

OBJECTS OF WORSHIP

C L A U D E L A L U M I È R E



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INTRODUCTION

GODS OF DESIRE: THE EROTIC THEOLOGY OF CLAUDE LALUMIÈRE

B Y J A M E S M O R R O W

Surely we can all agree that the universe would be a better place if Claude Lalumière had been put in charge of its clustered suns and interstellar gases, whereas, alas, the job instead went to the anthropocentric, xenophobic, sexophobic, misogynist, bloody-minded, egomaniacal, and generally unimaginative Supreme Being of the Western religious tradition. But despite Lalumière's lamentable lack of godhead, speculative fiction aficionados have many

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reasons to acquire and read *Objects of Worship*. Minimalist in style, plenary in scope, elliptical in sensibility, and abrim with sardonic humour, the present collection affords its readers far more food for thought than any quantitatively equivalent swatch of Holy Writ.

Conventional wisdom holds that, while literary fiction is concerned primarily with plumbing the human psyche, genre fiction derives its appeal from narrative twists and turns. It seems to me that *Objects of Worship* occupies a third domain. These twelve stories are not so much character-driven or plot-driven as drive-driven. Lalumière's protagonists exhibit the sorts of yearnings and proclivities that our most respected social institutions teach us to mistrust: erotic energy, artistic mania, idiosyncratic mysticism, impassioned empathy with the natural world. These characters constitute a rogues gallery of sexual, political, and culinary outsiders. On page after page we profit from the appealing company of misfits, bohemians, eccentrics, visionaries, loners, losers, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and zombies, all determined to prevail in a world that has no particular use for them.

Forces both rational and irrational contrive to keep Lalumière's oddballs and dissenters from getting what they want. Whereas the protagonists of much speculative fiction, including the characters in my own satiric epics, turn to the official epistemology of the secular West—experimental science—for insight and empowerment, we find little enthusiasm for that worldview in *Objects of Worship*. In one of those pranks so beloved by the laws of caprice, our author was born with a name that evokes the 18th-Century

Enlightenment, “le siècle des Lumières,” the joke being that Claude Lalumière has cultivated a decided chariness toward that heritage and its technological stepchildren. A major character in “Hochelaga and Sons,” the narrator’s hapless father, was once “a disposable guinea pig” subjected to atrocious Nazi medical experiments performed in the name of science. “Roman Predator’s Chimeric Odyssey” unfolds in the aftermath of a “BioWar” that sterilized much of the planet, leaving it to the descendents of “laboratory-created hybrids.” “This Is the Ice Age” thrusts the reader into a frozen dystopia inadvertently wrought by “the rogue R&D department of some corporate weapons manufacturer.”

If Lalumière regards the empirical with suspicion, he brings an equally wary eye to the empyrean. In the universe of *Objects of Worship*, all deities are guilty until proven innocent. The nebulous gods of the title story cheerily suck up oblations from humans and give them nothing in return but grief. The plot of “Hochelaga and Sons” turns on the Hebrew God’s preoccupation with *treyf*, unclean things, a proscription that tragically prevents the hero’s fantastically gifted brother from confounding a terrorist threat called the Hegemony of Hate. “The Sea, at Bari” dramatizes an encounter between a troubled young man and a nightmarish beast that can be exorcised only through a grisly variation on the eucharist. “The Darkness at the Heart of the World” and “A Visit to the Optometrist” both feature Yamesh-Lot, the kind of foul Lovecraftian lord who reminds us of the recurrent disconnect between embracing the supernatural and doing the right thing.

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For all Lalumière's religious skepticism, it's clear that he would sooner cast his lot with an imaginative metaphysics than with any sort of Skinnerian utopianism or Newtonian instrumentalism. Not all of the transcendent beings in *Objects of Worship* are malign. "Spiderkid" gives its readers a moving celebration of the world's arachnid deities, "all degraded memories of God . . . the primordial Spider who wove the universe into being." "The Darkness at the Heart of the World" presents the mythos of the Shifpan-Shap, avatars of a Gaia-like "Green Blue and Brown God" locked in perpetual conflict with the demonic Yamesh-Lot. In "Njàbò" we meet a sympathetic female elephant-god who refuses to forget how ruthlessly the human species arranged the extermination of her kind.

Beyond the more obvious sorts of deities, we find herein an abundance of those cape-flaunting, long-underwear-clad, quasi-divine protagonists known as superheroes. While I personally harbour a profound indifference toward this particular aspect of popular culture, I must admit that certain writers of a postmodern bent have spun their childhood affection for Superman and his descendents into beguiling works of fiction, among them Michael Bishop's *Count Geiger's Blues*, Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, and Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*, achievements to which we must now add three stories from the present volume, "Hochelaga and Sons," "Spiderkid," and "Destroyer of Worlds."

It's clear that Lalumière has thought through the most severe critique of the superhero ethos, namely, that the sort

of justice it seems to recommend partakes of vigilantism at best and fascism at worst. At his earliest convenience, around the midpoint of “Hochelaga and Sons,” the author presents a taxonomy of superheroes in which the troublesome “crimefighters” are accorded the shortest entry, for his heart clearly lies with the cosmic “protectors” and the romantic “adventurers.” Lalumière knows perfectly well that the promiscuous violence and casual apocalypses of Marvel Comics are, to use Susan Sontag’s memorable phrase, “in complicity with the abhorrent.” “But perhaps it was time for all this to end,” muses the unnamed protagonist of “Destroyer of Worlds.” “For another world, perhaps a better world, to be born from this one’s destruction . . . Perhaps I was full of shit—justifying a monstrous offer I could not bring myself to refuse.”

And so it happened that Lalumière’s enthusiasm for Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, and other such graphic storytellers ultimately won me over. Indeed, before I’d finished *Objects of Worship*, Lalumière had himself emerged in my eyes as a kind of offbeat superhero—several, in fact. In the following pages you will meet an authorial persona we might call Lord Libido, that is, Lalumière the paladin of eroticism, as well as Doctor Vegan, that is, Lalumière the crusader for animal rights, not to mention Irony Man, the Lalumière who understands the ubiquity of thwarted human intentions, plus The Eclectic Ranger, the Lalumière who has synthesized many narrative traditions into a dozen entrancing tales—tales from which I shall keep you no longer.

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY RUPERT BOTTENBERG



THE OBJECT OF WORSHIP

The god settles on the table. Rose tears a piece from her toast, slathers a heap of cream cheese on the ear-sized morsel, and lays it next to the god. It consumes the tribute.

Rose smiles as the god's warmth permeates her body, enfolds her heart. She squeezes Sara's hand. "Your turn."

With an irritated sigh, Sara cuts a thin—too thin, Rose thinks—sliver from a slightly unripe banana. Sara's hand moves toward the god, but Rose grabs her wrist.

"That's not enough. At least put some peanut butter on it."

Rose recoils from Sara's glare.

"I don't need you to tell me how to worship." But Sara nevertheless dips her knife into the jar and smears a dollop of chunky peanut butter on her tribute before offering it to the god.

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Rose runs the six blocks from home to the video store. As assistant manager, it's her responsibility to open the shop in the morning. Rose usually gets to the store a half-hour early; she likes to attend to her morning tasks unhurriedly. But today the home god was too upset. It hates when she and Sara fight, or even when they exchange tense words. After breakfast, they had to cuddle silently on the couch with the god nestled between them until harmony was restored. When Rose and Sara finally kissed, the god rewarded them.

Rose looks at her watch as she reaches the storefront. She's made it with five minutes to spare. Two of the employees are waiting outside. And smoking. They know the staff rules. No smoking in front of the store. If they have to smoke, they should do it in the alley, or at least not so close to the door.

"We're not on the clock yet, so don't get on our case," says Vandana as she stubs out her cigarette under her black construction boots.

"Yeah," Maddie concurs, flicking away her own half-smoked cigarette with her long, crooked fingers. The green polish is flaking off her chipped, overlong nails.

Rose unlocks the front door, steps inside, then quickly punches in the security code on the pad next to the light switch. Ashley—cheerful and perfectly groomed, as always—arrives; Rose waves in all three clerks before locking the door again, so they can ready the store. But first things first.

The store god rests in its altar, which is carved into a

column next to the counter. All four women kneel, cooing prayers at the god. The god glows, acknowledging their presence, but does not otherwise stir.

By the time the store opens, they're six minutes late; only one customer is waiting. Rose apologizes, but the woman—a tall redhead with a striking face, long luxurious hair, and big curious eyes—laughs it off. “I just got here.” Her smile is playful; it's enough to wipe away the remains of Rose's tension.

Rose is grateful for this change in the day's course. She should thank the store god. There's a box of chocolates in her desk. She'll bring one out for the god. Maybe mint cream? Or almond crunch?

Suddenly, the god moans painfully.

The god darkens.

Vandana, Maddie, and Ashley are already trying to soothe it by singing to it. The store god loves song, but the clerks' efforts are having no effect.

The only customer—that beautiful redhead—is browsing through the new releases as if nothing untoward was happening.

Rose walks up to her. “Have you greeted the god?”

The woman frowns and tries to suppress a chuckle. “What? . . . No.”

“The altar is by the counter. Perhaps a small prayer?”

“I don't think so.”

Gods must always be greeted. It's the same everywhere. Showing proper respect to the gods is what holds society together.

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Rose just stares blankly at the woman, who resumes browsing. She picks a shrinkwrapped DVD case off the rack. *Burning Sky*, Rose notices, remembering that Sara had asked her to bring a copy home.

The customer walks to the counter, holding the DVD. Rose follows her.

The three clerks are still trying to soothe the god, but it is more anxious than ever. Smoke spews from the altar.

The customer turns toward Rose. "Can I buy this?"

Rose snatches the DVD away. "Please leave. Right now."

"Because of that thing," she points at the god, "you won't take my money?"

"Get out."

After the woman has gone, Rose fetches the box of chocolates from her office and, piece by piece, feeds all of it to the god. Finally, the god appears to calm down.

Then the god leaves its perch, finds the DVD the woman had intended to buy, and destroys it.

Above the bed, in its niche in the wall, the altar lies empty. Rose stiffens and stops herself from reminding Sara that it needs to be cleaned. This has been such a stressful day; Rose wants it to end on a good note. But Sara's neglect nags at her.

Sara sighs. "I'll clean it tomorrow, okay? I can tell it's bugging you."

They hug, their breasts touching under the covers. Sara continues, "You shouldn't second-guess me so much. I know your family does things differently, but I've always taken

good care of the god. We live in harmony.”

The god's been in Sara's family for generations. Sara had been given to her mother by the god. And the god had given Sara's mother to Sara's grandmother . . . Sara grew up with the god, has spent her entire life with it. She and the god are ritually bonded; there are duties the god won't allow anyone else to perform. But Sara is not as fastidious as Rose would like.

“You're still thinking about it.” Sara, grinning mischievously, tickles Rose.

“No, stop!”

Sara pins Rose down, holding her wrists tight against the mattress. She bends toward her and almost kisses her, almost lets their lips brush.

Rose snags Sara's lower lip between her teeth, and Sara lets herself slide down on top of her lover. They kiss. Sara jams her leg between Rose's thighs. They squirm against each other. They love each other.

Noise awakens Rose. It's still dark. She groans, knowing how hard it can be for her to get back to sleep when she's roused in the middle of the night. She looks up; the altar is still empty. The god usually watches over them at night.

Sara snores, lost to sleep.

Worried, Rose gets out of bed and grabs her robe. She follows the source of the sound.

Through the kitchen window she looks at the large inner courtyard shared by five neighbouring houses. The gods are gathered. The gods are singing.

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A few other neighbours are sitting on their balconies, watching the gods.

All thirteen resident gods are there—one for every household with access to the courtyard. One of the gods lies in the middle of a circle formed by the other twelve. One by one, each god leaves the circle to rub itself against the god in the centre. They go around many times. With each round the singing intensifies, until it reaches a thunderous crescendo and all the gods swarm toward the centre. Abruptly the singing stops, and the mass of congregated gods pulses with light.

Rose returns to bed, troubled and confused. Before moving in with Sara, Rose had never seen gods together, and she is still unfamiliar with their social habits. Unsettled by them, even. It's a city thing, with so many households close together. Rose is still a country girl at heart, despite having lived here for three years.

Eventually, just as dawn breaks, the god returns to its altar. Rose has not slept the whole time.

Rose whispers a prayer to the god as it settles in. The god glows. Then the god joins Rose in bed, slips under the covers. It rubs itself against Rose's toes, her soles, her legs, her stomach, her breasts . . . It shares its warmth with Rose. Rose's heart melts with love for the god. The god presses itself between her legs. She spreads her legs. The god accepts the tribute of her moistness. And then the god gives itself to Rose.

Rose gasps.

Rose makes pancakes for breakfast. Lots of pancakes. With blueberries in them. She lightly sautés sliced apples and bananas, to serve on the side.

Yawning, Sara emerges from the bedroom. “Babe, it smells so delicious!”

The table is already set. Plates. Cutlery. Juice. Pot of coffee. Mugs. Can of maple syrup.

“Do I have time to shower, or should I eat now and shower after?”

“The pancakes’ll keep warm in the oven.”

“Fuck it. That smell is too delicious. Let’s eat now.” Sara sits, and Rose brings the pancakes and the sautéed fruit.

Sara asks, “What’s all that ruckus outside?”

“I think one of the neighbours is moving.”

“Yeah . . . Didn’t Jocelyn say she might be leaving? Something about a new job?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I don’t really know her.”

“Ah, who cares? Let’s eat this great food before it gets cold. Thanks so much for making this, babe.”

Sara stuffs herself like an enthusiastic child, grinning at Rose the whole time.

The god settles on the table. Together, the two women offer it an entire pancake, with banana and apple slices on top. The god consumes the tribute. The god hums.

Sara chokes.

Rose pats her on the back, and Sara coughs, clearing her throat.

“I’ve never heard the god sing like that after receiving tribute. Wow. It must love your pancakes.”

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“Maybe.” Rose can’t keep the hint of something more out of her voice.

Sara looks at Rose quizzically. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Biting her lower lip and keeping her eyes focused on the god, Rose says, “I’m pregnant.”

Sara skips a few beats. Then, “When . . . ?”

Rose turns toward Sara. “This morning. At dawn. The god . . . it stayed out all night with the other neighbourhood gods. Singing. And something else. Dancing, maybe?”

Sara says, tersely, “They must’ve been saying goodbye to the god who’s moving away. But whatever.”

“Oh. That makes sense. Anyway, when it returned. It—”

“The god made you pregnant.”

“Yes.”

“You.”

“Yes! I’m blessed! What will we call her?”

Sara looks away.

Rose gets up from her seat and hugs Sara. “I’m sorry, love. I’m sorry it wasn’t you. I know I should’ve woken you, so you could be with me and pray to the god . . . but it was so sudden. So fast.” She runs her fingers through Sara’s hair. “Aren’t you happy for me? For us?”

“Yeah . . . sure. It’s just so . . . unexpected. I wasn’t thinking about children at all. Not yet, at least. It’s just kind of a shock. That’s all.”

Sara skips a few more beats, but in her silence she strokes Rose’s arms.

Then, “Of course I’m happy, Rose. It’s going to be great having a baby. Plus, with your looks, our daughter’s gonna be cute as a button.”

The god wedges itself between the two women, settling against Rose’s belly, enveloping the family in a cocoon of divine warmth.

The moon is nearly full, the starry sky cloudless. The night air is a bit chilly; Rose and Sara are cuddled under a thick red quilt, pressed against each other and holding hands. They’re waiting for the gods to come out.

The new neighbour moved in earlier today, but neither Rose nor Sara has seen her. After dinner, Sara told Rose that, their first night, new gods are always welcomed by the resident gods. Sometimes, new gods will vie for dominance, especially rural gods, unused to the proximity of other gods. It never unfolds quite the same way, and it can be quite a spectacle.

So here they are on the back porch. Waiting. They wave at their neighbours. Everyone is out tonight, to witness the welcoming of the new god.

Time passes, and nothing happens.

Rose asks, “Does it usually take this long?”

“No. But let’s wait for it. It’s worth it.” Sara kisses Rose, and they neck. Waiting for the gods.

Rose is woken by Sara’s snoring. Dawn is breaking. “Shit. I missed it.”

Tabitha, their upstairs neighbour, yells down: “You didn’t miss anything. The gods didn’t come out. I’m gonna

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need so much coffee today.” Tabitha stomps back inside and slams her back door shut.

Maddie called in sick at the last minute. Rose, unable to find a replacement, is stuck working the evening shift at the video shop. She calls home, to apologize. She’s surprised that Sara doesn’t pick up. She leaves a voicemail message.

It’s a slow night. Petra and Ashley would have been able to handle it. The rules insist on a minimum staff of three, though, and Rose could lose her job if she left early and management found out. Ashley would probably rat her out; and she might get Rose’s position if she did. It’s not worth the risk, especially with a baby on the way.

At eight o’clock, while Petra and Ashley are taking a cigarette break out back, Sara walks into the store. Rose perks up. “Hey, you came by! Thanks.”

Sara’s carrying a little paper bag. “For you.”

Rose opens it and finds an almond croissant. She leans over the counter and gives Sara a quick kiss on the lips.

Rose breaks off a tiny morsel of the croissant and hands it to Sara. “Would you . . . ?”

“Uh . . . sure.” Irritation flashes on Sara’s face, but she forces a grin. She places the tribute on the god’s altar, hurriedly singing a line from a children’s ditty. The god accepts the tribute.

“See, I even remembered to sing. Be right back.”

Sara quickly scans the shelves and picks a DVD. Walking back toward Rose, she waves it in the air. “Weren’t you supposed to bring one of these home?” It’s a copy of *Burning Sky*.

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“Shit. I forgot. Sorry. Take it, and I’ll handle it.”

“Alright, babe. I gotta go. I might be out late tonight. Don’t wait up.”

Sara gives Rose a quick peck on the cheek and is out the door before Rose even has time to utter, “What?”

Rose presses her face against the window. Already across the street, Sara walks away briskly, arms entwined with another woman’s. A tall woman with long red hair.

The home altar is still filthy. The god is flaccid, discoloured. Sara has been neglecting it.

In Sara’s absence, Rose offers tribute to the god, but it ignores her.

Rose worries about her baby.

When Sara finally gets home in the middle of the night and slips into bed, Rose feigns sleep.

The god instantly latches itself onto Sara, glowing brightly. Through half-closed eyelids Rose sees it take tribute from Sara’s mouth, drinking her saliva.

The god darkens, oozes stinking grey goo all over Sara, all over the bed. It rushes out the bedroom.

“Oh, fuck!” Sara wipes her face on the clean underside of the pillowcase.

“You kissed her,” Rose accuses. “That woman. That heathen.”

“Not heathen. Atheist. Heathens worship invisible gods. Jane doesn’t worship at all.”

“How can anyone not worship the gods? They are with us.”

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“Whatever. Let’s not argue.” Sara gets up, walks to the bathroom, and cleans herself with a wet towel.

Rose follows her in. “I’ve met her before. At the store. She angered the god.”

“Yeah, she told me. She was scoping out the neighbourhood. Jane’s our new neighbour.”

“An atheist? The resident gods won’t accept her. It’ll cause trouble for everyone. Look what you did to our god.”

“Well, maybe we don’t need the gods.”

“The gods give us life, give us children.”

“And why do you think the gods do that? Maybe because they need us to take care of them? Is that what you want our life to be about?”

Rose clenches her teeth. “We are the chosen of the gods. We are blessed. What can be more important?”

“Listen, babe, Jane has lots of ideas that I . . . that I agree with. Things that I’ve been thinking about but was too afraid to discuss with anyone, even you. Talking so freely, it made me giddy. It opened me up. We just kissed.”

Rose makes an exasperated sound.

“Okay, well, maybe a little more. But it was just tonight. I was swept up by the evening. I still love you. And the baby.”

“What about the god?”

“I didn’t say I wanted to change our way of life . . . but things might not be how they seem, how we believe they are. Maybe society should change. It’s worth thinking about, that’s all.”

“So . . . how does she live?”

“Well, she doesn’t keep a god. Other than that, she’s just like everyone else.”

“But that’s no life.”

“Why not?”

“There’s nothing to connect her to the harmony of the world. It’s an empty existence. Meaningless. And it’s irresponsible. Selfish.”

“You don’t understand. Maybe you should meet her. She’s knowledgeable about the gods and their relationship to us. Talk to her.”

“Never. Especially not while I’m pregnant. Promise me you’ll stop seeing her. For the baby’s sake.”

“Rose . . . I can’t do that. You can’t dictate to me. Or blackmail me like that.”

Both of them stay silent for a few minutes, while Sara gets fresh linen.

Rose helps Sara change the bed. “You saw how the god reacted tonight. If I can’t stop you from seeing her—at least be careful. Please. But . . . I don’t know what to do. About us. I don’t know if I really believe that you still love me. Maybe I don’t trust what you’re becoming.”

Sara didn’t come home last night. She didn’t even leave a message.

Rose is tired. It was a big day for new releases, with nonstop waves of customers. She unlocks the door to the apartment, wondering if Sara is gone for good.

Rose walks in to devastation. The couches are shredded. The television is on the floor, the screen shattered. Most of

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what was on the walls or on shelves is now on the floor, in pieces. The kitchen is a mess of broken china and splattered food. Everything is covered in dark, stinky slime.

The god.

Rose rushes to the bedroom. The bedroom is mostly intact, with only a trail of dark slime leading to the altar. The god rests in its niche, exuding dark smoke. The air is thick and odorous. Rose coughs.

“What the fuck . . . Rose . . . ?”

Rose turns to see Sara enter the bedroom.

“What happened here?”

“What do you think? You’re so selfish. You didn’t come home last night. You can’t just abandon the god like that. If you want to leave, fine. Leave. But there are rituals.”

“I’m not leaving. We just talked late into the night yesterday. I didn’t even sleep. It was simpler to go straight to work from Jane’s.”

“You think I’m stupid? The god knows what’s really happening.”

“Maybe the god doesn’t know as much as you think it does.”

They don’t talk for the rest of the evening. Sara cleans up the apartment while Rose tries to comfort and placate the god.

In silent agreement, both women climb into bed at the same time, their backs turned. The god slips in between them. The women turn toward the god, toward each other. The god’s warmth is so delicious. Rose is surprised when Sara kisses her, and she’s surprised, too, that she lets her.

The god hasn't accepted tribute of any kind for days. It rarely leaves its altar, now, which Sara still hasn't cleaned. It reeks.

Sara is snoring, but Rose wakes her up. "We need to talk."

"Can't it wait, babe? I'm too tired."

"No. It can't go on like this."

"Fuck. What are you talking about?"

"Look at the god. You're ignoring it."

"So what? Why don't you take over? I'll even help with the transfer ritual. You care about the god a lot more than I do. And clearly it cares about you more, too." Sara tips her chin toward Rose's belly.

"Is that what this is all about? You're jealous!"

"No . . . I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." Sara sits up and gently puts her hand on Rose's arm. "Look. I don't want to worship anymore. I started thinking about this stuff before the baby. And before I met Jane. I don't mind if you still worship, but it feels wrong for me."

"What does that mean? You can't live here if you don't worship. The god can't tolerate that. Look at it. Do you want to live like that woman? She can't even walk into a store without making trouble. Things are just going to get worse unless you stop being so selfish."

"I'm not being selfish. And neither is Jane."

Rose pushes Sara away. "Maybe you should just leave. Stop pretending."

"Have you ever thought that maybe the god is the problem, and not me?"

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Through the door, Rose hears voices inside the apartment. Isn't Sara supposed to be at work?

Rose walks in. Sara is sitting on the couch. With that woman, Jane.

The god is lying at their feet, collapsing on itself. Rose rushes to it, offers it her saliva, holds it against her breasts.

"What is she doing here? What were you doing to the god?"

Jane says, "Only what should be done to all of them." Sara interrupts her with a gesture.

"Rose, baby, this is for your own good. For the good of the baby. It's safer this way."

"You monsters. You were trying to kill it."

"Baby, you don't understand."

"Leave. Don't ever come back here. I'm having the locks changed. If you ever try to come near the god again, I'll call the police. I never want to see you again."

"It's my family's god, you know."

"Not anymore. The god blessed me."

Jane says, "Rose, the gods don't care about us."

"I don't want to hear your lies. Get out! Both of you!"

Sara and Jane exchange a glance, and the two of them get up to leave. Sara turns back, looks at Rose hugging the god, and opens her mouth to speak. But Rose glares at her, and she walks out and quietly closes the door behind her.

Rose nurses the god back to health. She performs all the proper rituals. The god must let go of Sara, now. It must

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focus on Rose and the coming baby.

The god accepts tribute again. It lets Rose clean its altar. When Rose sleeps, it squeezes itself next to her.

Rose tries not to think of Sara anymore. That woman, Jane, has moved away. Good riddance.

Rose is three and a half months pregnant. It's her birthday today. Twenty-five years old. She gives the god extra tribute at breakfast to celebrate the occasion.

Despite the god, despite the baby growing in her body, Rose feels loneliness gnaw at her as she slips into bed.

The phone rings. "Hello?"

"Hi, babe. I just wanted to wish you happy birthday. I hope it's okay that I called. I miss you."

The god gets agitated, excited. It wraps itself around the phone, presses itself against the receiver, against Sara's voice. It glows and hums.

Rose yanks the phone cord from the wall. She's been faithful to the god. It must love her, not Sara. Not Sara.

In a flash, the god darkens. It fumes and crackles. It attacks the phone and shatters it. Dark smoke quickly spreads throughout the room. The god knocks Rose onto her back. It pushes Rose's legs open.

"No!" Rose stifles a scream.

The god squeezes itself into Rose's womb. Rose feels the god inside her, twisting and thumping. Taking back what it had given her. It pushes its way out of Rose's vagina. Blood oozes in the god's wake, flowing out of her womb and

OBJECTS OF WORSHIP

spreading onto the sheets.

Silently, Rose weeps, clutching at her belly.

The god accepts the tribute of Rose's tears and consumes them.