

# ODYSSEY 6

So Odysseus slept, the godlike survivor  
Overwhelmed with fatigue.

But the goddess Athena

Went off to the land of the Phaeacians,  
A people who had once lived in Hypereia,  
Near to the Cyclopes, a race of savages  
Who marauded their land constantly. One day  
Great Nausithous led his people  
Off to Schería, a remote island,

Where he walled off a city, built houses  
And shrines, and parceled out fields.  
After he died and went to the world below,  
Alcinous ruled, wise in the gods' ways.

Owl-eyed Athena now came to his house  
To devise a passage home for Odysseus.  
She entered a richly decorated bedroom  
Where a girl as lovely as a goddess was sleeping,  
Nausicaa, daughter of noble Alcinous.

Two maids, blessed with the beauty of Graces,  
Slept on either side of the closed, polished doors.

Athena rushed in like a breath of wind,  
Stood over Nausicaa's head, and spoke to her  
In the guise of her friend, the daughter  
Of the famed mariner Dymas. Assuming  
This girl's form, the owl-eyed goddess spoke:

"Nausicaa, how could your mother have raised  
Such a careless child? Your silky clothes  
Are lying here soiled, and your wedding is near!

5

10

15

20

25

You'll have to dress yourself and your party well,  
If you want the people to speak highly of you  
And make your mother and father glad. 30  
We'll wash these clothes at the break of dawn.  
I'll go with you and help so you'll get it done quickly.  
You're not going to be a virgin for long, you know!  
All the best young men in Phaeacia are eager  
To marry you—as well they should be. 35  
Wake up now, and at dawn's first blush  
Ask your father if he will hitch up the mulecart  
To carry all these sashes and robes and things.  
It'll be much more pleasant than going on foot.  
The laundry pools are a long way from town." 40

The grey-eyed goddess spoke and was gone,  
Off to Olympus, which they say is forever  
The unmoving abode of the gods, unshaken  
By winds, never soaked by rain, and where the snow  
Never drifts, but the brilliant sky stretches 45  
Cloudless away, and brightness streams through the air.  
There, where the gods are happy all the world's days,  
Went the Grey-eyed One after speaking to the girl.

Dawn came throned in light, and woke Nausicaa,  
Who wondered at the dream as it faded away. 50  
She went through the house to tell her parents,  
Her dear father and mother. She found them within,  
Her mother sitting by the hearth with her women,  
Spinning sea-blue yarn. Her father she met  
As he headed for the door accompanied by elders 55  
On his way to a council the nobles had called.  
She stood very close to her father and said:

"Daddy, would you please hitch up a wagon for me—  
A high one that rolls well—so I can go to the river  
And wash our good clothes that are all dirty now. 60  
You yourself should wear clean clothes  
When you sit among the first men in council.  
And you have five sons who live in the palace,  
Two married and three still bachelors.

They always want freshly washed clothes  
To wear to the dances. This has been on my mind." 65

She was too embarrassed to mention marriage  
To her father, but he understood and said:

"Of course you can have the mules, child,  
And anything else. Go on. The servants will rig up  
A high, smooth-rolling wagon fitted with a trunk." 70

He called the servants, and they got busy  
Rolling out a wagon and hitching up mules.  
Nausicaa brought out a pile of laundry  
And loaded it into the polished cart, 75  
While her mother packed a picnic basket  
With all sorts of food and filled a goatskin with wine.  
The girl put these up on the cart, along with  
A golden flask of oil her mother gave her.  
For herself and her maids to rub on their skin. 80  
She took the lash and the glossy reins  
And had the mules giddyup. They jangled along  
At a steady pace, pulling the clothes and the girl,  
While the other girls, her maids, ran alongside.

They came to the beautiful, running river 85  
And the laundry pools, where the clear water  
Flowed through strongly enough to clean  
Even the dirtiest clothes. They unhitched the mules  
And shooed them out along the swirling river's edge  
To munch the sweet clover. Then they unloaded 90  
The clothes, brought them down to the water,  
And trod them in the trenches, working fast  
And making a game of it. When the clothes were washed  
They spread them out neatly on the shore of the sea  
Where the waves scoured the pebbled beach clean. 95  
Then they bathed themselves and rubbed rich olive oil  
Onto their skin, and had a picnic on the river's banks  
While they waited for the sun to dry the clothes.  
When the princess and her maids had enough to eat  
They began to play with a ball, their hair streaming free. 100

*Artemis sometimes roams the mountains—  
 Immense Taygetus, or Erymanthus—  
 Showering arrows upon boars or fleet antelope,  
 And with her play the daughters of Zeus  
 Who range the wild woods—and Leto is glad 105  
 That her daughter towers above them all  
 With her shining brow, though they are beautiful all—*

So the unwed princess among her attendants.

But when she was about to fold the clothes,  
 Yoke the mules, and head back home, 110  
 The Grey-eyed One sprung her plan:  
 Odysseus would wake up, see the lovely girl,  
 And she would lead him to the Phæacians' city.  
 The princess threw the ball to one of the girls,  
 But it sailed wide into deep, swirling water. 115  
 The girls screamed, and Odysseus awoke.  
 Sitting up, he tried to puzzle it out:

"What kind of land have I come to now?  
 Are the natives wild and lawless savages,  
 Or godfearing men who welcome strangers? 120  
 That sounded like girls screaming, or the cry  
 Of the spirit women who hold the high peaks,  
 The river wells, and the grassy meadows.  
 Can it be I am close to human voices?  
 I'll go have a look and see for myself." 125

With that Odysseus emerged from the bushes.  
 He broke off a leafy branch from the undergrowth  
 And held it before him to cover himself.

*A weathered mountain lion steps into a clearing,  
 Confident in his strength, eyes glowing. 130  
 The wind and rain have let up, and he's hunting  
 Cattle, sheep, or wild deer, but is hungry enough  
 To jump the stone walls of the animal pens.*

So Odysseus advanced upon these ringleted girls,

Naked as he was. What choice did he have? 135  
He was a frightening sight, disfigured with brine,  
And the girls fluttered off to the jutting beaches.  
Only Alcinous' daughter stayed. Athena  
Put courage in her heart and stopped her trembling.  
She held her ground, and Odysseus wondered 140  
How to approach this beautiful girl. Should he  
Fall at her knees, or keep his distance  
And ask her with honeyed words to show him  
The way to the city and give him some clothes?  
He thought it over and decided it was better 145  
To keep his distance and not take the chance  
Of offending the girl by touching her knees.  
So he started this soft and winning speech:

"I implore you, Lady: Are you a goddess  
Or mortal? If you are one of heaven's divinities 150  
I think you are most like great Zeus' daughter  
Artemis. You have her looks, her stature, her form.  
If you are a mortal and live on this earth,  
Thrice blest is your father, your queenly mother,  
Thrice blest your brothers! Their hearts must always 155  
Be warm with happiness when they look at you,  
Just blossoming as you enter the dance.  
And happiest of all will be the lucky man  
Who takes you home with a cartload of gifts.  
I've never seen anyone like you, 160  
Man or woman. I look upon you with awe.  
Once, on Delos, I saw something to compare—  
A palm shoot springing up near Apollo's altar.  
I had stopped there with the troops under my command  
On what would prove to be a perilous campaign. 165  
I marveled long and hard when I saw that tree,  
For nothing like it had ever grown from the earth.  
And I marvel now, Lady, and I am afraid  
To touch your knees. Yet my pain is great.  
Yesterday, after twenty days, I pulled myself out 170  
Of the wine-dark sea. All that time, wind and wave  
Bore me away from Ogygia Island,  
And now some spirit has cast me up here

To suffer something new. I do not think  
My trials will end soon. The gods have much more 175  
In store for me before that ever happens.  
Pity me, mistress. After all my hardships  
It is to you I have come first. I don't know  
A soul who lives here, not a single one.  
Show me the way to town, and give me 180  
A rag to throw over myself, some piece of cloth  
You may have brought along to bundle the clothes.  
And for yourself, may the gods grant you  
Your heart's desire, a husband and a home,  
And the blessing of a harmonious life. 185  
For nothing is greater or finer than this,  
When a man and woman live together  
With one heart and mind, bringing joy  
To their friends and grief to their foes."

And white-armed Nausicaa answered him: 190

"Stranger, you do not seem to be a bad man  
Or a fool. Zeus himself, the Olympian god,  
Sends happiness to good men and bad men both,  
To each as he wills. To you he has given these troubles, 195  
Which you have no choice but to bear. But now,  
Since you have come to our country,  
You shall not lack clothing, nor anything needed  
By a sore-tried suppliant who presents himself.  
I will show you where the city is and tell you  
That the people here are called Phaeacians. 200  
This is their country, and I am the daughter  
Of great-hearted Alcinous, the Phaeacians' lord."

Then the princess called to the ringleted girls:

"Stop this now. Running away at the sight of a man!  
Do you think he is part of an enemy invasion? 205  
There is no man on earth, nor will there ever be,  
Slippery enough to invade Phaeacia,  
For we are very dear to the immortal gods,  
And we live far out in the surging sea,

At the world's frontier, out of all human contact.  
This poor man comes here as a wanderer,  
And we must take care of him now. All strangers,  
All beggars, are under the protection of Zeus,  
And even small gifts are welcome. So let's feed  
This stranger, give him something to drink,  
And bathe him in the river, out of the wind."

The girls stopped, turned, and urged each other on.  
They took Odysseus to a sheltered spot,  
As Nausicaa, Alcinous' daughter, had ordered.  
They set down a mantle and a tunic,  
Gave him a golden flask of olive oil,  
And told him to wash in the river.  
Then sunlit Odysseus said to them:

"Stay off a ways there, girls, and let me  
Wash the brine off my shoulders myself  
And rub myself down. It's been a long time  
Since my skin has felt oil. But I don't want  
To wash in front of you. I'd be ashamed  
To come out naked in front of young girls."

The girls went off and talked with Nausicaa,  
And Odysseus rinsed off with river water  
All the brine that caked his shoulders and back,  
And he scrubbed the salty scurf from his scalp.  
He finished his bath, rubbed himself down with oil,  
And put on the clothes the maiden had given him.  
Then Athena, born from Zeus, made him look  
Taller and more muscled, and made his hair  
Tumble down his head like hyacinth flowers.

*Imagine a craftsman overlaying silver  
With pure gold. He has learned his art  
From Pallas Athena and Lord Hephaestus,  
And creates works of breathtaking beauty.*

So Athena herself made Odysseus' head and shoulders  
Shimmer with grace. He walked down the beach

And sat on the sand. The princess was dazzled,  
And she said to her white-armed serving girls: 245

"Listen, this man hasn't come to Phaeacia  
Against the will of the Olympian gods.  
Before, he was a terrible sight, but now,  
He's like one of the gods who live in the sky. 250  
If only such a man would be called my husband,  
Living here, and content to stay here.  
Well, go on, give him something to eat and drink."

They were only too glad to do what she said.  
They served Odysseus food and drink, 255  
And the long-suffering man ate and drank  
Ravenously. It had been a long fast:

Nausicaa had other things on her mind.  
She folded the clothes and loaded the wagon,  
Hitched up the mules and climbed aboard. 260  
Then she called to Odysseus and said:

"Get ready now, stranger, to go to the city,  
So I can show you the way to my father's house,  
Where I promise you will meet the best of the Phaeacians.  
Now this is what you must do—and I think you understand: 265  
As long as we're going through countryside and farms,  
Keep up with my handmaidens behind the wagon.  
Just jog along with them. I'll lead the way,  
And we'll soon come to the city. It has a high wall  
Around it, and a harbor on each side. 270  
The isthmus gets narrow, and the upswept hulls  
Are drawn up to the road. Every citizen  
Has his own private slip. The market's there, too,  
Surrounding Poseidon's beautiful temple  
And bounded by stones set deep in the earth. 275  
There men are always busy with their ships' tackle,  
With cables and sails, and with planing their oars.  
Phaeacians don't care for quivers and bows  
But for oars and masts and streamlined ships  
In which they love to cross the grey, salt sea. 280



It's their rude remarks I would rather avoid.  
 There are some insolent louts in this town,  
 And I can just hear one of them saying:  
 'Well, who's this tall, handsome stranger trailing along  
 Behind Nausicaa? Where'd she pick him up? 285  
 She'll probably marry him, some shipwreck she's taken in  
 From parts unknown. He's sure not local.  
 Maybe a god has come to answer her prayers,  
 Dropped out of the sky for her to have and to hold.  
 It's just as well she's found herself a husband 290  
 From somewhere else, since she turns up her nose  
 At the many fine Phaeacians who woo her.'  
 That's what they'll say, and it will count against me.  
 I myself would blame anyone who acted like this,  
 A girl who, with her father and mother to tell her better, 295  
 Kept the company of men before her wedding day.  
 No, stranger, be quick to understand me,  
 So that you can win from my father an escort home,  
 And soon at that.

Close by the road you will find  
 A grove of Athena, beautiful poplars 300  
 Surrounded by a meadow. A spring flows through it.  
 Right there is my father's estate and vineyard,  
 About as far from the city as a shout would carry.  
 Sit down there and wait for a while, until  
 We reach the city and arrive at my house. 305  
 When you think we've had enough time to get there,  
 Go into the city and ask any Phaeacian  
 For the house of my father, Lord Alcinous.  
 It's very easy to spot, and any child  
 Can lead you there. There's no other house 310  
 In all Phaeacia built like the house  
 Of the hero Alcinous. Once you're safely within  
 The courtyard, go quickly though the hall  
 Until you come to my mother. She'll be sitting  
 By the hearth in the firelight, spinning 315  
 Sea-blue yarn—a sight worth seeing—  
 As she leans against a column, her maids behind her.  
 Right beside her my father sits on his throne,  
 Sipping his wine like an immortal god.

Pass him by and throw your arms 320  
Around my mother's knees, if you want to see  
Your homeland soon, however far it may be.  
If she smiles upon you, there is hope that you will  
Return to your home and see your loved ones again."

And she smacked the mules with the shining lash. 325  
They trotted on smartly, leaving the river behind.  
She drove so that Odysseus and the girls  
Could keep up, and used the lash with care.  
The sun had set when they reached the grove  
Sacred to Athena. Odysseus sat down there 330  
And said this prayer to great Zeus' daughter:

"Hear me, mystic child of the Storm God,  
O hear me now, as you heard me not  
When I was shattered by the Earthshaker's blows.  
Grant that I come to Phaeacia pitied and loved." 335

Thus his prayer, and Pallas Athena heard it  
But did not appear to him face to face, not yet,  
Out of respect for her uncle, who would rage against  
Godlike Odysseus until he reached home.