

RUSKIN BOND



THE WIND ON HAUNTED HILL

Illustrations by Jit Chowdhury

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PUFFIN BOOKS
THE WIND ON HAUNTED HILL

Born in Kasauli in 1934, Ruskin Bond grew up in Jamnagar, Dehradun, New Delhi and Simla. His first novel, *The Room on the Roof*, written when he was seventeen, received the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1957. Since then he has written over 500 short stories, essays and novellas and more than forty books for children.

He received the Sahitya Akademi Award for English writing in India in 1992, the Padma Shri in 1999 and the Padma Bhushan in 2014. He lives in Landour, Mussoorie, with his extended family.



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Dust on the Mountain

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A watercolor illustration of a village on a hill. The village consists of several small, simple houses with white walls and brown or grey roofs. Some houses have small windows and doors. The houses are clustered together on a green hillside. In the background, there are large, hazy mountains in shades of purple and blue. The sky is light blue with some yellow and green specks. A winding path or road is visible in the foreground, leading towards the village. The overall style is soft and painterly.

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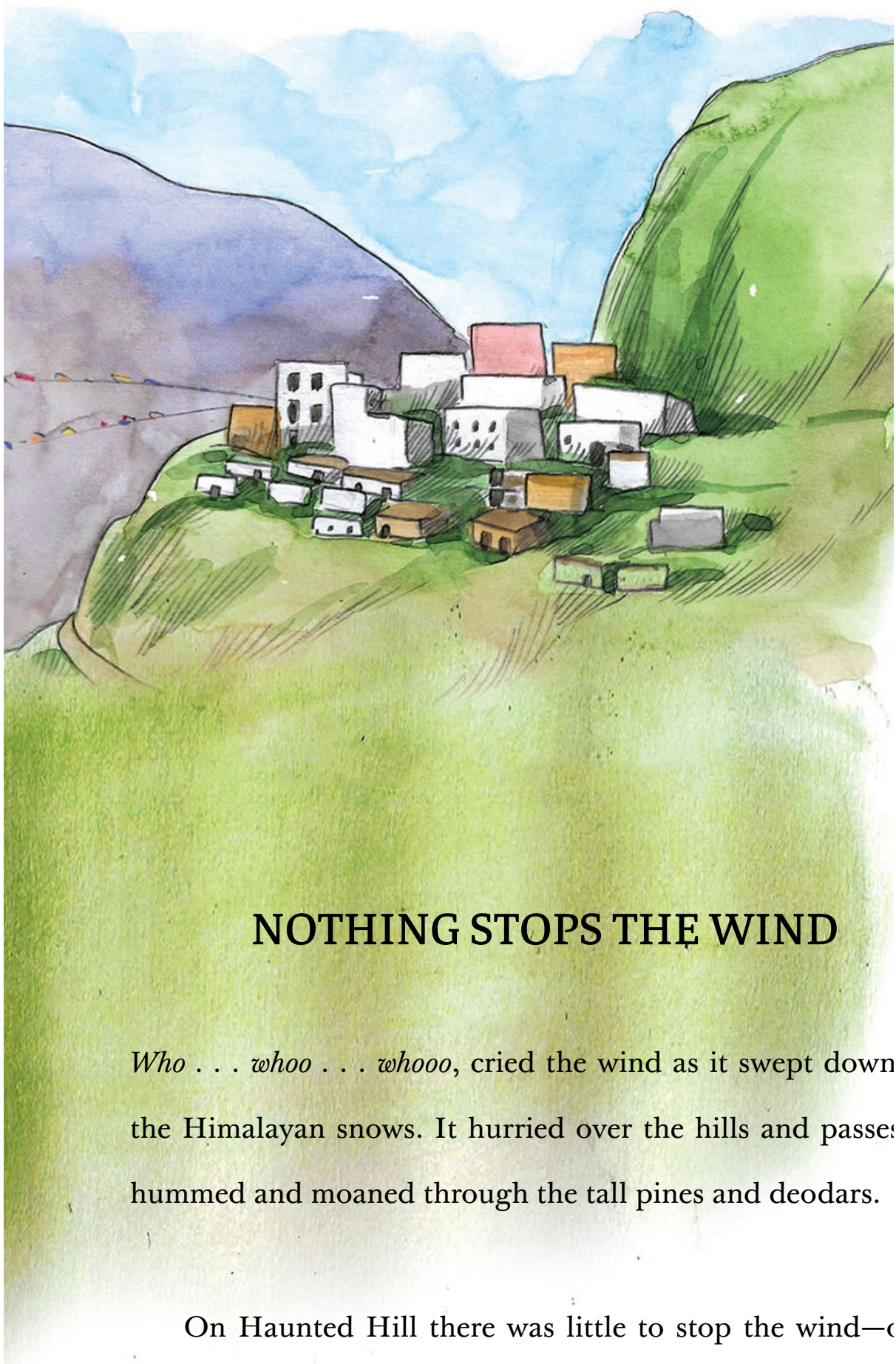
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NOTHING STOPS THE WIND

Who . . . whoo . . . whooo, cried the wind as it swept down the Himalayan snows. It hurried over the hills and passed; it hummed and moaned through the tall pines and deodars.

On Haunted Hill there was little to stop the wind—only a few stunted trees and bushes, and the ruins of what had been a small settlement.



NOTHING STOPS THE WIND

. . . *whoo* . . . *whooo*, cried the wind as it swept down from Himalayan snows. It hurried over the hills and passes, and whined and moaned through the tall pines and deodars.

On Haunted Hill there was little to stop the wind—only aunted trees and bushes, and the ruins of what had once been a small settlement.

On the slopes of the next hill was a small village. People kept large stones on their roofs to prevent them from blowing away. There was nearly always a wind in these parts. Even on sunny days, the doors and windows rattled, chimneys chimed, and clothes blew away.

Three children were standing beside a low stone wall, spreading clothes out to dry. They placed a rock on top of the garment. Even then the clothes fluttered like flags or pennants.



On the slopes of the next hill was a small village. People
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Usha, dark-haired and rosy-cheeked, struggled with grandfather's long, loose shirt. She was eleven or twelve years old. Her younger brother, Suresh, was doing his best to hold down the sheet, while Binya, a slightly older girl, Usha's friend and neighbour, was handing them the clothes one at a time.



Once they were sure everything on the wall was firmly down by rocks, they climbed on to the flat stones and sat for a while, in the wind and the sun, staring across the field at the ruins on Haunted Hill.

‘I must go to the bazaar today,’ said Usha.

‘I wish I could come too,’ said Binya. ‘But I have to go with the cows and the housework. Mother isn’t well.’

‘I can come!’ said Suresh. He was always ready to visit the Landour bazaar, which was three miles away, on the other side of Haunted Hill.

‘No, you can’t,’ said Usha. ‘You must help Grandfather chop wood.’

Their father was in the army, posted in a distant part of the country, and Suresh and his grandfather were the only men left in the house. Suresh was eight, chubby and almond-eyed.

‘Won’t you be afraid to come back alone?’ he asked.

Once they were sure everything on the wall was firmly held by rocks, they climbed on to the flat stones and sat there while, in the wind and the sun, staring across the fields at Hains on Haunted Hill.

'I must go to the bazaar today,' said Usha.

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‘Why should I be afraid?’

‘There are ghosts on the hill.’

‘I know, but I will be back before it gets dark. Ghosts appear during the day.’

‘Are there many ghosts in the ruins?’ asked Binya.



Why should I be afraid?’

There are ghosts on the hill.’

I know, but I will be back before it gets dark. Ghosts don’t
appear during the day.’

Are there many ghosts in the ruins?’ asked Binya.

‘Grandfather says so. He says that many years ago—
hundred—British people lived on the hill. But it was a bad
always getting struck by lightning, and they had to move
next range to build new houses.’

‘But if they went away, why should there be any ghosts

‘Because—Grandfather says—during a terrible storm,
the houses was hit by lightning and everyone in it was l
Everyone, including the children.’

‘Were there many children?’

‘There were two of them. A brother and sister. Grand
says he has seen them many times, when he has passed th
the ruins late at night. He has seen them playing i
moonlight.’

‘Wasn’t he frightened?’

‘No. Old people don’t mind seeing ghosts.’

Grandfather says so. He says that many years ago—over a hundred—British people lived on the hill. But it was a bad spot, always getting struck by lightning, and they had to move to the other side of the range to build new houses.’

‘But if they went away, why should there be any ghosts?’

‘Because—Grandfather says—during a terrible storm, one of the houses was hit by lightning and everyone in it was killed. All of them, including the children.’

‘Were there many children?’

‘There were two of them. A brother and sister. Grandfather says he has seen them many times, when he has passed through the ruins late at night. He has seen them playing in the moonlight.’

‘Wasn’t he frightened?’

‘No. Old people don’t mind seeing ghosts.’





THUNDER OVER THE HILLS

Usha left for the bazaar at two in the afternoon. It was about an hour's walk. She went through the fields, now turning yellow with flowering mustard, then along the saddle of the hill and down to the ruins.

The path went straight through the ruins. Usha knew the way well; she had often taken it to the bazaar



THUNDER OVER THE HILLS

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to do the weekly shopping or to see her aunt who lived :
hill station.

Wild flowers grew in the crumbling walls. A wild plum
grew straight out of the floor of what had once been a large
Its soft white blossoms had begun to fall. Lizards scuttled
the stones, while a whistling thrush, its deep purple plu
glistening in the soft sunshine, sat in an empty window
sang its heart out.



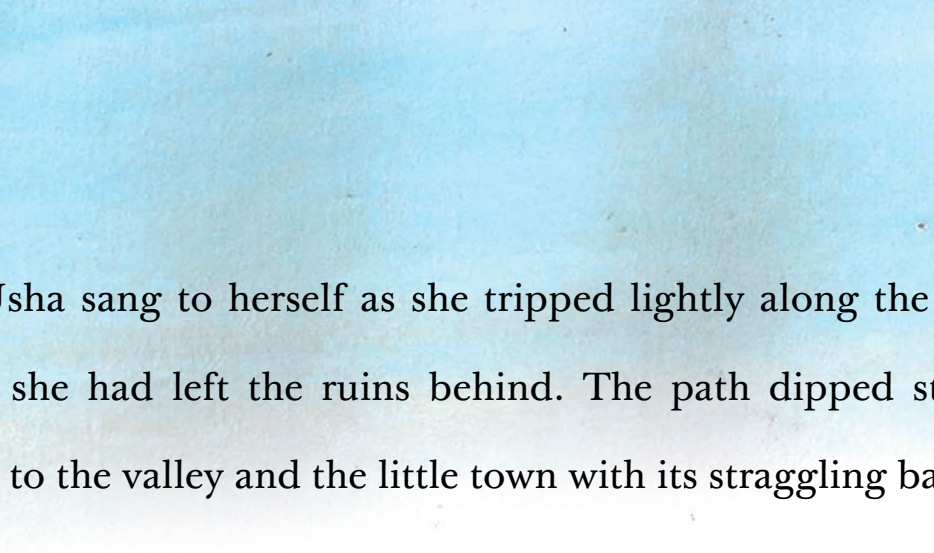
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ts heart out.

Usha sang to herself as she tripped lightly along the path. Soon she had left the ruins behind. The path dipped steadily down to the valley and the little town with its straggling bazaar.

Usha took her time in the bazaar. She bought soap, matches, spices and sugar (none of these things could be had in the village, where there was no shop), a new pipestem for grandfather's hookah and an exercise book for Suresh to copy sums in. As an afterthought, she bought him some marbles. Then she went to a *mochi's* shop to have her mother's slippers repaired. The *mochi* was busy, so she left the slippers with him and said she'd be back in half an hour.

She had two rupees of her own saved up, and she used the money to buy herself a necklace of amber-coloured beads from the old Tibetan lady who sold charms and trinkets from her shop at the end of the bazaar.



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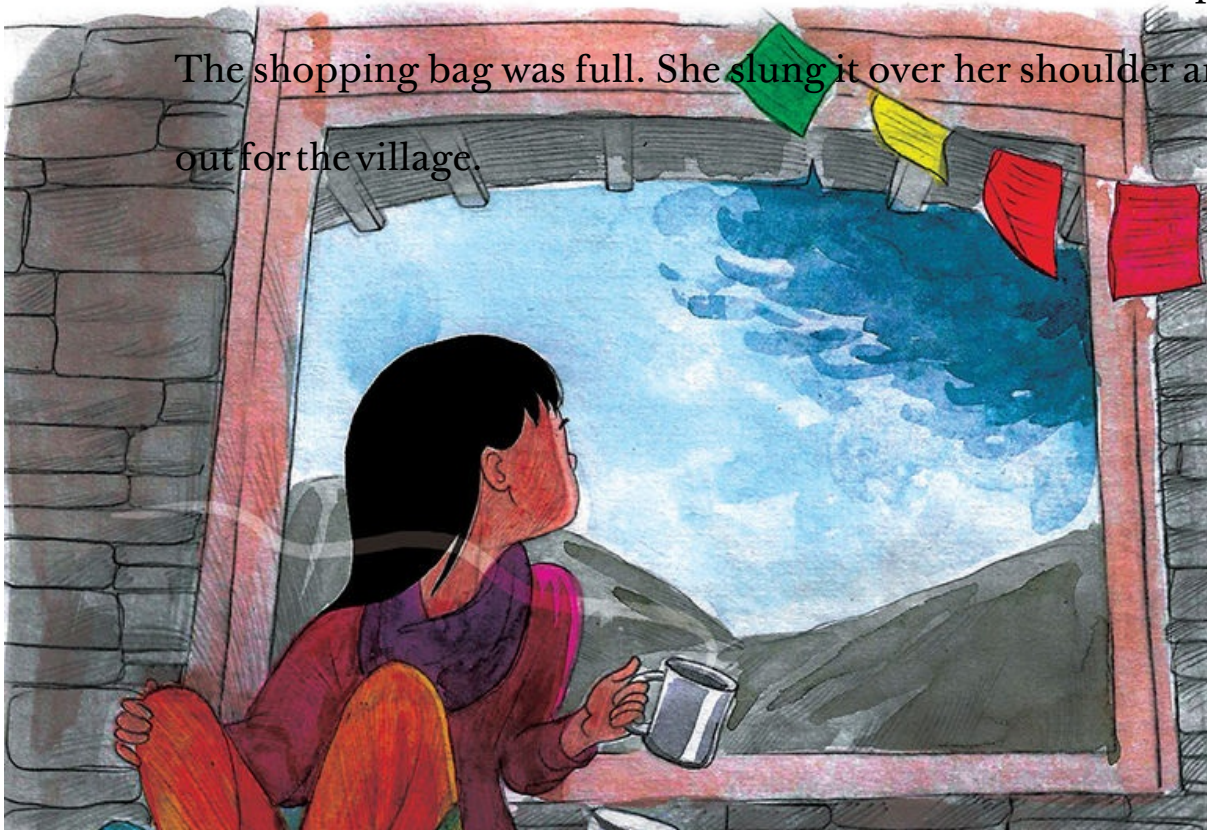
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There she met her Aunt Lakshmi, who took her home for tea.

Usha spent an hour in Aunt Lakshmi's little flat above the shops, listening to her talk about the ache in her left shoulder and the stiffness in her joints. She drank two cups of hot tea, and when she looked out of the window she saw that dark clouds had gathered over the mountains.

Usha ran to the cobbler's and collected her mother's slipper. The shopping bag was full. She slung it over her shoulder and ran out for the village.



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Trisha spent an hour in Aunt Lakshmi's little flat above the
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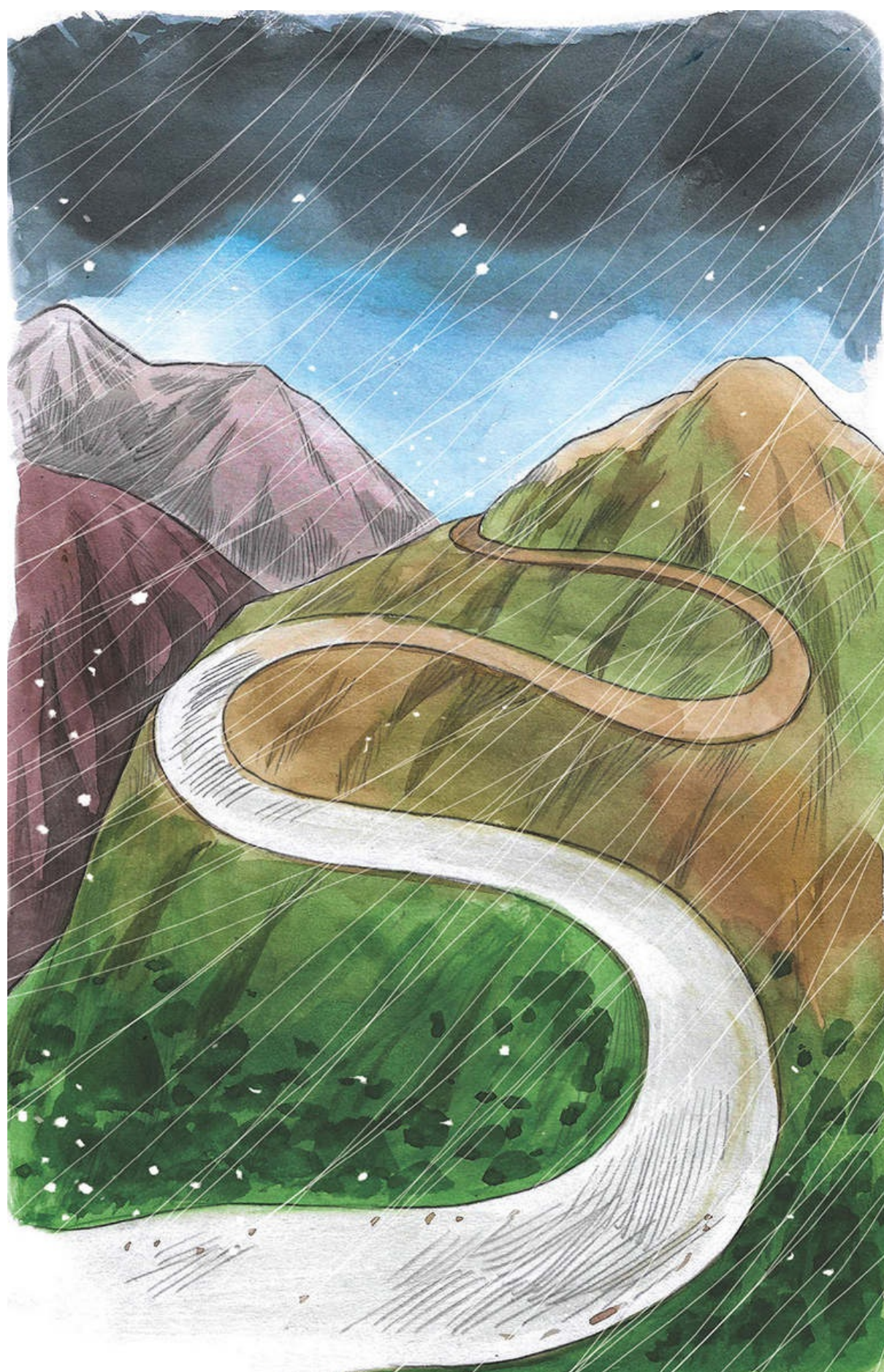
Strangely, the wind had dropped. The trees were still, leaf moved. The crickets were silent in the grass. The crow around in circles, then settled down for the night in an oak

I must get home before dark, said Usha to herself as she hurried along the path. But already the sky was darkening clouds, black and threatening, loomed over Haunted Hill was March, the month for storms.



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A deep rumble echoed over the hills, and Usha felt the heavy drop of rain hit her cheek.

She had no umbrella with her; the weather had seemed just a few hours ago. Now all she could do was tie an old cloth over her head and pull her shawl tight across her shoulders. Holding the shopping bag close to her body, she quickened her pace. She was almost running. But the raindrops were coming down faster now. Big, heavy pellets of rain.

A sudden flash of lightning lit up the hill. The ruins came out in clear relief. Then all was dark again. Night had fallen.

I won't get home before the storm breaks, thought Usha. *I'll have to shelter in the ruins.* She could only see a few feet ahead, but she knew the path well and began to run.

Suddenly the wind sprang up again and sent the rain lashing against her face. It was a cold, stinging spray. She could hardly keep her eyes open.

A deep rumble echoed over the hills, and Usha felt the first drop of rain hit her cheek.

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The wind grew in force. It hummed and whistled. She did not have to fight against it. It was behind her now, and helped her along, up the steep path and on to the brow of the hill.

There was another flash of lightning, followed by a peal of thunder. The ruins loomed up before her, grim and forbidding.



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ALONE IN THE RUINS

Usha knew there was a corner where a piece of old roof remained. That would give some shelter. It would be better than trying to go on. In the dark, in this howling wind, she had to stray off the path to go over a rocky cliff edge.



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Who . . . whoo . . . whooo, howled the wind. Usha saw a wild plum tree swaying, bent double, its foliage thrashing against the ground. The broken walls did little to stop the

She found her way into the abandoned building, helped by her memory of the place and the constant flicker of light. She began moving along the wall, hoping to reach the she corner. She placed her hands flat against the stones and sideways. Her hand touched something soft and furry. She let out a startled cry and took her hand away. Her cry was answered by another cry—half-snarl, half-screech—and something leapt into the darkness.



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It was only a wild cat. Usha realized this when she heard it. The cat lived in the ruins, and she would often see it. But at that moment she had been very frightened. Now she moved quietly along the wall until she heard the rain drumming on the remnant of the tin roof.

Once under it, crouching in the corner, she found shelter from the wind and the rain. Above her, the tin sheets groaned and clattered, as if they would sail away at any moment. But they were held down by the solid branches of the straggling old oak tree.

Usha now remembered that across the empty room stood an old fireplace and that there would be an alcove under the clogged chimney. Perhaps it would be drier than it was in the corner; but she would not attempt to find it just now. She did not want to lose her way altogether.

It was only a wild cat. Usha realized this when she heard it. It had lived in the ruins, and she would often see it. But for a moment she had been very frightened. Now she moved quickly to the wall until she heard the rain drumming on the front of the tin roof.

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Usha now remembered that across the empty room stood an open fireplace and that there would be an alcove under the tiled chimney. Perhaps it would be drier than it was in her room; but she would not attempt to find it just now. She could not go any other way altogether.

Her clothes were soaked and water streamed down from long black hair to form a puddle at her feet. She stamped her feet to keep them warm. She thought she heard a faint cry, was it that cat again, or an owl?—but the sound of the storm blotted out all other sounds.

There had been no time to think of ghosts, but now there she was in one place, without any plans



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Then there was a bigger flash than most, and for a second or two the entire ruin was lit up. A streak of blue sizzled the floor of the building, in through one end and out the other. Usha was staring straight ahead. As the opposite wall was illuminated, she saw, crouching in the disused fireplace, two small figures—they could only have been children!

The ghostly figures looked up, staring back at Usha. Then everything was dark again.

Usha's heart was in her mouth. She had seen, with a shadow of a doubt, two ghostly creatures at the other side of the room, and she wasn't going to remain in that abandoned building a minute longer!

She ran out of her corner, towards the big gap in the wall through which she had entered. She was halfway across the open space when something—someone—fell against her. She stumbled, got up and bumped into something again. She g

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frightened scream. Someone else screamed. And then there was a shout, a boy's shout—Usha instantly recognized the voice.

‘Suresh!’

‘Usha!’

‘Binya!’

‘It's me!’

‘It's us!’

They fell into each other's arms, so surprised and relieved that all they could do was laugh and giggle and repeat each other's names.

Then Usha said, ‘I thought you were ghosts.’

‘We thought you were a ghost!’ said Suresh.

‘Come back under the roof,’ said Usha.

They huddled together in the corner, chattering excitedly.

‘When it grew dark, we came looking for you,’ said Binya.

‘And then the storm broke.’

‘Shall we run back together?’ asked Usha. ‘I don't want to stay here any longer.’

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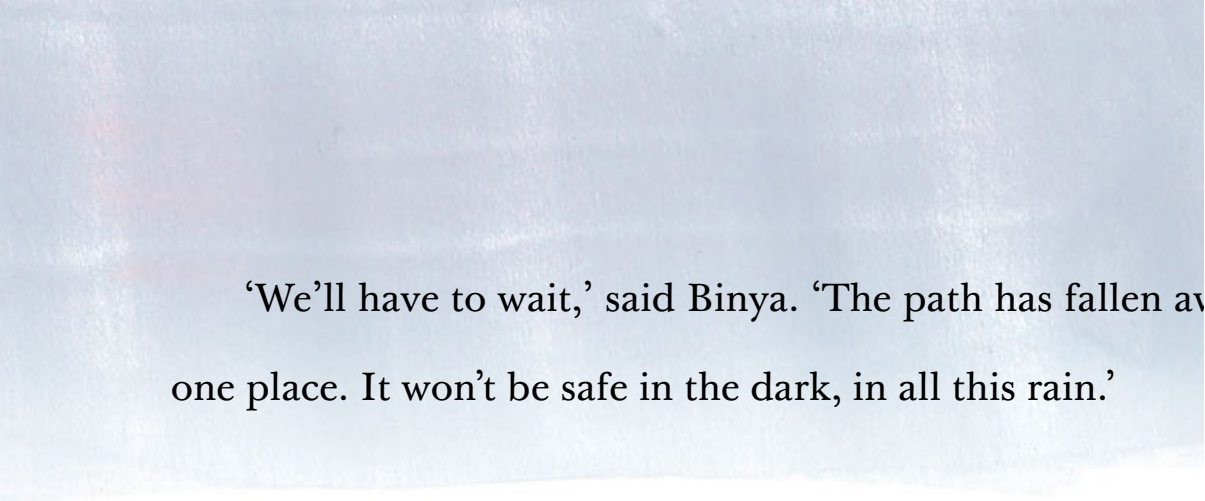
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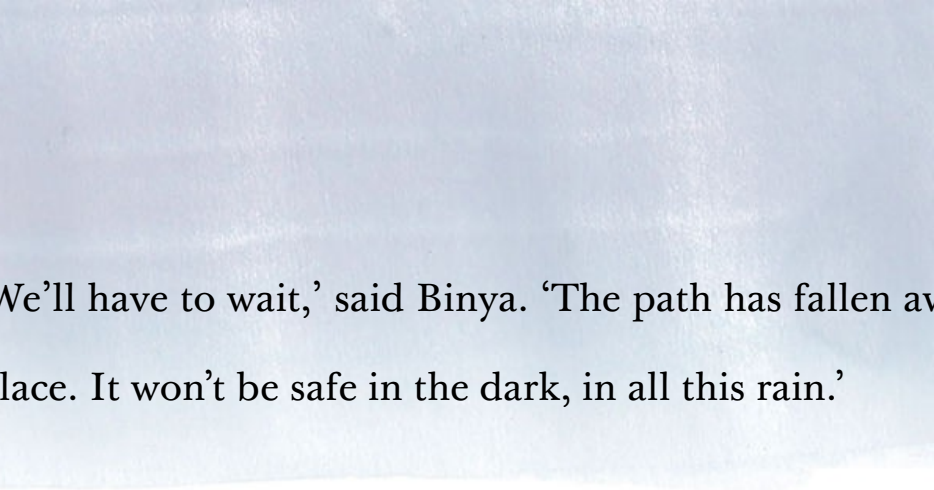


‘We’ll have to wait,’ said Binya. ‘The path has fallen away in one place. It won’t be safe in the dark, in all this rain.’

‘Then we may have to wait till morning,’ said Suresh. ‘I’m feeling hungry!’

The wind and rain continued, and so did the thunder and lightning, but the three were not afraid now. They gave each other warmth



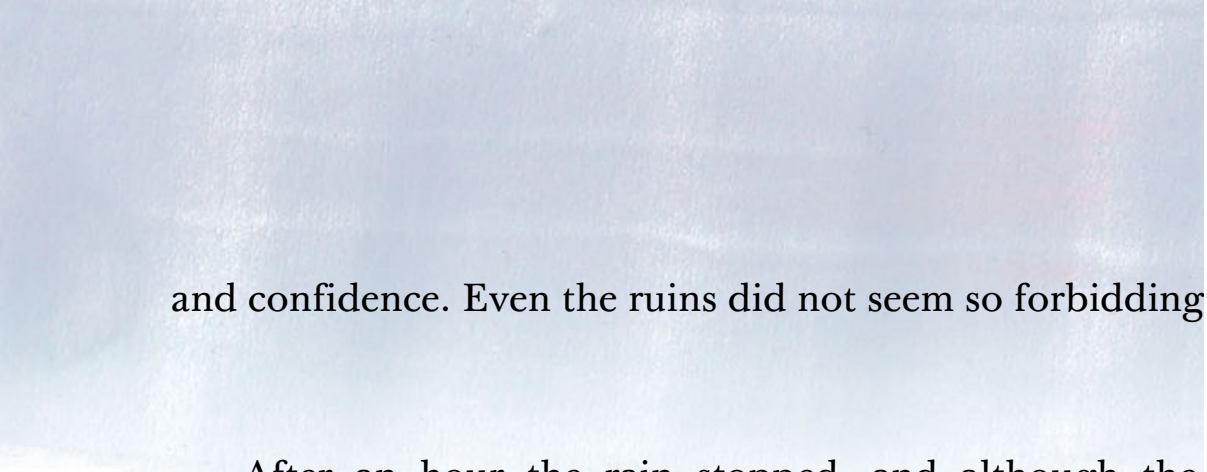


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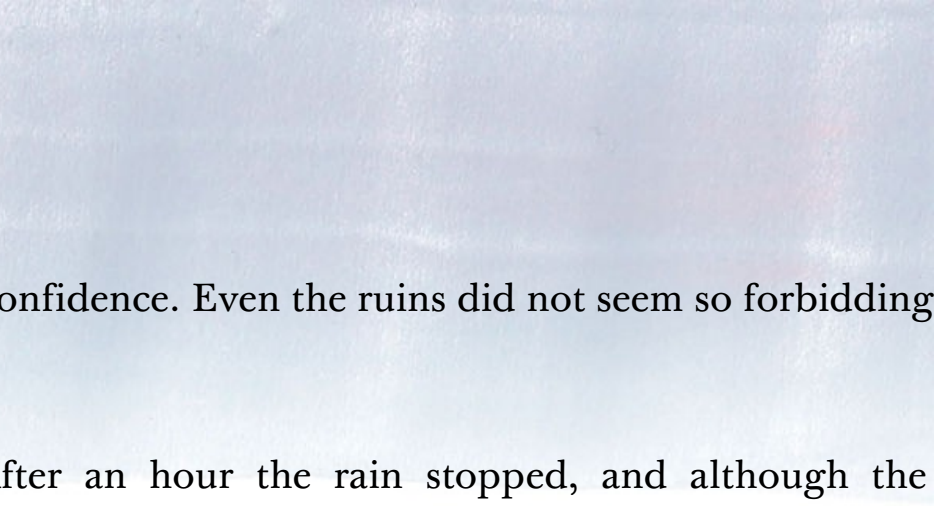




and confidence. Even the ruins did not seem so forbidding

After an hour the rain stopped, and although the continued to blow, it was now taking the clouds away, so the thunder grew more distant. Then the wind, too, moved and all was silent.





confidence. Even the ruins did not seem so forbidding.

After an hour the rain stopped, and although the wind continued to blow, it was now taking the clouds away, so that the under grew more distant. Then the wind, too, moved on, and all was silent.





WHO SAID GOODBYE?

Towards dawn, the whistling thrush began to sing. Its broken notes flooded the rain-washed ruins with music.

‘Let’s go,’ said Usha.

‘Come on,’ said Suresh. ‘I’m hungry.’

As it grew lighter, they saw that the plum tree was standing upright again, although it had lost all its blossoms.



WHO SAID GOODBYE?

As dawn broke, the whistling thrush began to sing. Its sweet notes flooded the rain-washed ruins with music.

‘Let’s go,’ said Usha.

‘Come on,’ said Suresh. ‘I’m hungry.’

As it grew lighter, they saw that the plum tree was standing upright again, although it had lost all its blossoms.

They stood outside the ruins, on the brow of the hill, watching the sky grow pink. A light breeze had sprung up.

When they were some distance from the ruins, Usha looked back and said, 'Can you see something there, behind the wall like a hand waving.'

'I can't see anything,' said Suresh.

'It's just the top of the plum tree,' said Binya.

They reached the path leading across the saddle of the hill.

'Goodbye, goodbye . . .' Voices on the wind.

'Who said goodbye?' asked Usha.

'Not I,' said Suresh.

'Not I,' said Binya.

'I heard someone calling.'

'It's only the wind.'

Usha looked back at the ruins. The sun had come up and was touching the top of the walls. The leaves of the plum tree shone. The thrush sat there, singing.

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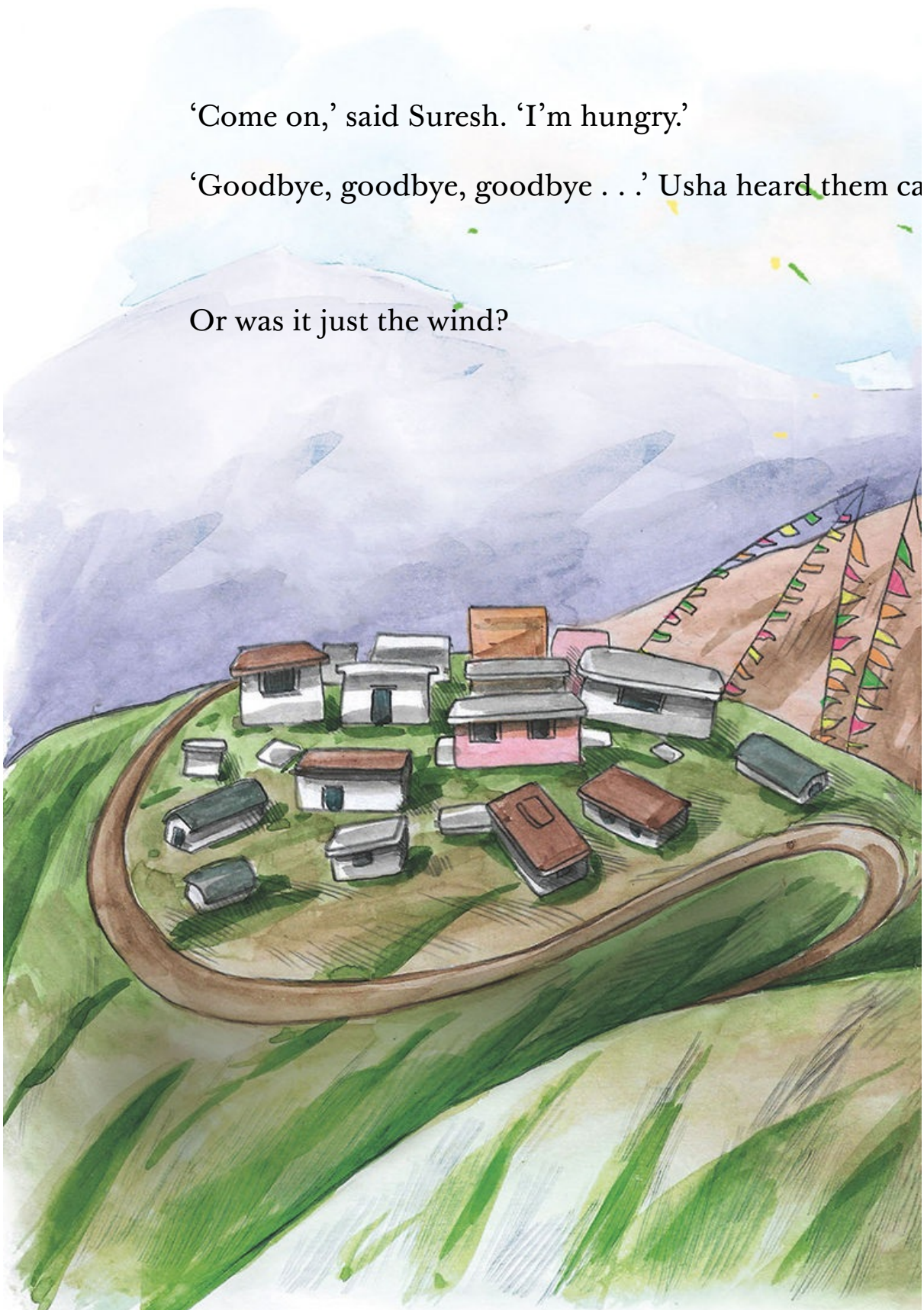
'It's only the wind.'

Usha looked back at the ruins. The sun had come up and
was touching the top of the walls. The leaves of the plum tree
were rustling. The thrush sat there, singing.

‘Come on,’ said Suresh. ‘I’m hungry.’

‘Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye . . .’ Usha heard them call.

Or was it just the wind?



Come on,' said Suresh. 'I'm hungry.'

Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye . . .' Usha heard them calling.

Or was it just the wind?

