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Cristina Nannini

Odyssey in the Time of COVID

“THIS JOURNEY WAS AN ODYSSEY!”

When I made this emphatic declaration, my mother chuckled and affectionately called me a drama queen. I certainly don't blame her; I am Italian after all, and everyone knows Italians adore dramatic deliveries and over-the-top gesturing. Yet, fully aware of what it takes to be deserving of the above label, I must insist I still find the metaphor fitting.

I wasn't returning from a ten-year-long war, the gods weren't hindering me, and I certainly didn't face nightmarish monsters the like of Scylla. “Then what was so wearisome about your experience?” you ask. It's a valid question, and I'd love to answer with a clear-cut exposition worthy of being published in some academic paper. But the truth is I'm not entirely sure myself.

I could argue that while his journey was fraught with dangers, Ulysses and his destination were separated by just 565 nautical miles—almost one-tenth of the approximately 6,000 miles I had to cross to get home. (For those who are about to counter I had twenty-first-century technology on my side, I remind you that dear Ulysses was gifted divine artifacts, among which was the magic wind.) In my favor, I'd also like to appeal to the fact I was traveling at the time of a COVID-19 outbreak—and isn't there something undeniably epic about that? Most of all, though, I was leaving home to visit home, a paradoxical phrase that aptly describes the soul-splitting experience of thousands in the year of our Lord 2021.

Anyway, I'm not here to put up some sophist argument to convince you of the woes of my travel and draw a parallel with classical Greek literature. (I can't even talk myself out of snacking after dinner, so good luck with that.) No, no, I'm just here to tell a story, a curious anecdote of crossing country borders during a pandemic. So buckle up and stick with me a little longer, if you like.

Where do I begin, though? Figuring the ideal starting point of a tale always involves a lot of head scratching on my part.

There was once a silly little girl who craved affirmation so badly that she went out looking for it on the opposite side of the world.

No, scratch that. Too far back and lacks the edge to keep people interested anyway. My troubles began on the fateful day of the flight—when, as I awaited judgment at the foot of the check-in counter, I was denied boarding.

Maybe. It starts in the middle of the action and grabs attention; then again, I'm not trying to write some exciting, action-packed story, and we'd like to avoid being anticlimactic. Rejected.

March 11, 2020. The WHO declares the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic; a cumbersome pall weaved from fear and confusion falls over the world, and my way home gets blocked off indefinitely.

Yeah, I think I'll go with that if it's alright with you.

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March 11, 2020. The WHO declares the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic; a cumbersome pall weaved from fear and confusion falls over the world, and my way home gets blocked off indefinitely. The entry (and consequent reentry) ban in Japan only happened in April, but by March, it already felt like an ineluctable fate. Lamenting the distance from my family at a time when people fought for their lives in reanimation chambers and died by the thousands every day seems petty, but the human flesh is made of selfish cells and bones of egoistic matter.

From inside the claustrophobic walls of my house, I watched the number of contagions and deaths rise staggeringly to impossible heights. The death toll announcement was my constant companion; it was there when I woke up with my good morning coffee and before I prepared for yet another sleepless night in bed. It got worse as the pandemic took over Italy. Then my hazy stomach-clenching fears for faceless and nameless people around the world transformed into concrete and lucid horror for the fate of my family and friends. My grandparents, especially, were at the center of my concerns. My grandpa already had emphysema, and my grandma had gone through a bad case of pneumonia just the previous year. My indefatigable, anxious brain kept supplying unwelcome yet vivid images of my grandma inadvertently brushing her fingers over a contaminated pack of pasta at some (at least in my mind) apocalyptic-looking supermarket, among other equally haunting scenarios.

While I'm quite sure epidemic-triggered psychosis has been quite common these past two years, I couldn't pin all my problems on the ever-expanding blameful disaster that was the COVID-19 pandemic. My troubled mind had been playing tricks on me for a few years, just like a "raggedy" car that decides a neck-breaking downhill slope is the best place for the brakes to stop working. Well, it turns out that an unmedicated mental condition left to fester is only going to get worse, especially during a looming pandemic. Figures.

Funnily enough, it was my unkempt mind that handed me a ticket home, exactly one year and a half after the onset of COVID-19. Neglecting my issues finally caused me to cross a fatidic line and step into that apathetic, albeit unbearable, depression's territory where you can't bring yourself to leave the house or even pay your daily visit to the shower—the last bit having enough shock value to finally push me to seek help. (But I'm digressing; we're not here to discuss my mental condition.) A long story short, my psychiatrist suggested some time off work. Maybe a visit to my family could do me good, he said—a delightful proposal that I immediately seized.

The doctor's order was essential for me to venture back home. While the Japanese government had kindly lifted the reentry ban for foreign residents on September 1, 2020, they still required a fourteen-day quarantine upon arrival, which would have inevitably sucked up all my paid leave at work. Sick leave allowed me to bypass the problem, with the minor inconvenience that I needed to survive two whole months with no salary.

So August 2021 came around, and there I was, [not so] ready to leave. The odious blob of anxiety that dangles down my neck everywhere I go kept feeding my exhausted mind with catastrophic pictures of doom, and

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I could only march into the airport thanks to my husband's sturdy support (and because I was armed with a pack of Tavors, the anxious person's Graal).

Little did I know that leaving was the easy part; returning, as I'd soon find out, was going to be the real chore. Then again, the ominous strip of paper the immigration official wordlessly slid in my passport should have warned me of what was to come. It said, "The government disapproves of all unnecessary travels abroad." A peremptory statement that encapsulated Japan's view on people daring to leave the country.

As you might imagine, I was a weathered traveler, and fear of a plane wreck was the farthest thing from my mind. I had gone through too many security checks, nibbled at too many stale airplane meals, and nursed too many stiff necks after napping on uncomfortable seats for that to be even remotely present on my mind. No, my go-to worries were of a more morbose nature. For every surface I had to touch, my mind would conjure up an overly detailed and uselessly graphic feature film on par with the most ambitious apocalyptic horror flicks. My hands, now contaminated, would smear the virus on a patch of my trousers, or my wallet, or my iPhone (the variables were endless), a place I would inadvertently touch in passing before stuffing my face with food or sticking a finger in my eye, thus condemning myself to be a vehicle of contagion, no more than an inconvenience for an on-paper healthy 30-something, but a potential death warrant to my elderly grandparents.

Consumed by foreboding visions of the future, unwelcome gifts of my overactive imagination, I boarded the plane, which was nowhere near as empty as I had hoped.

As anyone suffering from anxiety will be able to confirm, the annoying penchant for catastrophizing does nothing to boost your providence. While your attention is riveted by remote, smoky what-ifs, you get screwed by the most obvious possibilities, which totally went unnoticed right under your nose. This is how my self-devouring maniacal tendencies ended up ignoring the ongoing Olympic Games and, consequently, a bunch of strapping athletes waiting to go back home.

All things considered, my half-packed flight shared with the returning Italian team was uneventful. I didn't even have to drop one of my Tavor tablets to make it through the journey. The real odyssey, as I previewed earlier on, was yet to come.

My time in Italy flew by. One moment, I landed in a dimly lit emptied-out airport one August evening; the next, I was packing my bags, exchanging teary goodbyes with my friends, and dreading the incumbent reality slap that would return me to my duties and responsibilities.

In bright daylight, the airport looked almost unchanged from the times before COVID-19. If you tried hard enough, you could blot out the giant temperature control machine and the paper masks covering people's faces. Then again, a little more difficult to brush off were the locked-down entrances in the middle of the terminal—only two of the automatic doors were working, one to enter and one to exit.

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I gathered up my resolution together with my bags, wiped my moist eyes, and strode inside the airport, ready to leave. The scenery was familiar if not comforting, and I went through the usual well-rehearsed motions as I waited in line. Then, at the check-in counter, a tired Alitalia employee burst my commiserative bubble by flinging at me the news I wasn't boarding any flight that day. And poof! Just like that, the weight of sleepless nights spent obsessing over my imminent departure and emotional days during which I ached at the sight of even the plainest object in the house came crashing down on me. All of a sudden, it was as if someone had turned up the volume in the room, and with a hissing screech, the airport's noise assailed my ears—the vociferous children who rolled on the filthy linoleum floor as their parents checked in (clearly unfazed by not only COVID-19 but any bacterial threat known to man), the angry Japanese businessman who whispered thunderously on his phone, and the mechanical beeping of the conveyor belt that laboriously transported everyone's baggage away (but my own).

Sounds weren't the only perceptions flying off the charts. Gravity seemed to pull me down with new-found force, to the point I had to clutch my bags' handle, clinging on for dear life, to resist the urge to plonk down to the floor, scream at the top of my lungs, and wail, starting a tantrum right there in the middle of the terminal. Luckily for me, my mum was lucid enough for both of us. She steered me around the airport as she made sure beyond absolute doubt that we were out of cards to play and, once that was confirmed, changed the flight date to the following week.

But what exactly did I do to be denied boarding, you'll ask? Well, I flunked my COVID-19 test. No, I didn't test positive; I just got the wrong one. PCR-RT, LAMP, TMA, CLEIA, TRC, the world of COVID testing is vast and confusing, and I ended up taking one of the few tests rejected by the Japanese government. Who could have told a wrong code was to be the beginning of my odyssey?

When the first wave of shock retreated, I was left feeling embarrassed. I knew my tendency to put off whatever felt potentially anxiety-inducing was to blame. I hadn't checked well enough because the going-back business was an unsavory thought. How was I going to announce my extended stay to all my friends and family without looking like the fool I was?

Then again, I realized this mishap actually brought me closer to Ulysses, or at least his crew. If I had demonstrated how inept I was at checking out regulations, my ancient Greek counterparts had likewise failed big time at following instructions—I mean, they had been told explicitly not to open the bag of winds and not to eat the sacred cattle. I was left to figure everything out on my own.

Feeling raw and exposed, I let my mum tug me back toward the car and tuck me safely in the back seat. I wanted to apologize to my parents, who now had to waste another day driving to Rome and back, but I was too stupefied to talk. On their part, they were cheery, eager to justify the mistake as something perfectly reasonable, and intent on looking at the silver lining—namely, that I could stay home one week longer. Half an hour and a double-filling chocolate croissant later, I began feeling tethered to my skin again and could start seeing sense in what they kept telling me. I broke the news to my friends, who were happy enough not to rub

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salt on the wound and only focused on how good it was to have me for a little longer. It might be superfluous to say, but I enjoyed the extra time I landed.

When the time to leave came again, I felt strange. Disrobed of the jittery anxiety that accompanies any big endeavor (you see, now that the worst had happened, what was there to fear?), I was eerily calm, a sensation so foreign to me it was unsettling. Everything looked and sounded so clear, like when you finally wash your grimy glasses and observe the world through limpid lenses for the first time in a long time. The lingering nostalgia in leaving again, the sour reminder I wouldn't be back for a year or more, the clamorous thought that perhaps I didn't have any reason to remain in Japan anymore—they all raged inside my brain, no longer shushed by nerve and worries; they were my sirens' song, and I craved to have my earplugs back on.

Together with my mum, I marched into the terminal, joined the short line winding in front of the check-in counter, and readied my documentation (this time, I knew, immaculate). The lady at the reception was kind and good-humored, characteristics that I appreciated even more considering her company was going through an ugly bankruptcy. She took my bags and wished me a good flight. Like that, the sails were unfurled, and the cargo was loaded, the ship ready to be released onto the open sea.

Saying goodbye to my parents was an awful business at the best of times, and my new heightened sensitivity made it all the more detestable. Reluctantly, I peeled myself off my mum's arms and dove back into the white tide of masks washing inside the departure gate. I got my green pass checked, took my hand baggage apart and walked through the metal detector, navigated long stark corridors, and finally got to passport control. "Where are you going?" the policeman asked me, a routine question he had to ask a thousand times a day. "I'm going home to Japan," I replied, causing the usual bout of curiosity from my interlocutor, and a novel unprecedented bitterness spreading in my mouth. Leaving home for home, then setting off again to go from home to home—again, and again, and again.

The wait for the boarding call was the same as usual, but there was a distinctive otherness wafting through the gray halls of the airport. Although the number of passengers had been dwindling, the place was neither desolate nor empty. A sea of assorted passengers filled the duty-free shops, the galleries connecting the gates, and the lounge. It wasn't a physical change; it was more of a glaring lack of energy and noise. What the airport was missing was the hustle and bustle, the buzzing vitality of people eager to embark on a journey, the ringing chit-chats of phone calls and gleeful conversations, the industrious rhapsody of businessmen's keyboard clicking. Everybody sat in silence, quietly waiting for their turn to get on the plane, or wordlessly roamed the shops for some last-minute souvenirs. The profoundly un-Italian demureness weirded me out, and I hurried to call my mum to fill the deafened atmosphere until take-off.

The uncanny quiet followed me inside the plane, where I got to claim all the four seats on my row—incontestable proof of the meager times experienced by airlines. The airplane rolled on the heated tarmac, soared, and sailed the sky as the flight assistants distributed water bottles and

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disappeared. Normally, I would have browsed the limited movie selection for something to see or read a book, but this ride wasn't like others. So I donned my earbuds and put on some music, then I lay down across the hard, poking seats in a futile attempt to make myself more comfortable. In my ears, Elton John sang that he was still standing (I wished I could keep saying the same for myself), I made the Beatles repeat they wanted to hold my hand three or four times, and I dreamed of following Bob Dylan's tambourine man on a magic journey. Had I known Purple Mountains back then, I'd have listened to "All My Happiness Is Gone" on a loop until the notes seeped into my neurons and the lyrics welded with my synapses. Unfortunately, I was still one month away from discovering that song.

When the plane landed at Narita International Airport twelve hours later, we were catapulted into what by all rights looked like a futuristic space station border control. The airport had been remodeled into a bureaucratic maze, divided into a gauntlet of checkpoint rooms you had to clear to proceed. A tad bit intimidating but also an outstanding demonstration of Japanese people's formidable organization skills. In a pale imitation of Ulysses recounting his tales to the Phaeacians, I had to give a precise account of where I had been, what I had done, and where I was bound to. Unlike Ulysses, though, I had to supply official documents where I declared (to my knowledge) not to be contagious nor to have been in contact with contagious people.

Room after room, document control after document control, the impression of floating through some liminal space, not quite in and not quite out, intensified. I was required to sign a written pledge where I swore to adhere to quarantine rules, was retested for COVID-19, and waited with trepidation for the results in a dead-silent waiting room. Airport personnel and security guards steered well away from us but stood vigilant at the corners in their protective lemon-yellow gowns, their eyes following us as we shuffled to the exit. When I stepped out into the arrival lobby, ghostly traces of in-betweenness still lingered on my clothes. Not even docking safely in my husband's arms washed me clean of them.

In the subsequent fourteen days I spent under house arrest, held on probation for COVID crimes, the exhaustion dissipated and the jet lag eased away, but the sensation of drifting directionless at high sea remained. I was home, and yet I was not, and I held the conviction I never truly would be. It had been that way for a while; only now, I knew. My odyssey had just begun.