

Gods Behaving Badly
By Marie Phillips

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ONE MORNING, WHEN Artemis was out walking the dogs, she saw a tree where no tree should be.

The tree was standing alone in a sheltered part of the slope. To the untrained eye, the casual passerby, it probably just looked like a normal tree. But Artemis's eye was far from untrained, and she ran through this part of Hampstead Heath every day. This tree was a newcomer; it had not been there yesterday. And with just one glance Artemis recognized that it was an entirely new species, a type of eucalyptus that had also not existed yesterday. It was a tree that should not exist at all.

Dragging the mutts behind her, Artemis made her way over to the tree. She touched its bark and felt it breathing. She pressed her ear against the trunk of the tree and listened to its heartbeat. Then she looked around. Good; it was early, and there was nobody within earshot. She reminded herself not to get angry with the tree, that it wasn't the tree's fault. Then she spoke.

"Hello," she said.

There was a long silence.

"Hello," said Artemis again.

"Are you talking to me?" said the tree. It had a faint Australian accent.

"Yes," said Artemis. "I am Artemis." If the tree experienced any recognition, it didn't show it. "I'm the goddess of hunting and chastity," said Artemis.

Another silence. Then the tree said, "I'm Kate. I work in mergers and acquisitions for Goldman Sachs."

"Do you know what happened to you, Kate?" said Artemis.

The longest silence of all. Artemis was just about to repeat the question when the tree replied.

"I think I've turned into a tree," it said.

"Yes," said Artemis. "You have."

"Thank God for that," said the tree. "I thought I was going mad." Then the tree seemed to reconsider this. "Actually," it said, "I think I would rather be mad." Then, with hope in its voice: "Are you sure I haven't gone mad?"

"I'm sure," said Artemis. "You're a tree. A eucalyptus. Subgenus of mallee. Variegated leaves."

"Oh," said the tree.

"Sorry," said Artemis.

"But with variegated leaves?"

"Yes," said Artemis. "Green and yellow."

The tree seemed pleased. "Oh well, there's that to be grateful for," it said.

"That's the spirit," Artemis reassured it.

"So," said the tree in a more conversational tone. "You're the goddess of hunting and chastity then?"

"Yes," said Artemis. "And of the moon, and several other things. Artemis." She put a little emphasis on her name. It still hurt when mortals didn't know it.

"I didn't know there was a goddess of hunting and chastity and the moon," confessed the tree. "I thought there was just the one God. Of everything. Or actually, to be honest, I thought there was no God at all. No offense."

"None taken," said Artemis. Unbelievers were always preferable to heretics.

"I have to say you don't look much like a goddess, though," added the tree.

"And what does a goddess look like, exactly?" said Artemis, a sharpness entering her voice.

"I don't know," said the tree, a little nervously. "Shouldn't you be wearing a toga or something? Or

a laurel wreath?"

"You mean, not a tracksuit," said Artemis.

"Pretty much," admitted the tree.

"Times change," said Artemis. "Right now, you don't look like somebody who works in mergers and acquisitions for Goldman Sachs." Her voice indicated that the clothing conversation was closed.

"I still can't get over the fact that you're a goddess," said the tree after a pause. "Wow. Yesterday I wouldn't have believed it. Today . . ." The tree gave an almost imperceptible shrug, rustling its leaves. Then it seemed to think for a bit. "So does that mean, if you're a goddess," it said, "that you can turn me back into a person?"

Artemis had been expecting this question.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but I can't."

"Why not?" said the tree.

The tree sounded so despondent that she couldn't bring herself to reply, as planned, *Because I don't want to*. "A god can't undo what another god has done," she found herself saying instead, much to her own surprise. She hated admitting any kind of weakness, especially to a mortal.

"You mean that guy was a god too? The one who . . . did this. Well, I suppose it's obvious now. I kind of hoped he might be a hypnotist."

"No, he was a god," said Artemis.

"Um," said the tree. "Could you do something about that red setter? I don't really like the way it's sniffing around me."

Artemis pulled the idiot dog away.

"Sorry," she said. "So what happened exactly?"

"I was just taking a walk yesterday and this guy came up to talk to me—"

“Tall?” said Artemis. “Blond? Almost impossibly handsome?”

“That’s the one,” said the tree.

“What did he say?” said Artemis.

The bark on the tree seemed to shift slightly, as if the tree were making a face.

“I, um . . .”

“What did he say?” Artemis asked again, allowing a hint of command to enter her voice.

“He said, ‘Hello. Do you want to give me a blow job?’ ”

A blow job. Why did people do these things to each other? Artemis felt faintly sick.

“I said no,” continued the tree, “and then he said, ‘Are you sure, because you look like you’d be good at it and I think you’d really enjoy it.’ ”

“I’m very sorry,” said Artemis, “about my brother. If it were up to me he would not be allowed outside unsupervised.”

“He’s your brother?”

“My twin. It’s . . . unfortunate.”

“Well, anyway, I just walked off, and he followed me, and I got a bit scared and I started running, and then the next thing I knew . . . here I am.”

Artemis shook her head. “This isn’t the first time something like this has happened,” she said.

“Rest assured, we will be having words about it.”

“And then he’ll turn me back?”

“Absolutely,” lied Artemis.

“No need to tell my family back home what happened, then,” said the tree. “Good. Maybe I should call in sick at work though. I can’t really go in like this. I had my phone with me; it should be around here somewhere. Could you dial my boss’s number and hold the phone to my trunk?”

"Mortals aren't going to be able to understand you, I'm afraid," said Artemis. "Just gods. And other vegetation. I wouldn't bother talking to the grass, though. It isn't very bright."

"Oh," said the tree. "Okay." Artemis gave the tree time to absorb this information. "Why aren't I more upset about this?" it said eventually. "If you'd told me yesterday that I was going to be turned into a tree, I'm sure I'd have been really, really upset."

"You're a tree now, not a human mortal," explained Artemis. "You don't really have emotions anymore. I think you'll be much happier this way. And you'll live longer, unless it gets very windy."

"Except your brother's going to turn me back."

"Of course he is," said Artemis. "Right, then. I'd best be getting on. I've got to get these dogs back to . . . my friends."

"It was nice meeting you," said the tree.

"Likewise," said Artemis. "Bye, then. See you soon. Maybe."

The pleasant look on her face vaporized before her back was even fully turned. The dogs saw her expression and whimpered as one. But they had nothing to fear from Artemis. It was time to go home and find Apollo.