

## Excerpts from *American Gods*

NOTES

### Mr. Nancy

He was looking at Mr. Nancy, an old black man with a pencil mustache, in his check sports jacket and his lemon-yellow gloves, riding a carousel lion as it rose and lowered, high in the air; and, at the same time, in the same place, he saw a jeweled spider as high as a horse, its eyes an emerald nebula, strutting, staring down at him; and simultaneously he was looking at an extremely tall man with teak-colored skin and three sets of arms, wearing a flowing ostrich-feather headdress, his face painted with red stripes, riding an irritated golden lion, two of his six hands holding tightly onto the beast's mane; and he was also seeing a young black boy, dressed in rags, his left foot swollen and crawling with blackflies; and last of all, and behind all these things, Shadow was looking at a tiny brown spider, hiding under a withered ocher leaf.

### Shadow's Death

"Hello." He said, turning to her face.

She had brown hair and brown skin and her eyes were the deep golden-amber of good honey. Her pupils were vertical slits. "Do I know you?" he asked, puzzled.

"Intimately," she said, and she smiled. "I used to sleep on your bed. And my people have been keeping their eyes on you, for me." She turned to the path ahead of him, pointed to the three ways he could go. "Okay," she said. "One way will make you wise. One way will make you whole. And one way will kill you."

"I'm already dead, I think," said Shadow. "I died on the tree."

She made a **moue**. "There's dead," she said, "and there's dead, and there's dead. It's a relative thing." Then she smiled again. "I could make a joke about that, you know. Something about dead relatives."

**moue:** pout

"No," said Shadow. "It's okay."

"So," she said. "Which way do you want to go?"

"I don't know," he admitted.

She tipped her head to one side, a perfect feline gesture. Suddenly, Shadow remembered the claw marks on his shoulder. He felt himself beginning to blush. "If you trust me," said Bast, "I can chose for you."

"I trust you," he said without hesitation.

"Do you want to know what it's going to cost you?"

"I've already lost my name," he told her.

"Names come and names go. Was it worth it?"

"Yes. Maybe. It wasn't easy. As revelations go, it was kind of personal."

"All revelations are personal," she said. "That's why all revelations are suspect."

"I don't understand."

"No," she said, "you don't. I'll take your heart. We'll need it later," and she reached her hand deep inside his chest, and she pulled it out with something ruby and pulsing held between her sharp fingernails. It was the color of pigeon's blood, and it was made of pure light. Rhythmically it expanded and contracted.

She closed her hand, and it was gone.

"Take the middle way," she said.

Shadow nodded, and walked on.

The path was becoming slippery now. There was ice on the rock. The moon above him glittered through the ice crystals in the air: There was a ring about the moon, a moonbow, diffusing the light. It was beautiful, but it made walking harder. The path was unreliable.

He reached a place where the path divided.

He looked at the first path with a feeling of recognition. It opened into a vast chamber, or a set of chambers, like a dark museum. He knew it already. He could hear the long echoes of tiny noises. He could hear the noise the dust makes as it settles.

It was the place he had dreamed of, that first night that Laura had come to him, in that motel long ago; the endless memorial hall to the gods that were forgotten, and the ones whose very existence had been lost.

He took a step backward.

He walked to the path on the far side, and looked ahead. There was a Disneyland quality to the corridor: black Plexiglas walls with lights

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set into them. The colored lights blinked and flashed in an illusion of order, for no particular reason, like the console lights on a television starship.

He could here something there as well: a deep vibrating bass drone, which Shadow could feel in the pit of his stomach.

He stopped and looked around. Neither way seemed right. Not any longer. He was done with paths. The middle way, the way the cat-woman had told him to walk, that was his way. He moved towards it.

The moon above him was beginning to fade; the edge of it was pinking and going into eclipse. The path was framed by a huge doorway.

Shadow walked through the arch, in darkness. The air was warm and it smelled of wet dust, like a city street after the summer's first rain.

He was not afraid.

Not anymore. Fear had died on the tree, as Shadow had died. There was no fear left, no hatred, no pain. Nothing had left but essence.

Something big splashed, quietly, in the distance, and the splash echoed in the vastness. He squinted, but could see nothing. It was too dark. And then, from the direction of the splashes, a ghost-light glimmered and the world took form: he was in a cavern, and in front of him, mirror smooth, was water.

The splashing noises came closer and the light became brighter, and Shadow waited on the shore. Soon enough a low, flat boat came into sight, a flickering white lantern burning on its raised prow, another reflected in the glassy black water several feet beneath it. The boat was being poled by a tall figure, and the splashing noise Shadow had heard was the sound of the pole being lifted and moved as it pushed the craft across the waters of the underground lake.

"Hello there!" called Shadow. Echoes of his words suddenly surrounded him; he could imagine that a whole chorus of people were welcoming him and calling to him and each of them had his voice.

The person poling the boat made no reply.

The boat's pilot was tall and very thin. He—if he was a he—wore an unadorned white robe, and the pale head that topped it was so utterly inhuman that Shadow assumed it had to be a mask of some

sort: it was a bird's head, small on a long neck, its beak long and high. Shadow was certain he had seen it before, this ghostly, birdlike figure. He grasped at the memory and then, disappointed, realized that he was picturing the clockwork penny-in-the-slot machine in the House on the Rock and the pale, birdlike, half-glimpsed figure that glided out from behind the crypt for the drunkard's soul.

Water dripped and echoed from the pole and the prow, and the ship's wake rippled over the glassy waters. The boat was made of reeds, bound and tied.

The boat came close to the shore. The pilot leaned on its pole. Its head turned slowly, until it was facing Shadow. "Hello," it said, without moving its long beak. The voice was male, and, like everything else in Shadow's afterlife so far, familiar. "Come on board. You'll get your feet wet, I'm afraid, but there is not a thing that can be done about that. These are old boats and if I come in closer I could rip out the bottom."

Shadow took off his shoes and stepped out into the water. It came halfway up his calves, and was, after the initial shock of wetness, surprisingly warm. He reached the boat and the pilot put down a hand and pulled him aboard. The reed boat rocked a little, and water splashed over the low sides of it, and then it steadied.

The pilot poled away from the shore. Shadow stood there and watched, his pant legs dripping.

"I know you," he said to the creature at the prow.

"You do indeed," said the boatman. The oil lamp that hung in the front of the boat burned more fitfully, and the smoke from the lamp made Shadow cough. "You worked for me. I'm afraid we had to inter Lila Goodchild without you." The voice was fussy and precise.

The smoke stung Shadow's eyes. He wiped the tears away with his hand, and, through the smoke he thought he saw a tall man in a suit, with gold-rimmed spectacles. The smoke cleared and the boatman was once more a half-human creature with the head of a river bird.

"Mister Ibis?"

"Good to see you, said the creature, with Mr. Ibis's voice. "Do you know what a psychopomp is?"

Shadow thought he knew the word, but it had been a long time. He shook his head.

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"It's a fancy term for an escort," said Mr. Ibis. "We all have so many functions, so many ways of existing. In my own vision of myself, I am a scholar who lives quietly, and pens his little tales, and dreams of a past that may or may not ever have existed. And that is true, as far as it goes. But I am also, in one of my capacities, like so many of the people you have chosen to associate with, a psychopomp. I escort the living to the world of the dead."

"I thought this was the world of the dead," Shadow said.

"No. Not *per se*. It's more of a preliminary."

The boat slipped and slid across the mirror-surface of the underground pool. And then Mr. Ibis said, without moving its beak, "You talk about the living and the dead as if they were two mutually exclusive categories. As if you cannot have a river that is also a road, or a song that is also a color."

"You can't," said Shadow. "Can you?" the echo's whispered his words back at him from across the pool.

"What you have to remember is that life and death are really two sides of the same coin. Like the heads and tails of a quarter."

"And if I had a double-headed quarter?"

"You don't."

Shadow had a **frisson**, then, as they crossed the dark water. He imagined that he could see the faces of children staring up at him reproachfully from beneath the water's glassy surface: their faces were waterlogged and softened, their blind eyes clouded. There was no wind in that underground cavern to disturb the black surface of the lake. "So I'm dead," said Shadow. He was getting used to the idea. "Or I'm going to be dead."

**frisson:**  
shudder of  
fright

"We are on the way to the Hall of the Dead. I requested that I be the one to come for you."

"Why?"

"You were a hard worker. Why not?"

"Because..." Shadow marshaled his thoughts. "Because I never believed in you. Because I don't know much about Egyptian mythology. Because I didn't expect this. What happened to Saint Peter and the Pearly Gates?"

The long-beaked white head shook from side to side, gravely. "It doesn't matter that you didn't believe in us," said Mr. Ibis. "We believed in you."

The Boat touched bottom, Mr. Ibis stepped off the side, into the pool, and told Shadow to do the same. Mr. Ibis took a line from the prow of the boat, and passed Shadow the lantern to carry. It was in the shape of a crescent moon. They walked ashore, and Mr. Ibis tied the boat to a metal ring set in the rock floor. Then he took the lamp from Shadow and walked swiftly forward, holding the lamp high as he walked, throwing vast shadows across the rock floor and high rock walls.

"Are you scared?" asked Mr. Ibis.

"Not really."

"Well, try to cultivate the emotions of true spiritual terror, as we walk. They are the appropriate feelings for the situation at hand."

Shadow was not scared. He was interested and apprehensive, but no more. He was not scared of the shifting darkness, nor of being dead, nor even of the dog-headed creature the size of a grain silo who stared at them as they approached. It growled, deep in its throat, and Shadow felt his neck hairs prickle.

"Shadow," it said. "Now is the time of judgment."

Shadow looked up at the creature. "Mr. Jacquel?" he said.

The hands of Anubis came down, huge dark hands, and they picked Shadow up and brought him close.

The jackal head examined him with bright and glittering eyes; examined him dispassionately as Mr. Jacquel had examined the dead girl on the slab. Shadow knew that all his faults, all his feelings, all his weaknesses were being taken out and weighed and measured; that he was in some way, being dissected, and sliced, and tasted.

We do not always remember things that do no credit to us. We justify them, cover them in bright lies or with the thick dust of forgetfulness. All of the things that Shadow had done in his life of which he was not proud, all the things he wished he had done otherwise or left undone, came at him then in a swirling storm of guilt and regret and shame, and he had nowhere to hide from them. He was as naked and as open as a corpse on a table, and dark Anubis the jackal god was his protector and prosecutor and his persecutor.

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"Please," said Shadow. "Please stop."

But the examination did not stop. Every lie he had ever told, every object he had ever stolen, every hurt he had inflicted on another person, all the tiny lies and little murders that make up the day, each of these things and more were extracted and held up to the light by the jackal-headed judge of the dead.

Shadow began to weep, painfully, in the palm of the dark god's hand. He was a tiny child again, as helpless and as powerless as he had ever been.

And then, without warning, it was over. Shadow panted, and sobbed, and snot streamed from his nose; he still felt helpless, but the hands placed him, carefully, almost tenderly, on the rock floor.

"Who has his heart?" growled Anubis.

"I do," purred a woman's voice. Shadow looked up. Bast was standing there beside the thing that was no longer Mr. Ibis, and she held Shadow's heart in her right hand. It lit her face with a ruby light.

"Give it to me," said Thoth, the Ibis headed god, and he took the heart in his hands, which were not human hands, and he glided forward.

Anubis placed a pair of golden scales in front of him.

So is this where we find out what I get?" whispered Shadow to Bast. "Heaven? Hell? Purgatory?"

"If the feather balances," she said, "you get to choose your own destination."

"And if not?"

She shrugged, as if the subject made her uncomfortable. Then she said, "Then we feed your heart and your soul to Ammet, the Eater of Souls..."

"Maybe," he said. Maybe I can get some sort of happy ending."

"Not only are there no happy endings," she told him, "there aren't even endings."

On one of the pans of the scales, carefully, reverently, Anubis placed a feather.

Anubis put Shadow's heart on the other pan of the scales.

Something moved in the shadows under the scale, something it made Shadow uncomfortable to examine too closely.

It was a heavy feather, but Shadow had a heavy heart, and the scales tipped worryingly.

But they balanced, in the end, and the creature in the shadows sulked away, unsatisfied.

"So that's that," said Bast wistfully. "Just another skull for the pile. It's a pity. I hoped that you would do some good, in the current troubles. It's like watching a slow-motion car crash and being powerless to prevent it."

"You won't be there?"

She shook her head. "I don't like other people picking my battles for me," she said.

There was silence then, in the vast hall of death, where it echoed of water and the dark.

Shadow said, "So now I get to choose where I go next?"

"Choose," said Thoth. "Or we can choose for you."

"No," said Shadow. "It's okay. It's my choice."

"Well?" roared Anubis.

"I want to rest now," said Shadow. "That's what I want. I want nothing. No heaven, no hell, no anything. Just let it end."

"You're certain?" asked Thoth.

"Yes," said Shadow.

Mr. Jacquel opened the last door for Shadow, and behind that door was nothing. Not darkness. Not even oblivion. Only nothing.

Shadow accepted it, completely and without reservation, and he walked through the door into nothing with a strange and fierce joy.

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