

One

A MISSION FROM GOD (1993)

GEOERGE," *THE VOICE* was booming, resonant, almost eternal, yet it had a softness that instilled confidence, serenity.

George did not stir. It was nearly two in the afternoon and he'd come out early, ten-ish, to clear some brush, a task that seemed to require slamming three Lone Stars and a half pint of peach schnapps. He was stretched out, back against a small cedar, eyeing the remnants of the six-pack, when he dozed off. As he crumbled into sleep, his Stetson dipped forward protecting his eyes from the Texas sun.

He snored.

"GEORGE!" the voice persisted. It still held the same rich bass and improbable softness, but a touch of disdain had been added.

"Just five more minutes," George's muffled voice came from under the hat.

A nearby bush burst into flames and the voice, now coming from the bush, boomed without any trace of kindness, "Wake up you idiot!"

George stirred...tilted his hat back...blinked...rubbed his eyes...blinked again....

"Ho-o-lee shit," he said.

George scrambled to his feet, struggling to put the thin tree between him and the bush. He scanned the arid landscape. His pickup was no more than twenty feet away, but it was almost directly behind the bush; there was precious little brush to cover his escape and he marveled at and cursed his own efficiency.

"Who...what are you?"

"I am that I am," the bush responded, the infinite authority, primal force and indescribable kindness returning to the voice.

"What?"

"I'm God you schmuck. Haven't you ever read the Bible?" the bush said, most of the authority, force and kindness replaced by a seemingly infinite exasperation. "This isn't going to be easy," the bush thought.

"I don't read a whole lot," George said, his Alfred E. Newmanesque head peeking out from behind the protection of the tree.

"How about movies? Don't you watch movies? Charlton Heston...The Ten Commandments? Cecil B. DeMille? Does any of this ring a bell?" the bush said, with heroic patience.

"Heston. He's that NRA guy, right? Did the movies where monkeys took over the planet, or maybe it was apes, or something."

"Planet of the Apes. They made five movies between '68 and '72."

"Um, '68. I was kind of on the down low, as the kids say, in '68," George said, shifting his down turned hands back and forth while tucking his head forward and bobbing from side to side. "Keeping my head down, staying out of...um...trouble and such."

George pursed his lips into a frowning smile that could only

be described as a smirk. But not just any smirk, an infinitely annoying smirk. A smirk so irksome the bush imagined Gandhi, thin, renowned for his patience, the epitome of non-violence, bitch-slapping it off George's face. And then smacking him again just in case.

The bush smiled at this thought. It had crowded out the image of Mother Teresa kicking George in the nads to banish the offending facial gesture. Well, the bush couldn't actually smile. Not so a person could see it, anyway. But it was smiling on the inside.

"Didn't Heston do that sci-fi flick about eating people?" George offered when the bush didn't say anything. "Soylent Green is people! We've gotta stop them somehow!" George did his best Heston. "I love that one."

The bush tore itself from thoughts of George being pummeled by Fraggles, Care Bears and Smurfs.

"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob," the bush said.

"Wow. You get around, don't cha," George smirked.

"I am the Lord thy God!" the bush boomed. The tree shook, tumble weeds raced away, a prairie dog colony keeled over dead.

"Kay. Sorry. Take a chill-pill or something. Jeez."

The bush said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in America. I have heard them crying out because of their oppressors, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from progress and to redeem this land turning it to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—a land for the free and a home for the brave. And now the cry of the Neo-cons has reached me, and I have seen the liberal tyranny oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Washington to bring my people out of Egypt. Shit. I mean out of bondage to Satan's progressives."

"Dude."

"Damn right," the bush said.

"So what do I have to do?" George said with budding

enthusiasm.

“Mostly, you just have to be yourself. I’ll provide you with advisors and supporters. Just do what they tell you. If you get in too deep, I’ll be there to guide you. All you need to do is stay clean and sober....”

“Whoa there, Bushy. What do you mean ‘stay clean and sober’?” George said the enthusiasm withering.

“Just what I said. You’re going to be president and you need to appear qualified, intelligent, and you need to be sober. The last time I worked with a drunkard, I ended up wiping out the whole world and Noah repopulated it with the same dumb bastards I was trying to purge.”

“President?”

“Yes, George. You are the anointed. God’s...er...my choice to lead the world into the Kingdom. What better platform than that of the most powerful man in the world?”

“You want me to be president?” George said.

“Christ, George. You are my Prophet, second only to my own flesh Jesus of Nazareth. Maybe even first if He doesn’t get a haircut and quit spouting crap about giving to each according to his need. Why would I send you to Washington to free my people from oppression and make you, what, a page boy? Maybe one of hundreds of House lackeys, or some Senator stuck following Robert’s Rules of Order? Are you really that fucking dense?” the bush said, adding, “The hand of God shall guide you, my son, and I shall be with you. And the Earth shall prosper and praise your name.”

“But sober?”

“You’ll be the most powerful man in history.”

“Sober?”

“I could kill you now.” The bush suggested.

“Sober’s gonna be hard. Poppy tried being sober and president and look how that turned out. What’s in it for me?” George asked.

“Besides power, fame, immortality and the satisfaction of saving the souls of billions?”

“Yeah,” said George.

“How about a crap-load of cash?” the bush offered.

“Now you’re talkin’ Bushy,” George smirked.

In its mind the bush dropped an Acme anvil on George’s head. “God I don’t know if I can stand that smirk for....” He did some quick math in his head. It was 1993 to Americans. The new millennium would mark the beginning of the End Times and just happened to be an election year. So seven plus however long it took to finish the job. Say about eleven-years. Could he really deal with this idiot for eleven years?

The bush shuddered.

“Now get thee to Betty Ford,” the bush said.

“But....”

“No more questions.”

“I was just gonna ask if you could just stop the cravings. You know, like a one-step program. Click, you’re cured.”

“It doesn’t work that way, George. Free will and all. You’re on your own as far as drying out and staying sober is concerned. But they have a hell of a program at Betty Ford. You’ll be fine. Especially now that you’ve found Jesus,” the bush said making a mental note to ensure George’s DTs featured some especially, shall we say, troublesome hallucinations.

“What about...?”

“Go now. When you get out I’ll send Cal Meche around to think for you.”

“Cal? I remember that loser. He worked for Poppy. Why him? He’s a dweeb. How’s he gonna get me elected? The first time I met him he nearly shit his pants. I thought he was gonna ask to have my baby,” George said?

“George, I am love, and I love even you. But, and I say this with nothing but love, you’re a dumb-ass, lazy bastard and the only way you’re going to get elected is through stealth and trickery and downright nastiness. Cal is not cool and it’s made him bitter, vengeful, rotten. He knows how to hurt people, how to lie. He’s perfect. Trust me. Cal could get a gerbil elected. I think he has. You need Cal,” the bush said.

“Hey, I’m not....”

“Not what, George? Not lazy? Not a dumb-ass? Not a weasel? Not morally bankrupt? Not a spoiled, draft dodging rich boy? Be careful. Lying is a sin.”

“My folks were married.” George was pissed, but what could he do?

“Now go. Don’t even look back or I’ll turn you into a pillar of salt,” the bush said.

George slunk away. In his head he had a vague notion that the pillar of salt thing was in the Bible, something to do with some lout and his wife who was into sodomy, or was it Gomorrah. “What the hell’s gomorrah? Bet it’s even more kinky than anal or blowjobs,” George thought. He didn’t look back.

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“Todd, what the hell are you up to?” the angel said, materializing next to the burning bush and squelching the fire with a heavenly lugee.

“Hey! What the hell, Ephraim. That was uncalled for,” Todd said, returning to his own form and wiping spit from the scales on his shoulder.

Todd could best be described as a CPA with scales, or is that redundant? He had a basically human body, slight of build, with excruciatingly boring features from his unremarkable black toenails to his stringy black hair. If his body had not been covered with rusty brown scales, or his forehead had not featured a half circle of tiny horns, Todd would be virtually invisible at the H&R Block office in your local strip mall.

Alas, poor Todd was a netherworld nerd. A fact hammered home again and again by the suave demeanor of his fellow chaos demons Tom Hanks, Tony Blair and Ralph Lauren. This, of course, contributed to his dislike of all things not Todd.

“You were telling me what you wanted with the sot,” Ephraim said.

“Nothing for you to worry about, F. I found him sleeping

under a tree in a hundred degree heat and thought I'd have some fun with him. Anyone hearing his story would think he was half drunk and half out of his mind from the heat. It was a freebie."

"So you weren't trying the old burning bush routine to get him to do some mischief he wouldn't have thought of on his own?" Ephraim asked. He knew that was exactly what Todd had done, but needed to know just what he was after.

Ephraim, your typical angel--six-foot-two, blonde, blue-eyed, chiseled features, basically Thor in a white robe--had been policing demons and wayward lost souls for nearly six-thousand years. He had once been a short, swarthy man with curly black hair, but western European Christians had willed the change in his appearance.

Cain had been Ephraim's first failure. Michael, the Archangel, was fairly pissed, considering there were like four people on the planet and Ephraim had failed to stop Todd's little scheme. If angels could hate, Ephraim would have hated Todd.

It took almost four-thousand years for Ephraim to get back on Michael's good side. And that required preserving the purity of a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph. With that win, Mickey had clapped him on the back, grinned and gave him a thumbs up, the universal sign for well done, man, you're back in. Ephraim had found the thumbs up cheesy even before Egypt, but he never said so.

At least the job wasn't dull, even before the underworld became crowded with kings, religious fundamentalists, mimes, politicians, music critics, CEOs, telemarketers, serial killers and people who collected tags from department store mattresses, there was a lot to do. And, surprisingly, most of the plots, if not unique, had fairly original twists. There may be nothing new under the sun, but there seems to be no end to the variations the citizens of heaven and hell can imagine. Not to mention the warped imaginations of Earth's current inhabitants.

"You lie very well, Todd," Ephraim had found stroking Todd's ego was an excellent way to get information.

"Thank you, F. Coming from you that means absolutely

nothing. But thanks anyway,” Todd said. He added, “I’m not going to tell you anything.”

“But you just did,” Ephraim replied with a coy grin. Annoying Todd was also a sure way of drawing out, if not the truth, at least enough insinuation to piece together most of his plots.

“I didn’t tell you anything, angel!”

“Calm down. I just meant you told me you weren’t just messing with some overheated drunk.”

“Huh? Whadda ya mean? I just....“

“Now Todd, we’ve been unfriendly for a very long time. Let’s not let a little thing like trying to get that guy to.... Well, never mind. Your secret is safe with me,” Ephraim smiled and gave Todd a knowing wink.

“Even if you knew I was trying to use him to destroy the mud puppies, you couldn’t stop it. This plan is out of your league, angel. Once this clown is president nothing will stand between me and my dream of...uh...what did I just tell you?” Todd was perplexed. He often went off in a rage and had no idea what he had just said.

“You said the booze hound was going to help you corrupt the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in Singapore,” the angel said. “It won’t work. I’m on to you.”

Two

ENTER OUR HERO, I SAID ENTER, DAMMIT

GUY LOOKED OUT the window. Sunlight skipped across the emerald-green lake; birch trees clung to the rock rising from the far shore; maple branches danced in the breeze along the ridge above.

Guy and Marie Alethia were already overwhelmed by the view when the realtor pointed out the bald eagle riding the currents above the ridge. As if on cue, he dove, snatched a fish from the lake and flew off.

Marie smiled and Guy knew the little blue house on the lake would soon be home.

But Marie was gone now and the house, lake, woods had lost much of their appeal.

The canoe lay near the shore, weeds creeping up the sides. Two pairs of hiking boots sat on the porch, dried mud slowly flaking off. Two pairs of snowshoes made dust imprints on the wall above. Two mountain bikes sat propped against the window ledge, waiting.

Guy saw Marie's ever indulgent smile reflected in the window. He touched the glass and felt her familiar contours. His finger drifted across the pane, tracing the earth mother tattoo between her shoulder blades. The sill seemed to hold the faint scent of patchouli.

How long had he had to get used to her being around? It seemed like a day or two at most. Twenty-three years seemed an absurd guess. Correct Guy realized, but absurd nonetheless.

And how long had he had to get used to her being gone? Two years, three months, six days, seven hours, twenty-five minutes and what, forty, forty-one, forty-two, forty- (stop it, he felt Marie scold) three seconds.

Counting the time since she passed was a morbid way to spend his time, as the kids, who had taken turns babysitting him for the first year and a half, constantly reminded him. But what the hell did they know. He had had to tell them to use water in the shower, not to hide boogers under the coffee table and not to drink out of the dog's bowl.

Still, he knew it was doing him no good to stare out the window, count and sulk. The antidepressants worked much better if he exercised and interacted with people.

Abbey would call soon, then Mickey around eight, when the west coast caught up to the east and quitting time rolled around. He wasn't sure when Aidan would call. He was on the road again, touring to promote the band's new LP. Was it still called an LP? "I'm so old," Guy, who was forty-five, thought.

He drifted back to the window, to Marie. She was trying to tell him something. He pressed his forehead to the pane and listened harder.

"What do you see, Guy?"

"Nothing. Just the lake, the woods," Guy said.

"No. You see her. She's telling you to move on. She's pretty pissed. She thinks you're wasting your life. She thinks you're making losing their mom much more difficult for the kids. She thinks you're being a selfish bastard and wants you to cut it out."

“That’s a bit harsh, isn’t it? I mean.... Hey, who said that?”

Guy turned from the window to face his accuser, but he was alone, except for Pedro, his yellow Lab.

“Hey boy, I think the kids are right. It’s definitely not healthy for me to keep staring out this window dreaming about Marie.”

“Ya think?” Pedro said.

“No need to be sarcastic. This has been hard for me. I’m not sure I even want to go on without her. I mean, what’s the point? What good is life alone?”

“I know it’s been rough. You think it’s been easy for me? You know I love you, best friend and all, but I’ve considered bolting more than a few times, especially when you forget to feed me. There’s no excuse for that, no matter how distraught you may be,” the dog, who was fairly trim for a Lab, but still highly food-motivated, said.

“I’m sorry. I guess I let you down, too.”

“Oh, cut the self-pity crap. I’m sick of it. The kids are sick of it. Marie is sick of it. It’s time to get your shit together.”

“Where would I start?” Guy asked.

“You can start by strapping on those boots and taking me for a walk. There’s no place left to drop a duce in the yard. Take me for a walk and when you get back you can clean up some of the crap. Then you can make an appointment with the vet to get me some heartworm and tick meds. I think I have a nasty tick behind my ear.”

“Sorry, I guess I’ve let things go.”

“Well, you could pick this place up some, too. But don’t worry too much about the trash or the dirty dishes. They’re aging nicely.”

“You eat that stuff? That’s gross,” Guy said.

“Oh, like you didn’t know. When was the last time you took out the trash? Where did you think it was going?”

“It’s still gross.”

“I don’t say anything about your nasty habits. Like you’re soap and water fetish? I mean it’s one thing to try to pretend you’re some kind of flower--it doesn’t fool me, you know, I can