



Narcissus and Echo

Echo was the best beloved of all the nymphs of river and woods. She was not only very beautiful and very kind, but she had a hauntingly beautiful voice. All the children of the villages used to come into the woods to beg her to sing to them and tell them stories.

One day as Echo sat among a circle of wide-eyed boys and girls, telling them stories of heroes and gods and monsters, a handsome young woodsman, all dressed in green, came into the grove. He was carrying a bulging sack over his shoulder.

Now Echo didn't know this, but the young

woodsman was Zeus, king of the gods, in disguise. Occasionally Zeus liked to change into human form and wander the earth. He waited, enchanted by Echo's voice, until she finished her tale, and then said, "Well told, beautiful maiden! I have a present for you and for each boy and girl."

He opened the sack. It was full of golden apples — solid gold and heavy and shining. He gave one to Echo and one each to the children, who began to play ball with them, tossing them from one to another. In the midst of their play the woodsman disappeared.

Echo knew now that the woodsman was Zeus, for she recognized the golden apples which grew on a magic tree belonging to Zeus' wife, Hera. Echo also knew that Hera, who was not as kind as Zeus, would be very angry when she learned that her husband was giving away her precious golden apples. Echo couldn't wait to tell the news to her friend Venus, goddess of love and beauty.

The next day she told Venus how Zeus had come to the grove disguised as a woodsman and given away Hera's golden apples. "See, he gave me one too," she said, tossing it up in the air so that it flashed in the sunlight.

"You'd better hide that, my child," said Venus.

"Why? It's so beautiful. I don't want to hide it. I want to look at it."

"Take my advice," said Venus. "Hide it. Hera is very jealous. She knows what Zeus has done and she is furious."

Poor Echo was soon to learn how dangerous it was to make Hera angry. For the queen of the gods sent her spies everywhere. And very soon she learned that Zeus had given one of her precious golden apples to a wood nymph named Echo.

"Echo, eh?" snarled Hera. "That little tree toad who thinks she's a nightingale? Well, I'll make her sorry she ever laid eyes on a golden apple. I'll punish her in a way that will be remembered forever."

Hera strode down from Olympus, muttering to herself, scowling, black hair flying. This happened on a day that Venus was visiting Echo. They were sitting comfortably in the woods on a fallen log, chatting.

"All the world asks me for favors," Venus said. "But not you, Echo. Tell me, isn't there someone you want to love you? Just name him, and I will send my son, Cupid, to shoot him with an arrow, and make him fall madly in love with you."

But Echo laughed, and said, "Alas, sweet Venus, I have seen no boy who pleases me. None seems beautiful enough to match my secret

dream. When the time comes I shall ask your help — if it ever comes."

"Well, you are lovely enough to have the best," said Venus. "And remember, I am always at your service."

Now Echo did not know this, but at that very moment the most beautiful boy in the whole world was lost in that very wood. His name was Narcissus. He was so handsome that he had never been able to speak to any woman except his mother, for any girl who saw him immediately fainted. Because of this he had a very high opinion of himself. As he went through the woods, he thought: "Oh, how I wish I could find someone as beautiful as I am. I will not love anyone less perfect in face or form than myself. Why should I? This makes me lonely, it's true. But it's better than lowering myself."

As he walked along talking to himself, Narcissus was getting more and more lost in the woods. In another part of that wood, Echo had just said farewell to Venus, and was going back to the hollow tree in which she lived. As she came to a clearing in the forest, she saw something that made her stop in astonishment and hide behind a tree. What she saw was a tall, purple-clad figure moving through the trees. She recognized Hera, and hurried forward to curtsy low before the

queen of the gods. "Greetings, great queen," Echo said. "Welcome to the wood."

"Wretched creature!" Hera cried. "I know how you tricked my husband! Well, I have a gift for you too. Because you used your voice to bewitch my husband, you shall never be able to say anything again — except the last words that have been said to you. Now, try babbling."

"Try babbling," said Echo.

"No more shall you chat with your betters. No more shall you gossip, tell stories or sing songs. You shall endure this punishment forever."

"Forever," said Echo, sobbing.

Then Hera went away to search for Zeus. Echo, weeping, rushed toward her home in the hollow tree. As she was running she saw a dazzling brightness that she thought was the face of a god, and she stopped to look. But it was no god. It was a boy about her own age, with yellow hair and eyes the color of sapphires. When she saw him, all the pain of her punishment dissolved and she was full of great laughing joy. Here was the boy she had been looking for all her life. He was a boy as beautiful as her secret dream — a boy she could love.

Echo danced toward him. He stopped and said, "Pardon me, but can you show me the path out of the wood?"

"Out of the wood?" said Echo.

"Yes," he said. "I'm lost. I've been wandering here for hours and I can't seem to find my way out of the wood."

"Out of the wood."

"Yes, I've told you twice. I'm lost. Can you help me find the way?"

"The way?"

"Are you deaf, perhaps? Why must I repeat everything?"

"Repeat everything?"

"No, I will not. It's a bore. I won't do it."

"Do it."

"Look, I can't stand here arguing with you. If you don't want to show me the way, I'll just try to find someone who can."

"Who can."

Narcissus glared at her and turned away. But Echo went to him, and put her arms around him, and tried to kiss his face.

"Oh, no!" said Narcissus, pushing her away.

"Stop it! You can't kiss me."

"Kiss me."

"No!"

"No!"

Again Echo tried to kiss Narcissus, but he pushed her aside. She fell on her knees on the path, and lifting her lovely tearstained face, tried

to speak to him. But she could not. She reached up and grasped his hand.

"Let go!" he said. "You cannot hold me here. I will not love you."

"Love you."

Narcissus tore himself from her grip and strode away. "Farewell."

"Farewell."

Echo looked after Narcissus until he disappeared. And when he was gone she felt such sadness, such terrible tearing grief, that it seemed as if she was being torn apart. And since she could not speak out, she offered up this prayer silently:

"Oh, Venus, fair goddess, you promised me a favor. Hear me now, though I am voiceless. My love has disappeared and I want to disappear too, for I cannot bear this pain."

Venus, in the garden on Mount Olympus, heard Echo's prayer, for prayers do not have to be spoken to be heard. She looked down upon the grieving nymph, and pitied her, and made her disappear. Echo's body melted into thin cool air, so that the pain was gone. All was gone except her voice, for Venus could not bear to lose that lovely sound. The goddess said:

"I grant you your wish — and one thing more. You have not asked vengeance upon the love that

has made you suffer. You are too sweet and kind. But *I* shall take vengeance. I decree that whoever caused you this pain will know the same terrible longing. He will fall in love with someone who cannot return his love. And he will seek forever for what he can never have."

Now Narcissus knew nothing of this. He was not aware of Echo's grief, or the vow of Venus. He still wandered the forest path, thinking, "These girls who love me on sight — it's too bad I cannot find one as beautiful as I am. Until I do, I shall not love."

Finally he sank down on the bank of a river to rest. Not a river really, but a finger of the river — a clear little stream moving slowly through the rocks. The sun shone on the water so that it became a mirror, holding the trees and the sky upside down. And Narcissus, looking into the stream, saw a face.

He blinked at the water again. It was still there — the most beautiful face he had ever seen. As beautiful, he knew, as his own, even though the shimmer of light behind it made it slightly blurred. He gazed and gazed at the face. He could not have enough of it. He knew that he could look upon this face forever. He put out his hand to touch it. The water trembled, and the face disappeared.

"A water nymph," he thought. "A lovely daughter of the river god. The loveliest of his daughters, no doubt. She is shy. Like me, she can't bear to be touched. Ah, here she is again."

The face looked up at him out of the stream. Again, very timidly, he reached out his hand. Again the water trembled and the face disappeared.

"I will stay here until she loves me," he thought. "She may hide now, but soon she will love me and come out." And he said aloud, "Come out, lovely one."

And the voice of Echo, who had followed him to the stream, said, "Lovely one."

"Hear that, hear that!" cried Narcissus, overjoyed. "She cares for me too. You do, don't you? You love me."

"Love me."

"I do. I do," cried Narcissus. "Finally, I have found someone I love. Come out, come out. Oh, will you never come out?"

"Never come out?" said Echo.

"Don't say that, please don't say that. Because I will stay here till you do. This, I vow."

"I vow."

"Your voice is as beautiful as your face. And I will stay here adoring you forever."
"Forever."

And Narcissus stayed there, leaning over the stream, watching the face in the water. Sometimes he pleaded with it to come out, coaxing, begging, always looking. But day after day he stayed there; night after night, never moving, never eating, never looking away from that face.

Narcissus stayed there so long that his legs grew into the bank of the river and became roots. His hair grew long, tangled, and leafy, and his pale face became delicate yellow and white. He became the flower Narcissus that lives on the river bank, and leans over watching its reflection in the water.

You can find him there to this day. And in the woods, when all is still, in certain valleys and high places, you can sometimes come upon Echo. And if you call her in a certain way, she will answer your call.