

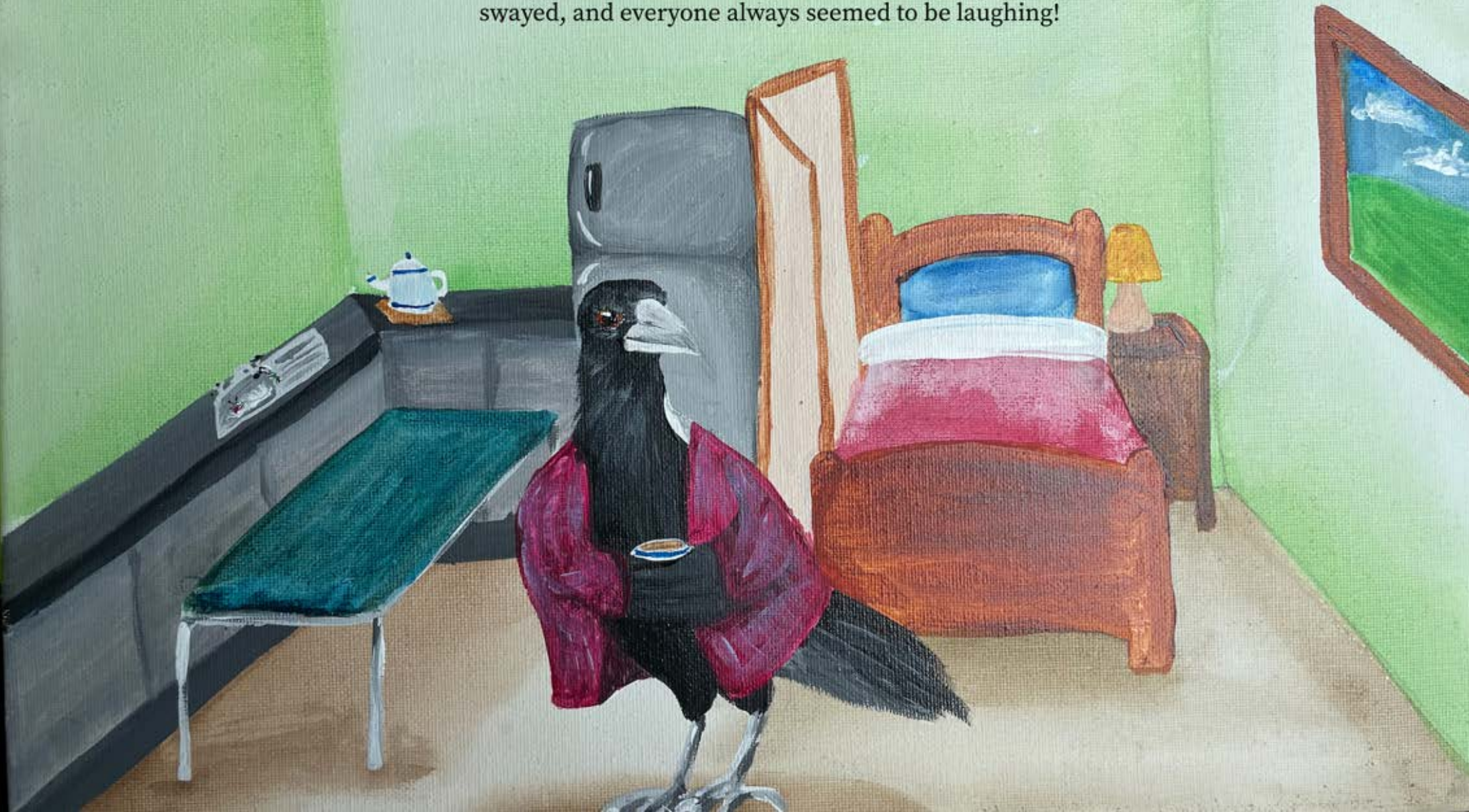
Tamar the Thief

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Riggall, Illustrated
by Grace Roberts



Tamar the magpie lived by the banks of a river.

Her little nest had everything that she needed, but when she woke up each morning, her first thought was that she was unhappy. Oh, how she wished that the world inside her house was as glamorous and exciting as the one outside it, where the water sparkled, trees swayed, and everyone always seemed to be laughing!



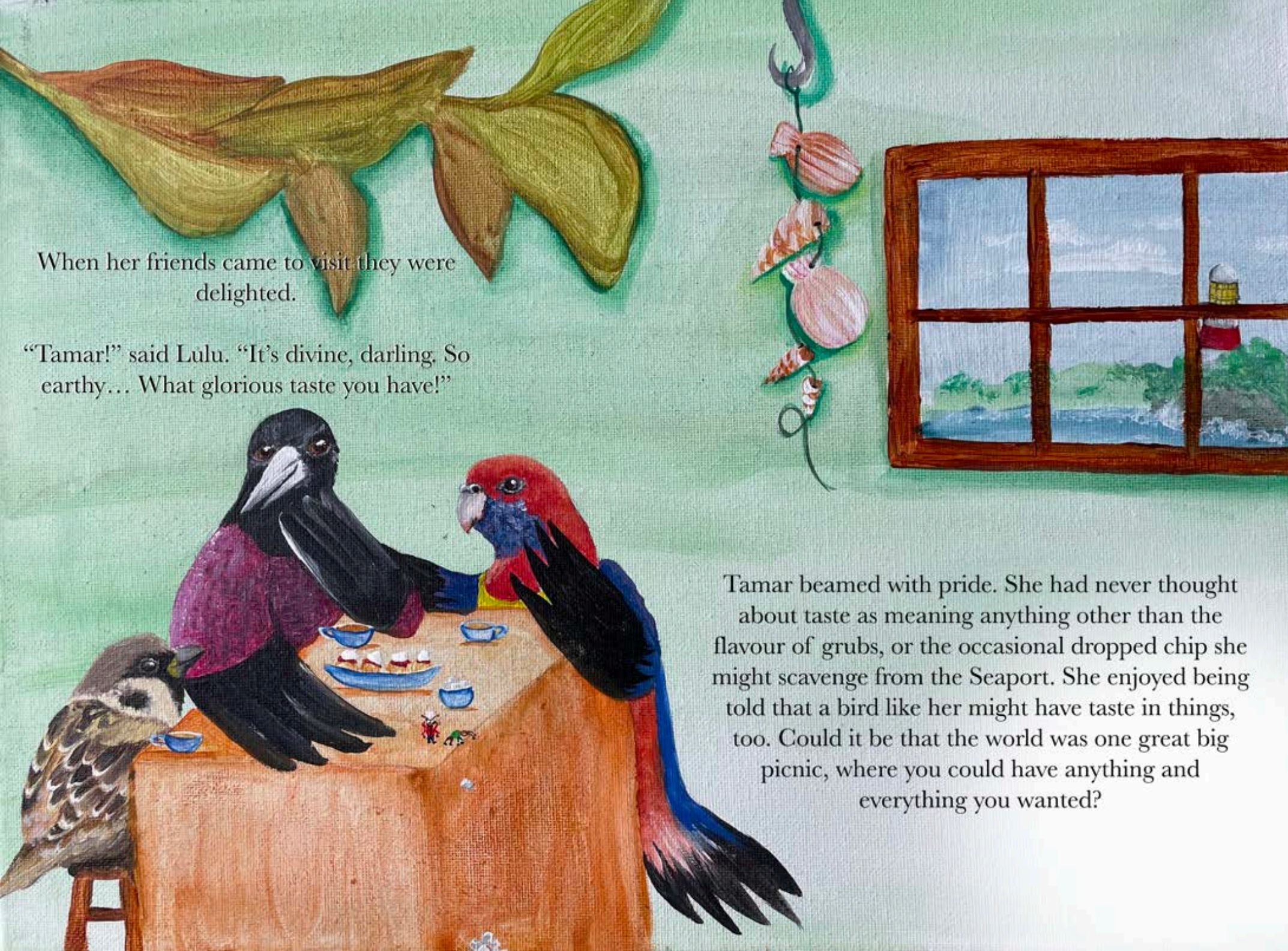


Whenever the other birds of the river invited her for tea, Tamar would sit in their homes and marvel at all of the things that they had bought, and been given, and collected, and her eyes would sparkle with envy. She felt as if she was stuck on the ground while they were flying away.

All she wanted—more than anything—was for her life to be beautiful too.

It began with little things. Tamar would fly down to the shore by the water in search of food and if she found something that caught her eye—stones, or sticks, or leaves with interesting patterns—she would take them home and arrange them all around her loungeroom.

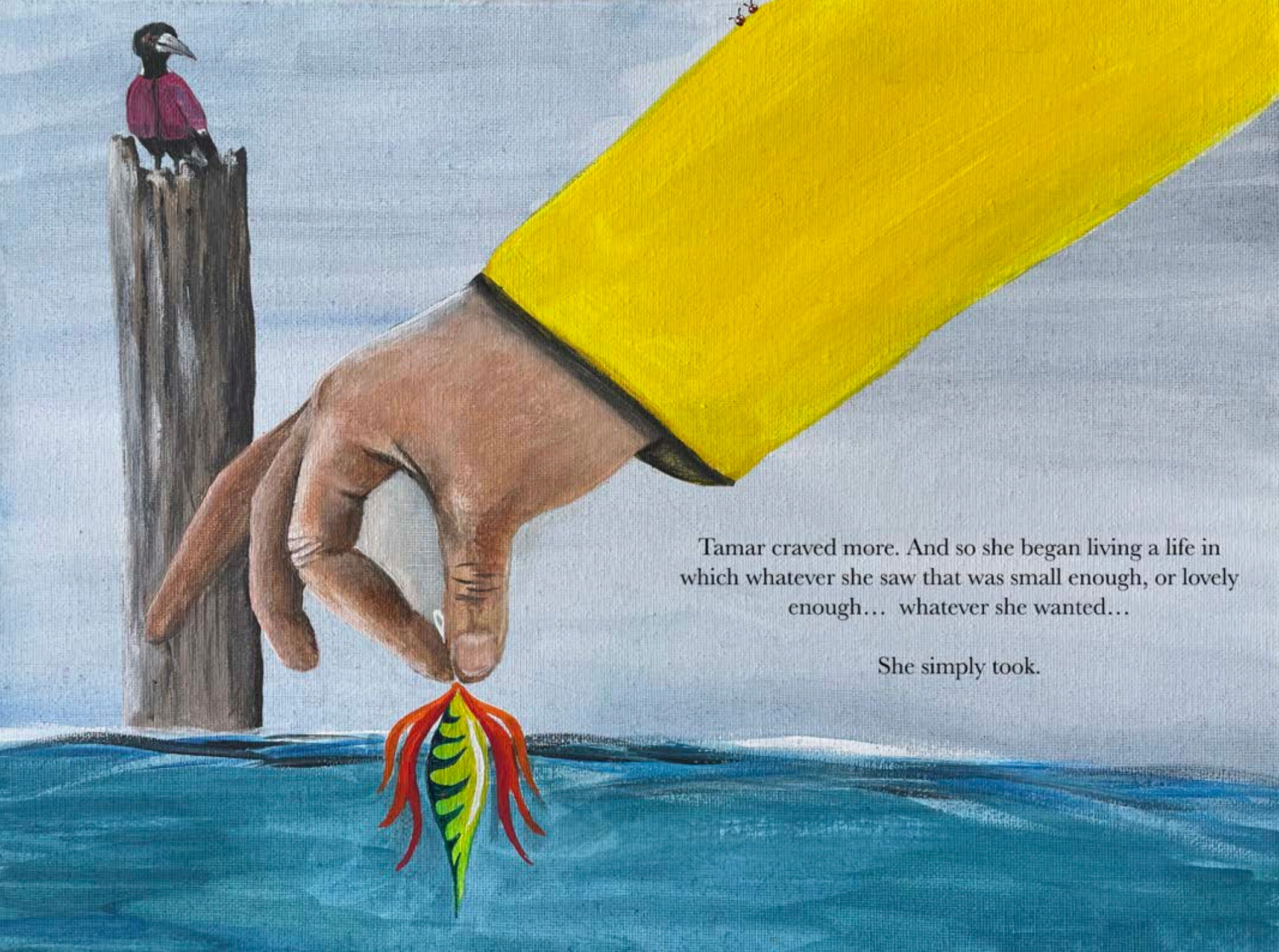




When her friends came to visit they were delighted.

“Tamar!” said Lulu. “It’s divine, darling. So earthy... What glorious taste you have!”

Tamar beamed with pride. She had never thought about taste as meaning anything other than the flavour of grubs, or the occasional dropped chip she might scavenge from the Seaport. She enjoyed being told that a bird like her might have taste in things, too. Could it be that the world was one great big picnic, where you could have anything and everything you wanted?



Tamar craved more. And so she began living a life in which whatever she saw that was small enough, or lovely enough... whatever she wanted...

She simply took.



She saw no reason to even be careful. She snatched and clutched and swooped and swiped and she didn't think twice about any of it for a second. Why should she?



The people who lived by the banks of the river had such fine and interesting things, and it seemed to her that they didn't really appreciate them. But she would appreciate them.

She started shooing other birds away at the door.

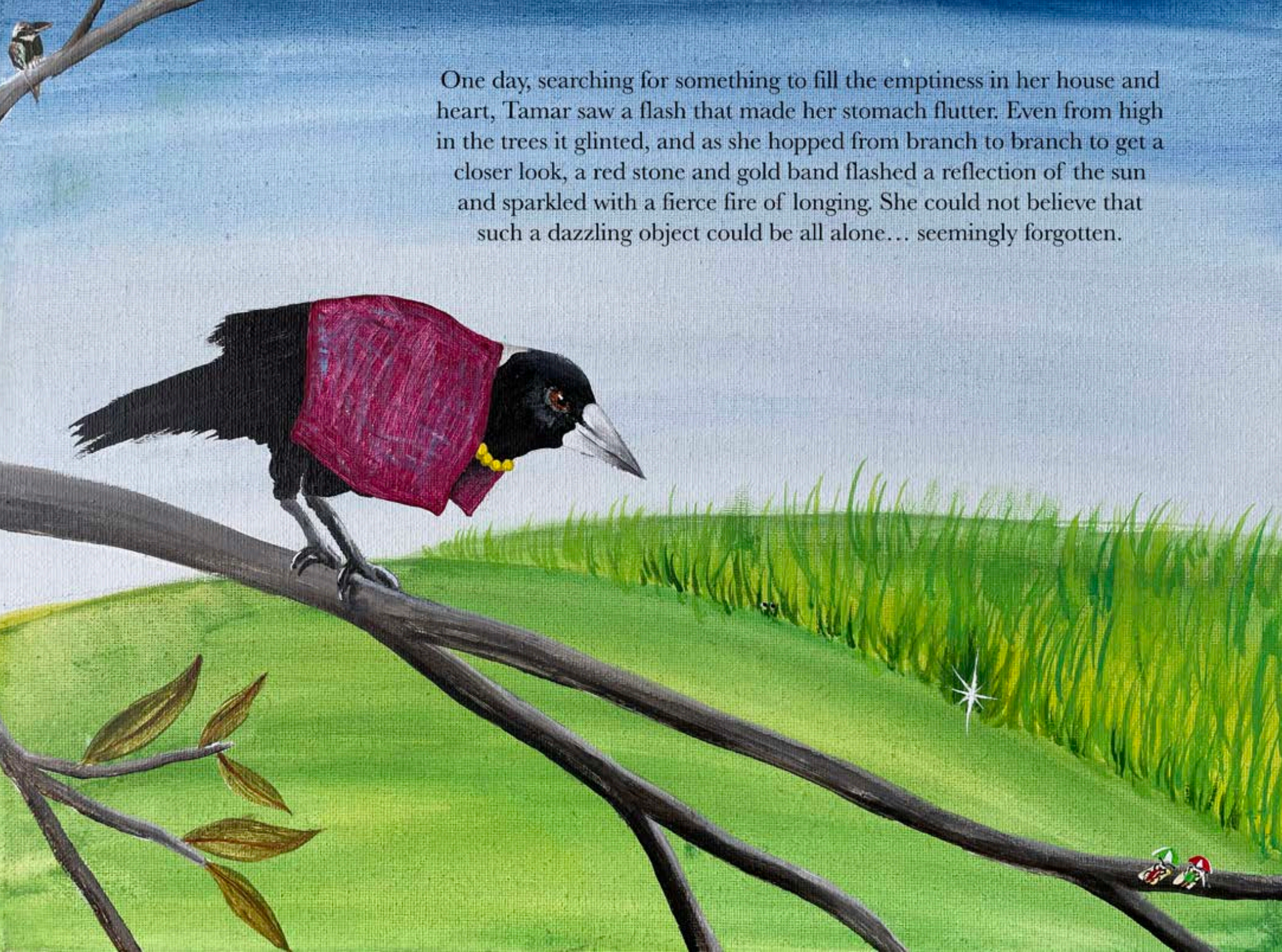
“I know what you want,” she would say in a cruel, raspy voice, “and you can’t have any of it. Keep your sneaky beaks out of here!”



Yet despite all her treasures, Tamar soon discovered that it is not much fun to have things when you have no-one to share them with.



One day, searching for something to fill the emptiness in her house and heart, Tamar saw a flash that made her stomach flutter. Even from high in the trees it glinted, and as she hopped from branch to branch to get a closer look, a red stone and gold band flashed a reflection of the sun and sparkled with a fierce fire of longing. She could not believe that such a dazzling object could be all alone... seemingly forgotten.

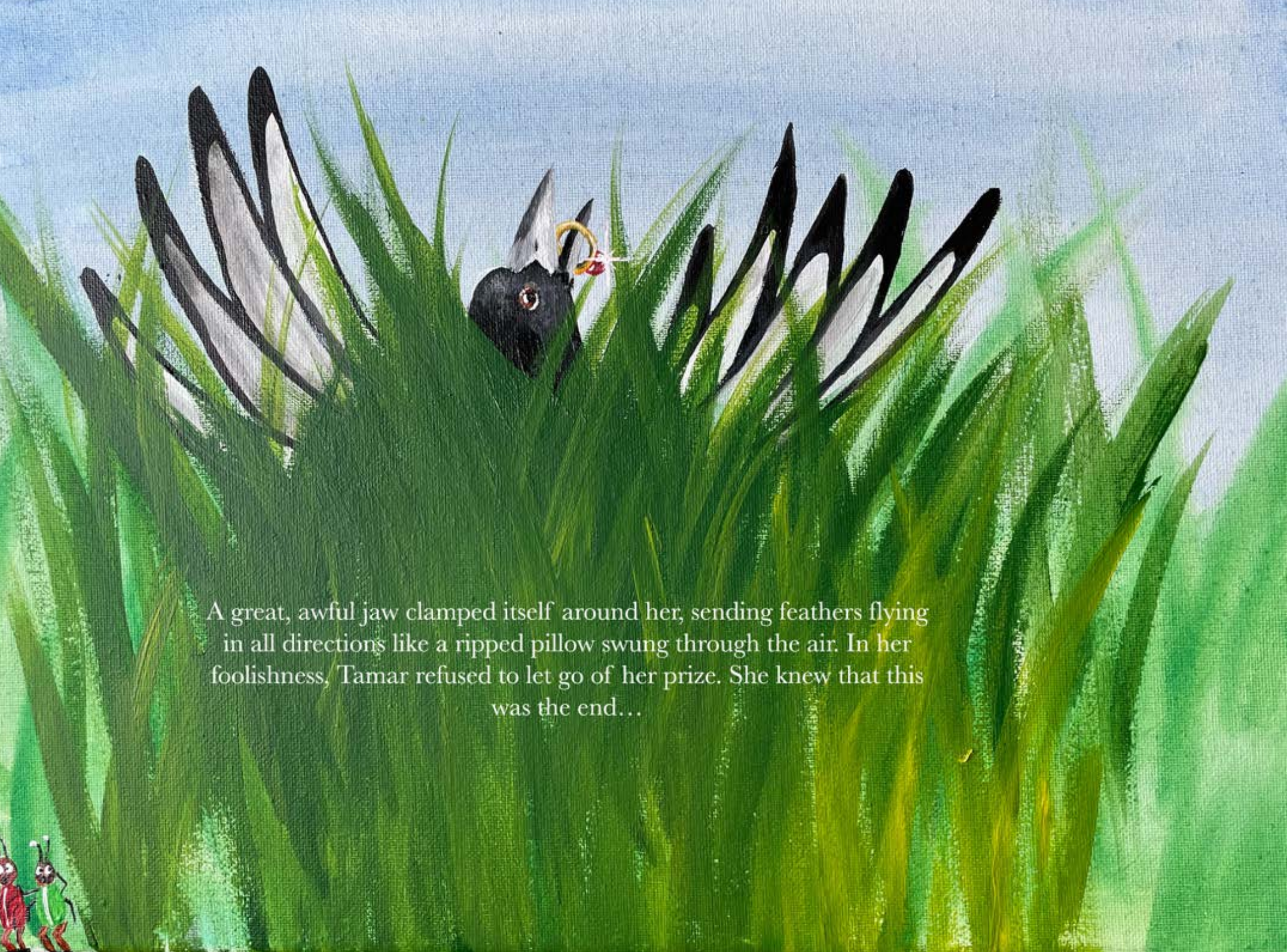


Tamar's mother had always told her that the tall grass beside the river was not a safe place for a magpie, but she was foolish—blind to everything except flickering dreams of her own future: that beautiful gemstone sitting right beside her bed, like a great watching eye, and all of her friends gathered around it, cooing softly as they told her how beautiful it was.




Tamar plucked the ring from the grass, and that was when everything went wrong.





A great, awful jaw clamped itself around her, sending feathers flying in all directions like a ripped pillow swung through the air. In her foolishness, Tamar refused to let go of her prize. She knew that this was the end...

A detailed oil painting of a bird's wing and tail. The feathers are rendered with intricate brushstrokes, showing a mix of dark blue, teal, and brown tones. The central part of the image is dominated by a block of text. Below the text, two talons are visible, painted in a dark, almost black color with some grey shading to show texture. The background is a light, textured white.

... But then Tamar heard something: a screeching and flapping in the sky above her. She thought for a moment that she must have died, and that this was the fluttering of magic angels, but no—it was something else—a blur of brown and white and mottled blue that swooped over and above her until the beast finally let her go, scurrying off into the bush with a backwards glance of shame and disappointment.



“Let me help you,” said the bird who had saved her. Although it wasn’t safe in the long grass, Tamar was hurt, and the kookaburra bravely guided her—slowly and carefully—back to her nest. He told her that his name was Luka, but Tamar didn’t say anything in response. After all, she still had treasure in her beak that had almost cost her life... she wasn’t letting it go now!





Over the coming days, Luka continued to visit Tamar, taking the time to help keep her house as clean as he could and bringing her food while she got better.

“Where are all your other friends?” he asked her one day.

“Oh, don’t worry about them,” said Tamar, glancing to the ring with loving eyes. “They’ll soon come running when I tell them what I have!”

That didn’t sound to Luka much like friendship. He didn’t like Tamar just because she had things that were new, or expensive, or fancy. He liked her because she was funny, and interesting, and brave—even if sometimes she did things that he knew she probably shouldn’t.

Tamar lay in bed for a week like that, considering all of the objects in her house, one-by-one, contemplating each in its turn. She would tell Luka stories of how she had found them, or snatched them, or slipped them away, and he would click his beak lightly and say, “Okay. Well... as long as they make you happy.”

Soon, those words started to ring in her head like the bells of the clock tower in the city. And when she asked herself if she was—really—happy...

...Well, she didn’t have a simple answer.

Luka found her one morning, flapping around her little nest, a basket under one wing.

“What’s going on?” he asked her.

“I need to get rid of them!” she told him. “They don’t belong to me and I don’t want them anymore!”

Luka’s beak curled into a smile.





In just the same manner in which they had taken them, the two birds from beside the river began the mammoth effort of returning everything that Tamar had stolen.



Surprisingly, she remembered the faces of all of her victims, as if there was some other part of her that she had squashed deep down in her little feathery belly that had been thinking about them ever since, and perhaps had always had a secret longing to put things back to how they had been before.

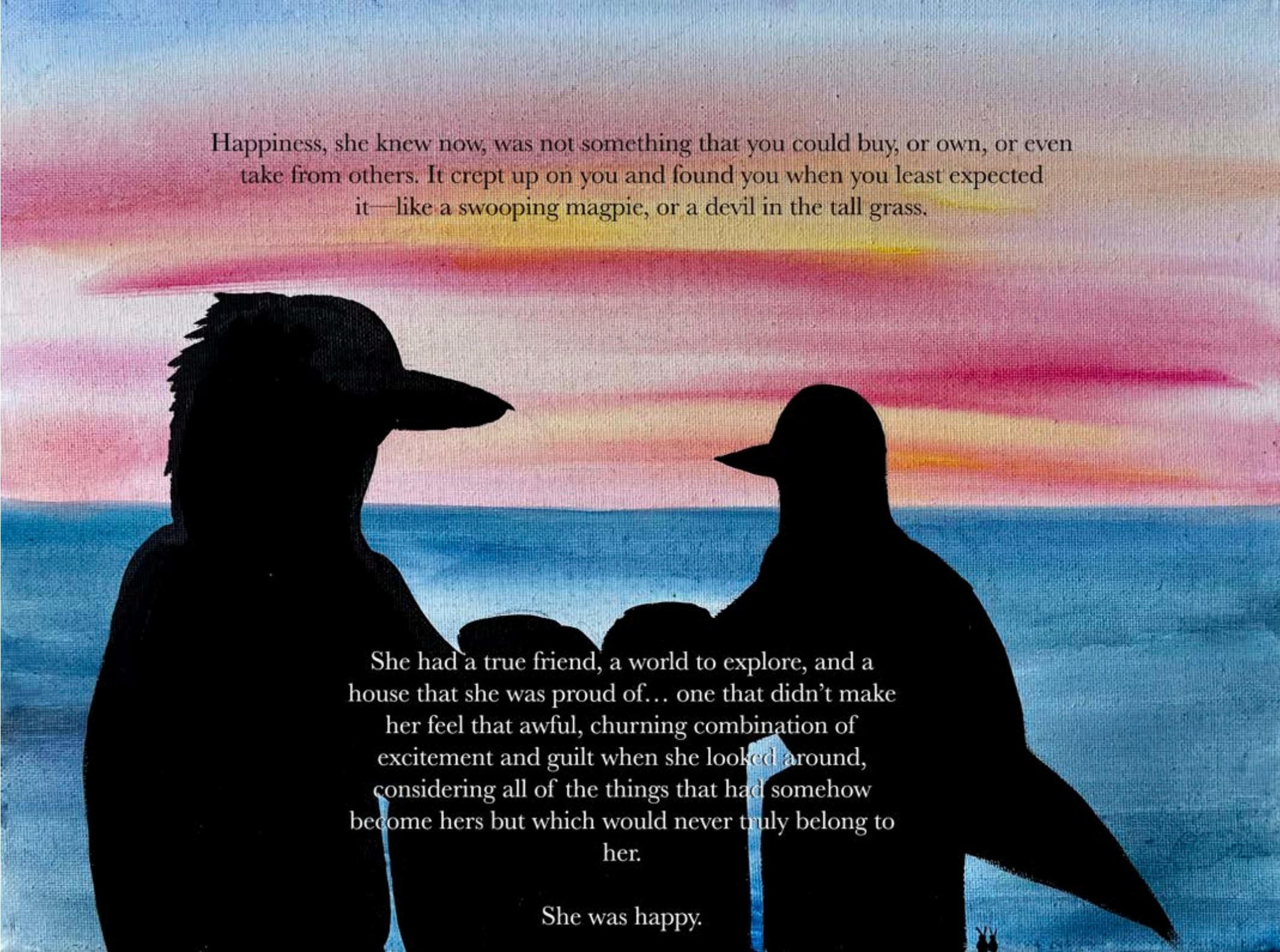


They would go on adventures together, flying high above the water, and over time she came to realise that the most beautiful thing imaginable—and the most worthy of collecting—was not what she took, but what she shared:

Eventually, her house was almost empty again. Still, even when Tamar was back to her old self, Luka didn't stop his ritual of visiting every day.



memories of the landscape beyond her door, a quiet moment watching the sun rise and fall over the water, and all the times when she made her friend laugh.

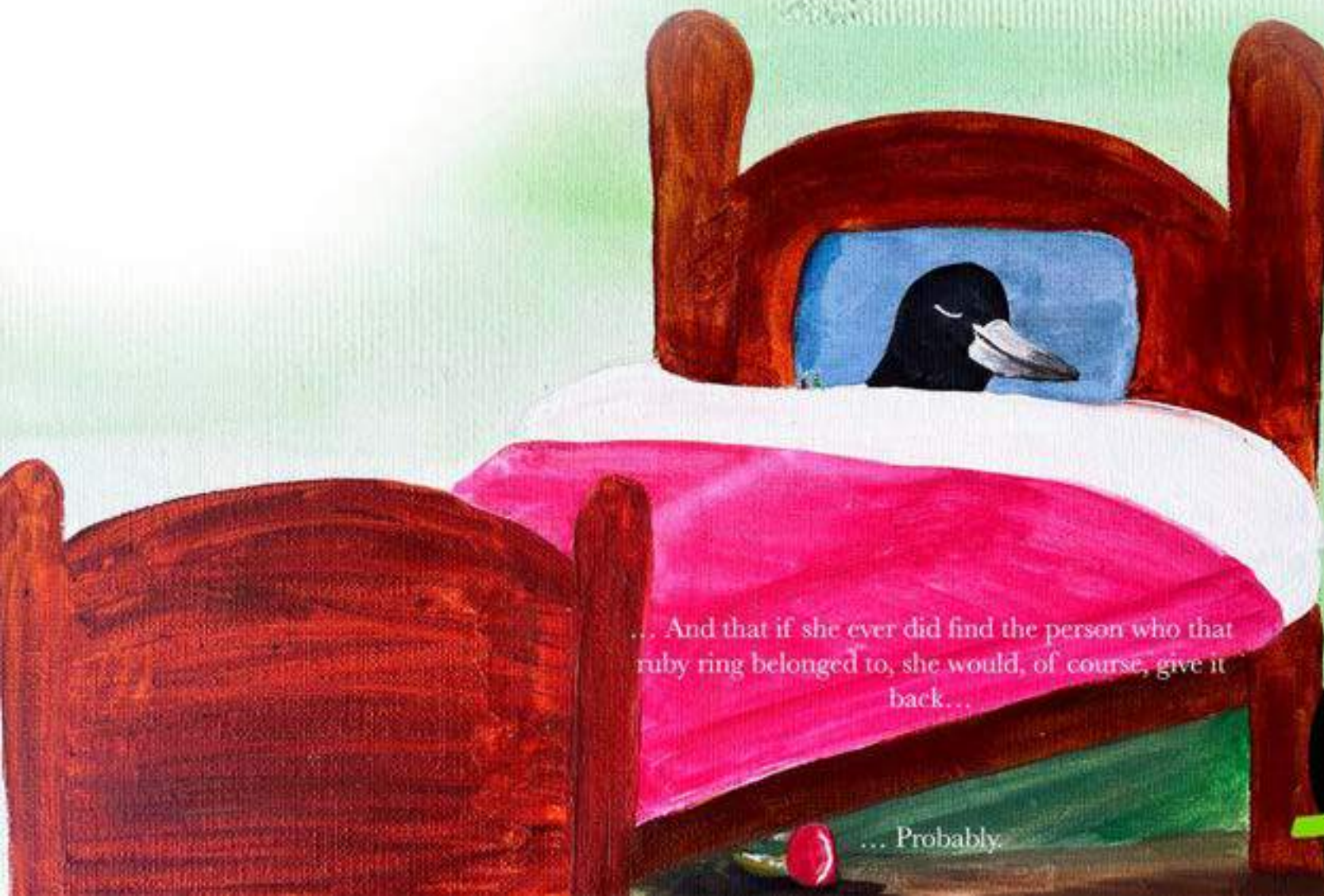


Happiness, she knew now, was not something that you could buy, or own, or even take from others. It crept up on you and found you when you least expected it—like a swooping magpie, or a devil in the tall grass.

She had a true friend, a world to explore, and a house that she was proud of... one that didn't make her feel that awful, churning combination of excitement and guilt when she looked around, considering all of the things that had somehow become hers but which would never truly belong to her.

She was happy.

Each night, before she slept, she made herself a promise that she would never be a thief again...



... And that if she ever did find the person who that ruby ring belonged to, she would, of course, give it back...

... Probably

Tamar Valley
**WRITERS
FESTIVAL**