

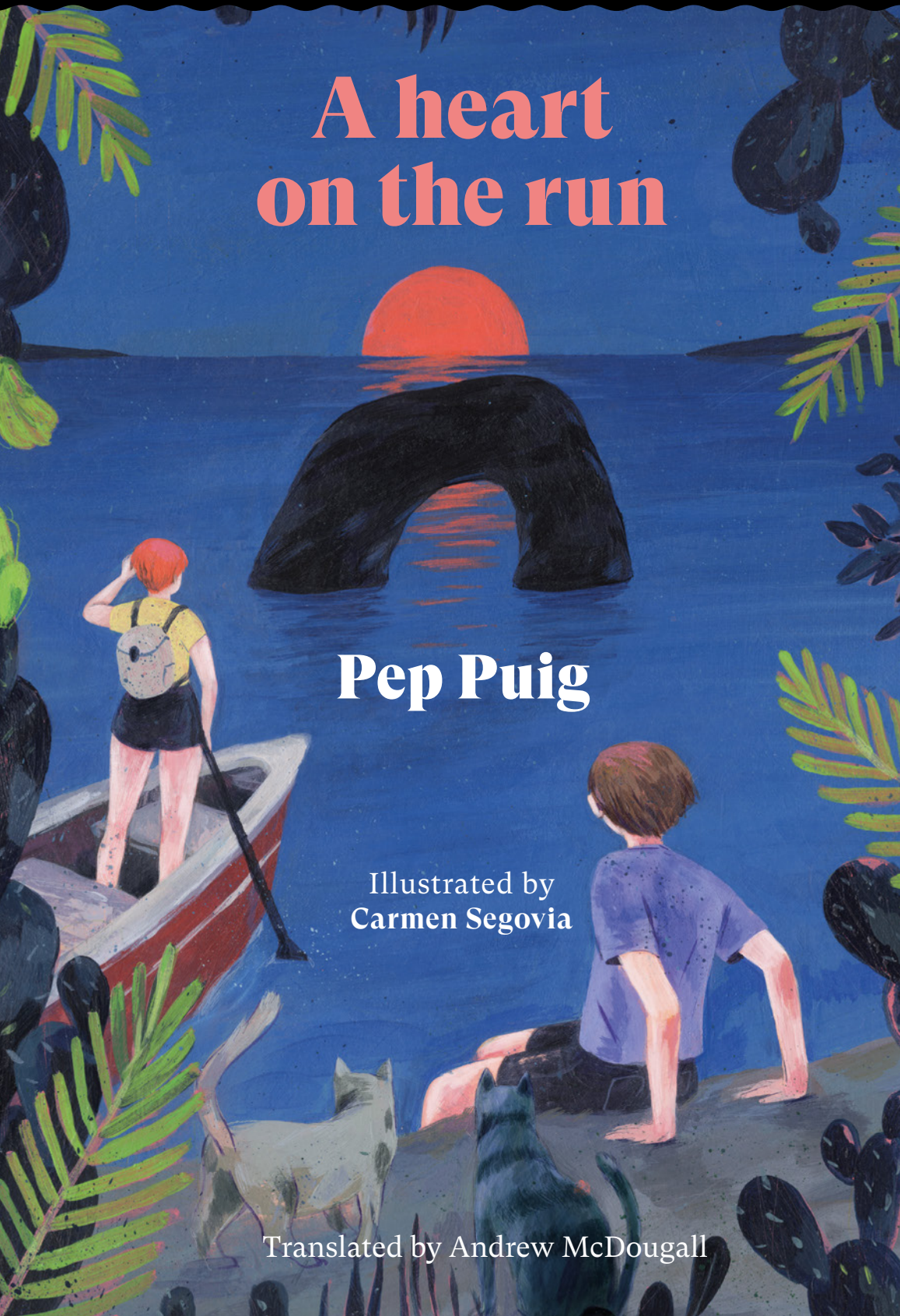
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A heart on the run

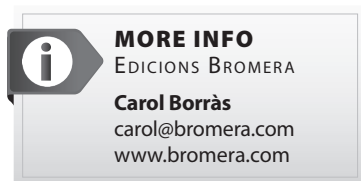
Pep Puig

Illustrated by
Carmen Segovia

Translated by Andrew McDougall



A heart on the run



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A heart on the run

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“There used to be a train that took you back again, but now it’s a one-way ticket. Do you still want to come?”

Chihiro’s Journey. HAYAO MITAZAKI

“Human passions have mysterious ways, in children as well as grown-ups. Those affected by them can’t explain them, and those who haven’t known them have no understanding of them at all.”

The Neverending Story.

MICHAEL ENDE

“If we attribute cats with certain magical powers, it is only because of their mysterious appearance. They do not, in fact, have any magical power whatsoever. I have observed them closely and they are beasts like any other. Something else altogether are those small creatures – certainly, rather similar to cats – that dwell in some unknown corner of the Mediterranean and have the ability to turn into human beings.”

The Travels of Marco Polo.

MARCO POLO

“Between living and dreaming there is a third thing: guess what it is.”

ANTONIO MACHADO

“Heart, heart, on the run, wounded by doubts of love.”

SILVIO RODRÍGUEZ

PART ONE

1.

The announcement

I don't know where to begin, this isn't my story, it's my sister's. Well, it's also a little bit mine. I'll start with the cats. Some people hate cats, everyone knows that; my dad sometimes told me that when he was young, he had a friend who really had it in for them and chased them with stones. He wasn't the only one. Another friend, he told me – and sometimes I wondered if it wasn't him – shot pellets at them from out the window. He loaded his father's gun and took aim at the cats lounging on the rooftops opposite. That story fascinated me. How could you be so sick as to shoot at a cat, I wondered, even though cats weren't exactly my favourite animal. I didn't have a problem with them, but I think it annoyed me that they were so aloof. Sometimes, I got the impression that cats didn't like me much either. Maybe it's a kind of selfishness, but if cats don't like me, why should I have to like them? But all that was before this story began: now I love them, and I think they love me too – well, at least three or four of them.

I think it would be better to start with the moment when my mum surprised us with the announcement that we'd be going somewhere different on holiday that year. It would have been mid-April and we were having dinner.

'Where are we going?' asked Alex somewhat suspiciously. Her name was Alexandra, my sister, but she liked being called Alex.

'If we tell you, it takes the fun away, dear,' replied my mum.

'What does different mean?' said Alex, even more suspiciously.

Mum looked at her with a mix of amusement and tenderness.

'Different means different, very special.'

Alex held mum's gaze for a moment, but she didn't insist, as if she didn't want to keep playing her game. Lately, she didn't want to play along with any kind of game. Until then, our holidays had always been to mountainous regions – my dad couldn't handle heat or humidity – to places with rivers, gorges and, ideally, swimming pools.

'Is it somewhere by the sea?' I thought to ask.

My boldness made my mum chuckle.

'Yes, dear, it's by the sea, but stop asking, we won't say any more.'

So I did, or at least I didn't manage to get them to reveal anything else. Deep down, however, I enjoyed that game, and I took that *somewhere different* as a ray of hope.

So, without having any idea of our destination, in late June, as soon as school was finished, after St John's Day, we loaded up the car with all kinds of clothes and beach things, and set off on the road out of G.

In the front, a mum and dad getting on rather well. In the back, two kids: an adolescent girl and a boy with an adolescent sister. I couldn't have been more expectant. And

Alex, although she didn't want to show it, behind her green sunglasses, was much more than expectant. Nervous, I'd say. If you'd put your ear to her chest, you'd have heard her heart pounding away something awful. And although I sometimes did just that – I liked listening to her heartbeat – that time I held back.

One road led to another, and another and another. Sometimes we went through a tunnel, or a line of tunnels, and when we came out the other end I had the feeling of having not just changed scenery but also dimension. To help us handle the nerves, dad suggested singing a song, but when we didn't follow his lead, he began to whistle a tune – he was a great whistler – until mum put on a Caetano Veloso CD on repeat until dad took it out and started whistling again.

It wasn't, however, a very long journey for going somewhere so special. Although we crossed countless borders, or at least that's what dad wanted us to believe because he kept pointing here or there and calling out:

'Look, another border!'

They were simply distraction techniques, just like when we stopped at a service station for lunch and dad had his usual siesta. In truth, we were almost there. When we got back onto the motorway, we soon turned back off and ventured down windy lanes through an almost-constant backdrop of vineyards, olive trees and carob trees. Then it did feel to me like we had crossed a border; however, dad didn't say anything until he pulled up in front of a train station surrounded by weeds.

'You can stay here if you want,' he joked, encouraging us to get out of the car.

Mum got out first, and then the two of us. For the moment, there was no mystery. The explication was simple as to arrive at the *different place* there were still 12km of twists and turns to go, so they had decided to spare us the certain car sickness. It must have been about five in the afternoon.

I remember the silence that surrounded us; the muffled chirping of birds. While dad wound his way up the road, we went along a dirt path, onto the platform and sat down on a stone bench. There was no mystery to it, but it was a strange place. The station seemed abandoned. There was nothing there. Not even a name or a board with the timetables. Nothing: just us, that bench and one set of train tracks. That was strange, too. I stood up and approached the edge.

‘Guys, guess where the train is going to come from,’ said mum.

I looked from side to side. To the left, about fifty metres away, the track led into a tunnel. I pointed in the other direction and mum smiled to indicate I’d guessed correctly. We were alone. The only other creature, on the opposite platform, was a cat who was staring intensely at us. If I remember that it’s because right then it decided to cross the lines and come over almost to where we were.

‘It’s not scared of us,’ said mum.

I don’t whether to contradict her, but I picked up a very small stone – the size of a pellet, let’s say – and threw it at the cat. It didn’t even blink. It was surprising. The way it looked at us. We didn’t know what it wanted. Maybe it was hungry, because it meowed several times. My mum took a biscuit out of her bag and rolled it towards it.

‘Hey, mum! Cats don’t eat biscuits!’ Alex scolded her. ‘Do you want to kill it?’

My mum laughed.

‘And what do cats eat?’

Alex didn’t answer: it was one of those questions she wasn’t prepared to answer. She approached the cat slowly. It didn’t budge. Not even when Alex crouched down next to it and began to caress its little head and whisper nice things to it. All it did was close its eyes. Sometimes I thought my sister had certain powers. That was one. No doubt about it. How many street cats would let a stranger stroke them in

exchange for nothing? Of course, though, my sister wasn't offering nothing. She could be the sweetest girl in the world, when she wanted to. The problem was that lately she didn't want to.

'Noa, come here.'

At first, I remained still. Not out of fear so as much as because I was sure that as soon as I moved, the cat would run away. It was logical that it wouldn't exactly trust the person who just threw a stone at it. Besides, I don't think I really felt like touching a cat, so I reckon I was a bit scared, or at least apprehensive, but nevertheless in the end I decided to go over to them, with the misfortune that right at that moment, the train appeared and the cat shot off.

2.

The train

It looked like a toy train. Not because of the size – although it didn't have more than five or six carriages – but the colours – dark silver with a yellow horizontal stripe – and its air of something old. Without making loud noises, it stopped and the doors opened. No one got off. Luckily, when we boarded, we discovered we weren't alone. Inside there were other families on their holidays – not many, right enough – and mainly people wearing darker clothes. I remember their expressions, a cross between curious and distracted, some sleepy. Committed to keeping our destination a secret until the last minute, mum found us somewhere to sit down. The wink gave her away. With the same slowness with which it had arrived, the train began to move. We went inside the tunnel and soon came out again. Then came another one and we emerged again. The impression these small tunnels that cut through the rock made on us was surpassed, however, by that made by the sea that stretched out towards the horizon. Blue and intense.

Without asking permission, Alex got up and went for a stroll around the train. She had been doing things like that lately: any excuse to get away from our parents. I asked permission and went to look for her. I found her in the last carriage, sat alone, with her forehead resting on the window. But that wasn't what caught my attention; it was a black-and-white photograph on her lap that she hurried to hide inside a book she then stuffed inside her bag of clothes. What was that photo?

I sat down in front of her and rested my head on her lap for her to stroke me like a cat.

'Why can't I see it?'

'See what?'

'The photo...'

'What photo?'

I didn't insist. It wouldn't have been any use.

'Shall we go back to mum?'

'Not yet.'

As I said before, Alex was going through a rebellious phase. She had always been a bit like that, wanting to do things her way, but lately the situation had become more extreme. Two weeks previously, for example, she had cut her hair very short. Not quite shaved, but almost. When she saw her, mum clasped a hand to her mouth. Dad just said sneered that if she wanted to look like a boy, she'd managed it. The next day, Alex went back to the hairdresser and dyed her hair orange. At home, no one said anything. I suppose it was to avoid a third rebellion, or because to be honest it didn't look bad.

In fact, she looked especially pretty. And really, she didn't look at all like a boy.

We didn't go back with mum, but she appeared from the other carriage to tell us to get ready because we were almost there. We got up and faced the door on the platform side. Dad was waiting down there and waving exaggeratedly.

It was strange seeing him there. It seemed like a long time since we had seen him, that we had made this journey to find him. He added a dose of comedy, opening his arms wide and declaring:

‘My children, beloved wife, how long it’s been!’

He had a fun side, dad. In fact, he was a very funny man. Even though he was usually more serious. His appearance was suited to it, both to being funny and to when it came to giving us boundaries. He was tall and thin, with a thick beard that half-covered a scar he’d got from a piece of glass when he was little. He could be scary, but we weren’t scared of him. I think what I liked most about him was how he well he got on with mum. And his knack for whistling, of course.

3.

An important place

After taking mum's hand – I don't remember that specifically, but he always took it, as if scared she'd escape - dad led us out of the station. First we went round a wall of cypress trees, and after crossing a line of very tall trees, mum made us stop. I don't know how many seconds passed until she said:

‘What do you think, daughter and son?’

Daughter and son. She hardly ever said that. And when she did, there was a hint of irony, but also of great significance. We were her children, though, so it wasn't much of a joke. We looked up. There we had it. The different place. And it certainly was. Different and very special. Impressive, we should have said. But I was a kid and I paid compliments with my facial expressions. As for my sister, not even that. I had never seen such a place. Not even on a postcard. It was a little village nestled into a cliff. With colourful houses all piled up on top of each other. And beyond that, the turquoise sea, dotted with tiny islands.

‘I can’t tell you why,’ said mum after a while, ‘but this place is very important to me.’

Her tone surprised me. Her expression still more so.

‘Why, mum?’

She smiled at me, almost sadly.

‘For now, I’d rather not say, love. Soon you’ll find out for yourselves.’

Love. She called me love much more often than son. Luckily, dad wasn’t in the mood for nostalgia and impatiently asked us to follow him. With the time we’d taken, he had already unpacked in the apartment. Keeping our eyes up, we went down a very narrow street and began to climb. That town was a labyrinth. Every few steps mum stopped and looked around. First upwards. Then downwards. I copied her: I liked copying mum. Upwards and downwards. I don’t know what the others noticed first, but for me it was the cats. They were everywhere. On window ledges, door canopies, even in the middle of the road. Most of them were sleeping or had one eye half open; others were so still they looked dead. It wasn’t so much the number of them, though, but that every one had a kind of singularity.

‘Here the cats are in charge,’ an old man sat in a doorway told me.

I looked at him; he held a cane in his hand. I gave him a smile.

‘Although they’re not exactly cats,’ he added mysteriously.

‘Oh, aren’t they? And what are they?’ laughed my mum.

‘Look closely at them.’

We did. My sister even crouched down in front of one to stroke it.

‘They don’t exactly look like pigs,’ joked dad.

The man smiled.

‘Not all of them,’ he said, ‘but some of them, more than cats, are mythological beings.’

‘Is that so?’ said mum, smiling. ‘And what does that mean?’

The man looked at us for a moment.

‘I see you don’t know the legend...’

We shook our heads.

‘Well, I don’t think we can call legend something that the residents here witness regularly.’

‘What legend?’ asked mum.

‘Many centuries ago, I couldn’t say how many,’ the man began as if he was well used to telling this story, ‘in this town there was a terrible plague of rats. That brought many illnesses; elderly people died, but so did young people – children died. The rats multiplied and the humans divided. There were barely enough cats to defend them. People were desperate. They didn’t know what to do until a woman from the town, who was half witch, decided to mix human blood with that of cats who had also died and then began to draw cats on all the walls in the town. People thought she was crazy, but she was in such a frenzy that they decided to let her got on with it and some folk even helped her. The next day there wasn’t a rat left alive.

‘Wow, a miracle!’ said dad, for the sake of saying something.

‘Yes!’ acknowledged the man. ‘But the most surprising thing is that neither did there remain a single cat painted on the walls.’

‘Oh, no?’ said mum with false intrigue.

‘Not a single one!’ said the man. ‘It wasn’t that the rats were frightened at the sight of the cats and scarpered as fast as their legs would carry them, oh no, it was that the cats on the walls took action and hunted and devoured every living rodent...’

A silence fell until mum admitted:

‘That’s a powerful legend.’

‘If it were true, it would be quite something,’ added dad.

‘Ah but I’m afraid it is,’ insisted the man. ‘That’s what I was trying to tell you,’ he added before our stupefied expressions. ‘Not all of them, but some of these cats you see lying around the town are the same ones that took care of getting rid of the rats. You can’t say this too loudly,’ and he lowered his voice before continuing, ‘but I’m very old and some of these cats have barely changed since I was a boy. It’s as if for them time passes in a different way than for us, if indeed it passes at all.’

My mum smiled; such a conclusion was well worthy of mum’s smile.

‘Mythological beings...’ scoffed dad.

‘Mythological beings,’ repeated the man. ‘Or, if you prefer, regular street cats only with certain supernatural powers.’

Without stopping stroking the cat, my sister suddenly looked up to ask:

‘Which ones?’

The old man looked at her.

‘You don’t seem surprised that time doesn’t pass for them, eh?’

Alex didn’t answer. My mum laughed.

‘If only it didn’t for us, right?’

‘If only,’ nodded the old man. ‘But let me tell you it’s not the only power they have...’

Until then my boyish voice hadn’t piped up.

‘What other ones?’

The man smiled at me again. I smiled back. One of the things I liked most as a kid was when grownups kidded me on. I waited but he didn’t tell us what supernatural powers they had. At that moment, however, an elderly woman, surely his wife, popped her head out an upstairs window and told him to stop with his tall tales.

‘What powers is a cat going to have?’ he asked, suddenly in a bad mood, abruptly ending the conversation and leaving me even more intrigued.

4.

The apartment

We hadn't gone much further up the hill when we were there. The front of the building was pale blue and slightly flaking. If I close my eyes I can see it. Two steps. Made of stone and well worn. The greenish wooden front door that opened without a key. And just above, two windows on either side with green blinds. We went inside and up the stairs. Even now that smell of I'm not quite sure what comes back to me. It's exciting, feeling it all again. Seeing that somehow things are still exactly where they once were, waiting for us. The two flights of stairs, the bannister, the upstairs door. Before going in, dad lifted the mat and showed us the key hidden underneath.

'We'll always leave this here, okay? Just in case...'

It was a small apartment. Old. Furnished with the bare minimum. It didn't even have a television. Even better, said dad. The only thing that surprised us a bit was the little wooden rocking chair by the balcony, which looked almost like a decoration, but is so relevant to this story. From the

look in her eye, I wondered if mum had been here before, but I didn't say anything. Dad ordered us out onto the back balcony to contemplate the scene before us. The colourful village, the sea. That was the first time I saw the rock archway. In the middle of the opening formed by two passageways, between the earth and the sky, floating on the sea like a giant turtle, rose a sort of islet with a hole as black as carbon.

'The mystery of the holes,' said dad after a while, not mysteriously at all.

I could barely hide my excitement. I was at an age when things often excited me, and being in this peculiar but fascinating village – and so important to my mum – was absolutely thrilling. I don't know why I tried to conceal it. Maybe because of mum, who was so silent. Or Alex, who didn't say anything either.

We explored the rest of the house. Apart from the bathroom, the dining room and the kitchen, there were only two rooms. Both faced onto the street we'd walked up. One for our parents and one for us, sharing just like in G. Without asking me, Alex chose the bed closest to the window, which was next to a rectangular mirror. The adolescent girl looked herself up and down. She couldn't avoid it, whenever she came across a mirror, she had to plant her feet in front of it. Then she took her books out of her large rucksack and spread them out between the shelf and the bedside table. Did she plan on reading all that? I had only brought two books. And a notebook for drawing. As if it weren't enough with a full-body mirror, Alex hung up her bag and went to check herself in the bathroom. She hardly did anything else lately.

'Patience, dear, it's just adolescence,' mum often said. One day she told me, 'your sister is changing a lot and if she's looking at herself in the mirror a lot it's to recognise the person looking back. Remember they have to spend a lot of time together.'

I took advantage of Alex being out the room to look

in her bag. I wasn't one for spying on her things, but that black-and-white photograph had filled me with curiosity. It wasn't inside the novel anymore. Had she changed its place so I wouldn't sneak a glimpse?

A little later, while she was arranging her clothes in the wardrobe, Alex said:

'Noa, look.'

I got a fright. At the back of the last drawer there was a pistol. A real pistol, or at least so I thought. And so did Alex, because she told me to stay behind her. She picked it up very carefully.

'Be careful,' I said, but then we realised it was a toy. It didn't have any holes in it. Not to put a bullet in, nor for one to come out. I took it and, as if I were four or five years old, or seven or ten, I left the room and pointed it at my parents.

'Hands up, this is a robbery!'

Dad didn't even blink, but I'll never forget mum's fright.

'What are you doing?' she shouted. 'Put that back where it was!'

More horrified that I could have imagined, she took it from me and made us put it back in the drawer.

'But mum, it's a pretend one.'

'There are no pretend guns.'

Her reaction shocked me so much, I didn't know what to say. In G I had quite a few toy guns and she had never stopped me from playing with them, on the contrary, she herself had even bought me some of them. What was the deal with this pistol?

5.

A clue

As it was still early, we went out for the customary wander, losing ourselves in that special place. Taking a different route to the way we came up, we went down towards the sea. Suddenly, Alex went on ahead and I followed her. Alleys, stone steps, bridges, passageways, little squares and viewpoints. And all around, the cats. Alex crouched down again in front of one of them and started to stroke it.

‘Are you coming?’

I didn’t go to her.

‘Mum, were there this many cats when you came here?’ I asked.

‘Yes. But I don’t remember them letting people touch them, nor them having supernatural powers.’ she said, making herself laugh.

We carried on downwards and arrived at a large square, with arches on one side and a stone railing at the other. People were sitting outside, having something to eat. Or, like us, they leaned on the railing to contemplate the spectacle of

the sea. It didn't look like a beach town. There was no beach anywhere. There was a lighthouse, at one end. And right in front of us, a small port with boats going all the way down to the water. On the other side, a line of tiny coves cut into the rock. We went down some steps, crossed a line of boats and, walking over a carpet of stones and seaweed, made our way towards the shore. The seagulls glided silently. Mum sat down and put her arms around her knees. Alex kept going. I hesitated, unsure whether to stay with our parents or follow her. To act brave – and maybe to get Alex's attention – dad suddenly took his clothes off and approached the water.

'Anyone coming with me?' he called out as he edged in.

We pretended he wasn't talking to us. I don't know why he looked so white. He wasn't even wearing boxers that could pass for swimming shorts. But then without warning he took them off and put them on his head. Luckily, he soon dived down and the sea swallowed him up. He reemerged a little way off, waving at us with his little flag.

'Kids, this is paradise!'

We had come to a unique and very special place, of that there was no doubt. Now, I just had to find out why it was so special. At a glance, we could see that it was special, but that wasn't enough. No, I was still a long way off knowing the exact reasons. I didn't stop looking from one side to the other, looking for clues, until my eyes came to rest on those of my mum.

'Mum, come on, tell me why this place is so important.'

She looked at me as if from very far away.

'Don't be impatient, Noa. Where would the fun be if I told you on the first day? Don't you want to find out for yourself?'

'Give me a clue at least.'

'A clue...' she pondered, or pretended to. 'I was here

many years ago, when I was very young, before I had met your father.'

I held her gaze for a few seconds, then looked for dad who was stretched out in the water, as if resting from a whole year of work.

'It's a good clue, isn't it?' said mum.

I shrugged.

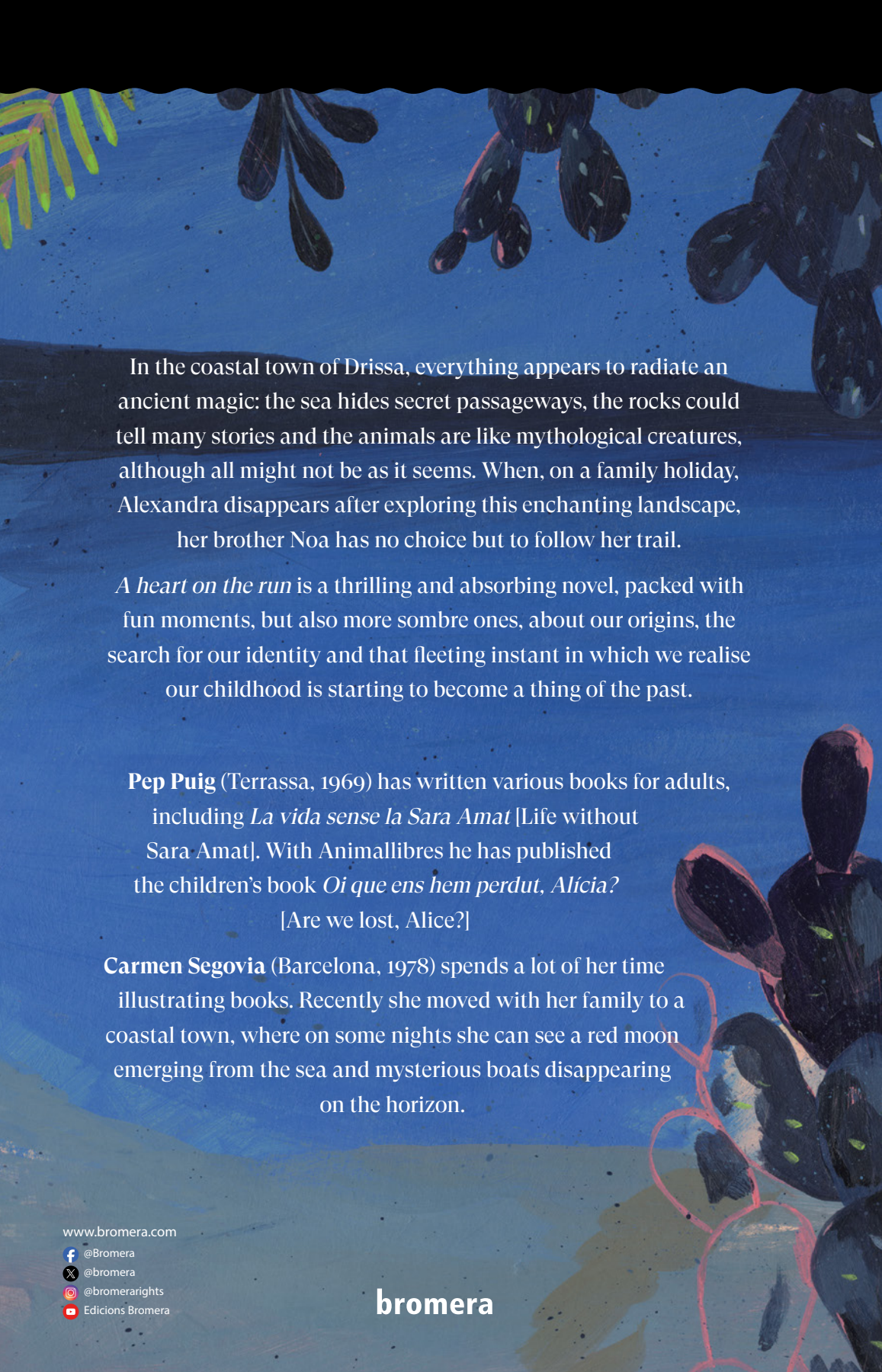
'Does dad know?'

'Know what?'

'Why this place is so important to you.'

'Yes he does. But he won't tell you either.'

I didn't insist. I looked at mum again; she seemed happy, but also as if something was paining her. Not her knee or her back, but something much harder to touch.



In the coastal town of Drissa, everything appears to radiate an ancient magic: the sea hides secret passageways, the rocks could tell many stories and the animals are like mythological creatures, although all might not be as it seems. When, on a family holiday, Alexandra disappears after exploring this enchanting landscape, her brother Noa has no choice but to follow her trail.

A heart on the run is a thrilling and absorbing novel, packed with fun moments, but also more sombre ones, about our origins, the search for our identity and that fleeting instant in which we realise our childhood is starting to become a thing of the past.

Pep Puig (Terrassa, 1969) has written various books for adults, including *La vida sense la Sara Amat* [Life without Sara Amat]. With Animallibres he has published the children's book *Oi que ens hem perdut, Alícia?* [Are we lost, Alice?]

Carmen Segovia (Barcelona, 1978) spends a lot of her time illustrating books. Recently she moved with her family to a coastal town, where on some nights she can see a red moon emerging from the sea and mysterious boats disappearing on the horizon.

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