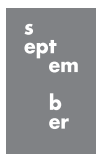


# CHILDREN OF THE VOLCANO

Finding Freedom and Making a Home for Three in Sicily

## ROS BELFORD

an extract



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# STRETCHING COBWEBS

Salina, Spring 2023

I am going to break into our old house. Easy. I used to do it all the time, climb in whenever I forgot the key. There is this huge, long terrace looking down to the sea over the lagoon and its lopsided lighthouse, and I want to stand on it again. It feels like our souls are still in the house, and that even after all the years away, it still belongs to me and the girls, not the landlady, because we had loved it so much and created our messy, noisy, chaotic and colourful home there.

Try explaining that to the Carabinieri.

Hmm.

The Carabinieri would never understand. Not even Salvatore, who once backed the patrol jeep onto the box of shopping I had waiting at the port, squidging two kilos of tomatoes and inspiring a recipe I called *pesto al carabiniere*. By Italian law, Carabinieri cannot serve in their place of birth, and Salvatore came from Milan where the rules of ordinary capitalism hold good. But on the island, things are different. On the island, you can possess a house by living in it. Except that to do so you must demonstrate that there is no identifiable owner, and Juno and I met my former landlady, Maria Rosa, on the road to Santa Marina last week. She recognised me straight away, despite my long absence, stopping the car as she

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passed, as all the islanders do when they spot a friend. She opened the car door, apologising that her legs were no good now, so she couldn't stand up and embrace us. She looked into my eyes, then up at Juno, five feet ten in cut-off jeans, chestnut hair to her waist.

'Ismene? It can't be? Grown up already?'

Juno grinned, said, 'No, I'm Juno.'

Maria Rosa shook her head slowly. '*Come vola il tempo.*' How time flies. 'When I last saw you, Juno, you were a tiny little girl with wild blonde hair who never wore shoes.'

Juno laughed and pointed. Her feet are still bare.

'How old are you?'

'Twenty-one.'

'*Fidanzata?*'

Juno laughed. So far every islander we'd met had asked her if she's got a serious boyfriend. The day before, someone had even offered to find her a suitable island boy.

'*Per fortuna, non!*'

Maria Rosa looked surprised for a moment, then laughed. '*Hai ragione.*' You're right. 'Too many girls marry too young. You know one of your classmates has a baby already?'

Indeed we did. It was the talk of the island. Juno muttered something under her breath that might have been *nemesis*. She and the girl in question had never seen eye to eye.

'How long is it, Ros, how long since you left?'

Thirteen years. It feels like a lifetime and it feels like no time.

I walk up the lava-stone path that winds up to the house through olives and citrus trees. Sixty-seven steps and I know each one. There was a time when I bumped a double buggy up and down here four times a day. In the distance, I can see the lights of the night ferry carrying Juno away, back to Bristol, university and her fierce defences of Ancient Roman sex workers and Greek goddesses. At the tail end of the pandemic, she came to the island for a week, alone, returned and said: Mum, it's still home. The only place in the world that feels like home and where I can be exactly who I am. Please come back with me.

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I'd been afraid to go back after so long away, worried that no one would remember me and that if they did remember, that they might feel let down, betrayed even, by my absence. Juno persuaded me to come. I never imagined I would stay on after she had gone.

I arrive at the blue metal door that leads to the terrace. The moon is shining through motionless clouds, the sky an eerie shade of steel. The ferry is still visible, its port light leaking like juice from an over-ripe pomegranate into the metallic sea.

I slip my sandals off. The lava is still warm from the day.

It's late. The village is in darkness. There's nobody about.

I crouch down and peep through the gap in the door. The one I used to use as a foothold whenever I forgot the key. In the moonlight, I can see the terrace is inches deep in bracts of bougainvillea brown as cornflakes and leaves from the lemon tree below where I used to hang balloons for the girls' birthdays.

No one has been living here.

It would be so easy.

I've done it so many times before. Left foot into the little gap. Swing up onto the wall, slither over, dangle down and jump.

I land on the ceramic-tiled bench built into the wall, the *bisuolo*, they call it, gritty on my soles with the sticky sand the sirocco blows from Africa. All island houses have a *bisuolo*. Somewhere to sit while you pod peas, watch the sea, eavesdrop on your neighbours. It was here I sat alone those dawns and midnights after the earth tremors, watching Stromboli erupt, looking at ultrasound scans of the seabed mapping its story of seismic violence, wondering what the hell I had done. My conscience had a field day weaving metaphorical life lessons out of the natural world. Being inside my head was like being back at school, found guilty by morality tales.

It had been like that since the day in Massachusetts, just after Christmas, when I told the children's father I was leaving him. By the time I left, a few weeks later, the adrenaline of conflict had subsided and I arrived in London with the girls in an amorphous, amoeba-like fuzz. It felt as if there was nothing much inside me any more, just the leftovers of a mistaken identity and an inner voice of ceaseless recrimination. To survive, I knew I had to make a decision.

Choose a direction. Jump. Sometimes all you can do is swim away from what you know you do not want. Then it's swim, swim, swim. Living in the present, looking forward, always forward, knowing you're striving for something, aiming at something, without really knowing what, without daring to think about what may be lurking beneath the surface, without daring to glance back, because look what happened to Orpheus and Eurydice.

All I knew back then was that I didn't want to bring the children up in London.

Perhaps it's not until you find safe harbour that you can let your mind dwell on the implications of your actions, and dare to confront the future as you really are and as it really might be, not simply make happy-lists. Once I got to Salina, I sat on this terrace night after night, teaching myself to tell the difference between the way the house responded to wind, thunder and jumping children, from the deep, earth-jelly swing of a tremor. I watch Juno's ferry slip behind the headland of Lipari. Was I more disturbed back then by living on a fault line or by the consequences of my decisions? Sometimes there seemed to be no difference.

Back then, I didn't know if I could create a life here for myself and the children. But life went on. Chaotically, as it is with kids, from hour to hour and day to day, fragile skeins of happiness and laughter accumulating like sand forming stone. The terrace became the heart of our lives. The girls learned to cycle and skate here, made tents of cushions and sarongs, houses of cardboard boxes, built wobbly towers of Kapla, citadels of Lego. I would sit here with Emma, then mother of two, now of six, drinking Yorkshire tea, exploring our lives – mine as a single mum, hers as the wife of an island fisherman – as the kids painted pebbles or made perfumes of stolen roses.

A beam of light, the sputter of an engine. I drop to the ground and peep over the wall. A solitary headlight on the road sixty-seven steps below. Someone on a Vespa. I wait for its tail light to disappear around a corner, then walk over to the kitchen.

The lock on the door is still broken.

I open it, stretching cobwebs.

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The gap is just wide enough. You could step inside, avoiding the loose tile where the kids hid coins, and into the room where I worked on a laptop that fizzed with static from unearthed electrical wires. Next, the bathroom with its pink bathtub, where Izzy, inspired by a Horrible History of Cleopatra, once bathed in a month's supply of long-life milk. Those little heaps of white powder on the floor, the duct tape over the plug holes? Protection against the cockroaches that would creep in when the house was empty. Carry on and you'd move into the front bedroom, where you can lie on the bed and see nothing but the sea. A good place for daydreaming and crying.

But even without breaking cobwebs, entering is trespassing.

So back over the wall and slither down softly. Peep back. No footprints in the bougainvillea. A flash of orange by my knee. I wiggle a hand through the weeds and find the pebble the kids painted with an erupting volcano that we used as a doorstep. I put it in my pocket, slip my sandals back on and walk softly down the sixty-seven steps to the road.

Part I

# FAVIGNANA





## ORANGEADE

February 2004. A damp Saturday afternoon at Notting Hill Gate. Izzy is five, Juno two, and we are waiting for a bus in the rain, huddling inside the shelter. Someone has fired an air pellet, transforming the window into a giant web of shattered glass. It has been like this since we arrived in London five weeks ago, and every day there are more lozenges of glass on the pavement. There's a guy now, sunk inside a damp hoodie, fretting at a shard with a fingernail. Izzy watches him, entranced. His cuticles are picked raw. The lozenge falls, and she bobs down and picks it up. She's been collecting bus shelter safety glass, like she used to collect shells and sea glass on Good Harbor beach in Massachusetts. The glass isn't sharp, so I suppose the activity to be harmless. But as usual, there is an interfering old lady to disapprove.

'No, dear, it's dirty.'

Izzy glowers, holding the shard up to show Juno the tinge of sea green along its broken edge. 'Look, Juno, another diamond. We are rich!'

Nothing could be further from the truth. I have a royalty cheque from the *Rough Guide to Italy* due next week and that is it. Here in London, it will be gone in three months. Of course, I could ask the children's father but the break-up is so new, wounds still raw, that grey areas feel dangerous. Leeds? Where Mum and Dad are? The royalties would last longer up north but, much as I love my parents, much as they would love to have their grandchildren close by, I know that in Leeds I would disintegrate.

But I am in danger of dissolving here in London too. My mind feels like a bolus in a lava lamp, forming one shape then splitting, splitting again, morphing, disintegrating, reforming, then cutting loose and drifting out through ears and eyes and hair follicles, carrying us up as in a hot-air balloon, slowly, above the cars, above the traffic lights, up, past the floors of a tower block until our heads are dots, until London becomes like the map at the beginning of *Eastenders* and we are invisible. I've had bad times before, fragile times, but nothing quite like this. At least, not since I became a mother. But then, I say to myself, you've just made yourself a single mum.

'Mummy, look!' And we and the hooded man watch another lozenge of glass fall. Izzy picks it up. 'So beautiful!' The man is young but his eyes are bloodshot. He shakes his head and smiles.

The 52 to Kensal Rise pulls in, along its side a huge advert for Sunny Delight, a heavily advertised orangeade with which Izzy has become obsessed. With most of their toys still in storage, her TV watching has gone through the roof, especially as the only child-friendly aspect of the mirror- and laminate-lined apartment I've rented for a month is the Disney Channel.

She has been asking for Sunny Delight several times a day.

'So when?'

'When you're big.'

'How big?'

'Big.'

'But how big?'

'Nine.'

'Really, really? I can have Sunny Delight when I'm nine?'

'Uh-huh,' I say, lifting the pram onto the bus.

'How many years is that?'

I put the brake on the pram, swing her up too. Plant a kiss on her cold, wet nose. 'Four.'

'Four! That's not fair, that's forever, that's ...'

If things had worked out as I'd dared to dream, we'd have been off next week to the Mediterranean, eating and island-hopping from Greece to Italy. I was going to write a book called *Eating*

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*the Odyssey*, an adventure to pursue while I healed, something to focus on that would keep me busy, moving from place to place without too much time to think. Something that would reflect me back to myself as somebody I would like to meet, someone strong and brave, someone not prepared to settle for the path of least resistance. I was even excited. But over the past month, as publisher after publisher rejected the proposal, my glorious dream of spending a year in the wake of Odysseus has shrivelled.

I peer through the mucky bus window. It is raining in earnest now, water sheeting down the canopies of kebab shops and money exchanges. What the hell am I going to do? I can't believe that it was only just before Christmas that I pushed the pram across the iced sands of Good Harbor beach to the internet café to find an email from an agent, saying, '*Eating the Odyssey* is a wonderful idea, please don't show it to anyone else.' On the way home, we danced on sand that the ice had turned to fudge, Izzy twirling as I spun Juno, dancing turquoise seas, hot sun, olive trees, lemons, bougainvillea, the scent of jasmine, us in a garden gathering basil, picking pine nuts from cones, taking turns with a pestle as we made our own pesto. 'It's very important to remember,' I said to Izzy as we stood on the deck of the house, stamping snow and sand off our boots, 'that sometimes you can make dreams come true.'

Ha ha ha, says my whisper voice, shows how much you know.

The gutters of Ladbroke Grove are awash with dirty rainwater. Is London trying to tell me something?

I spent my childhood pursued by morality tales, narratives created not for the pleasure of storytelling but to teach you a lesson. School assembly was full of them. Robert the Bruce and his damn spider, and a weird one about William Colgate, the toothpaste inventor, making a financial arrangement with God. Most were variations on the theme of pride comes before a fall. Indeed, in 1970s Yorkshire, I was surrounded by relatives who seemed to think it was their job to teach kids not to get ideas above their station – cynical great uncles who wallowed in the anti-romance and misogyny of working men's clubs, and narrow-minded great aunts who thought that school-learning was a waste of time for

girls, and tut-tutted over my low grades in needlework and the pricks of blood that spotted anything I sewed.

My parents were different. Mum made up adventure stories for us, an instalment every night, and dreamed of us having a sailing boat. She had sailed only vicariously, through the pages of *Swallows and Amazons*, and by the time she could afford a boat, we had all grown up, but she taught me that having dreams is OK. She wrote children's stories and *libretti* broadcast on Radio Leeds and YTV. She wrote reading books about children on a council estate, so that the inner-city kids she taught could see themselves in books. She showed me that ordinary people like us could achieve stuff.

Looking back, it seems strange that the morality tales from outside our family could have had such power. But then, I think, as the bus stops beneath a poster that reads 'BE SURE YOUR SIN WILL FIND YOU OUT', morality tales, like religions, find self-doubt as nourishing as bacteria do warm agar in a petri dish.

Dad left school at fourteen to be a watchmaker, but out of nowhere he developed a passion for opera and classical music. He and a friend hired a basement on an elegant Georgian square full of private doctors and barristers' chambers, furnished it with old cinema seats and built a seismic sound system with tombstones inside the speakers to play opera to any waif, stray, lost soul or cold policeman who happened to be passing. Dad showed me, just by the music that he surrounded us with, that there was a depth and complexity to life that went beyond the everyday, and that not everything could be put into words. He also taught me happiness was more important than ambition. Concerned, I think, that geeky kids got bullied, my parents bought me a radio for my eleventh birthday, tuned to Radio 1, and I discovered pop. One of my most joyous memories is dancing to 'I Feel Love' outside a souvenir shop on a school trip to London, but it was Monteverdi, Albinoni, Mahler, Rachmaninov, Britten who soaked up my teenage angst and made me feel that yearning was universal.

The bus jerks to a stop up outside Sainsbury's and I duck to dodge an elbow. As drenched people haul shopping aboard, I hear

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Albinoni's *Adagio* playing in my head, so vivid I almost turn to check it's not some weirdo hugging a ghetto blaster. But I know it's not, just as well as I know it's not a telepathic message from Dad. It is simply music that I heard so often it is as much a part of me as my DNA. I look through the rain and wonder if it's not the conscious values and sensible rules of parenting that remain in your children for all their lives – helping them find resilience when things are tough – but your passions and dreams, the authentic ones that speak of who you really are, and that you transmit whether you are aware of it or not.

And what I love is Italy.

The first time I went to Italy, in the 1980s, I was shocked. I got off the train in Verona and it stank. It stank of drains and sewage and decaying cabbage and forgotten dishcloths, and I spent much of the first day trying to breathe through my mouth. Coming from a solid British city of brick and stone, stucco perplexed me, the way it flaked and crumbled, and soaked up the stains of rust and black mould. And so did the cracks between cobbles filled with cigarette butts and sunflower seeds.

But I loved the life on those cobbled streets. The colour, the sun, the light, the way Italians spoke with their hands, choreographing the air, and how kids played in piazzas while their parents had an *aperitivo* instead of being dispatched to bed by seven. I loved how people dressed like it mattered what they looked like – golden men in ochre trousers and women who walked like being gorgeous was nothing to be ashamed of, heels and bags selected to give just proportions to every outfit. No one had scuffed shoes or creased coat hems; even the punks had immaculately coiffed Mohicans. Far from not getting above your station, here they made an art of it. As I travelled from Verona to Venice then Padua and Mantua and Florence and Siena, bus drivers, shop assistants, market-stall holders and chambermaids not only knew but were proud of Giotto, Michelangelo, Raphael, Dante, Vivaldi, Puccini. Culture, it seemed, wasn't a class thing, it was an Italian thing.

I got over the flaking stucco. I even started to find something

beautiful in the way the yellows, pinks and madders faded with the sun, and the plaster eroded to reveal the crumbled rubble and brickwork beneath. I loved the way that heavy rain would leave traces of ochre and rose stucco on the pavement below and I wondered if Italians had a more comfortable relationship with the idea of impermanence and accepted that the present is provisional. Perhaps that is what having a Roman amphitheatre or Renaissance duomo round the corner does to the psyche.

Time in Italy seemed less linear than it was at home, more of a space waiting to be filled with whatever delights the day might bring – exquisite miniature pastries behind the etched glass of an art nouveau window, a sliver of cantaloupe on a market-stall holder's knife, amber and pink spritzes on a waiter's tray, a flirty glance, a raised eyebrow, a tanned ankle in a tasselled loafer. Italians didn't mind waiting at the deli counter half an hour or more for a custom-made *panino*, and nor were they embarrassed to take up other Italians' time as they gave precise instructions to the *panino*-maker ... a touch of oregano, a *pizzico* of pepperoncino, *no*, the pecorino a little thinner, *yes*, so the light shines through, and just one artichoke, sliced thin, no thinner, and a sundried tomato left whole. Italians didn't appear to mind waiting at all. They chatted and laughed and joked, and time seemed fluid. Nor did they rush home after work for tea. They brushed their hair, reapplied make up, straightened their collars, sprayed on perfume and strolled, appraising shoes in shop windows, encountering friends by chance or design, stopping for an *aperitivo*. And then these glamorous people disappeared through heavy wooden portals in the flaking stucco walls, and, a few minutes later, between the slats of shutters, you could see lights go on.

I went back to England, learned Italian and practised by talking to imaginary Italian friends. I finished university and wanted to live in Italy, but I didn't quite have the nerve. It still felt like something for better connected, wealthier people than me. I started a PhD on T. S. Eliot and hated it, trained to be a teacher and hated it more, and then one day at a friend's house in the mid-1980s, I found a copy of *Cosmopolitan*. In among the fashion spreads and perfume

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ads was a half-page interview with a guy who had set up a series of guidebooks for travellers on a tight budget who were as interested in contemporary life and beaches as they were in high culture and history. The guy was Mark Ellingham; the series was the Rough Guides, and they had published four titles. Italy wasn't one of them.

'I could write one of these,' I said.

My friend spluttered over her cup of tea. 'They were advertising for writers for Italy last week, in the *Guardian*.'

Strokes of luck like that don't happen often, especially ones that could change your life, and I worked harder on that application than I had ever worked at anything before. I don't know how I would have coped if I'd failed. But thankfully, I didn't, and in September 1987 I was off, a backpacking travel writer living on a shoestring, unable to quite believe that this was my life, and that by the skin of my teeth I had escaped the ordinary.

It wasn't exactly glamorous. I spent a lot of time copying down bus timetables and museum opening hours and survived on bread, olives and oranges. I couldn't afford hotels, so slept in hostels, convents, campsites, even once a commune, where I helped two members of a Bulgarian heavy metal band sell contraband cigarettes. But it wasn't humdrum. Even the simplest things in Italy seemed resonant with history, culture, tradition. Making coffee in a little hob-top Moka instead of with a spoonful of Gold Blend; joining the elderly ladies scrubbing clothes on a stone washboard by the village fountain; buying food from market stalls where not only was everything seasonal, but the provenance of the vegetables was scrawled on labels, suggesting that everyone knew that the broccoli from village A was better than that from village B.

Over the next decade, I carried on making trips to Italy, no matter whatever and whoever else was in my life. While pregnant I sang Spice Girls songs with a radio producer as we walked through a disused train tunnel on the way to Spoleto. The first time I went as a mother, Izzy was not quite one, and so fussy with her food that she was becoming seriously underweight, and I was beginning to panic.

'Let's see how she is when you get back from Italy, and in

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the meantime try not to worry,' said my lovely paediatrician, patting my hand. Doctor O'Connor turned out to be right. The first lunchtime, with Izzy sitting on my knee, the waiter placed a steaming dish of tagliatelle with truffles on the table. Izzy breathed in, grabbed a handful and stuffed it into her mouth.



## MYTHOLOGICAL RESONANCES

That evening, in Kensal Green, when the girls are asleep, I sit in the kitchen eating pasta and pesto and begin to think. Just because *Eating the Odyssey* hadn't worked out doesn't mean that nothing could. I have my royalties coming and the pound is strong against the euro. We could just go and live in Italy. If I am careful, we could almost manage on the royalties alone. But whereabouts? I know and love Rome, Florence, Venice and the art towns of Tuscany and Umbria, but they are expensive, and the past year, living on the coast of Massachusetts while the children's father set up a business importing Indonesian furniture, had been a revelation. On the beaches of Cape Ann I discovered that if you have sea and sun, you don't need much else when children are young. Sandcastles, sea glass, beachcombing, sea creatures, fishing nets. They play and you get odd moments to lie in the sun, swim, even to read.

But I know it is more than that. I had discovered that out-of-season beaches are good places to be alone without feeling lonely, good places to think without staring into nothingness. On Cape Ann, I learned that there were fears, dreams, memories that I would have been afraid to contemplate in a room, even in the countryside, that I could face up to without flinching by the sea. Living in an old wooden house on Good Harbor beach, I found that the sea made things bearable that otherwise might not have been. The wild seas were exhilarating, waves crashing with therapeutic abandon

against the rocks, and calm seas were a salve, the shifts in light, mood, colour compelling me to stand still for a moment, swallow the lump in my throat and look at what was before me. It wasn't some hackneyed notion that the sea put life into perspective; it was more visceral than that. During those awful months when the relationship was crumbling, my reflex responses to the sea reminded me that feeling wonder at the beauty of the world can be enough.

However, although I need to know that solitude is available, I am not a recluse. I am not self-sufficient enough to have no one with whom I can share emotions, opinions, ideas, anxieties. I need to go somewhere I will meet people. I love the buzz of small-town evening life in the Mediterranean. And the chance to dress up sometimes. I am an outdoor person, and even in my prettiest clothes I am happier in a pavement café watching life pass by than in the finest of bars or restaurants.

I would like a fishing harbour. It's not just that I like fresh fish; it's the culture, with its ancient roots and rhythms, the boats, the nets and the fact that all is dictated by the vagaries of the weather. It could be a fantastic education, I think as I wash the dishes, to live in a community where the girls would learn that they were not in complete control of their surroundings. It might foster respect for the planet, and perhaps help them to grow up questioning the metropolitan world most people we know inhabit, with its mania for instant gratification and aspirational consumption. And wouldn't it be great for them too to be able to eat only local, seasonal fruit and veg, as an antidote to supermarkets where anything is available all the time? *OK, reality check.* I make myself a camomile tea and go to sit in the window. Currently, the only vegetables they will eat are potatoes and cucumbers, but surely that would change surrounded by the fantastic colours and smells of an Italian market? We could grow our own vegetables. I have never successfully grown anything but surely it can't be hard in Italy.

Finally, I think, I might have to forget about following Odysseus, but I am fascinated by the way classical mythology gives the sense of tapping into a common humanity that stretches back over the

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millennia – the fear of illness and death, the dread of betrayal, the dream of love, the fear of harm coming to loved ones, the struggle to understand life and what it means, and how to live well.

So, the sea, the sun and Italy. But I can't think of anywhere along the coast that I want to live. I've seen the chic, over-populated seaside towns of Tuscany, Liguria and Amalfi; the dreary Adriatic coastline, with kilometres of featureless sand punctuated with grids of sun loungers and umbrellas. I remember some nice little coves in Puglia, but the interior depressed me, motorways slicing through agri-industrial fields of wheat, and dead flat hectares of olives and vines.

But that is all about me, not the girls, and though it is probably true that the kids have a nicer time when their parent is happy, is that really a valid argument for taking them away on what could essentially be a very long holiday? On the other hand, who can argue that a childhood by the sea, absorbing another language and culture, would not be a fantastic basis for the rest of life?

I open my notebook and write a list:

Sea and sun

Quiet beaches

An old town or village – evening *passeggiata*, some life

Fishing harbour

Primary school

House with a sea view

Garden? Grow fruit and veg?

Ancient, preferably mythological resonances

Accessible and cheap

Over the next week I read. I google. Beaches. Fishing villages. Coastal reserves. Houses to rent by the sea. I pore through guidebooks, cut out photographs from magazines and research places on the web. I look at maps, at low-cost flight routes, call friends. That we should head somewhere in Italy, obvious. But apart from that, I wasn't getting anywhere. It is all too random.

I rang Mum.

'Do you really think this is a good idea?' she said. 'After all, it's nearly time for Izzy to start school.'

Exactly. I am surrounded by friends buying houses in the catchment areas of the state primary schools with the highest Ofsted scores or going to church every Sunday to try to get their kids into the local C of E school. Children as young as five are sent to private maths and English tutors, music lessons, drama lessons, language schools, in the hope that at eleven, they will secure scholarships at public school. And in case they don't, parents are feverishly saving money to add to the school fee accounts grandparents have been persuaded to open. Anything rather than see their children end up in the community school, where, if the stories passed between parents pushing their kids on swings in the park are anything to go by, our offspring will spend their days writing misspelled essays, getting stoned in the toilets or being laughed at for over-achieving and threatened with broken bottles.

'You're a mother now,' says Mum. 'You can't just carry on living like a nomad. And you don't even seem to know where you want to go.'

So even Mum thinks I am being irresponsible and selfish. Perhaps she is right. She'd dreamed of having a boat but had put us first, worked hard to pay for music lessons, roller skates, seaside holidays in a fisherman's cottage.

Living by the sea in Italy is what *I* want, how *I* want to be a mother, but how can I know if it will be good for the girls or not? Is it egoistic to think what I could offer them, alone, in some Italian paradise, would be more than the museums of London and one of Ofsted's top-rated primary schools?

After Mum rings off, I look back at my notes and despair. Perhaps, I think, we should just go to Italy for a few months and have a look. So I start to plan a journey right around the Italian coast. I am frantic. Manic. Gripped by the fear that if I pause for a moment, or think too much, I will end up spending the rest of my life in Kensal Green.

I write to a magazine editor. Could I write a series of monthly columns following my travels around Italy with two young kids as I look for the perfect place to live? She emails straight back. 'No.'

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I pull out my list again. If we can't go everywhere, I will have to choose somewhere.

'There are plenty of beautiful places in England,' my mum had said.

I look back at my list. The Northumberland coast, Cornwall, even the Scilly Isles would not cut it. I want an outdoor life that does not involve technical fabrics, battling the elements and swimming in freezing water, and I want an abundance of fish, fruit and vegetables that does not involve ice freight, Israeli poly tunnels or overpriced farmers' markets. And, pretentious or not, I want to inspire the girls with my love of classical history and mythology, and give them a sense at first hand of the roots of Western culture.

Then, a few days later, the magazine editor emails. 'I need a piece on the tuna massacre, the *mattanza*, on the Sicilian island of Favignana. £320. Are you interested?'

Sicily. I have never been to Sicily. Of course I am interested. Not in the tuna massacre, nor even in the fee, which will barely cover our flights, but because it feels like destiny has stepped in. The cost of living in Sicily is low, isn't it? And the sun shines all year. *What about the Mafia?* said Mum. I look to see what my colleagues Jules Brown and Rob Andrews had written in the *Rough Guide to Sicily*. 'The Mafia is usually an in-house affair, hardly likely to affect travellers.' I google Favignana and find images of turquoise seas, white beaches, golden cliffs that looked as if they'd been sculpted by a Cubist. I also read about the *mattanza*. Every spring, bluefin tuna leave the Atlantic for the warmer waters of the Mediterranean, swimming through the Straits of Gibraltar and along the Tunisian coast to Sicily, where the fishermen of Favignana trap them. We had to be in Sicily in May, when the tuna arrived. The rest would follow.