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ART AND THE GODS

by

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When Art woke up and did (in temporal order): 1. feel the wet droolpatch on the pillow, 2. yawn, stretch, scratch, notice one-pm-ness of Time, and 3. contemplate the trade-off between getting up-smoking-eating-predicting and sleeping, he decided to return to Z-land and shut his eyes. Pillowsmell teamed up with HungerGod, BladderGod, and NagGod (of whom more later), and dug moats, erected barricades around Z-land. Art mumbled *fuck off* and refused to open his eyes, shutting them *so* hard—as if trying to suck his entire body in through the eyes and slipping unnoticed, disembodied, into sleep—into Z-land.

The passage of ten minutes, followed by orange juice from another era, and a crumpled cigarette out of jeans last washed in that same OJ-originating era, led Art to his desk. NagGod stared out of the PC screen and nagged. Art ignored NagGod and typed:

> And when the chéf brought out the main course, Mr. Spooner exclaimed gleefully, "Why, I have never seen a diner fuck!" The hostess giggled and spreadeagled herself on the table. The diners shrugged, Oh-what-the-hells were uttered, copulatory activities were initiated. Confusion and merriment reigned supreme, until the butler cleared his

> throat and clarified the situation. The hostess giggled and thanked Mr. Spooner for appreciating the duck. So what? What happens next? What happened before? Why am I writing this crap?

That was the trouble with Art. What he wanted to write, he couldn't. What he could write, he didn't want to write. Worse: what he didn't want to write, he had to write. And NagGod, having a great time with all this: *Heh heh! Art? Are you done with Libra yet? Still stuck on Leo? What? Haven't even finished Aries yet? Heh heh! Four PM, Art. Are you sure you'll be done by then? Just two hours left, Art. Better start, shouldn't you? Heh heh! Heh heh!*

What Art wanted to write: extraordinarily successful novels, one-ing the bestsellers list without fuss, catapulting him into ⋆-land. He was pretty clear on that. Exactly what those thousands of words would be, that would implement this transition from noman's land to ⋆-land, Art wasn't so sure about. That was the trouble with Art.

What Art did not want to write: horoscopes. Every day, every sign. The *Chronicle* had given him the job mostly because of his unique claims about incorporating current events and their impact on ascendant signs, oppositions, conjunctions, suns, moons, and other future determining parameters. Art did not want to assure the Librans that yesterday's stock market crash would have no effect on their lives, stock, or livestock. Art did not want to ask those born when the Sun was in Capricorn to exercise extra caution as the escaped convict was likely to be prejudiced against their sun-sign. But he had to. Every day. All twelve signs due by 4:00 PM in the out-tray of the editor's Fax machine. To appease ContractGod and HungerGod. That was the trouble with Art.

Heh heh! Ninety minutes, Art. NagGod opened a can of beer. *Beer, Art? Heh heh! I didn't think so. This is getting to be more fun every day. Yesterday you were already finishing up Sagittarius at this time. That stuff about Mr. Spooner, Art—funny—mildly so, but funny nonetheless.*

But it won't sell, now, will it? Forget stardom and return to the stars, Art. Get on with it, then. Aries, Art, Aries! Heh heh!

Art mumbled *fuck off,* and opened a new file. The horoscopes weren't going to be pleasant. He typed:

> **Aries:** The same star configuration that brought about the war in Bosnia has now entered your charts. Avoid being bombed. ...

By the time Art finished telling those in Pisces to beware of the Unabomber, it was three-fifty. As he fed the pages into his Fax machine, NagGod started humming. And nagging: *All done, eh, Art? Heh heh! All set to have a good time now? Not worried about tomorrow, are you? And the day after? Well, free for now, Art. Is it time, therefore, to write that novel? Heh heh!*

Art and pizza

At 5:00 PM, just like every other weekday, Art settled down in front of three slices of greasy pizza at the local pizzeria. HungerGod made a disgusted face.

Art and resolution

At 5:30 PM, Art resolved to head back home and *really* begin writing his novel. Just like every other weekday.

Art and BeerGod

At 5:35 PM, Art stopped at the local pub to briefly celebrate his resolution. BeerGod approved.

That was the trouble with Art. After his ninth beer he stood in the men's room staring at his steady trickle, and told NagGod to piss off. NagGod, being no match for BeerGod, pissed off to sulk in the sink. Art told a fellow micturator to keep an eye on the bestsellers list. "Watch out for my masterpiece," he advised the stranger. "It will be pretty good," he assured. Art rang up the editor from the bar. "Your astrologer is a gem," he said in falsetto. "He should be writing novels.

Horoscopes limit his genius. Watch out for his masterpiece. It will be pretty good." "Go home and sleep, Art." The editor hung up. Art mumbled *fuck off* and ordered another beer. BeerGod approved.

The stranger from the men's room declared his name to be Al and sat down next to Art.

"I have seen you before," Al said.

"Hi Al," Art greeted Al.

"Now I remember," Al remembered. "At the astrologers' convention. You said all that crap about Saturn in Cancer implying a fat tax return."

"Do you buy bestsellers?" Art asked. "What do you think of this: Man goes to a bar and meets a complete stranger. Stranger turns out to be his guardian angel. Naw. Turns out to be an extraterrestrial alien. Naw. An insurance agent! How about that?"

"Saturn in Cancer is rather bleak, I would say. An IRS enquiry into all past filings is more likely. Who taught you your stuff? Saturn happens to be my area of expertise. You might have heard of me. I write under the name of Madame Rose." Madame Rose aka Al declared.

ConversationGod forced Art to realize Al's presence, despite BeerGod's protests. "Saturn, eh? Your expertise, eh?" Art winked. "Boring planet. Decidedly dull. Stinks too, no doubt."

"Why, you no-good charlatan! How dare you sully Saturn!" Madame Rose rose and glowered. It turned out that Madame Rose's areas of expertise included pugilism along with the ringed planet. At 11:30 PM, Art found his face in the sink inside the men's room, and found his lips uttering paeans confirming Saturn's ineluctable glory, egged on by Madame Rose's burly bulk. NagGod woke up from his sulk-spot in the sink and said: *Heh heh!*

Art and broken nose

The bouncer was kind enough to call a cab. The cabbie (a regular) knew the address where Art and his broken nose belonged. He knew how to open Art's apartment with the key under the mat, deposit Art on the couch, and collect his fare and a hefty tip from Art's wallet. "Good night, Art," the cabbie said and left. Getting beaten up wasn't conducive to bestseller production. That was the trouble with Art.

But Art wasn't asleep. Drunk, beaten up, bleeding, yes. But asleep, no. While the ceiling imitated Saturn's rings, Art vowed to give up astrology for good. *Fuck horoscopes,* Art mumbled. *Man goes to a bar. Man gets beaten up by stranger. Naw.* Art opened the bottle of Merlot conveniently placed under the couch.

At around 2:00 AM, Art passed out. That's when DreamGod decided to have some fun.

Art and DreamGod

The manuscript had three hundred pages. The dream that had begun with Saturn-worshipping astrologers in drag, experimented with Art-eating monsters and sheer cliffs and open-jawed sharks, had settled down into an altogether more appealing plot. Art saw himself writing. Word after masterly word, page after masterly-worded page. Not only was he watching himself write, he could also read every single word. *This is pretty good,* Art murmured in Z-land.

Around 10:00 AM, Art's dream-manuscript was done. By 10:30, the editor of the best publishing house in Z-land had bought all rights and signed Art on for an incredibly lucrative contract. At 11:00 AM, Art was greeted with thunderous applause as he accepted some important-looking award for his bestseller. Outside the auditorium, Madame Rose groveled at his feet and begged for an autograph. *This is pretty good,* Art repeated.

At noon, DreamGod called it a day. Art woke up. Ignoring all kinds of Gods, he rushed to his desk and turned his PC on. The entire novel was still there in his head. Especially the last chapter. The last page. The last sentence. The last word. Art typed:

...eh?

That was all that came out. He could make out the long chain of masterly words in his head, headed by the trailing 'eh?' which obscured the rest. Art squinted. The 'eh?' got bigger. Art moved his head, to peer behind it. EhGod moved with him. Art shut his eyes. The moats and barricades were up—Z-land was closed for the day. Art sighed and got up. Inside the bathroom, his fingers fetched a crumpled cigarette out of his jeans. NagGod was sitting and grinning on the lighter. Art stared at his swollen lips and broken nose in the mirror. *Thuth oth,* he said, to no one in particular.

A glass of OJ later, Art returned to his desk. He typed:

> **Aries:** Saturn in Cancer spells trouble for you. Avoid getting your nose broken. ...

Rolling on the floor, NagGod was in splits.