

Rituals for a New God

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Madeline was working on her new sculpture, *Struck by God*, when she first sensed the prayer. It spread a disquieting need through her, like hunger. She put down her acetylene torch, peeled off her safety goggles and work gloves to wander out of her barn workshop and into the house.

Her husband looked up from his monitor as she meandered into the kitchen, hand tangled in his hair, tugging absently as he studied manufacturing schematics of his newest patented invention. "What's up?"

"Don't know." She opened the refrigerator, frowned at the contents, closed the door again. "I think I'm going to town."

She went out to her '52 Ford pickup, classic despite the many rust-through patches, parked beside the cinderblocks on which it used to rest. On the first try, the engine groaned as if the battery was dying, but she turned the key again, willing the truck to start. The engine caught, shuddered and settled down to a rough purr.

The prayer was so faint, just a nagging urge to go someplace and perhaps eat, that she could have ignored it if she'd known. It was her first time answering a prayer, though, and thus she didn't recognize it for what it was. So, despite the fact she didn't have any money in her pockets, nor the desire to stand as someone's deity, she went.

As she drove, she pondered her sculpture. What was wrong with it? She had struggled for days now, trying to give form to her inner feelings. She conceived it as a massive gleaming bolt striking a small fragile figure. Somehow it wasn't working; there was no inner identification to the whole or any part of it.

The road, the Ford, and the niggling prayer-borne desire took her south toward Pittsburgh with its sprawling suburbia. Where the farms and stop signs gave way to red lights and custom homes, the burnt offerings snared her tight.

The smoke traced "Please" across her senses. "Protect us" whispered the cooking meat. "Hurry," murmured the spilt wine. She paused overlong at a red light as it turned to green, recognition on her, trying to resist. The blare of the angry horns behind her, and the call of the prayer, turned her off the main road into the maze of artful turns and high priced cul-de-sacs.

When she arrived, however, she wasn't recognized.

She pulled the pickup up to a carefully manicured lawn of a contemporary ranch house. Frost whited the grass to the winter-brown edge. In the asphalt driveway, before his open garage door, a man stood grilling steaks, a bottle of her favorite brandy in hand. He eyed her battered pickup suspiciously.

She turned off the engine, and the old truck rattled and shook before settling down to rest. She sat, listening to the ticking of the cooling engine, wondering what she was doing here. True, she wasn't the most devote Presbyterian. She always viewed organized religions, their rites and rituals, as creations of men, often more interested in controlling their flock than defining God. She believed, though, in the one God, All Mighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth. Believed it to her core. So why was she here? Why was this happening to her?

It occurred to her that perhaps she had caught scent of the grilling meat, followed the smell, and mentally twisted things in some crazed notion that she was summoned. Being crazy certainly was more believable, a natural occurrence which occurred often, and didn't challenge the fabric of reality.

The man glanced in her direction, and poured a dribble of the expensive brandy onto the coals. Flame *woofed* upwards, searing the beef. "Come!" it cried to her, and she was halfway out of the truck before she realized that she was moving.

"Can I help you?" The thirty-something man, worn to premature gray, he seemed caught between embarrassment and wistful hope.

"I felt you calling." She waved a hand toward the grill, the spilt brandy, and the burnt offering. "I think all this is meant for me. Do you need some kind of help?"

"You're one of the new gods?"

She shrugged. "That's what they're calling it."

He took it as a yes. "Really? It worked? Amazing!" He laughed with nervous exhilaration.

"Awesome!" He started to hold out his hand, and then checked the motion. "Is it all right to shake hands? It's not sacrilege or anything?"

"No, it's fine." Madeline shook his hand, suddenly conscious of her filthy, patched jeans, unwashed hair, and dirt-smudged face.

"Mac Pierson." He held out the brandy and motioned to the steak. "Do we start with this or do I give it to you later?"

"Let's eat and you can tell me what I'm doing here."

The food gave meaning to the phrase "nectar of the gods." Madeline could barely keep from moaning as Mac Pierson told of his wife falling to a mysterious illness.

"Do you think you can help? I mean, really help? We've tried everything else: X-rays, CAT scans, acupuncture, herbal therapy . . . She's only gotten worse. I figured—I figured it couldn't hurt to try one of you new gods. I sent the kids to school, fired up the grill, and winged the rituals."

And luck of the draw, he had gotten her. "I can try."

He led the way into the house: gleaming wood floors, oriental carpets, Ethan Allen furniture, and the hospital smell of antiseptics. On the living room coffee table, she spotted Pierson's inspiration. "New Gods Walk Among Us" exclaimed the tabloid cover. Always more reserved, the *Time* magazine stated "Mass Miracles or Mass Hysteria?" She had all the same magazines at home, researching her condition, and finding no answers. *Hysteria*. Actually, it would be comforting to believe that was all it was, and nothing more.

"She's in here!" Pierson called from the master bedroom at the end of the hall.

Madeline stopped short at the door.

A creature waited in the master bedroom, something half snake, part cat, part a weird collection of others. Eyes black and cold as onyx marbles regarded Madeline. It sat curled on the chest of an unconscious woman lying in the bed, claws kneading her nightgown-clad breasts.

"My god!" Madeline yelped in surprise. "What's that?"

"This is my wife. Grace."

An oxygen mask shrouded Grace Pierson's face, but did not totally hide her fragile beauty. Even inert, she exuded brilliant warmth. Perhaps Madeline's imagination supplied the impression, wove a complete fabrication from the comfortable elegance of the home and Mac Pierson's devotion to his wife. Perhaps sensing the inherent good in a person was part and parcel of being a god. Regardless of the source, Madeline felt a sudden rage at the injustice.

"Hey! Shoo! Go on!" She tried shooing the creature away like one would scare a cat, with a wave of the arms, and a quick hiss. "Get! Leave her alone!"

The creature flinched, as if her voice pained it, but otherwise sat unmoving. The digital rhythm showing on the heart monitors flickered, and Grace gasped slightly into the oxygen mask. Alarmed, Madeline stepped toward Grace and the creature crouched lower, its spine fur lifting into hackles. It opened its snoutlike mouth, exposing a horde of needle teeth, breath rank as week-old road kill.

Okay, it was braver than she was.

Madeline backed out of the room. A lifetime of farm animals had given her plenty of respect for what a mouthful of teeth like that could do. The next door down was a boy's room, a clutter of sports equipment. The Piersons' son apparently played goalie position on a hockey team: she found a facemask, leg guards and body armor and tugged them on. She picked up a hockey stick, tested its heft, and abandoned it for a baseball bat.

"Um, pardon me, but what are you doing?" Pierson asked.

"I'm not going in there without a weapon and some protection!" Madeline snapped. Maybe she should go out to her truck and get her shotgun.

"A weapon?" He started to edge between her and the door to the master bedroom. "What do you need a weapon for?"

"You really can't see that?" Madeline pointed at the creature.

Pierson glanced over his shoulder. "What exactly am I suppose to be looking at?"

"Something really ugly." Madeline took a few practice swings with the bat, then steeled herself to step back into the room, bat cocked up over her shoulder. "You're going to have to trust me."

Pierson reluctantly let her pass and then hovered close behind her.

The creature hunched down again, hissing loud as air brakes on a tractor-trailer truck. Madeline inched forward, wanting to make sure her first swing hit. Suddenly the creature sprang, and, yelping in surprise, she swung, fighting the urge to clench shut her eyes. Oak *thunked* into flesh, and through her squinted gaze, she saw the creature fly back across the room to smash into the dresser mirror. The mirror shattered.

"Oh damn!" Madeline cried. "Sorry about that."

"Oh, shit! There *is* something in here!" Pierson bolted away.

The monster scuttled under the bed. Blood seeped through rends in Grace's nightgown and her breath grew fast and light.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Madeline stepped toward Grace, alarmed by the blood and the woman's obvious distress. The creature started growling under the bed; a deep rumble that Madeline could feel in the soles of her feet. The sound, and the sudden image of those teeth locking down on her ankles, checked her. "Okay, get the monster first, then deal with Grace."

Madeline backed up as far as the room allowed and stooped down to peer under the bed. Shadows swallowed the creature and dust bunnies whole. There wasn't even a cat-eye gleam from those cold black eyes. No way she was crawling under the king-sized bed to get it, armor on or not. The bat didn't give her a long enough reach. She considered getting the hockey stick, and then decided even that put her too close to those teeth.

Ideally, she needed a long sharp pole, or a net on a pole, or her head examined.

Pierson came up the hall and stopped just shy of the doorway, armed with the abandoned hockey stick. "I closed all the doors, so it couldn't get into the other rooms—that is if it can't go through wood. Is it still in there? Is Grace okay?"

"It's under the bed. Grace is fine." *For now*. Would her shotgun work? Was this creature like a vampire, where only holy water and sunlight did any harm? Well, the baseball bat connected with it. "Mr. Pierson—Mac, could you do me a favor? Go out to my truck and get my shotgun. The ammo is behind the seat."

She waited with the creature growling and rumbling, wondering yet again: why me? Was this some obtuse, karma-incurred lesson brought on by believing that God didn't concern himself in the day-to-day life of his creations? Was it because the Feng Shui of her house was better than she thought, somehow tapping extraordinary powers and funneling it into her? Or was the Wiccan purification ritual her best friend performed on her workshop somehow responsible?

Pierson returned, carrying her shotgun gingerly, as if he expected it to go off accidentally. He startled her by asking, "So what do you think?"

"Pardon?"

"Is it a demon?"

"The hell if I know." She loaded the shotgun full, unsure how many shots it would take but certainly not wanting to be caught short once the action started.

"I thought—I thought you would know everything, that it went along with being a god."

"Apparently I'm not that type of god." She didn't actually believe she was any type of god. But if she *was* going to start shooting up this man's house, it would be best if he thought it was holy intervention.

She chambered a shell, warned him to stay back, and mindful of the woman on the bed, got down as low and as close to the bed as she dared.

She had never fired a shotgun inside before. The noise was like a cannon, a deafening bark followed by endless ringing in her ears. In the muzzle flare, she saw that she nearly missed the beast entirely, catching it only in its back haunch. Still, the shot slammed the creature out from under the bed and into the far wall. It left a stain of mucous yellow on the wallpaper when it hit, and then careened madly about the room.

Madeline leapt onto the corner of the bed to get out of the creature's path. It bowled over Pierson in the doorway, clawing him up as it climbed over him, and escaped down the hall. Pierson scrambled in the opposite direction, leaving a smear of blood on the wood floor. His mouth moved, but she could only hear the ghost ringing from the gun's report. Madeline bound into the hall, saw the creature corner into the kitchen, and followed.

It crouched under the kitchen table, hissing. The haunch wound, bleeding like a kid's snot nose, seemed smaller than she initially thought. Chambering a shell, she took careful aim between those black eyes, and fired. The buckshot slammed the creature against the wall. As it went limp, it lost form. Smoke, black as the creature's eyes, roiled upward and then dissipated.

She found Pierson guarding his wife, the baseball bat in hand. Blood slicked the front of his shirt to his chest. "It's dead!" She shouted over the ringing in her ears. Sticking her fingers into her ears, she willed the ringing to stop, and the noise vanished. "Let me look at those cuts."

He gestured helplessly at his wife. "She's dying! She moaned when you fired the second shot and then her heart started fibrillating. Oh, God! Oh, God! Do something!"

Grace Pierson lay deathly still except for her shallow, faltering breathing. Blood seeped from the claw wounds on her chest. Where Madeline touched her, the flesh healed cleanly. Health flooded Grace's ash pale skin, only to drain away again. The monitor showed only a momentary slowing of the frantic pulse. Mac knelt beside the bed, clutched his wife's hand, and whispered a soft mantra of "Oh please, oh please."

Madeline clung to Grace's other cold hand, willing her to live. *Why wasn't it working?* Irony struck her, and she fought the sudden desire to laugh. Deny it all she wanted, but she believed in herself. She didn't know why her, and she certainly did not rate her powers equal to God, the Father, but she *knew* that she had the power to heal Grace. The smooth skin of Grace's breast stood testament that her powers worked. All the health that she willed into Grace, though, continued to sieve away.

"Why is she losing everything I give her?"

Pierson glanced about the room. "Is the monster back?"

Madeline opened her mouth to say she had killed it, and stopped. What if dissipating the creature hadn't killed it? Every time she had damaged the creature, Grace had worsened. What if it had been healing itself with Grace's vitality? If she hadn't killed it, it could still be feeding on Grace.

But if it no longer had a form, how could she stop it? Perhaps there was a physical link between woman and monster she could break.

She ran her hands over Grace's slender arms, searched her glossy black hair, and pulled down the blankets. Sticky, fibrous black strands wove like grapevines through Grace's toes, wrapped about her foot, and crawled up her right leg to midcalf.

"Oh, ick!" She tried using the corner of the blanket to scrub away the strands without touching them directly. Skin and muscle shifted under the cloth, giving no hint the strands actually existed. "Christ on a donkey." She muttered as she realized that she actually had to touch the growth with her bare hands. "Could you get me a bucket or something to put this stuff in?"

Pierson looked mystified but scurried off without a question. She stripped off the hockey equipment. He returned with a galvanized steel bucket in hand. This was going to be so creepy. Thoughts

of the stuff growing on *her* already had her skin crawling and, as the last places she wanted to touch with contaminated hands, her eyes and nose itching.

The strands felt like cords of thick, damp, greasy snot. As she pried them off, it seemed that they thrummed with deep anger. Tiny hairs bristled the ends, and occasionally a longer hair thinned to spider-silk fine and trailed off toward the kitchen. After great inner debate, she snapped these off short. All the while, she willed Grace to be better, that the creature would find no refuge in the house, that everything would be good and right. With a sound like ice quick-chilling a glass, the mirror knit itself whole again.

They burned the strands on the grill, which Mac promised to take to the dump once the ashes cooled. Madeline scrubbed her hands with bleach and ammonia before feeling clean again.

Grace Pierson, who had lain like the dead during the whole struggle for her life and possibly her soul, woke when Madeline shook her shoulder. Like a butterfly, she struggled out of her cocoon of oxygen tubes, IV drips, electrode lead wires, and catheter, slipped into a bright dress, and fluttered about the room, laughing over how good she felt.

"Thank you," Grace lighted briefly in a warm hug, smelling of sunshine and clean sky. "I don't know how you did it, but thank you."

Mac Pierson followed Madeline out into the kitchen, with awe in his eyes. "You're really a god!"

Madeline collected her shotgun from the kitchen table. "I guess so. I wasn't like this before."

"What was it like?" He asked. "Did you just wake up one morning, changed, or did it hit you, like lightning?"

Madeline shrugged, thoughtfully unloading her shotgun. Once she considered it, quiet miracles filled her life. "Things have always had weird ways of working out. Like once I was downsized from a machinist job. I spent a week without sleep to finish all my works in progress, and then found an upscale art gallery that would give me space. Only, the owner copied down the prices wrong, and sold them all for a hundred times more than what I wanted."

He didn't see the magic of it, so she said that it was like being hit by lightning.

The late-winter frost was gone from the yard. Green buds of spring flowers dimpled the flowerbeds. The rust was all gone from the front right fender of her Ford. She supposed it was difficult to compare those old mundane miracles to these new ones.

Starting the Ford's engine, though, she remembered how, just a day after telling her husband how she always wanted a classic old pickup truck, they found it rusting away in the yard of their dream home. Two for one, her husband quipped, surely a sign that they controlled the universe. What if there lay a germ of truth in that joke? What if the simple answer to "why her" was because she believed in herself? Like a Buddhist finding nirvana, had she simply found a new level of self-empowerment?

On the heels of this thought, came the solution to her sculpture, *Struck by God*. She should invert the piece. Instead of gold, the bolt would now be a wedge of graduated blue, like the layers of water of a deep clear lake. At the apex would be a gleaming figure. She had broken the surface of the ordinary world, and crawled out of the lake to stand on an unfamiliar shore. And if the newspapers read true, there were others gathering there with her.

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