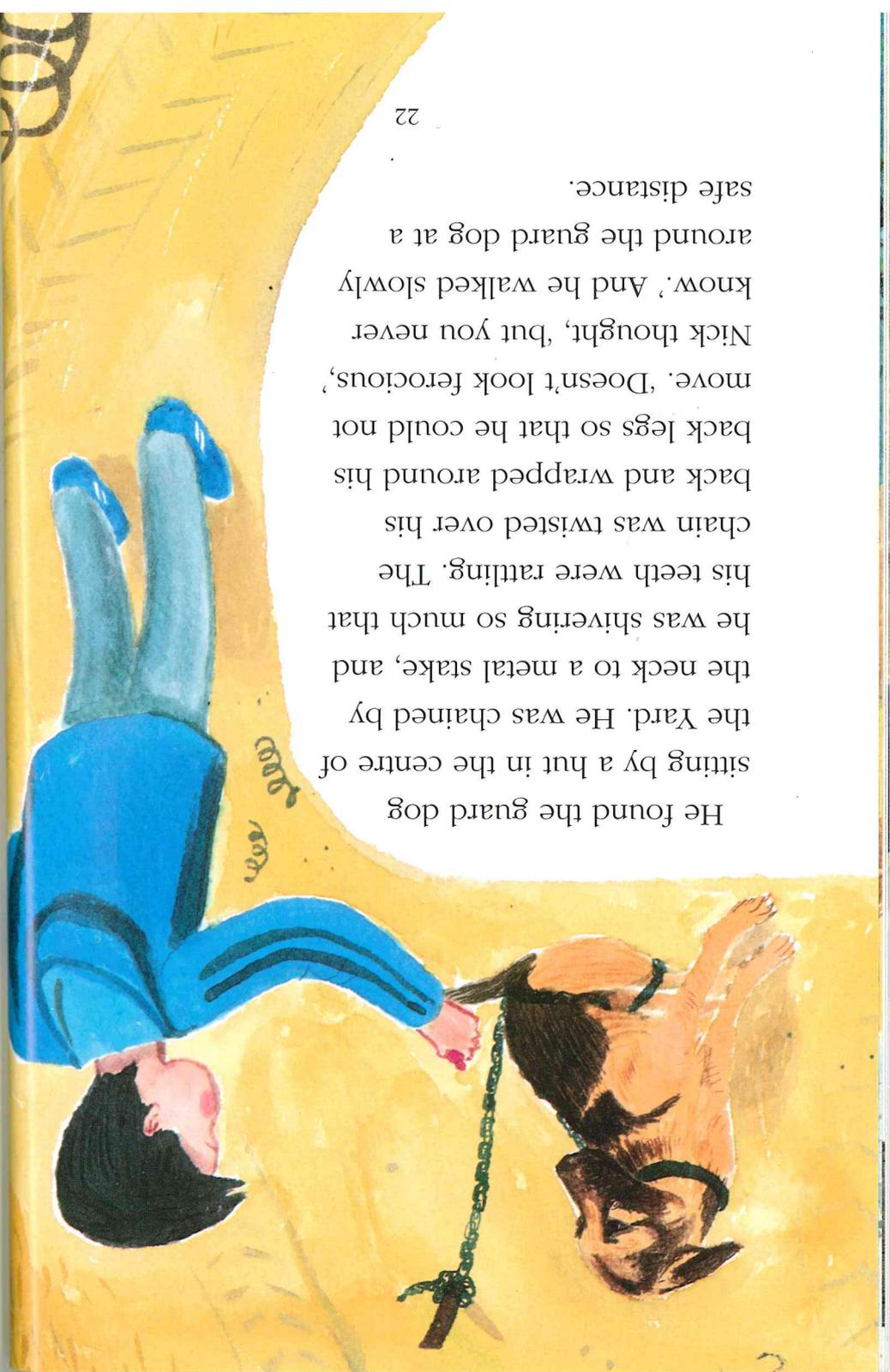
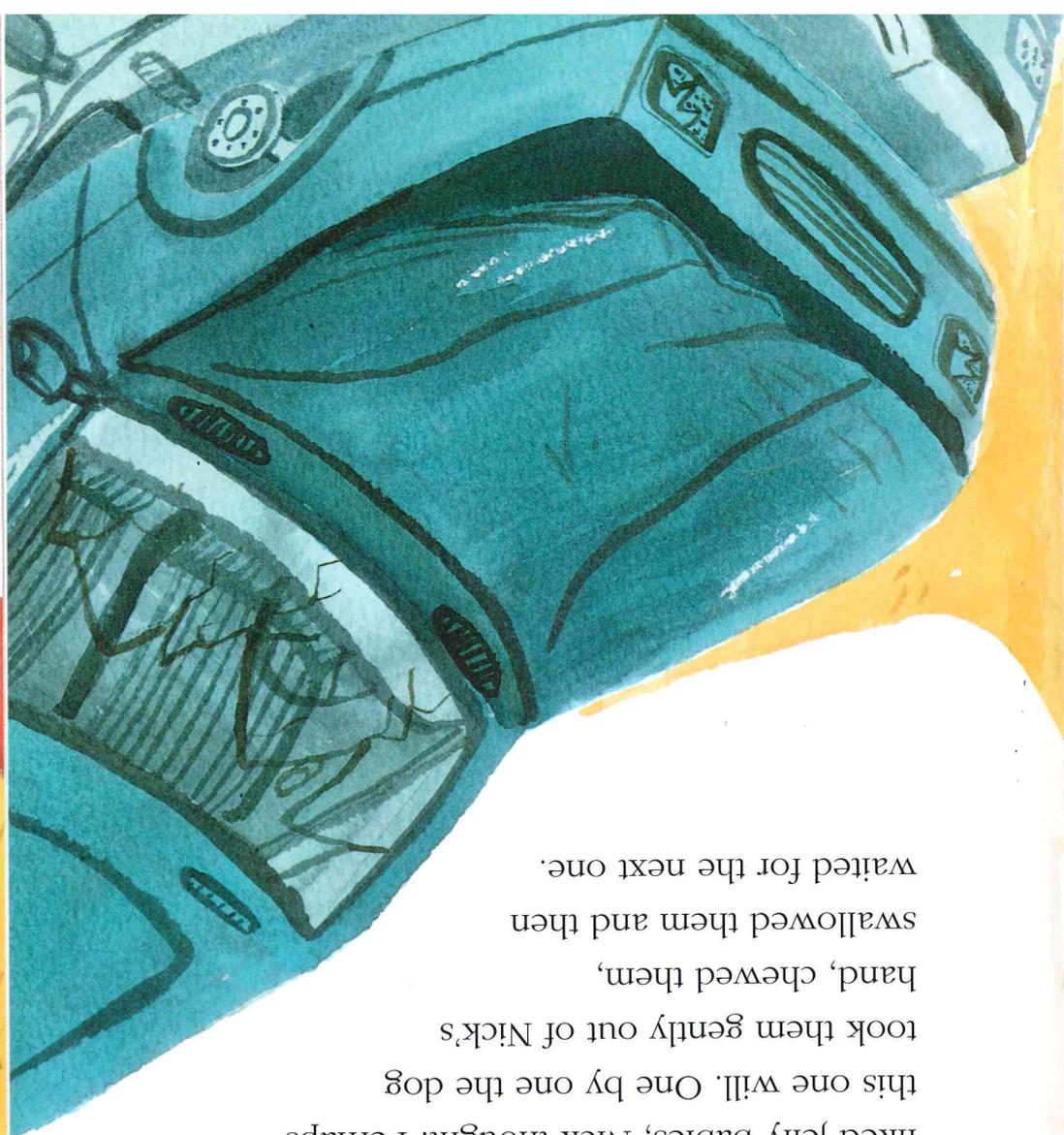


He found the guard dog sitting by a hut in the centre of the Yard. He was chained by the neck to a metal stake, and he was shivering so much that his teeth were rattling. The chain was twisted over his back and wrapped around his back legs so that he could not move. 'Doesn't look ferocious,' Nick thought, 'but you never know.' And he walked slowly around the guard dog at a safe distance.



And then Nick noticed the dog's face. It was as if Old Station had come back from the grave and was looking up at him. He had the same gentle brown eyes, the same way of holding his head on one side when he was thinking. Old Station liked jelly babies, Nick thought. Perhaps this one will. One by one the dog took them gently out of Nick's hand, chewed them, swallowed them and then waited for the next one.



When there were no more Nick gave him the paper bag to play with whilst he freed him from the chain. He ate the bag too, and when he

stood up and shook himself, Nick could see that he was thin like a greyhound is thin. There were sores around his neck behind his ears where his collar had rubbed him raw.

Nick sat down beside him, took off his duffel coat and rubbed him and rubbed him until his

teeth stopped chattering. He didn't like to leave him, but it was getting dark. 'Don't worry,' Nick said, walking away. The dog followed him

to the end of his chain. 'I'll be back,' he said. 'I promise I will.' Nick knew now

exactly what he wanted to do, but he had no idea at all how he was

going to do it.

It was dark by the time Nick

got home and Grandma was

not pleased with him.

'Where have you been? I

was worried sick about



you,' she said, taking off his coat and shaking it
out.
'The conkers were difficult to find, Grandma,'
Nick said, but he said no more.



Grandma was pleased with the conkers turning them over in her hands. 'Unbreakable little beauties.' And then Grandma began what she called her 'conker magic'. First she put them in the oven for exactly twelve minutes. Then she took them out and dropped them still hot into a pudding basin full of her conker potion: a mixture of vinegar, salt, mustard and a teaspoon



of Worcester Sauce. One hour later she took them out again and put them back into the oven for another twelve minutes. When they came out they were dull and crinkled. She polished them with furniture polish till they shone again. Then she drove a small brass nail through the conkers one after the other and examined each one carefully. She put two of them aside and held up the third in triumph.



'This is the one,' she said.
'This is your champion
conker. All you have to do
now, Nick, is sleep with
that down the bottom of
your bed tonight and
tomorrow you'll be
"Conker King of
Jubilee Park";'
But Nick couldn't
sleep that night. He
lay there thinking
of the dog he had
left behind in
Cotter's Yard, and
about how he was
going to rescue him.
By breakfast the
next morning he
was still not sure
how to set about it.
'Remember, you
must play on a short



string,' Grandma was saying. 'And always play on grass so it won't break if he pulls it out of your hand. And try not to get tangled up - puts a strain on the knot. What's the matter with you, dear? You're not eating your breakfast.'

'Grandma,' Nick said, 'what if you found a dog all chained up and lonely and miserable, would you try to rescue it?'

'What makes you ask a thing like that, dear?' Grandma said.

'Would you?' Nick asked.

'Of course, dear.'

'Even if it meant stealing it, Grandma?'

'Ah well, that's different. Two wrongs don't make a right, Nick,' she said. 'What's all this about?'

'Oh nothing, nothing,' Nick said quickly. 'I was just thinking, that's all.'

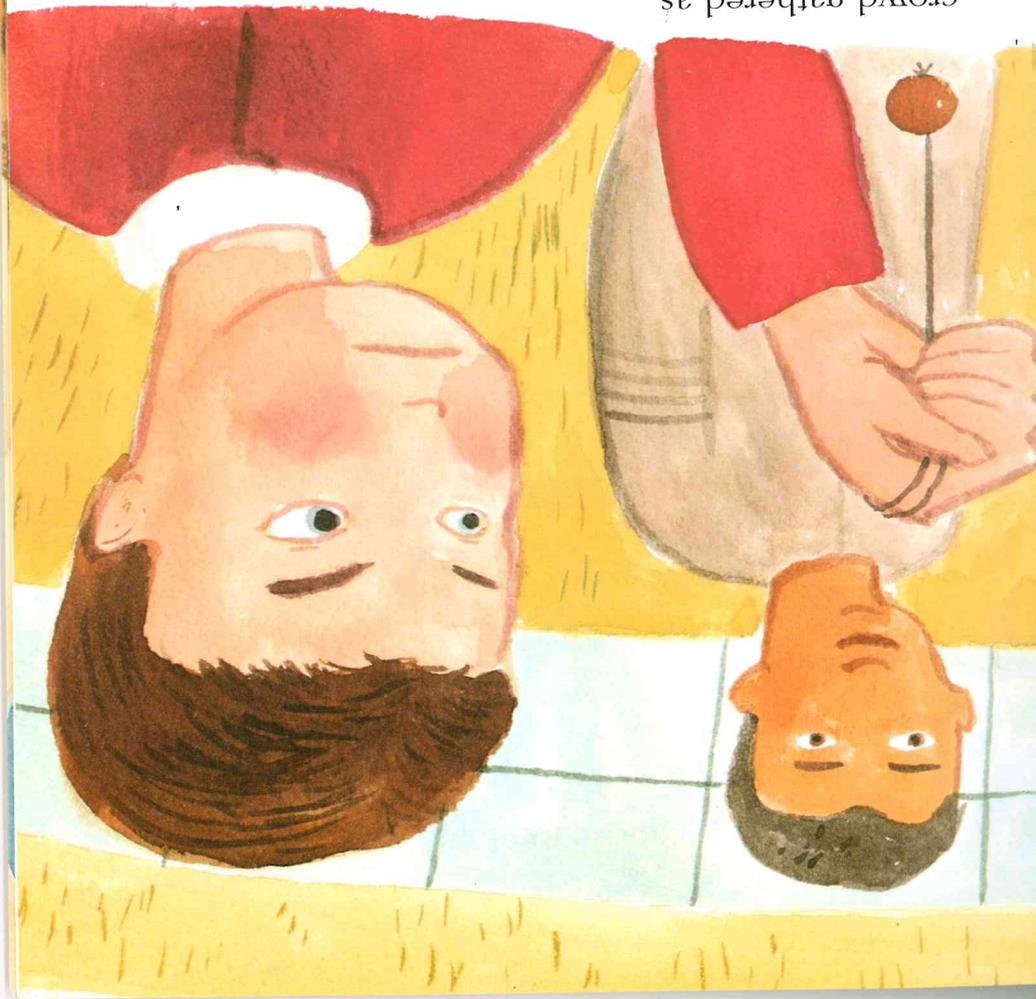
Nick could feel she was suspicious. He had said far too much already. He left quickly before she could ask any more questions.

'Good luck, Nick,' Grandma called after him as he went off down the path.

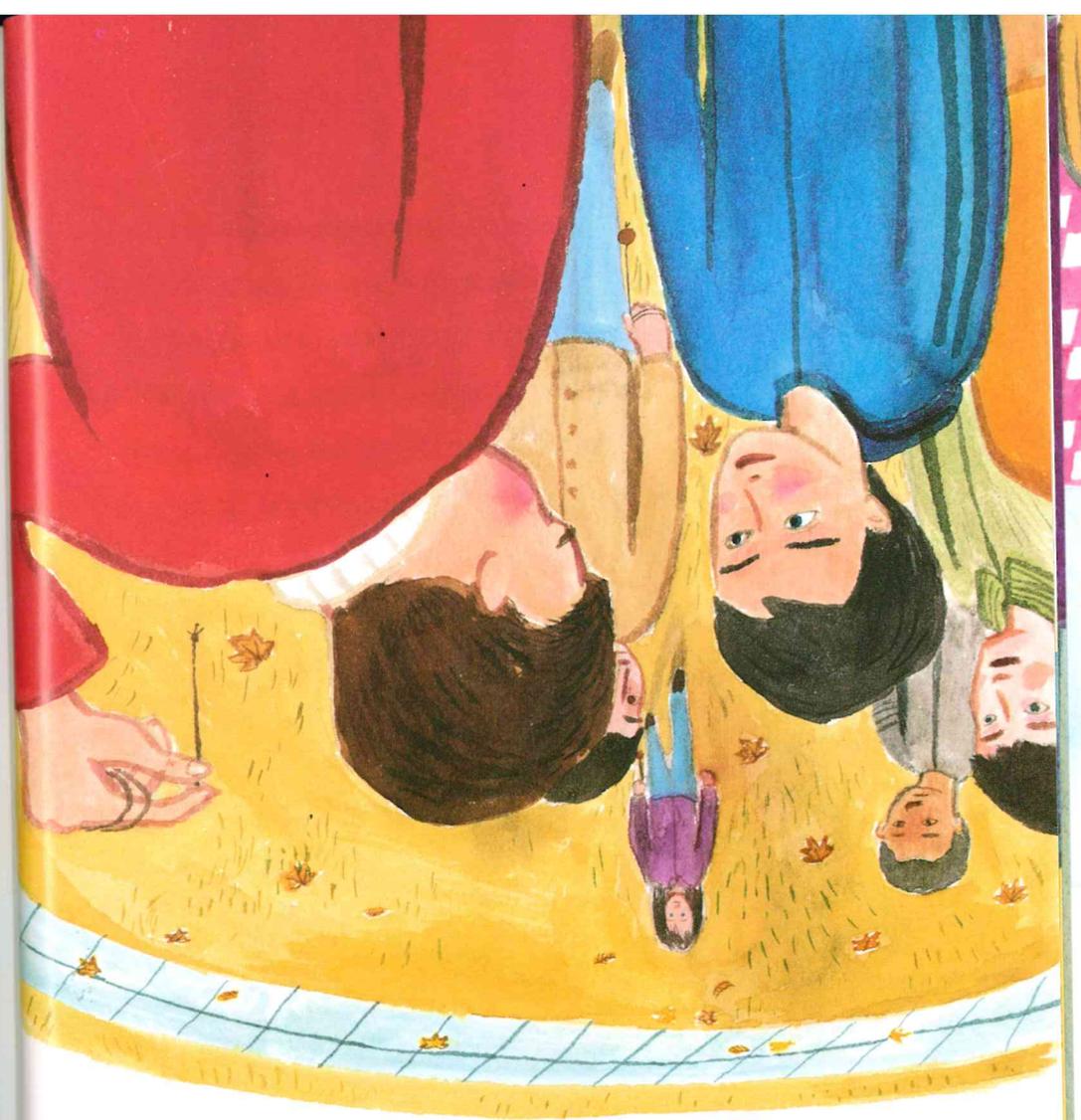
He cycled right up to Stevie Rooster in the Park and challenged him there and then. 'I've got a conker that'll beat any conker you've got,' he said. Stevie Rooster laughed at Nick and his little conker, but when his first conker broke in two the smile left his face. He took conker after conker out of his sack, and each one was shattered into little pieces within seconds. A



crowd gathered as
 Nick's conker became a twentier,
 a thirtier, a fiftier and then at last an eighty-fiver.
 Stevie Rooster's face was red with fury as he
 took his last conker out of his sack.
 'Your turn,' Nick said quietly and he held-up
 his conker. There still wasn't a mark on it. Stevie
 swung again and was left holding a piece of

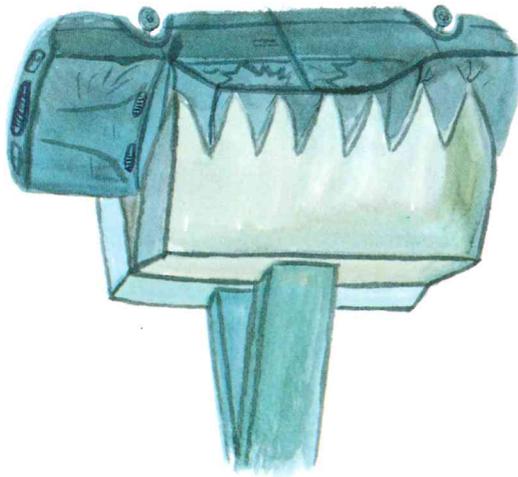


empty string with a knot swinging at the end of it. Nick looked him in the face and saw the tears of humiliation start into his eyes. 'You shouldn't have said that about Old Station,' Nick said and he turned, got on his bike and cycled off leaving a stunned crowd behind him.



IT WAS A twenty minute ride up to Cotter's Yard, but Nick did it in ten. All through the conker game he had been thinking about it and now at last he knew what to do. He had a plan. He was breathless by the time he got there. The gates were wide open. The Yard was working today, the great crane swinging out over the crushing machine, a car hanging from its jaws. 'Hey you, what're you after?' It was a voice from the door of the hut. It belonged to a weasel-faced man with mean little eyes.

Chapter Four



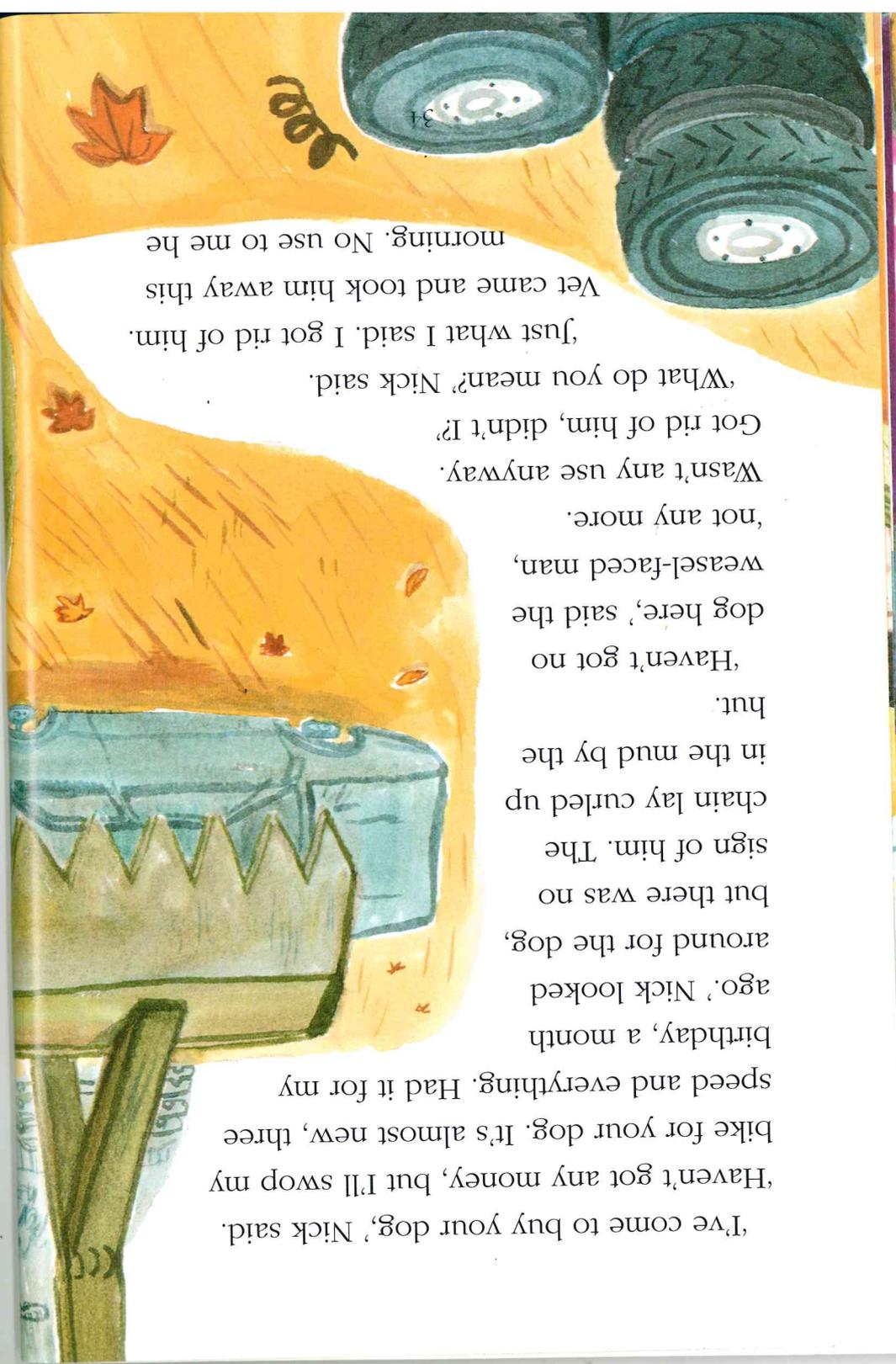
'I've come to buy your dog,' Nick said.
'Haven't got any money, but I'll swap my
bike for your dog. It's almost new, three
speed and everything. Had it for my

birthday, a month
ago.' Nick looked
around for the dog,
but there was no
sign of him. The
chain lay curled up
in the mud by the
hut.

'Haven't got no
dog here,' said the
weasel-faced man,
'not any more.
Wasn't any use anyway.
Got rid of him, didn't I?'

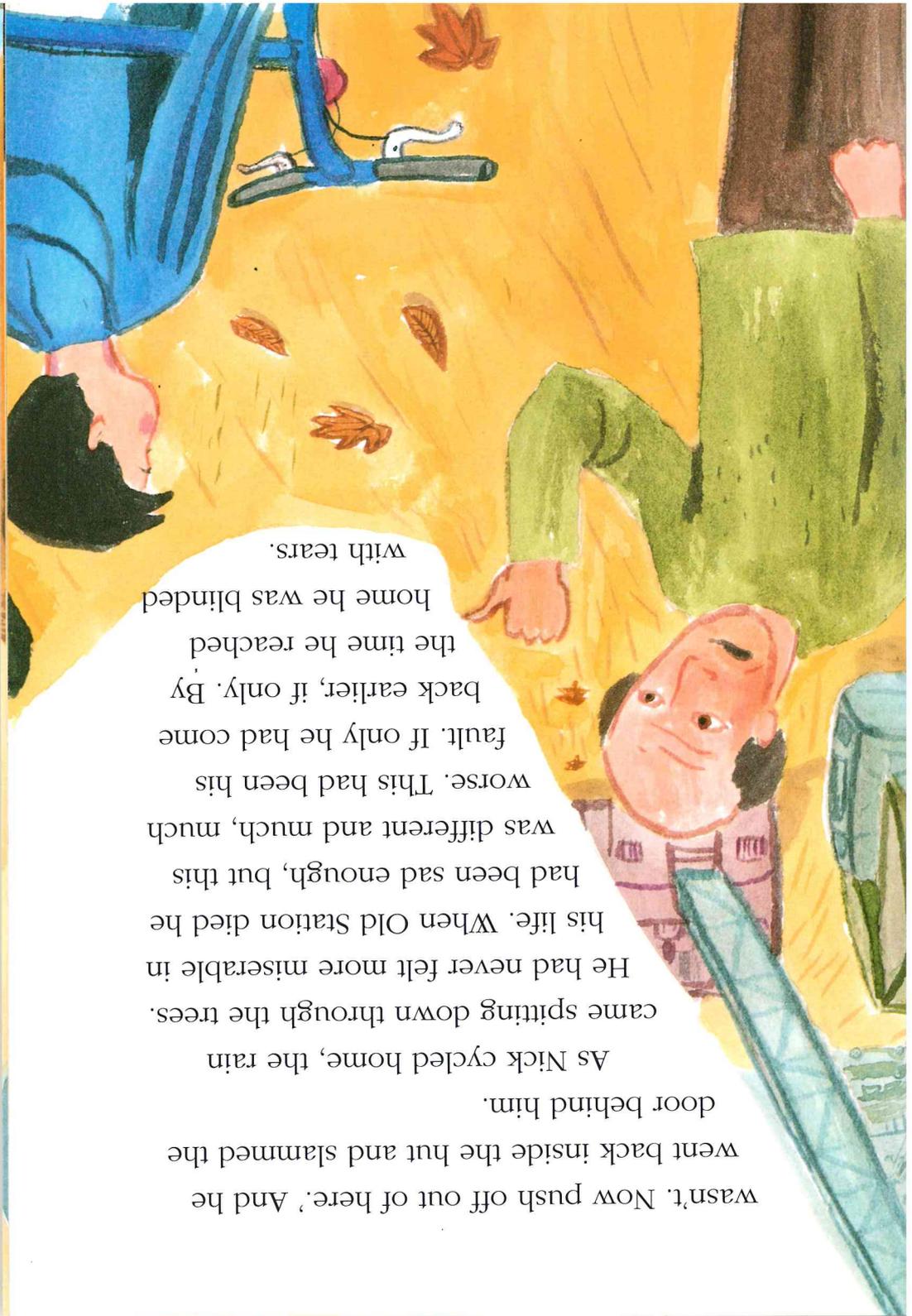
'What do you mean?' Nick said.

'Just what I said. I got rid of him.
Vet came and took him away this
morning. No use to me he



wasn't. Now push off out of here.' And he
went back inside the hut and slammed the
door behind him.

As Nick cycled home, the rain
came spitting down through the trees.
He had never felt more miserable in
his life. When Old Station died he
had been sad enough, but this
was different and much, much
worse. This had been his
fault. If only he had come
back earlier, if only. By
the time he reached
home he was blinded
with tears.



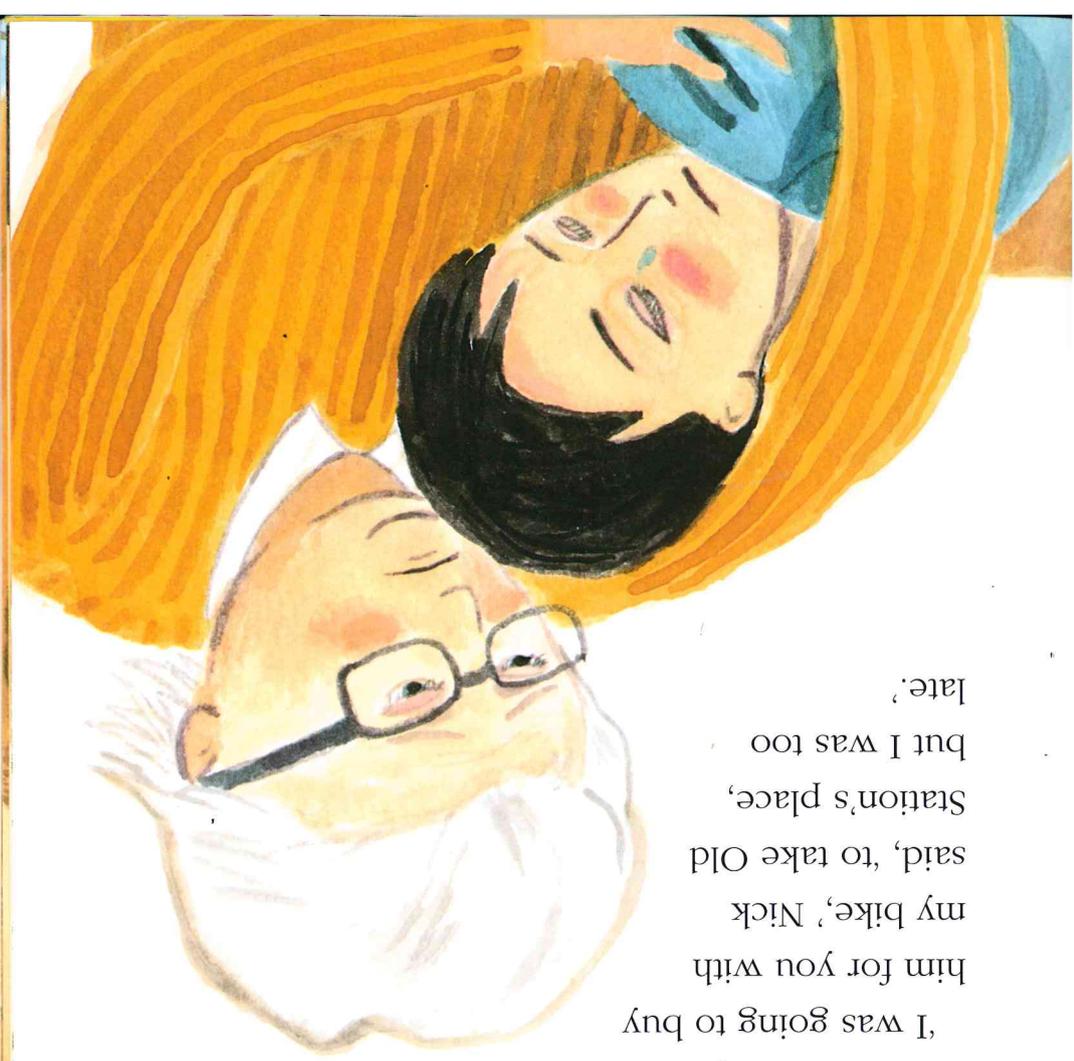
'Well, and how's the "Conker King of Jubilee Park"? Grandma called out from the kitchen as he closed the door behind him, and she came hurrying out to meet him. 'Well I told you, didn't I? I told you. It's all down the street. Everyone knows my Nick's the Conker King. Well, come on, let's see the famous conker. An eighty-five, isn't it?'

'Eighty-sixer,' Nick said and burst into tears against her apron.



'What's all this?' Grandma said, putting her arm round him and leading him into the kitchen. 'We can't have the "Conker King of Jubilee Park" crying his eyes out.' And Nick blurted it all out, all about Cotter's Yard and the poor starving dog he had found there that looked just like Old Station, about how the vet had come and taken him away.

'I was going to buy him for you with my bike,' Nick said, 'to take Old Station's place, but I was too late.'



'Who says you were?' said Grandma, and there was a certain tone in her voice.

'What do you mean?' Nick asked.

'What I mean, dear, is that if you'd wipe your eyes and look over in the corner there, you'd

see a basket with a dog in it, and if you looked hard at that dog you might just recognise him.'

Nick looked. The dog from Cotter's Yard lay curled up in Old Station's basket, his great

brown eyes gazing up at him. The dog got up, stretched, yawned and came over to him.

'But how . . . ?' Nick began.

Grandma held up her hand.

'When you came home from Cotter's Yard

yesterday with your duffel coat stinking of dog,

I was a little suspicious. You see, old Cotter's

known for the cruel way he looks after his

guard dogs, always has been. And then when

you asked me this morning if I would rescue a

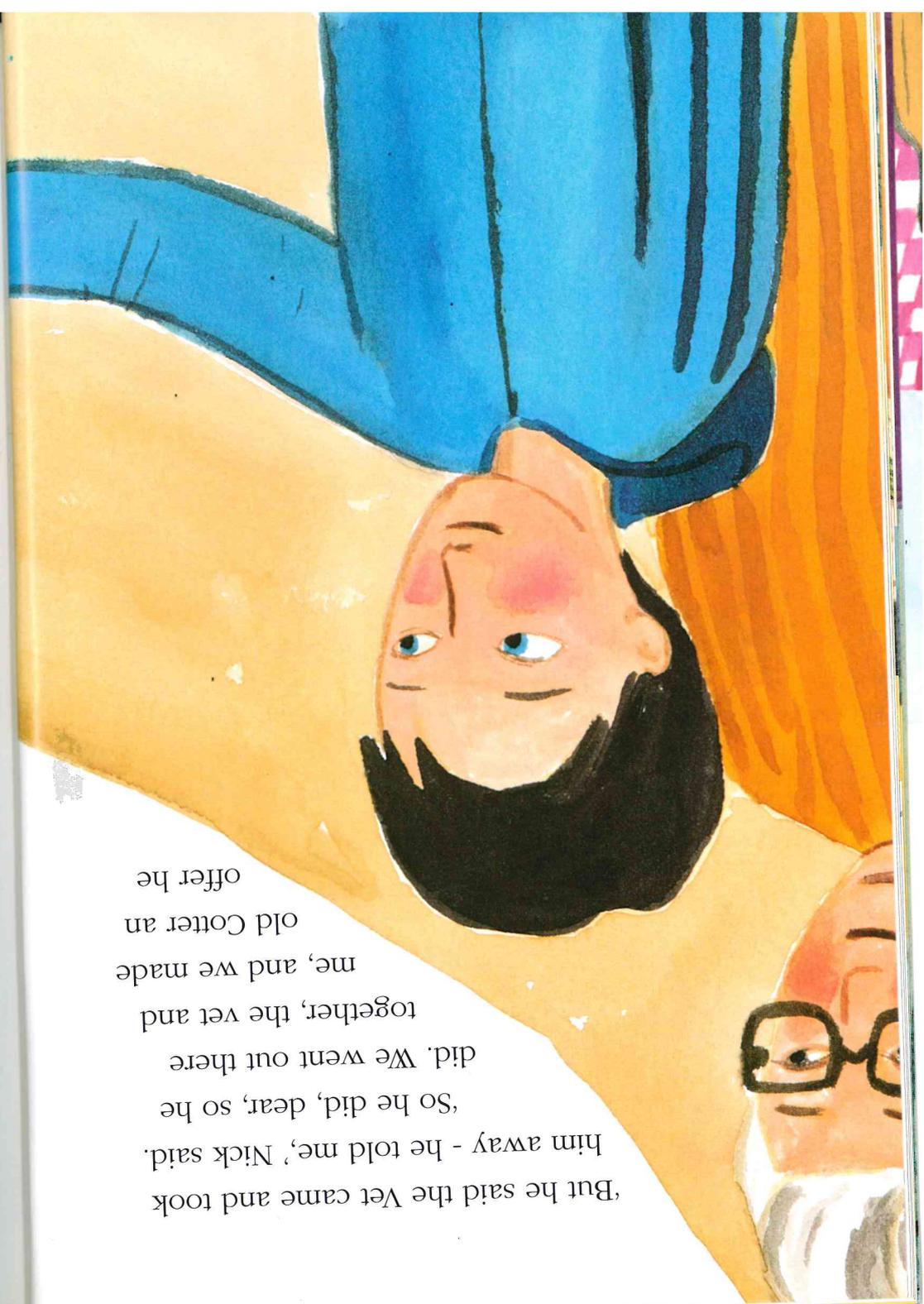
dog if I found him all chained up and hungry

and miserable - well, I put two and two

together.'

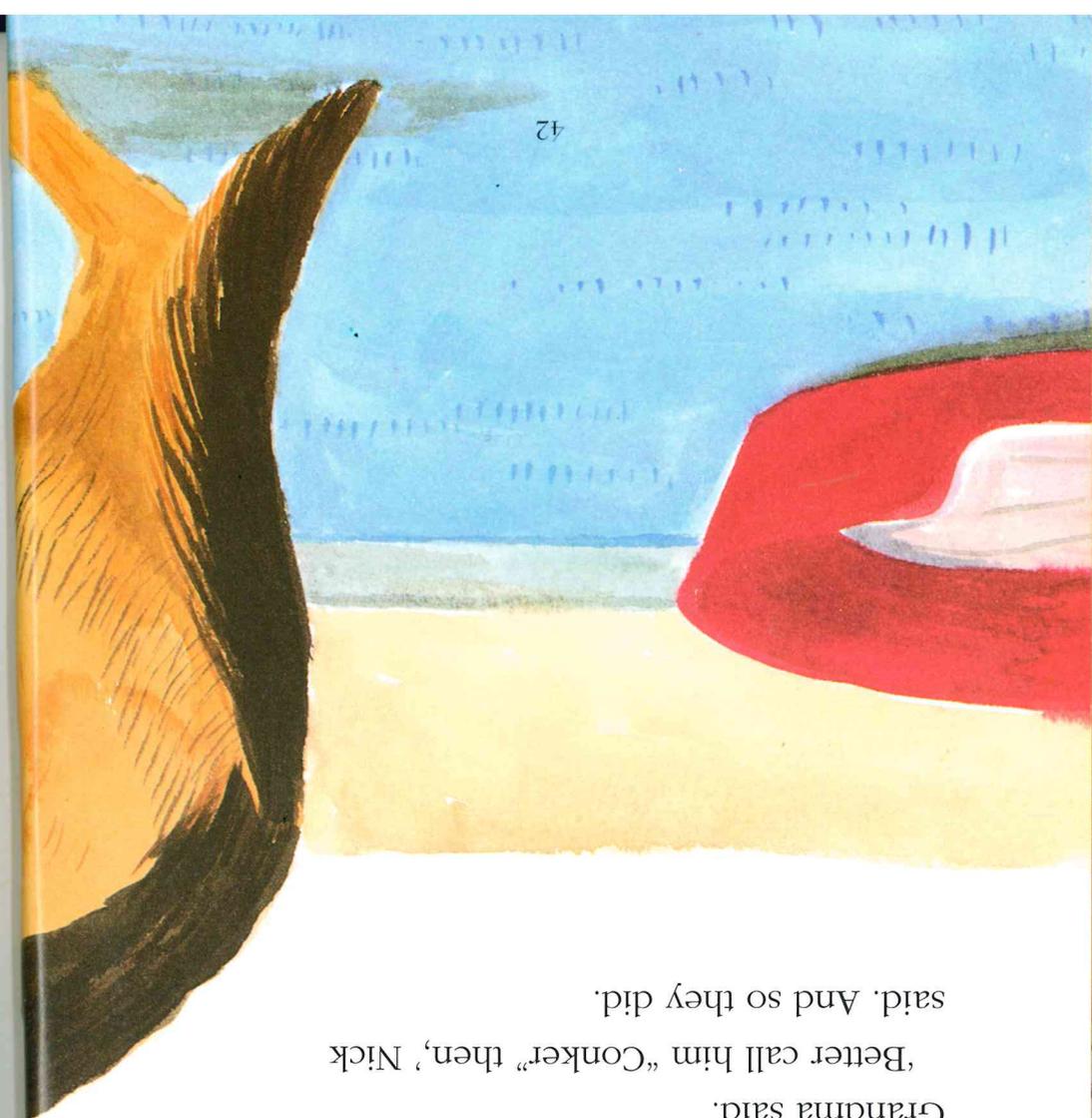


'But he said the Vet came and took
him away - he told me,' Nick said.
'So he did, dear, so he
did. We went out there
together, the vet and
me, and we made
old Cotter an
offer he



couldn't refuse. Either we took his dog with us
or we reported him for cruelty to animals. Didn't
take him long to make up his mind, I can tell
you.
'So he's ours then, Grandma?' Nick said.
'Yours, Nick, he's yours. Old Station was mine.
I had him even before I had you, remember? But
this one's yours, your prize for winning the
Conker Championship of Jubilee Park. Now can
I see that famous conker or can't I?'

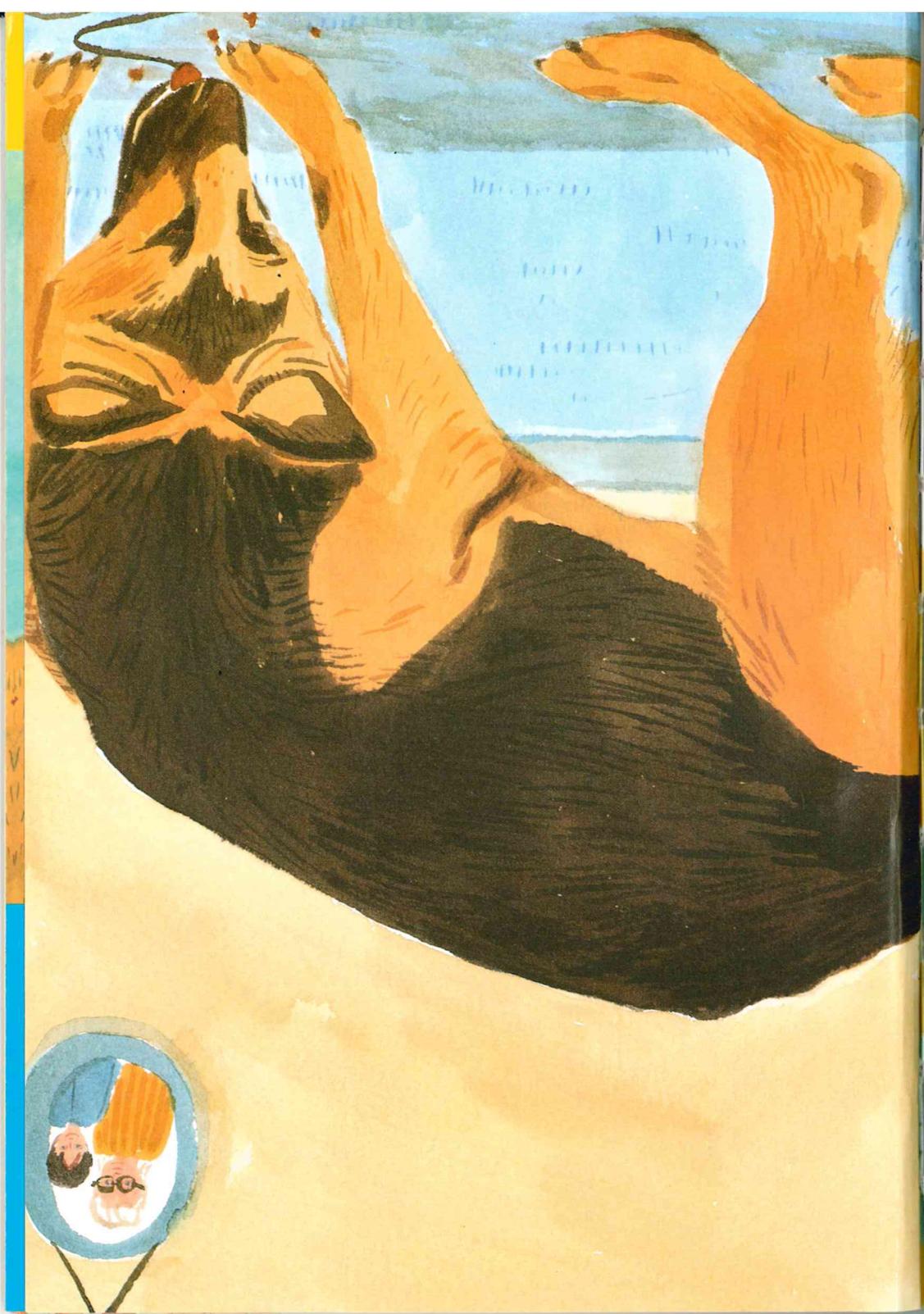




Nick fished the conker out of his pocket and held it up by the string. Before he new it, the dog had jumped up and jerked it out of his hand. A few seconds later all that was left was a mass of wet crumbs and chewed string.

'It looks as if he likes conkers for his tea,' Grandma said.

'Better call him "Conker" then,' Nick said. And so they did.



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When Nick's grandmother decides to help him become Conker Champion of Jubilee Park, she sends him off to find some special conkers from Cotter's Yard. There, he discovers a half-starved dog. Will Nick be able to rescue him?

