

What Would Satan Do?

Anthony Miller

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ISBN: 0615540023
ISBN-13: 978-0615540023

Dedication

To my partner for life and the three mini-me's.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my wife and partner, Meggie. Thank you to my writer friends, Peazy, Kris, Heather, Jeb, Don, Elizabeth, Joan, Carol, and all the other Lessers. Thank you to my encouragers and first readers, Bob, Beth, Ryan, Steve, Mom, Gary and Jaye. Thank you to the person who said, “Go for it!” – Tina.

*Chapter 1. The Apostles Were Dirty
Cannibals*

There are days when it is appropriate to stomp the hell out of a frog, and days when it is just better not to. The trick is to know which is which.

Satan shot an evil look at the creature on the sidewalk. *Fuck frogs*, he thought, using the new vernacular he hadn't quite got the hang of yet. *Fuck them to fucking Hell.*

He had on his favorite Italian shoes – made out of baby cats or something really nice he couldn't remember – and they were no good for stomping much of anything, let alone juicy amphibians. But the little bastards were everywhere, just begging to be obliterated and, in the case of a few particularly cheeky ones, having their innards ground into the pavement.

The frog croaked and Satan snapped – Italian shoes be damned, this frog was going to die. He raised his leg high, preparing to stomp down. But then the clock tower tolled, and he realized he was late for class. When he looked back, the frog

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had hopped away, thereby narrowly escaping stompy, cat-shoe death.

He heaved a weary sigh. His shoulders slumped. After a few strange looks from passersby, he also put his foot down and stalked off to class.

The day had started so well. He wasn't sure why – yesterday's therapy session had, after all, been a complete waste of time. The woman hadn't told him anything helpful. She'd been too busy screaming after he had set her on fire. He'd liked her though – what was her name? Dr. something or other. Whatever. He'd still felt pretty good when he'd woken up this morning.

He'd been having too many anger management episodes lately, too many things he'd had to explode, light on fire, or evaporate – the man on the street, that other man on the street, the lady standing next to the man on the street, the movie theater, all those people inside the movie theater, Pennsylvania Avenue between M and H Streets – the list was really longer than it ought to have been. But then, this morning, he'd woken up feeling like this was it; like he was really going to be able to change this time.

It hadn't taken very long for his optimism to fade, though. He'd only gone a few steps from the parking garage when he'd seen his first frog of the day. And then he'd seen about fifty of that frog's slimy, froggy friends, at which point the morning's cool demeanor had checked out, leaving the Devil teetering on the edge.

You might think that, of all God's creatures, frogs probably wouldn't be particularly high up on the list of what irked the Prince of Darkness, but each of us has his Kryptonite. Of course, it wasn't just the sliminess, croakiness, or hoppiness of the frogs that set him off. It was what the frogs represented – or

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what they seemed to represent. Maybe. Hopefully not, but maybe.

A bitch fuck ass shit fucker fucker bitch plague, thought Satan.

He practiced his anger-management respiration exercises as he clomped off toward the be-spired edifice of Healy Hall. He wasn't very good at it, but soldiered onward with gusto, and the other pedestrians gave him a wide berth on account of the horsey breathing sounds he was making.

Healy Hall is a fancy place. It has lots of pointy bits made of serious-looking gray stone that give it a slightly ominous, gothic appearance, and the whole thing should probably be in a museum. But it isn't. Quite the opposite, in fact – its historied halls are instead used as the place where Georgetown students go to get their forms and papers stamped, and where they attend boring survey courses with titles like, “Intro to Whateverucks,” or the “History of the Kingdom of Whogivesacrap.”

Nowhere does this juxtaposition between timelessness and everyday mundanity stand in starker contrast than in the Gaston Auditorium. This wood-paneled auditorium is fancy enough that it's often used for things like presidential debates. It was also, for one semester, the location of Satan's weekly lectures in his History of Religion course.

The Devil burst in through the back door of the auditorium and found it packed with students. They occupied every seat and even most of the space on the aisles that led down to the stage. His stage. A hush fell over the audience as he entered and threaded his way toward the front. The first sound to break the silence was the tapping and scraping of a small piece of chalk as he scribbled “DIRTY CANNIBALS” on a portable chalkboard, underlining it twice for emphasis.

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“Ladies and Gentlemen!” He spun with a flourish. “Who can tell me . . . why there is so *little* written in the Bible about what happened to the Apostles after the crucifixion?”

The students just sat, not bothering to look sheepish at their own silence.

Satan stood at attention as he scanned the room, a thin, well-dressed soldier standing tall for truth and justice. “Well,” he continued, “you may recall, if you’ve studied your Bible – and I expect nothing less of students at this fabulous institution—” He waved his hand at the general fabulousness of it all, which for some reason seemed to be located kind of up and to the left. “—that after Jesus died, they took him down and stuck his body in a tomb, and the next morning, according to the Gospel of Luke—” There was a popping sound, and Satan produced a Bible, from which he began reading without having to flip or search, “[T]hey entered in, and found not the body of the Lord Jesus.” The Book popped back out of existence, and Satan glanced up at his audience from underneath a lofty and benevolent brow. “Well, isn’t it obvious?”

The auditorium stayed silent. Nobody even blinked at Satan’s parlor trick with the Bible. Magic, schmagic.

“Okay,” said Satan. “I’ll tell you.” He began to pace. “The night before the crucifixion, Jesus went on and on about, ‘This is my body’ and ‘This is my blood.’ It was *so* tedious.” He shook his head. “But,” he pointed a finger, “as it turns out, the Apostles were actually listening very closely.” He paused, pressed the finger to his lips, and then resumed pacing.

A lone croak reverberated through the auditorium. Satan stopped mid-step and turned to face his audience, his eyes darting this way and that. There was no sign of a frog anywhere.

“Was that—?”

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The students just continued to stare at their teacher, waiting. Some of them tilted their heads, but none gave any sign of having borne witness to anything other than pearls of Satanic wisdom. The frog, having apparently said its peace, stayed silent.

“Anyway.” Satan nodded and turned on his heel to resume his pedantic stride. “Jesus died, and after he died, and was dead, they—” He paused to peer behind a stack of boxes piled on one side of the stage. “They stuck his body in a tomb. But you already knew all that.” He peered behind the portable chalkboard and then turned again to face the students. “What you didn’t know—”

The noise frogs make usually sounds a lot less like “ribbit” than children are led to believe. Cats go “meow,” and ducks really do go “quack,” but frogs do not say “ribbit.” Instead, they usually make a sound that is not entirely unlike the gastroesophageal event that follows a good root beer. For Satan, that sound was like having a bunch of fire ants shoved in his ear, but only if those ants had just come from a crack and methamphetamine picnic, and were maybe armed with tiny, ant-sized pitchforks. His face went all squinchy for a second, and when he opened his eyes, they glowed a little.

“Where the hell is it?” he asked, scouring the stage. He shoved the lectern aside and was just about to fling the portable chalkboard when he was stopped by the sound of a small, female voice.

“Um, professor Astra—A—A—Astraval...?”

Satan spun around. “Yes? What? What is it?”

It was the squirrely girl. The one with frizzy hair who always interrupted with her stupid questions. She had a mousey face, wore Beatnik glasses, and had on a shapeless brown bag of a dress that looked as if it had been made from a burlap sack, probably because it had, in fact, been made from a burlap sack.

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“What’s the deal with all the frogs?” she asked.

“What?” Satan squinted at the girl as if she’d just invited him to find the interloping amphibian and give it a good, ice-cream-worthy lick. “How should I know? What on Earth gave you the impression that I’m some kind of expert on slimy, disgusting things?”

“It’s just that—”

“What? Spit it out!”

“It’s just that there’ve been, you know, a lot of weird things going on lately,” she said. Like so many young people, she was incapable of uttering a simple declarative statement, and instead allowed everything she said to taper off as if it were a question. “I mean, there was that crazy storm? You know?” A quiet murmur of agreement rose up in the auditorium. She turned to look at a couple of other students, eliciting nods and, further back in the room, a quiet, “Yeah.”

Satan answered her question by ignoring it entirely. “What you all did not know,” he said, “was that later that night, in a fit of apostolic fervor, some of those same attentive disciples snuck into the tomb and, taking the ‘this is my body’ tripe far too literally, went to town.” He turned to the audience, his eyes wide. “That’s right – they ate him, the dirty cannibals.”

There were a couple of gasps, and one guy in the back harrumphed, gathered his stuff up, and stormed out. But mostly the students were unmoved by this revelation. This wasn’t their first rodeo with the Devil.

He continued in a quieter, more conspiratorial tone. “Later, when Luke and Mark and all the other tossers wrote the Gospels, they invented the whole we-found-the-tomb-empty bit to cover up the cannibalistic nastiness.” He struck a dignified, remorseful pose, and stared off into the distance. “It was a shameful,

inauspicious way for the Church to start, and I can hardly blame them for leaving it out.”

“Professor?” It was the squirrely girl again.

“How many of you have heard of the Shroud of Turin?” asked Satan. He scanned the audience for hands, pointedly ignoring the inquisitive student in a potato sack.

The girl pressed on. “I ... heard on the radio this morning ... that these are all signs of the Apocalypse?”

“The Shroud of Turin was their tablecloth,” said Satan, holding his hands out wide like a showman.

“And all the frogs?” said the girl. “Well, they called it—they called it ‘a plague?’”

Satan’s hands dropped. He shifted his eyes—all glowy again—and locked them on the girl while the rest of him stayed perfectly still. “What—?” he asked.

“Well, it’s just that it’s all a little —”

“—is your problem?”

“—too coincidental.”

The Devil thought about exploding her. Right there. In front of the whole class. It would be so easy. He stood perfectly still for a moment, picking at some invisible lint on the lapel of his pinstriped jacket as he imagined her head going “Pop!” It would be so very easy. But no. He would maintain control.

“Nonsense,” he said, waving his hand dismissively. He beamed. “Now, as I was saying.”

An earnest-looking student wearing an earnest-looking sweater raised his hand. Satan turned to stare at the young man. “Yes,” he said. “What is your problem?”

The student spoke with a slowness that was either the result of some neurological deficiency or having been raised in the South. “Well, sir, I was also wondering whether you have any

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thoughts about the string of earthquakes and storms and floods, and all of that?”

“What has that got to do with what I’ve been talking about?” asked Satan. “And anyway, what on Earth is a ‘strang’ of earthquakes?”

“Well,” said the young man, “it’s been all over the news. There’s been a whole ton of earthquakes and floods and volcanoes and things – for months, I—even right here, in—in Washington. Surely you’re aware—”

“What floods? What earthquakes? What on Earth are you *talking* about?” Satan shooed his hands, as if he could wave away such utter nonsense. He didn’t really care much for the news. He’d found that he much preferred watching science fiction and adventure stories.

“Well—” said the student, gathering himself up.

Another student – who’d apparently grown up in a part of the country where folks talk faster – interrupted. “What about those tornadoes last year – the one in New York and the one in England – on the same day even? And all that weird stuff happening down in Texas?”

“Right, that’s what I’m talking about,” said the be-sweatered Southerner. “Do you think it’s the end of the world as we know it?” The other students started nodding and yeaving at each other.

Satan seethed for a moment, and then burst. “I had nothing to do with any of that!” he screamed. “Nothing! And if I didn’t do it, it can’t be happening! So it’s nothing!” He paused, wide eyed, and scanned his stunned and silent audience.

One student was neither stunned nor silent. She had on a burlap sack. “But I thought—” she started to say, but didn’t finish on account of the fact that, at that instant, there was an

abrupt step change in the amount of entropy in the room. All of the atoms that had made up the stage at the front of Gaston Hall for the hundred or so years of its existence spontaneously rearranged themselves into a diffuse, unstructured array. This they accomplished with the assistance of a great deal of heat, some flames, a lot of noise, and a shockwave that lifted the first few rows of students (along with their seats and various personal belongings) into the air, depositing them approximately fifteen feet backward in the auditorium.

The students' reaction to the explosion was fairly normal, which is to say that there was a lot of screaming and hollering and falling over or lying very still under fiery debris.

Satan stood, seething amidst clouds of swirling, settling dust, and muttered to himself.

"Oh, God!" said one student.

The Devil's head snapped up. "Where?"

"I think she's dead!" said another. "Oh my God, she's dead!"

The earnestly-sweatered Southerner lurched out from underneath a pile of debris. He stood, wiped at a line of blood that trickled down his forehead, and surveyed the mayhem with wide eyes. Fortunately, his sweater seemed to have escaped the blast unharmed. "Professor?"

Satan didn't notice. He'd gone back to his ranting. "How dare He?! It's my job! Mine! And if I choose not to do it..." He turned, started to pace, stopped, and turned again.

"Professor?"

"He can't just start it without me! That's the whole reason I came here!" The fancy paintings on the walls burst into flames, one-by-one. He threw up his arms, and the glass in the windows shattered and sprayed into the room.

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There was some more screaming. The student who'd been making startled statements about the deceased state of one of his fellow students encountered more fallen comrades, and lamented their passing as well.

From out of nowhere, a frog zipped through the air and splattered against the wall. Satan let slip a tiny smirk, and swept over to the young man in the sweater. "It's not happening," he said.

"What? What?"

"None of it," said the Devil. He shrugged and smiled.

Sirens outside announced the arrival of one or more emergency vehicles.

"I—I don't understand what—"

"This!" Satan grabbed the student by the collar, and flung his free arm out to indicate all of this. He smiled broadly, but then let go, jerking back at the sound of a distressed cry from the squirrely girl, whose hand he'd apparently been standing on. He took a moment to kick her and turned back to face the student in the sweater.

The young man made a confused, squinty face at the Devil.

"Nope," said Satan, surveying the damage he'd done. "Not happening." He spun, his eyes wide and defiant, and grabbed the young man by the sweater again, this time with more enthusiasm. "But what if it is?"

Chapter 2. Behold: Megachurch

Pastor William Earl Cadmon stood on the stage of his church and practiced smiling. He'd just had veneers installed, and felt as if he were shining a spotlight every time he opened his mouth – kind of a toothy Bat Signal. He flexed his jaw a couple of times and wriggled his lips, doing a pretty good Mr. Ed impression – he'd just have to get used to his new teeth before the service tomorrow. He closed his lips, pursing them as he did so, turned his head slightly to the left, and made his eyes all action-hero squinty. There were no cameras on him, but he found it was always best to practice as if there were.

The old stadium seemed cozier now – replacing the metal railings and folding chairs with wood paneling and upholstered seats had helped – but it still didn't seem all that churchy. He'd have to fix that. At some point.

He looked up at the rows and rows of empty seats, and thought about coming here with his Mom back when it was called the Pinnacle Arena to see his father perform with the circus. It was hard to imagine trapeze artists, lions, and elephants

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where he now preached the Word of God™. Down on the floor – in the “Corinthians” section, rows J, K, and L – was where it had happened. He pictured the little red car, his dad, and the other clowns – those heartless bastards – and closed his eyes to say a quiet prayer.

Bill Cadmon was the pastor of Austin’s Driftwood Fellowship, a non-denominational, evangelical Christian megachurch. It was the biggest house of worship in the world, if you didn’t count those Korean jerks and their Yoshi-yoshobuttrado-Kung-Pao thing. Cadmon sure didn’t. After all, he ran a live, closed-circuit feed to a whole other campus every Sunday. Plus, his television ministry reached out to over twenty million people in more than one hundred countries every week. And anyway, they were friggin’ Koreans. They could just go suck it.

He stepped down off the stage and walked the aisles, pausing here and there to thumb through stacks of promotional materials piled on the seats – like he did every week. These days it was just a spot check, but when he’d started, he’d taken a sort of pride in making sure that everything was in order; that each and every person who came in had a copy of the week’s program. But the church had grown – exploded really – so he’d long since had to delegate that task. And nowadays, folks got way more than just a program. They got glossy, full-color brochures advertising all kinds of interesting, faith-based services that the church now offered. But he still liked to walk the aisles.

As he worked his way up the lower bowl of the arena, Cadmon thought about what an insane ride it had been over the last few years. He’d begun expanding his business empire – “*fellowship*,” he reminded himself – with a line of books, taking the catchy phrase, “What would Jesus do?” and turning it into faith-based guidance for daily living. His most recent book –

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How Would Jesus Lose Weight? – was at the top of the *New York Times* Best Seller List, and had been there for six weeks already.

More recently, the fellowship had begun offering a variety of End Times-related services, the most successful of which was a planning business designed to help folks get their worldly affairs in order before Judgment Day hit. A last will and testament is great if you actually die, but what is the legal effect of being among the Chosen – those the Lord takes up to Heaven during the Rapture, before all the really bad, fiery, end-of-the-world stuff happens? Cadmon had experts standing by 24-7, ready to help figure that out. Of course, that kind of service would really only work if you could convince people that the end of the world was near. But he wasn't worried about that. He had inside information.

He stopped and sat down at the end of a row, leaning back and propping his boots up on the seat in front of him. Things were good. Real good. And now he needed to do some thinking; to figure out his next step.

There is a strange kind of quiet that comes with being in a big, empty enclosed space like that. It hits you in the pit of your stomach, almost like a touch of vertigo. Cadmon took a deep breath. *What the Hell would Jesus do now? Would he get the convertible? Or would He just say, "Fuck it," and go for the Turbo?*

He'd just closed his eyes to ponder this weighty inquiry when the giant speakers that hung from the ceiling erupted with a furious sound – a robotic buzz saw that tore through the cavernous arena. At the same time, every light ramped up to full brightness, flooding the building with brilliant light. One exploded in a shower of sparks.

The metallic racket worked its way down from a high-pitched static to a low rumble that shook the floor. Cadmon jumped, startled by the blast of sound, and tried to stand, but his

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elephant-skin cowboy boot slid, and he fell awkwardly over the top of the chair, sprawling across the seats in the next row. The noise was overwhelming, and he could barely think, but he had to get up and do something. For a second Cadmon thought about Ray, the audio tech, wondering if the idiot was blasting his damned 80's music again. But then he realized that he recognized the sound. *Shit*, he thought, disentangling himself. *It's the middle of the day!*

Then it was gone. The light and noise had quit just as quickly as they had started, leaving the arena in total darkness. The change caught Cadmon by surprise, but he grabbed a handrail and managed to avoid falling on his face. He crept slowly down the steps toward the main floor, his eyes locked on the scene before him.

Down on the stage, a glowing, white-orange light appeared, bobbing and hovering three feet off the floor. In the center of the orb, Cadmon could see shapes and shadows moving as if through a window. The light grew brighter and taller, and as the preacher arrived at the foot of the stage, the shadows resolved themselves into the shape of a very tall man. The man stepped forward, and the light seemed to shrink and close behind him.

His eyes were shut and his hands clasped in front of him. At last he looked up, letting his hands fall by his sides. "William Cadmon," the angel said, "I am Ezekiel."

Cadmon stopped, frozen – he couldn't help it. He shook the feeling off, and stormed up the steps to the stage, ready to tear the angel a new one.

"Yes, hello again, Ezekiel." The angel always introduced himself as if it were the first time. *What an idiot*, thought the preacher. The novelty of meeting someone who'd spent time face-to-face with God had worn off. "Can't you just come in the door or something?" He threw his arms up in exasperation. "Do

you have any idea how much it's going to cost me to fix all those lights and speakers again?"

The angel turned his head slowly, looking down at the little human. He glowed with a light that pulsed and ebbed, making him look like he'd just spent some quality time inside a nuclear reactor. His eyes narrowed and seemed to Cadmon just a little bit fiery. "You have made a lot of money since I started visiting," he said. "You can afford it."

"Yeah, okay. So that's true," Cadmon admitted. And it was. The angel had told him that if he wrote the books, they would sell, and they'd sold. The angel had told him to start up the automated, computer-based prayer service, and now that was raking in millions. Perhaps the most important information that the angel had shared, however, was a warning about a series of natural disasters that had struck over the last eighteen months – earthquakes, floods, volcanoes, and plagues of gross things. And that, more than anything else, was what had allowed Cadmon to grow his empire.

The preacher had started by sprinkling a few relatively benign statements about the coming Day of Judgment into his sermons. After the first earthquake had struck Paris, he'd started a two-month series on Judgment Day and the Book of Revelation. He was two weeks into that when the first swarm of locusts had showed up. A week later, two tornadoes ripped through Manhattan and central London almost simultaneously. He'd got a call that night from a producer on CNN, asking if he was available for some on air commentary. And so he'd begun his rise to national prominence.

The angel cleared his throat and Cadmon snapped out of his daydream. The slight smile faded from the preacher's face, replaced by an expression that was either pain or constipation.

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He gritted his teeth and glanced around to see if any of the staff was watching.

“You shouldn’t be here now,” he said. “It’s the middle of the goddamned day! Someone is going to see you!” Cadmon ran his eyes up and down the angel. *He was*, thought Cadmon, searching for the right word, *crusty*. Apart from the whole glowing thing, he hardly appeared angelic or heavenly at all. And the glow really only made him look like a Chernobyl victim. His clothing looked like a rough bed sheet or maybe a curtain. *At least he’s got wings*, thought Cadmon.

“There is a storm coming,” said Ezekiel.

“Yeah, yeah, end of the world. We’ve been over this. I’m doing what I can. I already told you—”

“No, I speak of an actual storm,” Ezekiel said, staring off into the unknown void. “A very large storm. One that will breach the shores of this state and those of your neighbor. Many will perish.”

“Oh,” said Cadmon, surprised. The angel had never before warned him about anything like that. At least, not in Texas. Usually, the things that happened here were relatively benign. Fucking annoying, sure, but nobody was getting hurt by a bunch of stupid bugs or toads. The really bad stuff struck far away, and earthquakes or floods wiping out brown people in some far-off country somewhere didn’t bother him. In fact, he found it helpful. A frightened flock was a good thing. A dead flock, on the other hand, wasn’t going to keep the lights on. A scary thought occurred to him. “I’m not going to perish, am I?”

The angel whipped his head around. “No,” he said.

Cadmon rubbed his chin. “So,” he said, trying to remember the weather report he’d seen, “you’re talking about that storm in the Caribbean.” He tilted his head and regarded Ezekiel through

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squinty, skeptical eyes. “The tropical storm? You know where it’s going to hit?”

“Yes,” said Ezekiel, “and now it is time for us to begin.”

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Chapter 3. Enorma Was Round, Like Sputnik

Explosions always just seem to make people go crazy. It's weird. And the students at Georgetown University were not the unique and individual snowflakes they'd have you believe. No, when Gaston Hall blew up, they went nuts and started freaking out just like people always do.

The Prince of Darkness paused and turned back to watch as students and staff ran around screaming, shouting, and snapping photos with their mobile phones. He wondered for a moment if he should try to look inconspicuous, but with no mobile phone of his own, wasn't sure he could pull it off. In the end, he just decided not to worry about it – his usual approach to dealing with problems these days – and ambled off toward the parking garage where he'd left his beloved automobile.

The chaos soothed him. Or it should have. Mayhem usually did. It always had, even before the whole misunderstanding with

that big, galactically-stupid, lunkheaded asswiper Michael and all those other angelic fuckwits. But today? Not so much.

The problem, of course, was the frogs. Well, no, it wasn't the frogs. It was what they represented – or might represent. He saw one and regretted his choice of shoes for the second time that day.

What if it really were ending? What if? Was that even possible? If he wasn't doing it – and he wasn't – then there was no way any of this could be happening. Without him, there would be no end; no final showdown between good and evil. He was the necessary ingredient; the catalyst. He was the special sauce in God's divinely-constructed, cosmologically-huge hamburger, and now he'd taken his evil ball and gone home.

It wasn't that he cared particularly for the world. Except for Lamborghinis. And Star Wars – well, Darth Vader anyway. And ice cream. But the rest of the world could go take a flying leap up into a goat's butt for all he cared. No, he'd come here to avoid being a pawn.

It had all started with an admission. He finally, after all of the years of waiting and time-biding and grudge-holding, had admitted the one thing he'd never even allowed himself to consider: He was going to lose, and there was no way around it. The Day of Judgment was coming, and though he was supposed to have kind of a leading role, things weren't going to turn out very well for him in the end. After all, that God jerk had planned the whole thing. In fact, there was a whole book in the Bible that set it all out: He'd start things up, have a bit of fun, and then, in the end, have his ass handed to him by that Great Big Dick in the Sky.

And so Satan had quit. He'd just walked right out of Hell.

“I—uh—I think I'll go for a bit of a walk about. You know, check things out,” he'd said.

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The minions looked at each other. Satan hadn't gone topside in two millennia.

He looked at them, his evil eyebrows raised expectantly. They stared right back, waiting.

“Okay then,” he said. “Be back soon.”

He'd been a little impetuous about it, sure. But how do you tell a legion of angelic bad guys who you've led into Hell that you've changed your mind? Satan could just see it. “So, you know that the whole End Times, Let's-go-kick-God's-ass thing we had planned? Yeah ... we're going to have to go ahead and cancel that. Budget cuts – you know how it is.”

He wrung his new human hands and sighed. Even without the plague of frogs, things hadn't exactly turned out as he'd expected. He'd known living as a human was going to be different, of course, but he'd expected it to be different in the, “Wow, this is new and cool and exciting!” sense, rather than the, “Holy crap this really sucks a lot!” sense. He just had not anticipated so many things – traffic jams, old, slow people, Muzak – but then, that's the problem with moving to a place you haven't been in 2,000 years. Entire continents get discovered, civilizations rise and fall, paradigms shift, indoor plumbing becomes popular – and it was all a little overwhelming.

Of course, there were good things. He had, for example, spent almost an hour flushing things down the toilet in his first apartment. And when he'd run out of stuff to flush – his pet fish, his car keys, a toupee he'd stolen – he'd run out and bought fifteen pet rodents of varying size. He flushed seven of them before number eight – some kind of fidgety thing with odd hair – had got stuck and put an end to the evening's adventure.

There were other technological marvels that appealed to Satan's inner twelve-year-old. First among these – after toilets,

of course – were exotic sports cars. Italian ones were particularly nice. He recalled, back in the 1960s, when one of his minions had come in to tell him about this new project.

“Sire, I have developed something new. Something that will distract countless minds and separate souls from The Almighty.” It was Azriel. Kind of a boner, but earnest and a hard worker, so, you know, tolerable.

“What? Yeah, okay, swell.” Satan had by this time already become almost completely overwhelmed by the sheer monotony and predictability of it all. He waved Azriel on and tried not to collapse in a fit of boredom.

Azriel had then produced a tedious parade of mind-numbing charts and graphs and other un-fun things that described the super car in glowing terms like, “the ultimate expression of pointless excess” and “a giant penis suit that people can wear.”

“Yeah...” said Satan, exploring just how far he could mash the side of his face with his palm.

“Men will spend their lives lusting after these. They will prioritize acquiring these cars over all else. They will have mid-life crises. They will wear gold chains. And most importantly, they will forget Him.”

“Sounds cool,” he said thinking, *Whatever*.

But now that he was here and had actually managed to procure one for himself, he finally understood. These things – in his case a Lamborghini – were truly manifestations of the sublime. Just thinking of being behind the wheel sent chills up his human spine – the sound of ten cylinders and forty valves, all working together in absolute harmony; a perfectly-orchestrated symphony that, as you pressed the accelerator, spun faster and faster, working to a feverish, howling crescendo. And then, just when you and the engine couldn’t take any more, you shifted

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into the next gear, and got to start all over. It was exhausting just to think about it.

His Lamborghini – a white Gallardo LP570-4 Superleggera with a bright red, go-faster stripe and extra shiny wheels – was parked on the lowest underground level of Georgetown’s enormous main parking garage, where he’d managed to find three empty spaces in a row so that he could park sideways. That meant, however, that he’d have to take the dreaded elevator.

It wasn’t a particularly bad elevator. In fact, it was perfectly nice, with almost none of the urine smell or stains that one so often encounters in parking garages. But it was slow. Hellishly slow. It made him want to smash his head into the wall – except that he knew better than to try that again.

He trotted around the corner into the parking garage and nearly tripped when he saw an extremely heavy woman waiting in front of the elevators. He was about to say something, but then remembered that he was supposed to try to find the positive in any situation. The positive here, he thought – just as the elevator bonged and the down arrow lit up – was probably the fact that she’d already pressed the button and done all the waiting for him. He swept past her just as the doors opened, spun, and stabbed the “CLOSE DOOR” button. She stood perfectly still, a look of shock on her face. But then, just as the doors were coming together, she stuck out a meaty arm and forced them back open. The rotund woman stepped into the elevator and smiled at the sartorially resplendent Lord of the Underworld.

Yuck, he thought. There weren’t so many fatties around last time he’d made the trip up. He made a show of looking nervously back and forth between her gargantuan caboose and the elevator weight capacity sign. She harrumphed and turned to the task of selecting a floor.

This, it turns out, was kind of tricky.

She pressed the button for the fourth floor, hesitated, and then also selected the fifth floor.

Satan raised his eyebrows. *No*, he thought, *she wouldn't*. He tried to imagine what was going through her mind, but drew a blank. He decided that was probably right.

His cellmate pondered for another moment, and decided apparently, that she also ought to press "3." And so she did.

Satan's jaw slowly made its way toward the floor. The cow had pressed three different floors! Sure, there was a lot of her, but he couldn't see any way that she was going to manage more than one stop. He fought off the urge to stab her in the ear with a pencil, but only because he didn't have a pencil. He seethed.

Enorma stepped away from the button panel, but still looked pensive. She took a tiny step forward, but stopped again, apparently still trying to remember which floor she actually needed.

No. Fucking. Way, he thought. He searched the elevator frantically. He felt trapped, which wasn't really all that shocking, since he was, in fact, trapped inside a metal box with a giant woman who seemed intent on prolonging their time together.

The woman squinted, squared her jaw, and threw her shoulders back as she stepped up, once more, to the panel of backlit buttons. Her previous forays into the field of floor selection had all been in error. Just practice, perhaps. But now she knew, apparently. She saw the light. She was on the true path. She reached out triumphantly for button number two, but before she touched it, launched up through the top of the elevator, up the shaft, through the atmosphere, and into low-Earth orbit.

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“Shit,” said Satan. “Not again.” He wedged the doors open and climbed out of the elevator to go find the stairs.

Chapter 4. Holy Land Coffee

Liam McEwen's path was similar to Satan's. Except that he didn't start out as an archangel. Or lead legions of other angels in a direct, militant uprising against God. Or bring about the fall of man by manifesting as a reptile and passing out fruit. Or, you know, rule Hell. So saying that they were "similar" might be putting it a little strongly. But their careers were precisely the same in one important respect: Both had simply walked away one day.

Liam had left his job with the CIA's Special Activities Division five years before. He'd done well there – worked his way up the ranks, shot some bad guys, snuck in and out of foreign countries – just normal stuff. But the stress and the politics had ultimately gotten to be too much. At least, that was what he told people. In fact, he'd actually quite liked it. A lot. After all, not everybody gets paid to kick the crap out of bad guys. Most folks have to develop hobbies or drinking problems to help them cope with the daily grind, but Liam got to exorcise

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his demons while he was on the clock. All good things, however, either have to end or start sucking eventually.

Liam's departure from the CIA had been precipitated by an unfortunate incident involving former Vice President Dick Whitford, a hot-rodded golf cart, and fourteen gallons of lemon pudding. This, of course, had come on the heels of a series of strange episodes that, in that rarified, secret-agent air, might otherwise have merited little more than an entry in some top secret report and an endearing nickname among the other sociopaths he called co-workers. But that was not to be. Instead, the episode with the VP bumped him up from a necessary evil to a full-fledged problem, and so Liam had been encouraged to fuck off.

He'd left that life behind, and today a much less lethal Liam stood in line for coffee, just like he did pretty much every morning. Ahead of him, a queue of students waited to order beverages of absurd complexity. They wore Gucci and Prada and jaded expressions, and they made waiting in line look cool. In his old khaki shorts and tattered T-shirt, Liam actually looked more like a student than pretty much anyone else there in the coffee house.

Holy Land Coffee was located just a couple of blocks from the campus of the 50,000-student University of Texas. It was also next door to the guitar shop Liam had started when he'd returned home. He loved his guitar shop, if only because running it meant that he tended to encounter far fewer smelly, unfriendly terrorists who were up to no good and needed to be shot. Or vice presidents, for that matter.

He sighed. His life these days was relaxed, comfortable, and mostly fire-arm free – and so he should have felt pretty good. But something was not right – something he couldn't put his finger on. It nagged at him. He felt like something was missing;

like he was waiting for something to happen. Liam had no idea what, though, because like most men, he was unable to wrap his head around tricky things like “feelings.” And so, as usual, he just dismissed the whole thing.

A few spots ahead in line, a young woman who was either a coed or a Hollywood starlet stepped up to the counter. Her expensive-looking sunglasses had gaudy, gold lettering on the sides and giant, bug-eye lenses that made her look a little like a platinum-haired insect – an insect who probably would’ve looked spectacular in a bikini. She was on the phone, and didn’t pause to place her order so much as redirect the stream of her conversation from her handset to the barista.

“Um, hi, yes, I’d like grande half-caff, extra hot, soy latte with extra foam, half a squirt of sugar-free vanilla and half a squirt of sugar-free cinnamon, two packets of Splenda, and please put it in a venti cup, ‘kay? And,” she tilted her head and clasped her hands together in faux prayer, “can I please get a teensy bit of sugar-free caramel sauce drizzled on top? ‘Kay, thanks.” Her order placed, she snapped her phone back to her ear and picked up right where she left off without slowing down or even, apparently, breathing in. “And oh my god she was like, *so* drunk. I know, right? What a bitch. Yeah, I *know*, the *whole* night, and did you see those shoes she was wearing? So last summer, right? Oh. My. God!” She shoved past Liam and wandered off to take up space down at the end of the counter.

Liam was, generally speaking, an unflappable guy, partly because he’d seen and done stuff that would have flapped most people. He’d shot guys and been shot at. He’d visited the homes and hideouts of notorious terrorists at hours when polite folks wouldn’t dream of calling. He’d flown in helicopters while failing to keep his arms and legs in the vehicle at all times. He’d even been bitten by a lemur. Twice. And so he usually

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confronted the would-be Paris Hilton acolytes of his favorite coffee house with the oblivious looseness and the ever-present, lightly-ironic smile of a man who has seen and done horrible stuff and therefore refuses to get worked up about the everyday bullshit of life. Usually, anyway. He stared after the coed for a second, shrugged, and then returned his attention to the business of standing in line.

That was when he noticed the weirdo staring at him. The man was, as Liam's Irish grandma would have said, "a wee bit husky" – not all the way fat, but definitely well-endowed in the man-breast department. He was also short, and had a largish nose and brilliantly-hued, electric blue hair, which he wore in a severe bowl cut, making him look kind of like a Smurfy Beetle.

Maybe, thought Liam, the guy recognized him from television. That was probably it. He'd been on the news a bunch lately. It was completely random, but then it just kept happening. It would start raining blood or a bunch of frogs would come out of nowhere, and television crews would show up, see him, and suddenly he'd be on camera, giving his account of whatever weird shit had gone down. He didn't particularly care about being on TV, and he certainly didn't know any more about the frogs and locusts than anyone else. He just seemed to have a knack for being around whenever weird stuff happened. So that was probably why the dude was looking at him.

Liam caught himself staring at the guy's haircut, and looked away quickly. He glanced here and there, trying to act naturally as he fixed his gaze on a series of random spots in the coffee shop. When he looked back, Ringo Smurf was still staring. And then the man winked.

This sent Liam into a bit of a panic. Like most straight guys, he professed to being cool with homosexuality. In fact, he was generally able to resist the typical hetero male urge to offer an

unsolicited clarification of the fact that he would never, ever, under any circumstances, touch another man's penis – or that, if such an extraordinary thing were to happen, he wouldn't enjoy it. But here? Now? With this blue-haired weirdo actually making eyes at him? Liam lost his cool.

Weren't gay guys usually pretty good at figuring out whether other guys were gay? And weren't they usually pretty weight conscious? He tried to avoid the gaze of the world's only non-manorexic homosexual with broken gaydar by looking around immediately for a chick to ogle conspicuously. But all of the hot coeds seemed to have disappeared to that alternate dimension where keys and matching socks get off to, and all Liam saw were two grandmas and what looked like a dugong in a floral dress. It was no use. He was stuck, and ended up giving the guy kind of a half-smile, half-constipated look.

Of course, all of this took place in a matter of just a few seconds, but, as Einstein proved, time is relative, varying inversely with the awkwardness or uncomfortableness of a particular social situation. For Liam, time had slowed almost to a dead stop.

Fortunately, time hadn't actually stopped, and it was finally his turn to order. He turned to address the barista – Mr. Dao Tiêntri Duong – the craggy, weather-beaten Vietnamese proprietor of Holy Land Coffee, who looked as if he should be off guarding the ancient secrets of the Wu Lan Mountain, and whose sparkly, black eyes barely peered over the counter.

"I'd like," Liam started, but before he could finish, he realized that he was already holding a hot beverage.

The tiny barista had already swiped Liam's credit card and was completing the sale. "Freeooww!" he said.

Mr. Duong often did weird shit like this. The soundtrack was a new addition, however.

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“What’s with the sound effects?” Liam took his credit card and receipt. “And what if I had wanted to pay with cash?”

“You,” said the barista, “need to figure out who you are and what you want.”

Liam glanced at the coffee in his one hand and the credit card receipt in the other. “I think you already did that.”

“You’re lacking in focus, my friend,” said the little man. He squinted at Liam with hard, wizened eyes. “You don’t want to run out of time.”

“What?”

Mr. Duong, however, had moved on to the next customer.

Liam took his coffee and turned to leave, only to find himself face-to-face with His Smurfiness.

“Hi,” said Ringo.

Liam stared, wide eyed. “Oh...” he said. The rest of the words dallied in his parietal lobe, but then he was granted a second reprieve.

“Uh ... excuse me!” said the insectoid hottie.

Liam glanced around for a second before realizing that she was talking to him. He was apparently blocking her path to the shop’s supply of straws, napkins, and pre-packaged petroleum by-product sweeteners. He reveled for a moment in the mild irony of a plasticky, bitchy young woman yatching her way over to a rack of artificial sweeteners, but then she stamped her foot to show she meant business.

“Uh!” she said, shooing him with her phone. “Get out of the way!” He stepped back, and she strode past him, muttering a not-at-all-quiet and very distinct, “Freak!” as she passed.

There was a popping sound, and the woman yelped and jumped back as she tossed her now-flaming phone to the ground. She did not drop her beverage, however, opting instead

to demonstrate why it is inadvisable to engage in acrobatic activities or otherwise leap about with hot coffee in hand. Most of the contents of her cup slopped down the front of her tank top. This might have elicited a few murmurs of appreciation from the members of the young male demographic present in the coffee shop, but there wasn't time. The young woman had hardly finished spilling coffee all over herself when she slipped on the small amount of liquid she hadn't actually managed to pour on her shirt, and toppled over backward on to the floor.

"Huh," said Liam, regarding the woman with a kind of distant, academic interest.

He and the rest of the patrons watched as she tried a couple of times to stand, but slipped repeatedly, unable to find any solid footing among the puddles of expensive and complex beverage. Nobody moved to help her, and it seemed like a week passed before she finally stopped flopping all over the place and was finally able to pick her coffee- and dust-bunny-covered self up off the floor.

She stood for a moment, fuming, her fists balled. "Hmmp!" she said, and stormed out of the coffee shop.

"Huh," said Liam again, leaning over to pick up the phone, which was still flaming merrily to itself. He held it up and looked at it, and the flame went out. "Huh," he said, one more time – for good measure. He glanced around to demonstrate that he was just as surprised by this as everyone else. Nobody seemed very interested though, so he tossed the phone into a waste bin.

He glanced around a final time, took his coffee, and left.

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Chapter 5. Where You Can Stick that Parking Permit

The Devil ranted and muttered to himself as he stomped his way down the stairs, cursing the stupid, indecisive lady for making him shoot her into space.

There it was. His car. A breathtaking jewel that glittered among the exposed pipes, the steamy underground air, and the dank smells of the garage. He clicked the little beeper thingy to unlock it, slithered into the seat, and stabbed a finger at the button labeled, “Start.”

Ordinary engines start up by turning over once or twice, and come to life with a little bit of a wheeze that turns into a throat-clearing that eventually settles into a quiet hum. The engine of a Lamborghini, however, is not ordinary. It’s more like an enraged bull – an enraged bull who’s been poked, prodded, and generally tormented by a matador, and then fed amphetamines and stuffed into a small box. Even the Devil felt a little shiver as the car came to life.

Satan backed out of the spot, put the car in gear, and mashed the accelerator. He cackled as he struggled to control the car – or at least, to keep it pointed generally in the direction he hoped to go – as he tore up the ramps that led to the exit with the sort of artistic flair and panache that would have humbled and shamed Olympic ice dancers. He worked his way up the ramps at speeds well in excess of the posted five-miles-per-hour limit, never managing to align the front of the car and his intended direction for more than a second or two at a time. The tires squealed and smoked and the car lurched and slid as rubber and concrete came to terms about how best to apply 500 horsepower and 400 lb-ft of torque in the face of the wholly-inadequate friction coefficient of slimy, underground concrete. The fun, however, came to an abrupt halt as he approached the garage exit.

There in the middle of the exit lane, like a speed bump turned on end, stood a short man in a green, FunParc shirt – Satan’s parking garage nemesis. This wasn’t his first run in with the parking guy. He remembered thinking that Jesus was a gigantic pain in the ass, but this guy? He was on his way to earning his very own circle of Hell.

Satan eased the raging bull forward, goosing the throttle to make the engine emit a demonic snort, and rolled down the window. He stared straight ahead, ignoring the man until the window finished gliding all the way down into the door. Then, slowly, he turned a disdainful eye on the FunParc man.

The garage attendant did not react to the Devil’s television-worthy greeting. Instead, he waddled up, and with a sigh, squatted awkwardly beside the car. He squinted as he peered in at Satan.

“You must have parking pass,” he said in a foreign accent that revealed little about his origins other than that he should

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probably try to get back to them. “You don’t park here without pass.”

The Prince of Darkness tried to remain calm as he pointed to where he’d duct-taped his parking pass to his windshield earlier – the result of his last run in with this extraordinarily dense asshat. “It’s right there, on the windshield, *exactly* where you told me to put it.”

“No, very sorry sir. You must hang pass from mirror. It must hang from mirror.” He made a twisting gesture with his hand, as if the problem had maybe just been that the Dark Lord of the Underworld hadn’t been able to figure out how to attach his parking pass to his mirror.

“You moronic twit, you are the one who told me that you couldn’t see it when I hung it from the mirror.” He paused to take a deep breath. “Tell me, please, are we going to have to do this every time I come through?”

“The parking pass must hang from mirror to show you have contract to park here. If we can’t see pass, we think you don’t have contract. We have you towed.”

Satan decided to try another tack. “Listen, how many other \$250,000 Italian sports cars do you see here?”

“I’m sorry, sir?” The attendant made a face as if he’d just been told his mother and his favorite goat were having an affair.

“Look around, you knob. Do you now see – or have you *ever* seen – any other cars that look anything like this one? At some point, shouldn’t you start to think, ‘Ah yes, here comes that odd-looking white car!’” The Dark Lord omitted to point out the red “go faster” stripe he’d had painted down the center of the car, making it unique, even among Italian exotics.

This argument appeared to confuse the attendant, who simply returned to what he knew. “Eh ... your parking pass ... it must be

in visible spot.” The pronouncement thus pronounced, the attendant stood back on his heels, folded his arms, and raised his eyebrows with finality. “Or we tow car.”

“It’s taped to the fucking windshield! How is that not a ... ?” Satan stopped, deflated. There was no point trying to convince this moron. “You don’t have any idea what I’m saying, do you?” he said. “Okay, then.” He put his car in gear and drove off.

The parking attendant spent the next two and a half hours on fire.

The fire department showed up and tried to put him out, but the firefighters found that their usual tools were completely ineffective. They started with water, but the flames actually seemed to get bigger. So they sprayed him with fire extinguishers, and while they found that mildly entertaining, it really wasn’t any better. They tried smothering him in flame-retardant blankets, but that just made it impossible for the man to breathe – oddly the blaze itself hadn’t given him any trouble – and then the blankets themselves started to burn.

Ultimately, they weren’t really sure what to do with the fiery parking attendant, and since the guy didn’t seem to be about to die or anything, the firemen pronounced it to be, in their professional opinions, “some kind of Goddamn, fucked-up, super fire,” and just let him burn.

* * *

A late-model Ford careened across an athletic field, bumped and lurched over a sidewalk, and skidded to a halt in front of Georgetown’s main parking garage, scattering the crowd of students who’d managed to wrench themselves away from watching the conflagration at Healy Hall. The driver misjudged the distance though, and the car didn’t actually come to a stop until one wheel bounced up on top of the curb.

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Agent Bob Robertson stepped out onto the sidewalk and scanned his environment over the top of his car door, taking in every detail, every mote of dust. It was a while though, before his eyes finally settled on the group of firefighters who stood in a circle, talking to the guy who was on fire. That kind of crap just didn't surprise him anymore. He tweaked the lapels of his jacket, rolled his neck, and strode over to the newest group of weirdos.

The burning man appeared to have just said something funny, because most of the firemen were doubled over laughing, trying to catch their breath. Robertson paused to let the moment pass. He didn't do funny.

"Detective?" Robertson said.

Detective Dan Schmidt turned from the fire show just in time to see an uptight-looking man in a ill-fitting suit bearing down on him. "Can I help you?" he said, putting his hands up. There were enough people from enough departments standing around already – and nobody was accomplishing much of anything.

"I'm agent Bob Robertson, FBI," the stiff man said, holding up a badge.

"You guys investigate weird shit now too?" said Schmidt.

"That's correct. Whaddya got?" He nodded at the burning man.

Schmidt paused for a moment, wondering if he'd missed something, but Robertson just stood and stared. "Well," he said, "we got a guy," he pointed to the parking attendant, who at that moment appeared to be imitating a bird, much to the amusement of the firefighters, "and he's on fire." Schmidt waved his hands up and down quickly in kind of a "he's-on-fire" gesture.

"I see," said Robertson. "How did this happen?"

"How the hell should I know?"

Robertson leveled a serious look at the detective.

Schmidt took the cue. “So, he said he was having an argument with some guy who’d managed to park here without a permit or something. Said the guy drove off in a huff and then all the sudden he’s on fire.”

“Odd,” said Robertson. “He doesn’t seem to be in much pain.” He pointed to the parking attendant who, for a guy on fire, seemed to be having a pretty good time.

“Well, he was kind of screaming and stuff when we showed up. And after we couldn’t put him out, the paramedics tossed him a handful of heavy-duty painkillers. He’s apparently not feelin’ too much right now,” he said, waving his elbow at Robertson in a conspiratorial-chicken-wing, “You know what I mean?” way. Robertson just stared. Schmidt cleared his throat and put his chicken wing away before continuing. “And anyway, you look real close, you can see his skin ain’t burnin’ or nothin’, so I don’t know, you know? It’s just ... weird.”

“Hmmm...” Robertson edged closer to the flames. This wasn’t the first incident recently where he’d been called in to investigate weird stuff involving fire. Not even close. Some kind of sick, pyromaniac fuck was definitely on the loose in Washington, D.C.

“Oh,” said Schmidt, “and apparently one of the elevators is all fucked up. Like really fucked up. Big hole in the ceiling. Not sure if that’s connected, though.”

“Tell me, was he able to provide an identity?”

“An identity? For who?”

“For ‘whom,’” corrected Robertson. “I want to know who he was talking to just before he got set on fire.”

The cop shot Robertson a look that, if spoken, probably would have involved the F-word. “Said he drove a white car. Maybe a sedan. But that’s pretty much all he knew.” He looked

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back over at the flaming parking attendant and sighed. One of the firefighters was tearing open a package of marshmallows. “They got video, if you want it. Tape’s over there in the office. Apparently, most people park here under contract, but I doubt it’s any of them that did it. I guess we could try to run the plates. You know, if you want.”

“I want,” said Robertson. “Get me the tape.”

Chapter 6. Magic Queso from Heaven

The little bell on the door of the guitar shop jingled as Raju Singh came in for his afternoon shift. “Dude,” he called to Liam, who was sitting on a couch in the back office, watching T.V., “your chakras are all fucked up. I am telling you this all the way from here.”

“Thanks for the reminder,” said Liam, without looking up from an assortment of take-out containers filled with chicken and various ancillary fajita-making materials. “I’ve been meaning to have them un-fucked, but haven’t had the time. You know how it is.” He pulled the lid off a container of queso.

“No problem. But you should remember to un-fuck them soon, or you’ll be in some serious shit.”

Raju was practicing to become a self-help guru. He didn’t have any applicable knowledge or formal training *per se*, or even much of a clue really. In fact, all he knew about spirituality was what he’d garnered from a couple of evenings spent surfing the Internet, alternating between hits from a search engine and hits from his industrial-grade bong. Even so, he was supremely

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confident that he was The One. He was going to change the world. Or at least make a lot of money and be surrounded by hot chicks.

“Liam, I am thinking that maybe the time is ripe for me that I should be sharing my spiritual wisdom with the customers. What do you think of this plan?”

“Raju, shut up.” Liam saw no reason to indulge Raju’s spiritual pretense, or his affected Indian accent for that matter, if only because Raju hadn’t had either when Liam had hired him. And the fact was, Raju already spouted his B.S. at the shop’s patrons every chance he got. Of course, it didn’t really matter. The kind of musicians who came to Liam’s store weren’t about to stop coming in just because of a wacko, pothead clerk who saw himself as the next non-denominational spiritual guru. “You want some fajitas? I got guacamole this time.”

“Shit, yeah,” said Raju, forgetting to use his accent.

The bell rang again and Raju hurried back out to man the counter.

“Hellooo?” called a voice. It was Festus – Festus P. Bongwater – a bearded seminary dropout who represented the wild-eyed, I’ve-just-spent-five-years-on-a-desert-island-and-these-are-my-coconut-friends demographic among the employees at Liam’s guitar shop.

He pulled what looked like a very large grasshopper off his shirt and threw it back out the open door. “Damned locusts again,” he said.

Another swarm of the giant bugs had arrived the week before – on the same day that someone tried to hold up the shop. It had been a disaster – the locusts, dealing with the cops, the cops mistaking Festus for a perpetrator of some sort and arresting him – but they’d got it all worked out eventually. There were still a

few straggler bugs, however, who had not managed to fly off with the rest of the sky-darkening swarm.

Raju looked up, spreading his hands over the countertop territorially. “Dude, you’re not supposed to be here. This is my shift. You need to fuck off. Right now.”

Festus waved him off and leaned over the counter, keeping his voice low and conspiratorial. “Hey, man,” he said. “I need to ask you a favor.”

“What is up, my friend?” Raju glanced over his shoulder, to make sure Liam wasn’t within earshot. Raju’s vague antipathy toward Festus took a backseat to any opportunity to conspire or otherwise be sneaky.

Festus looked toward the back too. Liam was busy downing tortilla chips and yelling at the television. “Is he watching the news again?” asked Festus.

Raju turned to regard his boss. “Yeah, I know. What the hell, right?”

They shook their heads, and then leaned back over the counter in their conspiratorial huddle.

“Listen,” said Festus, “I really need you to drive me somewhere tomorrow.”

“Okay,” said Raju, “when?”

“Eight o’clock.”

Raju stood and slapped the counter. “This will not be a problem for me, my friend.”

Festus took a deep breath, preparing to lay out his case, and then stopped. “Really?”

“Most definitely. Not. Most definitely not. Not a problem.”

“Well, okay. I’ll meet you here first thing tomorrow morning!”

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“Okay,” said Raju. “Wait, what?”

“You’d rather come pick me up? That’s fine. You know, whatever.”

“No, no, no,” said Raju, pressing his fingers to his temples as he tried to wrap his brain around the incomprehensible, absurd notion of being up as early as eight in the morning. On a Sunday even. “There is no way I can help you. It is not possible. This is much too early.”

“Well ... can I borrow your car?” asked Festus.

Raju became apoplectic. “Can I borrow your car? Can I borrow your car? What kind of question is this?”

“Hey, mmrph,” said Liam. His hand, apparently unaware that he was trying to speak, stuffed another bite of fajita into his mouth. “Look at this bullshit!” He pointed to the TV.

Festus and Raju stepped into the back office. The television showed Texas Governor Dick Whitford giving a speech. “That guy is the fucking anti-Christ,” said Festus.

“Didn’t he die? I thought he was dead,” said Raju.

“No, not dead. Undead maybe,” said Liam, pointing to the screen that showed a very not-dead Governor.

Raju’s eyes grew wide. “You mean he’s a zombie?”

Reasoning that spending too much time answering the questions of a complete idiot can lower one’s IQ, Liam had long ago made it a rule simply to ignore most of Raju’s queries. He kept watching the news as he tried to liberate the last of the queso from the prison of its Styrofoam container.

“Are you sure he’s a zombie? I mean, I guess he looks pretty dead, but still, you know?” Raju reached for the empty bowl.

“Man, we’re out of queso,” he said. He held the bowl up to the light and scraped at the bottom with a chip. “Dude!” said Raju, dropping his accent again in order to set out his first employee-

relations dispute of the day. “I wanted some of that, you queso-hogging fuck.”

Liam pointed the remote at the TV, and cranked the volume. The television distracted Raju for a second, but then he turned back to berate Liam some more over the cheese sauce.

“Oh hey!” he said, snatching up a fresh container of queso. “You got more.”

“I,” said Liam, “use my powers for good, not evil.”

Raju stared at Liam for a moment, trying to figure out just what the heck his boss was talking about. But then he just shrugged and scooped up some more queso.

They watched in silence as Governor Whitford disappeared off the screen and an anchor woman came on. With shockingly white teeth and an oddly motionless helmet of blonde hair, she explained that the government of the State of Texas was stepping up, and stepping in, to fill a void left in the Louisiana state government in the wake of Hurricane John.

“Oil,” said Liam.

“No, no, no. Queso,” said Raju.

Liam either ignored Raju or he just didn’t hear him. “This ... this is just...”

Festus looked at Liam. “What?”

“Whitford’s a total dirt bag. A real piece of shit.”

Raju and Festus exchanged surprised looks. Liam seemed to be taking this personally. He seemed to be getting upset about a lot of things lately. Usually it was over stupid, little things, like Raju frightening off customers with the six-foot “super bong” he’d constructed. But this was different – this was some random political dude – and who the hell cared about that?

Liam glanced at his employee and his friend, and seeing the looks on their faces, explained. “I had to deal with that dirt bag

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on more than one occasion,” he said, but then stopped, offering nothing further.

“You sold guitars to the vice president? That’s amazing! Does he even play guitar? I bet he sucks,” said Raju.

“Liam used to be in the military,” explained Festus.

“Oh. Well, maybe that’s what’s wrong with him,” said Raju. “Post-traumatic stress disorder or ... what’s that other one? Rickets or something?”

“Scurvy?” said Festus.

“Yeah, scurvy.” He pointed the barrel of a pretend handgun at Festus and winked. “Liam,” he said, “we’re pretty sure you have scurvy.”

Liam didn’t respond. He was too busy making angry faces at the TV. On the screen, the anchor’s disembodied voice spoke over images of soldiers with little Texas flags on their shoulders passing out blankets and food, remarking about how odd it was that the Louisiana governor, lieutenant governor, and secretary of state had all been missing since the storm, along with most of the state legislature.

“What the fuck is the governor of Texas doing running Louisiana?”

“Looks like he’s just helping fix things after that big hurricane,” said Festus.

“Wait a minute,” said Raju. “There was a hurricane?”

“Where the hell have you been for the last week?” asked Festus. He shook his head with the special kind of condescension that comes from knowing more about current events than someone else, and turned his attention back to Liam. “I really think they’re just helping...”

“No, there’s an entire federal agency that’s responsible for this sort of thing. How the hell did he even pull this off? Where

is FEMA in all this? Where is the National Guard?” Liam was really starting to get agitated.

“Maybe FEMA needed some help?” volunteered Festus.

“Well, I’m sure they did, but that doesn’t mean they’re just going to hand over the whole operation to the ass-headed governor of Texas.”

“What was the hurricane called? Where did it hit?” asked Raju. Nobody answered, so he unleashed another barrage of questions. “Why are you so pissed about this? Who cares about Louisiana?” he asked. “I went there once. It sucked. Though Bourbon Street was pretty cool. There was this blues singer. He was maybe five hundred pounds, and he sang this cool song about wanting to ‘be your backdoor man.’”

Now it was Festus’ turn. “Seriously Liam, why are you so angry about this?”

“I don’t know. Because it’s screwed up. And wrong,” said Liam. “And I’d be willing to bet that it has absolutely nothing to do with helping those folks get back on their feet.”

“Why?” asked Festus.

Liam looked up at them as if he were debating whether to bother explaining. He sighed. “A ridiculous proportion of the country’s refining capacity – something like 25 or maybe even as high as 30% – is there in Louisiana,” he said. “Add in Texas, and you’ve got just over half of the country’s total capacity. Also, there are four major oil pipeline entry points in the United States. Two are in Texas. One is just north of New Orleans. Almost two-thirds of the country’s petroleum reserves are tucked away in salt domes in Louisiana.”

“And there’s more than that. Texas ranks second only to California in terms of military bases. Group Louisiana and Texas together, and suddenly California is a distant second. This guy,”

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Liam shook his head, “now has the most powerful country on the planet by the balls.”

“Dude,” said Raju, sitting down on the arm of the couch, “how do you know all this stuff?” This was the most serious conversation he’d had in years – at least since he’d started working at the guitar shop.

Liam returned from Angry Land for a second to stare at Raju. “I used to do some work for the CIA. You know that,” he said.

“I thought you were in the military,” said Festus. “I just told Raju—”

Liam glanced over at Festus. “Right,” he said, waving his hand dismissively. He slumped back on the couch, ranting quietly to himself.

Festus and Raju just stood there, looking around, not sure what to make of Liam’s sudden weirdness. He was usually the sane one in the guitar shop.

“That man,” said Liam, pointing at the screen, “is a bad man. And now he’s put himself in a position—”

“What? Position to do what?”

“I’m not sure. Whatever it is, it’s not good.”

They watched in silence for a moment.

“Wouldn’t it be cool,” asked Raju, “if there was one of those locust clouds right now, and they ate the president?”

“What?” asked Liam.

“Who?” asked Festus.

“Locusts! The president!” Raju pointed to the screen. “They eat him up.” He put his fingers to the sides of his mouth to demonstrate locust mastication.

“He’s the governor,” said Liam.

“Whatever,” said Raju. “It would be cool, and you know it.”

“Yeah,” said Festus. “Or maybe some frogs. That would be so—”

Raju jumped off the couch and levitated, Scooby-Doo style as he pointed to the screen. “Holy shit, dude! It’s bugs!”

On the screen, the picture of Dick Whitford cut away to the hair-helmet woman. She expressed some uncertainty as to the exact nature of what was transpiring at the Governor’s press conference. Over her shoulder, the little screen-within-a-screen showed the Governor flailing and waving his hands wildly, and then being ushered off the stage.

“It’s bugs!” said Raju. “They’re there. Right now! Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit!”

“Calm down,” said Festus. “It’s not bugs.” He leaned in for a closer look. “It’s not—” He squinted, leaned even closer, and then touched the television screen as if that would help. “Wait a minute. I think it might be...” He turned to look at Liam, but Liam had stood up and was headed out of the room.

“Liam?” said Festus. Raju turned to see what the hell was wrong with Liam that he didn’t want to stay and watch the Governor get eaten by a swarm of locusts.

“I’ll be up front,” said Liam. “Got some ... guitar stuff to take care of.”