Tina and the Green City

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Tina's favourite thing to do was listen to her grandmother's stories about the time before now. In Grandmother's world, people lived in green meadows and forests; children played with the birds and animals, and splashed in clear streams.

"Why wasn't I born then?" Tina asked Grandmother one night. "I want so much to live where the air's clean and flowers grow!"

Grandmother looked at Tina solemnly. Then she said, "If you want something badly enough, you can make it happen."

When morning came, Tina dashed to school. As usual, the dirty air made her throat raw. As usual, she dodged cars across the highway and hurried past burned-out buildings, filthy vacant lots, and a deserted park.

That afternoon at her after-school club, Tina announced, "I'm sick and tired of not being able to play outside! Let's clean up the park across the street so we can use it."

Some of the children laughed as Tina pulled on rubber gloves and grabbed a big garbage bag. But Paulina said, "I'm with you! Let's go!" In a few hours they collected hundreds of cigarette butts. Dozens of beer and soda bottles and cans. Old shoes. Hubcaps. A broken doll.
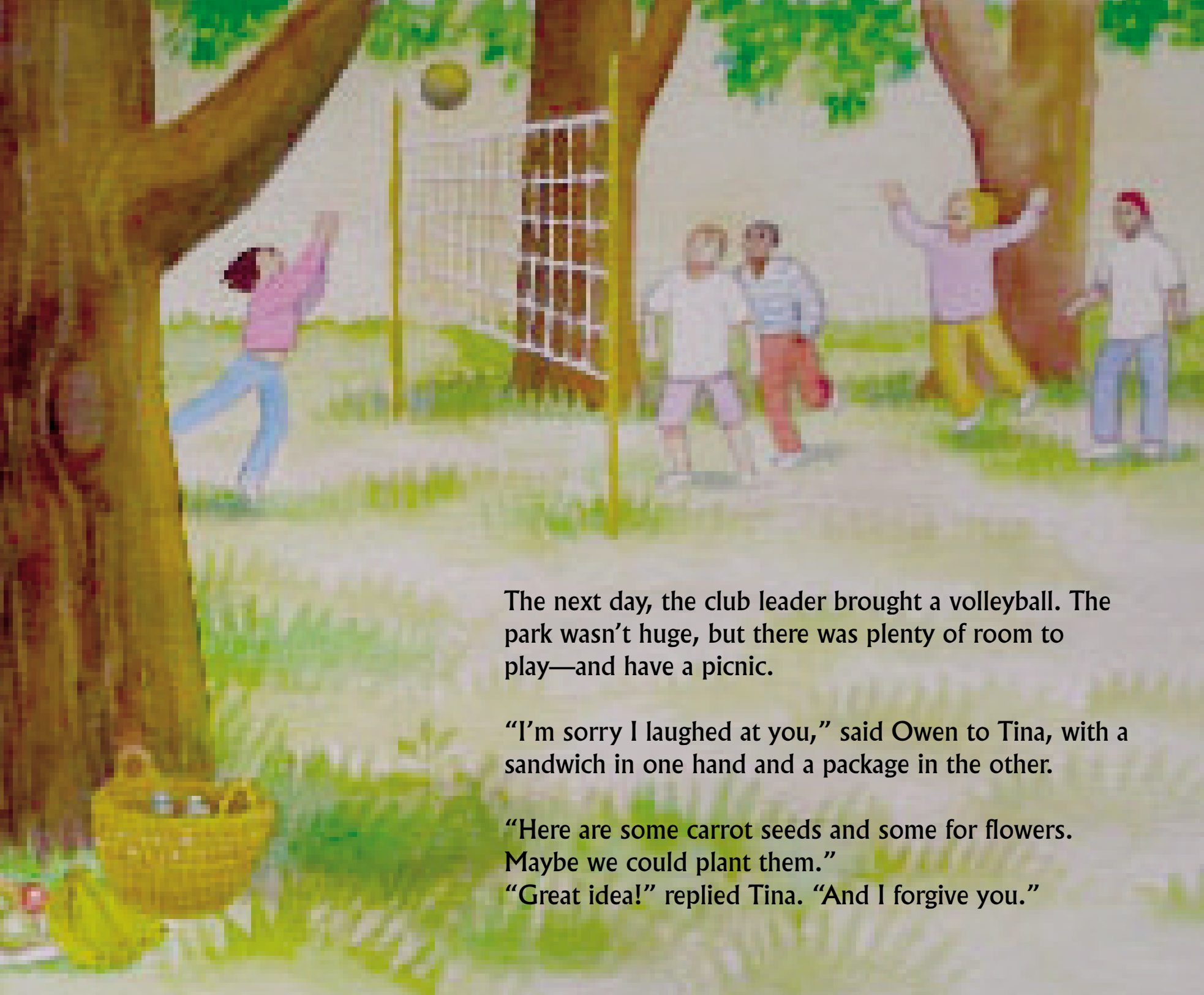
The next day, the club leader brought a volleyball. The park wasn't huge, but there was plenty of room to play—and have a picnic.

"I'm sorry I laughed at you," said Owen to Tina, with a sandwich in one hand and a package in the other.

"Here are some carrot seeds and some for flowers. Maybe we could plant them."
"Great idea!" replied Tina. "And I forgive you."
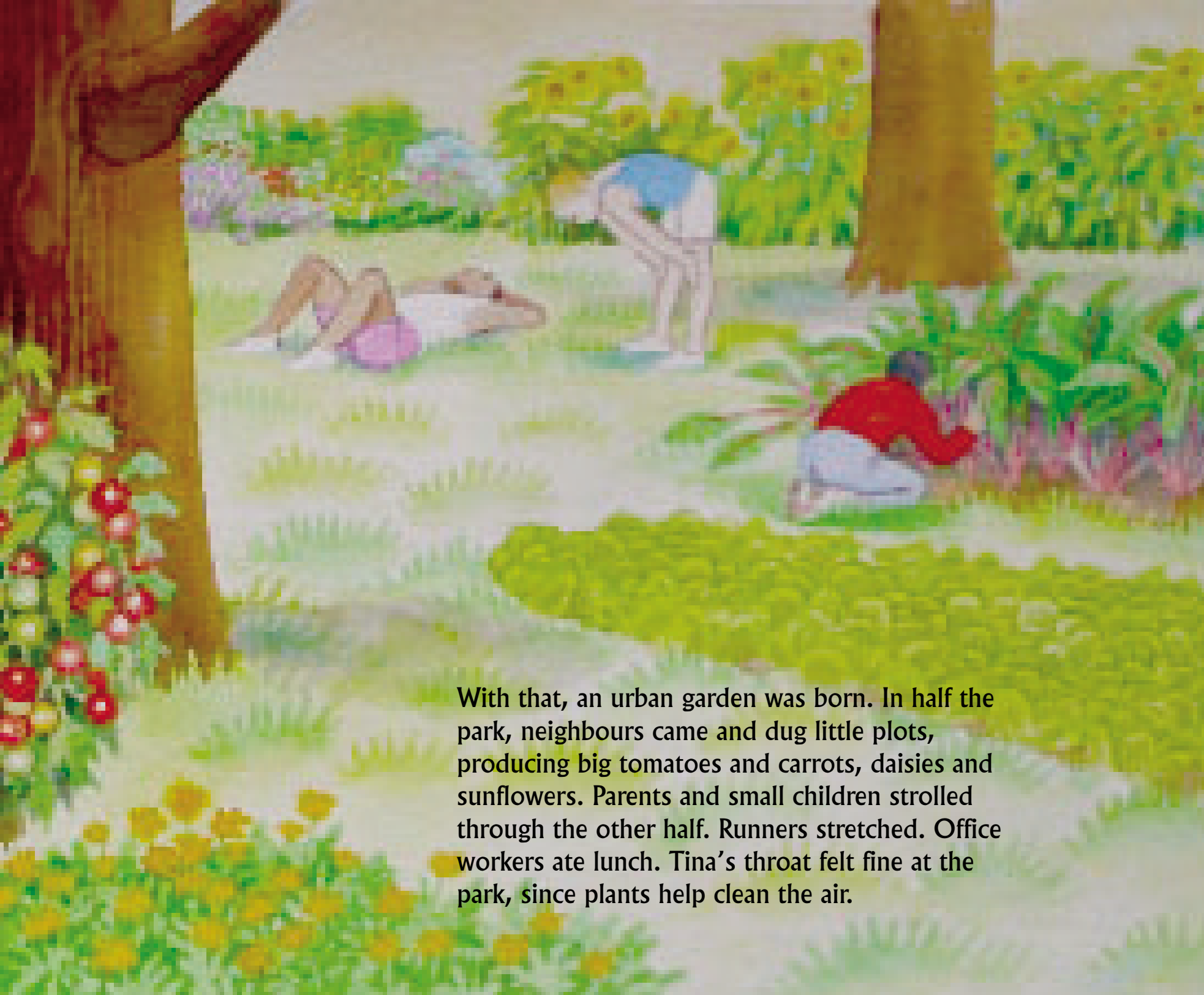
With that, an urban garden was born. In half the park, neighbours came and dug little plots, producing big tomatoes and carrots, daisies and sunflowers. Parents and small children strolled through the other half. Runners stretched. Office workers ate lunch. Tina's throat felt fine at the park, since plants help clean the air.

Soon, though, newspapers and candy wrappers began sprouting among the vegetables and flowers. "This is too disgusting," yelled Paulina. "We should get a nasty guard dog and keep everybody else out." But Tina knew this patch of green touched a lot of people. She also remembered Grandmother's words. "If we want it badly enough," she said to herself, "we can make it.

Tina, Paulina and Owen went to the city council and asked for trash cans and recycling bins. They hauled them over to the park along with a sign: "This is our own park. Let's keep it clean!" They printed flyers explaining how recycling saves money and natural resources.

One afternoon as Owen and Tina were picking daisies, they heard tyres screeching and a scream. Paulina ran toward them, yelling, "I just almost got hit!"

Tina, Owen and Paulina set off for the mayor's office. They told him about their wonderful park and how many people used it. "But we have to do something about the cars," Tina said.

"You can't do anything about cars!" chuckled the mayor. "We all need cars!" He laughed them out of the office.

"Forget it, Tina," said Owen. "We got the park and our community garden. We should quit while we're ahead." But Tina told him her grandmother's words: "If you want it badly enough, you can make it happen."
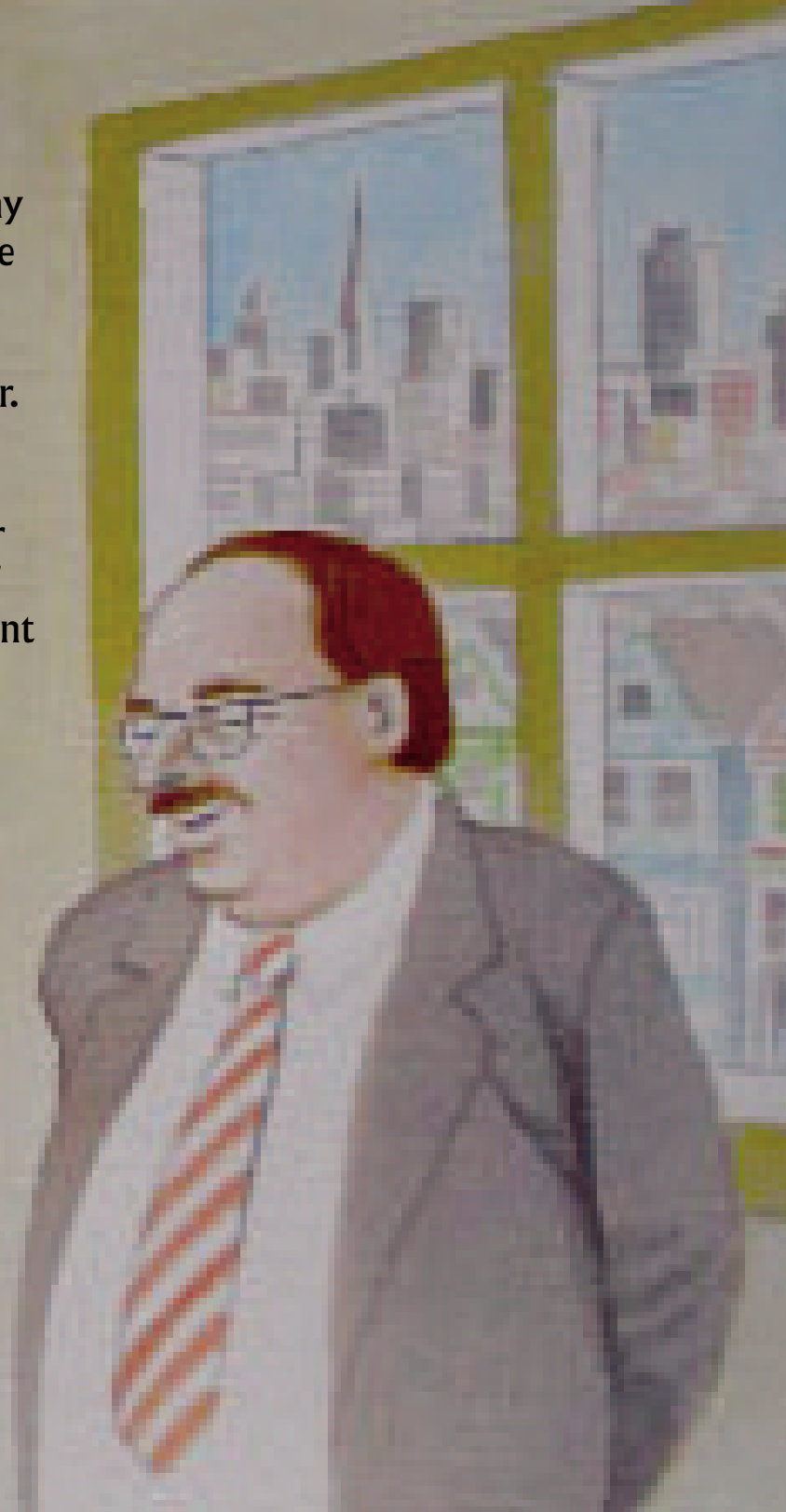
Every night Tina read about cities and traffic. Every day she shared the information with her club.

At the next town meeting, all the club children showed up. They carried pictures of streets in other cities where people got around by bicycle and by foot, or used buses and trains. There were lots of trees, wide sidewalks, and a peacefulness quite unlike in their city.

Tina told the meeting: "Less driving means fewer accidents. It also means cleaner air, because burning gasoline creates air pollution. Cleaner air means healthier people, since air pollution can cause diseases like asthma, which makes it hard to breathe. Also, you stay thinner and stronger if you bike or walk than if you just sit in a car."

Paulina said: "Less driving means cleaner water too, because oil washes off into streams and rivers whenever it rains. Less driving saves money for people, since other ways of getting around cost less. It saves money for the city, because it costs less to clean up the water."

Owen said: "Less driving can help save our climate. Gasoline releases carbon when it burns. Extra carbon in the air is making our planet hotter. Scientists even think it's leading to more hurricanes and tornadoes, floods and droughts around the world—and in some places will make it harder to grow food."

No one laughed this time. Instead, the adults nodded in agreement. The mayor looked embarrassed. He knew the three were right.
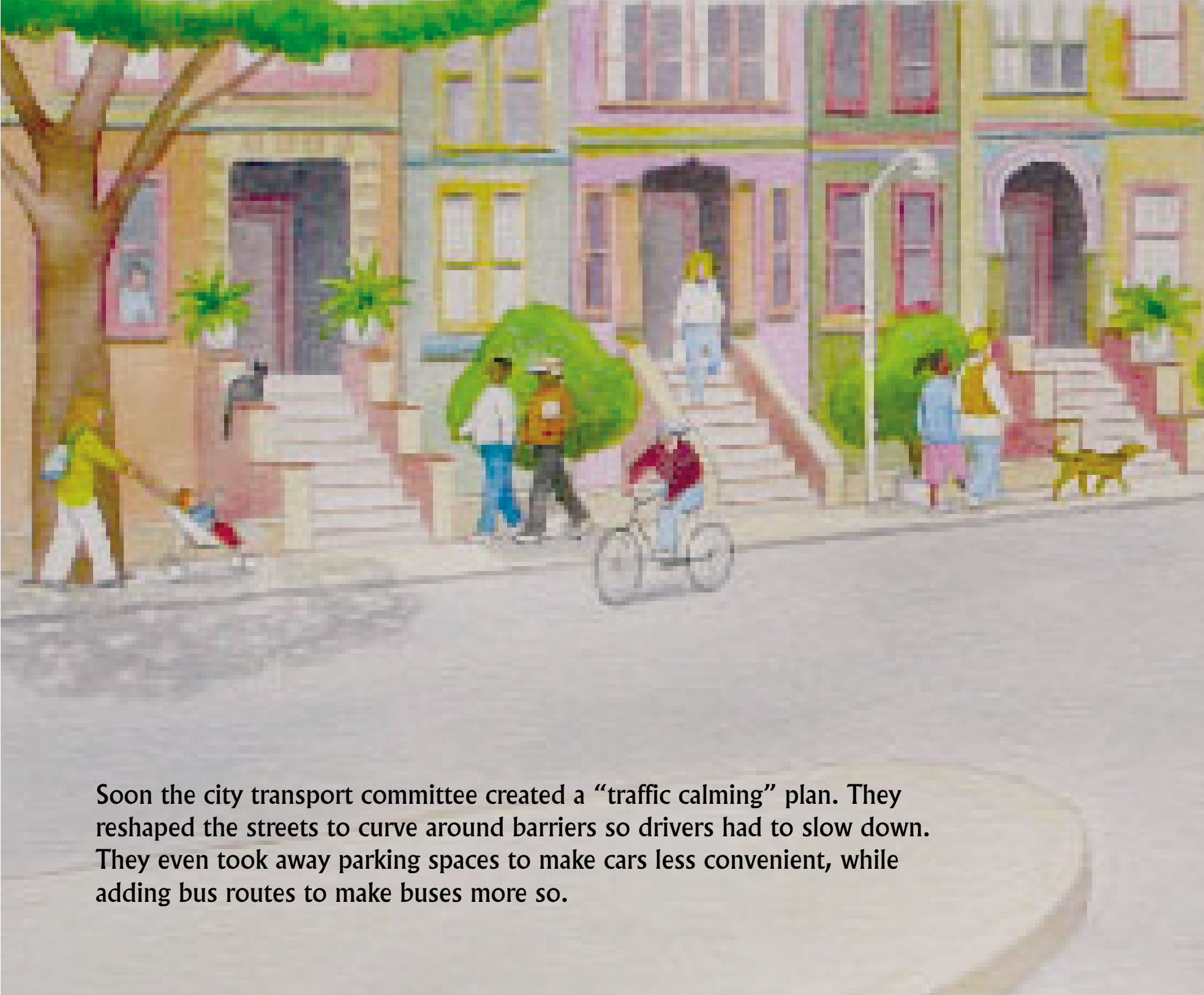
Soon the city transport committee created a "traffic calming" plan. They reshaped the streets to curve around barriers so drivers had to slow down. They even took away parking spaces to make cars less convenient, while adding bus routes to make buses more so.

Amazing things happened! The neighbourhood came alive in a way no one had imagined. Now that people didn't have to scurry across highways, they walked together. They ran with their dogs and strolled with their cats. They whooshed by on skates. On bicycles. On scooters.

With so many new customers, new businesses popped up in formerly abandoned buildings and vacant lots. Coffee shops and book shops, art centres and clothing boutiques, theatres and playgrounds all blossomed. Musicians played in the parks. Jugglers and acrobats appeared. Crime decreased because more people were out enjoying the city at all hours. People from around the country came to see how Tina's city worked, because they wanted to "green" their city too—make it healthier and more attractive.

But as Tina's neighbourhood grew more fun, it also got more expensive because so many people wanted to live there.

One day the landlady who owned the clubhouse showed up. "Sorry, kids," she said, "but this old house is coming down. I can finally make some money if I put up apartments instead."

"But this is where all the greening started! How can you?!" cried Tina.

"You show me real money and I'll be as green as you want," said the landlady.

"Forget it," sighed Paulina. "Who needs a clubhouse now, anyway?"

Tina lay in bed at night, thinking of all the younger children who wouldn't have a place of their own to play and plan. As she finally drifted off to sleep, she murmured, "If you want it badly enough, you can make it happen…"

The next day, Tina knocked on the landlady's door. "We have a deal for you," she announced. "We'll help build your apartments. But in exchange, we get a space to use for our club."

"What do you know about building?" the landlady asked.

"We'll learn," Tina said, trying to sound confident. "Not only that—we'll make it a "green building." You'll save money on electricity, heat and air conditioning. More people will want to rent from you because it will be a special place that's good for the earth's health—and their own too."

The landlady looked Tina up and down. Finally she reached out and the two shook hands.

"Phew!" thought Tina as she ran down the steps. As quickly as she could, she found architects and builders to teach the club children about green construction.
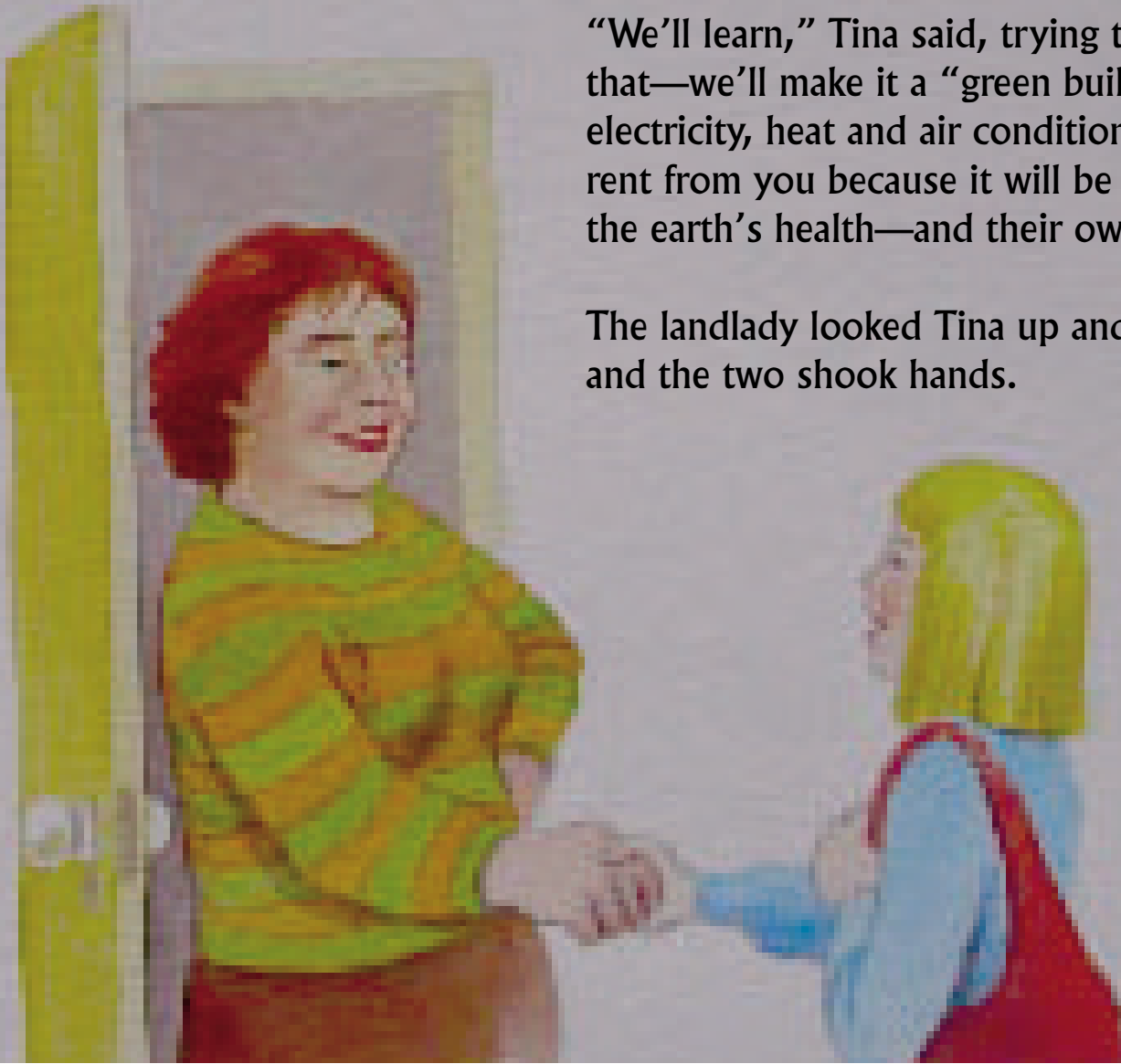
The kids carried wood from a building that was being torn down, and reused it to make stairs and cabinets. They hung doors made from trees grown in plantations, so no forests were felled. They installed windows of recycled glass. Fitted lights that use very little electricity. Mounted sinks, toilets and showers that use very little water. Laid carpets made from old plastic bottles. Painted the walls with non-toxic paint—and drew a colourful mural in their club space.

The roof was Tina's favourite place. It held sparkling solar panels: glass rectangles that collect energy right from the sun. Some were designed to make electricity to run the lights and computers. Others were for heating water.

Plants and trees covered the rest of the roof. Insulated with soil and greenery, the "green roof" would help the building stay cool in summer and warm in winter. People could grow flowers and vegetables on part of it, and the plants would attract birds and butterflies.
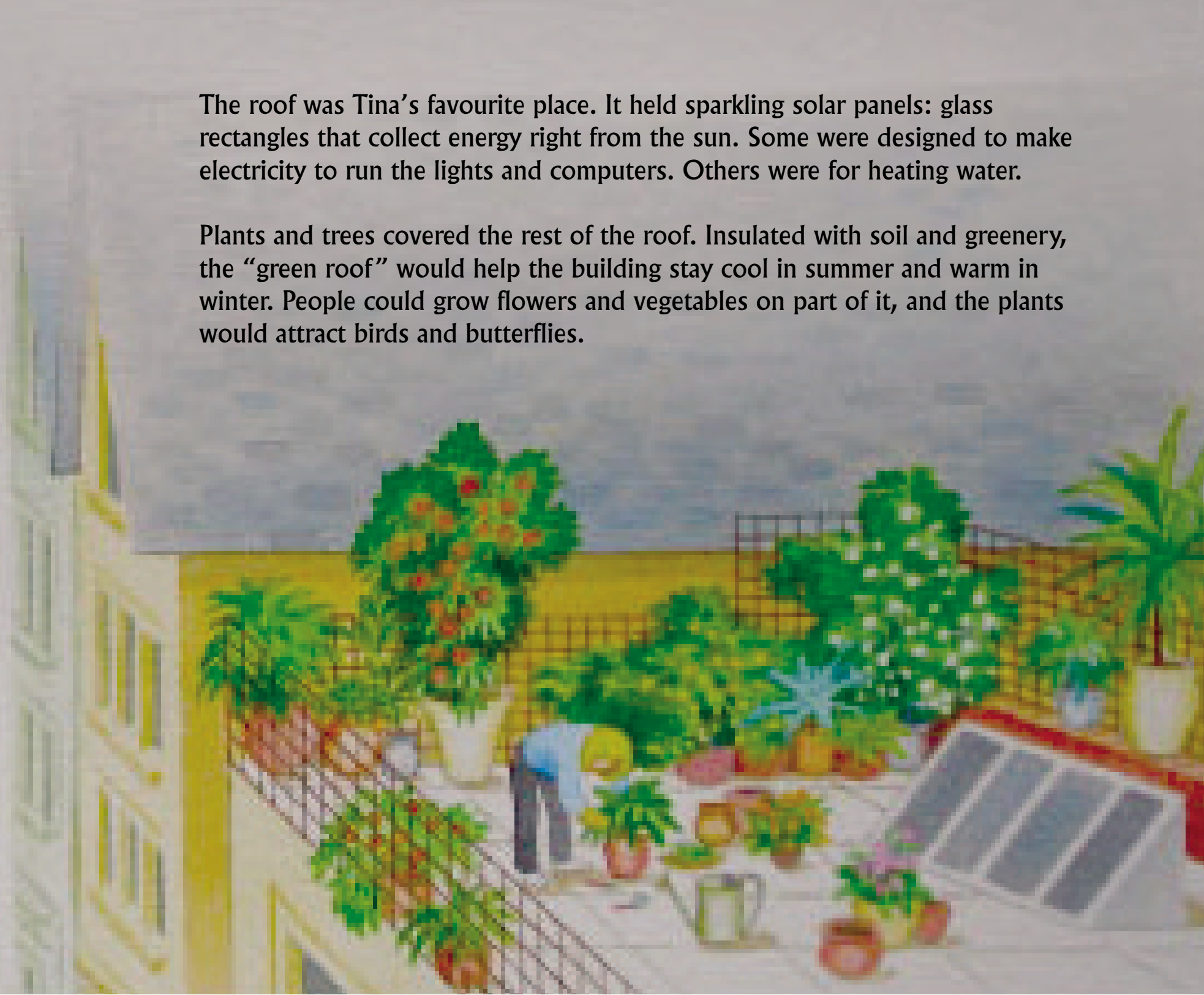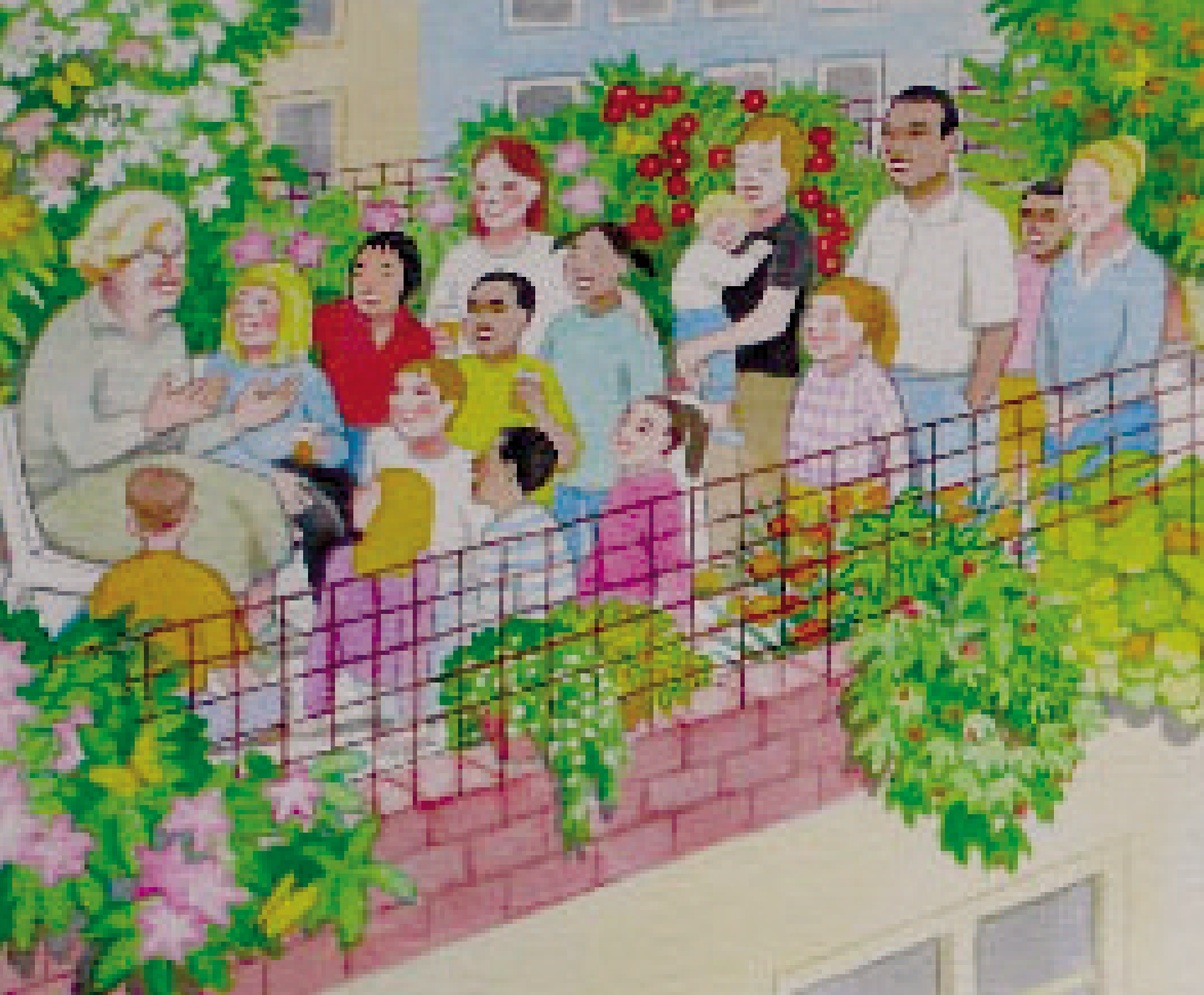
When the building was finished, Tina, Paulina, Owen and the other club children climbed up to the roof to celebrate. So did the landlady and all the people who had helped the club.

Tina's grandmother was the guest of honour. She told the group, "The building, the park, the neighbourhood… All this green feels like the old days—but in the middle of a modern city. What an amazing combination!

"Just think," she continued, "if everyone built like this, how healthy the world would be once again."

At that, the children yelled: "If we want it badly enough, we'll make it happen!" Their voices resounded all over the city.

Some facts and figures on cities

1. Today, half of all people—three billion of us—live in towns and cities. That is where most population growth will now happen, especially in developing countries.

2. About a billion people in the world live in slums, without good housing or sanitation, clean air or safe water. Often their water is polluted with sewage or chemicals, including oily runoff from roads.

3. In some parts of the United States a quarter of the children have asthma related to dirty air. In the developing world, where there are often fewer controls to limit pollution from vehicles and industry, the story is even worse for children's health.

4. In the United States, people throw away on average more than four pounds of materials per day. This waste can pollute land, water and even air when the trash is incinerated. In poorer countries there are often no services for collecting rubbish. Plastic and other litter sits in the streets, rivers and fields. Or people burn it in the open, creating poisonous smoke.

5. Cities use most of the world's fossil fuels, such as oil, coal and gas, to run cars and factories, heat homes and fuel the power plants that make electricity. Fossil fuels release carbon dioxide, which helps to trap heat in the atmosphere, and is creating the serious problem of climate change.

6. Climate change is melting ice at the North and South Poles, making sea levels rise. Island nations and coastal cities could be swamped by storms. Climate change could also make deserts expand, or other places wetter. It might make life harder for animals and plants, including our food crops.

7. Slowing climate change means burning less fossil fuel, getting more power from the sun, wind, plants and oceans, and even using less energy. Planting trees can help too: trees absorb carbon dioxide.

8. All over the world people are starting to make "green cities", creating "green buildings" that use energy and water more efficiently, and planting more trees and gardens. Green cities provide better public transport and make streets safer for walking and cycling—reducing energy use and traffic.

9. Green cities encourage people to re-use older buildings downtown instead of paving over more countryside in endless "sprawl." They also make people happier, healthier and more productive. Trees and parks can help local businesses since people will pay more to live and shop in a leafy location. Going to school in a green building even improves students' test scores!

What can you do?

1. Try some investigating for a project or for your school newspaper. Where are the power plants that produce your electricity? What do they burn? Who's using solar, wind and other "renewable" energy? Where does your water come from, and where does it go? Where does your trash go? If you recycle, what happens to bottles, cans and newspapers?

2. Reduce, re-use, recycle and repair. You can save lots of energy by turning off lights, computers and rechargers when you don't need them. Use only as much water as you really need.

3. Ask your parents and school to invest in green technology. Compact fluorescent light bulbs use far less electricity; low-flow showerheads and toilets save water.

4. Find out the local schedule for recycling. Re-use plastic bags or get a strong canvas bag for shopping. Keep things out of the garbage dump by having them repaired.

5. Organize a neighbourhood clean-up with a group like the Scouts or Guides or a green club at your school. Test the water in local rivers—and the water you drink. Make posters and organize campaigns encouraging people to recycle and conserve.

6. Start a garden at your school or club. Plants provide beauty and a home for butterflies, birds and other wildlife. But before you plant food, ask how to have the soil tested for pollutants.

7. Go to political events. Ask what candidates have done about greening your city. If they've talked of greening, have they kept their promises?