

The Room of Small Gods

Paula V. Smith

They have carried his bed downstairs to the study where he can see the garden as he dies, with you, his collection of small gods, around him.

Small gods, you hear the rustle of Anna's long skirts. She enters to administer pain medicine. Three times during each night she does this. Her father refuses a stronger medicine that would make him less alert and impede his work. Doctor Freud is a patient now. His light-colored eyes flicker. He doesn't try to speak.

Sand blows across a desert. You are older than the doctor, very old. Rock caves slowly erode. A mountain stands where it stands.

What dangers they risked to bring you, his antiquities, out safely—smuggled in suitcases, smothered in packing crates. The doctor didn't want to go. Until Anna was placed briefly under arrest, and influential people had to intervene, he would not agree to the family's flight. He said he would not abandon ship. But a friend, after Austria's annexation, suggested to him that the ship exists no longer.

Does he escape into the past, into all of you, as a refuge? You are small figures, and there are hundreds of you, standing in rows, arranged in a semi-circle around him. You are made of terracotta and wood, ivory and bronze. The doctor's grown children made an effort to arrange you in the same places where you stood in his old consulting rooms, back in Vienna. As a retinue, they offered you, not as a crowd.

Your bodies are naked, or in robes that outline the human form. Some of you wear a headdress: plumed helmet, bishop's mitre, pointed cap, or the moon resting between curved horns. Some have an animal's head—a bird, a cat—on a human torso. Some of you are winged, or lack limbs, sit astride horses, or pose in contorted ways. With faces that span from glee to agony, you gathered from all corners of the earth. Now, small gods, you are part of the doctor's collection of antiquities. You stand between objects of carved jade and wrought metal, obelisks engraved with hieroglyphs, and smaller items like keys, weapons, phallic amulets, and knives.

He assembled a library to interpret you. You have no voice to explain what you are. The bookshelves stand behind you, here in the study. Tomes of archaeology, myth, legend, and history—he turned pages, wanting to understand you, generating myths of the mind.

Eleven years ago, retaining a new physician, he set the condition that he would not be made to suffer unnecessarily at the end. Time comes when an overdose of morphine can ensure a peaceful end. His physician agreed to these terms.

In 1938, London suffered its coldest winter in eight years. You watched snow fall outside, but made of hard substances, you did not feel the room grow cold when the heating system faltered and failed. The house has large windows, through which cold draughts can pour. "Of course, we preferred our apartment in Vienna," Anna said without tact to a recent visitor, one of their hosts in this new country, England.

He continued seeing patients until a few weeks ago. He asks them to talk, say whatever comes into their heads. The unrelated fragments will form a pattern, he promises. They must not prepare for their sessions, or resolve what to explore. Notes, especially, are discouraged.

When one stands all day in a consulting room, one is in a good position to overhear secrets. You hear the same few secrets, admittedly, spoken over and over by different tongues, but secrets still.

He used to gesture crudely with his elbow to summon patients from the waiting room or send them away at the end of a session. To one patient this motion looked like the flap of a bony bird's wing. When he spoke, the doctor made remarks unrelated to the analysis. He took a chair beyond the view of his patients. He allowed their words to fill the room as if they were alone. From the corner where he sat concealed, there wafted the sweet and heavy smoke of his cigar.

A recent biopsy revealed malignant cancer, too near the eye socket to make further surgery feasible, even if he would consent. He wrote to a friend: "It is really a case of the carcinoma once again trying to put itself in my place."

Doctor Freud takes patients into his confidence by showing his treasures. The relish in a new acquisition, his manner of pointing out your rarest and most special features, invariably disarms them. He seems to tell them, "I will share with you a remarkable journey. We will discover what has been buried. We will unearth old sites of damage, reassemble the fragments of delicate things."

Would it have been better to leave you in the ground? It seems wasteful for such works of art to stay packed forever with insensate dirt. But could you have remained near the site of your excavation, as a proud treasure of the local people, rather than coming to play the role of foreign plunder—of tribute?

While the patient was talking, sometimes his hand would reach out and take one of you from your place on his desk. You were selected to embody a truth in the patient's mind, or to tell a story describing an important scene in his or her life. You have no voice to explain what you are. So the doctor reads you aloud,

like a message from a distant place. Sometimes the distant place is the patient, propped against the stiff pillows of the analyst's couch. The source may deny it has sent the message the doctor finds. Doctor Freud hands you to the patient. You and the patient stare mutely into each other's eyes.

A diary lies on the desk beside you, written in Gothic script. Fortunately it can be read upside down. You watched him enter first the deliberate words, "Passed over for the Nobel Prize." The last phrase was "war panic." From your position here, you could see him record the dates when his works were translated into Swedish and Japanese. Over the years, the doctor records the deaths of professional rivals, relatives, old schoolmates, and colleagues. He carefully draws a small sign of the cross beside each of their names.

When Doctor Freud brought his family to London, four of his sisters did not come with them. He left his sisters money enough to live on. Surely the Gestapo would not arrest four elderly ladies living quietly in Vienna, causing trouble to no one.

You heard what he said to his private physician last night. He sees no sense in undergoing further torture. When one can no longer work, the reason to live recedes.

Once a girl came with her parents for a visit—no relation this time, though many of his grandchildren, too, visited over the years. The girl wore her hair in two neat braids behind her ears. She was holding a doll. Her left eye was slightly larger than the right. She wore a dress with a white collar, Mary-Jane shoes with knee socks. "So kind," the doctor said when the girl silently handed him her doll. "I thank you for your kindness." The circle of grown-ups laughed, as grown-ups do when a child makes a serious gesture. The girl looked steadily at Doctor Freud. After all, she was thinking, he has his own collection of dolls.

To you, figures impervious to disease, how must it look when a man physically disintegrates? His jaw rots, gives off a smell of death while he still lives. Even the family dog shrinks away from his room in the last days.

Morphine has done its work. The doctor can hear and see nothing now. He will not see or hear when his sisters are taken to the camps, to provide nice apartments for the Gestapo. He senses, without seeing or hearing, that Anna will bear the flame for him and their work. His body breathes, but no longer absorbs information. Sun casts a pattern on the wall of the London room.

Long before coming here, you must have watched people die—not all departing as willingly as this one. In the Egyptian tombs, you witnessed what is said to assume a shape not unlike yourselves: batlike, winged, with a human face. Haven't you seen it fly out of the darkness of the body's mouth, to rejoin the light? ☞