

We was girls  
together

A comic by Trần Châu Hà

## Content Warnings

This comic includes mentions of sexual violence, chronic illness, death, incarceration, and deportation.

We was girls  
together

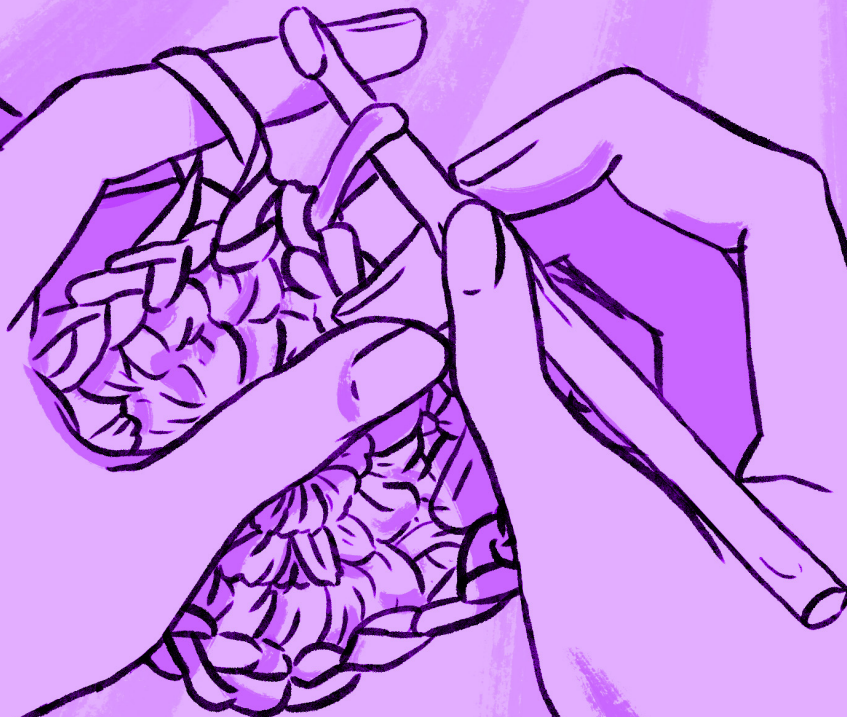
A comic by Trần Châu Hà

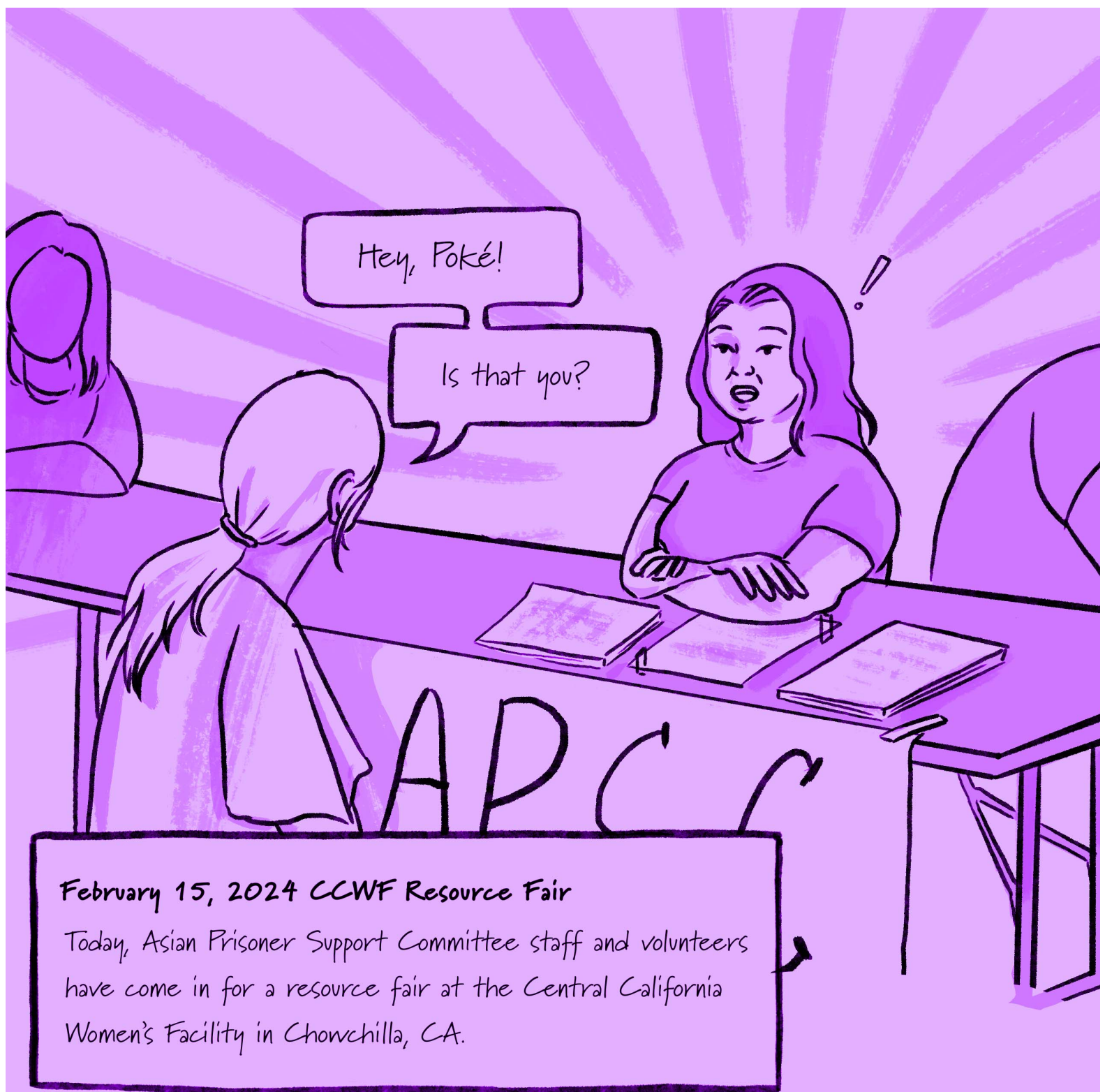
We are not born women of color.  
We become women of color..

We would have to unlearn an  
impulse that allows mythologies  
about each other to replace  
knowing about one another.

We cannot afford to cease  
yearning for each other's  
company.

M. Jacqui Alexander,  
*Pedagogies of Crossing:  
Mediations on Feminism,  
Sexual Politics, Memory,  
and the Sacred*





**February 15, 2024 CCWF Resource Fair**

Today, Asian Prisoner Support Committee staff and volunteers have come in for a resource fair at the Central California Women's Facility in Chowchilla, CA.

But for Maria, it's a bit of a homecoming. Prior to being one of APSC's reentry coordinators, Maria spent 14 years in CCWF.



But, her story begins not with her conviction, but with her time in the Philippines. Maria was born in Manila, Philippines in 1979.

The eldest of 4 siblings, Maria felt an immense responsibility to her family, especially after her younger sister, Cecile, started getting sick.



Watching her sister become more and more frail, Maria recalls how difficult this time was: not only did her family not know what was causing her sister's rapid decline, but the financial strain of repeatedly visiting doctors with no answers was significant.




In the backdrop of the unraveling tapestry of her home life, the Philippines went through a period of sociopolitical unrest. Maria was born during the Ferdinand Marcos regime, during the period of martial law (1972 - 1986).

Supported by the United States in response to the rise of the Communist party in the Philippines, Marcos enacted incredible state violence to plunder the country's resources, increase national debt, enrich his family with public resources, and heighten class inequality.

The country's economy declined under Marcos, since stabilizing after World War II, leading many people to look for work overseas.






In 1995, Maria's sister passed away from childhood leukemia, leaving Maria and her family with incredible grief and financial debt.

Years prior, Maria's parents put all their attention on Cecile, leaving Maria to fend for herself. While she understood the duress her family, especially her parents, were under, Maria couldn't help but feel abandoned. As a result, Maria grew up early, feeling the immense responsibility to provide for her family once she completed her education.

In Tagalog, **utang na loob** loosely translates to "internal indebtedness", a feeling of paying your family back for the sacrifices they've made to raise you.






Two years later, Maria would graduate from high school, and go on to complete her degree in Business Management from De Salle University.

In June of 2001, Maria immigrated to the United States. Maria's cousin's boss owned a chain of stores and was going to sponsor her, but eligibility requirements shifted in response to anti-immigrant sentiment post-9/11, making her ineligible.

She had 6 months left on her tourist visa, and after a series of fraudulent immigration consultations, her options dwindled to none.

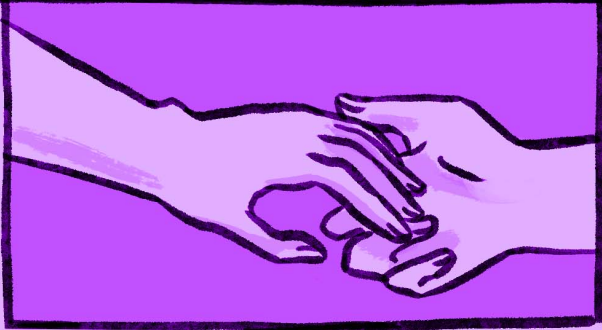
She desperately wanted comfort from her parents...



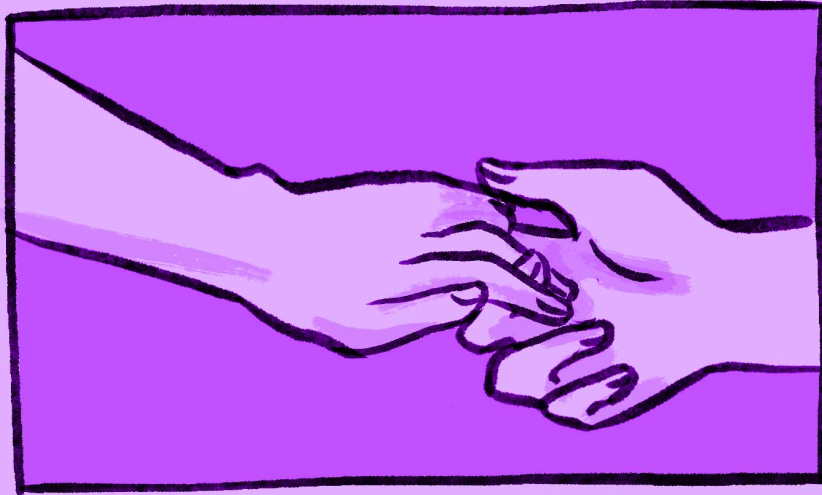
Mom? Are you there?

but in the aftermath of her sister's passing and Maria's decision to leave put a wedge between herself and them that was far too large to overcome.

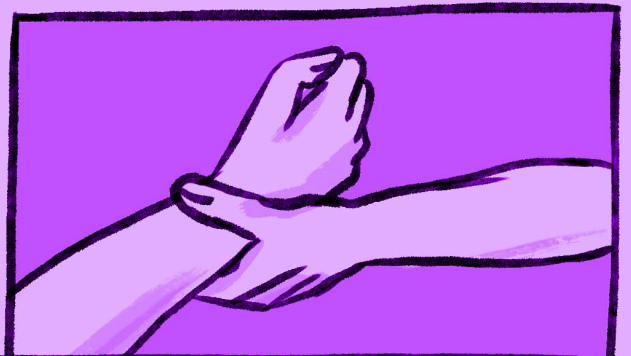
Maria was in an incredibly dark place, one that she struggled to pull herself out of. All she wanted was care and community, that her parents did not have capacity to provide.



But Marcus did. Marcus gave me time and attention and everything I wanted (while ignoring all the red flags). Maria says, "For the first time in my life, I felt like somebody actually cared about me".



But upon their first meeting, an inconceivable act of violence happened.



After the assault, Maria fell pregnant. She saw her rape as her fault, internalizing the trauma and seeing it as a failure on her part.

What are you supposed to do with darkness, if not to drown in it? When Maria's substance abuse issues became untenable, she found herself in jail, where her younger sister found her.

This was her hail mary, a wake up call to reach out to her mom with the simple request to see her. Maria did not have the language to articulate what she needed with her mom. So when her mother refused, Maria took that as a signal that her mom had not cared, that no one did.

In 2003, Maria was arrested and then sentenced to 25 years to life in federal prison. Her conviction: the death of her newborn child because of her addiction.



CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS AND REHABILITATION  
CENTRAL CALIFORNIA WOMENS FACILITY

23370 RD. 22

A

Maria entered CCWF a hardened person, unable to make sense of her trauma, her anger, or handle her addiction.



That's where Maria met Granny. Granny held Maria, and all hurt and anger like a child, moving her towards being a kinder, and softer person.

"That's the connection I needed," Maria recalls.



With the passage of AB109, Maria's world opened up even further as more prison programming began.

In programming centered around survivors of sexual and domestic violence, Maria met Ny Nourn.

Ny was too facing deportation to Cambodia at the time, punished for her abuser's actions.



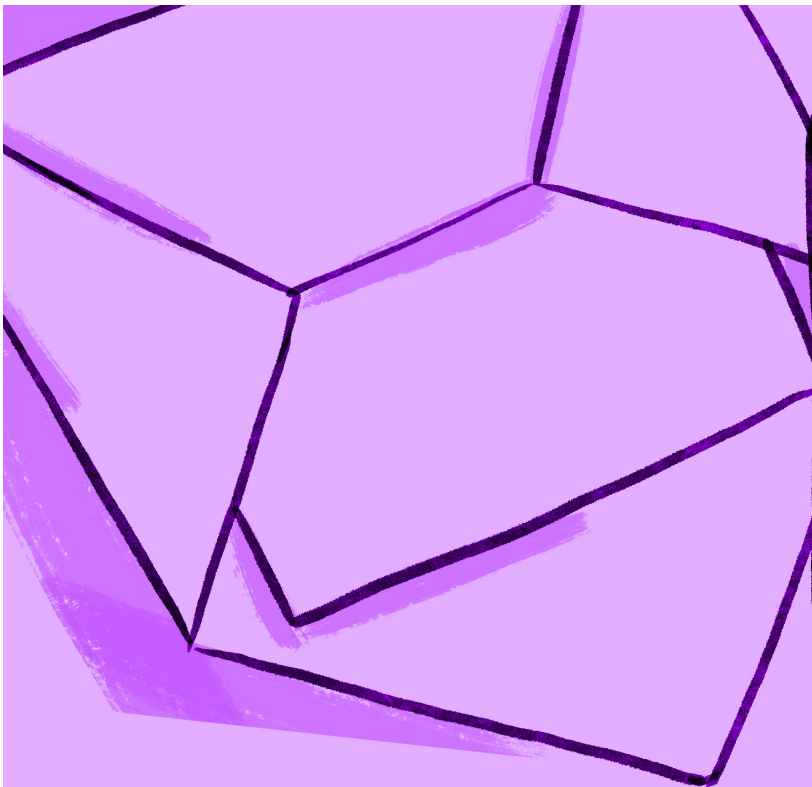
Maria really began to understand how she did not make an individual bad choice, but rather was informed by a system of violence that other survivors also experienced.



Later on, Maria would meet Sheila, who also was facing deportation to the Philippines.



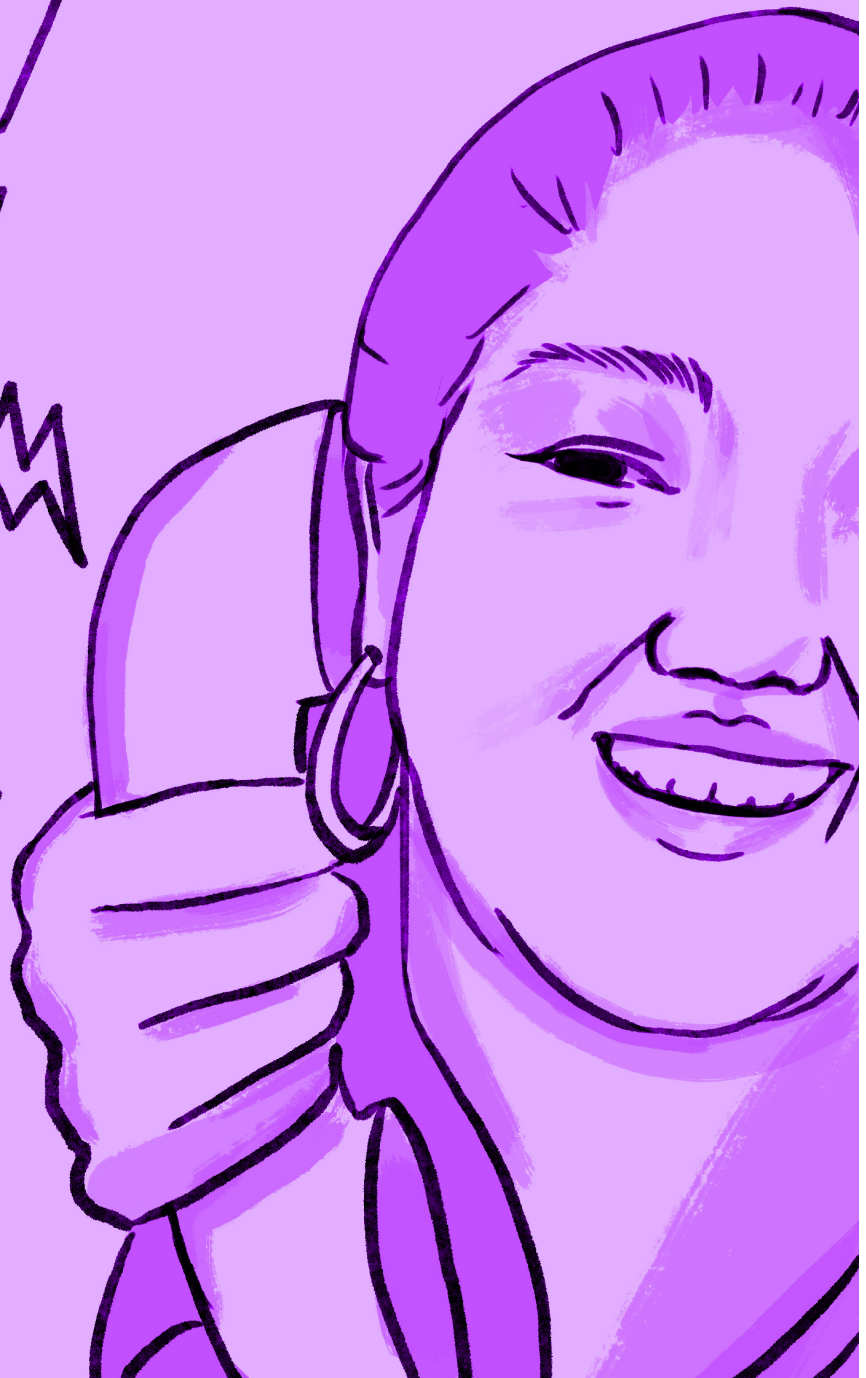
As Maria began to make sense of her life prior, she grew into the role of a mentor, much like Granny had been for her before. She helped facilitate Helping Others with Life Skills, also known as HOWL, where she met Ursula, another survivor facing deportation to Mexico.



In 2013, Maria wrote to her parents ever since she was in prison (not expecting a response). With the encouragement of her friends, Maria made a 3 way call in prison to speak to her mom and dad.



You know I love you, right?

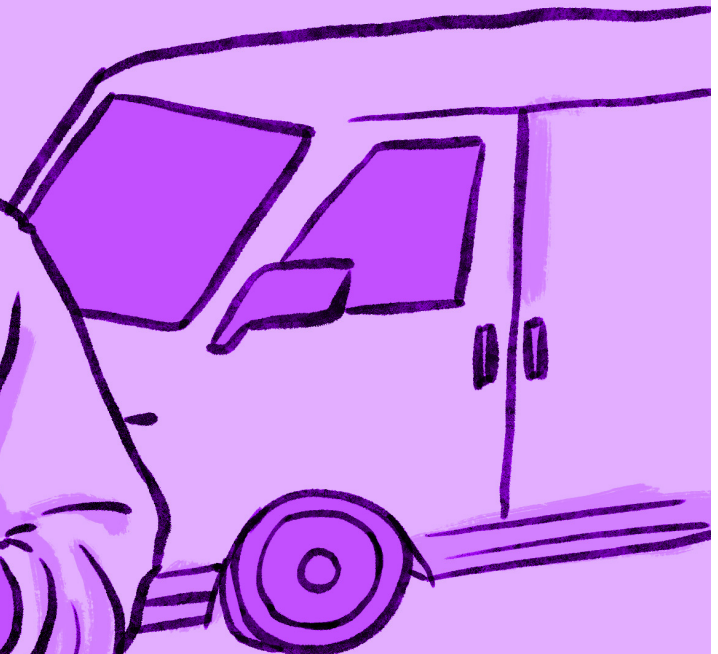


In 2019, after 14 years of incarceration, Maria was granted parole.

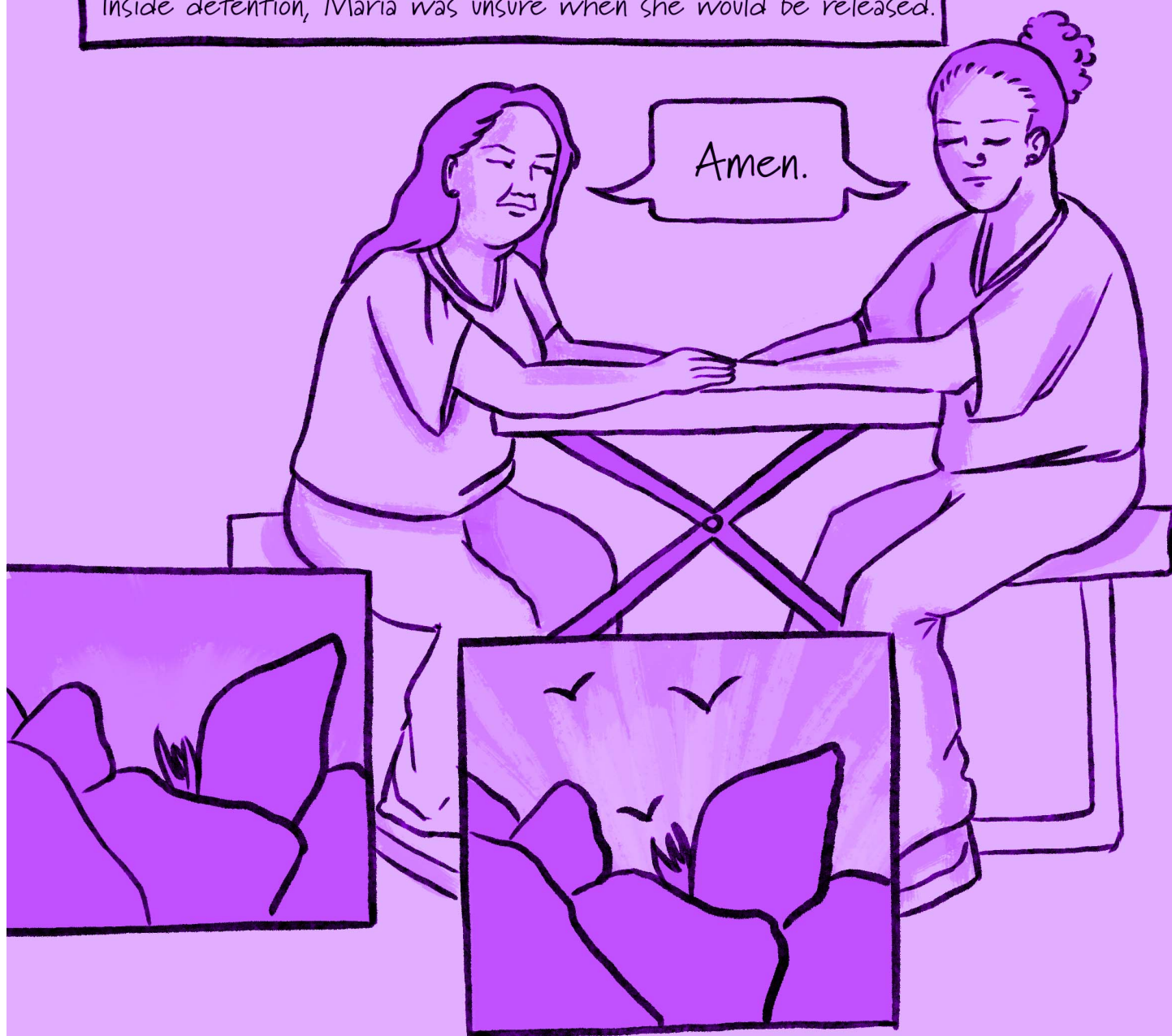
She was ready to go home, start her life, free of abuse, free of addiction, surrounded by people who loved her, with a new found sense of purpose fostered by the relationships she had made with other women in prison.

But when Maria was released, she was met with a white van.

POLICE  
ICE



Inside detention, Maria was unsure when she would be released.



These places are meant to isolate us from one another, but Maria knew better than to sit with herself, her grief, her uncertainty. She sought solace in others. She asked for help from her friend Lulu, facing deportation to Tonga.

11 months after her transfer, Maria was released from detention.



Today, Maria has continued to expand her community, working for the Asian Prisoner Support Committee, where she helps people who share her life experiences.

But despite all of this, Maria still faces deportation to the Philippines. At any moment, ICE can tear Maria away from her communities, the relationships that saved her.



APSC

Maria says, "I'm still not sure what's going to happen, I have a court date and I don't know what the outcome of the hearing is"

But in the uncertainty, one thing is clear to me: Maria is an incredible person, who has built many beautiful friendships with survivors inside.

Maria and these women, teach me what feminist networks of care can do: if we want to free everyone, we absolutely need to know and love one another.

Only then, can we see a world more beautiful, patient, and kind.



# Acknowledgements

I stole many hours away from my day job to make this comic happen. In between mobilizing for Palestine (it's Free Palestine 'til its backwards) and all the personal transitions and grief I was moving through, I wasn't confident that this was going to happen to be honest. I have many people to thank for the materialization of this project (and if I missed you in these acknowledgements, let me know because I definitely owe you a delicious meal and a hundred apologies).

First of all, thank you to Toni Morrison for writing *Sula*, from which the title of that comic pulls from. I was deeply inspired by the richness of female friendship in that novel, that of which reminds me of my own friendships in community.

Thank you to Josh Acosta for being an incredible scholar who helped me contextualize Maria's life. You are a genius from SouthBay LA; all my homies love SouthBay LA! Thank you to Victoria Hvyuh, my best friend/wife and another genius in my life who helped me think through the heart of this piece, as well sent me many wonderful things to read.

Thank you to my wonderful partner, Vincent Chang, and my mom, My Chau Loi for feeding and taking care of me during the duration of this project. I really thought it was over when I got that cold from hell and was in the last week of exhibition prep, but y'all really got me through it. I love you both deeply.

Thank you to Ny Nourn for giving me this opportunity and showing me concretely what it means to be an abolition feminist. You are an inspiration and I'm honored to be your friend and in community. Lastly, thank you to Maria Legarda. Thank you for your friendship, your kindness, your generosity, and all you do for all the women in our community impacted by gendered violence. I'm honored to tell your story. You are one in a million, Maria, and I'm endlessly grateful that the ancestors brought us together in the Bay Area.

created in May 2024  
with the Asian Prisoner  
Support Committee