



**story**  
weaver

# Kabuliwala

**Author:** Rabindranath Tagore

**Illustrator:** Maithili Joshi

**Translator:** Sanghamitra Ghosh

Level 4

## About the Author

Rabindranath Tagore was born on 7 May, 1861 to Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, one of the leaders of the Brahmo Samaj, and Sarada Devi. He was a distinguished Bengali poet, writer, painter, playwright and composer of songs. He was homeschooled by a variety of teachers in a variety of subjects. He composed 'Sishu', 'Dakghor', 'Birpurush', 'Proshno', 'Sahaj Path' and others for children.

He was the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in the year 1913. In 1915, the prestigious 'knighthood' was awarded to him by the British Raj but he soon renounced it as a protest to the Jallianwalah Bagh massacre of 1919. A highly renowned artist, he was known for introducing the Indian culture to the West which led to his establishment of the 'Vishwabharati' University in Santiniketan which is a mosaic of the East and the West. Two of his song compositions, "Jana Gana Mana" and "Amar Shonar Bangla" were chosen by India and Bangladesh respectively as their national anthems.

Rabindranath Tagore passed away on August 7, 1941.

## About the Story

Published in 1892, Kabuliwala has survived the wrath of time in being one of the most iconic short stories by Rabindranath Tagore. Revolving around little Mini and her much-older friend, the Kabuliwala, a man from Kabul, dealing with business in dry fruits and money lending. While it focuses on the unconditional love and bond between this mismatched couple of friends, it also highlights the universal emotions of a father's heart and the reality of the passage of time. .



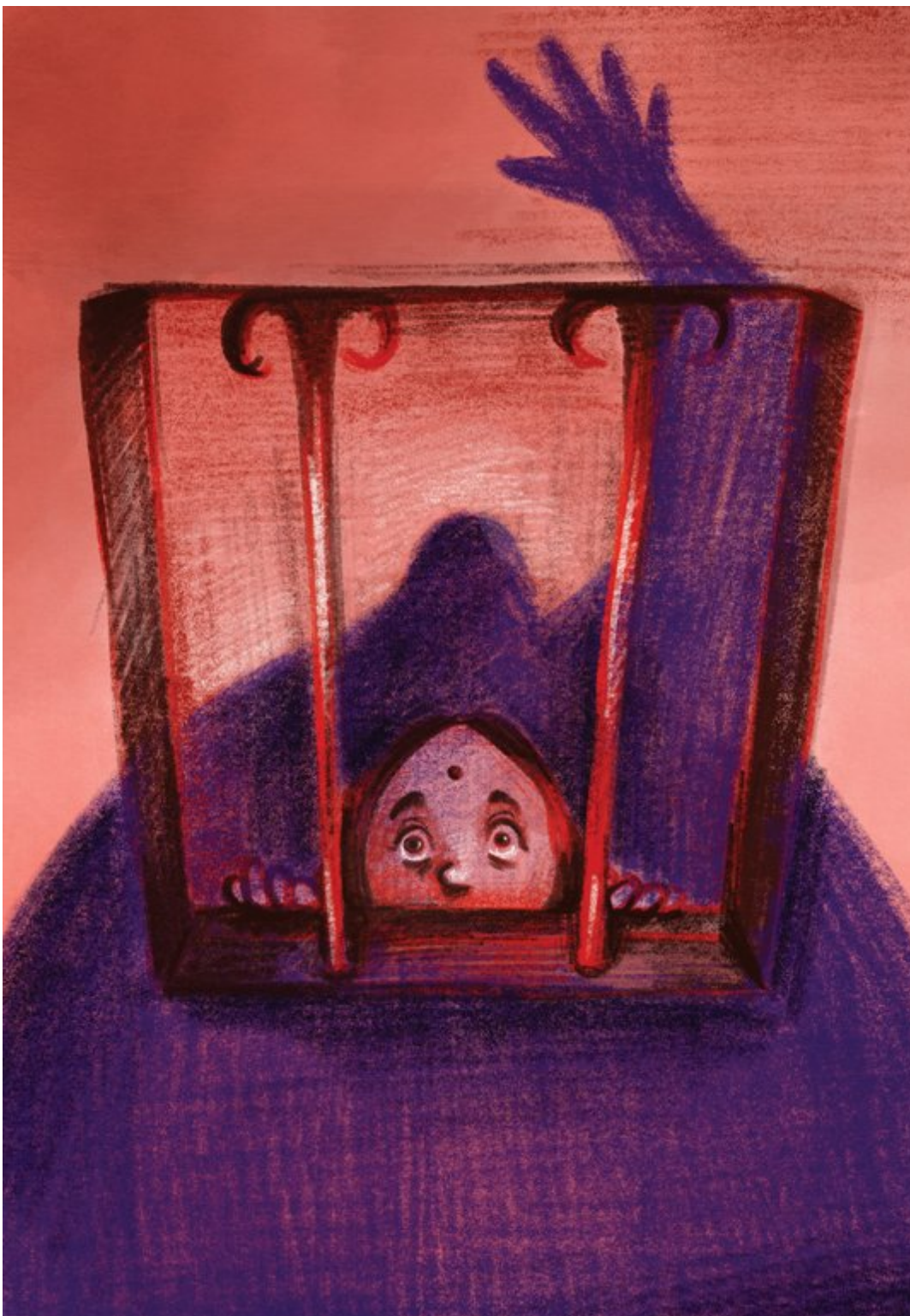
My five year old daughter cannot stay even a moment without talking. After she was born, she only took a year to learn her language. Thereafter whenever she was awake she never wasted a moment by staying silent. Her mother silences her sometimes by scolding but I cannot do that. It is strange to see her silent. Due to this, her conversation with me goes on with a lot of excitement. One day, in the morning, I had just started writing the 17th chapter of my novel, when Mini came in and started, "Baba, Ramdayal doorkeeper doesn't know anything, he was calling the crow a 'Kaua'. He doesn't know anything right?"

*\*\*Kaua: Hindi word for 'crow'.*

Before I could start about different languages existing in this world, she had changed the topic by saying “You know Bhola was saying elephants throw water with their trunks and that's why it rains. My! My! Bhola talks for nothing. He talks and talks, day and night, just talks.

She didn't wait for my opinion on this and asked, “ Baba, who is Maa to you?”

I uttered in my mind “sister-in-law”; but actually said “Mini you go and play with Bhola. I have work to do.”



She then started playing *Agdum Bagdum* in a fast rhythm using her knees and hands sitting near my feet next to my writing table. I was on my 17th chapter. It was a dark night and Pratap Singha was jumping off the high prison window to the river below, with Kanchanmala.

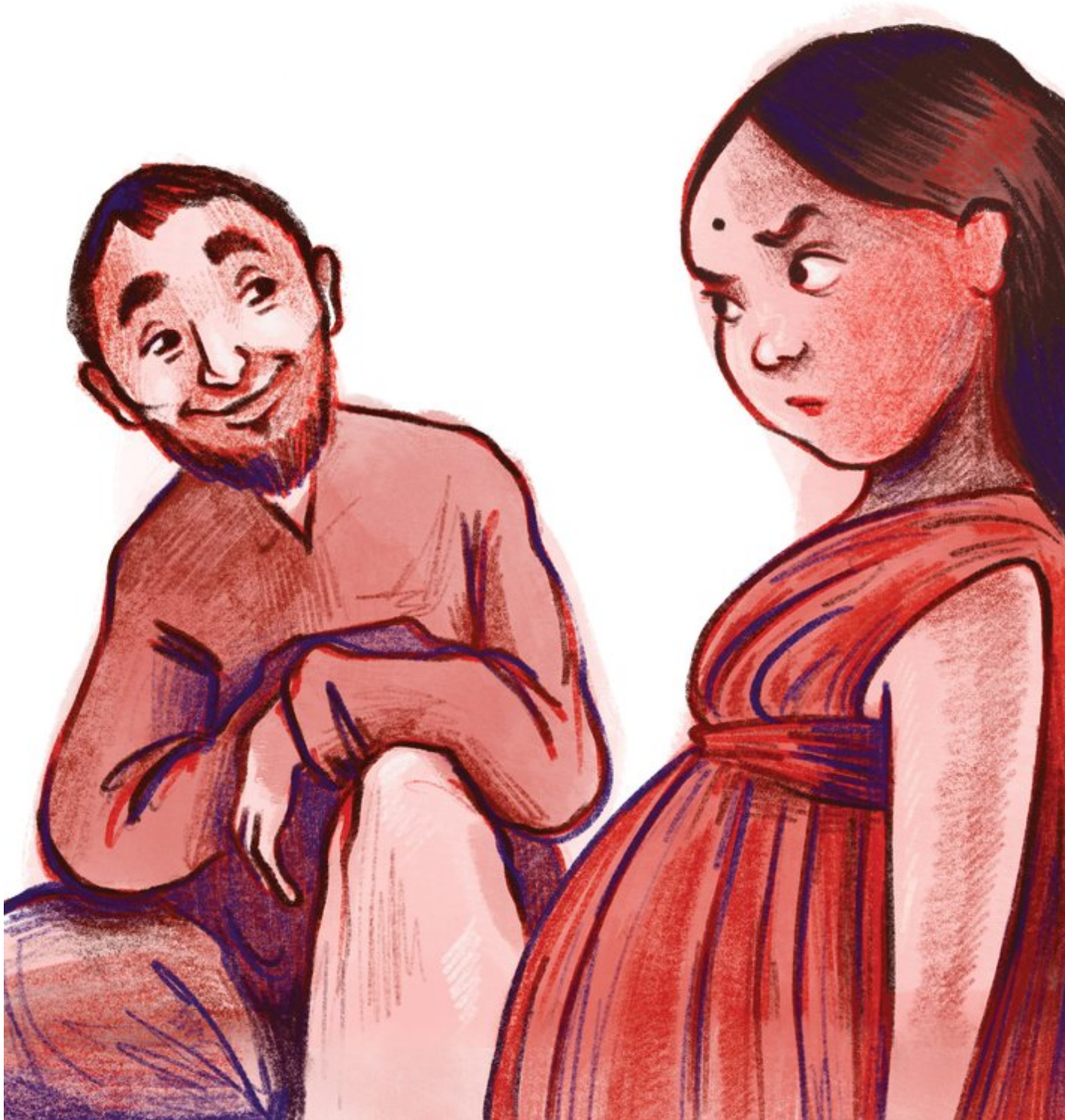
My room is next to a road. Suddenly, Mini stopped her game of *Agdum Bagdum* and ran towards the window and started calling in a loud voice, "*Kabuliwala, O, Kabuliwala.*"

A tall *Kabuliwala* was passing by slowly, wearing loose dirty clothes and a turban, carrying a side bag on his shoulders. I was not sure why my daughter was so excited on seeing him and started calling him with such excitement. I was thinking, now this trouble will appear with his bag and I would not be able to finish my 17th chapter.

But when on hearing Mini's call he looked at her with a smiling face and started coming towards our house, she ran inside. She had an almost-superstitious belief that there were a few children like her inside his bag.

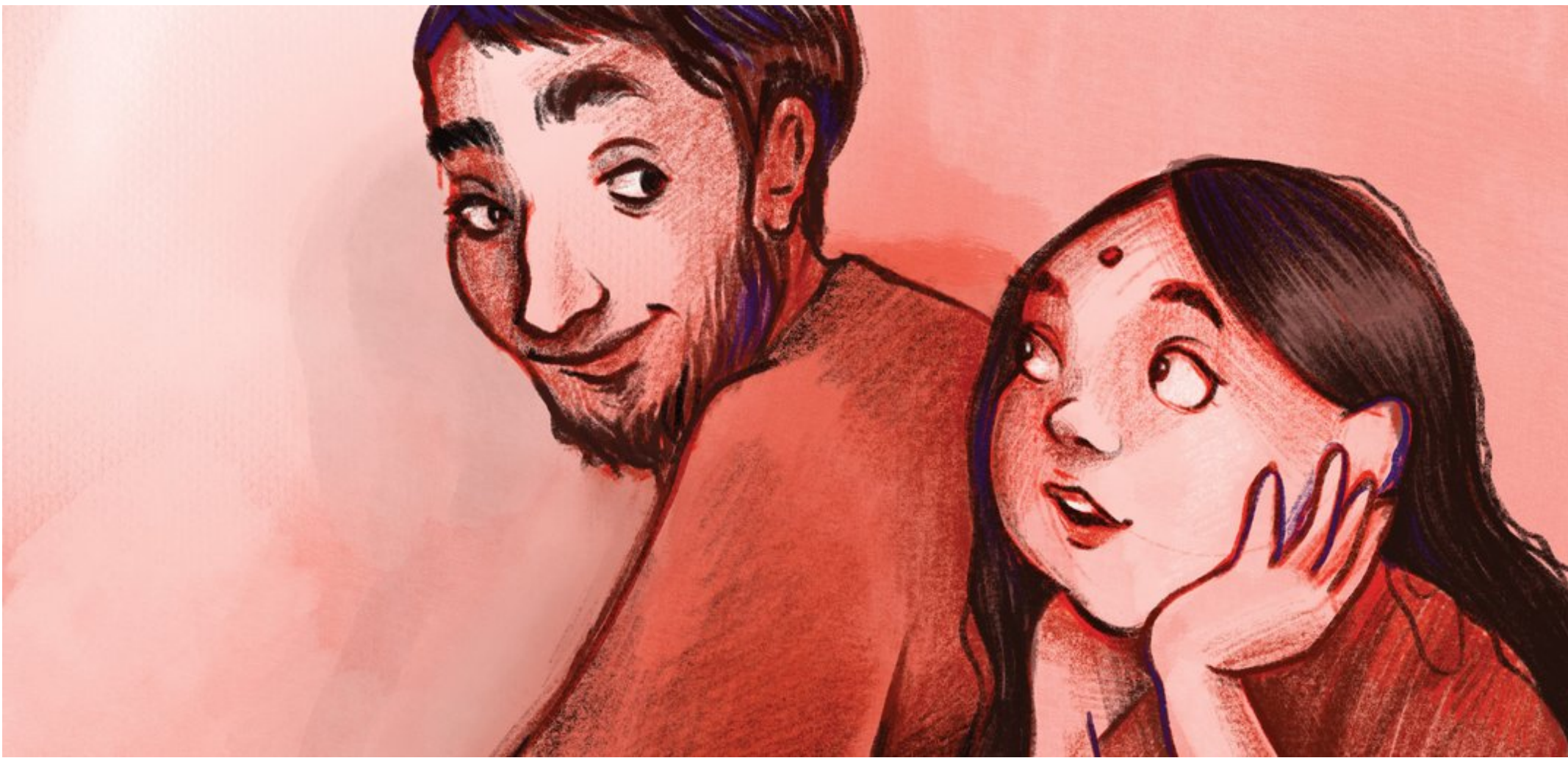
*\*\* Agdum Bagdum: A game of instructing soldiers(derived from folk Bengali rhymes).*

*\*\* Kabuliwala: someone who has come from Kabul, Afghanistan to engage in businesses of dry fruits and money-lending.*



Kabuliwala greeted me with a smiling face, and I was wondering that even though the situation with Pratap Singha and Kanchanmala was very difficult, now that we have called him inside, it did not look good to not buy anything from him.

I bought something from him. Then our miscellaneous talk started, concerning Abdur Rehman, Russia, Englishmen, about border security laws and so on. While leaving, he asked, "Babu where has your daughter gone?" I called Mini from inside to break her baseless fear-she kept staring at his bag with much suspicion. Kabuli took out some raisins from his bag and offered it to Mini. She didn't accept it at all and instead held my knees tightly with more and more suspicion. Their first introduction went off like this.



After a few days when I was going out, I saw that my daughter was talking non-stop to the kabuliwala, sitting on the bench next to our door. He was listening to her with a smiling face, sitting at her feet and giving his opinion on and off in his broken Bengali. Mini has never received such a patient listener except her father in her little experienced life of five years. I saw that she had gotten a lot of raisins and almonds from him. I told Kabuliwala “Why have you given her those again? Don’t give again,” and then I gave him a 50 paisa coin. He accepted that without hesitation and kept it in his bag.

When I returned home, there was a lot of hue and cry concerning the coin.

Mini's mother was scolding and asking her "From where have you gotten this coin from?"

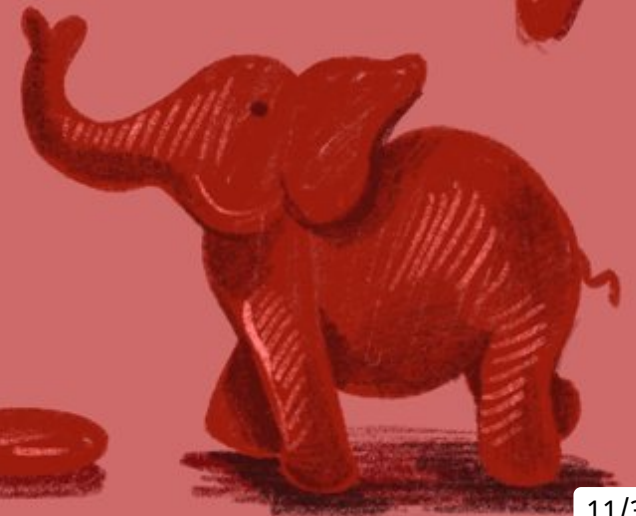
Mini was saying, "Kabuliwala has given"

Her mother was saying, "Why have you accepted?"

Mini was about to cry and said, "I didn't ask, he has given it."

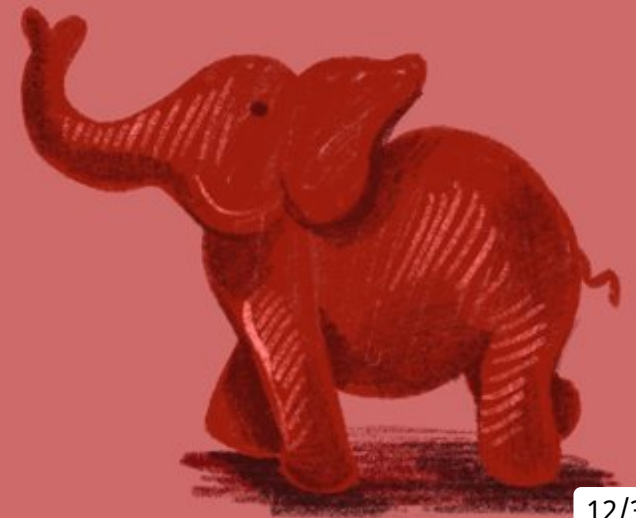



I came and saved Mini from possible danger and took her out.  
I came to know that it was not Mini's second meeting with Kabuliwala. He had come almost everyday, bribing her with pista almonds and winning her greedy little heart. I observed that there were a few private jokes between them- for example, on seeing him my daughter would ask, "Kabuliwala, O, Kabuliwala what is there in your bag?" Rahmat would reply in a nasal tone and with a smile, "There is an elephant."



To say there is an elephant inside his bag, that's the humour here. One can easily say this is not at all fine humour but both of them were enjoying it, and in that autumn morning, seeing that hearty laugh of a child and an adult child, I felt great.

There was also a phrase prevalent between them-Rahmat telling Mini, "Little girl, you will never go to your in-law's house."





Girls in Bengali households are well aware of the word 'in-law's house' since their birth but as we're modern in our outlook, we didn't make Mini aware of such ideas. Mini couldn't understand what Rahmat was saying but maintaining silence was against her nature so she said, "Will you go to in-law's house?"

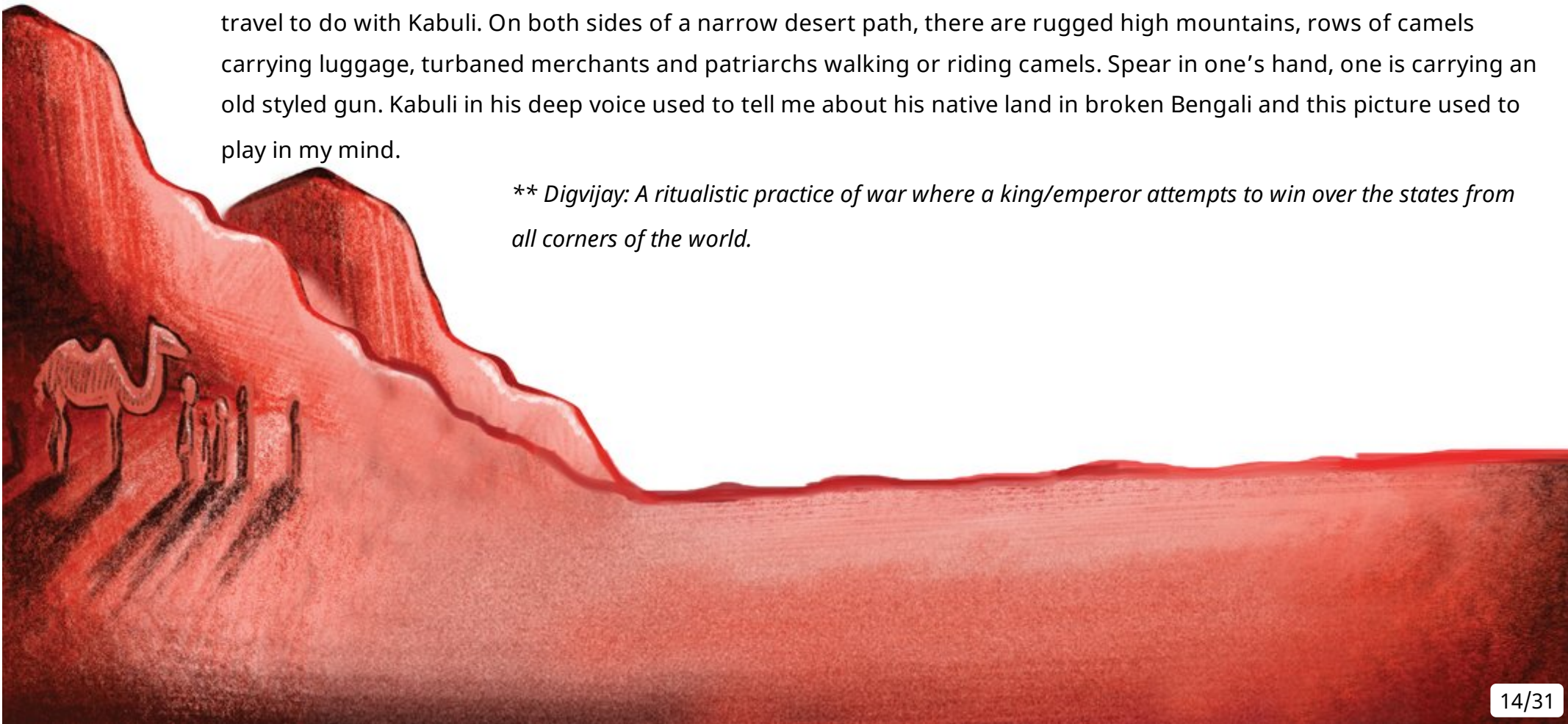
Rahmat says, "I will beat father- in- law ."

Listening to that, Mini used to laugh considering the plight of an unknown being by the name 'father- in- law'.

It was a clear Autumn morning. In ancient times, kings used to go out around this time for *digvijay*. I never go anywhere outside Kolkata, but that's why my mind wanders around the world. I feel like a traveler forever sitting in the corner of my room, my mind pained to go to the outside world. As soon as I hear the name of a place or a foreigner, my heart starts wandering. I see the site of a cottage amidst rivers, mountains and forests and the idea of joyful independence awakens.

Again, I am such a vegetable that the mere thought of going out of home, out of my designated corner, showers a thunderstorm on my head. So in the morning sitting in front of the table of my small room, I used to have a lot of travel to do with Kabuli. On both sides of a narrow desert path, there are rugged high mountains, rows of camels carrying luggage, turbaned merchants and patriarchs walking or riding camels. Spear in one's hand, one is carrying an old styled gun. Kabuli in his deep voice used to tell me about his native land in broken Bengali and this picture used to play in my mind.

*\*\* Digvijay: A ritualistic practice of war where a king/emperor attempts to win over the states from all corners of the world.*





Mini's mother is a scared person. When she hears a noise in the street, she feels that all the drunkards of the world are speeding towards our house. The fact that this earth is filled with thieves, robbers, snakes, tigers, malaria, caterpillars, cockroaches and white people, after living in this world for a while (not much though), the frightening thought has not gone away from her mind.

About Rahmat Kabuliwala, she had a lot of doubts, as well. She repeatedly requested me to pay special attention to him. As I tried to dispel her suspicions, she repeatedly asked me, "Has no child ever been stolen? Is there no slave trade in Kabul?" Is it impossible for a huge Kabuli to steal a young child?"


I had to admit, it's not impossible but unbelievable. Still not everyone has the power to believe, so my wife remained scared but I could not ask Rahmat to not come to our house.



Every year in the middle of January, Rahmat goes to his native land. This is the time he is busy recovering all the debts he has given out. He goes around visiting houses for his collection. And yet, he comes to meet Mini at least once. It looks like they are plotting a conspiracy. On days he doesn't come in the morning, I see him in the evening. When you see that tall man wearing a sloppy robe in the dark, there is an apprehension that comes to mind but when I see Mini coming running, laughing and calling out "Kabuliwala, O, Kabuliwala" and the old simple jokes between the two friends continue, my heart is filled with joy and happiness.



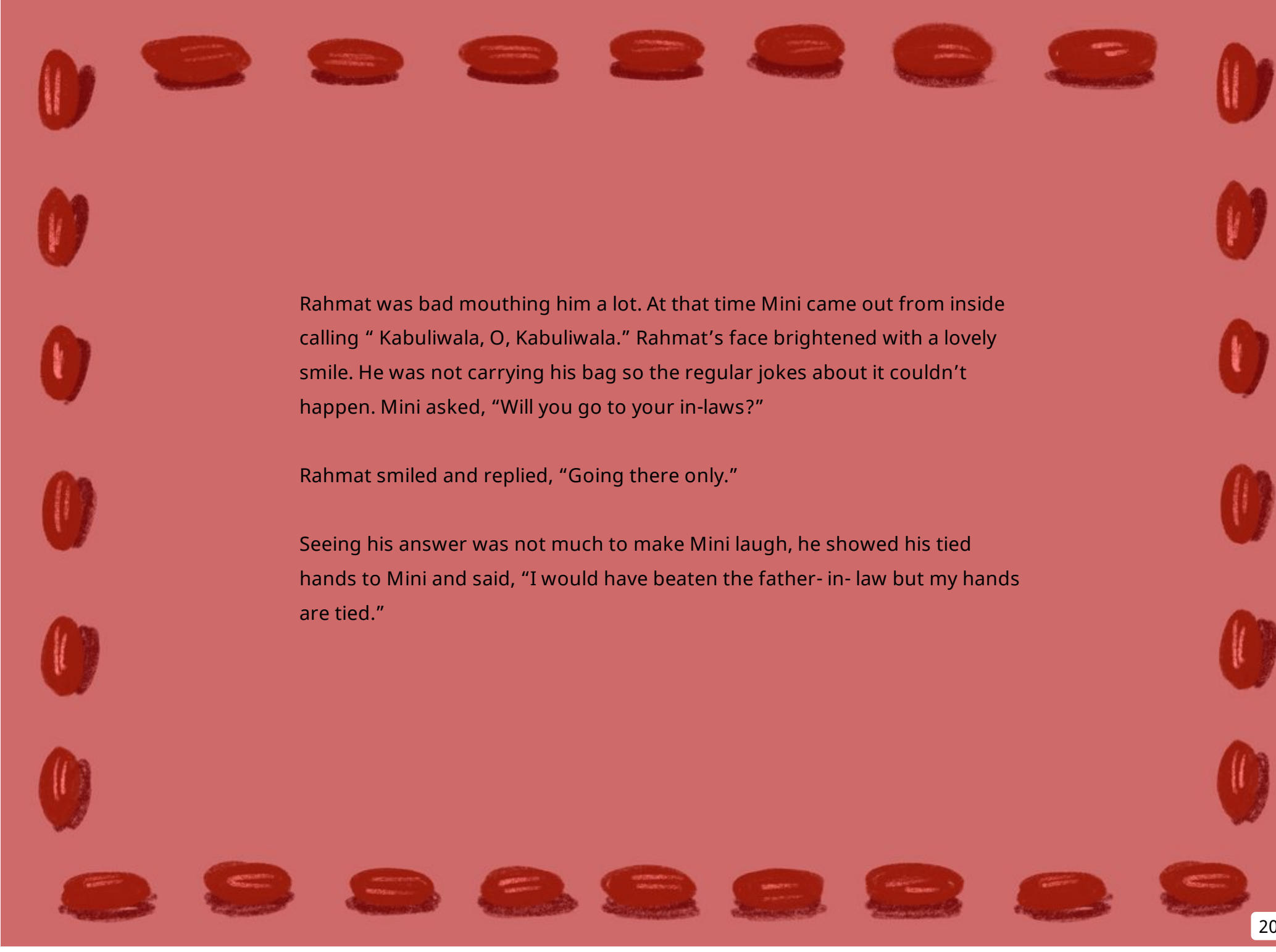
One morning I was sitting in my small room and was correcting a proof sheet. It was two or three days before the departure of winter, the cold was bone chilling, everyone was shivering. The sun spread its rays on my feet under the table, piercing the window. The heat was quite warm. Probably it was eight in the morning, all the cap wearing morning walkers came back home at that time. A loud noise started coming from the street.

A red snake with a black shadow is coiled around the text. The snake's head is on the left, facing right, with its mouth slightly open. The body of the snake winds around the text, with its tail at the bottom left. The background is a dark, textured brown.

I saw two guards coming with Rahmat with his hands tied- a group of curious boys were following them. There were blood marks on the clothes of Rahmat and a blood soaked knife in the hands of a guard. I went outside the gate and stopped the watchman and asked about the incident.

I heard that a neighbour of ours had bought a Rampuri sheet from him with a promise to pay the price later. Now he has refused to pay the debt which angered Rehmat who stabbed him.





Rahmat was bad mouthing him a lot. At that time Mini came out from inside calling “ Kabuliwala, O, Kabuliwala.” Rahmat’s face brightened with a lovely smile. He was not carrying his bag so the regular jokes about it couldn’t happen. Mini asked, “Will you go to your in-laws?”

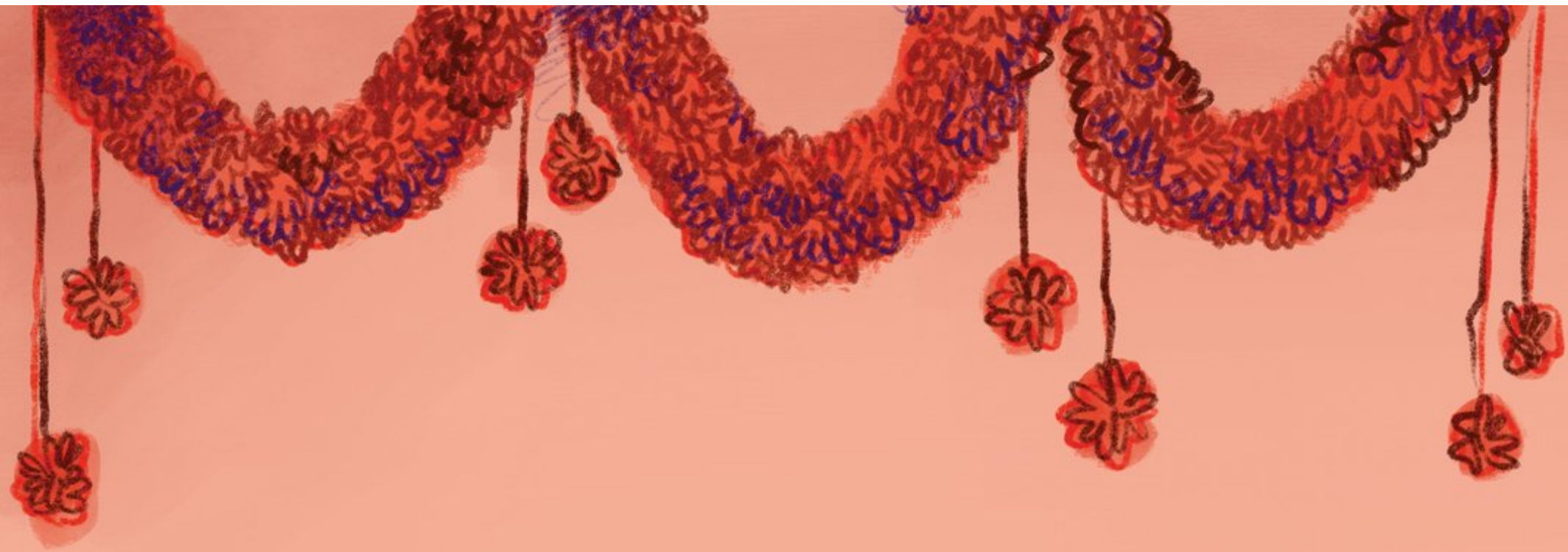
Rahmat smiled and replied, “Going there only.”

Seeing his answer was not much to make Mini laugh, he showed his tied hands to Mini and said, “I would have beaten the father- in- law but my hands are tied.”

He was sentenced to several years of jail.

I somewhat forgot about him. We were spending day in and day out doing routine activities at home. How an independent mountain man was spending years inside a high-walled prison didn't even come to my mind.

Mini's nature is so frivolous that I am ashamed to admit it as a father. She comfortably forgot her old friend and at first instance befriended the new horse keeper. Then slowly as she grew up, she started getting more female friends. Even her presence in her father's writing room became less and less - it seemed like we had stopped being friends.



Many years passed by. Another autumn is here. Mini's marriage has been fixed. She will get married during Durga Puja vacations. My source of happiness will go away like goddess Durga goes away to Kailash.

This morning is very beautiful. Autumn sun rays, washed and new, after the monsoon rain, are shining like gold. The old brick and mortar houses standing close by are shining bright. Shehnai has been playing in my house since early morning. That is my wail, originating from my chest bones. Melancholiac Bhairavi Ragini is spreading my sadness to the world along with the autumn sun.



Since morning, there has been a lot of noise at home. People are coming and going. The pandal is being made at the courtyard using bamboo, chandeliers are getting fitted making a sweet sound, there is no end to the humdrum.

I am checking accounts sitting in my writing room when Rahmat comes in and salutes me.

I am unable to recognize him at first. Neither is he carrying the sling bag nor does he have that long hair, and his body does not have that usual vigor.

I ask him, "Rahmat, when did you come?"

He says, "Last evening, I was released from jail."

It sounds like an alarm bell in my ears. I have never seen a murderer in person, I receive a shudder inside. I wish for the man to go from here on such an auspicious day.

I say, "I am busy with some work today at home. You please go today."

He starts leaving immediately but stops for a bit, on reaching the door and says, "Can't I see 'Khuki' for once?" As if, he believes that Mini is as little as she used to be. As if she will come running, calling out to him "Kabuliwala, O, Kabuliwala" and they will continue their funny conversation. He had even brought a box of grapes and a few almonds and raisins, begging from a native friend- but he did not have his sling bag.

I say, "There is a function at home today. You cannot meet anyone."

He is a little upset. He stands silently and looks at me straight for some time and then says "Salam Babu" and leaves.

I feel some pain and consider calling him back, when I see him coming back.

He comes near me and says, "Here are some grapes and almonds and raisins for khuki that I had brought, please give it to her."



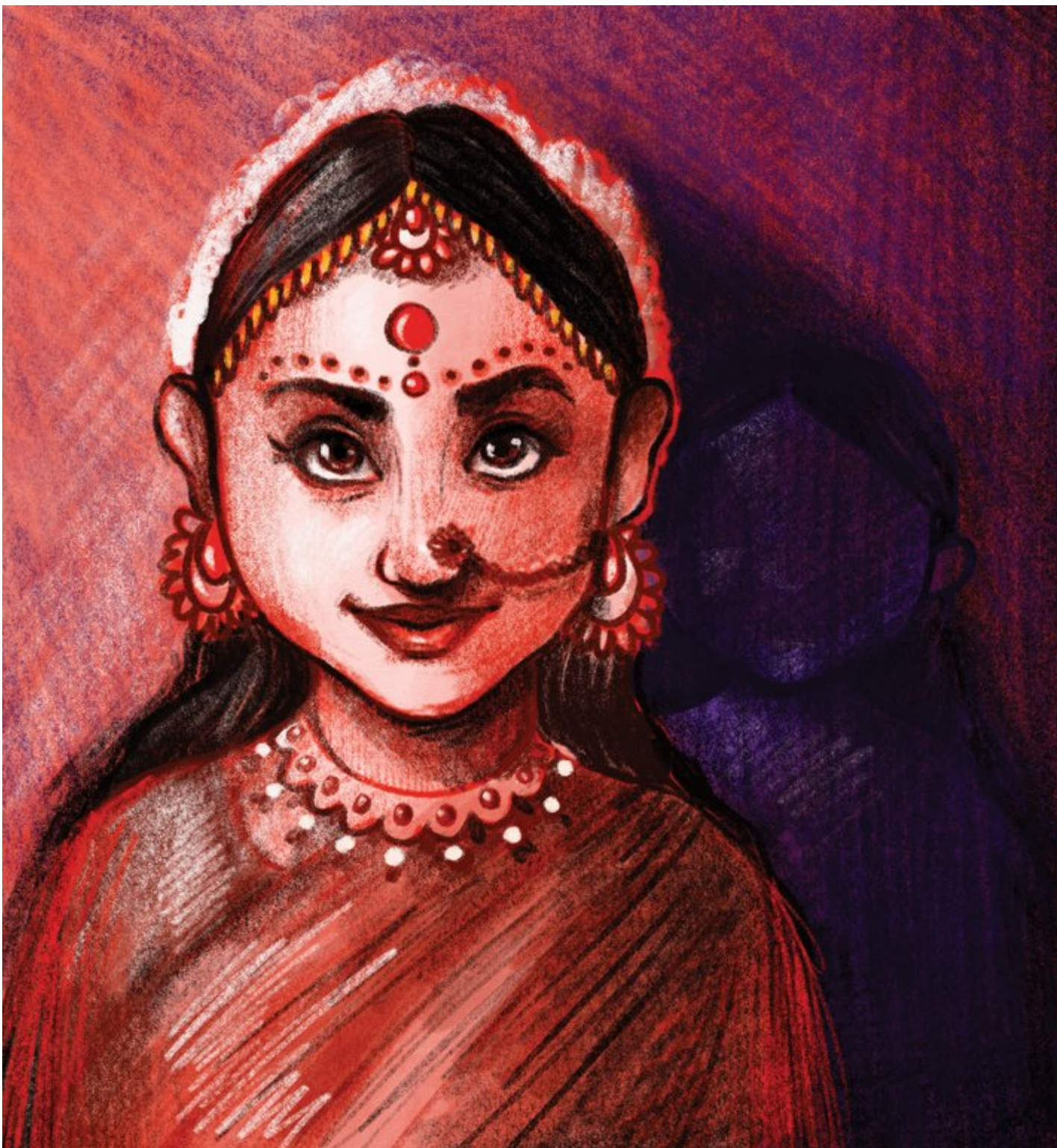
He suddenly grabs my hand as I am about to pay him; He says, "Your great kindness, I will remember forever - do not give me money. Like you, I too have a daughter back at home. I think of her and bring some dessert for your daughter. I don't come here to do business.

Having said this, he puts a hand inside his loose robe and pulls out a dirty piece of paper from somewhere near his chest and very carefully opens the fold and spreads it on my desk.

I see a print of a small hand on that paper. Neither a photograph nor an oil paint, just an imprint of a small hand taken on paper using black soot. Taking this reminiscence of his daughter to his chest, Rahmat arrives every year to sell 'mewa' on the streets of Calcutta. - as if touching his little child's hand imprint pours nectar into his forlorn heart.





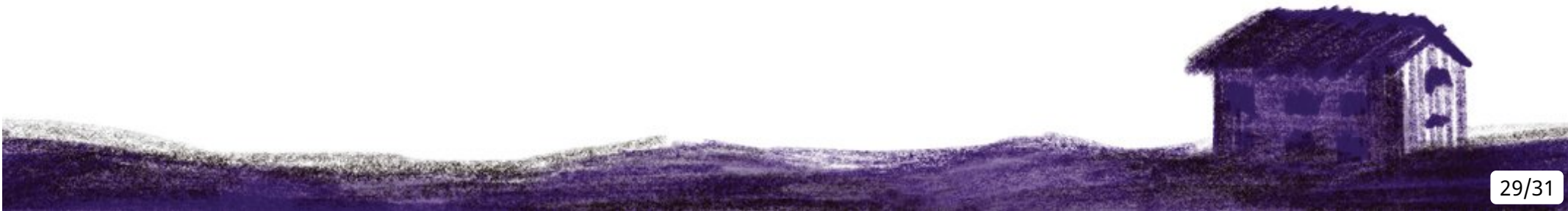


My eyes water at the sight of this. At that point in time, I forget that he is a Kabuli mewala and I am a Bengali aristocrat. I understand him as the father I am. That small handprint reminds me of my Mini. Immediately I call her from inside. There are many objections raised by the women of the house but I don't lend a ear to that. Wearing a red bridal sari, sandalwood designs on her forehead, the bride Mini comes and stands near me coyly.

Seeing her, Kabuliwala is taken aback at first, and can't start their old conversation. At last with a smiling face he says, "Khoki, will you go to your in-laws' house?"

Mini now knows the meaning of in-laws' home, so she can't answer like before. She turns red and looks the other way. I remember the first day when they had met for the first time. I am a little pained.

When Mini is gone, Rahmat sighs and sits on the floor. He suddenly understands that his daughter has also grown up now, he would have to have a new introduction with her again.



Who knows what has happened to her in these eight years! In this bright autumn morning, the shehnai is playing while Rahmat is watching the desert mountains of Afghanistan in his mind, sitting inside a narrow lane of Kolkata.





I give him a currency note and say, “Rahmat go back home to your daughter. The happiness from your union with her will do some good to my Mini.”

Having donated this amount, I need to cut down some items from festivities. Lighting will not be there to the extent I had planned and there is no band to play. Inside, the women of the household are unhappy, but one divine light illuminates my festivities the brightest.

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# Kabuliwala

(English)

Five-year-old Mini can't stay without talking. She talks all the time to her parents. She talks with Rahmat, the Kabuliwala. Rahmat gives her cashews and kishmish. A beautiful relationship develops between them based on the airy hills of Afghanistan and his own daughter who he had to leave behind at home. But circumstances force Rehmat to end up in jail! Years later, it's Mini's wedding day and Rehmat walks out with his freedom into a world that has moved on without him.

This is a Level 4 book for children who can read fluently and with confidence.



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