

LEVELED BOOK • R

# Turtle Tom



Written by Stephen Cosgrove  
Illustrated by Carolyn LaPorte

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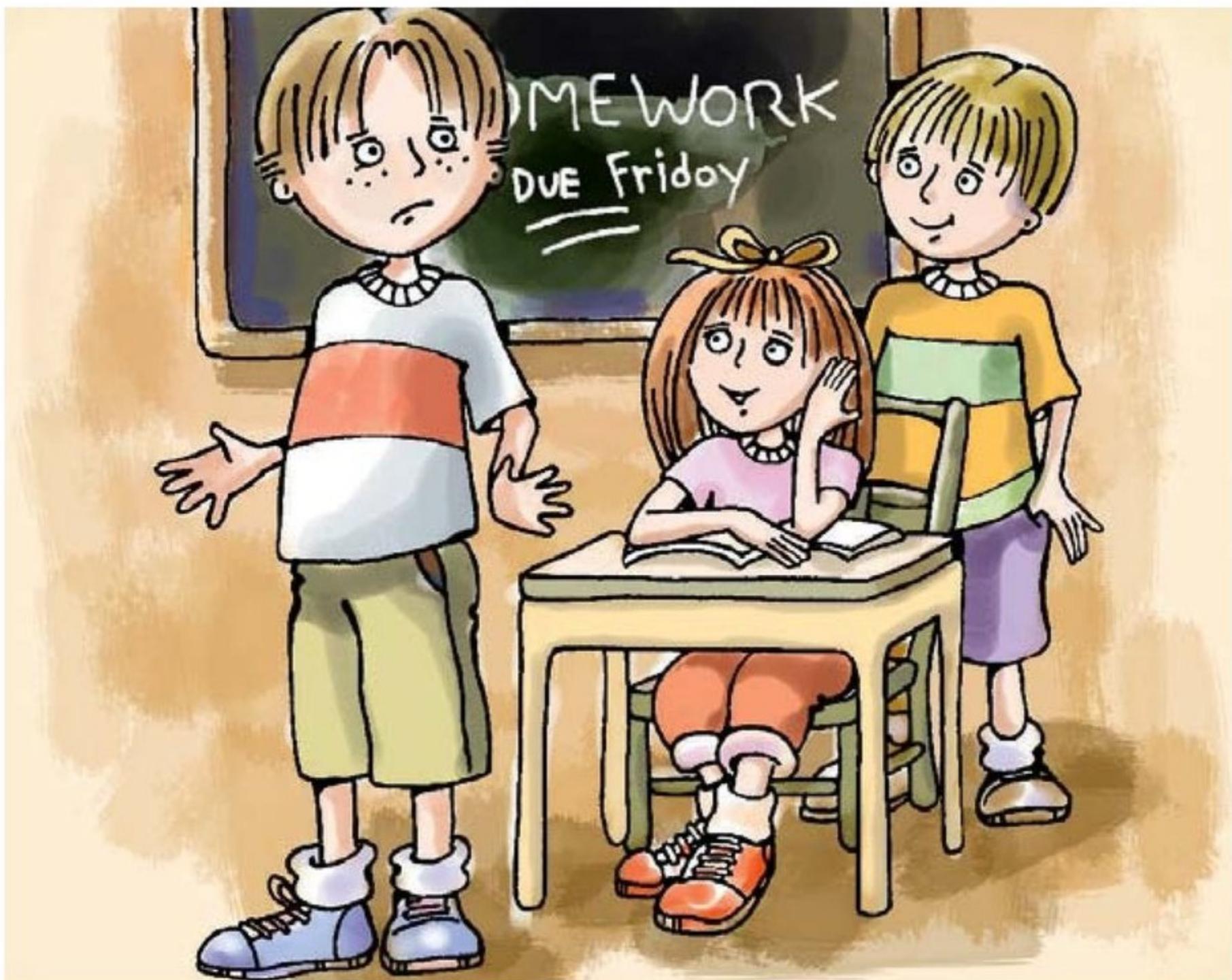


I've got the worst name in the world.  
There is none worse.

My name is Tom T. Terdle.

Pretty dumb, huh? I don't have a middle name, only the initial. It has something to do with my grandfather and his father's father. And, my first name is Tom—not Thomas, just Tom. It lends itself to all kinds of things, all of which are pretty mean.

People, all kinds of people, call me all sorts of things. I haven't had one teacher who hasn't laughed after calling my name on the first day of school.



It usually goes like this: “Robert Miller?”

“Here!”

“Becky-Sue Porter?”

“Here.”

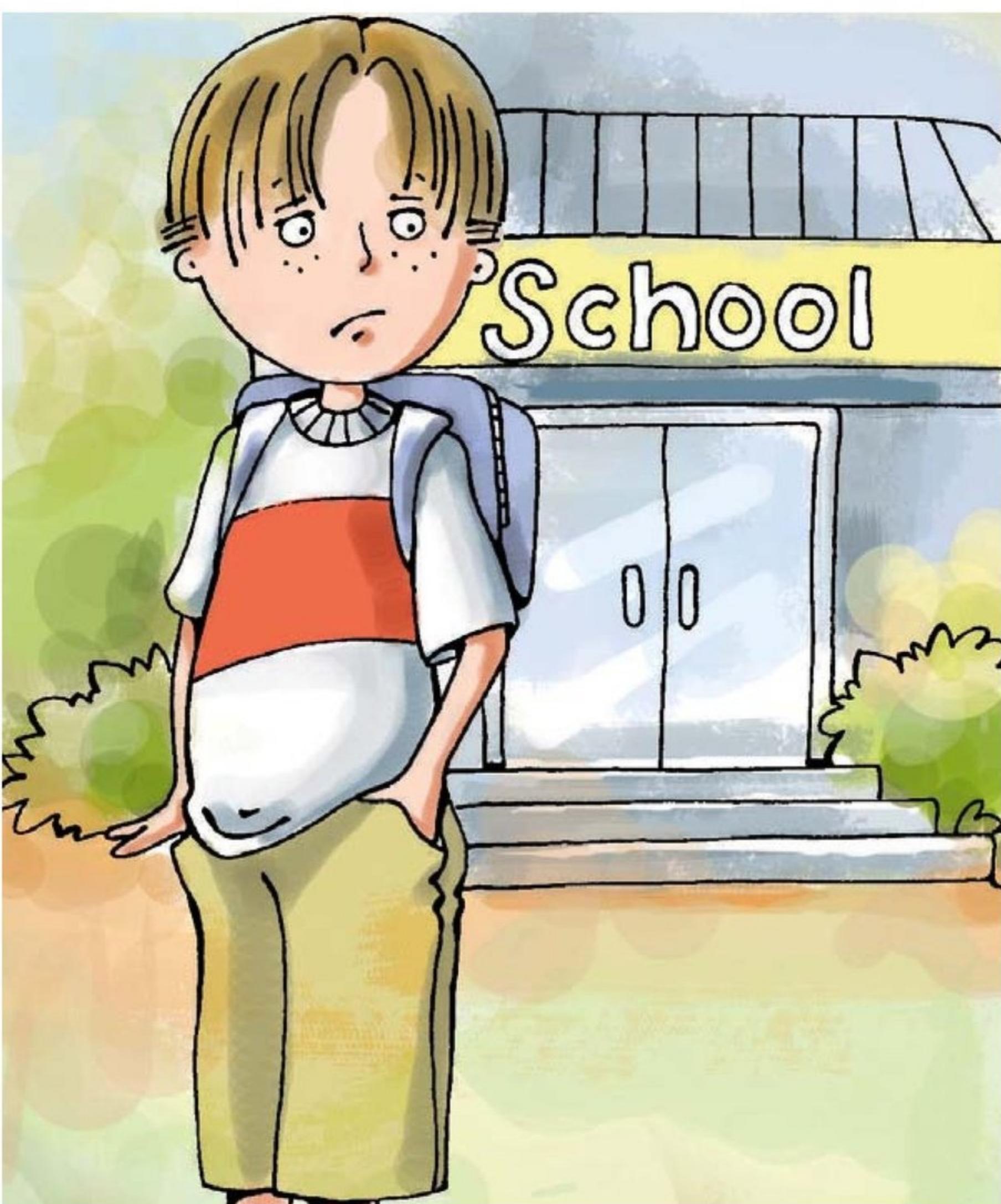
“Tom T. Terdle?”

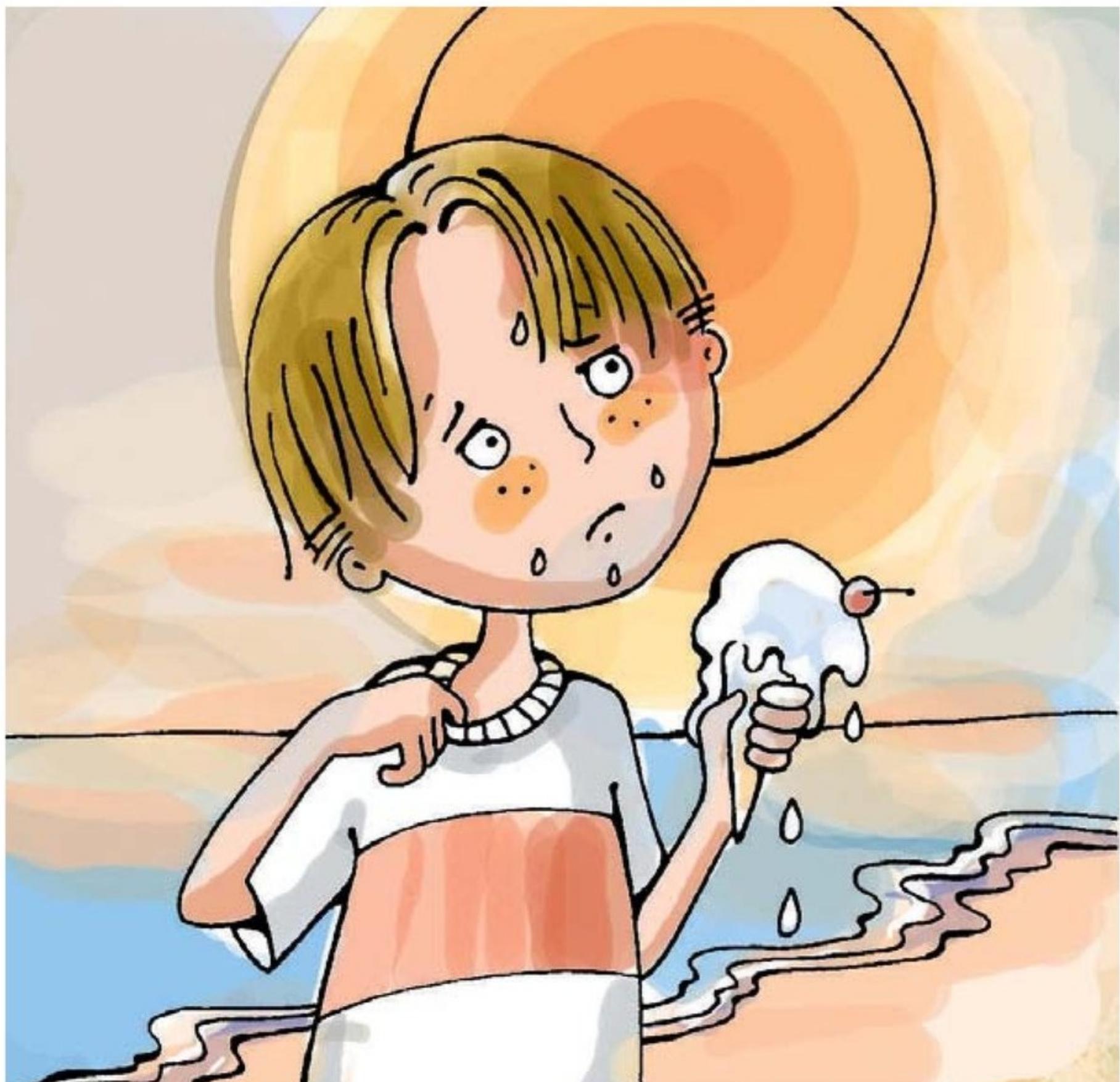
“Here.”

“Does the ‘T’ stand for ‘The,’ as in ‘Tom The Turtle?’ Heh, heh, heh!”

Groan.

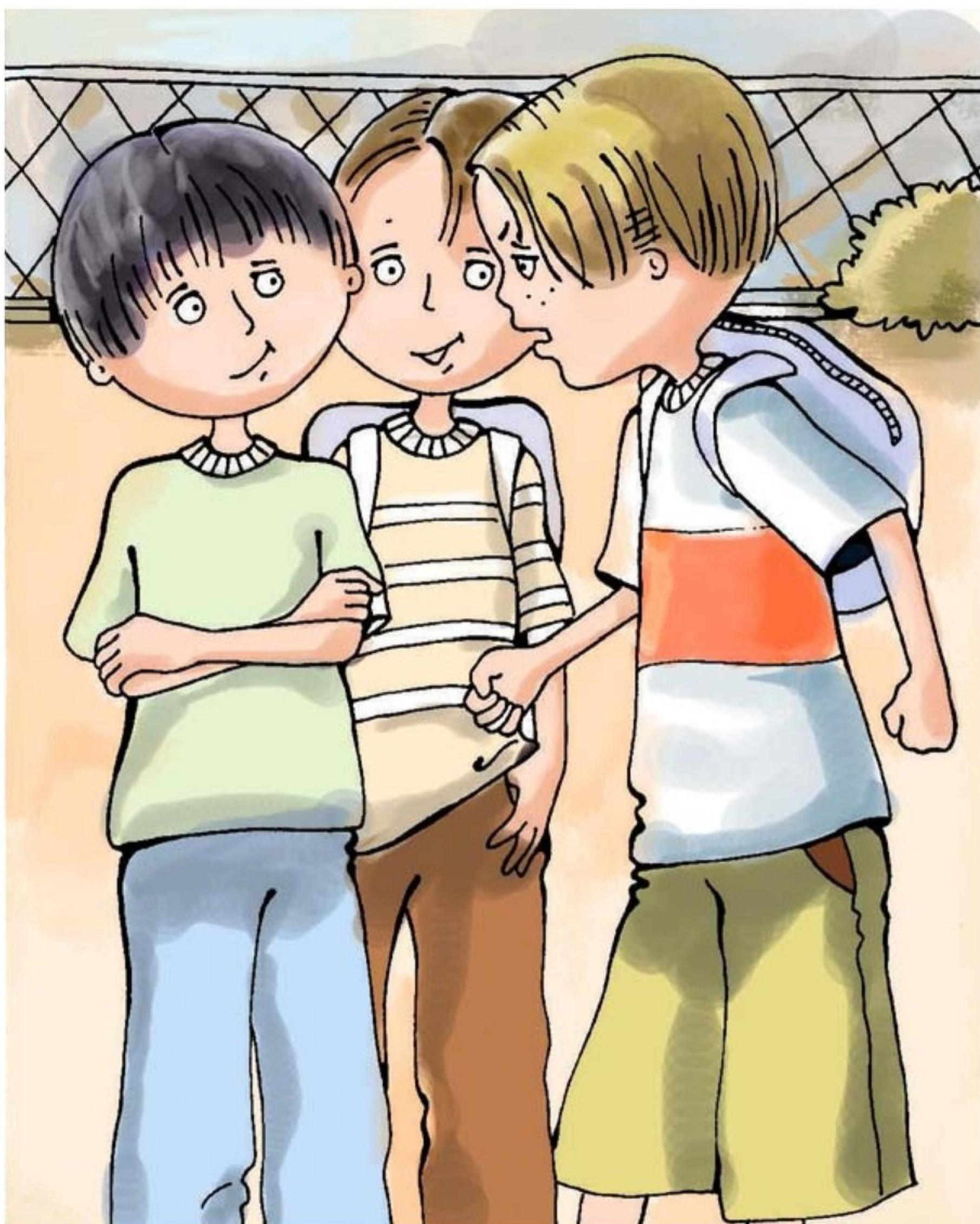
I've heard that every year and sometimes twice. That's because my dad has to move around with his job, and one year I went to three different schools. I'm in the fourth grade, and already I've gone to six grade schools. Every time we move, I have to get ready for the stupid names and a fight or two.





This time my dad was transferred to Port Aransas, Texas. We had been living in Utah, and at first I thought it would be really cool to live on the ocean. Port Aransas is on Padre Island, which is on the Gulf of Mexico. It wasn't what I expected. Because the water is protected, the waves are pretty small, and the water is warm. The land is warmer than the water, and when we first got here it was hot. I mean really hot!

If that wasn't bad enough, Texas schools start in the middle of August, so I didn't get much of a vacation. I didn't meet any of the other kids in my class until school had started. By now it was too late to meet anyone. I would probably get into another fight.

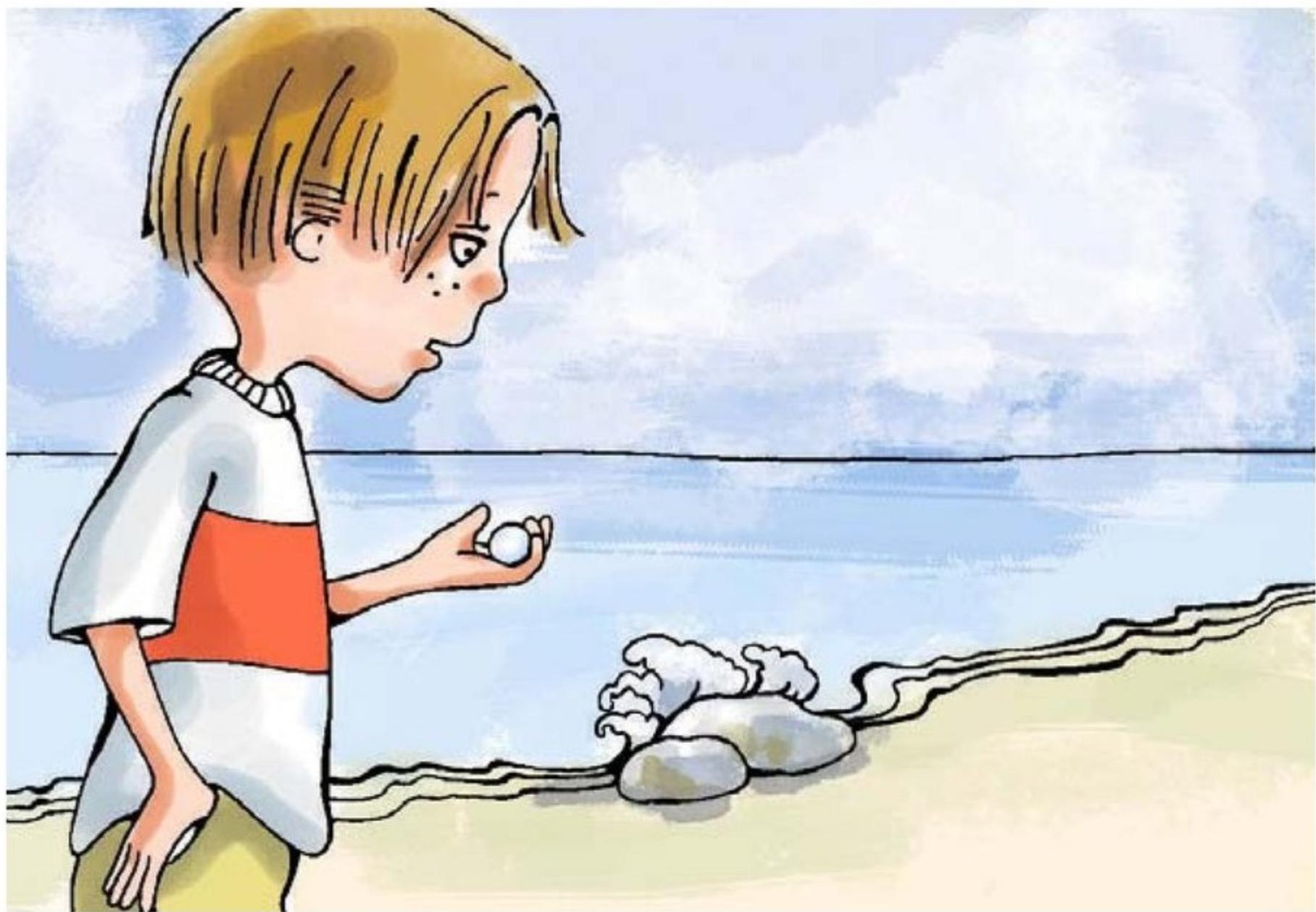


I don't like to fight, but some of the things other kids say are pretty nasty. One thing leads to another, and usually I hit somebody. Then, I end up in the principal's office with my mom having to drive over to the school.





All of which is the reason I ended up alone on the beach on a weekday. I got kicked out of school for three days for fighting. Still had to do my homework, but I couldn't go to school, which was just fine with me. Don't get me wrong, I like school—I just don't like the other kids always teasing me. If there's any salvation in what happened yesterday, it's that the principal kicked out the other four kids, too. He said I was provoked. That still didn't help me much at home.



In the first day, I got all my homework done for the entire three days. So I was allowed to go down to the beach and look for stuff along the shore.

What I found is the last thing I wanted to find—turtles.

Actually, what I found first was eggs—lots of eggs buried under the sand. I thought it was a joke. Maybe somebody had buried a bunch of hard-boiled eggs after a beach party. But the eggs were weird. They were soft and kind of leathery. They didn't look like chicken eggs at all.

I kept digging and the deeper I dug,  
the more eggs I found.

I felt like a dog digging for bones, and  
minutes later I really felt like a dog.

My digging was interrupted by an angry  
woman's voice, "What in tarnation are  
you doing?"





"Huh?" I looked up, sand all over my face and an egg in my hand. Standing behind me, hands on her hips, was an old lady with fluffy white hair.

"You are going to kill every one of those if you don't stop it!" she said.

"Kill what?" I asked.

"The turtles," she said, taking the egg out of my hand. "Don't you know how to read?" She snapped her thumb at a sign on a weathered post not twenty feet away: "Be Aware! Sea Turtle Nesting Area! Violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law!"

I felt bad. I started pushing sand back onto the remaining eggs. “No, no, no!” she said, kneeling down beside me. “The entire clutch has got to be put back—and gently.”

Together we carefully put the eggs back in the hole and began covering them with the warm sand.





“What’s your name, boy?” she asked.

I took a long look at her. She was even older than I thought, eighty or more, but she didn’t act like it. “My name is Tom T. Terdle,” I answered.

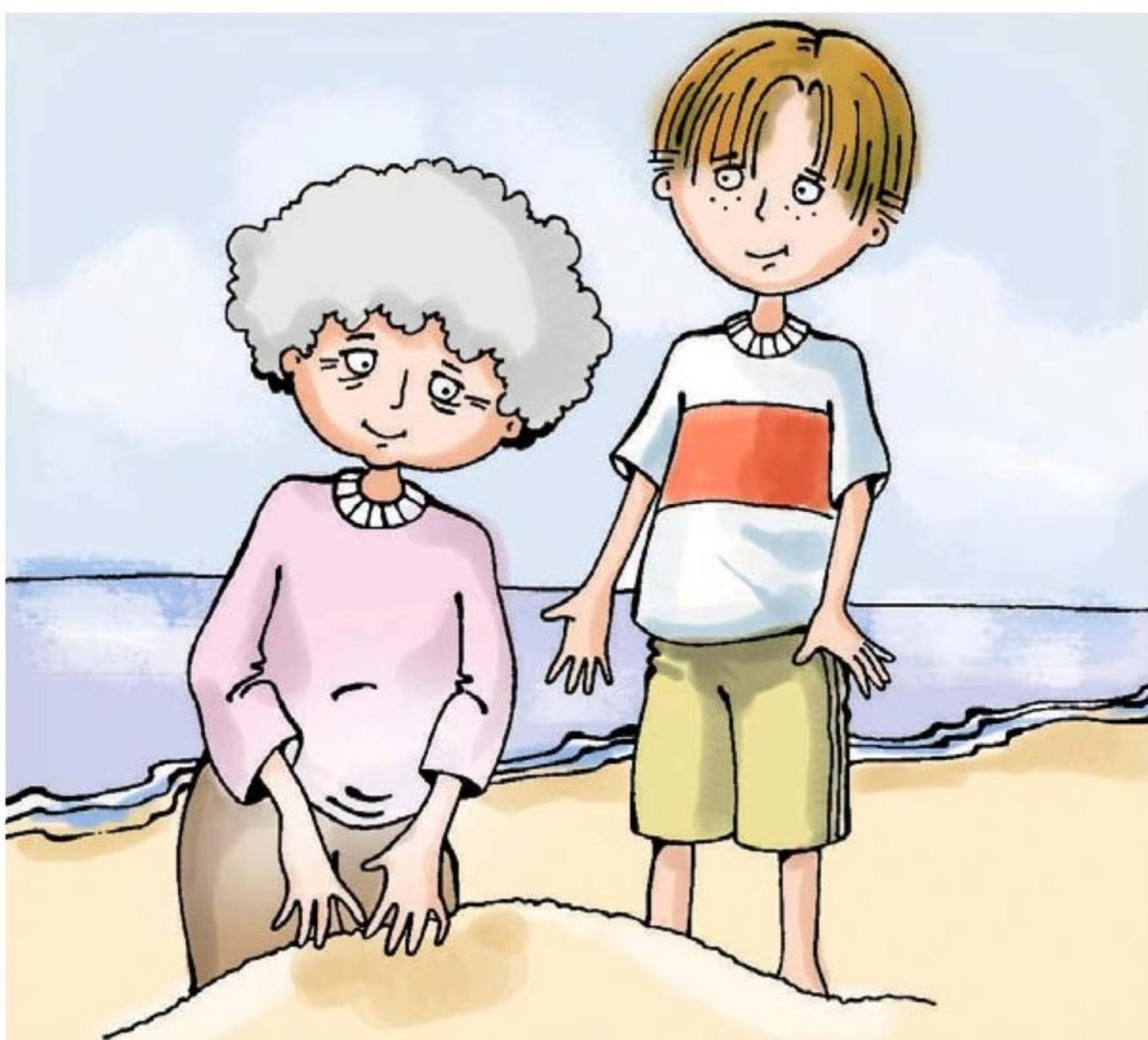
“Don’t you go getting smart on me, young man,” she snapped. “You can keep a civil tongue. I want your real name.”

“I’m not joking,” I answered, slipping into my normal defensive mode. “My name is Tom Terdle. T-E-R-D-L-E.”

“Harrumph,” she grunted. “Well, Tom, they call me the Turtle Lady around these parts, and I’m a deputy with the Port Aransas Police Department. Now what am I going to do with you? Besides endangering an endangered species, you are also skipping school.”

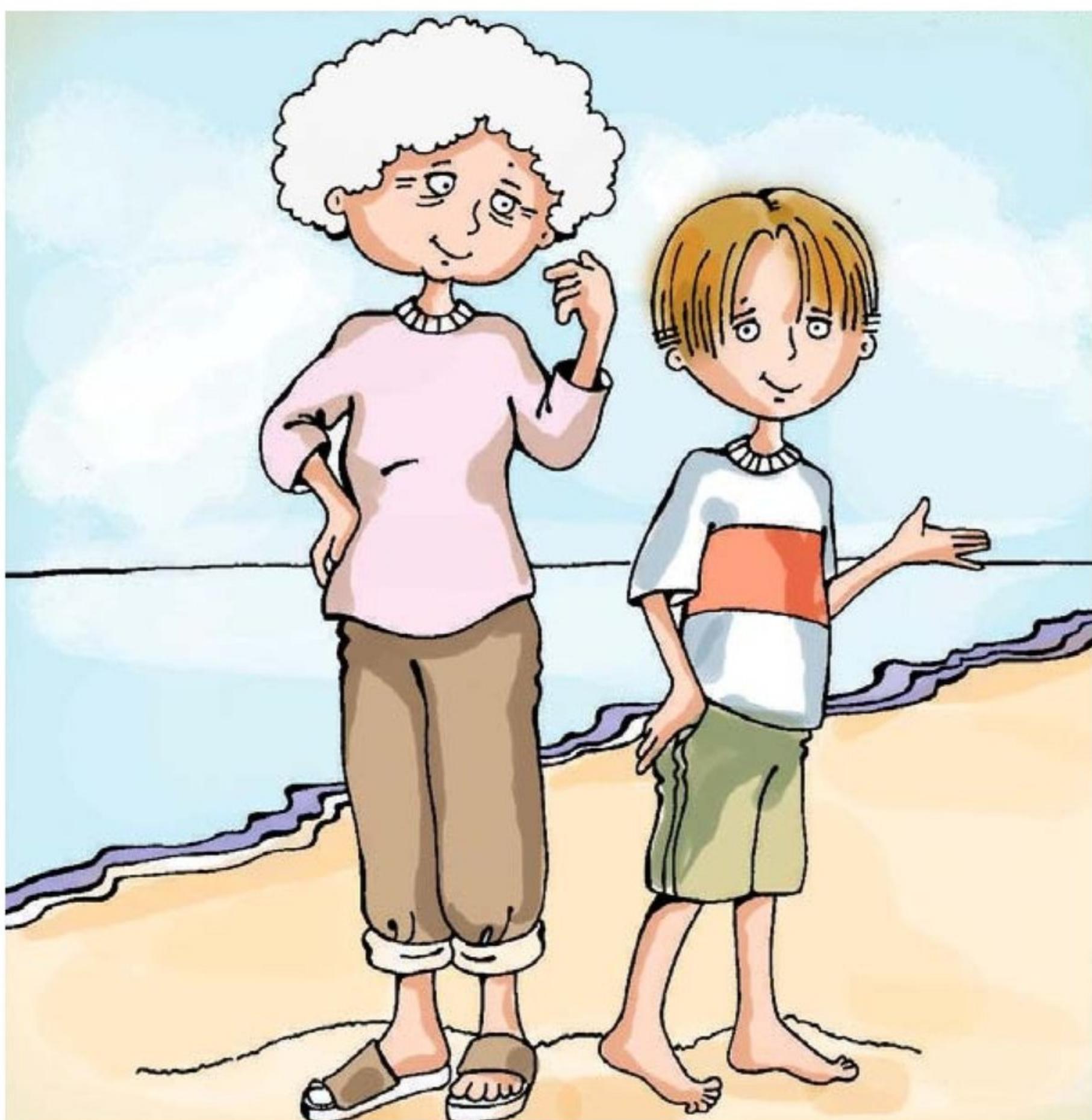
“I am not skipping school,” I said. “I got suspended for three days.”

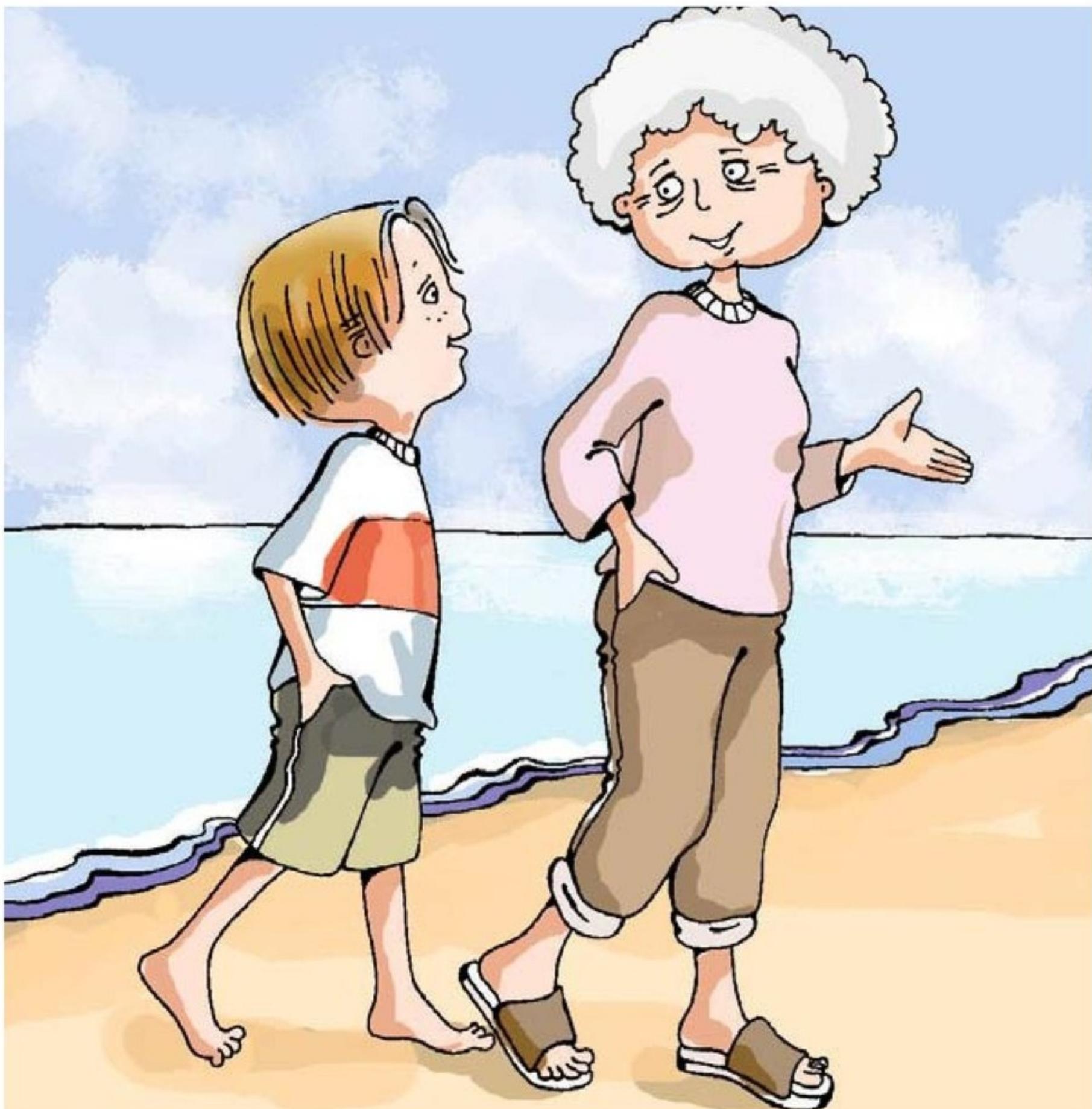
“For what?” she asked as we finished burying the eggs.



She was easy to talk to, and I told her everything. When I say everything, I mean everything. I told about all the schools, and the kids making fun of me, everything.

She smiled and laughed, “Well, I take a lot of pride in being called the Turtle Lady. I love turtles. So I really can’t sympathize with you about your name. Personally, I’d take it as a compliment, but then again, I’m not you.”





We began walking along the beach. “Look, Tom. You’re out of school for a few days. You help me patrol this area, especially tomorrow night when the eggs will probably hatch. If you help me, I won’t arrest you for digging up the nest.”

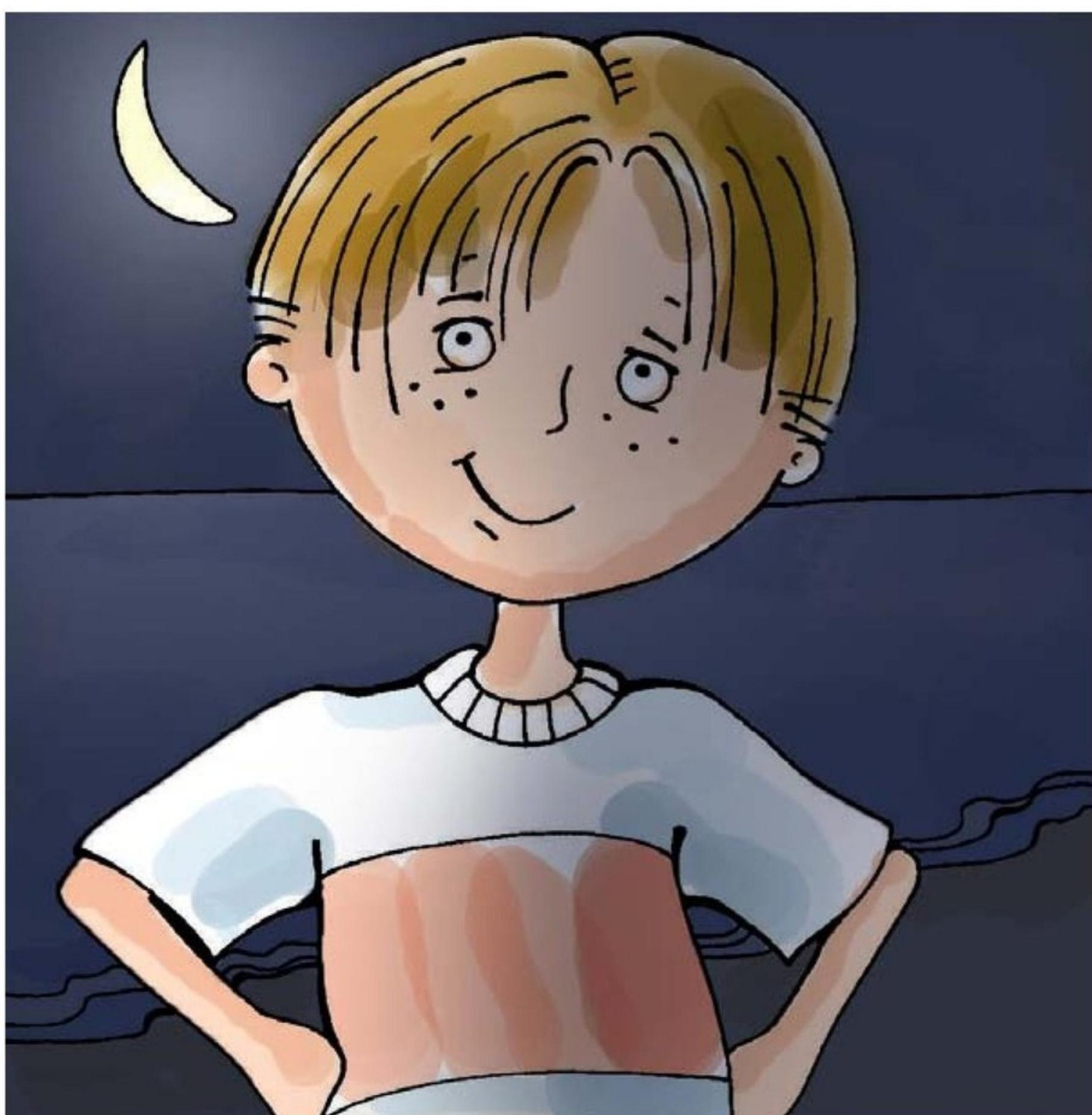
I would have agreed even if I wasn’t going to be arrested. She may have been old, but she was instantly my friend.



That night, after convincing my folks that I had to help the Turtle Lady, I met her down at the beach. We sat there around a driftwood fire and watched for some sign that the eggs were going to hatch. She told me about the sea turtles. I learned more in that night than I had in all my science classes.

I got to stay up all night, but nothing happened. As we put out the fire she chuckled, “It’s going to be tomorrow night. Always happens in the dark of the moon. Get some sleep, Turtle Tom. Tomorrow night we’ll see some turtles.”

For the first time ever, I wasn’t insulted by that name. In fact, coming from the Turtle Lady, it felt very special.





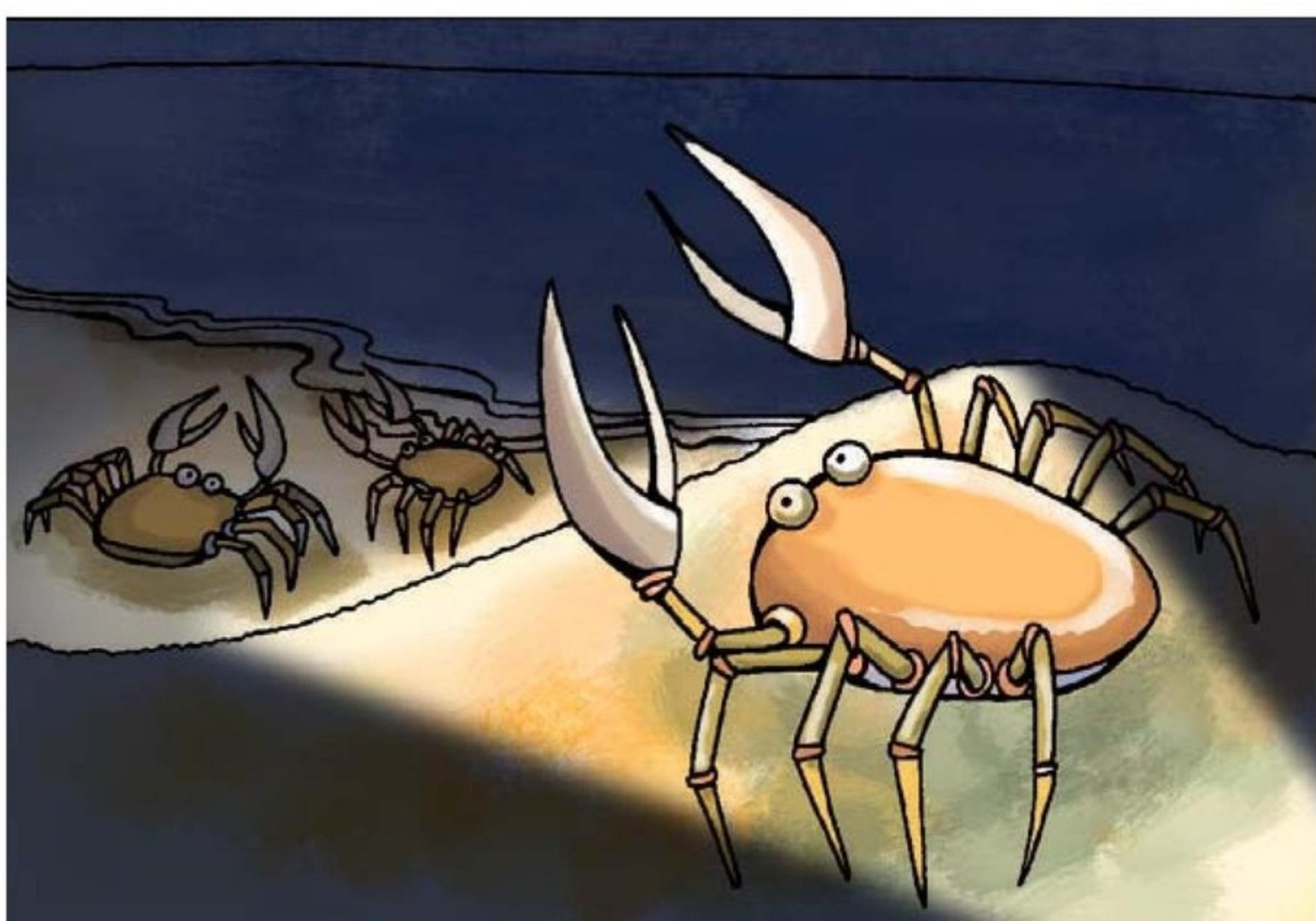
I got home just as my dad was getting up. I told him all about the night. He ushered me toward my room and told me to sleep. “One more night, son,” he said gently. “No turtles tonight and you’re going to be out of luck.”

I didn’t argue. I was too tired. I slept all through the day and at about six o’clock, Mom woke me up. I ate some dinner and then rushed back down to the beach.

That night was a wild night, a night I will never forget. We stood around the fire, and at first I thought we were out of luck. Then, the Turtle Lady said, “Hear that?”

I could hear a funny scrabbling sound like something was crawling across the sand. “Turtles,” I shouted.

“No,” she laughed, “crabs. But that’s a good thing in a bad way.” She flipped on her flashlight and drew the light across the beach. There, scuttling across the sand against the fluorescent foam from the surf were hundreds of crabs.





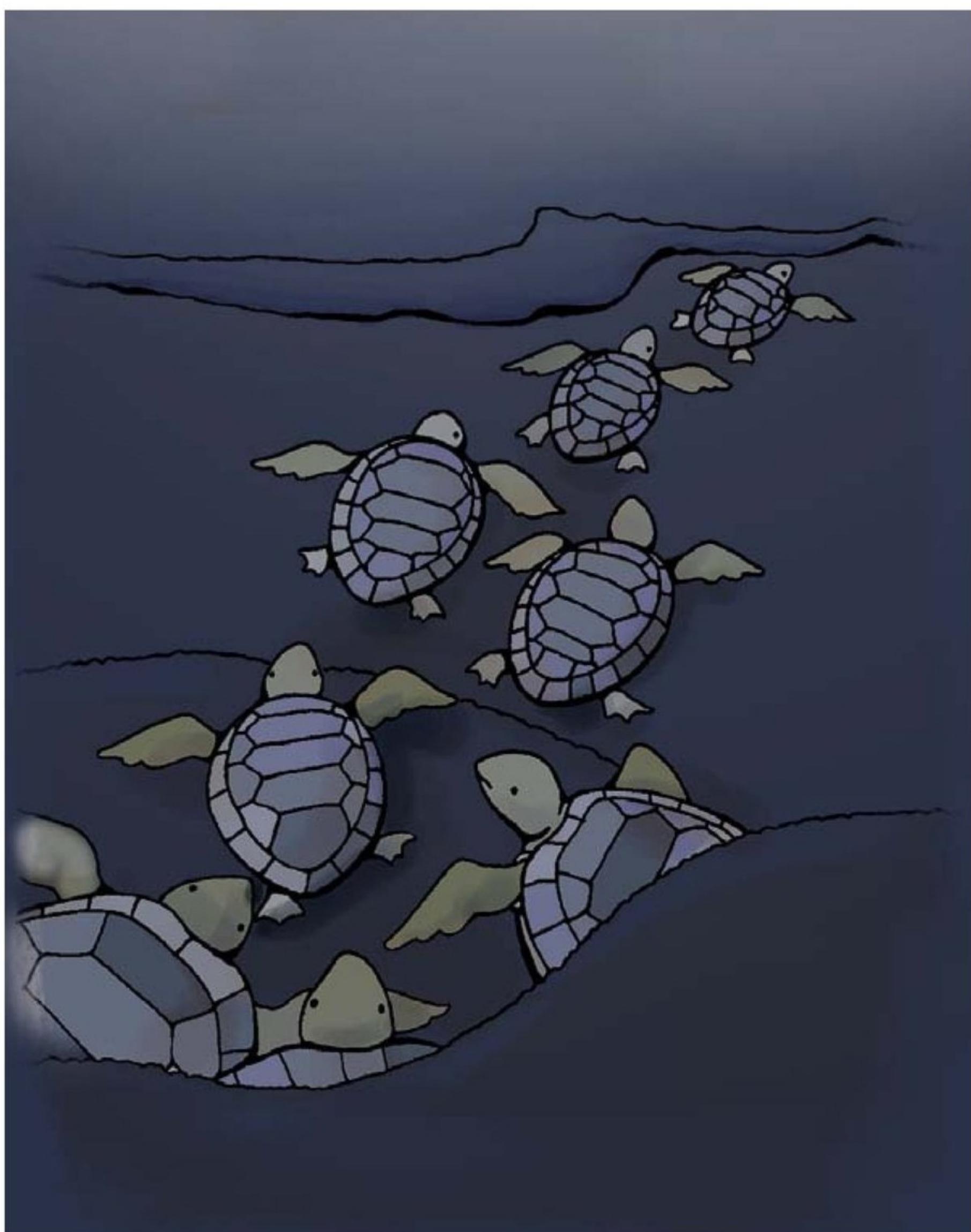
“Crabs? What’s that got to do with the turtles?”

As we watched she explained that the crabs prey on the turtles. “It’s a good thing,” she said, “because it means the turtles are hatching. It’s a bad thing because they will kill a lot of them.”

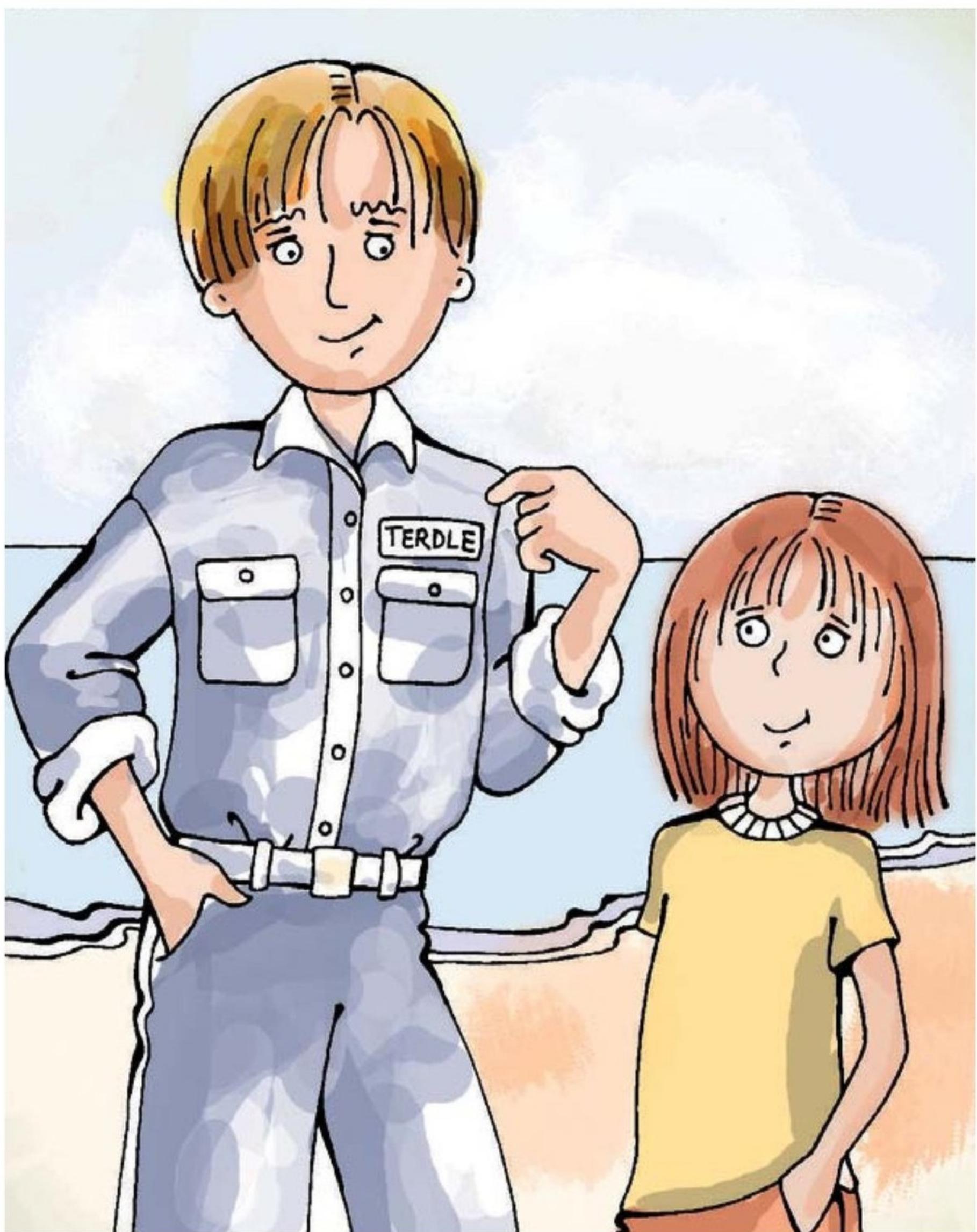
I grabbed a big stick and said, “Then I’ll just kill some crabs.”

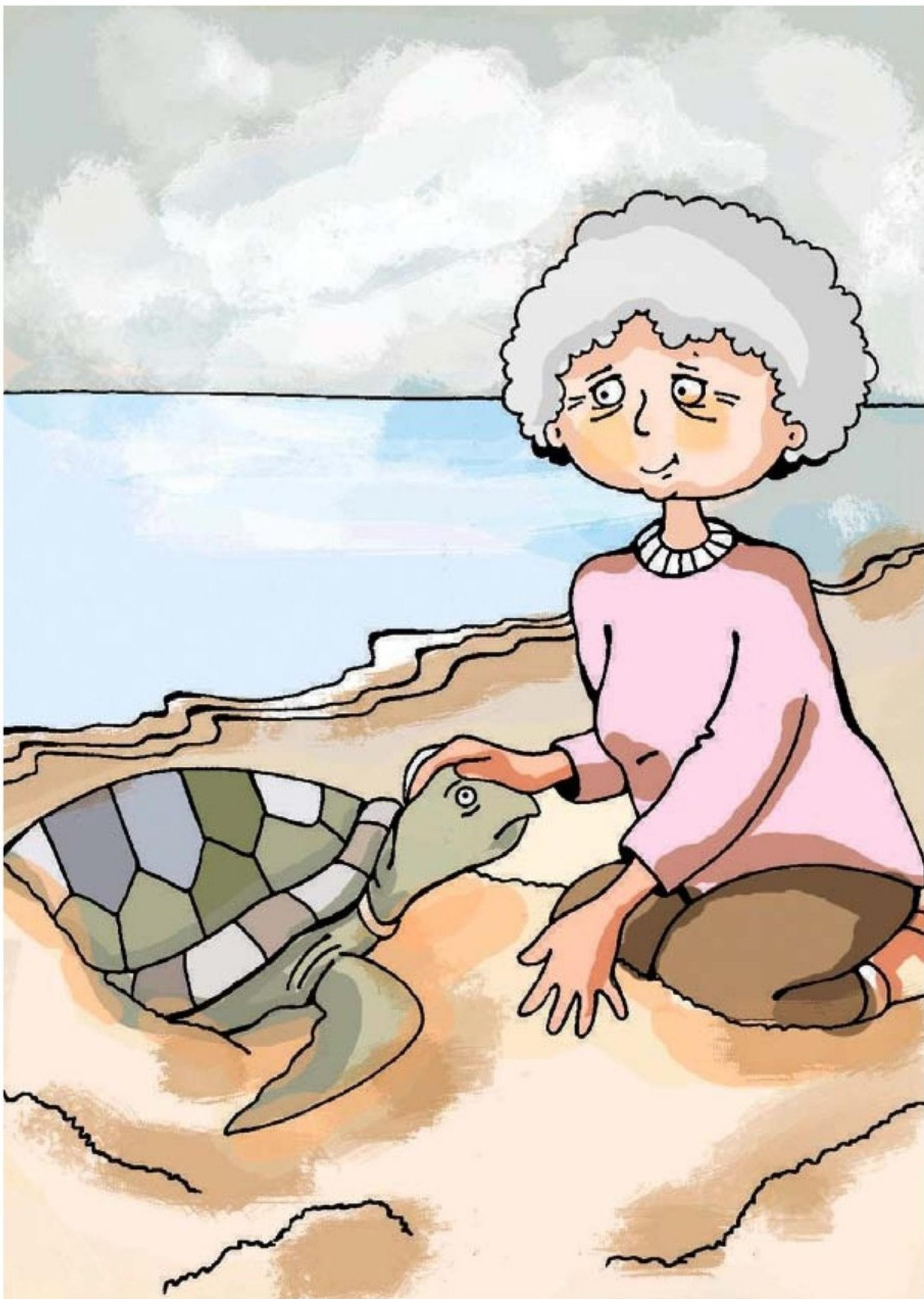
“No,” she said gently, “the crabs are a part of nature. The turtles that survive will be the strongest. That is the way of nature. The weak die so that the species will be stronger.”

In thirty minutes or so, they came. Starting like a trickle, then like a bigger wave, the little turtles began digging from the sandy nests and scurrying down to the surf. The crabs caught some of them, but many more made their way to the water.

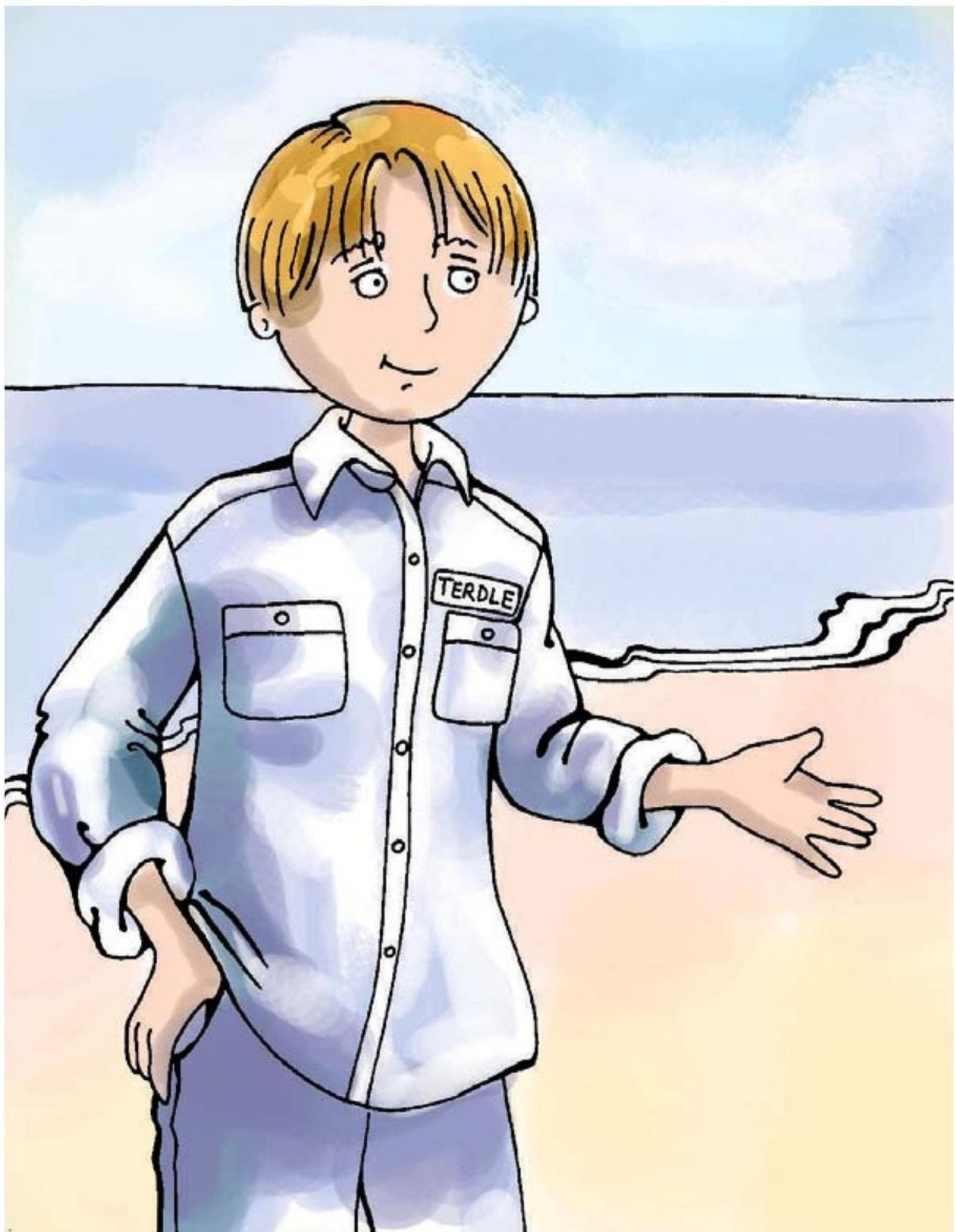


All in all that was the most amazing night of my life, some fifteen years ago. I long since have gotten rid of my sensitivity to being called Turtle Tom, and now as a marine biologist I am flattered when school kids who come to the marina call me that.





Who was the Turtle Lady? Her real name was Ila Loetscher, and she loved and protected the turtles like nobody else in Texas. She died at the age of 95.



I often walk the beaches at Port Aransas.  
She is still there in spirit, guarding the sea  
turtles.

By the way, all my friends call me Turtle  
Tom.

Turtle Tom  
Level R Leveled Book  
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