



Photograph courtesy of Ali, Istanbul streets.

**Samantha Mautner** is an illustrator who brings her characters and worlds to life through warm and expressive line work and visual storytelling. She holds a BFA in Illustration and Animation from the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) and works across animated shorts, comics and graphic novels. Samantha lives on the East Coast of the US with her big orange cat Gilly, the undisputed studio boss with gangster swag.

Cover art by Samantha Mautner



In Cihangir, a cat compound built by the human neighbors is home to a young mother cat with Audrey Hepburn-like elegance, her three kittens, and her streetwise companions. Two visitors are drawn into their world, and as the days unfold, the everyday encounters become something much more. But nothing stays the same. When the mother cat and her friends suddenly vanish, the twist reveals the city's TNR network and a hidden layer of life in the palce. *A Cat Compound in Cihangir* is a tale of cats, people, and the ways we come to belong. Hand-drawn illustrations and nostalgic color palette immerse readers in the sounds, sights, and rhythms of this much-lived-in and beloved old Istanbul neighborhood.

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## A CAT COMPOUND IN CIHANGIR

Selected Sample Pages

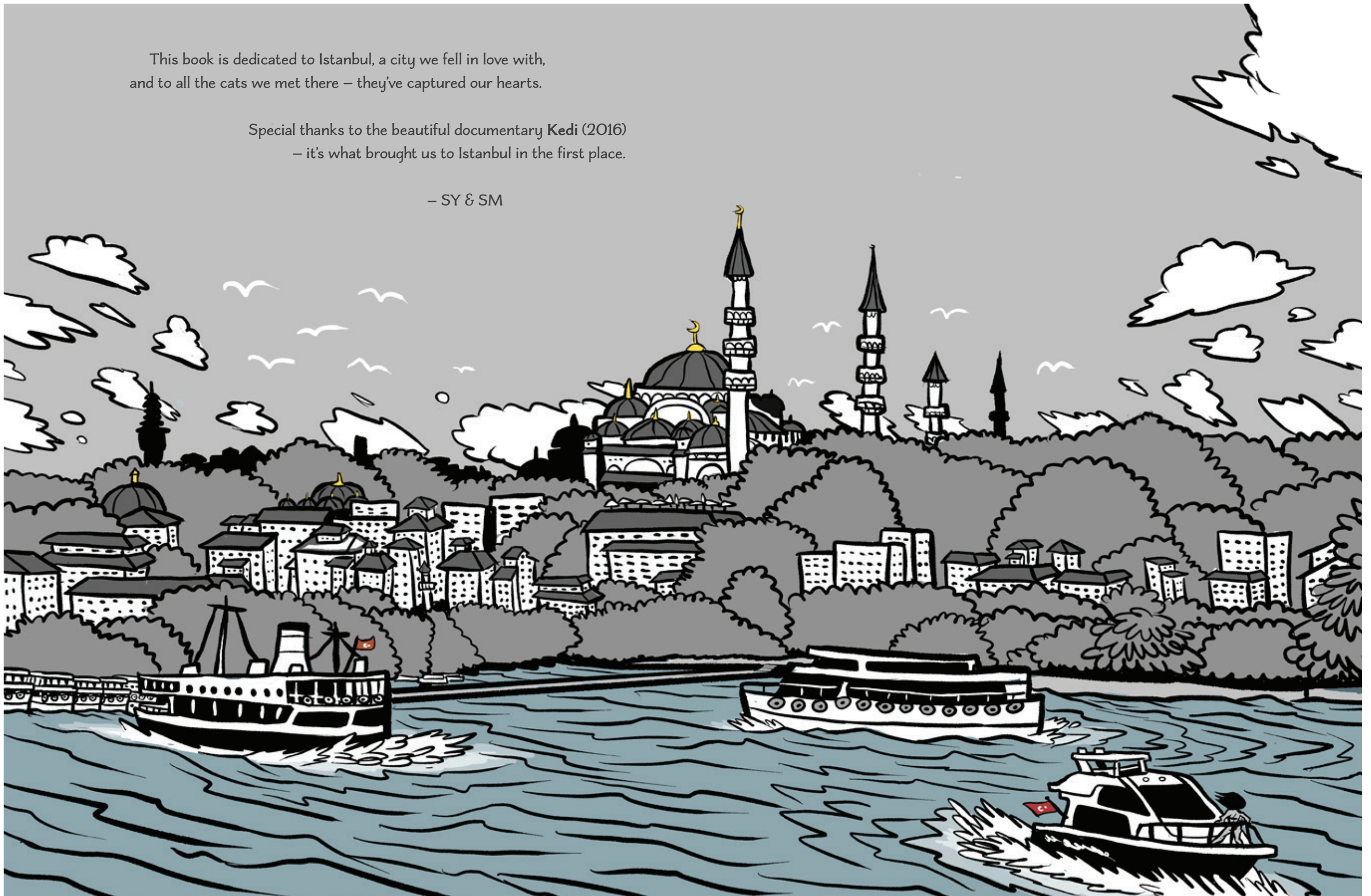
*"It really is so lovely reading about your adventures with the cats of Istanbul; and the illustrations so wonderful."*

*—Ceyda Torun, Director of Kedi (2016)*

This book is dedicated to Istanbul, a city we fell in love with,  
and to all the cats we met there – they've captured our hearts.

Special thanks to the beautiful documentary Kedi (2016)  
– it's what brought us to Istanbul in the first place.

– SY & SM



# A Cat Compound in Cihangir

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Illustration by Samantha Mautner



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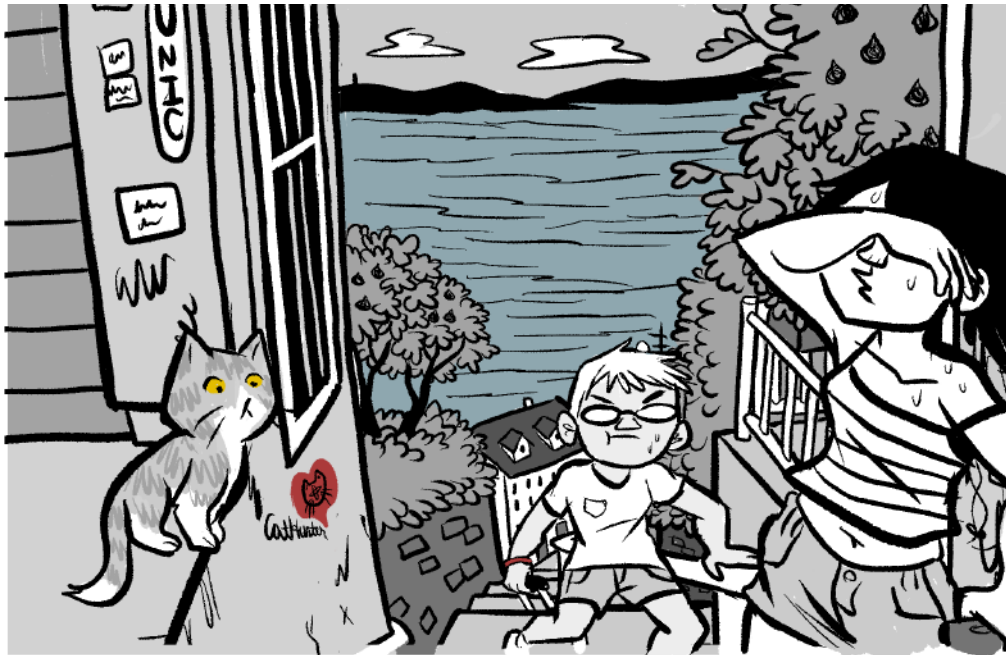




We walked into the cat compound soon after the taxi dropped us off in Cihangir. We were walking up a narrow cobblestone street that wound past all the old apartments, their carved façades weathered now but still jostling for a Bosphorus view up the slope.

On the other side were neighborhood stores and random-looking buildings, some being torn down or rebuilt, rusty beams jutting out in defiance. From the remaining walls, mysterious graffiti cats with large cross-shaped eyes stared in silence.

The cat compound sat at the top of one of the countless stone stairways



that crisscrossed Cihangir, with streets of endless ups and downs.



The stairway took a few uneven steps down to the building entrances,

before plunging into a long, steep descent

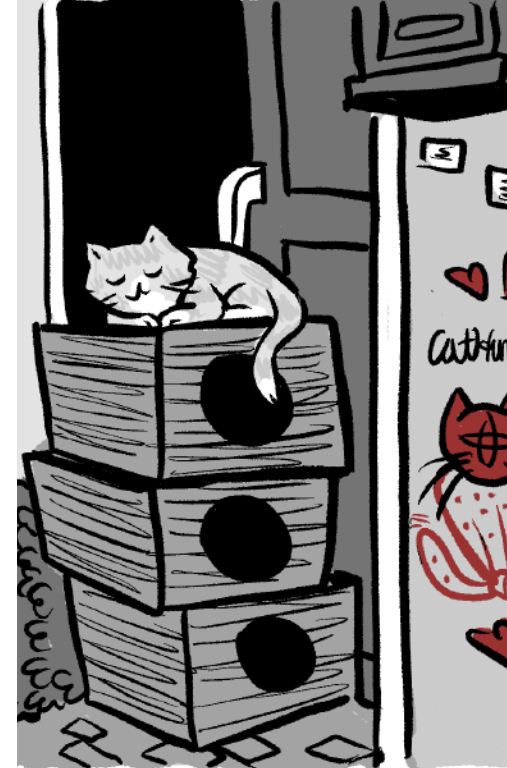
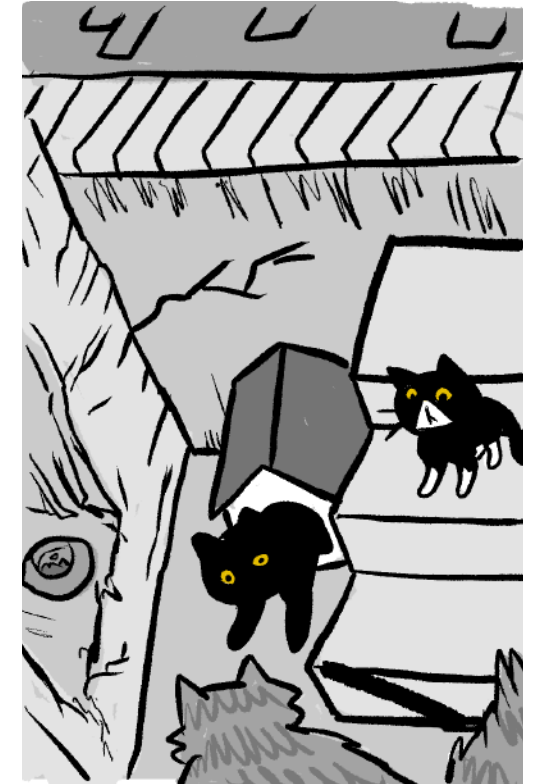


to the busy streets of Tophane below where the T1 tram



glided past our favorite "million dollar view" café by the Bosphorus shore.

By then, my daughter Tilly and I had been to Istanbul many times. Cat houses in every shape and form, in all the likely and unexpected places, had become part of the city itself.



Our apartment was on the third floor. It was high enough to see the Bosphorus in the distance, the harbor busy with ferries and massive

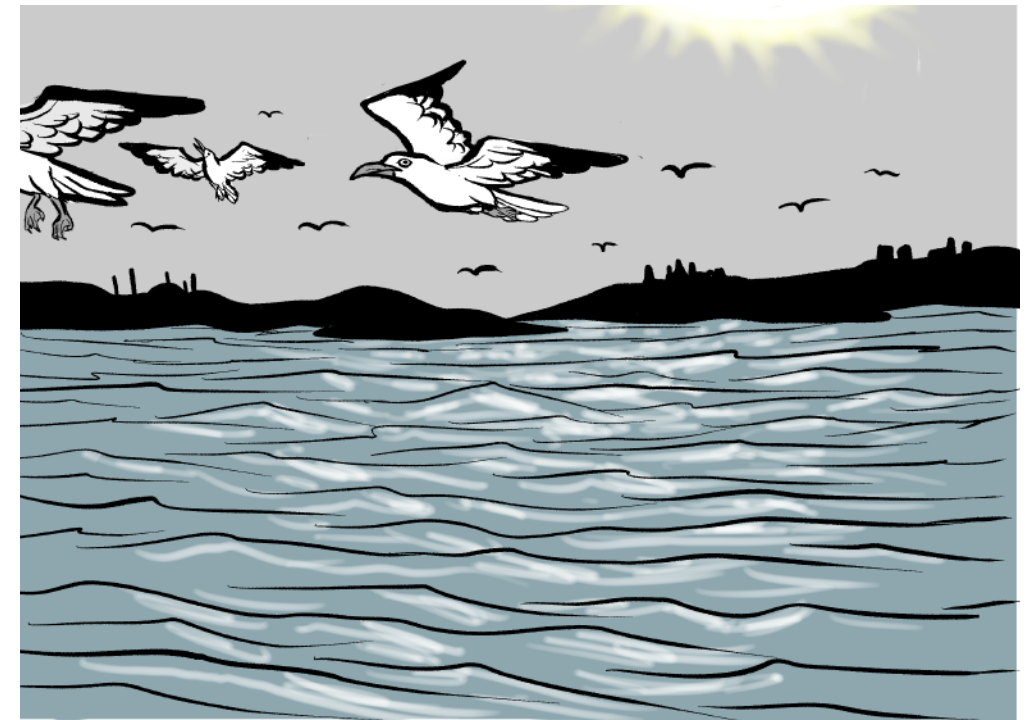
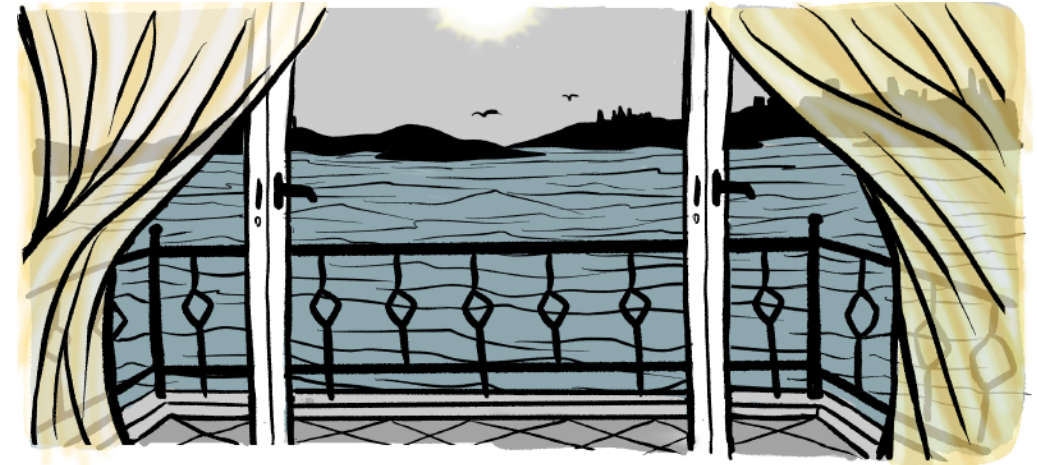


grain ships, the long gleaming bridge, and the hills across Asia, packed with



building and mosques. It was also low enough to catch the comings and goings on all those whimsical rooftops lining the slope below - each crowning a building with its own haphazard built-out, complete with satellite dishes, where they loudly bickered and flapped for landing space.

It was the middle of summer in Istanbul, the aircon barely holding the heat at bay. Along our long narrow balcony, sheer curtains lit up in gold.

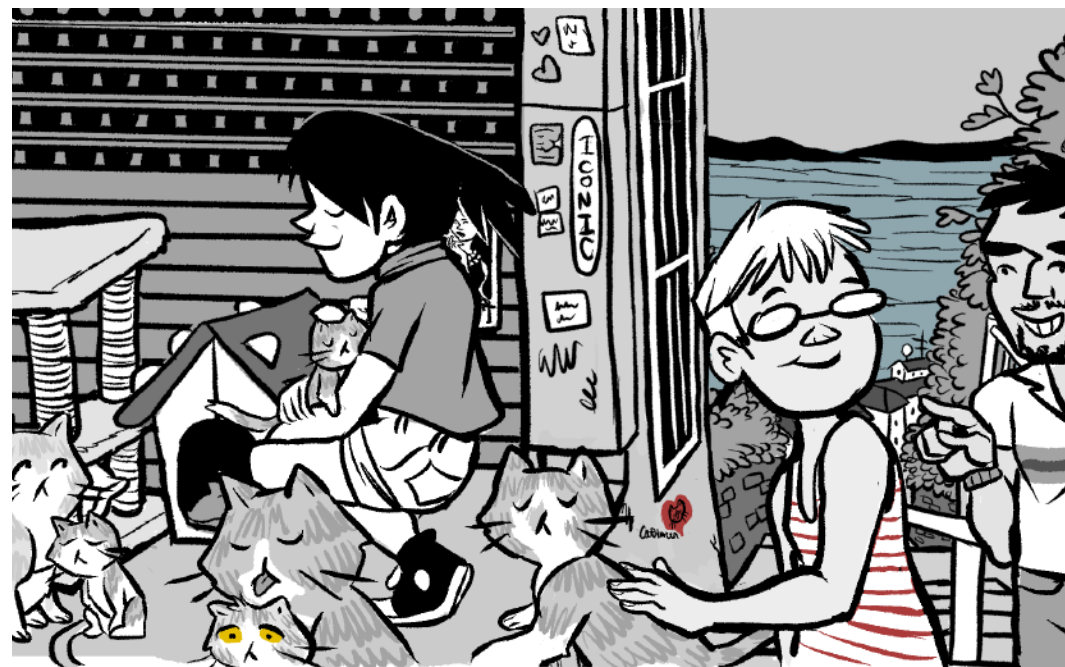


We surrendered to jet-lagged drowsiness.  
In our dreams, the ceaseless cries of seagulls outside pulled the Bosphorus shore closer and closer to the edge of the balcony...

Sometimes, one of the male cats would stroll over to the kittens, either to break up their squabbles, or to lick the tops of their tiny heads.



Could one of them be the father? We kept asking each other,



until one day, our BnB host came by to drop off more bottled water. "They're not the fathers," he chuckled. "More like step-up dads maybe."

A slightly older kitten, we called "the teenage boy cat", would often saunter down to the cat compound from up the slope. Once there,



he'd jump about a bit, stretch, then raise his paw to suddenly smack one of



the kittens. The young mother cat would watch all the commotion for a while, then shift her paws and turn her head away, probably deeming it all harmless.

There was a mosque in the neighborhood,  
which we later learned was Cihanjir Cami,



said to have one of the best views in Istanbul.

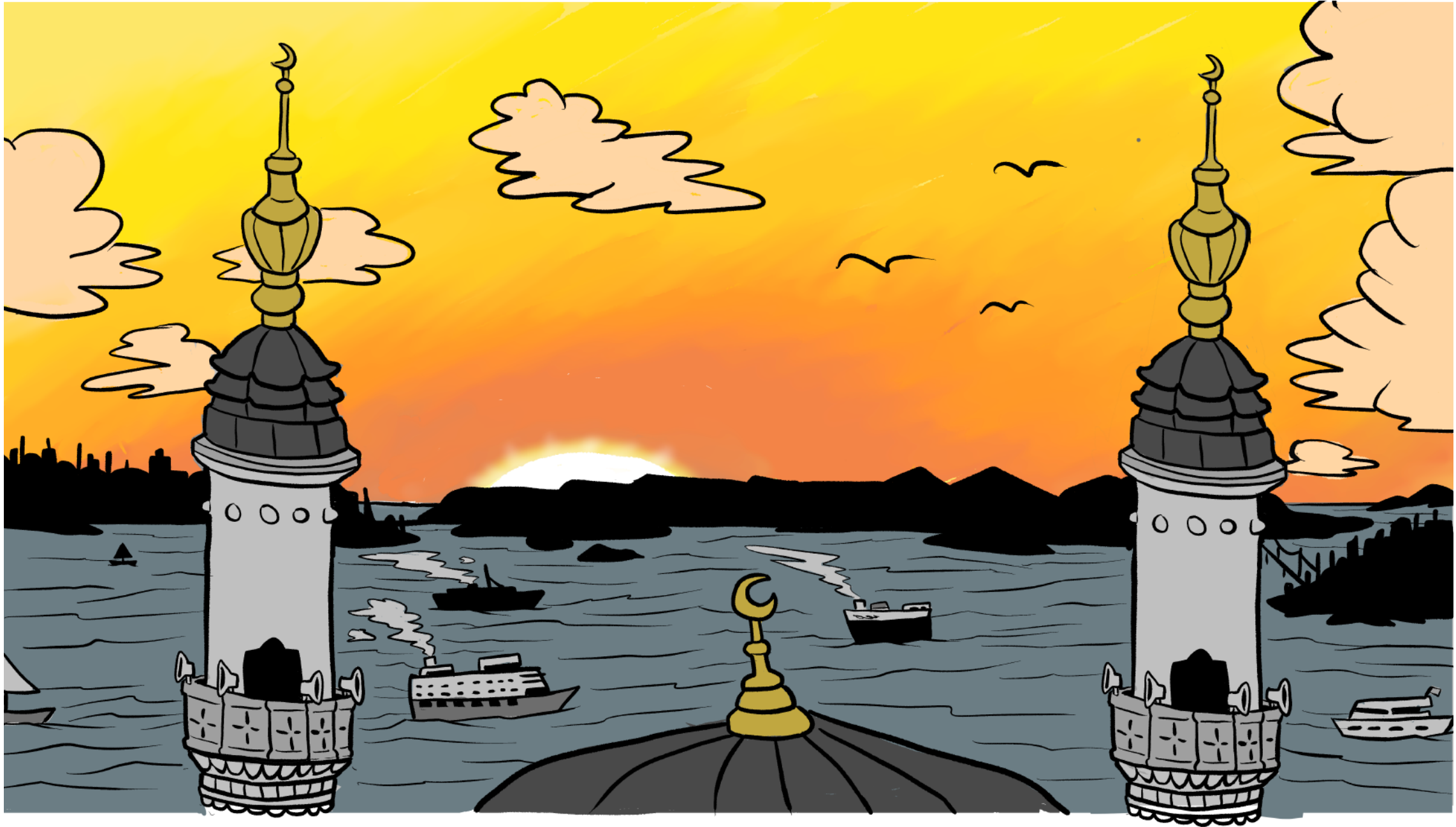
In the mosque was a yard with a green lawn, where we leaned on its low stone wall, watching the hills on the Asian side and grand mosques of Sultanahmet.



In the middle of the yard, stood  
a little loquat tree covered with  
hundreds of tiny yellow fruits.  
Its large dark green leaves waved,  
each time a passing horn blew...



The path below were lined with fig trees. It seemed to be the regular  
after-school hangout for the middle-school boys in the neighborhood.



We liked to walk home through the mosque grounds, following the back path that led to our slope. In early evenings, a summons would rise, setting off a wave of calls to prayer cascading from all the nearby mosques,

rippling across the Bosphorus. The setting sun would cast a soft pink glow over the neighborhood. Everything felt so familiar by now – the corner markets, our daily bread shop, the cafés and çay spots, even the little antique shops.

That day, we joined a crowd gathered in front of the Cat Museum Istanbul where cats were slipping in and out through a gap between glass panels



as if they owned the place. Inside, with disarming, charming quirkiness

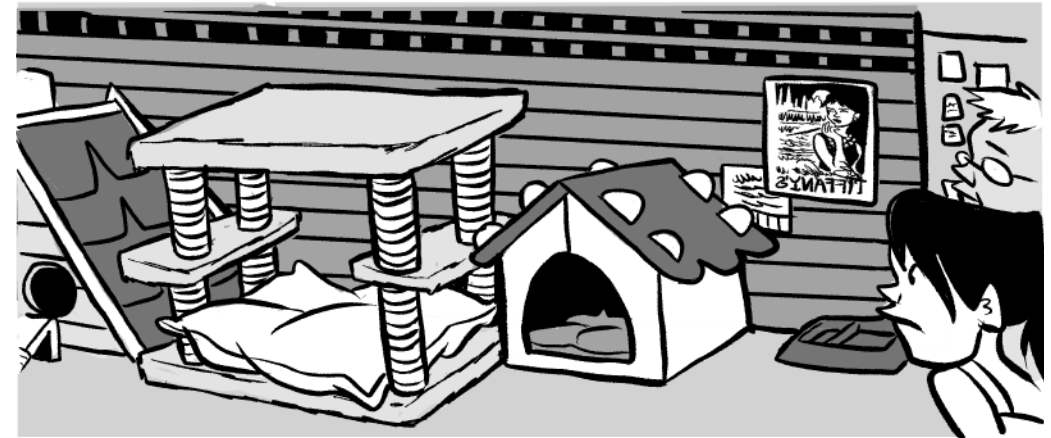


the whole space itself felt like art, stories, and unexpected treasures, all at once.



By the time we finally stepped outside, the sky had already softened to dusk.

We hurried back, eager to check out the cat compound. But when we got there, there was not a single cat in sight!



We stood there, stunned by how suddenly this place emptied.



"Wait! The grey one is here!" Tilly called from below. When we climbed back up,



the dirty white kitten was sitting in the far corner, his small body huddled up.

A moment later, the mini-me also emerged, stopping halfway. Still, no adult cats – not even the teenage boy cat from up the slope.



By the time we finally got up to leave, evening had set in.



We strained to see the three kittens – tiny shadows slipping in and out of view, swallowed by the empty cat compound.

Back in the apartment, the distant Bosphorus shimmered with what seemed like a million lights from the bridge and the hills on the Asian side.



Large grain ships sat anchored, while ferries glided the dark water in silence.



I wondered if the dirty white kitten was still standing alone by the edge of the cat compound, bewildered by the sight before him.

In the afternoon, we walked by the mosque and noticed someone new, a middle-school girl crouching by the side steps of the mosque. Nearby, the boys we had seen there before were joking around, stealing glances at her.



As we got closer, we saw she was holding a tiny kitten – it was the mini-me! She was now nudging it toward a black mother cat, hoping for adoption.



The mother cat, however, turned her head away, casting a sideways glance one moment and vigorously licking her paws the next, pointedly ignoring her. This back-and-forth went on for what felt like an eternity.

We were heading back along Susam Sokağı – “Sesame Street” when a white minivan blocked our path in front of the Susam Café.



We couldn't read the writing on the side of the van, but there was a drawing of a black cat with one ear tipped. Above it were large letters: TNR.\*



Two men stepped out from the van and opened the back door. They took out three plastic cages and carried them toward the cat compound!



Meanwhile, a woman stood at the top of the steps, looking our way. "It's the lady on the ground floor!" We quickened our steps, following the men.



When we arrived, two cages were already open and the male cats emerged. The lady was now opening the last cage and calling to the opening: "Çık, çık..."



words we didn't understand but sounded like beckoning. Just then, we noticed a sheet of paper on each cage, likely with her name and address.

Back in Cihangir, the place already felt like home in so many ways...



Karaköy ferry in the evening – the crowd, screeching gulls, and grilled fish.



In cafés, street cats had names and stories; cards to more helping hands.



Watching daily afternoon tavla, their regular cat too, hovering over to advise.

Our last few days in Istanbul. At our regular kabebe place, same little cat made



a cameo, eyes fixed on the prize, chin resting on the table, working his charm.



As pickle jars caught the afternoon light, the turşucu faded back into the 30s.



Under Atatürk's unblinking gaze, a cat curled on the windowsill, as people brushed past the narrow sidewalk below.

A few days later, we left Istanbul...



*Special Thanks (Istanbul Edition):*

**Burçin Kimmet** of **Robinson Crusoe 389** - for being the first to welcome this project with such openness, and for providing a level of confidence we needed more than you likely realized.

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**Hilary Sable** of **Cihangir Cool for Cats** - for the serendipity of your street cat feeding, timed so perfectly with our random neighborhood stroll. Fate clearly had a plan. Thank you for the laughter, the rescue stories, and for helping this book find its way back to the Cihangir streets that inspired it.

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*And to all the cats of Istanbul who led us here - thank you for letting us follow.*



The End.