

# Part I – Displaced

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## Of Athene

Becalmed. In the dark the ship lay lolling with a list, no direction evident, just thick damp mist within its sails. The first bell of the morning watch sounds and the crew, they gather round their Master, Odysseus, who slumbers not but sits beside a cask of wine and beside a lantern burns. Writing his journal, he is in the company of a quiet dark-haired boy.

The bo'sun, stepping from their midst, speaks thus: 'Odysseus, forgive the intrusion that I cause to you and your friend the passenger. This idle time we have upon our hands whilst we endure the sea-god's slumber and can no longer make our way towards our destination's land: though I have piped them down, the men and I, we climb the walls within the fo'c's'le and sleep cannot. Pray, ease our minds with tales that bring happiness and chase the burden from our hearts till the wind can find its way to fill our sails and chase the mist away.'

Odysseus then casts his eyes across the crews' most piteous faces and, after a few moments with a grave look, he cracks a smile and says, 'It is true; we journey must from a

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place where father time has washed his hands of us and head toward our hopes and pray that we are bold enough to face the challenges of each new day. I have such a tale that may just help the slow turn of the clock. Though this tale of woe and joy and everything between spans many years, one score and ten almost, I begin just seven years afore its end and set the scene: Though I was in the summer of my time, I was still malleable and green.

‘Bo’sun, although the sun has well and truly been over the yardarm — indeed, it has been almost all the way under it too — night continues to outstay her welcome in sobriety and I am far from being warmly affected toward her or upon her bosom be inclined to lay; let us first pour some wine so that I may let the juices flow upon my tongue and let its silver surface be a little bit more slippery!’

The bo’sun eagerly rushes to fetch the open cask from beside Odysseus and, jostling with it through the crowd, gives it to the cabin boy, instructing him, ‘Endow all cups and hearts with the promise of sweet merriment.’

Odysseus meanwhile, continues. ‘At that time, I was rent from what I thought was love to last and found myself between a rock and some other place as hard. And so I sought some wisdom from Athene with hope that, through her tarot cards, I might foresee my plight of troth. An impatient man I was, no sooner fallen from the pan than looking for a fire in which to heat my tender flesh!

‘The room was dimly lit but, as I remember, warm. And soon after our greetings, she tapped into the spirit of Tiresias and took on his female form: her face became an ashen grey yet all her years, they fell away; and her golden voice gripped at me,

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as only from a goddess could. “Odysseus, you are on a journey but you are in a wood and cannot see for trees! You have far to travel yet, over water I would think. There is someone there, slightly older, who is trying to guide you through giant changes. There are broken rings here, beware! And someone tries to hold you back but they will have to let you go. Do not despair, for you will turn round after the storm and come into calmer waters.”

‘She shuffled the cards once more and spread them out to lie across the small table. Clutching her left arm to herself, she poured over them eagerly with her flashing eyes.’

As Odysseus pauses to drain his cup, a voice calls out from the crew, ‘Odysseus, was the Athene that you knew truly a goddess? For I have heard it said that you are favourite amongst the deities so surely you could tell.’

Refilling his cup, he answers. ‘The lesser men that knew Athene well in that time, considered her like Circe: a witch! But to me she was far more than her ability to foresee. A teacher, a guide, she watched over me like a mother. Yet there was a tie, a connection between us that spanned beyond the umbilical attachment to mortality. Her guidance has been a part of me through many, many years. She told me that her words would replay to me when the time was drawing nigh, reminding me of foretold hazards during certain encounters. Why, sure enough, they would jump out from the forests of thought, casting dispersion upon the blinding light of uncertainty. I think she was goddess but few would let her be.’

With his right arm outstretched and bent like a ballet dancer, cup still in hand, he gestures at it with his left hand’s open palm, ‘And like the characteristics of a good wine, the true

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meanings of those words would only reveal themselves after a good period of maturing!

Odysseus then reaches behind him and pulls an odd shaped case from the shadows, places it on its side close to the lantern and sits upon it, legs astride.

‘Now let me turn my tale again back to that day and continue telling of our encounter:

‘Once more her mind wandered and her expression became distant, the spirit mists within her eyes, “There’s an elderly gentleman there, he’s a very noble man but acts more plain, talking to you at the end of the journey, making it right for you.” And with those words, and many more that would fill a book of tales, she turned to me and said, “My dear, you may make a wish.” Well, in my heart, I felt the emptiness; the yearning for a gift of love; a sweetness of companionship. And so I wished that the gods would grant me a sentence that was brief and spare me this imprisonment in which I was bereft of true love’s lasting tenderness.

‘But her answer in the pit of my stomach lay alongside the grief and ached to my dismay, “In seven years the answer to your wish will be fulfilled with a slightly older lady’s love adorned with sweet sincerity; it is slow in coming but it is there; her name, I think, Penelope. When she comes, you must not hesitate or you will truly feel despair.”

‘I left from there that day with an angered mind and wrote me a decree that I would find this love; break free from the chains of my burden and travel far and wide, seeking in every port until I found the one with whom I could lay side by side in contentment till the day that my last breath be spent.

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‘For you to understand the basis for my being so hell-bent on this foolishness, I should take you back to springtime and my youth when I was blessed with Dawn’s rosy fingers fresh and a first love’s sweet caress. But of this tale of special love, I will make you wait: the juicy details for which you yearn, anticipate — I can see the sparkle from within your eyes — and for which I dangle it like fishing bait,’ at which point Odysseus wiggles his index finger and, laughing somewhat merrily, dips it into his cup of grog, raises it again into the air then licks it like a hungry dog.

The crew laugh loud and cheer but Odysseus soon quietens them with a wave of hand then beckons for them to come near. ‘I will tell but first: take comfort in the knowing that, through all the years, Athene helped me understand the many paradoxical beliefs that shape our lives. And she taught me how to navigate the paths that do reveal themselves for us to contemplate; and well she prophesied many hidden things, some of which have come to pass and others, perhaps, still before me lie. In essence, her wisdom encouraged flight; she nurtured my desire to find the wings of true freedom and seek the love that, on that winter’s night, she did foretell.

‘Now I will also introduce to you another friend for whom I have an everlasting love but one that could never be anything but platonic, as you will see.’ Odysseus pats the odd shaped case on which he sits. ‘This friend has travelled far and wide with me, always at my side; to many lands and across many miles within; through air we’d fly and in metaphoric oceans, together we would swim!

‘But now the story must continue on from the point at which I left Athene that day, carrying her words of wisdom,

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though disheartened and a little bit dismayed.

‘And so it was that, after vowing to be free, I met someone that I will call the Bird Lady. Her sweet voice carried tales of folk: painters and poets and all manner of kind that she encountered. Her love of life entwined my soul inspiring me to seek within and capture words of flying free with which Athene had seeded me.’

Odysseus stands up, lays the case down and opens it. He then removes an instrument of music, closes the case and, putting it back on its side, sits down on it again. ‘This is the friend of whom I spoke,’ he sets it on his lap, ‘Martin is his name. He’s crafted in fine wood with strings of bronze and together we’ll continue with our tale through narrative and songs...

‘One evening, the Bird Lady told a tale of how a feathered friend of paradise that she possessed, through an open window did fly, escaping from its nest and out into the cold. She did not know if it would live or die in that winter wild. So sorely was her concern, I could not bring myself to tell her that I, too, was planning an escape! How ironic then that mine would lead me to become entrapped, as you will hear later in this tale: of Calypso and her hold on me.

‘Now let us pour some more of this fine wine and I shall share with you the tuneful rhyme that tells more about the Bird Lady and her sweet singing voice that captivated me.’

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Of Wisdom and Freedom: The Bird Lady

*Brown is the colour of her feather-textured hair  
and she sits there with her birds upon a cage beside the chair.  
And her voice sings out for freedom like a Nightingale on stage  
but like her birds we'll spend most of our lives inside a cage.*

*Sing a song of anything and her heart is flying free;  
four and twenty Blackbirds wouldn't sound as sweet to me.*

*Her heart is multicoloured like the plumage of her birds,  
and her fingers clutch the steel bars that capture all her words,  
and her voice goes on the airwaves and the taxis they all dance.  
We all want to fly to freedom but we seldom get the chance.*

*Sing a song of anything and her heart is flying free;  
four and twenty Blackbirds wouldn't sound as sweet to me.*

*Bird Lady, I've listened to your words  
and maybe I've realised the freedom we deserve,*

*'Cause the windows never open and the keys they never turn,  
and despite the many lessons how to fly, we never learn.  
If flying free means loneliness we'll often chose to stay;  
are we strong enough to cope with all that freedom anyway?*

*Sing a song of anything and her heart is flying free;  
four and twenty Blackbirds wouldn't sound as sweet to me.*

