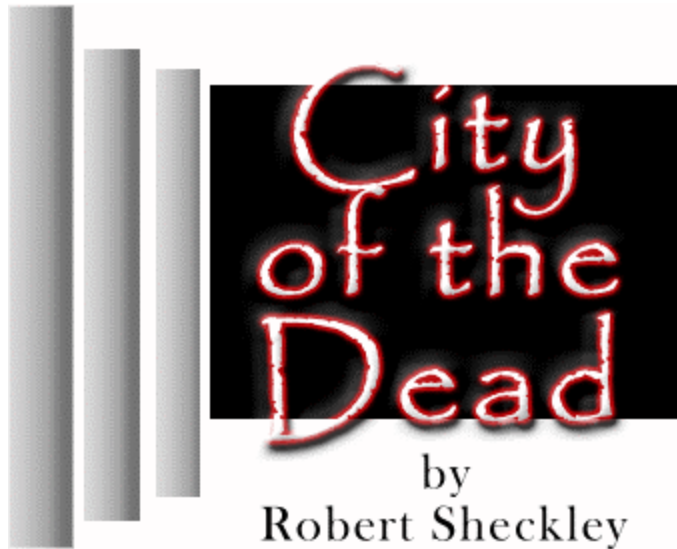


Gilford Graphics
International
presents



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Mr. Sheckley joins Mr. Stephen King in his attempt to
revolutionize the publishing industry.

We fly through the streets of the city of the dead, a ghost among ghosts, and we turn the corners and respect the masses of the buildings, even though we could fly right through them. This is a documentary about hell, not a commentary. The city of the dead, the city of hell is abstract enough without us worsening the situation by flying through walls that are supposed to be solid.

It is quite wonderful to be able to fly through the streets. Most of this city is built of a soft white marble, and it is a very classical sort of place. Plenty of pillars so that you could almost think you were in Athens in about 400 b.c. But the streets are empty, there's no traffic of any sort, the city of the dead is a dead sort of place, although people have tried to start some entertainment.

It stands to reason, what else do the dead have to do but entertain themselves? What to do has been a problem in hell for a long time. What is death for? What's it all about? This sort of thing begins to bother people once they find themselves dead. The first thing they do is check out their situation. OK, I'm dead, I've got that. So is this supposed to be punishment? If so, what for? Is it for my sins? Which sins, specifically? Is atonement permitted? What do I have to do to atone? Or is it a question of serving a specific sentence? Or is this one forever, and should we just relax it and take it one day at a time?

The main question of course is, how long does this go on? Most people would even take "Forever" as an answer. But that's not what they tell you, once you start asking. On the contrary. You are led to believe from the start that hell is for a period of time, after which there will be something else. Maybe this is the only way they can get you to think over your life. Because you're going to have to do something about it. Or so you think

"By the way," I said, "would you like a pomegranate seed?"

I was Hades, a large well-built fellow with black hair and a black closely trimmed beard. I was a sort of piratical looking fellow, though soft in nature to belie my bold looks. My grabbing Persephone the way I did was the first thing of its kind I had ever done. Put it down to irresistible impulse. There she was, gathering flowers in the meadows with her girlfriends, and I was riding by in my golden chariot drawn by my four fiery black horses, and the next thing I knew she was in my arms and there was hell to pay.

Persephone of course was beautiful. She had long light brown hair that reached to her waist. Her nose, also, was quite finely drawn. It was one of those perfect Greek noses that merge up into the forehead.

That was then and now was now, six months later, and she and I were sitting in the little shaded platform on the banks of the Styx, at the place where Charon ties up his houseboat. She looked at the two pomegranate seeds I was holding out to her, and said, "You're not trying to trick me, are you?"

"No" I told her, "I'm not a tricky sort of a guy. I don't play games. That's not how we operate here in hell. We're direct, straightforward, just like I was when I kidnapped you in the first place. Do you remember that day?"

"I remember it all too well," Persephone said. "I was out in the fields, harvesting with my friends. You came riding up in your chariot of gold drawn by four fiery horses. You were wearing black.

"And I lifted you up with one arm, first twisting my cloak back so it would be out of the way. I put my arm around your waist and lifted you into my chariot."

"The girls just stood by and gaped," Persephone said. "And when Mother found out, she didn't know what to make of it."

"She knew perfectly well what to make of it," I told her. "It had been prophesied long ago that this would happen: that I would see you gathering flowers with the other nymphs and fall in love with you. And it was the first time I ever fell in love. I'm not like the other gods, you know, Apollo and

Poseidon and all that lot. They're forever falling in love and swearing that this time it's for keeps. And then they're off again next day after the next bit of skirt. But I am the King of Death and I only fall in love once."

"Poor Hades!" Persephone said. "Will you be very lonely without me?"

"I'll have my memories," I told her. "I've had a wonderful half year with you. I've loved having you on the throne beside me. I've been so happy that you're my queen in hell."

"I quite liked being queen of hell," Persephone said. "It's been special.. I mean, hell is not like some other country. Hell is everything after it's been used up and turned all soft and easy to handle."

"Hell is the place of appreciation," I told her. "On earth, when you're living, there's not enough time to really get into things. But here in hell everything can take as long as it needs. There's nothing to fear because we're dead already. But also there's nothing to feel bad about because in some weird way we're still living."

"The afternoons are so long," Persephone said. "They're like the afternoons when I was a girl. They seemed to just go on and on, and the sun is reluctant to climb down the sky. But here there is no sun. Just a faint sepulchral glow across the marches

that at irregular intervals lightens and darkens. But no definite sun. I miss the sun."

I nodded. "We have light, but no sun. There's moonlight, though, and the special light from the torches that light the halls of the palace of death."

"Yes, and they cast long shadows," Persephone said. "I used to be afraid of shadows, but in hell there isn't anything to fear."

"No," I said, "the worst has happened and it's all over. Won't you try this pomegranate seed?"

She took one of the pomegranate seeds I was offering her and put it on the palm of her narrow white hand. "Why do you want me to eat it?" she said. "It's a trick, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said, "I can keep no secrets from you. It's a trick."

"What happens if I eat it?"

"It means I will still have some claim on you even in the land of the living. It means that you will return to hell."

"Return to hell?" Persephone said. "But I was planning to return and visit you anyway."

I shook my head. "You don't know what you'll do when you get back into the upper world with its

light and air. Once you're fully alive again, you'll forget me. And you'll wonder how you ever came to enjoy this gloomy palace with its dark courtyards and the river of forgetfulness always running by with the dead souls swimming just below its surface and the weeping willows murmuring just overhead. You'll think to yourself, 'He must have bewitched me! No one in his right mind goes for a holiday in hell.'"

She smiled and touched my hand. "Maybe you have bewitched me. I'm quite content here in hell."

"Then eat the pomegranate seed," I told her.

She did not move. Her gaze was far away. She said after a while, "Achilles and Helen asked us over this evening for dinner. You must make my apologies."

We freeze on Hades and Persephone, and then we cut away from them, leave the river bank, track across green rolling meadows with topiary sculpture that makes the place look like a funeral home or a French park, and we continue to the palace of the dead. From the middle distance it like a small city. The palace is the composite of many palace-shaped buildings. They are all crowded together, and some are a dozen levels high. You see all sorts of shapes in these buildings made up of many other buildings that make up the city of the dead. There are domes of all sorts, and spires, and many shapes, both curved and cubical. Binding them all together are narrow roadways from many different levels. From many of the buildings you can walk out a window

onto an upper floor and cross directly, or by a little catwalk, to the next building.

The lighting of the city of the dead is like moonlight. Or like late afternoon sunlight in winter as seen from behind a bank of clouds. It is not night, it is not day. Twilight is the eternal hour in the city of the dead.

There's not a lot to do around here. But if you're bored, you can watch the people step out their windows and take to the catwalks to cross from one part of the city to another. There are wires that connect everything to everything else here, and some people use them as shortcuts, Tiptoeing along the high wires to get from place to place. They do this clumsily, because few of the dead, just as few of the living, have any acrobatic ability. They use the catwalks and high wires anyway, no one fears falling. When you fall from a catwalk in the city of the dead, you tumble down to the ground slowly, slowly, like a shadow falling. If you happen to bounce off a cornice or two, or graze yourself on a gargoyle, or catch yourself on a sharp projecting bit of roof, it is no matter. You can't hurt yourself, you're already dead. You can't feel any pain. Pain is forbidden. That is because pleasure is forbidden.. Or unlikely, almost the same thing.

Where there is no pleasure, there's no pain. Some might think that a good tradeoff. The dead in the palace of the dead don't think so. Being unable to hurt yourself just makes the boredom that much

more excruciating. There are people in hell who cut their throats every evening. It doesn't do anything. It's just a gesture. But gestures are important when you don't have anything else, and all you have in hell are gestures. Some make gestures of pain, and cut their own throats. Others step out the windows and take to the catwalks and high wires and go visiting. Is visiting a pleasure? Not in hell. It is a gesture. The people of hell don't despise gestures. After you're dead, gesture is all that's left.

We zoom through a doorway, segue down a corridor, slither through a doorway, do the whole thing several times, and then we come to a stop in a large room. Achilles is sitting in a lyre-backed chair. We know it is him because affixed to his back there is a bronze plaque reading ACHILLES.

The matter of easy identification has been found necessary in hell, where unnecessary confusion is frowned upon. It is more than enough work just to be dead, without wondering who the people all around you are. This plaque system is for the benefit, not just of the inhabitants, but for future audiences which will look at the stories of people in this place on films made by us, the people who will either go back in time to record them, or build them up as imaginative constructs in the computer that can build anything that can be imagined. And looking just beyond that, we foresee a time when secondary and tertiary images will be capable of generation based not only on primary sources but also people's different versions of those primary

sources; and while this might not strictly be the only kind of imagination--the jury's out on that one--it certainly is one of the possible sorts, a sort of synthesis manqué so the least we can do is keep everyone easily identifiable.

Back in the real world, of course, people are rarely found just sitting in a chair, not reading, not watching TV, not even thinking. But these are not realistic stories in that the sort of detail one would like--the incomes of the protagonists, their main loves and hates, their family tree for three generations, is unfortunately missing. But Achilles does in fact happen to be just sitting as we turn our attention to him. He spends a lot of time doing this. The problem of doing nothing is one of the greatest problems in hell, one which people have put a lot of attention into but not solved yet. Achilles certainly has not solved it. He is just sitting in his chair, staring into the middle distance.

Helen of Troy enters from the right.

It's a mistake to try to describe or even photograph the features of someone as famous, as numinous, as Helen of Troy, because her features exist mostly in dreams, where they are made up of the images generated by all the men who have ever dreamed of her, or at least a significant cross-section thereof, because the computer only needs a cross-section of data, not all of it. Since we don't use the dreams of everyone who ever dreamed of Helen, her reproduced image is a little blurred around the

nose, though I think we captured her general shape quite nicely. Suffice it to say she's a good-looking dame of everyone's predilection, and she wears her bronze plaque with distinction, so you think, looking at her, she walks like she's Helen of Troy, and that of course is who she is. She wears a simple frock made of up silken ambiguities, and around her head is a golden lie.

"Hello, Achilles, " she says. "I'm just back from the marketplace. Boy, have I got a story to tell you."

Achilles had been staring off into the middle distance, paying no attention to his wife, Helen of Troy. But on hearing her words, he turned his head..

"How could you hear anything? There's never any news around here. What could ever happen in hell? Just people's opinions, that's all you get in hell.. So what could you have heard in the marketplace? I suppose the philosophers have figured out another proof for the possibility or the impossibility of this place existing? Frankly, I couldn't care less. It's a matter of minor importance, whether this place exists or not. But even if they have a proof about it one way or the other, it is still hardly news."

"Do stop making speeches," Helen said "It isn't your turn. Despite your hypothesizing, I do happen to have real and incontestable news of a timely and late-breaking nature. That gives me the right, not only to speak, but also to embroider images and use words in strange and unlikely ways. For it is well

known that matters must never be spoken of directly, and that one must not take refuge in the subterfuge which the Heisenbergian position forces on us."

"If you got some news," Achilles said brutally, "what is it?"

"That approach is much too simple, my darling," Helen said. "Once the bearer of news has discharged her novelty, it is all over, she has no more news to impart, she is forced to return to her original rather static position, Unappreciated Love Object. Me. Can you fancy that? No, don't be too quick, my friend, I need to get some value out of the fact that I might even carry news, without being forced prematurely to divulge it."

"You run a fine line," Achilles said, "since what you mean is that you carry the imputation that you carry news, rather than the news itself. And an imputation is of much less value than the fact it imputes toward."

"What I have heard is weighty enough," Helen said, "for me to interrupt you and to tell you that what I have to tell is even now taking place, but out of your sight, my dear Achilles. Now, wouldn't you like to know what is happening?"

The scene froze. The camera or whatever it was dissolved into a light show. This was pleasurable in its own right, and mildly hypnotic as well. The dead

have found that everything goes better when you're mildly hypnotized. In fact, there are some who say that death itself is but a state of mild hypnosis, or, to be more specific, that there is no such thing as death, since what we call death is merely a pathological hypnotic state from which we cannot waken.

Be that as it may, the camera was powered through a cable that trailed out through the window, from which it hung in a great catenary loop so that, considering it as a roadway, we could travel along the curve, and see, at the top, a little house, under which the stream that is the cable flows. In the several rooms of this house above the torrent, there are various activities going on. We make a choice, go through the nearest door, and we see that we are in some sort of a control room. There's a man sitting there. Hello, it's me! I look closer to see what I am doing.

I see that I am engaged in some extraordinary work involving symbols and dials and buttons. By manipulating the controls, I can put together all the inputs from all of the selves who are signaling to me through the many threads that connect this place to everywhere else. It forms a beautiful tapestry. Or would if I could ever get it all together. Actually, I don't quite have it down yet. Or, even more likely, I have no idea what to do with it after I get it all together. Assuming I ever do.

I decide that I'll return to this place at some other time. There's a lot of stuff here that interests me. Not necessarily you, the audience for whom I'm spinning this tale. Why should you care what happens to me? But maybe you do, since this is likely your problem too, since everybody is everybody else. But it is time to return to Achilles and Helen.

"I'll hold it back no longer," Helen said. "For the sake of the story I'll put aside the byways of statement and tell it to you forthright. The fact is, Achilles, someone is leaving Hell today."

Achilles was stunned, but not by Helen's statement. In fact he barely registered Helen's statement, astounding though it was. Another realization had come to him, and its even more monstrous implications had flooded his mind and was presently using up all referential emotion. The fact of the matter was, Achilles suddenly saw that he was a provisional figure, and it really blew him out. Achilles had always considered himself immortal, without even thinking too much about it, and to realize now, on the basis of one tightly packed fragment of information that had come careening out of the god knows where and impacted in his mind, to realize that the collection of circumstances that brought him to life today in the mind of the computer might not come to pass again soon, or perhaps even ever, well, it was really a little much.

Provisional! It was an astounding thought, and Achilles forced himself to contemplate it without shrinking. Provisional meant that he was a manipulable concept in someone else's mind, and it meant that he wasn't even important enough to that mind to ensure securing him for another appearance at a later date. Because the indications were clear, this entity who was doing this dreaming was about to shut down, go off line, take itself out of circuit, shift its attention-energy elsewhere, attend to something else. While that was going on, Achilles would be literally nowhere until he was brought back into this mind again. And when was that likely to happen? Perhaps never. Because Achilles realized (and it was a hell of a thing to become aware of) that he was as likely as not never to be thought of again, and certainly not in this context, unless he could do something, make some sort of impression on the entity dreaming him so that the entity, after taking care of his own unimaginable concerns, would call him up again rather than some other character. Some quick research convinced Achilles that this was the first time the computer had ever conjured him up, and the whole damned construct was likely to crumble into dream-dust unless the computer did the hard work necessary to give the damn thing some zing so that he would call the city of the dead back into existence on subsequent occasions.

But how likely was that? Achilles ground his teeth in frustration. He was going to have to try to bribe the computer. What present could he make to bribe the Computer-dreamer who was the one who had

synthesized all the available views of Achilles that Achilles was now cognating? How could he convince him the errant and light-minded dreamer that he, Achilles, was worth coming back for?

"I'll put it to you as directly as I can," Achilles said. "I'm trying out for Voice. I'm not asking for an exclusive. I want to be a Viewpoint. And I know you're looking for one. I'm also trying to sell mood. I'm trying to talk you into making the City of the Dead a regular stop on your mental itinerary. I know you've been looking for a place like this."

The computer didn't answer.

Achilles said in a soothing voice, "I know what you're scared of. That you'll make this commitment and then find out that this concept is not interesting. That it will not solve, all by itself, the problems of creativity and recombination and energy. That's it, isn't it? I hail your caution, applaud your uncertainty. That will make it all the stronger when you choose the right one, this one. Helen, why don't you say a few words?"

Helen smiled into the camera, and said, in low thrilling tones, "I think we can accommodate you very nicely. We're stage people, you see, Achilles and I, and we perform best when we're set into motion. We're not your tight-lipped modern people. If it's words you want, we have a lot of them for you. Daring words, lying words, but not boring words. Let us entertain you with the story of your life."

Achilles touched her shoulder. "Well said, Helen." And now he turns his face directly to us. We blink, unsure what to do, staring into the blinding beauty of Achilles' face. Because this Achilles is the Achilles of infinite thought over the possibility of great deeds in the world. Achilles also represents the hopelessness of falling in love with the wrong woman. Looking at him we realize, through a swift glance at the sidebar, that Briseis, the love of his life, isn't even represented in this story, her whereabouts are unknown, and Achilles has been paired with Helen for purely symbolic reasons, two troupers acing out a part. "We've done what we could," Achilles said. "Now tell me what you learned in the marketplace."

"Hades, King of Hell, has gone out of the city and across the little streams that surround Hell. He has gone to the near shore of the Styx, where there is a meadow suitable for a picnic. But he does not picnic there, Hades, though he has caused a feast to be laid for his guest, Persephone."

"Persephone? Hades walks with Persephone, the Queen?"

"Of course. Who else would he walk with? You know how besotted he is of her."

"That's because she's living," Achilles said. "People are much more attractive when they're living. But she is a lovely woman in her own regard,

and of course a first-class nature myth of considerable antiquity. Being a very old myth gives a girl a certain panache, don't you think?"

"Of course I do," Helen said. "You think being Helen of Troy is jello? Nobody knows about Persephone any more. But everybody knows Helen."

"I know you're wonderful," Achilles said soothingly, because he didn't want to get her started. He wanted to hear her news, wanted to know what was going on with Hades, because Hades' condition was of importance to Achilles because he figured if he could put some pressure on Hades there might be a way to get out of this place. Because Achilles had by no means accustomed himself to being dead. At least not all of the time.

So if you're Achilles you attend to reality, even if reality is just being dead. But what you want is this nice interior place protected from bill collectors, jealous lovers, bailiffs, lawyers, wives and ex-wives, husbands and children in all degrees of alienation, and all the rest of the people who live out there, just outside your head, in a world of their own. They're a little much, aren't they, other people? That's why you like to come here, to the City of the Dead. That's why we're trying to convince you, or rather, demonstrate to you, that our City of the Dead is one hell of a good construct and is worthy of your most careful attention. We'll come back to this from time to time. The important thing to remember is this:

we are the party of freedom.

We cut back to Hades. Me.

Persephone was saying, "When Achilles hears about this, he'll go crazy. He wants like crazy to get out of hell."

"Achilles thinks he had a lot more fun when he was alive than was actually the case. He makes too much over living."

"Tell me the truth" Persephone asked me. "Is being alive really that good?"

I shrugged. "Achilles thinks so. But that's just one dead man's opinion."

Persephone and I were sitting together beside a black poplar and close to an enormous weeping willow, its branches trailing in the black waters of Lethe which flowed silently past us with a slight gurgle, like a dead man's gasp. You could see low gray shapes across on the far shore but it was not possible to make out what they were. I was strangely happy. Being with Persephone always brought up that mood in me. She made hell seem brighter. Although gray clouds forever overhung this place, they seemed majestic and inspiring today rather than ominous and sad. I was happy in hell. Which was lucky because I was king. Or, I should say I was almost happy and I was virtual king.

I looked at Persephone's hands. The one that held the pomegranate seed was on the other side, away from me. I couldn't see if she had taken the seed or not. I supposed not. It seemed almost as if she had forgotten about it. But how could she have forgotten? The weight of all that stagecraft pressed on my soul. I knew something was about to happen.

Then, very faintly from the direction of the palace, I heard a jingling sound. Persephone heard it too. She said, "That's the little bells on Demeter's harness. It's the harness she put on the bullocks that draw her cart. She is coming for me, as we agreed."

"Yes," I said. For I had been forced to agree to Persephone's returning to the upper world. The weird old ladies who make up what you could call the Supreme Court of Hell had handed down a restraining order on me. Cease and desist. Give the wench up. I had briefly contemplated revolt. But quickly wised up. I didn't stand a chance against the living. Not even if all the dead fought for me, which was far from sure. Trouble is, the dead don't fight worth a damn. Dying seems to take something out of them. It would be slaughter.. There's nothing the living like better than killing the dead. They consider us evil. A case of projection if I ever saw one. But impossible to fight against.

And anyhow, I was in the wrong, snatching her off the face of the earth like I'd done was against the rule. I was in the wrong. And being in the wrong weakened my case.

The way it was originally set up, when Zeus, Poseidon and I divided all creation between us after we succeeded in killing old Cronus, our rules were very simple and clear. Each to be supreme lord of his own realm, and no poaching on the terrain of any of the others. These rules were not always followed in full. But potentially, if anyone had a complaint, this was the rule they referred back to. I knew that but I took her anyhow. I took her because I wanted her. But my desire had no standing in the law. And even though Persephone was the most important thing in my life, such as it was, because I think you understand now that the life even of a king of hell is not to be compared to that of the most miserable living human being, or so the philosophers say, I was bound by the rule of law concerning cosmic property and all that relates to it, unfair and arbitrary though that rule might be. But you simply must have the rule. Your life is nothing without rules, and not even death is anything much without its rules.

"The seed," I said. "What about the seed?"

She opened both her hands. They were empty. "Oh," she said. "I must have dropped it." And yet there was lightness in her voice. Nothing very playful ever happens in hell so I didn't really know how to react to it.

"Don't tease me," I said. "Do you have the seed? Or did you drop it? Or did you conceal it and plan to take it later?"

She bent forward and kissed me on the forehead. "Of course I'm going to tease you. Teasing, my love, is exactly what you need. You're all too gloomy and serious here."

"You've changed all that," I told her. "You've brought a lightness and a pleasure to hell that I never thought possible. Won't you leave me now with some hope that you'll return?"

"Oh, you'll always have that hope," she said, "no matter what I do or say. It's certainty that you really want, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," I said. "Can't I have that? The certainty of your return for six months of every year?"

She shook her head but she was smiling. "Certainty is a very salient quality of your realm. Everybody knows exactly where they stand, which is nowhere. There seems to be nothing quite as certain as death. I think that's what Achilles really objects to about being here. That's what you dead people have grown very accustomed to. 'Maybe death is bad,' you say to yourself, 'but at least it's reliable, at least I can count on it.'"

"Sure we say that," I said.

"That's because you're dead," Persephone pointed out. "But I'm not, I'm alive. I'm not bound by your rules. I'm a creature of the realm of life. Where I come from, we have no certainty. Everything changes from better to worse, from worse to better. There's always hope and there's always despair."

The sound of the bullock's bells grew louder. And then the wagon itself came into sight, decked in flowers, drawn by six garlanded heifers. Demeter herself was standing in the front looking stern and classical, her usual look. She had a little whip in her hand made of grapevine. Her hair was blowing free and she brandished her whip in the air in salutation when she saw Persephone.

Demeter is one of those people who are important but you don't want to deal with them. They're so significant that you don't want to shortchange them, but they don't play any part in your story so how much characterization do they need? Does a personification of Autumn need a mole on her chin? Must we give her a dumpy figure, and flinty, unrelenting eyes. Yes, the eyes, maybe. But not the rest. She comes in riding standing up in a bullock cart. You know what kind of woman would do that. Need we say more?

Persephone rose, then she bent over and kissed me once, lightly, on the lips. Before I could put my arms around her, she had drawn away. She stepped

up lightly into Demeter's cart. And soon they were gone.

Hades stood there with a stupid look on his face. She was gone. And he had no one to talk to. It looked like he was going to have to monologue.

Suddenly she was back with her cart and her disapproving mother and her garlanded bullocks. The whole shot. The eternal recurrence! Hades' heart leaped.

"I forgot to remind you about Achilles and Helen," she said. "You'll have to cancel our dinner with them."

"You did remind me," I said.

"I did?" Persephone said.

"You did," I said. "Previously. But I'm glad you came back. There was something I was going to ask you."

"I thought you'd never get around to asking me anything," Persephone said. "I know you love me, but you're entirely too silent and gloomy about it. At least you could talk about it a little. Yes, I'll be pleased to answer. What do you want to ask?"

"What I want to ask," I said, "is that I heard that you know what is happening to Tantalus these days, and I wanted you to tell me."

"I'll be happy to," Persephone. "I'll be as quick as possible, mother," she called out to the old woman in the shawl driving the bullocks, her mother, Demeter. Her mother nodded resignedly. It was enough she was getting her daughter back. No sense offending her by interrupting her story.

TANTULUS

Persephone, I've always found Uncle Tantalus an interesting figure. You know his general circumstances, I assume. Waist deep in mud in a swamp. Huge rock suspended above him on a thin copper wire. The rock never drops, of course, but the suspense is nevertheless intense, because it was written in by Zeus himself that no one should take anything for granted concerning the boulder, it could drop at any time, there was no story device forestalling it, even though we always pick it up at a moment when the boulder is just hanging there solid as a rock. There is no way around such a situation except by arbitrary rule: You will feel anxiety for Tantalus on account of the boulder over his head. Do that or we'll strike the Greek Myth set.

Tantalus is standing there in a muddy little pool on the banks of the Styx up to his chin in water. But each time he bends over to take a drink, the water recedes from him, leaving his face caked with black mud and him with the nickname given him by the Corybantes, Old Dirty mouth. No water for Tantalus. That's the first rule.

Next, from branches of the willow tree near which he is chained, from drooping branches hang great snack foods, whole pastramis, liverwursts, salamis of every size, sort and description, cheeses like the world has never seen, composed salads, beautifully cooked vegetables suspended in cobwebs, themselves edible.

But of course, you guessed it, when Tantalus tries to eat anything, the thing is pulled out of his hands and is always just out of his reach. So he's standing there up to the chin in water he can't drink surrounded by foods he can't eat and this is Zeus's idea of a really cruel punishment.

But in hell you get used to anything and if Tantalus couldn't drink the water, at least he could feel it, the feel of water lapping around his legs. They hadn't taken that away. Couldn't. What would be left if he couldn't feel the water he stood in?

The water was really feeling good this morning. Sometimes that happens even in hell. They try to gross you out, but sometimes they slip up. This was Tantalus at his best, trying to make the best of his lot. Inviting friends over for a banquet even if he couldn't eat it himself.

His guests came from far and wide. From all parts of hell. Soon they were all assembled. And then Tantalus addressed them.

"My friends," he said, "you will forgive me if I don't get out of the water just now. It's my whim to entertain you while standing chin-deep in this rather delicious flow."

The fact was, Tantalus had been in hell so long that he had been granted certain privileges. Like the right of bathing in any river of hell of his choosing. This morning it was the Lethe. Of all the rivers of Hell, this was his favorite. The gods had dug mud pits on the banks of all the rivers of hell, and planted willow trees there to carry the food, and Tantalus could stand in any mud-pit he wanted just as long as he gave the people who arrange this sort of thing a little advance notice so they could set everything up.

It had taken Tantalus quite a long time to talk Hades and the other gods into giving him free access to the rivers. After all, he had pointed out, I'm not trying to mitigate my sentence. It has been indeed pointed out that I am indeed doomed to stand until eternity with water up to my chin, and that's all very well, I accept that. But why shouldn't I have different waters and different views?"

At first nobody paid any attention to him. Then his case was finally heard by the Judges.

Rhadamanthys, chief god of the judges of the dead, had at first refused to listen to Tantalus' argument. "It's not traditional," he grumbled.

"No," Tantalus replied, "but there's no rule against it. What isn't forbidden is allowed."

Rhadamanthys, Minos, and the other judge hadn't been interested in getting into it, certainly not at first. It looked like a lot of trouble and they had plenty of work on their hands. There was a lot to do back in those days.. People were always dying and coming through from Earth, arriving at the great crossroads where the judges of the dead sat, showing up in droves, hundreds, thousands, and then millions. There was scarcely time to judge the tenth part of them. Their stories were in many ways remarkably similar.

Most of the souls waiting to be judged were clad in winding-sheets. Some still had their jaws bound with the graveyard bandages. A few had managed to bring money with them, and some of them had quite a lot of money, because although Charon demanded but a single obol, several of the more aristocratic families had stuffed several obols, or a shekel or two, or even an entire talent of silver into their mouths. It was better than looking cheap.

It is well-known that Charon, the boatman of the dead, demands payment for ferrying dead souls to Hades--one obol, cash on the barrelhead. Since there are no pockets in shrouds, the dead used to carry their money down to hell in their mouths.

The reason for payment to Charon, and the whole subject of money in hell, forms an interesting and

permissible side issue. There is no use for money in hell. You only need money for buying and selling, and earth's the place for that, not hell. Nothing's for sale in hell, and people down there get into a terrible mental condition due to atrophy of the buying gland. They say that no matter how long he lives in hell, a mortal never gets over the memory of the convenience stores of earth. There are none in hell, nor are there inconvenience stores, though it's an interesting idea. So, nothing to buy, but form was important.

Nevertheless, he refused to take people aboard except for money. The money less dead used to gather on the Styx's near shore and complain. It is a terrible thing, having to listen to the dead whine. They would stand or lie in the mud of the riverbank and cry to Charon, asking to be taken across anyhow, for free, consider it a public service. Charon would just glare at them and say, "No free rides, not even in hell!"

It became a scandal, the way the penniless dead were piling up on the earth side shore.

Charon was a stickler for form. He charged for the sake of form, not for the money. He had no use for people's obols. He had a great stack of them that he kept in his locker back in Styxville, in the boathouse where he brought his houseboat in for repairs from time to time and as occasion demanded. For there are dangers even to crossing the Styx and if you think dead is the last word danger wise, that just

shows you haven't seen what can go wrong after you're dead.

The famous people among the dead had no trouble getting across, whether they had money or not. No one was going to stop a famous courtesan like Lais of Corinth, or Sappho, who was said to be able to discourse more cleverly than Socrates. By the time Rome became a power, the custom of putting an obol in the mouth of the dead had fallen into abeyance, not least for the lack of obols that a bankrupt and discredited Greece no longer sent forth into the world. But the old obol-in-the-mouth construct still remained. But it didn't matter; no one was going to keep a Roman empress out of hell just because her tiny white teeth were not clenched over a copper coin.

It had taken Tantalus a while to get used to visits from Roman Empresses who hadn't even been gleams in their daddy's eyes back in his day. They came to visit him because he was one of the sights, and they asked him questions all respectful-like because Tantalus was one of the old ones, one of the first settlers, one of the original population of Hell, The First Damned, they called themselves, the world's first criminals,

Tantalus had seen a lot of changes going on over the years that he had been here. What the hell, he used to tell the new recruits who came to him for advice, it isn't so bad a place. You can get used to anything. Even hell. Maybe even especially hell.

Because when the worst has befallen you, there really is nothing else to fear.

SISYPHUS

The camera swung into action again, forefront of the shockwave of recognition, speeding down long dusty corridors with the reflected light gleaming off them, and, in its ingratiating manner, stopped to point out that Tantalus had some old friends down here. Take Sisyphus, for example, and we cut to a big bald old guy with a beard, condemned to carry a boulder up the side of a steep mountain, then, when he reached the top, roll it back to the bottom again.

That was all right as far as it went. Trouble is, no one said how long he should keep on doing it. Sisyphus continued to roll his boulders down the mountainside long after his punishment ought to have been over, long past the time when he should have been released in his own recognizance.

But no, they kept Sisyphus working. Sisyphus got a lot of wear but he didn't wear out because human spirit is eternal and a good thing too, it needs all the longevity it can get. Sisyphus used to go through a lot of boulders.. Letting boulders fall back down the mountain was part of his job, so he can't be accused of wanton destruction. It's just that no one had thought through the ecological consequences. Because when he was on the mountaintop he would release the stone and it would roll down the mountain, what could be simpler. But they kept on

having to bring him fresh boulders, and they finally even had to change his mountain, because he simply wore it away with his boulder-rolling. Sisyphus' boulders cut deeper and deeper paths into the mountainside, making a scalloped path and finally wearing it all away. So the people in charge of that sort of thing had to go all over trying to find suitable boulders for him to carry up. The boulder couldn't be just any slab or rock; it had to be quite round otherwise it wouldn't roll all the back way down to the bottom, except that sometimes it broke into pieces before it got there. And that also took its toll.

The camera swings into view again and considers for our delectation the mechanism of temptation. We dolly back to

Tantalus in the nicest way we know how. We get serious for a moment. We know--what need to tell us again?--that the earthly vision consisted of fruits and roasted meats and other good things dangled from the branches of trees above Tantalus' head--tantalizingly--which they jerked back out of his reach when he reached for them. So of course after a while he didn't reach for them any more. But no one thought about that.

In any event, all that food had to be renewed almost daily, just the same as if he had made a meal of it. Because you can't tempt a man with a moldy roast and a bunch of rotten grapes. So you could say that in order for there to be a punishment, Tantalus,

though he never tasted a morsel, still went through a hell of a lot of food.

And as times changed, and new certainties came and went, the style of his meals changed, also.

In the beginning they tempted him with simple fare: oat cakes, radishes and onions, and an occasional bit of roasted lamb. When a new administration came in, some thinking was done about all this.

"This classical hell of ours," one of the chief administrators pointed out at a recent meeting, "is an important interstellar tourist attraction. Millions of people come here nightly in their dreams. Millions more are brought here in one-way or another. Even alien peoples come to visit us. We are an important exhibition; I could almost say a diorama of man's spirit. And it is necessary for us to put on a good show."

This became law and there was a great hustle and bustle in the halls of the administration of ancient halls and monuments. Everything had to be refurbished. In Tantalus' case, the whole exhibit was to be spruced up and this meant new menus. Cooks were trained to prepare the newer more modern meals that the menus called for, volunteers were not in sufficient supply so some people who were not actually cooks by any stretch of the imagination were especially condemned to do this work. But

after a while the job acquired some panache and the finest chefs in the world vyed to cook for Tantalus.

Tantalus found hanging from the branches of his tree items that he had never dreamed of before. In fact, special guides had to be assigned to explain to him what the offerings were, otherwise he wouldn't know what missing and his punishment would lose both efficacy and symbolic value. So they told him, "This is smoked boar in aspic, and this is pears bel Helene, and this is a compote of rare fruits." And so on and so on. And they waited anxiously to see how he responded to all this, and took notes, because Tantalus, after all, was the standard by which temptation was judged.

Tantalus quickly got into the spirit of connoisseurship that his work required. He knew he was an important cultural artifact. It was not small potatoes to realize that all temptation was to be judged by the effect it had on him. He was like the Smirnoff Man of the so-called modern world. He grew captious and difficult to please. With the succession of feasts that were put in front of him day after day, he became very knowledgeable in the preparation of foods. He didn't have to taste to know good from bad. He would complain bitterly when he detected by some means known only to himself that a spice missing. "This turbot is entirely too peppery. This lamb, too bland by half, and adorned with the wrong kind of honey. This sauce, it has a bitter taste underneath it."

The cooks used to grow very angry at Tantalus. How, they asked, could he judge the food without tasting it? For of course the hellish mechanism made sure he never tasted anything. And Tantalus told them he did it first of all by the aroma, which he made sure to sniff, and secondly by the sheer powers of discrimination which had developed in his mind. "For look you, gentlemen, actually tasting these foods dulls the senses. I wouldn't taste your food if I were able to! But what I'm here for is to judge it, and I have to tell you that this meal was not up to snuff."

And that was the end of Persephone's reply to Hades, and she got back into the bullock wagon and let Demeter carry her back to the upper world. No eyewitnesses exist who can tell us what happened to the pomegranate seed she had had in her hand. But it is a fact that she returned to Hell and to her spouse, Hades, every fall, just as the world was turning dark and cold. Winter with tiny snowflakes came and went and soon the hounds of spring appeared in the upper valleys. I sat on my throne in hell and had dinners with Achilles and Helen and waited for Persephone to return. What was she doing, I wondered. What about that pomegranate seed? And just before she came back, at the very last possible instant, when I had used up all my hope and I had grown tired of thinking about the inhabitants of hell, I thought to myself, what I want is my Persephone. It's the beginning of winter now, and as I sit there on my iron throne, the taste of ashes in my mouth, I hear the faint sound of bells.

And I know it heralds a blessed event, the arrival of my beloved, though you can never be sure.

❧ **END** ❧

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