

The Touch of Aphrodite

By Nicole Levin

“Age cannot wither her nor custom stale.

Her infinite variety...”

- William Shakespeare, *Anthony and Cleopatra*



Florence, 20 May 1484

A wobbling belly. Guffaws. Contorting jeering faces blurring against paintings. Lips twisted in mocking sneers. Stop! Stop! This is a great painting! Can't you see? This is my best work. Can't you see?

Sandro Botticelli's dream faded as the dawn light slivered through the arched bedroom window and sliced against his eyelids. He rolled over and hit his throbbing head on the carved wooden headboard. With groggy groans, Sandro propped himself up, gulped down half a glass of water and stared at grey stone floors. His slumped body, leaden against the headboard, echoed with melancholy.

Sandro twirled his greying chest hairs then rubbed his swollen belly. Perhaps his humours were changing. He wondered if in mid-life a man could turn from sanguine to phlegmatic. Usually he possessed a chuckling laugh, twinkling eyes, and a light step despite his barrel size. His ebullient outlook was reflected in his zest for painting. But lately, he felt his soul was filled not with lustrous images, but stale bread, desert winds and anxious dust swirling across scrublands. *Perhaps it was time to visit the herbalist*, he thought as he studied the sculptured crucifix hanging next to the window. Then he threw his arms in the air.

'I'm a success! Sandro Botticelli! One of Lorenzo de Medici's favourite artists! And who would of thought this of me? Botticelli- the little barrel? Now the envy of Florence! What is wrong with me? I have recognition, money and . . .wo. .' before he could complete that sentence, his house began to shake and shudder. The crucifix and the washstand wobbled. Sandro crawled out of bed, flung open the window and bellowed, 'Ferdinand! Ferdinand! You louse! Turn those wretched looms off! The sun has barely risen! Turn them off, or I'll call for swordsmen to shred you and your weaving to bits!'

‘Get up you drunken painter! And call whoever you like, you heathen! It’s my house and I’ll do as I please!’ yelled the cloth maker over the din.

Every morning and evening, the same argument was replayed. On many occasions Sandro had begged the weaver to find alternative accommodation for his eight looms. Initially he had pleaded rationally. He had calmly emphasized that a man couldn’t read, eat, sleep or love in a shuddering house. But Sandro had slowly lost his patience and cast aside neighbourly diplomacy. Now, a sudden rage surged through his body. It was time to act. Sandro threw on his clothes, hooded brown cape and boots, and strode out of the house. The search for a very large rock had begun.

Steadily the Florentine streets were yawning awake. In the Via Calimala, the printing press chugged while a silk merchant folded indigo cloths under the shade of an awning. On the Piazza a green grocer stacked cherry red tomatoes and two old men, playing a game of chess, warmed their wrinkled hands with their breath. People calm with the ritual of morning purpose.

Inflamed, Sandro marched through the flagstone streets. He thought about the evening with Lorenzo the Magnificent’s younger cousin, Lorenzo de Pierfrancesco de Medici, and Marsilio Ficino, Francesco da Piacetto and other members of the Platonic Academy. They had met at Lorenzo’s marble-columned villa that overlooked Florence.

It was a cold evening and the debaters, tainted with the smell of stale sweat and garlic and dressed like monks in heavy woollen capes, filed into the large dining hall. The tall, leonine cousin of the de Medici empire poured everyone glasses of the finest Italian Chianti. After a simple meal of bread, goats milk cheese and fruit, Marsilio Ficino stood up.

‘The topic for tonight’s discussion and debate is the nature of love and beauty,’ began Ficino in a nasal twang as he squinted his raven eyes at the chattering a hall. An intrigued murmur swirled through the room. Ficino, who had a philosophical framework independent

yet not contrary to the Church, was extremely popular despite his sullen temperament and tendencies towards hypochondria; he believed he suffered from intestinal worms and blood poisoning. As the leader of the Platonic Academy, Ficino was deeply committed to humanistic philosophy, the revival of the classical texts and ancient learning. Ficino, the quintessential Renaissance man, believed that the study of antiquity would allow him and his fellow Florentines to break free from the white-knuckled grasp of medieval beliefs and traditions.

Ficino launched into his speech about the perfection of the world and his philosophies on love. According to Ficino the true nature of God is found through the expression of love and contemplating beauty. Ficino's eyebrows arched as he built to the pinnacle of his argument, 'It is love that unites all things that are separate, and therefore love can be considered the primary dynamic that connects everything in the world!' Ficino paused and examined his hypnotized audience. 'This topic is now open for debate.'

Questions and statements punctuated the air like hunting arrows.

'What kind of love do we speak of? Do we speak of love of God, love of a woman, a friend?'

'It doesn't matter what kind of love as all love follows the law of affinity.'

'What greater meaning does this knowledge add to world philosophy?'

'That is the crucial question! It is through love that we find God. Love leads not only to the union of bodies but the inner unification of beings!'

'That is quite preposterous!' replied a red-cheeked debater. 'What is the point of studying the bible, and learning philosophy if not to unite the mind and soul with God?'

'Because it is ultimately through the contemplation of love and beauty that we find the true nature of God'¹'"

¹ Kristellar, p. 263.

‘Yes, especially when we *love* beautiful women!’ said a red faced youth thrusting his pelvis backwards and forwards. The room erupted in laughter.

‘Yes, he’s right, Ficino. Is not the purpose of women’s beauty merely to stir our lust?’ said another man jovially.

‘No,’ replied Ficino patiently, ‘Because ultimately it is through contemplating all beauty; the beauty of women, the beauty of bodies, the beauty of sounds and the beauty of souls that we can contemplate the beauty of God’. Ficino paused and took a long deep breath. ‘Any other comments?’

A hush descended over the hall as the debaters pondered these arguments. Francesco da Piacetto thought carefully about love and its relationship to the ancient texts. A tall, good looking man, with a head of thick black hair, prominent cheek bones and a hooked nose, Francesco da Piacetto was Ficino’s most dedicated student.

‘Yes. I have a comment,’ said da Piacetto standing up. ‘I would suggest that according to this theory, the ancient Greek goddess, Aphrodite, is an expression and extension of God. Therefore, she would be the ultimate personification or reflection of God’s love and beauty.’

Like an orchestra’s crescendo, the room suddenly burst into discussions about the relationship between love, beauty, God and Aphrodite. Words were slashed with dramatic hand gestures, debaters shouted over one another and Ficino couldn’t find an opportunity to sum up the debate.

The discussions continued until well after midnight, and as the last stragglers ambled out through the dark wooden front door, Lorenzo pulled Sandro aside. He ushered him into his library. Sandro shivered. The high ceiling room with its shelves of leather bound books was icy. Lorenzo leaned his chubby fingers against a cabinet to steady himself and poured

two goblets of wine. Sandro sat down in a tapestry-covered chair and watched his host pace along the bookshelves, spilling his greasy presence into each molecule of air.

I would paint him as a lion pacing outside his lair, thought Sandro.

Lorenzo's booming voice brought Sandro back to the moment. 'You heard all the talk of love and Aphrodite tonight. What did you think?'

Without giving Sandro a chance to answer, Lorenzo spluttered, 'I want a painting of her. Of Aphrodite.' He took a large gulp of wine and stared up at the volumes of classical poets. 'The painting must be the embodiment of beauty and the most splendid depiction of Aphrodite in the whole of Europe. So splendid that it is the envy of everyone in Florence, and *especially* my cousin Lorenzo, the not-so- Magnificent, Everyone who looks at it must know that *I* and not the *Great* Lorenzo, possesses Aphrodite.' Lorenzo paused, hiccupped, and steadied himself against the bookcase. 'Somewhere I have a picture of Aphrodite rising from the sea by the classical painter Apelles. Now let me see. I know this picture embodies the moment of Aphrodite's birth, and Hesiod's Theogony tells the whole tale.' He ran his stubby fingers along the book spines and chose a cracked leather-bound volume. 'Here is it!'

'Take these books. Read about Aphrodite in the *Homeric Hymn* and in *La Giostra* by Poliziano. And paint her for me.' Lorenzo studied Sandro for a moment. 'Can you do this?'

'I certainly can,' replied Sandro with a faint smile, amused by Lorenzo's drunken ostentation.

'I can assure you that you will be handsomely paid. We will discuss payment tomorrow. But remember, the painting must be *the most splendid depiction of Aphrodite* in the whole of Europe! Now it's late,' said Lorenzo shoving Sandro towards the door.

'Goodnight my good fellow!'

The most splendid depiction of Aphrodite in the whole of Europe. The most splendid depiction of Aphrodite in the whole of Europe. . . The words echoed in Sandro's head like the rattle of the cloth makers' looms.

Returning from his daydream, Sandro found himself on a hillock just outside the town. He scratched around in the bushes hoping that a suitable rock and a vision of Aphrodite would spring from the undergrowth. After little success, he stood up and took a deep breath. The air was perfumed with wild thyme and heather. The morning was crisp and tinged with the promise of summer. Sandro admired the view of Florence. From this distance, the town was spindle-shaped; narrow at the end and broad in the middle, created from winding walls and crenulated ramparts with towers. Sandro watched the smoke rising from the factories and the sluggish water seep under the stone bridge of the Arno river. He could almost see all four of the Florentine neighbourhoods.

He closed his eyes. *Aphrodite. Aphrodite. Aphrodite. Come to me.* But all he saw were the pages of Lorenzo's books. *To paint beauty you have to see beauty,* thought Sandro. He opened his eyes but all he saw were bits of rock at his feet and the muddy Arno waters below him. *Slimy seaweed, sluggish sea monsters, stinking rotten fish, bloated sailors floating on a wave, washed against sewerage, empty rum bottles, the splintered bows of shipwrecks. That's what I should paint.* Sandro hurled a stone down the side of the hillock. *Aphrodite! Aphrodite! Come to me! Come to me!*

But Sandro's words just rolled downwards like the stone. To get a better view, he climbed further up the hill. It was at that moment that he noticed a perfect rock lying at his feet. He picked it up, thanked the gods, and prayed that a vision of Aphrodite would soon follow.

Sandro lugged the rock through the Florentine streets. Already mid-morning, the central Piazza was bustling with haggling housewives, fishmongers, butchers and grocers. He wove through the crowds, past a juggler and a group of rowdy children and trudged home.

Sandro propped a ladder against the side of his house, heaved himself and the rock to the top, and balanced the rock precariously on the roof. Because Sandro's house was built higher up the hill, he knew that when Ferdinand ran his looms, the rock would be dislodged, roll off his house and crash through the cloth maker's roof. Due to the proximity of the houses it was impossible to stand a ladder in the narrow communal alleyway. From his own property, Ferdinand had no access to Sandro's roof. 'Hey Ferdinand! Ferdinand!' he bellowed, 'You better check my roof before you run your looms again!' Sandro quickly disappeared into his own house. Although Sandro's inner malaise had not passed, the prank had helped restore some of his characteristic humour.

'You insane painter! This rock could kill me! You barbarian!' raved Ferdinand. But Sandro wasn't listening, he had collapsed on his bed laughing.

A few days later, the hunched weaver carted his looms across town cursing Sandro as he whipped his old donkey. Sandro watched Ferdinand leave, feeling the breeze of relief flow over.

However, peace did not come to Sandro Botticelli with the departure of the weaver. For three days and three nights, Sandro Botticelli lit white candles and prayed to the Virgin, begging for his muse to return bestowed with inspiration for Lorenzo's painting. He went to church, visited his herbalist and then prayed again. Each morning he woke from a dry, dreamless night with beads of sweat gathered at his hairline and his chest crushed with anxiety. It was as if Lorenzo de Medici's words were choking him, ' . . . *it must be the most splendid depiction of Aphrodite in the whole of Europe. It must be the most splendid depiction of Aphrodite in the whole of Europe. . .* '

Nothing less than 'the most splendid' would be acceptable. If he produced a mediocre painting, Lorenzo would commission another painter and bestow all the honour and glory on someone else.

Yet, still his mind did not flood with images Aphrodite, clear water, crystals, maidens, mermaids, seashells and all was silent in the creative pool of his soul.

So Sandro poured over every painting, book or sculpture of Aphrodite that he could find. From a faded replica, he copied Apelles's famous painting of Aphrodite rising from the sea. Over and over again, he read lines from The Sixth Homeric Hymn:

'Revered, golden-crowned, and beautiful Aphrodite
is whom I shall sing,
whose dominion is the walled cities
of all sea-set Cyprus,
where the water force of the western wind, breathing
bore her over the waves of much-resounding sea
in soft foam.

And the Hours in their golden diadems
received her with joy,
clothed her in ambrosial garments,
and placed a well-wrought crown, beautiful and golden,
on her immortal head
and flowers of copper and precious gold

in the pierced lobes of her ears.’²

And then. . . On the night of the spring equinox, after Sandro collapsed from a day of anxiety that wrung him like a washerwoman’s cloth, he was visited by his muse. Aphrodite appeared in a dream standing naked on a seashell that floated over the crest of a wave. Covering her translucent nakedness with her arms, this voluptuous long-limbed goddess was being blown towards shore. Her bronze hair blew in wild spirals, her face was as placid and serene as the gently lapping water. To cover her nakedness, the nymph Hours stood upon the shore, offering Aphrodite a purple velvet cloak.

Sandro woke up with a start and leapt like a locust out of bed, ‘The muse has come!’ he proclaimed reverently. He held his stone statue of the Virgin and kissed it repeatedly. Daylight was beginning to peep through the window. ‘I mustn’t lose it! I mustn’t lose it! Oh muse don’t go!’ cried Sandro. Reaching for his sketchbook and charcoal, he drew the vision as quickly as he could.

The next morning, Sandro marched past the printing press and tannery to his bottega.³ He burst open the heavy wooden doors. His two apprentices Luigi and Mario were kicking a ball around the dusty studio.

‘Boys! Sit down! Now! Today we are going to create a new painting! It will be the ultimate expression of love and beauty! Do you know the story of Aphrodite?’

Surprised at this outburst, the wide-eyed boys shook their heads. Sandro paced along the wall of the studio, shaking his arms. ‘Right! Pay attention!’ Sandro opened Lorenzo’s book and read, ‘At the time of creation of the early gods, Gaia, the Earth Mother and Ouranos, the sky father, had given birth to many divine children. Among the later births came the Titans, monstrous sons who hated their father. So Ouranos just pushed them back into

² P. Friedrich, *The Meaning of Aphrodite*, extract of from ‘The Sixth Homeric Hymn, The University of

poor Gaia each time a new one emerged. Finally one of the youngest sons, Kronos, who also hated his father, turned upon Ouranos and castrated him with a stone sickle that Gaia made especially to punish her cruel mate.'

'Ooo, how gruesome,' said Luigi.

'Listen! Its not finished!' replied Sandro, flicking the boy's ears. ' "He casually threw the bleeding severed member over his shoulder, and it fell to earth. From the scarlet droplets rose the Furies and the Giants, but the member itself was carried by the waves. Here it and writhed in bubbles of foaming blood and semen. From the seething foam that formed around the severed genitals a girl grew. And here she lived, feed by salt, mermaids and the tumult of the ocean. Encircled by waves, she was first washed to Kythrea and then to Cyprus. Fully formed, the goddess stepped out of the sea. Beside her were two companions, Eros, whose name means Love, and Himeros, whose name means Desire. As she touched the earth, grass and flowers grew up beneath her feet. Her name to mortals was Aphrodite which means 'born of foam,' On Olympus she was welcomed by all other gods and goddesses, where to this day she rules all acts of procreation and every aspect of love and beauty.'" ⁴ Sandro snapped the book closed, 'And this boys, is what we're going to paint.'

'The severed member?' enquired Mario.

'No stupid! Aphrodite! Now copy these drawings. I'm going to find us live models to draw.'

Luigi and Mario were excited about the prospect of a new painting. They were bored with Sandro's depression and lack of productivity. These gangly fifteen year olds had been Sandro's apprentices for two years. They had begun their training by drawing on small panels, but under Sandro's tuition they were studying all branches of the artist's profession; learning how to mix colours, boil sizes, grind gessoes (the white ground used in painting) and

Chicago Press, 1978, p. 58.

mould panels. They constantly practised drawing, copying, modelling, scraping, gilding, stamping and painting walls. They would study under Sandro for a minimum of six years and collaborate with Sandro on his paintings. Only once they had created one of their own masterpieces, were they free to open their own workshops.

Sandro returned an hour later with two alabaster skinned women, flowing red curls. Under Sandro's instruction, the women stripped off their clothing and posed on a low platform. 'These lovely young damsels are with us for only two days. So get drawing!'

'We're going to draw a real naked woman!' whispered Luigi.

'I think the master's gone crazy. We've never been allowed to draw real nudes before,' giggled Mario.

'I said draw, not talk!' barked Sandro.

'Yes, sir!' replied Luigi and Mario in unison.

Over the next few days, Sandro set up new canvases and hired many models for drawing studies. Later he would combine the best features of several models for his final Aphrodite. Sandro, Luigi and Mario studied the way velvet blew in the wind and how to recreate its texture in paint. They drew the contours of seashells, trees in shadow and the sea through high and low tide.

'Open your pattern books and let me see your drawings of the models,' instructed Sandro. He carefully examined their work. 'What are these? Luigi? Mario? Why are her hands and feet bigger than her face?'

'She's reclining backwards. We drew them larger to give some perspective,' answered Luigi.

'Perspective! Perspective!' shouted Sandro, hitting the boy on the side of his head, 'You are NOT to use perspective like this. This extensive use of perspective results in

³ his workshop

distortion! The aim of this painting is to show beauty and harmony and NOT distortion! Do you both understand? Answer me, do you?' Tears tumbled down Luigi face and splashed onto the model's enlarged foot.

'Yes,' replied Luigi, 'But why you are you so harsh towards us?'

'Because I want you to learn,' replied Sandro, softening, 'Do you not realize that you are lucky to have a master who is interested in your work? When I was an apprentice to Friar Lippo, I didn't receive nearly as much attention. Lippo was always pursuing some love affair and left his apprentices unsupervised to finish his work. So you should consider yourselves lucky! Now, stop whimpering and redo those drawings.'

'Yes, sir,' said the boys dejectedly.

While the boys drew in silence, Sandro spread all the drawings on a large wooden table. He was almost ready to start the final painting; he remembered his dream of Aphrodite clearly and the studies provided him with much material. However, Sandro wasn't exactly certain how to realise his vision. He wanted the painting to express a mystical, abstract and godly beauty that was not bound by time, space and physicality. Nature was not to be depicted as a reflection of life, but as a symbol of godlike love and an idealised world. Somehow, he had to drain the images of their earthly substance and forge an intimacy between poetry and painting. The lyricism of words had to be translated into the rhythm, movement and flow of painted images. Sandro scrutinised all the drawings. Some of them had successfully captured the beauty of the models, seashells and velvet, but the images were too earthy, too concrete, too real. He dreamed of a painting that was like a sacred myth, a symbolic story, rather than a concrete representation of life. For several weeks, Sandro contemplated this question and urged the boys to draw ethereal images.

⁴ adapted from J. B. Woolger and R. J. Woolger, *The Goddess Within*, Rider Books, London, 1990 p. 147.

Then one crisp morning, the solution flowed in a tidal gush. Sandro realized that the images had to be suspended in space and the lines must show movement and lyricism. Sandro approached the canvas and began to draw the waves of the ocean. He drew the nymph Hours, making certain that her feet didn't touch the ground so that she remained suspended in time and space. Over the next few weeks, slowly, limb by limb, curl by curl, Aphrodite's birth emerged upon the canvas, exactly as she had appeared in his dream, in a utopian world of poetic floating images.

Aphrodite pivoted on her shell and pondered her new environment. She sighed wistfully and twirled a lock of hair. *So this is the world he's given me. How droll. How mundane. A fussing nursemaid nymph on my left. Pah! He could at least have something for my erotic imagination. And as for this ocean, placid as a bathtub. For goodness sake! I was born in a lightning storm into seething, foaming waters, not in a lukewarm tranquil lake! And what's this in the sky? Doesn't look like he's decided yet. Better be something dramatic- like a wind god or a thunderous storm at least.*

Aphrodite sighed and smoothed her hands over her face. She tried to pout her lips into a kiss but she couldn't. *My skin feels too taut. Why did he give me this ridiculous insipid smile? Oh! Life was much more fun in the old days. But since that Jesus character was born my activities have been thwarted. Now I have to be content with a virginal gaze and a gently lapping lake! I'm the goddess of love and sex! Not the holy virgin Mary! How I miss the storms! The passion! The love triangles! The intrigue! Oh for my sumptuous love affair with the god of war, Ares. How I loved his body. His muscles so defined, as if carved by a sculptor's chisel.*

‘Nursemaid! Nursemaid! Yes, I’m speaking to you! Do you know about my love affair with Ares? Do you? Well since we’re going to be stuck together for a long time, I’ll tell you the story. I was married to a pompous idiot called Hephaistos, Ares and I would meet clandestinely. But the interfering Sun spied on us and told Hephasistos about my deception. The fool! I remember Hephasistos! So consumed with rage that the madman fashioned a huge net of gold in which to capture us! He was clever! Got to give him that credit. He attached the net to the bedposts with invisible gossamer and pretended to leave town. Ares and I had been waiting for this opportunity and hurried to the bedroom. When we lay down the net fell and trapped us so we couldn’t move. I can still hear Hephasistos’ voice booming,

“My cunning net is going to keep them fast until Father Zeus returns every one of the gifts I made him to win her. She may be his daughter and a lovely creature, but she’s the slave of her passions.”⁵

Luckily, the other gods of Olympus heard our cries. The gods agreed that Ares should pay the adulterers fine, and accepting this payment, Hephasistos set us free and we escaped to my favourite shrine at Paphos on Cyprus.

You know in those days, I had several love temples in my honour where I was worshipped by hundreds of priestesses. These holy women, who were sacred prostitutes, served me by worshipping Eros and procreation. If a man came to a love temple, a priestess would make love to him as a ritual offering to Aphrodite. A child born of this union would belong to the temple. But over time, people misunderstood my temples and the sexual sacrifices to Eros. My temples and holy women were denigrated and eventually lost their dignity and power. So that’s my sad tale. Nowadays, I’ve just got to content myself with a pot-bellied painter. Nursemaid ? Nursemaid! Are you listening to me?

⁵ J. B. Woolger and R. J. Woolger, *The Goddess Within*, Rider Books, London, 1990 p.164.

Aphrodite sighed again , gazed out from inside the painting and observed Sandro mixing some paints on a palette. *He really isn't that attractive but it's my fate. When the goddess of love and beauty is summoned, I am obliged to appear. This is my raison d'etre; to infuse all mortals with passion and romantic dreaming. Hmmm. . .those brushstrokes against my thighs feel good Oh don't stop now! Damn! Don't paint the sky now!*

As Sandro stepped backwards to admire his work, Aphrodite pointed her toe and delicately stepped out of the painting

'Look. Mr. Painter. I've overheard your conversations. In this painting, you want me to be a symbol of divine love and beauty, but that isn't who I am or who I want to be. I am the goddess of physical love, passion, desire and sensuality and I'm not going to allow some pompous artist to create me in any other way. I've lost my temples, my honour, my social status and my lovers. I'm certainly not about to loose my identity.'

'Wh. . .wh. . . are you talking to me?'

'Yes, Botticelli- little barrel. I'm speaking to you.'

'But you're a painting, a . . .a . . .picture,' said Sandro.

'Yes? And so?'' replied Aphrodite nonchalantly.

'I must be dreaming. . .'

'You're not.'

'I must be crazy, then.'

'You're not. And since you're not crazy and you're not dreaming answer my question.'

'W. . .w. . . well, I can't create you otherwise, you are a commission. Lorenzo wants you to be an embodiment of these ideas.'

'**An embodiment of ideas!** This is Aphrodite you're speaking too! I'm not some whim of some hooked nose insecure philosopher!'

‘I . . . I . . . I’m terribly sorry. I didn’t mean to insult. . . to offend you.’

‘Maybe you didn’t but you certainly have forgotten my true purpose.’

‘And that is. . .?’

‘Let me show you.’

Aphrodite dropped her arms (that he had so carefully arranged) and exposed her nakedness, she stepped closer to Sandro, ran her hands through his hair and gently nibbled his ear lobe. Sandro held his breath. He felt intoxicated, drunken by her pearly breath that circled him like an invisible cloud.

‘Wh. . .wh. . . what is happening?’

Aphrodite smiled innocently, kissed him gently on the forehead, and unbuttoned his crumpled shirt and ran her silken alabaster fingers along his chest.

‘I’m seducing you,’ replied Aphrodite simply.

‘But you’re a *picture*,’ insisted Sandro.

‘So what.’

‘This is crazy. . .ridiculous. . . the apprentices. . .’

Sandro glanced nervously around his workshop. It was late and Luigi and Mario had already gone home for dinner.

A chill of desire travelled down Sandro’s spine as he felt Aphrodite press her fleshy breasts against his back.

‘Kiss me,’ said Aphrodite.

Sandro’s breathing became peppered with gasps and sighs. His heart pounded with desire, whisked with fear and confusion. Aphrodite was amused by Sandro’s unmanly lack of initiative, so she loosened his trousers and then placed his hand between her thighs.

Tentatively he caressed her, in the small creamy movements of a paint brush.

‘I suppose there’s no going back now,’ said Aphrodite.

‘What do you mean, I thought you wanted this. Women! You’re all the same, always giving mixed messages!’

‘You misunderstand me,’ replied Aphrodite, ‘It’s just that like all other creatures, I too am bound by the divine hierarchy of beings and governed by the rules of the universe. According to these laws, as a goddess I can love or seduce a mortal but the love will remain forever unrequited. This passion we are entering into is doomed because I am a goddess. I can visit your world of mortals but my place is ultimately with the gods. Sandro, you must know that my destiny is to leave, to dissolve into the wind as soon as my touch has imbued you with my essence

‘Well, stop now. Step back into the painting,’ answered Sandro.

‘It’s too late. I’ve already touched and kissed you. And besides, I don’t like the way you’ve painted me.’

‘I told you, you are a commission, and besides, he wants the painting next week. I don’t have much time.’

‘Pah! What does Lorenzo know? He’ll like whatever the artist tells him to!’

‘So what do you want then?’

‘A stormy sea!’

‘Impossible! That will ruin my sense of perspective! What else?’

‘Well then at least improve my appearance, I want stronger thighs. You’ve given me twigs. If I have to pose on shell for the next five hundred years, at least give me good legs to stand on. Besides, they’re not sexy or curvaceous enough for the goddess of love.’

‘Very well. What else?’

‘Umm. . . Longer hair, with a touch more blonde, bleached from the sun.’

‘That I can also do. Anything else?’

‘I’ll let you know tomorrow,’ said Aphrodite softly kissing his lips, ‘Now hush.’

Dizzy from her beauty, touch and sea salt scent, Sandro fervently stripped off his clothes, and tumbled with Aphrodite onto the studio floor. There he lost himself in her translucent silkiness, coiled hair and velvet softness. As he enveloped the contours of her flesh and lost himself deep inside the great goddess born from foam, he was plunged into a vision of crystal fountains, thrashing waves, voluptuous nymphs, mermaids and memories, and returned to the deep watery oceans of infinite possibility. And here he slept, cradled in her silvery skin and luxuriant visions.

In the morning, he woke up on the workshop floor and found Aphrodite demurely poised back on her shell in the painting.

Convinced he had been dreaming, Sandro rushed home to wash and prepare for another day's work. As soon as he returned, he thickened her thighs and lightened her hair. Aphrodite or whoever spoke to him the previous night was right, she looked more provocative this way.

Sandro was still confused and wasn't entirely convinced that he had dreamt about the encounter. That evening, once the boys had gone home, and an evening chill blew under the workshop door, he approached the painting.

'Did we make love last night?' he asked feeling slightly idiotic. Aphrodite stared back at him in silence. *You crazy old fool, what did you expect, of course you were dreaming.* He sighed, feeling the all- too- familiar melancholy dampening his bones. He turned away from the painting, picked up his cloak and walked towards to door.

'We did make love last night. Would you like to do it again?' said a voice. He swivelled around to see Aphrodite standing behind him.

'Wh. . .what?'

'You heard me. Would you like to do it again?'

'So. . .you are real !' said Sandro

‘Of course, I am,’ replied Aphrodite indignantly.

‘Y... yes. . . I would like that very much,’ replied Sandro.

‘Then step a little closer,’ said Aphrodite.

Without asking any further questions, Sandro dropped his cloak.

‘There’s just one thing?’ said Aphrodite

‘What. . ? You don’t like the legs, the blonde hair?’

‘No, no ! I do! They’re much improved. I’d just like to know what are you painting in the sky on my right?’

‘A cloud.’

Aphrodite stepped closer to Sandro and whispered in his ear. ‘I’d like a wind god, a Zephyr, blowing his hot potent breath onto my neck. I want you to paint him with thick black hair like my ex-lover Ares.’

‘Alright,’ said Sandro, wiping his perspiring brow, ‘I can only try. If those are your wishes.’

‘Thank you,’ whispered Aphrodite and ran her tongue along his neck.

Sandro closed his eyes, breathed deeply and allowed Aphrodite to take him along her journey of magnificence.

Every night, for six weeks Sandro Botticelli and the great goddess Aphrodite caressed, talked and made love on the workshop floor. With each encounter, Aphrodite instructed Sandro how to paint her world and transported him to the world of gleaming crystals, mossy fountains and infinite possibility. As his inner dusty desert landscape became drenched with Aphrodite life-giving sea spray, he had a recurring dream.

Sandro saw himself riding a tidal wave which crashed him repeatedly against a cliff-face. His body was slashed, dismembered and his limbs, head and genitals floated on the waves. His blood mingled with the sea foam, his hair tangled with seaweed. Then he was

swallowed by a great blue whale where all his body parts were churned upside down. Inside the whale's belly, Sandro shook as the whale echoed its searing music. Next he was blown on a fountain of water out of the whale's spout and catapulted onto a beach. His body was now whole and complete, yet different. He was young, slim, energetic, with a head of golden curls. Sandro would then awaken spluttering on the dusty floor.

In the days that followed Luigi and Mario noticed changes in their master. He looked well rested, he'd lost weight, his skin appeared to be smoother and clearer and he walked in light-footed strides. Sandro sang as he worked, praised their painting, bought red wine at lunchtime and even dressed in black velvet clothes. Only the most confident and prestigious painters dared to paint in such gentlemanly attire.

One night after their love-making, as Aphrodite lay tangled in Sandro's arms, she wept. For as she predicted, she had fallen in love with the untidy, barrel-bellied painter who she initially found so unattractive. But as she could hear the gods of the west wind calling from the painting and beyond, she knew her mission was complete. It was time to return.

As if pulling a scab from an unhealed wound Aphrodite prized herself from Sandro's grasp. Leaving him undisturbed, her tears splashed onto the floor as she wistfully stepped back into the painting for the last time.

For days Sandro waited for Aphrodite to move. Not one brushstroke had touched the painting since that fateful last night. He gently ran his fingers over the contours of her form.

'My beauty, my beauty, come- back, come, back,' he pleaded.

'Excuse me, Sir,' said Luigi one morning as Sandro sat transfixed, 'Maybe you should get a real girlfriend.'

‘You cheeky bugger!’ replied Sandro, hitting the boy over the head.

‘Go on , run, call Lorenzo, tell him. . . tell him. . . .’ Sandro took a deep breath to muster all his courage, ‘tell him that his painting is ready.’

An hour later the workshop door burst open. Lorenzo strode inside wearing a feathered hat. His cloak flapped in the wind as two horseman followed him.

‘I believe it is time to see my Aphrodite.’

‘Here she is,’ said Sandro his eyes brimming with tears of both pride and loss.

Lorenzo paced along the easel, examining every detail of the painting. Sandro and the two boys watched in silence. *Let me keep her. Let me keep her please, for just one more day,* thought Sandro.

‘Indeed, you have done it! You have created the most splendid depiction of Aphrodite in the whole of Europe!’ said Lorenzo. Laughing, he flung his arms around Sandro

‘Here is your fee in full as promised,’ he said handing Sandro a bag of gold coins from his cloak pocket. Lorenzo clicked his fingers at his horsemen, ‘Put this painting on the wagon!’

Sandro’s hands shook. ‘Wait! Wait!’ He ran across the studio and picked up a large piece of red velvet.

‘A woman should not travel naked,’ he said.

‘Indeed, she should not,’ agreed Lorenzo.

Sandro draped the cloth tenderly all around the painting. And as the fabric fell across Aphrodite like the final curtain of a stage play, Sandro saw her wink.

Reading List

- Argan, G.C., *Botticelli: biographical and critical study*, Skira, Lauanne, Switzerland, 1957.
- Burke, P., *The Italian Renaissance: culture and society in Italy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1987.
- Dubreton, J.L., *Daily Life in Florence: in the times of the Medici*, Allen and Unwin Ltd, London, 1960.
- Formaggio, P., *Botticelli/(plates. Text)*, Oldbourne Press, London, 1960.
- Friedrich, P., *The Meaning of Aphrodite*, The University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Gombrich, G.H., *The Heritage of Appelles: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, Phaidon Press, Oxford, 1976.
- Kristellar, P.O., *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1943.
- Kristellar, P.O., *Renaissance Thought and The Arts*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1990.
- Rowdon, M., *Lorenzo the Magnificent*, H. Regnery, Co, Chicago, 1974.
- Wolfflin, H., *The Art of the Italian Renaissance*, Schoken Books, New York, 1963.
- Woolger, R.J., and Woolger, J.B., *The Goddess Within*, Rider Books, London, 1990.