

Theo and the Giant Plastic Ball



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Published in December 2004
© 2004 United Nations Environment Programme
ISBN: 92-807-2462-2

Theo and the Giant Plastic Ball is part of the Tunza Environmental Series for Children, sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

"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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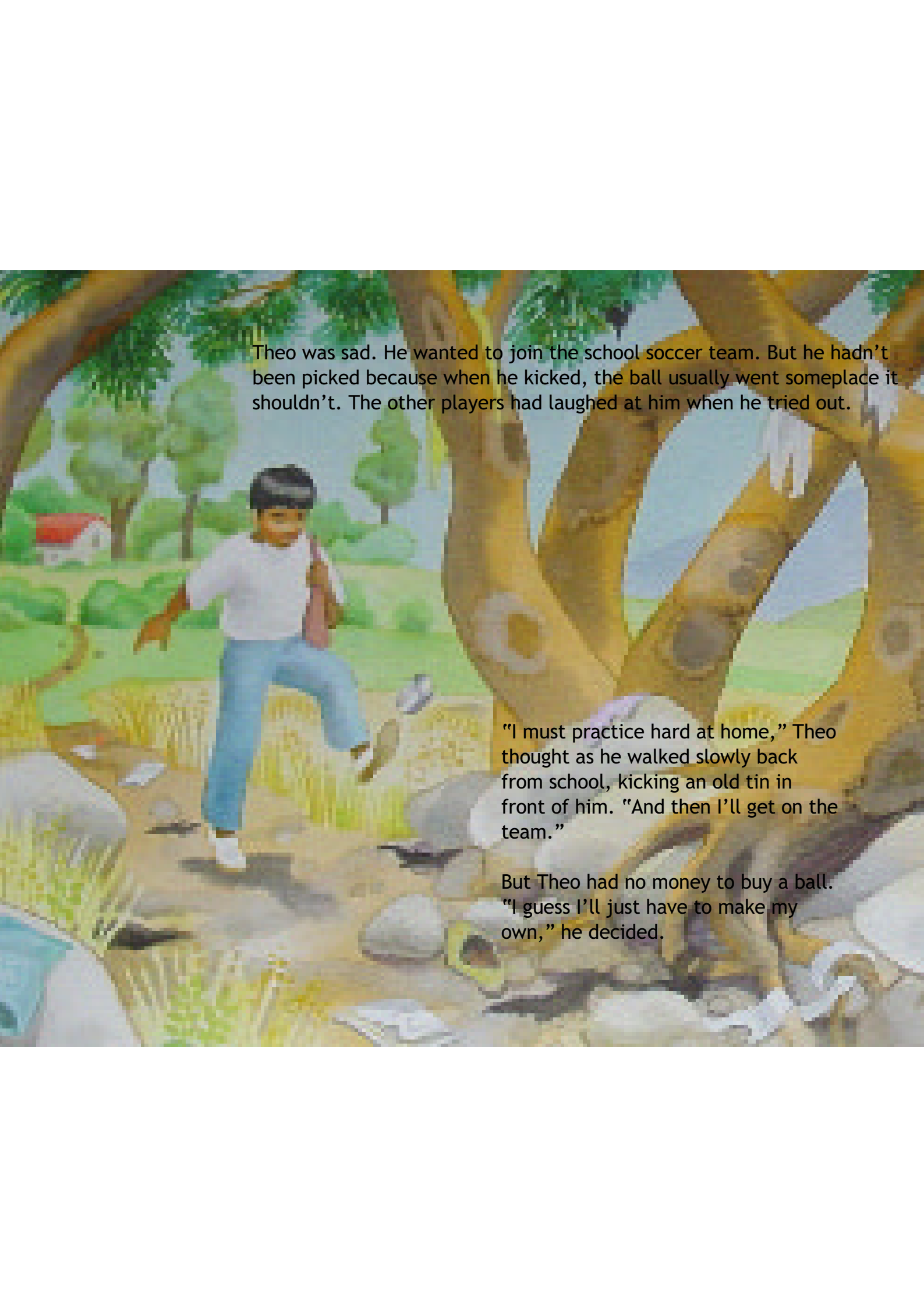
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Printed by Interprint Limited, Malta

A young boy with dark hair, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and blue pants, is walking on a dirt path in a park. He is kicking a small, round, silver tin can with his right foot. The path is lined with large, textured tree trunks. In the background, there are green trees and a small red-roofed house. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

Theo was sad. He wanted to join the school soccer team. But he hadn't been picked because when he kicked, the ball usually went someplace it shouldn't. The other players had laughed at him when he tried out.

"I must practice hard at home," Theo thought as he walked slowly back from school, kicking an old tin in front of him. "And then I'll get on the team."

But Theo had no money to buy a ball. "I guess I'll just have to make my own," he decided.



With that, he started to pick up plastic bags along the roadside. It wasn't hard—there were lots of them. He wadded them up and tied them together.

Before he knew it, he had gathered all the plastic bags along his way home—and had created a solid little ball.

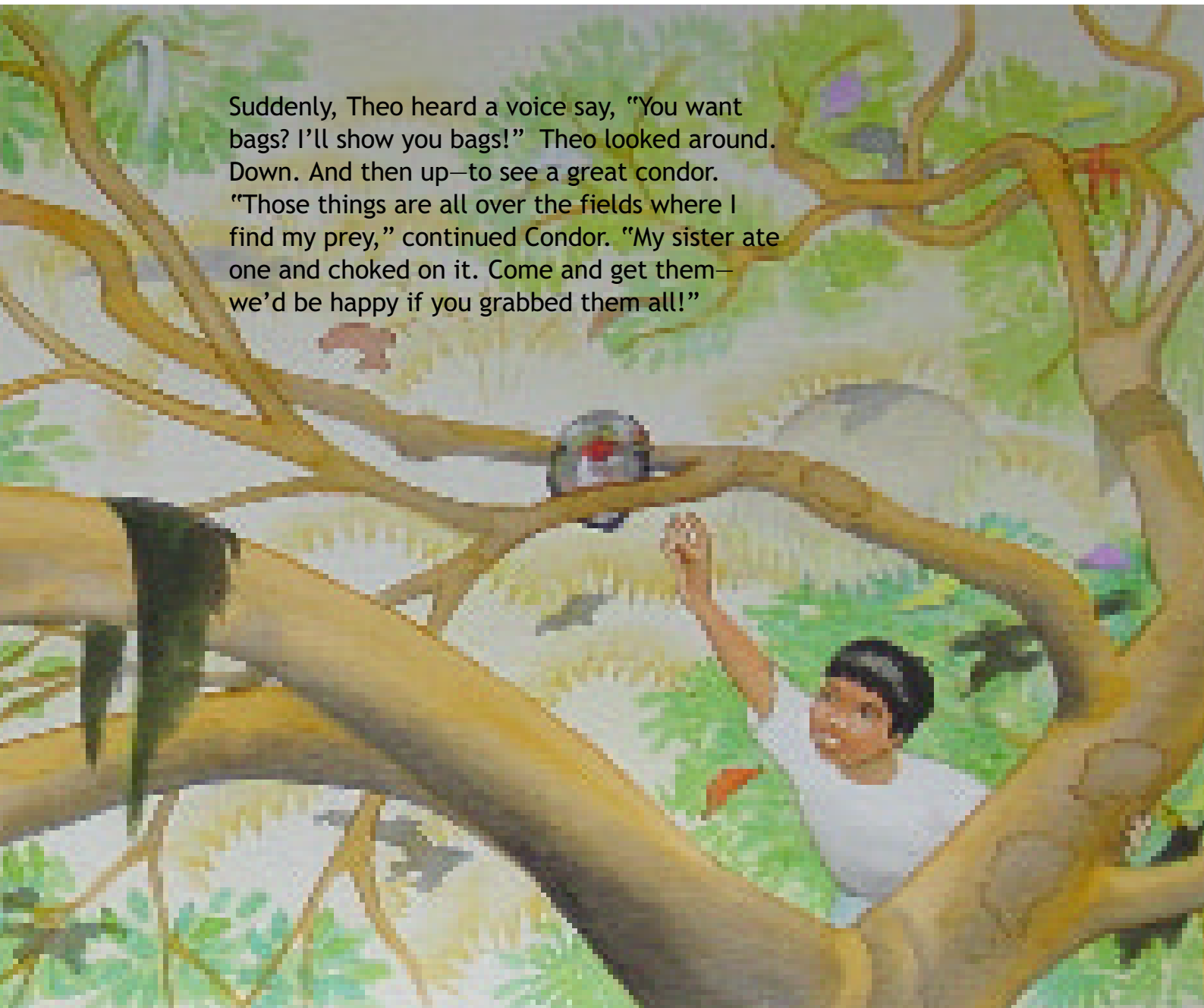
He kicked it, and the ball went flying into the top branches of a tree.

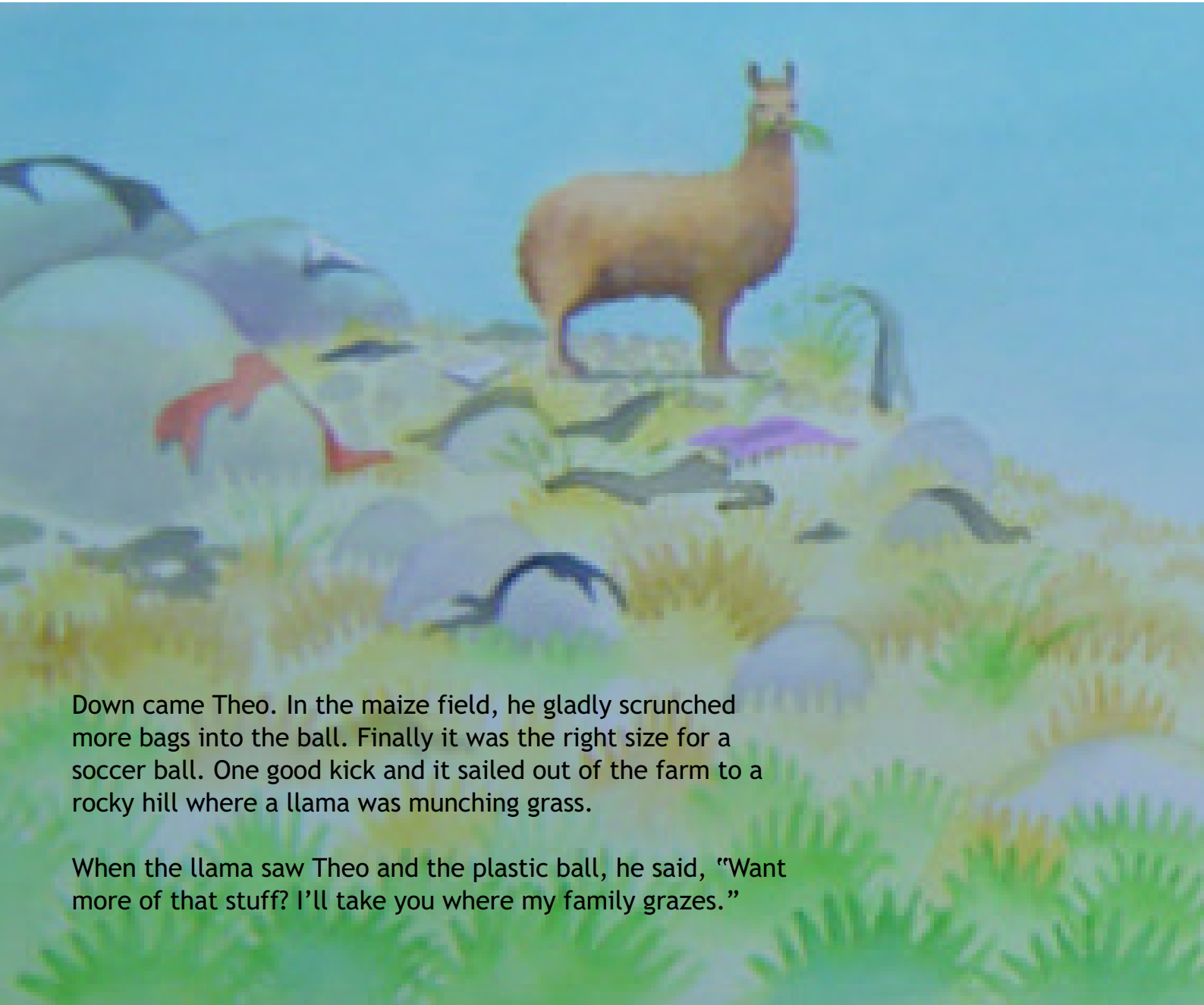




Up Theo climbed to rescue his ball. He was amazed to see how many plastic bags were caught on branches. They were pink, green, yellow, brown and white—the villagers called them “village flowers,” he’d heard. He decided to “pick” them for his ball.

Suddenly, Theo heard a voice say, "You want bags? I'll show you bags!" Theo looked around. Down. And then up—to see a great condor. "Those things are all over the fields where I find my prey," continued Condor. "My sister ate one and choked on it. Come and get them—we'd be happy if you grabbed them all!"

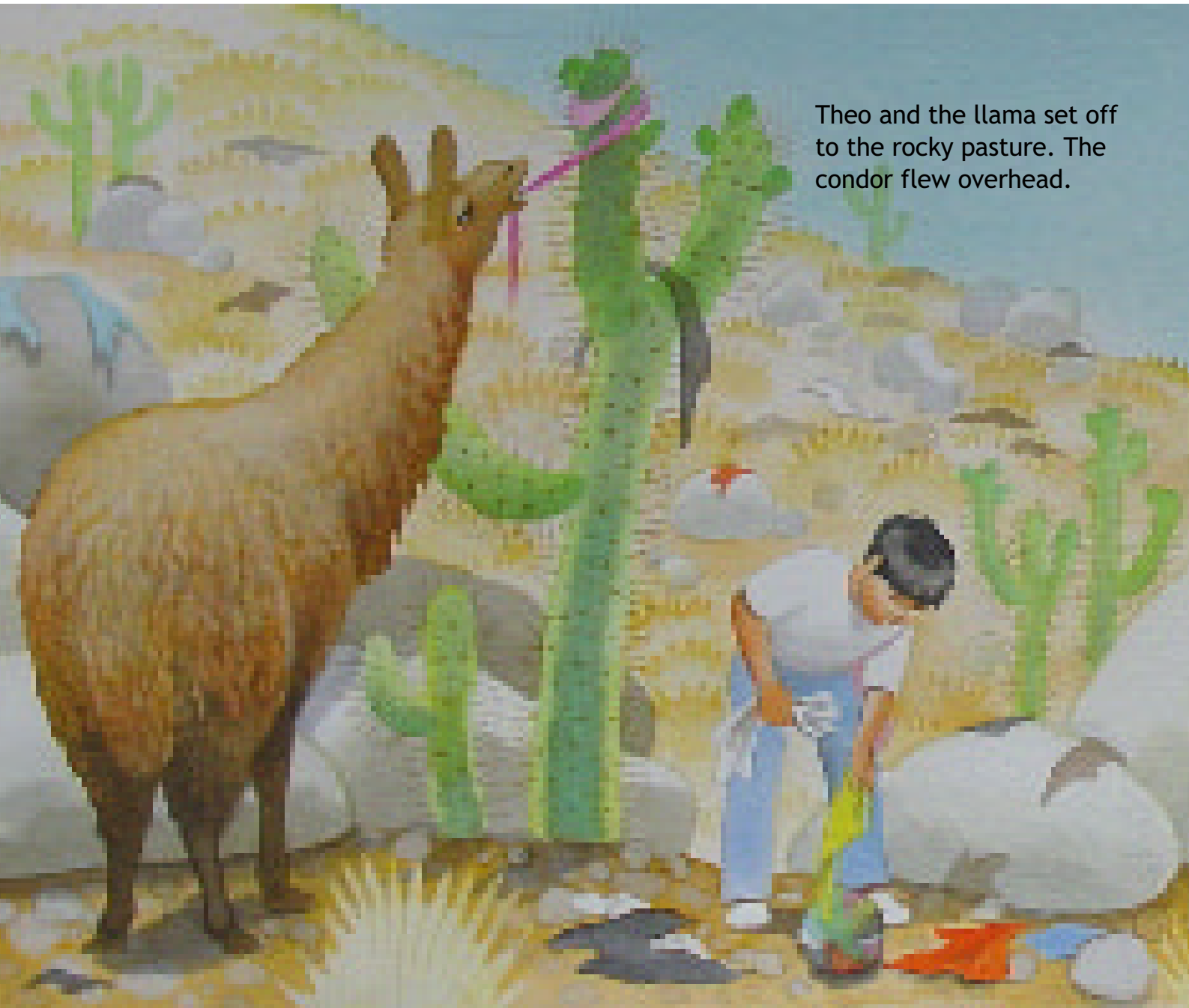




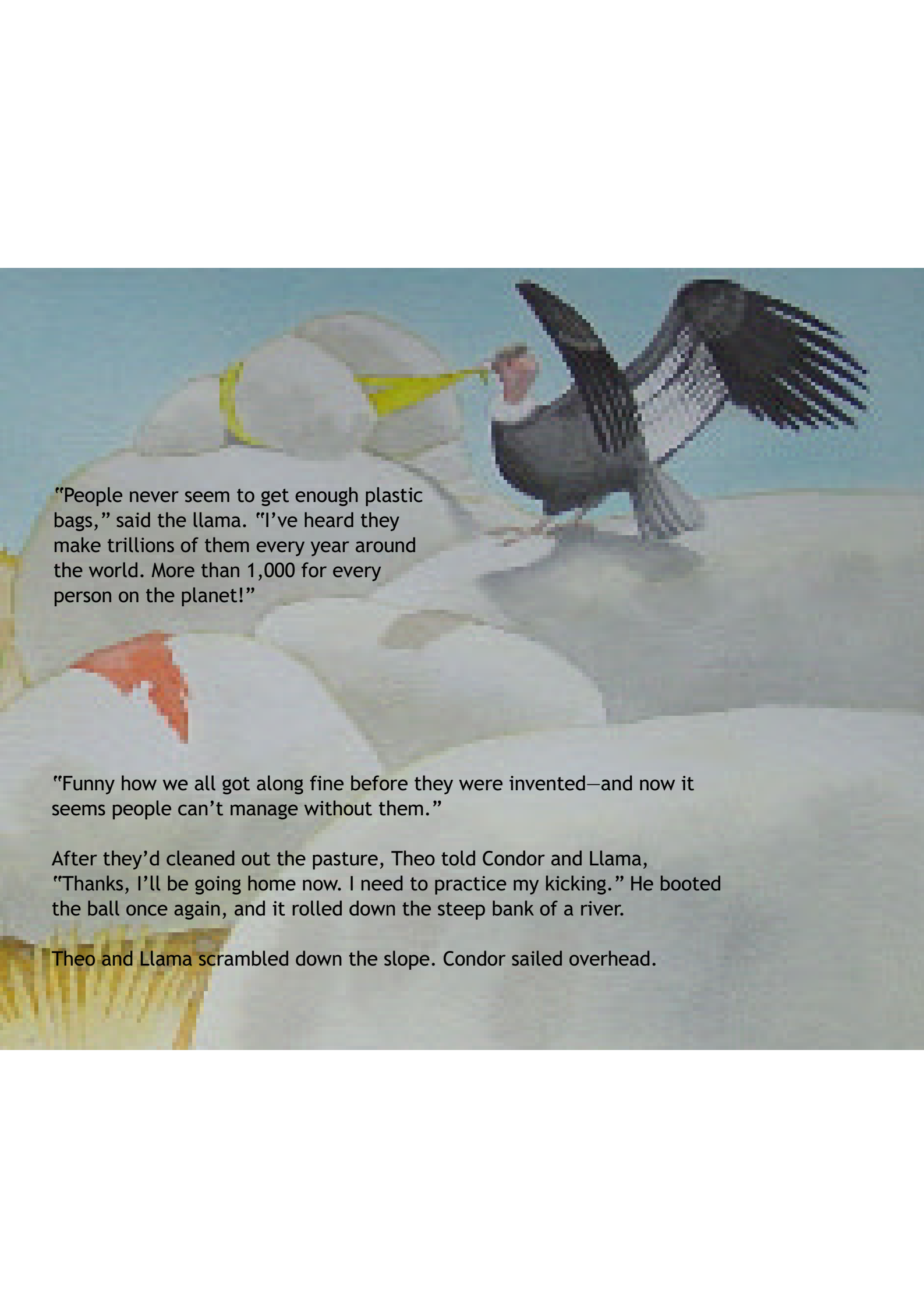
Down came Theo. In the maize field, he gladly scrunched more bags into the ball. Finally it was the right size for a soccer ball. One good kick and it sailed out of the farm to a rocky hill where a llama was munching grass.

When the llama saw Theo and the plastic ball, he said, “Want more of that stuff? I’ll take you where my family grazes.”





Theo and the llama set off to the rocky pasture. The condor flew overhead.

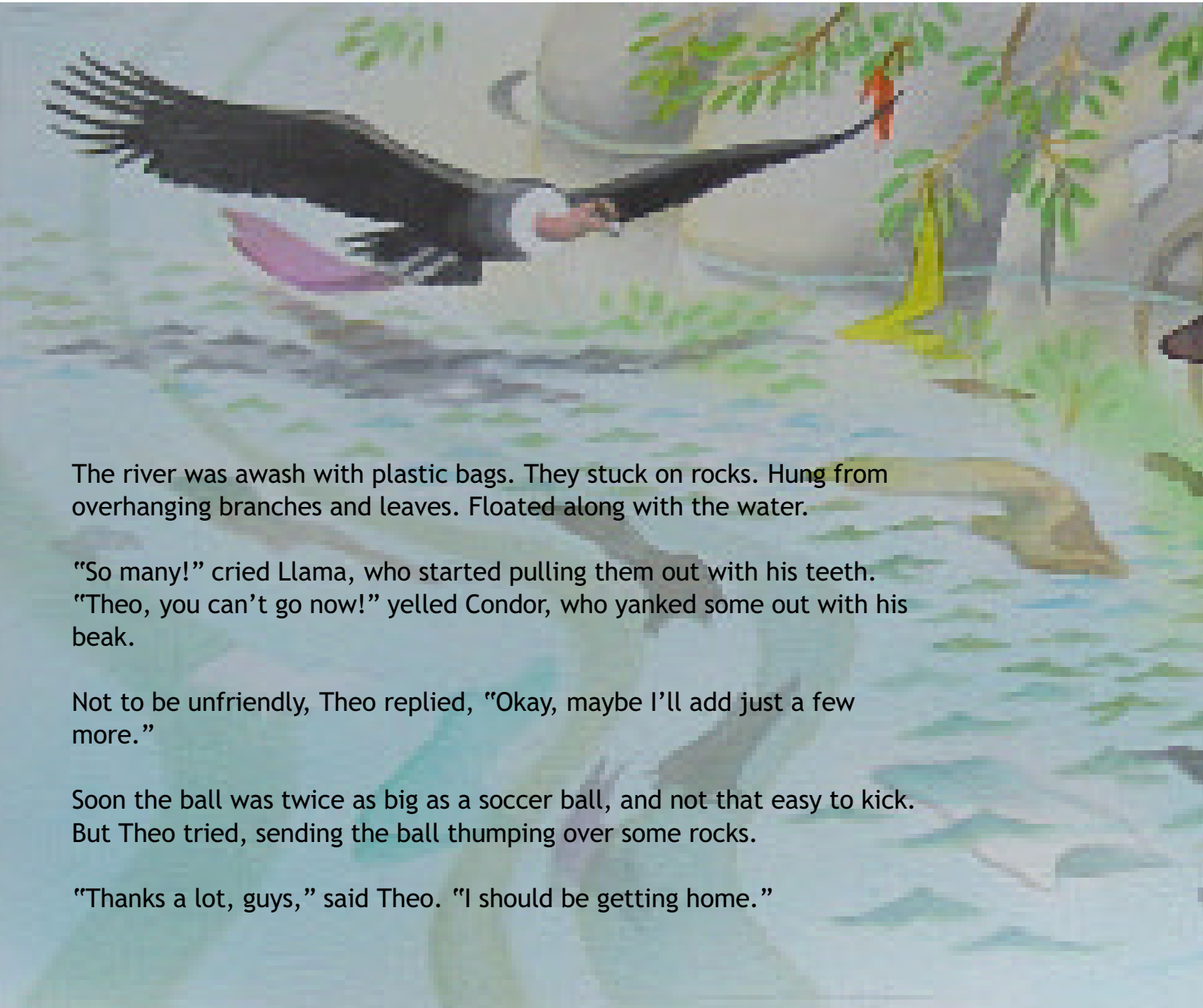
A llama and a condor are on a mountain slope. The llama is on the left, and the condor is on the right, with its wings spread. They are surrounded by a large number of white plastic bags. The llama is holding a yellow bag in its mouth. The condor is looking at the llama. The background is a clear blue sky.

“People never seem to get enough plastic bags,” said the llama. “I’ve heard they make trillions of them every year around the world. More than 1,000 for every person on the planet!”

“Funny how we all got along fine before they were invented—and now it seems people can’t manage without them.”

After they’d cleaned out the pasture, Theo told Condor and Llama, “Thanks, I’ll be going home now. I need to practice my kicking.” He booted the ball once again, and it rolled down the steep bank of a river.

Theo and Llama scrambled down the slope. Condor sailed overhead.



The river was awash with plastic bags. They stuck on rocks. Hung from overhanging branches and leaves. Floated along with the water.

“So many!” cried Llama, who started pulling them out with his teeth.
“Theo, you can’t go now!” yelled Condor, who yanked some out with his beak.

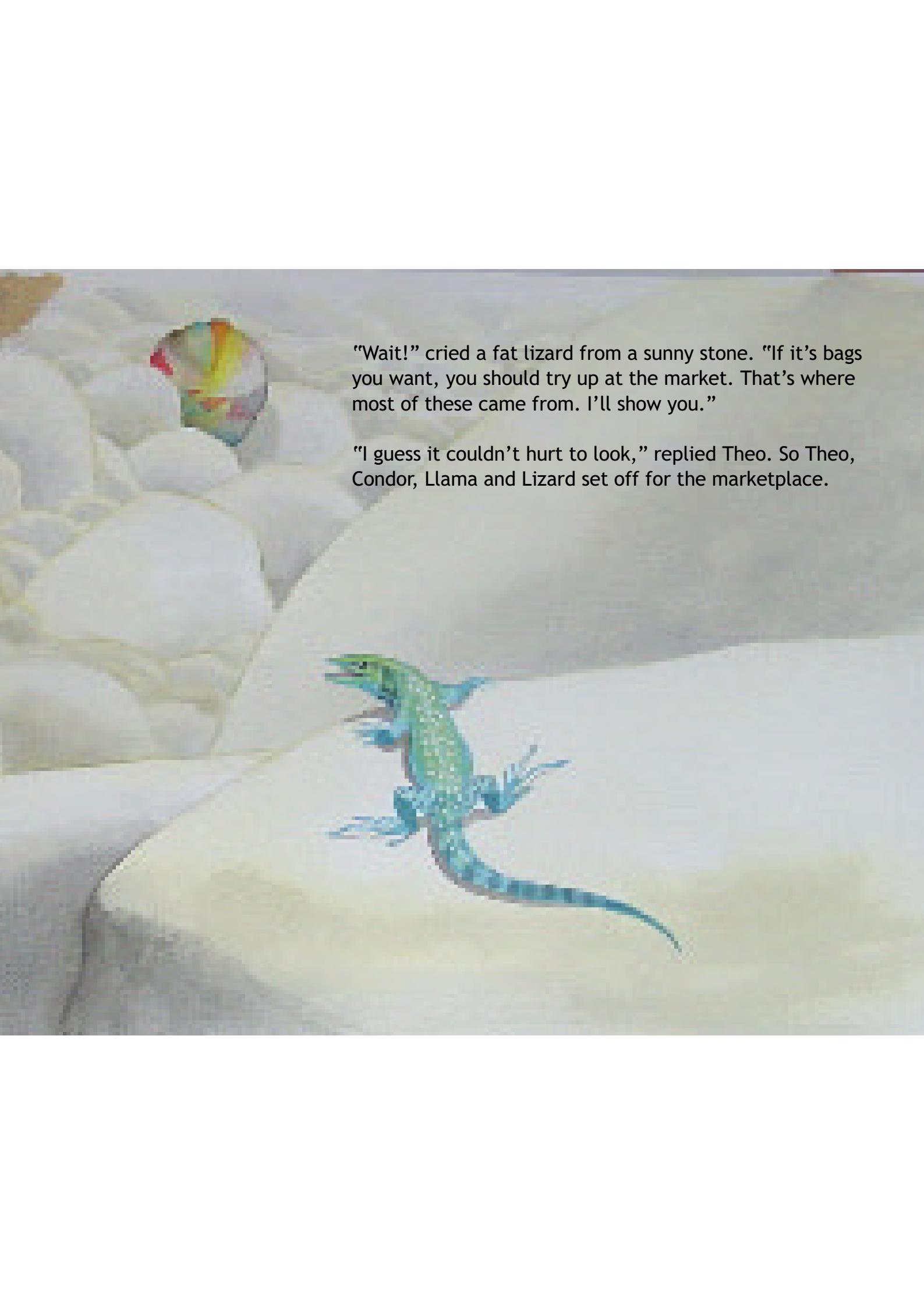
Not to be unfriendly, Theo replied, “Okay, maybe I’ll add just a few more.”

Soon the ball was twice as big as a soccer ball, and not that easy to kick. But Theo tried, sending the ball thumping over some rocks.

“Thanks a lot, guys,” said Theo. “I should be getting home.”



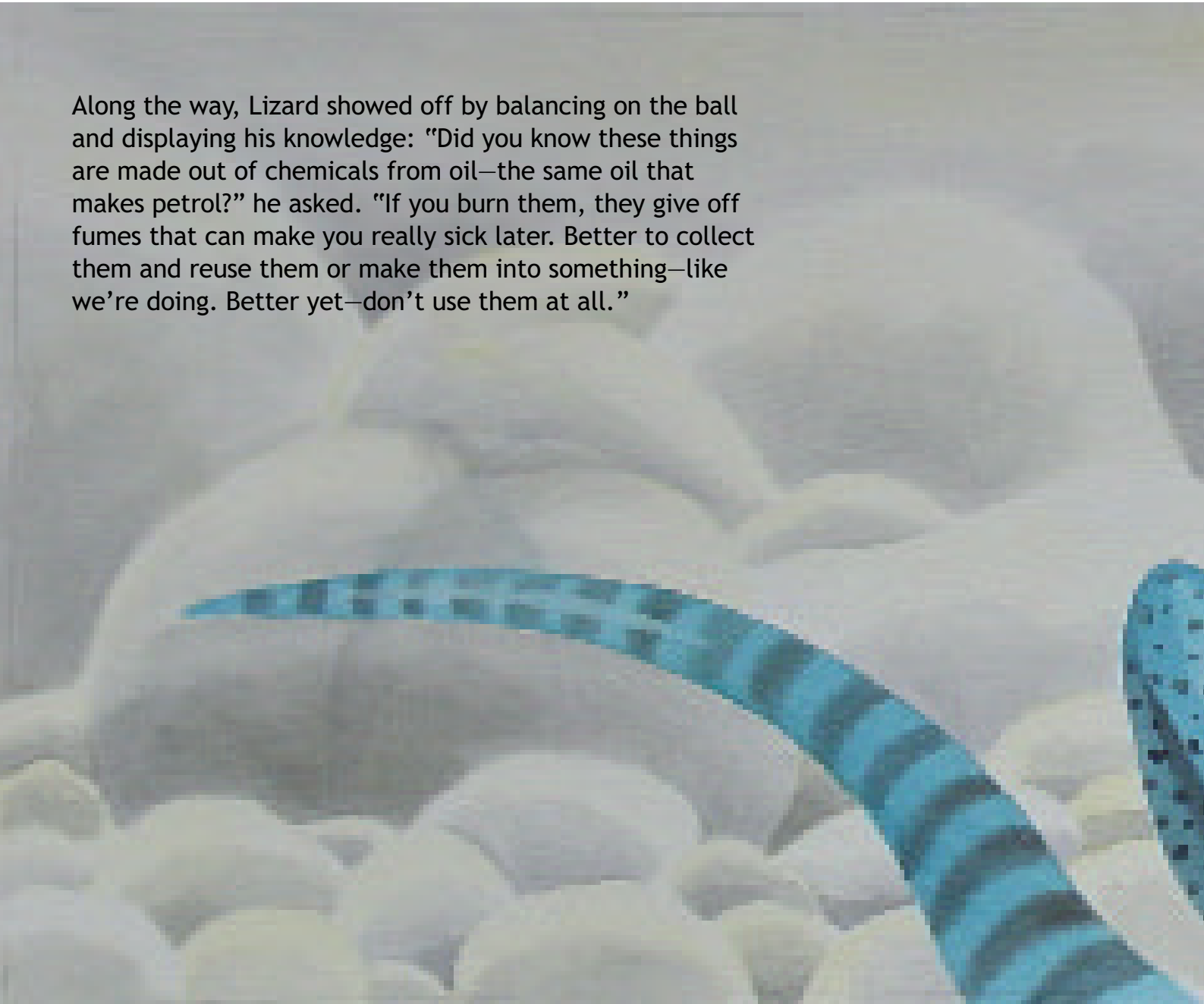


A vibrant, multi-colored lizard with shades of red, yellow, green, and blue is perched on a large, smooth, white rock. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape of more white rocks under a bright sky.

“Wait!” cried a fat lizard from a sunny stone. “If it’s bags you want, you should try up at the market. That’s where most of these came from. I’ll show you.”

“I guess it couldn’t hurt to look,” replied Theo. So Theo, Condor, Llama and Lizard set off for the marketplace.

Along the way, Lizard showed off by balancing on the ball and displaying his knowledge: “Did you know these things are made out of chemicals from oil—the same oil that makes petrol?” he asked. “If you burn them, they give off fumes that can make you really sick later. Better to collect them and reuse them or make them into something—like we’re doing. Better yet—don’t use them at all.”





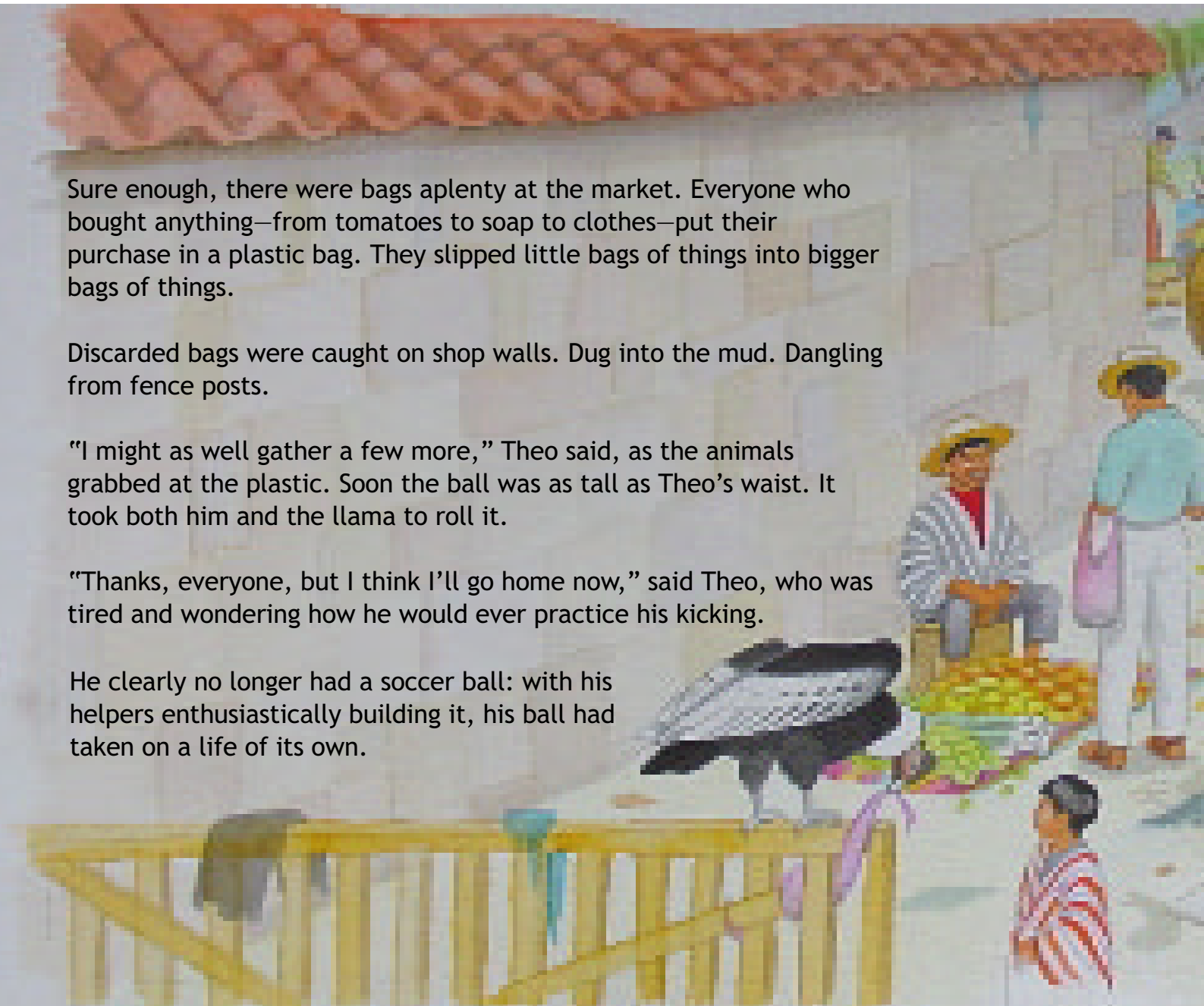
Sure enough, there were bags aplenty at the market. Everyone who bought anything—from tomatoes to soap to clothes—put their purchase in a plastic bag. They slipped little bags of things into bigger bags of things.

Discarded bags were caught on shop walls. Dug into the mud. Dangling from fence posts.

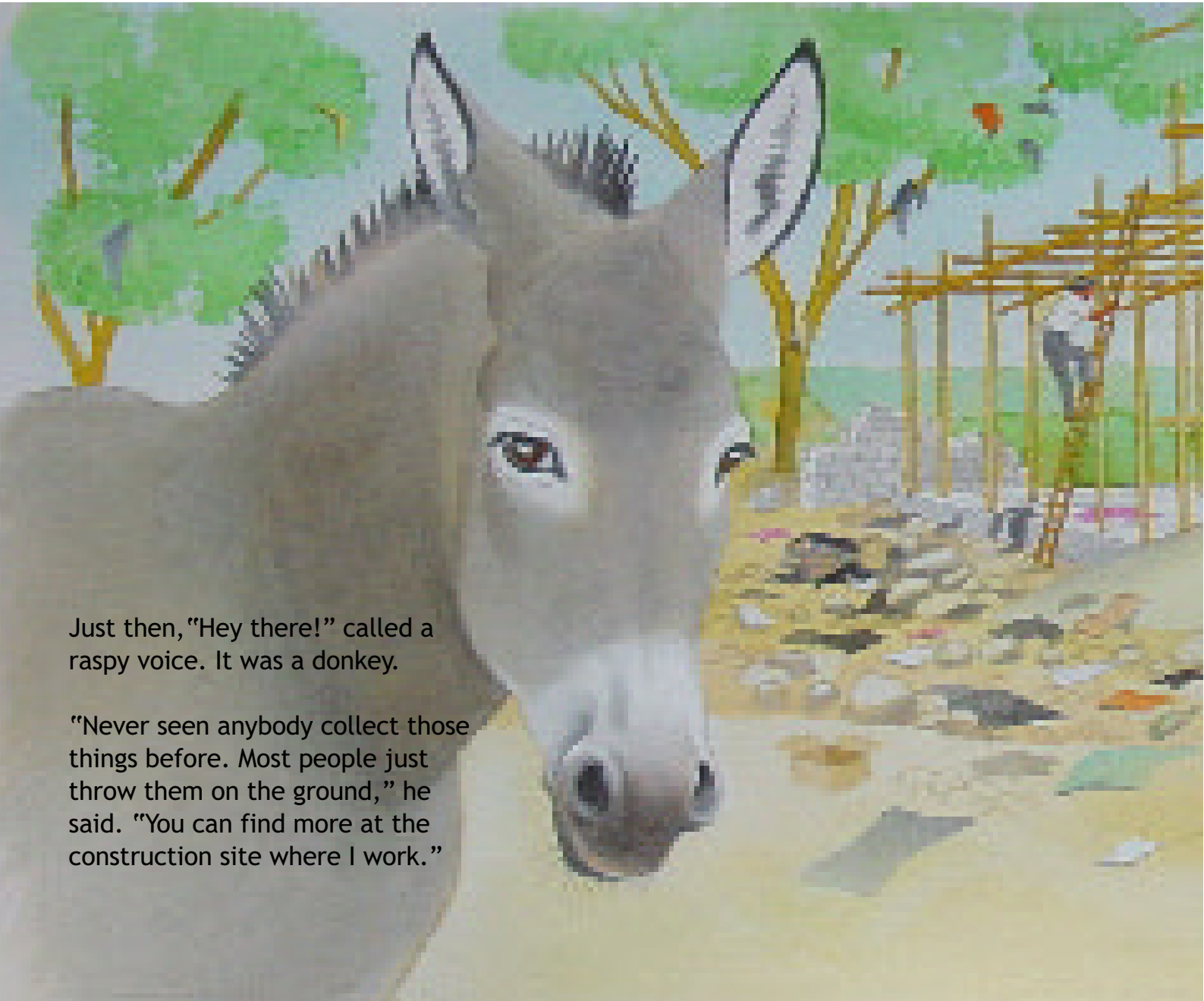
“I might as well gather a few more,” Theo said, as the animals grabbed at the plastic. Soon the ball was as tall as Theo’s waist. It took both him and the llama to roll it.

“Thanks, everyone, but I think I’ll go home now,” said Theo, who was tired and wondering how he would ever practice his kicking.

He clearly no longer had a soccer ball: with his helpers enthusiastically building it, his ball had taken on a life of its own.

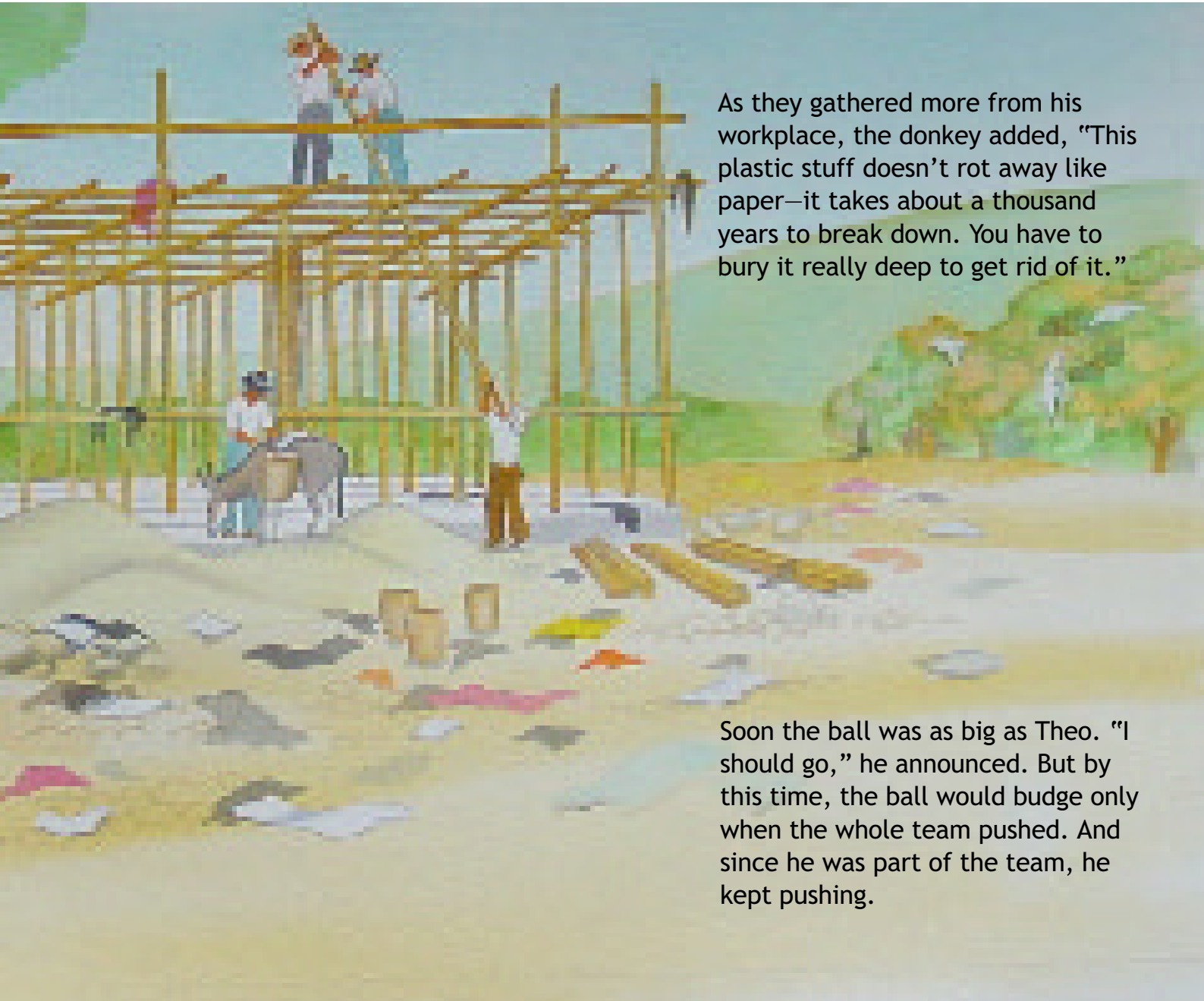






Just then, "Hey there!" called a raspy voice. It was a donkey.

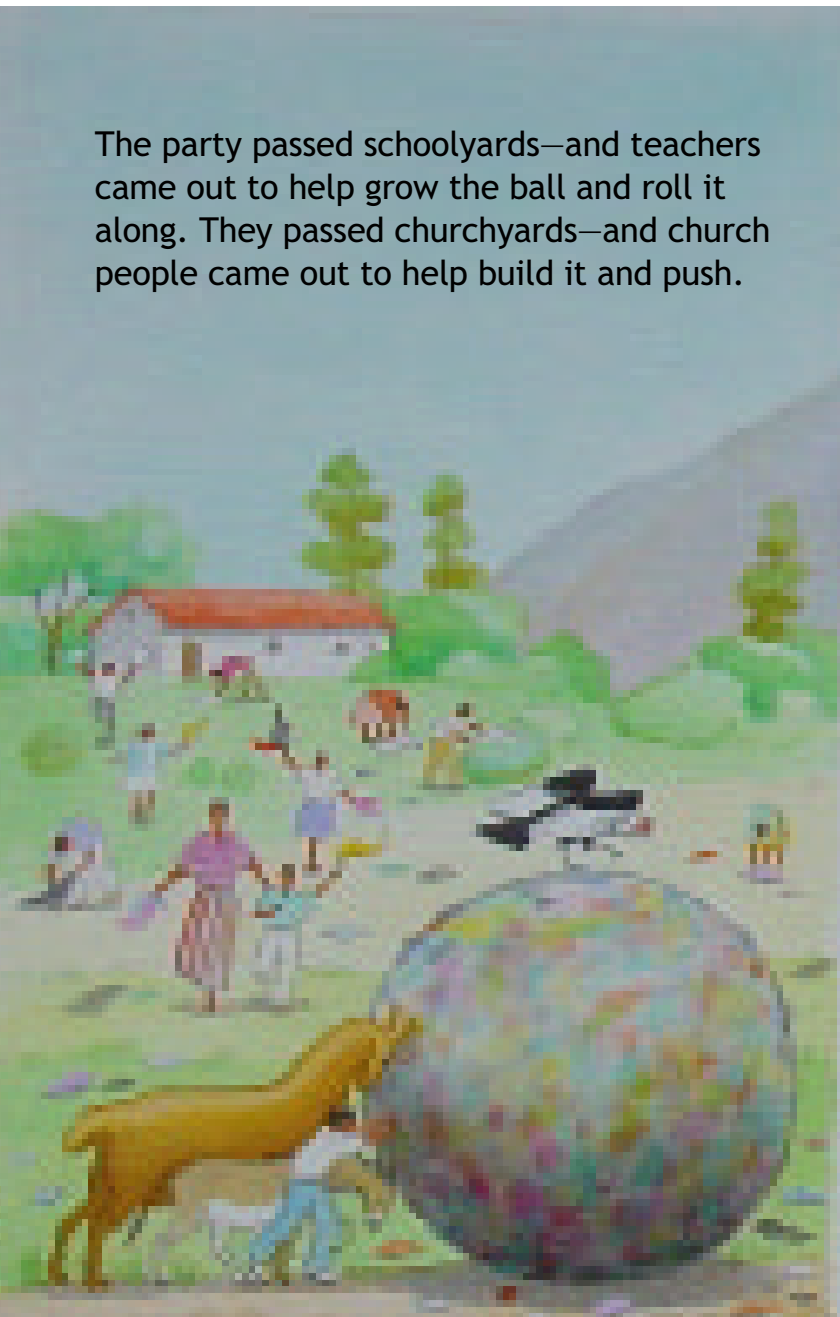
"Never seen anybody collect those things before. Most people just throw them on the ground," he said. "You can find more at the construction site where I work."



As they gathered more from his workplace, the donkey added, "This plastic stuff doesn't rot away like paper—it takes about a thousand years to break down. You have to bury it really deep to get rid of it."

Soon the ball was as big as Theo. "I should go," he announced. But by this time, the ball would budge only when the whole team pushed. And since he was part of the team, he kept pushing.

The party passed schoolyards—and teachers came out to help grow the ball and roll it along. They passed churchyards—and church people came out to help build it and push.



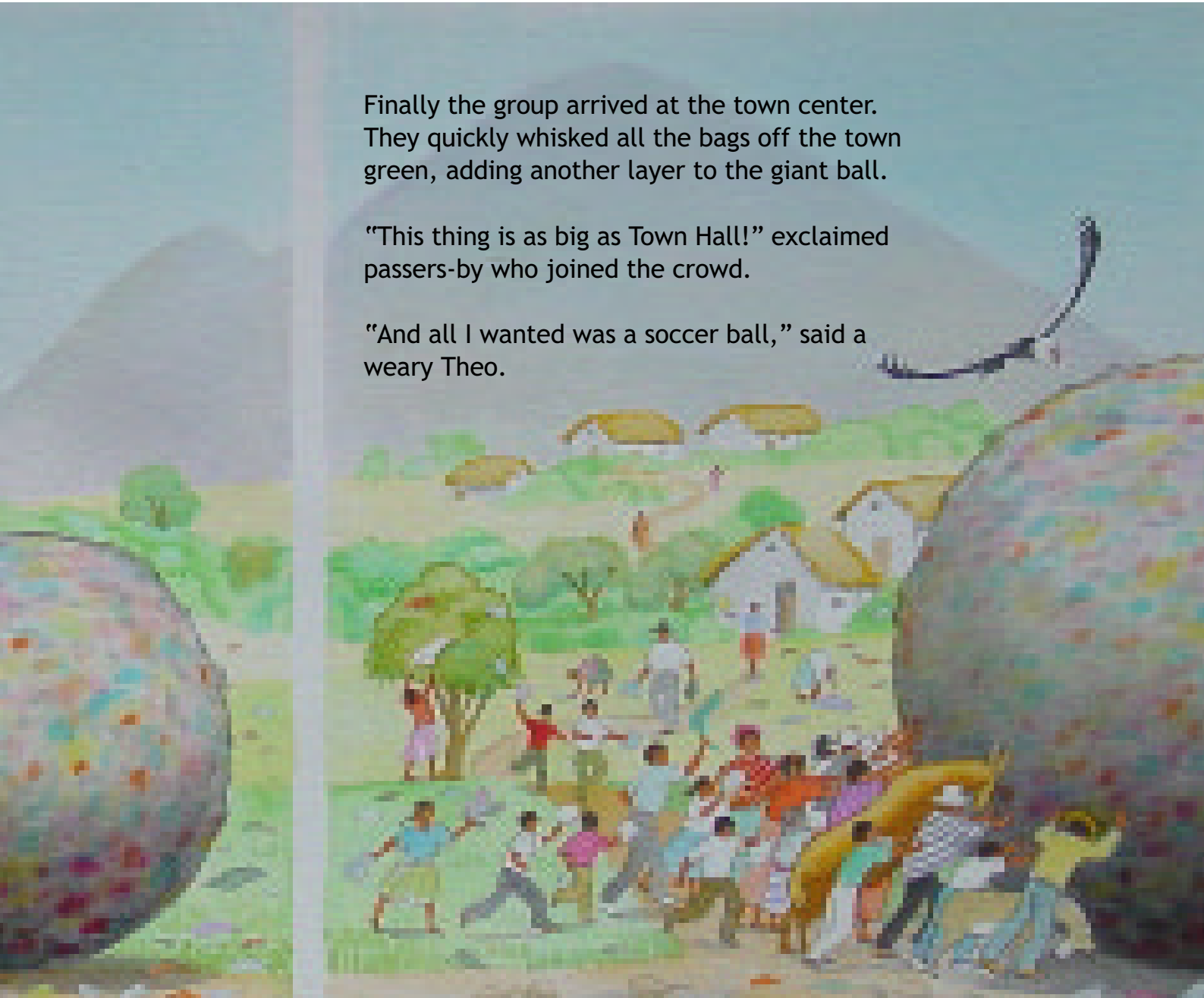
They passed backyards and front yards—and neighbours came out to help.

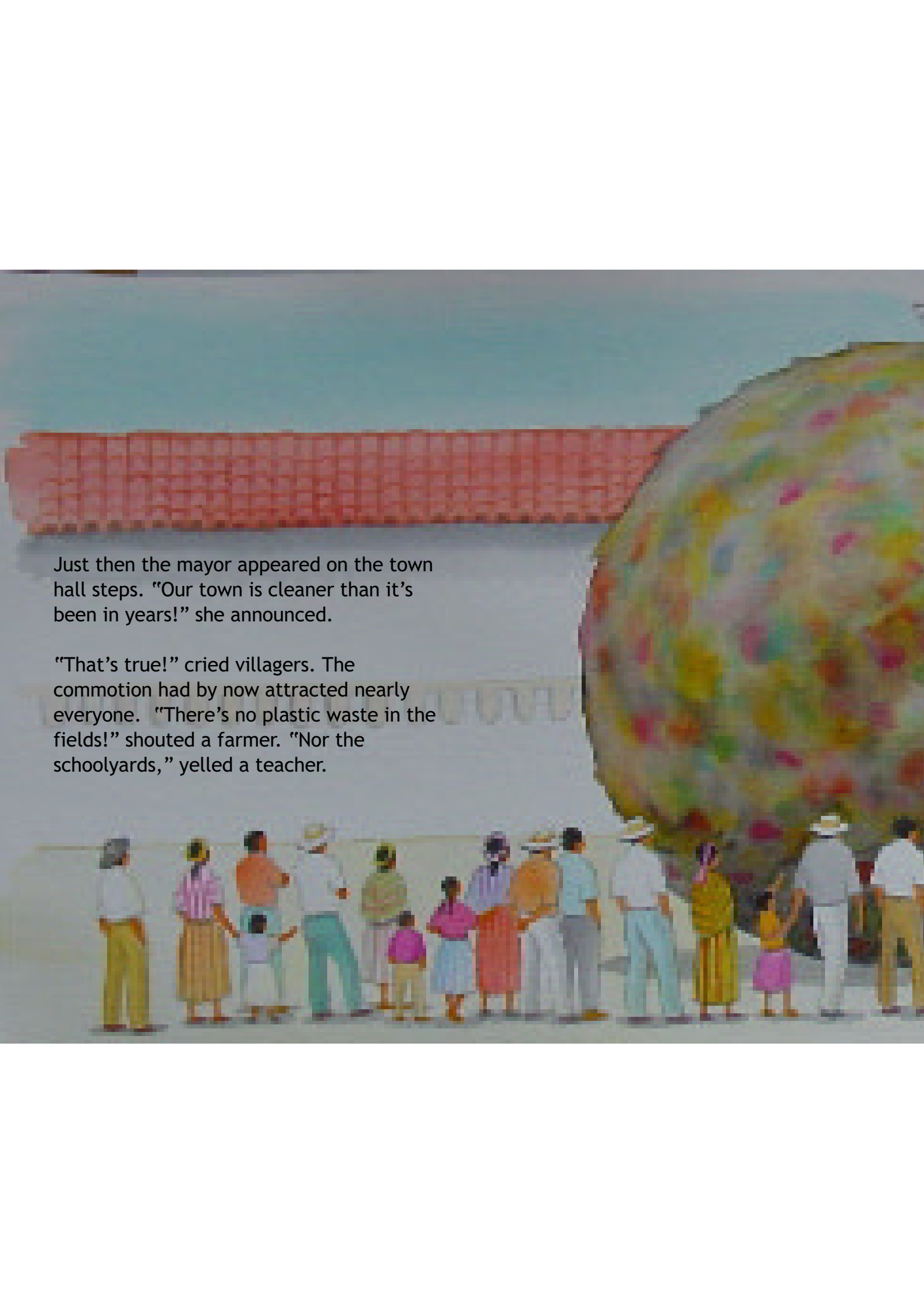


Finally the group arrived at the town center.
They quickly whisked all the bags off the town
green, adding another layer to the giant ball.

“This thing is as big as Town Hall!” exclaimed
passers-by who joined the crowd.

“And all I wanted was a soccer ball,” said a
weary Theo.

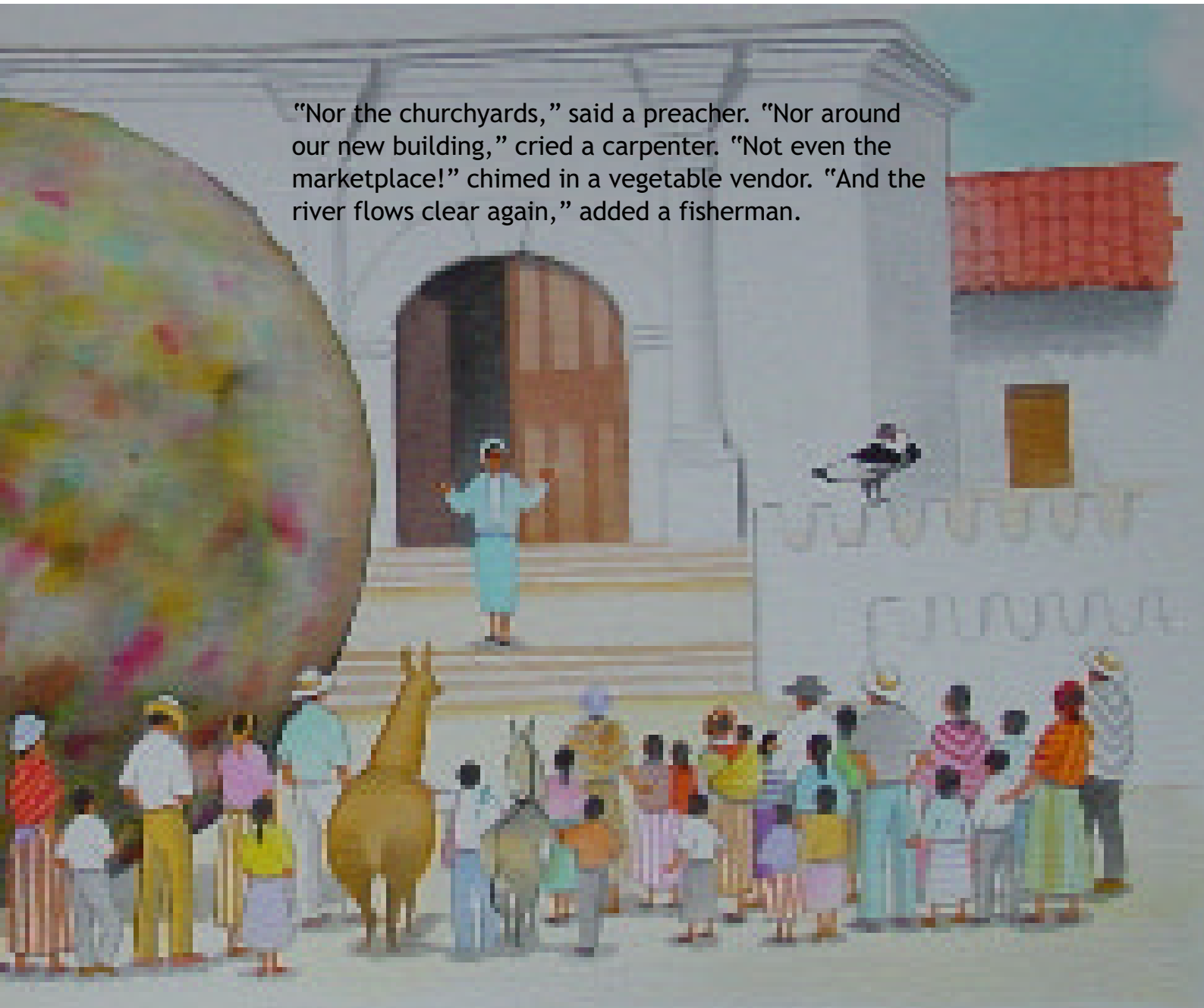


A group of villagers, including men, women, and children, are gathered in front of a town hall. The building has a prominent red tiled roof. To the right, a large, colorful mural is visible. The scene is set outdoors under a clear sky.

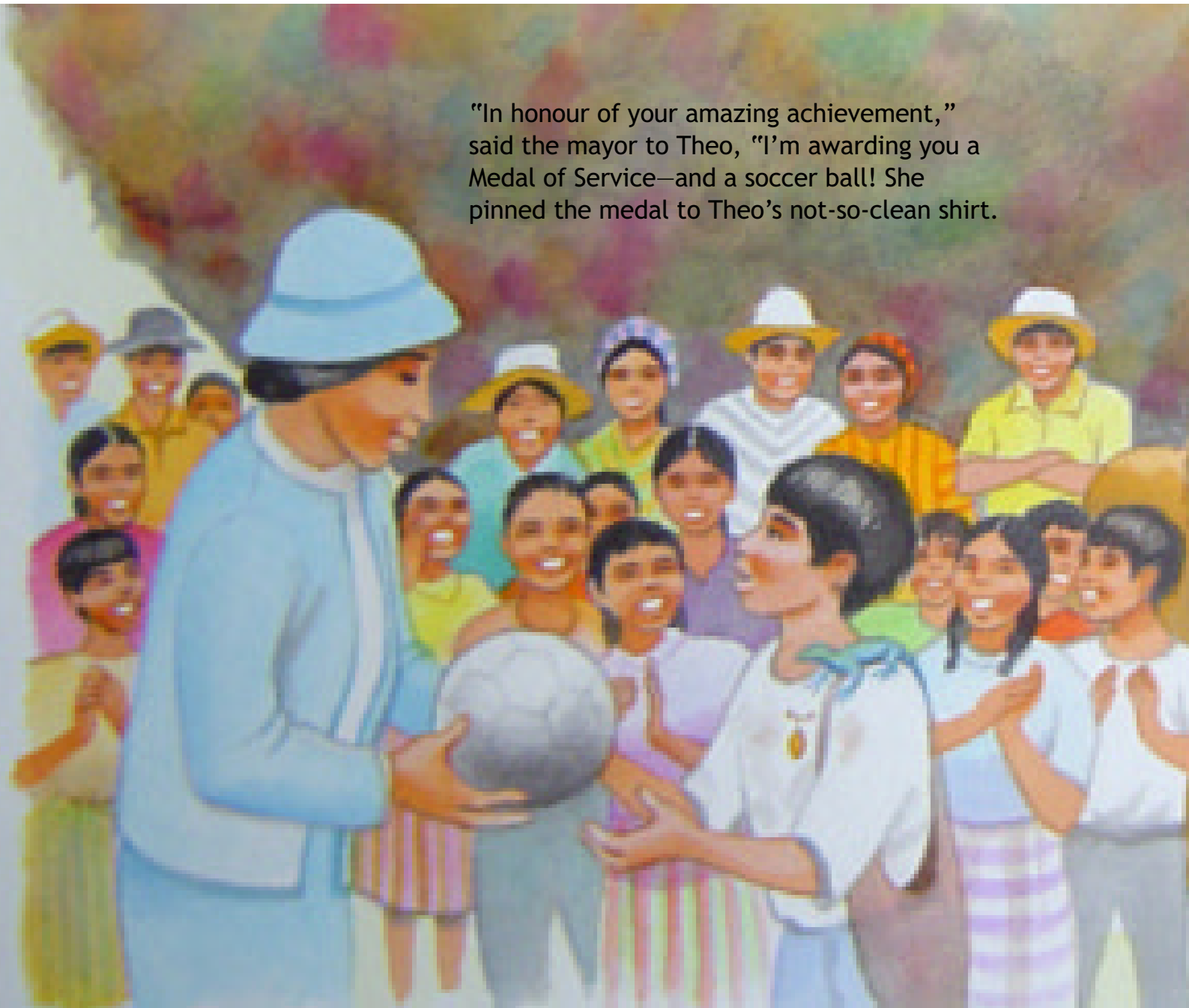
Just then the mayor appeared on the town hall steps. "Our town is cleaner than it's been in years!" she announced.

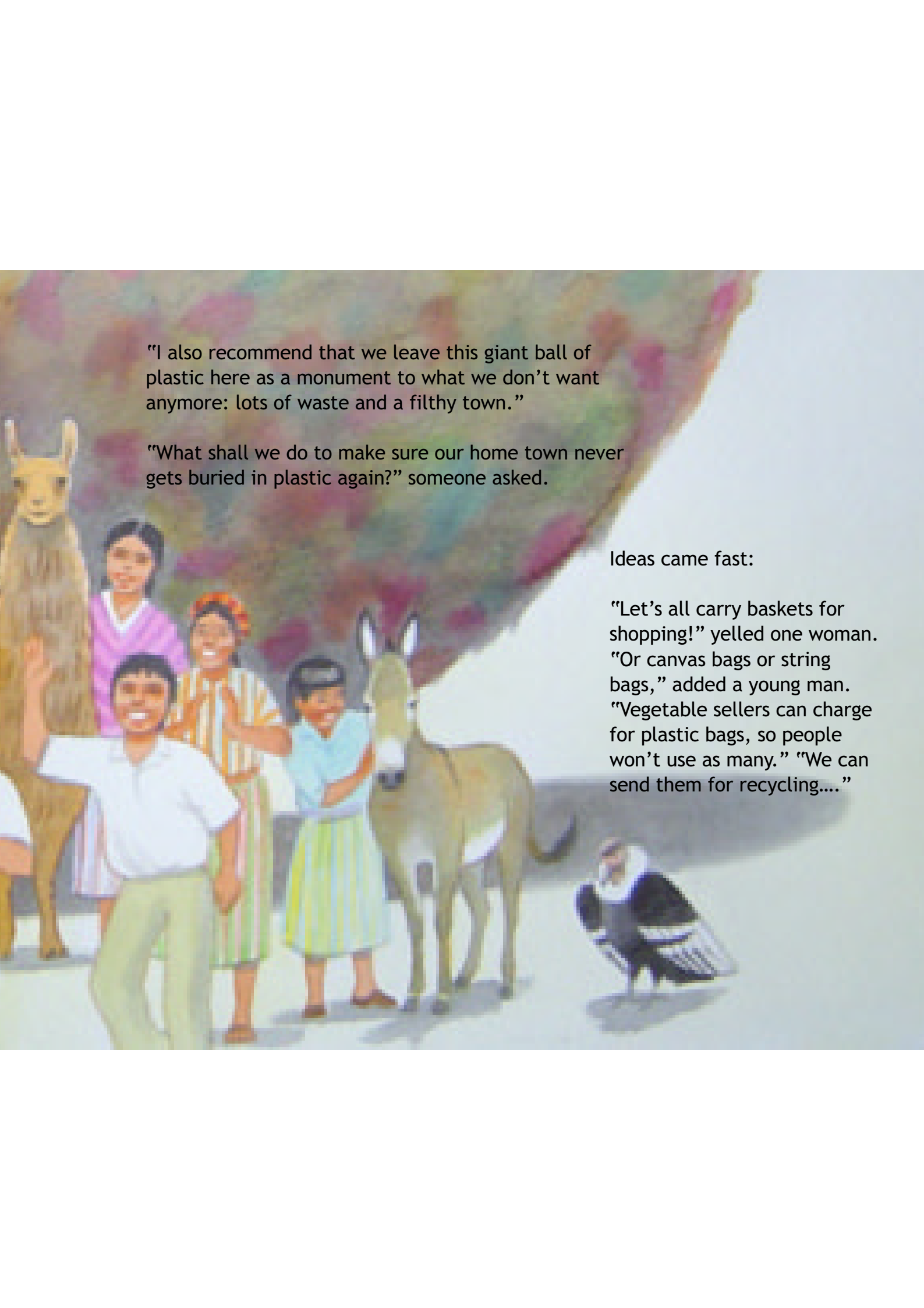
"That's true!" cried villagers. The commotion had by now attracted nearly everyone. "There's no plastic waste in the fields!" shouted a farmer. "Nor the schoolyards," yelled a teacher.

“Nor the churchyards,” said a preacher. “Nor around our new building,” cried a carpenter. “Not even the marketplace!” chimed in a vegetable vendor. “And the river flows clear again,” added a fisherman.



“In honour of your amazing achievement,”
said the mayor to Theo, “I’m awarding you a
Medal of Service—and a soccer ball! She
pinned the medal to Theo’s not-so-clean shirt.





"I also recommend that we leave this giant ball of plastic here as a monument to what we don't want anymore: lots of waste and a filthy town."

"What shall we do to make sure our home town never gets buried in plastic again?" someone asked.

Ideas came fast:

"Let's all carry baskets for shopping!" yelled one woman. "Or canvas bags or string bags," added a young man. "Vegetable sellers can charge for plastic bags, so people won't use as many." "We can send them for recycling...."





Grinning and proud, Theo finally headed home, as did Condor, Llama, Lizard, Donkey, and the townspeople.

Starting the next morning, Theo practiced hard with his new soccer ball. Soon it would go where he wanted. The following term Theo joined the soccer team. In no time at all he became the best player—and captain of the team. Of course they played on a beautiful, clean field. Theo was happy indeed.

Some facts and figures on plastic

1. Plastic is a by-product of gas and oil refining called ethylene. It is durable and will not rot or decay as do natural products such as those made of wood. It is difficult to burn plastic and it releases harmful fumes such as hydrogen chloride gas.
2. An average household throws away 45 kg of plastic a year. It forms 9% of the total household waste, 36% of plastics are used in packing and only 5% of plastics are recycled.
3. Plastic bags are now nearly everywhere. People have seen plastic bags floating as far north as the Arctic Ocean, and as far south as the southernmost tip of South America.
4. Plastic is tough and can last up to 1,000 years in the environment. Its durability is suitable for making such items as telephones, pipes, clothing, containers, bins, flooring, furniture and toys.
5. Plastic can be recycled and reused. You can wash plastic forks and plates and use them again. Some countries have programmes to recycle plastic, by melting it down and making new things. But less than 3% of plastic bags around the world get recycled today.
6. Around the world, supermarkets are reducing the use of plastic bags by charging for them—or offering a discount when people bring their own basket or bag. In March 2002, Ireland introduced a 15 cent tax on each plastic bag sold. This resulted in a 95% cut in their use. The South African government required that producers make the bags both thicker and more expensive—so that people would be more likely to reuse them. Use of plastic bags in that country dropped by 90%. In Ladakh, a province of India, citizens' groups led a successful effort to ban plastic bags. Other countries are also considering making bags more expensive, or banning them.
7. About 20% of the plastic in the oceans comes from ships or offshore platforms; the rest is blown or washed off the land.

8. When plastics are floating in the seas, they will accumulate and absorb toxic chemicals that are present from other sources. These chemicals cling to plastic and may then be transported to organisms that eat the plastic. Plastic kills up to one million sea birds, 100,000 sea mammals and countless fish each year.

What can you do?

1. Organize a clean-up of your neighbourhood, school or river.
2. Keep a beautiful basket or canvas bag at home, on your bike or in the car, so it's always there if you go shopping.
3. Ask your favourite shops to stop giving out plastic bags for free, or to offer money back for not using them. Encourage the shops to provide recycling drop-off bins.
4. Join an environmental club to learn more about the plastic menace and how you can make a difference.
5. If your town has a recycling programme, make sure you recycle your waste plastic. If not, encourage your family to dispose of waste properly. If you don't have garbage collection services bury plastics deeply. Burning plastic creates toxic fumes.
6. Consolidate purchases from different stores into one bag and reuse bags for subsequent shopping trips.
7. Encourage your local shops to stock products made from recycled bags.

