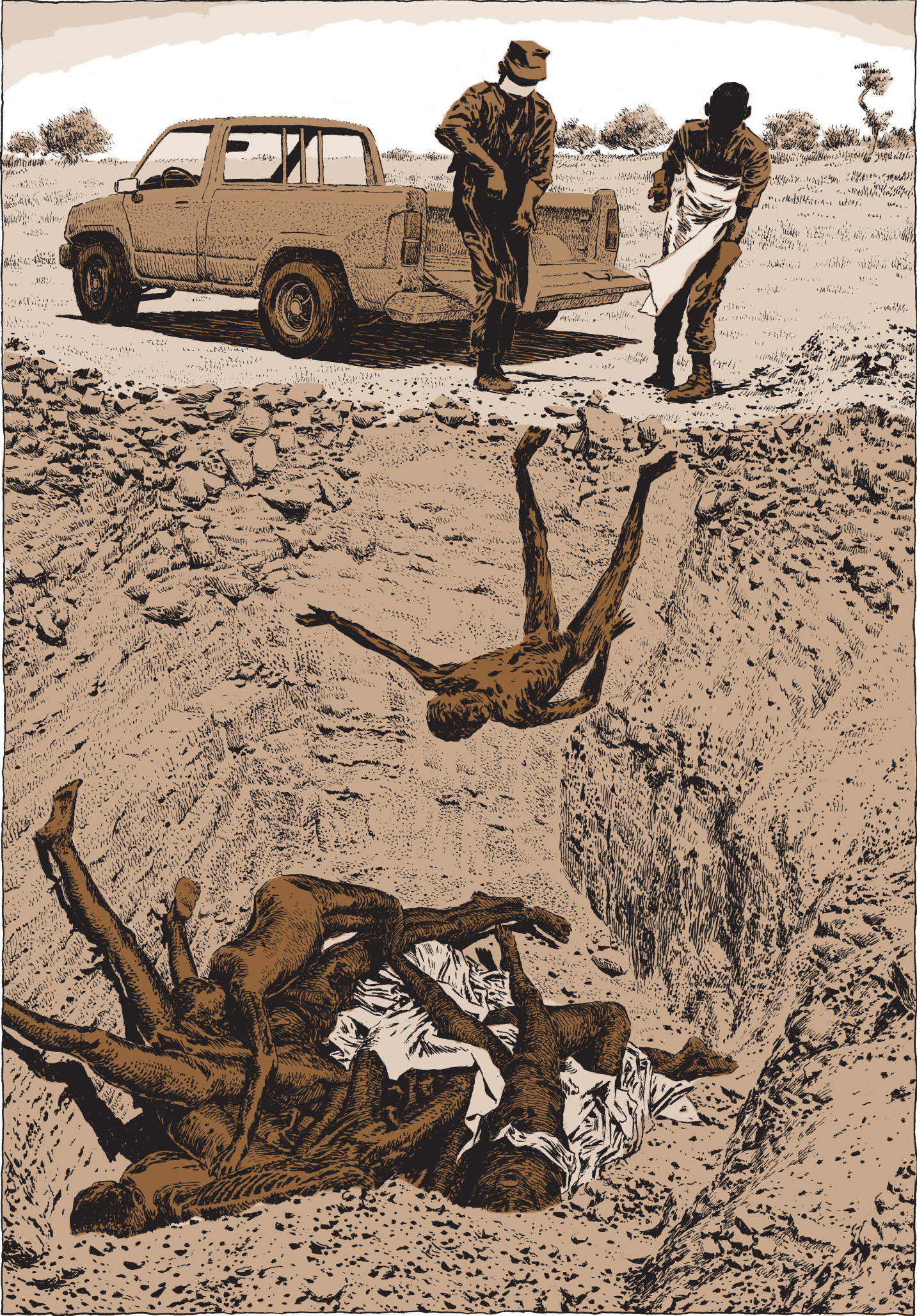


# X - In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni





It's been stewing for a while in the pot now. The rebel soup must be ready.



A few soldiers have proclaimed themselves officers. You can tell from the medals and stripes they decked themselves out in.



They've no idea what these decorations mean. Most were stolen from enemy corpses.

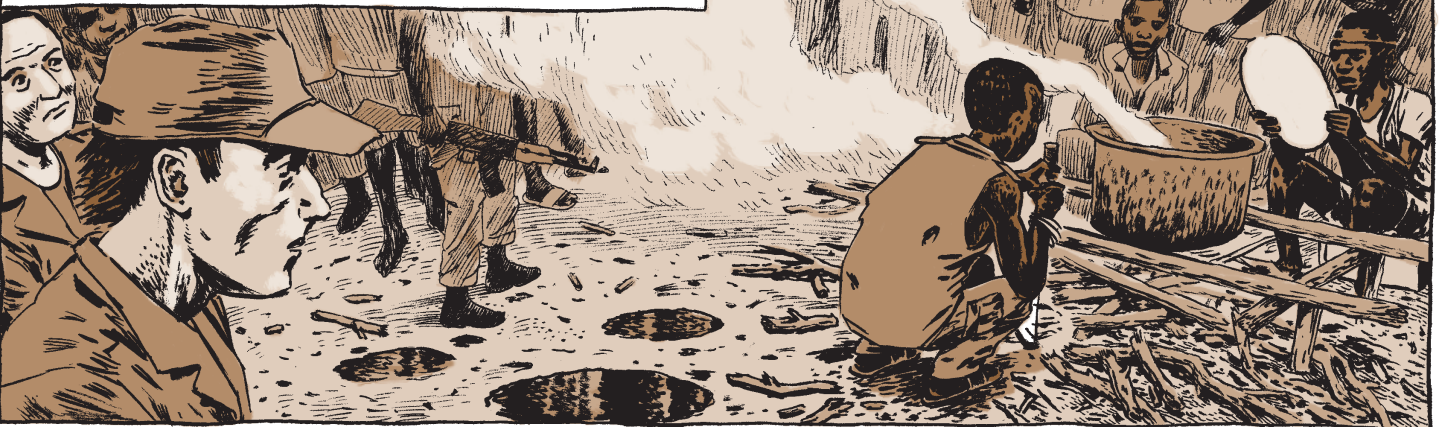
There's Corporal Talkante, the biggest sadist of the bunch.



He beats his own men shamelessly, going so far as to rape young female recruits. Sanguinho cut his ear off to punish him for laying into his men. But he still does it every day, without asking permission.



He's the one who hacks up the bodies, earning him the nickname "The Butcher".



Among the other officers in this camp are Sergeant Ricardo, one of the company's elders at 25th, and Sergeant Rambo.



A sickening smell wafts from the stewpot, a gruesome odor blending with the dusty atmosphere of the encampment.

Now comes the moment they've all been waiting for.



Sanguinho picks out ten men, including Jacky, Paulus, and me, to drink the potion the curandeiro's prepared.

It's sticky and rancid. When you drink the sinister brew, you feel ready to defy the unspeakable.



Disoriented, confused, stupefied, I've just broken one of life's fundamental taboos. A serene ecstasy wherein good and evil intertwine, like two rivers sharing a bed, a single flow for the rest of their existence.



When it's y turn to share in the agape—ninth in line—there are only a few scraps of liver left. I take them, humble and grateful.



Without shame or repugnance, I crunch the bits of charcoal-grilled liver. They're soft, bitter, spongy. But I do not eat my fellow man for the taste—rather, to absorb his life force.



Then it is the other soldiers' turn, the rank-and-file and the bandits. They are only allowed the stew.



Drunkenness takes me back for seconds. I split a serving of human flesh with my friend Jacky. Frankly, you could say it's pork, and I couldn't tell.



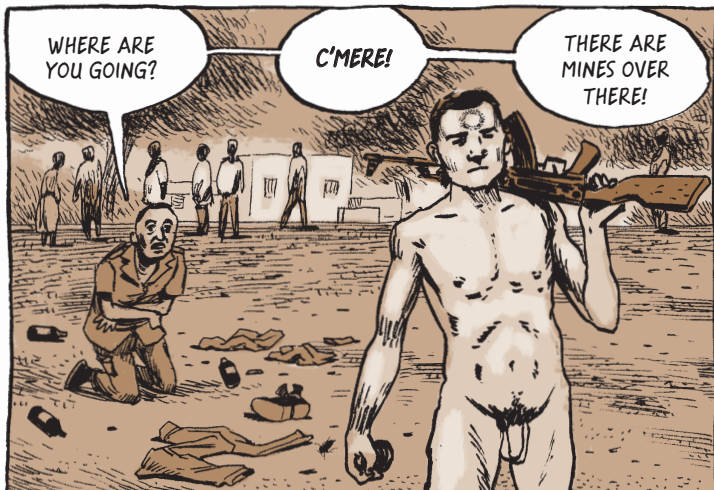
After several mouthfuls, the medicine man's potion begins to work. As our flesh absorbs that of our sacrificial victims, reality slowly but surely warps.



WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

C'MERE!

THERE ARE MINES OVER THERE!



IF I'M INVINCIBLE, NO MINE'LL KILL ME!



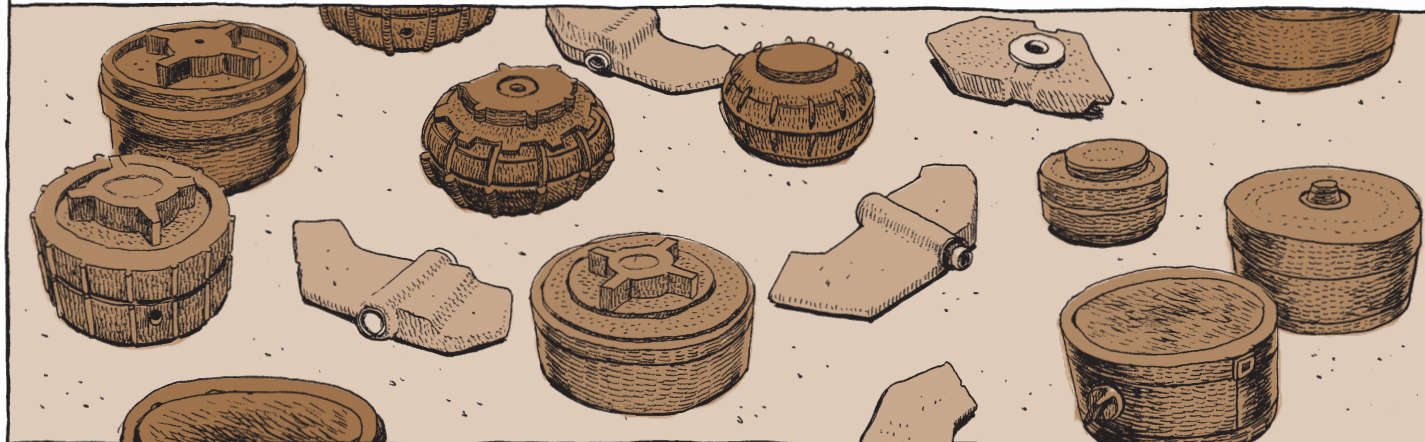
Turning in circles in the night, consumed by fire, I must prove my strength, that unconquerable strength the Naparama has set running through my vens.



I pull the pin from a grenade. Grip it in my first. Count to five. Toss it. The sky splits in two and the earth lights up.



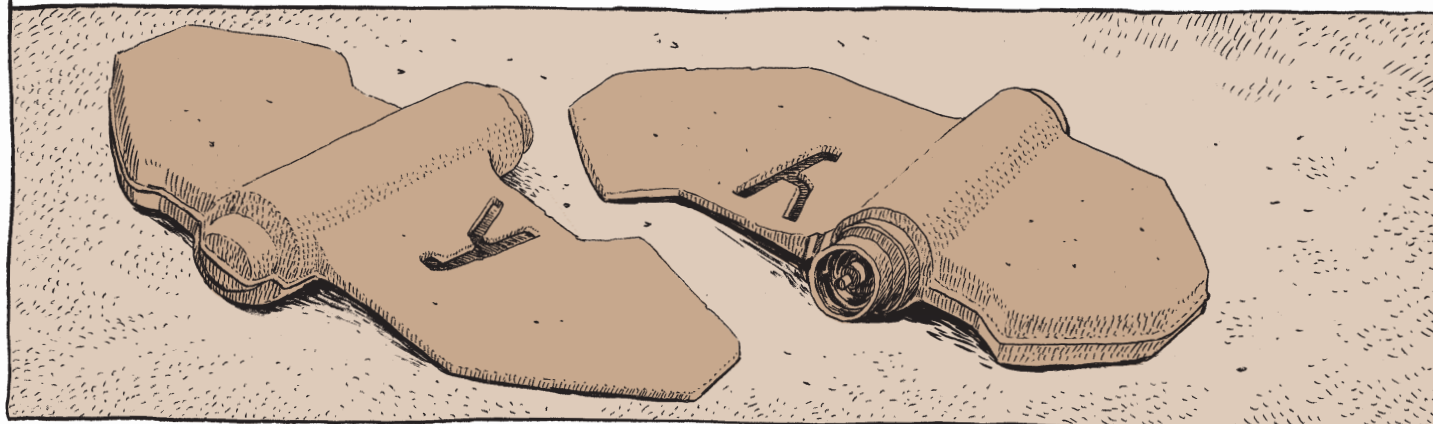
A M14's no M16. S'right, AUPS go boom and ZAPS go bang. 'Cause MON 50's no high pair, MON 100 three of a kind, and MON 200 goes all in, double or nothing. Watch out for the final deal: TM-38, TM-46, TM-57, and as an added bonus, TM-62.



See, you gotta know the brutal lingo: blast mines, fragmentation, directional or bounding, with or without tripwire, plastic or metal, khaki for soldiers, fluorescent for kids.



The best ones are butterfiles, with colorful little wings kids love. No Playskool or Lego here. Gotta make up for it somehow.

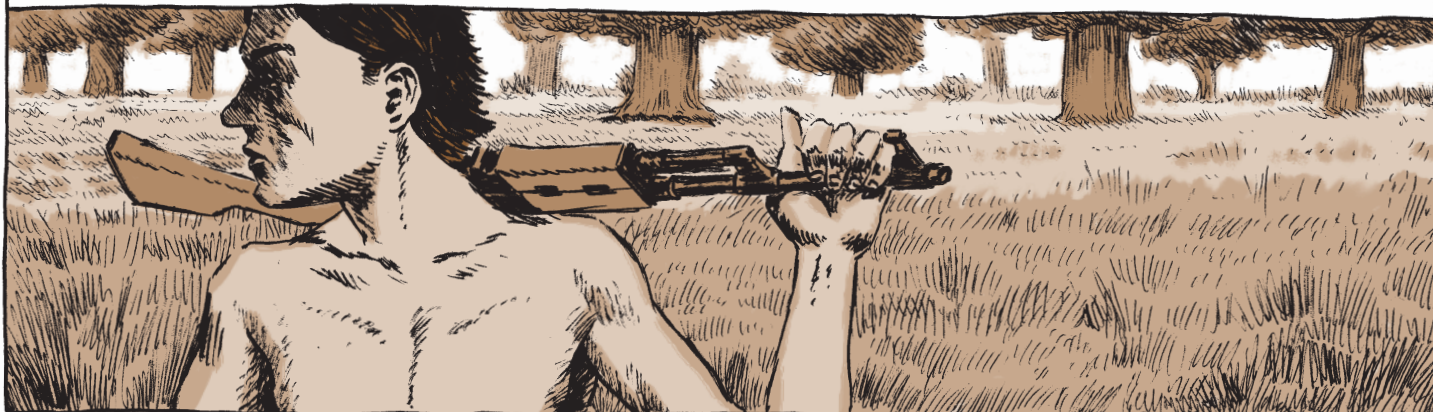


To think that Christmas is coming... In a month, our little cherubs in France will be swimming in gifts. Not here. Not that they don't buy into baby Jesus, quite the opposite. They're righteous Christian fanatics. But the nicest gift they can hope for is being alive, or that looters will overlook their harvest.



To each his own.

Cold, hunger, doubt, fear—I don't feel a thing. Go on, sentence for war crimes or atrocities: I no longer fear the judgment of other men. I just want to go home, have Christmas with a nice ham or goose. And watch it snow.



Christmas... in under a month, the streets will be decked with lights and pines. The great pagan holiday draws near. I'm so happy I've got no family to celebrate this Christian-capitalism amalgam with. Frankly, it disgusts me.



Well, there is Aunt Jeanne... but I couldn't do that to her. She boycotts Christmas. Almost goes on a hunger strike. Observing Christ's birthday—the worst possible insult for someone whose whole own cross to bear has been fighting the church all her life.



And all that food! Millions of shrimp, turkey, snails all slaughtered. Absurd. OK, fine, the snails, sure, I shouldn't talk. But why wait till December 25th to stuff your face?



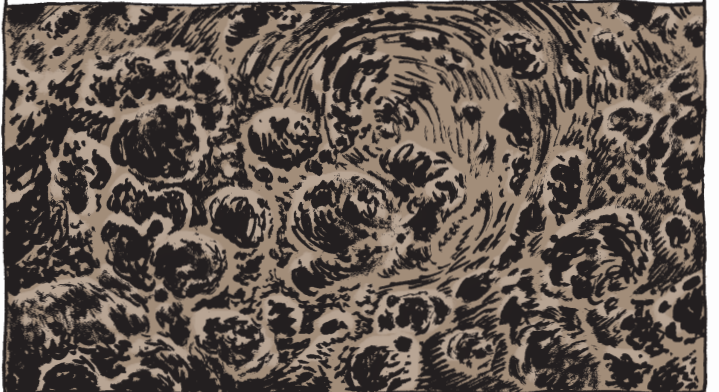
It's not like it costs a ton to have a nice meal every night, instead of making yourself sick on cage-raised frozen fowl or third-rate farmed fish fed on the shit of its fellows.



The snails I had for lunch are really making me lose my appetite. Should've let those gastropods fast another two days. They probably weren't done purging their waste when I tossed'em in the pan.



They're sliming up my stomach now. All those trails glistening up my paunch, along with parsley butter tying it all together as sauce. I leave it to your imagination.



I decide to get some air to help digest. Instinctively, my steps take me into Perrache, a neighborhood where I haven't set foot for ages.



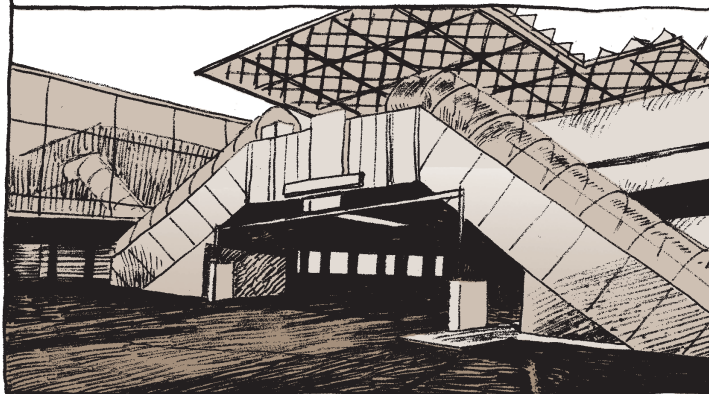
Not like I have a choice, anyway. I want to see Joia and the African women who've haunted my nights since I got a hold of those diamonds.



The Rhone. The highway that runs alongside it for miles brushes by the confluence, the train station-mall, and the St. Paul and St. Joseph prisons, those old carceral bastions whose unsanitary conditions make the front pages and up the record suicide count.

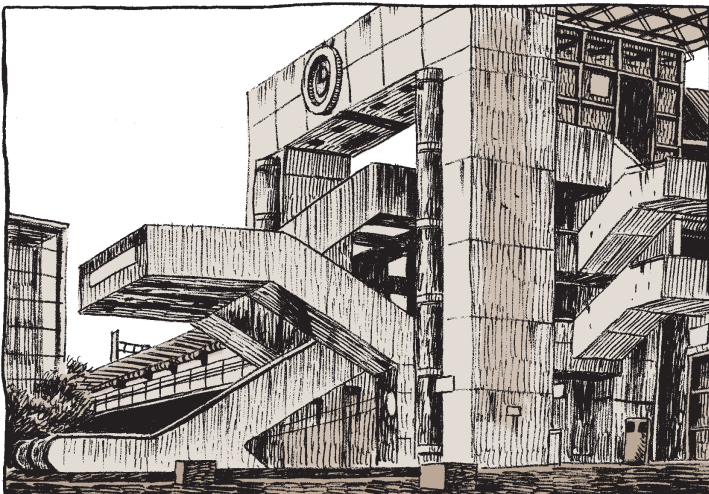


Then it dives under an interchange built at the height of the oil crisis, a filthy orange octopus whose every tentacle swells with bulbous smoked plastic...



This hideous urban renovation project inextricably knots together railways and highways, a metro, two tramway lines, a bus station, and a train station.

It sliced the neighborhood in two. Behind the thick, vaulted tunnels that support the railway stretches the zone. After thirty years of being cut off, gentrification is in full swing.

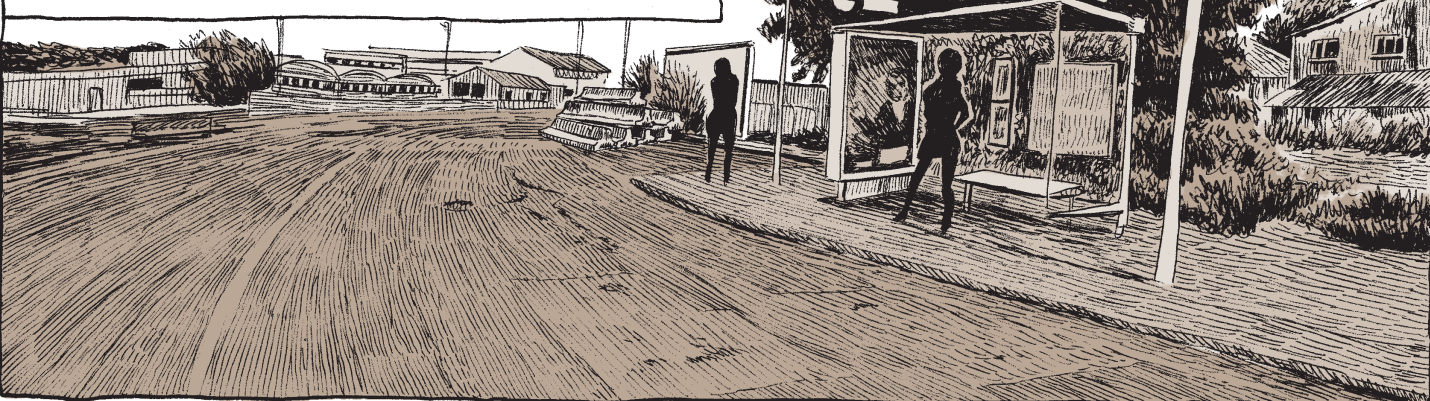


Bit by bit, it's all being torn down. Collapsing. What about the jails? Are they going to keep them? They could turn them into artists' residences. I'm sure that'd work.



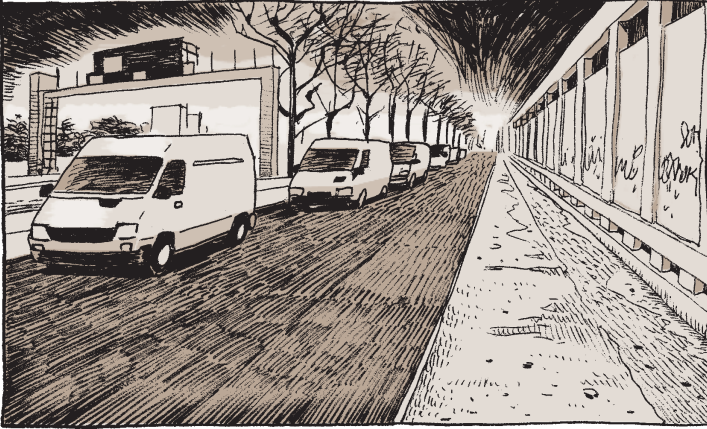
Then again, Lyon'll never be New York.

As for whores, take your pick. The area's been swarming with them since a city decree banned prostitution downtown. The first ones I see are Slavs, deplorably young and posted at every bus stop.





A bit farther off, along the station-mall, I spot my target. A second group of prostitutes in the street. They all look African.



Three-quarters of the vans look empty. The lights that are supposed to indicate availability, like on a taxi, are mostly off. Can't tell if people are fucking in back, or no one's home.



I'm not about to knock on doors to find out which. So my options are narrowed.



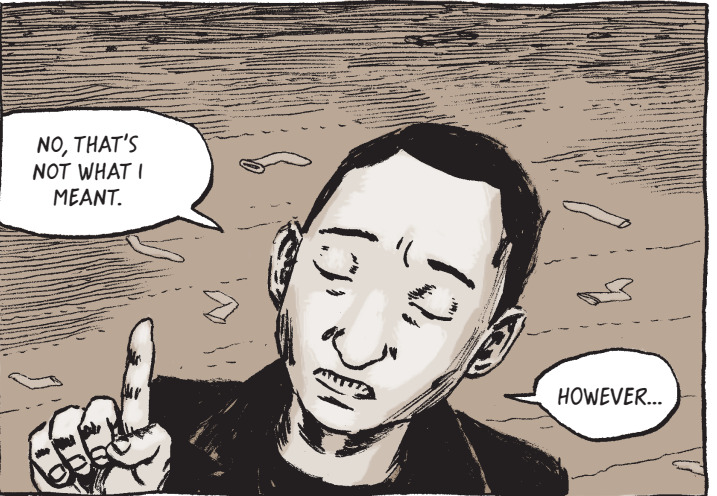
I WANTED SOME INFORMATION.

20 FOR A BLOWJOB, 50 TO SCREW.



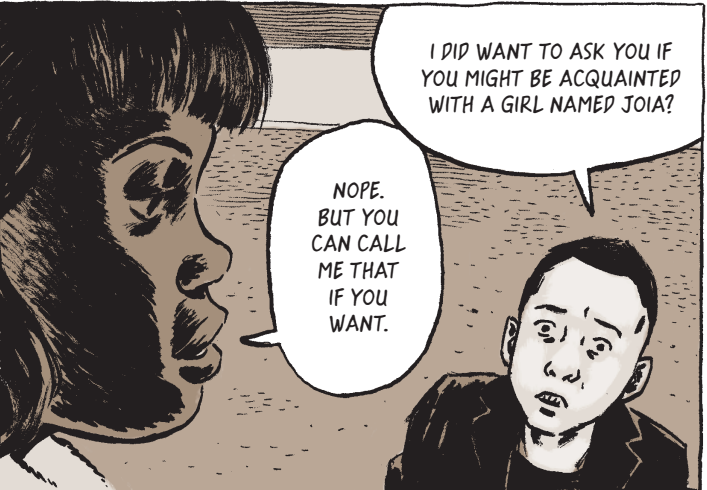
NO, THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT.

HOWEVER...



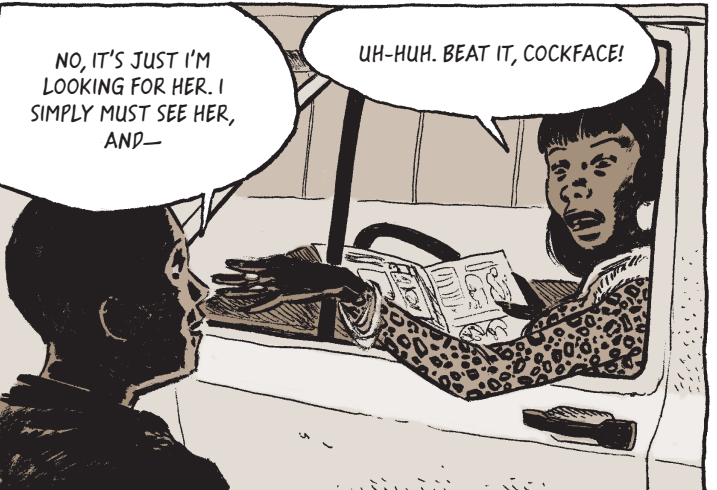
I DID WANT TO ASK YOU IF YOU MIGHT BE ACQUAINTED WITH A GIRL NAMED JOIA?

NOPE. BUT YOU CAN CALL ME THAT IF YOU WANT.

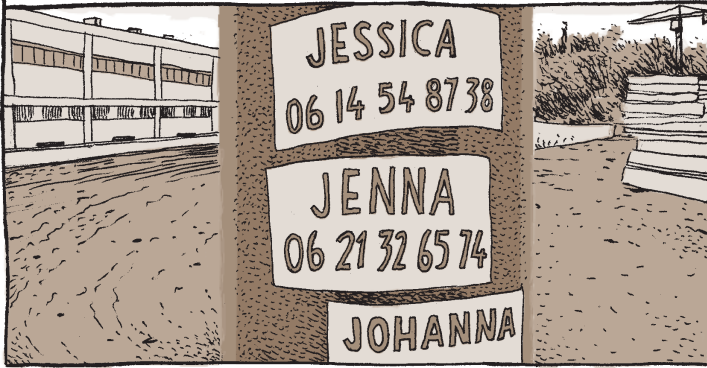


NO, IT'S JUST I'M LOOKING FOR HER. I SIMPLY MUST SEE HER, AND—

UH-HUH. BEAT IT, COCKFACE!



I slink off, tail between my legs, despairing of coming across a small fluorescent sticker with her name on it. Most of the town's traffic and streets lights are covered with promotional stickers.



But no Joia. I have only two choices: get lucky, or go ask Roger.



Then again, there's always the Saône. After wandering unsuccessfully along the quays of the Rhone to the confluence, I decide to head back downtown along the other river.



Chance has always guided my steps. I don't see why it'd let me go home empty-handed today.



It promises to be far more bucolic a stroll.



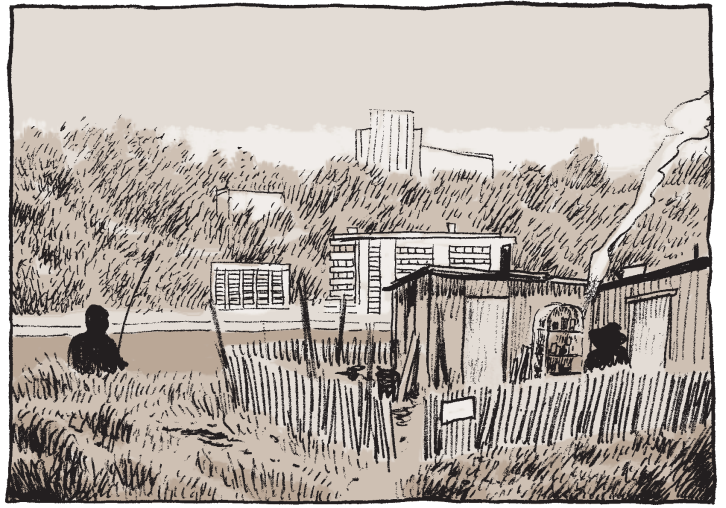
Castaways of the banks, the homeless have staked out a small patch of urban beach with nary a backward glance.



Not a care for the decadence all around them.



After all, maybe they've found their little patch of paradise right here...



During the half-hour I stand watching, I notice an especially crude hand-painted sign.



YOU LOOKIN' FOR SOMETHIN'?



WOULDN'T MIND A LITTLE DRINK.

I SEE YOU'VE A BAR THERE, SO...

OH, THAT.

IT'S NOT REALLY A BAR. I MEAN, SOMETIMES, SURE, BUT...



WHY'D YOU PUT UP A SIGN, THEN?



IT WAS A JOKE, AT FIRST. JUST FOR US FOLKS. FOR A LAUGH.

THERE WAS NO ONE ELSE AROUND, SEE? THEN ALL THOSE GIRLS SHOWED UP, AND THEY THOUGHT IT WAS A REAL BAR TOO, SO SOMETIMES WE'D GIVE 'EM A DRINK OR TWO.

THEY'VE GOT ONE HELL OF A JOB, AFTER ALL.



OH, I SEE.

WELL, THAT'S VERY NICE OF YOU.

SAY, YOU COULDN'T SPARE A DROP FOR ME, COULD YOU?

NOW, A MAN CAN'T SAY NO TO THAT.

HOW'S A BIT OF PASTIS?

BAR  
PONCH  
BIERRE

SURE IS THIRSTY OUT!



COME ON IN.

GREAT!

That's how I got myself invited to skid row.