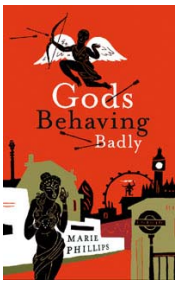
RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

GODS BEHAVING BADLY
by Marie Phillips



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WARNING: This extract contains explicit language and content

One

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 passer-by, 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 recognised 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.'

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‘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 offence.’

‘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.’

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‘Why not?’ said the tree.

The tree sounded so despondent that Artemis 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 was pulling 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.’

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‘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 mobile 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. ‘OK.’ 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 any more. 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 vaporised 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.

Two

There was a time, thought Apollo, thrusting rhythmically, when sneaking an illicit bathroom shag with Aphrodite would have been exciting. He scrutinised her as she leant away from him against the peeling back wall, one dainty foot up on the stained toilet cistern, her toenail-polish the only paint in here that was perfectly applied. She was exquisite. He couldn’t deny that. Simply the most beautiful sort-of woman ever to have sort-of lived, though Helen of the ship-launching face had given her a run for her money. Eyes (thrust), hair (thrust), mouth (thrust), skin
(thrust), breasts (thrust), legs (thrust) – he could not fault an inch of her. Though this was hardly an achievement on her part. She was the goddess of beauty after all. But still, thought Apollo, sublime as she was, did she have to look so . . . well . . . bored? True, Apollo was so bored with Aphrodite that he could almost scream. His pride, however, demanded that she did not feel the same way.

‘Right, I’m turning around,’ announced Aphrodite.

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‘OK,’ said Apollo. At least he wouldn’t have to look at that passively indifferent face any longer.

Aphrodite detached herself from him and turned so that she was facing the wall. She arched her back, pointed the flawless ivory spheres of her buttocks at her nephew, and supported herself against the wall with her slender, elegant hands. Apollo reengaged himself and resumed thrusting. Looking down at the back of her head, her glossy black hair curling down over the alabaster slope of her shoulders, he could almost imagine that he was screwing Catherine Zeta Jones. He wondered whether he could persuade Aphrodite to speak to him in Welsh. Just for
the novelty. Anything for some novelty.

Apollo wanted out. Out of Aphrodite, out of this bathroom, out of this house, and out of this life. He was sick of London. The family had moved there in 1665, when the plague was keeping property prices rock bottom, and just before the destruction of the Great Fire sent them spiralling upwards again. This had been a typically canny piece of financial engineering by his sister Athena, the goddess of wisdom. At the time, though, he had foreseen that they would never actually be able to sell the house that they had bought so craftily, and he had tried to warn the rest of the family, but they hadn’t listened. It was true that he had been known to lie about his predictions just to get his
own way, and everyone knew that he didn’t want to move to London in the first place, but even so, this time he had been right, and he’d known it from the start. It was putting the property in Zeus’s name: that had been the problem. But even he could not have foreseen what would happen to Zeus.

‘I was thinking of redecorating my room,’ said Aphrodite, interrupting his thoughts.

‘Again?’ said Apollo.

‘I could do with a change,’ said Aphrodite. ‘I’m sure Heppy won’t mind.’

Heppy was Hephaestus, god of smiths and Aphrodite’s husband, as hideous as she was beautiful. Treated with contempt by the rest of the family, he nevertheless did all the refurbishment and repairs in the house. As they had been living in the same place for over three hundred years, that was a lot of refurbishment and repairs. Even so, in Apollo’s opinion, he could have done with spending more time on things like patching up this damp, crumbling, leaking bathroom, which would be in the interests of the entire household, and less on adding further unnecessary levels of luxury to their bedroom every time Aphrodite had one of her increasingly frequent whims.

‘So what are you going to do this time?’ he asked her. ‘More gold leaf ? Hang some diamonds off the chandelier? Get rid of the roses at last?’

Aphrodite looked sharply at him over her shoulder. Even her glare was calculated to be sexy.

‘There’s nothing wrong with roses,’ she snapped. ‘No, I just thought I would change them from red to pink again.’ She turned back to the wall, picked up a passing cockroach and crushed it between her thumb and forefinger. ‘Do that more slowly,’ she said.

Apollo obediently changed pace. He thought of thousands and thousands of years of living with Aphrodite, thousands gone, and thousands yet to come – and that was the best-case scenario. And she never changed. Never, ever. But sex with Aphrodite was better than no sex at all. And none of the other gods would sleep with him. If only he could get a decent mortal

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lover, someone like one of his old lovers in Greece or Rome, who worshipped him and everything that he did . . . but he refused to let his thoughts stray in that direction. It was too depressing. Things had all been so much easier in the years that they were now obliged to refer to as BC.

There was a knock at the door, a distinctive grumbling thumping like the falling of distant bombs. It could only be Ares, god of war: Apollo's half-brother, roommate, and, gallingly, Aphrodite's favourite lover. Apollo paused mid-thrust.

'Can you get a move on in there?' came Ares' voice. 'I've got a Start the War demo this morning, and I need a shave.'

'Bugger off,' shouted Apollo, resuming his activity. 'I got here first, you'll just have to wait.'

'Oh, let him in,' drawled Aphrodite from beneath him. 'He can join us. It'll be fun.'

'Didn't you hear him?' said Apollo. 'He's going out. He doesn't have time for you.'

'Everybody has time for me,' said Aphrodite.

This was almost certainly true. But Apollo felt no need to be sexually outclassed by his brother.

'This bathroom is first come, first served,' said Apollo primly.

'If Ares doesn't like it he can get Hephaestus to build another one. It would be about bloody time that he did. And your frigging new wallpaper can just wait.'

'OK, I'm done now.' Aphrodite orgasmed quickly and tidily, and removed herself from Apollo.

'I hadn't finished!' protested Apollo.

'Well, you should have been nicer to me then.'

Aphrodite stepped over to the cracked enamel bath and switched the shower attachment on, as Apollo watched his tumescence disappear. He limped over to the sink and splashed cold water onto his genitals. Aphrodite had no respect for him. Glancing at himself in the mouldy mirror above the basin, he wondered whether she might think more of him if he had a tattoo.

'I don't believe it,' said Aphrodite.

'I was just thinking about it,' said Apollo. 'I wasn't actually going to . . .'

Aphrodite spoke over him. 'There's no hot water. Again!'

She marched over to the door and opened it, sticking her head out into the cold, empty stairwell. 'Who used up all the hot water?' she yelled. There was no reply. She pulled her head back in and slammed the door.

'I hate this family,' she said.

'The feeling is mutual,' said Apollo.

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Aphrodite spun around. Apollo was expecting her to bite his head off – possibly literally – but instead, unexpectedly, she had one of her best smiles on her face, the one that looked like dry land to a drowning man, like water in the desert, the one she saved for only the most special of occasions, or, rarer yet, for times when she was genuinely happy. It had been perfected over the centuries to be irresistible. She wants something, thought Apollo, slowly and numbly, but the words refused to take meaning in his head.

'Apollo darling,' said Aphrodite, her eyes suddenly shining with what Apollo couldn't help but think must surely be unfeigned warmth, 'seeing as we've just had such a lovely time together, I don't suppose you could just use a teensy bit of your power to heat up a tiny little bit of water for me? Just enough for a quick, quick shower. You've made me so . . .' and she trailed a delicate finger down between her breasts, '. . . sweaty.'

Apollo blinked twice and swallowed. He told his penis sternly to stay where it was. He waited until he was quite sure that his body and mouth would obey his brain, and then he said, with all the nonchalance he could muster, 'Sorry, but no.'

'Please, darling,' said Aphrodite. 'I'd do it myself, but you've worn me out. You could join me if you like . . .' She stepped closer to him, gazing up at him from beneath the undulating black of her lashes.

Apollo looked down at the ground. 'The answer is still no,' he forced himself to say. 'If you want hot water, use your own power.'

'Suit your fucking self,' said Aphrodite, dropping the smile like a cold, dead fish, and she stepped beneath the icy beam of the shower, pulling the curtain shut behind her with the sharp rattle of a snake.

It was the wrong decision and Apollo knew it. According to everything he'd heard about the place, hell had no fury like Aphrodite scorned. Improbably, though, he felt slightly cheered. Her revenge would be swift and no doubt deadly, but at least it would pass the time.

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