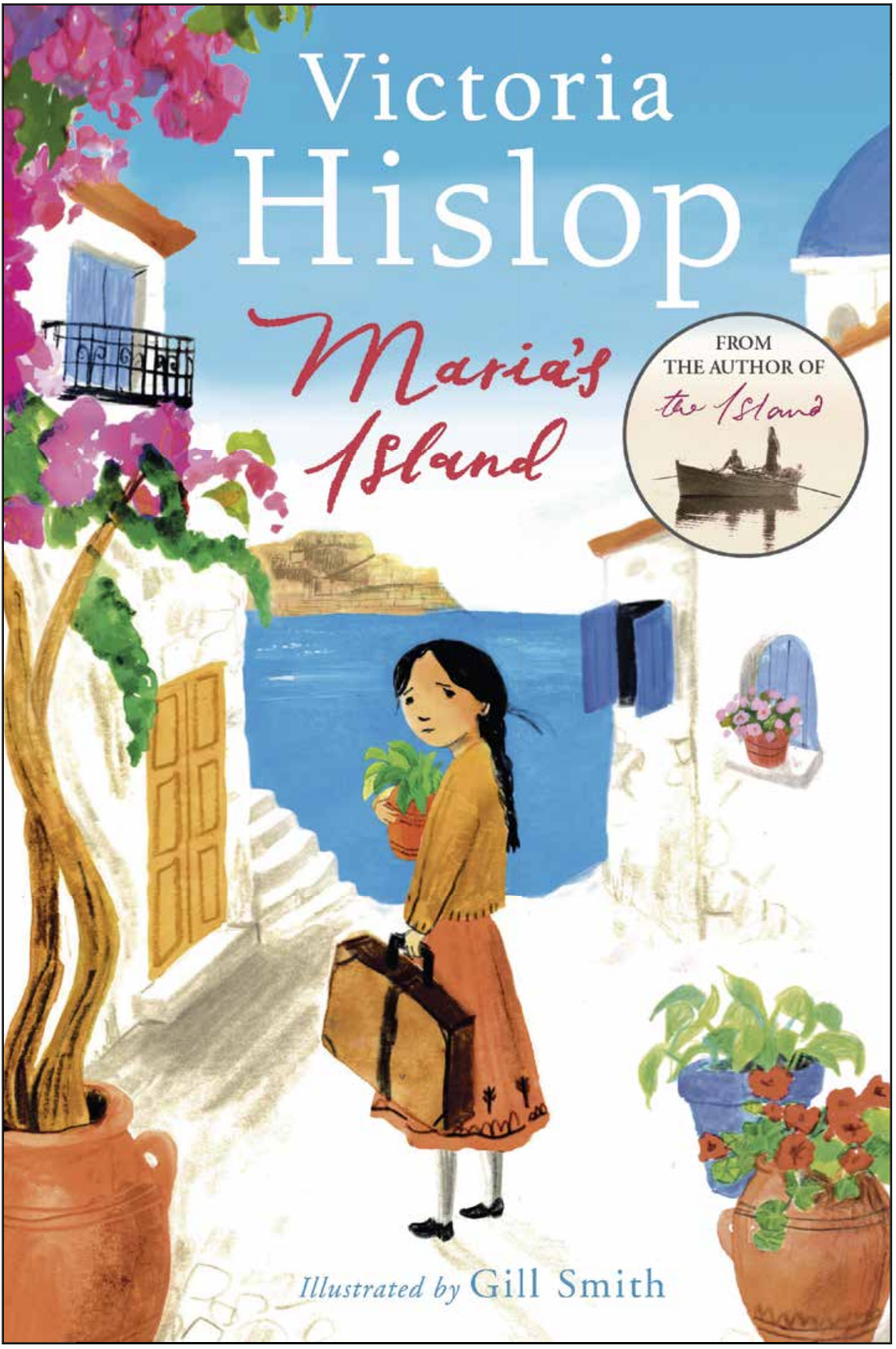

Victoria Hislop
Maria's Island
FROM THE AUTHOR OF
the Island
Illustrated by Gill Smith

WHEN I GOT UP FOR SCHOOL THE next day, Dad was sitting at the table drinking coffee.

He looked just the same as before, still with all his limbs. Even so, I found myself staring at him with curiosity.

"What's the matter, agapi mou?"

"We were worried about you ... you went across to Spinalonga."

"I took two patients. A man and a woman. They'll never leave again so it was very sad."

Why couldn't they leave? How had they caught the disease? What would happen to them?

I asked all these questions: *Why? How? What?* Just as we were encouraged to in science lessons at school. My father answered patiently while my mother sat listening.

"The problem is that there is no treatment and no cure," he explained. "So the government has said

that anyone with the disease has to go and live on Spinalonga, in case they pass it to anyone else."

"But what will happen to them?" I insisted.

Science was my favourite subject and I already knew that the only way to understand anything was to keep digging for answers. This was how you got to the bottom of things. I was full of questions about leprosy that day, especially because my father had been across to Spinalonga. For the first time, I was getting proper answers.

"What people are afraid of is partly right," he explained. "Sometimes the disease eats away at your body. In the end you can lose your fingers and toes because you can't feel them any more, so you can't work or even walk."

I couldn't speak. I had assumed my sister was over-reacting as usual. But now I realised she wasn't.

"And that's all I know really," he said. "I left the

couple at the quayside over there and then they went through a tunnel that leads into the rest of the island. I didn't see anything else. Or anyone else."

"Will you go again?" asked my mother quietly.

"No, agapi mou. Mr Lidakis will definitely be better tomorrow."

Anna ran into the room and stopped abruptly in front of our father.

"You're back!" she said, looking him up and down, as if to make sure he was still the same.

"Of course I am, Anna."

She hesitated in front of him. Normally she would have given our father a hug before leaving, but I could see that she still had her suspicions and thought that if he had been with leprosy patients, he might be able to pass on the disease.

"Come on, girls," our mother interrupted. "It's time to leave for school."

MY SISTER AND I ALWAYS WENT TO CHURCH in those days even though we didn't want to. Anna moaned about it every week.

"It goes on all day!" she complained.

"No, it doesn't, Anna," reprimanded my father. "It's only two hours."

"But I want to go to the beach!"

"You can go later," said my mother patiently.

That Sunday, the priest read out a passage from the book of Leviticus in the Old Testament. It said that anyone with leprosy was cursed, that they were unclean and that they should be sent out of the village.

I felt Anna pinching me on the leg.

"You see?" she whispered. "What did I tell you? It's a living death."

I didn't really understand what the Bible was telling us. Did "unclean" just mean "dirty"? Or more than that? And what did Anna mean exactly? How can you be alive and dead at the same time?

It was still a mystery to me. I could not imagine what a leprosy patient even looked like. If they arrived in Plaka from another part of the country and were taken over to the island by Mr Lidakis, they were always covered by a blanket.

I sat on the hard wooden seat in church, listening to the words of the priest. Then my mind began to wander and my imagination to take hold of me. My fear of leprosy and whether Dad might have caught it was greater than before, but I still did not really understand what it was.

GRADUALLY, THESE WORRIES SLIPPED TO the back of my mind and, soon enough, the summer holidays began. Anna and some of the other older children didn't play with us any more and Fotini had to help her mother a little more in the taverna, so much of the time it was just me and Dimitris. Several months stretched ahead of us to play, explore and have fun.

Sometimes my mother packed up some food for us to take into the mountains. On other days we spent hour after carefree hour, jumping off the rocks, swimming, and collecting shells to make necklaces for our mothers. We were allowed to stay up later that summer and we often used to lie on the pebbles waiting to see a comet.

One night in July, there was a spectacular show of falling stars. Every few minutes a bright light flew across the sky, some leaving a long trail of white. There were so many that we lost count.

"Look! Look! Maria! Look at that tail!"

"Quick! Quick! Make a wish, Dimitris!"

"You too!" he urged.

I made a wish that my father would be safe when he went out to sea. That was the only thing I ever wanted.

In August there was an eclipse – slowly, slowly the giant, dark red moon was cast into shadow.

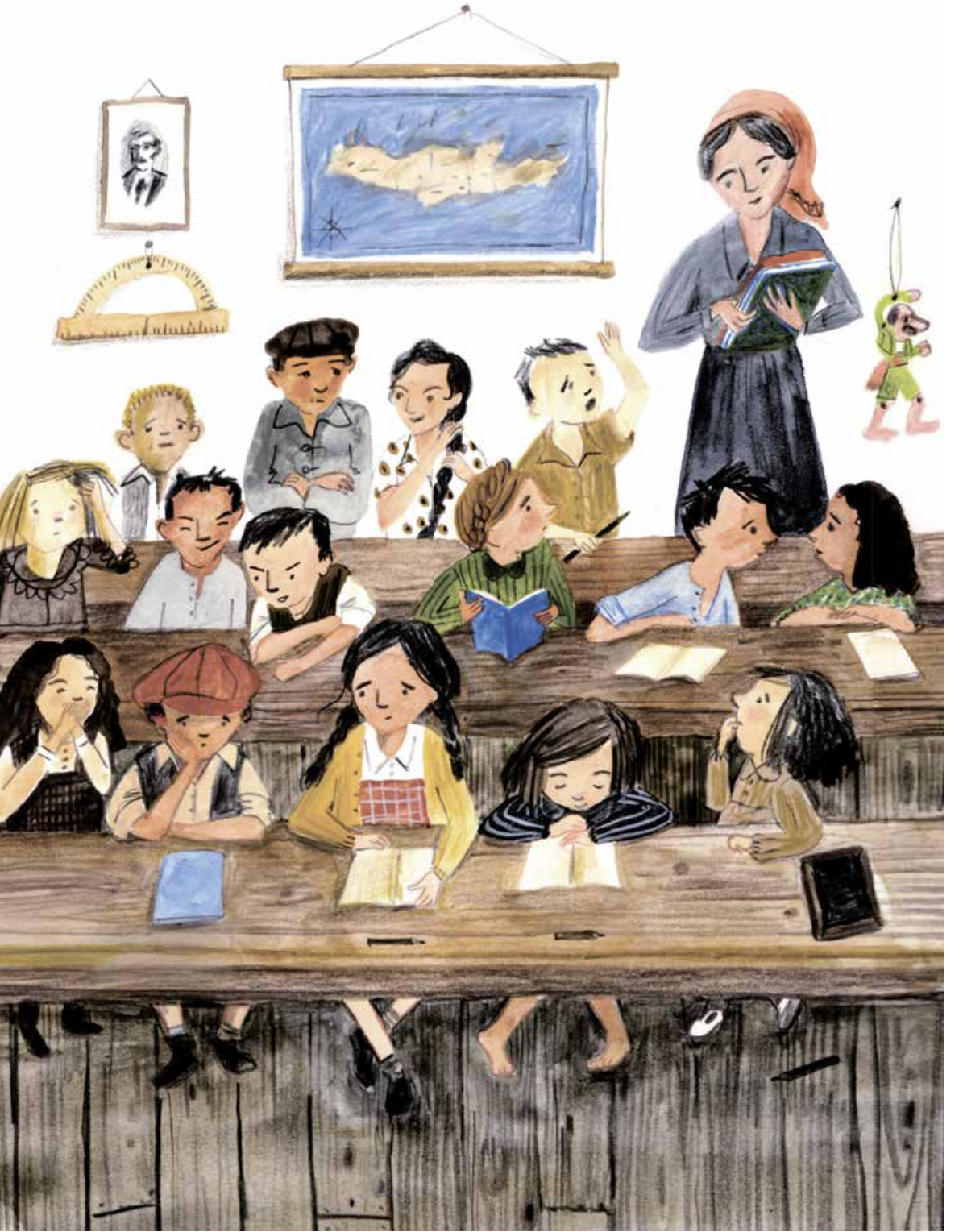
"It's like magic!" I said.

"It *is* magic," Dimitris replied.

We were enchanted by everything up above us.

A few days after the eclipse, Anna and I were taken to Elounda for winter shoes, and my mother bought books for the new school year.

And then term began again. Dimitris and I were excited to be learning fresh things. It was the year when we began algebra and geometry, and numbers suddenly came to life. Dimitris turned out to be brilliant at solving equations and my mother started setting him special extra homework.



THE SCHOOL DAY ALWAYS FOLLOWED THE same routine. We started with a song, then my mother said a prayer, then we divided into groups according to age and sat at our desks. One day in October, however, none of these things happened. When we got to school we were all told to form a line. We assumed this was a nit-check. Whenever my mother spotted nits in someone's hair we all had to be inspected. Any boy who was found with them had his head shaved and any girl would be sent home for her mother to go through every strand of hair with a special fine comb. For some weeks, Dimitris had been hiding his head under an old red cap of his brother's. He was still practically bald after a nit-check earlier in the term and had been getting bullied even more than usual.

We soon realised that this was not a hair inspection. That day, a doctor in a white coat and a nurse in a pale blue uniform were waiting for us.

"We need to examine you all today," said the doctor. "There has been an increase in the number of people with leprosy in Greece and the government has instructed that every child must have an examination."

There was some murmuring among the smaller children but from the older ones at the back, including Anna, there were loud protests. The words "catching!" "disease!" "infection!" rang in the air.

"It's nothing to be afraid of, children," said my mother in her gentlest voice. "All the doctor will do is check your skin for any signs. There is only a very small chance you will have it."

In spite of what she said, there were lots of children shouting and some were crying and even though she

was my own mother, I did not believe those words: *"It's nothing to be afraid of."* If there was one thing I knew about leprosy, it was that everyone was terrified of it.

My mother was very cross at the fuss everyone was making and shouted at us all to calm down. This was very unlike her.

One by one she led the children behind a screen. Anna was among the first, being almost the oldest, but she was soon out and smirked at me as she passed, before going out into the school yard.

Dimitris grabbed my hand. He was always shy with strangers.

"Don't worry, Dimitris," I said, squeezing his hand. "You won't be in there for long."

After half an hour or so, it was my turn. I had to stand in my underwear while the doctor examined my legs and arms and torso. He used something like a magnifying glass and soon he was done. My mother smiled as she saw the doctor put a line through my name.

I got dressed again and loitered in the schoolroom. Almost everyone was out in the yard now, and I could see them running about in the morning sunshine. Only a few were left to be checked. Dimitris was among them. I waited while he went behind the screen. And waited. And waited. The others who were still in the queue were getting restless and had begun to play chase around the room, weaving in and out of the desks and sending chairs flying.

MY MOTHER CAME OUT FROM BEHIND the screen. She was very pale and at first I thought it was anger at seeing the commotion her pupils were creating. She clapped her hands sharply to make the remaining children form a line again.

I saw Dimitris come out and immediately dash through the door. I chased after him and soon found him in the corner of the school yard, his face hidden beneath his cap. He was crying.

I sat next to him on a low wall, put my arm round him and felt the sobs that rocked his body.

"Dimitris ... Dimitris ... it's all right. It's all done now."

He wouldn't speak.

The examinations must have been completed because my mother appeared and hurried towards us.

"Maria, please get up and go and play with your other friends," she said sternly. "I need to take Dimitris home. If they ask, tell the children that I will be back very shortly and lessons will start then."

I had no wish to play and stayed alone in the corner of the school yard, from where I could see the gate and keep an eye for her return. It was impossible not to think about Dimitris. Did my best friend, the boy who was like a brother to me, have leprosy? I was struggling to believe this. Surely there had to be some mistake?

When she returned, my mother took us all inside to finish the day's lessons, but as soon as the bell rang for the end of the school day, I raced up to her.

"I will tell you what's happened, Maria. But only

when everyone else has gone," she said. I had never seen this look on my mother's face. It was a mixture of sadness and fear.

Anna had already left and soon enough the school was silent. My mother gathered up some exercise books for marking and turned out the light. Taking my hand, together we began the short walk to our house.

When we were halfway there we stopped, went down to the beach and sat on the pebbles.

"I'm so sorry, Maria," she murmured. "Dimitris has leprosy. In a few days he will go to Spinalonga."

I felt sick. This could not be happening. It couldn't be true!

For a moment I couldn't speak. There was nothing I could think of to say. I didn't even cry because I was so shocked.

"I know how much you'll miss him," she said. It was only then that I realised my mother was weeping.

I stared at my shoes as we walked home and then noticed that they were covered in splashes. It took a moment to realise that these were my tears. I was crying too. In my whole life, nothing so terrible had happened. My best friend had caught the incurable disease and soon he would leave for ever.

At dinner that evening, everyone was too sad to speak and none of us had any appetite, even Anna who always ate more than anyone. Dad went out on his boat that night. There was no moon so it would be a good time to fish.

The doctor had given my mother a leaflet about leprosy, which now lay on the kitchen table. Finally, my curiosity could be satisfied. On the first page it showed some photographs of how the disease might look at the beginning. In one of them it showed a child's leg. It looked completely normal except for an area of skin which was paler than the rest. Was that really all it was?

Was this all that Dimitris had? As I flicked through the rest of the leaflet, I saw images of more extreme cases. Some of the people shown were badly disfigured.

There was information about using sulphur to disinfect anything that had been touched by someone with leprosy, but the leaflet kept on repeating that anyone diagnosed must be isolated. Isolation was the only solution. There was no cure.

I put the leaflet down. I wished I had not read it at all.

Eventually, I got up and put my arm around my mother to say goodnight.

"Goodnight, agapi mou. Try not to worry about Dimitris. He will be looked after well on Spinalonga."

She stood up to hug me and I began to cry for the second time that day.

"Agapi mou! My darling! I know it's sad but we must try to be brave for Dimitris."

My tears kept flowing and my mother held me tighter and tighter. After a while, I went up to bed but I could not sleep. My heart was full of sadness and my pillow was wet with tears.

Very late in the evening, I heard the bang of the door then my mother's raised voice. She was scolding Anna for coming in late again. After that I fell asleep and then had a nightmare about being in a strange place. I was playing hide and seek with Dimitris, but he was nowhere to be found.

Anna and I slept in the same room and she leant across to poke me.

"Shhh!" she said. "Stop shouting! I want my beauty sleep!"

With thanks to Iro Porgiazidou for planting the little seed – V.H.

For my mum and dad – G.S.

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