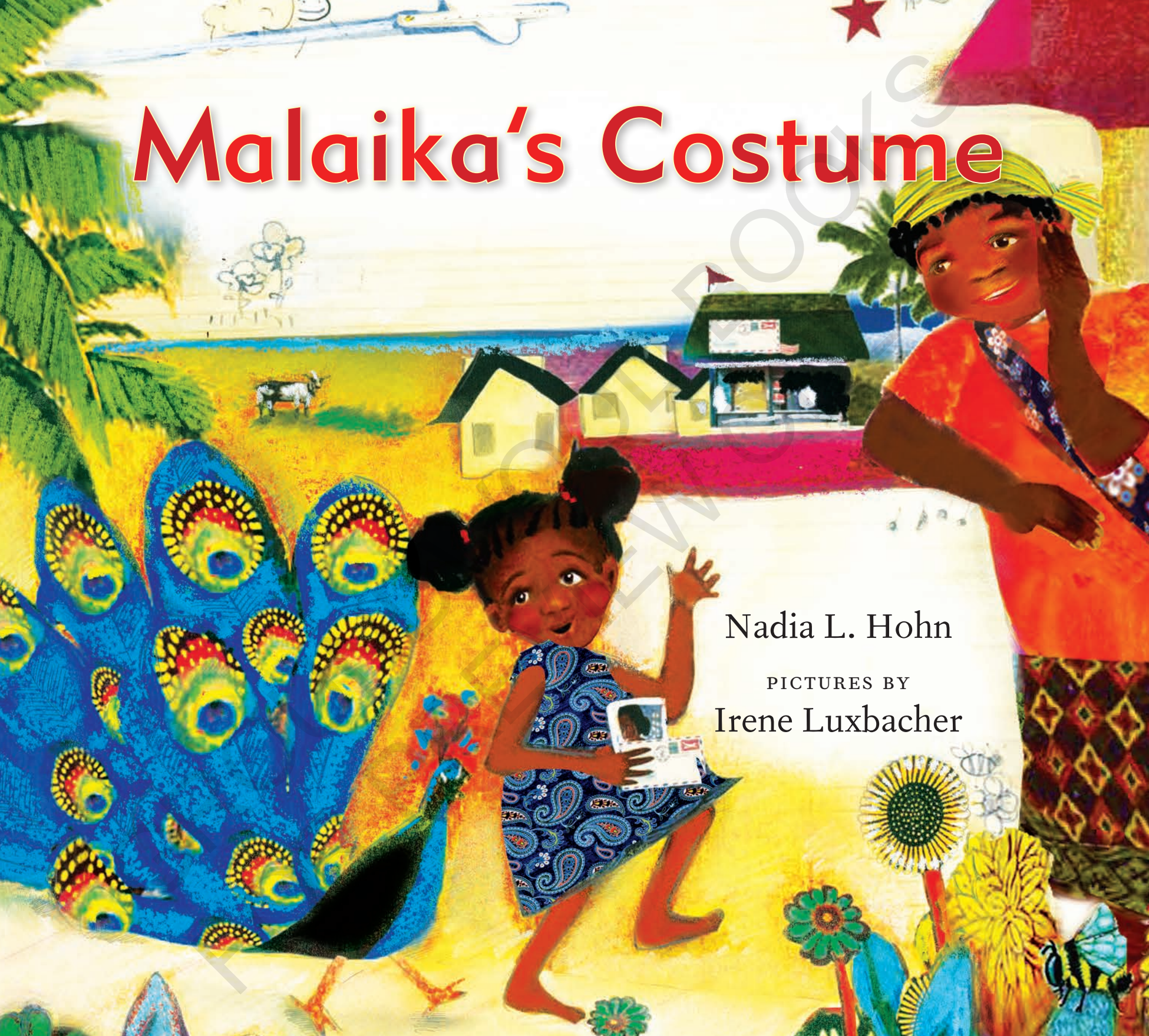


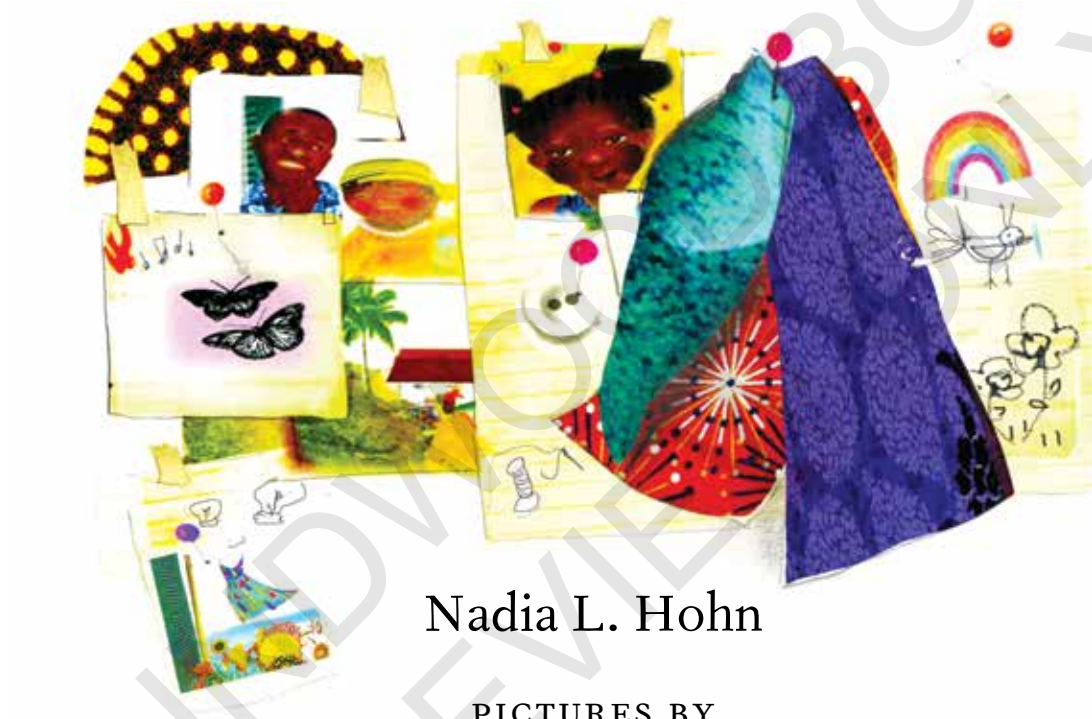
# Malaika's Costume

Nadia L. Hohn

PICTURES BY  
Irene Luxbacher



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For my dear students at Africentric Alternative School.  
To every child with big dreams, one day they can  
come true. — NH

Dedication 2 lorem alset dolor armet erreum imquel  
rerum aspin debat — IL

cassava: the starchy root of a tropical shrub,  
which can be used for foods such as flour  
and cake.

Jab Molassie: a carnival mas (masquerade)  
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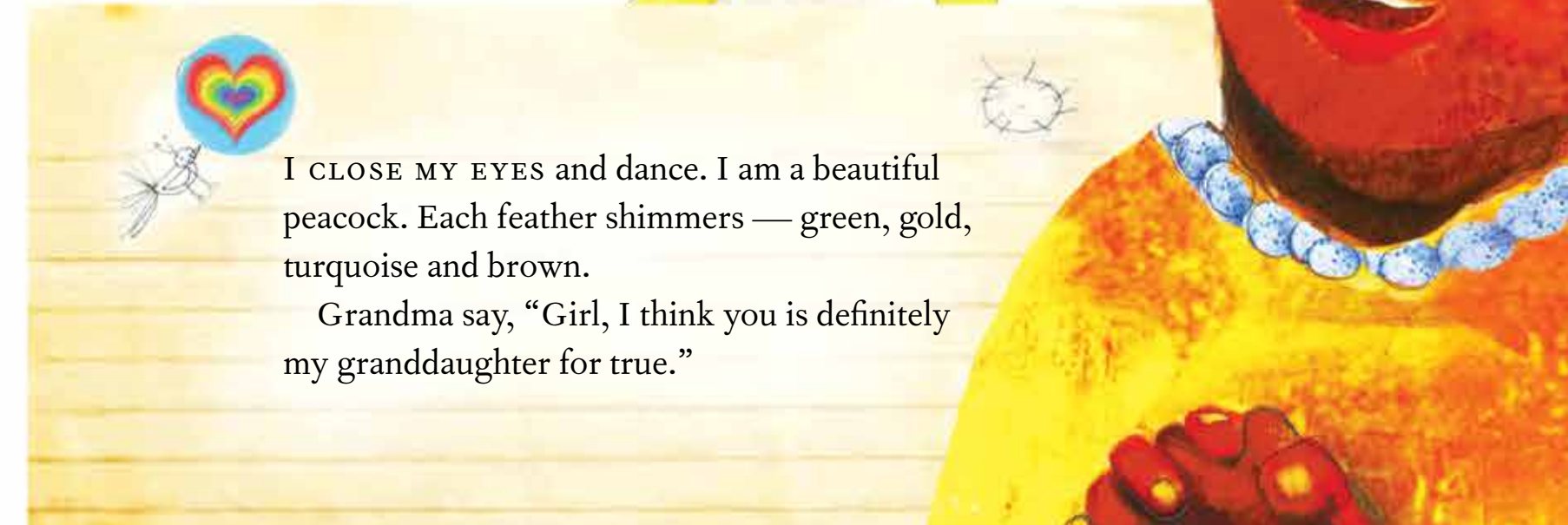
mysticism and sorcery in combination  
with Christian beliefs.

pan: a musical instrument made from an oil  
drum, also called a steel drum or steelpan,  
originating in Trinidad.

Pierrot: a carnival mas (masquerade)  
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is known for long speeches and verbal  
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Rastaman: a man who practices Rastafari, a  
way of life that began in Jamaica but has  
African, Jewish and Christian roots.

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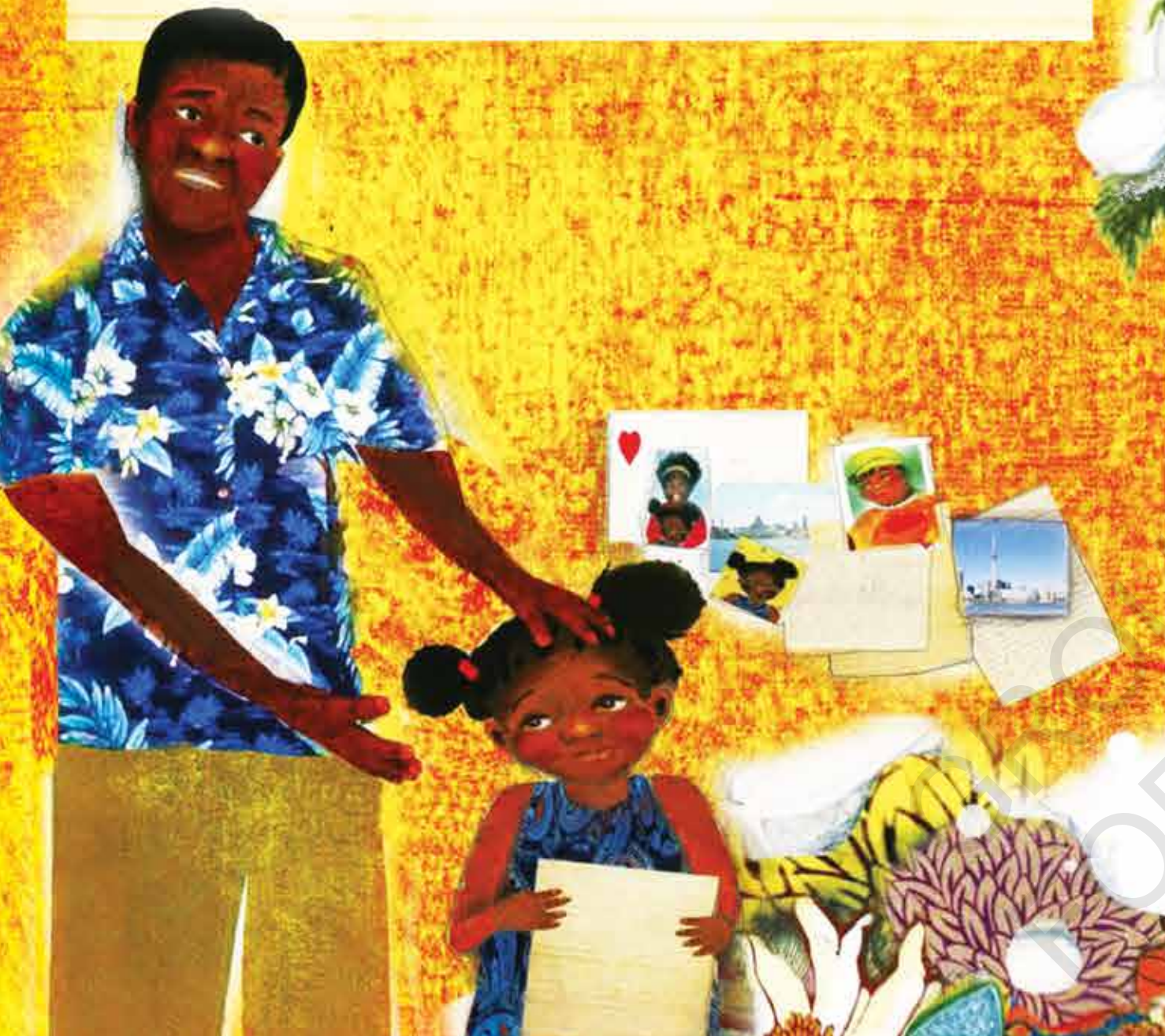


I CLOSE MY EYES and dance. I am a beautiful  
peacock. Each feather shimmers — green, gold,  
turquoise and brown.

Grandma say, “Girl, I think you is definitely  
my granddaughter for true.”



This is the first carnival time with Mummy gone.  
“She in Canada,” Uncle Ewart say. “Canada’s  
a place where she can get a good job. She going  
to make a better life for you and Granny.”



Canada is cold like an icebox and something they call  
snow is on the ground, Mummy tell me. She send me  
pictures, too. The snow look like coconut-sky juice. She  
say that children play in it and build man with it. What a  
sticky mess!





If there's so many jobs in Canada, how come Grandma and I have been waiting so long, long for the money Mummy say she would send to make my costume?





Carnival soon come, and everyone getting their costume ready.

Michael and Junior are playing Jab Molassie in the Kiddie Carnival. They wearing briefs and blue paint. Ravina and Shelly are red hibiscus. They wearing their saris and looking like brides.

Malcolm and Marcus are stilt-dancing Moko Jumbies. They look like giraffes. Even the Johnson's baby, Ivan, has a Pierrot costume. He's still crawling! Everyone practice their dance moves. Everyone except me. I don't feel like dancing anymore.





Today a letter comes, but after Grandma open it, she look sad. I just know what the writing say, and big teardrops roll down my face.

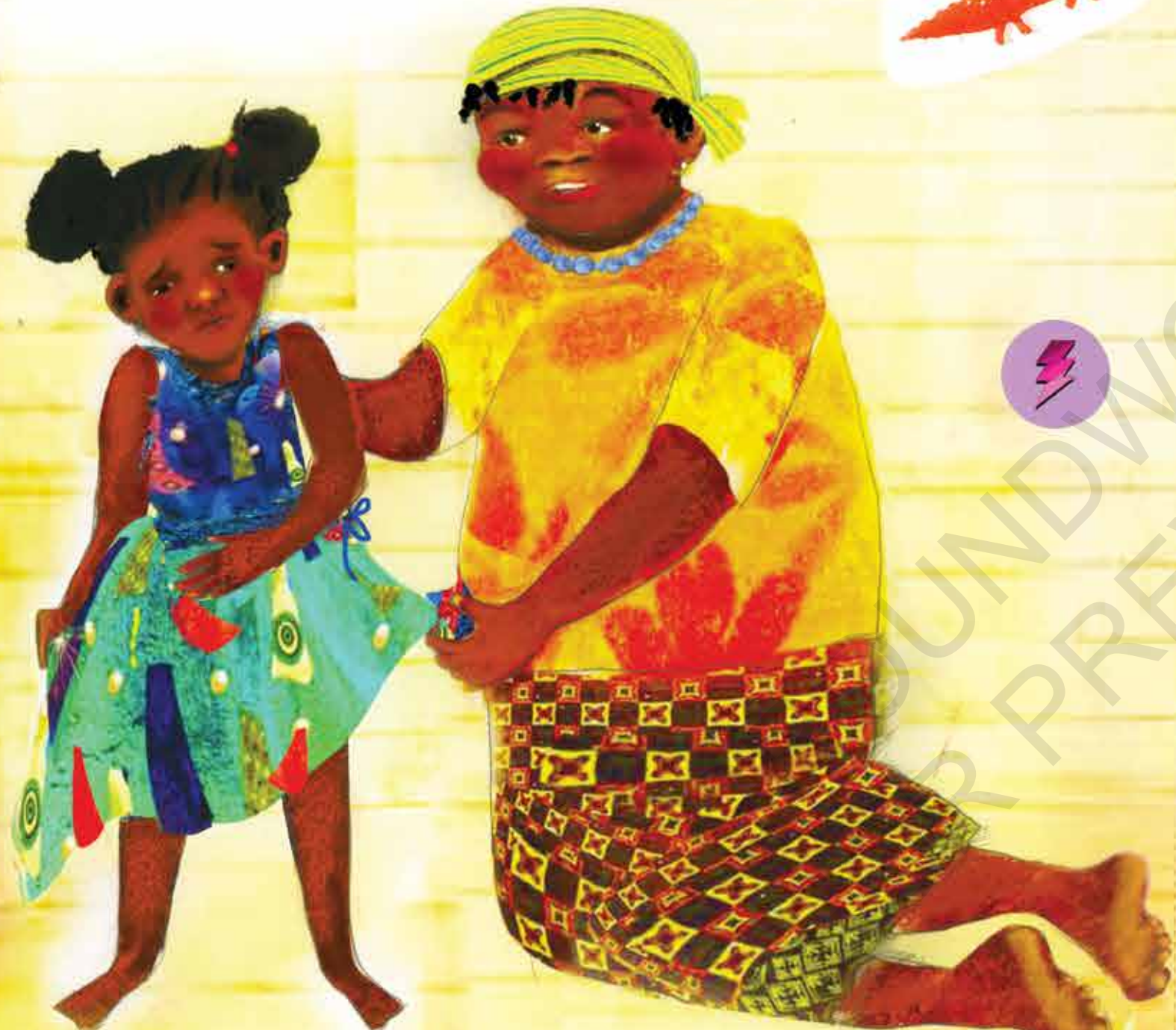


Grandma goes to her room. She returns with an old red cardboard suitcase that I never see before. She pull out a green and purple costume covered in gold sequins and dangling ribbon.

“This was my carnival costume when I was a girl.”



Grandma make me put on the tired costume. It smells funny and it dusty. The costume squeeze my belly and some of the sequins fall off. I feel hot and itchy.



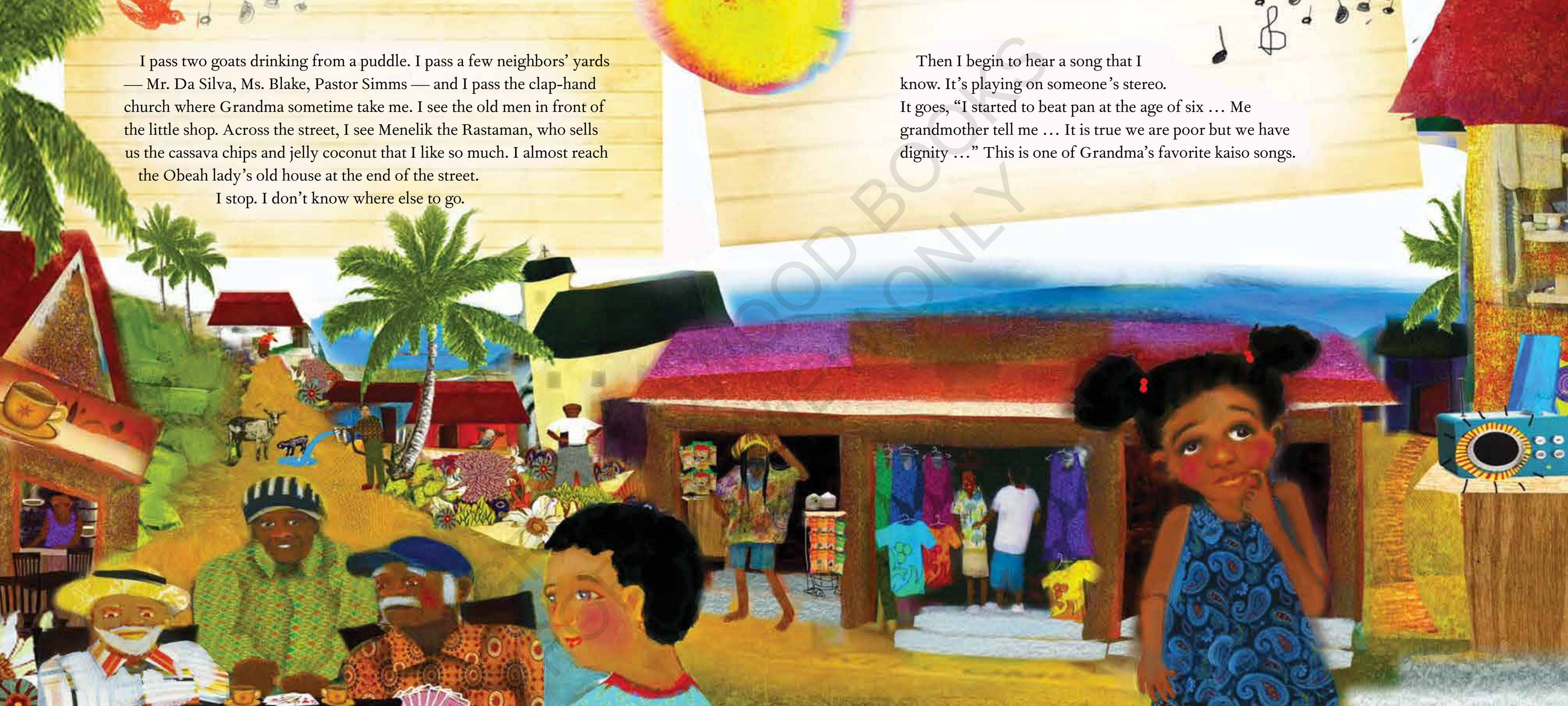
“Grandma, I don’t like it. I won’t wear this tear-up old thing,” I say, and with that I pull off the costume, hearing it rip. I run, run, run with my hot, dry feet.



I pass two goats drinking from a puddle. I pass a few neighbors' yards — Mr. Da Silva, Ms. Blake, Pastor Simms — and I pass the clap-hand church where Grandma sometime take me. I see the old men in front of the little shop. Across the street, I see Menelik the Rastaman, who sells us the cassava chips and jelly coconut that I like so much. I almost reach the Obeah lady's old house at the end of the street.

I stop. I don't know where else to go.

Then I begin to hear a song that I know. It's playing on someone's stereo. It goes, "I started to beat pan at the age of six ... Me grandmother tell me ... It is true we are poor but we have dignity ..." This is one of Grandma's favorite kaiso songs.





I run to Ms. Chin the tailor lady, around the corner.  
“Do you have any throwaway cloth? I just need a few rags,” I say.  
“Chile, is Granny making you some more dolls?” she asks in her singsong kind of voice.  
I think about my two pretty rag dolls, CeeCee and DeeDee, sitting on my bed.  
“No, ma’am. For a surprise,” I say.  
Ms. Chin turn around and go into a room. She come back with a big red plastic bag. It flowing over with pieces of ripped-up cloth, all in different colors. I smile.  
“Thank you, ma’am,” I say, and then I run all the way back home.





I bang the door open.

“Grandma, Grandma, guess what I find?” I yell, while holding the handle of the bag tight.

“Shhhhh. Hush, chile,” Grandma say. She look at me with a sad face, then I start to cry.

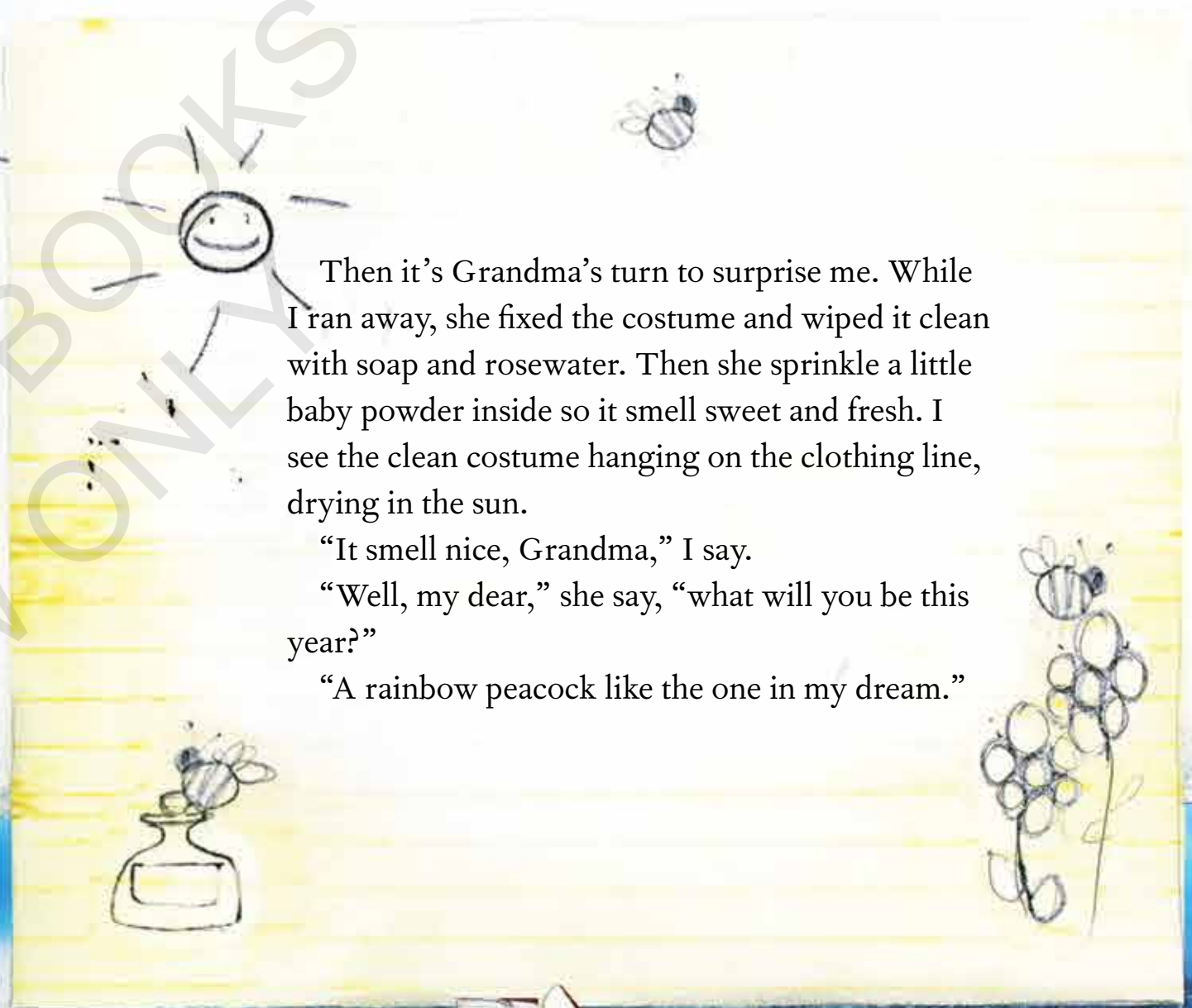
“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to run off and say those things.”

“All right, Malaika, you do better now.” She smile. “Now, what you bring?”

I show her the bag of cloth and I smile when I tell her my idea.



GROUNDWORK  
FOR PREVIEW



Then it's Grandma's turn to surprise me. While I ran away, she fixed the costume and wiped it clean with soap and rosewater. Then she sprinkle a little baby powder inside so it smell sweet and fresh. I see the clean costume hanging on the clothing line, drying in the sun.

"It smell nice, Grandma," I say.

"Well, my dear," she say, "what will you be this year?"

"A rainbow peacock like the one in my dream."





“The head will be shiny and proud and strong,” I say.  
I find tiny turquoise, green, gold and brown buttons  
in Grandma’s sewing box to glue on to make the head.  
I find two clear buttons for the eyes. They look like  
sparkling jewels.

“The body, round and full of bright feathers,  
Grandma.”

We rip, rip, rip small pieces of the colorful cloth, tying  
it on to the body of the costume.

“Oooh, red chiffon, blue silk, jade lace, purple  
ribbon,” Grandma whispers.

The words sound like music to my ears.





“And gold stocking on its legs.”

Grandma pull out some crinkled stocking from the suitcase and a pair of slippers. There are some holes in the stocking, but Grandma help me to patch them up with pieces of cloth.

“Grandma, this rainbow peacock have patchwork legs,” I laugh.



We glue, sew and tie the cloth onto the body. Grandma even help me make cuffs for my arms out of copper cloth so that it look like wings. I twist in some gold wires to add extra feathers.



I carefully pull the peacock bodysuit on. Then Grandma puts on my peacock head, just so. I look in the mirror. The costume fits me, and I shine from head to toe.

“Who looking so lovely? Girl, this costume look better than ever,” Grandma say, and she is right. I am even more beautiful than the peacock in my dreams.



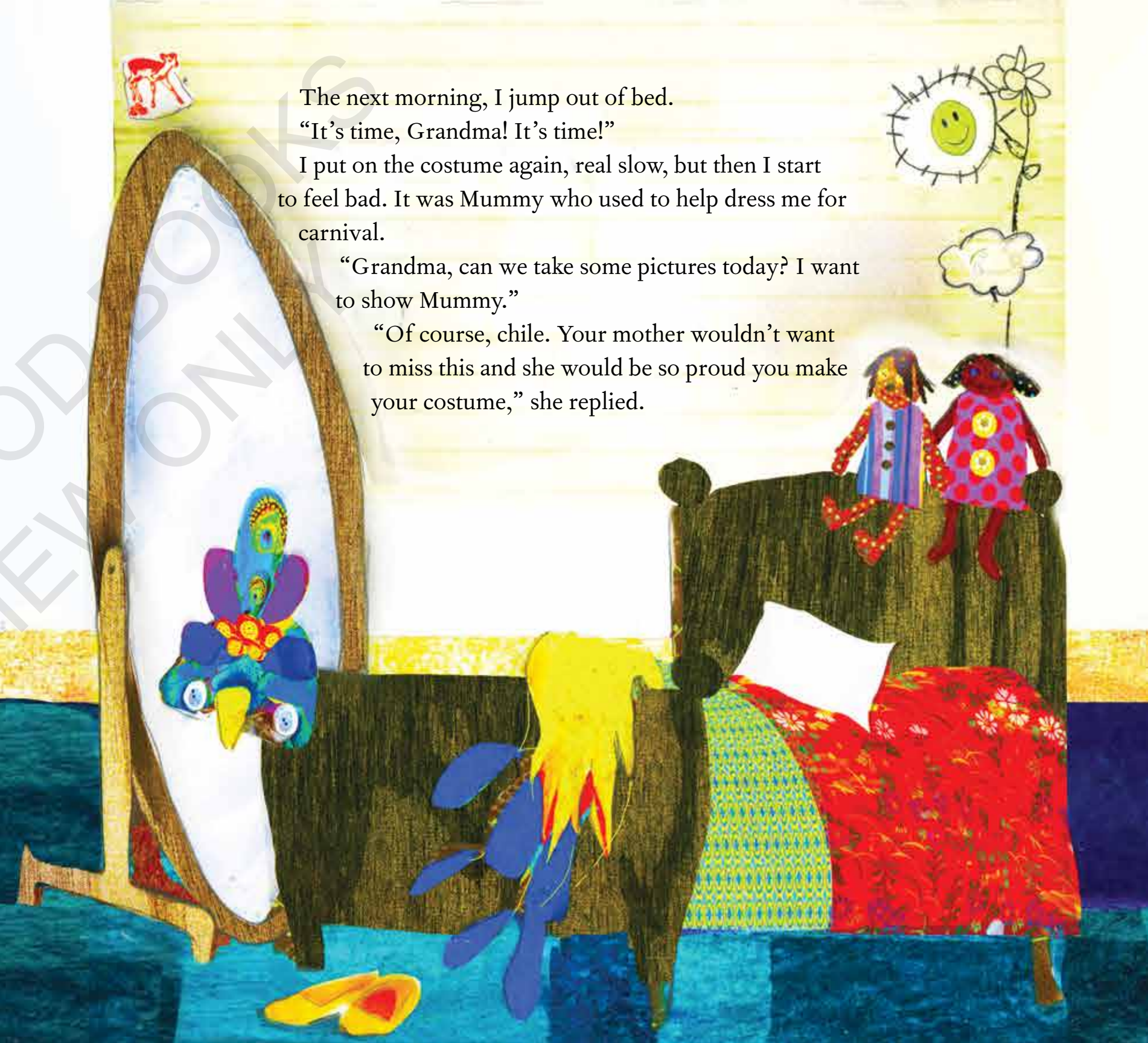


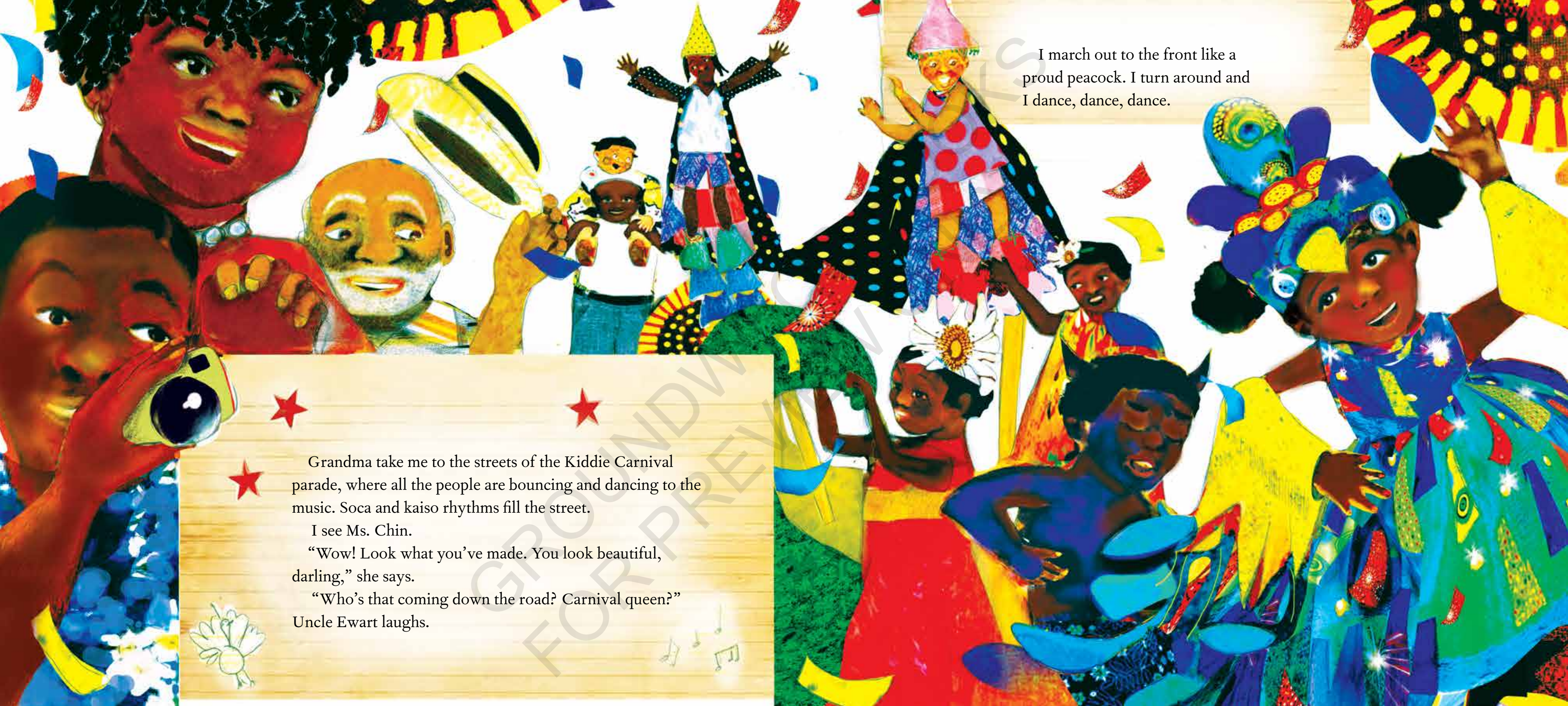
The next morning, I jump out of bed.  
“It’s time, Grandma! It’s time!”

I put on the costume again, real slow, but then I start to feel bad. It was Mummy who used to help dress me for carnival.

“Grandma, can we take some pictures today? I want to show Mummy.”

“Of course, chile. Your mother wouldn’t want to miss this and she would be so proud you make your costume,” she replied.





I march out to the front like a proud peacock. I turn around and I dance, dance, dance.

Grandma take me to the streets of the Kiddie Carnival parade, where all the people are bouncing and dancing to the music. Soca and kaiso rhythms fill the street.

I see Ms. Chin.

“Wow! Look what you’ve made. You look beautiful, darling,” she says.

“Who’s that coming down the road? Carnival queen?” Uncle Ewart laughs.

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