

## ODYSSEUS

I've often asked myself how the sea can be salty when the rivers that flow into it and the rain that falls from the sky are not. I've never found the answer, and now, awakened from a deep sleep by the wind, I ask the question anew as I sit here on the rocky shore of this land that I know should be Ithaca, but which I do not recognize.

I look around, confused because I cannot recognize the rocky coast, or the arid land covered by leafless wind-swept trees, or the mountainous horizon, or the sea-blue sky above me. And I wonder where these fragments of porous red rock come from, carried down from the mountains by rushing rains. With every storm, another piece of the world falls into the sea, dragging down dirt and stones, leaving behind holes and naked tree roots. Will the sea someday become one great plain, filled in by the debris of vanished islands and mountains?

Many years ago I hunted for deer and boar in the mountains of my Ithaca, from one peak to another, but I don't remember ever walking over this red sponge-like rock that I find around me, sculpted by the wind and waves. Where does sea salt come from? Where do all these red sponge-like rocks along the shore come from? Where on earth am I? Did the Phaeacian sailors drop me off on the shores of Ithaca, or somewhere else? I've never trusted sailors, whom I know to be the biggest liars in the world.

The difficulties of the war and my long voyage have made me suspicious of everything, so I suspect that the Phaeacian sailors who brought me here waited until I was asleep and then dumped me on the shore of the first deserted island they could find. That way, they could rid themselves of an unwelcome guest once and for all, and steal the gifts that their generous King Alcinous had loaded onto the ship for me. I could see from their anxious faces that they wanted nothing more than to finally sail the high seas in search of their fortune before returning home. But if they had wanted to claim my treasure for themselves, they would have just thrown me overboard into the deep salty sea at night, rather than land on this craggy coast. Maybe they wanted to steal the treasure but didn't want my death on their consciences. Who knows? Fellow feeling sometimes survives even in the hardest of hearts.

But I see something over there, shining underneath the branches at the base of an olive-green shrub at the entrance to a deep cave. There they are, the gold and silver cups and plates that the king of the Phaeacians presented to me before my departure. I'll hide them better with another layer of branches and some heavy stones so that no wanderer can make off with them.

I still don't know if this land is my native Ithaca, or some other little island adrift in the ocean, or simply some unknown coastline. I don't know if this land is inhabited by hospitable men or by giants with a single eye in the middle of their foreheads. I look around, but still don't know if I am home.

I ask myself whether this arid and wild land can be the homeland that I dreamed about for nine long years of war and another ten years of treacherous and adventure-filled voyages. I know that the memory of home can be unreliable indeed. During the years I was away and in times of danger, I imagined my rocky

island to be as green and full of flowers as a garden, though in truth it is only good for nourishing the flocks of sheep and goats that graze on dry grasses growing between hard rocks, and for the herds of pigs that grow fat on the acorns that fall in the wooded highlands. I have finally learned that you should never try to make dreams match up with reality.

But I am not telling the whole truth when I say that the years under the walls of Troy were long for me; in truth, they were the fastest years I have ever lived. Hard, happy years. And I can even boast of how I personally was decisive for the victory of the Achaeans. I call it a victory, but who knows if victory is the right word for the destruction of a city and the atrocious events that took place beneath its walls, events that I myself have recounted as moments of glory a hundred times during the stops on my long voyage back.

I left dressed in the robes of the king of Ithaca, and now I'm going to reenter my house dressed in the rags of a beggar that I found in this cave at the edge of the sea, which will allow me to observe secretly—and thus truthfully—what has been going on during my absence. To learn if what I have heard is true, that my house is full of admirers vying for the hand of Penelope, hoping to take my place in my palace and in my bed. How Penelope behaves with these admirers. How Telemachus has grown since I left him behind as a baby. What condition my lands are in. How the servants and handmaidens have been acting in my absence.

Twenty years thrown to the winds? Twenty years without a memorial? Who knows if anyone will ever collect the survivors' stories about the feats of Achilles, Hector of Troy, and Agamemnon of Mycenae, warriors of great heart but limited mind, of their anger and cruelty, and especially of the story of the wooden horse I invented, which allowed us to conquer Troy and return the beautiful Helen to Menelaus of Sparta.

When I think of the struggles, of the wounds, and of the lives lost because of an unfaithful woman like Helen, my mind grows muddled. But when I ignore the cause of the most idiotic war in the world, then I too want its history of events that will never repeat themselves and that have already been consigned to antiquity to be carved in the lasting stone of memory for generations to come.

No woman shall give birth to men like Achilles, Hector, and Agamemnon ever again. The Sparta of Menelaus and the Mycenae of Agamemnon were constructed under the clash of arms and will last as long as the stones with which they were built, which is to say a miserable fraction of eternity. But memory deceives and history is a liar, because men want to remember and listen to fairy tales, not to brutal, stupid reality.

Many things have happened to me in these twenty years, but how many other things must have happened in Ithaca while I was gone? If I can't even recognize my own homeland, which has remained unchanged for centuries, I wonder how much Penelope will have changed, or how I will ever be able to recognize my son Telemachus, no longer a babe in his crib but a full-grown man. How much can a husband and a father who has been so far from his home and his family for all these years count on their love?

And so I'll be on my guard, I'll sneak into my house without being recognized, acting as carefully as my experience tells me to. Who knows if I can depend on Telemachus and on Penelope's devotion, she to whom I have sent my noblest thoughts every day, even amidst the sound of battle and the roar of tempests.

Your children are your children even if they don't know you, even when circumstances make them hate you, but a cheating wife becomes a stranger, unbound to you by relations or blood. I

never once doubted Penelope in all these years, so why do questions assail me now, just when I have finally set foot on what I hope are the arid soils of my Ithaca? When the crashing waves threatened my ship, when the winds snapped the strong mainmasts that held my sails aloft, my thoughts flew to Penelope awaiting my return, and the thought of her gave me the strength to fight against all the adversities that jealous gods placed in the way of my homecoming.

Why am I now afraid that I have lost the only reason for my embattled return home? Why now, just when trustfulness would be a warm bed for my exhaustion, do the embittered gods once again resist me and confound my mind with all of these doubts? For years my ears have heard their noisy celebrations high on Olympus after their daily banquets, but I don't hear them anymore, and the bright shell in which I listened to the sound of Penelope's voice was left behind on the ship. The loss of the shell is harder to bear than the loss of the drunken gods' voices. But why should I lament the loss of this shell when soon enough I will be able to listen to Penelope's voice in person?

If I raise my eyes to the sky I can see black hawks with their angular wings, gliding on high as if motionless against that deep blue. If memory doesn't fail, I remember that hawks were rarely seen in the skies above Ithaca. Should I thus think that the farmlands have been left to grow wild and that snakes, the prey of raptors, have taken over?

#### PENELOPE

I've counted the days, months, and years, and the number overwhelms me. Each morning I have focused my thoughts on my beloved Odysseus, I have recalled our happy days and amorous

nights a thousand times, keeping them alive in my memory night after night. In days long gone by I even tried to share his worries, and in the end I forced myself to accept his departure for a war that may have been just for Sparta and Mycenae, but which was unfair to our marriage and without a doubt ruinous for Ithaca.

Troy was so far from our thoughts and from our happy isle, and the war was so foreign to our own interests, that Odysseus would have much preferred to remain behind in his homeland with his family and his adoring subjects. But how could I keep him from leaving for the war when all the other peoples of Hellas were calling his name? I tried to stop him, but his old nurse Eurycleia stood in my way, refusing to give me a hand. It would have been enough to break just his arm or leg with an ax handle. That wouldn't have been so terrible compared to the disaster wrought on us by his departure.

Our small Ithaca had been sailing happily and prosperously on the waters of the ocean, our flocks went out to pasture in the mountains high above the reach of plunderers, and each Suitor peacefully governed his own lands. But when the absence of their king Odysseus grew longer, years longer than expected, they started to show signs of restlessness, taking up residence here in my own house to stuff themselves with food and lay claim to me, expecting me to betray my husband with one of them and prepare myself for another wedding. A curse from the gods fell upon my house, which was transformed into my prison and into a vulgar orgy for my Suitors. I would never be able to betray my conjugal bed, and if I were forced to do so, my admirers would fall upon one another in such competition as to drag Ithaca to its demise.

I've never felt more in need of a strong and courageous man like Odysseus at my side as I do now. My beloved Odysseus, you have been gone too long, and I pray to the gods that my love for you will not turn into anger over your unjustified absence. The Trojan War ended many years ago, but of your return to Ithaca I have heard only unreliable rumors that fly speedily on the wings of Boreas. I have chased from my mind the fear that you perished in a tempestuous storm at sea, and I don't know if I should believe the voices that tell me you are still being held by the Sirens or some Enchantress, or even those who claim that your return to Ithaca is imminent.

My greatest fear, though, more than any Siren or Enchantress, is that you have been entangled in the seductive arts of one of the many depraved women whom the gods throw into the paths of men, and that this is the real reason why you have been gone so long. Even the most steadfast of men can easily fall into temptation. Gossip flutters about my ears, and I have done my best to block it out, relying on all of my faith and my love to do so. I am a weak, lonely woman, but I have known how to turn my bed into an impregnable fortress while you travel in parts unknown throughout the wide world.

I've tricked these gluttonous and haughty Suitors with the story of the shroud that I weave during the day and unravel through the night, but I can feel their suspicions rising, and I fear the guarded whispering amongst them, the knowing grins on their faces.

I know I shouldn't show it, but these years of waiting have eaten away at the lightness of my soul. I cry in my sleep, and when I rise from bed at night to unravel the previous day's work, my pillow is soaked with tears.

## ODYSSEUS

The swineherd Eumaios is a rough man, but generous and, most importantly, loyal to his king Odysseus even after a twenty-year absence. I appeared before him dressed as a beggar, a ragged cloak on my back and a satchel hanging from my shoulder, and I force myself to walk bent, supporting my weight with a cane, but I must really look the worse for wear, or perhaps I'm perfectly disguised, if Eumaios didn't recognize me. More than a few times, when I was hunting in this area, he saw me near the pen where he raises pigs, and he also saw me whenever he came to the palace to hand over the animals that were needed for my table. He hasn't recognized me; all the better.

Eumaios invited me into the house where he lives with Galatea, his adolescent daughter, who helps him graze the pigs, prepares his food, and mends his clothes. It is the first time I enter this house. It was considered unseemly for a king to enter the home of a herdsman, and when I had tried to do so I was held back by the men in my retinue. Covered with rags like a beggar, I was kindly welcomed by Eumaios underneath the roof that was forbidden to me when I came dressed as a king.

It is a white stone dwelling plastered with mud and the roof is made of straw, but it is clean, and the fireplace does not seep smoke into the single large room. The floor is of rammed earth and the bed that Eumaios offered me is made of hard stone covered by sheepskins. The house has few furnishings, but enough to cook a fava bean or barley soup and a few hunks of roasted meat. In a large earthenware vase he keeps the olives in brine that we ate before dinner, spitting the seeds into the flames of the fireplace.

I led Eumaios to believe that I am the son of an illustrious prince of Crete, that I fought underneath the walls of Troy for



nine years with Odysseus, and that, after returning to my homeland, I had taken to the sea once again with a small fleet headed for Egypt in order to begin trading with that country. But there, I told him, my companions betrayed our agreements and resorted to common thievery, and it was only thanks to the intercession of a friendly goddess that my life was saved. I told how from that distant land I was put on a Phoenician ship to be sold as a slave. Halfway on our journey to Thessaly, while my slave drivers stopped along this coast to hunt for some meat and load fresh water, I managed to slip from the vessel and hide in the undergrowth.

“So here I am,” I said to him, “covered in rags, as you can see, on this unknown island.”

“This is Ithaca, the homeland of Odysseus,” Eumaios said.

I had put so much energy into the telling of my tale that I myself became emotional over my sad destiny as an impoverished prince reduced to begging. Poor Eumaios listened to me with great feeling, and I knew that he would have liked my story to continue as if it were an exciting tale of adventure, but I told him that I am no prophet, and that I could not tell him about the future too.

No one can lie like I can, but even knowing that my stories were complete inventions, I found myself shamefully sobbing at the end of them. It is the first time that I have cried so much since those tears that I vainly tried to hide when Demodocus, in the palace of the Phaeacians, sang the story of the Trojan horse in such beautiful verse.

How can this be, this unexpected cloudburst of tears from the cunning and powerful Odysseus, the sublime liar, the crafty weaver of deceit? I attributed this strange weakness to the exhaustion that has tired not my limbs, which remain strong,

but my mind, which is affected by the very words that fall from my lips. I won't blame myself too hard for this, but just as I was unable to hold back my tears earlier, now I cannot hold back my surprise.

Good Eumaios believed my every word, and when I told him that I had been Odysseus' companion under the walls of Troy he embraced me, renewed his offer to host me, and showed great sadness over the long absence of his king. His expressions of loyalty were so sincere that I almost thought he had recognized me, and that his words were guided by well-calculated flattery. But then I understood that the poor herdsman is heartbroken over the fate of this island, which for twenty years has been held up by the fragile shoulders of Penelope, and which has been at risk of descending into chaos and civil war ever since the Suitors from nearby areas have taken up residence in the palace, expecting Penelope to choose Odysseus' successor from among them.

Eumaios called it a civil war, but then said that he wouldn't mind the Suitors slaughtering one another if it weren't for Penelope getting caught in the middle. He has his own ideas about statecraft, this herdsman.

My idea, on the other hand, would be to slip into the palace as a beggar and observe the Suitors' quarrels so as to later intervene with weapons when they are at their most vulnerable. But I obviously cannot act alone, and I don't know if I will be able to keep my head and avoid being recognized when I am next to Penelope. And Penelope, whom Eumaios declares has been faithful to Odysseus, how is she behaving with these admirers? What does she concede to these princely usurpers to keep them at bay?

I asked Eumaios many questions, since he often goes to the palace to bring animals to be slaughtered for the Suitors' ban-

quets. Has he seen Penelope in their company? Who does she seem to like the most?

“It’s impossible,” I said to him, “that a beautiful young woman like Penelope has been able to hold them back without offering anything in return. Who amongst all the Suitors do you think is her favorite?”

“How do you, foreigner, know that Penelope is young and beautiful?”

“Odysseus talked to me about her many times. The men always spoke much about their women during the lulls in the fighting.”

Eumaios is a simple soul and incapable of casting doubt on the queen he adores as much as an Olympian goddess, as he put it.

“But even the Olympian goddesses,” I rebutted, “have their favorites, and they often take great liberties, just like prostitutes.”

Eumaios took offense at these words and scolded me, waving his arms and raising his voice.

“I’ll make you march right out of this house if you’re not careful. What terrible thing have my ears heard from the mouth of a foreigner whom I have received in my house? How dare you speak of prostitutes and throw such slander on Queen Penelope?”

“Perhaps I let my tongue get carried away and I offended the goddesses of Olympus,” I said, “but I never wanted to offend Penelope.”

“I know that Antinous is chief among the Suitors,” Eumaios revealed to me, “but this does not mean that Penelope has chosen him. I know that her admirers have argued furiously and that Antinous, the best among them for courage and beauty, has been able to position himself ahead of them all. I know nothing else, and even the things I am telling you, O foreigner, are just

rumors garnered from the palace handmaidens, gossiping women who hate one another as much as Penelope's admirers do."

"How many of these admirers are there, though?"

"I know that there are so many they have filled the palace, but I have never counted them."

"Ten? Fifty?"

"I count my pigs every day, but I have never counted Penelope's admirers. I think it must be closer to fifty than ten."

I have understood that I could never fight all those young Suitors, and that I should study their strengths before facing them with weapons. I'm still hoping the gods and fate will not fail me.

#### PENELOPE

I have already held out against the siege of the Suitors longer than Troy against the siege of the Achaeans, but time neglects the plans, the thoughts, and the feelings of a woman who has no walls or weapons in her defense as Helen did. I have survived these months and years without surrendering, and I have measured my private war against that distant one which the besieged Trojans fought, and I still hope that one day Odysseus will arrive and invent a new horse to free me. This would be a just cause, better than fighting for that adulterous Helen, whom Odysseus had wisely refused as his wife, who provoked an atrocious war and thousands of deaths and a destroyed city because of her running off with the youthful Paris.

Time does not flow equally in all places, the days and years of the siege of Troy are not the same as the days and years of my solitude here in Ithaca. And the ten years that have passed for

me and for Odysseus since the war ended? Who has lost them? Who has gained them?

It is true that I have held out longer than the Trojans, but the Suitors continue their assault, intent on sapping my energy and eating my bread until I become a solitary, naked prey. The gods rarely concede the privilege of being able to fill the space between one day and another, one year and another, with hope. Poor Queen Penelope, where is your crown? How much pain, how much sadness, how many sleepless nights still await you?

Last night I dreamt I was wearing a burnished iron cuirass and gripping a sword that was so large and heavy that it dragged my arm to the ground. Thus armed, I entered the hall where the Suitors were banqueting noisily, with coarse singing. When they saw me, they fell silent in terror, and the moment I lifted the sword in a threatening manner they fled, and the palace quickly became deserted.

I don't know what message the gods were trying to send me in this dream, whether it is a truthful proclamation coming through the gate of horn, or a false promise passing through the gate of ivory. But why search for obscure meanings in such a clear dream? I want only to know what import a nocturnal desire can have for my unhappy life. A prodding? To do what? Is there anything I can do? No advice from any quarter. The sky is mute and the gods distant. What am I saying—it is the sky that is distant and the gods mute.

Dreams are like the cries of the seagulls that I interpret as good or bad omens based on how I feel. These days, the gulls sound like frightened voices, as if something terrible were to happen, but I know that this is true only in my distraught

imagination, and that I should not listen to these stupid sea birds that make such a racket over my head for no reason.

#### ODYSSEUS

Every morning Eumaios brings two pots of boiled turnips mixed with the residue from the olive press to the sows who are suckling their piglets. He brought me to see a sow that cannot suckle all thirteen piglets that she had just given birth to, because she only has twelve teats. The twelve little pigs, each of which has laid claim to its own teat, will allow no one else to suck milk from their mother. The thirteenth, left out, is being fed by Eumaios with goat's milk until he is able to eat by himself.

"Thirteen is a bad number and I don't know if we will be able to save him," said Eumaios, who believes in the magic of numbers.

"In that case, let me tell you that on the island of the Phaeacians there reign thirteen kings and the thirteenth, Alcinous, is the richest and most powerful of them all. And when Odysseus was shipwrecked off the coast of the Phaeacian island, his twelve sailors were swallowed by the waves and he, the thirteenth, was saved."

Eumaios looked at me suspiciously.

"How do you know these things about Odysseus? You certainly couldn't have spoken about his shipwreck while under the walls of Troy."

"Merchants ply the seas and land in ports. They are the ones who bring the news."

I accompanied the herdsman from the sows' pen to that of the other pigs, which he released and led, along with Galatea, to forage in the oak woods. I saw that he would have been disap-

pointed if I had not joined them. The herdsman explained that twice a year, in spring and fall, he has to clear the underwood of brambles so that the pigs can feed more easily on the acorns that fall from the oak and beech trees. In addition to Galatea, he has two boys who work for him in the glades, collecting chests of acorns that will be stored for winter.

The pigs grunted contentedly as they rooted through the dry leaves, then lifted their heads to chew the acorns found on the ground.

Every time he takes the animals to pasture, Eumaios brings a bow and a quiver of arrows to hunt wild rabbits.

“When I bring the animals down to the Suitors, all they leave me is the head, and sometimes only the ears and tail. And so I try to catch some wild rabbits, which Galatea roasts on a spit or stews in wine for me.”

At one point, while we were walking through a clearing, I saw a flock of wild ducks coming. I quickly grabbed the bow from Eumaios’ hands, and when the ducks were overhead, I let an arrow fly. With a single shot, I brought down a good-sized duck, which I gathered and handed over to Galatea.

Eumaios was speechless for the speed and accuracy of my shot, and he stared with wide eyes of amazement.

“Never seen anyone shoot so well,” he said.

“I started practicing archery when I was a boy, and I obviously got a lot of practice during the Trojan War,” I told him.

“I’m not bad with a bow myself, but I’ve never hit a flying duck. Only Odysseus could do that.”

I’ll have to be more careful, otherwise Eumaios will become suspicious. I handed over the bow and arrows, and we continued walking in the burning sun, past a small garden where Eumaios was growing turnips.

“Those turnips are also for the winter. They’re good for the pigs, but when they are roasted over embers and seasoned with the oil that this island so abundantly produces and a pinch of salt, they’re good for men too.”

We got home at sunset, passing by a spring where the pigs sated their thirst. Eumaios washed the wheels of the cart that he uses to bring the pigs into town, then we went inside, sat down in front of the fire, and ate barley soup cooked by Galatea, then the duck, roasted with watercress, veronica, and seaweed on a spit, along with small flatbreads cooked on a hot stone. And we washed our dinner down with a glass of red wine, flavored with resin.

After dinner, I listened patiently as the good herdsman told me about his life, his early days with his father, a lord from the island of Syros, about his abduction by a band of Phoenician marauders, and of his being sold to Laertes, the king of Ithaca, which has since become his beloved homeland. Landed in Ithaca, his story carried on until late, when sleep made our eyelids heavy and our heads droop.

Out of the many words I heard between wakefulness and sleep, I learned that Telemachus, trying to uncover news about me, faced the dangers of a long sea voyage, arriving in Pylos in Messenia to ask the elderly Nestor for news, and then in Sparta, where Menelaus lived with Helen, reinstated to her conjugal bed after the fall of Troy.

Eumaios was told by a traveling merchant that Telemachus left Sparta two weeks ago and should have returned by now. He looked worried, though, about his arrival because he fears the Suitors have set some sort of trap.

I have thus arrived in Ithaca in time to watch over my son’s fate. I decided that I will go into town as soon as possible, dressed once again as a beggar, so as to keep Telemachus from being



betrayed by the Suitors in an ambush. They can hardly bear the presence of Odysseus' son, his legitimate heir, on the island.

"Of course," Eumaios said, "it is a real stroke of bad luck that Odysseus is far from Ithaca in a moment of danger. He has either been shipwrecked by a storm or become an adventurer, because the war in Troy has been over for ten years now. I've heard that some soldiers, rather than return home, have turned to the life of outlaws."

"Is that what you think of your king?"

"What are you saying? I was talking about soldiers who don't want to go back to their wives. Odysseus is a king and has a beautiful and honest wife whom he loved."

He sat in silence, then offered a private reflection.

"I think war changes the way men think."

"There are men, though, that are born for war," I said. "Achilles, Agamemnon, Hector, Ajax were heroes with a sword and spear, and Odysseus was no less; I remember that he handled his weapons no less adroitly than them, but he was different. Odysseus was a man of stratagems, and he told everyone who would listen that future wars would not be won by brute force but by strategy and cunning above all. He even said that the age of the sword and spear was finished, and that an age of numbers and words was coming."

Eumaios looked at me, his face showing confusion.

"What did he mean? Before leaving Ithaca, Odysseus was a champion archer, but I don't know if he philosophized about numbers and words. It is true that he enjoyed telling stories, and he always found the right words to make people listen."

"Under the walls of Troy, everyone stopped to listen to his tales," I said.

"The legend of his deeds has traveled all the way to Ithaca, and everyone says that Troy fell when that wooden horse with

its belly full of soldiers invented by Odysseus entered within the walls. But what does all of this matter if first the war and then the return voyage have kept him far from Penelope and his son Telemachus, who are now in grave danger?"

"So you have heard news about a plot against Telemachus?"

"The herald Medon fears that terrible things will happen when Telemachus reappears in the palace after his trip to Sparta. Telemachus is very young and will do something careless. All of our troubles began with that pointless war that took our king from Ithaca and put the island's sovereignty at risk. What did we care if they had stolen Menelaus' wife? Stolen? Rumors say that Helen ran off willingly with Paris. And Menelaus decided to drag all of the Achaeans into a war over a bedroom affair."

"In fact, only Agamemnon, king of the Mycenaeans and brother of Menelaus, immediately accepted the invitation to go off to war. The other Achaeans had no intention of getting their ships and men involved in such a distant war."

"Even Odysseus did what he could, using words and tricks, to avoid going, but Troy must have been written in his destiny."

"Not even Achilles, the heroic Achilles, wanted to leave for Troy," I said. "His parents had sent him to Skyros in the court of King Lycomedes, where he disguised himself as a woman. It was Odysseus himself, once he had joined up with the other Achaeans, who discovered the trick and exposed him. He presented himself at Lycomedes' court disguised as a merchant and showed his goods to the women, sliding weapons in amid the jewels, fabric, and silk ribbons. Young Achilles immediately showed his interest in the weapons, ignoring all the rest, whereupon everyone understood who he was. Dropping the disguise, he was easily convinced by Odysseus to sail with the others. This story was whispered under the walls of Troy, but Achilles