**The Gods About Town**

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The gods congregate around town in threes and fours: on street corners, in liquor stores, on the roof of the single-story motel with the bad reputation. They huddle with their heads together, as if wishing to not be overheard speaking. But that’s the thing—they don’t speak. They have no mouths, just impressions in their skulls where mouths and eyes should be. Each is his own color. Each is a 6’ 3” Academy Award, naked to the world.

They showed up last spring, just there in town one morning, with no indication of where they came from. The bronze god used to have a cardboard sign that hung from a chain around his neck that said: “We are the gods. We are here for you.” The sign disappeared, though, and nobody knows what happened to it.

Many citizens wish to speak with the gods. “What are the winning lottery numbers going to be?” is still a popular question. Walk up to one and ask him about the meaning of life or next month’s weather or what he seeks to accomplish with his loitering. The god will walk right past you with that slightly stooped posture they all have.

The purple god plays guitar in dive bars on Saturday nights. His talent is undeniable, but he only plays covers.

The tin god leaves cardboard boxes on street corners, boxes filled with pamphlets written in an alphabet of alien, angular letters no one can read. Leave the boxes there long enough and they’ll eventually be covered with graffiti.

The sapphire god climbs to the tops of utility poles and holds handstands for hours. Pigeons perch on his feet. His sinews and tendons strain, making him look strong and, well, godly. An artist paints a lovely oil of the spectacle, even if the shade of blue isn’t quite right.

A stranger in a gray duster and New York Jets cap is found bloody and dead in the town dump. None of the gods have blood on their hands, though no one can be entirely certain about the blood god.

Some elementary school boys steal knives from their parents’ kitchens and run to the golden god, who stands by an abandoned gas station in a squatting position, as if sitting on a chair. The bravest boy runs his knife along the god’s arm. Soon, the others do so as well. The god holds his pose while golden blood fountains from his wounds, sparkling in the sun. None of the other gods try to stop the boys.

Everyone in town agrees life can’t go on this way. Surely the gods will have to do something. They’ll speak. They will give the people an indication of what their plans may be.

Then, on the year’s last hot day, when the roads are at their dustiest, a man kneels before the granite god. The granite god has his arms folded over his chest, like he’s guarding some invisible door. Standing behind him are the rose, ivory and turquoise gods. The man shouts: “I‘ve known your plans all along. I wish to be in your service. Let me help you destroy this town.” None of the gods acknowledge him, but everyone along the street stops to watch this encounter. No one has ever spoken to a god in this way before. The man takes hold of the granite god’s hand. “Let me serve. Let your enemies be my enemies. Act through me and smite this miserable population. I hate them all as much as you do.”

The god unfolds his arms. He presses an outstretched finger to the man’s forehead. The man collapses into the dust, and as the citizens look on he starts to lose all color, becoming more and more transparent. The wind blows and pebbles on the sidewalk skitter through him, like he’s a ghost. After several minutes, all that’s left is a mirage in the heat. Then, in the blink of an eye, he disappears completely. The pack of gods amble away from the spot, walking, it seems to most of the onlookers, slower than usual.

A miracle? Most likely. It is, like all genuine miracles, terrifying.

Someone places a knee-high posterboard along that dusty street. In black marker it proclaims: “The Gods Are Just.” The next morning, “Just” has been crossed out, the word “Merciful” now appearing beneath it. By evening, “Merciful” is scratched out in favor of “Inscrutable.” The day after that, the sign is covered with graffiti. The next day, it is gone.