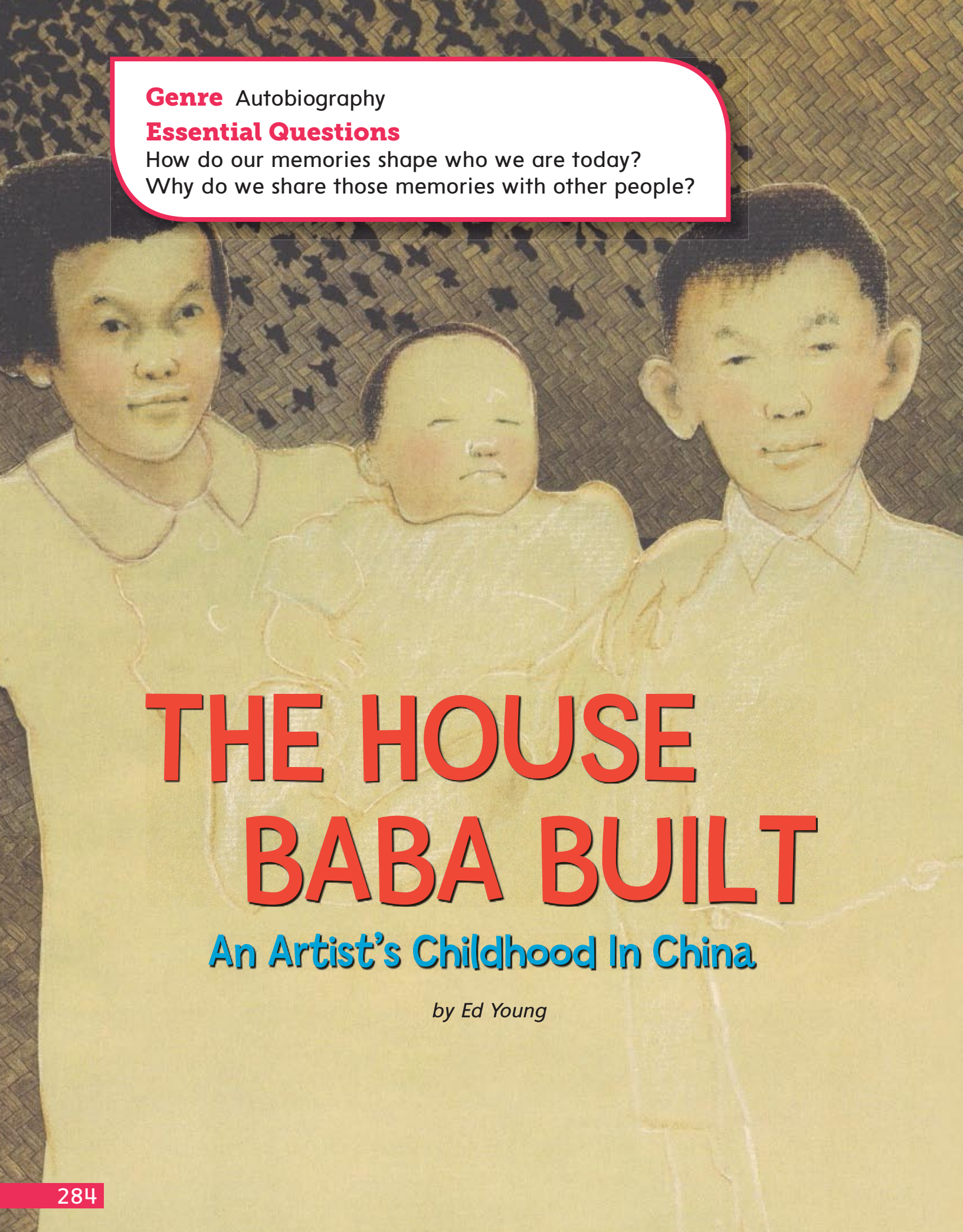


Genre Autobiography

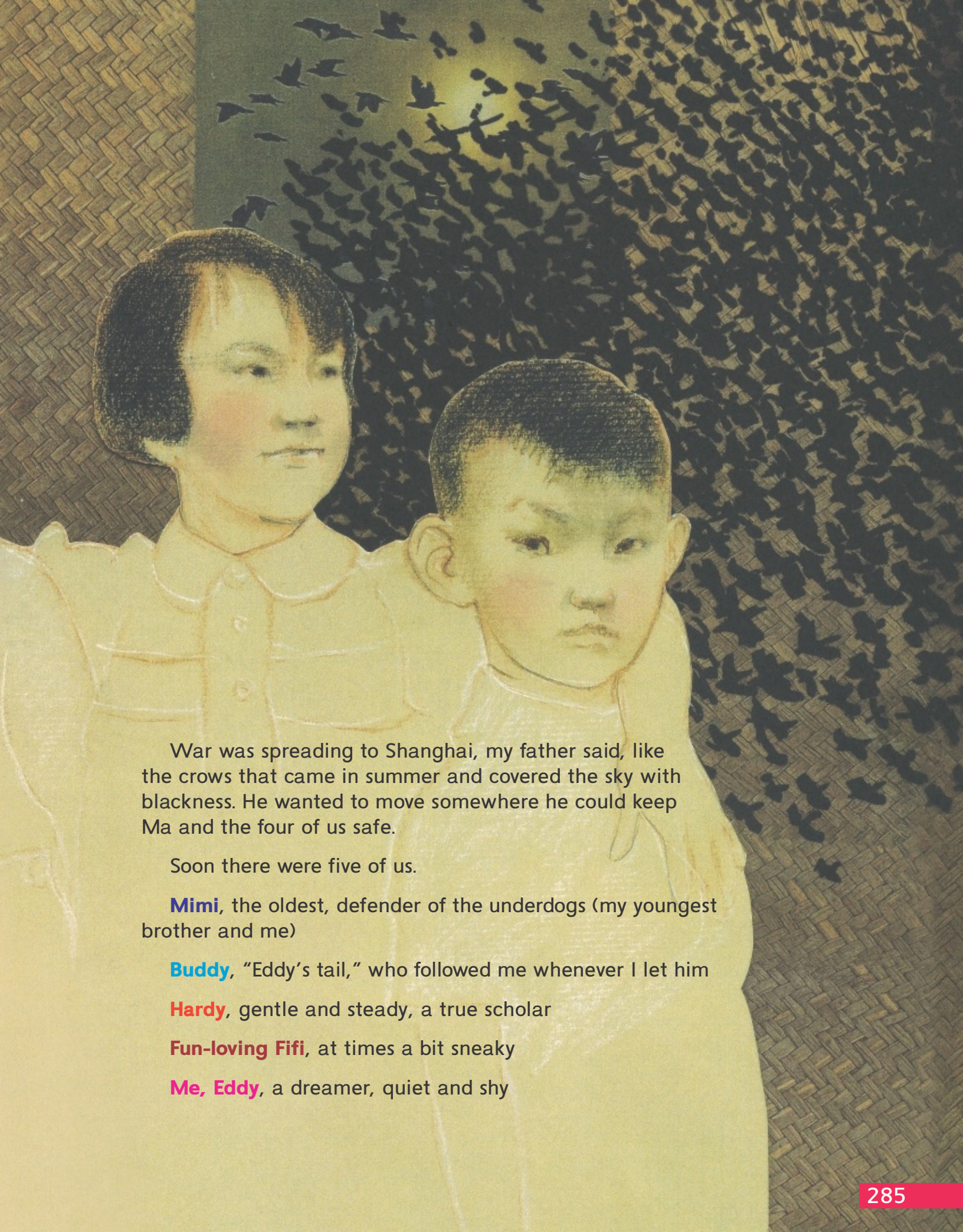
Essential Questions

How do our memories shape who we are today?
Why do we share those memories with other people?

THE HOUSE BABA BUILT

An Artist's Childhood In China

by Ed Young



War was spreading to Shanghai, my father said, like the crows that came in summer and covered the sky with blackness. He wanted to move somewhere he could keep Ma and the four of us safe.

Soon there were five of us.

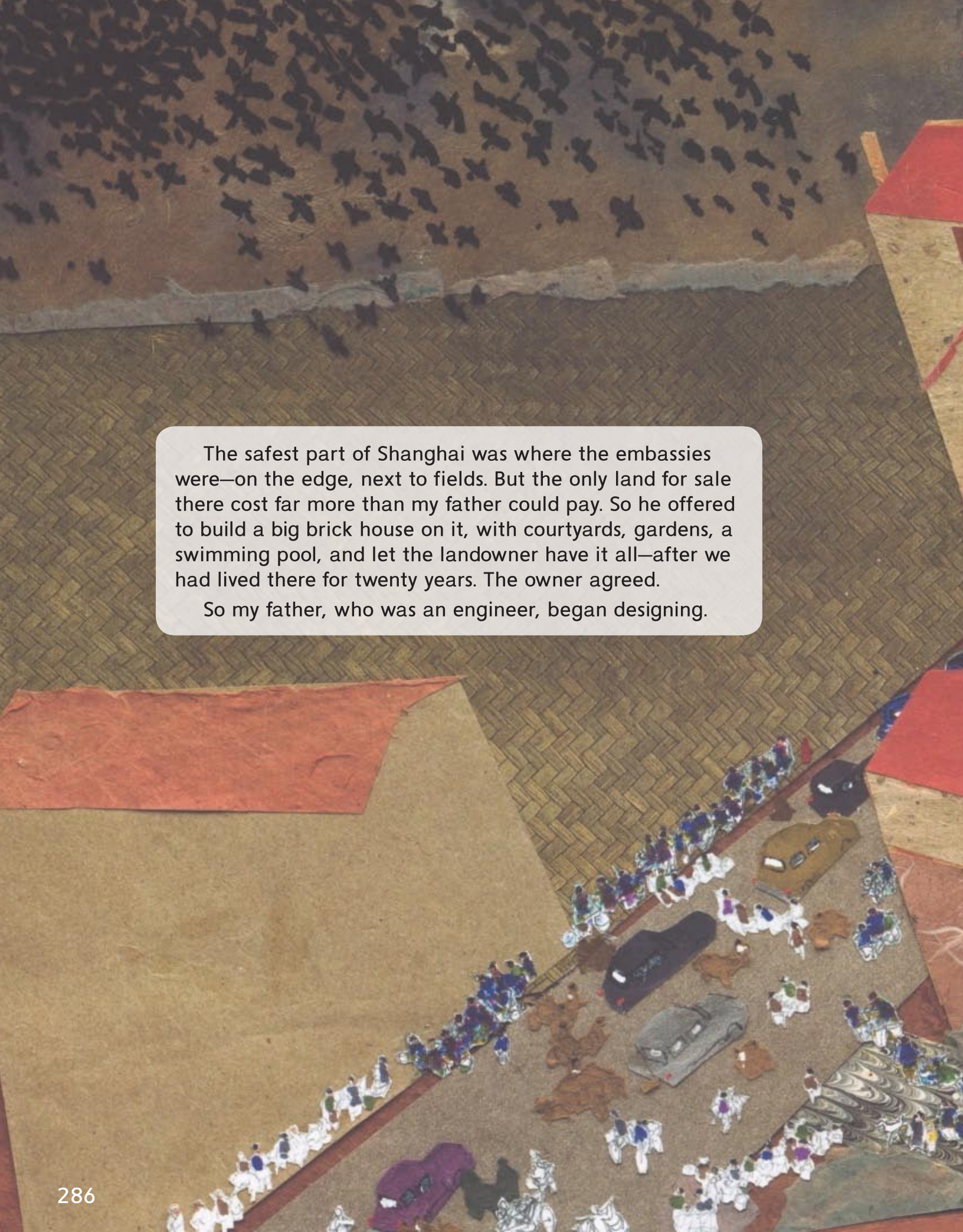
Mimi, the oldest, defender of the underdogs (my youngest brother and me)

Buddy, "Eddy's tail," who followed me whenever I let him

Hardy, gentle and steady, a true scholar

Fun-loving Fifi, at times a bit sneaky

Me, Eddy, a dreamer, quiet and shy



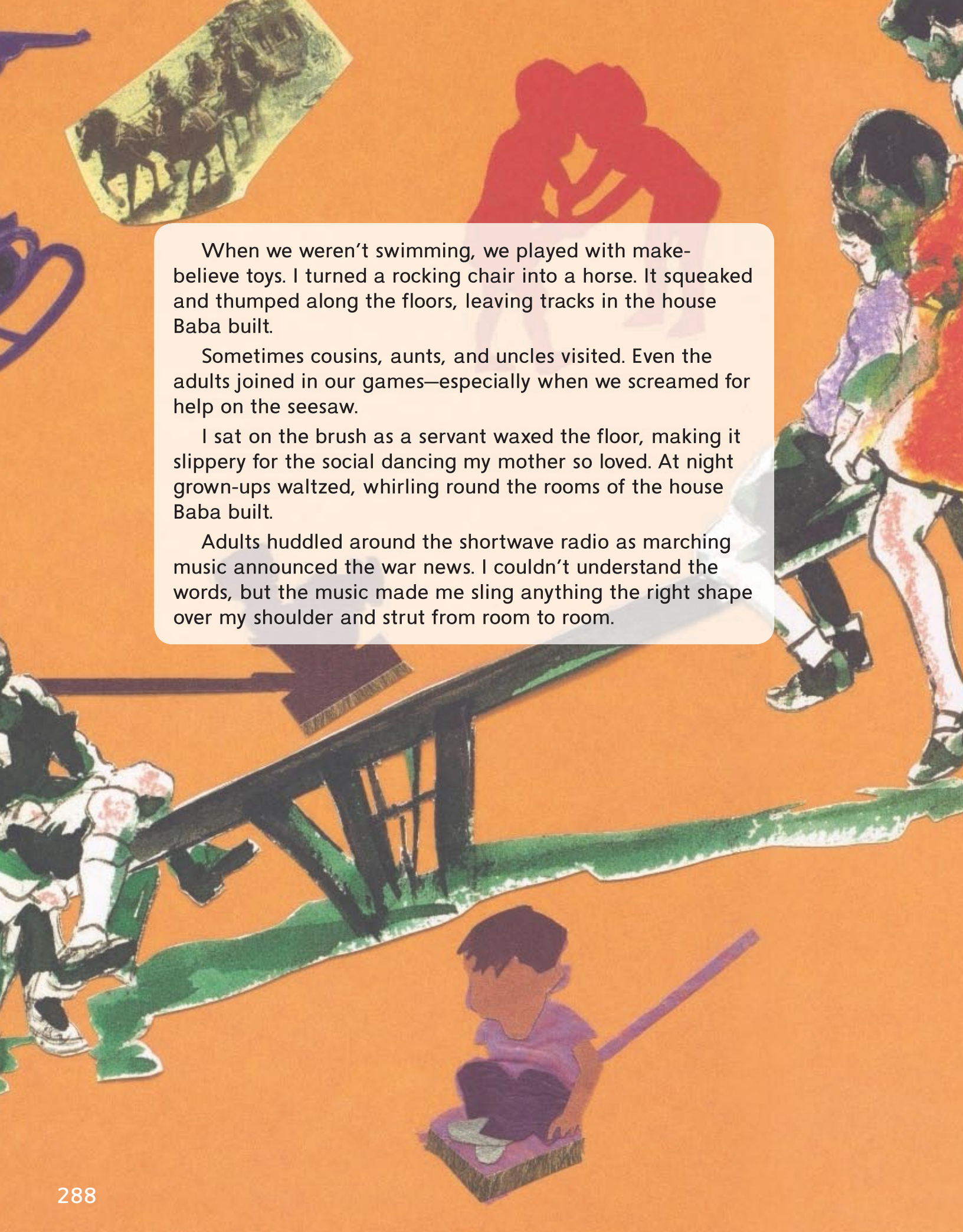
The safest part of Shanghai was where the embassies were—on the edge, next to fields. But the only land for sale there cost far more than my father could pay. So he offered to build a big brick house on it, with courtyards, gardens, a swimming pool, and let the landowner have it all—after we had lived there for twenty years. The owner agreed.

So my father, who was an engineer, began designing.

This is the house Baba built.

When we moved in, what excited me most was the swimming pool. Only two other houses in Shanghai had pools, and both belonged to millionaires. Baba got the money to build and maintain ours by forming a swim club with other parents who had been educated abroad. After hours it was our own private pool. Encouraged by Baba, who believed the sunshine would keep us healthy, we spent our summer days there.

Even Ma, who didn't swim, socialized with friends by the pool.



When we weren't swimming, we played with make-believe toys. I turned a rocking chair into a horse. It squeaked and thumped along the floors, leaving tracks in the house Baba built.

Sometimes cousins, aunts, and uncles visited. Even the adults joined in our games—especially when we screamed for help on the seesaw.

I sat on the brush as a servant waxed the floor, making it slippery for the social dancing my mother so loved. At night grown-ups waltzed, whirling round the rooms of the house Baba built.

Adults huddled around the shortwave radio as marching music announced the war news. I couldn't understand the words, but the music made me sling anything the right shape over my shoulder and strut from room to room.

I became a pilot, a mountain adventurer, a tightrope walker. . . . When Buddy and I were captives on an enemy submarine, we banged on radiator pipes to send coded signals to the search party.

We four older ones roller-skated on the roof, sharing two pairs of solid-steel skates. They rolled and rumbled on the concrete, making first your feet, then (as you went faster) your whole body, vibrate. The faster you went, the more noise they made—louder than the thunderstorms and torrents of rain that flooded Shanghai in the monsoon.

One day I saw two fighter planes far, far away swooping and circling around each other—two dots in the sky, now visible, winking in the sun, now hidden behind clouds. It was exciting, but less real than the pictures in the stories Baba read us.

Company arrived, and (as usual) we had to go downstairs and greet the guests. The others spoke, but I didn't. With strangers, my tongue wouldn't work properly, and my words got jumbled. I was already shy—being tongue-tied made it worse. So I remained silent.

"Yaba," one guest teased—meaning a person without a tongue.

While the adults feasted, we five watched from the darkened stairs, hoping for leftovers—especially leftover meat. Baba charmed the guests with his stories and teasing until even the shiest and most stoic couldn't stop laughing.

When we didn't have company, the bell on the stairway announced mealtimes. We five slid down the banister and rushed for the table. We were growing like bamboo shoots and always hungry.

Our cook served whatever was in season, like fava beans. Shelled and then sautéed with bamboo shoots, they tasted like new peas. When the beans got older, she mashed them.

We liked these foods, and some others, at first. But by the second week, it was: "What? We're having that again?!"

If there was meat, we eyed the platter—and each other. Only the quickest would get a second piece. Fifi's short, stubby chopsticks were usually the quickest. When Buddy saw Fifi grabbing more, he had a way of looking at her sideways, through his long lashes, that she hated. Once when Fifi snatched a second piece, Buddy didn't look at her, but Fifi said, "Ma, Buddy's giving me that look again!" Ma scolded Buddy. Mimi stuck up for him, and then Ma reprimanded her. Baba defended Mimi, his favorite. We three boys didn't say a word—one world war was more than enough in our lives.

After Nanking fell to the Japanese, my aunt, uncle, and grown-up cousins Wilbur and Sonny fled to Shanghai. Baba built an apartment for them on what had been our skating rink.

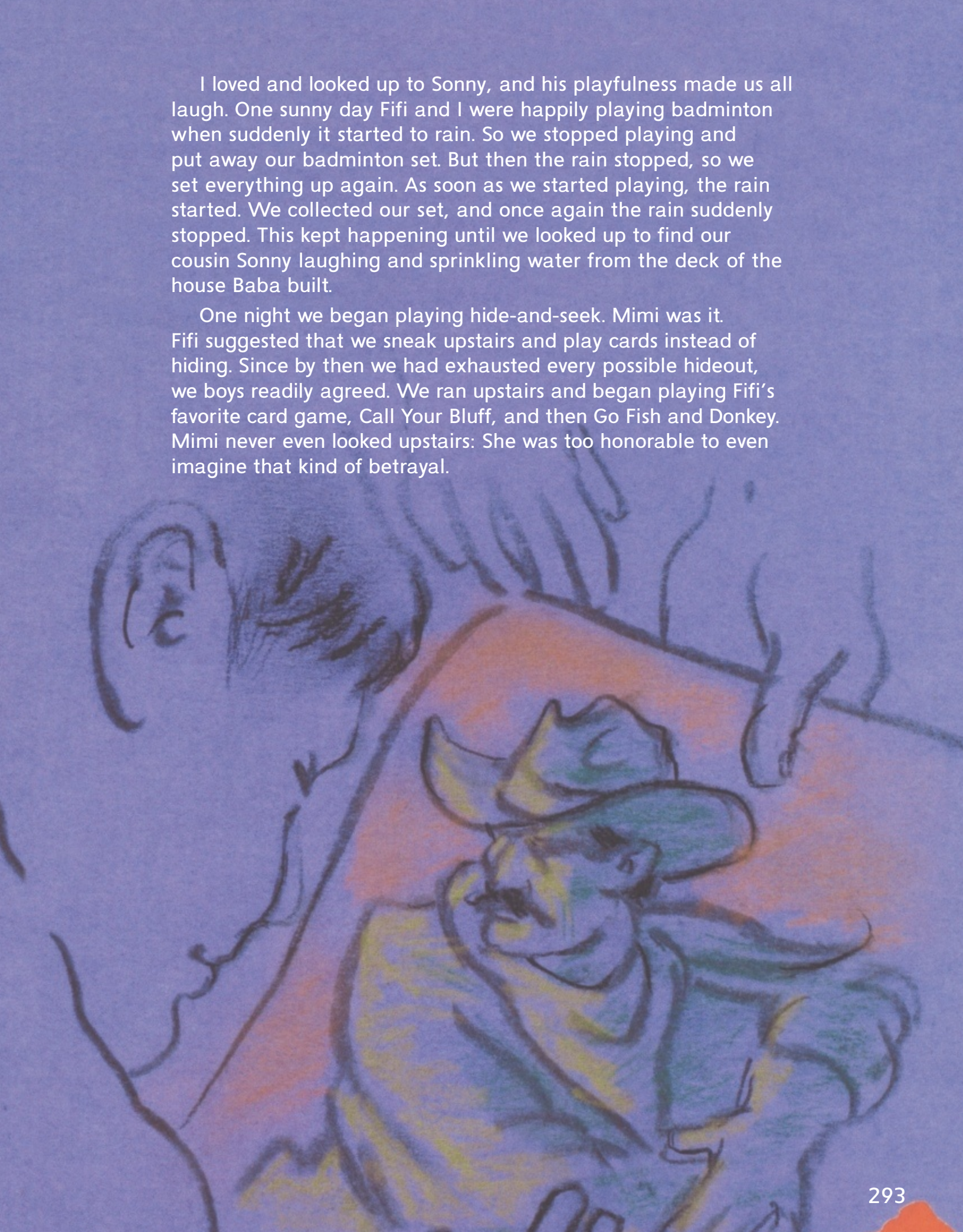
I spent a lot of time hanging around their kitchen. They had three working people to feed four; we had one working person to feed seven, so their food was richer. Our cook was creative about feeding us; but with little oil and no meat, her dishes had a lean, watery taste that kept us hungry.

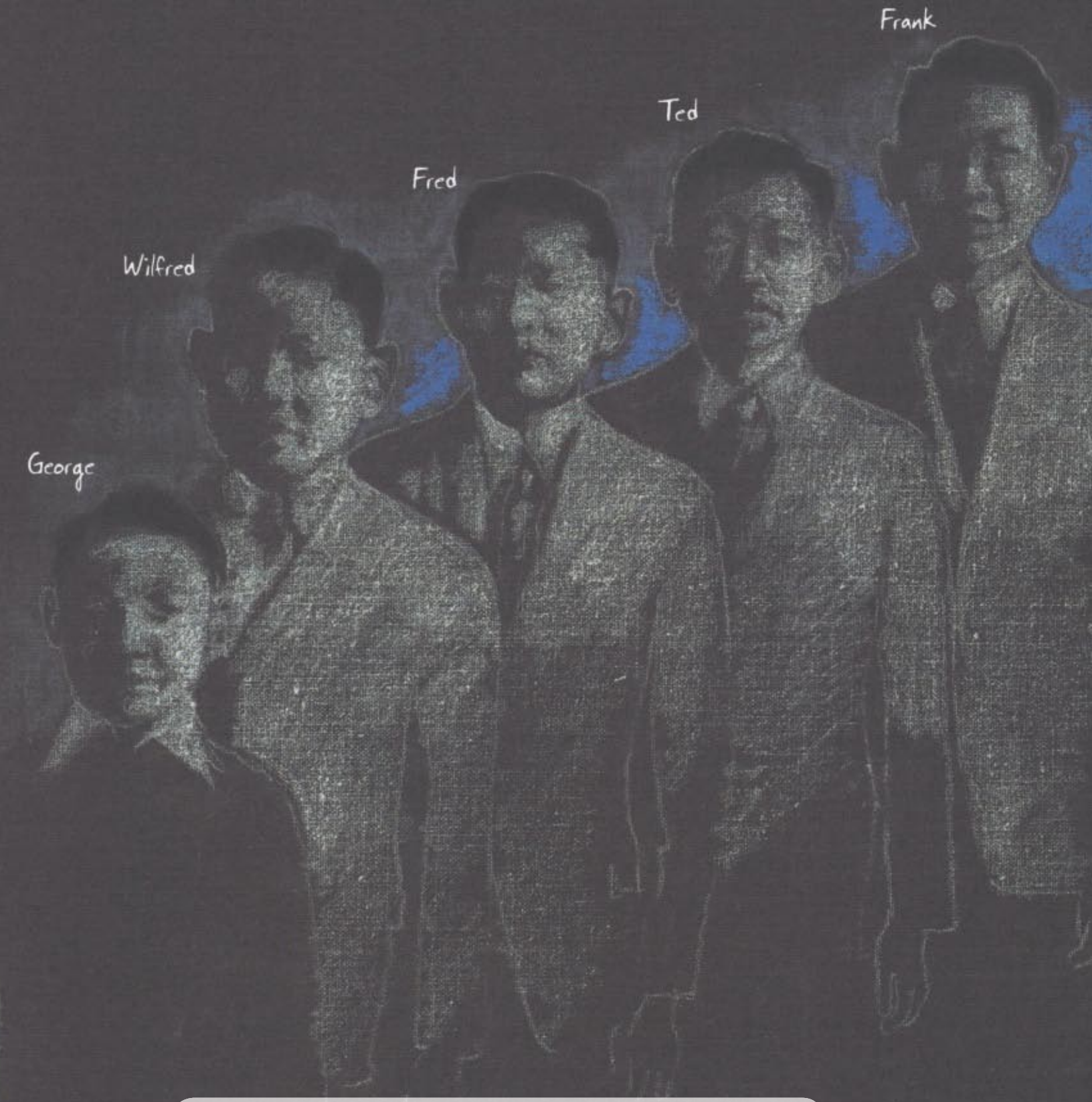
One day when I was recovering from a bad cold, Ma gave me paper and crayons. I was excited to draw the cowboy I saw clearly in my head, but I couldn't get him on paper. I looked at my drawing and felt very frustrated.

Then Sonny came down, listened, and—like magic—drew just what I had seen.

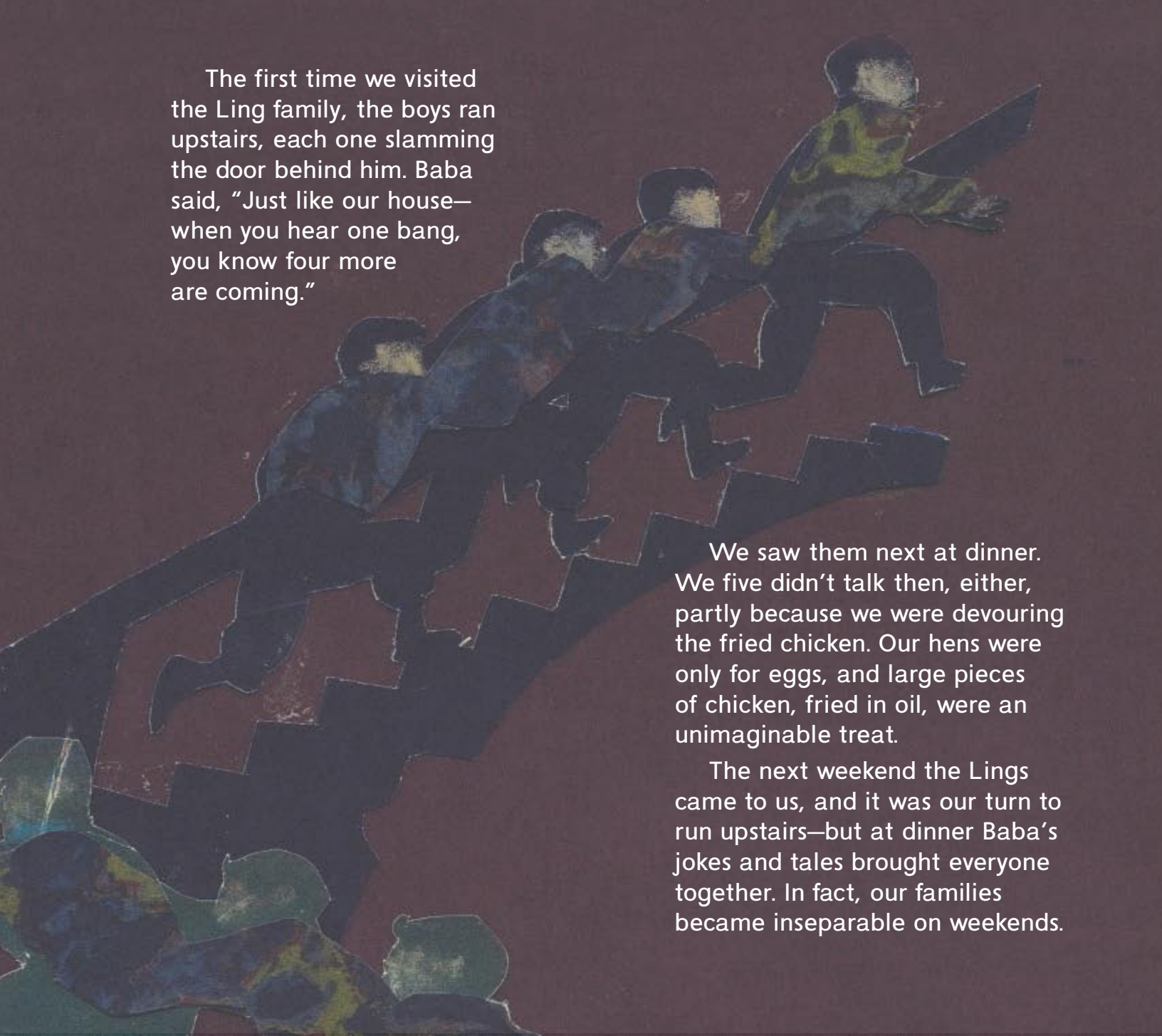
I loved and looked up to Sonny, and his playfulness made us all laugh. One sunny day Fifi and I were happily playing badminton when suddenly it started to rain. So we stopped playing and put away our badminton set. But then the rain stopped, so we set everything up again. As soon as we started playing, the rain started. We collected our set, and once again the rain suddenly stopped. This kept happening until we looked up to find our cousin Sonny laughing and sprinkling water from the deck of the house Baba built.

One night we began playing hide-and-seek. Mimi was it. Fifi suggested that we sneak upstairs and play cards instead of hiding. Since by then we had exhausted every possible hideout, we boys readily agreed. We ran upstairs and began playing Fifi's favorite card game, Call Your Bluff, and then Go Fish and Donkey. Mimi never even looked upstairs: She was too honorable to even imagine that kind of betrayal.





Some distant cousins of Baba's—the Lings—moved to Shanghai. Their five children's ages fit into ours like the fingers of two hands sliding into each other: Frank, Ted, Mimi, Fred, Hardy, Wilfred, Fifi, George, and Buddy. Baba and their mother, who had known Baba in college, thought it would be nice for all ten of us to be friends.

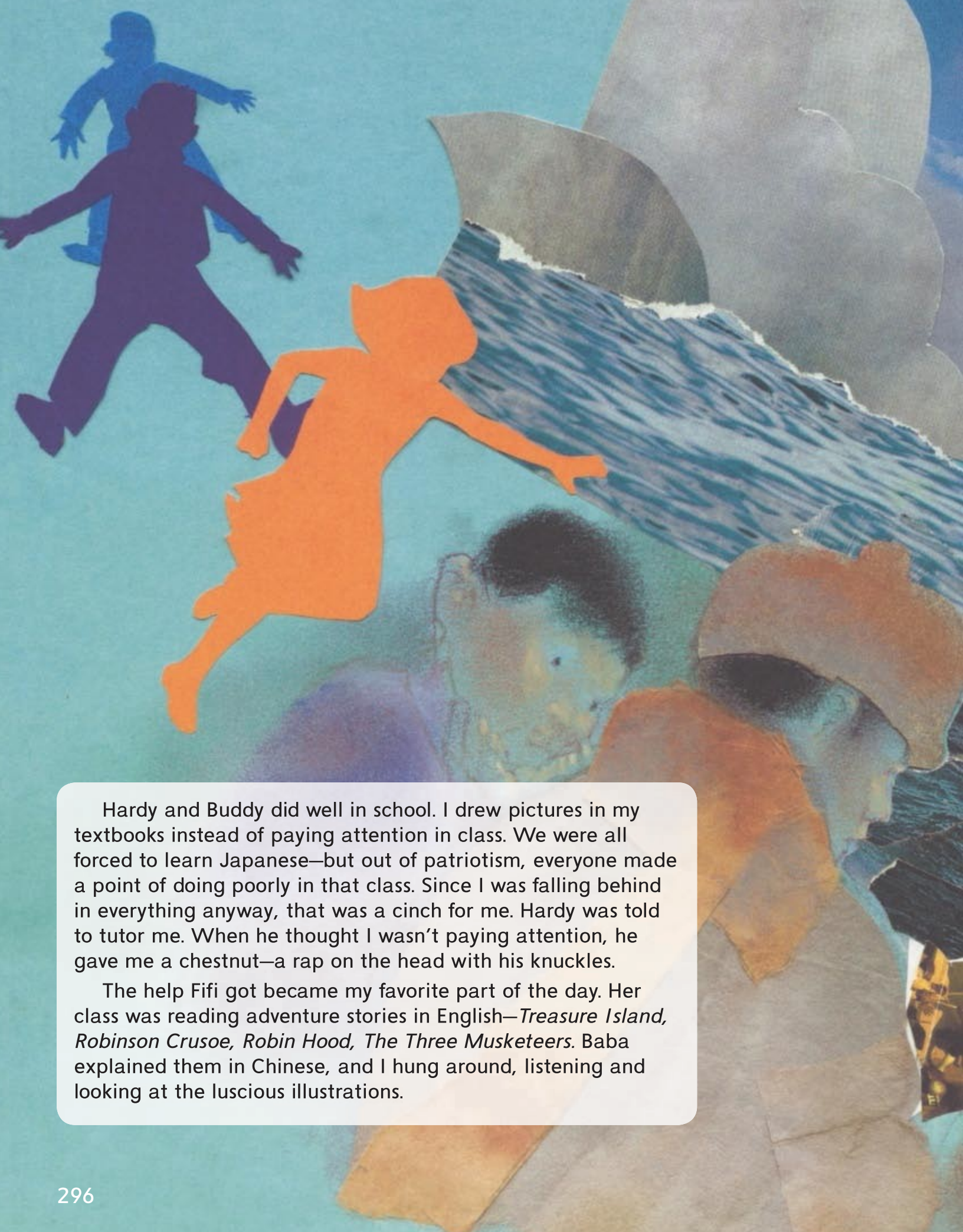


The first time we visited the Ling family, the boys ran upstairs, each one slamming the door behind him. Baba said, "Just like our house—when you hear one bang, you know four more are coming."

We saw them next at dinner. We five didn't talk then, either, partly because we were devouring the fried chicken. Our hens were only for eggs, and large pieces of chicken, fried in oil, were an unimaginable treat.

The next weekend the Lings came to us, and it was our turn to run upstairs—but at dinner Baba's jokes and tales brought everyone together. In fact, our families became inseparable on weekends.

At the start of the war, I often heard Baba whistling at his drafting table. But when the Allies joined the war in Asia, building construction halted, and Baba's engineering work did, too. His income as a college professor couldn't feed us all. So Ma pitched in, starting different businesses. She settled on supplying cupcakes and snacks to the university, leaving jars of unsold candy in the music room. We began spending a lot of time there—it was our favorite place in the house Baba built, until the candies were gone.

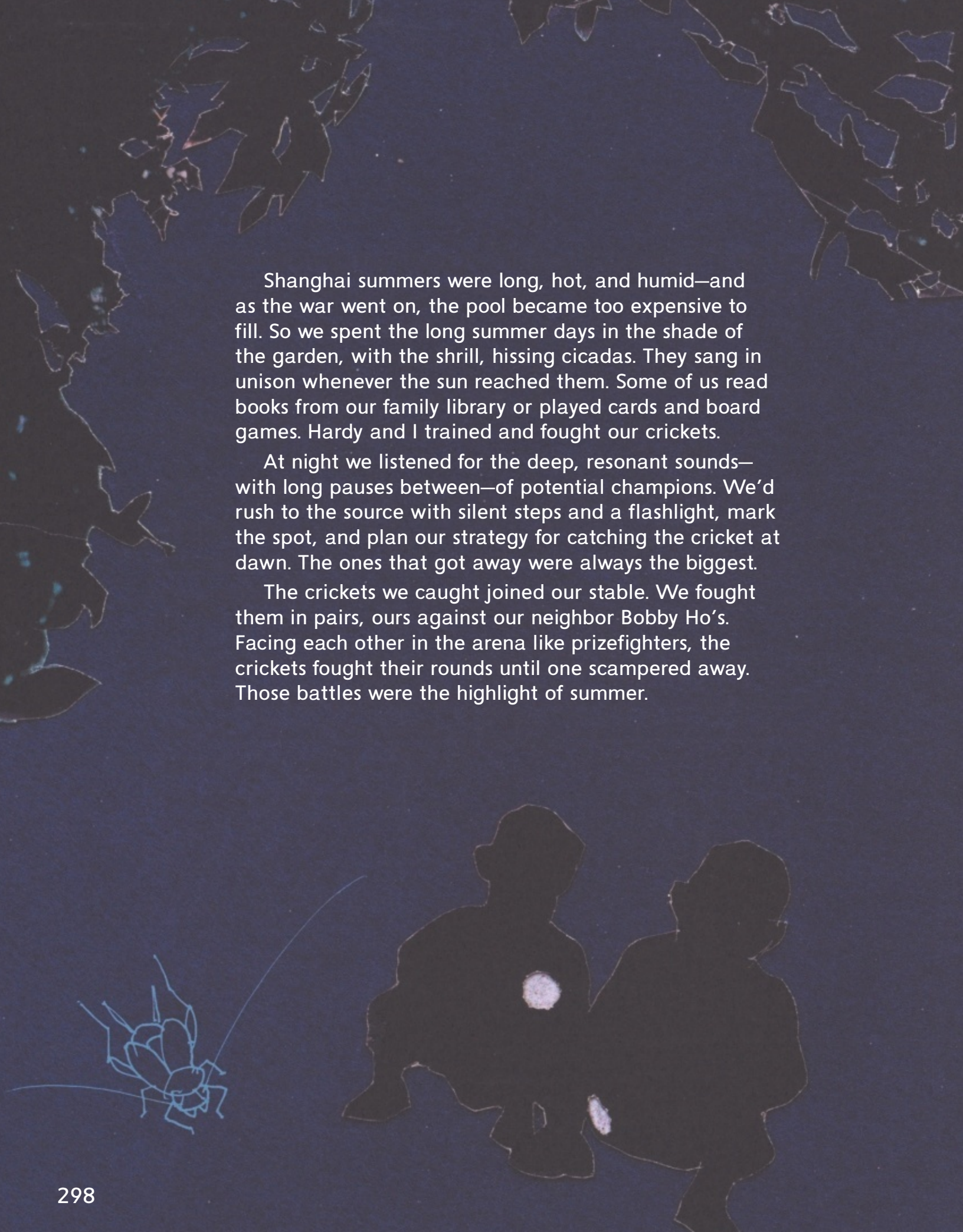


Hardy and Buddy did well in school. I drew pictures in my textbooks instead of paying attention in class. We were all forced to learn Japanese—but out of patriotism, everyone made a point of doing poorly in that class. Since I was falling behind in everything anyway, that was a cinch for me. Hardy was told to tutor me. When he thought I wasn't paying attention, he gave me a chestnut—a rap on the head with his knuckles.

The help Fifi got became my favorite part of the day. Her class was reading adventure stories in English—*Treasure Island, Robinson Crusoe, Robin Hood, The Three Musketeers.* Baba explained them in Chinese, and I hung around, listening and looking at the luscious illustrations.

Sometimes, Ma packed a picnic for the whole family. We'd get on our bicycles and ride out to Jessfield Park, with a climbing tree and a hill we called a mountain. But one day, it began to rain when our meal was packed. We decided to wait it out. But then when the sun came out we couldn't go after all—it would be dark before we could get home, Ma said. (There was a curfew during the war.) No picnic after all that waiting! We were so disappointed. "Why don't we have a picnic right here, by the pool?" said Baba.

That's just what we did. Of all the picnics we ever had, that was my favorite: the whole family, including our dog, Jolly, by the pool behind the house Baba built.



Shanghai summers were long, hot, and humid—and as the war went on, the pool became too expensive to fill. So we spent the long summer days in the shade of the garden, with the shrill, hissing cicadas. They sang in unison whenever the sun reached them. Some of us read books from our family library or played cards and board games. Hardy and I trained and fought our crickets.

At night we listened for the deep, resonant sounds—with long pauses between—of potential champions. We'd rush to the source with silent steps and a flashlight, mark the spot, and plan our strategy for catching the cricket at dawn. The ones that got away were always the biggest.

The crickets we caught joined our stable. We fought them in pairs, ours against our neighbor Bobby Ho's. Facing each other in the arena like prizefighters, the crickets fought their rounds until one scampered away. Those battles were the highlight of summer.

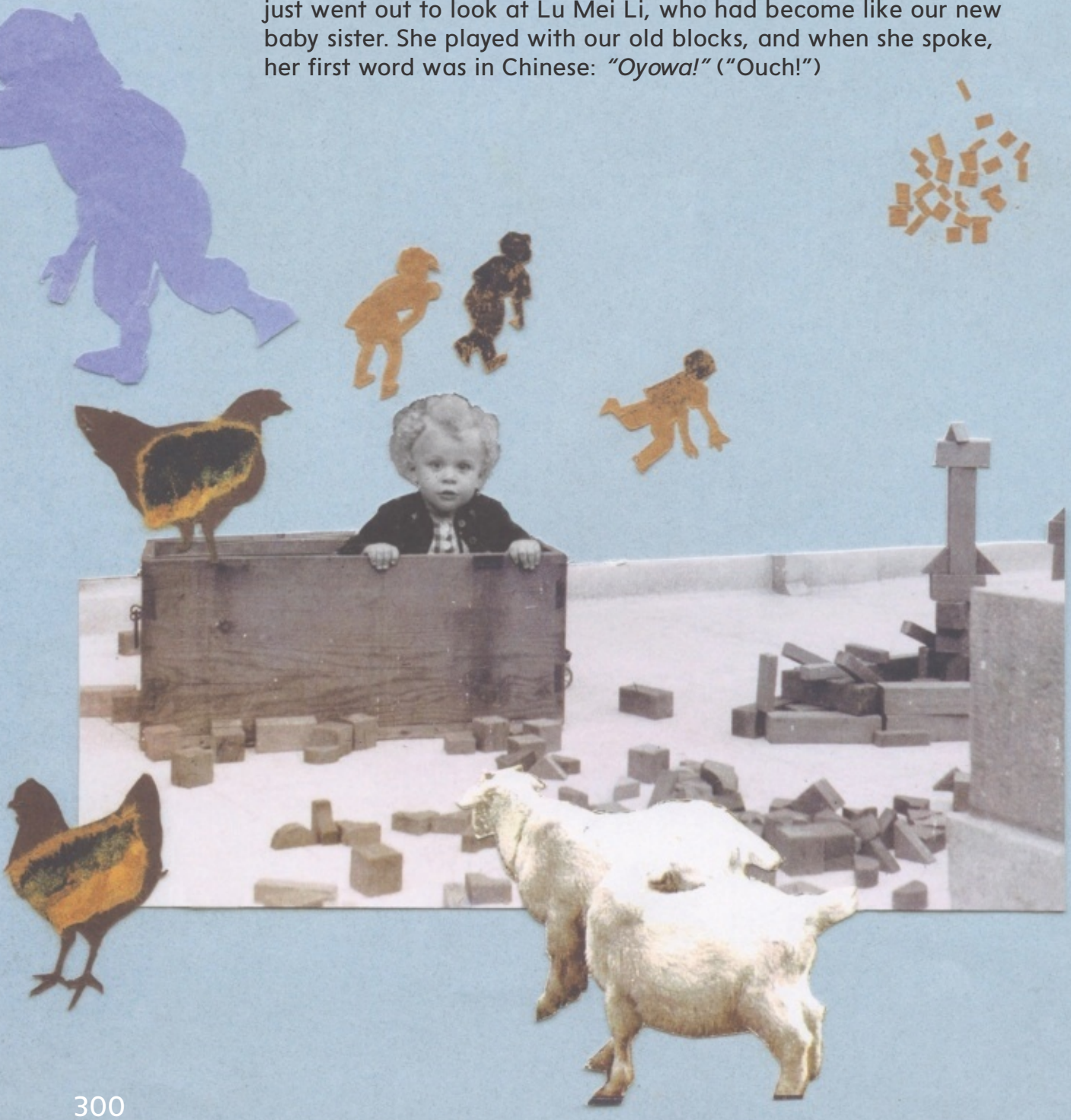
In the fall, after school, we rode our bikes and scooters in the dry pool, speeding through crackling leaves. We cruised down the slope, through the crisp air, faster and faster, shrieking when we crashed into the blockade at the bottom. Leaves drifted down more slowly, onto the deck of the house Baba built.

The days shortened, and then came the exciting, almost endless readying for the New Year. We boys fought to try grinding the rice flour on the stone mill. Each year, as my muscles grew stronger, my turn lasted longer.

Baba made an apartment for a German refugee family in what had been our bedrooms, and we were scattered to make room for the Luedeckes.

They had one child, a baby named Jean. At first my sisters treated her like a live blond, blue-eyed doll. They named her Lu Mei Li (Beautiful Sister). Fifi combed her hair into one big curl at the top and then called on us to admire her.

Mrs. Luedecke often put Jean out on the deck for a sunbath, even in freezing winter. Ma was horrified. We were so bundled up against the cold that we walked like penguins, even when we just went out to look at Lu Mei Li, who had become like our new baby sister. She played with our old blocks, and when she spoke, her first word was in Chinese: *"Oyowa!"* ("Ouch!")



Early spring, when the mulberry leaves were sprouting, was the season for trading silkworm eggs at school. We made paper origami boxes for their houses. The eggs were tiny; when the silkworms hatched, they were so small that you could hardly see them wriggling. We cut mulberry sprouts and then leaves to feed the silkworms as they grew bigger and bigger, until we could actually hear them chomping.

Then suddenly they would climb a wall and go into a trance, leaning their heads up and away, a strand of silk pulled taut against the wall. Before we knew it, they were spinning cocoons. At first the cocoons were transparent, so we could see the silkworms inside. Then we couldn't see the silkworms anymore, only their cocoons. Most were white, but some were pink, or yellow, or powder blue: the colors of our old bedrooms.

I was tutored in history, geography, and civilization. Once, during a break, my tutor and I were looking at the map and he said, "Does Japan look like a silkworm to you? And China like a mulberry leaf?" They did.

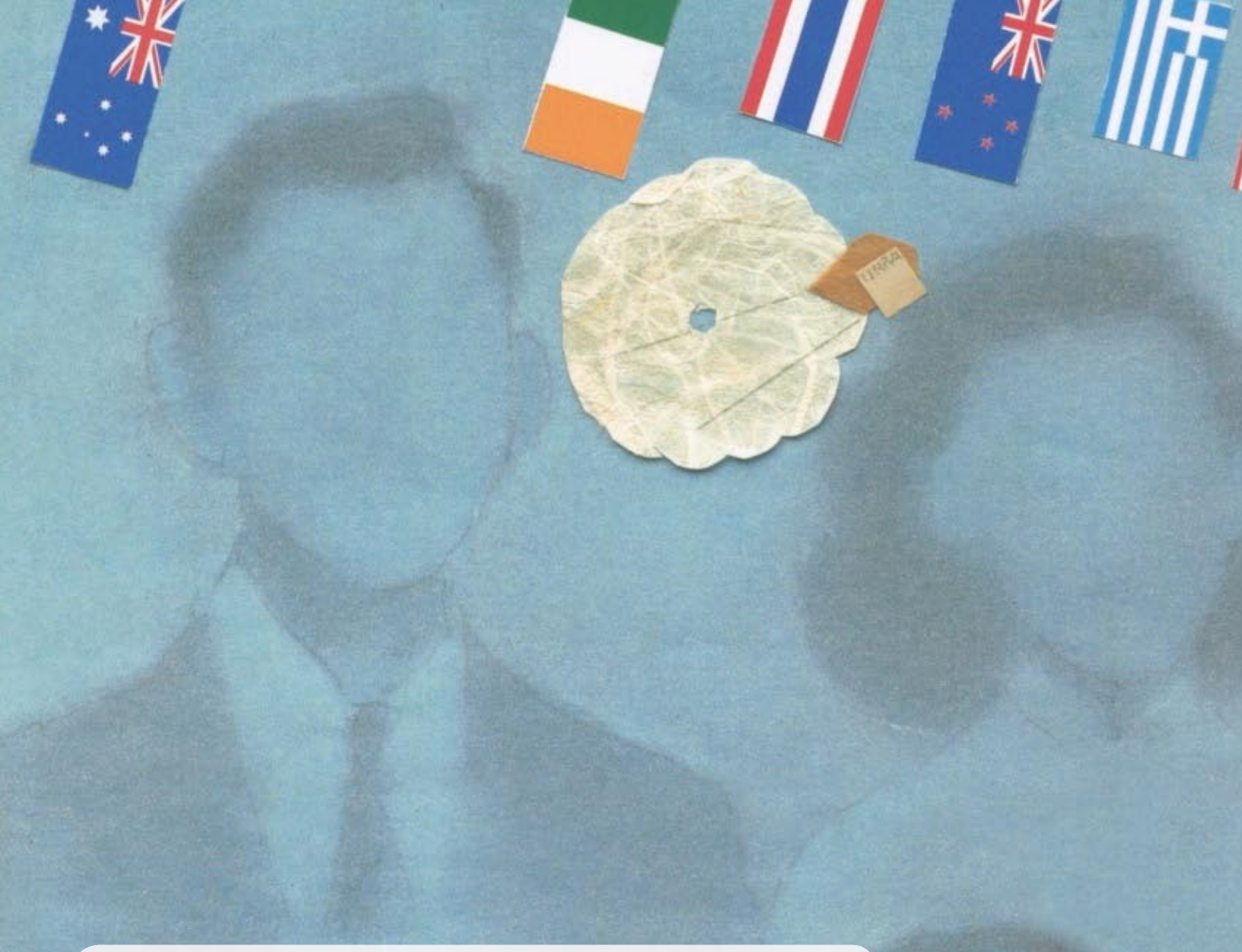
When Jean helped us pick mulberry leaves, I thought about how many of her people's homes in Germany had been devoured by the war as well.

The Lings still came over—but without the two oldest boys, who had joined China's air force. George and I played and talked nonstop about everything and went to American movies, especially Westerns. If he missed one, I acted it out for him, becoming cowboy, sheriff, outlaw. He was the perfect audience. We drew together, did card tricks at parties, decorated the parlor. At Christmastime we made snow scenes, with white flour for snow and matchbox houses with flashlight bulbs in their windows. George was my best friend.

We played hide-and-seek with Jean and were so surprised by how small the old hiding places had become. The mantelpiece pushed into my head, even when I hunched over. My sisters under the coffee table were like the stepsisters' feet in Cinderella's glass slipper.

Only toward the very end of the war did we hear bombs. First we'd hear the long warning siren that meant enemy planes had been sighted. Then came the quick, shrill blasts signaling that bombing was about to begin.

We gathered in the hallway, where the dinner bell was—the safest part of the house, Baba said. There were no windows there, so we could keep a light on. When everybody was settled comfortably, the stories began. Baba told of a woman kung fu warrior with bound feet. She was chasing an enemy, who was getting away until his shadow from the slanting moonlight fell in her path. She kicked his shadow so hard that she killed the poor bandit. I pictured her, not the bombs outside, which didn't frighten me anyway. I knew nothing could happen to us within those walls, in the house Baba built.



And then, suddenly and unbelievably, the war was over. The first thing I said was, "Now we can have meat again." It had been years since I'd tasted braised pork.

Parachutes drifted down from the sky, carrying medical supplies and food. Some found their way to us. The cheese tasted like rubber but, as Ma said, it was protein.

The two Ling boys came to our house, wearing their pilot uniforms. Cousin Wilbur's friend, a Chinese-American lieutenant, brought treats: . . . a science magazine for me, nylon stockings for Ma, dance records for Mimi, chocolate for everyone.

We gave a big party for family, friends, and soldiers. George and I did the jitterbug we'd learned from the movies. Sonny's dad sang Peking opera. Sonny played the accordion and then the ukulele for my hula shadow dance. Everyone raced paper turtles.

We rolled up the rug for the family relay race—everyone ran across the room, holding a pea with chopsticks, shrieking with laughter. Even Aunt Nihima, who had half-bound feet, raced. She couldn't run as fast as the rest of us, but she was the best with the chopsticks and didn't once drop her pea. Baba rounded off the race by imitating everyone's running style.

We danced the conga—all of us, young and old—through the whole downstairs of the house Baba built.

I did get the braised pork shoulder, plus unimagined fresh fruits from abroad: strawberries, mangoes, bananas so ripe they were almost black, but oh so sweet. Now we realized what we had missed during all those war years.

It took weeks to fill the pool—we lolled in the shallow water, waiting.

In the midst of all this, Mimi became engaged to a handsome Chinese interpreter. A bridal suite was added to the house Baba built.

When the twenty years came to an end, Baba kept his promise to the landowner. The house had done its job; we five were safe. Like the sons of the dragon king, we scattered, and some of us settled far from home. Baba sent his hopes in this letter:

"Dear Children,

. . . You may put down as rule No. I that life is not rich not real unless you partake life with your fellow man. A successful life and a happy life is one as measured by how much you have accomplished for others and not one as measured by how much you've done for yourself. love Dad"

Respond

Comprehension

You will answer the comprehension questions on these pages as a class.

Did You Know?

An ancient Chinese tradition integrates poetry, calligraphy, and painting—a trio known as "the three perfections." For Ed Young, the author and illustrator of "The House Baba Built," this philosophy inspires him to do the same. As he says, "There are things that words do that pictures never can, and likewise, there are images that words can never describe."

Text Connections

1. Identify and define the figurative language Eddy's father uses to describe the coming war. How does this image help you understand Eddy's situation?
2. How does Eddy's family find a way to still enjoy the pool, even after they cannot afford to fill it anymore?
3. Why do Eddy and his siblings have the reaction they do to the Ling's fried chicken?
4. What role does nature play in both "Island Treasures" and "The House Baba Built"?
5. Describe a creative way you used an object in a game, and relate it to something Eddy and his siblings did.
6. Based on details in "The House Baba Built," why do you think difficult times in life sometimes lead to wonderful memories?

Look Closer

Keys to Comprehension

1. Make an inference about what Eddy's tutor is implying by noting that Japan looks like a silkworm and China looks like a mulberry leaf. Quote from the text to support your inference.
2. What are two main ideas related to the family's safety during the war? Summarize the relevant parts of the text while explaining how those details support the main ideas.

Writer's Craft

3. Compare and contrast the lessons taught by Baba in "The House Baba Built" and by Abuelito Modesto in "Island Treasures," and relate them to the shared topic of family.
4. Explain what a refugee is using details from the text.

Concept Development

5. Use information from "The Pot That Juan Built" and "The House Baba Built" to explain how people can use personal talents to help others.
6. Explain how the author uses evidence to support the idea that, though the family has few toys during the war, the children are happy.

Write

Write a letter to your own imaginary descendants, explaining what you think is most important in life. Give evidence to support your argument.

Read this Social Studies Connection. You will answer the questions as a class.

Text Feature

A **line graph** compares data by displaying them as a series of points connected by a line.

The Many Transformations of Shanghai

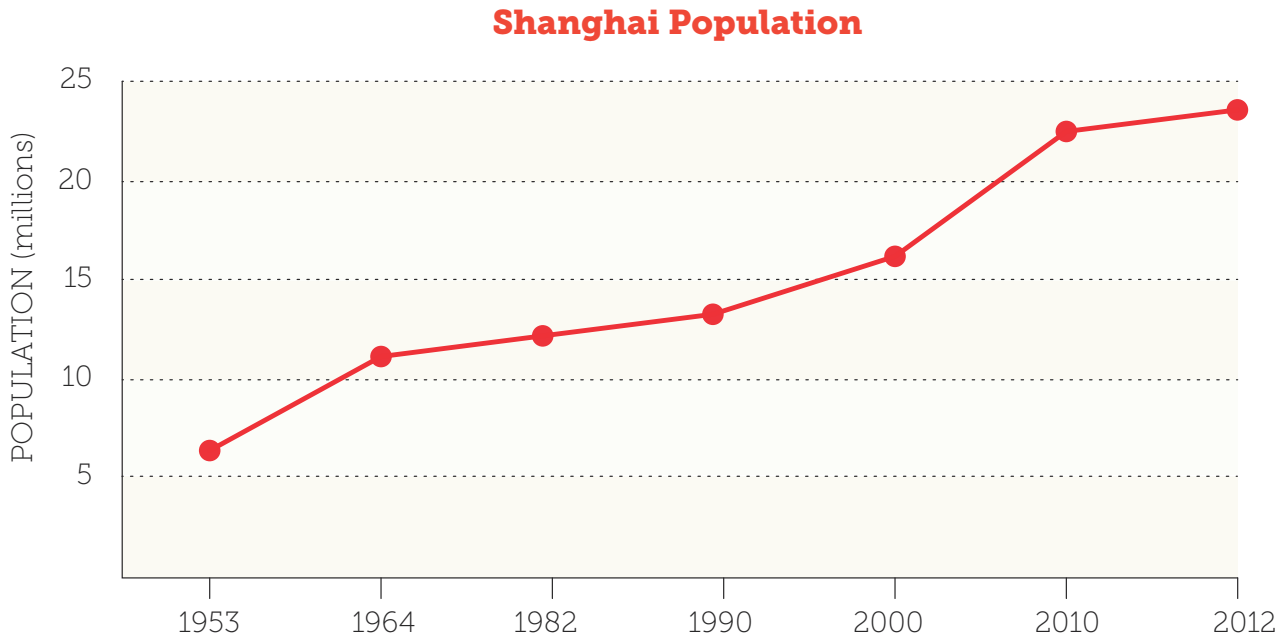
The story of Shanghai's past is a story of great change. No one would have guessed its future when, in ancient times, it was nothing more than a small fishing village. It grew from the late 1200s through the 1700s, and by the early 1800s it was a busy city and trading port.

After winning a war with China, the British came to Shanghai and opened it as a treaty port. A weakened China ruled one part of the city; the other became an international zone. Foreign colonial powers divided this into concessions—land areas granted by a government. By the late 1800s, France, Japan, and England with the United States each controlled concessions. The city's population grew as many Europeans living abroad moved there. By the 1920s, it was known as the "Paris of the East."

As the Nazi party began to rise to power in Germany, Shanghai became a haven for thousands of European Jewish refugees. At that time, Shanghai was one of the few places in the world that would accept them. About 20,000 Jewish refugees relocated there in the 1930s.

At the same time, the country of Japan was advancing on China. In 1937, after the Battle of Shanghai, the Chinese part of the city became an occupied Japanese territory. Many British, American, and French foreigners fled the city. Those who stayed were put under tight restrictions and eventually became captives. The Jewish refugees, however, ended up being safer in Shanghai than in Europe—in Shanghai they were put under restrictions but not killed.

In 1945, the Allies liberated Shanghai. However, unrest in China led to a civil war that ended with a Communist victory in 1949. Foreigners left Shanghai, and the city changed once more.



Shanghai's remarkable population growth over time

1. In what ways did the government of Shanghai change over time?
2. How did the changing government affect the people who chose to live in Shanghai?
3. How does your own government influence you?

Go Digital

Research what life is like in Shanghai today. How has the city changed yet again as recently as the 1990s?