

THE GODDESS AND RAMSES

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It's 9 a.m. I haven't had a drink in seven months, and it's been five since I walked into Hugh's house. I knock this time, lightly on the front door and then walk in. His home looks like an abandoned art studio or woodworking shop, and it's hot inside, overheated; the thermostat must be broken. There is hardly room to maneuver through the machinery and lumber that fills the space. The past year's mail is piled up on the band-saw, and several months of dirty dishes sit on the table in the corner. Sawdust covers the hard-wood floors, mixed with pistachio nut shells, cat shit, and broken bits of pottery. Beneath the floor, I can hear Ramses in the basement, barking and whining to be set free, while two or three generations of cats surround my feet and meow to be fed.

Two years ago, he had decided to move back to his farm. It's been deserted now for quite some time—no animals, no children, no garden, no wife, the wire fences fallen into the tall grass in places. He took me there many times. A lonely place—acres of beautiful flowering fields where once horses grazed now filled with the hum of insects and the soft erratic flight of butterflies. Inside the ramshackle farmhouse powdery dust had settled on the kitchen counter tops, the near-empty bookshelves, the plywood floor. A cold, black wood-burning stove stood dormant in the middle of the one large open room, its chimney reaching up through the roof where the insulation hung down in big loops. The children's rooms were up in the loft. Dolls and books and toys were left behind. We would take Ramses to the farm with us. It was his chance to run like mad through the fields.

He had wanted to go back. He'd had enough of this backward college town where nobody understood him, so he emptied his home of the beautiful antique furniture inherited from his aunt, packed up a U-haul, and took it to the farm. "I just want to be alone," he said. He took everything except his brass bed and four-cup coffee maker.

But after moving the furniture, he himself hadn't bothered to go.

Shortly after, he moved his sculptures into his emptied house; they told him at the art studio on campus to get his stuff out, once and for all. The tall, handsome architectural structures lined the bare, dirty walls of his living room and dining room, some of them made of stone, some of brick; others were made of charred wood—pieces he named before setting on fire, then snuffed out half burnt, halting the sacrifice.

And in the middle of the living room was the goddess.

She was my favorite. Cast in bronze, she was perfect, a female form with small upturned breasts and full arching hips standing between two slabs of limestone. She leaned slightly on one leg and her arms rested gracefully by her sides. Though her palms faced her body just below the hips, she held them slightly outward, as though to entreat, or comfort. Her bald head was tipped back and tilted to one side, a soft but insistent expression on her face, half pleading, half commanding. She was beautiful.

But the goddess is gone now, raffled off in Detroit to help pay taxes on the farm. The other pieces are still here, hidden behind the large machinery, a place to dry dish towels, hang up his coat, a place for Ramses to pee for lack of a tree.

I step carefully over a pile of dog shit and I see Hugh's potter's wheel lying idle in what was once the dining room. The cats follow. Unfired cups and bowls of various sizes are stacked on shelves above the wheel and the top of the kiln, dozens of empty whisky flasks among them. He used to spend hours drinking, and throwing pots that were never fired while Ramses barked and ran circles around a post he was tied to outside, sometimes well into the night. Every now and then I'd stop in to see Hugh engrossed in pot throwing, one after the other, and I'd go out and lead Ramses around the post in the other direction to unwind him.

I peek into the kitchen and I see there's no coffee made. He is still sleeping. The faucet lets water plop steadily into a sink already filled with greasy dishwater, and it overflows into the basin beside it. The cupboard doors all hang open—not a single clean glass or plate. Every dish and pot and pan sits unwashed, on the counter tops and on the floor, green mold growing on some of them, onion and potato peels scattered around them. I used to come every couple of weeks and do his dishes for him while he cooked for me, taking my hands out of soapy water to drink a beer and watch him slice mushrooms. He knew they were my favorite. I loved to watch him cook. His hands were as sure and steady in the kitchen as they must have been when he molded the goddess. As it grew dark outside, Hugh would untie Ramses and let him in.

Ramses is an Ibezahound, an Egyptian breed from the island of Ibeza. You can see his flattened profile, one front leg held up high, marching next to Egyptians in ancient hieroglyphs. He would bound like a deer over the threshold, and proudly prance through the house on top of dirty dishes and bits of pottery, knocking over beer cans and bottles, sniffing the corners of each room in search of old dinner plates. With my hands elbow deep in greasy dish water, Ramses would come to me and whine, his ears pointing straight up. He'd stick his big

Roman nose into my side, and working his way between me and the sink, he'd shove me back forcefully. I'd push him aside, but he was as big and as stubborn as a farm animal and wouldn't budge. Hugh would grab him by the collar and drag him, his feet refusing to move, his butt dragging along the kitchen floor, to his dish of dog food. He'd sniff it, then sit, and letting out a pleading yelp, he'd look at Hugh and cock his head, ears up, expectantly. Hugh would stand there with his hands on his hips. There they would be, staring at each other, and then Hugh would say, "Dumb dog."

Hugh used to take hours to prepare a meal for me, enough time for me to get the kitchen clean. As clean as it could get. Enough time for us to become giggling drunk before stuffing ourselves with fried mushrooms, baked chicken or steak, tossed salad with vinaigrette dressing. He was the best cook. And the best lover. Later, we'd make our way clumsily to Hugh's big brass bed, which back then was in the sun room behind the kitchen. We'd shed our clothes and toss them over the side of the bed the three feet to the floor. I'd climb up on top of him, and he'd pull my hips up with his large, firm hands until I straddled his face and held onto the rails for drunken dear life.

In the morning the sun would stream in through the dusty windows, and I would listen to Hugh in the kitchen, the sound of each gentle movement so subtle: his placing the filter into the basket, measuring out ground coffee, pouring water into the coffee maker. His opening the bathroom door and then closing it, his urinating into the toilet. In a few moments, he would bring me a cup with cream and sugar, just how I liked it.

But now, it's too hot in here, stuffy, and the place smells like dog shit, rotting meat, stale whisky, cat piss, stiff dirty laundry. Ramses howls mournfully in the basement.

After the house was emptied, Hugh moved his bed upstairs into one of the bedrooms, using the sun room for storage of boxes that didn't make it to the farm. I head up the stairs and call out hesitantly: "hello?"

No answer. The narrow stairway has been stripped of carpeting, the cats had pissed all over it, and the stairs creak as I climb them. The stench of urine is strong up here as I walk past the bathroom. I wonder if Hugh is missing the toilet, or if it's the cats. Looking in, I see the bathtub, its faucet also dripping, filled with rusty colored water. Two grocery bags filled with Old Milwaukee cans sit outside his bedroom door. I knock, and hear the brass bed clank.

"Yeah?"

I open the door and see Hugh, wearing a once white T-shirt and stained Fruit-of-the-Looms, struggling to sit up on the high edge of the bed. He seems to be looking for something on the floor— his trousers maybe, or a bottle. He's gained weight and is grossly puffed, his hairless thighs and calves a pale white and covered with purplish red bruises the size of oranges, no doubt from falling down or bumping into the machinery downstairs. He looks up at me. His once curly graying hair is matted down against his scalp, his face bloated a pale yellow and covered with red blotches, his once sparkling blue eyes are bloodshot red. I inhale nervously. He breathes unsteadily and reaches up to wipe last night's

drunk off his face. I see his fingers rattle against his forehead and then he quickly puts his hands in his lap to still them. I sit down beside him on the bare mattress, the sheets having been shoved to the foot of the bed during fitful sleep, and I touch his face. I work on his sticky hair, trying to loosen the curls with my fingers, and he lets me.

“You don’t have to get up,” I say. I move my hand down to touch his cheek. Taking a sudden shaking breath he lays his head back on the single pillow and I cover him with the quilt, the one his mother made for him. It reeks of piss. With his eyes closed he reaches for me and pulls me into his arms, as if I had never left him, as though I had never been missing, and I let him. I lay my head down against his chest; his T-shirt smells like booze. He strokes my hair as I listen to his racing heart occasionally skipping beats. I used to carry anti-anxiety meds in my purse. I’d give him one every now and then to help him with his morning jitters, or sometimes he’d pop one with me in the evening; it made for a smoother drunk. I don’t have them anymore—doctor said I had to quit those too.

He wraps his arms around me and rubs my back, and I try to position myself so I can’t get wind of his stale whisky breath. He pulls the shirt out from the waist of my pants and I let him lift it over my head and off me. We kiss. It’s not my fault this has happened to him, I tell myself. I didn’t do this to him. His mouth is sticky, dry. It tastes like rot, but I ignore it. I take off the rest of my clothing and his, and pushing the smelly quilt to the floor we make love on the bare mattress, the brass bed squeaking, the rails clanging against the wall.

I started drinking after my marriage came apart four years ago. I hated being alone. But it wasn’t long before I met Hugh. An acquaintance of my parents’, he came with them in a big white truck to help me move. I had cried on the phone to my father two days earlier, telling Dad to please bring me back to my hometown.

I had to hook up with Hugh, I knew that as soon as I saw him. Actually, I knew that when I shook his hand. There was something about his hands. I needed him as much as I needed to drink, and I needed him to drink with me. All it took was a phone call. I knew if I called him and invited him over for a drink, he’d be mine. Something told me—maybe it was his hands; maybe it was his long graying hair pony-tailed behind his head—that he needed me too. Hugh had been married for twenty-five years and had seven children, all of them home-schooled on the farm that he and his wife had retreated to once the Sixties were over. When I met him, his marriage was over, and so was his idyllic family life on the farm. Half his children had grown, and the other half were shuffled between his house and hers, in the same small college town where I grew up.

I liked him because he was an artist, a sculptor, and he liked to drink. I like art, but I like all the erotic talk surrounding it more. Not the incoherent stuff, not the babble about shape and form and color and depth, but the talk of gods and goddesses, and women and sex, and mothers with infants. It made me

feel powerful. I like it that men have to make art because they're terrified and awed and in love with women. It's a turn-on. Art gave Hugh and me something to talk about, and the break-up of our marriages gave us something to cry about, over beer in the evening and wine in the morning.

We drank margaritas at La Seniorita's on our first date. He told me he'd wanted to be a priest, and spent seven years in the seminary. When he was twenty-one, he fell in love with a young married woman in his church. Their affair was nothing more than kissing. "We were both very Catholic, after all," he said. The young woman ultimately stayed with her husband, and Hugh left the seminary to study art. Later, he met and married a young Canadian woman. They bought sixty acres in the middle of Michigan, built a house and a barn, and dedicated themselves to a life of arts and crafts—weaving, jewelry making, pottery, and sculpture. They raised their own sheep; they spun their own yarn; they made their own blankets and clothing. It was the ideal life, he said. Immediately after accepting an artist-in-residence position at the university in town, things fell apart.

"We moved from the farm into town, and it just wasn't working," he said. "So, we agreed to separate, and we agreed it would be temporary—we needed space from each other." He paused. "And then she met this guy, and I got divorce papers in the mail." He shrugged and looked down at his drink, then quietly shook his head. "She married him last month."

We continued for hours, sharing sorry stories of marriages gone bad. I told him how my husband left in the midst of his nervous breakdown, taking my stepson and leaving me with our two baby girls, how awful it was, how I couldn't eat or sleep. After stuffing ourselves with chicken enchiladas and spanish rice, and slugging down three salty margaritas each, we drove downtown to see a movie. Before the film began, Hugh reached over and rubbed my right shoulder.

Nice. And he continued, not just rubbing, but kneading my shoulder and upper arm, all the way down to my elbow with his large, firm hand. It was as though he were molding me, attempting to change my shape.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to see how you're put together. It's for the goddess"

"Goddess?"

We arranged to meet at the art studio on campus the next day. After walking in, the first thing I saw, taking up the majority of space, were two enormous square legs of white marble, a single structure about eight feet tall, holding up a kind of twisted and flattened calligraphic form, as though he had taken the marble and bent it like iron. It was a commissioned piece, a monument to be installed in a Catholic cemetery in Detroit for children with cystic fibrosis, a thirty thousand dollar job. Sadly, it was money already spent, used as a down payment for a house that he and his wife had purchased together before she left him. She got the house and he got the piece, unfinished in the middle of the art studio. Apparently he was past deadline, and his priest friend who got him the job was pissed. Hugh's other pieces were there too, the architectural structures, the burnt altars, all ready to be moved to the campus gallery for his MFA show.

Then I saw her. She was covered in plastic and wrapped in damp brown paper towels, standing on a pedestal of some kind. When Hugh unveiled her she was nearly perfect, a female figure about a foot and half tall. She was made of red clay, still moist. Her face appeared to be finished; she was already pleading, already entreating, as though she had pushed her face out from within the red clay to beseech her creator. Her back and shoulders were still in progress, thin strips of red clay were draped on her arms and across her back like muscle tissue, like you might see in a human anatomy book—no skin yet.

“So that’s why you were feeling my shoulder.”

“Always doing research.”

After a tour of the studio, I gave him a ride home. When I pulled up to his house, he leaned over and kissed me quickly on the lips, and before he stepped out of the car, I asked him: would he like to come over tonight? No, he couldn’t. He had too much to do. He’d give me a call, he said.

So I went home and threw a stool, puncturing the dry-wall. I didn’t like being alone.

And that’s how it went for the next several years.

Right from the beginning, I couldn’t stand to be without him. I desperately needed him to be with me, to drink with me. Hugh, on the other hand, seemed indifferent. If I felt him slip away, I panicked, and the more whisky he drank, the more he slipped away. The more he slipped away, the more I drank.

“I just want to be alone.” he would say during his darkest moods.

“I just want you to want to be with me.” I would plead.

“Well, I don’t always.”

And I’d go home and throw a coffee mug, or a book, or whatever was handy, against the wall and cry myself to sleep. And I’d go back, and we’d cling to each other, making love for long hours, his lying his head between my breasts afterward, still and quiet like a boy.

I told a psychiatrist about it. “I’m so antsy,” I said, “jumpy, nervous. I can’t sleep. I can’t stand to be alone.” And he prescribed pills: ambian, klonopin, zoloft. I went home that night, took one of each, and drank a six pack. I was never so relaxed in my life.

Sometimes Hugh and I would wake the next morning in the big brass bed, our mouths sticky, our hands jittery. We shouldn’t drink so much, we would say. I need to stay away from the whisky, he would say. We should at least hold off until next weekend.

Of course, Ramses would always be there, sitting up next to the bed staring at Hugh, his head cocked, looking guilty. He’d stand on all fours for a moment, sniff the floor, and take a quick prancing step backward, then forward. He’d sit up again, cock his head, and stare at Hugh. And a massive pile of dog shit would be sitting on the living room floor.

“Ramses!” I’d hear Hugh yell from the living room after he staggered out of bed. Ramses would jump up, pivot around in nervous circles, and start to

whine. Hugh kept a shovel next to the kiln, and before the morning's coffee he cleaned his home like a barn stall, dumping shovels full of shit into the toilet and gagging, while Ramses, head down, would look up in shame with sad brown eyes. After he'd dump the last pile, he'd grab Ramses by the collar and drag him sitting on his butt, his hind legs kicking underneath him. Hugh would struggle to open the back door, and when he did, Ramses would yank himself free, back up, take a few high prancing steps, and dart around Hugh. Leaping through the torn screen of the door, he would run like a gazelle at full gallop until he disappeared down the street, out of sight.

"Damn dog," Hugh would say.

One day, I suggested we take Ramses for a walk. "I think he needs to get out of the house for a while," I told him. We drove to a nearby park with Ramses in the back seat of my car, refusing to sit and sticking his big head over the seat, nudging me as I tried to drive. "Sit Ramses!" said Hugh, and Ramses turned circles on the back seat, bumping Hugh in the head until he settled down, his long body sprawled along the entire back seat.

Ramses enjoyed his walk by the river, prancing happily, stepping high, pulling Hugh along on his leash. A woman stopped and remarked, "What an unusual dog—what is he?" and Hugh proudly related the entire history of the Ibezanhound, rambling on, while Ramses, afraid of most people, stood shuddering, cowering nervously, wrapping his leash around Hugh as he spoke

"Uh- huh," said the woman. "Interesting."

We decided to stop at a picnic table and finish the Old Milwaukee from the night before.

"I should really walk him more often," said Hugh. "This is nice." He tied Ramses to the table, and we drank our beer and talked. When it was time to go, we headed back to the car.

"You know," Hugh said. "I should walk him every day, maybe he wouldn't take off so often."

"The exercise would do him some good," I replied. When we reached the car we both turned around. "Oh!" we exclaimed simultaneously. We retraced our steps back to the picnic table. Poor Ramses sat there, still tied, cowering by the table.

I could never get Hugh to come and stay with me. It was as though he was tied to his house, trapped, unable to escape. I went to Hugh's house on Fridays after taking my daughters to their father's, and came home on Sundays when their dad brought them back. On Monday mornings, I'd take the girls to school, go back to Hugh's, and climb in bed with him. If he was shaking bad enough, I gave him one of my pills, and after one of us said, "oh what the hell—let's get some beer," we jumped in the car and ran to the store. I knew Hugh was an alcoholic, but me—I wasn't sure.

If his mood was dark, he told me to leave him alone. I'd leave in tears, and picking up my own beer, I'd go home and drink, screaming at him over the telephone for not loving me, for not wanting to be with me.

"Give me some space!" he'd yell back. "I just want a little space!"

I'd slam down the phone, and he'd get shit-faced drunk. The next morning, I'd climb into his bed, and we'd start all over again.

I finally saw her finished. It was late afternoon on a beautiful spring day, and Hugh took me to the art studio to show her to me. She was outside on the sidewalk, waiting to be loaded onto a truck and taken to a show in Detroit. The goddess stood in the sunshine, cast in bronze and posed on a limestone base. Two rectangular posts rose up on either side of her, supporting a cross member as a ceiling. She stood framed, solidly female—slim waist, flat belly, tiny breasts—even more perfect than her clay predecessor. Her palms were turned just slightly outward, her head tilted back and cocked to one side. I could imagine the fiery-red molten bronze that filled her plaster mold and then hardened and froze, transforming her into the goddess she was now, into shades of light and dark golden metallic brown. Though passive, serene, her expression showed she was as demanding, as insistent as before, even more earnest now that she was solid bronze. Above her head hung a lead hammered relief mask of the Egyptian Goddess Hathor. The sun shone on her and the limestone fortress she stood within, highlighting her features, illuminating her face, and casting a shadow on the sidewalk like Stonehenge.

“Wow,” I said. “She’s beautiful.”

“Well,” he paused for a moment, “she’s ninety percent you, y’know.”

“Me? She is not!”

“Yes, she is.”

I was stunned into silence. We left to go buy some wine, to sit in his back yard and celebrate, relax. On the way to the store, I spoke, interrupting my own reverie: “So what’s the other ten percent?”

An eight thousand dollar price tag was attached to her and off she went, only to return again after the show unsold. She stood in the middle of Hugh’s living room for the next several months. That’s when his money ran out. He’d been offered another commission to build an altar for a Catholic church at Georgetown University earlier that year, but that money was long gone, and the project barely started.

His phone was disconnected; his water shut off; his ex-wife sued for full custody. His lawn grew to eight inches tall, until the city finally mowed it and sent him the bill. He gathered loose change to buy whisky, or waited for me to bring beer. I told him to relax, things would be all right, and I’d give him another pill. The faculty at the art studio told him to get the monument for the cemetery out of the building; if he wasn’t going to bother finishing his MFA, or the commission, he had to clear out. He forced himself to work on the marble piece, and each night that summer he lay down in a lawn chair in the backyard, exhausted, covered with marble dust that he couldn’t shower off, looking like death, like a drunken depressed ghost.

He had decided to go into rehab last spring. I thought he hit bottom. We drank one last time before I drove him to a recovery center in a nearby city.

I drank alone for three weeks, and when he came home, he got to work on his Georgetown commission and started attending AA. Shortly after, the marble piece, titled "The Covenant," was installed in Detroit. Hugh looked better, healthier. He was feeling great, he said; he was eating well, and sleeping fine. Thank God, I said.

I couldn't understand why I wasn't happy for him.

"So what's going on with you and me now?" I asked him one day.

"What. Nothing's changed."

"What do you mean nothing's changed? I don't know where I fit into your life anymore."

"Same place you always did."

"What are you talking about. You never have time for me anymore."

"Oh, that's crazy!"

"Oh, fuck you!"

It made no sense. He wasn't the same. This was a different version of Hugh, a version my drunken self did not understand. A version I was sure did not love me.

I got into my car and drove to the nearest party store and bought a twelve pack of Budweiser. *Bastard!* Instead of throwing stools against the wall, I went home and drank three cans of beer as fast as I could and took two pills. *Why was he doing this to me?* Then I drank three more and took two more pills. *Jackass!* After one more beer and two more pills, I called him on the phone.

I don't remember much. I recall his taking me, in my car, back to his house. I remember telling him to make sure he got the beer from the refrigerator. I know I threw up on my shoes.

I woke up with wet pants in Hugh's big brass bed, Hugh sitting on the edge of it looking down at me. I was dreaming; I was sure of it. Hugh was drinking from a can of Budweiser. *No*, I said. *You can't drink that.* Was it out loud, or to myself? *It's okay*, I thought I heard him say back to me. *It's okay.*

I got off alcohol first, then the pills. I went over to Hugh's house a few more times, though they told me in AA I should stay away from him. Finally I did stop, partly because they told me to, and partly because I couldn't stand to see him drunk now that I was sober. I often wondered, during that time, how he was doing. I worried that he might cut his arm off on the band-saw, or set the place on fire while the kiln was going. "You need to take care of yourself," they kept telling me at meetings. I had been going to AA for seven months, but I still felt responsible for Hugh's relapse. Five months had passed since the last time I walked into his house. The place was a mess.

After we made love, I lay down beside him and listened to his heart beat erratically inside his chest. "You have to stop," I whispered. His skin smelled like whiskey. "You can't keep doing this. It's going to kill you." I knew that now. He nodded and breathed in and out shakily, his eyes watering. I felt helpless.

"I have to go," I said and gathered my clothes together. I couldn't stay.

I dressed, and then kissed him on the cheek before I walked out of his bedroom, closing the door behind me. I hoped he might go back to sleep, but more likely he'd look for his bottle from the night before. I hoped he might have heard what I said. But I knew he knew. I walked slowly down the creaky stairs, and out the front door, and on my way out, I saw the goddess—that is, the ghost of her former self.

I wondered why I didn't see her when I came in. Her plaster mold lay amongst piles of rubble on the front porch. There she was, her hollow impression in two halves, the front and back lying side by side. Perhaps he could make another. Perhaps he will. As I stepped off the front porch, I wondered, and as I walked toward my car, I could hear Ramses through the basement window, howling sadly.

The last I heard, Hugh took Ramses for a drive to the farm. He decided to stop to buy corn on the roadside. After returning to his car and driving twenty miles down the road, he realized that Ramses was gone. He must have leaped through the car window and taken off through the cornfield, bounding high and running madly like a deer at top speed.