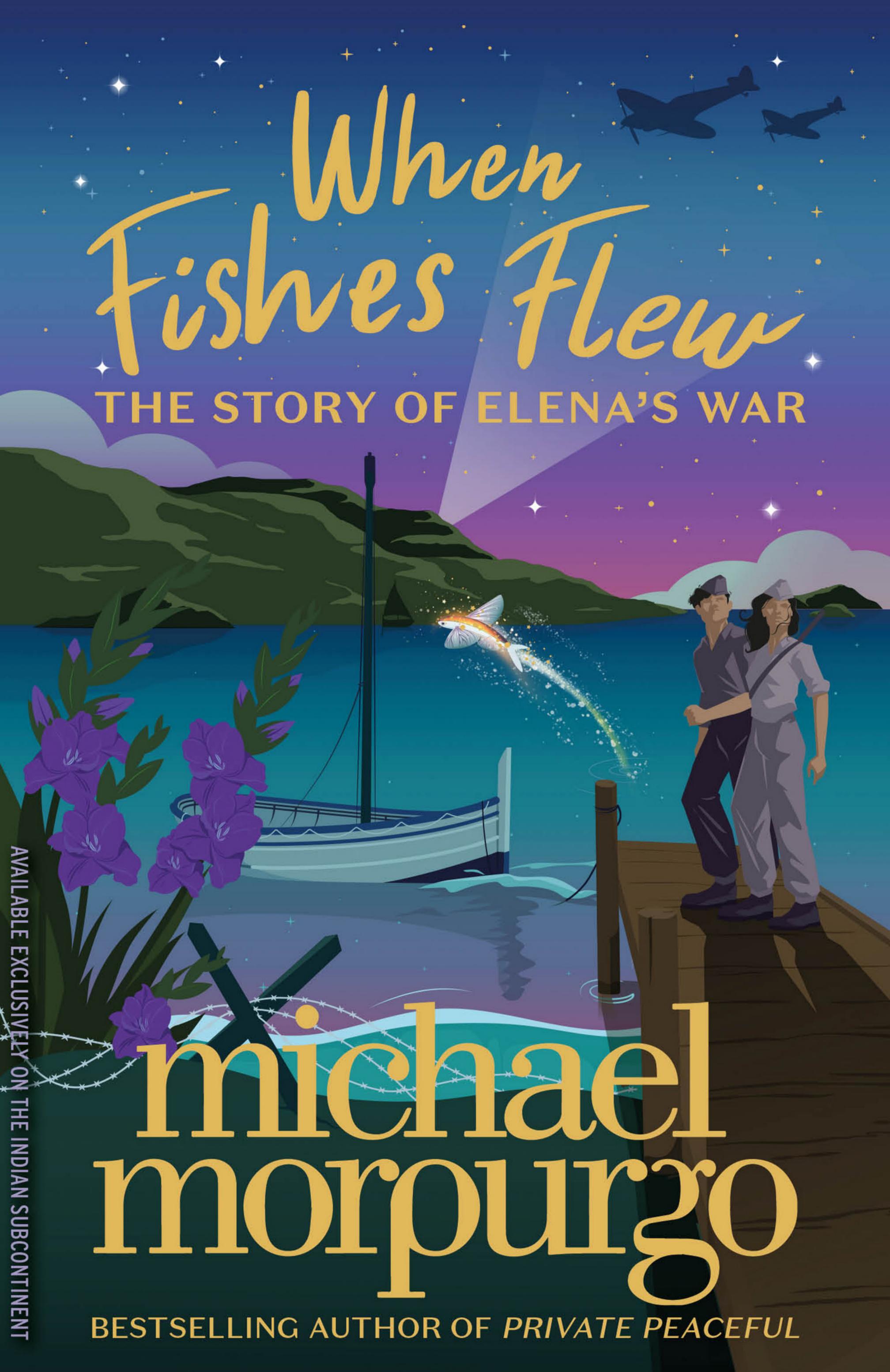


When Fishes Flew

THE STORY OF ELENA'S WAR



AVAILABLE EXCLUSIVELY ON THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

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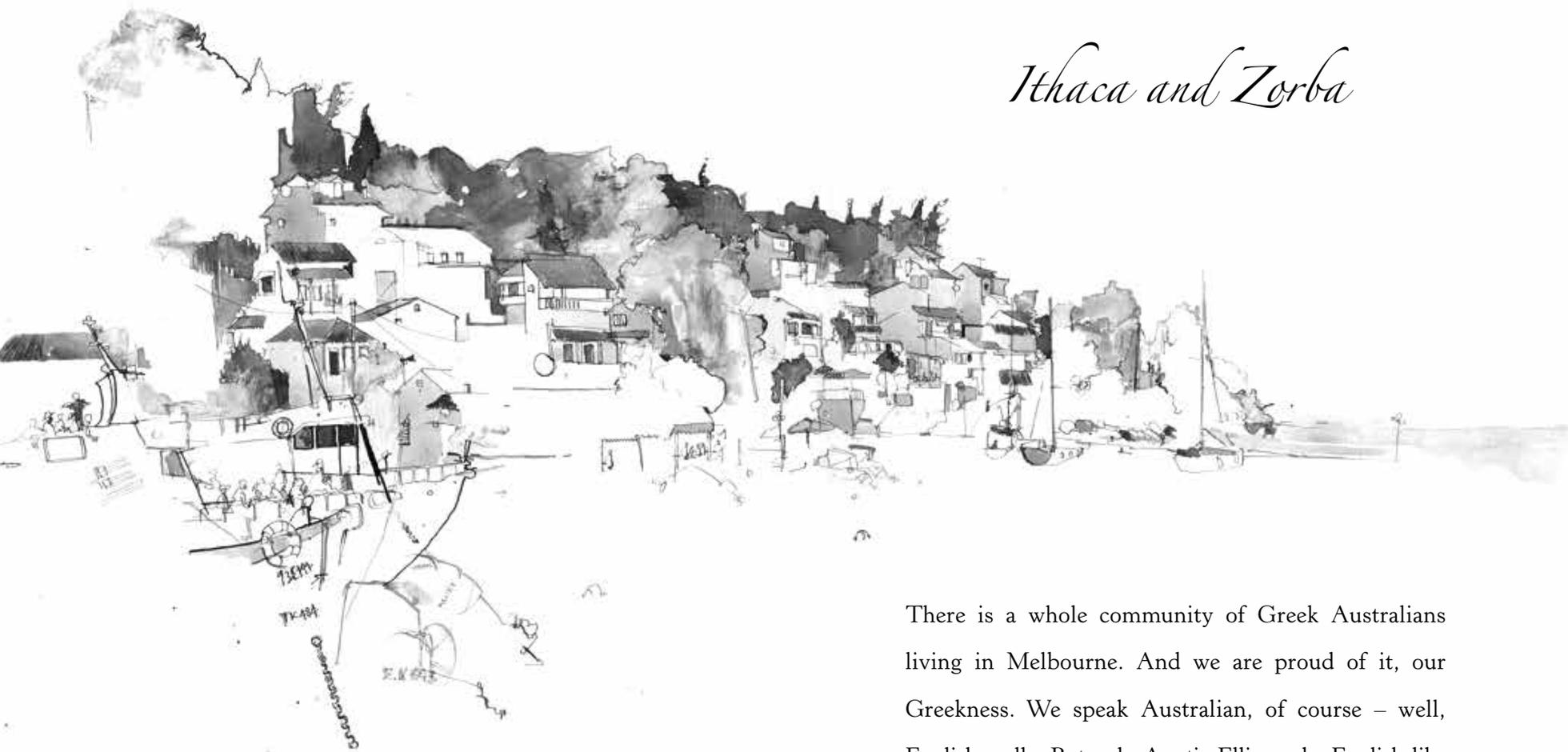
THE STORY OF ELENA'S WAR

Illustrated by George Butler



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

Ithaca and Zorba



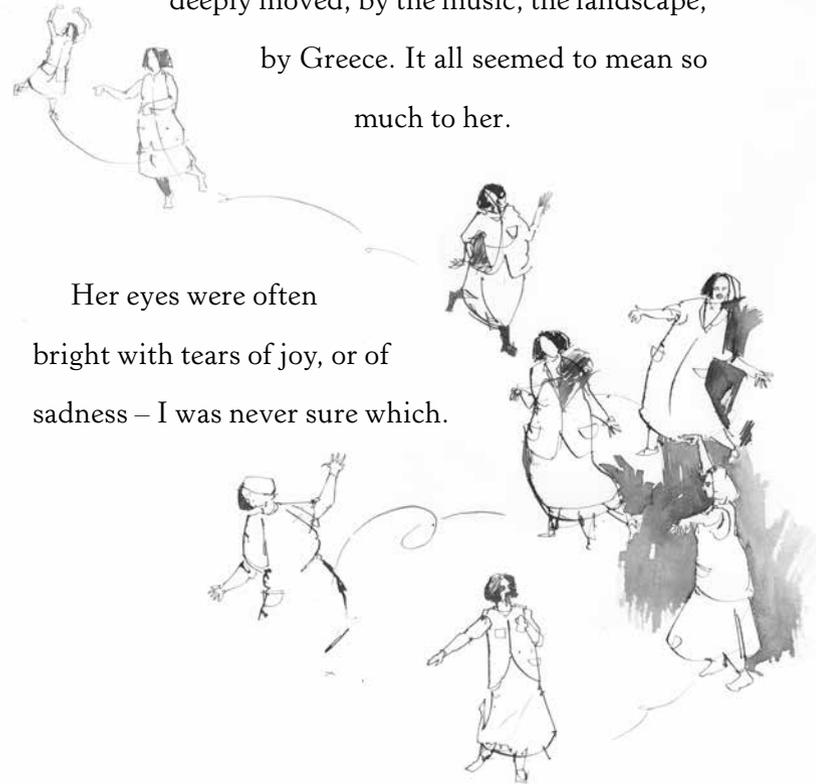
There is a whole community of Greek Australians living in Melbourne. And we are proud of it, our Greekness. We speak Australian, of course – well, English really. But only Auntie Ellie spoke English like a real Greek person. At home, even when she wasn't with us, we sometimes tried to be like her – properly

Greek. We supported Greece in the Olympics, or when they played football – even when they played against Australia or Ireland, which Ma didn't like much, but she wasn't that interested in football anyway.

We ate Greek salad often – too often – always with feta cheese and tomatoes and cucumber and onions. Calamari and moussaka. Meatballs with the *sapsychos* that Auntie Ellie brought us from her home in Ithaca, were firm favourites, and with chips, of course. We would often play Greek music and dance all together round the barbecue – Greek dancing, the *sirtaki*, Auntie Ellie called it, her favourite dance. We often danced when family and friends came round, at Christmas and on birthdays, but always when we were welcoming Auntie Ellie on the first evening she arrived.

We often played music by Mikis Theodorakis. She loved it when we all danced to his music, especially the *sirtaki* dance from the film *Zorba the Greek*. We would watch that at least once during her visit, and she

always cried quietly. She wasn't sad, I felt, but moved, deeply moved, by the music, the landscape, by Greece. It all seemed to mean so much to her.



Her eyes were often bright with tears of joy, or of sadness – I was never sure which.

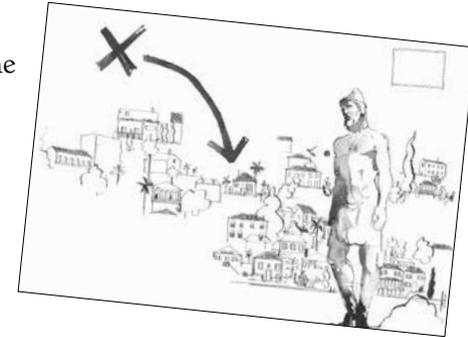
'Zorba's Dance' became my favourite piece of music to listen to when she wasn't there. Up in my room, I would close my eyes and dance, imagining I was on a beach in Greece, the beach I'd seen in *Zorba the Greek*,

and I'd be dancing with Auntie Ellie, side by side, arms round one another's shoulders, dipping to the rhythm, clicking my fingers like she did. For me, it was always her tune, and I loved it because of that.

The truth was though that I only felt I was truly Greek when Auntie Ellie was there. I missed her so much when she wasn't with us. The spirit went out of the house somehow, the Greekness. We did Skype or Zoom with her sometimes, at Christmas, on birthdays, but she found it very difficult to make the technology work in Ithaca – and anyway it wasn't the same as having her there in the house. She never phoned, and we never phoned her. We all knew that she hated the phone. She told me once it was because she liked to see the faces of the people she was talking to, and it only made her sad to hear our voices and not be able to see us.

She would send us letters and postcards, lots of postcards, always of Ithaca. Ithaca was everywhere in our house in Melbourne, all over my bedroom walls, pinned

up on the noticeboard in the kitchen, propped up on the mantelpiece in the sitting room. I would often take them down to read them,



and that wasn't always easy. As she got older, her handwriting became more and more wobbly. But whenever I read the postcards I could always hear her wonderful voice in her wobbly words. Sometimes I felt she was so close to me then, in the room with me almost.

Auntie Ellie was always old to me, maybe the oldest person I knew. But you should have seen her doing her Greek dancing! She danced so joyfully. She danced better than Papa or Ma, or any of their friends. Light on her feet, she seemed to float over the ground. And she swam in the sea every day, in her dress. She always wore black, a long black dress, and a black scarf that she would let me wear sometimes. I felt so Greek in her scarf.

She wore black because she was a widow – Ma told me that. Her husband, my great-uncle Alexis, had died when he was very young, she said, less than a year after they were married. I asked what had happened to him, but either Papa and Ma did not know, or they just wouldn't tell me. I never knew which. I didn't want to ask Auntie Ellie because I thought it would make her sad.

I longed to dance like her, to do it as easily and naturally as she did, and I longed to learn how to speak English like her so that I sounded Greek. I used to practise both my dancing and my speaking down at the bottom of our garden where no one could see or hear me. But, when I danced, I could never float over the ground like she did, and when I tried to speak like her, or try out the few Greek words she had taught me, I just sounded silly. So I very soon gave up.

And how I loved the honey she brought us, the honey her bees had made on Ithaca. We kept it as long as we could, eked it out. For me, a taste of that honey was a

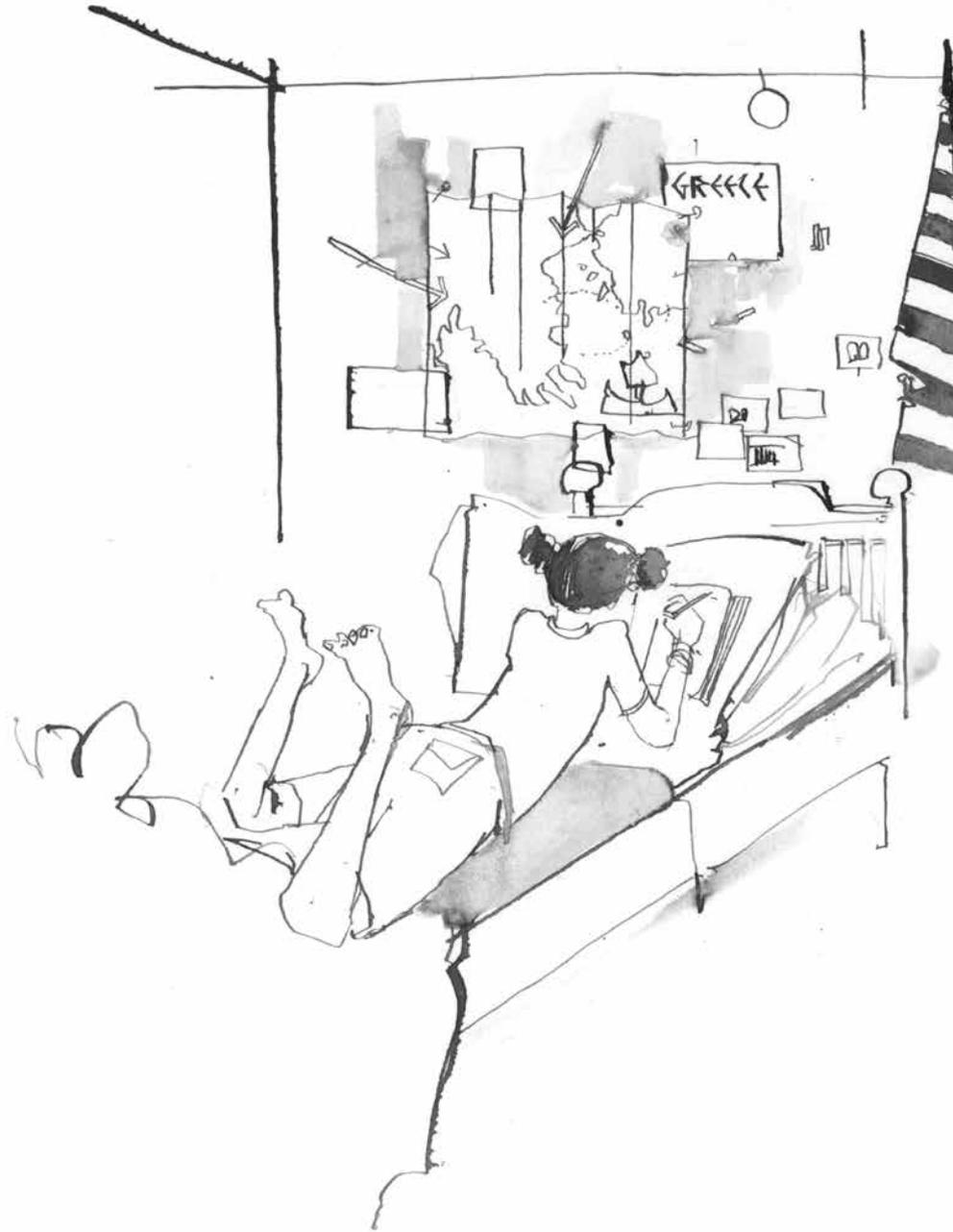
taste of Ithaca, of her world, another world I longed to go to. And I loved the idea that it was her honey that made the 'honey money', that she was saving up to fly over to see us the next time.

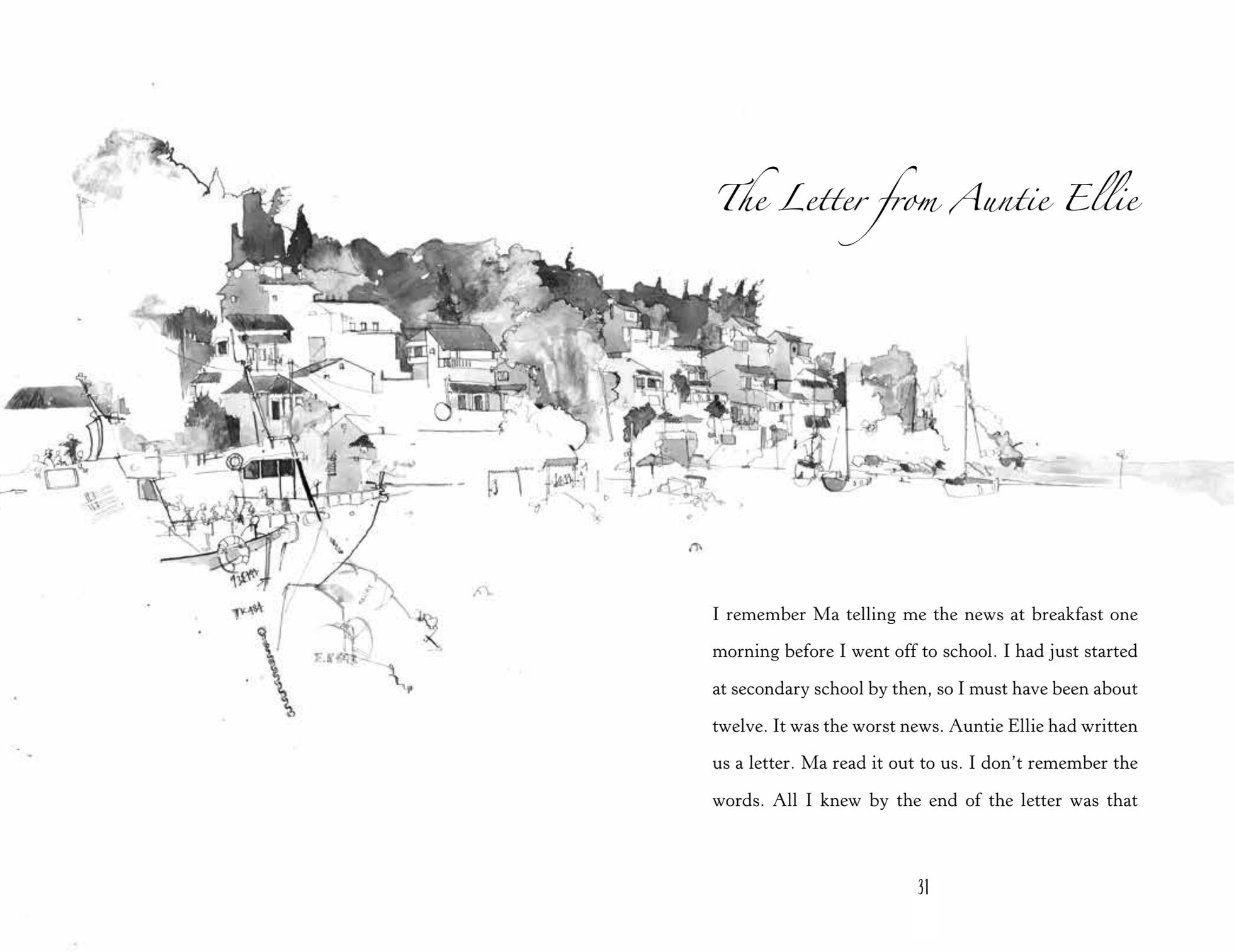


I still have most of my childhood treasures: the glowing globe, the silver dolphin and my Odysseus statue. They still live side by side in my room, but on a different chest of drawers, and in a different house, in a different country, on a different continent. Sometimes it feels like a different planet.

I'm looking at them right now as I am writing this. On my bed. I always write on my bed. It's more comfortable this way, propped on my pillows. I can concentrate better, dream better, remember better. And I can go off to sleep whenever I get tired. I'm getting tired now.

I keep wanting to tell you about the flying fish. But this is not the time. Not yet. Anyway, it would spoil the story if I told you now. So you're just going to have to wait.





The Letter from Auntie Ellie

I remember Ma telling me the news at breakfast one morning before I went off to school. I had just started at secondary school by then, so I must have been about twelve. It was the worst news. Auntie Ellie had written us a letter. Ma read it out to us. I don't remember the words. All I knew by the end of the letter was that

Auntie Ellie had decided that, as much as she wanted to, she felt she couldn't come to stay with us any more, that she was getting too old anyway to make the long journey by air from Ithaca to Australia. But she also said that she'd been worrying more and more that flying round the world was not something she should be doing any more. The threat of global warming,



the terrible bush fires we'd had in Australia, the flooding and the droughts that she'd seen on television – all of this had made up her mind not to fly again.

As Ma read the letter, Papa was sitting there at the table, looking as sad as I felt. I often forgot she was his aunt, but I was reminded now. I couldn't stop my eyes filling with tears. Ma could see I was upset too. She went on to explain to me how all good things have to come to an end, that we just had to accept that Auntie Ellie was an old lady now, that she was right about flying and global warming, that this moment was bound to come anyway one day, that travel was always going to be more and more difficult for her as she got older.

As the implications of this dreadful news sank in, it felt to me as if someone, something – fate, the gods – had taken scissors to my life and just cut it, cut me off from Auntie Ellie, from Greece, from Ithaca, from all the stories of Odysseus and Proteus, from my whole childhood.

'She can still Skype us, though, or Zoom us, can't she?' I said, fighting back the tears.

They kept looking at one another. 'Not really, Nandi,' replied Ma. 'You know she doesn't like all this technology. She says that whenever we do it she misses us more afterwards. And she doesn't like phoning either. You know that. She thinks it's expensive too, and it's not. But she won't listen. She has a mind of her own. She's like that.'

'But that doesn't mean we can't Skype her, does it?' I insisted. They didn't answer, but kept looking at one another. 'And we could go and see her instead. We could!'

After long moments, Ma told me: 'We couldn't afford it, Nandi. It would cost the earth for us all to fly there.'

I knew from their faces there was something else they didn't want to talk about. They were deciding which of them should tell me.

It was Papa who spoke up in the end.

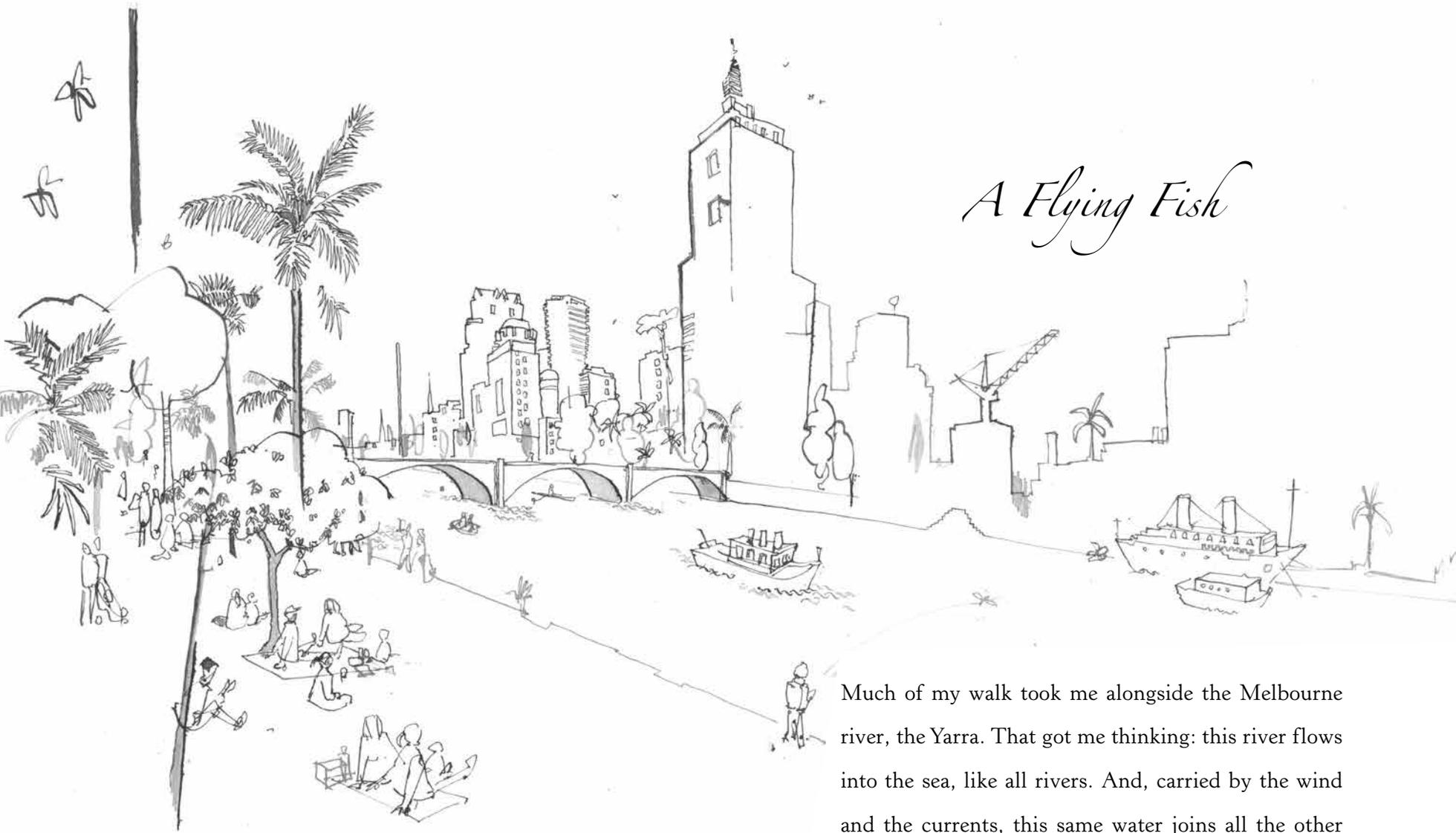
'The thing is –' he began hesitantly. 'The thing is, Nandi, we didn't want to worry you, but last week Auntie Ellie had a fall. Quite a bad fall. She hit her head and now she doesn't see at all well, she says. Reading is hard for her. And she has dizzy spells. She even rang up, so we knew something had to be wrong. We didn't like to tell you till we'd found out more about how she was. You mustn't worry. She's made a great recovery, still a bit dizzy sometimes, but she's much better. Seeing a bit better again now too. She's walking fine, a bit shaky, but she's okay. I told her – we both told her – that she must come and live with us here. We're the only family she's got. But she won't hear of it. Ithaca is her home, she said, and she has good friends around her on the island, and that's where she belongs, where she's lived all her life. She wants to stay at home. She's also been saying for a while now, in her cards and letters, that there's something important she's got to do, and she has to stay in Greece to do it.'

‘What?’ I asked. ‘Why? What’s so important?’

‘She won’t say,’ Ma went on. ‘She’s being very firm about it. She says she’s not going to be a bother to anyone. And she doesn’t want us feeling sorry for her or spending our “good, hard-earned money”, as she calls it, flying out to Greece to see her. Her own words, Nandi. We can write to one another, she says. She’s got that nice neighbour she’s told us about, Maria, down the street, who looks after everything for her, and who speaks English, and can type for her whenever she wants to write us a letter if ever her writing gets a bit too wobbly. Anyway, one thing’s for sure, and we have to get used to it: she won’t be flying out here to visit us again. I’m sorry, Nandi. We’re all sorry. But we’ve just got to accept it.’

I went off to school that day, heartbroken. The truth of it was hard to take in, hard to bear. I was never going to see Auntie Ellie again. Try as I might, I could not stop myself from breaking into sobs. The tears kept

coming. I decided I couldn’t go into school that day. I could not face my friends the way I was. Instead, I would just walk around the city. So that’s what I did, for hours and hours, feeling about as miserable as I had ever been.



A Flying Fish

Much of my walk took me alongside the Melbourne river, the Yarra. That got me thinking: this river flows into the sea, like all rivers. And, carried by the wind and the currents, this same water joins all the other great oceans of the world, which must in time flow into the sea around Ithaca. So the Yarra is like a pathway, a

pathway to Ithaca and Auntie Ellie on the other side of the world. She looks out on the same sea, up at the same sky, the same moon and stars. Such thoughts as I walked along the river brought Auntie Ellie closer to me. I felt calmer and the tears stopped coming.

Then I saw the fish, the flying fish. I'd seen them before, by the sea, but not in the river. This one leaped up out of the water right in front of me, and flew off low over the river, on his way to the sea, on the way – I felt it at that moment, and was quite sure of it – to Auntie Ellie and Ithaca.



That was when my phone began buzzing in my pocket, went on and on buzzing at me. I didn't answer. I didn't even look at who was calling. I didn't want to know, didn't want to talk to anyone. I switched it off.

It was during that long day of wandering that I made up my mind what I would do. The flying fish had decided me. I would spread my wings and fly, just like him. Someday, some way, I would go to Ithaca and see Auntie Ellie.

When I left school in a few years' time, I would spin my globe for the last time, say goodbye to Ma and Papa, walk off down our road, and find my way over the sea to Ithaca, to Auntie Ellie. I would visit her, see her island home on the far side of the world, and discover where Odysseus had lived. I would walk where Odysseus had walked. It would be the adventure of my life. Yes, I would fly. Global warming was important, but seeing Auntie Ellie was much more important. That's how I felt, and I wasn't going to change my mind.

Meanwhile, I determined I would write to her often. I would send her lots of postcards of Australia, of the cities, the outback, the wild life, the kangaroos, the galahs, the kookaburras, the wombats. If she was having problems with her eyes still, that English-speaking neighbour of hers, Maria, could read them to her, and describe the pictures on the postcards. Auntie Ellie could pin them up in her house. So then we would have her Ithaca all over our house, and she would have our Australia all over hers.

I didn't know it at the time, of course, but I discovered later that while I was wandering along, lost in thoughts of Auntie Ellie and Ithaca, the secretary from school had already phoned Ma in the hospital where she worked to ask where I was, if anything was wrong, why I hadn't come to school that day. She told Ma that a teacher on her way to school had spotted me walking down by the river, and that I looked as if I'd been crying.

So, by the time I got home that afternoon, they were both frantic with worry. Papa was furious, but Ma just clung to me as if I'd been gone for a month. Papa went wild. He kept waving his arms and shouting at me, and made me promise never to do such a thing again. I promised. He ended up in tears then, we all did, and all our hugging told me I was forgiven. They knew why I was upset, why I'd run off. They understood.

The next morning, our head teacher, Mr Perkin – Peeky we called him – was not so understanding. I had a ticking-off from him in his office, but that was to be expected. It was his job after all. Peeky wasn't really cross, just pretending. I think Ma or Papa must have explained the reason I'd gone missing. I didn't know it then, of course, but that day I spent wandering along the Yarra River, that sighting of the flying fish, that day I decided to skip school, was to change my life for ever.