

Eurydice and Orpheus, by Sam Redway

This is the story not of Orpheus and Eurydice, but of Eurydice and Orpheus.

First let me introduce Eurydice. A Dryad – that’s like a tree spirit, a nymph, a magical being of sorts. Which is pretty special as it goes. But Eurydice is no ordinary Dryad. Eurydice is the daughter of Apollo. The god of archery and healing and light and truth among other things. As such Eurydice has inherited some pretty special skills and power unmatched by most mortals.

Now to Orpheus. A man. The son of a king. A very skilled musician with god-like talent in song writing. His music, it is said, can charm the birds from the trees and the rivers from their banks and the gods from their judgement. But he was, as we shall see, never-the-less, unchangeably, a man.

Orpheus and Eurydice met under an elm tree – understandably – as Eurydice was an Elm Tree Dryad. And understandably and predictably, they fall in love. And they fall a long way. This is a love to last an eternity. This is a love that made the world stop turning, the poets stop writing, the gods stop meddling and the storytellers stop storytelling. Just so they could watch, absorb and remember it all the better. This love would be taught as the example, the pinnacle, the very highest that love could be. For thousands of years. No-one could say that this love was anything other than Legendary. But this love was cursed. The world would weep for this love.

No-one knows why. Was some minor god jealous of their love? Had someone else fallen in love with Orpheus’s music? Were the fates just conspiring against them for no reason at all? Was it luck? Whatever it was, it was a curse. For, not 2 days into their marriage, Eurydice was bitten by a snake. A deadly snake. For spirits, even powerful ones, cannot heal themselves. Before very long at all, and way before her time, Eurydice was dead.

Eurydice passed out of the realm of the living, through the gates of Taenarus, she was ferried across the river Styx, she passed Cerberus, the three headed hell-hound that guards the Underworld until she came at last to Hades – the realm of the dead, lorded by Hades himself, with Persephone as his wife. This was the one way ticket.

But Eurydice felt cheated. “If my love is going to be sung about for thousands of years I ought to, at least, feel some of it myself!” So she bargained with Hades.

“I am Eurydice. Daughter of Apollo. I demand another try. You must have made a mistake.”

Apollo smiled on Eurydice from Mount Olympus and gifted his powers of poetry. For no-one knows what she said but what she said next touched the hearts of Hades and his wife, Persephone, and all the gods.

Weeping, Persephone spoke with her husband and begged him to grant Eurydice another life. After much thought Hades relented.

“If you can complete three trials for me I shall grant what you ask. I don’t know why – but my wife has taken a liking to you and I owe her a favour or two. First you must shoot an arrow round a corner to hit a target placed out of sight. Second you must heal a wound with no tools or medicine. And last you must bring light into this darkest part of darkest Hades – the kingdom of Darkness.”

Despite the impossibility of these tasks Eurydice, without a thought, leapt to her feet and pulled a bow & arrow from the hands of a waiting daemon, notched the arrow to the bow and offering prayers to her father, Apollo – god of archery, among other things - fired the arrow. It bounced twice on the walls, travelling round the corner and embedding itself in the hidden target. Just a little left of dead centre.

Second, laying her hands on the broken leg of an unfortunate soul, she thought of her father, Apollo - god of healing, among other things – and with a word and a breath and a bend in the wind the leg crunched and clicked and righted itself.

Lastly, Eurydice knelt. Silently. And closed her eyes. And cast her mind to the sun that lights the realm of the living. And, being the daughter of Apollo - god of Light, among other things...

Just then, a crash, a fanfare, a burst of light and a shout behind her as Orpheus blundered in, his voice filling the hall.

“Eurydice, my love, I have come to save you! Hades, Lord of Everlasting Death. I have entered the gates of Taenarus. I have paid the ferryman and crossed the river Styx. I have charmed the 3 headed hell-hound, Cerberus, to sleep and now I am here to beg for the life of my love, Eurydice!”

And Orpheus played his Lyre (an instrument not unlike a harp). And Orpheus sang sad songs of his love for Eurydice. And Orpheus moved Hades and his wife Persephone and The Furies to tears with his music. So moved was Hades that he allowed Eurydice to go with Orpheus back to the land of the living. But only on one condition. On their journey back to life Orpheus must not look back to Eurydice. If Orpheus looked back but once before they both felt the warmth of the sun on their faces Eurydice’s soul would be brought back to rest in Hades forever and unchangeably.

Orpheus thanked Hades, took Eurydice by the hand and left. Eurydice slightly miffed as she had rightfully and fairly secured her return to life with no catches or conditions. But she was, she reasoned, at least on her way back to the land of the living – all he would have to do is make it out without looking back.

They passed a confused looking Cerberus, the three-headed hell hound. And Orpheus did not look back. They crossed the river Styx (leaving a perplexed looking ferryman - for this was the first ever return fare across the river). And Orpheus did not look back. After 3 days of walking, they finally arrived at the gates of Taenarus – the entrance to the underworld. Orpheus came out into the light – and here, dear listeners, is a decision, a moment that has

confused, perplexed, bamboozled, mithered, bothered and puzzled scholars and poets for thousands of years.

As dear Orpheus felt the sun on his face a weight lifted from his shoulders, a breath of fresh air filled his lungs and oh, dear Orpheus, he turned to his love.

Was it fear? Was it doubt? Was it severe memory loss? A carefree abandon? Or was it Orpheus, just being a man? Whatever made him turn is irrelevant. He turned.

Eurydice, from the darkness in the mouth of Taenarus, saw her love turning in the sun and began to run shouting to "Turn Away!" But before the sound reached Orpheus's ears the light faded. The image of her love turning in the sun burned into her eyes and she found herself back in the Hall of Hades. More than a little unhappy.

"I warned you." Said Hades "You have broken our agreement. Your soul is now mine. Forever, unchangeably and fairly, mine."

"But I won my freedom fair and square. Before Orpheus arrived! I shot an arrow round a corner. I healed a wound without tools or medicine. I brought light into darkest Hades. By our agreement my soul is mine. By our agreement you owe me life. You must let me go. I have unfinished business with Orpheus!"

Hades heard the truth in her words. She was, after all, the daughter of Apollo, the god of Truth – among other things. But he was un-resolved – he too felt cheated. Persephone, glared at her husband for his pride.

"Very well." He said, "you shall live in the world of the living. But not in your human form. You are a Dryad. A Wood Nymph. The spirit of an Elm Tree. You and your Orpheus shall live in your spirit form. Forever. Forever twinned and twined together. You shall live, forever upside down to remind you of your tricks in the underworld. Your wood will be scorched so you never feel the joy of leaves. Forever, you and your love, in charred wood and gold shall live."

And here, still now, you can see with roots facing the sky and threads of gold through the scorched wood Eurydice and Orpheus forever entwined. And if you listen closely you can still hear Orpheus, as all people do, trying to explain – or perhaps understand - why on earth he turned around.