

# Can You Pet a Pine Cone?

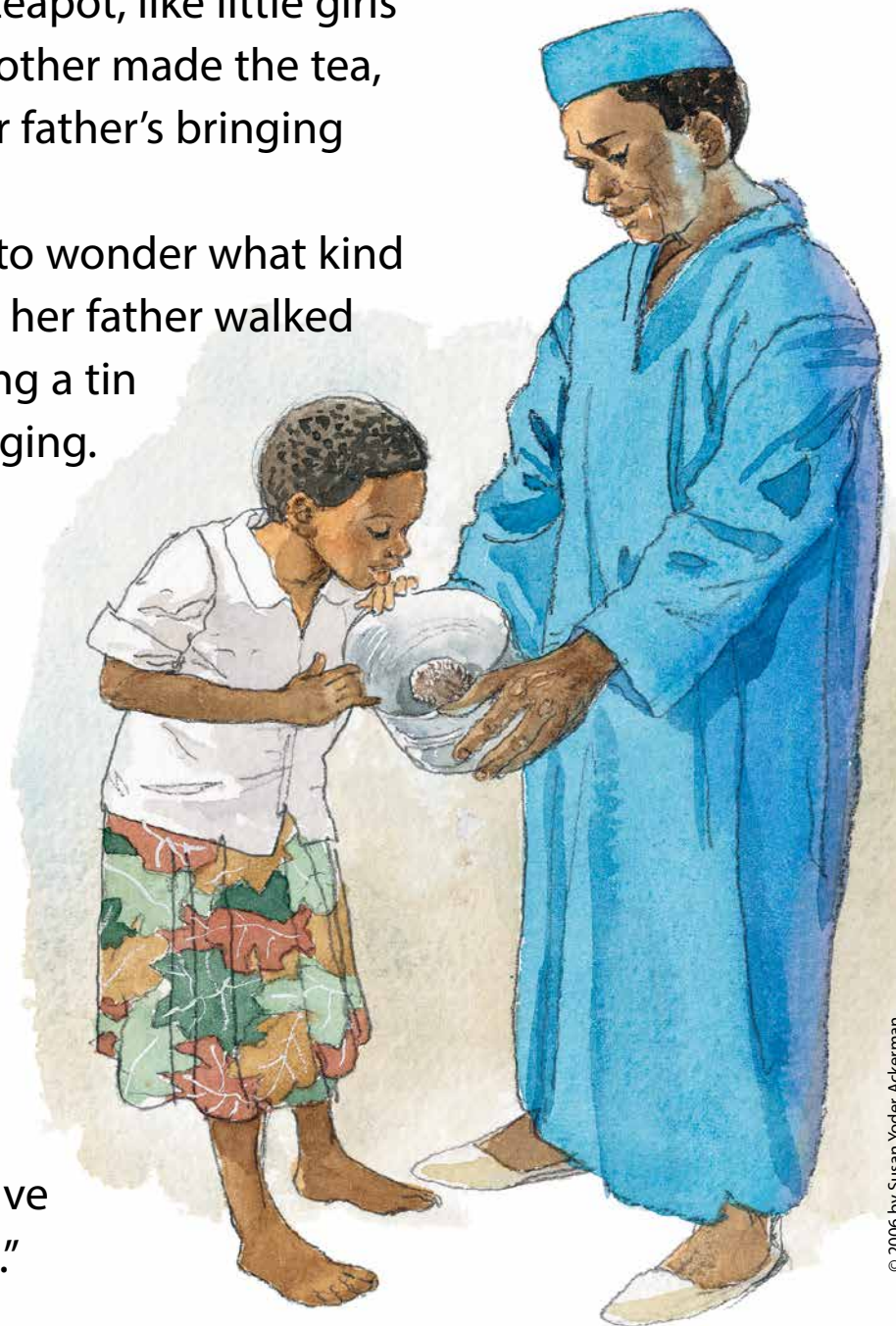
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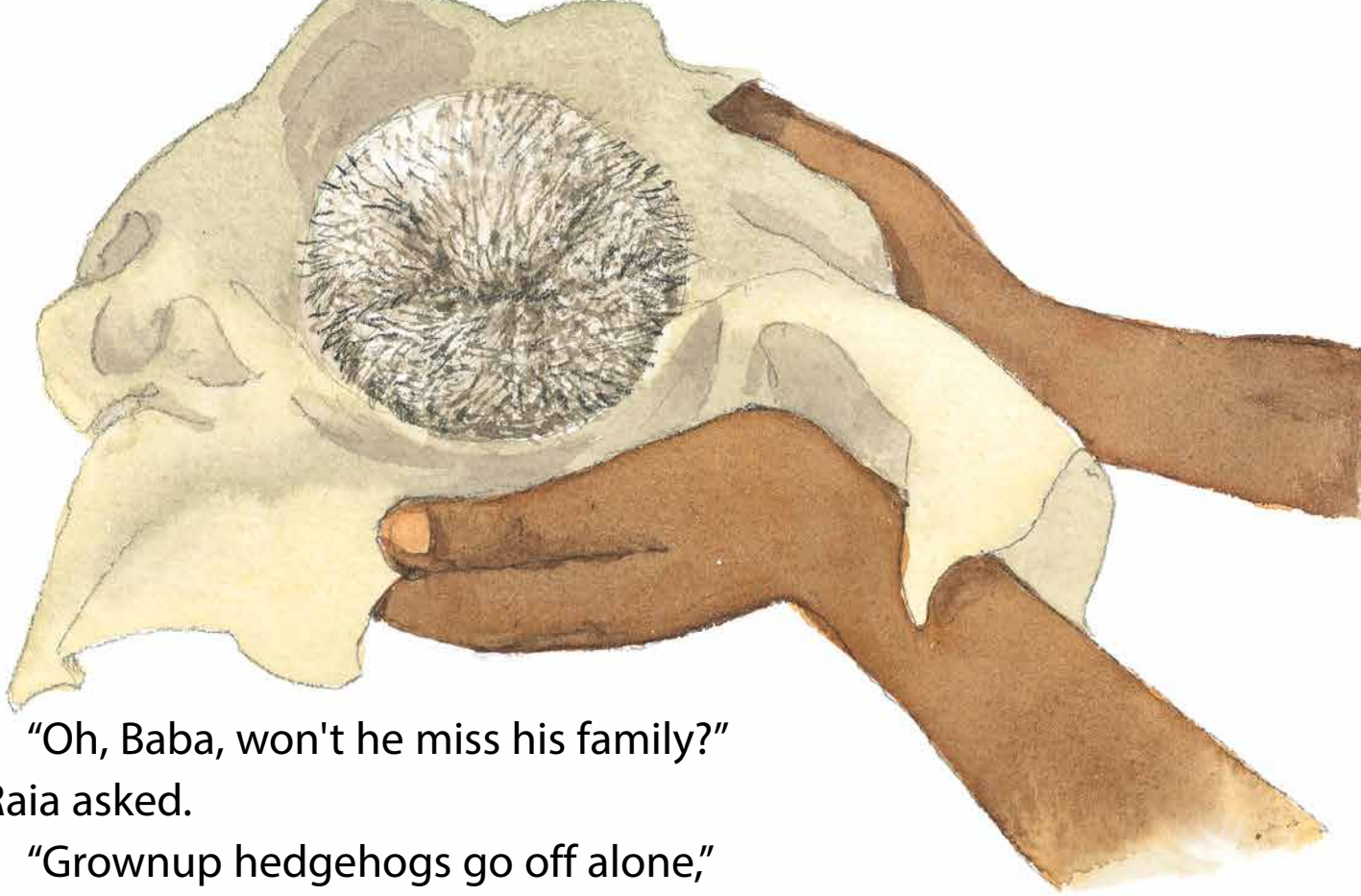
Raia stroked the neighbor's cat one last time. Then she ran home to fan the charcoal fire under the teapot, like little girls do in Senegal. As her mother made the tea, she surprised Raia. "Your father's bringing you a pet," she said.

Raia hardly had time to wonder what kind of pet it could be, when her father walked through the gate carrying a tin can, his blue robes swinging.

Inside the tin, there was nothing you'd want to pet. Just a heap of needles with two bright eyes!

"It's not a cat or a dog, Raia," her father said. His dark eyes smiled. "It's a hedgehog. I found him in a dry riverbed, and I thought he could survive well in our desert home."





"Oh, Baba, won't he miss his family?"  
Raia asked.

"Grownup hedgehogs go off alone,"  
her father said. "He'll be glad to have  
the insects in our yard all to himself."

"Can I hold him?" Raia asked.

Her father laughed. "Of course. Use a  
towel, so his spines won't poke you."

"Why is he so poky?" she asked.

"His spines protect him. When he sticks  
them out, nothing can hurt the soft little body  
underneath," said her father.

Raia carefully took the hedgehog. He made a  
huffy sound, then rolled up into a prickly ball.  
She couldn't see his head or his feet anywhere!  
She wondered how she'd take care of an animal  
that looked like a pine cone.





She began by naming him Huffy. In her warm lap, Huffy's spines smoothed down. He unrolled. He had a black nose at the end of a pointy snout. His face was sparkling white. His spines were dark with white tips.



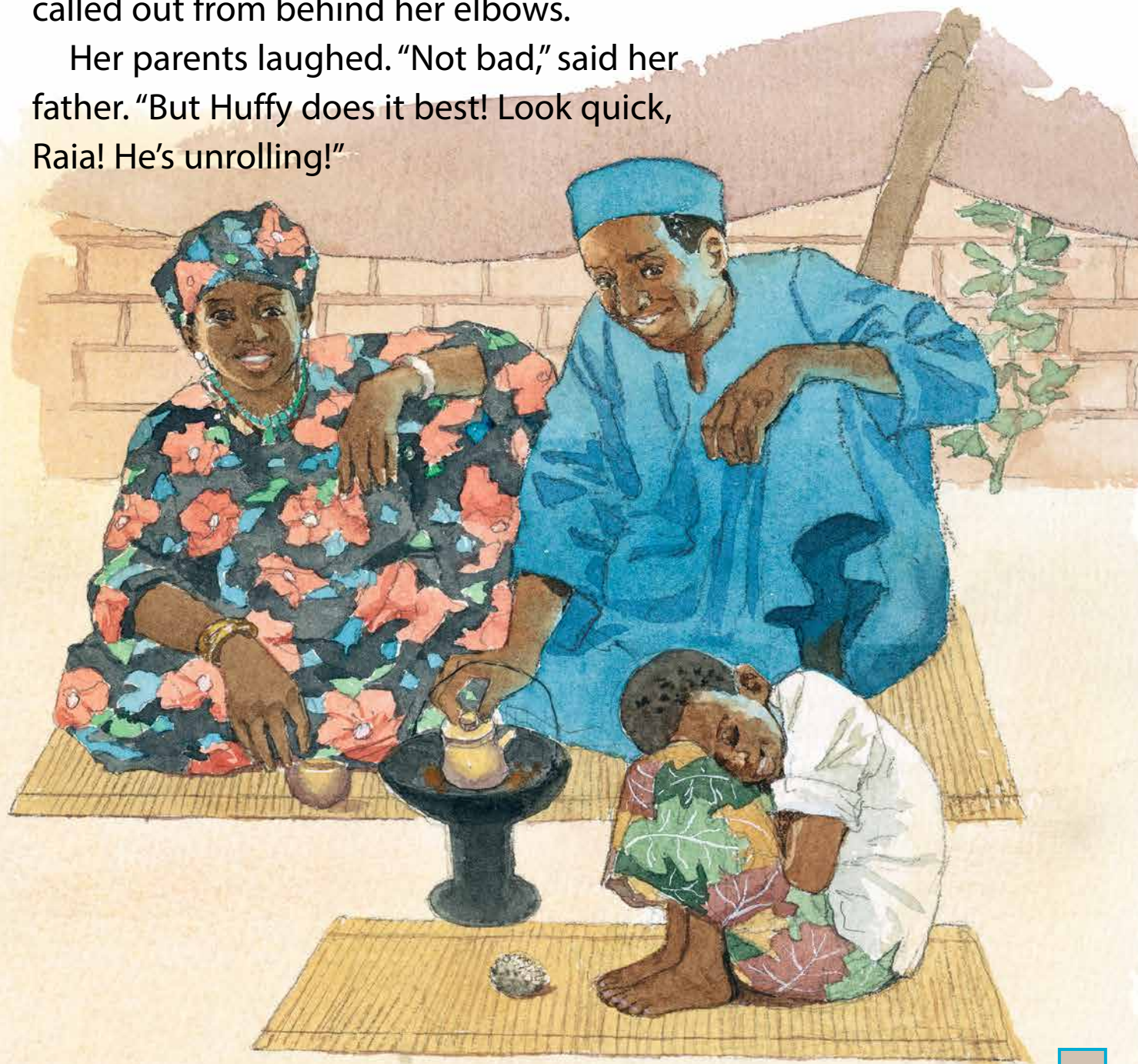
Raia turned Huffy on his back and stroked his soft, white tummy. Suddenly, the edges of Huffy's spine coat pulled together like a drawstring purse, tucking his head, belly, and feet neatly inside. Raia snatched her fingers out of the way just in time! She laid the hedgehog ball on a straw mat in the backyard. And then she had an idea.





"Baba! Mama! Watch!" she called to her parents, who were sitting in the shade, sipping tea. Raia curled up on the mat beside Huffy. She tucked in her own head and arms and legs and pulled her skirts around her. "Do I look like Huffy?" she called out from behind her elbows.

Her parents laughed. "Not bad," said her father. "But Huffy does it best! Look quick, Raia! He's unrolling!"



The little animal took off, scuttling around the yard, hunting. He looked so adorable, coming back around with cricket legs hanging out of his mouth! The wall all around the backyard kept her active pet safe inside.

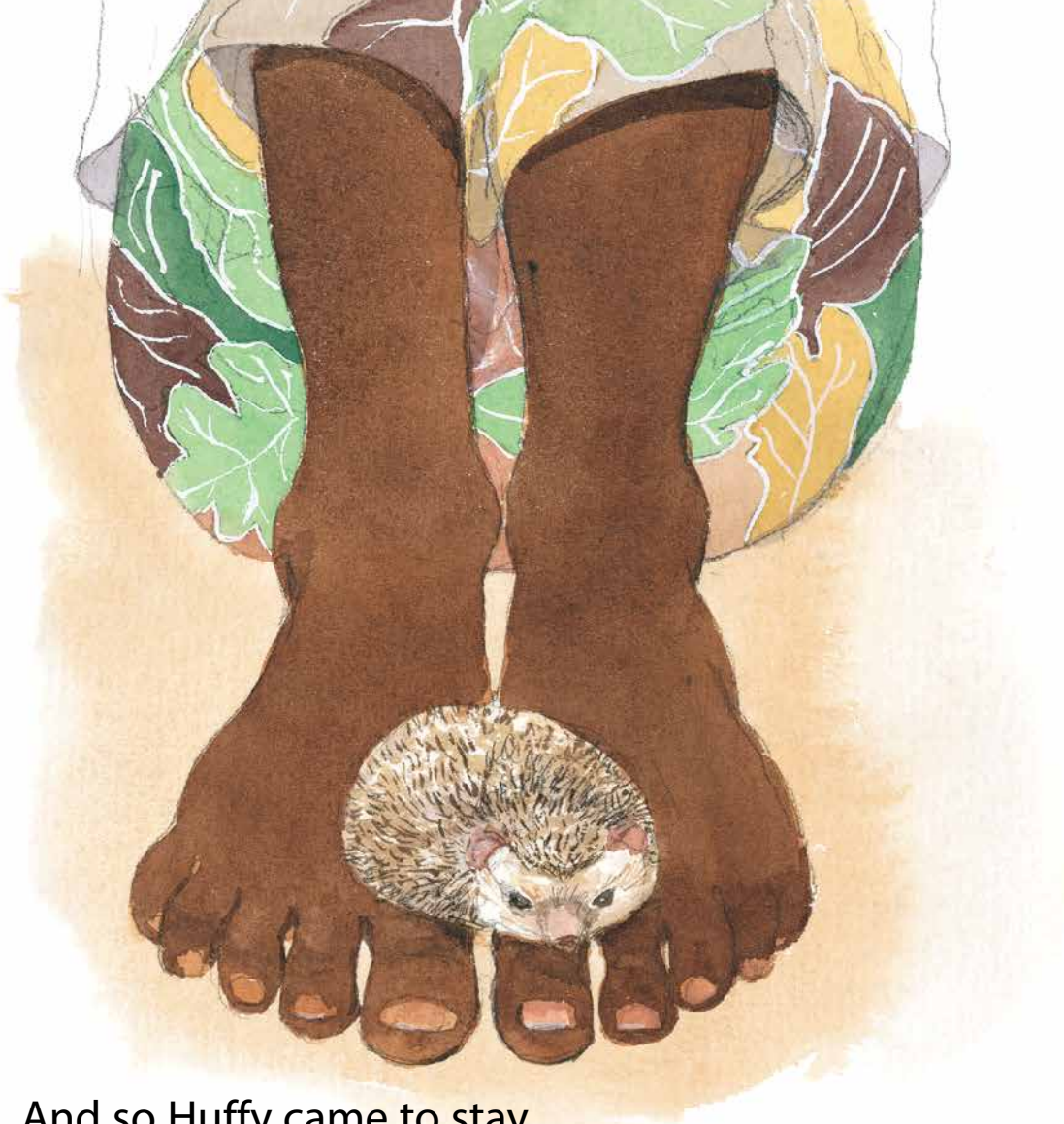
"He needs a little fresh water," said Raia's father.

Raia ran to put out a saucer. "I can give him some of my rice and meat, too," she said.

"He'll find his own food," said her father. "He'll hunt all night. He hears insects we can't even see. He digs them out of the sand with his long snout. Then in the morning he'll find a cozy place behind a rock or under a bush and go to sleep."







And so Huffy came to stay.

Raia has forgotten all about the neighbor's cat. Though petting Huffy's spines is a little like petting a hairbrush, Raia can turn him over and stroke his soft, white tummy any time. Sometimes she brings him into the house to play hide-and-seek. When he's tired from all the excitement, he comes to snuggle down and sleep on her warm bare feet (spines down, of course!)—the very best moment of the day with Huffy the hedgehog.

