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2310 words

Medusa's Stare

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

Medusa, she's staring at you
Medusa, with her eyes
Medusa, oh she's cold
Anthrax, Medusa

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They say that some of the world's most important stories are about women, yet they are always told by men. I don't know whether my story is that important, but it has certainly been told (falsely) by one man after another. Until now.

My father Phorcys, a renowned sailor, was my first betrayer. I never learned what secrets nested in his soul, but from an early age he was eager to part company with me. I was a docile and unusually beautiful child, and loved him with the fervor only a daughter can bestow on the father she worships. Thus, I was hurt to the core when he announced that soon he would present me as a gift to the priestesses of Athena so I could become an acolyte in the new temple erected by the city in honor of its patron deity. "The Goddess can only favor us upon receiving such a wonderful gift" was his explanation. I saw my suffering reflected also on my mother Ceto's face, but she did nothing to oppose my father's designs.

Around my fourteenth birthday, my first *menses* were discharged and I was deemed to be of age, whereupon my father led me on the steep climb to the Acropolis, and together we entered

the Parthenon, the great temple dedicated to Athena Polias. There, he took me before Eueris, the high priestess, and presented me to the old woman: "Reverend Mother, I am Phorcys, the sailor, and this is my daughter Medusa, a virgin just of age. I wish to dedicate her to the Goddess and enroll her in your service. It is my wish that she become your *diakonos*...."

Eueris interrupted him: "Are you seeking to expiate some sin against the Gods or ill deeds towards another mortal? Because this is neither the place nor the appropriate manner for seeking such forgiveness."

My father replied with eagerness: "No, Reverend Mother. I am not seeking atonement, but presenting the Goddess with a disinterested gift."

The priestess scowled in disbelief, but turned her attention to me. Holding my chin up with her withered hand, she declared: "Girl, you are beautiful. Your presence will lighten up the dullness of our duties." Then, to my father: "Very well. Go in peace. We accept your gift. May the Gods grant you their favor in your future endeavors." My father turned around and left without a word of farewell.

I later learned he had been harboring suspicions of infidelity against my mother, which he could not prove (as they were unfounded) and his spite against her was vented in part upon me and my sisters. Whatever his reasons, I never laid eyes on him again.

Years passed and, as I matured, I became comelier – I do not say this in vainglory, for beauty was the bane of my existence. All the men whose eyes rested on me, and not a few of the women, were charmed by my perfect white skin, my full lips, the shining violet eyes, and the wild curly hair that cascades, like an auburn waterfall, down my back. Oftentimes, I found myself needing to fend off the too friendly advances of my admirers.

I gave those encounters little thought, as an inconvenient part of existence. I felt uninterested in the passions of the flesh. Since I entered Athena's temple, I had dedicated myself to a chaste life of prayer and service.

My devotion to Athena did not go unnoticed. My offerings to the goddess – milk, cakes, the organs of baby goats – were well received, for the smoke of my burnings rose gently to the heavens, giving off a subtle perfume to the air in the temple. Eueris complimented me more than once on my piety and hinted that I might be her worthy successor once she retired.

Then, one night a few weeks after midsummer, Athens experienced one of the violent storms that are typical in our city during that part of the year. The thunder and lightning were so severe that each of us took refuge in our cells, cowering in fear. I was praying that Zeus would stay his hand and spare the temple of his favorite daughter from his thunderbolts when, framed by the livid bursts of lightning, I saw a dark shape on the threshold of my cell. I was sure I had closed the door, but somehow the figure was soon inside, approaching the *klismos* chair on which I sat. He was a giant of a man, all muscle and sinew, with a weathered face and a graying beard. He stopped in front of me and commented, in a booming voice that sent shivers down my spine: "Maid, you are as beautiful as they said!"

I trembled and, instinctively, covered my face with my hands, hoping that perhaps this was a nightmare that would vanish when I looked up again. But he did not go away. To the contrary, he lifted me by the hips, raised me to my feet, and carried me effortlessly to my narrow, skin covered bed. There, in several deft motions, he removed my peplos, lifted the *strophion* that covered my breasts, and lay on top of me, panting. I tried to resist, but he

was almost twice my weight and exhibited an inhuman strength. A few moments later, he had freed himself from his tunic and pulled down my loincloth. We were naked.

My recollection of what happened next remains unclear. On the one hand, I did not welcome his attempt to possess me; on the other, I did not resist and, by my motions, facilitated his undertaking. Past the initial intense pain, I may have been enjoying the loss of my maidenhead to the virile stranger. The new sensations of pleasure and pain became so intense that I was overwhelmed and passed out.

I woke to a slap on my face by Eueris, who was hovering over the frame bed in which I lay, naked and bloody, exhibiting marks on my body that were clear evidence of recent intercourse. The priestess was accompanied by two of her young *kanephoroi* attendants; they all seemed in a state of profound shock.

As I opened my eyes, Eueris shouted a question that was more of an accusation: "Who? Who did this?"

I burst into tears. "I don't know. I don't know. He broke into my cell during the thunderstorm..."

"You are lying!" replied Eueris angrily, grabbing and pulling on my hair. "We found the door to your cell wide open, with no signs of forced entry. Whoever it was, you let him in!"

My tears became an anguished cry. "I swear for all the Gods that I did not let that man into my room, nor did I consent to be violated..." I was shaking and bawling uncontrollably, and perhaps my giving all these signs of distress made Eueris let go of my hair and pull away from me.

"Perhaps it was a God" said, timidly, one of the *kanephoroi*. "It is said that evil gods travel abroad during storms and wreak havoc on mortals."

Eueris gave me a considered look, as if weighing her options. "This is a terrible scandal. Medusa has broken her vow of chastity and can no longer remain in our service. On the other hand, she has been a favorite of Athena and, if she is an innocent victim as she claims, the wrath of the goddess may descend on us all."

She turned to me and cautioned: "I need to think and seek counsel on this grave matter. For the time being, you are to remain in your cell and not show your face in public. You have dishonored us and your presence contaminates this holy temple. I could send you back to your family, but I fear that your father would treat you more harshly than you deserve."

"No! Please don't send me back to my family!"

I began bawling again.

* * *

Some days later, Eueris returned, accompanied by a very old man dressed in the white tunic of the religious orders. He introduced himself to me with these words:

"Medusa, my name is Erimateus. I'm a priest in the service of the Oracle of Delphi. Eueris has sought the advice of holy Apollo on how to deal with you, seeing how you have profaned the temple of Athena and consorted with an unnamed man or god. I have come to relate to all of you the God's counsel."

There was an expectant pause while Erimateus prepared to deliver his message. In a slow, formal voice, he continued as follows: "Pythia, the priestess that serves as Oracle, conveyed this message from Apollo: 'the virgin who has consorted with a male must be

confined forever on a remote island, away from contact with humans, for she is cursed: whoever gazes into her eyes shall promptly die.”

With those words, my fate was sealed. Apollo was a well-known enemy to his half-sister Athena and was inflicting pain on her through the banishment of a favorite acolyte. I had been betrayed by another male, this time a god.

* * *

They took me to the small island of Sarpedon, a rocky outcrop of land in a remote corner of the Mediterranean. To keep me company, they forcibly brought my sisters Stheno and Euryale and the three of us made a solitary living, feeding off sea birds and fish and longing for the bygone days of our youth. No ships ever touched on our island save by misfortune: in the span of a decade only three shipwrecked vessels came ashore on the tiny bay near our hut. Each time this occurred, my sisters hid because they were ugly and feared that pity and scorn would be visited on them by the castaways. I was left to play hostess and give such succor as I could to the stranded mariners.

There were unfortunate consequences to these sporadic visits. Invariably, one or more of the sailors would become mesmerized by my beauty and would try to make love to me, despite my protestations. On those occasions, my sister Stheno came out of hiding and slew or chased away the importuning suitor. She was the strong one in our family.

One of the visitors driven away by Stheno was Agenor, the oldest son of king Polydectes of the island of Seriphos. Agenor became so heartbroken by my refusal to yield to his entreaties that, during his voyage back home, he killed himself by jumping into the sea.

Polydectes was devastated by the death of his heir and swore to take revenge against me. He commanded his future son-in-law Perseus to come to Sarpedon and kill me. Perseus, to protect his mother, who was at the mercy of Polydectes, agreed to do so. He says he never had any intention of harming me in any way.

Perseus arrived in Sarpedon a fortnight ago. Shortly after we met, he declared his love for me; in turn, I was swayed by his beauty, for he is as handsome a man as I have ever encountered. I am hoping the two of us will be able to find peace and contentment somewhere far away. We leave at high tide two days from now.

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It is I, Euryale, who must complete the story recounted so far by my sister Medusa. Anger and remembered pain lash at my soul as I recall the betrayals she endured, and I can hardly hold the *kalamos* straight in my hand as I etch the rest of her story on the wax of these tablets. But the tale must be finished, for there are lessons in her tragedy for women to learn.

Perseus had not fallen in love with Medusa, but was biding his time for the best opportunity to slay her and carry out Polydectes' revenge. Feigning affection, he gained Medusa's confidence and was ultimately invited to her bed. After a night of lovemaking, Perseus rose before dawn and, seizing his double-edged *xyphos*, struck a mighty blow that severed Medusa's head. He ran from the scene of his crime holding Medusa's severed head in one hand and the sword in the other. At the beach, he was met by Stheno, who had been awakened by the noises coming out of Medusa's bedroom. Perseus did not hesitate for a second: dropping my sister's severed head on the sand, he squared off against Stheno, put her to death in three wild strokes, and swam back to his ship.

The rest of the story I have learned bit by bit, through the mouths of visitors to my island. Perseus' trip back to Seriphos encountered numerous delays, and it took him almost a year to appear before Polydectes. To show the successful completion of his task, Perseus displayed to the King my sister's severed head. The head was largely decomposed and emitted a loathsome odor; the abundant curly hair had become a mass of vermin and the sockets of her once beautiful eyes were bottomless pits of darkness. Polydectes stared at Medusa's eyes, trembled, and slumped from his throne, dead.

Popular imagination has woven a tale of horror involving Medusa's head and its ability to inflict death upon those who gaze at it. It is all invention; the truth is that Medusa, either dead or alive, has never hurt anyone and the accusations against her are only efforts by the men who wronged her to discredit and vilify their victim, a common tactic among males.

I, however, remain in Sarpedon. My complexion, like that of my father, is greenish; I have bulging eyes; serpents coil around my waist. Pity the man who dares to approach me, for the rage of a woman against men who wrong her is worse than that of the Furies (who are women themselves).

THE END