There was once a girl named Psyche who was so beautiful that she made Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty, jealous. As a punishment, Aphrodite told her son Eros to shoot one of his arrows into Psyche's heart and make the girl fall in love with a mean and ugly man. But Eros fell in love with the girl himself. While she slept, he took her away to be his bride.

Psyche now had a beautiful home and everything she could wish for—but she did not know who her husband was. Eros never let Psyche see him—he came to her only at night, under cover of darkness.

One night, Psyche's curiosity got the better of her. She held a candle above her sleeping husband, and saw that, far from being a monster, he was the handsome god of love. But some wax, dripping onto Eros's shoulder, woke him, and he fled.

Psyche searched everywhere for her lost love. She begged Aphrodite for help. The goddess set her three tasks, the last of which was to fetch a box from Persephone, queen of the Underworld.

Psyche succeeded in her tasks, but when she got the box, she opened it. Inside was the sleep of death, and as soon as she breathed its scent, she fell down lifeless.

But Zeus, seeing all that she had gone through for love, took pity on her and had her brought to Mount Olympus, where she and her true love could be together forever.
It would be a fine thing if the great heroes of classical mythology had female counterparts who performed the kind of astonishing deeds we expect from Hercules or Xena the Warrior Princess. Alas, there is no such heroine, with the possible exception of Psyche, whose story was written down—or perhaps invented—by the Latin writer Lucius Apulius in his second-century novel *The Golden Ass*. The tale of her harrowing adventures and her marriage to Eros (or Cupid or Amor) has been interpreted as an allegory of the journey of the soul through life and death, as a myth of feminine individuation, and as an itinerary of relationship that begins in the dark and ends, many episodes later, in joy.

Psyche—"soul" in Latin—was so lovely that as she walked down the street, people offered her garlands of flowers, and after a while, they literally began to worship her. Their devotion was so extreme that Venus felt slighted and sought to make her powers known. She summoned her winged son Eros and asked him to use his magic arrows to make Psyche fall passionately in love with someone utterly vile. Then Venus "with parted lips kissed her son long and fervently." Her words were ineffectual. The moment Eros saw Psyche, he was smitten.

Meanwhile, Psyche's parents were worried. Their other two daughters, ordinary girls, were married to kings, while Psyche was always alone. She was so beautiful that no one dared approach her. Finally, her despairing father asked the oracle of Apollo at Miletus for advice. The news wasn't good. Apollo said he must give up all hope for a mortal bridegroom, dress the girl for her funeral, and leave her on a craggy mountaintop. Weeping, Psyche's parents did as directed, leaving their youngest daughter trembling at the summit.

She wasn't there long. Along came the West Wind, which picked her up, wafted her down the slope, and deposited her in a field of flowers, where Psyche fell asleep. When she awoke, Apuleius tells us, "the tempest had passed from her soul."

Looking around, she saw a grove of tall trees, a transparent fountain, and a luxurious palace with gold columns and a roof made of sandalwood and ivory. She wandered over to the palace, and a voice told her to make herself at home. That night, Eros became her lover. Every night he made love to Psyche—in the dark. He insisted that she must never try to see his face, and she promised to obey. But such promises are made to be broken, or what's a story for?

After some time had passed, Eros told her that her sisters thought she was dead. Psyche was distraught. She found it impossible to ignore their sorrow. To reassure them, she brought them to the palace (with the help of the West Wind) and related her story. When she reached the part about never seeing her lover's face, her intuition told her to lie. Her husband was young and handsome, she said, and, thinking about his bow and arrows, she added that he was involved with hunting. Afraid of further questioning, she filled their arms with gifts and sent them on their way.

Anyone who remembers Cinderella knows that in stories like this, older sisters are bad news. Soon the sisters were eaten up with envy. It hardly seemed fair, one of them whined, that Psyche was married to a rich and handsome man when she had "a husband older than my father, balder than a pumpkin, and feeble than any child." The other voice similar complaints. Their envy turned to suspicion on the next visit, when Psyche made up a story that conflicted with the first. This time, she said her husband was middle-aged with grizzled hair. Psyche's sisters began to plot against her.

That night, Eros told her that she was pregnant and warned that she and the child were in danger from the sisters. "If you keep my secret in silence," he told her, "he shall be a god; if you divulge it, a mortal." The sisters had different ideas. It occurred to them that Psyche had no idea what her husband looked like, and they began to suggest terrible scenarios to her. Perhaps he was a snake, they said, who intended to devour her as soon as the baby was born. To protect herself, they suggested that she take a lantern into his room while he was sleeping and cut off his head. They frightened her so badly that she decided to do as they suggested. One night she took...
an oil lamp and a knife, and while Eros slumbered, she lifted the lamp above his bed and gazed at him for the first time.

He was not a monster, as her sisters had led her to suppose, for this is not a story about disappointment, about learning to accept reality, about sensing the soul of beauty beneath the face of the beast. No: this is a story of true love. At that climactic moment when Psyche was breaking her promise, she was overwhelmed by her beloved’s tangled curls and dazzlingly, godlike beauty, and she dropped the knife. Then the lamp sputtered and a drop of oil fell on his shoulder and woke him. Thus Psyche broke her vow—and shattered the relationship. She “refused to remain in the garden of the unconscious,” writes Jungian psychotherapist Connie Zweig. “Like Eve, she chose knowledge and sacrificed the innocence of the original relationship, enabling it to become something more.”

Within moments, Eros spread his feathery white wings and flew away, with Psyche clinging to his leg. When she lost her grip, she tumbled to earth and, miraculously unhurt, realized she was near the home of one of her sisters. No longer in the dark, Psyche confided the whole sorry tale but now, understanding at last that her sister was not her friend, she made one futile addition. She confided that Eros promised to marry her sister just as he had once married her.

Her sister, wed to a man who disgusted her, took the bait. She climbed to the top of the same mountain where Psyche had gone in her funeral clothes, called out to Eros, and, trusting in the West Wind, jumped. But the West Wind did not lift her up. Eros did not come to her aid. She fell to the rocks below and died. Then Psyche visited the other sister and told a similar story, with similar results.

Venus Reacts

When a white seagull related this to Venus, she was furious, first at her disobedient son, who was recuperating from the wound he received when the drop of oil fell on his shoulder, and then at Psyche. She determined to seek revenge. Just as Hera persecuted Heracles yet drove him into heroism, Venus badgered Psyche, presenting her with a series of seemingly undoable chores which are the most important part of the hero’s journey. Intent on being reunited with her beloved, Psyche plunged in.

Her wanderings brought her to a deserted temple that belonged to Ceres, the goddess of grain. Psyche straightened it up, and her housekeeping efforts earned high marks from the goddess. But Ceres was loyal to Venus and refused to help Psyche. Juno refused to help for the same reason. Psyche was forced to face the goddess of love herself.

Although the artwork that this meeting has inspired is often very pretty, Apuleius reports that Venus tormented Psyche, tearing her clothes, messing up her hair, beating her, and even having her whipped. Then she gave her a series of tasks.

The Labors of Psyche

Psyche’s first assignment was to separate an overflowing heap of seeds and grains into individual piles of millet, corn, barley, lentils, beans, poppy seeds, and so forth. Psyche didn’t know how to begin this hopeless task. Fortunately, a parade of ants showed up and, one by one, carried each tiny seed to its proper place, thus bringing order to chaos.

Then Venus directed Psyche to retrieve some fleece from a wild herd of golden sheep whose bite was said to be poisonous. Psyche, easily discouraged, was ready to commit suicide by throwing herself over a cliff, but a green reed by the river counseled patience. Wait until the sheep leave their grazing place, the reed whispered, and it will be easy to find a few tufts of wool clinging to twigs. Psyche wandered through the meadow at dusk and found exactly what she wanted.

Her third task was to fill a crystal bottle with icy water from a stream whose black waters, guarded by long-necked dragons, gushed from a slippery mountaintop into the River Styx. Psyche climbed to the summit, only to discover that the waters were inaccessible, having worn a deep crevasse into the mountain side, and menacing. As they cascaded through the fissure and into the river, they hissed that she was doomed to die. Psyche was terrified. Once again, the world
of the spirit came to her aid in the form of Jove’s eagle, who claimed to be on an errand from Venus and easily obtained the water for her.

Her final task was the most dangerous. Venus gave Psyche a small casket and instructed her to go down to the underworld and ask Proserpine, queen of the dead, to fill it with beauty. Once again, Psyche considered suicide. She decided to fling herself off a tower. But the tower spoke up, giving her complicated directions to the underworld and many suggestions about what to do once she got there. It was important, the tower said, to hold barley cakes in her hands and to keep two coins in her mouth. With the cakes, she could distract the three-headed dog Cerberus who guarded the entrance to the underworld; with the coins, she could purchase a round-trip passage across the River Styx. The tower told her that she would meet a man driving a lame ass who would ask her to pick up a piece of wood for him: she must silently refuse. Crossing the river, she would see a dead man floating in the awful waters. He would ask to be lifted into the ferry: she must decline. Finally an old woman weaving a web would ask for help: again, her answer must be no. It was essential that Psyche set aside her compassion and ignore these pitiful requests, for if she did not, she was likely to drop the cakes, which she was going to need if she intended to return. She received other warnings, too: she must refuse to eat the delicious feast Proserpine would offer her and ask instead for rough bread. She must sit on the floor rather than relaxing on an irresistibly comfortable chair.

And one more thing: once Proserpine filled the box with beauty, she must not look inside it.

So Psyche began the journey. She gave coins to Charon and cakes to Cerberus, she chatted with Proserpine, and she made it safely back to the light of day, casket of beauty in hand. Back on earth, she gave in to her curiosity, risked everything, and peeked inside the box, which held a dark and Stygian sleep. Psyche fell into a stupor so deep she looked dead.

At that moment, all appears lost. Psyche fails. “But although she does not know it,” writes Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann, “it is precisely this failure that brings her victory.” Once she ignores the prohibition and looks into the box of beauty as a conscious choice, she is ready to meet her divine lover on equal ground.

At that moment, Eros saw that his wound had healed. He flew to Psyche’s side, scraped off the sleep, and squeezed it back into the box. Then he woke her with a prick of his arrows. Psyche returned to consciousness and gave the box to Venus, thus completing her assignment.

Yet a barrier still separated the two lovers, for one was a god and one was mortal. So Eros flew to Jove to ask for assistance. Jove complained that Eros had embarrassed him on many occasions, causing him to fall prey to lust, to commit adultery, and to disfigure himself through disguises. Nonetheless, he announced to all the gods that it was time for Eros to marry, that “the wanton spirit of boyhood must be enchained in the fetters of wedlock.” Then he gave Psyche a goblet of nectar to drink and she became immortal.

The wedding was spectacular. Vulcan cooked, Apollo strummed the lyre, Pan played the pipes, and the Hours, the Graces, and the Muses filled the hall with flowers and song. Even Venus kicked up her heels and danced.

Not long afterwards, Psyche had her baby. It wasn’t a son, as Eros had expected. It was a daughter whom they named “Pleasure” or “Joy,” which is always what you get when soul and desire, Psyche and Eros, are united in love.
Eros and Psyche

There was a king who had three daughters, and the youngest, named Psyche, was so beautiful that Aphrodite grew jealous and began to plan mischief.

“I’ll teach that little upstart,” she said to herself. “How dare she go around pretending to be as beautiful as I? When I get through with her, she’ll wish she’d been born ugly as a toad.”

She called her son Eros to her and said, “Son, your mother has been insulted. See that castle down there? In a bower there, a maiden lies asleep. You must go pierce her with one of your arrows.”

“While she is asleep? What good will it do?”

“No good at all. Just evil, which is exactly what I plan for her.”

“But she can fall in love only with the one she is looking at when the arrow pierces her. Why bother when she is asleep?”

“Because if you scratch her with the arrow while she sleeps, she will form a passion for the first one she sees when she awakes. And I will take care to supply her with someone very special—the castle dwarf, perhaps. Or the gardener, who has just celebrated his hundred-and-second birthday. Or a donkey—yes that’s possible too. I haven’t decided. But you can be sure it will be someone quite undesirable. Her family will be surprised.”

“This is a cruel trick, Mother.”

“Oh, yes—it’s meant to be cruel. I tell you the girl has irritated me. Now be off and do your work.”

Obediently, Eros flew down to the castle. He made himself invisible and flew through the window into the girl’s chamber. He stood looking at her.

“She is very beautiful,” he thought. “Too beautiful for her own safety, poor girl.”

He leaned over her, holding his dart so as to delicately scratch her shoulder. But he must have made some sound, for she opened her eyes then and looked straight into his, although she could not see him. And her huge black brilliant eyes startled him, so that the dart slipped and he scratched his own hand. He stood there feeling the sweet poison spread in his veins, confused, growing dizzy with joy and strangeness. He had spread love, but never felt it; shot others, but never been wounded himself. And he did not know himself this way.
The girl closed her eyes and went to sleep again. He stood looking at her. Suddenly she had become the most wonderful, the most curious, the most valuable thing in the world to him. And he knew that he would never let her come to any harm if he could prevent it. He thrust his dart into his quiver and flew back to Olympus.

When he told his mother what had happened, she fell into a rage and ordered him out of her sight. She then flung a curse upon Psyche. She cast an invisible hedge of thorns about her, so that no suitor could come near. The beautiful young princess became very lonely and very sad. Her father and mother could not understand why no one offered to marry her.

Now the gods often quarrel, but Olympus had never seen such a feud as now flared between Aphrodite and her son.

"How dare you torment the girl like that?" he said to his mother. "So long as you keep this spell upon her, I will do no business of love. I will shoot no one with my arrows. Your praises will not be sung. And without praise you will dry up and become a vicious old harpy. Farewell."

And indeed Eros refused to shoot his arrows. People stopped falling in love with one another. There was no praise for Aphrodite; her temples stood empty, her altars unadorned. No marriages were made, no babies born. The world seemed to grow old and dull in a day. Without love, work died. Farmers did not plough their fields. Ships crawled listlessly on the seas. Fishermen scarcely cast their nets. Indeed, there were not many fish to catch, for they had sunk sullenly to the very bottom of the sea. And Aphrodite herself, goddess of love and beauty, found herself wasting in the great parching despair that came off the earth like a desert wind.

She called her son to her and said, "I see that you must have your way. What is it you wish?"

"The girl," he said.
"You shall have her. Sharpen your darts now and get back to work, or we shall all run melancholy mad."

So Eros filled his quiver with arrows, stood upon a low cloud, and shot as fast as he could. And man and woman awakened to each other again. Fish leaped in the sea. Stallions trumpeted in the fields. Sounds of the earth holding revel came to the goddess on the mountain, and she smiled.

But the parents of Psyche still grieved. For now with all the world celebrating the return of love, and the most unlikely people getting married, still no one asked for their daughter. They went to the oracle, who said:

"Psyche is not meant for mortal man. She is to be the bride of him who lives on the mountain and vanquishes both man and god. Take her to the mountain and say farewell."

As the king and queen understood this, they thought that their daughter was intended for some monster, who would devour her as so many other princesses had been devoured to appease the mysterious forces of evil. They dressed her in bridal garments and hung her with jewels and led her to the mountain. The whole court followed, mourning, as though it were a funeral instead of a wedding.

Psyche herself did not weep. She had a strange dreaming look on her face. She seemed scarcely to know what was going on. She said no word of fear, wept no tear, but kissed her mother and father goodbye, and waited on the mountain, standing tall, her white bridal gown blowing about her, her arms full of flowers. The wedding party returned to the castle. The last sound of their voices faded. She stood there listening to a great silence. The wind blew hard, hard. Her hair came loose. The gown whipped about her like a flag. She felt a great pressure upon her and she did not un-
understand. Then a huge breathy murmur, the wind itself howling in her ear, seemed to say, "Fear not. I am Zephyrus, the west wind, the groom’s messenger. I have come to take you home."

She listened to the soft howling and believed the words she seemed to hear and was not afraid, even though she felt herself being lifted off the mountain, felt herself sailing through the air like a leaf. She saw her own castle pass beneath her and thought, "If they’re looking up and see me now, they’ll think that I’m a gull." And she was glad that they would not know her.

Past low hills, over a large bay, beyond forests and fields and another ring of hills, the wind took her. And now she felt herself coasting down steeps of air, through the falling light, through purple clumps of dusk, toward another castle, gleaming like silver on a hilltop. Gently, gently, she was set down within the courtyard. It was empty. There were no sentries, no dogs, nothing but shadows, and the moon-pale stones of the castle. She saw no one. But the great doors opened. A carpet unreeled itself and rolled out to her feet. She walked over the carpet, through the doors. They closed behind her.

A torch burned in the air and floated in front of her. She followed it. It led her through a great hallway into a room. The torch whirled. Three more torches whirled in to join it, then stuck themselves in the wall and burned there, lighting the room. It was a smaller room, beautifully furnished. She stepped onto the terrace which looked out over the valley toward the moonlit sea.

A table floated into the room and set itself down solidly on its three legs. A chair placed itself at the table. Invisible hands began to set the table with dishes of gold and goblets of crystal shells. Food appeared on the plates, and the goblets filled with purple wine.

"Why can I not see you?" she cried to the invisible servants.

A courteous voice said, "It is so ordered."

"And my husband? Where is he?"

"Journeying far. Coming near. I must say no more."

She was very hungry after her windy ride. She ate the food and drank the wine. The torch then led her out of the room to another room that was an indoor pool, full of fragrant warm water. She bathed herself. Fleecy towels were offered her, a jeweled comb, and a flask of perfumed oil. She anointed herself, went back to her room, and awaited her husband.

Presently she heard a voice in the room. A powerful voice speaking very softly, so softly that the words were like her own thoughts.

"You are Psyche. I am your husband. You are the most beautiful girl in all the world, beautiful enough to make the goddess of love herself grow jealous."

She could not see anyone. She felt the tone of the voice press humbly upon her, as if she were in the center of a huge bell.

"Where are you?"

"Here."

She reached out her arms. She felt mighty shoulders, hard as marble, but warm with life. She felt herself being enfolded by great muscular arms. And a voice spoke: "Welcome home."

A swoon of happiness darkened her mind. The torches went out, one by one.

When she awoke next morning, she was alone. But she was so happy she didn’t care. She went dancing from room to room, exploring the castle, singing as she went. She sang so happily that the great pile of stone was filled with the sound of joy. She explored the castle, the courtyard, and the woods nearby. One living creature she found, a silvery greyhound, dainty as a
squirrel and fierce as a panther. She knew it was hers. He went exploring the woods with her and showed her how he could outrace the deer. She laughed with joy to see him run.

At the end of the day she returned to the castle. Her meal was served by the same invisible servants. She again bathed and anointed herself. At midnight again her husband spoke to her, and she embraced him and wondered how it was that of all the girls in the world she had been chosen for this terrible joy.

Day after day went by like this, and night after night. And each night he asked her, “Are you happy, little one? Can I bring you anything, give you anything?”

“Nothing, husband, nothing. Only yourself.”

“That you have.”

“But I want to see you. I want to see the beauty I hold in my arms.”

“That will be, but not yet. It is not yet time.”

“Whatever you say, dear heart. But then, can you not stay with me by day as well, invisible or not. Why must you visit me only at night?”

“That too will change, perhaps. But not yet. It is too soon.”

“But the day grows so long without you. I wait for nightfall so, it seems it will never come.”

“You are lonely. You want company. Would you like your sisters to visit you?”

“My sisters—I have almost forgotten them. How strange.”

“Do you care to renew your acquaintance?”

“Well, perhaps. But I don’t really care. It is you I want. I want to see you. I want you here by day as well as by night.”

“You may expect your sisters here tomorrow.”

The next day the west wind bore Psyche’s elder sisters to the castle and landed them in the courtyard, windblown and bewildered. Fearful at having been snatched away from their own gardens, they were relieved to find themselves deposited so gently in the courtyard. How much more amazed they were, then, to see their own sister, whom they thought long dead, running out of the castle. She was more beautiful than ever, blooming with happiness, more richly garbed than any queen. She stormed joyously out of the castle, swept them into her arms, embraced and kissed them, and made them greatly welcome.

Then she led them into the castle. The invisible servants bathed and anointed them and served them a sumptuous meal. And with every new wonder they saw, with every treasure their sister showed them, they grew more and more jealous. They too had married kings, but little local ones, and this castle made theirs look like dog kennels. They did not eat off golden plates and drink out of jewels. Their servants were the plain old visible kind. And they ate and drank with huge appetites and grew more and more displeased with every bite.

“But where is your husband?” said the eldest one. “Why is he not here to welcome us? Perhaps he didn’t want us to come.”

“Oh, he did, he did,” cried Psyche. “It was his idea. He sent his servant, the west wind, for you.”

“Oh,” sniffed the second sister. “It is he we have to thank for being taken by force and hurled through the air. Pretty rough transport.”

“But so swift,” said Psyche. “Do you not like riding the wind? I love it.”

“Yes, you seem to have changed considerably,” said the eldest. “But that’s still not telling us where your husband is. It is odd that he should not wish to meet us—very odd.”

“Not odd at all,” said Psyche. “He—he is rarely here by day. He—has things to do.”
“What sort of things?”
“Oh, you know—wars, peace treaties, hunting—you know the things that men do.”
“He is often away then?”
“Oh, no! No—that is—only by day. At night he returns.”
“Ah, then we will meet him tonight. At dinner, perhaps—”
“No—well—he will not be here. I mean—he will, but you will not see him.”
“Just what I thought!” cried the eldest. “Too proud to meet us. My dear, I think we had better go home.”
“Yes, indeed,” said the second sister. “If your husband is too high and mighty to give us a glimpse of his august self, then we’re plainly not wanted here.”
“Oh, no,” said Psyche. “Please listen. You don’t understand.”
“We certainly do not.”
And poor Psyche, unable to bear her sisters’ barbed hints, told them how things were. The two sisters sat at the table, listening. They were so fascinated they even forgot to eat, which was unusual for them.
“Oh, my heavens!” cried the eldest. “It’s worse than I thought.”
“Much much worse,” said the second. “The oracle was right. You have married a monster.”
“Oh, no, no!” cried Psyche. “Not a monster! But the most beautiful creature in the world!”
“Beautiful creatures like to be seen,” said the eldest. “It is the nature of beauty to be seen. Only ugliness hides itself away. You have married a monster.”
“A monster,” said the second. “Yes, a monster—a dragon—some scaly creature with many heads, perhaps, that devours young maidens once they are fastened. No wonder he feeds you so well.”
“Yes,” said the eldest. “The better you feed, the better he will later.”

“Poor child—how can we save her?”
“We cannot save her. He’s too powerful, this monster. She must save herself.”
“I won’t listen to another word!” cried Psyche, leaping up. “You are wicked evil-minded shrews, both of you! I’m ashamed of you. Ashamed of myself for listening to you. I never want to see you again. Never!”
She struck a gong. The table was snatched away. A window flew open, and the west wind swept in, curled his arm about the two sisters, swept them out and back to their own homes. Psyche was left alone, frightened, bitterly unhappy, longing for her husband. But there were still many hours till nightfall. All that long hideous afternoon she brooded about what her sisters had said. The words stuck in her mind like poison thorns. They festered in her head, throwing her into a fever of doubt.
She knew her husband was good. She knew he was beautiful. But still—why would he not let her see him? What did he do during the day? Other words of her sisters came back to her:
“How do you know what he does when he’s not here? Perhaps he has dozens of castles scattered about the countryside, a princess in each one. Perhaps he visits them all.”
And then jealousy, more terrible than fear, began to gnaw at her. She was not really afraid that he was a monster. Nor was she at all afraid of being devoured. If he did not love her she wanted to die anyway, but the idea that he might have other brides, other castles, clawed at her and sent her almost mad. She felt that if she could only see him her doubts would be resolved.
As dusk began to fill the room, she took a lamp, trimmed the wick, and poured in the oil. Then she lighted it and put it in a niche of the wall where its light could not be seen. She sat down and awaited her husband.
Late that night, when he had fallen asleep, she crept away and took the torch. She tiptoed back to where he
slept and held the lamp over him. There in the dim wa-vering light she saw a god sleeping. Eros himself, the archer of love, youngest and most beautiful of the gods. He wore a quiver of silver darts even as he slept. Her heart sang at the sight of his beauty. She leaned over to kiss his face, still holding the lamp, and a drop of hot oil fell on his bare shoulder.

He started up and seized the lamp and doused its light. She reached for him, felt him push her away. She heard his voice saying, "Wretched girl—you are not ready to accept love. Yes, I am love itself and I cannot live where I am not believed. Farewell, Psyche."

The voice was gone. She rushed into the courtyard, calling after him, calling, "Husband! Husband!" She heard a dry cracking sound, and when she looked back, the castle was gone too. The courtyard was gone. Everything was gone. She stood among weeds and brambles. All the good things that had belonged to her vanished with her love.

From that night on she roamed the woods, searching. And some say she still searches the woods and the dark places. Some say that Aphrodite turned her into an owl, who sees best in the dark and cries, "Who...? Who...?"

Others say she was turned into a bat that haunts old ruins and sees only by night.

Others say her husband forgave her, finally; that he came back for her and took her up to Olympus, where she helps him with his work of making young love. It is her special task, they say, to undo the talk of the bride's family and the groom's. When mother or sister visit bride or groom and say, "This, this, this... that, that, that... better look for yourself; seeing's believing, seeing's believing," then she calls the west wind, who whips them away, and she, herself, invisible, whispers to them that none but love knows the secret of love, that believing is seeing.
Psyche and her two sisters were the loveliest girls in Greece. The elder sisters were vain but Psyche, the loveliest, never thought of her beauty. People threw flowers before her and called her the queen of love.

This title properly belonged to Aphrodite. When the goddess heard that people threw garlands before a mere girl, she grew angry. 'How dare they make offerings to a mortal? I'll see this beauty for myself.' One glance was enough. The goddess was ravaged with envy and jealousy. It was no comfort to remind herself that mortal beauty withers. Aphrodite vowed to make Psyche suffer.

From that moment Psyche's perfection cast a chill on people's hearts. Though all men sang her praises none loved her. Her sisters married and still no suitors came for Psyche. Her despairing parents consulted Apollo's oracle at Delphi. 'A husband waits for your daughter. He is feared by men and gods alike,' the oracle declared. 'Leave Psyche on the mountain top and he will fetch her.'

So the wedding procession with bridal torches wound up the mountainside and left Psyche on the bare summit, alone and shivering. Clouds swirled around her feet and a strong wind blew. 'Do not fear, Psyche,' the wind said. 'Leap from the precipice and I will catch you.' Psyche was terrified but the voice seemed to be her friend so she stepped into the air. She felt herself caught and lifted up and the air roared in her ears. Then the wind grew soft and gentle. Down, down, she came and was laid in soft meadow-grass, where she fell asleep.

She awoke in a scented garden in the middle of which was a palace. The servants were expecting her. Their master, they said, would return at nightfall. Psyche went to the chamber prepared for her and waited. When it was dark her husband came and took her in his arms. 'I have been
watching and waiting,' he said. 'I was afraid you would not come.' Psyche felt safe and happy. But before it grew light he left her, promising to return at nightfall. So the days slipped by. Psyche spent every night with her husband but he always left before it was light enough to see him. At last she begged to see his face.

'You must not ask that,' he replied. 'If you saw my face or knew my name, we would have to part. Trust me and all will be well.'

Psyche had to be content with this. She lived so happily in the enchanted palace that she forgot for many weeks that her parents and sisters had no idea what had become of her. Then she begged to be allowed to tell them of her happiness. The wind lifted her in its arms and brought her to her parents who were overjoyed to see her. She told them that she lived in a palace and had the kindest husband in the world.

'Who is he? What does he look like?' asked her sisters.

Psyche had to confess that she had never seen him. Her sisters were envious of her palace and fine garden. They told her they thought her husband must be hideous, a monster, a serpent putting on a sweet voice to deceive her. 'He will eat you when he's tired of you,' they said.

Psyche became so miserable that she was glad when the time came to leave. Her sisters' words echoed in her head. When her husband was asleep she fetched an oil lamp and, shielding the little flame with her hand, tiptoed to the bed. It was no monster, but
Aphrodite's son Eros, the god of love himself, matchlessly beautiful. As Psyche stood gazing, the lamp tilted and spilt scalding oil on Eros's shoulder. He awoke and saw her. "Psyche!" he cried. "Why did you not trust me? Love and suspicion cannot live together." And he spread his wings and was gone.

Psyche sobbed herself to sleep. She awoke to find herself at the gate of her old home. "Then her family learned of the husband she had lost, her sisters were secretly delighted. Each thought, 'Eros may like me better.' Without telling the other, each made her way up the mountain and called to the wind Psyche had described, and leapt into the air. But the wind did not answer the sisters' calls and they were dashed to pieces on the rocks.

Psyche waited and hoped, but Eros did not return. So she decided to search for him. She journeyed through towns and countryside and met many people who had felt Eros's arrows but none knew where he lived. She rested in a temple of Demeter and the goddess gave her good advice. 'Go to Aphrodite and beg her to forgive you. She is unreasonable, but you must try. Eros tried to keep your marriage secret for fear of what his mother might do. Without her goodwill you will never find him.'

Psyche went trembling to Aphrodite's temple and bowed before the altar. The goddess was delighted to see her rival looking so pale and careworn. She set her to work. She took Psyche to a barn where she kept food for her doves. It was full of grain in heaps: wheat, rye, barley and millet, all mixed together. "It needs sorting," said Aphrodite. 'Separate it into piles, one of each kind of grain, and do it by this evening.'

So Psyche began, but after an hour she had not sorted more than a cupful. She was sitting in despair on the floor of the barn when she saw a colony of ants marching across it. They went directly to the grain. To and fro, never stopping, each ant carried a grain from one heap to another until, by darkness, all was sorted.

Aphrodite was furious. 'Someone's been helping you! You won't win my respect by cheating.' She tossed Psyche some black bread to eat and left her.

The following day the goddess said, 'Cross the river and bring me wool from the golden sheep that graze on the other bank.' Psyche was wading across when she heard the reeds whispering, 'Take care, Psyche. The rams are savage. They will rip you to pieces if you cross now. Wait until the midday heat makes the flock drowsy. Then collect the wool that
clings to the brambles.' Psyche did as the reeds advised and brought Aphrodite an armful of golden wool.

Aphrodite grew angrier than ever. 'Go to the land of the dead,' she ordered. 'Ask Persephone to put a little of her beauty in this casket. I need it to repair the damage my son's treachery has done to mine.' Psyche thought of killing herself as the only means she knew of reaching the land of the dead. But a voice whispered, 'Psyche, do not be so rash. That way you will never return.' The voice told her how to find the cave that led to the underworld, how to cross the River Styx that encircled it and how to pass Cerberus, the three-headed dog that barred the way. 'But do not look inside the casket,' the voice warned. Psyche followed its guidance faithfully, was received kindly by Persephone and hastened with the filled casket back to the daylight. Then a cruel thought struck her. 'With all my misfortunes I will have grown sad and ugly.' So she opened the casket to take a tiny scrap of beauty. But the box contained the sleep of death, and she fell senseless to the ground.

Eros, who had been protecting Psyche, sped to Olympus. 'Take pity on us, Zeus,' he entreated. Zeus sent Hermes down to shake Psyche from her sleep and bring her to Mount Olympus. On Olympus Zeus offered her ambrosia, the drink of the gods. 'Drink it and be immortal,' he said. So death's sleep lost its power over Psyche and she was united with Eros for ever. But it was a long time before Aphrodite forgave them.
Cupid and Psyche: An Allegory of Love

Apuleius, the second-century AD Roman author of *The Golden Ass*, included in his book a love story about a god and a beautiful mortal, using traditional characters in a new way and combining elements of myth and folktale. His story of Cupid and Psyche is at the same time an entrancing fairy tale and an allegory about the nature of love.

A master story-teller, Apuleius presents his tale of love with refreshing humour. He uses many traditional elements of myth, with a cast of characters including the famous divinities Venus and Cupid and a plot revolving around a love affair between a god and a mortal. In addition, the pronouncement of an oracle plays a key role in moving the plot along. However, the story also contains many elements that are more typical of popular folk tales, including a mysterious bridegroom, evil sisters and a cruel mother-in-law. It begins with the words, "Once upon a time" and ends happily, as romantic love overcomes all obstacles.

At the same time, Apuleius uses the characters of Cupid and Psyche to develop a long-standing philosophical enquiry about the nature of love. Both characters can be seen as essentially symbolic. The heroine's name, Psyche, means "soul" in Greek, and according to one popular interpretation the story examines the relationship between the soul and love (because Cupid, or Eros, is the divine incarnation of the power of love).

Concepts of love and the soul underwent many changes over the centuries. In the Homeric epics, the soul was seen as a person's life-force. Visually, it resembled the person but was intangible, and it inhabited the body; at death it departed the earthly frame and took its place in the Underworld still possessing the outward appearance of the dead person, like a kind of ghostly after-image. From the fifth century BC, artists, poets and philosophers, including Plato, began to see a profound connection between love and the soul, Eros and Psyche. Around the third century BC, they started to depict Eros as inflicting torments on Psyche, reflecting the familiar idea that true love has to prove itself by surviving pain. Apuleius picks up this theme of the miseries of love.

In Apuleius's story, Psyche was a young princess so beautiful that awestruck admirers began to worship her almost as if she were a goddess, undertaking pilgrimages to her home and making offerings and sacrifices to her. Venus, the Roman goddess of love and beauty, resented the attention paid to this mortal woman, and she commanded her son Cupid to cause the princess to fall in love with someone wholly unsuitable - a wretch, beggar or criminal.

Meanwhile Psyche's father had consulted the oracle of Apollo (see page 83) because he feared that the gods would be angered by the devotion his child was attracting. He was also concerned about her marriage prospects, since men, intimidated by her beauty, found her unapproachable; her two less remarkable sisters were already suitably wedded. The oracle offered little comfort. It
commanded the king to prepare Psyche for a wedding and then leave her alone on the top of a mountain where she would become the bride of an evil spirit.

Accompanied by a mournful wedding procession, Psyche set out for the appointed crag. Nightfall found her alone, in the dark, weeping and waiting to meet her monstrous husband. But no monster appeared; instead she was carried off by the west wind to a magnificent palace in a lush, green woodland.

In exquisite surroundings, invisible hands dressed her to receive her suitor and served her a bridal banquet, accompanied by the sweet music of unseen players. Eventually she retired, alone, to her bedroom. There, in pitch darkness, a lover came to her, but he was so gentle that her fear evaporated, and she regretted his sudden departure just before the break of day. This pattern repeated itself the next day and the next, and Psyche was happy even though her new husband vanished each morning.

For a long time Psyche was content in her palace with the unseen servants for company. One night, however, her husband warned her that her sisters were searching for her but that she must ignore them. They would only try to persuade her to discover his identity, but if she looked upon his face she would instantly lose him. Nonetheless, Psyche missed her sisters and begged him to allow her to see them. Despise his deep misgivings, her husband was unable to resist her pleading. Warning her again to tell her sisters nothing about him and to resist becoming curious about his identity, he conceded to her request.

Although the visitors were at first delighted to discover that Psyche was not dead, they soon became jealous of her good fortune and conspired against her. They told her that she was mad to love someone she had not seen, and that the child she was by now carrying had a right to know the truth about its father. They teased and worried her so much that she lost confidence in her husband, finally making up her mind to discover for herself who he might be.

That night Psyche concealed a lamp under her bed and when she knew her husband was asleep, she drew it out. The flame illuminated the divinely beautiful body of Cupid, the winged deity of love himself. The god had been so overcome by her loveliness that he had disobeyed his own
mother and constructed the elaborate plot in order to marry her. In her joy and excitement, Psyche let a drop of hot oil fall on Cupid’s shoulder. The pain of the burn woke him and he took flight, injured, betrayed and furious.

When Psyche reported all this to her sisters, they were delighted. Each secretly visited the crag where Psyche’s adventures had begun, to beseech Cupid to accept her in Psyche’s place. Then they jumped off the cliff, expecting to be wafted by the west wind to the palace of love. But their greed and treachery were promptly punished and they crashed to their deaths on the rocks below. Psyche herself, inconsolable at the loss of her husband, tried to commit suicide by throwing herself into a river, but the river washed her ashore. She then set out to search for her husband.

The distraught girl at first attempted to find comfort and advice from the shrines of Demeter and Hera, but neither goddess was prepared to risk the wrath of Venus. Hearing reports of her son’s love affair, Venus was furious that he had disobeyed her orders. Her anger was further inflamed when she learned that Psyche, a mortal, was expecting Cupid’s child – her grandchild.

Venus sought Psyche out and punished her with a series of seemingly impossible tasks. The girl had to sort a whole roomful of mixed grains,

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**The Golden Ass**

*The Metamorphoses, more commonly known as The Golden Ass, is the only narrative in the form of a novel in Latin that has survived in its entirety. It is an entertaining and magical adventure story that influenced many later writers.*

*The Golden Ass* describes the adventures of Lucius, a young man whose curiosity about magic leads him into trouble when he is accidentally turned into a donkey. Wandering in search of a way to be transformed back into his human form, Lucius is haunted by bad luck, but his many misfortunes serve only to improve his character and disposition. Finally he is turned back into a human being by the goddess Isis (see page 15). The tale is amusingly told in the style of a popular romance and remains a good read today.

Apuleius, the author of the text, was a highly educated man, who studied extensively in Carthage, Athens and Rome and was known as a poet, rhetorician, priest and philosopher. He wrote a number of successful books, including some serious philosophical treatises and other more comical works, of which *The Golden Ass* is the most famous. It won broad acclaim in its own day, and was popular for centuries, even though many of its messages conflicted with Christian doctrine. In fact, the lasting popularity of Apuleius’s story led St Augustine, the influential fourth-century Christian theologian, to warn against praising the author too highly.
and to bring Venus some wool from a flock of man-eating sheep and a jar of water from the River Styx. But the powers of nature were so moved by Psyche's love for Cupid that they helped her fulfil the goddess's commands. First an army of ants separated the grain. Then a reed advised her that she could collect wool from the briars against which the sheep had brushed. Finally an eagle, sacred to Zeus, fetched the water from the Styx.

Venus was not appeased and set Psyche one more task, which this time seemed sure to be fatal. She ordered the young woman to go down to the Underworld and bring up a jar of Persephone's cosmetic ointment. Since no mortal could return from the realm of Hades alive, Psyche reconciled herself to death and climbed a high tower, planning to throw herself from it. But again she was offered supernatural help. The tower, moved by her unhappiness, gave her instructions on how to reach Hades safely and on how to escape.

Images of Eros or Cupid often adorned jewellery. Here a bust of Eros is used on a gold medallion decorated with garnets, delicately crafted in Greece in the 3rd century BC.

Psyche brought the precious ointment to the surface of the earth, but then foolishly thought that if she used some of it herself she might win back her husband's affection. When she opened the jar, the scent of the ointment overcame her and she fell into a death-like trance.

Now, however, Psyche's devotion and grief and her obedience to Venus moved Cupid to forgiveness, and he rushed to her side to revive her. While Psyche took the jar to Venus, Cupid sought the permission of Zeus to re-marry his faithful partner, this time with the full ceremony of a heavenly wedding. Zeus agreed and granted Psyche immortality, inviting her to live on Olympus. Psyche and Cupid dwelled there in eternal joy with their daughter, Voluptas (Pleasure).
Greek Myths
Jacqueline Morley

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A Mortal's Companion to the Fantastic Realms of Gods, Goddesses, Monsters, and Heroes
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Heroes, Gods and Monsters of the Greek Myths
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