!
CREAK
SHE DIDN'T STUDY THE SCRIPT FOR THE WHOLE WEEK,
HOW CAN SHE LOOK SO CALM?
WHAT WAS SHE THINKING?
IF SHE FAILS, WHO'S GOING TO PLAY BETH?
IT COULD BE ANY OF US, RIGHT?

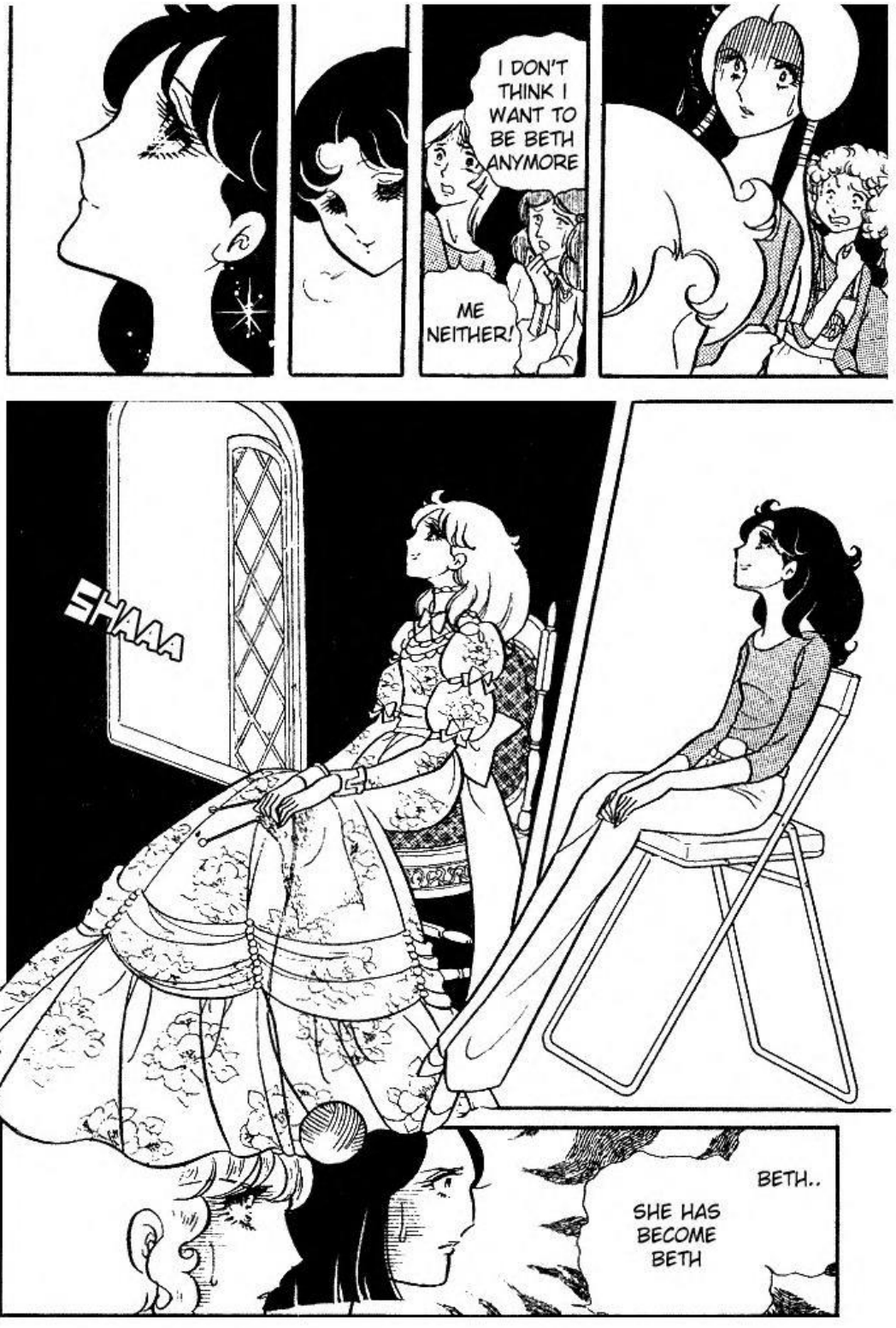
SENSEI!
SURE
YOU PROMISE THAT THE WINNER WILL PLAY BETH?
THE BEST ONE WILL BE BETH!
YEAH, WHO DOESN'T WANT TO BE BETH!
THAT MEANS WE HAVE A CHANCE!
IF ONE OF US WINS, WILL YOU LET HER PLAY BETH?
SENSEI, CAN WE PARTICIPATE IN THE CONTEST TOO?
LET'S START THE CONTEST
YES, SAYA-KA
C'MON GIRLS!
THERE ARE CHAIRS ON THE STAGE
PLEASE SIT DOWN..
..AS BETH!
SIT DOWN AS BETH?
THAT'S A PIECE OF CAKE!

BEGIN!
THIS ISN'T JUST ABOUT SITTING DOWN..
SHE SAID..
SITTING DOWN IS EASY..?
THIS IS BORING.. I WANT TO YAWN..
WHY DO WE HAVE TO SIT AS BETH..
..THIS LONG..
IT'S HARD TO ACT WHEN YOU'RE NOT DOING ANYTHING
ARE WE GOING TO SIT ALL DAY?
WHAT SHOULD I DO?
SEICO
TICK
TICK
TICK

WE MUST ACT NATURAL, WITHOUT SHOWING ANY SIGNS OF BOREDOM..
..OR OUR TRUE SELVES
UH..
TO ACT OUT SITTING DOWN QUIETLY.. THIS IS A VERY DIFFICULT ACT!
HER BODY LOOKS SO RELAXED,
AND HER FEET ARE SPREAD NATURALLY..
LOOK AT HER
IT'S BEEN LIKE THIS FOR A WHILE
YAWN
HOW MUCH LONGER..?
WHAT'S THE MEANING OF THIS TEST?
THIS IS BORING..
BUT I MUST HOLD MY YAWN..

YAWN
Huff
WHAT IS SHE DOING?

UH..
SHE'S..
KNITTING!
IT'S BEEN ONE HOUR AND TWENTY MINUTES
WOW, IS SHE GOING TO KEEP ON KNITTING?
TICK
TICK


I DON'T THINK I WANT TO BE BETH ANYMORE
ME NEITHER!
SHAAA
BETH..
SHE HAS BECOME BETH

IF SHE'S BORED, SHE'LL YAWN
THEN SHE'LL KNIT,
OR LOOK OUTSIDE THE WIN-DOW..
..AND DAY-DREAM
AS BETH, SHE CAN SIT STILL LIKE THAT FOR A LONG TIME
WHILE THE OTHER GIRLS CAN ONLY THINK OF ACTING
hehe
hehe
hehe..
CLAP!
ENOUGH!
SHE IS BETH!

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HURRAY!
YAY!
BANZAI!
I DID IT!
I CAN PLAY AS BETH!
I WANT TO BE JUST LIKE THEM!
I WANT TO BE AN ACTRESS!
I LOVE WATCHING THEM ACT ON TV!
BUT ON STAGE, I CAN BE ANYONE, EVEN A PRINCESS!
I'M NOT EVEN PRETTY
I MAY BE USELESS..
I MAY BE A BORING PERSON..
MOTHER..

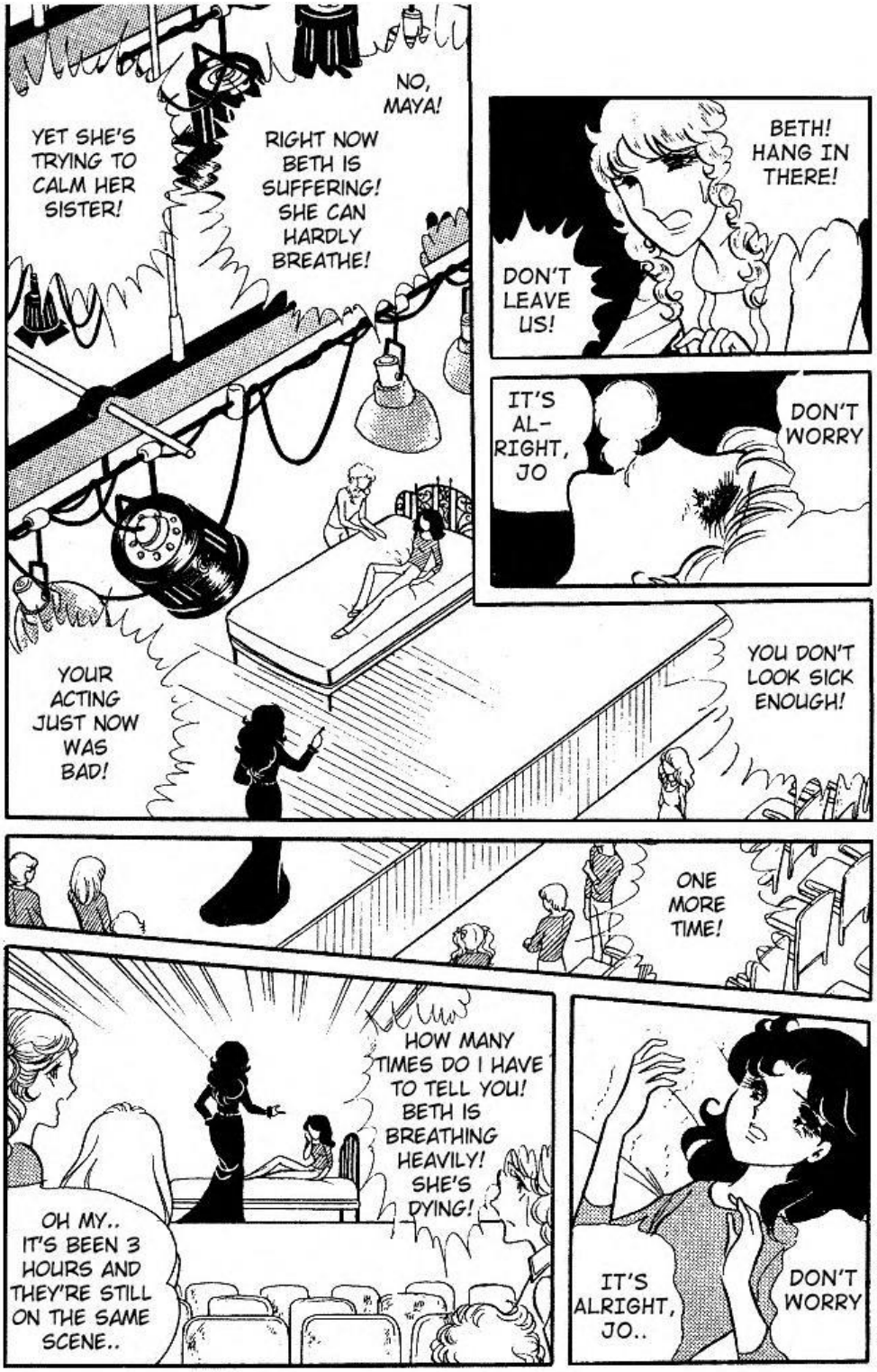
CLAP
CLAP
CLAP
SEVERAL DAYS PASSED..
I HOPE WE'LL WORK TOGETHER WELL!
WELCOME BACK, MAYA!
CLAP
CLAP
YEAH, I LIKE HER ACTING
HER BETH IS MUCH BETTER NOW
MAYA IS REALLY GOOD!
NOW THE REHEARSALS HAVE MOVED ONTO THE ACTUAL STAGE THAT WILL BE USED
OH, THAT'S THE PART WHERE BETH IS ILL, RIGHT?
MAYA NEEDS TO WORK MORE ON THAT
BUT THE WAY SHE PLAYS THE PIANO IS STILL AWKWARD,
AND THAT'S THE CLIMAX OF THE PLAY
OKAY! NOW BETH COMES FORWARD!

YOU WANT TO LEARN TO PLAY PIANO?
THAT'S NO PRO-BLEM!
I'VE KNOWN HOW TO PLAY SINCE I WAS A LITTLE KID!
REALLY, YUU!?
GOOD, LIFT YOUR ARM A LITTLE BIT
NICE TO MEET YOU
MOM, THIS IS MAYA
I'M GIVING HER A PIANO LESSON BECAUSE SHE'S PLAYING THE ROLE OF SOMEONE WHO CAN PLAY THE PIANO
PLEASE HAVE SOME TEA!
WEL-COME!
OH! THANKS, MOM!

I'M ALWAYS VERY STRICT WITH MY KIDS
BUT WE'RE ALL HAPPY
OH, NO..
HOW IS YUU? IS HE A MEAN TEACHER?
HELLO, I'M TAMAMI, YUU'S SISTER
DON'T EVER COME BACK!
YOU'RE NOT MY DAUGHTER ANYMORE!
WHAT A NICE MOTHER..
NOT EVEN FOR A SIP?
DON'T STOP PLAYING!
NOPE!
LEMON OR MILK?
MILK
DO YOU WANT SUGAR ?
PLE-ASE
WHAT ARE YOU THINKING? LET'S RESUME YOUR LESSON!
YES, SIR!
I'M A VERY MEAN TEACHER, Y'KNOW?!

YUM!
NEXT, YOU CAN HAVE A COOKIE!
Slurp
KEEP MOVING YOUR FINGERS
HERE, YOU CAN HAVE A SIP
I FEEL LIKE A MOTHER HEN
Munch Munch
MORE!
NOT NOW! YOU CAN HAVE MORE LATER!
AH? YOU ARE MEAN!
SOMEDAY, LET'S PERFORM ON STAGE TOGETHER, MAYA
HAHA HAHA

OH, THIS BOOK..
IT TELLS YOU STEP BY STEP HOW TO PLAY THE PIANO! I'LL LET YOU BORROW IT!
YEAH..
MAYA FEELS HAPPY WHENEVER SHE'S TOGETHER WITH HIM.. IT'S THE FIRST TIME MAYA HAS EVER FELT THIS WAY..
IS NICE AND KIND
SAKURA-KOUJI YUU:.
CHUGGA CHUGGA
PERFORMING ON STAGE..
TOGETHER WITH HIM.. ALWAYS
PIANO Step By Step


NO, MAYA!
YET SHE'S TRYING TO CALM HER SISTER!
RIGHT NOW BETH IS SUFFERING! SHE CAN HARDLY BREATHE!
BETH! HANG IN THERE!
DON'T LEAVE US!
IT'S AL-RIGHT, JO
DON'T WORRY
YOUR ACTING JUST NOW WAS BAD!
YOU DON'T LOOK SICK ENOUGH!
ONE MORE TIME!
HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU! BETH IS BREATHING HEAVILY! SHE'S DYING!
OH MY.. IT'S BEEN 3 HOURS AND THEY'RE STILL ON THE SAME SCENE..
IT'S ALRIGHT, JO..
DON'T WORRY

NO! THAT'S NOT ENOUGH!
SHE MUST FIND OUT HOW A DYING GIRL BREATHES
MA'AM! I THINK THAT'S ENOUGH!
MAYA IS TIRED TOO!
SLAP!
CAN YOU DO IT, MAYA?!
OUR PERFORM-ANCE IS IN 3 DAYS!
RUINED..
IF YOU CAN'T DO IT, THE PLAY WILL BE RUINED!
BETH IS ON THE BRINK OF DYING!
THIS IS THE CLIMAX OF THE WHOLE PLAY!
RUINED ...
YOU MUST PUT MORE EFFORT INTO IT!

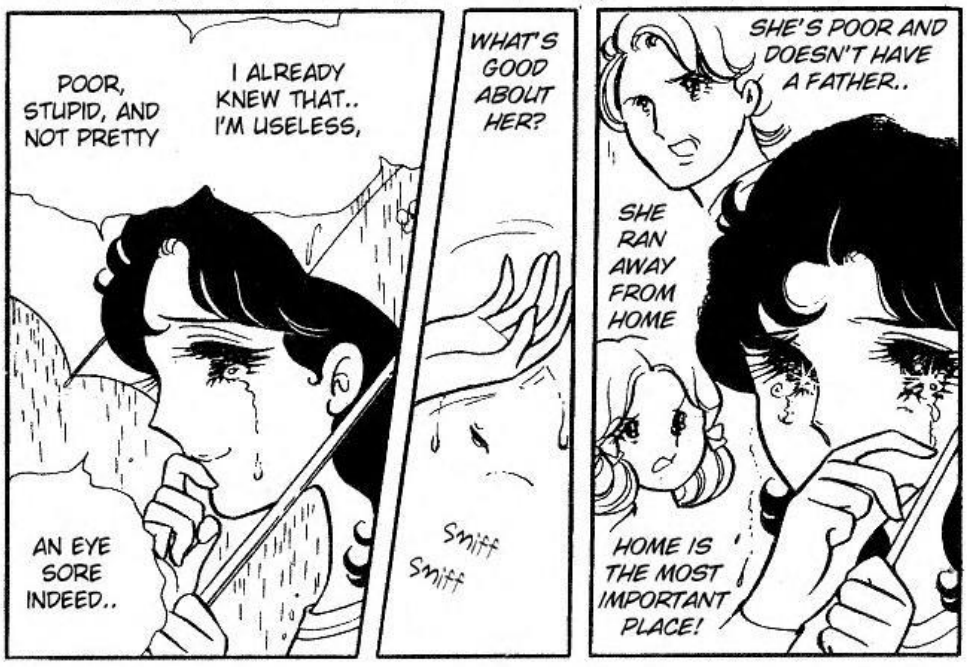
BUT..
BUT..
I REALLY WANT TO PUT MORE EFFORT INTO IT..
MY BETH COULD RUIN THIS PLAY..
MAYA!
REI, WHAT SHOULD I DO?
I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO!
IT'S OKAY, MAYA.. WE KNOW SENSEI LOVES US
MAYA,
IN ORDER TO IMPROVE, A PERSON HAS TO GO THROUGH A LOT OF PAIN & DIFFICULT TIMES
MOST ACTORS AND ACTRESSES LEARN A LOT DURING THEIR LIFE JOURNEYS
SO THIS IS NORMAL, MAYA

YUU..
THREE MORE DAYS..
WHAT SHOULD I DO?
DON'T GIVE UP!
THANKS FOR SUP-PORTING ME, REI
PSSSHHT
GOOD AFTER-NOON!
OH, IT'S YOU..
IS YUU IN?
DING DONG
WILL HE BE SURPRISED WITH MY SUDDEN VISIT?
HERE I AM..

I'M SORRY
I'M SORRY, BUT HE'S OUT WITH HIS FRIENDS RIGHT NOW
OH, AND YOU'VE WALKED THROUGH THE RAIN TO SEE HIM..
SLAM
COULD YOU PLEASE TELL HIM THAT I...
IT'S AL-RIGHT
AH, I FORGOT TO RETURN HIS BOOK
YUU!

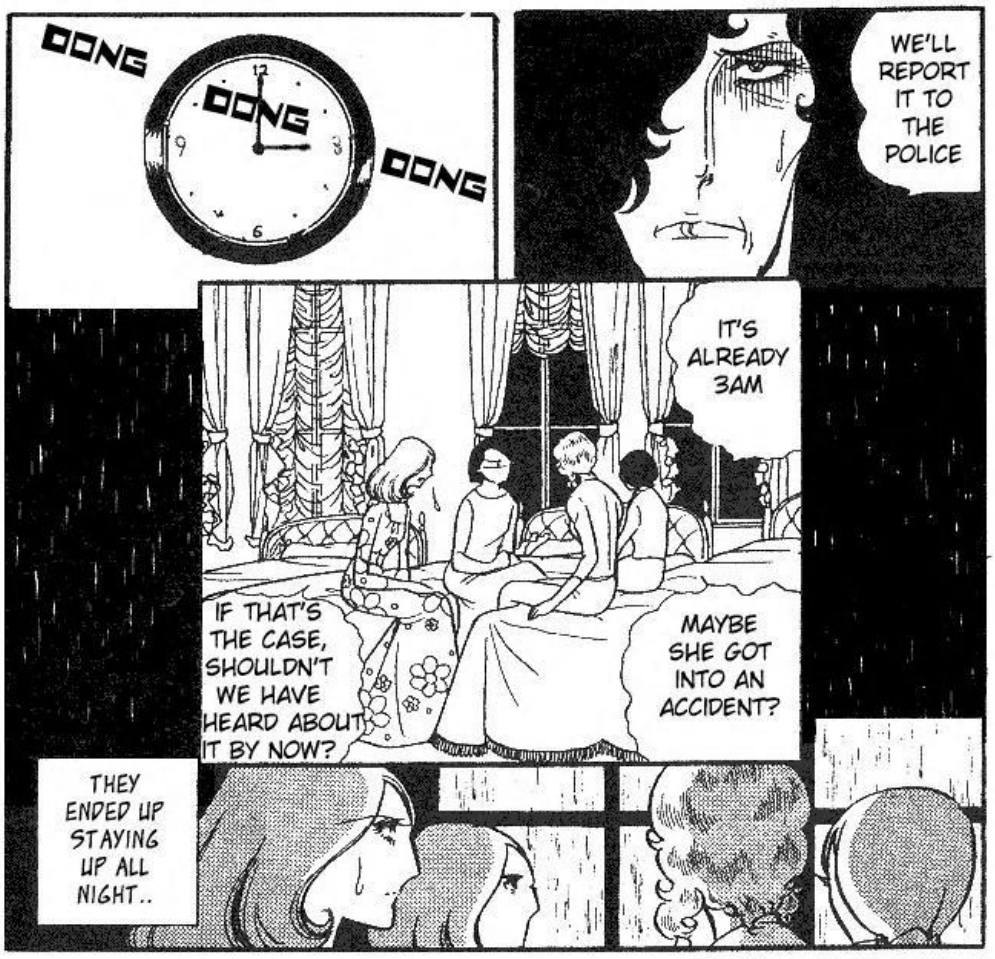
BECAUSE SHE'S POOR AND DOESN'T HAVE A FATHER!
AND SHE RAN AWAY FROM HOME!
YOUR HOME IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PLACE!
WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL HER I'M HERE?!
WHY DID YOU LIE, MOM?!
BUT SHE CAME DURING THIS HEAVY RAIN.. THIS COULD BE AN URGENT MATTER!
THUD
LISTEN TO YOUR MOTHER!
WHAT'S THAT NOISE?
THAT'S NOT THE WAY I SEE HER!
MOM'S RIGHT, ONIISAN..
WOULDN'T IT BE BETTER IF YOU WERE WITH A PRETTY GIRL LIKE AYUMI?

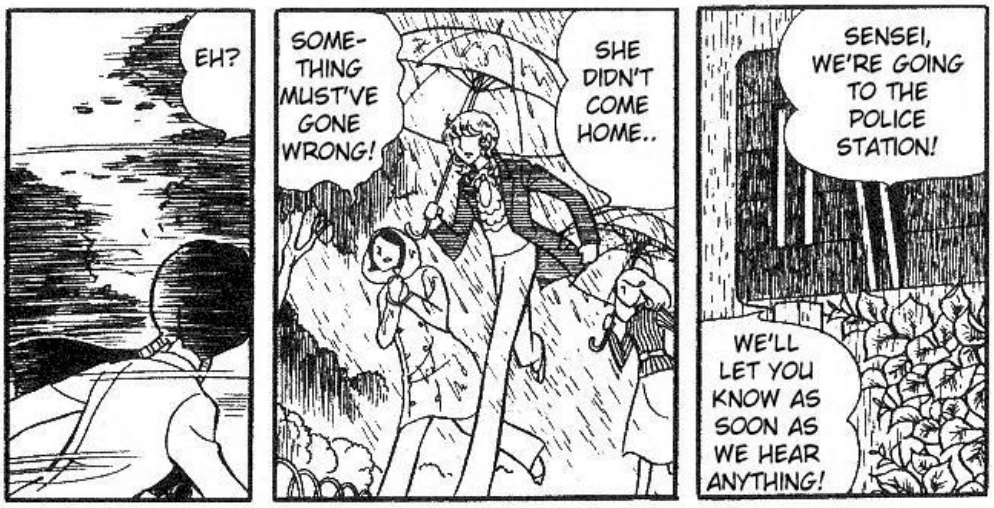
MAYA!!
MAYA
..
PLANO
Step By Step
PSSHT


POOR, STUPID, AND NOT PRETTY
I ALREADY KNEW THAT.. I'M USELESS,
AN EYE SORE INDEED..
WHAT'S GOOD ABOUT HER?
Sniff
Sniff
SHE'S POOR AND DOESN'T HAVE A FATHER..
SHE RAN AWAY FROM HOME
HOME IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PLACE!

PSSHT
BUT WHY DO THESE TEARS COME OUT? OH, YUU..
I AL-READY KNEW THAT..
THIS IS NORMAL, MAYA
IN ORDER TO IMPROVE, A PERSON HAS TO GO THROUGH A LOT OF PAIN AND DIFFICULT TIMES
BETH!
THAT'S RIGHT!
IN ORDER TO IM-PROVE ...
PSSHT
FLAP

PSSHHT
RAIN..
LIKE COLD THORNS
ALL OVER MY SKIN..
PLEASE.. SOOTHE MY TUMULT-UOUS HEART
RAIN..
SENSEI, MAYA'S STILL NOT HOME!
WE LOOKED FOR HER EVERYWHERE, BUT WE CAN'T.. FIND HER..
MAYBE SHE WENT HOME TO YOKO-HAMA?
SENSEI WAS TOO HARSH ON HER LAST TIME
YOU CAN ALL REST, I'LL WAIT FOR HER
IF SHE'S STILL NOT BACK,

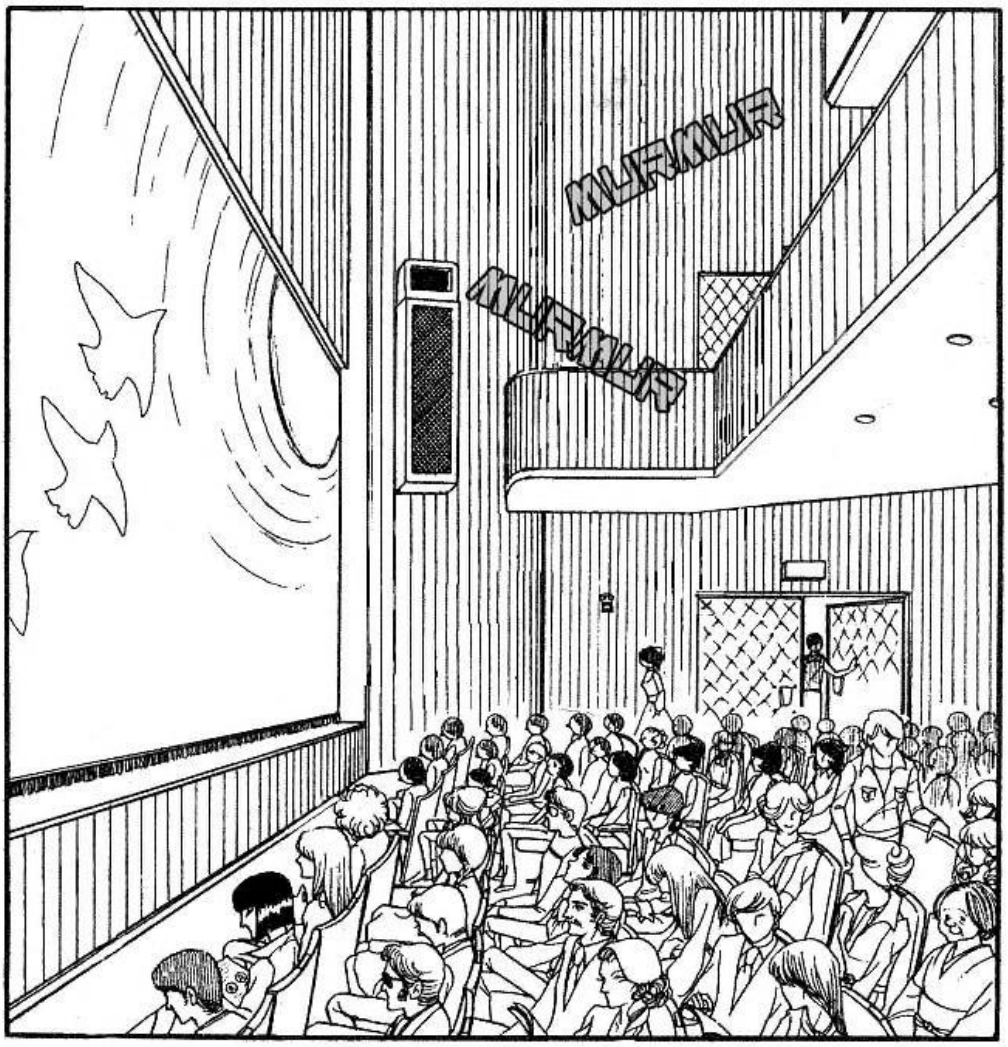

DONG
DONG
DONG
WE'LL REPORT IT TO THE POLICE
IT'S ALREADY 3AM
IF THAT'S THE CASE, SHOULDN'T WE HAVE HEARD ABOUT IT BY NOW?
MAYBE SHE GOT INTO AN ACCIDENT?
THEY ENDED UP STAYING UP ALL NIGHT..


EH?
SOME-THING MUST'VE GONE WRONG!
SHE DIDN'T COME HOME..
SENSEI, WE'RE GOING TO THE POLICE STATION!
WE'LL LET YOU KNOW AS SOON AS WE HEAR ANYTHING!

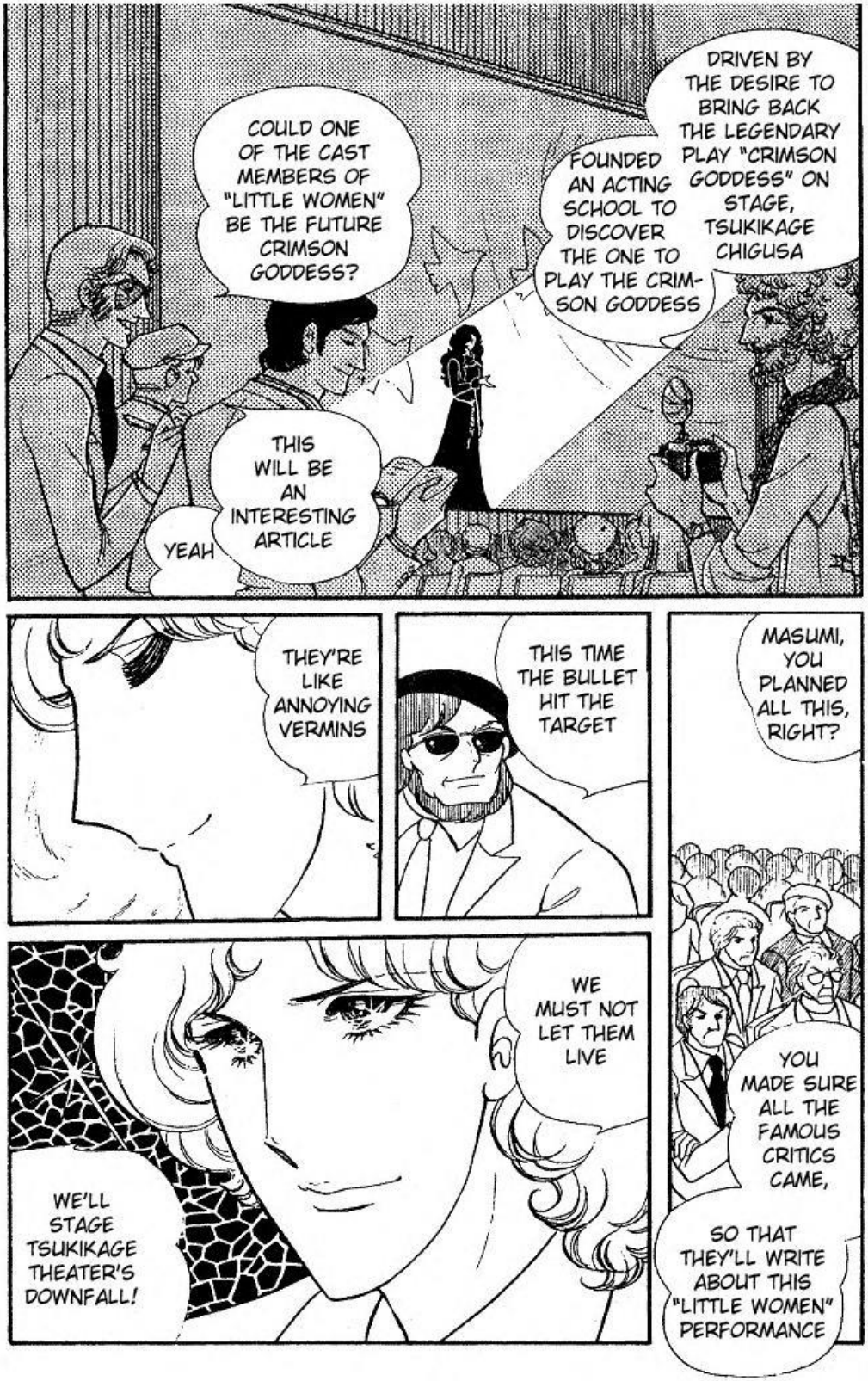
PSSHT
HUH?
WAIT!
LOOK! OVER THERE!
Huff Huff
A LITTLE BIT MORE.. JUST A LITTLE BIT MORE..
I FINALLY UNDERSTAND
shiver
THIS IS ALL I CAN DO..
ONLY THIS ...
I LOVE ACTING..
MORE THAN ANYTHING
shiver

MAYA, HANG IN THERE!
HER TEMPE-RATURE IS REALLY HIGH
SHE'S BURN-ING UP
SHE WAS IN THE RAIN ALL NIGHT!
SHE MIGHT'VE CAUGHT PNEUMONIA!
Huff Huff
I'M ALRIGHT, JO..
DON'T WORRY..

TSUKIKAGE THEATER IS PERFORMING "LITTLE WOMEN" IN CELEBRATION OF ITS FIRST ANNIVERSARY
DAY ONE
RING
TIME TO PULL THE CURTAIN UP
AND HER MOM, HIME-KAWA UTAKO!
LOOK, THAT'S HIMEKAWA AYUMI!
HEY, ISN'T THAT HAYAMI MASUMI, THE SON OF THE DAITOU COMPANY DIRECTOR?
NEXT TO HIM IS ONODERA HAJIME, A FAMOUS STAGE DIRECTOR
AND THERE ARE AT LEAST 5 OR 6 CRITIC WRITERS
WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON?
ISN'T THIS JUST A REGULAR PERFORMANCE?


MUMUR
MUMUR

BLITZ
BLITZ
AH!
WHAT? THIS IS..!
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WELCOME TO TSUKIKAGE THEATER'S FIRST ANNIVERSARY PERFORMANCE
I'M TSUKI-KAGE CHIGUSA
OH MY GOD!
LOOK AT THOSE FRONT SEATS!
REPORT-ERS FROM WELL-KNOWN MAGA-ZINES
HIMEKAWA AYUMI AND UTAKO
MASUMI HAYAMI..
ONODERA HAJIME..
AND THE ONES LINING UP IN THE MIDDLE ROW ARE ALL FAMOUS ACTING CRITICS!


COULD ONE OF THE CAST MEMBERS OF "LITTLE WOMEN" BE THE FUTURE CRIMSON GODDESS?
DRIVEN BY THE DESIRE TO BRING BACK THE LEGENDARY PLAY "CRIMSON GODDESS" ON STAGE, TSUKIKAGE CHIGUSA FOUNDED AN ACTING SCHOOL TO DISCOVER THE ONE TO PLAY THE CRIMSON GODDESS
THIS WILL BE AN INTERESTING ARTICLE
YEAH
THEY'RE LIKE ANNOYING VERMINS
THIS TIME THE BULLET HIT THE TARGET
MASUMI, YOU PLANNED ALL THIS, RIGHT?
WE MUST NOT LET THEM LIVE
WE'LL STAGE TSUKIKAGE THEATER'S DOWNFALL!
YOU MADE SURE ALL THE FAMOUS CRITICS CAME,
SO THAT THEY'LL WRITE ABOUT THIS "LITTLE WOMEN" PERFORMANCE

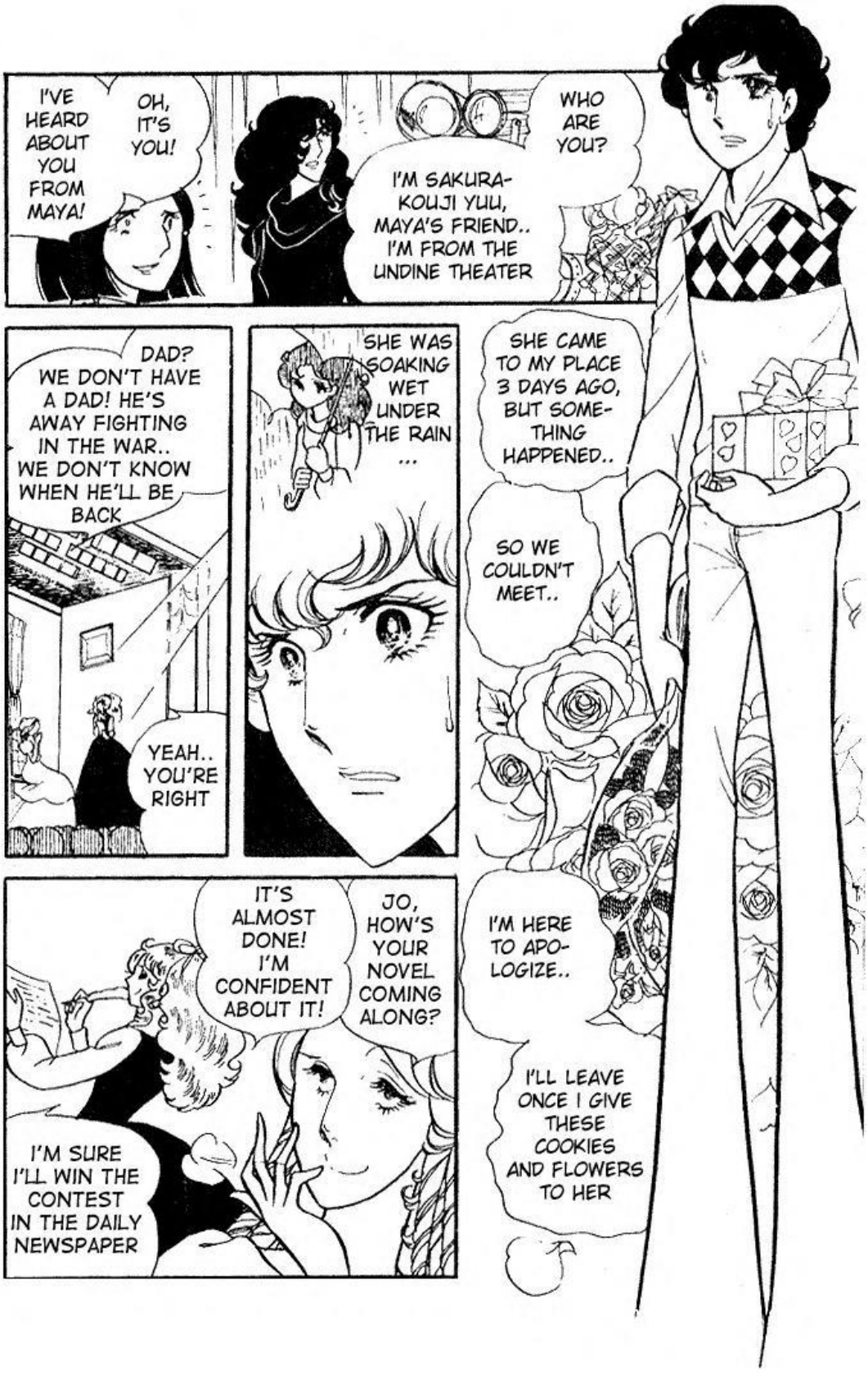
HAHAHA! I DOUBT ANYONE WANTS TO BE WITH A WORKAHOLIC!
AND YET, MANY BEAUTIFUL ACTRESSES LONG FOR YOU
YOU DON'T HAVE ANY WARM HUMAN BLOOD LEFT!
YOU'RE STARTING TO SOUND LIKE YOUR FATHER!
OH, NO! MY STAGE FRIGHT HAS GOTTEN WORSE!
WHAT'S HAPPENING?
WHY ARE THERE SO MANY REPORTERS?
WAIT!
BUT WHAT IS IT?
IT'S MAKING ME NERVOUS
SOMETHING'S NOT RIGHT..
REMEMBER! UNITE ALL YOUR FEELINGS!
WE MUST GIVE OUR BEST PERFORMANCE!

CRASH
YES, MY KNEES ARE SHAKING
MAYA, YOU LOOK PALE!
DRINK THIS, IT'LL CALM YOU DOWN
IT'S TIME! FOUR SISTERS, GET INTO YOUR STAGE POSITIONS!
SORRY, I'M REALLY NERVOUS
HER ARM IS..
WHAT?
Huh?
I COULD BE WRONG, BUT HER ARM FELT REALLY HOT!
AH!
MAYA, ARE YOU ALRIGHT?
THANKS, I'M OKAY!

WOOSH
PLEASE ENJOY OUR PERFORMANCE
MOM'S NOT HOME YET?
I BET SHE'S SHOPPING FOR CHRIST-MAS!
IT'S DREAD-FUL TO BE POOR
I'VE SEEN OTHER GIRLS WITH BEAUTIFUL DRESSES, WHILE WE HAVE NOTHING
BUT WE'VE GOT MOM AND DAD, AND EACH OTHER!

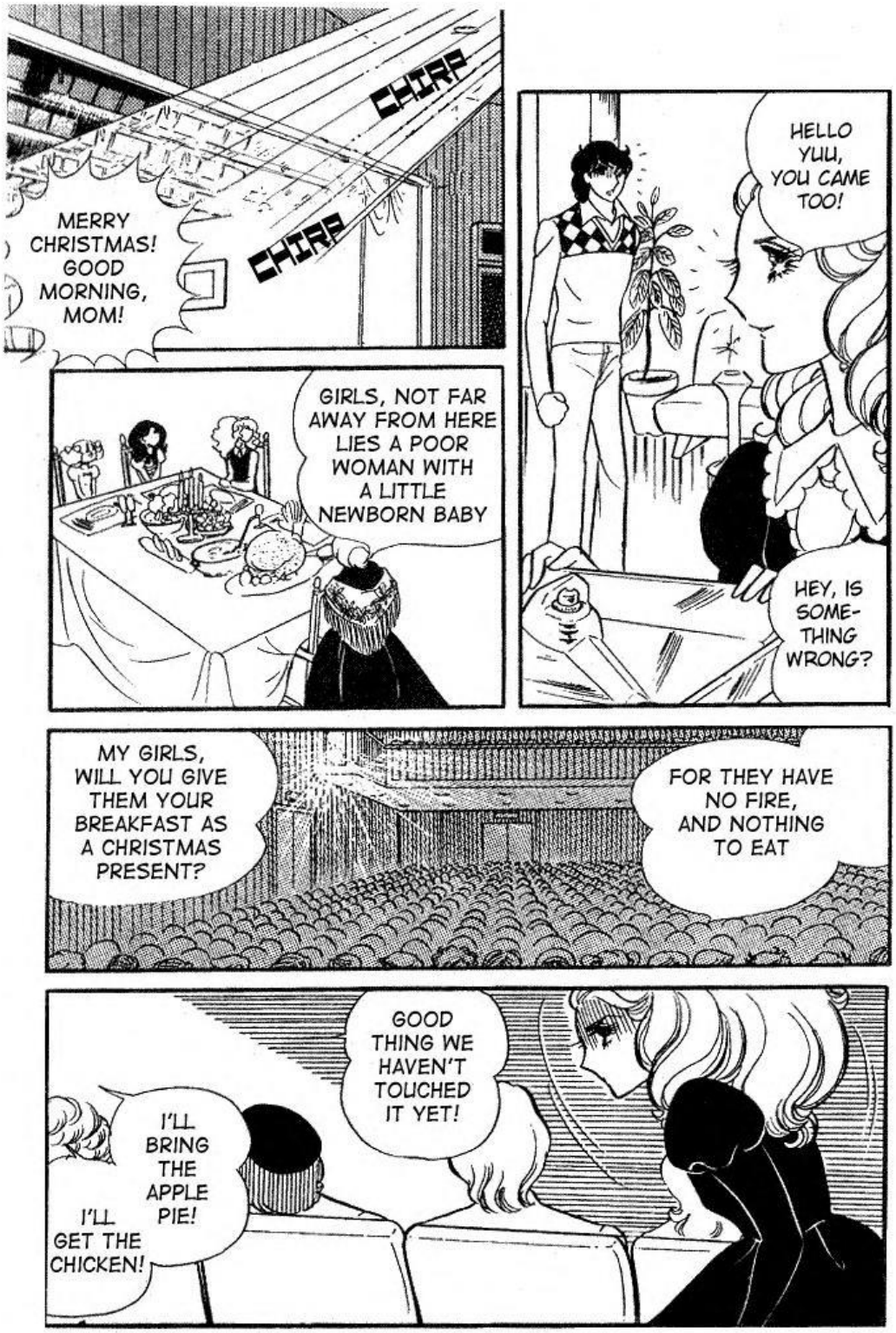
EVEN NOW, I STILL WANT IT..
TSUKIKAGE-SENSEI.. I'VE WANTED THE "CRIMSON GODDESS" ROLE EVER SINCE I WAS YOUR STUDENT..
WHEN WILL YOU REVEAL WHO WILL GET TO BE THE "CRIMSON GODDESS"?
I WON'T FORGIVE YOU IF YOU GIVE IT TO ANYONE ELSE
IS SHE AMONGST THEM?

SEN-SEI..
YES?
I MUST TELL YOU ABOUT MAYA..
WHAT ?
HAYAMI MASUMI AND ONODERA HAJIME..
WHAT ARE YOU TWO UP TO NOW?
40°C = ± 104°F
RIGHT NOW SHE HAS A 40°C FEVER..
IS THAT TRUE?
SHE DIDN'T WANT TO TELL EVERY-ONE, BUT WE KNEW..
THAT TIME,
WHAT !?
WE FOUND HER SOAKING WET UNDER THE RAIN.. SHE HAD A LITTLE REST, BUT HER FEVER WOULDN'T GO DOWN
RIGHT NOW SHE'S ACTING AS IF SHE WAS HEALTHY
A 40°C FEVER..


I'VE HEARD ABOUT YOU FROM MAYA!
OH, IT'S YOU!
WHO ARE YOU?
I'M SAKURA-KOUJI YUU, MAYA'S FRIEND.. I'M FROM THE UNDINE THEATER
DAD? WE DON'T HAVE A DAD! HE'S AWAY FIGHTING IN THE WAR.. WE DON'T KNOW WHEN HE'LL BE BACK
YEAH.. YOU'RE RIGHT
SHE WAS SOAKING WET UNDER THE RAIN ...
SHE CAME TO MY PLACE 3 DAYS AGO, BUT SOME-THING HAPPENED..
SO WE COULDN'T MEET..
IT'S ALMOST DONE! I'M CONFIDENT ABOUT IT!
JO, HOW'S YOUR NOVEL COMING ALONG?
I'M SURE I'LL WIN THE CONTEST IN THE DAILY NEWSPAPER
I'M HERE TO APO-LOGIZE..
I'LL LEAVE ONCE I GIVE THESE COOKIES AND FLOWERS TO HER

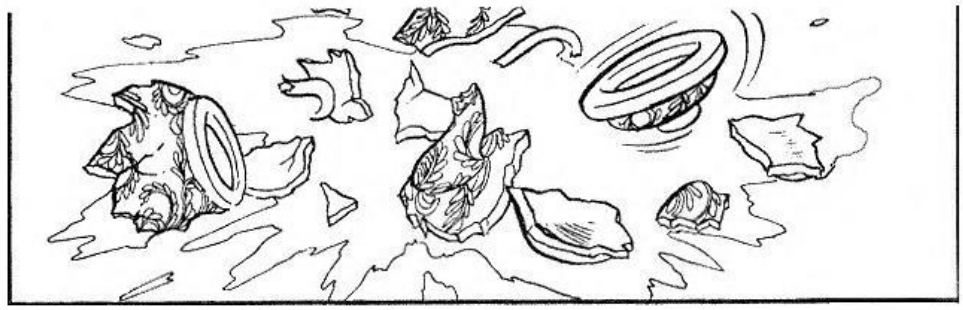
JO, WHAT WAS YOUR PREVIOUS NOVEL ABOUT?
IN THE END, HE KILLED HIMSELF! EVERONE DIED!
BRILLIANT, DON'T YOU THINK?
THEN HER LOVER KILLED MANY INNOCENT PEOPLE
LISTEN! THE TITLE WILL BE "THE CURSED FOREST"
IT'S ABOUT A FEMALE GHOST WHO DIED OF SUICIDE
THE NOBLEMAN COULDN'T LIVE WITHOUT HER, SO HE DROWNED HIMSELF IN THE LAKE
"A PITIFUL LOVE"! IT'S ABOUT A NOBLEMAN WHO FELL IN LOVE WITH A FLOWER GIRL. MANY PEOPLE WERE AGAINST THEIR RELATIONSHIP, SO SHE KILLED HERSELF
HAHA
HAHA
YEA, YEA! WE KNOW THE ENDING.. EVERYONE DIED..
THEN THEIR PARENTS ALSO DIED, AND..
WHAT A PRETTY JO!
MAYBE BECAUSE OF WHAT SHE'S WEARING!
YOU'RE VERY GOOD, JO! JUST LIKE SHAKE-SPEARE
THANKS BETH! YOU'RE THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN SEE MY TALENT!
I'M SURE YOU'LL BE A GREAT NOVELLIST!

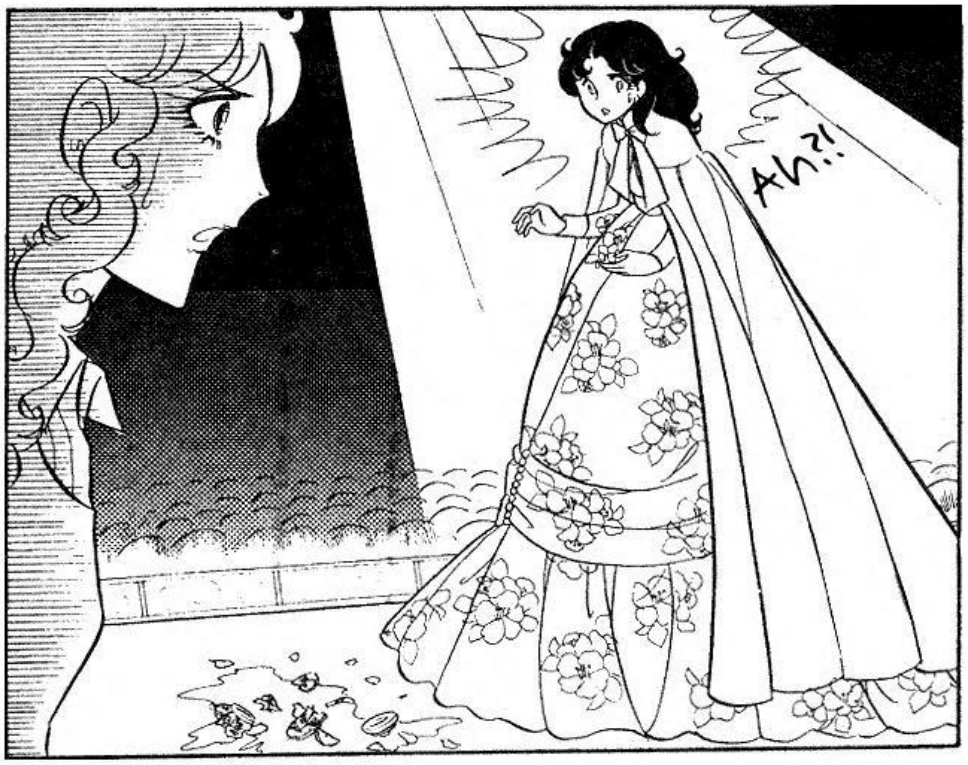
I WILL GET HER A PAIR OF GLOVES
I'LL BUY THE SLIPPERS
SHOULD WE EACH BUY ONE?
WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO GIVE MOM AS A CHRISTMAS PRESENT?
MAYA, YOUR LINE!
UGH!
HAND MADE..
DID SHE JUST FORGET HER LINE?
THIS IS TER-RIBLE!
THIS IS LIKE A SCHOOL'S PLAY!
ONLY JO PLAYS HER WELL
AH, I ALMOST FORGOT I'M ON STAGE!
SOME HANDKER-CHIEFS FROM ME..


CHIRP
CHIRP
MERRY CHRISTMAS! GOOD MORNING, MOM!
GIRLS, NOT FAR AWAY FROM HERE LIES A POOR WOMAN WITH A LITTLE NEWBORN BABY
HELLO YUU, YOU CAME TOO!
HEY, IS SOME-THING WRONG?
MY GIRLS, WILL YOU GIVE THEM YOUR BREAKFAST AS A CHRISTMAS PRESENT?
FOR THEY HAVE NO FIRE, AND NOTHING TO EAT
GOOD THING WE HAVEN'T TOUCHED IT YET!
I'LL BRING THE APPLE PIE!
I'LL GET THE CHICKEN!

WHAT A STRAN-GE GIRL
AND I'LL CARRY THE MILK!
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
SHE'S ILL!
SHE'S GOT A 40°C FEVER, AND YET SHE CAN STILL STAND UP ON STAGE AND SMILE
BUT HER FACE IS SMILING SO BRIGHT!
A 40°C FEVER..!
SHE'S ACTING AS IF SHE'S OKAY..
BUT IN TRUTH, SHE COULD BARELY STAND!
SHE STAYED UNDER THE RAIN ALL NIGHT LONG
I HEARD SHE GOT SICK PURPOSELY IN ORDER TO PLAY BETH

WHY DOES SHE GO TO SUCH AN EXTENT.. HER SMILING MASK IS HIDING HER PAIN AND SUFFERING!
BUT WHY DOESN'T SHE SHOW EVEN A LITTLE SIGN OF PAIN?
WHY?!
WHO IS SHE REALLY?
CRASH
OK
HERE, BETH! TAKE THIS WITH YOU





TO BE CONTINUED