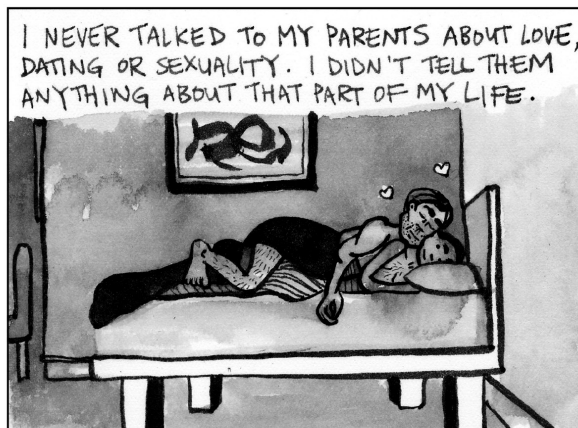
As a teenager, I started to accept the fact that I was attracted to men and I wanted to explore those feelings on my own terms.

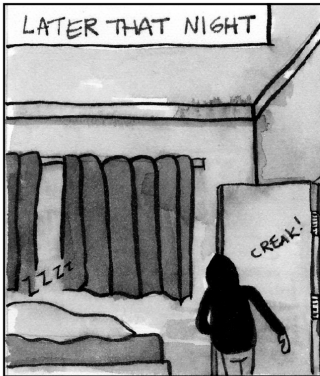


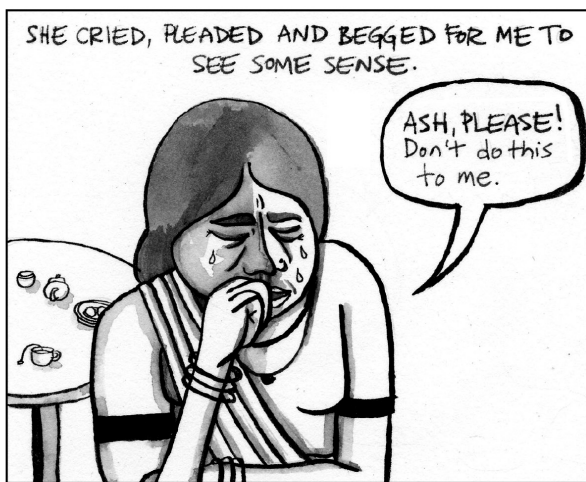
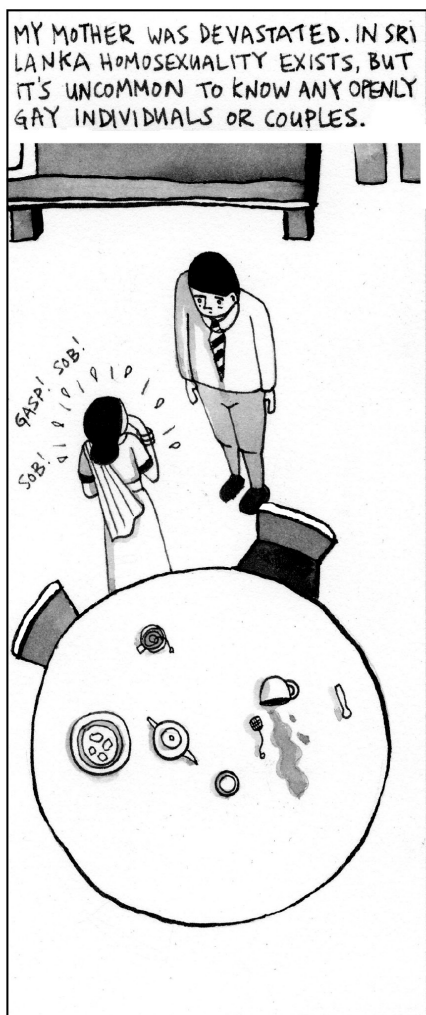
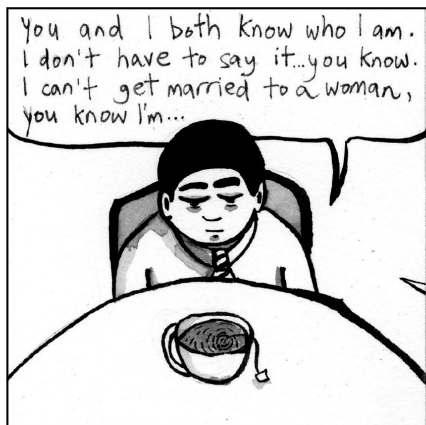
WHEN I WAS STILL IN ENGLAND I TOLD MY AUNT THAT I THOUGHT I MIGHT BE GAY AND TO MY SURPRISE SHE WAS UNDERSTANDING. SHE ENCOURAGED ME TO MOVE TO NORTH AMERICA.

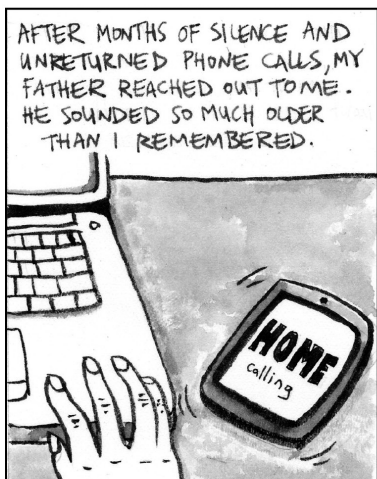




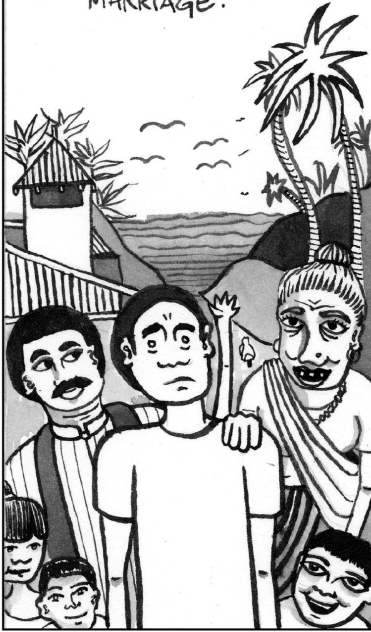








AS SOON AS I ARRIVED IN SRI LANKA MY FAMILY STARTED TO PRESSURE ME ABOUT MARRIAGE.



MY AUNT CAME FROM ENGLAND AND TRIED TO HELP ME GET OUT OF IT. AFTER ALL SHE KNEW THE TRUTH ABOUT WHO I WAS.

The boy will marry when he is ready. Don't force him to do this.

We have found a nice, educated girl for Ash to marry.



You will and you must. Everything is arranged. You must get married to her now, it is your mother's last dying wish.



Ash, this is her, isn't she beautiful? She's also very bright.



Papa, I don't know... I don't know if I can marry this girl.



MY MOTHER MADE ME PROMISE TO MARRY THE GIRL THAT THEY HAD CHOSEN.

I have been suffering so much because of your choices. By marrying this girl you will allow me to be remembered within our community without shame.



"Having a wife, family and responsibilities will fix you. You have too many freedoms in Canada - you don't know who you are anymore. I can die in peace if you marry this girl."



I WAS RIDDEN WITH GUILT AND SHAME. I COULDN'T SAY NO TO HER. THE WEDDING TOOK PLACE AND A FEW DAYS LATER, MY MOTHER PASSED AWAY IN OUR FAMILY HOME.



I WAS DEVASTATED BY THE MANY LOSSES I EXPERIENCED ON THIS TRIP HOME.

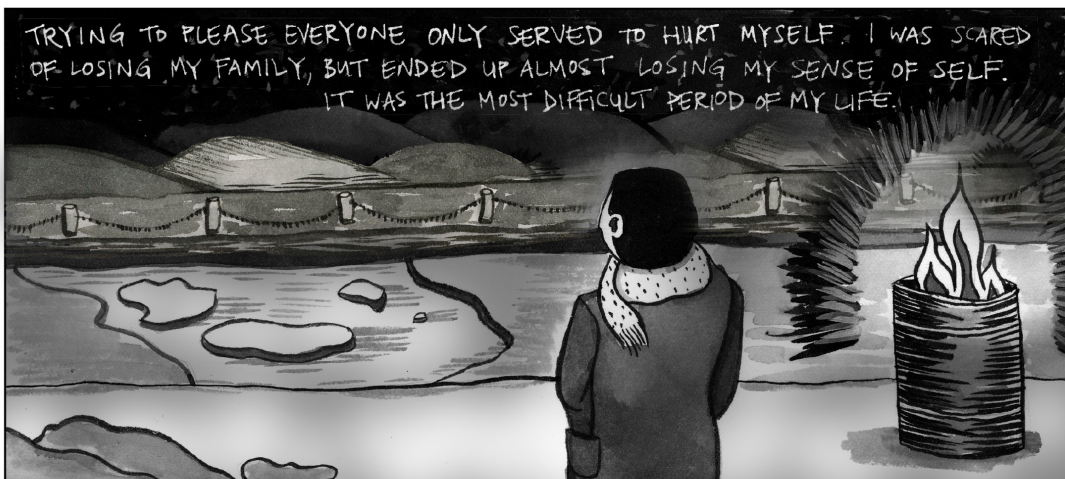


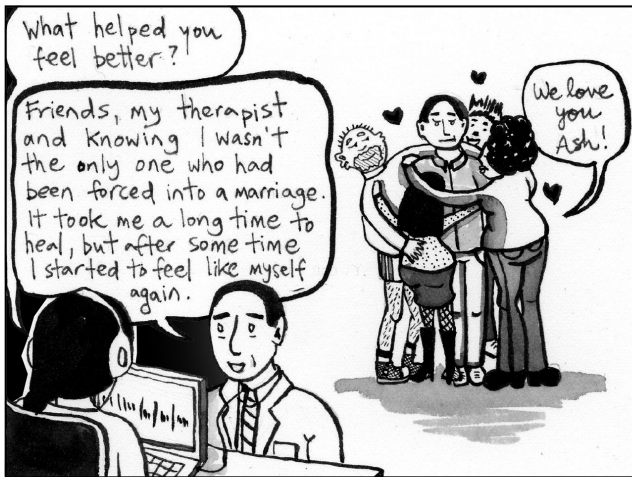
WHEN MY NEW BRIDE AND I RETURNED TO CANADA I TRIED REALLY HARD TO MAKE IT WORK. I WANTED TO BE THE SON THAT MY MOTHER WANTED ME TO BE.



HOWEVER, AFTER A YEAR I COULDN'T HANDLE THE DECEPTION ANYMORE. I FELT LONELY, DEPRESSED AND UNHAPPY ALL THE TIME.







REACH OUT FOR SUPPORT, DON'T DO THIS ALONE. OTHERS HAVE GONE THROUGH THE SAME THING. IF YOU ARE BEING FORCED INTO A MARRIAGE THERE ARE LOTS OF PLACES THAT CAN PROVIDE YOU WITH SUPPORT LIKE ONLINE RESOURCES, COUNSELORS, AND LEGAL CLINICS THAT SPECIALIZE IN FORCED MARRIAGE ISSUES.



MAYA & SAM

Writing: Somya Singh & Maryum Anis

Illustration: Somya Singh

Editing: Maryum Anis, Shalini Konanur & Deepa Mattoo

KARINE & SHEILA

Writing: Somya Singh & Maryum Anis

Illustration: Somya Singh

Editing: Maryum Anis, Shalini Konanur & Deepa Mattoo

ASH

Writing: Somya Singh, Maryum Anis & Farrah Khan

Illustration: Somya Singh

Editing: Maryum Anis, Shalini Konanur,
Deepa Mattoo & Farrah Khan

