accompany the three visitors to the field to witness this pitiful sight. "You'll see," I said, weeping. "He no longer recognises me, or even our little son!" I carried the baby along with me to make the point.

It was Palamedes who found Odysseus out—he grabbed Telemachus from my arms and put him down right in front of the team. Odysseus either had to turn aside or run over his own son.

So then he had to go.

The other three flattered him by saying an oracle had decreed that Troy could not fall without his help. That eased his preparation for departure, naturally. Which of us can resist the temptation of being thought indispensable?

Waiting

What can I tell you about the next ten years? Odysseus sailed away to Troy. I stayed in Ithaca. The sun rose, travelled across the sky, set. Only sometimes did I think of it as the flaming chariot of Helios. The moon did the same, changing from phase to phase. Only sometimes did I think of it as the silver boat of Artemis. Spring, summer, fall, and winter followed one another in their appointed rounds. Quite often the wind blew. Telemachus grew from year to year, eating a lot of meat, indulged by all.

We had news of how the war with Troy was going; sometimes well, sometimes badly. Minstrels sang songs about the notable heroes—Achilles, Ajax, Agamemnon, Menelaus, Hector, Aeneas, and the rest. I didn't care about them; I waited only for news of Odysseus. When would he come back and relieve my boredom? He too appeared in the songs, and
I relished those moments. There he was making an inspiring speech, there he was uniting the quarrelling factions, there he was inventing an astonishing falsehood, there he was delivering sage advice, there he was disguising himself as a runaway slave and sneaking into Troy and speaking with Helen herself, who—the song proclaimed—had bathed him and anointed him with her very own hands.

I wasn’t so fond of that part.

Finally, there he was, concocting the stratagem of the wooden horse filled with soldiers. And then—the news flashed from beacon to beacon—Troy had fallen. There were reports of a great slaughtering and looting in the city. The streets ran red with blood, the sky above the palace turned to fire; innocent boy children were thrown off a cliff, and the Trojan women were parcelled out as plunder, King Priam’s daughters among them. And then, finally, the hoped-for news arrived: the Greek ships had set sail for home.

And then, nothing.

Day after day I would climb up to the top floor of the palace and look out over the harbour. Day after day there was no sign. Sometimes there were ships, but never the ship I longed to see.

Rumours came, carried by other ships. Odysseus and his men had got drunk at their first port of call and the men had mutinied, said some; no, said others, they’d eaten a magic plant that had caused them to lose their memories, and Odysseus had saved them by having them tied up and carried onto the ships. Odysseus had been in a fight with a giant one-eyed Cyclops, said some; no, it was only a one-eyed tavern keeper, said another, and the fight was over non-payment of the bill. Some of the men had been eaten by cannibals, said some; no, it was just a brawl of the usual kind, said others, with ear-bitings and nosebleeds and stabblings and eviscerations. Odysseus was the guest of a goddess on an enchanted isle, said some; she’d turned his men into pigs— not a hard job in my view— but had turned them back into men because she’d fallen in love with him and was feeding him
unheard-of delicacies prepared by her own immortal hands, and the two of them made love deliriously every night; no, said others, it was just an expensive whorehouse, and he was sponging off the Madam.

Needless to say, the minstrels took up these themes and embroidered them considerably. They always sang the noblest versions in my presence—the ones in which Odysseus was clever, brave, and resourceful, and battling supernatural monsters, and beloved of goddesses. The only reason he hadn’t come back home was that a god—the sea-god Poseidon, according to some—was against him, because a Cyclops crippled by Odysseus was his son. Or several gods were against him. Or the Fates. Or something. For surely—the minstrels implied, by way of praising me—only a strong divine power could keep my husband from rushing back as quickly as possible into my loving—and lovely—wifely arms.

The more thickly they laid it on, the more costly were the gifts they expected from me. I always complied. Even an obvious fabrication is some comfort when you have few others.

My mother-in-law died, wrinkled up like drying mud and sickened by an excess of waiting, convinced that Odysseus would never return. In her mind this was my fault, not Helen’s: if only I hadn’t carried the baby to the ploughing ground! Old Eurycleia got even older. So did my father-in-law, Laertes. He lost interest in palace life, and went off to the countryside to rummage around on one of his farms, where he could be spotted shambling here and there in grubby clothing and muttering about pear trees. I suspected he was going soft in the head.

Now I was running the vast estates of Odysseus all by myself. In no way had I been prepared for such a task, during my early life at Sparta. I was a princess, after all, and work was what other people did. My mother, although she’d been a queen, had not set a good example. She didn’t care for the kinds of meals favoured in the grand palace, since big chunks of meat were the main feature; she preferred
— at the very most — a small fish or two, with seaweed garnish. She had a manner of eating the fish raw, heads first, an activity I would watch with chilled fascination. Have I forgotten to tell you she had rather small pointed teeth?

She disliked ordering the slaves about and punishing them, though she might suddenly kill one who was annoying her — she failed to understand that they had value as property — and she had no use at all for weaving and spinning. ‘Too many knots. A spider’s work. Leave it to Arachne’ she’d say. As for the chore of supervising the food supplies and the wine cellar and what she called ‘the mortal people’s golden toys’ that were kept in the vast storehouses of the palace, she merely laughed at the thought. ‘Naiads can’t count past three,’ she would say. ‘Fish come in shoals, not lists. One fish, two fish, three fish, another fish, another fish, another fish! That’s how we count them!’ She’d laugh her rippling laugh. ‘We immortals aren’t misers — we don’t hoard! Such things are pointless.’ Then she’d slip off to take a dip in the palace fountain, or she’d

vanish for days to tell jokes with the dolphins and play tricks on clams.

So in the palace of Ithaca I had to learn from scratch. At first I was impeded in this by Eurykleia, who wanted to be in charge of everything, but finally she realised that there was too much to be done, even for a busybody like her. As the years passed I found myself making inventories — where there are slaves there’s bound to be theft, if you don’t keep a sharp eye out — and planning the palace menus and wardrobes. Though slave garments were coarse, they did fall apart after a while and had to be replaced, so I needed to tell the spinners and weavers what to make. The grinders of corn were on the low end of the slave hierarchy, and were kept locked in an outbuilding — usually they were put in there for bad behaviour, and sometimes there were fights among them, so I had to be aware of any animosities and vendettas.

The male slaves were not supposed to sleep with the female ones, not without permission. This could be a tricky issue. They sometimes fell in love and
became jealous, just like their betters, which could cause a lot of trouble. If that sort of thing got out of hand I naturally had to sell them. But if a pretty child was born of these couplings, I would often keep it and rear it myself, teaching it to be a refined and pleasant servant. Perhaps I indulged some of these children too much. Eurycleia often said so.

Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks was one of these. Through my steward I traded for supplies, and soon had a reputation as a smart bargainer. Through my foreman I oversaw the farms and the flocks, and made a point of learning about such things as lambing and calving, and how to keep a sow from eating her farrow. As I gained expertise, I came to enjoy the conversations about such uncouth and dirty matters. It was a source of pride to me when my swineherd would come to me for advice.

My policy was to build up the estates of Odysseus so he’d have even more wealth when he came back than when he’d left – more sheep, more cows, more pigs, more fields of grain, more slaves. I had such a clear picture in my mind – Odysseus returning, and

me – with womanly modesty – revealing to him how well I had done at what was usually considered a man’s business. On his behalf, of course. Always for him. How his face would shine with pleasure! How pleased he would be with me! ‘You’re worth a thousand Helens,’ he would say. Wouldn’t he? And then he’d clasp me tenderly in his arms.

Despite all this busyness and responsibility, I felt more alone than ever. What wise counsellors did I have? Who could I depend on, really, except myself? Many nights I cried myself to sleep or prayed to the gods to bring me either my beloved husband or a speedy death. Eurycleia would draw me soothing baths and bring me comforting evening drinks, though these came with a price. She had the irksome habit of reciting folk sayings designed to stiffen my upper lip and encourage me in my dedication and hard work, such as:

She who weeps when sun's in sky
Will never pile the platter high.
THE PENEOPLIIAD

or:

She who wastes her time in moan
Will ne’er eat cow when it is grown.

or:

Mistress lazy, slaves get bold,
Will not do what they are told,
Act the thief or whore or knave:
Spare the rod and spoil the slave!

and more of that ilk. If she’d been younger I would have slapped her.

But her exhortations must have had some effect, because during the day times I managed to keep up the appearance of cheerfulness and hope, if not for myself, at least for Telemachus. I’d tell him stories of Odysseus — what a fine warrior he was, how clever, how handsome, and how wonderful everything would be once he got home again.

There was an increasing amount of curiosity about me, as there was bound to be about the wife — or was it the widow? — of such a famous man; foreign ships came to call with more frequency, bringing new rumours. They brought, also, the occasional feeler: if Odysseus were proved to have died, the gods forfend, might I perhaps be open to other offers? Me and my treasures. I ignored these hints, since news of my husband — dubious news, but news — continued to arrive.

Odysseus had been to the Land of the Dead to consult the spirits, said some. No, he’d merely spent the night in a gloomy old cave full of bats, said others. He’d made his men put wax in their ears, said one, while sailing past the alluring Sirens — half-bird, half-woman — who enticed men to their island and then ate them, though he’d tied himself to the mast so he could listen to their irresistible singing without jumping overboard. No, said another, it was a high-class Sicilian knocking shop — the courtesans there were known for their musical talents and their fancy feathered outfits.

It was hard to know what to believe. Sometimes
THE PENELOPiad

I thought people were making things up just to alarm me, and to watch my eyes fill with tears. There is a certain zest to be had in tormenting the vulnerable.

Any rumour was better than none, however, so I listened avidly to all. But after several more years the rumours stopped coming altogether: Odysseus seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth.

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The Chorus Line:
The Wily Sea Captain, A Sea Shanty

As Performed by the Twelve Maids, in Sailor Costumes

Oh wily Odysseus he set out from Troy,
With his boat full of loot and his heart full of joy,
For he was Athene’s own shiny-eyed boy,
With his lies and his tricks and his thieving!

His first port of call was the sweet Lotus shore
Where we sailors did long to forget the foul war;
But we soon were hauled off on the black ships once more,
Although we were pining and grieving.

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