

IN OUR OWN WORDS:
MY HEROINE



A short fiction anthology by young people

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For Elisha

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IN OUR OWN WORDS: MY HEROINE

A short fiction anthology by young people

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Cover Illustration by Srija Shrestha

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Partners



ANURADHA


My heroine

This collection of stories is penned by young people between the ages of 10 and 14 from across Nepal. The theme of the series is *My heroine*. Through each title, the authors explore gender roles and issues, crafting memorable characters that collectively represent the heroines enriching our lives.



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, bullying, suicide, death and cancer that some readers may find distressing. Parental guidance is advised for stories that are marked above with the  symbol.

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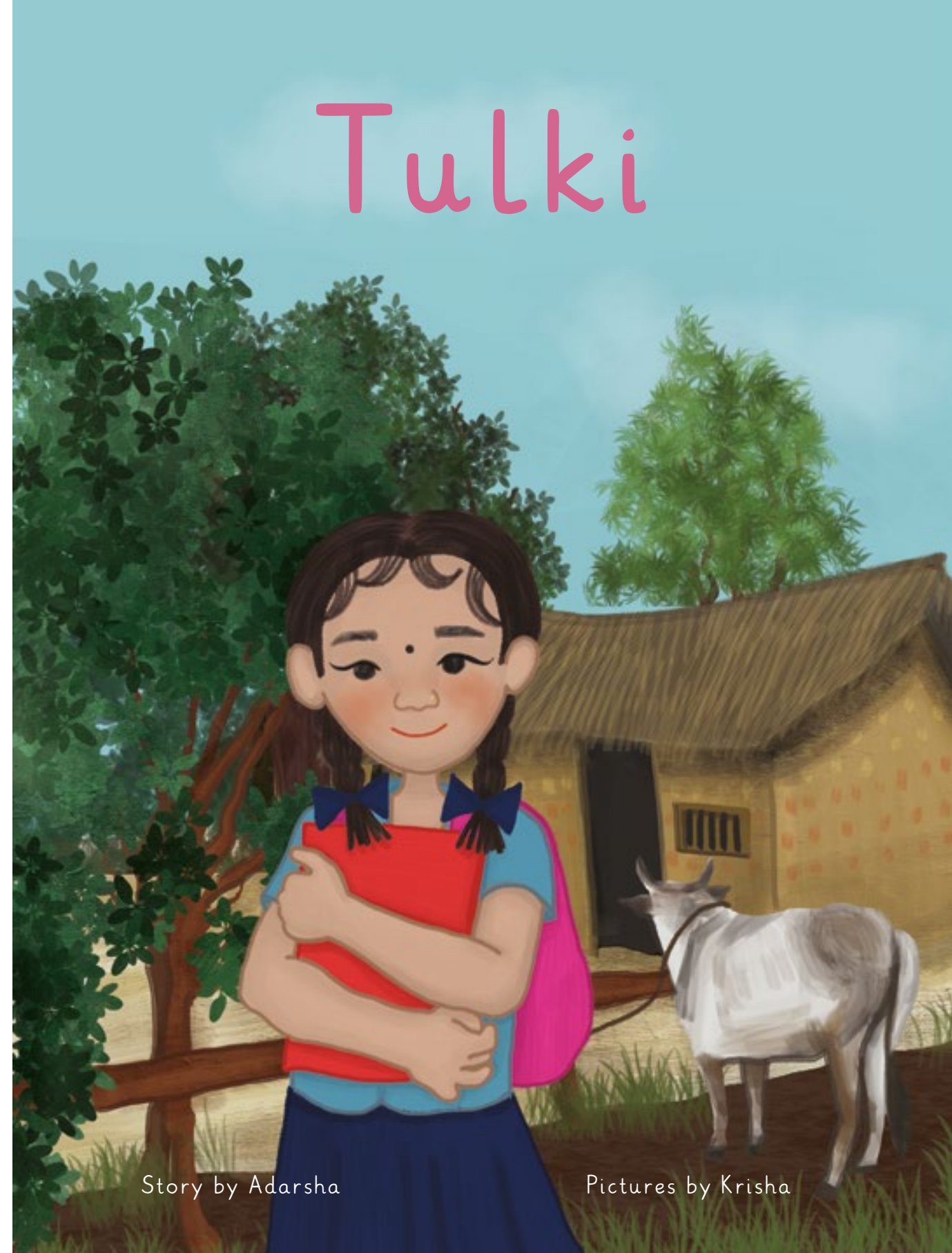
Tulki

Author:

Adarsha Chaulagain loves to live in his world of imagination, creativity and fun. Story writing and painting are areas that fascinate him. He is curious and enjoys chatting with friends.

Illustrator:

Krishna Joshi is a 21-year-old art student from Kathmandu. She loves sketching and painting portraits, illustrating and reading and creating comics. She wants to learn and explore as much as she can every day. Her goal is to illustrate as well as animate in many different styles and genres, especially horror, which is her favourite genre.



Story by Adarsha

Pictures by Krishna



‘Please send me to school, mother. I want to study.’ As usual, Tulki begged her mother.

‘Don’t be silly. We have told you many times that it’s no use going to school. Why should your father spend his money on your education when all you are going to do is get married and go to your husband’s house? Learn to do some household chores instead.’ Tulki’s mother replied.

Tulki was born in the western part of Nepal in a poor Tharu family. She had a younger brother. Her brother went to school, but she did not. She often went to drop her brother off at school and saw other girls in their school uniforms. She dreamed of wearing a school uniform and going to school as well.



One day, Tulki's father took Tulki to his boss, Mr. Chaudhary's house. He wanted Tulki to work in order to support her family. Tulki cried a lot. When they met Mr. Chaudhary, Tulki's father asked him to keep Tulki in his house as a housekeeper.

Mr. Chaudhary looked at Tulki and asked, 'Why are you crying? Is everything okay?'



'I want to go to school like other girls. I want to study.' Tulki gathered courage and expressed her desire to go to school. Her father tried to stop her from talking but failed to do so.



'She is going to get married. Why does she need an education? I also cannot afford to send her to school. I need to save money for her wedding', Tulki's father explained.

'You should be proud of your daughter. She wants to study. If she studies well, she might get a good job, and this will improve the condition of the family. Why are you trying to stop her? I will pay for her education', said Mr. Chaudhary.

Tulki's father unwillingly agreed to it.
In the beginning it was difficult for Tulki to adjust in
school with other children as they were younger than



her, but Tulki was determined to continue her studies.
She worked hard and passed her exams with good grades.
The teachers appreciated her, and this motivated Tulki



to do even better.

After finishing Grade 12, Tulki became a teacher in her school. She continued her higher education and later went on to become the principal of her school. She earned a good salary and was able to support her family. The villagers and her family were proud of her. She had set an example in her community. She was able to show how important it was to

educate girls as well.

'If a girl is educated, the whole society gets educated', she would say.



Exemplary Sita

Author:

Abhinav Saud was born and lives in Kathmandu, though is originally from Shibnath – 1, Baitadi. He takes an interest in writing stories and poems. Besides this, his interests lie in information and technology.

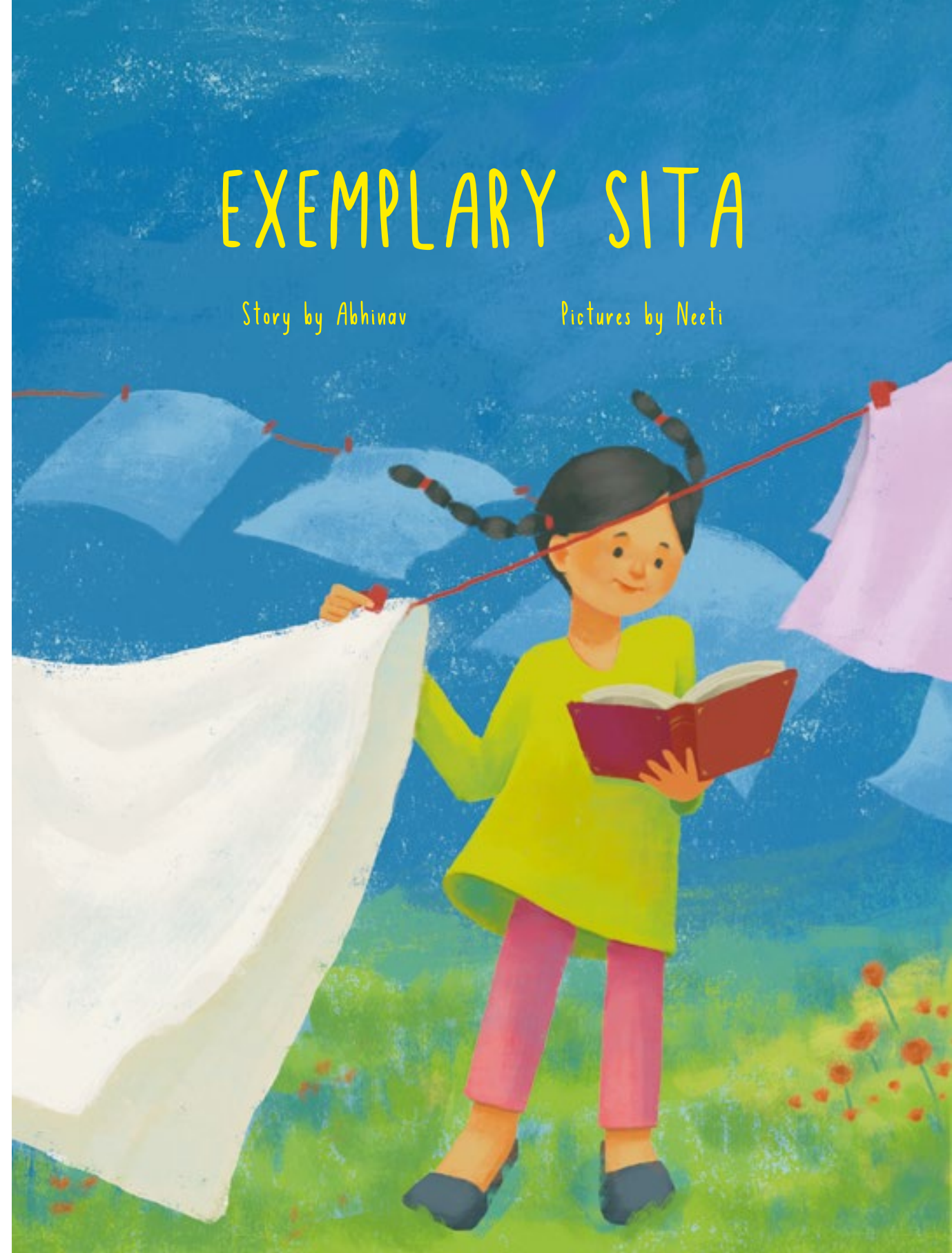
Illustrator:


Neeti Shrestha is an illustrator, graphic designer and an aspiring children's author based in Kathmandu. She enjoys experimenting with different mediums of storytelling as well as art materials. Since completing her BFA in 2018, she has been involved in different visual storytelling projects with authors and organisations. In her personal work, she likes to explore the themes of emotions, nostalgia, humour and early education.

EXEMPLARY SITA

Story by Abhinav

Pictures by Neeti





Sita lived with her father in a village. The villagers did not believe in educating their children. Sita's father was a labourer. However, he wanted to educate his daughter. He worked hard and paid Sita's school fees. Sita too did not disappoint her father. She studied hard and excelled in her studies. She helped her father a lot with household chores as well.

Ravi was in Sita's class. He was very rude towards all the girls. One day, on her way back from school, Sita saw Ravi making fun of an old man. The old man was injured and could not walk on his own. She went near them. 'Why are you troubling this old man? Leave him alone', she said and helped the man get up.



'Don't act smart. You good for nothing girl. Girls just cry and complain. On top of that, you are poor. You poor people are stupid!' Ravi shouted back at Sita.

Sita didn't pay attention to Ravi and helped the old man walk home.



'Thank you for helping me. You are a kind girl', the old man said to Sita.

'I'm glad I could help you. You seem to be new in the village. I haven't seen you before', Sita said.

'Yes, I came this morning and went around the village for a walk. I happened to trip and sprain my leg', the old man said.

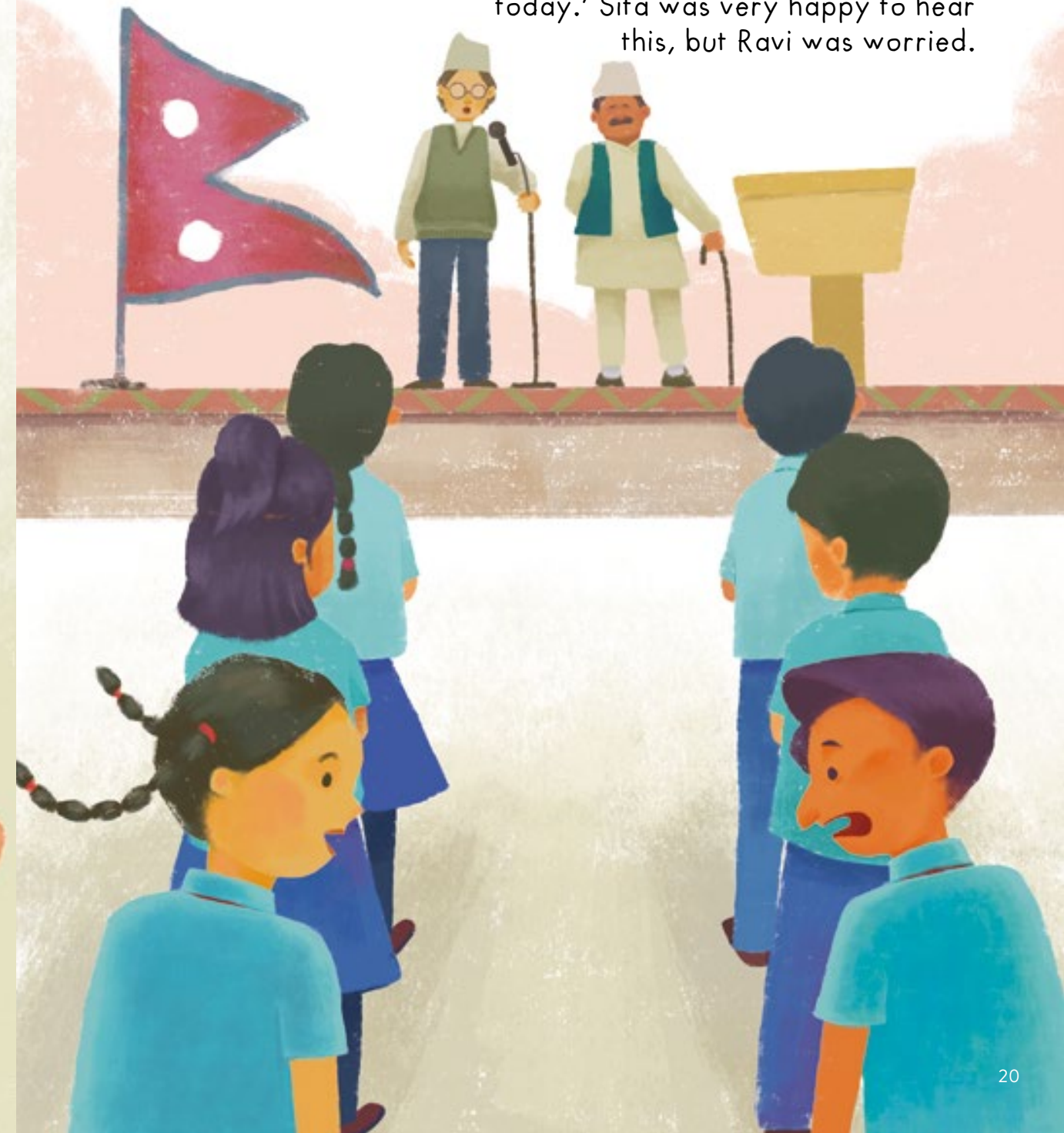
On their way to the old man's house, they chatted about Sita's family and her school. After dropping the man off at his house, Sita said goodbye and went home.

She told her father everything.

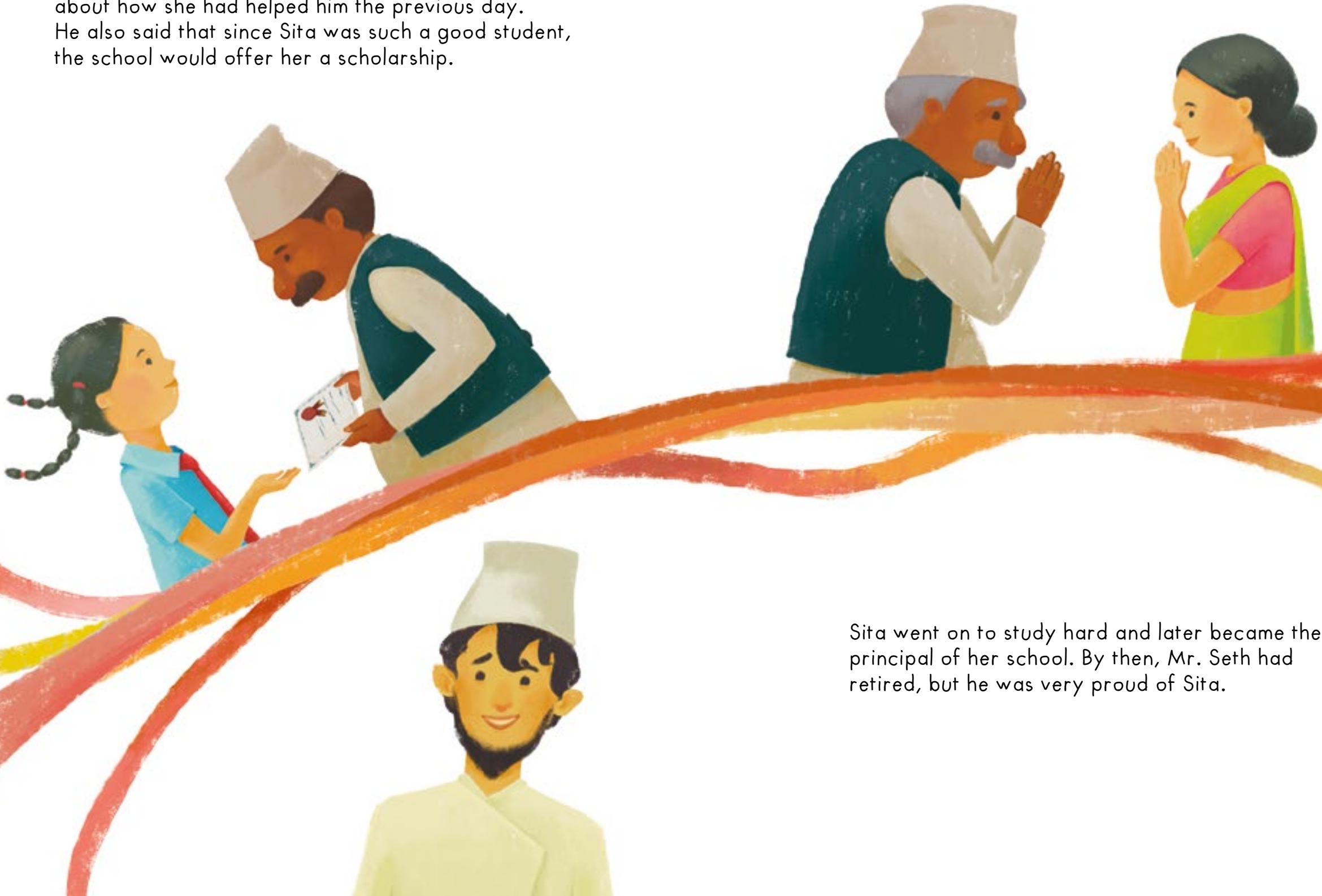
The next day during a school assembly, Sita and Ravi were surprised to see the same old man standing next to the principal.

'Please welcome Mr. Seth', said the principal.

'Mr. Seth will be your new Principal from today.' Sita was very happy to hear this, but Ravi was worried.



Mr. Seth called Sita's father to the school and told him about how she had helped him the previous day. He also said that since Sita was such a good student, the school would offer her a scholarship.



Sita went on to study hard and later became the principal of her school. By then, Mr. Seth had retired, but he was very proud of Sita.

Meanwhile, Ravi's father had to bear a huge loss in his business, and they had become poor. Ravi could not continue his studies. However, Sita helped him get some training and even helped him financially. He opened a shop and started earning.



'I am sorry for my bad behaviour. I underestimated your potential just because you are a girl. I now realise that boys and girls are equal. You are my hero, Sita', Ravi said.



Everyone is equal !

Author:

Anugya writes to explore her creative mind. All she needs is a paper and a pen and she can write anything, any way she wants. A strong-willed person, you can find her writing stories or thinking of what to write about. Her interest in writing will never fade.

Illustrator:

Shubha Joshi is a visual storyteller based in Lalitpur. She completed her BFA from Kathmandu University, Department of Art and Design. Her works mostly draw inspirations from her inner world, the people she surrounds herself with and her roots. Currently, she is working as a freelance designer and illustrator. She strives to explore digital illustrations and a plethora of other mediums to communicate heartwarming, powerful and inspiring stories.

Everyone is equal

Story by Anugya

Pictures by Shubha



Rita was a very smart girl. She lived with her mother, father and a little brother. However, she and her family were frequently discriminated by some people in the community because of their caste.



Rita's father got a new job and had to move to another town. Rita was sad to leave, but she was also happy that she would be away from some people who were mean to her and her family.

'Nobody in this area knows about our caste. I am not going to tell anyone about it', Rita thought.



In the evening, she went to the nearby park to play.
Some children were playing there. They welcomed Rita
and were curious to know more about her.

‘I am Rita Dami’, she introduced herself.

‘Dami? I’ve never heard of Dami’,
one of the boys shouted.
He was really surprised.

The other children didn’t care, and they all played together.
Rita was very pleased with herself.





Soon, Rita got admitted to a school in the new town. The boy she had met in the park was also in the same class. Hari was happy to see Rita. However, when the teacher introduced Rita to the rest of the class, Hari came to know of Rita's real caste. Rita was embarrassed.

In the evening, when all the children were gathered in the park, Hari made fun of Rita and told all the other children how she had lied about her caste. He also said that she should not play with the rest of them. Rita ran back home crying and told everything to her parents.



‘Why do we have to face such discrimination?’ Rita cried.



‘All people are not like that, dear. And don't worry about those who discriminate against you. You stay strong and don't let such things affect you. Instead, prove to them that caste is not a barrier to achieve your goals', Rita's father explained.





'You are a rude boy. We do not want to play with you', they said to Hari.

Rita wasn't happy with how Hari was treated by everyone. 'I don't think it is right for us to treat him this way just because he was rude to me. How will he correct his mistake if we do not give him a chance? We should all forgive him', Rita explained to the others.

Hari was embarrassed to hear this. He realised his mistake and apologised.



Rita was determined to follow her father's advice. She was very kind and helpful towards others and soon became friends with everyone. She excelled in her studies and even got awarded for her hard work. Apart from Hari, all the other children played with her in the park.



'I'm sorry, Rita. I now understand that caste is not a big deal. What matters most is how a person acts. You are such a nice girl. Now I know that you are *daaami* (precious). Rita *daaami*', Hari said.

'I like that', said Rita and they all laughed.



Princess Makeda

Author:

Gaurav Puri is a young writer who also likes to paint and invent new things. He aims to inspire others to be brave, friendly and kin-hearted through his story. He is fond of cycling, football and enjoys being creative.

Illustrator:

Jebish Shakya is a 20-year-old artist/illustrator based in Kathmandu. A BFA student at Lalitkala Campus, he has been creating digital illustrations for the past two years.

Princess Makeda



Story by Gaurav

Pictures by Jebish

Princess Makeda lived in a big palace in a kingdom named Mushroom. She was an intelligent girl and was trained in martial arts.



One day, the king's enemy kidnapped her and took her to the forest. Suddenly, a monster appeared in front of them. The kidnapper ran away in fright, but the princess sprang to her feet and began to attack the monster with her martial arts skills.

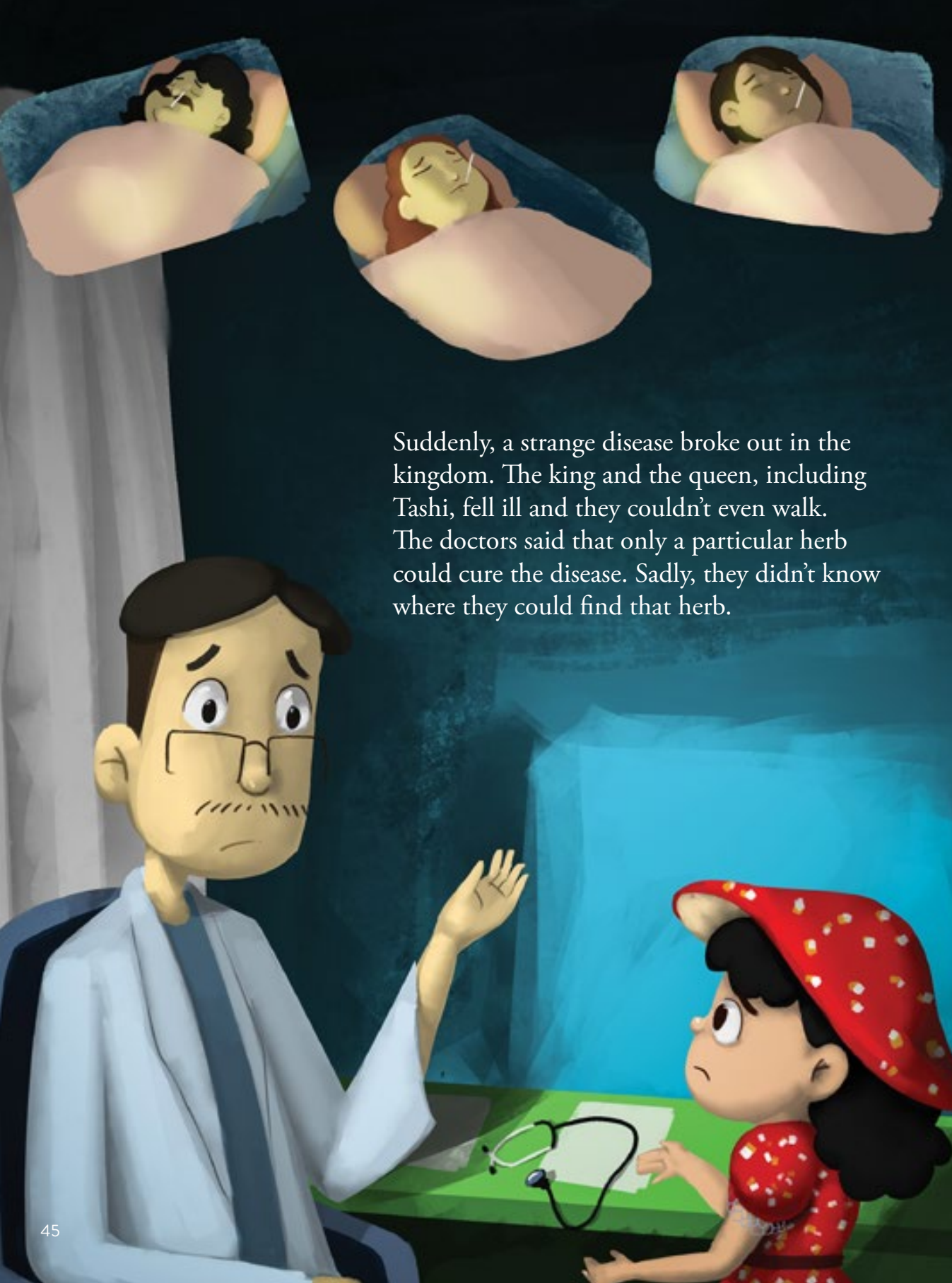


'Please don't beat me. I was only trying to save you from the kidnapper.' The princess was surprised to hear the monster speak.

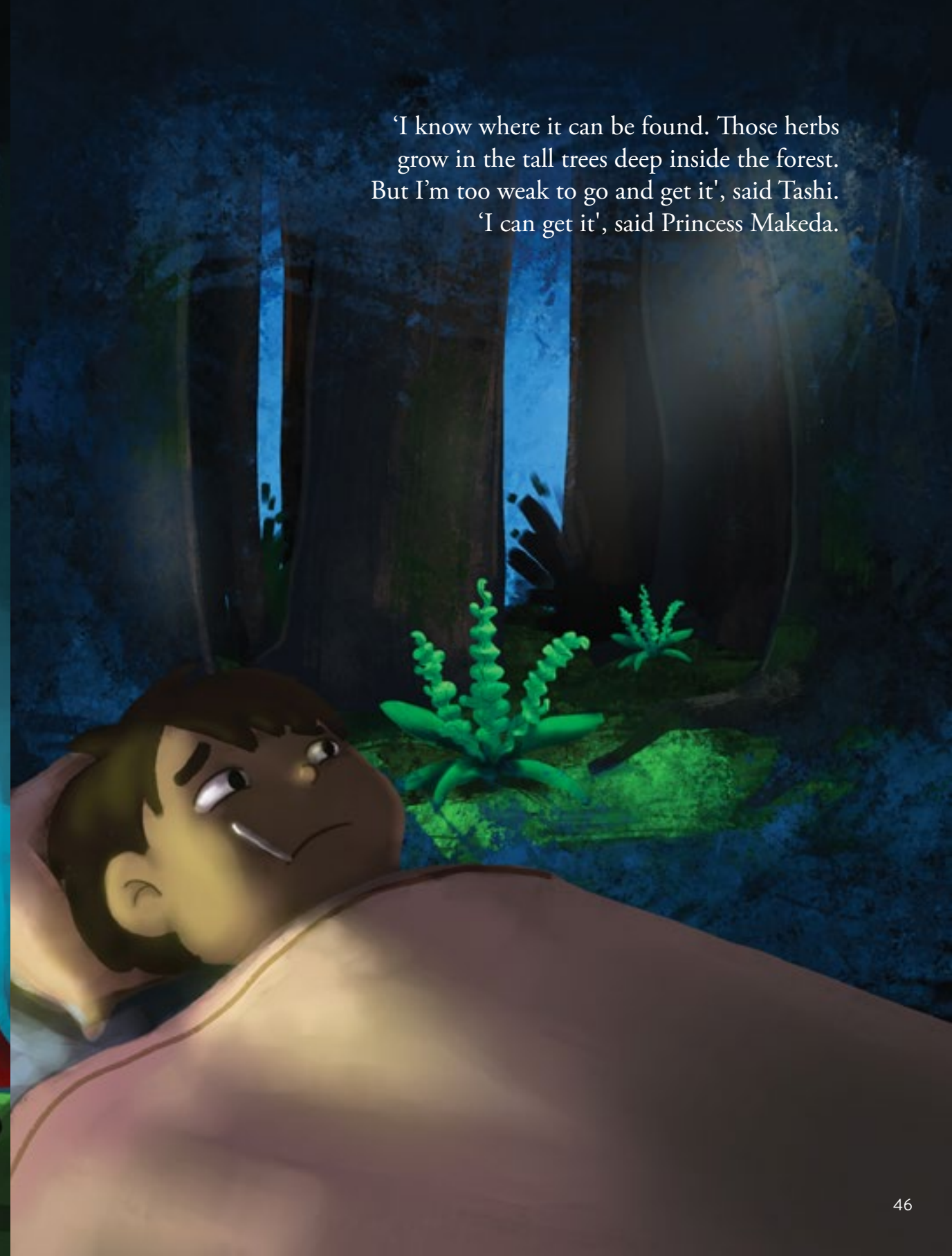
'My name is Tashi. I am an orphan living in this forest. Because of my shabby appearance, people mistake me for a monster', he said.



Makeda took Tashi back to the palace and told her parents everything. Tashi began to live in the palace, and he was admitted to a school.



Suddenly, a strange disease broke out in the kingdom. The king and the queen, including Tashi, fell ill and they couldn't even walk. The doctors said that only a particular herb could cure the disease. Sadly, they didn't know where they could find that herb.



'I know where it can be found. Those herbs grow in the tall trees deep inside the forest. But I'm too weak to go and get it', said Tashi.
'I can get it', said Princess Makeda.

Tashi gave her directions and Princess Makeda left for the forest with some soldiers. After travelling for a long time, the princess and her soldiers rested in the forest for a while.



The princess got thirsty and went to the river to drink water. She was again attacked by the enemy who had previously kidnapped her.

She fought bravely and punched the enemy unconscious. By then, her soldiers arrived, and they arrested him.



A couple of soldiers took the enemy back to the kingdom while the rest of them followed the princess deeper into the forest.





Soon, princess Makeda returned home with the herb and cured all the sick people.



‘Thank you for saving my life’, said Tashi.
‘And thank you for saving mine as well’, said Makeda.

Princess Makeda and Tashi became good friends and lived happily ever after.

A new life

Author:

Kalash Sundas writes optimistic stories and often finds refuge in writing. Her stories are mainly about dreams and goals in life.

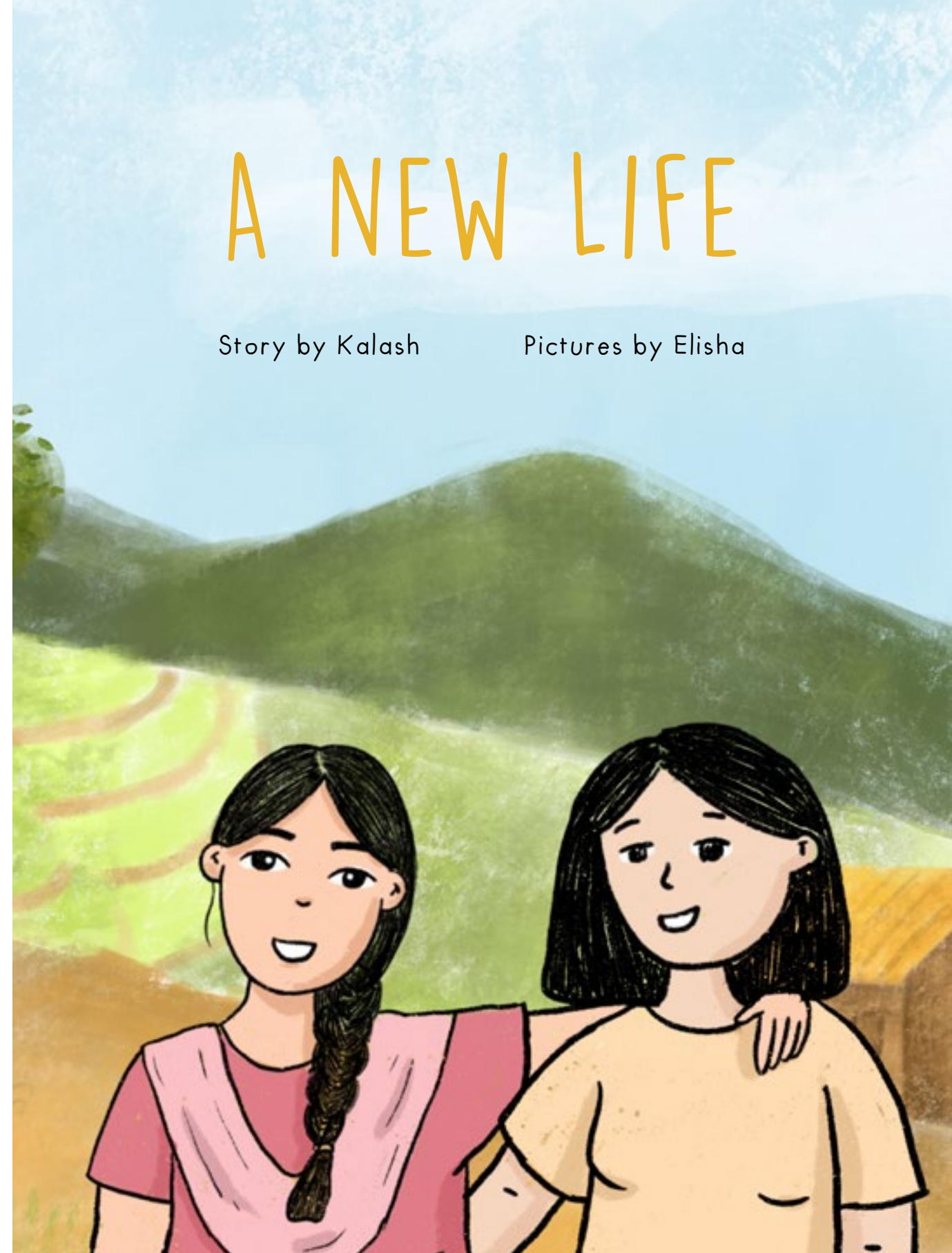
Illustrator:

Elisha Thapa was an illustrator known best through her work, Whaddafish! Designs which she started as a side project in 2015. Her illustrations find humour in everyday happenings through her awkward life stories and puns. She liked tea, reading, petting dogs and her guinea pig, and exploring places.

A NEW LIFE

Story by Kalash

Pictures by Elisha





Anupama lived in a village. She was a hard-working girl and she also enjoyed going to school.



‘How is your school, Sneha?’ Anupama asked excitedly.

‘I stopped going to school. We study so that we can get a job and earn money, don’t we? But my parents already have enough money. So, why should I waste my time going to school?’ Sneha replied.



One day, on her way back from school, she met her friend Sneha. Sneha used to live in the same village, but she had moved to the city a few years before.

'The city is wonderful. Unlike the village, it has big buildings, shops, wide roads and so many cars. I've come to realise that the village is not nice at all. Sorry to say this, but you smell of cow dung, Anupama.'



You should come to the city and change your lifestyle', Sneha added.

Anupama felt sad for Sneha. She knew that no matter how much money a person has, it could not be compared to the education one receives.



As the years passed by, Anupama finished university and became a teacher. She also started a training centre for girls where she provided them with various trainings to help them build their skills. With the skills they learned, the girls were able to work and earn for themselves.

One day, on one of her visits to the city, Anupama was shocked to see Sneha begging by the side of the road. She went to Sneha.



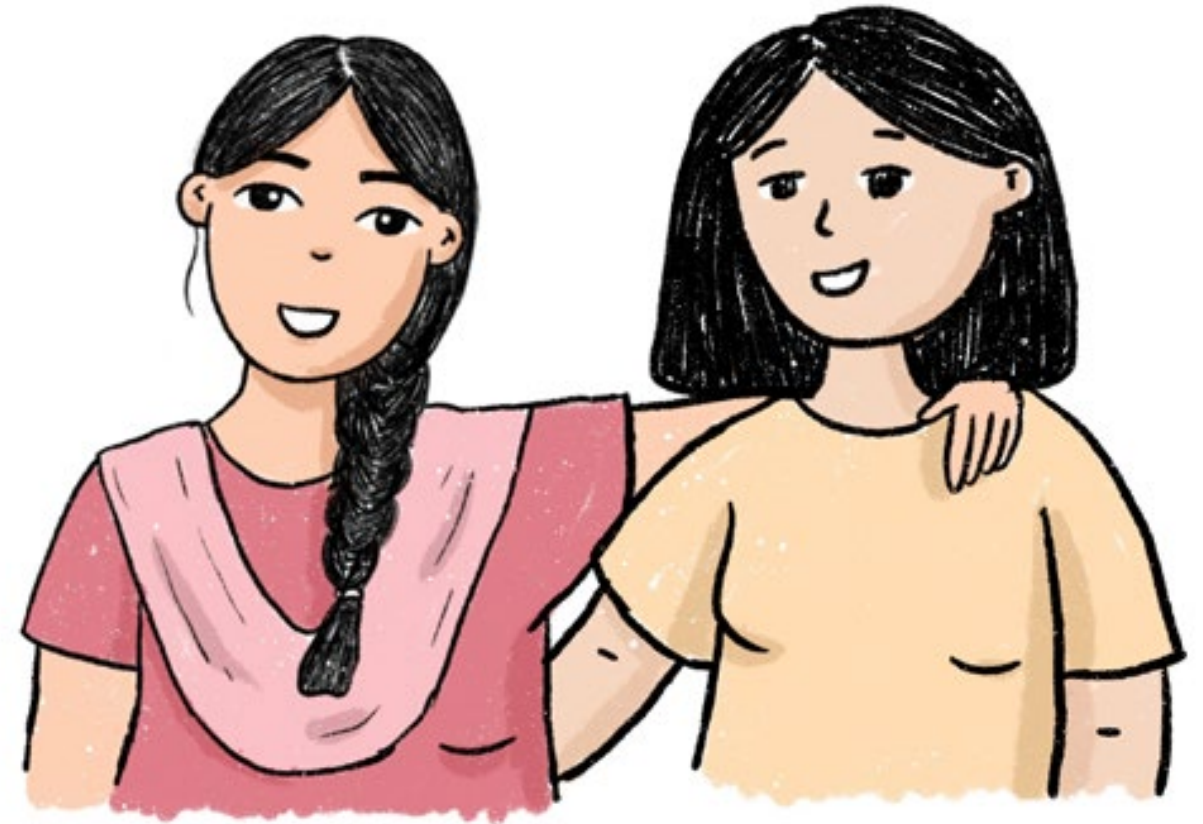
At first Sneha was too embarrassed to speak. But later, she cried and told Anupama, 'My father lost all of our money because of his business. Then my parents got divorced and my father started drinking a lot of alcohol. Since I had no education, I had no option but to beg.'



‘Do not give up on life, friend. Life always has many challenges, but we must face them. You are a strong girl, and I am here to help you’, said Anupama.

She took Sneha back to the village and enrolled her on a tailoring course at her training centre.

‘Thank you for giving me a new life. You are a real hero’, Sneha told Anupama as they hugged each other.



Wrong judgement

Author:

An avid swimmer and nature lover, **Kevin Jung** is a simple 13-year-old with a diverse and open mind. He is able to develop strong connections with his surroundings either by exploring the outdoors or embarking on imagined adventures into cosmic realms to the edges of existence without leaving his room. He loves animals and has recently adopted a cat.

Illustrator:

Anushri Lama is a digital Illustrator from Kathmandu and loves developing characters. Colours are her biggest inspiration. She enjoys immersing herself into all forms of art, be it dancing, singing, acting, animation or video games. Having graduated in 2016 with a degree in Graphic Design & Communication, she has worked with many organisations that aid the development of the education sector in Nepal. She aims to create and do things that bring joy and inspire, and she looks forward to more fun projects like this.

Wrong Judgement

Story by Kevin Pictures by Anushri

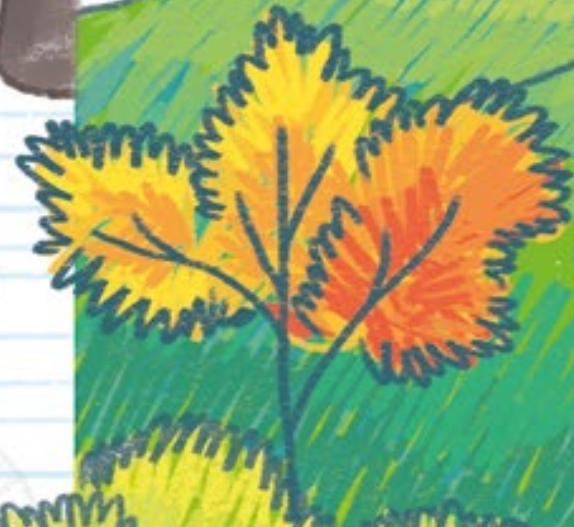




$$(a+b)^2 = a^2 + b^2 + 2ab$$
$$ax^2 + bx - c = 0$$
$$y = 2x^2$$



John glanced at the clock impatiently waiting for the bell to ring. It was Friday and he was looking forward to an adventure at the weekend. He and his friend had decided to go to the countryside for a short hike.



Early the next morning, John and his friend Sam drove to the scenic countryside.

They hiked to a nearby hill, and towards the evening, they were returning to the village when they met a girl.

She was dressed messily, her hair was untidy and she was carrying a pitcher of water.

'You must be thirsty. Do you want to drink some water?' she asked.



'You stink. Get away from us', said Sam. 'These village girls are always dirty, and I'm sure she's just being nice to us so that we give her some money', added Sam.



The girl looked embarrassed as she walked away.



As the two friends were walking, Sam slipped and fell down the hill. He hit a tree and his leg started to bleed. He was not able to walk and was in a lot of pain. John shouted for help, but there was no one around.





Suddenly, the same girl that they had met earlier showed up. When she saw what had happened, she quickly tore off her shawl and bandaged the wound on Sam's leg. It stopped bleeding.



She then told John to help her carry Sam and she took them to a nearby health post.



As soon as the staff at the health post saw them, they came rushing to help.



The girl quickly went inside the room and to John's and Sam's surprise, she came back in a nurse uniform. She quickly cleaned and bandaged Sam's wound and prescribed some medicine.



Both the boys were ashamed of themselves. They thanked the nurse and Sam apologised to her.



The next day, on their way back home, Sam and John talked about how wrong they were to judge someone just by their outer appearance.

'She will always be my hero', said Sam.

Fire

Author:

Saurav is a 12-year-old who loves playing Free Fire and making animated videos. He likes spending time with his parents and is interested in facts about the universe. Saurav enjoys travelling and experiencing the different cultures of people in Nepal.

Illustrator:

Bishwo Manandhar is a designer/illustrator based in Kathmandu. As a child, he was inspired by comics, cartoons and animations and he credits his journey in art and illustrations to the adoration he had for them. He enjoys developing characters and making illustrations inspired by his experiences with cultures and people. He is currently working as a freelance designer and illustrator.

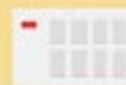
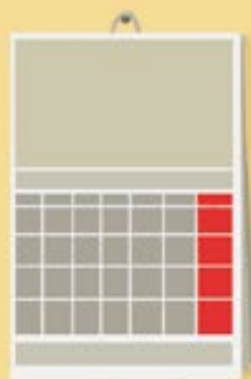
FIRE



Story by
Saurav

Pictures by
Bishwo

Once upon a time, there was a boy named Saurav. He lived with his mother, Kaushalya. Although he loved her, he was often embarrassed by her as she had a huge scar on her face. A few years ago, she had burnt her face in an accident.



'Please don't come to pick me up at school',
he would say to his mother.

Kaushalya always smiled and never
complained about her son's rude behaviour.

One day, Kaushalya's friend came to visit her. She was overjoyed to meet her childhood friend.

'I can't believe we haven't met for the last twelve years', said Kaushalya.

'Well, you left the city after that horrible incident, and I too went abroad. I am glad we are meeting after such a long time', her friend replied.



'Saurav, meet Aunt Kavita. She and I were best friends at school', Saurav's mother told him. But Saurav wasn't interested.

'Wow! Is this my little Saurav? You have grown so big. You were a baby when I last saw you', said Kavita.

Saurav went to his room while his mother and her friend continued with their conversation.



‘Saurav is so lucky to have you as his mother. If not for you, he wouldn't be alive today.’ Saurav heard Kavita talking outside. He was surprised and confused. He quietly listened to their conversation.

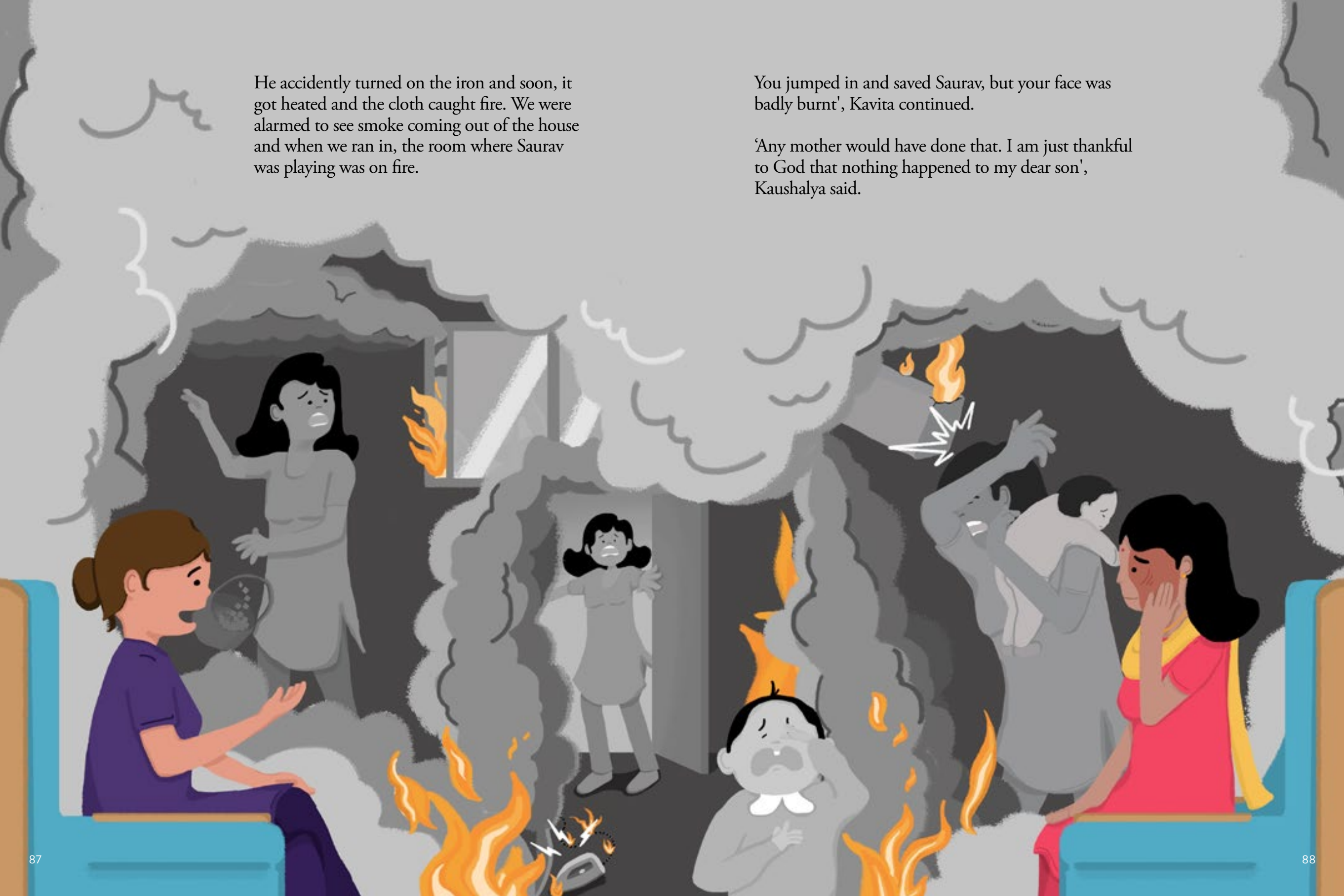


‘I remember that fateful day when you and I were out in the garden tending to the flowers and Saurav was playing inside the house.’

He accidentally turned on the iron and soon, it got heated and the cloth caught fire. We were alarmed to see smoke coming out of the house and when we ran in, the room where Saurav was playing was on fire.

You jumped in and saved Saurav, but your face was badly burnt', Kavita continued.

'Any mother would have done that. I am just thankful to God that nothing happened to my dear son', Kaushalya said.





Tears rolled down Saurav's eyes. The mother that he was embarrassed about all these years had actually saved his life. Saurav felt terribly guilty.



He ran to his mother. 'I am sorry mother. I am sorry. You are my real hero', he wept as he hugged her.

Saurav's mother hugged him tight and kissed him on his forehead.



Ideal daughter

Author:

Shamiksha is a 10th grader and lives in Birgunj, Parsa. Her hobbies include reading storybooks, comics and painting. She is fond of writing stories, doing science experiments and playing badminton.

Illustrator:

Srija Shrestha is a digital artist and illustrator based in the UK. She is currently studying MA Illustration at MIMA School of Art and Design, Teesside University. She loves making visual content, especially comics and cartoons by infusing humour and art. Her work mostly centres around the themes of authenticity, humility and simple joys of everyday life.



Story by Shamiksha

Pictures by Srija



Once upon a time, there was a small village named Lakshmanwaa. In this village lived a girl named Ranjana Kumari. Girls in this village were not allowed to go to school. The villagers believed that girls were to be married off soon, and so there was no use spending money on their education. Instead, they taught girls to do household chores.

However, Ranjana had big dreams. She wanted to study and become role a model for the girls in her village. She wanted to change the perception of the villagers towards educating girls.





Ranjana's father wanted to discontinue her studies after she completed grade six. Ranjana had to beg her parents to allow her to continue her studies.



Finally, she convinced them by saying that she would earn a scholarship to a school and save them from spending money on her education. Ranjana studied very hard after that and was successful in getting a scholarship.

After she had completed her schooling, Ranjana wanted to go to university. But this was next to impossible.

The villagers were already against educating their daughters. And her parents did not want to go against the villagers. And so, they also denied her further education. Ranjana tried her best to convince her family.



Despite their approval, Ranjana continued her education.

Along with her studies, Ranjana started working as well and became financially independent. She also learned new skills during her free time.

It didn't happen all at once, but slowly but surely,
more and more girls from her village
began attending university.



She completed university and went on to
become a lecturer. After that, she returned
to her village.

In her village, she began spreading awareness
among the villagers about educating girls.
Her goal was to educate the girls of her village.



Ranjana's persistence and success changed her life and inspired girls in her village to not give up on their dreams.



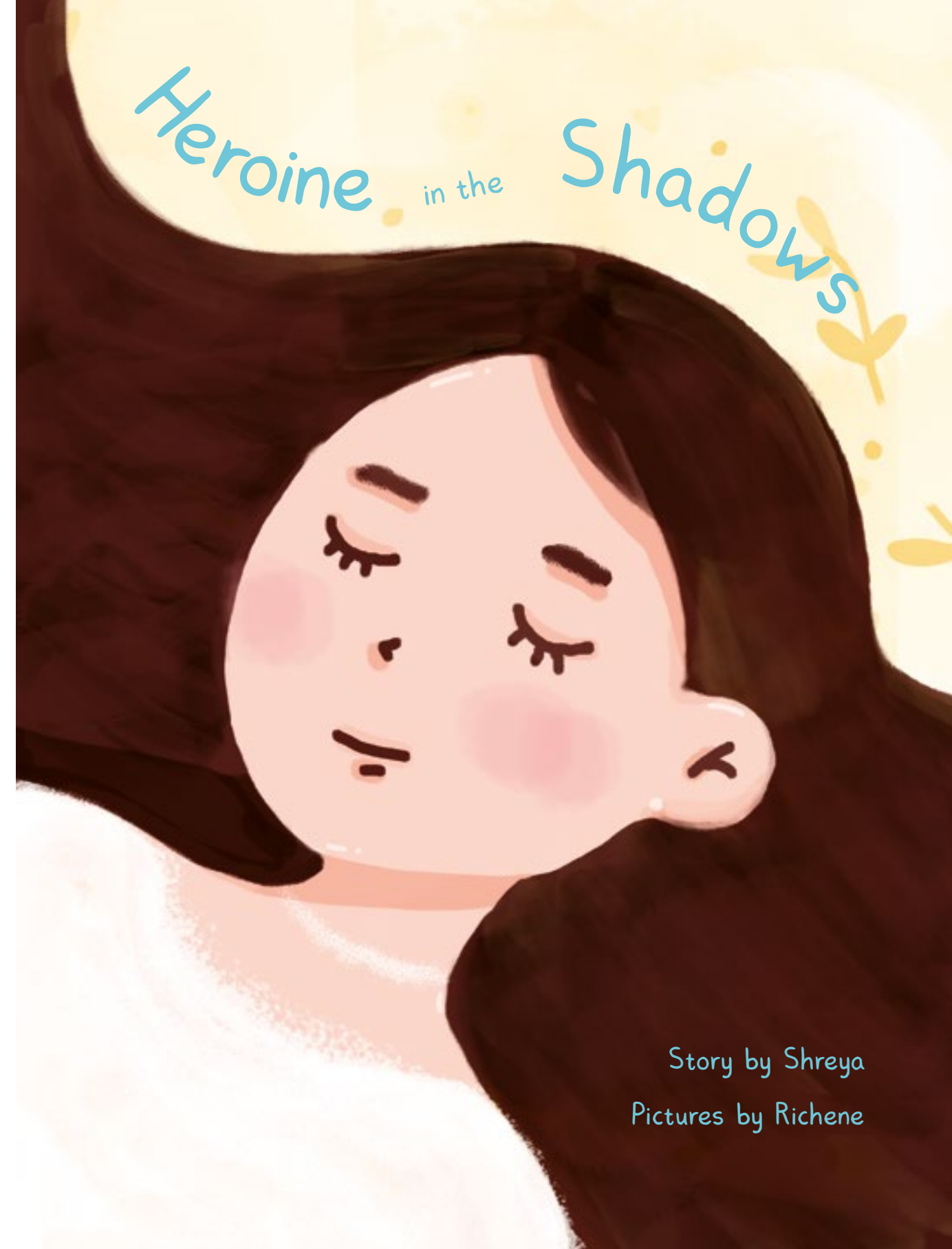
Heroine in the shadows

Author:

Shreya Paudyal is a young bibliophile. Growing up, she was fascinated by realistic fiction and biographies. Having spent her childhood away from her extended family and in a different culture has resulted in Shreya's writings dwelling upon what she values the most – family

Illustrator:

Richene Singh is a graphic designer and illustrator based in Patan. A user of varied media, she has been a part of a numerous group art exhibitions and projects on design innovation and awareness campaigns. She aspires to create works that can be interactive and initiate dialogue.



Story by Shreya
Pictures by Richene

Tring! Tring! Sincheon and her friends rushed to the dining hall as the lunchtime bell rang. After lunch, as usual, they went to sit under their favourite tree and began to chat.



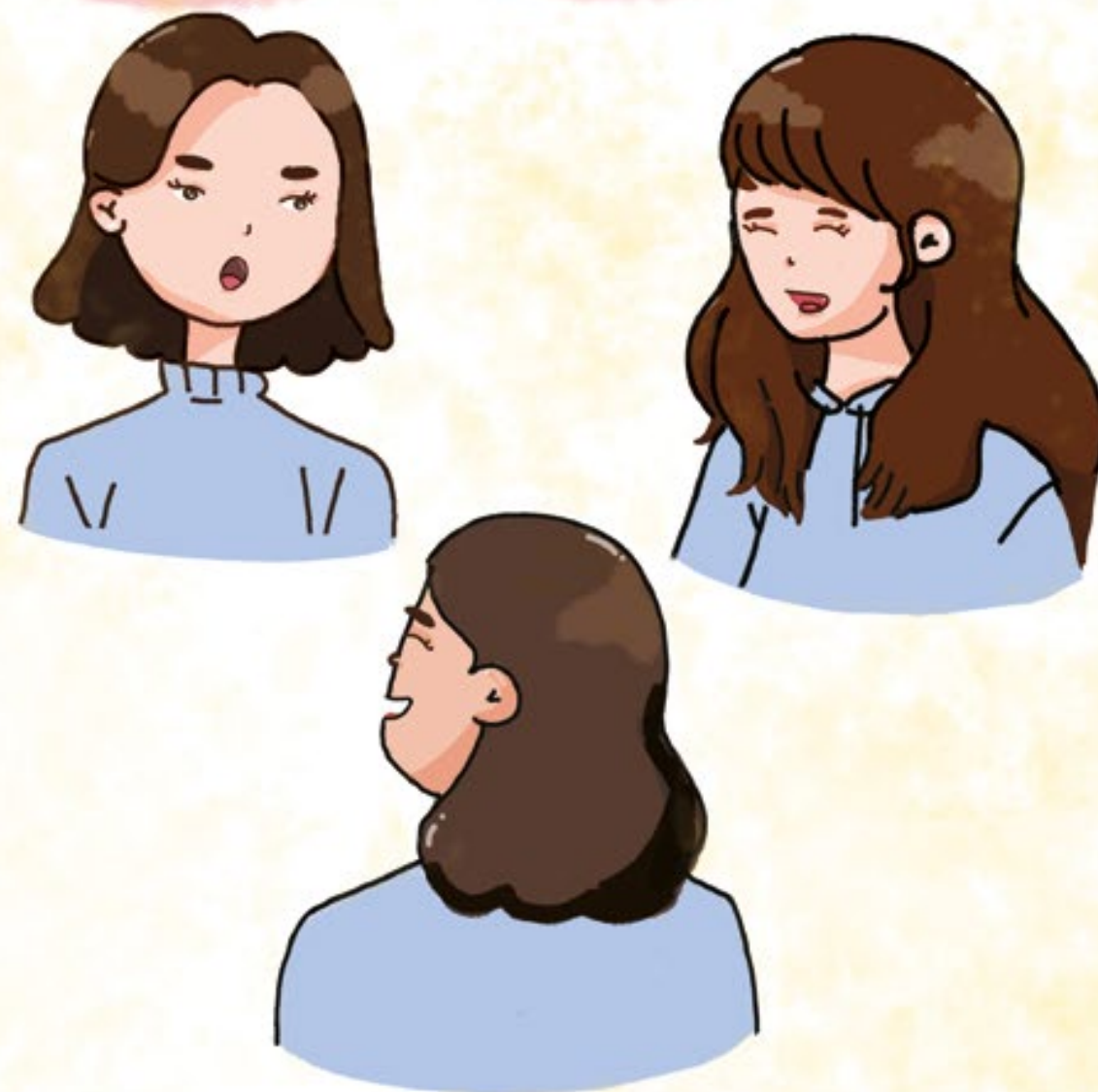


'Did you listen to Greta Thunberg's speech last night? I can't believe she's not even twenty, yet she's been nominated for the Noble Peace Prize twice!' said Suhani.

"I RAISE UP MY VOICE-
NOT SO I CAN SHOUT BUT
SO THAT THOSE
WITHOUT A
A VOICE CAN
BE HEARD."



'We all know Greta is your role model and you talk about her almost every day. My role model is Malala. And do you know that she has already won the Noble Peace Prize?' said Modika.



Later, on her way back home, Sincheon thought of the various people whom she admired. When she was younger, Cinderella and Snow White seemed amazing. As she got older, Malala Yousafzai and Marie Curie were her inspirations.



But Sincheon felt like there was something missing. Although all of these people had affected the lives of many others, Sincheon could not relate to any of them. With her life so different from theirs, she couldn't look up to them when she faced a hurdle. Sincheon knew what qualities an ideal heroine should have. However, she still couldn't think of anyone she could look up to.



As she neared her house, she suddenly thought of one person. This person was brave, compassionate and kind-hearted. Many a times, she had sacrificed her own happiness and choices for the sake of others. She never took time off, worked hard and was always ready to help others. Sincheon was fully dependent on her. Without her, Sincheon would not be the person she was today.

'I will always admire all the wonderful women I read and hear about. But first, I must appreciate the fact that there is someone right here in my house. I live with her. We often seem to ignore what is closest to us. I have my role model right here with me', Sincheon thought and smiled.

Once home, Sincheon knocked at the door.
The door flew open and standing there was her
perfect heroine, her role model.

'I love you, Mom!' Sincheon exclaimed, reaching
out to hug her mom.

'I love you too', said Sincheon's mother.



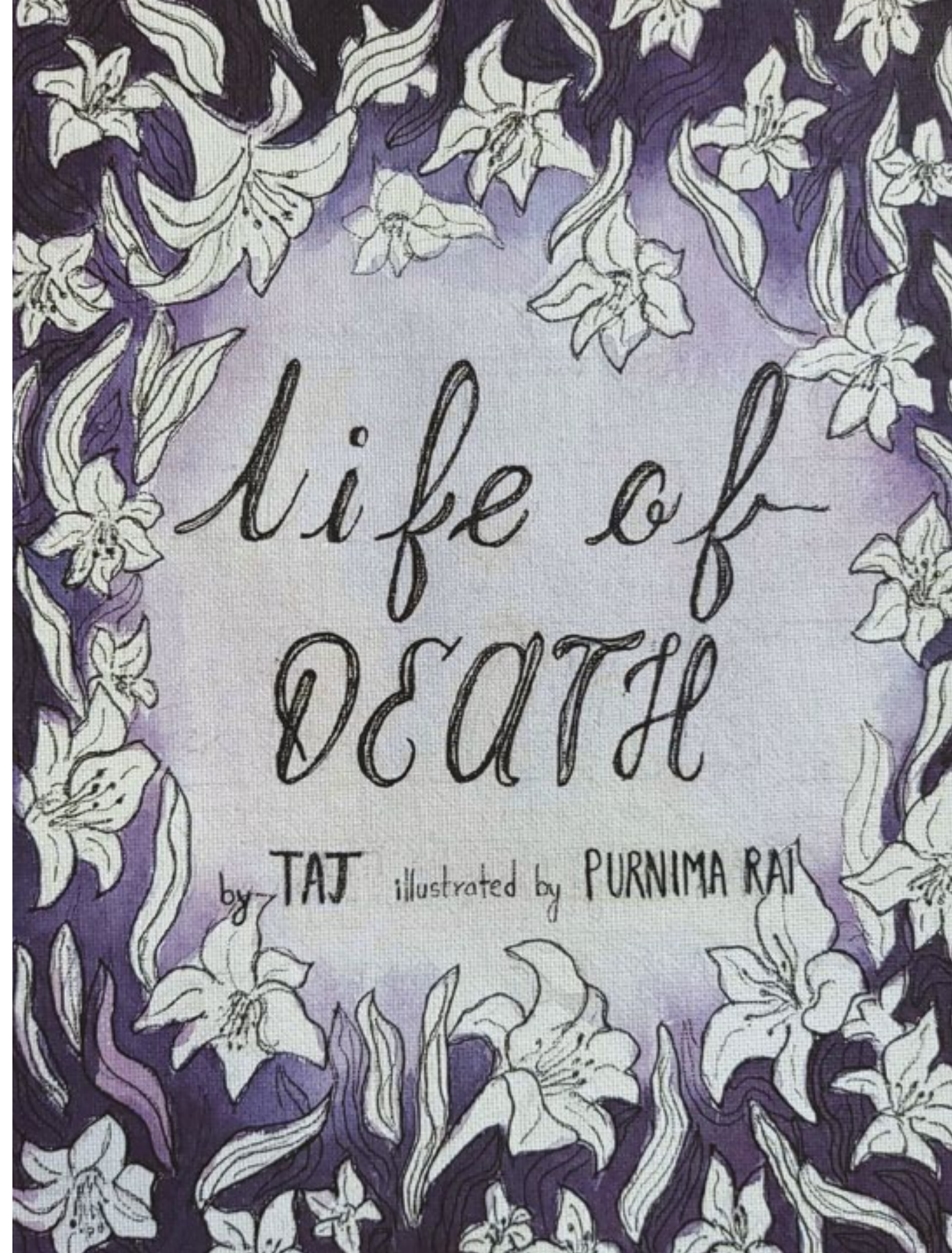
Life of death !

Author:

Taj has always been passionate about arts and crafts. She is a cheerful teenager who loves reading fiction stories, manga and comic books. Although she plays all kinds of sports, she is not particularly good at any one sport. She likes trying new things and loves to travel. She hopes that this book encourages others to imagine and express themselves, just like how she has expressed herself in her story.

Illustrator:

Purnima Rai is 19-year-old artist from Panchthar, currently based in Kathmandu. She is an undergraduate student at Kathmandu University, Center for Art and Design. She loves illustrations and enjoys doing work in pen and ink and watercolour.





Ellie had a bandage on her leg and the doctor told her to take complete rest. But Ellie was really worried. She had plans to take part in a school programme where she was going to perform a ballet. She didn't know if she would be able to participate now.



Ellie's room was on the second floor but because her leg was injured, she had to spend some days in the guest room downstairs. Ellie stretched herself to grab a book from the drawer next to the bed. To her surprise, it was her sister Snowy's diary.



1 - 'I love ballet.'



2 - 'Practicing for the finals.'



3 - 'During the ballet classes today, I suddenly felt dizzy. I woke up in a hospital bed with mom crying beside me. Later, I came to know that I had cancer.'





4 - 'Chemo is painful. My hair has all fallen off and I sleep all day. I take a lot of medicine and it's no fun. I need to take so much medicine that my taste buds have stopped working.'

5 - 'The wheelchair is fun when dad pushes me with Ellie on my lap.'

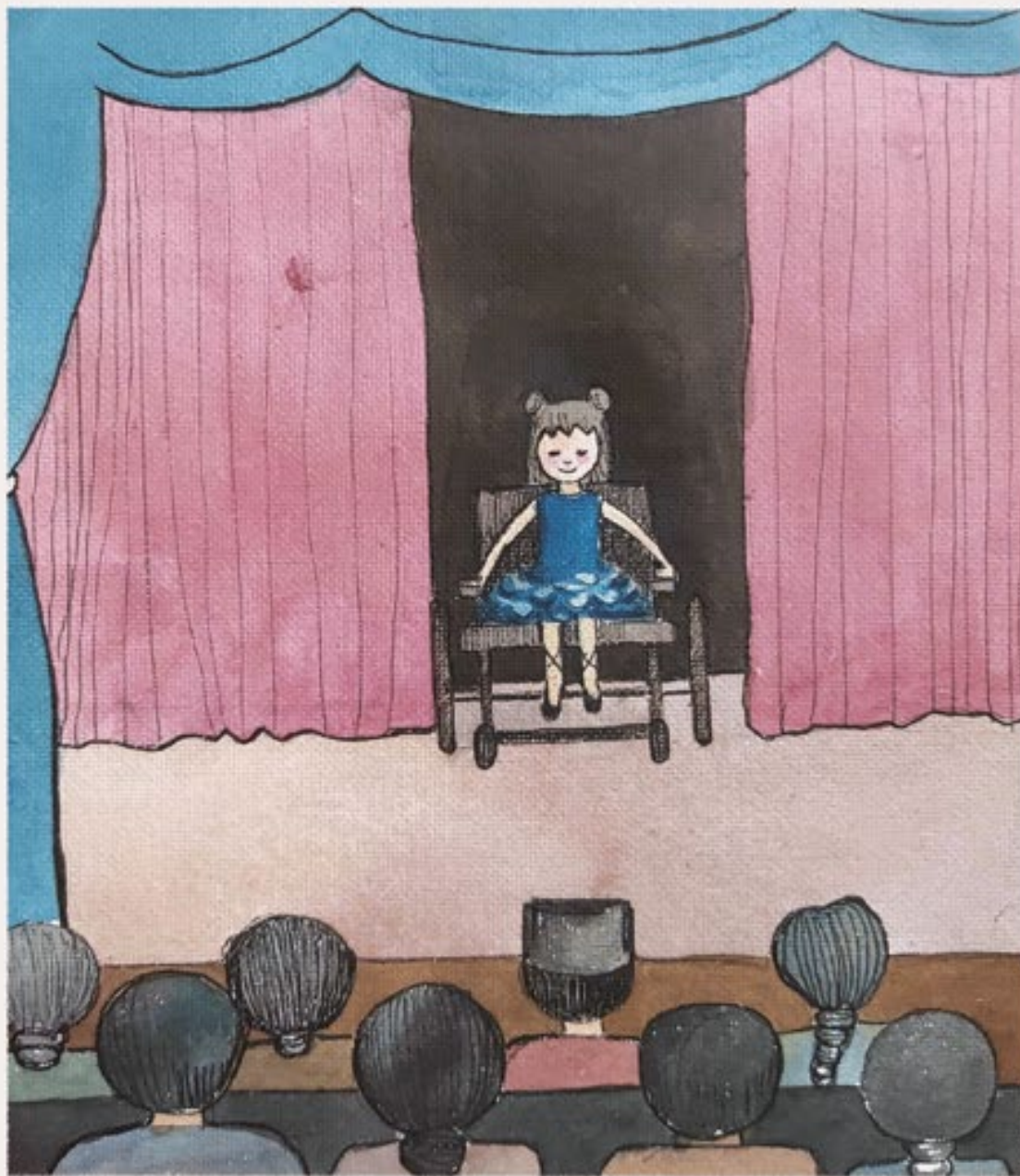


6 - 'No medicine and not even surgery seems to help. I am slowly losing my vision and I can't get out of bed anymore.'

7 - 'I think of all the happy moments of my life. Time with family and friends. I miss the flowers, sunsets, ice-cream. Oh, how I would do anything just to go on stage one last time and dance, even if it was in a wheelchair. I even prayed to God to give me a little strength that could help me perform a ballet in a wheelchair! I would call that dance the Life of Death. Maybe I will one day.....'

The diary ended abruptly. Ellie burst out crying as she closed the diary. She understood that Snowy had died after that.

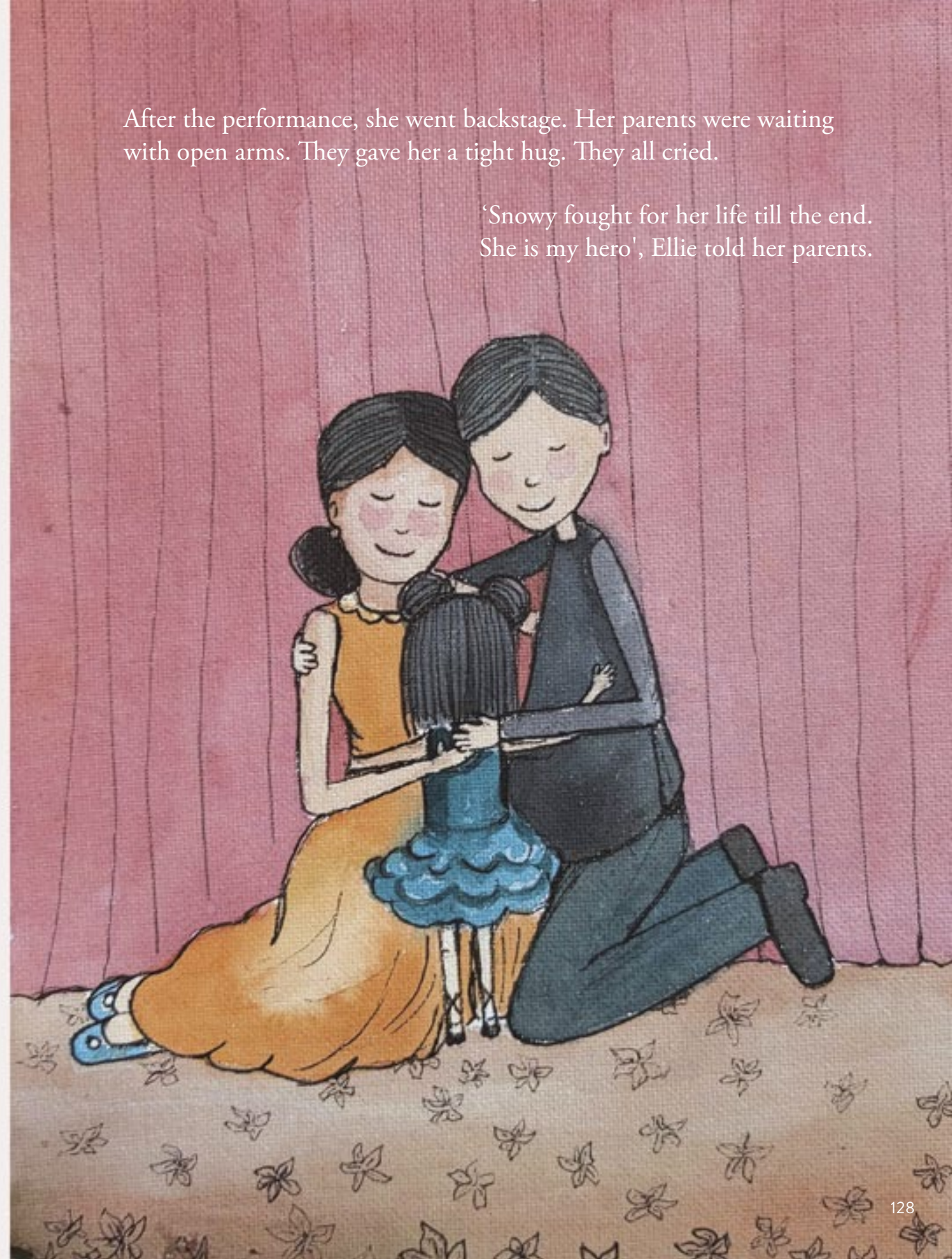




After a couple of weeks, Ellie's leg recovered, and she joined her ballet classes again. On the day of the performance, Ellie wheeled herself out on the stage in a wheelchair, wearing a ballerina dress. She announced that she was dedicating her dance to her sister Snowy. She performed the entire dance in a wheelchair.

After the performance, she went backstage. Her parents were waiting with open arms. They gave her a tight hug. They all cried.

'Snowy fought for her life till the end. She is my hero', Ellie told her parents.



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

Education is a great equalizer; when children learn, they can make a change in their families, their communities and the world. Education persists and addresses many of the world's greatest challenges such as public health, disasters and gender inequality. Yet, 750 million people are illiterate, two-thirds of whom are women and girls worldwide.

In times of peace and conflict, girls are most often vulnerable to early marriage, violence and forced school dropouts. A recent girls' education risk survey done by Room to Read during Covid-19 school closures shows that one out of two girls are at risk of not returning to school even when it resumes. As families deal with unprecedented levels of stress during this situation, the risk of intrafamily conflict and gender-based violence also increases, negatively impacting girls' self-confidence, mental health and ability to negotiate key life decisions. Therefore, a global crisis like the pandemic emphasises the need to listen to the stigma and that the girls face in their quest for education and well-being, as well as to develop resources to help their voices be heard. This anthology of short stories is therefore a self-reflection of children and youth in Nepal – a powerful tool that can advocate for children and help children to think about why and how they can be forces for better communities.

Pushkar Lal Shrestha
Country Director, Room to Read 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.

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

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

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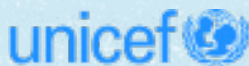
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Anuradha

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From the Mushroom Kingdom to the village of Lakshmanwaa; from a girl with an unfamiliar last name to the story behind a scarred face, the short stories in this book are a mixture of the strange and the commonplace. This collection will take you on many journeys. Go on a ride through these ten stories by young authors who will introduce you to heroines of all kinds.

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ANURADHA