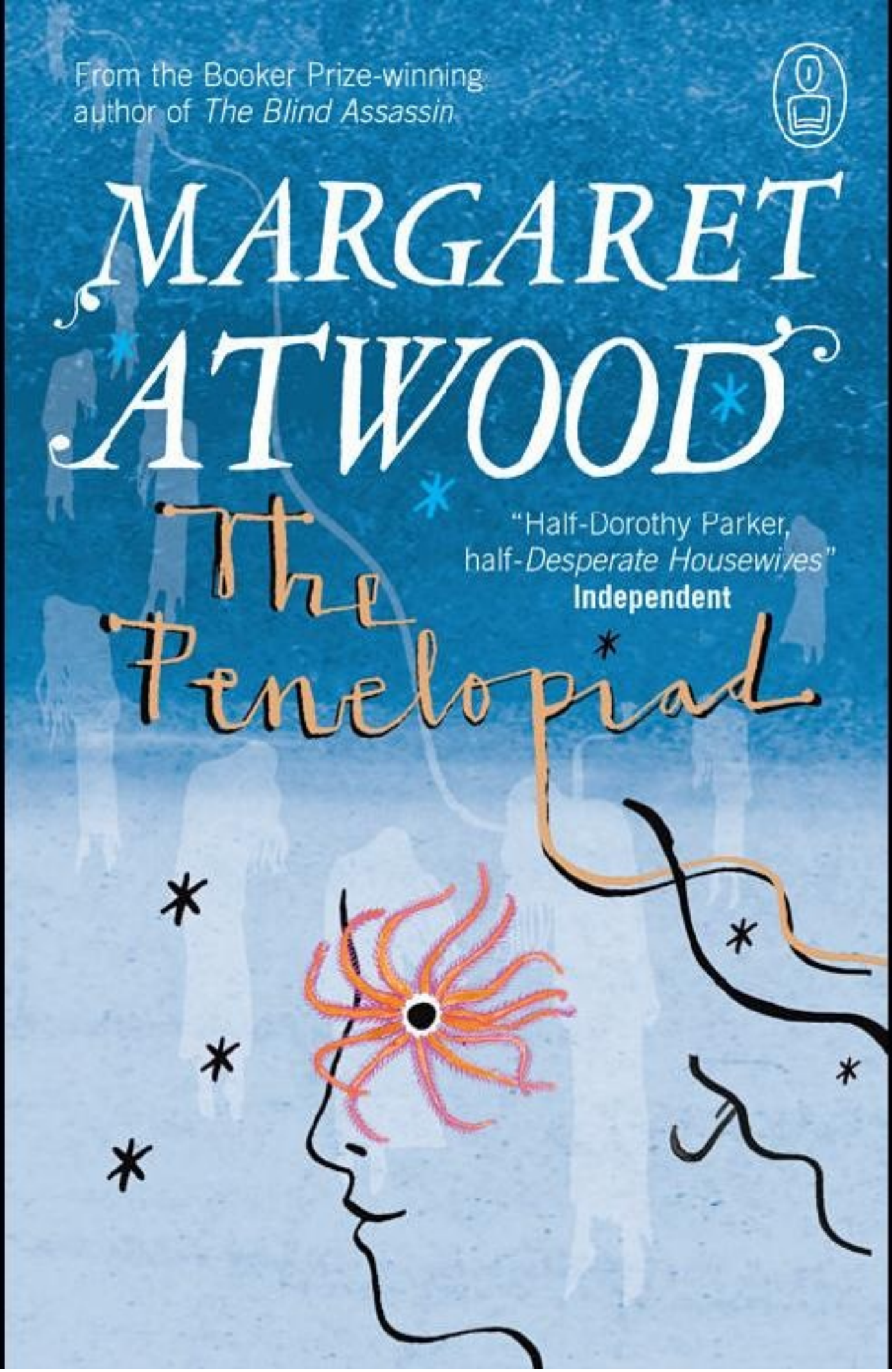
From the Booker Prize-winning author of *The Blind Assassin*

MARGARET ATWOOD

The Penelopiad

"Half-Dorothy Parker, half-*Desperate Housewives*"
Independent



THE PENELOPIAD

Margaret Atwood

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For my family

‘… Shrewd Odysseus! … You are a fortunate man to have won a wife of such pre-eminent virtue! How faithful was your flawless Penelope, Icarius’ daughter! How loyally she kept the memory of the husband of her youth! The glory of her virtue will not fade with the years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a beautiful song for mortal ears in honour of the constant Penelope.’

– *The Odyssey*, Book 24 (191–194)

… he took a cable which had seen service on a blue-bowed ship, made one end fast to a high column in the portico, and threw the other over the round-house, high up, so that their feet would not touch the ground. As when long-winged thrushes or doves get entangled in a snare … so the women’s heads were held fast in a row, with nooses round their necks, to bring them to the most pitiable end. For a little while their feet twitched, but not for very long.

– *The Odyssey*, Book 22 (470–473)

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Introduction

The story of Odysseus' return to his home kingdom of Ithaca following an absence of twenty years best known from Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus is said to have spent half of these years fighting th Trojan War and the other half wandering around the Aegean Sea, trying to get home, endurin hardships, conquering or evading monsters, and sleeping with goddesses. The character of 'wi Odysseus' has been much commented on: he's noted as a persuasive liar and disguise artist – a ma who lives by his wits, who devises stratagems and tricks, and who is sometimes too clever for his ov good. His divine helper is Pallas Athene, a goddess who admires Odysseus for his ready inventivenes

In *The Odyssey*, Penelope – daughter of Icarius of Sparta, and cousin of the beautiful Helen Troy – is portrayed as the quintessential faithful wife, a woman known for her intelligence an constancy. In addition to weeping and praying for the return of Odysseus, she cleverly deceives th many Suitors who are swarming around her palace, eating up Odysseus' estate in an attempt to forc her to marry one of them. Not only does Penelope lead them on with false promises, she weaves shroud that she unravels at night, delaying her marriage decision until its completion. Part of *Th Odyssey* concerns her problems with her teenaged son, Telemachus, who is bent on asserting himse not only against the troublesome and dangerous Suitors, but against his mother as well. The boo draws to an end with the slaughter of the Suitors by Odysseus and Telemachus, the hanging of twelv of the maids who have been sleeping with the Suitors, and the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope.

But Homer's *Odyssey* is not the only version of the story. Mythic material was originally oral, an also local – a myth would be told one way in one place and quite differently in another. I have draw on material other than *The Odyssey*, especially for the details of Penelope's parentage, her early li and marriage, and the scandalous rumours circulating about her.

I've chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids. The mai form a chanting and singing Chorus which focuses on two questions that must pose themselves aft any close reading of *The Odyssey*: what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope real up to? The story as told in *The Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies. I' always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself.

i

A Low Art

Now that I'm dead I know everything. This is what I wished would happen, but like so many of m wishes it failed to come true. I know only a few factoids that I didn't know before. Death is much to high a price to pay for the satisfaction of curiosity, needless to say.

Since being dead – since achieving this state of bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness – I'v learned some things I would rather not know, as one does when listening at windows or opening oth people's letters. You think you'd like to read minds? Think again.

Down here everyone arrives with a sack, like the sacks used to keep the winds in, but each of the sacks is full of words – words you've spoken, words you've heard, words that have been said abo you. Some sacks are very small, others large; my own is of a reasonable size, though a lot of the wor in it concern my eminent husband. What a fool he made of me, some say. It was a specialty of hi making fools. He got away with everything, which was another of his specialties: getting away.

He was always so plausible. Many people have believed that his version of events was the true on give or take a few murders, a few beautiful seductresses, a few one-eyed monsters. Even I believe him, from time to time. I knew he was tricky and a liar, I just didn't think he would play his tricks ar try out his lies on me. Hadn't I been faithful? Hadn't I waited, and waited, and waited, despite th temptation – almost the compulsion – to do otherwise? And what did I amount to, once the offici version gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with. Why couldn't the be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I had been? That was the line they took, th singers, the yarn-spinners. *Don't follow my example*, I want to scream in your ears – yes, yours! B when I try to scream, I sound like an owl.

Of course I had inklings, about his slipperiness, his wiliness, his foxiness, his – how can I put thi – his unscrupulousness, but I turned a blind eye. I kept my mouth shut; or, if I opened it, I sang h praises. I didn't contradict, I didn't ask awkward questions, I didn't dig deep. I wanted happy endin in those days, and happy endings are best achieved by keeping the right doors locked and going sleep during the rampages.

But after the main events were over and things had become less legendary, I realised how mar people were laughing at me behind my back – how they were jeering, making jokes about me, jok both clean and dirty; how they were turning me into a story, or into several stories, though not the kir of stories I'd prefer to hear about myself. What can a woman do when scandalous gossip travels th world? If she defends herself she sounds guilty. So I waited some more.

Now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it t myself. I've had to work myself up to it: it's a low art, tale-telling. Old women go in for it, strollir beggars, blind singers, maidservants, children – folks with time on their hands. Once, people wou have laughed if I'd tried to play the minstrel – there's nothing more preposterous than an aristocr fumbling around with the arts – but who cares about public opinion now? The opinion of the peop

down here: the opinion of shadows, of echoes. So I'll spin a thread of my own.

~~The difficulty is that I have no mouth through which I can speak. I can't make myself under~~stoo not in your world, the world of bodies, of tongues and fingers; and most of the time I have n listeners, not on your side of the river. Those of you who may catch the odd whisper, the odd squea so easily mistake my words for breezes rustling the dry reeds, for bats at twilight, for bad dreams.

But I've always been of a determined nature. Patient, they used to call me. I like to see a thi through to the end.

ii

The Chorus Line: A Rope-Jumping Rhyme

we are the maids
the ones you killed
the ones you failed

we danced in air
our bare feet twitched
it was not fair

with every goddess, queen, and bitch
from there to here
you scratched your itch

we did much less
than what you did
you judged us bad

you had the spear
you had the word
at your command

we scrubbed the blood
of our dead
paramours from floors, from chairs

from stairs, from doors,
we knelt in water
while you stared

at our bare feet
it was not fair
you licked our fear

it gave you pleasure
you raised your hand
you watched us fall

we danced on air
the ones you failed
the ones you killed

iii

My Childhood

Where shall I begin? There are only two choices: at the beginning or not at the beginning. The re beginning would be the beginning of the world, after which one thing has led to another; but sin there are differences of opinion about that, I'll begin with my own birth.

My father was King Icarius of Sparta. My mother was a Naiad. Daughters of Naiads were a dime dozen in those days; the place was crawling with them. Nevertheless, it never hurts to be semidivine birth. Or it never hurts immediately.

When I was quite young my father ordered me to be thrown into the sea. I never knew exactly wh during my lifetime, but now I suspect he'd been told by an oracle that I would weave his shrou Possibly he thought that if he killed me first, his shroud would never be woven and he would liv forever. I can see how the reasoning might have gone. In that case, his wish to drown me came fro an understandable desire to protect himself. But he must have misheard, or else the oracle herse misheard – the gods often mumble – because it was not his shroud that was at issue, but my father-i law's shroud. If that was the prophecy it was a true one, and indeed the weaving of this particul shroud proved a great convenience to me later on in my life.

The teaching of crafts to girls has fallen out of fashion now, I understand, but luckily it had not my day. It's always an advantage to have something to do with your hands. That way, if someon makes an inappropriate remark, you can pretend you haven't heard it. Then you don't have to answer

But perhaps this shroud-weaving oracle idea of mine is baseless. Perhaps I have only invented it order to make myself feel better. So much whispering goes on, in the dark caverns, in the meadow that sometimes it's hard to know whether the whispering is coming from others or from the inside your own head. I use *head* figuratively. We have dispensed with heads as such, down here.

No matter – into the sea I was thrown. Do I remember the waves closing over me, do I remember t breath leaving my lungs and the sound of bells people say the drowning hear? Not in the least. But was told the story: there is always some servant or slave or old nurse or busybody ready to regale child with the awful things done to it by its parents when it was too young to remember. Hearing th discouraging anecdote did not improve my relations with my father. It is to this episode – or rather, my knowledge of it – that I attribute my reserve, as well as my mistrust of other people's intentions.

It was stupid of Icarius to try to drown the daughter of a Naiad, however. Water is our element, is our birthright. Although we are not such good swimmers as our mothers, we do have a way floating, and we're well connected among the fish and seabirds. A flock of purple-striped ducks cam to my rescue and towed me ashore. After an omen like that, what could my father do? He took m back, and renamed me – *duck* was my new nickname. No doubt he felt guilty about what he'd almo done: he became, if anything, rather too affectionate towards me.

I found this affection difficult to reciprocate. You can imagine. There I would be, strolling hand i

hand with my apparently fond male parent along a cliff edge or a river bank or a parapet, and th ~~thought would occur to me that he might suddenly decide to shove me over or bash me to death~~ with rock. Preserving a calm façade under these circumstances was a challenge. After such excursions would retire to my room and dissolve in floods of tears. (Excessive weeping, I might as well tell yo now, is a handicap of the Naiad-born. I spent at least a quarter of my earthly life crying my eyes ou Fortunately in my time there were veils. They were a practical help for disguising red, puffy eyes.)

My mother, like all Naiads, was beautiful, but chilly at heart. She had waving hair and dimple and rippling laughter. She was elusive. When I was little I often tried to throw my arms around he but she had a habit of sliding away. I like to think that she may have been responsible for calling u that flock of ducks, but probably she wasn't: she preferred swimming in the river to the care of sma children, and I often slipped her mind. If my father hadn't had me thrown into the sea she might hav dropped me in herself, in a fit of absent-mindedness or irritation. She had a short attention span an rapidly changing emotions.

You can see by what I've told you that I was a child who learned early the virtues – if such the are – of self-sufficiency. I knew that I would have to look out for myself in the world. I could hardl count on family support.

iv

The Chorus Line: Kiddie Mourn, A Lament by the Maids

We too were children. We too were born to the wrong parents. Poor parents, slave parents, peasar parents, and serf parents; parents who sold us, parents from whom we were stolen. These parents we not gods, they were not demi-gods, they were not nymphs or Naiads. We were set to work in th palace, as children; we drudged from dawn to dusk, as children. If we wept, no one dried our tears. we slept, we were kicked awake. We were told we were motherless. We were told we were fatherles We were told we were lazy. We were told we were dirty. We were dirty. Dirt was our concern, dirt w our business, dirt was our specialty, dirt was our fault. We were the dirty girls. If our owners or th sons of our owners or a visiting nobleman or the sons of a visiting nobleman wanted to sleep with u we could not refuse. It did us no good to weep, it did us no good to say we were in pain. All th happened to us when we were children. If we were pretty children our lives were worse. We grour the flour for lavish wedding feasts, then we ate the leftovers; we would never have a wedding feast our own, no rich gifts would be exchanged for us; our bodies had little value. But we wanted to sir and dance too, we wanted to be happy too. As we grew older we became polished and evasive, v mastered the secret sneer. We swayed our hips, we lurked, we winked, we signalled with ou eyebrows, even when we were children; we met boys behind the pigpens, noble boys and ignoble boy alike. We rolled around in the straw, in the mud, in the dung, on the beds of soft fleece we wer making up for our masters. We drank the wine left in the wine cups. We spat onto the serving platter Between the bright hall and the dark scullery we crammed filched meat into our mouths. We laughe together in our attics, in our nights. We snatched what we could.

v

Asphodel

It’s dark here, as many have remarked. ‘Dark Death’, they used to say. ‘The gloomy halls of Hades and so forth. Well, yes, it is dark, but there are advantages – for instance, if you see someone you’ rather not speak to you can always pretend you haven’t recognised them.

There are of course the fields of asphodel. You can walk around in them if you want. It’s brighte there, and a certain amount of vapid dancing goes on, though the region sounds better than it is – *th fields of asphodel* has a poetic lilt to it. But just consider. Asphodel, asphodel, asphodel – pret enough white flowers, but a person gets tired of them after a while. It would have been better to supp some variety – an assortment of colours, a few winding paths and vistas and stone benches an fountains. I would have preferred the odd hyacinth, at least, and would a sprinkling of crocuses hav been too much to expect? Though we never get spring here, or any other seasons. You do have t wonder who designed the place.

Have I mentioned the fact that there’s nothing to eat except asphodel?

But I shouldn’t complain.

The darker grottoes are more interesting – the conversation there is better, if you can find a min rascal of some sort – a pickpocket, a stockbroker, a small-time pimp. Like a lot of goody-goody girl I was always secretly attracted to men of that kind.

I don’t frequent the really deep levels much, though. That’s where the punishments are dealt out the truly villainous, those who were not sufficiently punished while alive. It’s hard to put up with th screams. The torture is mental torture, however, since we don’t have bodies any more. What the goo really like is to conjure up banquets – big platters of meat, heaps of bread, bunches of grapes – an then snatch them away. Making people roll heavy stones up steep hills is another of their favouri jests. I sometimes have a yen to go down there: it might help me to remember what it was like to hav real hunger, what it was like to have real fatigue.

Every once in a while the fogs part and we get a glimpse of the world of the living. It’s lik rubbing the glass on a dirty window, making a space to look through. Sometimes the barrier dissolve and we can go on an outing. Then we get very excited, and there is a great deal of squeaking.

These outings can take place in many ways. Once upon a time, anyone who wished to consult would slit the throat of a sheep or cow or pig and let the blood flow into a trench in the ground. We’ smell it and make a beeline for the site, like flies to a carcass. There we’d be, chirping and flutterin thousands of us, like the contents of a giant wastepaper basket caught in a tornado, while some sel styled hero held us off with drawn sword until the one he wanted to consult appeared. A few vagu prophecies would be forthcoming: we learned to keep them vague. Why tell everything? You neede to keep them coming back for more, with other sheep, cows, pigs, and so forth.

Once the right number of words had been handed over to the hero we’d all be allowed to drin from the trench, and I can’t say much in praise of the table manners on such occasions. There was a l

of pushing and shoving, a lot of slurping and spilling; there were a lot of crimson chins. However, was ~~glorious to feel the blood coursing in our non-existent veins again, if only for an instant.~~

We could sometimes appear as dreams, though that wasn't as satisfactory. Then there were thos who got stuck on the wrong side of the river because they hadn't been given proper burials. The wandered around in a very unhappy state, neither here nor there, and they could cause a lot of trouble

Then after hundreds, possibly thousands of years – it's hard to keep track of time here, because v don't have any of it as such – customs changed. No living people went to the underworld much an more, and our own abode was upstaged by a much more spectacular establishment down the road fiery pits, wailing and gnashing of teeth, gnawing worms, demons with pitchforks – a great man special effects.

But we were still called up occasionally by magicians and conjurors – men who'd made pacts wi the infernal powers – and then by smaller fry, the table-tilters, the mediums, the channellers, people that ilk. It was demeaning, all of it – to have to materialise in a chalk circle or a velvet-upholstere parlour just because someone wanted to gape at you – but it did allow us to keep up with what w going on among the still-alive. I was very interested in the invention of the light bulb, for instanc and in the matter-into-energy theories of the twentieth century. More recently, some of us have bee able to infiltrate the new ethereal-wave system that now encircles the globe, and to travel around th way, looking out at the world through the flat, illuminated surfaces that serve as domestic shrine Perhaps that's how the gods were able to come and go as quickly as they did back then – they mu have had something like that at their disposal.

I never got summoned much by the magicians. I was famous, yes – ask anyone – but for som reason they didn't want to see me, whereas my cousin Helen was much in demand. It didn't seem fa – I wasn't known for doing anything notorious, especially of a sexual nature, and she was nothing not infamous. Of course she was very beautiful. It was claimed she'd come out of an egg, being th daughter of Zeus who'd raped her mother in the form of a swan. She was quite stuck-up about it, w Helen. I wonder how many of us really believed that swan-rape concoction? There were a lot of stori of that kind going around then – the gods couldn't seem to keep their hands or paws or beaks o mortal women, they were always raping someone or other.

Anyway, the magicians insisted on seeing Helen, and she was willing to oblige. It was like a retu to the old days to have a lot of men gawping at her. She liked to appear in one of her Trojan outfit over-decorated to my taste, but *chacun à son goût*. She had a kind of slow twirl she would do; the she'd lower her head and glance up into the face of whoever had conjured her up, and give one of h trademark intimate smiles, and they were hers. Or she'd take on the form in which she displaye herself to her outraged husband, Menelaus, when Troy was burning and he was about to plunge h vengeful sword into her. All she had to do was bare one of her peerless breasts, and he was down o his knees, and drooling and begging to take her back.

As for me … well, people told me I was beautiful, they had to tell me that because I was princess, and shortly after that a queen, but the truth was that although I was not deformed or ugly, was nothing special to look at. I was smart, though: considering the times, very smart. That seems be what I was known for: being smart. That, and my weaving, and my devotion to my husband, and m discretion.

If you were a magician, messing around in the dark arts and risking your soul, would you want conjure up a plain but smart wife who'd been good at weaving and had never transgressed, instead of woman who'd driven hundreds of men mad with lust and had caused a great city to go up in flames?

Neither would I.

Helen was never punished, not one bit. Why not, I'd like to know? Other people got strangled by s

serpents and drowned in storms and turned into spiders and shot with arrows for much smaller crime
~~Eating the wrong cows. Boasting. That sort of thing. You'd think Helen might have got a~~ goo
whipping at the very least, after all the harm and suffering she caused to countless other people. B
she didn't.

Not that I mind.

Not that I minded.

I had other things in my life to occupy my attention.

Which brings me to the subject of my marriage.

vi

My Marriage

My marriage was arranged. That's the way things were done then: where there were weddings, the were arrangements. I don't mean such things as bridal outfits, flowers, banquets, and music, thoug we had those too. Everyone has those, even now. The arrangements I mean were more devious tha that.

Under the old rules only important people had marriages, because only important people ha inheritances. All the rest was just copulation of various kinds – rapes or seductions, love affairs one-night stands, with gods who said they were shepherds or shepherds who said they were god Occasionally a goddess might get mixed up in it too, dabble around in perishable flesh like a quee playing at milkmaids, but the reward for the man was a shortened life and often a violent deat Immortality and mortality didn't mix well: it was fire and mud, only the fire always won.

The gods were never averse to making a mess. In fact they enjoyed it. To watch some mortal wi his or her eyes frying in their sockets through an overdose of god-sex made them shake with laughte There was something childish about the gods, in a nasty way. I can say this now because I no long have a body, I'm beyond that kind of suffering, and the gods aren't listening anyway. As far as I ca tell they've gone to sleep. In your world, you don't get visitations from the gods the way people use to unless you're on drugs.

Where was I? Oh yes. Marriages. Marriages were for having children, and children were not to and pets. Children were vehicles for passing things along. These things could be kingdoms, ri wedding gifts, stories, grudges, blood feuds. Through children, alliances were forged; throug children, wrongs were avenged. To have a child was to set loose a force in the world.

If you had an enemy it was best to kill his sons, even if those sons were babies. Otherwise the would grow up and hunt you down. If you couldn't bring yourself to slaughter them, you cou disguise them and send them far away, or sell them as slaves, but as long as they were alive the would be a danger to you.

If you had daughters instead of sons, you needed to get them bred as soon as possible so you cou have grandsons. The more sword-wielders and spear-throwers you could count on from within yo family the better, because all the other noteworthy men around were on the lookout for a pretext raid some king or noble and carry away anything they could grab, people included. Weakness in or power-holder meant opportunity for another, so every king and noble needed all the help he could ge

Thus it went without saying that a marriage would be arranged for me when the time came.

At the court of King Icarius, my father, they still retained the ancient custom of having contests to s who should marry a nobly born woman who was – so to speak – on the block. The man who won t contest got the woman and the wedding, and was then expected to stay at the bride's father's pala and contribute his share of male offspring. He obtained wealth through the marriage – gold cu

silver bowls, horses, robes, weapons, all that trash they used to value so much back when I was aliv
His ~~family was expected to hand over a lot of this trash as well.~~

I can say *trash* because I know where most of it ended up. It mouldered away in the ground or sank to the bottom of the sea, or it got broken or melted down. Some of it made its way to enormou palaces that have – strangely – no kings or queens in them. Endless processions of people in gracele clothing file through these palaces, staring at the gold cups and the silver bowls, which are not eve used any more. Then they go to a sort of market inside the palace and buy pictures of these things, miniature versions of them that are not real silver and gold. That is why I say *trash*.

Under the ancient customs, the huge pile of sparkling wedding loot stayed with the bride's famil in the bride's family's palace. Perhaps that is why my father had become so attached to me afte having failed to drown me in the sea: where I was, there would be the treasure.

(Why *did* he throw me in? That question still haunts me. Although I'm not altogether satisfie with the shroud-weaving explanation, I've never been able to find the right answer, even down her Every time I see my father in the distance, wading through the asphodel, and try to catch up with hir he hurries away as if he doesn't want to face me.

I've sometimes thought I may have been a sacrifice to the god of the sea, who was known to b thirsty for human life. Then the ducks rescued me, through no act of my father's. I suppose my fath could argue that he'd fulfilled his side of the bargain, if bargain it was, and that he hadn't cheated, ar that if the sea-god had failed to drag me down and devour me, that was his own tough luck.

The more I think about this version of events, the more I like it. It makes sense.)

Picture me, then, as a clever but not overly beautiful girl of marriageable age, let's say fiftee Suppose I'm looking out the window of my room – which was on the second floor of the palace down into the courtyard where the contestants are gathering: all those young hopefuls who wish compete for my hand.

I don't look directly out of the window, of course. I don't plant my elbows on the windowsill lik some hulking maid and stare shamelessly. No, I peek, from behind my veil and from behind th drapery. It would not do to let all those scantily clad young men see my unveiled face. The palac women have dolled me up as best they can, minstrels have composed songs of praise in my honour 'radiant as Aphrodite', and all the usual claptrap – but I feel shy and miserable. The young men laug and joke; they seem at ease with one another; they do not glance up.

I know it isn't me they're after, not Penelope the Duck. It's only what comes with me – the roy connection, the pile of glittering junk. No man will ever kill himself for love of me.

And no man ever did. Not that I would have wanted to inspire those kinds of suicides. I was not a ma eater, I was not a Siren, I was not like cousin Helen who loved to make conquests just to show sh could. As soon as the man was grovelling, and it never took long, she'd stroll away without backwards glance, giving that careless laugh of hers, as if she'd just been watching the palace midg standing ridiculously on his head.

I was a kind girl – kinder than Helen, or so I thought. I knew I would have to have something offer instead of beauty. I was clever, everyone said so – in fact they said it so much that I found discouraging – but cleverness is a quality a man likes to have in his wife as long as she is son distance away from him. Up close, he'll take kindness any day of the week, if there's nothing mo alluring to be had.

The most obvious husband for me would have been a younger son of a king with large estates one of King Nestor's boys, perhaps. That would have been a good connection for King Icariu Through my veil, I studied the young men milling around down below, trying to figure out who eac one was and – a thing of no practical consequence, since it wasn't up to me to choose my husband

which one I preferred.

~~A couple of the maids were with me – they never left me unattended, I was a risk until I was~~ safel married, because who knew what upstart fortune hunter might try to seduce me or seize me and ru away with me? The maids were my sources of information. They were ever-flowing fountains trivial gossip: they could come and go freely in the palace, they could study the men from all angle they could listen in on their conversations, they could laugh and joke with them as much as the pleased: no one cared who might worm his way in between their legs.

‘Who’s the barrel-chested one?’ I asked.

‘Oh, that’s only Odysseus,’ said one of the maids. He was not considered – by the maids at least to be a serious candidate for my hand. His father’s palace was on Ithaca, a goat-strewn rock; h clothes were rustic; he had the manners of a small-town big shot, and had already expressed sever complicated ideas the others considered peculiar. He was clever though, they said. In fact he was to clever for his own good. The other young men made jokes about him – ‘Don’t gamble with Odysseu the friend of Hermes,’ they said. ‘You’ll never win.’ This was like saying he was a cheat and a thie His grandfather Autolycus was well known for these very qualities, and was reputed never to have wo anything fairly in his life.

‘I wonder how fast he can run,’ I said. In some kingdoms the contest for brides was a wrestlin match, in others a chariot race, but with us it was just running.

‘Not very fast, on those short legs of his,’ said one maid unkindly. And indeed the legs o Odysseus were quite short in relation to his body. It was all right when he was sitting down, you didn notice, but standing up he looked top-heavy.

‘Not fast enough to catch *you*,’ said another of the maids. ‘You wouldn’t want to wake up in th morning and find yourself in bed with your husband and a herd of Apollo’s cows.’ This was a jok about Hermes, whose first act of thievery on the day he was born involved an audacious cattle rai ‘Not unless one of them was a bull,’ said another. ‘Or else a goat,’ said a third. ‘A big strong ram! bet our young duck would like that! She’d be bleating soon enough!’ ‘I wouldn’t mind one of that kin myself,’ said a fourth. ‘Better a ram than the babyfingers you get around here.’ They all bega laughing, holding their hands over their mouths and snorting with mirth.

I was mortified. I didn’t understand the coarser kinds of jokes, not yet, so I didn’t know exact why they were laughing, though I understood that their laughter was at my expense. But I had no wa of making them stop.

* * *

At this moment my cousin Helen came sailing up, like the long-necked swan she fancied herself to b She had a distinctive swaying walk and she was exaggerating it. Although mine was the marriage question, she wanted all the attention for herself. She was as beautiful as usual, indeed more so: sh was intolerably beautiful. She was dressed to perfection: Menelaus, her husband, always made sure that, and he was rich as stink so he could afford it. She tilted her face towards me, looking at m whimsically as if she were flirting. I suspect she used to flirt with her dog, with her mirror, with h comb, with her bedpost. She needed to keep in practice.

‘I think Odysseus would make a very suitable husband for our little duckie,’ she said. ‘She like the quiet life, and she’ll certainly have that if he takes her to Ithaca, as he’s boasting of doing. She ca help him look after his goats. She and Odysseus are two of a kind. They both have such short legs She said this lightly, but her lightest sayings were often her cruellest. Why is it that really beautif people think everyone else in the world exists merely for their amusement?

The maids sniggered. I was crushed. I had not thought my legs were quite that short, and certainly hadn’t thought Helen would notice them. But not much escaped her when it came

assessing the physical graces and defects of others. That was what got her into trouble with Paris, lat – he was so much better looking than Menelaus, who was lumpish and red-haired. The best that w claimed of Menelaus, once they started putting him into the poems, was that he had a very loud voice

The maids all looked at me to see what I would say. But Helen had a way of leaving peop speechless, and I was no exception.

‘Never mind, little cousin,’ she said to me, patting me on the arm. ‘They say he’s very clever. An you’re very clever too, they tell me. So you’ll be able to understand what he says. I certainly nev could! It was lucky for both of us that he didn’t win *me*!’

She gave the patronizing smirk of someone who’s had first chance at a less than delicious piece sausage but has fastidiously rejected it. Indeed, Odysseus had been among the suitors for her hand, an like every other man on earth he’d desperately wanted to win her. Now he was competing for what w at best only second prize.

Helen strolled away, having delivered her sting. The maids began discussing her splend necklace, her scintillating earrings, her perfect nose, her elegant hairstyle, her luminous eyes, t tastefully woven border of her shining robe. It was as if I wasn’t there. And it was my wedding day.

All of this was a strain on the nerves. I started to cry, as I would do so often in the future, and w taken to lie down on my bed. Thus I missed the race itself. Odysseus won it. He cheated, as I lat learned. My father’s brother, Uncle Tyndareus, father of Helen – though, as I’ve told you, some sa that Zeus was her real father – helped him to do it. He mixed the wine of the other contestants with drug that slowed them down, though not so much as they would notice; to Odysseus he gave a poti that had the opposite effect. I understand that this sort of thing has become a tradition, and is st practised in the world of the living when it comes to athletic contests.

Why did Uncle Tyndareus help my future husband in this way? They were neither friends n allies. What did Tyndareus stand to gain? My uncle would not have helped anyone – believe me simply out of the goodness of his heart, a commodity that was in short supply.

One story has it that I was the payment for a service Odysseus had rendered to Tyndareus. Whe they were all competing for Helen and things were getting more and more angry, Odysseus made ea contestant swear an oath that whoever won Helen must be defended by all of the others if any oth man tried to take her away from the winner. In that way he calmed things down and allowed the mat with Menelaus to proceed smoothly. He must have known he had no hope himself. It was then – so t rumour goes – that he struck the bargain with Tyndareus: in return for assuring a peaceful and ve profitable wedding for the radiant Helen, Odysseus would get plain-Jane Penelope.

But I have another idea, and here it is. Tyndareus and my father, Icarius, were both kings of Spart They were supposed to rule alternately, one for a year and the other the next, turn and turn about. B Tyndareus wanted the throne for himself alone, and indeed he later got it. It would stand to reason th he’d sounded out the various suitors on their prospects and their plans, and had learned that Odysse shared the newfangled idea that the wife should go to the husband’s family rather than the other wa around. It would suit Tyndareus fine if I could be sent far away, me and any sons I might bear. Th way there would be fewer to come to the aid of Icarius in the event of an open conflict.

Whatever was behind it, Odysseus cheated and won the race. I saw Helen smiling maliciously she watched the marriage rites. She thought I was being pawned off on an uncouth dolt who wou haul me off to a dreary backwater, and she was not displeased. She’d probably known well beforeha that the fix was in.

As for me, I had trouble making it through the ceremony – the sacrifices of animals, the offerin to the gods, the lustral sprinklings, the libations, the prayers, the interminable songs. I felt quite dizz I kept my eyes downcast, so all I could see of Odysseus was the lower part of his body. *Short legs,*

kept thinking, even at the most solemn moments. This was not an appropriate thought – it was trivi
and ~~silly, and it made me want to giggle – but in my own defence I must point out that I~~ was on
fifteen.

vii

The Scar

And so I was handed over to Odysseus, like a package of meat. A package of meat in a wrapping o gold, mind you. A sort of gilded blood pudding.

But perhaps that is too crude a simile for you. Let me add that meat was highly valued among us the aristocracy ate lots of it, meat, meat, meat, and all they ever did was roast it: ours was not an ag of haute cuisine. Oh, I forgot: there was also bread, flatbread that is, bread, bread, bread, and win wine, wine. We did have the odd fruit or vegetable, but you've probably never heard of these becaus no one put them into the songs much.

The gods wanted meat as much as we did, but all they ever got from us was the bones and fa thanks to a bit of rudimentary sleight of hand by Prometheus: only an idiot would have been deceive by a bag of bad cow parts disguised as good ones, and Zeus was deceived; which goes to show that th gods were not always as intelligent as they wanted us to believe.

I can say this now because I'm dead. I wouldn't have dared to say it earlier. You could never te when one of the gods might be listening, disguised as a beggar or an old friend or a stranger. It's tru that I sometimes doubted their existence, these gods. But during my lifetime I considered it prude not to take any risks.

There was lots of everything at my wedding feast – great glistening hunks of meat, great wads fragrant bread, great flagons of mellow wine. It was amazing that the guests didn't burst on the spo they stuffed themselves so full. Nothing helps gluttony along so well as eating food you don't have pay for yourself, as I learned from later experience.

We ate with our hands in those days. There was a lot of gnawing and some heavy-duty chewin but it was better that way – no sharp utensils that could be snatched up and plunged into a fellow gue who might have annoyed you. At any wedding preceded by a contest there were bound to be a few so losers; but no unsuccessful suitor lost his temper at my feast. It was more as if they'd failed to win a auction for a horse.

The wine was mixed too strong, so there were many fuddled heads. Even my father, King Icariu got quite drunk. He suspected he'd had a trick played on him by Tyndareus and Odysseus, he wa almost sure they'd cheated, but he couldn't figure out how they'd done it; and this made him angr and when he was angry he drank even more, and dropped insulting comments about people grandparents. But he was a king, so there were no duels.

Odysseus himself did not get drunk. He had a way of appearing to drink a lot without actual doing it. He told me later that if a man lives by his wits, as he did, he needs to have those wits alwa at hand and kept sharp, like axes or swords. Only fools, he said, were given to bragging about ho much they could drink. It was bound to lead to swilling competitions, and then to inattention and th loss of one's powers, and that would be when your enemy would strike.

As for me, I couldn't eat a thing. I was too nervous. I sat there shrouded in my bridal veil, hard daring to glance at Odysseus. I was certain he would be disappointed in me once he'd lifted that ve and made his way in through the cloak and the girdle and the shimmering robe in which I'd bee decked out. But he wasn't looking at me, and neither was anyone else. They were all staring at Hele who was dispensing dazzling smiles right and left, not missing a single man. She had a way of smilin that made each one of them feel that secretly she was in love with him alone.

I suppose it was lucky that Helen was distracting everyone's attention, because it kept them fro noticing me and my trembling and awkwardness. I wasn't just nervous, I was really afraid. The maid had been filling my ears with tales about how – once I was in the bridal chamber – I would be to apart as the earth is by the plough, and how painful and humiliating that would be.

As for my mother, she'd stopped swimming around like a porpoise long enough to attend m wedding, for which I was less grateful than I ought to have been. There she sat on her throne besid my father, robed in cool blue, a small puddle gathering at her feet. She did make a little speech to m as the maids were changing my costume yet again, but I didn't consider it to be a helpful one at th time. It was nothing if not oblique; but then, all Naiads are oblique.

Here is what she said:

Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hand into it, all you feel is a cares Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you. But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothin in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone. Remember tha my child. Remember you are half water. If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does

After the ceremonies and the feasting, there was the usual procession to the bridal chamber, with th usual torches and vulgar jokes and drunken yelling. The bed had been garlanded, the thresho sprinkled, the libations poured. The gatekeeper had been posted to keep the bride from rushing out horror, and to stop her friends from breaking down the door and rescuing her when they heard h scream. All of this was play-acting: the fiction was that the bride had been stolen, and th consummation of a marriage was supposed to be a sanctioned rape. It was supposed to be a conquest, trampling of a foe, a mock killing. There was supposed to be blood.

Once the door had been closed, Odysseus took me by the hand and sat me down on the bed. 'Forg everything you've been told,' he whispered. 'I'm not going to hurt you, or not very much. But it woul help us both if you could pretend. I've been told you're a clever girl. Do you think you could manage few screams? That will satisfy them – they're listening at the door – and then they'll leave us in pea and we can take our time to become friends.'

This was one of his great secrets as a persuader – he could convince another person that the two them together faced a common obstacle, and that they needed to join forces in order to overcome He could draw almost any listener into a collaboration, a little conspiracy of his own making. Nobo could do this better than he: for once, the stories don't lie. And he had a wonderful voice as well, dee and sonorous. So of course I did as he asked.

Somewhat later I found that Odysseus was not one of those men who, after the act, simply roll ov and begin to snore. Not that I am aware of this common male habit through my own experience; but I've said, I listened a lot to the maids. No, Odysseus wanted to talk, and as he was an excelle raconteur I was happy to listen. I think this is what he valued most in me: my ability to appreciate h stories. It's an underrated talent in women.

I'd had occasion to notice the long scar on his thigh, and so he proceeded to tell me the story how he got it. As I've already mentioned, his grandfather was Autolycus, who claimed the god Herm was his father. That may have been a way of saying that he was a crafty old thief, cheat, and liar, an

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