

ADONIS

When Pygmalion sculpted a marble woman, fell in love with her and called her Galatea, he prayed to Aphrodite, the eternal goddess of ephemeral beauty. Aphrodite answered his prayer. Galatea's stone softened into flesh, and she became a woman of startling beauty and passion.

The years went by and the Queen of the Underworld, Persephone, called the lovers to her in death. But Galatea's beauty and passion lived on, in all her descendants. Among them were Kinyras, king of Cyprus, and his daughter Myrrha.

The women of Cyprus were devoted to Demeter, the Great Mother. On one of Her holidays, mothers and daughters went into the forest together and found a wild sow on the point of giving birth. She was so pregnant they could see the little piglets wriggling under her skin. They prayed to the sow and called her: Demeter, goddess of birth and harvest. Then they midwifed her, and then they took her squealing piglets and carried them into the Caves of Demeter.

There is a gorge where a sacred river plunges to the sea. That river comes out from the dark underworld, deathly cold. It passes through caverns in the earth, and they are sacred to Demeter, who is Mother Earth. In the caverns, the women put the

newborn piglets into baskets woven out of wheat and offered them to the earth, to the Great Mother.

On the way back from the caves, Myrrha was dancing and singing with the other young women. Her mother gazed at her and said, "You are beautiful, Myrrha! More beautiful than -- Aphrodite."

"Mother!", Myrrha said, "do not say that!"

But her mother insisted: "More beautiful than Aphrodite!" And Myrrha smiled. So the power of Aphrodite was stirred up in her.

Another festival of the Great Mother began. Once again wives separated from their husbands, and mothers and daughters went to the sacred caverns. There they found their wheaten baskets, filled with rotten flesh. They mingled it with earth and went to the fields to strew it on the soil. They were wearing crescents of wheat in their hair.

That was how the festival began, and it went on for twelve days and nights. But Myrrha was not with her mother. All through the twelve nights of the festival she did not leave her father's bed. They were the most beautiful of Galatea's descendants, and Aphrodite's power drew them together again and again.

After the festival, Kinyras welcomed his wife back to his bed. But in Myrrha a child was growing. And when she could not hide that she was on the point of giving birth, Kinyras looked at his daughter and realized or remembered what had happened. He drew his sword and rushed at her in murderous rage.

Myrrha ran toward the sacred river, calling the gods to help her. "Let me not die", she cried, "and let me not live!" Her prayer was heard, and as her father stared and started back, Myrrha's feet became roots in the ground. Bark, branches and leaves covered her, and her tears became bitter, fragrant, precious drops. She had become the first myrrh tree. Her tears are still precious. They are made into incense for offering to the gods, or perfume for arousing love. Then Kinyras saw a wild sow rush out from the caverns in the earth -- a sow with tusks, that were shaped like crescents. She charged at the new tree, buried her tusks in what had been Myrrha's belly, and sliced the tree open. A laughing baby boy fell out, beautiful as his father and mother, golden in the sunlight and dripping with myrrh. As he fell, before the sow could touch him, beauty too great for mortal eyes enfolded the boy and blinded Kinyras. When his eyes became clear again his son was gone.

It was Aphrodite who had caught the baby as he fell. She carried him down deep into the gorge, where the river became a throbbing, thundering cascade pouring down into the sea. There she cradled the baby in her warm arms. She looked deep into his eyes and smiled at her beautiful reflection there, and kissed him on the mouth. She murmured sweet nothings to him and gave him a name: Adonis. Then Aphrodite uncovered her breasts and let the baby nurse.

As he drank her rich, sweet milk, flowers began to bloom around them, filling the gorge with fragrance. And so Adonis' first memory was that fragrance, and the comfort of Aphrodite's

arms and breasts, and her flowing hair tickling him.

With more tenderness than any mere mother, Aphrodite nourished her child. She played baby games of teasing and caressing. She bathed with him in the sacred river. She watched him grow stronger and more handsome day by day. When the time came to wean him, she frowned, and wondered how best to protect him from the world and keep him to herself. Then she wrapped Adonis in her perfumed robes and followed the river upstream. She stepped quickly through the caves of Demeter and then, at the cold sources of the river, into the realm of her sister Persephone.

As she entered the underworld, Aphrodite's steps slowed and stiffened. Her robes lost their fragrance and her gold ornaments turned grey. Her eyes became dull and closed. Bit by bit her soft skin and her flowing hair turned shadowy and cold. It was truly as a shadow of herself that Aphrodite approached her sister. Only Adonis, in her arms, stayed rosy and warm and the scent of myrrh clung to him.

At last, Aphrodite was standing before her sister's throne. Persephone sat deathly still as always, shadowy queen of a shadowy world. Had Aphrodite not been standing, and holding Adonis in her arms, the two sisters would have been mirror images of each other. When Aphrodite spoke, her rich, full voice had become a quavering whisper. "Sister", she said, "accept this child to distract you until he becomes a man. Then he would be mine."

In silence Persephone stretched out her cold arms and sat

Adonis on her lap. To her touch, he felt burning hot. Her knees shook. She nodded.

When Aphrodite left the underworld, the blood again ran warm in her veins. As soon as the sunlight caressed her, she was once again golden Aphrodite, the delight of the universe. But the flowers by the river were gone.

So Adonis spent his boyhood in the land of the dead, where there's no playing and no growing. No doubt Persephone wrapped him in shadows like a cocoon, hidden away, growing without knowing that he grew. She kept him hidden and she waited while a desire she had never known grew deep inside her.

When just enough years had gone by, Persephone unwrapped the cocoon of shadows and uncovered a naked, glorious adolescent.

Both of them were filled with desires they had no way of understanding. Persephone put Adonis's hands on her shoulders and made him strip away her queenly robes. Clouds formed around them and hid them, and she taught his warm strength cold secret ways of love.

All this time Aphrodite was waiting and dreaming, till her sweet dreams became fearful and jealous. Then, from deep inside herself, out of memory and anticipation, she drew such power that anything that saw her went mad with pleasure. Radiating welcome and delight, she hurried through the caves into the underworld, and this time Aphrodite kept her power and did not slow down.

The grey underworld filled with colour. The shades began to breathe, laugh, embrace. Songs filled the silence. And in the arms of Adonis, Persephone herself began to change. Adonis was

terrified at first, and then flooded with pleasure, as he felt his lover's cold skin become warm and soft, and her hair cascading around him. For the first time her eyes gazed into his. "No", Persephone said, "don't want me like this", but her whispering voice had become rich and musical and Adonis was kissing her wildly.

Persephone pulled herself away from him and pushed him back into the shadows. But the shadows dissipated. Aphrodite was standing there with the light of dawn playing on her skin as always. The two sisters faced each other like golden, radiant mirror images. "He is mine", Aphrodite said, and at first Persephone could only echo: "Mine."

Then they fought as only sisters can fight, with harsh, biting words. But as they quarrelled Persephone wrapped herself in her grey robes and composed herself, and slowly became her cold, deathly self again. And when Aphrodite saw how Adonis was looking back and forth at the two of them, she knew that he did not belong only to her.

Aphrodite sighed. "Sister", she said, "we must share him." Then she added, "But perhaps Mother Demeter has a claim too? Remember he was conceived on Her festival, and She had a hand in his birth."

"Mother is far greater than this", Persephone said.

"Yes", said Aphrodite, "far be it from us to offer Her our light pleasures. But shouldn't we leave a possibility?"

And so they agreed. Adonis would spend a third of his time with Persephone, a third with Aphrodite, and a third -- however

he chose. Just what cunning Aphrodite had wanted.

Then she wrapped Adonis in her perfumed robes and they followed the sacred river downstream. By the time they reached the caves of Demeter, they were embracing without restraint.

Eternal Aphrodite had not changed since Adonis nursed at her breasts. All his memories of her as his mother mingled with all the desires she awakened in him now, and with knowing: it was in his power to give her pleasure. And Aphrodite, enjoying Adonis with all her senses, knew how greatly he had changed. They made love in the sunlight, laughing, overwhelming each other with pleasure. Around their joyful lovemaking, flowers grew. Green leaves and all colours of blossoms covered the walls of the gorge. The flowers bloomed, grew over each other, were choked by each other and made room for new flowers, until the air was intoxicating.

A year and another year passed, and Adonis went back and forth along the sacred river. The dead times of the year were the ones that he spent with Persephone in dark, secret love. But as Aphrodite had planned, he forgot that a third of his time was free. In ever-new pleasure, he spent two-thirds of his year with Aphrodite. When they were not making love they were speaking about love, exploring the flowery gorge down to the seashore and bathing in the sea, and the whole world filled with the colour and fragrance of flowers.

The harvests of wheat and the other crops of Demeter became choked with blossoms. Men and women who should have been at work in the fields lay down to play instead. Wives were staying with

their husbands and neglecting the festivals of the Great Mother.

It was an anniversary of the day when Myrrha's mother spoke those rash words. Aphrodite and her lover lay dreaming among the flowers. Out of the caverns at the head of the gorge came a wild sow, so pregnant the little piglets were wriggling under her skin, a sow with crescent-shaped tusks. She blinked in the bright sunlight, wrinkled her snout at the smell of flowers, and charged at Adonis.

Adonis woke up, and sprang to his feet, as the beast rushed toward him. Behind him Aphrodite still lay dreaming. In that moment, how many thoughts rushed through his mind! He could run, but that would expose his beloved to the sow's tusks. But he knew the animal wanted him. If he ran, she would pursue him. Most likely she could make him run wherever she wanted, and trap him. Suddenly it seemed to Adonis that all his life he had been put where someone else wanted him, handed back and forth from one to another.

As the sow closed in on him, Adonis made his choice. He would be free. He would stand his own ground. He stretched out his strong young arms and caught the sow by the head, stopping her charge. His muscles swelled. He felt an exhilaration he had never known before, and a thrill of freedom. In his youthful power he forced the sow backward, keeping her at arm's length, her tusks away from him. His feet dug into the ground, his hands closed tighter and tighter around the sow's throat, scarcely feeling the stings of her sharp bristles. He would choke her or break her neck. She struggled, but he was stronger.

Aphrodite woke smiling from her dreams and saw her beloved in this death-struggle. She cried out with fear. For a moment, Adonis looked toward her and at that moment the sow surged forward and buried her tusks in his belly. Grunting with desire and rage, she moved her head up and down and sliced his body open. Then the sow shuddered and began to give birth.

Aphrodite flung her arms around Adonis and stared into his dimming eyes. She held him to her breasts, her fragrant hair cascaded around him, and Adonis' last memory mingled with his first. Already Persephone, queen of death, was claiming her own. All the flowers withered.

The sow's attention turned to her thirsty newborn brood. Slowly, she withdrew, rolled away and offered her nipples to the newborn piglets. In the underworld, Persephone welcomed Adonis to her cold embrace, and in the sacred gorge, Aphrodite alone mourned his dead body. She tore her hair, scratched her face, kissed him again and again. His face was wet with her tears. When Aphrodite's tears trickled to the ground, they became white wind-flowers. Where her tears mingled with the blood of Adonis, the flowers were red. But scarcely had their blossoms opened when the wind tore their petals away.

The sacred river ran red with blood.

Aphrodite, do not mourn always, though we mourn with you year after year. The women weep for Adonis as you did, the wind-flowers blossom and the wind tears their petals away, and the sacred river runs red with his blood. But doesn't Adonis come back to you? Don't we call him back with our stories and our

songs? Doesn't he come back to you of his own free will, truly a man now, worthy of your love? We welcome Adonis back to you year after year, and the seasons of his return, Aphrodite, are times when the sun wakes up passions, when flowers fill the world with colour and rich fragrance, and when the scent of myrrh and every perfume of love becomes irresistible.

Aphrodite, you who are all beauty and sweet deceitfulness and pleasure, please help this story of you to charm the hearts of my listeners. Let it give them pleasure and stir their passions, and at other times and in other places I will tell more stories of you, and praise you to everyone who hears me.