

# “WHAT THESE ITHACAS MEAN”

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THE MAJOR WORK (A NOVEL) – VOLUME 1

BOUND

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## ABSTRACT

'Bound' is a contemporary sea fiction narrative in which Bailey, Odysseus the epic hero, and a remnant of Scott of the Antarctic, the colonial hero, circumnavigate the island of Tasmania aboard the yacht, the *Argus*. As they voyage, they navigate failure, love and heroism, for each is embarked on a different mission: Bailey flees from the responsibilities of care; Scott is haunted by past failures; and Odysseus, endlessly distracted by novelty, is on a mission from Pallas Athene (goddess of truth, justice, moral values and heroic endeavour) to rescue the listing Ship of State and redress construction of the sea fence.

'Bound' consciously utilises characteristics inherent within the sea fiction motif of *nostos* to explore character metamorphosis, symbolised in the paradoxical experience that is the setting out, journeying and return of an ocean voyage. The novel, utilising the metaphor of life as voyage and adventure, explores what it might require to be a meaningful twenty-first century hero.

## DECLARATION

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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## TEXTUAL NOTES

Extensive research underpins ‘Bound’ and a number of sources are directly quoted or paraphrased in the novel.

The wonderfully accessible Robert Fagles’ translation of *The Odyssey* is referenced, and the introduction by Bernard Knox provided invaluable insight into many matters, notably the concepts of *xenia* and *koinonia*.

The secondary source, south-pole.com, was helpful in detailing Captain Scott’s expeditions (including diary content). Edward Evans’ *South with Scott* is directly quoted from. Information regarding Scott’s geological contributions is paraphrased from a BBC News article by Megan Lane.

Paul Repts’ *Zen flesh, Zen Bones* is quoted or paraphrased, Tennyson’s “Ulysses” is quoted, as is Dante’s *Inferno* (Canto 26 excerpt). The novel’s epigraph is a loose translation from Petrarch’s *Secretum* (Dialogue 1). Lines from Douglas Stewart’s verse play, *Fire on the Snow*, have been paraphrased. Scott paraphrases Heraclitus, Odysseus quotes a line from a Beyzaie play, and Aunty quotes Bertold Brecht and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Definitions of ‘ex’ are sourced from an online dictionary. Lyrics of the Scottish folk song, *The Water Is Wide*, are used. The Hellenistic Ionic song, “The Epitaph of Seikilos” is quoted and the Chorus paraphrases a Sophoclean line from *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Ideas about the role of the Chorus and individual fate were influenced by reading,

amongst other sources, Helen Bacon's "The Chorus in Greek Life and Drama".

The characters of Scott and grandfather, plus the object of chart, realised in 'Bound', are drawn from draft material within 'Ile du Coeur'. Creative licence has been exercised regarding the shearwater migration (which, in reality, occurs in autumn not summer) as well as in rendering coastal features and locations around Tasmania.



A NOVEL

# BOUND

*So that if I have lived in war and tempest*

*I may die in peace and in port.*

Petrarch

## CHAPTER 1

*You're needed.*

Bailey tried not to think about what the phrase might actually mean. Anchored came to mind. She drank, and flirted with Alicia, the steward, from Rome to Dubai, then dozed until Sydney, avoiding thoughts of a future with want in it, and a past in which need had been jettisoned.

*He never gave me a key, Mrs Bucher, the neighbour, had emailed. She hadn't seen him about for a day. No-one knew precisely how long Bailey's grandfather had been on the bathroom floor. The police had gained entry through a back verandah window. Long enough for hypothermia, Mrs Bucher had written. I cleaned up as best I could. There are decisions to be made.*

Flying in to the island, Bailey tracked the curve of a coast that was like a familiar body; its intimacy obliterated the Mediterranean coast she had just left. The plane approached the landing from the south and she couldn't stop herself locating the D'Entrecasteaux Channel and imagining its nautical chart, the pencilled line of what would be a normal course north—Bligh Point ahead, twenty fathoms, eighteen fathoms, well out from the shore rocks. *Simple.* She navigated safely through in her mind. *How could her father not have managed it?* She shunned the impulse to follow that thought. The plane banked to reveal the swathe of silver river on which the city was built. Below, she located her grandfather's cottage tucked into the suburban shoreline, and memory swamped her. In her mind Bailey watched the captain taking her by the hand and leading her along the nearby jetty.

*At seven, she had wanted to skip out by herself but his grip had told her she should stay close. He had suggested she wear shorts even though the day was cool, and had made her take an old jumper, holed in the sleeves. They reached the jetty's end and were greeted by his long-time friend, Mr Toxley, the boat builder. The two men shook hands.*

*"Is she beautiful?" the captain asked.*

*"Of course she is. You should know that," Mr Toxley laughed.*

*Bailey had thought they were speaking of her. It did not feel right.*

*"Not that I doubt your work," the captain had continued. "Just that I wish I could see it."*

*"Is she beautiful?" the captain had asked Bailey.*

*Bailey had been confused. Mr Toxley put a hand on her shoulder and pointed to the single-handed sailing dinghy rocking on the water below. The varnished high finish gleamed in the sun and to Bailey the perfect craft glowed.*

*"She's yours. What do you think?"*

That small craft was long gone but Bailey caught a glimpse of the captain's *Argus* at anchor beyond the cottage as the taxi drew up. Despite not being able to sail, he had refused to sell it. Next door, the lace curtain lifted. Mrs Bucher emerged.

"Third visit back is it?" She inserted the key in the lock. "How long are you staying this time?"

Bailey, awed yet nervous by the elderly woman's precise memory, was pleased not to have to meet her eye. "The boat gave me a month off," she wanted to say, but didn't. Wanted to explain how the owner had paid for the return fare; that it was unusual, an indicator of being valued.

"Not long."

“I see.” Mrs Bucher’s self-righteous censure transformed into satisfaction as the door swung open. “You won’t recognise it.”

His navy jacket still hung on the coat rack and Bailey leaned her head into it when the door had closed and the older woman, reluctantly, had returned the key. The coat, and the cottage, smelt the same—tobacco, tea, years of routine. The house and he had been companions for a lifetime. But the rooms had been stamped with a new order—Mrs Bucher’s revenge for all those years of being kept out—the kitchen linoleum was scrubbed, carpets vacuumed, surfaces dusted, piles straightened.

Bailey sat alone in the sitting room. There was no tick from the grandfather clock. What had once been a hollow silence, save for that noise, now felt vacant. She placed into it imagined sounds of the captain in the kitchen; china banging against sink metal, a kettle screaming. She recalled, as a teenager, how she had avoided him by exiling herself here to read, accompanied by the clock’s ponderous repetition. The cottage had been a harbour for her, first safe but then too small. The initial departure was at thirteen; she was awkward, not a girl, not a woman.

*At the front door, the captain had placed a hand on each of her shoulders, able to see only her outline now. Beside her were lumps of dull shapes, her school bag and all the requirements for boarding school. Next door the lace curtains slyly lifted, and Bailey had known Mrs Bucher would have a self-satisfied look on her face.*

*“Uncharted waters, Bailey. We’re off the map. Do you remember what I said?”*

*She had shaken her head, not because she could not remember, but so that she wouldn’t cry, so that he would tell her one more time and delay the leaving.*

*“It’s just that you don’t yet have your next chart out. Temporarily lost. Be patient. Unroll the next chart. You’ll find yourself.”*

*She could not have known, as he had, that the charts yet to be unfolded—youth,*

womanhood, the future—could not contain him. Or that his heart, that soft shore against which a wild sea beat, may or may not hold. The car waited, provisioned and ready. He had done his best. She did not see how, from the porch, he had watched her darkened shape walk the path toward the front gate as though she were walking along the jetty.

Bailey had entered the waiting car, feeling already the loss of his nearly sightless eyes upon her. As they drove off, she watched the metronomic swing of his white cane, like the loom of a reliable lighthouse, guiding him back inside, and then the fall of next door's curtain.

Boarding school had been quick and lively and in the holidays other worlds beckoned. Summers were increasingly spent with friends, away from the cottage, on farms where there was yabbing in the creek, helping with the lambing, horse riding, climbing towers of haystacks in sheds and jumping off into soft straw. On the farm, at the day's beginning and end, she anticipated the plurality of family with its chattering relating, ebbing and flowing like some foreign, wonderful tide. She did not think of the captain, alone at the table, eating a boiled egg in the morning, soup at night. The head of the egg severed in one precise stroke, the soup pot sitting on the stovetop for an entire week, contents lasting through. She thought of him only in the afternoons, she and her friend sitting on a paddock's rise, smoking, watching seas of golden grass sway. The grass' sheen and movement reminded her of the sea from her their porch. Away from it, that sea in her mind was always calm and luminescent and he was always in his chair, listening to the story it told, the light illuminating him too.

When she did go back for holidays, the cottage seemed tiny and contained. Speech, movement and time were all confined. Outings brought no relief. They were formulaic, banal—the jetty, the Toxleys, the museum. He and his choices were predictable, old, and she was embarrassed by him. The stains down his jacket which he did not see, the dandruff

*on his shoulders, the lack of speed, the lack of variety, all sickened her, for which in turn she felt guilt. Their days were a series of small outbursts followed by long silences. She felt his patient bewilderment and avoided him with books, seeking out the sitting room and the clock—the inescapable resident—as if to prove that time was a sentence, each dull second echoing in the airless stasis; confirming, surrounded by his compass and sextant, that her grandfather was of another age and the house a museum.*

*In that too-slow quiet, the clock had ticked upon things mounting inside her. She had not yet understood, still did not understand, the nature of grief. All she had sensed then were river-like movements of anger, shame, emptiness, despair. If they ever coalesced they would feel like a beast, animate and dangerous. She had sought it out, sitting in there, often not reading; fascinated and frightened as she skirted above the violent potential of her depths. If it escaped it would, like some terrible, unpredictable wave, engulf the cottage and the two of them. She imagined its ferocious roar, its terrific shattering of the silence. She could not yet know that the body was designed to simultaneously carry love and hate, that its equilibrium was the unity of these. She only knew that feeling was uncomfortable, and, like ballast not yet perfected, risky.*

*Then school was suddenly finished, forever. Grown was the feeling that he was a stranger, a person she did not know or did not know how to know. A six month stay, after which they both knew she would cast out, permanently. With his help, she had gained a job in the chandlery and she saved and sailed. When she wasn't doing either she booked flights, planned accommodation, investigated employment and, as the date grew closer, laid out items in readiness around her sailing bag. At the kitchen table, over dinner, he had invited the day's progress and she would momentarily find him by listing things—clothing, travel documents, inoculations, ports. Hers an unbridled excitement, his a calm encouragement. The first job would be as a steward aboard a cruising yacht in the*

*Mediterranean.*

*“Why not crew?”*

*“I’m a girl.”*

*He snorted.*

*She shrugged, indignant and uncertain—that this should be the case, that they shared the same response.*

*Crew turnover had been high, still was. Bailey quickly progressed from steward to deckhand. It was work that never quite felt like work, predicated on routine and effort but not the tyranny of sameness. Boat owners were invariably men and the only real tyranny was an ego, or a wife who, out of boredom, redecorated suites and retiled lap pools, forcing the boat into dry dock. Crewmates, when they lasted long enough, became a family of sorts, the Mediterranean and beyond their playground, financed by boat owners with more money than sense. (We’re flying into Barcelona, have the boat meet us there to cross to Ibiza. To arrive —two thousand euros worth of fuel later—and be met with, we’ve changed our mind, we’re flying out tomorrow. Take the boat back to Pula.)*

*Bailey wrote the captain letters that Mr Toxley read aloud. About the journey from deckhand, interspersed with training time in London and Madrid to get her tickets, to bosun. Boat after boat, year after year, her letters became increasingly infrequent. She did not share with him that she knew the Venetian Port Authority channel by heart, or that she could spot, early, swell breaking on Almirante Rock or the beacon on La Fourmigue. How she could smell the Alize before it hit and recognised the peculiar slant of coastal sea that the Etesian made.*

*She did not write of the friendly rivalry between the super yacht crews—motor and the sail-powered luxury yachts—played out in drinking games in bars after days off in which they hiked to island hilltops, mountain biked, or took tenders to remote bays from*



*whose cliffs they dived, or snorkelled and lazed in the sun. Nights off in which extended communities of crew gathered in portside clubs and bars to drink, dance, do drugs, and later, pair off to have sex in the narrow berths of communal cabins or beds in shore-based hotels. Or how, unlike on the island, people didn't care that Bailey's bed companions were women, always transient. Or that keeping a relationship going seemed limiting and impractical; not needing and so being unneeded ensured freedom. Nothing, or was that no-one, should be relied upon.*

*You're needed.* Bailey leaned over to the side table and picked up the compass, watching the needle's urgent veer home. She would settle in first, visit him in hospital tomorrow. She listened again to the stilled clock's silent legacy. He would want her to wind it.



The captain was lying on his back, as if sleeping. Bailey paused in the doorway; the distance to the hospital bed seemed ocean-like.

Close up, he was recognisably himself—whiskered chin, veined and weathered cheeks, full head of silvery white hair—yet not someone she knew; his body seemed oddly frail. Occasionally a limb twitched. His eyes, when they did open, looked ahead or occasionally flicked about the room. If they did alight on her, it was brief, unseeing. Weirdly, his eyes seemed to contain a different light than before the stroke, almost as if they could see.

It was not easy, or natural, to draw up a chair and sit. To place sound into the void of the neat room, offer words to the silent form in the bed. Stilted sentences: the flight, Mrs Bucher, the tidied cottage.

“The *Argus* at anchor looks...”

In the long silence that followed Bailey recalled her first visit back, ostensibly to

visit her grandfather but as much to confirm that her life was no longer here, on the island, with him.

*Bailey and the captain didn't speak of the past as they shared awkward meals at the table during which she stared at the plastic salt and pepper shakers, the gold 'S' and 'P' so worn that they were barely discernible.*

*"How do you know which is which?"*

*"Magic."*

*"No. How?"*

*He doesn't explain the subtle, learned difference of weight in his hand, or the workarounds he has devised over the years. Cannot put into words the intimacy his loss of sight has gifted him. The subtle pleasure of knowing her through her breathing, the tone of her voice, the manner in which she pulls the chair into the table—heartily when she wants to be there, measured when she does not.*

*"Familiarity," he replies, sensing her contempt.*

*Rather than the past, he had asked her about the future. She realised only now that it was only hers they had spoken of. Of how her savings were mounting. Bailey had felt shy speaking of the yacht that was always in her mind's eye. A slightly old-fashioned design with elegant lines, not unlike the Argus.*

*"Perfect," he had said, "for offshore solo voyages." As though he understood her need for a base, a home, which would convey not corral.*

*She spoke of voyages to remoter places—the Hebrides, the Orkneys, maybe Iceland. "To prove..." But her words had tapered off. Even she didn't know what needed proving or to whom.*

Bailey replaced the visitor's chair and stood over him. His arm, when she touched it, was

surprisingly warm. “See you tomorrow.”

In front of the cottage, at anchor in the suburban bay, the *Argus* tugged at its anchor. Bailey watched through binoculars. Turned by wind and tide it moved round and round its globe of limited water. She scanned the bay. The weather had set in, a typical south-easterly; flat sea and dull sky. A grey, mournful drizzle would follow. The world had stilled, nothing was going anywhere. It could be like this for weeks.



The days and weeks that followed established a routine. Get up, run, eat breakfast. Go to the hospital. Sit with him, offer a cup uselessly to his mouth. Mimic the pretence of conversation. Bailey could not accustom herself to the awkwardness of a monologue with someone who may or may not be listening. Sounds became pronounced in that silence, the raspy pull of his breath, footfalls in the corridors, the rattle of a trolley.

Home again. Dinner. Phone calls. Friends from the past, maybe a movie, the pub.

His friends popped in, those still alive. Mrs Bucher was a tireless visitor, her hunched frame exuding a dogged resignation, as though this were the Depression again, or the war—to be endured. As though it were she who suffered as she knitted bed socks for him, washed pyjamas, baked Bailey casseroles and managed a disconcerting mix of sanguinity and disapproval. About everything. *These things happen. Well, what can you expect? Modern technology!* And a commentary on the standard of his care fluctuating between *woeful* and *wonderful* depending on the age and nationality of the nursing staff.

“There are decisions to be made,” she repeated.

Had she loved him, Bailey wondered? Needing him but unneeded by him? And if she did, was that what fidelity was, love was? A lifetime of unrequited service?

It was only now, prompted by the prospect of care of her grandfather, too late to

thank him for the care which he had given her, that Bailey had insight into what it may have been like for him to have inherited her. To have had a child foisted upon him amidst his grief. Of five, three had been taken the night in the Channel, two returned. Did he ever resent her? Had he considered saying no?

The *History of Wrecks in Southern Waters* described the event in two sentences: *The timber hulled yacht Atlanta lies approximately one nautical mile east of Cape Bligh in twelve fathoms of water. The intact hull is buried in sand.*

Across the years, Bailey accumulated mixed snippets of the story her grandfather had let slip and had woven them with shards of Mrs Bucher's narrative.

*Her grandfather and grandmother were sitting in the galley, her parents were on deck. The Atlanta had not been long underway. It was a routine, weekend trip down the Channel. That last afternoon, her grandmother had been diving on the wreck of the barque, Hope. The weather was due to change. The son, Bailey's father, the skipper of the yacht, had let his mother dive longer than he should have. They had been near enough, her grandfather had said once, to 'smell' the home port. A front had passed over early, 'big end first'. As a teenager, Bailey used to imagine the wind screeching through the rigging, the waves menacing the yacht and the unforgiving end of the fist of god descending in slow motion. 'Hit by a series of large ones.' A lee shore. They found rock. The boat went down. Her grandfather had spoken of the sinking like he still couldn't believe it.*

*Bailey had pondered across the years how was it that they had lost steerage? How could they? The question, the real question, was how could he, a captain, have let it happen?*

*The rest of it, never spoken of, was like a shadow play Bailey had invented. Her grandmother in the water, skin pale, wet hair streaming out like weed. Did they uselessly*

*shout over the gale or was it all mimed? Or, as air refused them, had it been completely silent? 'The child,' her grandmother imploring, 'take her.'* The son somewhere, seeing to his own wife perhaps? The grandfather's arms suddenly full of wide-eyed, silent child.

*He had never once asked Bailey: 'Do you remember?'*

*'A wave,' he had once said, 'tore them apart, broke them up.'* And Bailey could not bear to ask if he meant the yacht or the family.



Bailey weighed options or pretended to. She knew people could not be relied on, including her. She chose a nursing home and put him on a waiting list. Three weeks later, a resident died. The hospital organised patient transport. Bailey looked about the cottage, casing the contents of each room but finding what they contained redundant for his present needs. In addition to pyjamas and toiletries, she took the compass. Placed on his bedside table, it seemed less symbolic, more mockery.

*She rang the boat and offered to resign. Take another three months. We want you back.*

Some days his eyes were open, but mainly they stayed closed. Occasionally he emitted a low, terrible moan. An animal-like sound, pitiful. Trapped? In pain? Bailey could barely stand it. The staff assured her he was not suffering but she was unconvinced; their confident knowledge seemed suspect, based on an inability to admit there were things of which no-one might know.

She thought of all the nights he had got up to her as a child: calming a nightmare, changing sheets when she wet the bed, soothing her cries for a presence she ached for but did not understand its absence. She recalled him in his striped pyjamas, performing his care in a slightly brusque, practical manner before he'd say, *Now, back to sleep.* She'd wait then for it. Not him saying *I'm sorry* from the doorway but that moment his big hand lingered

on her head.

She imagined him lying on the bathroom floor in his pyjamas. How cold it might have been. Had he managed to get to the toilet first? How his head had cracked against the concrete floor. Had he wondered if anyone would come and tend him? If she had been there, would she have been practically brusque like him? Could she have been tender and what might she have said?

Bailey resigned from the boat, took a part-time job at the chandlery and assumed powers of attorney—medical, financial. She watched the savings for her dream boat shrink.



The *Argus* nosed out of the bay and caught the sea breeze that had come early up the estuary. On the foredeck, Bailey raised the jib. The *Argus* heeled. A small spray flew. The boat's forward movement, the breeze, the sunlight, her easy responses at the wheel, were everything the nursing home room was not. She spotted its grey-roofed institutional profile on the eastern hill, watched it slip past and then be left behind as the boat cruised towards the river mouth.

Today's sail was brief, as much a break from routine as to rid the hull of weed and check the boat. Bailey anchored and ate lunch on deck, savouring the sun and the lilt of the hull. Out here, suburban life could be viewed at a distance, in perspective. The dense clusters of red roofs petered out on the east and west pincers of land whose arms pointed south to the ocean beyond the river mouth. Bailey diverted her thoughts from the beckoning vastness, and instead looked at the coast of the island that lay on the eastern side of the channel. She went below and pulled charts from the locker (relishing paper over digital for a change), looking for, and finding, the one that depicted it. Bailey's eyes travelled south to linger on Bligh Point, seeing below it strewn timbers, bones, incoherent

pieces of a history. A jigsaw that would never coalesce. She forced her gaze further south to Recherche Bay. A short trip away would be feasible.

Rearranging the paper chutes, Bailey spotted a manila paper tag on a rubber band. She drew out the chart and read her name, penned in her grandfather's hand. The chart mapped the central portion of Bass Strait. It took her a moment to spy the X, in pencil. She looked carefully. No landmarks, no islands, nothing of note nearby, just an X over water. She turned the chart over looking for notes and found none—he would not desecrate a chart. She removed all of the charts from the locker. No other was tagged but she unrolled them all, looking for a key. She methodically went through the main cabin and then the master berth, then the whole yacht from stem to stern, searching for something by way of explanation.

It was only at the galley table that evening, anchored and brewing tea, delaying rowing back to the cottage, that she found it, unsurprisingly, in the log. The final entry, dated, and this was a surprise, just four weeks before the stroke. *A hidden sea*, he termed it. On which he had found peace. *I would want with all my heart for you to sail upon a sea such as that.*



Bailey sat by his bed as he breathed doggedly on, wondering if he knew she was here in this small room with its close air and lack of view. Whether it made any difference.

She missed him.

She switched on the redundant television. A late night current affairs program showed a panel of experts discussing mining in Antarctica, where territorial claims are not recognised under international law and the Chinese have built another base in Australian territory. They debated what will happen when the Antarctic Treaty's Madrid Protocol comes up for renegotiation in 2048. A carer returned laundry. The segment segued to the

plan for commercial developments within state national parks. Bailey turned the tv off. The carer smiled kindly as she took pyjamas from a film of plastic wrap to arrange them neatly in a bedside drawer.

“Some have no-one. He’s lucky.”

She moved across the room and fossicked in the cupboard for soiled night clothes.

“What about some photos?” she asked over her shoulder. “To brighten up the room? Photos might be nice. Of the family. Scenes that he liked. Drawings from the grandkids. It gives us a better sense of who they were. Are.”

A buzzer sounded. She smiled again.

“I’ll come back for the rest.”

The fingers of his hand, the one near the discarded film, twitched and curled as though attempting to... To reach for it, she wondered? Bailey looked at his face, then, when nothing was revealed took to studying the exposed profile: jutting chin, cracked lips, strong yet elegant nose, the dead eyes. The retraction of his limbs had become increasingly pronounced, his facial bones, the skeleton beneath the flesh, increasingly revealed. He was evolving backwards, an ancient becoming foetus-like.

She spent so long being a child with him caring for her that whole stretch of time. And then, suddenly, she was an adult and for a brief fraction of time they collided in something that equated to being equals before the migratory passages of their lives moved them inexorably on. Now, this perplexing role reversal for which neither of them had asked. She was sure he would hate it, if he knew.

*Did he?*

Bailey took the plastic up and balled it. It expelled a sigh as its soft strength was crushed within her fist. Would his breath invite it closer? His yellowed, waxen skin would blanch a little, and then a little more. The useless limbs would not kick, frozen as they



were. Or would they? Would his eyes widen? At least she would know if he were in there.

Footsteps sounded in the hall.

“Now, what was left?” the carer asked rhetorically. She paused amidst her collecting, “You’re good you, know. Doing this.”

*I don’t want to*, she wanted to say, tossing the ball of film up into the air instead and catching it, crushing it again, not properly hearing the talk about photo boards and how the occupational therapist might assist. *Family*, was the only word Bailey heard the staffer say, repeatedly. Her grandfather had been responsible for everything being taken from her in the beginning. And now, her future. With each ragged breath she steeled herself to settle as he was forced to settle back then when he had inherited her. To settle as he was settled now.



At the jetty, the *Argus* was provisioned for the trip to Recherche Bay. At her front door, Mrs Bucher was all thin-lipped magnanimity. Her delight at being handed charge for the long weekend surfed on an undercurrent of judgement. Her send-off choppy.

“Off you go. I’ll manage. No shame in needing a rest if you’ve had enough. Of course, it’s early days yet.”

The *Argus*’ passage south was smooth. But, at the helm, Bailey raged inwardly at Mrs Bucher, and her sickening willingness. Approaching Bligh Point, the drownings surfaced but all that accompanied them was the familiar absence of feeling that disconcerted her in its blankness. All she knew was that the Channel suddenly felt too small. Hemmed in, Bailey swung the boat around, proceeded back up the channel and at Bruny Island’s northern end struck out into the space of Storm Bay where the Southern Ocean beckoned.

Anything can grow in the space and freedom of a far horizon. The plan seeded

itself when the *Argus* sailed past the entrance to Stewart's Bay. Bailey went below and brought the *Argus'* log on deck: *A hidden sea...Peace...*

The plan blossomed when she helmed the *Argus* round the south-eastern corner of the island mainland and sailed north, surfing down waves that ran parallel with towering sea cliffs on whose wave-cut platforms swell landed or raced beneath ancient arches to be swallowed by the black mouths of sea-caves. Nearby, a hidden blowhole roared then groaned, the moans an amplified version of the sounds from her grandfather's hospital bed.

She would not return.

## CHAPTER 2

The blue waters of Fortescue Bay were dark and light striations interspersed with sandy creams. Walking and thinking, near the beach's end, Bailey almost stepped on the mask. It sat upright, facing the ocean, as though a diver or explorer, perhaps buried neck-deep in the sand below, watched the ocean out of which she, or he, had come. Bailey bent and scraped at the sand. All that remained was a rubber seal, still in perfect mask shape—visor, space for eyes, distinct outline of nose. She sat down beside it and stared, too, at the water which, time and again, presented itself quietly to the sand. The ocean often made her feel peaceful, but this was not what her grandfather had meant, she sensed, when he wrote of peace.

What did he mean by a hidden sea? Could she find it?

Bailey glanced down at the mask. She had not spoken aloud for a while.

"I'm needed, apparently." She said aloud. "What does that mean?"

"I'll tell you what that means," she imagined the mask replying, and spoke for it.

"It means being stuck. Stagnating. Washed up from life."

"So," Bailey continued, enjoying the clarity of this exchange, "should I sail to it?"

Down at the water's edge, two pied oyster catchers strutting in the shallows took to the air crying as if in answer, but the meaning of their *keleep, keleep* unintelligible.

"The X?" she continued. "It's kind of like he was telling me, don't you think? To go. Not stay?" But her words sounded suspect; less adventure, more excuse.

Bailey leaned over and dug out the mask; left, the rubber would deteriorate into small particles that fish or birds would eat. "I'm not going back," she confided. And then, encouraged by its silent assent, "People should not be relied on. He should know that better

than anyone.”

The return journey, with its stopping and collecting of plastics, was hampered by the mask. So, when Bailey spotted frayed, blue bailing twine, pushing up from the sand like a tiny seedling, she dug out the trailing root of it and looped the long length round a visor end and measured around her own head before tying it off. The mask sat on her forehead like raised sunglasses.

The light south-westerly made for a speedy, easy run allowing Bailey time below to make coffee and consult the Schouten Passage chart. Binning the pocketful of plastic, Bailey paused at the mask on the chart table. Something about it was companionable. Steadfast, in its weathered survival. She propped it in the netted sleeve by the chart table, opened the iPad and read to it the marine forecast.

“A high...ridge decays as a broad area of low pressure develops to the north...cold front will cross. Winds south-easterly ten to fifteen knots. Seas, one metre. Swell south-westerly one to one point five...”

“So,” she continued aloud, “let’s go the eastern side of Maria Island.” Pleased, once more, at the prospect of open water. Plotting the course, she consulted the mask, reasoning aloud between options, speaking to it the way her grandfather had spoken to her as a child, as though she would know the answer despite inexperience.

That patient outlining of her grandfather’s thinking had laid down in Bailey a template of prudence she adopted on the sea but often abandoned when she returned to land. “I owe him a lot.” Suddenly, she wanted to take that sentence back. “Why,” she asked the mask, “do you think it is so hard, when land bound, to be as rational, as sensible as when on the sea?”

“Do you think it’s something to do with the movement? You know, you try and be stable in response to changeability: water, wind, weather. Land feels so *stable* in

comparison.” She thought here of the nursing home room and the years of sameness that would follow if she returned. “Stuck. So, we want, need, to be changeable?”

“I won’t be bound,” she said, defiantly adding twelve extra nautical miles between herself and her grandfather. “We’ll anchor at Wineglass Bay. Not south on Schouten Island.”

Ile des Phoques, like a single speech mark upon the chart, receded into distance. The *Argus* gybed and cut through the Schouten Passage. Navigating through the reefy shoals and relieved to tuck into the southern end of Wineglass Bay, Bailey wished the mask, which she had hung off the boom vang like a talisman, had eyes to act as bow lookout.

For courage, for patience, protector-like she placed it beside her on the housing as she prepared herself for what would inevitably be a longish call to Mrs. Bucher, uncertain if she would simply ask for an update about her grandfather, or partially lie and advise that she was ‘extending’ the trip.

Down the line, Mrs. Bucher launched into lengthy, critical detail about staff, laundering, room cleanliness, meals. Bailey rolled her eyes at the mask.

“An ETA? Well, I was thinking, perhaps, to extend the trip. If it worked for you? Some,” Bailey could not bring herself to say *somewhere* I need to go, and then have to explain what seemed a vague, sentimental mission. “Someone I want to visit. Across in the islands,” Bailey constructed a journey that might plausibly involve the Strait. “Might not get the chance for a while, what with the captain...”

Did Mrs. Bucher hiss ‘that woman’? Whatever she was assuming, Bailey ran with it. “Yes, that’s right. Molly.” The name rang a muted bell in her memory. “On Cape Barren Island. She *was* close with the captain. History! She’d want to know, don’t you think?”

Yet, in closing, Bailey was hesitant, “It’s possible that I may be longer than I first thought but I’m still not sure. I’ll phone tomorrow evening.”

“I caution against the use of those words. A colleague of mine said something similar. Oates it was.”

Confused Bailey looked about.

“In a bad way, he was,” the mask continued. “We all were. ‘I am just going outside,’ he said, ‘and may be some time.’”

“Fuck!” Bailey cracked her head on the boom as she jumped. “Not you, Mrs Bucher. Sorry. I’ll ring you back. Yes, I’m ok.” Bailey fumbled with the phone screen, eyeing the mask.

“Didn’t put on his shoes,” the mask recounted. “Out of the depot into the driving blizzard and...” The voice trailed off.

Had it come to this, she wondered. A madness; the stuff of sea tales and castaways. After a long silence, Bailey recovered herself and spoke aloud to ensure sanity. “Oates. Never returned...”

“You know of this?”

“Scott’s diary,” she proceeded slowly. “He recorded everything. They found the bodies.”

There was relief in his voice. “I wanted them to know we had done our best.”

Bailey saw then that the mask was a remnant of polar glasses, slightly warped and misshapen. Yet the nose was straight, and one could imagine, below it, a mouth.

“An arduous voyage but nothing like what we encountered on the Barrier. Death’s no safeguard against hardship.” The mask described, then, the ice inching seaward decade upon decade, as if yearning to return to the great flow. How it calved into the sea. Encased within the berg he had drifted, taken on the currents. Pieces of berg shearing off and melting; his belongings, his body, leaving him piece by piece.

“Here I find myself. Greetings. Scott, of the Antarctic. If I had a hand I would offer

it as gentlemen do.”

Bailey stared at the facial apparition of the explorer. He looked, she thought, a little surprised at having arrived here, or was he still surprised that the original voyage had not gone according to plan?

“You spoke earlier of land being stable. Illusion! Everything is movement, decay. But I glimpsed something once or twice amidst our terrible last labours. A curious form of joy.” Scott sounded wistful. “When that final, high wave threw me onto the sand back there, I knew I had been given another chance; my unfulfilled determination, summoned in those last hours of life, to not move until endurance is beaten, or melted like ice, into that joy...”

But Bailey was not fully listening. Yes, she was surprised that the mask spoke. And no, she did not feel unwell or crazy. And, equally, the voice of the mask was lucid and what he said was, in fact, interesting. But more pressingly it was dawning on her that Scott had travelled beyond the eightieth parallel, into country virtually invisible, absent as it was, back then, from any map.

She described the log entry. The hidden sea. “Fancy another voyage?”

Scott contemplated the voyages he’d undertaken. There was his naval career, and the first successful Antarctic voyage followed, in time, by the second. The glory of leaving accompanied by the nation’s desire that he return a hero; their hopes on his shoulders, their funds in his equipment, their belief driving him forward. It was not the unknown that had been unimaginable or surprising. It was defeat. Encountering one’s insignificance and, then, how laughable plans became in the face of the elemental. How unimaginable it had all quickly become! Staggering across those last miles of ice, inching towards the pole—the prize—only to see aloft, through the driving snow, Amundsen’s triumphant flag. The heroic feat somehow not legitimate if you came in second; his own dream, and the dream

of national glory, evaporating in that instant. Then, the arduous slog back, spirits and rations low, and the interminable weather. Even now, he has no words to describe to Bailey the series of events that replaced what should have been a hard yet successful return. There was fog, wind, the likes of which he could not have ever imagined, snowdrift, the deep sastrugi. Elements—innocuous water and air—combining to beat down upon them, a ferocious foe against which they, his exhausted men and he, and his hopes, were defenceless. Frostbite, snow-blindness, exhaustion. Forced delays, depot stores ruined or low. Death after painful death. That return journey made the mission to the pole, with all its hopes and aspirations, the dreams of glory, laughable; a form of child’s play. He had made himself hold on for his men, his death the last; his duty to his men, even in failure, complete.

He didn’t share with Bailey how sweet it was to finally give up, to not have to contemplate moving. The peace that was stillness. To not have to decide, to no longer be responsible. Or, that when one goes beyond the borders of the map, the known laws disappear.

Instead, he simply replied,

“No more voyaging.” If he didn’t move, he couldn’t fail. “You ruined it, you realise,” he added, “my waiting for joy. Moving me.” He watched the descending dusk. “In the morning you’ll take me back. Replace me at my lookout on the beach. But meanwhile,” he continued, lightening up, “tell me of the modern world. Did the French conquer Morocco?”

Something about Scott’s desire to sit still and wait for joy repelled Bailey. It made her want to go forward even more, away from the form in the bed with its terrible stillness, and its invitation to responsibility. But Scott knew something, Bailey realised, about being needed. About care.



“Did you ever feel uncertain, you know, about your decisions?”

Scott’s bonhomie vanished. He stared vacantly out at the darkening sea, a good view from his right eye, the left side of the mask shrivelled and misshapen. For all the stoicism in his diary, for all the stiff upper lip in his final Message to the Public, scrawled out before he died, in which he had explained how the expedition’s outcome was not due to poor planning but bad weather and bad luck—*It was no one’s fault...*he wrote, not quite believing it as those around him, one by one, died—was a worry, a secret burden too awful to bear alone, that had subtly escaped in the form of a question embedded within the letter to his wife, *I have taken my place throughout, haven’t I?*

In awkward silence, together they watched the fading shore upon which the sea dashed in and shuddered out.

“The bunk calls,” Bailey offered.

“Yes.”

She hooked Scott to the vang. It felt more respectful somehow, his being placed high. “I’ll check the anchor.”

“Prudent. Take me with you,” he offered, collegially. “I’ve missed a boat.”

At the bow, she propped Scott on her forehead, leaned out from the pulpit and pulled at the slack chain. Bailey didn’t feel the twine break. Scott scooted past her face like he was sliding down a glacier and sank into the black sea.

## CHAPTER 3

Scott tumbled in the wake of wash that sloshed against the bay's beach.

The stranger, the hero, Odysseus of Ithaca, stooped down to him, recognising immediately that it was not just a mask but a message. He scooped Scott up in his bear-like hands.

"Hermes be praised. You have been sent to assist. Come, you will be my companion, my eyes and ears in this new world."

Scott let out an anxious yelp. The thought of committing action, publicly, and in a modern world at that, was too much for him.

"Heavens, no. I bowed to the will of Providence long ago, determined still to do my best to the last. So, if not at the other beach but here, I must remain, and continue to endure until endurance itself is beaten into..."

"Come. The gods favour me."

"No gods favoured me, I fear."

Odysseus wondered who he was, he who had no gods to aid him, since his bearing, despite his physical reduction, suggested breeding and his speech was dignified.

"Not that I am complaining," Scott continued, wondering not only who this man was but in the wisdom of confiding in another fellow, "one must sheath home full responsibility for one's choices. They were mine, and mine alone. But it is my men of whom I still think."

Odysseus nodded sympathetically. "My entire crew, all perished."

"Scott of the Antarctic," Scott said. And then, everything topsy-turvy, added,

“*Errare humanum est.*” Made imprudent by the unexpectedness of the last twenty-four hours, and uncharacteristically abandoning all pride, Scott told the stranger the whole story from beginning to end, commencing the lengthy, bittersweet rendition with the aphorism that gave him comfort—to err is to be human.

Odysseus, a great enactor and lover of a lengthy and detailed telling, became a mute and attentive audience as Scott, at first rigid with endurance then eager for the words and feelings he had denied himself all these long years, because he felt his defeat nullified his entitlement to speak, shared his story.

When Scott was finished, Odysseus said nothing, just nodded knowingly.

Scott felt lighter.

Odysseus announced himself. “Odysseus, Prince of Ithaca.”

Scott stared at the hero. Regret and shame rose in him. Such self-revelation, such indulgence, particularly with a luminary such as the one sitting beside him, in whose mighty deeds Scott had versed himself when passing long nights aboard the *Vulcan*.

“So, here I am,” Scott concluded lamely, unable to backtrack. “Perhaps pride holds me somewhat, perhaps a little uncertainty...But I am enduring, convinced that one day endurance will melt, transform like ice into a fluid kind of joy. I think I glimpsed it once amidst our final toils. And you? Still voyaging...?”

“The real trials begin when you arrive home. The gods don’t tell you that,” Odysseus set off on his story, hungry for a telling like in the old days. “The enslavement of responsibility and domesticity, of fidelity. It all felt like a yoke, a collar more fearsome in its weight than Poseidon’s mighty storm off Phaeacia’s shores. I would have set out again a thousand times over if it had not been for Penelope’s steadying words and kind hands.

“Yet, even so, a part of me longed to roam despite that long decade of return teaching me the futility of adventure. Such tyranny—to long for adventure yet hope for

rest. But the final voyage, the true return—I am not ready for it. A man’s destiny is greatness, not some whimpering end.”

Beside him, Scott flinched.

“I watch existence being paid out like a great rope, hand over hand; its measure was seemingly endless yet now I spy its tail end, lying bare on the deck. I want that length of life to endure! There are so many things I have not done, so much untried and unconquered. A hero is born to die but I am not content.”

Odysseus paused, surmising that there had been enough examination of the past, even regret, in the story to satisfy the melancholy Scott.

“The past can be let go. It is long gone. How many times have I been a broken man, Scott? Those pieces can be reassembled, if the gods decree, and one lives to fight another battle. How many times I could have given in yet gritted my teeth and bore it all to stay among the living.”

Odysseus then launched into an artful entreaty that enticed, flattered and hypnotised.

“Come, lend me heart. No man, your tale tells me, has ever put you in the shade.”

Was he deaf or feeble of mind? Scott wondered. Had Odysseus not heard the bit about Amundsen beating him?

“It is one such as you, measured and fearless, that my undertaking requires. The hero who leads the way is half-human, half-god. All your careful planning—devise me a ruse, a cunning stroke to save the Ship of State, off course and listing. Come, Scott, one last victory. With the gods on our side, success is assured.

“Yet I fear you are sick at heart for the dear companions lost to you. I know such agony. But what is it to stay alone, far from hearth and company? What good comes of grief? Of regret? Pain weighs on my spirit, too. Weary and ready for rest, I must pay my

debt to the shining one, Pallas Athene, who, time and time again, aided me. Like you, I cannot rest until my duty is done.”

“What duty?” Scott was confused. And Odysseus seemed to contradict himself; longing for adventure but now ready for rest...

But Odysseus would not be interrupted about mere details. “‘My old campaigner, I need a hero,’ Pallas Athene said to me. ‘The Ship of State... Societies are no longer *koinonia*,’ she instructed.”

Scott unsuccessfully dredged up his Greek.

“United in the communication of the highest friendship and values. ‘They’ve become disjointed collections of separate people focused upon themselves or their nearest kin,’ Pallas said to me, displeased. Personal love, personal possessions, personal wealth, personal fulfilment...I’ve seen it for myself in my wanderings,” Odysseus added.

Scott started to say it was not like that in his day, then thought of the vessel owner, Bailey. Her unwillingness to care. “Yes.”

“Waves are dangerously growing, Scott, threatening the Ship of State already off course and weakened by a rot seeped into those two ballast-like relations—the bond between captain and navigators charting a course for good. And the bond between host and guest.”

Pallas Athene, Scott recalled, was the goddess of truth, justice, law, moral values and heroic endeavour. And navigation, if his memory served? The champion of heroes.

“You were Pallas’ favourite, I seem to remember.”

Odysseus waved his hand as though this were a given. “‘Who knows how,’ she asked me, ‘to get a ship back to port? Who really understands, who has had to rely upon, time and time again, the fundamental bond between guest and host?’” She recounted my ten-year journey of travail, the hosts I had charmed, assisted or honourably outwitted, the

unmannerly suitors, guests of sorts, abusing my estate, my despatch of them to restore honour and justice. “You’re one of the few who can set a ruse and lie better than I can”, she said. And then she commanded me to bring the Ship of State home.”

“Why does she not deal with it herself?” Scott enquired.

“She’s busy.” Odysseus described, then, the changes at Olympus; and Pallas’ battle with the Chairman of the Olympian Efficiency and Expenditure Committee. How Zeus, complacent and ineffectual, blithely waved assent at the end of each flattering briefing to the Council of the Gods. The Chairman’s oily monologues full of incomprehensible phrases: ‘commercial reality’, ‘business hook’, ‘assets and collateral’. The Chairman who had commandeered the western wing of Olympus for use as a luxury lodge, a premium-priced getaway for mortal high flyers who paid undreamt amounts of money for the privilege of three hours with Zeus (Rule Your Corporate Domain), Hades (Turn Up the Heat: Burn Off Your Competitors) and Hermes (Sell Your Message!).

Odysseus cast his hands out at the sea as if it were the world.

“Times such as ours, virtuous and honourable, are gone. Come, cast your lot with mine!”

Odysseus’ question about being alone had found a mark in Scott; the years waiting *had* been lonely. Scott thought silently about Bailey and the duty she was shirking. Could he, Scott, help get the *Argus* home?

“It will be a battle, Scott,” Odysseus, who seemed to like talking, continued, “Yet you are battle-tested and know, like me, that all warfare is violence and deception. Pallas Athene has taken pity on me and put you in my path. Honour me with your company and cast thought of staying from your mind.

“We are timeless, Scott,” Odysseus concluded. “We and our deeds. What is it that men such as we cannot offer?”

Scott looked out to sea. He was not sure Odysseus had accurately perceived him. He was not a deviser of ruses; think how straightforward he had been with Amundsen and Shackleton—too polite, too accommodating, many had said. Neither did he believe that warfare was wholly deception. But to be recognised as a hero by one such as this was...flattering. Reassuring. Fortifying. And, perhaps in agreeing to assist Odysseus, Odysseus might assist Scott with returning Bailey home?

“Admirable,” Scott said. “But as to heroism, I feel uncertain. To place me in such a category...And the modern world, I have lost touch. Who knows what it is like out there now? The Ship of State, though—most worrying.” Scott clicked his tongue at that gargantuan task—the very thought of which cemented his decision. “Best of luck to you.”

Odysseus placed Scott down on the sand and looked at the sea and sighed.

“Farewell, noble friend.”

“I ask one thing. Place me above the tideline, will you? She will find me and return me.” Scott added an encouraging afterthought, “Crafty, you and that horse in Troy. You’ll think of something.”

Odysseus walked him up the beach and Scott, cradled in Odysseus’ warm hands, thought then, of what it would be like if Bailey did not come in and find and return him. He had simply presumed she would search, because that is what one did. He had suffered misfortune in falling, and one did one’s duty, one cared for the unfortunate. Bailey had said she had wanted to journey with him, but why should he believe she would look for him given she was abandoning her own grandfather? Would she not similarly, expediently, abandon Scott? Far easier to forsake the effort, the inconvenience of searching for him and continue on her way alone and unimpeded, without responsibility, as she was clearly used to doing. Scott contemplated the years ahead sitting in the sand alone, painstakingly monitoring his own decay like a penance. What good might come, his new friend had

asked, from a lifetime of grief endured but not transcended?

Odysseus placed Scott in a nest of grass that afforded him an ocean view.

“Wait.”

And Scott allowed himself to be lifted up, once more, into Odysseus’ great hands.



## CHAPTER 4

*Had the tide taken him?*

Masked and suited, Bailey dived at first light, again and again. She searched her hands through the thick white sand, methodically attempting to stick to some form of logical grid. Her concentration waxed and waned, disturbed at her sense of loss at Scott's disappearance, and surprise at her deep need to find and keep him.

Scott's calm presence had fortified her. In it, she felt she might have figured out her burden of confusion, shame, memory. Yet she had unknowingly confessed to him, before he spoke, about not returning. Scott had loved his men and sacrificed for them. What had he thought about her desire to flee?

Bailey gave a bottom-resting skate a wide berth and continued on a grid, knowing that as time went by and the tide turned, the chances of finding him diminished.

Had Scott, she wondered, intuited that she would keep sailing beyond the pencilled mark on the chart, using it simply as an exercise to keep heading north, to keep voyaging anywhere but home? But part of her was fearful in sailing to the X; she feared arriving and finding nothing. Not going there left the possibility of some sort of hope; a promise, if things got too much, that there remained a purpose, a final option.

Across the sandy floor she moved, hands outstretched, willing Scott to appear, her heart leaping when, in the distance, the sand shifted, only to have it fall again as a disturbed flathead scuttled off into the blue.

"I'm sorry," she said, eventually, preparing to surface for the final time, "I truly am."

Climbing the stern ladder, Bailey heard shouting. A bearded figure on the beach was waving. The *Argus* had been joined overnight by a ketch, anchored at the northern end but he was clearly signalling not at it but at her. He shouted and waved again. Bailey took off her mask and hood.

“Are you alright?” she called. The reply was unintelligible, but the outcome of the gesticulated conversation was clear: Bailey must row in to the beach.

“Are you ok?” she ventured, as she feathered the oars and coasted in. The man didn’t reply. Just took hold of the bow, and with her still in the dinghy, with surprising agility heaved it up the sand. His body was weathered, his calves where his trousers were rolled were scarred, and his mane of hair was peppered and gingery, his beard silver. Bailey was confused about his age. He seemed old yet...vital.

He walked away from the waterline as though to leave but at the grass line crouched down and turned back, holding an object aloft.

“Scott!”

The stranger stood and bowed, “Greetings, traveller.”

“I’ve been looking for him. It.” Bailey reached out, but the man pulled Scott back. Bailey extended her hand again. The mask dangling from his hand, the stranger laughed,

“The mask means something to you.”

“No. Well...”

“You deceive yourself. It spoke in truth, I see now. Cowardice. The plan to run away. Self-deception. *Facta non verba*, he was saying, but was interrupted by your arrival. What does it mean?”

“Acts, not words. But there were things I wanted to convey,” Scott croaked at Bailey, in a waterlogged voice, “if I didn’t survive.”

Down in the not-so-depths, then speaking with Odysseus, and on seeing Bailey

again, Scott had realised two things. First, he liked company. All those years frozen into the ice, then all those years washed up on the beach; it had been lonely, his self-imposed exile into silence as he waited for a joy that hadn't arrived.

He would not only accompany Bailey to the hidden sea to find peace, he would get her home.

And second, he was tired of living with the terrible sense of having failed. He would find out how, here in this modern world, he had been judged.

“Odysseus, Prince of Ithaca.” The stranger held out his hand to Bailey.

“Bailey. Scott, please.” She held out her hand for the mask, but Odysseus re-tied the twine and put Scott on his own head.

“Recall,” said Scott. “Virgil, Ovid, Dante—they all wrote about him, Bailey. The great hero. *No love...could overcome in me the passion that I had to gain experience of the world, and know the sum of virtue, pleasure, wisdom, vice and pain. Once more I set out on the open sea...* I've made a decision. An extra set of hands. He's coming with us.”

“I will teach you courage,” Odysseus announced. “How to skewer a head from astride a horse, how to pierce a heart with a lance from ten paces...”

“What she needs to learn,” Scott's watery cough contained a rushed sentence, “is courage of heart.”

But Bailey didn't hear what he said. Neither did Odysseus. Scott's words were drowned out by an engine. From out of the scrub lumbered a bulldozer. Followed by another.

Odysseus put his hand over his ears and pointed to the dinghy.

“You could show gratitude, you know, me finding him,” he said, as they approached it.

“Thank you. Now, if you'd just hand him over.”

But Odysseus got into the boat. “He’s a message. Sent to me by Hermes. Sent by Pallas Athene herself.”

“I don’t necessarily see it that way,” countered Scott. “I was simply lost.”

“Besides,” said Odysseus to Bailey, of Scott, “unlike you barbarians, he knows who I am.”

“Something of an ordeal,” Scott said to her. Well aware Bailey would not countenance Odysseus joining the voyage, he watched her face. There was no sign his pointed comment had effect. So, he mimicked Odysseus’ capacity for a ruse. “At the least, I promised him a cup of tea. In gratitude.” Scott pulled his ace. “For finding, for rescuing, me.”

An awkward silence accompanied the row to the yacht, interrupted only by the slap of the oars. Odysseus looked ill at ease on the water, Bailey observed. Distracted only when Scott mused hopefully, “Perhaps of myself, too, the writers, the poets, they may have written something?”

On the boat, Odysseus never took Scott off. He nosed around, peering at the array of instruments adorning the cockpit wall, amazed at their purpose. Bailey, liking him even less, answered his questions with terse replies, enduring him only because Scott had decided to voyage on. She stayed on deck, willing him to place Scott down, whilst below, in the saloon, with Scott perched on his forehead, Odysseus reached for the picture of Bailey as a young girl on the *Argus*, she at the wheel, grinning, her grandfather standing behind looking proud.

“Sea captain,” Scott muttered approvingly.

“Ah, one of us.” Odysseus knocked his head against a globe hanging from the ceiling. He took it down fascinated by the vast map that he itched to learn, to travel, to explore. All was possibility. An arena for even greater heroic deeds. He threw the globe

into the air then, distracted, fumbled.

Scott watched the world bounce and roll around the cabin. *Impulsive chap*. Perhaps a worthy characteristic in the epic age but now Odysseus needed tempering. A dose of prudence would not go astray.

Odysseus rummaged amongst the books snugly tucked on a netted shelf.

“These.” he commanded Scott. “Read aloud. For I cannot.”

Alongside novels, and a few diverse volumes of poetry, Scott delightedly listed an array of maritime and polar accounts—Ballantyne, *The Cruise of the Alert*. Polar photographs by a chap called Hurley! Then Scott let out a low whistle at a cloth-covered book, the colour of a dirty blizzard. *South with Scott*, by Admiral Sir Edward Evans, R.N. Evans had survived! And, gained a knighthood. What stories lay within those pages? How had it all turned out? Scott itched to catch up on his own posthumous life, to learn how History had judged him and began to anticipate days of sitting out of the wind reading his life.

His eyes travelled the shelves. Next to Evans, almost as though someone had been expecting them, was a copy of *The Odyssey*. Scott explained who Homer was, and Odysseus opened a random page.

“Tell me of it!”

“From Book Eleven, ‘The Kingdom of the Dead’. You are with Tiresias. ‘A *sweet, smooth journey home, renowned Odysseus, that is what you seek but a god will make it hard for you—I know—you will never escape the one who shakes the earth, quaking with anger at you still, still enraged because you blinded the Cyclops, his dear son. Even so, you and your crew may still reach home, suffering all the way, if you only have the power to curb their wild desire and curb your own what’s more.*’

“Curbing desire. We might remember that,” Scott muttered pointedly, looking at

the globe on the floor. “And reaching home.” Now seemed the time to broach the matter of Bailey. “In addition to the Ship of State, there is someone else who needs to return...” As he spoke, he recalled that Odysseus, too, continued to remain perennially homeless.

But Odysseus didn’t respond. He was busy recalling the augury, the one that had been etched into his mind like figures etched on an urn. “Tiresias did say exactly that before he gave me the prophecy.”

“What prophecy?” asked Bailey, descending the companionway.

Odysseus, scooping up the world, presented it to her. “No longer flat!”

“Yes, the earth is round. And now battered,” observed Scott. Africa was dented, and Saudi Arabia slightly ripped. “And twenty-five percent of it Empire. God save the King.”

Bailey rehung the globe. “What prophecy?”

“Book Eleven,” instructed Scott.

“*‘But once you have killed those suitors in your halls...’*” Bailey read aloud, “*‘go forth once more, you must...carry your well-planned oar until you come to a race of people who know nothing of the sea, whose food is never seasoned with salt, strangers all to ships with their crimson prows and long slim oars, wings that make ships fly. And here is your sign—unmistakable, clear, so clear you cannot miss it. When another traveller falls in with you and calls that weight across your shoulder a fan to winnow grain, then plant your bladed, balanced oar in the earth and sacrifice fine beasts to the lord god of the sea, Poseidon—a ram, a bull and a ramping wild boar—then journey home and render noble offerings up to the deathless gods who rule the vaulting skies, to all the gods in order. And at last your own death will steal upon you...a gentle, painless death, far from the sea it comes to take you down, borne down with the years in ripe old age with all your people there in blessed peace around you.’*”

“Did you?” she asked.

“Make the journey? Of course.”

“No. Find peace?”

Odysseus privately recalled how, after slaughtering the suitors, he had thought it would all stop—the nightmares, the darkness, the unpredictable torrent of anger that drowned tenderness, the desire to flee domesticity and its suffocating responsibilities. That the bewildering, terrible emptiness of life after war would pass and that his old self would return to him. He would be doing something ordinary, he had thought—eating, hunting, inspecting the harvest—and from the corner of his eye, he would glimpse himself, and the old Odysseus would finally have come home. But the violence, the disenchantment, the melancholy, grew. He committed terrible acts. Even he sickened himself. Then came the day that Penelope had shouted,

“What did Tiresias say?”

He had mumbled, and she had struck his face. The first time ever the blow had come from her.

“Say it.”

She stood over him until the last words had been uttered. . . . *With all your people there in blessed peace around you.*

“Peace,” she had said. “Do you remember? All those years? You weren’t here? I never asked anything of you.”

So, he had set off, almost on pretext, to keep the promise that blind Tiresias had settled on him that day in the underworld.

Fleeing from memory, Odysseus chose his words carefully in response to Bailey’s question. “After the suitors there was no more bloodshed.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

A ray of sun down the companionway lit up the iPad on the galley table. As though the thing were an enchantment made by the gods, the dazzle lured Odysseus. He reached out, anticipating its whiteness to be highly polished marble but it was surprisingly light. Inscribed into it was a single symbol. *A portent.*

“What’s this?”

“What do you mean?”

“What is it?”

“Yes, what is it?” echoed Scott.

“Serious? You guys are...weird.” Bailey shook her head and opened the tablet.

Odysseus watched her fingers dance. The opposing surface lit up. Whoosh! Things rapidly appeared and disappeared.

Bailey paused amidst typing, thinking about how to reclaim Scott and be rid of Odysseus; he seemed odd, possibly even a bit unhinged. Unlike Scott, she didn’t want to take him to the Strait. She remembered bits of *The Odyssey* and had seen earlier how Odysseus had sat carefully amidships in the dinghy on the row to the yacht, peering warily into the water. Could it be him? If the mask could talk, then...She typed ‘Poseidon’ and watched Odysseus’ face as the Lord of the Sea, brandishing his trident, glowered from the screen.

“You being on water makes him very close now. Want to read what he thinks of you?”

“He can’t read.” Scott was entranced by the screen.

“And here’s Penelope.”

Whether at Poseidon or the mention of his wife’s name, Odysseus, Scott still on his head, turned and ascended the companionway.

“Speaking of whom, do you want to know the bit I remember from *The Odyssey*?”



Your female slaves. Who would have had no choice but to submit to the suitors. Their hanging... Just girls..." Bailey shook her head, "You were such a bastard."

"I'm not having him on board, Scott," she called after them. "Say your goodbyes and then he can go."

"I promised tea," Scott replied. "I gave my word."

"Is everyone in there?" Scott added wonderingly from the stairs. "Me? Am I in there, too?"

Bailey considered the debate surrounding Scott's legacy. She closed the lid.

"Battery's flat."

Odysseus, it turned out, was a talker. Invariably the story was about him. Below, having little choice until Odysseus chose to put Scott down, but to make the promised tea, Bailey listened. It was curious that both men were either forgetful of the fact or were unaware that she could overhear. Or did they intend, she wondered as the conversation grew less flattering, that she should?

"A simple cup! None of the old ways apply in this age, Scott. No *xenia*." Odysseus recounted how, these days, he would cross the threshold of a shop, or, tired and requiring rest, enter any dwelling he was passing. The greetings were barbarous; he was banished, insulted...

Scott again scrambled to recall his Greek. *Xenia*. Hospitality?

"No-one knowing to say, welcome traveller, welcome guest. Come, let me raise you up a seat. Let my heralds mix up more wine so we can pour cups to Zeus. Let the housekeeper be generous with the stores. And after we have eaten and drunk, tell us where you are from. Tell us, welcome stranger, your tale. Speak to us of the fortunes which brought you to our shores."

To illustrate the lack of hospitality, Odysseus told Scott, then, of the great sea wall

they were building to the north of Australia. Pallas had spoken of it and he had, indeed, seen with his own eyes the pylons sunk deep into shallow parts of the Timor Sea, the barges floating into place an ingenious series of interlocking segments, and the giant gate which would let freight and only selected travellers through.

Scott let out a low whistle.

“No *xenia*,” Odysseus repeated. “The Ship of State. The sea fence. My task here appears endless,” he lamented. “Little has worked...” he trailed off.

Life in this world was, for Odysseus, an exasperating mix. The old ways were gone yet there was something that was fun, fast, fantastic, about the modern world. The boom of traffic was a constant surf endlessly hammering on a concrete shore. Vehicles, like charging horses, headed straight for him seemingly intent on injuring, only to veer off at the last moment. Even the night itself—too light—was pierced with a constant hum and pound. Odysseus felt fragmented. All that he had learned was undone in this chaotic civilisation. He was like a man setting out who knows nothing. Yet he was seduced. This new, unfamiliar territory required him to start, in an endlessly enticing way, all over again.

But some things jarred. Their fighting, for example. *What is the sense*, Odysseus had questioned on hearing of a shooting in a school, *of spending time teaching your heirs and then killing them?* At first speechless then appalled by arms dropped from the sky and weapons used that the opponent could not even see, he could see no glory in modern warfare. Slaughter was not wrought by human hand or skill or strength, and it was seemingly unrelated to conquest or battle. Without skill and a worthy opponent, did they not see no honour was won?

Yet worse than their lack of honour, worse than their barbarous lack of hospitality, worse than the sensory assault, was the fact that no-one knew him. The Prince of Ithaca, the Blameless and God-like, Favourite of Pallas, was accustomed to commanding respect.

Awe and obeisance were simply his due, not only amongst his people but across the known world. Here, he was ignored.

He could not firmly arrive upon what it was about this new world that disturbed him most of all. But there was a characteristic, a quality that was in everything except in Scott; something decidedly unheroic.

Pallas had asked him a favour. But tucked behind loyalty was desire, like flame licking tinder. New worlds, new adventure; one more chance to prove himself glorious.

“I get distracted,” Odysseus confessed, now, to Scott. “But honour is honour. And debt is debt and must be repaid. I gave my word,” he concluded. *Well, to a degree*, he thought privately.

Scott thought it encouraging that a hero of Odysseus’ calibre should admit to such uncertainties. He politely said nothing of it but a small yet growing confidence was emerging through his dealings with the great Odysseus; he was remembering his ability to hold his own. More than that, to lead. Scott waited out the silence that followed Odysseus’ confession, a paternal care growing within and the fire of his internal command centre being re-lit.

Scott did not share Odysseus’ love of adventure; he had first set out on the *Discovery* expedition as much for financial necessity as anything else—if he proved himself he could command a wage that would enable him to support his mother and sisters in the wake of his father’s death and the family’s financial ruin. Scott did not need to wander incessantly as Odysseus did. Odysseus needed tempering, his desires curbed. Bailey needed to find courage of heart. Both needed to get home. Gone was the commitment to stillness. Scott had a mission to achieve, an adventure to be had, and companions with which to have it.

“Do you know what this is?” Odysseus drew with his finger, on the deck, the

symbol that adorned the tablet.

“An apple with a bite removed,” confirmed Scott, reminded of that first fall from grace. He noted, though, that Odysseus had changed the subject, in much the same way Bailey did when the subject drifted too close to a truth or to uncomfortable feelings.

“It’s on the tablet. It’s important?”

“It propelled us out from Paradise. That’s why. We’ve been seeking return ever since. Latin script,” remarked Scott, thinking of the keyboard. “My goodness, the modern world! You’d be surprised at what I’ve seen over the years back on that beach.” He shook his head in disbelief, then grew pensive. “Though the view is fading now. Inertia, gravity...the great laws that govern the universe govern us. They cannot be denied. See, even the mask is perishing.”

“Inertia? Gravity? Your words knock at my ears but are denied entry.”

“Soon I will be gone,” said Scott. “*Omnia mutantur nos et mutamur in illis.*”

“The gods will fix it.”

“Impossible, my dear sir! Your compatriot, Heraclitus. Not sure if you know him? Wise fellow. No man steps into the same stream twice.”

Odysseus interrupted, tiring of talk he did not understand.

“I didn’t mean your decline. I meant my task. Who is the enemy now, Scott? Of whom should I be wary?”

“I’m not sure. All the years, there in the ice and then the sand. Instead of clearer, things have become less certain. I have a sneaking suspicion, though, that the enemy is that half-eaten apple; our inability to find our way back.” That, it seemed to Scott, was the perfect segue with which to come clean about his plan.

“Bailey,” he said, “and our imminent Expedition. As one leader to another, might I present you with an opinion further to those things I told you back there on the beach? You

need to know she has potential but is wanting in discernment, discipline and valour. And, did I say she is prone to self-indulgence? Also, she lacks some basic skills in practicalities. Heroic? No. Would I choose to take her on an expedition? Mm, I think not. I believe we should first deliver her home.”

“Oh, that I had my son by my side to assist.” Odysseus, suddenly homesick, again changed the subject. “Sons? You have had some?”

“Yes,” said Scott. “One.” He wanted to tell Odysseus about the boy child he did not see grow into a man and how he has so many times imagined what he might have become. *Make the boy interested in natural history if you can, he had written in that last letter to his wife, it is better than games. They encourage it in some schools. I know you will keep him in the open air. Try to make him believe in a God, it is comforting...and guard him against indolence. Make him a strenuous man. I had to force myself into being strenuous, as you know—had always an inclination to be idle.*

He wanted to tell Odysseus, too, about his own faithful wife who, Penelope-like, awaited his return that never came. And more than that, he wanted to speak aloud about his great love—the woman, a geologist, not his wife—and that wonderful, all-too-brief time expunged from his naval record. Yet, even though he knew of Odysseus’ time with Circe and Calypso, Scott felt shy.

“Yours was Telemachus, I recall?”

“My heart runs heavy to think of him.”

“And speaking of labours...” Scott returned the conversation to Bailey. What perplexed him most, what he found most difficult to accept was her debate about duty. Her refusal, and particularly as a woman, to contemplate not caring for the one who had cared for her. It amounted to betrayal, and for Scott, who had so arduously cared for each and every man to the last, sacrificing his own needs to take care of theirs, this was the gravest

travesty of all.

“Her inability to know how to care, to love, troubles me. But there is something about her I liked,” he counterbalanced, “right from the start. Self-indulgent she is, yes, but there’s a streak of pluck. But whether she will return to do her duty or endlessly wander, who knows? Will you help?”

To the listening Odysseus, Bailey’s refusal to commit or care meant little. Leave, stay—he had no opinion. Rather, his judgement concerned her lack of hospitality. Her lack of course and lack of captaincy regarding the ship of herself. Plus, the immaturity at never having proved herself—not a single great deed to her name! He would change that. He waved his hand at this incidental task that they would achieve along the way.

Now that Odysseus had agreed, surprisingly amenably, to this additional task, Scott omitted to say that Bailey’s pride, loneliness and uncertainty spoke to him of his own, and that her suffering, endured but untransformed, made him want to change. He simply wound up with the words, reminding himself as he spoke,

“To endure and endure and endure, that is what I wanted to tell her from down in the depths. Until endurance itself is beaten into joy.”

“I have figured it out,” Odysseus interrupted. “She has nothing to return to. No lands or herds, no wife, no son.”

Scott took up the list.

“No proper job or vocation. Yes, I do not understand this undisciplined wandering. An endless expedition with no purpose, with no scientific goal. Does no one have responsibilities in this modern world? Yet I do understand the idleness, the daydreaming. I had to work very hard to stamp it out of myself. She has what I would term an active form of inertia. She needs a mission, a goal.”

“I think she needs a wife,” said Odysseus. “It was for Penelope I laboured to

return. And, a longing in my bones for my lands.”

“On that point, I have come to realise you are uncannily, ah, close to the mark.”

Scott, feeling indelicate in broaching such a matter but deeming it necessary so that Odysseus would fully understand what it was they were dealing with, chose his words carefully, “I have something to explain. Er...unnatural.”

Scott looked at Odysseus hopefully. Odysseus looked back, expectant.

“Are you not affronted?”

“I don’t understand.”

Scott sighed and explained Bailey.

“Anyone might lie with anyone where I come from,” Odysseus said, when Scott had finished, “provided one eventually got married. Men with men, women with women, men with women. Nothing more natural than satisfying that urge.”

“No one could, with anyone, in my day. Hardly even the one to whom you were married.” Again, the memory of the expunged portion of Scott’s naval record surfaced. “I do find it...disconcerting.”

Odysseus wondered how it was, with such timidity, Scott had led anything.

After a musing silence, Odysseus, as though thinking it logically through, pronounced,

“Home is where you rule from, what you rule over. Where you are most known and loved, the seat of wealth from which you offer hospitality.” He thought of Bailey’s lack of deeds. “It’s the place from which you set out to journey, prove yourself, and return a hero.”

“King and country,” Scott shifted the focus away from heroic endeavours. “Rest and recreation. As a navy man, the sea always calls. Of course, it is easy, with time, to forget the hardship and consider only the beauties. Yet I cannot rightly say what it was that drew me out once more, leaving my wife and son behind,” he mused. “Why it was I did

not content myself with a single polar foray? Society expected it of me, that was clear, to make a dash for the Pole, and, as an Englishman, to beat the foreigners.

“One wants to broaden one’s horizons, of course. And Science,” he continued, “that was a large part of it. To finish the work we started with the *Discovery* voyage. There are always problems to be solved.” His eyes misted over. “On November 25, we crossed the eightieth parallel, beyond which all maps were blank. It was always my ambition to get inside that white space. And when you are there the space can no longer be a blank; this compensates for a lot of trouble. And of course, you cannot stop, you cannot go back, and there is no alternative but to harden your heart and drive on.”

“That’s it!” cried Odysseus, “That’s what I couldn’t name. The lack of hospitality, the lack of time and greeting; these people, they cannot stop. Intent on a destination even they have forgotten. On and on they push, not pausing to pour a cup of libation or offer bread to strangers. Everywhere here is a *hardness* disguised as strength, pretending to be courage, achievement, but it lacks...something.”

“I named it earlier,” Scott reminded Odysseus, a little testily. “Courage, openness, of heart.”

Odysseus looked at his companion expectantly. “How do you suggest we get her to do that?”

Bailey, having heard the entire conversation, took the tea on deck.

“I had ample time to think down in the depths,” Scott began in a grave voice, whilst Odysseus drank. “And, if this Expedition to the X is to succeed, I am ready to insist on a number of conditions. To the point of resignation if, in my opinion, their refusal imperils the success of the undertaking.” Scott listed his demands.

“One, I am not a piece of property belonging to either of you that can be fought over. I am my own man.



“That said, I have certain...ah, limitations, for which I do require your assistance, but assistance rendered should take into account the aforesaid.”

They nodded.

“Two. We are a team, yes? All three of us.”

It was forgiveness, invitation, question and blackmail bound together.

Odysseus contemplated his own, as yet unspoken plan to rout the boat and tackle the fence. Yet he nodded. Let Scott think whatever he needed. He, Odysseus just needed to stay on board.

Bailey opened her mouth to protest at the addition of Odysseus, but Scott hurried on.

“That said, Bailey is indisputably skipper. However, I request logistical command of the Expedition. My reason being that I have the most experience, and particularly with,” here he thought of the Strait and the X, “matters ‘off map’.”

“And, as soon as this Expedition is over, Odysseus will resume land. Bailey and I will continue on.” Here he nodded at Bailey, it was an olive leaf of sorts that he would remain with her and that Odysseus would disembark.

“And, each night, someone will read aloud, for half an hour or thereabouts, from *The Odyssey* and then from Evans’ *South with Scott*. I am determined to know how it all turned out.”

Bailey winced.

“And, you will ensure I am securely bound. There will be no more swimming. Do you both agree?”

That night, Scott was ceremonially placed on the chart table. He gazed ahead while they fussed about him, measuring lengths of climbing tape for a new band onto which were threaded sections of neoprene for flotation.

The climbing tape was a combination of purple, light blue and fluorescent green strands. The neoprene was a bright, safety pink. Scott sighed at the indignity as it was fixed to the mask.

“What I would not give to be able to down a whisky.”

Odysseus liked it so much that he made himself a matching wristband and necklace. He brandished his wrist, “We are joined.”

“You’ll be right now. Its breaking strain is close to a thousand kilos. That’s about two thousand plus pounds,” Bailey added for Scott’s benefit. “And hang on, Odysseus,” she found the tablet and typed a conversion search, “maybe four hundred talents.” She would commit to cooperation with Odysseus for Scott’s sake. That Scott had omitted to say why he planned to voyage back to home port had not escaped her attention. She would keep him on board.

Later, Bailey asked Scott how it had been, down in the depths.

“A test of endurance. I am as familiar with a skate’s anatomy as ever I care to be.”

## CHAPTER 5

Bailey had kept Odysseus on board because it ensured Scott remained. As to that overheard concern about getting her home, well, she would see to that. Such commandeering of her fate made her less inclined to, simply on principle. Yet Bailey began, despite herself, and in spite of his terrible cooking, to warm to Odysseus. When he was needed, say to tack and tack again into a driving wind, he was able, uncomplaining and cheerful. His naked curiosity, his hunger for knowledge, his lack of pretension was endearing. And, having overheard the whole, uncensored conversation between him and Scott (after which Bailey's feelings for Scott had cooled a little by virtue of his blunt appraisal of her), in Odysseus, Bailey had heard and appreciated an outlook that was wider than Scott's, not least his unbridled acceptance of her sexuality.

When it came to the tablet, however, his fascination to learn, his child-like wonder, manifested as an incessant, child-like pestering. Whenever the boat was propelled by a leisurely tailwind, Bailey, at the wheel, was joined by Odysseus bearing the tablet.

“Now,” he said, plopping himself down, “what else is in this box?”

She demonstrated how to turn it on and off and flicked to a couple of websites—the Bureau of Meteorology, the Bureau of Marine Safety—and attempted to explain the role of satellites but gave up when every statement was met by yet another question.

So, it was they advanced up the coast along which farms rolled down to the sea edge, and in whose green paddocks grazing cattle were dark dots.

Bailey had planned to avoid the treacherous, shifting bar of Georges Bay but was forced to

enter and retreat behind its shelter to escape a vicious northerly that rose up to spit and sting, her leg inexplicably aching in that way it oddly did whenever bad weather came through.

Safely moored, Odysseus, not one for sitting still, and growing increasingly bored—paced, sighed, drummed his fingers on the table and cracked his knuckles—despite the weather, wanted to visit the town.

Bailey didn't. His edginess was annoying; the prospect of time alone on the boat alluring.

“Will you go with him?” she asked Scott, privately. “Keep him out of trouble? Or better still,” she joked, “leave him there?”

In the aftermath of their departure, silence descended, and the afternoon drew on luxuriously. Bailey read and ate. She made tea, savouring the boat's return to solo normality. It briefly entered her head, then to sail off without them, well, without Odysseus, but that wasn't feasible for it would mean abandoning Scott. But taking down the photo of her grandfather, and looking closely at him, her heart softened. She traced her fingers round the two of them and recalled graduating from her little solo dinghy to a craft designed for a crew of two.

*“You understand,” the captain had said gravely, “that you are responsible for this boat and everyone on it?”*

*And he had taken her through a simplified version of maritime law, the rules he had lived by all his life. The rule, and its terrible consequences, that he had lived by that night in the Channel. The rule that had cost him his wife, son, and daughter-in-law and had bequeathed to him Bailey. The rule he loved and feared in equal measure, and in which he staunchly believed.*

*“Never abandon a vessel in distress.”*

Bailey napped.

It was the sound of laughter and a dinghy rudely banging against the hull that awakened her. She looked out the porthole to a darkened world. Night had fallen, the rain still fell but the wind was dropping. What coaxed her from her bunk was the sound of not one but two sets of footsteps on the deck, and an unknown voice saying,

“I’m feeling seasick already. I told you.”

The sound of vomiting followed, and Odysseus laughed, crazily. Drunkenly, it turned out. No sound from Scott.

Odysseus could not, or refused to, have a sensible conversation. He fell asleep at the saloon table. The visitor, whose name was Peter, kept vomiting.

“I’m not much of a drinker,” he slurred, draped over the head’s bowl. “I got sacked. Odysseus thought it would help.”

“Scott?” he mumbled in reply to Bailey’s questions, as she put him to bed in the stern cabin. “Scott who?”

At the local pub, Odysseus had got drunk fast. He had befriended Peter, the Chorus, who had sat beside them at the bar, morose, baseball cap pulled low. When Odysseus had found out about Peter’s sacking he grew expansive with sympathy, insisting that he join them. Insisting, too, that the *Argus* would provide the ride he needed out to the islands.

Hearing this and imagining Bailey’s response, and aided by the warm, smoky geniality of the bar, Scott had experienced a moment of intense craving to escape from reality.

“Oh, to drink a whisky. Just one,” he said, imagining being asked, “Neat, sir? Or ice, water?” The whisky tumbler set before him and the generous nip of golden brown liquid shining behind the cut crystal. To lift it, cool and weighty, in his hand, to smell the

smoky, peaty fumes, to have its flavours burst in his mouth and then burn a satisfying path to his centre. And to nurse that glass as the evening wore on and the fire in the grate burned down, and to feel that all was well with the world.

Odysseus, increasingly expansive, ordered a jug of whisky.

“Bottle is what you want,” said the barwoman.

“Two bottles. Jug, too.”

She returned from the storeroom.

“Beer? Chaser?”

“Just jug.”

“Water?”

“Jug.”

The barwoman obliged. Odysseus uncorked one bottle, poured its full content into the jug, and dunked Scott in.

For Scott, the drift down into the depths was nothing like falling from the *Argus*, for he hit the bottom immediately and an end of him protruded. He felt wet and cold and was momentarily furious with Odysseus. But the mask casing was old. Whisky quickly penetrated into the hairline cracks and fissures and Scott was soon warmly embraced by the peaty, ashen, earth fumes of Scotland.

Odysseus leaned in close. “What I would not give, my friend, to have Penelope here.” Fuelled by alcohol and nostalgia, memory was all around him—winning his wife through mounting and shooting the bow, the mayhem in the halls as the suitors were slain, the vengeance for the treachery of the serving girls, their legs swinging to and fro, high in the courtyard air.

“I, too, have regrets, Scott. Every man does.” Here, he clapped his hand on the Chorus’ shoulder. “When I returned, the palace gardens were ruining...”

Courtesy of the immersion, Scott did not hear Odysseus. For he had left the peaty moors of Scotland and was now bathed in the dark red volcanic soils of home. Above were the primrose, honeysuckle, blackberries, the five-petalled pink dog-rose whose stamens were laden with pollen. The scents of wet grass, of cut hay in fields. Then the alcohol itself really hit and Scott was on fire. He became the hum of bees in the hedges and then that wave passed, too, and he was simply drunk. Scott's head completely left him.

"Inside, the hall was thick with sweat, wine and bragging," Odysseus went on, unaware of Scott's absence and intent on a full account for his new friend, the Chorus. "Fury grew as I watched and waited, disguised as the beggar. I had imagined fêting and fanfare on my return? Such fantasy! I was ignored, treated rudely, the feasting and drinking did not stop and each night a number of serving girls and boys lay with the suitors, who in the daytime, vied for my wife. Their hot, proud, fanciful talk made my bile rise.

"Eurymachus, who fancied himself in with the best chance with the mistress of the house, was sitting on my stool in my dining hall. Thinking me a lowly beggar, he said, 'Back off. Be clear of my table.' He threw a stool at me and laughed. My table. My hands trembled as I picked the stool up. Eurymachus turned away, talking about feeding extra guests, as though it were his wealth that was being squandered on me, a stranger. I raised the stool higher and imagined it meeting with Eurymachus' skull but then the room went quiet.

"The door had opened, and a serving girl appeared. I saw her then, behind the girl. An older woman with lines on her face and grey in her hair, and a full firm figure. An elegant downward carve of cheekbone, olive skin and warm, wise eyes. She paused a moment in the doorway. My girl who had yearned for peace had become a woman who had found it. A powerful woman, who, in spite of the hall full of suitors, walked the length

of the room as though the house were entirely hers. And the way they stood to greet her, brushed at their robes, sat a little straighter, they knew it, too—that she was not theirs. And in that moment, I saw too that she was not mine. Penelope belonged to no one but herself.

“And when that moment of unfamiliarity ceased, decades of desire replaced it. My gut, a hollow cavern of longing for this stranger, my wife.”

“There is something true and fitting about the clash of warriors on the field,” Odysseus mused. “Each day you stride out and the sun beats down or the wind blows up a carpet of dust. The elements within you and those without mix and all become simply a part of the great glorious battle that is a worthy life. It is you and he, he and they, the helmeted thousand, meeting in the great space under the vault of sky overlooked by the gods. Unconfined, the fear and fury; the guttural cries can fly forth soundly, side by side with spears. The clash of steel on steel rises high and the muffled stunned surprise of a man as a lance pierces his lung, his thud to ground and the hissing seep of his blood can all be heard, but then they evaporate. The sounds of victory, the sounds of death, are absorbed by the willing, blind earth. In the night, the sprawl of twisted, punctured bodies is cleared and next day, when you advance once more, it is restored. All is cleansed. You ride out and the sun beats down or the wind blows up a carpet of dust, and your eyes, before they see the wall of leather approaching on the field’s far side, barely notice the brush marks that the dragged bodies have left. It is simply the theatre of war, with the arena swept clean. And so the day begins.

“But a home is all confines. Nothing escapes.” Odysseus raised his voice, impassioned. People stared at him.

“I dispatched the suitors with an unbounded fury, slicing and beheading with merciless precision to win my wife and home. I would finally finish with bloodshed, and I would do it well.”



Odysseus recounted as if he were back there.

“Had I not been dealt enough? Eurymachus’ head dropped off his shoulder, hit the floor and bounced once. Where was Argos to play? Twice, lower this time. Rolled like a ball. His blood shot forth; a silent spray of final, hot bravado. Had I not proven myself time and time and time again in those twenty arduous years? Had the gods not finished with me?

“Precise and efficient we were—I, Telemachus, Eumaeus and Philoetius. And Pallas Athene too, who, true to her word that day on the beach at Phorcys, deflected arrows designed for my brow, my heart. And when it was over, the gods be praised, she called for peace.”

Odysseus didn’t speak for a time, but the Chorus was too drunk to notice. Silently Odysseus recalled how bodies lounged in strange shapes; bags of slit skin strewn like a foreign type of furniture. The room was silent save for an odd, hoarse breathing. Someone had crawled up under a corner table, his back to Odysseus, his body hunched small. Telemachus bade him come out and he retreated in reverse from his paltry tunnel. He paused on all fours, his head hanging down, before, slowly, still on hands and knees, turning around to face Odysseus. But his eyes looked only at Telemachus.

‘Father?’ Telemachus’ eyes were the bright of battle.

The man’s face was pale, as though the blood of his body had pooled deep within, fearful of being spilt. Near his left hand, in the shallows between the flagstones, ran a small red river, which a shaft of sun glorified with light. Odysseus could smell shit.

‘Go to him,’ Telemachus commanded. It was the palace bard, Phemius.

The bard drew his torso up and approached on his knees. When he lifted each knee somebody’s blood, perhaps Antinous’, perhaps Amphinomus’, stained his skin a rich carmine. Telemachus was talking but a haze had settled down upon Odysseus much as a

sea haze sits quietly upon Ithaca's western shores. He was listening to music, to the soft and civilised strains of a lute played by the man when he was a boy.

'Father? 'Father!'

Odysseus' body jerked back.

'Shall you pardon him?'

And, for a second time, Telemachus told him of the bard's merit, how the suitors had forced him to sing.

Odysseus recalled sparing him, though he had not yet raised his eyes. Him, and the herald, Medon, huddled and moaning in a corner. When he had uttered the words of absolution, the bard's torso moved above his knees in circles, like he was swaying to a music no-one else could hear. Then he tottered over as if from a self-inflicted blow.

"The suitors' bodies were burned." Odysseus took up the tale again, aloud. "So close was I to the final harbour, after which would reign peace.

"Do a thorough job,' I instructed Philoetius." Odysseus slapped the bar emphatically and raised his voice.

"I ordered those maids slung up.

"Do it well,' I commanded Telemachus, and later inspected his work. Satisfied to see them so orderly—their slim, treacherous heels now still, their thin necks at neat, mute angle. The remaining maids scrubbed down the dining hall. As we ate breakfast in the courtyard, pails of pink water were emptied onto the rose garden.

"I ordered the halls be smoked. The herb fumes swirled wildly and stayed low, as though unable to slip past the thick of death hovering in the rafters.

"Penelope looked at me. Although she did not say it, I could see the question in her eyes. Yes, the suitors. But the maids?

"The maids. How do you begin to talk to each other after twenty years? How do

you begin again? Half a lifetime. Each of you having travelled different paths. Each of you different.

“Everywhere I walked I saw the blood of the suitors, the unshed blood of the hanging maids. Each day, until I tired of it, I ordered the hall walls and floors be scrubbed and the dried herbs lit until the smoke, eventually, rose high and easy.

“At first Penelope held me, stroked me, bathed me. She offered me her body, offered me her peace. At first Phemius sang with force, his brush with death gifted his voice a flight and beauty it had never before contained. At first, I thought the bewildering, terrible emptiness would pass. I would recognise my life and my old self in the same way Eurycleia, my old nurse, had recognised me within the body of the beggar. Bathing my feet, she had glimpsed the scar above my knee, inflicted by a frenzied boar on my child-self whilst hunting on Parnassus with my grandfather and uncles. In that moment, I was returned to her.

“I would be doing something ordinary, I thought—eating, hunting, inspecting the harvest—and from the corner of my eye, I would glimpse myself. And then,” Odysseus thumped the bar again and implored the room, “the old Odysseus would finally come home!”

The barwoman signalled her brother-in-law, the pub’s unofficial Security.

“Yet life is governed by the gods,” Odysseus clapped the Chorus reassuringly on the back, unaware of the burly bloke approaching, “you know this. So, to regret any part seems strange, for the balance changes as they, ruthless or just, mete out pain and mercy in whatever measure they decree.”

Bailey eventually discovered Scott the next morning, in the skip bin at the back of the hotel. Still drunk, Scott giggled like a child.

“Don’t you feel the least bit ill?” Bailey asked incredulously as they clambered back onto the boat. “You should have alcohol poisoning.”

But his only damage from the long dunking seemed to be a slight diminishment in his eyesight.

The Chorus clearly did have alcohol poisoning. He remained, bucket beside him, vomiting, in his berth. Odysseus, with no one to dispute his version of events, casually mentioned his promise (making it sound as though it were a joint decision by both him and Scott) to drop Peter on Cape Barren Island. He downplayed losing Scott and talked up the altercation with the security guard. Bailey, delighted to have Scott back unharmed, and unfazed by Peter, who she thought seemed kind, and, importantly, normal, resigned herself to the fact that Odysseus was too hungover to help, and readied the *Argus* for re-entry into coastal water.

After Georges Bay, the weather was kind. The *Argus* flew. An easy routine was established. The Chorus—for that, Bailey learned, had been his job—relaxed and began to find his sea legs. Welcomingly, he could cook and seemed happy to do so, perhaps motivated after being dished up a first meal by Odysseus. A mound of semi cooked ingredients—tinned beef, eggs, cornflakes, muscatels.

Grateful for the lift, he even consented, now and then, to a tentative but credible turn at the wheel. It was there that Bailey, touched by his solicitousness towards Scott, asked,

“Do you not find it disconcerting that he’s, you know...”

“English?”

It was only then that Bailey recognised his indigeneity. Peter saw the dawning comprehension on her face.

“A mask,” she said after a brief pause.

“Aren’t we all? Where I come from, the island, everything speaks,” Peter replied, eyes on the sea but thinking how it was the problem here—if you didn’t look a certain way... “Water, rocks, creatures.” He took a pen from his shirt and drew a shape on his hand. “What’s this?”

“An S.”

“To you. To someone else, it’s a river, someone else a snake. Scott’s more real to me than some of your mob, half dead. You mob only hear one language, that’s the problem.”

Cleverly, the Chorus introduced Odysseus to the marvels of translator and text-to-speech to rid himself and Bailey of the constant badgering. Relatively independent, Odysseus researched Greece, the Mediterranean, the Aegean, the Battle of Troy, modern warfare techniques, cattle insemination. In lighter moments he read recipes, although they did not always translate well.

“Can I Twitter?” Odysseus asked. And mused about starting a food blog. But, mostly, he stalked himself, or compared himself to other heroes: Alexander the Great, Beethoven, Marco Polo, Leonardo da Vinci, Spartacus. He was at a loss, at times, to understand how and why they were so labelled, for their achievements seemed wanting.

Once he snorted indignantly, “Who is this Beyzaie? ‘The world has been destroyed by the hand of heroes!’ Brazen words! Let me meet him, then there will be destruction.”

Odysseus loved it, this new world at his fingertips, an adventure at every swipe, an ever-new path that wound but led, without fail, to some fascinating new place. And all of it without hardship or toil. It was a sea of information into which he could dive, surf and cavort without fear of Poseidon. But even that thought was still a little shaky. For Bailey had said everything was in there. But in the modern world technology ruled, Odysseus

reminded himself when switching the tablet on. He, Odysseus, held the power. He alone dictated if, when and where Poseidon, that terrible God, might appear.

Scott continued to bloom. The bright, unbreakable headband seemed to give him a novel lease of life, and the drunken escapade seemed to have loosened something in him. Whatever the cause, and despite his eyesight being clearly affected by the stay in the jug, he was reinvigorated; he was on Bailey's forehead when she took sights, plotted courses, wrote up the log. And when Bailey unrolled the chart for the Fleurieu group of islands, the ones nearest to the X, Scott, too, pored over the charts, asking her repeatedly to recount in detail what her grandfather had written about the X. Disconcertingly, it didn't amount to anything concrete.

Each night there was the promised reading, for which Bailey and the Chorus took turns.

Scott had, at first, found himself on edge when each reading of Evans began, to the point that he insisted Evans be read last; nervous that somewhere in there lay criticism. He was relieved to hear the Admiral reinforce the decisions he had made and allowed himself a measure of pride when Evans commented on arrangements for the winter. *'Still, things went beautifully, and so they should have, when one considers the great care our leader had exercised in the choice of his personnel.'* Scott stole a proud glance at Odysseus as the group gazed at the photo of him in the hut, looking every inch the nickname his men had given him. *The Boss*.

Bailey didn't quite know how, in the face of this delightful energy and connection, to set Scott straight about the movement of history; the demise of the empire, and his own contested place in it.

"Is there not something written about you?" Odysseus asked Bailey, on the second last night before they would cross to Cape Barren.

“It is history,” said Scott helpfully, diplomatically, less anxious now that Evans’ reports, so far, seemed favourable.

“Only heroes get written about,” said Bailey acidly. “And, surprise, it appears they’re all men.”

“Yes, why would one bother to speak of the inglorious?” Odysseus asked rhetorically.

“Who have fucked things up,” she added.

Scott chose to ignore Bailey’s addendum. If Odysseus heard it, he did too.

“The Chorus knows,” Odysseus nodded in Peter’s direction. “He helps make them.”

“What precisely did you do?” quizzed Bailey.

Odysseus looked at her oddly and spoke slowly and gravely for Peter, choosing his words carefully as though Bailey were a child to whom he must teach a lesson.

“The Chorus’ judgement is the verdict of History. It is he who makes History, not us. It is he, ultimately, who makes heroes.”

Peter recounted his sacking, then.

“People stopped listening. It’s the fourth century all over again. Do you remember it, Odysseus? Tragedy displaced by those terrible plays with no Chorus. Everyone in them striving for personal happiness in the form of romantic fulfilment combined with financial security! No Chorus, no heroes, no memorable events of the distant past...

“It started...let’s see, when opinion began to replace fact. No longer necessary, the thinkers stopped thinking and the poets stopped writing, tired of being ignored, ridiculed, underpaid and overruled. With the thinkers not thinking and the poets not writing, the Chorus was less frequently written in and Chorus numbers were reduced. When a Chorus was actually required, a din of untrained voices was hired. People clambering on stage proclaiming expertise but having no real knowledge of when, for example, to employ a victory ode, without which the glory remains with the victor alone—a limited, hollow prize

rather than a shared celebration in which that one fleeting moment of triumph was infused with a temporary permanence and meaning. Or, when to appease the dead with a lament, carrying them off in song to the underworld and in so doing uniting them with the living, sobered, through song, by the finality and fleetingness of life.”

Such was his oratory, his small audience was all ears.

“No one remembering anymore what actions to take; what gestures to make to ensure the fragile coherence and meaning which, exquisitely thinly, divided the civilised from the barbarous.

“It seems such a trivial thing,” the Chorus continued, “the replacement of small, ritualised gestures with something else or nothing. The replacement of song with songlessness. It’s ominously unremarkable, this forgetting of tragedy.”

He described weathering the cutbacks and the downsizing of the department to the point of becoming a Chorus of One, kept on largely due to his corporate knowledge.

“When no-one knew what to do—how something should be said, or the order of a ritual—I was asked but still my advice was largely ignored. A sort of symbolic device I was, wheeled out for public occasions and issues of gravity, which these days constitute the funerals of dead politicians who may or may not have done something remotely useful, football grand finals and Anzac Day.”

The Chorus grew heartened by their ongoing attention. “Tragedy! It’s never simply about the fate of an individual, it speaks to something *vast*. How can they hear or recognise that wider significance without a Chorus, unified and speaking as one?”

In the last few years, his words had come from the Media and Marketing Office. “For example,” he explained, “I wasn’t to make public comment on the fact that the government was planning developments in national parks, which would soon be zoned ‘wilderness commercial.’” He was instructed to conduct no autonomous acts in the course



of his duties, and to keep on message.

“Keep on message,” the Chorus of One repeated. “I don’t even know what that really means. That’s why the poets were sacked,” he recounted. “They kept raising inconvenient issues—the Park developments, the parlous condition of the Ship of State.”

Bailey looked at him blankly.

“You know, the populace, the shipowners, not remembering anymore how to sail. The sailors—politicians and business people—knowing something of sailing but not how to navigate, yet they covet captaincy and entice the owners, in bids to buy favour and votes, with trifles to maximise personal wealth! The old drop in personal income tax approach, tax loopholes for the wealthy, half-baked, short term plans, and impossible-to-keep promises. The more they promise, the more popular they become! And the more the Ship of State dangerously veers. But no one will listen. No one appears to care; the navigators are viewed as impractical stargazers. And the sailors, impersonating a captain, have either forgotten or never truly experienced the notion and practice of good.

“And,” Peter concluded, “there’s a lamentable lack of heroes to match the job of fixing it all.”

Odysseus snorted dismissively.

As if counter to Odysseus’ arrogance and outmodedness, and to prove his point, Peter went on. “Then there’s hospitality. The boats seeking refuge. Unheard of discourteous behaviour by the hosts to the guests. Then the guests behaving poorly after they arrive. All the hallmarks of a tragedy,” he said, “but not one we could perform. Because reality TV has displaced us.”

“On what precise grounds did they sack you?” Bailey asked.

“For singing.”

“Singing?”

“The Director of Communications, in the Media and Marketing Office, ordered no more singing.” Peter faltered when he said this. “But I sang.”

At that, his eyes misted over, and, like a being in pain, he lifted his voice and, in stunning counter tenor tones, broke into a long, traditional melodious lament. He didn’t hold back.

Involuntarily, the crew collectively closed their eyes and listened to the tragedy of which the Chorus told, the song communicating nuances not possible in words. Of the coarsening of a life devoid of music. Of the debasement of a life lacking voice, lacking poetry, lacking ritual, lacking gods. Of the poverty of a life without spontaneity, curiosity, truth, generosity, kindness. A life without heart.

His craft was so beautiful and precise and so off-message that each of them squeezed back tears.

The Chorus of One finished. He waited until his last notes died in the cooling air and then smiled a sad smile.

“I’m supposed to be an integral and contributing part of the action.”

As she performed a last check to ensure that the anchor was holding, Bailey took Odysseus aside.

“Keep the tablet away from Scott. He’s probably on safe enough ground with that book by Evans, but History, his, it’s not all good. Recent accounts haven’t judged him so favourably.”

“A man’s courageous actions bring favour from the gods.”

“Not in his case.”

Bailey went below, got the tablet, and performed a search, saving pages so that Odysseus could read of Scott’s changing fortunes in the eyes of the world. There were

questions about his method and achievements; analysis of his character and his fitness for leadership—some thought him too aloof, self-absorbed, over-sentimental, inflexible, erratic with decision-making, and prone to favouritism. Nothing Odysseus wasn't, Bailey thought, as she handed it over, having explained what a bungler was.

“So, you see, it's somewhat delicate.”

“Failure, incompetence...slurs on his honour! So easy for the weak, never having to lift a sword, to slay a man's reputation. We'll seek revenge.”

“But is it possible they're truths?” Bailey asked.

“History is fickle,” the Chorus said, softly. He had arrived on deck, unheard.

“What do you say about this?” Odysseus motioned the tablet.

The Chorus shrugged, thinking back on memorable events of the distant past that, under the gaze of later history, deformed into shame or dishonour or disintegrated into almost nothing of repute, if not irrelevance.

“History's in the eye of the beholder.”

“But you voice the judgements of the polity,” Odysseus encouraged. “You're unassailable.”

“The polity changes its mind, its values, its understanding. I barely know, any more, for whom I speak, or should speak. Or even what it is, sometimes, of which I speak.” He paused. “In my role, I also express what the main characters cannot say, their hidden fears or secrets. And Odysseus, the brave Odysseus, is wondering, in this moment, that if heroism and the memorable events of the distant past are assailable, is he? Could Odysseus be described as a bungler? Was it unseasonal weather that prevented him from arriving home earlier? Or lack of planning and erratic, self-interested decisions that not only delayed him but also caused the loss of his men? These interpretations,” the Chorus motioned to the tablet, “come after death. Perhaps they less reflect the man than the

changing culture? Who knows? History evolves.”

“Then why speak at all?” asked Bailey.

“Tragedy demands that the sorrowful or terrible events encountered, or caused, by a heroic individual be told. Without remembering tragedy—history, *we*—wouldn’t evolve. It would be simply a terrible, painful, ever diminishing repetition.”

“So, they’re not questioning Scott?” Odysseus interrupted.

“They’re questioning heroism itself.” Bailey replied.

Odysseus spat dismissively into the water and went below.

“There are times in history conducive to heroes, Odysseus,” the Chorus called after him.

“You were lucky. This isn’t one of them.”

“And a good thing, too,” countered Bailey, also making below. “Archaic, irrelevant mess-makers.”

“Yes, but where does that leave us?” the Chorus asked the night sky.

The day’s sailing to their final anchorage, Snug Bay on the western end of Swan Island, progressed easefully. Tomorrow they would cross the treacherous Banks Strait and deliver Peter home. The southerly strengthened enough to drop the spinnaker yet still surf down the rolling, predictable waves at a brisk eight knots under the power of the main and genoa alone. Odysseus, now adept at taking selfies with the tablet, snapped the four of them standing at the *Argus*’ stern, the Tasman Sea sparkling behind them. Scott was on Bailey’s head, their arms around each other’s shoulders. They all looked happy.

It was after the photo that the Chorus went below and returned with, not a nautical chart but, a topographic map. On it, nineteen circles were marked, each representing one of the national parks. Since being sacked he had been collecting information, suspicious of government process. Was the government hand-in-glove with developers? For developments seemed to be occurring, allowed to commence without legislation fully

passed and full approvals in place. Had they been fast tracked? What he would do with his finding he was still not sure. But as the *Argus* neared the Mount William National Park, he would continue to document what he saw. He had not visited the Tasman National Park, he said, but reports advised nothing was amiss there. Driving north up the east coast, he had stopped in to Maria Island and noticed an extended pier had been built, presumably to berth larger ferries. The southern end of the Freycinet National Park boundary had revealed signage—miniscule— indicating an eco-hotel would be constructed at Wineglass Bay.

“We saw bulldozers at Wineglass.” Bailey recalled. “Remember, Odysseus? They came out of the scrub and were so loud you relocated us? An excuse, I now realise,” she added, “for you to get in the dinghy.”

“We’ve forgotten our place,” Peter opined.

“We’ll help,” offered Bailey. “Everyone will keep their eyes peeled as we voyage across the north coast. We’ll phone with updates.”

Odysseus rolled his eyes and the Chorus knew what he was thinking. That she was lacking; a lookout yes, but not a hero. Each of them, privately, pondering; Odysseus the task he must achieve, the Chorus about who, in this modern world, would replace the redundant likes of Odysseus. And each of them simultaneously, silently, offering up prayers for help.

They neared the Mount William Park and Peter spotted through the binoculars land clearing and evidence of what could well be foundation materials. He documented what he saw on his map, saddened. Yet, cheered by the offer of help, he placed the map down and stood up, facing the Park. He began to sing. He sang of the desecration of the earth, and of human arrogance, of promises made but unfulfilled, of potential unrealised. It was the second time Bailey had heard his voice and she excused herself on the pretext of washing up. Alone in the galley with the dishes, she was uncertain as to why it was she felt like

crying.

“It reminds me of the Aegean,” said Odysseus, relaxed and triumphant after a stirring read of *The Odyssey* and a culinary success, a tuna bake, constructed from a recipe prepared by him and overseen by Peter. He gazed at the turquoise waters of Snug Bay and the scrubby promontory hills, dominated by bald, grey, rocky outcrops.

“Yes,” said Scott. “I see what you mean. Perhaps Samos?”

“You’ve been there?” Odysseus was incredulous.

“I made a tour of the Mediterranean as torpedo officer aboard the HMS *Vulcan*. Depot ship. 1894 it was. It was aboard her that I first read that.” He nodded at *The Odyssey*.

“Oh yes, I remember the Heptanese well. Corfu, Paxos, Ithaca...”

“Ithaca? You have set foot upon my kingdom?”

“If I recall, no-one’s precisely sure where your Ithaca is.” Scott was abruptly reminded of the X on the chart. “There is one with that name but none of the descriptions in that,” he nodded towards the book again, “match. You could enlighten us?”

“There’s one in the US,” ventured Bailey. “New York State.”

“Well, we must go there, after here. I shall see it,” Odysseus replied. “And then I shall take you all to my kingdom, and then we must go to your home,” he said to Scott. “Where’s that?”

Scott didn’t answer. He was thinking of the X and the task ahead, of finding territory uncharted. The very notion of home, it seemed to him, after his death, and now his present decay, was a rather indeterminate thing.

Bailey felt embarrassed for Scott in his delayed reply. The dunking had left his eyesight affected, had it affected his mind, too? She rescued him,

“Weren’t you born in Devon?”

“Plymouth.” But Scott sounded hesitant.

“Well, we shall go,” Odysseus vowed.

“You would travel such a distance for me?” Scott asked, surprised.

“One does not truly know a man unless one knows his home.”

They all looked to the Chorus.

“The island. Cape Barren,” he motioned north, “is home. Of the native people,” he added for the benefit of Scott and Odysseus. “I desire, though, to see those places you spoke of, Scott. Can you believe, all these years of narrating, place names tripping off my tongue, yet I’ve never been.”

“Do you know Molly?” Bailey asked.

He nodded. “Aunty. Everyone calls her that.”

“She knew my grandfather.”

“Oh. I’ll take you,” said Peter, “to her place. When we land.”

Bailey went below and came back with the globe swinging from her hand.

“Us, now.” She pointed to the tiny southern island.

Scott watched Bailey’s finger trace a line across the Indian Ocean, round the Horn of Africa, up through the South Atlantic, past the Cape Verde islands, the Canaries, the Azores—*islands forever studding their imaginary future path—to arrive at Plymouth.*

“Home.”

How duplicitous maps could be, Scott thought, in encouraging the belief that one knew precisely where one was.

They sailed again, across the Channel, and Bailey’s finger of boat drew a line south until it ducked beneath the lee shore of Spain to enter the Mediterranean.

“And home again.” She tapped Greece.

“And you? Home?” prompted Odysseus of Bailey. He had no precise idea where they were; all he saw beneath Bailey’s finger was promise and adventure.

“Anywhere really,” she laughed.

She had no such mastery, the Chorus knew—to be truly at home anywhere—but thought better of publicly disputing her words. Odysseus, however, had no qualms about holding her to task.

“Yes, but to get home you must hold it close in your heart. Want more than anything else to reach there.”

Bailey stared at him impassively. He held out his hand for the globe, got Scott to help him locate the tiny southern island whose coast they tracked. He traced an anticlockwise route for Bailey, safely returning her to where they had set out.

“A single island only to encounter.”

Bailey, edgy at the definitive sound of a homecoming seemingly commandeered by Odysseus, and not one she intended, misinterpreted his tone.

“There are actually nine hundred and seventy-nine named islands and rocks that constitute the archipelago that is Tasmania,” she retorted. “Few know this.”

“His Majesty’s dominions, colonies, protectorates, mandates and territories, covers, I believe, about twelve million square miles,” said Scott, trumping her. “The Empire includes a fifth of the world’s population.”

As much to buy time while she considered how to remedy Scott’s time warp, Bailey took up the tablet and looked up Greece.

“I think that may have, er, changed somewhat,” she said gently. Then to Odysseus, “I’ve sailed those waters. Estimates between twelve hundred and six thousand, but most agree on fourteen hundred.”

Odysseus looked quizzical.

“Greece, it’s one country now. All the islands are ruled from Athens.”

“I win,” he shouted, triumphant.



“Does it always have to be a competition?” Bailey snapped.

“Yes,” said Odysseus. “Who are you if you’re not pitting your prowess?”

“But it must be honourable,” said Scott, recalling Amundsen’s secretive plan for a dash to the Pole. “No deceptions.”

That night, at the saloon table, Odysseus positioned the tablet and played them the YouTube clip. On a vast expanse of water, barges floated into place an ingenious series of interlocking gates that comprised a floating fence. Nearby, pylons were being sunk deep into selected shallow parts of the of the Timor Sea seabed. Around the sea fence site was an armada of border protection craft.

“I have a plan.”

Odysseus had earlier agreed to Scott’s overall plan but, at heart, he had thought it lacked reach and daring—no wonder the man had failed at the Pole, neglecting to see the crafty reach of his rival, and so capitulating. So, Odysseus hadn’t mentioned anything to Scott at the time. He announced it now. First, they must venture further north, to find and dismantle the sea fence. That accomplished, they would then retrace their route and continue to the X, but rather than deliver Bailey home they would then sail deeply south to look for the Ship of State. He had privately questioned the Chorus who had heard a rumour it was foundering in the Southern Ocean, having been leased to the Chinese Government for an undisclosed sum in order to transport minerals from Antarctica. These aims accomplished, only then would the crew deliver Bailey home, hopefully after she had proved herself along the way. By emulating him, of course.

Odysseus then outlined his fence plan. It was, in essence, a replication of the Trojan Horse strategy. The Chorus would stay with them, they would sail north, and Odysseus, Bailey and Scott would insert themselves within segments and be floated into place, right

in the heart of the construction.

“And then what?” Bailey asked in disbelief.

“We take them.”

“For a start those blocks won’t be hollow. They’re solid. Concrete. Like a footpath.”

Odysseus looked disbelieving.

“And then? We capture them, the hundreds of workforce? Is that what you’re proposing? With the Chorus at the wheel? He can barely even sail.” She turned on Scott. “Did you know of this?”

“Not a word. Neither was it in the Plan.”

“Ah, so at least now you’re honest. There’s a plan. I heard you on deck the other day. Heard everything.”

All night Odysseus argued, flattered, remonstrated, implored.

“I feel a stranger among men who are so uncertain,” he snapped, huffily suggesting they devise something better.

So it went until Bailey fell into her bunk exhausted. She awoke at dawn to find the boat underway.

## CHAPTER 6

The *Argus* had been plunged directly into Banks Straits and, pushed by a light southerly, was running north. The boat was not only crossing the hazardous tide-ridden strait, it was crossing on the wrong set of tides. And fast. At this rate, Bailey knew, if they didn't run aground on shoals or hit several looming reefs, they would end up in New Zealand.

“You idiot!”

“That's the attitude,” smiled Odysseus, at the wheel. “Stoke the fire of fury and the enemy will be routed.”

He was confident that, aided by Pallas should he call upon her, he could keep badgering and cajoling and rusing until such time as Bailey, and Scott, came around to the plan.

Whilst Bailey would prefer having nothing to do with Odysseus, she would not risk the *Argus*. The remedy for the boat's safety was to tack east, dodging shoals and reefs, all hands on deck. She put Odysseus where she could see him on genoa sheets, called the Chorus up as a bow watch, and placed Scott on the mast as lookout, though he seemed to call things late. Reluctantly she placed Odysseus on lookout, too.

“Sandbar! Sandbar!” Odysseus yelled, urgently. “Put us about. Now!”

Bailey debated whether to trust him.

“Now!”

She flung the helm over and the *Argus* responded. But at the last moment, just as they were about to fully assume the new tack, Bailey felt the sickening grab against the hull, and the boat pulled back, shuddering. She adjusted the main and prayed. The *Argus*

made as if to move forward but stopped again, dead in the water.

“Fuck.”

“The hand of Poseidon,” Odysseus said hoarsely. “Pallas Athene, be my guide.”

A terrible silence descended.

“Athene!” Odysseus lifted his prayer loudly to the mighty goddess. “You, who have never forsaken me.”

Nothing happened. Then the *Argus* shuddered. Just slightly. A gust hit. The hull slid a little sideways. She strained as if on her own accord, strained again, and suddenly, as if freed from a giant’s grip, leapt forward.

“Gods be praised,” the Chorus responded from the bow, face ashen.

“You believe in that stuff, too?” Bailey tried for cynicism, but her voice was shaky.

“Remember the conversation, everything speaks?”

They out-waited the tide, all eyes trained upon the sea’s surface. No one spoke except for when Bailey asked Odysseus to stay on bow watch, curtly thanked him for his prudent call and had him agree he was never to take unappointed command again.

The tide eventually turned, and the *Argus*, too, turned back west. As they approached the north-east corner of Cape Barren Island, off Puncheon Point, Odysseus walked back aft and whispered to Scott, pointing ahead. He went back to the bow. A few moments later, as though he had seen it himself, Scott hailed aloud from the mast,

“Sandbar!”

Then,

“Wreck! Wreck!”

Bailey knew both from sailing with her grandfather. Scott’s eyes were suspect in that he had not called the bar earlier, situated as, he was higher, than Odysseus. And Odysseus, after his quick sighting feat of earlier, had been generous in allowing Scott to make the

call. Odysseus was confounding, Bailey mused. One minute annoying, the next delightful. One moment useless, then suddenly indispensable.

The crew stared in silent horror at the remains of the *Farsund* high on the bar, the entire forty-two listing foot of her nakedly exposed. The iron barque was now a skeleton of rust. Waves swept through her broken stern, through which horizon and sky were visible. Centrally, half a mast remained, and her bare ribs were indecorously embraced by the easterly swell. Yet at her bow, defiant, or oblivious, was a figurehead—Carradog, a sea god, relative of a sea god, or saint, depending on who told the story.

Odysseus, as if to fortify himself against the wreck, requested Scott's company and placed him on his head.

"How did it happen?" he asked, returning to the cockpit.

He was so much easier to relate to when scared, Bailey thought. "March 1912," she began, recounting her grandfather's response to the very question she had once asked of him.

"Fifty-nine days out from Buenos Aires, I think it was. Bound for Sydney. A south-east gale. Ferocious. She went in on an even keel with just eleven feet of water. It's rock bottom beneath the sand. They tried to tow her off, but it didn't work. A tug was dispatched but arrived too late. Another southeaster, meanwhile, had driven her further on."

Bailey thought back to the Strait, how lucky they had just been.

Listening, Scott was lashed backwards by mention of the date. His mind ground to a halt at March 10, 1912—the beginning of the end; just nineteen days later his body had perished. Even now he had the same terrible, sinking feeling that the crew of the *Farsund* might have had when the ship struck. It had been a southeast gale for the *Farsund's* captain, he heard Bailey say, but for Scott it had been a nor-wester.

*Outside the depot at Mount Hooper, into which they had dragged themselves,*

*starving and frostbitten, an unusually bitter wind had howled terribly. They had been marching for some fifty days. Evans (Edgar, not Edward) had already died. Oates' toes were black; gangrene had set in. Inside there were limited stores of food and oil—something had prevented the dogs from getting through. He severely rationed the food, and the fuel; their food was only ever half cooked. Each man was getting frostbitten even though inside. The wind outside prevented them from moving on, even if they could have found the strength to put on their layers and crawl out to take up the burden of the laden sledges. He was the captain of a sinking ship. All of them, not just he, knew they were doomed. He ordered Wilson to open the medicine chest. He nodded and watched, trying not to let his face betray him, as Wilson handed each man thirty opium pills.*

Odysseus held up the tablet and snapped a photo of the wreck's figurehead as they passed, and Scott was jerked back to the present and to the ship, the mere ghost of something that had been practical and purposeful, a remnant of something once whole.

“Not sure *that* god was entirely useful,” Bailey taunted Odysseus.

“It was no one's fault,” Scott reassured them, unsure of whose past he described, the *Farsund* and its captain's, or his own. “Just bad weather and bad luck.”

“Debatable. You know what they say about bad luck...a series of small, poor decisions.” Bailey aimed that one at Odysseus, then remembered Scott. “Of course, you never know what it might have been like in the circumstances. But all the same...”

The *Argus* motored in to Cape Barren's jetty at high tide and a handful of curious islander children, all of whom knew Peter, swarmed down the gravel road from the front of the shop to greet them. Odysseus, Scott on his forehead, picked up a stout staff (half club, half walking stick) in one hand, and swung the shortest child onto his shoulders with the other. Bailey carried a pack of biscuits, as gift. At the last minute, she had slipped into her sailing vest pocket the photo of her and her grandfather, thinking it may help to jog Molly's

memory.

“I have the feeling we’re being watched,” remarked Scott as they walked inland on the dirt road. At the windows of sparse dwellings, curtains shifted.

“It’s always news when someone not local lands,” Peter smiled. “And they’ll know already that you’re visiting the matriarch.”

“How?” asked Scott. “We’ve spoken to no-one bar the littlies.”

“Bush telegraph. Though here the telegraph’s a tad different. Blackfella way.” Peter glanced across at Bailey. “The entire island—all ex poets, ex writers, soothsayers, seers. All sacked, not just lately but down the ages. Never employed for long; we’ve got a habit of not saying the right thing.” He smiled ruefully, then laughed at Bailey. “Here, we’re all that stuff that does *your* head in. You’re rooted, Bailey. Watch out!”

“So, who is this matriarch?” It was Scott again, planning ahead.

“One of the elders,” replied the Chorus. “*The* elder, really. What she doesn’t know isn’t worth knowing. She’s...”

The Chorus searched for the right word to describe the quiet dignity and presence that was most tangibly felt after, rather than during, a visit. How her power stayed on, affecting you. He knew that each of them would leave her, somehow set on a new and altered course.

“An oracle?” Odysseus asked hopefully, Poseidon’s hands fresh in his mind after the temporary grounding, and unease in his bones since seeing the wreck. He had a question to ask, the one that never changed. Would he arrive safely home? That question remained, and he felt compelled to ask it. But any answer seemed less clear after Tiresias’ prophecy, for he had arrived home but had been impelled to set out again. And all this time on, the seduction of adventure, the ceaseless pull for movement, had somewhat befuddled him. Despite his oration about home yesterday, to the others, something new always

beckoned.

“You decide.” Peter opened a gate to a plain house, clearly one of the best maintained on the island. The garden was tidy, the lawn decorated with an assortment of salvaged whale ribs, gnome statues and hunks of washed up hawser. Inside, the living room, with its brown vinyl couch, recliner rocker, lace doilies matching lace curtains, cyclamens in plastic green pots, macramé wall hanging and photos of the grandchildren, might have been a living room from any house in any suburb anywhere.

And the compact, bespectacled woman on the couch might have been any kind-hearted grandmother. But, where china dolls, tea cups ladening a china cabinet, souvenir spoons hanging in wooden boxes on walls, or a collection of ceramic frogs might clutter a place, here a vast, impressive collection of shells dominated the room. All were of a single variety. Paper-thin, delicate egg cases discarded by pelagic octopi.

The paper nautilus were larger than any Bailey had ever seen, and each seemed perfectly and miraculously intact. How such fragile, wafer-thin creations survived being washed up on wild beaches, making it to shore without crack or chip, always astounded her.

Odysseus, too, pointed at them with his staff, awestruck.

“Argonauts,” said Scott, then, conscious their attention had been with the Argonauts, Scott introduced himself, “Captain Scott of the Antarctic.”

The Chorus, a little overcome, and relieved, to be in her presence, recalled his, too.

“Aunty, I’d like you to meet Bailey, Scott and Odysseus. Odysseus, everyone, meet Aunty.”

Odysseus politely bowed, and the old woman smiled again.

“‘Unhappy the land that is in need of heroes.’ Bertold Brecht. Is that not the truth Prince Odysseus, Captain Scott? How unhealthy, how inconvenient, it is to be needed. Still one must take one’s turn. Must one not?” She eyed Bailey and smiled. “Do they still teach that nowadays? Sit down, sit down. Cup of tea?”



Bailey extended the biscuits.

“Thelma? Persephone?” she called out. “And you, Captain Scott?”

“No thank you, madam.”

“Thelma’s here?” Peter sounded nervous.

“Thelma! Persephone! They’ll be here soon.” And Aunty fell to small talk: the recent fires on the island, the weather, the ecology conference at which she had been asked to speak and at which there had been fervent discussion of the consequences for species threatened by the government’s decision to allow development, not just in National Parks but also extending into World Heritage areas.

“But you know all about that, dear,” she said to the Chorus. “I don’t know why half these people invite me to speak, but there you are. They’ve started building on Mount Strezlecki, next door.” She nodded in the direction of Flinders Island. “A twelve-storey eco-village right near the top...And I believe the same for the Kent group, though there it’s an eco-marina for cruise ships. Starting in the remote areas, less noticeable. You’ll see it if you go north. I think that’s your plan?” she smiled now at Odysseus. Then asked Bailey, “But which way are you headed?”

“North-west. We’re sailing north-west,” Bailey insisted firmly for Odysseus’ sake, yet shy to mention her grandfather and the mark on the chart. For what would she say?

“Is that so?” Aunty said, smiling again at Odysseus. “Rare that someone knows their course. The best laid plans, as they say...Well, then, look at Narawntapu as you pass. The plan there is an eco-hotel and eco-shopping mall.”

“These are really Argonauts?” Odysseus was transfixed by the shells yet perplexed at the name, thinking of Peleus, Herakles and Atlanta, and the other forty plus heroes who each worked an oar of the *Argo*. “What happened to them?”

Bailey, too, hoped to get Aunty talking about the nautilus. And then, perhaps her

grandfather? Yet that would lead to the matriarch surely asking after him, and then what would Bailey say? Shame rose in her, then anger for feeling it.

Suddenly, a woman appeared, half-floating, half-stumbling, into the room. Bailey's discomfort faded.

"Mm?" the newcomer mumbled.

"Tea, dear. For three. And of course, for you, should you wish to join us. My daughter, Persephone. Meet my visitors. Captain Scott of the Antarctic, Prince Odysseus and... I can't remember your name, dear, but I remember your grandfather, of course. And that storm. Such a fine man, a gentleman. Courageous. Now, if there was ever one who took their turn..."

Bailey shifted in her seat. How did Aunty know about her grandfather, that they were related? Her hand strayed to her vest pocket. Her grandfather's presence had been evoked by the woman's words. Bailey wanted to say his name aloud.

"Yes, I feel him, too." Aunty said, nodding to Bailey's hand. "That vessel limped in here, after the storm. All three bedraggled. He was kind to me, to us, after. Long before we became fashionable," here she laughed, "he continued to drop by on voyages, delivering things, things unasked for, helping. Said when he needed it, the sort of help that his own people would not know how to give, we gave it." The old woman moved on. "His friend. Can't recall his name... Ageing! It's the nouns that are going; things. The only ones I don't forget are my granddaughters. That photo," she said to Bailey (who was visibly confused about which photo she meant—the one in her pocket?), "hand it to me. No, the one of the graduation. Up there." She pointed at the bookcase. "Don't they look pretty?"

They were subjected, then, to photos and stories of the high-achieving grandchildren. Persephone disappeared and could be heard rattling around in a kitchen. She emerged with a tray, set it down and then collapsed onto the couch, leaving Bailey to pour

the tea.

“You,” Persephone said dreamily to Odysseus, “I feel like I’ve met you.

Somewhere dark...”

Her words were slightly slurred, her skin flushed, pupils tiny.

*Smack?* Bailey wondered.

“I would know if I had met someone as beautiful as you.”

Bailey glared at Odysseus, sensing the conversation, and occasion, might easily go awry.

“The paper nautilus,” Bailey suggested to Aunty, “can you tell us where you get them?”

“Oh, I’ve found them over the years.” She named an island beach. “We normally get one good wash up every year. And people find them, of course, and give them to me now.”

“That one,” Bailey pointed to one at least twenty centimetres wide, “It’s huge.”

“Yes,” the matriarch said politely, but watched with interest as Odysseus plied Persephone with compliments.

“She’s...” Aunty looked to Bailey and loosely floated her hand near her head.

Bailey nodded sympathetically.

“Touched?” Scott was diplomatic but uncomprehending, his comment inferring some sort of disability.

“Gifted with insight.” Odysseus, who had been listening as well as flirting, nodded knowingly. “Would you,” he said to Persephone earnestly, “give me a prophecy? It’s about...”

But he was interrupted.

“Prophecy, prophesy, prof-fess-or. Prof, prof, PROFIT! That’s what I want. Would you, profit me, Professor? Confessor Odysseus.” The voice perfectly mimicked the voice of

Odysseus himself. “Would you give ab-solution? Absolute, absolawtly.” The voice changed, “You can ablute me, but not abort me. No, just money will do, eh Aunty? Hello!”

The woman who had blitzed into the room pushed her way between Persephone, her distant cousin, and Odysseus, and placed her hand high on Odysseus’ thigh. She alternated between looking intently into his eyes and looking at everyone else.

And most of all at Peter, Bailey thought. Quick, fleeting glances. The size of her dilated pupils, together with a pale thinness, reminiscent of a paper nautilus gone wrong, and her speedy monologue, told Bailey, that she, too, was probably doing some sort of drug. A crack head? And how did she know Odysseus’ name?

“Thelma,” Persephone sighed, crossly.

“Crackhead.” Thelma said, as though it were, indeed, her surname, and she had directly answered Bailey’s thought. She uttered it as though it came from a parrot. “Thelma. Crack-er? “Crack-hor! Crack, crack, cracking up, are we, Persephone?” she cackled.

Did she just say crack whore? Bailey wondered.

“Yes!” muttered Persephone emphatically, then added dreamily, “St John received his word of God through a crack between two rocks in the ceiling of his cave. In Greece,” she added, for the benefit of Odysseus.

“Both,” said Aunty, and touched her head again, “gifted. But...” her voice trailed off, with a note of sadness.

“I hear the word of god through this crack.” The crack whore lifted a buttock off the couch and farted and Odysseus laughed and flirted more outrageously with her than he had been with Persephone.

“Boat,” Thelma surmised correctly. “Did you bring any gear?”

“Gear?” repeated Scott quizzically, and began to list the boat’s inventory.

Bailey interrupted with a cough.

“Drugs,” she whispered to him.

“Oh.” He looked confused but helpfully listed the contents of the first aid kit, including the wilderness first-aid oral morphine.

“No, no,” cautioned Bailey, cutting in. “Been on the island long?”

“She left her lovely caravan in Beauty Point,” said Aunty.

“Because,” Thelma fluttered her lashes at Odysseus, “I am a beauty.”

She looked about, and addressed the Chorus for the first time, as if just seeing him.

“Well! Hello, Peter.”

“Hello, Thelma.” The Chorus said it shyly.

“A prophecy?” reminded Scott loudly, still not sure exactly what was going on but intuiting some form of impending disaster. “And then we shall be off.”

Odysseus remembered the rule. Be specific. Be careful in what you ask, for they answer the precise question posed.

“And what will you give me?” asked Thelma.

“My staff,” ventured Odysseus.

“Which one?” Thelma eyed the stick in his hand, then stared at his crotch.

Odysseus undecidedly held up the stick. She shook her head.

“Not enough. Besides, it’s from here anyway, so therefore it’s kind of mine.”

“Yours? Is that so?” Aunty queried gently. “It was once, when your connection to it all, to the land, was strong. But you somewhat lost the right to claim it when... Well, frankly, when you got lost. You must earn it back, but only if you choose, my dear.”

“Besides, the staff will be needed,” interrupted Persephone, “for the underworld.”

“Well, the shop as far as I can tell,” added Thelma, a tad subdued now.

“Exactly,” said Persephone.

“Show me a hero,” sighed Thelma, as if making an effort, “and I’ll write you...”

She trailed off then, as if effort bored her. Or as if effort itself were meaningless.

“‘A tragedy.’” Aunty and the Chorus finished the quotation in quiet unison.

“Sorry,” Peter said to her, deferentially.

“Not at all. It’s good to see someone remembering.” She looked wistfully to the two women on the couch. “Honour us with the full...”

“‘Show me a hero and I’ll write you a tragedy.’ F Scott Fitzgerald.”

“I wish you would, dears, show them,” Aunty said to Persephone and Thelma. “Get yourself back to performing, to writing?”

Aunty smiled encouragingly at the Chorus.

“You could assist, perhaps? Now you have no job? Yes, I heard. There are things that I... What I know just doesn’t translate to this changing world. Someone else must do it. Someone new, someone younger...” her voice trailed off. “Enough of my lecturing. Now, you come with a question, don’t you?” But it was unclear to which of the visiting party she addressed it. “But first, back to the staff.”

She beckoned for Odysseus’s staff, looked at it carefully, running her hands up and down it as though she knew every object on the island and was, indeed, ascertaining its provenance, and perhaps assessing the suitability of the new owner-guardian. Aunty closed her eyes and held the staff tightly for a few moments—as though investing it with something. She opened them again. A single tear ran down her face. She brushed it off and smiled.

“You are welcome to it, Mr Odysseus. These can be useful. I know, my knees are not what they once were!” She gave a laugh. “May it aid you and all you contact.”

Bailey had the strongest urge to find out more about what Aunty knew of her grandfather—his visits here, the storm she mentioned, the help he needed. She glanced meaningfully at Scott, took him from Odysseus and asked Aunty if she would show her the

garden. They would leave Odysseus to his prophecy.

But Persephone spoke forcefully. “Stay. You are indivisible. The prophecy covers you all.”

“The three musketeers,” mocked Thelma. “Someone with great power is looking over you, a woman. Which is fortunate, because left to your own devices...”

“Four, we are four,” said Odysseus, but they ignored him.

“Each of you will make a mistake,” Persephone took up the thread, “an error with unintended consequences. A companion will join you and a companion will be lost to you.”

She closed her eyes and sighed.

“Will we get home,” Odysseus asked nervously, “unharmedly?”

“Why do you ask?” retorted Thelma. “Prophecies never fail and yours has already been told. You’re not very trusting, are you! That your old nemesis won’t...” She cackled and raked her hands, like claws. “Rah! Po-seid-on! Side on, baby. I’ll take it any way you like if you’ve got the stash, or cash”

“No one in the history of voyaging, of journeying, gets home unharmed,” Persephone continued wearily. “And not without giving something up. Now,” she said, holding out her hand, “what will you give *me*?”

The crew looked at each other, and then all eyes looked to their skipper. Bailey glanced at the biscuits on the plate. The only thing she had on her was the photo. Persephone eyed her and nodded. Bailey put her hand in her pocket and touched it. She was not prepared to give it up.

“I want the mask in that case.” Persephone held out her hand.

Odysseus and Bailey shook their heads.

“Well then, what?” There was a growing edge to her voice, the quiet menace of one coming down.

Bailey thought fast, then leaned in and whispered in Persephone's ear.

"How about Odysseus? He seems to like you."

Persephone repeated her words slowly,

"Each of you will make a mistake, an error with unintended consequences. The mask, thanks."

Bailey looked at Scott, then reached into her pocket and took out the photo. But it was Thelma who snatched it just as the front door opened and the three grandchildren from the photo—tall, tanned, attractive, polite and conversational—tumbled in. Aunty looked at Thelma.

"You could give it back. It's rightfully hers."

For a moment Bailey felt hopeful but Thelma, having looked intently at the photo, with poor grace handed it to Persephone. She stood up.

"Good," said Aunty.

"I didn't get nothin'," Thelma grumbled as she left.

"Bye, Thelma," chirped one of the children, brightly.

Persephone handed the photo to the one who had spoken.

"Do something useful with it."

"You could, you know," said Aunty encouragingly.

"Yes..." said Persephone dreamily, leaving the room.

"Hello dears." Aunty beamed at the kids.

"We should go." Bailey felt cheated and angry—the photo, the lack of information.

"Wait."

Aunty motioned for the children to go and recall Thelma, firmly suggested Odysseus and Scott go and visit the local shop, instructed Bailey and Peter to stay and then left the room.



She returned holding a drinks coaster adorned with a picture of two full and foaming beer glasses, and two paper nautilus shells. She beckoned Bailey over.

“Prince Odysseus had his travails after Troy. Captain Scott had his South. What is it these days that one encounters, against which one must battle?”

She silently thought of the face of her daughter, Persephone, worn prematurely old and telling the tale of a modern hardship, in which the tempests arose from the inside. She could have said to Bailey, *what will scour and abrade every last hope and dream? What will reduce you to nothing in the most uncomfortable and terrible but ultimately best of ways?* Instead she said, “I can see you are being asked to take your turn. What would your grandfather say to that?” She shook her head, shaking away a reminiscence. “Would he, will he, be proud of you? But that matters less. The question is, will you be proud of yourself?” She placed into each of Bailey’s hands a nautilus shell, one larger, one smaller.

“Delicate yet surprisingly strong. You have given much to keep your friend.”

The smaller shell was intact, but she drew attention to the larger argonaut, to a hole, like a puncture wound, in its side.

“Like me, some would say. A little cracked, too.” She touched her head and laughed, “Like all of us, yes? Not quite perfect.”

She rummaged around, then, for a pen. “I’d like a word with Peter.” And Bailey was dismissed.

“My grandfather,” Bailey began.

“Tell me, how is your leg?”

“Um, fine...” Bailey was floored by the randomness, the oddness, of the question.

At that moment the grandchildren returned.

“Nan, Nan, we couldn’t find her.”

“Look for her at the shop. And take this one back with you.” Aunty waved her

hand dismissively.

When the door closed, Aunty looked intently at Peter then sketched on the coaster what appeared to be a heart but turned out to be the heart-shaped island with its three approximately equal coasts. East—gentler but far from safe. North—fronting onto the perilous Strait. West—rugged and blasted by the roaring forties.

“You said it yourself, I believe—a lamentable lack of heroes. Odysseus, and his spiral of endless wandering, entranced by his own hubris. Scott and his ghosts, real and imagined. Bailey seemingly so future focused but trapped, grieving, in that past. Persephone barely with us. Thelma wasting her gifts. Not one among them who can unflinchingly look their present in the eye and so see past everything that is not real.” She sighed, then laughed. “Right. The voyage.” She wrote the word ‘*Heroism*’ up the east coast and then looked at it, contemplating. “Yes, but it was all theory at the early stage. It must be fuelled by pity as much as power. So,” she gently crossed ‘*heroism*’ out with a single decisive line, “I would use the word ‘*bonds*’, perhaps. Or knots. Knots of friendship, of personality; some tightened, some loosened. And not always in the right direction. Bonds that must necessarily be tested, and some broken.” She smiled at Peter, “Remember the Gordian?

“Now, across here...” She penned the word ‘*Failure*’ across the north coast. “And the journey down here...” The word ‘*Love*’ spread along the west coast. “For what is heroism,” she smiled, “but the equal embrace of both?”

“And, if they manage that,” she spoke now as if to herself, drawing a dotted line around the short reach of south coast, back to where she had started, “then, and only then, will they truly arrive home.”

She handed the map across. “You, out of everyone, know Tragedy is good at naming feelings. And lord knows they are so in their heads they have forgotten how, and

so are overrun. There, that should keep you occupied.

“Now, about Thelma... Earlier, when I foresaw the boat coming, I charged her with a story, the one that Bailey must hear. It’s part of your job, Peter, to ensure she tells it.”

“But Thelma has her own mind,” he stammered. “You know that.”

“Yes, increasingly uncontrolled. Look where that takes her. This homecoming,” Aunty pointed at the map “depends on it, that story. So, too, does Thelma, though she doesn’t know it. The same goes for all of you. Persephone, too, will be helped by it. A little more truth in the world. We all will.”

“And, my dear, don’t forget,” she called, as he walked down the path, “you’re the Chorus. You’re supposed to be a contributing part of the action.”

In the plain little shop that supplied the island’s basic needs a few locals gossiped or browsed the scantily stocked shelves. They stared at Odysseus, Bailey and Scott. No-one said anything.

“Is Thelma here?” asked a grandchild, of the taciturn man behind the counter.

“Been and gone.”

Suddenly, the earlier swarm of children flocked in and Odysseus, Scott on his forehead, was engaged with buying them sweets. He was standing at the front counter, deliberating over the selection of lollies strategically kept under glass, when a man walked in carrying a shotgun.

Bailey thought it an odd shopping accompaniment.

Odysseus eyed the weapon. He caught the man’s eye, who looked at him briefly before peering up and down the aisles.

“Roger,” the gun toter called out. “Roger?”

A tall, thin man emerged from the bread section.

“Who wants to know?”

“I do, ya bastard.”

A mere moment before the shotgun trigger was pulled, Odysseus wheeled the staff through the air. His blow cracked the shooter’s head and the subsequent effect caused a redirection of the shotgun spray. While a portion did rain into the tall, thin man’s right arm, the majority sprayed the chip stand, one of the few full displays in the establishment. Bags popped, and potato slices spilled.

“Ah! Ah! He got me, he got me! The dirty bastard got me.”

Roger lay in a pool of blood that spread across the linoleum and ran under shelving.

Odysseus, having kicked away the shotgun, stood with his foot on the chest of the shooter.

If the victim was speaking, Bailey knew, he couldn’t be too bad. There were no police here but there was a local nurse. But instead of calling her, the shopkeeper casually picked up the gun.

“So fast, Odysseus!” Scott said admiringly.

“Well done,” enthused Bailey.

“You stupid bastard,” muttered the shopkeeper to Odysseus.

“Yes,” Bailey agreed, looking at the shooter on the floor.

“No, not him. Him!” The shopkeeper pointed at Odysseus. “Well done?” The shopkeeper was yelling now, louder than the injured man, “Well done?”

Odysseus was impassive.

“You should thank him,” said Bailey. “That man could have been fatally shot.”

“Exactly. And the whole island would have thanked *him*,” said the shopkeeper pointing down at the man pinned beneath Odysseus’ foot, “if *he*,” pointing at the bleeding Roger amidst the chip carnage, “*had* been shot. Best thing that could have happened. He’s a fuckin’ prick. Been trouble from day one.”

The swarm of children giggled.

“Callin’ me a prick?” Roger moaned from the floor, “You fucking...”

“An air ambulance?” Bailey looked at the shopkeeper, who reluctantly rang for the local nurse.

The nurse arrived as did the Chorus.

“Might be best,” whispered the nurse, “if you make a quick exit. Shop, and island. All hell will break loose. You kids,” her voice became authoritative, “out!”

The children protested.

“Now!”

“Yes,” Peter concurred. “It’ll get interesting.”

Once outside, voices inside escalated.

“You’re a hero.” The same small girl tugged at Odysseus’ hand, asking to be shouldered again.

“Not now,” said the Chorus, shooing her off. “Run! No not you. Us!”

He urged the crew to dash to the boat, children cheering around them, a bevy of locals pouring to the shop, and some toward the jetty.

“Friends of yours, Peter?” Bailey heard someone shout menacingly.

The three tumbled aboard. Peter stayed on the jetty unloosening lines.

“Are you safe?” Bailey asked.

He shrugged.

“Get yourself aboard if you like,” she offered.

Peter looked at the boat and thought about seasickness. He looked at the mob approaching down the jetty road.

“Throw the lines over! Quick!” Bailey commanded. At the third line thud, she swung the wheel.

For a time, Bailey nervously looked between the shallow shoals ahead and back over her shoulder at a crowd of vocal islanders congregating on the jetty. Finally, the *Argus* safe in deeper water, she grinned at the Chorus in the cockpit.

“Nice work with the lines. And that deck leap!”

Behind them, the island grew smaller. Odysseus hung Scott on the vang and went below.

“Such reflexes!” With the melee left behind, Bailey felt emboldened to dissect the drama for the Chorus. “I must tell Odysseus,” she said to Peter and to Scott, “even though a part of me hates to say it, how impressed I was.”

“Odysseus,” Scott called, anxious for amity.

But he did not appear. Half an hour passed. Bailey went below to use the head and heard his voice, quiet, as though reassuring himself, coming from the bow where the sails and anchors were stored. The contents of the first aid kit were spread across the chart table. Had he, unknown to them in the midst of the fray and then the chaos of the hasty getaway, been injured during the altercation at the shop?

“Odysseus,” she called, worried.

His voice stopped.

“It’s ok. Let me help...”

A terrible sight awaited her. Two figures were hunched in the v-locker. Odysseus, and beside him, pupils like needle points, empty morphine bottle in her lap, the crack whore.

## CHAPTER 7

It was not unlike how Homer recounted him, Bailey thought, watching Odysseus regale Thelma with tales. The books of *The Odyssey* revealed how, each time its hero beached upon foreign shores, someone asked him a question—tonight it was Queen Arete of Scheria, *didn't you say you reached us roving on the sea?*—and, having pleaded bashfulness or tiredness or modesty, he launched out yet again, but upon the sea of story. And upon that ocean of words, he was an indisputable captain. There, Poseidon could neither reach nor match him. Time without fail, though the journey was long and winding, he brought every listener in those great halls back, not to the same shore on which they had commenced the listening, but to some new and intriguing landscape where before they had never ventured. Despite the recounting winding long into the night, such that the fires burned low and the stars outside wheeled, Odysseus did not cease until the heart of every person was captured, and, usually, some great craftiness set loose to his advantage.

Odysseus interrupted Scott incessantly as he read.

“That’s me,” he said to Thelma, draped nearby.

“And that’s me again.”

Then, instead of listening to Bailey read from Evans, the pair retired to the aft cabin from which they had ousted the Chorus. And Bailey, Scott and Peter had to cease the Evans reading early, on account of the laughter and heavy breathing, disturbances which continued, punctuating the night’s sleep.

“She’s off, the minute we sight Beauty Point,” said Scott over breakfast.

“They both are,” Bailey retorted loudly enough for the aft cabin to hear. And who

was Scott to be making crew choices, anyway? They had agreed, after the dunking, that she remain skipper and he be Expedition Leader.

“It only takes a single black sheep to lend colour to the flock,” Scott muttered, indignant not only at what he considered to be the night’s improprieties, and lack of sleep, but also Odysseus’ unwillingness, in skipping the reading, to bear witness to anyone else’s heroics but his own.

“He’s disgracing the ship. As Expedition leader, I’m going to have it out with him.” Besides, Scott had begun to wonder about Odysseus’ stories. Each concluded with him painted in a rosy light, yet on so many occasions he left a trail of mayhem. The readings revealed how his men had perished: eating the cattle of the sun; with the Cyclops; with Circe. Certainly, his men invariably disobeyed his instruction. But why was that? Surely, ultimate responsibility lay with the leader...? Out in the Strait, was Odysseus really the wisest choice of crew?

“I’m of a mind to discharge him but unfortunately the Expedition, the original agreed version of crew,” he stressed, “depends on him, and his cooperation, as it does on each one of us.” For worryingly, Scott’s world was closing in and he was unwilling to reveal the extent of it. Across the galley, the kettle was a mere blur. He had missed the shoal back in the Banks Strait. Who knew what would be asked of Bailey, and so of the entire crew, out there in Bass Strait? Not only was he a weak link, if Scott revealed his impairment, it would further delay the voyage.

“She was right, you know,” Scott mused, thinking back to Persephone, “for all her peculiarities. *We are* indivisible.”

As though echoing his thoughts, a unified moan emanated from the aft quarters.

Scott sighed. “We are, as they say, stuck with him.”

Bailey acquiesced to Scott’s leadership. “Yes, but not her. I don’t care where she



wants to go, the minute we sight that Point she can swim to shore.” Yet a thought nagged at Bailey. When speaking of her grandfather, Aunty had said she remembered a storm; might Thelma know something of it?

“Now, on that very point...” Scott coughed in anticipation of Bailey’s likely response to the chart vandalism. “Her caravan is there.” He nodded in the direction of the current chart. Thelma, in red texta, had indelibly marked the location with an X but then, as if changing her mind, had crossed it out.

Bailey drove the *Argus* hard. Southwest to Waterhouse Island, onward to Ninth Island and then past Tenth, summoning Five Mile Bluff in her mind, willing for them to be there. And encouraging boat speed meant Odysseus being on deck to assist in sail work, which, in turn, meant the company of the crack whore—Bailey could think of her as nothing else now. (After all, was it not a title she had seemingly used to describe herself?)

“In a hurry, are you?” Thelma asked Bailey and laughed. “Won’t make no difference, you know.”

When they passed the shores of Narawntapu National Park, the binoculars revealed, just as Aunty had suggested, a litter of utes, trucks and concrete mixers. *Eco hotel and eco shopping mall?*—the Chorus crossed out the question mark he had written on his map after Aunty’s recount. He gazed through the binoculars for an age, making more notes, then called for Thelma to look, too. It was she, with sharp eyes and an uncanny ability to see or know things, who detected, back in the hinterland, a road being built, and large areas pegged out, pink surveying tapes of intention barely visible even with the glasses.

After lunch, Thelma arrived on deck with the smaller of Bailey’s nautilus shells. She held up the shell to the sun, and, as if it were an aerial she was tuning in, shifted it in various directions. Seemingly satisfied, she placed the shell on the angled housing and looked at it closely.

“Other octopuses live on the sea floor, avoiding all the turbulence. But not these sailors. For them, it’s the ocean’s surface Mayhem, storms... Skate right across the top of it.” She sounded envious.

“Careful. It might get blown over.”

“Just going home then,” Thelma laughed. “Surface or depth? Your choice.”

Bailey felt it as a question, and thought of the question she wanted to ask, but Thelma rushed on.

“Anyway, you’ve got two. Aunty never gave me one. Just a task. I hate being responsible. Fuck tradition!” She picked the shell up and there was an edge in her voice that made Bailey think she might crush it. “So fragile. All alone,” she looked at Bailey, “out there. You’d know all about that.”

“Back on the island...My grandfather...Aunty mentioned a storm. Do you know anything about it?”

“Funny you should mention that. Bailer,” said Thelma, and promptly went below.

The Chorus followed her down.

“Look, I don’t want to ask, but I need help.”

“Don’t we all.”

“I mean it. Aunty said you’ve got a story...”

Thelma laughed. “You’re the coryphaeus, Peter. You’re the sanest, most able person I know; you don’t need help. And that’s the problem, we all look hopeless in comparison. Besides, no coincidence you turned up on the island; Aunty would have given it to you—help. What’re you doing here anyway? Shouldn’t you be in the big smoke, commenting on the fucked state of the nation?”

“Didn’t you hear? I was sacked.”

“Only a matter of time.”

He told her the story of Media and Marketing. About no more singing. Then showed her the coaster. “I’ve got no real idea what to do. Aunty said, though, that you’d tell Bailey a story.”

“Aunty, she doesn’t give up, does she? Still believes in the old shit. Look where storytelling got me!”

“Why aren’t you writing, anymore?” Peter asked gently. We miss...everyone misses you.”

“Same reason as you. Same reason Persephone isn’t treading the boards. No-one wants to listen to truth, whatever that is now. Friggin’ waste of time.”

“So snorting or smoking or whatever it is you’re doing, isn’t?”

She said nothing.

“Bailey wants to.”

Thelma snorted. “She’s running, Peter. Her flight happens to look romantic rather than tragic and sweaty just because she’s on a yacht.”

He switched tack. “How’s Persephone? Really...”

“You saw her,” Thelma bit her lip. “I think that prophecy, the bit about a companion being lost and the underworld, was as much for me and her as it was for this lot.”

“Such a waste,” Peter shook his head, recalling Persephone on stage. “She was amazing. Is.”

Thelma bit her lip, again. Peter had the sense she might have cried if she’d allow herself. “She overdosed, right after you left. The nurse pulled her back, just. Like I fucking wanted to be involved in this little adventure. I’ve done my bit. I took my turn if you call writing,” she looked at him, “contributing. F’ing useless. Who wants to hear truth? Especially not from a blackfella.” She pointed at the mark she had left on the chart. “I thought about it, I

was going to tell the story. That's why I'm here. But then, nah. Bailey will figure it out herself, at some stage. Or not. It's none of my business. I should pack."

"Me, actually. I want the truth. Always did. About us."

Thelma flinched.

Peter turned for the companionway stairs. "And apparently, even though she's got no idea what she's doing, Bailey does too because it's no coincidence we all ended up here, Thelma. Aboard. You, too. Turns out you're needed, whether you like it or not." He thought about Aunty's words. "This little adventure, all of them, need you." He sighed, resigned, "As do I."

The *Argus* sailed into the mouth of the Tamar, dropped sail and motored towards a narrow point. On it, an old Falcon station wagon, rusted, dented and missing parts, was hooked up to an unreliable looking trailer, upon which was a dented, faded caravan. A tarpaulin, ineffectively tied down, flapped wildly over the van roof.

Never had the sight of that Head looked so sweet to Bailey.

"Home sweet home," said Thelma, appearing with a single bag. "Coming anyone?" she looked at Odysseus then at Peter.

Odysseus looked at the compilation on the Point and at Thelma longingly.

*Go*, Bailey willed to them both.

*Go*, Scott coughed in Thelma's direction.

The Chorus said nothing, just watched as Thelma slipped into a charade he knew well, an act that kept her from herself.

"Never mind, darlin'." To whom Thelma said it was unclear. "It moves. Might find its way up the coast." She winked. "Might be I've got business in the burgeoning commerce capitals; Stanley, Marrawah, Strahan. And speaking of business..." She nodded at Odysseus.

“Yes. Can we give her money?” Odysseus asked Bailey.

“I’ve earned it,” Thelma rolled her eyes and laughed at Odysseus, then stared at Bailey. “More than you can imagine.”

“It will only go up her nose.”

Odysseus looked uncertain.

“Actually, I save it. Up here. Only spend it on good causes.” Thelma lifted her skirt.

Odysseus laughed.

“Go on.” It was unclear who he was urging, Bailey to generosity or Thelma to action.

“Good God,” uttered Scott.

“You might not see me again?”

“Promise? Odysseus, get the dinghy ready.”

“Cross my legs. Hope to die.”

Bailey went below to get cash, seeing again the marred chart as she passed.

“By the way,” Bailey said, holding the money out but not giving it, “a chart can mean the difference between life and death, you know.”

“Precisely,” retorted the crack whore.

“Well, it would be helpful if you didn’t deface it.”

“I’m doing you a favour, Bailer.”

“By going?”

“More than you know. Gratitude!” said Thelma, taking the money. “Whatever happened to gratitude?”

“Take Scott. And him.” Bailey instructed Odysseus, indicating the Chorus (who looked reluctant or sad, Bailey couldn’t tell and didn’t care), so ensuring a return without endless delay. She was sick of the lot of them, wanted a moment of peace. She watched them

row in, Thelma with oar in hand (she rowed well) beside Odysseus (who rowed well, too).  
The Chorus sat wanly in the bow.

Bailey made tea, again savouring the return to a type of peace. She looked to the space where the photo of her grandfather had been. The pair of paper nautilus, blu-tacked down, had replaced it. It entered her head, then, to sail off without the others. She imagined it, the peaceful solo journey. But in the void that was their imagined absence, her thoughts began to wander; forward and back, the future, the past. They focused on loss, and she recalled her second return to the cottage, for the funeral of the captain's best friend, Mr Toxley.

*Mrs. Bucher had emailed on his behalf. The death and funeral notices were attached.*

*I thought you would want to know, she wrote. And just in case you might think to attend. He needs you, she had added.*

*No, he doesn't, Bailey had thought.*

*When she had arrived, it was not the cottage or the harbour that was smaller, but her grandfather. He still stood ramrod straight, still had a powerful presence but there was less flesh on him and his full head of hair had thinned.*

*"I'm sorry about your friend." She hugged him, and he held her fractionally longer than he might usually.*

*"It's to be expected. I'm glad you're here."*

*Something tightly held loosened in her.*

*At the graveside, he inclined his head riverward. "The sea takes and gives in equal measure. Don't let them put me in here. Out there."*

*When they returned to the cottage, he looked around, as if for the first time, and said, "Home." And asked her, the first time he had ever done so, if she would mind turning on his electric blanket.*

*She stood beside the neatly made bed and looked at the space where he slept, then at the absent space where his wife used to lie. Bailey picked up the photo of her grandmother from his dressing table. She was a beautiful woman and Bailey acutely appreciated how her grandfather could not have helped falling for her. She replaced the frame, feeling like an intruder. Next to it was the photo of her parents. The young couple aboard the Atlanta could be any couple. All her life Bailey had wondered what exactly it was she was supposed to feel when she looked at the youthful faces, the tanned limbs; what it was that other people felt when they looked at the flesh from which they had originated. She did not remember coming from them, did not remember losing them. How or why the sea chose was no longer a question that stuck in her gut, but she recalled her grandfather's dictum about the sea taking and giving in equal measure. Bailey had never believed it.*

*She looked again at that space in the bed and what dawned on her, in a way it had never done before, was how lonely he must have been. How the presence of a child would never fill that particular gap.*

*He had not made a cup of tea but had turned the heater on and was sitting in his chair by the fireplace. He rarely lit the fire now, the effort too much.*

*"Special occasion." She set and lit it.*

*He rubbed his hands. "A whisky? You'll join me?"*

*"I'll get the bottle."*

*"To Eric."*

*Lifting his glass, he looked at Bailey, as though he was remembering a lifetime of things. Bailey didn't ask questions of his time at sea, though she would have liked to. Rather she listened to stories of his life with his friend. Eventually the stories petered out and they sat in silence. Bailey eventually stood.*

*He indicated the flames.*

*“I’ll sit up and enjoy this.”*

*“Do you miss her?”*

*“Every day.”*

*“I’m sorry.”*

*“I am too.”*

*Bailey sat back down.*

*He didn’t say anything, just looked at the flames.*

*“For what you lost. All of it.” She did not say, what you had to do. They had always been the unspoken burden of the other. “And today.”*

*He looked at her. She could not know that he rarely saw her outline without being reminded of the shape her body had once assumed. His reference points, in a life that had become routine, remained the unusual: storms, wrecks...*

*“Yes. But what I gained, too.” He smiled at her. “What came after.”*

Bailey finished her tea and went to the chart table to write up the log. What descriptors could possibly record the day they had just had? She favoured brevity so as to prevent herself from revisiting the detail of it.

*Stowaway. Deposited safely at Beauty Point.*

She took out the charts for the remainder of their journey westward. She unrolled her grandfather’s chart. Shards of something fell out and Bailey felt a surge of anger. The smaller paper nautilus lay in pieces. And next to the carefully pencil-marked X of her grandfather, Thelma, again in a messy, or strung out, hand had written. *⌘ ex marks the spot.*

What looked like a reversed S was clearly crossed through. Why had she written it, if not to bawdily suggest or mock?



When Bailey emerged on deck, having heard the others returning, the caravan, thankfully, was gone. The *Argus* retraced its route up the Tamar. Odysseus—whether for missing his companion or having acquiesced to Scott’s insistence that the original plan would hold—was as flat and quiet as the river waters over which the *Argus* moved towards the open sea.

“Remember what Persephone said,” recounted Scott to Odysseus, “that a companion would be lost to us?” He looked at the stars as he spoke. He had engineered it so that it was just the two of them on deck, prompted by his growing sense that, as commander, he and Odysseus, as crew, must frankly talk—about what had occurred with Thelma. But unease, along with the stars and his irascible comrade, was also his companion. He and Odysseus had all along championed Bailey’s entry into the un-journeyed world, yet there was his own inability to return from a place not marked on any map and the fact that Odysseus’ men had all perished. Perhaps it was more prudent that Bailey should go to the Strait alone? Scott ploughed on, quoting Persephone,

*“Each of you will make a mistake,” she said, “an error with unintended consequences. A companion will join you and a companion will be lost to you.”* What might possibly be our error on this journey, Odysseus? With Bailey? Can you foresee it?”

“Error?” Odysseus sounded blank. “She will go to meet her fate. There is no greater purpose.”

“Do you ever feel unease about the past?” Scott asked, carefully manoeuvring the conversation.

“The past exists to gloriously recount.”

Scott recalled how Odysseus, back at Swan Island, commented that he had felt a stranger amongst men so uncertain. Yet it was Odysseus’ blanket certainty that was unnerving Scott. “But what if it’s not glorious?”

“You make it so.”

Odysseus was tiring of Scott’s inward focus, his unpredictable questions. He looked at the black ocean beyond the rail. Tonight, it appeared benevolent but belied, he knew, the fearsome waters that were the Strait; the perfect place for the sea god to revel. The intersection of currents between the Indian and Pacific oceans was unpredictable, the southern trade winds howled through, the Strait’s limited depth made its waves steep, and, hiding throughout, Poseidon-like, were reefs and semi-submerged rocks.

Odysseus recalled Calypso’s raft building instructions as she prepared to release him. Would that he could be released from Scott’s questions! *Cut your lengthy timbers, make them into a broad-beamed raft...so you can reach your native country all unharmed, if only the gods are willing. They rule the vaulting skies. They’re stronger than I to plan and drive things home.*

Home. With the passage of so much time, where was that now, he wondered? Tennyson’s eternal silence loomed but was redeemed...*every hour is saved from that eternal silence, something more, a bringer of new things...This grey spirit yearning in desire to follow knowledge like a sinking star, beyond the utmost bounds of human thought.*

The journey was endlessly on and out, not back. As his new friend understood, how dull it was to pause, to make an end! One grew easily bored. *Come my friends, tis not too late to seek a newer world. Push off...Scott should look forward!*

“Was there not one thing about which you wonder if, indeed, you made the right decision? Took the correct course of action?”

“No.”

“Something you did that haunts you?”

Odysseus was uncomfortable. Why was Scott insisting on this line of questioning? What was his motive, his strategy, in trying to make Odysseus revisit the past, or frailty?

Perhaps it was about Phemius? But that story had been told. A new day had dawned. Scott must journey on in the same manner. Or was this about Odysseus leaving Scott at the tavern? Odysseus did not have a plan because he did not quite know what was going on. So, he did what he always did, sidestepped with story,

“A life is not circumscribed in a plan made by men,” Odysseus began. “As a youth, I visited my grandfather Autolycus on Mount Parnassus, in the great olive groves that were the thriving estate of my mother’s line. It was he who had named me. Odysseus, he told my parents, the Son of Pain. Call him this, for he will earn it in full.

“He and his sons stood in line to greet me. I tried to stand taller, find the deep part of my voice that came and went like an unpredictable tide. And my grandmother, Amphithea, when the greetings had been extended and the feasting begun, hugged me first then cradled my chin in her two warm hands and whispered as she smiled,

“‘Don’t be afraid of any of them. Underneath their shouting and cursing, they are just like you.’

“The hunt the next day was in dense forest. Anxious to prove myself, my limbs propelled with fear and senseless bravado, I darted, unthinking and blind, between the trees, charging ahead of the others, my spear held high. But the hidden boar was quicker and smarter. Time slowed as he ran at me and I watched the white bone tusk slip beneath my skin, seamless as a hand slipping into water. My blood flowed yet, before I fell, I traded a single blow for his; fear more than anger or sense sending forth the spear with splendid, sickening force, striking his shoulder and dropping him down. I felt his mighty fall, the ground reverberating beneath us both. I noticed, before the pain blazed, that my spear entry was skewed, never as clean, as elegant as the work of his tusk. He shrieked, that old fearless boar, shrieked out his pain and I did too. Pain, yes, but also a gut-wrenching regret for his having to show me, through agony, that there was no shame to a

fearlessly gained wound, no dishonour in a fearless death. I cried out with him again—pain, failure, regret—wishing I could retract both fear and spear, wishing I could reach out to honour him, but one of the uncles shook his head at my cries and covered my mouth as my grandfather bound my leg and chanted an incantation to stop the blood. And I knew that the way they looked, neither at the boar nor the hand covering my mouth, but at the great, glorious gash in my thigh, that I was a hero; a man now, who had gloriously vanquished a foe. As my grandfather's hands worked and his song rose, between the great blades of pain I felt not jubilation or relief but simply how the boar had been within me. How his final fall had shuddered something inside me. But I neither touched him nor taught him anything, had simply given him pain. And, as the jubilant sounds of my uncles, and the dogs, filled the air, the distance on the ground between the boar and me grew.

“It was only after—after the feast, and the repetitions of the stories of the hunt, and after Amphithea had visited me in my bed and her tears had fallen down on the sliced flesh as she kissed my leg and bound it cleanly and sang me to sleep—that I wished I could touch and sing for the oozing black shoulder of the boar. I tried to shrink that distance between us as the song rose in my throat but instead the gap widened, and the song bubbled out in lame sobs. In my dreams, he chased me for that single unsung song, and my cries brought my grandmother to my bed and she hushed me down and told me that we, she and I, the new hero, would say nothing of it in the morning.

“Blood, the sung and unsung songs, and the black, staring eyes of the dead—these have been my unceasing companions. The companions of Odysseus, the hero; Odysseus, Son of Pain.

“Fate cannot be scheduled, Scott, it is the work of the gods.” He closed his eyes, hopeful that Scott's dour pessimism was now extinguished.

Scott misinterpreted the closed lids.

“For all our bravado, Odysseus, we must maintain heart.”

## CHAPTER 8

Odysseus was not as thrown by the absence of Thelma or the deviation from his sea fence foray as the others assumed. For Thelma had a knack, it soon became apparent, of knowing precisely where they might anchor or when they required supplies. At various intervals along the coast, the vehicle and caravan ensemble, like a reliable navigation mark, could be seen out on a point, in a beach car park or near the local yacht club. If it was a beach, Odysseus, increasingly accompanied by Peter, would take the dinghy in, or if it were a town, he would excuse himself from supply shopping.

To dissuade them from Thelma's company, Bailey showed them the second, marked chart. Scott was aghast at the defacement of the document. Odysseus, on seeing it, was fearful.

"A giant sea serpent, its head above water. A portent. We may be done for."

"Far from done for. I'm hoping we may, in fact, be saved." Peter's words were measured but there was strain in his voice.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Bailey snapped. "I know, liberated that she's gone."

At Rocky Cape National Park, the van clearly visible in the car park, the crew went ashore. Except Bailey, who would have nothing to do now, after the shell and chart destruction, with Thelma. They returned, having walked out to Mary Anne Cove, reporting the destruction of great tracts of Xanthorrhoea. And enthusing about attending, clearly informed of local happenings by Thelma, a Wooden Boat Festival in Stanley.

"Penteconters," Odysseus exclaimed. "I wonder if they'll have any?"

“They’ve got pirate plays,” the Chorus noted helpfully.

“I want to get up into the Fleurieu group,” Bailey mouthed to Scott, “sooner rather than later.”

And Scott, the Expedition Leader, he who represented order, sense, even primness, after a single afternoon with Thelma didn’t mouth back but said aloud,

“Lighten up, Bailey. A bit of fun won’t hurt you.”

The sparsely populated town of Stanley was awash with boats. Scale models, kayaks, canoes, tenders and sailing dinghies, punts and shells, even the odd replica Viking ship and Gaelic longboat. They were on the football oval and in parks, jammed on footpaths and overtaking roads. And beside them were stalls and marquees holding the wonders of all related things—design drawings, varnishes and timbers, techniques and tools, knots and scrimshaw. There was artwork. And maritime dramas played out on makeshift stages. The bawdy lyrics of sea shanty choirs made children giggle. Pirate costumes abounded, as did competitions: sailing, plank walking. Poking about, polishing, coveting, and swapping histories and facts and designs, were people who loved them. And the small harbour, with its harried harbourmaster, that lay beyond the town overflowed with owner pride and yet more craft—couth boats, trading vessels, steamers, a few obligatory tall ships.

Odysseus held court near a figurehead of Pallas Athene on the bow of a large schooner, regaling festival-goers with stories of her that to their ears lived and breathed a peculiar vividness. Scott pestered both Odysseus and Bailey to take him to the portion of the port that afforded the best view of tall ships, and he and Odysseus toured those open for inspection, Scott relishing educating Odysseus on the intricacies of yards, topgallants and jackstays, fife rails, bunts and clews. The Chorus and Thelma seemed to have disappeared.

Bailey, having intentionally slipped the company of them all, was in a tent full of people, mesmerised not only by an artful demonstration, but by the demonstrator, a

shipwright. She had looked up and smiled a dazzling smile when Bailey entered, teeth vivid white in contrast to her tanned face.

“Welcome!”

She continued with her instruction and Bailey watched her closely as she worked, shaping a rib timber using adze, drawknife and spokeshave. Despite having her dark hair tied back, she had to brush a strand behind her left ear each time she leant over to perform a new task. Her hands were small and strong, and she wielded the heavy adze with ease, the shape of her forearms in relief as she combed the drawknife back and forth. Bailey noted how people listened to her, respected what she said. How she charmed them, using humour and passion, expertise and encouragement, and won over even the most hardened and obstinate know-alls. Bailey could not be sure if the frequent smiles were directed at her or if she were inventing it. In a break, Bailey introduced herself and they spoke, enough for Bailey to feel that Selmo’s glances may not have been random.

Odysseus and Scott entered the tent and jostled through the crowd to stand beside her.

“Look,” Odysseus had charmed the community centre into printing, for free, the photo of the four of them on the east coast.

“My lord, she’s good,” said Scott.

“Isn’t she,” Bailey enthused.

Odysseus shot her a look. “But she’s not for you,” he whispered so loudly even the charismatic boat builder looked up and participants stared.

“Shh.”

He made a grimace. “All wrong. I can tell just by looking.”

On Odysseus’ head, Scott, out of diplomacy, and feeling out of depth in this particular aspect of the modern world, refrained from comment but felt impelled to politely add, again, “She is, however, remarkably skilled in the craft.”



When the workshop was over, it was Odysseus who commandeered Selmo's time and attentions, engaging her with his knowledge of biremes and triremes. Bailey watched as he flirted—did he ever not?—whilst talking about strength and propulsion, weight and waterline. And the shipwright, who to Bailey just minutes before had seemed immovable, captivating and unconquerable, seemed as malleable as a newly steamed rib in Odysseus' hands.

Their talk was interrupted by an older, fit-looking woman with hair still dark and an indefinable dignity. Even Odysseus was tempered in her presence. The boat builder's mother. Talk fell to their family's long, matrilineal history of boat building.

Bailey did not tell either Odysseus or Scott that she had arranged to meet the boat builder in the pub that night. She took extra time in the shower, extra care with her choice of clothes and after they had eaten in the town, encouraged the Chorus' interest in the pirate play, so that they all accompanied him. Then she slipped off unannounced and optimistic.

The pub was alive with warmth, talk and music. Thelma, slightly drunk, was on stage singing karaoke, "Waterloo". Begrudgingly, Bailey had to admit Thelma's voice was credible; better than credible, actually. Keen to avoid her, Bailey found the bar, then Selmo with a group of friends. Eventually she and Selmo found a corner table and just as the exchange was becoming interesting, Bailey felt a large hand on her shoulder and watched as another hand grasped Selmo's shoulder. Odysseus, clearly drunk, grabbed a chair from a nearby table and grinned at them both. Scott, on his head, appeared sober.

"How about an arm wrestle?" Odysseus asked the boat builder.

Scott looked aghast.

"Mm, no thanks." Selmo raised an eyebrow at Bailey.

"Meet Odysseus. Remember him from the demonstration?"

“Oh, yeah. I remember now. Triremes. How on earth is it that you know so much about them?” They fell to conversation. Scott looked at Bailey as if to say *sorry*.

Displaced, Bailey went to the bar. In the jostling throng, a familiar voice at her elbow.

“Reckon you owe me a drink.” Thelma had the same bloodshot eyes as Odysseus, like they’d perhaps been smoking earlier.

“Is that right?”

“Yep. X marks the spot, taking your turn... Reckon Odysseus would have you somewhere up past Lizard Island headed for the Timor Sea if it wasn’t for me. Me bait—just for you; Odysseus an obedient dog. You’d have been fucked up there. Lost. More fucked and lost than you are now.”

“Speaking of the X—the chart. You did it again. And, even more selfish, the shell...”

“Shellfish,” Thelma cackled.

“It was a gift. It was mine!”

“Yikes, symbolism! Is everyone asleep? We’ve all got two selves, Bailey, a larger one and a smaller one.” Thelma looked at her closely. “You don’t have a clue what’s going on, do you?”

Bailey pointed at Thelma’s forearm, her nose. “What, and you’re awake?”

“Maybe. Maybe people like you just break my heart, and sometimes...I need a little rest. What’s Peter told you?”

Bailey looked blank.

“Where is he, by the way?”

Bailey shrugged.

“Odysseus?”

“Chatting up all and sundry.”

Thelma laughed. “About time.” She mimicked, in sing-song tone, as if it had all been an act, a performance, her own whiney voice on the island, “Looks like *I didn’t get nothing*, again. So, Bailer, how about you make that a double rum and coke?”

Thelma’s capacity to laugh at herself softened something in Bailey. She held up her finger for another beer. “What’s the story with Peter? How do you know him?”

“We worked together. And then some. Might have had a relationship.” Thelma changed the subject. “He’s looking out for you.”

“Look where that gets me. Remember the defaced chart, the second one? I’m sailing there and then I’m headed north. Without Odysseus. Or any of you. Just Scott.”

“You need them more than you know. Nothing’s going to happen out on that bit of ocean, or anywhere, on your own.”

“Like you know...”

“I don’t, if it’s about putting it into practise. Can I do that? Hell no. What I know is you don’t tell the truth. To yourself. Wanna do that? Then feel something. In here. And if you can’t do that then someone else has to help you. Getting a sense, now, of why we all might be around, making life sunny?”

Infuriatingly, Thelma followed Bailey back to the table, and laughed when she saw Odysseus draped over Selmo. She took Scott off Odysseus’ head and placed him on her own and asked Bailey if she’d ever owned a caravan, but the noise was so loud that it was difficult to hear and then Thelma, who seemed unable to sit still or be anywhere long, got up and resumed her wait in the karaoke line, along with Scott. Again, Bailey went to the bar and waited her turn in the informal queue, debating whether or not to return to the boat. A gap appeared, and she surged forward.

“Hey Bailey, just wanted to say I’m going.”

Selmo and Odysseus had jostled (Odysseus not gently, leaving mutterings in his

wake) their way through the bar throng to find her. The boat builder gave Bailey a bemused look.

“He’s up for karaoke but I declined.”

“Want to sing?” Odysseus asked Bailey and kissed her on the head like a drunken uncle might, and then asked the same question of the people around him.

“For fuck’s sake.” Bailey shook her head at him.

“Remember, not for you. Thelma said it right from the start. Said it’s the last thing you need, another distraction. I’m making sure of it,” he whispered, nodding at Selmo.

“Come down to the workshop in the morning, maybe? Be great to see you.”

She gave Bailey an extended, meaning-laden hug and made her way into the crowd.

“Bye,” Bailey called, grabbing Odysseus’ arm and steering him towards Thelma who was waiting for the current singer to finish.

“Stay with her. You’re a good pair. But just get Scott. I’m worried he’ll be lost.”

Bailey started to follow the boat builder, but Odysseus grabbed her and insisted she watch Thelma perform a rousing version of “Happy” before he claimed Scott. The performance was followed by wild applause. Uninvited, Odysseus joined Thelma for her next number.

“This one’s for Bailey.” Thelma announced. ““Stand by Your Man””. But instead, she broke into “Dancing Queen” and Odysseus exhibited wild folk-like moves worthy of a Eurovision contest, which gained equally wild applause, a fact that seemed to make him even more jovial. On Thelma’s head, Scott looked mournful. Thelma introduced Odysseus to the audience and advised that as he had not sung karaoke before she was going to teach him the words and tune to “My Way”, and she wanted everyone to join in by way of help. Scott looked ill.

The duo’s effort was both touching and hilarious and received enthusiastic support

from the audience who were now chanting,

“O-deesy-us. O-deesy-us.”

Bailey gestured to Odysseus, pointing at Thelma’s forehead.

“Scott. Scott,” she mouthed, but Odysseus misinterpreted her and came over and hauled her onto the stage.

“Yes! Join us!”

“No! Scott!”

“Oh! Yes.”

Odysseus pulled Scott from Thelma’s head, held him up and announced into the microphone.

“And now Captain Scott will sing for us.”

If he could have, Scott would have looked positively ashen.

The crowd went wild, loving this crazy bear of a man that didn’t act like any man they knew.

“Is he a comedian? You know a famous one?” Bailey heard a woman ask aloud.

“Yeah, he looks like someone off the telly,” another patron agreed.

“O-deesy-us. O-deesy-us.”

The chant got louder.

“No! Bring him here,” Bailey frantically motioned. But Odysseus was consulting with Thelma about songs.

I will teach you all “The Epitaph of Seikilos”. But first, I will get another drink...”

Odysseus was a natural, addressing the crowd without a microphone as if addressing a battalion awaiting his every word.

“A drink for me. And,” the crowd roared encouragingly as Odysseus looked to the bar, as though the staff behind it were his own personal retinue, “a drink for everyone!”

The pub erupted. Selmo was long gone. Scott or no Scott, Bailey had had enough. At the exit, she turned to see Odysseus being crowd-surfed to the bar.

At the bar, a combination of anticipation about “The Epitaph of Seikilos”, the alcohol, and the swell of the crowd’s mood reminding him of past battle glories, triggered a conflicted, melancholic change in Odysseus’ mood. He felt torn between the old and the new: a sweet, familiar yearning to go back; a compulsive and vicious yearning to venture boldly on. After being slapped on the back by patrons and having returned high fives, Odysseus propped Scott on the bar, leaned in and divested himself of a memory.

*“Months on from my return, we were celebrating the sale of a herd of longhorn cattle, for which we were famed. They had calved beyond all expectation; the greatest number of young in living history. Capitalising on that good fortune that the gods bestowed, we sold many cows and were paid a fine price. I myself went down to the port and oversaw their stamping, wild-eyed loading onto the barge, glad it was they who would traverse the seas to the mainland.*

*The celebration dinner had been very fine. After the fennel-stuffed boar had been devoured and the figs, apples and raisins were served, I requested the cups be filled again with honeyed wine, rose to my feet and bade the bard play the lyre. He did so and the room quietened. I glanced across at Penelope. She was swaying and smiling, dressed in a robe of olive green silk that perfectly matched her eyes, a pair of gold ornaments in her hair. The butterfly pendant that I gave her when we married hung from her neck.*

*“Phemius,” I instructed the bard, “sing for my beautiful wife.”*

*“The bard straightened, as he did now whenever I spoke to him.*

*“Yes, master. What would you have me sing?”*

*“The Epitaph of Seikilos.’*

*“Penelope’s favourite. The words always made her soft-eyed.*

*“While you live, dance and sing, be joyful, for life is short, and Time carries away his prize. As long as you live, shine, let nothing grieve you beyond measure. For your life is short, and time will claim its toll.”*

*“I said the title softly, looking across at her. But no music came. I stared at Phemius.*

*“‘I am sorry, master. I, I...,’ he stammered.*

*“‘Perhaps, he did not hear you?’ Penelope offered, looking at Phemius encouragingly.*

*“‘Which tune shall I,’ his breath had a little caught and sweat on his brow now, ‘sing?’*

*“The word stuck in his throat, almost incomprehensible. I was displeased. And nervous, too.*

*“‘Seikilos’ epitaph.’*

*“‘Ah.’*

*“Phemius nodded and looked down at the strings. He played the introduction well and opened his mouth, but his voice was off. Guests stared straight ahead or reached for their wine. Phemius faltered then stopped. He begged my pardon and started anew. But the result was laughable. The thin utterance betrayed him. Betrayed Penelope. Me.*

*“Alexios, who can also play, took a lyre off the wall and joined him and together they found a jerky rhythm that slowly strengthened after the first verse. Where Phemius would have given up, Alexios persevered and together they grew in confidence and I saw my wife settle back in her chair. I tried to relax. I raised my cup and we all pretended to celebrate.*

*“When the guests were gone, my wife led me up to our chamber and tried to love me. Distrustful of the waves of feeling that took me over when I was atop her since my return, a terrible upwelling sea of madness, I pushed her away. I sat up, all the better to keep it down, and when she knew she could not change my mind, she knelt behind me and*

*in hushed and soft voice, so that no-one in the house could hear, she sang the song the bard had ruined.*

*“I awoke in the night, screaming. Again. The dream terror of every man, since the gods begat the world, who has walked into battle. Eventually my eyes settled, and I could see Penelope curled tight on her side of the bed. When I became calm, she turned over, and, like a mother humming a lullaby, willed me back to sleep.*

*“But of it all, Phemius was the worst. I would command him, my voice rising against my will, but he stayed mute, terror and despair in his eyes.”*

Odysseus roused himself from memory, looked once only at Scott, sculled his wine and returned to the stage.

Thelma took a breather, tired of being upstaged by Odysseus and having spotted the Chorus in the crowd. She liked the way Peter was happy to sit there alone and just look about, seemingly un-self-conscious. They watched as Odysseus attempted to teach the crowd the tune he knew so well but which the crowd found odd. In short, “The Epitaph of Seikilos” was not going well. Mistakenly, Odysseus thought he could command the crowd to anything, but the mob wanted entertainment, something faster, funnier; something like Miley Cyrus or Katy Perry.

“She’s like him. Bailey.”

Peter nodded. “Obstinate, deceptive, disciplined...”

Thelma took up the list. “Smart but dumb. A good talker when she has to be. But unlike him, she’s not generous. You’ve got a problem, you know. You need to tell her.”

“What?”

“That she’s got a choice to make. About taking her turn.”

Peter laughed, slightly hysterically.

“And watch the whole thing fall apart? And the whole point is that she isn’t going



to take her turn like Odysseus, like Scott. She's going to do, to be, something...new. Something different. And apparently not without hearing that story. Aunty said this leg was about failure. I'm not sure she meant it was to be the point of the whole trip."

Thelma changed topic, pointing at the microphone, "You should get up there. Let it rip." She clapped him on the shoulder and let her hand rest longer than necessary, if only to see him recoil. He didn't recoil, just lightly flinched. She removed it.

"Not really my style. Look how well that's going down."

The crowd had begun to boo Odysseus.

Thelma looked at the stage, at Odysseus up there, in love with himself. She replayed Peter's flinch, borne of their history, she had no doubt. She had hurt him, not once but many times. Little nicks, intentional at times, others just mean, over which she seemed to have little control. Two years together, in which she had never been happier, never been more scared, in which the hurting grew until nicks grew into a wound, one he had seemed, at first, willing to bear. She had hated him for that, the generosity, the vulnerability, of staying open. The decency, the health, in him that caused him to see decency and worth in her. She hated it, feared it, that sort of love. Enough to wound him harder, to prove it not so. Wound him enough to make him leave. Except he didn't. So, she had slept with his best friend, kind of like how she had slept with Odysseus, just to see what would happen. Just enough to keep Peter, and the terrible nagging hope that somehow it could be different, at bay.

Was there shyness in his flinch? Or hope? Or was that just in her? Thelma re-summoned the resolve that had caused her to make the first, and then when the intent had faded—it was too hard—second mark on the chart. The one she made after he had said he wanted to hear the truth.

"I'll give him this," Thelma said, admiring Odysseus, and pitying him at the same.

“You can’t say he doesn’t try.

“Where’s Scott, by the way?” she asked. But Thelma’s words were lost in the noise.

Up there, alone, plagued with regret, memories of failure close at hand, Odysseus snapped. In response to increasingly vociferous heckling, he picked up the microphone stand and, a mass of opponents in sight, aiming true, he hurled it like a javelin.

Bailey had not been able to find Selmo in town and had gone back to the boat. Alone and angry, she had worked her way through most of the whisky. Still drunk, she was woken by a massive thump and couldn’t be certain if it was on deck, or against the hull. Grabbing a head torch, she stumbled up to check.

Thelma lay moaning on the cockpit portside seat. And Odysseus was sprawled, seemingly close to comatose, near the rail, blood staining the deck.

“Someone glassed him,” Peter said, thanking the group of people who had helped him transport the wounded.

Bailey shook her head.

“He deserved it,” countered Peter. “Odysseus threw the first missile.”

“Silly prick,” the last of the helpers muttered, walking away.

Bailey knelt beside Odysseus and inspected the wound. “Where’s Scott?”

“With Thelma. She saw him get ripped off Odysseus’ head. Braved the melee to rescue Scott. Got knocked momentarily unconscious. A blow or something to the back of the head as she stood up—a chair designed for Odysseus’ face. Reckon she saved Odysseus’ life! I haven’t checked how Scott is, yet.

“By the way, reckon we’ve got two options. Sail before the light or settle the bar and damage tab. The pub owner’s ape shit, apparently. Sail now?”

But Odysseus’ head, Bailey could see, whilst not critical would require stitching.

Which meant waiting around until things opened in the morning. Which meant facing the music.

“Is she alright? We’ll get her checked, too, for concussion or neck injury. Maybe don’t move her too much.”

“I’ll sleep up here.” Peter stood beside Thelma, feeling at her pulse. “She seems ok.” He smiled wryly. “Said she’d never felt better when we were all carrying her back here.”

Scott was still on her head back to front and had to be prised off.

“Are you ok, Scott?”

But Scott just looked blankly ahead.

“Scott? Scott?”

Bailey went below, wrapped him gently in a towel, placed him on the galley table, and turned off the lights to shield his eyes. He would come good by the morning, surely. She found the first aid kit, applied butterfly closures and a bandage to Odysseus’ wound, rolled him into recovery position in case he vomited, put a line on him so he wouldn’t roll off the deck, and covered him with a blanket. Peter set himself up beside Thelma.

Bailey didn’t sleep much. She sat by Scott monitoring him, dozed, or looked at the photo that Odysseus had tacked up in place of the one of her and her grandfather. The one of them all on the east coast. How happy they all had looked.

*Fuck Odysseus.* People couldn’t be relied on; they just got in the way. Hope, it let you down.

By the time the sun arrived, Scott still hadn’t said a word. And Bailey had resolved to drop Odysseus at the community health centre and to sail while he was being treated. *Let him clean up his own mess.*

She would not go to the X. She could see it now, a thing depended on but which

would not deliver. In the same way, they expected her to deliver with her grandfather.

Better to not try, to not hope. To not need. Better to keep on sailing.

## CHAPTER 9

Odysseus, when he had awoken, had airily waved away any consequence of his actions of the previous night. But the morning brought the police. Then, the hotel owner, angry and abusive, whom the police instructed to leave until investigations were complete. There was questioning of the crew, followed by instructions to not leave port, a lift in a paddy wagon to the community health centre for medical assistance, and advice the police sergeants would be back.

Throughout the entire night Scott had remained silent. Not in a daze as the others assumed but because an extraordinary thing had occurred. It required digestion; the crew's forced departure now gave him uninterrupted time to think. About the fact that the blow in the pub designed for Odysseus, had, in fact, been foiled by Scott; Thelma had rescued Scott, but Scott was responsible for saving Odysseus' life. Yet it was not this Scott dwelled upon. It was what had occurred as the table hit his face.

On the carpet amidst a sea of unpredictable boots, he had seen a bistro chair being lifted from the floor. The face of the man lifting the chair was beet red and his eyes bulged, a combination of rage and bloodlust. On all fours, Thelma had shoved Scott on her head but back to front. Out of the corner of his eye, Scott saw the man lift the chair higher, aiming for Odysseus. Suddenly the big man had doubled in pain; kneed in the stomach by a woman who had purposefully put down the chair and picked up a small wooden table. The demeanour of the woman entranced Scott, and he forgot, for a moment, the flying curses, fists, flying bodies. It was the boat builder's mother. The table, now high over her head, would fly true. The elder shipwright hurled and watched her missile's trajectory with

curious detachment. Then Thelma stood up. Scott was suddenly face to face with the table top. Time stopped.

Scott was looking down on it all, in the same way he had left his body and been looking down on the sorry end in the depot. With wonderful calm and clarity, matching that of the shipwright, Scott knew the table would hit him. He understood it would be his end and he willed, with all his might, for Thelma not to move, so that this might be so; and his beautiful friend, Odysseus, who, for all his failings, was generous of heart, always bravely himself, and had been so kind to Scott, should not feel pain. Scott watched himself lean forward to accept the blow. In doing so he was afforded a full view of the shipwright, who had noticed Scott. Scott comprehended that the woman fully saw him, that is, not as a mask but as a person, for her face registered first horror and then regret. Scott knew that if the table thrower could have, in that moment, retracted her projectile, she would have. And Scott understood, too, in their exchanged look, that the table had been thrown with a single intent—to stop the fight. Scott smiled at her; forgiveness, acceptance. The table sped on. Scott smiled to himself, then, at how it had come to this, an inglorious blow amid a sweaty, smoky melee. Nothing epic or heroic about it, not even dignified! Those thoughts that had accompanied him out of life, back in the depot, revisited now. Yet they sat even more rightly in him, in this unlikely public bar, because of his experiences journeying with his little crew on their odd, little adventure. Life, he realised, was a curious show, over which one had little control and that really, it came down to love. If he could spare the table tosser regret, and Odysseus pain, then his job was done. Scott bowed his head in readiness.

But the table did not smash him. The thrower had launched herself after it, a feat capable only by a woman of great ability; magically, she averted its full force. Yet it hit still, and time resumed its normal speed. Scott was back down in the fray, pain exploding. Thelma was sent sprawling.

Then the extraordinary thing occurred.

The woman broke off a table leg, clasped it in one hand like an oar, or a staff. She stood Thelma up, her back to the two of them, and steadied her. It was Scott she spoke to,

“With this oar in my hand I can measure the depths and shallows of the world. It supports the heavens and makes the earth firm. Wherever it goes, there is a path across the ocean on which anyone might walk.”

She let go of Thelma, transferred it to both hands and turned away. “One touch...” she murmured, smiling. She turned abruptly back, fists clenched around the neck, and sent the oar crashing at aching speed towards Scott face. Scott saw it coming in the way that one sees the end of a life, clearly and too late. Again, time dropped away. He ceased to think as the world shattered into a brilliant and free expanse.

At the final moment, with the oar a feather’s width from Scott’s forehead, the shipwright ceased the intentional and joyful swing of her torso, locked her wrists and feathered the vertical blade until the mere edge of it rested across the line of Scott’s brow. Scott moved his head slightly forward, desiring only to sink further into that sweet and total presence.

The shipwright let him rest, then removed the oar and dropped it to the floor. She laid her hand on Scott gently. “One touch,” she said, “one touch only, and the whole life clears.”

Ever since that touch, Scott’s mind had reverted to a state that was akin to his time encased within the ice. It was suffused with stillness and silence. He no longer thought any of the disquieting thoughts that had been clamouring as the *Argus* progressed along each coast: about his role in History, that his current Expedition Plan, so carefully crafted, was not coming to seamless fruition, and what use, therefore, were written plans in the face of the mercurial and unpredictable circumstances that constituted life, and, what actual use was

he, a disabled man from an irrelevant age, here in this modern world? What was it that he had to offer the little party of four who, when they sat around the galley table, subtly and unconsciously in response to his lack of engagement, directed their conversation to one another alone. (For which he did not blame them.)

Was he giving up if he told them what was on his mind? Bailey and Odysseus might judge him as doing that, yet in doing so, could he somehow help change the future? Might it become more permissible to insert into History's accounts those words that once could not be named—inactivity, uncertainty, defeat, mistake? Like Bailey's holding on and letting go, or setting out and returning, perhaps there was a certain form of paradox, or honour, steeped in wisdom in what he planned, that heroism's incessant forward gaze—its mandate that the adventure continuously unfold—might never quite understand?

What of this new history that was being created on the *Argus*? For history, Scott saw clearly, was of its own time. People could go back to learn from it but it had little place coming forward. He was a mismatched relic, a curiosity rendered mute by virtue of values and traditions that lacked modern resonance. For Scott there was no lingua franca for this current age. Yet, that he was a remnant was not a disturbing thought since the oar incident. The pressing question was what to communicate, what offer, and how?

The single clear thing was the voiceless urge in his chest, a thing which might bind them.

Despite not sharing Odysseus' incessant yearning to adventure, Scott had come to cherish the big, exasperating bear of a man who strutted and posed and embellished his stories. Cherished him in the same way he, Scott, had, each in turn, learned to love and care for his men in their idiosyncratic frailties.

Thelma looked terrible but was committed to enduring her self-inflicted hardship, Scott observed. The Chorus was washed out but happy, clearly in some form of patient



love with a woman who could not yet believe in her own goodness.

Bailey seemed uncertain, but in the best of ways; the uncertainty that necessarily preceded the possibility of any hard-won homecoming. Her sense of being at sea with herself was palpable. Her frustration, her feeling of failure that she still did not know what the X meant. Conflicted still, she did not know whether to leave or to stay. What was exploration and discovery, and what was running away, she seemed to be wondering.

Scott's heart swelled. Despite her vacillation, he felt proud of her, as her own grandfather surely would. Coming to know Bailey on this voyage, learning to love her in her hardness and now this emerging softness, his shock and horror, his judgement of Bailey when she had told the story (thinking he could not hear) about her grandfather, had softened. Holding on and letting go, he realised since the oar, were all a matter of judgement, of discernment. And choosing to remain or set out was perhaps the same.

All such decisions, he was now willing to admit—the whole unpredictable unfolding that appeared to be a life—might also perhaps be luck, or Fate, or the movement of something bigger. How disconcerting it was to think of oneself, of the great men of history, and of Empire, as random, not wholly effectual, not wholly significant. Scott's mind reflexively slumped at this traitorous thought. Yet potentially how freeing! His heart leapt.

The crew returned to the boat mid-morning. Odysseus with his head bandaged, and Thelma pronounced fit in terms of effects from the blow—"You're remarkably fortunate; it's as though something absorbed the force," the locum GP had mused—but with a referral to a drug rehabilitation centre. And in that regard, it was clear that it was needed; she was not in good shape, and worsening by the hour.

The atmosphere aboard was fractious: the prospect of charges, the prospect of a damage bill, the Expedition diverted. Hangovers, pain, withdrawal. *Eidolon*, Odysseus

pronounced Thelma's signs—possessed by a spirit. He warily ignored her; his opinion assisted by the fact that she and the Chorus seemed increasingly close. Whilst waiting for the police to revisit, they resorted to cards.

Odysseus slapped down his hand.

"I win! Bailey, that's ten dollars and forty cents you owe me."

"Do you realise what the cost of the tab might be, the damage, at the bar, you moron? No way!"

"The rules of battle," Odysseus held up an ace, "are the rules of battle."

"And like you don't change them when it suits."

"At least I battle."

"Yeah and look at the consequences. What's that supposed to mean, anyway?"

"Glorious," said Odysseus.

"Now, now," countered Scott.

"Abandoning people is glorious?" As soon as the words were out, Bailey knew she was vulnerable to Odysseus raising the matter of her dropping Scott in the depths.

Odysseus snorted and looked at Scott, "Remember we spoke of hardness of heart? Look no further."

"I don't think that's entirely true," Scott said quietly. It was unclear to which remark he was responding.

Odysseus launched an attack. "No *xenia*. You and your modern, 'civilised' world—infants. The barbarians displayed better manners!" He knew what would wound Bailey, "You want it all to be given. No duty. Think of Polyphemus, Ctesippus, Antinous." He looked at the Chorus for confirmation, "You see it."

"Not how you do. I don't see any of you, really. I see the accumulation of what you've done. I see history."

“You see Thelma.” said Bailey quietly, her anger causing barbs to want to pour from her mouth in the guise of truth.

“Be warned,” Odysseus continued, glaring at Bailey, “ignore divine obligation at your peril. The gods will have their rules obeyed.” He leaned over to the netted bookshelf and located *The Odyssey*. “Where was it, Scott? That bit we read once, on deck, before we started the voyage. About hardness of heart?”

“I’m not sure it’s a choice time for reading.” Scott was still unwilling, yet, to reveal that his eyes, damaged by the blow, would be hard pressed to perform the task. He felt a bit like Odysseus’ blind seer Tiresias though; the outer faculties decaying but his insight never clearer.

Bailey snatched the book.

“Show me. Go on,” she taunted Odysseus. Then to Scott, “Where is it? Which bit?”

“If I recall they were my own words I quoted: *You cannot stop, you cannot go back, and there is no alternative but to harden your heart and drive on.*”

Scott was relieved, that despite the other degeneration, his memory, too, remained clear.

“Tomorrow,” Scott said to Bailey, invoking the original Expedition in order to divert them both, “you, God willing, are about to cross into your own white space. In order to continue, one must, indeed, harden one’s heart for to feel it in its tenderness, one might not proceed.” It strikes him he is speaking, now, not of his time back there, but of how it is for him here; the effort it is taking to simply go on in the same predictable way. Yet was this the type of advice he wanted to impart to Bailey, he wondered? Advice from the old world. For where did it get him, that hardness of heart?

Rather, he returned to basics. “In our time,” he indicated both Odysseus and himself, “we have both tried.”

But Odysseus wanted blood, for if Bailey bled then his abandonment of Scott back at Georges Bay, or in the pub, would not be examined. “But her hardness, remember what we said?”

“Yes,” Scott said evenly. Seemingly it was a time for truths. “You said something about the lack of hospitality, the lack of time. ‘They cannot stop’, you may have said. ‘Intent on a destination even they have forgotten. On and on they push, not pausing to pour a cup of libation or offer bread to strangers. Everywhere here is a hardness disguised as strength, pretending to be courage, dressed up like an achievement, but lacking something.’”

“Pretending strength and courage, yet hollow and hard.” Odysseus felt vindicated.

Yet Scott continued, for if truths were to be told they should be without selectivity. “And then there was our discussion of what Tiresias said to you in the Underworld.”

Thelma, lying on a bench seat, eyes closed, her head on Peter’s knee, sat up, suddenly alert on hearing the word ‘underworld’.

“He said, *Even so, you and your crew may still reach home,*” Scott recounted, “*suffering all the way, if you only have the power to curb their wild desire and curb your own what’s more.*”

Thelma lay back down. “Yes,” she said, weakly.

“Curb? He’s failed at that! Gloriously,” she added, archly. “Let’s see, at Georges Bay, then there was Thelma, and then the pub...”

Scott stopped listening and looked at the wreck of Thelma. No longer appalled but with admiration. She hid nothing. Did not omit those words lying beneath the surface—defeat, failure, sadness, mistake—that others, himself included, could not place into the public account. For their presence undercut the whole show; named, myths and edifices came crashing down. How free, despite her indisposition, she seemed!

The conversation at the saloon table travelled on. Scott listened, gentle in this new

language of the heart, to Bailey and Odysseus' need to do, to orchestrate, to effect, and became clearer in his own mind what was needed, not out of duty, not for family or country or for anyone else now, but simply for himself.

Scott cleared his throat.

"I have given the matter considerable thought. I wish to resign my command of the voyage."

Talking ceased.

Bailey looked at Scott and then at Odysseus. "No."

"Yes." Odysseus pragmatically agreed with Scott.

"It's the effect of the blow," Bailey suggested.

"I shall of course commit this to paper..." But Scott was suddenly weary of that laughable archive that lived on to mock and remind. Indelible yet unreliable, he was suspicious of how little it truly conveyed. No fear, despair, shame—how stable and assured History appeared without the unpalatable words! And here he was, no longer stable, no longer assured, yet trapped to live alongside a frozen document that could not shift or moderate as life itself shifted. "No. *Facta non verba.*" Scott had learnt his lesson and would revert, wherever possible, to his original stance of deeds not words. His variation on it, *verba ac facta*, had been a most interesting experiment, he had to admit. Without his brief, rash foray into self-revelation he would not, for example, have been brought his four companions. There would have been none of this—the richness of the voyage. He looked about the galley, at the dented, injured globe that Odysseus had wrecked, the photograph of the original four of them on deck, all smiling. This...Scott searched for a word. *Caper* was the one he fell upon. He liked it for its lightness, for the sense it held not of duty but more of dance, or even laughter. This caper, which had veered off course under his command and yielded no new acquisitions or glory or scientific discovery, had yielded a great deal.

His life, Scott reflected, had not held enough dancing, enough laughter, enough...dogs. Simply too much responsibility. He thought of Molly on the island. Could one take one's turn, as she had named stepping up for duty, for being the very best one could be, and still have an enjoyable time of it; still laugh, still play, not lose that beautiful lightness that one had as a child? That one naturally possessed as a dog?

"I would like us to finish reading Evans. I wish to know how it turned out before we go to the X," Scott said to Bailey.

Bailey was flicking through *The Odyssey* desperately trying to find a passage that demonstrated Odysseus' selfishness. "Let's do it when I come back."

"I?" Odysseus heard what the others did not.

"We'll do it now." The Chorus said the words firmly and quietly. He motioned for the book.

Scott asked, then, for another from the small library. Mawson's expedition with photographs by Hurley. He would be visually reminded, as they read, of what it was like. And whilst the Chorus read the remainder of the Evans account, Thelma twitching but quiet in his lap, Scott stared at the double page image in the book Bailey had propped up before him.

On the left, two figures were bent into the wind, one leaning forward with a pick axe, the other behind him proceeding on hands and knees. The wind flung ice and sleet and its own endless fury at them. Though they strained, they remained ineffectual dark blips in the storm of white that was the blizzard. The page was awash with that frenzied current of white, and Scott knew it to be uncertain whether their toil or fatigue would ultimately prevail. Meanwhile, the account he listened to was unambiguous. His leadership, his prudent advice, was unequivocal: 'Certainly no living man could have taken Scott's place effectively as leader. Of our Expedition—there was none other like him. He was the Heart,

Brain and Master.’ His instructions were ‘explicit and comprehensive...they clearly show how Scott’s organisation covered the work of the ship, the base, the western party, the dog teams...’

Scott looked at the opposite page where there was another truly terrible image, one that might appear comical to one who had not experienced it. A veritable prison of ice colonised the folds of fabric around the head of a man. Scott recalled being so encased; cold to the bone in a rigid anorak, or to awaken in a stiff sleeping bag. What acute hardship it was to be that frozen man!

Evans’ narrative neared its description of the party’s demise. Scott steeled himself as he heard of his ‘horrible, ugly fate’. The lay of the bodies in the tent was described, his half out of its sleeping bag. Edgar Evans’ body is found, Oates’ is not, but all are honoured. He was touched by the cairn with its crossed skis, and humbled when Evans described the jarrah cross, carved by Davies, and lugged on a sled over the frozen sea to Hut Point. All their names were on it—Scott, Wilson, Oates, Bowers, Edgar Evans. And words from Tennyson befitting a hero, *to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield*. It was not lost on Scott that in death he was irrevocably linked to Odysseus by those words.

There was silence in the cabin.

“History,” said the Chorus finally, putting away the book.

Scott felt relieved. Satisfied, he nodded for the Hurley book to also be returned.

Thelma popped out an arm and fluttered it above the tablet, “Yes, but are they prepared for the present?”

Bailey shot the Chorus a pointed look. “No,” she mouthed.

Odysseus stood quickly, “I think I will cook.”

Scott was at peace. “Yes, we are.”

“As you wish.” The Chorus took up the tablet and typed in a search. “Ah, pages

already bookmarked. It seems someone, Odysseus, Bailey perhaps, has been this way before?" He began to read, "Antarctic Legend Reassessed."

The fall took only an instant and began with surprise. Scott's was confused on hearing the words, unbelieving, thinking a mistake had occurred that would soon be rectified. It felt not unlike a slip into a crevasse; he had experienced that—he and Evans dangling in mid-air, nothing below them. But that time, miraculously, he was able to swing his feet around and get a crampon to stick into the wall and climb out. This time, the plummet did not stop. The words continued and Scott, from the seemingly unassailable position of hero, commenced his descent.

"With questions raised about his character..."

The unexpected hurtle continued, interspersed only by his reputation, like a flailing body, slapping rudely, brutally, against an unmoving wall of verdict.

"Second rate hero."

Scott's mind came to a halt on some ledge. He watched as the figure of controversy that was him fell on unchecked. He only half listened to the snippets of condemnation and criticism, or, when kinder or more balanced or better researched, of query. He was reminded of another crevasse. It was the return trip from One Ton Depot where they had laid stores. In they went, no warning; the ground there and then not. Two sleds hung precariously on the crevasse edge, his included; eight dogs dangling in mid-air, howling. Two dogs slipped their harnesses and fell forty feet to a ledge below. Amidst much protest from the men, who would have left them, Scott insisted on being lowered into the chasm to rescue them. But when the dogs were safely landed, they promptly fought with the dogs of another team! Scott was left swinging whilst the men attended to the canine brouhaha. He remembers he had laughed then, dangling over the abyss, at his own unimportance.

Odysseus snatched the tablet from the Chorus, searched for and clicked on a glowing article.



“Read this. ‘Robert Falcon Scott, the best of British manhood...’”

Mid-sentence warning beeps sounded. The machine shut down.

“Battery.” The Chorus broke the lengthy silence.

“History has handed down its verdict,” Scott said slowly, “which it is clear—those saved searches—you already know.”

“They are just words! Just opinions!” countered Odysseus.

“The Plan,” said Scott. “I think you should leave me here.”

“We don’t need to go.” Bailey said awkwardly, not wanting to further imply his leadership suspect, rather wanting to let him off the hook, and to pave the way for ridding herself of Odysseus and sail north.

Odysseus, furious, made to grab the tablet but the Chorus prevented him. Instead, Odysseus grabbed Scott roughly and picked up Evans. He snatched an armful of texts from the bookshelf before bounding up the companionway. Odysseus flung Scott and Evans onto a seat and, at the rail, hurled the other books oceanward.

“Words, opinions, history...The things that are in here, they are not you.”

Books, those bright stars of knowledge, became mere objects. They ceased orbit, hit the surface with an unremarkable splash, and then disappeared. With Scott on his forehead now, Odysseus held up Evans, the cover of which glistened whitely like snow in the sun. All that frozen History.

“You will not be shackled to the opinion of any man.”

“No,” demurred Scott lamely, schooled that books should not be desecrated. But Evans was cast beyond the stern. The text did not fly out like the others, just spun briefly. Its cover opened in disbelief and pages fluttered, wild and nervous, the words dishevelled. Odysseus returned below, swearing, and gathered more. He brandished his own history, *The Odyssey*, at the remaining crew, at their inaction.

“Opinions good, bad or otherwise.”

No-one stopped Odysseus. Not even when he grabbed the tablet. On deck, Bailey’s copy of *The Odyssey* was sent off on its own precarious adventure, unequivocally destined to meet Poseidon. Odysseus threw Homer just as the sodden Evans, seemingly intent on survival, paused briefly on the surface before going under. Lastly, the tablet beloved by Odysseus. He swung his arm in towards his great chest and, mighty discus thrower that he was, uncoiled it. The tablet spun and glistened in the last light.

“Imprudent,” Scott, ever practical, remarked vaguely, “No more recipes.”

Odysseus was unflagging. The only written words left on the *Argus*, courtesy not of Bailey nor of the Chorus (who saved one item) but solely due to Scott’s quiet, sensible urging, were the manuals of instruction for the boat engine and electronics, the first-aid kit manual, the charts, and the log. And a single volume of poetry adroitly saved by the Chorus who placed it beneath Thelma’s supine bottom.

At the rail, Odysseus took Scott off his head and kissed him passionately.

“You, my friend, are a prince among men.”

After, the silence in the saloon was broken only by Scott repeating his wish, “I wish to remain whilst the Expedition continues.”

Bailey did not answer, trying as she was to determine, without asking, what he meant precisely: returned to land, some sort of Oates’ manoeuvre, a sea burial?

Thelma was sleeping, but patchily; she moaned and whimpered. The Chorus seemed either wisely or genuinely bereft of words. It was Odysseus, the storyteller, the crafter of words, the man at one with twists and turns, who launched himself into the abyss for his friend, just as Scott had done for the dogs.

“Hear me, loyal companions. Hear what the heart inside me has to say. I have no need to speak of it for everyone knows of the fabled journey, they immortalised it in

song—the nine year war, the decade-long sail home, then winning my wife through mounting and shooting the bow, the mayhem in the halls as the suitors were slain, the vengeance for the treachery of the maids, their legs swinging in the courtyard air. Yes, I meted out swift vengeance against those who had insulted my honour. I, Odysseus, hero to the end.”

Bailey rolled her eyes. He made everything about himself.

“In years past, I would have spoken of it in the same way I recounted my achievements to King Alcinous or to Aeolus. Waiting to hear their words in return—‘Well said. Fair words.’ But I have lost my taste for oratory. To speak like that you must feel proud of what you have done.

“Wake her,” Odysseus commanded the Chorus about Thelma, “Everyone shall hear.” Odysseus looked pointedly at Scott, propped up on the saloon table. “For what came after was far from heroic.”

Scott suddenly realised he had not thought the announcement properly through! He had not re-blurted his desire to resign, as the others may have thought, in response to the sobering summation that History had made of him. Though it had helped. No. He re-made it as sacrifice. Bailey alone must engineer her own solution, he had come to see. But it meant Odysseus might now lead...

Odysseus continued. “That story remains hidden, a life worn in darkness. It is the story, months on, of all men who return from war, about which no songs are sung. It is the terrible silence when the victory ballads have ceased, from whose depths arise the clamour of opponents, dead and gone, ghosts and memories that refuse to be slain again. Our wives and families become physicians attempting to heal wounds invisible to the eye, and the home becomes a hospital of sorts, and all is sadness and shame.”

But the discussion was interrupted by voices, police voices, calling out from the

dock. The very same sergeants were investigating a report about littering and erratic, potentially dangerous, behaviour in public. Someone had been seen violently throwing computers and other objects into the dock; the sergeants hoped this did not involve the *Argus*. And no, they could not confirm whether this latest report had been made by the hotel owner.

Odysseus, Thelma, and Peter as pub patrons whilst the fight was on, and Bailey as owner of the vessel about which this latest complaint had been made, were requested to attend the police station for interview and statements. It would be determined, then, if charges, concerning both last night and just now, were to be laid. Which would depend, to some extent, on the hotel proprietor. The matter of the damages bill would also be discussed.

Alone on the chart table, with the crew at the police station, Scott sensed that the whole endeavour was unravelling. There was a rift between Bailey and Odysseus. Which would worsen, no doubt, when Bailey was forced to pay the pub damages bill. There was the Chorus who clearly had some sort of agenda; benign it seemed, but suspiciously veiled. Then there was Thelma's health. Should she remain on board, and she was in no fit state to be abandoned, she would be a liability; to venture onto open sea with her in this state was a risk, both for her and for the Expedition. Fortunately, Odysseus' infatuation with Thelma had passed, that was a blessing. And, there was Bailey's wavering commitment as she neared the unknown. Was it because of him she had commented that they did not have to proceed? Or was she getting cold feet, as so often occurred when what had once been dream neared reality? And, how to avoid Odysseus leading....

But Scott was still technically commander. He did not yet know how he would deal with each issue. However, until the crew accepted his resignation and appointed a new Expedition leader, he could not let them go unchecked. He sighed over the great and

delicate balancing act that was leadership; when to speak, when to say silent, when to act, when to wait.

The crew returned. Bailey predictably out-of-pocket for the damage bill, the collective vibe even more cantankerous, Thelma even more pathetic. Scott launched his entreaty without delay.

“We have not formally transferred command. Before we do, I have something I wish to say. An expedition relies on the cooperation of all.”

He outlined his revised plan. Bailey would assume full command of her own expedition, it was only right. Thelma and the Chorus would do as they needed, but on no account should Thelma be taken to sea. And Odysseus? Scott would require assistance; Odysseus would remain with him, on land.

Scott spoke knowing that, despite the truth of collectivity, there was a section of each journey for which one could not be accompanied. Odysseus’ story had proved it time and again. And there would be a portion of Bailey’s that necessarily must be hers alone. That he, Scott, must soon venture on alone he did not say.

After the meeting, as though Scott’s decision had set something elemental alight, a westerly began to blow. As if in response to the outer turbulence, Thelma worsened. Distressed, anxious, she could not be soothed.

“That mark on the chart, Persephone had seen it too I realise,” she muttered, as much to herself as to anyone. “Her prophecy, the bit about a companion being lost, and the Underworld, was as much for me and her as it was for you lot. The underworld, it’s nearing. She knows something I don’t. The Underworld. Take me out there.”

The Chorus ushered her to the aft cabin. All [night] she moaned and tossed. Odysseus put Scott to bed and then Odysseus and Bailey went on deck. The Chorus briefly left his vigil of care to join them.

“We’re devising a plan to save Scott face,” Bailey raised her voice as the winds tugged at the rigging. “Any ideas?” Wondering as she said it about when and how to break the news. To Scott—that there would be no X, and that only she and he would continue north. To Odysseus, the Chorus and Thelma—that they were being left behind.

But the Chorus was adamant of one thing only, that the original Plan to go to the Strait should not be changed. And that Thelma, not just Bailey, needed to get there.

## CHAPTER 10

The force of the weather continued to delay departure. Bailey called a crew meeting.

“I’ve come to a decision.”

Everyone eyed her expectantly.

“We’re not going. Anywhere.”

The cabin was silent. Thelma began to moan, then wail. Odysseus, furious, slapped the globe of the world to the floor. Peter left.

“And you?” Bailey queried Scott. “What’s your response?”

“Yes,” he said, “I hear you.” Pleased that the leadership could not go to Odysseus but perturbed at the abandonment of the Strait. Yet she had made the announcement with such finality, perhaps it was that she intended to return home? That in itself would suffice. “You’ve decided,” he continued, gravely, hoping that he had correctly guessed her intent. “I can hear that.”

Scott’s words, so full of assent, so lacking in any form of fight or disputation, had a profound effect on Bailey. A forward motion, of which she was now only just aware had propelled her, ceased. She felt as if she was standing still for the first time. Accompanying that stillness was a sort of peace.

On deck, Peter could be heard singing, “The water is wide, I cannot cross over...”

Tell me,” Scott continued gently, “what it is that might help? What is it you need?”

His words were like a soft knife, slipped behind the heart. A knot was sliced.

Something akin to a wave began to move.

On deck, at the sound of Bailey’s weeping, Peter stopped singing. He untied the

staff lashed to the mast, descended the companionway stairs and, raising it just like Odysseus had done at the shop, but inexpertly, crashed it into Bailey's skull.

Peter's hasty, desperate plan to stymie Bailey's planned flight, and whilst captive have Thelma tell Bailey the story, went awry. Firstly, he did not knock her out, just heavily hit the side of her temple. And secondly, despite his entreaties, regardless of his pointing out to Thelma that Bailey would split the crew up and the opportunity—for precisely what no-one was still quite sure—would be lost, Thelma would not tell the story. Instead, clearly accessing some sort of hidden drug stash, she became terribly worse.

The temperature plummeted as only it could on the west coast and front after front passed through. Cooped aboard, the lack of conversation punctuated only by Thelma's plaint, Scott was the crew's single vitalizing force. He suggested a trip out to the west coast's Cape Grim to experience the westerly's full power.

“Nothing like the air to enliven one.”

But the others found excuses to stay. Odysseus was intent on being allowed back into the pub and had planned to allow the owner to beat him at the town's illegal card gathering as a first conciliatory step. Thelma was in no fit state for travel. The Chorus refused to visit what was the site of a massacre of his kin. Bailey, who had not forgiven him the blow (despite his confessing that Thelma held a story Aunty had instructed Bailey be told) would not have agreed to walk with him anyway and, glad of the excuse to be rid of them, hired a car.

The drive was through farmland. Scott dangled from the rear vision mirror. And then, suddenly they were above the ocean with no landmass between them and Argentina; the northwest beach held a fearsome line of breakers.

“Where precisely does such a wave begin?” mused Scott, staring at the swell.



“These began where? Patagonia? I was never there—we left for the Pole from New Zealand. Let’s walk.”

Out from the sand, the sea was a pounding, fretful wall of white, behind which menaced a moody, darkened sky. Bailey estimated the waves to be twelve, maybe fifteen, metres. It was both beautiful and frightening. She shuddered at the thought of a yacht being caught in too close. Beyond the beach were quartzite reefs, and, further south, should she choose to return, cliffs and gulches.

Beneath her feet the sand was soft, their pace slow. Drizzle seeped in to neck folds and sleeve openings. But for Bailey it was better than being stuck below decks with Thelma incoherently ranting about the underworld, avoiding Peter’s apologetic-unapologetic eyes, pretending to not hear his request that she ferry Thelma to the X, or hear Odysseus bang on about the sea fence mission as though nothing had happened, as if the bruising that had now spread to her eye socket had arrived there by chance. She no longer knew if she wanted to hear the story now. For if Peter, usually so gentle, and whom she trusted, was prepared to assault her in order for Thelma to tell it, then suddenly the stakes, which no-one appeared to really understand, felt frighteningly high...But there was that curious moment of rest before she was hit which now served to highlight to Bailey just how much terrible turbulence and pain surrounded Thelma, enough to make Bailey want to take her out to the Strait. Her former decision no longer seemed so clear.

The wind strengthened but Scott declined the offer to turn back. No matter where Bailey chose to walk—above the old tide line or right near the water’s edge—her feet sank into sands of varying but predictable softness. She persevered, driving forward despite the fierce crosswind that swung to gust as a headwind, pondering why it was she just did not abandon them all and leave. Four kilometres on and sensing her labouring, Scott, recalling his own fruitless labour with the sleds, called a halt.

“No, I’ll push on.” Bailey’s footfalls sank deeper. It was like that, she realised, with the crew, hating the thought. She was in too deep. She liked them. And, if she admitted it, she was lonely. And they also knew she could not decide and would probably not return to do the thing that was expected of her, to care, and they did not judge her. Sand ripped from dunes and beach surface. Like glass, it abraded exposed flesh and bit into eyes, nose and ears. Gusts careered down the unbroken expanse of beach. Combined with mist, spray and drizzle, the impression was of walking through fog. Bailey lowered her head and trudged on into the onslaught. On her forehead, Scott was no longer on the island’s northwest coast with forested slopes creeping parallel to the dunes. Rather, he was exhausted and spent, slogging across the Barrier, trying to reach the depots.

Scott felt how Bailey laboured, as though struggling against the elements were a form of penance that could soothe her. And perhaps persevering in order to make him happy.

She said something then, but he could not hear it amidst the fury of the wind and the sound of the strengthening rain. So, she stopped, ineffectually positioning her daypack as shelter. She attempted to procure a snack and eat but sand invaded pack and mouth. Even drinking water was a chore. She took Scott off her head, placed him in the pack’s lee and lay curled tight, protecting him.

“I said, in this weather, to go back or forward are both...” she searched for a word.

“Unenviable,” suggested Scott.

“As is here,” she added.

Listening to the conundrum that lay behind her words, it dawned on Scott that life was not characterised by a single, glorious achievement, or a conquest, but more a series of terrible and beautiful errors. Perhaps even a perpetual error. And the greatest error, the greatest source of misery and heartbreak, indeed, the greatest tragedy and the greatest lack

of adventure, was perhaps to think otherwise! To think as History did. It was a comfort of sorts, this knowledge. A paradoxical relief. And, again, his heart felt tender. For he had only really learned it by being subjected to the trials and tribulation of this little company; he himself was error, Bailey and Odysseus were error, too. Yet they were also more than that.

“Extra weight at times like these is an added burden.” Scott recalled the stones he did not jettison on his return journey, specimens gathered to support the furthering of Science; collected at the request of the woman not his wife. Would ditching that weight have saved them all? The question had always haunted him. “Some weights a joy, others a tyranny.”

“Not that we need to abandon anything,” Bailey hastily added, sensing the conversation was turning somewhere awkward.

“No?”

She was silent.

“You were right, you know, to not keep searching for me. Back at Wineglass,” Scott said.

“I had to make a decision.”

“I know what that’s like. I just wanted to say, in case it ever did, never let it weigh upon your conscience.”

“What was the end like?” Bailey asked, trying not to picture her grandfather.

“Elemental. Dying is hard work, no one tells you that. We are averse to disintegration! One thinks of all that one is leaving and suddenly sees how beautiful it is. Was. Apt, and curiously perfect. But before that, you do not think much of yourself, just those you loved. Or perhaps did not love enough. And you want more than anything to let them know, despite the failings, how much you did love them. And you intuit, but don’t

know until it's too late, they are held in something that's bigger than anything you could have imagined. And you wish you could let them know that, too; that they don't need to worry. But of course, one forgets all that back here. Curious. Such a great forgetting. And then we set out again, it appears, so resolutely, in order to remember."

There was no room for advice and experience on the knife edge of choice, Scott knew, and lamented that he had nothing concrete to give Bailey, here in this place of indecision, which would be of use.

But then it dawned on him that he did. The galvanising alchemy of loss. "There's something I would like to ask."

"Anything." Bailey stood and picked up the pack.

"I wish to go home."

"England?" Bailey was shocked. "Why? Is it because Odysseus and I argue? Your eyes?"

"Not there."

"Because the plan, the voyage, has turned out a mess? Not like we thought?"

"The white south. In all its peace and quiet!" Scott laughed as the wind howled around them. "At least, that's how I remember it. Curious how time erases suffering. I think it's where I belong."

"You'd leave us?" An accusation, not a question.

"There are times when leaving is more prudent than staying. And, because finally," said Scott, "I don't have to watch myself. Keep myself up to the mark. I can now let myself," and here he thought of a taught rope forever under strain, "slacken off."

The tail wind of their return journey was scant comfort.

"I'm not ready," Bailey said, lamely, as they trudged the last of the wending track up to the carpark.

“One never is.” Scott wasn’t sure what Bailey was referring to but it didn’t matter. He recalled his final days in the tent. “You must at least try, my dear. For if you do not, you’ll never know. You’ll live with doubt, a sense of never having fully tested yourself. And perhaps there is no greater tragedy than that?”

He thinks again of that last letter to the Public: ‘But for my own sake I do not regret this journey, which has shown that Englishmen can endure hardships, help one another, and meet death with as great a fortitude as ever in the past. We took risks, we knew we took them; things have come out against us, and therefore we have no cause for complaint, but bow to the will of providence, determined still to do our best to the last.’

But was it ‘things’ that came out against them, or he that had? How glad he was, though to not go out in the Strait and have all eyes upon him as command.

On their return to the boat, the crew was summoned from cabins to huddle in the saloon. The air was damp from rain, the atmosphere sluggish. But before Scott could make his announcement, Odysseus stood up and reached into his tunic. “I found something.” He held up a bag of white powder. He reached across and placed it on Thelma’s chest.

“No,” said Peter and Bailey in unison.

“Yes,” said Odysseus, and crossed to Thelma. “Take it in both hands.” He forced her hands around the bag. “Tell the demons you want them; that they can live in your bones and suck the life from you. Become one of them. Go on. Go.”

But she would not.

Into the awkward silence, Scott advised them of his desire to return south

Thelma looked wanly at Bailey, “Is this you getting rid of us one by one?”

“It’s my idea,” Scott responded.

“But it’s not home.” Odysseus was concerned, “A man must return to his own lands.”

“You would find it entrancing, Odysseus,” Scott offered.

“And how do you propose this occurs?” the Chorus asked.

But Odysseus interrupted. “The deep, white south. I’ve itched to see it since that first day you described it,” thinking, as he spoke, of the Ship of State in the Southern Ocean and the chance, with crew to aid him, to intercept it en route. “We’ll sail him there. The *Argus* can be modified...”

“You don’t even like the ocean,” scoffed Thelma weakly.

“Athene will protect me.”

“Be aware that when you cross the sixtieth parallel you have to swear allegiance to Poseidon and abide by his laws.” Peter was anxious to put paid to any plan not involving the hidden sea.

“The Crossing the Line ceremony. The Laws of the Realms of the Deep.” Bailey waded in. “Poseidon appears, and you have to swear, or otherwise something terrible happens.”

“I think its Neptune they invoke. Roman,” mused Scott.

“They’re all the same,” Thelma intoned miserably. “Gods. Doesn’t matter what they’re called. All devious. All out for their own ends.”

“It’s sorted, Odysseus. No need to worry about Poseidon. I’ll deliver him.” She had become glad of the task, the excuse. “The *Argus* will be returned to home port. And we’ll, Scott and I, will fly to South America from there. You lot can make your way to wherever it is you plan to go from here and,”

“I have just one final request,” interrupted Scott.

“Another one.” Thelma attempted sarcasm but failed. It just sounded sad.

Bailey looked at Scott, quizzical. Together they had planned the detail in the car on the way back to the boat.

“I would like us *all* to take Thelma to the X.” He nodded to Peter. “We don’t understand, but you, despite what it looks like,” he coughed, clearly intending Bailey’s bruising, “have been nothing but kind. To everyone. Clearly, going there is important. And not just for Bailey.”

At this, Bailey said nothing, Odysseus clapped, Thelma moaned aloud and clasped the bag, and the Chorus, overcome with relief, put his head in his hands.

The image of being forced to swear allegiance to Poseidon had immediately haunted Odysseus. And Scott’s talk of final return was unnerving to him.

“Are you sure,” Odysseus asked Scott in a whisper through the dark of the cabin, “that you truly wish to return?”

“Yes.”

“Truly return to where you belong, dear comrade?”

“Unquestioningly,” Scott was tired of being kept awake. “Though who knows when we shall depart. And to where?”

But neither Odysseus nor Scott were there when, the next morning, Bailey announced she was in full agreement, the *Argus* would convey Thelma out to the X.

Odysseus’ gaze flicked between the clock on the wall, the bag he had located from a shelf, the queue ahead of him and the door.

“We must hurry,” said Scott. “Bailey will be furious.”

“Can I help you?”

Odysseus smiled at the woman behind the counter. “I wish to send a package.” He handed over the padded postbag.

“Where to?”

Odysseus leaned over the counter and whispered.

“And what will be going in it? Anything prohibited?”

“I’ve not decided.”

“Well, you need to pay for just the bag, then, and come back when you’ve got the contents. Cost depends on weight. Nothing prohibited, though.” She stabbed at the signature line, “You have to declare.”

“Can’t we just do everything, pay, now?”

“Not without content to weigh and your signed declaration. There are drugs, anthrax, terrorists.”

“They send Jacobins in bags now? Good heavens!” Scott muttered. “What is it, Odysseus, that’s so important for Aunty to receive? And why isn’t Thelma taking it herself?”

Odysseus caught sight of advertising for the passport photo service. “Photos!”

“You want a box, then.” She pointed to a shelf, “and maybe bubble wrap.”

“Right,” said Odysseus, uncertainly, “I’ll pack them.”

She pointed at a bench. “Over there.”

But Odysseus didn’t locate a box. Instead, he fumbled with the postbag, then, muttering, left Scott on the bench amidst pens and discarded envelope seals and, bag in hand, returned to the main counter. He returned and picked Scott up.

“A man, oh honourable Scott, must return to his native land, to his loved ones who patiently wait. You must return, not to where it ended—those trials are over—but to where it began. Onward go and meet your fate.”

Odysseus kissed Scott passionately, and weeping, wrangled him into the padded postal bag on which the woman had written in neat letters, *The Family of the Honourable Captain Scott of the Antarctic, Prince Among Men. c/- Plymouth, PL4 6N3. United Kingdom.*



It was the Chorus who persuaded Bailey—returning empty-handed from the Post Office, the mail had already left for Launceston by road—that they should cast lines and motor out.

“That which is done is done. It is the Fates.”

“Selfish bastard. I won’t have him on board.”

“Won’t we need experienced crew?” the Chorus reminded her, nervously.

“Thelma knows how to sail, doesn’t she?”

“Yes, but she’s only going to get worse.”

“His exile is over.” Odysseus defended himself from the dock. He made to step off the jetty. Bailey lunged at him with the boathook.

She handed the boathook to Peter, went aft and started the engine. “Don’t let him on board.”

Odysseus moved to the bollard and placed his hands on it, “I’m not slipping this cable.”

“I’ll happily live without it if it means being without you. Untie that line,” she said to Peter, “and when I say so, slip it through the rail. Then fend off. And if you don’t, I’ll cut it.”

Peter stowed the boathook.

Bailey increased revs and fended off. “See,” she yelled at Odysseus, “easy. You know how it’s done. You just leave someone.”

Odysseus, praying to Athene to save him from Poseidon, flung himself into the freezing harbour waters, alternately going under and, when resurfacing, yelling to the receding *Argus*.

## CHAPTER 11

The weather had been perfect since the storm, that had long kept them in port, had blown itself out. Having tacked multiple times to compensate for the current, the *Argus* entered the Strait proper. Unencumbered by near horizons, the boat was unconstrained. The tapered curve of the *Argus*' leaning hull was athletic and sure, the sail trim looked elegant, a slash of red paint from below the water line contrasted with the white hull and deep green of the ocean; the yacht, Bailey felt, was optimistic, a noble brightness beneath the clear, spacious blue sky.

She was tempted to just keep sailing. The mark on the chart no longer seemed so important, more an encumbrance to forward movement. To go there now was perhaps a folly, an unnecessary, nostalgic delve back into a past that, from this place of freedom, seemed irrelevant.

But she would go there, for she had Thelma to deliver. She would honour Scott's final wish.

The others stayed mainly below, and Bailey was enjoying having the boat largely to herself. When Thelma was not voicing distress, or Peter vomiting, the only noises were those of rigging, wind and sail, the hull moving against the ocean, the slap of Bailey's feet on the deck, and beyond the boat, water, wind, waves or occasional cry of a passing petrel. It reminded her of the old days, the days before Scott, Odysseus and the Chorus. But trying to remember that time was proving a challenge, for, weirdly, it felt like they, even Thelma now, had always been with her.

In the afternoon both Thelma and Peter joined her on deck, in time for the horizon

to transform from a hazy blue line into a thick black band.

“Look.” Bailey pointed. “What is it?”

“The great migration,” Thelma said softly. “Shearwaters.” She briefly outlined the mutton birds’ journey north from the islands, including hers and Peter’s, up across the Western Pacific to the Arctic. Fifteen thousand kilometres in six weeks; exhausted and starving birds were found as far away as North America, Japan, the Aleutian Islands. Then the return, to arrive back at the very same burrow, the same mate.

All afternoon the black line remained, the shearwaters patiently, insistently, lifting and dropping their wings, enacting the exacting commitment to which they had been born. On impulse, Bailey swung the wheel northwest, heading to anchorage in the Hunter group, keen to deviate from the mutton bird path; the thought of that lifetime of relentless fidelity caused a knot in her stomach.

“What if something happens?” Peter said.

“What do you mean?”

“Out there. Something bad.”

Bailey looked at Thelma, huddled in the cockpit, irritable and ashen. Beside Thelma, Peter, too, was hunched; the open water had again brought on bouts of vomiting.

“*You understand,*” for a moment Bailey heard the captain’s voice when he had presented her with her second dinghy, a two-hander, “*that you are responsible for this boat and everyone on it?*” And Bailey recalled the girl that she had been nodding, half listening, thinking only about the boat; in her mind, she had been already aboard, dreaming of where it might take her.

“Can you sail?” Bailey asked Thelma.

“I’m a child of the islands, aren’t I?” She motioned at her shaking body, “But I’m useless now.”

As if on cue, Peter vomited over the side and took himself below decks. Thelma, tottering, followed. Only Bailey saw the straggly tail end of the migratory line finally petering out as the great flock pierced north.

Bailey put the boat on autopilot and went below. All was miraculously silent. She made a sandwich and a coffee, consulted the chart and re-checked the plotted course that first led to an overnight anchorage, then on to the careful X of her grandfather, beside which was Thelma's unwieldy scrawl. What had occurred for Bailey's grandfather there, the gift he had wanted her, too, to know? X; in books it was easy—it was always on an island, people simply dug, knowing somewhere down there was treasure. The Strait's bottom was notoriously uneven; below the *Argus* lay thirty unpredictable fathoms.

The *Argus* nosed into East Telegraph Bay, to join the company of a single craft, already anchored, its dinghy pulled high on the beach and a tent visible at the beach end.

Bailey popped her head into the aft cabin. Both were asleep. She checked the weather forecast, it continued to hold but was predicted to break. *What would the captain do?* Bailey, now sailing waters he knew intimately, consulted the barometer, radioed in for a weather update, and ate dinner on deck, the granite covered outcrops in silhouette, the sky a silver mass. Before bed, she penned a log entry. Glancing up, as she re-read it, at the hanging globe with its spread of oceans that she, her grandfather, Scott and Odysseus, had variously travelled. She took it down and let her finger rest on Plymouth, wondering how Scott was faring. Had he made it? Before turning in, she gently extracted the nautilus from its blu-tack perch, handling the paper-thin case with care and wonder. *Not quite perfect*, Aunty had said.

Contrary to the forecast, the morning brought similar conditions. The Strait was often like that, unpredictable. There could be weeks where the weather did anything but that which was predicted. She popped her head into the aft cabin. Peter was asleep, Thelma

in the head. Careful not to disturb them, she weighed anchor and the *Argus* made its passage eastward into the Strait, revelling in a steady fifteen knot breeze, the sky still blue. Albatross wheeled past, gliding like beautiful, airborne boats.

If the weather held they should arrive at the X by day's end.

Departures. Arrivals. Bailey watched the hull carve its path through the ocean, the ocean ever practised in the grief of parting, the joy of return, and remembered the time she had returned, back to the cottage, after first leaving.

*Flying in, habitually tracking the estuary coastline, she had felt that her life had become an active statement against, a repudiation of, tradition and community with its small-minded, long-remembered, intimate knowledge that insisted on replication and uniformity. (Homophobia the least of it). The captain's, and so her life, were too known; any island future was circumscribed. But her sense of validation of the alternative she had chosen, unlimited possibility beyond the island's boundaries, had been marred. For her grandfather held knowledge of the sea, the depths of which she was only becoming aware as her own knowledge increased. His felt encyclopaedic, a resource that she had wished to speedily download but had not known how to. Extraction took time. It meant sitting still and listening, including to digressions and seeming irrelevancies. Plus, enduring silences. Extraction risked raising the night in the Channel, which for Bailey now felt as though it were relegated to the past. The drowning of her parents a theoretical history, one that almost belonged to someone else now. Her grandfather's increasing returns to it disconcerting, a tethering to an anchorage she no longer needed. And neither should he, she had thought. Let it go. History has no place in the future.*

*Of similar disinterest were those other, repeated stories. The ones he had also told her when she was young—the whale that winked its eye at him in the Labrador Sea, or the heady spice-scented smells of the markets of Tangier that found their way down to the dock*

*so much so that entering port was to be enveloped by a cloud of cinnamon, nutmeg and anise.*

*Craving forward movement and information of practical use, Bailey had veered him past these, but, despite having told it all before, he started at the same point, labouring the detail—signing up, aged sixteen, without his parent’s permission, aboard a liner in the docks.*

*Bailey had not heard how he gently stressed that he had telegraphed home from Melbourne yet had omitted to say he did not look back. Nor did it enter her mind to question why it was, or what, he might have wished to leave. She had thought only, as he originally had, of the forward voyage.*

*“It smelt of coal and cider. She was shipping apples to Newcastle and, from there, wheat to South America.”*

*Bailey had hurried him on to facts—ports entered, oceans crossed, calamities experienced—and mined for detail of vessel, weather, tides, ballast, navigation, crew. She had made him comb his memory, feeling an urgency for something he possessed—knowledge? experience?—she could not guarantee would ever be hers, and, in feeling this, had sensed herself, for the first time, to not be young. She had not been able to hear or see the thing in him that surpassed the sea, knowledge gained because life had engulfed him, wrecked him, taken from him. (And he saw that Bailey had lost nothing to it yet, or not that she could properly remember, not that she could properly feel).*

*“A first mate?” he had enquired on the night before she was to depart.*

*She had shrugged, non-committal.*

*He had not minded that she couldn’t find the words to tell him. He had simply thought of how she would be judged in the eyes of the world.*

*“Some choices, fates, are hard, Bailey. Some might or might not agree.*

*Particularly someone my age.” He had thought of his wife; of people’s discomfort at the colour of her skin, including those close to him, when they had returned to live on the island.*

*“The heart, it’s no one else’s business.”*

*As offering for not being able to return his openness, she had told him of her plans, boatswain to mate and maybe beyond. To say ‘captain’ in front of him felt impudent.*

*She had been met with a nod of his head and a smile.*

*“The logical next step would be captain.”*

*She had realised in that moment, that she liked him. Not because she had seen pride in his face, but because he did not deny her those dreams.*

*“Want to try email? There are programs that translate text to speech.”*

*He had shaken his head.*

*“Old nose next door would be out of a job.”*

*Bailey had left suffused with information, and keen to be gone. Yet the momentum of her outward passage had subtly changed. There was a pull back now. Not to the man per se, but to his knowledge. Yet more than that. They had met in a different way; like he who never held her had let her go. That distance, that freedom, now a line joining them.*

*It had comforted her, after that visit, to think of him. To think that her path was not unlike his. That he approved of her or did not, in some areas, disapprove. That the very waters that flowed past the cottage door, flowed beneath her hull. The island and her grandfather comfortably distant but not absent.*

*And in the years that had followed, when the yearning to re-find him had surfaced but she was too busy, the holding of the hull felt like his stable presence. She invoked him when on watch as the weather turned bad, or if she were uncertain about a navigational, traffic or crew decision. What would the captain do? And had realised, as time passed, that*

*he had instilled in her a quiet competence, an ability to methodically assess a situation and a capacity for decision-making that was his. Mixed into this were characteristics not his; those of her parents, she had wondered? A temper that he did not appear to possess (or if he did, he did not show), an intuitive streak that could render a well-devised, rational decision redundant, a carelessness.*

In recalling that particular coming and going, Bailey only half registered the drop in breeze. The opposite of what had been predicted, it then dropped out almost entirely. She watched the crumpled water for a time but grew bored and fell to tasks. She mopped decks, sealed the bow hatch cover that leaked, tightened the stern gland then washed clothes on deck. Thought about going below and greasing the steering but couldn't be bothered. It was getting late, past lunch, idly thinking about food, she watched the now flat ocean, thinking about the X, enough to retrieve the chart from below, grabbing fruit and water bottle as she went, and, in the sun, re-checking the course.

Late afternoon, the yacht approached the coordinates. She took down all sail. In the blissful silence, she waited. Nothing happened.

*What would Scott do?* Not drift. He would be systematic; construct a grid, measure lengths, wind speed, average boat speed. *What would Odysseus do?* Fart, appear optimistic, and consult Athene. Bailey wondered, then, what Odysseus had done, after the boat had departed. Where he was. Out here, in the space and clarity of the Strait, his betrayal seemed slightly less travesty, slightly more foolishness.

“Any ideas on what I’m supposed to be doing?” she said aloud. Then repeated it, louder.

“Help.”

Bailey looked about.

“Help!”



Peter was lying in the corridor, vomit surrounding him. He tried to raise his head.

“I’m worried, about Thelma.”

Slumped over the bowl, Thelma’s body, vomit stained, was cold. All of it ached, she mumbled. Her limbs, her torso, her jaw, even her eyes it seemed, tremored. But she shook her head at the prospect of returning. “Are we there yet?” she whispered.

*You are responsible for this boat and everyone on it.* Bailey heard the captain’s voice as she changed clothing, systematically rehydrated, mopped, and changed bedding; offering, too late, medication for nausea and vomiting. Just once had she glanced into their cabin.

From then on, Bailey’s watch felt endless. Attending to the movement of the boat, pulling it back to the X, monitoring its drift, resetting their course in what seemed like an endless, meaningless repetition, persevering only because Peter and Thelma insisted, and because she felt guilt. And, in between, offering water, dry crackers for Peter, preparing insipid broth.

But nothing stayed down or in for Thelma; foulness poured from her body, depleting her further.

Bailey shifted Thelma into her own fore’ard berth to be nearer the head. She emptied buckets. Changed sheets, towels, clothing, and washed; the deck littered with fabric. Grateful, again, for the weather’s benevolence—drying, solo boat handling. Then, it became such that Bailey had to carry Thelma to the head, trying not to knock the limp, skinny legs against the narrow passageway. Physically assisting her to vomit or toilet.

Sponging her down, and placing a cool washer to her forehead, Bailey was frightened by the heat that radiated from the thin body, and then similarly concerned when chills and shaking took it over. It alternated like that, on and on.

Sitting through Thelma’s tears, Bailey didn’t know what to do. She awkwardly held

her hand. She updated Peter, still aft, still unwell, encouraging him that the sea sickness would, indeed, pass, and consulting him on Thelma's symptoms. They might not, she thought. At what point was this course of action foolish? But he was adamant that they should stay. Medical aid would not work; he vowed. Something else was needed.

Presence, vigilance, sleeplessness. Through the night and then into the dawn. And Bailey, beyond tired, beyond worry, beyond answers, required to do it all again.

The third morning ushered in a tiny breeze and a pitiful sight. After another night in which not one of them had slept, Thelma lay inert in the cockpit, eyes glazed, dribble hanging from the corner of her mouth. She had asked, at dawn, to be taken on deck. Peter sat, slumped, his back against the combing, bucket beside him, face by turns green or grey, his eyes barely leaving Thelma. Bailey was beside herself with lack of sleep. The three of them remained like that for half a day, saying little, whilst beneath the *Argus* waters slipped past. Then the little breeze that had arisen died off. The ocean became pool-like. An eerie, dead calm prevailed.

“Food?” Bailey could not keep the guilt out of her voice.

“I'm so tired,” Thelma began to weep. Not tears but sobs, growing in intensity, as though a swell within her was beginning to form.

Bailey looked to Peter. He shrugged.

The wailing grew in intensity.

“I'm going down.”

Bailey was left alone with the heaving mess. At first, she felt concern. Then, when Thelma waved wildly at the horizon and called out, “the migration!” she felt dismay, for there were no birds there.

“Where am I?” Thelma called out. Blindly, hands fluttering like panicked, useless wings.

Bailey held her. “Shh.”

“Persephone,” Thelma uttered weakly. “Persephone?”

And, across the afternoon, other waters joined the growing wave within Thelma—  
disorientation, despair, panic, pain.

It was the pain Bailey saw in her that caused her to retrieve Peter in the late  
afternoon.

“She hasn’t stopped, has she,” he said wearily, and turned over in his bunk.

“Impossible to sleep with her noise.”

“I don’t think we can go on.”

On deck, Peter looked at Thelma like she was an annoying object, or an unappealing  
curiosity.

As if sensing him, she opened her swollen eyes and stared hard.

“Will it ever finish, Thelma?”

“It’s all your fault,” she said bitterly. Again, she began to weep.

“What should we do?” asked Bailey.

He shrugged again.

“There has to be something.”

“Put her in the dinghy.”

“What?”

“Set her adrift. Out there.”

Bailey looked at him. “You’re joking?”

He said nothing.

Incredulous, she began, “I’m responsible for...”

But Peter went below. And Thelma, in some other place, but as if sensing his  
abandonment, howled.

“Fuck.” Bailey decided then that enough was enough. They would get her medical attention in Burnie.

Peter returned, carrying the tow line from the v locker.

“I’ll not have another night of this shit.”

He pulled the dinghy in and tied an inexpert knot, tenuously linking the line to the dinghy painter. He handed the line to Bailey.

“I can’t,” Bailey held up her hands, refusing it, “It’s against every tenet of sea law, of safety. Of common sense. All my training... I won’t do it.”

“You won’t do it now?”

“Ever.”

“So, you only do it when it suits you?”

Bailey looked blank.

“What’s the difference between this boat,” he pointed at the dinghy, “and the boat of body?”

“It’s not a riddle,” he added.

She didn’t understand yet a terrible sensation rose in her gut.

“The vessel of your grandfather.”

It felt like a punch. All the more shocking given his normal gentleness. A sound, half gasp, half cry fell out of her.

But Peter had no investment in her feeling good or not good. He was simply doing his job. He dropped the line and went below.

Bailey snatched it up. He returned with a chart. He stabbed at the X and Thelma’s scribbled mess.

“It’s not always about you, Bailey. Or, maybe it’s everything about you and nothing about you all at the same time.”

“Cast her adrift,” Peter said, after Thelma had been made to get in.

Bailey made to climb the rail.

“What’re you doing?”

“She can’t go unaided.”

“Correct, you can’t do it without help,” said Peter. “And, she has to do this bit alone. How did Odysseus describe it? *Eidolon*? Possessed. She has to battle it out. Only she can decide to reclaim herself from the thing that grips her.”

Bailey held up her hands. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Tragedy, it’s never about the fate of an individual. Help her.”

“Yes, what can you give?” Thelma croaked, from the dinghy floor.

It felt like the time on the island all over again but this time there were no biscuits, no photo, no Odysseus to give away. Bailey thought of him, then. How generous Odysseus had been. How accepting he was of her moods and her temper. And then she thought of Scott. How solicitous, how like her grandfather he was in his care and instruction of her. Together, they had tried to encourage, cheer, assist her.

“Hang on.”

She went below decks and found Odysseus’ staff in the sail locker. She laid it beside Thelma in the dinghy.

“A hero’s staff. For luck.”

Thelma gave a wan smile.

“Luck’s useless where I’m going. Heroes even more so, spending their lives avoiding death...” Yet she clasped the staff to her body.

It was Peter who made Bailey pay the line out.

“Don’t let me go,” Thelma’s voice was panicked.

“You’ll be...fine,” Peter said.

Bailey tied and double-checked the line on the rail. “All good.” Her voice belying a confidence she did not feel.

“What else?” Thelma asked weakly from the dinghy. “What more can you give?”

Bailey aware she had nothing, said nothing.

Thelma nodded her head. “Yes. So, return.”

“Now what?” Bailey turned to Peter.

“We wait.”

“Hades, Hades...,” Thelma whimpered, thrashing.

“Sophocles made us, the Chorus, repeat,” Peter said quietly, as the line was paid out, “not to be born is best. But I’ve never believed it.”

Thelma, wearing a PFD, lay in the dinghy that trailed a long distance behind the *Argus*.

By turns she was agitated, anxious, fatigued. Anguished sounds floated across the water as though a demon battle were indeed being enacted, and, pitifully, that Thelma was losing. Bailey could see the wracking of her body. Her cries of ‘cold’ or ‘burning’ or ‘take me’. Then the long silences, when she clearly did not sleep yet worryingly did not move. Only occasionally did she fitfully sleep. All this was watched, through binoculars, by Bailey, who insisted she be hauled in to be given water, after which she invariably vomited. Peter, present on deck the whole time but seemingly disinterested, would have left her out there, victual-less. He remained pragmatic.

“Tough love.”

Not softening even when, in the night, from wherever a bout of sleep had taken her, Thelma once called out,

“Peter.” A gale of longing behind it.

All night, Bailey worried. About Thelma, about her dying. About having been irresponsible. About her grandfather twitching and moaning in a silent room. About tides,

winds, storms, the notorious Strait. Images of all possible weathers visited—waves converging from multiple directions, building on each other to become rogue and brutal. Storms—and their elemental parades of power, when the gods flexed muscle, or staged fiery, passionate performances of light, firework and thunderous sound. Tired, she could not think straight, and feeling sick in her gut from the toxic mix of fear, hope, and helplessness that sluiced through her, she became resigned but still compulsively checked and rechecked lines, pulling on them like a fishing line, assuring herself that, at that other end, despite the clear visual, some form of response existed.

Weirdly, phenomenally, the *Argus* seemed to stay, more or less, dead on the X. She drifted this way and that but largely remained faithful, as though inexplicably bound to the drama. Or tragedy.

At another bout of hopping up to fiddle with lines, Peter urged Bailey to not act and simply trust. Something about his steadiness, his sense of belief, or knowledge, that this was the right thing to do, settled her. She still watched the dinghy but noticed the sky, the water. Darkness enveloped them. They sat in silence.

Waves, Bailey began to perceive, with a logic and timing that was their own, moved not just the *Argus* and the dinghy, but Thelma, too. And, as though she herself was a sea, inside Bailey successions of pity, horror, remorse, exasperation, boredom, anger, repulsion rose and passed away. Seconds became minutes and slow minutes dragged into an hour, then two. Vigils are not brief, rarely comfortable; Bailey was tired, half awake, half asleep and cold. Her thoughts careered back into a past comprised of the voyage to date, her grandfather in his nursing home room, her life before returning, and forward into myriad imagined futures—returning to Nice, remaining, continuing to sail, adopting a dog. Waves of random, chaotic thought ceaselessly arose and endlessly broke, their wash drowning her mind like a mid ocean rock.

“So, tell me,” Peter said aloud, perhaps to Bailey, perhaps to himself, perhaps rhetorically, “What is the sea?”

It was so quiet now that Thelma, if she were awake, would have heard his question.

What sprang to Bailey’s mind was an oar blade slicing through dark indigo, a cluster of buoyant, light-filled bubbles swirling to the surface. The clear drops that fell from the blade, anxious to return to their origin. Then of stones rolling to and fro in the tidal push and pull of murky depths. But how to describe the indescribable? How to impart it was one thing to look at it but another to be on it? How, at first, it was strangely intoxicating, and wildly fascinating in its lure, promise and gleam, suggesting discovery, adventure. One could admire it, set out upon it, yet simultaneously hate and fear it. Unpredictably soothing, it was also moody; mighty, wrathful, deceptive, alluring, inconstant, perilous, savage, uncompromising, a thing capable of taking everything, lives included, and returning little. Yet how bountiful! Empty but teeming with life. Never still, it was uncountable, uncontainable, endless.

“Unfathomable,” she offered.

Peter smiled in the dark, “If such a thing as progress existed, I’d say you were making some.”

They sat on.

Bailey sailed an endless mirage of an ocean whose restless thought waves gradually slowed from tempest to storm to swell. And then there was within her an extended calm that was sweet and welcome. It grew, and with it her focus. She felt solidly there. Present, in a way she realised she had never before been. Peter nearby, the deck beneath her, the lilt of the boat, the shush of the sea, the night around, Thelma off in her craft; she was aware of it all. Then, suddenly, without warning, she went under as though fallen into depths. The conflicted woman of action was left hollow on the surface, unused to a different dark, a



different quiet. Bailey panicked and kicked up. But, somehow, someone or something held her under. The habit of fight or fright reared but she stilled it, somehow willing to trust. And then, when accustomed to being below, that thing guided her down deeper still. Down past the end of air, down past the end of light. Deeper, in search of something long past where anything existed. Not resting, not yet. Until...It was as if her breath stopped, though she was breathing, and elemental exchange ceased. Left only was the eternal push and pull of a great current and a deep, exquisite sense of peace.

Drowning folk struggle for air. Bailey would have stayed there had the sun not begun to suggest a new day calling her back to the world's surface. Yet it was not she, the old Bailey, she felt, who surfaced. It was someone new, bearing some sort of prize of return.

The sun was nosing towards the horizon when, in the half light, the mooring lines to the dinghy lifted high, went taut, and trembled violently as if fit to snap. Standing at the bow Bailey leaped aft and went to pull it in.

“Wait,” cautioned Peter.

A breeze arose, as if from nowhere and the dinghy, a distance off, pulled further and darted this way and that, as if under its own propulsion, as though undecided between two disparate decisions.

Suddenly the spastic lines stopped moving, dropped flatly and sank below the surface. They did not pull it in immediately, avoiding that moment when they must catch the trailing painter with the boat hook and pull the lonely vessel in by hand.

“I think...” Bailey said hopefully.

Peter stared blindly ahead.

“There's something I want to tell you. It's not in the script.”

He turned to her, his face stricken.

“You must find the courage to let the world break your heart, again and again.”

The dinghy knocked emptily against the yacht’s hull. Thelma, unmoving, lay curled around the staff, like a snake around a caduceus.

Thelma was like an aged person, moving slowly. She seemed to stand a little bent, appeared a little confused, her actions unsteady. She said she felt woozy, washed out, weak. Slowly that passed and was replaced by long periods of silence. She had the air of someone returned from an arduous journey, much of which, so painful, they had forgotten or erased, as if to recall it would be unendurable. And then, as she took more food, more liquid, and seemed to reinhabit her body, it was as if, simply, the time in the dinghy belonged to a life that had been and was now gone, as transient and disappeared as the writing a child’s finger makes on water.

They were waiting for a casserole to cook. Thelma was resting in the galley berth. Peter had been paying special attention to her diet, making nourishing, protein-filled meals which he insisted she eat. And her appetite was growing.

“What happened to you?” Thelma had been watching Bailey. “Something’s different.”

“I don’t know.”

Thelma smiled. “I see.” She smiled at Peter. “I think she’s ready. I’m not quite but when I am....”

“I think I know,” Peter said to Bailey. “I watched you, on deck. But life begins again. Has. And it’s easy to forget.” *Seize it, that gift*, he wanted to say. *Remember.*

Thelma would have opened her mouth then and recounted her own journey but there were no words for the voyage down that dark chute.

At first it was to Hades, with its vats of burning oils, its excruciating flames, and its grinning, maniacal demons. Even now she shuddered. For how long that terrible torture,

that great battle of trying to escape and then succumbing, trying to flee and then giving up, went on, she doesn't know. Time had been irrelevant in that endless, circular suffering where the demons found ever inventive ways to inflict their pain. And then, no longer capable of anything, desiring only death, she had, unthinkably, dropped down further still, past the underworld—Ajax and the rest squabbling on in eternal unrest, Tiresias blindly reciting prophecies. Hermes in the shadows pointing the way on—down past the end of life.

How sweet it will be, she had thought, to die, to stop, to cease.

Then it began, the dismembering.

Beyond drowning, all her dramas, all her high heroics, had floated up into the light. All her hideous, graphic actions, like weed streaming away as the ship of her plummeted down in slow motion. The air from her lungs—bubbles of light ascending. Her great head, like some mere helmet, pulled, slipped away from her neck by the weight and drag of that monstrous body and life falling down. The arms and legs of it, like ship's timbers, peeling flimsily away.

*Dive. Dive. Descend and do not return.* Whose voice was it that had guided her on?

The dark and the weather of her, gone. The human, hollow and sunk. She and her pained life. The history of her, the god of her, no longer. Then even that movement stopped. Not even water now, not even light.

She remained moored and unmoored within an infinite, wordless expanse, of which the sea was a single drop, out of which it had all come, and into which, on each tidal breath, it all returned. Again, and again, everything rose and fell, coming and going, until imperceptibly, washed and held, there remained no setting outs, no returns. Again, and again, repeating on until only vast, empty, luminous wakefulness remained.

The Chorus's phone pinged. He looked at it intently, turned off the gas beneath the

casserole and sat down near Thelma. “I tagged Scott.” He read the feed information then handed across his phone, and the article, to Bailey.

*Found in the tent alongside their frozen bodies were sixteen kilos of fossils, collected on the return journey from the Pole. Despite running low on food and struggling against foul weather, the explorer-scientists made detours with a specific goal in mind... The prize fossil, found alongside Scott’s body, was the plant *Glossopteris indica*, an extinct beech-like tree from 250 million years ago. The delicate fern like imprint on the stone proved that Antarctica had once been part of the ancient super-continent Gondwana. Scott had found a missing piece of the Earth’s jigsaw, one that indicated multiple countries had all been part of the same prehistoric land mass, a finding which changed modern geological understanding of the planet.*

“I would trade so much just to tell him,” Bailey whispered.

The Chorus and Thelma took cups of tea up into the sun.

“Sing?” Thelma asked Peter. She asked because she knew it made him happy.

Peter’s voice sounded, notes softly dropping like the first melts of snow high in the mountains. Gradually it grew. Thelma stared at the back of his head, at how his dark hair was neatly cut well above his collar, how his skin, from so much time indoors, had seen so little sun. It shocked her, the softness of him. His was a frightening innocence; his commitment to the truth, his belief that she could help. She thinks how, when she is with him, like at the pub, people did not seem to stare. How his gentle graveness could vanish, his whole face uncharacteristically lighting up, when she said something that made him laugh. And that was frequently. The sun was shining on them and she felt healthily warm for the first time in ages. Thelma closed her eyes. *Æ ex marks the spot.* The demons in the depths. The possibility that that which was above the surface and that which was below

could be in balance. She remembered why she wrote it on the chart. Because it set down a commitment, and if you wrote it, it's real. Ex. She listed definitions in her mind. All of them fitted: Out, as in exclude. Upward, as in extol. Thoroughly, as in excruciate. Denoting removal or release, as in expel. Forming verbs which denote inducement of a state, as in exhilarate. Forming nouns which denote a former state. Ex-addict.

Peter sang, "there is a ship and it sails the sea, it's loaded deep, as deep can be, but not as deep as the love I'm in, I know not if I sink or swim."

The wind picked this beauty up in great armfuls and carried it away across the oceans, as if soothing seas. Thelma realised she could let it in, his love. The thought was frightening and exhilarating. And to let things in, she must let things out.

She opened her eyes. Could she, would she remember the story? 'The sea is a mirror,' Aunty had said when instructing her to tell it.

"The water is wide," Peter sang on, "I can't cross over. And neither have I wings to fly. Give me a boat that can carry two. We both shall row, my love and I."

The gift of his voice, hiding nothing, washed over Thelma. You couldn't hide when you sang, she realised. Nor could you hide when recounting story. Something at the base of her spine stirred, or reawakened, like a snake uncoiling after the sleep of winter; a serpent that, with time, could cut something dangerous down with one swift flick of its head. An energy that could eat anything. She went below and returned with the zip lock bag. As if making an offering to the gods, or the sea, she tilted the bag. The waters had only just received the fine, white dusting when Bailey said,

"Then I think we're done. We'll get underway, yes?"

Thelma returned aft and sat Bailey down behind the wheel.

"First, there's something." And she began to tell the story.

"Tell it," Aunty had said, "like it's your own."

But Thelma knew that that capacity would only come with time, borne of something that she did not yet have but now wanted. So, she began, feeling her way, recounting it as Aunty had told it to her.

## CHAPTER 12

The captain had had the haunted look of someone who had truly seen the sea. Or something else that was deep, or madness producing. For he said nothing as they greeted the ragged yacht that had limped into the jetty. So, it was to her house they were sent, the three refugees from the sea; anyone fleeing anything was directed there.

And she saw that he had indeed seen something out there that had marked him. Or that frightened or shamed him. Probably both of those. Most likely he had seen himself, she thought. For the sea was only really a mirror of the mind; you saw yourself.

She could see the mark, the thing that happened to people who had experienced and survived the indescribable. Knew it well, now, for she saw it daily in her own people, and how, if not attended to, it got passed on in the bones. Knew it herself; how something got scooped out or wrenched out. The space it left. What he would do with it now would either leave a terrible vacancy or a spaciousness. His choice. She served the two men tea, after which they both stumbled to bed.

It was only then she dealt with the child, who also ventured few words, sat in one spot, rarely moved and had the same wide-eyed look. It was putting her to bed that she realised she was injured. In the absence of medical help, they did the best they could; intuition and the neighbour she summoned together suggested the splint of newspapers and brandy.

In the morning, Toxley caught the barge, the one which came in once a week with goods and the mail. The captain asked to stay on. Still saying little, he mainly sat in a daze. Did not enquire about the child, who she had made stay in bed, and who seemed happy to

do so having found Aunty's childhood bear. When she heard the child whispering to it that night, she knew the girl would be alright.

On the second day he chopped wood, mended a fence. After that he didn't ask, just chopped wood for three days straight, lathered and exhausted. She suggested collecting weed off the beach, but he shook his head and she, Aunty, knew the shoreline was still too proximal to the sea from which they had come.

In the shelter of the kitchen, he ate sparingly, sitting on the wooden shoe box, as though the table was a place he didn't deserve. He drank tea outside in his wood splitting breaks and watched the horde of children who came and went, her own and everybody else's. He couldn't look properly at the girl, but she saw how he observed her with the other children. That she saw each of them, and, amidst the washing and cooking and cleaning had enough love, enough time such that each small face bloomed into a small smile or a laugh.

And she saw, too, that he didn't know where to begin. Or how.

It was the child who made it happen.

On the sixth night, the child, Bailey, put her hand on his knee.

"You ask if you can hold his hand," Aunty said.

He put his head in his hands, then, unable to stop the great gulping breaths of air that came out of him.

The child stayed at his knee, looking up at him.

Eventually Aunty said, "You put her to bed."

Generosity shone out of her, he thought. She was still young, he guessed. But she watered it, and he could see it would only grow across her life until she became luminous, nothing short of extraordinary. It was all there. He needed something of that. Or  
absolution. To go on.



When he returned, he paced awhile and then haltingly began.

They were delivering a yacht from Melbourne.

He had turned down so much work because of the child. Grief, financial worry, her, crying night after night, and him sleepless. This led Eric to suggest he say yes.

“Cynthia’s delighted to have the girl for a few days. It’ll be good for you to get away. And the money. Double-handed will be fine. Plus, you need to get out there. Again.”

But at the last minute, the Toxley children had gone down with mumps, Mrs Bucher was away and, other options exhausted, the child ended up accompanying them for what they revised into a fast run.

The boat was in good shape and handled well. He and Eric had an ease on board borne of years of shared experience. He did most of the helming, Eric the sail trimming and cooking, and, this time, child watching.

“She takes after you,” Eric smiled, the first day out.

And the child was surprisingly adaptable, a pair of sturdy little sea legs on her. He relaxed then; had begun to enjoy it, this outing back upon the sea. Had the thought that perhaps his life could be normal again at some future time, rather than being the endless black space of fatigue that was grief and the unrelenting care of the girl combined.

The second evening the glass fell rapidly, and he was woken in the night, not by the child, but by the terrible sound in the rigging that spoke of dirty weather on its way. He dressed for it and went on deck to relieve Toxley, who shook his head as he handed over the wheel.

“Storm jib only? Then I’ll prepare something. Eat while we can.”

“Washboards in the companionway. Lash, or double lash, everything below that can be fastened. I’ll do the deck. And tie the child in.”

Eric raised an eyebrow.

“Tie her in.”

The wind kept rising and, if the night sky had allowed them to see it, a dirty grey cigar-shaped cloud, spanning the entire sky, rolled inexorably on, heading directly south, sucking all before it into its terrible growing momentum. They ate a hurried snack as the waves began to bank and then stand tall in a way he not seen in the Strait before. The ocean, as they ran before it, bucked, turning (not that they can see it in the dark except its white crest teeth) from green, to blue, to black. The mighty peaks of waves became fodder for the growing wind that slashed at their mouths, the crests screaming as they were cut and sent flinging by the shrieking beast the wind had become. The boat’s gunwales rolled under at every movement. Below they could hear things crashing and breaking. He could only hope the child would be all right.

Huddled down in the cockpit, Eric yelled something to him, but the captain could not hear what he had said. He could barely see him—the spray was like a blizzard. He motioned to him to go below and position the washboards. On deck, he tethered himself to the wheel, attempting to hold a course slightly off angle to a dead run.

Taller and taller the waves became. First house high, then multi-storied high, transforming somewhere up there into mighty watery cities toppling down. The captain could barely hold on, hoping they would not be pitch-poled or, should the full force of one wave hit them, be smashed to pieces. He had ceased praying years ago; the day after the night in the Channel.

He retraced the Channel chart in his mind. He still couldn’t fathom, even now, how, well out from the shore rocks, they could have been blown in so quickly. Why had his son not come below sooner to update him? Why had he not gone on deck earlier? Surely, he could have dealt with the succession of waves, the loss of steerage, there on that lee shore

so close to home? He saw his wife then, not as he did in his nightmares where, perpetually fighting for air, she was whitened and partial, her flesh eaten out, bones floating ragged. Rather, she came to him as she was when she dived, hair streaming. Vital, strong, beautiful. Her arms were outstretched, welcoming him, down where things did not shriek, where no child cried. Down into the quiet where he would lie beside her again, fully entwined, in a time and place where embraces were never broken. Would he meet her down there, his beautiful wife? His son whom he still didn't know how to forgive? Or is it himself he can't absolve? Surviving sometimes seemed a random thing, he thought, as though determined by the gods, and he had a moment of not caring if they did or didn't survive this terrible drama playing out around them.

*Money depends on survival*, his wife reminded him, pragmatic, *money to feed, clothe and educate the child.*

How onerous, how fatiguingly weighty, it was to have lives depending on you! And his heart broke again for his son. If only it were he, the captain, out here alone tonight. No expectations. It would be three against his name on this voyage; his was not to be an unblemished record.

*It wasn't your responsibility*, said his wife, in the way she had said in his mind, so many times over the years. *It was the boy's. His boat. Your gift to him, no longer yours. His captaincy. He did everything he could. It was just bad luck.*

*But I taught him*, the captain mentally replied. *Or did not teach him enough.* He does not believe in luck: bad luck was just a series of small mistakes adding up, one atop another.

The water exploded like grenades against every inch of the boat and, not knowing it well enough, the captain could only hope for all the invisible construction, minor man-made efforts that he could not view when he took possession, to either hold or not hold

against the onslaught.

He thought back to the debris of the *Atlanta* on the beach the day after the night in the Channel. His heartbreak had extended to the boat too, for which he felt guilt. They were not just timbers. She, too, had been a living thing, different from but not unlike his wife, his son, his daughter-in-law. He had shed tears on the beach over her planking in a way he could not shed tears over the bodies the sea chose not to return.

And then it came, a roaring sound he had never heard before. A sound against which timbers, good choices, luck were useless. The sound of the world ending. The storm jib, sheeted flat, was shredded from luff to clew in an instant. Helming was useless and the yacht wallowed broadside before resuming direction. Then she was picked up, her stern thrown impossibly high. Miraculously she dropped and surfed, balanced on her nose, before being spun to starboard with a sickening lurch. A wave smashed her down on her port side. He does not fully know what happened next, just that he had miraculously remained clipped on, and that the boat and he emerged back into the air after what seemed like a lifetime in the depths. Depths unspeakably frightening, in which, in those long moments that felt like hours, his wife was conspicuously absent.

The event sent him below decks. Eric had lashed himself to the girl, both of them in the lowest bunk. They seemed intact but nothing else was. Anything that could have been thrown across the cabin and smashed had been.

How they managed to endure what followed, including two additional knock downs, he would never fully understand. And how it was that they survived those hours of endless tempest blurring into a single frightening night the like of which he had never encountered upon any other ocean—cyclones in the Coral Sea, the might of autumnal north Atlantic gales, a dismasting while rounding the Cape—and a single night's late passage in the Channel, so close to home, had ended in such mayhem, would remain unfathomable.

The pair of them re-emerged, seas still massive, frightened of the damage they might find on deck. Below, the wide-eyed but miraculously calm child remained safely strapped in the bunk. Beggaring belief, the mast still stood, and despite various damage, the boat was intact.

Two things stuck with him as the storm abated. The first indelible memory was not about surviving. Rather, he looked behind to see a dark shape hurling down the face of a wave. He could not make it out at first, had the thought it was an injured whale, unable to dive and caught within the maelstrom. But then he got better sight of it as it was tossed like a piece of balsa wood. The stupendous and full mighty length of it fell through air. Not a branch or a floating telegraph pole but an entire dead tree. A solid arrow shot from a great height. Perhaps one hundred and fifty, one hundred and eighty feet in length and who knew what girth. Nothing would survive being hit by it. He thought of the child tied in below.

“Untie her, untie her,” he shrieked at Toxley, who heard him now the wind had somewhat dropped.

Toxley clambered below, sprawling on the stairs, mercilessly oblivious of the harpoon pitching across their wake. At least, if it hits, they will both never know what happened; at least it will be fast, he thought. He looked again and could not see it. It was possible, as waves broke around the yacht, that the mammoth lay in the trough, a hurdle they would never clear, one last obstacle, one last taunt from the gods, waiting to take them down. He scoured the sea, saw the tree periodically being pitched about then sliding down a wave. What did it weigh? It was almost a relief, in some perverse way, to concentrate on the tree and so fail to notice or care about the size of the waves still hurtling down on them.

How strange, he thought, that a piece of the land (which was, after all, what a wooden boat was) would be vanquished by the ally tree, another intruder on the sea, rather than the foreign ocean itself. He looked up to see the trunk suspended for one single,

miraculous moment, fully upright on a wave crest, as though growing out of the ocean. The tree was even bigger than he had first imagined. But then it was usurped; Poseidon trumped Demeter. He felt again, watching it shoot down the wave face, that they were being played with, that the yacht was a fly in a basin of water, the target of bored, competing gods.

The second indelible memory was of turning his attention back to the boat just in time to see the child clamber from the companionway and, in the pitch of the yacht at that exact moment, topple out of the cockpit onto the downward sloping deck. She had not been immediately lost. Rather she hovered between deck and sea, suspended. Her body was parallel to the deck, her head under the water and he watched the top half of her body bow with the weight upon it. Time, the pounding of the sea, and the roar of the wind, all stopped.

*Where is Toxley?*

She should have gone by now, and in some ways it would have been a relief, as the boat momentarily righted, to be left with vacant freeboard. But the body was still there, stuck out at a weird angle as if she were flying. A misplaced figurehead.

*Go, go*, he whispered, perplexed. The sea should have taken her. Should have done its predictable job. He waited a moment more. For the next roll of the boat, for the weight of responsibility, of duty stretching across the years, to be cleanly gone. The worst will have happened, and it will be clear and neat. Demarcated now. This additional failure would not be a prison, as it had been, but a refuge, an earned identity in which he could comfortably reside. Within its wall would be freedom rather than the terrible conundrum of each day—unwilling to let go the shape of his old life, yet not knowing how to move into the invitation of the new posed by the child. How to meet the little one's incomprehensible needs? The terrible uncertainty of if, and how, to care? The incessant unanswerable question of whether he was doing it right, companioned in equal measure by terror and

relief that it may not last.

Now, he would not have to look into her face and see the colouring of his son, the curve of chin that replicated that of his wife. Rather, he would be left simply with the humdrum grind of grief and failure. Finally, he would be left alone with these companions who did not ask him to come back to life in the way the child's funny little small talk insisted. Her need each day to eat and wear clean clothes. The way she tugged at his hand to point at an ant and looking up at him smiled, counting on his return wonder.

Unencumbered, and simple, his old life could come back—sailing and the freedom to forget.

He knew he must go over and free the inert body, that decency, competency, captaincy required it, but he was thinking of how his wife had handed him the same body, much smaller back then, the night in the Channel. *Take the child.* He had wanted to take them both, but his wife insisted. *Look after her.*

If the sea took her this time, he thought, she would be spared from ever feeling pain, ever having to make choices, ever having to be responsible. He would not have to feel the weight of the little frame, this time lifeless, lying in his arms.

*Look after her.*

Toxley, stricken, was in the companionway. He tried to clamber into the cockpit, but the roll of the boat prevented him. He looked between his friend at the wheel and the child. As he threw himself across the deck, the captain saw his head was bleeding. (Later, it would turn out he had unstrapped her and then been thrown across the cabin by a wave hitting the boat, rendered momentarily unconscious by his head cracking against the stove.) Toxley crawled and clawed across to eventually place his hands on the child's leg. He pulled. Her body returned, but at awkward angle. It was only then they saw that the other limb was stuck down the scupper. It was this which had kept her on board.

The captain hated to think what had happened to those small bones with the force

of the water pulling her torso this way and that. He thought of the *Atlanta's* timbers on the beach, the fibres gashed and torn. He did not want to look on all the smashing, the damage. It came to him again, the terrible but sweet thought of just letting the limp body go out into mayhem—before the inevitable silence that would come after the storm.

Toxley held on to her while the captain bent her torso round so they could extricate her. Toxley scooped her up, and they stared not at the pale face but at her chest. It rose. Eric offered him the sodden sac. The two men stared a moment into each other's eyes and all that must be said was not said and never would be in the way of old friends. The captain turned away.

When the two were safely below, he held onto the backstay and screamed at an ocean so unpredictable in what it took. He shouted out the name of his wife, his son, his daughter-in-law—accusation, call, question, keen—thumping his fist against the battered stay. The wind ate his words. When he could shout no more he leaned against the wheel, crumpled, crucified, and cried for the child and himself. For the whole watery, windy mess in all its power and promise. For the too little and too much. For the benevolence that in an instant turned to tyranny and terror. For the failures, losses and futility. For the tree trunk balanced for that single moment on its mighty wave, and the single rise of the child's chest, like an improbable flower blooming. The chance and risk of his own redemption.

For all of it in its terrible, violent beauty.



## CHAPTER 13

Odysseus was waiting on the dock for them. He waved and then secured lines as if nothing had happened. Bailey welcomed him on board as if nothing had happened.

But he was keen to be gone. Too keen. And it turned out there was the not insignificant fact of the pub owner's wife. The pub owner, who had been away on a fishing trip in the highlands, was returning tomorrow. Was there any chance the *Argus* would be moving on?

"She reminds me of Calypso," Odysseus defended his choice.

"I've had an idea," said Thelma.

Peter nodded his head, thinking of the temple on the coaster and the remaining work of the west coast.

"We're so close to Macquarie Harbour, to Port Davey," Thelma continued, "When are we going to get the opportunity for Park reconnaissance there again? Chances are they're doing the worst stuff in the remotest places."

"Yes!" Odysseus urged, and began stowing food into a nearby Esky. "We must start!"

"It's two-day's sailing," But Bailey was not arguing, just thinking aloud. For the *Argus* was headed home, she had already decided, and the west coast was the logical route. To maintain their company was a bonus.

So, it was, Bailey having updated Mrs. Bucher and been updated (in detail lengthy enough to make her sail north), that the *Argus* turned the north-western corner and headed south. The Chorus and Thelma were arranging to disembark at Port Davey and rendezvous

with one of the island fishing boats—the fleet regularly sat off the west coast—who would take them back to Cape Barren.

Together the crew pushed the boat hard, anxious to beat the growing westerly that, should they delay, would prevent them navigating the dangerous entrance into Strahan, through Hell's Gates, safely. They needed to make it before dark and enter on slack water. Bailey had no wish to sit outside the Gates in foul weather; and missing it and continuing direct to Bathurst Harbour wasn't an option. Besides, Thelma had returned with the appetite of a person drug-free. The stores were bare. They would need to re-provision and refuel.

The *Argus'* passage from Strahan, south, was uneventful. That is, if having Odysseus rote learn Tennyson aloud, plus provide his own commentary, was considered uneventful.

*"It little profits that an idle king..."* he murmured lines to himself. *"I cannot rest from travel, I will drink Life to the lees: All times I have enjoyed greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those that loved me, and alone; on shore, and when thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades vext the dim sea: I am become a name; for always roaming with a hungry heart much have I seen and known; Cities of men and manners, climates, councils, governments"*.

"It's true," he said to anyone who would listen, seeming to gloss over the line, *myself not least...*

*"But honoured of them all; and drunk delight of battle with my peers, far on the ringing plains of windy Troy. I am a part of all that I have met..."*

"Hear that? It's true. And you are now famous because of me."

*"Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades for ever and for ever when I move. How dull it is to pause, to make an end, to rust unburnished, not to shine in use! ...As though to breathe were life. Life piled on life*

*were all too little, and of one to me little remains. But every hour is saved from that eternal silence, something more, a bringer of new things; and vile it were for some three suns to store and hoard myself, and this grey spirit yearning in desire to follow knowledge like a sinking star, beyond the utmost bounds of human thought.”*

The boat glided across the mirror surface of the sea entrance of the Southwest National Park, the vast sky above perfectly reflected in the sea below. Bathurst Harbour, the jewel in the island’s wilderness crown, appeared untouched by development; little islands dotted the waterway in whose depths were kelp forests and seagrass meadows. Within the inland valleys, steep cut gorges surged, their white water glinting and disgorging to the bay via the mouths of red-brown tannin-infused creeks. On deck, the crew sat enfolded into the silent reciprocity of which they seemed a part. The boat’s intrusion barely marked the water’s surface. It parted then re-joined, their presence a temporary disturbance, like a caddis fly landing on the surface before flitting off. And later, the crew retained that silence, sitting on deck to watch evening obliterate the view, replacing the land with an upward brilliance of stars, great silver bands linking horizon to horizon.

The morning silence was broken by the sound of the weather report, soon followed by the low revolutions of the *Argus*’ engine. Bailey, realising a perfect window of weather existed to get them around the coast—delay would mean they would encounter the nor’easter that was predicted to follow—woke the Chorus early. He had asked her, before bed, to sail deeper within the Harbour to verify there had been no disturbance.

At the bow the Chorus shielded his eyes from the sun and water glare. On the western shore, the quartzite flanks of Mount Rugby gleamed, the ridges of its spine green in parts, in others browned gold. It seemed half creature, half god. Not simply a landmass arising above the water; courtesy of reflection, it became a being reaching simultaneously skyward and penetrating the depths, heaven and earth unseparated. But the heavenly-

earthly balance, as they neared, had been tipped. At the southern end, where the natural summit would have been, was a huge white gash. Part of the mountain's head had been blown off with explosives to level it with the northern end. Butchered so, its unique outline, the unpredictable folds on the skin of its face, the indentation at its collarbone, were reduced or gone. And what had been its skull, its cheekbones, its muscles, tendons and nerves, its arteries and veins, were pulped and strewn down its torso.

The Chorus thought the low drone, becoming louder, might be that of the light plane that ferried in bushwalkers, or a tourist flight. But the air was chopped by blades. Suspended beneath the helicopter was a basket. The chopper flew low, hovered whilst the basket was unhooked and then settled on the flattened summit. Men were disgorged. Through binoculars, the Chorus watched the team unload equipment and drive a series of stakes into the mountain's exposed flesh. Then, the helicopter, and its team of workers, left.

"Right," said a voice behind him, adamant. It was Thelma. "That's it." She went below, found pen and paper, sat at the chart table and began to write.

The transfer, in calm water, was simple. Thelma stood on the deck of the fishing boat, *Carmen*, an arm around Peter's shoulders. He closed his eyes, feeling her touch and thought of the coaster in his pocket. *Heroism*—the matriarch had crossed it out and written *Bonds*. Then *Failure* along the north coast. *Love* down the west. He looked at the two who remained on the *Argus*. Recalled Scott. Then marvelled at the marriage of Aunty's words. He thought of, and ached for, those words that Thelma had begun to write, the ones that would cut like a benevolent blade into a putrid wound. He thought about singing, about collectivity, and the future.

"Wait." Bailey rushed below.

"My staff," Odysseus moaned.

Bailey handed it to Thelma. "I heard what you said back in the Strait, about heroes

avoiding death. It's not a gift. More a return, really. It was yours all along, I think."

"And I'm returning it," Thelma grinned. "A gift for Aunty. Though maybe she'll let me keep it, now..." She smiled. "All those lives to touch. Whack! The whole life clears, eh Bailey?" she laughed. "Besides, I'm not sure I trust you two to not inflict grievous bodily harm on each other."

"Will you be alright?" Peter asked earnestly. He meant the sailing.

"They'll work it out," Thelma encouraged. "Won't you?"

"Story," said the Chorus, inspired by the gesture to consider endings and beginnings. To recall again, with excitement, the words Thelma had begun to write, and all those other things not yet said. "We may go back to the beginning to make sense of what we've become, and how we became it. But the beginning has no place at the end."

"End? Is there such a thing?" Thelma asked softly.

"Good luck," said Bailey, feeling Peter had overdone it with that final flourish, but unsure of what he meant. "With the Parks. With everything."

"A prophecy?" requested Odysseus, thinking of the voyage ahead.

"You don't want another bloody prophecy doing your head in, Odysseus. But we'll tell all your happy mates at the shop hi, from you."

## CHAPTER 14

The *Argus* rounded South West Cape and slammed into the storm. Nose first, the yacht struggled beneath waves that buried the bowsprit and Bailey wondered, not for the first time since poking their nose out of Port Davey, if it had been the correct decision to set out and make the run for home. Normally, with careful planning and prudent timing, she would have avoided the weather but the extra time at Mount Rugby, the negotiations about getting Thelma and the Chorus out had had them waiting for the rendezvous with the *Carmen*, all this had delayed departure. The front had come early, and the barometer was still falling but she had felt eager, though unsure why, for return.

But sitting it out under the south coast wasn't an option. Waves rose, and the wind strengthened. The kettle leapt off the stove as a wave hit the *Argus'* side. Securing the cabin, Bailey saw, then, the photo, tucked into shelf netting. A gift, a return, from Thelma.

From time to time waves punched not just the bow but sometimes the coach-house roof, obscuring view, and torrents of water gushed along the side decks. Bailey, vigilant, nervous but not feeling in danger, saw the sea differently. Could only think about it, now, through the lens of her grandfather. Occasionally a surprise wave threw the *Argus* sideways. Bailey helmed by feel and intuition, the *Argus* at once heavy and sluggish beneath the wheel, then weightless as she was lifted. Tack followed tack in the steep, wallowing sea. It was sixty-five nautical miles to Recherche Bay; they would simply weather it.

Drenched, cold, tired and hungry; there was no inclination to talk for there was nothing to say. The few words she did call out to Odysseus were snatched from her mouth

by the storm gods who would hear only their own names. Mute, they simply did what was necessary as the hours passed.

Bailey had been watching Odysseus during tacks, habitually overseeing crew action. Hunched in the cockpit, holding on, he did not look around between tacks, but concentrated on something. It took her time to realise what it was. His eyes followed, again and again, the clip and tape of his safety line.

How terribly heavy, she realised then, was the burden of that fear, and how much courage it must take for him to voyage. She wanted to do the impossible, take him below and tie him in. Make him safe. Instead, she caught his eye, or thought she did amidst the wall of spray. *Thank-you*, she mouthed but could not be sure if he saw it.

She watched the weather through his eyes after that. How the wind must shriek, and the sky darken as if in threat. Waves pounding, elements hissing and spitting to become an otherworldly growl, a mania. A crazed Poseidon throwing waves like king punches, then, as if in sadistic joke, forcing a rail under so that wherever and in whatever manner Odysseus on his craft might turn, he was unable to escape the gargantuan reach of the god's hand. Poseidon intent on wearing him down.

And then her perspective again became her own and in place of fear, she watched, awed and wondrous, how the storm, conjuring now air, now water, performed its elemental display; the massed power of the storm and their insignificant selves somehow reciprocal, somehow beautiful.

The twenty-hour marathon ended in Recherche Bay. Bailey woke, arms aching, still wearing her sailing boots. From there it was an uneventful sail, drying gear strewn over the decks and on the stays, bypassing Dover and Port Cygnet, to anchor in Barnes Bay. Tomorrow would see the last twenty or so nautical miles up the Channel into Hobart. But Bailey was wary of the D'Entrecasteaux Channel. A doddle, the foolish called it. *Was that*

*what her father had thought?*

The final dinner, despite the occasion, the wine, and Odysseus' effort at talk, was subdued, and Odysseus thought Bailey smarter than he for knowing that return was never quite what you imagined. Sensing there would be little conversation, Odysseus took himself to his berth early.

It was while putting away the charts she would no longer need that Bailey saw Thelma's final Tamar addition. *Æ ex marks the spot* had been modified. *As above, so below*, Thelma had added. The head and tail of the symbol that Odysseus had claimed was a serpent (understandably so, Bailey could now see) had been joined; a serpent eating its own tail. A perfect ouroboros; the infinite cycle of creation and destruction. The eternal return.

Bailey pored over the Channel chart as though it held a key. She traced and retraced the line that the *Atlanta* should have taken. Near Rat Bay, Bligh Point would have been visible, twenty fathoms, eighteen fathoms, well out from the shore rocks. *Near enough to smell home port*, her grandfather had said, describing how the front had passed early. *Big end first*. How the *Atlanta* had been hit by a succession of growing waves and lost steerage. A lee shore...

Bailey put the charts away and went on deck. The night was cool but not cold. How much time had elapsed after they hit the rocks, Bailey wondered, before the boat went down? Did they find each other in the watery chaos? Her grandmother passing her to her grandfather. *The child. Look after the child*. Bailey, offered up by the ocean, offered up by her grandmother's love.

Bailey looked over the rail into the depths and imagined the weed those arms had become, waving this way and that. She hungered to reach down. Wanted to feel their flesh, alive. She thought of the storm in the Strait. Her grandfather had been beaten down again



but survived. And she, Bailey, offered up once more by the sea. Twice placed into his arms. She thought of his slack hands on the nursing home sheets. Of how his fingers had twitched that day in invitation, the plastic in her hand. She could not have imagined, back then, that the curl of his fingers could have signified a second possibility. *Come closer.*

Bailey sat on deck and watch the combined lights of the city cast a net of dull light onto the northern sky. To the east, over the land, a bright disc of moon rose.

Below decks, Odysseus, the man of twists and turns, thrown time and time again onto a new and foreign shore, heard her cry, and understood, how her heart was torn inside her chest.

In the lower reaches of the Derwent, the outline of the mountain that enfolded the city appeared. Lenticular clouds danced on its crown. Ahead, Odysseus spied an orange ship moving in repeated circles.

“What’s it doing?”

“Antarctic ice breaker. Boxing its compass in preparation for going south.”

Scott was with them as they watched that vessel chart an intended, purposeful course; the repetition of seemingly no headway essential to ensuring the compass directions lay true.

“The deep white south?” There was excitement in Odysseus’ voice.

He went below and returned with the binoculars. Trained them on the icebreaker, scanning stem to stern.

“I miss him,” Odysseus offered, out of nowhere. It could, or could not, have been an apology.

“When we get there, what will you do?”

“Journey on.” Odysseus did not meet her eye. Rather he re-trained the binoculars.

“Until Athene calls me home.”

“What happened,” asked Bailey, “after you left? You never told us. That second setting out. Do you remember, I asked if you had found peace? You never answered.”

And with the *Argus* so close to home, Odysseus, instead of doing his usual, launching out on a distracting sea of story that shored him and his reputation up, a tale that had at its heart a devious intent for profit or gain, spoke simply as if hearing it himself for the first time.

Bailey felt as though he were offering her something.

“If I had known the banishment and trials Poseidon would lay down upon me for having blinded his son, Polyphemus, would I have thrust that burning wooden stake so deeply into the Cyclops’ eye? Yet, life is governed by the gods. To regret any part of it seems strange, for the balance changes as they, ruthless, just, mete out pain and mercy in whatever measure they decree.”

“I used to love the sea,” he recalled. “Before Poseidon cursed me, before it became my watery labyrinth. I row my mind back to before I left for the war, before the birth of our son, Telemachus. It was summer, we were young, and it was just Penelope and I embarking. She was good in the boat for a woman,” he smiled at Bailey, “surefooted, balanced in her movements, unafraid. She stowed a basket filled with food in the bow whilst I fastened an oar to the thowl. She was happy to be escaping the house and her duties. Happy it was just she and I.

“I pulled on the oars and we smiled at each other knowing that as soon as we rounded the headland, out of sight of the servants and island eyes, she would take an oar from me. Together we rowed our small vessel across the flat, blue expanse, heading for the secluded northern bay.

“‘Tell me,’ she said, finally breaking the easy silence, speaking in time with the pull of the oars, ‘what it is you most want.’

“‘You,’ I said, in the gap between strokes.

“‘She laughed.

“‘Besides me.’

“‘A son.’

“‘And?’

“‘Victory. Fame.’

“‘We rowed on, the sun beating down on us.

“‘And you?’

“‘Peace.’

She timed the beginning to coincide with the oar digging deep into the depths and strung the word out until the blade reappeared. She knew that the war was coming.

“‘I want us to live in peace.’

“‘We rowed seven silent strokes. Then, she dropped her oar and the boat turned. She kissed me, one arm around my neck, one dangling in the sea. I remember all of that.’”

Odysseus stood up for a moment, then sat down.

“‘The answers I gave my wife that day in the boat before the war, were eventually all delivered to me by the gods—her, Telemachus, victory, fame. And when I finally returned to Ithaca, I still believed in them, victory and fame. Heroism. Thinking, too, that I had done my part, and now the gods would do theirs. Tiresias’ prophecy was beginning to come true. I was home. Now there would be peace.

“‘But the long wandering home didn’t satisfy. The war, and everything else, changed me. I did terrible things.

“‘That day, it was the first time ever a blow had come from her. Penelope was shouting, ‘What did Tiresias say?’

“‘I mumbled. She hit me again.

“‘Say it.’

“I could not speak.

“‘Repeat it.’

“My mouth had become like that of Phemius. It took an age to get it out, but she stood over me until the last word was said.

*“But once you have killed those suitors in your halls...go forth once more, you must...carry your well-planed oar until you come to a race of people who know nothing of the sea, whose food is never seasoned with salt, strangers all to ships with their crimson prows and long slim oars, wings that make ships fly. And here is your sign—unmistakable, clear, so clear you cannot miss it. When another traveller falls in with you and calls that weight across your shoulder a fan to winnow grain, then plant your bladed, balanced oar in the earth and sacrifice fine beasts to the lord god of the sea, Poseidon—a ram, a bull and a ramping wild boar—then journey home and render noble offerings up to the deathless gods who rule the vaulting skies, to all the gods in order. And at last your own death will steal upon you...a gentle, painless death, far from the sea it comes to take you down, borne down with the years in ripe old age with all your people there in blessed peace around you. All that I told you will come true.”*

“‘Peace,’ she said. ‘Do you remember? All those years? You weren’t here. I never asked anything of you.’

“My blood ran slow and ponderous. Even I sickened myself. So, I set off, almost on pretext, to keep the promise that blind Tiresias had settled on me that day in the underworld. The prophecy was etched into my mind like figures etched into an urn, A *gentle, painless death, far from the sea it comes to take you down, borne down with the years in ripe old age, with all your people there in blessed peace around you.*

“On the beach, I hovered over the little boat Penelope and I had never rowed since

my return. I could hardly stand to part one oar from the other. Instead, I looked for one from another vessel. Which would be my companion on that march inland? But my mind was soft, the task arduous—I could not determine which would help appease the gods and would ensure I lived a long and peaceful life with the wife I was so near to but could not reach. I eyed the handle and blade of every tied captive. Which should I cart far away from its home of vessel and neighbour of sea? And though my life depended on it, I was loath to part one from the company of its brethren, for I knew what it was like to not return.”

Whilst he had been talking, Bailey had sailed past the bay in which the *Argus* was moored, happy to take Odysseus to where he had asked to be dropped. She would moor in the port tonight and refuel there before heading back to anchor in the bay.

“For that second journey, I sought the help of Aeneas, the physician,” Odysseus recounted, “and the valerian he administered mercifully ensured I slept the voyage from Ithaca to the mainland, for I would not knowingly venture on the sea again. I recalled nothing of it, but the ashen-faced crew who roused me at the voyage end muttered of rogue waves and the windy howl of Poseidon’s wrath.

“Of that long journey I shall not labour the detail. Suffice to say that apart from the initial dreaded voyage I did not board a single ship the entire length of it. Rather than more swiftly sail the Argo’s path, following the outward wake of Jason, I stalked around the great northern sea basin, avoiding the Bebryces, associated as it once was with Poseidon’s son, Amycus, before Polydeuces’ fast fists took him down. I skirted the Symplegades, rocks that mark the mouth to the wine dark sea. Along its southern shores I wandered, asked by so many why I would carry my wooden burden. Each place named it differently but still they knew the oar as I did, a scudder of ships not a winnower of grain, and so I walked on. Up the River Phasis, to Colchis, where people still spoke of Jason’s feats before he snatched the fleece from under the rank nose of the dragon. Then I ventured on where

Jason never had.

“West, some had advised for there is a sea there but beyond that only mountains. North, others said, for there is no sea until the great white, frozen expanse near where the world finishes. I chose north and hit the top of that first sea and walked north again. But each small place, growing smaller still the further I ventured, knew of a river somewhere on which sped a boat, and where there was a boat there was inevitably an oar.

“In one such place of three humble dwellings, I stopped a night for shelter. They eyed me warily and pointed at the smallest hut. An old man came out, wrapped in reindeer skin. Miraculously he spoke my tongue, and that night, over a meal of bear, beets and black bread, Fedor became a ready friend. What joy, over a sturdy white spirit of his own making, to speak long and fully.

“At supper’s end, Fedor stood and walked to the oar. He looked at me without saying anything, a kind of request for permission. He picked it up and brought it back and laid it down between us. Then he began to tell of his voyaging days. How, as a young boy, his father had taken him south to find work and his astonishment at seeing the sea and how he knew he must be upon it. He had sailed the full length and breadth of that great, local sea. Then on an ambitious voyage east, farther than Jason had ever been, they had struck rocks. The boat went down like a stone but seven of them floated ashore on a great oar and lived for eight turns of the moon.

“I have always felt great affection for these ever since. I would take it off your hands and hang it on this wall, but something tells me you would not part with it.’

How I would have longed to leave that great burden there on his hearth! For him to treasure it and me to walk free and unburdened.

He touched the oar and said, simply,

‘I miss it, the sea. Upon which no adventure is greater but yet none more

dangerous. Here, it does not compare... but here there is peace.’

He paused and looked at me,

‘I venture that some ship aches for this blade.’

“It was a gently posed question and I looked to the fire on the floor between us as a sailor looks to a beacon on a far shore for guidance. That oratory which, so long ago, provided me safe and gilded passage through obstacles—the Cicones, Lotus-Eaters and the Laestrogonions—that hid me and cloaked me and let me paint the pictures of my choosing, so much so that listeners, under the spell of it, would believe any version I chose to tell them, had long ago perished. Only Athene could see through me. And perhaps this man before me.

“I told him, then, why I was so far from home and why the oar was so far from the sea. I told him of Penelope for whom I ached, and wept in the telling. And I told him, the first man ever, ashamed even as I said it, of my distrust of action.

“He looked into the fire, then spoke as though something had been revealed there. ‘Many are they who might think this a fan to winnow grain. And they have missed out on something, for is not the sea, Odysseus, despite Poseidon, a fearsome yet remarkable thing?’

I asked if he would accompany me home, now that the prophecy was filled, promising him wealth and comfort upon our return to Ithaca, and the promise of a labour free life close to the sea. But he shook his head.

“*Poly palia*. Too old.

“‘Besides,’ he laughed a toothless laugh, ‘Marta next door would miss me. Not my wife but may as well have been. She is good to me.’

“‘I do not believe in your gods, Odysseus. So, you will need food for the return.’

He packed me a ration.

“‘And what of your gods?’

“‘Nor mine. Since sinking, I believe in something else now, the thing that is greater than the sea.’ He thumped his chest. ‘I believe only in this.’

“‘And then we got drunk, in the manner of men who have everything to remember and everything to forget.

“‘In the morning, he embraced me and bade me farewell.

“‘Be the unsame same to friend as to stranger, Odysseus. And you shall have the good that you bring.’”

Odysseus made to speak but was forced to wait for the end of the three long horn blows that signified some nearby great ship set to depart. The final note faded.

“‘These are my words for you, Bailey. They are what I have to offer, the only thing I truly learned. Be the unsame same to friend as to stranger. The rest...well...’”

Only the water could be heard after Odysseus’ tale ended, its sighing interrupted by the ringing of Bailey’s phone. The port bridge would be lifted in half an hour.

“‘You could just walk around, you know. From the port.’”

But Odysseus, familiar, in part, with the paradox of homecoming, aware it was a solitary endeavour, eschewed her offer to enter the dock aboard the *Argus*.

She pointed where he would find the icebreaker once it returned. Bailey then slid the *Argus* past the waterside steel ladder that remained east of the old port shed. Odysseus leaned out, grabbed and swung, climbed, smiled at her broadly and turned and walked towards the city.

The bridge operator was delayed by traffic congestion. The *Argus* had to wait another half hour. Bailey made small passages beyond the port and tidied gear, conscious of the bay water’s endless movement; in, out, ceaselessly coming and going.



Ahead, like folded arms across the chest of the port, was the barrier bridge. Bailey felt nervous. She glanced south numerous times, down the estuary, recalling the circular journey, trying not to think ahead.

Then, the modest metal bridge began its slow swing. She was let in. The *Argus* motored through, into the dock, the passage recorded on the phones of random tourists, and it all seemed anti-climactic, this homecoming. Perhaps because it did not resemble one of Odysseus' stories, she thought. There had been no stunning feats, no high heroics, and now, just the need to pay attention and safely navigate, before the port's full embrace, the thin channel with its unforgiving stone walls.

She nudged the *Argus* in against the waiting dock and secured lines, feeling, just for a moment, like a ship for which the shipwright had laid down the final timber; a rightness of fit, a seaworthiness, spread throughout.

Finally, the capacity to sail. So necessary now that she had returned, now that port and anchor, and all those other oceans, so close to home, awaited.

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