

Comprehension

Genre

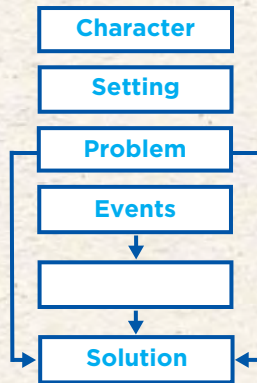
Realistic Fiction is an invented story that could have happened in real life.



Story Structure

Character, Setting, Plot

As you read, use your Story Map.



Read to Find Out

What does Sara learn about herself as she searches for Charlie?

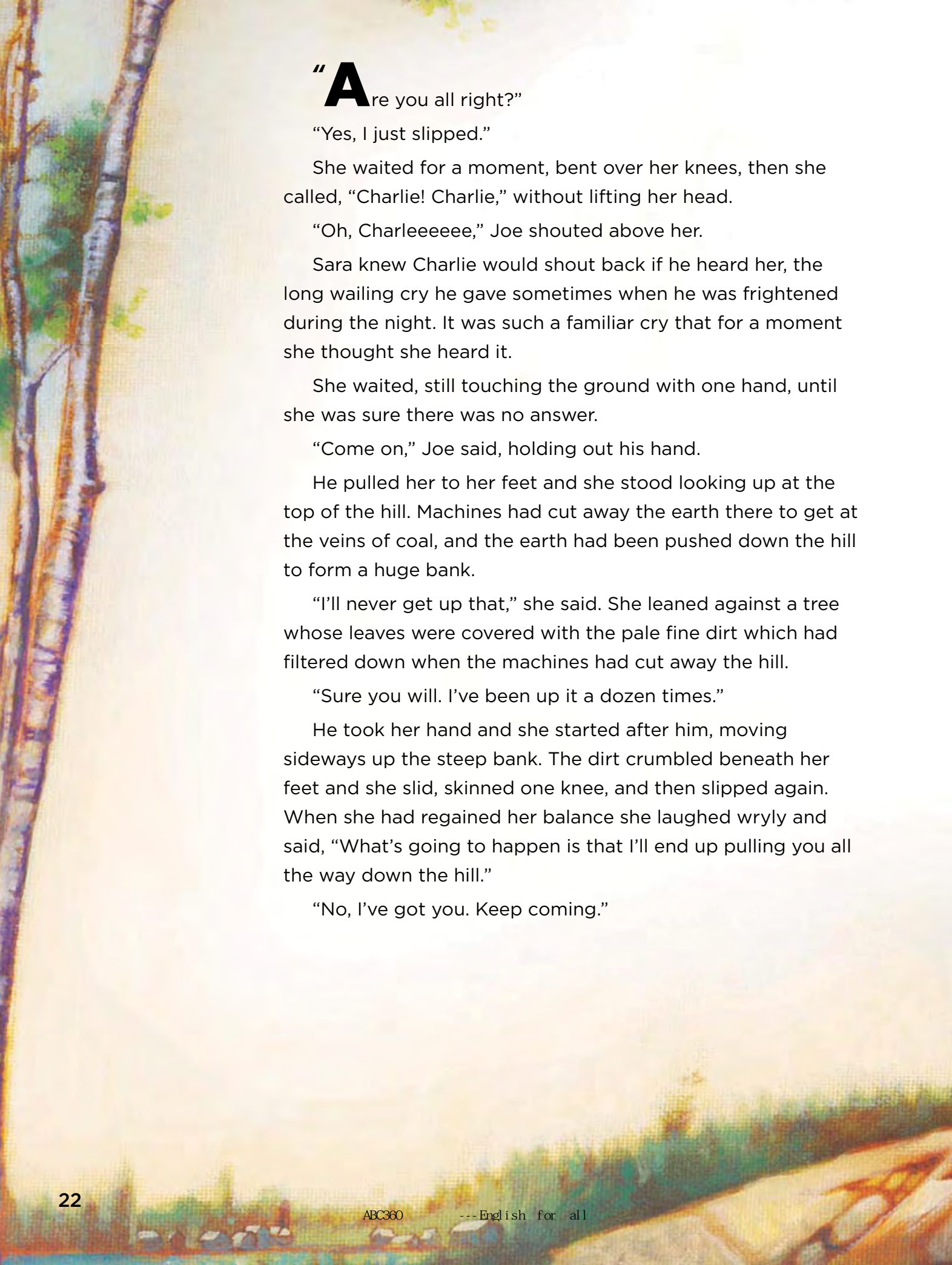


THE SUMMER OF THE SWANS

by **Betsy Byars** • illustrated by **John Rowe**

Sara and Joe must find Sara's little brother Charlie, a ten-year-old who suffered a brain injury as a small child and doesn't speak. Charlie leaves home during the night to find some swans he's seen on a nearby lake. After becoming lost in the woods near his home, Charlie doesn't know where to turn. In the morning Sara and her classmate Joe join the town's all-out search for the lost boy. But after frantically looking for hours, Sara and Joe have found only a slipper belonging to Charlie.





"Are you all right?"

"Yes, I just slipped."

She waited for a moment, bent over her knees, then she called, "Charlie! Charlie," without lifting her head.

"Oh, Charleeeeeee," Joe shouted above her.

Sara knew Charlie would shout back if he heard her, the long wailing cry he gave sometimes when he was frightened during the night. It was such a familiar cry that for a moment she thought she heard it.

She waited, still touching the ground with one hand, until she was sure there was no answer.

"Come on," Joe said, holding out his hand.

He pulled her to her feet and she stood looking up at the top of the hill. Machines had cut away the earth there to get at the veins of coal, and the earth had been pushed down the hill to form a huge bank.

"I'll never get up that," she said. She leaned against a tree whose leaves were covered with the pale fine dirt which had filtered down when the machines had cut away the hill.

"Sure you will. I've been up it a dozen times."

He took her hand and she started after him, moving sideways up the steep bank. The dirt crumbled beneath her feet and she slid, skinned one knee, and then slipped again. When she had regained her balance she laughed wryly and said, "What's going to happen is that I'll end up pulling you all the way down the hill."

"No, I've got you. Keep coming."

She started again, putting one foot carefully above the other, picking her way over the stones. When she paused, he said, “Keep coming. We’re almost there.”

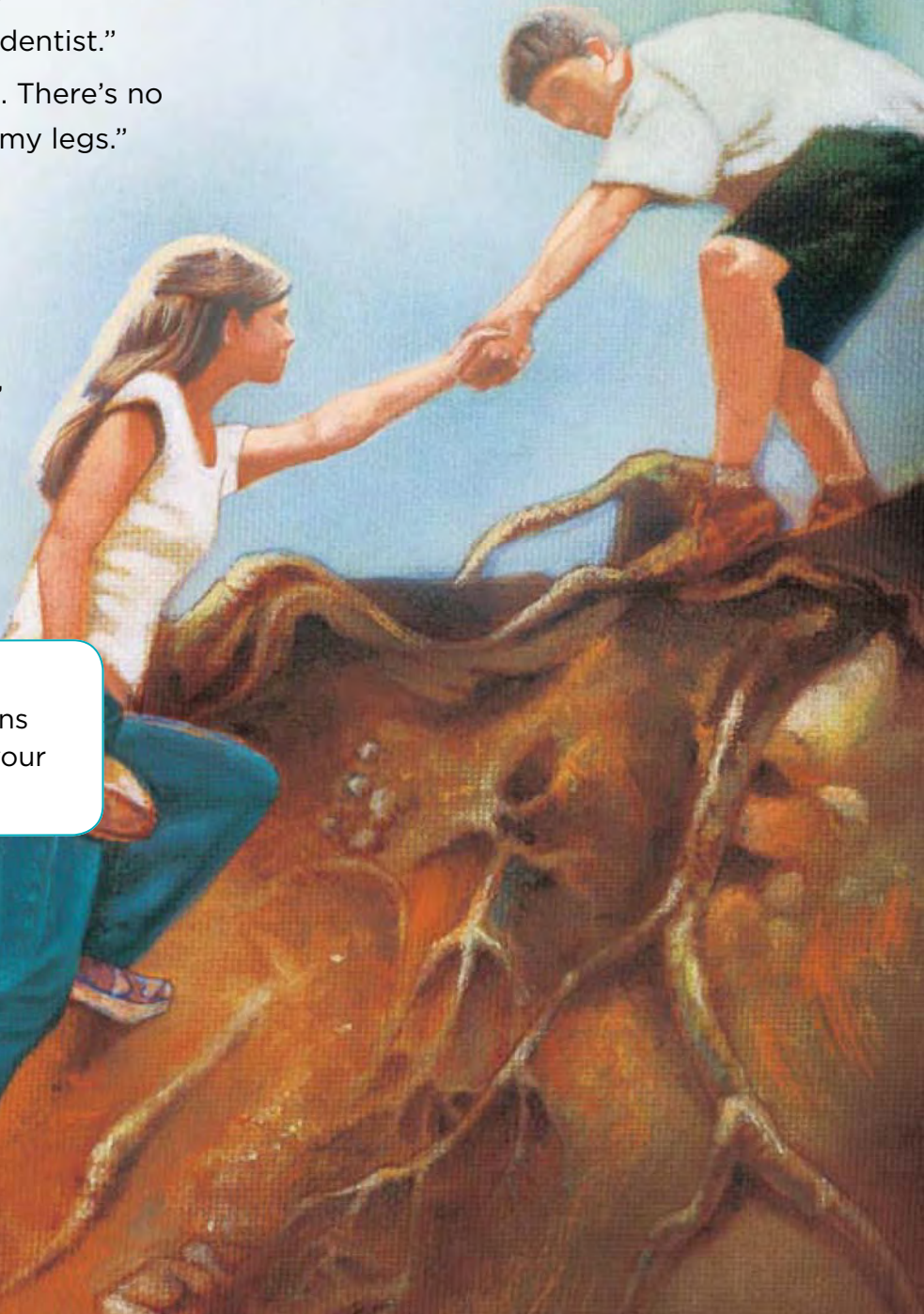
“I think it’s a trick, like at the dentist’s when he says, ‘I’m almost through drilling.’ Then he drills for another hour and says, ‘Now, I’m really almost through drilling,’ and he keeps on and then says, ‘There’s just one more spot and then I’ll be practically really through.’ ”

“We must go to the same dentist.”

“I don’t think I can make it. There’s no skin at all left on the sides of my legs.”

“Well, we’re really almost practically there now, in the words of your dentist.”

She fell across the top of the dirt bank on her stomach, rested for a moment, and then turned and looked down the valley.



Character

Describe Sara’s emotions at this point. Support your answer.

She could not speak for a moment. There lay the whole valley in a way she had never imagined it, a tiny finger of civilization set in a sweeping expanse of dark forest. The black treetops seemed to crowd against the yards, the houses, the roads, giving the impression that at any moment the trees would close over the houses like waves and leave nothing but an unbroken line of black-green leaves waving in the sunlight.

Up the valley she could see the **intersection** where they shopped, the drugstore, the gas station where her mother had once won a set of twenty-four stemmed glasses which Aunt Willie would not allow them to use, the grocery store, the lot where the yellow school buses were parked for the summer. She could look over the valley and see another hill where white cows were all grouped together by a fence and beyond that another hill and then another.

She looked back at the valley and she saw the lake and for the first time since she had stood up on the hill she remembered Charlie.

Raising her hand to her mouth, she called, “Charlie! Charlie! Charlie!” There was a faint echo that seemed to waver in her ears.

“Charlie, oh, Charlie!” Her voice was so loud it seemed to ram into the valley.

Sara waited. She looked down at the forest, and everything was so quiet it seemed to her that the whole valley, the whole world was waiting with her.

“Charlie, hey, Charlie!” Joe shouted.

“Charleeeeeee!” She made the sound of it last a long time. “Can you hear meeeeeee?”

With her eyes she followed the trail she knew he must have taken—the house, the Akers’ vacant lot, the old pasture, the forest. The forest that seemed powerful enough to **engulf** a whole valley, she thought with a sinking feeling, could certainly swallow up a young boy.

“Charlie! Charlie! Charlie!” There was a waver in the last syllable that betrayed how near she was to tears. She looked down at the Indian slipper she was still holding.

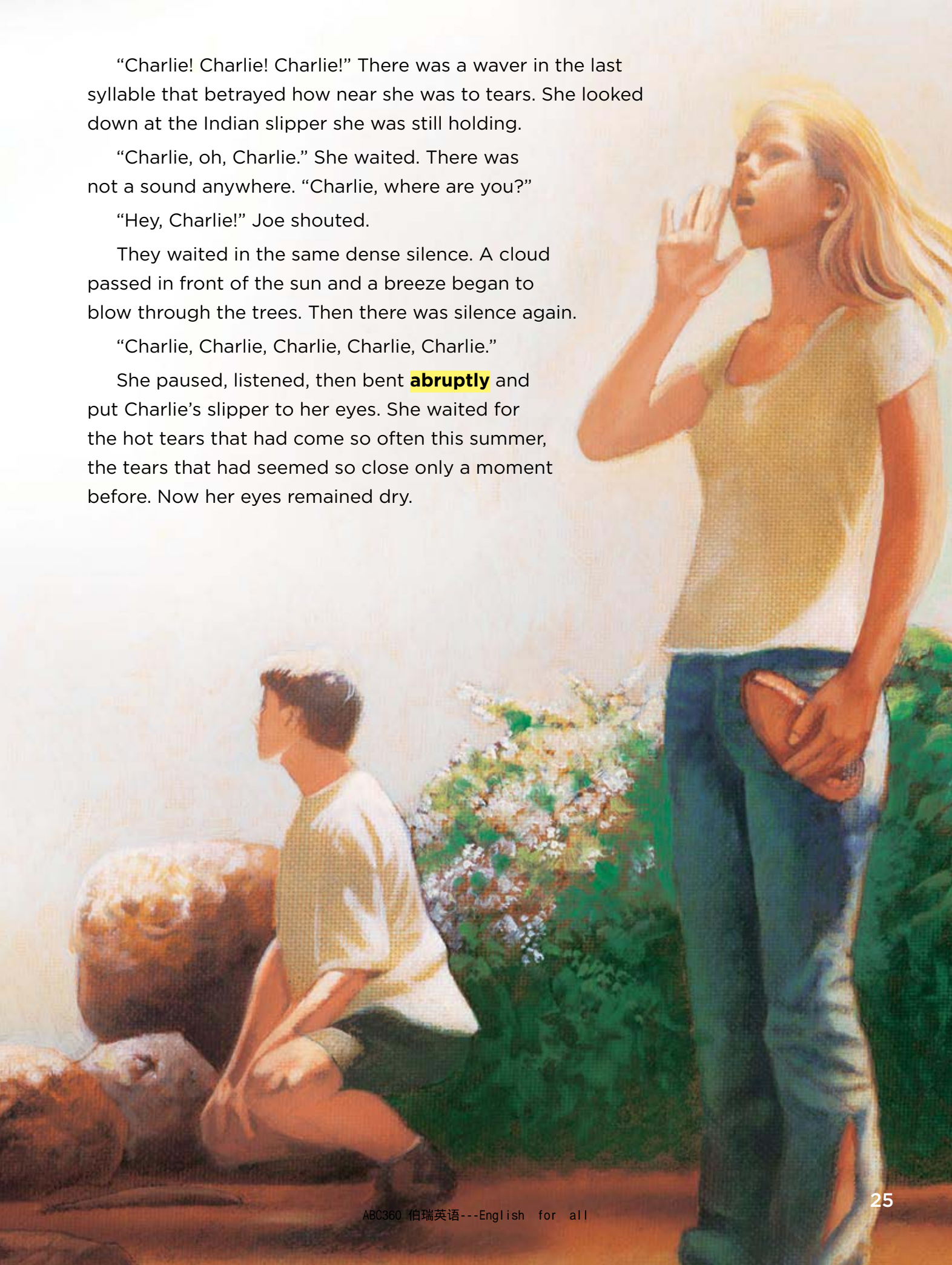
“Charlie, oh, Charlie.” She waited. There was not a sound anywhere. “Charlie, where are you?”

“Hey, Charlie!” Joe shouted.

They waited in the same dense silence. A cloud passed in front of the sun and a breeze began to blow through the trees. Then there was silence again.

“Charlie, Charlie, Charlie, Charlie, Charlie.”

She paused, listened, then bent **abruptly** and put Charlie’s slipper to her eyes. She waited for the hot tears that had come so often this summer, the tears that had seemed so close only a moment before. Now her eyes remained dry.





I have cried over myself a hundred times this summer, she thought, I have wept over my big feet and my skinny legs and my nose, I have even cried over my stupid shoes, and now when I have a true sadness there are no tears left.

She held the felt side of the slipper against her eyes like a blindfold and stood there, feeling the hot sun on her head and the wind wrapping around her legs, **conscious** of the height and the valley sweeping down from her feet.

“Listen, just because you can’t hear him doesn’t mean anything. He could be—”

“Wait a minute.” She lowered the slipper and looked down the valley. A sudden wind blew dust into her face and she lifted her hand to shield her eyes.

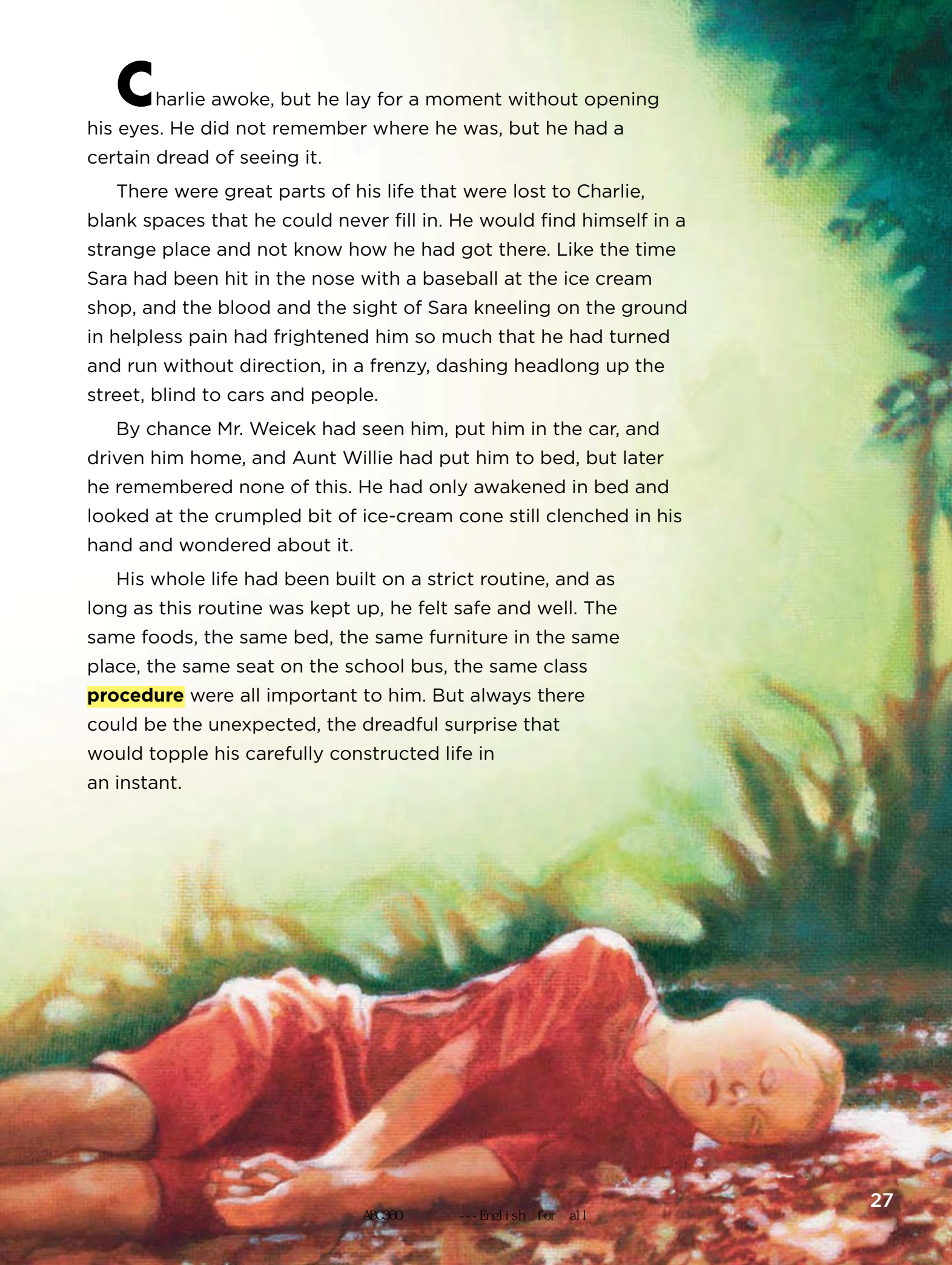
“I thought I heard something. Charlie! Answer me right this minute.”

She waited with the slipper held against her, one hand to her eyes, her whole body motionless, concentrating on her brother. Then she stiffened. She thought again she had heard something—Charlie’s long high wail. Charlie could sound sadder than anyone when he cried.

In her **anxiety** she took the slipper and twisted it again and again as if she were wringing water out. She called, then stopped abruptly and listened. She looked at Joe and he shook his head slowly.

She looked away. A bird rose from the trees below and flew toward the hills in the distance. She waited until she could see it no longer and then slowly, still listening for the call that didn’t come, she sank to the ground and sat with her head bent over her knees.

Beside her, Joe scuffed his foot in the dust and sent a **cascade** of rocks and dirt down the bank. When the sound of it faded, he began to call, “Charlie, hey, Charlie,” again and again.



Charlie awoke, but he lay for a moment without opening his eyes. He did not remember where he was, but he had a certain dread of seeing it.

There were great parts of his life that were lost to Charlie, blank spaces that he could never fill in. He would find himself in a strange place and not know how he had got there. Like the time Sara had been hit in the nose with a baseball at the ice cream shop, and the blood and the sight of Sara kneeling on the ground in helpless pain had frightened him so much that he had turned and run without direction, in a frenzy, dashing headlong up the street, blind to cars and people.

By chance Mr. Weicek had seen him, put him in the car, and driven him home, and Aunt Willie had put him to bed, but later he remembered none of this. He had only awakened in bed and looked at the crumpled bit of ice-cream cone still clenched in his hand and wondered about it.

His whole life had been built on a strict routine, and as long as this routine was kept up, he felt safe and well. The same foods, the same bed, the same furniture in the same place, the same seat on the school bus, the same class **procedure** were all important to him. But always there could be the unexpected, the dreadful surprise that would topple his carefully constructed life in an instant.

The first thing he became aware of was the twigs pressing into his face, and he put his hand under his cheek. Still he did not open his eyes. Pictures began to drift into his mind; he saw Aunt Willie's box which was filled with old jewelry and buttons and knickknacks, and he found that he could remember every item in that box—the string of white beads without a clasp, the old earrings, the tiny book with **souvenir** fold-out pictures of New York, the plastic decorations from cakes, the turtle made of sea shells. Every item was so real that he opened his eyes and was surprised to see, instead of the glittering contents of the box, the dull and unfamiliar forest.

He raised his head and immediately felt the aching of his body. Slowly he sat up and looked down at his hands. His fingernails were black with earth, two of them broken below the quick, and he got up slowly and sat on the log behind him and inspected his fingers more closely.

Then he sat up straight. His hands dropped to his lap. His head cocked to the side like a bird listening. Slowly he straightened until he was standing. At his side his fingers twitched at the empty air as if to grasp something. He took a step forward, still with his head to the side. He remained absolutely still.

Then he began to cry out in a hoarse excited voice, again and again, screaming now, because he had just heard someone far away calling his name.

At the top of the hill Sara got slowly to her feet and stood looking down at the forest. She pushed the hair back from her forehead and moistened her lips. The wind dried them as she waited.

Joe started to say something but she reached out one hand and took his arm to stop him. Scarcely daring to believe her ears, she stepped closer to the edge of the bank. Now she heard it unmistakably—the sharp repeated cry—and she knew it was Charlie.

“Charlie!” she shouted with all her might.



She paused and listened, and his cries were louder and she knew he was not far away after all, just down the slope, in the direction of the ravine.

“It’s Charlie, it’s Charlie!”

A wild joy overtook her and she jumped up and down on the bare earth and she felt that she could crush the whole hill just by jumping if she wanted.

She sat and scooted down the bank, sending earth and pebbles in a cascade before her. She landed on the soft ground, ran a few steps, lost her balance, caught hold of the first tree trunk she could find, and swung around till she stopped.

She let out another whoop of pure joy, turned and ran down the hill in great strides, the puce tennis shoes slapping the ground like rubber paddles, the wind in her face, her hands grabbing one tree trunk after another for support. She felt like a wild creature who had traveled through the forest this way for a lifetime. Nothing could stop her now.

At the edge of the ravine she paused and stood gasping for breath. Her heart was beating so fast it pounded in her ears, and her throat was dry. She leaned against a tree, resting her cheek against the rough bark.



Character

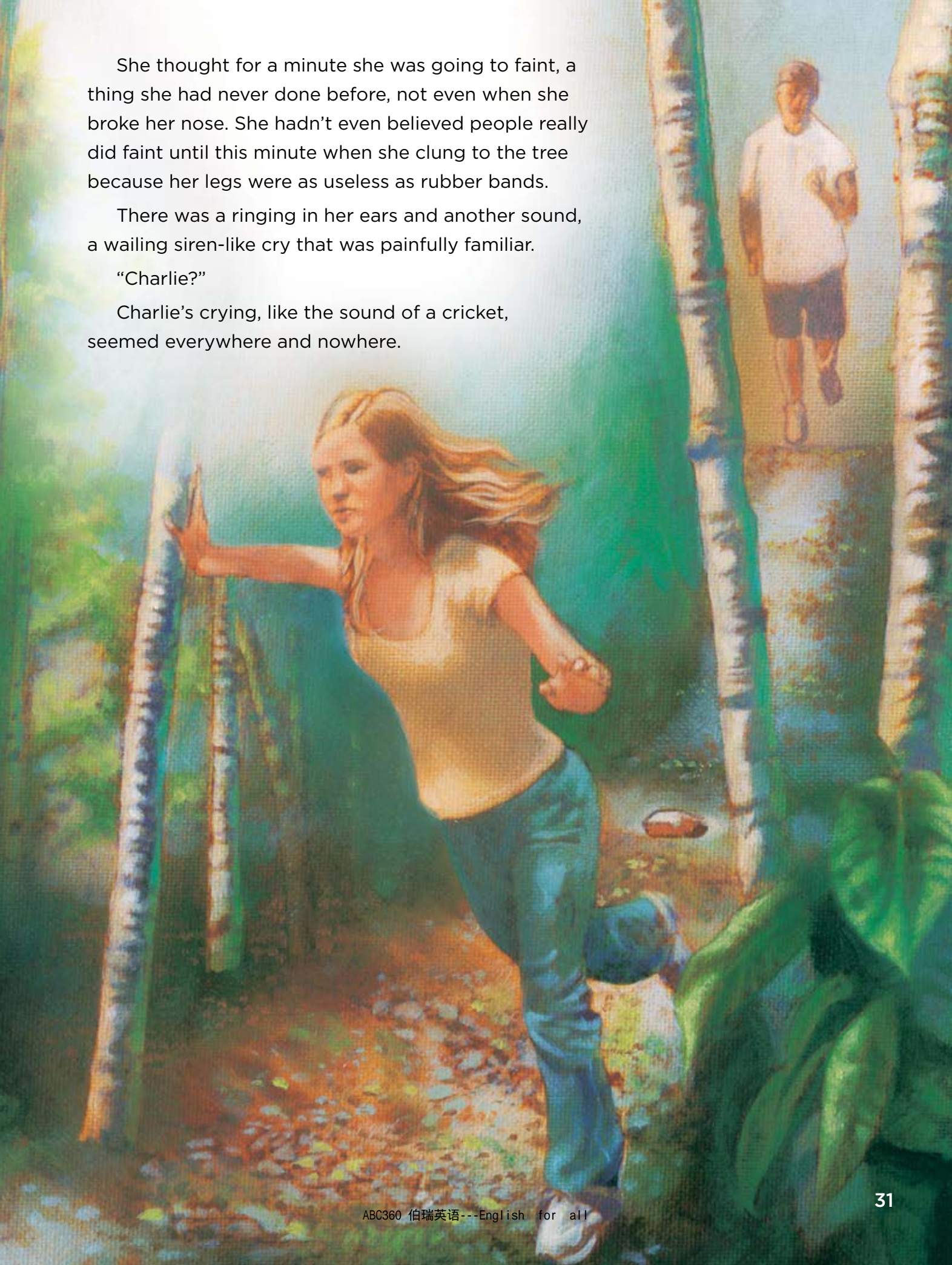
How have Sara’s emotions changed from the beginning of the story to when she hears Charlie?

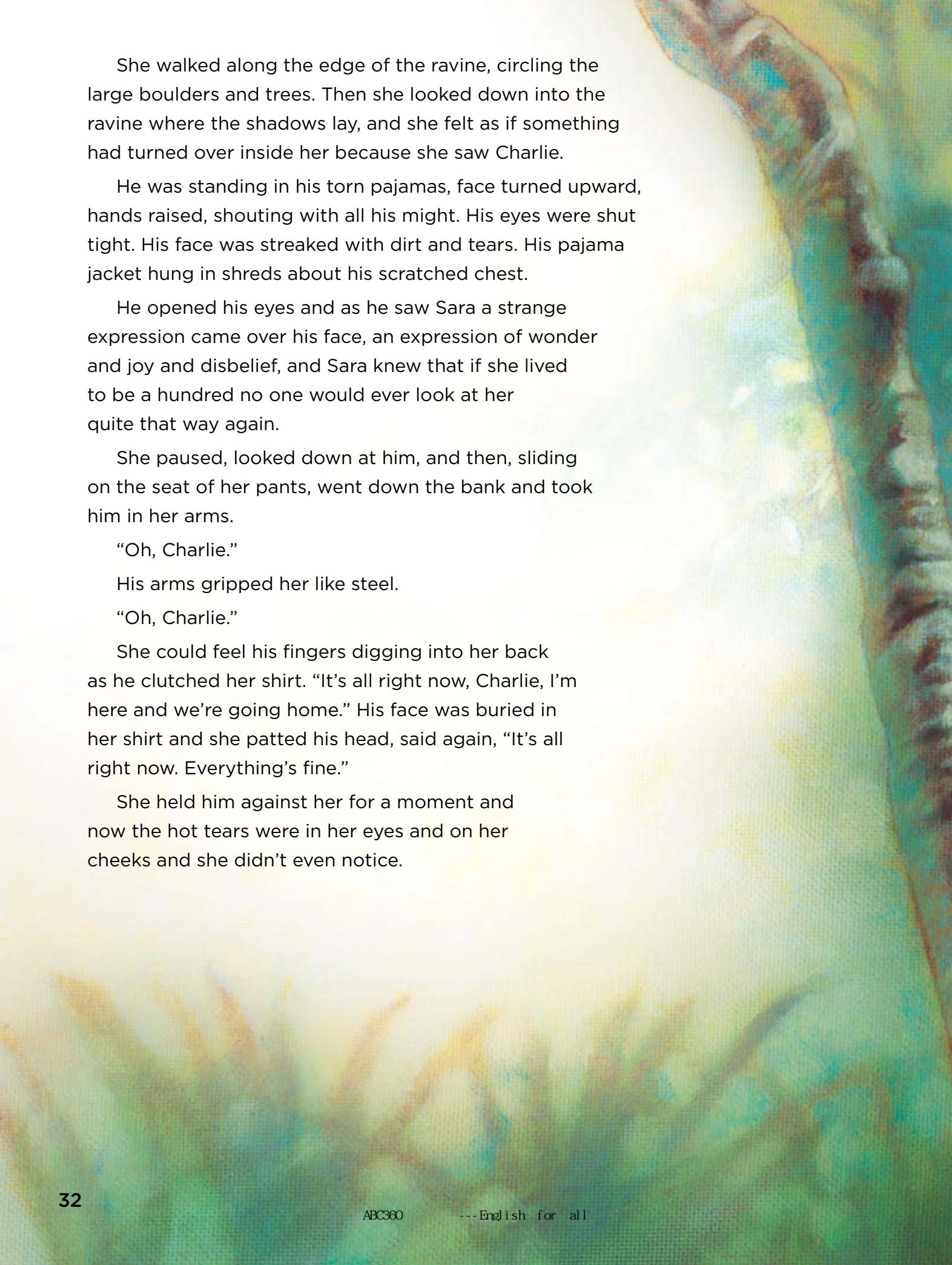
She thought for a minute she was going to faint, a thing she had never done before, not even when she broke her nose. She hadn't even believed people really did faint until this minute when she clung to the tree because her legs were as useless as rubber bands.

There was a ringing in her ears and another sound, a wailing siren-like cry that was painfully familiar.

“Charlie?”

Charlie's crying, like the sound of a cricket, seemed everywhere and nowhere.





She walked along the edge of the ravine, circling the large boulders and trees. Then she looked down into the ravine where the shadows lay, and she felt as if something had turned over inside her because she saw Charlie.

He was standing in his torn pajamas, face turned upward, hands raised, shouting with all his might. His eyes were shut tight. His face was streaked with dirt and tears. His pajama jacket hung in shreds about his scratched chest.

He opened his eyes and as he saw Sara a strange expression came over his face, an expression of wonder and joy and disbelief, and Sara knew that if she lived to be a hundred no one would ever look at her quite that way again.

She paused, looked down at him, and then, sliding on the seat of her pants, went down the bank and took him in her arms.

“Oh, Charlie.”

His arms gripped her like steel.

“Oh, Charlie.”

She could feel his fingers digging into her back as he clutched her shirt. “It’s all right now, Charlie, I’m here and we’re going home.” His face was buried in her shirt and she patted his head, said again, “It’s all right now. Everything’s fine.”

She held him against her for a moment and now the hot tears were in her eyes and on her cheeks and she didn’t even notice.



MEET THE AUTHOR



Betsy Byars's first book was rejected eleven times! But she kept reading (a book a day) and writing, and now she has many published books. *The Summer of the Swans* won the Newbery Medal, a distinguished honor. All of Byars's stories come from her life. She calls them scrapbooks because they bring back memories from her past. When Betsy is not reading or writing, she is flying in her plane, parked at the end of her airstrip outside her front door!



Find out more about Betsy Byars at www.macmillanmh.com

Other books by Betsy Byars: *The Midnight Fox* and *The 18th Emergency*



Author's Purpose

Authors write to inform, persuade, entertain, or explain. In describing the longest day in Sara's life, Byars both entertains and informs. Give examples.

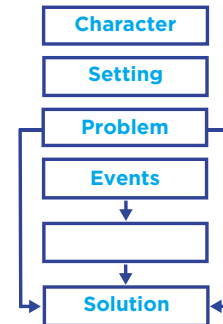


Comprehension Check



Summarize

Use your Story Map to summarize *The Summer of the Swans*. Tell about the different emotions that Sara feels while searching for Charlie.



Think and Compare

1. Reread page 32, paragraph 3. How do you think Charlie's reaction to seeing Sara changes how Sara feels about herself?

Story Structure: Character, Setting, Plot

2. Why does Sara feel **anxiety** when she looks at the forest? Use evidence from the text to support your answer. **Analyze**
3. Reread the flashback section on page 27. If you saw the world like Charlie does, how would you handle being lost? **Evaluate**
4. The setting of the story presents many obstacles for Sara to overcome. If you were to plan a search for Charlie, what would you need in order to overcome these obstacles? **Synthesize**
5. Read "Sam's Summer Search" on pages 18-19. How do friends help in the two situations? **Reading/Writing Across Texts**

