EMILY HAUSER

SANDER BERG

ANCIENT LOVE STORIES

The Most Remarkable Romances in History

BIG PICTURE PRESS

ANCIENT LOVE STORIES

DEDICATION – E.H.

TO VELLE, AND TO MR AND MR WILLIAMS,
WITHOUT WHOM THIS COULD NOT HAVE BEEN MADE. – S.B.

BIG PICTURE PRESS

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CONTENTS

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Three thousand years ago, in an ancient world where the glittering kingdoms of the Aegean were teetering on the brink of collapse, a prince of Troy ran away with the wife of a Greek king. Their names were Paris and Helen, and their love affair set the world on fire. It kickstarted one of the greatest battles of all time. It was celebrated in poetry, scrawled across the history books, and splashed over richly coloured vases. To the ancients, Helen and Paris were as real as they were infamous.

Today, Helen and Paris might seem little more than a myth. But we don't have to look to fiction – even some of the most famous fictional couples, like Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet – to find true love. The pages of history are crammed with remarkable stories about love that are, quite literally, true. And many of them are among the greatest love stories ever told.

This collection brings together some of the most remarkable true love stories in ancient and premodern history. It is, perhaps, a cliché to say that love never dies. But the survival of these extraordinary tales (in some cases, across millennia) goes to show that love really does stand the test of time. Some couples, like Mark Antony and Cleopatra or Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal, played out on the main stage of history and are instantly recognisable; others are less well known and stand in the wings, waiting to be told. But they all have something to tell us about what it means to be in love, and why across thousands of years of history love, above all, has endured.

Here we see love shot through like a thread in different cultures and time periods, from the bloody revolts of archaic Greece to the cultivated soirées of Han China; from the frenzied witch hunts of Jacobean England to the bejewelled wonders of Moghul India. As is the nature of any collection, particularly one of this breadth and scope, the stories are merely a selection from among thousands of possible candidates reaching up to the end of the early modern era (broadly defined as 'the past'). Each story aims to give an insight into a different culture, a different historical moment, a different type of love. Each story asks us to open ourselves up to love's transformative – and sometimes tragic – power. Each story celebrates the incredible variety and diversity of love – from passion and jealousy to hope and longing; from besotted emperors to loved-up shopkeepers; from men who died for the men they loved, to women whose fierce passion redrew the map of the heart.

Above all, the extraordinary, fearless lovers represented in this book remind us that love is a touchstone we can always come back to in order to understand what it means to be human – today, just as much as three thousand years ago.

SAPPHO

Dawn. Greece. Summer. The air smelled of violets. Pink fingers of sunlight crept over the horizon, already hot, reflecting off the white rocks of the Greek island. A woman stood on the cliff edge, her toes whispering the air, her sandals tracing the stone. Playing with the edge between rock and sky. Her gauzy tunic catching on the sea breeze, tugging her like a ship's sail. Threatening to slip at any moment into the white foam below.

Her name was Sappho. And how she got here is a love story.

But it is not the kind you might think. This is a story of a woman who had a gift: she knew how to write about love. In the world of ancient Greece, where women were meant to idolise men and were told to stay silent – seen and not heard – her love was different. She loved women passionately, openly, and she was able to turn what she felt into fierce words of poetry. These words would speak to thousands of people and become famed across one of the most powerful nations on Earth. They would be sung at banquets and written down on scraps of papyrus that were sent on ships and hoarded in libraries across the world of the ancients. These words would see Sappho embroiled in rebellion in the teetering, overcrowded cities of the rocky island of Lesbos. They would cast her into exile across the glittering seas of the Aegean to the ends of theEarth and back again. They would ask her to defy everything that was expected of a woman and climb to dizzying heights of fame and success, before falling to the repute of a ridiculed prostitute. They would see her challenging ideas about sex and sexuality, and speaking out about love in a way no one had ever done before. Her words would become immortal – even as it took her to her death.

So yes, this is a love story with a difference. And it would change the way we talk about love forever.

The year was 600 BCE, or thereabouts. Greece was a tumbling, rocky mass of hilltop towns lorded over by petty tyrants. The old heroic age of kings and palaces, the era of Achilles' legendary battles and Agamemnon's fabulous jewels was gone: all that was left were the walls ringing the old citadels, made of stones so huge that locals said they must have been built by the gigantic, one-eyed Cyclops. Peasants chained by centuries of debt toiled in the walls' shadows, bringing in crops for the wealthy who lounged in shaded villas nestled among the rubble of the old palaces. These were people who lived among the ruins of better times.

And yet there were glimmers of something new on the horizon. Ships were starting to cross the seas, heaving with a cargo of pressed oils and baked pots, in search of new shores to explore. They brought back new ideas and new letters – the alphabet, named after the Phoenician letters *aleph beth*, or *alpha beta* in Greek – to write down and disseminate those ideas. Politicians and thinkers were rising up to challenge the oligarchs who had maintained a stranglehold on power for so long, since the fall of the kings. In Lesbos, where Sappho was growing up as a child, a series of riots, family rivalries and power struggles would place a new tyrant, Pittacus, on the throne, who would scatter the ruling aristocratic clans that rose up against him across the seas.

Onto this scene of tyrants, debt, social invention and political upheaval, Sappho exploded like a multicoloured supernova burning across the sky. We know little about Sappho for sure. She had a towering reputation in the ancient world: she was hailed by scores of well-known poets as 'the tenth Muse', while a later critic compared her to Greece's

famous father of literature as 'the female Homer'. Her intensely personal, intimate, sensual depictions of love initiated a seismic shift in the landscape of poetry – in stark contrast to the gory battle narratives of epic giants like Homer, who had lived a hundred years before. Paintings of Sappho reading her poems appeared on local pots (the ancient equivalent of a billboard advertisement for a blockbuster film) and famous men wrote songs about how madly they were in love with her. Her poetry was quite literally the soundtrack to the ancient world, sung for hundreds of years at the private parties that defined the ancient Greek social scene.

And yet – because she was a woman, perhaps, or because she wrote about love affairs between women – her poetry is almost entirely lost to us. Barely two hundred fragments remain today of Sappho's original nine books crammed with poems. What little there is survives in scattered quotations or inked on scraps of papyrus that were tossed onto rubbish dumps and dug up by chance thousands of years later in the Egyptian desert.

But what we do know about Sappho – what she tells us herself – is that she was in love, and that she was in love with women. The names of these women echo like ghosts treading lightly through her love poems: Gorgo, Atthis, Anactoria – we know nothing about them except their names. Later biographers trip over themselves to fill the gaps for us with what can only be described as sexually fuelled fantasies, consigning Sappho's love of women to the footnotes with much judgement and raising of eyebrows, and conjuring instead an almost cartoonishly heterosexual version of Sappho.

The end result: to both diminish and contain the dangerously off-centre woman poet. Rumours about an extraordinary list of male lovers and a characterisation of Sappho as something akin to a sex-crazed courtesan tell us more about men's lurid imaginings than they do about Sappho herself. Meanwhile, the widely circulated story of her leap from the white cliffs for a man appears nowhere in her poetry. This is a love story that is, quite literally, in fragments. So how do we piece it all together?

Sappho's love story starts with a woman called Anactoria and a journey to the end of the world. We don't know who Anactoria was, or when Sappho chose to address to her one of the most sensational love poems in history, and a manifesto for her radical redefinition of what it means to be in love:

Some people say armies of
cavalry, infantry, ships
are the loveliest things on this black Earth.
I say
it's whoever you love.

The famous Helen, Sappho goes on, renowned as much for her devastating beauty as for starting one of the greatest wars the world had ever seen, ran away to Troy for love of Paris; *it makes me think of Anactoria, who is gone. I'd rather see her lovely walk, the flaming light in her face, than all the Trojan chariots and fighters in full armour.*

The name-drop of Helen of Troy shows that Sappho is turning the old story of the Trojan War on its head. What if, she asks, instead of telling the story of Troy through the battles of men like Achilles, we focused instead on Helen and the fact she fell in love? What if we put love centre stage in a way that had never been done before?

But there's more to this than just poetry. Helen's voyage across the sea to Troy contains hints of Sappho's own journey. One of our earliest historical chronicles tells us that Sappho was exiled from the Greek island of Lesbos (just off Troy) across the sea to Sicily. Other sources reveal that she was involved in the dynastic power struggles on Lesbos, along with the other riots that were sweeping across Greece like summer fires.

Sappho had been a child during the violent years of the leader Pittacus' rebellion against the ruling family of Lesbos; she had grown up in the ferment of revolution. What she did in later years to warrant banishment, we can only guess. Was she really part of a treacherous coup to take down Pittacus? Was it, perhaps, simply one step too far for a woman to try to involve herself in politics? For Sappho, plucking at her lyre strings and dreaming of her lover hundreds of miles away under the baking Sicilian sun, the tale of Helen must have held a particular fascination. Here was a woman who fell in love with someone she shouldn't. Here was a woman who was vilified as a harlot for trying to break the bounds of her society and caused a war by doing so, who journeyed across the world to Troy – not far from Sappho's own home – and lived much of her life in exile in a foreign land. Helen's journey, in other words, was Sappho's.

But there is the critical point of difference: while Helen loved a man, Sappho loved a woman. There is an undeniable sensuality to Sappho's lingering remembrance of 'Anactoria's lovely walk' that shows that this is much more than just a friendship. For the first time, Sappho – a woman and a poet – celebrates love in a woman's voice that sets her against the battles of men. She conjures up, instead, an intimate world where the two women walk together, hand-in-hand, perhaps, through the olive groves of the Lesbos she remembers, and the lovely Anactoria throws back her head and laughs with sparkling eyes.

We do not know if Sappho ever saw Anactoria again.

Yet sometimes it is the gaps in Sappho's poetry that allow us to imagine her story for ourselves. In one of the most famous of all her poems, Sappho watches her lover – an unnamed woman; Anactoria again, perhaps? – flirting and laughing with a man. (The poem became so famous that, hundreds of years later, Roman poets competed to create their own versions.) We might imagine Sappho returning to Lesbos after years of exile to find her lover and a man, reclining side-by-side at the feast:

He's lucky as a god
to sit by you:
he gets to listen to
your voice,
your laugh.
It makes my heart shake.
When I look at you
I can't speak any more:
tongue breaks
flesh burns
can't see
ears thrum
sweat pours from me, and I shiver.

It is impossible to read these lines without feeling, viscerally, the sensations they describe. Every word captures the nerve-tingling frissant of being in love. Metaphors that have defined the way we

talk about love for centuries – tongue-tied, burning, heart trembling, blind with love – started their life here. But this poem is not just about being in love – it is also about the unbearable bite of jealousy when unrequited love turns sour. Sappho's body – older now, perhaps, skin wrinkled by sea voyages – responds, almost against her volition, aching and breaking with a physical rejoinder of passion that is almost the stronger for being unmet.

This is the kind of love that might drive you to the edge of the cliff.

What we don't find here – or anywhere in Sappho's poems – is the Sappho who hurls herself off the edge of a cliff for a man. The story we opened with is a myth, a fantasy – the kind of story other people tell about Sappho's love, not her own. It's a way of trying to turn this extraordinary woman into someone the ancients could understand: a tragic heroine flinging herself to her death for a man, not a stand-out, vocal, independent woman who publicised her love for women and made a name for herself across the world, influencing writers from Ovid and Tennyson to Virginia Woolf.

Piecing together the fragments, we find a very different solution to the puzzle of Sappho's story emerging from the jigsaw. Here is a love that is possessive, fierce, sensual, loyal, tangible and passionate. Here is a love that is different, and unashamed to say it. Did Sappho jump to her death because she fell in love with a man? Probably not. But did the way she wrote about the women she loved change how we talk about love thousands of years later? Absolutely.

As revolution swept across Greece, one woman stood out like a beacon of bright, flaming change: ensnared in conflict, embroiled in political struggles, driven a thousand miles away, and yet still able to stand up and call out her own experience of love, as a woman, as someone different.

Sappho's story is not a 'boy meets girl' love story: it is a tale of how we tell stories about love. And perhaps that – the tale of the controversial, outspoken, era-defining poets like Sappho, who stood up for what they believed in and whose passions were inscribed into words that changed the very way we talk about love – is the oldest love story of them all.

AMYTIS AND NEBUCHADNEZZAR

She missed the mountains of her home, so he made her a garden.

Not just any garden, though. This was a paradise of rare blooms carried hundreds of miles on a seemingly impossible journey through glacial passes and rocky deserts, across lands which had been at war for a millennium and more. This was an unthinkable feat of engineering that planted trees on terraces that towered to the sky, till they seemed to conquer gravity itself. This was a garden that would become a legend.

He was Nebuchadnezzar, the king of ancient Babylon, fabled crusher of nations and one of the most powerful rulers his kingdom had ever seen. She was Amytis, princess of Media, the fantastical eastern land of high-bred horses and occult magic, and his ally in war.

Together, they created one of the Wonders of the World.

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon: a garden that grew out of a love story. The gardens are the most enigmatic of the Seven Wonders and the only one never to have been found, even though archaeologists, equipped with trowels and the cryptic clues of ancient texts, have searched for them for millennia.

These gardens – built over two and a half thousand years ago in the early sixth century BCE – were famed across the ancient world as the pinnacle of luxury and a marvel of engineering. They were a phenomenal architectural and scientific achievement that was testament to the extraordinary, millenia-old civilisation of the Babylonians – the people who lived in the fertile, field-dotted landscape of Mesopotamia (between the Tigris and Euphrates in modern-day Iraq). This was a culture that had produced the oldest works of literature ever to be written, that had advanced complex mathematics and astronomy thousands of years before the invention of calculators and telescopes, and constructed some of the largest cities in the world.

With seven-metre-thick walls built up in tiers like a theatre, the garden reached as high as the battlements of the city and carried the weight of hundreds of trees on every level. Gigantic machines lifted water from the Euphrates river to the topmost gallery, from where it filtered down level by level, watering the entire structure in an ingenious feat of engineering. Hundreds of years after Nebuchadnezzar had died, Greek, Roman and Jewish historians were still marvelling at the spectacle. Diodorus of Sicily, a Greek chronicler of the first century BCE, could hardly believe the painstaking lengths to which Nebuchadnezzar had gone to replicate the greenery of his wife Amytis' mountainous home. This was not simply a garden of remarkable beauty: this was a mechanical marvel, a feat of architectural brilliance and a botanist's dream all rolled into one.

And yet, in spite of all this grandeur, there is something inescapably intimate and romantic to the story behind the Gardens that sets this Wonder of the World apart. Amytis and Nebuchadnezzar were not, at first, a love match: their marriage was a political one dreamt up by their fathers, Nabopolassar, king of the Babylonians, and Cyaxares, leader of the Medes. Both of them military generals and shrewd tactical strategists, they planned to broker a lasting tie between two nations – an alliance that would take down the Assyrian Empire, Babylon's long-standing rival and the largest empire in the world.

To reach her new husband in Babylon, Amytis would have had to travel hundreds of miles from her home in the lush Zagros Mountains in Media, where oak forests and meadows unfurled across the hills. Followed by a train of carts filled with her dowry (the price of her marriage to Nebuchadnezzar) and accompanied by a royal guard and retinue, she would have joined what was known as the Great Khorasan Road: a mighty highway stretching between east and west that had witnessed the comings and goings of travellers for thousands of years. Traders and caravans filled to the brim with lapis lazuli trundled from the alluvial plains of the Indus Valley into the barren wilds of the Iranian plateau, through the forested passes of the Zagros Mountains, before heading down into the sweating, overcrowded cities of the Mesopotamian plain. As she entered the flatlands of Babylon, the carts swaying behind her and the sun baking cracks into the mud of the Euphrates' floodplain, Amytis must have wondered whether her father's lust for the empire of the Assyrians was really worth the effort.

Yet, sure enough, as Nabopolassar and Cyaxares had hoped, the alliance blossomed. In 612 BCE Nineveh, the capital of Assyria and the largest city in the world, fell to the joint forces of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonians and Amytis' Medes. Together, they had brought down the greatest empire on Earth, bringing Babylon back onto the world stage as a global power to be reckoned with. It was probably not long after that Nebuchadnezzar – the newly crowned king of Babylon, with coffers bursting with gold from the Assyrian treasuries, his status as crusher of nations and sacker of cities publicly confirmed – decided to construct the extravagant Hanging Gardens for Amytis.

In spite of the glaring fame and bombast they attracted in later years, the Gardens were a quiet symbol of love: a gift from a husband for his wife who simply missed her home. This was about more than the spectacle of reconstructing the mountains of the Zagros on the Mesopotamian flatlands, or a prize-winning exhibition of plants from across Nebuchadnezzar's new empire. It was the coming together of two people – a princess of the mountains and a king of the plains. It was a union of two landscapes, and the dazzling leap of the imagination that brought the two together. It was a gift of a love, celebrated against the backdrop of the rise and fall of empires. A love that, like the Gardens it inspired, flowered once, but would be spoken of for thousands of years.

THE SACRED BAND OF THEBES

With a muffled thud, the last body hit the dry soil. The Theban gravedigger stood back, wiping his forehead, damp in the blazing heat of summer. Trying not to breathe in the smell of sweat, and mud, and sweet rotting flesh. Trying to block out the sound of the flies, with their incessant greedy humming, and the hopeful whining of the crows.

He cast an expert's eye over the rows of bodies laid out before him. A job well done, for the kind of job it was. They were laid out in the formation of battle, soldiers lined up side by side, as they had been in the final, terrible war that had taken them down. All three hundred of them. Young men who had barely started shaving, some of them; others, their skin latticed with silver scars, their hair threaded with grey, some with children of their own. Hard to look at, even for a professional.

His spade speared the ground, scattering the first heap of dirt over the bodies, hiding them from view. And a wry thought came to him, as wry thoughts do when you're digging graves.

No one, in years to come, would believe that this was in fact a lovers' tomb.

This was the final resting place of the Sacred Band of Thebes: one of the most remarkable and most loyal armies that had ever lived. A bold experiment in an age torn apart by unending wars and broken alliances, who had died fighting for the freedom of the Greeks. An army, not just of soldiers, but of a hundred and fifty male lovers.

Bound together by fierce loyalty to each other, this crack team of warriors was founded in Thebes in 379 BCE by an enterprising visionary by the name of Pammenes. It began as a resistance corps against the looming military power of Sparta (renowned the world over for its rigorously-trained soldiers) across the mainland to the south. These were shadowy, quarrelsome years, splattering blood across the pages of history, and well suited to the birth of a new kind of army.

In 404 BCE, Sparta had won a triumphant victory after a virulent thirty-year war against Athens, and finally brought the golden Athenian empire (home of the Parthenon, birthplace of democracy, stamping-ground of Socrates) to its knees.

The Athens-shaped power vacuum, and with it, the promise of more land, military power and wealth, was simply too tempting a prize to be left out in the open for long. The other Greek city-states and Athens' old enemies were itching to step in to fill the gap. The main contenders: Sparta, ruthless city of kings and cold-blooded fighters; and Thebes, legendary northern birthplace of Hercules, whose gargantuan warrior founders were said to have sprung from dragons' teeth.

The years following Athens' fall became marked by a dizzying kaleidoscope of different alliances and endless wars, as the tides of power washed back and forth across Greece. Over the course of five decades, from 379 BCE until their brutal slaughter in 338 BCE, the Sacred Band led Thebes in an unprecedented rise to prominence on the Greek political and military stage to become one of the most fearsome fighting forces in the world. They would fight impossible battles against forces that vastly outnumbered their own, and win against all the odds. They would invent new fighting tactics that would become the stock-in-trade of military handbooks. The young Philip II of Macedon – later father of Alexander the Great – would learn the art of warcraft at Pammenes' table on a visit to Thebes, and take it back to the hill-country of Macedon to teach his son how to conquer the world.

· THE SACRED BAND OF THEBES ·

But what was truly unique about the Sacred Band was not their fighting prowess, remarkable as it was. It was the fact that they were all lovers. Love between men was not, in itself, an unusual thing in ancient Greece. Older men would commonly, and openly, take younger male lovers in cities across the Greek world (Greek vases are splattered with images testifying to the custom). But the expectation was always that the younger partner, after a dalliance with their older paramour (who also afforded them a bit of education, financial sponsorship and an introduction to society), would move on, find a woman to marry and settle down.

In Thebes, things were different. Male couples there seem to have taken lifelong vows of love, making their pledges at the nearby grave of the legendary Hercules' (male) lover. They appear to have lived together in something like marriage –'bound together', as one ancient historian puts it, with a word commonly used for married life. There were even instances where men were buried together. Male love, in Thebes, formed the shape of many a man's life – from the early vows of youth to a shared home and, in the end, a grave.

The innovation of the Sacred Band was to harness the passionate, fiercely steadfast love between men that Thebes so openly embraced, and use it as an asset both to protect – and expand – their city. It was a unique experiment in mobilising the power of love, amplifying the passion of two individuals and catapulting it into the public arena of battle. Plato, the famous Athenian philosopher of the same period, who had, no doubt, heard tell of the illustrious Band, explains the logic: "An army of lovers, fighting side by side," he writes, "would be totally invincible: a man in love would rather die than be seen by his lover deserting his post or throwing down his weapons, and – if his lover was in danger – even the most cowardly soldier would become the bravest man alive." Plato seems to have got it right. Over forty years of marching out to war, shoulder to shoulder with the men they loved, the Sacred Band went undefeated – as if the sweeping conviction of their love simply couldn't be matched.

So it was that, in August 338 BCE, a hundred and fifty pairs of lovers clad in armour advanced into one of the most decisive battles in history. On one side, Thebes and Athens, the two great Greek superpowers, along with their Greek compatriots; on the other, Macedon, eyes fixed firmly on expansion, spearheaded by an ambitious Philip (once a student of the Sacred Band, and now their enemy) and his even more ambitious son, Alexander. As morning broke across Chaeronea, an undistinguished plain in the valley not far from Thebes, thirty-five thousand Macedonians tramped into position, against just as many troops gathered from all over Greece – the largest Greek force in history. Among them, a small contingent but a fierce ally: the Sacred

Band of Thebes. The soldiers took a moment: one last look into their lovers' eyes. One final vow, to stand by each other's side, always. Then, on the trumpet call, they marched out together for the last time.

Two thousand years of winds had blown dirt across the plain of Chaeronea. The tomb that stood where Thebes' legendary warriors had fallen, cut down by the troops of Macedon, was lost beneath centuries of dust. And then, on a cloudless June day in 1818, a horse, riding the dirt track that crossed the wide open field, stumbled on a stone jutting from the road. The horse's rider, a young English architect and enthusiast of antiquity named George Ledwell Taylor, leapt to the ground, feverish with excitement. In his trembling hands, he held an ancient Greek travel guide, written by Pausanias in the second century CE – the equivalent of a tourist's cheat sheet to the greatest monuments of ancient Greece:

The Lion of Chaeronea. As you approach the city, you can see the mass grave of the Thebans who died in the battle against Philip. There is no inscription, just a monument of a lion, to represent the men's courage.

Taylor had struck, not exactly gold, but just what he was looking for. It was the find of a lifetime. He and a couple of friends and locals set frantically to work, digging at the block of stone with their riding crops, scrabbling away at the earth. What emerged was not only the colossal stone lion, six feet high, that had topped the Thebans' tomb, but an extraordinary mass burial: almost three hundred men laid in battle formation. Anyone who had read even a little Greek history would immediately connect the dots. Here, clearly, was the grave of the Sacred Band of Thebes.

But this find – astonishing as it was – had one more breathtaking secret to reveal. A nod, perhaps, to the extraordinary love that had bound the Sacred Band together, and the way they died, side by side, for the love of their city and each other. For whoever dug the grave had introduced a detail not found anywhere else, and not even known to those who recorded the ancient texts.

Several of the couples were buried holding hands.

ZHUO WENJUN AND SIMA XIANGRU

It was the lute's haunting notes, floating like a swallow's song above the chatter of the guests, that made her open her bedroom door. A glint of light from the bronze lamps, touching her outstretched fingers like a forbidden kiss. The heady scent of her father's rice wine mingling with the ripe aroma of dumplings. And there, surrounded by men in the inner hall, the lute propped on his knees – the famous poet, Sima Xiangru.

Zhuo Wenjun was peeping.

It was around 140 BCE. For just under a hundred years, China – previously a fractious bunch of warring states – had been united by the First Emperor in a superpower empire, safeguarded by the Great Wall. The current dynasty, the Han, had built on their predecessor's achievements: extending their lands in desert wars in the north, forging west to trade silk (the hazy beginnings of the Silk Road) and swaggering about with other great imperial powers (among others, the Romans), pioneering educational reform, nurturing scholarship and literature.

For a man like Sima Xiangru – book-loving, idealistic, yet not without an element of practical calculation to him – it had seemed a place where a poet could find a way to make his mark. And, sure

enough, at the court of the emperor's younger brother, Sima made a name for himself as a polished master poet with the literary chops to take Chinese poetry to new heights. When his patron died and Sima moved back to his childhood home in the city of Chengdu, then, it was natural that the dinner-party invites flooded in from wealthy magnates, keen to curry favour with the local celebrity. This included Zhuo Wenjun's father, Zhuo Wangsun, an iron manufacturer with particularly deep pockets and a hankering for social approval. The party he threw for Sima featured hundreds of guests, served by nearly a thousand servants and enslaved people; even the regional town official was invited. This was more than a party: it was a celebrity appearance crossed with a networking event, a kind of local red carpet bash. No wonder Wenjun's curiosity was piqued.

Wenjun was just seventeen, barely out of childhood – but, in the patriarchal, Confucian-inspired world of ancient China, that barely mattered. As a woman, she was her father's property, and a major playing piece in the game of social connections at that. She had already been married once, and widowed – to whom, we do not know, but he was probably both rich and well-connected. Wenjun's opinion on the subject would have mattered little, if at all. So by the time Sima arrived in Chengdu, hopping down from his carriage with his lute case, bringing with him the whiff of the refinement of the court and the quixotic nonchalance of a poet, Wenjun had already had her life's path dictated for her once. She had already bowed her head at the wedding ceremony, dressed in a blood-red robe, and kowtowed to her husband. She had already married to suit her father, and seen how that had turned out.

Now, she was ready to choose for herself.

So it was that, the next morning, as the servants were still clearing away the debris of the night before and drunken guests meandered home through the gardens, Chengdu was rocked by a sensational scandal: the rich magnate's daughter had run off with the poet.

Things quickly went from bad to worse. Sima had no family wealth of his own (and poetry never made anyone rich), while Wenjun, cut off by her enraged father, had forfeited any kind of dowry. Unable to make a living for themselves, they were forced to open a wine shop. Even the most open-minded aristocrat would have shuddered in blue-blooded horror at the news. Wenjun – who had once spent her days weaving beautiful silks and sipping tea behind bamboo screens – waited

· ZHUO WENJUN AND SIMA XIANGRU ·

behind the counter like a common merchant's wife; Sima, wearing only a workman's loincloth, washed the winejars in the marketplace's public well. A far cry indeed from the celebrated poet who had quaffed from gilded cups and the sheltered girl who had peered from the women's quarters to sniff at her father's finest wine.

Zhuo Wangsun was incandescent with rage. The shame of the muttered rumours, and his daughter's betrayal, was simply too much for a man who had invested so much in keeping up appearances. He shut himself away in the mansion which Wenjun had chosen to leave behind, the gates barred where once they had been open to over a hundred guests.

And yet, perhaps Wenjun had been cannier than the rumour-mongers gave her credit when she chose a local shop for her and Sima's exile. Her father's pride and shame at his daughter's scandalous station seems to have won out over his anger – as Wenjun had probably calculated it would. She and Sima were soon rescued from poverty and installed, with the luxury proper for the daughter of a wealthy and powerful man, in a generous residence nearby, complete with a hundred servants and no less than a million in cash. The lovers – the debonair poet and the enterprising girl – went on to live a life filled with love, comfort and prosperity. And with Wenjun's father's blessing, Sima's star began to rise again in court as the favourite of the new emperor: a happily ever after indeed.

Perhaps Wenjun had chosen right, after all.

MARK ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

A flash on the horizon, gleaming in the heat like an apparition. The flicker of a sail. Then a whisper of a drumbeat, and the splash of oars. Chanting. Incense – rich, cloying, exotic – floating on the wind. A glint of gold.

The crowd pushed harder, elbows into shoulders, determined to see.

The day was hot and humid, the air hard to breathe, the sun flaring in the sky. The year: 41 BCE. Three years after Julius Caesar, dictator, descendant of the gods (so he said) and would-be king of Rome, had been brutally murdered in the Senate House. Forty-one years before the birth of Christ, another man who claimed – in a very different way – to be descended from a god. This was a world that was spawning deities and brewing change like a storm. Not that the people crowding along the harbour in Tarsus, baking in the heat of the Syrian coast, either knew or cared.

They were waiting for a goddess to arrive.

And here she was, her ship gliding closer like a deity floating on the ocean foam. Sails of rich purple. Oars of silver. Deck roofed in gold. And above it all, reclining on a couch like Aphrodite, in diaphanous robes

wafted by attendants dressed as cupids and sea-nymphs: Cleopatra. Ruler of Egypt. Goddess of the Nile. Queen of one of the wealthiest countries in the world. Beautiful, certainly, at just twenty eight, but more than anything, utterly, alluringly certain of her star-quality charisma. As one writer put it, "her sex appeal, together with her powers of persuasion and her ability to charm all around her, made her simply, irresistibly desirable." This was who had come to call on Mark Antony, one of the most powerful men in Rome (and so, at that time, the world). Antony was a soldier, a devotee of the wine-god Dionysus, a playboy extraordinaire – a man, in otherwords, who lived life in vivid technicolour.

If anyone was going to make Rome's fun-loving general pay attention, it was going to be the young queen sailing towards him dressed in gold.

But there was more to this than just sex appeal. For Antony, vying to hold onto his position of power amidst the remains of the crumbling Roman Republic, Cleopatra meant Egypt, and Egypt meant two things: grain and gold. Both were essential to to fund (and feed) his battle for world domination. For Cleopatra, Antony meant Rome's backing for her precarious hold on power back home, following a decade of civil war, during which the young queen had gone into exile and returned with an army to take the throne from her brother. No meeting could be more important for either of them. It was a moment well worth a bit of theatre, not to mention a spot of role play.

The mass of spectators who had come out to watch were instantly swept into the drama of it all. "And the cry went up," the historian Plutarch tells us, "that Aphrodite had come to feast with Dionysus." Antony was enthralled by it all (as, no doubt, Cleopatra had intended he would be). He promptly joined the feast and took Cleopatra to bed, right on cue.

The young queen knew that this was a meeting on which all her hopes and ambitions rested, and, as such, it was spectacularly well planned. The divine role-play was expertly designed to catch Antony's interest – who, Cleopatra must have known, had already shown a fondness in the past for dressing up as Dionysus. Above all, she chose to make her entrance by ship, to show off her huge fleet of expensive and highly lavish pleasure-boats. These magnificent ships would cruise down the Nile, shaded by the timeworn, sand-blasted monuments of the ancient pharaohs, before gliding into Alexandria's harbour, a majestic double port presided over by the gigantic Pharos lighthouse, one of the Wonders of the World.

This great lighthouse, a hundred metres high, was the tallest structure ever built by the Greeks and it was a global tourist attraction. The lighthouse blinked out to sea, a beacon of safety to merchant vessels from across the world making the treacherous crossing into the Nile Delta. Cleopatra had grown up in the grand palace in Alexandria watching the lantern flash over the water. She must have thought that – like the sailors who had guided their ships to safety by the lighthouse – she, too, could not fail to steer her vessel straight to get what she wanted.

But the course of true love never did run smooth (as Shakespeare – another fan of Antony and Cleopatra's – would later put it). Cleopatra might have begun the affair fully in control of her craft – wafting into Tarsus on her glamorous boat, even adopting the pose of Aphrodite, as if she could choose for herself exactly who she fell in love with (and, more importantly, who fell in love with her). But by the end, both Cleopatra and Antony were trapped in the wreckage of a love affair that would bring down with it the entirety of the Roman Republic.

Rome, in the year 41 BCE when Cleopatra was cruising upriver to meet Antony, was the greatest power in the world. Its massive empire stretched from Spain in the west all the way to Syria in the east, covering thousands of miles and consuming the crumbs of the carved-up empire of Alexander the Great. Yet there were cracks in the great Roman edifice: its constitution, while suited to an archaic city-state of mud-huts and local farmers, was ill-equipped to cope with the vast armies and bureaucracies of its ever-expanding empire, and it was groaning under the burden. The past century had seen a succession of strong men emerging, one after another, in a series of bloody power grabs, of which Caesar's dictatorship had been merely the latest instalment.

By the late first century BCE, power was hanging in a precarious balancing act between two major players, each of whom claimed to have Rome's best interests at heart: Octavian, Caesar's heir and adopted son, and Mark Antony, his former general. Meanwhile, Egypt hobbled along in the shadow of its pharaonic golden days, barely clinging to its independence and relying on Rome in all but name. There are signs,

in all this, that both Cleopatra and Antony were trying to use each other for their own political gains. They were both determined to hold on to power, both clawing back a kingdom that was on the brink of extinction. Yet they kept returning to each other again and again, tying their fates to each other against all the odds.

This, then, is the tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra. They both thought that when their love hit the rocks and began to sink, they could let the other go. But they couldn't.

And so they brought the world down with them.

As the meeting at Tarsus had shown from the off, Cleopatra and Antony were cut from the same flamboyant cloth: both lovers of spectacle, both determined to gain power, both unwavering in their commitment to work hard and party harder. (In a telling anecdote, we are told that they founded a drinking club together, called 'The Society for the Utmost Enjoyment of Life'. We don't know what they got up to, but it sounds like riotous fun.) The Egyptian queen accompanied Antony on his campaigns all over the world, barely leaving his side, travelling with him from Syria to Greece to Egypt. From 37 BCE they spent more time together than apart; it seems that the two lovers simply would not, or could not, be parted.

· MARK ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA ·

Over the next seven years, they did what they did best: enjoying extravagant parties. During one particularly lavish banquet, Cleopatra – ever the performer – was said to have wagered that she could consumea feast worth millions, before promptly dissolving one of her pearl earrings in a glass of wine and downing it in one. And, of course, such dazzling performances, spiked with luxury, lust and Cleopatra's trademark wit, could only ever lead to the bedroom. Cleopatra swelled three times with the signs of Antony's favour, bearing him first twins and then a son. In such golden times, their success must have seemed as inevitable as their growing love and need for each other – Aphrodite and Dionysus, queen and king of empires, careering through life in an endless swirl of parties, laughter and light.

Yet all was not so rosy back in Italy. Octavian's propaganda machine had been hard at work during Antony's sojourn abroad, churning out slander against Antony, and – unsurprisingly – it was not good news for the loved-up couple. In the shadows of Antony and Cleopatra's sunny love affair, distrust had been breeding between Octavian and Antony like damp. Given both men's sky-high ambitions, the virtually boundless power up for grabs, and the turbulent, bloody history of the Republic over the last fifty years, the balancing act was realistically never going to hold. Octavian and his crew of enthusiastic Republicans started to level a series of slanderous attacks at Cleopatra. A raging, terrifying, demonic foreign queen, she had entangled Antony in a torrid, exotic, horrifyingly unstatesmanly love affair. (Little wonder that Octavian disapproved: Antony had taken Cleopatra as a mistress while married to his own sister, Octavia.) At one particularly low point for Antony's reputation, so Octavian's cronies put it, he had swaggered into Alexandria dressed (again) as Dionysus, and parcelled out huge swathes of the eastern Roman empire to Cleopatra and their children, like (the Romans back home shuddered in horror) some foreign king founding his barbaric dynasty.

By 31 BCE, things had come to a head. Octavian – delivering Rome, so he later said, from the frightful fate of being ruled by a cross-dressing idiot and a barbarous, deranged queen – sent the joint naval fleets of Antony and Cleopatra skittering into a swift and embarrassed retreat at the Battle of Actium on the western coast of Greece. The fate of Rome looked to be decided.

It was apparent by this point that Antony's association with Cleopatra was doing him nothing but harm. Antony's good name had taken a battering for his intoxication with Cleopatra – something which the morally uptight Romans with their fear of the luxuries of the east simply could not stomach. Cleopatra's coffers had been all but emptied for Antony in the war against Octavian. Yet, like a knot that tightens the harder it is pulled, after ten years of binding their cause together so inextricably, the two refused to be parted.

Love that had matured from superficial spectacle into a real and pressing need, and the knowledge that their claims to power were nothing without the other, bound them deeply, irrevocably to each other. They fled, together, back to the shining city of Alexandria beneath the beam of the Pharos lighthouse, to take part in one last feast, one last revel in 'the utmost enjoyment of life' – to think back to that first summer day when Cleopatra had welcomed Antony as an immortal goddess, and it had seemed there was all to play for.

The next day, determined to defend his tattered honour, Antony went once again into battle. With the predictability of a tragedy, his forces immediately defected to the other side. With barely any bloodshed, the battle was lost, and the fight for Rome decided. Back in the city, informed of Antony's defeat, after more than a decade spent fettering her country to his cause, Cleopatra must have realised the game was – at last – up. Without a word, she retreated to the tomb she had prepared for herself, and, with the utter composure of a consummate actor and drama queen, ordered a message to be taken to Antony: she had killed herself.

Perhaps she meant it to be a cryptic code to her lover; perhaps she thought he would understand she wanted to tell him she was hiding in her tomb. (Cleopatra had always been cleverer than Antony.) Perhaps – well aware that they would both end up dead in any case – she simply liked the drama. In any case, Antony – continuing, as he had always done, ever since their first meeting at Tarsus, to participate in Cleopatra's fantasies – took her at her word. Determined to see his lover again in the afterlife, he attempted to commit suicide, but botched the job. Half-conscious and barely able to stand, he was carried to Cleopatra, who had heard the screams of his attendants and, sobbing and calling out to him, ordered him to be brought to her. He was lifted up into her tomb, where, smeared with blood, he died in her arms. It was not long before Cleopatra joined him, smuggling an asp into her prison hidden in a fruit-basket and succumbing to a poisoned bite. She died laid out on a golden couch, her diadem still perched on her head: a queen with an eye for spectacle to the very last, making her last voyage to meet Antony again.

The lovers were buried together, on the orders of Octavian, newly proclaimed Emperor Augustus of Rome, in Cleopatra's tomb. And beyond the window, the Pharos lighthouse blinked blithely on, sending out its Siren call.

THE LOVERS OF POMPEII

Pitch black night. The air stinking of sulphur and smoke. Dogs howling on the streets. Bullets of ash hailing from the sky, shearing bare skin, clattering off roof tiles. People shoving and panicking in the darkness, pressing towards the city gates. And then those who had already climbed the battlements, almost on the road that led out to the plain, stopped dead in their tracks.

Beneath the gigantic cloud belching out of the mountain in the distance, the slopes had begun to glow with an eery orange light.

Who would you run to if the world was ending?

It was the early hours of 25th October, 79 CE, in the Roman city of Pompeii. Two men emerged from the wine-cellar where they had sheltered from the storm, huddled against the stacked amphoras through the night, listening in silence to the hail of pumice. But the rock fall had begun to lighten its drumbeat against the roof, and it looked like dawn was coming. It seemed a good time to make a bid for safety.

Ash coated the pillows they had fastened over their heads as they crossed the courtyard garden towards the doors. The night was hot and close, and made their nostrils burn. The lamplight flared on a few lines of graffiti scratched into the wall, by a loved-up couple, perhaps, in earlier days: "if you want to stop falling in love, just stop the wind from blowing and make the rivers dry."

Just ahead of them, the front door was open, and on the street beyond they could see people running. And then, without warning, the world exploded.

A blast of incandescent air hit the outer wall, blowing it outwards. Tiles, bricks and roof-timbers buckled and flew through the air. Stones hurtled like catapults burning with fire. For half a second, time seemed to stand still, as if the night itself had been warped by the heat.

And in that moment, the question found its answer.

The two men fell into each other's arms.

In mid-July 1914, the world was, again, on the brink of apocalypse. Europe's disintegrating imperial powers were clashing like tectonic plates. War was simmering beneath the surface.

Vittorio Spinazzola, on the other hand, was at work.

Spinazzola was the director of the archaeological site of Pompeii, the ancient city that had been buried – and, luckily for Spinazzola and for us, nearly perfectly preserved – by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE. In the summer of 1914, under the sweltering heat of the Italian sun, Spinazzola and his team must have been increasingly aware that time was closing in on them. Franz Ferdinand of Austria had been assassinated mere weeks before. Austria-Hungary was marshalling its soldiers, and the wireless was blaring news across Pompeii of impending war.

Spinazzola, however, with the doggedness of a scholar, refused to be deterred. His current project was the House of the Cryptoporticus – a high-end villa, one of the largest in Pompeii, complete with wine cellar and luxury bath complex. The team were busy clearing the metres-high build-up of volcanic sediment in the garden to the back of the house. And then, as the month wore on and the heat intensified, they made a most extraordinary discovery: 'a Pompeiian drama', as Spinazzola scrawled in his excavation reports. They had uncovered two bodies.

The victims of Vesuvius were already well known. Indeed, it was Spinazzola's predecessor, Giuseppe Fiorelli, who had first worked out how to bring the bodies they discovered back to (almost) gut-wrenching life. After the boiling surge of volcanic gas hit Pompeii in the early hours of 25th October, ash had continued to fall, several metres deep. The dead were gradually surrounded by feathery rock. Over the years, as the pumice hardened, a cavity was left that preserved every detail like a footprint in sand: belt-buckles, fingernails, iron-studded shoes. Centuries later, in the late 1800s, Fiorelli pioneered the technique of pouring plaster into the hollows to make a mould of the last moments of

Vesuvius' dead – clawing their way out of the ash-drift, clutching their worldly possessions, or, as in the horrifying case of one enslaved person, trying to free herself from the manacles that she couldn't escape.

But the two bodies Spinazzola had found were something else entirely. Rather than writhing against their fate or scrabbling their way to freedom, these two were wrapped in a poignant, almost calm, embrace. One of the figures rests his head on the other's chest, as if seeking the protection of his arms. From the moment they were discovered, the pair became a symbol of both the horror, and the enduring pathos, of Pompeii. "They give us," wrote Spinazzola, "a vivid image of their end, in the extreme tenderness of their pose."

Looking down at the fresh plaster as it emerged – revealing the love and the small comfort of the instinctive touch between two humans facing the end of their world – Spinazzola must have thought that it is not just the disasters of history that repeat themselves.

And that might have given him at least a little bit of hope for what was coming.

HADRIAN AND ANTINOUS

It was late October in 130 CE and a body was floating on the murky waters of the Nile. The midday sun, sharp as a mirror, marked out the young man, his curling hair soaked in the river. Face-down and drifting on the current. Crowds of farmers and fishermen hustled on the overheated muddy banks of the town of Herwer, swarming to see the Nile's latest victim, squinting as the boatmen hauled him to land in their nets. Whispers began to fly among the press of people as, backs straining, stinking of sweat, they heaved him onto the silt banks. Undeniably beautiful, even in death: sensuous lips, tumbling hair, clothes that reeked of luxury. The crowd began to heave and surge as the true extent of the scandal made itself known, and the air seemed to shimmer in a heat-haze with the shock.

This was Antinous, lover of the emperor Hadrian.

And he was dead.

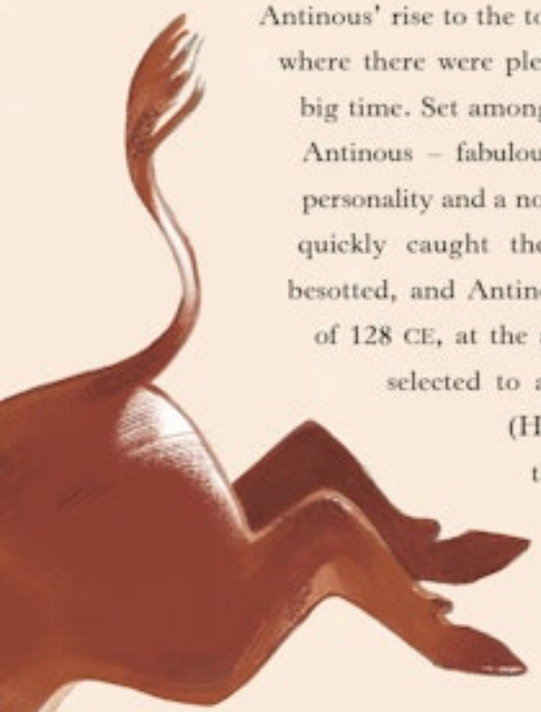
Rumours as to how it had happened swirled faster than the flies buzzing around the cattle beyond the riverbanks. Was it suicide? A tragic accident? Murder? Or, they whispered, was it even a kind of bizarre ritual or a human sacrifice, performed by the emperor himself? To the people of Herwer, who suddenly found themselves splashed across the front page of history, anything must have seemed possible.

But this was a death that was not just about the tantalising scandal of the whodunnit. It would set off a chain of events that would turn a mortal into a god, kick off a cult that would rival Christianity itself and transform the entire world into a memorial for one man's passion.

And it all began when an emperor fell in love.

Their paths first crossed seven years earlier, when Hadrian – ruler of the Roman world and self-proclaimed prince of peace – took a summer jaunt across the Roman province of Bithynia, in northern Turkey, where Antinous had his home. The emperor, busy with his day job, probably did not spot Antinous among the crowds of adoring subjects and eager petitioners. But one of his retainers did – and, no doubt, with an eye to the emperor's tastes, spotted a talent in the making in the beautiful, luscious-locked young man. Antinous was duly offered a dream career: admission to the exclusive imperial retinue along with a tuition package in the emperor's personal academy in Rome. To the boy from a dusty village on the fringes of the Roman empire, this must have seemed an offer too good to be true – a one-way ticket to live among the stars. But, as any good student of mythology would have known, fly too close to the sun and you might get burned.

Antinous' rise to the top was meteoric even by Roman standards, where there were plenty of lucky chancers who made it to the big time. Set among the other staff of the imperial household, Antinous – fabulously good-looking, smart, with a magnetic personality and a notorious talent for Hadrian's beloved hunt – quickly caught the emperor's eye. Hadrian was instantly besotted, and Antinous became his paramour. In the summer of 128 CE, at the age of seventeen, Antinous was personally selected to accompany Hadrian on a tour of Greece (Hadrian was a notorious Greek enthusiast), then into Asia Minor and, finally, Egypt.



· HADRIAN AND ANTINOUS ·

It was clear to everyone that Hadrian was unwilling to let Antinous out of his sight – and together, they took part in many extraordinary experiences on their round-the-world trip. A night-long dip into mystical revelry at the Eleusinian Mysteries of Greece. A brisk boar hunt in the highlands of Asia Minor. A quest – almost like something out of Hadrian's much-thumbed Greek mythology books – to take down a monstrous lion that had been terrorising the people of Libya. On all these adventures, the near-obsession with each other grew steadily.

This was, to Greek eyes at least, nothing new. Ancient Greece (always at the forefront of Hadrian's dreams for Rome) had provided the model for socially approved love matches between men – sometimes platonic, often sexual, always intellectually edifying. In his infatuation with Antinous, Hadrian was doing no less than following in the footsteps of Achilles and Patroclus, Socrates and Alcibiades. (Hadrian, like Socrates, also had a famously poor relationship with his wife.) But this was far more than just a meaningless imitation of the past. Hadrian's obsession with Antinous was something of a perfect storm – bringing to life his vivid political fantasies of a new Greek-style Rome, at the same time as it sated the personal need clearly not met by his wife.

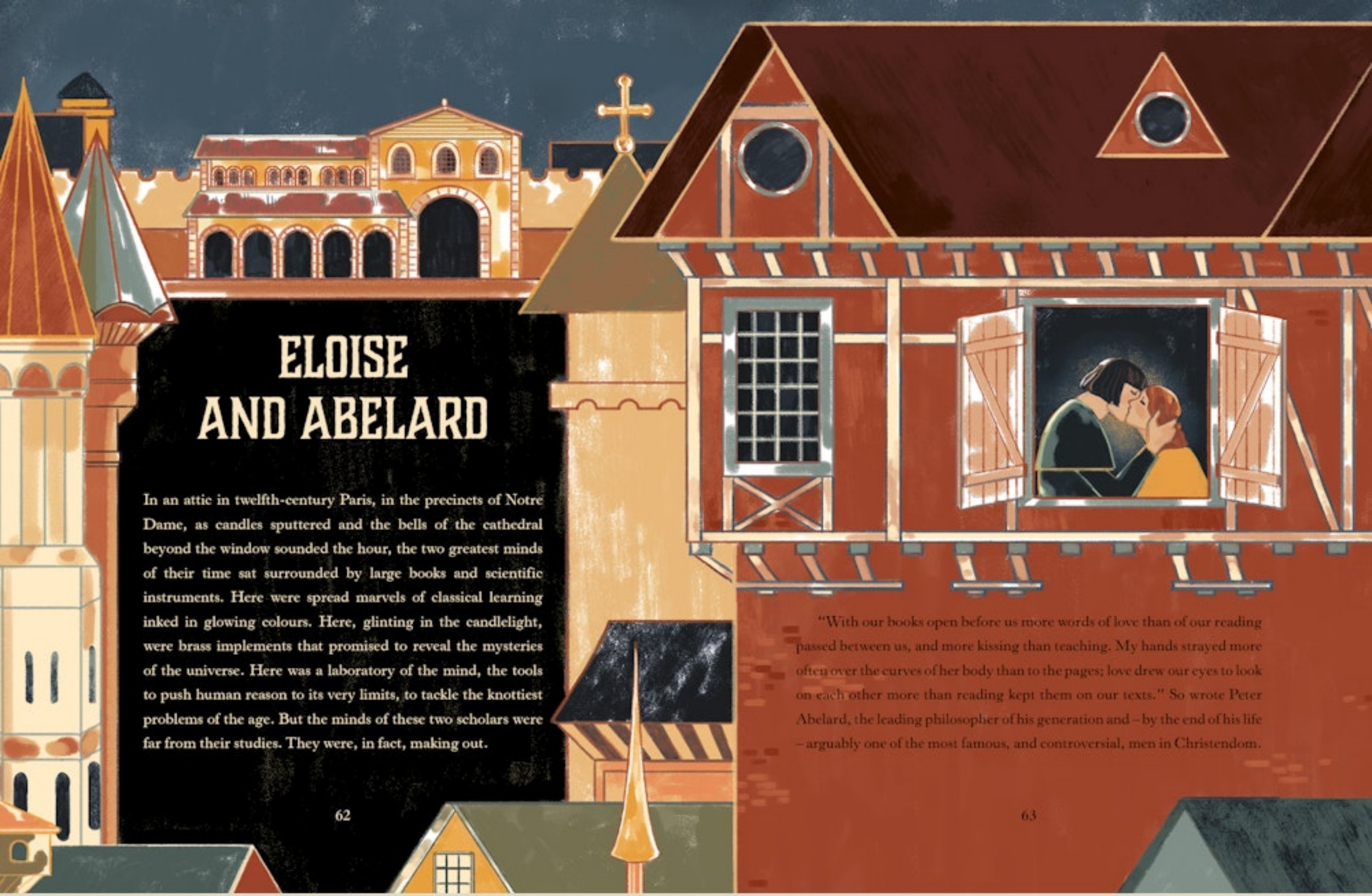
But the days of Hadrian and Antinous' dreamy love affair were numbered. As the sweltering days of summer began to shorten, and the imperial party embarked on a sightseeing cruise up the Nile, Antinous was found dead, drowned in the river that gave Egypt its life.

To this day, no one knows how or why Antinous died. And yet the mysteriousness of his death was, in large part, overshadowed by the sheer extremity of Hadrian's response. Lover he might be, but he was also the ruler of the Roman world, global superpower, conqueror of nations from Britannia in the north (where he was already building his wall) to Jerusalem in the east. While some people might weep with grief or neglect their personal grooming (and Hadrian did both), he also had the power to play out his loss on the world stage. So he did the most dramatic thing an imperial ex-lover could do. He made Antinous a god.

· HADRIAN AND ANTINOUS ·

This was not quite as strange as it seems to us now. The pantheon of Roman gods was filled with former emperors who had been made divine on their deaths. But it was still hugely irregular, not least for the emperor's barely twenty-year-old boyfriend. Statues of Antinous, hair flopping and languidly eyeing up eternity, were commissioned at an unparalleled rate to be shipped in their thousands across the Roman empire. Worshippers flocked to his temples to pray for miracles of healing from the boy who had become a divinity, whose death and resurrection promised eternal salvation (it is easy to see why the Christians had a problem with him). Medallion necklaces, and even collapsible busts for travellers on the go, were churned out with the fervour of mass production. He was the new face of antiquity – the poster-child of Rome. His image became so famous that he is one of the most common subjects in all ancient sculpture: walk into any museum now, nearly two thousand years later, and you will probably see Antinous.

And so the young man from Bithynia found immortality. Loved by an emperor, mourned by the world, the last god of the ancient world was born through one man's love affair.



ELOISE AND ABELARD

In an attic in twelfth-century Paris, in the precincts of Notre Dame, as candles sputtered and the bells of the cathedral beyond the window sounded the hour, the two greatest minds of their time sat surrounded by large books and scientific instruments. Here were spread marvels of classical learning inked in glowing colours. Here, glinting in the candlelight, were brass implements that promised to reveal the mysteries of the universe. Here was a laboratory of the mind, the tools to push human reason to its very limits, to tackle the knottiest problems of the age. But the minds of these two scholars were far from their studies. They were, in fact, making out.

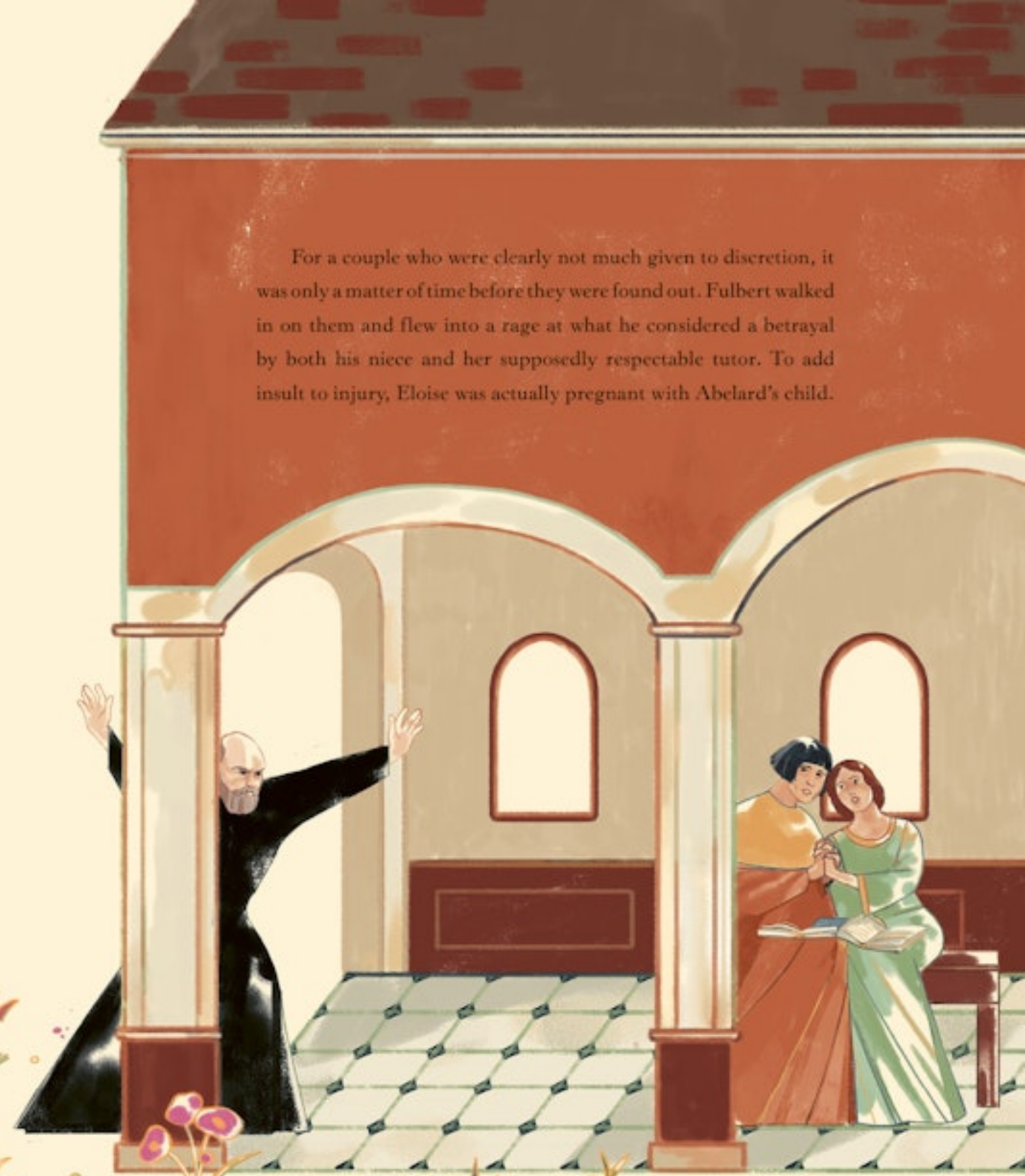
"With our books open before us more words of love than of our reading passed between us, and more kissing than teaching. My hands strayed more often over the curves of her body than to the pages; love drew our eyes to look on each other more than reading kept them on our texts." So wrote Peter Abelard, the leading philosopher of his generation and – by the end of his life – arguably one of the most famous, and controversial, men in Christendom.

It all started in 1115, when Abelard, newly appointed master of the prestigious School of Notre Dame, was asked by one of the cathedral canons, Fulbert, to give private tutoring to Eloise, his brilliant young niece. The stage for romance seemed to be set, with all the props of a scandalous love affair. He was the good-looking, famously smart and cocksure scholar, who was popular with the ladies and even composed the medieval equivalent of pop songs (Eloise writes, like a typical fan girl, that it was what first attracted her to him). She was the voraciously intelligent student, nothing more nor less than the most brilliant woman of her time, versed in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, cloistered in her uncle's house in the Notre Dame precincts, spending hours a day with her new tutor.

The affair, when it came, was intense and explosive. We get a glimpse into the intimate details of the early months from the near-daily letters the couple wrote to each other – miraculously preserved in an obscure fifteenth-century guide to Latin letter-writing. The letters, which were only rediscovered in 1980, recount – with remarkable frankness – the couple's urgent, all-consuming passion. They long to be together, and can think only of each other, even when they are apart. "You are with me until I fall asleep," writes Abelard, "while I sleep you never leave me and when I wake I see you before even the light of day." They linger on frantic moments of stolen (and forbidden) pleasure in churches. They swear that their love for each other will never change: "it is for me the proof beyond doubt that you will remain in my love for eternity," writes Eloise.

Remember that promise – because it turns out to be true.

For a couple who were clearly not much given to discretion, it was only a matter of time before they were found out. Fulbert walked in on them and flew into a rage at what he considered a betrayal by both his niece and her supposedly respectable tutor. To add insult to injury, Eloise was actually pregnant with Abelard's child.



To Fulbert, nothing could be more shameful – an affair outside wedlock, under his own roof, his beloved niece bulging visibly with the evidence of her trampled virginity.

But Fulbert's anger was about much more than his niece getting knocked up by his lodger. This was a clash of dramatic proportions between two very different attitudes to sex and marriage, that were – at that very moment – fighting it out for the top spot in the moral codes of the day.

On one side of the divide stood the dictates of the Christian church, which railed that women were tempters of men. Just as Eve had enticed Adam to commit the original sin in the Garden of Eden, sex was the hotline to evil. Chastity was the ultimate prize, most of all in the ranks of priests and monks who were meant to remain untainted by earthly pleasures (though the Pope had recently been forced to launch a series of crackdowns to get the Church's virginity back on track). For those outside the priesthood, sex was permitted strictly within the confines of marriage: even then, devout parishioners were instructed to lie still and enjoy it as little as possible.

On the other (and, one has to imagine, far more tempting) side were the dizzyingly romantic stories being offered up by the troubadours. These were wandering minstrels from Provence whose poems had started to redraw the map of what it meant to be in love. The minsterals told tales of the gallant Lancelot tormented by his illicit passion for Queen Guinevere, and Tristan's forbidden love for Isolde – this was courtly love, or *fin' amor* – 'true love'. The concept of *Fin' amor* strained against the Christian dictum that love and sex could only exist within marriage:

here, instead, was a delicious, forbidden passion between an unattainable woman and her tortured lover, a star-crossed meeting of two souls. It was nothing more nor less than the invention of modern romance.

So when Fulbert walked into Eloise's room and found her playing out a real-life troubadour love story with Abelard, it was not simply her deception that rankled. It was the blatant challenge to the authority of the Church, the violation of everything that Fulbert stood for as a canon of the cathedral, the proof of humankind's inevitable descent into sin: a conflict between the generations on a monumental scale.

And so, to Fulbert's mind, there was only one way to rescue the situation. Eloise and Abelard would have to marry.

It was not an altogether foolproof way out of the deadlock, however; and unfortunately, Fulbert proved to be a fool. Abelard's association with the cathedral as Master of the School meant that – with the Church's growing obsession with the celibacy of its workforce – the wedding would have to be kept secret. It was not very long, however, before Fulbert was boasting of the marriage – desperate, no doubt, to demonstrate that he had attended to Eloise's virtue after all. It seems that he could not have made a more dangerous move. Eloise, determined to protect Abelard's reputation at all costs, avidly denied the rumours. Fulbert grew even more enraged. As the situation escalated, rapidly deteriorating into a family brawl played out before a scandalised Paris, Abelard – concerned that Fulbert might resort to violence, and claiming the right of a husband to protect Eloise – decided to take matters into his own hands. He smuggled Eloise away right under Fulbert's nose to a convent, disguised in the habit of a nun.

Fulbert went wild with rage. That much, perhaps, was to be expected: but what he did next went beyond all reckoning. In a bloodcurdling display of vicious, almost feral, cruelty, Fulbert bribed Abelard's servant to gain access to his quarters – and there, as Abelard later miserably put it, "they cut off the parts of my body whereby I had committed the wrong of which they complained." Abelard was near-literally dismembered, and his pride fatally wounded. The whole of Paris seethed with shocked curiosity. The next morning, crowds of gossips and bystanders, keen to witness the public humiliation of France's greatest philosopher, surged before Abelard's doors. What had started as a love affair of extraordinary passion appeared to have ended in a bloody brawl.

The scandalous nature of the case – and the fact that, shockingly, it had happened on church land between two high-ranking church officials – meant that the bishop of Paris himself had to intervene. Abelard and Fulbert were both fired. Abelard was sent to a monastery to devote himself (a little too late) to a life of chastity. Eloise did the same on Abelard's request (it may well be that Abelard felt that if he couldn't have her, then no man should). For twelve years, the pair lived apart: Abelard moving from monastery to monastery; Eloise at a convent called the Paraclete. In all this time, they barely spoke – even though it was, in fact, Abelard who helped Eloise to get her position at the Paraclete. It was as if Abelard and Eloise were acting out the model monk and nun, trying to pretend that the romance that had splashed itself across the medieval equivalent of the tabloids had never happened.

But then, in 1132, Abelard broke the silence. In a gripping exposé (disguised in the form of a letter to a friend, but clearly intended for wider circulation), he revealed the juicy details of exactly what had happened during the momentous events of 1115 to 1117. It was Abelard's claim to fame, his public defence (he was still, after all, France's most famous philosopher), and – above all – an attempt to make sense of the vertiginous events of his life. For Eloise, as she sat in her convent dressed in a nun's habit, reading her own love story must have seemed strange, and rather unreal.

Not one to sit back and let history write itself without her, Eloise penned a response. Her reply kicked off a quite extraordinary correspondence, preserved in eight letters that would almost instantly become famous across the medieval world. At first, Eloise admits she still loves Abelard: "the pleasures of lovers which we shared," she writes, "can scarcely be banished from my thoughts." But with new times come new rules. Abelard, who had embraced his monkish persona with vigorous enthusiasm, reminds her in his response that they have dedicated their ives to God. And so Eloise and Abelard manage something that most ex-lovers don't when the flame of romance burns out. They embark on a remarkable journey to resurrect, from the ashes of their love affair, a deep and spiritual partnership of the mind. In her letters, Eloise suggests a joint project that enshrines their shared Christian commitment and allows them to establish a lasting collaboration: to set up a rule for the nuns in her convent where she has now become Abbess. Abelard accepted the request immediately.

Over the next few years, the letters would fly back and forth between the pair, debating dilemmas of philosophy, outlining the roles of women in the Church, generating a joint body of work that enabled them to find a new way to be together again.

When Abelard died in 1142, he was buried in the crypt of Eloise's convent, the Paraclete; and when she, too, passed away twenty years later, she was laid to rest beside her partner.

In love, just as Eloise had promised all those years ago, some things never change.

FRANCES HOWARD AND ROBERT CARR

As morning broke, a woman left the warmth of her husband's bed in Chiswick, in the fields around London, to scatter feed for the chickens. The air was still, the oak tree on the village green hushed, the only sound the murmuring of the Thames and, in the distance, a couple of lowing cows. All was quiet.

No one watching her would think that, only a few years before, she had been at the heart of one of the English court's most scandalous murder trials – accused of bewitching her husband, seducing the king's favourite and poisoning her enemy. No one would guess that her name had once been upon everyone's lips, for all the wrong reasons. No one would imagine that she had been branded with the very worst titles that gossip could think of for a woman. Wife. Witch. Poisoner. Whore.

But Frances Howard was, above all things, a survivor.

Like any good survivor, Frances had learned early on how to act. It is significant, then, that her story starts with her putting on a part. She enters the history books in 1606, traipsing down the aisle with her head bowed and her hair brushed carefully over her shoulders as a sign of her

virginity, off to marry Robert Devereux, third earl of Essex. The world around her, under a just-crowned King James I, was burgeoning with excitement and opportunity – new lands to be settled (the first English colony of Jamestown, Virginia, was on its way to being founded), new luxuries to be tried (New World tobacco was doing a frenzied trade in smoking houses across England), new dramas to be imagined (Macbeth first trod the boards that same year).

But for Frances, her life was fast becoming an elaborate farce. Like many a high-society marriage at King James' court, with its patrician families all seeking to bind themselves into the knot of power, this was a political union, hatched by the scheming elders of the realm, that took little or no notice of the preferences of its principal actors. Frances, at the tender age of thirteen, was on the verge of becoming the darling of this cosmopolitan, luxury-loving court. Beautiful enough to inspire poets' songs, daring enough in her fashion choices to push trends to their very limits (portraits show her wearing dresses cut so low they barely do the job), she was a dazzling courtier with a connoisseur's eye for beauty. Matching the young Howard girl to Devereux – an unpleasant, violent, smallpox-scarred youth with deep-lidded eyes and a fondness for prostitutes – was like locking a diamond in a box and then throwing it away.

· FRANCES HOWARD AND ROBERT CARR ·

Frances made the misalliance abundantly clear. She refused, openly, to let her new husband into her bed. For Devereux, the knock to his reputation seemed irrecoverable, denied the singular rights of a husband that had been granted by the double authority of God and the king. The influential Howard clan, meanwhile, shuddering at Frances' rebellion, must have panicked that the family's good name was being thrown to the mercy of a pig-headed teenager. But this was about more than just a teenage girl turning up her nose at a less than attractive boy, or having her fancy caught by a more appealing model (though both these factors undoubtedly played their part). This was – for a young woman who, by the nature of her birth, was always slap bang in the centre of the spotlight – a defiant and very public objection to the status quo, in which girls barely out of childhood could be paired off for everyone's benefit but their own. Frances knew what had been denied to her – to every woman sent down the church aisle, trussed up in a lace-ruff collar – and what it was she wanted.

And what she wanted was the chance to fall in love.

The man she had set her sights on was Robert Carr, golden boy of James' court, and an upgrade to unpopular Devereux in every way. Carr was all that Devereux was not: delightfully well-mannered, exquisitely good-looking with his chiselled face and mop of blond hair, and a firm royal favourite after a convenient accident at a jousting tournament. (King James – who was known for his infatuation with young men – had, so it was said, run straight to hold the fainting youth in his arms.)

And so Frances threw high society into uproar by demanding an annulment to her marriage. It is a testament to the force of her character that – against the odds – she got her way. Not that it was an easy victory: she had many enemies who resented her rise to fame. But King James (charmed, no doubt, by Frances' determined pleas) intervened and, in 1613, gave the annulment the full sway of his blessing. Frances was allowed to marry the man she had fallen head-over-heels in love with.

Frances got everything she had ever wanted – a titled husband to appease her family, yes (the king made Carr the Earl of Somerset), but, above all, a love match. The passion between the pair was clear for all to see – and why should they not flaunt their success? They were good-looking, they were in love and they were basking in the king's favour. For a while, Frances seemed to be on top of the world, and her friends were drawn into the aura of her good fortune, and her enemies smouldered with envy.

And then one of her enemies was – apparently – murdered.

His name was Thomas Overbury, courtier, essayist, and Carr's closest friend. Some people muttered that he was much more than a friend – and not without good reason. His dogged opposition to Frances' attempt to get closer to Carr certainly hints at a lover-like jealousy. Overbury bent over backwards to persuade Carr that Frances was "noted for her immodesty"; he even went so far as to petition the king against the annulment of Frances' first marriage. None of it worked. In fact, it only served to turn Carr – who was, by now, deeply in love with Frances – against his one-time friend. Not long afterwards, Overbury was imprisoned in the Tower of London on the rather banal charge of refusing a job offered to him by King James; more likely, the real cause was that he was irritating the king, and everyone else, with his increasingly bad-tempered railing.

So when Overbury died, it was natural, perhaps, that fingers started pointing. It hardly helped that in his prison cell he had received an unusually thoughtful gift: tarts and jellies, sent by Frances herself. Whispers of poison started to circulate among the court. Then, as the rumour machine started to rumble into life, the gossip got wilder. Frances had conspired with a witch and cast spells to make her first husband impotent. She had slept with half the men in court, and lied about her virginity when she married Carr. She had purchased seven different toxins (including gigantic spiders) to kill Overbury. She was part of a widespread and festering conspiracy to poison the most powerful men of the land – including the king's own son.

Clearly, the gossip-mongers of King James' court – who, after all, had seen Shakespeare's Macbeth and were thus well-versed in witchy plots – were penning quite the drama. London was gripped by the sensation of

it all, watching on tenterhooks as the trial began and unravelled a potent brew of poison, sex and witchcraft, apparently breeding in the hotbed of the palace. Charge after charge was brought, the bodies piling up as the accused were sent to their deaths: the witch who was supposed to have abetted Frances; the poison-seller; the keeper of the Tower. Each of these unfortunate cast members went to be hanged with the predictability of a play whose script had already been written.

But here comes the twist in the tale. As the weight of evidence and public animosity swelled against them, and their days appeared nothing short of numbered, Frances and Carr, shockingly, received a royal pardon. While Overbury had died a miserable death in his cell and the gallows had claimed the rest, Frances and her husband walked free. Perhaps it paid to be rich and influential and friends with royalty. Perhaps the king could not resist sparing his one-time favourites. Or perhaps – just perhaps – King James, who had once been so enamoured of Carr himself, recognised true love when he saw it. The public, on the other hand, were hardly satisfied: they wanted a hanging, a bloody end to the tragedy they had been promised. They even chased a carriage down the streets, howling for justice, thinking that Frances was inside.

But Frances was far away. She was with her husband, Robert Carr, the man she loved and for whom she had fought so hard – escaping the clutches of her first marriage, and (possibly, depending on where you land on the question of her guilt) risking everything to remove an opponent of her second. They lived out their days together in peaceful anonymity in a house in Chiswick: an inconsequential village in the countryside around London, known only for its cheese markets. Both died, years later, of natural causes.

Frances had not just survived. She had won.

SHAH JAHAN AND MUMTAZ MAHAL

17th June, 1631. Hot, oppressive, dark, rain spattering off the moonlit banana trees, green parrots peering bright-eyed from under the eaves of the Burhanpur palace. The Indian monsoon draining the night skies dry.

On Earth, the life was bleeding out of Mumtaz Mahal.

Her husband, Shah Jahan – 'King of the World', distant descendent of the legendary Genghis Khan and formidable ruler of the mighty Moghul empire – strode back and forth outside her chamber: powerless, for the first time in his life. To his fevered gaze, the oil lamps seemed to cast ominous shadows like the ghosts of the dead over the tapestries. To one side stood the abandoned chess game they had been playing (so one source tells us) when the queen had first clutched her swollen belly, gasping as pain swept through her. The gold pieces lay scattered, knocked aside as the servants scrambled in their haste to lift Mumtaz to her bedchamber, and Shah Jahan had watched on, shouting orders that no one heard.

And then the doors to the queen's rooms opened – as they had done again and again over the last thirty endless hours as she had screamed through her labour – and he was given the news he had been dreading. His favourite wife, his only queen, Mumtaz Mahal – 'the Chosen One of the Palace' – was dying.

Shah Jahan swept to her side and took her in his arms. She whispered to him to keep their children safe, and gave him a last promise of her love.

And in that moment, the man who controlled the world realised, with the shattering revelation of an earthquake that diverts the oldest rivers and recarves the greatest mountains, that you cannot control love, or when the one you love leaves you. He swore an unbreakable oath to her, then, as the walls became shadows and the earth bent beneath him. He would build a crowning monument in her memory, a Taj Mahal, that would not shift or change with time. People would speak, always, of their love.

The story of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal is one of the most famous love stories of all time. A tale so powerful, so enduring, so sweepingly and almost impossibly romantic, that it would come to be told alongside the great love affairs of fiction. A fairytale ever-after which has stood the test of time as an icon of love the world over, drawing millions of lovers on a near-holy pilgrimage to the great tomb.

It all started when Prince Khurram, son of the great Moghul Emperor Jahangir and the future Shah Jahan, first laid eyes on Arjumand Banu Begum – or Mumtaz Mahal, as she would come to be known. The Royal Meena Bazaar, part of the great Persian New Year festival, was an occasion primed for match-making. Here wives and daughters of the nobles (usually modestly veiled and hidden in the inner sanctum of the harem) were allowed, for a single night, to drop their veils and play dress-up in a whimsical make-believe market fair – for the private viewing of the great emperor and a few of the chosen princes only. Staged in the royal gardens under draped tents with lanterns glittering from the trees like fireflies, the emperor and his relatives moved easily among the women, who teased and bartered over the prices of their wares. So it was, in 1607, that Prince Khurram, the future Shah Jahan, first caught sight of an unveiled Arjumand Banu, granddaughter of one of the royal family's most trusted advisors.

It was love at first sight between the two, so they said. And it was a love that would change history.

At the time, the Moghul empire was about to reach its dazzling zenith. The first Moghul emperor, the fierce warrior-king Babur, had swept down with his forces from the mountains in the north barely a hundred

years before, enticed by the fabulous riches that lay beyond the river Indus. Eager to write himself into the history books, Babur had promptly founded his own dynasty, known as the Moghuls, and ravaged the cities of northern India one by one with a ruthless determination.

By Shah Jahan's time, the Moghuls held sway over a vast territory that stretched far beyond the Indus in the west, east to Bengal, and south to the hot, dusty plains of central India, the Deccan. This was an era of extravagant, almost unimaginable wealth: the imperial treasuries housed enormous diamonds literally worth the world (the famous Koh-i-Noor), while the emperors themselves held court seated on golden thrones heaving with emeralds and carpeted with rubies. Women of the royal harem dripped in jewels, wore exquisite gold-trimmed clothes of inconceivable cost (they changed them several times a day), and doused themselves in perfumes of musk, amber and rosewater. With such vast wealth and resources came towering ambition: to fashion a name for the Moghul emperors that would proclaim their might across the world, writ large in the fabulous facades of their sandstone palaces, the priceless fabrics and spices that heaved across the seas on enterprising merchants' galleys to Europe and beyond, and the peacock colours of their exquisite, jewel-like paintings.

But empire also brought war. Shah Jahan might have fallen instantly, irrevocably in love with the beautiful young Arjumand Banu and married her as soon as the court astrologers (always looking to the heavens to determine the appropriate date) allowed; but the duties of an emperor's son would wait for no man. In 1614 he was sent by his father into the field in command of an imperial army, charged with subduing a rebellion

· SHAH JAHAN AND MUMTAZ MAHAL ·

in Rajasthan. Yet the extraordinary love that had blossomed between this young royal couple meant that the newly titled Mumtaz Mahal would not be parted from her husband. Against all the usual muttered superstitions against bringing women to war, Shah Jahan and a pregnant Mumtaz rode south together, away from the shining palaces of the imperial capital of Agra and south towards the baking heat of Rajasthan.

Over nearly twenty years, the queen would accompany her husband on all his military campaigns. She lodged in the fortress-palace at Burhanpur during his victories in the south as prince-in-waiting, and fled with him (and their children) across the desert as he sparred against his brothers for the throne. And all the while, her belly swelled again and again with the proof of his attentions: of the fourteen children she bore, twelve were conceived and delivered during their travels. When the victorious prince finally emerged from the whirlwind of bloodshed, betrayals and family feuds to be crowned King of the World in 1628, amidst much showering of jewels and beating of drums, it was Mumtaz to whom Shah Jahan granted the unheard-of honour of bearing the Royal Seal. This meant that all documents of state and imperial decrees had to go across her desk; she even had the right to issue her own orders and make her own appointments.

For the traditionally cloistered wives of the imperial palace (and Shah Jahan had at least two other wives, as was customary – though in his case it was purely for political purposes, as his chroniclers make clear), this closeness, this like-mindedness, this intensity of trust between the two was unheard of. "And always," one of the court historians wrote, "that Lady of the Age was the companion, close confidante, associate and intimate friend of that successful ruler, in hardship and comfort, joy and grief, when travelling or in residence… The mutual affection and harmony between them had reached an extent that has never been seen between a husband and wife among the rulers or the ordinary people."

So it was that, when Mumtaz passed from this world – the girl who had won the heart of an ambitious prince, the wife who had stood by his side in years of rebellion and war, the queen who had led his hard-won empire into a burnished golden age – Shah Jahan simply ceased to exist. For eight days he would not eat, weeping copiously, locked in his rooms, refusing to attend to the business of state or public audiences. When he emerged from his week-long vigil, the once-virile emperor had aged suddenly, impossibly, to a frail old man. It was a kind of fairytale transformation, from king to beggar, riches to rags – his eyes cloudy with tears and hidden behind spectacles, his hair threaded with white. His clothes, too, were drained of colour, and for two years the splendour-loving king wore only white to show his grief. Almost immediately, as soon as Mumtaz's body could be moved from Burhanpur to the capital of Agra, Shah Jahan began to work on her mausoleum, with the kind of obsession born of terrible loss.

The Taj Mahal was an undertaking of truly mammoth proportions. It took twenty-one years to bring to completion, and the expenditure was nothing short of breathtaking: it even kickstarted an artificial famine when a massive supply of grain was diverted to Agra to feed its workers. Twenty thousand of the finest artisans – architects, stonecutters, calligraphers – toiled every day in the scorching heat of the Indian sun, drawn from all over the vast Moghul empire to the spot that Shah Jahan had selected, just around the bend of the river Yamuna from his palace at the Red Fort in Agra.

Millions of bricks
were baked in colossal kilns on
the site, and gleaming white marble
was dragged hundreds of miles from Makrana
in Rajasthan to face the tomb and its great white
dome, soaring seventy metres above the ground.

It was, in part,
a testament to the mighty
Moghul emperor's untouchable power –
his ability to fabricate reality, to raise bricks
and stone up to the skies where once there
had been nothing but air.

But this had always been a story about love – and, for Shah Jahan, that was what the Taj had always been: a way to make Mumtaz eternal, to carve her memory in stone, and thus to keep her with him always. So it was that, in the early, quiet hours of the night of 22nd January 1666, Shah Jahan was to be found gazing over the river towards his beloved Taj. The world looked very different from that fateful night when he had paced the chamber at at Mumtaz's bedside, a young emperor newly crowned, a golden king favoured by fortune with everything to win and everything to lose. Now, at seventy-four years of age, ravaged by the wasteland of the years that had followed Mumtaz's death, he was emperor no more, but a captive – thrust from the throne and garrisoned in Agra's Red Fort by his own son, whose lust for power matched only his father's. Prisoner, in all but name.

And he was dying.

The Taj rose before him across the riverbend from his apartments in the Red Fort like a ghost in the night mist, the moonlight striking the precious stones set into its walls and casting them into glittering stars. He had bade the servants bring him onto the balcony, wrapped in fine blankets against the night chill, so he could fix his eyes on the place where Mumtaz lay. Where, soon, he would join her again.

And as dawn broke, blushing the Taj Mahal, a single boat cleaved the waters of the Yamuna. It bumped into the bank, a coffin was drawn from its belly and led silently towards Mumtaz's grave. Here, the King of the World was laid to rest beside the only woman he had ever loved, in the miraculous tomb he had built to protect them against the tides of time.

IGNATIUS SANCHO AND ANNE OSBORNE

17th December 1758, London. Mid-morning, crisp and dusted with smoke, just before Christmas. A young couple clattering over the cobbles towards St. Margaret's Church in Westminster, spires squatting in the Abbey's shadow. The air heavy with the stench of the cattlemarket down the street, the church bells sounding out over the prattling of the poor crowded before the workhouse. A few of them stare as the couple whisk past. Some caps are withdrawn from heads to hide gossiping mouths.

A man born on a slave ship and a woman from the West Indies.

On their way to be married.

Ignatius Sancho and Anne Osborne exchange a look, a clasp of the hand. And then they step forwards, together, into history.

In the mid-eighteenth century, a burgeoning Britain was throwing its imperial weight around the world. Factories across the British north were starting to disgorge smoke into the air in the name of progress. Millions of enslaved African were being trafficked to the Americas in conditions of unimaginable horror, shackled below the deck in the stinking, cramped, disease-ridden holds of the slave ships that were lacing the Atlantic.

In 1729, on one of these ships on the months-long crossing from Guinea to the Spanish West Indies, Ignatius Sancho was born.

Yet Sancho was one of the (relatively) lucky ones. He escaped the atrocities of slavery and was sent by his master into service in England. For nearly twenty-five years, Ignatius worked his way up in the Duke of Montagu's family – encouraged by the Duke, who furthered his voracious appetite for reading.

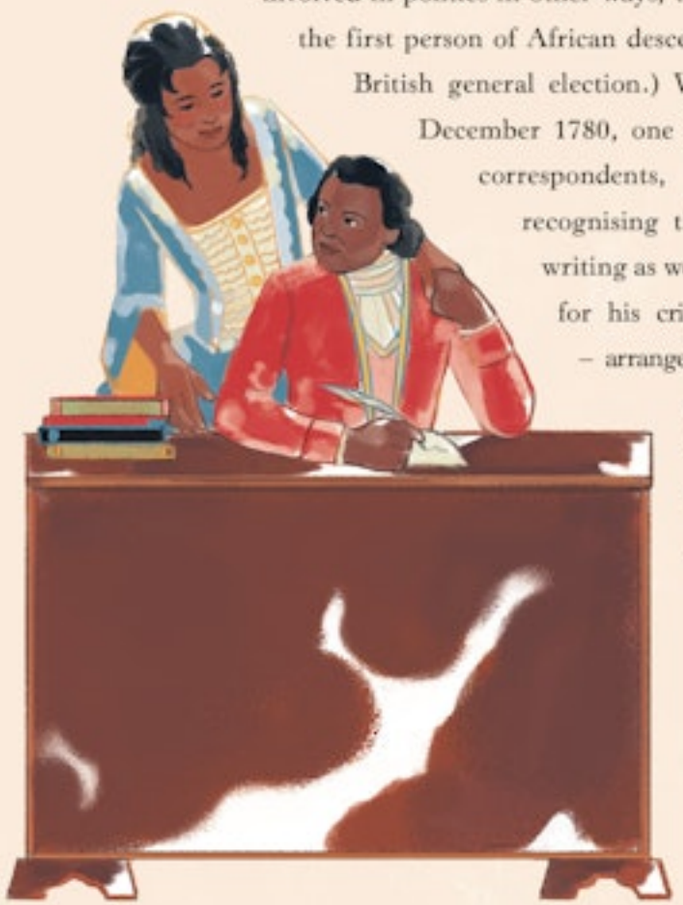
It was here, while still in service, that Ignatius met the love of his life, Anne Osborne. Time spent together would have been a rarity compared to the demands of the Duke. Ignatius later describes how the romance was snatched in those stolen moments available to servants – below stairs, where the flagstones rang to the tap of the valet's shoes. The couple were married in a quiet ceremony at St. Margaret's Church in Westminster in 1758. Their marriage can still be seen in the parish record, scrawled in now-fading ink.

For Ignatius and Anne, this was much more than a signature scribbled on paper. This was a promise of lifelong respect, a refuge from the hostility that swirled around them like coal-smoke. The streets of London – bustling with hackney carriages and aristocratic coaches – were the theatre for a society of unequals that could be bitterly hostile to those it deemed did not belong. The pair were often, as Ignatius records in his letters, "most generously insulted" as they travelled on the stagecoach (the local bus). For them, this was a partnership born of the conviction that, with love, even a world of unequals could be made to change.

And change it did. In late 1773, after years of scraping savings, the couple opened a grocer's shop at 19 Charles Street in London's most up-and-coming district, Mayfair. Their little shop sold day-to-day goods that catered to the rapidly expanding palette of vices available to London's populace: tobacco, sugar, rum and snuff. From here, to the ringing of the shop-door bell, Ignatius let loose his prodigious literary talent, scribbling letters to friends and voicing – to some of the biggest celebrities of the day –

his (and, no doubt, Anne's) impassioned opposition to the slave trade. One particularly important exchange with the novelist Laurence Sterne saw Sancho urging the A-lister to "give one half hour's attention to slavery… That subject, handled in your striking manner, would ease the yoke (perhaps) of many."

That letter (and Sterne's admiring reply) made Sancho famous. It threw him into the circle of many prominent and powerful figures – including the MP Charles James Fox, who eventually succeeded in steering a resolution through Parliament to abolish the slave trade. (Sancho got involved in politics in other ways, too: in 1774, he became the first person of African descent to cast his vote in a British general election.) When he died on 14th December 1780, one of his more influential correspondents, Frances Crewe – recognising the quality of Sancho's writing as well as the public appetite for his critiques of the slave trade – arranged for his letters to be published. The book, *The Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African*, proved to be a runaway success.



· IGNATIUS SANCHO AND ANNE OSBORNE ·

This, then, is the public face of Ignatius Sancho. But there is so much more to Sancho than the political commentary, the fervent calls to action and the witty barbs against Georgian society that make up much of his letters. What makes them unique – and glittering treasure troves of historical detail – are the vignettes of Sancho's family life that are peppered through the correspondence. He paints a picture of family dinners full of laughter in the cramped rooms behind the grocer's shop. His daughters giggle away on the floor as he writes another letter at his desk, and his four-year-old son shouts not to forget their dog, Nutts. In one letter, a friend drops by to visit Sanchos, and the girls romp around the room, laughing madly (Sancho pretends to be irritated, but his fatherly indulgence is clear).

Above all, running through every letter like a refrain, we see his devotion to his wife, Anne – who was, quite clearly, the love of his life. Announcing your love for your wife was rather unusual in eighteenth-century letter-writing (which was, as a rule, more preoccupied with witty self-fashioning, literary high jinx and clever word play). But Ignatius Sancho confidently throws convention out the window. He frequently declares how much he adores Anne – even when writing to his wayward bachelor friends (who could hardly have been expected to sympathise). With the painstaking, almost painterly devotion of a lover, he cannot resist describing the features of her face – her "eyes kindl[ing] with pleasure while she speaks" in the light of day – and, in their small bed behind the grocer's, he conjures the quiet image of Anne "talk[ing] him to sleep on nights".

In March 1779, Ignatius and Anne's relationship was tested once again. Their five-year-old daughter Kitty lay in bed dying and Anne stayed up for nearly 'thirty Nights' beside her. It is at this time – with an insight sharpened by loss of his child – that Sancho's letters really get to the heart of what made his relationship with Anne so strong. At this particularly tragic moment for their family, Anne is not simply the determined, capable mother of his children: she is, when you 'take her for all in all', his wife, and his 'friend'. "To my inexpressable happiness," he laments, "she is my wife & truly best part – without a Single tinge of my defects."

Anne and Ignatius would remain devoted to one another for their entire lives. Through twenty-two years of marriage up to Sancho's early death, they stood by each other's side. Through harrowing experiences of racial discrimination and the turbulent decades of the height of slavery, they cared deeply for one another. Through dinners behind the shop with Nutts the dog skittering at their ankles and their children packed and laughing round the table, and nights spent in silence at their sickbeds, they made a life for their family. As the world struggled to understand them, as hostility flared and celebrity beckoned, they saw in each other – quite simply – who they were.

This is not simply a tale about love in a grocer's shop. Anne Osborne and Ingatius Sancho's story is about the enduring, extraordinary power of true love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Hauser is an award-winning classicist and the author of an acclaimed trilogy of novels retelling the stories of the women of Greek myth, *For the Most Beautiful*, *For the Winner*, and *For the Immortal* (2016–18, Penguin Random House). She read Classics at Cambridge, where she received a double first with distinction and won the Chancellor's Medal for Classical Proficiency. She has a PhD in Classics from Yale and was a Junior Fellow at the Harvard Society of Fellows. She is now a Lecturer in Classics and Ancient History at the University of Exeter, and teaches and researches on women's writing, ancient and modern. Her academic book, *How Women Became Poets: A Gender History of Greek Literature*, is coming out with Princeton University Press in 2023.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Sander Berg is a Swedish illustrator. His artwork seamlessly blends contemporary techniques and medieval subject matter, finding inspiration in art of the Renaissance and Middle Ages, nature and animals (unicorns included). His style has lent itself to various zines and books, gallery shows in the UK and US, and Google Doodles. *A Journey Through Greek Myths*, was published in 2020 by Flying Eye Books.