

## BIBLE STORIES FOR ADULTS, NO. 20: THE TOWER

By James Morrow

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BEING GOD, I MUST CHOOSE My words carefully. People, I've noticed, tend to hang onto My every remark. It gets annoying, this servile and sycophantic streak in Homo sapiens sapiens. There's a difference, after all, between tasteful adulation and arrant toadyism, but they just don't get it.

I've always thought of Myself as a kind of parent. God the Father and all that. But an effective mom, dad, or Supreme Being is not necessarily a permissive more, dad, or Supreme Being. Spare the rod and spoil the species. Sometimes it's best to be strict.

Was I too strict with Daniel Nimrod? Did I judge the man too harshly? My angels don't think so; they believe his overbearing vanity — Nimrod the enfant terrible of American real estate, slapping his name on everything from Atlantic City casinos to San Francisco condos — merited the very come up-pance he received. Hear My tale. Decide for yourself. I will say this. As divine retributions go, it was surely My most creative work since the locusts, lice, flies, murrain, blood, boils, dead children, hail, frogs, and darkness. And here's the kicker, people: I did it with language alone.

As I said, I must choose My words carefully.

We all must.

Listen. . .

Like so many things in Michael Prete's safe, comfortable, and unenviable life, this began with the telephone. A crank call, he naturally assumed. Not that he was an atheist, nor even an agnostic. He attended Mass regularly. He voted for Republicans. But when a person rings you up claiming to be God Almighty, you are not automatically inclined to believe him.

There were ambiguities, though. For one thing, the call had come through on the private phone in Michael's bedroom and not on the corporation line in his study. (How could a common lunatic have come into possession of those seven heavily guarded digits?) For another, the caller was claiming to be the very same anonymous eccentric who, back in '83, had agreed to pay out twelve thousand dollars, twelve times a year, for the privilege of occupying the Nimrod Tower penthouse. The man had actually raised the rent on himself: an additional thousand a month, provided he could move in immediately, even though the Tower atrium was still festooned with scaffolding and cloaked in plywood panels.

"Come to the penthouse," the mystery voice told Michael upon identifying

himself as the Lord God of Hosts, the King of the Universe, the Architect of Reality, the Supreme Being, and so on. “Nine P.M. sharp.” The voice was high, brittle, and cosmopolitan, suffused with the accentless accent of the excessively educated. “We must talk, you and I.”

“About what?”

“Your boss,” the voice replied. “You know more about Daniel Nimrod than does anyone else on the planet, including that overdressed mistress of his. There’s quite a lot at stake here: the destiny of the earth, the future of mankind, things like that. Bring a calendar.”

“If you’re really who you say you are,” ventured Michael, intent on catching the crank in a manifest lapse of logic, “why are you living in Nimrod Tower?”

“You think God Almighty should be living in a lousy Holiday Inn? What kind of jerk do you think I am? Nine P.M. sharp. So long.”

Michael slipped into the green velvet suit he’d recently acquired at Napoleon’s, snatched up his Spanish-leather valise from Loewe’s, and descended fifteen floors to street level. Within seconds a Yellow Cab, dome lit, came rattling down Lexington Avenue, pushing through the squalls of snow. (Every year at this time, the same idea haunted Michael: I deserve my own chauffeur — I’ve earned it.) He flagged down the cab and climbed into the cozy interior, its seats redolent of oiled leather and surreptitious sex. “Nimrod Tower,” he told the driver, a Rastafarian with a knitted cap and gold tooth. “Fifth Avenue and —”

“I know where it is, mon — why else-you fine folks be paying me, if not to know? Why else you be giving me such a fat and juicy tip on top?”

They crossed Madison, swung left onto Fifth. February already, but the city still seemed Christmasy: the red and green of the traffic lights, the swirling snow. At Fifty-sixth the Jamaican pulled over. “Door to door, eh, mon?” he said cheerfully, musically. Michael paid the \$9.50 on the meter, adding a generous three-dollar tip.

He recognized the security force immediately, Manuel and Jake, the former a tall, spindly, grim Puerto Rican who spoke no English, the latter a self-confident and raffish African-American, both wearing the gaudy crimson tunics Mrs. Nimrod had imported from Baghdad. By day the Tower’s guards functioned mainly as treats for the tourists, a touch of the Arabian Nights in midtown Manhattan, but after eight the show ended, and any underclass scum attempting to breach the skyscraper quickly discovered that these men were real guards equipped with genuine guns.

“Buenas noches, Senor Prete,” said Manuel morosely, his pith helmet shining in the roseate light spilling from the atrium.

“What’s new with the Poobah?” asked Jake, grimacing. A two-foot-high bearskin busby sat atop his head like a treed possum.

“He’s in Japan,” said Michael.

“Buying it?” asked Jake, sniggering.

“Not exactly,” said Michael, for it was merely the Island of Yaku Shima that Mr. Nimrod intended to buy.

Michael entered the atrium — a dazzling space, epic, echoey, and grand, agleam with polished bronze trimmings and florid Breccia Perniche marble. Boarding the UP escalator, he ascended through the tiers of polyglot shops. Level A, Loewe’s of Spain; Level B, Jourdan’s of France; Level C, Beck’s of Germany; Level D, Pineider’s of Italy. Michael’s own stooped self glided by, caught in a panel of gleaming copper — his hunched shoulders, receding hairline, pinched sad-eyed face. He got off on E, the floor from which the multi-speed, indoor waterfall, at the moment set on Slow, commenced its perpetual plunge. Marching past Norman Crider Antiques, he flashed his corporation pass to the Vietnamese guard and stepped into the open elevator.

The penthouse commanded the entire sixty-third floor. A castle in the clouds, Michael mused as he rose, his eardrums tightening with the force of his ascent. A San Simeon of the sky, he decided, disembarking. The front door, a slab of glossy oak, held a bronze ring threaded through the nostrils of a minotaur. He grasped the ring and knocked.

God answered. At least, that is who the penthouse’s occupant claimed to be. “Hi, I’m God,” he said amiably, “into macroevolution, quantum mechanics, and Jewish history.” Those cosmopolitan tones again, filtered this time through the pressure in Michael’s ears.

“Michael Prete.”

“I know,” said the alleged deity. “Everything,” he added. With his dusky skin, Price Valiant haircut, and deep chocolate eyes, he seemed to be of no particular nationality, and his age and gender were likewise indeterminate. A mildly feminine bosom bulged the top of his white silk smoking jacket.

They shook hands.

“I suppose you’d like some sort of proof,” said the penthouse’s owner in a subtly chiding voice. He led Michael into a parlor paved with carpeting so soft and thick it was like walking on a vast pat of butter. “I suppose you expect a sign.” They moved past a Steinway grand piano to a tract of window the size of a squash court. “Voila,” said the rich man, gesturing toward the stormswept city below.

Being God, I was able to give Michael Prete several signs that night. First I made the blizzard disappear. Whoosh, poof, and suddenly it was a sweltering summer night in New York, not a smidgeon of slush, not one snowflake. The thermometer read 91 degrees Fahrenheit.

Michael was impressed, but his skepticism vanished completely only after I filled the nocturnal sky with phosphorescent seraphim singing “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” and the streets with platoons of cherubim giving out roast turkeys to homeless alcoholics.

I changed everything back, of course. Restored the season, recalled the turkeys, sent the angels home, wiped all trace of the event from the collective consciousness. If You intervene too profusely in Earth’s affairs, I’ve noticed, the inhabitants end up wandering around in a state of chronic distraction, and they forget to worship You.

“Would you like a drink?”

“Y-yes. A d-drink. Please.” Michael was so badly shaken he’d dropped his Spanish-leather valise on the rug. “Are you really God? God Himself?”

“Ever since I can remember.”

“This is hard to take. You can understand that, fight? Do you have any brandy, God, sir?”

The Almighty strolled to His mahogany bookshelves and took down two sparkling cognac glasses and a crystalline decanter containing a honey-colored liquid. “I want you to come clean about something. A confession, if you will. Given that you’re a practicing Catholic, perhaps I should summon a priest. . .”

“Depends on the sin,” Michael mumbled, glumly pondering the strong possibility that he had lost his mind. “If it’s venial —”

“You hate Daniel Nimrod, don’t you?” God asked abruptly as He filled both glasses with brandy.

Michael gasped so profoundly his clogged ears popped. “It’s not a bad situation, this life of mine. Really. Yes. I’ve got my own apartment on Lexington Avenue with a dishwasher and a rear-screen TV.”

“He makes you call him ‘sir.’“

“He doesn’t make me.”

“He sounds pompous.”

Michael sipped cognac. “Anybody who’s achieved as much as Mr. Nimrod—a person like that has a right to be keen on himself, don’t you think?”

“You’re envious. Your insides are bright green, I can see them from here. He’s got his yacht and his concubines and his name in Fortune every month, and what have you got, Prete? You can’t even get a date. Never mind. We’ll change the subject. What can you tell me about Nimrod Gorge?”

Michael knotted up; he sweated as if caught in the ersatz summer God had recently imposed on Manhattan. “I’m not free to discuss that particular project.”

“And Nimrod Mountain — another secret? Your boss fancies seeing his name on things, doesn’t he? He’s a man who likes to leave his mark.” God sat down on His revolving piano stool and began pecking out “Chopsticks” with His index fingers. “I want to meet with him. Face to face. Here.”

“He’ll be back from Japan in two weeks.” I’ve gone insane, Michael decided, retrieving a cowhide-bound appointments book from his valise. Only certifiable schizophrenics showed meetings with God on their calendars. “How does Saint Patrick’s Day sound?” he said, scanning March. “We can squeeze you in at ten.”

“Fine.”

In the March 17th square, Michael wrote, 10 A.M. — God. “May I inquire as to the topic?”

“Let me just say that if your boss doesn’t learn a bit of humility, a major and unprecedented disaster will befall him.”

To Michael Prete, “Chopsticks” had never sounded so sinister.

GOD KNOWS why Michael experienced no trouble convincing his boss he had an appointment with Me. He experienced no trouble because being contacted by Yours Truly is a possibility that a man of Daniel Nimrod’s station never rules out entirely. Indeed, the first thing Michael’s boss wanted to know was why God was calling the shots — why couldn’t they meet at Sardi’s instead? Whereupon Michael attempted to explain how the skyscraper was intrinsically suitable to such a rendezvous: God might own the earth, the firmament, and the immediate cosmos, but Nimrod and Nimrod alone owned the Tower.

Never underestimate the power of words. When I appointed Adam chief biologist in Eden — when I allowed him to call the tiger “tiger,” the cobra “cobra,” the scorpion “scorpion” — I was giving him a kind of dominion over them. For the tiger, cobra, and scorpion, meanwhile, Adam and his kind remained utterly

incomprehensible, that is to say, nameless.

Nimrod bought his secretary's words. The meeting would occur when and where I wished.

Screw the Irish, thought Michael. Screw their crummy parade. Everywhere the chauffeur turned, a sawhorse-shaped barrier labeled N.Y.P.D. blocked the way, channeling the limousine along a byzantine detour that eventually landed them in United Nations Plaza, a good ten blocks south of the Tower.

Mr. Nimrod, smooth, cool Mr. Nimrod, didn't mind. As they started back uptown, he stretched out, sipped his Bloody Mary, and continued asking unanswerable questions.

"Do you suppose He'll let us drop His name?" The boss's boyish face broke into a stupendous grin — the first time Michael had seen him happy since the Yaku Shima deal fell through. "Word gets around who's up there on the sixty-third floor and bang, we can double everybody's rent overnight."

"I believe He prefers to retain a certain anonymity," Michael replied.

"What do you think He's selling?"

"I don't think He's selling anything." Michael looked Nimrod in the eye. Such a vigorous young man, the secretary thought. How salutary, the effects of unimaginable wealth. "I got the impression He regards you as, well. . ."

"Yes?"

"Ambitious."

The boss shrugged. "It's a big universe," he said, mixing a second Bloody Mary. "Hey, maybe it's not stuff at all — maybe it's a service. You think He's selling a service, Michael?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know — immortality or something."

"I wouldn't want to guess."

"Photosynthesis?"

"Don't ask me, sir."

Even after they exited the limo and started through the atrium, the boss

continued to drive Michael crazy. Nimrod lingered in the stores, reveling in the clerks' astonished gasps and bulging eyes: good God, it was he, the great man himself, strolling amid the goods like an ordinary Fifth Avenue shopper — like a common millionaire. At Beck's he stopped to admire a \$2300 Nymphenburg chess set; at Asprey's he inspected a \$117,000 clock studded with cabochon rubies and lapis; at Botticellino's he bought his newborn nephew an \$85 pair of blue suede baby shoes. It seemed to Michael nothing short of a miracle that they arrived at the threshold of God's pied-a-terre only thirty-two minutes behind schedule.

Although their Host came to the door wearing a relaxed and cheerful expression, Michael remained uneasy. God had dressed with dignity — mother-of-pearl business suit, white cotton shirt, beige moire tie — whereas Nimrod's primrose-yellow trousers and open turquoise shirt radiated a casualness that, Michael feared, bordered on the irreverent.

Nimrod shook the Almighty's hand. "Your reputation precedes You."

"As does yours," said their Host, eyelids on a snide descent.

God guided His guests into the parlor. An array of hothouse orchids and force-fed dahlias now decorated the lid of the Steinway.

"I have a gift for You, God," said Nimrod. "May I call you God?"

The Almighty nodded and said, "May I call you Daniel?"

"Certainly." Nimrod snapped his bejeweled fingers. Michael popped open his Spanish-leather valise and drew out a copy of *Paydirt: How to Make Your Fortune in Real Estate*. "Shall I include a personal message?" Nimrod asked.

"Please do," said God. "And permit Me to reciprocate," He added, removing a New International Bible from His mahogany bookshelves.

The two of them spent a protracted minute inscribing their respective books.

"Saturn," said Nimrod at last.

"Huh?" said God.

"That's the snazzy one, right? The one with the rings?"

"Jupiter's got a ring too," God noted. "Even the Wall Street Journal carried the news."

"I'll give you seven hundred and fifty," said Nimrod. "Eight hundred if we can close the deal before the month is out."

“What are you talking about ?”

“I’m talking about Saturn — Saturn for eight hundred million dollars.”

“Saturn?”

“I’m going to build on it,” Nimrod explained. “Once I close the Canaveral deal, I’ll be jamming more tourists into space in a single day than Paris sees in a whole year.”

At which point Michael felt obliged to step in. “Correct me if I’m wrong, God, sir, but isn’t Saturn merely a ball of gas?”

“I wouldn’t say ‘merely,’“ He replied, sounding a tad miffed, “but, yes, the terrain isn’t anything to get excited about. The idea behind Saturn was the rings.”

“Then the deal’s off,” said Nimrod, slamming his open palm on the Steinway.

“The deal was never on, you son of a bitch,” He said, striding toward His picture window. The glass was swathed in thick acetate drapes the color of pistachio nuts. “I didn’t ask you here to make any deals.”

Michael glanced furtively at Nimrod. The boss didn’t bat an eye. Damn, he was one nervy entrepreneur.

“I understand you have some big plans,” said God, yanking on a gold rope. The drapes parted on a spectacular view of Saint Patrick’s Day celebrants lining Madison Avenue, waiting for the parade to appear. “I hear there’s a Nimrod Gorge in the works.”

The boss flashed Michael an angry, stabbing stare, a look to turn blood to ice, flesh to salt. “Certain people should learn to keep their mouths shut,” Nimrod muttered.

“Your secretary divulged nothing,” noted the Almighty.

Nimrod joined Him at the window. “You bet there’s a Nimrod Gorge in the works, God, and it’ll make the Grand Canyon look like a pothole. Listen, if you’re one of those environmental-impact types, you should realize we’re using nothing but conventional explosives for the excavation.”

The brassy, blaring forte of a marching band wafted into the room.

“There’s also going to be a Nimrod Mountain,” said God.

“Rather like the Gorge,” said the boss, “only in the opposite direction.”

The Almighty laid His palm against the window. The parade was in sight now, sinuating down the street like a long green python.

“I want you to drop all such plans,” He said.

Bending over slightly, Nimrod scowled and bobbed his head toward God, as if he couldn’t quite believe his ears. “Huh? Drop them? What do you mean?”

“You can start by shutting down this vulgar and arrogant Tower.”

“Vulgar?” Nimrod echoed defensively. “Vulgar?”

“Pink marble and burnished bronze—who do you think you’re kidding? This place makes Las Vegas look like a monastery.”

“God, I’ll have you know we’ve got nothing but raves so far. Raves. The Times architecture critic positively flipped.”

The Almighty removed His palm from the glass, leaving behind a mark suggesting a fortune teller’s logo. “Have you checked the prices down there lately? Thirty-five dollars for a T-shirt from Linda Lee’s, three hundred and fifty for a salt-and-pepper set from Asprey’s, twenty-one thousand for a gold evening bag from Winston’s — really, Daniel, it’s offensive.”

“Merchants charge what they can get,” Nimrod explained. “That’s how the system works.”

“So you refuse to close up shop?”

“What’s the matter — don’t you believe in progress?”

“No,” said God. “I don’t.” He tapped the inscribed Bible in Nimrod’s hand. “The last time your species got out of line, I was moved to sow seeds of discord. I gave you all different languages.”

“Yes, and the whole arrangement’s been a complete pain in the ass, if You want my opinion,” said Nimrod, brandishing his New International Bible, “especially when it comes to dealing with Asians.”

“I sympathize with your frustration,” He said, sidling onto His piano stool. “In fact, there’s probably only one thing worse than not being able to understand a person.”

“What’s that?” asked Nimrod.

“Being able to understand him completely.”

A thoughtful frown crinkled the boss’s brow. “Oh?”

Pivoting, God faced Michael and stretched out his right hand, eyes burning like two meteors smashing into air. The slightest brush from the Almighty’s extended index finger was all it took, the merest touche, and a white, viscous light suddenly flowed through Michael’s brain, seeping into his cortical crannies and illuminating his powers of articulation.

“Go ahead,” He commanded Michael. “Speak.”

“What should I say?”

“Just talk.”

“D-Daniel. . .” Michael winced: he’d never called the boss Daniel before. “Daniel, the plain fact is that you harbor feelings of insecurity bordering on paranoia,” he found himself saying. Complete understanding. . .total lucidity. . .yes, it was really happening — for the first time in his life, Michael could truly communicate.

“Feelings of what?” said Nimrod.

“Insecurity.”

The boss’s puckish features grew tense and flushed, as if he were suffering from apoplexy. “Well, this day’s certainly shaping up to be a pissar,” he said, tugging on the 14-karat gold chain around his neck. “First He turns against me, now you. Really, Michael, after all I’ve —”

A froggish glunk issued from Nimrod’s throat as the Almighty laid a divine hand on his shoulder. The entrepreneur squeezed his head between his palms and, stumbling across the lush carpet, dropped to his knees as if intending to pray.

God said, “Your turn, bigshot.”

The boss raised his thickly tufted head and gave a meandering smile. Slowly, cautiously, he planted his two-hundred-dollar wingtips from Biagiotti’s on the carpet and rose to full height. “If Freud were here, he might infer my problems have a sexual etiology,” said Nimrod in measured tones. “He would probably note the phallic implications of my skyscraper. I hope I’m being clear.”

“You’re being extremely clear,” said Michael, putting on his overcoat.

“Clarity — that’s the whole idea,” said God.

“Where’re you going?” asked Nimrod.

“I’m afraid that in a teleological cosmos such as the one we evidently occupy,” said Michael, tucking the valise under his arm, “I can no longer rehabilitate any actual truth from the highly circumscribed domain of real estate transactions.” He started into the foyer. “And so I’m off into the great wide world, where I hope to gain some insight into the nature of ultimate reality.”

“The fact is, I’ve never been entirely certain I love my mother,” said Nimrod, scowling profoundly. “Jung, of course, would project the discourse onto a more mythic plane.”

“Daniel, I know exactly what you mean,” said Michael.

And he did.

Last night I reread Genesis. On the whole, I find it well-written and poetic. I particularly like My use of the Omniscient Narrator.

Don’t ask Me why I found the Shinarites’ Tower so threatening. I simply did. “And now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do,” I prophesied. My famous curse followed forthwith. “Let Us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.”

But that didn’t stop them, did it? They still did whatever they liked.

This time around, I got it right.

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Hopping aboard the escalator, Michael began his descent. As the shops glided by, he realized that an uncanny anomie had overtaken the atrium. Instead of selling Italian sportswear, the employees of Biagiotti’s had convened a colloquy on Dante. Instead of purchasing French shoes, the crowd in Jourdan’s was holding an impromptu encounter group. “The thing of it is,” a teary-eyed young man croaked as Michael bustled past, “I still love her.” To which an aging matron replied, “We could tell, Warren — we could just tell.”

A shocking and spectacular sight awaited Michael as he swung through the revolving door and stepped onto Madison Avenue. The crowd had turned against the parade—against Saint Patrick’s Day per se, it seemed. They were attacking the marchers with bricks, showering them with broken bottles, beating them with lead pipes. Screams zagged through the sharp frigid air. Wounds blossomed like red carnations.

From his post by the Fifty-sixth Street entrance, the security man, Manuel, contemplated the chaos with a bemused expression.

“With what meaning do you invest this disturbance?” Michael asked, rushing up.

The Irishmen were fighting back now, employing every weapon at hand—batons, harps, trumpets, ceremonial shillelaghs. “The spectators have deciphered the parade’s subtext,” Manuel replied. He had shed his accent—or, rather, he had traded his Puerto Rican lilt for a nondescript succession of nasal, mid-Atlantic inflections. “Such a festivity says, implicitly, ‘At some nonrelativistic level we Irish believe ourselves to possess a superior culture.’”

“I didn’t know you spoke English,” said Michael.

“A sea change has overtaken me.” Manuel adjusted his pith helmet. “I have become mysteriously competent at encrypting and decoding verbal messages.”

At which point a refugee from the besieged parade—a drum major in a white serge uniform decorated with green shamrocks—staggered toward the Tower entrance. Pain twisted his face. Blood slicked his forehead.

Manuel leveled a hostile glance at the intruder, then lightly touched the sleeve of Michael’s overcoat. “Now please excuse me while I shoot this approaching drum major in the head. For you see, Mr. Prete, I find myself in fundamental agreement with the mob’s interpretation, and I take concomitant offense at the tacit ethnocentrism of this event.”

“Excuse me,” said the drum major, “but I couldn’t help overhearing your last remark. Do you really intend to shoot me?”

“I understand how, from your perspective, that is not justifiable praxis on my part.” Manuel drew out his Smith & Wesson.

“Let me hasten to aver I am no longer conspicuously ethnic.” The drum major wiped the gore from his brow. “You’ll note, for example, that I’ve lost my brogue. In fact, I’ve started talking like some self-important Englishman.”

“The issue, I suppose, is whether our newfound homogeneity truly mitigates the nationalistic fanaticism I was about to counter via my revolver.”

“Surely you no longer have a case against me.”

“Au contraire, does it not occur to you that I am suddenly free to hate your very essence, and not merely your customs, clothing, and speech? Am I not still

obliged to fire this gun, acting out of those pathological instincts that are the inevitable Darwinian heritage of all carnivorous primates?”

“Now that you put it that way. . .”

“Ergo. . .”

As soon as the bullet departed the barrel of the revolver, messily separating the Irishman from his cranium, Michael began a mad dash down Fifth Avenue.

“I wish to effect an immediate exit!” he yelled, pulling back the door of a waiting cab. “Please cross the Hudson posthaste.”

The Rastafarian driver looked Michael squarely in the eye. Amazingly, he was the very same cabbie who’d shuttled Michael to his initial interview with the Almighty.

“Judging by the desperation in your voice,” said the Jamaican, “I surmise it is not New Jersey per se you seek, but, rather, the idea of New Jersey” -the man’s musical accent had completely vanished — “a psychological construct you associate with the possibility of escape from the linguistic maelstrom in which we currently reside. Am I making sense?”

“Entirely,” said Michael. All around him, the air rang with the clamor of coherence and riot. “Nevertheless, I earnestly hope you will convey me to South Hoboken.”

“The Holland Tunnel is probably our best option.”

“Agreed.”

The cabbie peeled out, catching a succession of green lights that brought them through the Forties and Thirties, all the way to Twenty-ninth Street, where he cut over to Seventh Avenue and continued south. Another lucky run of greens followed, and suddenly the tunnel loomed up. No toll, of course, not on this side. The city did everything it could to encourage emigration.

The cabbie slowed down, maneuvering his vehicle toward a corral of yellow lane markers shaped like witches’ hats.

“You aren’t going through?” Michael asked.

The former Rastafarian sideswiped a rubber cone, stopped his cab, and smiled. “Consider the dialectics of our present situation. On the one hand, I am a hired chauffeur, with the plastic wall between us symbolizing the economic and material barriers that separate my class from yours. On the other, I exert a

remarkable degree of control over your destiny. For example, through malign or incompetent navigation I can radically inflate your fare. The tipping process involves similar semiotic ambiguities.”

“Quite so,” said Michael. “If I underpay you, my miserliness might be construed as racism.”

“Whereas if you overpay me, you are likewise vulnerable to the charge of bigotry, for such largesse conveys a tacit message of condescension.”

“To wit, you aren’t taking me to South Hoboken.”

“I’m leaving my dome light off and driving directly to the New York Public Library, where I hope to discover what, if anything Marx had to say about taxicabs. Would you like to accompany me?”

“I believe I’ll get out here and solicit the services of another driver.”

But there were no other drivers. As the afternoon wore on, it became obvious that a massive and spontaneous taxicab strike had overtaken the city, a crisis compounded by an analogous paralysis within the subway system. Even the pilots of illegal, maverick cabs, Michael learned, had begun pondering their heretofore unconsidered niches in the ecology of power politics and public transportation.

He proceeded on foot. Slowly, gingerly, he entered the Holland Tunnel, moving past the thousands of dingy white tiles coating the walls. His caution was unnecessary; there was no traffic. Not one car, bus, van, pickup, semi-rig, recreational vehicle, motorcycle.

At last he saw a faint, cheerless glow. Two women stood on the safety island, a grizzled bag lady and an attractive Korean toll collector, communicating with intensity and zest. Stumbling into the crisp, cold daylight, Michael Prete drew a deep breath, rubbed his rumbling belly, and began to wonder from whence his next meal would come.

So My plan is working. Half the planet is now a graduate seminar, the other half a battleground. Afrikaners versus Blacks, Arabs versus Jews, Frenchmen versus Britishers, collectivists versus capitalists: every overtone of contempt is being heard now, every nuance of disgust is coming through. Plagued by a single tongue, people can no longer give each other the benefit of semantic doubt. To their utter bewilderment and total horror, they know that nothing is being lost in translation.

As for Nimrod himself, he has long since left the island. Like most Americans, he is presently operating at a Stone Age level of efficiency. He rides around Jersey on the ten-speed bicycle he stole from an asthmatic teenager in Bayonne. This morning, goaded by hunger, he broke into a sporting goods store, grabbed a

fiberglass hunting bow and a quiver of arrows, and pedaled off toward the Delaware Water Gap. He hopes to bag a deer by nightfall. Lots of luck, Danny.

Like I said, I got it right this time. I've won. No more tasteless skyscrapers. No more arrogant space shuttles or presumptuous particle accelerators. Damn, but I'm good. Oh, Me, but I'm clever.

I guess that's why I've got the job.

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James Morrow's short fiction has twice won him the prestigious Nebula award from the Science Fiction Writers of America. His most recent novel *Only Begotten Daughter*, won him a World Fantasy Award in 1991

Jim has composed a number of Bible Stories for Adults. About this one, he writes, "Before I wrote 'Bible Stories for Adults, No. 20: The Tower,' I'd become accustomed to thinking of the Babel story as an allegory on human arrogance. But when I reread Genesis, I realized that the yarn's main purpose is to explain why humankind lacks a single, unifying tongue. So I visited New York City, did some field work at the Trump Tower, came home, turned on the computer, kicked my cynicism into overdrive, and got to work."