

The Gods that Weren't

After centuries separated, two societies
meet again.

Daniel Barreiro

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5 - Meeting with Strangers

They arrived at Ponju after one more meal had passed. The barge was almost empty, having delivered most of its cargo along the route. Baludy had already two thirds of the hold spoken for on the trip downstream. The cargo would be ready on the docks waiting for him when he went back. He still had to go further upstream to deliver the rest of his cargo and pick whatever he could find. There would always be some cargo at Ponju, his hometown, to fill the rest of the hold.

Baludy would not accept Allucio's offer to help to unload the cargo for Ponju. He had helped in the other towns as if he were part of the crew but he reached Ponju as a visitor to call on his mother and Baludy insisted he had to arrive wearing proper clothes according to his new position, and so he did.

He had long been out of his hometown and had changed much in the meantime. Many people greeted him but just as many failed to recognize him, just as he failed to recognize many of the younger ones who had changed so much since he last saw them when they were children.

He arrived at his mother's home after a short walk. He had telegraphed her the day before after the meeting with the trustee, but nobody could predict when he would arrive. If he hadn't met Baludy, several more meals would have passed. Allucio had come through the back door, as family and close friends did, and found his mother, his half-sister and a neighbor in the kitchen having some tea. They all raised their eyes when they saw him but remained silent. According to tradition, after a long stay away from home, it was Allucio who had to say the first words.

"Blessed be the Mother who support us," he said while pointing to the ground about two steps in front of him and then turning his hand palm up, as if scooping the gifts of Mother, the planet, and showing them to his mother.

“Welcome, my child, you are at home,” she replied. Only then his sister raised and gave him a hug and everyone started talking at once. Allucio kissed his mother and the neighbor, a woman about her same age that he had known for as long as he had memories. His sister had a cup set up for him at the table and filled the kettle with water to place at the stove to make some more tea for them all. He sat after putting his bag aside and taking off his coat.

Allucio hadn't been away any more than it had been the norm since he left to study at Pinnacle, nor had he been completely cut off from his mother; now he wrote more often than what he used to when he was younger. But they went through all of it again, all three of them, since the neighbor and his mother were best friends. While automatically replying to all their questions, Allucio's mind veered off to other thoughts, triggered by the salutation and all the weight of tradition it carried with it.

The planet had not always been called Mother nor had it always been a matriarchal society. After the Great Collapse that followed the War, Reconstruction started to propagate back into the world from a set of villages settled by dreamy pacifists, far away from the worst of the debacle. While the down-to-earth majority devised very practical ways to exterminate each other, those supposedly dreamy good-for-nothing fellows managed to carry on quite well in their remote villages and their well tended fields. Not only were they able to support themselves but they started to take refugees and even founded new villages and then they even got to export what used to be called an utopia.

That utopia was now the norm in Mother, the name they were the first to use to refer to the planet. The war had taken most of the male population and so it fell on the women to take care of the houses and the fields, the children, the elder and the sick and then, when it ended, the survivors, broken in body and spirit. The very macho jingoism that led to the war was completely repudiated by the survivors. The matriarchal society which some historians said it had been a minor aspect of those utopian pacifists, became the norm mainly because it had been women who had remained at

home while men killed each other and, when peace came, women were not about to give up control of what they had preserved from destruction. Many villages had all-female populations and they were not eagerly waiting for a man to come and tell them what to do.

One of those broken men had been the Supreme Priest at Pinnacle, Elvar, later known as the Pacifier. Along with a few disciples he arrived sick and half starved at a remote village after escaping through half a continent from the worst of the war. There, it is said, under the loving care of the all-female inhabitants, he repented from blessing the troops and their weapons and of so much warmongering he had tolerated and even supported and wondered how to make amends. He traveled through the new villages, those where the new reverence to the Mother had taken root, he talked with their inhabitants and he learned. He knew there wouldn't be peace with two different systems of belief. At the time, there was a sort of very fragile peace caused by exhaustion. There was no central authority and no commander had control over any significant number of troops. The Great War simply fell into the Great Collapse because there was not enough people, guns or ammunition to do any further fighting. Survival no longer meant annihilating the enemy but finding food, shelter and, most of all, rest to heal all wounds, those of the body and of the spirit. The new belief promoted caring love and forgiveness, just what those men needed.

Elvar the Pacifier conceived the way to merge the new and the old, the Reverence to the Mother, as it began to be called, and the veneration of the Gods in Heaven that his own church had represented. He formalized the doctrine that was now the dominant form of religion and the basis for much of the law. And so the responsibilities of society were split: women provided shelter and sustenance, men did trade, crafts and learning. Mother and Heaven, the twin planets were their symbols and, as the two planets, they could not be separated. Mother was the planet of birth, Heaven was the planet of the souls, where the spirits of the dead went to be one

of the Gods. So many ideas had to be changed! And he changed them. He developed a convincing doctrine for the scholars to munch on, a compelling story for the people to remember and such eloquence in delivering it that he almost hypnotized his audiences. He changed everything.

Marriage became obsolete. With one man for every two and a half women, men had to be shared. There had been some promiscuity and some men managed to have harems but only very poor, desperate or uneducated women fell into that, but it soon faded as the Reverence of the Mother reached every corner. Women became the center and support of the household while men become temporary partners of them, their only obligation being to the children they fathered. Women and men ceased to be wife and husband and became temporary partners to one another, permanent mothers and lasting, if not always present, fathers to their children.

As generations passed, the balance of the sexes became more equal. The high fertility rate of the earlier days after the Great Collapse, when there had been a real and tangible need to repopulate the planet, went down to barely above maintenance level with most women having two children. Some women had a third and very rarely a fourth child if they didn't have a girl to pass their estate to, but that was regarded as selfish. Most, in such a circumstance, adopted a niece, a daughter in law or the daughter of a close friend, which made her the sole inheritor of the estate. Adoption didn't necessarily mean that the adopted woman had to leave her home to live with her new family nor it was a gift but, if accepted and the step-mother died, she had to provide a roof for her step-father and step-brothers. Adoption was a good deal for both sides as the adopted woman was usually one of a pair of sisters, and accepting the adoption meant that she gave up her rights to the property of her own biological mother which then went, undivided, to her sister.

There was a party that claimed equal rights for men, but they didn't have many followers, partly because the macho posturing of some of its most vocal members reminded people of the aggressions that led to the war, an event that even with all the generations that

had passed since, had not been erased from the collective mind of the people. On more practical terms, though, men were far from destitute. Men could not own real estate but they could have assets, just as Baludy had his barge and many others had businesses or lived of their trades and professions. A lawyer, such as the trustee, could not own his office or his house, but he could rent them. A businessman might not own the factory premises, which he had to rent, but he could own the machinery, the trademarks and patents and any other intangibles. Monasteries were part of the commons and no person could claim ownership over any part of them though they were directed by men. Thus, being unable to own land wasn't such a big deal and it was no different from a childless women since only mothers could own property. A childless woman could inherit property in trust but she might have to pass it on to her younger sisters or even sell it if, a few years after she reached childbearing age, was proved unable or unwilling to have children. The proceeds of the sale went to all her siblings, with lesser amounts to the male members in lieu of the shelter she could no longer provide.

The Great War ended up producing an economically egalitarian society, since death and famine leveled out society to the lowest possible level of survival. There were no shortage of resources since the greed of the earlier era consumed most of those in abundance and left only those that could be renewed, and the population had leveled off at a very sustainable level, much lower than it had been before the Great War. Plenty of good land remained unoccupied, held as a commons by the neighboring communities, and it was likely to remain so since there wasn't any people in need of housing.

And so it was that Allucio's salutation was an act of reverence to both Mother, the world, and his mother, the woman, for the sustenance and shelter they both provided. It was imbued with a mystical significance which was exaggerated, in Allucio's opinion. Perhaps some other philosophy might have been just as good. Perhaps matriarchy had been, indeed, the key to the success of the Reconstruction after the Great Collapse, but its real significance was being forgotten and turned into a series of rites and gestures, as the

one he had just made. When he came, he was almost tempted to go straight to his mother to hug her and give her a kiss, but the silent stares of the three women stopped him in his tracks.

After the meal Allucio retired to his room for a long nap. He was more tired than he thought; the trip, meeting his family and all that chatting with him at the center of it had been really exhausting. When he woke up he dressed light and while the house was still quiet, went for a walk. Initially, he felt like going downtown but he knew he would be forced to socialize which he didn't want to just yet. Large cities were good for anonymity, but small towns weren't since everyone knew each other and they all had expectations and preconceptions. The road away from town soon left the cultivated fields behind, since they didn't stretch much beyond the town. Allucio was in what appeared to be the wilderness, though you could still see earlier signs of occupation if you paid attention. Overgrown with bushes, the ruins of old stone hedges, walls and fallen columns were easy to find. They soon ended as well, as he went beyond the former town limits.

A couple of hikers were coming his way, one of them with a map in his hands. They waved hello from a distance and the one with the map approached him. Allucio expected to be asked for directions. It wasn't so.

"Master Allucio, please look at this map and point to the town as if providing me with directions."

After the initial surprise at these strangers knowing his name, he said "Yes, let me see, that's Ponju," not knowing what else to say, while pointing back to the town.

"Please keep walking as you intended and when you come back, you'll see us resting by the stream down there. Please join us for some tea."

"Yes, of course, very kind."

"Enjoy your walk, Master Allucio."

And so he kept going until the road started going uphill where, as he didn't feel like forcing himself to climb, he turned around and started back. By the time he met the hikers on his way back, they were comfortably sitting under the shadow of the trees lining the creek and they had water heating on a portable stove.

"Would you like to join us?" shouted one of them as soon as he came within reach, "there will be some tea soon."

He obviously accepted the invitation and sat on a fallen tree trunk in front of the other two, with the stove in between them.

"Just so you have a story to tell, our names are Marlo and Jobas, we are half brothers not currently employed from Cantorea, and we are on our way to Pinnacle."

"Marlo and Jobas from Cantorea."

"I am Jobas. Nice to meet you."

"So, what is this all about?"

"I trust you have witnessed our little light show on Heaven."

"I did, you know I did."

"Yes, we know. Are you convinced it was not a natural phenomenon?"

"Quite, I cannot imagine anything in nature that could produce that."

"Are you willing to accept the flashes were actually produced on the surface of Heaven?"

That was a much tougher question. A part of his mind still wanted to find a way in which the flashes could have had been from a source in the ground, that is, the ground of Mother, but it was hard to imagine one. He did go around the observatory the morning after to try to find what could have produced them, but failed to find anything out of the ordinary. But then, it was the steadiness of the flashes within the background of the surrounding terrain that made such a solid argument in favor of their Heavenly origin. Reluctantly, he replied "I am willing to accept the flashes I saw were on the surface of Heaven, I cannot say where the source was."

"Very prudent, I see. Anyway, assuming there were some sort

of projection from some source on Mother, it would be quite a technological feat, to have such a powerful source of light here that could produce such a bright and stable point of light in the surface, don't you agree?"

"Indeed, I can't imagine any way such a projection could have been produced."

"So, are you interested in knowing how it was made? It may sound strange, but lacking any better explanation, are you willing to entertain my version?"

"If I am here at all it is because I am quite interested so, please do go on."

"I will, in a moment. We mean to explain you what happened and we trust that, for lack of a better explanation, you will believe us. However, we have already provided you with a good excuse for this supposedly chance meeting. We are no more than Marlo and Jobas, hikers on our way to Pinnacle, one of the many that are bound to go this way. Should you dislike our explanation, just let us know and lets all go on our own ways, as if all this has never happened."

Allucio just nodded.

"Very well. This is the story."

"Before the war, all sides had airplanes, machines that could fly for long distances carrying cargo, passengers or bombs. They were extensively used during the war. They caused great, indiscriminate damage to the people below. That, you know; everybody knows and everybody fears having anything flying over them so much that there has never been any serious attempt to resume the development of airplanes."

"What was not widely known and now it has almost been forgotten, is that flying reached far higher than anybody nowadays imagine. One of the parties, and it really doesn't matter now which one, since none of them exists, even reached beyond the atmosphere. They reached orbit; they could send their orbital ships,

as they were called, up beyond the atmosphere and keep them there indefinitely. They built orbital stations by coupling new sections brought with every orbital ship, and kept those stations manned at all times. The orbital ships would return with the previous crew along with the pictures they took of enemy installations. Those orbital ships were not good for bombing, as it was once thought. It didn't make sense to send a rocket bomb all the way up to orbit to let it then drop back down, it was easier to simply send those rockets from the ground to targets elsewhere on the ground. However, the observations that could be made from so high up were invaluable. Those ships were big manned photographic cameras. It took weeks to analyze a single shipment of pictures brought down from those orbital stations which allowed them to direct the bombers, both airplanes and rockets, to destroy all the infrastructure of the enemy. Were you aware of this?"

"Of course I knew about airplanes, but orbital ships and stations? I know what an orbit is, I'm an astronomer after all, but reaching orbit? That is not possible," said Allucio.

"I believe I know the usual objections, one of them being that the best fuels do not have the energy to raise a rocket and all its fuel to orbit even if they burned it at 100% efficiency, and I know the key to solve that was the multiple-stage rocket, that is, you let parts of your rocket fall as they empty their fuel so that you don't need to raise the full weight of the rocket up to orbit, but I am afraid I don't know the details. Marlo, here, can give you the details if you wish but, for the time being, allow me to continue."

Allucio could not respond immediately, he was already elaborating on the idea of a multiple-stage rocket. He looked at Marlo who was about to talk in response when Jobas signaled him not to.

"I have to ask you to defer this discussion for later, there is much more you have to know so, unless you find this to be such a stumbling block that we cannot go any further until cleared, I must ask you to let me continue," said Jobas.

Allucio signaled Jobas to go on, though he was still thinking about this.

"I need your attention, please," said Jobas, and after Allucio raised his eyes, he continued, "Reaching orbit was all very good but, as you would expect, once you reach this far, you want to go a little further and then further away. I'm sure you know how to do the calculations though you might have never applied them to artificial bodies so close to Mother. A low orbit, high enough so there is almost no friction from the atmosphere and low enough to make it economical to reach takes about 75 minutes. You still need a little push every now and then to compensate for the little drag that remains from the few molecules of gases you have up there; the atmosphere simply does not disappear all of a sudden, it becomes less and less dense, but there is always a little bit. Each rocket that reached the orbital station would give it a little push. In the Great Collapse, with no further rockets providing that push, the orbital stations eventually fell and burned up in the atmosphere, their stranded crews long dead for lack of provisions. That's why you haven't seen any up there. Anyway, I'm digressing, the point is, you make a full orbit every 75 minutes which means you don't remain for long on any particular spot, half the time you are on the other side of the planet, and there is nothing to observe back there! So, if you want to place a good observation post, where would you put it?" asked Jobas while looking straight up. Allucio almost followed Jobas gaze, but he didn't need to, he well knew Heaven was up there.

"Heaven," replied Allucio, half dismayed at the thought of such impiety. Allucio was not particularly religious so he surprised himself at such a reaction to that thought. Perhaps it was more fitting to say that he felt that it was a very trivial and unworthy use for Heaven.

"Yes, Heaven is a good answer, but there is an even better place, halfway in between Mother and Heaven the gravity pull balances out and you can remain there indefinitely and cheaply."

"I don't understand, once you reach that middle point, you can just fall to Heaven," objected Allucio.

"Falling is easy, landing safely is not. And once you landed on

Heaven, whenever you want to come back to Mother, you have to climb again out of the gravity of Heaven just as you did from Mother.”

“So they put an observation post up there?” asked Allucio in disbelief.

“They did, for a while at least. You see, the midway point has several advantages, there is no atmosphere to blur your view and you are closer to Mother than Heaven so you have a much better view. Besides, that spot has another military advantage. You must pass through it to reach Heaven. All the orbits in between Mother and Heaven look like an hourglass and that spot is at the neck of the hourglass. If you are willing and able to spend some fuel, you can give it a wide berth, but it is costly. If you put an observation post in Heaven, someone else can put another observation post somewhere else but if you control that midway point in space, you control the gates of Heaven.”

“So, what happened?” asked Allucio after the whole idea sank in.

“They blew it up.”

“Who?”

“Nobody knows. Some other military power sent a rocket, a very small one that went unseen until it was too late. It arrived during the midnight eclipse when the sun was at its back. Once near enough, a big enough explosion with lots of shrapnel does a lot of damage to anything in the vicinity, no matter what.”

“So, there is no station at that midway point?”

“No, you would have seen it, wouldn’t you?” said Jobas looking at Marlo.

“Well, not really,” replied Marlo, “his telescope barely has the resolution but, as far as we know, it was painted dark mate so there is little chance it could be seen. Camouflaged, as they called it.”

“Anyway, you can’t see even that much now, the station was gone before the War ended. The orbital stations, and there were three of them, always kept an eye for rocket launching sites. The ground stations, the orbital and the midway point stations all kept

a watch for rockets. They were all armed with small rockets and rapid-fire machine guns that could fire at any incoming threat.”

“It probably was a very small rocket. Its launch site had probably been improvised right for the launch before any picture of it could be interpreted and it might have even been mobile. The launch probably happened when there was no orbital ship right above, or when there were clouds, who knows? They waited for the right conditions and they got lucky. Perhaps there would have been further attempts if that one had failed, perhaps there had been earlier attempts and nobody had noticed them, eventually one of them had to get lucky. No other power had placed anything in orbit so far, they went from the ground straight for the midway point station. Anyway, the power that put the midway point station up there knew it was vulnerable so they also placed a ground station at Heaven.”

After a pause, Jobas started again at a slower pace, “Master Allucio, I see you have followed my story with some interest. I meant to provide it with enough detail so it would be credible and it seems I have succeeded. I believe I can assume you are no longer wondering if there could possibly be a ground station on Heaven, I believe you take its existence as a fact and are wondering what happened to it. Is it so?”

Surprised, after a while, Allucio replied, “Indeed, your story is very convincing, it is all too plausible but, is it true?” Allucio was reluctant to admit he had been carried away by the story and he had failed in submitting it to any critical questioning.

“Well, where else did the flashes come from?” asked Jobas, “Please, your tea is getting cold, let me pour you some more.”

Allucio had probably taken a couple of sips, he didn’t even remember whether he had or not. His cup felt lukewarm there in his hands. His mind was running wild. “Yes, please,” he managed to reply.

“Master Allucio, I think you have enough to think about at this point. Marlo can go into the details of the physics of it, if you want to. You will be able to understand each other quite well, I’m sure.

However, if I may, I would like to suggest we leave it for a later meeting. You probably planned to stay for 3 or 4 journeys, am I right?"

"Yes, I planned to return with Baludy whenever he makes the last day trip downstream."

"That should be fine. So, please, understand that what we've told you has lots of implications, religious, political and who knows what else. That is, if it is true. This far, you might well ignore the flashes that you've seen and all that we've told you and continue your life. You may completely forget about it all as it had never happened or as if it had been a prank. Just think about it, take your time."

"You know the ruins of the old grain silo two kilometers upstream from here?" continued Jobas pointing in the right direction.

"Yes, we called it the fort when we were kids."

"I'm sure you would have, of course, it looks like a tower. Well, we'll be there. If you believe what we've told you so far is true or at least plausible and want to know more, you can meet us there. We'll wait for two meals, then we'll leave and that's it. We'll understand that you were not interested and we'll simply ignore this whole thing ever happened. Is that Ok with you? Actually, there is no need for you to reply right now, just think about it, either you will show up or not and if not, then you have just had a cup of tea with a couple of weird hikers on their way to Pinnacle."

Jobas stood up, followed by Marlo, who extended a hand to take Allucio's cup. Allucio gave him his now empty cup and stood up as well. Jobas extended his hand to stretch Allucio's while saying goodbye in the most casual way as if, indeed, they were no more than a couple of hikers having a chat with a local. Marlo did the same and so Allucio turned back to the road to return home. When he had walked a short distance on his way back, he heard Jobas shout, "And remember your lucky number!" and when he turned to look at him, he saw the both of them waving their hands with four fingers extended.