

# Ishtar

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*The Divine Personification of the Planet Venus*

— The Babylonian Pantheon

**SAN FRANCISCO THINKS OF ITSELF AS NEW YORK CITY WEST.** It's a beautiful place in most ways, much more beautiful than Sodom and Gomorrah on the Hudson. There's more space, more smiles, more sunlight — with so many low buildings built to resist earthquakes — laid-back rolling hills, and the cerulean blue of the Pacific Ocean. On the other hand, the bars close at two, and you can't get pizza at three in the morning. Both deal breakers as far as the Kid is concerned.

Nonetheless, it's Spring 1997 and Red is in San Francisco, having a great time. It is California, after all, and that alone brings him more joy than he can say. Almost as soon as he gets off the plane, polynesian paralysis sets in. He feels like he could sit under a palm tree forever, and never move again. But, isn't that one of the things easterners complain about? Move into the Hotel California and you can never leave? Of course, if you're living in Paradise, why would you want to.

The second day he's there, he gets a tattoo. It seems like the perfect thing to do, a souvenir of his visit, and something he's been wanting for years. The first time he sees one like it, he's thirteen. It's a black widow spider crawling up the leg of a naked boy in gym class. At the Kid's high school, boys from all four grades take gym together, a requirement guaranteed to terrify anyone without pubic hair. Everybody dresses for class — or undresses, depending on your point of view — and everyone showers together at the end of the period. For Red,

that's the best part of gym. The rest is just a dreary repetition of the monotonous team sports that have demanded mindless obeisance since third grade. Our boy is not a team player. That's already been established.

Neither is the boy with the black-widow tattoo. He is a GOD. Red cannot imagine that he cares about such things. A sophomore, about fourteen years old, he doesn't know Red exists. The Kid never even learns his name. He's Hispanic — presumably Mexican, the most prevalent minority group in Southern California in the fifties — and that makes him exotic and oddly appealing. Add the tattoo on his leg, a black and red stunner that absolutely screams "I'm a bad boy" and he's almost orgasmic. He is Red's first crush.

Red remembers him vividly, standing in front of his locker in a pool of light, his body shower-wet and sleek. His right arm is raised and he's holding a white towel in his left hand. The contrast between the towel and the dark cream of his skin makes our boy ache. Like a renaissance prince — shoulders tapering gently into his waist, genitals glowing softly against dark public hair — he is innocent and beautiful, frozen like that forever, as untouchable then as he is now.

It's a bright morning in San Francisco when our boy finally celebrates the wonder of that moment by getting inked with a spider of his own — crisp black and blood red — an instant of joy riding on his calf ever since. Red wonders many times over the years what might have happened to that nameless boy. He doesn't know anything about him except at that moment, when he was so beautiful. *The Boy With the Spider Tattoo*. He should have been a movie of the week.

The Kid has been admiring his leg for two days now, oiling his new art and thinking about that boy who inspired it. But, now, something equally intriguing has come up. Tonight, he's going to a party, a sexual extravaganza dedicated to the *Crossing*

*of Ishtar at the Summer Solstice, the Descent of the Goddess into the Underworld.* My God, how “San Francisco” is that? It sounds more like an opera than an orgy.

No one in New York City would ever admit to celebrating anything so esoteric. Or, maybe, it’s just that no one in New York City would embarrass themselves by naming their fête after a Babylonian goddess. But, Red can’t remember *ever* attending an erotic event having anything at all to do with a female anything, so maybe he’s just missed something.

Every sex club he knows at home is decidedly butch, dark and rough, celebrating an unyielding masculinity that exists more in nighttime ritual than daytime reality. And, what a ritual it is; a parallel culture that comes alive entirely after dark, in warehouses and cellars, in vaults, trucks, and dungeons. It is direct and demanding. Tops and bottoms. Masters and slaves. Do what you’re told or suffer. In San Francisco, that gets our boy in trouble almost immediately.

It’s interesting, I think, how much our orgies differ depending upon their location. In The City, for instance, there are noticeable differences between Chelsea and the East Village. Why this should be is hard to understand. They’re not far apart, a little over two miles on the F-Train, and many of the same people can be found in both places. In spite of The City’s size, a population of 1.6-million in Manhattan alone, the number of actual players is quite small, an incestuous mix of leathermen, fetishists, bondage masters, Chelsea boys, and dilettantes from New Jersey. The core is maintained by many of the same people, but the attitudes of the peripheral players vary enormously.

There is nothing dark and rough about Red’s experience in San Francisco. It’s utterly different than other play parties of his experience. The venue is the second floor of a large, suburban house. The party begins about eight o’clock, which, at the time of the year Red is there, means a bright, late afternoon,

framed by a California sunset. The entire second floor of this house has been stripped of most of its furniture. At least, there is little furniture there.

The Kid is a guest at this affair. He's been staying with a friend, a member of this group, who he met at the campout held every summer by the New York Jacks. He is very much looking forward to this event. When they first arrive, however, he has real doubts. For one thing, everyone is dressed. The first thing anyone does at the events he's used to is strip naked, or down to whatever bits and pieces their particular fetish might require. Here, everybody has drinks, and the atmosphere is more like a suburban cocktail party than a bacchanal. Nobody is doing drugs, either, not openly, anyway. In the East Village, almost everyone does drugs and alcohol is a secondary consideration.

And, of course, there is the question of gender. It would hardly be appropriate to honor a Babylonian goddess at an all-male sex club, would it? Of the approximately eighty-five attendees at this grand soirée, perhaps sixty percent are women, and forty percent are men. Of those, sixty percent of the women are lesbians, and forty percent of the men are gay. Red can't be absolutely sure about those numbers after all this time, but they provide a good indication as to the sort of mix he encounters that night.

At the top of a long flight of stairs, the Kid and his host are greeted by an attractive young man who checks them in. "I'm Carl," he says. "Welcome." Not yet attuned to the local protocols, Red does what he's accustomed to do. He gooses Carl—grabs his crotch and squeezes—the most common way of saying "hello" in New York. It's a sex party, isn't it?

Apparently not, or not *yet*, anyway. Carl is speechless. But, the lesbian with the clipboard is not. She appears suddenly—seemingly out of thin air. She's dressed in steel-toed boots and *very* short jean cutoffs, with a large dildo in her toolbelt. She

doesn't like men, and she's livid. It seems our boy has violated some rule on her list. She pushes her clipboard in his face and yells it out.

"Ask permission before moving on to the next level," she screams. She bangs on her clipboard with her free hand. "You're going to have to leave."

At first, Red is really pissed. At this time in his life, he's seldom refused anything; no one *ever* screams at him, *ever*. Nor has he *ever* been kicked out of an orgy. At first, he's so irate that he almost screams back. His buddy is sputtering, and some of the other guests are beginning to stare. It's all he can do not to throw this harpy down the stairs. But, he takes a deep breath, and sanity prevails. During that long moment, it occurs to him that he's a guest here, a stranger in a strange place. So, he swallows, forces a smile, and looks her in the eye.

"I'm sorry," he whispers through his teeth. "Where I'm from, that's how we say 'hello.' I apologize." She doesn't blink, just stares like some fury out of a Greek myth. She obviously wants a fight—beware the militant lesbian—but, Red doesn't give her a chance. "Let's just call it a misunderstanding," he says softly.

The Kid can't recall how long they stay like that, staring at one another, nose to nose. He tells me later that his apology seems to make it worse. There's real hate in her eyes. She doesn't move. But, her face turns bright red, and she grits her teeth. It seems a bit of an overreaction considering what he did.

It's lucky the "goosee" decides to step in, or who knows? When no one seems to be backing down, he stammers a bit, says something like "Uh, it's okay. Come on," he pleads. "No harm done."

"He didn't know," Red's host adds. "He's never been here before. He's from, uh, New York City." Like that will help.

"He doesn't know the rules," Carl tries again. "Let it go."

Red is perfectly calm. But, his ego has been attacked, and he's going nowhere. He isn't intimidated by this person. She's shorter than he is. Had she assaulted him, however, he isn't sure what he'd have done. Lesbian or not, she's a woman, and that's more pertinent in this situation than anything else.

Early on, Dad says, "Never hit a woman."

"What if she hits you first?" Red asks. A reasonable question if you're being kicked in the back every day by a nasty alto in seventh grade chorus.

"You *never* hit a woman," Dad says again.

"She keeps kicking me," Red argues. Chorus is his favorite class and this girl is ruining it.

"Never hit a woman!" Dad repeats, louder this time.

"What am I supposed to do?" Red yells back. "She won't leave me alone."

"Just ignore her, and I don't want to hear any more about it," Dad snaps. "Never hit a woman. That's it!" He turns and walks out of the room, leaving behind what is, possibly, the worst advice he ever gave.

Not that Red wants to beat up on women, and Dad is right as far as it goes. But, he doesn't offer a solution. Maybe it's because he doesn't understand that women *can* be a problem. Maybe they weren't, back in his day. But, things have changed a great deal since the nineteen-thirties. Women are beginning to express themselves, but it's going to be a while before everyone learns that, given the opportunity, women can be just as mean as men.

Red learns it early, before his father does, apparently. From day one, the girl who sits behind him in seventh grade chorus does everything she can to make him miserable. Beyond that, he remembers nothing about her except he hopes she burns in hell. But, because of Dad's uncharacteristically thoughtless dismissal of his problem, he never develops a defense. The few

times in his life he's faced with female hostility, he's cowed into silence. Hardly fair, is it?

I'm happy to note that this is the *only* problem the Kid encounters that night. A few of the lesbians, unfortunately including the first one he meets, definitely seem to hate men. They refuse to be drawn into a mixed-sex conversation. The majority of them, however, are friendly. Indeed, Red's experience with lesbians in general is that they're really *great* at parties. The sexual tension always present in the straight world is not an issue, and that allows everyone to be more open and relaxed.

Once Carl puts in his oar, everything seems to resolve. The Kid is handed a list of rules, or, rather, a list of rules is thrown in his general direction as his adversary stalks off. "Behave yourself," she snarls. "I'm going to watch you." Beyond that, Red doesn't recall any more ruckus, which is a relief because it gives us an opportunity to move on to some of the evening's other activities.

The Kid sets out to explore the venue. Since it's a BYOB party, he and his friend first head for the kitchen, where a large table has been set up as a bar. There are literally dozens of beverages; Napa Valley wines, lots of beer, some hard liquor, and mixers. Red adds a bottle of Johnny Walker Black to the collection, and makes himself a drink.

The crowd in the kitchen is amazing. He's never been to a sex party with such a wide variety of guests, all ages, all types, soccer dads, truck drivers, suits, more hippies than one would have thought could still exist, and many, many women, all, except the lesbian with the dildo, wearing pastels. This is the most notable difference Red sees. At home, there is very little color at their orgies. Mostly, it's skin, tattoos, and black stuff, accented here and there by the gleam of hot sweat.

But, pastels are nice, too. For a house party in the suburbs, they're swell. BUT, WHERE'S THE SEX? For a moment, the

Kid is afraid he yelled that out loud. He looks around, grins self-consciously at a young woman pouring a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon, and turns away to continue exploring.

The rest of the house is typical; a large back porch with wooden steps leading down to a well-kept lawn; two smaller rooms with no doors, apparently bedrooms, except there are no beds, which does nothing to assuage Red's concerns; a sizable community room, which seems to have been put together by removing a wall between what were once separate living and dining rooms; a boring bathroom; and a big entry hall at the top of the stairs, with about half of its space curtained off for privacy. No one's having sex in there, either.

Nor are the nooks and crannies dark. Everything is well lit, which in itself is something the Kid finds encouraging. Too often, in New York City, there's just enough light to avoid stepping on someone's head. Not something the exhibitionists are happy about, nor the voyeurs either, for obvious reasons. For some, sex in the dark is a fetish. But, not Red. He likes to see who he's doing, so maybe this San Francisco soirée will work out after all, if something will just *happen*. Which, suddenly, it does.

The sound of a large gong echos throughout the house; slow, throbbing pulses that seem to shake the walls. As if on cue, every person in the Kid's immediate vicinity turns and heads toward the community room. Apparently, they've all been waiting for this to happen. It's a great deal more structure than Red is used to, but, what the hell. He steps into the traffic and is swept into the nearest end of the big room, close to a small platform where a middle-aged woman wearing a white, floor-length gown — we will call her the High Priestess of Ishtar — is beating the gong.

Practically everyone is settling onto the hardwood floor, lying down or leaning against the almost bare walls. The Kid sits next to a young man who seems friendly, and introduces



himself. They speak for a moment and exchange particulars, including their sexual orientation; the guy's name is Jeff. He's straight, but it's perfectly all right if Red wants to feel up his leg while they wait. Somewhat surprised by this — at home, no one shares *anything* until afterwards, if then — our hero settles back and enjoys his new friend's leg as he looks around the room, wondering again why they're waiting.

The tolling of the gong continues until virtually everyone at the party is crammed into the community room. It seems like that, anyway. What's certain is that Red is now boxed in on every side, much as he was when he was ten-years-old, in church, and wound up signing the "pledge." At first, he's quite content just to fondle the muscled leg flexing so pleasantly under his right hand. Then, the gong stops. That's when he realizes he should have taken a seat closer to the door.

Red has asked me to apologize in advance to anyone who might be offended by the following description. We're sure many people take this sort of spiritual nonsense seriously, although whether or not the party participants that night were anything but horny isn't at all clear. By the time of this affair, the Kid has been living in Manhattan for over thirty years. He is New York City cynical. His attitude toward the spirituality of what follows is rife with disbelief. I've chided him for that, but he insists that we're telling this from his viewpoint, so what can one do? All that aside, however, it is certainly a *terrific* myth.

"Welcome, worshippers of Ishtar," cries the lady with the gong. "Tonight, we celebrate the crossing of the goddess at the summer solstice." Booooooonng!

The audience is paying rapt attention. All Red knows is that he can't get out.

"Beloved is Ishtar, the daughter of Anu." Booooooonng! Sorry about that, but there are only so many ways to characterize a gong.

“Beloved is Ishtar, the goddess of love, fertility, and sex.”  
Booooooonnng!

Finally, someone says the word. Still, no one moves. The crowd is hushed. Many have put down their drinks.

“Beloved is mighty Ishtar, the brilliant courtesan of the gods.” Booooooonnng!

The Kid is beginning to worry now. He’s even stopped fiddling with that delicious leg. He’s right up front, three feet from that damned gong, and it’s looking more and more like we’re all going to have to listen to a sermon.

“Beloved is Ishtar. Praise be to the great goddess,” sings the priestess.

“Praise be to the great goddess.” A trio of lesbians, including Red’s adversary, responds.

“Revere the goddess, the greatest of divine spirits.” The priestess raises her arms.

“Praise be to the goddess,” the lesbians cry out.

“Revere the queen of women. Revere the queen of heaven,” the priestess proclaims.

“Praise be to the goddess,” the lesbians shout, this time at the top of their lungs.

But, the priestess is not to be outdone. “Beloved is Ishtar.” Her voice is like a trumpet. “She holds fate in her hand. With her glance she creates joy. She is the protecting deity and guardian spirit.” Booooooonnnnng! The audience breaks into wild applause.

By now, Red desperately wishes he was somewhere else. For whatever reason, he finds all this embarrassing. It has nothing to do with him, of course, other than that he has to sit there and endure it. But, there’s no way he can leave the room without causing a commotion, and he’s already drawn more negative attention than he would have liked. So, he takes a deep breath and tries to look interested.

The priestess lowers her arms. "Thank you, friends." She smiles, and waits for the congregation to quiet down. "Thank you all for coming." The three acolytes line up behind her. The Kid is relieved to see his antagonist standing on the far side of the platform. The priestess continues.

"As we all know . . .," she begins.

"Oh, do we?" Red murmurs. "Do we, really?" He wants to say that out loud, but many of his neighbors are nodding in agreement, so he manages to keep his mouth shut.

"As we all know," she says again, "the crossing of the goddess at the summer solstice marks the coming of winter. At this time, Ishtar descends into the underworld, which is ruled by her sister, Eréskeigal, the goddess of death. Her quest is to rescue the lover of her youth, Tammuz, the harvest god, who is being held hostage. When she arrives at the land of the dead, Ishtar approaches the gate and imperiously demands it be opened."

"If the gate does not open," cries lesbian number one, "I will break the door of hell, I will force the lock."

"I will smash the door-posts," says number two. "I will shatter the bolts,"

"I will raise up the dead to eat the living . . ." adds Red's special friend.

"... and, the host of the dead shall reign," all three shout at once.

"Needless to say," the priestess explains, "Ishtar is refused admission to the underworld."

In spite of himself, the Kid wonders why this doesn't need to be said. I mean, is it her attitude or what?

The priestess goes on. "The sentry, intimidated by the goddess' rage, rushes to Eréskeigal, who proclaims that Ishtar must pass the seven gates of hell *according to the old decree*. This decree, apparently, will not allow her to pass the first gate until she removes her crown. It will not allow her pass the second

gate until she removes her earrings. He will not allow her pass the third until she removes her necklace. Nor, will he allow her pass the fourth, fifth, or sixth until she removes her chemise, her girdle and her proud finery. So, when she finally passes the seventh gate, she is humbled and naked."

The priestess cries out in alarm. "Enraged, Ishtar throws herself at her sister, but Eréskeigal is the queen of hell and will not have it." Her voice shakes the walls. "She imprisons Ishtar, and releases sixty diseases against her."

The three disciples shriek like harpies. "Great Ishtar is in hell," they howl. "Sixty diseases defile her," they moan. "On earth, procreation stops, and the land is barren." Boooooonng!

The audience cheers. Now, Red is pissed. What the hell happens? Does Ishtar get her necklace back? What about Tam-muz? What about those diseases? If nobody on earth is fucking, why are we having this damn party?

"We all know what happens next," the priestess declares.

"No, we don't. No, we don't," screams Red's inner voice. Now, he *does* want to leave. But, he also wants to know what happens to Ishtar. Does she die of plague? Does she succumb to leprosy or measles or athlete's foot?

But, those are apparently questions for another time. The priestess raises her hands to quiet the crowd. She smiles, and speaks out in a more normal tone of voice. "Thank you, friends. Thank you again for coming. To round out our program for this evening, we have two very special guests."

That's something our hero doesn't want to hear, either. By this time, it's almost nine-thirty, and I'd think anyone would be wondering about all this foolishness, particularly if they're horny and have been promised an orgy. Red settles back against the wall and resumes playing with the straight boy's leg. Is this all he's going to get out of this fiasco? Then, it occurs to him to ask.

"What is this?" he whispers to his friend. "Is this it? I thought there was going to be sex."

Jeff grins. "You new?" he asks.

"From out of town," Red confirms.

"Just wait a bit," Jeff replies. "Have patience."

The Kid squeezes his plump thigh and turns his attention back to the platform. "I've had patience," he says. "Why is there so much ..." He's interrupted before he can say "bullshit," but, that's just as well.

The first "special guest" has been introduced and taken the platform. She's wearing combat boots, and a bandolier over a red T-shirt with the arms removed. Her tattoos are exquisite. Red completely misses her name, which doesn't matter, because, for obvious reasons, he will remember her for a very long time.

"This poem is dedicated to my new lover," she says. Her eyes are moist. She smiles gently as she begins reading from the page in her hand. "Maria," she says. She looks up, at a pretty young woman sitting on the other side of the hall. "Maria?" she asks, singing it out in a soft, fluting soprano. "Maria, Maria, Maria." Her voice rises and falls as she dances from one side of the stage to the other. "Maria," she says on the left. "Maria," she says on the right. "Maria, Maria." She raises her hands toward the ceiling. "Maria?" she asks. "Maria!" she demands. "Maria," she whispers quietly. "Maria, Maria," she says to the floor. Tears are running down her cheeks.

Red has no idea what to say. His smile is frozen. He can't believe he has to sit through this shit. On the other hand, this woman is obviously sincere, and he's not going to make any new friends if he starts laughing.

"Maria, Maria, Maria, Maria, Maria." The poet moves on to the second page. "Maria, Maria," she says again. Red looks at Maria, but it's hard to tell how she's reacting. "Maria," the poet says softly. "Maria," she sings. "Maria?" she asks again.

And, she may be asking it still, but Red tunes out at this point, and doesn't hear any more until the very last "Maria" is screamed off the third page at the decibel level of an F15 fighter jet. You can see why the Kid remembers this woman.

The audience applauds, not quite as madly as it did when Ishtar was attacked by all those diseases, but almost. Red would give anything for a drink, which is saying something for a guy who's been a pothead for thirty years, but I digress. There is another "special guest," a young gay man who reads a rather good short story of his own, but I'm happy to say that the Kid can't remember anything about him, which suggests that there was nothing laughable about whatever he read.

By now, Red is practically asleep, and Jeff's leg is bruised from the knee up. The priestess again takes the stage as she leads the last bit of applause. The Kid wants to throw something, but he doesn't have any old fruit. It's now almost ten, and he's numb. He looks around, hoping that, somehow, enough people might have shifted their position so as to allow him get to the bathroom. As a result, he's taken completely by surprise when the priestess raises her arms, and issues a clarion call for action.

"Praise to the goddess," she calls out.

"Praise to the goddess," the acolytes reply.

"Ishtar is risen from the dead," she declares.

"Ishtar lives, she lives." The disciples are positively giddy.

"Great Ishtar calls all her people, the dancers and singers," cries the priestess.

"The dancers and singers," the trio responds.

"The prostitutes of the temple," the priestess exclaims.

"The prostitutes, and the courtesans," the three howl in unison, "and the great warriors of Uruk."

Suddenly, the room wakes up. People shift around, and shuffle their feet. A frisson of anticipation takes hold as the quartet of lesbians on the stage works itself into a frenzy.

“Bless the West,” they cry, their voices rising as one.

“Bless the East,” demands number one.

“Bless the North,” demands number two.

“Bless the South,” demands Red’s first friend.

“Bless Down! Bless Up!” The trio shrieks at the top of their lungs. They raise their hands toward the ceiling.

“Glory be to Ishtar, the Queen of Heaven.” The voice of the priestess rings out like the trumpet of revelation. “Let the celebration begin.”

The room explodes. Seldom has Red seen so many people move so fast. Obviously, he’s not the only impatient guest. Some head into the kitchen, some back into the entry hall. Clothes fly into the air. Shoes, shorts, socks, and skirts hit the walls. Pants are torn off, underwear is ripped away. T-shirts and panties, blouses, jockstraps and brassieres, dozens of colors and styles litter the floor in every direction.

At first, this sudden upheaval is a surprise, so unexpected that Red isn’t sure how to react. That lasts about two seconds. Everywhere around him, naked bodies are coming out of hiding. Intoxicating beauty is revealing itself and demanding attention. Jeff is stepping out of his 401s, showing a fine, white ass. So, what’s a guy to do?

In less than a minute, Jeff is standing there wearing a big smile and a hard cock, watching Red adjust the chains on his chest harness. “Bitchin’ gear,” he nods.

“Thanks for your leg,” the Kid grins. “It kept me sane.”

“I told you it’d be okay,” Jeff reaches out and caresses the breast of a girl he seems to know. “Have a good time,” he says, as she pulls him down to the floor.

Our boy turns and studies the room. “Glory be to Ishtar!” Red has to agree. The place has been transformed. Cabinets and cupboards have opened in the walls, and trays of lubricants, along with sexual devices of all sorts, are being passed around.

Athletic mats have appeared almost magically, and couples, trios, and quads are using them to tangle themselves into all sorts of delicious combinations. Dildos, butt plugs, dog collars, and handcuffs are already in use. In the entry hall, the curtained off area has been taken over by a disciplinarian who is offering to whip, spank, or beat anyone who asks. His sign-up sheet is already full. He has enough names to keep him busy for most of the night.

In the kitchen, the transvestites have come out of hiding. The conversation is remarkable, and Red meets a beautiful lesbian dressed in a stunning cascade of greenery, with vines and leaves spiraling across her shoulders, around her breasts and hips, into her vagina, and down her legs; some of the most awesome tattoos he has ever seen anywhere.

The fucking that night is exquisite. The lesbians are terrific company, The gay boys, except for their annoying habit of calling Red *papi*, are every bit as depraved as their counterparts in New York City, and for the first time in thirty years, the Kid has sex with a beautiful young woman. Let's hear it for Ishtar. Wherever the hell she is, Red would like to thank her for that evening. It remains one of the most remarkable sexual gatherings he has ever experienced. ■