

## GOD BE DAMNED

by

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GODDAMN, it wasn't my day!

Thick and heavy, the air loomed redolent of bacon, eggs, and sausage, usually a welcome smell. I observed those around me, though they were the furthest from my thoughts. People ate, people conversed, people laughed. 2:00 a.m. and they kept coming in, freshly drunk and obnoxious. I sat alone in a back corner of the restaurant's smoking section, waiting, thinking about the previous day, a smile never to appear on my unshaven face. Teetering on a crooked edge, a partly crushed pack of cigarettes sat on the table before me. Eyes bloodshot from being awake at this hour and shedding a few tears—yes, tears—I waited patiently.

At first.

Thirty minutes had gone by before a fucking asshole of a waiter had even asked if I'd been helped. Thirty motherfucking minutes! I knew exactly how long I'd been sitting there. I didn't wear a watch—didn't need one. Ten Winstons were stubbed heavily into the amber ashtray in front of me. Roughly three minutes for each cigarette, fifteen drags each—right down to the filter. Chain smoking.

I gave thanks for still having the freedom to smoke in this particular restaurant. Everything else about it wasn't worth a shit.

I didn't answer the waiter the first time he asked for my order, maybe to give him a lingering taste of his own medicine. Or perhaps, just to squeeze every bit of cockiness out of a head that seemed too small for his venous biceps and chiseled abs, both revealed beneath a shirt that appeared purposely small.

"Excuse me, SIR, have you been helped?" he said in a voice complete with an irritating nasal whine. His eyes rolled into the back of his head and looked everywhere but at me, his customer. From somewhere below the table, I heard his foot tapping quickly. I only looked at the open menu bent and trembling within my gnarled fingers, waiting for him to come to his own fucking conclusion.

I refused to answer until he looked directly at me.

After three long drags pulled from my cigarette and exhaled into his squinting, beady eyes, he did. Gritting my teeth, trying my damndest not to scream into those mocking eyes, I ordered a large breakfast and a pot of coffee through lips stretched tight across my teeth.

First licking the tip of a pencil, he scribbled down my order then walked away with a stride that hobbled on thick thighs.

I shook my head and continued to wait, looking at the other customers. They were all eating—even the drunks who'd staggered in after me. I watched my waiter move between tables, whispering into the ears of his coworkers every now and then, spending more time in one girl's ear than the rest. His eyes met mine on more than one occasion and a sneer formed upon his face as if I was some sort of festering inconvenience.

*Asshole!*

I tried to cast him out of my thoughts, but could think of nothing other than wiping the grin off his face with a little help from the pavement outside. I pulled another crooked cigarette out of my pack, contemplated the effects it could have on my life, and realized it just didn't matter. With a quick flick of a Zippo, I had the cigarette lit and half smoked within one long, depressing drag.

A moonless night pressed against the exterior of the windows, giving the impression that the people inside were the only people left on the face of this godforsaken Earth. Dim reflections of those inside danced upon this makeshift mirror, their shapes distorted by the glass. Beyond that, not even the headlights of a vehicle penetrated the thick blanket of darkness.

If only my dumb-ass waiter knew my story ...

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The tumor in my head was the size of a lemon. A big one. Two months to live at best. Why couldn't it have been a tumor in one of my lungs? So far, I still had two of those. Or even gangrene? I could do without the use of one appendage.

Besides the tumor, something was growing alongside it, as if it were feeding on the tumor, increasing in size just as fast. A pool of magnifying shadows, it had an abstract shape of its own.

And a pulse.

The entire staff of the hospital had huddled around the pictures of my brain clipped against a fluorescent light and determined a pulse existed in the mysterious shape through the change in its size every few seconds, each caught on a different frame.

I couldn't stand looking at their faces while they perused the images with wrinkled brows and jaws a little too slack to make me feel comfortable. And when they tried to explain things, they never seemed able to look me in the eyes. They looked only at each other or their shuffling feet, hoping someone would come up with a grain of truth they could transform into cryptic babble I would swallow like a candy-coated lozenge.

I knew better.

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I hadn't been home since three o'clock yesterday afternoon.

After leaving the doctor's office, numb and in disbelief, I had driven around town for hours, images of X-rays and CT scans going through my diseased mind, only stopping for gas when necessary. The sun set and hookers perched on the city's darkest corners. I almost invited a fairly attractive brunette inside my car, but doubt if I could've erected anything other than her curiosity.

I was only feeling desperate. And alone. So I drove. And drove some more, going over the last few months, trying to make sense out of the nonsensical, bring order to something that had become overwhelmingly chaotic.

The nails on each of my fingers and toes had been growing at feverish speeds. Those were the initial symptoms—weird, I know. At first, it was no big deal. I chewed my fingernails constantly, so I didn't realize how fast they were really growing. I also cut my toenails once a

week, enough to keep any ingrowns from puncturing the sensitive skin of my big toes. I started cutting them every other day when I realized my socks had more holes in them than usual. My nails were starting to become stronger, thicker, and the nastiest shade of yellow I have ever seen; a color I'd normally associate with something near death, exhaling its final fetid breath. Minor headaches quickly turned into explosions of pain. The sudden pale color of my face painted a reflection of the man struggling to live inside its ghastly shell.

My wife had scheduled yesterday's appointment knowing damn well that I wouldn't do it and followed up by calling the doctor's office to be sure I actually showed.

She hadn't heard from me since.

I went in for a manicure, a tan, and something to get rid of these fucking headaches, but came out with something strange growing inside of me and feeling like a dying misfit toy. The doctor wanted me to stay away from any stressful situations, as my condition could increase dramatically. I tried to appreciate the irony of what he was saying—my visit to his quaint little office sure didn't help matters. Storming out of his office, I did my best to ignore the violent spikes of pain in the back of my skull and the shadows starting to breed and creep along the shrinking boundaries of my vision.

I couldn't go home until I found a way to break the news to my pregnant wife that our new baby would have no father.

That hurt the most.

Where the hell was *God* in all this? Forget the starving children in third world countries, natural disasters, the depleting ozone layer, or the threat of nuclear weapons in the hands of infidels. And *praise be to the almighty fucking God*, forget about the constant reminders of Armageddon coming from televised saviors.

This was about me!

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Three additional smokes added to my collection and creating some semblance of a pyramid with the other stubbed filters in the ashtray, my waiter returned.

With the wrong fucking order!

I told him so with a steaming whisper and spat what I thought was a fingernail onto the table then wiped it off with a lazy brush of my arm.

His eyes rolled again as he snatched the plate off my table and mumbled something beneath his breath. A thousand spiders seemed to crawl just below my skin. I felt like kicking this steroid-loving waiter square in the nuts. Instead, I merely smiled and he ran back to the kitchen, face almost as white as my own.

My cuticles split open around fingernails extending past their waxen tips. Pressing against the edges of my sneakers, my toenails begged for freedom. I placed my hands below the table, out of sight, lest I rip someone's throat out. The mysterious shape within my head permeated every part of my body, growing with languid leaps like some sinister amoeba. My pulse pounded chaos at my temples.

I took some deep, needed breaths and the darkness slowly shrank inside me, making my innards convulse as it receded into my cranium and finally slipped back inside my brain, leaving my body with a violent shiver that made the spoon rattle on the coffee saucer.

At least I could still control it ... somewhat.

I continued watching the waiter hobble around in search of my order, unsure if he was simply delaying another visit to my table. I lit another smoke, doing my best to hide my hideous hands. Studied the cheesy contemporary art decorating the walls. Tried to relax. Still fairly

amazed at the spectacle, I observed my nails slowly shorten as though perusing them before choosing which one to gnaw on; felt the warm hint of blood within my shoes. My hands were shaking, causing ashes to fall from my cigarette and into my coffee. I really needed some food.

A jukebox stood dormant against the wall farthest from me; unnecessary, considering the amount of entertainment the drunks provided. I think I heard one get slapped out of my line of sight. Laughter followed.

I looked for my waiter and thought of ways to kill him; the *good* Lord knew I had the time.

Clearly envisioning the look upon his face, blood vessels bursting within the glowing whites of his eyes, I imagined sewing his lips shut, permanently sealing the source of those snide remarks and that hideous whine. I chuckled around a mouthful of smoke. Coughed. I'd do it with some crude instrument—not the gently piercing needles that surgeons used—maybe a chicken bone. Not only would I sew his lips shut, I'd light his feet on fire and watch those lips split open like one of the Outback Steakhouse's *Bloomin' Onions*.

As he went through a door that led probably to the kitchen (most likely having the cook spit in my eggs), I pictured the amount of utensils I would find back there, perfect for poking and prodding. I wondered how long it would take his face to fall off as I dipped it into the fryer and enjoyed the frantic kicking of his legs as he tried to struggle free.

With more than enough time for my mind to wander, my malicious fantasies were suddenly intruded upon by the harsh, sad thoughts of my unborn child. The reality of it all flooded my veins with the heat of blood at a boil as I realized I would never be able to see the birth of my first and only child, never get the chance to snuggle with a life I had brought into this world.

Never smell the cleanliness of its innocent skin.

Soon, there would no longer be any late nights watching cheap horror flicks buried beneath the blankets with my wife. No more marveling at the swell in her belly as my son or daughter pushed against the feel of my touch, or the joy of laughter and amazement at such a simple sign of life waiting to breathe the outside air.

I fought against the wetness within my lids, the brewing of an impending storm.

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Though cold, he finally brought the right order, standing just far enough away from my table to lay the edge of each plate on the table's corner before pushing them the rest of the way. He didn't stay long.

Butter had soaked clear through the toast and made a slice droop within my fingers as I picked it up.

I noticed my nails again. Ugly.

Quickly scooped scrambled eggs into my mouth. Cold or not, they tasted pretty good. I thought the cook may have added a few eggshells as a favor for my whining friend, but didn't care. Ravished, I gulped down another piece of toast, sausage and more eggs. That was when I bit my tongue and restrained a scream of rage within my throat. A child-like squeal managed to escape.

I let my mouthful of eggs fall into an open napkin, rolled it up and placed it on the table.

Groaning to myself, I felt for my tongue with a shaking finger—still there. But the back of my finger rubbed against the bottom of a tooth and came away with a scratch. I checked the rest, gently probing from molars to incisors. Every one of them was as sharp as an ice pick and serrated, as though the outer enamels of my teeth had completely shattered.

Curious, I opened the napkin I had rolled up and stared at its contents. Bits of teeth peered at me from within the conglomeration of eggs, sausage, and sparse bits of pepper. Toying with the contents in dim fascination, I found almost the entire root of a bloody molar among the mix.

I slammed my jaw shut as someone walked by.

Then it hit me.

Any color I had left in my face drained to my feet as I wondered if what I had growing alongside the tumor would find its way into the blood of my child. The doctors didn't have a clue what was growing inside of me. Only tests, tests, and more tests could possibly offer some hints as to its creation. Tests—invasive, painful experiments—that would find their way into the infantile veins of my child as soon as he or she was delivered from the safety of its womb.

The thing in my head began to stretch its black fingers throughout my body, tugging on exposed nerves, taunting me.

No longer hungry, appetite stripped completely from my bones and something inside my head leaving me weak and delirious, I left enough money to cover the meal and a tip—no idea why—and made to leave in a hurry, before I hurled all over myself.

The night swallowed my footsteps as I exited the restaurant and walked toward my car. A light rain had fallen and moved on since I had first arrived, leaving only a soupy grey ceiling in its wake. Sporadic bolts of lightning decorated the distant horizon, accompanied by low rumbles of thunder; an unsettling truth to God's harsh existence.

I noticed my Taurus sitting at an odd angle, the right rear seeming to fall away from me. I knew what it was immediately and wasn't the least bit surprised, but the pounding soon reappeared at my temples. My nerves were beginning to flutter like malignant butterflies.

A flat!

I paused in the middle of the parking lot and squeezed my eyes closed as I pinched my fingers hard over the bridge of my nose. A nail scratched my cheek.

My tremulous hands could barely hold the tire iron in place; with every rotation I seethed, animalistic grunts erupting from my chest. There was always one nut that just wouldn't budge, and I fought with that one for quite some time, jagged teeth ripping into my gums as I clenched in frustration. My growing nails began to clink against the rim and I had to fight the urge to look at each monstrosity.

Tire changed, I left the deflated tire and rim where I had dropped them against the yellow curb of the parking space. I slammed the trunk, slammed the door shut once inside the car, slammed my hands upon the steering wheel.

*Fuck...fuck...fuck!*

Vulgarity spewed from my mouth with unharnessed fury. A mere glimpse of my reflection unleashed a rage I had no intentions of withholding. I ripped the rearview mirror from the windshield, clawed at the faux leather under my thighs.

Fire spread through my feet as my toes protested against nails exploding from tender flesh. Talons soon curled against the tops of my sneakers, screaming for release. Spittle landed on my chin as I arched my back, hard, chewing back the pain. With a searing climax, muscles fluttering with tension tight against bones, I collapsed into the driver's seat and felt my chin smack against my sternum. For a moment, I wondered if my heart still beat within its shallow cavity.

I was spent. Exhaustion replaced the anguish and numbed frayed nerve endings. Drool stretched from chin to chest, and I, without the strength to lift a hand to sever the liquid strand, just listened to a developing gurgle of phlegm rattling in the back of my throat.

My gaze wandered with slow strides inside the confines of my car. Left, right—lazy unfocused circles. When it happened upon the rearview mirror on the floor, the reflective glass within its plastic frame pulled me inside as if barbed hooks had just snagged my pupils. Snapped to attention, I looked past the Phish sticker adorning its right hand corner, and into the spotted glass, where I saw myself staring back from within the menacing eyes of my unborn child.

Within the mirror, crimson images dripped with ghastly detail.

Its razor-sharp claws tore at the womb, scraping against its protective cocoon. Ripping away layers of muscle and flesh, it paved a path to the surface, shredding organs with its teeth as it shook its head with spastic whips. It thrust through the surface of my wife's swollen belly, now a tangled mess stark against her beautifully skin, and expelled its sordid breath.

With a slow turn of its head, chest heaving with breaths that seemed too large for its tiny body to contain, it looked at me. And I knew.

Much like a child nuzzling the fabric of a favorite blanket, I caressed the tire iron next to me with calming strokes, loving its feel and the strength I pulled from it. I watched the last of the customers leave, a little more sober than when they had arrived.

My whining friend soon emerged from the restaurant, apparently done with his shift and fumbling inside his pockets. He picked out a key among dozens cluttering a large ring and passed my car, our eyes meeting again.

He flipped me the bird.

Before he even had the chance to get his key into the ignition, I had the tire iron hidden beneath the sleeve of my jacket, neatly in place and easily accessible. As I walked with steps in line with his side mirror, I heard the car deny him the favor of starting on the first try. When the sputter of the second crank faded, I tapped on his window with a long, yellowed claw. He jumped in surprise, chin quivering beneath a nervous frown.

I tapped again, this time hard enough to scratch the glass.

He stretched a third crank to no avail. It appeared as though this wasn't his day, either. His jaw muscles tightened and eyes stretched just a bit wider. I think he knew I wasn't going to be leaving anytime soon.

The tire iron fell from my sleeve and into my hand in one fluid movement. My speed and strength impressed me as I smashed the window, opened the door and pinned him to his seat with one arm, his nurtured physique suddenly worthless.

We shared a moment of intense eye contact before the ascending arc of my arm pulled his attention away.

He didn't blink.

With each blow of the tire iron, I yelled the Lord's name in vain, loving its flavor upon my lips. The absolute power! Over and over I screamed *His* name in vain, an insatiable appetite for blasphemy running rampant, searching for the very core of my soul. I longed to tear *Him* from the cross and bury my teeth into *His* throat, letting *His* purity boil within the heat of my blood.

A guttural snarl rumbled in the bowels of my chest as the darkness grew with sudden ferocity, filling every cell, every nerve, every pore. Pieces of flesh flew around me, on me, and

inside of me. I licked at a drop of splattered blood that had found its way onto my lips. My entire body tingled in ecstasy as I began to relish my newfound glory.

Only when my blows were striking the tattered remains of cloth and flesh did I stop, leaving the waiter's bloody corpse where it lay, irritating whine forever silenced. The sickness inside me pulsed with strong, thunderous beats, threatening to separate the skin from my bones. Soon, I knew, it would devour me.

Quickly getting behind the wheel of my car, I ignored a small group of people running from the restaurant, eyes wide, mouths agape. Oblivious to me, they only pointed at the hand that hanged from the open car door and dragged its knuckles on the pavement, swaying from a frayed strip of flesh.

Stroking the cool, sticky surface of the tire iron, I sped away, intent on delivering the terrible news to my pregnant wife.

And a cure for what was growing inside of her.

God be damned.

THE END