



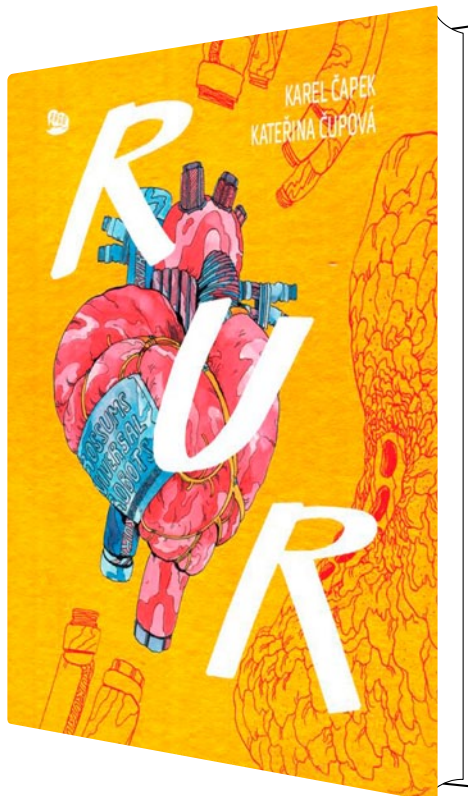
CZECHIA GOLDEN RIBBON AWARD 2021

★ **Best Comic Book of the Year**



R. U. R.

Kateřina Čupová (script and art)



A timeless commentary on the nature of human existence – and our future

The R.U.R. Factory, far from humanity on its own island, has produced the perfect product: Robots! Devoid of pain, love, and all human emotion, never tiring, never bored, unfazed by death they are the ideal worker for modern-day society!

All of this is about to change, and only Helena can see it. She is condemned to remain alone in her dread, as all of society embraces the robots and the automations' presence increases. However, there has been a glitch in the programming. All of our assumptions may have been wrong. The robots may indeed feel pain. They may harbor passions and hatred, and the Robot Revolution may be near!

As retold and drawn by the young, award-winning Czech graphic novelist, Kateřina Čupová, this seminal dystopian work by Karel Čapek makes the reader question the notions of work and progress and humanity itself. Through Čupová's deft hand, *R.U.R.* is a sight to behold.

"The 1920s Czech sci-fi theater piece that coined the term "robot" and set the bones of the many plots of "replicants" to come in modern literature gets transformed into a graphic novel, where fluid watercolors contrast with the heady philosophical dialogue and stark moral message. In a kind of anti-Blade Runner style, here the light and soft colors of the world and character portraits actively defy

the darkness of humanity's drive to oppression that is so profoundly depicted in these pages."

— Meg Lemke, comics and graphic novels reviews editor, *Publishers Weekly*

Kateřina Čupová is a Czech animator and comic book artist and a graduate from the renowned

Department of Animation at the Tomáš Baťa University in Zlín. Many of her works have been published in magazines and comic anthologies. Her webcomic, *The Author's Apprentice*, was published as a graphic novel following a successful Kickstarter campaign. In 2022, she won the Muriel Award for Best Children's Comic for her adaptation of *Hrnečku vař!* and for Best Short Comic for *The Horseshoe Meets Haha-Bimbi*. Previously, she was also nominated for her comic book adaptation of Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.*



■ November 2020 ■ 22x28,5 cm ■ 256 pages

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Meet Karel Čapek!

Introduction Mark Bould

Meet Karel Čapek! A journalist who hung out with presidents (well, with Tomáš Masaryk, the first president of the First Czechoslovak Republic). The author of a 1924 essay called “Why I am not a Communist” who became such a staunch anti-fascist that, in the run-up to the Nazi invasion, the Gestapo declared him their “public enemy number two” (he refused to flee but then died of pneumonia in 1938 just before they arrived). A writer whose work was banned in his own country when it was occupied by Nazis (obvs) and again, after 1948, when it was ruled by the Soviet-dominated Communist Party. A seven times Nobel nominated giant of Czechoslovakian literature who is now mostly remembered for coining the word ‘robot’. Now, of course, there were robots before Čapek. According to the Iliad, Hephaestus, blacksmith to the gods, fashioned mobile tripod servants, mechanical handmaidens, golden guard dogs—and guard lions! Herman Melville’s “The Bell-Tower” (1855), Villiers de l’Isle Adam’s *The Future Eve* (1886), Jerome K. Jerome’s “The Dancing Partner” (1893), and Ambrose Bierce’s “Moxon’s Master” (1899) unleashed humanoid automata. Edward Bellamy’s *Erewhon* (1872) imagined machines evolving into sentient beings. Edward Ellis and Luis Senarens presented dime novel readers with, respectively, a *Steam Man of the Prairies* (1868) and *Frank Reade and His Electric Man* (1885). In the slapstick short, *A Clever Dummy* (1917), cross-eyed comedian Ben Turpin swapped places with his clockwork mannequin double, and in the movie serial, *The Master Mystery* (1918), escapologist Harry Houdini fought a mechanical man. But all these machines only became robots retrospectively—after the massive success of Čapek’s *RUR: Rossum’s Universal Robots* introduced the word to the world. First staged by Prague’s National Theatre in 1921, the play was swiftly translated into around 30 languages, becoming a hit on Broadway in 1922 and in the West End the following year. And on 11 February 1938, a live 25-minute BBC adaptation of this by-then famous play was the first science fiction ever broadcast on television.

But nowadays *RUR* is rarely performed, and surprisingly it never became a film (the BBC adapted it again in 1948, as did Hungarian television in 1976). So it is no longer well known

other than for giving us that word. Which was not actually coined by Karel Čapek. He had gotten as far as calling his creatures *laboři* (from the Latin for work) before turning, disgruntled, to his brother Josef for help. (They were very close: they worked together on The National Newspaper, quit it together, and went instead to work together for The People's Paper.) Josef suggested *roboti* from the Czech *robota*, which means serf labor or *corvée* labor—that is, forced, unpaid labor—and connotes the soul-destroying drudgery of hard physical work. Which makes it kind of perfect. Even as, with horrific irony, it anticipates Josef's 1945 death in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

Karel Čapek may well have denied being a communist, but *R.U.R.* offers a specifically Marxist analysis of capitalism (as do his 1908 short story 'System' (1908) and 1936 masterpiece, the anti-colonialist novel *War with the Newts* (1936)). No matter how nice your boss might be, capital itself will always try to drive down production costs so as to maximize "surplus value" or profit. He might throw you a pizza party to celebrate a successful year (or when he's trying to convince you not to unionize), but capital has absolutely no interest in or concern for you as a human being. All it wants is your "labour power"—it needs you to turn up day after day, year after year, to do your specific bit— and will do everything to reduce you to just that. As Čapek's *Domin* explains, "To go for a walk, or to play the violin. To feel joy. All of that is useless, if you are to compute, weave, work." So capital extends the work day or intensifies the rate at which you must work. It fragments labor into simple repetitive tasks, severs any link between increased productivity and reward, depresses wages, and prefers to pay you piece rate or commission or with "experience." It monitors your keystrokes or your route through the fulfillment center warehouse and docks your pay for going to the toilet or taking a moment's respite. It does not cover your healthcare or education, even though it demands healthy, educated workers. It minimizes paid leave, expects overtime (preferably unpaid) and constant availability, but would rather you were part-time or self-employed. It does not pay for the time it takes you to travel to and from work or for the electricity you use at home to do your job. It reaches its claws into all aspects of your life outside of the workplace. It hates unions and collective bargaining and labor laws and environmental protections, and constantly threatens to—and often does—relocate to places where such things are weaker (preferably non-existent). Rossum's Universal Robots are capital's dream version of you. And if it can't reduce you to a machine, it will in a conscienceless heartbeat replace you with one. From the steam loom to generative AI, capital does not care in the slightest for the people whose livelihoods and lifeways its innovations destroy. Whether it is Čapek's robots or climate catastrophe, capital will not relent. All that matters to it is profit, even if it means the end of the world. The Luddite

weavers who wrecked mechanical looms and burned down factories were not anti-technology. They opposed the social and economic structures which concentrated the benefits of increased productivity in the hands of a tiny, parasitic minority. There could have been plenty for all. But instead, skilled workers were thrown on the scrap heap and—because of the increased demand for cotton that followed—millions of Africans were abducted to and enslaved in the Americas, where they were reduced, as far as capitalist brutality could manage, to their raw labor power: to machines. But it need not have been like that. And, as Čapek's robot satire insists, it need not be like that. Read on.

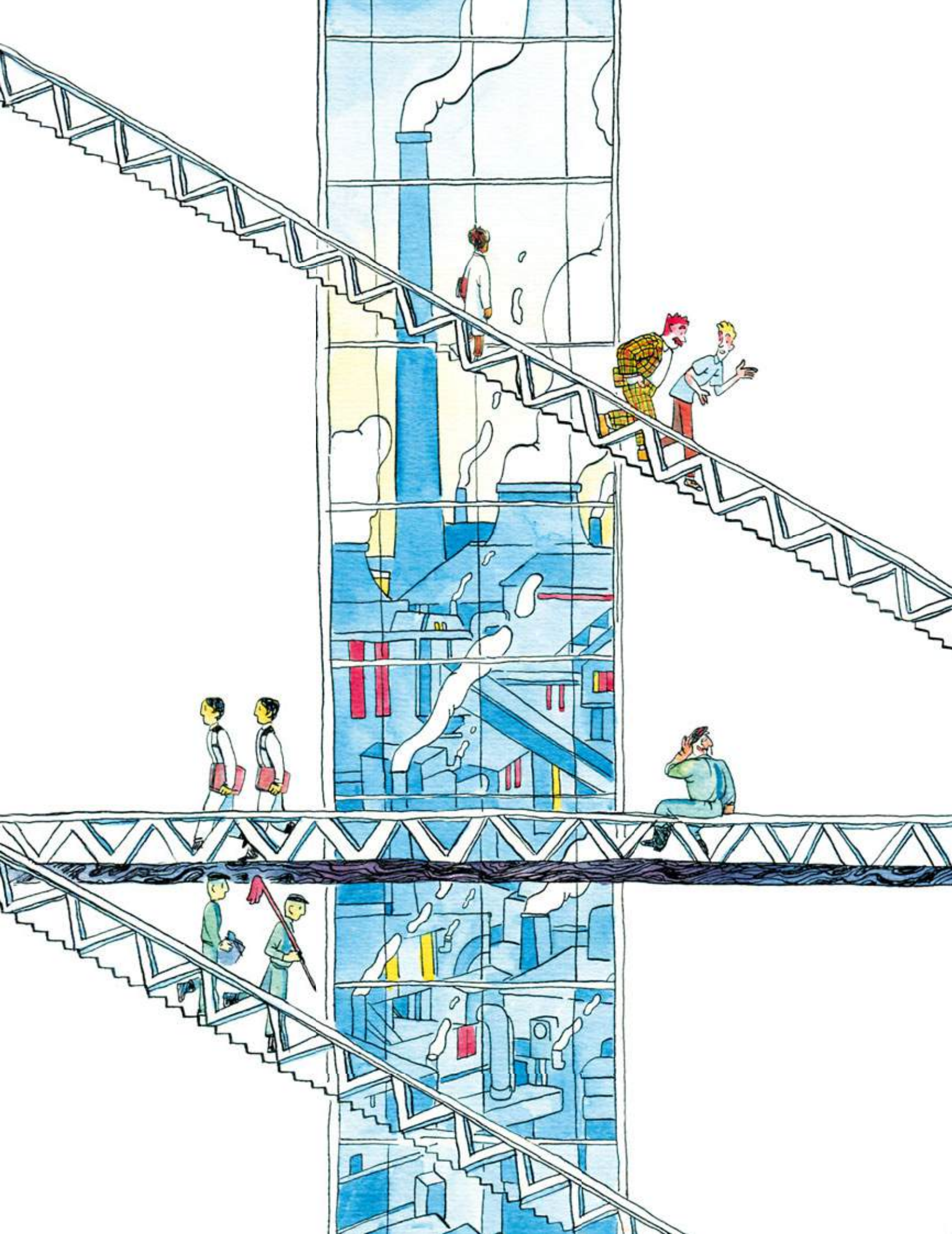
Mark Bould is Professor of Film and Literature at UWE Bristol. Founding editor of the Science Fiction Film and Television journal and the Studies in Global Science Fiction monograph series, he is a recipient of the Science Fiction Research Association's Lifetime Achievement Award and the International Association of the Fantastic in the Arts Distinguished Scholarship Award. His most recent books are *M. John Harrison: Critical Essays* (2019) and *The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate Catastrophe Culture* (2021).

RUR

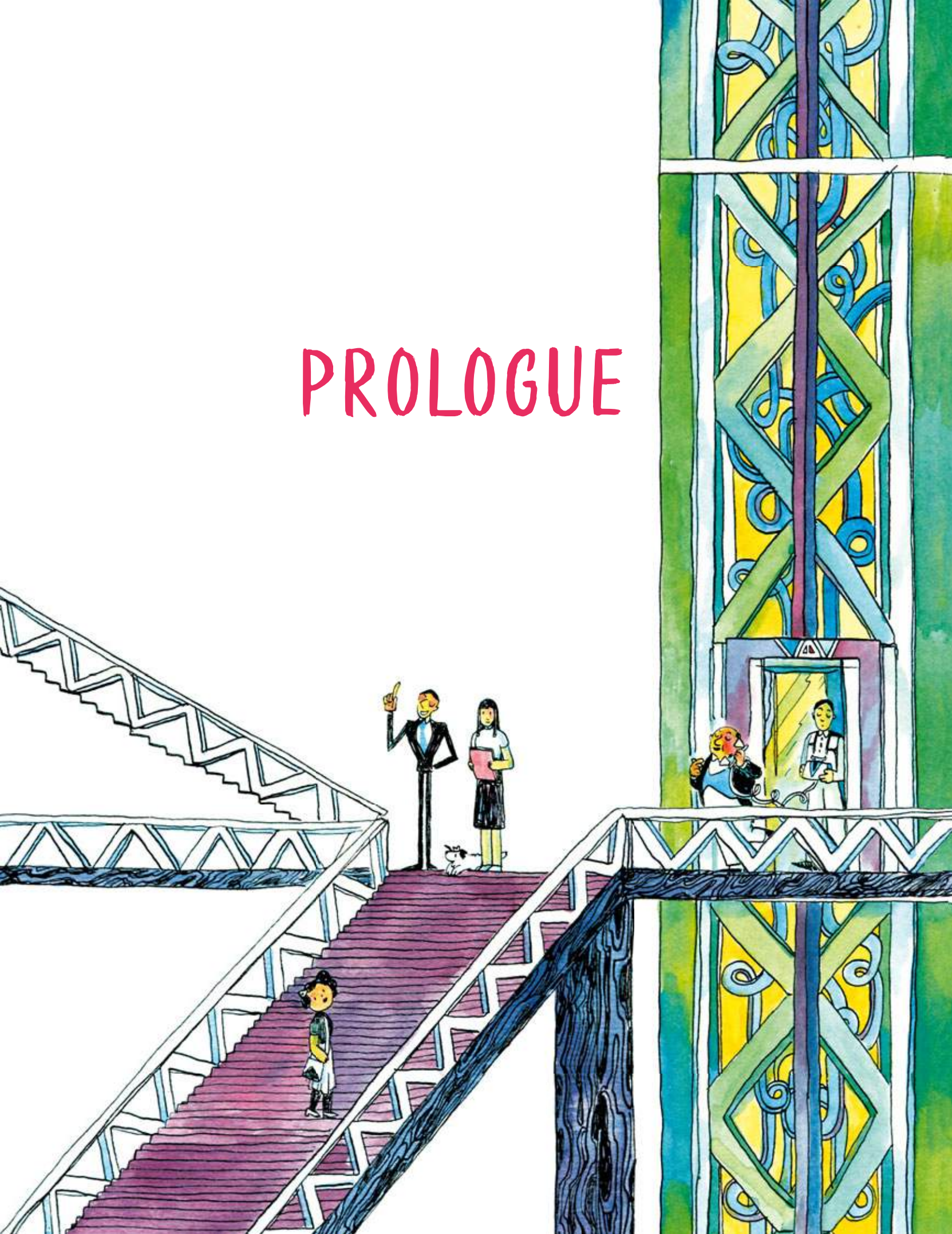
KATEŘINA ČUPOVÁ

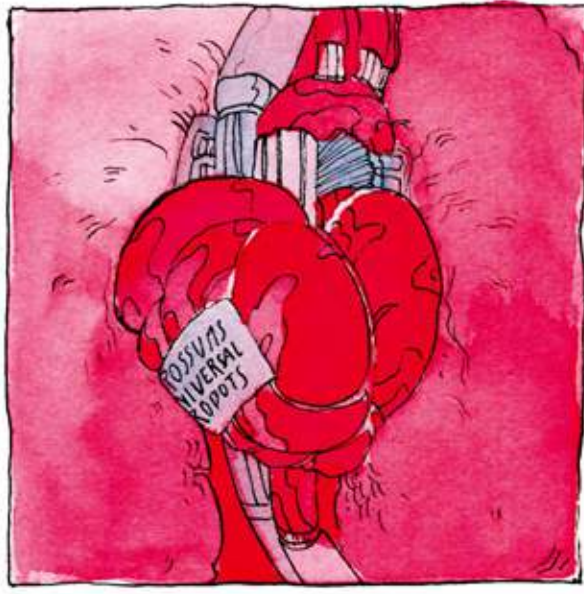
KAREL ČAPEK



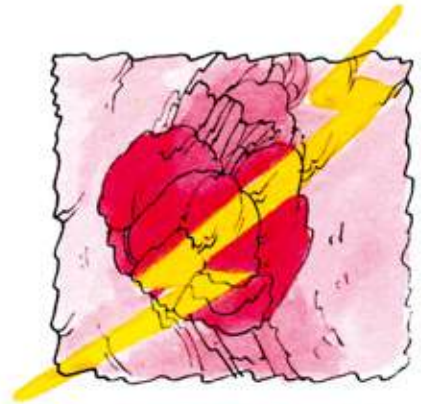
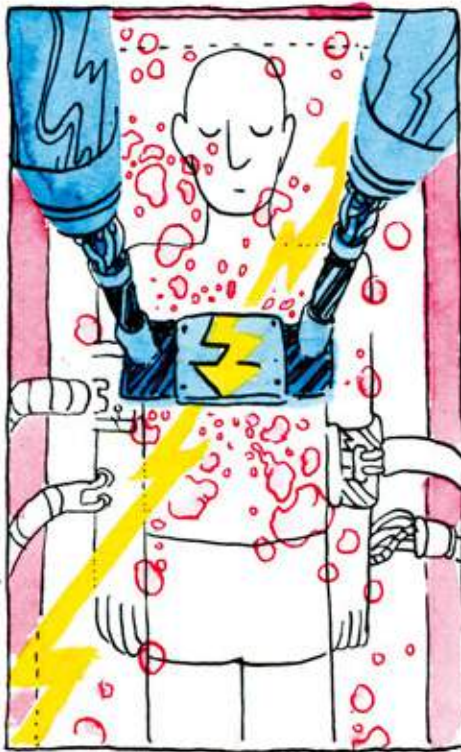


PROLOGUE

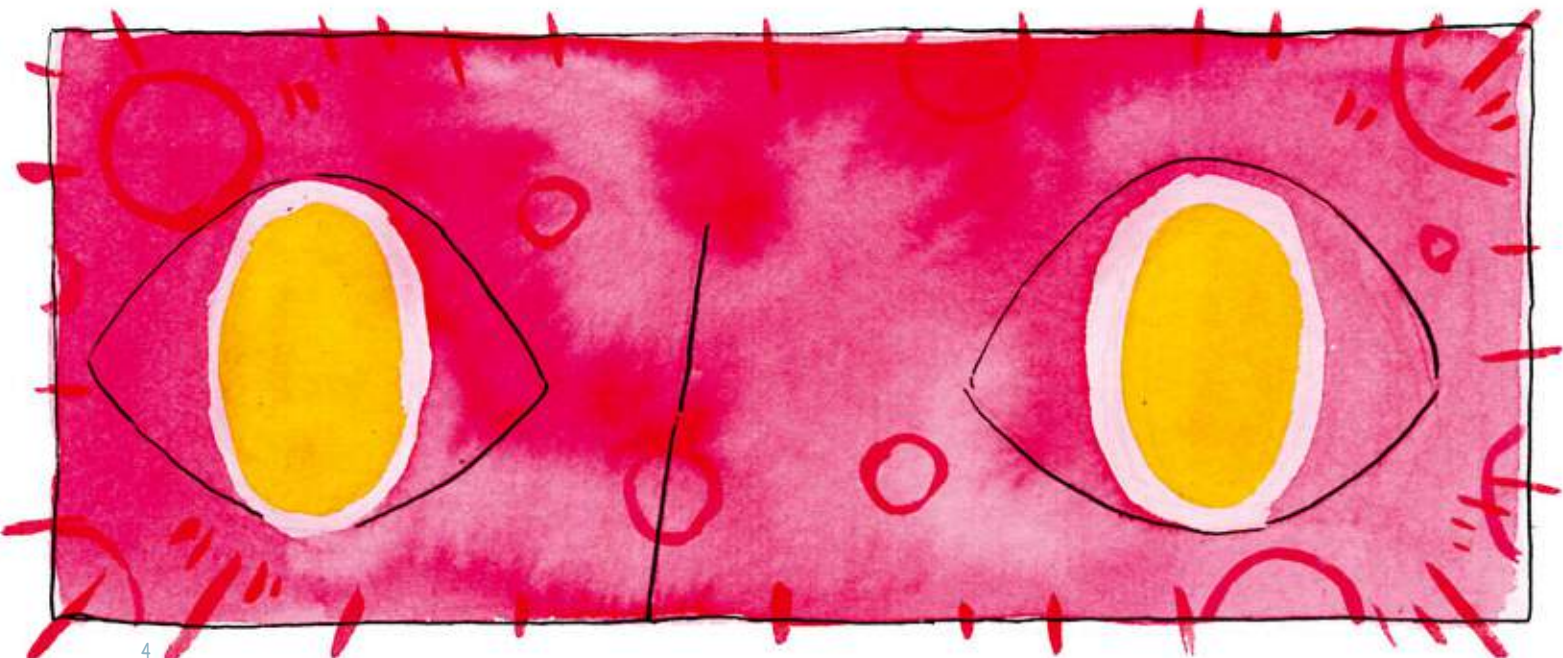


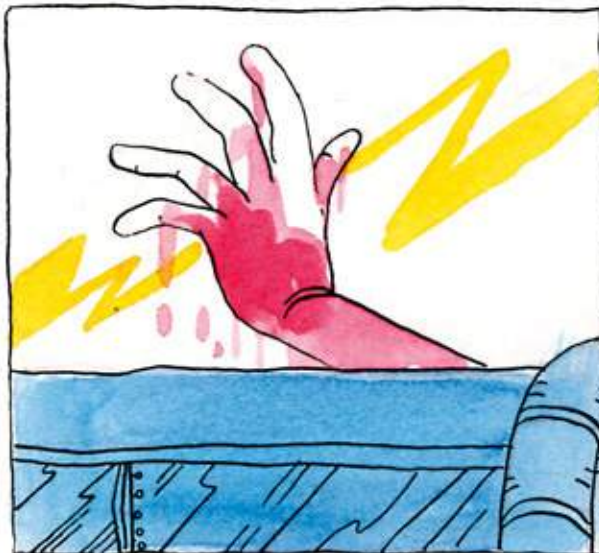
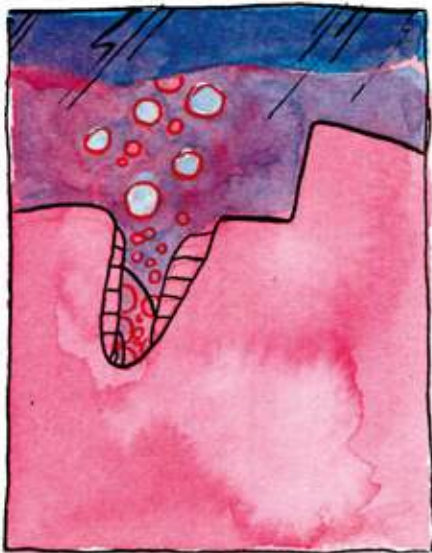


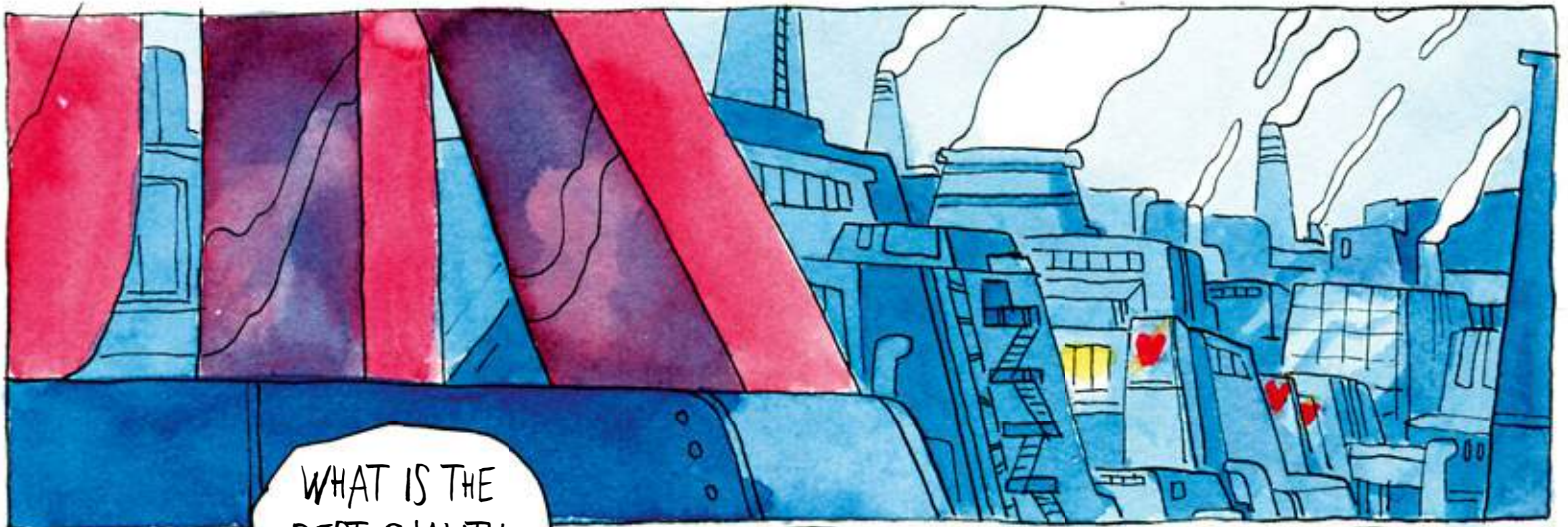
BZZT



THUMP!







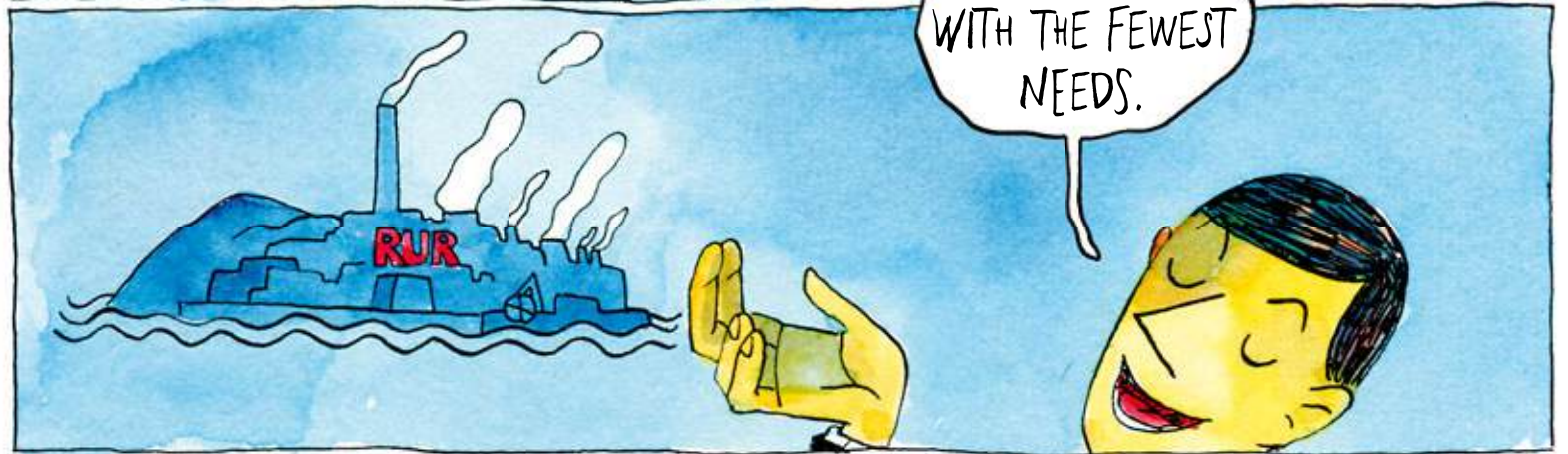
WHAT IS THE
BEST QUALITY
IN A WORKER?



DEDICATION?
HONESTY?

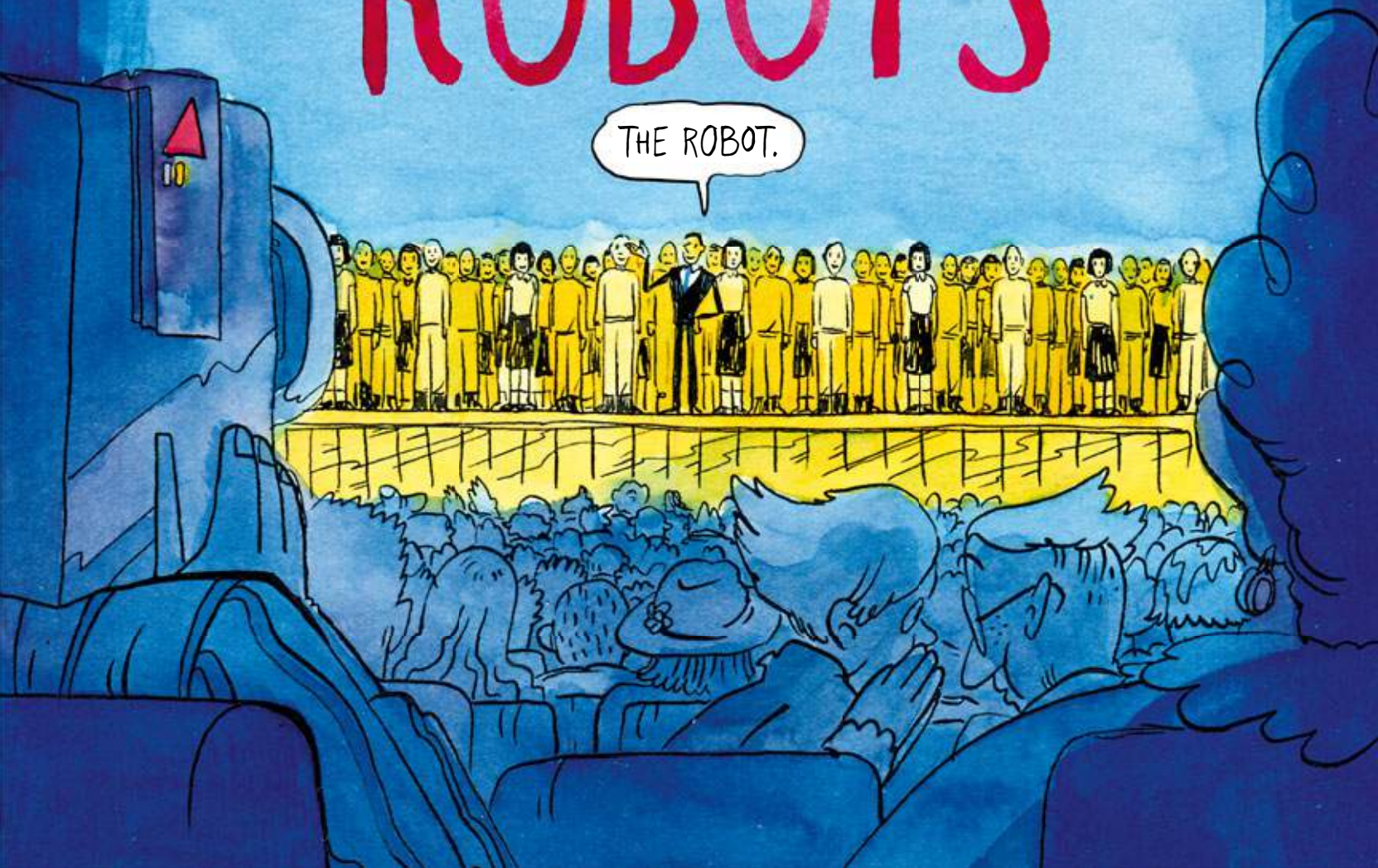
NO! THE BEST WORKER
IS THE CHEAPEST.

THE ONE
WITH THE FEWEST
NEEDS.



ROSSUM'S UNIVERSAL ROBOTS

THE ROBOT.





ROBOTS
AREN'T PEOPLE.
MECHANICALLY,
THEY ARE
SUPERIOR.

ANYTHING
NOT USED FOR
WORK WE GOT
RID OF.



THE CREATION
OF THE ENGINEER
IS MORE REFINED THAN
THE CREATION OF NATURE.



YOU SAY
HUMANS ARE
GOD'S CREATION?

ALL THE WORSE!

GOD HADN'T THE SLIGHTEST NOTION OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY.



MEMO:
HAMBURG, WE
HEREBY CONFIRM
YOUR ORDER OF
15,000 ROBOTS.



AND CABLE
LE HAVRE—

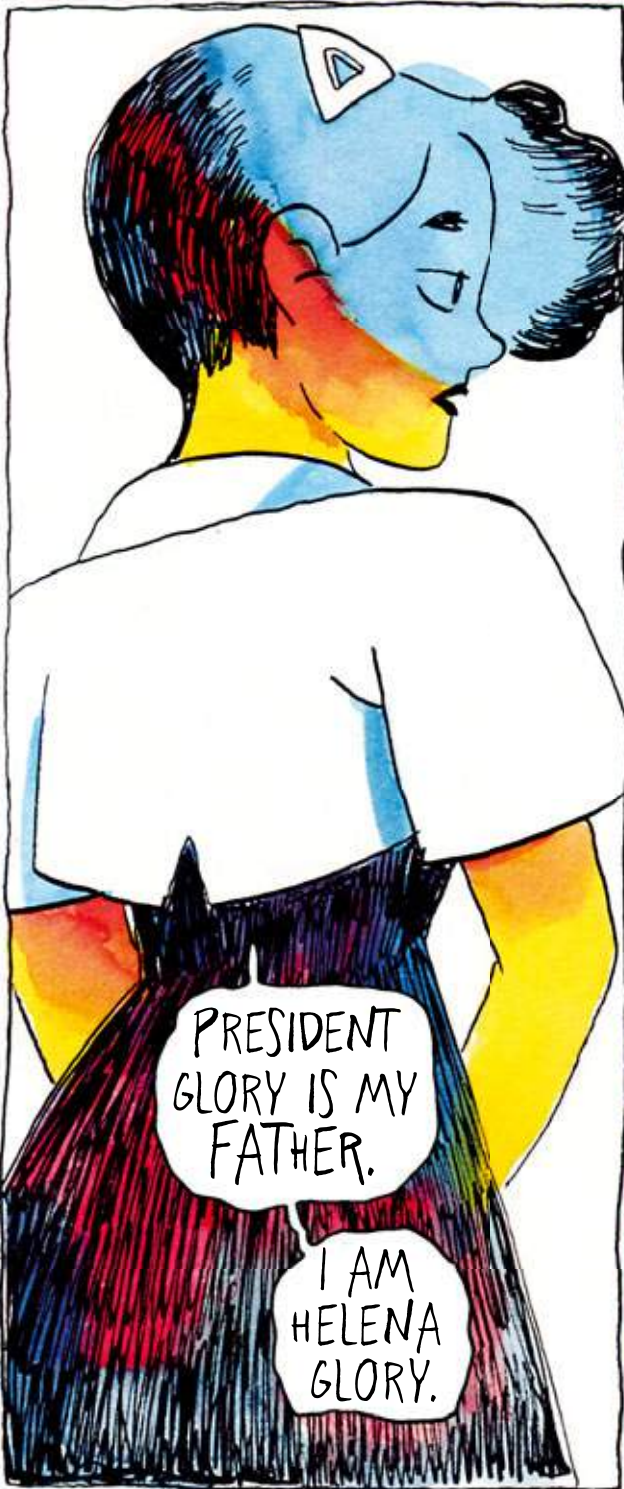
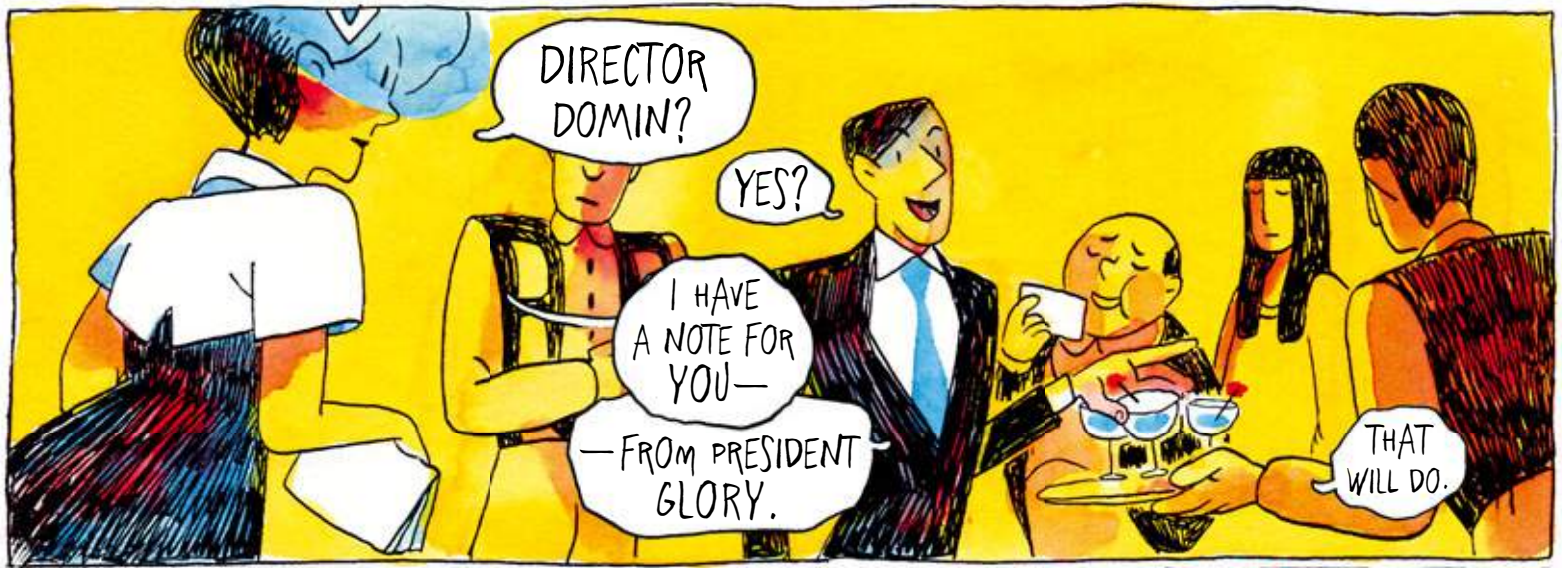


EH-HEM.



SIR,
A LADY—

PRESIDENT GLORY!
BY ALL MEANS.











HERE WE HAVE THE KNEADERS.

EACH VAT HOLDS ENOUGH TO MAKE A THOUSAND ROBOTS!

LET ME GUESS: TWENTY TWO?

TWENTY TWO WHAT?

YEARS.

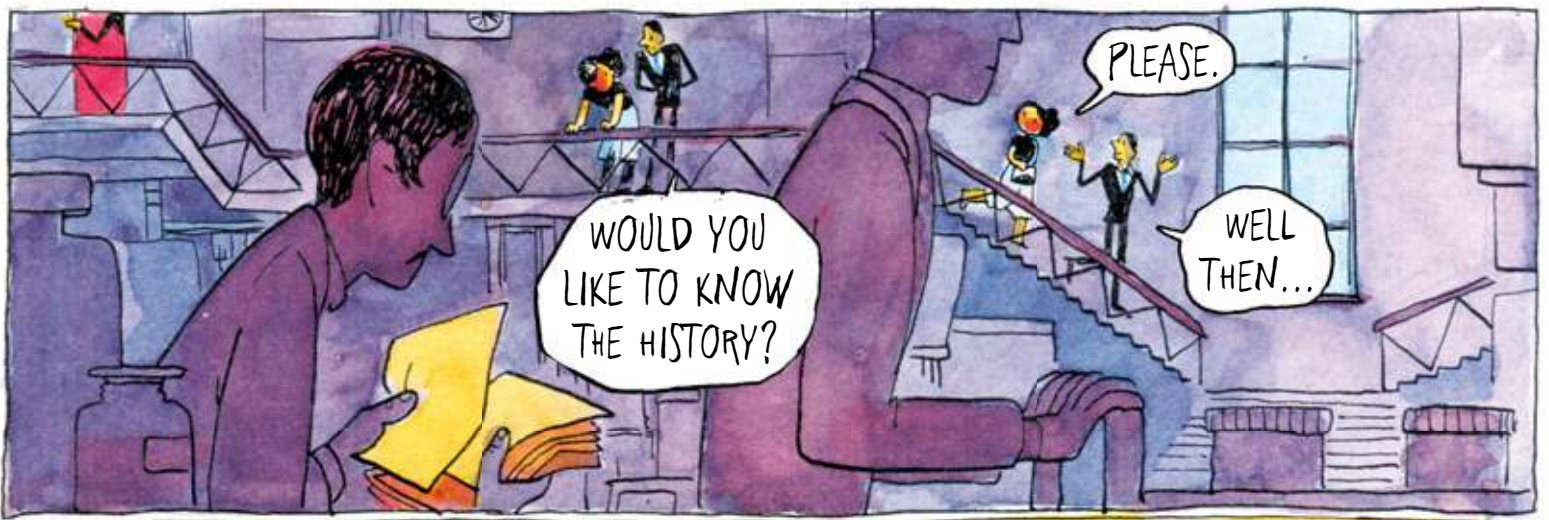
TWENTY ONE. WHY DO YOU WANT TO KNOW?



BECAUSE... IT'S JUST... I MEAN...

ON WE GO!





WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW THE HISTORY?

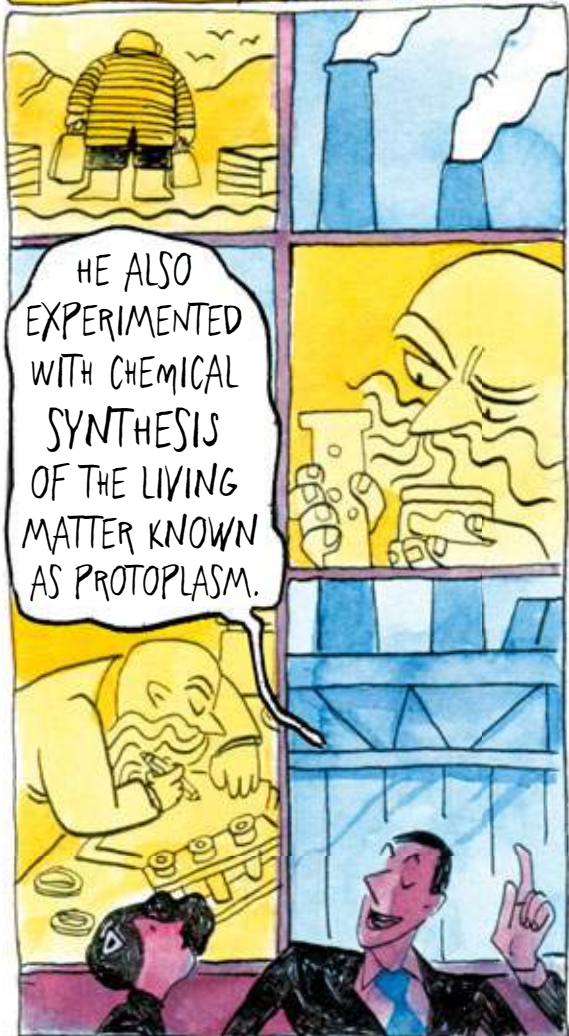
PLEASE.

WELL THEN...

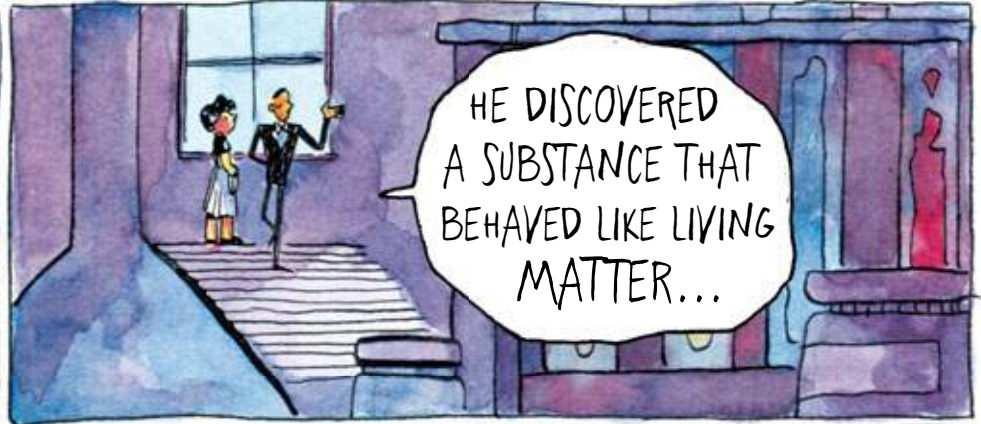


IN 1920 OLD ROSSUM MOVED TO THIS ISLAND...

... TO STUDY THE MARINE LIFE.



HE ALSO EXPERIMENTED WITH CHEMICAL SYNTHESIS OF THE LIVING MATTER KNOWN AS PROTOPLASM.



HE DISCOVERED A SUBSTANCE THAT BEHAVED LIKE LIVING MATTER...

... BUT ITS CHEMICAL MAKEUP WAS DIFFERENT!



THAT WAS 1932.

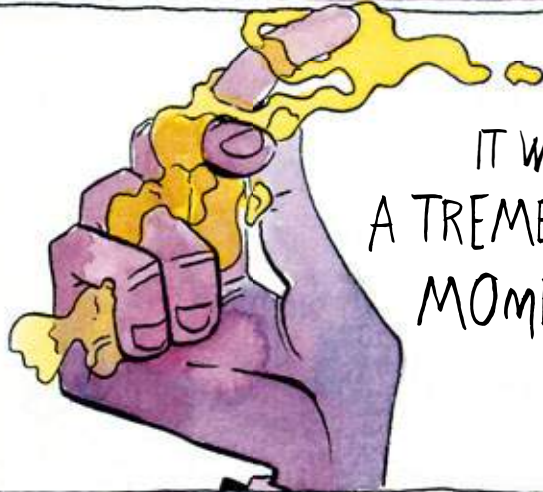
YOU KNOW THE STORY BY HEART?

YES.

AND ONE DAY
ROSSUM WROTE BENEATH
HIS FORMULAS:

$20 + 189,55$ $\frac{4}{15}$ $\frac{500}{11}$
 $\Delta \times \square$ $\nabla \times \square$ $\nabla \times \square$ $\nabla \times \square$
Nature has found one way
to organize living matter.
But there is another way
simpler, faster, more malleable
today! DISCOVERED

HE WROTE THIS NEXT
TO A BLOB OF GELATIN
THAT EVEN A DOG
WOULDN'T EAT.



IT WAS
A TREMENDOUS
MOMENT!

NOW THE QUESTION WAS
HOW TO TAKE THAT LIFE
OUT OF THE TEST TUBE.

CREATING NERVES,
ORGANS, BONES,
AND WHATNOT.

I DON'T UNDERSTAND
IT ONE BIT.

HARRY!

I'VE FINISHED MY
INSPECTION. WILL YOU
PUT THE MANUSCRIPT
IN THE SAFE?

CERTAINLY!



OLD MAN ROSSUM!

HE COULD HAVE CREATED WHATEVER HE WANTED.



WORMS A HUNDRED AND FIFTY FEET LONG!



BUT BEING THE HUMORLESS TYPE, HE DECIDED TO MAKE A MAN.



AND I CAN'T TELL THE STORY TO ANYONE?

NOT A SOUL.

PITY IT'S ALREADY IN ALL THE HISTORY BOOKS.

PITY.



BUT YOU KNOW WHAT ISN'T IN THEM?

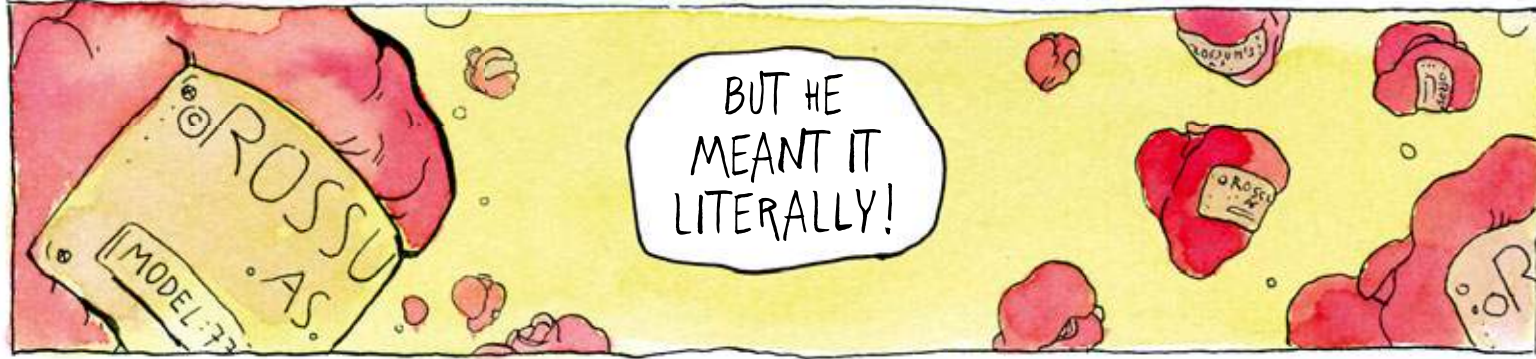
OLD MAN ROSSUM WAS STARK RAVING MAD.

HE REALLY THOUGHT HE COULD MAKE PEOPLE.



YOU DO, DON'T YOU?

IN A SENSE.



BUT HE MEANT IT LITERALLY!

HE WAS A HOPELESS
MATERIALIST
AND ATHEIST.

HE WANTED
TO REPLACE GOD
WITH SCIENCE AND CREATE
A WHOLE HUMAN
DOWN TO THE LAST
GLAND.



IT TOOK HIM
10 YEARS,
WITH DREADFUL RESULTS.
HE DIDN'T HAVE
A SPECK OF TASTE.



THEN ROSSUM'S
YOUNG NEPHEW,
AN ENGINEER,
CAME ON BOARD.

HE
SAID:



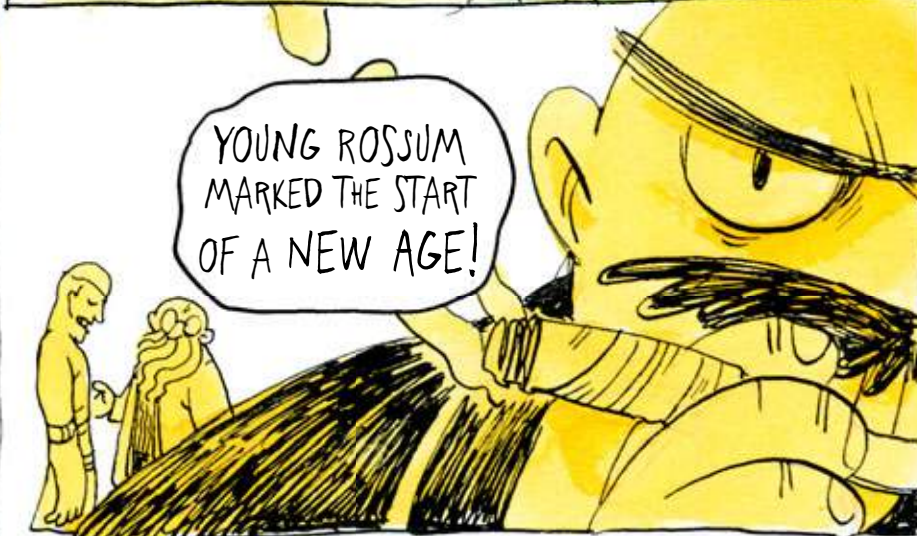
10 YEARS?
THAT'S
RIDICULOUS!

IF YOU CAN'T
DO IT FASTER
THAN NATURE, JUST
FORGET THE WHOLE
THING.



THAT'S NOT WHAT
THE HISTORY BOOKS SAY.

THOSE BOOKS ARE
NOTHING BUT
PAID ADS.



YOUNG ROSSUM
MARKED THE START
OF A NEW AGE!



ONE LOOK AT HUMAN ANATOMY AND HE KNEW: ANY DECENT ENGINEER COULD DO BETTER.

APPENDIX, TONSILS, BELLY BUTTON—ALL USELESS.



PEOPLE NEED TO DO USELESS THINGS.

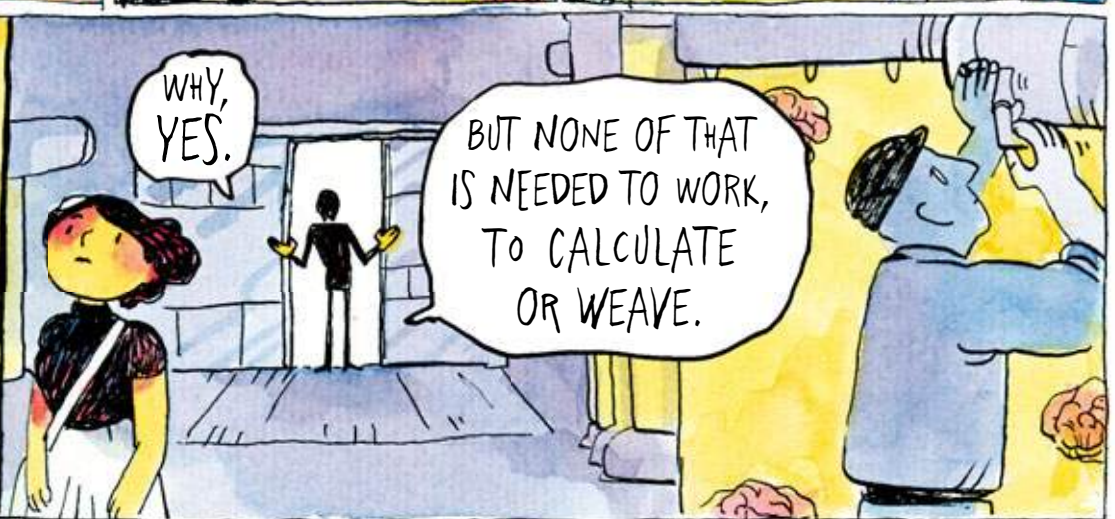
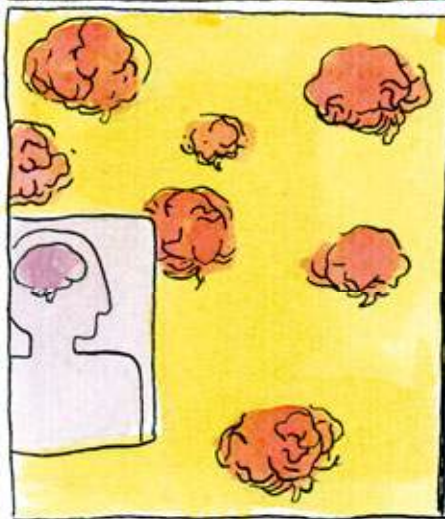


GO FOR STROLLS, PLAY VIOLIN.



EXPERIENCE JOY.

OH!





WHY, YES.

BUT NONE OF THAT IS NEEDED TO WORK, TO CALCULATE OR WEAVE.

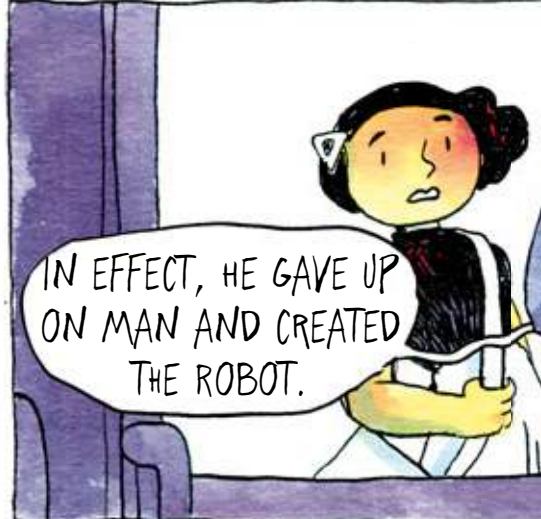
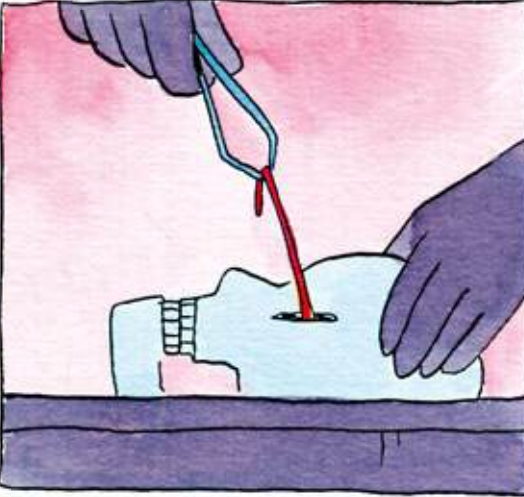


AN ENGINE DOESN'T
NEED DECORATIONS.


AND MAKING
ROBOTS IS THE SAME AS
MAKING ENGINES.



AND SO
YOUNG ROSSUM
INVENTED A WORKER
WITH AS FEW NEEDS
AS POSSIBLE.



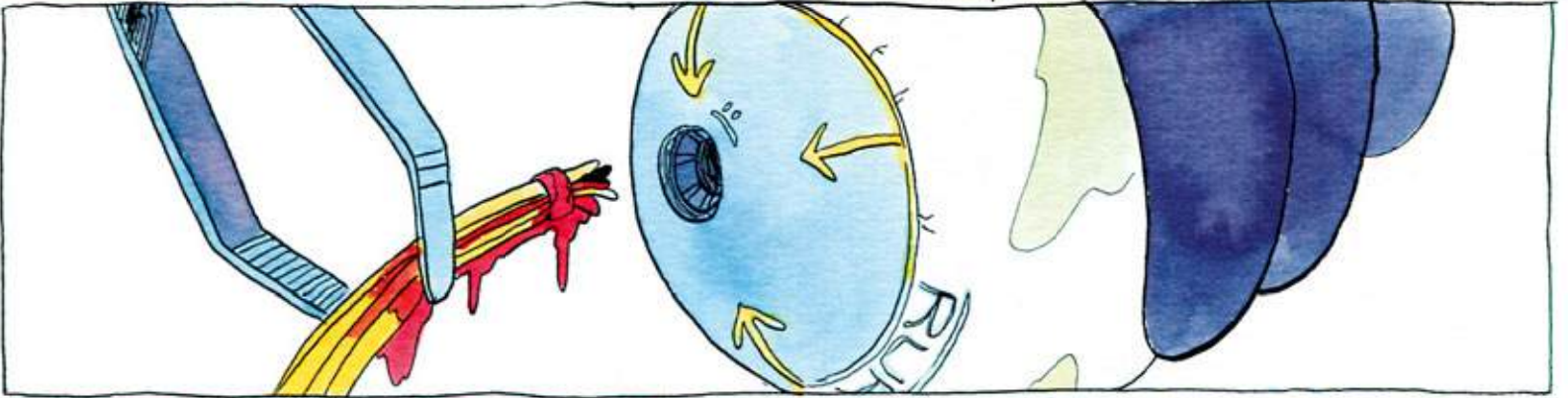
IN EFFECT, HE GAVE UP
ON MAN AND CREATED
THE ROBOT.



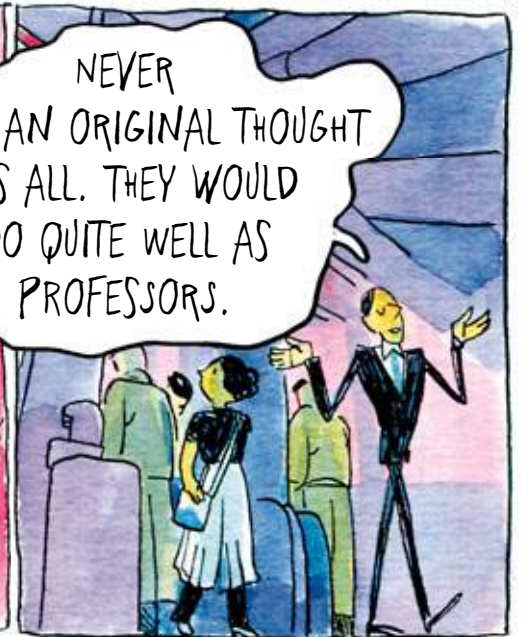
ROBOTS HAVE
ASTOUNDING INTELLIGENCE,
ASTOUNDING MEMORY.



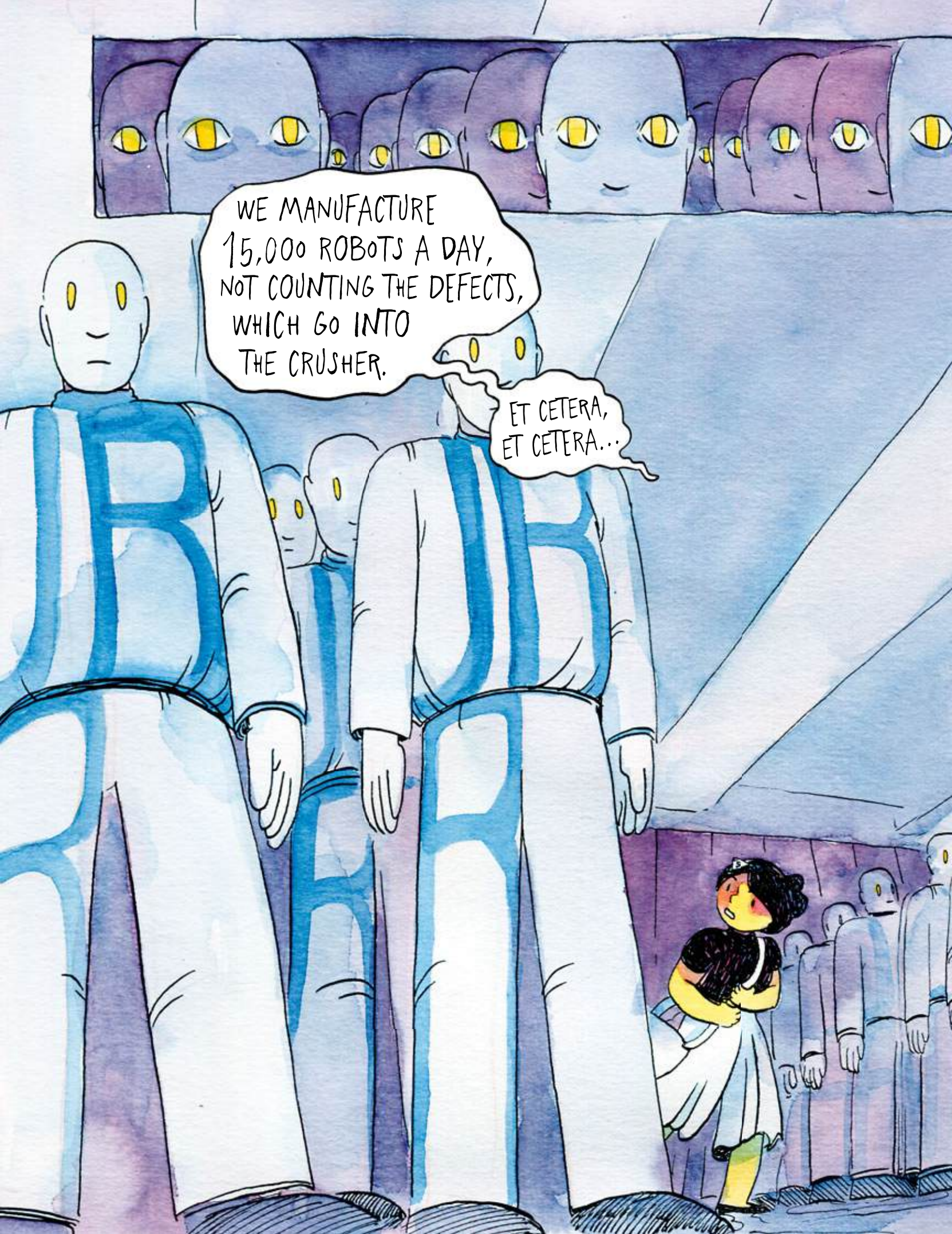
THE SIMPLEST PRODUCTION FOR THE MOST FUNCTIONAL PRODUCT.



SUPERIOR EVEN TO NATURE ITSELF.



NEVER AN ORIGINAL THOUGHT IS ALL. THEY WOULD DO QUITE WELL AS PROFESSORS.



WE MANUFACTURE
15,000 ROBOTS A DAY,
NOT COUNTING THE DEFECTS,
WHICH GO INTO
THE CRUSHER.

ET CETERA,
ET CETERA...



THE BEST ONES
LAST UP TO
TWENTY YEARS.

THEN
THEY DIE?

THEY
WEAR OUT.