

The Sea a Deeper Black

Tim Pratt

"Hey, mister, want to buy a god?"

Charles looked up from the pebbly beach, squinting at the last blush of sunlight over the water. A skinny man in a pale blue jogging suit, wearing a huge black backpack, sat on a rock near the waterline, grinning at him. He was in his late twenties, perhaps, two decades younger than Charles.

Uncertain what to say, Charles stood still for a moment. This wasn't like the city, where you could push past odd people on the sidewalk, ignore them and disappear in the crowd on the next block. There was no one else here on this strip of sand, with water on one side and sea cliffs on the other, so how could Charles pretend he hadn't heard?

He decided to play it straight. "You're selling gods?"

"A god. And it's not really selling. And you don't get the god exactly, I mean, not to keep. Just an experience with the god, an encounter, like a revelation."

Like an hour with a prostitute, Charles thought, and liked it so much he said it aloud: "Like an hour with a prostitute."

The man frowned. "I've been with prostitutes, and I've never yet mistaken one for a god."

Charles shook his head. "No thanks. I'll pass." He started to walk on.

"Wait up!" the man said. "Really, this'll do you good. Once in a lifetime opportunity, I'm serious."

Charles crossed his arms, pleased to find himself annoyed; it was the first discernible emotion he'd experienced in days. He'd come to the beach to lose himself for a while, to look at the place where the water met the sky and be soothed, to count the stones in the sand and see how they outnumbered his troubles. He didn't need this. "What the hell kind of god is for *sale*, anyway?"

"An old, corroded one," the man said. "Mostly forgotten, greatly diminished. But still a god."

Charles snorted.

"Look, you're depressed, right?" the man said. "Life has no meaning, everything's falling apart, and what's worse, it doesn't seem like it's worth the trouble to keep it together. You're in the shadow of the valley of despair, abandoning all hope, am I right?"

"What make you think that? For all you know I'm on vacation."

"Look, I *know* you're a good prospect for this."

"How? How do you know?"

The man sighed and shifted on the rock. "Not that I expect this to improve my credibility... but the dog told me."

"The dog?"

"Over there." He waved toward the water, behind Charles, who turned and saw a very old but still majestic dog with a silver-white coat, standing in the shallows, water lapping at its paws. It gazed at the horizon and the diminishing sun.

"And is the dog the god you're talking about?"

"No, man, don't be silly. The dog used to be a priestess, a *long* time ago, and when I say a long time I don't mean the Sixties, you know? A long time. When her village was invaded, she called on the power of the god to transform her into a swift animal, a dog, so she could escape. But the invaders killed the whole village, all the god's followers died, except for the priestess there. So... it's like, if all the shareholders in a company dump their stock, right, and prices plummet, the company tanks. With all its believers gone, the god lost its power. Mostly, anyway. So the priestess couldn't ever change back. She's been a dog ever since. I met her in Vegas. I was really drunk, on a losing streak, passed out in an alley, some guys were gonna steal my shoes, and she scared them off. I stayed with her after that, and it didn't take me long to figure out she was more than just a dog. She'd been trying to get someone to take her seriously for just about forever, but I was the first one who did."

"You're insane," Charles said. That statement seemed inadequate. "*Very* insane," he amended.

"Ask her yourself!" the man said, and whistled. The dog looked up, then slowly loped over. She was a beautiful animal.

"Ask her what, exactly?" Charles said.

"Whatever! Ask her what you should do!"

This was only getting more surreal, but what of it? Life was pointless and absurd, and you took your laughs where you could. Charles looked at the dog. She looked back at him. "So, pup. Should I run away from your crazy friend here before he decides to eat my face or something?"

"You gotta be patient now," the man said, apparently unoffended. "It's kinda slow."

The dog began scratching in the packed sand with her paw, and after a few strokes, it was clear she was making letters.

Charles stared; suddenly his limbs were like rocks, his belly full of cold seawater, his mind blown open and filled with sky. The dog was *writing*.

In the failing light of dusk, Charles read "BE YOU NOT AFRAID".

"Oh, my," he said.

The man patted the dog's head. "You should've written 'Don't fear'," he said. "More economical." He looked at Charles. "She learned to write ages ago. She always sounds old-fashioned. It took her forever to tell me her story."

The dog lay down, giving the man what might have been an affectionately tolerant look, though it was hard to be sure. Charles was not adept at reading the facial expressions of dogs.

Charles sat on a rock beside the man. Hope was in him, cool and inviting, like a sea wind in summer. Maybe this was just a con man and an amazingly well-trained dog... but he thought not. Funny, how here at the end of the land, with the rational underpinning of his worldview just unraveled before his eyes, Charles felt like he was standing on solid ground for the first time in months. "I'm Charles," he said.

"I'm Jake. The dog's just dog, she says."

"Ah. So. What's the god's name?"

"Dunno. She won't write it down. Says that'd be profane."

"If I accept your offer... what will this revelation entail?" Charles kept looking at the dog. She closed her eyes and thumped her tail against the sand, seemingly content.

Jake laughed. "This shit's deep mystery, you know? I couldn't tell you. I've never seen the god."

"You haven't?" Charles couldn't be sure, in the disappearing light, but Jake's thin face looked sad.

"My soul's too thin," he said. "Shallow, stretched out, narrow, whatever. For a long time I haven't lived for anything but booze and cards and sometimes women. I don't have the inner resources necessary to call the god. But we're working on it." He spoke slowly, but with confidence. "I'm getting better, working out, getting my spirit in shape. We walked here, from Vegas, you know." He said this matter-of-factly, though the idea of such a journey staggered Charles. "That was... intense. But good for me. The trackless wilderness, and all that. It has purifying qualities, but I'm not there yet. I've got a long way to go. But you, she says you've got a deep soul, lots of caves and hollows. You're *copious*, robust, just worn out some, and dark. You've got what it takes to help bring the god."

"She told you all that about me? I haven't been walking on this beach for *that* long."

"We've got like a shorthand worked out. So. You wanna buy a god?"

That was the question, wasn't it? "What does it cost?"

"Everything you've got. Everything you've got *on* you, anyway. Wallet, clothes, jewelry, whatever. The god's old-fashioned, too, and doesn't really get the concept of land ownership and bank accounts and stuff like that, so you can keep those things, the god doesn't care."

""So you want me to strip naked?" Charles frowned.

"See, it's a sacrifice. You give up everything material, and get something spiritual in return. And it's best to go into it naked, stripped of pretense. Sacrifices give the god power, so it can appear, work its wonders, you know?" Jake grinned. "Besides, it's pretty much full dark, now, so I won't be able to see your naked ass."

Charles hesitated, then stood up. Why not do it, and see what happened? What did he have to lose? He'd seriously considered walking into the ocean this evening, letting the riptide take him away, letting all his pains wash into the darkness—free from the pain of the divorce, his children who never called, his bitter, never-ending job at the ad agency. Just... dissolving his consciousness into saltwater. He'd heard drowning was a remarkably pleasant way to die, though he had his doubts; who'd reported on the sensation?

When self-destruction was an attractive option, why hesitate to give your clothes and money to a stranger with a genius dog?

So Charles removed his wallet, watch, and wedding ring (which he'd never stopped wearing, though every time he looked at it, it hurt); slipped off his shoes, stripped off his slacks, shirt, undershirt, boxers, and socks, and piled them on the sand. The air was cool; night came quickly and cold to the coast of central California. Charles tried to remember the last time he'd been outside, under the sky, with no

clothes on; probably not since childhood. His nudity didn't bother him now. Perhaps the obscuring darkness kept him from feeling shy about his middle-aged body; perhaps he was simply beyond that sort of embarrassment.

Jake slung off his backpack. Charles expected him to scoop up the clothes and put them in the pack, but instead Jake removed a fat plastic bottle. "Stand back," he said. He flipped the spout open on the bottle and sprayed the clothes. The sharp tang of lighter fluid filled the air, and Charles backed away, bemused. At least this proved Jake wasn't a con man out to abscond with his wallet.

Jake took a piece of paper out of his bag and, after several tries, set it aflame with a disposable lighter. Before the wind could blow it out, he threw the paper onto Charles's clothes, which ignited instantly. The dog barked, once, happily.

"Here's some rocks," Jake said, holding out a plastic baggie full of dark stones, also taken from his bag. "They're blessed. She blessed them."

Charles took the bag, then sniffed it. He frowned. "Did the blessing involve urination?"

"Don't ask. Let's just say, she's a dog now, she does doggy-type things. Call it marking the god's territory if you want; it's a little bag full of sacred ground."

"What do I do with it?"

"Walk down the beach a ways, find a nice spot, look at the water, toss the stones onto the ground..." He shrugged, his shadow in the firelight mimicking the motion on the sand. "Await revelation. Your sacrifice—giving up all your worldly goods, even if only sorta symbolically—and your need should be enough to bring the god. It'll draw strength from you. I wish I coulda done it... but I'm spiritually anemic. Not deep enough for that sort of thing yet." He shrugged.

Charles took the bag of stones, feeling faintly ridiculous, but also invigorated. The smoke from his burning clothes smelled surprisingly good, and he was glad he wore natural fibers. He walked a bit, until he found a nice place where the cliffs swooped in toward the water, and he sat in the shadow of the rock, looking at the ocean. Night was here in full now, and the sea was just a deeper black against the sky, untouched by moonlight, the stars clear and high.

He opened the baggie and shook out the stones. They fell to the sand with a series of quiet but distinct thumps.

Revelation. What would it be? How would it help him, reaffirm him, give him hope again?

Except he realized he already had hope. Just meeting Jake, and the dog, and hearing about the god, about Jake's struggle to make his soul stronger... that gave Charles hope, engaged his emotions in a way that nothing had for months. Maybe years, to be honest.

The wind picked up on the water, and a strange light grew in the water. Charles had gone to the Caribbean on his honeymoon, a long time ago, and seen phosphorescent fish; their eerie beauty had enchanted him. This was the same, only this light was vaster than any fish or school of fish; perhaps a pod of glowing whales could be this bright. Or a submerged god.

The dog ran into the water, splashing, streaking for the light, and Charles stood up to watch it. He glanced to his left, and saw Jake far off standing by the fire, watching the water, dancing in the sand. Charles grinned, looking at the sea again, at the imminence of the divine.

A figure walked from the waves, streaming water from long hair. It was a woman, and Charles looked,

dumbfounded; Jake hadn't said it was a *goddess*.

But where was the dog?

The woman approached him, but the glow in the water remained. It began to drift slowly to the left, in the direction of Jake and the fire.

The woman stood facing Charles, naked. She was shorter than him, her hair white though she seemed young, her skin and eyes dark. "Hello," she said.

"You're not the god," Charles said, certain, but strangely not disappointed.

"I am the god's servant. Its priestess." She spread her hands. "Your sacrifice gave the god strength, and transformed me. I thank you."

"I'm... glad to help. But there was supposed to be a revelation..." He still wasn't disappointed. Her skin gleamed. He remembered how the first stirrings of love felt, like wings opening, like a long fall without fear of hitting bottom.

"The god considered your problems, and found it had nothing to say. You don't need the god, don't need to have your world broken apart and remade anew, don't need such a devotion to fuel your life. You... the god says you are lonely, and full of regret, and that if those things can be solved, you will be as healed as ever you can be."

Charles shook his head. "Just lonely? Is that it?"

"Don't say 'just'. Lonely is enough. I have been lonely for a long time, before Jake, and even with him, there is a deeper loneliness that cannot be touched."

Charles nodded slowly, then looked beyond her, to the sea. "Is the god going to Jake, now?"

"Yes. Jake will go into the water, and swim in the god's light. Jake's soul is not really so small; he has simply sealed the openings, made his soul into a tiny room, full of needless clamorings. I have been chipping away at those walls, but the god will knock them down in a rush, and fill Jake with light and meaning. You have no such problem. Your soul is deep already; only full of empty places, cold places, that need to see the sun."

"I don't know how to do that," he said. "If I did, I wouldn't be here, now, naked on the beach." Charles shivered and wrapped his arms around himself. "And it's getting colder."

"Then let me help you be warm," she said, and opened her arms.

—*With thanks to Greg van Eekhout*