

Orpheus and Sisyphus at the end of the lane

Orpheus looks back. Of course, he does.

He looks back and he fails the love of his life. But you knew that, didn't you? Orpheus looks back and everyone knows about it. Everyone knows of the death of his lover, everyone knows of his descent into the underworld to get her back, everyone knows that he managed to charm the God of The Dead himself to let them leave. But you don't care about that. No. You don't care about that because you don't really know about that. All you truly know, that everyone knows, is the caveat.

"Don't look back," is all they said. That's all Orpheus was told. And at the time all he could do was smile and laugh and shake, because of course he did. He had saved her. He and Eurydice would be going home. Who cares about a tiny stipulation?

But Orpheus looks back.

He looks back, and his love disappears, leaving him alone in the underworld.

And that's supposed to be the end of the story.

Orpheus wakes up. For a moment he believes it all to be a terrible dream, a nightmare that will fade from his memory in but a few seconds, like dust. It doesn't. Everything is as it was. In the land of the living, the grass is just as it was before. The trees the same, the flowers the same, the sky the same. Everything the same. Eurydice is still gone.

But the sun hasn't moved an inch since he descended, and the entrance to the underworld beckons him just as it had before. 'Another chance', he thinks.

So, he descends once more. Once again, in the worm-like tunnel towards death, he exhausts the feet that once would frolic in fields. On the jagged rocks by the river, he scrapes the hands that once would play sweet melodies to adoring crowds. He even passes the exact same hill as before, shuddering at the dead man standing there, just where he was standing the first time. And when he sings his song before Hades, when he serenades the god of the underworld, he gets just what he was promised.

“You and Eurydice may leave the way you came,” The King of The Dead says, and you’d think the gleam in Orpheus’s eyes could light up the entire death realm- “On the condition that you may not look back at her until you’ve reached the land of the living. Consider it a test of your devotion to each other.”

He should be afraid, he knows he should, but as Hades shares his one stipulation, he can’t help but look past the god, at the shimmering ghost he knows to be Eurydice. She’s hidden, by Hades’s side, and she’ll follow him home. She’ll follow him all the way back home, and this time he won’t look back. He won’t. He doesn’t even know how he managed to look back in the first place. No one really knows. But it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter because this time he’ll get their happy ending.

They start the journey back. Past the hill with the dead man, past the rocks where he bruised his hands, and into the long slithering tunnel.

“Orpheus.” A voice speaks up, a soft one, sweet and melodious. The sort of voice that would whisper sweet nothings to you in the dark. Eurydice. “Why aren’t you looking at me?”

She didn’t speak the time before. His breath hitches at her voice.

“Orpheus!” Her voice was growing louder, pained, jagged. Did she not know he couldn’t look back at her? Had Hades not told her? “Orpheus, why aren’t you answering?”

He tried to speak, but nothing came out. Imagine that; A singer, unable to raise it voice when it really matters.

“Orpheus?” A voice like retching on an empty stomach, loud and coarse. Then comes the quiet before the storm, the silent part is said out loud:

“Don’t you love me anymore?”

He looks back.

Eurydice disappears.

For a moment, there is silence. Deafening silence unlike any he has ever heard before. And then he wakes up.

No. That doesn't count. That can't count, it just can't. You know that as well as he does. How could she speak? Why would she do that? He must have been cheated by Hades; he must have. A cheap trick, a joke, just to make him look stupid, make him look foolish. Hades, the bitter old man. He was jealous. He must be. Of their youth, of their love, of their happiness. Orpheus isn't about to let an old bitter man decide his fate.

He walks down once again. Through the tunnel, over the rocks, by the hill with the dead man. He sings his song, and Hades lets them leave.

The trip is quiet this time. Not a word. Just the silent hum of the dead below.

Then, Eurydice cries out in pain.

He looks back.

It was pure instinct. That's what he tells himself as she fades once again. Pure instinct. She just tripped over the rocks. But it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter and he wakes up and he tries again.

The same grass, the same trees, the same flowers, and he tries again.

Again, and again, and again.

He always looks back.

Maybe he's just coming at this from the wrong angle? Maybe he could get Hades to let them leave without the stipulation, without his stupid rule; Orpheus just has to sing a better song.

For the first half of the day, he writes and rewrites. Writes his heart out, writes until his fingers are numb, until his brain is fried from overexertion. He writes and sings a song unlike any before, a song of aching grief that will make even the muses themselves cry when they hear it. It's all in vain.

He and Eurydice go up the path, past the dead man, past the rocks, up the trail, and he looks back.

Orpheus writes. That's all he can do, that's all he is. An artist. His pen is his sword, and he writes in prose, and he writes in rhyme, and he writes in freeform, and he writes everything under the sun. He writes in iambic Pentameter, hoping the rhythm of the words, of the

syllables, will show him the way home. Up, down, up, down, up, down. Left leg, right leg, left leg, right leg, left leg, turn-

He looks back.

Maybe the song isn't the problem at all? Maybe it's simply the format, the style. The tale of Orpheus and Eurydice is a tragedy, a myth. That's how you know it at least. He just has to retell it. Tell it in his way.

Orpheus walks and strolls

Past the rocks, down where the bell tolls

Where the dead men are silent, going up and down their hills

Searing and yearning, with his song he wills

Wills his love to his side once more

The cruel king lets him go, with the one he adores

Further and further, they walk down the track

But with the day in sight, he always looks b-

No. Not that. Something else. Something else entirely. No.

He curses out poetry. Curses it out with his very being. He doesn't care what gods he angers, they can all rot for all he cares. For a whole day, the Orpheus simply lies there in the unchanged grass. Looking up at the unchanged sky and the unchanged sun, and he thinks. If the seasons had passed as they normally would, that sky would be a choking indigo right about now. Smothering the skyline bit by bit until the night fell, but the sun was still up. Just as it was the first time.

How about theatre, then? Yes! A classic Greek play, something in his element. That would have to work. He knows it would work. It must.

The Tale of Orpheus and Eurydice:

A One Act Play

Enter ORPHEUS, a young singer.

He is wearing a worn white tunic, an attire that at one point might have been covered in joyful grass stains but was now caked in mud. His once foppish hair was matted, and his eyes show signs of weariness one only gets from living out more than one lifetime. He stands before the throne of HADES.

ORPHEUS

(Melodious)

Hades, God of the dead and all that is underneath our feet and all that awaits us in the end. I come, begging before you, that you let me bring Eurydice back to the land of the living.

HADES looks at the poor boy and laughs. He laughs like the earth itself: Rumbling and unforgiving.

HADES

Oh, how you amuse me. Tell me, boy, why do you and your kind always insist on begging against nature?

Orpheus stays silent. He does not know.

HADES

(Cont.)

I'll let you and the girl go. You've proved yourself more than enough worthy of her love.

ORPHEUS

(Relieved)

Thank you.

HADES

But I do have one condition-

The curtain comes down. THE AUDIENCE is left in silence.

No. Not that either. What was he thinking? A Greek play? That's the recipe for a tragedy.

For a while he tries the opera route. Sings arias until his voice cracks. He sings, he dances, he tells it as every myth his mom would tell him before he went to sleep as a child. But nothing.

One day, after waking up to the light blinding his eyes as it always does, he has a new idea: If tragedies don't work then comedies surely must. How could a comedy doom his love to eternal suffering? It wouldn't. It couldn't.

The Tale of Orpheus and Eurydice:

A One Act Comedy

Enter ORPHEUS, a fool.

ORPHEUS

We're almost there, Eurydice! I can see the light of the living!

For the first time since he started his endless journey, he steps into the light. He had never made it so far before, not with her by his side. He's filled with an indescribable joy.

ORPHEUS

Eurydice! Do you see this?

He looks back. His face burns with something he hasn't felt before. The fool, not realizing that while he is in the daylight, Eurydice never made it that far, still in the shadows of death, left behind. She fades away.

Pause for laughter.

ORPHEUS

No.

A cruel trick. Orpheus laughs. He laughs and laughs until the laugh gets stuck in his throat and turns into a sob. Knees giving out from under him, his ribcage caving in: He collapses in on himself like a rotting fruit left out in the sun for too long. He stays there for a while, sobbing and shaking until his voice is broken and his eyes have no more tears to cry.

When he wakes up, he doesn't move for days. Or well, not actual days, as fate always cruelly reminds him. He can't remember the last time he saw the sunset.

'Why?' he asks himself, just as you've always done, like all of you always do: Why did he look back all those times? Is that the only thing anyone will ever ask him?

Why doesn't he just explain to her?

Why doesn't he just blindfold himself?

Why doesn't he just grab her and go without Hades's permission?

Why doesn't he just *not* look back?

For a while he almost makes peace with it. He'd been a singer for too long anyways, would it really hurt to be known as a fool for the rest of history? He's heard the stories, the myths, the poems, the plays, the songs. He has seen himself in a tunic, in robes, in a suit, in tap shoes, and in stage heels. Everything changes, but this one day seems to remain the same. You know that. You both know that.

So, he goes down one last time. One last time, he walks down the oozing path, one last time he scrapes his hands on the jagged rocks, one last time he stops by the dead man on the hill.

His name is Sisyphus, they say. He's old, very old. And very long ago he was cursed by the gods for doing them wrong. Orpheus doesn't really remember what he had done, he doesn't care anyways. He just remembers the man's destiny.

Every day, Sisyphus has to roll a boulder up a hill, on the promise that if he succeeds in doing so, Hades will let him out of the underworld, let him live again.

Every day the boulder rolls back down.

Orpheus watches Sisyphus for a while. The old man doesn't even look at him, he just keeps rolling. His muscles strain with every movement as he gets further and further towards the top, towards victory. Orpheus watches as the man's knees start to give out, and then he leaves. He can't bear to watch as the boulder inevitably rolls back down again.

For one last time he sings his song to the God of The Dead. This time, however, it's not a song wishing for the life of his love. No, it's just a song that wishes to speak with her one last

time, that wishes to hear her voice as it was. Before it was twisted and warped. Hades accepts.

This last part you won't get to hear. It's too private, too cherished, too intimate. For there's truly nothing more intimate than begging for forgiveness. Orpheus has been through more than enough lifetimes of being 'told', of being a story, he deserves a little privacy.

Below the ground, time passes:

Sisyphus rolls his boulder up the hill.

The hum of the dead fills the air.

Eurydice smiles.

And the boulder rolls back down again.

Eurydice smiles and all is forgiven. How could it not be? Because what better sign of love is there than someone looking back?

For the rest of the night, they sleep in each other's arms, a silent goodbye from the two lovers who thought that springtime would never end.

In the morning, Orpheus wakes up and for a moment he panics; The grass is the same, the trees are the same, the flowers are the same.

Then the sun moves, and he can finally rest.