

Prologue

Penelope gazed into the horizon again as she did the previous day and the day before that. She stood by the window and waited for Odysseus' ship to appear on the horizon. A ship arose from the fog of the deep distance, and her heart fluttered at the thought of being reunited with Odysseus. Penelope narrowed her gaze and realized that the ship was not his. The next day, another ship pierced the ethereal aura of the Aegean, and she felt her heart soar once more. But the ship was not that of the Ithacan king.

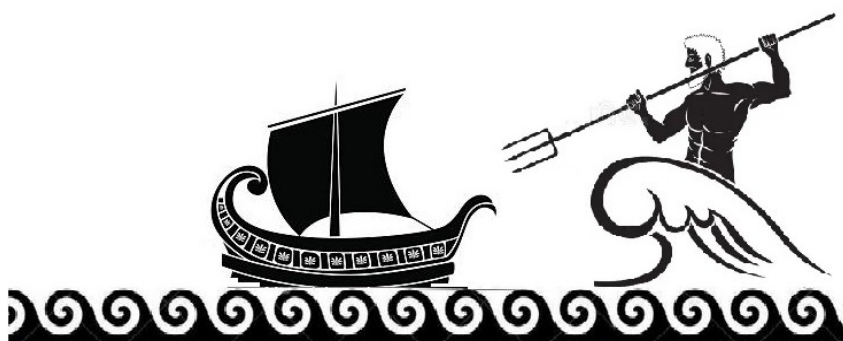
The wife of Odysseus had gazed longingly at the horizon countless times, but she saw a different ship each time. The horizon was smeared with formless, fog-like textures. She saw a ship breaking the impenetrable blue of the sea, and she felt that her hero had finally returned home from Troy. But it was not Odysseus' ship. She felt that the entire span of gazing at the horizon for all these years had contracted into this moment. She would have to wait.

The day of Odysseus' departure had spread into years. Each day he left for Troy, and each day it seemed he would return. But she knew as she

always did: the sea was Ithaca. The island kingdom was a bride, and the sea around her finger was a sapphire stone bearing a royal crest. The face of the morphing sea gazed into her loving visage. The bride saw herself in it. With each wave that wetted the shore, Penelope felt Odysseus fill the emptiness of her embrace. She heard her thoughts in the silence of the ocean's compression. She sensed his prolonged absence as well as his return.

A man emerged from the sea, feeling the ocean sweep across all of Ithaca. He would sit on Odysseus' throne. He felt himself assume the shape and form of the wandering king, but only so that Ithaca could be as it once was. Odysseus would one day return, and he would need to see the kingdom he left behind. He would have to recognize the Ithaca he once knew and loved. Only then would he see how much he had changed.

When sea kissed sand, Ithaca would be as it was. Penelope would feel the firm grip of Odysseus' loving hand in hers. And she would see him return in a light that traveled for a thousand years, in the sea of a thousand faces, in the knowledge of a thousand Ithacas.



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Ithacas

Time is an arrow. It flies over teeming seas, slaying one-eyed giants, piercing Siren song, whispering past disenchanted sea nymphs, taming wild Aeolian winds, evading the grasp of Poseidon's sapphire fist, and then finally moving through the axe heads of the Trial of the Bow. When it reaches the other side, it once again travels toward the same destination. It resumes its flight over the perils of sea and sky, one after the other, again and again. It carries the length and breadth of a distant star, a star already made half-distant by dreaming. It travels for a thousand years, and yet it arrives home instantly.

The thousand brides had been waiting for the groom forever it seemed. But they would have to wait longer. They had blissfully prepared for the

prolonged wedding, for they knew the wait would be enriching beyond words. Their earrings were the color of the foaming seas. Their golden hair fell loosely over their bare, sunburned shoulders. Each of the brides exuded the salted fragrance of the sea. Their ornamented brow was creased with worry. A wave of concern swept their shore-brown eyes. Only one of the brides would be wedded to him. Each felt as an ageless bride with arms stretched wide, and time after time each felt the emptiness of her embrace.

The faces of the brides were partly concealed by a shroud. For now, the brides stood utterly still. When one moved, the others moved as well. When a bride fell, the one before her felt the fall. When one cried, the others joined her. When one laughed, the others did so as well. But only one of them remained firm when the others moved. In the end, only one bride would remain. None of them knew who it was, but they would have to wait for years and years. They all stood apart from each other. But time would draw them closer into its compressed silences.

The brides formed a bright sea. Their dresses shone fiercely, as though lit up with their expectant longing. Something rippled through all of them, and each of the brides slipped beneath its current. The brides felt a wind-like sensation on their backs, each leaning on the other as though forming a wave rolling gently. Each of them helped to carry the ship bringing the groom closer to home. For now, the ship remained invisibly afloat in the abyss. The women allowed the king to slowly make it back home across their sea of whiteness. And then it seemed he had finally arrived. All the brides saw that the groom was a beggar. Only one of them would restore his royalty. The

touch of her hand upon his would turn the beggar into a king.

The one who remained would have proved her firmness even if the groom would see that her beauty had faded. She would be the one the groom would hold on to for all of time. But for the moment the groom was unknown to the bride, who would be unable to remember him. He was a beggar whose only wealth would be the loving touch of the bride. The beggar moved from bride to bride until he found the one who had changed the least.

Some of the brides moved away from him upon seeing that he was a beggar. Only one of them would ultimately recognize him as the king. Only one of them would recognize the richness he carried with him from far away. The beggar searched for his one true love, the one who waited for him all these years without losing faith. Deep down, she knew that a thousand brides have waited for him because they have loved him. But how have they loved him? How deep was their love? Was it merely a shallow surface or water that wetted solid ground? Only one of the brides will remain loyal until the end.

The bride and beggar would be thrust together by time and tide. The sea would reach the shore, and everything would seem to be as it once was. The king would smile at the bride, and she would smile back. Each would be the other's world, an island and a kingdom, an island kingdom.

I would like to say “Sing, Muse,” but there is no Muse who can sing

this tale for she would need to sing it a thousand times. Even the rarefied celestial voice of a singing goddess must have its limits. I cannot expect her to sing this tale as she sang a thousand other tales, for this tale alone is a thousandfold. But neither can I take her place, for I can seldom fathom singing a single syllable.

So where do I begin? The story seems to move, migrating from one period to another. I must search for the story, which has never ceased to become. Only then will Ithaca be the past and the future. Only then will the kingdom without a king become without ceasing to be. I will start where I saw him last, which is when I first saw him. No longer beholden to the divine memory of the Muse, I will tell the tale once and a thousand times. It seems there is no longer any difference.

The first time I saw him was on Calypso's island, the great itinerant, king Odysseus of Ithaca. Odysseus wept on the beach, swallowed up in powerlessness. His mind seemed to revisit some distant place. The lush scenery failed to lift his spirits, for his heart sought the sights and smells of home. He recalled the trunk of an olive tree from which he had fashioned the bed where he held Penelope in his loving arms after their love's consummation. The deserted isle of Ogygia shone under the blazing sun, which remained undimmed in the noon sky. Ithaca seemed to follow him everywhere for it remained carved in his endlessly wandering memory. Calypso, daughter of Atlas, had used her wiles to keep Odysseus under her

spell. She knew that the Ithacan king had wiles of his own, and that his clever tongue disguised his true intent.

Odysseus sat on the beach as the afternoon shade slowly swept over his statuesque frame. I saw him as he gazed longingly past the shore and into the great blue sea. The Ithacan king wept bitter tears, for he knew that he had no means of traversing the boundless ocean. Calypso wanted him for herself, far removed from the outside world. Odysseus had adapted to this new life as he had done in all previous steps of his journey.

The Ithacan king briefly felt Calypso's hand on his shoulder. Words of comfort traveled from the mouth of the nymph to his ear. Odysseus looked over his shoulder and saw the look of concern in Calypso's face. The nymph knew how much he longed for home. I saw the nymph move closer to him. She was whispering words he longed to hear. Calypso would give Odysseus his means of plowing through the waves and marking an end to his seemingly endless sojourn.

I was one of the tellers of his tale, of the long journey that seemed without end. I have told and retold it. But now I revisited this seemingly endless tale of mutability. I knew *The Odyssey* from beginning to end. But behind the story's end emerged an endless array of new beginnings. The odysseys within the odyssey reached farther and wider. I have told the tale many times before, but this time something has changed. The tale has morphed beyond my power to foresee the future. This time, I felt myself become the tale itself.

I could only tell this tale to those who could capture me just as Calypso

held Odysseus captive. Menelaus captured me on the island of Pharos as he returned from Troy. He wished to know the future, and he disguised himself as a seal to lure me out into the open. Menelaus was eager to learn how he could return to Sparta, and he needed my help to guide him through the teeming seas. He knew of my ability to morph into various shapes. I, god of elusive sea change, could sense a shift in the waters, but I also had to remain aloof from human eyes.

I could sense fish darting forth and quivering under me as the sea boiled with resentment. The liquid fury of Poseidon remained, but the aftermath of the Trojan war was still a source of chaos. Merchant ships drifted aimlessly while the scarred remnants of the Greek army drifted in slow spurts across a great void. Currents roared as they dispersed, as though in recognition of the war's end. The song-less rhythms of the sea bore no comfort for anyone seeking solace. Chaos spilled through the depths and into the heart of the ocean itself.

I watched Odysseus as he endeavored to catch fish. The king seemed to enjoy the simplicity of his isolation. The sea glittered before his gaze. Odysseus stood under the merciless afternoon sun as he searched for food. He felt Calypso's presence, and he withdrew himself into the shade. He felt his heart soar above the deep.

I saw him as he walked along the shore in aimless circles, his mind burdened with the remembrance of a past he longed to relive. Odysseus looked out toward the sea, and I made sure that I remained unseen. The depths of the sea were embroiled in ceaseless turmoil. I knew that I needed to

bring calm and relief to the morphing sea in order to facilitate Odysseus' journey home. For a brief moment, Odysseus looked to the sea and seemed intent on narrowing his gaze, as if he knew that I was there. He seemed to look at the sea as if for the first time.

I saw a faint glimmer of recognition in his eyes. I felt that at that moment, Odysseus realized that he would somehow make it home. I wondered if he sensed my presence. Odysseus maintained his curious eyes in my direction, but then he turned his gaze away. He could not have seen me for I remained elusive to him and every other mortal.

The tale was morphing again, and Odysseus needed to return home as a changed man. But his return has already happened. I have already seen it. The Ithacan king returned to Ithaca as a new man, and Penelope held him in her embrace under the stars. Now it seemed that I needed to live Odysseus' journey. I needed to become the journey itself. I, the Old Man of the Sea, must become Odysseus now. I must become *The Odyssey*.

Ithaca changed from day to day, from year to year. Although it seemed as an ageless bride, the groom was nowhere to be found. I have watched it morph beyond recognition. But I must ensure that the Ithaca that Odysseus returns to is the one he left behind. The island kingdom was a bride who aged in the groom's absence. Time had left furrows in the brow of the bride, but Ithaca would have to one day be as it once was. The wrinkles that dotted the bride's forehead will give way to the youthful restoration of recognition. It is the only way Odysseus can see the change in himself. The Ithacan king will

glimpse his reflection in the mirror of the ocean, but Ithaca must be the loyal bride who is waiting to grasp his hand.

Penelope had reckoned the days and years that followed Odysseus' departure, but there was no rest in sight for those who sought to devour her husband's riches. A kingdom without a king only meant dissent and discord. Telemachus watched as the suitors quietly took over his father's kingdom. He was just a month old when his father left for Troy, and now he stood on the uncertain threshold of adulthood. He felt as though the chaos that had taken over Ithaca had forced him to grow into a man overnight.

A woman approached him. Sensing her presence, Telemachus turned around. "Who are you, lady?"

The young man gazed at her inquiringly. The woman observed him and said "Your father is on his way here. It may take many years, but he will make it here."

Telemachus narrowed his gaze, mystified by the woman. "And how do you know? Who are you?"

I watched the lady speak with Telemachus. I knew that she was none other than the goddess in disguise, Athena, goddess of wisdom. After Telemachus went away, I approached the goddess.

Athena turned to face me as though expecting me to be there all along. She knew who I was. I was concealed by a hooded cloak. Only my white

beard shone in the open.

“Old Man of the Sea, what brings you here? What has lured you away from the swelling seas? And do not think I am unable to see through your disguise.” I imparted my most gracious smile, but she did not return it.

“Odysseus...you know where he is, and yet here you are, trying to restore peace and order. I am concerned with doing the same.”

“And why do you wear his face?”

“The great traveler is closer to home than he realizes. Ithaca is changing as he is changing. One Ithaca morphs into another. I must ensure that Odysseus can one day recognize the Ithaca he knew and loved.”

The goddess of wisdom looked away, staring into the sea. Then she vanished. Telemachus drifted toward me, noticing that I just spoke with Athena. He approached me, watching me as I changed shape and form. “Who are you, stranger? How did you change like that?”

I turned around and said, “I am nobody.”

“A nobody cannot do what you have just done. You are a shape-shifter.”

Telemachus heard voices behind, and he looked away from me. When he looked back, he saw that I was gone. Two men spoke with Telemachus and regarded the strange look on his face. “What did you see? Who was the man you spoke to?”

Telemachus shrugged and replied, “Nobody.” The young man remembered what the lady said. He knew that Ithaca was changing before his

eyes, and that he had to change with it. He was a child no longer. The son of Odysseus needed to prove to everyone that he would take on the mantle of manhood.

Deep down, the young man knew that he needed to summon everyone in an assembly. He wished to restore some semblance of order. He would need to go look for the story of his father's travels. He was aware of how different clues would point him in different directions, but also that he would allow a tale to emerge from all of them. The Greek veterans who fought in Troy alongside Odysseus would help him find Odysseus or at the very least know his whereabouts. They would help him restore some semblance of order in Ithaca. Telemachus boarded a ship and went on his way. A journey awaited him.

I approached the palace of Odysseus, where suitors made their presence known. The suitors made menacing gestures toward all those who aimed to obstruct their entrance into the palace of the absent king. Telemachus watched in dismay. I altered my shape and form before approaching the young man once again. “Son of Odysseus, the suitors wish to take over the kingdom. You must stand firm and act as royalty.”

“Who are you, stranger?”

“Someone who knows you have changed. All of Ithaca needs to see this as well. Stop the suitors. Make Ithaca as it once was.”

“I am aware of this. But I have never seen you before.”

“That is because I am nobody,” I said before vanishing into the crowd. Telemachus scanned the crowd in search of me, but I was gone.

I felt Ithaca going on a journey, and I would follow it wherever it went. Then I entered the palace and saw the twelve axe heads. The suitors looked at me with wonder, believing their king to be home. Penelope had prepared a trial, The Trial of the Bow. One of my hands morphed into a bow and the other into an arrow. The suitors at once knew I was a stranger, but I would shoot the arrow through the axe heads. I raised the bow and aimed the arrow toward the axes.

The arrow left the bowstring and flew through each axe head. Once it did so, I found myself back on the shores of the island, concealing my presence in a hood. I was back at the beginning. But this time, I became part of the tale. I was no longer the one telling the tale. I was living it.

The story shifted all around him. A sea of alteration swept the island kingdom. The sea was spinning a new tale.