



Stories
of
RESILIENCE
RAMENDRA KUMAR

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Maya Angelou

"You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may tread me in the very dirt,
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.
Weakened by my soulful cries.

Out of the huts of history's shame,
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain,
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear,
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear,
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise."

Shorter version adapted from
Maya Angelou's 'I Rise' poem.

Message from Protsahan

The human capacity for adversity and burden is like bamboo - far more flexible than one would ever believe at first glance. Our children too, absorb & adapt more than we can fathom, sometimes way more than adults. Never say that you can't do something, or that something seems impossible, or that something can't be done, no matter how discouraging or harrowing it may be; for human beings are limited only by what we allow ourselves to be limited by - our own minds. We are each the masters of our own reality; when we become self-aware to this, absolutely anything in the world is possible.

This book shares real stories of children who have mastered themselves in the face of extreme violence and adversity, and became tiny incredible leaders of the world around them. This book will teach you, through the world of children, that, no odds, chastization, exile, doubt, fear can prevent you from accomplishing your dreams. This book will teach you, to never be a victim of life; rather, it's conqueror.

Many children experience traumatic life events. Protsahan works with children facing the trauma of sexual violence, lack of education, lack of compassion, lack of resources to even have two square meals a day, leave alone resources that are needed for a child to thrive. In this book, through the stories of child survivors, Protsahan's dear friend and renowned author Ramendra Kumar has weaved real stories of Protsahan girls to show us that we all have the capacity to heal and lead truly meaningful lives. Special thanks to Kirti Bhardwaj who lovingly did the illustrations for the book and Stuti Arora who designed it so beautifully. This book is not only a compilation of real life stories of how Protsahan made an impact in the lives of the girls through an integrated arts based leadership training programme that was based in trauma informed compassionate care. It also stands out as a documented narrative of how broken childhoods can transform into resilient childhoods when nurtured with love, education and creative leadership training pedagogies. It speaks about allowing children to heal and move forward into a world of education, life skills and financial independence and chart out their own unique life stories.

I wish this book gives you hope and encouragement for times to come.

-

Sonal Kapoor

Founder Director
Protsahan India Foundation
New Delhi

About the Author

Ramendra Kumar (Ramen) is an award winning writer for children with 36 books to his credit. He also dabbles in satire, poetry and travelogues. Ramen has so far won 31 awards in the 'Competition for Writers of Children's Books', organized by Children's Book Trust. His writings have been translated into 15 Indian and 14 foreign languages and have also found a place in textbooks, as well as national and international anthologies. His graphic books on the JJ Act and POCSO, written specially for children, have received wide acclaim.

A much sought after inspirational speaker and storyteller, Ramen has been invited to participate in several conferences and literature festivals. These include the IBBY Congress of Children's Writers in Denmark (2008) & Greece (2018) and Sharjah Children's Reading Festival (2019), apart from many literary events across the country such as the Jaipur Literature Festival, Hyderabad Literary Festival, Bookaroo Festival of Children's Literature et al. An Engineer and an MBA, Ramen is working as General Manager (Public Relations), SAIL, Rourkela Steel Plant.

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Vidya

“Maa, see what happened to Papa. He is just lying there with his eyes open, staring at the ceiling. He is not responding to whatever I say,” eleven year old Vidya told Radha.

“Oh God! He seems to have



got into one of his moods again. Leave him alone he should be okay in sometime.”

Vidya did not say a word and went back in, where her father Shankar Das was lying. He was still in the same position. She sat next to him for some time and then went out to play.

A couple of months later Vidya heard Radha telling her *bua* who had come from Noida to spend the day with them.

“Jyoti, ever since Vidya's Papa lost his job last year he has been behaving in a funny way.”

“He was working as a security guard in Roxy Cinema, wasn't it?”

“Yes. The cinema closed down and he was out on the streets. Since then he has been roaming around looking for a job. He even tried his hand at a few things but nothing worked out.”

“When you say he has been acting funny, what exactly do you mean?”

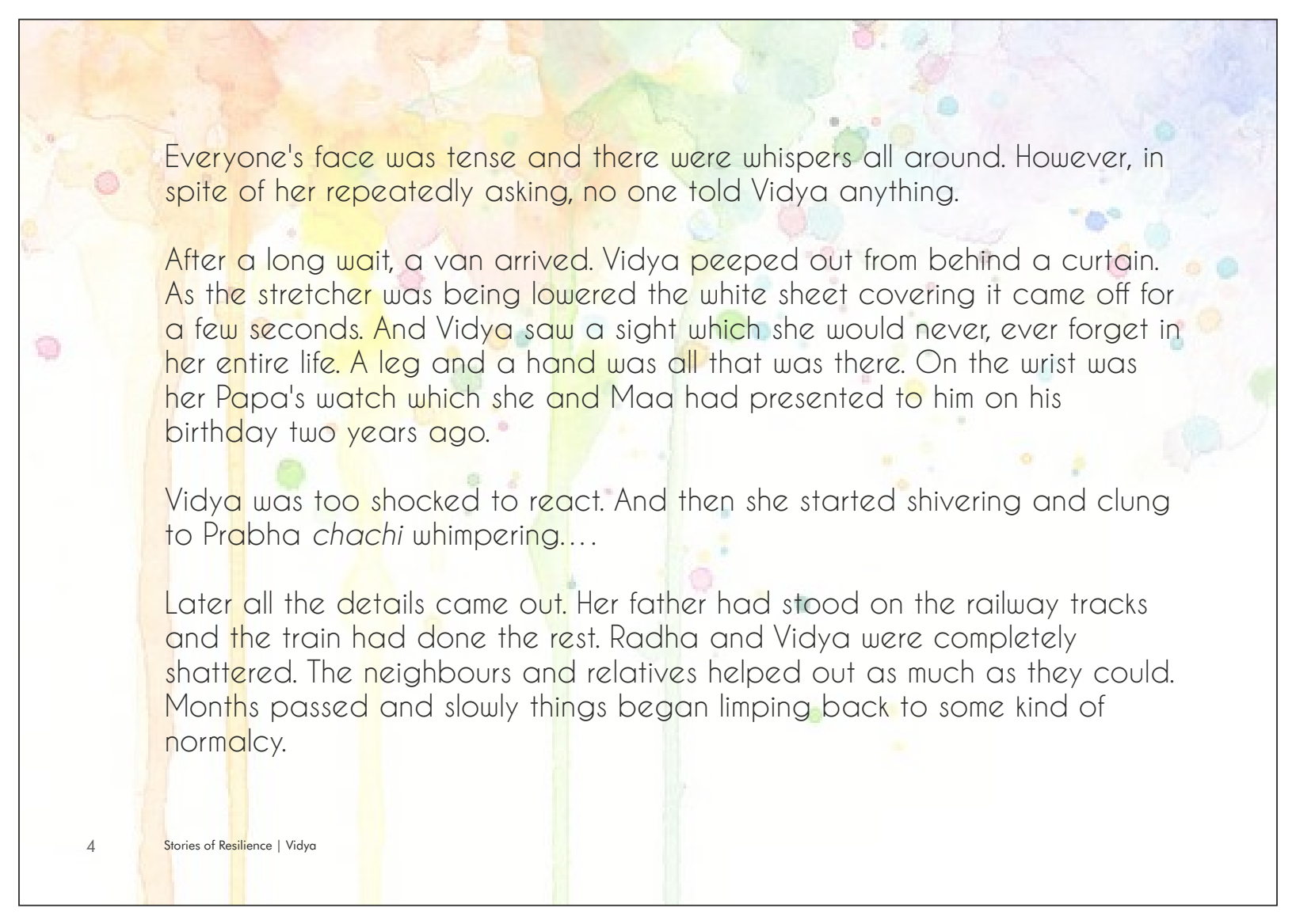
“He seems to have lost interest in everything. He nibbles at his food, doesn't sleep properly and hardly ever goes to be with his friends. Earlier he used to often play ludo with Vidya, even that, he has stopped.”

“I think he might be suffering from depression. Our mother too had the same issue. You should take him to a doctor. Just like our physical health, mental health is extremely important.”

Vidya was in the kitchen helping her mother out when they heard someone call out their name loudly.

It was their front door neighbor, Govind *chachu*. “Radha *bhabhi*... Shankar... he has... railway track...,” he was screaming.

The next hour or so was just a blur. Radha, accompanied by Govind got into a waiting auto. Prabha *chachi* came and took Vidya to her house.



Everyone's face was tense and there were whispers all around. However, in spite of her repeatedly asking, no one told Vidya anything.

After a long wait, a van arrived. Vidya peeped out from behind a curtain. As the stretcher was being lowered the white sheet covering it came off for a few seconds. And Vidya saw a sight which she would never, ever forget in her entire life. A leg and a hand was all that was there. On the wrist was her Papa's watch which she and Maa had presented to him on his birthday two years ago.

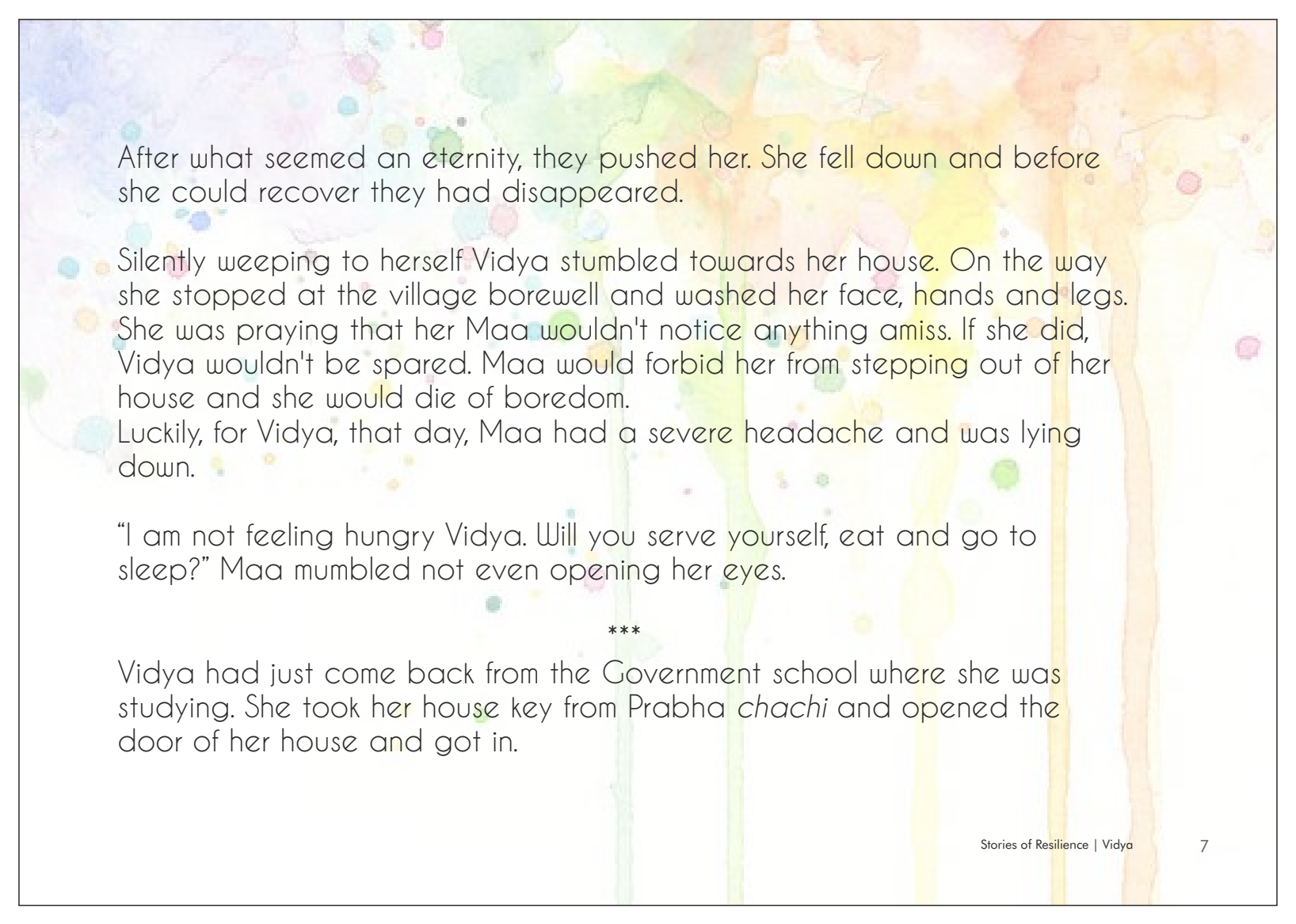
Vidya was too shocked to react. And then she started shivering and clung to Prabha *chachi* whimpering....

Later all the details came out. Her father had stood on the railway tracks and the train had done the rest. Radha and Vidya were completely shattered. The neighbours and relatives helped out as much as they could. Months passed and slowly things began limping back to some kind of normalcy.

Vidya was in the community centre watching TV. A dance reality show was in progress and she got so engrossed that she forgot all about the time. Finally after the programme was over she looked at the old clock on top of the TV set. 'Oh my God!' it is past eight, Maa will kill me,' she whispered to herself and scampered out. She knew her mother would be very upset. She hated Vidya staying out late.

She hurried towards her house which was almost at the other end of the *basti*. It was pitch dark as always. Some of the street lights had been stolen and the others possibly were not functional. As she walked quickly she suddenly felt a hand grab her and pull her in the shadows. Before she could even scream her mouth was covered. As she watched in horror, a figure emerged in front of her. He was tall and thin and looked vaguely familiar. He moved towards her and started touching her.





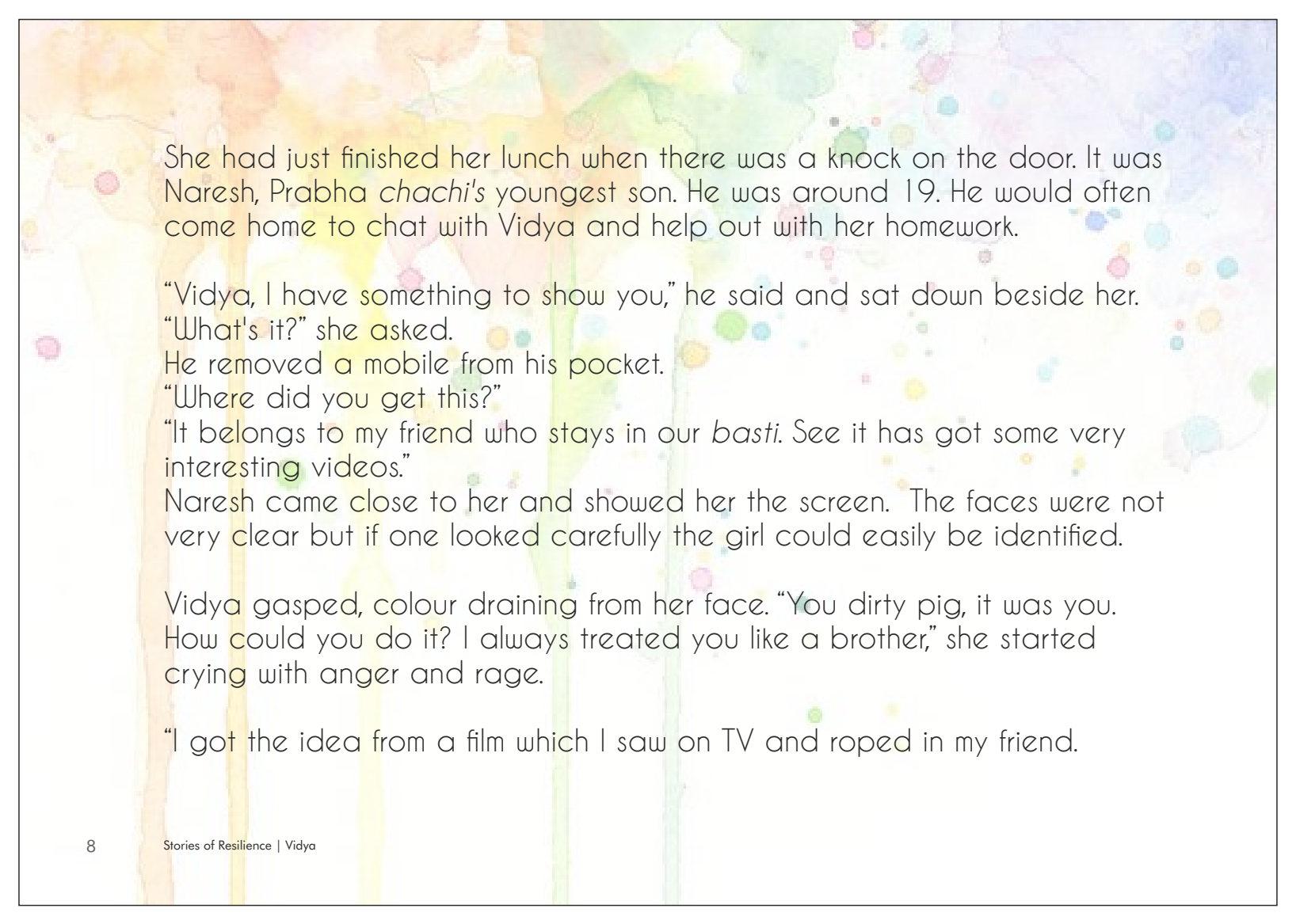
After what seemed an eternity, they pushed her. She fell down and before she could recover they had disappeared.

Silently weeping to herself Vidya stumbled towards her house. On the way she stopped at the village borewell and washed her face, hands and legs. She was praying that her Maa wouldn't notice anything amiss. If she did, Vidya wouldn't be spared. Maa would forbid her from stepping out of her house and she would die of boredom.

Luckily, for Vidya, that day, Maa had a severe headache and was lying down.

"I am not feeling hungry Vidya. Will you serve yourself, eat and go to sleep?" Maa mumbled not even opening her eyes.

Vidya had just come back from the Government school where she was studying. She took her house key from Prabha *chachi* and opened the door of her house and got in.



She had just finished her lunch when there was a knock on the door. It was Naresh, Prabha *chachi's* youngest son. He was around 19. He would often come home to chat with Vidya and help out with her homework.

“Vidya, I have something to show you,” he said and sat down beside her.

“What's it?” she asked.

He removed a mobile from his pocket.

“Where did you get this?”

“It belongs to my friend who stays in our *basti*. See it has got some very interesting videos.”

Naresh came close to her and showed her the screen. The faces were not very clear but if one looked carefully the girl could easily be identified.

Vidya gasped, colour draining from her face. “You dirty pig, it was you. How could you do it? I always treated you like a brother,” she started crying with anger and rage.

“I got the idea from a film which I saw on TV and roped in my friend.

Now, Vidya you have to do whatever I say or else I'll share it with everyone."

"I'll tell Prabha *chachi*!"

"She'll never believe because while your face is quite clear both me and my friend are in the shadows."

"Naresh!" Prabha *chachi* was calling him.

"*Dhat!* Mummy always chooses the worst time to call,' he snapped and disappeared.

When her Maa came home in the evening, in between sobs, Vidya told her the entire sordid story.

"This would never have happened had your father been alive. Seeing a fatherless girl these rascals are attacking like vultures. I'll speak to Prabha just now."

"No Maa, please. Like Naresh said only *my* face is visible. We will not be able to prove anything. And if we complain Naresh might share the video."

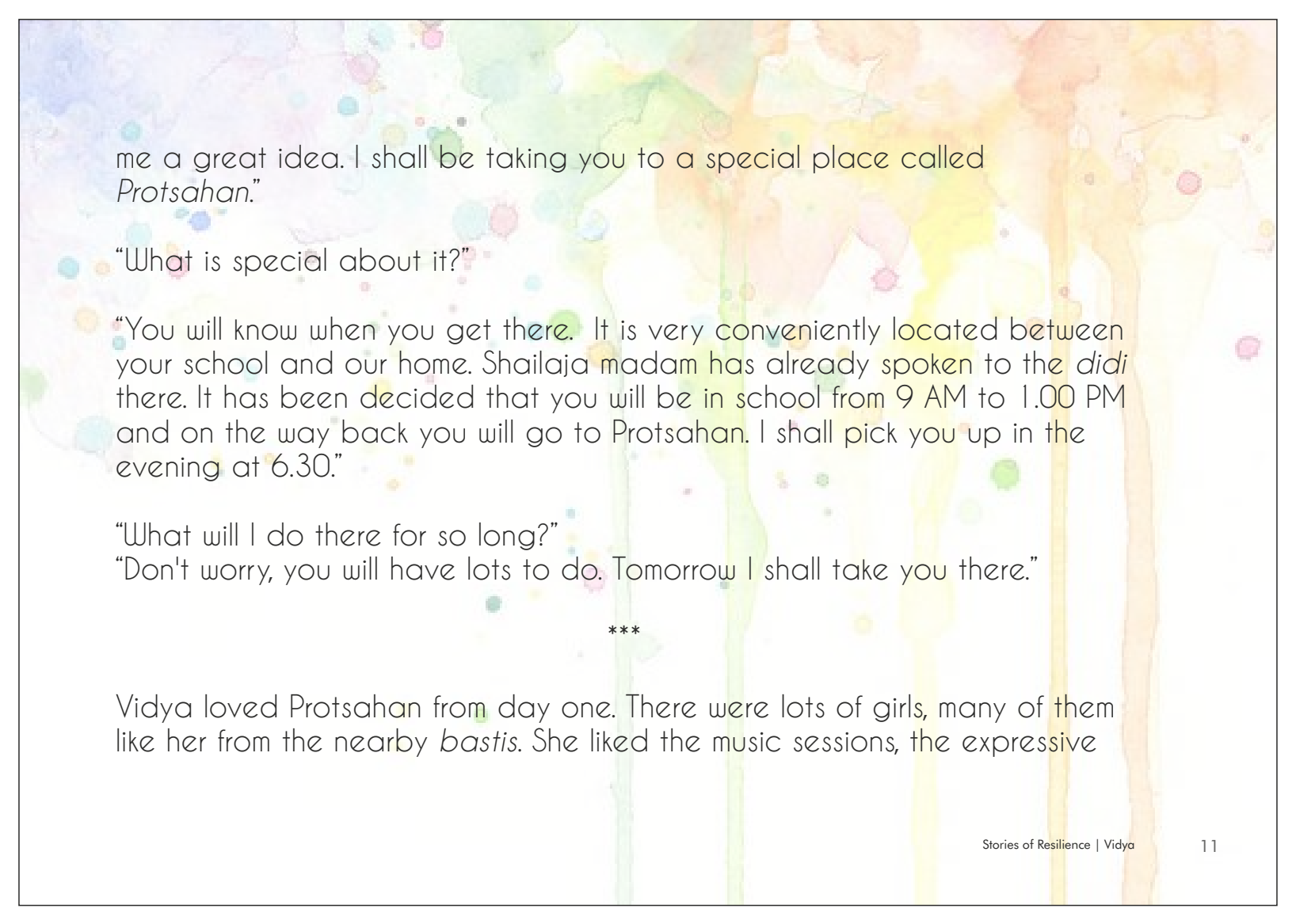
“But we can't just sit and do nothing. Today if I keep quiet God knows what they'll do to you tomorrow.”

“Maa, the best thing would be for you to take me along wherever you go. Once you are with me I shall always be safe. I shall stop school from tomorrow and go with you.”

“You are right. And moreover Prabha was telling me that after *Baisakhi*, which is next month, Naresh will be sent to Jharkhand to work in his uncle's factory. So hopefully it is only a matter of a month.”

Radha worked as a maid in four houses. Next morning Radha, with Vidya in tow, went to the first house. While Vidya dejectedly watched TV in the living room, Radha went about finishing her chores.

On their way home Radha told Vidya, “*Beta*, from tomorrow you need not come with me. Shailaja madam, whose house we went to first, has given



me a great idea. I shall be taking you to a special place called *Protsahan*."

"What is special about it?"

"You will know when you get there. It is very conveniently located between your school and our home. Shailaja madam has already spoken to the *didi* there. It has been decided that you will be in school from 9 AM to 1.00 PM and on the way back you will go to Protsahan. I shall pick you up in the evening at 6.30."

"What will I do there for so long?"

"Don't worry, you will have lots to do. Tomorrow I shall take you there."

Vidya loved Protsahan from day one. There were lots of girls, many of them like her from the nearby *bastis*. She liked the music sessions, the expressive



art and craft classes, the meditations, and the theatre workshops. However, what fascinated her the most was the art of *mehendi*. Shagufta didi came twice a week to teach the girls the art of applying *mehendi* and Vidya waited eagerly for her. Vidya was a quick learner. She had slender, artistic fingers and a lot of patience and soon picked

up the beautiful *henna* art. Gradually, she also started understanding about POCSO Act and how to report a crime to the right authorities. She went ahead and filed the case against Naresh, weeks after that incident had happened. Naresh was summoned and gradually convicted by the court to serve 7 years in prison. Vidya said, “No one asked me why am I, after so many weeks, reporting this.

They believed me. Naresh and his friends will rot in jail now. I have learnt at Protsahan that without justice and dignity, school education does not have much meaning. My voice is important. I see its power now.”

Meanwhile, there was bad news at home. Radha had been diagnosed with TB and had to quit working. While her medicines were provided by the government dispensary, the biggest issue was running of the house.

“Maa, I'll stop school and start working in places where you used to go. I might not be as good as you but surely I shall be able to wash clothes, clean vessels and sweep the house.”

Radha met the counsellor at Protsahan and explained to her the tragic state of affairs.

A few days later the founder met Vidya and gave her the good news.

“Vidya, Shagufta has agreed to take you along with her wherever she is called to apply *mehendi*. You will continue to come to Protsahan. Whenever Shagufta needs you she will pick you up and drop you. And she



will make sure that you earn a reasonable amount. If there is a shortfall, Protsahan will pitch in through a scholarship. But you should not discontinue school.”

Shagufta took Vidya to marriage functions, festive occasions like *Teej* and *Diwali* and many more community celebrations. In the beginning Vidya was a bit nervous but gradually her confidence increased. She began by applying *mehendi* to children and later moved on to the guests and on a few occasions even to the bride herself!

Four years have gone by, Vidya has cleared her tenth exam in second division. Her mother has been completely cured and now works as a cook in a couple of houses. Vidya is now regularly earning a decent amount and adding to the family income. She has picked up commerce stream in the eleventh grade as she wants to strengthen her business and accounting skills.

“Maa, instead of cooking in other people's houses why don't you start making and selling pickles from home?” Vidya told her mother.



"Sitting in this *basti* how do you think I will get customers?"

"I have been asking around. With some initial investment we can get all the stuff you need to start your little *bijus*. There are grocery stores nearby which are willing to buy good quality homemade pickle and then sell to their customers."

But where will we get the money from?"

"I have saved up a bit. You need not leave your work right away. We can start in a small way and if your *bijus* picks up you can become a full time *acharwali* aunty!" Vidya said grinning.

Vidya is still a part of the Protsahan family. Last week Shagufta got married and the *mehendi* on her hands was the cynosure of all eyes. Everyone wanted to know the name of the artist who had created such a beautiful and intricate art on her palms.

In the meanwhile after a few fits and starts Radha has become a full time pickle maker or in Vidya's words, a home-based micro entrepreneur. Her homemade mango & lemon pickles have become quite popular. The tagline of her pickle bottle says , '**Pickled With Love**'.



Khushi

Shaheen had just finished visiting three houses in Sarojini *basti*. She was walking across to the fourth one when she saw a 13-year-old girl sitting in front of her one room house. She had a chocolate complexion and was very thin with straggly hair. She was bending forward

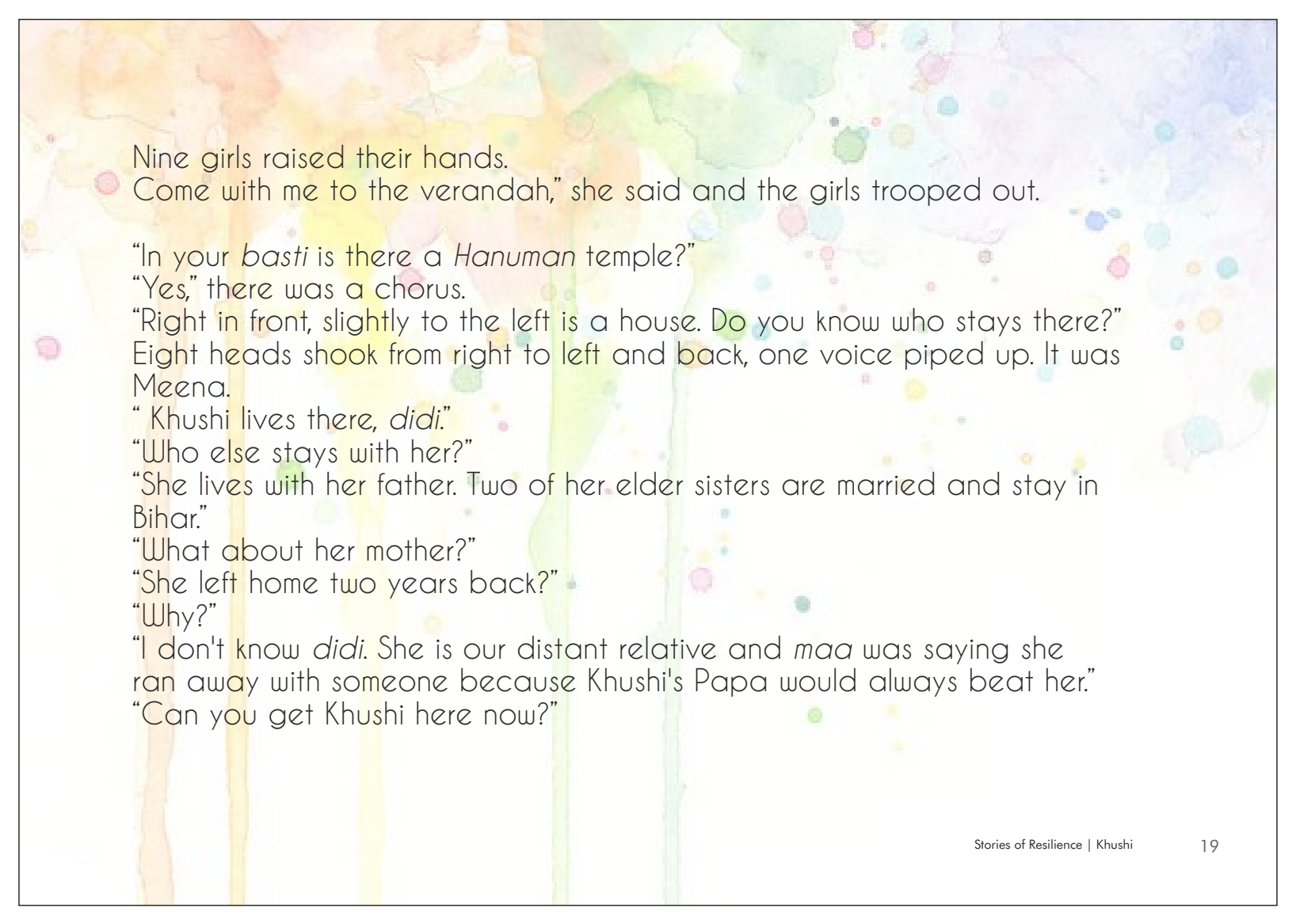
and sketching with a piece of charcoal. Out of curiosity, Shaheen stopped to look and froze. The sketch was of a man bending over a child – both were naked. The girl, oblivious to Shaheen's presence continued sketching.

Shaheen turned back and walked out of the *basti*. She rushed to Protsahan centre, where she was working. She had gone to Sarojini *basti* to interact with the slum dwellers on preventing child marriages.

At Protsahan she went to the main hall where the children were getting ready for meditation in the afternoon.

“Hey girls, how many of you are from Sarojini *basti*?”





Nine girls raised their hands.
Come with me to the verandah," she said and the girls trooped out.

"In your *basti* is there a *Hanuman* temple?"

"Yes," there was a chorus.

"Right in front, slightly to the left is a house. Do you know who stays there?"
Eight heads shook from right to left and back, one voice piped up. It was Meena.

"Khushi lives there, *didi*."

"Who else stays with her?"

"She lives with her father. Two of her elder sisters are married and stay in Bihar."

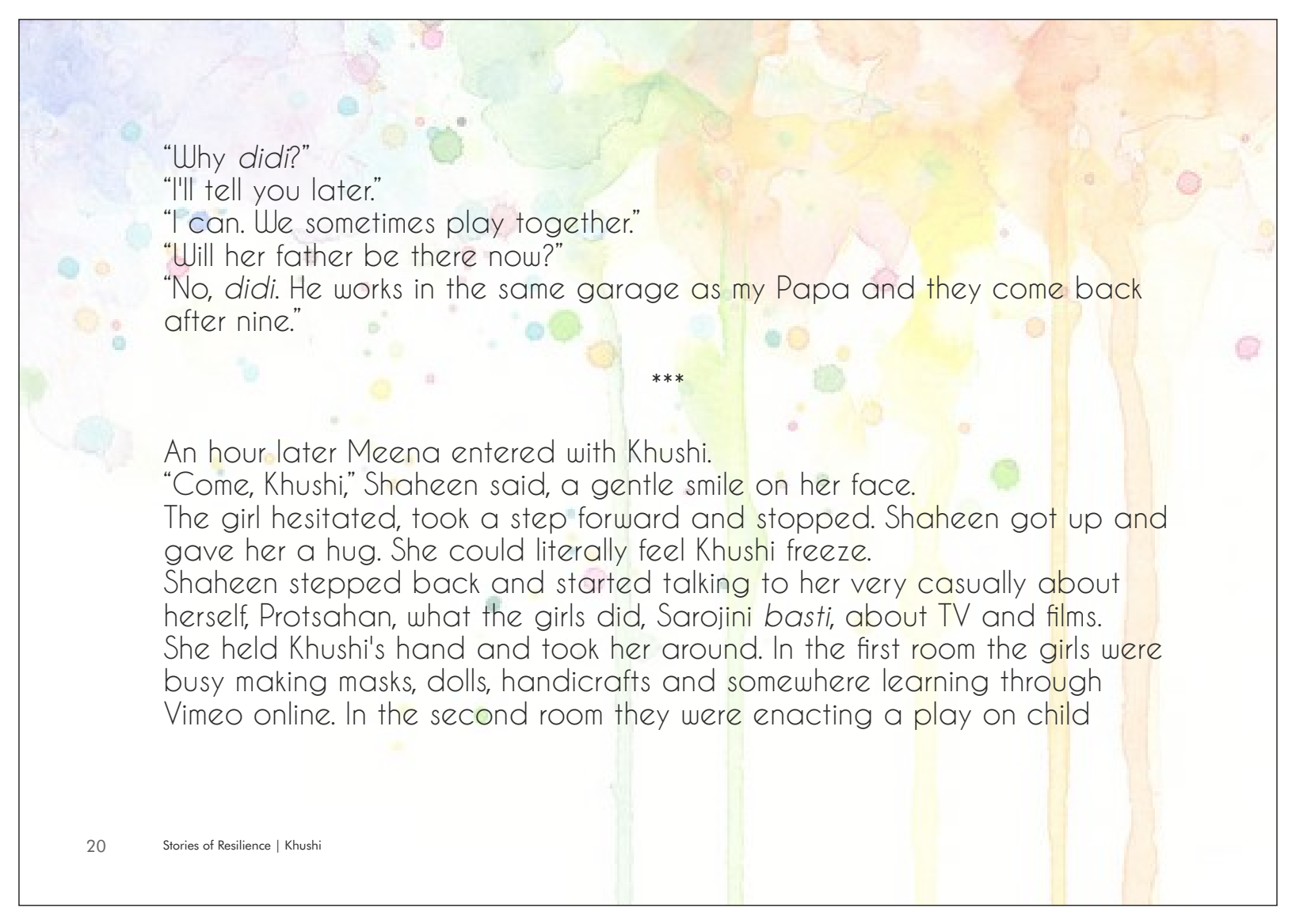
"What about her mother?"

"She left home two years back?"

"Why?"

"I don't know *didi*. She is our distant relative and *maa* was saying she ran away with someone because Khushi's Papa would always beat her."

"Can you get Khushi here now?"



"Why *didi*?"

"I'll tell you later."

"I can. We sometimes play together."

"Will her father be there now?"

"No, *didi*. He works in the same garage as my Papa and they come back after nine."

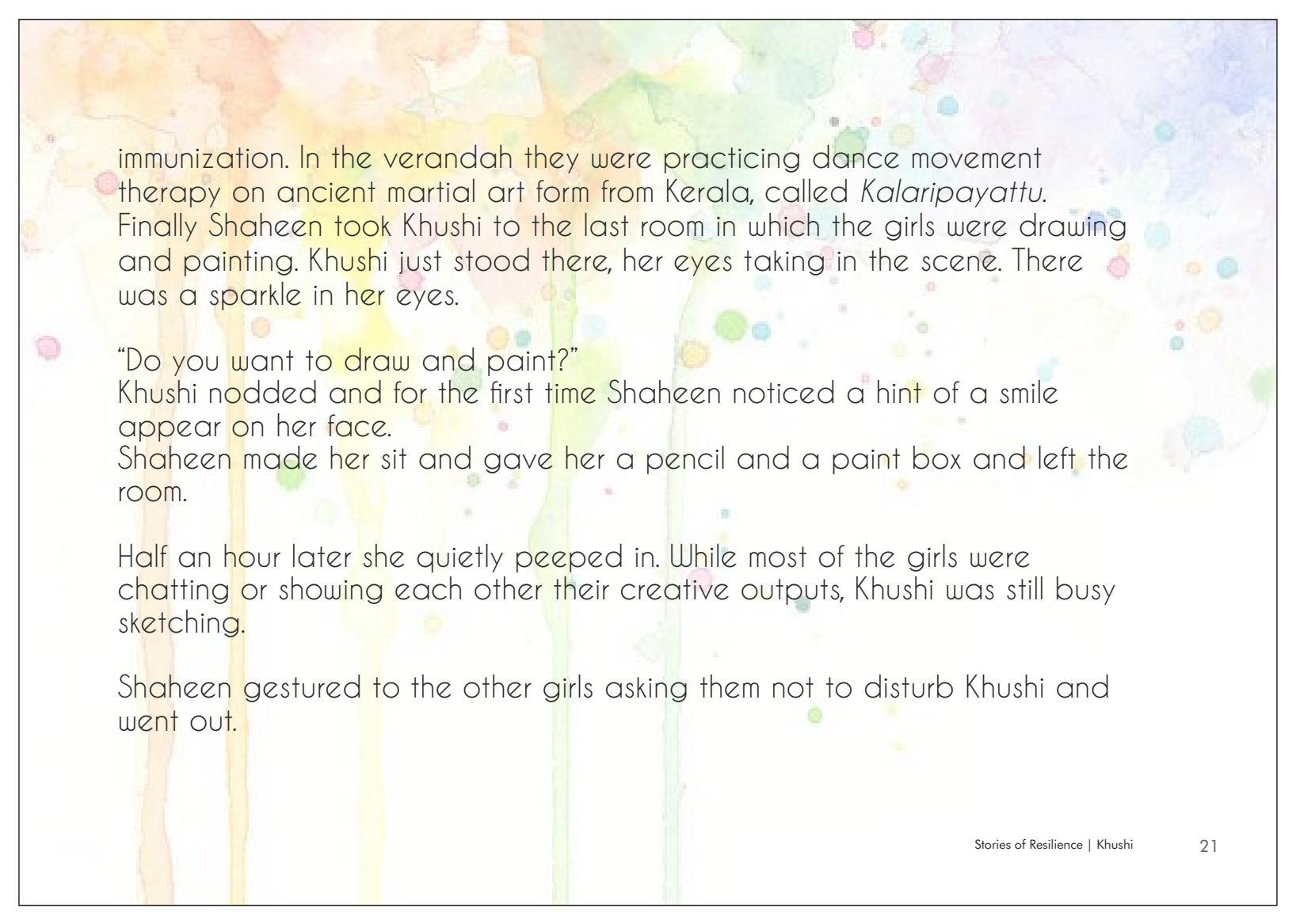
An hour later Meena entered with Khushi.

"Come, Khushi," Shaheen said, a gentle smile on her face.

The girl hesitated, took a step forward and stopped. Shaheen got up and gave her a hug. She could literally feel Khushi freeze.

Shaheen stepped back and started talking to her very casually about herself, Protsahan, what the girls did, Sarojini *basti*, about TV and films.

She held Khushi's hand and took her around. In the first room the girls were busy making masks, dolls, handicrafts and somewhere learning through Vimeo online. In the second room they were enacting a play on child



immunization. In the verandah they were practicing dance movement therapy on ancient martial art form from Kerala, called *Kalaripayattu*. Finally Shaheen took Khushi to the last room in which the girls were drawing and painting. Khushi just stood there, her eyes taking in the scene. There was a sparkle in her eyes.

“Do you want to draw and paint?”

Khushi nodded and for the first time Shaheen noticed a hint of a smile appear on her face.

Shaheen made her sit and gave her a pencil and a paint box and left the room.

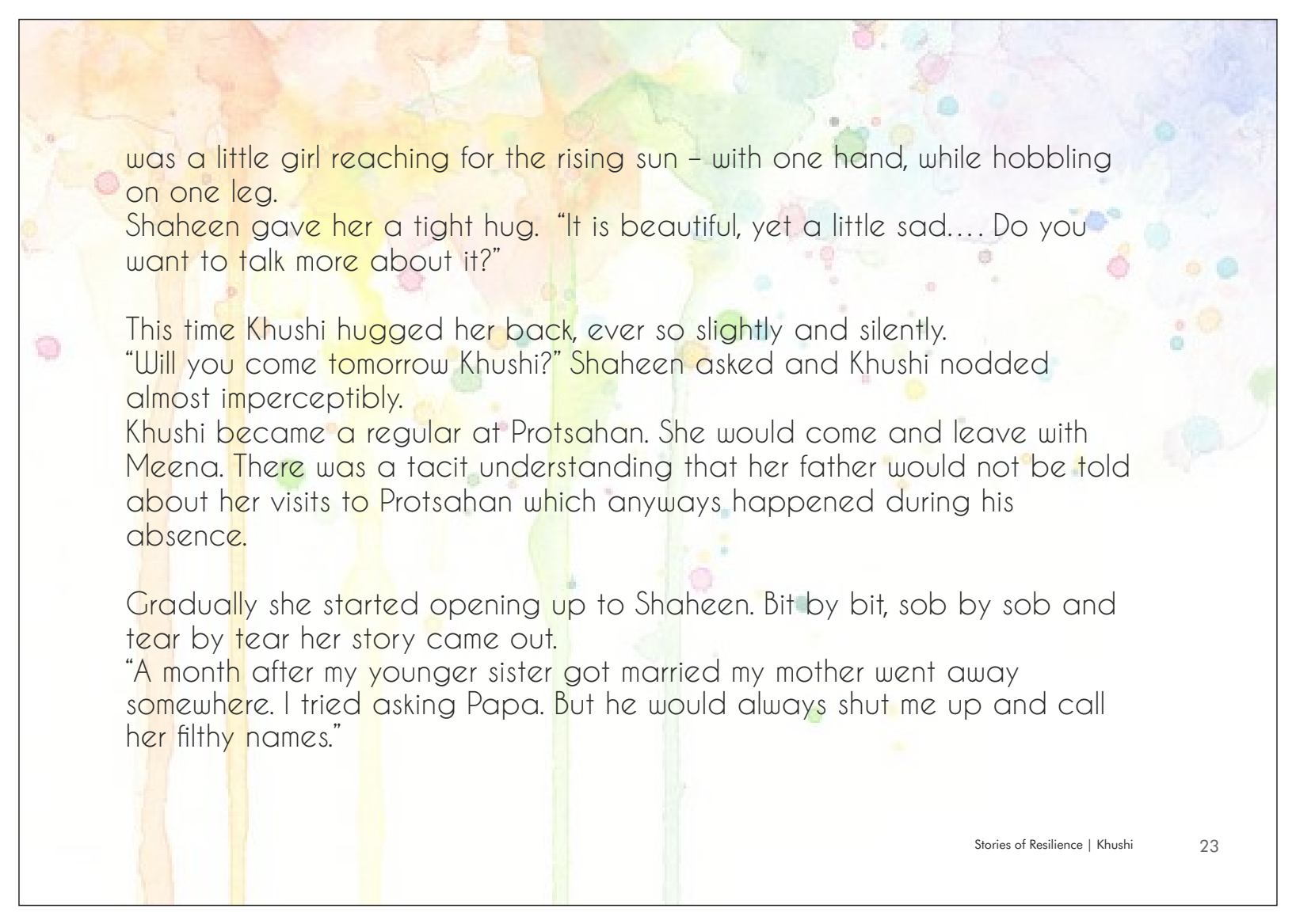
Half an hour later she quietly peeped in. While most of the girls were chatting or showing each other their creative outputs, Khushi was still busy sketching.

Shaheen gestured to the other girls asking them not to disturb Khushi and went out.



She was in the verandah watching the girls organize a 'shoot' when she felt a small hand on her shoulder. She turned back. Khushi was holding an A-3 size sheet in her hand which was folded. Shaheen gently took it and spread it on the floor. The girls crowded around her to see and there was a collective gasp.

One of the most striking paintings Shaheen had ever seen a youngster draw, was right in front of her. It depicted a valley of flowers which was a riot of colors with butterflies in every possible shape. Right in the middle



was a little girl reaching for the rising sun – with one hand, while hobbling on one leg.

Shaheen gave her a tight hug. “It is beautiful, yet a little sad.... Do you want to talk more about it?”

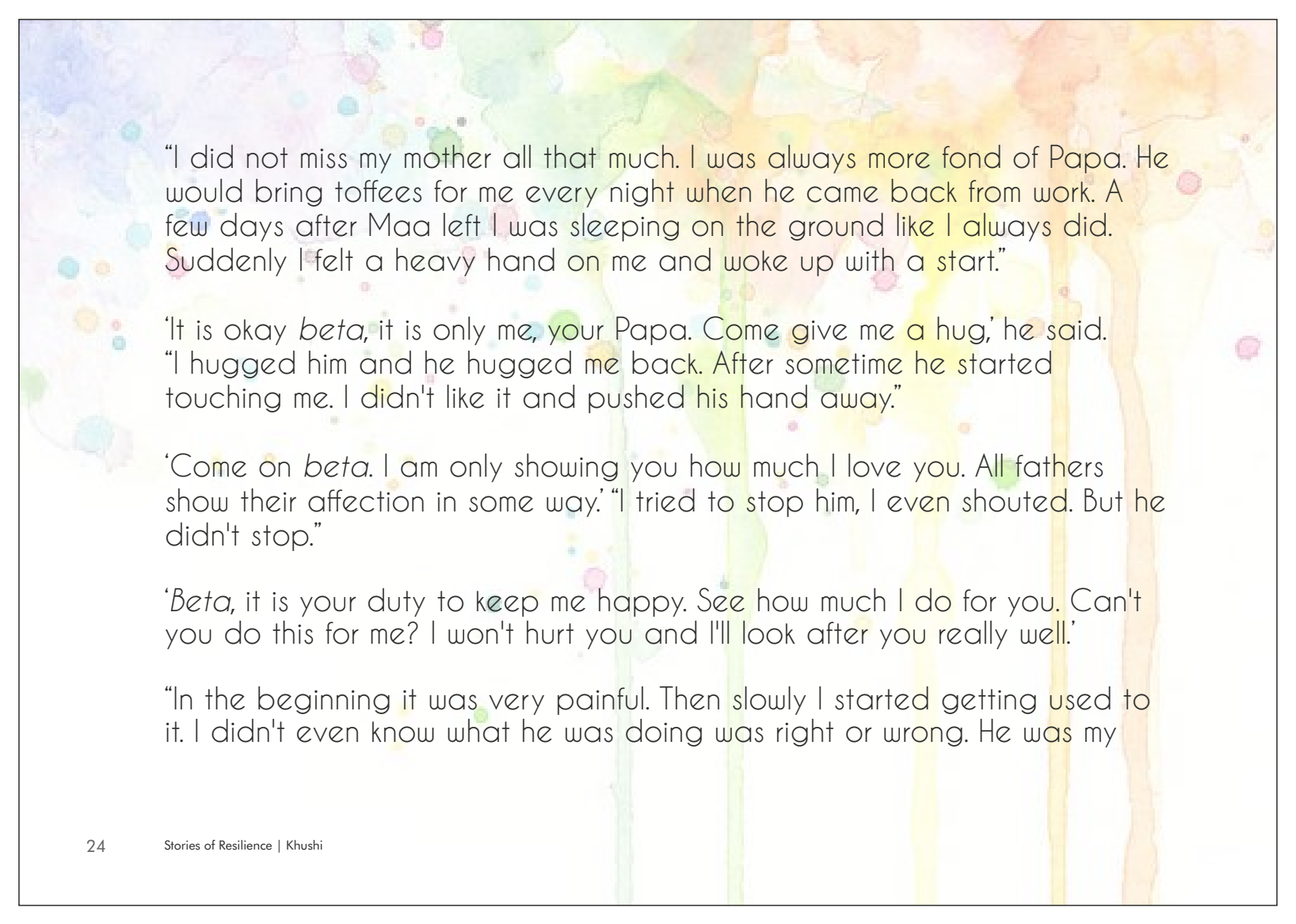
This time Khushi hugged her back, ever so slightly and silently.

“Will you come tomorrow Khushi?” Shaheen asked and Khushi nodded almost imperceptibly.

Khushi became a regular at Protsahan. She would come and leave with Meena. There was a tacit understanding that her father would not be told about her visits to Protsahan which anyways happened during his absence.

Gradually she started opening up to Shaheen. Bit by bit, sob by sob and tear by tear her story came out.

“A month after my younger sister got married my mother went away somewhere. I tried asking Papa. But he would always shut me up and call her filthy names.”



"I did not miss my mother all that much. I was always more fond of Papa. He would bring toffees for me every night when he came back from work. A few days after Maa left I was sleeping on the ground like I always did. Suddenly I felt a heavy hand on me and woke up with a start."

'It is okay *beta*, it is only me, your Papa. Come give me a hug,' he said. "I hugged him and he hugged me back. After sometime he started touching me. I didn't like it and pushed his hand away."

'Come on *beta*. I am only showing you how much I love you. All fathers show their affection in some way.' "I tried to stop him, I even shouted. But he didn't stop."

'*Beta*, it is your duty to keep me happy. See how much I do for you. Can't you do this for me? I won't hurt you and I'll look after you really well.'

"In the beginning it was very painful. Then slowly I started getting used to it. I didn't even know what he was doing was right or wrong. He was my



father and he cooked for me, brought me chocolates, gave me clothes...so maybe he was right. He had warned me not to talk about this to anyone.” ‘They won’t understand this love between a father and a daughter,’ he used to say.

“But somewhere I started hating my own body and sometimes even my own self. Nothing seemed right. I felt caged by someone who I called my very own.”

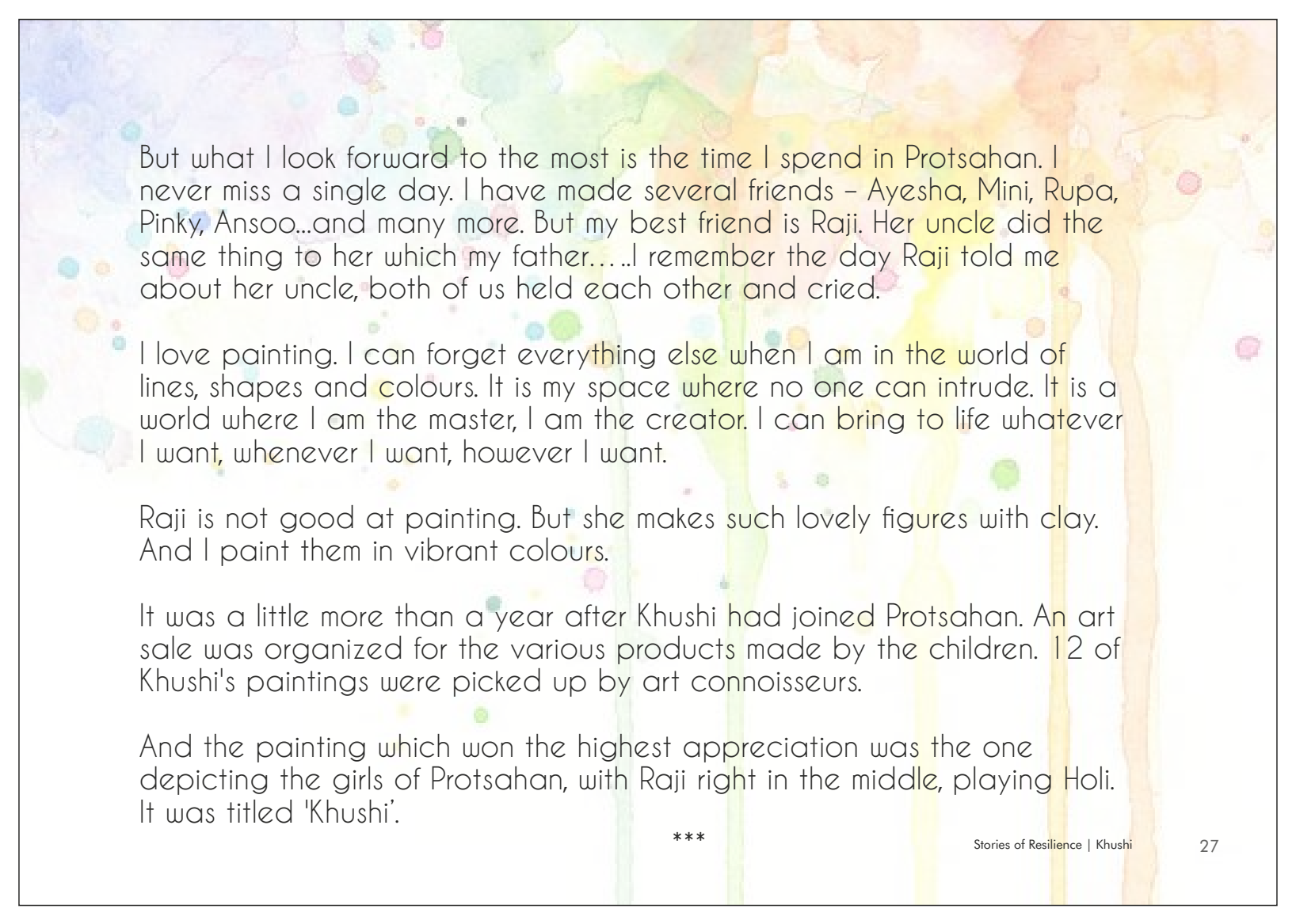
Shaheen knew what she had to do. She talked to the mentor of Protsahan. They did the groundwork for days and then informed the police. The police and the child helpline

swung into action and Khushi's father was arrested and charged under POCSO Act. It was a non-bailable offence so there was no danger of him coming out before the judgement. Shaheen started looking for a foster home for Khushi. Luckily Meena's parents agreed to keep her. The fact that a monthly maintenance fee of Rs. 1000 for Khushi could be organized, helped matters.



The biggest challenge now was to help Khushi heal.

Shaheen would often talk to her. "I don't like my father anymore. I hate him. I now understand that what he was doing to me was bad, it was depraved. I feel comfortable staying with Meena and her parents.



But what I look forward to the most is the time I spend in Protsahan. I never miss a single day. I have made several friends – Ayesha, Mini, Rupa, Pinky, Ansoo...and many more. But my best friend is Raji. Her uncle did the same thing to her which my father....I remember the day Raji told me about her uncle, both of us held each other and cried.

I love painting. I can forget everything else when I am in the world of lines, shapes and colours. It is my space where no one can intrude. It is a world where I am the master, I am the creator. I can bring to life whatever I want, whenever I want, however I want.

Raji is not good at painting. But she makes such lovely figures with clay. And I paint them in vibrant colours.

It was a little more than a year after Khushi had joined Protsahan. An art sale was organized for the various products made by the children. 12 of Khushi's paintings were picked up by art connoisseurs.

And the painting which won the highest appreciation was the one depicting the girls of Protsahan, with Raji right in the middle, playing Holi. It was titled 'Khushi'.





Asha

I am Janet. I have been working in Protsahan as a teacher for the last four and half years. I have come across many girls - survivors of abuse, abject poverty, child marriage... but there is one girl whose story is completely different. Let me tell you about her. Her name is Asha.

One afternoon I was in Protsahan when a thirty year old woman came to our office.

"Didi, my name is Parvati, I have an eight year old daughter, Asha. Can I send her to Protsahan?"

"Does she go to school?"

"Yes, she goes to a government school close by. But I want her to spend some time here. She is a problem child."

"In what sense?"

"She... she is very aggressive. She shouts and screams and throws things



at home, whenever she is upset.”

“Does she have the same issues at school with her friends and teachers?”

“No, I have not received any complaints so far.”

“What do you do?”

“I am an *ayah* in a private school.”

“And your husband.”

“He died two years ago.”

“I am sorry....how did it happen?”

“He was murdered.”

“Oh my God! Who...how...”

“The police are still investigating.”

I kept quiet for some time trying to digest the information.

“What are Asha's school timings?”

“It starts at 8 a.m. and finishes by 12.30 p.m.. She can reach here before one 'o' clock”

“Ok. Get her here tomorrow. She can be with us from 1 to 2 for our meditation and music sessions.”

Next day at 12.45 Parvati came with a little girl in tow. She was quite short for her age, dusky with her hair tied in two plaits. Her face was serious and her eyes dull.

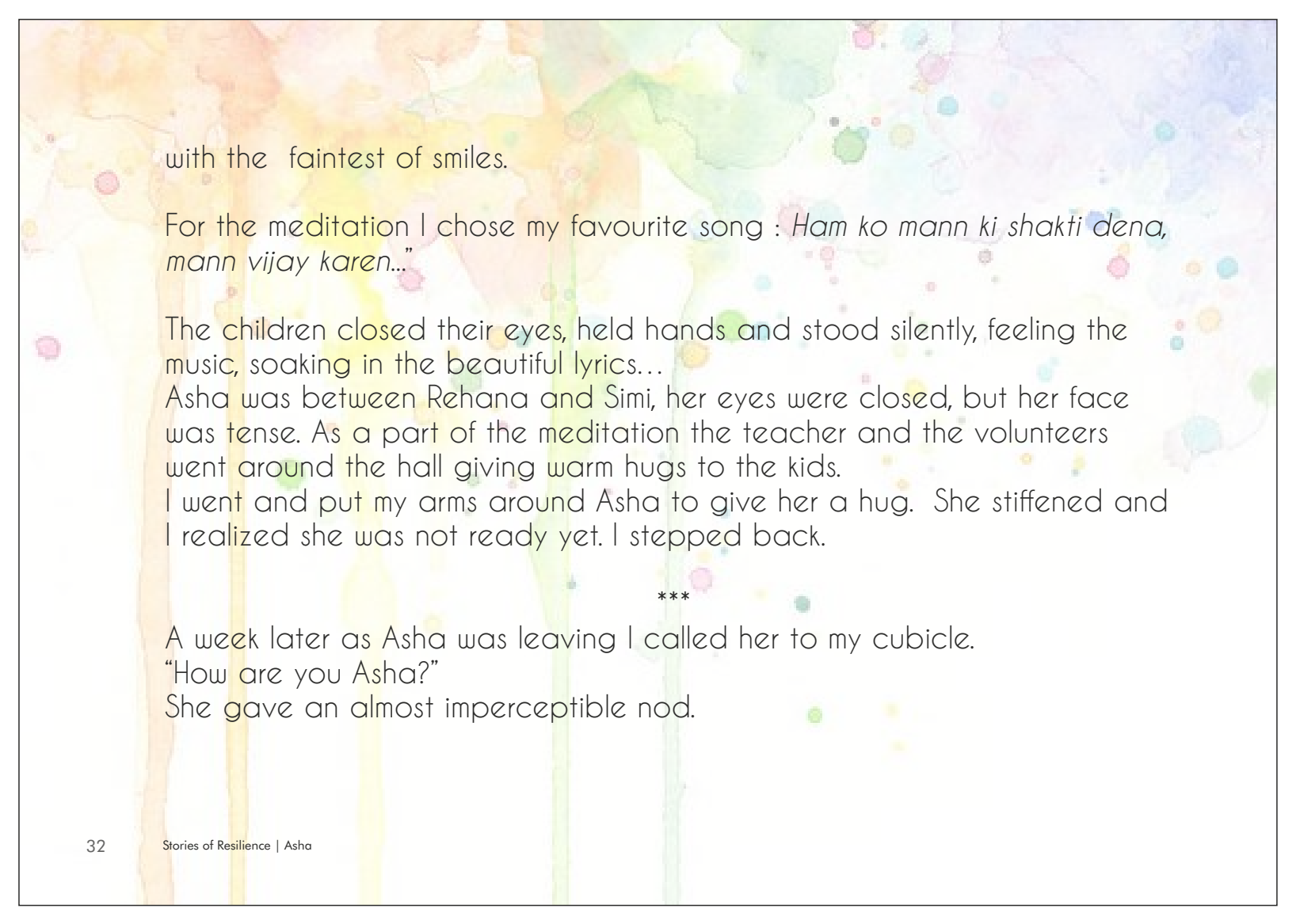


“What's your name, beta?”

“Asha,” she replied, her voice barely audible.

Parvati left and after a few minutes I took Asha to the meditation hall. A handful of girls were already there and the rest trooped in.

I introduced Asha and there was a welcome shout out to her to which she responded



with the faintest of smiles.

For the meditation I chose my favourite song : *Ham ko mann ki shakti dena, mann vijay karen...*

The children closed their eyes, held hands and stood silently, feeling the music, soaking in the beautiful lyrics...

Asha was between Rehana and Simi, her eyes were closed, but her face was tense. As a part of the meditation the teacher and the volunteers went around the hall giving warm hugs to the kids.

I went and put my arms around Asha to give her a hug. She stiffened and I realized she was not ready yet. I stepped back.

A week later as Asha was leaving I called her to my cubicle.

“How are you Asha?”

She gave an almost imperceptible nod.





“Do you like it here?”

She did an encore.

“Please sit down. Can we talk a bit?”

She looked at me, her face expressionless.

“I want to talk about your Papa.”

There was a hint of a spark in her eyes.

“Would you like to tell me about him?”

She nodded.

“What was his name and what did he do?”

“Shankar Prasad. He worked in a bakery and he got me a chocolate pastry every week. He would light a single candle and ask me to blow it. He would then clap his hands and sing ‘happy birthday...’ He would ask mummy also to join in.”

‘What’s this nonsense? You are spoiling her silly. Which child celebrates her birthday every week?’ Mummy would say in mock anger.

‘She is not just any child, Parvati. She is my princess, Rajkumari Asha of



Sarojini *basti!* He would say bowing down to me in an elaborate gesture and we would all laugh.

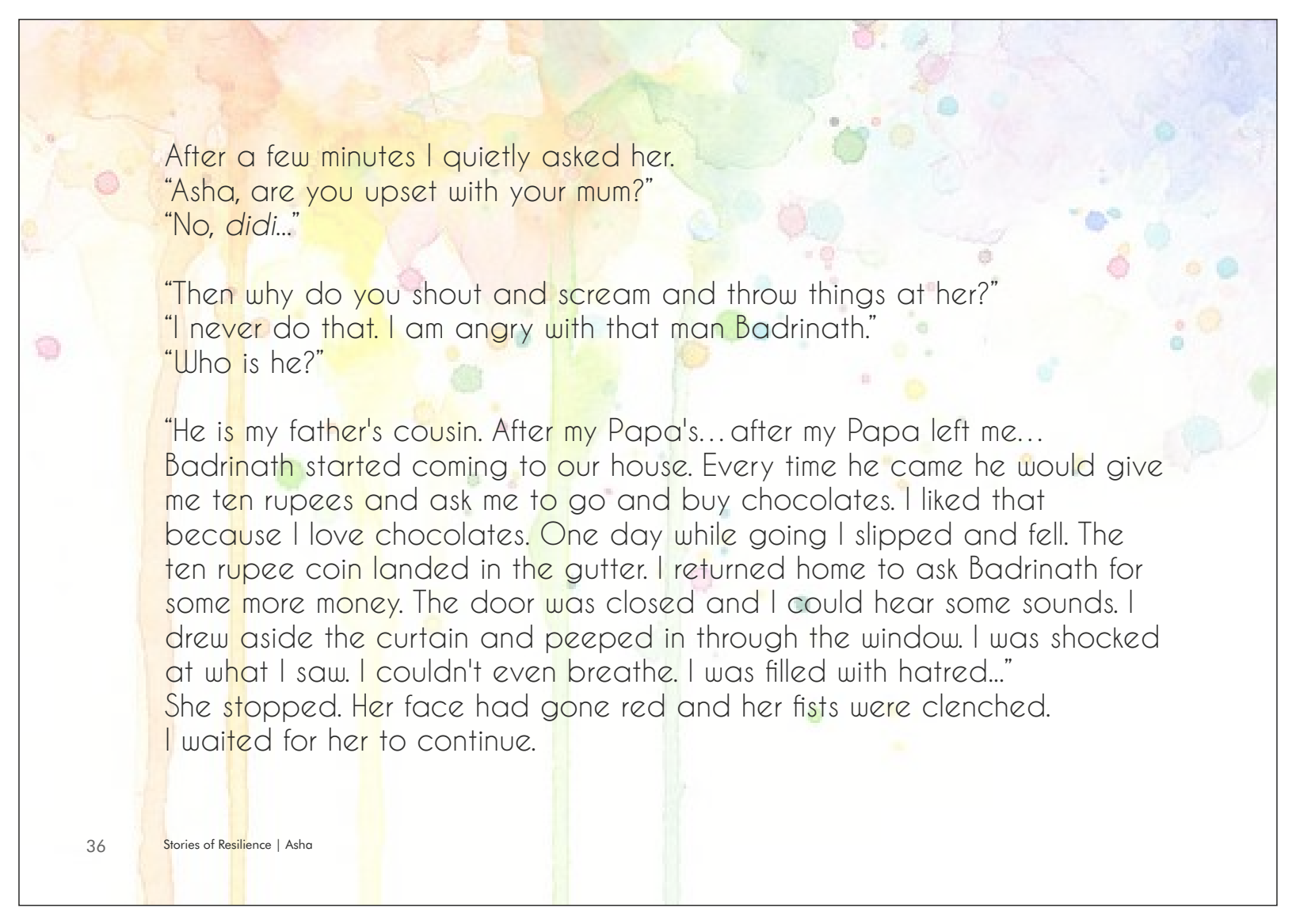
I loved him so much and he loved me even more. He was tall and handsome like Ajay Devgun!" She started speaking and it all came tumbling out, a virtual cascade of images and memories.

"*Didi*, Papa would always tell me that he would send me to an English medium school. He wanted me to become a police officer like Kiran Bedi and beat up all the *goondas*."

She stopped, her eyes glistening.

"*Didi*, this is the first time I have talked about my Papa... since he... since he left me. No one speaks about him anymore – neither my mummy nor our relatives or neighbours. They think it will hurt me. They don't realize that I want to speak about him more and more, as much as possible..."

I watched the various expressions flit across Asha's face and the intensity in her eyes.



After a few minutes I quietly asked her.

“Asha, are you upset with your mum?”

“No, *didi*...”

“Then why do you shout and scream and throw things at her?”

“I never do that. I am angry with that man Badrinath.”

“Who is he?”

“He is my father's cousin. After my Papa's... after my Papa left me...

Badrinath started coming to our house. Every time he came he would give me ten rupees and ask me to go and buy chocolates. I liked that because I love chocolates. One day while going I slipped and fell. The ten rupee coin landed in the gutter. I returned home to ask Badrinath for some more money. The door was closed and I could hear some sounds. I drew aside the curtain and peeped in through the window. I was shocked at what I saw. I couldn't even breathe. I was filled with hatred...”

She stopped. Her face had gone red and her fists were clenched.

I waited for her to continue.



“Badrinath was giving my mother a *jhappi* just like Papa used to. That was when I started hating him. He came after a few days and gave me a ten rupee coin. I threw it on his face and walked out. Since that day whenever he comes home I throw whatever I can at him – I want to hurt him and most of all I want him to stop coming.”

“Let me again ask, aren't you angry with your mother?”

“No, I am not. My mummy is not taking anyone's place. She is where she was... it is that man Badrinath who is taking my Papa's place... And I hate him for that.”

I was quite disturbed by Asha's story. I discussed the issue with her mother Parvathi.

“In the beginning she was okay with Badrinath coming home. It was only later that she started getting violent and attacking him. I too was confused and never realized that she...she... had seen us together.”



“It is none of my business but are you and Badrinath together?”

“He is planning to move in with me. His wife left him four years ago and he has no one else.”

“Can I ask you to hold on for a while? Give Asha some more time. She hasn’t yet recovered from the trauma of her father’s death.”

Parvati nodded and left.

I was working on a report on my computer when I looked up and found Asha standing beside me. “*Didi*, today during meditation I saw my Papa.”
“Really!”

“Yes, he was looking exactly like he used to. He waved to me just as he always did and then and then vanished...”

Attending meditation sessions became a passion with Asha. She was the most punctual among all the girls. She would come 15 minutes early and wait patiently for the session to begin. And Asha never, ever missed a single class.

It was almost two months since Asha had first come to Protsahan. I was checking my mail when she came rushing and sat on my lap.

"Didi, today for the first time my papa spoke to me," Aasha said. I looked at her. Aasha's eyes were shining with excitement and her face was wreathed in smiles.

"Today during meditation I felt someone standing close to me. As I continued concentrating on the words of the song and the music, my eyes tightly shut, I heard a faint voice , 'Bachha, I shall always be with you. No one can take my place..."

I looked at Asha and placed my hand on her little head.
“*Didi*, now I am convinced no one can replace my father. He will always be there for me. I am not angry with anyone anymore.”

I reached out and gave Asha a tight hug and she hugged me back with equal fervor.

“I am happy for you my angel,” I whispered to her.





Disha

Disha! Come here!”

Disha looked up. She was a short and healthy 14-year-old studying in class nine in the Government High School.

She lived with her father Hariram, her Maa Bindu and her brother Raja in Balaji Nagar, a colony of migrants and construction workers. While Hariram was a contract labour, Bindu worked as a part time maid-servant in three houses. Raja had been giving his class ten exam for the last three years.

She went into the kitchen where her Maa was cooking.

“Disha, your father has decided that you should stop studying and help me in the household work.”

“But why, Maa?” Disha wailed, not quite able to believe her ears.

“He wants me to take up more houses so that I can bring some extra money home. After all we have to start arranging money for your marriage.”

“Marriage! Maa, I am just 14! Where is the question of marriage? And

besides, I want to study further.”

“It is not for you to decide what you have to do. And what will you do by studying – become a collector or a doctor? You will anyway get married and do what I am doing. If you are lucky your husband will bring sufficient money and you will not have to go from house to house cleaning dirty vessels and washing soiled clothes of ungrateful strangers.”

“Maa, this is really unfair. You are not asking Raja to leave his studies. He has been failing for the last three years in class ten while I have been getting the first rank in my class. Besides, I complete all the housework before leaving for school and even after coming back, help you.”

“Don't talk nonsense, Disha. Raja is a boy. Who has ever heard of a boy doing housework?”

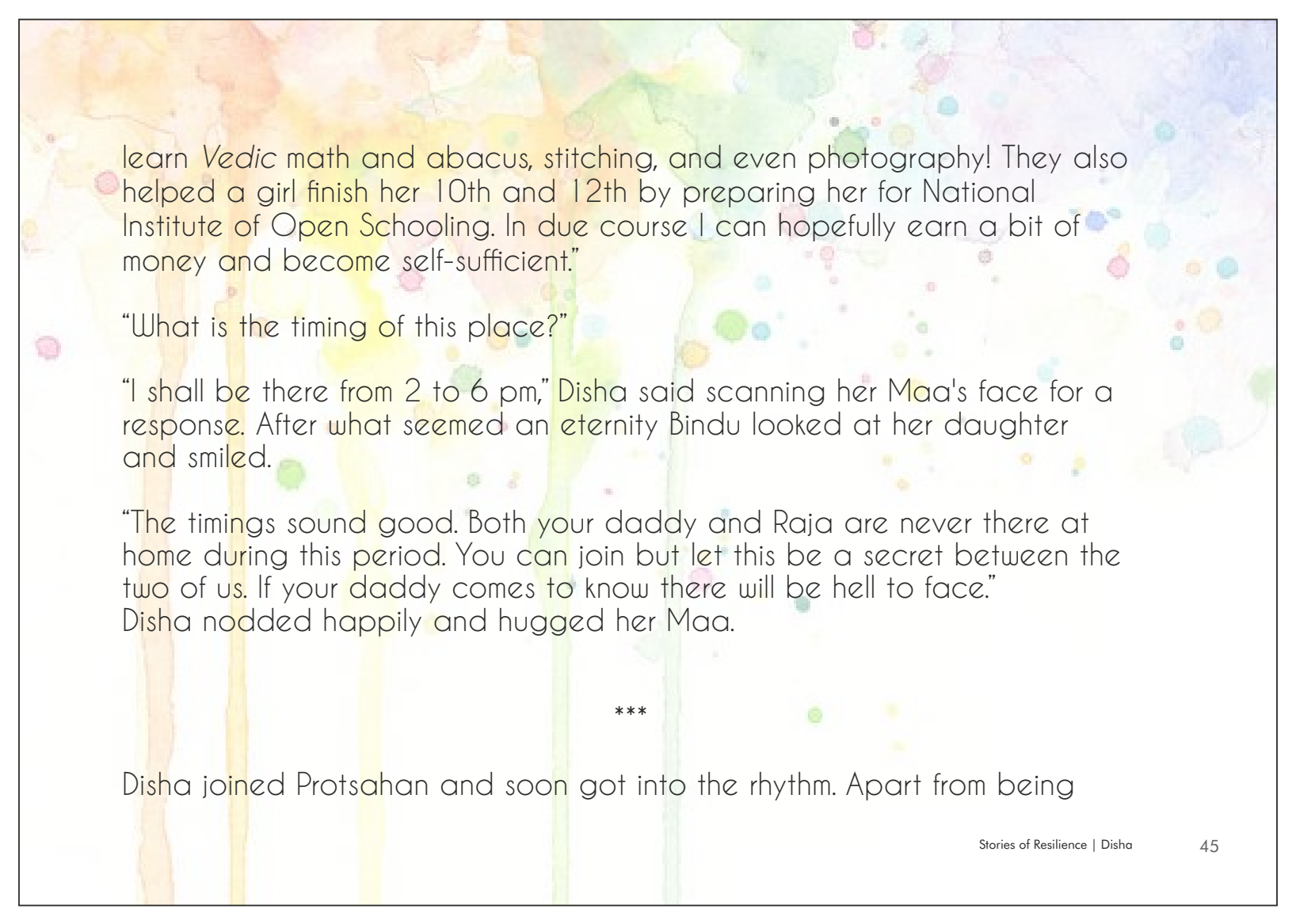
“You also give him pocket money. When I asked for money on my birthday you and daddy both shouted at me. And on Raja's birthday, daddy gave him a hundred rupees. And you know what he did with that? He gambled it all away sitting under the shade of the *peepal* tree behind the school!”

"You cannot compare yourself with Raja. He is an asset. Whatever we are spending on him is an investment. He will take care of us in our old age. You are a liability. We will have to spend on your dowry and nothing will ever come back to us."



Disha thought for some time and then said, "Okay Maa. I shall leave school. I'll help you as much as you want but please allow me to join Protsahan."

"What is this Protsahan?"
"It is an institution for girls like me. Two girls in my class have enrolled there. In Protsahan I can learn to make soft toys,



learn *Vedic* math and abacus, stitching, and even photography! They also helped a girl finish her 10th and 12th by preparing her for National Institute of Open Schooling. In due course I can hopefully earn a bit of money and become self-sufficient.”

“What is the timing of this place?”

“I shall be there from 2 to 6 pm,” Disha said scanning her Maa's face for a response. After what seemed an eternity Bindu looked at her daughter and smiled.

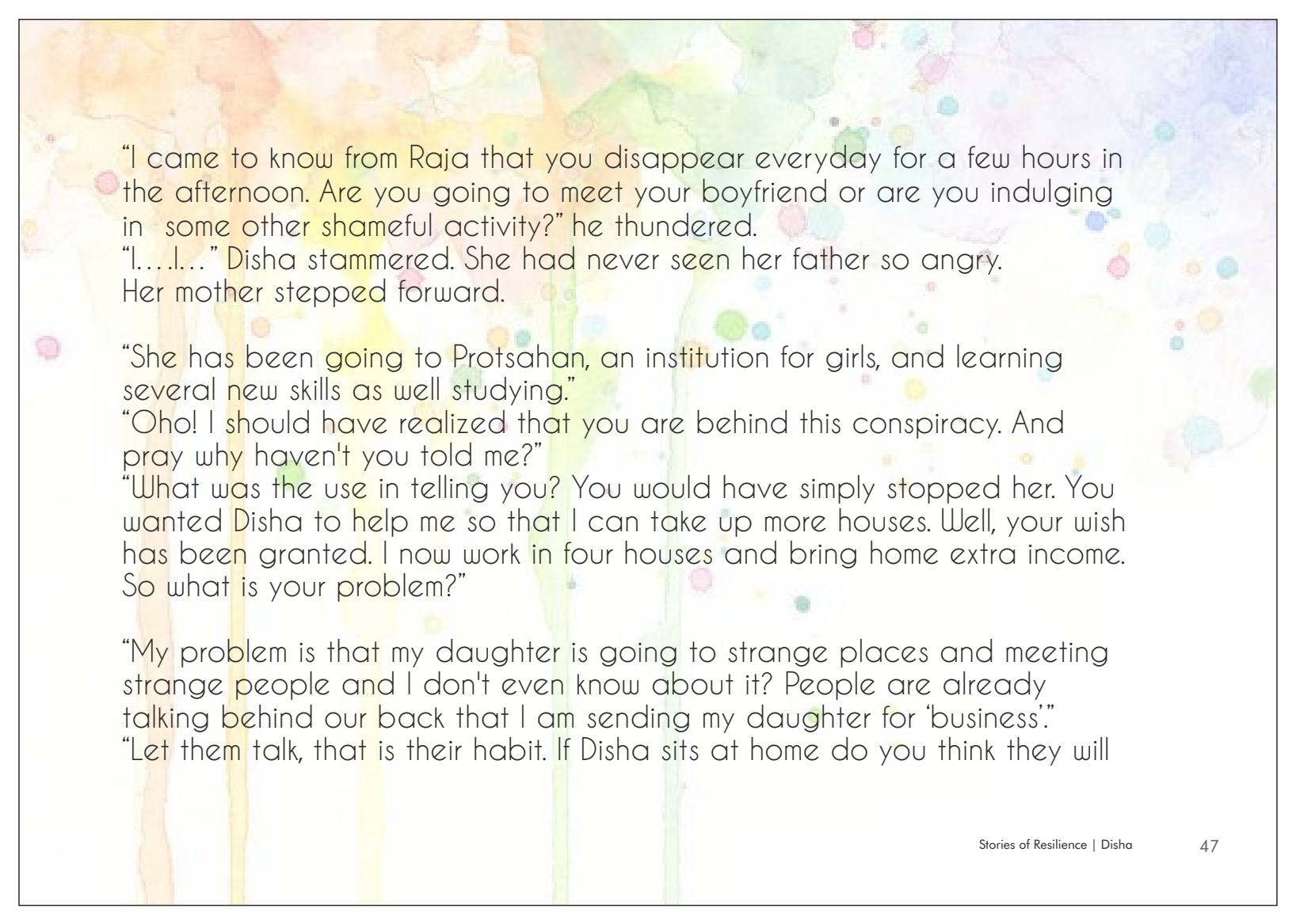
“The timings sound good. Both your daddy and Raja are never there at home during this period. You can join but let this be a secret between the two of us. If your daddy comes to know there will be hell to face.” Disha nodded happily and hugged her Maa.

Disha joined Protsahan and soon got into the rhythm. Apart from being

taught various skills she also got a lot of help in academics. She enrolled herself in National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and now her main goal was to pass class ten.

It was almost six and a half months to the day she had joined. It was dinner time and Disha was helping her mother in the kitchen when her daddy strode in. His face was red and his eyes were blazing.





"I came to know from Raja that you disappear everyday for a few hours in the afternoon. Are you going to meet your boyfriend or are you indulging in some other shameful activity?" he thundered.

"I...I..." Disha stammered. She had never seen her father so angry. Her mother stepped forward.


"She has been going to Protsahan, an institution for girls, and learning several new skills as well studying."

"Oho! I should have realized that you are behind this conspiracy. And pray why haven't you told me?"

"What was the use in telling you? You would have simply stopped her. You wanted Disha to help me so that I can take up more houses. Well, your wish has been granted. I now work in four houses and bring home extra income. So what is your problem?"

"My problem is that my daughter is going to strange places and meeting strange people and I don't even know about it? People are already talking behind our back that I am sending my daughter for 'business'."

"Let them talk, that is their habit. If Disha sits at home do you think they will



stop talking? They won't."

"I won't allow this anymore. Enough is enough. Disha has to sit at home from now on."

"I am sorry but Disha will not sit at home. I will not allow her to suffer the way I have. Whether you like it or not Disha will go to Protsahan and try to make a life of her own – which is far better than mine," Bindu said looking at her husband defiantly.

Disha couldn't believe her eyes. This had never happened in her house. Her daddy's writ ran large and her Maa rarely objected to anything he said.

Hariram stared at his wife not knowing how to react. He took a step as if to strike her and then turning around walked out.

For weeks the cold war between Hariram and his wife and daughter persisted.

Disha continued going to Protsahan and worked with renewed zeal. She now had a definite goal – she had to live up to her Maa's expectations of her.

A year passed by. Disha's class ten exam results were out. She had bagged a first class. A few days later Disha heard her father telling the neighbor. "Disha has got 61% in class ten. No one in our family has ever got a first division. I am so proud of her. I want her to study further and achieve her dreams. I used to keep thinking that my son is an asset and my daughter is a liability. It has happened the other way round – Disha has turned out to be a real asset."



Aastha

Gurmeet stopped his bike and got down. It was past seven and the moon had come out casting a golden light. He started walking towards a construction site. The work on building of a mall had been discontinued due to some litigation issues and the area was deserted.



Gurmeet was an insurance agent by profession and a photographer by passion. He worked in a freelance capacity with a few newspapers and often his clicks were published and appreciated. He loved taking off beat shots of moods and moments, ideas and images. 'The abandoned construction site would be a good backdrop for some creative photography,' he thought to



himself.

As he reached the site he noticed a movement from the corner of his eye and turned around. A girl was crouched under what appeared to be a staircase in progress. He walked towards her.

She seemed around 14 years old. Clad in rags, she was bent over and was sniffing something.

'What was she sniffing at this time of the evening all alone in a deserted place?' Gurmeet wondered.

"Hey? What's up?" Gurmeet said and his voice seemed to echo in the silence.

The girl looked up and stared at him. She had an oval face framed by short, thick hair. She was dusky with sharp features. But what caught his attention were her eyes. They seemed completely lifeless – cold, dead – like that of a fish waiting for the butcher's knife.

"What is your name?" Gurmeet asked.

The girl struggled to her feet and stood leaning against a pillar. She looked at him and then spoke, her voice a whisper, "Aastha."

“What are you doing here Aastha?”

She shook her head, “Nothing.” Gurmeet noticed a plastic bag in her hand even as she tried to hide it behind her back.

“Give the bag to me,” Gurmeet commanded. Aastha hesitated and then handed it over.

Gurmeet took the plastic bag and looked inside. He inhaled a bit. A pungent smell hit him and he immediately chucked the bag.

“So you were inhaling a whitener?”

Aastha looked at her feet unable to meet Gurmeet's eyes.

“You seemed to have become habitual to this it seems. How did you get into this habit?”

“I stay in Vikas Puri *basti*. I picked it up from the boys in my *basti*.”

“Do your parents know that you are an addict?”

“My parents are dead. I stay with my *naani* who is too old to understand these things.”

“Does your *naani* work?”

“No. I am a rag picker and we survive on whatever I earn.”

“Do you know how dangerous inhaling a whitener is, *beta*? It can destroy you completely in the long run.”

"I only know it helps me kill my hunger. Sometimes I am caught by the police men and beaten up. My addiction helps me bear that pain."

"Come with me I'll drop you home," Gurmeet said gently. Aastha hesitated.

"Don't worry, you can trust me."

"I hope you won't hand me over to the police."

"No, of course not."


Ten minutes later Aastha asked Gurmeet to stop in front of a narrow lane. "This is my *basti*."

"Will you not show me your house?"

Aastha once again thought for a moment and then said, "Ok, come." Gurmeet parked the bike and followed Aastha. After negotiating through a couple of narrow lanes he found himself in front of a tiny house which seemed to be virtually crumbling.

"Will you come in?" Aastha asked and Gurmeet shook his head.

"But I'll meet you soon," he said and turning around walked back.



It was evening and Astha was sitting with her *naani* on the steps of her house. *Naani* was applying oil in her hair. Aastha heard her name being called and looked up. It was the stranger who had dropped her home a few days ago. She had even forgotten to ask him his name.

She got up in haste.

"I have come to talk to you and your *naani*," Gurmeet said.

"Please, please don't tell her anything about my addiction. She has no idea and will not be able to bear it," Aastha whispered.

"Of course, I won't. Can you please help me get a chair or something on which I can sit and talk?"

Aastha rushed in and came out with a wooden stool.

"Aastha will you go inside and please make tea for me while I have a chat with your *naani*?"

Aastha hesitated and then went in.

As *naani* looked on silently Gurmeet sat down and did an elaborate *namaskar*.

"*Naani*, I am a photographer and I teach photography to some girls at a

place called Protsahan twice a week for an hour or so.

Protsahan is basically an institution devoted to teaching young girls skills which will help them stand on their own feet. Many of these girls have been subjected to different kinds of abuse. At Protsahan an attempt is made to help the girls come to terms with their past and grow as individuals, based on the tenets of empathy, creativity & technology”

“Why are you telling me all this?” asked *naani*. She was a tall, thin lady with sparse grey hair and appeared to be around sixty five years old.

“I want Aastha to get enrolled in Protsahan. I have already talked to the people in the organisation. The place is hardly 15 minutes from here. Aastha can leave at 1.00 p.m. and come back by six'o'clock everyday.” “But *beta*, we exist on what Aastha manages to earn. Where will we get the money to survive?”

“I have already thought of that. Whatever she has been earning will be given to her as a kind of scholarship.”

“Who will give it to her?”

"I work on a part time basis for a newspaper. I spoke to the editor and he has agreed to sponsor Aastha's training."

Naani looked intently at him for quite some time and then said, "*Beta*, all this sounds too good to be true. Are you sure she will be taken care of and no harm will come to her? You know she is a girl and every day one hears of horrible things happening to young girls..."

"You have to trust me *naani*. Why don't you come with Aastha to Protsahan on the first day and see for yourself? You send her only if you are convinced or else she can continue scrounging through dustbins."

"Have you talked to Aastha, *beta*? You know I can't force her."

"Of course I shall talk to her. I only thought I should take your permission first."

Aastha was simply delighted when Gurmeet told her about his proposal. She had always wanted to be like other children and go to school. Many boys and girls in her *basti* left in the morning to study. They talked about books, teachers, games, pranks and so much more. She had always felt left

out. Now finally she was getting a chance to go to a place, which even though wasn't a regular school, would allow her to escape from the wretched life she was leading.

“No more sniffing whiteners!” Gurmeet had warned her.

Aastha had been an addict for the last two years but she was confident she could leave the habit. It would be extremely difficult but certainly not impossible for her. After all so much was at stake.

She went to Jyothi *didi*, who was four years older to her and had kicked off the habit. She lived two lanes away



and after going off drugs was now working in a crèche in the *basti* itself.

“By deciding to give up the habit you have already taken the first step,” Jyothi said a gentle smile on her face.

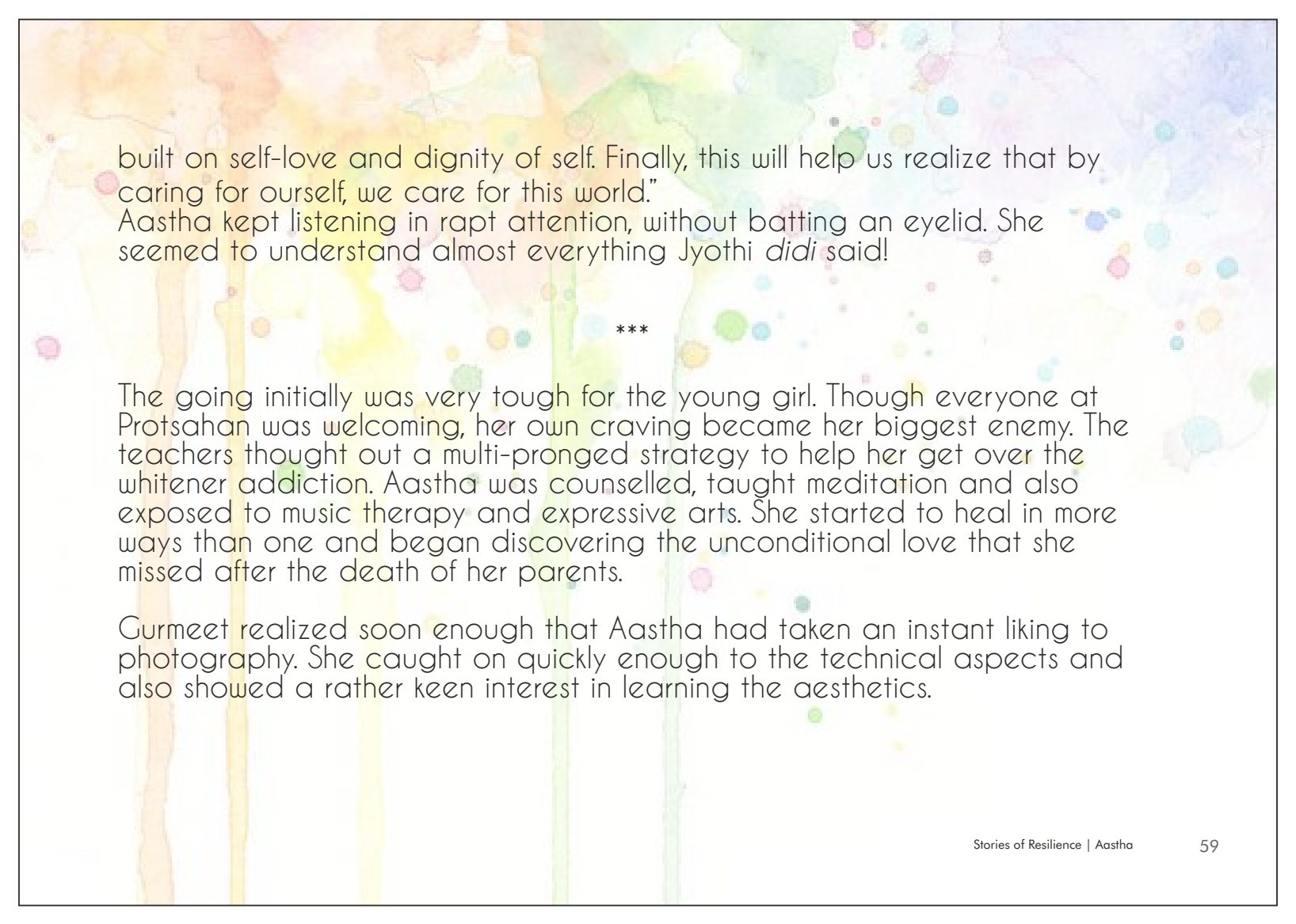
“However, let me warn you that the withdrawal symptoms will be terrible. And the urge to sniff will be overpowering,” Jyothi said looking at Aastha.

“What do I do then *didī*?”

“You will have to keep reminding yourself that it is this dangerous habit that is coming between you and your happiness. Whenever you feel the urge, seek help and try to get busy in some physical activity like yoga which I can teach you. I know a bit about Protsahan, they do *pranayam* and meditation there. If you learn the techniques and practise mindfulness meditation that too would be of great help. The teachers there are very compassionate and kind, they will take care of you and also teach you about self-love. I think you will like the place.”

“What is self-love *didī*?”

Self-love, self-respect, self-worth - there's a reason they all start with 'self.' You can't find them in anyone else. Life is full of ups and downs. But, no matter what happens on the outside, we can still create a solid foundation



built on self-love and dignity of self. Finally, this will help us realize that by caring for ourself, we care for this world.”

Aastha kept listening in rapt attention, without batting an eyelid. She seemed to understand almost everything Jyothi *didi* said!

The going initially was very tough for the young girl. Though everyone at Protsahan was welcoming, her own craving became her biggest enemy. The teachers thought out a multi-pronged strategy to help her get over the whitener addiction. Aastha was counselled, taught meditation and also exposed to music therapy and expressive arts. She started to heal in more ways than one and began discovering the unconditional love that she missed after the death of her parents.

Gurmeet realized soon enough that Aastha had taken an instant liking to photography. She caught on quickly enough to the technical aspects and also showed a rather keen interest in learning the aesthetics.



One day she told Gurmeet, “*Bhaiyya*, can I come with you on your local photography assignments?”

“Most of the time I have no specific project. I take my camera wherever I go and shoot whatever I like. But yes, you can come with me in the mornings for nature walks and continue going to Protsahan in the afternoons.”

Aastha started enjoying learning with Gurmeet and observing how he handled his camera and gadgets closely. He would keep giving her tips on the various nuances of photography and she would absorb each and every word.

The meditation technique and music therapy taught at Protsahan too was a huge help. What Aastha practiced at Protsahan she was told by her teachers to repeat at home along with yoga.

The various interventions – meditation, music therapy, yoga, her busy schedule at Protsahan and above all her passion for photography gradually got her out of the morass of addiction.

It was now almost three years to the day, Gurmeet had enrolled Aastha at Protsahan.

Gurmeet's first photographic exhibition – Ideas & Images was to be inaugurated at Community Centre of Kali basti community. The photographs had been laminated, framed and displayed on three sides of a rectangular hall. On the fourth wall was a tiny flex on which was written – 'Moods & Moments – Photographs by Aastha.'

The exhibition was inaugurated by Mr. Avinash Kumar, the Chief Editor of the paper where Gurmeet worked as a freelance photographer. He stood for some time looking keenly at Aastha's 'wall'.

“Aastha, you sure are very talented. Why don't you do some freelancing for our newspaper?”

Aastha couldn't believe it. Too surprised to speak, she could just nod her head in affirmation, her once forever glazed eyes shining brightly.



Salma

Anita had completed her work in Hussain basti and was walking towards the lane which led to the main road when she heard a commotion. She turned back.

She saw a twelve year old girl walking with a vessel on her head and a couple of girls and boys following her jeering and hooting. One of the girls tapped her on the shoulder. When she turned around a boy pushed her. Even as the girl tried to regain her balance the container fell down and water splashed all over. She bent down and picking up the vessel started walking towards the water tap and the girls and boys once again began heckling her. Anita turned around and walked quickly towards the bunch of kids.

“Hey, why are you teasing her?” she shouted.

Anita was a tall, twenty six year old with an impressive frame and a commanding voice. The kids took one look at her and scampered away. The girl in the meanwhile had filled another vessel. She turned to Anita and flashed a grateful smile. She was slim and fair with large, doe like eyes and



short hair.

"What is your name, *beta*?" Anita asked in her gentlest voice. There was no response from the girl. Anita repeated her question.

The girl put the vessel down and gestured to her that she was hearing and speech impaired.

"Where do you stay?" Anita asked, speaking slowly and deliberately.

The girl pointed out to a house hundred around a metres away and gestured to Anita that she wanted her to come home. Anita followed her to a small house, at the corner of the lane, which had a green door.

The girl knocked on the door. It was opened a few seconds later by a lady who was clearly her mother.

The girl quickly put down the vessel and through gestures communicated with her mother.

“My name is Anita. I was passing by when...”

“My daughter told me how she was being teased by a few girls and boys when you came to her rescue. Actually this is a daily phenomenon.”

She stopped with an apologetic look and said, “I am sorry. So silly of me to forget even the basic courtesy. Please come in.”

Anita entered a room which had a plastic chair in one corner and in the other a mat on which was placed a pillow. Except for a calendar and the photo of Mecca the walls were bare.

“Please take a seat,” Salma's mother said indicating the chair. She made a gesture, Salma nodded and disappeared inside.

“My name is Nikhat and my daughter is Salma.”

“Since when is Salma differently abled?”

“Since birth.”

“What do you do?”

"I work with an NGO. We make *masaala* and market it."
"And your husband?"

"He left a few months after Salma's birth blaming me for her condition."
"Does Salma go to school?"

"I sent her a few times. But every time the result was the same. She was teased and taunted so much that she stopped going. I have studied till class ten so I teach her at home."

"How do you manage to communicate with her?"

"Love needs no language, *didi*. Most of the time we communicate simply through our eyes. Sometimes we use gestures."

Salma appeared with a cup of tea.

"Nikhat *didi*, I work for an NGO called Protsahan which fights against child abuse and for the rights of the girl child. We conduct classes in different subjects as well as teach arts & craft, photography, stitching, dancing, computers etc. Why don't you enrol Salma in Protsahan?"

"But will I be able to pay the fees?"

"We don't charge any fees."

“Will she be able to adjust with other so called normal children?”

“Please don't worry about that. The children at Protsahan are truly special. Salma will feel absolutely at home.”

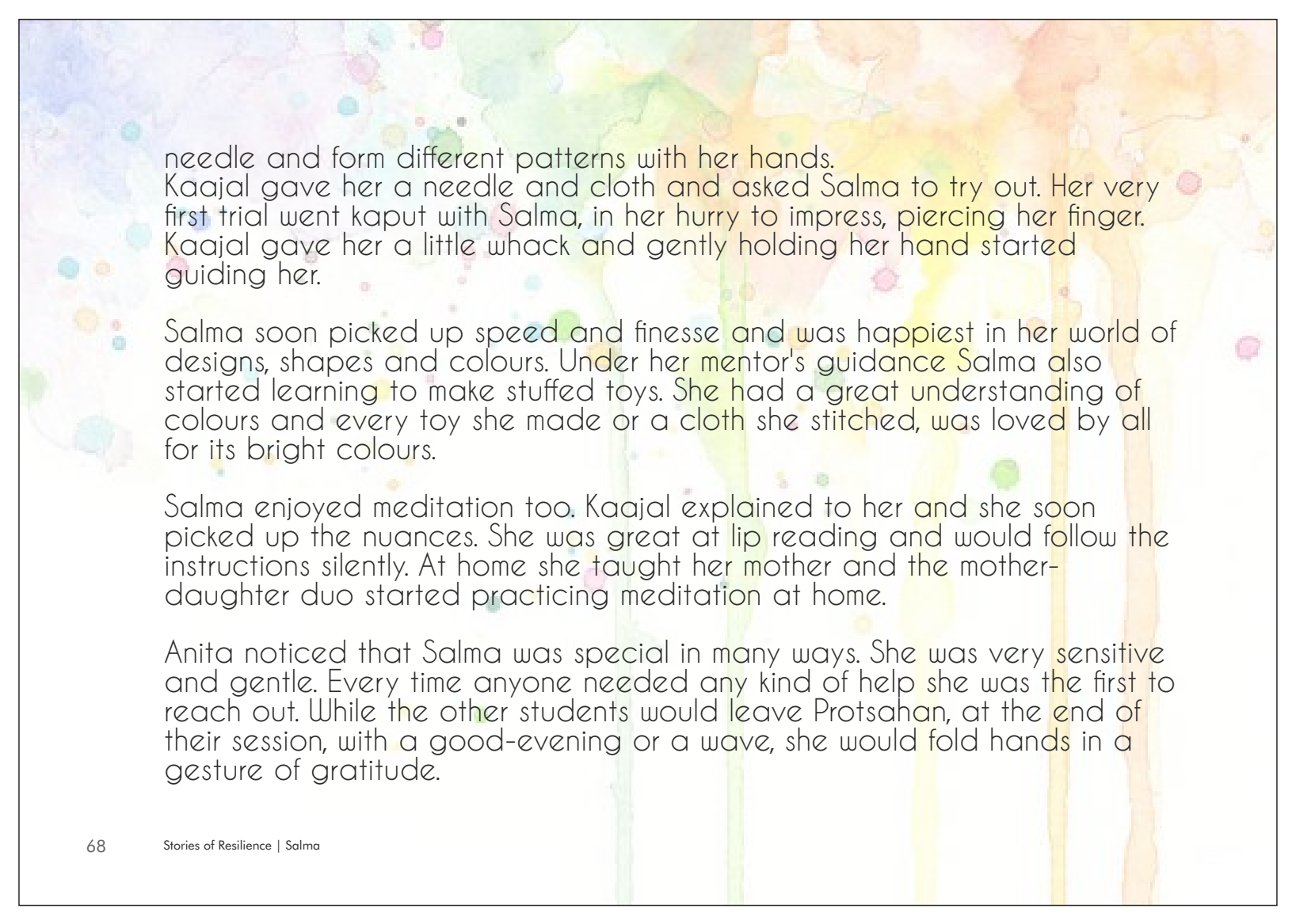
“I'll talk to her and let you know,” Nikhat said.

“If she and you are comfortable with the idea please come over tomorrow at 2 pm to this address,” Anita said handing a card to Nikhat.

The next day Salma appeared with her mother Nikhat at Protsahan. She liked the place and became a part of Protsahan from the very same day.

In the first week itself Kaajal became Salma's best buddy. Kaajal, who was around three years older to Salma, lived in a slum which was a few kilometres away. Her father was hearing and speech impaired. Kaajal had learned to converse with him and this knowledge helped her connect with Salma.

Salma started taking part in the different activities of Protsahan. Anita was happy to see the other girls reaching out to Salma as she had hoped they would. Kaajal soon noticed that stitching seemed to fascinate Salma the most. She would watch Kaajal cut out shapes, thread the



needle and form different patterns with her hands. Kaajal gave her a needle and cloth and asked Salma to try out. Her very first trial went kaput with Salma, in her hurry to impress, piercing her finger. Kaajal gave her a little whack and gently holding her hand started guiding her.

Salma soon picked up speed and finesse and was happiest in her world of designs, shapes and colours. Under her mentor's guidance Salma also started learning to make stuffed toys. She had a great understanding of colours and every toy she made or a cloth she stitched, was loved by all for its bright colours.

Salma enjoyed meditation too. Kaajal explained to her and she soon picked up the nuances. She was great at lip reading and would follow the instructions silently. At home she taught her mother and the mother-daughter duo started practicing meditation at home.

Anita noticed that Salma was special in many ways. She was very sensitive and gentle. Every time anyone needed any kind of help she was the first to reach out. While the other students would leave Protsahan, at the end of their session, with a good-evening or a wave, she would fold hands in a gesture of gratitude.

During birthday celebrations she would invariably present a soft toy made with her gentle hands and magical fingers to the younger children at Protsahan.

Two years after Salma's joining, Kaajal had to leave Protsahan. Her family was shifting to their native place in Uttar Pradesh.

When the news was broken to Salma she started crying. Kaajal explained her helplessness and promised to keep in touch.







A small farewell was organised at Protsahan for Kaajal who had spent seven years at the institution.

Salma gave her a 'Mickey Mouse' – Kaajal's favourite cartoon character and Kaajal in turn gave her bestie a brand new box of needles.

A few months went by. One afternoon Salma was called to the office and introduced to a ten year old girl. Her name was Isha and she too was speech and hearing impaired.

Isha was now the new Salma and Salma her Kaajal.



Prerna

I am Prerna. I am 14 years old and I study in grade Eighth in a Government school. I stay with my parents, Satya Prakash and Nirmala in Indira Nagar. I have two sisters who have got married and are settled in Begusarai village in Bihar.

Let me tell you my usual routine. I get up at 7, help mother with the housework, take a bath, get ready, have a quick breakfast and leave for my school at 8.45. I walk to the school with two of my best friends Minu and Rajkumari, who are in the same class. I come back at one, have my lunch, watch TV and do my homework. My mother stitches clothes for Dipali aunty who owns a boutique. Maa works from home and is busy the entire day.

My father drives an auto. He leaves around the same time as I do and if he is in the mood even drops us at school. He comes home at around nine or sometimes even later.

Usually I am sitting and watching TV when he pushes open the door and enters lurching. He then collapses on the old sofa which Maa had purchased from the second hand dealer at a throwaway price.

He is stinking and his eyes are red.

Ma enters from the kitchen and starts shouting, "So you have come home drunk again? Don't you have any shame? You are worse than a pig!"

Papa shouts back, "What's it to you? I am drinking from my money, not your father's! One more word and I'll beat the hell out of you."

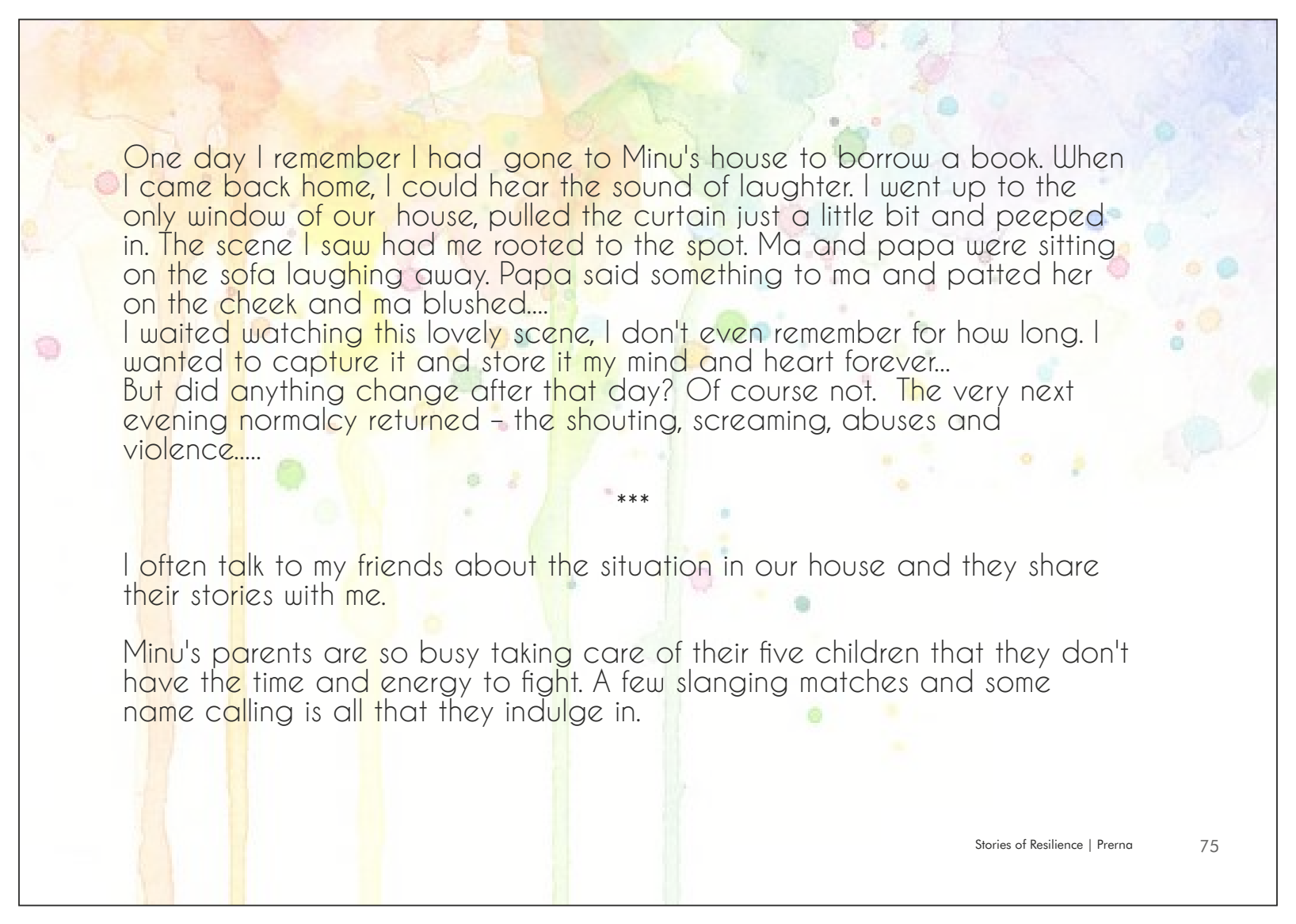
"Your money! You blow up whatever you earn on booze. You think I do not know. Just yesterday I had kept two five hundred rupee notes to buy a new pressure cooker and you took away even that money and spent it on your filthy habit. I have never seen a more irresponsible scoundrel than you."

"Who are you calling names, you-" Papa gets up unsteadily and slaps ma. She staggers back and rushes into the kitchen and starts throwing the vessels here and there...

And what do I do? I disappear into the bathroom, crouch in a corner and keep shivering till the entire episode is over....

On TV, which I often see, many of the comedy shows have the same actors telling the same jokes and acting in very much the same way. My house is like the set of a tragedy show with my Maa and Papa enacting the same script again and again.



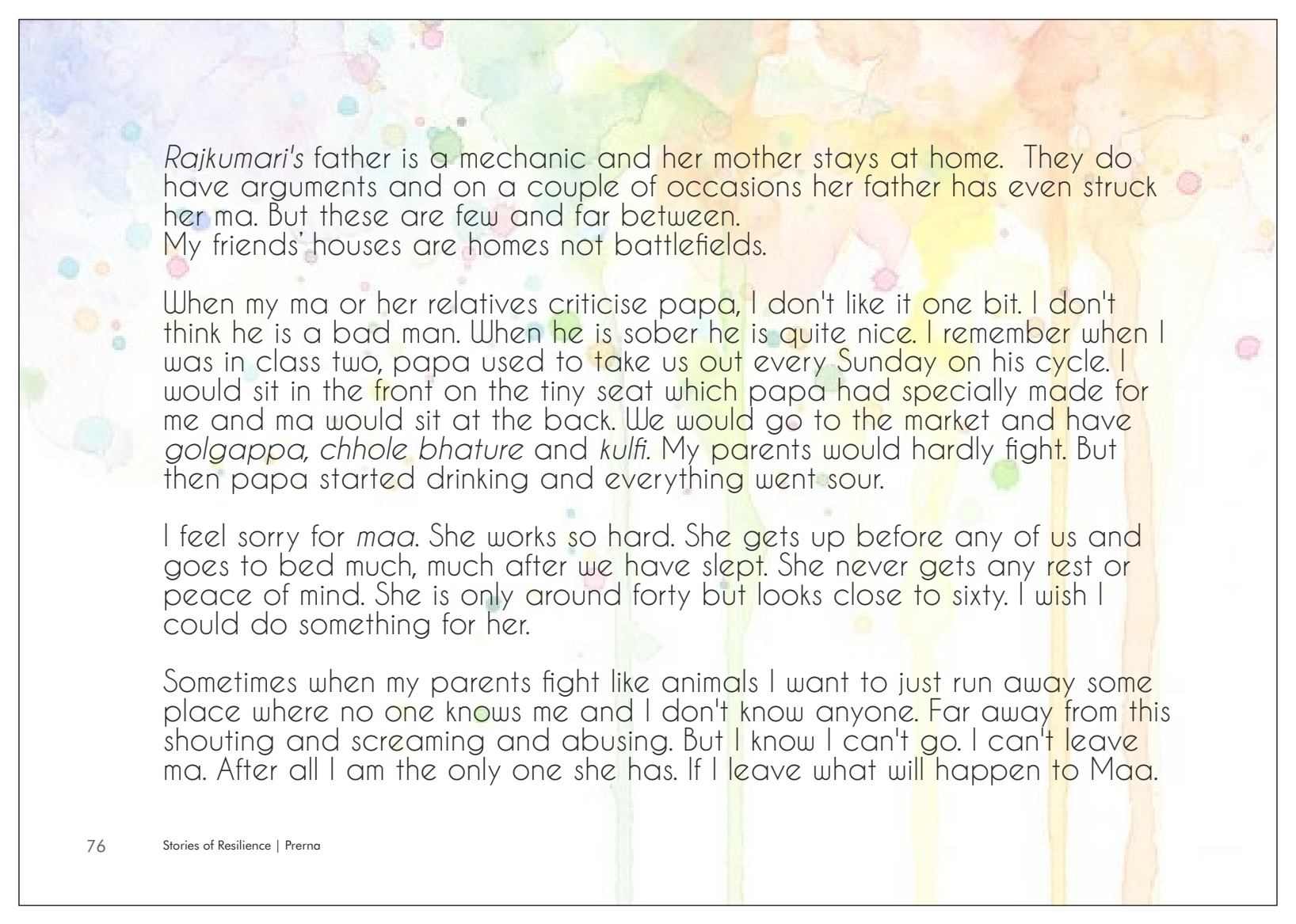


One day I remember I had gone to Minu's house to borrow a book. When I came back home, I could hear the sound of laughter. I went up to the only window of our house, pulled the curtain just a little bit and peeped in. The scene I saw had me rooted to the spot. Ma and papa were sitting on the sofa laughing away. Papa said something to ma and patted her on the cheek and ma blushed....

I waited watching this lovely scene, I don't even remember for how long. I wanted to capture it and store it my mind and heart forever... But did anything change after that day? Of course not. The very next evening normalcy returned – the shouting, screaming, abuses and violence.....

I often talk to my friends about the situation in our house and they share their stories with me.

Minu's parents are so busy taking care of their five children that they don't have the time and energy to fight. A few slanging matches and some name calling is all that they indulge in.



Rajkumari's father is a mechanic and her mother stays at home. They do have arguments and on a couple of occasions her father has even struck her ma. But these are few and far between. My friends' houses are homes not battlefields.

When my ma or her relatives criticise papa, I don't like it one bit. I don't think he is a bad man. When he is sober he is quite nice. I remember when I was in class two, papa used to take us out every Sunday on his cycle. I would sit in the front on the tiny seat which papa had specially made for me and ma would sit at the back. We would go to the market and have *golgappa*, *chhole bhature* and *kulfi*. My parents would hardly fight. But then papa started drinking and everything went sour.

I feel sorry for *maa*. She works so hard. She gets up before any of us and goes to bed much, much after we have slept. She never gets any rest or peace of mind. She is only around forty but looks close to sixty. I wish I could do something for her.

Sometimes when my parents fight like animals I want to just run away some place where no one knows me and I don't know anyone. Far away from this shouting and screaming and abusing. But I know I can't go. I can't leave ma. After all I am the only one she has. If I leave what will happen to Maa.



She won't survive.

Of late, father's drunken bouts and my response to his anger have been getting worse. I am often unable to sleep at night. I get strange dreams that a monster is attacking my mother and I am screaming....as my screams grow shriller the monster turns to me and I get up shivering uncontrollably...

I know ma is very worried about me. She has been asking around, trying to find out how she can help me.

"Prerna, I shall be taking you to a new place called Protsahan where you will study and learn many more things?" she told me one day.

"Does it mean I shall not be going to school?" I asked. I did not want to miss school. That was one place where I could forget everything and smile a bit.

"You will be going to Protsahan after attending school."

The next afternoon ma took me to a three storied building. The moment I

entered I could feel a certain sense of vibrancy, of happiness. It must be my imagination I thought and shrugged off the feeling.

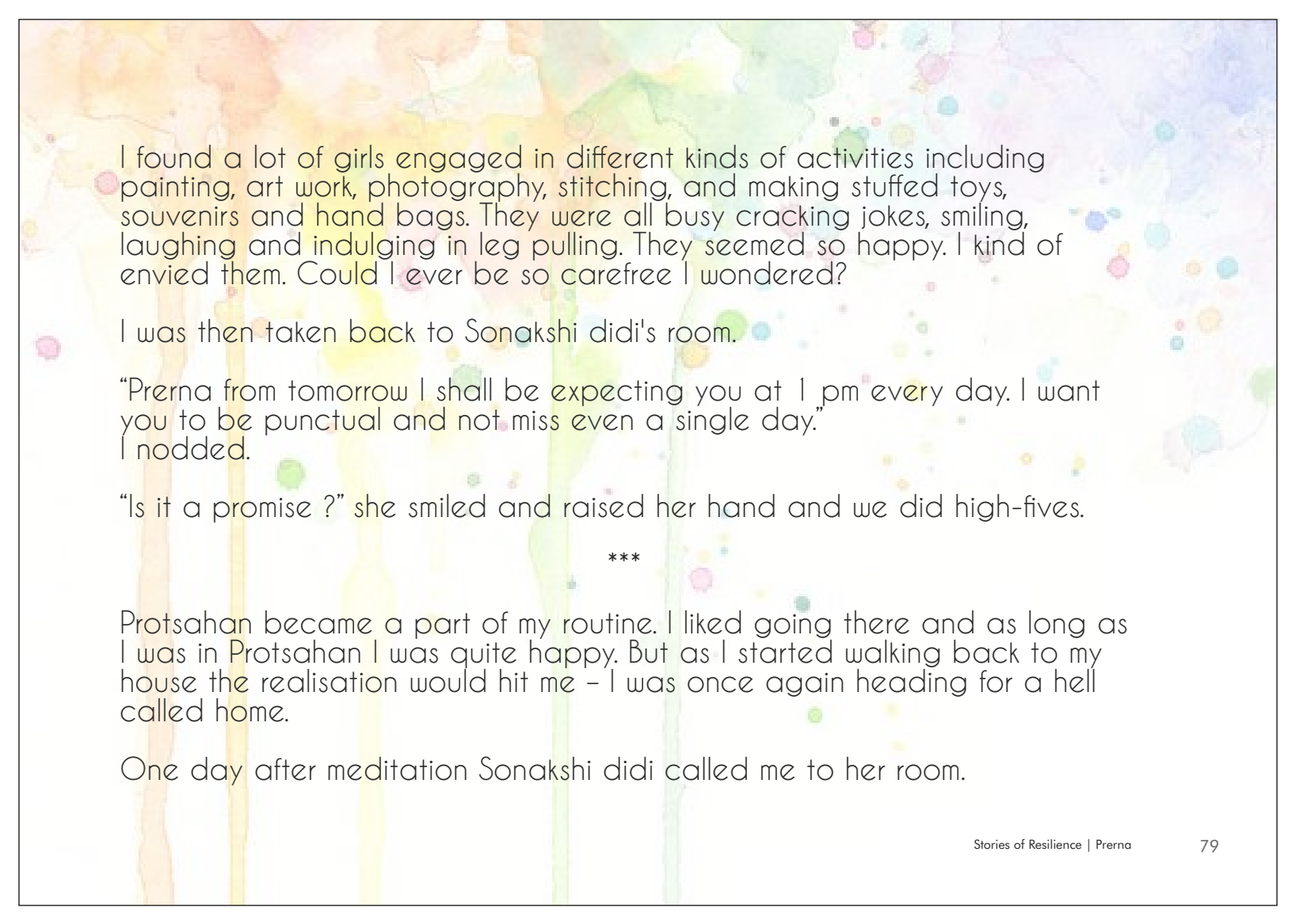
We were led to a room where a young lady was sitting. She did a *Namaste* to Maa and then looking at me smiled. "Hi, I am Sonakshi. You must be Prerna. Welcome to Protsahan."

She then turned to a girl who was sitting opposite a computer typing.

"Riya take Prerna around while I talk to Radha."

Accompanied by Riya I went around Protsahan.





I found a lot of girls engaged in different kinds of activities including painting, art work, photography, stitching, and making stuffed toys, souvenirs and hand bags. They were all busy cracking jokes, smiling, laughing and indulging in leg pulling. They seemed so happy. I kind of envied them. Could I ever be so carefree I wondered?

I was then taken back to Sonakshi didi's room.

“Prerna from tomorrow I shall be expecting you at 1 pm every day. I want you to be punctual and not miss even a single day.”
I nodded.

“Is it a promise ?” she smiled and raised her hand and we did high-fives.

Protsahan became a part of my routine. I liked going there and as long as I was in Protsahan I was quite happy. But as I started walking back to my house the realisation would hit me – I was once again heading for a hell called home.

One day after meditation Sonakshi didi called me to her room.

"Prerna, how do you like it here?"
I nodded with a slight smile.

“Can you tell me about yourself, your home, your parents? Your mother gave me an idea but I want to know from you.”

I told her everything – my childhood, how things were when I was a kid, then how things started falling apart, the fights, the shouts, the abuse...everything. I didn't leave out anything. Somehow I felt comfortable talking to her. She made me feel that she would understand, not make fun of me for being weak, for shivering like a baby when the fights started....

"What do you like best, Prerna?"

“Writing poetry.”

"Wow, that's awesome! I didn't know we have a poet in Protsahan," Sonakshi didi said doing fist bumps with me.

"I would like to listen to your favourite poem."

"I'll get it tomorrow didi?" I promised her.

Next day she called me after the music session.

"Did you get your favourite poem?" Sonakshi *didi* asked.

She had remembered such a tiny detail about me ! I felt so special.

I nodded.

“Come on then, I am all ears,” she said.

I started reciting the poem.

मुझे अपने घर में सांस लेती इक ज़िंदगी चाहिए
एक चुटकी भर ही गम और मुट्ठी भर मस्ती चाहिए।

बिस्तर की सलवटों में सिसकती खुशी नहीं,

कुकुर की सीटी सी गूँजती हंसी चाहिए।

माँ की आँखों का भीगा काजल नहीं,

उसकी मुलायम हथेलियों का आँचल चाहिए।

घर की दरारों में भरी नफरत नहीं,

किसी कोने में उभरती मोहब्बत चाहिए।

मेरे घर में भी कभी अमन का पौधा खिले,

मुझे अपने खुदा से इक ऐसी किस्मत चाहिए।

I stopped and looked at her.

“It is so beautiful and I got to see your heart through your words Prerna”

Sonakshi *didi* said.

“From tomorrow we shall spend some exclusive time together,” she added.

"Prerna let me tell you the stories of a few girls who are in Protsahan. I will of course not reveal their names to protect their identity," Sonakshi *didi* said.

We were sitting in Sonakshi *didi's* room. No one else was there.

"She told me about a girl who was raped by her father, another one whose father committed suicide, after which she was molested and another girl whose father was murdered and whose mother had brought home another man.

I was shocked. I couldn't speak for a long, long time.

"Prerna, I fully understand what you are going through. It is a living hell. But beta there are others too, your age or even younger who have suffered and are still suffering. I am not trying to compare, I am only attempting to make you understand that life can be tough and even cruel." She stopped and looked at me, "I hope I am making sense to you?" I nodded.

"Prerna, in many situations no one will help you, you have to be strong and help yourself. You have to accept there are things which are beyond your control, aspects of your life you cannot change.



You have to let go. You cannot stop your parents from fighting. But you can certainly stop yourself from getting so badly affected that you almost stop living.”

Slowly, bit by bit things started looking up. I began enjoying the various activities in Protsahan. My grades in school started improving, though rather slowly.

There was no great change in the situation at home. But my response to the fights and abuses has undergone a change. Though I still feel bad, I don't get traumatised anymore.

I have even, in my own way, started talking to papa. Telling him how he has transformed from the papa I adored to a father who has become a stranger.... a stranger I am scared of, a stranger I can't trust.

I can't say for sure whether my words made any significant impact on him or not. But definitely he has been making an effort to change...

Sonakshi *didi*, was in her room.

"*Didi*,"

She looked up.

"I have written a poem.
Can I recite it?"

"Of course," she said.

I started reciting from my diary :

मेरा मकान धीरे, धीरे, कुछ घर सा हो रहा है।

मेरा दिल गम से कुछ बेखबर सा हो रहा है।

नफरत की सीलन कुछ सूख सी रही है,



आक्रोश की हवा भी कुछ रुक सी रही है
डर की दस्तक अब एक आहट बन गयी है
मेरे मन में दबी ख्वा अब बगावत बन गई है।
ढूँढ़ रही थी मैं जिस खुशी को, मुझे, मुझ में ही मिल गयी है
खोज रही थी जिस हंसी को मेरे मन में ही खिल रही है।
मेरा जीवन धीरे धीरे बहार हो रहा है,
जैसे सावन की पहली फुवार हो रहा है।

After I had finished I looked expectantly at her.
She pulled me close and hugged me real tight.
I looked at her. Her eyes were glistening with tears but her face was
glowing with happiness.



'Can a girl who was almost married off at the age of 8, lead a crusade against child marriage?

Of course she can. After all impossible is really nothing!

What? You don't believe me? Ok then, I'll tell you my story to prove that if you have the guts, gumption and yes, loving hearts to guide you and, caring hands to support you then you can fight the toughest of odds.'

My name is Urja. And I am 17 years old. I stay with my father, mother and elder brother Naveen in Azad Nagar. My papa runs a small tea and pakoda shop while my Maa does the house work. Papa has a heart problem and hence cannot undergo much strain. Naveen is a criminal who roams on his bike with his gang trying to make money any which way he can. He has even been to jail a couple of times. I hate Naveen but my mother dotes on him. In her eyes he can do no wrong. Whenever there is any issue, mother and son gang up against papa and end up having their way.

I was in class three, studying in a government school when suddenly Maa

and Naveen decided that I should drop out of school and help with the housework. I cried and cried but to no avail. Papa too gave in to their demands.

I was heartbroken and papa made a quiet promise to help me out. A couple of weeks later he enrolled me in Protsahan and that is when I felt I really started living. I would finish my chores, go to Protsahan and after coming back help Maa in completing the housework. I picked up my studies from where I had discontinued and also learnt several new skills like photography, making soft toys, and stitching. But the circumstances at home continued to be tough.

When I was around 12, on Ganesh *Puja*, Maa told me, "We are having some guests in an hour's time. Take a bath and get ready. I shall help you wear a *sari*."

"*Sari*? But why Maa?"

"They are coming to see you. We are planning to get you married soon after Diwali!"

I couldn't believe my ears. "Have you gone mad Maa? I am only twelve!"

"I was married at the age of nine."

"But Maa those were different times. And anyways, if a wrong was done to

you should I also be subjected to the same injustice?

"You talk too much, Urja. You either do as I say or I'll tell Naveen. He will make you fall in line."

I begged, pleaded, cried buckets but there was no use. When I implored papa he told me, "Beta you know my condition. If something happens to me these two will sell you in the market. I want you to get settled while I am still around."

In the evening the groom-to-be came with his father. I was shocked to see him. He must have been at least 45, only a few years younger than papa.

After they left papa shouted at Naveen.

"Have you taken leave of your senses? That man is almost four times Urja's age !"

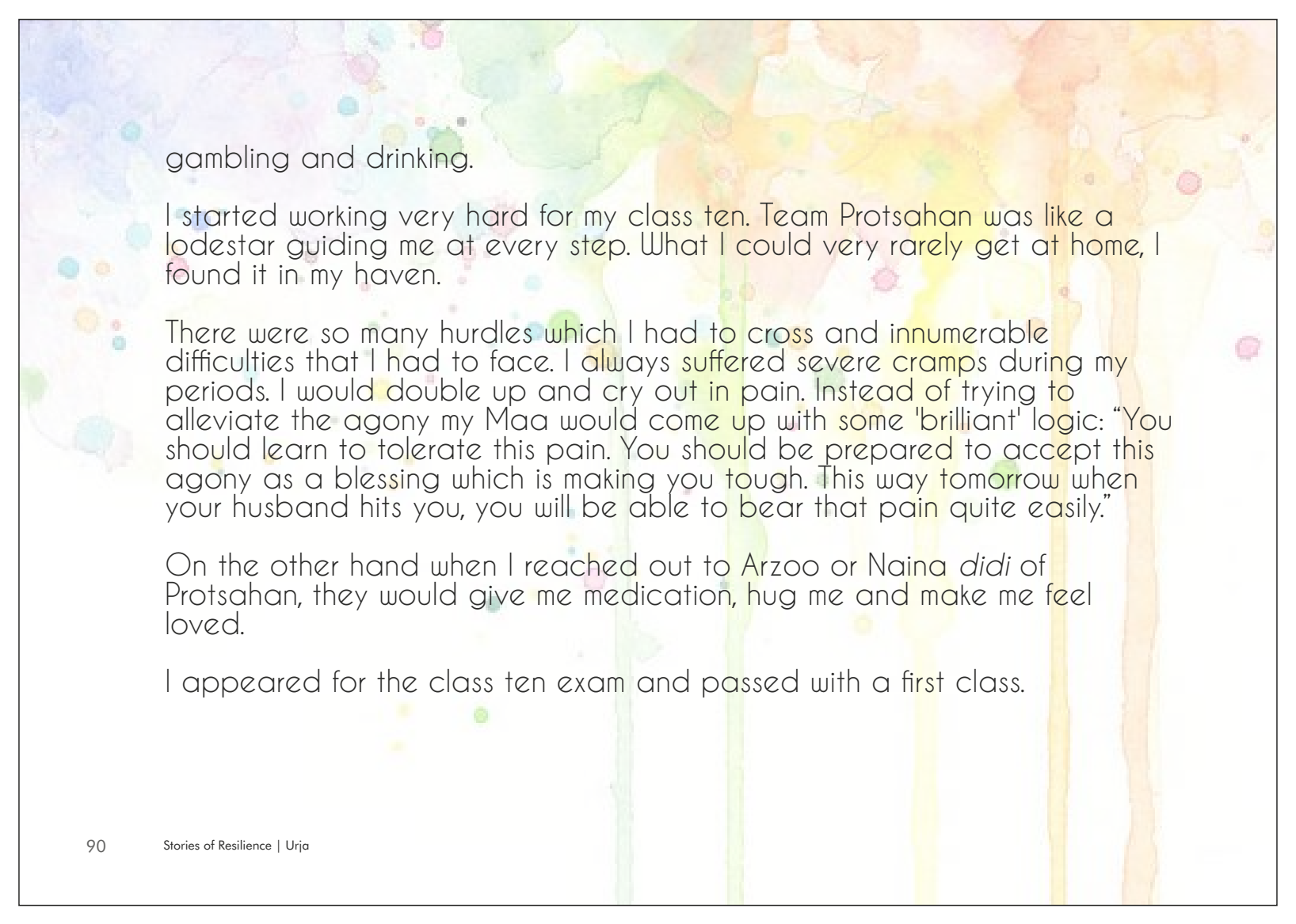
"So? At least he is not asking for dowry! Besides he has promised to give me money to set up a garage for repairing mobikes."

"Oh! So that is the reason. You want to sell your sister to that old fool for money. I will not allow it," he yelled. I had never seen Papa so angry.

Fortunately, his rage worked and the proposal was dropped. But the marriage issue kept cropping up every few months. When I was in class eight Maa again insisted that I should be married off. Arzoo & Naina, two *didis* from Protsahan came home to counsel Maa. They even proposed that Protsahan would pay me a scholarship of Rs. 1000 every month if I was allowed to appear for my class ten examination under the National Institute of Open Schooling scheme.

Maa was delighted. As long as the money was coming in she had no problems. My marriage plans were temporarily shelved and my scholarship money was used for Naveen's





gambling and drinking.

I started working very hard for my class ten. Team Protsahan was like a lodestar guiding me at every step. What I could very rarely get at home, I found it in my haven.

There were so many hurdles which I had to cross and innumerable difficulties that I had to face. I always suffered severe cramps during my periods. I would double up and cry out in pain. Instead of trying to alleviate the agony my Maa would come up with some 'brilliant' logic: "You should learn to tolerate this pain. You should be prepared to accept this agony as a blessing which is making you tough. This way tomorrow when your husband hits you, you will be able to bear that pain quite easily."

On the other hand when I reached out to Arzoo or Naina *didi* of Protsahan, they would give me medication, hug me and make me feel loved.

I appeared for the class ten exam and passed with a first class.

Papa was ecstatic and went around distributing sweets to the neighbours. Soon however, Maa and Naveen were back to their old ways. "Now that she has passed class ten we should get her married," Naveen said.

"Yes, what is the point in delaying?" Maa added.

"I am not interested in getting married now. I want to study further."

"Why, you want to become a Governor?" Naveen demanded.

"Let her study till she wants to. At least we have one tenth pass in our family. Naveen, you are a school dropout and here, Urja has brought so much honour to our family by securing a first class."

"What about her scholarship? That should not stop. If she wants to study she has to ensure that we get that money every month," Maa said, her voice as shrill as ever.

"Her job is to study and she will only do that. If you want more money to spend on your son you go out and earn it," Papa said and walked out before anyone could react.

A couple of months ago Arzoo *didi* came up to us girls and said that

there was an open short film competition conducted by a media house and Protsahan had decided to participate.

“Remember girls the entire movie will be done by you including scripting, direction, acting, production etc. We are planning to crowd fund the project and hire a professional cameramen for the cinematography and a studio for post production. So let us go ahead and do some brainstorming!”

We spent more than an hour bouncing ideas. Neha wanted us to do a film on child labour, while Sunita felt the ideal subject would be child abuse. Roohi suggested domestic violence as a possible theme and Sara came up with the idea of making a film on broken homes. I raised my hand and Arzoo didi looked at me. “Why don't we make a film on child marriage?”

“That's a pretty old fashioned theme. Child marriage doesn't happen now,” Neha said.

“That's what you think. I was almost forced into one a few years ago,” Sunita shot back.

There were arguments and counter arguments which went on for quite some





time. Finally Arzoo *didi* raised her hand.

“I have decided. The theme which has raised the most debate is the one we'll choose. Let us make a short film on Child Marriage.” Everyone, including the dissenters clapped.

“Now let us first decide on the storyline.”

“Didi, I'll write a rough outline and will submit it tomorrow,” I volunteered.

“Great! Let us meet up tomorrow and take it forward,” *didi* said.

I worked almost the entire night on the story and showed it to Arzoo *didi*.

She liked it and made me read it out to the entire gang. Almost everyone was happy with the story though there were quite a few suggestions. I agreed to tweak the story and we moved on to the other aspects.

After a couple of hours of intense deliberation the individual responsibilities were fixed. I was asked to write the complete script with the help of Sunita. I was also to assist in the direction and play a pivotal role in the film.


The Chief stopped as the award winners trooped on stage one by one to collect the awards. We were all close to tears. We had been hopeful of bagging at least one award but apparently we had not been good enough, we thought to ourselves.

“The second team to figure in the award list is Team Protsahan for winning the Second Best Film, Best Direction and Best Script award.”



I don't remember what happened after that – it is all fuzzy. Arzoo didi shepherded us up the stage. We received the awards amidst thunderous applause, even as the cameras kept flashing. We shook hands with the Chief Judge and as we walked down we couldn't control our tears....

* The film 'Fireflies' was completed in 2016-17. It is still available on Protsahan India Foundation's YouTube channel

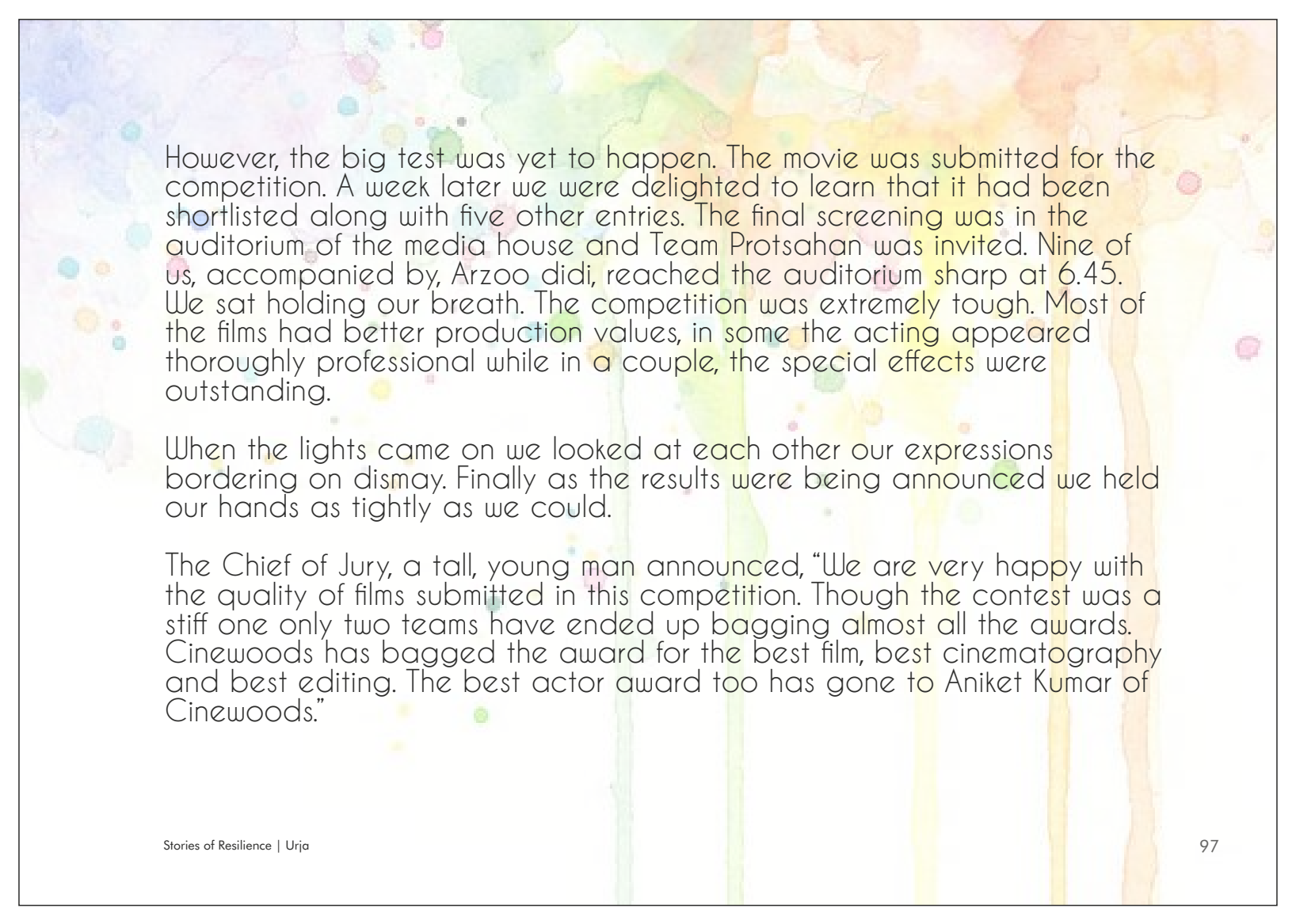


I was thrilled to bits. When I told Papa, he too was delighted. It took almost three months for the film to be completed. We would take out a few hours each day and would also work on Sundays and holidays. We all had a great time working together, arguing over nitty-gritty's, having loads of fun, learning from our mistakes and moving on.

Working on a project of this importance and sensitivity was a first for all of us and it was an experience we would treasure forever and ever. It felt like, our broken wings were healing and garnering a unique strength of their own.

Finally the film was ready and we were all super-excited. It was screened at Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in the heart of the capital city. We watched the entire movie keeping our fingers crossed. More than the audience reaction it was our own performance that we were worried about. Protsahan has always taught us that our competition is only with ourselves.

When the movie was over the teachers and volunteers got up and gave us a standing ovation. We yelled ourselves hoarse and indulged in hugs, high-fives and impromptu jigs.



However, the big test was yet to happen. The movie was submitted for the competition. A week later we were delighted to learn that it had been shortlisted along with five other entries. The final screening was in the auditorium of the media house and Team Protsahan was invited. Nine of us, accompanied by, Arzoo didi, reached the auditorium sharp at 6.45. We sat holding our breath. The competition was extremely tough. Most of the films had better production values, in some the acting appeared thoroughly professional while in a couple, the special effects were outstanding.

When the lights came on we looked at each other our expressions bordering on dismay. Finally as the results were being announced we held our hands as tightly as we could.

The Chief of Jury, a tall, young man announced, "We are very happy with the quality of films submitted in this competition. Though the contest was a stiff one only two teams have ended up bagging almost all the awards. Cinewoods has bagged the award for the best film, best cinematography and best editing. The best actor award too has gone to Aniket Kumar of Cinewoods."

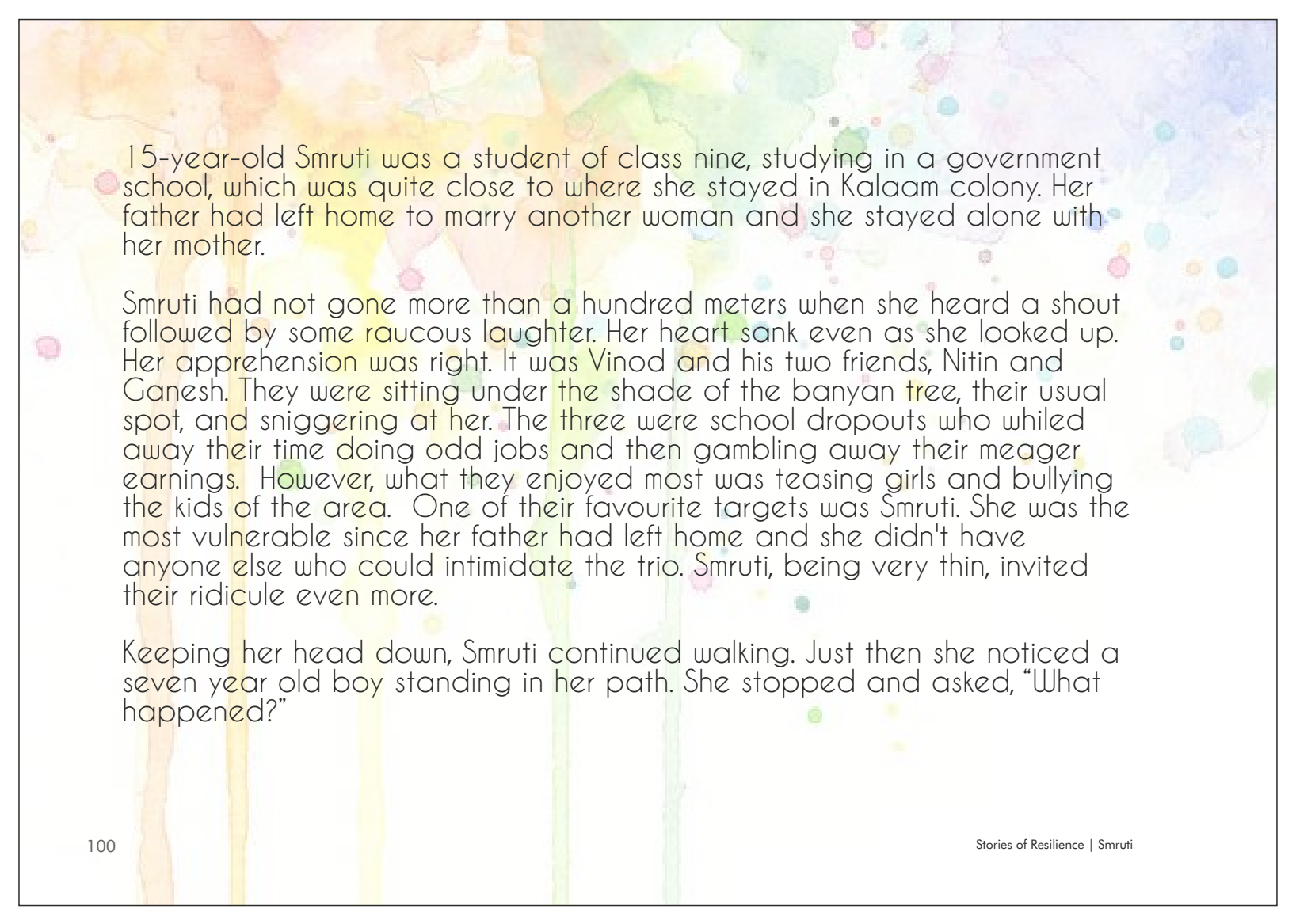


Smruti

Smruti hurriedly stepped out of the house and started walking quickly. The only alarm clock in her cramped house, which was cracked in one place and chipped in two, had shown 8.45. This meant she had exactly 15 minutes to reach her school.



The first class was Math, taught by Pooja ma'am, who was very strict. If anyone was even a minute late, he or she was made to stand outside during the entire class.



15-year-old Smruti was a student of class nine, studying in a government school, which was quite close to where she stayed in Kalaam colony. Her father had left home to marry another woman and she stayed alone with her mother.

Smruti had not gone more than a hundred meters when she heard a shout followed by some raucous laughter. Her heart sank even as she looked up. Her apprehension was right. It was Vinod and his two friends, Nitin and Ganesh. They were sitting under the shade of the banyan tree, their usual spot, and sniggering at her. The three were school dropouts who whiled away their time doing odd jobs and then gambling away their meager earnings. However, what they enjoyed most was teasing girls and bullying the kids of the area. One of their favourite targets was Smruti. She was the most vulnerable since her father had left home and she didn't have anyone else who could intimidate the trio. Smruti, being very thin, invited their ridicule even more.

Keeping her head down, Smruti continued walking. Just then she noticed a seven year old boy standing in her path. She stopped and asked, "What happened?"

"*Didi*, please take this one rupee coin. Vinod *bhaiyya* has asked me to give it to you."

Smruti looked at him blankly.

"He told me to tell you to hold it tightly in your fist – so that in case there is strong a breeze you won't fly off," with these words the kid scampered off followed by howls of laughter from the louts.

Smruti turned red and continued walking as fast as she could.

This was a regular phenomenon. She was poked fun at in school too. Even her teachers commented, "Smruti doesn't your mother give you anything to eat?"

"I don't know what you'll do in life? You seem so weak and fragile."

"Are you on a permanent diet, Smruti? At the rate you are going you will simply vanish one day."

Smruti was sick and tired of these comments, tired of being bullied, but there was little she could do other than grin and bear it.

One day she came to know about Protsahan from Malati aunty who lived close by.

"I am planning to send Swati to Protsahan. If you are interested I'll ask them

whether you too can join?"

Swati, Malati aunty's daughter, was around the same age as Smruti.

Smruti and Swati started going to Protsahan a week later. On the very second day Smruti came to know that all the girls were provided basic training in martial arts.

"*Didi*, will I be able to learn karate?" Smruti asked Radhika, one of the coordinators at Protsahan.

"Of course you can, provided you work hard and don't lose your focus."

Smruti joined martial arts training and started attending classes in right earnest. She worked very hard during the sessions in Protsahan and practiced at home. Kabir Sen, the instructor, was a tough coach and monitored the progress of each and every girl. In the beginning Smruti found it difficult to keep pace with the rest. However, as she put in more and more effort the results started showing.

Kabir sir also prepared a diet chart for her. She was to eat veggies and drink two glasses of milk every day. Though she hated her diet, she stuck to it with the same resolve that she exhibited in learning the nuances of





martial arts.

One day she heard Kabir sir telling Radhika didi, “I am impressed with Smruti. She has good reflexes, is flexible and most important is extremely dedicated. Even though she is thin she packs quite a punch.”

Soon it was time for the Delhi Mixed Martial Arts Federation Championship. It was a prestigious event with a number of institutions participating. The girls of Protsahan did well with a couple of gold and three silver medals. Smruti missed the bronze in her category by a whisker.

“Don't worry, Smruti, you were wonderful. Next year I am sure you will bag a gold,” Kabir sir said giving her a warm hug.

“I am so happy, I feel I am flying even without the assistance of the wind,” Smruti told Swati and the two friends burst out laughing.

It was a Sunday afternoon and Smruti was going to buy bread from the bakery which was near the entrance of the colony. Everyone was indoors because of the heat and the lanes were deserted.

She was very happy. Just yesterday the results of her class ten first terminal exams had come out and she had got 78% with 86 in her favourite subject, English.

As she walked, humming a tune, she heard a familiar voice. "Hey, look who's coming. Miss Thermometer!" She looked up. It was her tormentor in chief Vinod, leaning against the grill of a shop which was shut, smoking a cigarette.

"Yes *yaar*, we are seeing her after a long time!" Nitin added. Vinod started walking towards her languidly, followed by Nitin. Vinod was tall and thin while Nitin was on the plumper side. They blocked Smruti's path.

"So Miss Skinny, I heard your father went away with another woman? So how about running away with me?" he said, his face, a picture of arrogance.

"Sure," Smruti quietly replied and offered her hand. For a moment Vinod was too stunned to react. He then quickly recovered and with a smirk plastered on his face, extended his hand. Smruti grasped it and in one single move, which she had practised and perfected in her martial arts class scores of times, sent him flying over her shoulder. He landed on the ground and got up swearing.

He rushed towards her and lashed out. Smruti again brought him down using his own strength against him, effortlessly.

She turned towards Nitin. He took one look at the Vinod and then at Smruti and vanished.

As Vinod struggled to his feet Smruti told him, "Never, ever try to bully anyone who appears weaker than you. You never know when a thermometer turns into a sledge hammer."

She then turned around and walked away with firm confident steps.







Krupa

"Krupa, come here," it was her *babuji*, Gopal Sharma calling her.

Krupa was in the kitchen. She came out with two cups of steaming hot tea and handed them over to her parents. While her *Babuji* was sitting on the only chair in the room, her *Amma*, Pramila Devi stood leaning against the wall, looking tense.

"What happened *Bauji*? Anything wrong?" Krupa asked.

"Beta, I have made a decision regarding you. You will have to stop going to school and also to the other place, Protsahan."

"But why, *babuji*?" Krupa almost wailed.

"I shall tell you and there is no need to create a scene. You know I had to take a huge loan for getting your two elder sisters married. I have been struggling to repay it. And with the daily costs mounting it is becoming near impossible for me to run this house."

"B...but in what way will my not going to school help? My government school is free and Protsahan too does not charge any fee" Krupa asked. "I am getting you a job in a carpet making factory. You will be able to earn some badly needed money for the house. You keep saying that you are as good as a son. Well, if I had a son, wouldn't he have helped out?" with these words *Babuji* walked out. "Why don't you explain to *Babuji*, Maa ? You know how much I want to study?" she looked at her imploringly.

"Try to understand, beta. You have to chip in. Your father cannot manage on his own."

Tears welled up in Krupa's eyes and she went into the tiny corner of her thatched home, and started sobbing.

She couldn't believe this was happening. She would not be going to school and even worse she couldn't even go to Protsahan! She had started going to school late and though she had just passed her class ten, she was already 18 years old. However, she had done decently in studies and scored 61.8 percent. She wanted to study further, pass her 12th and then go on to complete her graduation. She wanted to become a teacher and teach hundreds of children like her who had to struggle to become literate.



And now all her dreams lay shattered and she didn't know what to do.

The entire night she kept tossing and turning. In the early hours of the morning, as she lay wide awake, a song started reverberating in her heart, mind and soul : "*Ek la chalo re*. At Protsahan she would, along with other girls, meditate on various songs. Her personal favourite was this immortal song by Gurudev Tagore. It had often given her strength. And as she got up with a resolve, she realized that this very song would be her inspiration even in these moments of despair.

She finished her morning chores and after informing ma that she was going to her friend's place, left home. She went straight to Rajesh's house. He was a thirty-year-old who worked in a computer firm. He was leaving for work when she landed.

"Hey, Krupa. This early, everything okay?"

"Rajesh *bhaiyya*, I need some information."

"Tell me."

"Can you check on Google and tell me the names of 3 or 4 beauty parlours in this neighborhood?"

Rajesh gave her a strange look and asked jokingly, "Why? Are you planning to contest for Miss India?"



"Please *Bhaiyya*. I'll tell you the reason later.

"Okay, okay. Give me a few minutes." He switched his laptop on, and after five minutes announced, "There are three parlours close by and another which is a bit further away. But you can get a direct bus from our colony to that place. Now quickly

note down the addresses and telephone numbers. I have to push off." Krupa wrote down the details in the notebook she was carrying and after thanking Rajesh, left.

It took her the entire day to cover three parlours. In the first parlour the gatekeeper shooed her off. In the second, the girl sitting in the front desk insulted her and asked her to immediately leave. In the third place - Tulip Beauty Parlour, she was allowed to meet the owner after a long wait. The owner was a heavily made-up woman called Ms. Chandini Luthra who took one look at Krupa and asked her to come back after five years.

The next morning Krupa once again started on her mission.

"Where are you going?" her Maa asked from inside the kitchen.

"Pinky's house, Maa. I'll anyway be losing all my freedom from next month. Let me at least enjoy a bit now."

The final establishment on her list was, 'Rashmi Beauty Parlour'.

She went in and found a girl who was a few years older than her, sitting at the reception.

"Yes?"

"I want to meet the owner of this establishment."

"Why?"

"It is something personal."

"Does she know you?"

"No!"

"Then you have to tell me the reason before I allow you to meet her."

"Please didi, I only need five minutes."

"No, way. Either you tell me the reason or get out," the girl snapped. Before Krupa could react she heard a voice, "Madhu, that's not the right way to talk."

Krupa turned back. A thirty five year old woman was standing there. She was tall and slim and had an air of complete confidence about her.

Madhu got up, "G... good morning Rashmi ma'am," she stuttered.

Rashmi ma'am nodded and turned towards Krupa.

"Yes, dear! What can I do for you?" she said smiling.

"M... ma'am can I talk to you for five minutes... alone."

Rashmi ma'am hesitated for a few minutes. "Okay, follow me."

She led her down a narrow corridor at the end of which was a glass door. Krupa followed her inside. It was a very tastefully decorated room and Krupa loved the colours.

"Sit down please" Rashmi ma'am said and took her seat.

"Shoot!"

"Ma'am, my name is Krupa. I am 18-years-old and I live in Jawahar *basti*, which is close to Nizamuddin station. I just passed my class ten, securing a first division. Ma'am, we are very poor and my father is facing a huge debt. He wants me to stop studying and work in a factory to supplement our family's income. But ma'am I want to study and become a teacher."

She paused to take a breath.

"So you want me to sponsor your studies?" Rashmi ma'am leaned forward and looked at her closely.

"No, ma'am. I don't want anyone to sponsor me. I want to sponsor myself and also earn for my family."

"Don't talk in riddles, Krupa. Come to the point." Rashmi ma'am's voice was sharp.

"Ma'am I want a part-time job in your parlour."

"Job? What kind of job?"

"Ma'am I have done a three month beautician's course."

"Where?"

"At Protsahan India Foundation, an NGO for child rights in India."

"Do you have a certificate?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Krupa dipped into the little handbag she was carrying and handed a

Krupa couldn't believe her ears. She grinned happily.

"Wait. I haven't offered you a job yet. First you have to answer some questions."

Krupa nodded.

For the next half an hour Rashmi ma'am grilled Krupa on the different facets of providing services like manicures, pedicures, facials, hair styling, etc.

"Good. You are quite ok as far as theory is concerned. Now let me test your practical skills. Wait outside in front of the reception for some time and then I'll call you."

An hour later Krupa was called into the actual parlour. There were three ladies who were being serviced by girls who were around five to seven years older than Krupa. The fourth seat was empty. As she watched Rashmi ma'am took the seat and turning to Krupa said, "So girlie, I want a pedicure and manicure and you have to give it to me."

"I...I ma'am. I... how can I give....I need some practice..." Krupa stammered.

"The best way of teaching a girl swimming is to throw her into the water - I

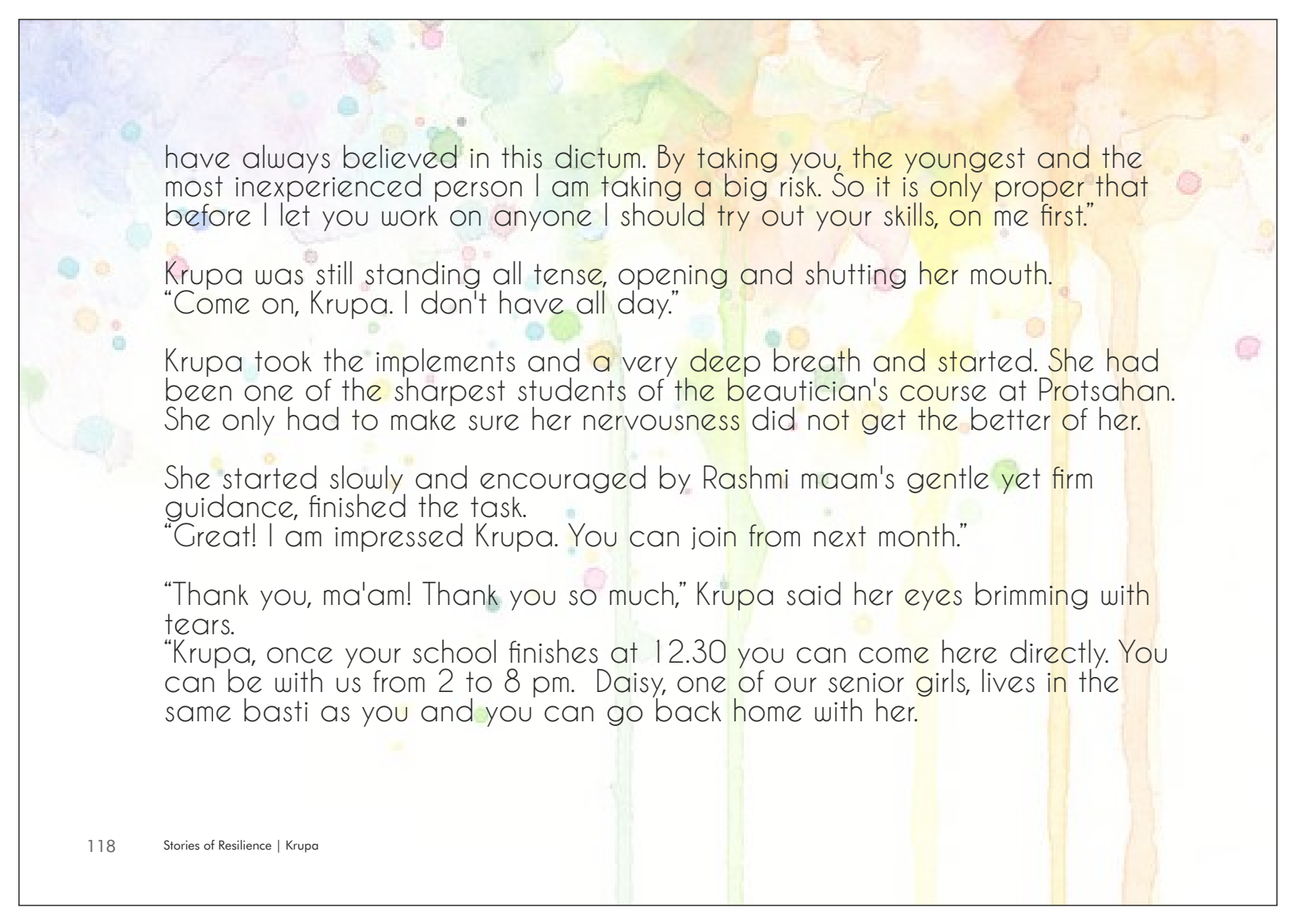


paper to Rashmi ma'am.

Rashmi ma'am glanced at it and then looked at Krupa.

"Listen Krupa. I am very impressed with your attitude. The fact that you came alone, without anyone to chaperone you, the confidence with which you talked and

above all that you didn't ask for sponsorship but rather an opportunity to prove yourself – shows that you've got stuff and should be given a chance."



have always believed in this dictum. By taking you, the youngest and the most inexperienced person I am taking a big risk. So it is only proper that before I let you work on anyone I should try out your skills, on me first.”

Krupa was still standing all tense, opening and shutting her mouth.
“Come on, Krupa. I don't have all day.”

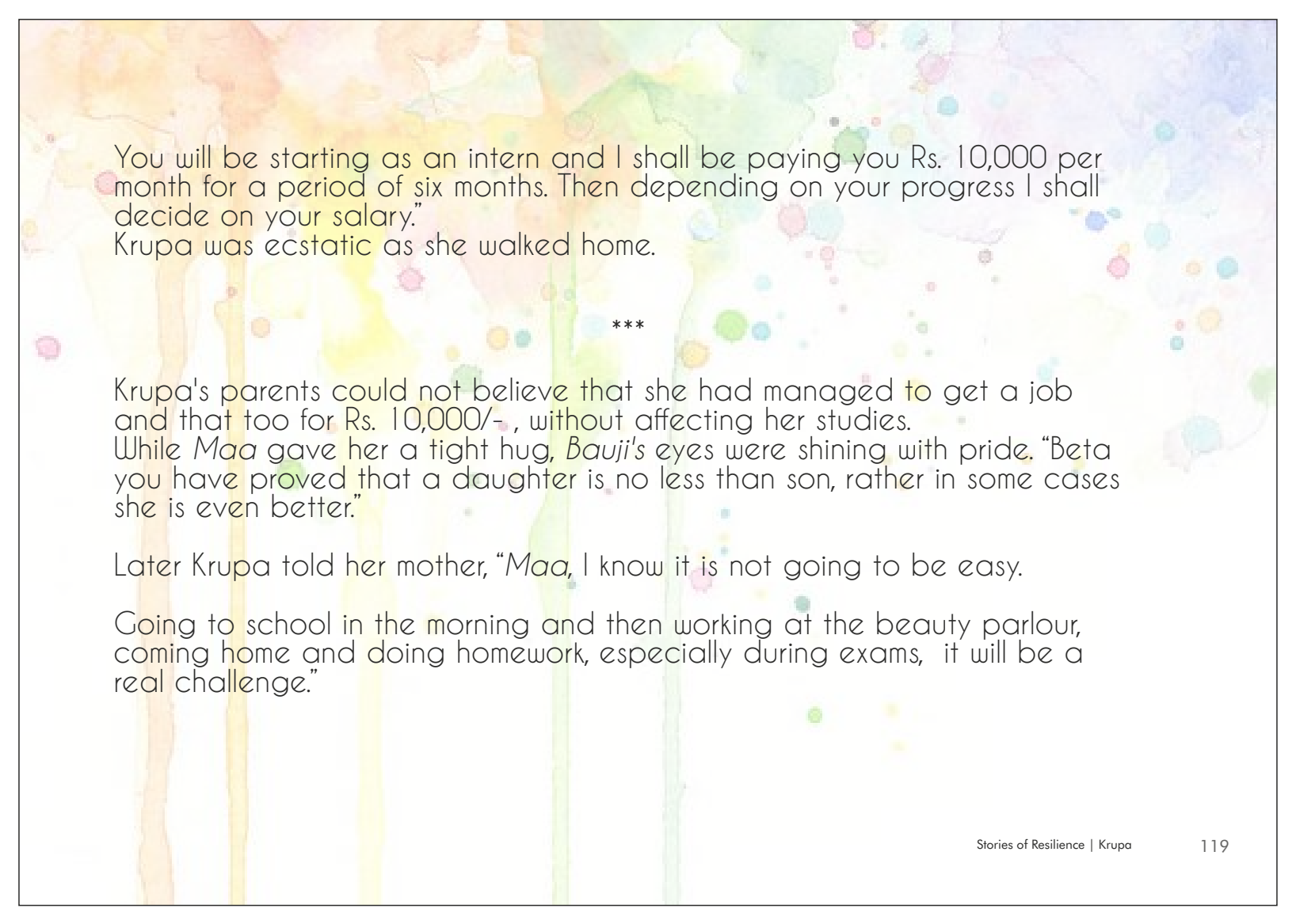
Krupa took the implements and a very deep breath and started. She had been one of the sharpest students of the beautician's course at Protsahan. She only had to make sure her nervousness did not get the better of her.

She started slowly and encouraged by Rashmi maam's gentle yet firm guidance, finished the task.

“Great! I am impressed Krupa. You can join from next month.”

“Thank you, ma'am! Thank you so much,” Krupa said her eyes brimming with tears.

“Krupa, once your school finishes at 12.30 you can come here directly. You can be with us from 2 to 8 pm. Daisy, one of our senior girls, lives in the same basti as you and you can go back home with her.



You will be starting as an intern and I shall be paying you Rs. 10,000 per month for a period of six months. Then depending on your progress I shall decide on your salary.”

Krupa was ecstatic as she walked home.

Krupa's parents could not believe that she had managed to get a job and that too for Rs. 10,000/-, without affecting her studies.

While *Maa* gave her a tight hug, *Bauji's* eyes were shining with pride. “Beta you have proved that a daughter is no less than son, rather in some cases she is even better.”

Later Krupa told her mother, “*Maa*, I know it is not going to be easy.

Going to school in the morning and then working at the beauty parlour, coming home and doing homework, especially during exams, it will be a real challenge.”



Her *maa* did not respond and simply continued gently stroking her head.

“*Maa*, however tough it may be I am not giving up. I am going to achieve my ambition,” she gave her mother a warm hug and walked out.

The moonlight was casting its gentle glow all around. As Krupa looked up at the full moon she could hear her favourite song echoing in her ears :
“*Ekla chalo re...*”



This book **Stories of Resilience**, brings to life stories of badly wounded world of children, who ultimately offer an incredible message of encouragement and hope to all readers. Children who have healed themselves and one another from the deepest personal injuries of child rapes, sexual violence, child marriage, intergenerational poverty and patriarchy, Protsahan's dear friend and renowned author, Ramendra Kumar says, "I got slender threads of fact, from the Founder of Protsahan, around which I had to weave tales of fiction that would showcase the resilience of the Protsahan girls in the face of almost impossible odds. The brief given to me was to tell stories which would epitomise the spirit but not reveal the persona of the girls in the remotest way. It was a tough task, possibly one of the most challenging ones I have ever undertaken. The book is my tribute to the girls of Protsahan – the angels who are ready to fly despite the broken wings, smothered hopes and smudged dreams..."

As director and founder of Protsahan India Foundation, working against child abuse in every form, Sonal Kapoor, has borne witness to the devastating consequences of the most unspeakable acts of violence against children in the past decade of her work at grassroots for India's most vulnerable children and girls. Furthermore, she has seen firsthand how victims of inhumanity have found the inner strength to overcome life-altering trauma with renewed faith and have even regained humor and optimism at Protsahan. Book's author, Ramendra over long interview based research with the Protsahan team, has beautifully, subtly and intricately described self-healing in children in an ambience of love and through trauma informed compassionate care model of Protsahan. He includes the importance of verbalizing and owning one's own story and the importance of faith, as he writes from the wisdom of his experience not only as a writer as much as a believer for those children and adults on the path to healing. His empowering message is that the invisible wounds left by violence are not intractable, that people can and will persevere. He offers a handful of real life stories that transformed forever through Protsahan's deep work with children within India's slums. This passionately written book contains many moving stories of children and adolescent girls, of recovery from trauma. This book has also been recommended for academic and specialized collections in mental health and counseling through an extremely simple storytelling approach.

This book will change forever, how you view children from difficult circumstances. It will teach you, they are not 'underprivileged' as most of the world likes to call them, instead, they are truly, 'resilient'.



Protsahan
India Foundation

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through education, life skills and financial independence, please click here to donate:

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