

Hera and the Maligned Feminine  
Benjamin Glatt

-Hey mom I'm just calling...

-Yes, I know it's been a little while so I was calling to let you know...

-Fine yes weeks. I'm sorry I've been really busy.

-I'm calling you now. And I don't have a lot of time so I...

-Well I'm sorry to hear that. But I don't really have time for this right...

-Yes, yes, sounds awful.

-Ok that's it. I'm sure you're right. The beet hummus was a carefully planned attack on our family and everything we stand for, but I am literally walking out the door right now. I was just calling to tell you that I'm coming down to see you this weekend, tell Joe that we'll be getting in Friday night.

-Oh now you want to hear about my...

-Yes, I said well, I met someone you'll meet him Friday.

-Goodbye mom!

-Love you too

Hera leaned back in the seat of the train and smirked at the man sitting across from her.

"So after only three weeks together you already want to know my tragic backstory?" He smiled at her, wide and inviting an expression full of such easy cheer and casual confidence that it felt like a hug, it was her second favorite of his smiles.

"Why of course my dear." His voice was rich and deep and kissed by enough of the Mediterranean sun to sound exotic but not enough to make his words less clear. "Though in my experience stories about you on your back are not tragedies." She turned away to avoid his dark eyes which never seemed to waiver very far from hers when he said things like that.

He said them a lot.

She rarely looked away.

"Come on, we're on a train and we were talking about my mother." He shrugged in the faint daytime reflection in the train's window and sat back.

"Ah sometimes in your presence I cannot help myself. But tell me the terrible tale of your youth. What monsters plagued the shores of Hamilton?"

"Oh, it's tales of monsters you want." She put on her best impression of a pirate. "Let me tell ye of the terror of the PTA, the scourage of service staff everywhere, and the lioness of the suburbs. Let me tell you about Karen Rheia." As she spoke the funny accent slipped away word by word until by the time she said, "my mother." Her voice sounded normal, or perhaps a little hollow. The man sat forward a shift that somehow didn't crease his casual Friday suit. His eyes were full

of anticipation, his smile full of sympathy, her third favorite of his smiles. “Well there are lots of stories, but I’ll tell you the one I remember most vividly. It’s not the worst one. That was probably what she did to my college boyfriend. Or maybe the soccer game, or that time when I was... Anyway, It’s not the worst one but it’s like the archetypical one. The Platonic form of mom stories, you know Plato's forms?”

“Of course, I remember Plato vividly. And you're stalling.”

Ok so I must have been twelve, or fourteen, or somewhere in there and mom and I are in the old Zellers in town, before they put in the new... Anyway, we were in the Zellers, and mom had a coupon for something. I think it was detergent. No, it was definitely detergent because I remember it wasn't even the brand she liked. But she had this three for the price of two coupon and she was dead set on getting the stupid stuff. So we got in the car at like eight on a Saturday which is just a cruel thing to do to a teenager. We drove over to the store and she made a beeline for the aisle with the soaps and towels and other household things. I was trying to hang back as far as I could, I had a pretty good idea of what my mom was about. I tried to duck into different rows or just stay still reading a poster or a book. I even tried telling her that I needed to find something else in the store, something as far away from detergent as possible. But when mom gets set on something she is like a force of nature. Every time I tried to pause or escape she pulled me along with her words, or her hands, or just her expectant looks. Uhg she can glare. So I failed and we got to the aisle and outrage of outrages, they had only two bottles of this detergent.

Now in most cases, a reasonable person would maybe look around, check behind a few bottles then give up, or maybe, maybe go find someone who works for the store and ask them. But if my mom was reasonable I wouldn't be telling this story. She looked behind a bottle, I swear a single bottle before she took her arm and simply swept the entire front row of detergent bottles onto the floor. Most just bounced but a few broke open and detergent started pooling and spreading over the floor. Mom didn't even seem to see it. She was just staring at the handful of bottles that were sitting in the back of the shelves and comparing them to her coupon.

At this point, I just wanted to crawl away and die but I knew if I did that she would start shouting my name until she found me. She had done it before, in the Toronto Reference Library. That was awful. So I did the only thing I could. Damage control. I begged her to leave. I helped her look, I put detergent back on the shelf, I was doing everything to get her out of that aisle before people noticed what she did. Then someone noticed, and it was the worst someone possible. It was Dung from the soccer team. The boy I had had a crush on for months. I was at an age when months of crushing felt like an eternal storybook kind of love.

So Dung came around the corner and he was wearing his soccer jersey. Which, as a side note, I used to think was about the coolest thing in the world. Unfortunately, the jersey was red, so it

looked the tiniest bit like the shirts the employees were wearing. To be clear it really didn't look like one of their shirts and it had a giant number on the back but it had a vaguely similar shade of red and apparently, that was all mom needed. She pounced on him. One second she was next to me surveying the shelf as though a third bottle would somehow reveal itself, the next she had rounded on him and started power walking over.

“Excuse me, young man.” Poor Dung was frozen with confusion and that hesitation cost him. “I insist that you help me find this bottle. Your coupon could not have been more clear that your store is selling three of these bottles for the price of two and yet. I do not see the third bottle. Do you have an explanation for this?”

“Uhh, I, I don't know? Maybe they ran out?”

“Well, that's unacceptable! Find me a third bottle now. Or you will face the wrath of your superiors.” See Dung was making a mistake. He should have run, you should always run, but it was too late and he was already in striking distance when he tried to defuse the situation.

“Oh, uhh, mam. I, I don't work here. I was just picking up dish soap for...”

“Lies!” you might think I'm exaggerating but sometimes when she would get upset she really talked like that. “I see the colors you are wearing, you are an employee and an unworthy one at that! To lie to me. To ME! A paying customer. Come with me.” she grabbed his wrist and pulled him towards the shelf with all the still dripping bottles of detergent. He was trying to get away trying to tell her to let him go but he was only in the 9th grade and mom had a wicked grip and the power of sheer unadulterated crazy on her side. Besides, he shouldn't have bothered trying to speak. I could have told him that. If I could ever have looked him in the eye again. Because mom was in full rant mode.

“Please ma'am I was.”

“Oh don't try to weasel out of this now. Do you think my wrath is so easily slacked?”

Just then the people started to arrive.

This was the part I was dreading.

You know that voice? The one in the back of your head that tells you not to make a fool of yourself in front of others? To read the mood of a room, a crowd, a person and fit yourself to that mood a bit better? That voice that reminds you you are still a social ape and your bonds with those around you are the difference between starving and living well? The voice that writes the checks that avoid worse wrecks? You know, courtesy, common sense, whatever you want to call it? Yeah, my mom either never listened to it or didn't have it, to begin with. So when the people arrived and when they rapidly became a throng she didn't even acknowledge them. She never did.

She kept yelling at poor Dung. “Young man, I demand you go get your manager this instant. I will see you expelled from this palace in shame as is befitting of your intolerable rudeness!” The

crowd was murmuring and growing. Have you ever heard a group of people do that thing where they rub their hands and snap their fingers and stuff to simulate a rainstorm? It was like that but rather than build to thunder and lightning it was grumbling and shocked whispers that built to a cry of outrage and disgust. Some people were edging forward, no one wanted to be the first to confront the crazy lady. But they were all working each other up to it. Until Dung's savior arrived.

I was the first person to see him. I was doing my best not to look anyone in the eye. And when you're surrounded by eyes that makes your options real limited. So I was sort of staring over the heads of the crowd hoping against vain hope that I wouldn't be associated with my mom. He came around the end of a row like some Greek hero emerging from the belly of the Argos. Five feet seven inches of pure middle management authority. His head glistened in the fluorescents as he moved through the crowd. They parted to let him pass, his nametag, Doug, the badge of office that quieted the crowd and turned them into his people.

He stepped out from their crowd Hector standing before the Trojan army and cleared his throat. "Uhh, ma'am can I ask you to please let him go and tell me what seems to be the problem."

Everything stopped.

Mom turned to him. And I swear she got taller and her eyes got sharper. Like a peacock when it sees something even remotely disrespecting it.

Mom used to keep those monsters.

"Ah excellent, you are this boy's manager?" Doug was not immune to my mother's stare but he had his people behind him and he wasn't going to surrender so easily in his own domain.

"Well, I am the manager of..."

"Then you are the one who will see him punished." She almost bodily threw Dung at the Doug. Doug caught and steadied the boy then turned to my mother, indignation visible in every one of his chins.

"Ma'am as this boy and everyone else has been telling you from the start he doesn't work here! He never has." My mother flipped her hand as though to wave aside his words and continued as though she hadn't understood a thing he had said.

"Oh don't be silly of course he does and I insist he be punished at once. The boy practically attacked me!" A grumble of disbelief boiled up from the crowd. One woman audibly scoffed.

"No ma'am he did not I saw what happened from the security office. You have been attacking this customer and if you don't stop this instant I will be forced to ban you from the store." Mom looked shocked, her eyes darting from Dung's shirt to Doug's and back again. Noting the different reds, seeing for the first time the numbers, his age.

That was another moment she could have backed off. Another moment when any sane person would just end the whole thing. She had alienated everyone around her in only a few minutes. She had been proven wrong, and the authority she sought had turned against her. But my mother is insane. Insane and mortifying. So instead of backing down instead of listening to that voice,

instead of taking the undeniable judgment of the crowd, she doubled down. She grabbed me. Pulled me to her side and declared in front of all those people.

In front of my crush.

“Please understand sir. This detergent deal is very important to us. I may have gotten a little too passionate but would you really deny my daughter this? Would you be that cruel sir? All we want is the third bottle of detergent.” She held out the coupon to him. I was certain, in that moment, that my face would catch fire. That I would melt through the floor and down into the pits of Hades. Doug took the coupon and looked over it. Took a wise step back to be closer to his crowd and said.

“Uhh ma’am this coupon is expired...”

No points for guessing what happened next.

So that’s the story of how we got banned from Zellers.

The man was sitting back listening with his eyes half-closed. One finger playing with a curl in his full dark beard. He chuckled as she reached the conclusion. He had a deep resonant chuckle that was both full of humor and wicked promise.

“She certainly sounds like a handful. Though it’s hard to imagine you as a bashful friendless little girl.”

“Friendless nothing. That was the only bearable part of growing up there. I had great friends. Always did. I even became friends with Dung in our senior year. Though I never dated him. I think he’s in school for sculpture or something fine arts like that.”

“Still it must have been hard to meet people, to keep friendships with your mother hovering and always acting that way.”

“Not really, that was more my older sister's problem. Honestly by the time I came around mom barely hovered. I think she may have learned her lesson. Though she messed up Pagoni pretty good before she did. Honestly, she was usually better than that.”

“Huh, interesting.” He said it quietly, almost to himself his dark eyes focused on something in the distance out the window, and for the first time since she had met him, she wondered if he was really listening to her at all.

It was probably nothing.

“Oh just to give you the mother of all heads up she is not often kind to my boyfriends.”

“I imagine not, You’ll have to tell me that college boyfriend story sometime but maybe not now. I’m not sure I want that rattling around in my head when I meet her tonight.”

“Oh, you're not meeting her tonight.”

“Oh?”

“No, I need to test the waters first. Tonight you and I are staying in a hotel. I’ll go talk to her and her boyfriend Joe tonight to feel her out and see how she’s doing and how much body armor we’ll have to put you in.”

“That’s quite a few hoops to jump through. I’m sure if I just met her tonight we’d all be great friends by this time tomorrow.” He reached out and casually placed his hand on her knee, and looked up into her eyes. It was almost as effective in the bumpy loud train as it had been in his apartment the first night they had met. “I can be very charming.”

“Yes, oh yes you can be. Oh yes. Uhh. right right. That might not actually help much though. Mom has a real thing about us dating older men and she practically bristles at charm. This one time a man in a nice suit at a local dance tried to kiss her hand and she practically slugged him. No. I’ll talk to her tonight and then tomorrow we can go together and try to make this thing work.” he smiled and shrugged, he didn't move his hand.

“She’s your mother, you know best. Though I have to ask if she’s so difficult, why bother? Why bring me to see her?”

“I really like you, and despite it all. You know. She’s my mother.” He shrugged again and nodded, not entirely understanding but agreeing. He glanced subtly around the train compartment then leaned forward, his hand moved up and her leg and in. Before he kissed her, he smiled at her. It was full of confidence and desire, a wicked smile that made her blood rise and her toes curl. It was her favorite of his smiles.

It had taken longer than she had expected to leave the hotel and she had been sorely tempted not to leave at all. But she had promised her mother and though she was a long way from the girl trying to hide in the magazine aisle at Zellers she still didn’t want to inspire the kind of reaction that standing up her mother would provoke. She checked her hair one last time in the rideshare’s rearview mirror and stepped out into the cool evening of Hamilton in springtime. Across the street was the house where she had grown up. She kept expecting it to look smaller or more tawdry as she grew older and more worldly. That had happened to her old school and all the old neighborhood spots she had frequented as a teenager. But her house was the same as it had always been. Painted white slats. Pillars on either side of the door. And a few of her mother’s accursed peafowl prowling in their enclosed part of the yard. The house looked darker than she had expected, the last time she had been there Joe had had half the neighborhood lit for Christmas and Hanukkah. But now it was almost dark. Only the porch light and a faint glow from behind the living room curtain hinted at the force of nature that had her layer within. Hera knocked on her mother’s door and was surprised when she wasn't greeted by barking. Joe had the kind of golden retriever that autumn apparel magazines drooled over. And he was invariably excited at the idea of anyone coming through the door. But the only thing she heard through the closed front door was the shuffling of slippered feet.

Karen Rea opened the door. She looked bad. Hera’s mother was wearing her least flattering housecoat, the old ratty one with a pattern of lions. Her short cut graying hair looked thinner than Hera could remember and she was wearing the old gray slippers she only wore when she thought no one was looking. But most of all she looked older. The lines in her fragile skin were deeper and harsher. Her bright hard eyes were rimmed in red. As soon as Karen opened the door

she took a step forward and hugged her daughter tight to her. And began to shake. Hera was terrified.

“Mom, what happened? What's wrong?”

“I'm not sure I know who I am anymore.” Her mother said into her shoulder and let out one harsh little sob. Hera was only frozen a few moments more. It was appalling and confusing to see her mother like this. To see the force of nature the queen reduced to this frail old hugging crying person. To see her mother ask, if not in so many words, for her help and comfort. But Hera had many close friends and she had learned enough from her chosen families, to know exactly what she had to do, to help her imposed one.

“Ok mom, why don't we go into the kitchen? We can get you something to drink and we can talk about it?” Her mother assented, her voice small and defeated. And allowed Hera to steer her to the kitchen, settle her in her favorite chair, and set about making her a cup of tea. She desperately wanted to ask her mother what was wrong again but she knew that the best way to get her mother to speak at any length was to wait for her to gather her thoughts. It rarely took very long.

“Joe left.” Her voice was strange, a bit hollow, a bit matter of fact.

“Oh, I'm so sorry mom.” Hera was sorry too. Karen had had a long string of boyfriends, a shocking number, four, becoming husbands. But they always left eventually, most, Hera suspected, for very good reasons. Hera had had high hopes for her and Joe though. He was as mellow a man as anyone could hope to meet. She wasn't sure if that thing about people growing to be like their dogs was true but if it wasn't the friendly, well-groomed, and trained golden retriever was a positively spooky choice for the man. He even managed to bring out the small vestigial elements of chill in her mother which was nothing short of miraculous. In fact, Hera's plan to convince her mother to approach her new boyfriend with an open mind had rested pretty squarely on Joe's flannel-clad shoulders. Now he was gone. “What happened? Did you have a fight?” Her mother looked up at her and in that moment seemed so lost that Hera could barely recognize her, save that she had seen those same eyes reflected back at her in her darker moments. She was struck by how much they looked alike in despair.

“No we didn't, that's the worst part.” Hera sat down across the table from her mom and put her hand on hers.

“Oh, mom I'm really sorry for... wait what do you mean that's the worst part? If you didn't fight, what happened?”

“We just talked. His oldest Larry just adopted twins and he wanted to be near his grandchildren. So he had to move. I, I didn't want to leave Hamilton. All my friends are here and it's close to... I didn't want to leave so, so we cried and hugged and said goodbye and, and that was it. I just let him go. Let him walk away. I even understood.” Karen was crying a little as she spoke and Hera was becoming more and more confused. She definitely understood her mother's sadness. She had lost a girlfriend to distance once before and it was a bittersweet pain that she would not soon forget. But the beats of her mother's sadness seemed off or discordant like a middle school

orchestra trying to play jazz. She sobbed when she talked about understanding but not when she talked about him leaving.

“I’m really sorry mom, I know you really liked him. But I’m proud of you. I remember when Mohammed left you almost ran him over with the minivan. I know it doesn't feel like it now but this really is progre...”

“You don’t understand! I never let go! I’m not supposed to, it’s not who I am. I have to keep the relationship together. I have to keep the family whole. I’m not like you, not like you people I, I can’t just let go. And if I can, if I can I don’t even know anymore.” Karen was almost shouting but it lacked the shrill carrying volume of her usual cries this was a horse, cracking, sad thing. A shadow of the cry that had once sent waitstaff all over the GTA scrambling for cover.

“Mom, mom calm down. You're not making any sense. Take a sip of your tea and just explain it to me ok?” Karen, for perhaps the first time that Hera could remember, listened to her daughter. “I’m not sure how. Oh Gods I should have explained everything years ago but I just wanted to be here with you and your sister. I didn't want to expose you to that whole... Well, I didn't, so I'll explain as best I can. I was raised to believe that it was my duty to hold the relationship together. It was my duty to never let it fail even, even when it was bad. I made oaths and I made promises. In my day there was no concept of divorce and even if there where I could never have any part of it.”

“Wasn't your day like the 60’s mom?”

“You would think so, wouldn't you? I should have explained. One day soon. I’ll get you, girls, together. One day soon I’ll tell you everything...” Karen petered out staring off into the distance.

“Mom? Explain what?”

“It’s stronger than just a tradition for me honey. It’s part of who I am, who I have always been, and what I represent. I can’t ever let go, and if I could. If I somehow become in this modern world the kind of... person... who could. Then what have all the years of hardship meant? Did my struggle mean nothing?”

“Mom, what struggle are you talking about?” Hera was feeling strange, as though a solid metal hand railing had just twisted and become a snake in her hands. She wasn't sure why but her mother’s words were scaring her.

“Oh, well. Before, long before, I met your father. Before I had you and your sister I was with a man. He was beautiful in his own way. Though I never really wanted to be with him in the first place, he tricked his way into my bed and well that was that. We were married and what a marriage it was. He cheated constantly, he was cruel to me and flaunted his affairs and he ensured that I could never hurt him back. His infidelity was a thing of legend and all I could do was take my own small revenges against the woman or their children.



Every day, and there were so many days. Every day I wanted to leave him. But that wasn't who I am. It wasn't what I was and so I stayed and I did things I wasn't always proud of. But times changed and the world changed and I found I was able to come down to... I was able to step away from him for a while. Not forever, never that but that I could have my own time away.

I don't think he ever noticed.

He was too busy with his own dalliances and sulking at how little was left of the power he once held. So I was able to get away. And I came down here to Hamilton and I had you and your sister and I've lived well, but I've never stopped being me. Like the clever man from the television said. I was just on a break.

But now, now I can just let Joe go. I can just sever the bond without a fight, without, without anything. If I can do that, then what was any of it for? Who was I and who am I now?" Hera listened in perplexed silence. Some of what her mother said made no sense. As far as she knew Karen had been in her early thirties when she had Hera and late twenties when she had Pagoni. But she supposed her mother was getting older and had always been prone to bouts of oddness. The gist of it seemed very clear and if Hera knew nothing else she knew how to be a good friend. "Mom, listen to me. I understand you were raised a certain way. Believe me, I can understand that. But things have changed now. The world isn't the same as when you grew up. I get that, that isn't easy to internalize, and if it was making you happy I'd say more power to the old ways. But this is making you miserable, mom, and it doesn't have to. You can let go of the way things used to be. Marriage, family relationships, they mean something a little different now. It sounds like you and Joe made a reasonable mutually healthy choice. It was sad but right. And leaving that horrible guy you used to be with sounds like it was the right choice too. Please mom, for your sake and everyone else's, it's time to let this go." For a brief moment, Hera was sure her mother would hit her, there was such strange intensity behind her eyes, but instead, Karen Rea hugged her daughter close. And whispered in a voice so low that Hera almost couldn't hear it, the words she had never expected to pass her mother's lips.

"You might be right."

It was very late when Hera returned to the Hotel room. The man was lying in bed in a bathrobe, his hair still a little damp from the shower. He was watching something on the TV that he turned off when Hera came in the door.

"Good evening," he said, his voice was as calm and melodious as ever.

"Hey, sorry I'm so late. I really got into it with my mom."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, it was intense. She was having some sort of existential crisis because she broke up with her boyfriend, then she started opening up about her past, and oh boy was that some messed up shit."

“Oh?” He leaned forward slightly, his eyebrows up, his stare focused.

“Yeah, turns out she was tricked into marrying this abusive guy. And I don't know but tricked sure as shit sounds like a euphemism for, well anyway she was tricked, And she's still hung up on these old ideas around marriage and family and all that. But do you want to know the real kicker?” She didn't need to ask. She had rarely seen the man more engaged in something she said and it made her wonder for a moment if she had ever really seen him engaged before.

“Certainly.”

“It was her brother! How messed up is that!”

“Ah well, I suppose different times...”

“How old do you think my mom is? Different times. She grew up in the seventies. That wasn't cool in the seventies.” he shrugged. “Well, the good news is that she has promised to be open-minded about you. She already knows you're older so that shouldn't be a problem and we really connected tonight so I think this will go well.” He nodded as though he was happy to hear the news but something in the way he did felt off to her. As though she were seeing a performance. The whole thing just made her tired. She wanted to be alone.

“Anyway, I'm exhausted. Let's just go to bed.” She said, pulling off her coat and pulling off her shoes one by one with her feet.

“We could.” He said rising from the bed and leaving the robe behind. “But I have an alternative suggestion.” She wasn't really feeling up to it that night. She hadn't been since she first saw her mother standing in the door but he was persuasive and charming and, and...

That night as she fell asleep she wondered if that was what it was like to be tricked.

It was the most beautiful Saturday of the year so far. It seemed that every house on her mother's street had discouraged its inhabitants out onto lawns and the open doorways of garages. Their rideshare driver prompted choruses of “CAR” from half a dozen groups of kids with nets and sticks and tennis balls before they even reached her mother's street.

“Alright, so I've prepared my mom and I think she'll be receptive but just in case. Please be as flattering as possible. She loves that. Oh and none of your usually touching.” He put his hands up and smiled nonchalantly.

“Alright, I'll be on my very best behavior, you have my word.” She wished she was feeling less apprehensive about how little she really knew about his word. But the time to back down had long since passed so she walked up to her mother's door and knocked.

Karen opened it almost at once. She was transformed from the night before. This morning she wore a smart green shirt with gold and silver peacocks embroidered around the hem and crisp white pants. She was practically unrecognizable from the shattered disheveled woman of the night before. She held her arms out to embrace Hera then froze.

Her eyes went wide and she stared slack-jawed at the man.

“Uhh hey, mom. This is my boyfriend I was telling you about. This is Zack. Zack this is my mom Kare...”

“Zeus.” Hera’s mom barely whispered the word and yet it could be heard clearly all the way across the street. From open garages and front yards. Kids and their parents turned towards the whisper.

“Hey, Hera,” Zack said, his voice full of deep masculine charm and expansive warmth. “Oh my mistake, you must be Hera’s mother. Karen right? You two looked so similar I must have forgotten myself. It certainly is a pleasure to meet you.” He held out his hand and took a step towards the door. He was smiling but in the second or so she saw it Hera thought it was an odd smile, full of a cruel confidence. She would think later that it was her third least favorite of his smiles. But she didn’t see it for long, because with a cry Karen grabbed her by the arm, pulled her into the house, and slammed the front door shut in Zack’s face.

“Mom What the hell are you?...” But Karen grabbed her and pulled her down against the inside of the door with her. Karen’s eyes were wide and she was almost chanting in her panic.

“Shit Shit shit. I knew I should have told you. I knew it. This is all my fault, this is all my fault...”

“Mom, what in gods names is going on!”

“That’s him. Your boyfriend. That’s the man I was telling you about. The one I was with all those years.” Something hard and cruel twisted in Hera’s guts but she ignored it. Her mother was just being crazy.

“Mom that’s ridiculous, sure he’s a bit older than me but he’s not that...”

“He’s not a bit older than you, he’s been around for almost as long as the thrice-cursed universe.” The knot in her stomach made a strange sort of contortion, a loosening and a tightening all at once.

“Mom, are you ok, he’s just a guy.”

“No, He’s not! No more than I’m just some mortal woman. Oh, I should have told you this years and years ago. I wanted to protect you and your sister, I wanted to... Oh, it doesn’t matter now. The sooner you believe me the safer you’ll be. That isn’t just some charming man you met. That is Zeus. Son of Kronus. King of the Olympian Gods. My brother and my husband.” Hera was utterly confused and shocked. She was also beginning to get angry. How dare her mother do this again! She had promised an open mind, and here she was bringing a full measure of crazy. And overfull measure.

“Mom, look, maybe he looks a bit like this guy you used to see. I get that you’re still emotional from Joe leaving. I’ll take him back to the Hotel room and we can talk this out.” Suddenly her mother’s eyes grew hard and flat and before Hera knew what was going on her mother had

placed her hand on her stomach. Hera felt an odd swooping sort of jolt and her mother pulled her hand away.

“Oh thank Olympus you're not pregnant.”

“What! Of course, I'm not. I use protection every time I... Mom what the hell. Listen, we need to talk about this. I'll tell Zack you're not feeling well and we can deal with this like rational...”

“No! You can't go near him. Didn't you hear me? He's Zeus. He can't be trusted.”

“Mom this is crazy talk, let's calm down and sort this out we really...”

“You, you don't believe me?! Of course, you don't. I never should have hidden this. I never should have. Fine. wait here. I'm going to prove it to you. My sister, that traitorous bitch, showed me how to do this trick once, though I've never had to try it on myself. Wait here. I'll be back in a minute.” Karen turned to stride into the house but before she left she half looked back at her daughter and said in a tone of calm almost regal control. “I'm so glad I gave you my name, you've born it so well.” Hera stared after her, terrified that what her mother had just said sounded like goodbye.

Hera, in a daze, was about to get up to go follow her mother, to see just how strange her world had become when she heard a gentle knock at the door.

“Hera? Is everything ok?” it was Zeus, no Zack. Why had she thought that?

“I, I don't know, give me a second.” She got to her feet and opened the door to find him standing there. He looked so solid. So normal, with his expression of sympathetic concern and his head tilted in a question.

“Did I say something wrong?” She wasn't sure if it was her mother's ranting but she thought that just for a moment she caught a note of mockery in his voice.

“I, I'm not sure. She's gone off the deep end. She thinks you're some kind of... well never mind. Look this isn't going to work out today. Let me call you a ride and I'll come join you later when mom is settled.”

“Oh, I couldn't abandon you. Let me at the very least apologize.”

“I really don't think that's a good idea.”

“No, no I insist. I would really feel awful about making such a poor impression on Karen.” She was almost entirely done with this day and was about to shout at him to just leave when she saw the people staring. All over the street families were looking on at their conversation. She saw one woman lean into the man next to her and whisper something. She cringed into herself an almost physical sensation of wanting to be smaller and kept her mouth shut. Who knew maybe Zack could talk her mother down. He did have a way with words. She knew it was a lie but believing it was a whole lot easier than yelling at her boyfriend in the street in front of all those people so she subsided and waited. With horrified bated breath for her mother. She did not have to wait long.

Karen came barreling out of the house. She had added to her wardrobe the hideous housecoat from the night before. In the light of the Saturday morning sun, the large dark stains on the coat

were painfully obvious and she seemed to be walking with an odd rolling gait as though she were a little drunk. She looked dreadful. Her makeup had smeared and she was yelling almost before she cleared the door. All around the street, Hera felt the attention of her mother's neighbors redouble. Almost as though they shared one mind they drew a step or so closer to the confrontation, ears pricked eyes keen. Social scavengers seeing a pariah limping slower than the rest of the pack.

"I demand to Speak to the king of the Gods!"

Karen's voice was loud and shrill and easily heard everywhere along the street. Hera shrunk back from the confrontation looking around at the staring eyes and the judging lips. At least two people had smartphones out.

"Uhh, ma'am if you're speaking to me I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about." Zack seemed supremely calm as he watched Karen approach. "But if I have said anything to offend you I would like to take this opportunity to..."

"No" Karen shrieked, cutting him off. "No, we won't play this game. You are Zeus. King of the Olympian Gods and you will stop this charade at once!"

"Uh ma'am I may be a very handsome man but God is a bit of an overstatement." Several members of the crowd laughed and Zack smiled. It was a hard mocking thing. Full of the love of power and control. Full of the joy he was taking in toying with this damaged and insane woman who was striding towards him in her housecoat with the growing stains. It was the smile of a boy pulling the legs off an insect or of a god toying with a mortal. In that moment Hera knew, in the part of her that had always had a knack for finding the best of friends everywhere she went, that this man was cruel in a way she never wanted to fully understand. It was her second least favorite of his smiles.

"Liar! Reveal yourself Zeus or are you too much of a coward? Have the mortals shoved your balls in their wires next to your lightning bolts?" His smile vanished. She drew closer. The crowd muttered and stared and whispered and Hera just wanted it all to stop. Just desperately wanted the tension to end. Wanted her mother to stop this craziness or at least bring it inside. But her hopes were as futile as they had been in the Zellers so many years ago, and her mother just kept coming.

She stopped right in front of Zack, her streaking eyes looking up at his cool angry ones. And she said again, this time if anything more shrill and more hysterical sounding.

"I demand to Speak to the king of the Gods." and she slapped him hard across the face. It wasn't a light slap either. The sound reverberated around the street as people stared in shocked silence. For the first time since she had stepped out of the door, Karen looked around and saw the crowd she had gathered. Saw all the people watching her. Saw what she was wearing and how she

looked. And for the first time, Hera was looking at her mother when the realization hit her. For the first time, Hera realized something essential about the woman who had raised her, the one who had loved and infuriated her more than anyone.

She did know the voice.

The one in the back of your head that tells you not to make a fool of yourself. The voice that says to read the mood of a room, a crowd, a person and fit yourself to that mood a bit better. That voice that reminds you you are still a social animal and must live with others. The voice that writes the checks. Karen heard the voice of courtesy and common sense. She heard that voice and recognized what else it was saying. It was telling her to let injustice stand. It was telling her to make herself small so that she didn't frighten others. It was telling her to just go along and if she did she would be rewarded with peace. . And so Karen turned away from the staring eyes and she did not listen to the voice. She never did.

It was what made her brave.

Zack turned back to her and his face was distorted with anger. He put his hand to his cheek and stared down at the small woman before him.

“How dare you! How dare you strike me.”

“Oh, what are you going to do about it? You're hardly even a God anymore. Your domain is torn asunder every moment by their flying chariots. And who cares anyway. Haven't you heard it's just some gasses clinging to a ball? That's all you are Zeus. God of some gas whose weapons are nothing more than tame beasts of burden chained to wires and set to work keeping food cold.” Hera saw it coming and tried to stop it. She lept towards her mother, tried to get between her and Zack but Zack's hand came down hard, cruel, and frighteningly fast across Karen's face. This slap sounded like a thunderbolt and blocks away kids looked up from their street hockey to scan the skies. But Karen didn't budge. She just stared up at the man who had hit her and spat in his face. “Is that all you have little brother?”

Then Hera saw on his face her least favorite smile. The one that would haunt her dreams for years to come. The one she would always associate with murder. It was a wild twisted thing. Full of rage and hatred and fear. And it cracked across his face as the horrible snapping crack of electricity lit up the street. An ark, as bright as the sun, jumped from the electrical wires overhead and struck Karen directly on the chest. It flung her back away from the man whose eyes sparkled in the afterglow of the corona.

Hera cried out in shock and horror. Then her mother burst into flames. It didn't happen gradually. Almost as soon as Karen hit the concrete the flames shot across the dark stains on her housecoat then found something in the center of those stains and went up in a variable column of

fire. Hera screamed and tried to run to her mother even as the flames ate away at her body and her clothes crisped and fused with her skin. But Zack stopped her. One big hand on her shoulder, the other holding her arm.

“Leave her be. She’ll come back in a few decades, and in the meantime, we’ll have plenty of time to enjoy ourselves, won’t we?” His charming smile was back, his calm sexy mellow voice was once again pitched just right. But now she knew what lay beneath that facade, it was the most disgusting thing she had ever seen.

Her slap wasn't nearly as impressive as her mother's but it still made him reel back from her a little and made his eyes dance with fury. “Very well. I suppose I should have expected nothing else from that bitch's daughter.” Hera braced herself for what was coming next and she found in a strange moment of clarity that she believed her mother, at least far enough that she was expecting another bolt of lightning to strike her from the lines above. But it never fell. Zack or Zeus stopped and stared, open-mouthed, past her, to where her mother's body had disappeared in the rush of flames.

Hera turned to look and saw her namesake rise from the fire. The Goddess of marriage and the family, daughter of Kronus and Rhea, Queen of the Olympian Gods, Hera. Her mother. She was shining as though stars had been woven into her very being. She looked younger, maybe a few years older than her daughter and she was dressed as a queen of ancient Greece.

“How.” Zeus sputtered looking up at his glowing wife. The woman he had just tried to kill.  
“Oh, it was quite simple. I just burned away my immortality. I had all the lighter fluid and gasoline I could want and you dear, stupid, short-sighted, husband gave me all the spark I could possibly need. Now that I am back in my true form and you are in that delightfully manageable mortal one. I think it is time we return to Olympus and discuss how things are going to change. Starting with our divorce.”

“But you can't, you can't leave me! I'm your king, you're, you're the Goddess of marriage. You can't!”

“Yes, I am. little brother. Yes, I am. But the world has changed since I got that title. And what kind of goddess of marriage would I be for this world if I were to stay in such a horrible one with you. Now stand.” Her voice was full of terrible command. Hera recognized it as the voice she had always used with her when she would misbehave but amplified and deepened and full of terrible divine power. Zeus stood, he was clearly trying to fight against her will but he stood nonetheless and stared at the goddess with a combination of fury, confusion, and fear. He tried to speak but she held up a finger and he was silent. With a gesture, and a hard, cold, sad smile the Queen of the Gods sent him flying high high into the air until he disappeared from sight. Nobody on the street reacted to the man disappearing into the clouds above them. They were staring slack-jawed at the Goddess, their phones held loosely by their sides.

Then the Queen of the gods pulled her daughter to her feet and embraced her. Pulling her close in and enveloping her with a warmth, not of this world.

“I’m sorry my dear I can’t stay here long. I have things to care for at home and my true form is not good for the fabric of reality. We will talk again but before I go I wanted you to know that you girls were the best parts of being mortal and I’m so sorry for all the ways I’ve hurt you. It’s hard to adjust to being just another mortal when you’re used to all this.” She gestured absently at the divine light that poured out from her. “I know I wasn’t always the easiest mother but I couldn’t have asked for better daughters thank you for everything.”

And with a flash of light Hera, queen of the Gods, was gone from the street leaving her daughter standing alone. Everyone else in the street was staring blankly away and one by one they shook themselves and started talking as though nothing had happened. While next to an inexplicably blackened bit of sidewalk Hera knelt down and wept.

-Sooo I have the altar set and now I just talk to you?

-Wow it worked!

-It’s it’s been ok. It’s been good, really. Pagoni and I are talking a trip in a few weeks.

-Greece of course.

-Hey mo... my queen?...

-Ok mom then. I’m really sorry for bringing him to our home. For falling for his, his. I’m really sorry mom I just can’t believe I was so stupid.

-MOM I did not need to hear that, come on!

-Yeah, grad school is good...

-Eh I think I’ll take a break from dating for a while but I’m going out with some of my friends in a bit...

-Ok bye mom

-Love you too