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10 to 12 years

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Nehru Bal Pustakalaya



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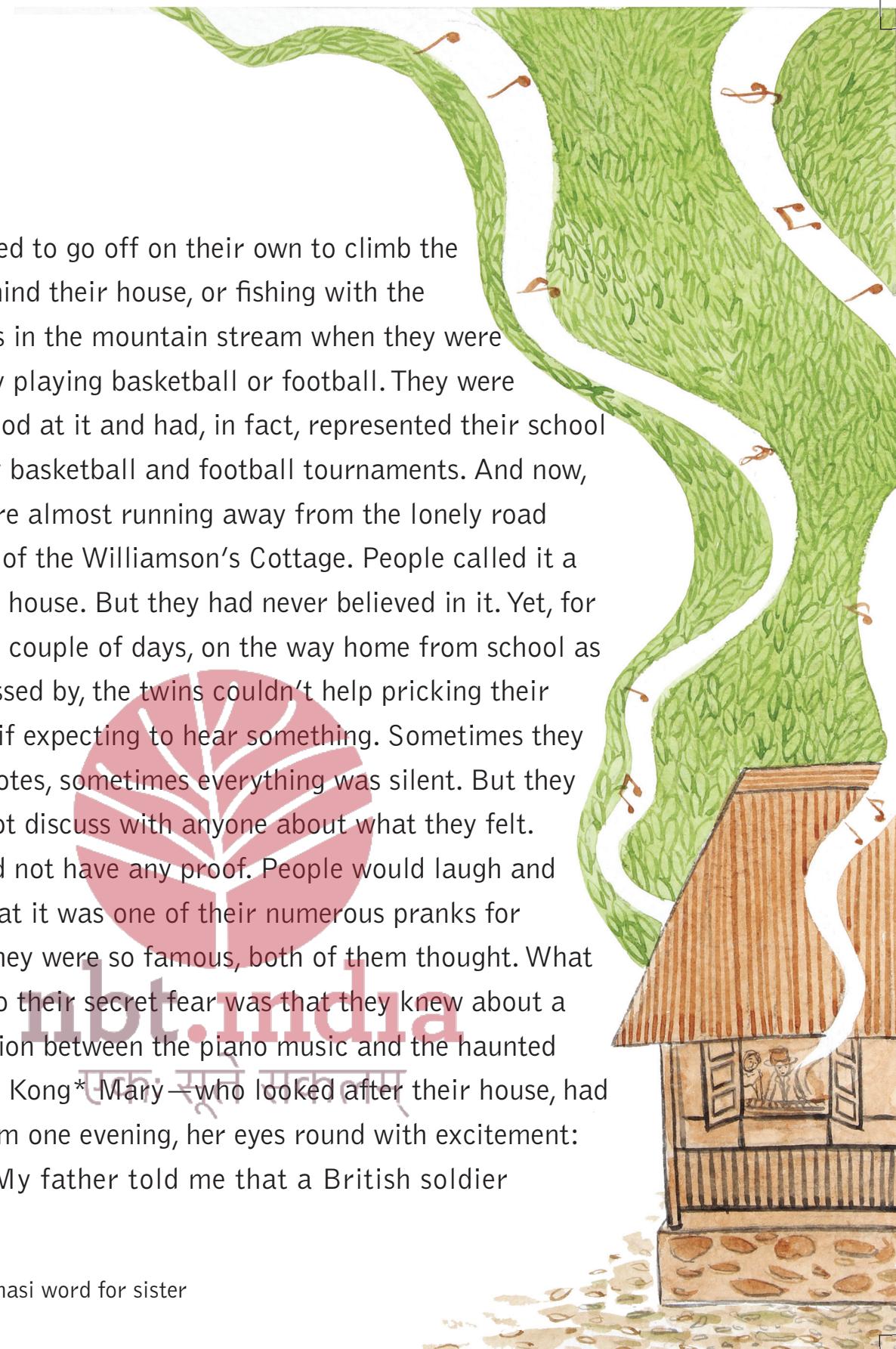


There it was again! Jocelyn and June looked at each other. The notes from the Blue Danube floated down from the 'abandoned' house. The strains of the music, though faint, could be clearly heard from the road skirting the house.

They shivered a little and quickened their steps as the air swished through the tall pine trees.

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It was uncharacteristic of the 'J Sisters', as people called them, to get scared easily. They were always known to be quite daring.



They used to go off on their own to climb the hills behind their house, or fishing with the villagers in the mountain stream when they were not busy playing basketball or football. They were quite good at it and had, in fact, represented their school at many basketball and football tournaments. And now, they were almost running away from the lonely road in front of the Williamson's Cottage. People called it a haunted house. But they had never believed in it. Yet, for the past couple of days, on the way home from school as they passed by, the twins couldn't help pricking their ears as if expecting to hear something. Sometimes they heard notes, sometimes everything was silent. But they could not discuss with anyone about what they felt. They did not have any proof. People would laugh and think that it was one of their numerous pranks for which they were so famous, both of them thought. What added to their secret fear was that they knew about a connection between the piano music and the haunted cottage. Kong\*—Mary—who looked after their house, had told them one evening, her eyes round with excitement:

“My father told me that a British soldier

\*Kong: Khasi word for sister



Williamson Sahib used to stay there long ago. He had fallen in love with Shillong when he was here during the Second World War and decided to stay on after the war got over. His

wife came to join him from England. They bought this house from Mr. Marbaniang. They didn't have any children. The Sahib used to play the piano very well. In the evening people heard him play and his wife singing with him. But sadly..."

Kong Mary let the words hang in the air as she chewed on the kwai\*. But they prodded her and she continued reluctantly, "His wife died in an accident. They had gone for a picnic at the Shillong Peak on that sunny summer day. But somehow she slipped on a mossy stone and fell down the hill. She was buried here in the local cemetery. Williamson Sahib never returned to England. He still played the piano every evening. One summer, after five years or so, after his wife's death, the windows of the cottage remained closed for two days. There was no piano notes coming out from the house either. The maid who worked in his house told the neighbours and they informed the police. The police broke open the door. They found him dead on his bed."

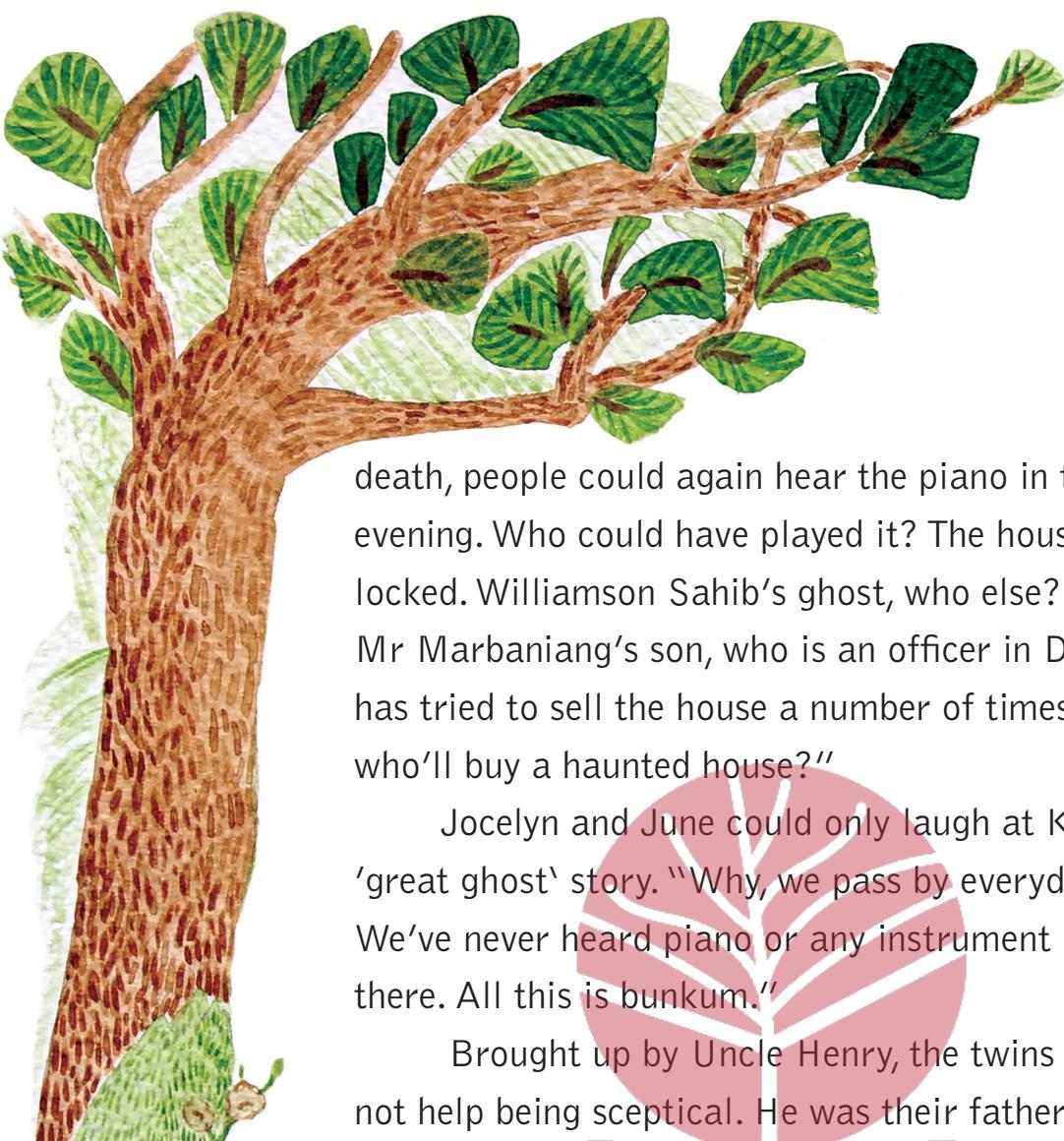
"But what is it to do with the ghosts?" the girls asked Kong Mary. She whispered dramatically, "After one week of the Sahib's

\*kwai: khasi word for betel-nut



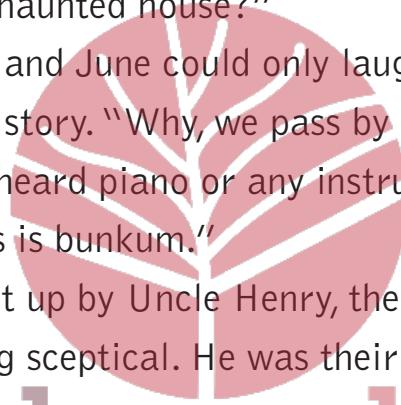
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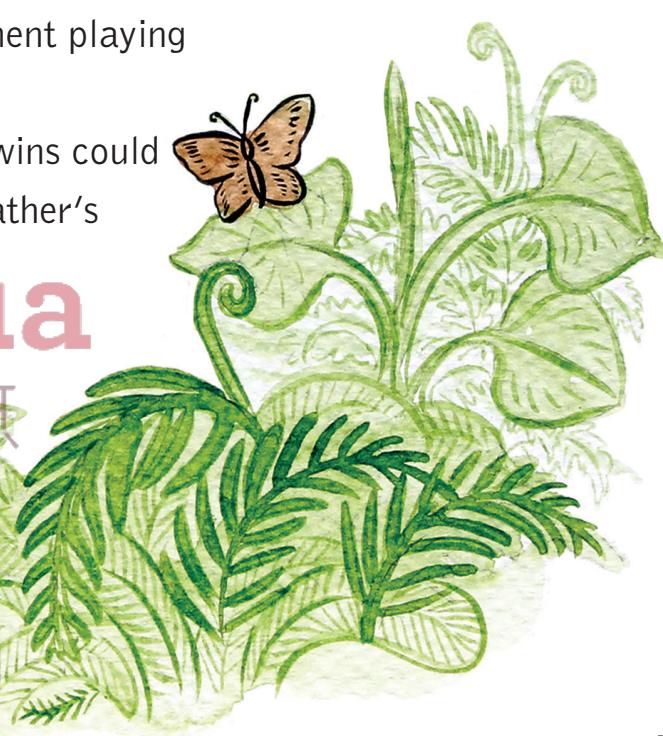
death, people could again hear the piano in the evening. Who could have played it? The house was locked. Williamson Sahib's ghost, who else?

Mr Marbaniang's son, who is an officer in Delhi, has tried to sell the house a number of times but who'll buy a haunted house?"



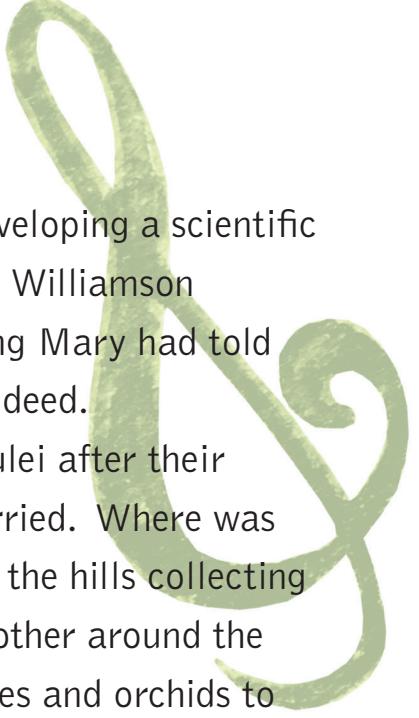
Jocelyn and June could only laugh at Kong's 'great ghost' story. "Why, we pass by everyday. We've never heard piano or any instrument playing there. All this is bunkum."

Brought up by Uncle Henry, the twins could not help being sceptical. He was their father's



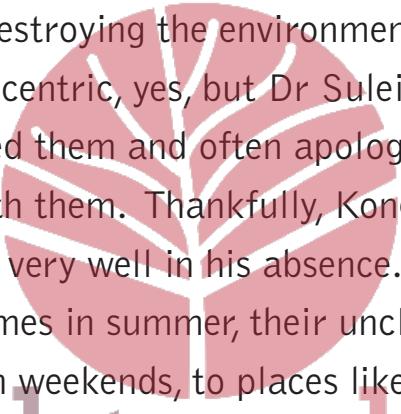
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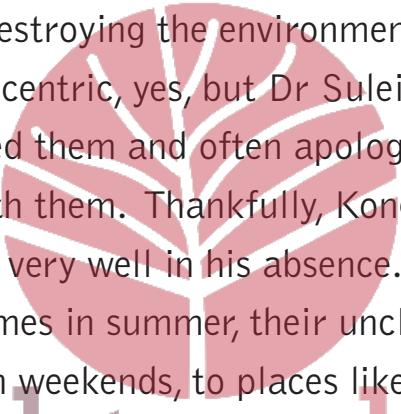


brother and a renowned geologist. He insisted on developing a scientific mind which questioned exactly the kind of belief like Williamson Sahib's ghost playing the piano. If he knew that Kong Mary had told them ghost stories he would have been very angry indeed.

The twins had found a home with Dr Henry Sulei after their parents passed away prematurely. He had never married. Where was the time anyway? When he was not roaming around the hills collecting stone samples or attending some conference or the other around the world, he was in the hills searching for rare butterflies and orchids to document them. "Who knows they'd disappear one day, the way we humans are destroying the environment!" he would often exclaim.



A bit eccentric, yes, but Dr Sulei was very fond of his nieces. He genuinely loved them and often apologised that he could not spend more time with them. Thankfully, Kong Mary was kind and looked after the girls very well in his absence.



Sometimes in summer, their uncle took them along too in the expeditions on weekends, to places like Cherrapunji and Mawphlang where orchids grew abundantly. Kong Mary would then pack a picnic basket with sandwiches and cakes and a flask of tea. Rare though the occasions were, Jocelyn and June looked forward to these impromptu outings. "There's the Jewel Orchid, and there's the Rat Tail orchid," Uncle Henry would point out in the woods smelling of pines, and teach



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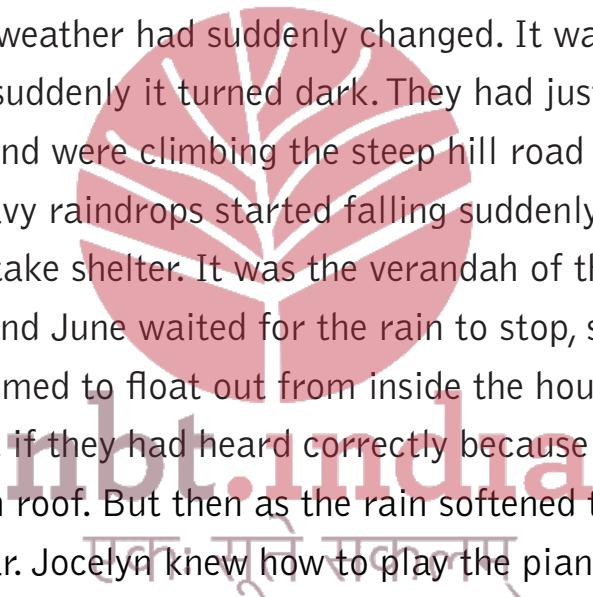
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them to recognise the different varieties.

"We have some of the rarest specimens in Meghalaya, do you know that? There are more than 300 species in this state alone,"

he would say proudly. In the winter evenings, when they sat around the fireplace, he would talk about his experience in South Eastern countries like Thailand and Singapore, where he had visited their beautiful butterfly and orchid parks.

As to the twins' current preoccupation with Williamson's Cottage, it was due to a strange happening one afternoon. That day, the moody Shillong weather had suddenly changed. It was so sunny a little while ago, but suddenly it turned dark. They had just passed the Garrison Ground and were climbing the steep hill road that led to their house when heavy raindrops started falling suddenly. They ran to the nearest place to take shelter. It was the verandah of the haunted cottage. As Jocelyn and June waited for the rain to stop, suddenly notes from a piano seemed to float out from inside the house. At first they could not make out if they had heard correctly because the rain was drumming on the tin roof. But then as the rain softened to a drizzle, the notes were clear. Jocelyn knew how to play the piano herself and she clearly remembered the notes from Strauss Blue Danube. Jocelyn and June were not exactly the panicky type of girls, but the notes of the piano





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from the unoccupied house made them jump up. They looked at each other, not liking to admit to each other that they were scared. Instead, they inspected the sky and muttered together, "Why, it's stopped." Actually it was still a smart drizzle but by common consensus they decided to step out of the verandah. They did not say anything to Kong Mary. If anything, she would get more scared and gossip in the locality about the ghost being real and the twins wanted to avoid the curious queries from the neighbours. Besides, if Uncle Henry, who was in Brazil now-a-days heard on his return that they had spread the rumour, he would be very upset. Moreover, they also admitted to themselves that their rational mind should not have allowed them to believe in ghosts.

After the incident, while returning from school, as if by common agreement, they slowed down a little at the spot near the deserted cottage at this time of the day. They pretended to examine the wild flowers around but actually pricked their ears to catch the sound of a piano playing in Williamson's Cottage. No, they never again and soon, when they privately discussed the phenomenon, they dismissed it as pure imagination. The only thing that bothered them was, why did they both hear it? It didn't make sense. One day in fact, they decided to take the challenge of stepping into the verandah of the house deliberately; just to prove that the haunted





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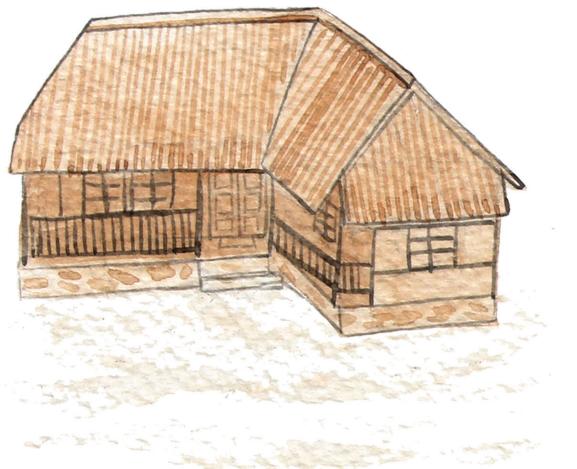
house and a ghost-piano were as foolish a story as any. "Like old Hindi movies, you know, when a woman in white goes on singing in the background," June giggled.

But as they reached the verandah, something made them stop short. There were mud spattered footsteps as if from heavy rubber-soled shoes on the wooden floor. There was even a new padlock on the door. At least it looked new. The twins tried to remember if they had noticed it before. Then suddenly, they heard the notes from a piano. Jocelyn immediately recognised it as Chopin's Majurka No 23 in D Major as she was a student of Western classical music. And did the heavy curtain on the window move a little? June was not sure.

This time there was no pretension. The sisters were both scared to their bones and they ran and ran, never waiting to catch their breath as they clambered up the steep path. Whatever Uncle Henry might have said, they decided, Kong Mary was right. There was Williamson's ghost in his beloved cottage. And he did not like to be disturbed. As long as nobody stepped into his house, he did not disturb others either. It was very difficult to keep the secret. But the sisters discussed between themselves at length and decided that it was the best way.

A fortnight passed without any incident.





Then everything turned topsy-turvy for the twins one afternoon. Just as they were getting settled down to the normal routine, not ever looking towards the cottage and walking very fast when they reached this point, they heard somebody whistling "psst...". The road was usually empty at this time of the day so the sound reached them clearly. They looked here and there. Who was trying to draw their attention? There was no one. Then again, "psst...". Reluctantly, as if by common consent, they turned their eyes towards Williamson's Cottage. Something moved behind the rose bush next to the house. They shivered. Then they saw a girl, perhaps a little younger to them, beckoning them.

Who was she? What was this girl doing in the abandoned house? Should they go? The twins hesitated. Then the girl beckoned to them again, more

urgently now. She looked very human indeed, and not by any chance a ghost. Besides, Williamson was a man. The girl was obviously in distress. Hesitantly, the sisters took a few steps towards her. The girl was wearing a rather tattered floral-print frock. Her cheeks were red like an apple but fear lined her brown eyes. She took a few steps, though her eyes darted from side to side. "I'm Hira," she said in broken Hindi.

The twins were at loss for words. They didn't know how to respond. At last, Jocelyn found her voice, she knew a smattering of Hindi from her lessons, and, of course, from Bollywood movies! "Who are you? Why are you calling us? What are you doing near this haunted house?" the questions tumbled out. "I live in this haunted house," the girl smiled for the first time as she saw how the sisters jumped.

"Alone?"

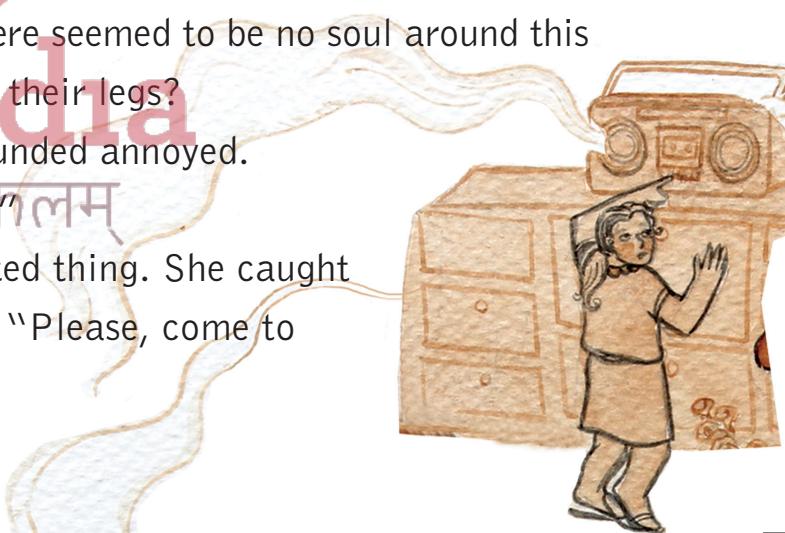
"No, with my uncle," the girl said, her eyes clouded again.

"But...?" the twins chimed together, still unable to comprehend. Why, they had always seen this house padlocked. Heavy curtains blocked the windows. There seemed to be no soul around this empty patch. Was this girl pulling their legs?

"Are you joking?" June sounded annoyed.

"No, I'm telling the truth."

Then Hira did an unexpected thing. She caught hold of their hands and pleaded, "Please, come to







the backyard. I have to talk to you. If somebody sees us, we'll be in trouble." The sisters looked at each other. Then their chins went up. The J Sisters could not act as ninnies. Besides, they were relieved to find the reason behind the music in the house too. So people lived there after all, and the ghost story, as Uncle Henry would have said, was all bunkum.

They were surprised to see the backyard neat and clean and not like the front yard full of weeds and thorny rose creepers. Obviously, somebody had swept it. But before they could ask anything, Hira spoke, her voice urgent, "Listen, my uncle and his friend have gone down to Nongpoh for business. I see you coming back from school everyday from behind the curtain but did not dare to come out. I saw you even that day when you got wet."

"Why are you so afraid?" the twins were puzzled.

"I'm from a small village in Nepal," Hira's voice shook as if full of tears, "My parents are dead. We were very poor. We hardly had two meals a day. This uncle, some distant cousin of my father has brought me here. I cook the meals and clean up the house."

"That's good." The sisters couldn't understand what was troubling Hira.

"But it's not good as you think," Hira continued, "They never let me go out of the house. At first I didn't understand. From time to time

uncle and his friend went out and came back with some creepers. I came to know them as orchids. Then at night, when everybody was asleep, and this place is deserted anyway, they would light candles and sort out the plants. And next day, they would go out, taking along the orchids."

"So what's wrong with bringing orchids home?"

"That's the whole point. They have forbidden me to talk about it. And they talk about things I don't understand...airport... police. Also, they always enter the house from the back door. Then one day, they brought this machine and cassettes. Remember the day you were taking shelter in the rain? They were at home. Whenever they see people near the cottage they play the music. Now they have taught me how to play it and given me instructions that if anybody comes near the compound, I should play it. I asked them if they wanted to scare away people but uncle has warned me that he will kill me if I ever talk about it to anyone. His friend has threatened that he would put me in jail as he knows lots of policemen. This happened a few days ago. These days they're mostly home and keep me under their eyes. Only today..."

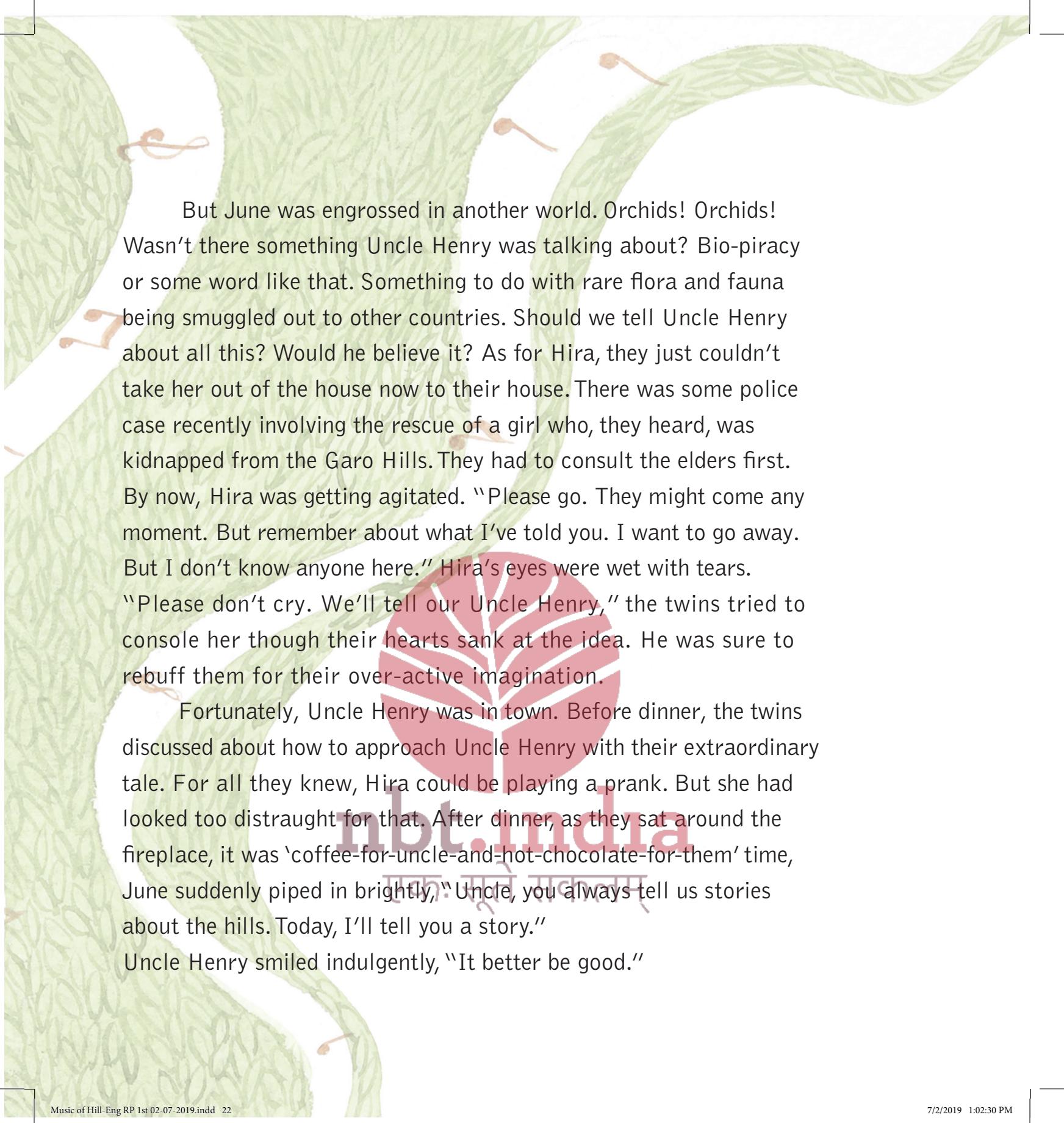
The sisters were stunned. What was the meaning of all this?

"One thing I know very well, they are thieves. It has to do something with the orchids. I want to go home, at least to some other place from here. Please help me," Hira pleaded.



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But June was engrossed in another world. Orchids! Orchids! Wasn't there something Uncle Henry was talking about? Bio-piracy or some word like that. Something to do with rare flora and fauna being smuggled out to other countries. Should we tell Uncle Henry about all this? Would he believe it? As for Hira, they just couldn't take her out of the house now to their house. There was some police case recently involving the rescue of a girl who, they heard, was kidnapped from the Garo Hills. They had to consult the elders first. By now, Hira was getting agitated. "Please go. They might come any moment. But remember about what I've told you. I want to go away. But I don't know anyone here." Hira's eyes were wet with tears. "Please don't cry. We'll tell our Uncle Henry," the twins tried to console her though their hearts sank at the idea. He was sure to rebuff them for their over-active imagination.

Fortunately, Uncle Henry was in town. Before dinner, the twins discussed about how to approach Uncle Henry with their extraordinary tale. For all they knew, Hira could be playing a prank. But she had looked too distraught for that. After dinner, as they sat around the fireplace, it was 'coffee-for-uncle-and-hot-chocolate-for-them' time, June suddenly piped in brightly, "Uncle, you always tell us stories about the hills. Today, I'll tell you a story."

Uncle Henry smiled indulgently, "It better be good."



“You judge,” June countered, avoiding Jocelyn’s eyes boring into her.

“Now there was this cottage, everybody called it a haunted house, in one of these hills,” June started, “Nobody went to the house. They said they could hear music coming out of the house.”

“Like Williamson’s Cottage?” Uncle Henry smiled. Jocelyn started and stopped herself from gasping.

“Yes, you can say that. Now this boy, Robin was a daring one. He didn’t believe in ghosts.”

“Good for him,” Uncle Henry quipped.

“He passed this house everyday on the way to the school,” Uncle Henry looked suspiciously at her.

June was in a hurry to finish, “One day he heard music coming out from the house. He went to explore. There was somebody after all... a girl.” She stopped and was at loss for words.

“What, the story’s finished?” Uncle Henry laughed. There was no use pretending. Jocelyn and June broke in together, fumbling over the words but telling him about Hira and the orchids.

“Orchids?” for the first time Uncle Henry looked grave. The lines on his forehead deepened. The twins knew that it was time to keep quiet. He was in one of his thinking moods. He got up after sometime, and made a call. They were right. He was calling Singh uncle, a senior



police officer and a family friend. Words like, orchids, smuggler, Guwahati airport were mentioned quite a few times. After his conversation was over, Uncle Henry confided, "I think we are into something. There have been reports of rare plants and butterflies getting smuggled from the North East through Guwahati and Kolkata airports. But don't you talk about it to anyone, not even Kong Mary. Go to school as usual. Don't look at the house and ignore the girl even if she calls you. We'll keep an eye on the house, don't you worry. If the girl is there and she's telling the truth we'll rescue her. But first we want to catch her uncle red-handed. Otherwise he'd say it's just a story made up by this girl."

It was easier said than done. For Jocelyn and June they were agonising three days, trying to keep the promise. On the third day, when they returned from school, a surprise awaited them.

Hira!

She was sipping tea and biting onto Kong's home baked cookies. Uncle Henry and DIG Singh were there too, beaming.

"You girls really did a great job. Hira was telling the truth. We've been keeping a vigil on the house with plain-clothes policemen. We saw these two men coming out of the house this afternoon with a bag; they tried to run away when we asked them to stop. Hira's uncle belonged to an international gang that operates in these areas.

They smuggle out rare species of orchids indigenous to this region and sell them at a very high price outside. The buyers can be anybody—researchers or firms who can then grow them in their own country."

"And the music was played to scare away the people, isn't it?" the sisters spoke in unison.

"Oh, there are people who like to believe anything," Uncle Henry's eyes twinkled mischievously. The sisters had the grace to bow down and apologise, "Sorry, uncle!"

June found an excuse to break the embarrassed moment and blurted, "And Hira? Where will she go?"

"At the moment she is with us. The police is trying to contact people in her home country."

"Great! Till then...!" the twins jumped in joy "...so many stories to listen to from Hira." As for Hira, she looked absolutely a happy and calm girl as she smiled at them from the other corner of the room.



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