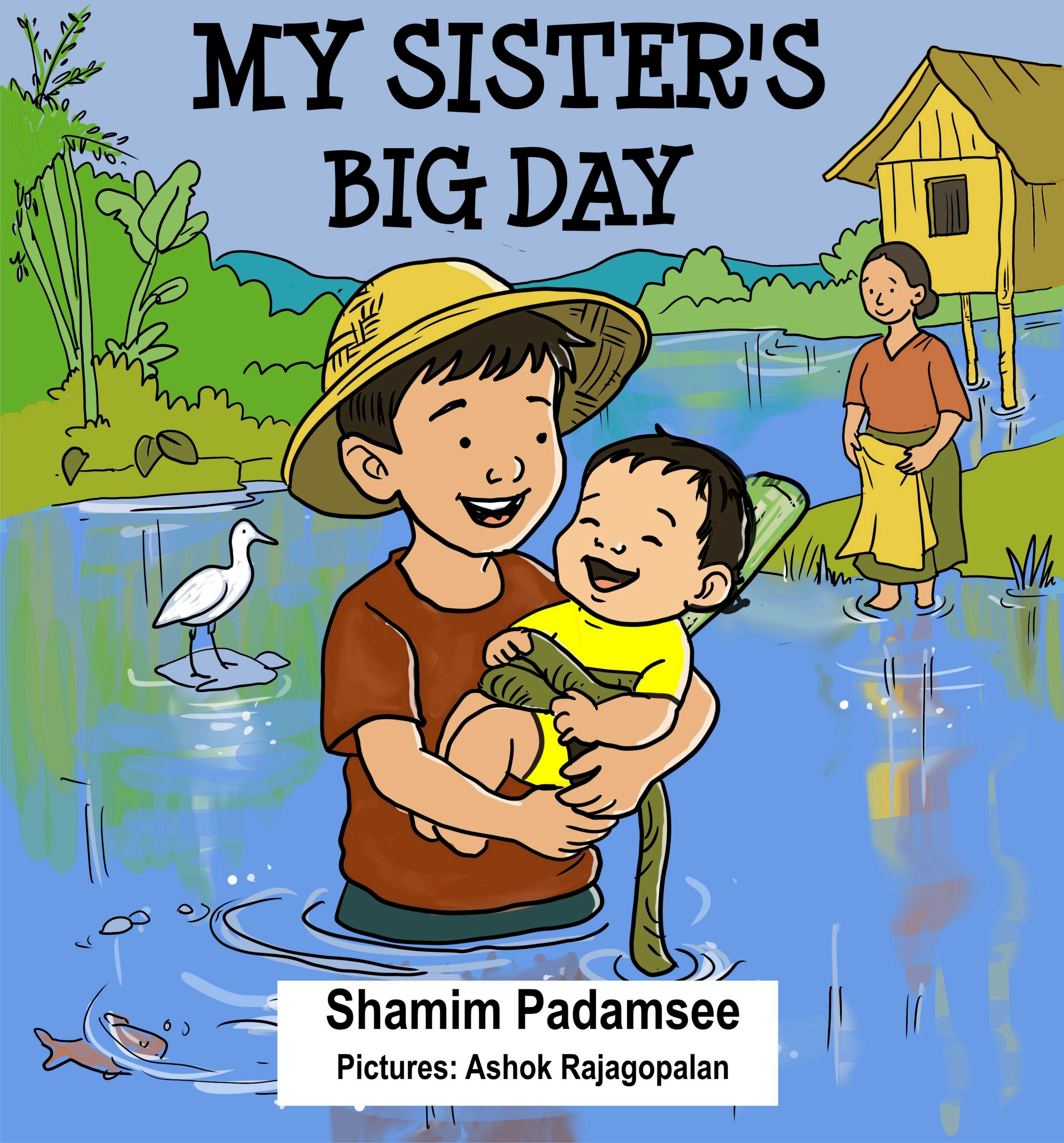


MY SISTER'S BIG DAY



Shamim Padamsee

Pictures: Ashok Rajagopalan

"It's my little sister Suu Kyi's Big Day today!"



"Come home early, Maung Maung," Mama calls out as I get ready to leave. "And don't forget to bring a strong banana stem!"

“Swish, swoosh,” I set off toward our farm, moving the paddle with my leg just as my father had taught me, steering carefully between the water-lilies.



“Hey, wait!” my friend shouts from behind,
riding his big, black buffalo. “Race me!”

“Not today,” I yell back. “It’s
my sister’s Big day, and I’ve
got errands to run.”

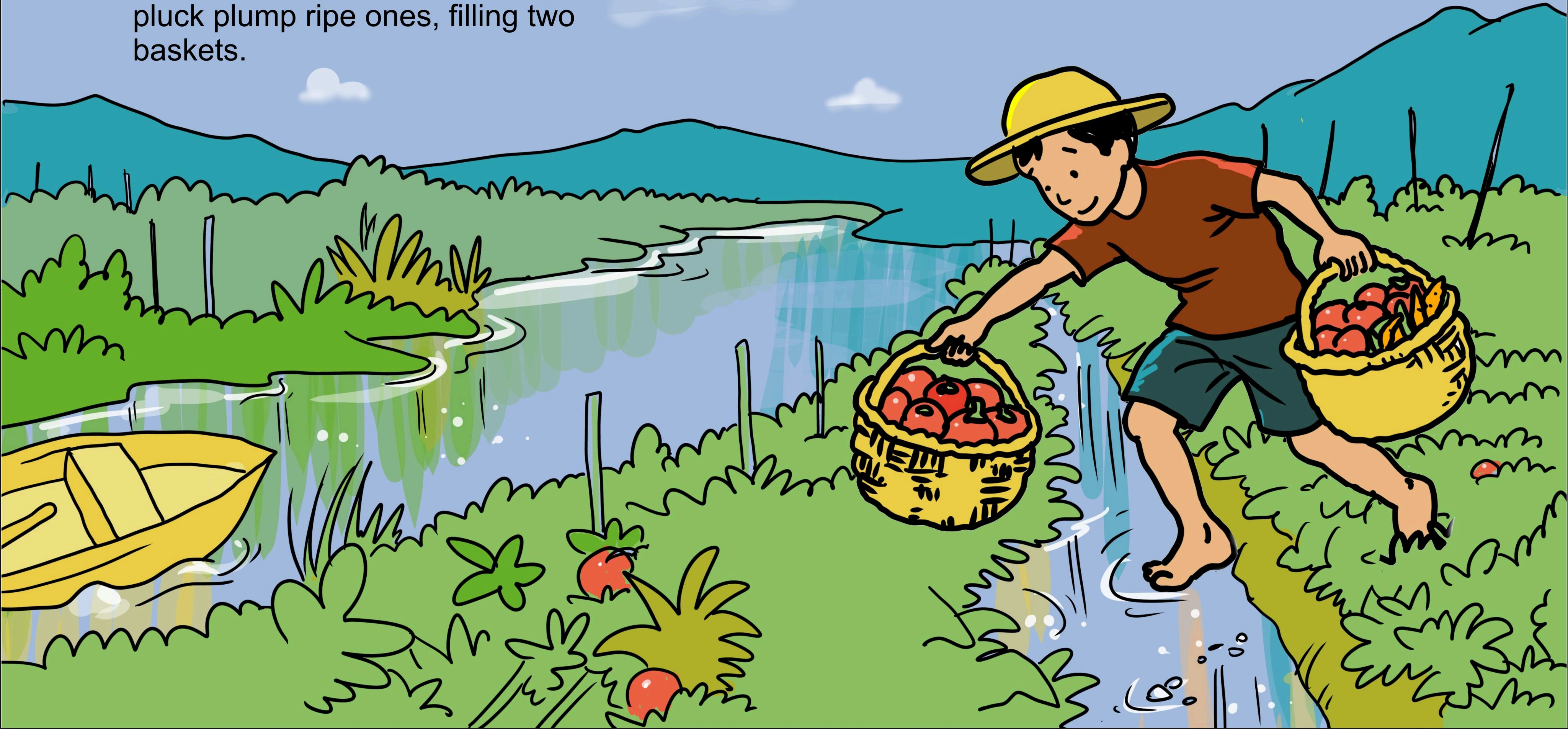


Soon, I reach the floating farm and step onto it. It feels like walking on a teetering, tottering trampoline.



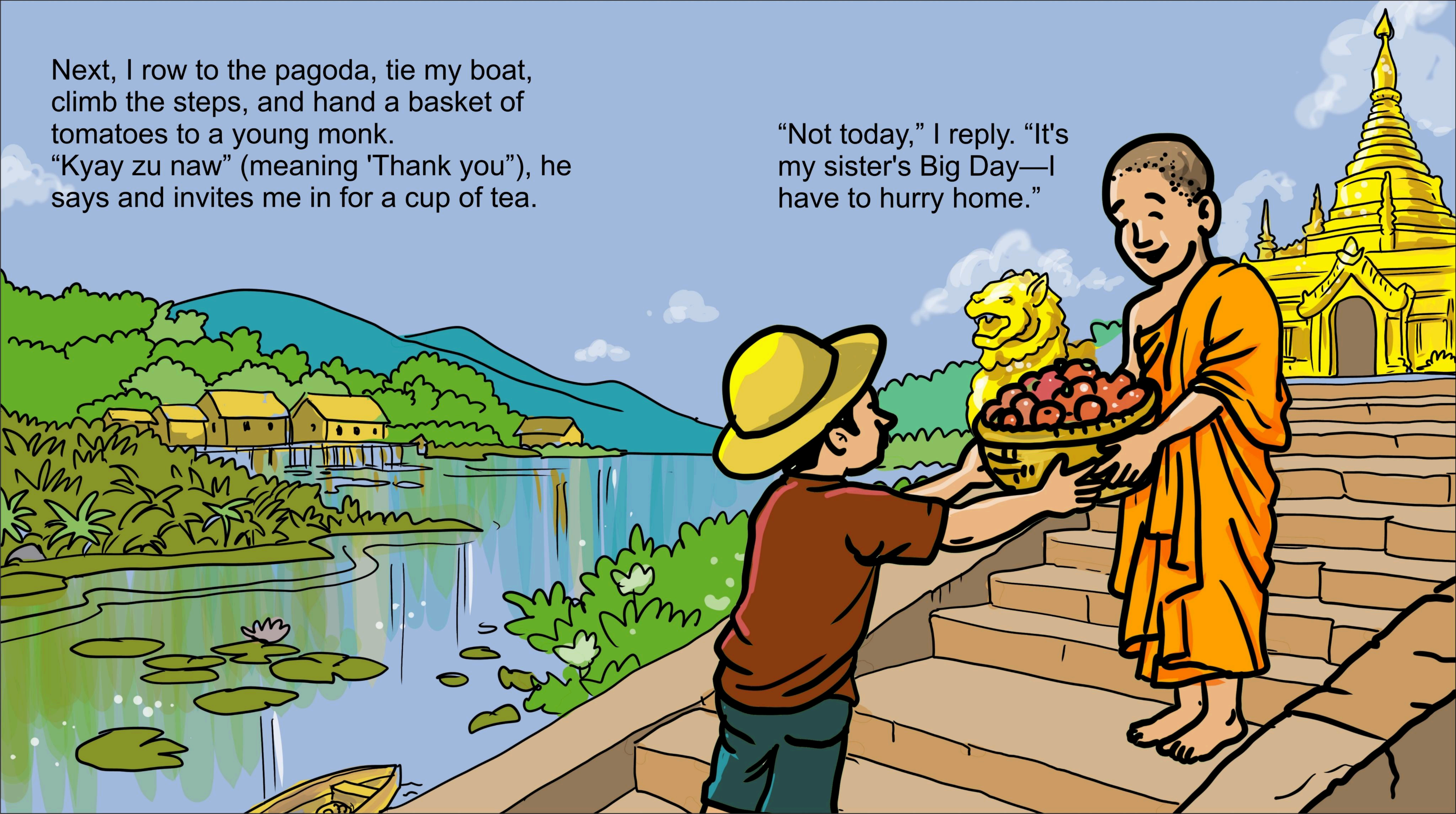
The farm is full of all kinds of vegetables. Today, I've come to pick tomatoes. I balance carefully as I pluck plump ripe ones, filling two baskets.

I spot some green beans and gather those too—Mama will be pleased.



Next, I row to the pagoda, tie my boat,
climb the steps, and hand a basket of
tomatoes to a young monk.
“Kyay zu naw” (meaning ‘Thank you’), he
says and invites me in for a cup of tea.

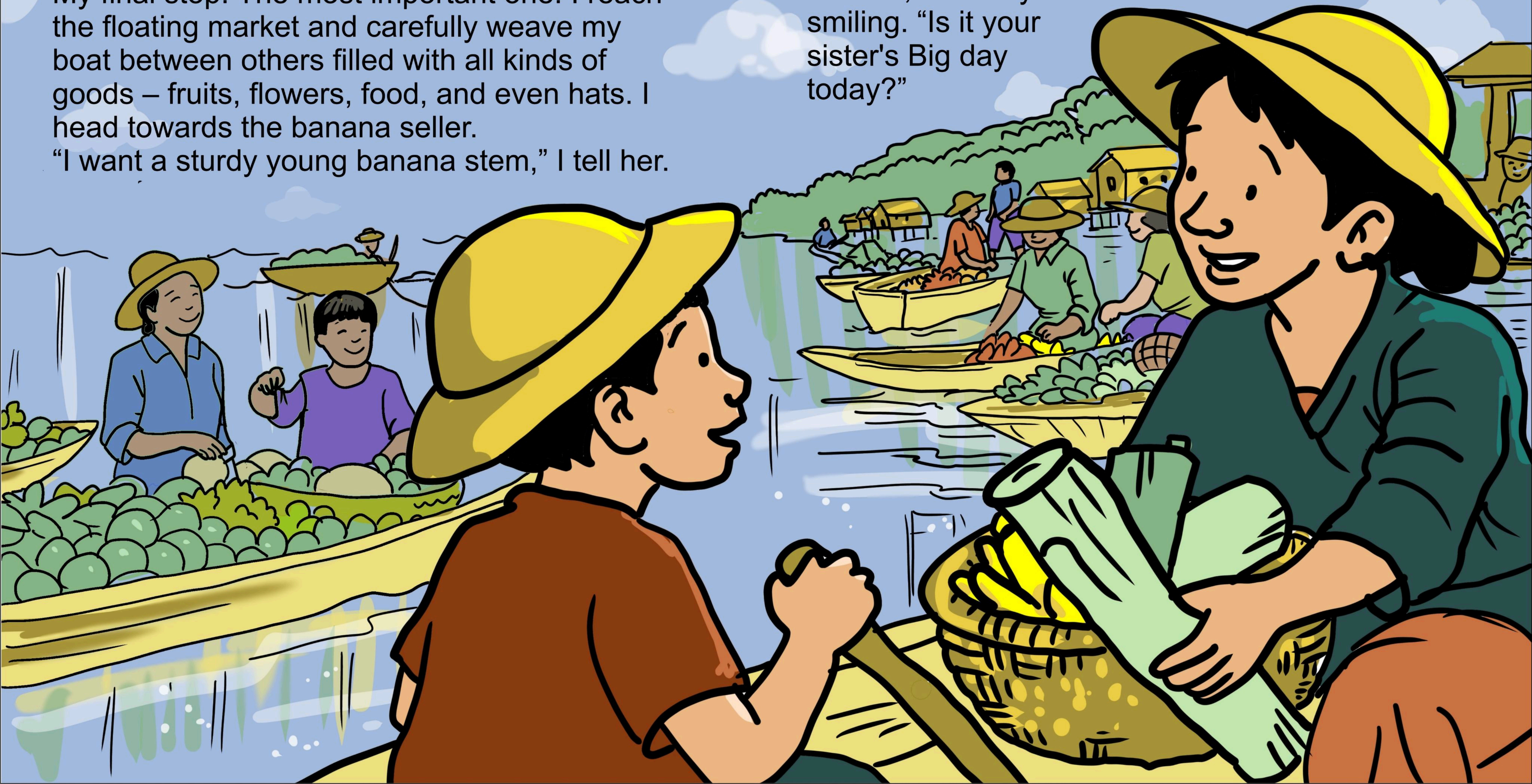
“Not today,” I reply. “It’s
my sister’s Big Day—I
have to hurry home.”



My final stop. The most important one. I reach the floating market and carefully weave my boat between others filled with all kinds of goods – fruits, flowers, food, and even hats. I head towards the banana seller.

“I want a sturdy young banana stem,” I tell her.

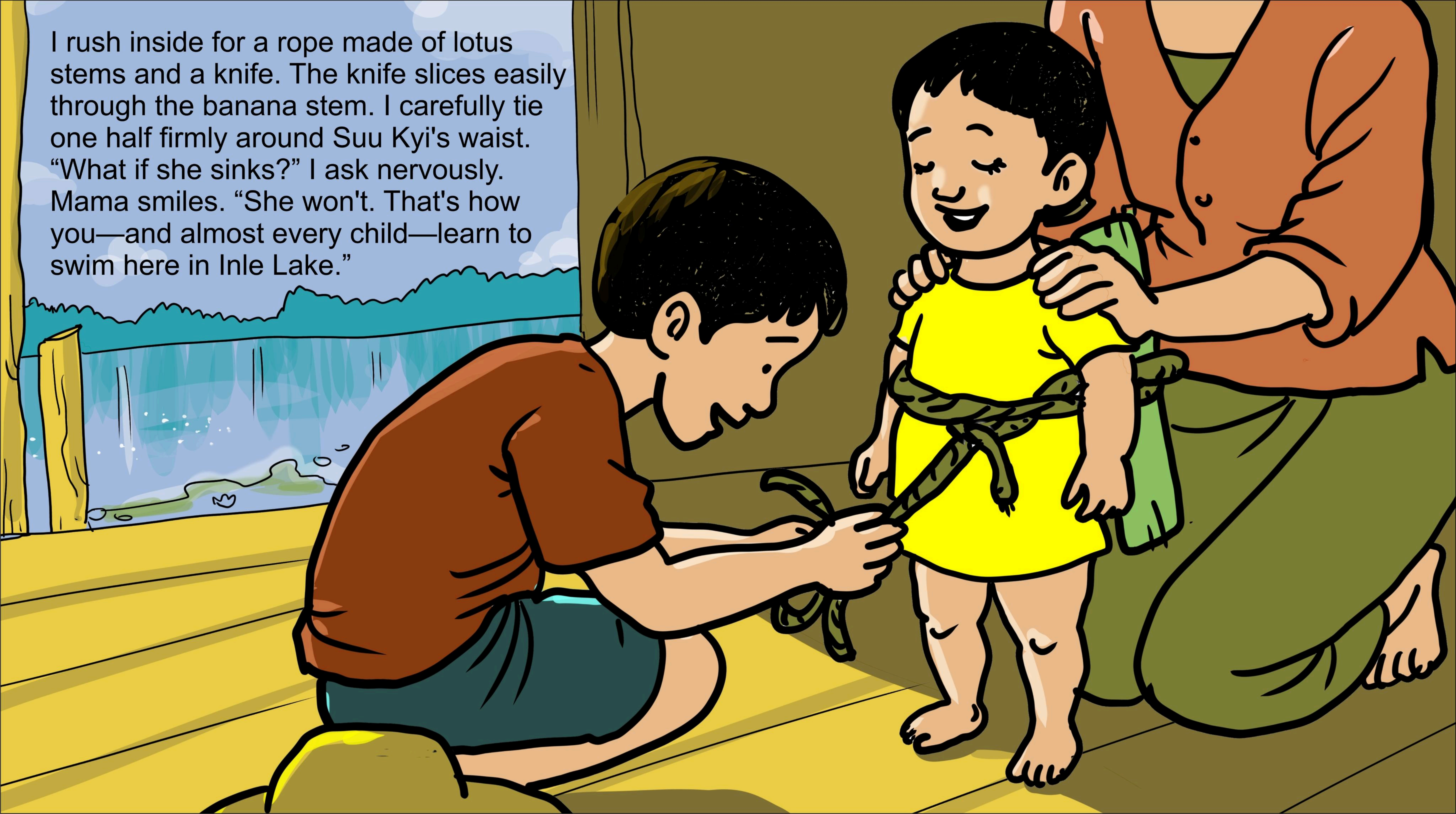
“Oh Ho,” she says smiling. “Is it your sister's Big day today?”



Back home, I park the boat under our stilt house. Mama is waiting with my baby sister in her arms. “Ah, I see, you got the banana stem—for Suu Kyi's Big Day.”



I rush inside for a rope made of lotus stems and a knife. The knife slices easily through the banana stem. I carefully tie one half firmly around Suu Kyi's waist. "What if she sinks?" I ask nervously. Mama smiles. "She won't. That's how you—and almost every child—learn to swim here in Inle Lake."



I lower her carefully into the cool water.
She's floating! The banana stem keeps
her steady.
“Eeeeeee!” she squeals with joy, flapping
her arms—it's her first time! She squiggles
and squirms”
Splish! Splash! Splish! Splash! She
paddles like a little frog, kicking her
dimpled little legs. My baby sister is
swimming!”

We are both soaked, laughing and
happy! Suddenly, the delicious smell of
Mama's fish stew wafts down,
“Mmmm.” I sniff deeply as my belly
gives a loud rumble.



I scoop Suu Kyi out of the water. She wiggles and giggles and then rests her dripping wet head on my shoulder. "You were great, my little duckling!" I tell her and plant a kiss on her forehead.

Suu Kyi's Big Day is a huge success!"



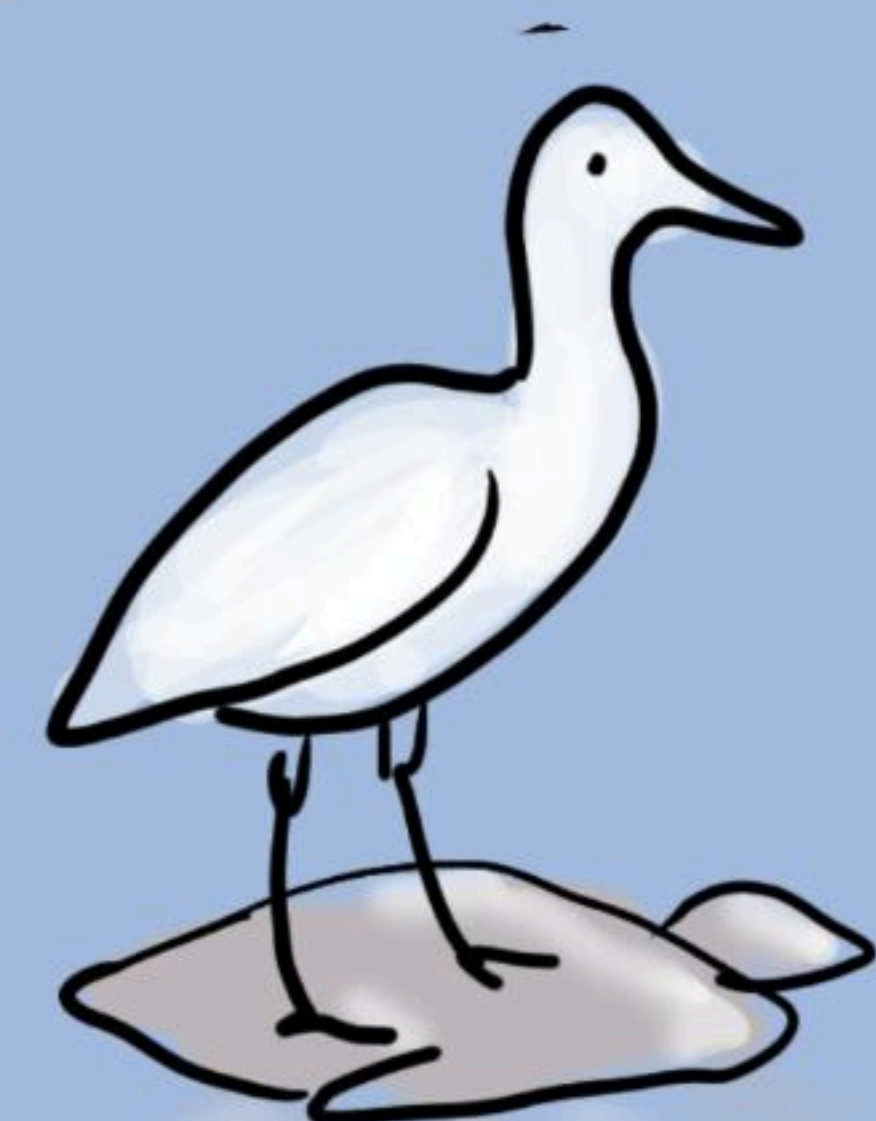
Fun Facts About Inle Lake, Myanmar

1. A Home on the Water

Legend goes that long ago, the Intha people, fleeing conflict requested refuge from the local ruler. He said, “You may live here as long as you do not settle on the land.” So they built their homes on stilts over the lake and created a unique way of life on the water.

2. Villages That Float

Entire communities live on Inle Lake. There are houses, schools, monasteries, and even beautiful pagodas built above the water. They bathe, wash clothes, and carry out daily chores right on the lake.



3. Floating Farms and Markets

Farmers grow vegetables on floating gardens made from reeds and compacted grasses. People buy and sell goods from their boats.

4. Swimming Is an Important Skill

Because people live surrounded by water, children learn to swim from a very young age. It helps them stay safe.

5. The One-Legged Rowers

People travel everywhere by boat. Inle Lake is famous for its fishermen who stand on one leg and row with the other! This unusual technique helps them see over the tall reeds while steering their boats.

