

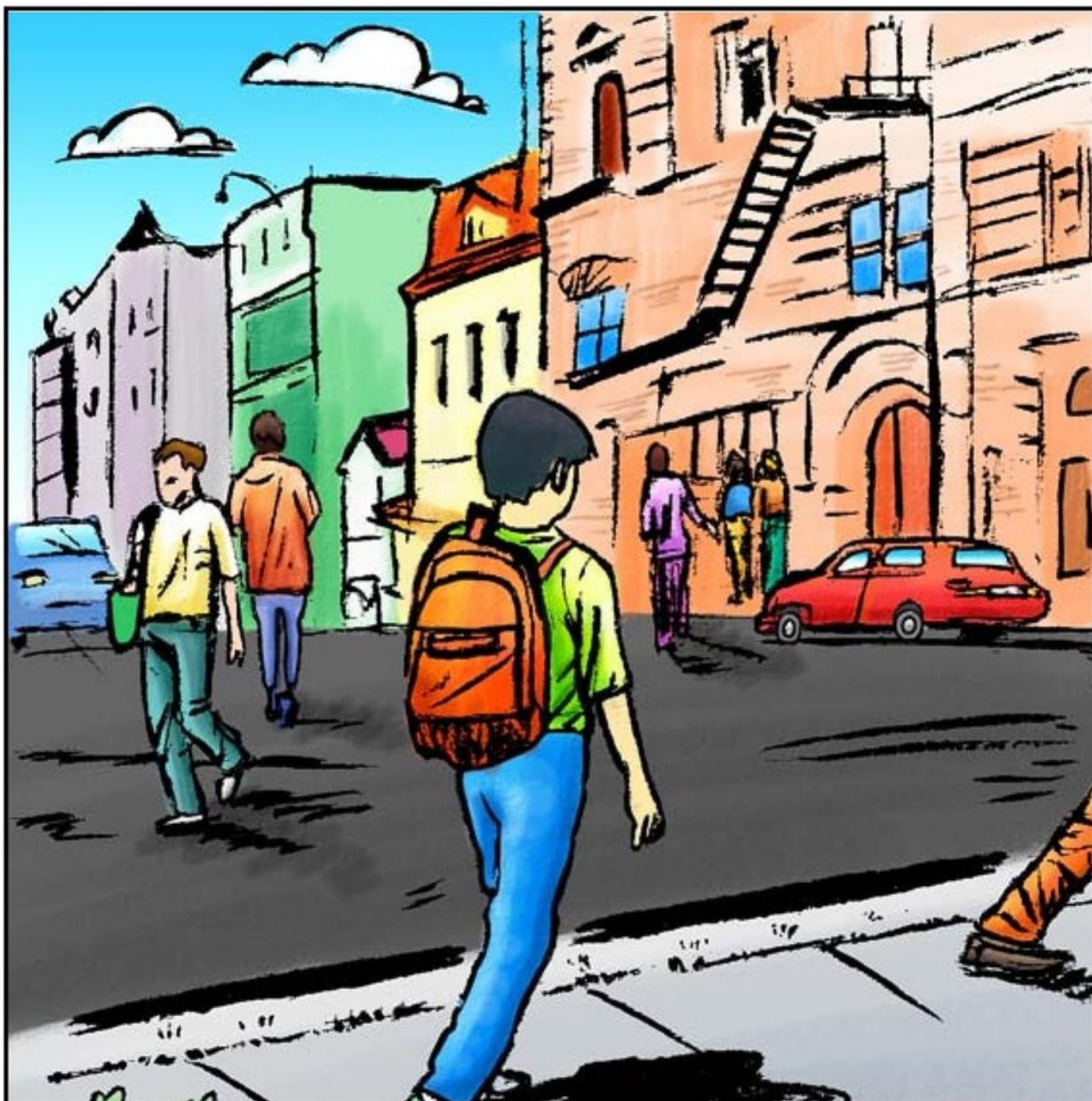
LEVELED Book • X

Takehito's Tango



Written by Steven Accardi
Illustrated by Linda Pierce

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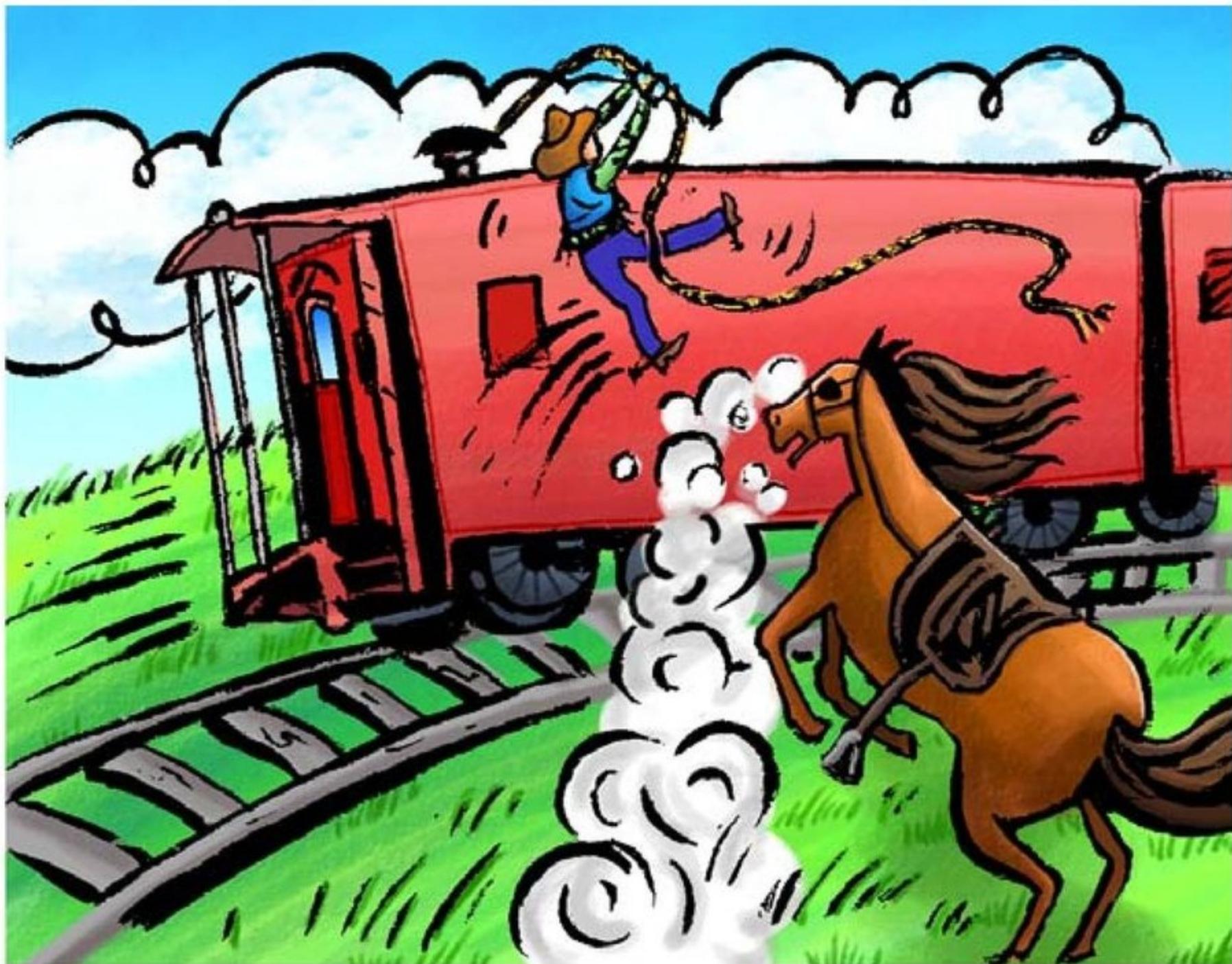


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Takehito's Talent

The train gained speed and began to pull away from Takehito (tah-kay-HE-toe). His trusty steed's stride faltered from exhaustion after chasing the clangng monster down its tracks. Fearing he wouldn't catch the train, the Japanese cowboy reached for his lasso. The horse huffed. The gap widened. Takehito tossed his rope. Success. The lasso tightened around a spire atop the caboose. Holding his breath, Takehito kicked his boots out from the stirrups and set sailing off his horse and into the air—nearly flying toward the train. But then, just moments before he kicked through the train's back door, he heard a voice.

"And what **performance** will you present at the talent show, Takehito?"

It was as though his rope had come loose and he had crashed on the track. The young cowboy jerked his head up from his daydream. Takehito's fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Klein, had spoken and was glaring down at him now. Takehito had been staring out the window from his desk while Mrs. Klein paced up and down the rows of desks to ask each student what talent he or she would perform for the show. The rest of the class and Takehito's teacher were now staring and waiting for his answer.



"Mrs. Klein," Brent interrupted, "is daydreaming a talent?"

Several students giggled. Brent was the most popular boy in the class.

"No, Brent, daydreaming is not a talent, but neither is interrupting your teacher, and you seem to do that as often as Takehito daydreams," Mrs. Klein snapped.

Takehito's face popped beet-red. He didn't know what to say. Luckily for him, the bell rang, signaling the end of the school day. Takehito quickly gathered his books and got up to leave, but Mrs. Klein stopped him.



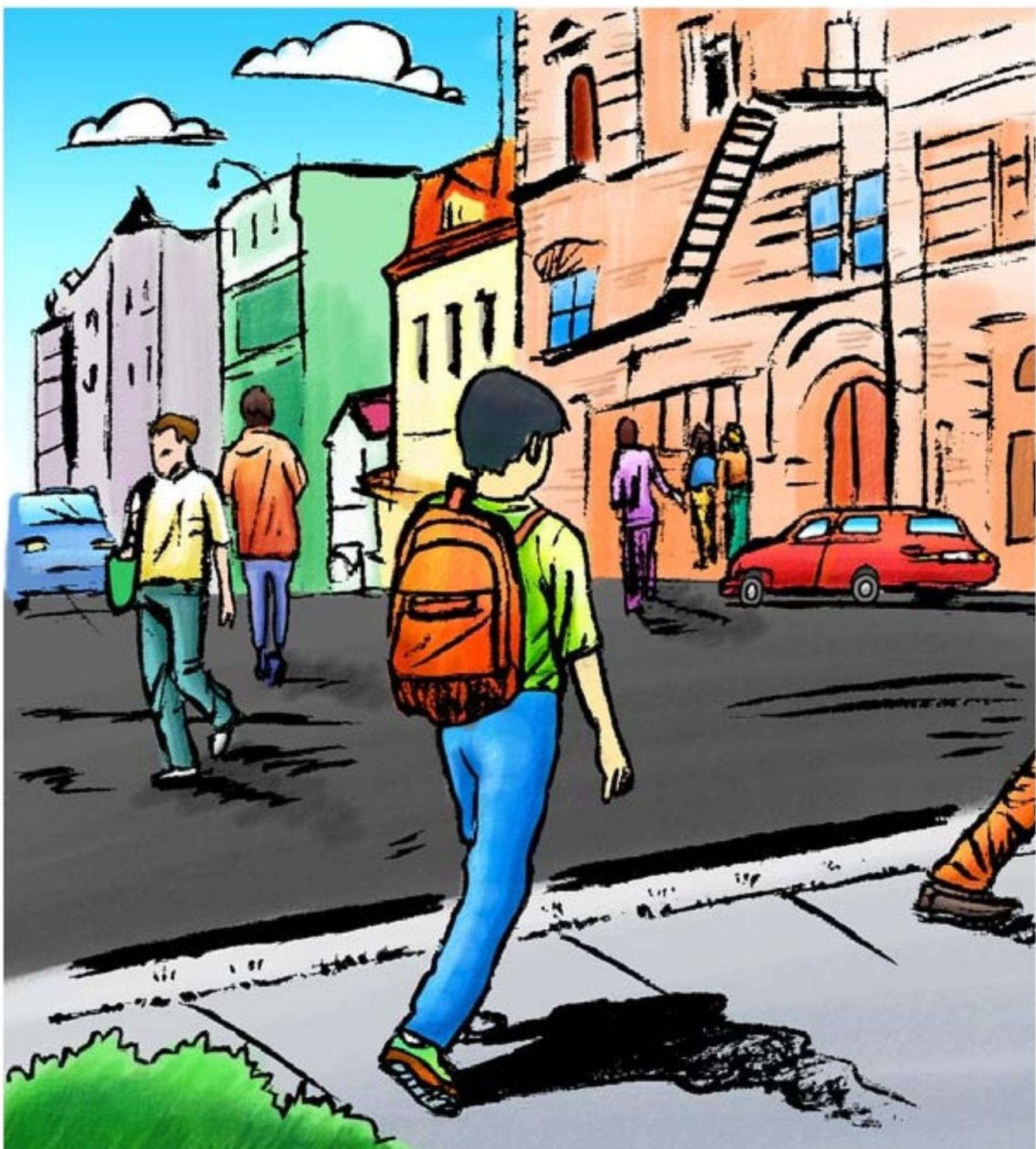
“Don’t even think about having your mother call in sick for you this year. Understood?”

He slowly nodded.

Mrs. Klein stepped aside to let Takehito pass. As he walked out of the classroom, the last cars of the elevated commuter train rushed by the school’s windows.

Mrs. Klein worried about Takehito. Last year, he and his mother emigrated from Japan to Chicago. He had not made friends easily. Some of the students in his old class made fun of the way he looked and the way he spoke. When it came time for the end-of-year talent show, everyone had teamed up with friends, except Takehito. So he pretended to be sick and convinced his mom that he needed to stay home from school that day.

When Mrs. Klein heard about this from the fourth-grade teacher, she was deeply troubled. She saw the talent show as an opportunity for everyone in the class to learn about each other. Therefore, as his teacher this year, Mrs. Klein was determined to get Takehito to perform in the talent show, knowing that if he did, he would establish some friendships before entering junior high.



Takehito didn't know what to do. As he walked home through the busy city streets, he debated. On the one hand, he didn't want to disappoint Mrs. Klein since she was his favorite teacher. On the other hand, he didn't want to be a laughingstock—to do or say anything that his classmates would laugh at. So, he decided to talk things over with Manny, the friendly street vendor he always passed on his route home.

How to Show Off

"*Hola, Takehito,*" cried Manny, a middle-aged Mexican man. "*¿Cómo estás?*"

"Hey, Manny," Takehito answered. "One *elote*, please," he continued, placing a one-dollar bill onto the small wooden counter of Manny's cart.

Takehito loved watching Manny make *elotes* because he made them so fast. First, he'd tong an ear of corn from the boiling water and then stab it through the bottom with a small wooden stick. Next, while spinning the corn, he'd slather on butter and mayonnaise, sprinkle on Parmesan cheese, and finally dash on cayenne pepper—all in a matter of seconds.



"Here you go, greatness on a stick," Manny said as he handed over the *elote*. "How are things at school?"

"Not good," Takehito replied after taking his first bite, which caked the sides of his mouth in red powdery pepper. "I want to do something for the talent show this Friday, but I don't know what to do."

"What are you good at?"

Takehito, thought for a moment as he chomped through the *elote*. Manny held out a napkin, but Takehito didn't take it.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean?" Manny asked. "Can you draw? Can you play a sport? Can you play a musical instrument? Can you sing?"

Manny continued listing talents, but Takehito stopped listening as his gaze wandered to three birds twittering around each other in a puddle in the street. As they flew away, a bus came barreling down the road. Takehito noticed that on the side of the bus was a poster for an upcoming movie. The poster showed two people dancing.

Suddenly **entranced**, Takehito was in a ballroom, dancing with a girl. She was in a blue country dress, and he was in his usual cowboy attire. The chandeliers, which hung from the ceiling, created a shimmering effect. As he twirled with his partner, wafts of her cherry-blossom perfume attacked his nose. As he looked into the crowd to avoid sneezing, he saw Manny.

"Have you ever thought about—"

"Dancing?" Takehito interrupted.

"Yes, dancing. Do you know how to dance?" Manny asked.

Takehito took his final bite of the *elote* and then shook his head back and forth.

"I don't know either," Manny continued, "but I should. In Mexico, when I was your age, I refused to learn, but my brother learned. A few years later, he was the most popular boy in school. He was so good. He made a bunch of friends."

"Really?"

"This past year, I had him teach my daughter the tango. She could teach you for your show."

Takehito raced home. He hoped his mother would be there, but before he reached the top of the stairs, he knew she was home—he could smell the tempura cooking.

As Takehito set the table, he explained that the talent show was on Friday, that he wanted to dance, that he wanted to take lessons every day after school from Manny's daughter, and that he would make friends.

"Takehito," his mother said, "I can see that you're excited, but are you sure you want to do this? You don't have to perform a stunt like this to make friends."

"Mom," Takehito pleaded, "this is not a stunt. This is my opportunity to be somebody, to be recognized for something I'm good at, something my classmates will think is cool."

"But you don't even know how to dance."

"That's why I need to take lessons."

"Oh, Takehito," his mother muttered. Then, after a long sigh, she smiled. "Be careful."



Let's Dance

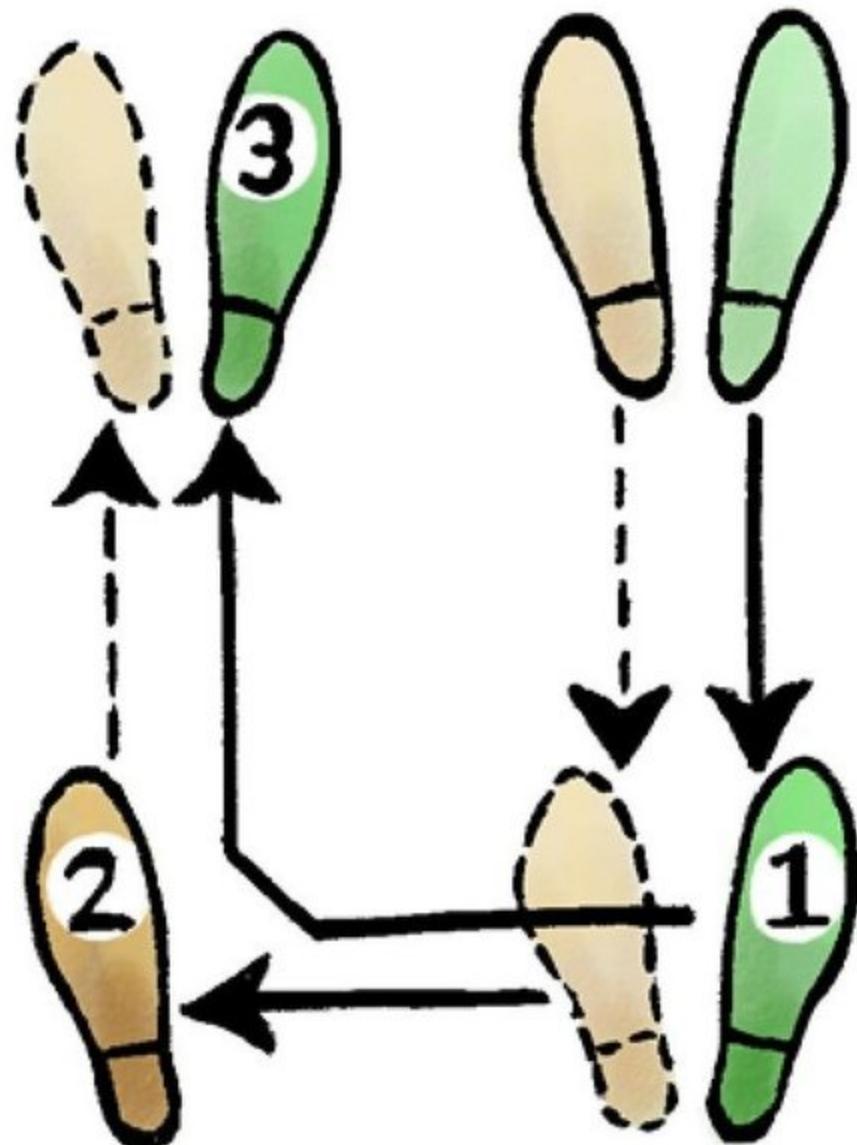
After school the next day, with his mother's permission, Takehito met Manny's daughter, Melinda, at the *elote* cart. She was in eighth grade and planned to help her father with the cart after school anyway, but when he suggested she help Takehito learn the tango, she was thrilled. She loved to dance.

The two shook hands.

"We'll begin with the **footwork**." She stood in front of him and pointed to her right foot.

"Every step you take is **deliberate**, exaggerated. When you walk forward, strike your heel first, then your toe—heel, toe, heel, toe, heel, toe." Melinda demonstrated this vertical movement to Takehito, keeping her left foot stationary while moving her right foot up and down. "Got it?"

Basic Tango step



"I think so," Takehito replied.

"Then, let's walk."

Melinda and Takehito walked arm-in-arm, up and down the sidewalk, forward and backward.

"The goal here, Takehito, is to walk like a cat. Stalk and pounce—sometimes slow, sometimes quick, sometimes slithery, sometimes sharp."

They began to fall into a **rhythm** as Melinda continued. "My uncle said that the tango is over a hundred years old. Lots of people from different cultures—African, Indian, French, Spanish, Italian—created what we're doing right now. As the story goes, in the late 1800s, European and African immigrants danced with the locals in Buenos Aires. The result was a hodgepodge of movements, and the tango was born."

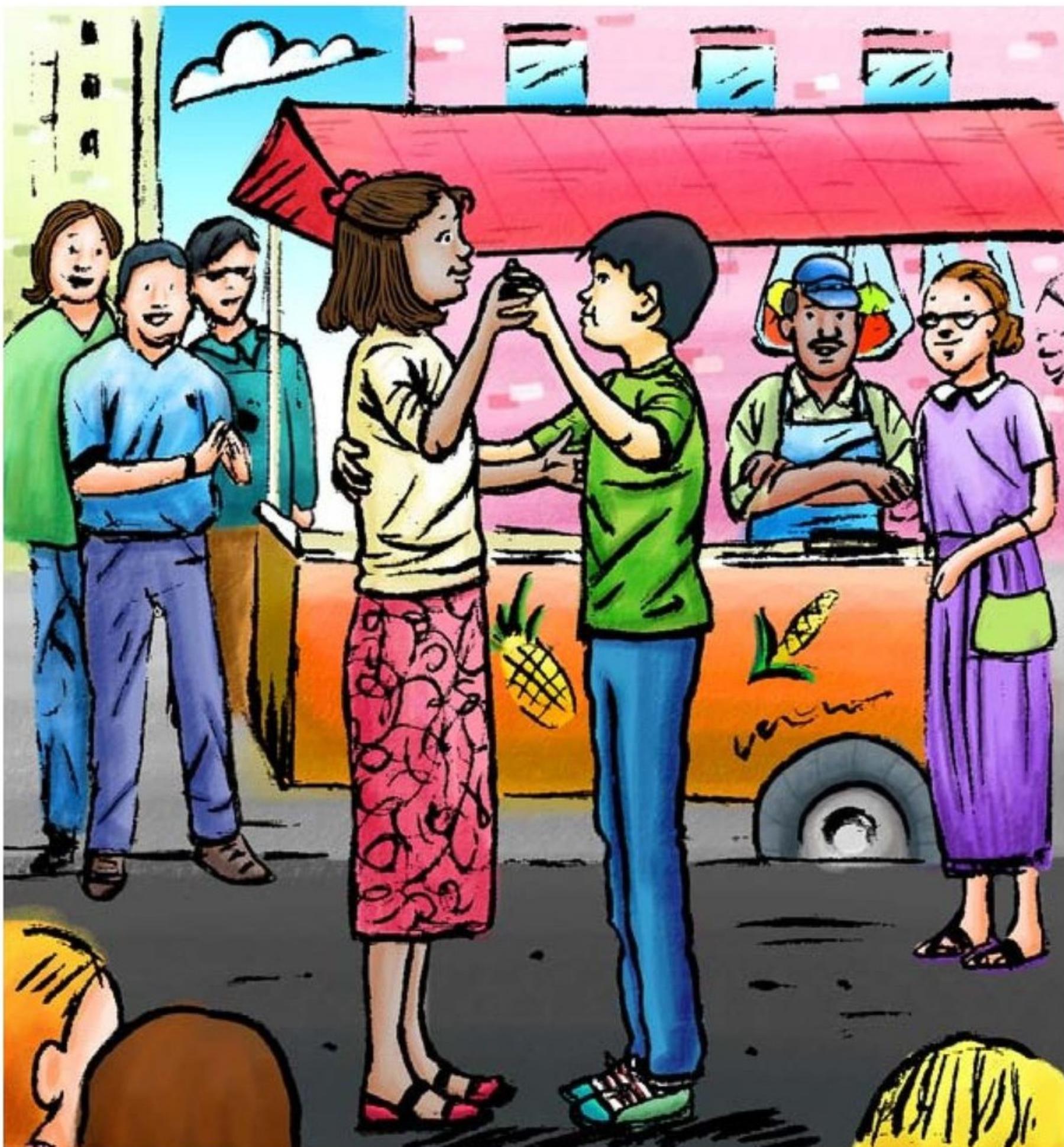
Takehito was working up a sweat. They moved faster and faster, slowing down and then speeding up again. He liked the changes of pace because they made him move like what he figured it would be like to ride a horse.

Manny pointed out to the two of them that several people across the street had stopped to watch them dance. Manny smiled and waved.

Tango Lessons

On Thursday, a small **audience** gathered around Manny's cart. A few of the neighborhood locals heard of the young couple's dancing and wanted to watch, yet before they did, they enjoyed Manny's *elotes*. Finally, Melinda stepped forward.

"Today, we dance." She turned on the music. The song was *Tango en el Parque*. "But first, we must get into the proper tango position."



She took Takehito's right arm and positioned it around her back, so that the fingers of his right hand lay across her spine. Then Melinda hooked her forearm underneath his elbow and upper arm with her wrist positioned directly underneath his arm, her palm facing inward, and her fingers just reaching his torso. Next, she grabbed his left hand with her right hand and held it at her eye level, which raised their elbows.

Feeling rather **awkward**, Takehito crinkled his brow.

"Are you sure about this? I feel uncomfortable, like at school pictures."

"It will feel better once we start moving."

Melinda explained that **traditionally**, Takehito would lead the dance because of his gender; however, because she knew the tango and he didn't, she would lead and he would follow. Right before they began, though, she offered one last bit of advice.

"Anytime we move forward, we'll gradually curve to the left, and if we decide to walk backward, we'll also curve to the left."

"What?" questioned Takehito, looking perplexed.

"Trust me. On three."

And so they began, **clumsily** at first, shuffling and stumbling, but eventually getting the hang of it. A small crowd of onlookers, many more than before, began to form. Manny pointed them out to the dancers again. They laughed. A few people who walked past them on the sidewalk applauded or cheered; others even began dancing with them.

Takehito became distracted. He would watch the **spectators** rather than where and how he was dancing. Then, suddenly, he slipped off the curb.

"Are you okay?" Melinda gasped. "You were dancing so well."

Takehito was down on the street, clutching his ankle, which was swelling up fast. Manny flipped open his cooler and scooped some ice into a small bag. He gave it to Melinda, who handed it to Takehito. He pressed the bag of ice onto his swollen ankle and winced.

"I think that's all for today," said Manny, worried. Melinda turned off the music.



The Talent Show

Takehito stood behind the curtain backstage, nervously wringing out his hands and feeling as though birds were twittering around in his stomach. Melinda seemed to be feeling just the opposite as she walked around, laughing and saying hello to her former teachers. Then Mrs. Klein came by to inform the couple that they were to perform next. Takehito lifted up his pant leg to see that his ankle was still a bit swollen. He imagined his ankle returning to its normal size, the curtains opening, and the entire student body staring at him, pointing and laughing. He stepped to the center of the stage, slowly and deliberately, his spurs pinging with each step, his hat covering his face. All went still. Then he shot up his head as the spotlight flashed on him and the music fired. Melinda came running toward him, and suddenly they were in rhythm, stride-for-stride, in sync, banging out a fierce tango. The crowd screamed wildly . . . then the curtains opened.



"Now Takehito will perform the tango with his partner, Melinda," said Mrs. Klein over the microphone.

The two got into position. The music began and they waited for the right beat.

"Are you ready, cowboy?"

Takehito smiled, knowing that he had made at least one friend.



Glossary

audience (<i>n.</i>)	a group of people gathered to see and hear a performance or concert (p. 15)
awkward (<i>adj.</i>)	difficult or uncomfortable, especially as related to body position (p. 16)
clumsily (<i>adv.</i>)	in a way that lacks physical grace or coordination (p. 17)
deliberate (<i>adj.</i>)	slow or careful movement or action (p. 13)
entranced (<i>adj.</i>)	filled with wonder (p. 11)
footwork (<i>n.</i>)	the movement of feet in dancing (p. 13)
performance (<i>n.</i>)	a show, such as a play, a piece of music, or another kind of entertainment in front of an audience (p. 5)
rhythm (<i>n.</i>)	a regular pattern of sound, with accents at fixed times (p. 14)
spectators (<i>n.</i>)	people who watch an event without taking part (p. 17)
traditionally (<i>adv.</i>)	according to ritual or action that is passed down from year to year and generation to generation (p. 16)

Takehito's Tango
Level X Leveled Book
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Illustrated by Linda Pierce

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