THE ODYSSEY OF PHOEBE QUILLIAM

ANNELISE GRAY

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For my brother, Justin,

who knows about dread pirates and storybook stories.

1

My name is Phoebe Quilliam and this is the story of how I defeated a monster and found my way home, with help from a golden sail, an invisible horse, a kite-flying king, a bewildered fisherman and a boy who could see dolphins swimming in the clouds.

It might seem strange to tell you the ending before I've told you the beginning. Believe me, I'm the last person to spoil a story. My nan would have words if I did.

'There's only one suitable punishment for people who give away what happens before you've finished a book,' she told me once when we were reading together. 'It involves a close encounter with the sharp end of a pencil and it hurts a lot.'

Lately, though, I've learned endings aren't always as important as you expect. It's the same with beginnings, although of course you have to start somewhere. I've chosen a Friday, shortly before teatime, in a seaside town called St Samuel's in Cornwall. Two artists – one

old, one young – are in a glass-walled studio filled with light and a sweet, pastry-like scent. For both, it's their favourite smell, their favourite place in the world and there's nobody in whose company they'd rather be.

The young artist is me, the other is my nan. We're quite similar in appearance even though we're almost seventy years apart. Both of us have freckled skin and red-gold hair, threaded with silver in Nan's case. We wear painting smocks over our clothes – baggy shirt and trousers for Nan, school uniform for me. Nan stands at her easel, mixing linseed oil into her paint, which is what gives the studio its delicious smell. I'm sitting at the big worktable which has scabs of dried paint spattered across it like a million melted sweets. Between us, in a patch of sun, Nan's grey lurcher Claude is half asleep on his beanbag.

'How's it coming along?' Nan's voice is strong for someone her age. Rich and deep, with a husky edge.

'It's difficult,' I say, looking doubtfully at my reflection in the mirror Nan's given me and then at the painting of my eye on a rectangle of canvas. 'I can't get the tones right.'

'Persevere, my love. Eyes are the window to the soul. If an artist can capture them, they capture the person.'

Nan finishes combining two tints of white with her palette knife, whipping the mix until it's like butter. Then

she pads towards me, the studio floorboards creaking under her bare feet. She never wears shoes if she can help it, even in winter when the studio's freezing.

'You're doing very well, you know,' she says, squinting at my artwork. 'Try to bring out that darker halo around your iris.'

Following her direction, I add indigo and a touch of violet to the acrylic mix on my palette. As soon as I apply it, I can see Nan's right.

'That's excellent,' she says, and her words give me that feeling you get when you're launching a kite and the wind lifts it. It's my dream to be an artist like Nan. On the walls around us are posters from her many exhibitions, showing seascapes and strange creatures from the myths and legends that inspire her. I picture my own name on posters alongside hers one day.

'What are *you* working on, Nan?' I ask.

'Just having another go at my Ithaca painting.'

'Can I look?'

'If you like. I'm battling to capture the light the way I remember it.'

I follow her to the huge canvas, which I know well. Sometimes, after school, when I arrive at the studio I find Nan adding something new to the picture, so absorbed she doesn't hear me come in. It's a seascape but not the kind she normally paints in the grey blue tones

of the surf around St Samuel's. The water in this picture is indigo, almost purple, with clear green patches so that you can see the sand in the shallows. It ripples across a cove under an evening sky, lapping at a beach fringed with pebbles. When I look at it, I'm certain I can actually hear the pulse of the tide washing through the stones.

'You've moved Hattie,' I say, pointing to a tiny dark-haired figure clambering up the cliff. 'She was down on those rocks before.'

'Always on the move, old Hats. Never likes to be in the same place.' Nan adds a drop more linseed to her whites, then mixes them again. 'Fetch me that house, will you?'

She gestures to a cardboard box on the worktable.

'House?' I laugh. 'You mean "box"?'

'That's the one.'

Nan's been doing this a lot lately. Saying the wrong words for things. It's because she's getting old, she tells me.

'What's in it?' I ask, passing her the box.

'Postcards from Hattie. I found them when I was digging through some stuff. Thought they'd been lost. Can't seem to keep track of anything these days.'

Nan pulls a photograph from the box, holding it by the edge so as not to mark it with her paint-covered fingers.

'This was mixed up with them,' she says, handing it to me. 'Look at the pair of us.'

Two girls smile at me from the photo, arm-in-arm and waving for the camera. It's not the first time I've seen their faces together. There's another black and white snap, in Nan's albums. Here, though, I can see the bright pattern on the girls' swimsuits and the colour of their hair. Dark curls for Hattie, red-gold bob for Nan. I turn the picture over and read the writing on the back.

'*Christina Hatzidkis and Cassandra James, August 1960, Ithaca, Greece.* So you were both…' I do the sum in my head. 'Twelve?'

'Sounds about right. Not much older than you, my love.'

'Was this the last time you saw her?'

Nan nods and I glance from the tiny figure scaling the cliff in the painting to the face in the photo. Hattie looks full of life and fun. It's hard to believe she died of a fever within a year of the photograph being taken.

'It's nice that you still remember her,' I say.

'She's hard to forget, old Hats,' says Nan with a smile. 'Packed a lot into that short life of hers.'

She takes the photograph and studies it before putting it carefully back in the box.

'Do you think you'll ever finish the Ithaca painting?' I ask. 'Or sell it?'

'Oh, I doubt it. I made a promise, you see.'

I want to ask what the promise was but the single chime of the clock on the wall distracts me.

'It's four-thirty, Nan.'

'Is it? Extraordinary. Barely got a thing done today.'

'Yes, but Mum will be here in an hour and it's Friday. You know what that means.'

I perch on the edge of the worktable, swinging my legs in anticipation. The only thing Nan might actually be better at than painting is telling stories and the Greek myths are our favourites. She tells me a new one at the end of every week.

'Can we have the myth you promised, about the boy whose father makes him a pair of wings? Or I don't mind hearing about the Minotaur again. Nan?'

She's using a piece of wire wool to smooth the picture's surface, so that it's ready for a new layer of paint, and seems lost in concentration.

'Have I told you the story of the *Odyssey*?' she asks, after a long pause.

'No.'

'Really? Haven't I? It's the greatest myth of them all. The story of King Odysseus, who sails to a far-off city called Troy to fight and help rescue a kidnapped queen. The *real* tale, though, is what happens to Odysseus as he's trying to get back to his homeland

of Ithaca, across the wine-dark sea, after ten years of battle.'

'Ithaca?' I glance at the painting. Nan smiles.

'That's right. Hattie and Odysseus came from the same place. As a matter of fact, this is the very beach on Ithaca from where Odysseus and his ships set sail for Troy. At least, that's what Hattie told me, though she did have quite an imagination.'

Claude whines. Nan peers at the clock.

'I suppose you're right,' she says, as Claude springs up and wags his tail. 'Do me a favour and feed him, would you, Phoebe? You can make us both another mug of tea while you're at it, and then we'll start the *Odyssey* and carry on until Sandra comes.'

'Who's Sandra?'

Nan hesitates. 'Your mother.'

'Mum's name's Rachel.'

Nan waves a hand. 'You know what I mean, darling.'

Claude trots ahead as I walk across the garden to the kitchen door of Saltspray, Nan's cottage. She's lived here almost fifty years and even though the heating's broken and there are leaks everywhere, she refuses to move. While I wait for the kettle to boil, I study the corkboard where she pins reminders to herself. *Pay electric bill. Tuesday bins. Take pills.* There's a plastic-covered newspaper clipping alongside them that's been there for years, with

a picture of Dad in his yellow rescue gear. I've read the caption a million times.

> Coxswain Jonas Quilliam, who has been awarded the Royal National Lifeboat Institution's Silver Medal for Gallantry for his part in the daring rescue of a stricken fishing crew off St Samuel's. After distress flares were spotted, Mr Quilliam skippered the vessel that went out in storm force winds and brought all six men to safety.

Dad's smiling for the photographer, his fox-coloured hair flopping messily over his forehead as usual. There are laughter lines around his eyes. I think I still remember his laugh, though whether it's my memory or imagination, I'm not sure.

Leaving Claude with his bowl of food, I go back to the studio.

'Here's your tea, Nan.'

She's sitting in front of the Ithaca painting and doesn't answer.

'Nan?'

When she turns, her face freezes and so do I.

'Who are you?' There's fear in her voice. She looks as if she's seeing a ghost. I stay still, the hot tea burning my knuckles through the ceramic mug.

Slowly, Nan relaxes. The fog in her eyes clears.

'Lovely. Bring that over here.'

'What's wrong, Nan?'

'Nothing's wrong, darling. Why should anything be wrong?'

'You said… "Who are you?" You didn't recognise me.'

'Don't be silly. The sun's setting on the glass, I couldn't see you properly when you came in.'

Trying to let myself be reassured, I put the tea on the table beside her. She tweaks my hair.

'You're getting so tall, gorgeous girl. Like your darling pa.' For a moment, I glimpse the swirl of sadness in her eyes. 'Now, let's get started and discover how our hero Odysseus finds his way home.'

'Nan,' I protest.

'What?'

'You just gave away the ending. You always say you should never do that.'

Nan picks up her tea. She seems normal now.

'I haven't spoiled anything. Besides, the ending's not the important part. You'll see.'

For a long time, I looked back on that day in Nan's studio and worried that it was all my fault. I was the

one who spent more time with Nan than anyone. Why didn't I realise what was happening? Why didn't I say something sooner to Mum? Could I have delayed the ending, given us more time?

Now, though, I know Nan was right that day she first told me the story of Odysseus the Wanderer. The ending isn't the thing that matters. It's everything before the ending that counts.

2

The following year

'Phoebe! Time to go!'

I carry on sketching.

'Don't move,' I mutter. 'Stay right there.'

The robin on the branch outside our kitchen window holds his pose. It's as if he knows he's being drawn and wants to be helpful. I study him intently, trying to let instinct guide my hand, the way Nan taught me. The sketchbook – a special one in its own waterproof carrying case – was a gift from her on my eleventh birthday.

'Draw every day, Phoebe,' she told me as I sniffed the smooth, crisp pages in delight. 'It's the best way to learn. Animals, faces, flowers. A rotten banana, if that's what's in front of you. There's something interesting to discover in everything if you look at it with curiosity.'

The sketchbook isn't quite half full though, despite me having it for over a year. So much has happened since that birthday. So much has changed.

'Phoebe!' Mum's calling again. 'Come on! We don't want to be late.'

The branch dips and the robin flies away. Reluctantly, I put the sketchbook in its case with the pencil and stuff it in the deep pocket of my dungarees. There's no putting this off. I check there's water in Claude's bowl and lean over the beanbag where he's been lying all morning. Ever since he moved in with us, it's been hard to get him to go for walks.

'See you later, Claude,' I whisper, kissing his salt-and-pepper head. 'Sorry you can't come with us. Mum thinks you'll get confused. Another day, maybe.'

Mum's waiting by the front door. She's been for an early-morning run and her hair's wet from the shower.

'Got your sketchbook?' she asks as we get into the car.

'Yes. I haven't done much since we last saw her,' I confess.

'That doesn't matter. She always loves seeing your drawings.'

Rubbish, a sly voice murmurs in my ear. *She can't even concentrate on her own art any more, let alone yours.* I try to block it out. But it keeps needling.

We drive along the harbour road, past the gift shops selling fudge and handmade soap. An aggressive seagull steals a woman's ice cream as she crosses the road in

front of us. At the far end, we take the turn past the lifeboat station. Mum used to avoid driving this way, but she's started using it again lately. When I asked her why, she said it was just time that she faced it. An orange and blue rescue vessel is at the top of the slipway, ready for launch, and they're testing the loud sirens that alert people to stay clear. Some of the volunteers hanging round the station wave to us. They all used to be Dad's crewmates.

'We need to make a quick stop at Saltspray,' says Mum, turning up the steep hill towards the back of town.

Hidden inside my pockets, my hands clench into fists.

'Why?' I ask.

'The estate agent wants to meet me there and ask a few questions, and I need to make sure everything's tidy before people start coming around to view the cottage. I hope you don't mind, sweetheart, I've been so busy at work and couldn't do it any other day.'

I don't say anything. The car pulls up outside the gate. Mum looks at me.

'Phoebe?' she says gently. 'You can wait in the car if you don't want to come in.'

Mum understands some of what I'm feeling, I know that she does. She understands because she lost Dad, and although, unlike him, Nan's still here, in some ways she isn't. But Mum doesn't realise how bad things have got,

how much I hate making this journey. No matter how hard I've tried to silence it, that mean little voice won't leave me alone. *It's your fault, you know. You could have helped. You should have recognised how sick she was and said something.*

Like Nan, though, I've become good at hiding what's really going on.

'It's fine,' I say, trying to sound casual. 'I'll come in.'

The first thing I notice as we enter the cottage is the quiet. Nan always used to have the radio on in the kitchen. Leaving Mum and the estate agent to talk, I wander into the cosy room Nan called 'the snug', where she watched TV from the squashy green sofa. Some of her photographs are missing but there are plenty left, in tarnished silver frames, crowding the side-tables. Nan when she was at art college, laughing with a group of friends. Nan with Grandpa Henry – Dad's dad – a shy-looking man with smiling eyes. Nan and me when I was a toddler, flying a red kite at the beach.

I pick up a picture of Mum and Dad on their wedding day. They're holding hands, and on Dad's third finger is his new wedding ring, a thick band made of Cornish silver. Mum used to wear an identical one, with an inscription inside. It was a line from a poem she and Dad loved: *Hope your road is a long one.* She lost it a year ago while she was swimming, the cold salty water

prising it from her finger. For weeks afterwards, she went to look on the shore, hoping by some miracle it might be washed up. Dad's old lifeboat colleagues even brought in a diver to search. It never came back, though.

From the snug's sliding door, I cross the garden to Nan's studio. The door is open – the estate agent must have unlocked it – and as soon as I walk in, I breathe the gentle, familiar scent of linseed that always made me feel safe. Nan lived in Paris in her twenties and she told me once that the linseed reminded her of the smell outside the patisserie below her apartment.

I look around. Everything's the way she left it. Brushes stuffed in jars, our paint-stained smocks hanging on their hooks, even her old coffee cup beside the sink. I sit on the daybed where Nan used to take naps with Claude in the afternoon, and listen for the distant surge of the sea. Then I search out the Ithaca picture, hidden under a shelf among other unfinished canvases. Setting it on the empty easel, I study the way the brushstrokes of light among the evening clouds cast a golden shimmer across the sea.

Nan's voice comes to me. *'It all starts with a boy. A boy called Telemachus.'*

It was the day she didn't recognise me, the day she began to tell me the tale of the *Odyssey*. Claude had come back from the kitchen and the two of us were squashed on his beanbag.

'For many long years, Telemachus has been waiting.' Nan had gone into her storytelling voice, slow and hushed. 'Waiting and hoping. You see, his father is Odysseus – ruler of Ithaca – who left to fight the Trojan war when Telemachus was a newborn. Now the boy is almost a man, and every day' – here, Nan pointed at the Ithaca picture – 'he gazes out to sea from this very beach, wondering if the father he's never known might one day come home.'

Stroking Claude's ears, I imagined a masted ship appearing over the painted horizon.

'How come he's a man already? I thought you said the war finished after ten years.'

'It did,' replied Nan. 'But Odysseus's journey back to Ithaca didn't run smoothly. He and his men faced many dangers on the way home. Monsters with a taste for human flesh. The wrath of Poseidon the Earth-Shaker, Lord of the Sea, and Zeus the Cloud-Gatherer, King of the Gods. Now, having lost all his crew, Odysseus is a prisoner, held captive by a goddess who hopes her magic will persuade him to forget his wife and son at home and finally give his heart to her.'

Alone again in the cold silence of the studio, I wonder the same thing I did back then. Was the fact that Odysseus eventually made it home the reason Nan loved this myth so much? Did she pretend sometimes that Dad was out

there, not dead, but a prisoner on a distant island, and was she telling me the story because she wanted me to think it too?

I notice the brightly coloured map, tucked under a big art book on the worktable, and suddenly remember the peculiar thing Nan said to me.

'Careful with that, my darling. Strange magic there.'

It was the same Friday afternoon. Nan had finished telling me the first part of the *Odyssey* story, pausing at a tense moment where Odysseus and his men were trapped inside the cave of the man-eating giant, the one-eyed Cyclops. I was tidying the worktable, thinking about Nan's gruesome description of the Cyclops eating the heads of Odysseus's men as if they were boiled eggs. When I moved the box containing Hattie's postcards, a piece of paper slipped out of the bottom. I picked it up and that was when Nan uttered her curious warning. Once she'd said it, of course I had to look.

'It's a map,' I said.

'Ah, but not just any map.' Nan was using her storytelling voice again. 'That is the map that shows you how to reach the lair of the dreaded Morpheia. A terrible creature, the Morpheia. She lives at the top of a tower, in a nest made of sailors' bones, and she can change shape at will, take on other faces and forms, even voices. Yet she can never leave her lonely prison. It is her curse.'

Intrigued, I examined the scribbled swathes of blue sea and islands picked out in brown and green.

'Did you draw this, Nan? When you were little?'

'With some help from Hattie.'

There was childish writing dotted over the map. The Land of the Lotus Eaters. The Sirens' Cliff. The Fortress of Aeolus – King of the Winds. The Island of the Cyclops.

'It's the *Odyssey*, isn't it? Are these all the places Odysseus has to stop on his way home to Ithaca?'

'Some of them.'

'Where's the Morpheia's prison?'

Nan put a paint-flecked finger on a rocky island, fringed with black sand. There was a tower rising from the island's heart and the caption above it was written in red letters.

The Rock of the Morpheia. I felt a delicious shiver go through me. 'When does Odysseus get here? Is she worse than the Cyclops?'

'Oh, much, much worse. Hattie was very keen that she should be.'

Clearly enjoying the puzzlement in my face, Nan turned the map over, showing me the large, looping writing on the back.

'*The Odyssey of Cass and Hattie*,' I read. 'Wait, you mean… you made this whole thing up?'

'No, I told you, the *Odyssey* is famous, thousands of years old. It was our favourite myth, mine and Hattie's. We used to spend our summers acting it out, pretending we were Odysseus, facing the same challenges. It inspired us to create our own monster, equal to, if not more terrifying than all the others.'

I looked again at the map.

'Are you allowed to do that?'

'Of course you are, my darling. What do you think artists have been doing for centuries if not following in other explorers' footsteps and discovering new realms?' Nan plucked the map from my fingers and studied it. 'Hunting the Morpheia became the game we liked most. The aim was to kill her before she dragged us into her nest and ripped us to shreds. We had to have our wits about us, mind. The Morpheia could confuse us. Pretend to be people we loved, so that we trusted her and forgot why we were there.'

'Kill her?' I said. 'How did you do that?'

Nan didn't reply. She was engrossed in the map.

I tried again. 'Nan, how did you kill the Morpheia?'

'Oh, I can't remember now, my love.' She sounded tired. 'It was all such a long time ago.'

Another voice intrudes on my memories, hauling me back to the present.

'Phoebe!'

It's Mum, calling me from the garden. She and the estate agent must have finished. I look around for the box with the postcards and the photo of Hattie but can't see it. Not wanting the map to be lost, I tuck it between the pages of my sketchbook. The glass walls of the studio rattle loudly. I jump.

'Breathe,' I tell myself. 'It's the wind.'

Outside, though, the leaves of the overgrown shrubs in Nan's garden are absolutely still. I'm about to move the Ithaca canvas back to where I found it when something catches my eye. Something I haven't seen before. I lean closer to look at the painting. The sound of the waves washing through the pebbles seems to grow louder…

'Phoebe! Time to go.'

Shaken, I leave the painting where it is and hurry to the studio door. It's hard to get rid of the feeling, though. I could swear I glimpsed someone floating among the crests of the indigo sea, arm raised as if they were waving to me.