

IN OUR OWN WORDS:

OUR LIVES TODAY

A short fiction anthology
by young people

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To young people around the world.
Thank you for your resilience.

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IN OUR OWN WORDS: OUR LIVES TODAY
A short fiction anthology by young people

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Cover Illustration by Nija Maharjan

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Partners



ANURADHA

Our Lives Today


This collection is penned by young girls between the ages of 15 and 18. The theme of the series is ‘*Our Lives Today*.’ In each title the authors explore mental health related narratives. Characters in these stories are affected by love, death, regret, and loss. They make mistakes, ask questions, and ultimately strive to overcome their ordeals. It is an anthology of strong and resilient female leads—who represent the collective vision of youth voices that console, entertain and challenge.

Stories feature a diverse set of illustrations made by artists with their interpretation of the text.




Happy reading!

Trigger warnings

This anthology includes references to caste discrimination, suicide and self-harm that some readers may find distressing. Parental guidance is advised.

Parental guidance is advised for stories that are marked above with the  symbol.

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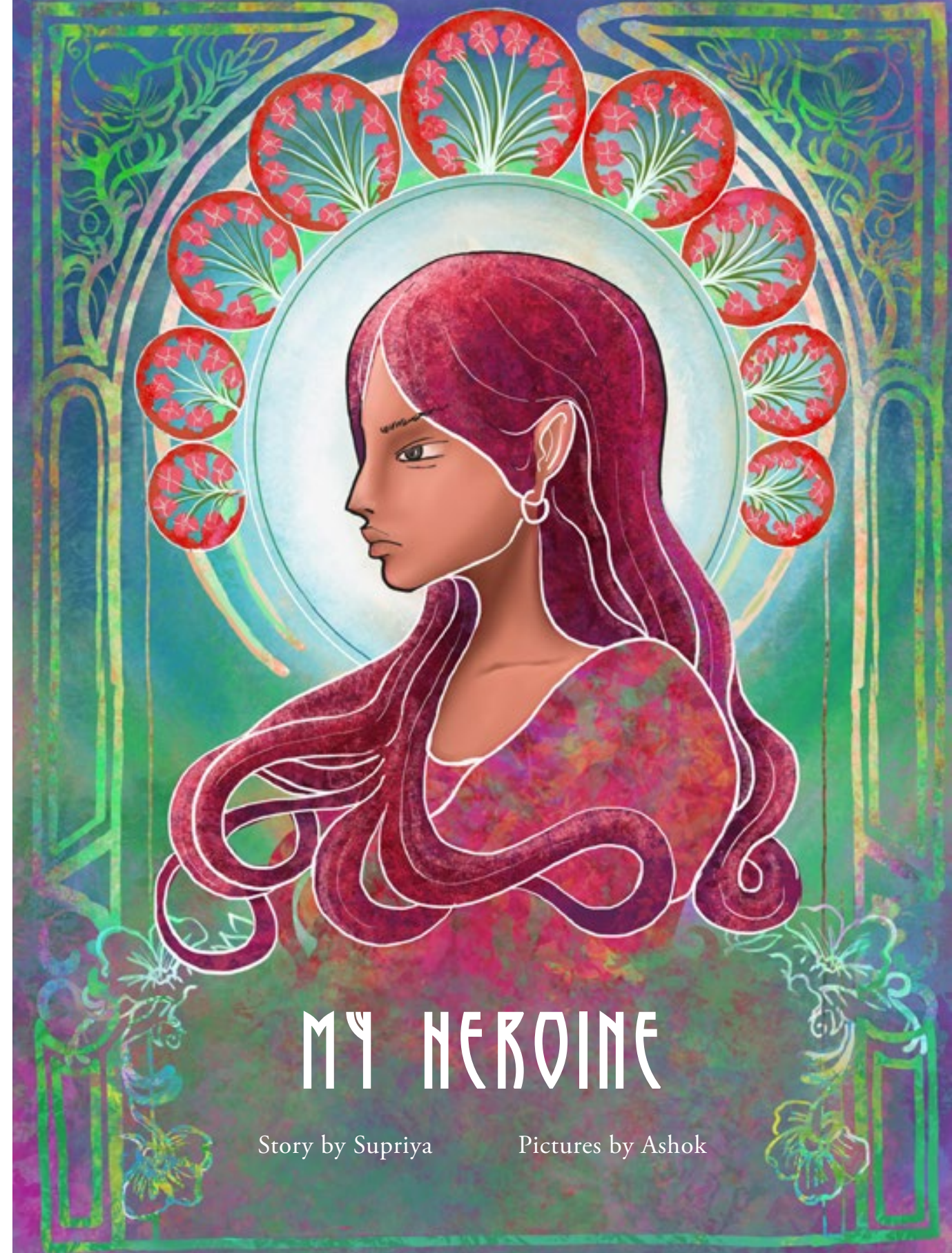
My heroine

Author:

Supriya, who everybody in her family calls lazy, is rather a fanciful girl. Born in Damauli, a small town in Tanahun, she loves reading fairy tales and eating out. She often goes out with her lovely friends; some with wings and others who are kind giants with small horns.

Illustrator:

Ashok Shrestha is an illustrator and graphic designer and will have completed his Bachelor's in Fine Arts degree from Kathmandu University by 2021. He grew up in the ancient city of Bhaktapur and has been witness to technological advancement in the world. These influences come across in his work and progress and in how he prefers mixed media. He is passionate about brush craft as much as he is interested in evolutionary technology. Similarly, his works are conceptual and speculative, often depicting nature and the duality of things. Shrestha was a part of an artist residency and an illustration project organised by Room to Read from 2018 to 2020.





Ashika belonged to a poor family. Her father had died when she was only ten years old. Her mother knit clothes and sold them to earn money. Ashika knew that her mother had high hopes for her, and she also knew that getting educated was the only way to improve their lives. Therefore, she studied hard and got a scholarship. However, she and her mother had to face discrimination due to their caste.



‘Some people are not aware and continue to believe in the caste system. We are cursed to be born into this caste. We cannot do anything about it. That is how society works’, her mother would explain.

Although Ashika knew this was wrong, she was too young to put forward her opinions. She did not even know how to express her feelings.



She would talk about it with her friend Samikshya. She too belonged to the same caste and could understand.

‘I feel very scared, Ashika. I sometimes even lie about my caste’, Samikshya would say.



Time went by and both the girls were in grade ten. Ashika had formed strong opinions about the caste system and used to speak up whenever she felt the need to do so.

‘Everyone should be treated equally regardless of their caste or colour’, she would often say.



One day, she was shocked to hear the news of Samikshya's death. Later, she came to know that her friend had committed suicide because she could no longer bear the insult of being treated wrongly because of her caste.



After her friend's death, Ashika was more determined to speak up against this discrimination. She decided that it was time to do something. She would make it her life's mission to reform her society.



She continued her education and went on to become a social worker. She formed a group of like-minded people belonging to different castes. They made people aware of caste discrimination that was prevalent in the society. Gradually, they could see people changing for the better. More and more people joined their group.



Ashika became very popular, and she was respected by all. Her mother was also very proud of her. She was awarded for her contribution towards the betterment of society.

Ashika had learned that we can bring about the change that we want to see in the world.

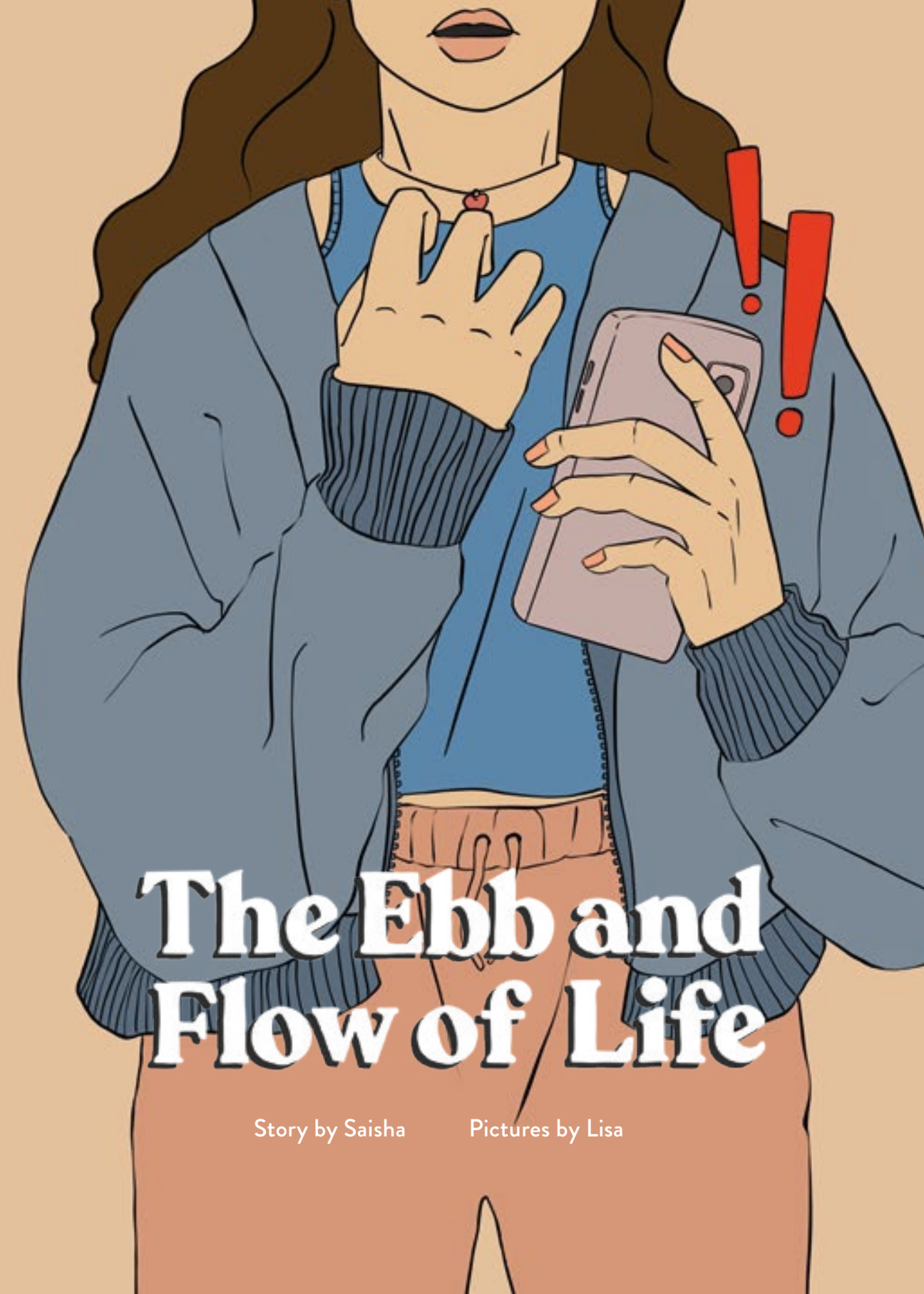
The ebb and flow of life !

Author:

Saisha vividly remembers the first book she read. It was about lions, and she just so happened to be reading it during a visit to the zoo. Since then, she has been reading wherever she can. She has started writing about lions and does not plan on stopping anytime soon – probably not until the end of time.

Illustrator:

Lisa Rai is a designer/illustrator based in the UK. She is currently a freelancer and has been able to work on exciting projects such as designing a poster for an upcoming movie titled 'Gurkha: Beneath the Bravery'. She did her BA in Graphic Communication with Typography and has been exploring communication as part of her daily practice in graphic design and illustration. She hopes to make art available and accessible to all groups of people. She believes culture plays an important role in helping realise one's identity.



The Ebb and Flow of Life

Story by Saisha

Pictures by Lisa



2016.

My life was simple and straightforward. I liked it that way. It meant that there were no grey lines, no nuances. The monotony painted a clear picture of the black and the white - the yin and the yang. To me, the grey lines suggested ambiguity and uncertainty. They were uncharted territories, ones which I would not dare to cross.

Early one morning, my phone dinged to announce a message. It dinged again. And, again. Fiddling around nervously with my heart locket, I picked up my phone to find my inbox flooded with messages. Upon closer look, there it was. A link.

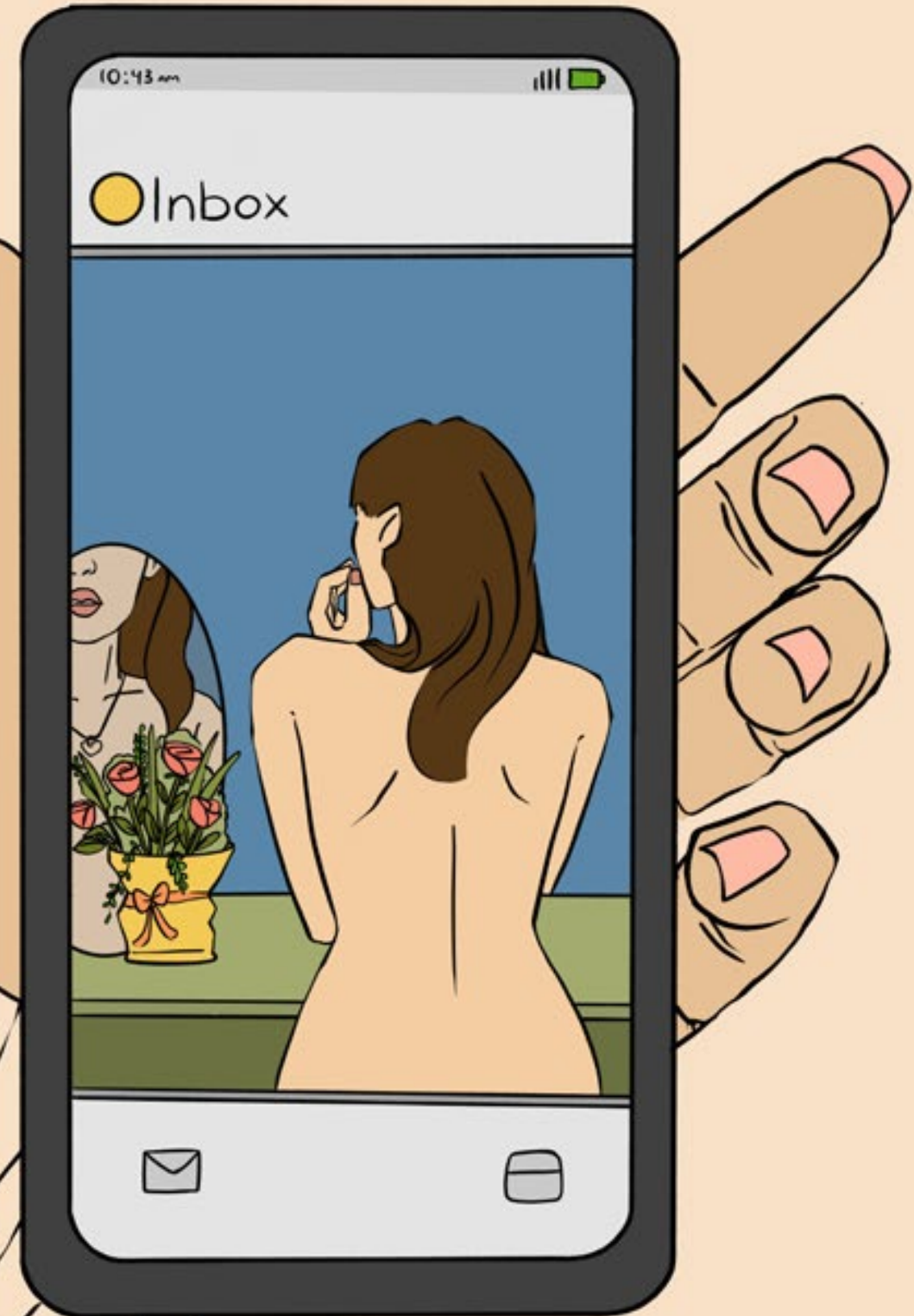
Finally mustering courage, I clicked on the link only to reveal – what seemed to be a nude picture.

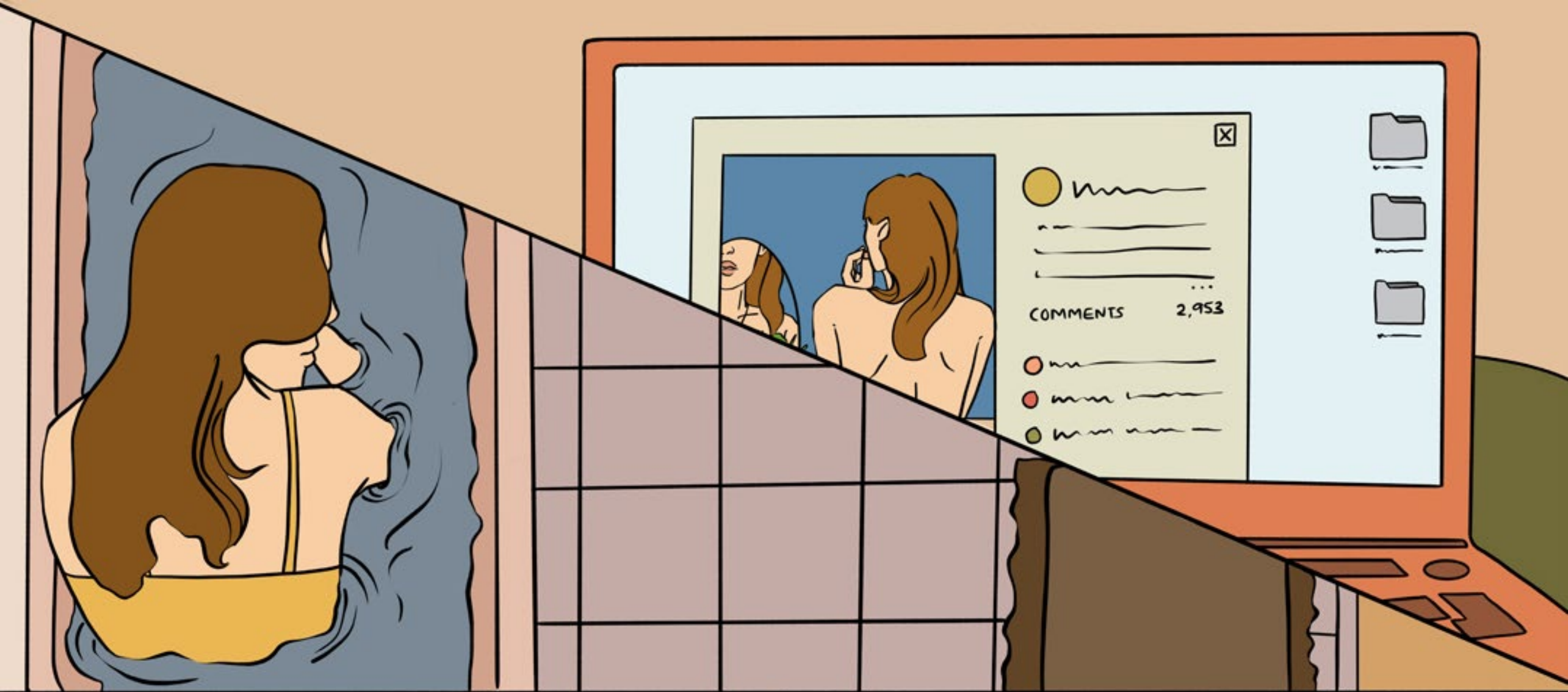
A girl. A dressing room. A heart locket on her neck. That was it. It took one second for my whole world to turn upside down. That very moment, my yin and yang fell apart.

The girl in the video was me. My heart dropped. No, no. I shut my eyes praying; begging that it was just a dream.

In response, a voice gently caressed my ear and whispered,

'Who are you fooling?'





But, I tried. I tried fooling myself. I pretended that my life was as simple and straightforward as I had imagined it to be. I pretended that there were no grey lines, no nuances. I brushed. I showered. I had my breakfast.

‘The face is not clear. No one will recognise me. It’s fine.’
I repeated to myself.

In reality, I was far from fine.

I would frequently check the comments. I was terrified that someone would know it was me. However, no one had. But it didn’t mean that no one would. I was totally and utterly helpless. And that’s how I felt every single day.



People were slut shaming the girl whose body was on full display for them to judge. They spun tales that she was ‘easy’, ‘desperate’ and ‘hideous’. It was all a web of lies but I was trapped at the centre of it. The fact that the girl was me always hit me like a ton of bricks.

Sometimes, even receiving a message or someone looking at me in a mall would make me panic and I felt paralyzed. Other days, I felt so violated that I had to scrub every inch of my body to wash away the feeling. Despite all the things that I actually was – all my strengths, my weaknesses, my story – I was just reduced to a ‘naked’ chick on the internet. I remember the tears of frustration I had to hold back.

I wanted to scream,

‘How is it my fault?
Why is this normal?’



2020.

Four years have gone by. They say time heals. Slowly but surely, I'm learning to let go of all this anxiety and fear. Slowly, I have trained my mind to free itself from the feeling of guilt. I have joined meditation classes. I read about experiences of other girls who had been through similar incidents and how they have overcome it.

I want perpetrators to be punished for their heinous crimes. But more than that I want to help other innocent girls who are already going through what I had to. By doing so, maybe I can heal myself as well. I refuse to be a mere shell of my past experiences. I have to fight back. And I will. This is 'my' life.

Colours of life

Author:

Vaidehi loves experimenting with new things. Whether it's food or fun hair colours, she will give everything a try. She also likes engaging in interesting topics at length. Her affinity for discovering new things often leads her to a state of confusion; but she is perfectly alright with that.

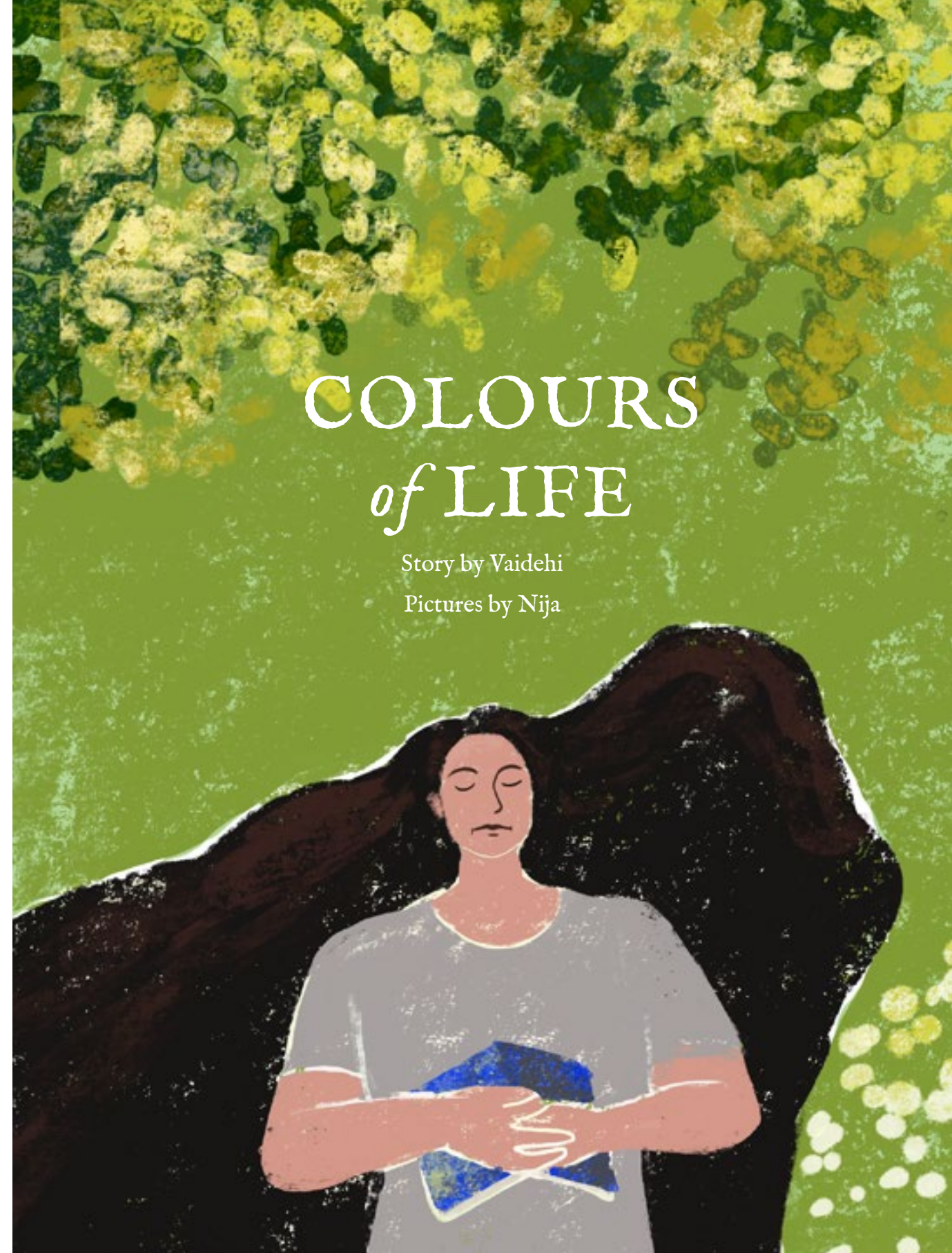
Illustrator:

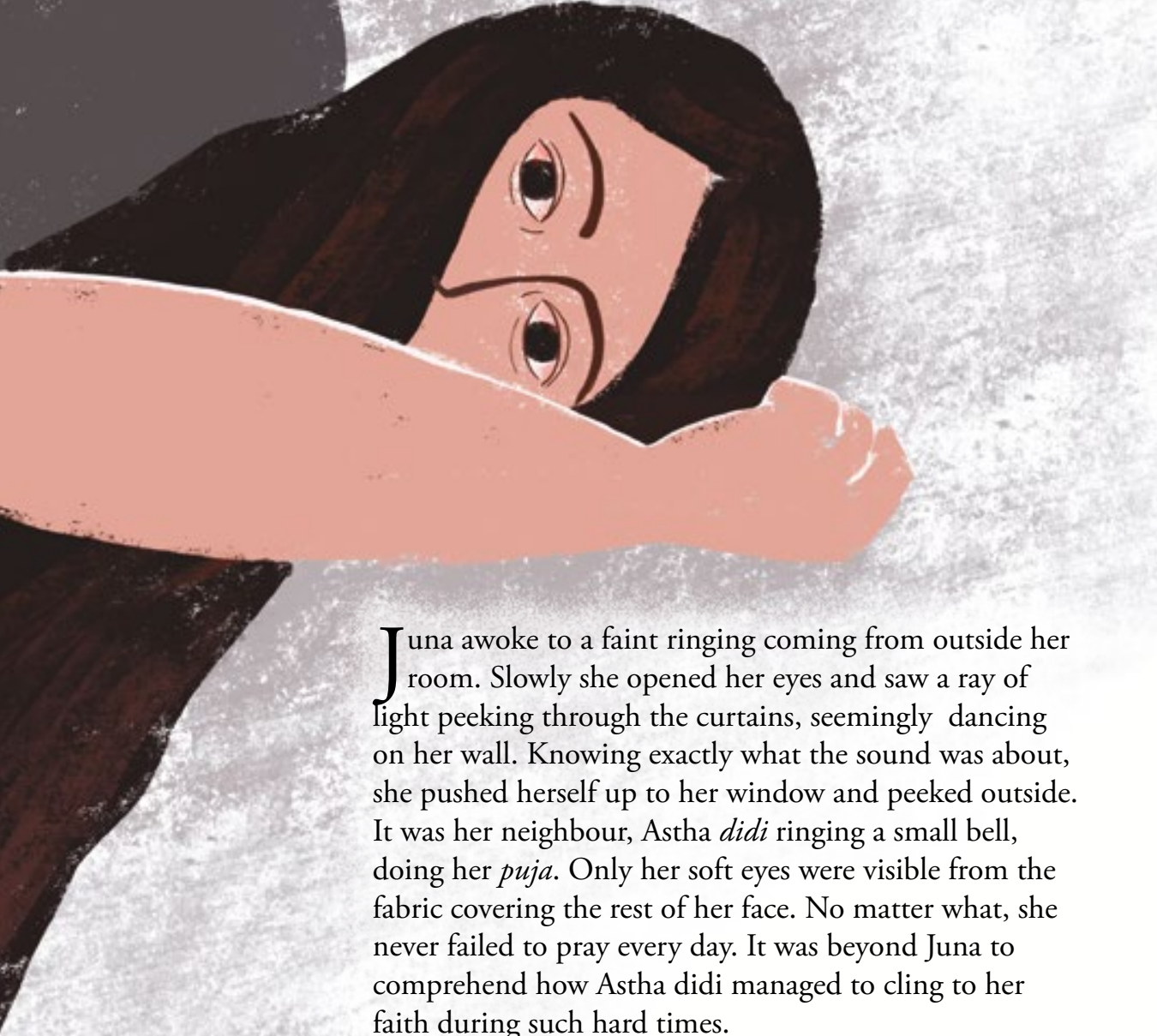
Nija Maharjan is currently pursuing her BFA in Graphics Communications at Kathmandu University. As a Kathmandu-based designer, illustrator and animator, her works strongly reflect her roots and people, places and things around her, which she believes makes her work relatable and approachable. She works both in traditional techniques as well as through digital media. Nija has been involved in education since 2014 and has always been passionate about using arts in education—in designing, teaching and facilitating.

COLOURS *of* LIFE

Story by Vaidehi

Pictures by Nija

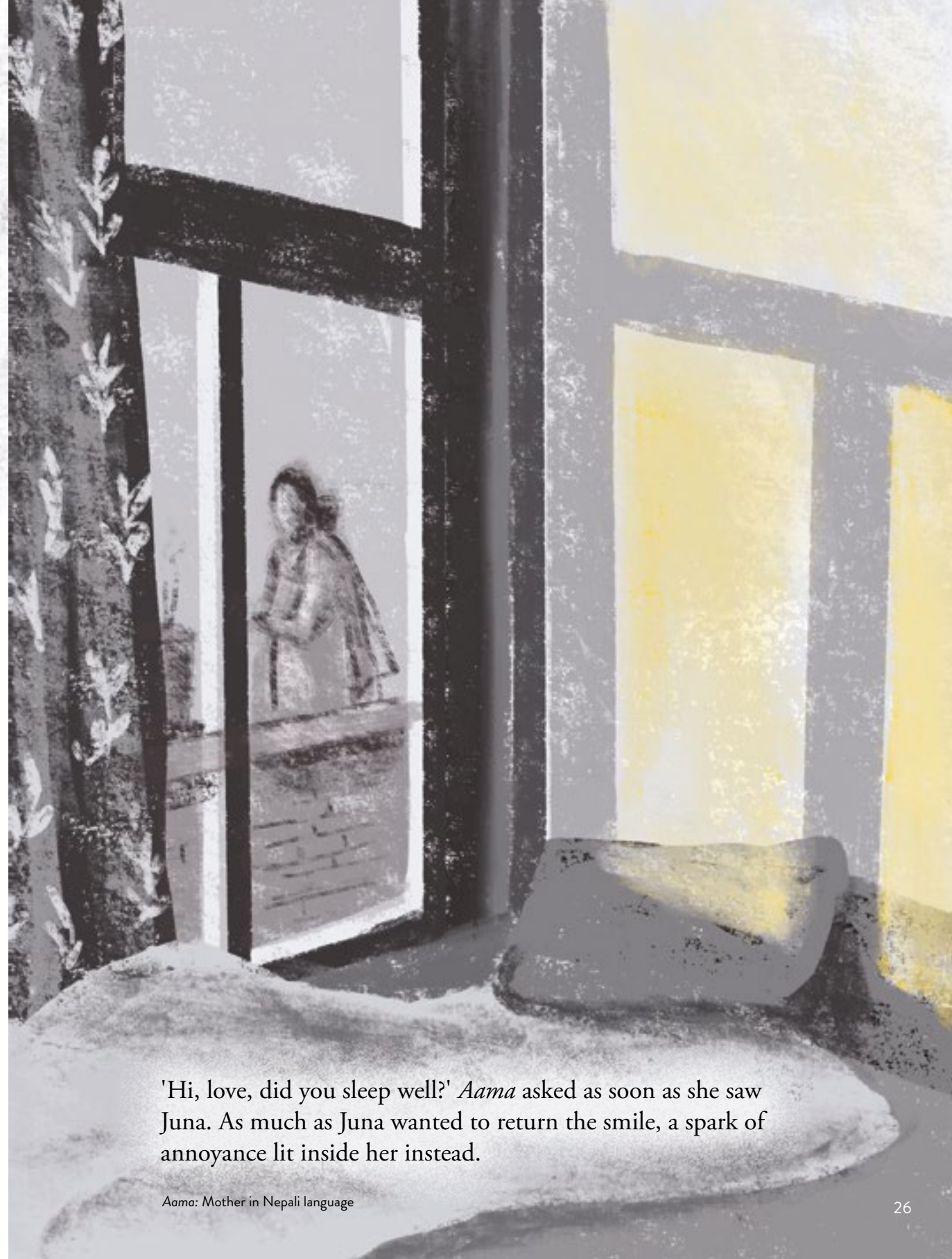




Juna awoke to a faint ringing coming from outside her room. Slowly she opened her eyes and saw a ray of light peeking through the curtains, seemingly dancing on her wall. Knowing exactly what the sound was about, she pushed herself up to her window and peeked outside. It was her neighbour, Astha *didī* ringing a small bell, doing her *puja*. Only her soft eyes were visible from the fabric covering the rest of her face. No matter what, she never failed to pray every day. It was beyond Juna to comprehend how Astha *didī* managed to cling to her faith during such hard times.


As Juna's eyes gazed upwards, she noticed that the sky was a shade of grey. It had been a long time since she had seen it any other way. Recently, the little streaks across the canvas were never bright. Glancing in the mirror, she noticed the puffiness around her eyes and saw that her skin had got greyer, suddenly reminding her of her fight with her *Aama* the night before. Shaking the thought away and giving one final stretch to her body, she carefully carried herself downstairs.

Didi: Translating to 'sister' in Nepali, *didī* is often used as a term of endearment or way to show respect when addressing or talking about women who are older than the addresser, similar to using 'Auntie'.



'Hi, love, did you sleep well?' *Aama* asked as soon as she saw Juna. As much as Juna wanted to return the smile, a spark of annoyance lit inside her instead.

Aama: Mother in Nepali language



'Why is she pretending like she doesn't know that she was the reason I cried myself to sleep last night?' Juna thought to herself.

'Is everything okay? Or are you just grumpy?' *Aama* said.

In fear of losing her temper, Juna gave a quick nod of acknowledgement in *Aama's* direction. Within just a few minutes, she'd grabbed a bite to eat, put on her shoes, put on her mask and swiftly headed outside.

Aama let out a sigh of disappointment.

When things got suffocating at home, Juna liked to go to a little hidden corner in Patan Durbar Square. The entrance to the hidden corner was a small opening in a wall. There was a beautiful tree beyond that wall and its leaves were every shade of green. Small purple butterflies would fly around in excitement when the wind blew. It was a sanctuary of sorts.

However, recently for Juna, the leaves looked pale and the place where she felt most comfortable made her feel lonely. Just then, a girl with a *tungna* emerged from the entrance. Juna noticed that the girl's hair was in a peculiar shade of... blue!


The girl smiled when she saw Juna, and she sat down comfortably opposite Juna.



Without a word, she slowly started playing a tune. Juna was in awe as the atmosphere filled with the most pleasant musical notes she had ever heard.

After a while, the girl finally spoke up breaking Juna from her trance. 'Daya. The name's Daya', she said.





Every day, the two began to meet under the tree. Keeping their distance, Daya would play her *tungna* while Juna would read, draw, or stare up at how the wind made the leaves sway back and forth. The two developed a friendship unlike any other. There were no expectations. The outside world did not matter when they were together.

As days passed by, regardless of where or who Juna was with, she would smile. During sunset, she started seeing strokes of orange paint the sky, the melodious tinkling of the bell as Aastha *didi* did her *puja* and her mother's cheeks flush with colour whenever she laughed.

'So what is the reason behind your smile?' *Aama* asked one day.

'A friend', Juna responded.

On one particular day, after coming home from meeting Daya, Juna stopped by the mirror and took a long look at herself.

A tear fell down her cheek. She smiled as she saw that her hair too had become a peculiar shade of blue.



JOURNEY of LIFE

Journey of Life

Author:

Writing is therapy for **Sheran**, who loves to write about a world where she can disappear into.

Illustrator:

Jyotsna Dhakal uses the process of creating to better understand herself and the world around her. She loves expressing herself visually, primarily through illustrations. Her works are inspired by the magical as well as the mundane, and are made through a combination of traditional and digital mediums. She grew up in Bhaktapur and is currently based in the US.



Story by Sheran

Pictures by Jyotsna



'Life is all about living. No matter what, we must go with the flow. Sometimes, it gives us unexpected surprises, but do not panic. Listen to your heart, use your brain and choose the right path', my grandmother often told me.

She was my best friend. When I was little, she gave me a seed and helped me plant it in our garden.

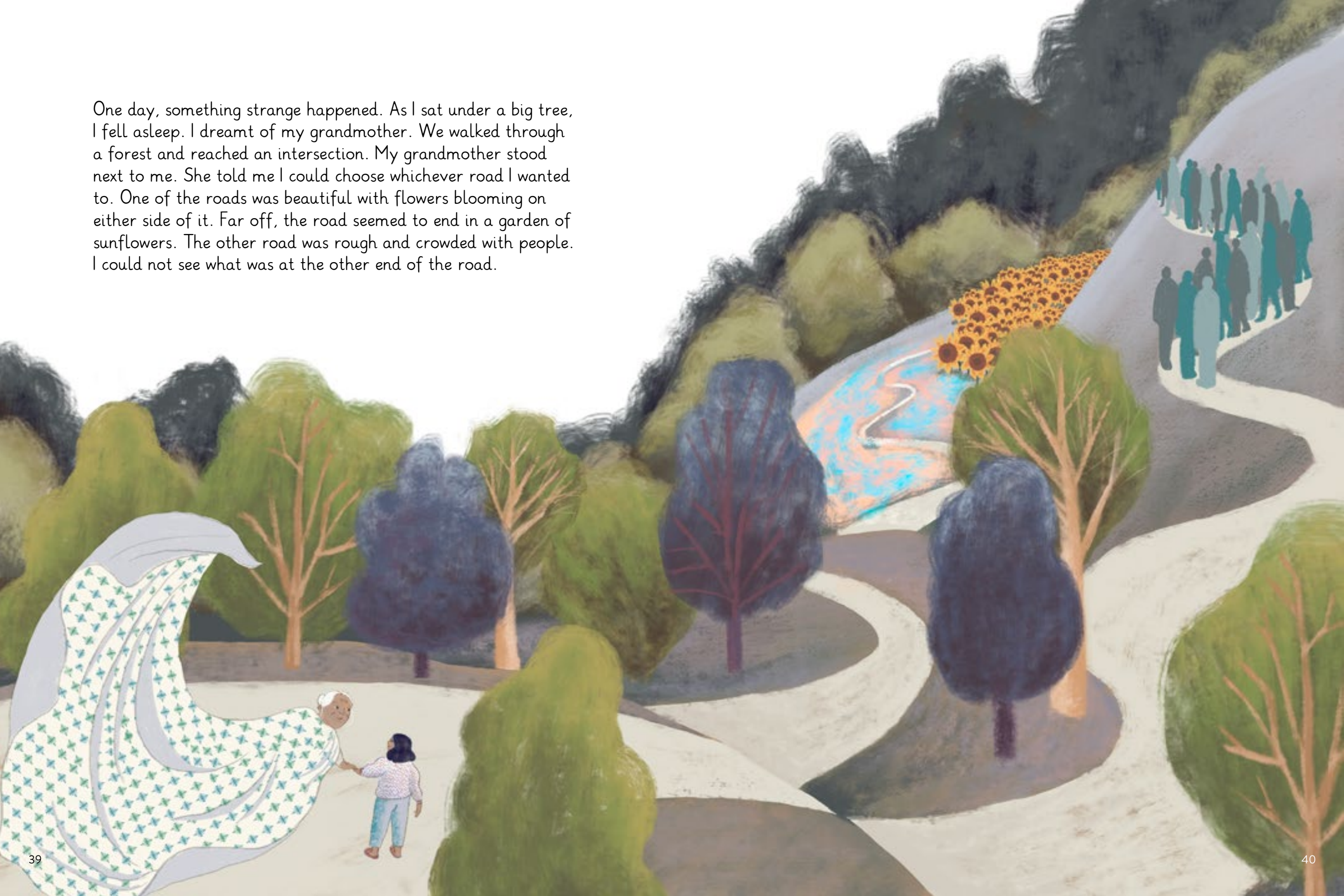
'All you have to do is water this plant until it becomes a tree. And together with this tree, you too will grow', she said with a big smile.



On a cold winter's day, my grandmother passed away. I was devastated. As time passed by, I missed her every day. The seed that I had planted had grown into a tree. I would often go and sit under its shade. It was like sitting with my grandmother and it made me happy.

As I grew up, I realised that I was not ready to face the world. It was terrible growing up as a girl in a society that was so biased. I was judged all the time and I felt suffocated. During such times, I missed my grandmother even more.

One day, something strange happened. As I sat under a big tree, I fell asleep. I dreamt of my grandmother. We walked through a forest and reached an intersection. My grandmother stood next to me. She told me I could choose whichever road I wanted to. One of the roads was beautiful with flowers blooming on either side of it. Far off, the road seemed to end in a garden of sunflowers. The other road was rough and crowded with people. I could not see what was at the other end of the road.



I chose the road with beautiful flowers blooming on either side of it. I walked ahead but surprisingly, there was no smell, no butterflies and no wind. The path was very quiet. By the end of the road, I was alone and scared. I ran back to my grandmother, screaming.

She gave me a handful of seeds. I knew she wanted me to walk the second path now. At the beginning, I was very hesitant. But I knew I could run back to her, and so I walked ahead. There were people on the road who pulled and pushed me. They pointed fingers and laughed at me. I spoke to them and shared my opinions. Some of them listened to me while others ignored me.





As I walked ahead, one by one, I dropped the seeds that my grandmother had given me. They bloomed into flowers. With every step forward, I felt stronger and more confident. By the time I reached the end of the road, I saw that there was a beautiful garden with sweet smelling flowers. The wind was blowing gently, and the butterflies were flying. There were many girls like me who welcomed me with their arms wide open.

I felt safe.

Suddenly, I woke up feeling happy and relaxed. The sun was shining bright, and I could hear little children laughing in the distance.

'Life is all about living. No matter what, we must go with the flow. It sometimes gives us unexpected surprises but never panic. Listen to your heart, use your brain and choose the right path.'

I remembered my grandmother's words. I understood that I had to live my life and fight against all odds. I felt like a warrior, and I knew I would win.



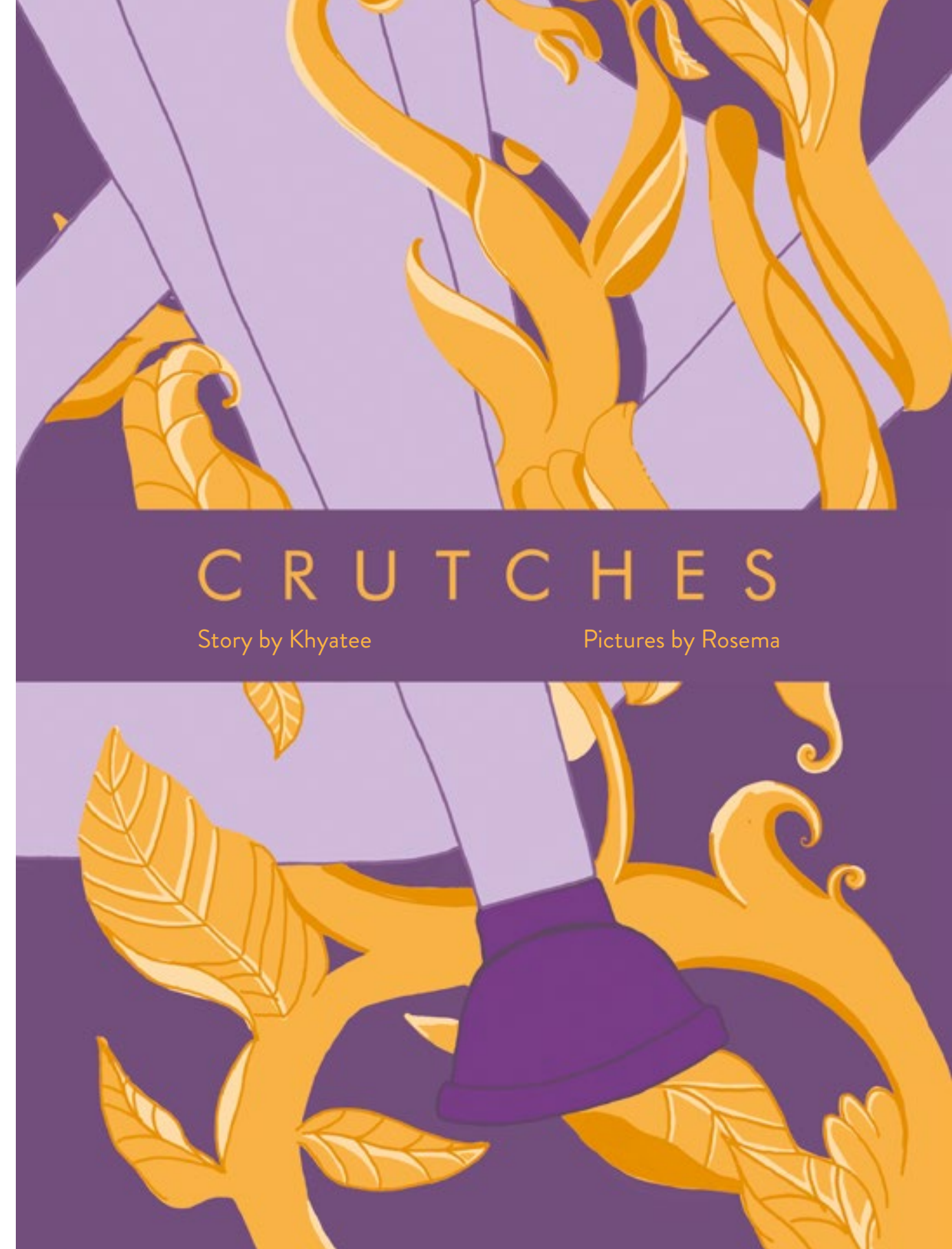
Crutches

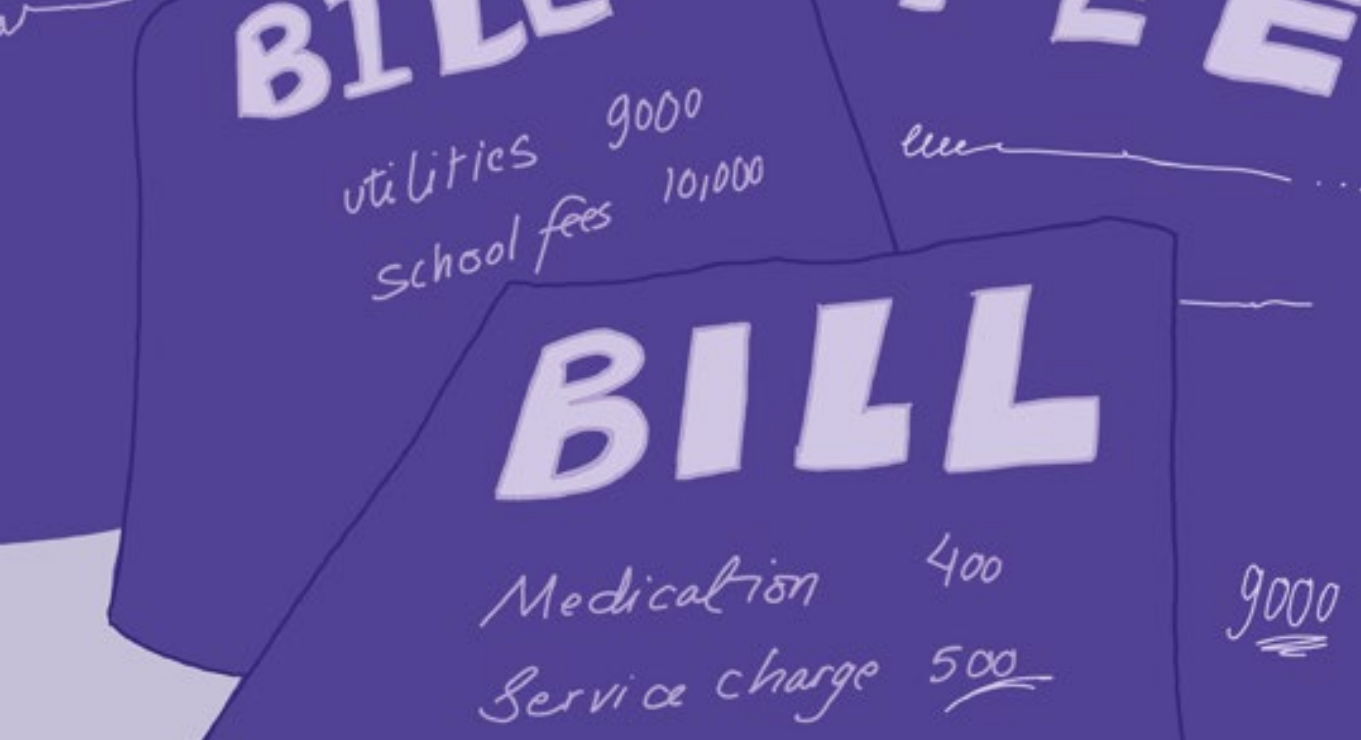
Author:

Khyatee Atolia is a dynamic and passionate teenager. Her interests range from reading, doing science, programming and volunteering to music and art. She is an avid reader and an eloquent writer – having kept a diary for almost five years. Her writings include fiction and self-reflection essays. She is guided by having respect and compassion for all beings.

Illustrator:

Rosema Shakya is an aspiring illustrator based in Lalitpur. She is currently working as a web designer and usually works digitally, but adores traditional methods as well. Her works reflect a sense of light-heartedness and are generally inspired by everyday moments in her life.





With my father having lost his job, money was tight in our household. He had become uncharacteristically short-tempered, and my parents quarrelled almost daily. The environment in the house had become toxic; I found myself walking on eggshells, scared I would trigger another argument. As my parents seemed to have more urgent matters to tend to, I was completely neglected.

As the last rays of sunlight faded, judgemental voices pierced me—reminding me of how miserable my life had become. I felt like an outsider, the misfit in my new online school. The nervousness to speak through a computer screen and the inability to understand lessons summed up remote learning for me. A non-existent social media presence meant that I was unwelcome, and this ruled out all possibilities of making friends. Oh, how I hated the virus!

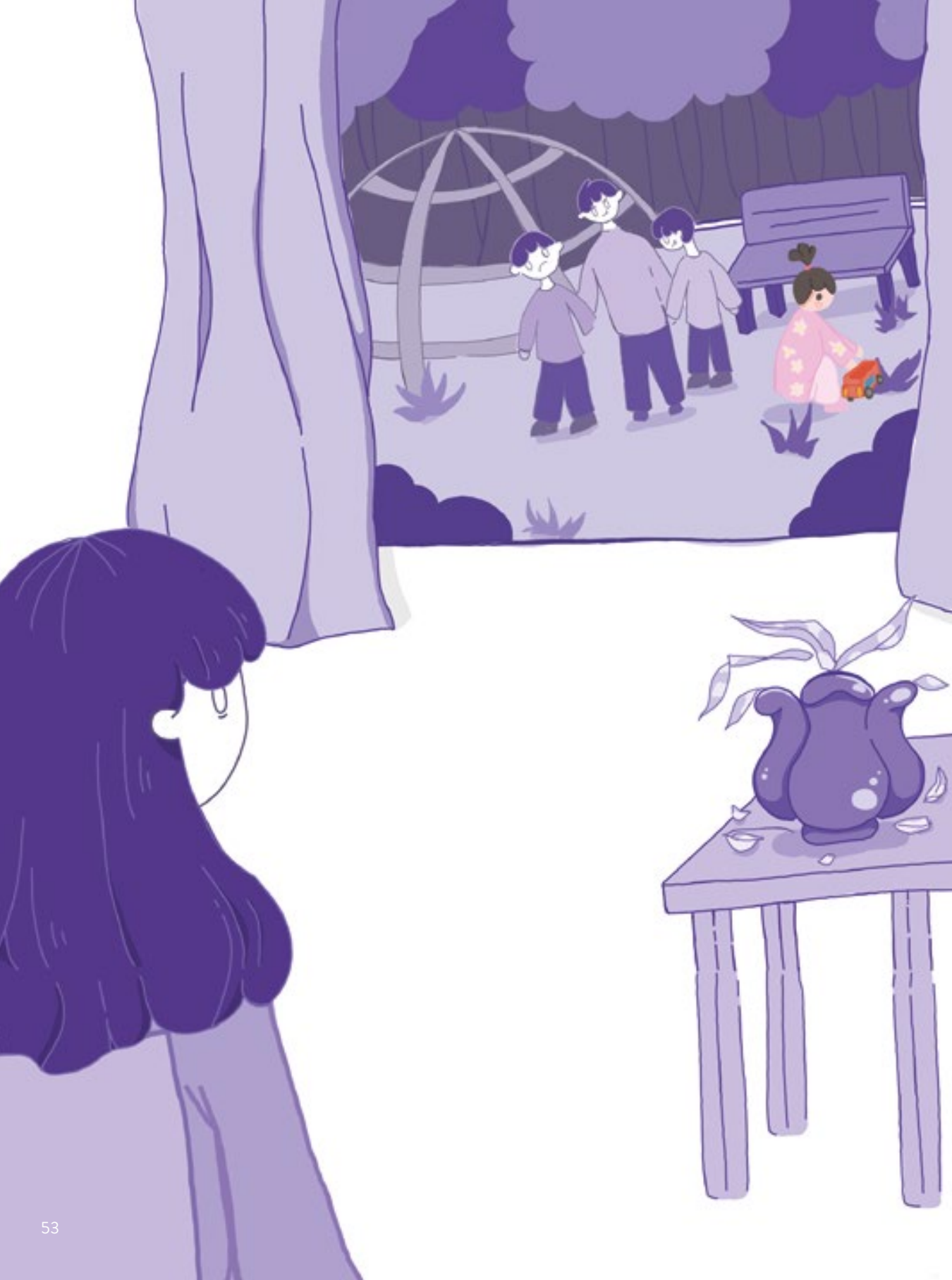




The lockdown made me feel like Rapunzel, confined to the lonesome tower of my room. I started to cry every night because I had so much to say, yet no one to say it to. The loneliness and lack of direction resulted in pain that seemed unbearable to me.

As the days of the quarantine progressed, I stopped eating or speaking. I could see the loneliness slowly consuming me. I rarely got out of bed and performing routine tasks felt like moving mountains. Three months into the lockdown, I was tired and filled with self-deprecating thoughts. You are loathsome. You are good for nothing and no one will ever, ever like you.





One day, while sitting on my bed watching the neighbourhood kids play, a small girl—about five or six years of age—grabbed my attention. She was showing everyone a small toy truck that she had built, with pride evident in her innocent eyes. However, with a cricket match ongoing in the playground, there were not many spectators interested. She went unheard.



I started noticing things I had missed earlier. She was a little shabby, sand sticking to her clothes, untied shoelaces and a spool of saliva drooling from her mouth.

A boy called out to her, 'Trucks are for boys. You are like a boy. Yuck.'

I was shocked. I expected her to be hurt and to retaliate. But to my surprise, she simply did not care. She continued to play, smiling and content in her own little world. The girl simply mumbled something incoherent, smiled and continued admiring her Lego truck as though it was the only thing that mattered in the whole wide world.

I later found out that she was autistic. But that day, all I had seen was a brave little girl, happy, without a care. I thought about it a lot. I kept asking myself: 'Why am I so desperate for others' validation and their company? When that little kid can be happy in her own company, why can't I?' I realised that I was lacking my own Lego truck.





That night, while going to bed, I decided that I was going to make an effort, no matter how small. I spent more time with myself—this time by choice—introspecting. I came out feeling rejuvenated. For the first time, I realised how little I knew about myself. Through a 10-day Vipassana, I journeyed to the root causes of my thoughts and fears. It gave me the space to listen to my emotions. I became more understanding towards my parents and stopped focusing on things that were not in my control.

I started indulging in activities I enjoyed but had forgotten about. I opened myself to the world of the Internet and connectivity. I took up dancing, I learnt Salsa and Zumba through YouTube. Dance helped me release stress and kept me away from negative thoughts. I started reading and books became my best friends. They took me to places out of this world.



Doing these activities—along with making other efforts like attending webinars—I got through the dreadful quarantine period. But I think what really helped me was the realisation that in the end, no one was going to be there for me except myself. I was hoping for someone to come and save me, but I learned that Rapunzel never needed a prince. All she needed was a pair of scissors. I have now stopped suffering from loneliness, and I enjoy my solitude instead. I realised I am complete.

I am my own superheroine and you too can be yours.

Heroine

Author:

Lavanyaa Nepal is a young creative girl with an interest in arts, fashion, dance and literature. Learning new things is also a passion of hers. She can talk for hours about the things she loves and is quite an extrovert.

Illustrator:


Alina Chhantel is a freelance illustrator and a researcher. Inspired by everyday life, she likes to explore and experiment with different media to create visual narratives. Her journey began with her first book project, *Daring to Dream: Sherpa Women Climbing K2* (2020). Since then, she has worked on projects including children's books, digital magazines, colouring books, and recently, in animation.

HEROINE

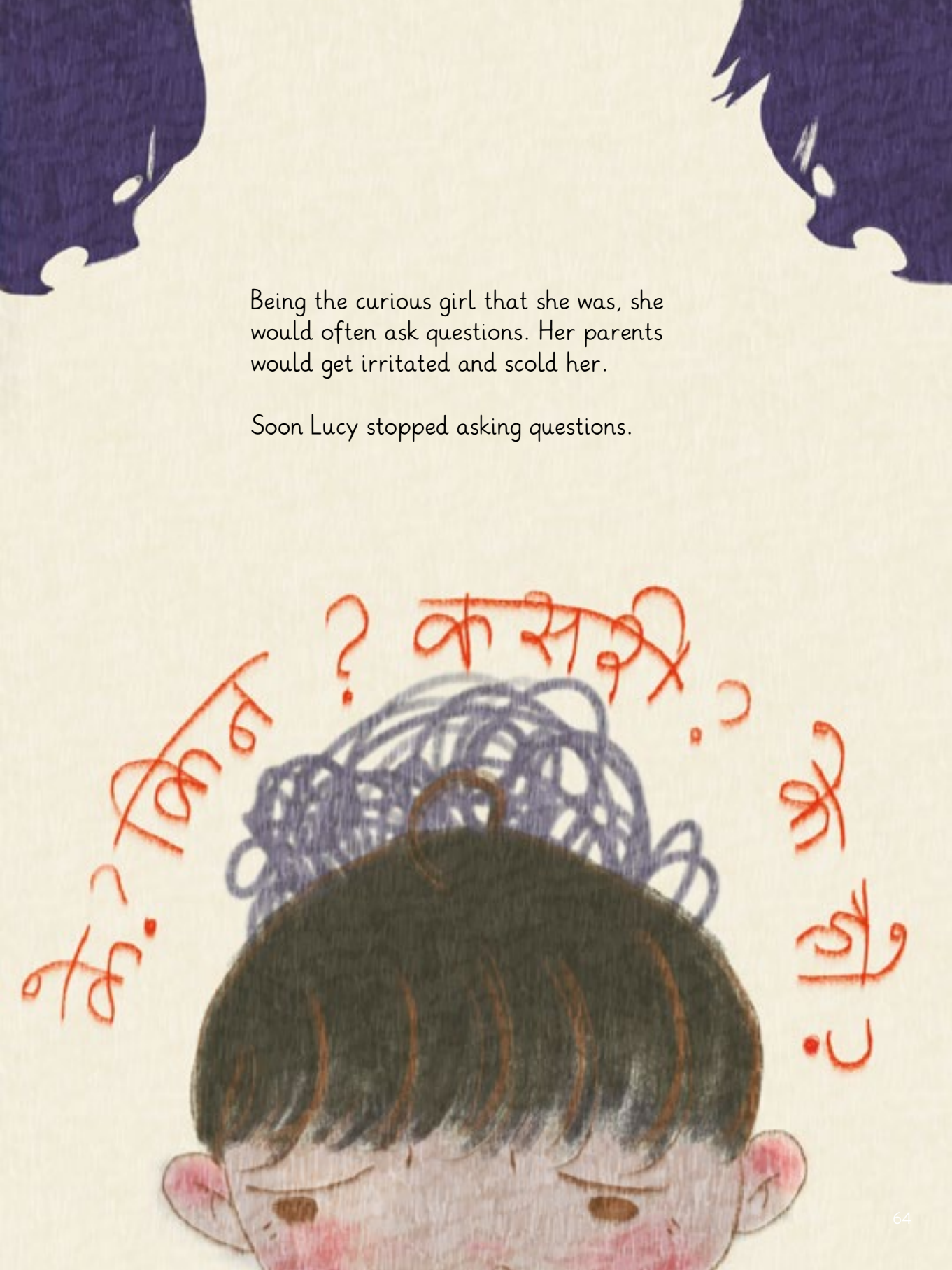
Story by Lavanyaa

Pictures by Alina





Lucy was an inquisitive eight-year-old girl who loved reading books and learning new things.



Being the curious girl that she was, she would often ask questions. Her parents would get irritated and scold her.

Soon Lucy stopped asking questions.

During winter vacation, her elder sister Mary came home from her hostel. She had brought an award with her. 'To our Heroine', the award read.

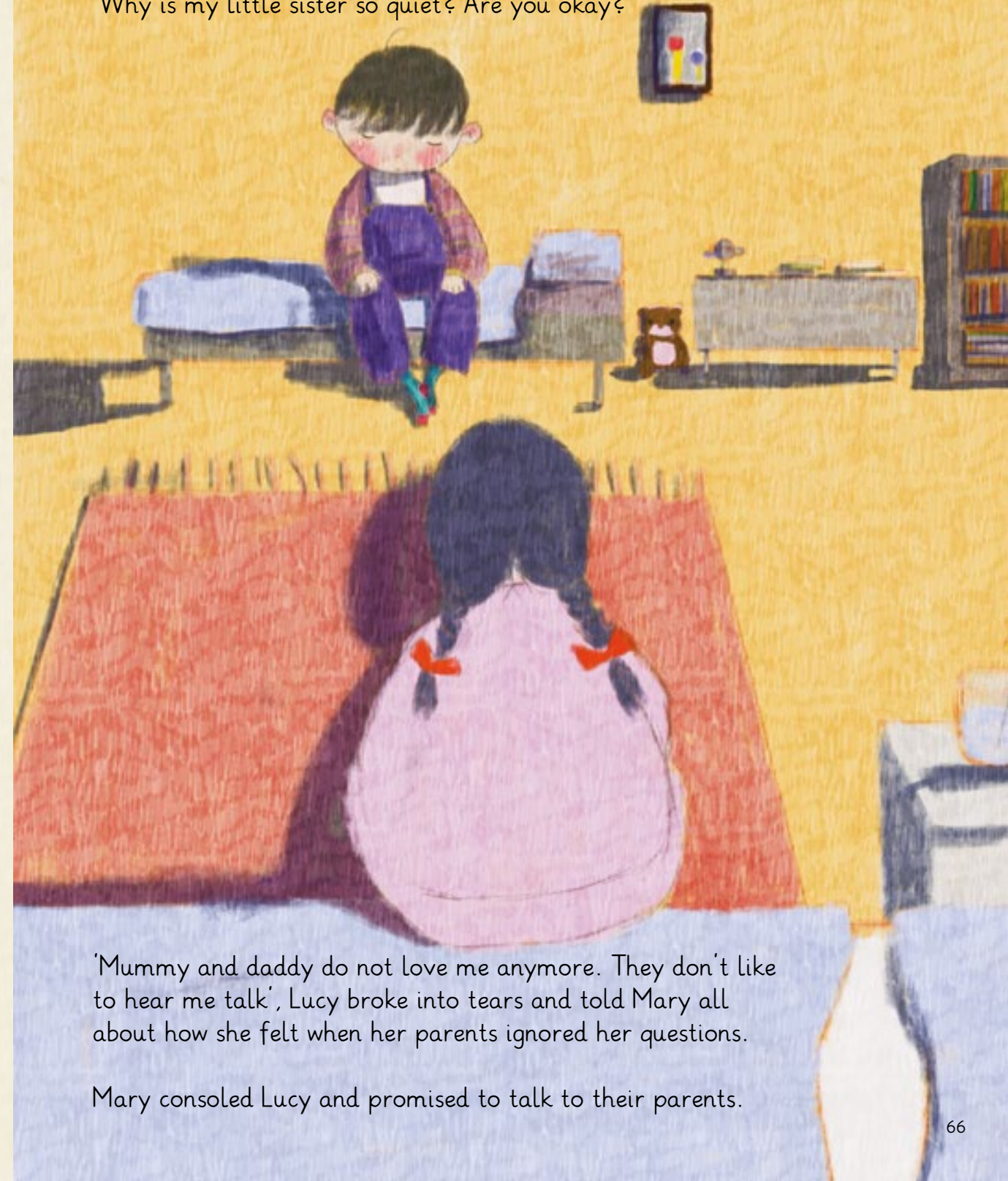


'Heroine? Heroines are girls who act in movies and Mary was not a heroine', Lucy thought to herself.

Lucy wanted to ask a lot of questions about the award, but she was scared that her parents would scold her.



After dinner, when the two sisters were in their room, Mary asked, 'Why is my little sister so quiet? Are you okay?'



'Mummy and daddy do not love me anymore. They don't like to hear me talk', Lucy broke into tears and told Mary all about how she felt when her parents ignored her questions.

Mary consoled Lucy and promised to talk to their parents.



The next day, they all went to the park.
A boy was beating a puppy.

Lucy grabbed the stick from
the boy and threw it away.
She shouted at him for
beating the dog.



She then picked up the puppy
and caressed it.



Just then, the owner of the puppy came looking for it.
He thanked Lucy and took the puppy away.



Later that night, when everyone was together, Mary said, 'I am so proud to have Lucy as my sister. What I like most about her is that she questions everything. That is a great quality. But I can see that she has changed so much. She does not talk and ask questions like she used to.'



Her parents understood what Mary was trying to say and they apologised.

'We love you, Lucy. You could have talked to us about your feelings. How could we understand without being told? You must speak up when you think something is wrong. Just like you did today at the park', her parents said as they hugged her.

'Yes, Lucy did something wonderful today and she deserves this award. You are a heroine as well', Mary said handing over her award to Lucy.

'How can we be heroines?' Lucy finally asked.

'Because heroines are bold, understanding, confident and caring. Just like you were today', replied Mary.



'And like you too, Mary. You understood my feelings and also helped mummy and daddy understand. You must have done something similar at your school to get this award', Lucy said.

'That's right. And do you know what the best part is? Just like you and me, any girl can be a heroine', said Mary.

Lucy thought of all the girls and women she knew who were heroines in real life, including her mother. She hugged her mother.



The white ceiling above me !

Author:

Kajol hopes that her stories inspire others to love themselves and accept their realities. She is a teenager whose stories are reflections of her struggles. She hopes her stories help others to cope with and overcome their own struggles.

Illustrator:

Rimishna Manandhar spends her office hours in architecture. Everything else she does is to break the monotony. Experiencing, learning and making art is one of them. She is fascinated with everything mundane to extraordinary. She expresses a lot of her musings through her instagram account.

the white ceiling above me



Story by
Kajol

Pictures by
Rimishna

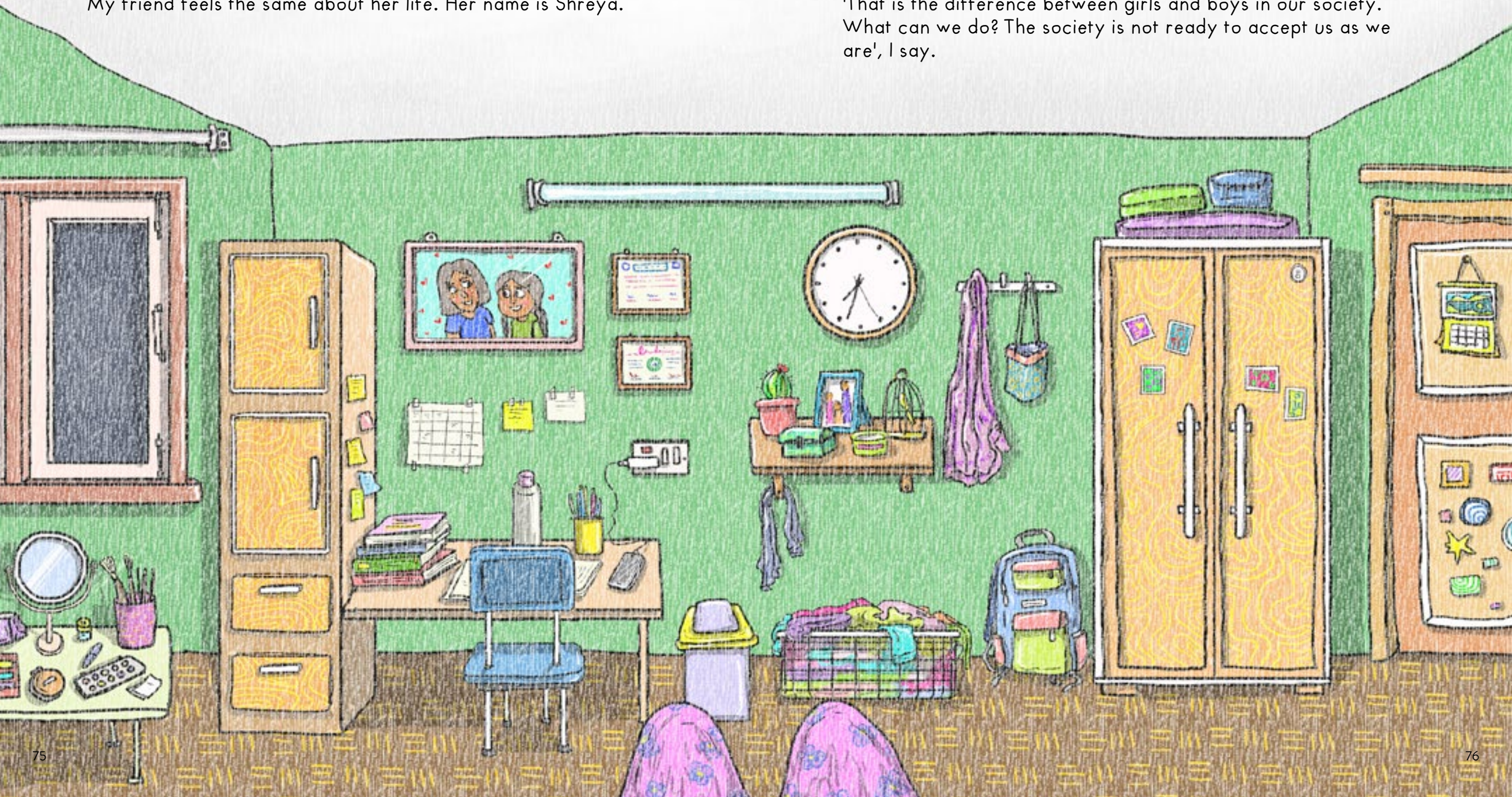
I lay in my bed in my room staring at the ceiling above me.
It was white and plain.

'How boring', I thought.

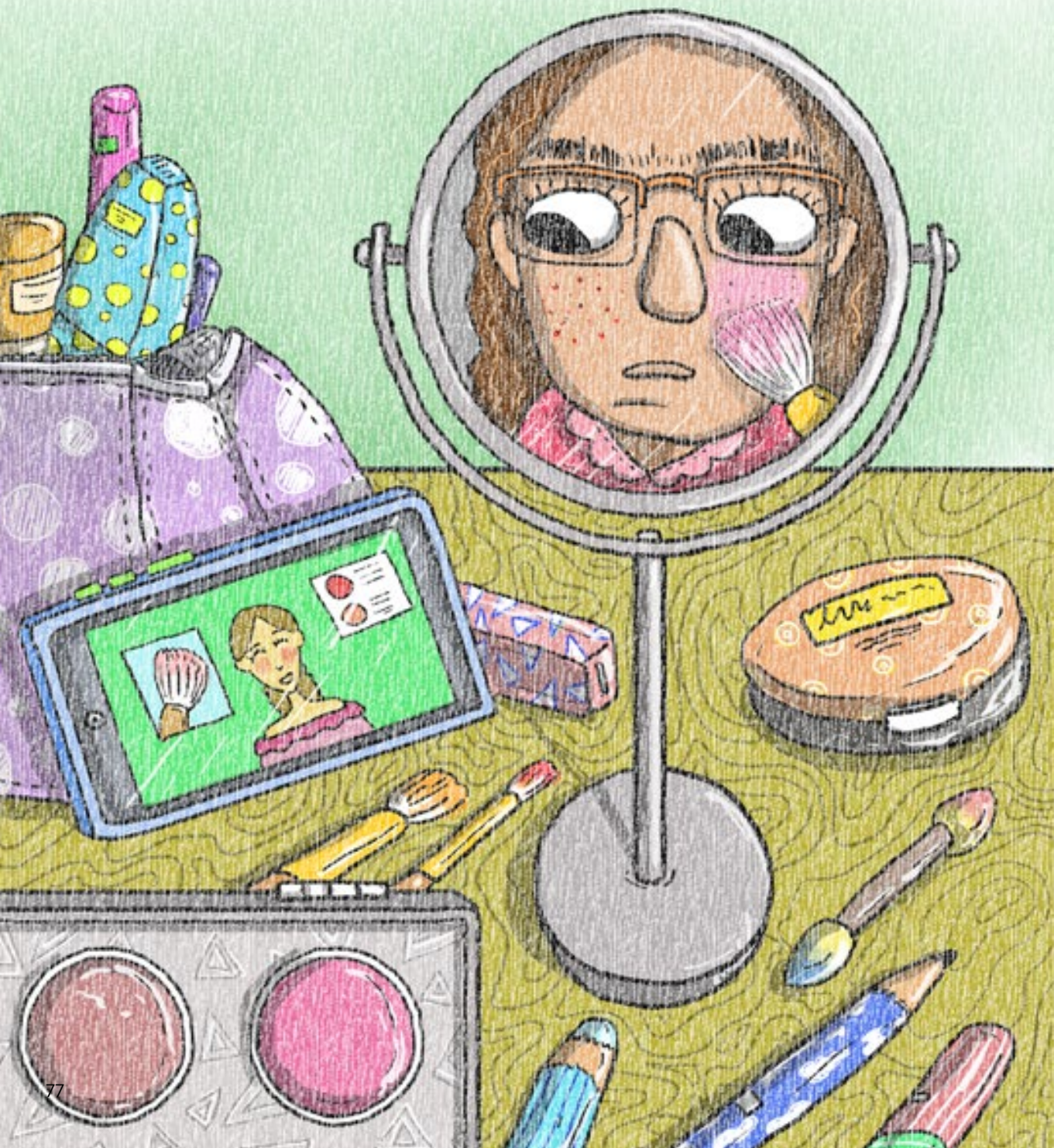
My friend feels the same about her life. Her name is Shreya.

'I envy my brother. He has so much freedom. He can go wherever he wants to. He returns home after seven in the evening. He can wear whatever he feels like. But my life is very plain and boring', Shreya often complains.

'That is the difference between girls and boys in our society. What can we do? The society is not ready to accept us as we are', I say.

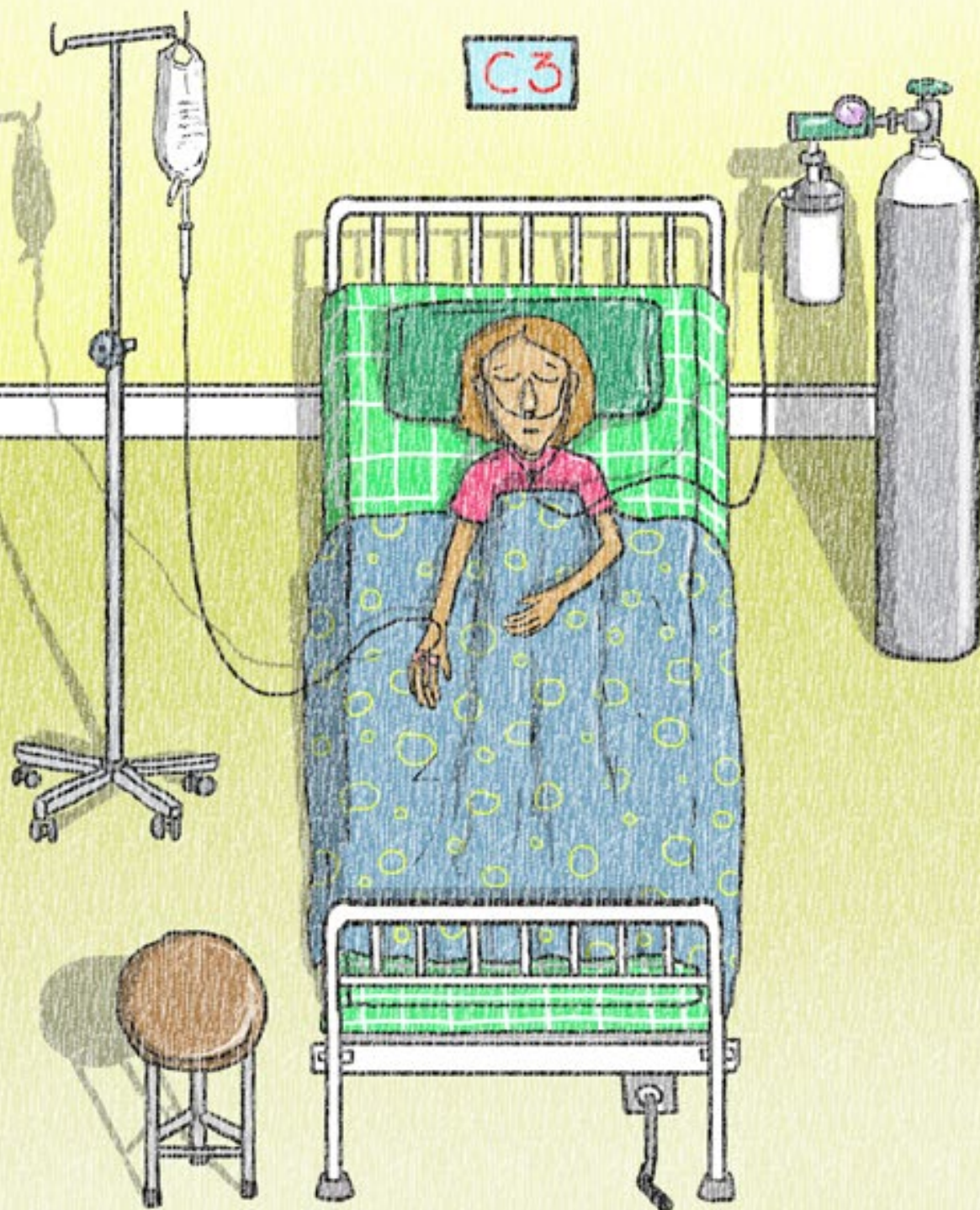


I too have similar thoughts like Shreya. I am embarrassed about my weight, my un-shapely brows and my nerdy glasses. I spend hours on the internet trying to learn how to apply makeup, how to cover a pimple or how to pose in front of the camera like a model.



One day, I got a call from Shreya. 'These people whom I don't even know on social media are commenting on my looks. Some of them hate me. I cannot live like this anymore. I wish I was dead', she sobbed.

We planned to meet, and we went for a walk in the park. We discussed our insecurities and how quickly people judge others.



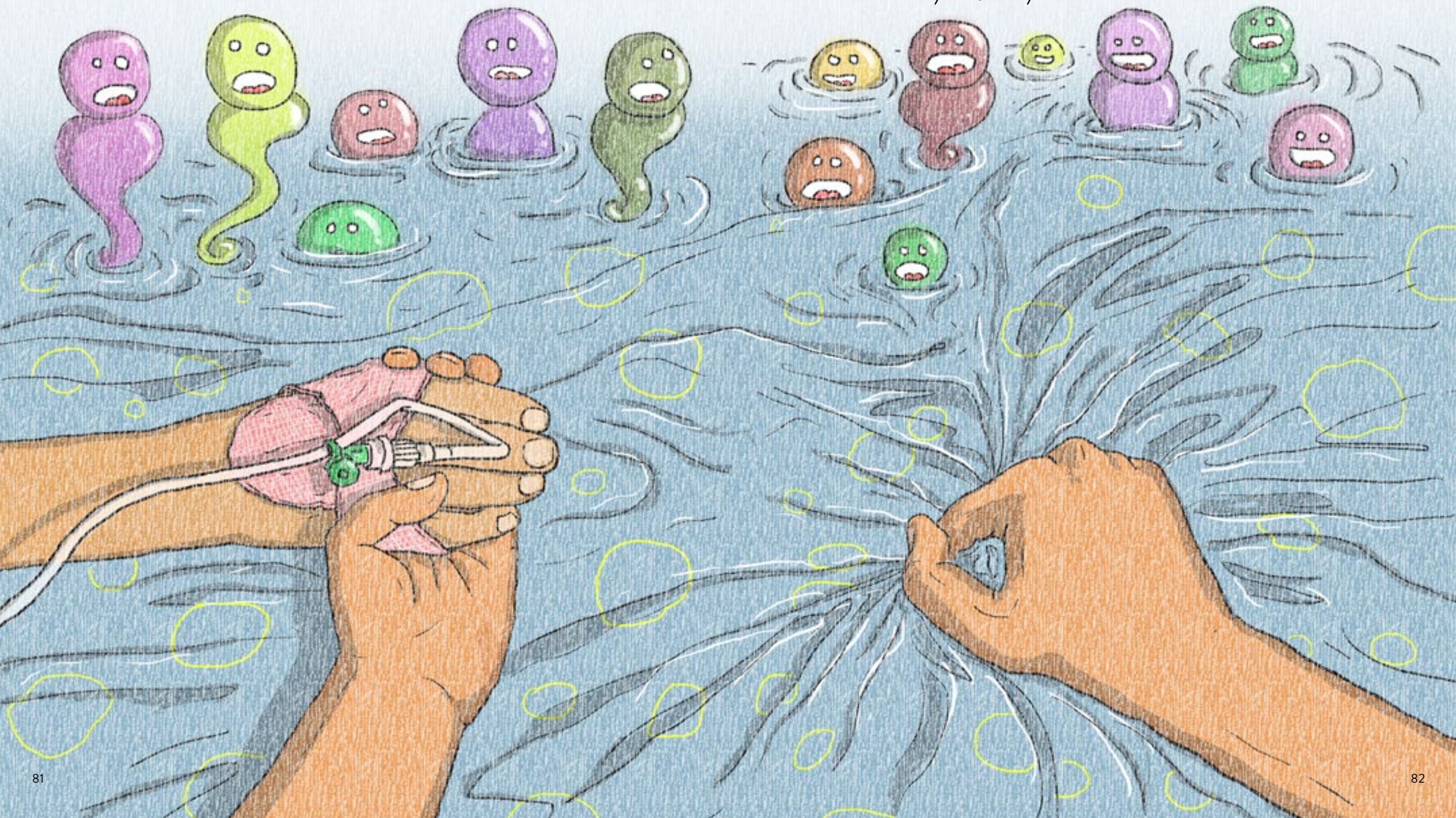
One day, I got a call and the news shocked me. Shreya had attempted suicide. Her brother had found her unconscious in the bathroom and had immediately drove her to the hospital. Shreya was saved just in the nick of time.

My parents and I went to the hospital. There, I saw my dear friend lying in bed with a needle in her arm and a pipe running through her nose. She looked so pale. I broke into tears. Her parents were nearby, sobbing. My parents were trying to console them. I looked at them. What would happen to our parents if we died? I thought to myself.

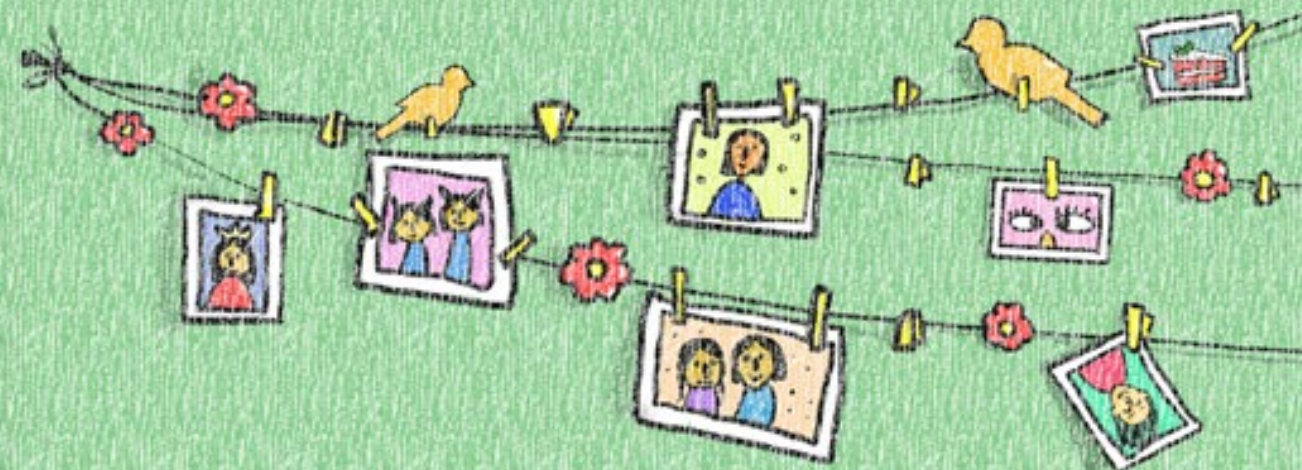
I was suddenly very angry at Shreya. What would she have achieved by ending her life? Would those haters on social media or her enemies feel pity for her? Absolutely not. They would have another reason to blame her even more.

'Oh what a coward. She must have had an affair. Or maybe she was pregnant, and her parents found out. She must have killed herself to save herself from shame.'

That is what they would say.



When I returned home, I realised I was no different than Shreya. I was always seeking approval from others. Sometimes from people that I didn't even know. I would often cry my eyes out for someone who didn't even deserve it. I spent most of my time comparing myself to others.



I realised that we could not change how other people look at us. But we can certainly change how we look at ourselves. We have one life to live and why waste it worrying about others?

I lay in my bed looking at the ceiling above me. It was white and blank. I could colour it in any colour that I wanted. I knew what colour it would be. I smiled.

Concealed !

Author:

Shreya Dhital's mother approached her with a choice of books. Reluctantly, she picked a blue one with a hardcover. With the sass of a mildly discontent six-year-old, she read the words on its cover: 'The Magic Faraway Tree by Enid Blyton'. A week later, she finished the entire series. She fell in love with the magic that words are able to create. To further explore the world of words that strings together meaningful sentences and captivating stories, Shreya began her journey as a writer.

Illustrator:

Swornim Shakya is a 24-year-old digital artist based in Kathmandu. He has been creating digital art professionally for a year now and his approach focuses on depicting emotions of characters as well as observing and understanding figures and the environment. He believes that works which are created with true and honest emotions are likely to reach out to others as well.

CONCEALED

Story by Shreya

Pictures by Swornim



I am sure no student has ever been alright on their first day at a new school. I am no exception, except that my anxiety is probably a thousand times worse than that of others.

Pounding heart? Check. Rapid breathing? Check. Fumbling steps? Check.

Walking into the school building, I pull on the sleeves of my jacket, bringing the cuffs to my fingers. I repeat my mantra in my head:

Do not let them see. Do not let them know.





When a girl in class asks me to sit next to her, I freeze.

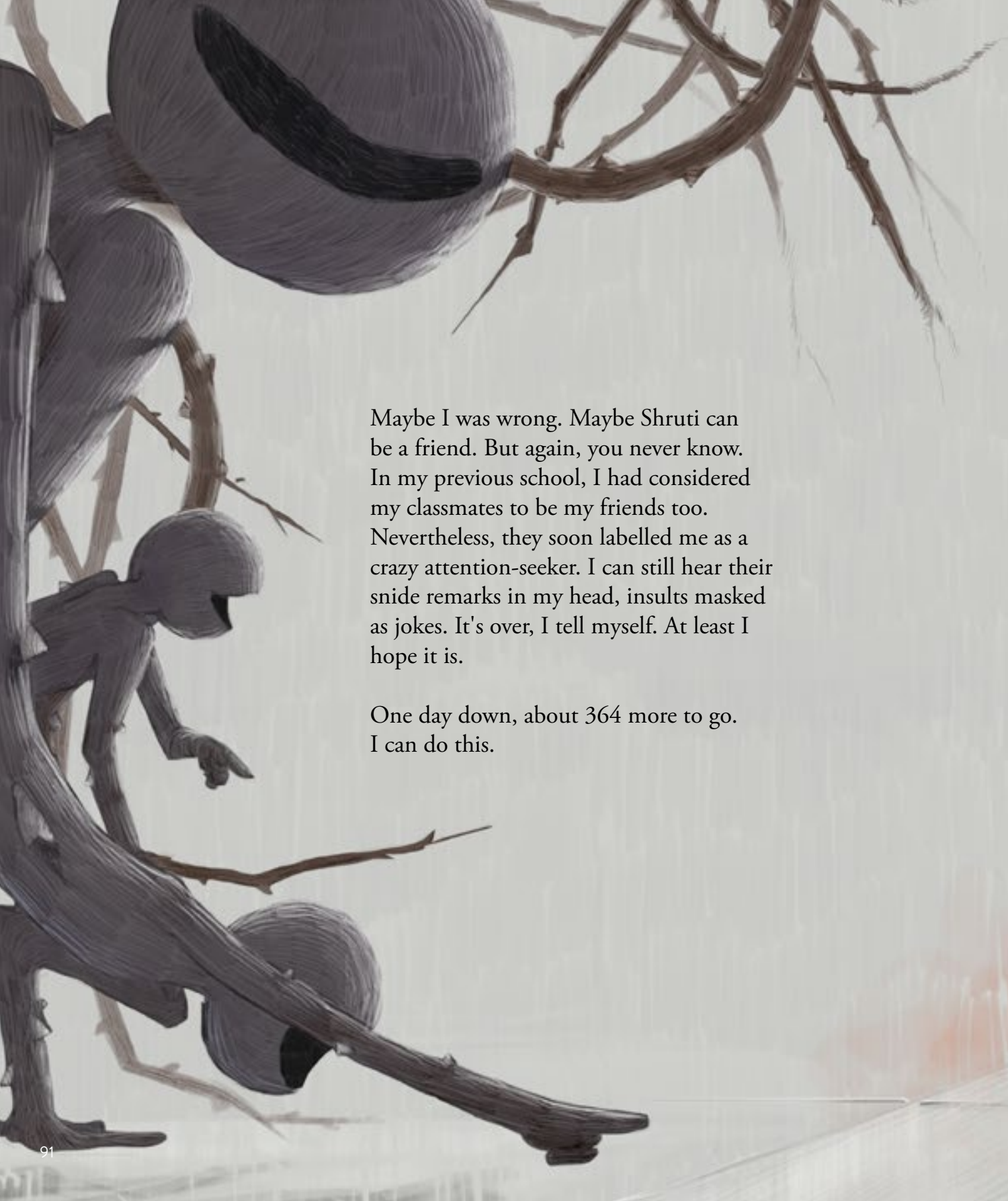
How am I supposed to make a friend after everything that happened?

I stammer an 'OK' and sit down, wondering what I am supposed to say next. Thank her for saving me a seat? Introduce myself? Crack a joke?

Before I open my mouth to make a fool of myself, she introduces herself as Shruti. I murmur my name hoping I don't look as nervous as I feel.

'Kalashree', Shruti repeats. 'I love your name. It's so unique.'

I look at her and she smiles.



Maybe I was wrong. Maybe Shruti can be a friend. But again, you never know. In my previous school, I had considered my classmates to be my friends too. Nevertheless, they soon labelled me as a crazy attention-seeker. I can still hear their snide remarks in my head, insults masked as jokes. It's over, I tell myself. At least I hope it is.

One day down, about 364 more to go. I can do this.

The next day, I walk to class with my eyes glued to the white floor tiles. I ignore the murmurs in the hall and try to focus on the soft thuds of my shoes. Even though the rational part of me knew that the others wouldn't be talking about me, I couldn't help but wonder if they were.

My fingers clutch tighter at the material against my wrist. *Do not let them see. Do not let them know. Do not* – Slam! I crash into a wall, lose my balance and fall. Ugh! What could be more embarrassing? I'm absolutely mortified.



The wall – Miss Preeti, the class teacher – gasps as her eyes fall on the raised scars on my wrist. I quickly pull my sleeves lower and look away.

My heart tries to beat out of my chest while the adrenalin in my veins screams at me. *Run! Run and do not look back, because if you do, you will either be judged or be an object of pity!* Both of which are worse than the other.

'I'm sorry. I wasn't looking.' I focus on my boots, refusing to meet her eyes.



'I'd like a word with you.' She leads me to an empty classroom.

I silently follow, analysing her tone. I dig my fingers in my palms and the slight pain from my nails do not even register in my mind. *I tried. I tried to stay away from their judgement. Moving, changing schools, it was all for nothing. They saw. They know.*

'Please take a seat.' Her voice breaks through my thoughts.
'Kalashree, Miss Heena is the school counsellor. I'd like you to meet her.'

And that does it. Just those kind words uttered with genuine concern changes my life for the second time. But this time, it is for the better.

In the counsellor's office, even with its bare walls and cold furniture, I find something that I had never found before. Something many of us take for granted. *Companionship and hope.*



About 364 days later, it is my first day in college. I am nervous and my heart races, but my chin is up. My breathing is fast but my lips curve in a smile.

I am alright.



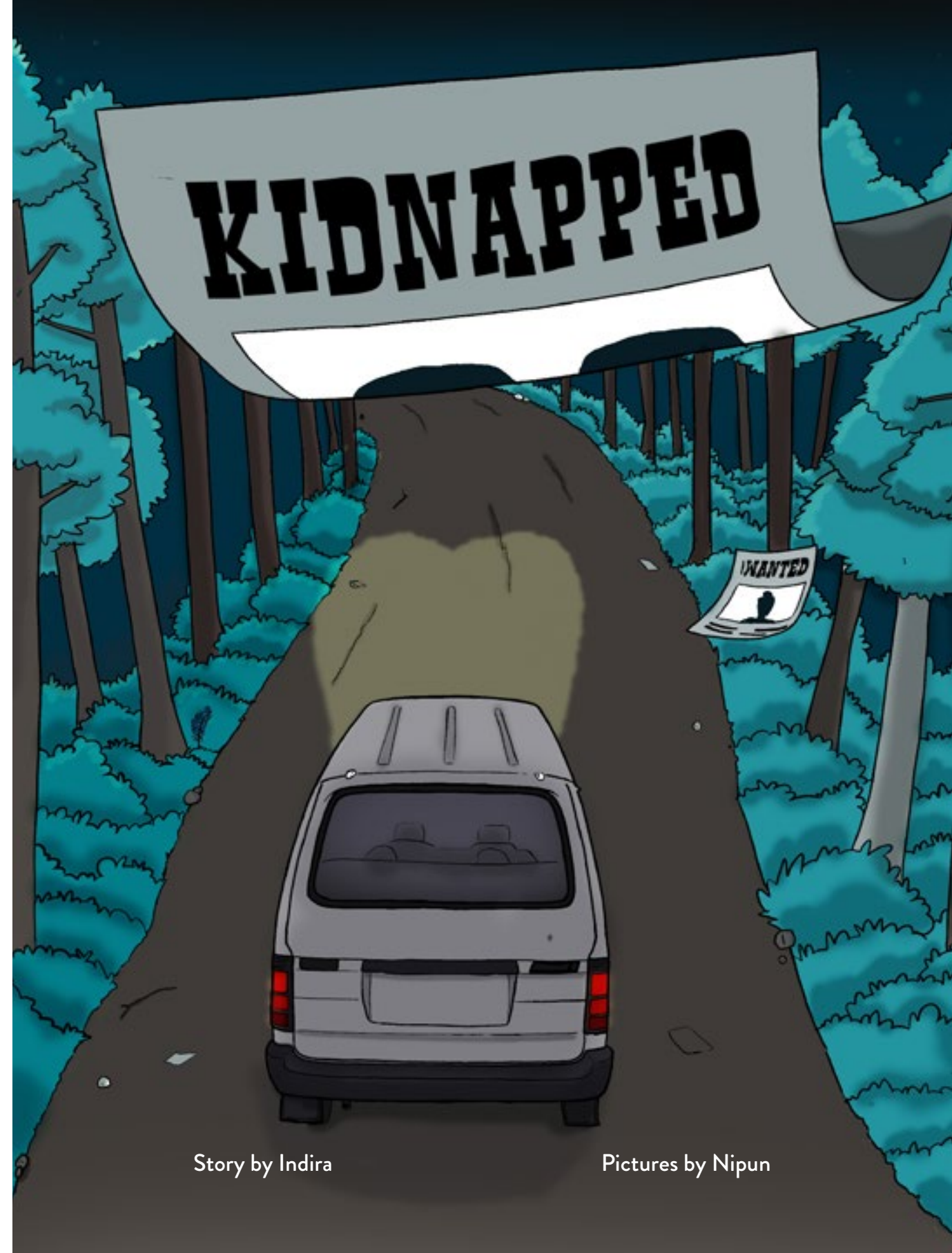
Kidnapped

Author:

For **Indira**, life is an adventure. Instead of running away, she prefers to face things as they come. She is what she is; she is what she was yesterday. Indira is a simple girl who is always learning and can turn any situation into a happy moment. She is zestful and likes conversations. She does not like making rash decisions. She loves spending time with her friends and family, cycling, travelling, hiking and doing tae kwon do. She also enjoys painting, writing stories and poems and reciting them, and presenting her views through various media.

Illustrator:

Nipun Bajracharya is a graphic designer and an illustrator. He grew up in Patan, so his favorite thing is cycling through the familiar alleys and discovering new courtyards. He enjoys finding typos in restaurant menus and collects original typography on hoarding boards and walls from all over the country. Everything he draws and designs is in competition with his imagination. He hopes, someday, for the former to win.



Story by Indira

Pictures by Nipun



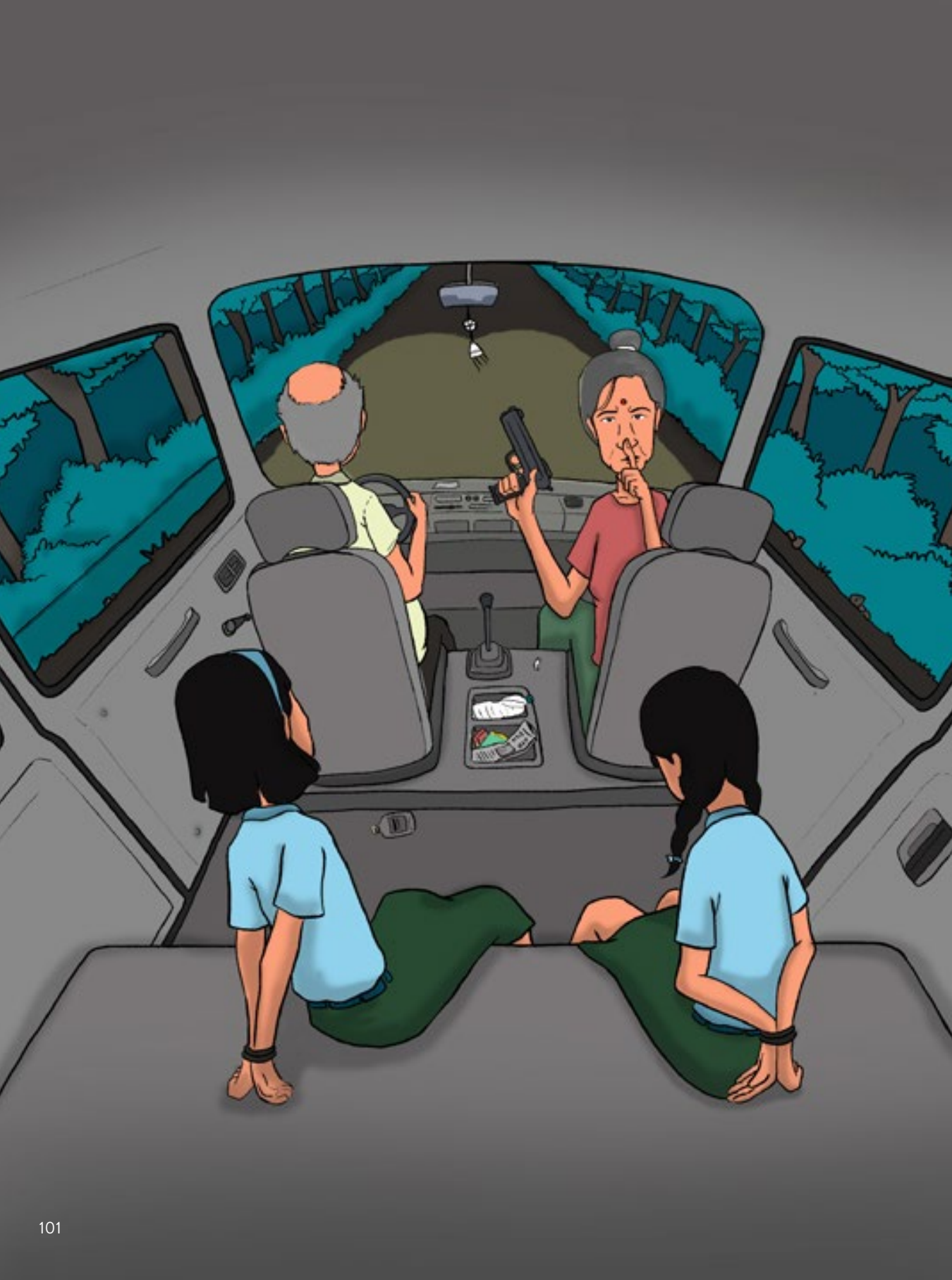
Sweetie and Misty were best friends. One day, when they were returning home from school, they walked into the nearby woods and got lost. Sweetie began to cry.

‘Do not cry, Sweetie. We must never panic when we are in trouble. We should rather find a solution to our problem.’ Misty tried to console her friend.

They walked for a while and saw a little hut. A woman lived there.

‘Do not worry. Eat something and sleep here tonight. I will take you back home early tomorrow morning’, the woman said.





Both girls ate the food and soon fell asleep. When they woke up, they found themselves in the back-seat of a car. Their hands and feet were tied up. They were terrified and began to shout for help.

‘Shut up, you two!’ Suddenly they heard the woman shout.

‘These two will get us a good amount, won’t they?’ She said to the man driving the car as they both laughed.

‘We’ve been kidnapped’, Misty whispered. Sweetie began to cry, and so did Misty.

After a while, the car stopped by the side of the highway. ‘Do not even think of running away or shouting for help. You see this gun? We will shoot you with it right away’, the old lady said, showing a shiny, black gun.



The girls were terrified. They followed the man and the woman to a small tea shop. They sat at a table and ordered some food from the menu.

‘Can we please use the toilet?’ Misty asked softly.

The woman took the girls to the toilet one at a time and waited outside the door. After eating, they went back to the car and the woman tied the girls up again.

‘What will happen to us? I’ve heard so many stories about girls getting kidnapped and being sold. They might even sell our organs!’ Sweetie sobbed.

After a while, the car stopped. There was a man lying in the middle of the road. There was blood around him. There was a suitcase near him that was open, and money was scattered on the road.



‘It’s our lucky day’, said the driver as he and the woman got out of the car. They started collecting the money.

‘Put your hands up!’ Suddenly, policemen jumped out from behind the trees on both sides of the road and surrounded them. Before the driver and the woman could understand anything, they were arrested.



You’re safe now. Don’t worry.’ The girls heard a soft voice, and to their surprise, they saw Anuradha Koirala standing by the side of the car. Sweetie and Misty had read about her in school. She was a social activist who helped save girls from being sold. She was also a CNN hero.



'You two are so brave and clever. We were able to follow you because you asked for help and wrote down the car number on the wall of the toilet', Anuradha Koirala said as she hugged the girls.

Sweetie was surprised to hear that. She looked at Misty. Misty winked at Sweetie smilingly. Sweetie realised that Misty had done that when she had gone to the toilet.



'I am so proud to have a friend like you. You are my hero, Misty.' Sweetie said, and the two friends hugged each other.



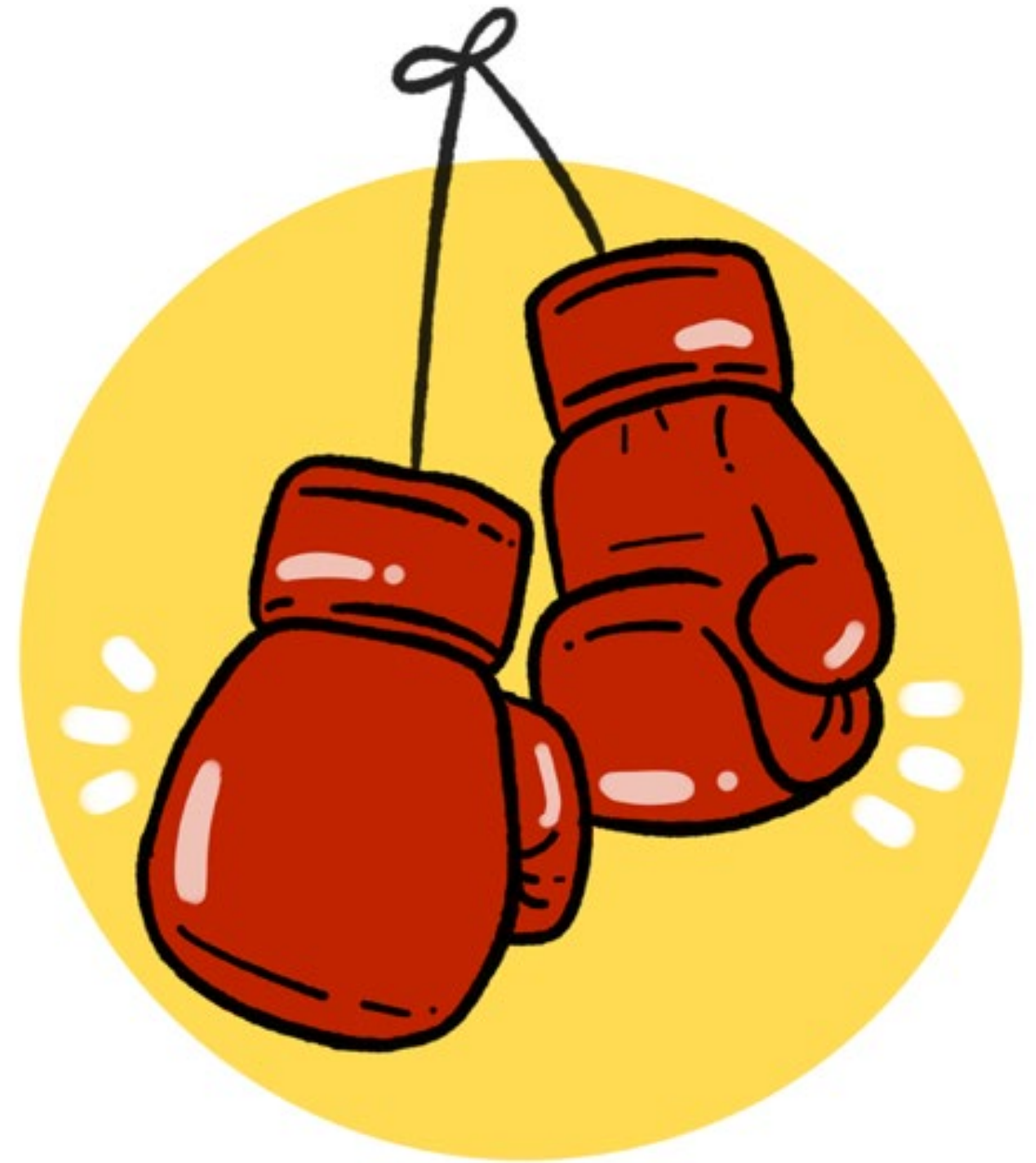
Success beyond failure

Author:

Ashreena has a sweet personality and a strong imagination. Creative writing is one of her strengths. She enjoys spending time watching movies, web serials, cooking, reading, playing sports – basketball, badminton and football are her favourites – and travelling. She also loves dancing.

Illustrator:

Sneha Thapa Magar is an artist based in Kathmandu. She currently works as a content developer for a multinational insurance company. When she's not working, she enjoys creating comics for her page. She also loves baking and runs an indie home bakery.



SUCCESS BEYOND FAILURE

Story by Ashreena

Pictures by Sneha



This is a story of a girl named Arshiya. Her father was a retired national level boxer. She had a brother who was training to be a boxer as well. Arshiya liked all kinds of sports and wanted to be a boxer herself. But her father was against it.





'Boxing is not a girl's sport. It is for boys like your brother', he often said.

'But papa, brother does not even like boxing. I like boxing. I want to participate in the international boxing competitions', Arshiya would reply.

But her father would not agree. Somehow, she convinced her father to coach her. Arshiya started training alongside her brother. However, her father did not give her as much attention as he did to his son.





Arshiya completed her school and went to college. One day, a boxing coach saw her practicing at the college and was very impressed. He spoke to her and asked if she would like to take part in a boxing competition. Arshiya was very happy and excited. However, she knew her father would not allow her to take part in the competition. She told the coach about it. The coach wanted to meet her father.

'Times have changed. Girls are taking part in all kinds of sports and doing so well. Don't you want your daughter to follow her dreams? I have seen her potential. She can do wonders.' The coach convinced Arshiya's father to allow Arshiya to take part in the competition.



On the day of the competition, Arshiya's father came to watch the game. Arshiya punched the opponent hard and the crowd cheered for her. With every punch Arshiya wanted to prove that girls are also strong. She wanted to make sure no one underestimated the power of girls. Her determination had brought her this far and she wanted to make the most of it. However, despite her efforts, Arshiya lost the match.



She was sad and she sat in a corner crying. Suddenly, her father came to her and gave her a big hug.

'I am so proud of you, my dear. You have shown extraordinary skills in the boxing ring today', he said.

'But I lost, papa', Arshiya replied sadly.

'One of the competitors has to lose. That's why it's called a competition. Practice more and try to do better next time', father said.

'Yes, failure is just an opportunity to try again. You did really well today', said the coach.

Arshiya was very happy. She knew that with her father's support she would certainly perform better next time.



Postface

I grew up wanting to be like Pippi Longstocking, the eponymous heroine in the series of children's books by Swedish author Astrid Lindgren.

Pippi is an unconventional, and superhumanly strong nine-year-old girl. She is independent, playful and unpredictable and, despite periodic attempts by the authorities to make her conform to cultural expectations of what a child's life should be, Pippi happily lives free from social conventions.

For me, Pippi represents my own rebellious side and admiration for a person who has power but does not abuse it. Although she is the self-proclaimed 'strongest girl in the world', Pippi often uses non-violence to solve conflicts or protect other children from bullying.

* * *

Reading not 'just' entertains – although escaping to a great story is always a joy – but also inspires. It is an essential life skill that supports all other forms of learning and development. Creating positive reading environments for young people is more important now than ever, as we struggle through a global pandemic which has put many children out of school. The findings from a Room to Read's survey concludes that half of all girls in Nepal are at risk of not returning to schools; this not only would be disastrous for them as individuals, but will also rob society of so much talent, human potential and economic opportunity, with generational consequences.

Collectively, we must take urgent action to find solutions to provide better educational opportunities for young people, especially girls. Access to education is proven as a pathway to a better, more equal future.

I would like to thank my colleagues Nhooja, Bhogendra, Aditi, Vaishali and Nischal for initiating and implementing In our own words, Virangana Comics Collective and Anuradha and the artists for their creative inputs. Most importantly, my sincerest gratitude and congratulations to the young authors for this wonderful selection of stories that will inspire a new generation of heroines and readers to make better, more informed – and indeed, educated – choices. I also hope that the book helps young people learn and inspires them to keep moving forward, come what may.

So, don't give up, do the right things—however hard it may be—and stay true to your values and principles!

Shahida MacDougall
Country Director, British Council Nepal

From the moment I could put words together and find meaning, stories have been the foundation of my learning, my spirit of adventure, my safe space to seek refuge. Stories have connected human beings since the dawn of time and more than ever, stories are the rivers that flow between humanity, feeding our minds and spirit. For a child, the act of sitting with a parent or loved one to listen to a book being read is one of the early moments that help to create an important bond and opportunity to gain insights into life's lessons. As children grow and begin to create their own stories, it is amazing to see how they articulate emotions and experiences through their writing and imagery. Inner worlds and feelings come to life on paper and open the door to sharing those emotions. It is for these reasons that the stories contained in this anthology come at a time when more than ever, we must break the silence that pervades the subject of mental well-being. Children and young people must be given the creative space to express themselves, in both their infinite capacity for sorrow, joy and so many other emotions. So, I read these stories with humility and wonder at young people's capacity to articulate the inexpressible, to open their hearts and to bring their audience into a world of healing and hope.

Tania Dhakhwa
Chief of Communication, UNICEF Nepal

British Council

The British Council builds connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and other countries through arts and culture, education and the English language.

We help young people to gain the skills, confidence and connections they are looking for to realise their potential and to participate in strong and inclusive communities. We support them to learn English, get a high-quality education and gain internationally recognised qualifications. Our work in arts and culture stimulates creative expression and exchange and nurtures creative enterprise.

We have been working in Nepal since 1959. Every year we connect with thousands of students, educators, policymakers, academics, creatives and entrepreneurs in Nepal. The focus of our work is on providing opportunities for young people by supporting them to achieve the education, qualifications and skills needed to reach their potential in their future careers and by creating and developing new networks and platforms to give them a voice in society.

Room to Read

Founded in 2000 on the belief that World Change Starts with Educated Children®, Room to Read's innovative model focuses on deep, systemic transformation within schools in low-income communities during two time periods that are most critical in a child's schooling: early primary school for literacy acquisition and secondary school for girls' education. We work in collaboration with local communities, partner organizations, and governments to develop literacy skills and a habit of reading among primary school children and ensure girls can complete secondary school with the skills necessary to negotiate key life decisions. Room to Read has benefited 18 million children across more than 37,000 communities in 16 countries.

UNICEF

UNICEF is dedicated to advancing the rights of all children, especially the most marginalized and disadvantaged. Across 190 countries and territories, we work for every child, everywhere, to build a better world for everyone.

Notes from the facilitators

In our own words is the voice of twenty young authors. These stories come out at a time when the world is a year into a pandemic and its impact on mental health, especially of children, is extremely concerning. During such times, it is crucial that children's voices continue to be heard.

The themes of the stories in this anthology vary from gender stereotyping, discrimination and bullying to the importance of education and mental health. These are stories not only to be enjoyed by children at home, but also to be used as a resource book by parents and teachers in order to help start conversations on these important issues.

Although this book is intended mainly for young people, we hope it will be read by adults as well to gain an insight into how children feel and think. And in doing so, perhaps, this could be a chance for adults to relate to experiences that they also had as children

Anuradha
Editor and Programme Facilitator

Illustrators often collaborate with adult writers to produce content for children and children's literature, but the opportunity to work on material created by young people is rare. This project has fostered collaboration between young authors and illustrators to work on an anthology containing a poignant collection of thoughts and feelings of young people and about the situations they face today. This has successfully given the illustrators an insight into a young person's mind and life, and it has been an interesting challenge for illustrators to translate and interpret these very important voices into images that capture the imagination of the readers.

The result is a wonderful convergence of heartfelt writings and beautiful artworks, which we hope will bring much meaning to the readers.

Virangana Comics Collective
Art Facilitator

About the facilitators

Anuradha

Anuradha is an author, editor and translator of children's story books. She also facilitates workshops for writers and illustrators to help them create stories that are not only meant to entertain young people, but also to address stereotyping of different individuals and groups and start conversations on various social issues. Anuradha is currently pursuing her PhD in Children's Literature and she is also working on a book project concerning menstrual health of women in Nepal.

For *In our own words*, Anuradha led workshop sessions, mentored the authors and helped edit and translate the stories.

Virangana

Virangana Comics is a bi-annual comics publishing platform for Nepali Comic artists. Besides publishing comics, as a collective, Virangana also conducts workshops for children and youths on creating and producing their own comics, and how comics can be used as a tool for disseminating narratives, ideas, histories, perspectives, education and so forth.

As part of the *In our own words* programme, Virangana worked with 20 artists to create images of the stories written by young people.

About the project

In our own words

In our own words is an arts and education programme initiated by the British Council and organised in collaboration with Room to Read Nepal and UNICEF Nepal. The programme provides a platform for young people to write short fiction stories based on social themes about everyday life while helping to improve their writing skills.

The ten authors featured in this book were chosen out of more than 90 Nepali children who submitted stories in an open call. They then participated in a series of workshop sessions to discuss story writing and other topics including gender and mental health. Their stories were finalised and shared with illustrators, the output of which resulted in this book.

Links

British Council

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Room to Read

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www.viranganacomics.com/
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www.instagram.com/viranganacomics/

Anuradha

facebook: Anuradha's stories for children

Helpline

If you are affected by the issues in this collection or have been feeling distressed, you can contact

Transcultural Psychosocial Organization – Nepal Crisis Hotline:
1660 010 2005 www.tponepal.org/

Centre for Mental Health and Counselling Nepal –
1660 018 5080

Koshish Nepal –
1660 012 2322

Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Help Centre –
1660 012 2223

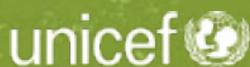
All above numbers are toll-free

TU Teaching Hospital, Suicide prevention helpline
9849630430 / 9840021600

Kanti Children's Hospital, Child psychosocial support helpline –
9808522410

In this anthology of short stories, the writers explore various themes ranging from love, death, regret and loss to bravery, making mistakes and asking questions. Characters suffer during the pandemic, seek purpose in life and work to make peace with their pasts. Some stories might seem personal while others are reflective of our times. What is common in these stories are female characters that exude strength and resilience. Welcome to a powerful, collective force of ten young female writers whose voices will entertain, unsettle and console.

Partners



Creative Partners



ANURADHA