

THE JACK OF WINDS.

The ocean was calm. There was not a breath of a breeze on the sea. My men had to row until their hands were studded with blisters. They bandaged their hands. The blood oozed through the bandages. Day after day they toiled. It was as if we were crossing the surface of a mirror.

At last we saw that something was approaching us. It was flashing and bobbing, reflecting the light of the sun. A floating island, surrounded by walls of bronze! I'd heard stories of this place from sailors. I'd heard it offered a welcome, and sure enough when we came closer the guards atop those bronze walls shouted, 'King Aeolus offers sanctuary in exchange for tales of your adventures!'

We rowed through a pair of bronze gates and tethered our ship to the jetty. We were led up a cobblestone hill to the bronze palace of the mad king Aeolus. He loved to hear the stories of the world, but he would never choose to leave his island. For seven days and nights his hall echoed with our tales. We filled our bellies with roasted meat.

All this time, there was not the faintest whisper of wind outside. When I mentioned this to Aeolus, he cackled and nodded his head.

At last, the time had come to resume our voyage. His soldiers led my men down to the harbour. The old king gestured to me to follow him up a flight of stairs to his bedroom. He led me to a curtain in the corner. Gleefully he pulled it back. I saw an alcove. I saw a sack tied tight with a silver thong. It writhed and wriggled. The king looked carefully around. Then he gestured to me to come closer. I came so close I could taste his breath on my tongue.

He whispered, 'Zeus is my friend. He's in the middle of a feud with his brother Poseidon. He has stolen the winds of the world from the Sea God and put them in this sack! He has given it to me for safe keeping. I am to open it when I see fit. It crosses my mind that I could let out one gust to fill your sail. With that wind behind you, you'd be carried across the surface of the sea as surely as an arrow loosed from a bow. I will give the sack to you. When at last you

plant your feet on Ithacan shingle you can open it and set free the gusts and gales. You will soon be home!

I wept for joy. The old man knelt beside the sack and untied the knot in the silver thong. He dipped his hand inside and pulled out what appeared to me to be a writhing snake of smoke. He opened his hand and the snake vanished. We shivered. Aeolus pulled the thong tight again and gave the sack to me.

The king and I went down the cobblestone hill to the harbour. I climbed aboard the ship. I placed the sack just behind the prow, on the foredeck. My men were waiting at their benches. The people of the island were lining the jetty. I shouted, 'King Aeolus has given me the finest gift that ever I received in my entire life. This sack holds a treasure greater than all the spoils of Troy!'

His subjects cheered, and the king beamed from ear to ear. My crew stared at the sack.

Once we were out of those bronze gates we unfurled the sail and lifted the oars from the water. The old man spoke

the truth! The sail filled with wind.  
No need to row, no need to steer! It  
was as if we were following a path  
across the trackless waves of the sea.

For nine days and nights I sat on  
the foredeck, the sack by my side. I  
kept a vigil, scanning the horizon,  
never sleeping, desperate for a  
glimpse of Ithaca. Then there she  
was. I knew her shape so well — the  
valleys, the secret places only I had  
seen, the terraces, the vineyards, the  
beaches — the outline of my beloved  
Ithaca! Great Mount Neriton rising

high into the sky! The land that  
gave me life.

But my vigil had taken its toll.  
With relief came exhaustion. I told  
my men to wake me when at last the  
prow ground against the beach. I lay  
on that foredeck, the sack beside me,  
and fell into a deep sleep.

Under the sea Poseidon saw his  
moment. He lifted his hand. His  
gesture caused a huge wave which  
our ship had to climb to overcome.  
As the prow of the ship rose, the sack  
beside me slid from the foredeck

and landed in the lap of one of my crew. He turned to one of his friends and said, 'Did you hear what Odysseus told that king? He said this sack contained the finest gift he had ever he received. Everything else he's shared with us. He ought to share this, too. After all, we've risked our lives as often as he has. But this treasure he seems to want to keep for himself. Where's the justice in that? What harm would there be in seeing what he has been given?'

He untied the silver thong. He pushed his thumbs into the mouth of the sack and as he did so he was blasted from his bench on to the deck! He saw a thousand wriggling snakes of smoke rising from the sack into the sky!

Poseidon had all the weapons he needed now. The sky darkened. The waves rose up around us. The sail was torn to shreds. The ship was spinning. The spinning woke me. I sat up. Poseidon spat brine into my eyes. I looked for Ithaca but already she was so vague that she might have been just the edge of a cloud.

I reached out across the side of the ship and tried to clutch at her, as if to pull her towards me but she was gone. I was so seized with despair it was all I could do to hold back

from hurling myself into the waves. The north wind tossed us for the south wind to catch. The west and the east winds fought over us. Sometimes we were climbing mountains of water. Sometimes we were sinking into valleys and the sky could not be seen. It was clear that Poseidon wanted us dead. How would we ever see our homes, our hearths, our fields and farms and families again?