

Lesson in Literature ...

SARAH AND THE SAN FRANCISCO EARTHQUAKE

HISTORICAL FICTION

- **Historical fiction** is partly true and partly made up.
- Usually, the setting is described as it really was, and some or all of the characters are made up.
- The writer makes up characters to help the reader feel what it was like to be living at a certain time.
- For historical fiction to be good, the author must do a lot of research about the time period that is being described.

The conversation, clothing, and behavior of the characters must all sound *authentic*—they must be true to life.

THINK ABOUT IT!

1. What was the date of the famous San Francisco Earthquake?
2. Why did the children have to leave their house?
3. Where did the people whose houses had burned down stay for a while?

A grandmother sat in a rocking chair with her cat on her lap. Her six grandchildren were sitting in a circle at her feet on an oval braided rug, sipping mugs of hot chocolate. There was a fire burning in the fireplace.

The wood crackled and sparked.

“Grandma! Grandma!” they cried.

“Tell us a story about San Francisco!”

They liked to hear stories from long ago about their hometown. She thought for a moment. “How about a story about a girl named Sarah? She lived a long time ago when my grandma was alive.” They all nodded yes.

She continued, “Sarah was a very brave young girl. This is her story.”

Sarah and her family lived happily in a small house in San Francisco. Very early in the morning on Wednesday, April 18, 1906, she was awakened from her sleep by a jolt. It was as though the ground under the bed was falling away. Sarah was sleeping with her two little sisters. Both of them awoke and tried to hold on to her. Then the shaking stopped. They had had minor earthquakes before.

Then the stronger, more frightening shaking began. Sarah's sisters were crying. Her mother and father were already at work. Her mother was a housekeeper and started working at 4:30 a.m. Her father was a firefighter. He had slept at the firehouse.

Sarah ordered her sisters to lie flat on their stomachs on the bed. She tried to speak calmly. She covered their heads with pillows. Then she lay on top of them and held a pillow over her head. They did this very quickly.

It seemed as though the shaking would never stop. It lasted about a minute, but it seemed like a much longer time to Sarah. It felt like the ground was falling away and she worried that the house might collapse.

Sarah knew from her father that when an earthquake comes, if you are in bed you stay in bed, as long as the bed is not near windows or the outside wall.

The shaking stopped. The children waited to see if there was going to be another big shock. When it did not come, Sarah said, "We must get dressed very quickly!" She stuffed clothing for her family in a basket. Then she gathered together food in a burlap sack: all the bread, cheese, and dried apples the family had. She took a bottle that was filled with water. She was afraid this would

be too heavy, but knew they needed some food. Sarah then thought they better leave the house and try to find their parents.

As they stepped outdoors, they could smell smoke and burning. Father had once said that it would be possible during an earthquake for gas mains to break. Then the gas could catch fire. But, he said, that hadn't happened yet. Now it seemed to have happened. What would happen to their house?

The children walked together in the middle of the road. It was a long walk to where their mother worked. By the time they got there, Sarah could see that parts of the city were on fire. Would her father be all right?

Their mother was still there—although the house she was working in was badly damaged. She ran to them and cried out, "Sarah, I knew I could trust you to come with the girls. I worried that if I set out looking for you, we might not find each other very easily." Mother lifted the burlap bag from Sarah's arms. Inside it she put little cakes and more bread that she had gotten from the people she worked for. Sarah took the clothing basket from her little sisters.

They all headed for the firehouse where they found Father. They later learned that their house had burned to the ground with 25,000 others. Like so many other San Franciscans, that night they began their life in a tent. As they struggled to put up the tent, Mother said, "We must be grateful we are alive and unharmed, and that your father is safe. We will live bravely and happily in a small tent for as long as necessary."

Blueprint for Reading

INTO . . . *Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion*

All of us have heard stories about earthquakes or floods or animals escaping from the zoo, but have you ever tried to imagine what it would feel like to actually *be* there? When major events are happening, most people don't even realize that history is being made. They see what is happening right around them, but are not sure what is happening everywhere else. Only later do they find out that they were a part of something important.

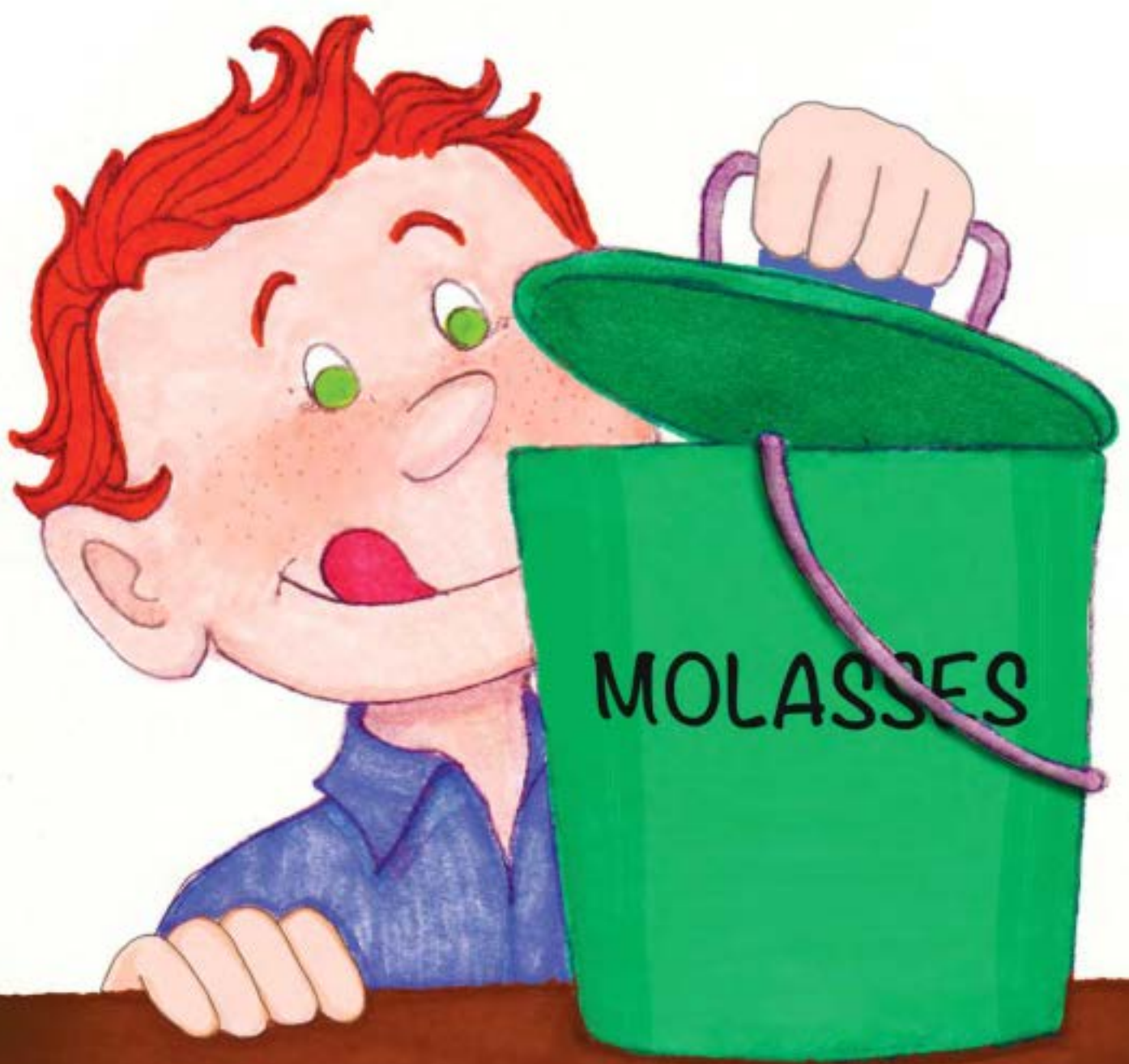
When a little red-haired boy named Patrick sees molasses flowing down the street, he knows *something* is happening, but little does he realize how much is happening!



Historical Fiction

When a story is interesting, the first question we usually ask is, "Is it true?" That question is not always easily answered. Some stories are completely true. Others are completely made up. But some are a blend of the two. You have learned that every story has a plot, a setting, and characters. When all three are true, the story is **nonfiction**. When one or more of those elements is made up, the story is **fiction**. For example, if the setting is real, but the plot and characters are made up, the story is fiction.

Sometimes an author knows of a true story and wants to tell it in an exciting way, so the author tells the true story, but makes up some of the characters. That kind of story is called **historical fiction**. It is *historical*, because the events and setting are true. It is *fiction*, because the characters are made up. As you read *Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion*, see if you can separate *fact* from *fiction*.



Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion

Marjorie Stover



There once was a boy named Patrick McGonnigal¹ O'Brien. He had red hair and freckles, and he lived with his mama, his papa, and his two-year-old sister, Mary, in the city of Boston.

Now if there was one thing in this wide world that Patrick had a fondness and a craving for, it was molasses. He had molasses on his oatmeal for breakfast. He had molasses on his pancakes for lunch. For supper he had Boston brown bread and baked beans sweetened with molasses.

WORD BANK

craving (KRAY ving) *n.*: a strong desire for something

molasses (muh LASS us) *n.*: a thick, dark brown syrup produced when sugar is being refined

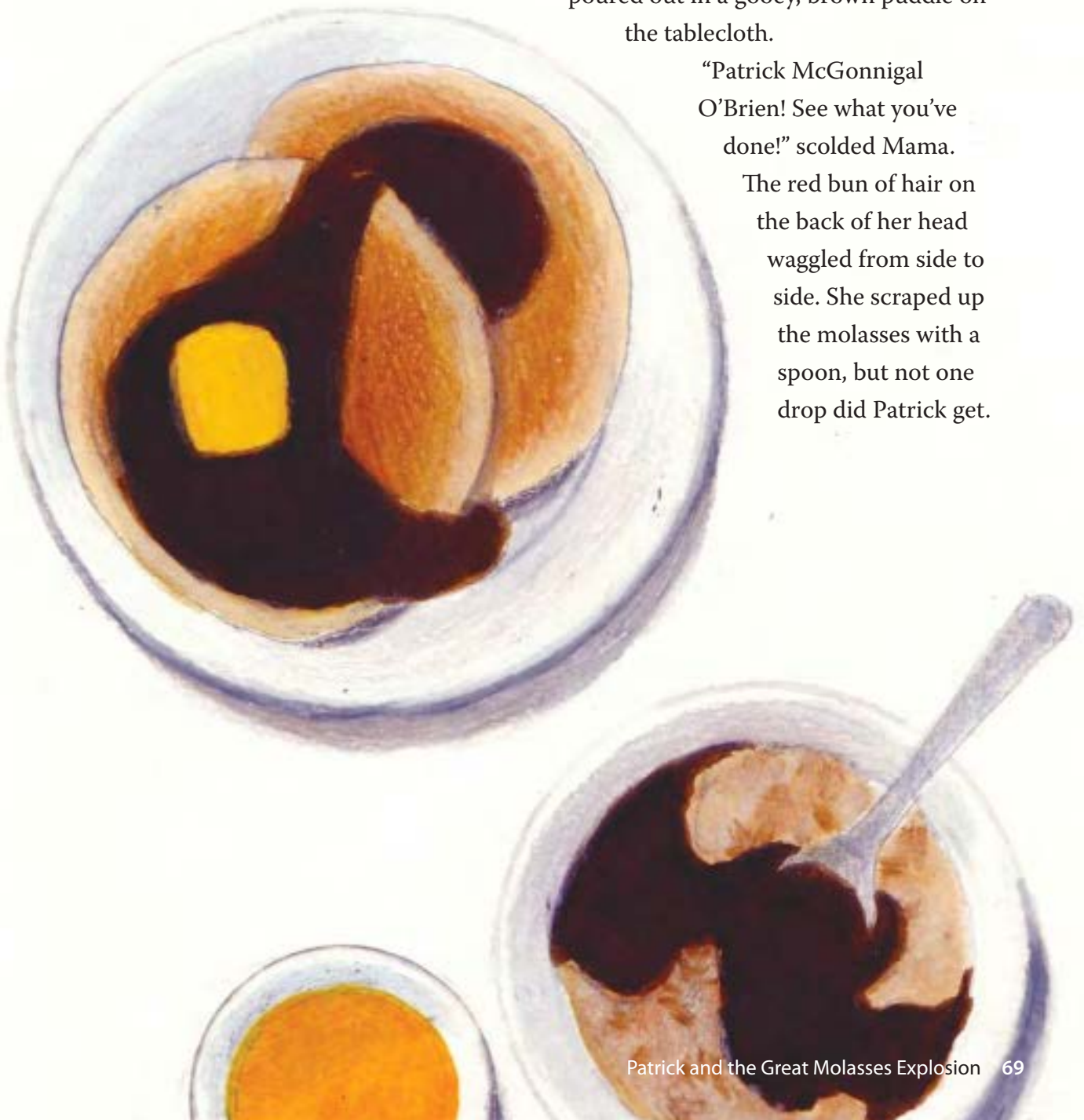
1. *McGonnigal* (muh GON ih gul)

Still, Patrick had never had enough molasses to satisfy his craving. He was always trying to get another lick. When Mama filled the molasses pitcher from the tin pail, he was right there to run his finger along the edge and lick up the dribbles.

One day when Mama's back was turned, Patrick stuck his finger into the pitcher to sneak a lick. In his hurry he tipped the pitcher over! Mama turned around just as the molasses poured out in a gooey, brown puddle on the tablecloth.

"Patrick McGonnigal O'Brien! See what you've done!" scolded Mama.

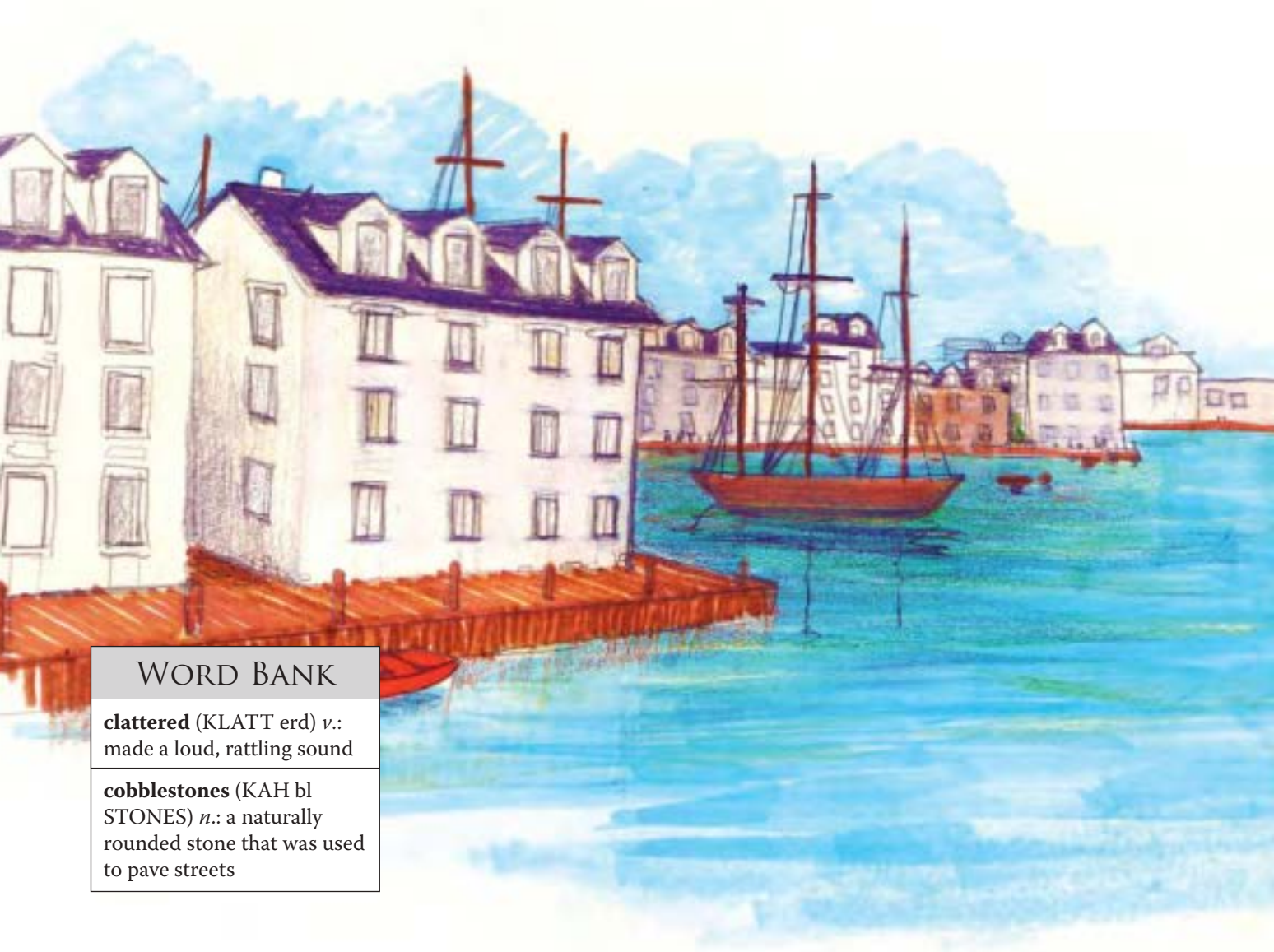
The red bun of hair on the back of her head waggled from side to side. She scraped up the molasses with a spoon, but not one drop did Patrick get.



Every Sunday afternoon Papa took Patrick for a walk down along the harbor to see all the wonderful sights. Horses and buggies clattered over the cobblestones. New-fangled² automobiles tooted their horns. Overhead, a train clacked along the raised tracks.

In the harbor they saw all kinds of boats—freighters, steamboats, tugboats, and sailboats. Together they stood on a freight-loading platform where Papa worked on weekdays. Patrick liked to brag that Papa could load and unload boxes and barrels as fast as the fastest man there, and maybe a wee bit faster.

2. *New-fangled* is an old-fashioned word for modern and complicated.



WORD BANK

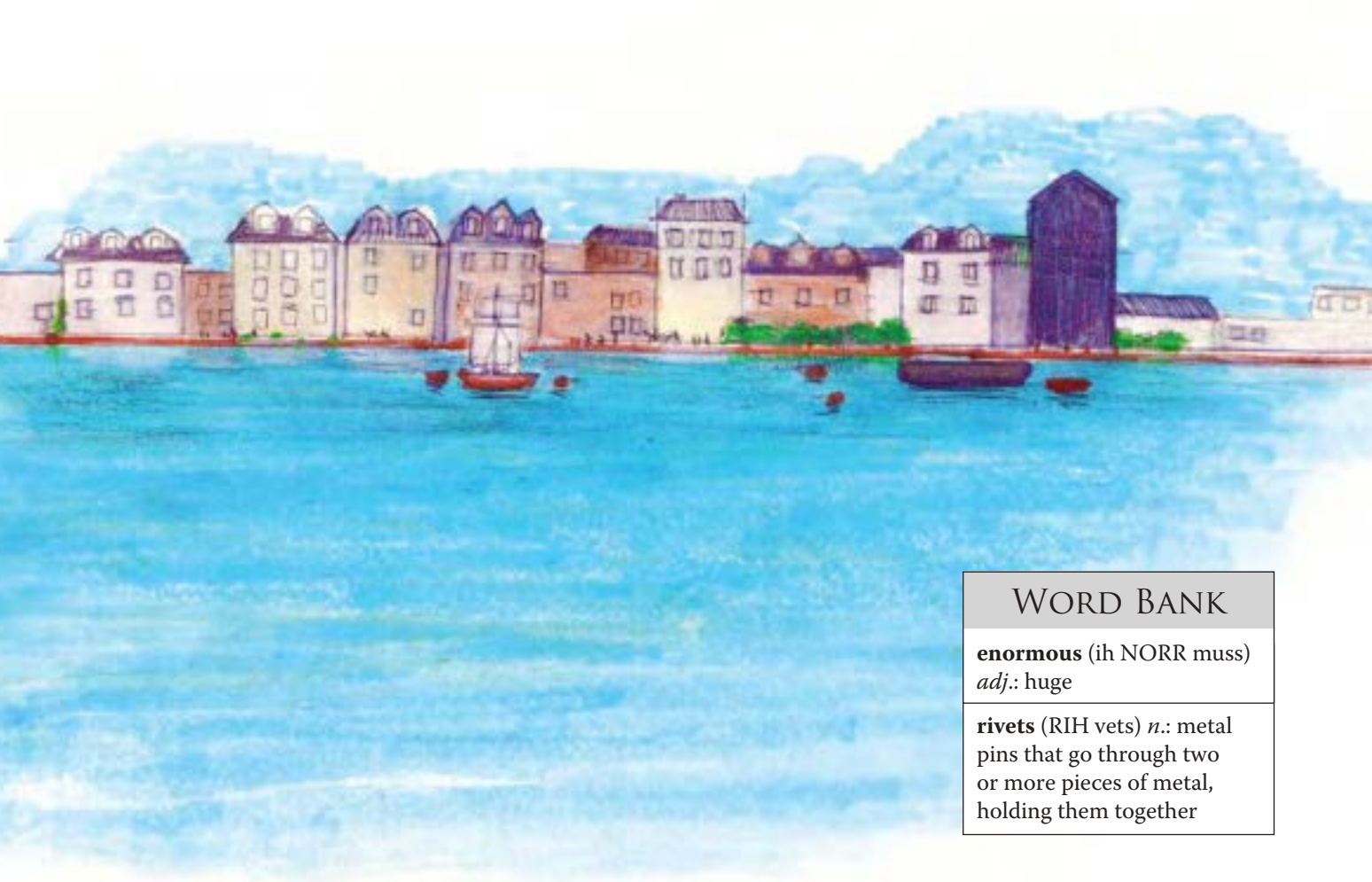
clattered (KLAT'T erd) *v.*:
made a loud, rattling sound

cobblestones (KAH bl
STONES) *n.*: a naturally
rounded stone that was used
to pave streets

They always stopped in the stable to see the big Belgian work horses that pulled the heavy freight wagons. Now and then Patrick slipped a sugar lump to one of the horses. Papa teased Patrick that the horses liked sugar as much as Patrick liked molasses.

The most wonderful sight of all, however, was a huge, enormous tank as tall as a four-story building. The tank was made of big sheets of metal fastened together with rivets. Patrick could see the large, round heads of the rivets pounded in neat rows along the seams. Painted in big letters on the round sides of the tank were the words, PURITY DISTILLING COMPANY. This giant tank was filled with molasses. Papa had said so.


The very thought of so much molasses made Patrick's mouth water. Sometimes Patrick dreamed that he was seated on the edge of the tank with a giant straw just sucking, sucking, sucking molasses all day long.




WORD BANK

enormous (ih NORR muss)
adj.: huge

rivets (RIH vets) *n.*: metal pins that go through two or more pieces of metal, holding them together



One winter day when Patrick arrived home from school for lunch, Mama said, “Eat your soup and crackers, and don’t delay. I’ve a fancy to make oatmeal molasses cookies this afternoon, but the molasses pail is empty. If you hurry, you can get it filled at the corner store before you go back to school.”



At the thought of molasses cookies, Patrick’s green eyes twinkled. He slurped down his soup as fast as he could. He pulled on his cap, buttoned his jacket, and hooked the wire handle of the empty pail over his fingers.

“Now mind,” said Mama, “don’t you dare stick your finger in for a lick, or not a single molasses cookie will you have.”

The sun was shining, and it was not a very cold day for the middle of January. Patrick ran as fast as he could to Mr. O’Connor’s store.

When the storekeeper saw Patrick swinging the molasses pail, he shook his bald head. “Sorry I am to disappoint you, lad, but the





molasses barrel is empty. I'm getting a new barrel this afternoon. Come back after school, and I'll fill your pail!"

Patrick walked slowly out of the store. His mouth was watering for molasses cookies hot from the oven. Then he had an idea. A few blocks farther on was another store—a bigger store. He had never gone there by himself, but he and Papa often passed it on their Sunday walks. The store was near the corner where they turned onto Commercial Street.

He did not have time to go home and ask Mama, but Patrick was sure he could get the molasses and not be late for school. Holding tight to the wire handle, Patrick ran lickety-split. He ran so hard that when he reached the store, he stopped on the doorstep to catch his breath.

At that very moment a heavy rumbling sound filled the air. BANG! BANG!
BANG! BOOM! BOOM! WH-O-O-O-O-O-SH!

Patrick rushed to the corner. What he saw made his eyes bulge. A great,
towering wave of smooth, shiny brown rolled toward him. It looked like ...
it looked like ... IT WAS MOLASSES!

The Purity Distilling Company's huge, enormous tank had E-X-P-L-O-D-E-D!
People covered with molasses ran in all directions. People with their feet stuck
fast screamed for help. Horses struggled in the sticky mess. Above all the noise
and chaos, three long alarms sounded loudly through the streets.

WORD BANK

rumbling (RUM bling) *n.*: a deep, continuous, low sound that is like a soft thunder

chaos (KAY ahss) *n.*: complete confusion



PURITY
DISTILLING
COMPANY



All the while the river of molasses rolled toward Patrick. Without stopping to think, he bent down by the corner of the building. Grabbing the lid off his pail, he held it out. The molasses poured into the pail, nearly jerking it from Patrick's hands. He pulled it back and clapped on the lid. The molasses spread up the side street and lapped around Patrick's shoes.



Patrick turned to run, but he lost his footing in the gooey river. Down he went, his hand held tightly onto the pail. As he rolled over, a hand grabbed him.

“Are you all right, boy?” A man with hair as red as Patrick’s smiled down at him. Strong hands pulled him to his feet.

Patrick nodded as he wiped his sticky face with a sticky hand. Before he could even say thank you, the man was gone. Patrick’s shoes, his pants, his jacket, and his cap dripped with molasses. Patrick stamped off, stick—unstick, stick—unstick.

The terribly sweet smell of molasses filled the air. Around him men shouted, women screamed, and horses neighed. Behind him buildings crashed.

Patrick, however, did not look back. He was too busy licking molasses. Lick-lick. He licked first one hand then the other. Women called to him from their doorsteps. Patrick did not answer. With his thumb, Patrick wiped the molasses from his face. Lick-lick. He walked slowly on, the pail of molasses dangling from one hand. Stick—unstick, lick-lick. Stick—unstick, lick-lick.

Patrick ran his thumb over his jacket. Lick-lick. As he made his way home, Patrick became worried. Not only would Mama think he had taken a lick, but he was going to be late for school. Patrick knew he was in big trouble.



As Patrick started up the back walk, the kitchen door flew open. Mama stared at him. “Patrick McGonnigal O’Brien! What have you done to yourself?”

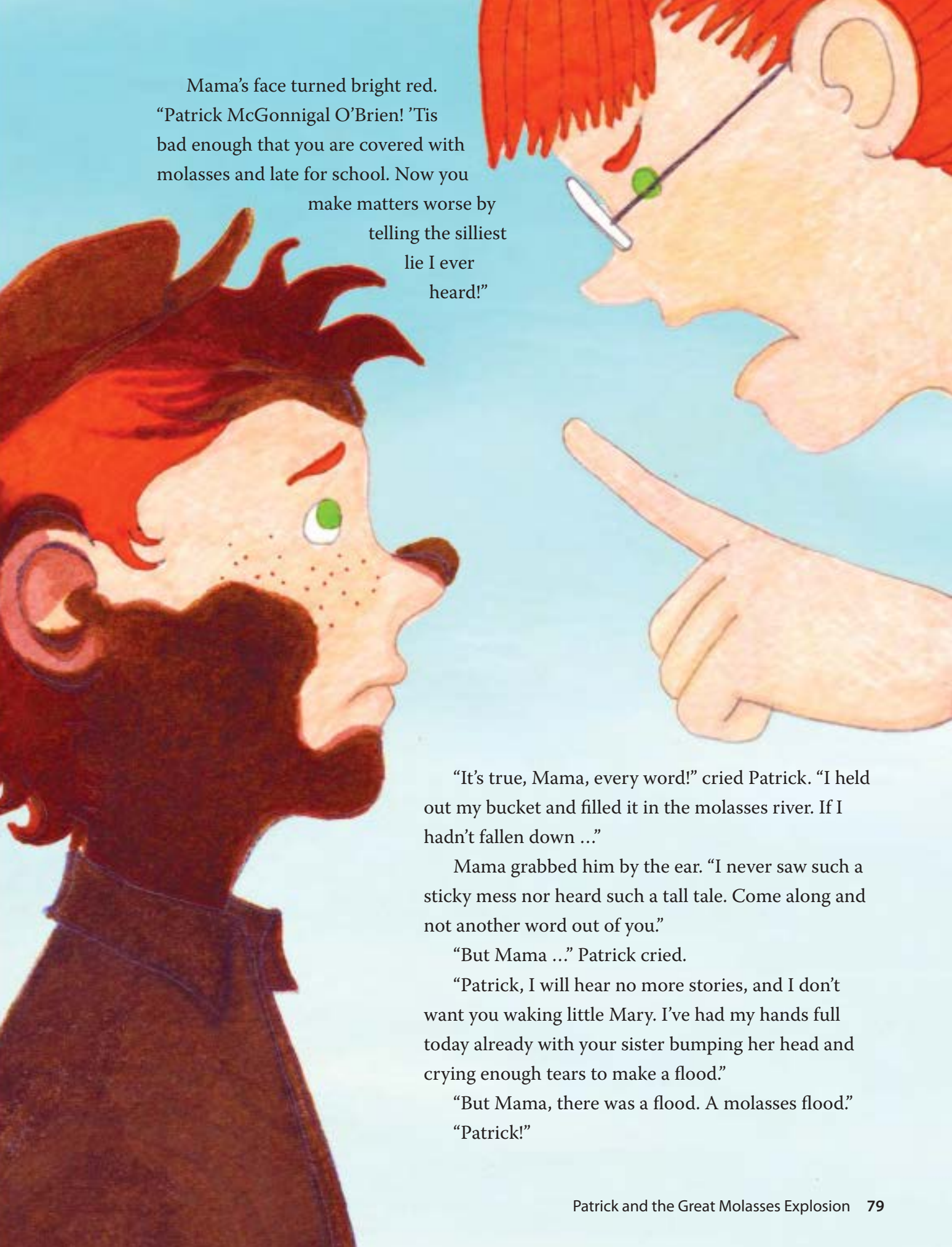
“I ... I fell in the molasses, Mama.” He gave his fingers a quick lick.

“What do you mean? ‘Fell in the molasses.’ You look as if you had climbed into Mr. O’Connor’s barrel and licked it clean!” The red bun on Mama’s head waggled back and forth.

Patrick shook his head. “Mr. O’Connor’s barrel was empty, so I ran to the store near the corner of Commercial Street. Then I heard a terrible noise. BANG! BANG! BANG! BOOM! BOOM! WH-O-O-O-O-O-SH!” Patrick waved a sticky fist in the air.

“I ran to look. What do you think? The Purity Distilling Company’s great big tank of molasses had popped open! The molasses rolled down the street right at me. I filled my pail and came home as fast as I could.”



An illustration showing a man with a dark beard and a woman with red hair and glasses. The man is on the left, looking towards the woman on the right. The woman is pointing her finger towards the man. The background is a light blue color.

Mama's face turned bright red.
"Patrick McGonnigal O'Brien! 'Tis
bad enough that you are covered with
molasses and late for school. Now you
make matters worse by
telling the silliest
lie I ever
heard!"

"It's true, Mama, every word!" cried Patrick. "I held out my bucket and filled it in the molasses river. If I hadn't fallen down ..."

Mama grabbed him by the ear. "I never saw such a sticky mess nor heard such a tall tale. Come along and not another word out of you."

"But Mama ..." Patrick cried.

"Patrick, I will hear no more stories, and I don't want you waking little Mary. I've had my hands full today already with your sister bumping her head and crying enough tears to make a flood."

"But Mama, there was a flood. A molasses flood."

"Patrick!"



Patrick sat in the big washtub in the middle of the kitchen floor. Every Saturday night he took his bath in it. This was not Saturday, but he was having a bath.

Mama's hands were not very gentle as she washed his hair and his neck and ears. "My goodness! There's even molasses on the back of your head. How did you ever get into such a sticky mess?"

Patrick tried again. "'Tis like I told you. The big tank of molasses over by Commercial Street ..."



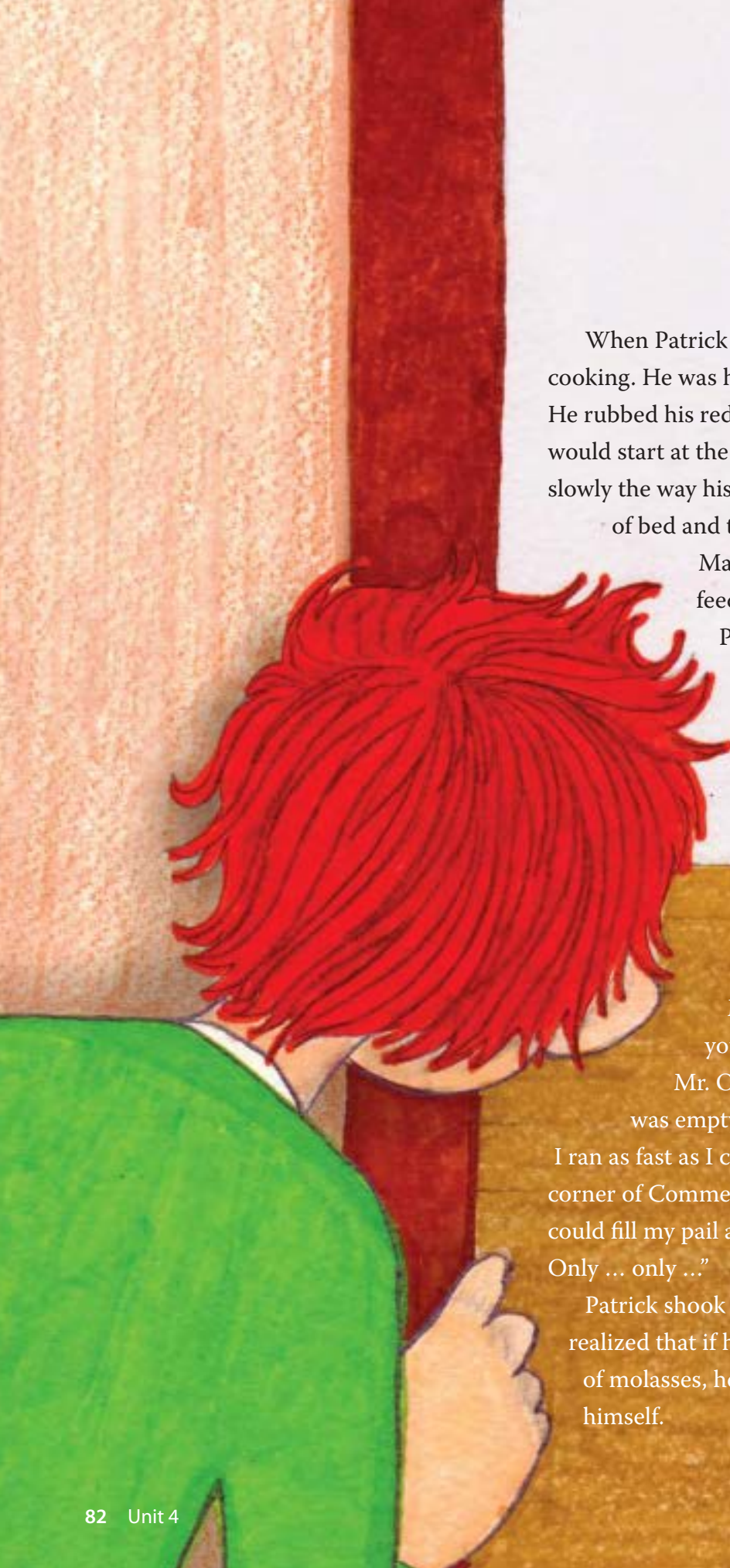
Mama's eyes flashed like green lightning. "No more of that!" she scolded and rubbed him dry with a rough towel. She handed him his nightshirt. "It's into bed with you, and there you'll stay until you're ready to tell the truth."

Patrick opened his mouth and then shut it again. Mama was angrier than he had ever seen her. Angrier than the day he had spilled the molasses pitcher on the table. Patrick shook his head. He had told the truth, and she wouldn't believe him. Sadly he crawled into bed.

"Mind, when you're ready to tell what really happened, you can come out," said Mama as she closed the door.

Patrick pulled the covers up tight. He felt terrible. What could he say? He shut his eyes to think better. Soon he was fast asleep.



An illustration of a young boy with a large, bushy head of red hair. He is wearing a green shirt and is shown from the back, looking towards a doorway. The background consists of a light-colored wall on the left and a dark red door frame leading to a white wall on the right.

When Patrick awoke, he could smell supper cooking. He was hungry, but Mama had said ... He rubbed his red hair. He would try again. He would start at the beginning and explain very slowly the way his teacher did. Patrick slid out of bed and tiptoed into the kitchen.

Mama was sitting at the table feeding Mary her porridge.

Patrick stared at his sister. She had a bump on her forehead, half the size of a hen's egg.

Mama looked at him sternly. "Are you ready to tell me what really happened?" she asked.

Patrick swallowed hard and nodded. "I took the molasses pail and went to Mr. O'Connor's store, just like you told me to do, Mama. But Mr. O'Connor's molasses barrel was empty." He took a deep breath. "So, I ran as fast as I could to the store near the corner of Commercial Street. I was sure I could fill my pail and not be late for school. Only ... only ..."

Patrick shook his head. He suddenly realized that if he had not seen that flood of molasses, he would not have believed it himself.



“Only what?” insisted Mama.

Patrick looked hard at his mother. “Mama, what would make a great big tank like that pop open?”

Mama shook her head. “It couldn’t! That’s why your story is so silly.”

“But if it did,” Patrick continued, “think what an awful mess it would make. Horses and people would get stuck in the molasses.”

“Patrick, stop pretending, and tell me how you got in such a mess. Papa will soon be home, and ...”

“Papa! I forgot about Papa!” Patrick’s face turned white beneath his freckles. “I wonder where Papa was!”



“Papa? Papa’s at ...” Mama stopped short. Before she could say another word, the kitchen door opened, and Papa stepped in. At least Patrick thought it was Papa. From head to foot he was streaked with molasses. His face and hands were copper colored and his black hair and his clothes were all sticky. Papa closed the door behind him, and the heavy sweet smell of molasses filled the kitchen.

Mama gave a loud cry.

Papa stood there, trying to wipe a sticky hand on his sticky trousers. “Did you hear what happened?” he asked.

Mama just stared, as if she could not believe her eyes.

“The Purity Distilling Company tank exploded,” said Papa, “and the tank was filled to the very top. Two million, three hundred and sixty thousand gallons of molasses poured out over the people, the buildings, and the streets.”

Mama gasped, and her green eyes opened wider.

“I was sitting on the loading dock, eating my lunch,” Papa went on. “All of a sudden I heard this terrible rumbling and shots that sounded like a giant machine gun being fired. Only it wasn’t a gun. The rivets that hold the molasses tank together popped off like buttons off my jacket. The next thing I knew, one side of the tank had blown clear into the North Side Park. Fourteen thousand tons of molasses poured out, covering everything in its path—people, horses, wagons, cars, buildings, and even a piece of the raised train track.”

Patrick looked at Mama. Would she tell Papa she didn’t believe him and send him to bed? No. Mama was speechless.

Papa stuck out a sticky shoe. “Have you ever tried walking through molasses? It flowed into buildings and flooded basements. I worked all afternoon helping people and horses get unstuck. People from all over the city helped.”

Papa rubbed a sticky ear. "It's a wonder you didn't hear the explosion way up here."

Mama shook her head weakly. "Oh dear, that must have been when Mary bumped her head. She set up such a howl." Mama looked from Papa to Patrick. "To think I wouldn't believe ... Oh, Patrick, my boy! If you like, you can pour molasses all over your supper tonight."

Patrick drew a deep breath. The heavy smell of molasses filled his nose with a sickening sweetness. His tummy felt strange. "Thank you, Mama, but for once I've had all the molasses I want."



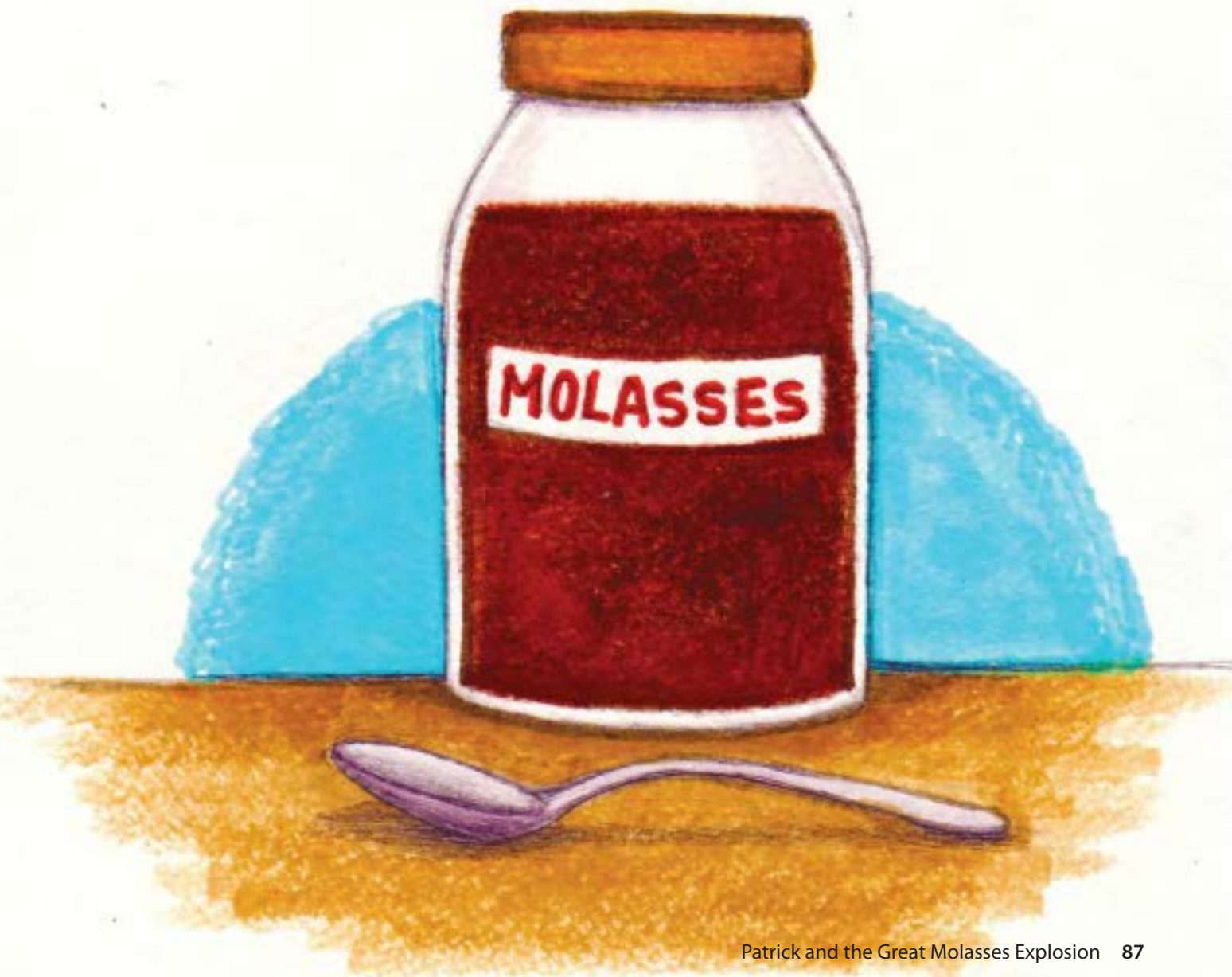
A few facts About Molasses

Molasses is a thick, sweet, sticky syrup, light to dark brown in color, that comes from sugar cane during the manufacture of sugar.

Molasses is mainly used in baking, candy making, and in feed for livestock.

Molasses has been an important product in New England since colonial times when it was shipped in from the West Indies and used to make rum.

Today, molasses is still widely used in Massachusetts in the making of Boston brown bread and Boston baked beans.





It Really

Oldtimers in Boston say that to this very day you can smell a faint whiff of molasses in the old buildings on Commercial Street. But is that only an oldtimer's tall tale?

The truth, as Patrick's mother would want to have it told, is that on January 15, 1919, a giant storage tank on Commercial Street in Boston's North End exploded. The tank, built by the Purity Distilling Company four years before, was filled with molasses, over 2,000,000 gallons.

When the tank popped, a great brown wave of molasses flooded downtown Boston, sweeping over everything in its path. In some places the molasses was three feet deep. Children on their lunch break from school were knocked over. Pieces of the tank flew in all directions, and one flying chunk of metal is reported to have crashed into the nearby freight house. Houses collapsed under the flood of molasses, and several people as well as horses were killed.

Rescue workers, trucks, and equipment had a difficult time getting through the streets of gooey liquid. Cleanup crews were brought in, but their task seemed almost impossible. Everywhere people walked



Happened

and everything they touched was sticky. Before the great flood ended, 21 people had been killed and 150 injured.

Even after the last brown glob disappeared from Commercial Street, the smell of molasses remained in Boston for a long time. Whether you can still sniff the molasses where it soaked into the cracks and crannies and under the wooden boards back in 1919, you will need to go to Boston and discover for yourself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Both of **Marjorie Stover's** parents were from families of Nebraska pioneers. Even though she was bored in history class in school, she always enjoyed hearing her family's historical stories. Mrs. Stover grew up to marry a history professor and write historical fiction. When she researches a story, she is fascinated by the little details. She finds out what people ate, how they dressed, and even how they talked. These details help her stories come alive.

The Grasshopper

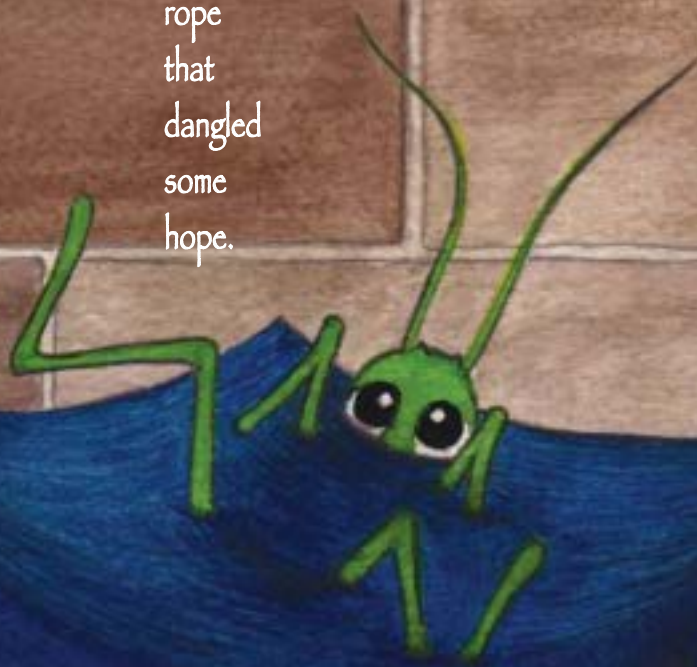
David McCord



Down
a
deep
well
a
grasshopper
fell.

By kicking about
He thought to get out.
 He might have known better,
 For that got him wetter.
To kick round and round
Is the way to get drowned,
And drowning is what
I should tell you he got.

But
the
well
had
a
rope
that
dangled
some
hope.



And sure as molasses
On one of his passes
He found the rope handy
And up he went, *and he*
it
up
and
it
up
and
it
up
and
it
up
went
And hopped away proper
As any grasshopper.



Studying the Selection

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Do you love sugary treats? Would you eat candy and cake at every meal if you could? How many sweets would you have to eat until you wouldn't want any more?

QUICK REVIEW

1. In what city did Patrick live?
2. What did Patrick sometimes dream?
3. What was Mama's reaction when Patrick told her what had happened?
4. When did Mama find out the truth?

FOCUS

5. Why didn't Mama believe Patrick?
6. In historical fiction, some parts of the story are true and some are not. On a paper, write a T for true or an F for fiction for the following examples:
 - a. The setting: Boston in the early 1900s.
 - b. The plot: The explosion of a tank of molasses.
 - c. The characters: Patrick and his family.

CREATING AND WRITING

7. Many people in Boston were affected by the explosion. Depending on where they were and what they were doing, they were affected in different ways. Pretend you are interviewing someone who experienced the explosion. Write down the questions and answers. Ask the person's name and age, and then ask several questions about where the person was during the explosion. Ask whether there was any injury or damage and any other interesting question you can think of. You should have at least three questions and answers in all.
8. Your teacher will divide the class into groups. Each group will be given one section of the story to pantomime, and a few minutes to prepare. Then, your teacher will call upon each group who will act out its part of the story. At the end, the class will have staged the entire story in pantomime.