Echoes from Mt. Olympus

Hail, children of Zeus! Tell of the everlasting gods. Tell how, in the beginning, gods and earth came to be, and rivers, and the boundless sea with its raging swell, and the gleaming stars, and the wide heaven above, and the gods who were born of them, givers of good things; and how those gods divided their dignities, and also how at the first they took Olympus.

from the Theogony
The All-Too-Human Gods

There is a lot of talk these days about dysfunctional families. These are families that simply don’t work, that are troubled in one way or the other. They do more harm than good, we are told, and they are a blight on our time. From all the hype about families lately, one might think they are a fairly new thing.

But dysfunctional families have been around for a long time. In fact, in the days of ancient Greece and Rome, the universe itself was said to have been run by one of the most troubled families ever. The gods who lived on Mt. Olympus, that fabled peak in northern Greece, were a family counselor’s worst nightmare.

Consider Zeus, the god of lightning and the ruler of the heavens. He was the head of the family, and he ruled wisely in some matters. But he was also an unfaithful husband who fathered numerous children by women he never married—and sometimes never saw again.

His wife, Hera (who was also his sister, by the way), was understandably jealous. No one can blame her for punishing her husband whenever she could. Unfortunately, she was also cruel to his unwitting mortal lovers. And she made life miserable for those children, including the hero Hercules and the vine god Dionysus.

Few of the other gods were models of good behavior. Hermes, the messenger god, was sometimes a thief. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, was unhappily married to the lame god of the forge, Hephaestus. So she had a sordid fling with Ares, the god of war.

When Hades, the ruler of the dead, decided to take a wife, he seized the young goddess Persephone by force. The grief of Persephone’s mother, Demeter, brought winter to the world and almost destroyed humankind.

Indeed, trouble often came to men and women when the gods misbehaved. Like Zeus, the god Apollo sometimes ruined the lives of mortal lovers. And when a
hunter accidentally saw the goddess Artemis bathing, she had him torn to pieces by his own dogs. Likewise, when gods like Athena and Poseidon were unhappy, war and destruction actually broke out in the world.

The only Olympian deity who did no harm was Hestia, the kindly goddess of the hearth. Is it any surprise that there are no interesting stories told about her?

And what of the people who worshipped these troublesome gods? Interestingly, both the ancient Greeks and Romans rose to great heights of civilization and culture.

During the fifth century B.C., the city of Athens became the most powerful city-state in Greece. It achieved great things in sculpture, architecture, drama, and philosophy. It even produced the world’s first experiment in democratic government.

Today, this “Golden Age” of Athens is regarded as one of the high points of civilization. And yet Athens’ citizens never gave up their reverence for the often ill-behaved Olympian gods.

Eventually, Rome replaced Greece as the center of civilization. Not the most original people in the world, the Romans adopted the Olympian gods as their own. They did, however, change most of the deities’ names. For example, Zeus became Jove, and Hera became Juno. In this book, you may notice inconsistencies in the spelling of names and even in facts from tale to tale. This is the result of many tellers telling many tales over many years.

By 27 B.C., the Romans ruled the greatest empire in the ancient world. During the following two centuries, the world was largely without war. This era was known as the Pax Romana, or “Roman Peace.” The cultural achievements of Rome came to rival those of Athens. And yet, like the Greeks before them, the Romans honored the unruly Olympians.

What all these great civilizations had in common is that they revered what we would now call a dysfunctional family. Why? Perhaps they saw something of their own faults and frailties in the Olympian deities. For even at their heights, the Greek and Roman civilizations were far from perfect. The Athenian Golden Age was marred by frequent wars, and the Pax Romana was an age of dictatorial emperors. Moreover, both Greeks and Romans kept slaves and treated women poorly.

For all their greatness, the Greeks and Romans may have learned humility from their gods. And although we no longer believe in the Olympians today, perhaps they can teach us a similar lesson. We are, after all, only human—much like the gods themselves.
Gallery of Gods and Goddesses

Zeus
Greek Name: Zeus
Roman Name: Jupiter, Jove
Job Description: king of all gods; god of heavens and earth; ruler of weather and giver of justice
Symbols and Emblems: thunderbolt, eagle, woodpecker, oak tree

Hera
Greek Name: Hera
Roman Name: Juno
Job Description: queen of the gods; goddess of marriage and childbirth
Symbols and Emblems: cow, peacock, lion

Poseidon
Greek Name: Poseidon
Roman Name: Neptune
Job Description: god of the sea and earthquakes
Symbols and Emblems: trident, dolphin, horse, bull

Demeter
Greek Name: Demeter
Roman Name: Ceres
Job Description: goddess of earth, agriculture, and fertility
Symbols and Emblems: sheaf of wheat, cornucopia, poppy flower

Aphrodite
Greek Name: Aphrodite
Roman Name: Venus
Job Description: goddess of love and beauty
Symbols and Emblems: dove, sparrow, seagull, rose, and myrtle shrub

Apollo
Greek Name: Apollo
Roman Name: Apollo
Job Description: god of sunlight, prophecy, medicine, archery, poetry, music, and unmarried men
Symbols and Emblems: laurel wreath, mouse, golden chariot, golden lyre, golden bow and arrows

Artemis
Greek Name: Artemis
Roman Name: Diana
Job Description: goddess of moon hunting, and unmarried women
Symbols and Emblems: she-bear, silver chariot, silver bow and arrow, crescent-moon crown

Hephaestus
Greek Name: Hephaestus
Roman Name: Vulcan
Job Description: god of fire, craftsmen, and metalworkers
Symbols and Emblems: quail

Athena
Greek Name: Athena/Athene
Roman Name: Minerva
Job Description: goddess of wisdom, courage, and war
Symbols and Emblems: owl, olive tree, Medusa-head shield

Hermes
Greek Name: Hermes
Roman Name: Mercury
Job Description: god of trade, travel, and theft; messenger of gods; conductor of souls to underworld
Symbols and Emblems: winged headband and winged sandals, staff with two snakes twined around it, crane

Dionysus
Greek Name: Dionysus
Roman Name: Bacchus
Job Description: god of wine, parties, and drama
Symbols and Emblems: ivy, vine, grape bunches, wine cup, leopard
 Myth into Language

The characters and events of the myths have given birth to words and phrases we use everyday. The words below are descendants of classic mythology. (Asterisks indicate the gods’ and goddesses’ Roman names; all others are Greek.)

Achilles heel is a symbol of weakness. The expression comes from Achilles, a warrior who died when a poisoned arrow pierced his heel. It was the only part of his body that was vulnerable.

Adonis is a term for a strikingly handsome man. Adonis was a handsome hunter who was pursued by Aphrodite, the goddess of love.

Ambrosia is a dessert made of oranges and coconut. Ambrosia was the food of the gods.

Aphrodisiac means love potion. It is derived from Aphrodite, who was the goddess of love.

Apollo is the name for several space vehicles. Apollo was god of the sun and patron of the sciences.

Arachnid is a scientific term for a class of invertebrate animals, including spiders. It comes from the story of Arachne, a mortal who was turned into a spider by the goddess Athena. (A related word is arachnophobia.)

Atlas is a collection of maps. Atlas was a giant who unsuccessfully fought Zeus, the king of the gods. He was punished by being forced to hold up the sky.

Cereal is named for Ceres,* goddess of the harvest.

Chaos means disorder. Chaos was the father of all gods. He imposed order on the swirling winds and waters at the beginning of creation. (A related word is chaotic.)

Chronology is the science that deals with measuring time. It comes from Cronos, the father of the gods, who was known as Father Time. (Related words are chronic and chronicle.)

Cloth comes from Clotho, one of The Three Fates (see fate below). Clotho spun the thread of life on her spindle.

Cupidity means intense desire. It is named after Cupid,* who was the god of love. The chubby angel with a bow and arrow is familiar to us from Valentine’s Day cards, but the Cupid of myth was depicted as an adult.

Echo is a word for the repetition of a sound. Echo talked so much that the gods punished her by allowing her only to repeat what others say.

Fate means destiny. The Three Fates decided how long a person’s life would be at birth by snipping a thread that measured years in feet and months in inches. (Related words are fatal, fatalism, and fatality.)

Flora is a scientific term for plant life. It comes from Flora,* the goddess of flower plants. (Related words are floral and florist.)

Fortune, or luck, is named for Fortuna.* This goddess spun a wheel to decide how to distribute fortune to mortals. (A related word is fortunately.)

Fury means rage. The Furies punished evildoers in the underworld. (Related words furious and furor.)

Grace is a word for charm. A trio of sister goddesses, The Graces, were in charge of bestowing beauty and charm. (Related words are graceful and gracious.)

Herculean task is a job involving great effort. Hercules was the muscle-bound hero who rose to the challenge of 12 seemingly impossible labors imposed on him by Hecuba, queen of the gods.

Hypnosis is a state resembling sleep in which a person easily accepts suggestion what to say or do. Hypnos was the god of sleep. (Related words are hypnotic, hypnotism, and hypnotist.)

January is named for Janus,* the god of beginnings and endings.

Jovial means hearty and friendly. It comes from Jove,* who was king of the gods. He was healthy and happy because he was born under a lucky planet. Jupiter (below) is another name for Jove.

June is named for Juno,* the goddess of marriage and childbirth.

Jupiter, the planet, is named after Jupiter.* He was king of the gods and in charge of light, the sky, and weather.

Mars, the planet, is named for Mars.* He was the god of war. (Related word Martian, martial, and martial arts.)

Mercury is the name of both the planet and the element. Mercury* was the swift messenger of the gods. (A related word is mercurial.)

Muse is a word that means to wonder, marvel, or reflect. The Nine Muses inspire fine arts. (Related words are amuse, music, and musical.)

Narcissism means excessive love of oneself. Narcissus was so enchanted by his own reflection in water that he couldn’t look away. The gods turned him into the lily called narcissus.
Neptune, the planet, is named for Neptune.* He was a god of the sea.

Ocean is derived from Oceanus, a lord of the seas. He was one of the giants who unsuccessfully battled against Zeus. (Related words are oceanfront, oceangoing, and oceanic.)

Odyssey is an adventurous journey. It takes its name from Odysseus, the hero who sailed the Greek isles having one hair-raising adventure after another.

Olive branches were given by the Greeks after battle as a symbol of peacemaking; today the expression "extending the olive branch" means attempting to make peace.

The Olympic Games are famous worldwide games named for athletic contests held on Mt. Olympus. (A related word is Olympian.)

Oracle is a person who gives wise opinions and decisions. Oracle answered questions about the will of the gods. (A related word is oracular.)

Owls came to be symbols of wisdom because Athena, the goddess of wisdom, was often pictured with an owl perched on her shoulder.

Panic means sudden, intense fright. Part god and part goat, Pan lived in the woods. There his bloodcurdling war cry made soldiers flee in terror.

Pluto, the planet, is named for Pluto. He was god of the underworld, or land of the dead. Hades is not only another name for Pluto, but also a word for the underworld itself.

Psychic is the soul and mind. Psyche gained self-knowledge while performing difficult tasks. (Related words are psychiatry and psychology.)

Tantalize means tempt. Tantalus was a Greek king who so angered the gods that when he went to Hades, they tortured him by keeping food and drink always slightly out of his reach.

Titans is a name used by several sports teams. It comes from giants called the "titans. Perhaps the teams don't realize that when the Titans waged war against Zeus, they lost. And of course the huge ship, Titanic, sunk after hitting an iceberg.

Typhoon is a tropical cyclone. It gets its name from Typhon, a monster who flew through the air spewing flames and shrieking.

Uranus, the planet, is named for Uranus. God of the sky and father of the Titans, he also gives a variation of his name to the element uranium.

Venus, the planet, is named for Venus.* She was the goddess of love.

Volcanoes are named for Vulcan, the god of fire.
The long war between the fearful Titans and the Olympian gods had finally come to an end with the defeat of the Titans. Zeus, leader of the gods, established his rule in heaven and imprisoned his enemies in Tartarus, a dark domain under the earth.

Not all the Titans had fought against the Olympians. One of those who had helped Zeus was Prometheus, on whom Zeus decided to bestow his favor.

"I have made men and women, three races of them," he told Prometheus. "They did not please me. One race did nothing but eat and drink; another planned only evil things; the third fought among themselves, had no reverence for the gods, and no respect for anything. Nevertheless, mankind should have one more chance, and this time I will be you, not I, who will make a new race. Make men and women of clay, mix in any other element they may need, and let them work out their destiny. Use any material that is on earth. But one thing you must not do. You must not take anything from the heavens, nothing that belongs to the immortal gods. If you do, there will be a punishment too terrible to contemplate."

Prometheus obeyed. He scooped up some wet clay, and began to shape creatures resembling the gods. In their bodies he built characteristics of all the animals: the pride of the lion, the cleverness of the fox, the loyalty of the dog, the bravery of the bull. He gave them knowledge as well as instinct so they would know how to plow a field, plant seeds, cultivate a crop, and reap a harvest. He taught them how to tame wil-
things, shear sheep, and milk cows. He showed them how to make tools out of stone and how to make weapons to protect themselves from the horns of deer and other beasts. He instructed them how to exist in the wilderness, how to erect shelters and eventually, how to build houses.

But they were not happy. They shivered miserably through the winters; they sickened on uncooked food; they could not bake bread, bend cold iron, or melt metal. One thing was needed, and that one thing was forbidden: fire, the heavenly fire that belonged to the gods. For a while Prometheus hesitated. He remembered Zeus's threat and realized that anyone who took anything that belonged to the gods would suffer terribly. But men needed the gift of fire; they needed it not only for comfort but also for their future.

Prometheus knew what he had to do and how to do it. He took a long hollow reed, dried it, and filled the inside with pith. He walked in and out of Olympus; none of the gods noticed what he was doing. He touched the gods' hearth-fire with his reed that looked like a walking stick, and a spark from the hearth caught on the pith which burned slowly like the wick of a candle. He brought this from Olympus, lit the first flame on earth, and taught men how to kindle fire whenever it was needed for warmth or for work, for cooking food, shaping metal tools, or creating things of beauty.

When Zeus saw smoke arising, he was furious. He thundered at Prometheus. "I warned you!" he stormed. "Because you dared to bring the gods' fire down to the earthlings you love so much, you shall never leave the earth again. You shall be chained to a rock on the highest peak of the bleak Caucasus. There you shall lie exposed to the heavens you violated. You shall be burned by the rays of the fiery sun and frozen by the icy winds of winter. You shall be sleepless and helpless, for no power will come to free you and no creature will hear you. Every day an eagle will tear your flesh and feed upon your liver, and every night the wound will heal so that the eagle can prey upon you again and again."

Prometheus was bound, fettered to the rock with chains of iron and manacles of brass. Years passed, the tortures continued, and Prometheus bore the cruelty of Zeus. He never cried out his agony nor did he regret what he had done. From time to time Zeus sent a messenger to urge Prometheus to repent. Prometheus refused. Then said the messenger, "Zeus knows that you have some secret knowledge about the fate of the gods. If you will disclose the secret, Zeus will set you free."

Prometheus knew that one day Zeus would be dethroned by a son of his own, just as Zeus had overthrown his father. Prometheus knew who the mother would be, and Zeus needed to know the name of the mortal woman so he could guard against her offspring. But Prometheus refused to talk. He remained inflexible, suffering indescribable pain rather than help a tyrant who would not help mankind.

Finally he was freed, not by Zeus, but by Heraclæs—the Romans called him Hercules—who shot the eagle and restored Prometheus to liberty. Then he went back to work among men.

It was Prometheus (according to the ancients) who gave man humanity. From the Firebringer, mankind inherited his forethought, his fearless spirit as a fighter against tyranny, his courage and, most of all, his compassion for all people everywhere.

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1 pith: spongy plant tissue from the center of the stem
2 Caucasus: mountain range between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea; considered the boundary between Europe and Asia
Pandora

BARBARA McBRIDE-SMITH

Have you ever been making up your bed or fluffing up your pillow, and you came across one of those little tags that reads: UNDER PENALTY OF LAW—DO NOT REMOVE? And you thought to yourself, “Who says? This is my pillow. I can rip this sucker off right now. Are the Pillow Police gonna come in here and arrest me if I do?”

Well, that must have been how Pandora felt about that box. The box had been a wedding present from Papa Zeus. It was a beautiful box, covered with gold and inlaid with jewels. It had a heavy lid held shut by lock. And underneath that lock there was a tag. It read: UNDER PENALTY OF LAW—DO NOT REMOVE. And Pandora probably said to herself, “Who says? This is my box. Papa Zeus gave it to me. Why wouldn’t he want me to look inside it?”

You see, Pandora had a problem.

It had all started years and years ago as a feud between Papa Zeus and the Metheus brothers. You remember the Metheus brothers. There was Pro—Prometheus. He was the oldest and the smartest. And then there was Epi—Epimetheus. He wasn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer, but he was real proud of his big brother. He used to say, “This here’s my bro Pro. He’s the brains in the family.”

The Metheus boys were Titans, but they lived right alongside the mortals from time to time. They were fond of the mortals and liked to give them presents. That made the mortals worship the ground they walked on. One day Pro decided to give the mortals a present like they had never had before—fire! With fire they could warm their feet and eat cooked meat. The problem was, the only fire that existed was in Papa Zeus
barbecue pit up on Mount Olympus. So one evening while Zeus was out on an affair—of state—Pro slipped in the back gate and stole a red hot coal from the fire pit. He took it down and gave it to the mortals. Well, that made Pro a hero with the mortals, but it chapped ol' Zeus's hide.

And what did Papa Zeus do about it? He punished Prometheus by hanging him on the side of a mountain. Pro hung there all day long in the boiling hot sun. And he hung there all night long in the cold. Then in the wee hours of the morning an eagle flew up to him, sat down on Pro's face, and started to peck at his belly. She pecked and pecked until she plucked his liver plumb out. She swallowed it and took off. Poor ol' Pro had to hang there again all day long in the boiling hot sun and all night long in the cold. He was miserable, shivering, liverless. But he didn't die. He couldn't die because he was immortal. So that night he grew a brand new liver. And the next morning, the eagle was back. She plucked out that new liver, ate it, and took off again. Well, that same old routine went on day after day, month after month, year after year! That liver-loving eagle thought she had a standing invitation for breakfast.

Even after eons of time had gone by, Papa Zeus still wasn't satisfied that the Metheus brothers and their pals, the mortals, had gotten their fair share of punishment for stealing his fire. If there was one thing Zeus was good at, it was revenge. That was when Zeus hit upon the idea of making a woman. That's right, the first mortal woman! Up until then the whole world was inhabited by nothing but the good ol' boys. Not a woman amongst them. Not one. How their toilet paper rolls ever got changed is a mystery to me.

Zeus went to his son Phesus, the blacksmith, and asked him to design a creature that would drive the good ol' boys on the earth real crazy. What Phesus built was a woman. He made her strong and he made her beautiful. Zeus made her smart and he made her curious. Then Zeus named her Pandora, which means "gift to all."

You getting my drift here? It was a setup right from the start! Papa Zeus gave Pandora that beautiful box, the one covered in gold and inlaid with jewels, the one with the heavy lid and the lock and the little tag. You remember the one: UNDER PENALTY OF LAW—DO NOT REMOVE. Then he sent her off to find Epimetheus and marry up with him. The moment Epi laid eyes on Pandora, he was in love. So they got married. She promised to love, honor, and redecorate. And she got busy straightening out his sock drawer and his life.

For the first couple of weeks, Pandora was so busy being domestic she didn't think much about that box. But when she figured out that housework was boring, she began to notice that box more and more. She took to dusting it every morning. She polished the jewels every afternoon. One day Epi came home from work early, and when she saw her fondling that box, he shoved it into the closet. "Whoee, Pandy honey, don't mess with that box! That box is trouble with capital T and that rhymes with P and that stands for . . . uh . . . for . . ."

"Pooey!" said Pandora. She wasn't scared of that box. She was curious about that box. And she went right on being curious.

As soon as Epi went back to work, she took that box out of the closet and put it on the coffee table. She read the tag under the lock again: UNDER PENALTY OF LAW—DO NOT REMOVE. And she said to herself, "How come I can't open this box? It's my box. What could possibly be in here that Papa Zeus wouldn't want me to see?" She commenced to stare at that box for hours each day. Her eyes would glaze over and her jaw would go slack. She'd even talk to that box. She began to look just like a TV soap opera addict. But that box held more troubles than a whole year's worth of "The Bold and the Beautiful," "The Young and the Restless," "All My Children," and "General Hospital" combined. Before long, Pandora was plumb eat up with curiosity. Why couldn't she just remove the lock, lift the lid, and have a tiny peek? She wouldn't take anything out of the box and lose it, for crying out loud!

Well, like I said before, Pandora was smart. So she finally figured it out. "Papa Zeus put that sign on the box so that nobody else would mess with it but me. After all, it was my present," she thought. "It's a lousy job," she chuckled, "but somebody's gotta do it." She ran out to the garage and got a crowbar. She popped off the lock, lifted up the lid, and . . . well, that's when it all hit the fan!

All the stuff that makes life miserable came jumping out of that box: Sickness, old age, anger, envy, and lust. Racism, sexism, terrorism, and tourism. Communism, and capitalism. Alcoholism, drug addiction, pornography, and censorship. War and bombs and nuclear waste. Cholesterol, hemorrhoids, PMS and the IRS. Ring-around-the-collar and the heartbreak of psoriasis. Oh yes, all of that stuff and much, much more came flying out of that box.

But there was one little misfit down at the bottom of the box. Her name was Hope. She really didn't want to join the others, but she felt an obligation to take a flying leap. Instead, she took a chance and yelled out, "Pandora! Get a grip, girlfriend! Shut the lid or I'm outta here!"
Just in the nick of time, Pandora got a grip on herself and slammed down the lid and Hope was kept safe in the box.

Under the circumstances, considering she was framed and all, I think Pandora did the best she could for us. You can blame her for your troubles if you want to. People have been giving her a bad rap for thousands of years. But when you're down-and-out and nothing else seems to help, just remember: there's always Hope. She's still there, waiting for you when you need her... deep inside.

Or all his children, the gray-eyed Athena was Zeus's favorite. She alone was allowed to carry her father's thunderbolt and his great breastplate, called the Aegis. Athena was the only Olympian who was not born of a mother, but sprang directly from the head of Zeus, fully grown and dressed in armor.

Athena was the most complex of the twelve great Olympian gods and goddesses. As the goddess of war, she could perform mighty deeds of battle; at least twice she defeated the war god Ares. Yet war gave her no pleasure. She preferred peace, and would rather settle disputes by wise judgment than by fighting. In this, she was most unlike the wild Ares, who loved battle for its own sake, and was never happier than when he was slaughtering enemies or destroying cities. It was probably Athena's superior intelligence and strategy in battle that made her stronger than the war god with his mindless fury and love of bloodshed. In peacetime, she put off her armor to dress in graceful flowing robes. Although many of the gods desired to marry her, Athena chose to remain single.

Like all of the other deities, Athena took a deep interest in the affairs of mortals. But unlike many of them, she tended to use her power to make life better for those humans she cared for.

This is a typical gesture: Athena competed with Poseidon, the god of the seas, over a new settlement of people, which was destined to be one of the greatest cities in the history of the world. Which of them should become the patron of the city, to be named after the winner? With the other gods and
of a mountain. Then Athena struck the rock with her spear. From rocky soil grew a tall olive tree, loaded with fruit. How much more useful that was than a flow of brackish water!

The goddess was the patroness of the great city, now named Athens in her honor. Ever since that time, the olive tree has been a special tree, and the owl, the symbol of wisdom, her special bird.

It was not only Athens that this goddess protected, but all of civilized life. Think of the innumerable gifts she brought to Earth for the benefit of mortals! She invented the flute and the trumpet for our pleasure, earthenware bowl for our convenience, and taught all the women's a special art of weaving. But she also worked to improve farming, inventing the plough and rake, the yoke to harness oxen, and the bridle to control horses. She gave us the chariot and the ship; she first taught us the rudiments of mathematics.

During the Trojan War, many of the Olympians took sides; in fact, it was as much a war among the gods and goddesses as between Greeks and Trojans. Athena took the side of the Greeks, and long after the battle was won, she continued to help them. She watched over Odysseus during his ten-year journey home from the war, offering advice and assistance when he most needed it. Among her other favorites, to whom she offered help and comfort during their ordeal, were Heracles, Perseus, Jason, Bellerophon, and Orestes and Iphigeneia.

Athena, called Minerva by the Romans, was unique among the deities. She defines heroism in a new way: courage does not necessarily mean fighting, but standing firm for what is right. She can serve as a model of proper conduct everywhere. The divine protector of human civilization, goddess of war who preferred peace, the judge who believed in mercy, this was indeed a gracious goddess, and a wise one.

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2. **trident**: a three-pronged spear

3. **plough**: or plow, an instrument used to prepare ground for planting

4. **Trojan War**: a ten-year war between the Greeks and Trojans caused by the kidnapping of Helen of Troy by the Greek warrior Paris
One day Zeus saw a beautiful nymph called Leto and fell in love with her. But he noticed that Hera was watching, and so he changed Leto and himself into quails, birds that are brown and speckled and can easily hide in trees and bushes. But Hera was too clever for him. She saw through this disguise immediately and put a curse on Leto. She told the unfortunate nymph that she would be pregnant, and that she would not be able to give birth to her child anywhere the sun could shine.

Then she sent the great serpent Python to enforce her curse, to drive Leto from any sunlit spot. Zeus tried to help the mother of his child and sent the south wind to float her to an island called Delos. It was a small, rocky place, but Python followed anyway. However, because the island was so small, the wind could push it farther out to sea faster than the serpent could swim. And so, finally, Leto had a place where she could give birth.

It turned out that she bore twins. First she had a lovely baby girl she called Artemis. From all the running and hiding, she was so weak that she had difficulty giving birth to her second child. But Artemis, even though she was just a baby, helped her mother, and a beautiful son was born. Leto called him Apollo.

Zeus had a great many children, but none he loved so much as those twins. They were gifted with strength and courage as well as beauty. Apollo had dark gold hair and deep blue eyes, and extraordinary talents in music, poetry, mathematics, and medicine. He became the god of the sun and patron of the arts and sciences.
Of all the gods he was probably the most admirable, in his character as well as in his appearance. He could not tell a lie, and so the oracle, which he established at Delphi, was sought out by Greek kings and commoners alike to find out what the future held for them. When the oracle agreed to speak, it always told the truth, although often the prophecies foretold danger and disaster and generally the actual prophecy was couched in phrases that were hard to interpret and were often misunderstood by those who heard them.

Apollo preached moderation. He told his followers to look into their own hearts to find the beginnings of wisdom. However, like all of the other gods, he sometimes did not practice what he preached. Occasionally he even angered Zeus with his impetuous behavior. When he became jealous or angry, he, too, could be cruel.

As soon as he was old enough to shoot a golden bow and arrow Zeus had given him, Apollo went in search of Python, the serpent who had tortured his mother. He found the serpent at the foot of Mount Parnassus and raced up the mountain to shoot a burning arrow at the animal, which screamed with pain and fled, leaving a trail of blood behind. The serpent’s hiding place was the cave of Mother Earth at Delphi, considered a sanctuary (a place where all fighting had to stop) by gods and man alike. Apollo knew that he could not follow the huge snake into the cave, but he breathed on his arrows and created a smoke screen, which he shot into the entrance of the cave. The cave filled with smoke, and the serpent, suffocating from the fumes, had to crawl out. Apollo shot him full of arrows, skinned him, and kept the hide as a souvenir of his revenge.

But he had accomplished his revenge in a sacred place, and Mother Earth complained to Zeus that her sanctuary had been defiled. To make amends, Apollo instituted annual athletic games at Delphi (which really were meant to celebrate his victory), and named them after his enemy: the Pythian Games. He also established the Delphic oracle and named the priestesses who gave advice Pythoneses. This did not help the dead Python, but the gesture appeased Zeus and got Apollo back into his father’s good graces.

Like Zeus, Apollo fell in love with and pursued many women. He also had many children. The most famous was his son Aesculapius, who was gifted with miraculous medical knowledge. Even today, when physicians take the oath to do their best to heal and not harm their patients, they use the name of Aesculapius as a symbol of medical knowledge and skill.

Aesculapius was the son of Apollo and Coronis, a princess of Thessaly. She was in love with a young mortal, but Apollo carried her off with him. While she was pregnant with Apollo’s son, she went back to her old lover. Apollo could not bring himself to kill the mother of his unborn child himself, so he asked his sister, Artemis, to shoot her with one of her arrows.

He wanted to save the child, however, so he delivered the baby (probably one of the first surgical births in history) and turned him over to the god Hermes, who was immediately struck by the infant’s extraordinary intelligence.

The child was sent to Chiron, a centaur—half man and half horse—unto that time the most gifted physician in Greek mythology. Aesculapius soon improved on his master’s methods. He doctored everyone who came to him and was able to heal even those who were on the point of death.

Eventually the young doctor enraged Hades, who went to Zeus to complain that Apollo’s son was robbing him of his victims at the very пор when they were supposed to cross over from the land of the living to the land of the dead. Zeus picked up his thunderbolt and threw it at Aesculapius and the patient he was curing at the time, sending both to Hades.

Apollo was not only heartbroken, but also very angry. He found Cyclops who had made his father’s thunderbolt and killed him, a sin against Zeus that the ruler of the gods could not allow to go unpunished. So he banished Apollo to Mount Olympus forever.

Until this time Leto had kept away from Zeus, realizing that Hera was watching her, and that any attempt to get in touch with her children’s father could only bring more misfortune on herself. But the banishment of her beautiful and clever son gave her the courage to go to Zeus and remind him of their old love. Zeus listened to her and relented. Not only did he allow Apollo to come back to Mount Olympus, he even agreed to bring Aesculapius back to life, with a warning not to rob Hades by curing those sick humans who were already on their way across the river Styx.

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2 Oracle: a place where the future is foretold
3 Delphi: a religious center on the southern slope of Mt. Parnassus, located in central Greece
4 Thessaly: a region in central Greece bordering the Aegean Sea
5 Cyclops: one-eyed giant
6 Styx: river through which the living pass on the way to the underworld, or land of the dead
According to one legend, Zeus's reversal of judgment angered Aphrodite. So she ordered Eros to shoot Apollo with the arrow of love, and the mountain nymph, Daphne, who happened to cross his path, with the arrow of indifference. When the beautiful god, not used to being turned down by women, started to follow her, she ran away as fast as she could.

Daphne was the daughter of a river god, and when she realized that Apollo was faster than she, she ran to the river and begged her father to save her. He turned her into a laurel tree. Apollo caught up with the nymph, and found that instead of a beautiful girl, he was hugging a tree with thorns that scratched his face.

So the river god, who knew that Apollo was more powerful than he was and could harm him, gave Apollo a gift to appease him: a crown of laurel leaves. From that day on, crowns of laurel, a plant that would never wither, were awarded to heroes and poets as a sign of extraordinary ability.

Apollo's special friends were the nine Muses, who represented the arts. When he was a very young god, they taught him their skills, so that Apollo became the greatest poet and artist in the universe, improving on everything that the Muses had taught him.

Apollo was one of the few gods who was allowed to keep his original name by the Romans. However, they tended to make him less important than the Greeks had. He was generally pictured as a beautiful young man who somehow never really grew up. Roman statues tend to make him look somewhat less masculine than those of the Greeks. His artistic abilities were less respected by the Romans. Music, poetry, and dance were considered among the greatest gifts of the gods by the Greeks, but were generally regarded as entertainment for the masses by the Romans. They respected political and fighting ability in men more than artistic accomplishments.

Artemis, Apollo's twin, was, in her own way as beautiful as her brother. While he seemed to be surrounded with a golden light, his sister gleamed like silver. Zeus loved her very much.

On her third birthday, he asked her to make any wish—he would make sure she got what she wanted. Artemis, who, in spite of her youth, had seen all the harm that Aphrodite could do to those over whom she had power, wished that she would always be a young girl—never a woman. She asked Zeus never to give her to any man. Also, she wished for a silver bow and arrow, the best pack of hounds in the universe, and the freedom to run and hunt over the mountains and in the woods for all eternity.

Zeus granted her wishes. He gave her the gift of eternal chastity, but, considering himself more experienced than his three-year-old daughter, told her that she could change her mind about falling in love at any time, if she got tired of the single life.

Artemis went to Hephaestus and asked him to make her a silver bow, but the god of the forge suggested that silver should be created underwater in a cold light. So Artemis swam to the Cyclops who had made Zeus's thunderbolt, and they fashioned for her the most beautiful silver bow, quiver, and arrows in their power. The quiver had a special magic: As soon as it was empty, it filled up again.

Next she visited Pan, who gave her his ten best dogs. From then on Artemis spent her days and nights hunting deer in the woods and streaking across the sky like a silver bolt. She was worshiped as the goddess of the moon and the stars, chaste but happy and fulfilled. Men who came near her, whether they were gods or humans, were frightened away by her fierce hounds.

In many parts of Greece, young women whose relatives wished to marry them off to men they did not love prayed to Artemis to save them. According to legend, she frequently did, although she sometimes had to turn the girl into a tree, a flower, or a deer. But perhaps the Greeks thought that it was preferable to be turned into an enchanted plant or animal than to have to spend the rest of one's life with a mate one disliked.

The Roman name for Artemis was Diana; she became a favorite subject of sculpture and painting. She is usually seen carrying her bow and accompanied by one or more of her many dogs.

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7 laurel tree: an evergreen tree with small green leaves and berries
The gods never grow old. Take Hermes. He is seventeen for all eternity and the other gods never let him forget it. "Fetch this, Hermes. Do that Hermes. Carry this message. Do as your half brother tells you." He ever cooks for them.

But Hermes doesn’t mind. He’s an easygoing boy. People down or earth ask his protection when they go on journeys. Some of those wild country roads swarm with thieves and ruffians. Mind you, the thieves and ruffians ask the help of Hermes, too. They’ve probably heard the stories of Hermes’s childhood and how light-fingered he was, even as a baby!

The day Hermes was born—in a cave in Arcadia1—his mother, Maia laid him in his cradle and kissed his tufty hair. "Don’t cry now. You are son of Zeus and a secret from his wife. If she hears you are here, Hera will hate you with a deadly hatred, and kill you if she can. So hush, my little Hermes. Don’t cry." In rocking the cradle, Maia herself went to sleep.

Hermes was a big baby: big in the morning and much bigger by noon, when he clambered out of his cradle, toddled out of the cave, and met a tortoise. Banging on the tortoise’s shell, he heard a throbbing hollow noise he liked. So, emptying out the tortoise, he tied threads of his mother’s hair around the shell. When Maia stirred at the pulling of her hair, Hermes plucked a tune that soothed her back to sleep.

1 Arcadia: or Arcady, a peaceful agricultural region of Greece
Then, slinging his newly invented lyre\(^2\) across his back, Hermes toddled away down the road, making up songs as he went. He was hungry. He wanted a drink of milk.

“Watch me go along,
To see what I can find.
Hear me sing my song,
With my lyre tied on behind.
I'm going to find a moo-cow
Maybe one or two cows:
I may just follow
My brother Apollo
And round up quite a few cows!”

All the way to Pieria\(^3\) he walked, growing all the while, and in the middle of the afternoon he found the grazing place of Apollo’s shining brown cows. They were all bursting with milk, and Hermes drank all he could drink.

Then, hazel switch\(^4\) in hand, he began to drive the cows back the way he had come. He did not drive them headfirst, but blipped their noses, and made them walk backward, so that the tracks they left would look as if they had been coming, when in fact they had been going. He tied twigs to his feet, as well, to scuff out his own footprints.

Back along the road he toddled, singing as he went, and picking grapes off the vines at the roadside. An old woman tending the vines straightened her aching back to watch him go by. It was a remarkable sight, after all: a baby toddling along in wicker shoes, driving a herd of back-to-front cows.

Hermes put a chubby finger to his lips, as if to say, “Don’t breathe a word.”

By the time he had hidden the cows—up trees, down holes, under bushes—Maia, his mother, was awake and standing at the door of the cave. “And where do you think you’ve been till this time of night?” she demanded, hands on hips.

Hermes climbed into his cradle. It was a bit small for him now—he had grown so much since morning. “Never you mind, Mommy,” he said. Then, sucking his thumb, he quickly fell asleep.

When he woke, Apollo was standing over him, shouting till the cave echoed. “Where are my cows?”

“Ago,” said Hermes.

“You don’t fool me. Where are my cows, you thieving infant!”

“A-moo?” Hermes said, and choked.

Apollo’s golden hair curled a little tighter. “An old woman saw a baby driving my cows this way. Now get out of bed. I’m taking you before the court of the gods! You can answer to Almighty Zeus for your cattle-rustling!”

“Silence in court!” bellowed Zeus as Hermes plucked his tortoise-lyre.

“Answer the charge! Is it true, Hermes, that you stole the cattle of Apollo?”

Hermes stood up. “Almighty gods . . . gentlemen . . . ladies . . . I appeal to you—do I look like a thief? Does it seem to you probable, does it seem to you likely, that I, a little child, a mewling infant, a child of rosy innocence, should walk fifty miles on the day of my birth and carry off—like some vagabond, some deceitful rapscallion—a herd of shining cows?”

“Yes!” bawled Apollo.

“Silence in court!”

“And me a vegetarian! A lover of animals! The merest silken butterfly, fluttering over my crib is enough to make me laugh aloud at the wondrous beauty of nature!”

“Shyster!”\(^5\) shouted Apollo.

“Silence in court!”

Hermes toddled about the courtroom, declaring his innocence, presenting his defense. He laid his baby curls on the knees of the goddesses and looked earnestly into the eyes of the gods. He even hugged Apollo’s knees, saying, “Would I steal from my own dear brother—child of my own beloved father, the mighty, the ineffable Zeus?”

Hera stood up with a scream of rage. “Another son of yours, Zeus?”

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\(^2\) lyre: a stringed instrument similar to a small harp  
\(^3\) Pieria: a region of Greece  
\(^4\) hazel switch: a flexible twig from the hazel tree used for prodding or whipping  
\(^5\) shyster: a dishonest person
She pointed a fearsome finger at Hermes. “For that I’ll make you sorry you were ever born, baby!” Then she slammed out of the courtroom.

“You were seen. There are witnesses,” snarled Apollo at his little half brother.

Hermes did not even blush, he simply took his tortoise-lyre and began to play. Apollo stared at the extraordinary instrument, overwhelmed with envy.

“I never said I didn’t take the cows,” said Hermes. “I only said I didn’t steal the cows. The truth is, I merely borrowed the cows. For a drink, you know. We babies, we need our milk if we’re to grow into big, strong boys. You ladies understand that, surely? Naturally, brother, you can have your cows back whenever you like. And as a token of goodwill, I’d like you to accept this lyre—I invented it yesterday.”

The court cheered and clapped. Apollo snatched the lyre and began to pluck at it suspiciously. Zeus got to his feet.

“Hermes, son of Maia, you are plainly a rascal and a rogue. But you have clever fingers and a golden tongue. From this day forward, you shall be messenger of the gods . . . as soon as you have given back Apollo’s shining cattle.”

“Thank you, Father!” exclaimed Hermes. “Perhaps he might like these back, too.” From behind his back, Big Baby Hermes produced the bow and arrow he had stolen from Apollo when he hugged him. The jury of gods gasped and stamped their feet, laughing at the outrageous audacity of the child. Even Apollo could not stay angry with a half brother who had given him the first lyre in the world. They left court together, discussing philosophy and music, poetry and politics.

“You had better watch out for Queen Hera,” Apollo warned his little half brother. “She hates you with a deadly hatred. She will never let you be messenger of the gods, no matter what Zeus says.”

“Oh, no? Would you like to bet on that?” replied Hermes. “If Hera drives me off Olympus, I shall teach you how to play that lyre of mine. If I make her like me, you can give me . . . what? . . . your magic wand. Agreed?”

“Agreed!” cried Apollo. “You haven’t a chance.”

“Well, please excuse me now,” said Baby Hermes politely, “but it’s time for my morning nap.” He trotted away across the marble floors of Olympus, toward the hall of the Queen of Heaven.

He went to the cradle at the foot of her bed, and smiled down at her own baby son, Ares.

“Could I ask you a very great favor?” he said.

When Hera returned to her room, she lifted her baby, swaddled in lambswool, and cradled him in her arms. She fed him, she sang to him, she rocked him—“My, what a fine, big boy you are!”—and, plucking back the swaddling from around his head, she kissed his tuffy hair.

“Ago,” said Hermes. “Guess who.”

It was a risk. She has a nasty temper, the Queen of Heaven. She might have beaten his brains out then and there. But she didn’t. They say a woman can’t feed a baby and hate it afterward. Hera and Hermes get along well now, so long as he makes himself useful: cooking, running errands. So he won his bet with Apollo—won the magic wand, too, though he still gave Apollo music lessons. In exchange, Apollo taught his half brother how to foretell the future. ☝️
The meal was finished. The Greek warriors and lords leaned back on their couches and took up deep cups of wine mixed with honey, as the great hall grew darker before the oncoming night. Torches, oil-lamps, and the flames from a huge fireplace illuminated the smoky interior of the hall with leaping tongues of light and shadow. All members of the household—servants, women, and those children who had begged to stay up or managed to slip out of bed—began to assemble quietly about the fireplace, for tonight was a very special night: among the guests at table was a bard, a singer of tales, who would entertain the company with hours of song in return for their hospitality. Presently the lord at the head of the table spoke courteously to his guest: “Friend, if you are now well rested and have eaten your fill, will you honor us with a song?”

The bard stood up. He was a strong-looking, middle-aged man, attended by a boy who handed him his harp and led him to a seat—for the poet was blind. He sat awhile and tightened the strings of his instrument, thinking of the tale he would sing and the words he would use to sing it. Then, striking his harp, he began a story of war waged for the sake of a beautiful woman and of the battles of heroic men on either side: of the noble prince Hector who fought to defend his walled city Troy from the Greek invaders, and of the Greek lord Menelaus, whose lovely wife Helen was stolen from his home by a Trojan
boy. In particular he sang of the Greek hero Achilles, of his nobility and his anger, his quarrel with the Greek commander Agamemnon, the brother of Menelaus, and the consequences of this quarrel.

He chanted his story for a long while, so long that everyone forgot the time and the fire died down to glowing logs before he had finished for the night. The story he sang was well-known to everyone, but the way in which the bard told it brought life and color and passion to the old legends. The battles of Greek and Trojan, and the flaming towers of Troy, were as vivid and real to these Greeks as the battles they themselves had fought.

Who was this Greek poet? Legend says that his name was Homer, that he was blind, and that he composed the two earliest works of Western literature, the Iliad, about the Trojan war, and the Odyssey, concerning the wanderings of the Greek general Odysseus after the fall of Troy. We do not know whether Homer really existed. The important thing is that there were poets like Homer who sang for their living and wandered from city to city, receiving welcome, hospitality, and a crowd of eager listeners wherever they went.

These poets did not write down their songs, although writing had been invented, the alphabet used was about three times as large as the later Greek alphabet, and writing was a very slow, awkward process, good for bookkeeping but hopelessly unsuited to heroic poetry. Nor did the bard memorize the lines of his poems—he would compose and sing in the same breath, never breaking the meter of his poem, never losing the action of his story. It is a manner of story-telling that has almost disappeared from the modern world, for books, radio, television, movies, and the automobile offer so much entertainment to us now that story-telling has ceased to be the art that it was.

But to the Mycenaean Greeks of the 8th century B.C., it was storytellers such as Homer who brought beauty, interest, and the Greek ideals of courage and excellence into their everyday lives.

At last the Trojan war was over; it is a long story, well worth your hearing, but I cannot tell it all now. I must tell you, however, of the adventures of one of the men who went home.

This was Odysseus of Ithaca. Now Ithaca is a small and rocky island, which lies in the sea west of Greece, not far south of Corfu. All the islands in this group once belonged to England, only [they] gave them back to the King of Greece after the Greeks made themselves free of the Turks. It is a lovely island, full of flowers, and the people are kind, and still very proud of their great man, Odysseus, after three thousand years.

Odysseus had left behind him his wife, named Penelope, whom he loved so much that all he wanted was to go home again and be at peace. When he bade good-bye to her, and his baby son Telemachos, he said, "My wife, I may be killed in the war. If I die, bring up our son to be a good man, and when he is old enough to manage the house, I hope you will marry again and be happy." But she said, "My husband, I want no one but you." He was away for twenty years: the siege lasted for ten years, and he took ten years to get home, but when he arrived, he found her waiting for him. And this is the story.

Odysseus set sail from Troy with his countrymen of Ithaca and the islands round about, twelve ships in all. They were blown far away to the west of the Mediterranean Sea, and when the wind fell, they came to land in a lovely country. The people welcomed those who went on shore, and gave them to eat of the fruit of the country, the lotus, which they lived on, sweet as honey. Anyone who ate of it wished never to come away, but only to go on forever eating the sweet lotus. It seemed to be
always afternoon, and nobody wanted to do any more work for ever and ever. But Odysseus would not have that. He carried off the lazy men, and tied them down under the benches, until the ships were well away.

By and by the wind took them to a little wild island, and Odysseus went off with one ship to explore. As he came near the mainland, he saw an enclosure upon the hillside, full of sheep and goats; so he took a few men with him, and climbed up to the place. They found a great cave within the walls of the enclosure. There were pens for lambs, and pens for kids: rows and rows of cheeses, pans and jars full of whey1 or milk. They helped themselves to milk and cheese, and roasted a lamb, and enjoyed themselves.

By and by a horrible monster approached, big and hairy, and they ran and hid in the cave. He milked all the sheep and goats, and curdled the milk: then he lit a fire, and saw the men.

"Who are you, stranger?" he asked.

Odysseus said, "Sir, we are strangers from Troy; have pity on us, for Zeus is the god of strangers."

"Pooh, pooh!" he said—"Zeus! We care nothing for Zeus, or any gods: we are stronger than they are."

He stretched out his hands, and caught two of the men, and dashed them like puppies on the ground, so that their brains ran out. Then he carved them limb from limb, and ate them for his supper, and slept.

This monster was a Cyclops, named Polyphemus. You remember that dreadful brood of creatures, and the three who were guardians of fire in the early days.

Next morning, the Cyclops killed and ate two more men, and went about his work. But he rolled a huge stone in front of the cave, so that no one could get out.

But Odysseus was never at a loss for a plan. He picked up a sapling of olive wood which lay in the cave, and smoothed it, and made it ready; and he chose out four good men to help him, when the night should come.

In the evening, the Cyclops drove in all his rams, and rolled the great stone in front of the door; next, as before, he killed and ate two more men for supper. Then Odysseus came up to him, bearing a skin of wine which he had brought from the ship, and he said, "Cyclops, here, have a drink after your supper!"

He drank it, and it pleased him so much that he said, "Another,
"If no man is killing you, you must just pray to God; what is the use

of waking us all out of our sleep?" And they went away, but Odysseus

laughed to himself at the success of his trick.

Then he caught up the long withies3 that lay on the floor in a heap,

and tied his men each under one of the fleecy rams, with another ram

tied to this ram on each side. He picked the biggest ram of all for him-

self, and waited for morning.

In the morning, the Cyclopes rolled back the stone from the door of

cave, and let his rams out, holding out his hands, and feeling their backs;

but he did not feel underneath, so the men all got safely out, fastened

together in threes. Odysseus came last, hanging on underneath the

biggest ram of all. And so they escaped from the Cyclops. But this

Cyclops was a son of Poseidon, and ever afterwards Poseidon hated

Odysseus and did his best to destroy him.

They all sailed away, until they reached the island of Aiolos, the stew-

ard of the winds. Aiolos wished to help Odysseus on his way; so he

bottled up all the winds in a leather bag, except the West Wind, which

was to blow them home. They went bowling along for nine days, until

they actually came in sight of Ithaca, their home; and then Odysseus,

tired out, fell asleep.

While he was asleep, the sailors eyed this bag, and one said to

another, "I wonder what Aiolos gave him. Gold and silver, to be sure! let

us see." So they opened the mouth of the bag, and all the winds poured

out, and began to blow together, north, south, east, and west, and blew

them far away. They had many adventures, which I cannot tell of now,

but after a long time they came to land in a pleasant island, and Odysseus

sent some of his men to explore.

They found a fine house among the trees; and as they came near,

what should they see but all sorts of animals, lions and tigers, leopards

and wild boars, which did them no harm; they just ran up, wagging their

tails, and barking in a friendly way. The men all went in, except one, who

remained to watch.

Within the hall was a woman, singing sweetly as she pilled the loom.

She gave them welcome, and provided a good feast; and when they had

eaten, she tanned each with her stick, and said, "Away to the sty with

you!" At once their hair changed into bristles, and they turned into pigs,

and ran away into the sty.

The watcher reported to Odysseus that the others had all disappeared,

and Odysseus himself went to explore. On the way, he met the god

Hermes, who gave him a magic root which would protect him against

enchantments. So when he came to the house of Circe—that was the

witch's name—she had no power over him, and he compelled her to

change his men back to their proper shape.

Circe was a good friend to them after this, and helped them with

advice, and gave them all they wanted. Odysseus had to visit the dark

Kingdom of Hades, where he received directions for his homeward voy-

age. And on the way back he had many other dangers to face.

He had to pass by the island of the Sirens. These were witches who

looked like birds; they sang so sweetly, that everyone who heard them

felt obliged to land. There they sat in a meadow, singing, and all round

them were the shrivelled bodies of the men who had come to hear, and

sat down and listened, until they died. Odysseus was warned of this by

Circe; and before he came to the island, he plugged up all the ears of all

his men with wax, so that they should not hear. But he wanted to hear

himself, yet not to be hurt; so he told his men to tie him to the mast, and

not to let him loose, whatever happened.

Then they rowed on. Soon the lovely song of the Sirens was heard,

and Odysseus struggled to get free, and shouted to his men to let him

loose; but they rowed on, until they were safe out of hearing.

Next they had to pass between Scylla and Charybdis. On one side of

a strait was Charybdis, where a whirlpool three times a day sucked up

the water, and spouted it out again: no ship could live in that whirlpool.

On the other side was a rock, and on this rock in a cave lived a monster,

Scylla, with twelve legs, and six long necks with heads like dogs; and if

a ship passed by, she curled down her six necks, and caught up a sailor

with each head. This is what she did to Odysseus and his crew.

After this, all his ships were destroyed in a frightful storm, but

Odysseus himself was saved, and washed up on another island. On this

island lived another witch, Calypso, who saved him, and kept him there

for seven long years. She wanted him for a husband, and she offered to

make him immortal; but he refused, because all he wanted was to return

to his beloved wife Penelope. And he did return, and did find his wife

waiting for him, although he had to fight a terrible battle with his en-

emies before he won her again. But after all his troubles, he spent with his

wife a peaceful and quiet old age.
Siren Song
MARGARET ATWOOD

This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
that is irresistible:

the song that forces men
to leap overboard in squadrons
even though they see the beached skulls

the song nobody knows
because anyone who has heard it
is dead, and the others can't remember.

Shall I tell you the secret
and if I do, will you get me
out of this bird suit?

I don't enjoy it here
squatting on this island
looking picturesque and mythical

with these two feathery maniacs,
I don't enjoy singing
this trio, fatal and valuable.

I will tell the secret to you,
to you, only to you.
Come closer. This song

is a cry for help. Help me!
Only you, only you can,
you are unique

at last. Alas
it is a boring song
but it works every time.
Cupid and Psyche

BARBARA McBRIE-SMITH

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 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 trollops 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?”

“No, bad enough.”

“How about a Cyclops?”

“No, 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 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 fortune-teller—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 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 snatch 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 Chocula. 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.*

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

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2 passage quoted from Shakespeare's Sonnet 116
King Akrisios was a happy man. He ruled the abundant land of Argos and the people of his kingdom lived in peace. His wife had died some years ago, but he had a daughter named Danaë. Her beauty and laughter filled his life with joy. She was growing up quickly and Akrisios looked forward to finding her a fine husband. He longed for the carefree embrace of grandchildren. A simple message from the gods shattered the king’s hopes. On one of his visits to the temple of Apollo, the holy priestess whispered to him his terrible future: he would meet his death at the hands of his daughter’s child, his own grandson.

Akrisios was desperate to avoid the death the priestess had foretold. He could not bring himself to kill Danaë, so he decided to hide her away, out of the sight of men. In spite of her tears and her pleading, he locked Danaë in a room deep underground, cut into the rock, lined with bronze, where the light of the sun never penetrated. Just one old woman was allowed to take the princess her meals. But nobody can build a barrier against Zeus. The great god had seen Danaë’s loveliness. He changed himself into a shower of liquid gold and seeped into her prison to be with her. When Danaë’s baby boy was born, she named him Perseus.

It is hard to hide the cries of a baby and Akrisios soon discovered Perseus. Although he realized that his life was beginning to unravel, he still could not bring himself to destroy his only family. So he ordered one of his carpenters to build a wooden box. He put Danaë and Perseus inside and nailed on the lid. Then Akrisios took the box to the shore and...
set it adrift, hanging over his daughter and her child to the sea. He stood and watched as the box floated to the horizon, where it was engulfed by the swell. Then he turned in sadness back to his palace.

***

The sun’s chariot had crossed the skies many times when, on the coast of the far distant island of Seriphos, a fisherman hauled up a battered and salt-crusted box in his net. His heart leaped at the thought of gold and silver, but when he forced open the lid and discovered a young woman and her baby, he realized he had found an even greater treasure. He had no family, no prospect of children to care for him in his old age. The fisherman recognized from her clothes and from the glow of her loveliness that Danaé was of royal blood and could never be his wife, but he took her and Perseus into his home. The little family lived together contentedly. The fisherman cared for and respected Danaé; she learned to spin and weave and tended a small field nearby. Perseus looked after the goats and fished and mended nets. He grew into an energetic young man, strong and good looking, but he knew little of the intricate web of life.

Polydektés was the king of Seriphos. He learned of the presence of a strange woman on his island. Enraged by stories of her loveliness, he decided he had to see her for himself. As his birthday approached, Polydektés ordered all those who lived on Seriphos to come to his palace and bring him a gift. As soon as he saw Danaé, he knew he had to possess her. But her son was a problem; he would be sure to try to protect his mother. The king had to get rid of him. When it was the fisherman’s turn to present his family’s gift, he opened his sack and unrolled a small rush mat at the feet of the king. Then on the mat he laid out two mullet, caught that very morning, their scales still gleaming silver. Next to them he placed a crumby white cheese.

Polydektés howled with laughter. “Is that the very best that you can scrape together from your wretched little life? Is that what you think is suitable for your king? You insult me with your smelly fish and stinking cheese.” Perseus’s anger flared up at once and before his mother could stop him, he cried, “If these are not good enough for you, name the gift you want. Go ahead. I will bring you anything you want.”

2 Seriphos: island in the Aegean Sea southeast of Greece
3 mullet: fish valued primarily as food for other fish

Polydektés smiled. He sat back in his throne. “Far from here, in the west, where the sun god dips his chariot into the encircling river of Okeanos and brings darkness to the earth, there is a desert. The three gorgons live there. Their hair withers with snakes, their tusks are sharper than a boar’s, their wings are quicker than an eagle’s. A single glimpse of a gorgon’s face drains the warmth, softness and moisture of life from humans and turns them to stone. Medusa is the only gorgon of the three who can be killed. ‘You told me to name my gift,’...’ The king leaned forward, stared into the eyes of Perseus, and spoke low and calm, “Bring me the head of Medusa.”

High on Olympus, Athena heard the king’s words. Deep inside the goddess there still glowed an ember of resentment at Medusa for an old insult. She called to Hermes to accompany her and the two children of Zeus set off for Seriphos. They found Perseus that evening sitting at the foot of an oak tree wrapped in his cloak. He had started immediately on his search for the gorgons and was tired from a long day’s walking in the heat of the sun. Athena spoke to him softly.

“Perseus, the law of my father Zeus prevents me from doing your task for you, but I can help you on your way. The Nymphs can give you three gifts which you need to win Medusa’s head, but you have to find them first. Only the three ancient Graiai, the Grey Sisters, know where the Nymphs live and they will not tell you unless you force them to. Hermes will guide you to their home. Watch the sisters, watch them carefully before you do anything.”

Perseus set off again with Hermes as his guide. Soon he was walking in a land of grey. The earth was a fine ash in which his feet left perfect tracks. A thick layer of smoky clouds filled the sky. Rocks lay scattered around. Their surfaces were veined with cracks and crumbled to powder at a touch. As they reached the mouth of a narrow gorge, Hermes stopped. “You will find the Grey Sisters here,” he said. “Go silently and watch them.” There was a sudden flutter of wings. Hermes disappeared and a sparrow darted away into the clouds.

Perseus crept forward slowly. He crouched low behind a large rock and very gradually peered around it. A little way ahead of him sat three old women. They were bundled up in thickly woven cloaks the color of cracked pepper. Their waxy skin was deeply lined and their dank hair was plastered in thick hanks over their shoulders. They were muttering and mumbling, and from time to time one would stretch out a bony arm and take something from one of the others. Perseus waited and watched.
Finally, he saw what they were doing. Instead of two eyes each, the three Graiai had just one eye between them. Instead of each sister having her own teeth, they had just one tooth between them. When one of the sisters wanted to gnaw a few crumbs from the crusts of stale bread that lay around them, she asked for the tooth and pushed it into her gums. When one of the sisters had to keep watch for trespassers, she took the eye and slipped it into one of her gaping sockets. Perseus waited and watched again. At last he saw where their weakness lay. When one of the Graiai eased the eye out of her socket and reached out to pass it to one of her sisters, for that moment, none of them could see and the eye was there for the taking. Perseus waited. Soon it was time for a change of watcher. The sister with the eye eased it from her face and held it out. Perseus darted from his hiding place and snatched the eye from the tips of her fingers.

At first each sister thought that one of the others had dropped the eye and scrambled blindly around in the dust complaining about their carelessness. Then their frustration rose and they screamed in anger and fear. Perseus sat and watched them for a little while, enjoying his victory. Then he spoke.

“Listen to me, you hags. I am Perseus and I have what you are looking for. Tell me where I can find the Nymphs and you will have your eye back. If you refuse,” he let the eyeball nestle in the palm of his hand, “I will squash the jelly out of it!” The three old women let out a howl of rage and scuttled towards the sound of Perseus’ voice, but he skipped away from them with ease. “This is your last chance. Where are the Nymphs?” The sisters knew they could do nothing and told him what he wanted to know. “Thank you, ladies. Now here is your sight back.” and he tossed the eye towards the women. It rolled along the ground gathering dust and grit on its sticky surface. Then he turned away and left them to their search. After he had gone some way, a cry of triumph—or was it pain?—told him they had found it.

Perseus passed out of the land of the Graiai and entered a thickly wooded valley. Here he found the Nymphs, who welcomed him graciously and gave him the three gifts Athena had mentioned. First, he pulled on a pair of winged boots, which gave him the power of flight. Second, he set on his head the helmet of death, which made him invisible and brought him under the protection of Hades. Third, he put across his shoulder a magic bag to contain Medusa’s head. Finally, Hermes came to him again and gave him a hooked sword. Its keen edge was jagged like the blade of a saw. Then Hermes pointed out the way and Perseus sped off towards the land of the gorgons.

Soon he came to a desolate place. No plant grew there. Bare rock stretched away to the horizon. No river, no stream, no trickle of water slaked the thirst of the arid earth. The gods avoided this barren waste. Only the all-seeing eye of the sun gazed down on its emptiness. High above this desert, Perseus soared in the vast vault of the sky, searching for the gorgons. He found them dozing, nestled together in a sandy hollow. Athena had sent the sleep god to drip drowsiness into their eyes. Perseus hovered overhead. He was unsure which of them was the mortal Medusa, but Athena, unseen, guided his hand. Turning his face away, he stretched out his left hand and grasped Medusa’s hair.

At once, a squirming mass of snakes entwined his arm. He felt his throat tighten at their disgusting touch. He raised his sword and struck. There was a gasp, almost a sob and then a long, sinking hiss. Perseus thrust the writhing head into his bag and sped away. Behind him, Medusa’s headless body thrashed about and her sisters awoke. They could not see Perseus, but quickly they caught his scent and with a screech of grief and fury gave chase. They hunted Perseus across the desert and over the waters of Okeanos, but his winged boots and the guiding hand of Hermes swept him away from them.

At last, Perseus arrived back in lands where humans lived. Far below him, at the end of a rocky finger of land jutting out into the sea, he could see something moving. As he swooped down, he saw that a young woman had been chained to a rock and that a crowd of people was gathered on the nearby beach watching. At that very moment, the crowd roared out in fear and pointed out to sea. Perseus slowed down to see what was happening. Deep below the sparkling surface of the water a vast, dark shape appeared. It rose swiftly and burst from the sea in a sputtering surge of salt spray. Perseus reached into his bag, gripped Medusa’s head and dived down from the sky.

The people on the beach had barely glimpsed the sea monster’s enormous scaly head and its gaping jaws bearing down on their princess Andromeda, when time seemed to pause for a moment and then jerk again into motion. Suddenly, instead of a monster there was a new, misshapen rock out at sea. A young stranger was standing before their king holding Princess Andromeda’s hand. Then the whole crowd cheered and wept with joy. The king embraced his daughter and announced a royal wedding and a month of rejoicing.
It was over a year later that Perseus and his wife arrived back in Seriphos. When he reached his old home, he found his mother gone and the fisherman alone. The fisherman explained that Danaë had resisted the king’s desires in the hope that Perseus might return. Now she thought that her only hope was with the gods and had taken refuge at the altar of Zeus. King Polydektes and his men had surrounded her there and were starving her into submission. Perseus left Andromeda with the fisherman and taking his bag set off to find his mother.

When Polydektes saw Perseus, he mocked him. “So you are back at last. It has taken you a long time to bring my gift, but I am always happy to have a birthday present, even a late one. I suppose you have Medusa’s head in that little bag. I can’t say that I think much of the wrapping!” The king and his followers roared with laughter, but when Perseus drew the gorgon’s head from his bag, their limbs hardened, their blood turned to sand in their veins and the laughter stopped. Then Athena came to Perseus and gently took the head from him. She was wearing her aegis skin across her chest. In its very center she set the gorgon’s face to paralyze her enemies with terror and she fringed the skin with the snakes.

Perseus made the faithful fisherman king of Seriphos—he learned to be a wise king and his people grew to love him. Then, with Andromeda and Danaë, Perseus set off back to his birthplace, back to Argos to see his grandfather. When they reached Argos, Akrisios was gone. He had heard of his grandson’s imminent return and had run away to escape the death the priestess had foretold. Perseus was hailed as the new king.

Some years later, in a distant land, Perseus was competing in an athletics competition. When it was his turn to throw the discus, he threw so far that the discus hit an old man in the crowd and killed him on the spot. Nobody knew the old man, so Perseus had the body brought back to Argos for burial. No one recognized the old man until Danaë came to mourn. She stood over the body and gazed down at the lifeless face of her father Akrisios.

Medusa lived on a remote shore troubled no one: fish swam, birds flew, and the sea did not turn to glass. All was as before. A few broken statues lay untidily on the lonely beach, but other than these there was nothing wrong with that peaceful scene. And so, when the hero, Perseus, came to seize the Gorgon’s head, he thought he might have been mistaken. He watched for a while, but she turned nothing to stone. The waves roared as waves will, till at last the hidden hero buried to be seen by her whom he had come to kill. ‘Look, Medusa, I am Perseus!’ he cried, thus gaining recognition before he died.
This was during the wartime, when lots of people were coming North for jobs in factories and war industries. When people moved around a lot more than they do now and sometimes kids were thrown into new groups and new lives that were completely different from anything they had ever known before. I remember this one kid, T.J., his name was, from somewhere down South, whose family moved into our building during that time. They'd come North with everything they owned piled into the back seat of an old-model sedan that you wouldn't expect could make the trip. With T.J. and his three younger sisters riding shakily on top of the load of junk.

Our building was just like all the others there, with families crowded into a few rooms, and I guess there were twenty-five or thirty kids about my age in that one building. Of course, there were a few of us who formed a gang and ran together all the time after school, and I was the one who brought T.J. in and started the whole thing.

The building right next door to us was a factory where they made walking dolls. It was a low building with a flat, tarred roof that had a parapet all around it about head high and we'd find out a long time before that no one, not even the watchman, paid any attention to the roof because it was higher than any of the other buildings around. So my gang used the roof as a headquarters. We could get up there by crossing over to the fire escape from our own roof on a plank and then going on up. It was a secret place for us, where nobody else could go without our permission.

parapet: a low wall or railing at the roof's edge
I remember the day I first took T.J. up there to meet the gang. He was a stocky, robust kid with a shock of white hair, nothingissy about him except his voice—he talked in this slow, gentle voice, like you never heard before. He talked differently from any of us and you noticed it right away. But I liked him anyway, so I told him to come on up.

We climbed up over the parapet and dropped down on the roof. The rest of the gang were already there.

"Hi," I said. "I jerked my thumb at T.J. "He just moved into the building yesterday."

He just stood there, not scared or anything, just looking, like the first time you see somebody you're not sure you're going to like.

"Hi," Blackie said. "Where are you from?"

"Marion County," T.J. said.

We laughed. "Marion County?" I said. "Where's that?"

He looked at me for a moment like I was a stranger, too. "It's in Alabama," he said, like I ought to know where it was.

"What's your name?" Charley said.

"T.J.,” he said, looking back at him. He had pale blue eyes that looked washed-out but he looked directly at Charley, waiting for his reaction. He'll be all right, I thought. No sissy in him . . . except that voice. Who ever talked like that?

"T.J.,” Blackie said. "That's just initials. Your real name? Nobody in the world has just initials."

"I do," he said. "And they're T.J. That's all the name I got."

His voice was resolute with the knowledge of his rightness and for a moment no one had anything to say. T.J. looked around at the rooftop and down at the black tar under his feet. "Down yonder where I come from," he said, "we played out in the woods. Don't you-all have no woods around here?"

"Naw," Blackie said. "There's the park a few blocks over, but it's full of kids and cops and old women. You can't do a thing."

T.J. kept looking at the tar under his feet. "You mean you ain't got no fields to raise nothing in? . . . no watermelons or nothing?"

"Naw," I said scornfully. "What do you want to grow something for? The folks can buy everything they need at the store."

He looked at me again with that strange, unknowing look. "In Marion County," he said, "I had my own acre of cotton and my own acre of corn. It was mine to plant and make ever' year."

He sounded like it was something to be proud of, and in some obscure way it made the rest of us angry. "Huh!" Blackie said. "Who'd want to have their own acre of cotton and corn? That's just work. What can you do with an acre of cotton and corn?"

T.J. looked at him. "Well, you get part of the bale² off yer acre," he said seriously. "And I fed my acre of corn to my calf."

We didn't really know what he was talking about, so we were more puzzled than angry; otherwise, I guess, we'd have chased him off the roof and wouldn't let him be part of our gang. But he was strange and different and we were all attracted by his stolid sense of rightness and belonging, maybe by the strange softness of his voice contrasting our own tones of speech into harshness.

He moved his foot against the black tar. "We could make our own field right here," he said softly, thoughtfully. "Come spring we could raise us what we want to . . . watermelons and garden truck and no telling what all."

"You have to be a good farmer to make these tar roofs grow any watermelons," I said. We all laughed.

But T.J. looked serious. "We could haul us some dirt up here," he said. "And spread it out even and water it and before you know it we'd have us a crop in here." He looked at us intently. "Wouldn't that be fun?"

"They wouldn't let us," Blackie said quickly.

"I thought you said this was you-all's roof," T.J. said to me. "That you-all could do anything you wanted to up here."

"They've never bothered us," I said. I felt the idea beginning to catch fire in me. It was a big idea and it took a while for it to sink in but the more I thought about it the better I liked it. "Say," I said to the gang. "He might have something there. Just make us a regular roof garden, with flowers and grass and trees and everything. And all ours, too," I said. "We wouldn't let anybody up here except the ones we wanted to."

"It'd take a while to grow trees," T.J. said quickly, but we weren't paying any attention to him. They were all talking about it suddenly, all excited with the idea after I'd put it in a way they could catch hold of it. Only rich people had roof gardens, we knew, and the idea of our private domain excited them.

"We could bring it up in sacks and boxes," Blackie said. "We'd have to do it while the folks weren't paying any attention to us, for we'd have to come up to the roof of our building and then cross over with it."

² bale: bundle of goods. Here T.J. is referring to the fact that sharecroppers get to keep some of the income from the sale of cotton.
“Where could we get the dirt?” somebody said worriedly.

“Out of those vacant lots over close to school,” Blackie said. “Nobody’d notice if we scraped it up.”

I slapped T.J. on the shoulder. “Man, you had a wonderful idea,” I said, and everybody grinned at him, remembering that he had started it. “Our own private roof garden.”

He grinned back. “It’ll be ours,” he said. “All ours.” Then he looked thoughtful again. “Maybe I can lay my hands on some cotton seed, too. You think we could raise us some cotton?”

We’d started big projects before at one time or another, like any gang of kids, but they’d always petered out for lack of organization and direction. But this one didn’t . . . somehow or other T.J. kept it going all through the winter months. He kept talking about the watermelons and the cotton we’d raise, come spring, and when even that wouldn’t work he’d switch around to my idea of flowers and grass and trees, though he was always honest enough to add that it’d take a while to get any trees started. He always had it on his mind and he’d mention it in school, getting them lined up to carry dirt that afternoon, saying in a casual way that he reckoned a few more weeks ought to see the job through.

Our little area of private earth grew slowly. T.J. was smart enough to start in one corner of the building, heaping up the carried earth two or three feet thick, so that we had an immediate result to look at, to contemplate with awe. Some of the evenings T.J. alone was carrying earth up to the building, the rest of the gang distracted by other enterprises or interests, but T.J. kept plugging along on his own and eventually we’d all come back to him again and then our own little acre would grow more rapidly.

He was careful about the kind of dirt he’d let us carry up there and more than once he dumped a sandy load over the parapet into the area way below because it wasn’t good enough. He found out the kinds of earth in all the vacant lots for blocks around. He’d pick it up and feel it and smell it, frozen though it was sometimes, and then he’d say it was good and growing soil or it wasn’t worth anything and we’d have to go on somewhere else.

Thinking about it now, I don’t see how he kept us at it. It was hard work, lugging paper sacks and boxes of dirt all the way up the stairs of our own building, keeping out of the way of the grownups so they wouldn’t catch on to what we were doing. They probably wouldn’t have cared, for they didn’t pay much attention to us, but we wanted to keep it secret anyway. Then we had to go through the trap door to our roof, teeter over a plank to the fire escape, then climb two or three stories to the parapet and drop down onto the roof. All that for a small pile of earth that sometimes didn’t seem worth the effort. But T.J. kept the vision bright within us, his words shrewd and calculated toward the fulfillment of his dream; and he worked harder than any of us. He seemed driven toward a goal that we couldn’t see, a particular point in time that would be definitely marked by signs and wonders that only he could see.

The laborious earth just lay there during the cold months, inert and lifeless, the cloths lumpy and cold under our feet when we walked over it. But one day it rained and afterward there was a softness in the air and the earth was alive and giving again with moisture and warmth. That evening T.J. smelled the air, his nostrils dilating with the odor of the earth under his feet.

“It’s spring,” he said, and there was a gladness rising in his voice that filled us all with the same feeling. “It’s mighty late for it, but it’s spring. I’d just about decided it wasn’t never gonna get here at all.”

We were all sniffing at the air, too, trying to smell it the way that T.J. did, and I can still remember the sweet odor of the earth under our feet. It was the first time in my life that spring and spring earth had meant anything to me. I looked at T.J. then, knowing in a faint way the hunger within him through the toilsome winter months, knowing the dream that lay behind his plan. He was a new Antaeus, preparing his own bed of strength.

“Planting time,” he said. “We’ll have to find us some seed.”

“What do we do?” Blackie said. “How do we do it?”

“First we’ll have to break up the clods,” T.J. said. “That won’t be hard to do. Then we plant the seed and after a while they come up. Then you got you a crop.” He frowned. “But you ain’t got it raised yet. You got to tend it and hoe it and take care of it and all the time it’s growing and growing, while you’re awake and while you’re asleep. Then you lay it by when it’s grewed and let it ripen and then you got you a crop.”

“There’s those wholesale seed houses over on Sixth,” I said. “We could probably swipe some grass seed over there.”

T.J. looked at the earth. “You-all seem mighty set on raising some grass,” he said. “I ain’t never put no effort into that. I spent all my life trying not to raise grass.”

“But it’s pretty,” Blackie said. “We could play on it and take sunbaths on it. Like having our own lawn. Lots of people got lawns.”

“Well,” T.J. said. He looked at the rest of us, hesitant for the first time. He kept on looking at us for a moment. “I did have it in mind to raise

3 Antaeus: mythological giant who gained his strength from Mother Earth
some corn and vegetables. But we’ll plant grass.”

He was smart. He knew where to give in. And I don’t suppose it made any difference to him, really. He just wanted to grow something, even if it was grass.

“Of course,” he said, “I do think we ought to plant a row of watermelons. They’d be mighty nice to eat while we were a-laying on that grass.”

We all laughed. “All right,” I said. “We’ll plant us a row of watermelons.”

Things went very quickly then. Perhaps half the roof was covered with the earth, the half that wasn’t broken by ventilators, and we swiped pocketfuls of grass seed from the open bins in the wholesale seed house, mingling among the buyers on Saturdays and during the school lunch hour. T.J. showed us how to prepare the earth, breaking up the clods and smoothing it and sowing the grass seed. It looked rich and black now with moisture, receiving of the seed, and it seemed that the grass sprang up overnight, pale green in the early spring.

We couldn’t keep from looking at it, unable to believe that we had created this delicate growth. We looked at T.J. with understanding now, knowing the fulfillment of the plan he had carried alone within his mind. We had worked without full understanding of the task but he had known all the time.

We found that we couldn’t walk or play on the delicate blades, as we had expected to, but we didn’t mind. It was enough just to look at it, to realize that it was the work of our own hands, and each evening the whole gang was there, trying to measure the growth that had been achieved that day.

One time a foot was placed on the plot of ground . . . one time only, Blackie stepping onto it with sudden bravado. Then he looked at the crushed blades and there was shame in his face. He did not do it again. This was his grass, too, and not to be desecrated. No one said anything, for it was not necessary.

T.J. had reserved a small section for watermelons and he was still trying to find some seed for it. The wholesale house didn’t have any watermelon seed and we didn’t know where we could lay our hands on them. T.J. shaped the earth into mounds, ready to receive them, three mounds lying in a straight line along the edge of the grass plot.

We had just about decided that we’d have to buy the seed if we were to get them. It was a violation of our principles, but we were anxious to get the watermelons started. Somewhere or other, T.J. got his hands on a seed catalogue and brought it one evening to our roof garden.

“We can order them now,” he said, showing us the catalogue. “Look!”

We all crowded around, looking at the fat, green watermelons pictured in full color on the pages. Some of them were split open, showing the red, tempting meat, making our mouths water.

“Now we got to scrape up some seed money,” T.J. said, looking at us. “I got a quarter. How much you-all got?”

We made up a couple of dollars between us and T.J. nodded his head.

“That’ll be more than enough. Now we got to decide what kind to get. I think them Kleeckley Sweats. What do you-all think?”

He was going into esoteric matters beyond our reach. We hadn’t even known there were different kinds of melons. So we just nodded our heads and agreed that yes, we thought the Kleeckley Sweats too.

“I’ll order them tonight,” T.J. said. “We ought to have them in a few days.”

“What are you boys doing up here?” an adult voice said behind us.

It startled us, for no one had ever come up here before, in all the time we had been using the roof of the factory. We jerked around and saw three men standing near the trap door at the other end of the roof. They weren’t policemen, or night watchmen, but three men in plumb business suits, looking at us. They walked toward us.

“What are you boys doing up here?” the one in the middle said again.

We stood still, guilt heavy among us, levied by the tone of voice, and looked at the three strangers.

The men stared at the grass flourishing behind us. “What’s this?” the man said. “How did this get up here?”

“Sure is growing good, ain’t it?” T.J. said conversationally. “We planted it.”

The men kept looking at the grass as if they didn’t believe it. It was a thick carpet over the earth now, a patch of deep greenness startling in the sterile industrial surroundings.

“Shoo sir,” T.J. said proudly. “We tooted that earth up here and planted that grass.” He fluttered the seed catalogue. “And we’re just fixing to plant us some watermelon.”

The man looked at him then, his eyes strange and faraway. “What do you mean, putting this on the roof of my building?” he said. “Do you want to go to jail?”

T.J. looked shaken. The rest of us were silent, frightened by the authority of his voice. We had grown up aware of adult authority, of policemen and night watchmen and teachers, and this man sounded like all the others. But it was a new thing to T.J.

“Well, you won’t using the roof,” T.J. said. He paused a moment and
added shrewdly, "so we just thought to pretty it up a little bit."

"And sag it so I'd have to rebuild it," the man said sharply. He started turning away, saying to another man beside him, "See that all that junk is shoveled off by tomorrow."

"Yes sir," the man said.

T.J. started forward. "You can't do that," he said. "We toted it up here and it's our earth. We planted it and raised it and toted it up here."

The man stared at him coldly. "But it's my building," he said. "It's to be shoveled off tomorrow."

"It's our earth," T.J. said desperately. "You ain't got no right!"

The men walked on without listening and descended clumsily through the trap door. T.J. stood looking after them, his body tense with anger, until they had disappeared. They wouldn't even argue with him, wouldn't let him defend his earth-rights.

He turned to us. "We won't let 'em do it," he said fiercely. "We'll stay up here all day tomorrow and the day after that and we won't let 'em do it."

We just looked at him. We knew that there was no stopping it. He saw it in our faces and his face wavered for a moment before he gripped it into determination.

"They ain't got no right," he said. "It's our earth. It's our land. Can't nobody touch a man's own land."

We kept on looking at him, listening to the words but knowing that it was no use. The adult world had descended on us even in our richest dream and we knew there was no calculating the adult world, no fighting it, no winning against it.

We started moving slowly toward the parapet and the fire escape, avoiding a last look at the green beauty of the earth that T.J. had planted for us... had planted deeply in our minds as well as in our experience. We filed slowly over the edge and down the steps to the plank, T.J. coming last, and all of us could feel the weight of his grief behind us.

"Wait a minute," he said suddenly, his voice harsh with the effort of calling. We stopped and turned, held by the tone of his voice, and looked up at him standing above us on the fire escape.

"We can't stop them?" he said, looking down at us, his face strange in the dusky light. "There ain't no way to stop 'em?"

"No," Blackie said with finality. "They own the building."

We stood still for a moment, looking up at T.J., caught into inaction by the decision working in his face. He stared back at us and his face was pale in the poor light.

"They ain't gonna touch my earth," he said fiercely. "They ain't gonna lay a hand on it! Come on."

He turned around and started up the fire escape again, almost running against the effort of climbing. We followed more slowly, not knowing what he intended. By the time we reached him, he had seized a board and thrust it into the soil, scooping it up and flinging it over the parapet into the areaway below. He straightened and looked at us.

"They can't touch it," he said. "I won't let 'em lay a dirty hand on it!"

We saw it then. He stooped to his labor again and we followed, the gusts of his anger moving in frenzied labor among us as we scattered along the edge of the earth, scooping it and throwing it over the parapet, destroying with anger the growth we had nurtured with such tender care. The soil carried so laboriously upward to the light and the sun cascaded swiftly into the dark areaway, the green blades of grass crumpled and twisted in the falling.

It took less time than you would think... the task of destruction is infinitely easier than that of creation. We stopped at the end, leaving only a scattering of loose soil, and when it was finally over a stillness stood among the group and over the factory building. We looked down at the bare sterility of black tar, felt the harsh texture of it under the soles of our shoes, and the anger had gone out of us, leaving only a sore aching in our minds like overstretched muscles.

T.J. stood for a moment, his breathing slowing from anger and effort, caught into the same contemplation of destruction as all of us. He stooped slowly, finally, and picked up a lonely blade of grass left trampled under our feet and put it between his teeth, tasting it, sucking the greenness out of it into his mouth. Then he started walking toward the fire escape, coming before any of us were ready to move, and disappeared over the edge.

We followed him but he was already halfway down to the ground, going on past the board where we crossed over, climbing down in the areaway. We saw the last section swing down with his weight and then he stood on the concrete below us, looking at the small pile of anonymous earth scattered by our throwing. Then he walked across the place where we could see him and disappeared toward the street without glancing back, without looking up to see us watching him.

They did not find him for two weeks. Then the Nashville police caught him just outside the Nashville freight yards. He was walking along the railroad track; still heading south, still heading home.

As for us, who had no remembered home to call us... none of us ever again climbed the escape-way to the roof.
Antaeus: Looking Back at the Myth

Antaeus was a giant—and something even more than that. His father was Poseidon, the god of the sea, and his mother was the Earth herself, often known as Gaia. As you might imagine, Antaeus was extremely powerful. But he had one dire failing; he didn’t know the limits of his own strength.

Whenever a stranger arrived in Antaeus’ country, the giant invited him to a wrestling match. The stakes were extremely high. If Antaeus won, the stranger would be put to death, and his skull would become part of a roof Antaeus was building for a local temple.

Why anyone would accept such a challenge from a giant isn’t easy to understand. Nevertheless, countless strangers did just that. Antaeus defeated them, killed them, beheaded them, and used their skulls for masonry!

Antaeus emerged from every fight victorious—that is, until the hero-god Hercules came along. Like so many strangers before him, Hercules accepted Antaeus’ challenge to a wrestling match. Antaeus studied Hercules’ well-shaped head, secretly gloating. This skull, thought the giant, would make an especially nice addition to his temple.

Antaeus and Hercules began to fight—and right away, Hercules found himself losing. Oh, he was able to throw the giant to the ground without any trouble. But something odd kept happening when he did so. Again and again, Antaeus would rise up from the ground with greater strength than before.

Now, Hercules was never known for his great intelligence, but he was far from stupid. He quickly realized that Antaeus was drawing strength directly from the earth. The giant was, after all, the child of Gaia. It seemed that Hercules would have to reinvent the game of wrestling—or else wind up as just another ceiling ornament.

Just when he was on the verge of going down in defeat, Hercules had an idea. He seized Antaeus in his massive, brawny arms and raised him high in the air. But instead of hurling the giant to the ground, Hercules simply held him aloft. Soon, Antaeus began to weaken. After the strength drained from his body, Hercules crushed him to death.

Let’s not give Hercules too much credit for Antaeus’ defeat. It was, after all, Antaeus’ own pride and stubbornness that lifted him to his doom. And we can learn something from his example. For indeed, like Antaeus, we are all children of Mother Earth. The strength we live by comes from her.