

Odysseus – Chapter 14

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 and 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.

Telemachus said, "Mother, strange cold-hearted

mother, your husband is home after nineteen years and you stand there and you say nothing?"

Odysseus turned to Telemachus. "Leave us alone." He turned to his servants and his maidservants who were lined up along the walls watching. "Leave us alone now."

As soon as the last one had left the room, Penelope walked across the hall. She looked into his face and said, "Is it you? You are so changed!" She reached and touched his cheek with her fingertips. "I do not know you any longer. I do not even know that it is you. You are not the young man I remember sailing off to fight in distant Troy all those years ago, leaving me standing on the seashore with a baby in my arms."

She turned away from him. "I cannot sleep with you. I will not share a bed with you. I will tell the servants to move the bed. You can sleep on the other side of a closed door."



Odysseus put his hand tenderly on her shoulder and whispered, "Penelope, you know that cannot be. You know that I built this hall around an ancient olive tree. You know that I carved our bed with my own hands from one of the branches of that tree. You know that there is no one who can lift it and set it on the other side of a closed door."

Suddenly Penelope turned, her eyes shining with delight. She seized his hands.

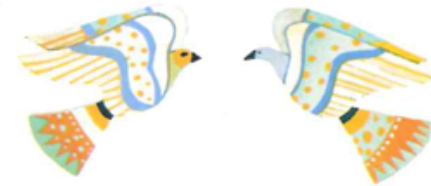
"Then it is you! Then it is you!" she cried. "Nobody knows the secret of our bed — you and I alone!"

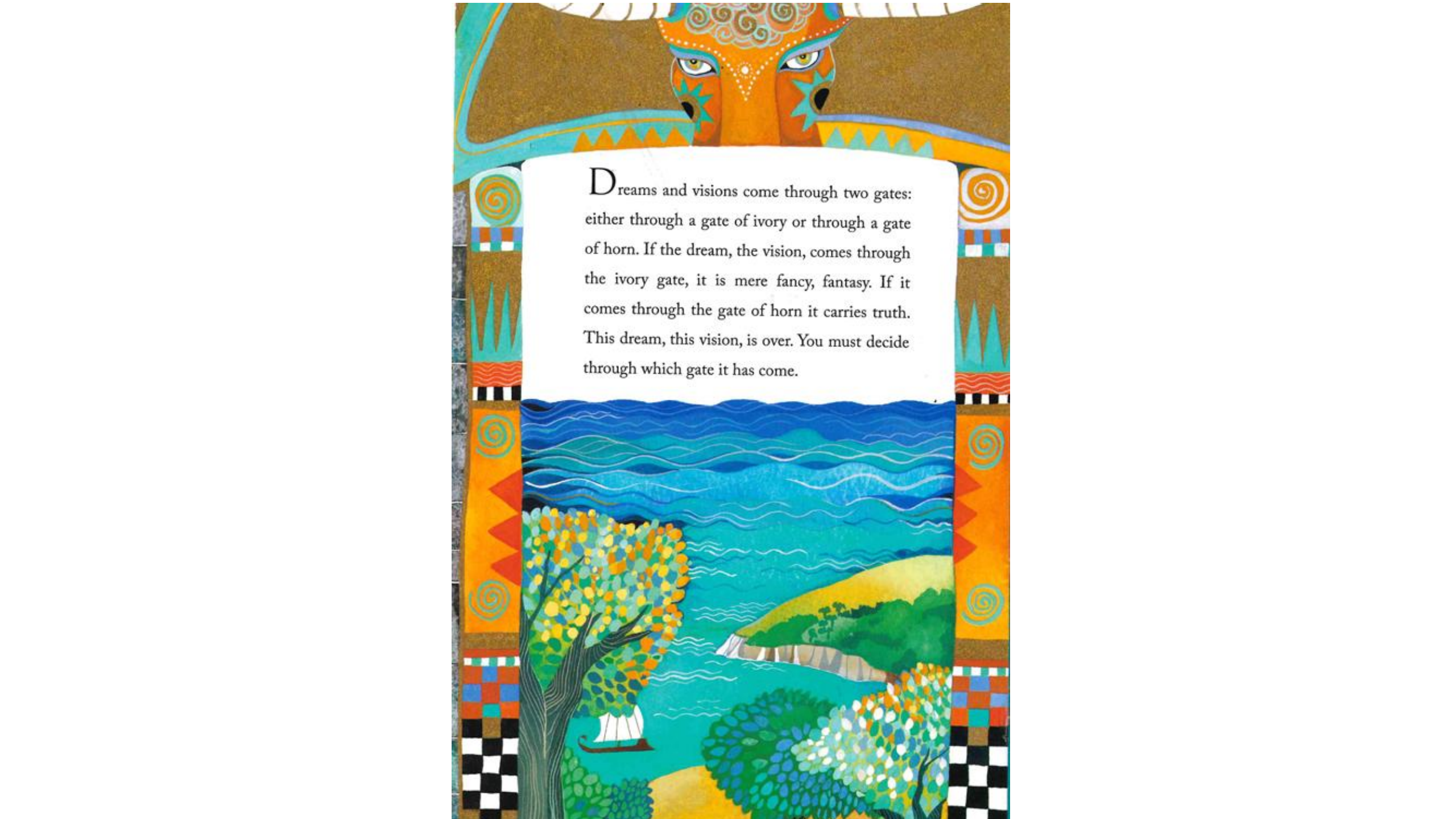
Odysseus looked into her face. She looked into his. Tears of joy were streaming down their cheeks. Suddenly she was in his arms. "Penelope," he said. "Penelope, my wife, my queen, only now am I truly home."

That night Odysseus, Penelope and Telemachus sat down together in the feasting hall. With them was Odysseus's old father Laertes, the faithful swineherd Eumaeus, and old Eurycleia. Odysseus listened as each of them told the story of all that had happened on the island of Ithaca during his long absence. There were tears at the death of his mother and there was laughter at Penelope's

trick with the loom. 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."





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.