

DIONYSUS  
*A Woman, a Man, and the God of Wine*

BY  
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*The gods – those perplexing, pernicious gods. Think how they help us define our drives. They give us the excuses we so desperately need. – Dionysus, Act II – Winter*

ACT I – SUMMER  
Scene 1

It was time. Taylor O’Neal turned the key and opened the blood-colored door facing Manhattan’s Tompkins Square Park. The familiar squeak of the hinges sent him back to a life that had ended one year and nine months ago. Or twenty-one months. Or ninety-one weeks. He stopped there. It would have been a step back for him to calculate the number days since he’d climbed the stairs to his foul den.

On the third floor, he stood at a dented door and braced himself for the smell – almost two years with no fresh air. He imagined the water bugs scurrying into the wall, shocked that anybody had come back to reclaim what they thought was now their territory. The bugs probably shared it with mice, but he supposed the vermin had made a peace treaty and all lived there undisturbed.

He unlocked the door and stepped in. From beneath the drawn shade in the window, a trickle of natural light seeped in, just enough. He liked it dark back then, except for candlelight when his mood was high. If he got too drunk and felt himself going down, he always blew out the candle. He thought he did, anyway, and it was probably true since he’d never burned the place down.

“I should’ve burned it down,” he said to the bugs hiding in the walls. “The whole building.”

Nothing had changed. It did smell, but not as bad as he’d feared. He swallowed hard and walked to the table in the center of the single room. He dropped his bag and went into the bathroom – just a toilet in a closet space with no door. The toilet, caked with mucky rust, had no water in it, but he had to pee, so he did. He finished and checked the sink in the alcove kitchen. The water came on, brown at first. When it ran clear, he filled an ice bucket and poured the water into the toilet.

He took a box of heavy-duty garbage bags and pulled one out. He ignored the pizza box and cigarette butts on the table. Would get to them later, but first things first. One by one, he picked up the empty bottles and put them in the bag. Green Heineken bottles clinked against the larger Jack Daniels empties. Jameson and Gentleman Jack. Jim Beam and Old Forester.

He chuckled sadly. At least he had variety, but according to his count, Jack Daniels won. Seven, the magic number. More beer cans, though, from cheap brands he bought when he was running out of money. Schlitz, awful taste that yielded an inferior buzz. He counted thirty-two of them. Thirty-two would have buzzed him, but it was an odd number. Two twelve-packs and a six-pack would have been thirty. He couldn't think why he'd buy two singles.

Bottle caps raced like pennies to the bottom of the bag. Corks, dried out with dark traces of what had been wine, took the scenic route down. The wine bottles formed an international cast. France, Italy, Portugal, Brazil, and Napa. Before he reached for the Americans, he pulled out a second bag so the first wouldn't break on his way to the dumpster.

Some of the wine bottles were premiums, a few rare. He didn't buy those, but he knew the subtle distinctions of each brand. He refused to dwell on them—or the man who'd brought them into the den. Taking a deep breath, Taylor felt himself detaching, as he'd hoped he would.

On the mattress on the floor lay a single 1.75-liter bottle of Stolli. He hadn't been a vodka drinker, really, but this bottle must have been his coup de grace. A shallow lake of the clear liquid remained. It wasn't much, but it might have been enough to kill him. Odd to recognize the lethal might of the now-quiet fluid. When he lifted the bottle, a tiny beam of light seemed to ignite the vodka and it glowed.

His heart thudded. Like meeting your assassin again after a failed attempt on your life. The bottle felt cool on his hand in the hot room. He unscrewed the cap and released the sweet bitter aroma. The smell created a series pictures—not movies, but stills, flashing and fading over a soundtrack of malevolent laughter.

Taylor walked to the toilet and mouthed a prayer. His words were not eloquent, and he didn't elaborate. He just said thank you, asked for help from his Higher Power, and blessed his daughter. Then he poured the vodka over the rust in the toilet bowl.

"Disinfected now," he said. "Works as good as ammonia." He chuckled, and it came from his heart. He pulled out his cell and called home. On the third ring, the nanny answered and he asked for Caroline. He could hear his daughter in the background singing in her melodic baby-voice. She said daddy.

"Hey, baby doll," he said. "Daddy loves you."

The little girl giggled. "Come home," she sang.

That night, as a blackout dressed Manhattan's Upper West Side in black, the festivities on Pier One were percolating. Dionysus stood at the railing on the promenade of the Hudson River. He watched ribbons of amber light play on the surface of the water like streamers reaching from New Jersey to New York. Admiring the figures on the pier swaying against the starlit sky, he sighed. Elegant bodies, liberated in the anonymity of midnight—figures responding to the possibilities of the moment, doing what they might not do in the light. The scene awakened his heart and longing rose from the core of it. The old man closed his eyes and welcomed it.

Encircled by fluttering candlelight, his group was easy to recognize at the end of the pier. They were the best dancers on Broadway. He smiled as their bodies moved in fluid harmony with the Hudson. His darling entourage – if only they were as fascinating as individuals, but a single star was hard to find.

Leah, a girl in the chorus of *Witches*, recognized him as he approached. She tapped her friends, who stopped and turned toward their benefactor. They raised their cups containing the *Chateau Bonalgue* he'd sent them. Elegant wine belonged in stemware, but the occasion had been spontaneous, and he wouldn't fault them for the inferior plastic.

"How'd you do it?" Leah called out. "We decided to come here at the last minute when the show was cancelled. The case of wine was waiting, with flowers and a card, no less."

Dionysus adored their sweet shallowness. "Despite losing thousands in cancelled tickets tonight, I thought you all deserved it. You know I have eyes and ears everywhere. It was a small gesture. Without wine, there is no party."

They laughed in unison. A boy leapt forward and handed him an empty cup. He tried to serve him, but Dionysus insisted on pouring his own wine from an open bottle on a wire bench. He relished the splashing of dark ruby into the cup and the translucent images contained in it.

"Where's Taylor?" he said, glancing over the group. "I was hoping he'd join us. I left him a message."

Larry, a bit player, shrugged. "He's never around anymore. When he's not onstage, he disappears. I guess he's too good for us now that he's a star."

"Nonsense," Dionysus placed his hand on the boy's shoulder. Nice tone, supple. He sipped his wine and it fueled his memories. The boy was right. Taylor was too good – too good for any of them. "Pity he couldn't make it." He closed his eyes and savored the nuances of the smoky bouquet on his tongue and in his memories. "Taylor was extraordinary at events like this. I worry about him. Perhaps he's working too hard."

Irreplaceable, irresistible star, he thought, but he didn't say it. The children wouldn't understand. He tucked away his images of Taylor and glimmered.

"Now, who will have a dance with an old man?"

The girls laughed and lined up.

At midnight, Kristen Jameson found her stuffy apartment unbearable. She made her way down the stairway in her building carrying a votive candle in glass. Outside, an impromptu party on Seventy-Fourth Street disrupted the quiet. Music and wine were flowing despite an undercurrent of annoyance in the neighbors. Nobody knew when the electricity would come back, and everybody relied on air-conditioning to sleep in the July heat.

In no mood for their festivities or gripes, she wandered into Riverside Park. It seemed the entire neighborhood had come outside. She passed through a tunnel under

the highway and down the steps to the Hudson River. Candles and lanterns flickered among clusters of people on the benches lining the promenade. Another party roared on the pier, but she chose the opposite direction.

She found a spot on a bench next to an old man. He was holding an unlit pillar, and when she sat down, he lit the candle. He nodded, and she knew he was a gentleman who wanted her to know she'd found a safe place. The flame cast his face in shadows, but his eyes shone with kindness.

He turned and spoke with old-world charm. "For once, we're free from electrical clutter. Magic has returned to the city." He pointed to the twinkling lights of New Jersey across the river. "Our neighbors aren't so lucky. But then, nobody ever considered New Jersey magical."

She looked into a night sky she hadn't seen since she'd moved to New York. "It's wonderful. I've missed the stars."

"But you haven't chosen a party. Most young people are making the most of it. If you listen, you can hear their jubilation on the pier. I had a lovely dance with a group of chorus girls just a few minutes ago. I believe you'd fit right in if you'd like me to introduce you."

"Not into jubilation." She managed a weak smile. Parties she'd once enjoyed flashed in her head. She used to have fun back then, before discouragement had morphed her.

"I'd think a pretty girl like you would prefer the attention of young men to conversation with an old man like me." With his piercing eyes, he studied her.

"No party will solve my issues," she said. "Sorry, I don't mean to sound..."

"I'm sorry to hear that. If you'd like to talk, I'm a good listener."

"A good listener in Manhattan? That's rare." In the shadows, she caught his grin. The man had a soothing affect. Easy to trust him, and this surprised her.

"What's the word now? Old school. Yes, I suppose I'm old school," he said.

"If you really want to know, I'm not in a good place right now."

"Are you speaking of your location or your heart?" he asked.

Her heart. Yes—he knew. "I hate what I'm becoming. Predictable. Normal."

The man chuckled. "Ah, yes. Normal. Such an overrated state of being. Look at the poor souls around us. Not one of them aspired to normalcy, but I imagine most of them have settled for it."

Kristen took a breath. The humidity wilted her, but a breeze from the river helped. "I came here to be on Broadway. Stupid, right? Everybody knows the odds. I'd be better off playing the lottery. I was so naïve."

"If actors were better at character development off-stage they'd have an easier time." He raised a bony finger to the sky. "What's the route to the Great White Way? That's the problem. Without a script, you don't know where to go."

"Sounds like you know how it is in theatre."

"I've been in theatre forever. I consider myself a playwright, although lately I've busied myself with other pursuits."

Purified by her confession, her disabled ambition kicked in—the part of her still on the lookout for those elusive connections. “You must know people in the business. Know anybody who’s casting right now?”

“No, dear.” He waved his arms dramatically. “This is the only stage that matters to me.”

“All the world’s a stage. I get it, but that only works when your life’s working. I’m no better off than tomorrow’s wannabes.”

“And how many will arrive this summer? Perhaps hundreds.” As he spoke, the candle flame trembled.

“Or thousands. I wish they’d stay away.” Buoyed by his empathy, she chuckled. “Here’s how it should be. Take a number and wait your turn. When it comes—bang. You’re in.”

“I like the concept. Now, if I were God...” He laughed.

“Everybody thinks I should let it go, but theatre’s the only thing I’ve ever wanted to do.” Above them, a helicopter hovered over the river. A couple slow-danced without music on the promenade. Somewhere behind them, a raven cawed.

“I know the sensation well. You desire the agony and ecstasy of soul.”

“Right now I’d settle for a walk-on. I’m stuck in a day job at the New York Musical Academy. Nobody expects the next breakout performer to come out of an office.”

“Ah, yes. The Academy,” he nodded. “I know the institution well. That would make a daring plot twist. I’d use it in a script. Young girl from...” He paused with his finger to his lips. “Let me guess. A girl from Middle America comes to the big city. She gets trapped in a day job, but living nine to five is like trying to dance in shoes that pinch. Then, on a dark summer night, a lonely stranger changes everything.”

Too long since she’d laughed, and it burst out like music. “Well, you’re right about the Midwest. I’m trying to lose my accent.”

“No, you should keep it. In fact, I wouldn’t change a thing. Except your attitude, of course. You’re angry.”

“I’m not,” she lied. She leaned in closer, and the gesture felt appropriate. “Can I tell you something I never told anybody? One day at the Academy, I stood downstage center and gave it my best belt. I rocked that empty place. When I got home, I cried myself sick.” She paused, aching in the memory of the experience. “The next day I promised myself I’d never cry about it again. Rejection goes with the territory, but I’ve had enough. I’m sick of hurting.”

He pointed at her. “Only a rare individual is stubborn enough to break through.” When he placed his hand over hers, his skin felt icy in the languid air. “I know this isn’t easy, but worthwhile endeavors never are.”

“You must be psychic,” Affection fluttered between them.

“I know how it is.”

“I’m like a pathetic woman trying to win back her lost lover. It’s a fucking dilemma.” She bit her lip. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to be disrespectful.”

"No need for censorship. I appreciate the word. So earthy, so gnarled with paradox." He looked up at the twirling blades of the helicopter. "They should leave us alone on a night like this. The city is full of interference. Never-ending distractions." For a period, he seemed lost. They sat hand in hand while the helicopter headed downstream toward the harbor. "Good. Now we can enjoy the moon."

Kristen had never viewed the moon as she viewed it that night—queen of midnight, liberated, as they were, from visual competition. Because of the moon, the candlelight, and the man, she felt a soft rush of euphoria.

"I'd like to offer you a bit of advice."

Her hope stirred. "I need it."

"What's your name, Starlet?"

"Kristen."

"Kristen, more than anything you need a script. You may be a fine actor, but as a playwright, you've faltered. You need to find a way to turn your stalled drama into triumph."

"But an actor can't be expected to write her own lines."

"Really? And where has such thinking taken you?" He raised his eyebrows.

"How old are you? Twenty?"

"Twenty-four."

The man's chiseled features softened. "I trust you've had significant experience."

"Regionally, yes." Ready to rattle off her list of credits, she stifled it.

"Then you understand the dynamics of good work. Use your experience to plot your destiny. Decide where you want to go. Choose fascinating people to be players in your world. Stop the nonsense and get to work."

He blew out his candle and stood. "Here, take this home with you. Yours is too small to last the night." After handing her the candle, he wrapped his coat around his wiry frame. Such an unlikely action on a summer night led her to believe the man was older than she'd thought. "I may have something for you. You could be ideal for the part. Of course, I'd need to see you in daylight before making a decision."

"Will you help me?" Her heart thumped, afraid to believe and afraid not to.

"What I suggest will take your highest devotion. Without undivided focus, you'll become one more victim among thousands. You'll blame your competition, the trends, the economics. Don't let that happen. Playing the victim is a worthless role."

"I'll do anything." The possibilities went to her head like wine. "I'll work for nothing if I have to. I just need to get cast."

"We'll talk again after the lights come on. For tonight, we'll all get to sleep in the pure darkness we deserve. Your company has been a pleasure."

"You didn't tell me your name. I'd like to learn about your work."

"You may call me Dionysus. Surely you..."

"Dionysus, god of theatre?" The iconic character amused her. He was playing her, providing comic relief after their heart-to-heart. "Clever choice of name."

“Clever indeed.” His melodic voice swirled in the air, bounced off the water, and caressed her. “Bonsoir, Ma Cherie.”

“Bonsoir, Dionysus. Can I give you my number?”

“No need. I know where to find you.” He reached into his deep coat pocket and pulled out an envelope. “Here, I have a small gift for you. I hope you’ll enjoy it.”

She took the envelope and pulled out a pair of tickets, but she couldn’t see what was printed on them.

“Witches,” he said. “Perhaps you’ve heard of it.”

“Everybody’s heard of Witches. These are the hottest tickets in town, but I couldn’t accept—”

“Don’t disappoint me, Starlet,” he said. “I can’t use them and I’d hate to see them go to waste. It’s an amusing show.” He bowed from the waist like a leading man at curtain call, turned, and walked toward the pier. “I think I’ll check up on those dancers now. I wouldn’t want them to over-indulge. Performing with a hangover is bad business.”

“Thank you,” she called.

The noise of the block party had reached crescendo when she returned home. Her neighbors were likening their camaraderie to the grand blackout of 2003. She smiled and wished them a good night. Her mood had shifted—in the darkness of Riverside she’d found light.

Inside her apartment, she lit the playwright’s candle. When the light hit her fireplace, a phantom-like face appeared etched in the bricks. The image looked like one of those ancient masks most people found terrifying. Entranced by the choreography of the flames, she gave the face a name—Dionysus. In an instant, she embraced the belief that her meeting with the old man had been providential.

The eyes in the image seemed to zero in on her, but Dionysus wasn’t real. Muses and gods never were. They were internal, collective wisdom locked up in human cells, aspects of the soul hidden in the subconscious. People externalized them to reach their latent genius.

She plugged into her iPod and clicked to the Witches Overture, savoring the heady sensation great show music evoked. When the iPod shuffled to Magic of Midnight, god Dionysus gleamed. He swayed to the bass notes of the anthem.

*This is the night I will change you forever. This is your destiny.*

The hair at the nape of her neck prickled.

*You will find me in the magic of midnight. Come let me set you free.*

According to myth, the god of theatre was more demonic than angelic, and she loved him for it. She needed something more potent than a guardian angel to spring her free from her prison of normalcy.

Then the lights blinked on. The ceiling fan whirled and the refrigerator hummed. All the mystical ingredients of the night dissipated in the stark electricity. The face in the bricks dissolved. Although the man had inspired her, she wondered if she would see him again.

Rejoining his dancers on the pier, Dionysus relaxed in fresh euphoria. He closed his eyes and pictured the opening of a play – a grand new work, perhaps his best. He assembled his cast on the stage in his mind and wondered how they would interact, whether the elusive chemistry would burn between them. Although he believed in a sublime plot, in the end, chemistry turned craft into art. Actors – actors were everything. They were the power in the playwright’s script. Despite their inherent difficulties, Dionysus adored them.

Suddenly, a collective roar echoed over the water. He looked up as the streetlamps burst alive with light and laughter rose. The dynamic switched when electricity zipped back into their lives. Such a pity. The best moments ended too soon.

He walked over to the case of wine. One bottle left. Raising it in a salute to the moon, he bid his dancers goodnight. He would drink the bottle in the solace of his bedroom where his mind could break free to dream of scenes he’d not yet imagined.

ACT I - SUMMER  
Scene 2

As Kristen and Mark found their seats in the Minskoff Theatre, he took her hand. "You belong on stage. I bet it's frustrating to sit back and wait," Mark said. Kristen wanted to pull away but didn't. She had explained to him they were friends and nothing more.

The nostalgic sound of the orchestra tuning – a glorious, disjointed melody – hit her hard as she leafed through her Playbill. Mark yapped about credit markets. Wall Street was back on the upswing, he told her, and his investors were pleased. He expected to make a fortune by the end of the year. She nodded without comment. When the orchestra began the Witches overture and the curtain rose, her eyes welled. She sniffled and Mark handed her a monogrammed handkerchief.

"Allergies," she whispered.

"Somebody's late." Mark pointed to the empty aisle seat next to him. "Waste of money to miss a show like this."

Five minutes into the grand-scale opening, Taylor O'Neal – Satan – ascended center stage in a cloud of smoke from what she knew was a lift under the floor, but the effect was enchanting nonetheless. Taylor drew the audience into the fantasy of a captivating devil rising to earth to menace a coven of witches as they danced in a frenzy of scarlet beneath an enormous moon.

Captured by the production, she barely noticed when Mark shifted. A latecomer arrived, escorted down the aisle by an usher with a flashlight, and took the empty seat. After Taylor's first solo generated a standing ovation, she recognized the man bellowing next to Mark.

"Bravo! Bravo," Dionysus cheered.

No longer shabby, the man was the epitome of a legend in a cashmere suit and silk scarf. Reminiscent of a grander generation, he made the rest of the audience look common. His demeanor gave him the air of everything Kristen had hoped him to be. Although she stared shamelessly, his eyes remained fixed on the stage. He applauded Taylor with fanatic zeal, and for a moment, it seemed he owned the rights to Taylor.

If it were any other show with any other star, the magic of Witches would have been lost to her, but Taylor won her back. By the time Act I reached its climax, she'd forgotten about Dionysus and Mark. This, she decided was Taylor O'Neal's gift. He had the power to make everyone disappear as he sang a love song to her alone.

At intermission, Dionysus was out of his seat and up the aisle. Mark went ahead to get in line for champagne and the crowd thickened as she made her way to the lobby.

"Good evening, Starlet. I trust the performance meets your high standards." Dionysus stood against the lobby wall looking sublime. Seeing him released another euphoric rush she defined as hope.

"I didn't know if I'd see you again," she said.

He cocked his head like an actor. "I wouldn't leave you with a proposal and then abandon you." He ran his fingers along his sapphire scarf.

"I wish I had your full name so I could Google you." She had questions, but it was not the time to ask them.

"Google." He snickered. "Such a foolish word, but forget about me. What do you think of our leading man?"

"He's..." Suddenly, she couldn't catch her breath, couldn't think of a word.

"Taylor is white light."

"Yes." Her face burned. "Yes, exactly. How eloquent."

"I wanted you to see him for yourself. Experience him before you make your decision."

She gasped. "Can you get me an audition for Witches?"

"No," he said with a wave. "I don't bother with casting directors and the like. Boring souls. I have something more imaginative for you."

Mark pressed against her shoulder and handed her a flute of champagne.

Dionysus nodded to him. "If you'll excuse me, I won't make a scene and walk in late for Act II. Poor manners on my part earlier. I trust you'll forgive me." He eased through the crowd and disappeared into the house.

"Do you know him?" Mark raised his eyebrows. "He looks like he's important."

"He gave me the tickets when I met him in the park. He's a playwright, and I think he's going to help me." She struggled to bring her excitement under control. "I can't believe this is happening. I shouldn't get my hopes up."

"Everybody needs hope," Mark said. They sipped their champagne, and when the lobby lights blinked, they returned to their seats.

At first, she didn't recognize the paradigm shift occurring inside her during the second act. As many times as she'd listened to the Witches cast recording, she'd never traveled beyond the score to acknowledge the artist who brought the music to life. While Taylor's persona was white light, his baritone was black satin. He seduced her as he ravished the witches onstage. Her stomach tumbled. Her pulse raged. Old desires bowed to him as Taylor entered her and took center stage.

Despite Dionysus' earlier enthusiasm, he remained stoic during the thunderous ovation at curtain call. She wondered what might have provoked him. After the cast exited, he turned to her.

"I suggest you stop by the stage door. Taylor appreciates compliments."

"Will you be there?"

"I may watch, but I won't interfere. A scene like this needs little direction. Improvise, Starlet." He shook hands with Mark. "I hope you enjoyed your evening with this charming girl."

When they reached the stage door, a crowd of adorers had congregated ahead of them. She caught the glint of the man's white hair, but when she tried to get close, the crowd hindered her. In the crush, she lost sight of Mark, too.

Following an exodus of cast members, the stage door opened and applause broke out. Resisting worship with irresistible grace, Taylor O'Neal claimed his domain. Kristen had no idea what she was supposed to do. The fans were pushy. Women pawed at him. Taylor smiled as cameras flashed. He signed Playbills. Claustrophobic standing there, she had inadvertently entered a scene over which she had no creative control.

A skeletal hand took her by the arm as she prepared to back away. Dionysus guided her toward Taylor, but the pressure of approaching him was more than she could handle.

"I can't," she whispered. In the summer heat, she shivered.

"Why?" Dionysus breathed in her ear. "Why would you be afraid of him?"

"Because Taylor is...white light."

"Then, as the cliché goes, embrace the light." He laughed. "Timing is everything. Take your cue like a good little Starlet." He nudged her into Taylor's path.

"Bravo," she stammered as they intersected.

Taylor looked at her with translucent eyes and said thank you with shyness too obvious to be false. This was the stuff of fantasy, but she wasn't pretending. She had no script. The previous markers of her ambitions disintegrated. An hour ago, she'd wanted nothing except a role on stage and now it didn't matter. Yesterday's dreams turned tawdry.

Then Taylor disappeared into the crowd. She looked for Dionysus, but he was gone, too. Mark found her and feigned concern.

"Don't you feel well? You look pale."

"I need to get home. I've... got a headache."

"I'm a bit enochlophobic myself," Mark said. "You know – fear of crowds. Maybe that's why you're avoiding the stage. You'll be fine." He held out his hand to her.

"I'm not afraid of crowds," she said. "But if you don't mind, I'd think I'll walk home."

"Are you sure? I didn't mean to –"

"It's not you. I'll call you tomorrow."

Mark shrugged, and she made her way through the fans to the street.

"Bonsoir," Dionysus breathed in Taylor's ear. "You're especially fragrant tonight." When Taylor tensed, the man stepped back. "On stage, I mean. A grand performance."

"I saw you in the audience," Taylor said. "But I thought it was beneath you to wait at the stage door."

Dionysus laughed. "Well, yes, but I do have a significant investment in this show. It's my duty to make sure our guests are pleased."

"And are they?" Taylor looked past his benefactor. The night was hot, and sweat dripped down his back. Fatigue was setting in.

Dionysus pointed to Taylor's t-shirt. "I wish you'd dress appropriately for your fans. But, yes. They're pleased. One young lady in particular. Did you notice her?"

Taylor darkened and cleared his throat.

"You know who I mean. I saw your eyes flare. No wonder she can't resist you."

Taylor shook his head. "Okay. Who is she? You're going to tell me anyway. I just hope she's not your latest project."

"I don't know the girl, but you must admit she has a look about her. Innocent, unaware of her charm. Reminds me of Beaujolais Nouveau. Fresh. Untainted."

"Then I hope she stays that way."

Dionysus frowned. "I'm not sure you appreciate my efforts." He stepped into whisper-range. "Look what I've given you. Your name is finally above the title."

Taylor pressed his palm to his forehead. "I need to get home. The show took a lot out of me tonight."

Dionysus' silk laughter filled the walkway. "That's what she said when she left her date standing here like a fool. A simple scene, but effective. I wouldn't have changed a word."

"I told Caroline she could wait up for me."

"It breaks my heart to see you like this," Dionysus whispered. "You're a shell of your former self."

"Thank God for that. I hope your investment in Witches pays off. And I appreciate your help, but..."

"But stay out of your life." Dionysus glared until Taylor looked away. "Honestly, Taylor, you crush me. I remember when you were the golden boy, as much a star offstage as on. Now, after you leave the theatre, you're nobody. Think about the life you've given up."

"I'm trying to do the right thing."

"To atone, you mean."

"Whatever." Taylor turned from him. "Goodnight."

"Bonsoir, Mon Cheri," Dionysus said. "And her name is Kristen. She was sitting near me and we chatted. That's all. I thought her infatuation was quite endearing."

"I don't need to know that."

"I know. Give my best to the child."

The man's spirit bore into him as Taylor walked up the block. He heard a dark whisper and felt it, but he kept walking. As he passed a restaurant with tables at the window, a bottle of wine glistened on a table. White. Chardonnay, maybe. Or Chablis, but it didn't matter. A woman held a wine glass to her lips. Red lips, and the white wine reached up to kiss her. She looked happy enough, but who knew. Maybe she was miserable, too.

As he approached Eighth Avenue, a group passed him. They were loud, laughing, drunk. A girl in a black skirt ending just below her ass flashed a smile at him. He looked away but caught her scent—floral, but it wasn't perfume. Her perfume was musky and it mingled well with the wine wafting from her pores.

*God grant me the serenity*, he prayed. He raised his hand and relaxed when a taxi pulled up. Perfect timing. He couldn't wait to get home to kiss his baby girl goodnight.

Kristen was singing all the classic Broadway love songs in her head at once: Tonight, A Heart Full of Love, All I Ask of You, and Last Night of the World. She was West Side Story's Maria, Les Miserables' Cosette, and Phantom's Christine. For the first time, she was a woman in love with no other agenda.

When she saw Dionysus waiting for her outside her building, she wasn't surprised. The man was her catalyst. His pale complexion glowed under the light of the streetlamp. To her, he looked celestial – her muse in the flesh.

"I see why you call yourself Dionysus." Moving in close, she wished to touch him but hesitated. "I'd hoped you'd help me get cast in a show, but this is beyond..."

"And what happened to you? Tell me. I love the opening scene of a drama." He folded his arms and winked at her. She sensed his delight, his sensuality. The man was theatre personified.

"I..." She giggled like a kid.

"I have an exercise for you. You need to practice speaking with your heart. Close your eyes for a moment." He waved his hand over her face.

She shut her eyes.

"Now breathe. Center yourself in your experience. Let it envelop you. You're standing at a portal. The world beyond you hums with pleasure. You have the opportunity to step out of your pathos. Now walk through the portal. You see a landscape with the sun and moon sharing a violet sky." He paused. "Are you with me, or did I put you to sleep?"

"I'm there," she whispered. "You're so poetic."

"You are surrounded by melody as your beloved anoints your skin with fragrant oil. You place a cup to his lips and he drinks. On his kiss, you taste his wine."

Kristen trembled. "I feel him." The sensation of Taylor looped around her looking for a place to land.

"Now tell me."

"During the first act Taylor did something to me, but I know the power a brilliant actor can have over his audience. I'm not that gullible. I figured Taylor had *it*. He knows he's good and he knows how to work it."

Dionysus chuckled. "Taylor has no idea how good he is. That's part of what makes him compelling."

She loved the way Dionysus said his name. "You're right. I know that now. Offstage, he was so unassuming. Humble."

"Humble? God forbid," Dionysus said. "He's afraid. The dear boy has been hurt. I'd like to help him if I can. Forgive me if I'm wrong, but I wonder if you'd be...well, let's say a friend to him."

From Riverside Park, a raven cawed. Kristen's head buzzed as if she were drunk. Taylor's presence burrowed into her.

"I hope you won't be disappointed if I tell you I have no other part in mind for you. Will Taylor be enough? I'm not saying theatre is unimportant. . The stage is grand, but Taylor is living proof theatre can never take the place of love."

Liquid desire streamed through her. "Enough?" Her breathing turned shallow. "I've never felt...I mean, I didn't think I was capable of what I'm feeling. I always figured I was defective. Something important was missing. Everybody else could fall in love—and most of my friends fell in and out of love all the time. I told myself they were the crazy ones, but after awhile, I knew. I'm the broken one, not them."

She stopped on the edge of the precipice, staring into the gaping unknown. "I was made wrong and had to live with it. Easy enough to fake it on stage, but I wasn't going to fake it in real life." She didn't do confidant and had never been comfortable with those who spilled their guts to anybody, let alone to a new acquaintance. The experience left her exposed, but more alive than she ever imagined.

"And now?" The toes of his shoes touched her bright toenails. The scent of wild lavender sweetened the night. "If you're faking it now, Starlet, you're quite good."

She laughed. "No. I'm not such a great actor. I've never reacted to a man like this."

"And yet, love is a role, if you think about it. You'll still need a plot. Think about how you intend to proceed." Dionysus brushed her cheek with his fingertips. "Now you understand why life takes precedence over the stage."

She exhaled all the traces of her past ambitions. "Everything has changed—just like that."

"I believe epiphany is the term you're looking for."

She beamed at him. "Now what?"

He stepped toward the park and bowed. "That, my dear, is your creative challenge. I leave you to the graces of the god of theatre."

"Wait," she called. "I need your help. I don't know how to get close to Taylor."

"Your muse will guide you. You've garnered the attention of the god of theatre. All you need is your intuition."

"When will I see you again?"

"I'll be watching you from the catwalks. Go home now. Your god of theatre waits. Your beloved will visit you in your dreams. I'm sure of that." He winked at her, crossed Riverside Drive, and seemed to dissolve into the night.

Her heart—once a closed fist—spread wide open. In the past, she'd been aware of its mechanics, but until tonight, she'd never understood the heart's dynamic.

After he paid the driver and the taxi drove away, Taylor walked to the curb and looked over the dark expanse of Central Park. He wanted to cross the street, follow one of the trails now empty of footsteps, breathe the night air and clear his head, but it wouldn't help. His thirst would stay with him and the walk would not be as free as he wished it would be.

Dead tired, he hoped he would sleep. Late night was still dangerous. He couldn't depend on the distraction of activity, lose himself in his role onstage or be swept into the sweet innocence of Caroline's world. Night was the time to break from family diversions and professional obligations. Night was his dead zone.

Three more months would make it two years, and he planned to start counting by years on the anniversary. He was getting better, he always said. Better every day, but it was a lie. At first he believed it because he had to – if not, it would have been over. But the early days and months for an alcoholic were special. Pink cloud, they called it. The fight was intense – almost violent, but desperation held him. Fear, too. The memories were raw back then, all stark and brutal. Pain and shame kept him from his following his bliss.

His thoughts were turning morbid and he needed to get inside. As long as he didn't take the monster into the house with him, he would sleep. When Dionysus spoke to him, he wished he'd turned away. The man's voice elicited too much.

"It's getting better," he whispered and chose to believe it. *One day at a time.*

He went into his building, and as he rode the elevator, he thought of the girl Dionysus had pushed toward him. She had an energy that touched him, but he couldn't define it. Pretty, and too young to dance with demons.

The lights were off in the apartment. He walked into Caroline's room where she slept in the bed he'd made with his own hands. No craftsman, but he'd worked hard and long on it, and the results weren't bad. The project had been a good one, and while he'd worked on it, he hadn't felt the need to count anything – not hours or days.

A golden strand of her hair brushed against the headboard when Caroline moved. He bent down and kissed her forehead, wishing she'd wake up for just a minute. Her eyelids fluttered and he thought of butterflies. She opened her eyes, smiled, and then closed them again.

"Baby doll," he whispered. "Sweet dreams." A tide rushed in, and his thirst was gone. Because of Caroline, he kept counting. When she turned eighteen, he would have sixteen years of sobriety. Maybe by then, he wouldn't deal with thirst anymore.

When he got into bed, he pictured Kristen. She smiled at him with hazel eyes and hummed a haunting melody. As her voice lulled him to sleep, Taylor was no longer aware of the dead zone.

ACT I - SUMMER  
Scene 3

Morning. Kristen lay in bed and ran her fingertips across her bare stomach and thighs. The texture of her skin, silk-like, excited her. The memory of a dream fluttered through her. Taylor had visited her. His essence was still in her mind. God Dionysus swished above her head like a winged creature, and the normal morning was magical. He'd done it. The god of theatre had liberated her from normality.

She whispered Taylor's name, and held an image she wanted to carve into her mind, a work of art to inspire her through the distractions of passing time. The paleness of his eyes, the fair palette of his flesh. A warm, full mouth contrasted with his strong jaw. She sculpted the curves of his biceps, the way his jeans hugged a tightly muscled butt. Embarrassing. She snickered. It was all so cheesy.

When she set her thoughts on the future – even the immediate future of today – it was blank. No idea how to proceed, and if her human Dionysus was telling the truth, he'd left her to his invisible counterpart.

Kristen faced a choice. She could forget last night, laugh at Dionysus and their outrageous drama, and return to her flaccid world. Or she could freefall into the unknown. She gave her heart a chance to feel it both ways. No contest – she plunged into the beautiful abyss.

Strolling the four blocks to her job, she wondered who she was now. Inside her skin, she didn't feel like Kristen. She made a point of greeting the dog walkers, and there were many. Their reciprocal responses encouraged her. Wishing she had a dog, she asked about breeds. What was yesterday a malevolent city now brimmed with kindness? It seemed Manhattan had experienced a spiritual metamorphosis overnight, and they'd all arrived in the New Age.

Even her job felt different. The Academy was a commercial enterprise run by unscrupulous owners and offered pricy, high-profile training by prestigious but frustrated teachers. On the day she'd interviewed there, faculty had picketed outside the school for improved benefits and job security. She laughed at the memory. They were all stage actors and knew an actor's life was one of perpetual insecurity. Ironic the Academy instructors demanded the one thing theatre never gave them – security. Hypocritically, she'd jumped at the same opportunity. But today, she believed even her compromise played a valid part in her backstory.

The Registrar's office was empty when she arrived. Alone in the common space she shared with Danielle, she logged onto her computer for some quick Googling. She clicked into the internet and keyed in Taylor O'Neal Broadway actor. A split-second later, a list of links appeared, the first of over five thousand. At the top of the list was a recent article from [broadwaytoday.com](http://broadwaytoday.com).

### *Witches Makes Magic for Taylor O'Neal*

*Satan proves to be the breakout role for a stage actor with mediocre credits and an admittedly controversial career. Taylor O'Neal, who has not been seen in a leading role on Broadway in ten years, garners a Tony nod, fan adoration, and respect in a theatrical community that wrote him off after a disastrous run in Pirates a decade ago.*

*42-year-old O'Neal is a living example that on the Great White Way anything is possible. Witches plays to a sold-out house nightly and enjoys the security of ten-million dollar advance sales. When asked what factors he credits to his resurgent success, the charming actor replied.*

*"Factors? F\*ing luck. Nothing more."*

*Not to mention a perfect baritone, charismatic stage presence – and yes, did we mention uncanny good looks?*

She clicked print, curious about the reference to the disastrous Pirates. While not a hit, it had a respectable run on Broadway.

"How was Witches?" Danielle entered the office. She set a leaky paper bag on a stack of paperwork on her desk and retrieved her doughnut from the bag before it got soggy. Taking her coffee, she tossed the bag into the trash.

A coffee stain was ruining Danielle's quarterly report, but she didn't notice. Vivacious in a Polo shirt matching a glow across her skin, it was obvious Danielle had received her morning dose of erotica from her boyfriend, Kevin.

"The show was awesome," Kristen said. A vicious pulse throbbed in her neck.

"So it's not just hype?"

"I never experienced anyone... anything like it."

Danielle beamed a know-it-all grin. "So you do like him. We knew it."

"He's...he's a god," she blurted, and instantly regretted it. "I sound like an idiot."

Danielle set down her coffee and wheeled her chair over. "Quite an announcement coming from the girl who hates her life. I want details."

"There's nothing to tell. I just enjoyed the show." She coughed. Her improv skills were rusty.

Danielle's phone rang and she picked up. "It's Tessa," she said. They chatted about Kevin and his unquenchable appetite while Kristen wallowed. "You'll never guess." Danielle chuckled. "We'll get the truth out of her at lunch. Hit it off? These are her exact words – Mark's a god."

"Not Mark," Kristen yelled.

"Then who?" Danielle eyed her.

She wouldn't say his name. Couldn't. Her friends would mock her. She'd make the same judgment if one of them came down with a case of celebrity worship. "I can't tell you." She exited out of the internet before Danielle caught her cyber-stalking. "It's a secret for now."

Danielle told Tessa she'd call her back. "Damn. I never would have guessed."

"Never guess what?"

"You're hot for a guy. When you're ready, I wanna hear everything."

"I don't know when I'll be ready." She grabbed a course registration. Hadn't planned to say a thing. It just slipped – bubbled out. She needed more restraint.

"You met him at Witches?"

"A friend of mine, a playwright, introduced us. Sort of."

"Really? I didn't know you were friends with a playwright."

"He calls himself Dionysus. You know – the god of theatre."

Danielle crinkled her nose. "He sounds eccentric."

"All playwrights are eccentric. It's a weird coincidence, though. Remember my first apartment in Hell's Kitchen? My friends and I used to talk about Dionysus and his extremes. Now, here I am. Believe me, this is the extreme zone."

"Come on, Kris, you guys were drunk. You were always having existential experiences back then."

"I'm serious. And now this playwright..." She cringed. "I sound like a freak."

"So this playwright set you up when you were on a date with Mark? How bad is that?"

"Sometimes you've gotta go with improv. That's all I can say."

"And now you've got a secret lover." Danielle wheeled her chair back to her cubicle.

"No," Kristen whispered, but she knew Danielle didn't believe her.

Throughout the morning, she noticed Danielle glaring at her as though an alien had infiltrated her body. She felt wicked in her passive deception, but the illusion of a secret love affair aroused her. It burrowed into her and gained substance.

Dionysus startled Kristen as she was leaving the building after work. He stepped from around the corner as a dog lumbered up to her.

"Forgive him, Starlet. He's a bit anxious to meet you." He held out the leash. "Here, give him a test drive if you'd like."

The dog, a shepherd, pressed against her, his tail slapping at her legs.

"I didn't know you had a dog."

"He's not mine. He's yours. If you want him, of course."

"Did I tell you...?" She stopped. She'd never mentioned her wish for a dog. "I get it. You're a mind reader. That would be scary if I didn't trust you."

The dog pulled at his leash and she followed him to a tree.

Dionysus laughed. "Not at all. I found him abandoned near the Boat Basin. When nobody claimed him, the shelter called me. I couldn't let them put down such a stunning creature. I thought he might work well in your script. Taylor loves dogs."

She flushed at the mention of Taylor. "You know him well, don't you? You think I'd be good for Taylor. That's why you're doing this."

"And what exactly am I doing? Tell me."

She sighed. "I don't get it. I have no idea where we're going with this."

He raised his face to the sun. "This is your story, not mine. I'm simply offering you a prop." He pointed to the animal. "It's your choice. You're in control."

"Of course I want him," she said. "He's beautiful. First Taylor and now the dog—I swear you're a god." She wanted to kiss him but didn't dare. "When can I see Taylor again?"

He grinned. "Whenever you choose. You know where to find him. This is an exercise in creativity. Go with it." He walked her to the end of the block, and then headed up West End Avenue. "I'll be watching."

She named her dog Thor. The big guy was trained. Knew *sit* and *come*. Not sure if Thor understood *no*, since she intended to avoid the word until it was necessary. They splurged on a steak for dinner. Thor was the perfect gentleman sitting beside the table as she divided the steak between them. He got the bone. When she handed him his feast, a puddle of drool had formed on the floor. It made her laugh. Her home life would be more complicated now, and it felt right.

While Thor chomped on his bone, she went online to look for a single ticket to Witches. She tried Ticketmaster. At first nothing, but she kept searching dates and scored. A single ticket was available on Thursday night, July 20 in the far left mezzanine. The seat had a partially obstructed view, but she didn't care. She had a dog, a life, and a ticket to Taylor.

After she uncorked a bottle of Chardonnay and poured a glass, she raised it in a toast. "To Dionysus, my muse," she said. Thor paused from chewing his bone and cocked his head.

She wondered if her dog had trust problems after he'd been abandoned. She thought about her own issues, so familiar she couldn't remember a time when she hadn't carried them. She'd accepted them like an extra set of fingers or toes allocated to her by nature. But thanks to a benevolent stranger, they were gone.

Their first visit to the Riverside Dog Run happened on spread-the-straw morning. The dog owners were untying bales of straw and scattering them around the run. A few others stood to the side and watched, but the loafers didn't make good impressions. Time she made some quick points with the ruling dog people.

Dorothy, the dog run grand dame, complimented her on her participation. Past sixty, Dorothy oversaw the maintenance of the run. Her dog sang, she said. She had him performing on the streets on Saturday nights. After complaining about the ingratitude of the dog owners who weren't helping, Dorothy said she was a veteran Broadway dancer. Knew everybody who was anybody on Broadway.

While she waited for her return to Witches, time passed like a sluggish old man. She developed a new understanding of the philosophical *Eternal Now*. The world of her own invention blossomed. In her imaginary Utopia, she reigned omnipotent. It never stormed and every night produced a dazzling full moon. She fantasized about Taylor, who always said and did exactly as she wished. He gratified her on demand. They had

no conflicts. Theirs was the ideal love affair – one she kept tucked in the solitude of her mind. In the fascinating place, she had no wish to be anywhere else.

Every morning she took Thor down to the promenade, hoping to find Dionysus. No luck. The man was playing with her again. He and his namesake seemed to be one in spirit. The lines between them were blurring.

On the night of the show, it was sprinkling on when she left the subway and walked to the Minskoff. Contrary to what she'd feared, she had no jitters, no intimidating self-doubt. As she took her mezzanine seat, she became Aphrodite watching over Taylor from the astral plane. The house was packed to the last row.

When Taylor performed, she discovered layers of genius she hadn't noticed the first time. A fat woman next to her sighed. The entire audience, at least the female portion, was smitten.

At intermission, she walked through the lobby and wandered outside. She looked for Dionysus, hoping he'd make a cameo appearance. Since the theatre entrance was in an enclosed walkway, attendees gathered unhampered by the rain. He wasn't there. She was destined to play her scene without direction.

Smokers puffed in clusters, commenting on the show. When she heard Taylor's name, she drifted in the direction of the voices. Somebody was bragging she'd seen him twelve times in Pirates. This was her fourth time seeing Witches. She nudged closer to see who it was, but the voice came from a group of middle-aged women talking at once. The lobby lights blinked as the curtain was set to rise on the second act.

During Act II, the devil revealed his true nature. Taylor shed his charming façade from Act I and waged war on the witches who defied his leadership. He played an incredibly believable nemesis. He roared and she shuddered. He was vengeful, and yet she adored him. No one could have pulled it off with more pizzazz. His lament, right before the climax, reached like a hand into her chest and squeezed.

*In my devotion, you betray me. What more could I have done? My dead emotion now confounds me. May I never see the sun.*

At the climax, as he vanished into the earth in a tornado of smoke, the audience gasped. Earth's loss was hell's gain. Kristen leapt to her feet during the standing ovation. In the anonymity of the mezzanine, she behaved like a star-struck fan.

Then the crowd exited as she sat paralyzed in the safety of her seat. She constructed a workable scene, a catchy opening line. Rehearsing *you're a great devil, Taylor*, she waited until she looked conspicuous to the tired ushers and walked outside. Fans pressed around the stage door where a security guard stood.

At the end of the walkway, driving rain splattered the street. She understood the dynamics at the stage door, knew how faces and voices blended into a unit. She wanted Taylor to see her as an individual. Waiting near Forty-Fourth Street, she hoped he'd recognize her before he hailed a cab. With any luck, he'd offer her a ride uptown.

When Taylor stepped out of the shower in his dressing room, his skin prickled. The air-conditioning, comfortable a few minutes earlier, was blasting icy air onto his damp skin. But it was more than that. The room gave him the creeps.

Just tired. Dead tired, he thought. Somebody knocked on the door. It startled him, but he didn't move. Wasn't about to open the door naked, and he had no reason to throw his clothes on in a rush. His body was dead weight. He didn't feel well.

Water dripped down his neck from his wet curls. He went back to the bathroom to get a towel. When he returned, he saw he was not alone.

"You should lock your door, dear one," Dionysus said, chuckling. The man's eyes traveled from Taylor's face down. "You are beautiful, though. I should have brought Kristen with me. She'd wilt with desire."

Taylor wrapped his towel around his waist but said nothing.

"She's waiting outside," Dionysus said. "Wouldn't you try to be a friend to her? She needs someone like you. Having a rough time, poor thing. Her situation is something you'd understand. I'd hate to see another sweet neophyte lose herself in the city. They're so vulnerable, you know."

"I'm meeting Darla," Taylor said. Dionysus flared at the mention of her name. "She's waiting for me at her show. I should get going." He knew the man too well, and the story didn't add up. "You know it wouldn't be a good idea for me to..." He unwrapped his towel and let it fall to the floor. "I'm not ready for friendships with women." He grabbed a pair of jockey shorts from his duffel bag and pulled them on.

"Everybody needs friends. I thought relationships were requisite in your recovery."

Taylor eyed him. He didn't hate Dionysus—couldn't hate him. The man had only given him what he'd wanted, but he didn't need an enabler now. He walked to the sofa and picked up his jeans.

"I'd never hurt you," Dionysus said. "You know that. This show—I did all of this for you. Name one person who ever offered you more."

"I know," Taylor said. "But I gotta get going."

"Or Darla will be angry." The man's voice was singsong facetious.

Taylor nodded. "I'm sure Kristen can find some friends."

Dionysus walked over, brushing against his bare shoulder, and sat down. "Well, that's the problem, you see. Their peers easily influence them when they're young. She doesn't understand. All alone in Manhattan with nobody to give her the support and wisdom she needs. Coming here has alienated her from her parents. I'd hate to see her dreams come to a tragic end. You can relate. You've been there."

"I'm sorry to hear that." He meant it, and thought of Caroline. When she grew up, she would still need him. Nothing would alienate him from his daughter, and Caroline would never feel alone in the world. Kristen's aloneness jabbed at him, but he couldn't do anything about it.

"Well, you better get going, then," Dionysus said, insincerely upbeat. "Do you mind if I wait in here for a while? I'm joining the cast at the little haunt they adore."

Bogs, I think it's called. We'll have a late night, I expect. But they seem to enjoy my presence."

Taylor smiled. "Cogs. You always got the name wrong."

Dionysus laughed. "Yes, Cogs. You remember."

Of course he remembered. Too often. Unwanted scenes still popped into his head when he thought they'd faded for good. He was hit with the smell of the place—the smoke, the weary bodies. Warm whiskey.

"Stay as long as you'd like. Dan will lock up."

Kristen's anxious wait ended when Taylor came out. There were obligatory autographs and photos. A few fans said things that earned hugs. She heard him laughing as she moved closer to the street, ready to take center stage.

But he didn't know the script. He turned left and headed toward Forty-Fifth Street instead. She followed him, but the crowd delayed her when he crossed the street and walked through the Marriott driveway. The rain fell heavier then. He turned west, walked to Eighth Avenue and veered north. Staying a distance behind him, she worried he'd look back and mistake her for a stalker. Felt cheap shadowing him, but she kept going.

Taxis buzzed by on Eighth Avenue. Their tires splashed as they hit wet potholes. Taylor crossed the street as the signal blinked then held. *Don't Walk*. She tried to cross, but a taxi honked and roared past her, splashing her with street-water.

She ran across the street and up the block so she wouldn't lose him. Ran so she wouldn't have to think, wouldn't have to admit the humiliation jabbing at her. If the stoplights would cooperate, she would walk up beside him and say hello. She didn't have a better idea.

All the way to Fifty-Fourth Street, with no cooperation from the lights, she stayed behind him. When he turned toward Broadway, he ran to a door and knocked. It opened, and he disappeared inside.

She knew the place—Studio 54. He'd gone in the stage door for the show, Cabaret. It was late. The audience had gone home. Her heart folded back into a fist. A bad idea to stay and wait, because he wouldn't be alone when he came out.

The door swung open then, and Taylor held it as a woman—tall, skinny—went out ahead of him. Kristen pivoted and raised her hand for a taxi. She didn't care if her mascara was running, or whether rain or tears were wetting her face.

*Not the end of the world*, a voice said in her brain.

Who the hell said that? She got into a taxi and let herself go numb for the ride, but when the taxi turned onto her block, she expected to see Dionysus. He'd be standing with a black umbrella at her stoop. He'd tell her to calm down. Stay rational, he'd say. She wouldn't, but she realized she wanted to hear him say it.

The block was empty. When she unlocked her door, Thor nudged her with his cold snout. She sat on the bare floor, buried her face in his fur, and cried.