

## ATHENA AND THE GODDESS

"So I ran away from him after he slapped me in the bar. He was with his brother and both of them ran after me. That's when this cab pulled up from no where and screeched to a military halt. And that's when I saw her...the woman who dressed in leather and wore a patch over one eye. The memory is as foggy as steam as ripe as freshly peeled persimmon."

Again, for maybe the hundredth time my roommate was telling me the story of this strange woman. I would say it was a coincidence on this particular night but how could it have been when she told the story so often?

"The woman shouted, 'Get in quick' and threw open the door for me. I stumbled in clawing the seat awkwardly from so much drink, no doubt. I slid next to the stranger. Then as lovingly as warm apple pie she wrapped her arm around my shoulder. She wore a leather jacket that smelled of musk, a black patch covered one eye and now I know I was being embraced by a mythical animal Goddess. In that moment, my friend, I felt loved as no lover has made me feel since."

"I wish you didn't live in dreams." I said, slicing the carrots into thin strips. She ignored me that night. She used to argue back and when I said, "You live in dreams," she would answer,

"Obviously you have never felt what I have or you would still be searching for it."

So what if my roommate is a romantic? So what if she has no other way to face what we in the here and now call the real world. She continued but, at this point, I can tell you the rest of the story...While Athena rested her head on the Goddess animal's breast, the men with Athena banged on the cab demanding her return. "She's my wife!" One of them shouted. "Yes, she's his wife." The other man shouted, both banging on the window of the cab. The cab driver, who was also a man, heard the word "wife" and ordered the Goddess to release the woman who he thought rightfully belonged to the men outside. The driver opened the door and the men tugged one of Athena's arms and she held on to her Goddess with the other until the cab driver threatened to call the police. Athena let her Goddess animal go, fearing for her, leaving with the men who owned her.

One would think that after 20 years, which passed, that Athena would have moved on to more interesting situations. Well, interesting things did happen in Athena's life but nothing compared to meeting the Goddess.

In twenty years babies were born, became children, then adults who moved away. Grass root movements pushed up through cement. We left men to become Goddesses. We made sweeping promises to each other that only real Goddesses could keep and broke them. I arranged the carrots on a blue plate left over from a far ago marriage.

Our dinner guests that evening were a lesbian couple who actually had a wedding to bond their relationship. I only say this because of the unlikely guest they brought with them. The couple were a sullen pair, not at all given to whims. My roommate worked with them at the Hershey Book Store. The two of them were trying desperately to fix us up with someone or another so we could be coupled like they were. I am afraid, maybe even ashamed to say I was also looking for the perfect lover, I wanted a ghost like Goddess who was perfect in every way.

By now you would have guessed why I am beginning this story with this night. It was past sunset when they arrived with their old friend. The sky was as purple as an amazon's tee shirt. "We're bringing an old friend" was all they told me on the phone. "Fine" is all I said back.

The woman they brought was larger than us. She had an alcoholic breath and broken veins in her

cheeks and nose. Her white hair stood from her head like bleached straw. Her pink scalp barely held her thinning hair. She wore synthetic slacks and a flowered shirt. I remember little of what she said. Most importantly, I remember her laugh that was like a sheer cackle, like the kind I've always heard that witches made.

My roommate was not interested in the stranger. Well, she was not disinterested either. Until the stranger began talking about things we thought utterly bizarre like when she said, "We should all be able to drink our closest friends' menstrual blood." And another thing was something to do with lying in wait in dark alleys for unsuspecting men to castrate. It was almost as if the stranger wanted to start a fight and was disgusted with our politeness because without warning she pulled out a marble eye from its socket and laid it in the middle of her plate.

One of the couple ran to the bathroom holding one hand over her mouth. "Oh my gawd!" The other one screeched. I was upset and fascinated. Fascinated because I have never seen my roommate look so alive, so animated, so totally enthralled with anyone. She jumped up from her chair and said to the stranger, "Where do you come from? Who are you?"

The woman rolled her eye back around and around on the plate and laughed and laughed. I grabbed my roommate's arm and said, "No! no don't even ask," not wanting this to be who she thought it was.

"You know me," my roommate shouted, pounding her chest with both palms. "Remember the night twenty years ago in the cab..."

The stranger stopped laughing. She held her glass eye tightly in her fingers and looked hard at Athena with the real eye. Her mouth dropped and her breathing stopped. Then in a bare whisper she said, "Yes, I remember you...those awful men..."

"I knew it," Athena said nearly in tears. "Your leather jacket? Your patch?"

I know now how it must feel to walk in on someone making love. I left and stayed with the couple for a few days. They apologized for the stranger's behavior. They said her behavior had deteriorated after she'd been in the mental institution or prison or was it both?

Women in and around the Hershey book store were surprised but polite about Athena's new love. Hours were spent analyzing it trying to understand why she would choose someone so disagreeable to her friends...someone who cackled loudly in serious meetings and talked about drinking menstrual blood at potluck dinners and who actually pulled her pants down at a benefit for lesbian mothers, exposing the faded eagle tattooed on her buttocks.

Athena was driven with passion for the stranger. She defended her tooth and nail. Nothing her Goddess animal did would change her mind. We tried to reason with her. "The woman is mad," we insisted. "She is angry and using us to vent her anger." Athena yawned when she heard that one.

They went right to Athena's room when they came home. Sometimes I could hear them whispering snake like secrets under the cool rock of night. I was the dull beauty of a fading rainbow over a gray city listening, jealously to lovers murmuring.

Athena bought a leather jacket for her Goddess and the stranger began wearing a black patch over her eye. I wish I could say there was some discord between the two. Everyone ask, "Are they fighting yet?"

"No," I'd say, "they seem perfectly content with one another." Well, I don't know if content would be the right word. The stranger was loud and boastful and my roommate floated behind her with a silly grin.

I think I let all the frustration of this unusual situation build up because one day I exploded with

atomic fury. I don't even remember what started it. Was it something the stranger said? did? or something my roommate did? I don't know. I only remember screaming, "Get out! Both of you' leave!" and throwing their clothes and belongings of the most personal type out the front door. The stranger's glass eye rolled down the hill in front of the house. It was when Athena and her Goddess laughed at the eye then laughed at me that I threw my head back, raised my fists in the air and screamed as I'd seen baboons on nature programs do.

I'm sorry now. No one ever ask about Athena and the stranger. It is as though they never existed. I smile when I think of the last time I saw them. I see them even today with their heads pressed together, their arms around each other, in the back seat of the cab as it pulled away.