

3090kms: Graphic narrative on a long distance relationship

Midhun Mohan



IDC School of Design
Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay
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3090kms: Graphic narrative on a long distance relationship

Project report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
of the course of Design Project-II

by

Midhun Mohan

216450008

Supervisor:

Prof. Prasad Bokil



IDC School of Design

Indian Institute of Technology Bombay

2022

Approval sheet

The project titled '3090 Kms: Graphic narrative on a long distance relationship' by Midhun Mohan is approved in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the course DEP702: Mdes Project-2.

Supervisor: Prof. Prasad Bokil



Date: 28.11.2022

IDC School of Design,
Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay

Declaration

I declare that this written submission represents my ideas in my own words and where other's 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 misrepresented, fabricated, or falsified any idea/ data/ fact/ source in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will cause disciplinary action by the institute and can also evoke penal action from the sources which have thus not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

Midhun Mohan
Roll no: 216450005

Date: 18/11/2022

IDC School of Design
Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay

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I would like to thank my supervisor for the project, Prof Prasad Bokil, firstly for giving me the courage to take up this project and for his encouragement, support and guidance throughout the course of it, without which it would not have turned out the way it did.

My sincere thanks to Prof Raja Mohanty for his valuable feedback that helped in making crucial decision over the course of the project.

I would also like to thank all my friends for their words of motivation that helped me push through all the uncertainties that the project initially posed.

Let me also thank Aromas canteen for the post midnight munchies that fueled the still running creative minds in IDC.

And lastly, heartfelt thanks to my dear love Bhagya, for living through this story with me, keeping me sane even in difficult times and supporting me through this whole journey. This would not have been possible without you.

Abstract

3090 Kms is a graphic narrative on a long distance relationship which is based on an actual story. It takes the reader through the journey of how two individuals who knew each other for a really long time, how certain events led to them building a rapport and at some point fell head over heels for each other, the challenges that geographical separation brings to their relationship and how they dealt and continue to deal with them.

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Introduction

Is there anyone who has not fallen in love! Many who did are fortunate enough to be with their special person. At the same time, many others including me, have to live our lives counting days until the next time we get to meet each other, since our life decisions have brought about a geographical separation between us. Long distance romantic relationships pose its own challenges, mostly caused due to the various miscommunications that may happen between the individuals as well as other hurdles that they need to fight against and overcome almost on a daily basis to keep their relationship together and strengthen their bond.

The narrative here shares the story and experiences of a couple (me and my special person) who have been in a long distance relationship for over 3 years, ever since they committed to it. The content does not intent to be a guide on how to lead a long distance relationship, nor to give tips on the same. What the content intent to do is to create a moment of retrospection to the reader, to think about their own relationship, one in the past or one they are currently going through and cherish the memories. If the relationship did not work out for them, to think for oneself about what went wrong. Even if not these, if the content makes a person who comes across it think about their special someone, it is serving a purpose.

Background study

Experiences of individuals who have been in a long distance romantic relationship were collected, studied and documented. There were a lot of commonalities as well as differences between the experiences shared by these individuals. Common aspects were mainly the problems they had faced along the way, problems that the factor of distance brought in their relationship. In many cases, these very same problems had caused the relationship to fall apart.

Every person had their own unique ways to how they approached these problems as an attempt to solve them. Their stories kept reminding me of my own as their experiences were so relatable as me and my special person had been through similar situations and problems, some of which we had not yet found a solution to. These experiences shared were so insightful, not just as a study conducted for this project but also that it gave me possible directions to think on how these very same problems that even I face in my long distance relationship can be solved.

It in a way validated the idea that sharing experiences can be useful to others, not by blindly following what others did, but by helping them to understand and articulate the problems better and think for themselves if what worked for others could work in their case and how they can work around their solutions to come up with their own.

Literature Study

Mixtape volume 1 and 2 are part of a series of graphic novel collections published by studio Kokachi. They are well known for their brilliant story telling and visualisations that captures the essence of the narrative, immersing the reader into that world of fiction.

The books gave insights on how even the simplest of stories can be told in a dramatic and impactful way and the importance of accompanying visuals, how they guide the reader through the story even when there is no textual narration.

Image courtesy: <https://kokaachi.com>



Ideation:

The story

The entire story is divided into 10 chapters. Each chapter revolves around a particular event that happened in their relationship. These chapters are titled based on the main event that happens in them, taking utmost care that it does not give away the story or the event itself and at the same time, create curiosity on what it could possibly be.

Through the experience of narrating the story multiple times to multiple audiences in the initial stages of the project, it was found that a linear structure to the story where was not engaging the audience as expected. Hence a non-linear structure to storytelling had to be explored to create moments of anticipation and suspense rather than plainly laying out the story. Here is the structure that was finalised after a repetitive process of creating multiple story lines with different order of events:

Chapter 1: That day

The first chapter introduces one of the two main characters as well as set the tone and narrative style to the entire story. The story is set on a crucial day in the character's life. It does not give away much details but rather builds some suspense and a glimpse of what is yet to come.

Chapter 2: Take me back to school!

It is based on certain events that happened in school during the school days that influences the way the characters turn out to be as young adults in the future.

Chapter 3: One for Mark!

The third chapter contains the storyline of how a random notification from facebook leads to a chain of events that drives the story forward.

Chapter 4: Back to that day..

It's when the story finally reaches back to the point where it started and the first chapter starts to make more sense, now that all the dots have been connected. The story further progresses from the starting point and ends at a resolution to a conflict that the character was facing, one which was built up over the previous chapters and ends at a cliffhanger for the next chapter.

Chapter 5: A date, a tiger

When a very much awaited meetup turns out to be a nightmare, as fate had other plans in mind for them.

Chapter 6: Time in a bottle

The point when the characters starts to understand the problems that the factor of distance brings into their relationship as time goes on.

Chapter 7: Stunt at the airport

When characters go through an unexpected turn of events that brought them together, even though for a really short amount of time.

Chapter 8: The pandemic: love it, hate it.

As the name suggests, it is how the characters and the story pushes through the pandemic, one of the toughest periods in their relationship.

Chapter 9: Chain reaction

This chapter questions the reality that all the previous chapters had built up to, rendering them meaningless and how the characters go about addressing it.

Chapter 10: That night

The story that started with 'that day' ends with 'that night', a night when everything collapsed like a castle of cards and the characters tries to put them back up. But will they succeed?..

Visual style

A major part of the exploration went into coming up with a visual style for the narrative. Initial explorations involved visualising ideas that are related to the content with the help of expressive typography as an exercise to understand how they shape. More styles were explored further down the line since the genre of the narrative demanded a style which is rich in detail and has a deeper personal connection to the story. The following are the explorations done on visual style.

MILES OCT 2019

yet
so
close

APART

THIS IS A
RECTANGLE

SO WHICH ONE
DO YOU MEAN?

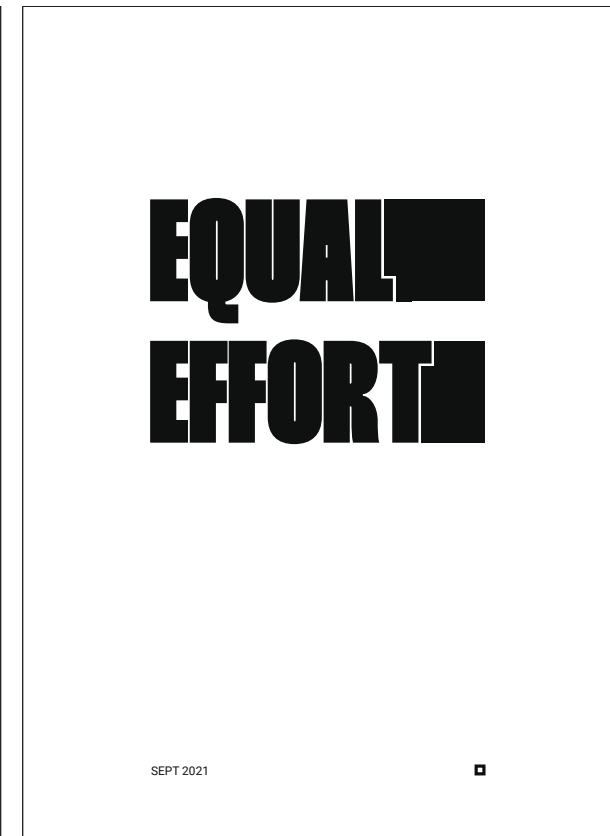
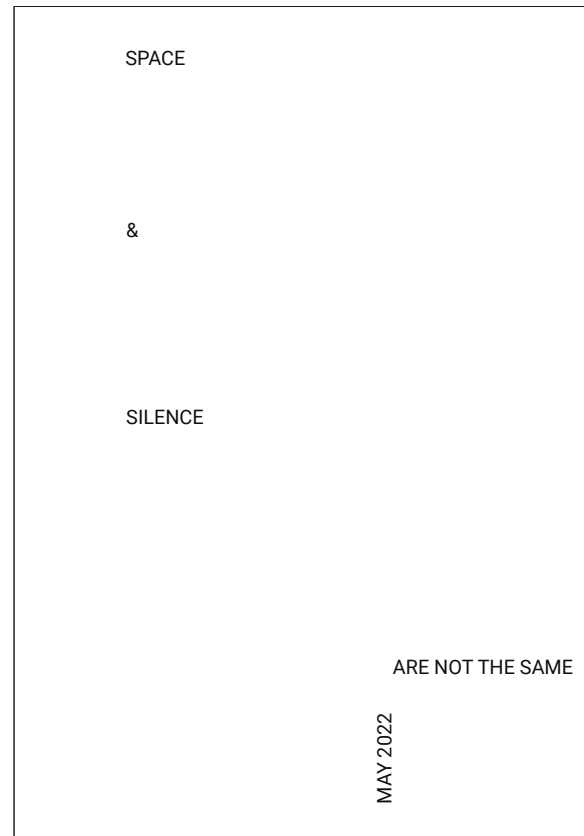
JUNE 2020

SO IS THIS

SE
CAN
PA
R
A
LETHAL
TION

May 2020

Early initial visual explorations were based on visualising various ideas related to the topic as an exercise to see how they can be shaped using different medium. Shown here are a set of explorations with type to visualise the ideas of distance, separation, miscommunication and more, all of which are relevant to the narrative.



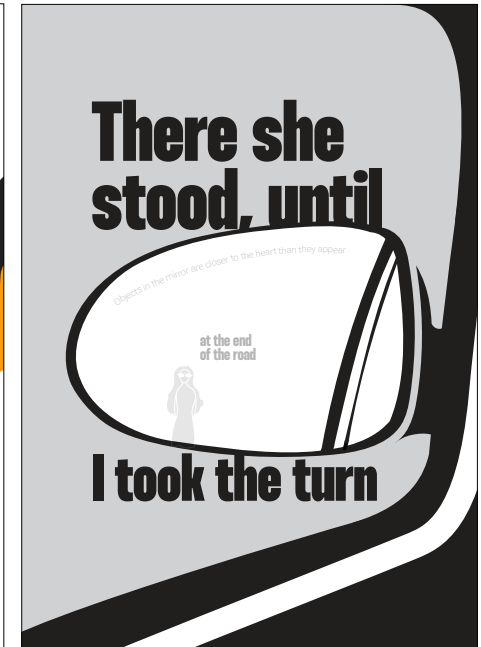
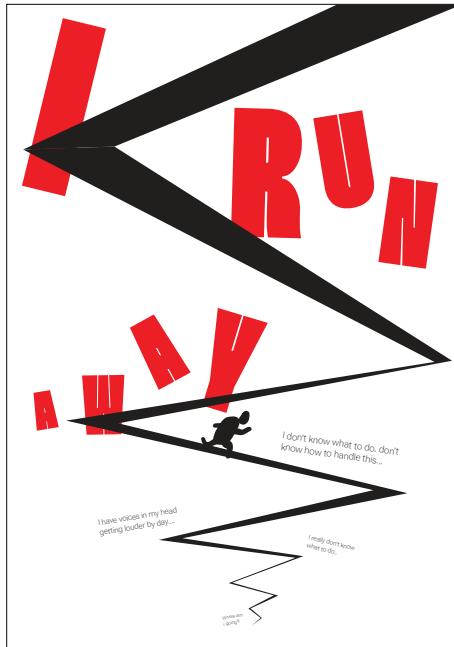
What makes a story different and interesting are its unique details. If they are told without these rich details it becomes generic and same is the case with visuals. So, how can the visuals be rich in details and have a certain connection to the story and its characters? A way to go about it was to use more direct imagery like illustrations for the ideas being narrated. It will also help the readers to understand and relate to these ideas faster.



An illustrated narrative can take any form and style. But, how can it be unique to this particular story with a relevant connection to it? Luckily in this case, it was not so difficult to find!

There is a point in the story where one of the main characters desperately wants to talk to the other, but has no clue how to start a conversation. A way he figures out for the same is with the help of WhatsApp statuses. Anything and everything found a place in the status but majority of them used to be visuals depicting random ideas. It was a time when the character, who is a designer, was taking his first steps towards learning graphic communication. And so, these visuals had two purposes to fulfil, each equally important for the character. This 'posting WhatsApp status and waiting for reply' phase went on for almost two years, thus leaving behind a rich collection of visuals, which have a strong relevance in their story.

Taking reference from these very same visuals that paved the path for the conversations and bonding between the characters, exploration was done on visuals that depict instances from their story.



These visuals are based on instances taken from the story and use a visual style adapted from the reference materials figured for the story. The visuals retained the same expressive and playful use of type along with minimal illustrations to depict certain events that happen in the story.



The same visual style is applied to a continuous narrative to understand how it would shape the spreads and how the flow of narration can be translated to visuals. Although these are richer in detail than the explorations with just type, it still looked too digital and lacked a certain flair, an element of personal touch to it. So again, how is it possible to bring in a human element to the visuals?

The approach taken to address this problem was to use illustrations with a crude style along with the expressive type which would interact with it and create an overall unique visual.

Let's breakdown the various narrative elements that has gone into this particular visual style.

Layering of details in visuals

Rather than putting the entire details in words, certain information lies in the visuals which the readers could discover themselves as they go through them. These easter eggs fill in those extra details that are not explicitly mentioned in the story, thus creating an engaging visual experience. Below shown is a visual from a part in the story where the main protagonist is going home, where it does not mention the location but gives an idea about it through the imagery that accompanies it.



I'm going home!

Conversations go in a linear manner

Conversations in the narrative are visualised in a linear manner consistently throughout the book so that the reader will understand by the visual itself that it is a piece of conversation they are going through or about to go through. Here is a sample for how conversations will appear:

"Hiii..Can you send me your flight details?"

"Of course love..

Done!!

Why?..what happened?!!"

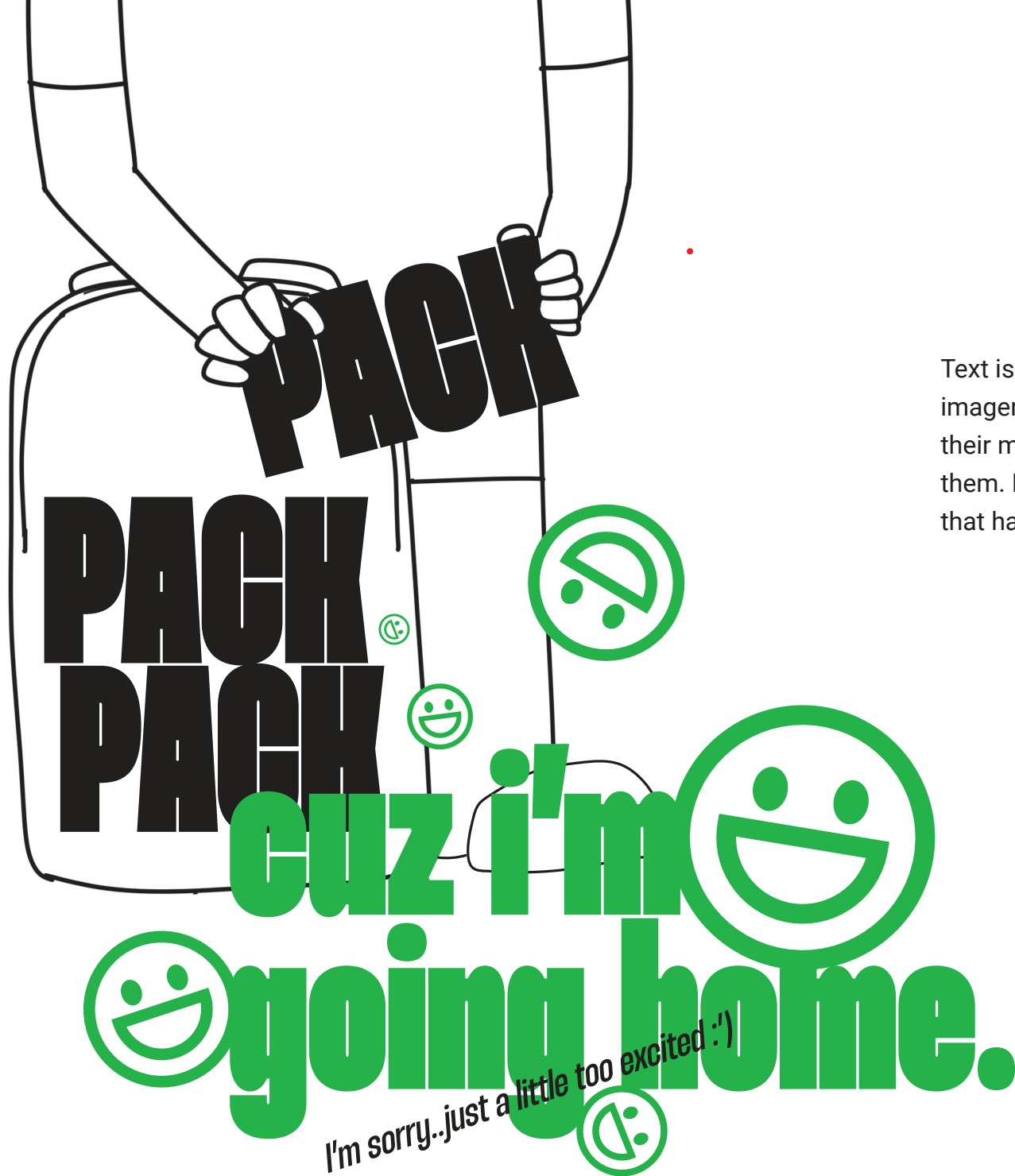
"Looks like they're gonna send us home too..and..."

PACH
PACH
PACH
cuz i'm
going home.
I'm sorry..just a little too excited :')

After
I ammm
aaactually
goingggg
home!!!
long months!!

Thoughts appear in a non-linear manner

Thoughts are visualised the same way they appear in our head. Sometimes they tend to overlap too much and clutter. Sometimes they create a complete chaos and therer are other rare times when they are in a slow and serene state. Since both the characters are heavy overthinkers, the readers get to see plenty of thoughts floating around in almost every page.



Text is more than just text. It is also a part of the imagery as they are used in a way that visualises their meaning and the characters interacting with them. It is again a nod to the visual references that have playful use of text to convey a message.

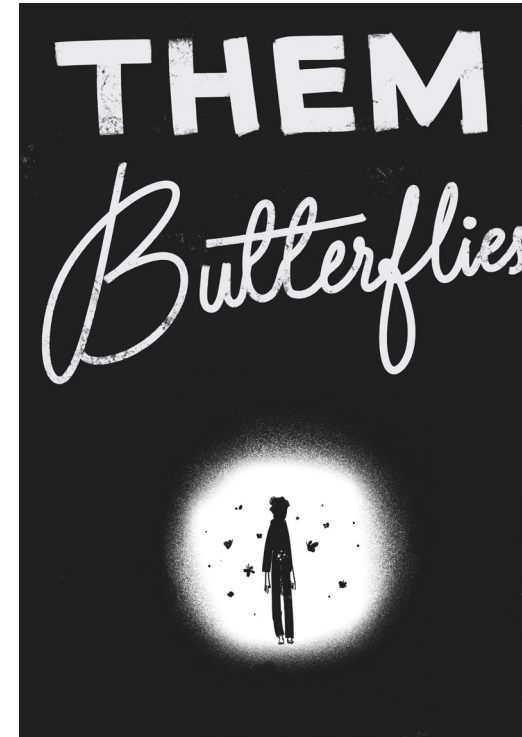


HER

HIM



Colours in the visuals are used to convey who is narrating the story and in the case of a conversation, who is saying what. This association of a colour to the character is established along with character introductions. The characters illustrated here are place holders as their intention was to explore the overall visual style and how illustration and text could work together.



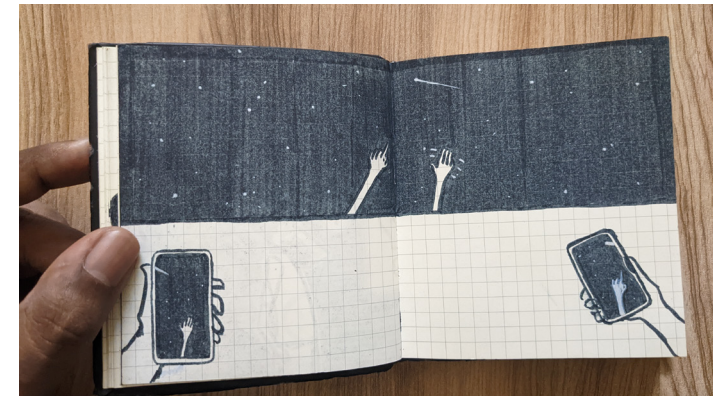
The style of illustrations had to be explored to incorporate certain qualities of the real life characters they are based on. The characters illustrated in these visuals adorn a few striking qualities of them such as hair and dressing style, physical features etc. More styles were explored to ideate on possible compositions with type.

All while exploring visual styles to narrate the story, one question that remained taunting was the medium that would be best suited for it. This question lead to once again going back to the context of the story for finding references and ideas that could possibly relates with the main characters and what they go through.

The story here is of two individuals who are in a long distance relationship, trying to get rid of all the screens and devices, and the whole idea of digital interactions which is always present in between them. What they miss the most is to be in each other's presence, the feel and healing of physical touch that nothing else can make up for.

One thing that they are adamant of is to get rid of their digital versions on phone screens. Therefore, their story that talks about these very same matter was not justified to be existing on a digital platform. It seemed best not to add more screens into their lives.

Hence it was decided to go ahead with print medium for the final output and further visual explorations were done based on this decision. If a book, it would be a great idea to use every opportunity for the reader to touch and interact with it as much as possible. At the same time acknowledging how they would have missed all that if they had to experience it on a screen, thus drawing a parallel between the experience from the book and from a long distance relationship.



Explorations on text and image compositions that visualises the ideas of distance, separation, yearnings and miscommunications.

Also, the square format of the book also seemed to help bring out the separation by distance that the characters face, with the wide space that the format creates when opened as seen as a spread. Also, the idea of using each side of the book as a window to the world's of the two characters separated by the binding was an interesting aspect that fit the context of the story.

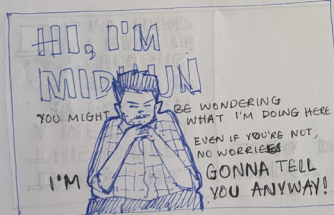
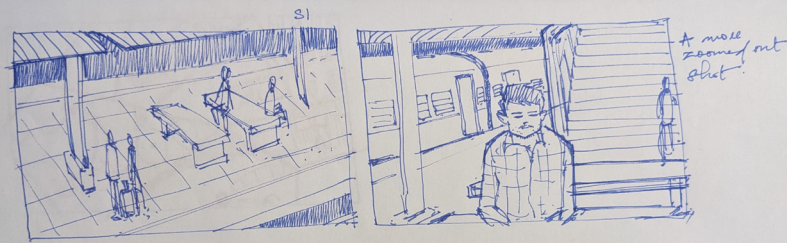
Further exploration had to be done on the illustrations to find a style that suited the tone and had a certain relevance to the story. To find such a style, it had to be searched in the context of actual incidents and events that happened, which brought about more interesting materials for visual reference.

The final illustration style is inspired from the letters that the characters had exchanged, one of which had these very crude doodles that ran from one side to the other depicting a story which was visualised in her own way. Adapting the rough line quality and the overall imperfect style of the doodles to the illustrations, the final style was finally starting to shape. What better than the character's own styles of visualisation to visualise their own story!





The scribble-like quality of illustrations with its rough lines and textures conveys an idea of human touch through the imperfections they add to the visuals as they appear to be drawn on directly on the paper.



Character intro

Hi, I'm MIMMO.
I call myself mimo.

WHAT am I doing here?
Well, it was a long eventful day.
The most "eventful" day of my life.
I'm not sure about that.

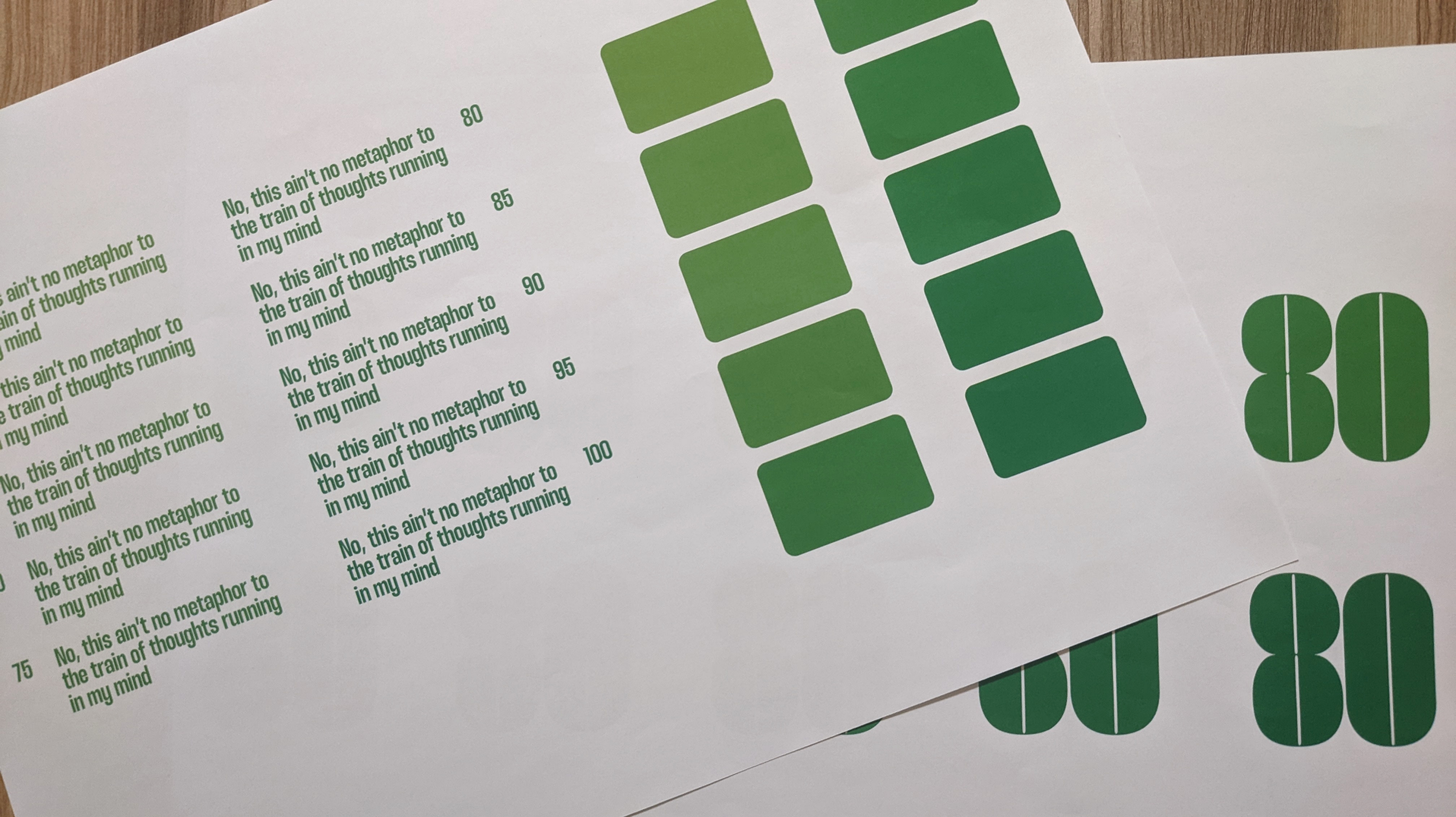


I DON'T WANT
THIS TO GO ON
LIKE THIS
ANYMORE

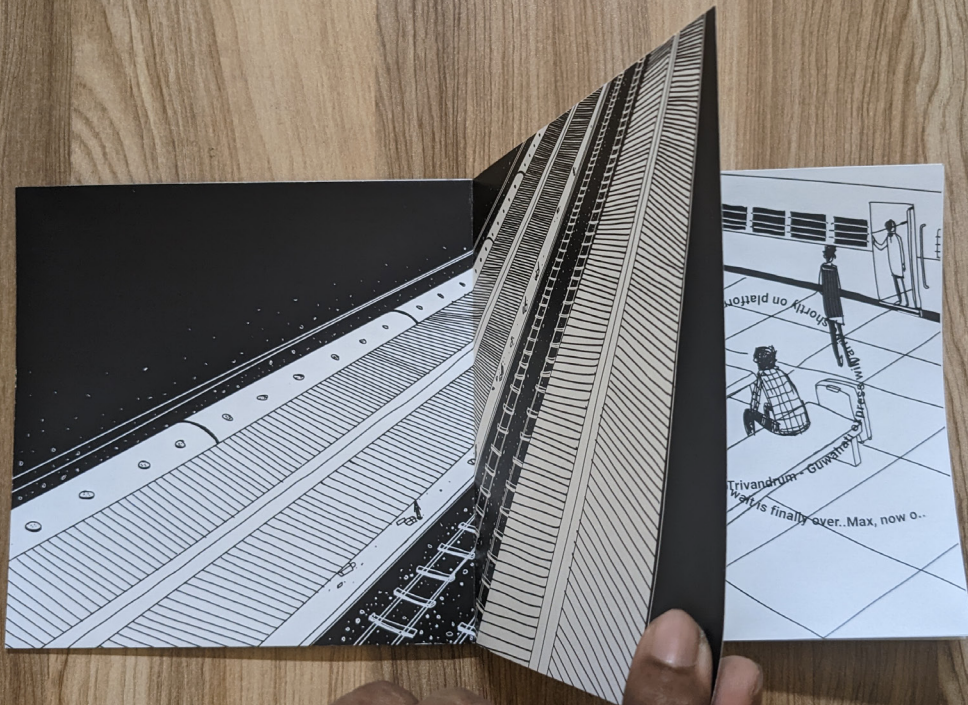


Layouts were first ideated through rough sketches and further refined to create the final layouts and spreads. 150mm x 150mm was chosen as the trim size for the final book after exploring a number of square sizes. This particular size was chosen due to its 'not too small and not too large' quality. This size was small enough for the book to be easily held in hand and to interact with. At the same time, it also gave enough working space to explore the expressive visual style.

The narrative was developed through an iterative process based on the story that was written down. Ideating on the imagery was also done alongside the narrative such that they complement each other so as to create an interlink between the both.



Test prints were done to finalise on colours and to identify corrections and refinements required for the visuals to create the final iteration.



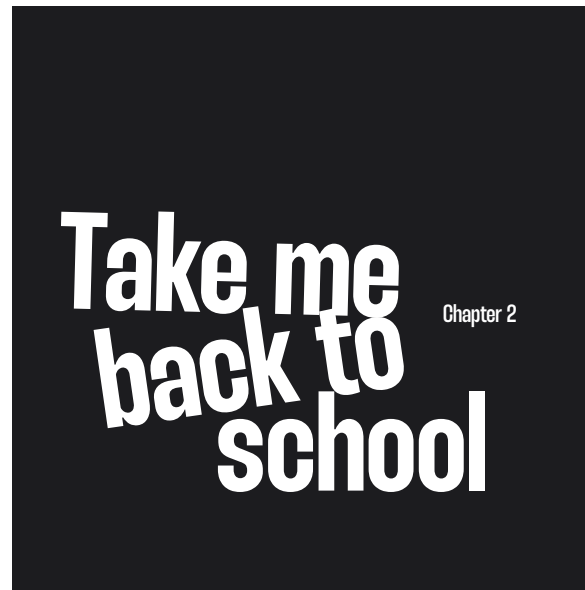
Physical print mock-ups were made for the first chapter to get a better understanding of how the final book would be to interact with and how the visuals turn out to be when printed.

Chapter covers

Covers for each chapter are designed in line with the main plot of the respective chapter. They visualise the chapter name in a rather abstract way, setting the mood for the story.



The day of a great fall, literally and figuratively.



A quick deviation into a flashback.



When a notification changed the course of a mundane life.



Back to the day of a great fall.



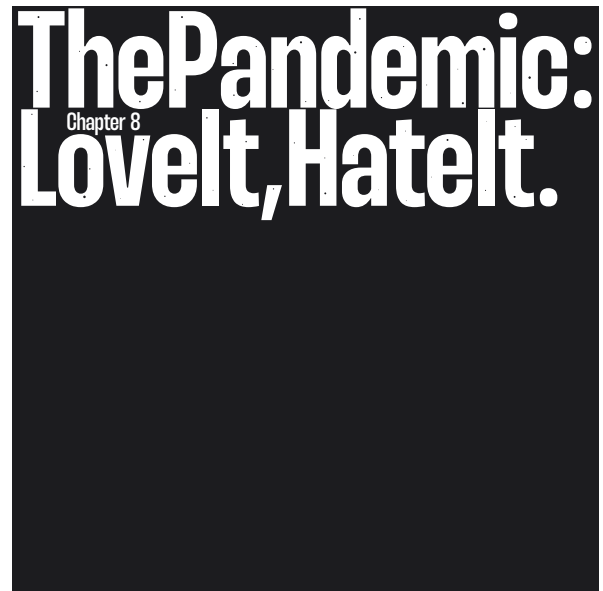
When a date turned out to be a meeting with her dad.



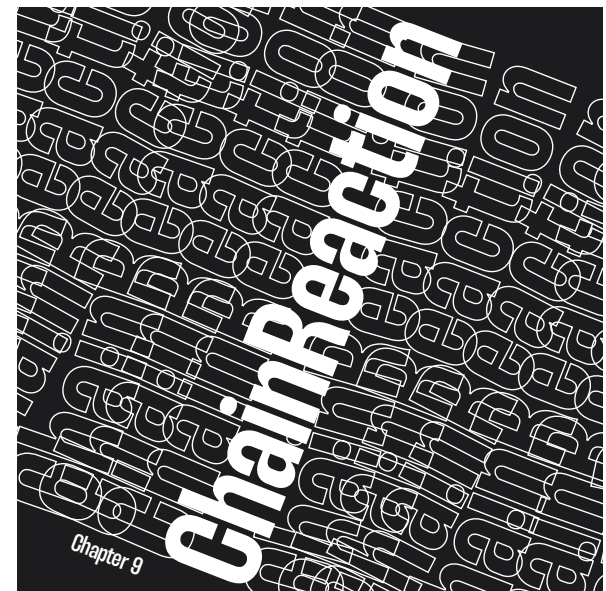
If I could save time in a bottle..an integral recurring element in the entire story.



An impossible stunt visualised by the act of balancing texts.



An unforeseen period of tension.



It's all overthinking to say the least.



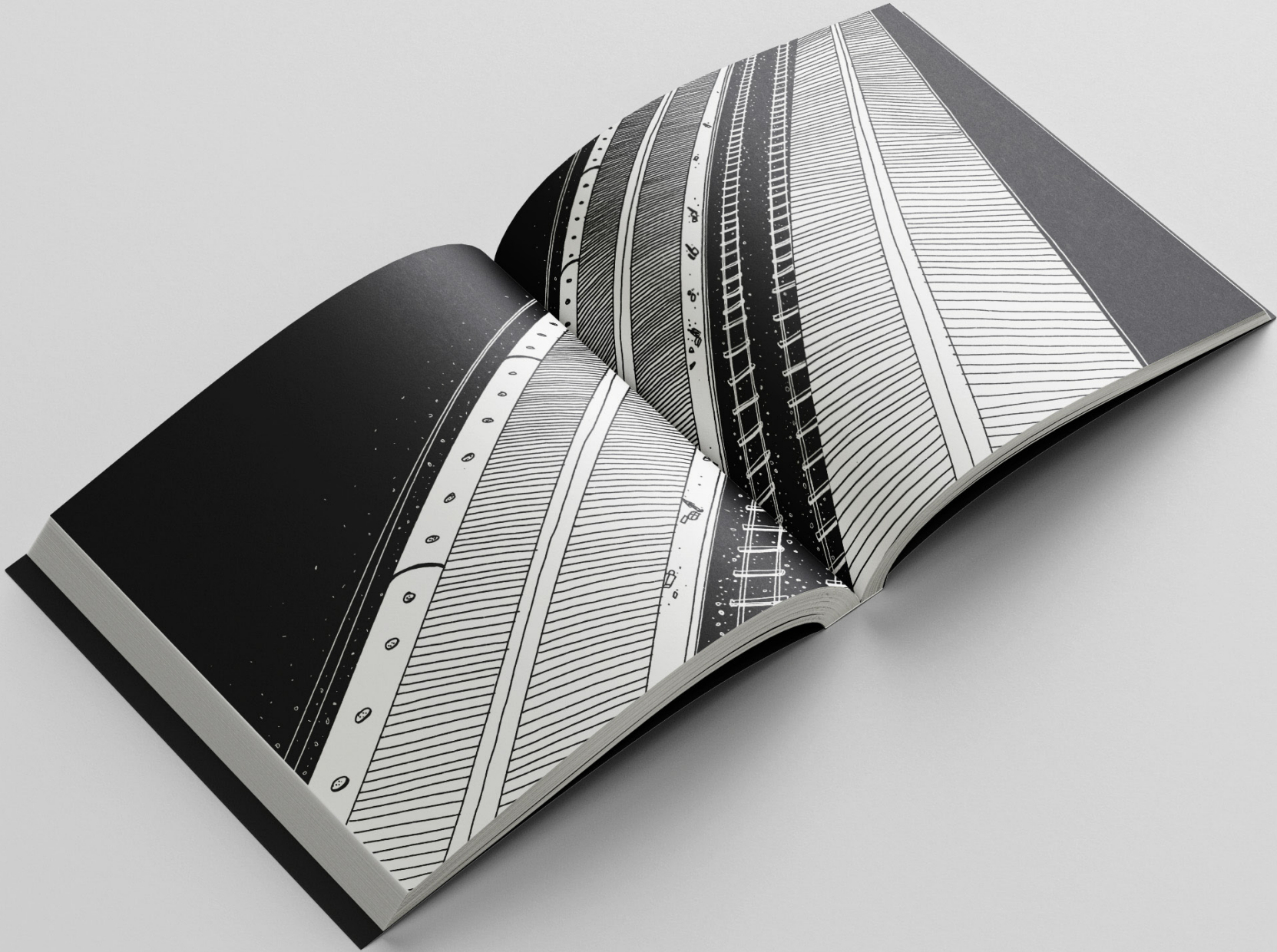
A night when things fell from hand
and shattered.

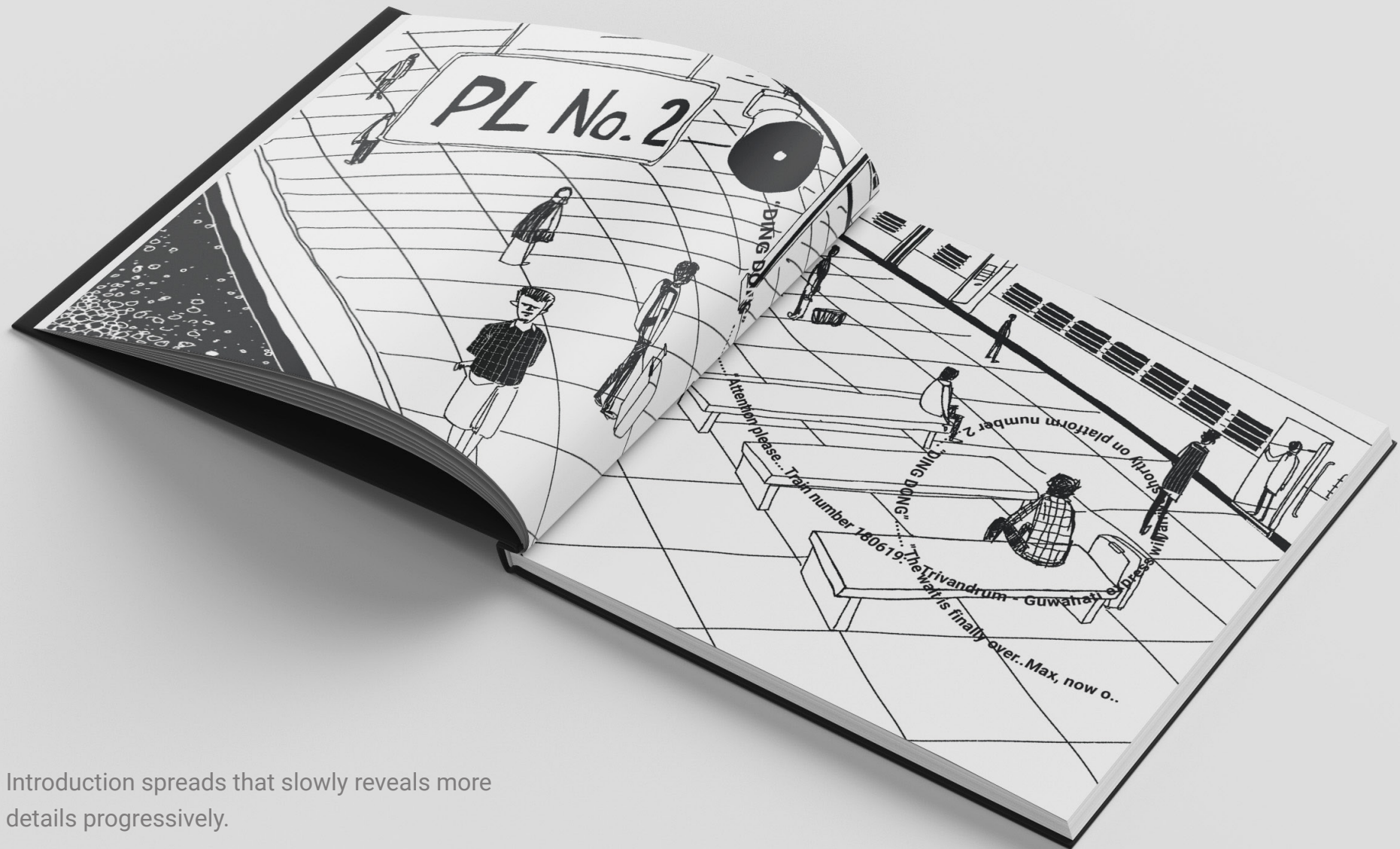
Final design





Front page to the first chapter in the story.
A dark background is used since the scene
is set around midnight





Introduction spreads that slowly reveals more details progressively.



Character introduction spread that sets the tone and style of the entire narrative ahead.

BEFORE ALL

was a time of isolation,
when most of the time



talking to those who
I rarely talked to...

Maybe, I missed school a little too...

THAT HAPPENED

was spent catching up
with school friends, even

In second year, I had to go home for
a few days in between the semester
due to an emergency.

Close to the departure date back
to college, I get this notification..

Facebook



It was Bhagya's birthday yesterday!
Not too late to send her a happy birthday!

I saw her in the tiny Facebook...

**IT
TOOK
SO LONG
TO
ADJUST**



**TO THIS
COMPLETELY
NEW
ENVIRONMENT**

All thanks to a bunch of great
friends who pulled me out of the shell

and made comfort
zones where I can
be me.

Print prototype of final design.

A FUTURE THAT LOOKED QUITE BLEAK IN 12TH GRADE TOOK UNEXPECTED TURNS..

I got admission in a college that I couldn't even dream of!!

ONE THAT IS FAR

FAR FROM HOME.

Having studied in the same school for 12 years, being around the same set of people and places and never having stayed away from home had taken a toll..

▲
N

Conclusion

Further ahead

Even though there is a rationale behind the specific use of colour for the entire narrative, the overall visuals tend to lose out on a lot of expressive potential that colours could bring. Colours make a visual richer and accentuates the ideas being conveyed. It is one of the first visual elements that a viewer takes notice of. An element of such great influence could have been explored more, especially for this story that involves a rollercoaster of emotions.

Another aspect to keep in mind is related to the narrative style incorporated and its usage. The style being one with a main story line and a parallel narrative of thoughts and commentaries that runs along and complements it, a regular check on not overdoing the same is essential. A surprising or a fun element will cease to be so it occurs throughout the story. The reader will get so used to it that it wouldn't interest them anymore. Therefore finding a balance by understanding where to use it and not will decide how effective this particular style will turn out to be.

Being a expressive text heavy content, more explorations could have been done in terms of the fonts used to bring out different emotions. As fonts add a voice to the matter being told, they help in getting the idea across in a more convincing way when the style of text and the content complements each other.

Learnings

Making the readers feel the emotions you want them to feel would be the toughest task for a storyteller. If a story is told in a way that is not relatable, it wouldn't connect with the readers and falls short of its intended purpose. This project gave insights on how to develop a story that captures the readers' attention and keeping it sustained throughout the entire period. Even when the story is based on real life events, there could be ways of framing the incidents such that it expresses and evokes the intended emotions in the reader, making it a more interesting experience.

Getting past the initial ideas and to explore a more unorthodox way of communicating a content was something that was possible through this project. The book does not follow a usual visual style with paragraphs forming blocks of text and images that illustrate what is being told. Rather the text itself is brought to the limelight and actively involves in the narration, playing their part as elements visualising the story.

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