



## the goddess

84/1-2  
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It came about in my childhood, in the days when I lived most with gods and heroes.

Several spring rains had soaked the earth that year, and several showers revived the vineyards in the midst of the summer. Grapes ripened; olives swelled. Some green grass showed on rocks. Dense shadowy thickets spread around. The sun beamed more brightly but at the same time more mild, the sky stretched like a tent of glittering blue silk. People looked handsomer, finer, and happier to me.

Some fresh, sunny rain sprinkled down upon me. Some undreamed-of horizons of my heaven opened in front of my soul's eyes. Something brilliant approached from the horizon, fluttered around me; breathed its breath into me; waited for me on the threshold of my home; roamed with me on beaches; crooned to me and whispered; sometimes assumed almost visible forms — in the contours of some lonely cliff, in the shadow of some tree trunk, in the shimmering of the air above the sea.

Yes, I lived with heroes, with gods and goddesses.

All this originated with a book, the first book of my father's that I began to read by myself.

I found it — old, dusty, with worm-eaten margins, missing its first page — on the little wooden shelves where our father kept his books, the place we called »the library«.

I still remember the lines that I read first.

And when the fight-minded Menelaus saw that Patroclus fell, killed by the Trojans, he came, all glistening in his arms, and started to defend the dead body of the fallen hero, walking around him in the way a cow moves around her first calf, lowing. And blond Menelaus stretched his spear and his broad shield over the corpse, ready to kill anybody who would dare to come nearer.

And Atreus' son, all glittering in his arms, with his shield extended over dead Patroclus, led me immediately into the fight of the Achaeans and the Trojans. — I even burst out in anger when Panthus' son, Euphorbus, dared to attack the blond hero with words and arms. I shuddered when his spear flew off and hit Menelaus' shield. But when Euphorbus fell and yelled, his weapons clanging on him, his long curls spreading on the dust, then I myself shared the victor's pride and joy...

Out of that enthralling book — a translation of Homer into easy Italian prose — a whole army heroes and gods swarmed to meet me.

Then I lived on a plain trampled by horses' hoofs, furrowed by chariots, sprinkled with blood, between the Achaean ships and the walls of the city of Troy. With the greatest pleasure I ran after Diomedes' chariot while he, standing upon it, cast his spears, killed heroes and wounded gods. I sat with the old Trojans on the city tower, watched the battles beneath the walls, and Helen from Argos, approaching from Paris' court, wrapped in a white sash; looking so like a goddess that the old men kept staring at her in silence without minding the miseries and misfortunes that they had to suffer on account of her. I listened to Nestor's and Odysseus' speeches. I watched how Sarpedon, handsome and young, fell at Patroclus' hand. In the morning I awoke on the bank of the sweet-

-flowing river Scamander, and closed my eyes in Achilles' tent.

With the heroes mingled gods and goddesses, descended from Olympus. In the clamor and roar of the war I discerned the thundering voice of the man-killing Ares and the clattering of arrows in the quiver of god Apollo. I knew how Iris' wings rustled when Zeus sent the divine messenger to people and gods; and how Aphrodite's waistband glittered; and Hera's eyes glimmered. Sitting under olive-trees-watching, as in a dream, how the battle raged and gods glistened in it, enveloped in a light mist — I thought that I saw in the trembling air the helmet-covered head of my dearest goddess, Pallas Athena...

But I wanted also to know what was not in the book: the destruction of Troy, Achilles' death, the return of the Achaean heroes to their country.

I soon knew all this from my father. He was happy to tell me something from his Virgil. But Aeneas' history did not attract me so much. I always lured my father to something else, and I was not satisfied until I knew the fate of the Achaeans. And what did I not hear from him then! How Memnon, the son of Eos and Tithonus was killed by Achilles; about Penthesiles, a virgin heroine who fell at Troy from the hand of Peleus' son, and the nymph Calypso in the rock of crystal; Nausica who on a bright cheerful morning washed her wedding dress on the beach when Odysseus slept somewhere near-by under a bush.

I began to like people because heroes sprang from crowds. I liked the earth from which we lived, on which we walked, with divine traces impressed upon it everywhere; and life, which is the more beautiful the shorter it is, full of battles, victories — and defeats. — I roamed alone on the rocks of the wild sea beach, waving my hands, letting fly imaginary spears and arrows, calling heroes and answering their calls, sharing their duels, and falling wounded and rising again, helped up by some divine hand... continuing in my own way the battles at Troy,

full of joy that I breathed and walked under the sun.

I then spent the first days of my life.

Only the big ship anchored that summer in the port could detach me, for a while, from the dreams of my imagination.

It was an old schooner with two masts, a narrow bow and a broad stern, where, cut in the hull beneath the flag, was the figure of a saint. There were three hatches on the deck: a large one for freight in the middle, and two smaller ones at each end of the ship, the passages towards the captain's and sailors' cabins. The sails were furled and wrapped in wax cloth, the lanterns taken down, the ropes all worn-out, and the rope ladders, which led from the edge of the deck to the top of the masts, were rotten and broken in several places.

As she grew old, our relatives' schooner, which for so many years had carried their wine to Venice and sailed on the northern part of the Adriatic Sea, seemed scared of all those iron ships that hooted and belched smoke from their stacks, that had begun to appear more and more often on the sea, and then she retreated — like a wounded beast into its lair — into the stillness of our port, to end quietly. She had no sailors or captain now; only the old boatswain Žepo guarded her most faithfully and devotedly, waiting for the day when finally a buyer would be found for her, when she would disappear forever.

Almost every day I went to help Žepo water the deck, sprinkle the sides of the ship, draw sea water from her hold with a pump, make coils of ropes and climb up to the mast to repair something. He rewarded me by telling me about his voyages to Venice with the schooner. Thus bent, with his meager, wrinkled face, with his eyes still reddened by sea winds and the sun, and with his small pipe in his gap-toothed mouth, he did not seem akin to the people then living in that region.

»Well, that used to be life! And now? You have to stand with your hands crossed on the ship while the steam from a boiler propels you along. Making a fire as in a kitchen... And is

it any better now? Do we now trade and earn more? How did the old Nazors gain all these vineyards and all these houses and cottages? With this ship!« He yelled and banged his fist upon the hatchway so that all boomed in the empty ship as if she, approving what he said, echoed his words.

»Now«, he continued, »instead of repairing her, their sons want to sell her like an old mule. They never sailed with her nor hunted after fortune; they hardly know her. Want her to serve them with a few of these old nails, ropes, and planks that still remain upon her. The sons don't want, to have anything to do with her, and the grandsons won't even be able to«.

So spoke old Žepo, but I — one of the grandsons — experienced something on her the very next day, that lives in my memory even at this moment.

I saw a goddess upon her.

When I came to shore before the twilight, I saw a whole group of people on board the schooner.

I was about to go back when somebody called me.

»Don't be afraid of us. Come on!«

When I reached them, I recognized two of my relatives from Velo Selo, who were in the company of some other gentlemen, whom I did not know. At first I could not discern them clearly since all of them were sitting between me and the western sun, which blinded my eyes.

»How sun-tanned he is!«

»You don't take care of your shoes. You've torn your coat at the elbow.«

»Sit down, boy! Here's something for you.«

The parson from Velo Selo was cutting a melon with his small knife. Holding one hand on top of it, with the other he was trying to slice it as neatly as possible. But his hand was too small for it, the slices kept falling off by themselves, the melon was opening up and revealing its red heart and scattering black seeds upon the hatchway.

»The first slice is for the lady. There, boy, help her with this one. Look! There she is.«

Only now did I notice the figure of a woman standing on the bow of the ship. She was watching the fiery sunset glowing at the entrance of the small bay. I barely made out a dark silhouette, only the hair around her head looked like flames in the light.

I came up to her. She turned a little.

I stopped dumbfounded, staring at her.

She was tall, in a loose blue dress, watching me with her large eyes full of pride and of sweet melancholy. Her aureate hair was glittering now in the sun. Out of her short sleeves extended her white arms with round elbows, slim fingers, a golden bracelet encircling her left wrist. She observed me with the smile of a benignant empress.

The slice slipped from my hand.

»Oh, you clumsy boy!«

»You wild boy!«

»Here I'm bringing another one.

But she put her hand on my head; and led me there.

»It's not necessary. I'm joining you.«

Her voice seemed something heavenly to me, something never heard before but still familiar.

I was so enraptured that I did not even feel much about the trouble with the unlucky slice. I was only watching her. I looked at her as she walked on the deck, how those people hovered about her, how she sat down and took a slice into her hand, biting with her bright teeth into the fruit, into the mellow, blood-red flesh... Well, all women are not skinny, mere veins and muscles, with their faces tanned and blotted by lichen, with manly gait and movement, exhausted and worn-out by hard work, with their wild-cat eyes, their hair and clothes mostly smelling of thicket and snakes. There she was! She was like women whom I had never seen, but whom I knew. Of their stock was she. Perhaps she was...

But the gentlemen now started to make fun of me.

»You're smarter when you help Žepo on this ship, aren't you, boy?«

»A real cabin boy! This child will run wild in this waste. A little peasant already«, somebody pitied me.

»If we strike the bargain, he'll be saddest with Žepo.«

She looked at me without that mocking benevolence, but also without pity. As if she understood why I watched her so, and discerned in me something that the others could not detect.

I melted away under the grace of her glance.

They continued in this vein, but did not seem to like my not being able to answer them: to defend myself with a good joke, surprise them with naive questions, cheer them with a foolish word — all this would have pleased them much more.

»Look here«, all of a sudden one of them said.

»What would you do if the schooner were yours? Would you sell her?«

»No. I'd repair her. I'd sail.«

»But she has no name of her own. What would you call her?«

I hesitated.

»Well, think it over. What would it say on her bow?«

I looked at the woman. Her eyes encouraged me.

»Helena!« I said.

The woman startled.

»Helena! But this is my name. Which Helena?«

»The Helena of Sparta, the wife of King Menelaus.«

A burst of laughter rang out.

»Ha! Ha! What a boy.«

»The most beautiful name of all for women«, somebody flattered the lady.

»Why are you so astonished? Isn't he Piĵer's son?« the parson said, who was the only man with whom my father could sometimes talk about his old books.

She took my hand. She let me sit down near her and allowed them to tease me no more.

Now the gentlemen laughed at something else.

Žepo was showing a workman round the ship. The latter had surely come with the party. They

came out through the stern opening, and the stranger examined every plank, every beam, screw, and rope. He silently touched everything, both with his hands and, it seemed, with his eyes, mumbling a word or two through his teeth from time to time. But only one word sufficed to make old Žepo nervous. He looked at him askance and answered with a shower of words.

»Ruined! Rotten!... What? Ruined? What? Rotten? I have greased her with tar one hundred times. This one on the stern is the soundest beam. She is not a carrion coffin in the earth; she always sailed in the sun, in sea air. Why would she have decayed... Let my old bones rot in my grave tomorrow!... Rope! Rope! But this is a rope like any other rope on such a ship. In Venice we used to unload full barrels of wine with them. I say: in Venice, on the Riva dei Schiavoni! All the Velo Selo bells could hang on them... May I hang on top of this mast early tomorrow morning!... Why are you looking at it like that? The hatch is firm, of oak... When you are buying a horse, not a single tooth is good; and afterwards: oh, woe! he eats you up!«

»Bravo, Žepo!«

»This is the way to defend one's master's possessions!«

Thus exclaimed some gentlemen though they well knew that the old sailor was not angry with the man, but with someone else, and that he cursed only in order not to weep.

»Look at that chain«, shouted somebody who wanted to hear Žepo's heavier swears.

Everybody smiled, looking at the old man, who threw his frowning glances around himself while his little pipe trembled in his mouth.

»Now he'll... Now...«

But She did not laugh, not even then. Something both melancholy and sweet in her eyes spread over her face, quivered around her mouth.

»Leave it alone now. Tomorrow, when the owner comes.«

She called Žepo to come up to her, and poured some wine in a glass.

»Drink, boatswain.«

But he only gazed at her. I myself saw some antagonism in his eyes, almost hatred. It seemed as though he would refuse the glass that she offered him, holding it with three fingers of her bare white hand with a golden bracelet around her slim wrist.

Her face grew more more serious, and almost more melancholy.

»No, boatswain! I'm not here because of that now. That's not *my* business.«

Žepo took the glass.

I felt that with her grace she protected and cheered again not only me but also the old man. I drew closer, without knowing what I had done. I felt like Telemachus, Odysseus' son, under the protection of Pallas Athena.

That evening she remained in the port, to sleep with a woman in the empty house of one of our relatives. She waited for the gentleman who had to complete the work with the tael-turn workman that so much distressed old Žepo.

The following day I awoke very early, eagerly looking forward to the sunrise. My mother was astonished when I complained about my shoes and my torn sleeve. Only when I told her that I had to go to meet the unknown lady did she give me what I wanted.

I ran towards her.

Oh, how merrily the crickets chirped that morning! The air trembled, blue and serene! The sun shone gloriously! The whole small bay seemed golden. From the bottom end of the port, from Dolac, I could hear shouts and singing. Something unusual was in the air, in all things around me, in myself. I did not wonder at it. That day had to be that way.

I found the door closed, the house silent.

»She's not got up yet«, I thought and sat down on the doorstep.

I waited rather long.

Suddenly it occurred to me that the voices of crickets were more silent now, hoarser and sadder, that all the songs had died in distance; that all murmurs had stopped, the sun began to darken, and some melancholy, sadness, and sorrow

descended upon the beach, around me, into myself.

»She came and vanished. She appeared and disappeared. She's no more«.

Some pain, deep, stinging pain, fell on my heart like a stone. Where were the paths upon which she walked? Which other forms did she assume when she descended among people? Which were the ways leading to Olympus? She had departed... she had not told me the right word... and she had not given me the divine gift.

How ugly the world and the life were!...

I startled.

Her companion approached.

»Where's she?«

»You're waiting for her here?«

»Tell me, where's she?«

»She went out early. Now she's in the field. There, where they're reaping.«

I ran towards Dolac.

From afar I could see her dress all blue, with some yellow dots and dashes that seemed to me like stars strewn upon her. She was sitting upon a sheath of cut wheat, listening to what a farmer's wife was telling her.

As soon as I came up to her, she looked at me protecting her eyes from the sun with her hands, smiling:

»How nice you are today! Sit down by my side.«

When I sat down, I felt her hand on the thick and hard hair upon my head.

From nobody, not even from my mother, had I had such caressing. She talked on with the woman while her fingers stroked my hair slowly and tenderly, from time to time winding a lock around her forefinger.

»Well, this year it is somehow... but if you had been here last year, at this time! This valley seemed scorched; people didn't even reap. All the water had dried up. Grapes tiny, hardly ripe. Where did God place us? You see, rock, rock everywhere... Real barrens, without grass, without water. Even this year! Look only at those small ears of wheat!«

The plain seemed endless to me, broad like a sea, and ears high, with stems of gold, with grains of pearls; no rocks or weeds around Dolac; and all around, brooks of brawling and bickering water running.

»Well, kind lady, if you knew our troubles and our struggles! The Boras in winter, and this terrible sun in summer. You only work your fingers to the bone, and for nothing.«

To me, with that hand in my hair, at that moment, it seemed that there had never been any pain or misery in this world. The Boras would blow never again, and the sun was so mild, this earth so fruitful and yielding.

»I'm fifty, and this is the first time I've seen any kind of harvest in this valley. It's seldom sown here. The soil remains waste, bare like this palm. This year I cannot wonder enough. How's that? I don't know.«

But I knew. All this derived from her. She was here now... She! The wastes would become green. Grass would hide the stones, and people would be happy.

»Give me a sickle!«

Her hand left my head.

She stood up. She soon stooped, with her left hand she grasped wheat, cut with the sickle, and threw the first handful upon the ground.

»Gather it and tie up!« she told me without turning her head, but I discerned it in her voice, she was overwhelmed with joy.

She walked, stooped, and moved hands in a rhythm that made her work easy and quick, and with each motion the tresses upon her head trembled, and sparks flickered in them in the sun.

»Women, sing!«

Then the women looked happily at her and began to sing.

I walked behind her, gathering her handfuls and assembling them into sheaths. I counted them aloud, while she spoke:

»That's too little. Some more! Some more!«

That lasted for some while. She reaped as if she had had a wager with somebody.

»Sing! Sing!«

But she finally stopped. She straightened up in a lively manner. She turned.

She was flushed in her face, with drops of sweat on her forehead, younger, more beautiful than ever. All that sorrow that always lay in the depth of her eyes had disappeared. She breathed powerfully, her mouth half opened. The first button beneath her throat was now undone. A red poppy petal stuck in her hair.

She returned the sickle and sat down on a stack.

»How beautiful it is! How I'd love a drink now!«

But there was no water in the field.

»Boy, I'm going to perish with thirst«, she said playfully.

»Right away!« I said and ran towards the houses. I drew water from our small well.

When I returned, she as still sitting, raising her tresses.

I extended the jug towards her.

She probably just wanted to have a close look at what kind of water it was, but when she raised the jug high up and tilted it, a jet of water spilled upon the earth, sparkling in the sun. Then I remembered the heroes of Achaea who, before they satisfied their thirst, had poured their beverage from a jug, raising their eyes and hearts to gods.

I followed all her movements as if I knew that now she would tell, discover, or give me something.

She brought the jug to her mouth and started to drink. She drank slowly, and long, leaning her head backwards and raising the jug higher and higher. Suddenly the vessel hid her face, and her throat beamed in the sun.

Naked, marble-white, hardly marked by thin blue veins, with muscles trembling lightly under her skin, encircled by an invisible necklace of tenderness and grace, her throat quivered like a pigeon's, rising and falling while she slowly swallowed the water. A three-cornered dimple at the base of her throat was filled with a thin shadow. I stood as if looking at something mysterious and sacred not seen by anyone; and for the first time in my life I felt-though uncon-

sciously — the beauty of a woman's body; the first ray of beauty beamed upon me.

When she put the jug down, she placed her hand upon her breast and sighed sweetly.

»Never in my life have I drunk so. Thank you, my little hero!«

Then she said again:

»How shall I reward you now?«

She caught my hands and drew me towards herself.

She kissed my mouth.

»Oh! Not like that! Return the kiss!«

We kissed each other, long and sweetly.

I felt drunk. Each vein in me trembled. Great bliss entered the depth of my soul.

The goddess still held my hands.

»Now we'll walk through the field. Together.«

»Yes. But you should keep a scepter in your hand. You know, like the king whose picture is on Achilles' shield!«

I wanted to talk to her about that book and about all I had almost seen and heard.

I had scarcely begun when something stopped us.

»Helena! Helena!«

A gentleman was walking on the winding road leading from the nearby town. The workman and several grown-up boys followed him.

»Helena!«

She jumped up and started to wave her hands happily.

»Right away! I'm running.«

»Who's that?« I asked almost angrily.

She let me sit down upon a stack, stroked my cheek, touched my nose lightly, and said roguishly:

»Menelaus of Sparta, my husband! Goodbye!«

Then she turned and ran across the field.

I watched aghast while she was climbing up the side of the road, running to that man and throwing herself around his neck.

That afternoon I was a little feverish.

The following day, late in the afternoon, I was hardly able to get out of the house, away from my mother.

When I arrived at the shore, the schooner was no longer there. Žepo was sitting on a beam looking at the sea, where the ship had previously anchored. He sat silent and motionless, but his small pipe again trembled in his mouth.

»Žepo!«

He did not answer.

»But where's she?«

»Where? What do you want? She was all rotten and decayed. That's why he bought her. He wants rotten ships. A strange buyer, isn't he? Sound money for rotten ships... and then: *detto, fatto!* I brought the boys. Anchors away. Hoist the sails. It's dawn. We're sailing. Žepo, goodbye! Greet the owners... I tell you it was like that!«

»But She? She?«

»Oh, you mean the one who wanted to buy people's souls with a glass of wine? She went away too, with the ship.«

»But where to?«

»I don't care where to! I didn't even ask her.«

»What now, Žepo?«

»What now? What now?« he shouted angrily as if I had done him some wrong. »I'm returning all I've earned from her these fifty years. Here, you see!«

He threw his little pipe indignantly into the sea and then got up and walked away.

We saw him no more in the port.

But I have always remembered the Goddess, never losing the memory into the sea of forgetfulness.

She still lives within me.

Whenever I tire on the ways I must follow, I suddenly stand up as if I've noticed the white throat of the Goddess again, raised to drink the water drawn from the small well near my father's house.