

14 · THE · OLIVE · TREE ·

When every last suitor was dead Odysseus turned to his son. 'Telemachus, call the old woman, tell her to open the doors!' Telemachus called to old Eurycleia. She came hobbling to the threshold stone. She pulled back the bolts and the doors of the feasting hall swung open.

And there she saw her king. He was standing like a mountain lion, surrounded by the bodies of his enemies. She let out a thin, shrill, cackling cry of triumph. She lifted up her skirts and came dancing into the hall. Odysseus raised his hand.

'Old woman, hold your tongue. It is an impious thing to exult and celebrate over the dead. Gloat in silence.'

Eurycleia stood still and lowered her head. 'Old woman,' Odysseus continued, 'fetch servants and maidservants with buckets, sponges and water. Clean every speck of blood from this feasting hall. Telemachus, you and I will burn the bodies of the dead!'

Odysseus and Telemachus grabbed the corpses of the suitors by their ankles, dragged them across the hall and down the hill. They built a huge pyre and lit the funeral fire. All that day the heat of the fire's heart consumed the houses of bone. When all had been reduced to smouldering white ash, Odysseus and Telemachus climbed back up the hill. They entered the hall. It was spotless. There was no trace or fleck or speck of blood.

Odysseus called Eurycleia. 'Old woman,' he said, 'go upstairs and tell my wife Penelope that her husband is home and he is waiting for her!'

Eurycleia nodded. She lifted her skirts and twinkled up the stairs to the bedchamber as though

she had forgotten all her years. Penelope was lying fast asleep on her bed. All day she had been sleeping, her heart heavy with sorrow. The old woman said, 'Madam! Madam! Wake up, wake up, wake up!'

Penelope sat up and rubbed her eyes.

'Madam, wake up. Your husband is home! He is downstairs! He is waiting for you!'

Penelope looked at Eurycleia and shook her head. 'Old woman, what are you talking about? Has one of the mighty Gods or Goddesses addled your wits?'

Eurycleia wrung her hands. 'For pity's sake, madam, come downstairs!'

Penelope climbed out of bed. She followed the old woman down the stairs. She saw there was a man standing in the feasting hall. She stood on the bottom step. She looked at him and she said nothing.

There was anger at the outrages of the suitors and gratitude at the interventions of owl-eyed Athene. When the stories had been told, Odysseus refilled his cup with wine and told of his adventures on the fields of Troy and his great journey across the broad face of the world. And then he filled his cup again and told of the one adventure still left to make — that journey far inland to the place where the oar he was carrying over his shoulder would be mistaken for a winnowing fan.

But Penelope put her arm over his shoulder and silenced his mouth with her kisses. 'Sweet Odysseus,' she said, 'that will be as it may be and as the mighty Gods decree. But now you are here, in my arms, at home, in the place where all past and all future melt into present joy.'

The Epilogue

Dreams and visions come through two gates: either through a gate of ivory or through a gate of horn. If the dream, the vision, comes through the ivory gate, it is mere fancy, fantasy. If it comes through the gate of horn it carries truth. This dream, this vision, is over. You must decide through which gate it has come.