



## Big Baby Hermes

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The gods never grow old. Take Hermes. He is seventeen for all eternity and the other gods never let him forget it. “Fetch this, Hermes. Do that Hermes. Carry this message. Do as your half brother tells you.” He ever cooks for them.

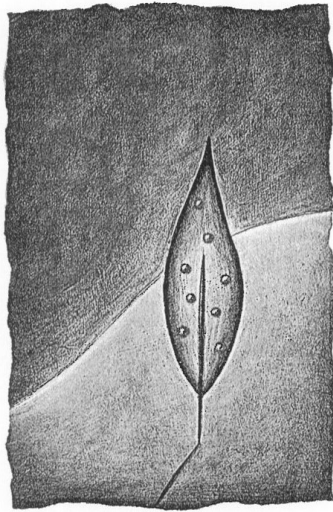
But Hermes doesn’t mind. He’s an easygoing boy. People down on earth ask his protection when they go on journeys: Some of those wild country roads swarm with thieves and ruffians. Mind you, the thieves and ruffians ask the help of Hermes, too. They’ve probably heard the stories of Hermes’s childhood and how light-fingered he was, even as a baby!

The day Hermes was born—in a cave in Arcadia<sup>1</sup>—his mother, Maia laid him in his cradle and kissed his tufty hair. “Don’t cry now. You are a son of Zeus and a secret from his wife. If she hears you are here, Hera will hate you with a deadly hatred, and kill you if she can. So hush, my little Hermes. Don’t cry.” In rocking the cradle, Maia herself went to sleep.

Hermes was a big baby: big in the morning and much bigger by noon, when he clambered out of his cradle, toddled out of the cave, and met a tortoise. Banging on the tortoise’s shell, he heard a throbbing hollow noise he liked. So, emptying out the tortoise, he tied threads of his mother’s hair around the shell. When Maia stirred at the pulling of her hair, Hermes plucked a tune that soothed her back to sleep.

<sup>1</sup> Arcadia: or Arcady; a peaceful agricultural region of Greece

Then, slinging his newly invented lyre<sup>2</sup> across his back, Hermes toddled away down the road, making up songs as he went. He was hungry. He wanted a drink of milk.



“Watch me go along,  
To see what I can find.  
Hear me sing my song,  
With my lyre tied on behind.  
I’m going to find a moo-cow  
Maybe one or two cows:  
I may just follow  
My brother Apollo  
And round up quite a few  
cows!”

All the way to Pieria<sup>3</sup> he walked, growing all the while, and in the middle of the afternoon he found the grazing place of Apollo’s shining brown cows. They were all bursting with milk, and Hermes drank all he could drink.

Then, hazel switch<sup>4</sup> in hand, he began to drive the cows back the way he had come. He did not drive them headfirst, but blipped their noses, and made them walk backward, so that the tracks they left would look as if they had been coming, when in fact they had been going. He tied twigs to his feet, as well, to scuff out his own footprints.

Back along the road he toddled, singing as he went, and picking grapes off the vines at the roadside. An old woman tending the vines straightened her aching back to watch him go by. It was a remarkable sight, after all: a baby toddling along in wicker shoes, driving a herd of back-to-front cows.

Hermes put a chubby finger to his lips, as if to say, “Don’t breathe a word.”

By the time he had hidden the cows—up trees, down holes, under bushes—Maia, his mother, was awake and standing at the door of the

2 **lyre**: a stringed instrument similar to a small harp

3 **Pieria**: a region of Greece

4 **hazel switch**: a flexible twig from the hazel tree used for prodding or whipping

cave. “And where do you think you’ve been till this time of night?” she demanded, hands on hips.

Hermes climbed into his cradle: It was a bit small for him now—he had grown so much since morning. “Never you mind, Mommy,” he said. Then, sucking his thumb, he quickly fell asleep.

When he woke, Apollo was standing over him, shouting till the cave echoed. “Where are my cows?”

“Agoo,” said Hermes.

“You don’t fool me. Where are my cows, you thieving infant!”

“A-moo?” Hermes said, and chortled.

Apollo’s golden hair curled a little tighter. “An old woman saw a baby driving my cows this way. Now get out of bed. I’m taking you before the court of the gods! You can answer to Almighty Zeus for your cattle-rustling!”

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“Silence in court!” bellowed Zeus as Hermes plucked his tortoise-lyre.

“Answer the charge! Is it true, Hermes, that you stole the cattle of Apollo?”

Hermes stood up. “Almighty gods . . . gentlemen . . . ladies . . . I appeal to you—do I look like a thief? Does it seem to you probable, does it seem to you likely, that I, a little child, a mewling infant, a child of rosy innocence, should walk fifty miles on the day of my birth and carry off—like some vagabond, some deceitful rapsallion—a herd of shining cows?”

“Yes!” bawled Apollo.

“Silence in court!”

“And me a vegetarian! A lover of animals! The merest silken butterfly fluttering over my crib is enough to make me laugh aloud at the wondrous beauty of nature!”

“*Shyster!*”<sup>5</sup> shouted Apollo.

“Silence in court!”

Hermes toddled about the courtroom, declaring his innocence, presenting his defense. He laid his baby curls on the knees of the goddesses and looked earnestly into the eyes of the gods. He even hugged Apollo’s knees, saying, “Would I steal from my own dear brother—child of my own beloved father, the mighty, the ineffable Zeus?”

Hera stood up with a scream of rage. “*Another* son of yours, Zeus?”

5 **shyster**: a dishonest person

She pointed a fearsome finger at Hermes. “For that I’ll make you sorry you were ever born, baby!” Then she slammed out of the courtroom.

“You were *seen*. There are *witnesses*,” snarled Apollo at his little half brother.

Hermes did not even blush, he simply took his tortoise-lyre and began to play. Apollo stared at the extraordinary instrument, overwhelmed with envy.

“I never said I didn’t *take* the cows,” said Hermes. “I only said I didn’t *steal* the cows. The truth is, I merely *borrowed* the cows. For a drink, you know. We babies, we need our milk if we’re to grow into big, strong boys. You ladies understand that, surely? Naturally, brother, you can have your cows back whenever you like. And as a token of goodwill, I’d like you to accept this lyre—I invented it yesterday.”

The court cheered and clapped. Apollo snatched the lyre and began to pluck at it suspiciously. Zeus got to his feet.

“Hermes, son of Maia, you are plainly a rascal and a rogue. But you have clever fingers and a golden tongue. From this day forward, you shall be messenger of the gods . . . as soon as you have given back Apollo’s shining cattle.”

“Thank you, Father!” exclaimed Hermes. “Perhaps he might like these back, too.” From behind his back, Big Baby Hermes produced the bow and arrow he had stolen from Apollo when he hugged him. The jury of gods gasped and stamped their feet, laughing at the outrageous audacity of the child. Even Apollo could not stay angry with a half brother who had given him the first lyre in the world. They left court together, discussing philosophy and music, poetry and politics.

“You had better watch out for Queen Hera,” Apollo warned his little half brother. “She hates you with a deadly hatred. She will never let you be messenger of the gods, no matter what Zeus says.”

“Oh, no? Would you like to bet on that?” replied Hermes. “If Hera drives me off Olympus, I shall teach you how to play that lyre of mine. If I make her like me, you can give me . . . what? . . . your magic wand. Agreed?”

“Agreed!” cried Apollo. “You haven’t a chance.”

“Well, please excuse me now,” said Baby Hermes politely, “but it’s time for my morning nap.” He trotted away across the marble floors of Olympus, toward the hall of the Queen of Heaven.

He went to the cradle at the foot of her bed, and smiled down at her own baby son, Ares.

“Could I ask you a very great favor?” he said.

When Hera returned to her room, she lifted her baby, swaddled in lambswool, and cradled him in her arms. She fed him, she sang to him, she rocked him—“My, what a fine, big boy you are!”—and, plucking back the swaddling from around his head, she kissed his tufty hair.

“Agoo,” said Hermes. “Guess who.”

It was a risk. She has a nasty temper, the Queen of Heaven. She might have beaten his brains out then and there. But she didn’t. They say a woman can’t feed a baby and hate it afterward. Hera and Hermes get along well now, so long as he makes himself useful: cooking, running errands. So he won his bet with Apollo—won the magic wand, too, though he still gave Apollo music lessons. In exchange, Apollo taught his half brother how to foretell the future. ∞

