

# Semele

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a novel

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# ΠΡΟΛΟΓΟΣ

## *Prologue*

*So he's knocked up another nymphet and his wife is really steamed?*

*Disguises herself as the Avon lady. Rings the girl's bell—all of a sudden they're gossipy girlfriends in the powder room, trying on blushes.*

*“You're dating who? How can you be sure? What if he's lying to you to get into your pants?”*

*That lights the fuse of doubt, for sure. Now the girl wants every treat in her lover's goodie bag.*

*Priming the charge by getting him loaded, she slinks into the pink baby doll that she knows drives him crazy.*

*“Zeusey,” she pouts, calling out from the boudoir. “You promised. Come to me in all your glory.”*

*What's with these gods? the poet decries. Were they born yesterday?*

*The king of them all really doesn't want to fry her, so he searches the attic for the oldest thunderbolts he can find and stuffs them into his bathrobe pockets.*

*He shuffles off to her bed with a heavy heart.*

*They set an Olympic record for coitus eruptus.*

*The results are in. Semele is toast; Zeus is sad; Hera is smirking in victory.*

The Roman poet Ovid pitching his publisher, VII AD

Meanwhile, ninety-eight generations later ...

A  
*THE JUDGMENT OF*  
*BRAVERMAN*

# 1 .

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She had been raised to avoid powerful men. There had been a bad family history. As it grew clear to all what a profoundly beautiful woman she would become, her parents took special care, training her to avoid potentially tragic situations. Sadly, in the real world, their lessons were academic. Besides power, there is little else that powerful men crave more than a beautiful girl who is trying to avoid them.

Her beauty was a constant annoyance. On good days, she simply hated it. On others, it drove her to hide in her bedroom. It wasn't supposed to be like that here. When she ran away, she picked the hugest, most impersonal megalopolis that she could find in Frommer's *Anonymity on \$5 a Day*. She wanted to become a tiny fish in a big pond. She thought, or at least hoped, that here she would be invisible inside the roiling crowd that clogged the sidewalks at every hour of the day and night. Unfortunately, wishing it doesn't make it so.

She realized that she was in for more of the same the moment she raised her hand to hail her first taxi. Within seconds, three cabs—two yellow Checkers and one Crown Vic—slammed into each other on the street just inches from her toes, accompanied by the sound of twisting metal and plumes of steam as all three radiators burst.

This particular morning, as she hurried down Fifth Avenue, she was anxious. She was always nervous meeting new people, but happy to be back in her own clothes again. She was never comfortable wearing anything that cost more than a month's rent. She only did that to please others.

Clutching a white square of paper in her hand, she stared with determination straight ahead like a native urbanite. There was no need to learn how to avoid eye contact. She had learned that years ago when her body

began to take shape. Unfortunately, she had not as yet perfected the ability of her peripheral vision to see everything in front of her. She lost critical seconds in which to react when the handsome young man, with eyes as wide as saucers and mouth agape, walked straight into her.

Both were young and agile, so little damage was done. They jumped apart at first contact. None of the gorgeous hunk's coffee had spilled onto Semele's clothes. The white square of paper, however, was drenched. She almost cried as she watched the ink wash away, taking a name and a company along with it, leaving her with nothing but a phone number. It was all too horrible. If she had known that running away was so fraught with peril, she would have picked a kinder and more familiar Greek island instead of Manhattan.

As the young man grasped for words, Semele recognized the expression of someone who has temporarily forgotten how to speak. She was used to that look and actually preferred it to some others with which she was equally familiar.

## 2.

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Twenty blocks to the north, a young man was stuck in a tunnel on the No. 7 train. He was good-looking enough but did not have Semele's handicap. No one gawked at him, which was fine with him. He was aware that eye contact was taboo in this environment. So he scanned the ads along the sides of the subway car, weighing his reading choices: "Torn Earlobes" or "Dr. Hemorrhoid"?

*There but for the grace of God go I*, Michael thought.

He had no pretensions. The wall of nasty placards offering relief for the most disgusting bodily malfunctions was only nominally inferior to what he cranked out all day. He was a junior copywriter at the hot ad agency du jour. The only difference between the shop that created the "Fixing Your Scalp Cake" ad over the subway map and his was the rent. Michael worked on Fifth Avenue in an opulent temple dedicated to the deification of style over substance.

The train had been stalled for nearly half an hour. Through discreet glances he had learned much about his fellow passengers. The demographic of the car definitely slanted toward the theatrical that morning. The big hulk in the denim overalls leaning against the door was reading *Respect for Acting*, by Uta Hagen. The wispy blonde in the seat in front of Michael was memorizing lines for *A Doll's House*. He was envious of her for being in a production, even if it was Ibsen. But he was bitterly jealous of the bearded fellow sitting next to her. He was lost to the world around him as he added and changed lines on a well-marked-up page of dialogue.

Michael loved the theater. In graduate school, his uncanny analysis of structure and technique impressed his professors. He could spot a flaw or a weakness in a script a full act before it entered stage left. His talent was also a great handicap. Besides earning him the displeasure of every playwright he

critiqued, it made it impossible for him to start, let alone finish, writing a play of his own.

Too aware of the innumerable pitfalls awaiting future scenes, his hands thus crippled were incapable of writing even "At Rise." As a result, he got his master's degree in dramaturgy, the study of plays that nobody ever went to even when they were new.

The bearded guy leaned across the doorway and swapped scripted pages with a lanky fellow in a fatigue jacket. That simple act of collaboration made Michael's heart sink lower.

He looked around and noticed that the entire car was a beehive of activity. Everyone was reading or writing or drawing or singing silently to a musical score. He was the only one who was just standing there waiting to get to a job that he did not enjoy. It was a diabolical morning commute penned by Sartre.

To keep himself from sliding deeper into the bottomless pit of personal despair and failure, Michael looked up again at the adverts and lost himself in the even more tragic realm of Genital Warts.

### 3.

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Michael was so late to work that, as he walked into the lobby, he was relieved to see that everyone else was too. He saw most of his fellow employees drifting around the elevator bank like an incoming tide. There was an ebb and flow of the crowd, even an eddy or two. The largest whirlpool was in front of the building directory. Michael was sucked along into it. That was when he saw her. He had never seen anyone so stunning. He walked right up to her. It wasn't a bold act so much as spontaneous.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"Can you?" she replied, turning slowly to face him.

When her eyes looked up into his, helping her was all that Michael wanted to do for the rest of his life.

"Are you looking for someone?"

"Yes," she answered as she glanced down at a slip of paper.

"Who?"

"Him," she said wistfully, then showed him a phone number that he did not recognize on a soaked and blurred piece of paper.

"Do you know what company it is?"

"No," she replied. "That's a problem, isn't it?"

Michael blushed when he heard the familiar voice of a coworker behind him. "Way to go, Mikey!"

To cover his embarrassment, he asked, "Would you like to use a phone?"

She nodded shyly.

"Come on up. It's only the sixteenth floor."

He wanted to kick himself for being so asinine. She didn't care what floor it was. It wasn't as if they would have to take the stairs. The elevator doors opened and they stepped inside the car. Michael stared straight ahead, trying

to avoid eye contact with the coworker just a few feet away. Standing close to the girl, he was aware that his skin was tingling, his heart was hammering, and his brain was in overdrive.

“Don’t be stupid,” the left side was saying. “Don’t talk too much. Be cool.”

After many stops and starts, the elevator finally reached the sixteenth floor. Michael put his hand against the door to hold it open as a group stepped off. He discreetly checked his fly as they filed out in front of him, removing one more anxiety from his list.

“There’s a phone to the left of that long and obscenely priced Italian leather bench,” he told the girl as they entered Reception. “Hit nine for an outside line.”

“Thank you,” she said as she walked away from him.

He stood watching her.

“Put it back in your pants,” he heard over his shoulder. “You won’t have time. You’re going to be a busy boy.”

Michael turned into the leering face of an obnoxious account executive.

“Congratulations,” the creep said with a spiteful grin. “You’re on the Lady’s Choice account.”

“Oh, shit,” Michael groaned. This was horrible. The fact that his mom was dying of lung cancer was bad enough. The fact that she would now cackle with glee over the irony that he was promoting it was going to be insufferable.

“Couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy.”

The suit started to leave, but turned and added, “By the way, kudos on top of congrats.”

*What else?* Michael thought in misery.

“I see you have finally found yourself an intern,” the other said in a lascivious voice that made Michael want to strangle him.

“She’s only here to use the phone.”

“That might even hold up in court,” the exec answered with a wink and a smirk.

Michael didn’t have time to curse at him because there were new distractions.

First the girl came up to him and said, “All the lines are busy.”

That comment made him notice that the big, complicated telephone on the unattended desk was ringing nonstop and all the lights on the console were blinking madly. Then the main double doors burst open and the office manager, the frightening Ms. Tucker—she of unfortunate rhyming possibilities—sallied forth with her retinue of toadies. They stood in the middle of Reception and glowered accusingly. All averted their eyes from the

empty reception desk and the cause of their shame as the agency's general counsel slammed in from the other end of the room.

"Jesus H. Christ," he growled. "Haven't you people heard of sexual harassment?"

"We call them rungs on the corporate ladder, Mr. Darrow," the office manager sneered. "After all, it's all public relations, isn't it?"

"You'll take it a little more seriously when you get the subpoena."

"The plaintiff was merely propositioned," Ms. Tucker responded. "I was the one who got screwed—unless you want to answer the phones, Counselor?"

No one noticed when Michael's recent discovery crossed over to the reception desk and punched one of the blinking buttons.

Glancing up at the brushed nickel letters against the polished black granite wall, she read off: "Reinhardt Ritter & Levine. How may I direct your call?"

Looking around the desk until she found a directory, she finally replied, "One moment, please."

She keyed in the appropriate phone number. By the time she had answered all the calls and cleared the board, every eye in the place was on her. The noise of the ringing switchboard was replaced by silence.

The girl looked up at the office manager and drew a breath.

"Do you mind if I use the phone?" Semele inquired.

"Please do," Ms. Tucker replied with a sincere but lipless smile.

## 4 .

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It was the Go-Go '80s. Reinhardt Ritter & Levine was up to speed for the decade. Dressed in silver and black, the uniform of industrial techno-chic, its reception area shrieked money and testosterone. The hard edginess of the jet-black floor was softened only by the exquisite Persian rugs, which had been casually tossed about by the even more costly decorator. There was a chrome-plated sculpture off to the side that no one liked but everyone knew was insured for a ton of money. They referred to it as the “million-dollar umbrella stand.”

Beyond the sight lines from the elevator, which were intended to show nothing but opulent stone, there was a gallery of the agency's work. The product was consistently excellent: blown-up four-, five-, and six-color high-end display ads, some with a varnish plate. Beautiful men and women smoking and driving beautiful cars, or smoking and drinking and swimming in beautiful pools. There were older, yet still beautiful people laughing over bottles of laxative along with intense, beautiful young men climbing into the cockpits of beautiful fighter jets next to an art shot of a nuclear waste depository looking pristine outside of Yuma, Arizona.

Yet all the beautiful people were dwarfed by the portfolio of the agency's most important client. His ads seemed larger and more commanding than those around him, if for no other reason than that he was too.

In those dramatic portraits, he was shown solo-sailing a forty-foot ketch in the trans-Atlantic OSTAR race; hang gliding over Sugarloaf during Carnival, wearing a headdress; taking the last tortuous strides to summit Everest without oxygen; and ballooning over Albuquerque with Mick Jagger. He was somewhere between a gorgeous forty-five and a brilliant sixty. His

hair was full and perpetually windblown. He had a chiseled tan face with high cheekbones, strong white teeth, and a secure, crinkled smile.

Gracing the lower right-hand corner of each advertisement was a line in 36-point Avant Garde Demi Oblique that read: "THE MAN. THE PLAN. THE PLANET." Centered under that was the logotype: "Jupiter Worldwide Unlimited." The line had been written by Michael's boss, T. J. Tutweiler III. It earned him a Clio and won the agency the account.

Just past the rogue's gallery was the massive reception desk, also in black granite. Today it was the scene of a colossal traffic jam. Even though it was far outside of the usual pedestrian patterns within the agency, Reception had become a bottleneck that morning. Not just with the men in the agency; women were also among the mix. Practically every female director and even two VPs stopped by to check the publication dates on magazines in the waiting area.

The men were far more blunt. Some of them even had the nerve to talk to her. Each of those was rewarded with a relaxed and clever response.

"She's wonderful," the lucky recipient reported to the next in line after he left the field. "Not just a beauty. She's got a head on her shoulders too."

What they hadn't noticed as they gazed into her eyes—being the titular feminists that they were—was that she was merely repeating to them whatever it was that they had said to her, but with a different emphasis. Semele had learned that trick years before. Everyone's favorite subject is himself, and the most interesting thing you can say to someone is what someone has just said to you. All she had to do was parrot back whatever someone said to her and add italics. It was so much safer to make the conversation about the other person. Others never said "no" to themselves; that saved her the effort and extended explanations.

"It is a lovely day," one of the production managers offered.

"It *is* a lovely day," Semele responded.

He was certain that her lovely smile was shining on him alone.

"Sharp as a tack," he reported to the man waiting around the corner. "And so perceptive."

The observation was quickly confirmed as the next one ran eagerly across to speak with her.

"What is a pretty girl like you doing in a place like this?" he asked.

"Good question," she acknowledged. "What *is* a pretty girl like me doing in a place like *this*?"

"Brilliant," he told the next man on deck.

So it went. The agency's best and brightest talent tripping over their shoelaces adoring the new girl, and not one of them got caught looking at her body. At least not until the baton was passed to Sal, the studio manager.

He wasn't burdened with the contemporary fashion of enlightenment. He hadn't looked a woman in the face for more than fifteen years. He had no problem as he strode through Reception, flat-footed, with both eyes firmly fixed where he knew they belonged.

"What's the big deal," he wondered aloud to all around him as he walked into the crowd gathered in the hallway. "The rack's okay, but it's nothing that would put an eye out."

For the first time in his long career, Sal's opinion was totally ignored. No one was listening. They were too busy gluing their eyes to the form-fitting black leotard that the girl had been poured into. They had to focus because it was somewhat obscured by the loose, blue work shirt that was open and tied above the waist.

Everyone's suppositions were soon confirmed by Ralph Waldo Braverman, who was not an employee. He was a vendor, but he passed through Reception often and therefore knew most of the players. The art directors referred to him as "the Typesetter of Rodeo Drive" because his letterspacing was so upscale.

When he got to the front desk, Ralph took his time and took in the view. He figured that she was barely out of high school but agelessly beautiful. Her eyes were the first thing he noticed. Eyes that could inspire the long step off Lovers' Leap. They were large and open, but not in surprise or curiosity. Yet they implied a profound interest in whomever they landed on. The whites were pure and brilliant, surrounding a rich slate blue that made the jet-black portal at the centers a dramatic midnight. Easy enough to fall into and deep enough to never hit bottom.

Her blond hair was captured in a long braid, pulled up in a loose knot like her shirt. Strands shot out the sides, making a gold aura around her face. She was wearing a pair of white painter pants a few sizes too big. Only the leotard fit properly, and it fit so well that the men on the floor wanted to be that leotard. She wore a new pair of bright white tennis shoes. They were off-brand, a highly unusual fashion statement to be made—or not made—at Reinhardt Ritter & Levine.

After the girl called the bullpen and ascertained that Braverman was kosher, he was finally allowed to walk past the milling crowd hiding around the corner. He was careful not to step on their tongues, which were hanging down to the floor tiles.

"Well?" everyone on line asked. "What do you think?"

"She's Helen," Ralph replied.

His answer carried authority. They all knew that he was a lot more than a typesetter. He was also a Ph.D. candidate in Classical Greek at Columbia University. Of course, if she had heard that pronouncement, Semele would have disagreed completely. She had studied the old family scrapbooks. She and Helen looked nothing alike.

## 5.

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Michael was the most junior member of the Lady's Choice creative group, which was probably the safest position to be in. It was the farthest down the table from the terrifying creative director. His name was Lech Pulaski. But while his family boasted a proud tradition covering hundreds of years in Poland and America, at Reinhardt Ritter & Levine he was known as the guy named after the highway between Jersey City and Newark. It was universally agreed that he was scarier than either of those cities.

Lech had flown a B-29 over Korea. The story was that after he got shot down, he escaped from Pyoktong because he brainwashed his guards. In his office was a bomb that he turned into a floor lamp. Whenever he was asked whether it had been defused, he just grinned. He was so intimidating that he once got a moment of special intimacy from an art director—*after* he fired her.

His nose looked like the photo of a major delta taken from the window of an early Apollo space mission. He had a bald dome covered with a mosaic of skin conditions, garnished on the sides with random stringy tufts. No one liked him except Ms. Tucker, the office manager. Around the water cooler, there was much speculation about the devil's spawn that would pop out of that hellacious coupling if they ever were to end up at the wrong end of the company's Christmas party.

The Lady's Choice team met in the small conference room on sixteen. Like any other meeting at Reinhardt Ritter & Levine, the first twenty minutes were spent waiting for the meeting to start. It was like the beginning of a sailboat race, where all the boats milled about, tacking and jostling for position, waiting for the cannon. The difference in this case was that the goal of the competition was to be the last one to cross the starting line.

It all had to do with power. The first in their seats were the lowest beaks in the pecking order. They had nothing to lose and everything to gain. No matter how boring it was, sitting there was a lot more interesting than being chained to their desks in the bullpen or steno pool or whichever hateful exercise yard they were assigned to. Next came the anal lower middle management, usually women. They were obsessed with being professional and on time and were constantly complaining about those who weren't. The creatives drifted in after that, if they remembered to come to the meeting at all. Finally, the two directors, art and creative, arrived—matador and toro. The ultimate *Paso Doble*.

Today, when all were present and accounted for, they added up to seven. Two account executives, the junior one and the one who was sleeping with the client; the art director and her two assistants; along with Michael and Lech. The senior copywriter, Michael's boss, was in rehab on Long Island.

"There will be no smoking in here today," Lech announced. "Little 'asthmatic-and-allergic-to-everything-including-sex' Lisa complained to the Mother Tucker after our last meeting."

Michael, along with all the other feeling beings in the room, sympathized with the blushing, young assistant art director as her boss's boss closed the conference room door with a jailor's finality.

"Fortunately, we have a contingency plan," Lech continued as he slid a block of chewing tobacco across the conference table to each male participant. "Have one on me."

He rolled out the expensive leather chair at the head of table and dropped down into it. The upholstery gave off a nasty erupting sound.

"Lisa!" he demanded. "Excuse yourself."

The poor girl went from radish to beet. Everyone else felt even more sorry for her and hoped that she would get a new job soon because her humiliation was an embarrassment to each one of them personally.

"What was I thinking?" Lech apologized as he bit the corner off his chaw. "It wasn't her fault. It was mine and these two-thousand-dollar farting chairs. I know what they cost because I ordered them to delicately caress your grossly overpaid butts. It was Reinhardt's idea."

Everyone around the room tried to laugh in a teamly manner. But it was hard. Lisa was staring sourly at him, and the chairs made additional rude noises every time anyone squirmed.

"The puking seats were cheaper," Lech added. "But they were harder to keep clean."

The pause that followed wasn't awkward. It was hateful. Fortunately for the underlings, this was the first meeting on the pitch, so nobody had to go first. Nobody had to go at all. That was the only comfort. Lech bit off another

large chunk of tobacco, which gurgled in his mouth as he announced, "You know why we're here. New campaign. We need background."

"You," he said pointing his chewed plug at an assistant art director. "I want a show-and-tell tomorrow at four. Broad strokes. Slides and style boards. Treatments. Hot, stylish chicks smoking so lustfully that you can smell sex on the filter tips."

Lech continued in a gentler voice, trying to rally the troops, "What we are going to do is to show the more sophisticated side of the tobacco experience."

He paused a moment to release a long, dangly sinew of black-brown spittle into the trash can at his feet.

"I'm thinking Garbo and Hepburn. Let's lose Gertrude Stein or Virginia Woolf."

"I understand," said the other assistant art director, as he wrote furiously on his legal pad. "Does one spell Garbo with a *T*?"

"Balls for brains," Lech groaned. "'Does one spell ...?' Where are we now, Toto? In a fairy princess costume drama on BB fuckin' C?"

He glowered at the art director.

"Where do you find these people?"

"It's hard," she replied.

"Why?"

"Because you are a son of a bitch."

"Oh, that," he said dismissively. He leaned back in his chair and ran his hand across his pate. The nicotine-stained fingernails complimented the red-purple and pale ocher that flecked his greasy scalp. The collective breath of the room was exhaled in concert as he drifted into a thoughtful rumination.

"Don't hate me because I'm beautiful," Lech said as he fluttered his eyelashes.

"Are we done here?" the senior art director replied. "The rest of us have work to do."