

It was a lovely sunny day with the bluest of blue skies. Tom and his friend Lila, the fox, were taking a walk along the river bank. Lila was jumping about, yapping excitedly. She seemed to be saying "Come on, Tom: let's play hide and seek!" Suddenly a strange noise rang out, echoing across the river.

- *Clang! Clang! Clang!*

Startled, Lila decided to hide.

Tom crept forward on his hands and knees, hoping to see what was making the noise. Oh, it was only old Basil, the bee-keeper. But what was he doing? No! Surely not! Tom leapt to his feet and rushed towards the old man.

- "Stop!" shouted Tom. "That's the beavers' dam!"

- "I don't care what it is!" grumbled old Basil, swinging his hammer: *Clang! Clang!*

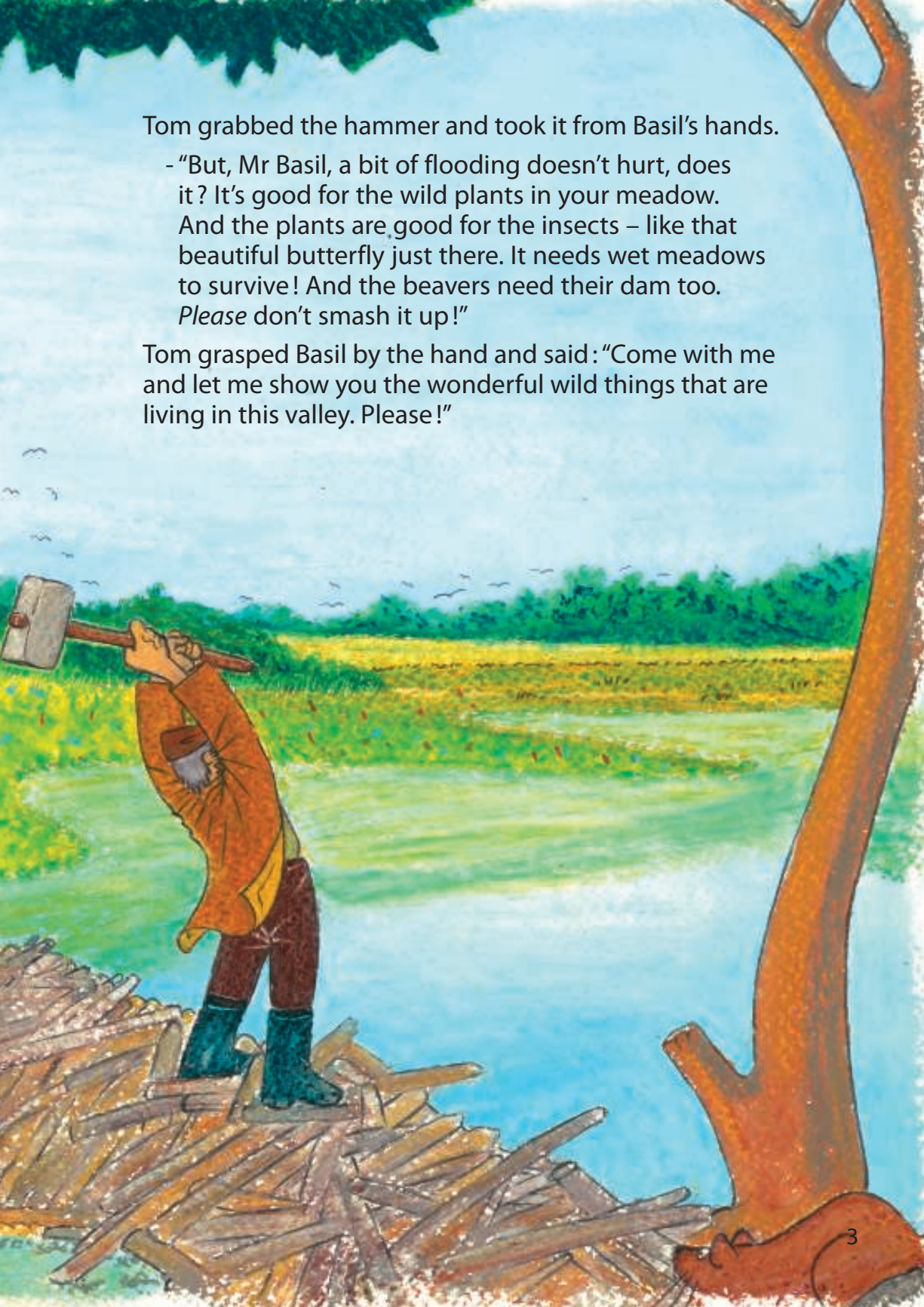
- "It's blocking the river and flooding my meadow! Before long, I'll need a boat just to get across to my beehives!"



Tom grabbed the hammer and took it from Basil's hands.

- "But, Mr Basil, a bit of flooding doesn't hurt, does it? It's good for the wild plants in your meadow. And the plants are good for the insects – like that beautiful butterfly just there. It needs wet meadows to survive! And the beavers need their dam too. *Please* don't smash it up!"

Tom grasped Basil by the hand and said: "Come with me and let me show you the wonderful wild things that are living in this valley. Please!"



- "Oh, all right then" grumbled the old man. "But don't walk so fast! I've got rheumatism, you know".

Tom wasn't listening. He had let go of Basil's hand and was chasing the butterfly, flapping his arms as if they were wings.

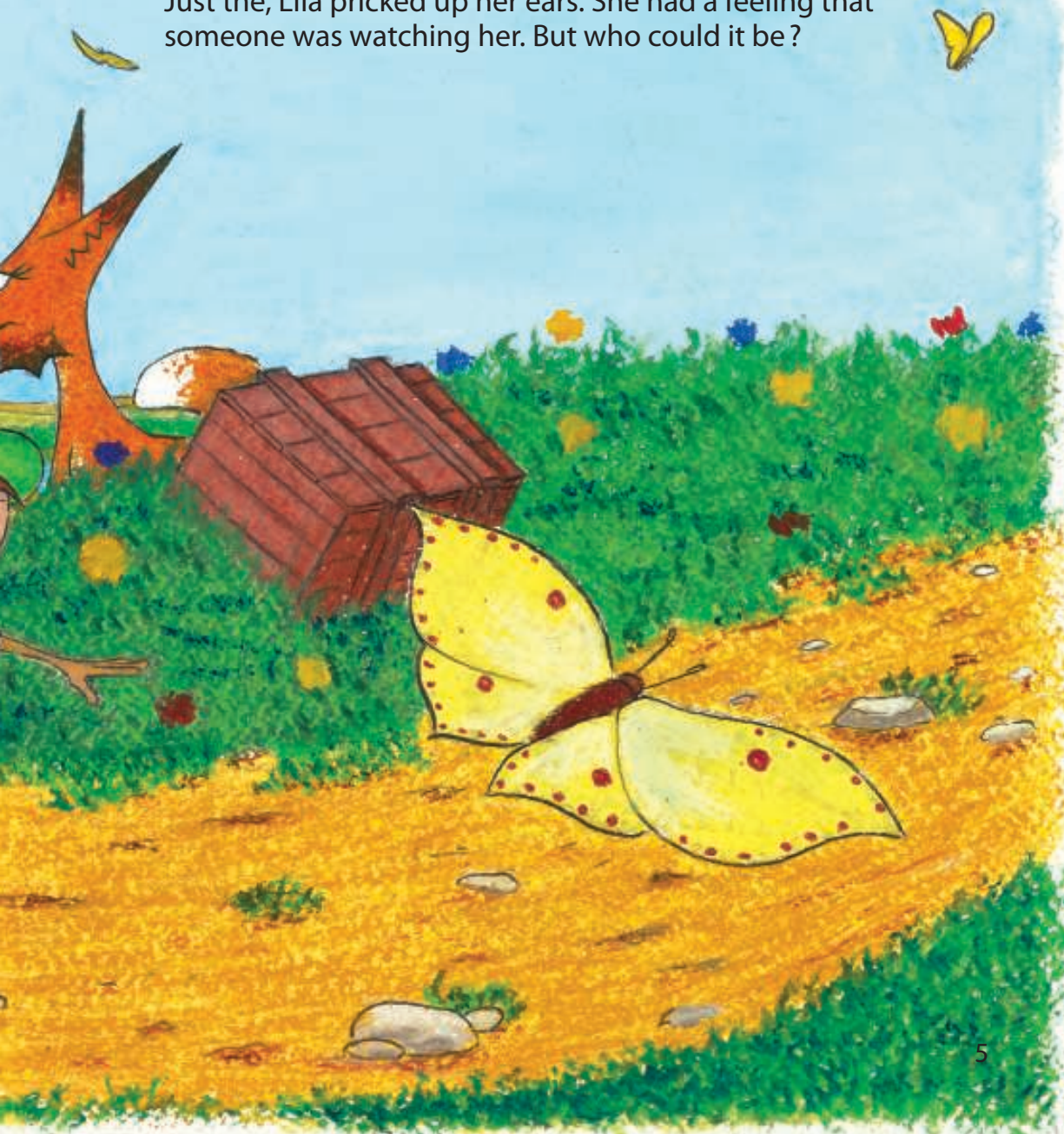
- "I wish I could fly like her!" yelled Tom. "Isn't she lovely! She's a *Brimstone* butterfly. There are dozens of them living here. Just look at them all!"



The butterfly came to rest on a wooden box. Tom was puzzled. "What's a brand new wooden box doing here?" he wondered.

- "Don't touch it, Tom" said Basil. "Best leave it alone. You never know what might be inside".

Just then, Lila pricked up her ears. She had a feeling that someone was watching her. But who could it be?



Tom would have loved the butterfly to perch on his hand. But instead it flew away, towards the other side of the valley.

- "Come on, Mr Basil" said Tom. "Let's follow her. She's flying towards the old cave".

- "The old cave?" echoed Basil. "I know that place. All right: I'm coming."

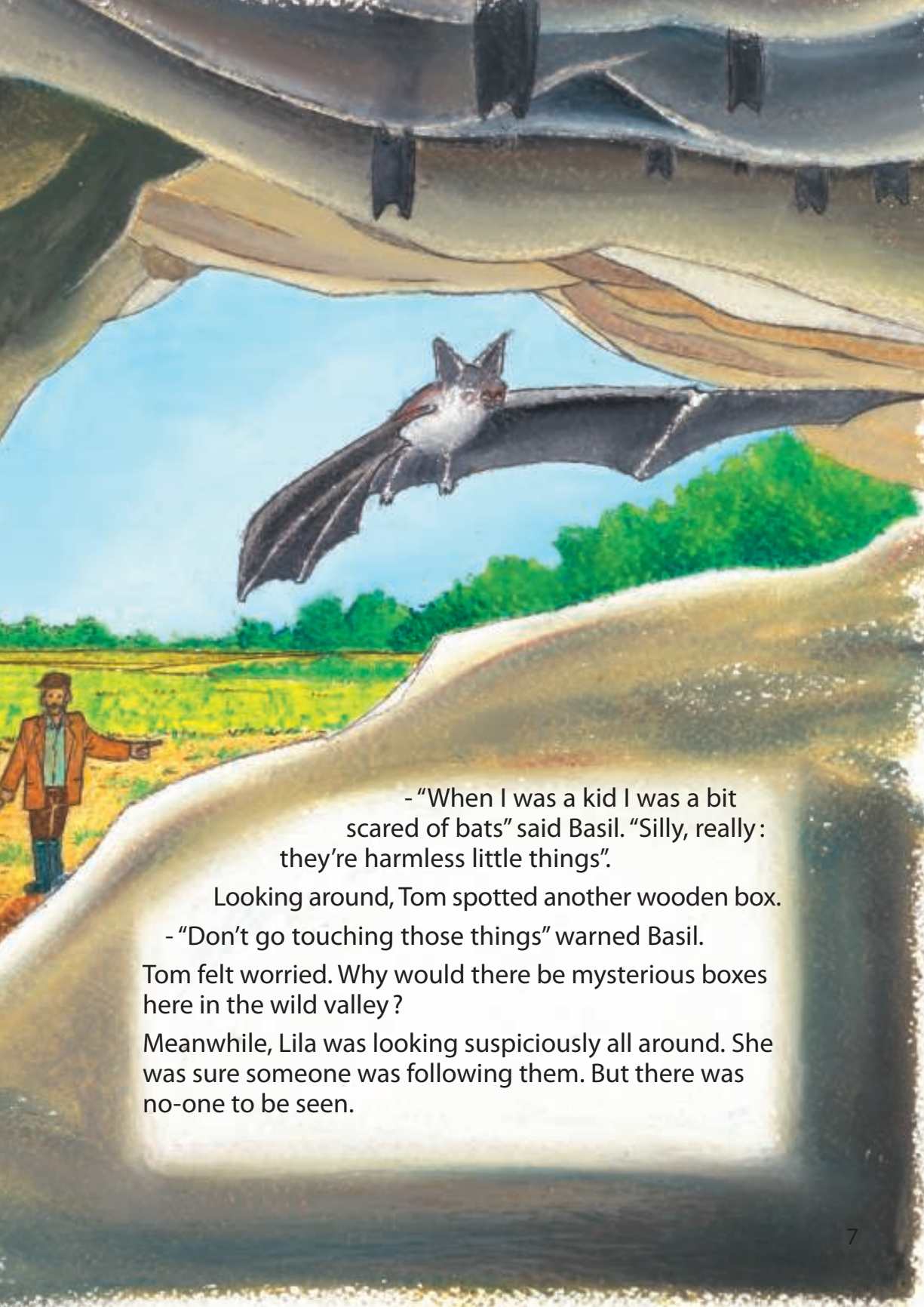
When they reached the cave, Basil stood gazing at it, lost in thought.

- "What's the matter?" asked Tom.

- "Oh, nothing" answered Basil. "It's just that I haven't been here for many years. I used to come and play in the cave, with my mates, when I was a lad..."

- "There are bats living here now", smiled Tom.

"They sleep here during the day. We'd better not go too close: we might disturb them".



- "When I was a kid I was a bit scared of bats" said Basil. "Silly, really: they're harmless little things".

Looking around, Tom spotted another wooden box.

- "Don't go touching those things" warned Basil.

Tom felt worried. Why would there be mysterious boxes here in the wild valley?

Meanwhile, Lila was looking suspiciously all around. She was sure someone was following them. But there was no-one to be seen.

The sun was sinking lower in the sky.

- "Oh dear, my rheumatism's playing up again" puffed Basil. "It's a sure sign that evening's coming and the air's getting chilly".

- "All right, Basil, let's go home" said Tom. "And if your rheumatism gets too bad, just lean on me. I'm strong!"

Basil smiled and put a hand on Tom's shoulder.

- "You're not such a grumpy old man after all", joked Tom.

- "Me? Grumpy? Never!" said Basil.





Suddenly, a whole crowd of frogs and salamanders came hopping and crawling by them.

- "Look!" said Tom. "They're heading for the road. They need to cross it to reach the pond. Let's help them! I'd hate to see any of them get squashed by a car".

- "Oh dear, oh dear, my poor back!" said Basil, as he bent down and tried to help the frogs. "Come on! Over you go!"

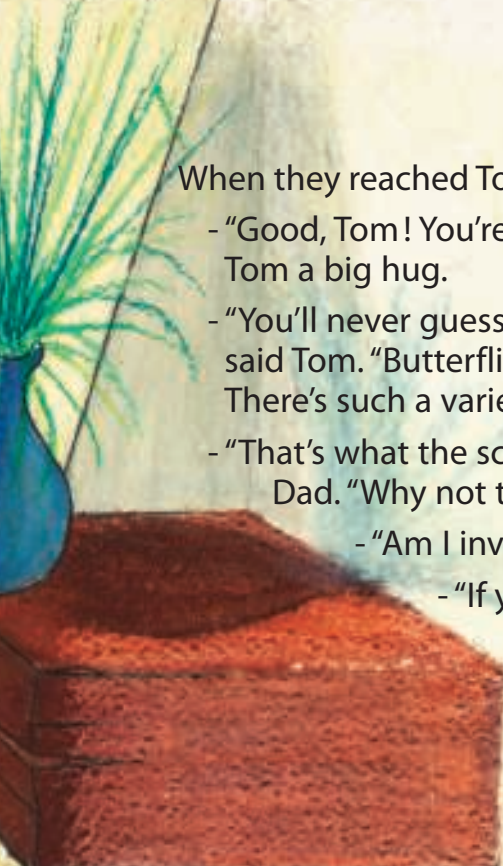
To Tom's surprise, there in the bushes lay yet another wooden box.

- "Well I'm blowed!" said Basil. "I think we'd better tell the Mayor of Merlin City about these strange boxes".

Lila heard a twig crack behind her. She turned – but saw no-one.







When they reached Tom's house, his Dad opened the door.

- "Good, Tom! You're back before dark" he said, and gave Tom a big hug.

- "You'll never guess all the things we've seen today, Dad" said Tom. "Butterflies, and the bats' cave, and the frogs... There's such a variety of wildlife in our valley!"

- "That's what the scientists call *biodiversity*" explained his Dad. "Why not tell me about it over supper".

- "Am I invited too?" asked Basil.

- "If you're not too grumpy" answered Dad, with a wink.

- "Me? Grumpy? Never!" said Basil.

Sitting by the fire, Tom and Basil told Dad all about their adventures that day.


- "And, Dad" added Tom: "Everywhere we went we found strange boxes!"

- "That's right" nodded Basil. "Tomorrow morning I'm going to tell the Mayor. But first I must get a good sleep. I'd best be going home".

- "Why not stay the night with us?" offered Tom's Dad. "You can have our spare room".

- "That's very kind of you" smiled Basil. "And I promise not to be at all grumpy!"

Curled up next to the log pile, Lila was keeping a watchful eye open. Could someone be following them even here?



Next morning, Tom awoke to find not only his Dad and Basil the bee-keeper but also the Mayor of Merlin City!

- "Oh, Mr Mayor!" said Tom. "I wish you'd been with us on our walk yesterday. The valley is so beautiful! We saw loads of butterflies... But, Mr Mayor, has Basil told you about the boxes? The ones in the valley? There are mysterious boxes everywhere!"

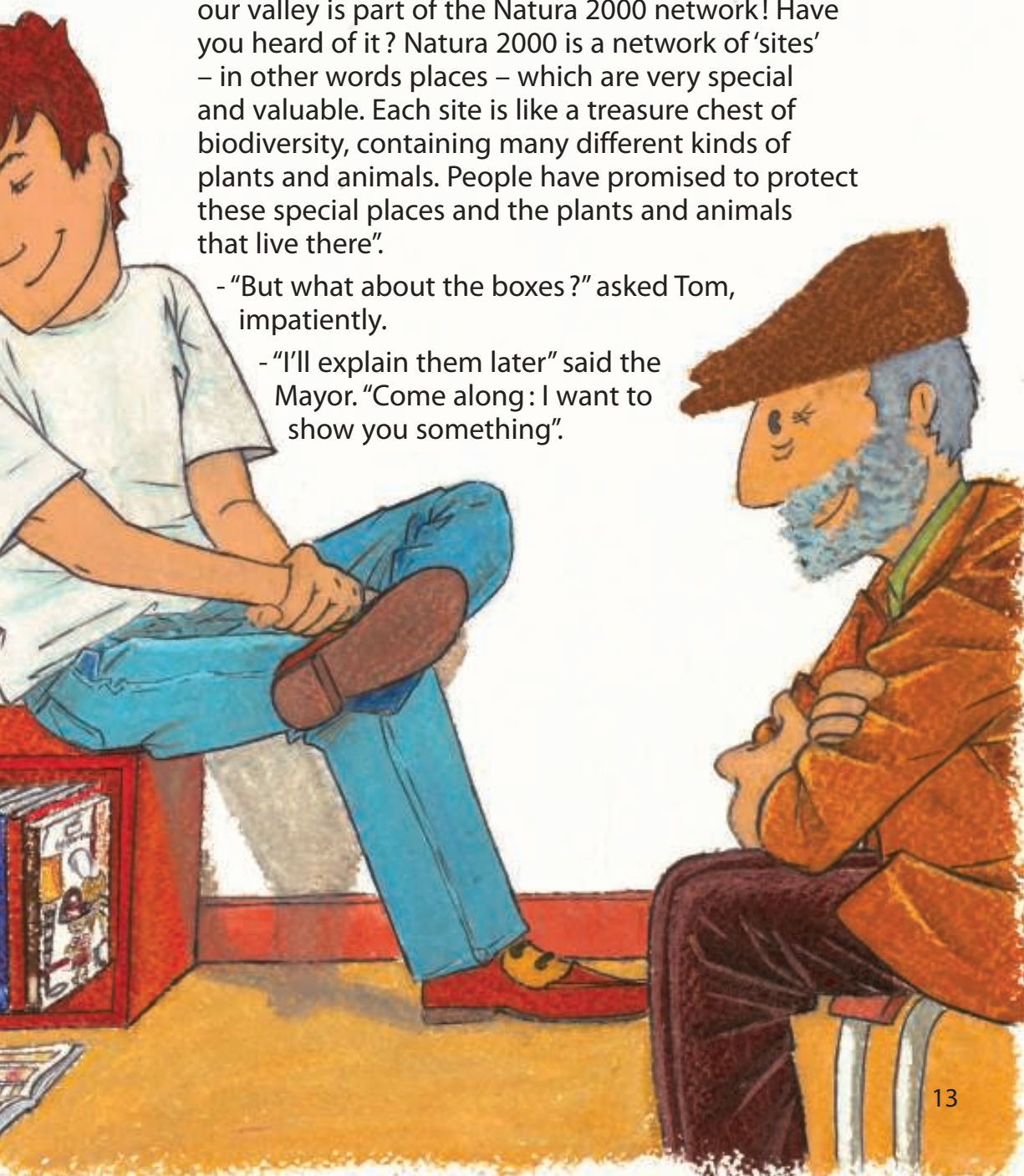


The Mayor smiled at Tom.

- "Thanks for calling me" he said. "Yes, we certainly have a lovely valley, and we're proud of it. In fact, our valley is part of the Natura 2000 network! Have you heard of it? Natura 2000 is a network of 'sites' – in other words places – which are very special and valuable. Each site is like a treasure chest of biodiversity, containing many different kinds of plants and animals. People have promised to protect these special places and the plants and animals that live there".

- "But what about the boxes?" asked Tom, impatiently.

- "I'll explain them later" said the Mayor. "Come along: I want to show you something".



The Mayor led Basil, Tom and Lila back to the Merlin river valley.

- "This is the place!" shouted Tom, suddenly. "This is where we helped the frogs and the salamanders!"
- "That's right" said Basil, who seemed just as excited as Tom. "The frogs were hopping all over the place! And I've never seen so many salamanders trying to cross a road! I was afraid a car would run over them – but we got them all across safely".



The Mayor went over to the mysterious box and opened it. He took out... some posts and some signs.

- "Wow!" said Tom. "What are they for?"

- "They're to warn motorists to watch out for frogs and salamanders on the road" replied the Mayor. "We had these signs made, and they were delivered just the other day. They have to be put up on these posts".

- "Let's do it *now!*" said Tom.

- "Not a moment to lose!" said Basil.

So Tom and the Mayor put up the posts and Basil fixed the signs onto them. Lila could hear rustling noises in the undergrowth – but when she went to investigate she found nothing. Very mysterious!



After all that hard work the Mayor was feeling hot but happy. He rolled up his shirt sleeves and said "Tom, I'm going to the cave. Do you want to come with me?"

- "You bet!" said Tom.

- "Me too!" said Basil.

So off they set. When they reached the cave, the Mayor tried to pick up the second box, but it was very heavy. What could it be?





The Mayor managed to get the lid off, and inside was...

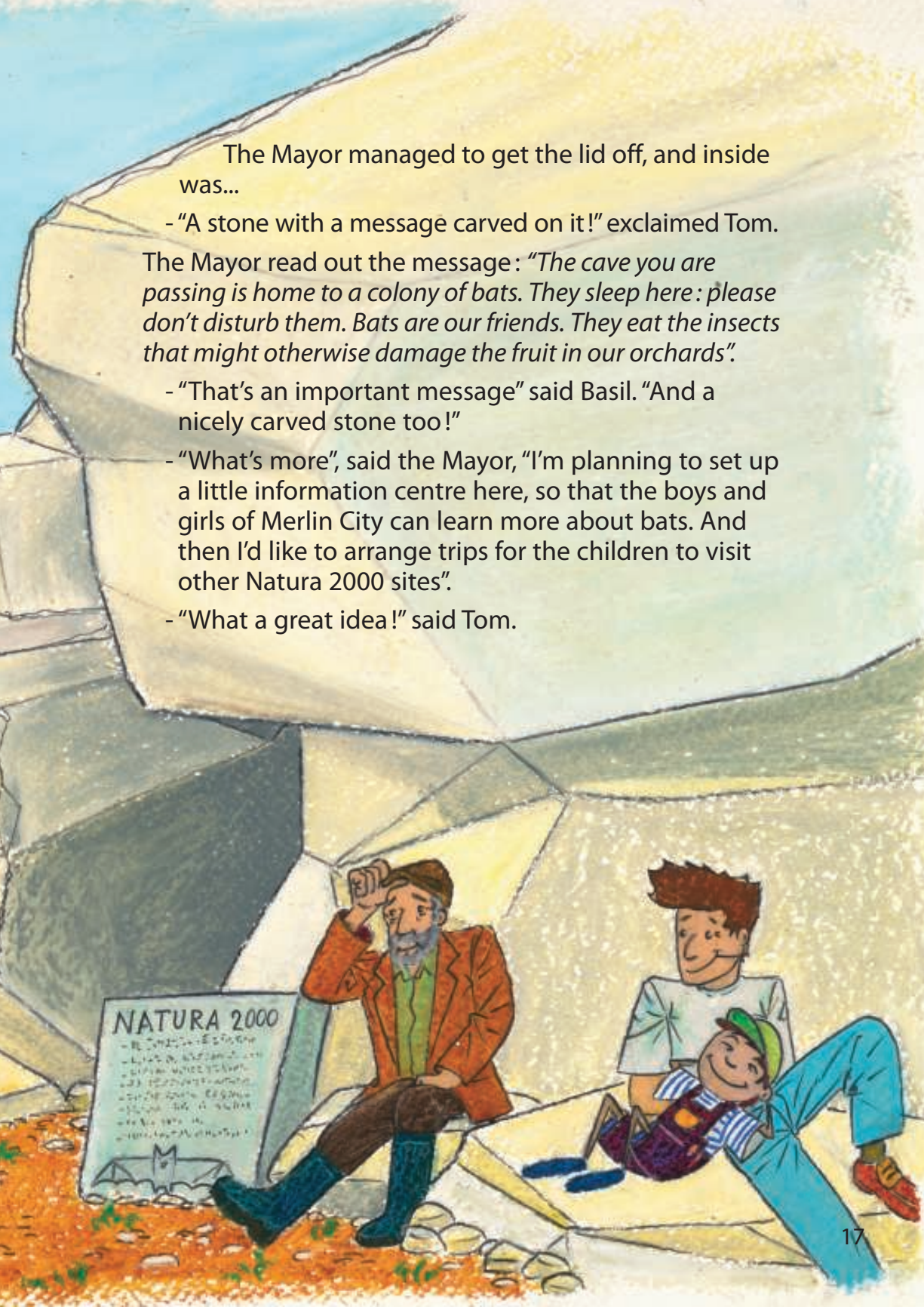
- "A stone with a message carved on it!" exclaimed Tom.

The Mayor read out the message: *"The cave you are passing is home to a colony of bats. They sleep here: please don't disturb them. Bats are our friends. They eat the insects that might otherwise damage the fruit in our orchards".*

- "That's an important message" said Basil. "And a nicely carved stone too!"

- "What's more", said the Mayor, "I'm planning to set up a little information centre here, so that the boys and girls of Merlin City can learn more about bats. And then I'd like to arrange trips for the children to visit other Natura 2000 sites".

- "What a great idea!" said Tom.



Lila, meanwhile, had found some strange prints in the mud on the river-bank. She wanted Tom to look at them, but he was too busy listening to another of the Mayor's good ideas.

- "Basil", said the Mayor, "are those your bee-hives over there?"

- "Yes" said Basil, proudly. "And my bees make really delicious honey!"

- "Good!" said the Mayor. "So how about selling your delicious honey in a special Natura 2000 shop, right here in Merlin City?"

Basil could hardly believe his ears.

- "What – my honey? Put on display and sold in a special shop? That would be an honour indeed, Mr Mayor!"



The Mayor smiled.

- "And here's another idea for you, Basil. How would you like to be the official Nature Guide for visitors to our lovely valley?"

- "Oh, Mr Mayor, that would be wonderful! But... But what about my rheumatism? Hmm! I'll have to think about it".

The Mayor went over to the last box.

- "Basil", he said: "Suppose we make a little bridge to help you get across to your beehives? After all, wading through water can't be very good for your rheumatism".

The Mayor opened the box and – lo and behold – inside it were all the materials needed for making a small bridge!



As the sun was setting, Tom, Basil and the Mayor were admiring their brand new bridge. Basil, the once grumpy old bee-keeper, was smiling from ear to ear.

- "Mr Mayor", he said: "I've been thinking. I *would* like to be a Nature Guide, so I accept your offer. Never mind my rheumatism: I'm so happy I feel quite young again!"

Lila nudged Tom with her sharp little nose. "Come and see!" she seemed to be saying. She had at last discovered who had been watching them: the beaver family!

