

~Ania & Kin~

THE GARDEN AND I



ANIA's storybook: **THE GARDEN AND I**

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Published by:

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Hecho el Depósito Legal en la Biblioteca Nacional del Perú N° 2021-01962

Primera edición digital: Enero 2020



The Asociación para la Niñez y su Ambiente -ANIA, (Association for Children and their Environment), is a non-profit association founded in Peru in 1995. Its mission is to promote active empathy for life through initiatives that bond children and young people with Mother Earth and empower them as change agents for sustainable development. Active empathy for life is the ability to prioritize the common good through daily actions that generate well being for oneself, other people, and nature.

This is the childhood story that inspired Joaquin Leguia to create ANIA.

A voice from the garden



I met Joaquin a few years ago, but the deep knowledge of a being cannot be measured in years. I looked into the eyes of an old soul with an ancestral knowledge of how things should be, and a young determination to make our world a better place. He told me about his tree, the one he climbed to dream when he was a kid. I told him about mine, where I spent so many hours of my childhood – three decades before he was born. The love of trees connected us in a pure and natural way. That, and our love for dogs!

I have the honor of writing a few words about this little book, which is special because it comes from deep inside Joaquin's heart. It is the story of a magical garden. While exploring it, the author is a child again, and leads us to discover the spiders, beetles, and of course his favorite trees. There are tears and smiles. His memories are crisp as if they were new. When he finally realizes that his garden will cease to exist, we share his pain because we have also experienced the destruction of things we love.

But Joaquin keeps the garden in a special place within him, where he can take refuge and find clarity to face the problems of the present world.

Thank you for taking us on this trip with you.

Jane Goodall

Dr. Jane Goodall is a United Nations Messenger of Peace.



To the garden of my childhood where the saplings, bees and ants were raised



that today inhabit my inner world and fill it with life.



At home I lived with my mother, grandmother, sister, and Augusto, my brother and a great companion of many adventures. I was the youngest.

Back then, they said the streets were not safe, so we spent most of our time at home.



My brother was funny:
he would grimace without reason, he had invisible friends only I knew of and,
if you looked at him from behind, his shirt was always inside-out and his pants
were stuck in his socks.

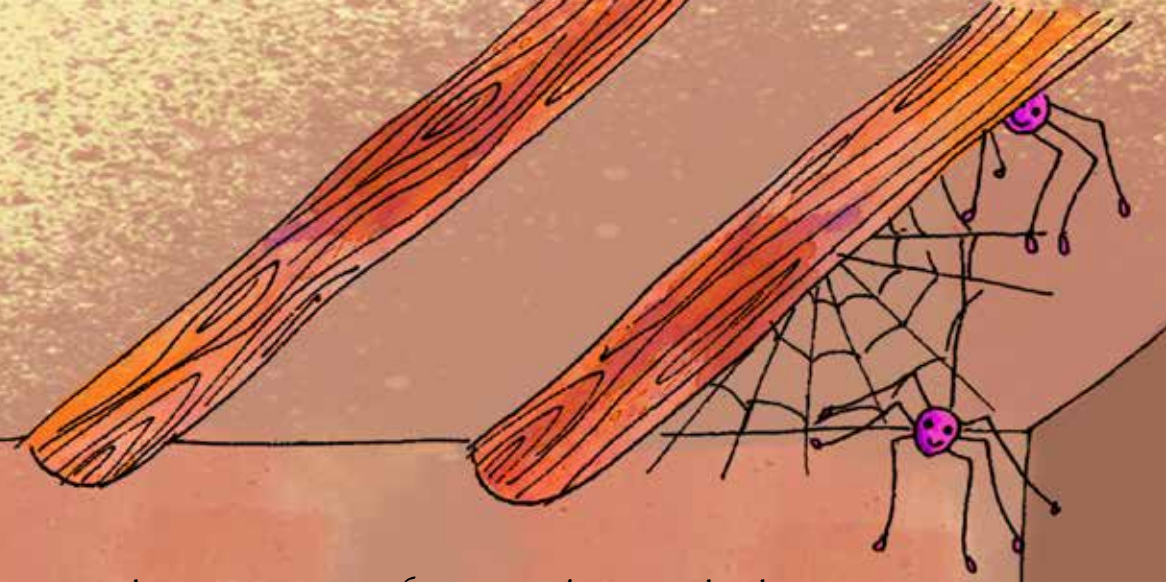
Sometimes, he would wear his shoes back to front. I tried to imitate him, but I
was never able to master his peculiar walk.



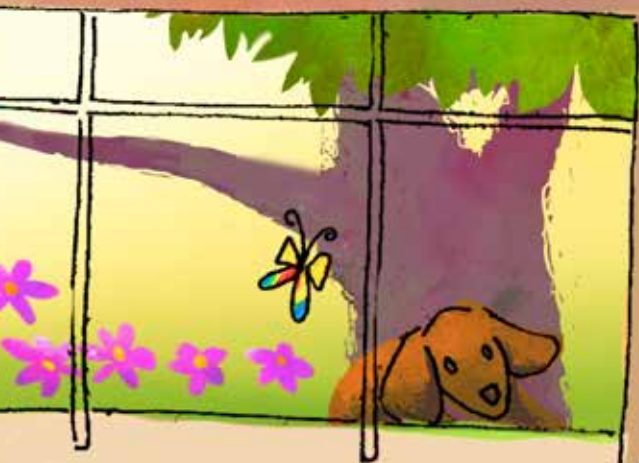
They said he had different abilities. I believed he had; for me his world was a
magical place and together we explored all sides of it. We were always having
fun together.

My house had a large, orderly garden with flowering plants of many colors and a manicured lawn. It reminded me of the formal dresses and hairdos of my mother's friends who visited our house on Sundays.





Besides the garden, my favorite place in the house was the attached garage. There in corners lived strange spiders with tiny bodies and long thin legs.



I used to watch these spiders and pester them with a pointed stick, which I thought of as my African spear.



However, the place I most preferred to be was known by everyone as "the land." A stone wall, like the one in China I imagined, separated "the land" from the house and garden. The wall was covered by creepers and at dusk I could see rats traveling back and forth using it like a roadway.



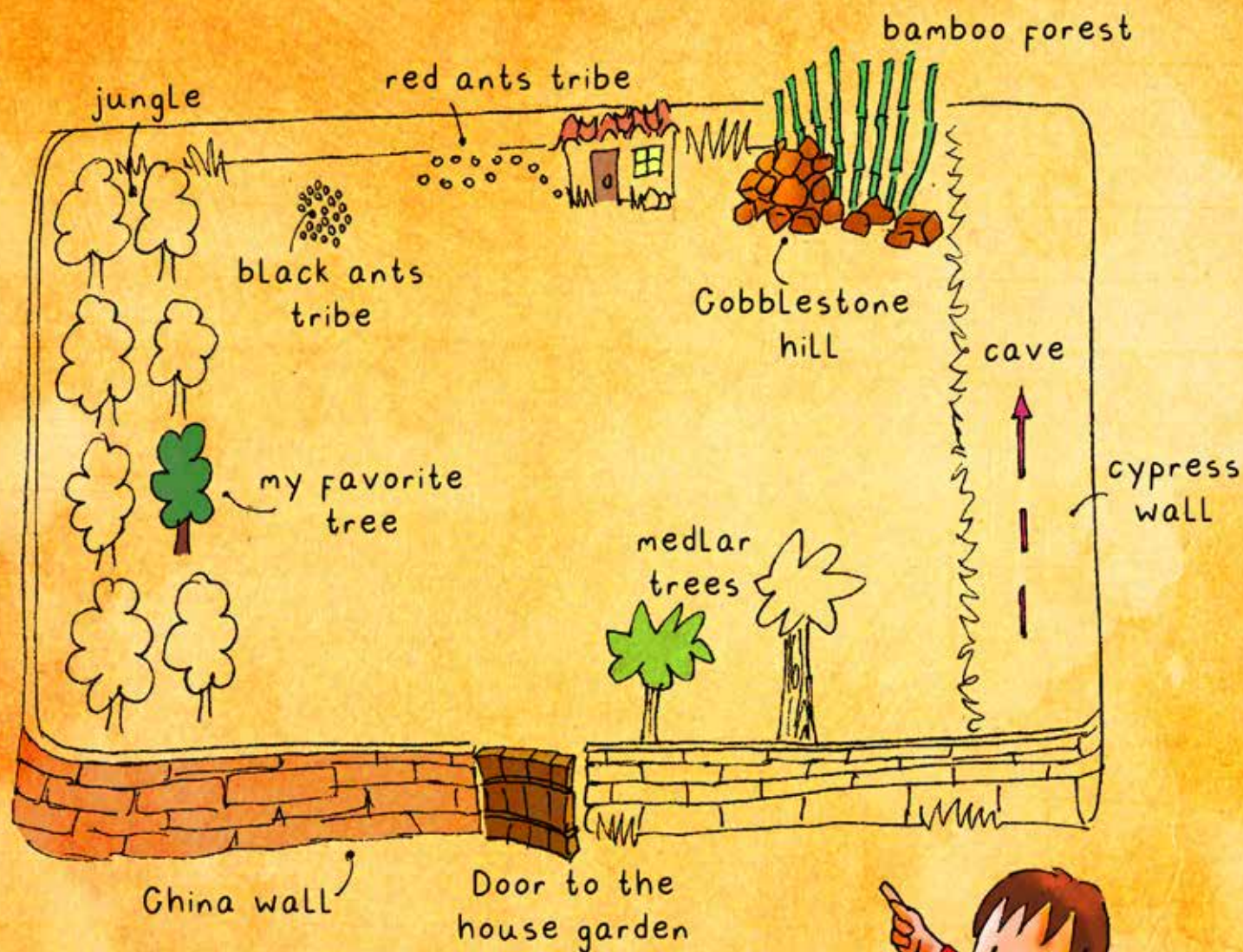
Our dogs were kept on the "land," and a gentleman who talked to plants and who was called "Gardener," would often rest there.

When I first entered, I was amazed by everything I found there.

-At the South end was an overgrown jungle with huge trees that had immense limbs we could climb. To the North side was a wall of cypress trees. Their bottom branches made a dark cave, which, led to a small bamboo grove surrounded by a hill of huddled cobble stones and gravel. In the center was an open green pasture where I could run. If I followed the China Wall East to the end of the garden there were two medlar trees. One was large and easy to climb (my favorite), while the other had a thin trunk but produced more yellow fruit. And finally, on the West side of the garden was a hedgerow that hid a brick wall. This is where the red and black ant tribes dwelled.



"The land" map



With time...

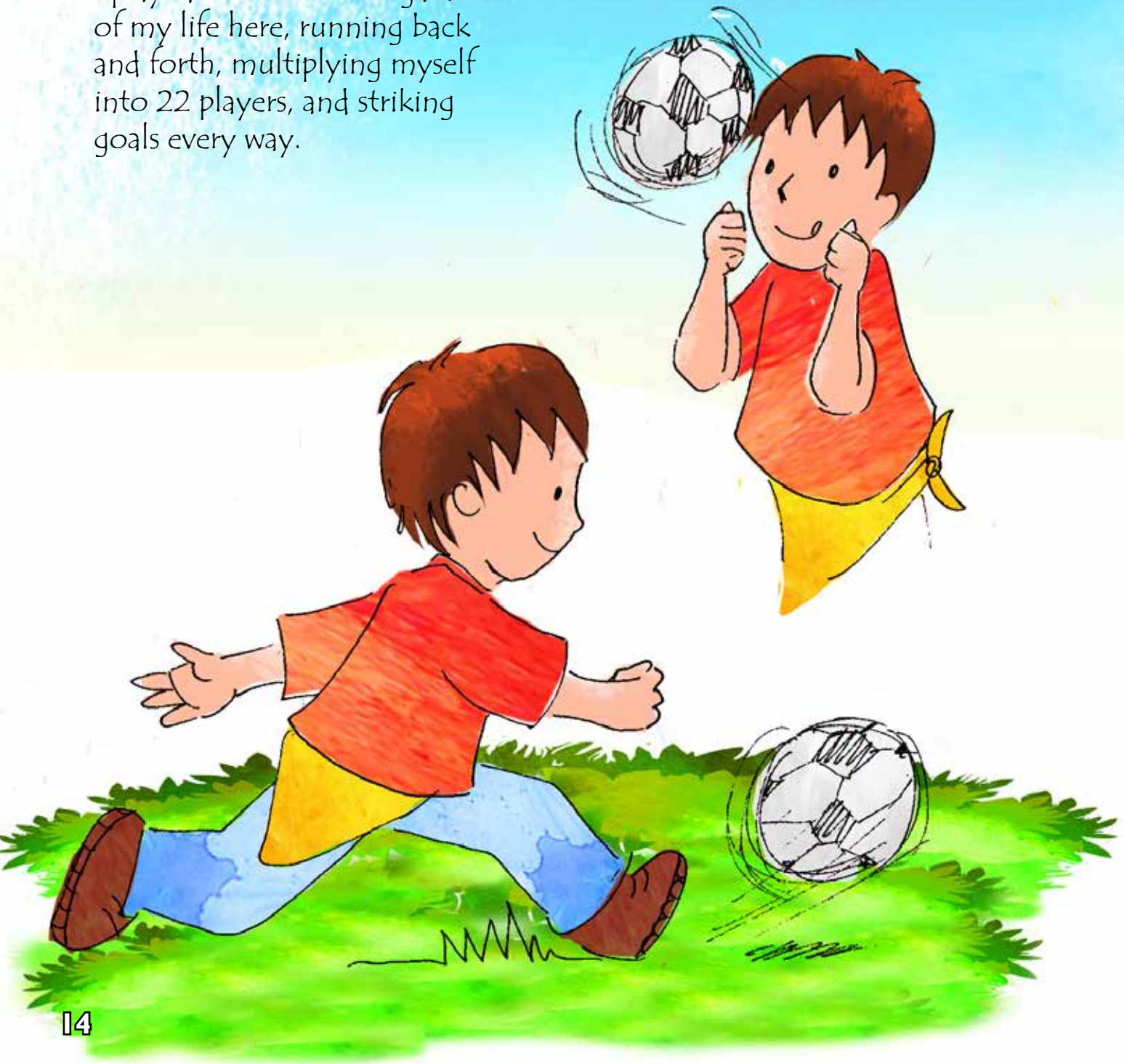


...the "land" became my Garden, my world.

When I wanted to reach the sky, I climbed to the treetops and held
the clouds in my hands.



I played the best soccer games
of my life here, running back
and forth, multiplying myself
into 22 players, and striking
goals every way.



My brother, who sat on one side, cheered me on while broadcasting the game at the top of his lungs, using a stick as his microphone.



After the final whistle I would turn and look towards the bushes. I was certain I was being spied on by the coach of the National Soccer Team.

When I was happy, I would run nonstop until jumped by a pride of lions,
then I would fall, fight them with my spear and run again until I dropped
from exhaustion...





When I rested, the lawn was my mattress, and a "lion" was my pillow..

I learned to ride a bike in my garden, zig-zagging back and forth through a minefield of dog bombs. I fell several times while practicing; luckily, it was always in a zone safe from poop.



Once, barefoot, I stepped on a bomb, slipped, and fell over. Nearby, my dogs, the authors of this disgrace, wagged their tails watching with joy.

In my garden, I killed a bird for the first and last time. I aimed at her with a sling-shot that was given to me as a gift, and bang, it fell. I felt horrible and buried the bird and the sling shot.





One day, angry about something that had nothing to do with my garden, I kicked one of the trees and ouch! It felt like I had hit myself. I never did it again.

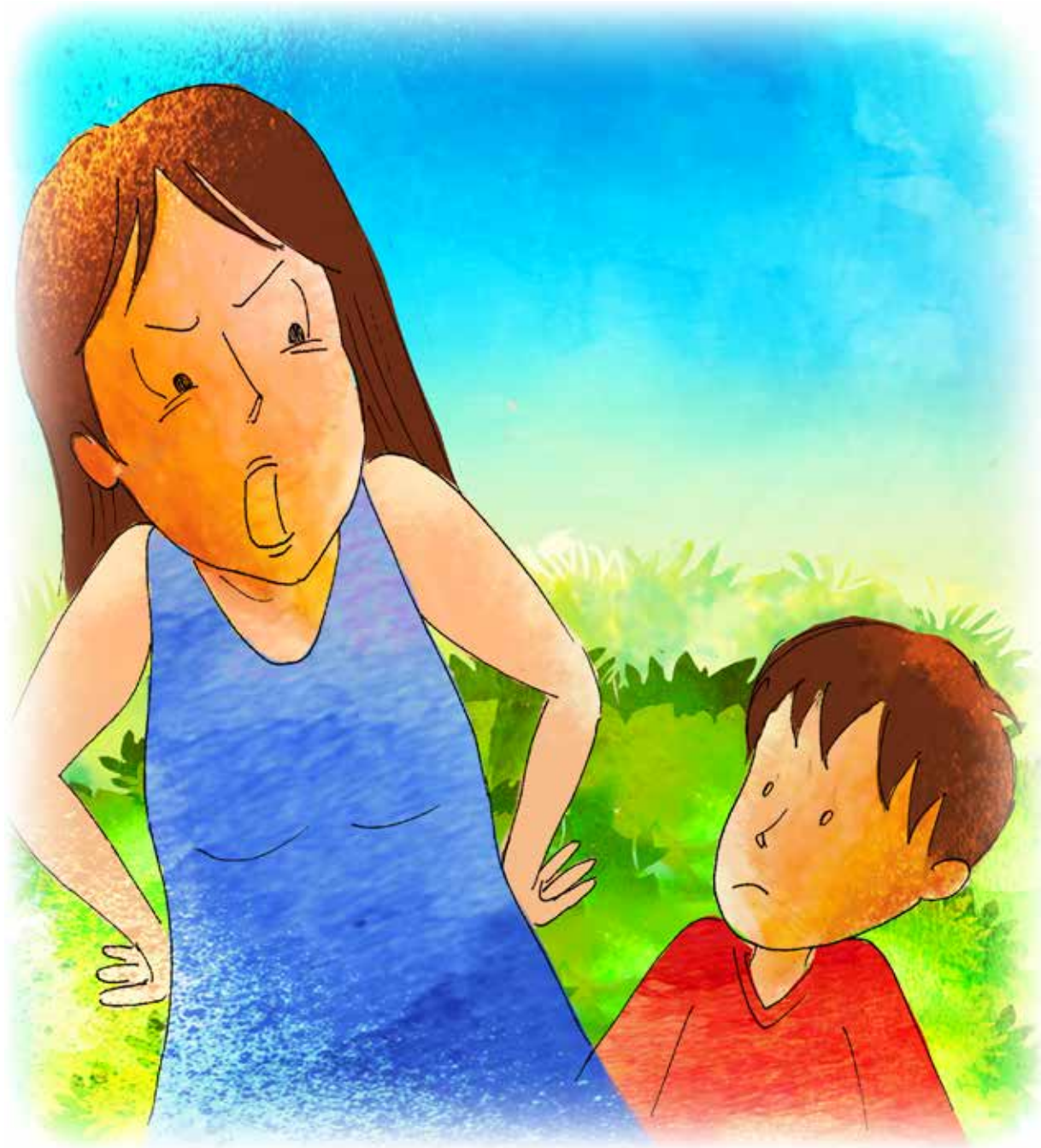
When I was sad, I would fall on the grass defeated, and cry until the sun or
the dogs' lapping dried my tears.





When I was hungry there were medlars to eat that I harvested myself. Before climbing up the two big trees, I would hug them and softly ask them to protect me from falling and reward me with tasty, bug-free fruit. Usually, the fruit was sweet, even if it came with bugs.

From crawling and tumbling on the grass I must have eaten kilos of grass among other things. Twice a year, a nurse would draw blood from me and a few days later my mother would inevitably proclaim, "you have worms"!



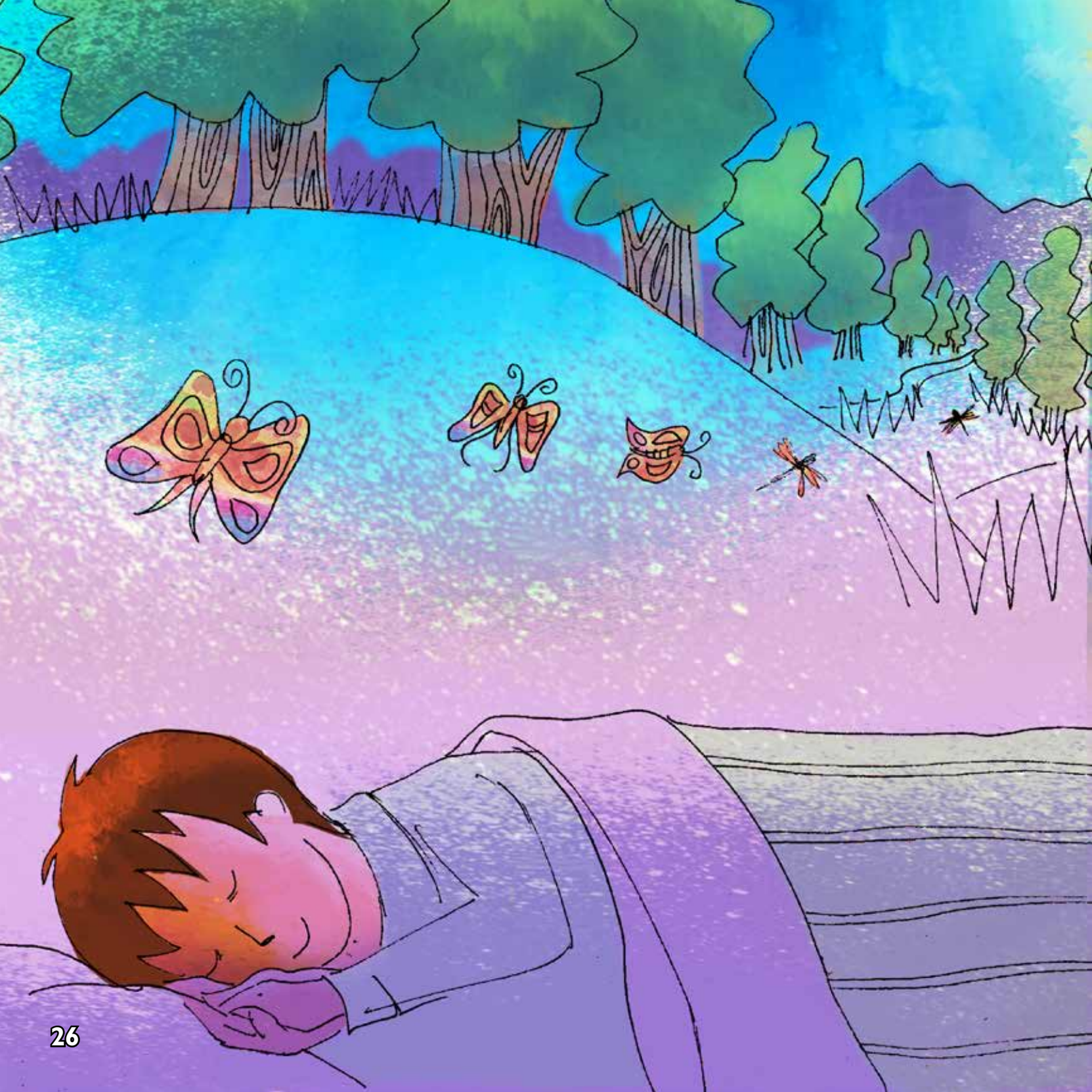
If I heard them looking for me to do my homework, I was able to hide and not be found. I had several hideouts. But the best and most dangerous one was behind the bamboo grove among the cobble stones. It was also home to a huge rat.



There, in silence, I would listen to her piercing shriek echo on the cobblestones. I respected her for not betraying the hideout to my persecutors.

At the end of the afternoon, when the sun was setting, I squatted on a high branch of my favorite tree and watched over my world. There, I felt safe and free as in no other place; I was my own hero.





At night, in my dreams, the walls around my house vanished, and the garden became a prairie with beautiful trees.

Flamencos, herons, and butterflies flew past a meandering river of crystal-clear water. Elephants, giraffes, and herds of zebra crossed it followed by a family of nomads who waved at me from afar.

And so, I spent my days, until after some years something magical happened. Mom announced we were going to the jungle. I was already eight. We climbed into a plane and after 30-minutes of peeking at white cotton clouds through the window, a green mantle appeared and there I saw a long, thin river of chocolate zigzagging into the vast horizon.

I could not part from the window until we landed. My mind and heart were anticipating the thrill of exploring that huge untouched garden.



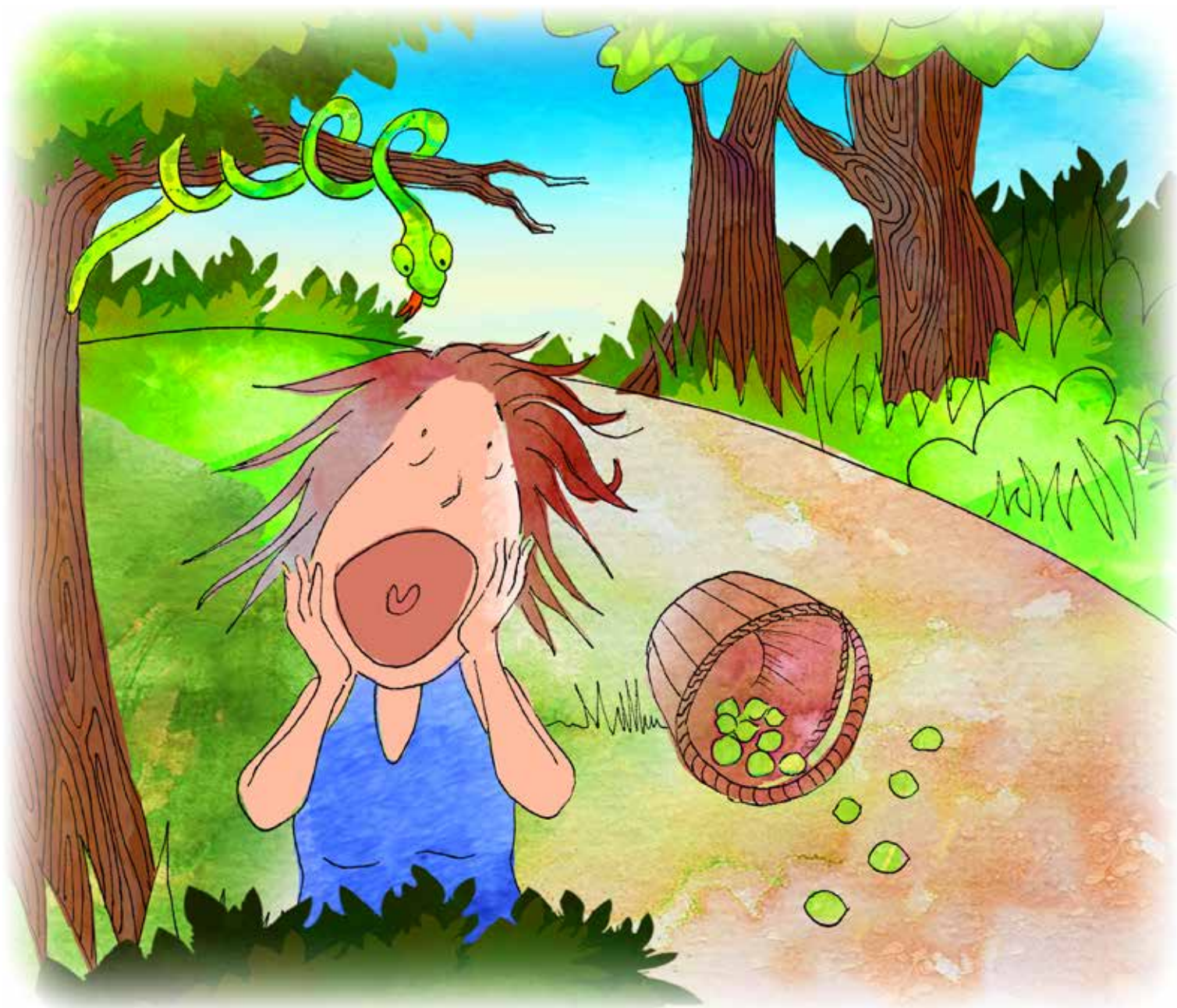


After we landed, we took a jeep down muddy roads to a hospital where people from the native villages came to be treated. Mom knew the doctors and was there to help them...

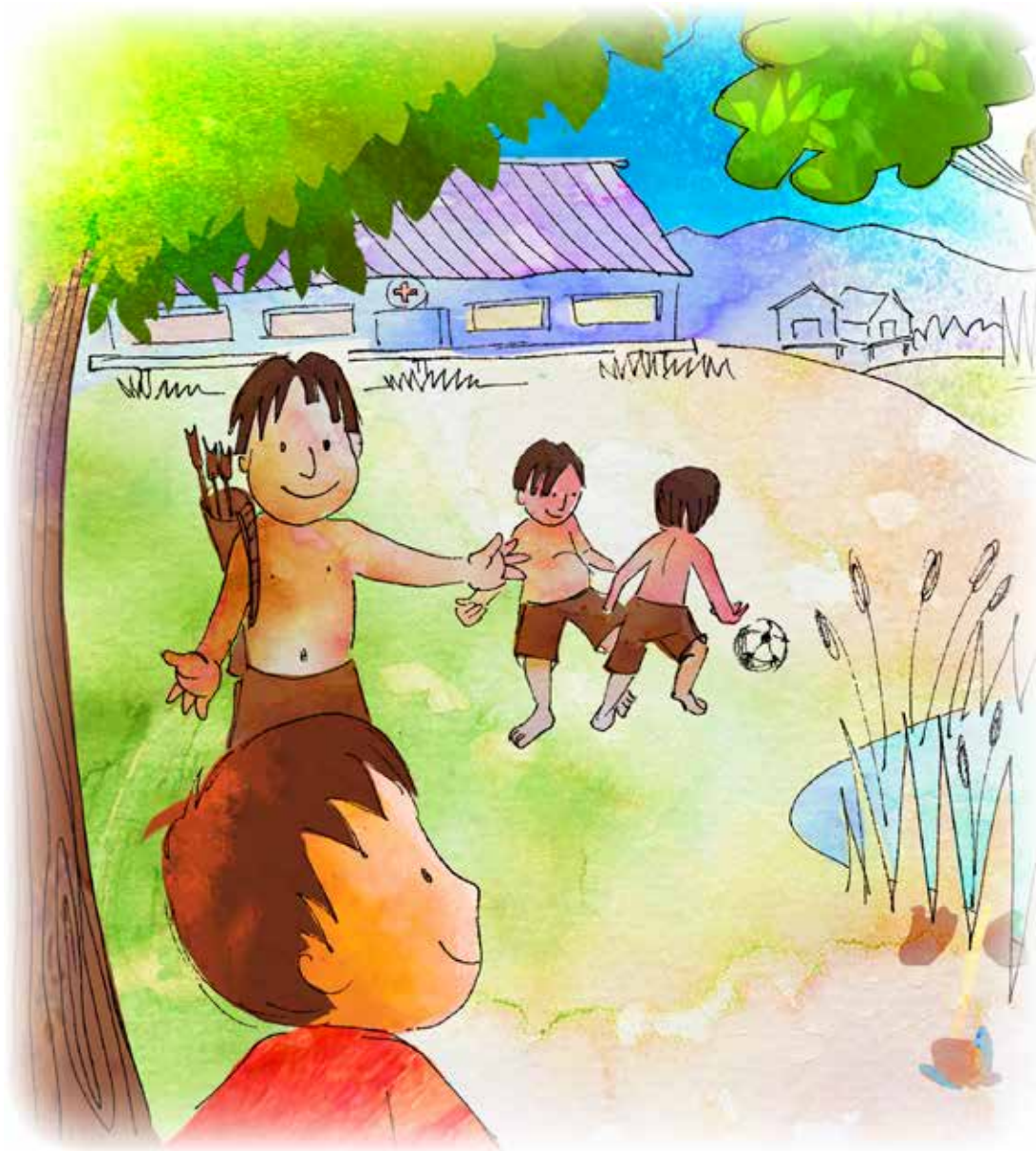


We settled in a little house close to the hospital's gardens. There was a cow shed with milking cows, many trees, lizards, and these large black beetles that could not get up when they fell on their back feet-up, so I saved them with a stick.

There were also beautiful green snakes that rested on the fruit trees. I could tell they were near if my mom screamed while she was picking lemons.



As soon as I arrived, I made friends with three native boys who lived in a village next to the hospital, at the edge of a lake. They always walked barefoot carrying their bow and arrows and a football. They were always happy, and I liked that.





They taught me how to use the bow and arrow, milk cows, listen to the wild spotted cat, fish piranhas, speak their language, eat manioc, walk barefoot, remove chigoe fleas, row the canoe and fight off snakes in dark waters. They saved me many times from venomous serpents and other dangers, warning me in a way so that fear of the jungle would not grow inside me.



I spent 4-years exploring the jungle and the people that lived there, and I felt, equally, that they explored me.

These were years in which my eyes and heart learned to see and feel differently, in the same way my brother and garden taught me to see.

When I moved back to the city, now speaking with a native accent that I was very proud of, I was told “the land” – my garden of magic and life – would be bulldozed and turned into a cement court.

With tears in my eyes I saw how quickly the trees of my childhood disappeared along with the welcoming grass where I had run those thousands of kilometers and played so many football matches.

Last to fall was the bamboo grove, the cobblestone hill, and with it all its inhabitants, including the giant rat.



The pain of loss fades with time. Today, I remember the past through a childhood that fueled my dreams. It made me who I have now become.

My brother protected my sense of wonder with the world and gave me the innate sense of who I was. The garden allowed me to find myself without judgment or limits.

When my Garden was converted into a lifeless space, the spirit of nature – stimulated by what I learned from the Amazon and its people – settled within me and nurtured my connection to the natural world.

I learned that we are better off if we do not kill birds or kick trees, if our weapons are buried, and if our gardens have no boundaries so our feelings can wander openly and freely.

I learned from my Amazon friends that we are made of the same air, earth and water as everything around us, and whatever we do to the world is inflicted back on us.





Today I still dream that I am playing in my garden, together with my brother and dogs. I see myself squatting on the branch of a great tree, looking over the horizon, ready to start a new adventure.

THE END



My brother Augusto and me in the garden, 1976



Thanks to my mother,
we recovered "the land"
in 2013. We broke down
and removed the cement
and restored the garden.
Today my daughter and
son are growing up with
nature.



Eva and Nicolas in the garden 2015

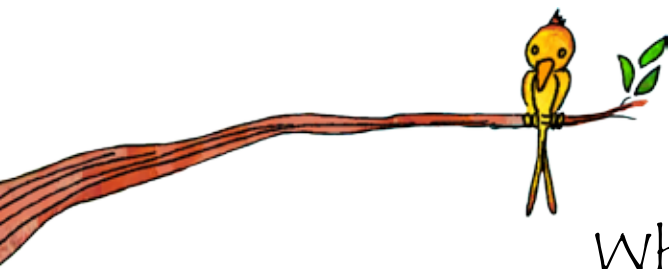


AUTHOR'S NOTE

To solve the global problems and advance towards sustainable development it is essential that new generations develop active empathy for life. For this to happen, it is essential that children grow up in positive and regular contact with nature. Who better than life herself to teach them to value and care for her?

The author is the founder of the Association for Children and their Environment-ANIA and member of the global network of social entrepreneurs, Ashoka.

Currently Joaquín and his brother Augusto work together in ANIA.



When I was a child,
I met nature and asked if I could play with her.
With happiness she said yes!
She shared the land, the grass, the water,
the trees, and the bugs.

When I was a child nature met me and asked if she
could play with me.
With happiness and I said yes!
I gave her my heart.

Joaquín



Produced by:

