

The Madness of the Gods

by Matthew Keefer

"Have you heard about Lucius?" The lawyer turned to the carpenter. "They say he's gone mad. Just gone; the madness of the gods."

Sitting in the barbershop were the former two, one in his forties and the other of his fifties; a gray-haired retiree in the corner, flipping through a day-old newspaper; and a young man attended to in the barber's chair. That said, it was abnormally busy for a Saturday morning, especially one that forebode early showers. The barber, whose scalp was cleanly shaven almost to a new-car's polish, stroked his beard, conferring with the young man in his chair.

"Really," the carpenter said.

"But you know what it is," the lawyer continued. "They say he's lost the love of his life." He let briefly a short smirk.

"Love?" The carpenter snorted. "Let him put food on the table for his wife and his kid, then he can talk about love. Seriously, what's a philosopher make these days?"

"Never mind what he makes," the lawyer said, "mind who he loves."

"What do you mean? He's a fruit?"

"Worse. Being gay would be an improvement. That's what I hear."

The old man let loose a loud sigh and crinkled onto the next page. The lawyer bent closer to the carpenter. "You know Davis' son?"

"What, Johnny? Isn't he out fighting?"

"I think so. No, the other one, the younger one."

The carpenter shrugged.

"I can't remember either," said the lawyer, "but Adam came to me, furious at Lucius, demanding that he press charges against the old bastard. He was livid, trying to protect his kid; that queer fruit was talking to him, and it sounded like -"

"Hey," the barber pointed his comb. "Watch your mouth. There're kids around."

The lawyer turned to the glass door, where Stephen stood peering in. "Come on in, Steve," the barber said, "no use in standing out

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there all day. How do you think you're going to deliver my paper to me if you're on the other side of the door?"

Stephen came in. "Sorry Mr. Ross," he said, flushed with embarrassment. He hauled up his newspaper sack and held a paper to the barber.

"Does it look like I'm going to read it now?" He smiled. "Over there, so Harris can catch up on today's news one of these days." The boy deposited the paper next to the old man. The boy studied the old man as if he were an exhibit in a museum. "Hey Stephen!"

The boy looked up.

"Don't you have other papers to deliver to industrious shopkeepers?"

The boy nodded and scooted out. The lawyer's eyes followed him out. The glass door slammed loudly.

"No shit," the carpenter said. "That's fucked up. Morris, I think his name is. Wants to be a priest."

"Something like that." The lawyer shook his head.

The barber looked up. "You two are worse than women. Worse than my older sister, and that's pretty bad. I can hardly cut this man's hair over here without hearing some seriously disturbing crap. I think you're just two old gossiping hens over there." He turned to the man in his chair. "Seriously, they look uncomfortable, like they're sitting on eggs or something."

"All I know," the lawyer said, "is that you don't come into a lawyer's office demanding a restraining order — to protect your son — without a good reason."

"That's true," the carpenter said. "If he were to come after my Stacy, I wouldn't even need to stop at a lawyer. No offense."

"None taken."

"Why didn't he go to the cops?" The barber said.

"Habeas corpus, they say. He doesn't have proof. Legally speaking, it's just conjecture."

"So he didn't see anything," the barber said. The lawyer shook his head.

“But still,” the carpenter said, “you get a sense about these things. You know your kids. Fucking pervert.”

“Hey, watch your mouth in my shop,” the barber said. “You want to know something about this Lucius you're talking about? You're too young to know,” he patted the young man on the shoulder, “but ever since he moved here from god-knows-where Russia, people have been telling crazy stories about him. He's killed a man, he's a circus reject, he's a Russian spy. Blah blah blah. One guy even came in here, claimed he was a vampire. Wanted me to point out his house, as if you could miss it. Some young kid probably mixed up in all those stupid vampire movies.”

The carpenter laughed. “Hell, his house looks like Dracula's. I know this guy who used to clean up his yard. Just leaves a check in the mailbox for him, year after year. Never sees him, never says anything, doesn't open a window, nothing. My buddy stopped a few years ago, that's why it's such a mess now.”

“Then I have something very interesting to tell you,” the barber said.

The lawyer crossed his legs. “What, he's a broom-riding witch?”

“Nope, far more interesting. He comes in here, gets his hair cut, just like any other guy.”

“No shit,” the carpenter said.

“Hard to believe.”

“It's true,” the barber said. “Comes in every six months, beginning of September and — that would make it March, I believe — he's like the trains, always on time. He used to come more often, but the last few times I saw him he looked something like a beast.” He cut the young man's hair. “Leaves a decent tip.”

“Isn't he a philosopher?” the young man said.

“That's very true. Not many people know that. I mean, a real philosopher. Those Russians, what with the cold twelve months a year and Stalin killing everyone, they have to be philosophers to survive. Not like the, umm,” the barber twirled his comb mid-air, “bookworms over here.”

“The academics,” the young man said.

“Yeah, the guys who couldn't wipe their asses if you pointed to them. This guy,” he tapped the comb against his shiny scalp, “he's smart.”

“Really,” the carpenter said. “What does that racket bring in? Hell, if Mary could get paid for talking all day, we'd be rolling in it.”

“I know you're joking,” the barber said, “but this guy's into some serious stuff. Very interesting conversations we've had.”

“When's the last time he came in here?” the lawyer said.

“That — that I don't quite remember. He hasn't been in in this year, actually.”

“Yeah,” the carpenter said. “I never saw him around.”

“First of the month, in like the tide. As for his last visit,” he paused from clipping the young man's hair, “I should say he seemed a little off. The guy's a little odd. But I suppose all smart people are a little odd.”

“What did he say?” the lawyer said.

“Well, he was talking about all this philosophical stuff that I didn't quite-” the barber inhaled. “I guess he was talking religious or something.”

The lawyer crossed his arms.

“He said — well, I think he was trying to find God. But the way he put it — how was it — he said something like 'I have God on the run.' Like he was trying to catch Him or something.”

“I think you're talking out your ass,” the carpenter said.

“It's tough to explain,” the barber said. “You know, I never took a philosophy course or anything, but we could really strike up a conversation or two. Just this time, he kept babbling about, I think I remember now, about creating God. Some kind of philosophical thing.”

“God is dead, god is dead,” the lawyer said.

“Like how you might make a house. You build it from the foundation, brick by brick, put in a floor, do the walls. But a philosopher, he uses different tools. Just the way he explained it to me, it sounded like he was trying to build God or something like that.”

"The guy's nuts," the carpenter said.

"Here you are," the barber said to the young man. "Check that out: is that what you wanted?"

"Yeah, it looks good."

"Good. Well gentlemen, I'm glad we had this philosophical-crazy conversation. I believe you're next."

The young man paid. "Keep the extra."

"Thank you."

The carpenter got up and sat in the chair.

"He's found Him," the old man said.

The young man bent to tie his shoes.

"Who's found who?" The barber sprayed the carpenter's head.

"Lucius. He found God."

The young man bent his head. "Really? Good for him," the barber said.

The soft clip of the shears kept a steady pace.

"What do you mean he 'found God,'" the lawyer said.

The old man turned a page. "Just as it sounds. I even saw Him."

"So you mean—" the carpenter started. "Bullshit, Harris, you're pulling our legs."

"Wait," the barber said, "you mean he actually 'found' him? I thought you meant he 'found God,' you know."

The old man folded the paper and placed it aside. "Lucius and I go back many years. He knocked on my door one day, and I could see it in his eyes. He didn't need to say anything — he never mentioned anything about his latest research — and still I knew. A brilliant man like that, what a shame..."

"What do you mean," the carpenter said. "God killed him?"

"Lucius? No," the old man said, "he is alive and well."

"I'm a little puzzled too," the barber said. "You're saying he found God, with all his mystical teachings, and there's something bad about that? All the more credit to the man, I say."

"It's not that," the old man said. "I told you I saw God. Lucius, he had created Him, or rather, found him. That was the flaw in his logic, that somehow God had to be teased out." The young man took

a seat. "I saw Him, just once, and Lucius could conjure Him at a moment's notice. He was beautiful..." the old man shook his head.

A moment passed in the barbershop, and the young man looked out the glass door, arching his neck to catch a glimpse of the overgrown estate. The old man paced a long breath.

"Too beautiful, one could say. Like Narcissus to the water, I could see the poor old philosopher wither in His light. He was trying to talk to Him, figure out some method of communication. That was years ago, I suppose..."

Silence fell in upon the old man. The carpenter muttered something, unable to inflate his words with his own breath.

"Do you hear that?" The barber looked around. "Sounds like something's going on."

Stephen rapped on the glass door. "Mr. Ross," he yelled, "Mr. ____ is dead! Mr. Ross!" He panted. "There's an ambulance up on the hill! Mr. Ross!"

A solemn moment passed. The newspaper boy, not finding the reaction he'd expected, sprinted to the next business over.

"That's spooky," the barber said. "I've got chills."

"Think of all we could have learned," the lawyer said.

The carpenter shook his head. "Too bad."

"How terrible," the old man said, "to have no beautiful surprise."

