



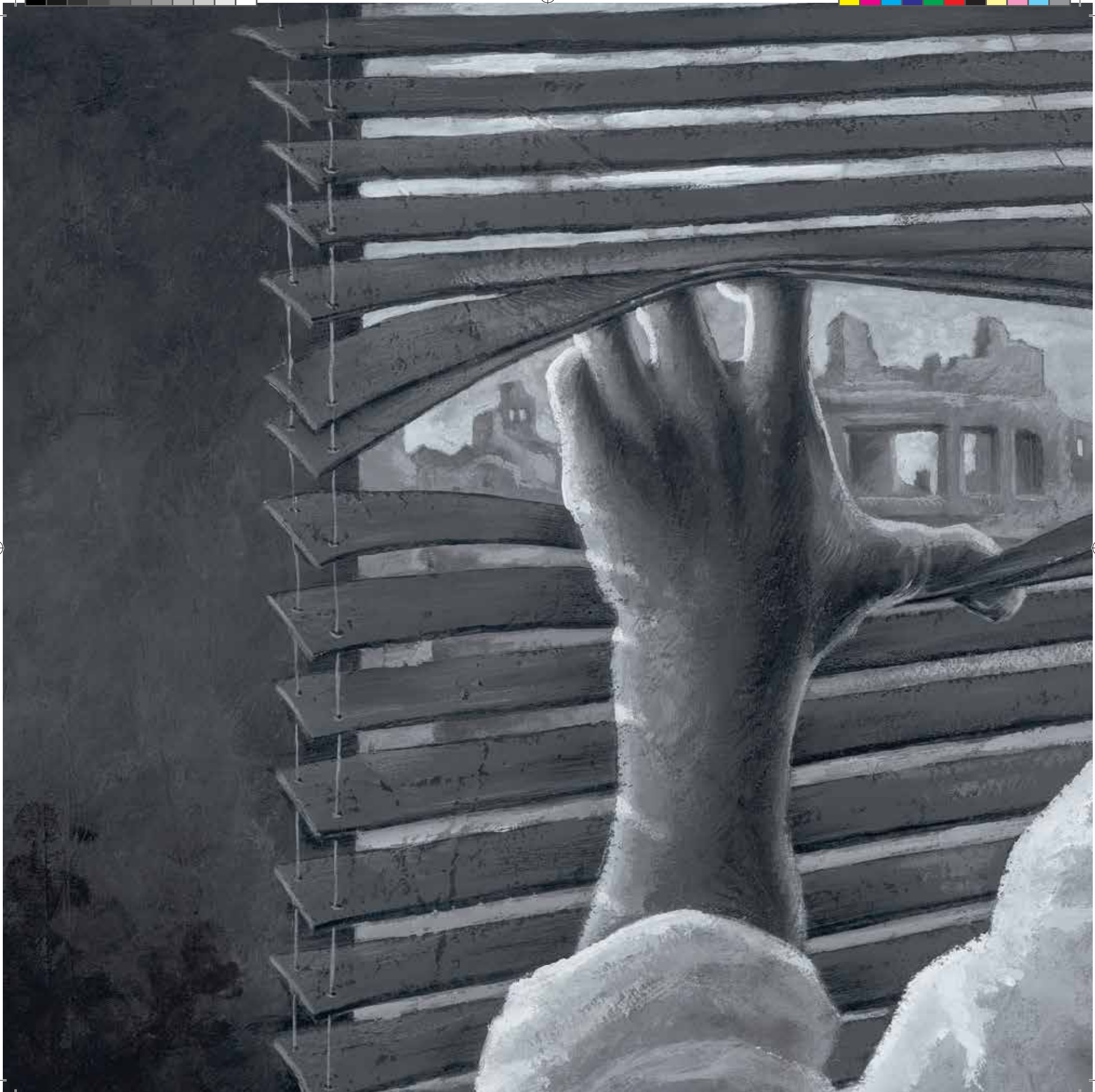
Luckily I had put my mobile in my back pocket. The explosions and gunshots outside were so loud that I only detected the call because the phone vibrated.

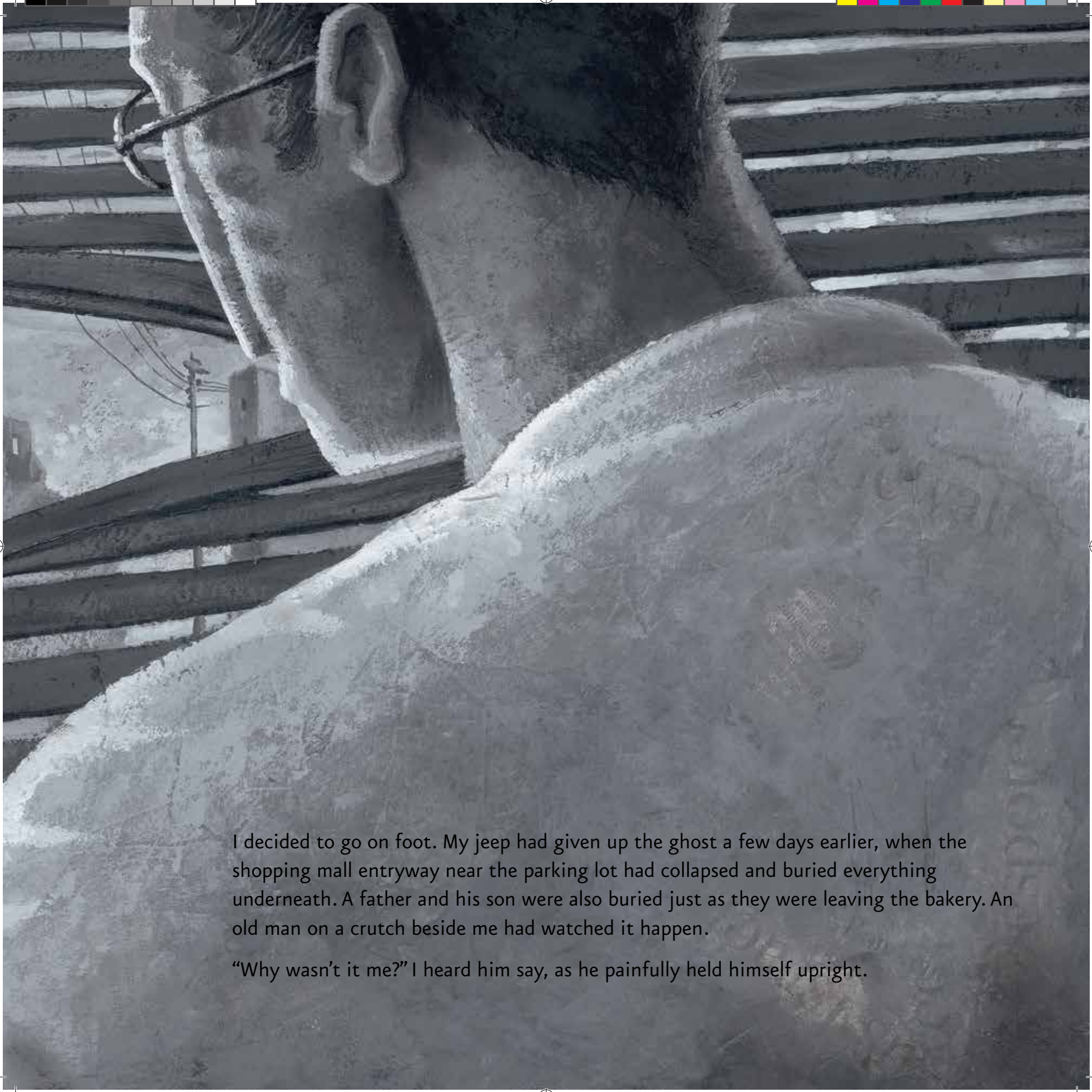
“A school bus has been attacked!” my colleague shouted over the sounds of combat. “The surviving children have just been evacuated.”

Strange, how ordinary this message sounded.

“Meet you at the clinic! And keep your head down if you hear gunfire, my friend, we’ll need you here!” With that, he hung up.







I decided to go on foot. My jeep had given up the ghost a few days earlier, when the shopping mall entryway near the parking lot had collapsed and buried everything underneath. A father and his son were also buried just as they were leaving the bakery. An old man on a crutch beside me had watched it happen.

“Why wasn’t it me?” I heard him say, as he painfully held himself upright.

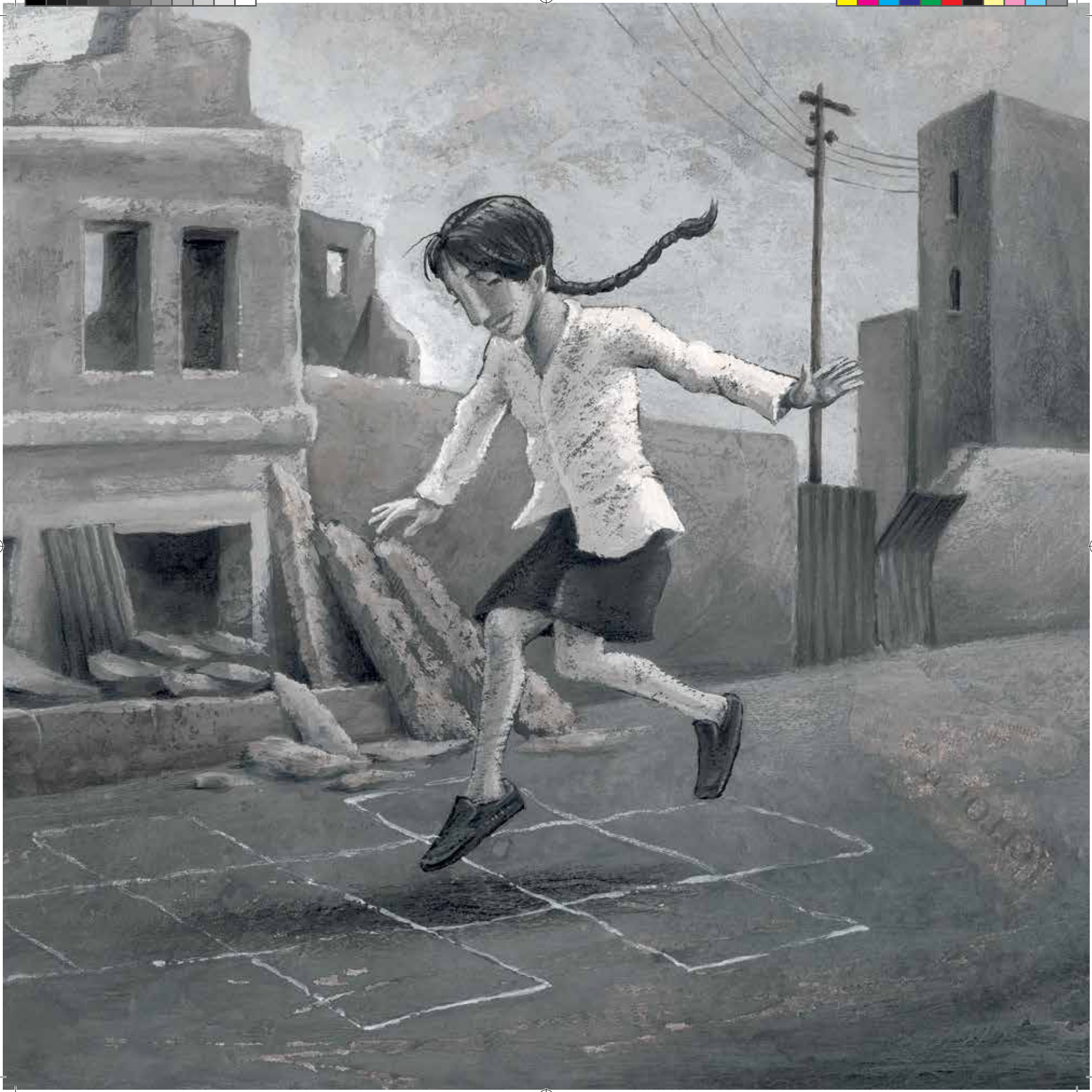


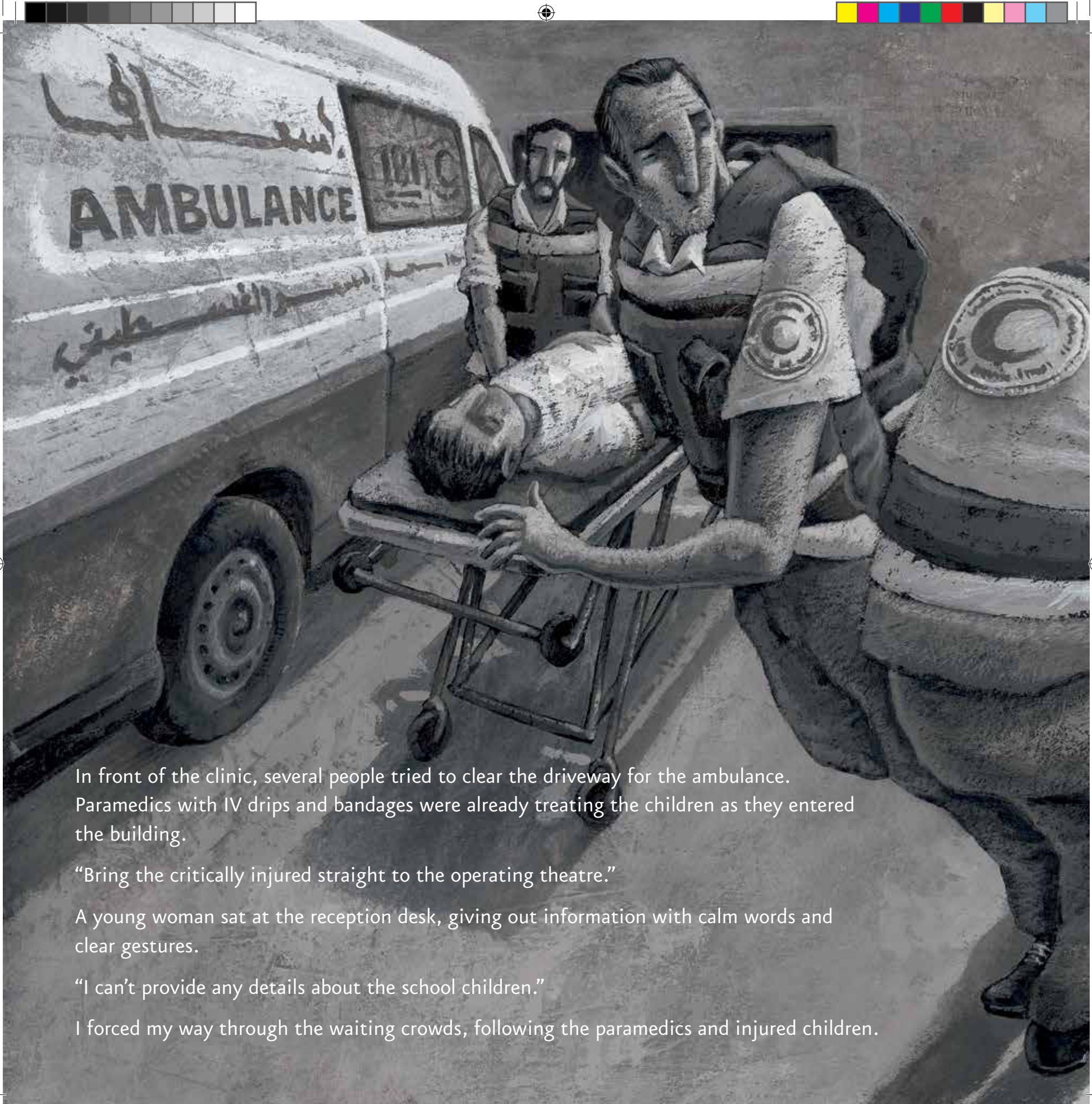


Television crews gathered out in front of the hotel; they had also heard about the attack on the school bus. I hurried along, staying close to the walls of the houses, past playing children.

I held my camera in my hand. You had to be ready for anything.







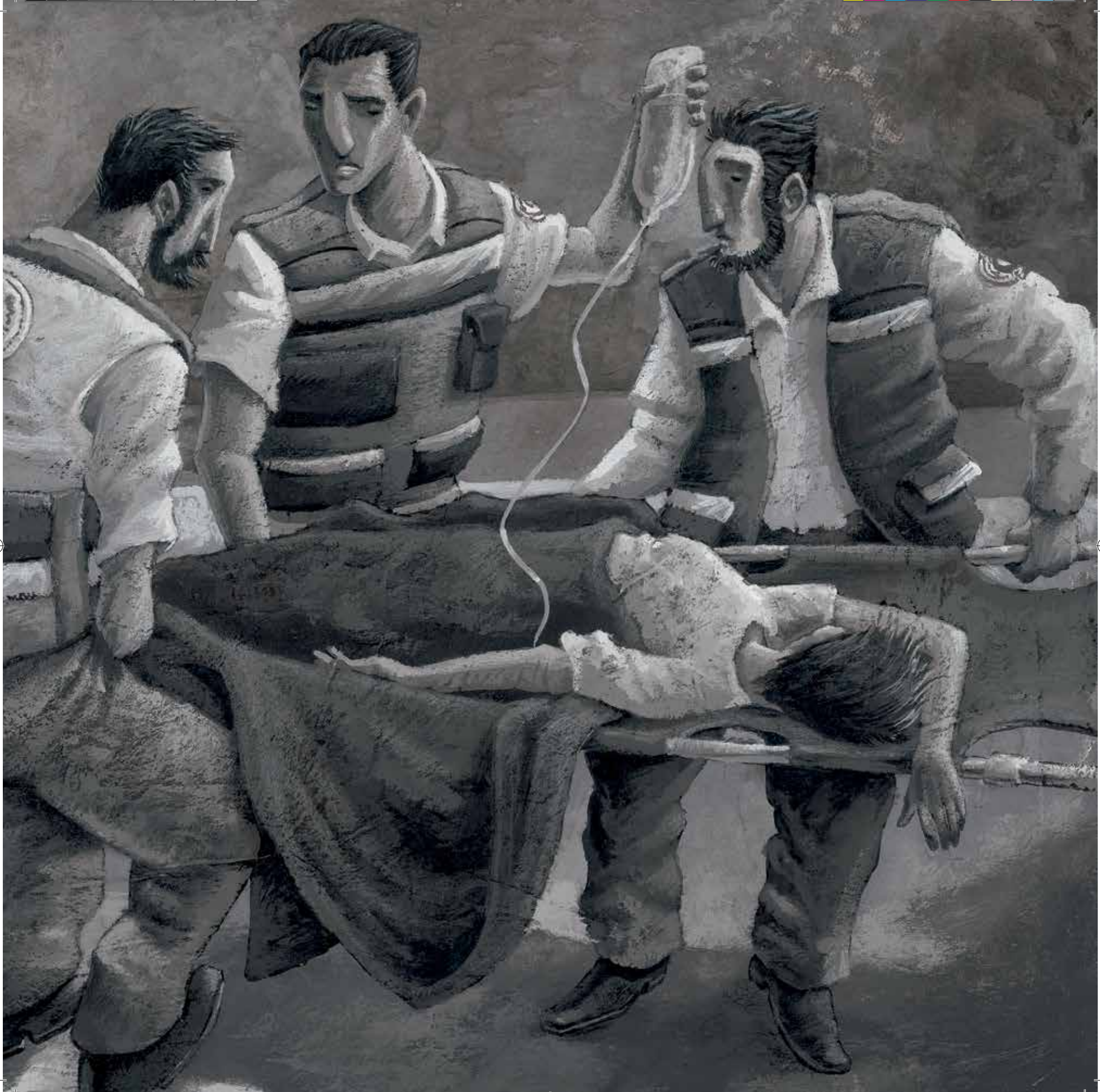
In front of the clinic, several people tried to clear the driveway for the ambulance. Paramedics with IV drips and bandages were already treating the children as they entered the building.

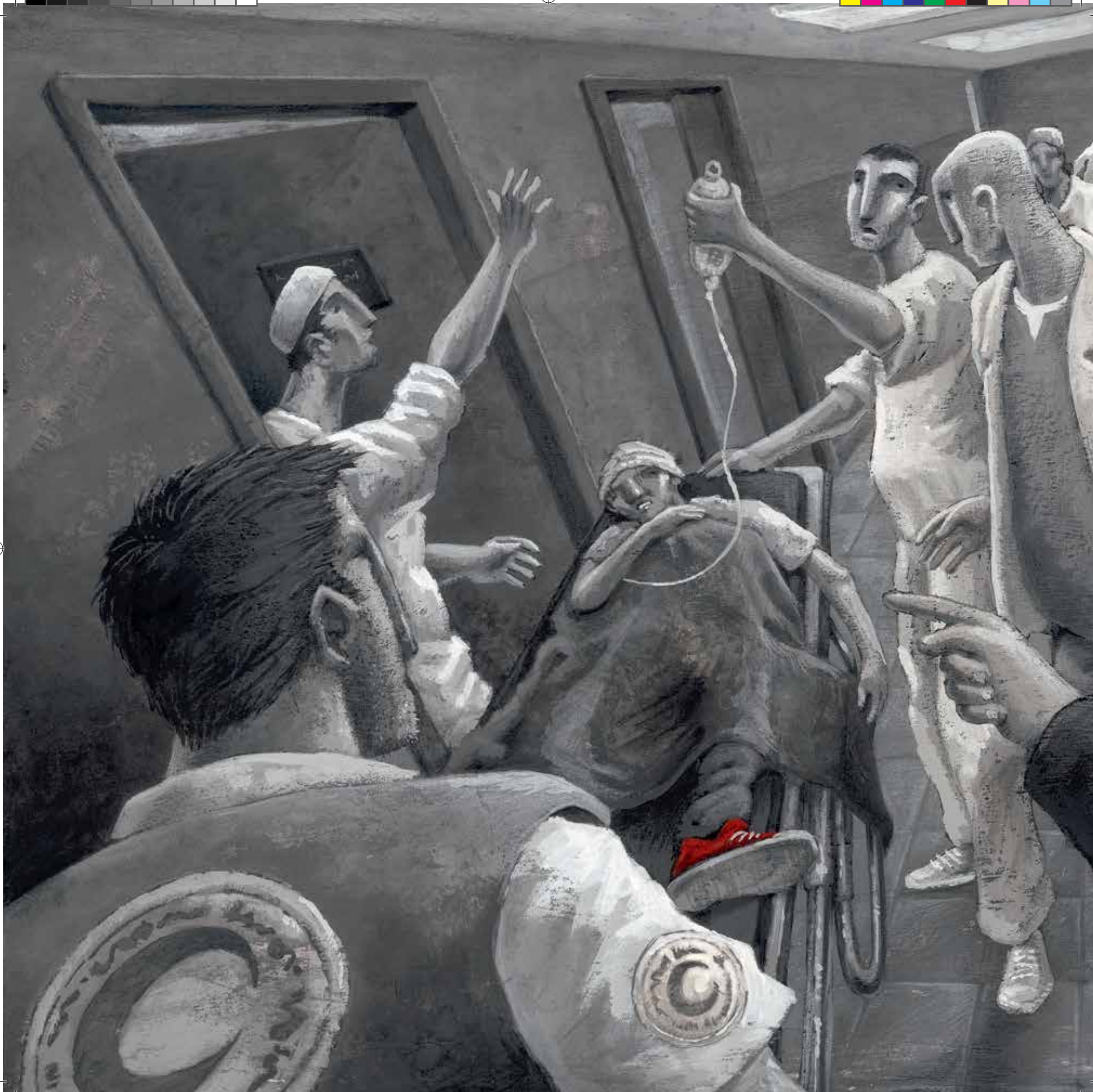
“Bring the critically injured straight to the operating theatre.”

A young woman sat at the reception desk, giving out information with calm words and clear gestures.

“I can’t provide any details about the school children.”

I forced my way through the waiting crowds, following the paramedics and injured children.



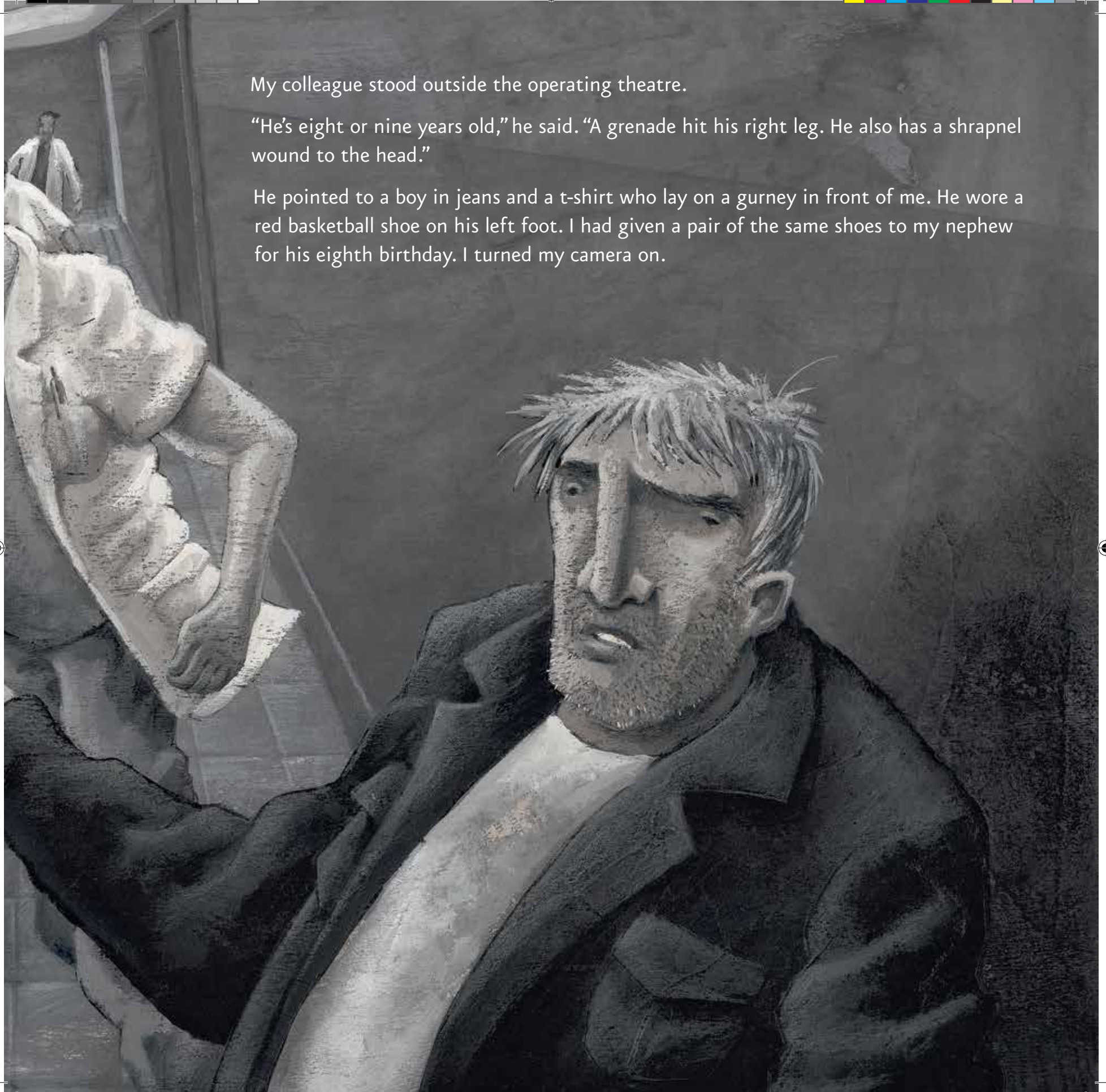




My colleague stood outside the operating theatre.

“He’s eight or nine years old,” he said. “A grenade hit his right leg. He also has a shrapnel wound to the head.”

He pointed to a boy in jeans and a t-shirt who lay on a gurney in front of me. He wore a red basketball shoe on his left foot. I had given a pair of the same shoes to my nephew for his eighth birthday. I turned my camera on.





The red shoe showed up clearly in the foreground of the display. Where had the other one gone? My nephew loved his basketball shoes. It was unimaginable to think he would lose one! Had this boy loved his shoes that much too?

I took another picture from a different angle. After all, this was about the boy, not the shoes! Now the bandage on his head came into focus.

For the first time, I looked at his face. His eyes were closed but his lips moved. It seemed like he was saying his name. Maybe children in wartime learned early on to repeat their names even if they lost consciousness, so that relatives could find them.



