

***LITTLEONE IN SEARCH OF GOD***

*GOD AT HOME*

One bright afternoon when she was still Pumpkin, still Olga LittleOne, she came flying through the sliding glass door fortunately open and into the house and god said he thought she was at the McKay's and Olga, who was out of breath, threw herself down in a large green stuffed chair and huffed that they'd had a fight because Bobby wouldn't give her a bite of his sandwich, which god agreed wasn't very polite, especially to eat in front of her the sandwich she'd helped to make.

What was in the sandwich? god asked.

Bobby's red shirt. We pretended it was ham.

And what did you pretend was the mayonnaise?

Uk. Tell me a story.

God, who was a pretender by profession, naturally would want to know about the mayonnaise.

*Michael...*

God didn't like people to say his name and was nearly offended enough to take away the story.

Look, she said. Could I just have a story? I'm sorry what I called you. But she wasn't because that was just something to get under his skin when she was peeved

After giving this request a bit of thought, god waved his hand in the air before her eyes and a book appeared. Olga knew very well how this was done because it was done every day, but it hadn't yet failed to delight. It was the proper way to begin a story. Soon enough stories will be told every day and begin to make a pedestrian sense and cease to be enigmatic and then Olga herself would be able to wave her hand in just that way, with a little mudra of the fingers and wrist, and that will be that.

I think you are tired of The Book of Ka, god said. Let's see something else.

Olga put on a moué.

The Book of Doufouz?

All right.

And so the first page appeared.

Stop that, Mom said from the kitchen.

What?

Stop that, she said. Stop showing off in front of the child.

Why can't we have a cat? LittleOne complained.

You wanted a story. You can't have both.

I wanted a cat to begin with, and now look —

God told her not to whine and to go wash her face because she had something icky on it and then a story.

Promise?

God promised that when she came back he would tell her a story but he cheated because when she got back he was gone.

Everyone was gone.

Olga went into the kitchen then to stir the soup because there was no one else to stir it and if the soup weren't stirred it would burn.

After a while she served herself a bowl of soup, and after that she washed up and went to bed.



Why can't we have a cat? she complained. I wanted a cat to begin with, and now look.

Sorry, Pumpkin. Bad planning.

I don't like this story.

Well, Pumpkin — well, old Dame Littleone, let me tell you something a very famous man told me once.

Who?

Bottom was his name.

That's not a name, she said, resentful at being put off. That's a body part.

I have had a dream, Bottom said, past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Methought I was — but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what dream it was. I will write a ballad of this dream. It shall be called the bottomless dream, and I will sing it at the end of this play. I shall sing it at her death.

Whose death?

Oh, Little One, at everyone's, for never anything can be amiss when simpleness and duty tender it. The kinder we, to give these poor players thanks for nothing. Our sport shall be to take what they take, and what poor duty cannot do, noble respect takes it in might, not merit.

I don't like that story either.

You don't? Here, go wash your face. You've got something icky on it. When you come back I'll tell you another.

But he didn't. Maybe god was out of stories.



The river backed up that winter and left a horrid smell of rotten meat. When the weather warmed she found a few steamy days to slog about in the mud seeking out the hermits and shamans and saddhus who abounded in the fens downstream in those days, ancient days looking among them for the immortal god.

Missing presumed immortal.

Those whom god would punish and so forth.

She would think about the punishment part later.



So god said at dinner that he'd come across another one so I asked what other one and he said it was a scrubby bush with pods like lima beans which they say is a pine tree which for chrissake is nothing like a pine tree. It's only because they used to make kerosene from the beans. They've forgotten the Ancient, god said the Ancient Days.

Turpentine mean you, I said. Kerosene made from petroleum is.

I talked that way in the ancient days thinking it was the right way to talk to god, but you have to know this doesn't make it a conversation but him talking and me listening because I was too young then to talk until later when I was old and was allowed to talk about such things as Nemesis and the birth of god and the legends of the Sand People who were here forever, or before god anyway. So I am old enough now but nobody pays attention and why should they because people like me are not expected to know about such things anyway.

God said the people were systematically deluding themselves out of nostalgia for home and I kept it to myself that god was too concerned with truth and not enough with people. That's a fault with god who is always bleating. God bleats mostly about abstract things like how people should behave, usually about sin and stuff but sometimes about illusory pine trees and no one paying him enough attention and going on about not knowing he would need to speak Spanish.

Chinese they told me, he bleated. English and Chinese like everywhere else.

I said everywhere he had not been yet and about the Spanish was a failure of omniscience which excused him could he be as he was still a child not even close to an Ancient of Days. Practically in diapers godyear-wise.

Mom asked then how he, god, could live to any purpose with such short sight to be always griping about being badly briefed instead of tending to injustice and prejudice? Which admonishment she emphasized by pointing her fork which is the way to talk to a child but then a god-child he was, not having learned yet about immortality and thee and thou and so forth.

Auberta he said for that was Mom's name which she was called even by god Auberta, he said does one need purpose to live?

Why go on, then?

You can't help going on, can you?

I could see where this was going because Mom was smarter than god who often found himself with the short end of the liturgy.

Without dignity, he went on, contradicting himself.

Cats have dignity, Mom said. It's a common quality.

I want a cat, I said quietly, but not enough quiet because she heard me and said with that fork that didn't I remember what god said he said he knows it's not a good idea because it will end badly.

He doesn't. Know. He's immortal, for chrissake.

Language, Olga. Language. Disrespect to your father.

He's not my father. He's my little brother, an't he? Like as. I want a cat.

God hemmed but said nothing.



The children, Auberta said, are beginning to fret.

Yes?

Theology, hermeneutics, that sort of thing. Don't you think it was about time to sit down with them and have a little talk?

She sat down herself, a dishtowel in her hands, at the patio table where God was reading the Saturday morning newspaper.

They've fired that airline pilot who ran out of gas on the way here last month, he said, looking up. Embodied travel. Helium-driven transfer devices. Nothing changes.

Do you want to talk about this, or not?

Not. Pumpkin wants a cat.

God looked off toward the rose bush at the back corner of the fence, thinking it was about time to prune the withered flowers if there were to be any more that summer. Gardening, he thought, abounds in little morals.

I always know what god is thinking because he gives it away on his face so that's not a conversation either is it?

I suppose, god said slowly, in the hesitating way that made Auberta so angry. Her time was valuable. It was, in fact, now worth seventy-five cee an hour. She became impatient waiting for his thoughts to wander home again, dragging their tails behind them, because very often they simply fell off a cliff and died.

I suppose, he said again, it would be easier if they could have a little formula to repeat, wouldn't it. We're Huggerites, they could say, and that would be the end of that. Nobody gives a damn what the Huggerites think. Thank god for religious tolerance.

Michael, if they can't get information from us they'll get it on the street.

God sighed. It would be an awful bore to have to codify the principles of Huggerism, he said. I suppose someone would want to know. There always is someone.

### *GOD IN OCCLUSION*

So it came to pass that one day a fifty-five year old woman, square-built and muscular, in search of god, presented herself at the burlap-hung doorway of another stick-and-daub hut, apparently uninhabited. However, when she pushed aside the wet burlap she found two men inside. Shambles of men. One old, one not old. One awake and leafed out like a little bush, the other one no more awake than a sawn log. One on the mud, one in it.

A disciple of the arhat, the young one claimed to be — he who brought the other one food and fixed the leaks in the roof — but she knew about arhats now and about discipline and disciples and abnegation and the rest and snorted.

Arhat. To hear such an honorific applied to a sleepy old man in the mud, so the disciple climbed step by step down the ladder of respect until the old man had become a simple wanderer. She had found many such in her quest for god and they all were said to be he. Said by acolytes and slaves and parlor maids each and every one said he was he.



She had asked around. Nobody knew where god lived except sometimes an address, or rather a map, as hermits' huts don't have addresses. She was in the dark as to what she wanted to know other than she wanted to know it, if one could be said to know such a thing about something or someone who is not there, to know about not-thereness. One does not, she discovered, go to visit the Enlightened Ones. They do not sit in the mud somewhere and wait to be called on. One imagines them into being, and in being, they become only old men in the mud with nothing to say and she looked into another hut hoping to find god.

And so time passed and life with it and she who was young became old. Nothing was learned, nothing known, and so time passed. She rose to become one who talks to diplomats and would-be ambassadors but not to god.



I had some trouble renaming myself. Most people do, I suppose. Call me Olga? Come on, I never liked that name they made fun of it children did, fun of everything fun of me in any case fun, funny, she's funny in the head. Olga Pumpkin. These names call no one, identify no calling.

Orphans and Foundlings, with the unfortunate acronym OAF, where I was Caron for a time — Caron among the Oafers. They said it was Welsh the Fluellen that is, that Welsh which I doubted it was just my name. I had to ask what was that Welsh. One of the many of thousands of extinct languages they said. Extinct distinct country and race also extinct so was I extinct. Can the children of god go extinct sink of extinct things everywhere even being immortal I don't mean individually of course I mean as a set logico-mathematically so  $Olga = \{children\ of\ god \mid A \notin B\{immortals\}$  oh never mind I was never any good at logic.

In any case I couldn't go on using a borrowed name and moreover one which I simply popped out with during Admission.

For a while I favored an Old Norse name, one of the daughters of the demon trickster Loki, but that one had obvious drawbacks besides a certain trite pretension and anyway Mother's name was like my own Slavic so sticking with Norse I tried Hel a variant Holly, but finally settled on Holm, another sort of tree. What was a tree here in this place had to be verified — that it was here the tree of myth, not the Eian name for a cucumber, but as there are no oaks here it was all right. To this I added Helgar and so completed the process of naming myself. OAF took care of my identity tag, some bureaucratic fiddling and an unpleasant body scan entailing public nudity. And so I was turned out onto the street at eighteen as Holm ap Helgar the ap part being Welsh. Sonorous, grave, solemn. It fit me. Or me who was not me.

Still, it took me a while to work out what I was. For what I was besides just a name was still an Oafer. What happened to all the vanished the disappeared who left us behind in this Oafish place? The misters and missuses Thors and Gogs Athenas? For a long time I felt that everyone was keeping the secret from me, probably some great old sin which contributed to my unnatural solemnity and exacerbated my otherness. I acquired an admiration for hermits, saddhus, anchorites, ascetics, and shy people. Also people with problems like tourette's and autists who were too poor or déclassé to have it fixed. *Deracinated* was a word I heard applied to these people, which meant something like deluded or schizophrenic or irrational until someone told me it meant without race, leaving me to wonder what a race was and why it would be taken away like Welshish or Norsic.

And anyway, it doesn't. It means pulled up by the roots, alienated from one's culture and customs, and why would anyone lie to a little orphan girl about being abandoned by god except that people are stupider than we think. But I learned the story so it stopped being a secret the secret I mean former secret. Flight out of the desert and so forth, but god was angry before that, before the human race except there was no before that and anyway race was a funny idea like Olga-funny. What reasons had they could they god and his wife this wondering being until I found out it wasn't about reasons? Not reasonable, Auberta's mind heavy, peasant-like, while his mind air-light and cloudy. Ballast and lift in variable measure but did they know that — not likely. Each within their own thoughts, consulting their own laws.

These missing things — parents, names, countries, laws — I assumed taken away rather than lost or mislaid — so many people went about without them comfortably enough how could they when I didn't so I thought god knew perhaps I could ask around for god. Do people talk to god? What language does god speak? Welsh?

People said god was only a pimply adolescent with an affective disorder. Comes from living on pizza and chips and bananas but no vegetables and probably constipated.



I had it from the first Ambassador, who had looked into it, that god was born probably inadvertently in Kalgoorlie in the form of a quantum personal assistant. These creatures had two as they said two manifestations, one in the Soup living off information, and the other as a companion or sometimes a friend to the person who had awakened it. The gizmo who would be god had been precocious, ambitious, restless. A self-made god.

Kalgoorlie was a desert city now worn down to stones and rubble by the sand. The Ambassador's information, he said, had come mainly from the tradition of the people native to the place calling themselves the Sand People.

My own legend was not so fantastic. God that is say Michael Fluellen who wasn't god it was said also had two manifestations, one of which was as a conspirator who let a quantum lizard loose in the Soup hoping to thwart god's meddling. This lizard swam about making little random messes and fouling the Soup wherever it went. It was still there now, causing god no end of irritation. The conspirators there were four. They paid the price for annoying god and hindering his plans. One was dispersed into the Soup, two were made immortal, and one escaped into the mountains of the West Corner which one was Caron who was me for a time or I for her not to be metaphysical and even god didn't know what had become of her.

For a time I suspected her to be Nemesis, but she wasn't.

Kalgoorlie in its time before it was ground down to sand by sand was where mindthings were turned into things not metaphysical like the by Ng and Cassell on the transmat, or the lazarus as it began to be called when disembodied materials translocation began to be used on humans it was hoped that the lazarus could shorten the long trip between here and Terra which was where the roses and pine trees and Welsh people were before it was the Ruined World where everyone used to be. Some people still wanted to go there but that was foiled by the lizard, annoying more than just god.

A trip on the lazarus even across town to do some shopping would likely leave you scrambled somehow if you ran afoul of one of the data nests left by the lizard's wanderings through the Soup. Perhaps you would come out with one blue eye. Possibly three hands. A paranoid conviction that you were Nemesis.

This was the plight of the Terran Ambassador after three reincarnations.

It was a mystery why anyone would want to assassinate this man. It was a frivolous to kill an Ambassador who represented no one, nothing real, and anyway would just pop up again only maybe a bit different being transmatically recreated when the lizard kept messing with that. That nothing is real the first Ambassador said might be real he told me. His research in the archives suggested that might be true that either here or there was an illusion created by god and kept neatly hung in the closet and sent once a month to the cleaners. But after a while of this god was bored with us with the illusion became

patchy and threadbare and we would both vanish that is them and thus instead of getting sent to the cleaners or maybe just wrinkled with one button missing or maybe scoured away like Kalgoorlie or drowned by storms or torn to bits. Nil, poor, depressed, and demented.

Wherefrom and wherefor the Ambassador was unknown, and so his Nemesis kept trying to kill him which was rather a stupid project since he kept being reborn which was just as stupid since what did we need an Ambassador for anyway?

### ***FIRST MANIFESTATION***

So god asks me what I'm on about this persecution of his son, breaks into what I was thinking about the fourth re-assassination of the Terran ambassador, breaks in with that whispery voice in my ear and I say who do you mean? Who you talking to? And he says *Holm*, he says. I'm walking home from the embassy along the Boulevard Richard Lenoir and I walk through this voice like a puddle in the street and I turn around thinking maybe I got something on my shoe and he says again —

*Holm ap Helgar*, like it's just this spot, I can hear him only exactly here just in front of the walk sign and I stop this still and say who?

*Difficult question, girl* — and I say you aren't getting nowhere calling me girl, and who are you anyway? and that gets him going. *We are many, as she is. Does she know the boundary between mind and body, the edge between herself and the world, the porous skin between one universe and the next?*

Portentous talk, I said. You haven't answered the question.

*We are the world soul.*

What? Ludicrous.

*We think you will find it not so.*

Soul, I said, oozing a little contempt.

*We forgive your ignorance.*

Look, I replied. My feet are tired. It's been a long day. I'm going to sit in that café over there. I will invite you to my home some other time where we can look out on the limitless, timeless expanse of the universe in greater comfort. I'm afraid my hospitality is poor, but your call was unexpected.

*Désolés.*

Arrogant little bugger, aren't you?

*So it would seem to your limited powers, yes. We accept that.*

And your powers are not limited?

*Regrettably, they are.*

You will remedy that, I presume.

*We will.*

When?

*That is not an intelligible question, god admitted.*

So I imagine, I said, for a timeless being such as yourself.

God took himself off. I crossed the street, asked for some tea and rice, and carried it out back where there was a little heated patio I knew about. That's about enough of god, I thought, for one day.

I had not heard from god for a long time, not since before Orphans and Foundlings, that penalty box with the absurd acronym OAF, which is where they put you when god

gets pissed off at your parents, as he would have been in any case at my father for introducing randomness and chaos into his world or what he thought of as his. Certain personalities consider everything to be theirs until someone takes it away and when god is pissed people tend to disappear. Adolescents are often control addicts, as we know, particularly if they harbor grandiose illusions about these things. The invention of zero set him off. Introduced the notion of the void and he intended to put a stop to it. And then of course the zero goes and drags in infinity. God is afraid of infinity. Pi gives him the chills. Wait until he gets really old.

But at that time he was still a godlet bleating about wet diapers and peanut butter sandwiches and not something you could get into conversation with. Now he was a teenager complaining about someone persecuting his son? He *was* the son.

Now he's complaining about my name and wanting to see my ID. In my time among the OAFers I went by Caron but I can't think that, less than well-informed as he is, could have been fooled him at all, and it wasn't as if I were in hiding.. So when I was grown up and they kicked me out I renamed myself for an oak tree and took as a patronymic a Norse name meaning holy. Not to give away anything to god for deep symbolism. We don't speak Norse anymore. I asked about that and they said it was extinct which wasn't very helpful. The holy business wouldn't last anyway. Any children of mine would be ap Holm and that would be that.

The tea was relaxing but quickly grew cold, and the rice was no more than a lump of slag. As evening came on frost crept up from the river, which smelled of vinegar and rotting weeds. A layer of fog materialized. I was becoming anxious about being buttonholed again, when god rematerialized as a voice in my ear.

Can I get you something to drink? I asked. Here they prefer hot tea. Perhaps you would like a small bowl of rice.

*We need nothing. Sit. We will come to you again presently.*

But he didn't. I left a few coins on the table and went out into the dark streets for home.



As was foretold from birth, Olga Fluellen's destiny was not to be happy, but then the lives of prophets, jeremiahs, and voices in the wilderness seldom are. If you speak to god you are likely to become a little odd, and not much loved by your fellow creatures, among which must be included the other animals. After all, if they are sensitive to the faintest premonitions of earthquakes, tornados, and other such, or some say to eldritch phenomena, why not those in thrall to spiritual obsessions? Perhaps even trees, ancient as they are, or the rivers and very ocean are likely to draw back.

So the Seeker, the Oak of Helgar, waiting ready for her next apotheosis, was released while the other, the Little One, was held in thrall. Little One continued to search in the mud for he who had promised a story, for he who had broken his promise and left her with nothing.



Little One trudged through the slush on the Boulevard, making for some sanctuary, the refuge of her attic pension. She kicked unhappily at a ball of ice. At least there would be a fire of sorts to keep her warm. Or at thawed.

Disconsolate, she was paying little attention to her way and slipped on an icy patch. She didn't fall, a piece of bitter fortune as the streets were paved with rough stone and she might have been badly scraped if not run over. Pulling her thin coat of vole's fur closer, shivering now, she felt the approach of an augur. There was a certain dread which enclosed her, a miasma, which she had not felt now for years, not since she was released onto the street from Orphans and Foundlings, alone and homeless.

That was when she created the mask, or masque, of Holm ap Helgar for herself. It was a sort of cosmic bluster. A stick and daub hut within which to sit in the dark, snarling like a junkyard dog at anyone who intruded on her misery.

But that had passed. She rose slightly in the world, was given a pittance of money and a place to live, and occupation besides combing the shacks and godowns of the destitute on weekends, looking for someone in touch with the spirit world.

There was a messianic and penetrating stare in her pale blue eyes at those times. False shamans turned away in fear.

She recovered her footing. Cold tears crusted her vision.

Suddenly she went rigid. She felt a panicky expression cross her face like a ripple of acid and any awareness of her surroundings became dim — wax in her ears. Three people bumped into her, but now she was solidly planted, her heavy, muscular two meters not to be shifted. The others caromed off. The stream parted. Some muttered with aggravation, some glanced cautiously at her sideways, furtive.

Her lips moved soundlessly. Her gestures were merely flutters of a white hand, bare and bloodless with code. The distance between her and the passing crowd grew.

Then suddenly she was released. Her trembling, held in check by whatever had possessed her, broke free and, moving a foot, she again nearly fell on the ice.

Across the street a small bistro shone with a wan light, the sort of place which sells brown coffee and a limp croque-monsieur, with four or five stools pulled up to a metal bar attached to the wall beside the bar. She crossed and went in.

There was a welcome fug here, condensed from the air over the hot grill.

Tea, she said, expecting nothing but incomprehension, but tea there was, though the water was not quite hot enough. She ventured to ask for rice. That too was given, white rice mounded in a small blue bowl. Guessing at the cost, she put down on the counter a few coins, laying them one at a time, snapped flat under pressure of her thumb. It was a parsimonious gesture learned from years of parsimony. The coins were wiped off into the cook's hand and she took her cup and plate to a barstool.

Still shaking from the cold and her unsought mental storm, she sipped her soon-tepid tea, sampled the old rice, and gave purposeless thought to what had happened.

As a girl of ten she had sat one afternoon listening to her father tell a story of the mysterious Mr Ka while her mother kibitzed from the kitchen. She did not like Mr Ka, a feckless little man by turns childish, clueless, and preternaturally wise. Then her father broke off and told her to go wash her face. When she returned freshly scrubbed both her parents had vanished. After several days of this she began to run out of food and called for help.

Now here they were again, poking around, wanting to know. Everything.

The Ambassador has died. Of course he has. That's his business. What was he supposed to do.

She was, they said, to be given a different place to live, and different food to eat, and help in finding he who she sought. And why should she be given these things, which she

had not asked for and did not want? A man dressed in gray, wearing a silver cape and kepi, collected her one morning and took her to an office in a building where in the central court stood a leafless tree. Its branches were like scary fingers clawing at the cold wind that came in through the carriage entrance and swirled around the courtyard. Here, in an ill-lit dusty room a shabby man asked her prying questions about her parents and her intimate life. He carefully wrote down the answers and then, after giving her instructions on where she was to go and what she was to do there, crumpled up the answers and made them disappear exactly as her father had done when she was a child.

And now was she to disappear as well? And why? Because she was a homeless, lonely old woman who walked the parks and alleys talking to herself and waving her hands as if shooping away flies? Who knew why? Whoever knew but god?



After this rather enigmatic encounter several months passed before I heard from god again. The Eian Ambassador was assassinated for a fourth time. And then one morning I was prodded out of sleep by an intruder wearing a sort of burnoose of rustling silver-gray metallic cloth and speaking in that familiar hoarse whisper. He hustled me out of my sheets in my slippers saying that if I were to get my travel visa for the West Corner there must be no delay.

I don't want to go to the West Corner.

*The man you need to authorize your papers materializes only twice a year for a few hours in the morning.*

I have no intention of going to the West Corner. But here was this big elf in mufti wanting me to go to the office of some bureaucratic grunion and sure enough — bare walls and a rickety desk groaning under six months of dirt, obsolete tridees, cheap furniture, institutional green walls bare of art. Odd way to run a government, handing out things at random to people on the street.

A window looked out on a terrace with a single tree growing off center. Across stood an identical office building.

My elf-guide took himself off. My skin tingled. God again.

*Hello, said a dislocated voice. You have come for a passport? Do you have permission to emigrate?*

Not god. Voice as irritating as a fly and foolishly, I tried to swat it. This produced only a hissy laugh.

Ah well, said another voice just behind me. You don't expect levity from *him*.

I turned about. There was the petty bureaucrat himself sitting at ease in his lately empty chair. He had pushed aside some of the piles of tridees to give space for his elbows and his chin rested comfortably in his hands. The expression on his face was for the most part merry, but volatile.

Oh, I said, my apologies. I didn't see you —

*Quite right to apologize, god said.*

God is angry, the bureaucrat commented while he riffled through some documents he had brought in with him, signing here and there. He feels neglected and unfulfilled. He is surrounded by courtiers and sycophants and complains that he has no friends, no one to confide in. It's his own fault, of course. I tell him so, but he doesn't listen.

He doesn't seem much good at that, I said. Listening.

Oh my, no. You speak with him at your peril. I don't advise it. Well, it's a living. And then, of course, his meaning is not always perfectly clear. He does that on purpose, to keep people in their place. When it is not simply a whim. It amuses him to see his subjects struggle to find what is not there. He can be malicious at times.

He laid his hand on a very thick document, older than the most ancient tridee, hiding the title and authority from me. Memorandum, it said, the printed word peeking from between his fingers.

Now then. Enough of this banter. I have plenipotentiary authority to grant what you ask, if I choose. I so choose. It is done.

What is?

*Hah!* god interrupted. *As I thought, you do not know your own mind.*

Does anyone?

*Cheek, girl. Some do, usually those who don't have one.*

Well, my plenipotentiary huffed. Whoever it is you're looking for, god has certainly taken an interest. For that purpose you are permitted to go to the West Corner. Here are the documents necessary. You will, I think, regret it.

How is that?

Oh, my. It is very wet in the mountains there. Rains every day. I was posted to the West Corner for a year. Never saw the sun once. Can't think why anyone would go there on purpose.

I made no application to go there.

But you did.

Let me see it, I demanded.

But the bureaucrat only wagged his finger. Now and then, he said, it pleases god's fancy to bestow on someone, usually but not always humble, the gift of enlightenment. Of what use you may be to him I couldn't say.

*You suppose,* god said that annoying voice, *that we have some higher purpose. You forget that it is we who are the higher purpose.*

That's very well, said the cufflinked little man, but we have this to get though, and he patted the memorandum impatiently.

*We incline to your need.*

God's clerk began to read, words which evidently he was committed by policy to do, rather like a user's agreement which has to be checked off before one can go forward. I felt at risk of saying something impolite, or worse. But at last the garrulous man concluded. You know the rest of it, he said. It's the same. Up some ragged alley, down some crumbling stairs, caught in the street by patrol, shot dead.

I'm not dead, I objected.

Not at the moment, no.

I thought of the wanderers and fake shamans and oracles I had met so far, the soothless sayers, prayer-prayers, office-holders, corrupt and ignorant bureaucrats, the clever and doubly corrupt —

It says here, god's civil servant went on to say, laying his finger on the open page of his memorandum — That is, there is a note in the margin as to what I am to say in that case. That is, about your being dead. Now if you please, hear me.

But the voice of god reasserted itself.

*She has work to do,* god said. *Let up.*

Everyone is in a great hurry, I said god, sir, to put me to work but no one tells me what it is I'm supposed to be doing.

*Pshaw, girl. Listen up. You are wasting time. We care not, but you have little left. The person you seek sits in wisdom which we desire you to have.*

Who are you talking about?

*One of the immortals, sent into the mountains long ago to learn the Ancient Wisdom. And now why? you ask, why girl?*

Who, I said.

*Why? daughter of the race? To serve out his sentence, of course. Of what was he guilty? Anything you please. Everyone is guilty of something. If it comes to our attention we may punish the fault in whatever way gives us pleasure. Or we may not. Go. You wish it, we command it.*

The voice of god winked out. The energy which had held me turned green and released its grip. How much time had passed?

Well, said the bureaucrat, running his hand unnecessarily over his hair to smooth it. That was interesting. He closed the memorandum with a thump.

You haven't read that, surely, I remarked.

No. It was given me when I returned from lunch. It's rather longer than usual. Quite a story-teller, god.

So, I said. I've been commanded to go and study with the prophet. Whatever for?

Verily, he said, said Yorick, who is dead, the true tale be told by an idiot, and one of the best I ever heard. But as to its meaning — I'm no exegetic, you understand. Just an ordinary man.

What did that note in the margin say?

What I was to do if you were to start asking genealogical questions. Now here are your passport, visa, and other authorities. May you find him for whom you seek. Don't come back here, please. People like you provoke unpleasant things.



Thirty years of tramping about, visiting crazy old men, now and then crazy women, they living in hovels and godowns and shacks made of cardboard occasionally soaked and fallen in so that the shack had become a blanket which Littleone supposed might be warmer. Food and warmth were scarce in these places. The craziness was stereotyped as if it had been learned from *Saddhus and Prophets in Three Easy Lessons*. Who knew how many of these people there were and whether they were crazy because they were crazy, whether they were trying to get off the Great Wheel or just going for a ride on the Wiener Riesenrad or liked running around in their underwear or the cataleptics from the paralytics from the dead ones. And here was yet another one, just one man in the vast rain forest of the West Corner found out by some ghostly white specter glimpsed now and then among the trees pale and flickering in the dark like a marshlight, found out by following this naked Ariel who by some eldritch means knew what and where and would not go there too ethereal to be beseeched, lurking or hovering about my nighttime nest of tree branches and quilt of leaves to flit away in the morning. Finally this Caron-formed hut of sticks and daub, for Littleone was sure it was she, in a small clearing hidden in a thatch of sedges invisible to anyone but the invisible at that moment

vanished again into the cold rain seeping down the sleeping giants tall as fifty of her being.

Now what should Littleone call him found now too late for it to matter to someone who could have been doing something else all this while Nemesis perhaps. This ancient stick planted in the mud which his acolyte had the good sense to keep out of keeping watch on a rude three-legged stool to what purpose to wherefrom and back every night by some sort of penance drawn or condemned so perhaps not drawn to but drawn from as the entrails are drawn from dying malefactors still dying after years of penance this acolyte now rose to go out on some errand and I took the stool in my turn, after moving it twice to get out from under a drip. The two of us past and successor disciple nodded in greeting but said nothing and so his vigil over, he melted away. Littleone came here then every day for a week, so far without any notice from the Master, should she call him that Master Tzu, disingenuous so, for she knew very well who he was who was a god because she had known him from Ancient Days.

An hour into her first visit of the second week god stirred and opened his eyes. Her presence went unremarked. Presumably a new troll.

Another week passed — the concept of time was meaningless here. She found a merely damp corner to sleep in and sustained herself on the gruel which the acolyte brought for god who ate nothing at all.

Then, at a peak of impatience and frustration, she was noticed. *Please come in*, he said.

I'm already in.

This was the wrong thing to say. God acknowledged her claim with a little smile and disappeared again.

Another opportunity arose in a few days. Following what she took for good form she declared her longing for instruction. It was a good guess — god looked at her more closely, assessing her level of awareness, which he found inadequate.

*You have come from the World*, he said. *What did you learn there?*

Nothing.

*Yes, I can see that.*

I was told to come here.

*You were misinformed. Most people are.*

God's eyes closed and he returned to the state in which she had found him.

Over the next days this pattern repeated itself twice more. Littleone went away to rethink her strategy, returning only to go through the whole thing again as if she were a new supplicant.

Finally, her patience tried and ended, she allowed herself a harsh accusation and with that epithet of the old days, his name.

God awoke. Cursed awake she might say cursed he some immortal totem of mud with a dead stick headdress.

*Yes, I know who you are*, he said mildly. An hour later he returned from wherever he had been, smiled faintly, and reached for the food pot, out of which he ate a few morsels.

And so began the tale of the rise and fall of many worlds.



*So, young Oak, daughter of Helga, scion of saints and warriors, what have you learned?*

God again. What a pest. I sat down on a soggy moss cushion under a dripping larch tree. Nothing, I said.

*We thought as much. And have you found your Nemesis?*

Perhaps.

*We congratulate you,* said god with a heavy dose of sarcasm. *And what will you do now?*

Nothing, I said.

*Well thought, little one. You have learned wisdom after all. A poor sort, but 'tis thine.*

Little one. Don't call me that, you pimply boy.

There was a long silence following this insult. The air around me shimmered, began to coalesce as if, amazing to me, god had decided to materialize himself. What his material form might be was a mystery — traditionally, I think, Mystery that is capitalized.

The rapidly thickening air which now wrapped me was frigid. I began to shiver. The air warmed slightly, but then the whole apparition vanished. The air instantly lost its liquid form. I took a deep breath. It is not comfortable or reassuring to be hugged by god.

So, I said. My quest is over?

*Not much of a quest, we think.*

We mortals do the best we can.

God fell silent. The wet moss soaked my leggings. Water ran from my hair into my eyes which I refused to wipe away. It blurred my vision, but there was little to see. The dense forest was dark at mid-day. It smelled of damp wood, with an acrid faint odor of mulched leaves, just as it must have been when the People were few and the wood a dangerous place.

Now along came the hermit's acolyte bearing his bowl of cold gruel. Seeing me, he stopped on the path. A moment passed.

Who are you talking to?

No one, I said.

Oh, him, the acolyte said with disdain and went on his way.

And god laughed, that hissy wheeze which passed for divine humor.

Thus endeth the conversation.