

The New Deity

By Robert Reed

A news conference was called for early afternoon and then delayed twice for reasons never explained. In the interim, a wild hailstorm rolled in from the west, peculiar fires sprang up in various kitchens and trash heaps, and every sleeping baby in the state woke from his nap screaming.

Then as evening fell, the overseer at last stepped up to the podium. He was a handsome fellow who wore a perpetual smile and a smooth unruffled air. Since coming onboard several months before, he had spoken glowingly about tradition, pride, and the demands of success. Like the man or not, he was undeniably smart, immune to criticism, and in ways that few others can even pretend to be, he was without fear. On that particular evening, the smile seemed especially radiant, while the eyes were the coldest blue. He gazed out at the assembled media, and with a voice that might be confused for warm, he said, "Our state has been blessed, and for a very long time. Our deity has performed His role with distinction and honor. We simply cannot thank Him enough. But by the same token, time marches, circumstances change, and our neighboring states and communities have been embracing new faiths and philosophies—many of them thriving as a consequence.

"This is why I have decided, with the approval and full support of the Board, to relieve our Good God of His duties, effective immediately.

"The search to find His replacement is already well underway.

"Until that process is finished, His top lieutenant will serve as our acting Agent-of-Divine-Actions, and you may worship Her or not.

"As always, your personal devotions are entirely your own concern."

Of course none of this was a complete surprise. There had been a few disappointing years of late, and after a private meeting between the overseer and the Grand Old Man, a carefully crafted press release spoke a little too glowingly about the sanctity of the relationship, while leaks hinted that the climate between the two entities was far short of cordial. But when that final decision was announced, everyone heard thunderbolts. The fact that the Old Man wasn't present at the news conference spoke volumes. Cameras eventually captured Him in the open, and the emboldened reporters bombarded Him with pointed questions. How did it feel to be fired? Who did He blame? Would He attempt some kind of retribution? And if not, what were His plans for the near-term?

Answering only the final query, He said, "I plan to rest. And perhaps for a very long time."

This came from an entity that never took vacations—a tireless, imperious, and very remote example of godhood that always wore a handsome face and a busy, even consumed manner.

"Where will you do this resting?" one reporter blurted.

"I really don't know," the Grand Old Man confessed. And then with a few more long strides, he started ascending into the heavens—onboard the trim robin-egg blue Gulfstream that was awarded him as a bonus after one of his final good years.

Everyone knows the world is full of things that are real, though they have no true flesh. The deities, great and small, are exceptionally real. So are dreams and desires, too. And there are those busy, relentless entities called rumors—bold little monsters too tiny to see, too slippery to hold.

Within moments, it seemed as if everybody in the state knew exactly who would be the next deity. The

trouble was that more than a dozen names were being bantered about. Was the overseer sending up trial balloons? Or maybe members of the Board were voting for personal favorites? Certainly, it had been years since the public had shown as much interest in any single issue. Most observers couldn't remember days like this. And then, just when matters seemed complicated enough, the acting deity—that one-time loyal lieutenant—made a seemingly offhand remark to a newspaper columnist. “I've always wanted to watch over a great state,” She admitted with a low rumble and a winsome smile. “And yes, I do feel ready to take the plow in My good hands. I've told the overseer exactly that: I wish to be considered for this great job.”

Suddenly it seemed as if the world was full of ambitious, hungry gods.

Each day brought word of some fresh candidate—a city lord wishing to move up in responsibilities; another state's deity needing clean horizons; or sometimes a foreign god or exotic spirit who spoke in elliptic terms about bringing some unique brand of miracles and subtle intervention into a new realm.

If just a tenth of those rumors were true, the overseer's office would have been jammed with holy bodies.

But that was never the case.

The selection process, like human faith and modern electronics, was a mystical and very nearly invisible phenomenon. The overseer would assume new names and fly to neutral locations, meeting secretly with a small, highly select group of candidates. But that didn't stop wagging tongues. Everyone seemed to know someone who had that watchful cousin or old pal who most definitely had seen a famous god strolling through a local shopping mall, or perhaps sipping beer suds in a landmark tavern. They might appear human, but the knowing eye can always pierce the best disguise. One Big Name was observed on the state's most exclusive golf course, putting for a birdie, while a young ocean goddess was caught swimming laps in one of the large irrigation reservoirs. Why the Big Name would bother with the likes of this modest state, nobody could say. And how a saltwater specialist could help the corn grow was never explained. But that wasn't the point. In the absence of information, information created itself. What is true about quantum mechanics is doubly true in the affairs of the human heart.

There also was a second, decidedly less optimistic thread of rumor and innuendo. Ugly stories about the Grand Old Man began to emerge—tales of disinterest and small incompetences, godly sins and human-style ones. So many years of exemplary service had caused Him to grow lazy, it was said. The worshipful words and long earnest prayers still fed Him, as all gods need to be fed, but they also built a sturdy complacency. Wishes were not being answered as quickly as before. The quality of His miracles was definitely on the decline. He might have been playing fast and loose with certain state funds, and according to range of sources, the Grand Old Man had cultivated affairs with at least two human women, and possibly many, many more.

Those rumors had more backbone than the noise about candidates, and because the ugly stories helped people understand His dismissal, they were embraced, believed, and eventually made into History.

Meanwhile, the interim deity watched over the state and its good people. During Her tenure, the winter proved cold, but at least it provided abundant snow and slow, timely thaws. Then came some good spring rains, particularly in the western regions that had been suffering from long-term drought.

She was just what the state needed, plainly.

Columnists began to chant their support. “Keep the Gal-God,” one old newspaperman wrote, while a liberal young woman writer claimed, “This is the millennium of the Maternal.”

But about the actual candidates, the overseer said nothing.

Nothing at all.

When news broke, it came from another part of the continent. According to other media outlets, the ruling deity from a smaller, much poorer state was going to accept the job later that day. The evidence was slender but telling: A state plane had been dispatched, and at that moment, it was waiting on the tarmac in the other state's capital, engines running, ready to whisk Him back to His new home. But the plane remained on the ground, void of passengers. And afterward it turned about, empty still, and began the long, embarrassing flight home.

Later, in an investigation that would consume the attentions of two state attorneys general, it was determined that the god-in-waiting had never intended to leave His current post. Pretending to accept the offer was just a bargaining ploy—a scheme hatched by Him and by His agent to let them extract a richer contract from His own people.

As a ruse, it worked wonderfully.

But the overseer found himself looking silly and foolish. A sudden press conference was called, and nothing was accomplished except that he spent most of an hour defending a process that nobody could see and asking for patience when there was no hint of a deadline in the future.

But that ugliness must have supplied inspiration, because after that, events moved at a decidedly crisper pace.

The acting deity finally received an official interview—an event that She described to one reporter as being, “Polite talk and idle b.s.”

Other assistants tried their incorporeal best to win the job, and failed.

And then, during those very last days, the most incredible and chilling rumor took hold: The overseer had looked at all of the candidates that the world had to offer, and after much consideration, he had decided to claim the job for himself.

For Himself.

Such things had happened in the past, on occasion. Mortals could always leave their realm, if deemed worthy according to certain arcane laws and convoluted customs. Just as the gods could lose their immortality and livelihood, if they proved themselves to be total boobs.

A final press conference was called.

That last rumor was taken as fact, and the people of the state began readying themselves for this unexpected change.

Yet the first godly form that strode out before the cameras was not the overseer, but instead one of the young gods from one of the world's new churches—a bold, baby-faced deity with ties to a hundred nations and fifty million people. Why would a Great Soul bother with the likes of us? That question bubbled out of everyone who was sitting at home, and from each of the spellbound reporters standing in that very crowded room.

"Why do I come here?" their new god roared back at them. "I will tell you why!"

Then in crisp, concrete terms, he outlined a glorious future: He would continue to oversee the weather and the crops, the health of individuals and little communities too. But in this day and age, what mattered most were the miracles wrapped around science and technology. The state's high literacy rates were

going to waste, he warned. He spoke about a good university system that could be great. With a warm smile, he described laboratories where Ph.D.s would bow to Him before uncovering new answers to old problems. Or better, find new problems that no one, not even His Greatness, could have imagined. Then He reminded His audience, "Genius is as wondrous as the remission of a cancer, and as miracles go, it is twice as rare." Then He spoke about the need to attract high-tech industries to the High Plains, with His help as well as lucrative tax breaks; and as the state economy moved away from simple agriculture, everyone would profit—Him included, naturally.

"I see a future of great prosperity and purposeful change," He declared, causing golden images to appear in everyone's mind. And then, just as His sense of the New began to shake the old conventions, He added, "But I will not leave behind those traditions and proven ways that matter to you most."

With a wink, He said, "The oldest ways remain the best."

Then He threw a strong arm around the overseer, squeezing the handsome, fearless, and always smiling fellow with a rough familiarity.

"In the oldest times," He continued, "the arrival of the new deity demanded a ceremony possessing both significance and sacrifice. And it should be the same today, I believe. All of you think that way. Do you not?"

Suddenly, the overseer's perpetual smile began to crumble.

The new deity glanced his way, winking again and whispering a few words that no one else in the world could make out.

The overseer straightened his back, trying to fight the gentle but irresistible shove of a god's right hand ... and he tumbled face first amongst the reporters and cameramen ... while a mighty god said to all, "Please Me, and I might stay a little while."

A soft squeal was heard.

"Thrill Me," he declared, "and I will make you glad."

Then blood rose in a neat crimson fountain, and a cheer rose up over the good sweet land.