330 FEET!

Rio the Waterdrop's Journey Through the Waterways of West Texas and Southern New Mexico

Three hundred and thirty feet beneath the earth...

Deep in the water well at the La Semilla farm in Anthony, New Mexico...

Rio the waterdrop awaited his destiny.

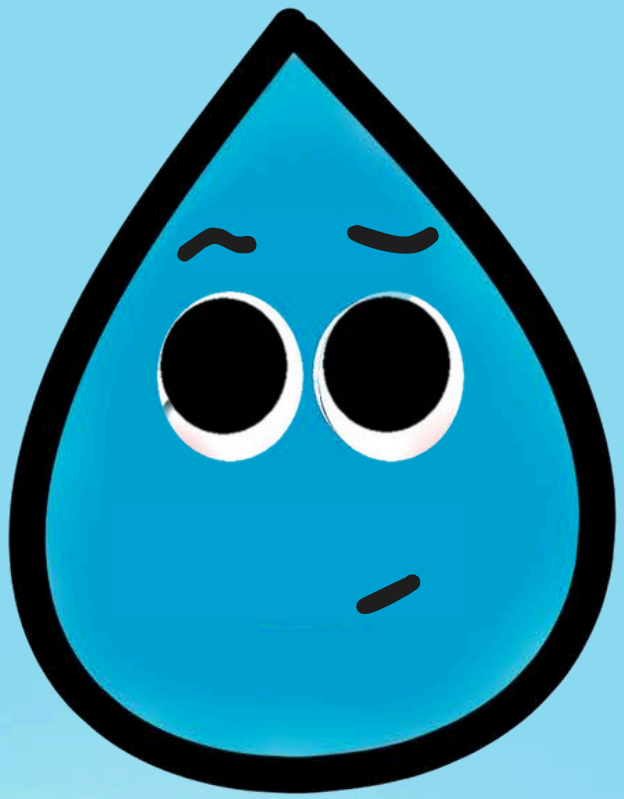
Along with his fellow waterdrops, Rio knew that one day soon, he'd have the chance to help water the crops at the La Semilla farm, providing sustenance not only to the plants but to the community members who eat them - a circle of life he'd waited for all 14 isotopes, or years in water-speak, of his life.

When the well opened, he'd travel the 330 feet - much steeper than your average well - up into the bright and sunny world of southern New Mexico and stream into the soft soil where the roots awaited them all.

And Rio was unbelievably stoked.

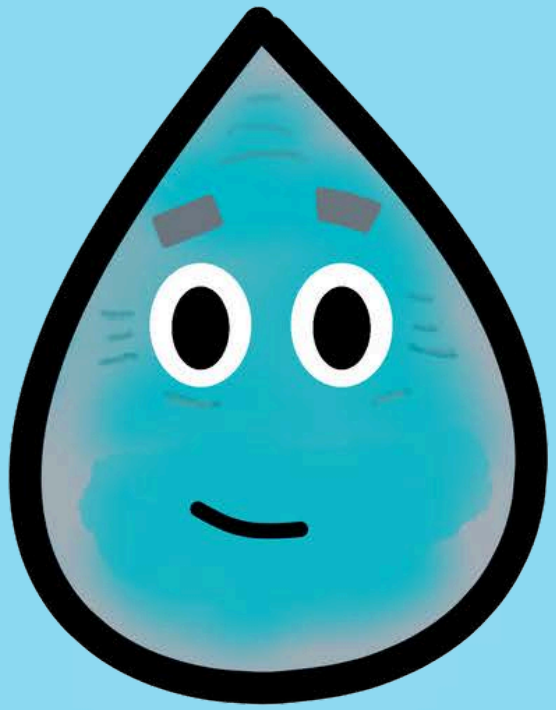
Our destinies often manifest at different times. Our destinies are often intertwined. Rio could not wait for his.

But Rio knew that waiting for his destiny could take a while, and as he waited, he couldn't help but wonder how it all came to be in the first place, how he got so lucky to end up here with his crystal-clear journey ahead of him.

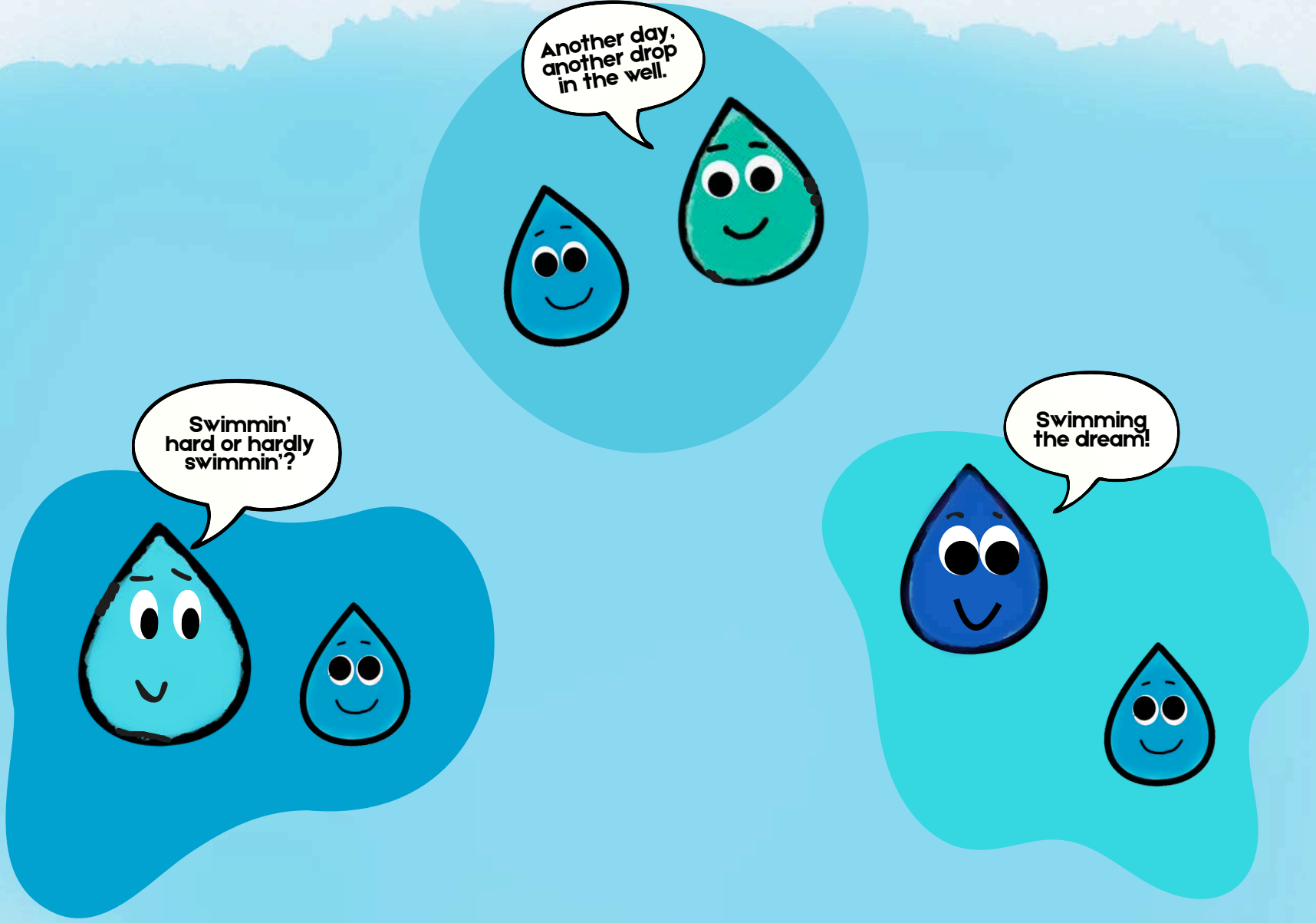


He knew how water communities came to be - the concept of the krill and the sardines. But he could have been a waterdrop anywhere else in this world, like a lake at a summer camp or a salty droplet in the vastness of the ocean. It's not every day one finds themselves in the deserts of New Mexico.

Rio knew exactly who he could ask for help deciphering this murky puzzle - his friend, Mr. Turbid.



Mr. Turbid had been waiting 67 isotopes for his journey to the farm, and he knew everything there was to know about the well and the farm, the community it supports.



Rio made his way down his liquid neighborhood to Mr. Turbid's house. It was a typical day in the La Semilla water well. His fellow waterdrops swam about. His neighbors went with the flow, enjoying their time in the well knowing that one day it would be washed away and replenished with a new waterdrop community.

On his way to Mr. Turbid's, Rio ran into his best friend Brook. She was 14 isotopes just like him and took chemistry with him.

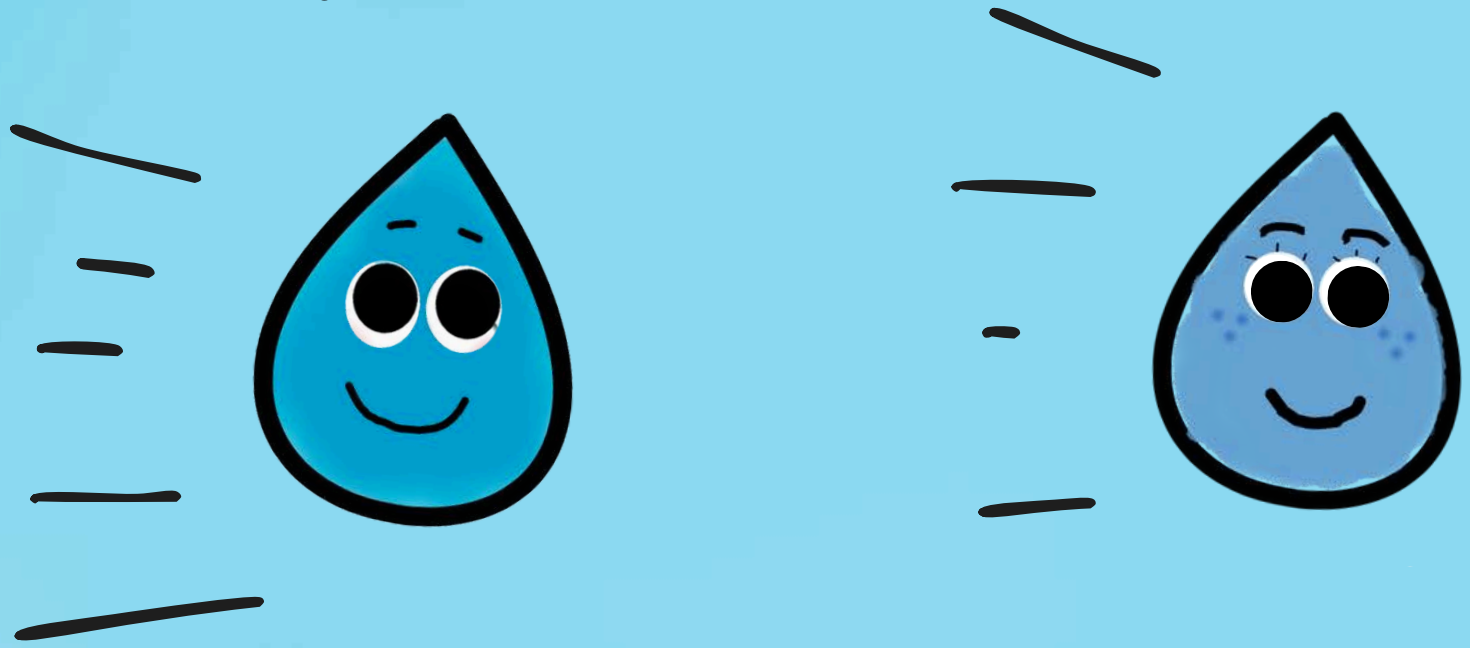
Brook perked up when she saw him. "Where you going, Rio?"

"To visit Mr. Turbid," Rio said, smiling at his friend. "I have questions about my destiny."

"Oooh," Brook said, considering this statement carefully. Rio realized that maybe they all had questions about their destinies. "Can I come?"

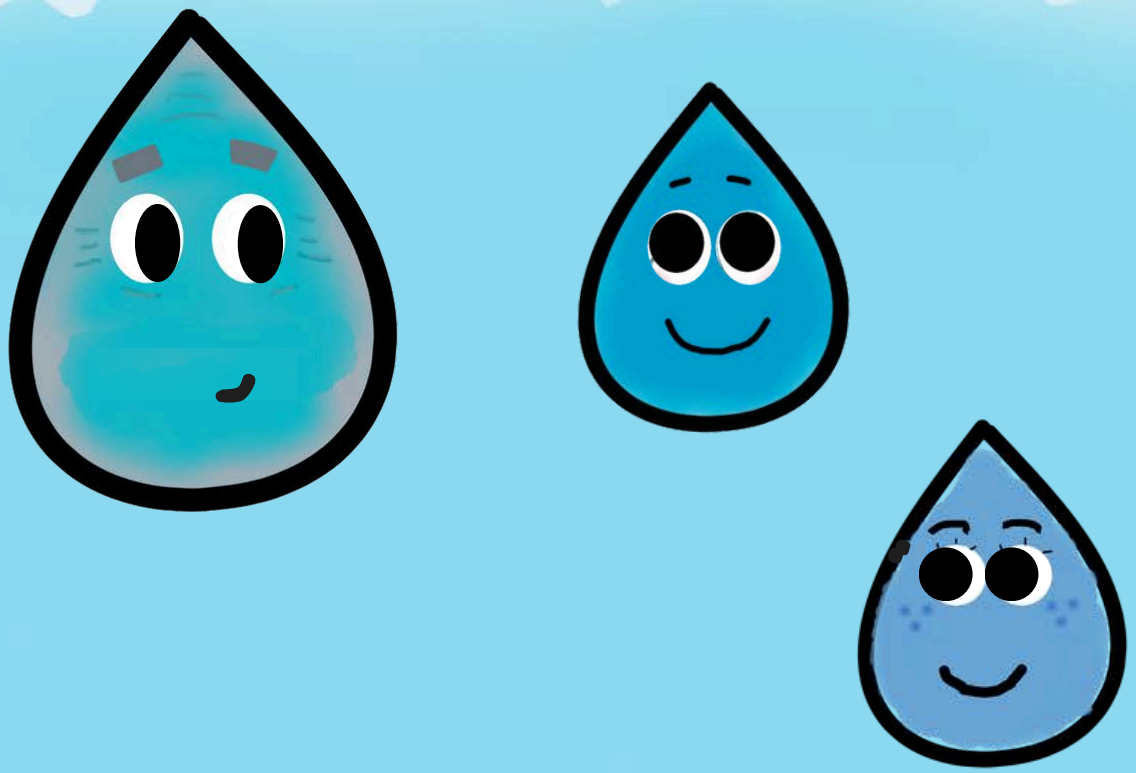
"Sure!"

"Race you there!" Rio said,
darting past her.



Brook swam past him, rippling the
water as she did. "Eat my bubbles!

Rio raced to keep up, but she still beat him to Mr. Turbid's
house. He rang his doorbell, and they waited.



"Rio!" Mr. Turbid said as he opened his door. "Brook! To what do I owe this pleasure?"

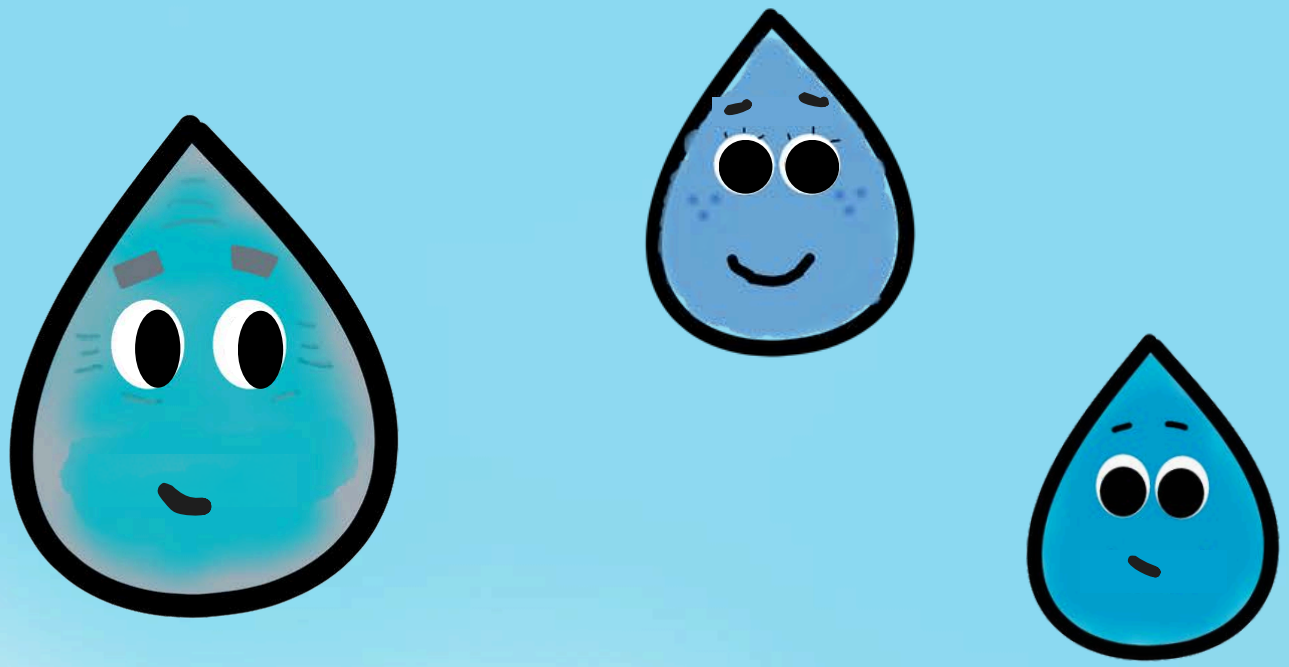
"We have questions about our destinies," Rio said.

"Well, sure," Mr. Turbid said. "Don't we all? Let's sit on the porch."

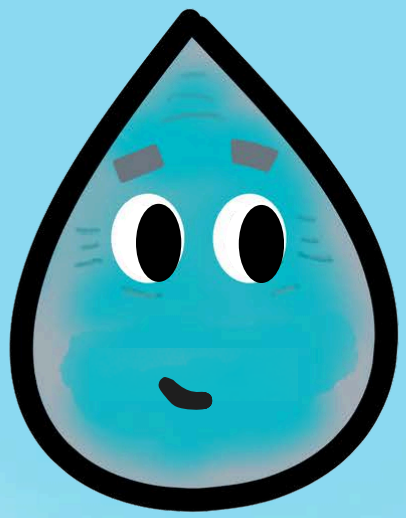
The three of them settled in on the porch. “So what kind of questions do you have? I may not have all the answers, but I will do my best to help you.”

Brook turned to Rio, awaiting his response. Rio felt suddenly nervous, like he had jellyfish in his stomach. It was a big deal thinking about his destiny.

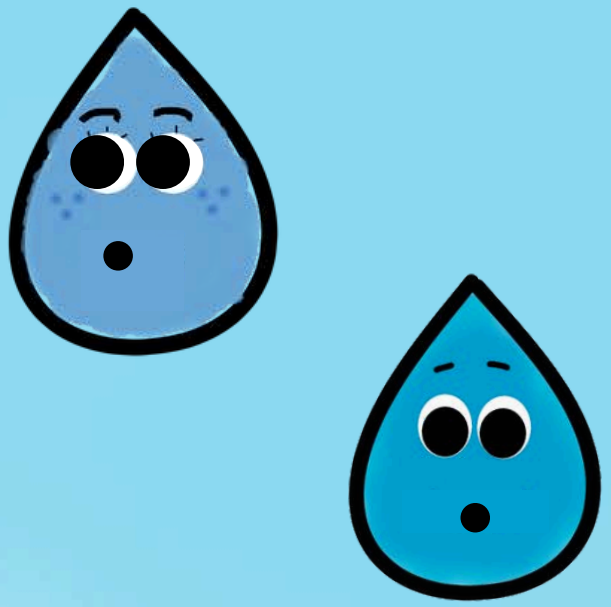
“I’m curious how I got so lucky,” Rio said. “How did I end up here? We could be in any other water system all over the world.”



Mr. Turbid laughed a burly laugh. “That’s very true. But really, so much had to happen for us to end up here. For example, this entire region used to be underwater.”

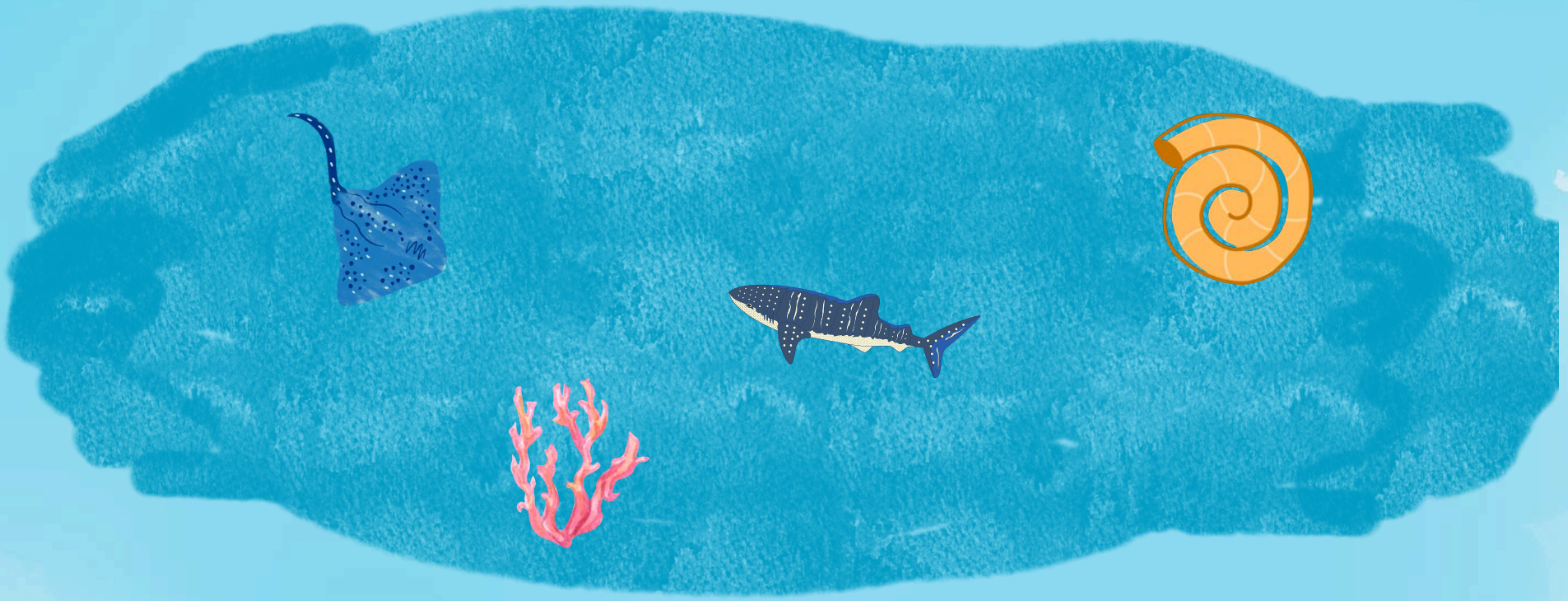


“Huh?” Brook said.



“But I thought this was the desert?”

“It is! But at one point, much of Texas was sea. Like during the Permian Period millions of years ago.”

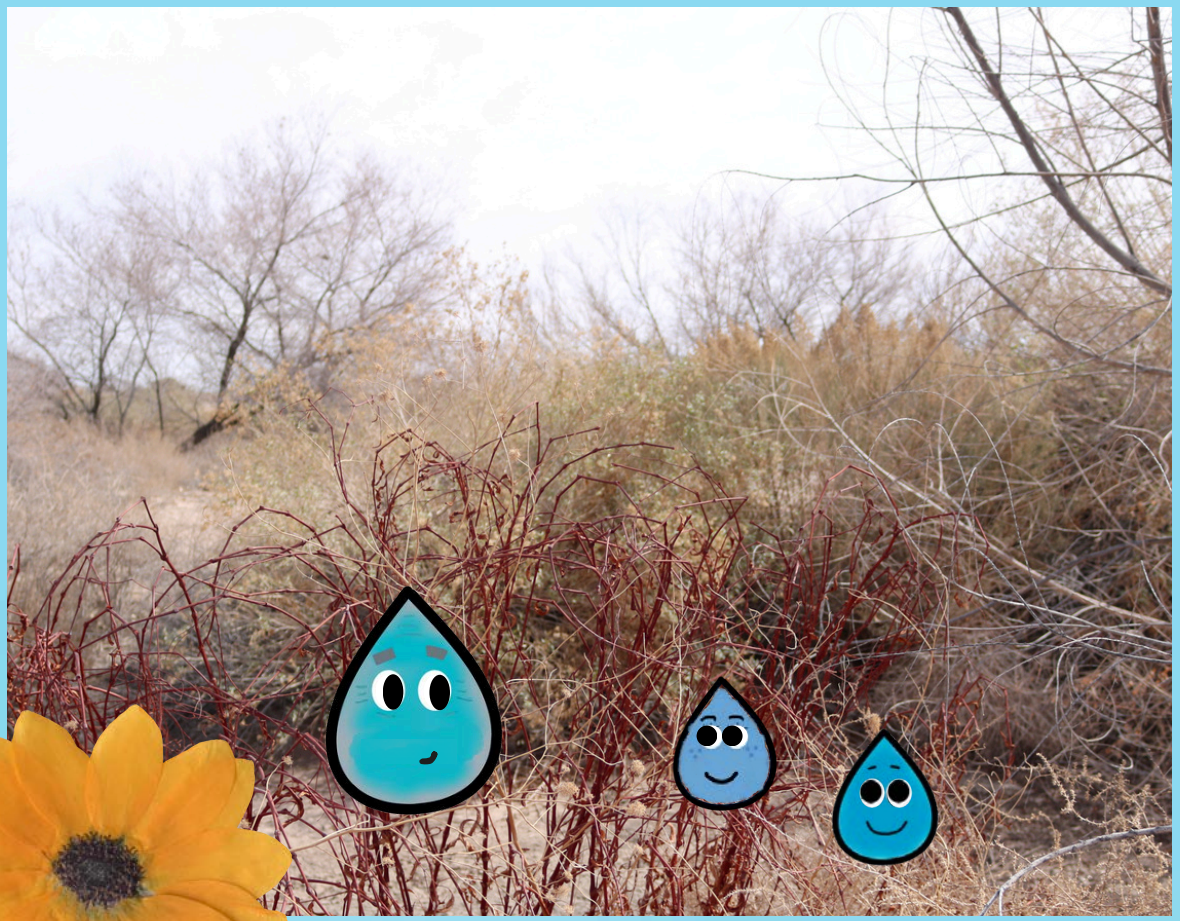


“This was one giant reef filled with ammonites, brachiopods and sea creatures alike.”

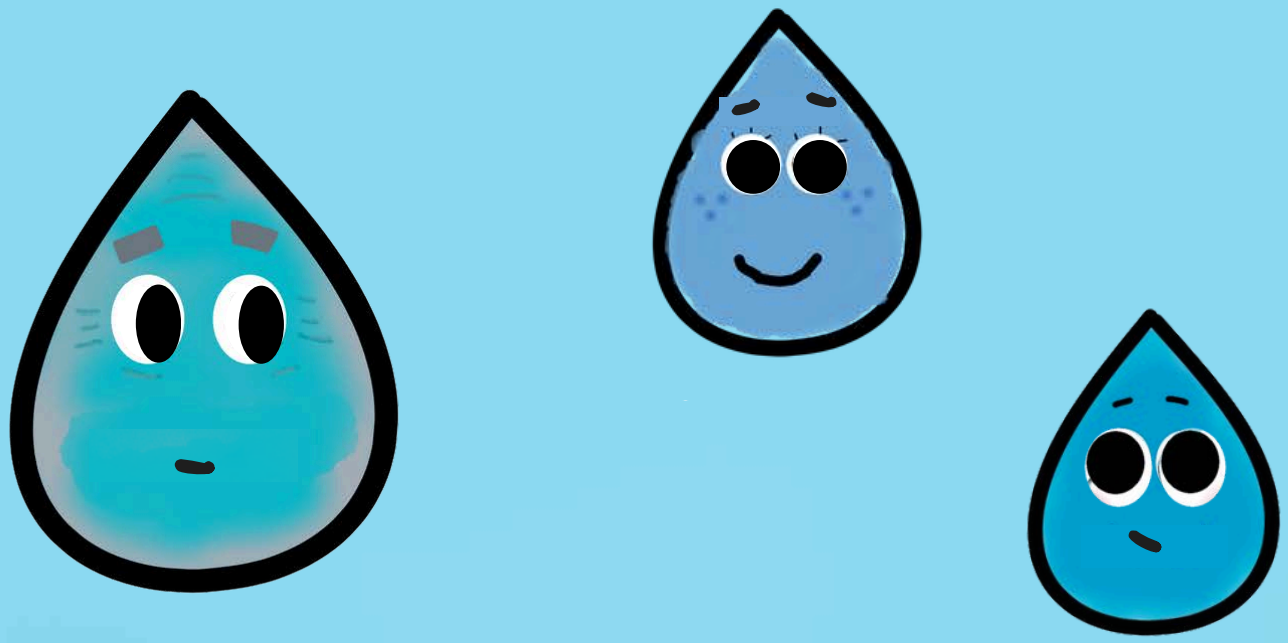
“But how come we’re a desert today?” Rio asked. “Isn’t the desert supposed to be dry?”

“The Earth is often in transition, and over the course of millions of years, this area became the beautiful desert it is today. However, the Rio Grande still flowed and provided sustenance to the people of the region. Despite popular belief, the desert is a gift. It gives and gives.”

"Which is why Indigenous groups like the Tigua and the Pueblo made the desert land their home."



"So then why is the well needed?" Brook asked.



"Well," Mr. Turbid began, and Rio couldn't help but notice he looked a little uncomfortable, a little sad.

Rio sat up straight knowing that what Mr. Turbid was about to tell them was going to be difficult.

"Water is important for everyday life, but had the region been left untouched by climate change, colonialism, and politics, I imagine our destinies would look quite different."

“Today, water in the region comes from a combination of the Rio Grande, groundwater, and water reclamation, among other sources. Its usage and distribution is highly political.”

Pictured: a dry riverbed at the Rio Bosque, a wetland habitat impacted by regulations placed on the Rio Grande.

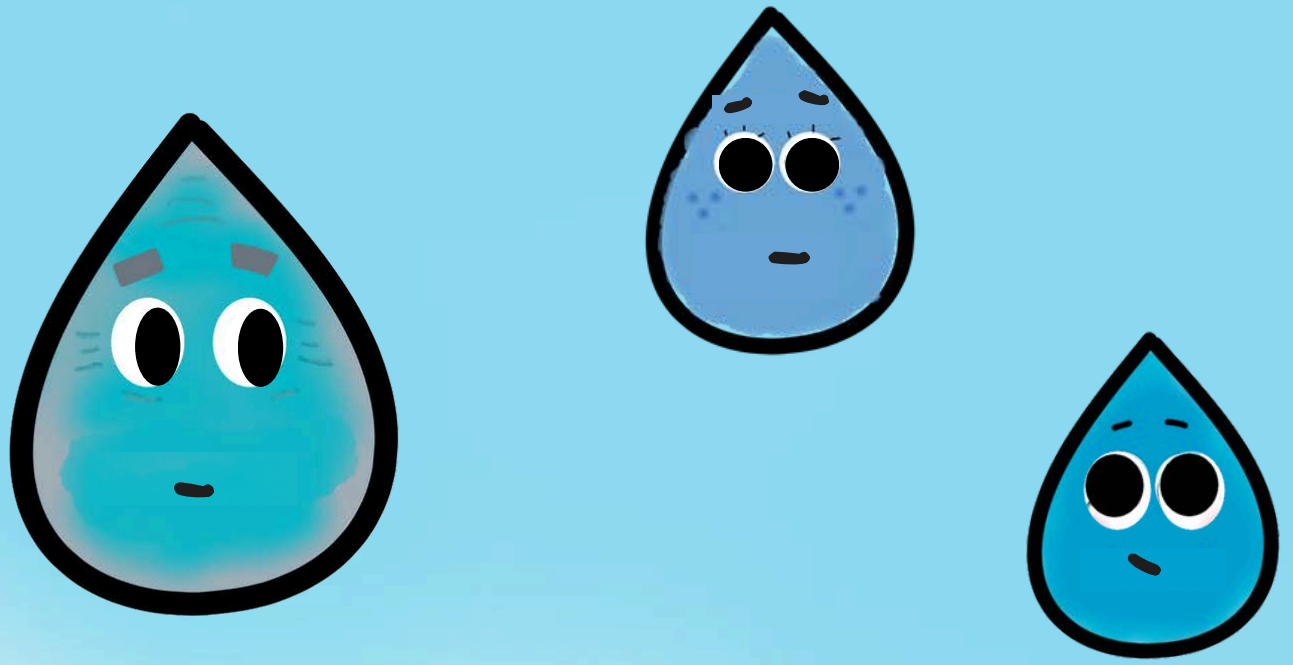
“But the Rio Grande has been here much, much longer than these politics, having first formed millions of years ago as water levels rose to topographical levels.”

Pictured: the Rio Grande flowing through Big Bend National Park.

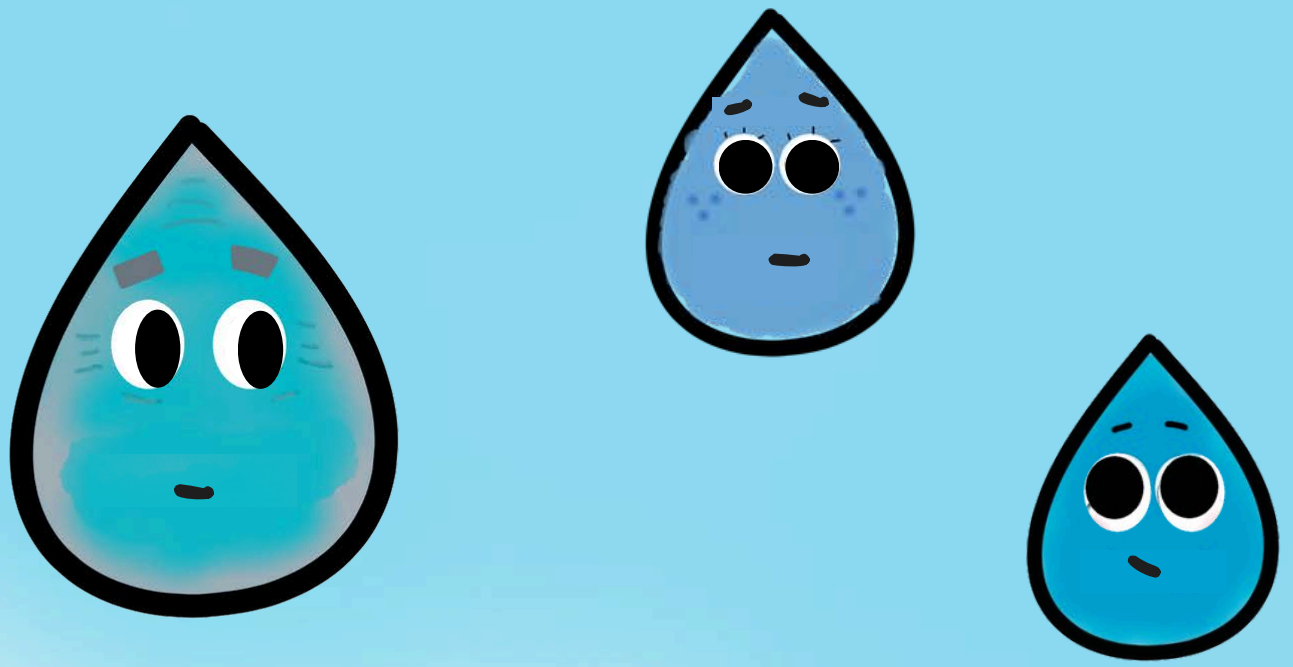
“Eventually, the lakes in New Mexico began to connect, and the river connected from where it begins in Colorado to where it exits into the Gulf of Mexico - a length of 1,896 miles in total. The river lives in two countries, Mexico and the United States, across three U.S. and four Mexican states. ”

Pictured: the Rio Grande flowing through Big Bend National Park.

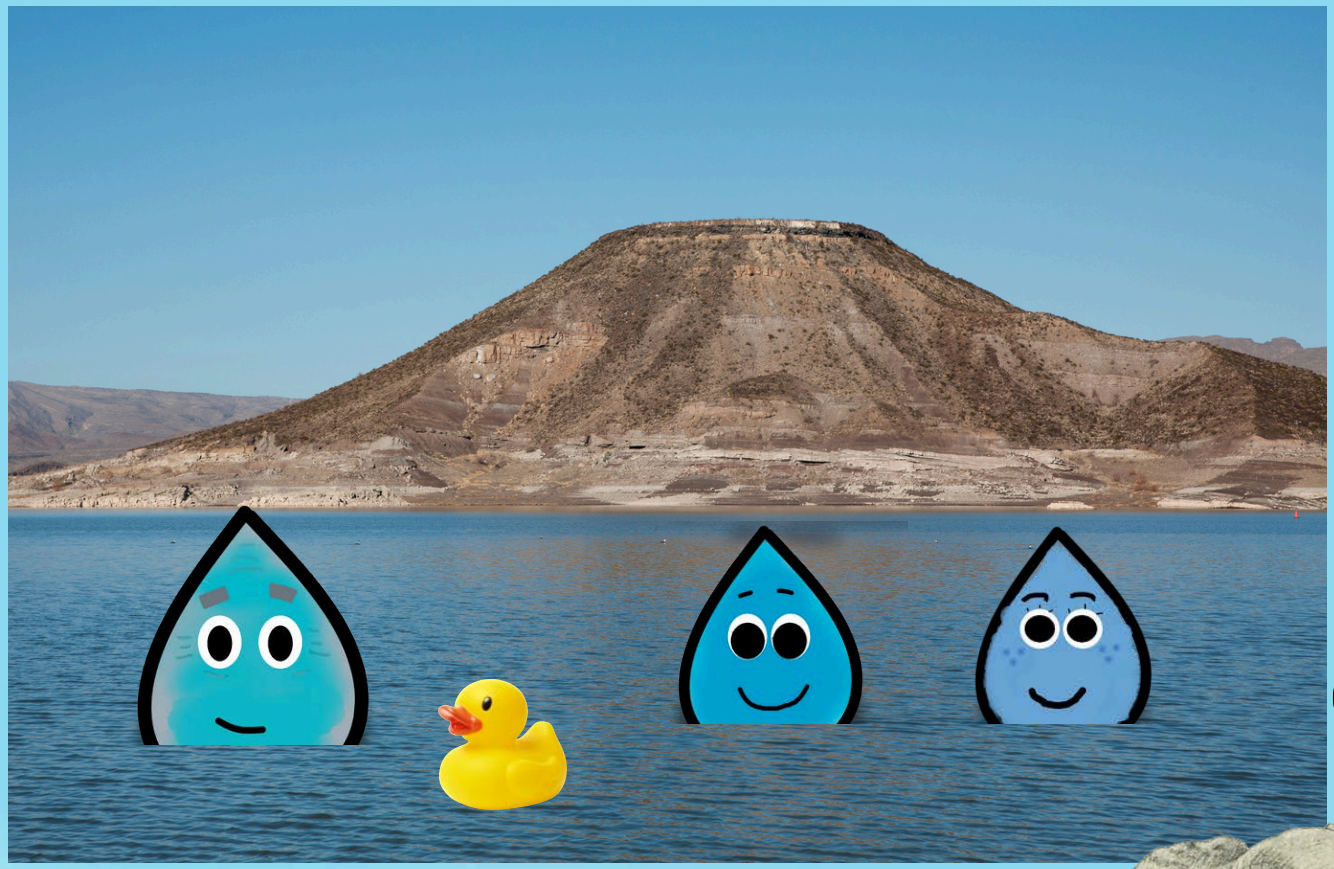
"For many years, Indigenous peoples, like the Pueblo, lived along the river. They used the river for their livelihoods, but they also respected and celebrated the river as a living being. However, this changed as the land was colonized and the Pueblo were forced to leave."



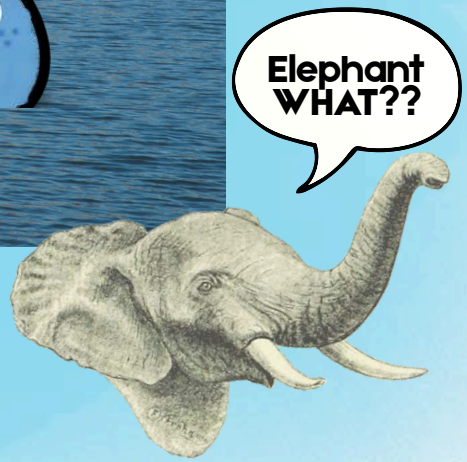
"The land was eventually claimed by the United States. As the different regions along the Rio Grande and their agricultural needs grew, the United States government intervened, implementing policies regulating the river's waters."



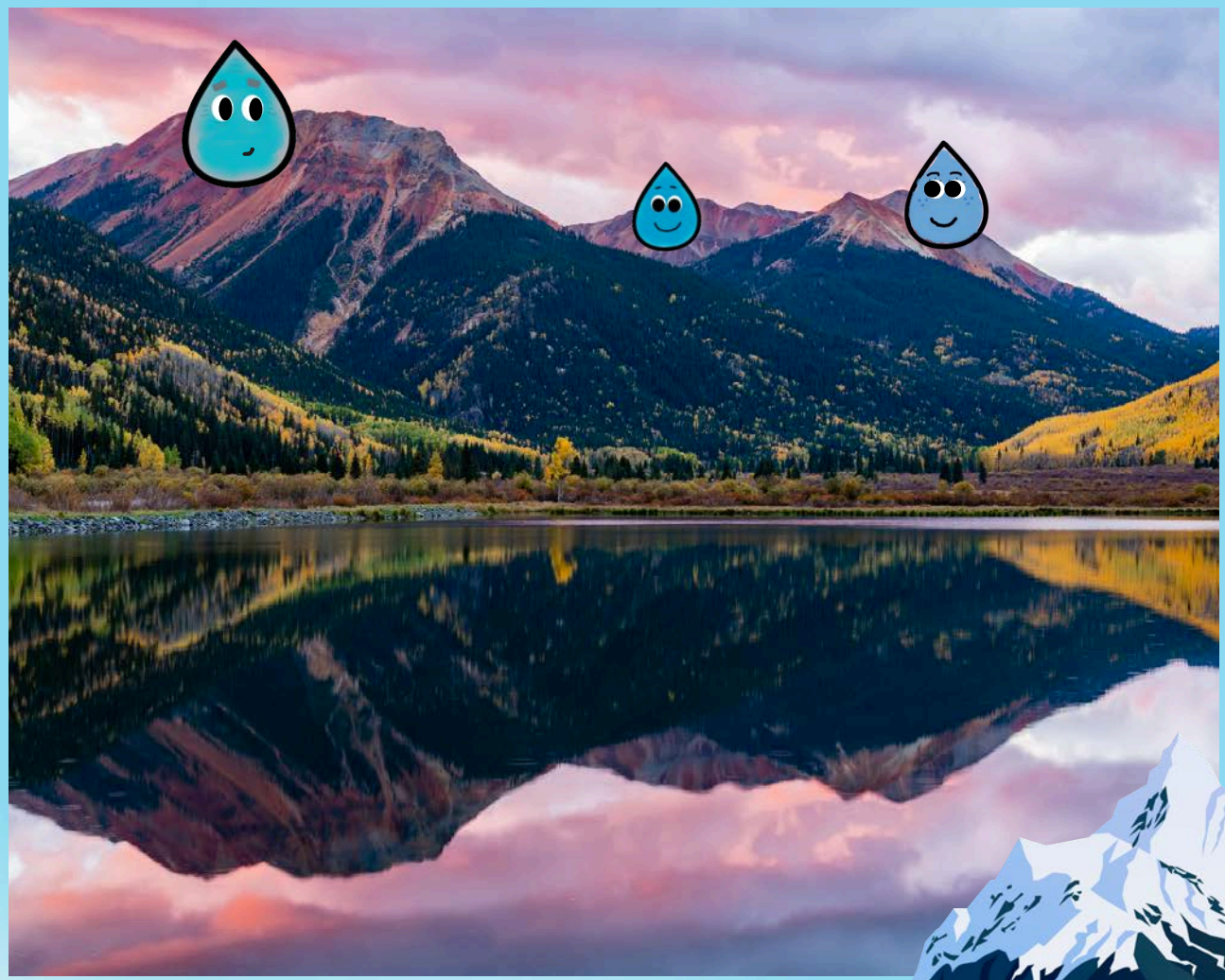
“To control the flow of the river and its distribution among the states, the Elephant Butte Dam was constructed in 1916. It was then rectified and canalized in the 1930s. Though most people probably know Elephant Butte as a popular camping spot in the region.”



Pictured: Elephant Butte lake.



“Today, the amount of water distributed amongst the states - and the amount of water in Elephant Butte - depends on the amount of snowfall the year before in the San Juan Mountains in Colorado. With climate change, this is becoming more and more unpredictable.”

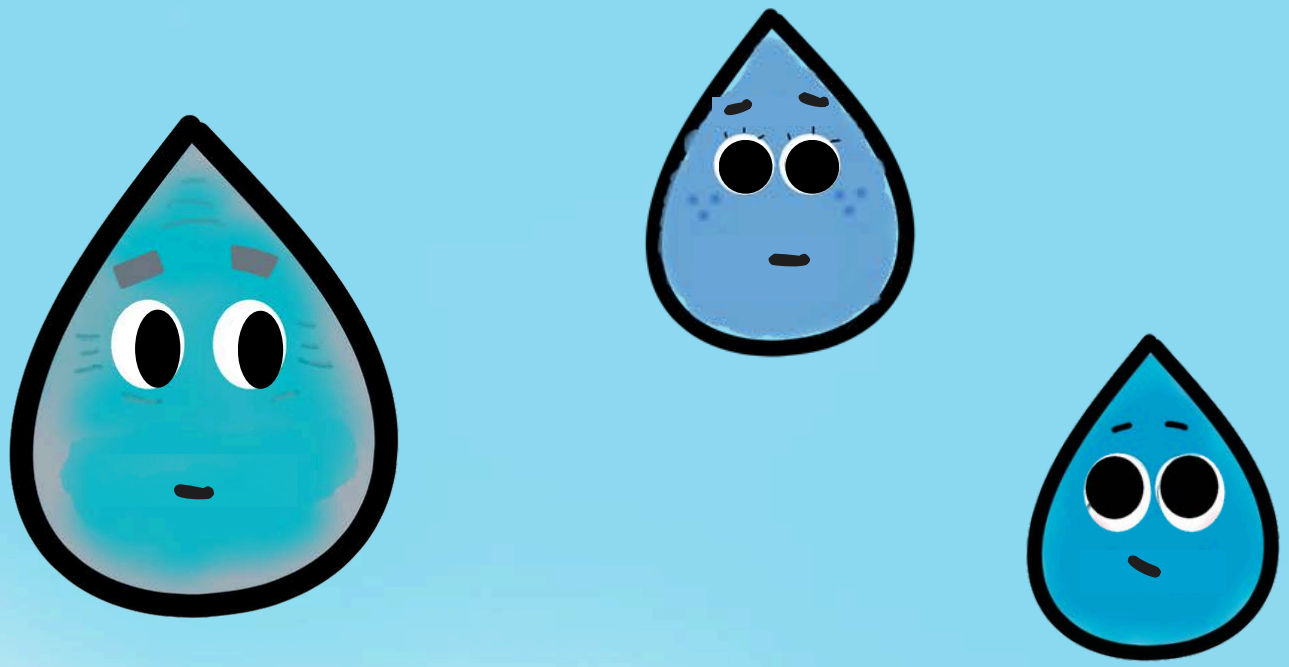


Pictured: the San Juan Mountains in Colorado.

“These policies have also created what can be called “string of pearls’ regions of the river, which have been cut off from the main river. This includes the Rio Bosque Wetlands Park. These regions are filled with an abundance of beautiful wildlife, including Bernie the Beaver, which is why organizers fight to preserve these habitats.”

Pictured: Rio Bosque Wetlands Park.

“This complexity set the foundation for the Rio Grande today, including policies on water-sharing between the United States and Mexico, especially since the river is used as the border between the two countries. It is also why you may see water in the riverbed in the spring and summer months but not in the fall and winter months. It also determines when and how much water farmers in the region receive.”



“The water at La Semilla comes from two sources: irrigation determined by the Elephant Butte Irrigation District and us here in the water well.”

“Like us here, water can also be found underground, in what’s called aquifers, or underground layers made of materials that can bear water. This region heavily relies on the Hueco and Mesilla Bolson aquifers for water.”

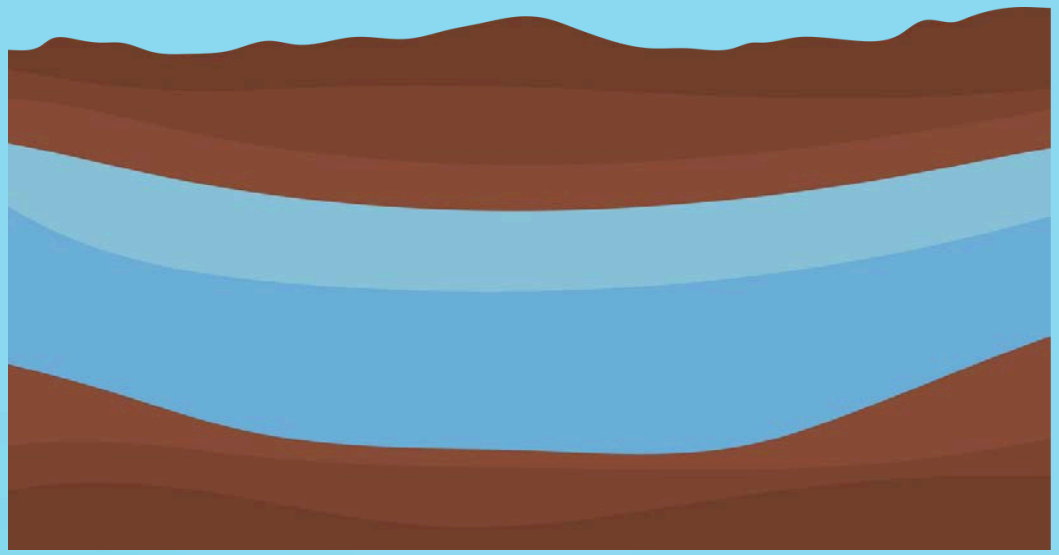


Diagram: Example of an aquifer.

“And because of the fluctuation in water availability, water reclamation - or the process of treating wastewater to be reused for what we call non-potable purposes, like irrigation, has also become increasingly popular.”

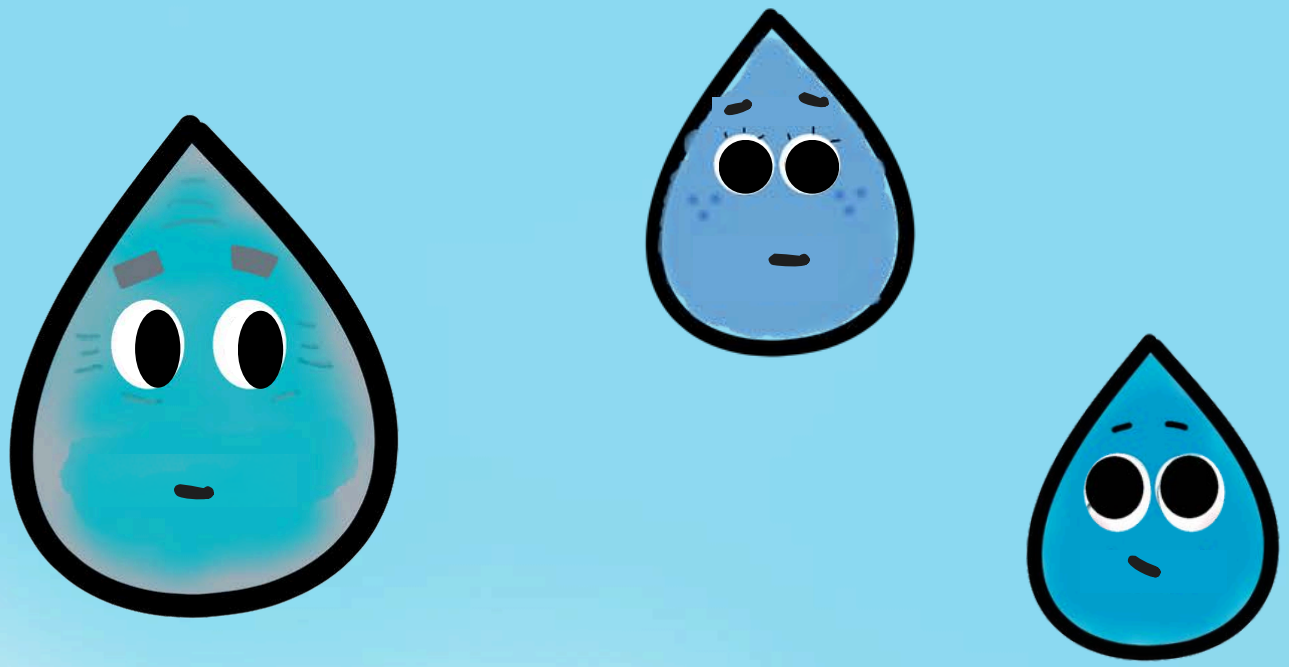
Pictured: Non-potable water source at the La Semilla farm.

"Here in the La Semilla water well, we come from the Mesilla Bolson aquifer. And that's how our destinies came to be, with us here excitedly waiting to water the crops that contribute to supporting their mission of fostering a healthy, fair, and sustainable food system in the region."

Pictured: An opening at the La Semilla farm that distributes water to the farm.

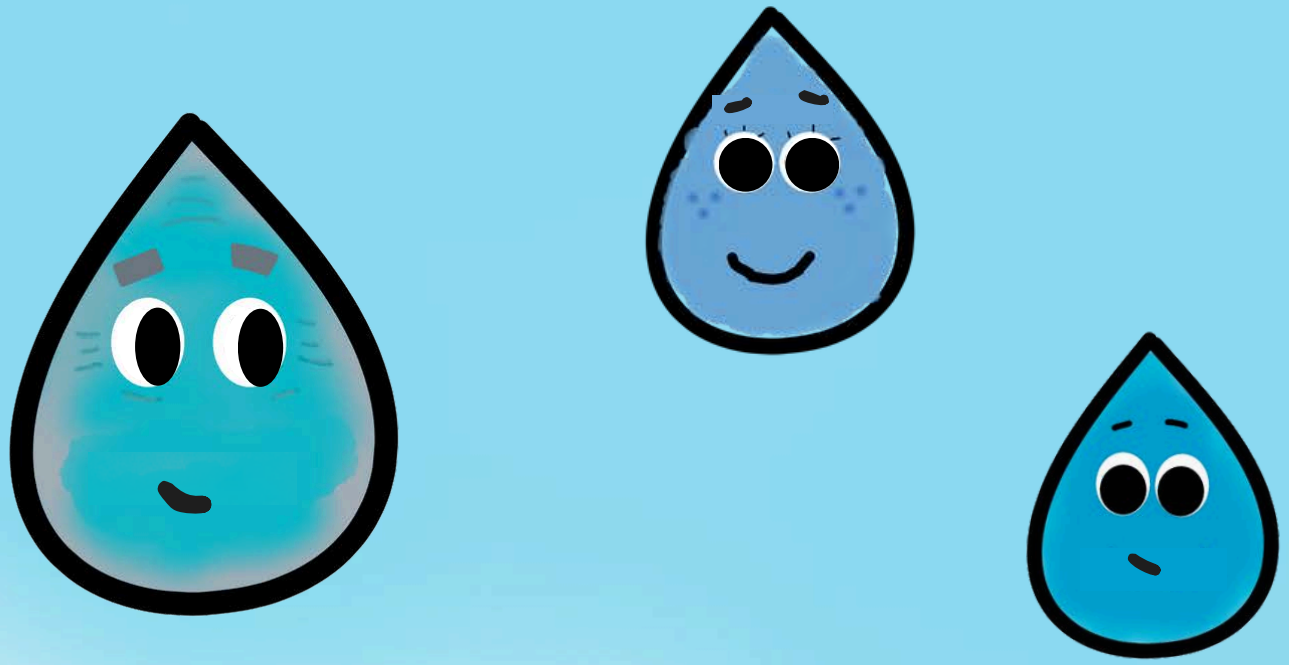
“But water is a living being,” Rio said, looking at his friends, his heart swelling with both pride and sadness.

“It is our most valuable resource,” Mr. Turbid added. “But sometimes our destines are laid out before us because our histories cannot be unwritten.”



“But not all of it has been good,” Rio lamented, questioning how so much bad could be wrapped up in his story.

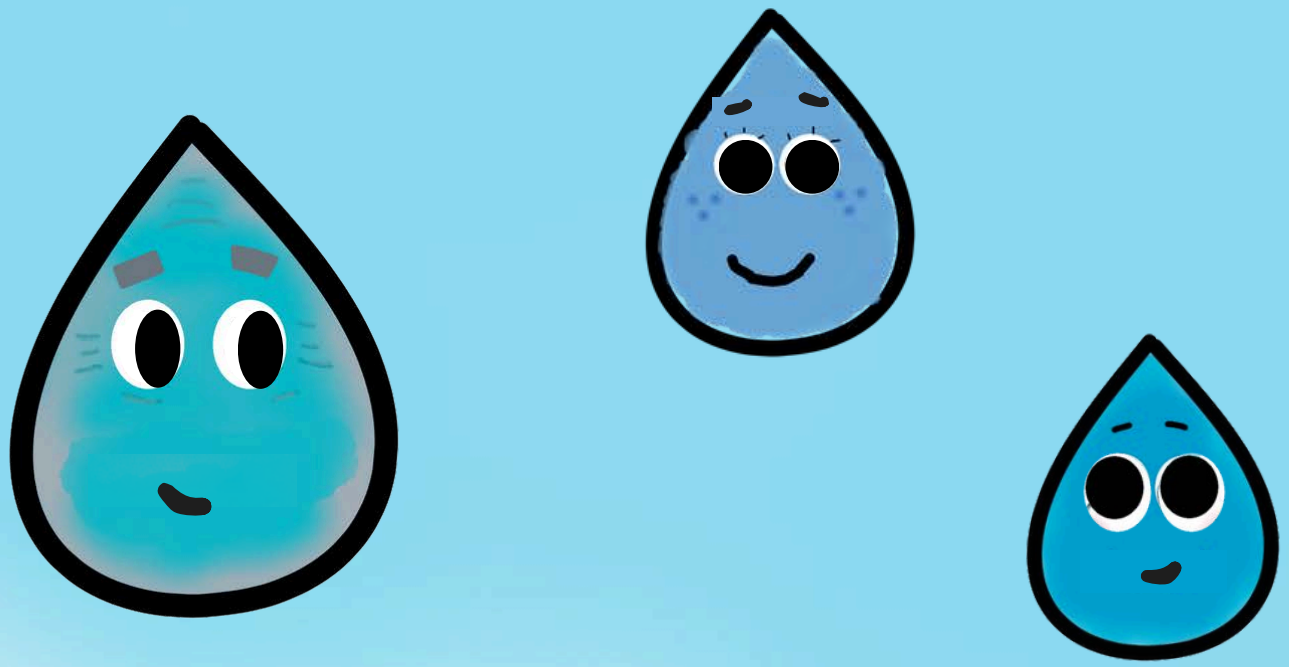
“Yes, but like humans, water is resilient.”



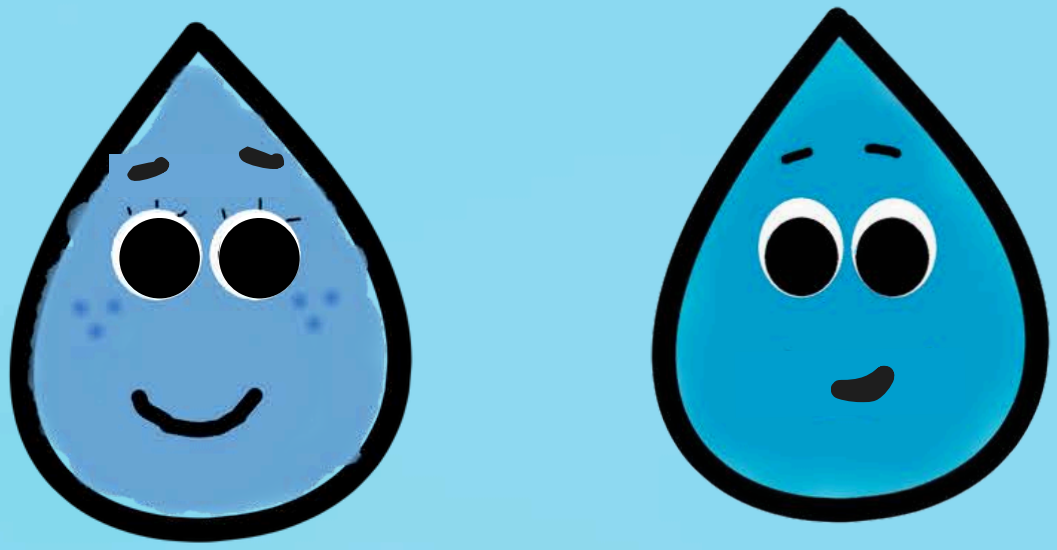
“Water is celebrated.
Water is fought for.”

Pictured: Water Moves, a celebration of water, hosted at the Rio Bosque.

“And things like community organizing, environmental justice practitioners, and community farms are working to protect our regional waterways and food sources. Three hundred and thirty feet may seem like a long distance to travel to reach our destinies, but the impact of our work travels much, much farther.”



After leaving Mr. Turbid's house, Rio and Brook walked in pensive silence, thinking about everything they had just learned.



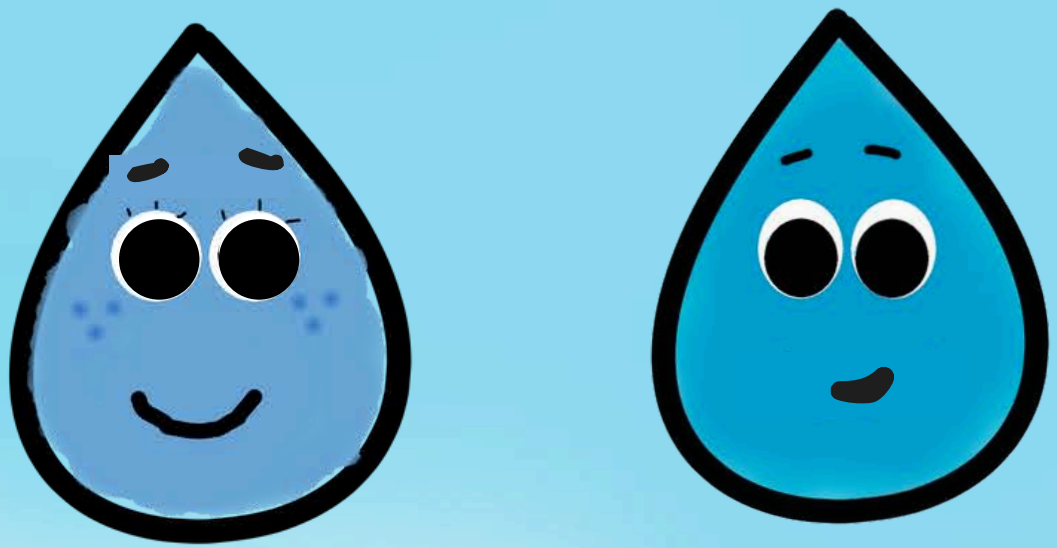
“Rio?” Brook asked as they got to her house.

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad we asked about our destinies.”

“Me, too.”

“And I’m glad you’re part of my destiny.”



"Me, too."

As he made his way home, Rio couldn't stop thinking about everything Mr. Turbid had told him. He was proud of his upcoming destiny. He was proud of all that he would be able to contribute to. But he wanted to make sure he put in the time to think about his history, his ancestors' history, his community's history. It made his work as one of the many droplets in the La Semilla well all the more worthwhile.

And when the well finally opened, he was more than ready.

The End