

EXCERPT from “Phaeton and the Sun Chariot”

a play from Wim Coleman’s *Nine Muses*

Nine Muses is a collection of one-acts based on classical mythology. Each play in *Nine Muses* is narrated by one of the classical Muses; the Muse Urania narrates “Phaeton and the Sun Chariot.” The following excerpt dramatizes Phaeton’s arrival at the palace of his father, the sun god Helios.

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(TIME enters, wearing sunglasses and carrying a tall stool. She sets the stool in front of one of the small ones, as if it were a desk. She sits behind it and freezes.)

URANIA. The god Helios lives in the Sun Palace—a classy place, all gold and ivory decorated with precious jewels, located in a very cosmopolitan, very posh district of India.

(TIME comes to life. She pantomimes answering a phone.)

TIME. Sun Enterprises, Far East Office, this is Time speaking. Could you hold, please? Thank you. *(Pantomiming again)* Sun Enterprises, Far East Office, this is Time speaking. Could you hold, please? Thank you. *(Again)* Sun Enterprises, Far East Office, this is Time speaking. Could you hold, please? Thank you. *(Throwing up her hands in exasperation)* It’ll never stop! *(She freezes again.)*

URANIA. Now the poet Ovid doesn’t mention Helios having a secretary/receptionist. In his version of the story, the Sun god is waited on by servants named Hour, Day, Year, and Century. But if you ask me, a celebrity who travels day in and day out can’t get by without a receptionist. I hope no one minds my writing one in.

(URANIA steps aside to watch. PHAETON enters cautiously. TIME doesn’t see him at first.)

TIME *(picking up the phone again)*. Sun Enterprises, Time speaking, thank you for holding, can I help you? No, he’s not giving interviews this week. I’m sorry, but that’s positively the last word. Good-by.

PHAETON. Excuse me—

TIME. What are you doing here?

PHAETON. I want to talk to Helios.

TIME. Have you got an appointment?

PHAETON. Well, no, but I—

TIME. How did you get past Security?

PHAETON. I just walked in.

TIME. Those guys are never on the job.

PHAETON. You're Time?

TIME. That's right. I'm in charge of years, months, days, hours, minutes, and seconds. If you want an appointment with Helios, I'm the one to talk to. But I can tell you right now, you'll never get to see him.

PHAETON. But you don't understand—

TIME. No, *you* don't. He's got a flight leaving in five minutes. He's not seeing anyone right now, with or without an appointment. Now if you don't mind, I've got a lot of calls. (*Picking up the phone again*) Sun Enterprises, Time speaking, thank you for holding, can I help you? No, there's no truth to that rumor, and if you print it you'll hear from our lawyers. Look, buddy, if you've got a problem, call Public Relations.

PHAETON. If you'll just let me explain—

TIME. Do you want me to call a guard? (*To the phone*) Sun Enterprises, Time speaking, thank you for holding, can I help you? Oh, Zeus, thank you for returning his call.

PHAETON (*excitedly*). Zeus? You're talking to Zeus?

TIME (*to PHAETON*). Do you mind? This is long distance. (*To the phone*) Yes, Zeus, I'm sorry. The office is a little crazy this morning. Helios just wondered if you could give him a little cloud cover. Nothing overcast, just a few scattered—what did he call them?—cirrus clouds. At about 20,000 feet. You know, just for variety. Weather's been awfully clear lately. Public gets tired of it. Oh, thank you very much. He'll really appreciate it. (*To PHAETON*) Still here, huh?

PHAETON. My name is Phaeton.

TIME. So?

PHAETON. I'm his son.

TIME. Oh, brother.

PHAETON. It's true.

TIME. Do you know how often I hear that one? (*To the phone*) Sun Enterprises, Time speaking, thank you for holding, can I help you? If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times, he will not endorse your chariots. He doesn't even ride one of yours. No, he doesn't want one for free, he's happy with the one he's got, thank you very much.

PHAETON. I won't leave till I talk to him.

TIME. I'm not a baby-sitter.

PHAETON. Then you'd better let me see him.

TIME. You don't know his temper.

PHAETON. I'll take my chances.

TIME (*to the phone*). Mr. Helios? There's a kid here to see you, making a real pain of himself. What do you want me to do with him?

PHAETON. Tell him who I am.

TIME. He says he's your son.

PHAETON. Phaeton.

TIME. Yes, I know, the third one this week.

PHAETON. Clymene's son.

TIME. He says he's Phaeton, the son of— (*To PHAETON*) Who was that again?

PHAETON. Clymene.

TIME. Clymene's son. (*A bit surprised by what she hears on the phone*) Oh. All right. I'll tell him. (*To PHAETON*) He'll be right out.

PHAETON. Thanks. I'll be sure to tell him how pleasant you've been.

TIME. Don't get cute. Have you got sunglasses?

PHAETON. What?

TIME (*handing him a pair of sunglasses*). You can't look at him without sunglasses. Do you want to go blind?

PHAETON (*putting on the sunglasses*). Oh. I almost forgot.

(*HELIOS enters, wearing his bright solar headdress.*)

HELIOS (*delightedly*). Phaeton!

PHAETON. Hello, Father.

(*HELIOS shakes PHAETON's hand warmly.*)

HELIOS. Is it really you, boy?

PHAETON. I could ask you the same.

HELIOS. Time, this is my son Phaeton. Phaeton, this is—

TIME. We've met.

HELIOS. Spitting image of his mother. Gorgeous woman. My, how you've grown. When was the last time I saw you?

PHAETON. I wouldn't remember.

HELIOS (*uncomfortably*). Yes, well, it has been quite some time, hasn't it? Have a seat, son. Make yourself comfortable. Would you like anything at all? Cigar, perhaps? A cup of coffee? Some of our delightful Oriental spiced tea?

TIME. Mr. Helios, you're due for your chariot in a minute and twenty-seven seconds.

HELIOS. I'll be going up late this morning.

TIME. Oh, no, please.

HELIOS. An hour or two, maybe.

TIME. The stars will disappear at their usual time, whether you're in the sky or not. And you know how mortals get when they're plunged into total darkness unexpectedly. Or have you forgotten the hysteria caused by the last solar eclipse?

HELIOS (*firmly*). I said I'll be late.

TIME. Am I taking the flack for this?

HELIOS. Of course not. Pass the buck. Go down the hall and tell Public Relations to take care of it. Oh, and while you're at it, send in my advisors, would you? I want them to meet my son.

TIME. I don't like this.

HELIOS. Relax. I'll give you a hefty raise next week.

TIME. If you're not going up yet, you might want to take off your headgear.

HELIOS (*absently*). Eh?

TIME. That way, the boy can skip the shades.

HELIOS. Oh, yes. Excellent suggestion.

(TIME exits. HELIOS sets his headdress aside, and PHAETON removes the sunglasses.)

HELIOS. Dedicated employee, Time. Been with the firm for an eternity. But she can be over-zealous. She greet you well? Make you feel at home?

PHAETON. She's very nice.

HELIOS. My boy, you're about to witness a crisis of international proportions. For the first time in hundreds of years—why, no, in millennia!—the sun is rising late. The world will go completely crazy. In just a little while, every emperor, king, president, prime minister, and dictator-for-life on the planet will call, asking what in the name of heaven has gone wrong. This phone will ring right off the hook. Oh, it will be fun! Don't know why I've stuck to such a tight schedule all this time. Responsibility gets to be a habit, I guess. So. Tell me everything. How are your sisters?

PHAETON. Fine.

HELIOS. And your mother. Does she speak well of me? No, let me rephrase that. Does she speak of me at all?

PHAETON. Not really.

HELIOS. Hardly any wonder. Our parting wasn't exactly a happy one.

PHAETON. So I'm told.

HELIOS. At least she's come to her senses and sent you here. Yes, I knew she'd finally see the light. That boring little peninsula—which is it, Greece?—is no home for a young demigod. India is the place for you.

PHAETON. But Father—

HELIOS (*ignoring him*). You're an ambitious boy. I can see it in your eye. Mortal life hasn't quelled your godlike spirit. You want to move up in the world. Well, Sun Enterprises is just the place to do it. I'll get you your own office this afternoon, start you on an executive's salary.

PHAETON. Wait a minute. I don't even know if I want to stay here.

HELIOS. Don't be absurd. Of course you'll stay. This is where you belong.

PHAETON. But I just came here to meet you, to get to know you. I just want us to talk.

HELIOS. And so we shall! I'll tell you what, I'll take the whole day off. The world can cope with an extra night this once. And before you know it, you'll forget all this nonsense about going back to Greece. Just wait and see.

PHAETON. But I don't even know you.

HELIOS. How can you say that? I'm your father.

PHAETON. Most boys my age have seen more of their fathers.

HELIOS. You're hitting a little low, son.

PHAETON. I'm sorry.

HELIOS. You've got a right, I suppose. I could blame it all on your mother, tell you she simply didn't want me to come around, but that wouldn't be fair. It was an awkward situation, one of those marriages no one quite approved of, mortals or gods. It seemed best for me to keep my distance. Someday you'll learn that no one's to blame in these matters.

PHAETON. That's supposed to explain everything?

HELIOS. Oh, come now. You surely didn't come all the way to India to whine about your life. If you did, I've got other business to attend to. You're testing my patience, and it's just not done. (*Pause*) I'm sorry. It's easy to forget you're my son.

PHAETON. That's just my point.