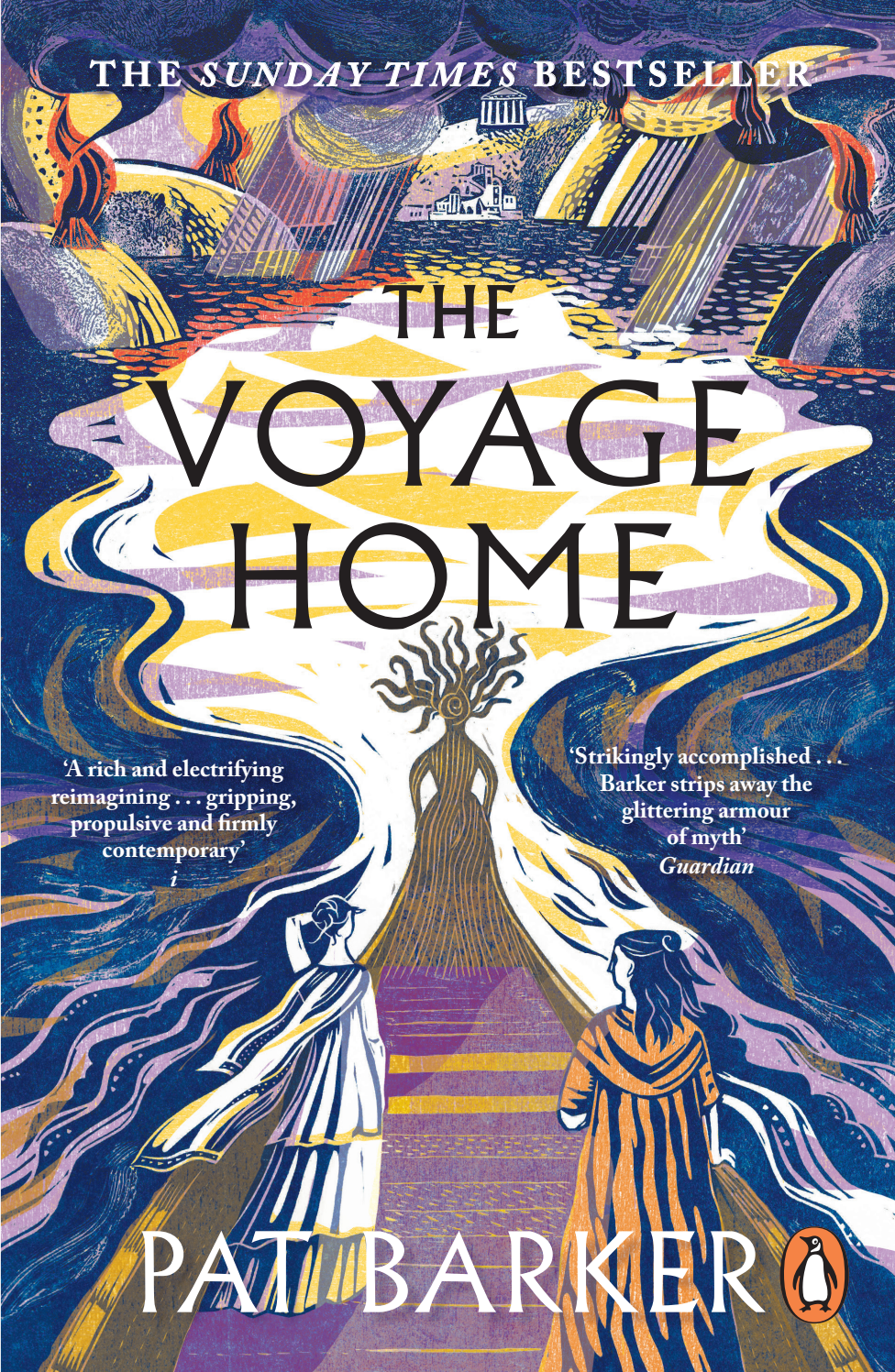

THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER
THE VOYAGE HOME
'A rich and electrifying reimagining . . . gripping, propulsive and firmly contemporary'
i
'Strikingly accomplished . . . Barker strips away the glittering armour of myth'
Guardian
PAT BARKER

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i

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pat Barker was born in Yorkshire and began her literary career in her late thirties, when she took a short writing course taught by Angela Carter. Encouraged by Carter to continue writing, she submitted her fiction to publishers. She has now published sixteen novels, including her masterful Regeneration trilogy, been made a CBE for services to literature, and won the UK's highest literary honour, the Booker Prize. *The Silence of the Girls* was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction and *The Women of Troy* was a number one *Sunday Times* bestseller. *The Voyage Home* continues the series.

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Blow Your House Down

Liza's England (*formerly* The Century's Daughter)

The Man Who Wasn't There

Regeneration

The Eye in the Door

The Ghost Road

(The Regeneration Trilogy)

Another World

Border Crossing

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Life Class

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THE VOYAGE HOME



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In loving memory of Alice Stott

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I

She had yellow eyes. At times, particularly by candlelight, they scarcely looked like human eyes at all. Calchas, the priest, once said they reminded him of a goat's eyes: that she had the same numbed look of a sacrifice. *I* never saw her like that. She reminded me of a sea eagle, a common enough bird on the coast where I grew up; the sailors call it 'the eagle with the sunlit eyes'. And its eyes are beautiful, but it doesn't do to forget the brutal beak, the talons sharp enough to tear living flesh from bone. No, I didn't see her as a victim, but then, I knew her better than most. I was her body-slave, or, to use the common, vulgar term slaves themselves use, her catch-fart. And I hated it.

That day, the day we finally abandoned the Greek camp and set sail for 'home', I was feeling really fed up with her because she'd kept me awake half the night praying – if you could call it praying. To me, it sounded more like a married couple having a row. Apollo didn't say much – in fact, nothing that I could hear. *She* was saying, 'Home? *Home?*' over and over again, as if it were the worst swear word in her vocabulary. I knew what she meant, because whatever unimaginable place our Greek captors were taking us to it certainly wouldn't be home. Home, for me, had been a little white house on the side of a hill, the back garden so steep I had to cut

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terraces into it to grow my herbs. I loved that garden. There were goats at the top of the hill, so my days were punctuated by the clanking of bells. For Cassandra, home had been first a palace, then a temple, both, now, in ruins, just like my house – a shared misfortune that should probably have brought us closer than it did.

Leaving Cassandra with the cart and the baggage, I walked round the hut for the last time, checking to see we'd left nothing behind – or that she'd left nothing behind. I didn't have anything to leave. The floorboards were gritty under my feet, the sand already starting to encroach. Normally, sweeping that out every morning was one of my jobs, but the last few days I hadn't bothered. What was the point? The sand would be everywhere soon, piling up in corners, wedging doors shut; and after that the winter storms would begin, finding cracks in walls, blistering paint, warping wood until only a few spars would remain, scattered across a beach that had swallowed everything else. There was a bitter satisfaction in knowing that the ruined marble palaces and temples of Troy would endure for centuries to come while in a few short years the Greek camp would vanish without trace.

Being alone like this, even for a few moments, was a luxury. For the past two months, I'd shared the hut with Cassandra, who'd been in a state of 'divine frenzy' when she arrived, clothes ripped, skirt bloodied and stained with semen. Nobody who saw Cassandra in those first days ever forgot it. Holding two blazing torches above her head, she whirled around the overcrowded hut, hair and skirt flying, shouting, 'C'mon, get up, what's wrong with you all? Dance!' Her mother and sisters cowered away from her. 'C'mon, what's the matter with you?' – she was kicking her mother's shins at this point – 'Get up, dance! DANCE!' And Hecuba, desperate to calm

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her demented daughter down, shuffled her scaly old feet from side to side. A further moment of horror in the old queen's life, seeing her daughter reduced to this: a pathetic creature with spittle on her chin and garlands of dead flowers drooping from her neck.

'Come on, all of you. Dance at my wedding!'

What wedding? Like every other woman in the camp, Cassandra was facing a lifetime of slavery. Royal birth, her status as a high priestess of Apollo, none of that would be enough to save her. Like everybody else there, like her own mother, she wasn't an important person any more; in fact, she wasn't any kind of person. She was a thing, because that's what a slave is – and not just in other people's eyes, the people who own her, and use or abuse her; no, it's worse than that. You become a thing even in your own estimation. It takes a strong spirit, a strong mind, to resist the stripping away of your old identity. Most of us can't do it. And yet here was Cassandra, who if half the stories were true was as mad as a box of snakes, prophesying that she was about to become the wife of a great king.

'Rejoice!' They all had to rejoice with her, not because she was going to marry the richest, most powerful man in the Greek world, but because her marriage would lead directly to his death. *Look at him*, she was saying, *riding in triumph over dead children, king of kings, lord of lords – and yet this hero, this mortal god, will die the death of a stuck pig on a slaughterhouse floor*. Her own death was of no importance. She'd go down into the darkness crowned with laurels, having done what her brothers, for all their strength and courage, had failed to do: bring Agamemnon's head level with the dirt.

Deluded. I don't remember anybody saying the word, but then, it

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didn't need to be said. Her sisters exchanged pitying glances, though I noticed that not one of them tried to console her. Even surrounded by the women of her own family, she was completely alone. She wasn't despised exactly, but nobody believed her prophecies; in fact, nobody listened to a word she said.

But then – and this was as unexpected as a flash of lightning in a clear blue sky – Agamemnon chose her as his prize. I was there. I felt the ripple of surprise, even consternation, that spread around the arena. Afterwards, as the crowd dispersed, I overheard a couple of Greek fighters talking: 'Bloody hell, I wouldn't want that in my bed.' 'No, you'd never dare sleep.' 'Did you see her with them torches? Bloody near set the place alight.' 'Well, I suppose if all else fails they'll just tie her to the bed.'

As it turned out, he wasn't far wrong about that. For her own safety, she was kept locked up, and I was the lucky soul sent to take care of her. The ranting, the raving, the spitting and pissing, went on as before, but behind closed doors. I followed her sisters' example and ignored the rants – no easy matter when they're being shouted in your ear in the middle of the night. What I couldn't ignore was the obsession with fire. Every minute, she was watching me, waiting for me to go to sleep so she could get out of the hut and grab torches from the sconces that lined the path outside. I'd wake and find the door wide open, cold night air streaming in, and Cassandra outside on the path whirling torches in great arcs of flame above her head. No doubt, in her poor crazed mind, they were the torches of Hymen that light a virgin bride to her marriage bed.

Hour after hour, I lay awake, staring at the rafters, afraid even to close my eyes in case I dropped off to sleep. 'Divine frenzy' people called it, but to me, supervising her every waking minute, combing

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her hair, washing her face, changing her bloody clouts – even that she couldn't do for herself – there was nothing 'divine' about it. When, finally, she began to calm down, when she no longer paced the floor for hours on end, spit flying, fingers snatching empty air, when she sat up in bed and accepted a cup of cold water, having slept non-stop for fifteen hours, I was broken. As close to physical and mental collapse as I've ever been. But curious too. Despite the weeks of enforced intimacy, I felt I didn't know this woman at all, and I wanted to.

Unfortunately, almost everything I'd learned about her since then repelled me. And – in so far as she bothered to notice me at all! – she returned the dislike. I'd seen her at her worst, dribbling and drooling in urine-soaked sheets. You can dress it up whichever way you like, but the simple fact was, I'd seen too much. I knew too much. Sometimes, I think, she found it difficult to be in the same room as me.

'Ritsa? RitSA!'

That was her now. One last look around the empty hut, one final blessed moment of peace, and then I had to go.

'What *have* you been doing?'

She was standing beside a cart loaded with her possessions, a great heap of them – not bad for a woman who'd arrived in the camp with nothing but the rags she stood up in.

I held out my hand. 'I found your earrings.'

Her hand went to her earlobes. 'Oh. I can't think how they got left behind.'

They were nice earrings too: solid gold hoops, a gift from Agamemnon. God knows what poor girl's ears they'd been ripped out of. Cassandra didn't thank me. I watched her climb into the cart beside the driver and then, with a snap of the reins, they were off, leaving

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me to trudge along behind, carrying a bag of 'special' clothes. What was special about them I had no idea; she'd packed that bag herself. It was heavy, I knew that, inexplicably heavy if all it held was clothes. I was also carrying her jewellery case, containing the various presents Agamemnon had given her, including a beautiful silver necklace set with fire opals. I had my own reasons for wishing to keep *that* safe.

So, there I was, stumping along behind the cart, my horizon bounded by the bullocks' shit-caked backsides and swishing tails. Had I really sunk so low? *Yes* – the only possible answer. I was Cassandra's catch-fart – well, be honest, would you want that on *your* headstone? No, me neither. Not that I was likely to get one – a headstone, I mean – or even a grave. In the camp, the bodies of women who died were thrown off the cliffs, or added – as kindling, you might say – to a fighter's funeral pyre. I lost count of the number of good women I saw leave the world that way.

At the end of the track, the driver reined the bullocks in because going any further would risk getting the wheels stuck in loose sand. Jumping down, he walked round the back of the cart, considered the number and size of Cassandra's boxes, sighed, ostentatiously, and went off to find somebody to help. Cassandra didn't seem to notice his departure; like me, she was staring out across the bay.

For the past few days, ever since the wind had changed direction, the harbour had been filling up with brown, fat-bellied cargo ships, sitting low in the water, holds stuffed with loot from ruined Troy, rising and falling on the choppy waves like a puddle of disgruntled ducks. They were surrounded by the black, beaked warships that were waiting to escort them home.

Closer to where I was standing, shadows of clouds chased each

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other across the wet sand. Dwarfed by the immensity of sea and sky, knots of Greek fighters stood around, some of them still singing the same stupid song they'd been singing for weeks: '*We're going, we're going, we are going HOME!*' Home. And what about us, the women of Troy and its satellite cities, where were we going? There were many women on the shore, hundreds; some of those who were holding little girls by the hand would be mourning the loss of their sons. Men and boys dead, women of child-bearing age shared out among the conquerors, some already pregnant with their children. What we were witnessing on that beach was the deliberate destruction of a people.

The long lines shuffled forward, a few feet at a time. Those at the front were being encouraged, by prods from the butt ends of spears, to wade into the sea and climb the rope ladders that dangled down the ships' swollen sides. I watched their uncertain progress and saw no comfort anywhere. It felt like the end of everything. *Was* the end. And then, suddenly, one of the women began to sing, though it was a while before I identified the singer. An old woman, past child-bearing age, had chosen to sing, not a song of defiance, but one of loss. A lament, but stoical rather than self-pitying. She gave a voice to those hundreds of silent women. You don't always need hope; sometimes it helps just to have your despair recognized, and shared.

Cassandra said, 'Do you think he's ever coming back?'

Meaning the driver, I supposed. A minute later, she'd jumped down from the cart and was striding across the beach, looking straight ahead of her, neither to the right nor to the left, like a young warrior eager for battle to start. Lugging the heavy bag, I stumbled and floundered after her. As we got closer to the shore, I saw that a small group had gathered to wave me goodbye. These were women from

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other compounds whose kings were not yet ready to sail – and among them, my closest friend, Briseis, who'd already spotted me and, despite her pregnant belly, was jumping up and down and shouting, 'Good luck!' – doing everything she could to urge me forward into my new life. But I didn't want a new life, I wanted the old life back. And I don't mean my previous existence as a freewoman in Lyrnessus; I'd long ago accepted the loss of that. No, I just wanted a few more months in the Greek camp, because then I'd still have *her*, and I'd be able to help her through the birth of her child. I stared long and hard at that little group of friends, though mainly at her, trying to fix this last sight of her in my mind so I'd have something to turn to in the blackest hours of the night when time just doesn't pass.

But Cassandra said, in a slightly prissy, bossy tone of voice, 'Come on, Ritsa, don't dawdle, we've got to get on board.'

Why did we? I couldn't think of a single reason, but it didn't rest with me. And so, long before I was ready, I had to turn my back on Briseis, who was like a second daughter to me, and face the sea and the ships.

Cassandra raced ahead. Slithering down the last steep slope of shingle, she dislodged an avalanche of pebbles that peppered in her wake. I followed her down more cautiously, telling myself, every time my right foot hit the ground: *last* time, *last* time, *last* time . . . I was desperately trying to nudge myself into feeling something, anything, but I couldn't. From the moment I turned my back on Briseis, every emotion seemed to dry up.

The ship we were about to board was easily the biggest in the cargo fleet, possibly the oldest and certainly not the best preserved. Why on earth was Agamemnon sailing home in this battered old sick bucket? *Medusa*, she was called. Fortunately, the figurehead was

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pointing out to sea – not that I had anything to fear from her gaze: I was already stone.

There was a gangplank. Nobody seriously expected Agamemnon to wade into the sea and scramble up a rope ladder, though presumably during his years as a fighter he'd done just that many times. But rumours were circulating about his health. In the last two months, he'd rarely been seen in public and when he did appear he kept his distance from the crowds. I hoped he was ill; I hoped he was dying, but I wasn't holding my breath. Even then, I'd lived long enough to see the wicked prosper, reach a ripe old age and die in their beds.

Cassandra *ran* up the gangplank – boldly, though I have to say, not gracefully. She wasn't a graceful woman, Cassandra. None of her movements was ever precisely the right movement and so, wherever she went, she left a trail of minor destruction behind her. I was forever picking up after her. On this occasion, just as she neared the top, she stumbled. I caught my breath, though she was never in any real danger – anonymous hands quickly reached out and pulled her on board. She was Agamemnon's . . . Well, what was she? Concubine, I suppose you'd have to say. Were there rumours of a secret wedding? I didn't know, and I didn't dare ask. But whichever way you looked at it, she was valuable cargo. You wouldn't want that landing in the drink on your watch.

Now, my turn. The bag of 'special' clothes weighed a ton and I had the jewellery case clamped to my side.

'You can leave that with us, love,' one of the sailors said. 'We'll look after it.'

Aye, bet you will. Dozens of boxes and bags were piled up round his feet. I added the clothes bag to the heap, but not the case – no way

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was I going to let go of that – and began to edge cautiously up the gangplank, trying not to look down at the waves rushing past beneath my feet. Two thirds of the way up, I wobbled to a halt, knowing I could never reach the top. My predicament was spotted by the sailors below – much to their amusement – and one of them bounded up the gangplank, nearly dislodging me in the process, planted both hands squarely on my arse and, to the accompaniment of ribald cheers from below, pushed me the last couple of yards on to the deck.

I was intact, even if my dignity wasn't – though I made everything worse by tripping over the hem of my tunic and falling flat on my face.

'Hey up, lass.'

Calloused hands hauled me to my feet and dusted me down. My rescuer was saying something, but I was too flustered to take it in and thanked a blur of chest and red beard. All the same, even in that first moment, something snagged my memory. His voice? Somewhere or other, I'd heard that voice before, but it was only a fleeting impression, and he'd already moved on.

I stood for a moment, struggling to take in this strange new world. The deck was crowded with sailors; two were shovelling what looked like sheep shit off the boards, while others gathered by the rowing benches and rubbed chalk into their hands. Obviously, Agamemnon was expected on board at any minute. Everybody looked nervous. One young lad stood not far away from me, fingering a pipe, even raising it to his lips and giving a little, tentative *toot*. Apart from that, my overwhelming impression was of the stink of animals. There were sheep in a pen and a couple of small goats, tossing their heads from side to side, clanking their bells – a dolorous sound at the best of times, one that always reminded me powerfully of home, but

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especially so at that moment. I was a good sailor, a calm sailor, but I was frightened of this voyage. Listening to the goats' bleating, I felt in my own legs and belly the terror of the tilting deck.

Cassandra was standing in the stern, staring across the beach and the battlefield to the ruins of Troy. They say if you look back you turn to salt, but what else could she do? Her father and brothers, her baby nephew, were all buried in that soil. Glancing sideways, I saw she'd stuffed the edge of her veil into her mouth, perhaps to stop herself crying out loud, or cursing Agamemnon, whose procession was now winding its slow, glittering snail's trail along the shore. A splendid sight – or so it must have seemed to the Greeks. Blaring trumpets, battle horns, beating drums, sunlight flashing on helmets and spears and, high above, the red-and-gold standards of Mycenae straining in the wind. Right at the end of the procession came Agamemnon, marching in the shade of a huge square canopy; priests swinging censers walked ahead of him to sanctify his path.

I expected Cassandra to remain on deck to greet him, but she spat out the hem of her veil and turned away.

'Come on, let's see where they're putting us to sleep.'

She called out a question to the man with the red beard, who indicated a low door on the opposite side of the deck. We had to bend nearly double to get through it. Blinded by the sudden gloom, we groped our way down a flight of stairs – it was a proper staircase, I was pleased to see, not just a glorified ladder – and into the deeper darkness beneath. A sweet, rather sickly smell with a stench of decay underneath, like the water in a vase where lilies have been left to rot. Even Cassandra, often so lost in her own thoughts she was oblivious to her surroundings, wrinkled her nose in disgust.

As my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw we stood in a long

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passageway with doors on either side. Voices shouted on the deck above us, but down here we might have been the last people left alive. The floor tilted and swayed – I was more aware of the ship's movement here than I had been on deck. We looked at each other, not knowing whether to press on or return to the deck and ask for more directions, but then a man came up behind us, holding a storm lantern whose shuddering light sent shadows fleeing along the walls.

'Hello, ladies,' he said. 'Lost, are we?'

'Yes,' Cassandra said.

'Don't worry, we'll soon get you sorted out.'

A wheedling, insinuating tone; this was a man who inspired instant distrust, but at least he seemed to know where he was going. So we followed him. About halfway down the passageway he pushed a door open and stood aside to let us past. Small, that was my first impression. Dingy was the second.

'I'll bring your bags and stuff down later.'

Looking round, I said, 'There's nowhere to put anything.'

'There's pegs.'

There were – two – on the back of the door.

'Look, I know it's a bit tight. When you get your things, just take out whatever it is you think you'll need and then give us a shout. The rest's got to go in the hold.' He glanced at Cassandra. 'Sorry, love, that's just the way it is.' He pulled a bunch of candles from his tunic and handed them to me. 'Go canny with 'em, mind. They're not cheap.'

'Can't we have a lamp?' Cassandra asked.

'Sorry, love, Captain's orders.'

Cassandra's face was a picture. This was probably the first time she'd been *sorry-loved* in her entire life.

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Our guide was leaning against the door now, settling in for a chat. 'See, if a candle's knocked over, nine times out of ten it's dead before it hits the deck. Whereas a lamp, now . . . that'll go on burning. Ship this age . . . Phuh, well, she's firewood, basically. Any little spark and *whoosh*!'

'If the ship's that dry,' I said, 'why does everything feel so damp?'

'Does it?'

'These blankets are virtually wet.'

'She's an old lady, she leaks.' He nodded over his shoulder. 'Wind gets up, that passage is awash.'

Cassandra said, 'More to the point, how long will it take to get there?'

'Nobody can tell you that, love. Because everything depends on the wind. Case you haven't noticed, this is a *sailing* ship, because it's too bloody far to row.'

'Two nights,' I said. 'With a following wind.' I turned to him. 'That's right, isn't it?'

''Bout right.'

By now, I was almost pushing him out of the door. It was a relief when that over-intimate, somehow slightly threatening voice was cut off.

With him gone, I looked more closely at the cabin. Water had gathered in puddles all over the rutted floor. There'd been no recent stormy weather, so perhaps that had been left behind after a last-minute attempt to clean the place up. The ceiling was low, too low to allow Cassandra to stand upright, so she paced up and down between the bunks like a predatory bird. I hoped she wouldn't go on pacing all night – it had been known. Even praying was better than that. What worried me wasn't so much the discomfort of damp blankets as

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the size of the place. The hut we'd shared had been cramped enough to get on her nerves and it was ten times bigger than this. But, give credit where it's due, she uttered not a word of complaint. After a minute or two, she sat down on the right-hand bunk and bounced a little, though you could see without testing that the mattress was lumpy and hard. Horsehair, I was guessing – possibly straw. She'd be sleeping on goose down, though, since she spent most of her nights in Agamemnon's bed.

After a moment's hesitation, I sat down on the other bunk. The space between us was so narrow our knees bumped awkwardly in the middle and I had to shuffle along.

'*Well*,' she said.

She sounded amused rather than angry, and I realized all this must have seemed trivial to her. From the moment she'd arrived in the camp, she'd been prophesying Agamemnon's death, and her own. Yes, yes, I know: fantasies, wish fulfilment, a traumatized woman's delusory dreams of revenge. But the point is, *she* believed them, and they determined the way she reacted now. Why make a fuss about the size of your cabin? However narrow it is, it's likely to be wider than your grave. I probably minded the constriction more than she did.

And I did mind. The dim light and the smell of damp wool made me feel submerged. I knew we hadn't walked far to reach the cabin, really no distance at all, and yet in the semi-darkness I'd lost all sense of where we were; for all I knew, we might be below the waterline. Perhaps what lay on the other side of that mottled wall was not light and air, but mile upon mile of the grey, heaving, voracious sea. Not a comforting thought – particularly as some parts of the wall were cracked and flaking, resembling nothing so much as the hide of an ancient whale.

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Cassandra stirred restlessly.

'You all right?' I asked.

'I'll be fine once we get going.'

Somewhere above our heads a drum began to beat. Shouted orders, a slap of running feet, followed by a cacophony of pipes, whistles, trumpets, drums: Agamemnon coming on board. Cheers – formal, organized cheers – and then, after a short pause, footsteps coming along the passage outside. I heard Agamemnon's voice, affable, charming – oh yes, believe it or not, he could be charming! – followed by a different voice entirely: curt, brusque, self-consciously down-to-earth, a man forced to play the role of courtier and knowing it didn't suit him. Again, I felt I knew the voice; and it wasn't just the accent, though that was a large part of it. I thought I recognized that mixture of aggression and . . . I couldn't think of the right word, but there was something both prickly and vulnerable in that voice. A few seconds later, they'd gone past.

Almost immediately, there was a great rattling of chains as the anchor was raised. The drumbeat started again, more measured now, marking time as the rowers bent to their oars. I pictured the ship pulling slowly away from the shore, the blades dipping and rising. Cassandra and I looked at each other. We were leaving our homeland for the last time and simply as Trojans we shared the pain of that moment. The cabin felt very dark. She'd gone back to sucking her veil and that tore at my nerves. I'd rather she'd howled like a wolf that's seen her cubs killed, anything would have been easier to bear than that babyish clinging to a piece of saliva-stained cloth – which was making me feel helpless too. Perhaps I could persuade her to go on deck, to watch the land disappear, confront the reality of loss, but just as I was about to suggest it, the drumbeat stopped.

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For a moment, the ship floundered – Cassandra's knuckles whitened as she gripped the side of her bunk – and then, above our heads, there were rhythmic cries of *heave! heave!* and a further rattling of chains as the sails were raised. This was it, we were leaving, and we'd never be able to go back.

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2

The ship leapt forward and then, as it left the shelter of the bay, began to shoulder its way through heavy seas.

We'd hardly got used to the change in motion when there was a hammering on the door and our guide appeared, looking even more unprepossessing than I remembered. He wore his hair scraped back in a long, greasy ponytail, despite being very bald at the front of his head. He probably had a tough time of it since the Greeks pride themselves on their long, thick hair. Pale eyes, almost colourless in the dim light, darting here and there for opportunities of one kind or another. He pointed to Cassandra's boxes and pushed the biggest inside the cabin. 'Ten minutes.' He held up the fingers of both hands as he spoke, as if I might not know how to count. Typical Greek arrogance – they really do think of us as barbarians with barely sense enough to wipe our arses. 'Not long enough,' I said, and slammed the door.

Opening the box, I took out a richly embroidered dress – yellow, a colour Cassandra was fond of, though it didn't suit her – a couple of plainer, more serviceable tunics and a thick woollen shawl for walks on deck, and . . . ? What else was she likely to need? Further down, tucked away beneath a blue dress, was a linen bag containing her clean clouts. As I hung the bag on one of the hooks, I was doing

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mental arithmetic and I suppose the calculations must have shown on my face because Cassandra said sharply, 'I'm not late.'

'No.' Seeing her face, I said it again. 'No, of course not.'

She was late. I knew that for a fact because it was my job to wash the clouts – but it never paid to contradict Cassandra, so I just got on with shaking out the creases in her tunics and hanging them on the back of the door. She'd been on her period when she arrived in the camp, and she definitely hadn't been since. Of course, in one way she was right: five, six weeks, it was nothing. Women in the camp, many of whom had witnessed the deaths of their sons and husbands, often went five or six months without a period. I've had many a girl come up to me crying her eyes out, begging and pleading for something to bring it away, and yet, when I examined her there was nothing there. On the other hand, a missed period isn't the only sign. I dressed and undressed Cassandra, bathed her, slept in the same bed: I knew how her breasts had changed.

Behind me, the silence went on curdling.

'You think I am, don't you?'

She was adept at reading people's thoughts. I've never known anybody do it better, before or since.

'You can't wear this,' I said, running my fingers down the yellow dress from neck to hem. 'It's damp.'

'I'm wearing it.'

'You'll catch your death . . .'

'I won't need to run very fast.'

I hated the way she teased me about her bloody prophecy. She knew I didn't believe in it.

'I daresay you'll live as long as your mother. That's always the best guide.'

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Turning away, I tried to hang the shawl on top of the tunics, but it kept sliding off.

'You can give that to me.'

She wrapped it around her head and shoulders, snuggling down into its sea-green folds – a colour, incidentally, that suited her far better than the saffron yellow of the dress. After I'd used all the available space – two hooks, for god's sake! – I dragged the box outside to await collection. Then, since Cassandra's eyes were closed, I lay down on my bunk, telling myself I mustn't go to sleep, though I was tired enough.

There was a new noise drifting down to the cabin from the deck above: the thrumming of the wind in the rigging. To me, it sounds like a mind at the end of its tether, as if the rigging ropes are nerves. I can hardly bear to listen to it, but cooped up as we were in that foetid little box, I had no choice. Was the sea getting rougher? I was aware of the ship's every movement, the laborious climb to the crest of a wave, the shuddering shock of its descent. Glancing across at the other bunk, I saw Cassandra had gone very white.

'You'd be better off on deck, you know. Get some air in your lungs.'

'I can't, you know I can't. I've got to be ready in case he sends for me. Oh, and that reminds me, I'm going to need hot water for a bath.'

Hot water? A bath? Apart from anything else, where did she think we were going to put the bath? Still, I got up at once, glad of any excuse to leave the cabin. Closing the door behind me, I saw that the boxes had been collected, though I hadn't heard anybody come for them. The passage was empty, nothing but a long, dark tunnel. I hesitated, not knowing which way to go, but then somebody opened the big double doors at the far end and a tall, broad-shouldered man

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came out. His face was in shadow, but when he turned I caught a glint of gold at his throat and in his hair. Agamemnon. Instinctively, I flattened myself against the wall. For a moment, he seemed to be looking straight at me, but then I realized he was peering beyond me into the darkness. I turned to follow the direction of his gaze, but I couldn't see anything, just more doors, more darkness. A man's voice called from the lighted room behind him and, after a quick, dismissive glance at me, he went inside and shut the door.

I was left alone with the murky light and the heaving floor. No railings to hang on to, but still, somehow, I had to find hot water, so using an arm to steady myself, I scuffed along the wall towards the double doors. A short passage led off to the right. As I hesitated, a door at the far end of it opened, belching steam, and an enormously fat man carrying a tray of cups emerged, his face slick with sweat.

'Oh, hello,' he said.

'My mistress would like some hot water.'

'Would she now?'

'And a bathtub.'

'We've only got the one, and *he's* in that.'

I repeated the request, trying to sound assertive, but it made no impression. 'Tell her she can have a bucket of *warm* water in half an hour, same as every bugger else.' Meanwhile, he said, I should go back to my cabin and lie down. 'Wind's getting up – and you can see for yourself there's nowt to hang on to. Wouldn't want you breaking a leg now, would we?'

A wolfish grin. I suppose, to be fair, we none of us choose the length of our canines.

'Is that lamb?' I offered a placatory smile. (God, I despise myself sometimes.) 'Smells nice . . .'

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'You tuck in, love, because that wind's rising – can you hear it? – and there's nowt worse than chucking up on an empty stomach.'

Defeated, I returned to the cabin to find Cassandra sitting on the side of her bunk.

'Hot water?'

'On its way.'

I had no faith whatsoever in the arrival of water of any temperature, though I was wrong there. A bucket of reasonably warm water was delivered about thirty minutes later. I undressed her, washed her, began brushing her hair . . .

'I can't be.'

It took me a second to grasp what she meant. 'Well, you could . . .'

It didn't seem to occur to her that a young, healthy woman having sex every night was likely to get pregnant, that it might even be rather surprising if she didn't. Looking down at the sunless white of her neck, I felt a twinge of pity for her, for this clever, convoluted woman, this prophet, this seer, who'd somehow managed not to foresee what any fourteen-year-old scullery maid could have told her to expect.

'You know, if you told him you were pregnant, he might leave you alone.'

'No, he wouldn't. And anyway, I'm not.'

That was a stupid thing to say. I didn't even know that she wanted to be left alone. She hadn't chosen a celibate life; her mother had taken the decision for her. After weeks of enforced intimacy in the hut I'd felt I knew everything about Cassandra – only to realize as the state of 'divine frenzy' receded that I knew almost nothing. Did she derive any pleasure from Agamemnon's pawing and groping? I found that hard to imagine. She never complained, but then she wouldn't, not to me. One of the surprising things about Cassandra,

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