

The Blue House I Loved

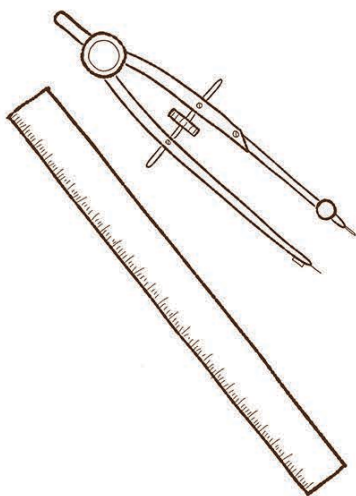
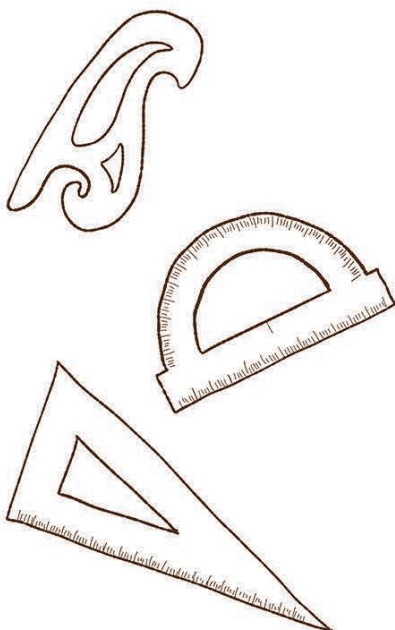
KAO KALIA YANG

Illustrations by Jen Shin

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Reading Copy
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The Blue House I Loved



A Hmong girl tells the story of her beloved aunt and uncle's first home in America—long gone, but still alive in the family's memories

The Blue House I Loved centers on a family of newly arrived Hmong refugees in Minnesota. The narrator loves her aunt and uncle's house, but it is too small for the large family. Even so, it is the cherished home where they live and love, their own small corner of a very large and unfamiliar place, and in this blue house a young girl learns about her new country. Combining Kao Kalia Yang's lyrical prose with ethereal illustrations by artist and architect Jen Shin, *The Blue House I Loved* speaks to the multitude of refugee experiences around the world.

"For those of us denied a place in the history books, our memory is like beautiful art meant to be shared. Through the gift of her art, Kao Kalia Yang once again encourages us to engage with one another in the communal—and vital—practice of remembering. A beautiful book."

—**Bao Phi**, author of *You Are Life*

Kao Kalia Yang is a multigenre author of books for adults and children. Her children's books include *From the Tops of the Trees*, winner of the 2023 APALA Award, and *Yang Warriors*, also published by the University of Minnesota Press. She is a Guggenheim Fellow, holds an honorary doctorate from Carleton College, and has received several Minnesota Book Awards. She lives in Minnesota, and she speaks and teaches across the nation.

Jen Shin is an interdisciplinary artist, urbanist, architect, and environmental advocate. The daughter of immigrants and granddaughter of refugees, she is fascinated by what it means to make a home and by the places where communities create home together. She lives and works in Brooklyn.

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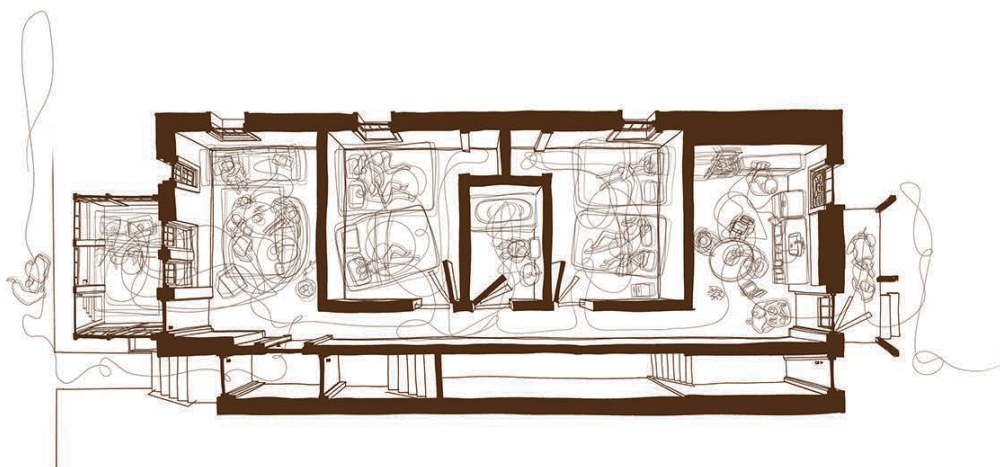
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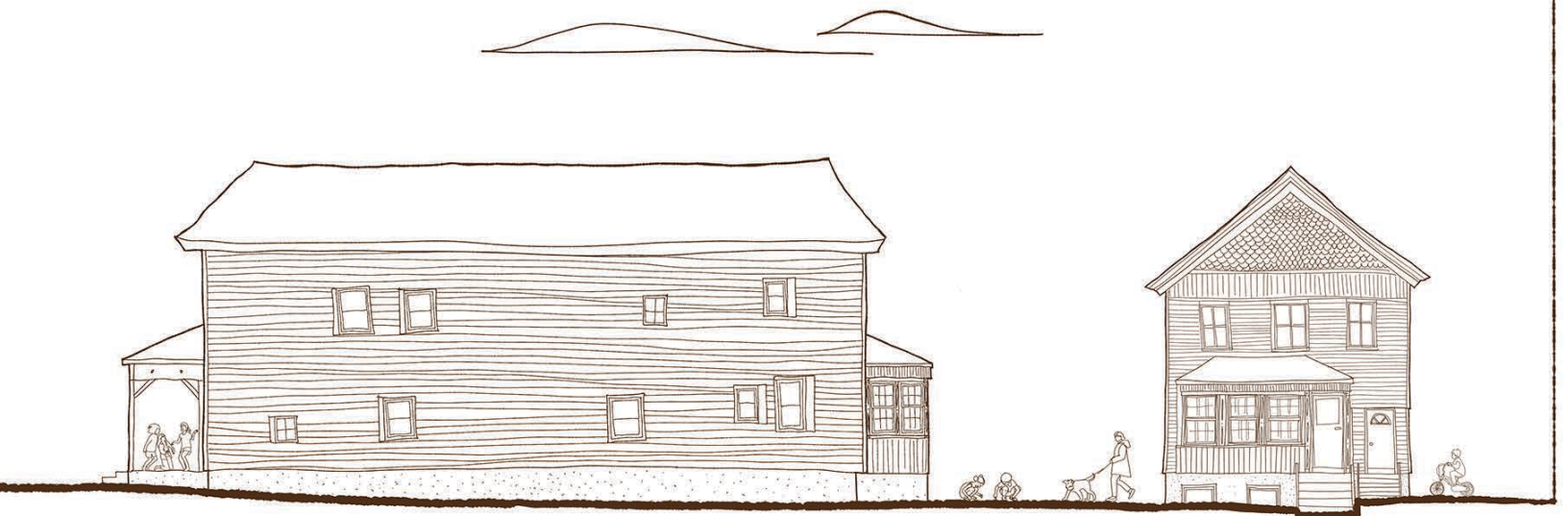
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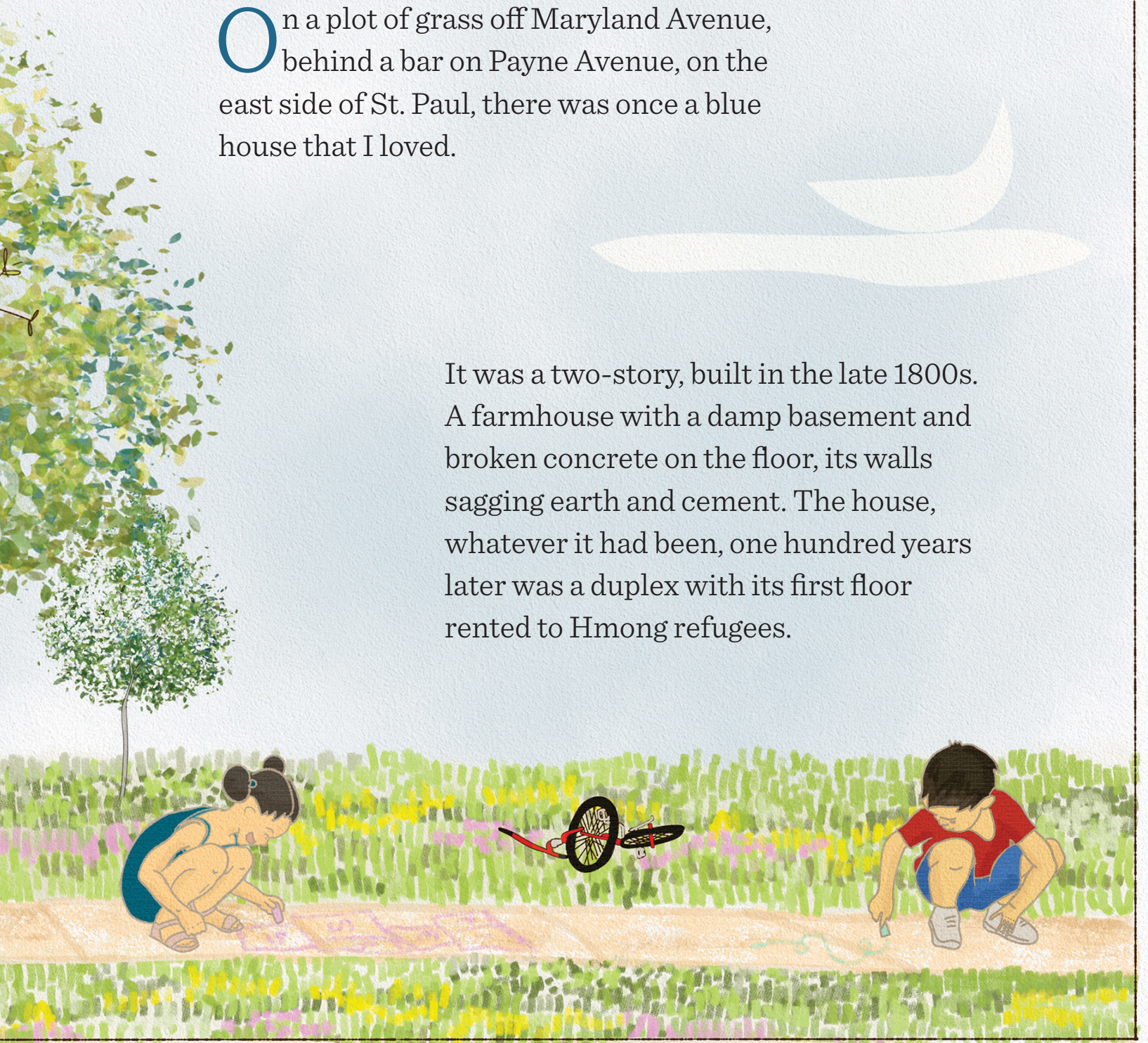
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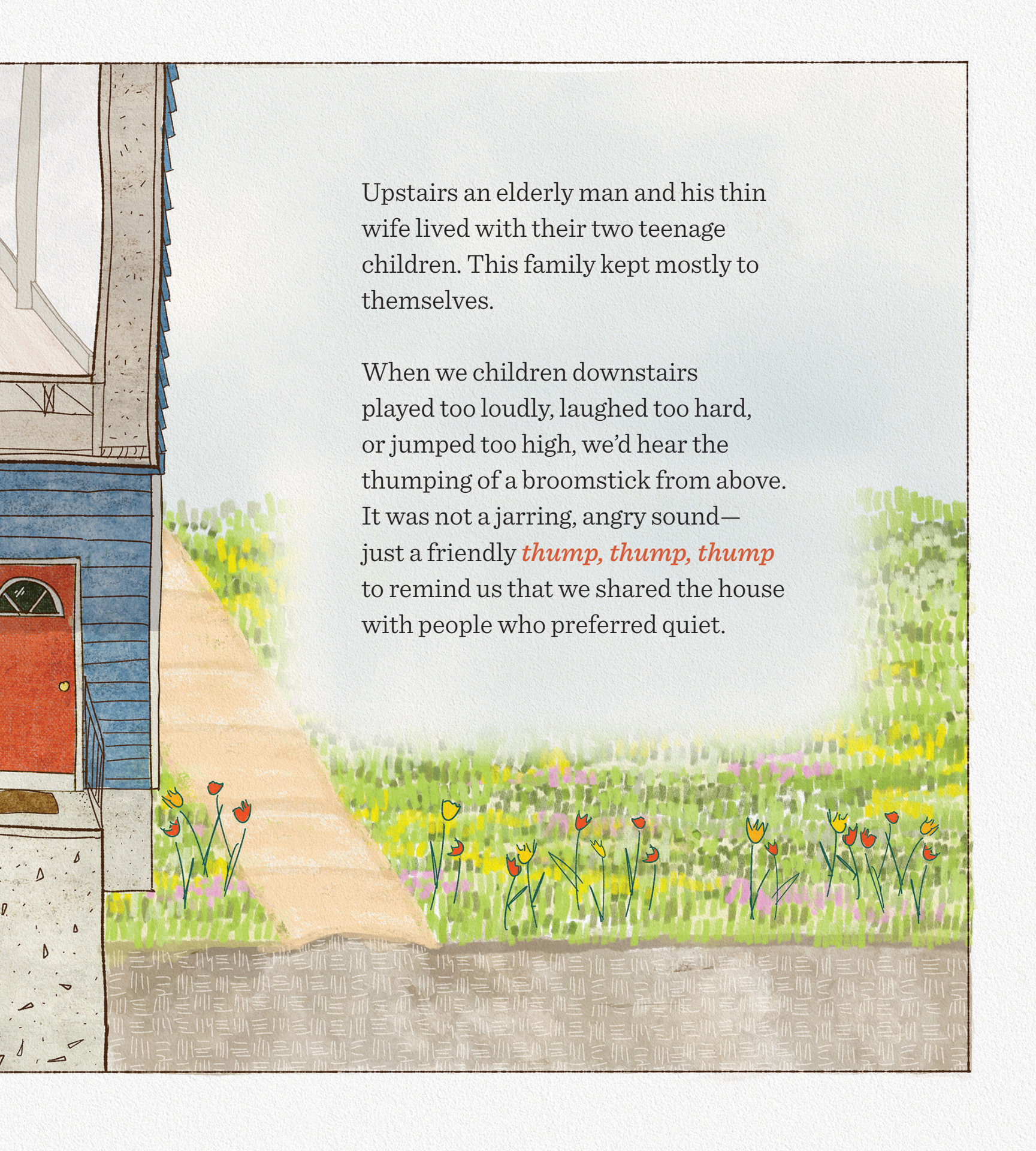


On a plot of grass off Maryland Avenue, behind a bar on Payne Avenue, on the east side of St. Paul, there was once a blue house that I loved.

It was a two-story, built in the late 1800s. A farmhouse with a damp basement and broken concrete on the floor, its walls sagging earth and cement. The house, whatever it had been, one hundred years later was a duplex with its first floor rented to Hmong refugees.

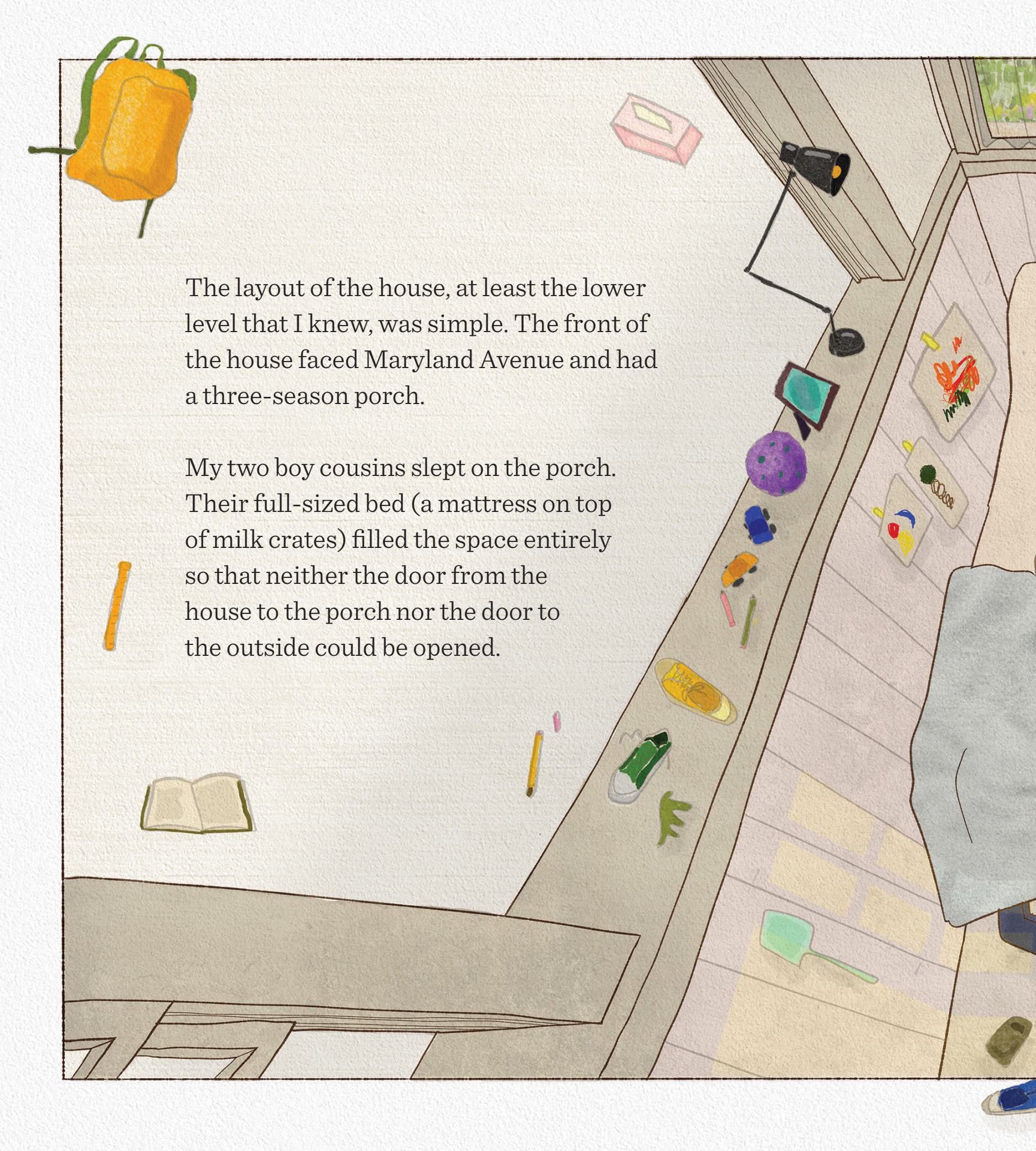




The illustration is a watercolor-style drawing. On the left, a portion of a house is visible, featuring a red door with a small arched window above it, set into blue horizontal siding. Above the door, a white window frame is partially visible. A light-colored path leads from the bottom left towards the house. To the right of the path is a lush garden with green grass, yellow daisies, and several tulips in red and yellow. The background is a soft, hazy landscape with more greenery. The entire scene is framed by a thin brown border.

Upstairs an elderly man and his thin wife lived with their two teenage children. This family kept mostly to themselves.

When we children downstairs played too loudly, laughed too hard, or jumped too high, we'd hear the thumping of a broomstick from above. It was not a jarring, angry sound—just a friendly *thump, thump, thump* to remind us that we shared the house with people who preferred quiet.



The layout of the house, at least the lower level that I knew, was simple. The front of the house faced Maryland Avenue and had a three-season porch.

My two boy cousins slept on the porch. Their full-sized bed (a mattress on top of milk crates) filled the space entirely so that neither the door from the house to the porch nor the door to the outside could be opened.

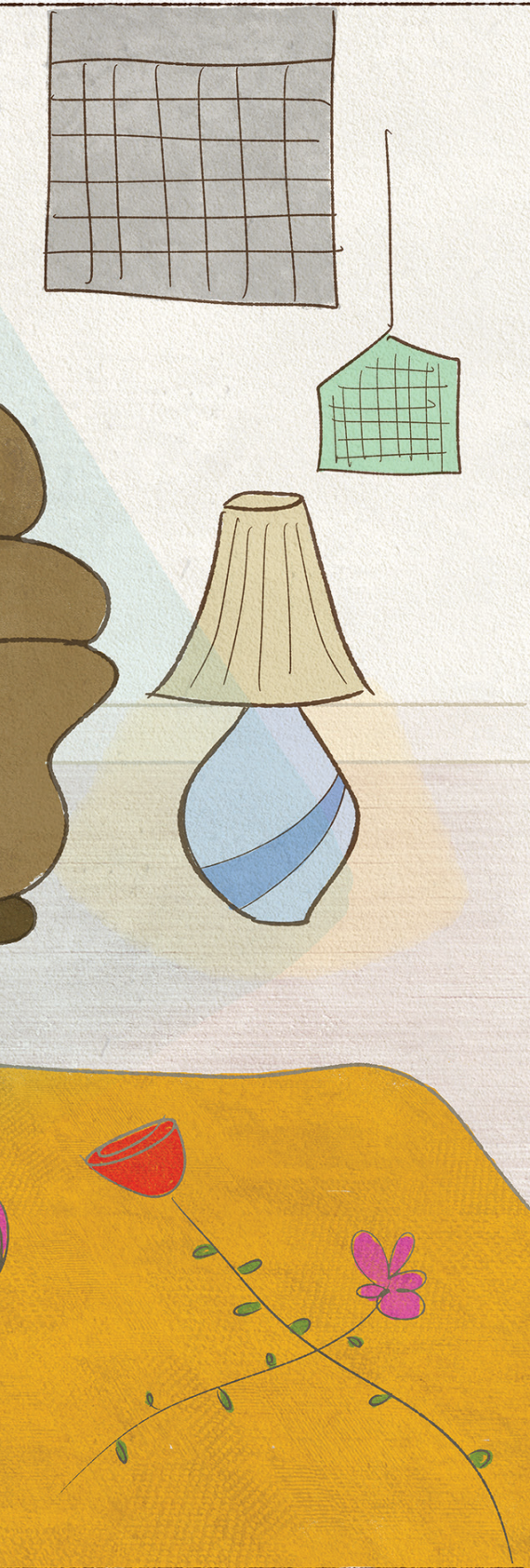


My boy cousins crawled in and out of their sleeping area from a window in the living room. During wintertime, their hair would become frozen stiff on the porch after their nightly showers. We took turns touching their **icy hair** in amazement and wonder.





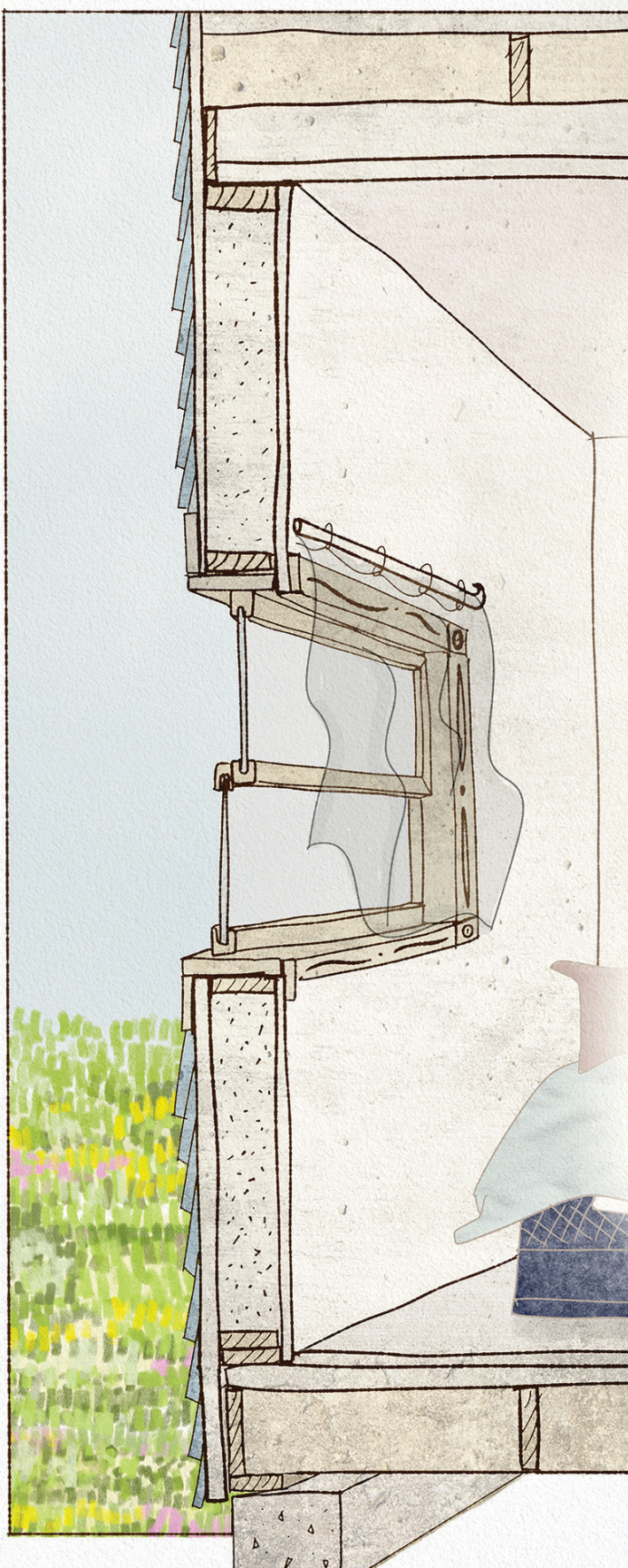




The dark living room held two mismatched sofas, donations from church basements. My aunt covered the sofas with old bedsheets in case we spilled our rice and water when we ate our meals.

My aunt spread a woven plastic mat on the floor for us children to sit and play on. It was the only splash of color in the room.

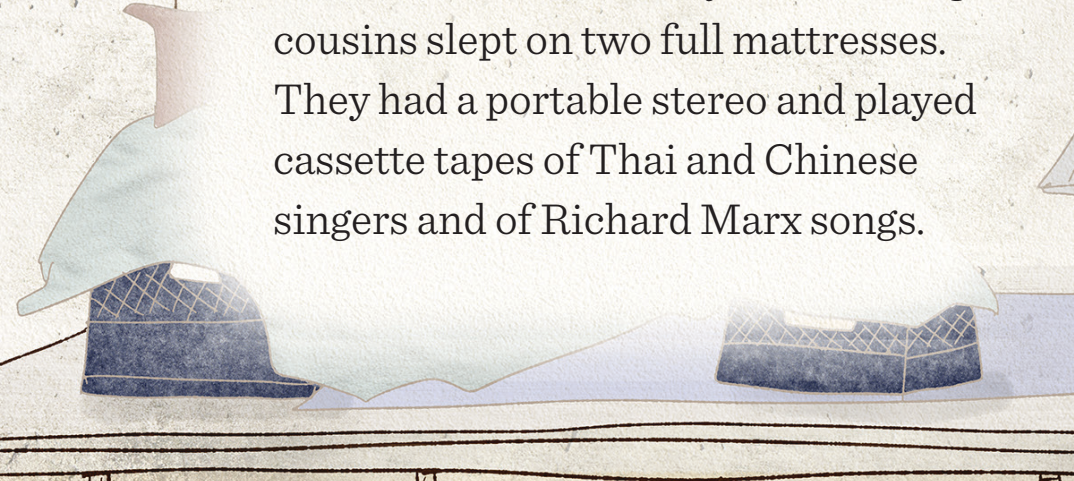
The light in the dim room came from a lamp in the corner and from the black and white television set, another gift from a church basement.



Beyond the living room were two bedrooms along a tight hallway, separated by a bathroom. Each bedroom was small. Their curtained windows were always closed.

In one bedroom, my aunt and my uncle slept with their two youngest children on double mattresses. They kept their clothes in baskets in the sliver of a closet at the end of their beds.

In the next bedroom, my three older girl cousins slept on two full mattresses. They had a portable stereo and played cassette tapes of Thai and Chinese singers and of Richard Marx songs.







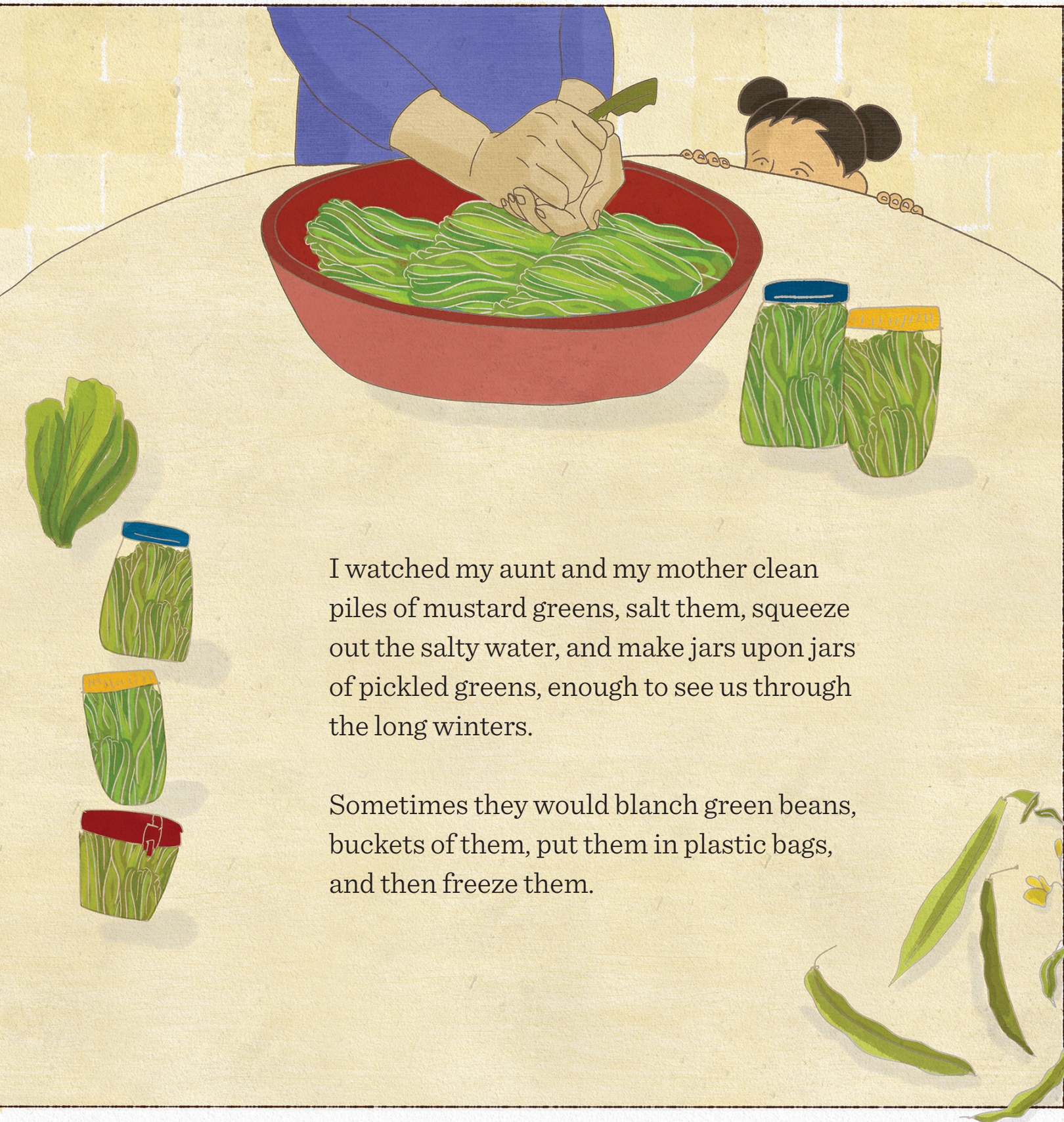


The last room of the house, at the back,
was a small kitchen with a dining
table big enough only for the adults.
During meals we children usually sat
in the living room before the blinking
television, plates of food on our knees.

The kitchen smelled of the food we ate:
rice, boiled pork bones, fried eggs, instant
noodles from Thailand and China,
and **pickled mustard greens**.



In the kitchen a single
window fan blew through
the hot summers.



I watched my aunt and my mother clean piles of mustard greens, salt them, squeeze out the salty water, and make jars upon jars of pickled greens, enough to see us through the long winters.

Sometimes they would blanch green beans, buckets of them, put them in plastic bags, and then freeze them.

My favorite spot in that **blue house** was the back porch, a slab of concrete two steps above the ground. It was the clean space between the house and the world outside.

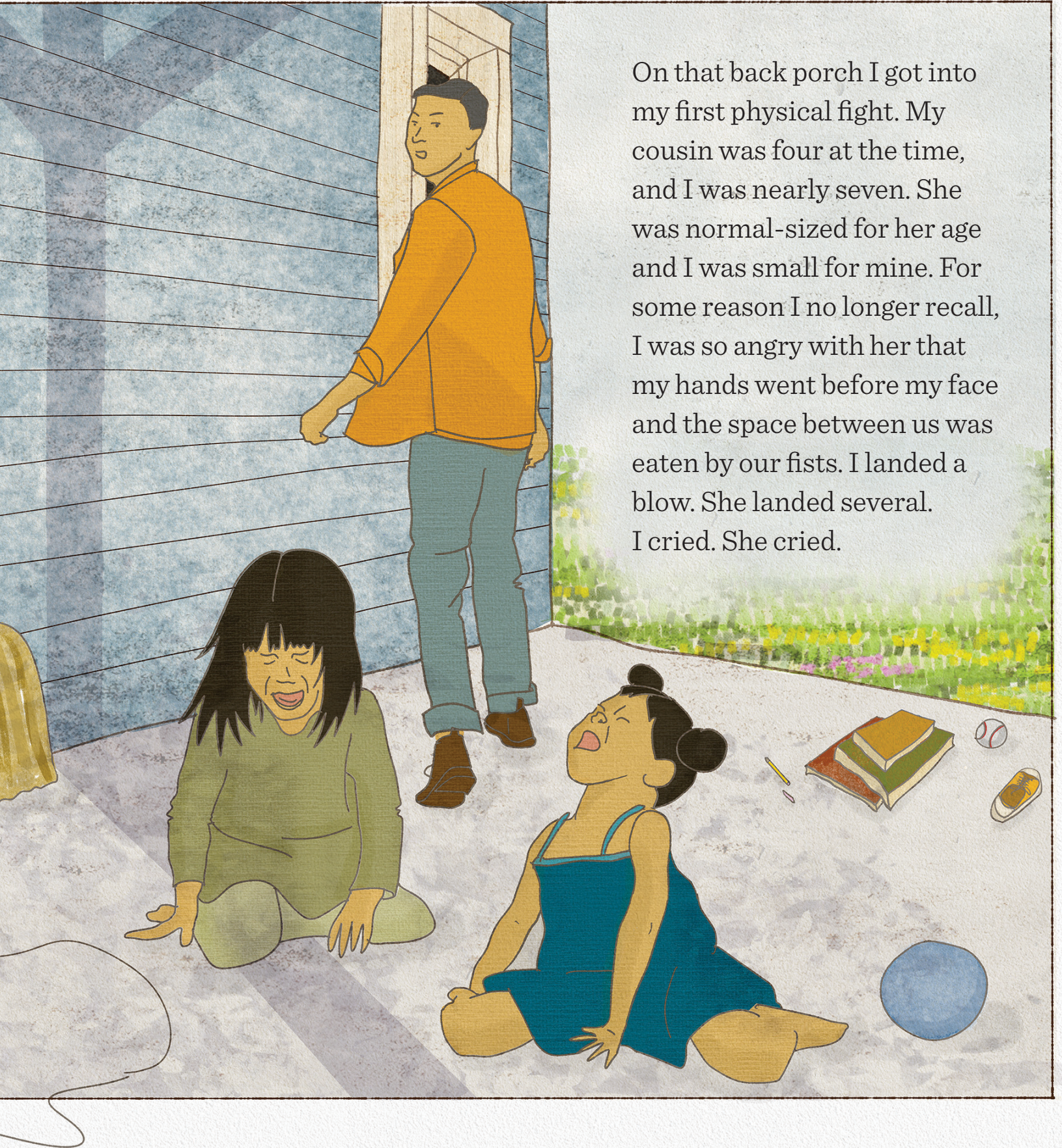
There I saw my aunt breastfeed my cousin for the first time, the baby's plump hands fisted at her sides, mouth busy at work. I thought then that my aunt had the longest breasts I'd ever seen, after my grandma's. I said to her, "One day your breast will touch the ground," and I remember the trill of my aunt's laughter in the wake of my words.

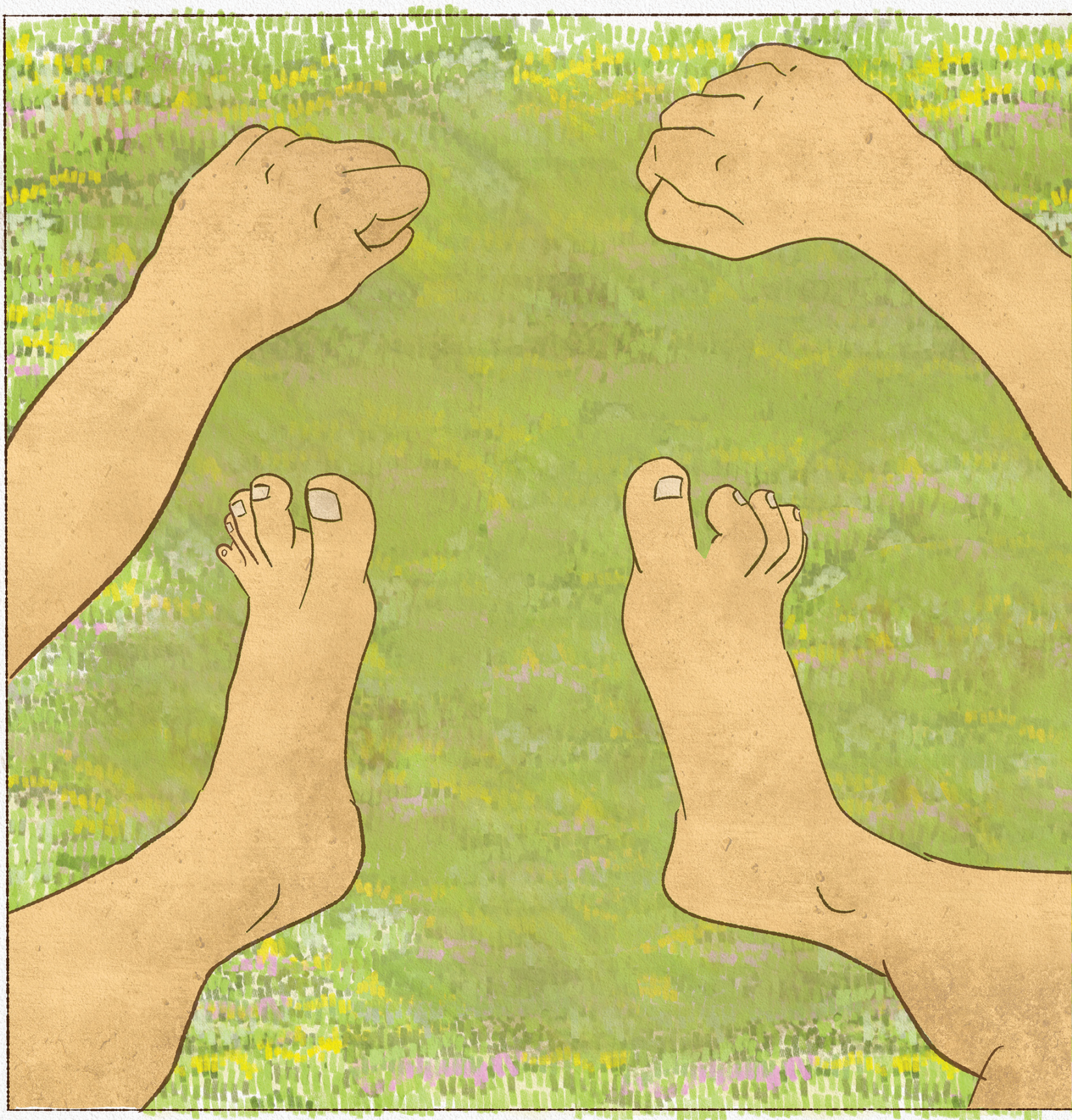


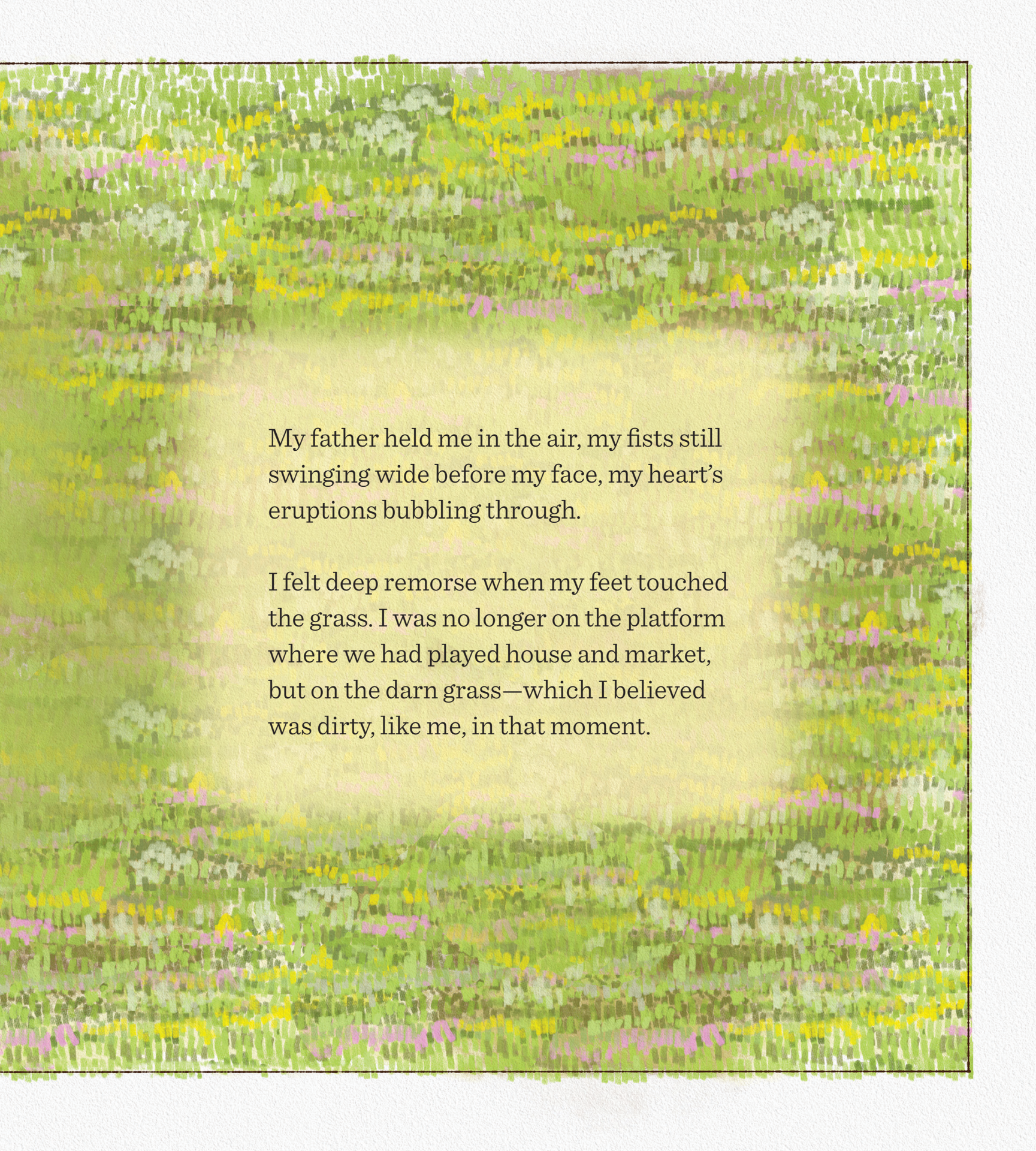




On that back porch I got into my first physical fight. My cousin was four at the time, and I was nearly seven. She was normal-sized for her age and I was small for mine. For some reason I no longer recall, I was so angry with her that my hands went before my face and the space between us was eaten by our fists. I landed a blow. She landed several. I cried. She cried.

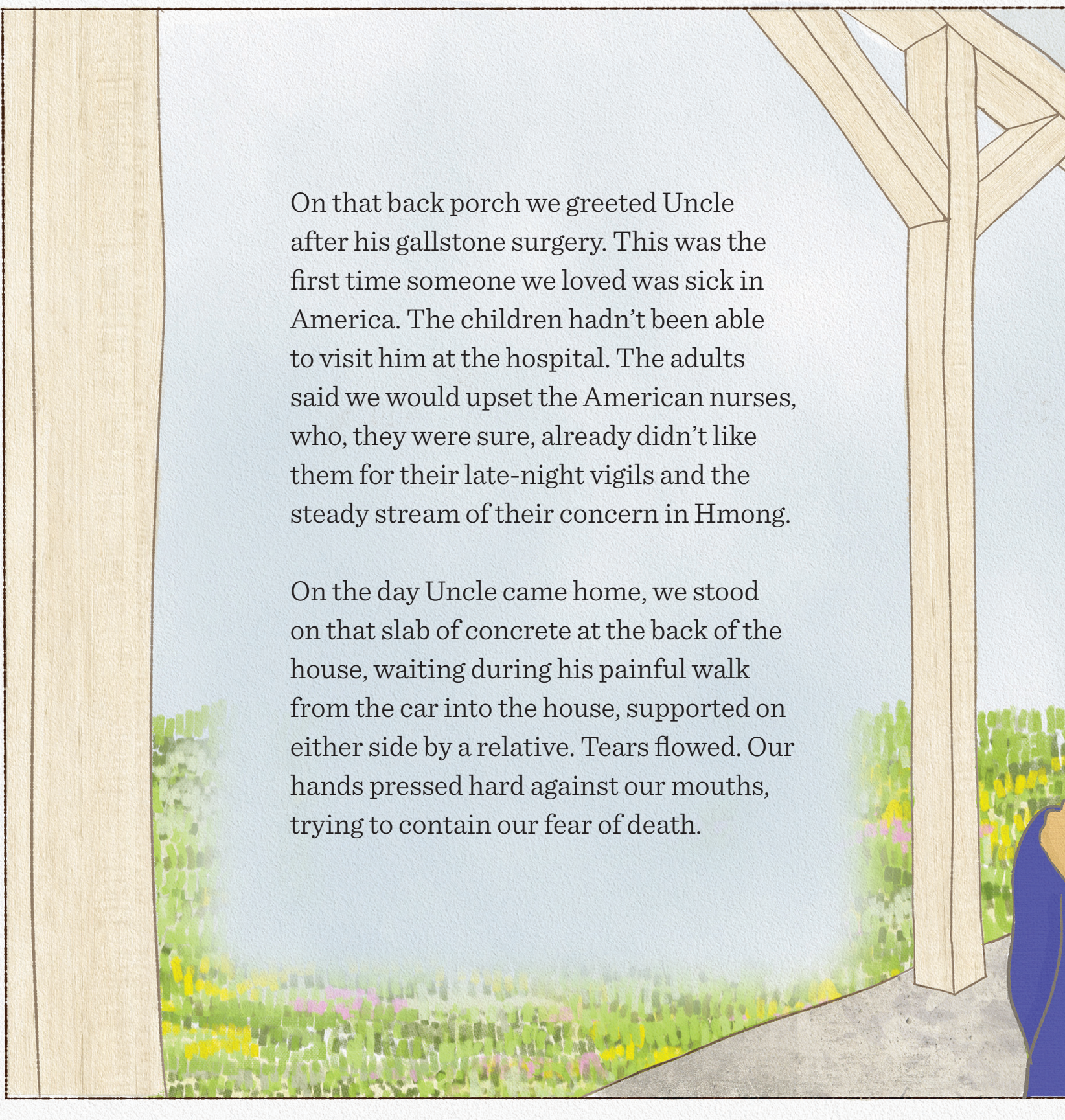






My father held me in the air, my fists still
swinging wide before my face, my heart's
eruptions bubbling through.

I felt deep remorse when my feet touched
the grass. I was no longer on the platform
where we had played house and market,
but on the darn grass—which I believed
was dirty, like me, in that moment.

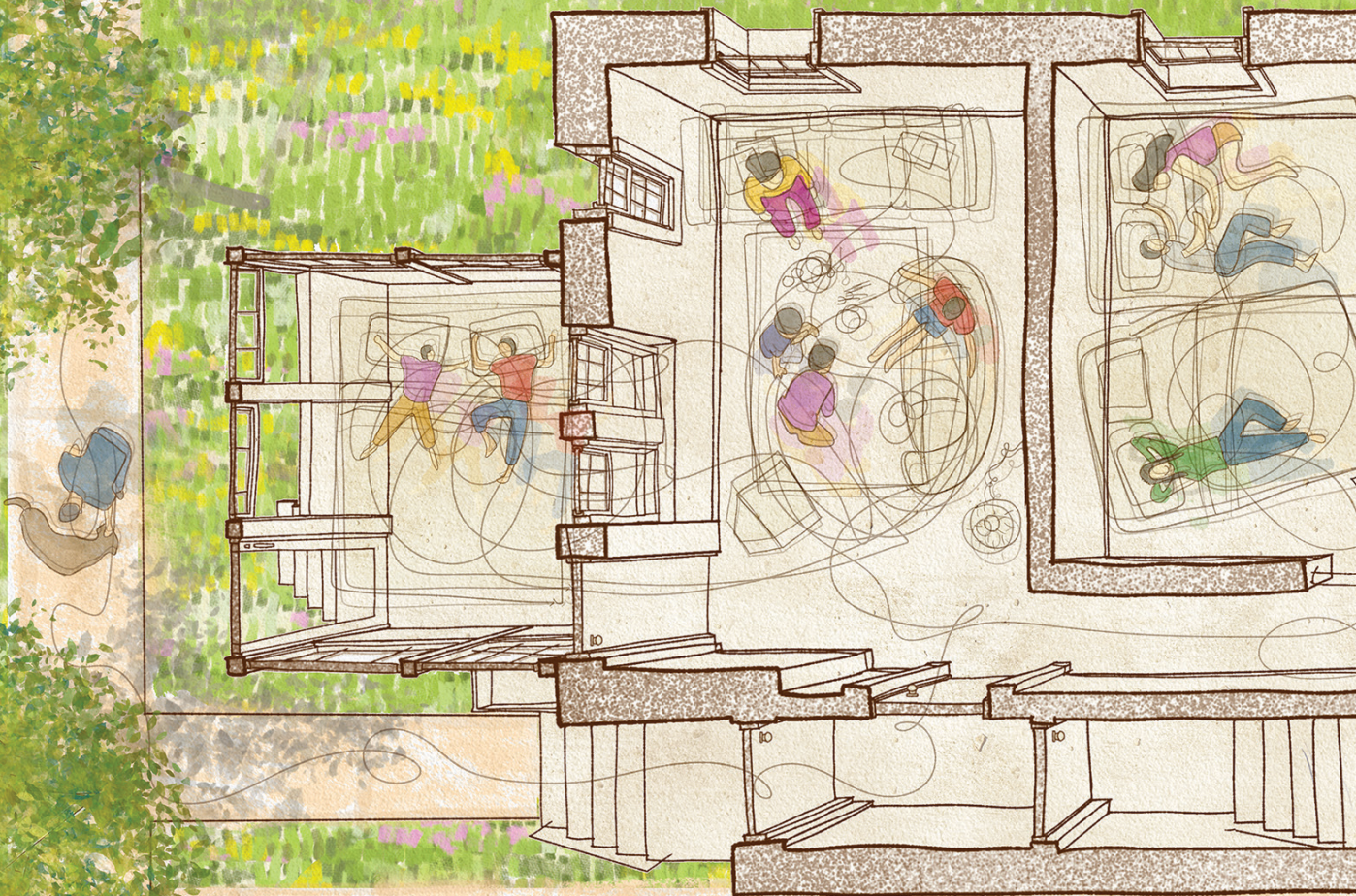


On that back porch we greeted Uncle after his gallstone surgery. This was the first time someone we loved was sick in America. The children hadn't been able to visit him at the hospital. The adults said we would upset the American nurses, who, they were sure, already didn't like them for their late-night vigils and the steady stream of their concern in Hmong.

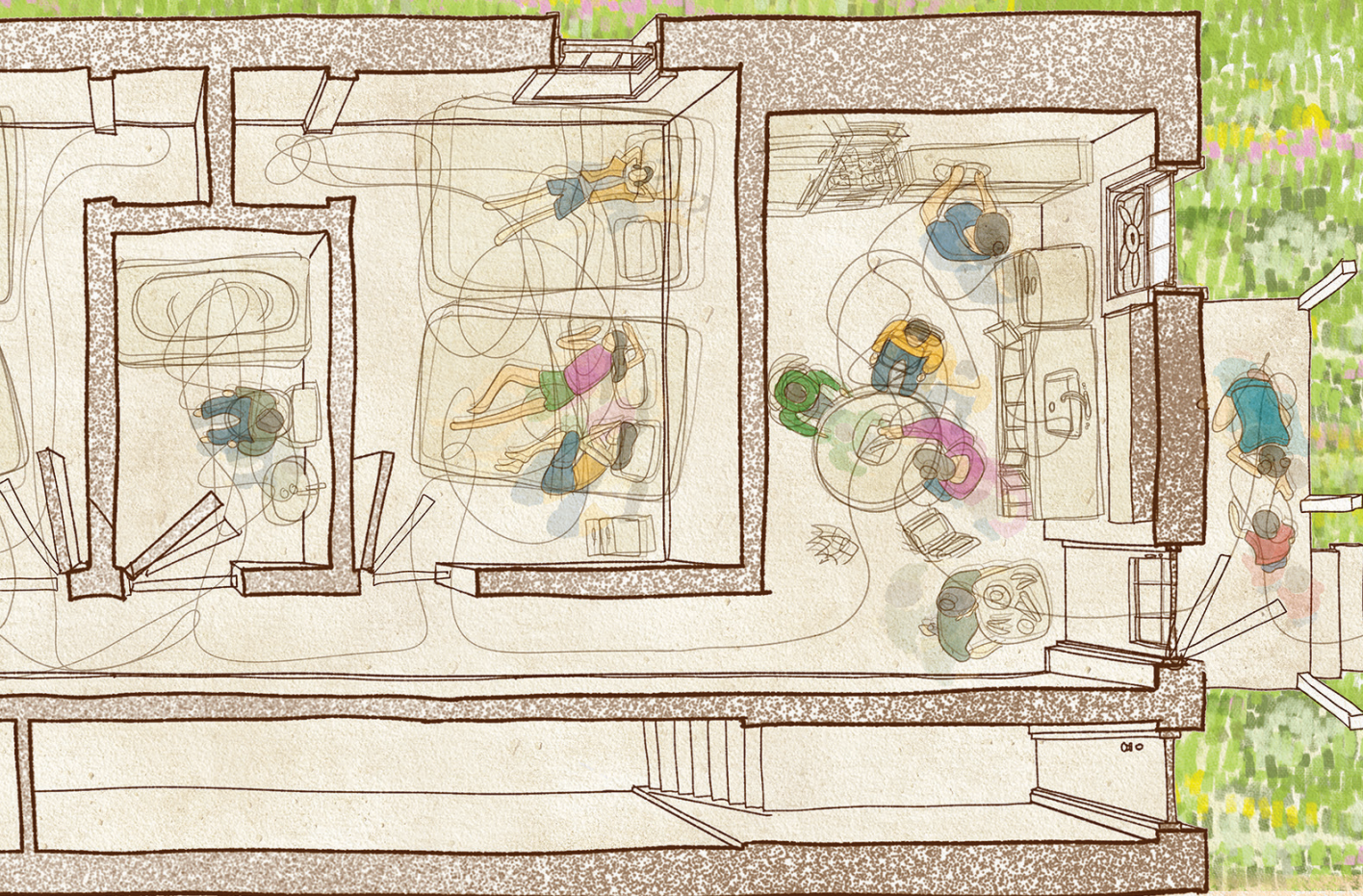
On the day Uncle came home, we stood on that slab of concrete at the back of the house, waiting during his painful walk from the car into the house, supported on either side by a relative. Tears flowed. Our hands pressed hard against our mouths, trying to contain our fear of death.



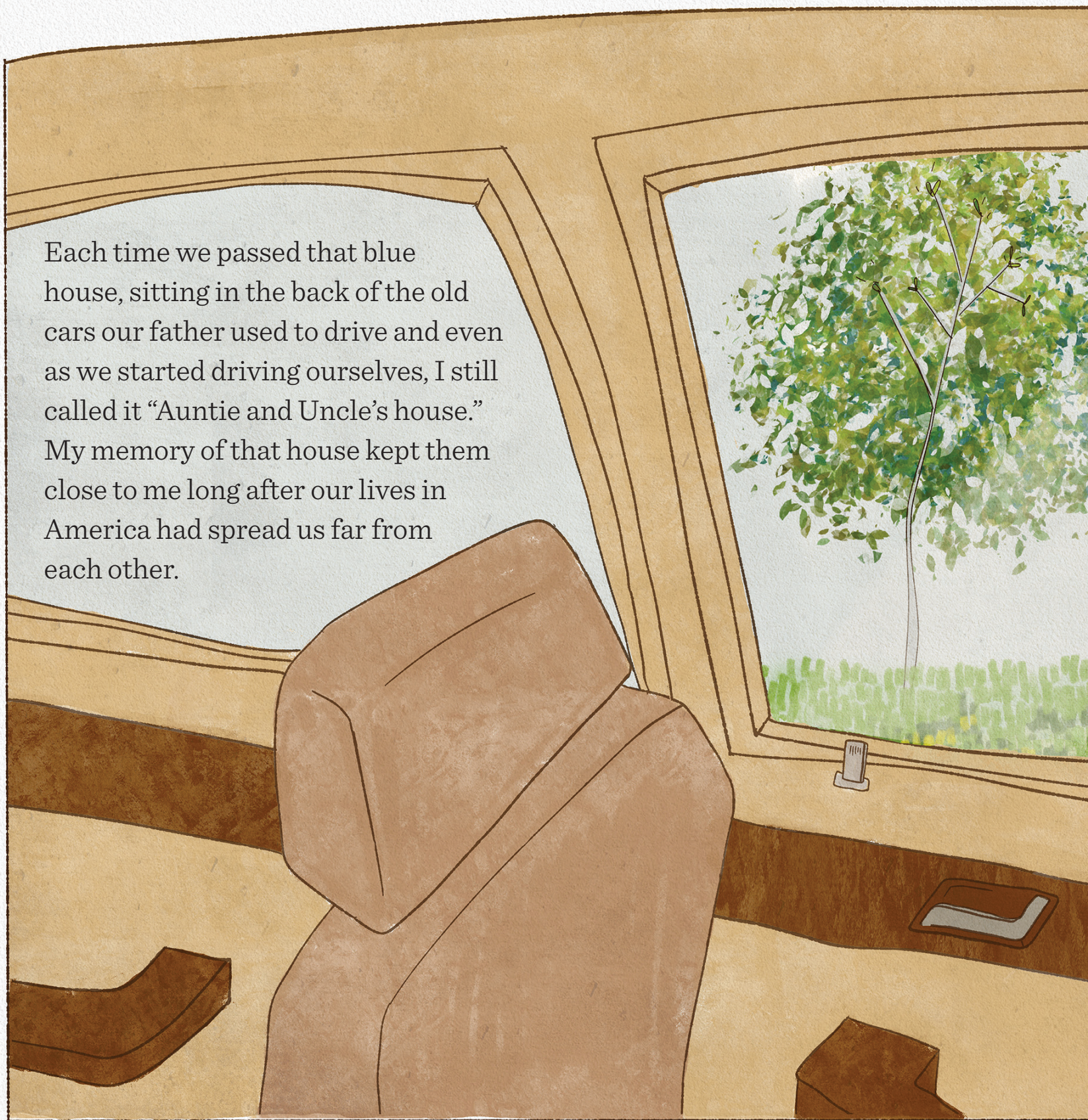
Aunt and Uncle lived in that cramped lower duplex for two years. They thought the house was too small, and they were concerned that the boys would get sick sleeping on the cold porch every night.



They grew afraid for the safety of the children when the drunk men from the bar on Payne Avenue wandered too close to the house, knocking on windows and doors. When they moved out of that house, they moved across the city, further away from us.

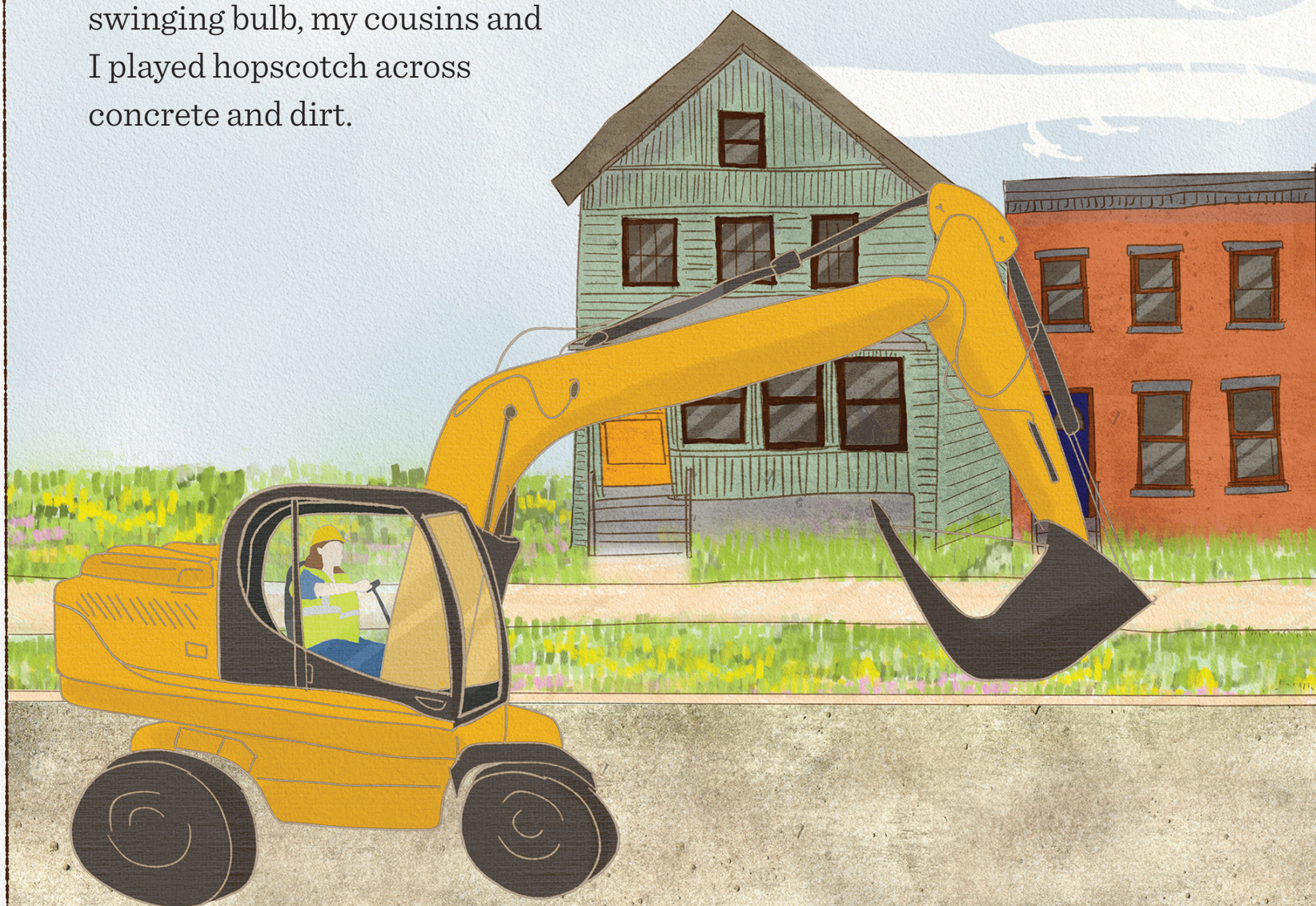


Each time we passed that blue house, sitting in the back of the old cars our father used to drive and even as we started driving ourselves, I still called it “Auntie and Uncle’s house.” My memory of that house kept them close to me long after our lives in America had spread us far from each other.





One day a big truck came and the house was torn down, bit by bit, until all that remained was the dark hole of the basement where, once upon a time, beneath a single swinging bulb, my cousins and I played hopscotch across concrete and dirt.



Then the hole was filled.

Suddenly green grass was growing
where the blue house once stood.

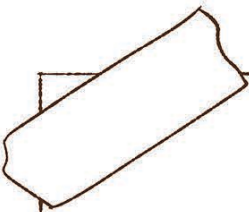






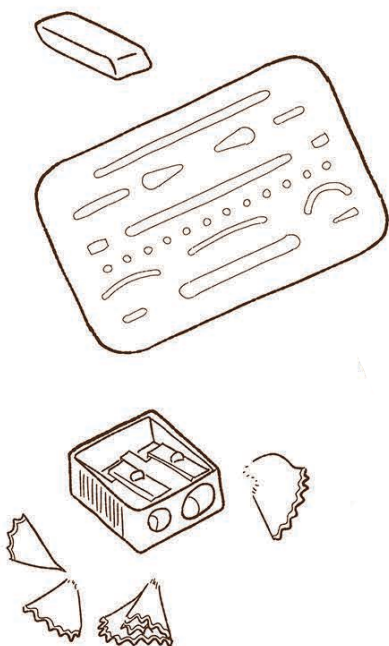
The blue house I loved is gone. Now we have an old aunt and uncle, and cousins who work near and far, and the memories we carry of that place where we had been poor together, in love with each other, learning about life in a new country, unaware that a house could disappear.

We children didn't know then that our lives would take us far from each other, and that love spread far too thin across time and space grows faint like dreams. Yet each time I pass by this plot of grass, behind Payne and off Maryland, I feel our ghosts in that house, inviting us toward the past, to ourselves and each other, again.



KAO KALIA YANG is a Hmong American teacher, speaker, and multigenre author of books for adults and children. Her children's books, including *Yang Warriors* and *The Shared Room* (both published by the University of Minnesota Press), center Hmong children and families who live, dream, hurt, and hope in our world.

JEN SHIN is an urbanist, architect, and environmental advocate. The daughter of immigrants and granddaughter of refugees, Jen is fascinated by what it means to make a home and by the places where communities create home together. Jen lives in Brooklyn, New York City, and loves to explore the world through drawing.



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