For Kate. For Amir. For the ocean they loved.

To Emmoa, Farah, Imran, Rohani, Pudding, Guz, Aba, Akka, Torang, Rammang, Elis, Sandy, Jean-Louis, Abdul, and Chris-Bapongka, forever.

Frances Lincoln
Children's Books

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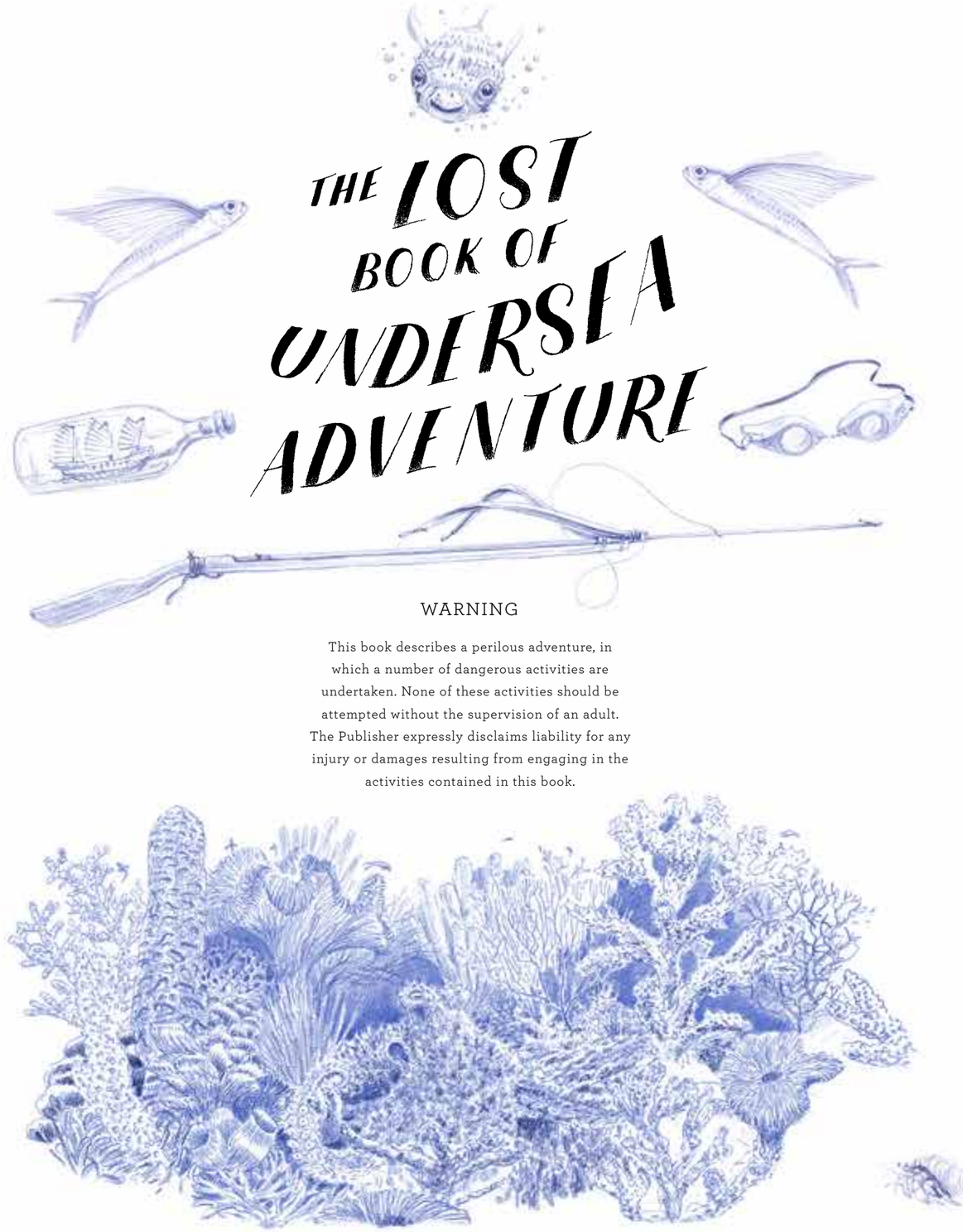
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THE LOST BOOK OF UNDERSEA ADVENTURE

WARNING

This book describes a perilous adventure, in which a number of dangerous activities are undertaken. None of these activities should be attempted without the supervision of an adult. The Publisher expressly disclaims liability for any injury or damages resulting from engaging in the activities contained in this book.



The original bottle with the story sealed inside.



Teignmouth Post

"Message in bottle" STUNS WORLD

Brother and sister make discovery of a lifetime on Devon beach. Leyla, aged 10, and Tom, aged 12, found the incredible washed up ocean traveler during the holidays but didn't realize just how extraordinary a find it was.

"We knew straight away it was special, but we had no idea there was a real explorer's journal inside!"

"Historians in London have begun piecing together the

THE MESSAGE IN THE BOTTLE

On August 12, 2022, two young vacationers stumbled across a barnacle-encrusted object that washed ashore. Little did they know that this was possibly the greatest "message in a bottle" ever discovered.

Preserved inside was an illustrated account of one of the most remarkable stories of survival that has ever been recorded. As for the mysterious author, it is believed to be by the same Unknown Adventurer whose discovered works became *The Lost Book Of Adventure*. This, however, is from when the explorer was a young adult, just setting out on their travels around the world.

The bottle also contained a letter (see opposite), written to the author's younger siblings. The powerful words speak for themselves, but I believe they could also be written for all of us. Now it is your turn to open the pages of this incredible adventure—one that has drifted through time and across oceans.

Take a deep breath. You are about to enter dangerous waters.

Teddy Keen
Editor & compiler

Editor's notes

- The term **sea nomads** is taken as a reference to a real ocean-dwelling people known as the **Bajo**. To learn more about the Bajo, see pages 92 and 93.
- A useful glossary of Bajo words can be found on pages 42 and 43 in the author's picture dictionary.
- For ease of reading, most of the author's original handwriting has been set in type.

Late November
Somewhere in the coral seas

Storm coming

Dear 2 & 3,

I wanted to give you this when I saw you, but I fear this may be my last chance of safely getting it into your hands. I'm putting it in this bottle in the hope it will find its way back to you. Inside, you'll find my journal—the one I promised to write for you from my quest to find the sea nomads. Within its pages you will discover things that few people will believe possible, but I know you will know it to be true. You will also learn what really happened on that ferry—and how I was thrown into the greatest adventure you could ever imagine.

I must stop writing. Waves are entering the boat. May these same waves carry this across the oceans to you.

Be good, be adventurous,
and look after Mom and Dad.

One day we will see each other again, I promise.

Your big brother.
x



The envelope the letter was found in. The address is no longer legible.

The Coral Seas

Potential search area for sea nomads

Ferry route from Manila

Philippines

Manila

START OF JOURNEY

Sulu Sea

Celebes Sea

North Maluku

Pacific

Borneo

Molucca Sea

Java Sea

Sulawesi

Ceram Sea

Indonesia

Banda Sea

Papua

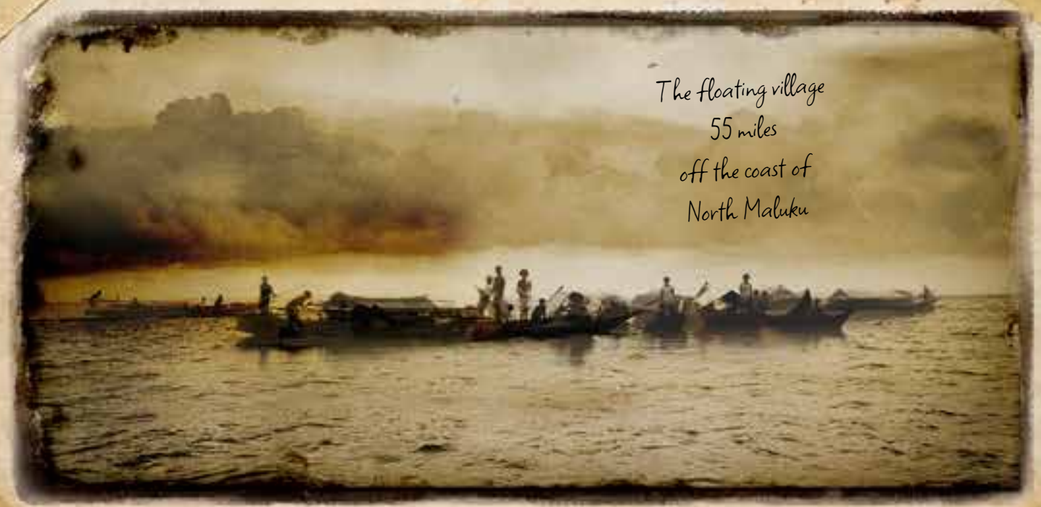
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In search of the sea nomads



The floating village
55 miles
off the coast of
North Maluku

The photograph that started it all. Grandma's encounter with a community whose home was the ocean. She said they had an extraordinary connection to the sea. But many refused to believe her stories.

Grandma's notes

Notes on the sea nomads
- Only live on boats and spend entire lives on the sea
- Dive underwater for a very long time
- May have a deeper connection with the ocean in some way
- Some believe they were brought to the world on the back of a great ray
- Peaceful
- Great navigators

Travel itinerary

Visas - Philippin
Indonesia permit
Ferry from Manil
North Maluku
Normally 5 days.

Sea nomads may
coast in septem

55 miles east
Jailolo or ternat



Do you remember those adventure stories we read - the ones full of daring and danger that always began with a terrible happening? I'm afraid sometimes they are not just stories.

As I write, I picture you thousands of miles away over the edge of the hazy blue horizon. I wish I could let you know that I am still alive, but I cannot. Days ago something happened that turned my world upside down. Something that I thought only happened in tales of fiction.

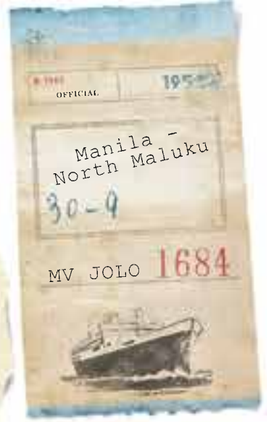
But this story is real. So real I don't know how it will end, but I'll keep writing as long as I am able. But first we should start where it all went wrong. In the Manila docks. And the terrible happening.



THE FERRY AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

Day 1





This was my ferry. The MV Jolo. The last one heading south before the typhoon landed. As she tilted in the murky water beneath the darkening sky and cries of seagulls, I felt a mixture of excitement and fear.

I stepped out of the queue and began sketching a copy of a map that was stuck to a nearby wall. It showed a thousand islands scattered like crumbs among the coral seas. It reminded me of shipwrecks, sharks, and lost desert islands. But somewhere in all that blue was something not found on any map.

"Who are the sea nomads?" you had asked. I had shown you the photograph. The one Grandma had given me before she died, taken while crossing these very seas long ago. I told you about her encounter with a people who lived on the ocean all their lives. Who could dive deeper than a tower block is high and hold their breath for what seemed like an eternity. Some believed they had an unspoken understanding with the ocean and its creatures. No one believed Grandma's stories, but I did. I wish that you had known her. She was so . . . adventurous.

We were up until midnight, weren't we? Atlas open. Exploring the remote coral seas. Our heads filled with the same burning questions. Did they really exist? What were they doing down there beneath the waves?
Then you said it. The thing that got my mind whirling and my heart racing. The thing that began this whole adventure. "Why don't you try and look for them?"

"You're NOT going. It's too dangerous. What about your education?" So began the arguments with Mom and Dad. "People that live on the water, really? You might as well be looking for the lost city of Atlantis . . ."
And finally . . . "Grandma was very *imaginative*." This just made me even more determined. Especially the last part. School was finally over. I worked all summer. I was going. Solo, just like she did. And no one was going to stop me.

And here I was.

As I put my journal back into my bag, a couple of armed patrol boats left the harbor mouth. I'd heard there were other things besides nomads out there. A network of smugglers, bandits, and illegal fishing fleets plied and plundered these waters. Inspection boats often never returned.

As I rejoined the last of the line, my feet suddenly felt anchored to the dock. I could wait a few more days for the next ferry. It would be more seaworthy. The weather would be better. There was a deep rumble of engines and soot billowed from the ship's funnel. I remembered something Grandma told me: "The best things in life live just on the other side of fear."

I took a deep breath, exchanged some money for the ticket, and stepped onto the gangway.

There were three upper decks. About 300 passengers. Piles of bags. And a few animals. I slung my hammock on the top deck, which was open at the sides and quieter, then went to explore.

It was 30 minutes later that I heard the sound I'll never forget. It was of a person in pain trying to be quiet. It stopped me dead. Through a slightly open door, I could just make out a shape. It was the captain. He was on his knees trying to pick up sea maps scattered on the floor with a trembling hand. His other hand was crushed beneath a heavy boot. I had to stop myself from calling out. The boot belonged to a man in a black leather jacket and cap. I could only see his back, but his voice was cold, rasping, and full of violence. I remember feeling the hairs on my arms stand up. In front of him, a map lay over the table. The man wrote something on a piece of paper and put it in his jacket pocket. I moved back just as he turned. The metal door swung open, hitting me like a punch in the shoulder. At least it hid me from view.

I waited for the sound of footsteps to fade. Inside, the captain was staring at the map on the table. At its center, in the sea of blue, was the intricate shape of an island. Next to it sat a brick-like package seemingly filled with layers and layers of bank notes.

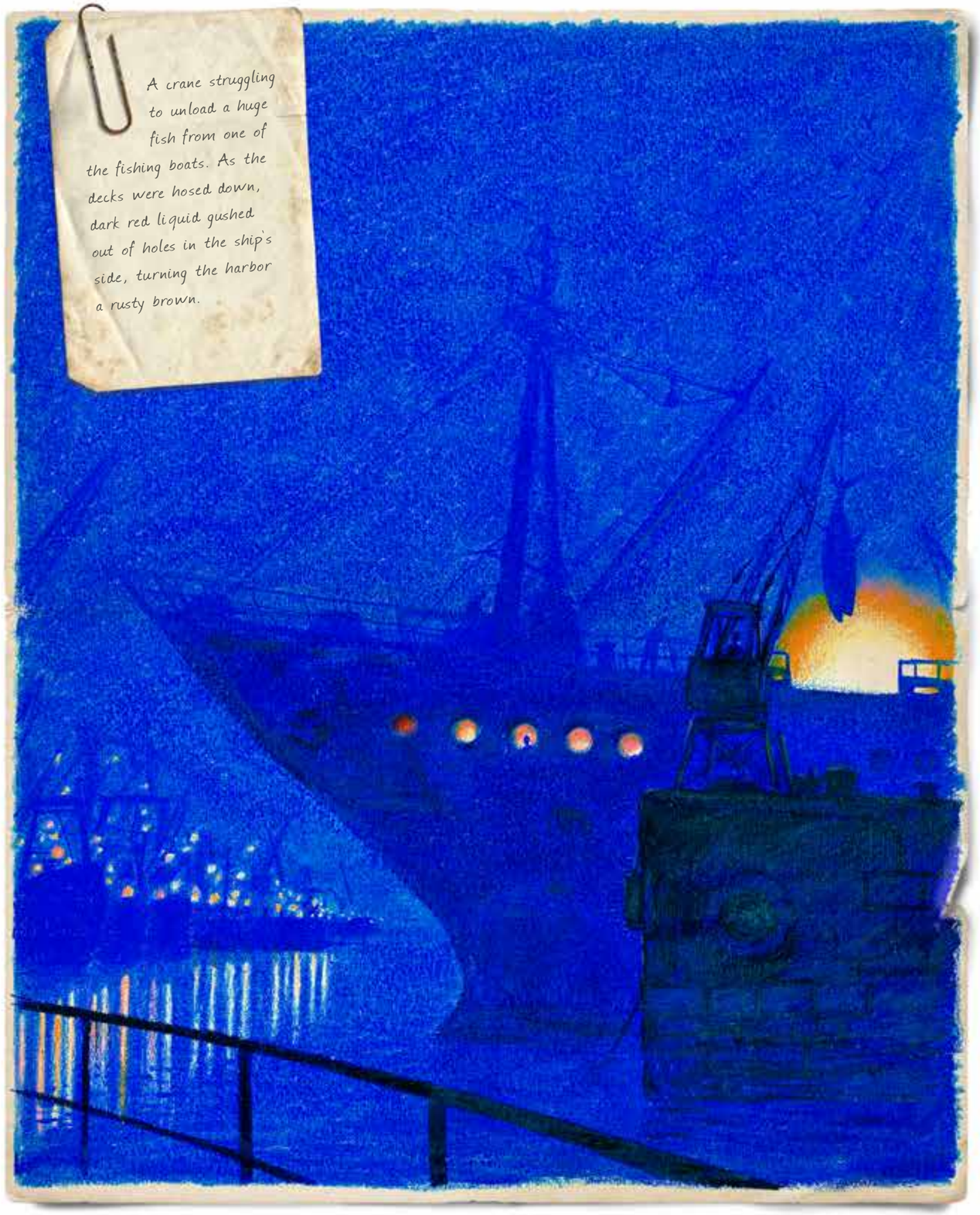
I'd do *anything* to go back to that moment. I would have gotten off that ship while I still could and never turned back. But I didn't. I went to my hammock and pretended everything was going to be fine.

As the ship pulled away from the dockside, I took out the souvenir I had gotten you. A large bottle with a ship cleverly placed inside. It was a stupid thing to be lugging around with me, but there weren't any stores where I was heading, and you do love these kinds of things.

The coastline twinkled as if to say goodbye. Before us, the ocean stretched out until it disappeared over the edge of the world.

The adventure had begun. I was off to find the sea nomads.





HEADING SOUTH



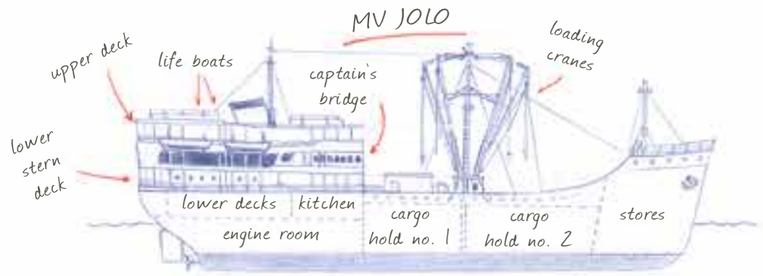
Me

Day 2 at sea. View from the rear stern deck. Me picturing the sea nomads out there somewhere. I was thinking what it must be like living your whole life on that great blue ocean. Were they even out there?





View from hammock





Kids having fun with my hat

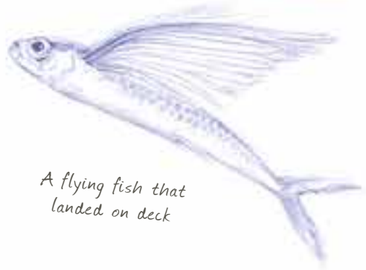
Day 3. We entered the Celebes Sea. A few more days and we'd reach North Maluku—the closest land to where Grandma took the photo. From there, I planned to join a local fishing crew to explore the coast.

Passing the palm-lined Basilan Island into the Celebes Sea



Distant cones of a volcano

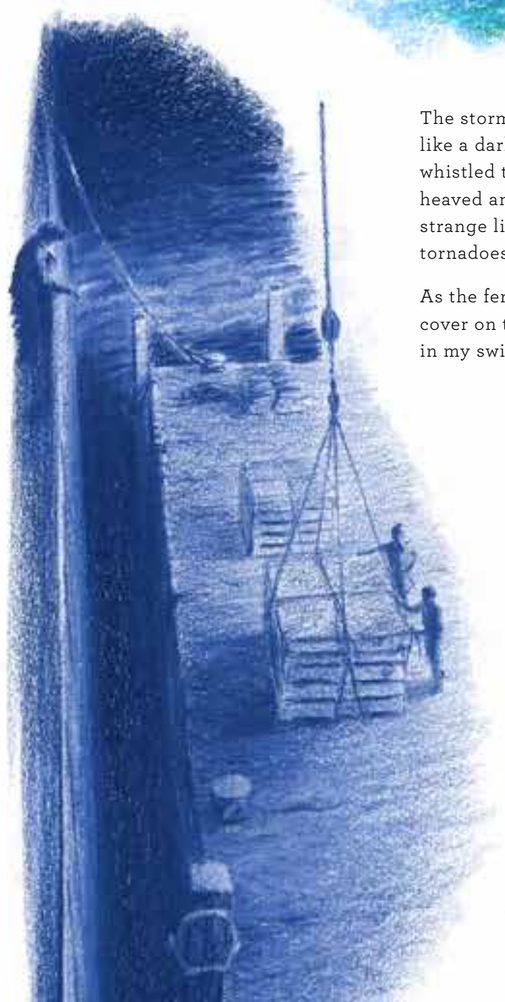




A flying fish that landed on deck

As the sun glittered on the sea, my previous fears were forgotten. I'd seen no sign of the man in the cap or even the captain. I remember feeling the warm breeze on my face and a sense of impending possibility and adventure.

It was on the fifth day that everything changed.



Day 5

UNCHARTED WATERS



The storm appeared in the late afternoon like a dark smudge on the horizon. Wind whistled through the railings as the sea heaved and spat white foam. In the distance, strange lines dropped from the sky—tornadoes, perhaps.

As the ferry pitched and rolled, people took cover on the lower passenger decks. I hid in my swinging hammock feeling sick.



View over the bows

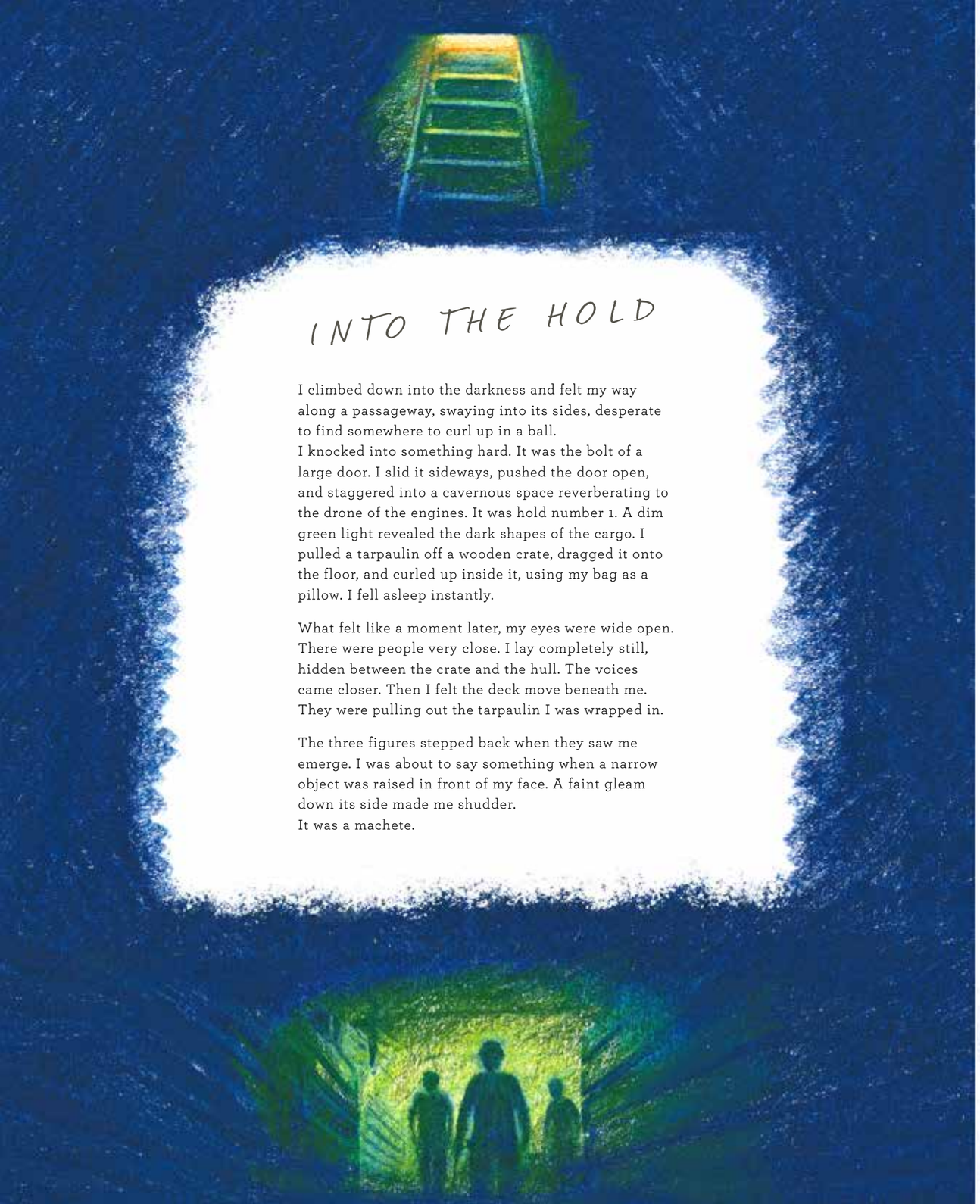
I woke in the darkness. The swinging had stopped. We had docked in a remote harbor, I thought to shelter from the storm, but as I looked over the ship's side I saw large cargo crates waiting to be loaded into the hold, along with two passengers. My watch read midnight. I crawled back into my hammock praying we'd stay put.

My sleep ended with a shudder.
The vessel was now rising and falling heavily. Spray whipped up its sides and over the deck. My head and tummy swirled with seasickness. I fumbled for my bag then staggered across the slippery deck, trying not to be sick. I needed to get somewhere dry and swaying less. I needed to head downward.

The jaws of a huge shark nailed to a post



The harbor in the middle of the night



INTO THE HOLD

I climbed down into the darkness and felt my way along a passageway, swaying into its sides, desperate to find somewhere to curl up in a ball.
I knocked into something hard. It was the bolt of a large door. I slid it sideways, pushed the door open, and staggered into a cavernous space reverberating to the drone of the engines. It was hold number 1. A dim green light revealed the dark shapes of the cargo. I pulled a tarpaulin off a wooden crate, dragged it onto the floor, and curled up inside it, using my bag as a pillow. I fell asleep instantly.

What felt like a moment later, my eyes were wide open. There were people very close. I lay completely still, hidden between the crate and the hull. The voices came closer. Then I felt the deck move beneath me. They were pulling out the tarpaulin I was wrapped in.

The three figures stepped back when they saw me emerge. I was about to say something when a narrow object was raised in front of my face. A faint gleam down its side made me shudder.
It was a machete.

Suddenly everything slowed down. My sickness was gone. I saw the uncovered crate and something large and metallic inside. A weapon. Other crates had “Explosives” marked on them and a symbol I didn’t recognize. I wanted to vomit. Then I heard the rasping voice. It was him. The man in the cap who had threatened the captain.

The thrust came without warning. Instinctively I raised my bag. For a brief moment, the machete blade was stuck in this journal.

I just remember running. Within seconds I was through a hatch and into the engine room, stumbling through steam towards a ladder and another hatch leading up to the passenger decks.
I broke through the door hoping to find someone, anyone.

The salty air and roar of the wind hit me in the face. I was on the lower stern deck. Beyond the railings was nothing but the dark, roiling sea. I was trapped.

In those few seconds the terrifying reality sunk in. These were smugglers of a deadly cargo. Of explosives and whatever else was hidden in those crates. I was a witness. All alone. Surrounded by ocean. I tried to scream out, but my voice didn’t come. Fear had taken it. I fumbled at the bag’s buckle. I had a penknife.
But it was too late.

They burst out into the night then stopped, barring my escape. The man in the cap began to laugh. “Don’t be scared.” I could just hear his cruel voice through the howling wind.

They were going to kill me. Anger. Desperate anger. I rushed at the henchman on the right, sidestepping him at the last second. I was nearly through when a wave lifted the ship and I was on my knees. Hands gripped me from behind. I was hoisted upward and over the handrail. For a moment I was weightless. Falling. My hand reached out and gripped onto the smuggler’s jacket, my weight pinning him against the railings. His eyes were wide. He wasn’t laughing now. I could smell his stale, wheezing breath as he tried to unfurl my fingers from the pocket. There was a brief tearing sound. A shout. His hand reached down. But the wind was already passing my ears.

I hit the water hard on my back. Then I was under, submerged in a muffled silence. Every muscle in my body strained to push me upward. I reached the surface choking, coughing, gasping. The ship’s stern loomed into the darkness and the engines rumbled. A wave lifted me and I saw the three silhouettes and caught the faint sound of shouting. Then the ferry was gone. Swallowed by the night.

I clung to my bag, struggling to keep my face above the surges of foam. Somehow it was floating. It was your silly bottle keeping me afloat. As I changed my grip, something floated out of my hand. It was the smuggler’s torn pocket and a scrunched-up note.

The ocean towered and fell. The wind screamed.
I was shaking uncontrollably.

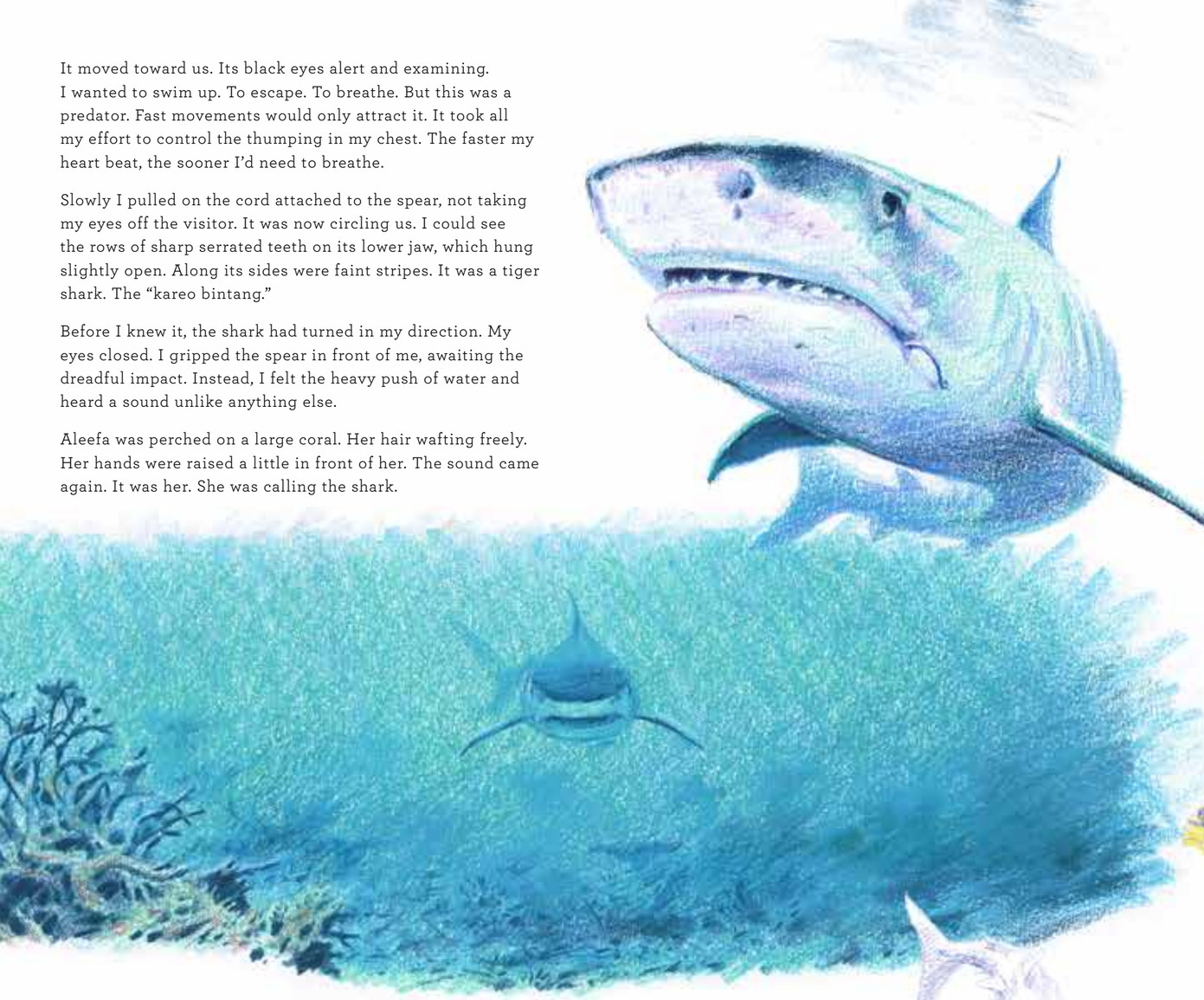
I was alone in the ocean.

It moved toward us. Its black eyes alert and examining. I wanted to swim up. To escape. To breathe. But this was a predator. Fast movements would only attract it. It took all my effort to control the thumping in my chest. The faster my heart beat, the sooner I'd need to breathe.

Slowly I pulled on the cord attached to the spear, not taking my eyes off the visitor. It was now circling us. I could see the rows of sharp serrated teeth on its lower jaw, which hung slightly open. Along its sides were faint stripes. It was a tiger shark. The "kareo bintang."

Before I knew it, the shark had turned in my direction. My eyes closed. I gripped the spear in front of me, awaiting the dreadful impact. Instead, I felt the heavy push of water and heard a sound unlike anything else.

Aleefa was perched on a large coral. Her hair wafting freely. Her hands were raised a little in front of her. The sound came again. It was her. She was calling the shark.



As it approached, she calmly pushed its nose away. She turned her body to face it as it circled again. This time though, she held it firmly. The shark slowed. As it did so, Aleefa reached for a pectoral fin (the fins on the side) and like a slow-motion judo move, she rolled the shark over using its forward momentum.
It stopped moving. Its eyes seemed to roll back into its head and it hovered motionless, upside down. It was in some kind of trance. As she did so, she began pulling at something from the side of its mouth. It was a large fishing hook. On the third pull it came free. She held the shark there for about ten more seconds before rubbing its nose and turning it back over. It seemed confused for a moment, then shook its body free and accelerated away into the blue.

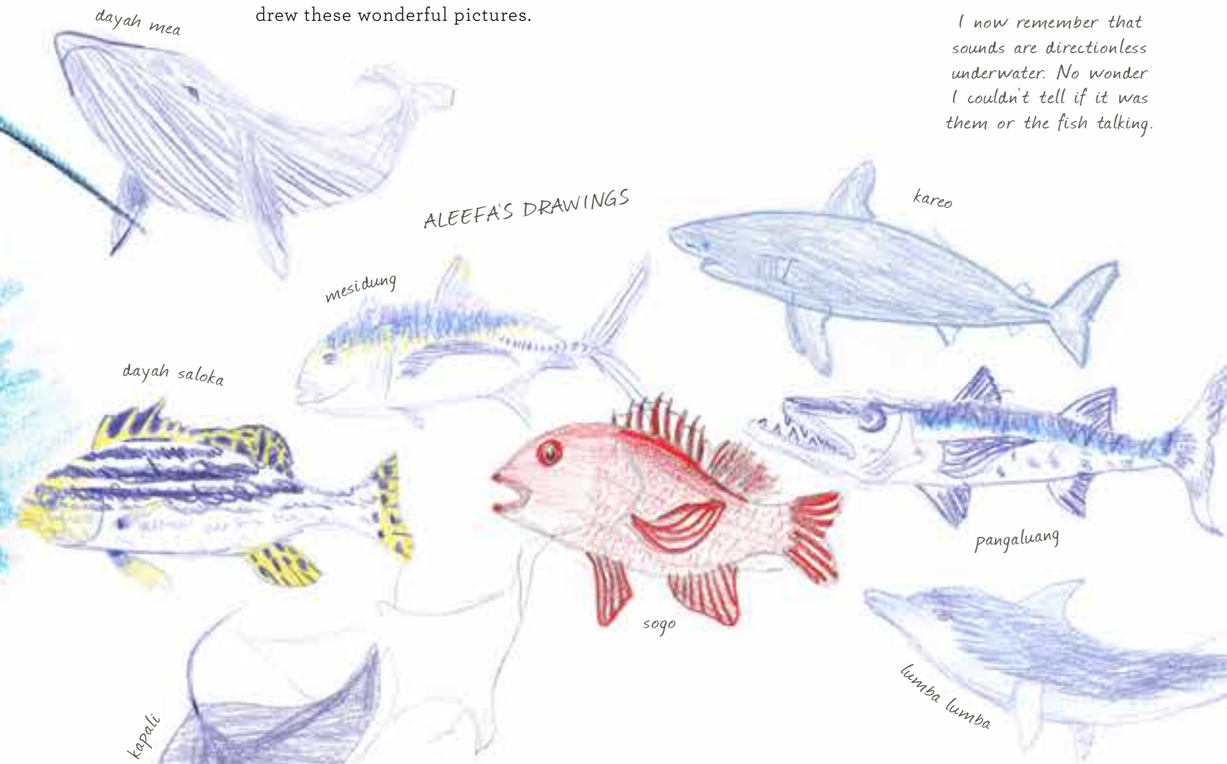


I don't know what it was I witnessed today, I just know it was real. And it was incredible. Aleefa didn't just put the tiger shark to sleep, she seemed to communicate with it, moving calmly and carefully. It was more than a trick—was there a bond?

And all those talking fish? I now know it wasn't the fish. It was my island family. They were calling them, too. But it wasn't magic—it was something else, maybe something that comes from living your whole life listening to the ocean and learning its language.

When I saw their diving abilities it did make me think of the sea nomads, but they are clearly islanders. They live in stilt houses not in boats in the middle of the ocean. I wish I could just ask, but the few words I've learned aren't enough. Aleefa can see my frustration. This evening she asked Ma'sida to tell a story and tried to explain. She even drew these wonderful pictures.

I now remember that sounds are directionless underwater. No wonder I couldn't tell if it was them or the fish talking.



I think these are some of the sea creatures they can call. But I don't think these are just drawings—I think they are a way of seeing the world through their eyes. Just like Ma'sida's stories aren't just stories. They are a way of passing down knowledge. If only I could speak their language.

I think Aleefa would have drawn more if Sarna hadn't interrupted us. "Kunang!" she shouted from the doorway. She was pointing toward the dark sea.