

THE ODYSSEY OF ULYSSES AND PENELOPE



The gods have heard me and rewarded my aching loneliness in these many years of war and travel. I dreamed again of Penelope last night. Odysseus, master of war and conqueror of Troy I may be, but I am defeated until I can return to Ithaca and Penelope.

Penelope calls to me in my sleep. Even when my mind is mercifully dark and dreamless, she calls to my body and my soul. I ache for her, like a body aches for breath after having it knocked out by a hard blow.

Last night I saw her surrounded by importunate men who dared to visit. Nay, who thronged to my rooms in my long absence. My rooms – in my own palace – to besiege my queen and my throne. She was surrounded like a stag by hounds, kept at bay and searching for any opportunity, any sign of weakness, to lunge for the kill.

MUSIC

Ten long years I spent before the walls of Troy – that accursed bone in King Agamemnon's throat. Ten long years I watched men die in every conceivable fashion before taking Troy by stealth in the night. All the while worried about the woman and the kingdom I'd left behind.

For ten long years I existed as a plaything of the gods, who had decided among themselves that Troy should be burned and its people slaughtered using the Greek army as their tools to do the job. Did that appease Zeus Cloudgatherer or Poseidon Earthshaker? Was all the death, misery and sacrifice of my kingdom not enough of a sacrifice? Apparently not. Even after taking leave of King Agamemnon, the stink of burning flesh and the even greater stink of men quarreling over gold, the angry gods demanded another ten years of my life after I set sail for home.

Another ten years I have lost as a wretched wanderer, an involuntary exile as the gods have banished me to a life of hard travel. Try as I will to return to Penelope and Ithaca, the winds set against me or I am captured and held prisoner or beset

by dangers such as I never faced from Hector's spear before the walls of Troy. The gods have even sent me in my travels to the land of Hades, where I encountered poor dead Agamemnon's shade. I survived to escape the underworld – will I survive my homecoming? Apparently my Lord Agamemnon – King of Kings – did not survive his and is now doomed to spend eternity covered in those terrible stab wounds he received from Clytemnestra – his wife.

How many of my companions have returned after so many years away to find a new master at their tables or a knife in the dark from a friend? How many wives will find a way to rid themselves of the gruff stranger beset by nightmares and odd wounds who has returned after so many years, demanding his status as head of a household that has managed well without him?

What of my Penelope? We were married such a short time before I received summons from the palace at Mycenae to prepare for war – scarcely any time to get to know each other as man and wife. I never knew such a strong hearted and quick witted woman.

When I first saw her in her father's palace in Sparta, I took her as a pleasant enough looking way to tie myself to King Icarius through marriage. Her grace of form was easy enough to see, although I took her silence as a possible sign of a dull mind hiding behind repose.

MUSIC

We chanced upon each other in a hallway later and she took the opportunity to question me about Ithaka and my rule of it. I should have had my wits more about me, but I had been going on at length about the attractions of my kingdom when I realized she was quietly laughing at me through the most beautiful brown eyes that I had ever seen. I stammered to a halt as she gracefully bowed and said that she must surely someday visit a land so bountifully endowed by the favor of the gods. I watched her glide away and realized that this was no thick witted palace brat, but a real mind. A woman this beautiful – and a daughter of a king of Sparta – would always attract suitors in droves. A companion this well educated, this astute, would be even more valuable as a helpmate in the work of governing men and lands. I knew I had to have her and set about the work of winning her.

The competition for her hand – as announced by her father – I won through quickness of foot and mind. Her father, stricken at the prospect of losing someone so dear and so valuable to him, begged her not to leave.

I was stricken by the old man's grief and gave her the freedom to decide whether she stay as her father's support or accompany me to Ithaka. She looked at me

steadily, as if judging the inner merits of my soul, before lowering her veil and kissing her father on the cheek as a sign that she belonged to me. We returned to Ithaka that night.

A thousand wonders waited for us, exploring each others minds and bodies in a tumult of days and nights. The love of man and woman flowed from us like music. Rarely were two people more suited to each other than we. Her hair, unbraided and available to me alone, fell about my face as she hovered over me in our bed. I drank in her fragrance, the very taste of her, in those heady weeks of love.

MUSIC

My household grew fat and prosperous as a new sense of order and purpose flourished under her hand. I believe she had even learned the names of the palace servants before the first moon had turned. She bore me a fine, strong heir as my son and I watched as she turned into the queen Ithaka had needed and foolishly believed great things loomed just over the Aegean Sea for our land. The summons from Agamemnon was what we got instead.

Forced by my oath to leave my bride and my kingdom, I told her "Wife, one thing is certain. Not all of our soldiers will return from Troy unhurt, so I cannot say whether the gods will let me come back or if I will fall on Trojan soil, but I leave everything here in your charge. Look after my mother and father and the house as you do now and when you see a beard on our boy's chin, marry whomsoever you fancy and leave your home."

Those whom the gods will destroy they first drive insane, so they have assailed me with dreams of Penelope, waiting patiently year after year. I've seen her, working night after night at the hard job of governing men and lands only to retire to a cold bed and always alone. She calls it her Bed of Sorrows watered by her tears and tells others "In that catastrophe, no one was dealt a heavier blow than I who pass my days in mourning for the best of husbands."

Such dreams I frequently had in front of the long walls of Troy. So many thousands of night she must have lain awake wondering if I were dead or alive. After the news reached home that Troy had fallen and soldiers began returning home, she waited for every bit of news as suitors for hand her began to arrive and then to take up residence in the palace.

"Penelope" they would say "Ulysses must surely have returned by now if he were willing to. Surely he must have found some other opportunity to pursue to leave such a rich kingdom and beautiful queen behind." Daily, they importuned her to marry each of them and daily more of them arrived. I saw this in my dreams and

also heard Penelope say "I pay no attention to strangers nor to supplicants nor yet to heralds that are in public service but always I waste away at the inward heart, longing for Ulysses. These men try to hasten the marriage. I weave my own wiles."

MUSIC

Verily, one long night I was engaged by Calypso, that most beautiful of enchantresses, while imprisoned on her island. Fair of appearance, she was, and would often run her hands over her breasts and thighs while trying to entrap me. I told her "Penelope is meaner to look on than you in comeliness and stature, for she is a mortal, while you are immortal and ageless, but even so, I wish and long to return to my home and to see the day of my return."

While blown off course by the malicious winds sent by the gods, I could only hope that my own queen Penelope was strong and clever enough to withstand the caprice of whatever god stood between us. As a special instrument of torture, the gods sent me visions in my sleep that showed my Penelope, perpetually seated at her loom, weaving a death shroud and telling her tormentors – her suitors – that she could not conceive of considering who to marry until she was finished with her work. She is celebrated all over the Aegean for her skill at weaving and sewing and the shroud would be her most intricate and her finest work. At night she would pick apart the day's needlework so that the garment always seemed to be making progress but never reaching completion.

The suitors, addled by my wine and eating my food, feasted nightly and let the years roll past until Antinous, one of the craftier of her suitors, demanded she finish her work and choose who would be the next king of Ithaka. He had stated "Penelope must beware of trying our young men's patience much further and counting too much on the matchless gifts she owes to Athena. Her skill in fine handicraft, her excellent brain and that genius she has for getting her way – in that respect I grant – she has no equal, not even in story."

Penelope responded "When he succumbs to the dread hand of death which stretches all men out at last, I must not risk the scandal there would be among my countrywomen here if one who had amassed such wealth were put to rest without a shroud."

My heart breaks as I think of that noble woman beset by such jackals and carrion dogs. The woman who will wait for Ulysses for twenty long years and will be imprisoned by her guests in her own household such as has been her fate is a queen, a natural queen. Tomorrow, I return to Ithaka disguised as a beggar, where I might see with my own eyes what has happened in my absence. All of Greece talks about my Penelope and the scandalous behavior of her suitors.

Twenty years we have waited for each other – twenty years which will end tomorrow.

MUSIC

END PART ONE

I am become a name, for always roaming with a hungry heart, much have I seen and known. I am part of all I have met, yet all experience is an arch where through which gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades forever and forever when I move.

I shall never forget how she appeared as she came down the stairs from her room looking like Venus or Diana. Long have I seen her in the dreams sent to torment me at night by the gods, but the feeble spark of my memory was as nothing compared to the flaming torch of this woman.

For twenty long years I have been absent from my kingdom of Ithaka fighting before the walls of Troy and fighting against the ill will of the gods on my long journey home. While away, my queen Penelope stood besieged by drunken louts who would steal my kingdom by forcing marriage upon her, thinking me dead or unable to return home.

I received the news from home, including the news of my besieged wife, while doing the bidding of the gods and journeying to the underworld of Hades. There, I met the shade of poor, murdered King Agamemnon, whereupon I greeted him. "Happy Ulysses, son of Laertes" replied the ghost of Agamemnon "you are indeed blessed by the presence of a wife with such a rare gift of understanding and as faithful to her wedded lord as Penelope. The fame, therefore, of her virtue shall never die and the immortals shall compose a song which shall be welcomed by all mankind in honor of the constancy of Penelope."

MUSIC

I returned to my court disguised as a beggar so that I could see for myself what had happened to my court and the woman that I loved in my long absence. She bade me welcome, exhibiting the kindness to strangers and travelers that marked my queen and my court in the old days. I offered that I was pleased to accept the hospitality of so beautiful and famous a queen.

"Stranger, heaven robbed me of all beauty, whether of face or figure, when the Argives set sail for Troy and my dear husband with them. If he were to return and look after my affairs, I would be both more respected and should show a better presence to the world. As it is, I am oppressed with care and with the

afflictions which heaven has seen fit to heap upon me. The chiefs from all of our islands and from Ithaka itself are wooing me against my will and are wasting my estate. I can therefore show no attention to strangers or to supplicants nor to people who say that they are skilled artisans but am all the time broken hearted about Ulysses. They want me to marry again at once and I have to invent stratagems in order to deceive them. I fooled them for three years without them finding it out but as time went on and I was nearing my fourth year, in the waning of the moon those good for nothing hussies, my maids, betrayed me to the suitors and now I cannot see any further shift for getting out of this marriage. My parents are putting great pressure upon me and my son chafes at the ravages the suitors are making on his estate, for now he is old enough to understand all about the ways of this world."

"Fair lady, despair not, I have seen your husband. It was in Crete. I saw Ulysses and showed him hospitality, for the winds took him there as he was on his way to Troy."

MUSIC

Many a further tale did I tell her, even describing her husband's clothing and jewelry and Penelope wept as she listened for her heart was melting. As the snow wastes upon the mountaintops when the winds from the south, north, east and west have breathed upon it and thawed it until the rivers run bank full of water, even so did her cheeks overflow with tears for the husband who was all the time sitting by her side. I felt for her, but kept my eyes as hard as iron without letting them so much as quiver.

"Stranger, I was already disposed to pity you, but henceforth you shall be honored and welcome in my house. It was I who gave Ulysses the clothes you speak of. I took them out of the store room and folded them up myself and I gave him the gold brooch also to wear as an ornament. Cruel life! I shall never welcome him home again! It was by an ill fate that he ever set out for that detested city whose very name I can not even bring myself to mention."

"Madam – wife of Ulysses – please do not disfigure yourself further by grieving thus bitterly for your loss. Though I can hardly blame you for doing so, a woman who has loved her husband and borne him children would naturally be grieved at losing him, even though he were a worse man than Ulysses, I have lately heard of Ulysses being alive and on his way home. He is among the Thesparosians and was bringing back much valuable treasure, but his ship and all his crew were lost as they were leaving the Threnacian island. They were all drowned to a man. Ulysses, I have heard, stuck to the keel of the ship and was drifted onto the land. I have heard it said that Ulysses had gone to Dodona that he might learn from the Oracle of Jove there whether, after so long an absence, he should return to

Ithaca openly or in secret, so you may know that he is safe and will be here shortly. He will return."

"May it even be so. If your words be true, you will have such gifts and good will of me that all who see you will congratulate you. Men live for but a little season. They are hard and people wish them ill for so long as they are alive and speak contemptuously of them when they are dead but he that is righteous and deals righteously, the people tell of his praise among all lands and many shall call him blessed. Please accept the hospitality of my house tonight in honor of my husband."

MUSIC

How could I help but accept such a gracious offer in such a gracious house ?

"Even so, my mind does toss and turn in its uncertainty whether I ought to stay with my son here and safeguard my substance, my bondsmen and the greatness of my house out of regard to public opinion and the memory of my late husband or whether it is now time for me to go with the best of these suitors who are wooing me and making me such magnificent presents. As long as my son was still young and unable to understand, he would not hear of me leaving my husband's house but now that he's full grown, he begs and prays for me to do so being incensed at the way in which the suitors are eating up his inheritance, for how is he to make his way in this world with no inheritance?"

"The coming dawn will usher in the ill-omened day that is to sever me from the house of Ulysses, for I am about to hold a tournament of axes. My husband used to set up twelve axes in the court, one in front of another like the stays on which a ship is built. He would then go back from them and shoot an arrow through the aligned holes in all twelve. I shall try to make the suitors do the same thing and whichever of them can string the bow most easily and send his arrow through the holes in all the twelve axes, he I will follow and quit this house of my lawful husband. So goodly and so abounding in wealth, but even so, I doubt not that I shall remember it in my dreams."

Unable to let such a noble heart suffer needlessly, I said "Madam, wife of Ulysses, you need not defer your tournament because Ulysses will return ever they can string the bow, handle it how they will and send their arrows through the iron. May heaven requite to them the wickedness which they deal high handedly in another man's house without any sense of shame, for nothing is greater or better than this: when man and wife dwell in a home in one accord, a great grief to their foes and a joy to their friends."

"As long, sir, as you will sit here and talk to me, I can have no desire to go to

bed. Still, people cannot do permanently without sleep and heaven has appointed us dwellers on earth a time for all things. I will then go upstairs and recline upon that couch which I have never ceased to flood with my tears since that day Ulysses set out for that city with the hateful name."

"For tonight, may the gods send you a sweet and dreamless sleep and tomorrow I daresay you might see with fresh eyes wonders such as scarce can be imagined" I replied.

She raised her eyes to mine and said *"Your certainty is my hope. Goodnight."*

"Goodnight." And so we parted, separate ships but at least in the same harbor. Merciful sleep closed both of our eyes as we drifted blindly towards each other and our fate.

MUSIC

END PART TWO

The years. The heavy and slow-turning wheel of all the years I have been away have finally brought me back to my kingdom of Ithaka and Penelope. Fearing the knife in the dark and not knowing the state of affairs after my long absence, I disguised myself as a beggar and appeared at my own palace with none knowing my identity except a few trusted servants and my son Telemachus.

I arrived to find a pack of two legged jackals filling my audience chamber and arranging an archery contest – using my great bow no less – with the prize to be my queen and my kingdom. One by one, the proud and the boastful of them tried to draw back the bowstring and all of them failed. I stepped up to ask for a chance to pull the bow. They called me a wretched creature, said I didn't have a grain of sense in my whole body and said I should think myself lucky being allowed to dine unharmed among my betters and in being allowed to hear their conversation. I was told to drink and keep quiet without getting into a quarrel with men younger than I am. I answered "Any one who is truly man enough to draw the great bow of Ulysses certainly should not fear a challenge from a beggar." This brought an angry challenge from several that their honor had been slighted. Penelope answered.

"People who persist in eating up the estate of a great chieftain and dishonoring his house must not expect others to think well of them." She then gathered up her robes around her and left the chamber for the quiet of her own room. I drew the string of my great bow while all around me gasped in amazement. As surely as Ithaka's rightful king had returned to his kingdom my arrow sped to it's mark.

The crowd gasped. I set another arrow to my bowstring and aimed at the first suitor. The arrow struck him in the throat and the point went clean through his neck so that he fell over and the cup dropped from his hand while a thick stream of blood gushed from his nostrils. He kicked the table from him and upset the things on it so that the bread and roasted meats were soiled as they fell onto the ground.

"Dogs – did you think that I should not come back from Troy? You have wasted my substance, forced my women servants to lie with you and wooed my wife while I was still living. You have feared neither god nor man and now you shall die."

The next man drew his keen blade of bronze and sprang at me but I shot an arrow into his breast that caught him by the nipple and fixed itself in his liver. He smote the earth with his forehead in the agonies of death until his eyes were closed in darkness. My son Telemachus and my loyal servants blocked the doors and together we purged my house of the rest of them.

After ordering servants to dispose of the bodies and to clean my floors of the carnage, I dispatched Penelope's maid to bring her to my presence. That servant would have told her by now that I was back and the fate of her would-be suitors, but she was too proud to show fear. She entered the room with such a regal bearing that it brought a tear to my eye. Death and worse she was perfectly prepared for as her composure ensured she could not be dishonored by anything that was about to happen. We circled each other warily, like a pair of grapplers looking for an opening.

"How, sir, can I truly believe you to be Ulysses? My husband was a king among kings, not like the ragged and dirty beggar I see before me. I will order a bed to be made for you outside my bedchamber door where you may sleep while we try to resolve this mystery."

"Fair enough, my queen, but let me tell you about the bed you sleep in. That bed, my dear wife, that I made myself. I remember a young olive tree growing within the precincts of the house in full vigor and about as thick as a bearing post. I built my room around this with strong walls of stone and a roof to cover them and I made the doors strong and well-fitting. Then I cut off the top boughs of the olive and left the stump standing. This I dressed roughly from the roots upward and then worked with carpenters tools and made it the center post of this bed, inlaying it with gold and silver. After this, I spread a hide of crimson leather from one side of the bed to the other, so you see I know about this bed as no other man besides Ulysses could." When she heard these sure proofs, she fairly broke down and flew weeping to my side, flung her arms around my neck and kissed me.

"Do not be angry with me Ulysses, you who are the wisest of mankind. We have suffered, both of us. Heaven has denied us the happiness of our youth and growing old together. Do not then be aggrieved or take it amiss that I did not embrace you thus as soon as I saw you. I have been shuddering all the time through fear that someone might come here and deceive me with a lying story for there are very many wicked people who are going about."

I, in my turn, melted and clasped this most good and faithful and good wife to my bosom. As the sight of land is welcome to men who are swimming toward the shore when Neptune has wrecked their ship, I found myself on firm ground after my long and dangerous voyage. We spent the rest of that long night in each others arms, telling of our misfortunes and our trials from the safety of our bed.

MUSIC

Much later in my long life, I encountered the ghost of King Agamemnon whom I had followed to the Trojan War so long ago. His shade roamed the underworld after being murdered by his wife upon his return from the capture of Troy. I will take his poor, twittering spirit's final words to my grave: "Happy Ulysses, son of Laertes, you are indeed blessed in the possession of a wife endowed with such rare excellence of understanding and so faithful to her wedded lord as Penelope, the daughter of Icarius. The fame, therefore, of her virtue shall never die and the immortals shall compose a song that shall be welcome to all mankind in honor of the constancy of Penelope."