

ADRIFT ON THE  
RIVER OF TIME

And other stories

By Uncle Jasper

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Cover image: detail from the Last Judgement fresco by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel.

Some strange short stories  
By Uncle Jasper

Suitable for weirdos, nerds, misfits and the downtrodden.  
The rest of you keep clear.

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# Adrift On The River Of Time

I was caught off guard by members of the Local Chapter of the Killjoy Club they jumped me, forced me into a wooden, barrel, nailed down the top, and threw me, barrel and all, into the River of Time.

Before my barrel bobbed away from the bank someone shouted through the bung hole that the average speed of the current was about five kilometers an hour and that would give me plenty of time to arrange my thoughts before the barrel plunged over the edge into the Devil's Throat, which, he said, was about five kilometers downstream.

The Devil's Throat? Surely that was a mistake. The Devil's Throat was much further away than five kilometers. It was certainly on a river, but not the River of Time. It is a chasm, part of the Iguazu falls of South America. Vast volumes of water do not so much fall as collapse over the edge into The Devil's Throat with a terrible roaring noise. There are birds down there too, about the size of a magpie-lark. They fly through a mist of spume and spray churned up by the falling column of water

These birds prey on startled insects whose peaceful passage, floating along the river, had been turned into chaos. Water and spray is the world of these birds and they make nests on sheer rock faces protected by tumbling curtains of water. You can see them flying straight into a waterfall to get to the nest behind. If you don't believe me go to Buenos Aires and take the tour.

To return to our story. The River of Time could go anywhere. To Iguazu as well as countless other destinations. No one could predict the future and so I set out to an unknown ending in a leaking barrel and only a telephone for company.

I had pleaded with my enemies not to drop the phone into the barrel before they started to nail it shut. Arguing was useless with these bitter people, they just wanted me to suffer.

My wife rang soon after I was pushed away from the bank and was gliding through peaceful waters far from any waterfall. She wanted to know where I was.

I explained that I had been forced into a leaky barrel, thrown into the River of Time and could possibly disappear into the Devil's Throat in about an hour after the beginning of our conversation. I said 'If that is to be my fate I hope the barrel would not injure any birds on the way down.'

'You're a liar,' she screamed. 'I've never heard such a bizarre excuse for not coming home. You're in a sleazy club somewhere with those low-life, good for nothing, useless mongrels you call friends!'

'I don't know where they are,' I retorted, 'but I am sitting in a leaky barrel and floating to an unknown destination. Even if I don't go into the Devil's Throat I am bound to end up somewhere equally discouraging. Once one is afloat on the River of Time there is no saying where the voyage will end. Every one of us is on a one way trip into the future; apart from that all is uncertain.'

'Your future is to end up in a shelter for hopeless drunks because I'm not going to hang around waiting for you to come home,

I said 'I admit I do enjoy the company of cheerful, jovial friends, and am not averse to the occasional drink, but to imply that I am a victim of alcohol is going too far.'

She slammed the phone down before I could say anything further, perhaps we were fated never to meet again. At least that was one comforting thought to cheer me on this dismal voyage.

I was wondering if I could force the telephone through the bung-hole and let the river take care of the problem. It rang once more.

I pressed the button expecting another round of abuse, but it was someone else altogether. A familiar voice cried out 'Bernie, where are you? We're all down at the tavern waiting and the boys are getting restless. We can't start the serious drinking until you get here', and the quartette can't get going without its bass man.'

Once again I explained my predicament and the uncertain fate that awaited me.

'Oh, that's too bad Bernie', was the response. 'Have you rung triple zero yet? They might be able to send someone to look for you.'

I pointed out that the River of Time has neither a beginning nor an end, and if the cops went looking for me in the twenty-first century the barrel may have drifted into the twenty-second, or there may be a loop in time and I was back in the nineteenth or twentieth. If a river has no beginning and no ending then it can't have a middle either, so the cops would not have the remotest idea where to search for me.

'Hard luck, Bernie.' Was the response. 'We're gunna miss ya. I'll tell the boys they'll have to find another bass man. Have a nice day, now, and don't you do anything I wouldn't do.' He rang off.

Those conversations seemed to have cut me away from the life I knew, which was a relief but I was not free yet because I could not force the telephone through the bung-hole and dreaded another call from my wife.

The barrel was riding low in the water because of the leaks, and cold water was lapping around my behind. Most uncomfortable! I peered through the bung-hole to see where I was.

It was pitch black out there and I thought the river must have gone underground because the rustling, burbling sound of flowing water seemed to re-echo quietly from stony walls. The barrel would sink presently and I wondered how long I would lie in this watery grave before a maintenance crew found me.

My thoughts were interrupted by a heavy banging on the top of the barrel. The impact seemed to start the seams and even more water flowed in.

Someone, or something very powerful ripped the top off the barrel and a huge, angry face glared down at me.

'What the hell do you think yer doin?' It roared. 'You an illegal immigrant or somethin'; and 'you're a fare evader, aren't you? Thought you'd sneak in without paying the ferryman. Well, you thought wrong, pal. This is my patch and I've worked the ferry for the past three thousand years and never lost anyone overboard yet, Though I might start now I've found a low-down rotten scab trying to sneak past without paying.'

These remarks put me in mind of my wife but said 'It's not my fault! The Killjoys hate people who take a drink now and then and laugh a lot, so they jumped me, nailed me into the barrel and dropped it into the River of Time.'

The face said 'How do I know you didn't nail it shut and climb in afterwards?'

'Gimme a break will ya! How could I do that?'

The stranger had to think about this. He was not the sharpest reasoner I had ever met so it took a while, but at last he had a mental breakthrough and realized the position that I was in.

‘OK. Maybe it’s not your fault,’ he grumbled, ‘but I’m still the ferryman here and no one crosses the river except I take ‘em.’

I thought of something the ferryman had said.

‘You say you’ve been on the job for three thousand years?’

‘Yeah, give or take a century or two. I took over from me dad. He was getting a bit long in the tooth and I was old enough to look after the business, so I been here ever since.’

It was clear where we were. This was Charon the Ferryman, and the river was the Styx, which divided hell from the rest of the underworld. My barrel had drifted far off course.

Charon said, ‘Let me help you out.’ He caught my collar and lifted me out of the barrel one-handed.

It was dark and we were standing on a stone quay. The River Styx ran steadily between us and a distant bank on the other side which was illuminated from time to time by wandering plumes of fire.

I was cramped after sitting all that time squashed in a barrel, but managed to stand up. The barrel drifted away into the darkness.

A large and ancient rowing-boat was tied to the quay where it strained against the mooring ropes. The Styx was running so strongly past the quay that the stationary boat had a bow wave of its own.

‘You’re Charon?’

‘How’d ya know I’m Charon?’ he asked.

I said I went on a tour of the Vatican once and in the Sistine Chapel Michelangelo painted a picture of you driving your passengers off the boat. They didn’t want hell as a destination. Have you seen your picture?’

‘I haven’t seen it, but I’ve heard about it often enough. All the cardinals and bishops who come through bound for hell tell me what a handsome fellow I am, and that it’s the most popular picture in the chapel, even though Michelangelo had painted the walls and ceiling with pictures. They all try to suck up to me, see, but it doesn’t do them any good. They go to hell anyway. I’ve even ferried a few Popes across in me time, but not so many since the Reformation.’

‘You should ask for leave to visit the Vatican’ I suggested, ‘and join one of the tours that go through the Sistine Chapel. Even though you’re a minor Greek deity they wouldn’t mind. Anyone can go on a tour, as long as they pay’.

Charon seemed interested in the idea so I pressed on. ‘Michelangelo did a good job with the painting. You look very commanding belting your passengers with an oar to make them get off the boat and finish their trip to hell.’

Charon looked even more thoughtful. I had appealed to his vanity and he would like to see the painting. If Michelangelo had painted my picture I would want to see it too.

‘Don’t forget, Charon, you haven’t had a holiday in three thousand years. You must have accrued a decent wad of long-service leave in all that time.’

‘Three hundred years,’ he said. ‘That’s not bad; and I could really use a holiday. But who would look after the business while I was away?’

‘I could do that,’ I said. ‘The Fates must have had some reason for sending me here.’

Charon looked at me thoughtfully. ‘Pick up that oar.’

The oars were lying on the cobblestones at our feet. They was not as thick as a telegraph pole, and not quite as long, but not far off. After a struggle I managed to raise one end.

Charon laughed at my endeavours.. ‘A pip-squeak like you couldn’t handle my job. How would you cross a river with this current if you can’t handle the oar, and how would drive the passengers off on the other side if you can’t even lift one end of it?’

‘You’ve been on this job a thousand years too long,’ I retorted. ‘All you need is the most powerful outboard motor on the market. It’d make this old boat of yours slice through the water like a hot knife through butter. Oars have had it. And as for getting the passengers off on the other side you can order a good quality electric cattle-prod, that should get rid of them in no time.

Charon seemed impressed by this

‘By the way’, I asked. ‘What sort of night life do they have here?’

‘Terrific!’ He said. ‘Go to the Firepit, tell them I sent you and you’ll get the hottest drinks in any known world; always good company there, too. The barmaids are beaut kids but you wouldn’t want to start any trouble; they got forked tails and they know how to use them.’

We talked things over for a while and eventually he decided to take his accrued leave and put me in charge of the business, together with the modern improvements I had suggested..

So Charon might be away for the next three hundred years and when you come this way you will probably meet me. The fare is no longer a penny because one has to allow for inflation. Bring \$50, nothing less, otherwise you will never be able to cross the river Styx and go to hell.

## **Replacing Charon**

I was drifting down the river Styx, in charge of a boat full of lost souls destined for hell, when the phone rang. It was my wife calling; naturally I was upset.

Several times I had tried to throw the cell phone away but it kept coming back. I cautiously said, ‘Hello dear’.

‘Don’t you hello dear, me. Where are you now?’

‘I’m drifting down the Styx with a boat-load of discontented lost souls. I told you before, Charon, the ferryman, had a lot of long service leave to use up so I took over the business while he was away. I should be home in about three hundred years.’

I could hear heavy breathing at the other end of the phone.

‘These stories of yours are getting wilder and wilder. Now get out of the pub, night-club, wherever you are, and you come straight home. The children are crying for you, God knows why, and the rent’s due. The Housing Commission people say I have to pay up or else.’

‘Or else, what?’

‘They say we can have a house in Nar Nar Goon West. But first they have to buy some plastic sheeting to cover the holes in the roof, and get rid of a pack of dingos that are living off the rats in the house.’

‘Sorry dear, I can’t do anything about it. When I took over the business from Charon he ordered a large outboard motor because I couldn’t handle the oars; and an electric cattle prod so I could persuade the passengers to get out when we reached hell. Well, the outboard cut out a little while ago and I can’t fix it.’

An exasperated sigh was breathed into the phone. She said, ‘Just come home,. I’ll go to Centrelink and explain that I’ve got a lunatic on my hands and maybe Medicare will pay for psychiatric treatment.’

'I don't need a psychiatrist, I need a mechanic who can fix an outboard motor. None of the lost souls on board know a thing about outboards. Anyway, I sent you some money, didn't you get it?'

She answered through what seemed to be gritted teeth. 'Yes, I got it. A messenger brought the money. Very amusing, I don't think. He was almost naked, had wings on his heels a funny looking helmet and he carried a stick with snakes writhing round it. He said his name was Hermie.'

'No, no! My dear, that was Hermes, messenger of the gods; the stick you saw with the snakes on it is actually the Caduceus, his symbol of office. He plays an important part in the story of Mount Olympus which was the home of the Greek gods -She screeched, 'Bernie Shut up. I don't want any semi-naked men, even if they have winged heels, ringing the door bell, and I could have done without the snakes.'

'He tried every apartment on the ground floor looking for me. But no one could understand him, not that they were listening much on account of the snakes. I wish Xantippe hadn't been at home. He tried her apartment. She understands ancient Greek, and doesn't mind snakes, so she brought him up to me. We had the elevator to ourselves too.'

'Who's Xantippe?'

'Xantippe Socrates. You know her, ground floor, always fighting with the neighbors and screaming at her husband, poor old Mr Socrates, though she seems to like me.'

'Oh yeah, Mr Socrates. He's a bit of a Bolshie, isn't he? Always against the government, always speaking on street corners, stirring up young people to riot. What a nutter!'

'Yeah, that was the problem, Xantippe wanted him to get a decent job, and earn some money well he's died since you left, drank a big cup of hemlock. Xantippe said the government made him do it because they were sick of his agitating and causing trouble.'

'That's a bit extreme isn't it?' I said. 'He probably did it to get away from her nagging. I'm sorry the old boy's gone but you got the money didn't you? It was very kind of Hermes to go to all that trouble; we are only casual acquaintances after all. I suppose being messenger of the gods he likes to deliver things.'

'Yes, but what's the use of a lot of old Greek coins to me. The bank wouldn't take them.'

'Alright, if the bank won't take them try the landlord.'

'That didn't work either, and Hermie disappeared before the police and three ambulances arrived, and no one believed my story.'

'What were the ambulances for?'

'You idiot, they were there to revive the people who had seen the snakes. Some had heart attacks and had to be taken to the hospital. The government snake catcher was here too. He was telling me off for bringing snakes into a built up area. He asked me Hermie's address and I couldn't tell him.'

'I'm sorry but I can't talk right now. The lost souls are restless. We've passed the landing place at hell, and we're just drifting with the stream. They want to know where we're going and I don't know any more than they do.'

'Bernard, don't you hang up on me! If you want to send me something sensible do it through Australia Post. At least the posties don't carry snakes round with them.'

I had to close the phone at that point. There were other things to think about; the passengers were becoming menacing. Their leader was a fat bishop who had committed all fourteen deadly sins. There used to be seven but one of the Popes added seven more and the bishop broke those too. He was now trying to stir up trouble on the ferry.



The bishop was fat, still wore his clerical collar, and addressed me as though I was a congregation that was not putting enough money into the collection plate

'My man!' he said. I hate it when people call me "my man".

'My man, there are about a hundred people on this boat and we each paid \$50 for our fare.'

I hurriedly checked my phone to make sure it was off. I did not want my wife to hear any mention of people paying me \$50 per head for my services. Women should not have to worry about financial matters; besides she would squander the money on housekeeping or rent.

I threw the phone overboard but it bounced back after hitting the river and landed in my pocket. It always does that.

The other passengers tell me you are not Charon the regular ferryman. If so I must enquire why is he not in charge. And why are we subject to this shameful incompetence. We appear to have missed the regular landing place because the "Welcome to Hell" signs are now behind us, and we are drifting further away.'

'Charon's away because he worked the ferry for three thousand years and now he's on three hundred years long service leave; so he won't be back for a while. Anyway bishop, you're more anxious than most people to get to hell.'

'I have urgent appointments, and duties to fulfill'. Some of my students at the theology college have predeceased me and were waiting at the landing in a welcome party; I saw them!

'There has been a change of plans, the motor has cut out so we're not going to hell.'

'Well, where are we going?'

'I don't know. This river runs pretty fast but we'll have to come ashore somewhere.'

The Bishop was enraged. 'But I am to deliver a lecture tonight on "Current Trends in Theology". It is most important that I get there.'

'You'll probably arrive at hell in the end, but not for a while.'

The bishop turned away. I think he wanted to stir up some trouble with the passengers.

A young man dressed in a tunic, once white but now grey and tattered, which reached to his knees, and with a frayed rope tied round his waist approached me when the bishop left. He carried a lyre, which is a sort of harp, and had been busking on the ferry, plucking away at the strings, singing, and trying to cadge a few coins, without much success.

He introduced himself. 'I am Prometheus, a fallen Greek god.'

'Oh, yeah!, and I'm Emperor of China.' I had heard this line before. There were quite a few beggars around the landing stage who claimed to be Prometheus.

No, no. I am the real one. I saved the human race once because I stole fire from heaven and brought it down to earth. You humans were in a bad way until I gave you fire, You couldn't cook your food, you couldn't warm yourselves.'

'That was very kind, but could you do us another favor and tell me how to fix this outboard motor?'

'I don't know about such things, but I think its vital essence has gone.'

'What, it's out of fuel?'

'I don't know but I feel its life force has drained away.'

I checked, and the god was right. The tank was bone dry. We drifted on with the current.

'Zeus, the chief god, Lord of Mount Olympus, punished me for giving you that great gift. He had me chained to the highest peak in the Caucasus Mountains, and every day an eagle came and tore out my liver with its beak'

'That's terrible, but you do look a bit pale and skinny. Surely you must have a liver otherwise you wouldn't be still be walking around. I guess even a god needs a liver.'

'The liver grew back magically every night. Zeus didn't believe in easy punishments. Anyway the whole thing undermined my health; I'm not the god I was.'

His story could have been true. He looked young, and gods never age or die, no matter how far they fall, or what happens to their livers.

The bishop had been making a speech. He turned back to me, now supported by a group of very angry passengers.

'I am told there is nothing wrong with the motor, it is merely out of fuel. You must use your oars to get us to our destination.'

'Look, bishop. Don't be a dill. You're going spend eternity in hell, why are you in such a hurry to get there.'

'I am a bishop of the church and I have a lecture to deliver. Now, where are the oars to row us to hell?'

'Sorry bishop. There are none on the ferry, Charon never used more than two and they're still lying on the quay where he left them.'

'I have never heard of such incompetence. You can be sure my man that this will be reported to the highest authorities. I will put in a formal complaint as soon as we reach hell.'

He would probably have other things to worry about when, and if, he reached hell, but we were all distracted by a huge noise made by someone on the side of the river that we had left a short while before.

A giant, angry figure was running along the bank. He carried two lengths of timber over his shoulders and was roaring at us to stop; which, of course, we could not do.

With a sudden sinking of my heart I recognised the giant as Charon and the two lengths of timber were the missing oars.

He must have been told about our mishap, but I knew there had been other complaints about the service. Every time the ferry crossed the river with a load of passengers there were unhappy souls on board, and they complained bitterly. The bishop was the first person I met who actually wanted to go to hell. Naturally people blamed the ferryman, and word of this must have got to Charon.

It was not long before he caught up and started roaring insults at me.

'You wait until I get you, Bernard, you hopeless idiot, I'll take you apart. I been the ferryman here for three thousand years, and you ruined the business as soon as I turned me back.'

He mentioned something about ripping off my head and what he would do with it afterwards.

He took one of the oars in his hand and threw it like a spear towards the ferry. It landed short and splashed down in the middle of the river. He then threw the other one. and followed it with a run to hurl himself off the bank, an exercise which caused the most tremendous belly flop into the water that I have ever seen.

As part of my wasted youth my mates and I used to water bomb the local pool from the top diving board, but I had never seen anything like the wave created by Charon.

When he arose from the deep puffing and ferocious, he started to swim towards the ferry pushing the oars before him.

It was time to abandon ship. I moved towards the far rail.

Prometheus grabbed my arm. He said, 'If you're thinking of going over the side, whatever you do don't open your mouth underwater. Keep it shut all the time; this river's deadly. I'll come with you. He doesn't like me either.'

We jumped together into the River Styx, no water bombing this time, it was a matter of life or death. I kept my mouth firmly closed.

We came up, not far from the bank and heard a rattling behind us as Charon threw the oars into the ferry.

He climbed aboard, rushed to the side and shook his fist at us.

'You keep out of me sight, Prometheus,' he roared. I know what you done, and if I catch you you'll wish you were back with the eagle. And as for you Bernard, you'll have to take the ferry ride someday, same as everyone else, and when you do I'll give you the worst passage anyone's ever had. By the time I finish with yer you'll be glad to get off at hell. No one mucks up my business and gets away with it.'

I am ashamed to say I made a rude gesture at him, but no doubt I will regret it when next we meet.

The waves created by Charon washed us up the river bank on to a dreary looking shore. I gazed around wondering what misfortunes would befall me next. We had landed on a dark, place illuminated only by the flaring lights of hell that reflected on the roof of the cavern which now was our world.

Prometheus seemed to recognise this dismal place. He said 'I've been here before. I remember coming to this very spot with Thetis, the mother of Achilles.

'What was she doing here?'

'Achilles was just a baby and she brought him to this place to lower him into the waters of the Styx.'

'But you said it was poisonous. Did she want to get rid of the kid?'

'No, not at all. She wanted him to be a great warrior, and anyone who bathes in the waters of this river is proof against all weapons and all accidents.'

'But wouldn't the kid howl when he was dumped in the river by his Mum. He'd get a mouthful of water and bingo, she's got a dead baby on her hands. How would she get on at the inquest? She would have to tell the court that she loved her little boy and dumped him in a poisonous river because she thought it would help him in his career. I reckon the Coroner would take a very dim view of that story.'

'Oh, Achilles was never known to cry. I think he knew from birth that he was to be a great warrior, and warriors don't weep.'

'Well, did it work? Did he have a long and happy life killing people?'

'Actually no. When Thetis dipped him in the water she held him by the heel, and that was the only part that didn't get wet, so when someone shot him in the heel he died. But you'll be alright, you were completely submerged in the water, and now you are proof against the knocks and shocks of this world.'

'Well, that should be a comfort next time I meet my wife.'

'There are worse things than your wife down here There are The Children of the Minotaur. Their specialty is catching passing travelers and eating them, alive.'

'Well, do you know the way out?'

'I told Theseus he should have killed the whole family while he was at it, not just the Minotaur alone.'

'I don't want to reminisce,' I said. 'Just get us out of here. How did you and Thetis find this place?'

'We came down through a series of descending caves. I think the entrance is over there.' He pointed vaguely away from the river.

'Let's go and find it.'

A horrible gurgling, shrieking noise broke out nearby.

'It's the Children of the Minotaur,' cried Theseus! 'Run!!'

'Is this the way to the exit??'

'It had better be, just run!' I ran, we both ran.

## **The Garden of Statues**

Prometheus and I finally reached the surface. It was toilsome, heavy work, through narrow places, over rocks jagged and dangerous. Through caverns, crawling round boulders that were liable at any moment to roll and crush us.

All the time during our escape we could hear the panting and bellowing of the Children of the Minotaur clamoring after us as we scrambled in blackness up those long steep tunnels.

At last we crawled out through the entrance, a cave, and fell onto grass and into a deafening silence relieved only by birdsong.

I had forgotten how vast the sky was, how blue. The light hurt after the long darkness of the underworld. It was nice to lie face down in the sunshine, taking in the scent of crushed grass and looking at the green through half closed eyes. The howling of the Children of the Minotaur died away as, unable to face the light, they retreated down to the underworld.

An equally unwanted noise broke the silence. The shrilling of my telephone announced that my wife wished to speak to me. I reluctantly picked it up and pressed a button.

She said, 'Bernard I'm not going to ask where you are because I'll just have to listen to a pack of lies about you associating with gods or ferrying people over a river I've never heard of.'

That was my wife's problem, a lack of education and, a lack of imagination. I had just left a post as ferryman on the River Styx, running through Hades. My companion was a fallen god, Prometheus. In fact all the Greek gods, of which he was one, had fallen, and no longer dwelled on Mount Olympus, no one believed in them anymore. They had to support themselves as best they could.

My wife spoke to me bitterly. 'You know those coins you sent me and nobody wants,' she asked.

'Yes,' I answered cautiously, I remembered them very well.

'I wish I'd never seen them. I found an ad in the paper that said a shop in the city wanted to buy gold, silver, old coins and medals. So I rang to say I had old coins to sell, and could they send someone out to inspect them.'

'What happened?'

'Well, a man came from the shop. This guy looked at the coins for quite a while through a magnifying glass and he seemed a bit shaken. He rang up the shop and the boss came out and looked at the coins and he seemed surprised too.'

'They wanted to know where I'd got them from, and I told them you'd sent them by someone called Hermie who said he was a messenger of the gods and he carried a stick with snakes crawling all over it and had wings growing out of his heels. He was wearing a funny looking helmet. There were wings on it as well'.

'I don't think they believed me, but they asked where you were and I said the last time we spoke you said you were in some joint called The Greek Underworld. Then the boss made another call and a detective from Interpol came out.'

'From Interpol!!'

'Yes, the International Police.'

'I know what Interpol is, but why would they be interested in your coins?'

'I don't know, but after I told my story again the Interpol guy rang Athens police to warn them that you've joined the Greek underworld and specialise in stealing ancient Greek coins. Then he rang some museums overseas and told them to check their coin collections. I don't know how I'll be able to pay the next phone bill.'

'Bernie, why are doing this to me? Why did you steal all those old coins and send them to me by a half naked winged messenger. I tried to be a good wife yet you get me into all this trouble.'

I defended my reputation by saying, 'Those coins are very common down below, and I didn't steal them. I taught some young devils on leave from hell to play poker and they paid my winnings in coins, so I decided to send them to you to help with the housekeeping.'

'Well, they're not common here, and no one wants them.'

'Don't worry dear, it will soon blow over. Tell the man from Interpol to go and talk to the neighbors. They'll back up your story about Hermes carrying snakes with him, when he's on a job, and the wings on his heels, and how he came knocking on doors in the building looking for you. They remember that, don't they?'

'They sure do! the one's that had heart attacks are back from hospital and everyone blames me for the trouble. Alright, I'll tell Interpol to check with the other tenants. But why don't you get out of that cheap dive, night club, whatever it is you call The Greek Underworld It can't be much of a place, it isn't listed on the internet' or on the telephone. Get out and come home. The kids miss you. I miss you.'

'I'll try and get back as soon as I can. I'm up on the surface now. Prometheus and I were chased through long, dangerous tunnels by the Children of the Minotaur but in the end we escaped out into the open and they couldn't follow us --'

'Oh God!!' she screeched and slammed the phone down. I don't think she believed my story either.'

When she finished I realized that Prometheus had disappeared. He was a bit vague like most of the gods. He must have lost interest in my conversation and wandered away.

No point in staying near the cave. The Children of the Minotaur might get sunglasses, or sun-block, and come out into the open and go after me. I walked on. After strolling a kilometer or so I came to a stone wall I couldn't see over. A little way along was an opened gate and a sign which read

Garden statue Display  
props.  
Medusa Gorgon and Silenus  
Please enter.

Having nothing else to do I walked in and saw dozens of statues in a walled garden. Lifelike statues of people in all sorts of positions. I was reminded of a crowd waiting for something to happen.

Usually those old Greek sculptors produced the body beautiful. Young athletes, gorgeous girls, muscle bound gods, all with a fig leaf, or windblown bits of robes to hide the vital spots and preserve modesty.

Here I saw ordinary people, naked, but no fig leaves, nothing to hide behind. Some figures were skinny, some fat, some just lumpy. There were a few in the old Grecian style, beautiful young men and women, but not many.

What spoiled the statues was the look of horror that the maker had chiselled into their faces. He gave them the appearance of one who had just seen something shameful or terrifying.

Another thing I noticed were the eyes. The eyes seemed to be almost real, probably colored glass, that looked out from faces of marble. The young girl I was studying stared back at me and her face was a mask of horror. I had to turn away. It wasn't the sight of me that upset her, the expression on her face was there before I arrived.

A feature of the garden was a large half round pool. It was opposite the entrance and backed up by the wall around the garden. Some statues were seated on a lower stone wall that, together with the garden wall, surrounded the pond and raised the water level, which nearly lapped over the top.

A horrible, ugly stone face was carved on the wall and a stream of water poured out of its mouth into the pool.

The season had turned while I had been underground working the ferry. Spring had arrived. The grass was starred with daisies. While low growing flowering shrubs were playing the part of fig leaves for some of the statues.

The day had turned hot. I looked at the water and was thinking how pleasant it would be to get in and cool down when someone, who had come up behind me, said. 'You are right, a dip would be very pleasant in this heat.'

I turned round startled, to see who had spoken.

The stranger had two horns rising up through black curly hair, a beard trimmed to a point, strange eyes that reminded me of a goat I once knew, and hairy legs. His feet were like goat hoofs. Apart from all this there was nothing unusual about him except what appeared to be an ancient Greek shopping bag he carried. Inside the bag was something round, but not particularly heavy.

'You have been admiring our collection,' he said. 'My partner and I have assembled this display over centuries. It has been slow to develop but in a few more years we will start charging admission.'

I sensed a business opportunity here and said, 'If you're looking for a manager to run the show I'm available. The first thing I would recommend would be to order statues that look happier than the miserable lot you have here.'

'What a clever thought,' murmured the stranger. My name is Silenus, and yours is ----?'

'Bernard,' I said, 'But everyone calls me Bernie.'

'Excellent! I can see you are brimming with ideas, what else should we do?'

'A children's section would be nice. And don't forget a souvenir shop that everyone would have to pass through on the way out.'

Silenus seemed rapt with my ideas. He cried out, 'This is marvelous! But you must not overheat yourself with all these wonderful schemes of yours. I will introduce you to my partner after you have had a swim.'

'I don't have my bathers,' I said. 'They're still at home.'

'Not to worry, there's no one about but me. You're the first visitor we've had all day and nakedness is the fashion here.' He gestured at the statues, which appeared to be looking at me with pained expressions.

'After you have finished in the pool you can meet my colleague and we can talk about your future here.'

The invitation was so kindly, the water so inviting that I slipped off my clothes and dropped them on the grass without a second thought.

I stepped up on to the low wall and straight into the water. 'Delightful!' It was too shallow for diving or swimming but good for frolicking. I wished the girl statues could come to life and jump in with me. They would soon lose that look of horror; or maybe not.

After about half an hour I came out to dry myself in the sunshine, close to some statues already sitting on the wall.

Silenus sat down next to me. He put down his bag to lean it against the foot of the wall. 'I should have introduced myself properly' he said. 'I am a Satyr, part of the pantheon of Greek gods. Our role was to create mischief and chase nymphs. But, of course, all changed when people lost faith in us. Our religion no longer has any worshippers to pay for our shrines so I have become a changed god. Together with my partner we try to look after people. It is time you met her.'

I looked round, expecting to see someone approaching.

'No, no! She's already here with us.'

'Where?'

'She's in the bag.' He reached into his shopping bag, pulled out a severed head and held it in front of me. He looked at me, not the head.

'This is Medusa Gorgon' he said, 'One of the Harpies. It was that blundering oaf Perseus who cut off her head.'

There were snakes growing up through hair, lots of them, and Silenus was holding the head up by two of the serpents which he held in either hand.

None of them liked this treatment and showed it by hissing loudly but Silenus seemed immune from being struck at or bitten.

'She is quite beautiful', said Silenus. 'In the way of Greek women. Her type is still to be seen on the islands of the Cyclades. What a pity you will never go there.'

'Her eyes are her best feature, look deep into them, you will see what I mean.'

I couldn't look away. Her eyes were black pools of unknown depth, and I could not stop myself from falling in.

Silenus was telling me something but he seemed a long way off. 'I found her,' he said, 'In a pawn shop in ancient Athens. The owner of the shop could not understand why members of his staff kept turning to stone, until he traced the problem to this bag. It was the gaze of Medusa that did it, so the bag and contents were offered to me at a greatly reduced price.'

I could not take my eyes from the horror he was holding up.

'That should do it,' said Silenus. 'Welcome to our collection.'

I tried to struggle, to get up and run from the park, but it was hopeless and my skin was turning to the color of marble.

'Don't fuss,' said Silenus. 'It only makes thing worse. Now I will set you up in a new pose I just thought of. He started pushing and prodding me into the shape he had in mind.'

He talked as he worked. 'You will like it here,' he said. 'Plenty of company, and you will never feel heat or cold again, never be hungry or thirsty, just a quiet existence sitting on this wall until the world comes to an end.'

This talking did not stop him from molding me into position. He guided my left elbow to rest on my leg just above the knee, and my fingers were clenched into a fist. My head was pushed down so I sat there chin resting on the fist and gazing downwards, looking at the fat legs of an ugly statue opposite. My right forearm rested on my thigh with my hand hanging down between my knees.

'Very artistic,' said Silenus. I could see his feet step back to admire what he had done. 'You are hardening up nicely. I will call you *The Thinker*. Perhaps in the future some sculptor will make a similar statue, but he will be too late. I was the first to create your pose, it's all mine.'

If I had been capable of speaking I would have asked him to turn me so I could see a girl statue nearby. Looking at her legs would have been preferable to the ones I could see, but it was not to be, I was fixed immovably like the other statues.

The sun shone on us, but other times it rained, or the wind blew. I remember being covered in snow which melted in its turn. Days and nights followed in a regular succession, but how long we were there I couldn't tell you.

Silenus' collection was coming along nicely. The occasional passerby came in to view the statues and ended up like the rest of us, though I could see very little of what happened, I could not turn my head to watch.

## **Prometheus returns**

It seemed, after months had passed that someone else came to view us. I did not know there was a visitor present until I saw another pair of legs before my lowered eyes. The owner of the legs leaned down so he could look upwards at my face.

'Oh, there you are,' he said. 'I wondered what had happened to you.' It was Prometheus.

Silenus appeared. 'I see that you are admiring our collection,' he said. 'My colleague and I have spent many years putting it together.'

'Oh, yes. A very fine display. Some of your statues are modern others have been here for a century or more.'

'I can see that you are an expert judge of art. But I can't help noticing that you have travelled a long way. You are very dusty and, I think, tired. A dip in our pool would make you feel so much better.'

'No thank you,' answered Prometheus. 'I am not going to fall for that old trick.'

'What do you mean, trick?' demanded Silenus. 'Are you questioning my honour?'

'Yes I am. You are one of the Satyrs and your race was never known for its honor or honesty.'

'I'm not going to put with lies of this kind. Get out or I will turn the dogs on you'

'You don't have any dogs and I have been savaged by worse things than them, as you should know,' retorted Prometheus.

Silenus looked closely at his face. 'By Zeus I do know you,' he said. 'Last time I saw you you were chained to a rock on the top peak of the Caucasus mountains, and an eagle was ripping your guts out.'

'Yes, I remember. You found it most amusing. I can still hear your laughter echoing among the rocks as you walked down the pass leaving me to my torment.'



'Ah well,' said Silenus. 'It was a long time ago. But tell me old boy, how did you escape?'

Prometheus paused before answering, calling up painful memories. He shook off the feeling and said, 'The eagle lost its power. No one believed in it any more, not after a Christian mob destroyed Zeus' last shrine and killed his last priest. My chains just fell away and I came down from the mountain to find the shrine still burning and the sacred grove cut down.'

'Well you scored something from those mad Christians, but for Medusa and me it was dead loss. Our shrines got the chop too. What have you been doing since then?'

I married a mortal woman. She was the shrine keeper's daughter, but it was no good. Galatea was a beautiful girl and we loved each other dearly, but she grew old and died. I have been alone ever since, wandering the world and doing what I could for mankind.'

'You always were a bleeding heart, it's no wonder Zeus turned the eagle loose on you. Now clear off, there's a good chap, leave Medusa and me to our little hobby.'

'No, I can't do that. I can't leave these poor souls to your cruelty. Free them now.'

'Always the do-gooder. You brought fire down from heaven and gave it to the ungrateful sods. Did they thank you? Did they climb the mountain to shoo the bird away, or try to free you from your chains? Not them. They turned Christian, or some other useless religion. They destroyed our temples and turned us out of our comfortable billets on Mount Olympus. Would you believe Zeus is a busker now? He travels the world playing the lyre and trying to score enough coins to buy a meal. Who wants to listen to a lyre? That's what brought us all down, he wasn't able to change.'

Free them!'

'They won't like it! Some of them have been here for long time. This is their home. They'll be back tomorrow asking to be turned into statues again.'

'That's their choice, do it!'

Silenus sulkily waved his hand and I felt life stirring again through my body. An effort to stand up ended in failure and I sank back again to the wall. It hurt, but never mind, the paralysis of stone no longer held me in its grip. All the statues were coming to life, stretching, staggering, taking their first step for ages.

Hard luck! The girl I had admired was clinging to a young man, resting her head on his shoulder. The other young statues paired off, male and female, almost immediately.

'Give them back their clothes,' Prometheus ordered.

Silenus shook his head. 'Can't do it. We sold their clothes to pay expenses. A dealer comes once a month and buys all the clothes we have.'

Everyone was looking at him. He gestured towards the gate. 'Bugger off, you lot!' he roared. 'You're all trespassers. Anyone who wants his job back as a statue come see me tomorrow. The rest of you can just stay away.'

The crowd was shambling towards the gates, glad to escape from the garden. The young couples walked hand in hand.

'Look at that,' grumbled Silenus. 'I do something nice for them and not a word of thanks from anyone. I expect that sort of ingratitude because I lost faith in human nature a long time ago.'

'There'll be hell to pay when they get home without a stitch of clothing between them,' he said, a little more cheerfully. 'There's going to be a few family quarrels when their great grandparents turn up naked and want to be housed and fed and given clothes.'

As the last of the crowd limped out of the gate my telephone started to ring. I had hoped that the batteries would have run out by now. I sighed, picked up the thing and said 'Hello Dear.'

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