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Trishna and the Dream of Water

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UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME

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"Tunza" means "to treat with care or affection" in Swahili. UNEP hopes to inspire caring for the Earth through creative literature that sparks the interest and awareness of children, their parents and teachers.

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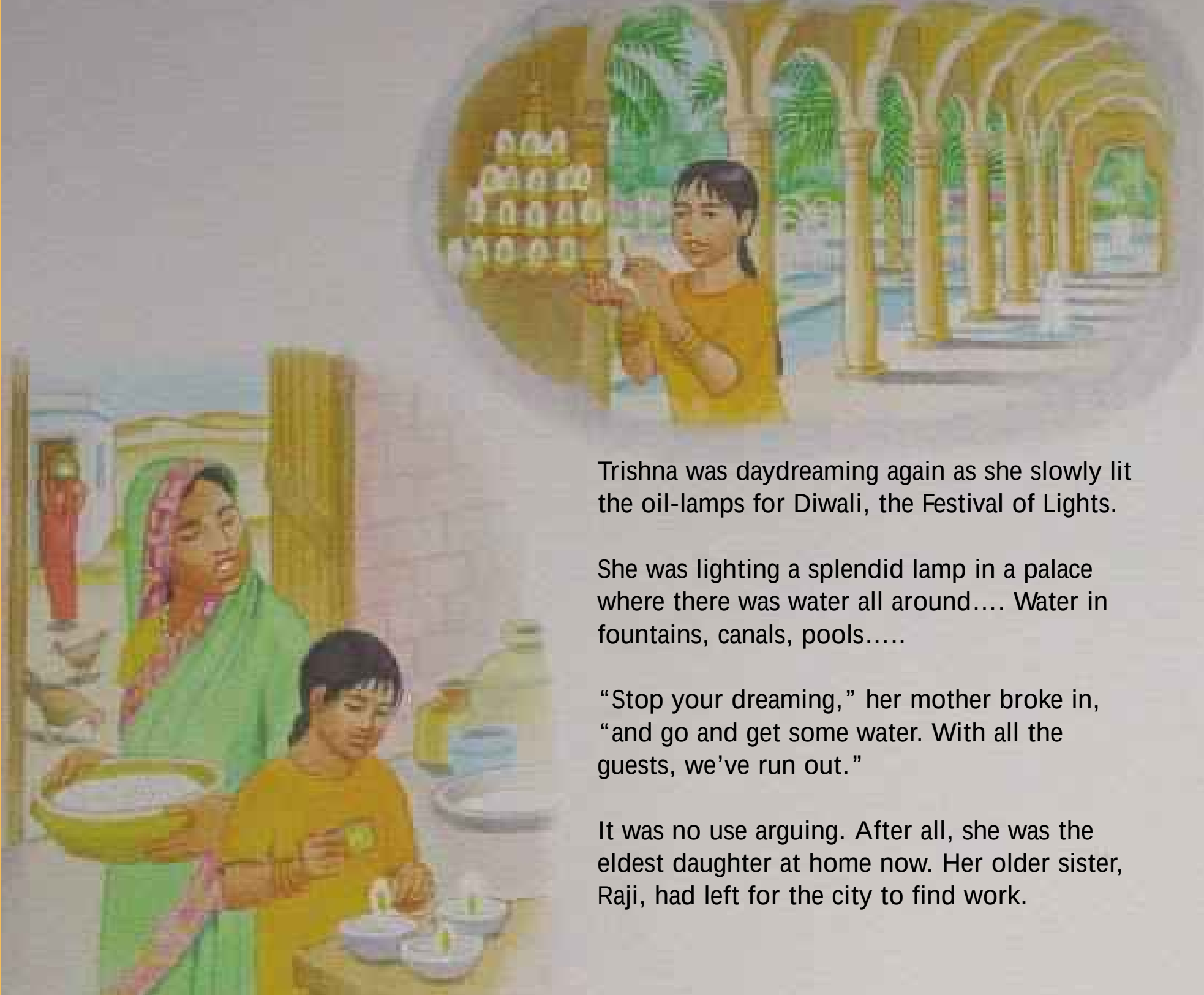


Trishna was daydreaming again as she slowly lit the oil-lamps for Diwali, the Festival of Lights.

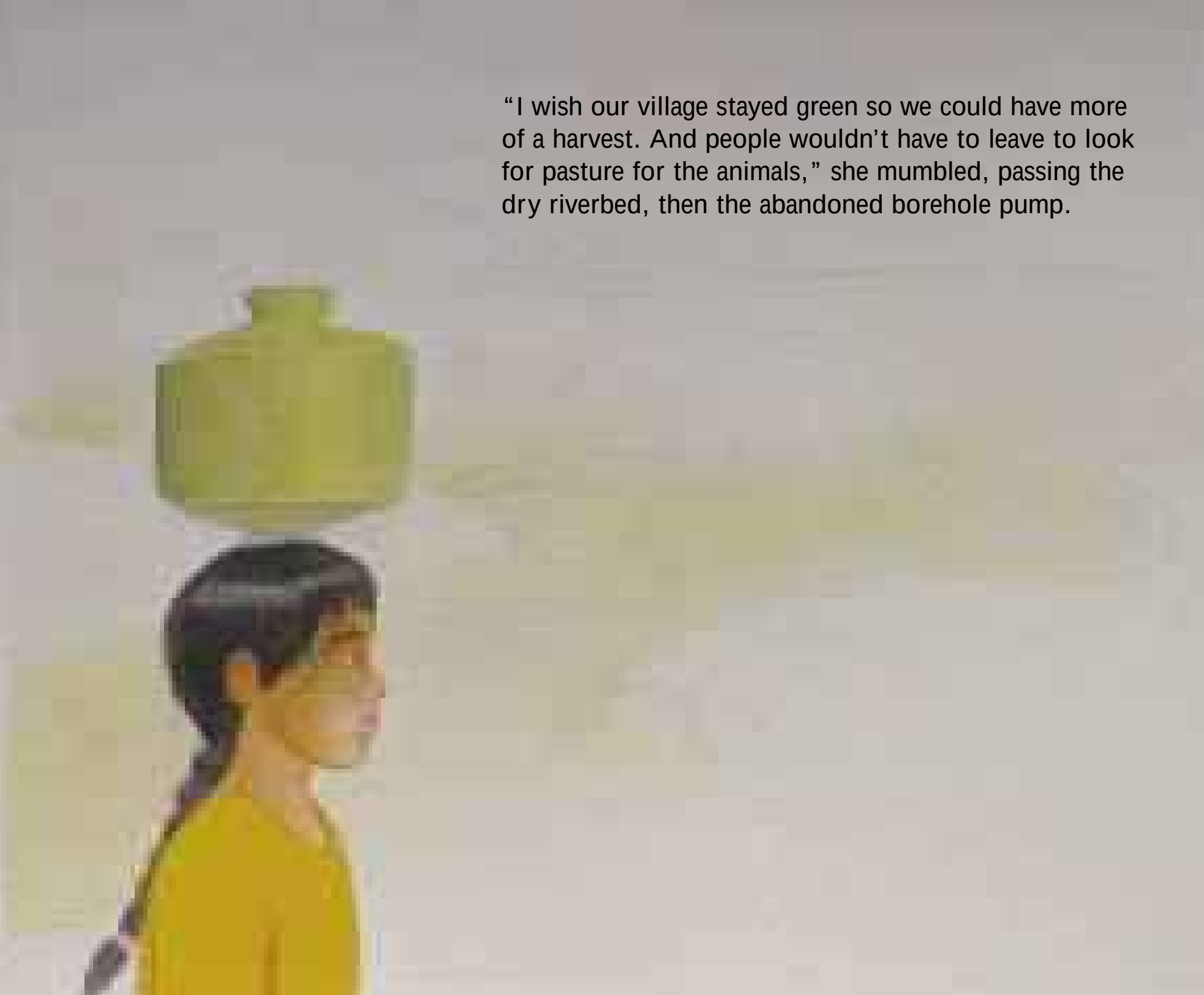
She was lighting a splendid lamp in a palace where there was water all around…. Water in fountains, canals, pools…..

“Stop your dreaming,” her mother broke in, “and go and get some water. With all the guests, we’ve run out.”

It was no use arguing. After all, she was the eldest daughter at home now. Her older sister, Raji, had left for the city to find work.

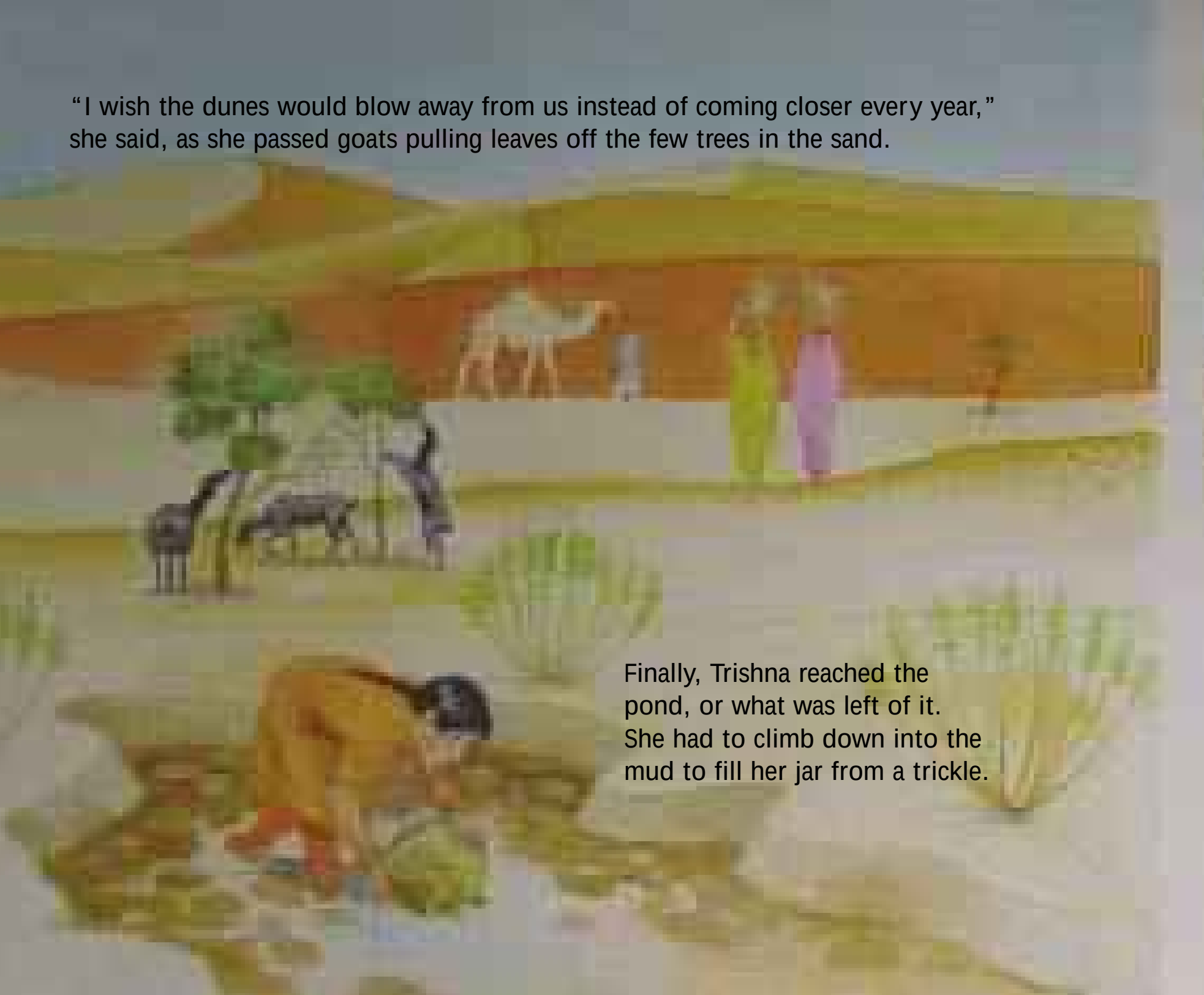
Trishna put down the match, lifted the water jar onto her head—and stuck some red and blue threads into her pocket before starting down the dusty path.

"I wish there were water all year long in our village so girls didn't have to carry it so far," she thought, strolling by the old well—out of use for years.



“I wish our village stayed green so we could have more of a harvest. And people wouldn’t have to leave to look for pasture for the animals,” she mumbled, passing the dry riverbed, then the abandoned borehole pump.

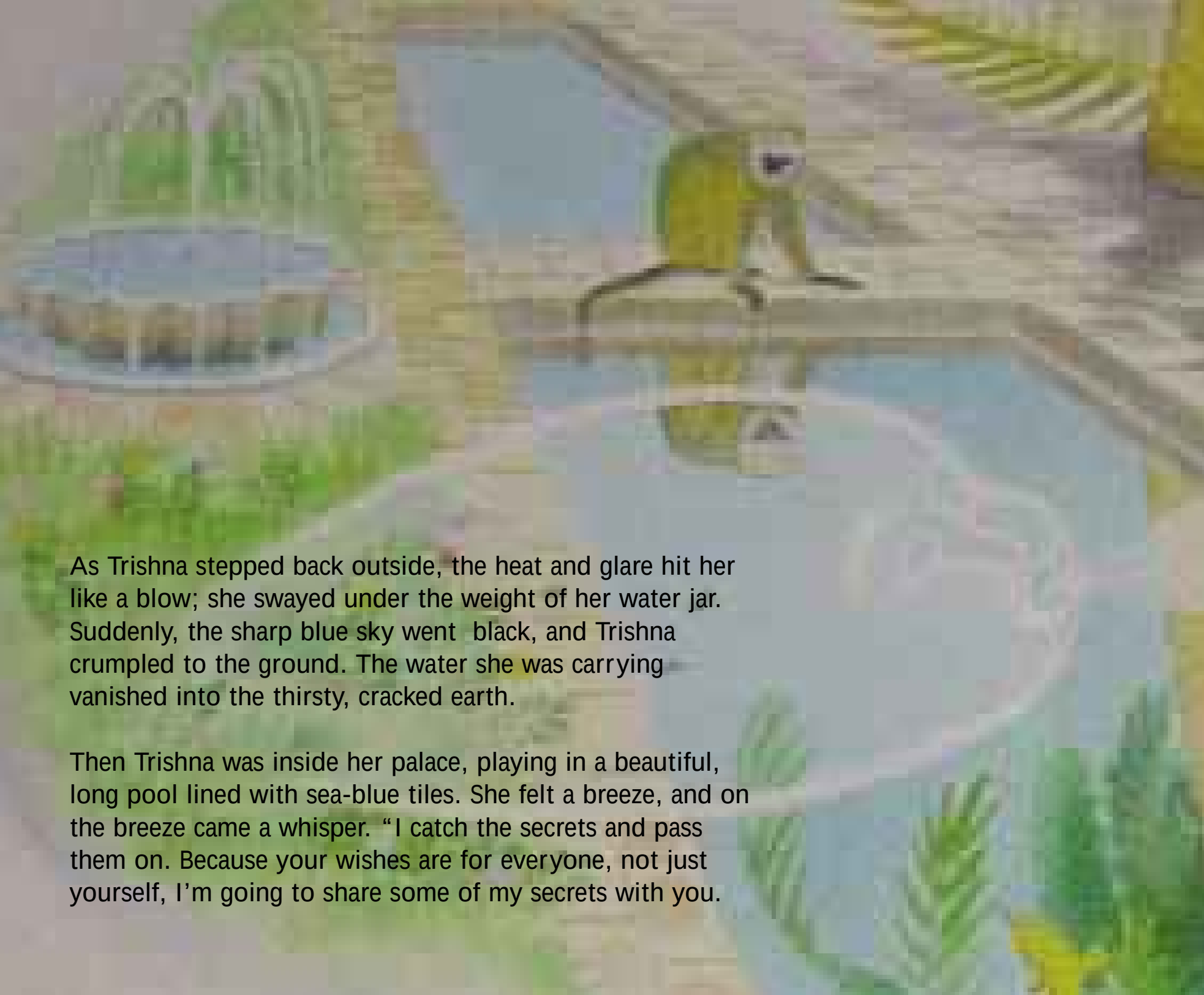
“I wish the dunes would blow away from us instead of coming closer every year,” she said, as she passed goats pulling leaves off the few trees in the sand.



Finally, Trishna reached the pond, or what was left of it. She had to climb down into the mud to fill her jar from a trickle.

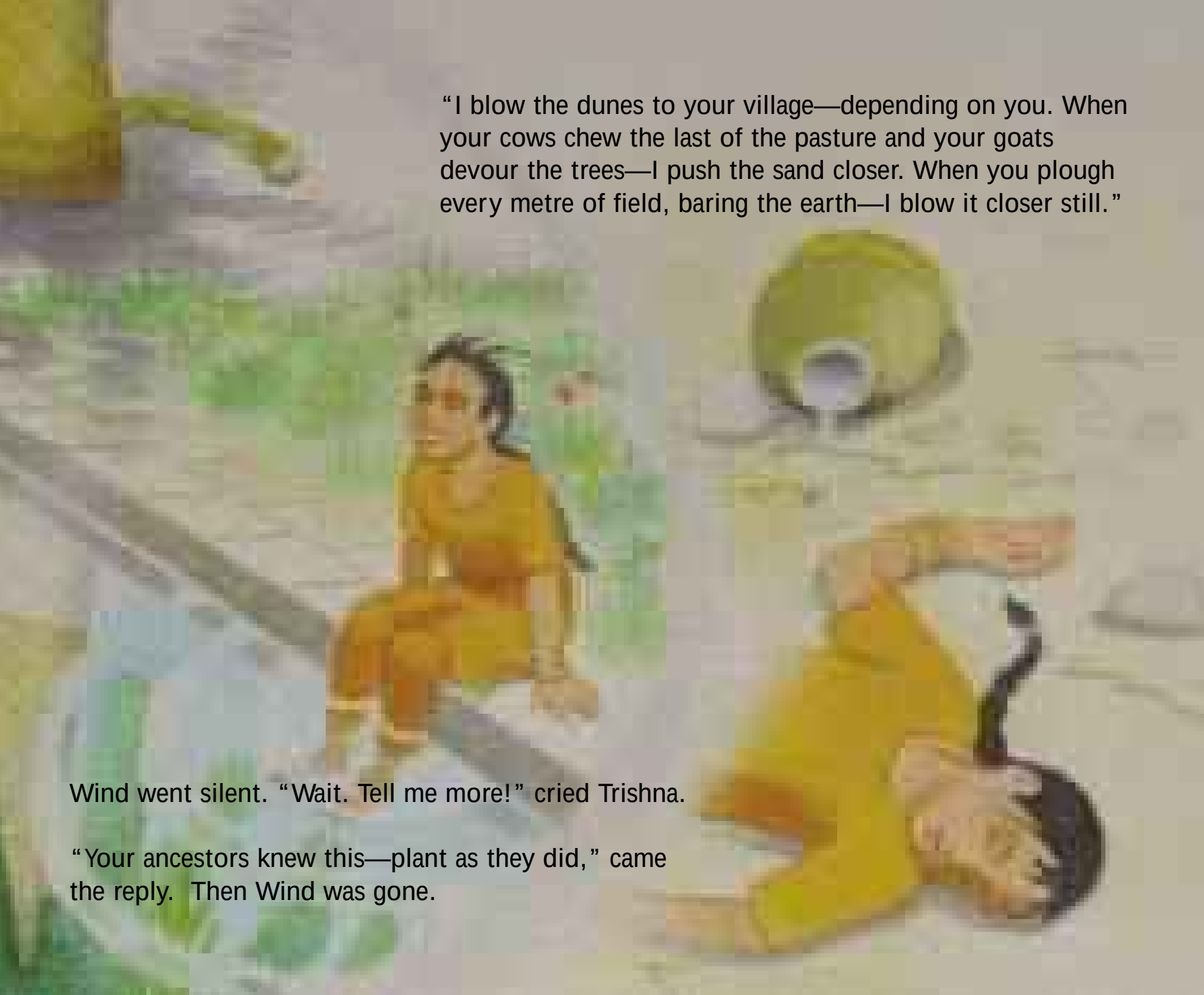
On her way back, Trishna stopped at the little shrine. There in the cool shade, she bowed her head and repeated her four wishes softly, tying a thread to the lattice screen for each wish.

Before leaving she tied one more thread: “I wish Raji could get work right here and come home.”



As Trishna stepped back outside, the heat and glare hit her like a blow; she swayed under the weight of her water jar. Suddenly, the sharp blue sky went black, and Trishna crumpled to the ground. The water she was carrying vanished into the thirsty, cracked earth.

Then Trishna was inside her palace, playing in a beautiful, long pool lined with sea-blue tiles. She felt a breeze, and on the breeze came a whisper. “I catch the secrets and pass them on. Because your wishes are for everyone, not just yourself, I’m going to share some of my secrets with you.



“I blow the dunes to your village—depending on you. When your cows chew the last of the pasture and your goats devour the trees—I push the sand closer. When you plough every metre of field, baring the earth—I blow it closer still.”

Wind went silent. “Wait. Tell me more!” cried Trishna.

“Your ancestors knew this—plant as they did,” came the reply. Then Wind was gone.

In a moment, a small wave in the water turned into a whirlpool.

“I’m the life-blood of your planet,” it gurgled.

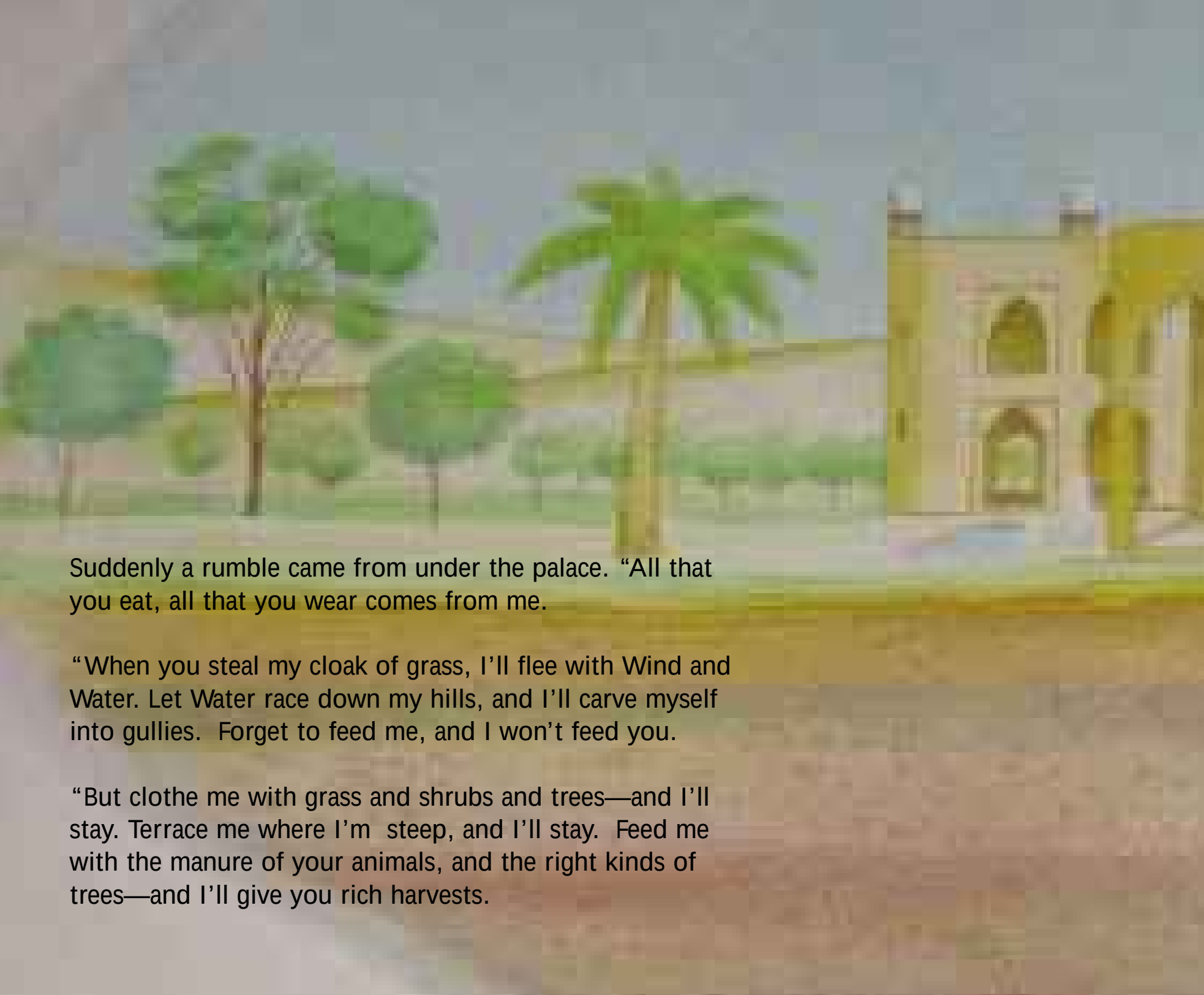
“I’ll fly down from the sky, but run from your village—depending on you. Where no plants stay to hold me, I’ll flood your land and vanish. If people take too much upstream, my riverbeds run dry. When your machines chase me deep in the ground, I’ll hide deeper.

“But catch me if you can, and I’ll stay. I’ll live in the soil where you plant trees and grass. I can live beneath your feet if you build me a little dam. In some places, I’ll live in a pond if you take out the silt. I’ll wait in a tank if you collect me from your roof.

“Please tell me more,” Trishna begged.

“Your ancestors knew this hundreds of years ago. Catch the rain as they did.”

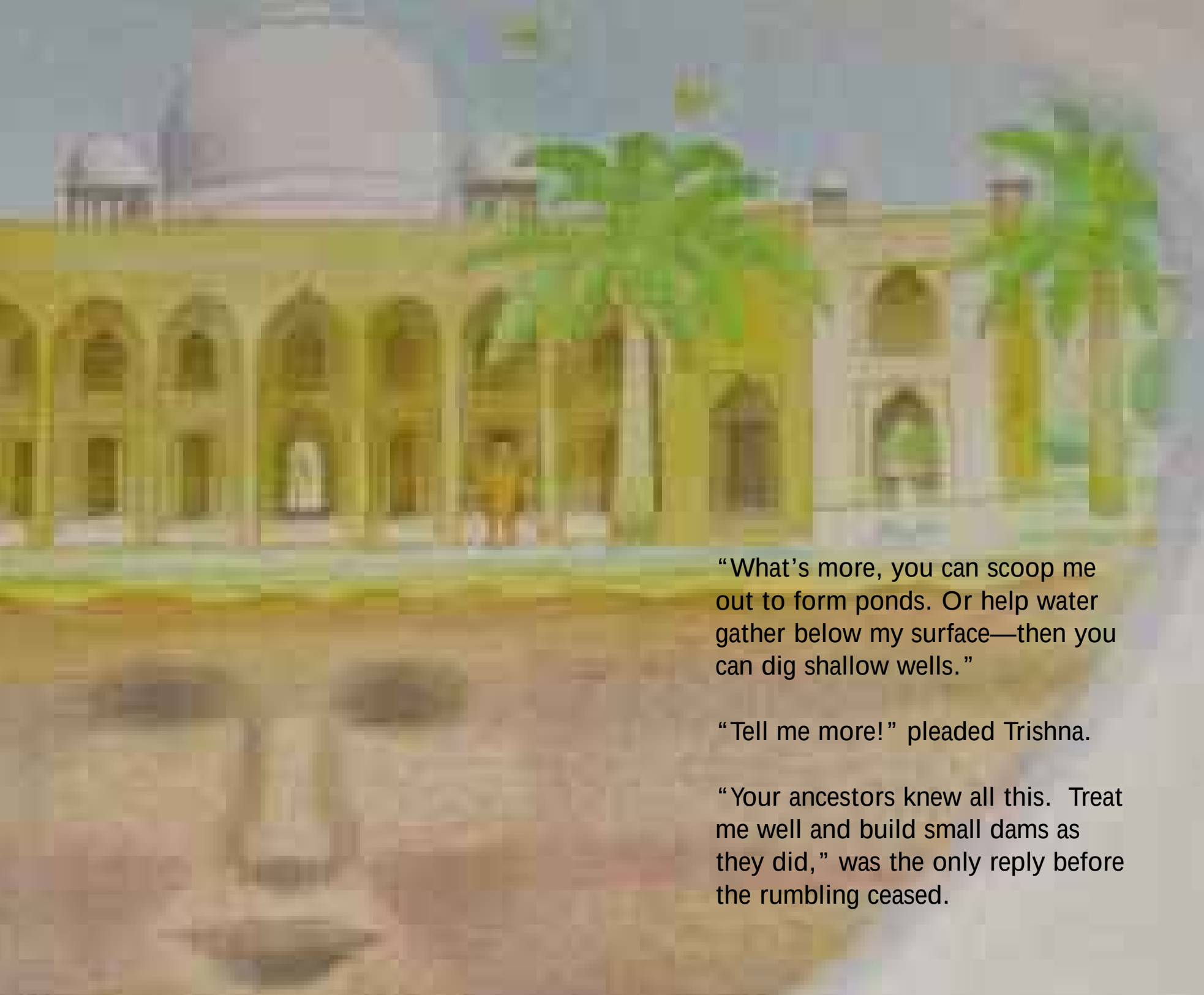
The whirlpool calmed and Water was gone.



Suddenly a rumble came from under the palace. “All that you eat, all that you wear comes from me.

“When you steal my cloak of grass, I’ll flee with Wind and Water. Let Water race down my hills, and I’ll carve myself into gullies. Forget to feed me, and I won’t feed you.

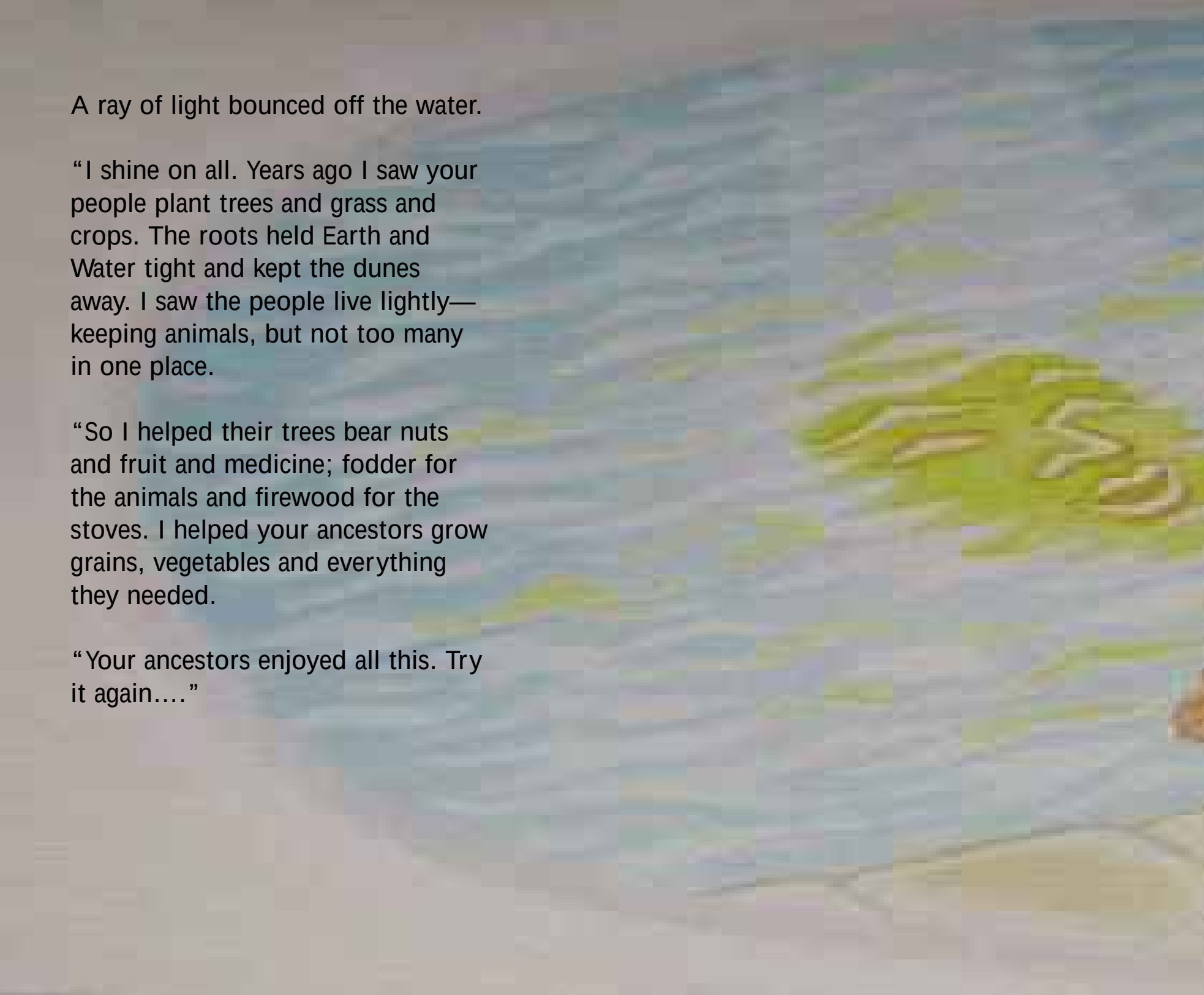
“But clothe me with grass and shrubs and trees—and I’ll stay. Terrace me where I’m steep, and I’ll stay. Feed me with the manure of your animals, and the right kinds of trees—and I’ll give you rich harvests.



"What's more, you can scoop me out to form ponds. Or help water gather below my surface—then you can dig shallow wells."

"Tell me more!" pleaded Trishna.

"Your ancestors knew all this. Treat me well and build small dams as they did," was the only reply before the rumbling ceased.



A ray of light bounced off the water.

“I shine on all. Years ago I saw your people plant trees and grass and crops. The roots held Earth and Water tight and kept the dunes away. I saw the people live lightly—keeping animals, but not too many in one place.

“So I helped their trees bear nuts and fruit and medicine; fodder for the animals and firewood for the stoves. I helped your ancestors grow grains, vegetables and everything they needed.

“Your ancestors enjoyed all this. Try it again….”

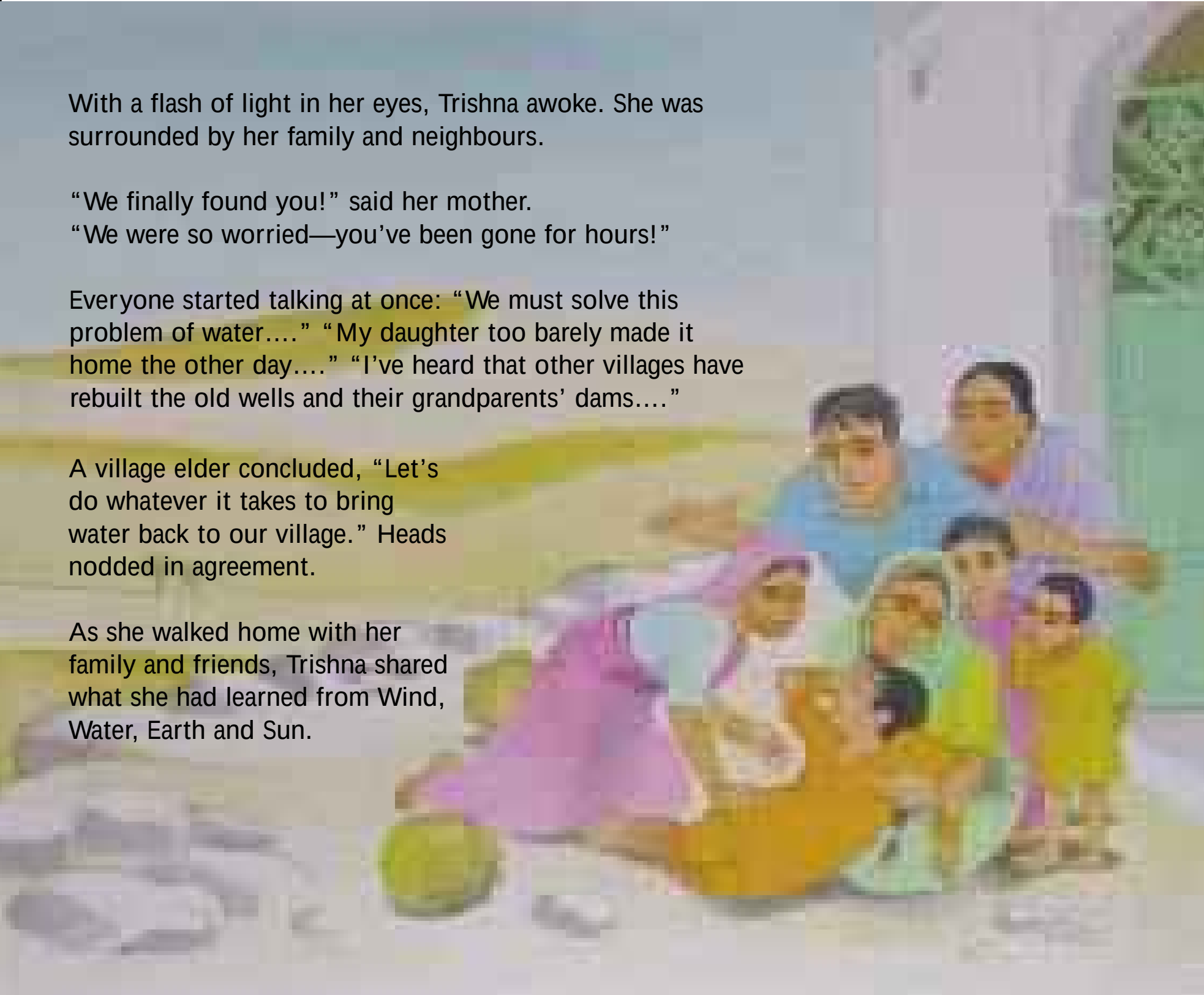
With a flash of light in her eyes, Trishna awoke. She was surrounded by her family and neighbours.

“We finally found you!” said her mother.
“We were so worried—you’ve been gone for hours!”

Everyone started talking at once: “We must solve this problem of water….” “My daughter too barely made it home the other day….” “I’ve heard that other villages have rebuilt the old wells and their grandparents’ dams….”

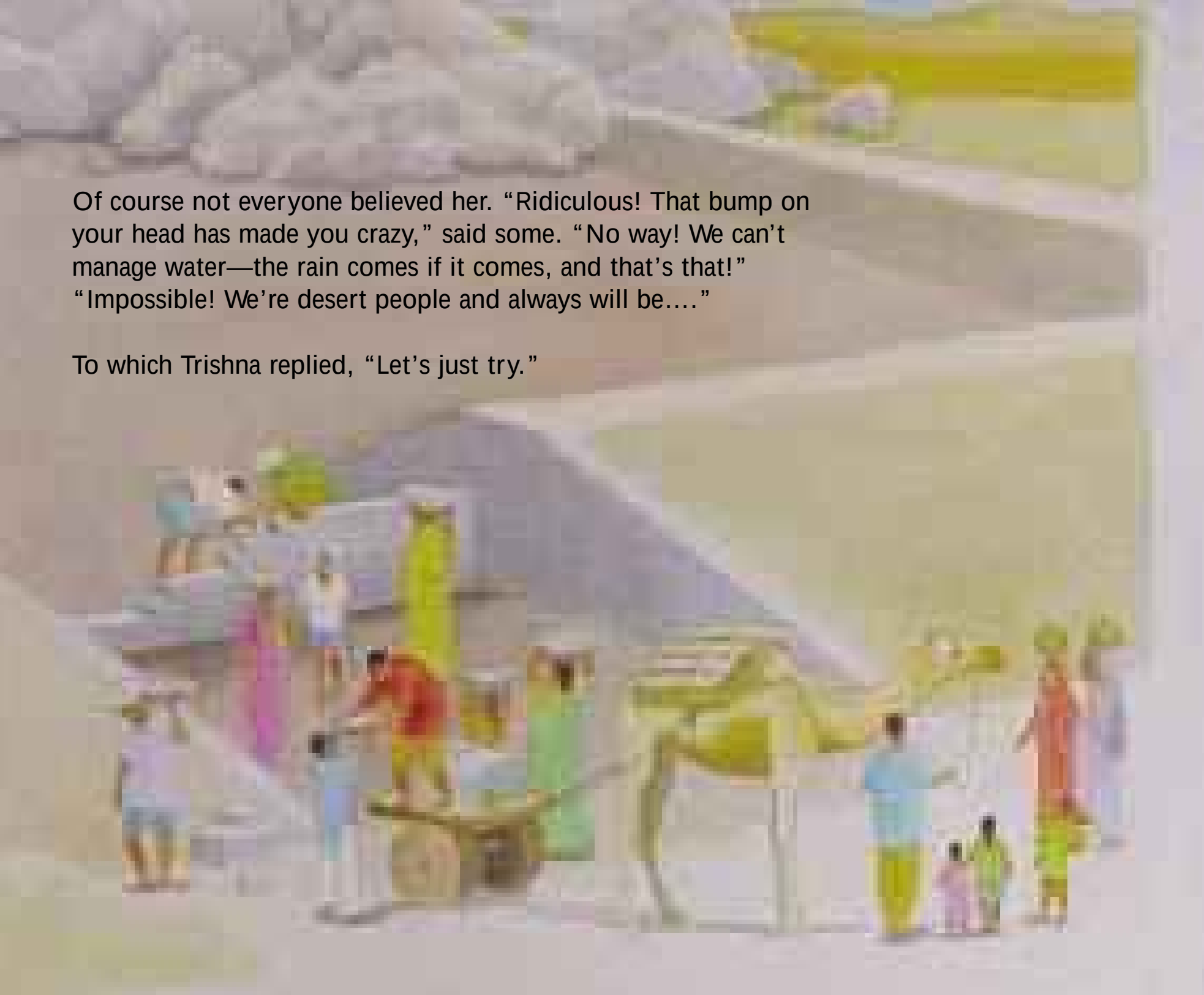
A village elder concluded, “Let’s do whatever it takes to bring water back to our village.” Heads nodded in agreement.

As she walked home with her family and friends, Trishna shared what she had learned from Wind, Water, Earth and Sun.



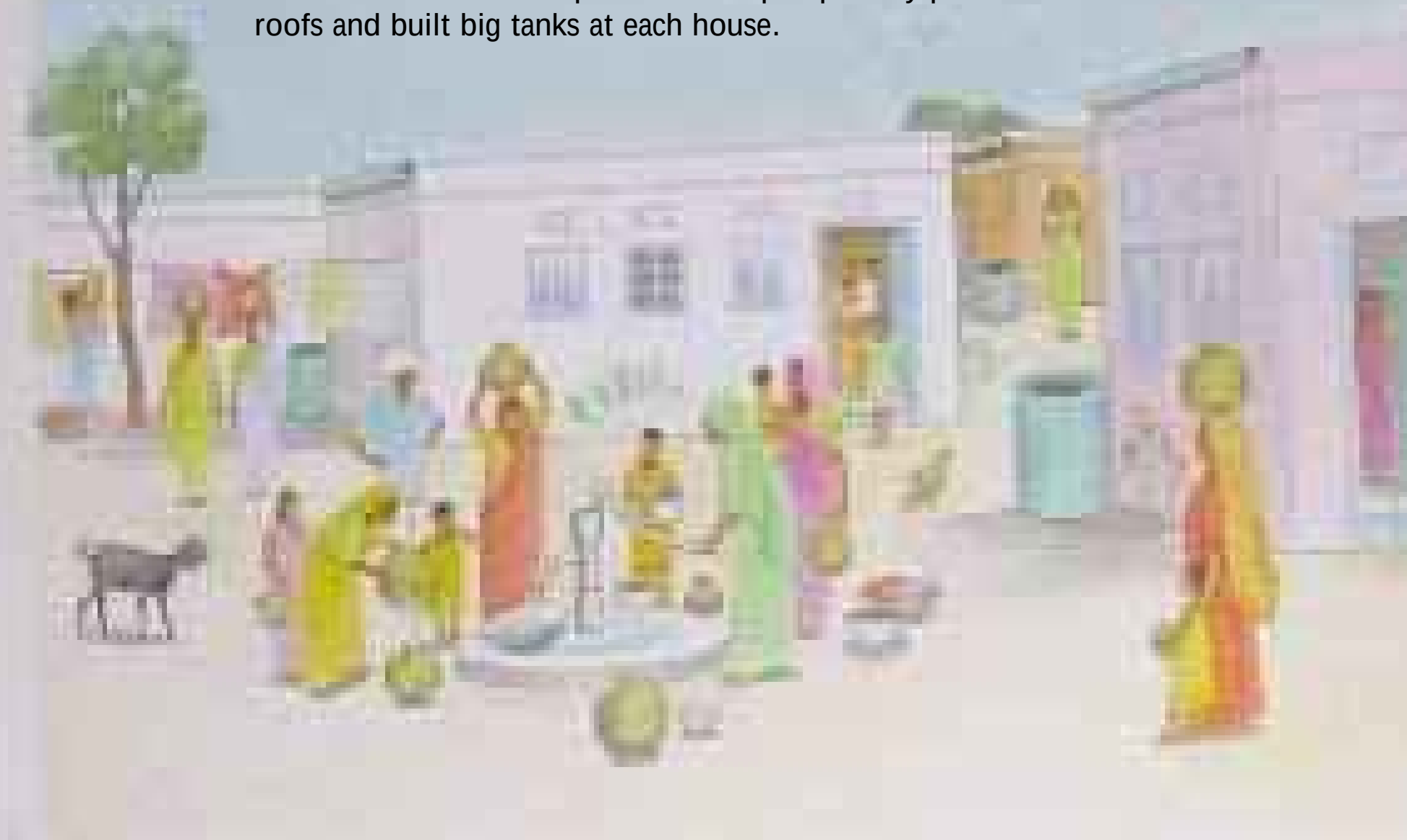
Of course not everyone believed her. “Ridiculous! That bump on your head has made you crazy,” said some. “No way! We can’t manage water—the rain comes if it comes, and that’s that!” “Impossible! We’re desert people and always will be….”

To which Trishna replied, “Let’s just try.”

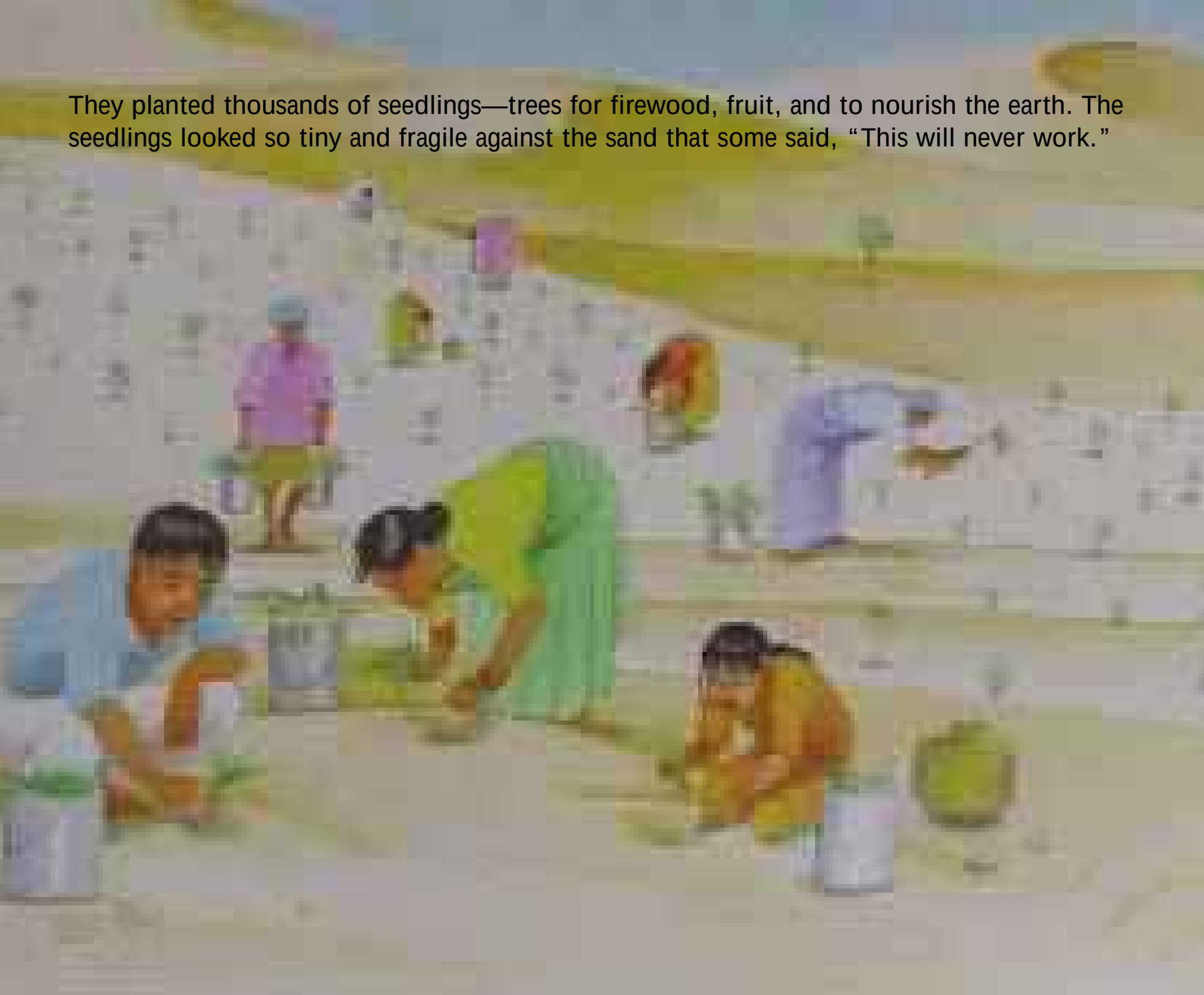


School children, elders, mums, dads, farmers, herders—everyone in the village volunteered time. Those who could, offered funds. Trishna even stopped daydreaming—most of the time. She was too busy.

Together they rebuilt an ancient dam near the foot of a rocky hill. They rebuilt the old well and put in a hand pump. They put drains on their roofs and built big tanks at each house.



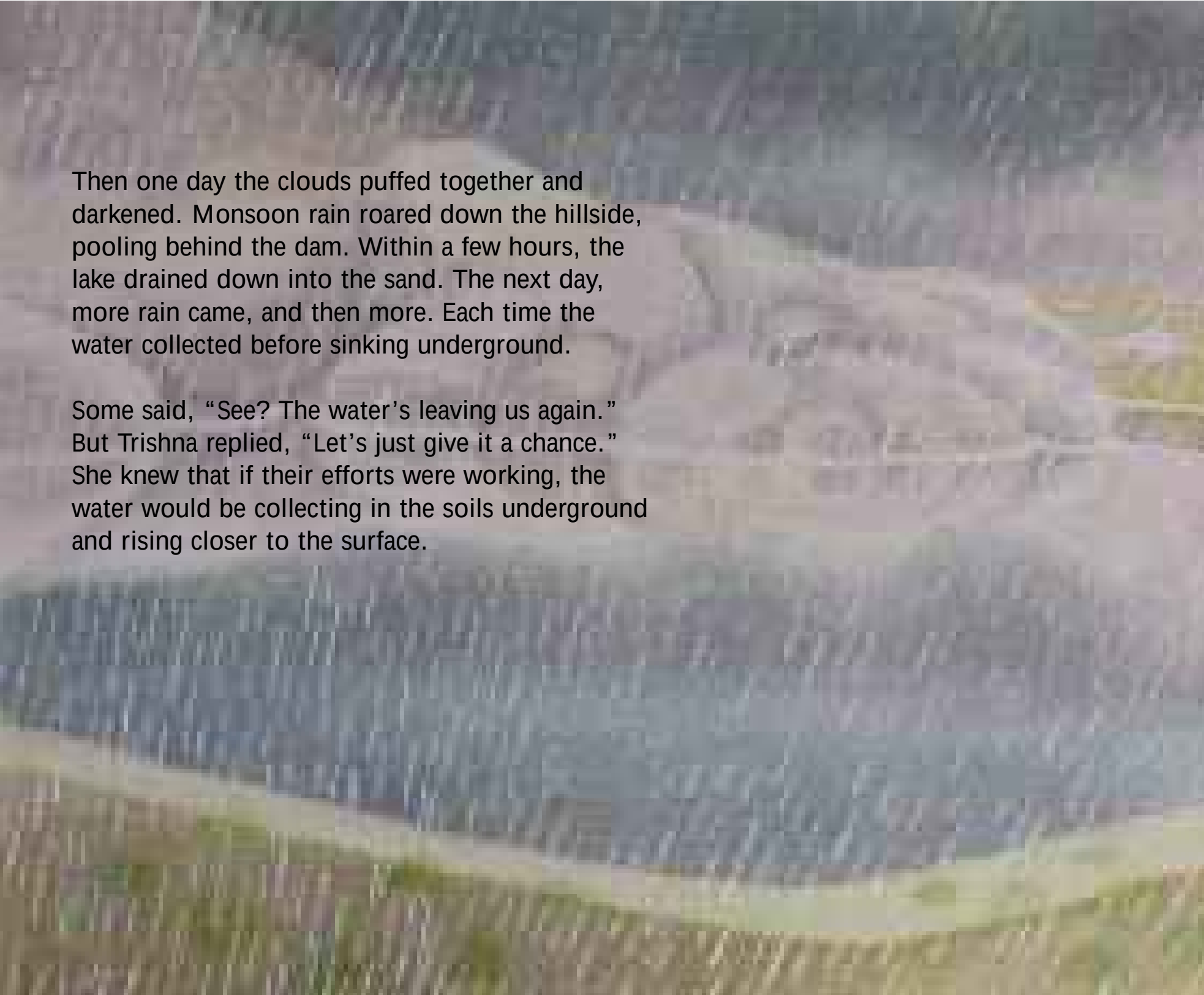
They planted thousands of seedlings—trees for firewood, fruit, and to nourish the earth. The seedlings looked so tiny and fragile against the sand that some said, “This will never work.”



Trishna replied, “Let’s just try.” And the work continued.

They planted tufts of grass that quickly turned brown.
Some said, “This will never work.”

But Trishna replied, “Let’s just try.” And the work continued.



Then one day the clouds puffed together and darkened. Monsoon rain roared down the hillside, pooling behind the dam. Within a few hours, the lake drained down into the sand. The next day, more rain came, and then more. Each time the water collected before sinking underground.

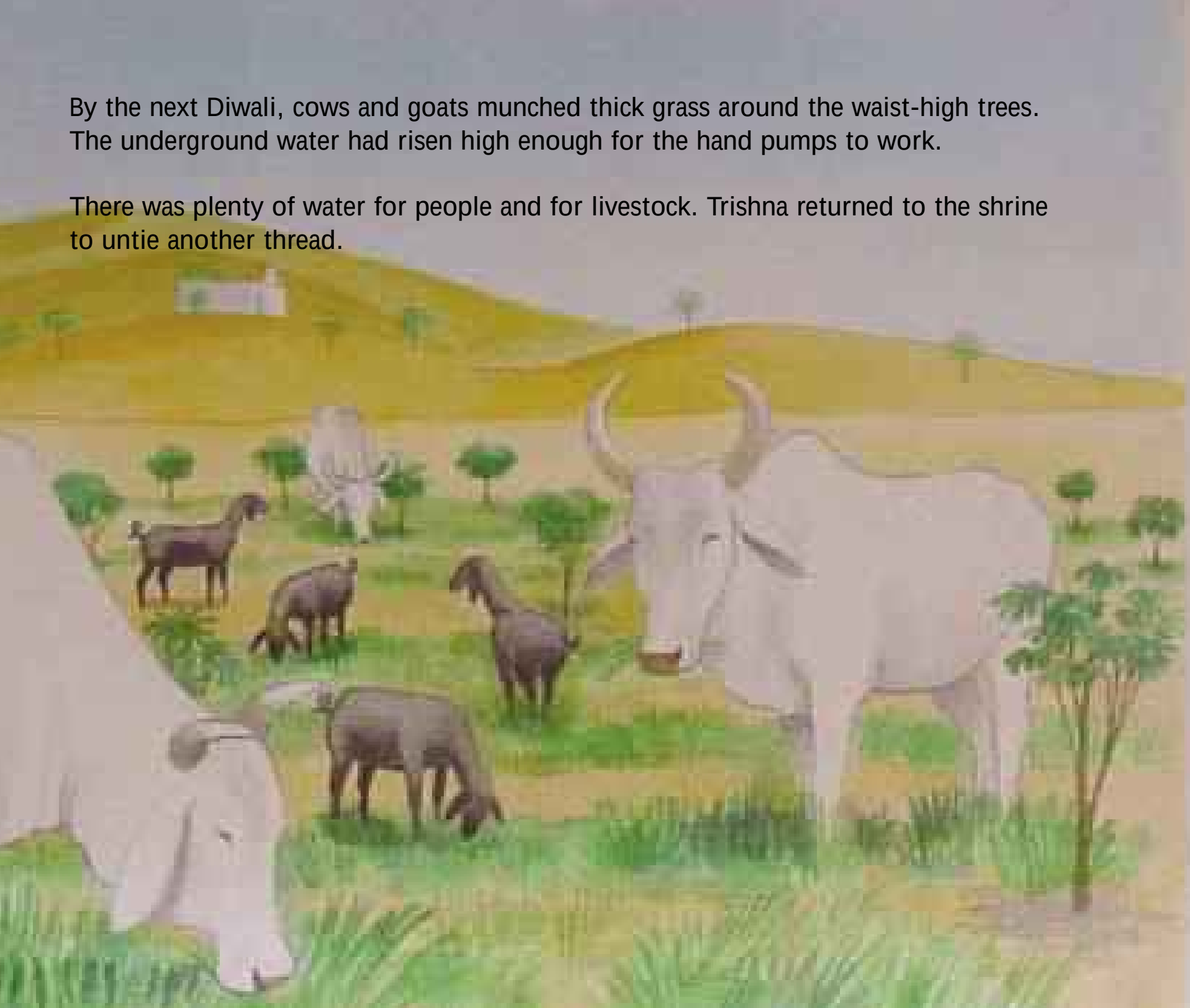
Some said, “See? The water’s leaving us again.” But Trishna replied, “Let’s just give it a chance.” She knew that if their efforts were working, the water would be collecting in the soils underground and rising closer to the surface.

Meanwhile, the seedlings perked up and the grass started to spread. Household rainwater tanks filled up. Dunes were no longer closing in on the village.

Trishna returned to the shrine to untie two threads and give thanks.

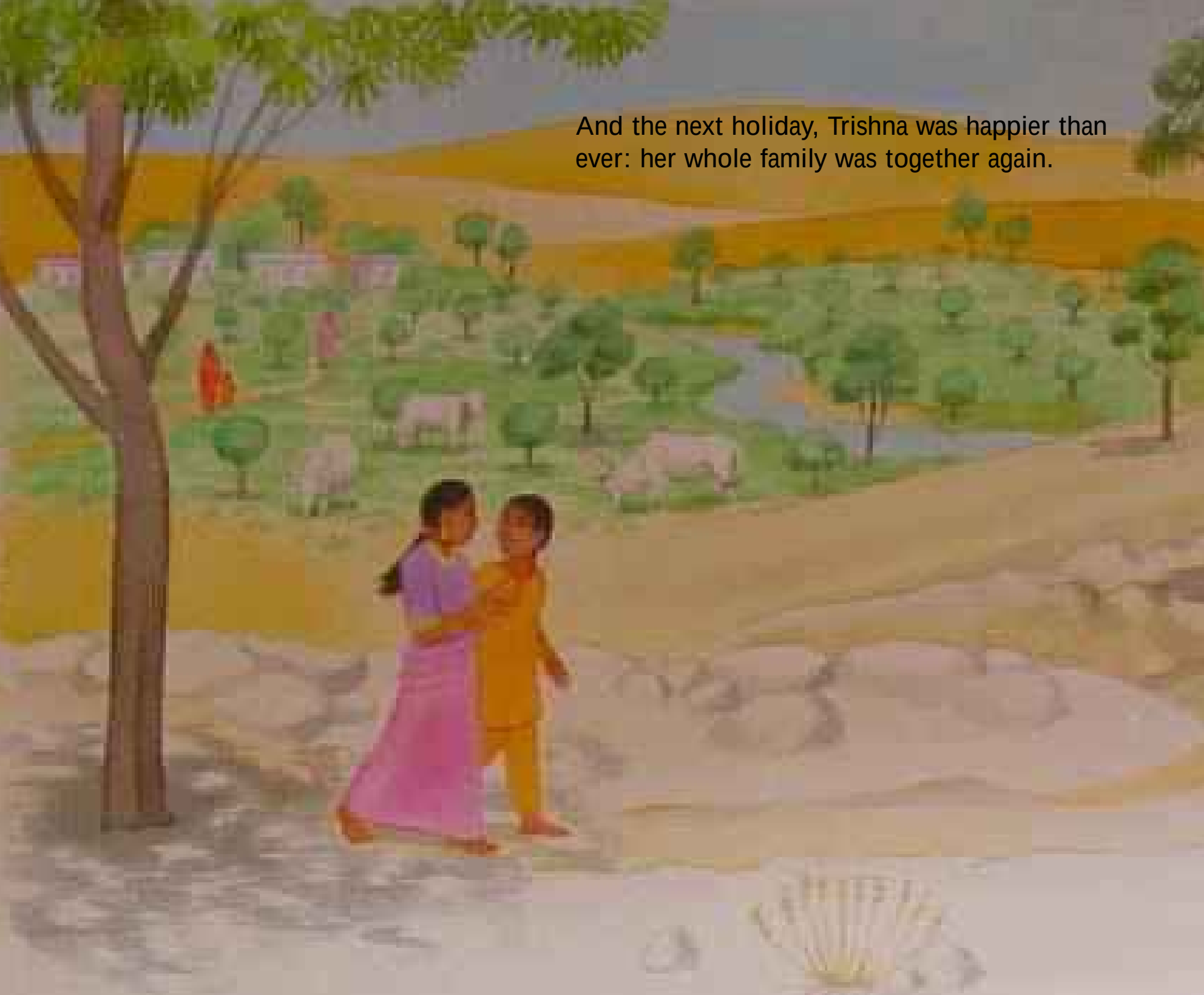
By the next Diwali, cows and goats munched thick grass around the waist-high trees. The underground water had risen high enough for the hand pumps to work.

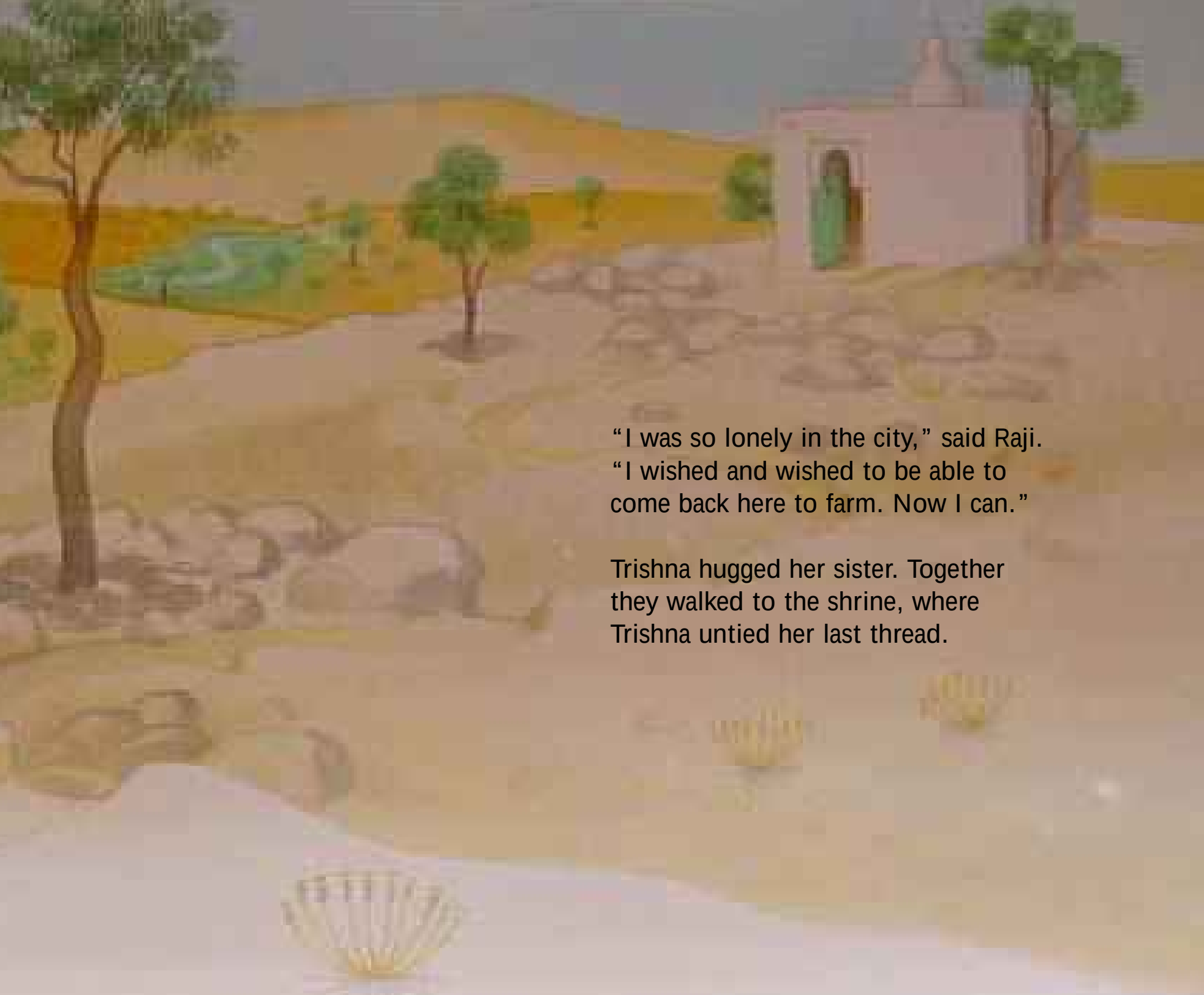
There was plenty of water for people and for livestock. Trishna returned to the shrine to untie another thread.



By the Diwali after that, the river came back to life year-round. People journeyed from other villages and towns to bring their cows and sheep during the dry season. “What a beautiful oasis!” they exclaimed.

Villagers were growing plenty of food to eat and to sell. Trishna untied the fourth thread.


And the next holiday, Trishna was happier than ever: her whole family was together again.



“I was so lonely in the city,” said Raji. “I wished and wished to be able to come back here to farm. Now I can.”

Trishna hugged her sister. Together they walked to the shrine, where Trishna untied her last thread.

Some facts and figures on drylands

1. More than 40 per cent of the Earth's land surface is desert or "drylands". Drylands are not quite desert, but dry and difficult for humans. More than 2 billion people live in these areas, including half the poor people of the world.

2. Although true deserts grow and shrink naturally, drylands can also "desertify"—basically turn to desert—because of the way people use land and water. Today, drylands in more than 110 countries are desertifying or at risk of doing so. Scientists estimate that up to one-third of the Earth's land is desertifying, mostly in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

3. Human population has more than doubled in the past 40 years, to 6.2 billion today—and it's still increasing. So we need to grow more and more food. People cut down trees for fuel and also to make more farmland. They try to raise more livestock—usually cows, sheep and goats. But too many animals in one place will eat and trample grass and other plants faster than they can regrow.

4. When trees and other natural vegetation disappear, and farming isn't done carefully, topsoil blows away or washes off when it rains. The land becomes less productive and begins to desertify. In many parts of the world, people have to leave their homes because the land has become impossible to farm or graze.

5. Many ancient civilizations developed in drylands where people learned to collect rainwater or floodwater and conserve land. "Water harvesting" is at least 9,000 years old. People have harvested water in parts of the Middle East, Pakistan and India, North and West Africa, and North America.

6. Traditional ways of collecting and using water have been disappearing as machines for drilling and pumping become more easily available. The new machinery allows people to pump so much out of lakes and rivers that sometimes they dry up. In many places, people also pump far too much from "aquifers"—the rocks and soil underground that hold water like a giant sponge.

7. When water gets "mined" faster than rain can replenish it, the water level underground drops. Water levels (called "water tables") are now as far down as 1,000 meters (a kilometre) or even more in parts of Asia and the Middle East. The aquifers in some important food-growing areas are in danger of running dry in the next few decades.

8. Most of the water pumped from aquifers goes to irrigate rice, wheat, maize and other crops for people and livestock. Irrigation can waste lots of water, especially when sprinklers spray it into the air, where much of it evaporates.

9. In contrast, a check dam like the one Trishna's village builds allows the rainwater to sink and refill the aquifer. If the dam is in the right place, the water table soon rises close to the surface. Then shallow wells and hand-pumps can supply all the water the villagers and their livestock need. In some places, people dig out land for a pond, and line it with mud. Then the check dams create small lakes or ponds.

10. An estimated 20,000 villages in India are now harvesting rainwater. Countries such as Mexico, Peru, China and Tanzania are also trying it out. Many nations have tree-planting programmes to keep the soil in place or stabilize sand dunes.

11. In addition, people have developed ways of irrigating that use much less water. For instance, farmers in western India fill large clay pots with water and bury them underground, where the water slowly leaks out to the crops' roots. Other places use "drip irrigation," which uses pipes or tubes to release water to the plants' roots one drop at a time.

What you can do:

1. Join an eco-club at your school or place of worship—or create one. Together, club members can learn about the condition of the land in your region and practice ways to keep it healthy.

2. Use manure and compost to nourish your garden or farm. Making compost—natural fertilizer from plants and waste—can be one of your club activities. Compost helps keep soil healthy and able to absorb water.

3. Letting the land rest, or lie "fallow," every few years also helps to keep it in good condition.

4. Plant grass and other vegetation to reduce soil erosion. Try to use types that grow naturally in your area.

5. Plant trees. Trees reduce erosion, act as wind-breakers, and can give you fruit, nuts, fodder for livestock, and wood for building or fuel. Some trees even take nitrogen from the air and add it to the soil through their roots, creating a natural fertilizer. Check out the best types for your area.

6. If you live in a farming community that irrigates, have your club experiment with drip irrigation.