

MEDEA



A NOVEL  
JASON FITÉ

**MEDEA**  
**By**  
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**(sample)**

“There are countless ways of telling a story, and each of them will contain elements of the truth, but never the complete truth – never the whole story.”

The Bookseller looked up from his scribbling and gazed expectantly at his wife, who after a few seconds, raised her dark eyes above the top of the book she was reading and regarded him with an expression of mild perplexity. “Truth is an illusion. You are old enough to have realised that by now.” She returned to her book.

The Bookseller was a man who could be described as of an ‘indeterminable age’. A shock of full bright white hair sat upon his lined but naturally noble features. To look at him you could easily imagine him to have been very handsome in his youth, and there still burned in his bright blue eyes a fiery idealism and a playful defiance. He wore a loose-fitting white shirt, tan trousers and an incongruous pair of bright green Persian slippers.

The Bookseller’s wife was of a similar age, but looked considerably younger, with only a few hints of silver in her dark hair.

He sat back in his chair and gazed at his wife. “I know, but it is in my nature to seek the truth.”

The Bookseller's wife tried unsuccessfully to hide a sardonic smile. “And look at the trouble it’s caused us.”

“Apparently the truth will set you free,” the Bookseller insisted.

“That would probably depend on the truth you are telling. If most people told the truth, they would end up in prison.”

“I’ve started my memoir.”

The Bookseller’s wife glanced up from her book again with a worried expression. “Which would cause even more trouble, especially if you attempt to tell the truth, or at least a version of it.”

The Bookseller felt deflated but not yet defeated. “Nonetheless, it’s something I have been considering for a very long time, and now I’ve got to the point that I can’t not write it. In fact, it is already written in my head –it’s just a question of typing the actual words.”

She could tell he was in one of his melancholier moods and knew that when he was in the grip of the darkness that threatened him it was wisest to direct his attention away from any thoughts that might cause him to dwell on his unhappy preoccupations. “The past should

remain in the past,” she reminded him with as much kindness as possible “Reliving or retelling it won’t ultimately make any difference. In fact, it may do a great deal of harm. Who knows what terrible memories may rise to the surface. If a wound is healed why risk opening it up again?” she insisted.

The Bookseller drummed his fingers on the table in an agitated manner. “It’s just something I feel I have to do. Once I’ve got it out of my system, I think I’ll be able to move on from the past.”

The Bookseller’s wife closed her book and placed it on the table beside her and gazed at her husband with some sadness. “Are you not happy with the life we have built?” There was no accusation in her voice, only regret.

He leaned across to her and took her hands in his. “You know I could never want any life other than the one we have together, but somehow, I still feel ... I don’t know how I feel. I just know I need to write this. I won’t even have it published or show it to anyone. I’ll just print one copy and place it in one of our more obscure book sections. No one will ever know.”

“Don’t you want me to read it?”

“Would you really want to read about yourself?” the Bookseller asked in surprise.

“Wouldn’t everyone, or do you think I might not approve of what you write about me? I am as vain as anyone else, but at least I am aware of my vanity, so I won’t be too offended by whatever you write about me. Don’t be afraid of telling your version of the truth however difficult it may be – it always seems to find a way of telling itself anyway.”

“Thank you. I will be as honest as I can. I’ll probably write about the bookshop more than anything else. That is what our real legacy will be, anyway.” He gazed around the shop with immense pride, his eyes resting momentarily upon each book as though it was a deeply cherished old friend.” He turned back to his wife. “Actually, that’s not even true anymore, is it? You are creating a far greater legacy than either of us could ever have imagined, aren’t you?”

“I am just one person at my company.”

“But you are the driving force. You are the one that is changing the world for the better.”

“Perhaps you should save the grandiose statements for your book.”

She could see that he was about to be overcome with emotion. “I am so incredibly proud of what you have achieved,” he told her.

She stood and opened her arms wide to welcome his embrace. “Without you I am nothing. There is no life without you. There never has been.”

They stood in the middle of the bookshop locked in each other’s embrace as the endless rows of books, standing to attention, watched them in silent reverence. The only sound was the ticking of the antique clock which hung upon the wall behind the Bookseller’s head.

Aware of the irresistible passage of time, the Bookseller gently disengaged himself from their embrace and glanced anxiously back at the clock. “You should go. I can’t be responsible for you missing this meeting. I could never forgive myself.”

She nodded, drank the last of her coffee, wiped her lipstick from the rim and carefully put the cup back on the shelf. “I will try not to be back too late though the meeting is likely to last for a very long time.”

“It will be worth it.”

“I will look forward to reading the first chapter of your memoir when I return.”

The Bookseller beamed at her “So, I have your blessing?”

“If it is your fate to write it then it will be so.” She kissed him briefly on the lips and left.

He watched her through the shop window as she made her way down the street. “Always so mysterious,” he reflected to himself, realising that she had not really answered his question. He pulled down the shutters on the shop window and turned the ornate sign so that it showed a closed face to the outside world.

He did not wish to be disturbed when he was embarking on his great autobiographical adventure. Not this time. He had attempted to write his life story many years before, but somehow had never got round to finishing it and then he realised he had lost it. He was secretly glad it had been lost, knowing that now in his more mature and seasoned years, he would find his earlier melodramatic reflections youthfully absurd and grandiose, “though maybe, just maybe, they were a version of the truth, though not a complete or honest version,” he pondered. “I was too consumed by various passions back then. They overwhelmed my judgement and reason. Better to tell my story now that I am near its end, now that I have found peace in my life, and can contemplate the past with greater clarity”

He realised he was procrastinating. He opened up his notebook and reread the opening words - “There are countless ways of telling a story and each of them will contain elements of the truth, but never the complete truth – never the whole story.” Dissatisfied, though he didn’t know why, he decided to rewrite it. He tried two or three variations and crossed them out. “It’s a good enough start for a first draft,” he consoled himself. “Now to really begin.” He tapped his pen rhythmically on the notepad and considered his next line. He stopped tapping and lifted the nib of his pen from the paper deciding that the sound of the ticking clock was far too distracting. How odd that he had never noticed how loud it was before.

He stood up and approached the stately clock which continued to defiantly tick at him in a deeply taunting manner. It was a very old clock, so old that he could not even remember how he had acquired it or where it had come from. He had the foolish notion for a moment that maybe the clock had been there before the bookshop or even before there had been a wall for it to hang upon. Regardless of its mysterious origin it had to be silenced, but he suspected that if he succeeded in stopping it (which he had no idea how to do) then it would inevitably refuse to start again – surely an ill omen for someone of his advanced years. He grabbed his long winter coat from the coat stand and carefully placed it over the clock. He could now only hear the ticking if he listened very carefully for its sound, and he was determined he would not do that. He returned to his desk and as he did so the ticking became increasingly faint and by the time he had reached his desk he could no longer hear it. A small victory against Chronos, he thought. He once again lifted his pen, ready to commence literary battle.

He put the pen down again. The unusual silence was very unnerving. Once again, he stood. This time he crossed to the other side of the room where there stood a record player and next

to it a shelf containing a large collection of vinyl records. He selected a record at random and placed it on the turntable. There was a satisfying crackle and music poured from the speakers like fine wine from a golden chalice. He once more returned to his desk and once more grabbed his pen. He listened to the music and allowed it to pour through him. The gift of inspiration was bestowed upon him. He wrote the next line of his memoirs, the sense of creative euphoria devouring him.

There was an urgent knocking at the door.

The Bookseller swore under his breath, his reverie broken.

He forced his gaze away from the notebook and glared at the door. He could see that the sign was most definitely set to 'We are closed'. Why would someone ignore that? He waited for several seconds and was relieved when silence once again reigned. He returned to his book and wrote three more words before he was interrupted by an even more fervent rapping on the shop door. He stormed across the room, flung the door open and glared malevolently at the young woman who was standing on the doorstep. "If you are illiterate, you probably are wasting your time in a bookshop," the Bookseller stated.

The young woman gazed at him bemusedly for several seconds. "Excuse me?" she eventually asked in complete confusion.

"You can read, can't you?"

"Yes?" the young woman replied uncertainly.

The Bookseller pointed to the sign.

The young woman glanced at it and nodded. "It's an emergency."

"Life or death?"

"Possibly more important than that," the young woman replied with absolute seriousness. "It's about a book."

"Why didn't you say so? You better come in, then."

The young woman followed the Bookseller into the bookshop. The Bookseller took his seat again and indicated for his unexpected guest to take a seat opposite. The young woman took a seat and placed a leather satchel on the desk which she then carefully began to open with all the delicacy and care normally reserved for defusing a bomb. "I need to know if this manuscript is genuine."

"It probably won't be. Most turn out to be forgeries," the Bookseller informed her.

"I don't think this is a forgery." She placed a large bundle of yellowing manuscript pages on the desk, each one carefully placed in a plastic cover. There were over a hundred pages in total. The Bookseller gazed at them for several seconds, seemingly mesmerised by the yellow sheets of parchment. "May I?" He stretched out his hand towards the first page.

The young woman nodded. The Bookseller removed the top page from its plastic covering and much to the young woman's astonishment placed it under his nose, closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. He looked as though he was savouring a fine wine. A smile slowly spread

upon his face. “It’s genuine. At least the parchment and the ink are. Now let’s see what is written upon it.”

“I think it’s in Ancient Greek, but I can’t read it.”

the Bookseller poured over the lettering. “It’s written in a quite obscure dialect and the writer doesn’t seem to be too concerned with grammar or presentation. It is a personal diary. May I know how did you acquire this?”

“I found it by accident. Whose diary is it?”

The Bookseller stared in rapt wonder at the manuscript before him. “Can you explain to me exactly how and where you found it?”

All thoughts of his memoir completely forgotten, the Bookseller reluctantly looked up from the manuscript and turned his full attention to the young woman for the first time. At first appraisal she seemed fairly nondescript. She looked to be in her mid-twenties, slim, to the point of almost appearing undernourished, a disorderly mop of light brown curls sitting on top of an angular face, pale blue eyes earnestly gazing out at the world from brown rimmed glasses. She was dressed in the uniform of youth – blue jeans, a black T-shirt, and scuffed trainers. She had the air of a slightly distracted academic which was only accentuated by the thickness of her glasses and the combination of diffidence and determination in her voice. “I guess I should begin somewhere near the beginning,” she said. “I’m just trying to figure out where that might be.” She lapsed back into silence as she considered how to tell her story. The Bookseller now noticed that there was a mild American twang to her accent, though he was unable to determine which region of America.

“Well, my name is Alex. I think it’s important that you know a bit about me, though I am guessing you are much less interested in me than in the manuscript. To be honest, I don’t blame you. I’m actually more interested in the manuscript than I am in myself or in anything else for that matter.”

Alex reached out and with one of her fingertips and for the briefest moment gently touched the manuscript as though trying to convince herself of its physical reality.

“My family are Dutch originally, but they moved to New York at the beginning of the twentieth century. They mainly dealt in banking and finance and were very successful in that area. Not billionaires exactly, but certainly very wealthy. I have one older brother and sister and an extended family which I can’t even begin to keep track of. Every single one of them adhered to the family tradition and went into finance. Much to everyone’s surprise and disappointment, I didn’t. Probably for the best really, as I probably would have been terrible at it. I think I may be mathematically challenged, if that is even a real thing, and this was evident from a very young age, despite all the expensive personal tutors my parents got for me. When I was eight, they even had me see a therapist to see if there was some psychological reason that I was so bad at math. Apparently, there wasn’t, so then, and this is true, they literally had my head examined, and I underwent an MRI scan which is not fun for anyone especially for an eight-year-old. Apparently, my brain is normal whatever that means, or at least not abnormal to the extent that it would cause me to be bad at math. There was a suggestion that I might be a ‘right brain’ person, but this was ironically dismissed as not being enough of a rigidly scientific explanation. Lastly, they had a complete analysis of my DNA which did reveal some quite

interesting results. Apparently, I am the proud possessor of a genetic mutation which means I prefer reading books to financial spreadsheets. There is still a printout of the genetic sequence in the hallway of our family home. My parents and siblings like to show it to people as it explains why I am what they describe as an ‘anomaly.’ I guess it means they are not to blame for my unusual dislike of math and finance – it’s all down to a faulty gene.”

Alex paused. ‘Don’t worry, this is all quite relevant to the larger story. At least I believe it is. It’s something I have never really spoken to anyone about before. I hope you don’t mind?’

The Bookseller smiled, surprised to find himself warming to this youth that had unexpectedly arrived in his shop. He was aware that this was not a usual encounter, and he felt himself becoming involved in Alex's story, despite the fact that he was burning to know how the manuscript came to be in her possession. “No, not all,” he reassured her. “But maybe, before you continue, we should have a coffee?” As he spoke, the record came to an end.

Alex nodded, “That would be very welcome. Shall I turn the record over?”

“Yes, it makes a good soundtrack to your story.”

The Bookseller crossed over to the archaic-looking coffee machine and pressed an intricate series of buttons on it. The machine began to splutter. The room was quickly filled with the scent of dark aromatic coffee. Alex went over to the record player, carefully lifted the record off the turntable and turned it over and placed it back, before lifting the needle onto its opening grooves.

As the Bookseller and Alex carried out these routine actions they continually and irresistibly glanced back at the desk where the manuscript sat waiting for them. The Bookseller caught Alex glancing at the manuscript. “Some books seem to possess an almost magical attraction,” he commented. “What you have brought me is obviously one of them. That is another way I know it is an original.”

They returned to the desk, the Bookseller carrying a tray containing a coffee pot and two porcelain cups. “Probably best not to have the manuscript on the same table as boiling hot black liquid. Can you put it on the shelf to your left?”

The Bookseller poured them each a coffee as Alex, using both hands, carefully lifted the manuscript onto the shelf, satisfying herself that it would still remain fully within her view.

She returned to her seat. “Where was I?”

“Your family had discovered that you have a rare genetic mutation that makes you bad at math.”

“Yes, it’s obviously nonsense, but bizarrely, it got me off the proverbial hook. No one in my family expected me to go into finance. They were probably worried that I would ruin us, and they may have been right. Anyway, I was allowed to indulge my true vocation which was reading.”

“There are not many people who would describe reading as a vocation. A passion maybe?”

“Well, with me it was a vocation. Many people like to read, but I seemed to have the capacity to devour books. From about the age of five or six I was reading almost a book a day. I could read at a remarkable speed, and I could remember virtually every word I read.”

“Quite a rare gift. Maybe it’s another genetic mutation?”

“Possibly, I suspect my family considers it to be some form of medical affliction. So, I spent most of my youth lost in books, which as I am sure you are aware, is a very wonderful place to be lost. It wasn’t really any surprise to anyone when I decided to study English Literature at university.”

“Now you may suspect that I am some kind of archetypically bookish and reclusive individual who shuns society, but in fact I am a rather sociable person and one of the greatest joys in my life is to spend time with likeminded friends talking about books and when not talking about books, talking about absolutely everything and nothing and as you may also have noticed I am quite the talker once I get going.”

“I was beginning to get that impression.”

“Well, I absolutely loved every minute of my time at university. I have to admit that upon occasion my behaviour was quite riotous, but I believe I balanced it out by being exceptionally studious. It was in my second year that I first heard about you.”

The Bookseller raised his eyebrows in some alarm. “You’re not from the tax office, are you? Because if you are, you can rot in hell for all eternity.”

“No, I am definitely not. No, one of the Professors mentioned you in one of his lectures. Apparently, you are quite a legend.”

The Bookseller was momentarily flattered and then reminded himself how many human monsters have been referred to as ‘legends’ “In what way, may I ask?”

“As an antiquarian. It is whispered that you have the greatest collection of rare ancient books in existence. Even that you possess books which are believed to have been lost for centuries.” Alex glanced around the bookshelves in reverence. “Is it true?”

“The truth I have recently been reliably informed is something it is best to keep hidden,” the Bookseller replied, thinking back to his wife’s earlier comment.

“I understand, though I would love to spend some time perusing your collection one day. Anyway, as well as having the greatest collection of ancient texts – allegedly, you also have the reputation for being the world’s leading expert on classical literature.”

“Well, like you, I have a tendency to read a lot.”

“And you also speak thirty languages.”

“Thirty-three if we are being pedantic which I usually am. I am presuming you also have some capacity for languages?”

For the first time Alex looked noticeably glum. “Unfortunately, not. I am completely terrible at learning languages – even basic French or Spanish. I suspect that the same part of the brain

or faulty gene that impedes my mathematical abilities has a similar effect on my ability to learn languages. That's my excuse, anyway."

"So, you haven't read the manuscript you brought me?"

"I can make out the odd word and the author's name which is what got me so excited, but no, most of the text seems to be quite incomprehensible to me and the App I tried to use to translate it." She glanced across at the Bookseller.

"I am aware of what an App is if that's what you were wondering?" the Bookseller quickly informed her.

Alex looked mildly embarrassed. "So, yes, the manuscript confused me as much as it confused the translation app."

"That's probably because it is written quite badly, or at least it seems so at first glance."

Alex looked shocked. "Badly written. How is that possible? He is one of the greatest writers of... forever."

"When I say 'badly written' I am referring to the physical act of its writing. The handwriting is virtually intelligible. I noticed several spelling and grammatical mistakes on my brief perusal of the first page. This manuscript was not written to be viewed by anyone else other than the author and I suspect he never intended to read it again."

"Then why write it?"

"I presume he felt a compulsion to get his thoughts down on paper. They seem quite anguished and from what I know of the writer and his work, it is likely that this was a form of ancient world therapy, or even of exorcism, or even an offering to the Gods which he may or may not have believed in. As you may know, there is quite a lot of debate on that subject."

"Many scholars argue that he became quite mad."

"Personally, I think he was one of the sanest people that ever lived," the Bookseller commented. "Please continue with your story."

"Yes. So, I was aware of you and your shop, and I always promised myself that one day I would visit you. Obviously, that day has come much sooner than I anticipated. Next year is the final year of my degree and I realised a few weeks ago that I had no idea what I wanted to write my dissertation on. No, that's not entirely true. I had far too many ideas. I had two weeks holiday so I decided to go to Greece and maybe find some inspiration there, and if not, I would at the very least have an enjoyable time sightseeing and rereading a few of my favourite versions of Greek myth in their original setting. Foolishly romantic I suppose?"

"Don't apologise. I also used to be foolishly romantic."

"But not anymore?"

"Now I am romantically foolish," the Bookseller quipped, trying and failing to not look too pleased with himself for his witticism.

"I spent a week in Athens. It's a wonderful place to explore. Have you ever been there?"

“A few times.”

Alex paused. “Now, this is where my story gets a little strange.”

The record had reached its end and a heavy silence descended upon the bookshop.

“Let me put on another record and then you can tell me about how your story becomes a little strange.”

The Bookseller crossed to the record player again, selected another record and put it on to play. He deliberately took his time, wanting a few extra moments to contemplate the deeper import of this young woman’s arrival and her story before it became ‘strange.’ Throughout his life, the Bookseller was aware of significant moments, turning points where the course of his existence would unexpectedly change direction. He was sure this was one of these moments, and, as it had always been, he knew that whatever he did he would not be able to avoid this inescapable new fate that was being thrust upon him.

He wondered what would happen if he attempted to deny the machinations of destiny. He considered thrusting the manuscript into the youth’s hands and ordering her to leave and never return. He knew that whatever he did, the end result would ultimately be the same. He could only pray that this time the Gods had decided to smile upon him.

He returned to Alex and poured them each another cup of coffee.

Alex thanked him and continued with her story. “On a whim, though in retrospect, it may not have been a whim at all, I decided to visit Delphi. I should have hired a car, but feeling adventurous, I took the bus to the nearest town and then, feeling even more adventurous, I decided to climb up Mount Parnassus to reach the Delphic Temple. It was one of those things that seemed like a good idea at the time, but probably was a very bad idea. I think maybe I believed that it would be a more authentic experience – ascending the mountain on foot, as though I was a supplicant from ancient times on a quest to consult the great oracle and discover my destiny. Now, that I think of it, they would probably have travelled on horseback. Anyway, it was a painfully hot day, and it was a very long hike up a very steep mountain, so by the time I reached the summit I was extremely dehydrated which may partially explain what happened next. To be honest, by the time I reached the Temple my only real desire was to head back down again and find some decent shade and buy a bottle of water. I was exhausted and possibly melting, so I found what little shade there was in the shadows cast by the stones of the Temple. I was too hot and tired to think about anything. I must have sat there for a few minutes; I was too tired to even wonder what the time was. I think I must have started to fall asleep because I remember doing that thing when you doze off and the action of your head falling forward wakes you up again. “Alex looked puzzled as though trying to make sense of her memories. “I think this may have happened a few times. I was just so tired I just wanted to sit there and sleep for all eternity. I think I started to dream – something about books, but I can’t quite remember what. Then, all of a sudden this loud voice just behind my right ear spoke to me and I was wide awake.”

"Deeply startled and a little panicked I jumped up and turned to see who was talking to me as I had been convinced I was utterly alone. And the strange thing was there was no one there. I was utterly alone. It was possibly the most unnerving experience I have ever had. And I know you are thinking that I must have dreamed the voice, but I am absolutely certain that is not the

case. I stood there for several minutes, completely forgetting my thirst and heat exhaustion, waiting for the voice to speak again. But there was only cicadas and silence.”

“Maybe it was a hallucination caused by the heat?” the Bookseller suggested.

“That’s what I tried to tell myself, but I couldn’t believe I had imagined it. And then something else happened, which I am a bit embarrassed to admit. Have you ever experienced real panic?”

“Hasn’t everyone at one time or another?”

Alex shook her head. “Not like this. This was as overwhelming as it was sudden. I was just gripped by this indescribable terror – not even fear of some immediate danger, but this raw, primal sense of incredible panic.”

“There is a phenomenon called ‘mountain madness’ which I have read about.”

“Yes, maybe it was something like that. Anyway, I began to run down the mountain as fast as I could. It’s amazing how much unexpected energy you can muster when you are seized by such an emotion. I ran and ran until I reached the bottom of the mountain and the sanctuary of the bus shelter. And then the panic disappeared as quickly and as inexplicably as it had appeared.” Alex gazed at the Bookseller in some embarrassment as she realised just how foolish her story must have seemed now that she had told it out loud.

“What did the voice say?”

“Go to the cave in Salamis.”

The Bookseller looked deeply thoughtful for a few moments as though considering the implications of what Alex had just told him. “That was it?”

“Yes. I presume you know what it was referring to?”

The Bookseller nodded thoughtfully. “Yes.”

“The oddest part of this is that I had no idea what the cave of Salamis could mean. I didn’t even know that Salamis was an island. This is what really perplexed me because the voice was telling me to go somewhere I didn’t previously know existed. I am not by nature superstitious, or a believer in anything supernatural, spooky or unscientific, so when I got back to my apartment in Athens and looked up the cave at Salamis, I was quite stunned to discover what it was.”

“Maybe you had read about it or heard about it before and forgotten about it?” the Bookseller suggested. “You would be surprised at what can remain lurking in your subconscious, waiting to leap forth when you least expect it.”

Alex considered the idea. “It’s possible and I tried to convince myself of that possibility. I wanted to believe that the whole incident was caused by heat exhaustion, stress, dodgy food, anything, but the idea that I was hearing voices, or at least a voice, because despite what my family may believe, I know myself to be quite sane and rational.”

“And yet you heard a voice inside your head?” A legion of professional psychiatrists would disagree.”

“And I wouldn’t blame them. I tried very hard over the next few days to dismiss it, or at least not think about it, but every time I had a quiet moment, I would hear the memory of the voice echoing in my head. I’m not sure a memory can echo but you know what I mean.”

“Did you think about talking to someone else about it?”

“I considered it, but I didn’t want to open up that particular can of worms. It was an isolated incident, and it was possibly explainable by the circumstances, and I’m sure that is what any potential psychologist or whatever would have told me. Why waste their time and my money?”

“Anyway, on the third night after my trip to Delphi it was incredibly hot and the air conditioning unit in my room was inadequate to put it mildly, so I was just lying in bed at three am, wide awake and slowly melting, and all I could think about was the voice, and I knew that I wouldn’t have any peace until I did what the voice instructed, so I decided to go to Salamis. Even at the time I realised just how absurd my decision was, but I reasoned that at the very least it might prove to be a pleasant day trip. Thankfully, after I had decided, I managed to fall asleep at last. There was a ferry leaving fairly early the following morning which I just about managed to catch. I arrived at the port in Salamis, found a taxi and it was about a thirty-minute ride to Euripides’ cave”.

“Is it actually called that?”

“Yes, it used to be quite a popular tourist attraction, but the taxi driver said that hardly anyone went there anymore. The journey was beautifully scenic, but again, I had this weird sensation of panic, though when I was running down Mount Parnassus the panic seemed to lessen the further I got away from Delphi, but now the closer I got to Euripides’ cave the more it increased. I came so close to asking the taxi driver to stop and turn round but I forced myself to control my anxiety and keep going. To tell the truth, I have never felt such a sense of dreadful anticipation.”

“We arrived and the taxi driver gave me his card so I could call him when I needed to get back to civilisation. The cave is a very isolated spot – beautiful, but utterly desolate,” he told me.

“I think that was the point,” the Bookseller commented.

“Do you know much about Euripides’ cave? The historical record is sketchy to say the least.”

“I know that Euripides’ went there as a self-imposed exile in order to escape from Athenian society which he believed was against him.”

“Yes, it is generally agreed that he was deeply paranoid and misanthropic.”

The Bookseller gave a grimly sardonic smile. “Maybe his paranoia was justified. I was reading a book about Roman history recently and it contained a sentence which I found quite brilliantly ironic – ‘The Emperor became increasingly paranoid after the first assassination attempt.’ So, it’s possible that Euripides’ sense of persecution was justified and understandable, or maybe he just wanted to find a quiet place where he could be himself and write his plays? It seems like we might finally discover the truth or at least his version of it. How did you find the manuscript? It must have been there for almost two and a half thousand years without anyone else finding it.”

Alex paused, as though trying to collect her thoughts and wondering how to tell a story which seemingly made no sense. "I'm going to tell you, but it is so absurd that I will understand if you don't believe me. The taxi driver left me near the cave. You can't actually drive right up to it. I fought my way along a very overgrown path, and as I was wearing shorts, my legs got extremely scratched, so by the time I reached the cave there was quite a bit of blood running down my legs. I must have looked quite a sight, but fortunately there was no one to see me."

"The cave itself is not terribly impressive. It's basically just a small cave in the middle of nowhere. My sense of dread had quickly disappeared to be replaced by a quite profound feeling of disappointment. It took me less than five minutes to explore the cave in its entirety and I found exactly nothing of interest. I sat down on a rock in the shade and did what I could to clean up my bleeding legs. I sort of hoped that if I just sat there and didn't really think about anything or look too expectant, then the voice might speak to me again. I sat there for about half an hour and had finally given up on the whole foolish escapade when I did finally hear a voice – sort of."

Alex lapsed into what the Bookseller suspected was an unusual silence. "Was it the same voice?" the Bookseller asked.

Alex looked deeply embarrassed. "It wasn't a voice exactly. It was more of a 'meow'."

"You mean it was a cat?" The Bookseller tried to disguise the sardonic amusement in his voice. "What did the cat say to you?"

"It did not say anything to me. It just meowed quite persistently at me. It must have crept up behind me without my noticing. It was a big furry monster that looked like it had been dipped in a pot of marmalade. It kept meowing at me, and I presumed it was hungry, so I offered it the filling from my tuna sandwich, but it seemed completely disinterested. It kept butting me with its head, so eventually I stood up, and then it kept butting me into the cave, and then it started to dig quite frantically near the back of the cave, The whole situation was just very, very strange. It kept looking round at me and meowing, so I started to help it dig."

Alex shook her head in disbelief, marveling at the absurdity of her own story. "And to cut a long story short (if it's not already far too late for that), buried a few feet beneath the floor of the cave was a large earthenware jar, which I managed to carefully pull out of the ground without breaking it, and then the cat leapt on top of it, and it toppled over and smashed to pieces. As you can imagine I was initially quite annoyed by this destructive action, but within the jar there was a sort of sheepskin and wrapped inside that was the manuscript. Quite amazing story, isn't it?"

The Bookseller did not reply for some time. His gaze was riveted on the manuscript on the shelf. He leaned over and retrieved it, and then placed it carefully on the desk in between them both. He continued to stare at it with an impenetrable expression. "What happened to the sheepskin?" he eventually asked.

"Is it relevant?"

"Probably not. I was just curious."

"I thought I may as well keep it. I don't know why, really. It's back at my hotel. It needs a good wash. Once I unwrapped the manuscript, I immediately knew that I had discovered

something extraordinary, even if I wasn't sure what it actually was. That was yesterday morning. I rang the taxi, went back to Athens, checked out of the hotel and caught several trains to get here."

"But why come to me? There must have been countless museums, collectors etc. you could have gone to in Greece?"

"As soon as I found it, I knew I had to find you. You're the world's leading expert on finds like this. Your reputation for honesty is impeccable which I know is very rare in the world of antiquarian books."

"Speaking of honesty, you know you have committed a crime by removing a major archaeological find from its country of origin. You have heard of the Elgin marbles, haven't you?"

"Yes," Alex replied. "I actually signed a petition to have them returned to Greece."

"So, why did you do it, and don't tell me it was because the cat told you to do it. By the way, I'm not sure I believe any of your story."

Alex frowned. "I don't blame you. Neither would I and yet it is all completely true. And that may be another reason I didn't want to go to the correct authorities. You have a reputation for being somewhat ... eccentric. I followed instinct rather than logic which is something I rarely do. I think I just really wanted to know what it says. You can translate it, can't you?" she asked with an intense keenness.

"Yes."

"How long will it take you?"

"Turn the record over and I will begin reading."

Infinitely relieved that the Bookseller was not going to immediately call the police, Alex crossed to the record player and performed the ritual of turning the record over. She returned to the desk where the Bookseller sat, hunched over the manuscript peering intently at it. He grimaced and Alex noticed that his hands were shaking.

"Are you okay?" Alex asked, realising that the Bookseller was in some kind of pain. He glanced up at Alex. "The words we are about to read have remained silent for over two and a half thousand years. We are embarking on a journey of the extraordinary. I am not sure that I am prepared."

"Aren't you deeply curious?"

"Fervently so, but also... You know there have been rumours that this existed for many, many years, but I never believed them, and now here before me is the greatest literary find since ... since I don't know when."

"Do you really think it is Euripides' diary?"

"I do."

"Why do you think he buried it?"

“He was a writer, and writers do strange things, especially ones that go and live in caves.”

Alex considered the Bookseller’s remark. “Yes, I was wondering about that. I always thought that if I could go back in time, it would be to fifth century Athens. It was one of the most extraordinary times in human history. A true Golden age – democracy, philosophy, theatre – all were born in that time and place. It must have been so exciting, especially for someone like Euripides who was such a vital part of it. I can’t understand why anyone would want to escape from it.”

The Bookseller picked up the first page of the manuscript. “I’m hoping that is one of the things we will discover. The language and style are obviously quite archaic, and I may have to paraphrase a little, but I shall do my best to make this as truthful a translation as I can. We will read these words simply because we desire to know what has been written. When we have finished, we can discuss and decide the future of this remarkable manuscript. Are you ready?”

"I don't think I could ever be ready for this, but please begin."

The Bookseller opened the first page of the manuscript.

“I am Euripides I am an exile, and until a few days ago, I did not believe in the existence of the Gods, though I always blamed them for the punishments that have been inflicted upon me.”

“I am a famous nobody – a nothing man - my works are more reviled than celebrated, my name a word to mock and ridicule in the public places and in private homes, and my beliefs a weapon for others to attack me with. But no one has ever hated me more than I have hated myself, not even my wives.”

"From my earliest age I was taught that I was worthless, and I have wasted most of my life struggling to prove this is a lie. But maybe it isn't. Maybe they were always right. It doesn't matter anymore. I have escaped and the wider world can do no more damage to me. Here, I am free to revel in my own misery with no one to criticise me or tell me to be more cheerful. I have sworn to spend the rest of my life alone in this cave with only my cats for company. Here my moods are more constant – there are less storms in my head but also fewer ecstasies. This is the price I must pay for the small sense of peace I now possess.

I first came here when I was but a young boy. I was naïve but never innocent – even then I was tormented by others and my own monstrous imagination. I found solace in the wild places far away from people and their questions and their demands of me and their rules I could never understand, and the expectations I could never meet. I wandered across my home island of Salamis, my head full of the heroic tales of Herakles and Perseus, of the revels of the Gods, and I dreamed that I was back in that golden Age. I found the cave by accident, though at the time I fooled myself into believing I had been led there by one of the more mischievous Gods – maybe Hermes or Bacchus. No one visited this part of the island because it was believed to be cursed – it was a place of darkness, and the people of my village believed it to be a place even the Gods would fear to visit. The cave entrance was obscured by the wildest of woods and could not be seen unless a person was looking for it with purpose. I knew when I found it that one day it would be my home. I understood even then that there would come a time when I would need to escape from the world."

I have been here for a year now and I am almost fully healed. This is my home. I see no one, except for once a week, when I walk to the village to buy food and wine. Most of what I need

I grow myself, but I have a liking for cheese and certain delicacies which I cannot grow myself. I have become very good at fishing and this occupation takes up much of my day. I am helped and sometimes hindered by my small army of cats. Each of them is named after one of the Gods. I did this to defame the Olympians, but then after time had passed and I appreciated the finer qualities of the cats, I thought that it is more of an insult to the cats. Now, I may have to change my belief again. This has been one of the constants in my life – this unchecked habit of believing something fervently and then just as fervently denying it the next day. It is the same with people. I believed in their goodness so thoroughly and then they would let me down and I would never be able to be friends with them again.”

“From the mouth of my cave, I can see the sea and I can sit for endless hours simply staring at the sea. I no longer feel the desire to always be doing something, to be rushing somewhere, to be meeting people and to always be busy even if that busyness results in nothing more than wasting time. Now I am still, and it is the world around me that is in a constant state of change. The waves ceaselessly breaking upon the shoreline, the sun crossing the sky from morning to night, the breeze that dances around me, changing direction with no pattern that I can ever know, the seagulls that come and go on with their cries of desolation as they search for what I do not know – fish probably, or maybe something more profound, though sometimes I think to the hungry there can be nothing more profound than a full belly, the smaller creatures that scuttle back and forth on urgent errands, and the cats – always the cats that sleep in the shade or sit and watch me watching the world.

Across the sea I know that the war still rages on, - a pointless struggle for pointless supremacy, or maybe it is something more worthwhile than that- maybe each side fights for its ideal – Sparta for its tradition, Athens for its dream of a new world? Whomever wins, the victory will not balance the bloodshed, the lives lost, and the world destroyed. I realise now that the effort has been futile, the destruction complete. From my viewpoint on the cliff, I can see the warships on the horizon. From this distance they seem like small, absurd childish toys and I cannot tell Spartan from Athenian. When their blood seeps into the sea it stains the same sickly red whether it has come from Spartan or Athenian veins. I used to wonder where were the Gods in this conflict? Did they view this as another Troy – do they take sides? Athena would naturally wish Athens to win, and Ares, I presume would be on the side of the Spartans, but the others?”

“No matter. It is a faraway matter – another time and another place, though the war stretches its talons across the sea and steals young men from the villages of the island. Some never return, others return, and they are no more than broken toys with missing limbs and damaged souls. It is no longer my concern – while the world tumbles and twirls I will sit and watch the sky and sea, and my cats will sit and watch me as I watch the sky and sea. That has been enough of a life for me for the past year.

At least it was until she arrived.

I have never been lucky. Misfortune has always found me, though for a long while I have believed myself to be hidden from the plague of ill-fatedness which has haunted me my entire life and which has now tracked me down to my island hideaway in the form of this sorceress queen. My life has always been overshadowed by the fate of Greece, as though we two are entwined from birth, and in my younger and more foolish days I would say to all those who would lend me their ears that Greece and I were born on the same day. My mother told me many times of how my birth cries were drowned out by the screams and cries of thousands of

Greeks and Persian warriors as they fought the battle of Salamis, breathing their last breath as I breathed my first. Maybe the spirits of those slain men passed into me as I struggled into the world? My father told me that on that first day of my life he took me in his arms and carried me down to the shore where the bloodied corpses of countless Greeks and Persians were strewn in the sand. My memory may lie, but sometimes I see the fallen and drowned warriors in my waking dreams – a phantom army strewn upon the shore, warmed by the gentle sunlight so it seems that they are only sleeping and may awake at any moment and may return to their wives and children, to their villages and farms and to the lives that have been stolen from them by the unseen Gods and the politicians and generals that cry for ever more bloodshed in the name of glory and patriotism.

The future of Greece was fated on that day. The mighty Persians had been defeated and soon would be destroyed. As Persia fell so Greece rose, and amongst the Greek city states, Athens would rise the fastest and the highest and I was witness to its ascent and all its glory and its folly, though I pray to silent Gods that I shall die before I have to witness its final fall.

My father was a pious man who worshipped all Gods with equal honour and reverence. He believed the timing of my birth to be a fortuitous omen. When I was an infant, he consulted one of the many travelling oracles that visited the island and asked them what my future held. He was told that it was my fate to wear ‘crowns of victory’. Thus, it was supposed that I was to be a great athlete. My few books were taken away from me and my family paid what little money they had to employ the greatest athletic trainer on the island. As Salamis is a small island this was not a difficult title to hold. My trainer was an elderly shepherd who in his youth had won medals in the Olympic Games – or so he claimed. I still do not know whether he was lying to gain money from my father. It no longer matters. He was a better trainer than I was a student. As an athlete I had some ability, but not much. I could run very fast for a short time or very slowly for a long time, but nothing in between. Several times a year, games were held on the island, and I would compete with other youths of my age. I would never win, and I did not wear any prophesised ‘crowns of glory’. Many times, I would win second or third place but never first. My father did not blame me. Neither did he blame my trainer – who was nearly blind by this time, but instead believed that I only needed a greater opportunity in a greater arena.

At the age of fourteen he sent me to an uncle in Athens. I was to start a new life in a new city, a city which was recreating itself in its own self-created image. A golden city in a golden time. My uncle was very well connected in Athenian society though I could never discover exactly what was his position and occupation. Nevertheless, he was obviously wealthy as well as influential.

When I first arrived, he met me at the port and the first thing he asked me was whether I had an interest in philosophy, I replied that I did not know what philosophy was. He smiled and happily informed me that philosophy was the greatest thing ever invented and that we, as in the Athenians, had invented it. He introduced me to his good friends Anaxagoras and Prodicus who allowed me to listen as they discussed politics and philosophies. I would listen and nod intently though I only understood a fraction of what they said.

One day my Uncle introduced me to an older man who he proudly informed me was the greatest tragedian of all time. I nodded, wondering what a tragedian was.

Later that day my uncle took me to the great amphitheater to show me what his friend, Aeschylus, had written. My life was forever transformed from that moment onwards. I sat on cold stone beneath the hot sun and watched as the world of Gods and heroes was brought to life before my eyes. Naively, I believed myself struck by the divine muses, though now I realise that I was struck by the spectacle of stories told which before I had only ever envisioned in the chambers of my own imagination. And yet, even now I doubt the truth of this belief. There was something profound and maybe divine in what I witnessed that day – something greater than the lumpen ground upon which we live our desperate lives – something born of the soul and the stars. There was a great unknowable power in the words I was hearing – a power that made it easy to believe in non-existent Gods. Many years later, when Aeschylus and I became acquaintances, if not friends, I asked him what had first made him begin his literary journey. He smiled his grandest smile and told me how as a youth he had been working in a vineyard and one afternoon after having filled his belly with food and wine he had fallen into a deep slumber during which Dionysius had visited him and commanded him to devote his life to the tragedian's art. I smiled at him, wondering if his inspiration had been more to do with the wine than with the divine.

That night I went home and started to write my first play. There was no struggle. I wrote without thought or contemplation, the words coming to me like water from a ceaseless fountain.

When it was finished, I proudly showed it to my uncle, who, with his benign smile, explained that he was far too busy to read it, but he would show it to Aeschylus to get his opinion. Despite being very busy we went to the amphitheater that same morning where Aeschylus was rehearsing a new play. My uncle casually presented my play to the great master who gazed with little interest at the title, and explained that although he would love to read it, he was far too wrapped up in rehearsals as the actors he was working with were proving to be as untalented as they were petulant. He called across the very harried looking theatre manager and explained in his eloquent manner that a young novice had presented him with a rare gift from the Gods – a new play, and would he care to read it? It was obvious to me that the theatre manager was much busier than either my uncle or Aeschylus. The theatre manager, beaming, turned to me. "What is your name, young man?"

"Euripides of Salamis," I proudly replied.

"Well, Euripides of Salamis, you are a very fortunate young man. It just so happens that I find myself in need of a play at this very moment. I will introduce you to the actors and you can get them ready for the performance next week. Unfortunately, as you are an unproven novice you will not receive any money, but congratulations – this is an enormously auspicious opportunity for you. Let's hurry along and I will introduce you to your actors." He grabbed me by the arm and escorted me over to a far corner of the amphitheater where a group of young boys with painted faces were lounging in the shade, drinking wine and idly playing dice.

"Esteemed actors, allow me to introduce you to, our newest playwright, Euripides. You have the unique privilege of performing in his debut work." He gave me a small bow and hurried off again.

The actors glared at me as though they blamed me for having their afternoon relaxation interrupted. My mind was still struggling to understand my new situation. A few short moments

ago I was excited at the possibility that the great Aeschylus might deign to read my play, and now I found myself about to have that play produced and performed in the great Dionysia.

“So, what is your play about?” asked one of the actors with insolent disinterest.

I could not disguise my excitement as I told them the plot. “It is the great tragedy of the Peliads,” I replied as grandiosely as I could. “Jason and the Argonauts have returned from the quest for the Golden Fleece, along with Medea, and they have discovered that the usurper king Pelias has murdered Jason’s relatives, and so they plot a terrible revenge.” I was pleased to see that the actors were beginning to look mildly interested.

“Revenge is always good. Audiences always enjoy a good revenge story,” one commented.

“How does Jason kill the evil old bastard?” asked another of them.

“He doesn’t. Medea does,” I announced proudly.

There were a few moments of disgruntled silence from the actors. “Jason is the hero. He should kill the old king. It doesn’t make sense otherwise and it’s what the audience expect.”

Mildly disheartened that they were not impressed by my clever plot twist, I was determined to argue my case. “But should we always give the audience what they expect?” I insisted, realising just how pretentious I sounded.

“If we want to win first prize, then, yes,” replied a third actor with a deeply sardonic tone.

I did not know it at the time, but my life would be filled with many similar conversations. Even when I became well known, if not well loved, I would be constantly questioned about my every theatrical decision, and not just by actors and those who produced the plays, but by everyone I met. Everyone had an opinion; everyone was a critic or a self-appointed expert. After each performance I would attempt with little success to avoid all those who urgently wished to give me unasked for advice. Most sentences would begin with the words “What you should have done...” or “it would have been much better if...” or “That’s not how it really happened.” Everyone knew better than me what I should do. It seemed that criticizing me had become the most popular sport in Athens. Quite often groups would meet in the Agora with the sole purpose of collectively discussing why my plays were so terrible.

A few kinder souls were more supportive. My fellow playwright, Sophocles, was one of the few people I would ever ask for advice. He seemed to enjoy my plays though he never said so in so many words. Once after a more vicious critique than even I was used to, he told me these wisest of words – “Never take financial advice from those that have less money than you. Never take diet advice from those that are fatter than you. Never take romantic advice from someone who is single or unhappily married. Never take career advice from those that are less successful than you, and never, ever take advice on how to write plays from someone who has never written a play.” I believe his words may have saved me. At least for a while.

As predicted, the Peliades did not win first prize and it was heavily critiqued for having Medea, not Jason enact revenge upon Pelias. I was accused of being unrealistic in depicting a woman who controlled those around her and who acted as a free agent. People whispered that it was a good thing women were not allowed to attend the play, otherwise it might encourage them to act wickedly. I listened meekly and politely to this barrage of criticism, but my mind burned with thoughts of my revenge upon these small-minded fools.

The theatre manager seemed pleased enough with my effort. He said that he did not notice any of the audience sleeping during the performance and he considered this the highest praise a tragedy could receive. "They can be disgusted or offended by what you create, but as long as they are not bored by it, that is really all that matters."

One of the more insolent of my actors gave me a begrudging compliment when, after the performance, he told me that playing Medea had changed something inside him. He could not tell whether he was a better or a worse man than before, but my words had altered something deep within him. He was drunk when he told me this, but I was willing to take any compliment. And how did I feel after watching the performance? – exalted and terrified.

That night I sat alone in the empty amphitheater. Something new and unknowable had been born within me and my instincts told me that this was not something I could resist. I felt a power greater than myself was in control, and I must surrender myself to its ultimate will.

I wondered if I had caught a fever or maybe drunk more wine than was wise, but I understood that this feeling was something more than a physical affliction. Alone in the darkness it was easy for me to believe in the Gods I would dismiss during daylight. Maybe I had been blessed by these unknowable Gods? Or maybe they had cursed me? Either way, my fate seemed inescapable to me. I lay on my back on the cold stone and stared at the stars for hours, watching as new words were written across the Heavens.

At the first glimpse of Helios the stars faded and died, or disappeared into whatever unknowable realm it is they dwell in during the daytime hours, I made my way home to my uncle's, and sleepless, yet not desiring sleep, I began to write my next play.

And so, it would be for the next several years. The words came easily to me and though my plays were never beloved, they were always performed. I believe this is less due to their merit and more to their availability. In Athens there were many who aspired to be playwrights and I would meet many of them in the amphitheater or the taverns where they would hold long and elaborate discourses on the plays they were writing, but they would never finish the plays they so exalted. There were many supposed playwrights who would spend years not writing a play. They claimed that they were awaiting inspiration from the divine muses or that their work was so very nearly finished, but never quite so. It had to be perfect before it could be shown to any discerning audience. Fortunately, I was aware that the pursuit of perfection meant creative death. They were the brilliant dilettantes of the day – witty, supremely talented and wonderfully informed on all matters surrounding theatre, yet dismally incapable of creating anything of worth. My talent, if I possessed any, was in being able to regularly produce three tragedies and a satyr play every year. The plays themselves were well attended if ill received. In my more suspicious moments, I began to believe that people only attended my performances so that they could complain and criticize them afterwards. Many would meet in the agora or in a tavern simply to eloquently explain to each other what was so wrong with my work. I was too impious, or I was too reliant on the Gods, I was too derivative, or I didn't adhere to the strict traditions of drama enough. My tragedies were too comical, my satyrs were not funny. I was accused of corrupting the morals of my audience, of hating women, of hating humanity, of hating Athens, of hating the Gods and of loving only hatred. If I became a monster, maybe it was because they made me so. Over the years I became increasingly melancholic and misanthropic. This may have been my original nature. Maybe I was born to suffer, to live in deepest misery however

much I might uselessly struggle against it and declaim my woes and sense of persecution through the voices of my characters.

I had a few allies to whom I could turn to for comfort. Foremost amongst them was the philosopher, Socrates who proved to be the most unconventional yet most wonderful of men. I remember the first time I encountered him. I was rushing to the amphitheater, late for rehearsal as I often was in those youthful days, afflicted by a perennial desire to remain in bed until late morning. It was a painfully dry, hot day such as it often is during the Athenian summer, and the streets were almost completely empty. I hurried along with my manuscript held above my head for shade and in the street before me I beheld a most peculiar figure standing utterly still in the centre of the street as though he was a tree that had taken root and grown in that spot. In my haste I gave little thought to this strangest of figures, taking him to be a madman or, maybe a beggar, such was the manner of his dress and appearance. I hurried past and soon forgot him, my mind intent upon the problems of my latest play, or at least what numerous others believed to be its problems.

The day passed with the usual turmoil, and, as night descended, I headed home, and there was the same man still standing as though a statue in the same position in the same place. With awakened curiosity I approached him. He seemed not to notice me, but rather to be listening intently to some unknown voice. I assured myself that he was a madman and made to pass him at a safe distance, knowing that such men could prove dangerous and unpredictably violent. "Euripides!" the madman hailed me. I turned and gazed at him. He now appeared to be aware of my presence. He was smiling at me as an adult might smile at a small naughty child.

I returned his gaze with my own more distrustful one. "Do you know me?"

"Yes, you are the great sage, Euripides."

"You must be thinking of another Euripides," I informed him.

"My daemon never lies. He tells me you are to be a great sage – one of the few immortals of our time."

This statement only confirmed the stranger's madness to me and yet, a small part of me was flattered and a greater part, curious. "Where is your daemon. I cannot see him."

"None can, for he lives only inside my head."

"Does your daemon have a name?" I enquired, now completely convinced of the man's insanity.

"Yes. I call him 'Little Socrates'."

I had heard the name Socrates many times since arriving in Athens. Many believed him to be the wisest man in all of Greece, others that he was the greatest fool in all of Greece, and that his ideas were a danger to all upstanding and moral citizens.

"You look troubled," Socrates observed. "I don't need my daemon to tell me there is much on your mind."

It was late, and I was tired and as the philosopher had so accurately stated, I felt 'troubled' I considered politely telling him I was fine and he was mistaken, but then I understood that

maybe it was easier and safer to tell your worries to a complete stranger rather than to someone with whom you were already intimate. I also believed that this most peculiar of men might make for an interesting character in one of my future plays. Although my characters are ultimately taken from myth, they are also largely based on those I know or encounter, though I would never admit this to any of the people in question. “Yes,” I agreed, “I am deeply troubled.” I laid my head on my chest and raised my hand to my brow as I had seen my actors do when they wished to communicate a great sense of woe.

“That is a good start,” Socrates said smiling. “Let us find a friendly tavern, drink some wine and discuss your troubles.”

We found a nearby tavern where Socrates was obviously well known. The tavern keeper glared at him as he entered. “I’ll only let you drink here if you promise not to upset any of my customers by getting them to question the nature of their reality.”

Socrates smiled at him. “Agreed.” I bought us a pitcher of wine and we retired to a quiet corner. “Now, what ails you, my friend? Why are you not happy with your lot in life?” Socrates kindly asked.

“Where to begin? Well, as you know I am a playwright, and unlike my peers I am generally despised and ridiculed, and quite often abused, and often find myself wondering why I choose this life as a tragedian when my only reward seems to be evermore insults?”

Socrates took a heroic swig of wine before replying. “People do not like to be told the truth. It makes them question themselves and their beliefs, and then, they discover only the flaws and absurdities of their existence. Many times, it is easier to not accept an unwelcome truth and instead to blame the one that reveals that truth. For truth is change and people do not love change.” He glanced up at the Tavern Owner who continued to eye him suspiciously. “Our friend here who serves us such excellent wine has been working in this same tavern since he was a boy of maybe ten or so, and no doubt he will continue to serve wine here until he is a very old man.”

“But if he is happy with his life here, why would you question that?”

Socrates grinned at me. “Why indeed? You tell me.”

I drank deeply from my wine cup and thought with the fevered furiosity that strong wine sometimes inspires in me. “Because he is leading a safe and limited life, and beyond the tavern door there exists an extraordinary world of limitless possibility, and on his deathbed, he will realise this, and he will weep tears of endless regret.”

“That may be truth, but I sense there is a hesitation in your argument.”

I had begun to doubt my words as soon as they had been spoken. “But it is also possible that if he did venture out that door and beyond, then he would have a life of difficulty and distress. He could be robbed or even murdered by the time he reached the end of the street. It is a dangerous world we live in and an uncertain life we each lead. Maybe it is better to cling to the certainty we know – only a fool would not seek shelter during a storm, and is life not an endless storm of troubles for most?”

“It is. But storms always pass and then who knows what wonders may be discovered once the clouds have drifted away.”

I retreated back into my wine and pondered his words, resisting any truth that may be in them. “I don’t see the point of making life more difficult than it already is.”

“But maybe facing the storm is the ultimate purpose of our life?” Socrates suggested.

I was determined to be cynical. “Or maybe there is no ultimate purpose, no Gods and no reason for anything? Maybe there is only this moment, this glorious cup of wine and the wonderful sound of the old drunk in the corner singing songs from his youth?”

Socrates smiled and this time I thought it was a wonderful smile. “Maybe you should have been a philosopher?”

I could not tell if he was mocking me. I eyed him warily over the brim of my cup. “Maybe each of us should do what makes us most happy?”

“And what makes you happy, young Euripides?”

I did not feel like immediately answering him, so I called the Tavern Owner over and ordered another jug of wine. Socrates waited patiently and repeated his question.

I glowered at him. “Nothing. That is my curse. Nothing makes me happy. My talent lies not in my tragedies, but in my capacity for suffering and melancholy.” Drunk and consumed by my own sense of cursed misery I slumped across the table, my head in my hands.

“Then you are one of the luckiest men alive,” Socrates exclaimed.

I raised my head, wondering if he was taunting me. “It is a strange kind of luck to be constantly suffering.”

“Suffering is the key to greatness. Only those who experience suffering become truly wise. Consider the heroes of your tragic plays – how many of them achieved greatness because of their tragic lives? We know Herakles because of his twelve labours, but he never would have embarked on his great quest if Hera hadn’t persecuted him and driven him to such madness that he murdered his own family. Would Jason have sought the Golden Fleece if his uncle had not usurped his father, would there even have been a Golden Fleece if Ino had not plotted to have her stepchildren sacrificed? Believe me, to suffer and to question everything is the only way to achieve wisdom enough to grasp the great truth.”

I glared at him blearily. My head was beginning to hurt. “And what is that great truth?”

“I am still seeking it.”

“But is it worth the suffering?” I insisted.

“I do not know. My journey is not yet complete.”

I could not decide whether I wanted to hug him or to strangle him. “Am I doomed to always suffer, then?”

“If you choose to do so. But do you think you would be able to write your plays if you did not suffer so? In your case, is not your pain your power? Ultimately, would you give that up for a life of ease? Does your suffering really matter when compared to what it brings to life? You may feel your plays are unappreciated, but they are something which exists beyond you. Who can tell, maybe many years from now, your words will still be heard, and you will finally

receive the accolades you feel you deserve? Is that not some consolation? Would you sacrifice that for contentment?"

"No, but sometimes it is too much for me to bear and I would willingly relinquish this habitual agony. I would escape to somewhere away from the tormentors and the parasites."

"And what would you do there?" Socrates inquired.

"Nothing. Just exist."

"And that would satisfy you?"

"For a while," I replied, understanding the truth of my answer and its implications.

Over the years we would have many such conversations. Many people, especially the younger citizens, would come to listen to Socrates and to debate about everything and nothing. My times spent in his company were amongst the most rewarding of my life.

He possessed the rare capacity to infuriate the majority of people that he met. He subtly forced them to confront their own inadequacies and to question their own beliefs about virtually everything. As the war with Sparta grew more desperate and intense, his beliefs increasingly came to be viewed as subversive and dangerous, and he would begin to suffer much persecution. I wonder how my old friend is doing now, living within the eye of the storm which is Athenian society, while I sit in my cave, avoiding the world and all its woes and worries?

My Athenian life continued with little sense of direction, though I continued to work steadily if not methodically. Each year I would write and produce the required three tragedies and one satyr, and each year, they would be well attended, but poorly received.

My version of Medea was considered an outrage. The women of Athens, none of whom had seen the play, vilified me as a misogynist because I dared to portray Medea as so morally villainous. They thought I must hate women because I dared to show them as being flawed and damaged – as complex human beings. I vainly protested that I did not see Medea as a villain – that there were no villains in my plays - only people dealing with tragic situations, few of which they themselves were responsible for. This is how I saw life – as a struggle against events beyond our control. If anything, life, fate, the Gods were the true villains of my plays. But no one believed my protests. I was described as hopelessly corrupt and immoral, and kinder souls believed me to be suffering from some sickness of the mind.

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