



ODIN'S SMELL

A Strange Tale of Temptation

Dreams are funny things Sometimes we can swear they are real. To the ancient Greeks, dreams are how we communicated with the gods. Maybe, just maybe, we still do...

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Dreams don't smell. At least, my dreams don't smell. This was my first clue this wasn't a dream. You can see things in dreams, hear them, even experience events in a dream, but you can't smell them. I found myself sitting in the bow of a wooden rowboat. I could smell the linseed oil and sweat. We were on a lake or a slow-moving river. You could smell the stink of the algae, the tang of the water stray. The kind of smell people mistake for fresh air.

In the stern of the boat was a man wearing a dark oiled raincoat and a pair of black leather gloves. His face was his most interesting aspect. He had so many lines and wrinkles he looked more like a carving of an old man made out of driftwood than a real person. His skin even had a slight gray quality to its color. He had a head of long gray hair running down to his back and a long grey beard. A knot of hair in the front was the most conspicuous. It covered his nose, like the guard of an ancient helmet. The breeze blew parts of his beard and his long flowing hair like they were sails in the wind. But the grey knot over the nose remained in place, unmoving, unyielding, immobile. His eyes had a soft glow about them that's hard to explain. It didn't look unnatural, but it was anything but common.

In his hand, he held a stick with a string tied to one end. At the far end of the string was a large hook. No bait mind you, only the hook. He'd drop the hook into the water and a few moments later, he'd pull up a fish. He'd gather the fish into the boat and almost lovingly remove the hook from its mouth. Then he'd toss the fish into the boat between us, where there already was a large pile he'd presumably caught. Some of the fish were common fresh-water fish, like catfish and trout. But one or two were distinctively salt-water fish. The ones which stood out to me were a tuna, a swordfish, and one rather large barracuda.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Pederson." His voice was clear and crisp, but the sound of it rang like a little clap of thunder. Not the kind of voice you'd associate with an old man. "Name's Wodin." Now if your reading this I know you saw the 'W' in the name. I heard it when he said it, but it was tiny, quiet, almost silent. So that you wouldn't be far off if you when you pronounced, didn't say the first letter at all. It would be closer to what he said his name was.

"Congratulations, Mr. Pederson, my associates and I have decided to make you a god. I'm here to welcome you to our humble group." He smiled. I swear he did it without any of the lines in his face moving. Now, this is normally the kind of thing you'd laugh at when you heard it. But for some reason, I took it very seriously. "Isn't there only one God?" I asked pretentiously.

"You mean him," he responded, "The big guy. Without a doubt. No question about it. He's the top dog, the big kahuna, the supreme being, no question. He's the only one who is a power unto himself." He put the pole down and turned to face me. He looked warm and friendly, like an uncle whose advice you respected. "Let me ask you something. How well do you know your bible?"

"I familiar with it," I said, slightly pleased with myself. "I'm not one of those types who can quote the text mind you, but I'm familiar with it," I added with a touch of humor.

"Do you remember the first commandment?" He asked pointedly.

"The one which goes, thou shall have no other gods before me?" I spoke up like a student answering a professor's loaded question.

“Precisely,” he grinned. “Interesting statement don’t you think? It’s not, ‘Hey dummies I’m it. It’s just me, get used to it’ wouldn’t you say? Kind of implies there are others don’t you think? Why would you say, ‘no other’ if there were no others to refer to?” He let his statement sink in for a bit. “Now for our little club, you need to know two things, well three actually. One, we are not all-knowing, like the big guy, we have to learn. Very important. That’s why I’m here, to teach you. Point number two, you are now immortal. That’s a hard one to grasp, so it’s easier if I show you.”

He reached into his raincoat and pulled out what looked like an old matchlock pistol, straight out of a pirate movie. He pointed it directly at my chest and pulled the trigger. I saw the flash as the black powder went off and felt the ball rip through my chest. I also felt it, very clearly, exit out my back. Not a pleasant sensation, I assure you. I saw the blood go flying everywhere. All over the boat, all over the fish. It went pumping out of my chest in great spurts. That’s when I passed out.

When I came too, he was just putting the pistol back in his coat. This wasn’t a dream. You don’t feel those kinds of pain in a dream. I instinctively looked down. There was a hole torn in my shirt. I wisp of smoke filled my nostrils. It was still smoldering from the powder. I put the burning embers out with the palm of my hand. That’s when I noticed it, there was no hole in my chest. I couldn’t believe it. I had to look closely, but there was nothing there. Not a scratch. No power burns, nothing. You only see such kinds of things on television as special effects, only in my case it was real.

“So, there you go,” he stated flatly, “You’re immortal. You can’t die. That’s the only thing you get for free. Everything else requires power and you must earn your power. That’s point three.” I must admit, I wasn’t yet ready for point three. I was still getting used to point two. The first stage was disbelief. Later I’d learn this was typical. It was why he chose the extreme demonstration. Looking at the blood all over the boat and the fish gradually convinced me the event had happened. All this was real. The only thing I could muster to say was, “Why me?” It seemed becoming a god, doesn’t impart you with any sudden wisdom. I guess that was point one.

“You fit the profile,” the old man said. “I could explain it further, but it won’t help much. You’ll understand later. We need people like you. We’ve been saving up power for a long time to make you. It’s all about power. You’ll need to learn about power. How to collect it, how to use it.” But I wasn’t about to give up on my point. I guess I needed something tangible to accept my selection. The result being, I merely restated my first question, changing the working slightly. “What do you need me for?”

The old man, calling himself Wodin, sighed. He knew I wasn’t letting go. “Ever hear of H.P. Lovecraft?”

“Yea, isn’t he that guy who wrote about all those gods with the names you couldn’t pronounce?” I answered.

“More or less,” grey-beard responded. “The basic stories were one of Apollo’s ideas. Tell the world he says. Knowledge is power. It’s all-new media these days ...” He looked at me and he could sense he was on the verge of losing me. “Point of the story is this, Lovecraft got the basic idea right. There is a whole set of elder gods who specialize in suffering. Before the dawn of civilization, they tortured men and the lesser beasts for power. My associates and I saved up our power for centuries and blasted them far out into space. Remember, they are gods, so they can’t be killed. Trouble is, they are on their way back. But the speed of light is a constant for everyone, but we gained a few eons anyway. But when they get here ... well, it won’t be pretty. If we don’t stop them, they’ll turn the Earth into an abattoir of blood and

suffering beyond your ability to imagine.” He looked at me with urgency in his eyes, it was almost a look of pure horrified panic. But I could tell he was keeping it under control. Still, you could smell the desperation. “We need to collect enough power to push them back out again. That’s where you come in. We need you to help us collect power for the push.”

I’m afraid I got a bit loud for the next part. “Shit, you made a vampire? Now I need to drink people’s blood?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he commented bluntly. “Vampires are mythical creatures. They don’t exist, except in the literary sense. But it would help if you didn’t use expletives. That’s how the old ones gained power. It’s all about power you see. So, in a real sense, each time you say something similar, you’re giving them power. Sort of defeats the purpose, if you get my drift.”

I took a few deep breaths to calm myself down. The picture he was painting was not one I cared to think about. I had lived under the sword of Damocles my entire life. My earliest memories are of my neighbors digging a hole in their backyard. All because some group of nut cases had parked a dozen or so nuclear warheads within a hundred miles of Florida. I had gotten used to living in the world ensnared in the last seconds of the doomsday clock. I had, as Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove suggested, learned to stop worrying. But the unrelenting approach of mindless, malevolent creatures bent on destruction was a new vision, one which I did not find in the least bit entertaining. “You’ll pardon my saying so, but only a few moments ago Odin was just a literary device to me as well. No offense.”

“None taken,” he answered, “It’s perfectly understandable.”

“Your plan then is to make me collect power for you, while you go fishing?” I suggested. “You think I’m some sort of Jim Carry?”

“You’re referring to the movie ... Bruce Almighty?” He smiled. “I loved that film.” He looked at me with those deep eyes of his. “No, not at all. We want you to work with us. The more people we have collecting power, the more we’ll have when the old ones return. I could show you the old ones to convince you, but it’s best if I don’t. Apollo did that with Lovecraft. It didn’t do much for his mental health, I can tell you. Him and his knowledge is power. No, best if you just take my word for it.”

“Everyone agreed you’d catch on quickly,” he continued, “and you’ve already touched on the crux of the problem. To most people, I’m just a literary figure. I’m not real. That’s my problem. Now, of course, it’s yours too. For the two of us can only gain power with respect. Each time someone utters a phrase of respect, we gain power.”

“You want me to start a religion?” I asked astonished. “You want me to collect worshipers for you?”

“I never liked that word, worshipers.” He snarled. “No, I don’t want you to do things for me. I want you to do things so people will respect you. It’s your show now. I still have a few people who respect my name, so I get a little power to add to the pool ... now and then.”

“I don’t understand,” I commented, “You want me to make other gods?”

“You won’t be able to do that,” he smiled, “You’re not one of those gods ... yet.” He grabbed the oars and set them slowly in the still water and started rowing. “Let me introduce you to the others.” I found myself in, well I’d guess you’d call it a mead hall, for lack of a better description. It was a massive

wooden structure, a bit like the largest log cabin you can imagine. There was a circle of burning fire pits around a huge, long, single table in the center. Sitting at it was a group of characters that seemed to have jumped out of a Marvel movie. There was food everywhere and the whole crew was busy chowing down.

“Is this a special occasion?” I asked Wodin, “or do you folks do this all the time?”

He laughed. It was a hardy laugh. Not the kind of laugh at your expense, but the kind of laugh a comedian looks for, a laugh of pure joy. “It’s your birthday celebration.” He announced. “Let me introduce you to the ones who helped elevate you. The big one down there with the curly hair is Zeus and the bald guy next to him is Ra.” As they were being introduced they stopped eating momentarily to give me a slight wave. The greek held an entire roasted duck in one hand as he waved with the other. He looked a bit like my impression of Dicken’s Ghost of Christmas Present. The Egyptian looked rather dire as he gave me a slight nod.

He introduced me to the others. Some of their names I recognized, but others eluded me. There was Anu, I think, and Quetzalcoatl, Shang-Ti, Enlil and Ahura Mazda. Amaterasu stood out, being one of the few women at the table. It was a bit much to wrap my head around. There were hundreds of other gods present, but I slowly began to get the impression this resembled a medical practice. Everyone had an area of specialization; some gods were gods of knowledge, others wisdom, bounty, or hope.

Shang-Ti had an excellent way of explaining things. I suppose being a god of wisdom helped. I asked him what they intended me to specialize in. His answer was blunt and to the point, not the cryptic type of double-talk I was used to in Eastern religions. He simply said that it was completely up to me to choose. Wodin added they had an idea what I would choose, but in the end, it was my choice and my choice alone.

It was the longest dinner I ever attended. I’m not sure how long it went on. Both the food and the conversation seemed ever-present. I’ll say one thing for this group, they knew how to eat well. Their cooks put all earthly forms of dining to shame. I could write a whole book on the things I saw and tasted during our meal. It would run several volumes at least. With a second set reserved for the dishes which I saw, but never got to taste. The combined work would have looked like the Encyclopedia Britannica. But beyond the eating, the talk was enlightening. I could relate it all to you, but it became clear to me the food was essential to my understanding. Eating it opened my eyes so to speak. But what it means is simply this; I could explain it all to you, but you wouldn’t get it. In this case, as the old saying says, you had to be there.

I guess the simplest way to put it is along the lines of a requirement to do good works, to earn the praise of my fellow humans. I was still thinking of myself as human at this stage. Each good thing I did, earned me power. I could use some of this power to do more good things, but like a saving account, I needed to put most of it away. Stored in the celestial bank for the time when the old ones fell like stars from the sky.

It was a difficult journey. Being a god doesn’t mean gaining self-control. Gaining power was a slow and arduous process. No matter how hard you work at helping people, they are not inclined to say thank you. At first, I tended to spend it all as soon as I got a hold of it, as a reward for all the considerable work I’d done. It reminded me of what I did with the first paychecks I’d ever earned. The paycheck connection

was the one that gave me the idea. Ahura Mazda and I worked out a system based on income tax, where a portion of what I earned was taken out before I even got it. Stored up for the eventual return of the old ones.

My first efforts were more or less on an individual level. After all, I was new at this. I couldn't stop hurricanes or prevent floods with only my mind, you understand, so I had to start small. I started an employment agency. I had no skills, but people needed jobs. Watching a tree grow would have been faster. Yet every success was like a rose pedal opening for the first time. There's an odd feeling you get when you are outside, and a butterfly comes and visits you. The beating of its wings doesn't change the weather. At least, not as far as I can tell, but it lifts a weight from your spirit which you didn't even realize you were carrying. You can't. Not until it's lifted.

So, I spent my time trying to lift the same weight off others. Without an office, I did all my work out of an old Vega. It was more rust than fuel. But it worked well enough to both collect information about employer needs and helped me to get folks to work. Later I worked out of an abandoned building down by the river. The place worked as a convenient location for everyone to gather. A few would bring a lick of paint and we'd fix a wall here and a pipe there. Of course, we had to do all the work during the day as the building didn't have any electricity. In the fall, people would collect broken branches that some folks left in the street. So we'd have something to burn in the old Franklin stove a guy had found in a junkyard during the winter.

I used a little bit of power here and there to open a door. A dash of power to create a bit of luck. I have no idea how professionals manage this without having the power of a god. If I didn't have it, I'd never make it. But thanks to a willingness to squander some of my power, things were looking up. Until the day we all came to the building to find that it was being torn down. I went back to the car. Occasionally, I even park in the lot they built where our building once stood. When we can, we meet in the basement of an old church. Mostly they don't even notice we are there, but eventually, they catch on and drive us out of the building. Our latest move is into a condemned building which was once low-rent housing. We used the wood from a group of old stolen cement forms to build a few desks.

It was around this time, I found myself alone in my office. "I take it you're the new one. The greater god Stanley?" The question came from a man in a crisp black suit, it was as close to being a tuxedo as you could get without being a real tuxedo. He had the type of face that made you instantly jealous.

"Well lesser god actually," I joked. You can't seriously tell people you're a god. Not unless you want a room in the local mental ward.

"They didn't even have the balls to make you a greater god, aye?" He had an English accent, but he didn't look that English.

"How can I help you?" I asked suspiciously. A guy with a suit like the one the English guy had on was rarely out of a job. I suspected he was here to remove us.

"Oh, you have me wrong, I'm here to help you," he smiled.

"Great," I smiled back, "We can use all the help we can get. Right now, I've got about twelve people who need work. Do you know of any openings? I have three carpenters ..."

“Well,” his face turned serious, “I’m looking more along the lines of helping you personally.” He took off a pair of black leather gloves and laid them over a silver-handled walking cane. “My name is Mephistopheles Giannopoulos and ... well, if you pardon the alliteration, I’m here to take you away from all this.”

“You wouldn’t happen to have a real building we can use?” I asked with an increased sense of expectation.

The man ran his fingers across a dusty window sill. “If that’s what you truly desire. I’m here to grant you a wish. Well more of a trade, if you like. You give me something I want, and I grant you any single wish.” He tapped the floor with his cane, testing it in the expectation it would collapse. He was lucky it didn’t work.

“You don’t look like you need a job,” I remarked, settling down on a stack of old newspapers I was currently using as a chair, “And as you can see, we don’t have much here anybody would want.”

“Ah, but *you do* Stanley. Can I call you Stanley?” He didn’t wait for an answer, “Stanley, I want to trade your power for a wish. Just imagine, you can have any life you want ... anything at all.” His tone was rather smarmy, reminding me of a used car salesman looking to move a clunker.

“Isn’t it supposed to be three wishes,” I joked.

“Well, if I was a djinn, your statement would be true.” He looked around for a place to sit down but decided to remain standing. “Djinn, however, like to turn their wishes sour or reflect them in their favor. What I’m offering you is a straight trade. Value for value. You’ll have to like what you get. If you don’t, you tell me what’s wrong and I’ll fix it. Otherwise, you get your power right back.” He looked at me as if he could see every part of me. I’ve seen less invasive x-ray machines.

“You’re immortal now. I can’t see you wanting to spend eternity doing ...” He pushed a piece of paper away from himself using the tip of his cane, “this. It’s going to get quite boring after a while you know.”

“Well, there is the matter of the dark ones,” I commented.

He laughed. I mean, he seriously laughed. It went on for some time, the kind of deep laugh you get from a good comic sketch. “Sorry about that,” he muttered, still fighting off a giggle or two. “Begging your pardon, but you didn’t believe all the old man’s claptrap, did you? It was all made up you know. Just the ravings of one unemployed writer in Rhode Island. His parents went mad you understand. Sort of runs in the family.” He looked at me with this deadly serious stare. “They’re just using you to fund their dinner parties.”

I got a knot in my gut. The kind of knot you get when you realize you’ve been had. The sinking feeling lets you know ... you’ve been a chump. I looked at the man in the fine suit and had visions of a splendid life in retirement. Beaches, cabanas, warm sun-filled days bicycling on the beach. Without trying, I could feel that lead ball ripping through my chest. I looked down in a panic. But there was no hole. No blood. I swear, I could hear the old man laugh.

Then it struck me. All those visions were from commercials by cheap-ass retirement firms which always offer far more than they can deliver. You can be pretty sure when you visit the used car lot, they have more than you have. But when the used car salesman comes to *you*, well, you can be pretty sure it’s the

other way around. Used car salesmen are always looking for a deal. I looked at the man with the dark suit and realized he wasn't looking at me at all, he was looking at the deal.

"You know," I smiled slightly, "I think I'll stick it out here."

The wonderful thing about being immortal is, things can move as slow as you want them. You have lots of time to make up your mind.