

PENELOPE SPEAKS

Philip Milner

I was coping with the suitors, thank you. I'd made my peace with walking through rooms that smelled always of Old Spice and roast pig, with tobacco smoke, with the air in my house smelling greasy and sweet like a Ponderosa Restaurant. I liked some of the suitors alright: Antinous was cute, especially when he was drinking, and Eurymachus was built like a bull. Some of them were foolish, of course, and some of them were in love with me, and all of them were too ambitious. But what do you expect? They were men, and if there is one thing I've learned rattling around this house for the past twenty years, it is how men work. Heavens, I didn't dare wear a frilly gown in my own house. I'd walk among them in something silky and female, and I'd hear their breath squeeze out of their lungs, see their hot eyes fix on the roast pig in front of them lest I see too much — the lust so thick in the air you could cut it with a sword.

Listen, I've no one to please with these words but myself, so we'll not get wrapped up in a lot of pig dump like Honor, Chastity, Loyalty and Nobility. Like HE does! Like MEN do! The suitors were boys and I liked them while feeling a vague contempt for them. But remember this: I was never for one second immune to a smile, a black beard on top of a muscular set of shoulders, a shared joke, a rippling forearm, an affectionate hand on my shoulder (so long as it wasn't heavy with lust).

But I slept alone and I'll tell you why; deeds have consequences for a woman, and no deed has more consequences than physical love. Two months with him and I had a house to maintain, a father-in-law to care for, Telemachus nibbling at my breast, and all Ithaca watching to see if I'd break. Consequences.

But not for him. He went off to war. And got lost! For twenty years! Then he came back and killed the suitors — twenty horny and foolish boys dead. To protect my honor, he said.

Afterwards, lying in bed, his eyes on the ceiling, his arm around me, a self-satisfied smile on his lips, I asked him.

"Why?"

"For you," he whispered, leaning over to kiss me.

"For me?" As if I needed protecting from the suitors on this day more than on any other day of the past twenty years.

"For you," he repeated.

"Why else?" I asked.

"Because Antinous threw a stool at me."

"And?"

"And because they stole our swine."

"I see," I said. Words have consequences for women too, so I didn't tell him that if it was swine we wanted, all I'd have had to do was bat my baby-blues and the suitors would have brought swine by the cartloads.

So he's back, after twenty years, and if the rumors around Ithaca can be trusted, he's back after twenty years of tom-cattng with every sweet mortal and goddess from Lesbos to Calypso.

I didn't recognize him when he came back although I should have, even disguised as a beggar. The style. I should have spotted the style — Ulysses all the way — the lying, the pointless disguise, the cock-and-bull story about the coat, the macho fight to the death. No, it was nobody if not my husband.

But I had other things on my mind — like raising a son alone, running a household alone, keeping twenty horny young suitors from tearing the place down or killing each other.

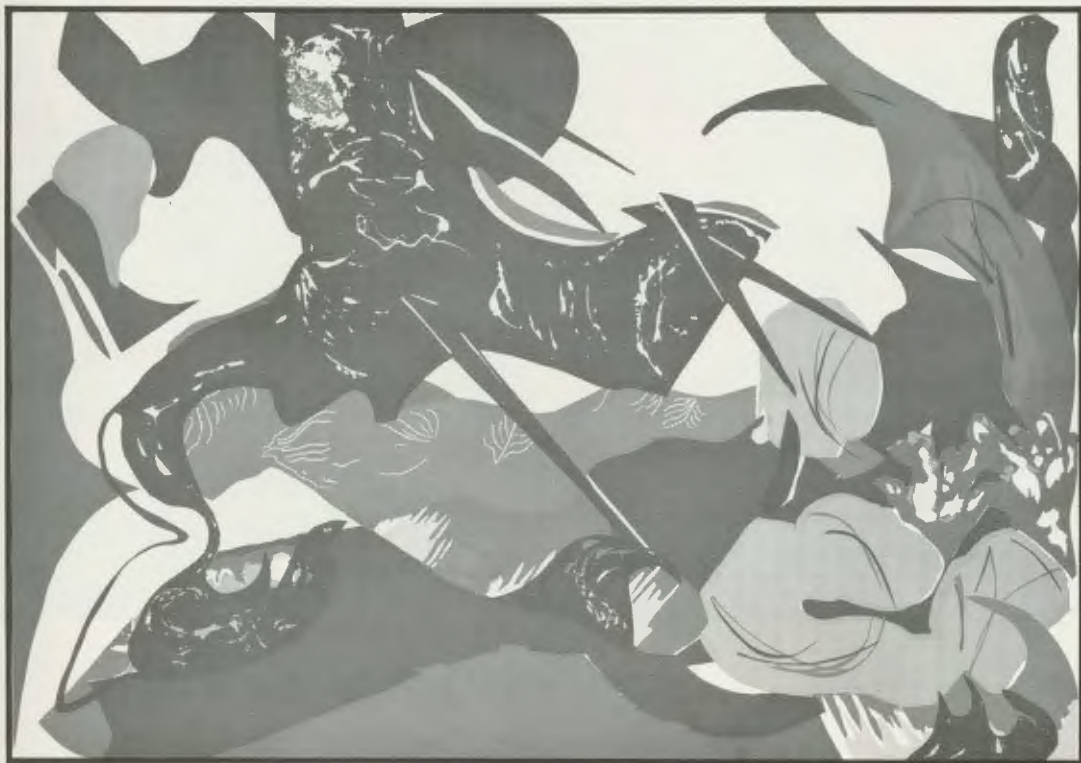
He's back to protect me, he said.

He got lost, he said.

And if I read that look of deep sadness that comes in his eyes when he thinks no one is watching, if I read that look right, I'd say he's back to stay.

I won't say anything just yet.

But now it's my turn.



All for the love of . . .

Lyn Hajek