



Cupid and Psyche

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Cupid was a mama's boy. It wasn't his fault. She wouldn't let go of him. She practically hogtied him with her apron strings. You know how mamas are about their babies. So what if Cupid was already thirty-something! He would always be her own little cherub.

Cupid had a hard time shaking that image. Let's face it, Cupid has been the official poster child for Valentine's Day for several thousand years. Cute little naked baby, chubby cheeks, curly locks. Teeny-tiny wings, itsy-bitsy bow with miniature arrows. Goes around shooting people with his arrows, and they fall in love and live happily ever after. Sound about right?

Well, forget about it!

Cupid grew up a long time ago. Grew up tall, blond, and handsome. Still had those wings and still shot people with those love arrows. In fact, he was the god of love, but his mama's apron strings were tying him down.

Cupid's mama was Aphrodite, and she had problems of her own. Years ago she had won a golden apple in a beauty contest, and she figured that settled the beauty question once and for all. So if she heard of another woman who was supposed to be really beautiful, she'd pitch a fit. Then she'd send her son Cupid out to ruin that woman's life with his bow and arrows.

Let me tell you about the power of those arrows. If you got shot with one, you'd turn into a seething mass of desire, a hunka-hunka burnin' love. Then you'd start to put the moves on the very next creature you laid eyes on. Let's say you were out having a business lunch with your boss,

and you got hit by one of Cupid's arrows. Because of the scene you'd make right there on the spot, you could lose your job—or get a great big pay raise. Either way, they sure wouldn't let you back in the Burger King anymore. You see what I mean about those arrows?

Well, there was a mortal girl named Psyche who was absolutely gorgeous. She had two older sisters. Remember the two sisters in "Cinderella"? How about the two sisters in "Beauty and the Beast"? OK, Psyche's sisters—same song, second verse. Anyway, Psyche was so beautiful people began to call her the "new and improved Aphrodite." That really got on Aphrodite's nerves a right smart. When her jealousy hit the overflow mark, she called to her son: "Cupid!"

"Yes, Mama?"

"Cupid, I need you to teach that little trollop¹ named Psyche a lesson."

"Sure thing, Mama."

"I want you to shoot her with one of your arrows. And I want the next thing she sees to be the ugliest creature in the universe. She'll fall in love with it and live a life of shame, degradation, and misery."

"All right, Mama. How about a giant two-headed spider?"

"Not bad enough."

"How about a Cyclops?"

"Not nearly bad enough."

"A Minotaur, Mama?"

"Son, lots of women are married to guys that are half-bull, half-man! What I want is a Texas redneck. I want one with tobacco juice running out the corners of his mouth, a beer can in his hand, and his belly hanging over his belt. I want a muddy pickup truck with a gun rack in the back window and a big ol' hound dog in the front seat. Am I making myself clear, Son?"

"Yes, ma'am. I've never seen you this mad before, but you got it!"

Cupid found Psyche taking a nap beside a stream. He hid behind a bush, got his bow and arrow lined up, and waited for the first pickup truck to come along. Then Psyche rolled over and Cupid got a good look at her face. "Wow!" he said, jumping back. "This is one beautiful girl." As he jumped back, he stabbed himself in the leg with his very own arrow.

That was Cupid's first experience with the idea that what goes around comes around. He fell crazy in love with Psyche, but he couldn't do a

¹ trollop: vulgar woman

thing about it because his mama might be watching. So Cupid hot-winged it outta there and hid for a while, trying to figure out how he could marry Psyche and still keep his mama happy—'cause if Mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy. Meanwhile he laid some magic on Psyche so she would stay unmarried while he worked out a plan. He wasn't taking any chances on losing her.

Time passed and both of Psyche's older sisters got married to kings. Psyche was still as lovely as ever, but no suitors came to call. Psyche's parents got so worried, they went to an oracle—you know, a fortuneteller—and asked for advice. The oracle told them the sad and mysterious news: Psyche was destined to marry a non-human winged creature with a poisonous bite. The fortune included instructions to buy her a black wedding dress and leave her on a mountaintop where her husband could find her.

When the parents broke the news to Psyche, she began to weep quietly. Her two older sisters carried on like they really cared. "Oh, Psyche! What a shame. You have to marry a monster. Maybe it's a dragon. Maybe it's a great big snake. Married to a snake. Imagine that! What a shame, especially with you being so beautiful and all. We're really sorry. Well, goodbye and good luck. Maybe we'll see you later. Maybe not!"

Psyche put on her black bridal gown and was delivered to the designated mountaintop to wait for her husband. Suddenly a great wind swept her off the mountain and carried her to the place where her husband lived. It turned out to be the most luxurious place Psyche had ever seen. The facilities included exquisitely maintained gardens, crystal-clear fountains, and a magnificent palace inlaid with gold and silver and ivory. Within the palace was a twenty-four-hour gourmet kitchen. Invisible servants met Psyche's every need. And each night, in utter darkness, her husband came to Psyche's room, held her close, and told her how much he adored her. As kind as he was, he never allowed Psyche to see him. She promised she wouldn't try. Each morning, Psyche woke up smiling. Life just doesn't get any better than this, she thought.

Months went by, and one day Psyche received a note from her sisters. They wanted to drop by for a visit, someday when her husband wasn't home. They weren't fond of snakes, they said. That night in the darkness when she told her husband, he said to her, "Not a good idea. Those sisters of yours are just trouble waiting for a place to happen."

"Perhaps they've changed. Besides, they're family. You know what they say, 'You can pick your friends . . .' Oh, never mind. Anyway, I miss them . . . sort of. It's just a short visit. What bad could happen?"

"OK, but I hope you know what you're doing," said the monster-husband. "A word to the wise: If they try to talk you into taking a peek at me, don't do it. Otherwise, it's all over for us. I'm a very private person. I'm in a . . . a witness protection program. You can love me without looking at me, can't you? Trust me on this."

The next day the wind shuttle was arranged and the two sisters showed up for their visit. They looked around at the facilities and said, "What's going on here? This place is ten times nicer than ours, and we're married to kings! Are you gonna try to make us believe you get all this from a snake? Never heard of a snake this rich. You sure he's a snake and not just some big west Texas billionaire trying to hide from the government? What's that you say? You've never even laid eyes on him because he only shows up here when it's dark? Oooo, baby sister, you *do* have a problem. Everything that goes around in the dark ain't Santa Claus. No telling what kind of a creep he is. You better get a look at this monster and terminate him before he does it to you first."

By the time the sisters left, Psyche was terribly upset and confused. She said to herself, "Maybe I need to shed a little light on this situation and snitch a peek at him. I know I promised I wouldn't, but what's he trying to hide?"

That night, Psyche took an oil lamp and a knife to bed with her. After her husband arrived and fell asleep, she got out of bed, lit the lamp, held the knife ready, and leaned over the sleeping form. "Wow!" she said, jumping back. "This is one good-looking monster! Wait a minute, this is . . . it's . . . no, it can't be. Cupid, the god of love? And he's mine?"

Now it so happened that while she was jumping back, Psyche sloshed the oil in that lamp. A drop of it ran down the side of the lamp and fell on Cupid's shoulder and burned him, ever so slightly. His eyes opened, and when he saw Psyche looking at him, he said, "*Sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds. Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.*" Which meant: "You didn't trust me, so I can't trust you, and now I gotta go."

Cupid flew out the window, and so did Psyche's happiness. She was miserable. Her curiosity and suspicions had ruined her idyllic life. The next

morning, she set out searching for Cupid. She searched for days but found no trace of him. Finally, in desperation, she went to his mama for help.

Meanwhile, guess who was giving aid and comfort to her baby boy? Mama! And she began to suspect that his melancholy mood was more than homesickness. Eventually it dawned on Aphrodite that Cupid was pining for Psyche. She suggested that he take a vacation at one of her resorts and try to forget whatever garbage was cluttering his head.

The next morning when Aphrodite looked out her window and saw Psyche coming, she got mad enough to eat nails. By now she had learned all the details of Cupid's scheme to keep his marriage to this mortal a secret. Aphrodite said to herself, "I'll work this girl half to death and I won't feed her much. She'll get skinny and ugly and Cupid will forget all about her. Oh yes! The golden apple and my son are still mine!"

But what Aphrodite said to Psyche was this: "Sure, hon, I'll be glad to help you find Cupid. Tell you what, you do a few little tasks for me, and I'll put the word out to all my contacts. My sweet boy will be so happy that you came to see me."

Aphrodite took Psyche into a room where a huge box sat in the middle of the floor. "Look at this, hon. Somebody mixed up my grain shipment from Demeter. If you can't get it all sorted into appropriate piles for me by morning, I'll see what I can do about finding Cupid." Aphrodite walked out and locked the door.

Psyche looked in that box, and it was full of cereal. There were corn flakes and bran flakes and wheat flakes. There were Sugar Pops and Cheerios and Count Choculas. There were Rice Chex and Grape-Nuts and bite-size, frosted Shredded Wheats. And they were in total disarray. Psyche took out a handful and began making piles. It seemed to take forever. She could never finish the whole box by morning. Just then, an army of ants crawled under the door. One tiny ant with sergeant stripes on its front legs stepped forward and saluted. "At your service, ma'am. Please step aside. All right, soldiers, let's move it!" Those ants formed themselves into twenty columns, scaled the side of that box, and began sorting the cereals. In short order, the job was done. Hmm, now who do you suppose was behind this helpful little trick?

Aphrodite walked back into the room the next morning and got so mad she wanted to slap Psyche into next week. But she didn't. Instead she gave Psyche two more impossible tasks to do, involving a herd of terrorist sheep who happened to have golden fleece and a goblet of mineral water located atop an ice-covered mountain. With the help of various

species of talking plants and animals, sent by a certain secret pal, Psyche was able to pull off both jobs in record time.

Now Aphrodite was really [ticked off]! But she just smiled through her clenched teeth and said, "Psyche, go to Hades! . . . and get me a box of beauty."

"I beg your pardon?" Psyche was certain she had misunderstood.

"Beauty. A box of it. Hades' wife, Persephone Korene, gets it for me wholesale. I'm feeling a little frayed around the edges, need to restore myself, so hurry and get back here with it. And whatever you do, *don't* open up that box and borrow any of my beauty. Maybe I'd better say that again, dear. *Don't* open up that box."

Psyche set off, looking for the road to Hades' underground kingdom. She passed a talking tower. What luck! The tower told her to take two quarters and three dog biscuits with her. "Never mind why, just do it!" said the tower as it pointed her in the right direction. She came to a river called the Styx. A ferryboat driver named Charon offered her a ride. Halfway across, he stopped the boat and held out his hand. Psyche placed a dog biscuit in his palm. Charon snarled, "Cut the funny stuff, lady."

"Oops! Sorry," said Psyche, switching the biscuit for a quarter. Charon then took her to the other side of the river, where she was greeted by Cerberus, a three-headed dog.

"Let me guess. Biscuits!" she tossed the doggie treats to the three heads and dashed through the gates to Hades' kingdom. She got the box from Persephone Korene and hurried out past the dog while the mouths were still chewing. She crossed the river, using her last quarter, and started up the road to Aphrodite's house. Along the way, Psyche said to herself, "I'm feeling a little frayed around the edges myself. I look like something the cat dragged in and the dog wouldn't eat. Cupid will never recognize me like this. I could use a little beauty right now. I wonder why I'm not supposed to open up this box?"

(Yo, Psyche! Does the name Pandora ring a bell?)

Psyche went right ahead and opened up the box . . . and there wasn't any beauty in it at all! That box was full of eternal sleep. The sleep jumped out, grabbed Psyche, and she dropped like a rock.

Now who do you suppose had been watching and providing assistance to Psyche all this time? Yes, indeed, it was ol' Mama's Boy himself. He had gotten himself some therapy and decided it was time to cut the apron strings. He went straight to the board of directors on Mount Olympus and got their stamp of approval for his marriage to

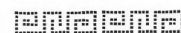
Psyche. They even granted her immortality—a favor rarely given to a human. They also instructed Aphrodite to find herself a new project! With the bargain made, Cupid flew down to Psyche, wiped the sleep from her eyes and put it back in the box. Then, ever so gently, he nicked her with his arrow. (Guess he wasn't taking any chances.) He looked into her eyes and said:

*Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds.*

And Psyche smiled at him and said:

*O no; it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests, and is never shaken.²*

And that's the way it's been from that day to this for Cupid and Psyche. ∞



| 2 passage quoted from Shakespeare's Sonnet 116