

HARRY WALDENSILL WAS SITTING in his cheesy apartment, reading a Theodore Sturgeon novel, when God appeared before him in the middle of the living room.

There was an uncomfortable pause as Harry squirmed in his ab-surdly comfortable armchair, wondering what to say. (There was no need for introductions, of course. When God appears in your living-room, you *know* it. Devine Revela-tion.)

"Uh . . . hi there," Harry stam-mered at last. "I was just reading about you."

God smiled. Wouldn't you?

"Appropriate," he said, in a voice that sounded . . . like a voice.

There was another uncomfortable pause. God's eyes seemed to glaze slightly, and Harry agonized as the seconds dragged by. *He's dead*, came the wild thought, followed closely by mortal terror.

"Hello?" he ventured.

God shook His head slightly. "Sorry," He said sheepishly. "Pretty thing happening out in the Horse Nebula. Got hung up."

Harry nodded absently.

God harrumphed. "Now then, Harold Waldensill . . ."

"No sir, it's just Harry," Harry said automatically, and then wished he could bite off his tongue.

"What's that?" asked God, Who hates to be interrupted.

"Sorry God, I didn't mean to cut you off. It's just that most guys named Harry are really Harold, but I'm not. I mean that's what my father put on the birth certificate: 'Harry.' I mean, I ... he didn't . . ." He trailed off.

"Yes," said God very gently. "Now then, *Harry*, I've got a very momentous announcement to make to you."

"You gonna come out for birth-control?" Harry burst out. "Hey man, you gonna make *dope legal*?"

Harry suddenly found himself hip-deep in shit. He subsided. So did the shit.

"Pay attention, mungle-bungle. This is serious. This is cosmic. This is the single most important event in history. I am going to make you God."

Harry swallowed.

Harry swallowed again.

He blinked three times fast.

He opened his mouth and closed it again, twice.

"Why me?" he managed at last.

"Because," God said brightly, "I calculate that you are dumb enough to do it."

Harry considered that for a long time, while poor memories of inac-curate renderings of various nebulae ran across the top of his mind, and a snake-dance of naked ladies slithered along the underside.

"Yes," he said finally, "I think you're right. I can't *wait* to see the catch."

"No. catch," God insisted. "Square deal all the way. I propose to give you the works: omnipotence, omniscience, the whole deal. Forever, or until you can find your-self another sucker."

"And if I misuse it I go to Hell, right?" said Harry with the weary cynicism of the longtime science-fiction fan.

"Don't tempt me, Harry," God said drily. "I don't have to go through with this. Now listen, schnook, how can you go to Hell if you're God? There doesn't have to *be* a Hell if you don't want one. I find it handy myself, but I'm told others did just fine without one."

"Others?" Harry interrupted nervously. "High turnover?"

"Eternity's a long time," God replied.

"Yeah, I suppose. But listen, you mean if I want, I can go on being God forever? No punishment if I do something bad?"

"You *define* bad, dullard. If you want the whole universe to be a giant vagina and you a phallus, and that by you is good, *that's good*." He shuddered. "It's been done."

"I mean . . . I mean," Harry stammered, "I mean I could straighten out all the things that are messed up in this world?"

"If you want to bother with this one, you're welcome to try. But you'll have an infinity of time and worlds to tinker with."

"Will I be able to understand that?" Harry asked seriously.

"And work with it," God nod-ded.

"Holy shit," said Harry.

"If by you that's good," God agreed sadly.

"Wait," said Harry, having lo-cated a last loophole. "What about you? Do we share, or what?" Infinity seemed suddenly cramped.

"Oh, I'm retiring, didn't I say? Matter of fact, I'm going to go be-come a redwood in California for awhile, and die when the redwoods do. You can fall by for advice, if you like, before you scrap this uni-verse and build another. Which you can do this afternoon if it suits you; it's all the same to me. But I would recommend that you fiddle with this one first, to sort of get the feel of it."

"Oh, by all means," Harry agreed abstractedly. He steepled his hands, then separated them. "Well," he said firmly, "no sense stalling. Do it."

And God did it.

* * *

Harry Waldensill took the subway out to Queens to see His old lady, Janet. The subway was immacu-lately clean. The patrons were few, but universally pleasant and amiable. They met Harry's eyes with-out flinching, and the children were well-behaved. After a noiseless, painless journey, Harry was de-canted onto Woodside Avenue, where cheerful taxi-drivers ex-changed polite conversation with smiling pedestrians while waiting out a traffic jam that was even now straightening out.

"This," thought Harry. "I could learn to live with. This is gonna take a little getting used to. I can see that right now."

Six cabs cut smoothly through traffic in response to Harry's raised hand. The driver of the fourth in line offered to haul Him for free, "seeing as how there's already some people in the cab and it ain't exactly the whole cab available for hire." The passengers, two Negroes who were not going anywhere near Harry's way, protested that He would be perhaps too cramped, and offered to find themselves other accomodations. But Harry waved away their embarassment and slid into the cab.

As the hack eased gracefully into city traffic, Harry regarded His two companions with a growing confi-dence. "You know," He said, "perhaps you can help me. There's something I've wondered for a long time, and now that I'm in a position to do something about it ... well, what I want to ask is, er . . . What exactly is it that you people want?"

The two young black men looked away uneasily, and Harry sighed (as Gods had done before Him) and *looked* into their hearts, and what he saw there shook Him so badly that He hardly noticed reaching His destination and getting out.

He snapped out of it when a pas-sing flower-child kissed Him on the lips, right in the middle of the sidewalk. Pondering on *that* one, Harry stumbled into the apartment lobby and paused, bewildered, in front of the panel which contained two hundred and twenty-four door buzzers. He could somehow never manage to remember even in which quadrant Janet's buzzer-button lay, and they were in no especial order, either by name or apartment number. Cursing, He hunted—then straightened up with a grin.

"I sure am slow today," He mut-tered, and teleported directly to Janet's apartment.

He hadn't thought to knock. He found Himself in the living room, facing the open bathroom door. It framed a picture whose chief com-ponents were Janet and the toilet bowl.

He closed His eyes. When he opened them again, he was facing the living room sofa, on which Janet was seated in a negligee. Slowly absorbing the implications of what His subconscious had just done, more or less as a reflex ac-tion, Harry trembled.

"Harry," Janet said delightedly, "I thought you had the night-beat tonight." Harry was—had been—a

reporter, which provided a wealth of excuses for broken dates, forgotten engagements, and . . . nights on which Harry wanted to read a Theodore Sturgeon novel.

"Well, yeah, you see, honey, I . . . uh, something came up."

"Tell me about it. Want to get high?" She pulled a joint from under a pile of comic books and offered it to Him.

"Yeah, thanks," He said absently, lighting up and toking deeply. "Janet, listen, I mean something really big has come up. I mean, it's going to color our whole relationship." He exhaled.

"You lost your job."

"Not exactly, no. Not yet, anyway. I mean, I've got a new job. I mean . . . I'm God."

"Gimme that joint."

"No, really, man, I'm God. I mean God told me so Himself."

"Harry, you tripping?"

Suddenly they were on the top of Mount Everest. Howling winds thrashed about them, yet they were not cold, neither were they buffeted.

"Harry, am I tripping?"

"No Janet. It's true. I'm God. You want to go to Paris? Or, hey wow, how about into the past, maybe the *future*? I mean, anything you can name, I can do. I'm God. Dig it."

Janet stared at Him for a long long time, and then backed slowly away. And off a ledge into the abyss.

Harry closed His eyes, and when He opened them again Janet was seated a short distance away on a maroon camel-saddle, confusion in her limpid brown eyes. *Thank you, subconscious*, He thought briefly.

They both sat lost in their own respective thoughts, she on her camel-saddle, Harry on empty air. After a time, Janet hesitantly spoke.

"Harry, I've thought it out. I don't know how this ridiculous thing happened, but Harry I want you to know it doesn't change my feelings about you. I'll be happy to be your Goddess."

When Harry's eyes opened again, He was alone on Everest.

He decided to trust His subconscious again.

The next while or so was pretty busy. The first thing that occurred to Harry was to solve the Problem of the Poor. He caused the Congress to declare a guaranteed national income of \$20,000 (with price controls built in) and created enough money to pay for it. But He was taken by surprise when He discovered how many people were thrown out of work by the disappearance of The Poor. Not that they went hungry—the GNI took care of that—but their training suited them for no other occupation, and they were miserably unhappy with nothing to do. Included in the list of unfortunates were poverty-agency caseworkers and staffs, dozens of Congressmen, numbers runners, dope peddlers, loan sharks, and the majority of the nation's policemen. The disappearance of the dope peddlers alone would have collapsed the national economy, but the implications of financial security for all ran much deeper than that. Riots broke out.

Harry fixed it so that there was pleasant, rewarding occupation for all. Then He discovered that with nobody going hungry, creativity by and large was disappearing from the land. The rest of the world meanwhile lay in smoking chaos caused by the drastic upheaval in world economics, and it was getting harder for Harry to put off repairing it.

Finally He gave up in disgust, gave in to whim.

* * *

Alicia Denderby lay on her back on a sturdy, sensible bed moaning softly.

For many of her contemporaries, this action would have been so commonplace as to be unworthy recording, but Alicia was virgin both in mind and body—a difficult thing to find in any culture. Thoroughly corrupted by a psychotic upbringing, Alicia sincerely believed to the depths of her soul that sex, and most things having to do with touching or rubbing, were a hideous snare designed by the Devil

to facilitate the theft of feminine virtue by slaving, lust-maddened males. She had *never* done such a thing before, and the ensuing sensation was even more disturbing than it was novel. Alicia's head whirled.

She could not understand why she was doing this. A few moments ago she had been sitting up in bed, watching T.V. before dropping off to sleep. A pot-bellied man in a hard-hat had just explained a new wrinkle in the ancient protection racket whereby the victims were invited to purchase appliances and furniture at considerable discounts. Alicia giggled: she thought the fat man was "cute."

"So dat's da story, Jerry?" came an off-camera chorus.

As Jerry threw out his arms to bellow his answer, his pot belly sprang a leak. Hissing wildly, he deflated, glancing about for advice.

Alicia sat up a little straighter. Jerry lay sprawled across the floor like a dead inner-tube. A short, utterly nondescript nebbish appeared stage left, strolled over and stood on Jerry, insanely reminding Alicia of a White Hunter on a leopard skin.

"Dis is de story," said the neb-bish. "I am Harry Waldensill, and I am here to tell you that there has been a little reshuffling upstairs. Back when I was human I was always convinced that there was no authority higher than my own reason, and I never did believe there was a sexier man alive than me. Amen amen I say to you, 'So be it.'"

Then the set had gone blank, and Alicia Denderby had slid lower on the bed, rucked up her nightgown, and begun to fantasize furiously, with Harry Waldensill's face splashed across the inside of her eyelids.

So, across a vast network area, had millions of other women.

Writhing, moaning, Alicia fought desperately against the waves of lust that racked her body, cast about for a weapon with which to fight off temptation, ward off the devil . . . *ward off the devil!* Her eyes fell upon the crucifix that hung over the T.V., and with an enormous effort she plucked her hand away and staggered to her feet. The jolt of her feet contacting the floor traveled up the smooth columns of her legs and set off explosions. Weaving considerably, she reached the far wall, snatched down the crucifix, and half-walked, half-fell back to the bed.

She collapsed across it, clutching the crucifix in both fists. The tides of lust seemed to subside a bit, and she relaxed.

The crucifix leaped from her hands, executed a flawless Immelman Roll and—disappeared, cross-bars retracting.

Her body went taut; her eyes rolled. "God help me," she moaned.

"Glad to oblige," came Harry's voice, distantly muffled.

* * *

Arthur Kellog was in a hell of a hurry. Consequently he wished for the ten thousandth time that there was a faster way than Route 25A to get to Riverhead. While the two-lane highway carried a 55 MPH speed-limit for most of its winding length (signs terminating occasional lower local limits caused the legal speed to revert to New York State maximum) absolutely no one knew it but the cops. Farmers took 25A to market in antique pickups; women in stationwagons backed up traffic for miles.

Somehow it was more infuriating to Arthur to drive at an average of 40 MPH down 25A than to drive at an average of 25 through downtown Port Jefferson. That you expected to be slow—*this* was supposed to be open road. Arthur had hoped he would meet no traffic.

A vegetable stand came into view around a long curve, against a background of distant forest and immense power-utility-towers. The highway was studded with such establishments, offering runty carrots and malformed ears of corn to the budget-conscious. Arthur happened to be doing a good 60 at the time, having successfully passed a pair of mobile homes back around Wading River. He was in a desperate rush to reach the Suffolk County Center in Riverhead, where a land acquisition deal was about to make him stinking rich—he hoped.

As he neared the fruit-stand, a brand new Chrysler convertible containing three senior citizens and a

fat lady pulled out onto the road before him, doing a snappy 15. The oncoming lane held a procession of oil trucks that stretched as far as the eye could see, which at that particular spot was a great long way. Arthur went cold, telling himself that if he slammed on the brakes *right now*, he might not be going too fast to pull off into the corn-field by the time he reached the Chrysler. He uttered a brief, heart-felt prayer

A bolt of lightning from the cloudless sky struck the Chrysler squarely on the fat lady; it exploded in an incandescent ball of flame and was gone.

The road was clear. Arthur's foot had not had time to come down on the brake; in seconds he was flash-ing through space previously occupied by suicide-prone mummies and a glandular case.

"Thank you, God," mumbled Arthur, bemused.

"You're welcome," said Harry.

* * *

Not everyone was grateful. Cer-tainly not the homosexual who awoke one morning in June to dis-cover that his groin no longer bore genitals (he had not specifically asked for a vagina). Nor the priests, ministers, rabbis and deacons of the nation when their houses of worship were packed to the rafters overnight with lime jello. Nor the politicians on T.V. shows throughout the coun-try when their mouths filled to over-flowing with something that looked like peanut butter (The President's New Clothes were something to see).

Eventually Harry turned His at-tention to the rest of the world, and what with restoring Angola calming down Ireland and turning all the he-roin in the world into Vitamin B and making all the fat people thin He had Himself quite a time, and learned quite a lot. The fat people, though thin, continued to be fat people—you could tell one when you met him. A lot of people mes-sed themselves up snorting Vitamin B, a restored Angola gave the guerillas of all sides too much cover to work from, and Ireland, calm, simply didn't know what to do with itself.

Harry finally betook Himself, in the form of a black Persian cat, to a certain redwood tree in California. Curled before him-who-had-been--God, Harry presented His problem. His disillusionment. His frustration. His disenchantment.

The immense gnarled redwood grew a face. It was patriarchal, bearded, and framed in lines of scorn. "Aw, fer Chrissake," it said.

"Listen," Harry said defensively, "maybe by *you* that was good . . ."

"Shows how much you know. Didn't I ever tell you the straight of that?"

Harry shook His head.

"Well, I was corresponding with a gent named John, a promising young feller lived east of here. Anyway, one day I dropped by to visit him, wearing a body to be po-lite, and the young fool blew my cover right in front of a crowd."

"What'd you do?" asked Harry.

"Decided to play along, just for the hell of it, without precogging so I could be surprised." He scowled. "Next time I'll precog. But then there isn't going to be a next time."

"A deal's a deal," said Harry nervously.

"Numbskull," said the tree. "If you didn't have a roof on your mouth you'd blow your hat off every time you sneezed."

"You know, something like that has been happening," Harry inter-rupted seriously. "Only I think it's my subconscious."

"No doubt, no doubt," snapped the tree. "You certainly haven't been using anything else."

"Now look," said Harry, "it's easy enough for you to talk—you've had a lot of experience in this racket. What about some of that infinite compassion?"

"Tripe. The attribute was created by my exploiters so that I would not be too frightening to worship: it was one of my biggest selling points. I don't suppose *you've* been troubled by this 'compassion' syndrome?"

Harry stirred uncomfortably. Even God must now and then shuf-fle His feet.

"You think you know every-thing," He muttered.

"Not any more, cretin, but *you do*."

"Eh?"

"Just like a human, hung up on playing with the toys. You're so fascinated by omnipotence, you never paid the least bit of attention to omniscience. Look *inside yourself*, dummy!"

Harry did.

While he was doing so, the ground on which he stood under-went four distinct changes of ownership, saw both advent and departure of a glacier, trembled to both earthquake and nuclear fire, and at one point was entirely obscured by a mountain which occupied the same space for a good many decades. Somewhere in there Harry's physical envelope—the Persian cat—was destroyed, but He was far too preoccupied to notice.

When He had at last come down from that first celestial rush which marks the onset of divinity, Harry looked about for the redwood—then realized it was long dead, obliterated by time and by entropy. And He smiled a bitter smile.

"God is dead," he said. "Long live God."

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Harry found that omnipotence had not grown rusty in its centuries of disuse. With an exhilarating surge he plunged from His home planet headfirst into the Universe, expanding His awareness to the approximate diameter of a fair-sized planet and ducking in and out of black holes both with and against the current. With an infinite number of viewpoints from which to select, He was in turn a star, a tachyon, a solar system, an electron, a nebula, and for one wild eon a chromium shopping cart careening between galaxies at translight velocities.

Harry disassembled the Cosmos and caused it to run backwards. He tinkered with individual solar systems, sometimes with individual planets or entities, sometimes even with individual molecules. He toyed with the concept of sexuality, created races of androgynes, races with tripolar sex, races with quadripolar sex—at which point even He became confused. He experimented briefly with alternatives to sex, but found them by and large to be flat, tasteless.

He brought Time back to Zero and reprogrammed Matter, but with subtle improvements over the last run. He implemented the new program with a hell of a bang, because He was feeling His oats, and sat back to enjoy the workings of a clockwork Cosmos so intricate that He Himself was constantly surprised by its behavior. It made the previous universe look quite punk, actually, and had much more interesting visuals. A lot of the gaudier optics were self-generated by the humans, of whom there were a mighty shit-load (Harry having correctly figured how to achieve an unpredictable Cosmos).

But the best light-show sooner or later ceases to hold the eye. Eternity is a long time.

For a challenge, Harry took to whipping up other Cosmoses (Cos-meece?), seeing how many He could juggle at once. He experimented with differing numbers of humans after His first effort destroyed itself (His grief, of course, was Cosmic). He soon found that no matter how many humans you put into a Cosmos, they would either blow themselves up or they wouldn't, and God Himself couldn't tell which it would be until it happened. Periodic floods and other natural disasters seemed like a promising control device at first, but Harry discovered that most people are incapable of learning anything from the most object lesson. Pain-association techniques more subtle than don't-touch-the--fire were lost on them.

People were always too damned busy hollering up at God to listen to Him.

Eventually He concluded (as had Gods before Him) that one planetful of humans was quite enough, thank you. He shut down all of His Cos-meece save those in which humans were restricted (by technology less than by temperament) to one traditional earth-type planet near the time-honored G-type star.

He settled down to some serious Godding for a spell, spicing up His Cosmeece from time to time by introducing varying numbers and types of aliens as foils for the humans (Harry had no real use for aliens in and of themselves—He just couldn't identify with them somehow).

And, after a few hundred billion years of cyclical history, pickin' 'em up and knockin' them down with a fascinated curiosity eventually, in-evitably

Harry was bored to tears.

With an embittered cynicism, the catabolic phase of God's love/hate relationship with Man, Harry Wal-densill quit. Retiring to spend His declining years as a tavern-keeper under the name of Mike Callahan, He passed on the Divine Mantle to a woman named L'Ran Kraxon, Who enjoyed it for a few billion eons before she palmed it off on an Arcturian called Rtxc K'Ploo'on (L'Ran lacked Harry's xenophobia), who fobbed it off on a sort of, ... well, a mountain range, who passed it on once again, well-used but relatively *well used*, to *me*, Jehovah Wingate, about a hundred trillion years back.

And frankly, ladies and gentle-men, it's been a long Eternity.

Quite honestly, I'm sick of the abuse and the aggravation, the agony and the ecstasy, the whole megillah. I haven't had a mi-crosecond's peace since I took this job, and I've been thinking it's time I checked out Nirvana. I'm ready to retire.

So that's why I've placed this ad, at tremendous expense, here where it will be seen by most of the science-fiction buffs.

Come on, all of you smart-asses, who think *you* could do a better job of running the Universe—anybody want the job?