THE GIRL WHO BECAME A FISH

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For Parker & John

Chapter 1

The first time Ita became a fish, she was in the middle of trying to remember the way back home.

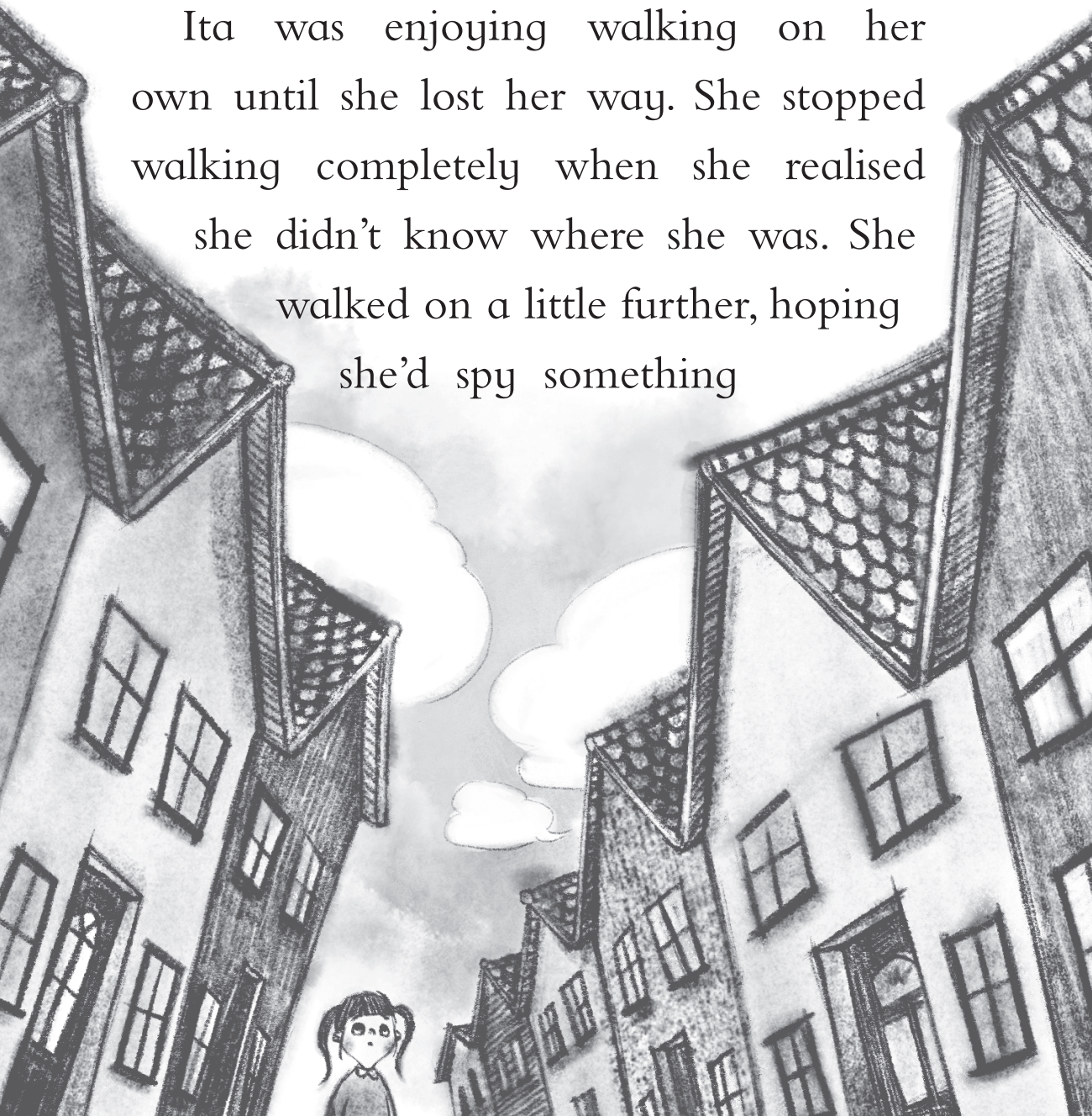
She'd become lost amongst the houses that all looked identical to one other and her brothers, Greg and Frankie, had gone on ahead.

They had sped away, disappearing around a corner and out of sight. Ita felt like they always did that – sped away from her – from the very moment she was born. She didn't like the feeling of being

left behind.

She wondered, on that day, whether the best thing to do was not even try and keep up with their impossibly longs legs and lightning-like speed. So, she'd slowed and lagged behind them.

Ita was enjoying walking on her own until she lost her way. She stopped walking completely when she realised she didn't know where she was. She walked on a little further, hoping she'd spy something



familiar, when she spotted the shadowy passageway in between the houses.

She was most definitely lost, and the passageway was unfamiliar to her.

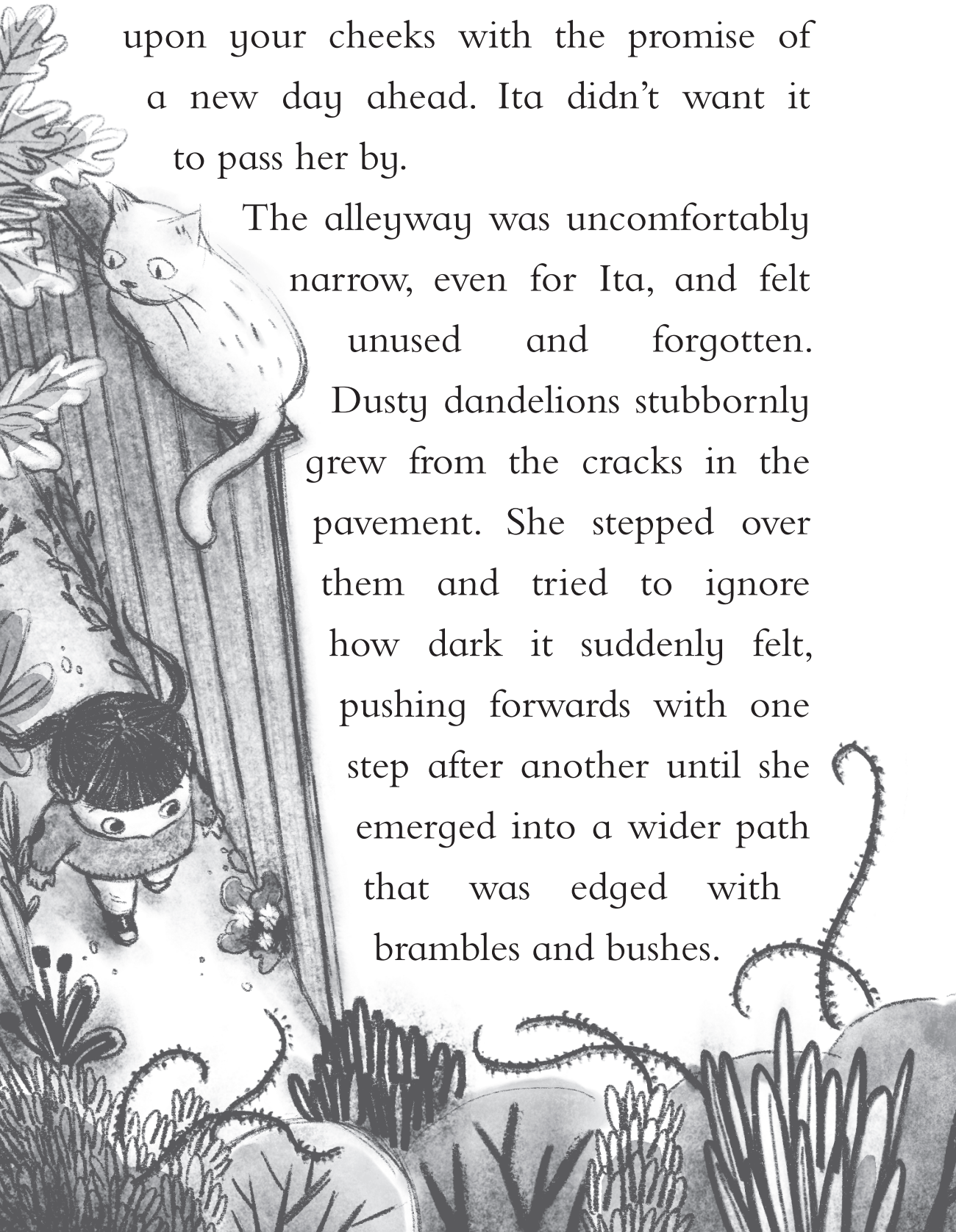
They'd only moved to the town five short weeks ago, and Ita's head was spinning from the newness of it all: new house, new streets, new school; and the absence of things too: no certainty, no friends, no feeling that this was her home.

But this was where she lived now and something in this new, strange town had made her stop and pause: this small gap in between the orange bricks of the houses that made a path leading off somewhere. A path she wanted to venture down.

For the first time in five weeks, Ita felt a forgotten feeling; curiosity mingled with something else, something like

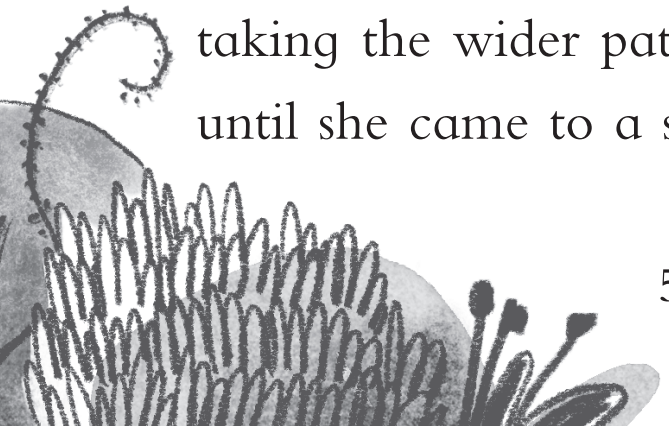
excitement. It was the feeling of having bubbles in your belly, or sunlight landing upon your cheeks with the promise of a new day ahead. Ita didn't want it to pass her by.

The alleyway was uncomfortably narrow, even for Ita, and felt unused and forgotten. Dusty dandelions stubbornly grew from the cracks in the pavement. She stepped over them and tried to ignore how dark it suddenly felt, pushing forwards with one step after another until she emerged into a wider path that was edged with brambles and bushes.



This was where, through the leaves, she first spotted the river.

It looked mud-green and there was a stillness about its surface that made Ita think of a mirror. She gave a glance back towards the narrow path that had led her there, and thought of her brothers disappearing off, the coloured rucksacks on their retreating backs getting smaller and smaller in the distance. They might be back at the house already, devouring whatever food they could lay their hands upon. She imagined Mum's face slightly creasing with concern as she asked them where Ita was, when Mum realised Ita was not with them. But she shook that thought from her head and walked on, taking the wider path by the river's edge until she came to a spot where the water

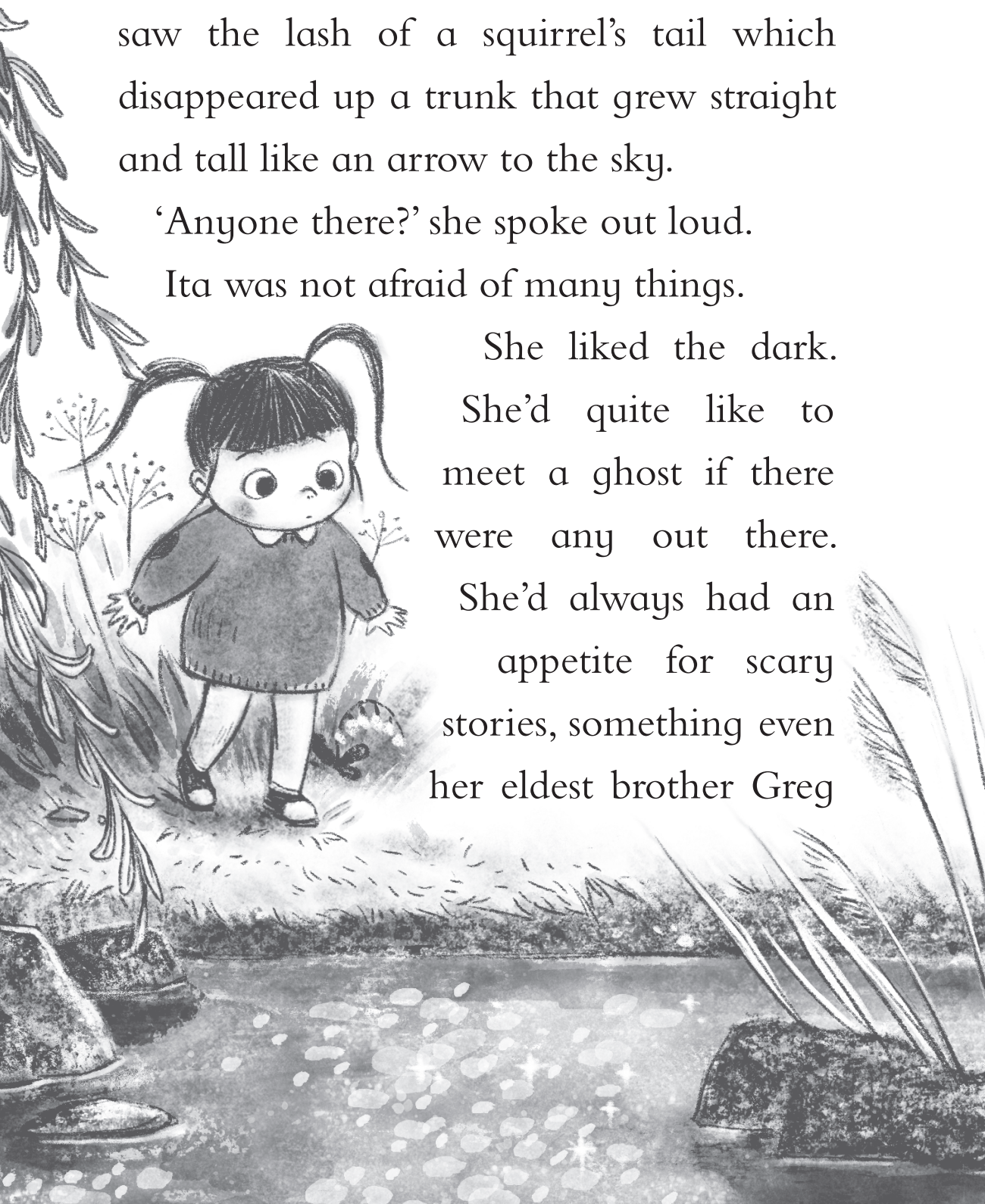


wasn't hidden behind a barrier of bushes.

It was quiet; silent, perhaps. But then there was a rustle in the grasses. She saw the lash of a squirrel's tail which disappeared up a trunk that grew straight and tall like an arrow to the sky.

'Anyone there?' she spoke out loud.

Ita was not afraid of many things.



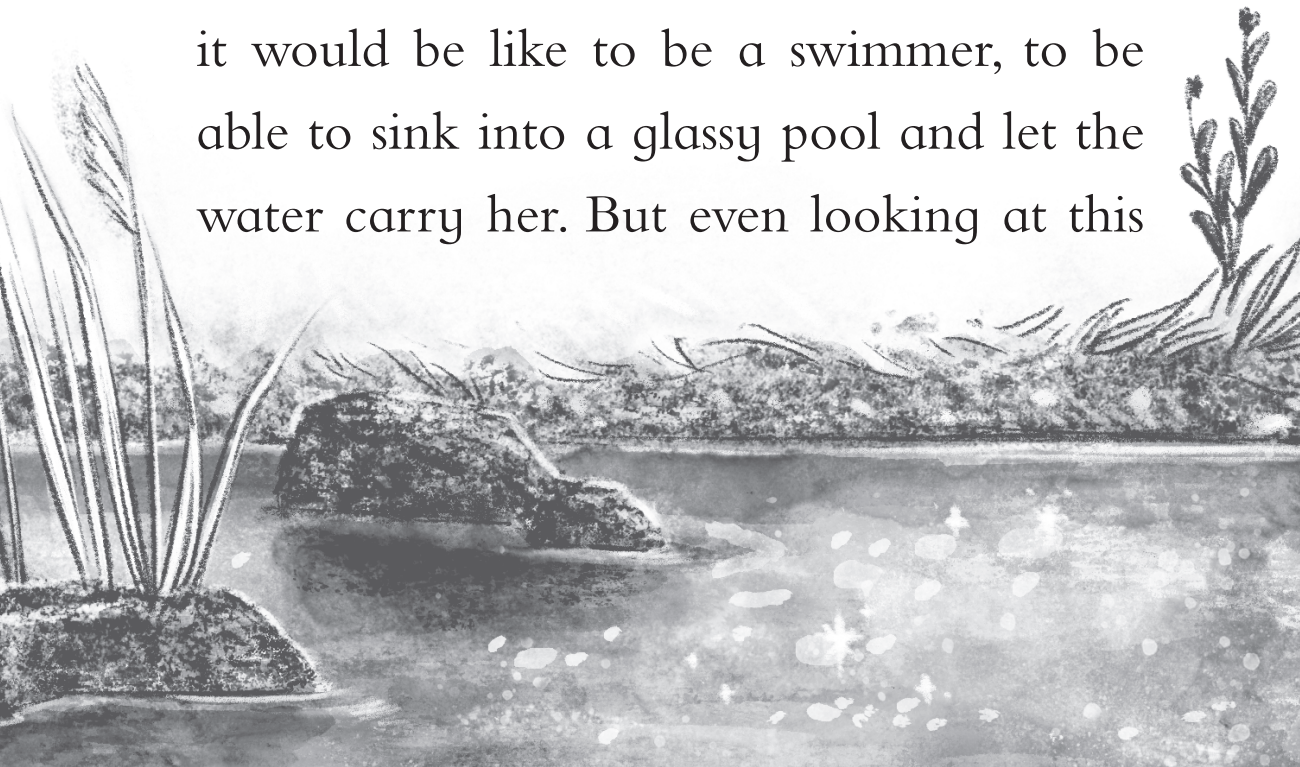
She liked the dark. She'd quite like to meet a ghost if there were any out there. She'd always had an appetite for scary stories, something even her eldest brother Greg

looked upon with admiration.

But, she *was* afraid of water. Now seeing the river in front of her, she wondered, as she had done so many times before: where had this fear come from?

She had no memories of having a bad experience around water and her parents never offered up any stories about it either. All she knew was that something in her gut stopped her from trying to swim; it put up an invisible barrier in between her and water that she could not cross easily.

Sometimes, she would imagine what it would be like to be a swimmer, to be able to sink into a glassy pool and let the water carry her. But even looking at this



meandering, still river was enough for the hairs to stick up on the back of her neck; for her to start wondering about what was below the surface and how she would possibly cope if she entered the water.

Not that she would do that, of course – she was on her way home, wearing her school uniform, her new jumper with the school logo of a flame emblazoned upon it that felt slightly stiff. This was not the time to think about swimming in a river, or even to poke one of the toes of her slightly-too-big school shoes into it.

So, when she found herself kneeling down and dipping a finger towards the surface of the water, it was almost as if it was happening to someone else. Like Ita was watching it happen to a person

completely separate to herself. Then, she glanced up sharply, imagining that she was going to be caught by someone who would stop her.

But there was no shout.

Only the water; the rippling, dappled, reflective water.

Her finger reached out and then in the next moment she could feel it, as though it were wrapping itself around her fingertip, welcoming and beckoning her.

Her gaze changed to a quizzical expression as she spotted something that was unexpected. Something looked different about her finger, she thought.

She retracted her hand quickly from the water, but it was just her normal finger, a nail that had been cut short recently, the lines on her knuckle where

her fingers bend. Nothing to worry about, nothing to see. She dunked her finger back into the water, holding her breath.

It was early summer but warm, the sun lacing the air, and the water felt cool.

She dipped both hands a little further into the water and that was when she saw it, when she could see that she was in fact correct before: her hands had changed.

Her fingers under the water were completely covered with fish scales: shimmering, tiny and perfect.

When her skin was under the water, she turned into a fish.