



story
weaver

The Postmaster

Author: Rabindranath Tagore

Illustrator: Ashwathy Menon

Translator: Arunava Sinha

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 1912, this story revolves around Ratan and her Dadababu, the postmaster. Having recently shifted from the city to a village, the Postmaster finds home in little Ratan. However, the fear of society, the expected but unnecessary possibility of explanation wrought in social hierarchy hinder him from extending the warmth and recognition that Ratan deserves. The bard's brilliant creation is quite different from any other stories written for children. Even though the entire story is wrought with humane emotions, the last paragraph brilliantly portrays the philosopher in Tagore.



The postmaster had to go to the village of Ulapur on his first posting. An indigo factory was situated nearby; its manager had gone to great lengths to have a post-office established here. Our postmaster was a young man from Calcutta. His condition on being set adrift in this remote hinterland was not unlike that of a fish hauled out of the water on to dry land. His office was located in a dark hut; there was a moss-covered pond close by, and around it, a dense wood. The cashier and other employees at the factory had no leisure to speak of, and not worthy of the company of a gentleman, besides.

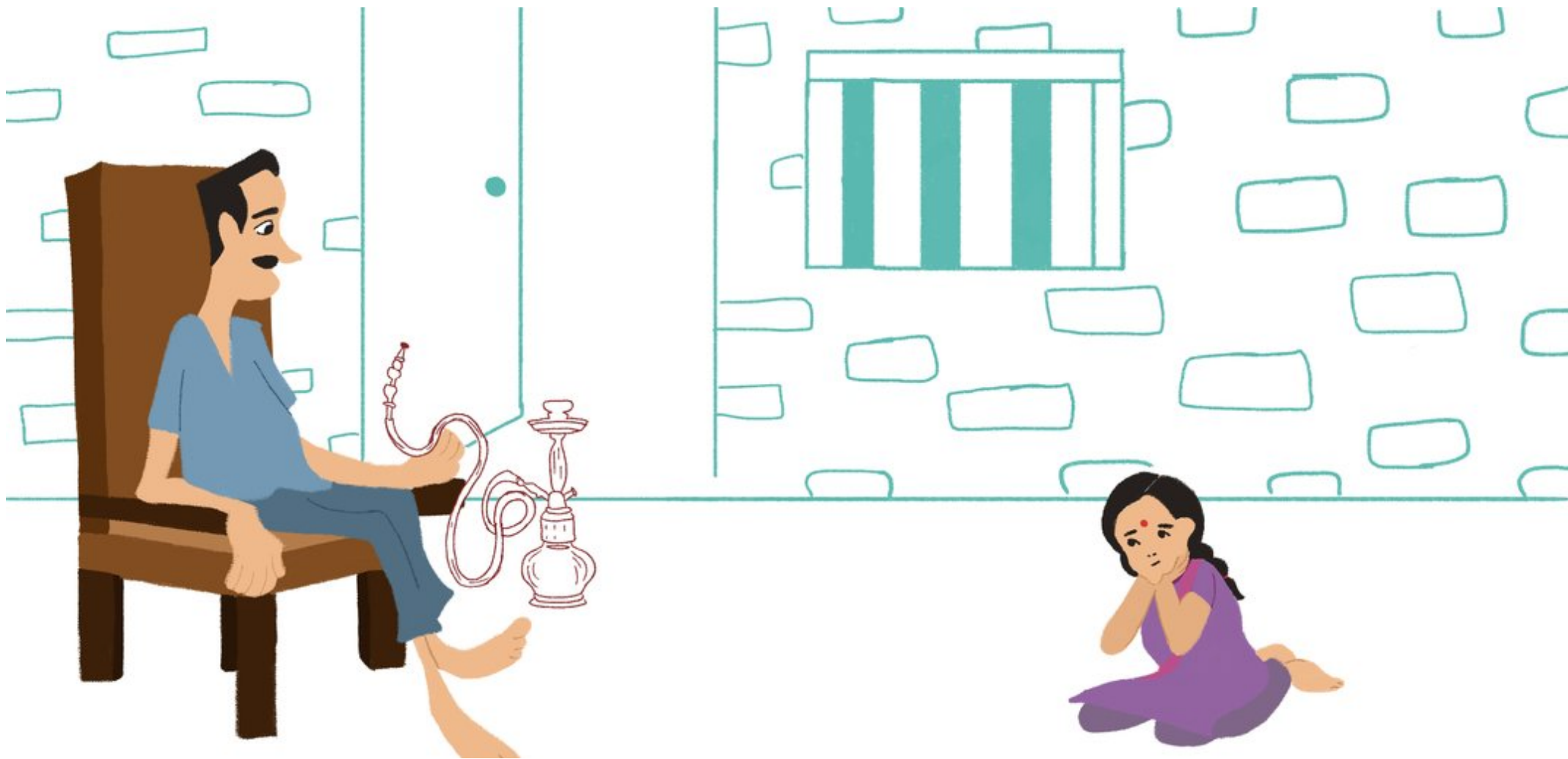


Those who are from Calcutta do not know how to mingle with people in a new place, where they either turn arrogant or diffident. As a result, they do not succeed in making friends and acquaintances locally. But the postmaster did not have a heavy workload.

He tried his hand at poetry now and then, expressing thoughts to the effect that life is blissful when it is spent watching the leaves on the trees sway gently and the clouds drifting across the sky—but the almighty knew only too well that were a djinn from the Arabian Nights to appear and replace the trees and their branches with paved roads, and to erect rows of mansions to obscure the view of the clouds, this half-dead young man from a genteel family would be given a new lease of life. The postmaster earned a paltry salary. He had to cook for himself, and a young orphan girl from the village did all his other chores, getting her meals in return. Her name was Ratan. Aged about twelve or thirteen, she did not appear to have bright prospects for marriage.



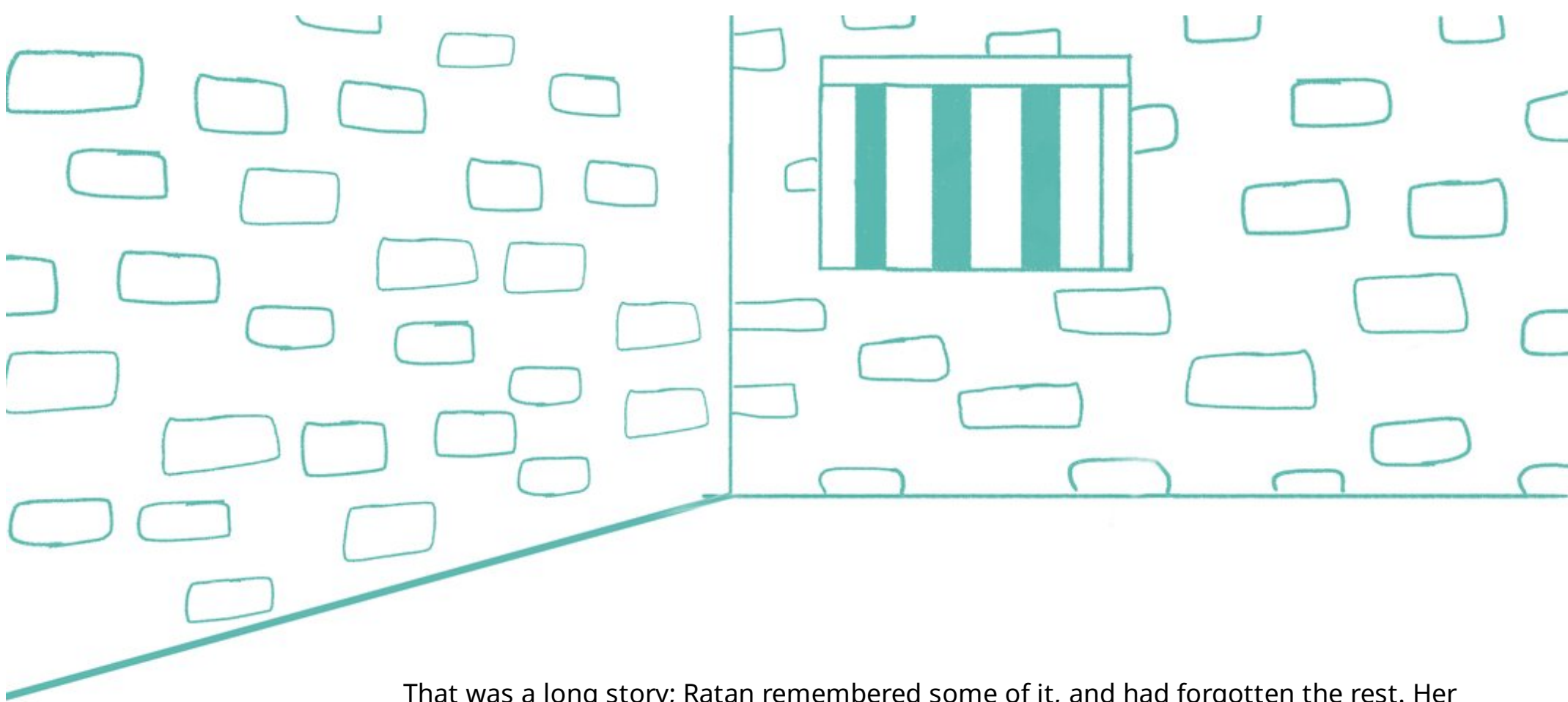
In the evening, when smoke spiralled up from cowsheds, when crickets began to call from the bushes, when the drunken bauls in a distant village started singing loudly, accompanied by their dhol and kortal, when even the poet's heart quivered on watching the trees sway as he sat all alone outside his front door, the postmaster would light a faint lamp in the corner of the room and call out, 'Ratan.' She would be waiting for this very call, but she wouldn't enter at once, saying instead, 'What is it Babu, what do you need me for?' Postmaster: 'What are you doing?'



Ratan: 'I have to light the oven... the kitchen...'

Postmaster: 'You can do your kitchen work later. I want to smoke.'

In no time Ratan would go in, blowing for all she was worth on the bowl of the hookah. Taking it from her, the postmaster would suddenly ask, 'Tell me Ratan, do you remember your mother?'



That was a long story; Ratan remembered some of it, and had forgotten the rest. Her father loved her more, she did remember him a little better. He would come home tired every day after work; memories of an evening or two with him were imprinted in her mind as clearly as a picture. As the conversation progressed, Ratan would sit down on the floor near the postmaster's feet. She remembered a younger brother... how, on a rainy day long ago, they had played at fishing from a pond with a broken branch from a tree... it was this incident, rather than many other momentous ones, that would spring to her mind.

It would get late as they talked, after which the postmaster would feel too lazy to cook. There would be leftovers from the morning, and Ratan would quickly light the oven and make a few rotis—that would suffice as dinner for both of them.


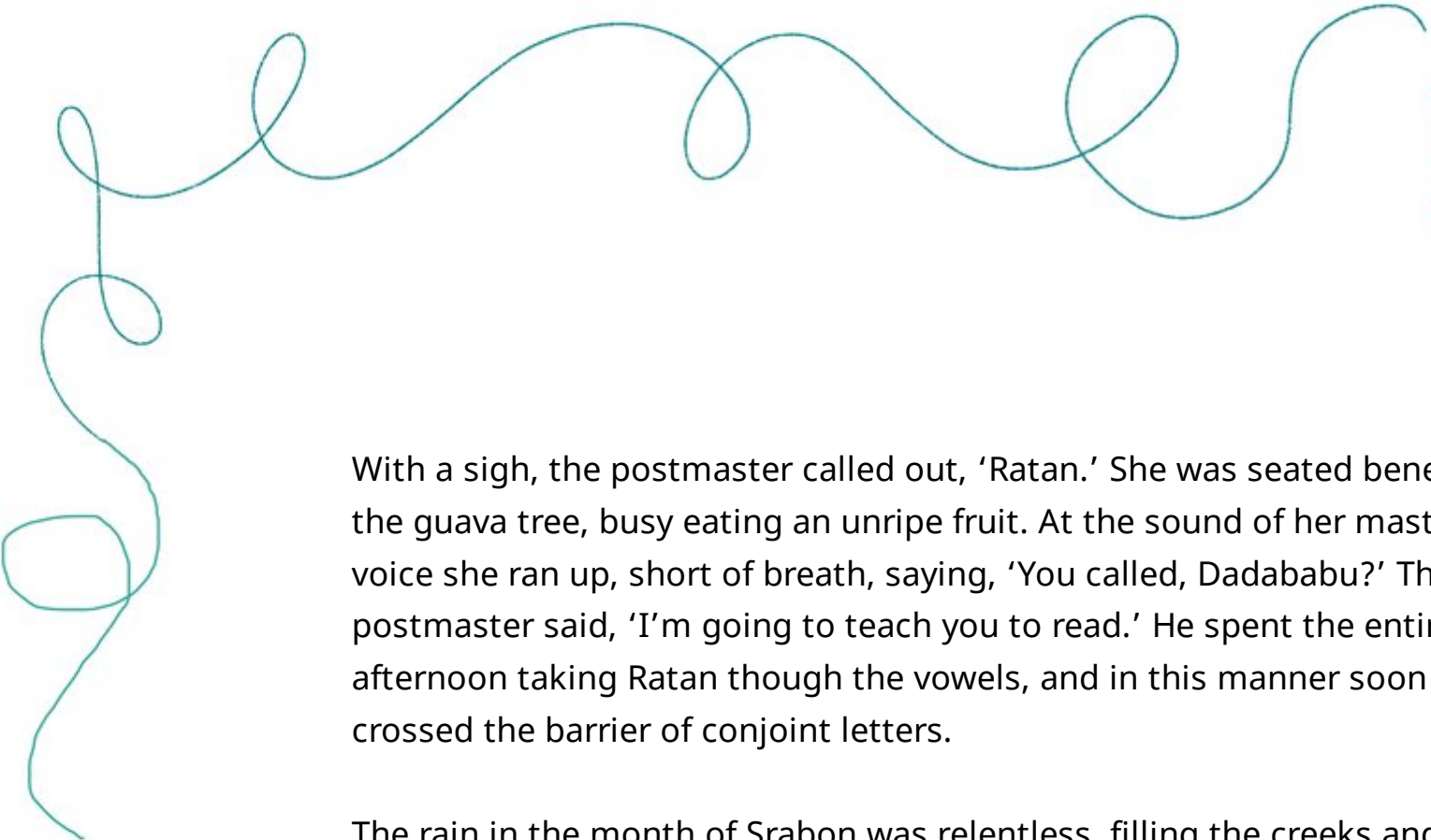
On some evenings the postmaster would sit on the wooden cot that was part of the office and talk about his own family—his younger brother, elder sister and mother, those for whom his heart would ache here in this distant village. Many things came to mind, but could in no circumstances be mentioned to the clerks at the indigo factory; however, he found it easy to tell the young girl all of these, it did not seem in the least bit unwarranted. Eventually it came to pass that she began to refer to his family as Ma, Didi, or Dada, as though she had known them for years. Ratan had even imagined their appearances in her tiny heart.





One cloudless monsoon afternoon, a slightly warm but pleasant breeze was blowing; a scent emanated from the moist grass and trees drizzled by sunlight, it was like the warm breath of an exhausted planet on the skin. Somewhere an indefatigable bird kept up an uninterrupted, mournful litany of melodious protest at the court of nature.

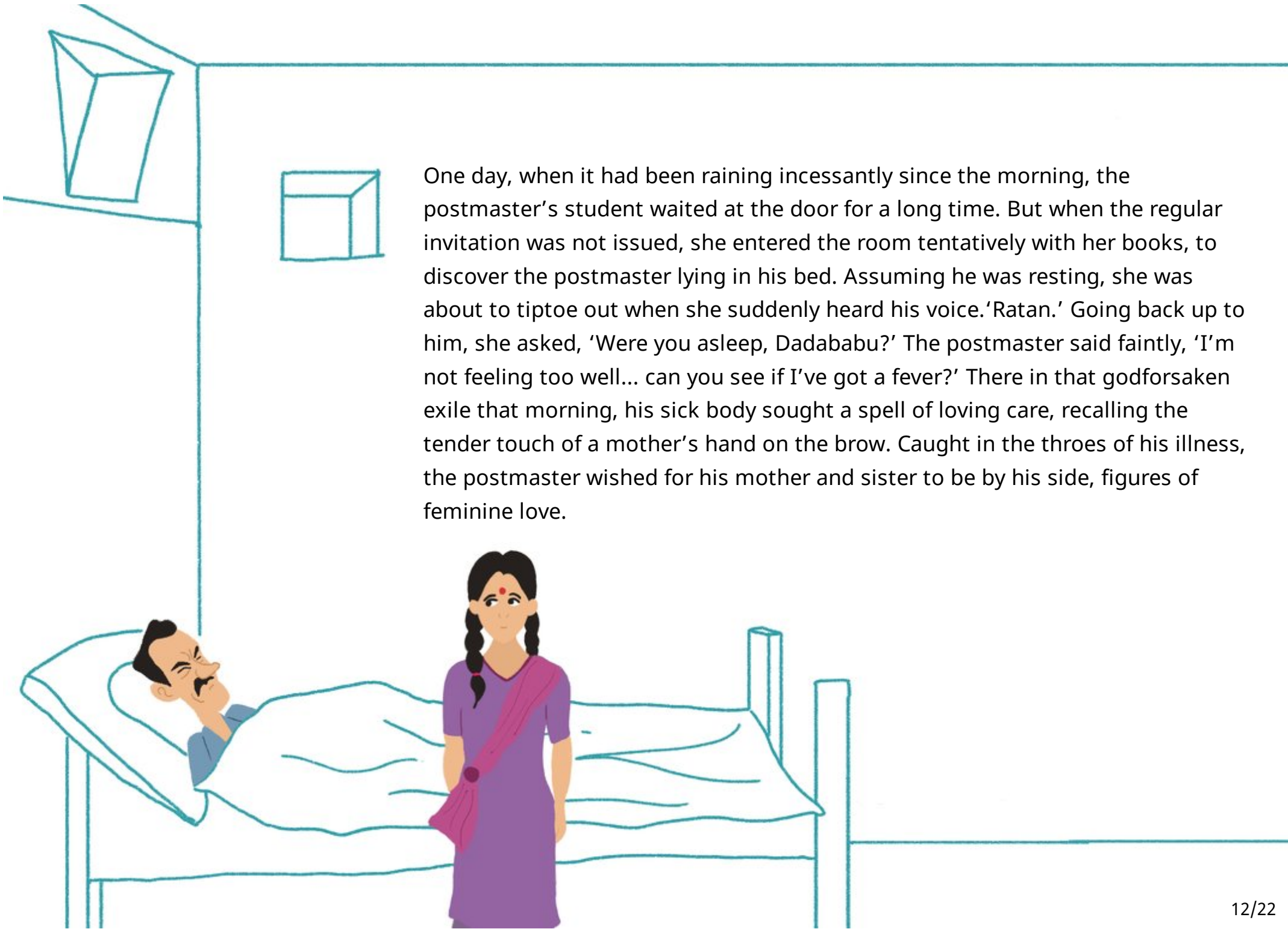
The postmaster had no work—the swaying of the silken rain-washed boughs and the sunshine-white clouds, remnants of a temporarily vanquished monsoon, were truly a sight to behold. Gazing at them, the postmaster wished he had someone with him who was close to his heart, a human being, a source of affection. Soon he began to believe that was precisely what the bird was saying repeatedly, and that the murmuring of the leaves in this desolate land full of trees indicated the same thing too. No one would have believed it, no one even came to know, but this was the notion that arose in the mind of a lowly postmaster with a meagre salary during the long afternoon hours on that quiet day.



With a sigh, the postmaster called out, 'Ratan.' She was seated beneath the guava tree, busy eating an unripe fruit. At the sound of her master's voice she ran up, short of breath, saying, 'You called, Dadababu?' The postmaster said, 'I'm going to teach you to read.' He spent the entire afternoon taking Ratan through the vowels, and in this manner soon crossed the barrier of conjoint letters.

The rain in the month of Srabon was relentless, filling the creeks and ponds and canals with water. Frogs croaked all day and night, accompanied by the sound of rainfall. Negotiating the roads became impossible, even the market had to be reached in a boat.





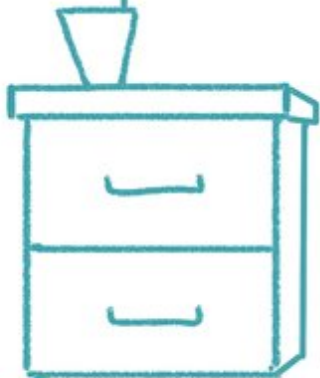
One day, when it had been raining incessantly since the morning, the postmaster's student waited at the door for a long time. But when the regular invitation was not issued, she entered the room tentatively with her books, to discover the postmaster lying in his bed. Assuming he was resting, she was about to tiptoe out when she suddenly heard his voice. 'Ratan.' Going back up to him, she asked, 'Were you asleep, Dadababu?' The postmaster said faintly, 'I'm not feeling too well... can you see if I've got a fever?' There in that godforsaken exile that morning, his sick body sought a spell of loving care, recalling the tender touch of a mother's hand on the brow. Caught in the throes of his illness, the postmaster wished for his mother and sister to be by his side, figures of feminine love.



In this case his desire did not go unmet, for Ratan remained a young girl no more, stepping into the mother's shoes at once and sending for the doctor. She administered medicines at the right time, maintained a vigil near the patient's head all night, cooked nutritious food for him, and asked a hundred times, 'Feeling a little better now, Dadababu?'

Several days went by before the postmaster managed to get out of bed, still frail after his illness. He wouldn't stay here any longer, he decided, he had to get himself transferred somehow. At once he sent off an application to the authorities in Calcutta, citing the unhealthy conditions hereabouts.

Released from her duties as a nurse, Ratan reclaimed her position by the door. But she was no longer called inside as before; sometimes she peeped in to find the postmaster sitting on the cot or lying down in his bed, lost in thought. While Ratan awaited a call from him, he waited impatiently for a response to his application. The girl sat by the door, revising her old lessons a thousand times, for she was worried lest she forget the conjoint letters when the call finally came. Finally, it did come, one evening a week or so later. Her heart overflowing, Ratan entered and said, 'You called for me, Dadababu?'





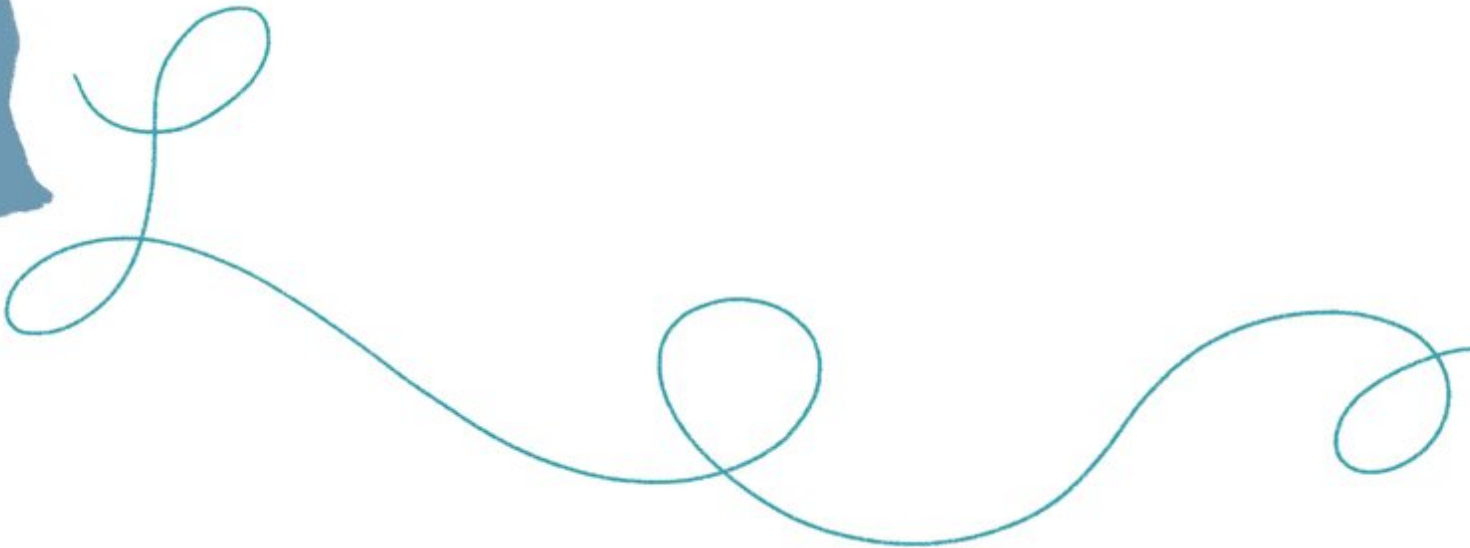
'I'm going tomorrow, Ratan,' said the postmaster.

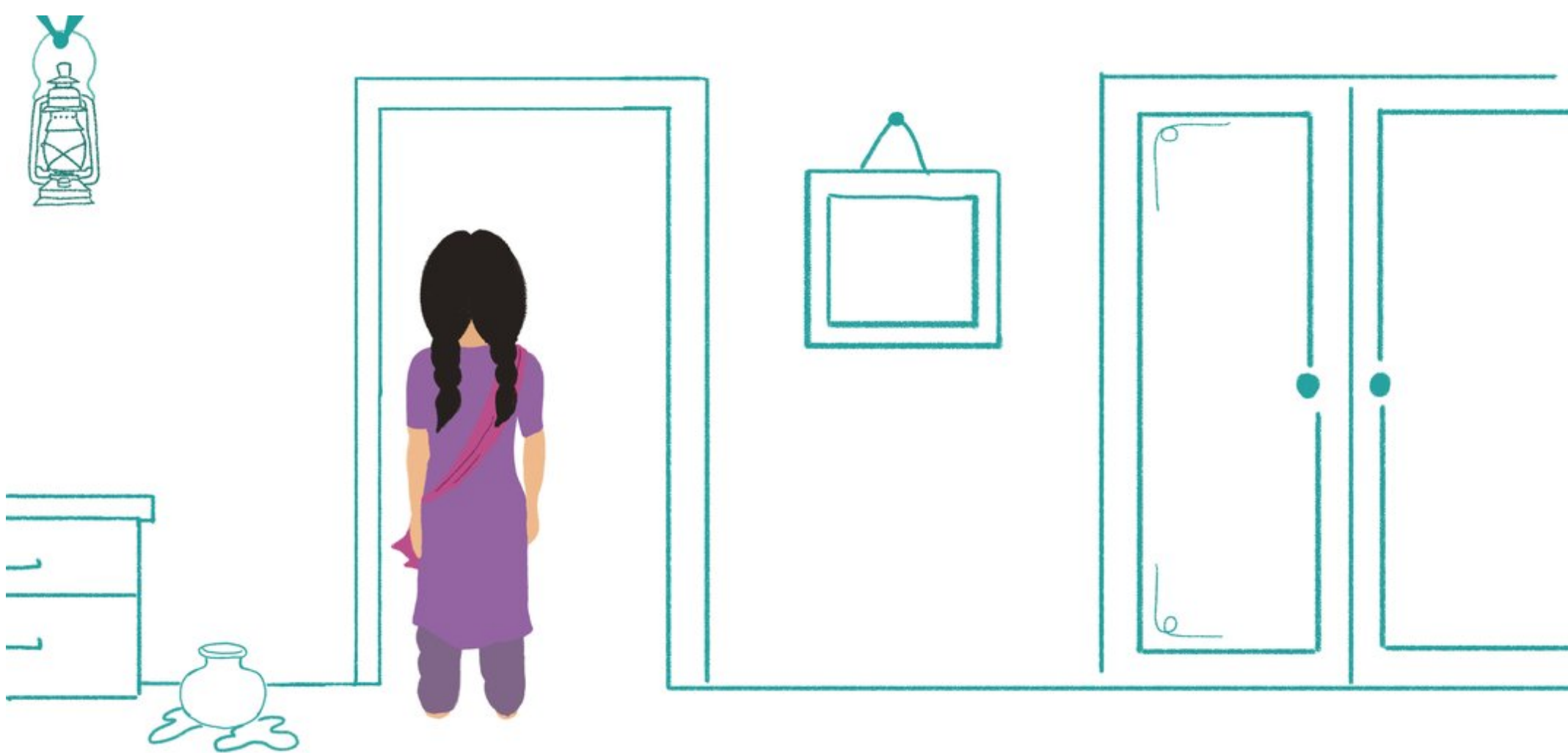
Ratan: 'Going where, Dadababu?'

Postmaster: 'I'm going home.'

Ratan: 'When will you be back?'

Postmaster: 'I won't be back.'





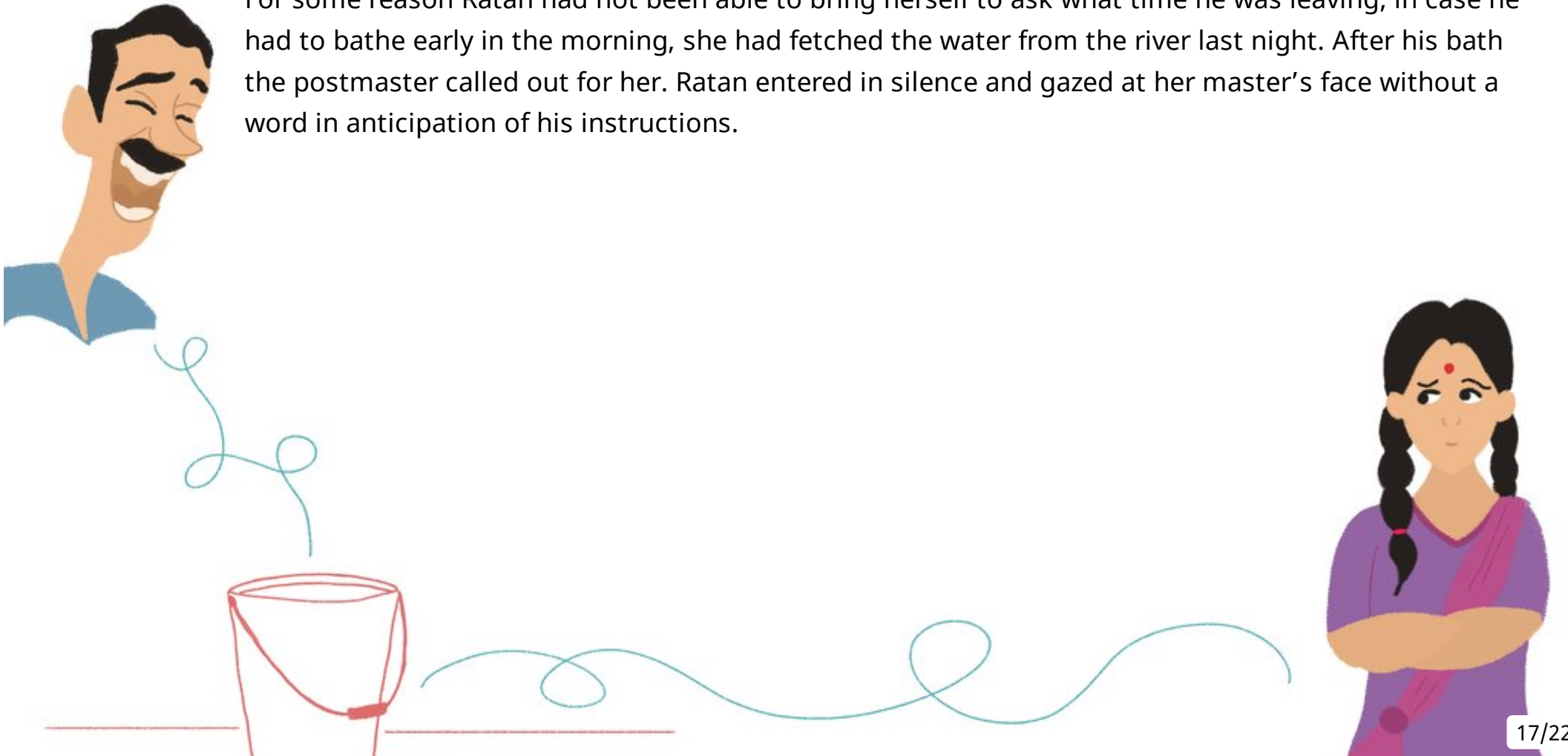
Ratan didn't ask any more questions. The postmaster volunteered the information that he had applied for a transfer, but his application had been rejected; so he had resigned and was going home. Neither of them spoke for a long time after that. The lamp flickered in a corner, and rainwater dripped from a worn-out spot in the roof into an earthen pot.

After a while Ratan left the room on slow footsteps, going to the kitchen to make rutis. She wasn't as quick as she usually was; perhaps her mind was assailed by questions. After the postmaster had eaten, she asked him, 'Will you take me home with you, Dadabu?'

The postmaster laughed. 'How can I do that?'

He did not feel it necessary to explain the reasons it was impossible. All through the night his words rang in Ratan's ears, in sleep and in wakefulness, 'How can I do that?' Rising early in the morning, the postmaster saw a bucket of water placed for him as usual. As in Calcutta, he was used to bathing in water stored overnight, and not in the river.

For some reason Ratan had not been able to bring herself to ask what time he was leaving; in case he had to bathe early in the morning, she had fetched the water from the river last night. After his bath the postmaster called out for her. Ratan entered in silence and gazed at her master's face without a word in anticipation of his instructions.



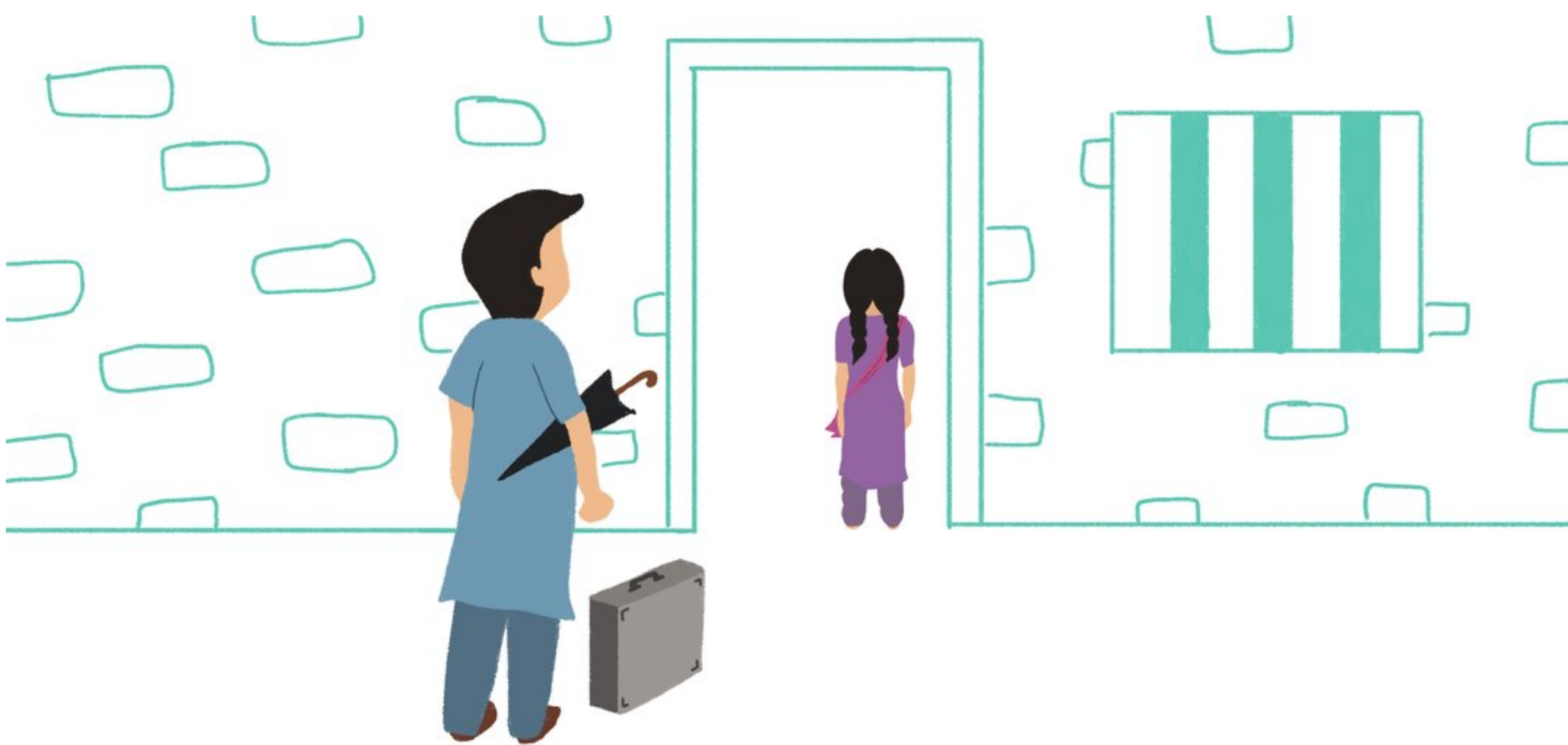


The master said, 'Ratan, I'll tell the new postmaster to look after you as well as I did. You don't have to worry.' There was no doubt that he was saying this with much affection and compassion, but who can fathom a woman's heart?

Ratan had often endured her master's harsh admonitions without protest, but today she could not bear his gentleness and burst into tears, saying, 'No, you don't have to tell him anything, I don't want to work here anymore.'

Not used to seeing Ratan behave this way, the postmaster looked at her in astonishment.

The new postmaster arrived. Handing over charge to him, the old postmaster prepared to depart. Before leaving, he called Ratan and told her, 'I've never given you any money, Ratan, I'm giving you some now before I go, you can live on it for some time.'

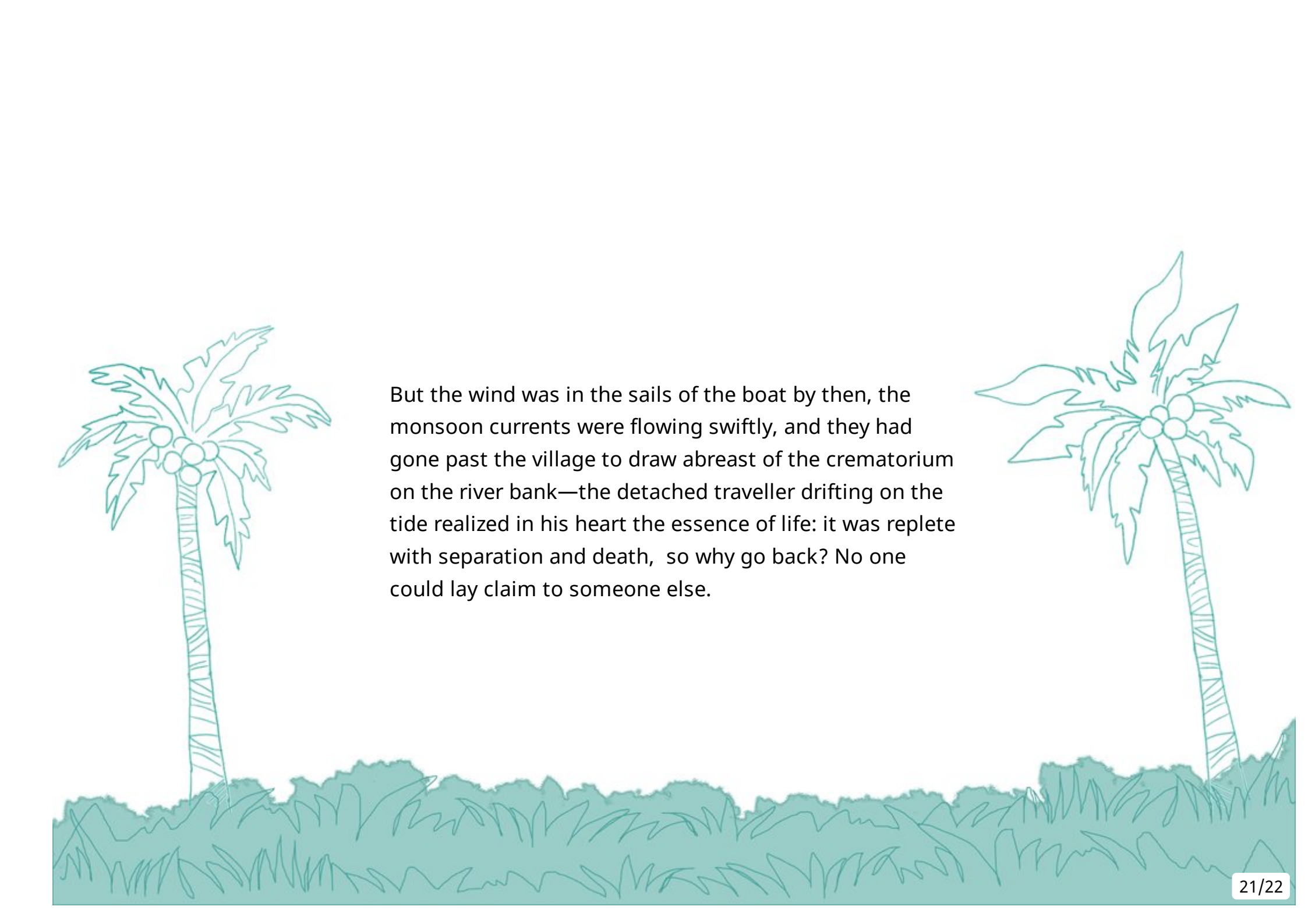


Keeping a little for his expenses during the journey, the postmaster took out all the money he had earned in this time. Flinging herself to the ground, Ratan wrapped her hands around his feet. 'I beg of you Dadababu, I beg of you, you don't have to give me anything. I beg of you, no one has to worry for me...' She ran away.

With a sigh the former postmaster picked up his travel bag, shouldered his umbrella, instructed the porter to gather his blue and white patterned trunk, and began to walk towards the river where the boat was waiting for him.

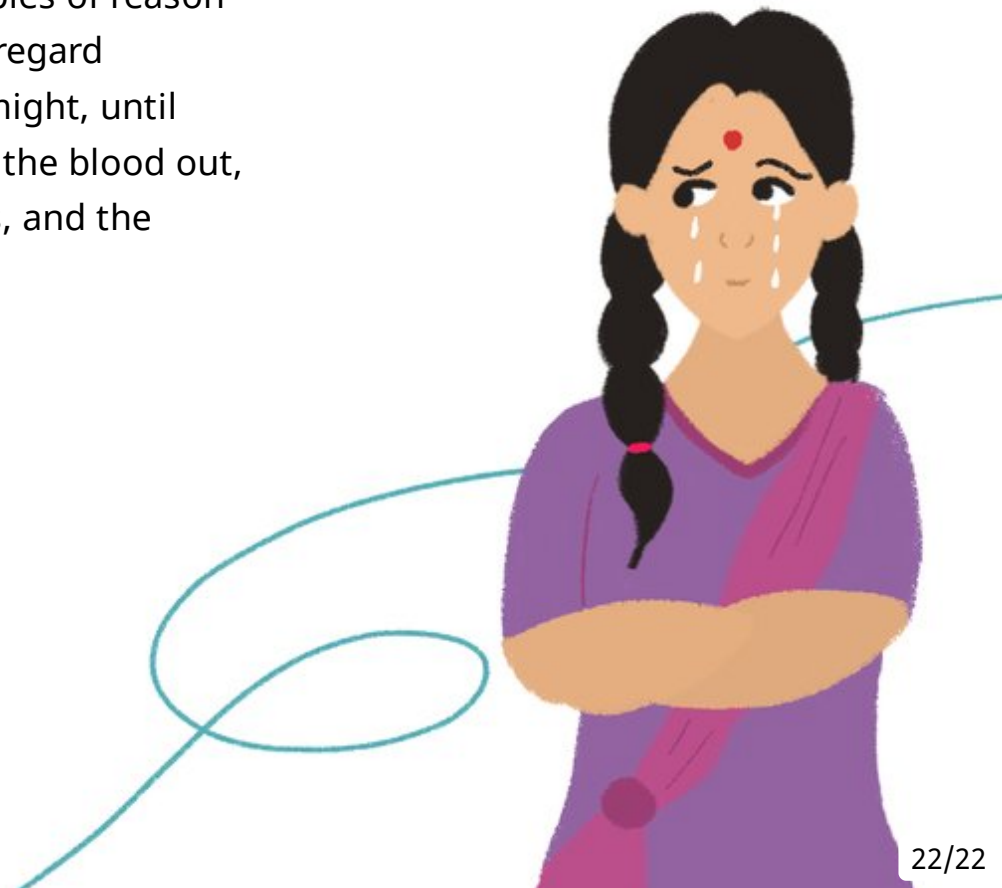


When he boarded the boat and it began to move, the river, swollen with rain, lapped around him like tears flowing from the earth. He felt an ache in his heart—the wistful face of a nondescript village girl began to convey to him the unexpressed pain of the entire world. Once or twice he felt an urge, ‘Let me go back and take the orphan girl forsaken by everyone with me.’



But the wind was in the sails of the boat by then, the monsoon currents were flowing swiftly, and they had gone past the village to draw abreast of the crematorium on the river bank—the detached traveller drifting on the tide realized in his heart the essence of life: it was replete with separation and death, so why go back? No one could lay claim to someone else.

But no such awakening came to Ratan. She kept wandering about outside the post office, flooding the ground with her tears. Perhaps a faint hope had arisen in her heart, that Dadabu might come back... it tethered her to the spot, preventing her from going away. Oh this foolish human heart—it never stops believing in illusion, the principles of reason penetrate its borders far too late, making it possible to disregard irrefutable evidence and cling to false hope with all one's might, until one day this lie cuts through each and every vein, sucks all the blood out, and makes good its escape. That is when realization dawns, and the heart longs to fall into the trap of yet another illusion.



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The Postmaster

(English)

The postmaster and Ratan, hailing from different worlds, build their cosy home on compassion and empathy. However, the postmaster has applied to leave the village. Read this poignant story by Tagore that explores a relationship without a name and leaves your heart aching for Ratan.

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



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