

Phaethon

(Time – 8:11)

A mother had four children: three dark daughters and a shining son. The boy was the youngest. His head was wild and red like fire, his skin bright white. His sisters, they were calm, careful. He was hot-headed. Mother and daughters doted on Phaethon. They bowed to his every whim.

As this boy grew he noticed something strange. His friends had two parents and he was so unlike his sisters. It wasn't just that they looked different – they shunned what he loved. On bright summer days they hid in the shade by the edge of the lake while he, he loved the fierce heat, the light. One day he went to his mother.

'Who is my father?'

She smiled, shrugged. 'Aren't we enough for you?'

'Why won't you tell me? Don't I have a right to know?'

He gave his mother no peace. Every day the same question until, 'You are the son of the Sun.'

He ran to his friends. 'I am the son of the god Helios himself!'

They laughed. 'How is that possible? He's far above us. He drives his chariot across the sky each day.'

'He is. He is my father.'

'Do you have proof?'

'My mother told me.'

'Listen to him: "My mother told me"!'

Hot with shame, he ran from them. He sank to his knees. He shouted at the sky. 'Helios, if you are my father, then when you have finished your journey across the heavens, come to me.'

That night he was woken by a stifling heat. A cloaked figure stood at the end of the bed. The stranger drew back his hood. The boy shielded his eyes. 'My child. I have come.' The stranger approached to embrace him but the boy recoiled.

'How do I know that you are the Sun? Give me proof.'

'Ask for anything – *anything*. I will grant your wish.'

'Then let me be you. Let me make your journey across the heavens.'

It was too late. Helios had given his word. 'Something else, I beg you: anything.'

'I knew it! I knew you were lying.'

'I'm not lying. You are mortal. You do not have the strength to drive my chariot. Granting this wish will end your life. I struggle to control those horses. They are fire-breathers, always straining against the reins. The first part of my journey is so steep it takes all my strength and resolve to keep my footing in the chariot. Every glance down to the tiny earth below fills *me* with dizzy panic. I must hold my course while all around me the stars are whirling and spinning. Perhaps you think that there are tranquil meadows above us. From the earth it may seem so but mine is a journey from one danger to the next. The road is plagued with ferocious beasts. Listen to me. Think again. You want a sign? You want a sign that I am your father? Here is the sign, written on my face. Do you see the worry, do you see the concern? I am afraid! I am afraid for you.'

‘I hate you! You gave me your word! Talk is cheap. If you deny me this, then don’t come back.’

Helios sighed. ‘Very well. I have lingered too long already. Night has ended. Day must begin.’ He led the boy outside. His chariot was a thing of dazzling beauty. The axle and shaft and car were bright gold. The wheels and spokes were silver studded with jewels. The boy climbed into the car. Helios gave him the reins. ‘Grip these with all your strength. Don’t let go, no matter what happens. You will see a groove in the sky, the marks my wheels have made; that is your path. Don’t stray from it.’

The blazing horses were impatient, stamping and straining, champing at the bit. Helios: ‘Please. Think again.’

But Phaethon, bursting with pride, shook the reins. The horses hurled themselves upward into the sky. The breath was gone from the boy’s body. Instantly those horses knew something was amiss; the weight behind was too light. There was no ballast. The chariot swung one way then the other. This chariot was beyond the boy’s control. Where was the path? They galloped as if up a sheer cliff. He tried to shout out orders to his team but his voice was lost in the roar of the wind.

Phaethon wished himself home. He wished he’d never nagged his mother, doubted his father. The reins were twisted. He crashed from one side of the car to the other. Now, celestial beasts appeared scattered across his course. A great scorpion lunged at him with its monstrous claws; now a lion, a bull, a huntsman. The boy screamed. The reins went slack. With nothing to restrain them the horses galloped where they would. They swooped so near the earth that mountains crumbled to ash, oceans boiled, cities were blasted to blackened stumps, lakes became hissing clouds of steam, whole forests became blazing torches. Great cracks appeared in mother earth, shafts of light shone even into the land of the dead. Ghosts fled in every direction; the jailor Hades, dazzled, stunned, powerless.

Zeus above saw the devastation. He took a lightning bolt in his right hand, drew it behind his back and threw. Phaethon was hurled headlong from the chariot. He tumbled, his arms windmilling, his legs kicking at nothing. He was dead before he struck the waters of a lake. His father was so sick with sorrow for one whole day the sky went black. Phaethon’s three sisters searched the earth until they found his battered body. They leant over him sobbing. Helios, moved by their devotion, transformed them. Their toes became roots, their arms branches, their hair leaves. Silver bark covered their faces. They became weeping willow trees.