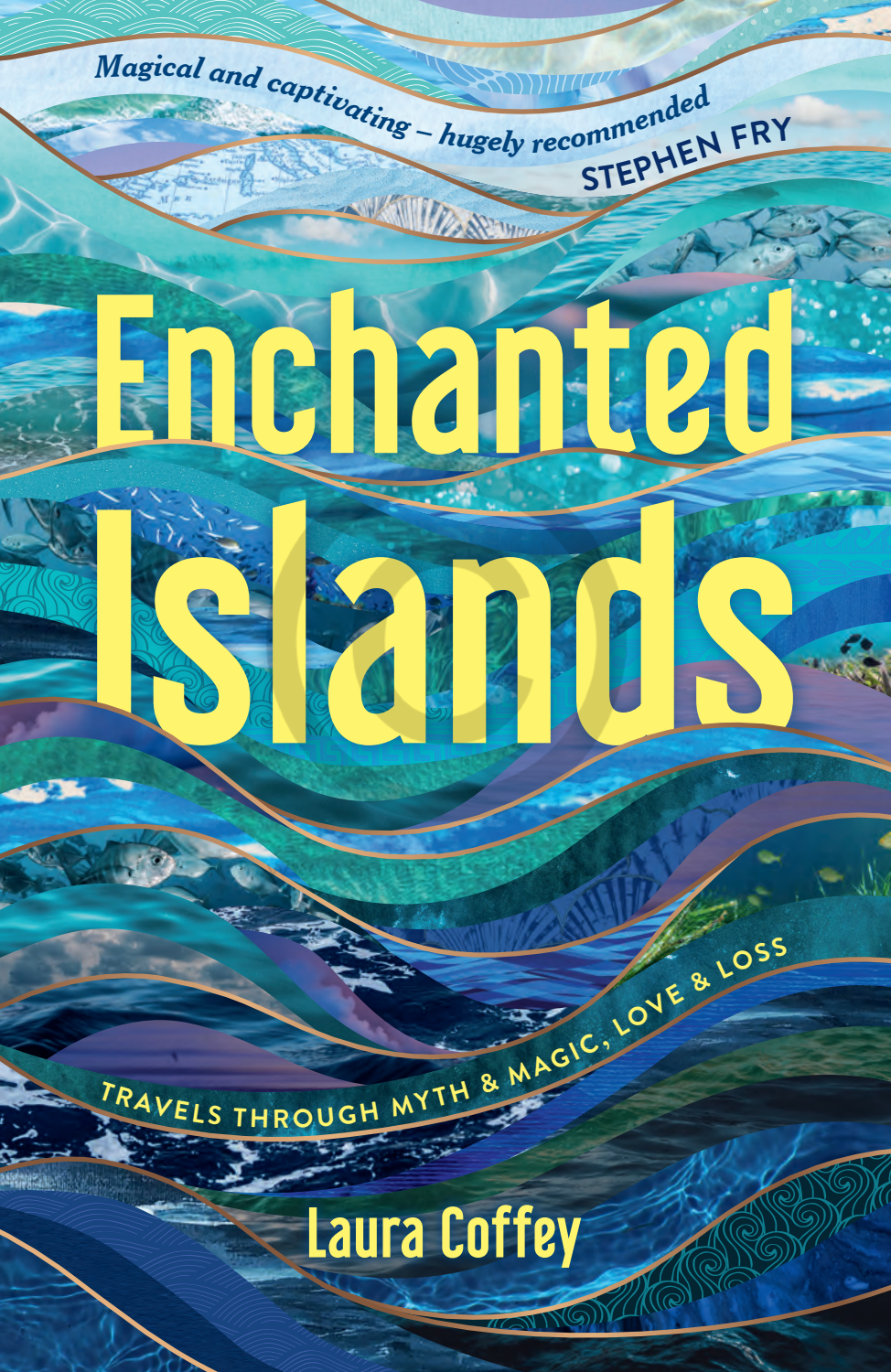

Magical and captivating – hugely recommended
STEPHEN FRY
Enchanted Islands
TRAVELS THROUGH MYTH & MAGIC, LOVE & LOSS
Laura Coffey

ENCHANTED ISLANDS

First published in 2024
This paperback edition first published in 2025

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Enchanted Islands

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TRAVELS THROUGH MYTH & MAGIC, LOVE & LOSS

Laura Coffey



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The events in this book are true, although occasionally I've played around with timelines and locations, and have, now and then, collapsed complexity for narrative purposes. For example, I have two brothers and use 'my brother' as shorthand.

Some people who appear in the book have been disguised to protect their identities – names and appearances have been changed – and I've created some composite characters, like the boyfriend who is not one single person but represents a combination of people I've dated. The breakup described is, similarly, a composite of my experiences. Other people have been generous enough to let me use their real names and tell their stories. Conversations have been recreated from memory and dialogue occasionally paraphrased to represent the essence of what was said.

Travel was in line with the different countries' entry criteria, which was set by their respective governments' assessment of risk at the time. I was lucky to be able to travel and acutely aware of the privilege and of the risks both to myself and others. I did my best to mitigate these, by following the regulations of the places I visited, and observing local guidance.

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Almost everything described in the book happened outside, including meals. People wore masks, applied hand gel, kept distance. I haven't written a lot about the pandemic in the text, or listed all these precautions every time, because it can be tedious to keep reading the same points. Instead, please be aware that this forms the backdrop to the story.

For more, see the Afterword at the end of the book.

'to find in motion what was lost in space'

Tennessee Williams

'You think about bathing in the sea – thick as velvet, supple and smooth as a wild animal. You think about swimming naked, and at night, with the stars, and a friend. Swim till you're far from the world, and breathing together in the same rhythm, and free of absolutely everything.'

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Albert Camus



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CROATIA
Korčula
Calypso's Island
Mljet
ITALY
Sicily
Island of the Sun God

Chapter One

Find the Beginning

London, England



Tell me about a complicated man.
Muse, tell me how he wandered and was lost
when he had wrecked the holy town of Troy,
and where he went, and who he met, the pain
he suffered on the sea, and how he worked
to save his life and bring his men back home.
He failed, and for their own mistakes, they died.
They ate the Sun God's cattle, and the god
kept them from home. Now, goddess, child of Zeus,
tell the old story for our modern times.
Find the beginning.

The Poet to the Muse

It started with a boy, like it always does. Otherwise I probably wouldn't have left London and would never have bothered picking up a copy of *The Odyssey.* He had a triple-first in English literature from a prestigious university, and I was trying to impress him. Later, when I think back, I'll remember that his degree class was one of the triple-first things he ever told me, and this should have been a warning. That somehow, despite it being awarded more than two decades ago, it was still important for him to tell me just how clever he was, the exact strata he occupied. But at this point it was early days, I was under the old kind of enchantment and suspending disbelief. It probably helped that he was an amazing chef, that he was cooking me dinner, and that I was very hungry.

Emily Wilson would have no truck with this kind of pretension. She's a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and her new translation of *The Odyssey* has been met with much acclaim for its muscularity. It's the first English translation by a woman, and her version strips out the overwrought insertions of self-important nineteenth-century male poets, to make the language shine, plain and simple and clear. Her aim was to bring back the original musicality to the poem, to restore its pace and rhythms, to give it edge and tension. I was browsing in a bookshop a couple of months after that first dinner when I saw Emily's translation glittering with gold inlay on a table display and picked it up on a whim, exactly the way people arranging those table displays trick you into doing. I guess I was thinking I could attempt to catch up with him, or at least that reading it might give me something interesting to say about a discipline I was entirely ignorant about, or maybe it was simply a way of seeking more connection, but when I lifted it, the book was off-puttingly thick. I asked the bookseller if it was even readable. Her face lit up, 'It's wonderful,' she said, 'just get it.' I trusted this woman's judgement, she'd guided me to some particularly brilliant

and strange and peculiar books previously. So I bought the book and it sat heavy in my bag. Back home when I opened it up, I saw the actual poem was pretty skinny, which was reassuring. He was probably clever enough to read the original Greek, but surely I could manage a translation. I added it to the stack of unread books on my bedside table where it stayed forgotten, for a while.

On one of our early dates I invited him to swim with me in Hampstead Ponds. He raised an eyebrow at the folly of the English, but he came and it was extremely cold and he pretended not to hate it, and I pretended not to know he hated it. He swam with me again, and again. Trying to like it with that determined, American kind of enthusiasm.

I had surgery – a dentist had broken something inside my face when he took out a wisdom tooth and there was infection and pain and a long emergency operation under general anaesthetic. When I came out of the hospital my face was bruised right down my neck to my collarbones and everything was swollen and there were stitches like spiders across the insides of my cheek. He gently tilted the angle of my jaw, slid his hand into my hair, touched my face so softly, the lightest pressure.

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'You know I like spending time with you,' he said.

'No, I don't know,' I said, wanting reassurance.

'Come on – I swam in a freezing pond for you,' he said.

'What do you like about me?'

'How soft your skin is,' he skimmed it like a stone across water, 'your mouth.'

Six months later we were walking his dog along an abandoned railway route through North London. It wound through a nature reserve and everything was dark green and in bud. Birds rustled in the trees next to the path. The city was in transition, not sure of itself, we

were expecting a curfew, we were not sure what to expect. It was hard to find somewhere to get coffee – the shops had started shutting ahead of official government guidance which was muddled and confused, but the sky was wide and open, the air was spring crisp and cold, and there was optimism amongst all the unease. I was wearing a bright blue coat and sunglasses and it made me feel better, less anxious, just being in motion, walking alongside him, having a destination to aim towards. He left the path to go and pee in the woods and as he came back he looked beautiful and I had this transitory surge of feeling for a moment in the cold spring sunshine. Something piercing.

In a supermarket, we shopped between the gaps: weird, panicky shortages – no soap, no loo roll. He was swapping eggs between two cartons so he got all the largest ones, something that it would never even have occurred to me to do in a million years. Except that he fumbled, smash-dropped two and turned red as the shop assistant walked over with the yellow Caution Wet Floor sign. I laughed at his embarrassment although to me this definitely felt like a step too far. The most I would ever do with eggs was flip the lid to check for breakages before putting them in my basket, and most of the time I barely remembered to even do that much.

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Back in his mews house we cooked for hours. I liked the small scale of it, the domesticity. The dog and I already felt like family. I was chopping garlic but there was something I wasn't doing quite right and I was demoted to opening the wine. I admired his culinary precision, his insistence on methodical process, lacking nearly all discipline myself. How soothing, to chop and stir and taste and season when everything outside was in flux. I felt like an almost-wife although it had only been six months.

We ate and watched the news which was inconclusive. Then he reached for me. Slow kisses.

'I want everything.'

'Yeah?' He moved down.

'Is this good?'

'Yes, is it good for you?'

Afterwards I put my hand on his chest and he held it in place with both of his as he fell asleep.

The next morning I shapeshifted. I didn't want to get in his way while he worked from home, I really didn't want him to ask me to leave, so I went invisible or at least attempted semi-transparency. His work seemed to involve endless conference calls for the private equity fund he worked for. I wasn't working at all, because I'd just left my job with spectacularly bad timing. I had vague ideas about taking a break, going hiking in Chile, resetting before finding a new one. This would, of course, turn out to be one of the worst plans I'd ever thought of but for now the future wasn't clear.

I sat outside in the sun in a hammock in his garden, wrapped in a blanket under the froth of the pink apple tree. Occasionally, petals dropped, confetti-ing my hair like a bride. I was reading Emily's introduction to *The Odyssey* and watching him through the glass doors as I learned just how much disagreement there is about who the author was – probably, it wasn't written by a single 'Homer' but rather created by a bunch of people. Even when the poem was written is a matter of much debate. The best the quarrelling scholars can agree to is that it was written sometime between the late eighth and late seventh century bce, which doesn't narrow it down all that much.

We remained cocooned in liminal time-space during the first spring warmth, while around us the city stilled and started sliding towards lockdown. The days looped and repeated. Waiting up late for the news drinking wine. Then those slow kisses, his hands in my hair and afterwards we slept, curled into each other. Time folded and

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concertinaed: a weekend became a week. Eventually, I thought I should go back across town to check on my flat. Before I left, I said fast, from uncertainty: 'Do you want to hang out more?'

'Yeah.' His answer came fast with a child's enthusiasm, then qualified, 'I mean there's nothing else to do.'

'Charming.'

'No. I didn't mean it like that. I meant I have no other plans.'

'Even more charming,' but I was smiling as I cycled back across the empty city.

I was sitting in the shared courtyard behind my flat with *The Odyssey* and a cup of coffee. The weather was beaming down at us – it was a remarkable spring despite the growing darkness in the world. No one could remember a prettier one, everyone was thankful for this fortunate weather, and confirming it with each other from a distance: aren't we lucky? These were the conversational beats we repeated with various combinations of neighbours, like dialogue in a badly improvised play.

In another section of her elegant introduction, Emily was explaining that Homer's poem 'has little interest in the realistic depiction of geography' and she was pretty dismissive of the scholars and readers across the ages who had attempted to map the fantastical story world onto the literal geography of the real world, but I quite liked this idea. To me there was something compelling about attempting to ground myths and mysticism, a twist of poetry in trying to nail the unreal down onto the real. I spent time looking at the hand-drawn

maps that Emily included. The picture of the story world was laid out next to the actual cartography of the modern-day world, and I flicked repeatedly between them. I liked reading the competing theories of the scholars of the past who fought over which of the islands in the story might represent real-life Sicily, which of the modern-day Aeolian islets off the Italian coast could be the inspiration for the floating island home of Aeolus, the guardian of the winds. I looked up where Calypso's island might be plotted on the map. This is where Odysseus gets trapped for seven long, sexy years, forced into having an affair with a hot goddess. Theories abound and the story islands shifted and moved, skittering across the seas depending on whom you consulted. People claimed they were located everywhere from around modern-day Greece to far-flung islands across the other side of the Mediterranean Sea, even parts of the north coast of Africa. Mapping section completed, I started reading the actual poem, and it wasn't as annoying as you might think.

I was intermittently turning my phone over to check for messages and still there was nothing. It remained darkly silent. So much of dating is waiting, just like those fairy girls, the ones in the original tales, not the feminist revisions. Waiting, feigning indifference, adopting the passive tense, hoping the prince isn't going to be too much of a dick. A deeper, more intimate silence enveloped me, was suspended inside the quiet suspension of the world. A Russian doll of silences. The smallest one was a long-held pause: it had been more than a week since I left on my bicycle, and he hadn't even checked that I had made it back across town safely. There were no messages.

During this silent week I did what any sane girl would do and formulated a list of conspiracy theories, hypotheses and wild assumptions to test with my best friend, Rachel. Over many days

I endlessly mapped imagined possibilities, became a professor of cartography, charting, measuring. I forensically replayed conversations and performed keyhole surgical analysis, with Rachel handing me the necessary instruments. Together we tested and probed and cauterised, and found nothing that explained anything. It wasn't as if he could be too busy, there was literally nothing to do. Everything had stopped moving and gone deadly still. Static crackled. Eventually the silence became too loud and full and anxious for me to bear. I've never been much good at playing it cool. So I asked, and when he answered it all clicked together, and it wasn't what I expected.

I wrote to him: *You're very quiet – everything okay?*

The reasons, of course, were boring and clichéd, like they always are. There was someone else that he was emotionally involved with, she lived abroad, he wasn't sure if she felt the same way, he wanted to find out.

I stopped reading and pictured her. An offshore girlfriend. Tanned legs. Smooth, tax-efficient movements, walking along the shoreline, picking up shells. It had been half a year, all the rhythms of romance: dinners, movies, trips away, flowers (mostly ones I bought him in reverse feminist enthusiasm), a valentine's card I'd handmade, designed to make him laugh.

A second text pinged, graciously offering to continue to 'hang out', in the meantime. He ended with the symbol for a kiss. Or crossbones.

After all that, it turned out to be just another boring variation on the classics. Once upon a time, in a country far, far away, true love was locked in a tower. Part of her allure, no doubt. Newly shipwrecked in high pandemic waves, I channelled Emily Wilson, and wrote a translation, sending my revised version to Rachel:

Dear Candidate,

We regret to inform you that the position of New Girlfriend with benefits package 'Romance' is taken. We have sourced a perfect global candidate with precisely the right skill set that we're now in the process of on-shoring. We apologise for any misunderstanding on your part. Perhaps we were not quite as clear as we could have been over the six-month interview process – with team-building challenges and take-home assignments, that all along we had an alternative candidate in mind, with whom we felt a deep emotional connection. However, we have an exciting new opportunity for Interim Girlfriend with the job title Mistress. This is short-term pre-maternity cover, until New Girlfriend is relocated. The role is a lesser grade, and we recognise it's not the position you interviewed for. Of course, the benefits package is slightly different. There is no long-term incentive plan element (for obvious reasons!) and the duties are tactical rather than strategic. We'd like you to take the position although if you decide not to then we're kind of indifferent. We're just trying to be honest and straightforward post-hoc. We hope you appreciate that's a big gesture on our part. We're being quite sensitive and emotionally intelligent (if not emotionally available!) and we congratulate ourselves on being so awesome. It took a lot for us to admit that the position was taken and we are not going to feel bad about it. If you reject our kind offer we reserve the right to label your response bitter and tell our friends how 'psycho' you are. It's probably all your fault for not realising since we gave you some pretty damn clear signals. Actually, we're kind of angry with you about the whole thing tbh.

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> We are starting to question your competence. Maybe *you* should think about *that*.

Rachel called me laughing. She was finally pregnant after trying forever, so even if it was legal to see her, I couldn't put her at any risk. These were the early days when we weren't sure about what was spreading the virus, and were all paranoid we might be accidentally killing people just by going to the supermarket. I realised this as I talked to her, holding my phone to my ear in the hushed city, that now I couldn't just nip over to see her and feel better, and I remembered how newly alone I was. More bad timing, this stupid ending just before something horrible was really beginning, just as the first brutal UK lockdown started up. He had omitted this information for so long already, couldn't he have kept it from me for longer so we could have kept each other company during the apocalypse?

I was living alone and immediately isolated, the perfect conditions to dwell and obsess, to pick over textual analysis, for blame to be introjected and metabolised. I'm also pretty smart so where had I missed the symbols and the subtext? Unsolvable equations: why would he want some semi-mythical figure who lived abroad when I was a real girl living in the same city and the world was in meltdown? Why wouldn't he at least have mentioned her before? Why weren't men routinely called manipulative but women were? What else had I deliberately overlooked in order to be fully complicit in my own deception?

Heightened by world hysteria, my emotions felt less trustworthy than usual. It really had not been very long, there were no promises, although there was a fairly frank conversation about not wasting time. Maybe I'd made it all up in my head, seen tigers in shadows, skipped

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casual dating into a relationship. How stupid of me to think it was going somewhere, to have built in love and romance and a future. Deluded. Overreacting. It was far too early for it to be heartbreak. I wasn't falling in love, I'd just really liked him. But it was real. I was falling, it hadn't felt casual, I'd told him I was only interested in something serious, he'd made me feel he was in the same place, we'd talked about the future. He'd come swimming. He'd come to the hospital. He was wrong, not me. Why was I doubting myself, letting him reframe, tell me it was different to how it actually was, why was I abandoning myself, adopting his version of the truth? There was a connection between us, I could feel it. It had felt exciting and soft and lovely. It had felt real. I was sad and angry and confused and the weight of each kept changing and my thoughts kept circle-spinning and he never replied to the last text and he turned into a ghost and I was spinning and dizzy and couldn't stop spinning.

I knew it should have felt more like a grey disappointment, just sharpened by a lost chance to couple up with intensity as the world went flat, but if I'm honest, I wrote privately in my journal, it *is* kind of heartbreaking in that annoying *almost* or *unrealised potential* kind of way. That's the thing with heartbreak, it's not rational, it doesn't pay attention to timelines or data points, it just feels. I felt like I was splintering. I was swimming in Homer's 'wine-dark sea' and my head ached with it all. I crawled exhausted, dragging myself on to the shore, into my cave and lay staring up at the ceiling, sorely in need of grey-eyed, gold-shod Athena, Aeolus who rules the winds, all of the trickster gods, to be spun into their drama. To become enchanted.

As the real world became stranger and more terrifying with new monsters and perils, I dived deeper into the fantastical world of *The Odyssey,* in search of escape.

I kept reading the poem. I even read the footnotes.

'Find the beginning' instructs the Poet to the Muse as *The Odyssey* opens. The start is rarely where you think it should be. Often you can't figure out the actual beginning until much later, when you're almost at the end.

The Odyssey begins in the middle and declares up front that it's all about a 'complicated man'. He is deceitful and manipulative – but he's also very clever – and these traits endear him to Athena, who makes him one of her pets. Odysseus is trying to get home after the Trojan war, back to an island called Ithaca. He's longing to see his wife, Penelope, who's wise and enigmatic, and his son, who was just a baby when he left and is now a young man. But he has badly annoyed the vengeful gods in various ways, so they prevent his return and skip-skim his ship, sending it scuttering all over the place, far and wide across the sea. Odysseus has basically been island-hopping for an extremely long time, only his islands are full of monsters and the sea is full of perils, he doesn't get to choose the route, and the whole thing has been going on for about ten years when we meet him. Back in Ithaca, Penelope is waiting, batting off the attention of gold-digging suitors who want to marry a rich 'widow', by weaving (and secretly unweaving) material on her loom, telling them she'll only consider marriage when it's complete.

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When I said that finding the beginning can be unclear, what I meant was maybe this was all just romanticised misattribution. An unreliable narrator, a false start. Maybe the real starting point had nothing much to do with that boy at all and was all about me. Maybe he was trying to be straightforward and I'd made it all mean something else. Perhaps the

start was when I left my high-flying job just before the pandemic hit, with spooky timing. Now I was unemployed, worried about income and what to do with my time given I could not leave the house. The market had convulsed, no one was hiring. My one-bedroom flat, chosen to be as close to the city's heart as possible, felt stiflingly small and contained now London was on hold, now that there was nowhere to go except within its four walls. Without work, hard work, and lots of it, how should I spend these ever-elongating days? Purpose, as the ancients tell us in their annoyingly superior way, is important. Without it, I had nothing to gravitate my time around. I also felt a strange loss of self-esteem, work is an important part of my identity, I liked my job, I had been good at it, and now I felt its absence, I missed my team, connections, conversations, focus, building things.

Without work to distract me, my obsession deepened even as I knew it wasn't specifically about him, even as I understood it represented a generalised longing for connection. I composed and deleted messages, stayed up late and reread the script of our relationship, beginning to end, searching.

Every morning I woke face-creased, unrested. I had nothing to do. Home had turned into a prison and I had gone invisible. Everyone pulled into their nuclear families, bunkered down in survival mode. I called, but people were busy homeschooling their children, figuring out how to work remotely, no one had time to speak. The days felt endless, the month stretched out. Something caught deep in my throat, making it hard to swallow, harder to eat. For the first time I felt sharply lonely, unmoored. Or when it wasn't sharp, I felt like a green mosquito-infested pond somewhere deep in the woods, stagnating, dangerous. Whichever way you cut it, life was hardly going to plan personally or professionally. So maybe when I received that crappy break-up text it wasn't the start of anything much. Maybe

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everything was exaggerated, the timeline wasn't even that long, and I wasn't sliding into love, I just wanted to be, it was more that it would have been convenient. Maybe I wasn't all that surprised, and definitely not that heartbroken, just inconvenienced.

If you can't have romance then you can at least have comedy. So I went back to the dating apps, to have something to do as much as anything, and curated my life that way. I spent my days walking in circles, looping in endless one-hour increments through iterations of objectionable conversations with generic men, thankful for the mandatory two-metre distance rule. Mainly they talked and I listened. Mostly, it turned out, my views were not solicited at all.

'You're very intimidating.'

Was that a compliment? Should I try to be less than I am, to make your inadequacy more comfortable? The exchange felt exactly the opposite of the elegant Edwardian courtship promenades for which Victoria Park was designed, and it was the exact moment I gave up on trying to distance date in a pandemic. I committed to riding it out solo.

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I was washing food packaging and thinking, is this really scientifically proven? The shattering of the world, the shuttering of my city, the increasing social atomisation I had studied long ago in a very dull sociology course at university now hyper-accelerated. We were telling each other how boring the zombie apocalypse was. We'd prefer to be chased and gut-eaten. We'd prefer to outrun them, to have to cut off their heads with swords. We are social creatures, our little warm

bodies are covered with soft, sensing skin. Being apart from each other was unnatural, painful. There's a reason people gather in cities, a reason solitary is the worst level of prison punishment. 'This is a breach of the Geneva Convention', screamed the outraged papers. The deep hole inside me had always been there but now it widened, glinted. My skin felt grey from touchless living, the opposite of all the tech-touch. My phone spooned into me, whispering, offering wisdom and despair.

One month became two. My friend Katharine was setting up a covid testing lab, was being useful, was saving lives, but in that gap of time, the vacuum of the world, I went into a strange, orbiting place.

I sat in the sunshine outside. I'd stopped washing my hair. I tried to rest in the bath but expensive oil elixirs didn't help. I lost the shape of myself, dissolving into the water. I bought a mini trampoline and bounced vertically, determined to manufacture endorphins if they wouldn't come naturally. I did yoga and lifted myself repeatedly into handstands in the upside-down world. I boiled eggs. Nothing helped. I was confronted with the age-old oppression of women, with total domestic terrorism. Cooking and cleaning, rinse and repeat. I stopped doing both. I stopped everything. It was startling the amount of dirt I generated, stuck here in my one-bedroom flat with nothing to do all day. I sat. In the sun. I waited. My eyes like piss-holes in the snow.

'Give me to drink Mandragora,' said Cleopatra, begging to be drugged, knocked out, sedated, 'that I might sleep out this great gap of time'.

'Sorry, love, we're all out of Mandragora, but the good news is we've restocked the loo roll.'

'Find the beginning.' Perhaps that wasn't the right beginning either. Let me find another. Maybe the true beginning did start with loss, but it wasn't a job loss, it was both a sharper and sea-deep kind, a slow sadness that sat underneath everything. In the beginning was my father and he was dying as slowly as he could, of cancer, not covid.

He was a doctor, a GP, so he understood everything. It was terminal, there was no hope of a cure, but his kind of cancer could be kept in check by various drug treatments. At this point it had been five years since he had first been diagnosed, and there was the promise of many more good years, if the treatments kept working. 'Anticipatory grief' is what it's called when you know something bad will happen one day, an 'impending loss' is the name for when you know your father will die, not in the generalised sense that we're all going to die, but in a more concrete, specific way. Over time, I had learned to live with this slow unease behind everything: my father was in peril but there wasn't anything I could do, other than spend time with him, go on walks with him, make him laugh, and I now couldn't do any of this without risking his health: catching covid was a real concern as the treatments suppressed his immune system. Often it made me angry that he was told, was forced to live with this knowledge. I thought it would be better for him not to know, I wanted to protect him from having to keep having scans, keep being blasted with radioactive substances, having to weigh different treatment options. As the cancer slowly grew more aggressive he became more diplomatic, more equanimous. I was at his hospital bed after another difficult treatment, trying to make him laugh. I didn't realise yet this would be the last time I saw him for a long while.

The time before, I was walking with him the way we always walked together, only a little slower, and a much shorter route. It was early February and the woods weren't green yet. I pretended to take a

photograph to allow him to pause and catch his breath. I left early to return to London to be cooked for and lied to. A choice I came to regret and later thought of often, twisting it this way and that like a stomach-knife. When the virus broke out my father became very fearful, stayed deep, burrowed in the quiet green countryside I grew up in, worried about dying extra-extra-early from covid, not cancer.

He understood the risk if he caught the virus: if intensive care places had to be triaged like rumours in the newspapers were suggesting, and doctors ended up having to choose who would get the next ventilator, he knew where he'd be on the list of priorities. So he banished everyone except my mother from his kingdom, and started to isolate before official regulations came in. He asked my brother and I to stay away from him for safety, we couldn't visit any more. I couldn't go back to my childhood home. I was an adult now anyway, had to face this by myself. As we spoke on the phone at night I tried to think of all the people who had it worse. I tried to imagine the people trapped on cruise ships in the middle of icy seas, especially the ones who'd saved all that money for a once in a lifetime trip to Antarctica, who were now confined to the windowless cabins they purchased with misplaced economy, with just an hour a day in the light, on the deck, because no countries would let the boats dock. I thought of teenagers caged inside without school, without friends, of bewildered people in care homes. I visualised it as clearly as I could but it didn't help all that much, thinking of those worse off. I knew I was lucky in so many ways but it wasn't much of a consolation – I was still enclosed within the confines of my own life, alone inside this horrible thing, I couldn't avoid the self-pity trap of my own petty issues: a break-up, no job, and a father I could no longer see – it seemed somehow to have a compounding effect inside the wider crisis of the world, even I saw the contradictions, the tension of it all. We are all so caught up inside ourselves.

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That strangely sunny, optimistic spring full of flowers and birds slowly unfolded into a blazing summer. My neighbours had all been stress-gardening in our communal courtyard. Tending growing things seemed to comfort them and now there was colour everywhere I looked, blooms surrounded me, proudful strong white calla lilies, early pinking-red roses. The illegal dogs that should not live in our building were happier and more spoiled with every day that passed – they were having a reverse pandemic experience, no longer lonely and waiting all day for people to come home, now they belonged to all of us, were always in company. In contrast to the dogs, I felt more and more like I was suffocating, couldn't breathe, going transparent. Restrictions in London surged and eventually started easing a little as summer began to end.

It was near the end of a hot day when there was screaming on the street outside, screaming so loud I ran to investigate.

It was the familiar London conversational exchange, only the beeping and swearing were heightened, in both cadence and volume, because of the aggressive atmosphere, I guess. A man arched, like a puffing snake, hissing through the air at some other guy whose car was in his way. More cars got blocked in, more horns joined the chorus of discontent, and the emphasis subtly changed and charged. Fuck you. No fuck *you*. *Fuck* you. *Fuck you.* Eventually one of them gave way and precisely at the point where the two enemy cars passed each other, both with their windows open the better to hurl insults, with great precision, ballet-like timing and deadly aim, one man spat. A long jet of liquid arced through the open window and on to the other man's face. It was an impressive and devastating social commentary. A water pistol fired by a highly trained army sniper. Spitting at a total stranger for a minor inconvenience, in a pandemic of a respiratory airborne disease that we did not yet understand. Disgusting even in normal times, now weaponised, deliberate, intolerable. What if

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someone did that to my father? Suddenly, everything narrowed to a point. I couldn't breathe. Why did I live here? Society was broken. Everything was broken. I needed to get out of this horrible city. I turned away, turned to my computer, turned it into a magic carpet.

At this point, the UK had 'holiday corridors' open and people had gone away for summer holidays. I had some privilege, some savings, perhaps it was time to dip into them. I called my father to see what he thought.

'Go,' he said, 'after all, it's not like you're a doctor or anything useful.' This was the way we always talked, direct, sometimes combative, mostly designed to make each other laugh. My brother was a doctor, my mother was a nurse, I was the outlier.

'Will you promise not to get covid while I'm away? I don't want to worry about you.'

'I'll do my best. Just go – what else are you going to do? Mope around that tiny little flat by yourself?'

So perhaps that's how it began.

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At this point Italy was on the list of safe countries and I consulted with my friend Lara about how best to avoid the romantic parts. I was keen to stay away from the tanned and beautiful honeymooning couples walking hand in hand on long beaches in white linen, blinding each other with sunlight catching on enormous, competitive diamonds, wanted whatever the opposite of the Amalfi coast was. She suggested I head out to a string of tiny volcanic islands off the coast of Sicily, and things clicked serendipitously. These islands, according to various

theories, inspired part of *The Odyssey*, so I'd be tracing Odysseus's story in the real world, much to Emily Wilson's imagined disdain. I would follow him to his enchanted islands, see if I too could find the capricious gods, figure out if I could reconcile poetry to geography, maybe learn what monsters lurked in the seas between.

Grey-eyed Athena, goddess of wisdom and warfare, had a soft spot for Odysseus. She also had really good shoes. When the poem opens she's making the case to Zeus and the other gods that enough is enough and that Odysseus should be allowed to finally get home. As a first step, she makes the various gods agree to a plan to release him from Calypso's island where he's been held hostage for a pretty long time. Hermes, the messenger god, is dispatched to bring Calypso to heel and get her to set him free. Athena

> *tied her sandals on her feet,*
> *the marvellous golden sandals that she wears*
> *to travel sea and land, as fast as wind*

and she sprints off in a separate direction, over to Ithaca to catalyse Odysseus's awkward teenage son into taking action to find his father, the man who had left when he was a baby. He's a bit pathetic but Athena galvanises him. Once the 'owl-eyed' goddess has set things in motion, she flies away like a bird.

All I had to do by contrast to all this plotting was simply book a flight. I packed my suitcase full of whimsical white linen, enough for two weeks in the fierce Italian sun, and left the fear and static greyness of London behind me.

Then through the looking glass, down the rabbit hole, and I was sliding into the blue Tyrrhenian sea, feeling the weight, the salt and itch of it.