

Stories of Failure

Visual Communication Project 3

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Project 3

Stories of Failure

by Hemant Kumar

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The Visual Communication Project 3 entitled:

Stories of Failure

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Introduction

The idea for this project comes out from an important aspect of my life - being a student. In my 19 years of being a student I have come across many incidents of people failing in exams and academics. I myself have faced such situations filled with humiliation. Humiliation because in the middle class society where I belong there is a lot of pressure to be good in studies and at it is matter of pride to discuss a child's academic performance over tea with guests and visitors. While performing well is filled with pride, failing is shameful.

Where being a successful student attracts a lot of appreciation and rewards, failing gets associated with negative attributes. A lots of unsuccessful students find it difficult to be accepted among other students due to preconceived notions by others about them being a failure. Although being a forerunner and successful is rightful by every means, the external pressure by family and society at times pushes the limit of an individual to extremes. In many cases it results in people harming themselves and others.

This project aims to look into situations and scenarios in everyday life where unconsciously, there exists a lot of pressure on people to live up to other's expectations.

Apart from the subject itself the medium is of a lot of concern to me. Growing up on power and fantasy driven comic books I have come to appreciate the medium for all the potential it has. Recently I have exposed myself with lot of graphic novels which have dealt with a lot of mature and complex themes using the vocabulary of comic books.

The project tries to address the issue of failure being within the medium of graphic story telling. The project also becomes an extension to the 'Special Project' undertaken by me, 'Story telling in Graphic Novels'. Through this project I aim to translate the knowledge gained through the research project into a tangible output.

Understanding the Idea

Thoughts on Failure

If you are not big enough to lose, you are not big enough to win.

- Walter Reuther

Men succeed when they realize that their failure are the preparation for their victories.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Because a fellow has failed once or twice, or a dozen times, you don't want to set him down as a failure till he's dead or loses his courage - and that's the same thing.

- George Lormier

Thoughts like these have always viewed failure as a stepping stone to success. Failure is often regarded as a learning in the path towards success. And even though moral science books and inspirational speeches are full of such quotes, very few people adhere to these thoughts. Fierce competition and desperation to succeed make such thoughts only appear as an excuses for unsuccessful attempts by people and to console themselves.

However, these words can not be perceived as a shield for those who do not even make an attempt for success.

The Irony in Action

There exists a great divide between what is practised in life and what is actually preached. People's perception or rather reaction to failure is completely opposite of what is taught in books. Although we are taught to take failure in life in a positive sense, the reactions attracted by an act of failure at any scale are highly negative.

Failure is looked down upon as a disaster. Very few times there is an appreciation for an honest attempt. Our performance driven life has forced the society to view failure as a stigma of sorts. Such irony surfaces in work and entertainment alike. Sports teams are condemned by media as well as public for losses and failure to perform. In some cases a loss in a critical game or match has led to even end of certain players' career.

But these incidence are not that public and distant only. At times in life I have witnessed people being cornered since they have failed in exams or have been detained for bad performance. Being judgemental of students failing to perform in academics is a common thing. Such students find it real difficult to be accepted among others since children are always advised by their parents to always stick with the meritorious and be distant to failures.

Idealistic statements have become only a thing of speeches and examination answer sheets.

The Extremities

There exists a lot of pressure on people not to turn out a failure, rather than being successful alone. With the high levels of competitiveness in profession as well as academics push people to perform well. Those at the top of the ladder try their best to maintain their position. But those at the bottom are always under the fear of falling down.

Not only failure but the fear of it also affects lives greatly. A goof up in an examination puts a student in lot of pressure even before the results are out. And since a person's worth is decided by the performance in exams and tasks, often learning goes on the back foot. Often good students are considered those who perform well in exams. The purpose of education only becomes to score higher and be successful and not being a better person.

There have been cases of extreme steps by people who have faced failure in their life. Although mental health and personal reasons are responsible for these incidences, societal and peer pressure can not be ruled out. Our society subconsciously has created these standards of success in which people get trapped in. Suicides are on a rise among young professionals and students who lose hope at failure. To face failure becomes harder for them than facing death. And in most cases even the closest person to them are unaware of such extremities taking shape in their mind.

The Occurrence

As far as we are talking about life failure can occur in any action of a person. Its the failure in a facet of life which is considered important by the person (may be society or peers too) is of a great concern and alters life to a great extent. More importantly the attitude a person has with regards to failure, even in an unimportant event, drives that persons actions.

Broadly failures can be seen as,
Academic Failure,
Professional Failure,
Relationship Failure,
Personal Failure,
Societal failure.

Even though such classification is based on the singular aspect of life, in most cases a sense of failure is present in multiple aspects of life. Since failing is more of a psychological set back, experiencing failure in one aspect of life gets reflected in others too. For instance a student's failure in an exam may get reflected into troubled relationship with the parents. The sense of failure is further intensified by the people's perception. The pressure surrounding such an issue sometimes result into people perceiving themselves as failure even when others do not.

Failure becomes a discrimination of those who face it from those who define it.

Taking a Stance

At this point of the project it becomes important for me to take a stand on how I view failure and how I want to tell the stories about the same. I have feared my entire life to turn out a failure. It is difficult to come out of a mind set that has been cultivated in a competitive environment and academic pressure. I witness people trying to live up to expectation (including me), whose driving force in life is fear of failure, as opposed to a confident lot which thrives on success and excellence. Its the former whose stories are of a greater concern here.

Stories of Irony and hypocritical views of the people who bend and fit ideals according to their comfort.

Stories of Struggle of those who live up to the standards of others or die trying.

Stories of Surrender by those who find it impossible to push themselves any more.

Stories of Discrimination by those who judge others solely on the basis of their performance.

To take a clear stance on the subject it is also important to define what the project should consciously abstain from.

Morality is defined as the righteousness, which may force bias against those who tend to overlook it in a pressure to perform. Its a conscious decision to not to pass any moral judgement regarding the issue.

I am trying to look at the stories for not *Inspiration* but to understand things as they are and avoid deriving a moral out of the story.

There is no intentoin to draw *Sympathy* either. Since there is a conscious effort to break away from the notion of what failure is defined by the successful, and at the receiver end there is no need for solace.

Finally the stories in no way should be viewed as an *Excuse* for those who failed to perform.

Approaching the Subject

To tell stories of failure various approaches for expression and understanding the subject were taken for the project.

Studying Graphic Novels

Studying of works by artists who have tried to explore similar themes within the medium of Graphic Storytelling.

Interpreting Writings

An attempt to view the subject in the expression of writers, works concerning failure and loss were explored.

Creating Stories

Coming up with short stories expressing the concerns and emotions in the shadow of failure.

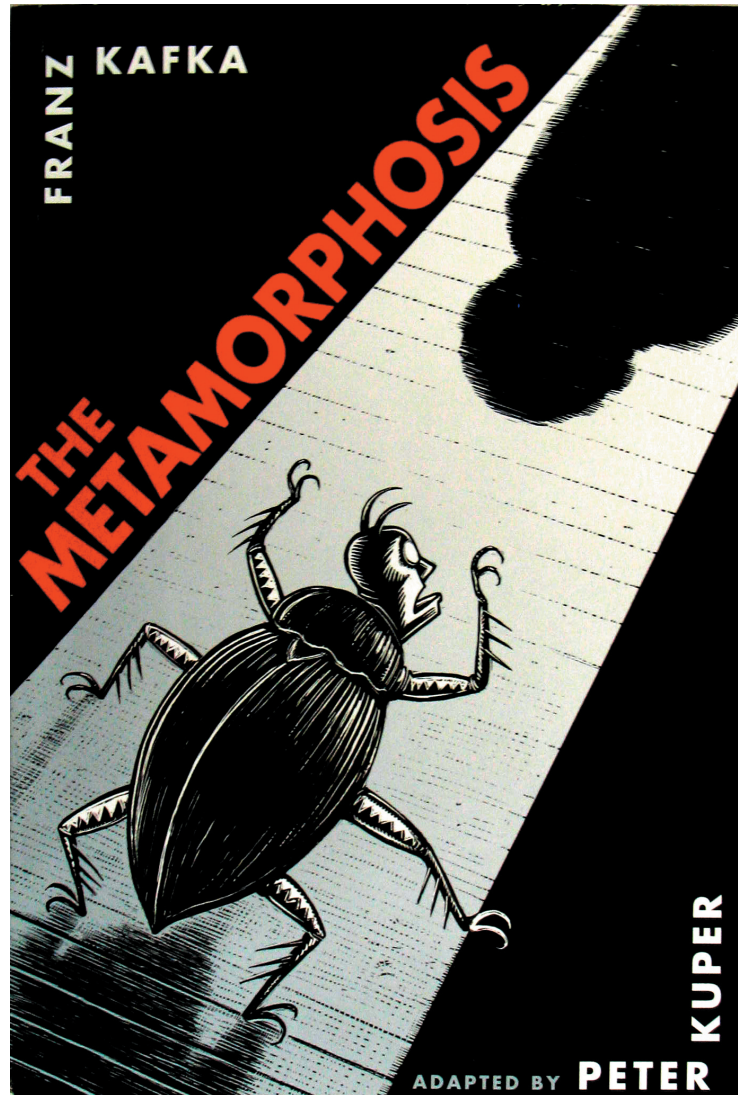
Real Life Incidents / People's account

Understanding events from real incidents and situations and other peoples's account and recollection.

Personal Experience

Expressing personal experiences and situations.

Studying Graphic Novels



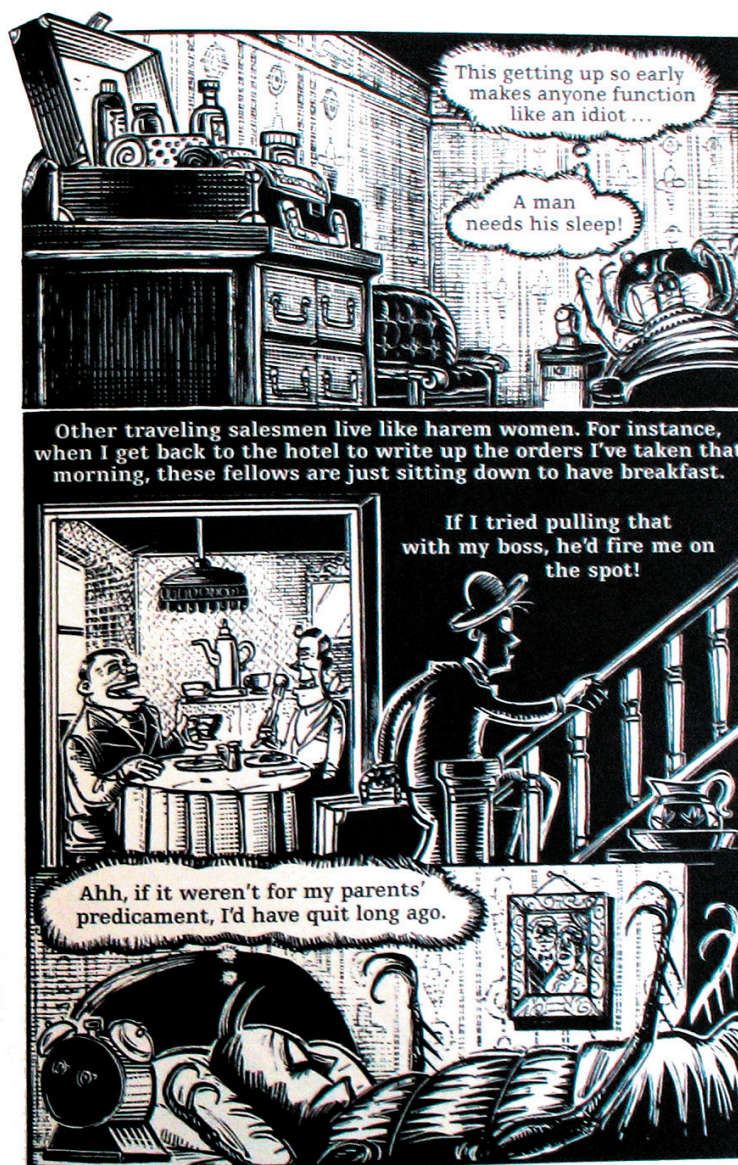
The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka

Adapted by Peter Kuper

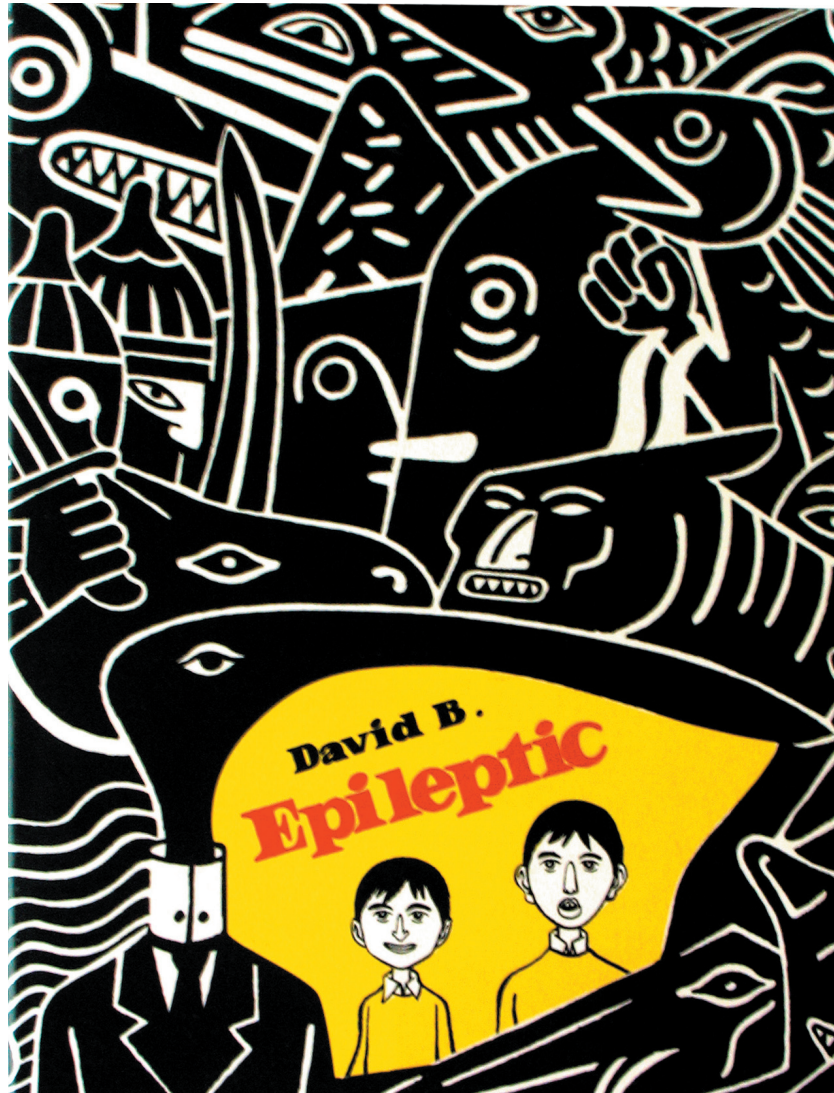
Metamorphosis is considered one of the most important literary works of the twentieth century. The tale starts with Gregor Samsa, a travelling salesman waking up to find himself transformed into a gigantic insect. It is a highly symbolic story with various possible interpretations.

Although there are more than a hundred interpretations of Metamorphosis, the most obvious ones are that of discrimination and ill treatment of challenged or different people by society and how selfishly people always guard their interests. Other views can be that of psychological turmoil in wake of hardships and unrealistic dreams that isolation brings.

This aspect has been well dealt in Peter Kuper's graphic adaptation which brings in a definitive representation as opposed to the abstract nature of words and language. His style of representation and choice of views and pace in story provides personal interpretation by a reader. Although setting and environment do suggest a definitive time period, but a universal and minimalistic approach in characters appear timeless. Peter Kuper has taken a massive and complex task of adapting a work of immense gravity and literary feats.



Peter Kuper's distinctive style of representation

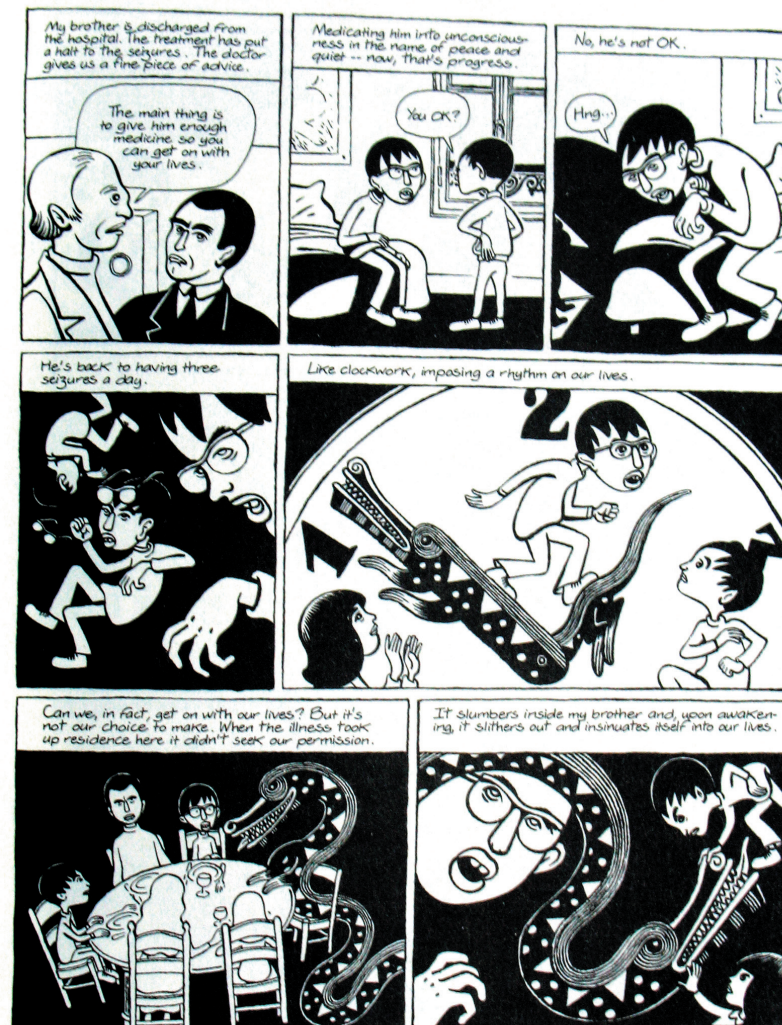


Epileptic *by David B.*

The book tells the story of the artist's early childhood and adolescence, focusing on his relationship with his brother and sister. His brother develops severe and intractable epilepsy, causing the family to seek a variety of solutions from alternative medicine, most dramatically by moving to a commune based on macrobiotics principles. As the epileptic brother loses control of his own life, the artist develops solitary obsessions with cartoons, mythology and war. The book's graphic style becomes increasingly elaborate as the children's fantasy life takes over, with their dreams and fears (including epilepsy itself) appearing as living creatures. In brief interludes, the children appear as adults when the artist begins the process of writing the story.

The story is in a way deals with a family's struggle and failure against a disease. A story of a family trying to protect their sick child from people judging him as insane. A failure of science and various medicines to cure a child which results in troubled relations between the family members.

The artist has used a visual style and metaphors to add a layer of emotions, personal struggle and turmoil. For instance, Epilepsy has been depicted as a huge mountain which all the family is struggling to conquer. Using such symbology, artist is able to tell a story which is not alone events but depiction of human emotions.



Ideation and Exploration

Interpreting Writings

One Art by *Elizabeth Bishop*

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

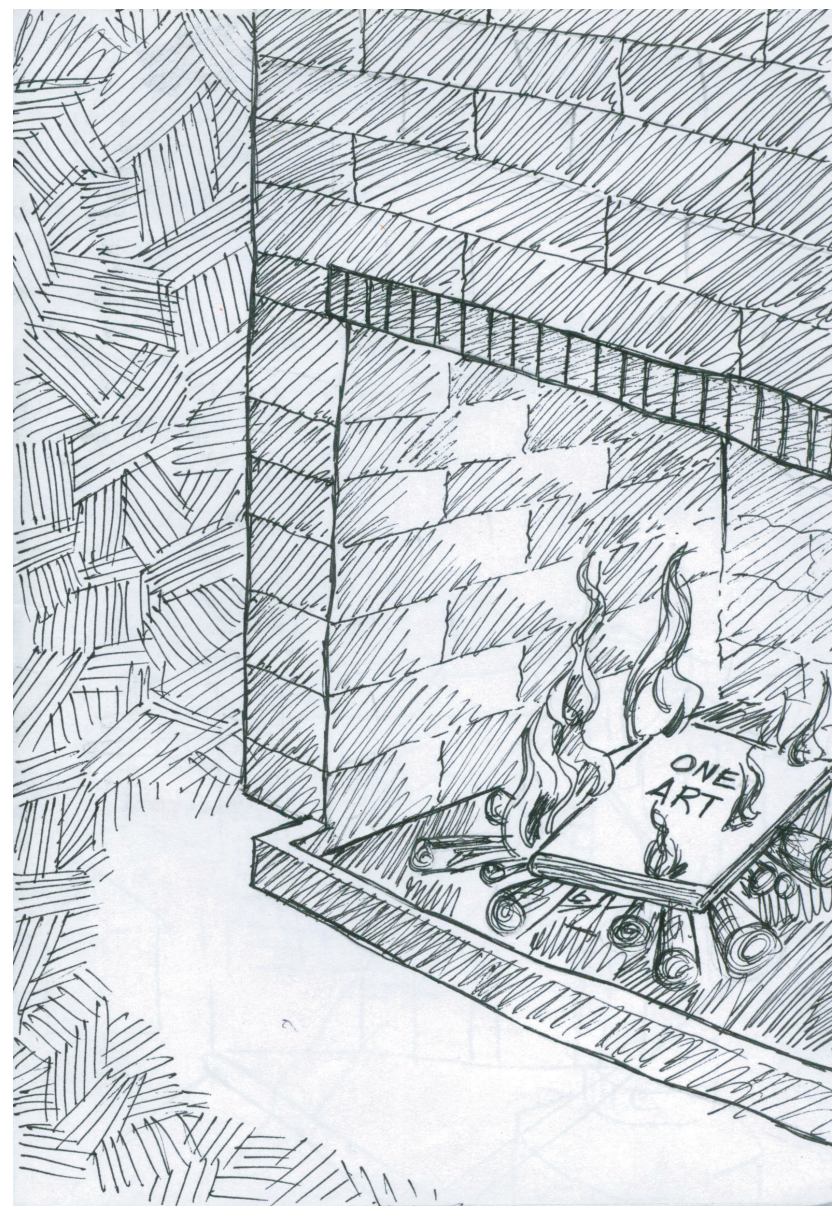
I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

---Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

Interpreting 'One Art'

The emotion implicit in the poem is the sense of loss. Elizabeth Bishop suggests that losing is an art and from trivial daily losses to losing loved ones can also be mastered. The tone of the poem is initially confident like a prophesy. But as the poet goes on talking about more personal losses, a sense of self denial becomes more evident. The sadness of loss is being forcefully suppressed by stating it as an art. A great sense of remorse and grief surfaces in the last verse when the poet talk about 'even losing you' (may be a loved one), when it appear that she is about to break down and to convince herself she has to 'write it!'. Its ironical to see the poet convincing herself more than others in an art which she claims isn't hard to master.

The interpretation of the poem was also explored visually in sketches. Here in the idea of convincing oneself over a self denial is represented through writings in a diary, which itself (the diary) is being referred as a loved one or confidant of sorts. The diary itself contains the references by its owner about losing it (the diary) who eventually goes on and lose it.



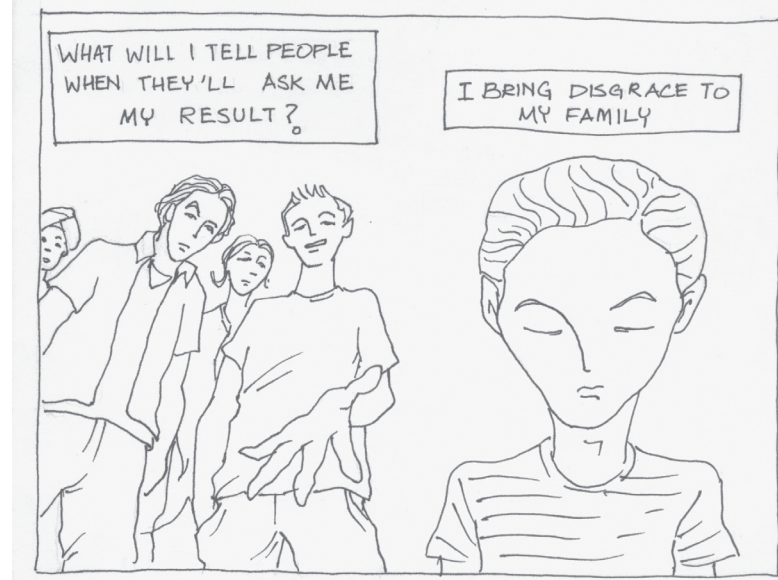
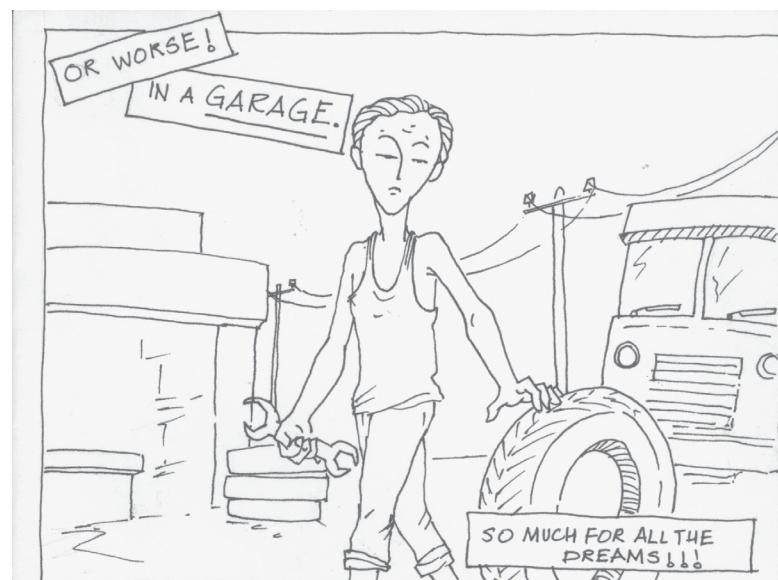


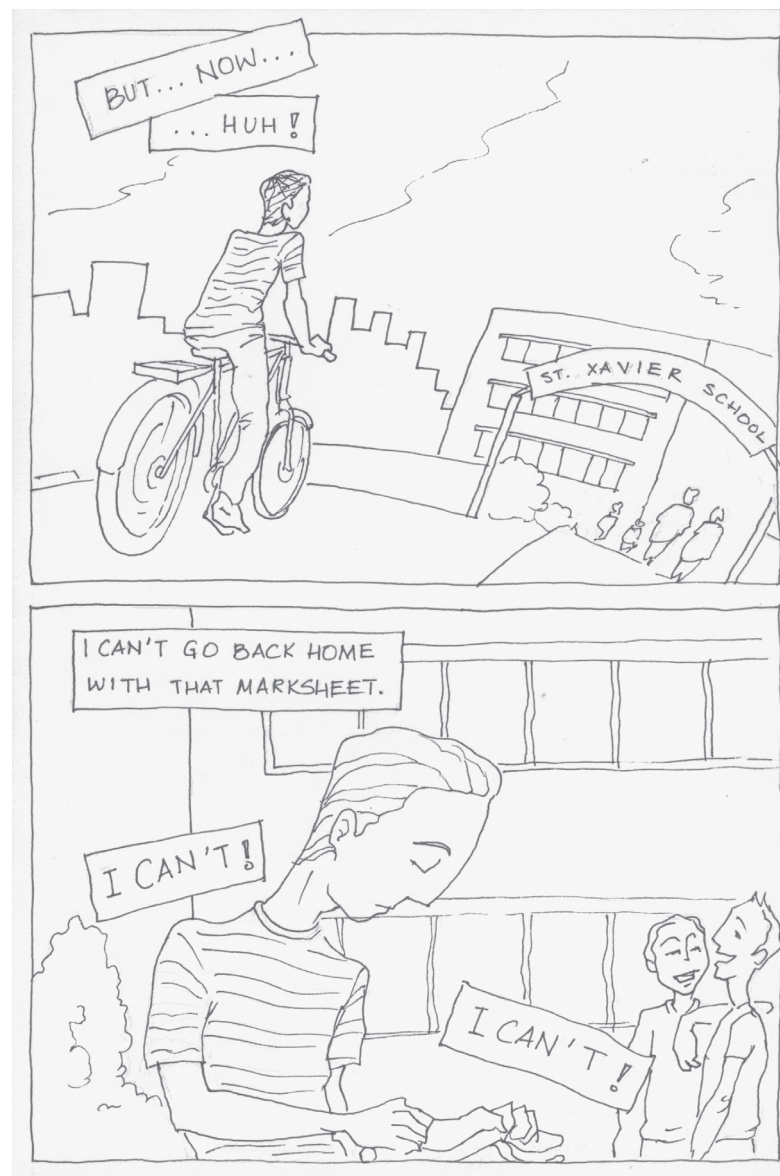
Creating Stories

'The D - day' is a short story exploring a boy's imagination who has just found out that his exam results are declared. Realizing that he had performed bad in exams he gets anxious and start imagining various scenario while he is on his way to collect the results. A feeling of fear, frustrations, anger, remorse and jealousy starts creeping is as he imagines his life if he failed.

The idea was to bring out the fear of failure rather than efforts to cope up with it. An average student who is scared of failing starts imagining all sorts peer and parental pressure even though they might not be existing. As negativity pushes its way through his mind, he sees his life being turned upside down by a mere exam result.

In a humorous way he finds out in the end that he has actually cleared the exam. This all the more emphasizes the point that the perception of failure in a young mind is more because what others think and expect out of him. The story is an attempt at a subtle approach to a serious issue.









Real Life Incidents / People's account

In a recent incident in the IITB campus, on 30th December 2006, Sreekanth M. (Srilu), a final year student, committed suicide. Srilu was detained in his final year due to bad academic performance. While the rest of his friends were graduating with good paying jobs, he was supposed to spend another year in the institution. He left 3 notes, one for friends, family and administration each, blaming academic pressure for his act. Srilu was very famous in the campus, mainly because of his huge collection of Movies on a local LAN server. This fact was one of important issue raised as the reason for his declining academic performance. The events that followed Srilu's suicide called for a lot of changes in the system. Which led to a lot of debate regarding the decisions of the institute administration. Where faculty member were calling for a ban on internet and restriction of digital content being utilized by the students, few of the students were protesting as an individual's incapacity to deal with issues can not colour a decision for collective interest.

I see the all these events as a series of failure. A failure at a personal front by Srilu, a failure on the part of his fellow students who couldn't get him, a failure on the part of administration who used Srilu's suicide as an excuse to prove their unreasonable decision, a failure on the part architecture of the hostel building which has forced students into loneliness and distant from each other. A failure on the part of the system and Society unable to help a troubled young man.

Final Concept

Personal Experiences

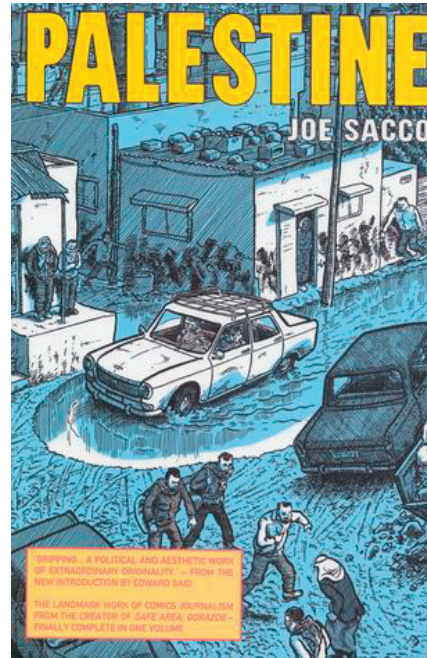
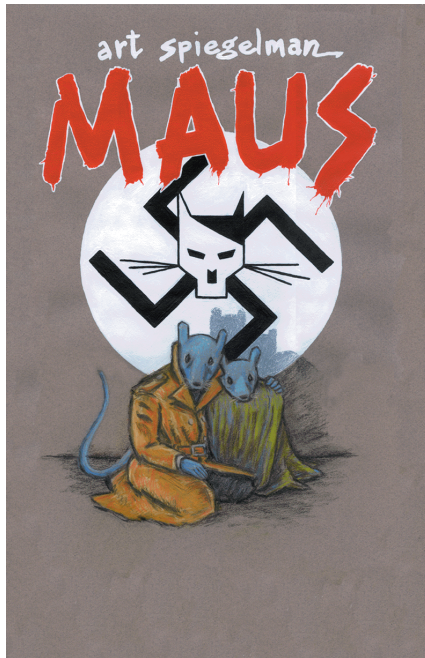


A highly significant incidence and relevant to the present concern happened when I was 11 years old. My elder rother amd me were average students. With bad performance he was being sent to a private tutor. He was a shy and timid person. Once as my father was touring for his official work, he missed his tuition class for a couple of days. On returning from his tour my father came to find it out. Although my father was not at all angry, due to miss communication between me and my brother, he panicked. In panic he got scared and took off from home leaving a note behind.

My parents never pressured him on studies, but they weren't happy about his performance either. As he took off a series of events revealed the unnoticed perception of people regarding failure in life, even as trivial as feeling guilty for missing tuition.

As he went missing, my mother sat home calling every known number of my brothers friends. My father was on his scooter searching the streets. My brother's tutor and her family were the only people aware of this situation since he left saying he was going to tution.

It was only late in the night that my parents called up the police to report him missing. As my brother roamed the streets and had nowhere to go, he returned home the next morning. My mother found him sleeping in the veranda.



Extending The Study

Taking up a personal account also becomes an extension of the 'Special Project' undertaken by me. The project looks at the storytelling in graphic novels with a focus on Autobiographies in comic books. Works by artists *Art Spiegelman*, *David B.*, *Joe Sacco*, and *Marjane Satrapi* were studied. These works which often talk about complex issues as the Holocaust, reflect artists' experiences and visions through elaborate artwork using same vocabulary as that of comic books.

Autobiographical accounts help to bring out the actual complexities of people, relationships and society and the same time let's the artists explore emotions and expressions which are very personal to them. These works have helped comic books gain long awaited recognition as a medium capable of true artistic expressions.

However taking up something personal also poses a challenge of not to get carried away and view certain issue without bias. There is a conscious effort to view the incident objectively in context of the issue concerned. As stated previously there is a conscious effort to refrain from sympathy and excuses.

The purpose is to bring out view and perception and irony concerning failure in life.

A Narrative Approach

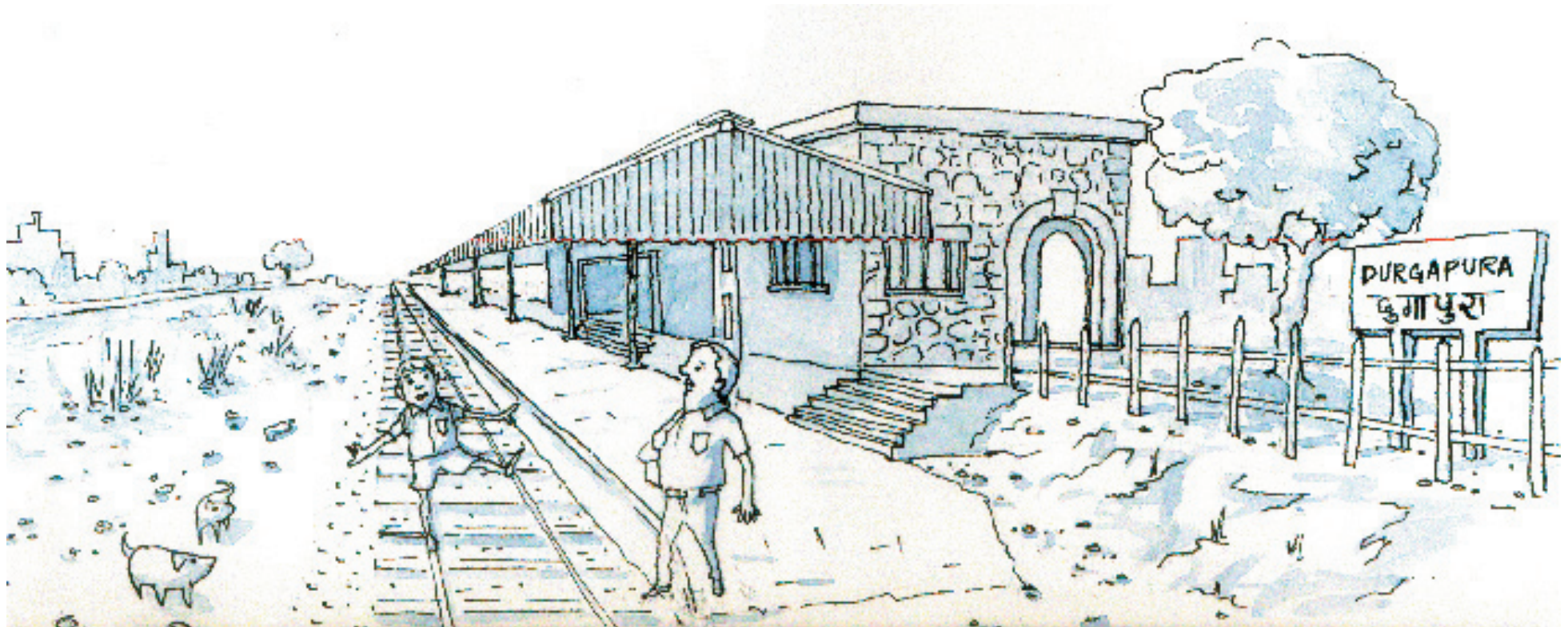
The story is being looked at as not an event but experience of various character following an event. The focus is on emotions and understanding of people's behaviour than the events that follow each other. When faced with a situation the characters responded to the situation according to their perception of it. Their insecurities, fears, strengths and sensitivity differ.

The story begins with the elder son taking off and ends with him returning back. The story takes place in five parts. Each part being from the point of view of every character. All though the events takes place chronologically, every person's view is expressed individually. As each character goes on expressing his/her opinion, complexity and irony with regards to failure is being portrayed.

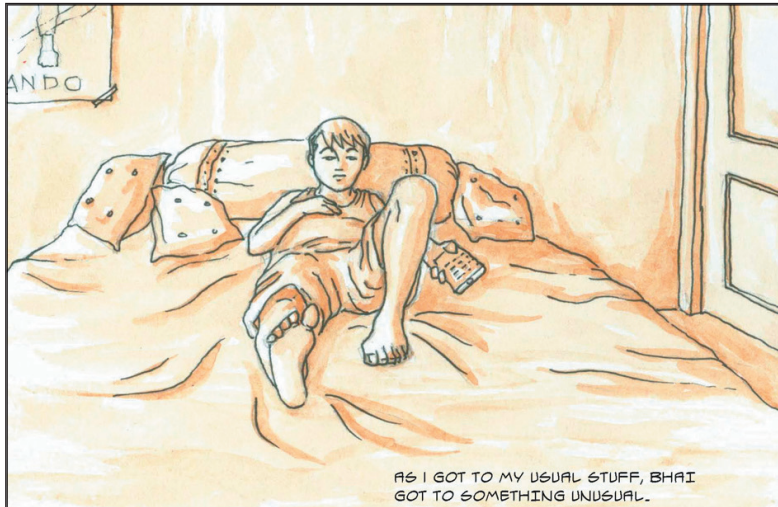
The chief characters involved are the two brothers, their mother and father and elder son's tutor. The character of the tutor provides an external and objective view to the scenario. The intent to depict the perception of failure from various view points is being focused upon.



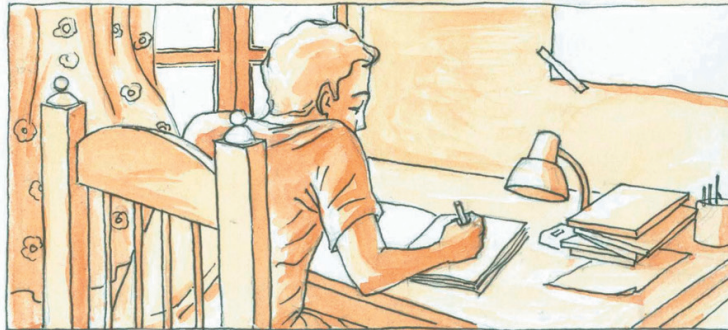
Visual Exploration



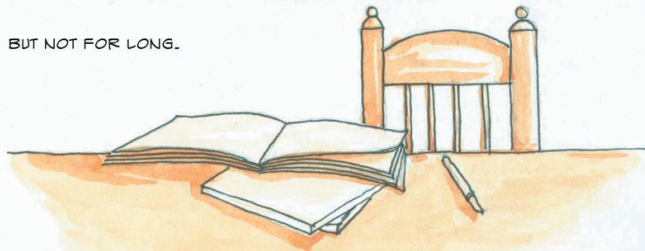
Visual Exploration



AS I GOT TO MY USUAL STUFF, BHAI GOT TO SOMETHING UNUSUAL.

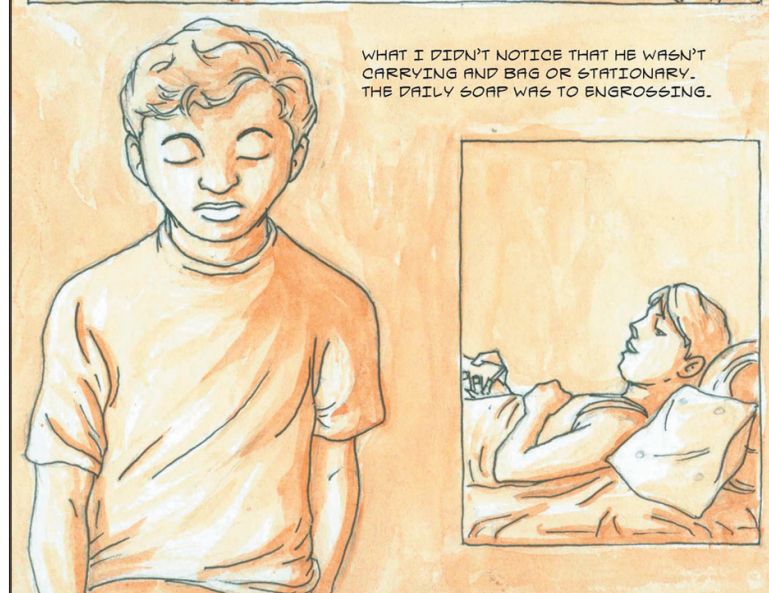


BUT NOT FOR LONG.



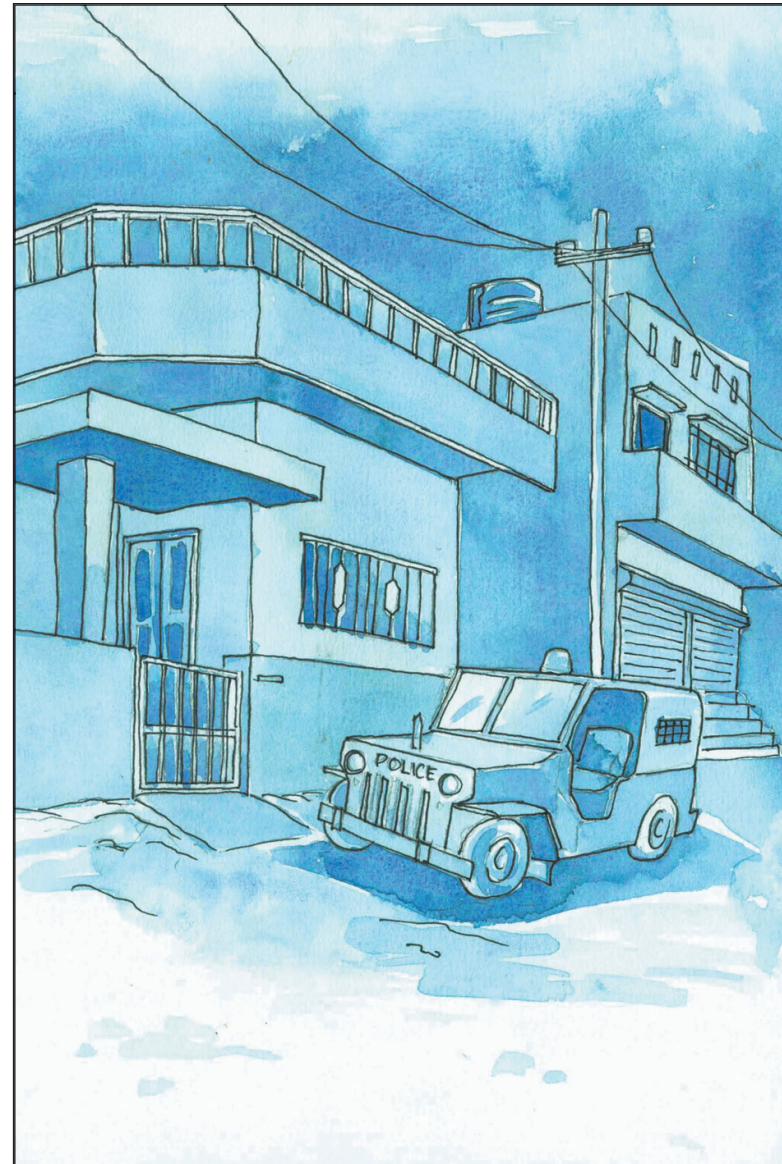
FEW MINUTES LATER HE WAS ALL SET TO GO TO TUITION. A WHOLE 2 HOURS EARLY.

NOW THAT DAD WAS BACK, MAY BE HE WAS PLANNING TO CATCH UP ON WHAT HE HAD MISSED.



WHAT I DIDN'T NOTICE THAT HE WASN'T CARRYING A BAG OR STATIONARY. THE DAILY SOAP WAS TOO ENGROSSING.

Final Pages



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