

WHOSE IMAGE?

by Mike Combs

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As far as I knew, it was merely continuing to mist heavily the way it had done all through the day. What I did not realize was that the mist was really ice, and it was accumulating on the road as I drove. Not until the car began to spin.

There is no feeling quite so terrifying as the one you get when your car is moving in a direction other than the one you are pointing it in. I was helplessly sliding off the side of the road and straight at an inconveniently-placed tree.

It's true what they tell you in those public service announcements about auto accidents: your body is going just as fast as your car. That's how fast I went through the windshield. I had time enough for only one thought: "This is going to kill me."

Later, I found out I was right.

I would like to say I had one of those much-talked-about "out of body" experiences, to say I glided up and out of myself, gazing down with curious detachment at my bloody, mangled body. Or to say I had the most powerful sensation of being rapidly propelled up a narrow tunnel with a brilliant light at the end. But unfortunately the sensation of dying was nothing that dramatic. More like falling asleep and then awakening after about half an hour: merely a short nap. I awoke (as I had confidently counted on all my life) in Heaven.

No mist on the floor. But I must admit everything did seem brilliantly illuminated and... well... glittery. I turned my head to see what appeared to be a normal-looking man at my side.

Figuring all this business about halos and wings was probably pure hokum, I hazarded a guess. "Are you an angel?"

"Only in the same sense that you're an angel now."

"In other words..."

"Yes, I once lived on the Earth. I'm dead and now I live here. Well, if you're though with your disorientation now, please come with me. God is waiting to see you."

I reeled briefly. "God is waiting to see me?"

"Of course," the angel/man said with casual annoyance. "Doesn't everybody count on getting to see God when they reach the other side? Isn't 'Gone to meet his maker' synonymous with croaking? Don't tell me you weren't expecting this."

"I guess if I ever thought about it," (and I wasn't even sure that I had), "I thought God must be an awfully busy man, and he wouldn't have the time to welcome everyone personally."

"The boss always schedules an appointment with each new arrival." My guardian angel's face

screwed up as he thought intently. "With the world's population the way it is now, surely there must be several people kicking the bucket every second. It must be true what they always said about him being in more than one place at once." He resumed tugging at me. "Well all the same, it ain't good to keep the big guy waiting. Come with me."

I will not even attempt to describe the (literally) heavenly vistas I saw on our journey to the mansion of the Almighty. Nor will I attempt to describe said mansion. There are simply no Earthly references that work. But a description of God himself, well, that's the crux of my story.

I suppose if I had any preconceived notions of what God looked like, then they were pretty much the standard ones: a big guy (about eight feet I guess), Anglo-Saxon, with long, flowing white hair and beard, wearing a robe. Turns out the only part of this stereotype on target was the eight-foot-tall part. Whenever it occurred to me that this image was most probably wrong, I had struggled to envision some noncorporeal form; perhaps a sphere of brilliant light something like the sun. It turns out our heavenly father has a corporeal form alright but...

Jehova did not so much resemble my mental picture of God as... Godzilla.

He had scaly lizard skin and green slitpupil eyes like those of an alligator. Pointy teeth. Claws. Threetoed feet. There was a division down the back of his throne to accommodate his long, tapering tail. He looked very much like science book illustrations I had seen (when I was alive back on Earth) of dinosaurs of the smaller, two-legged variety, but with one difference. Although the head was definitely reptilian in shape, the top was high and domed: A brainy dinosaur.

God looked me up and down appraisingly, forked tongue darting out and in rapidly. I knew enough about animals to know this was the lizard's equivalent of a dog sniffing at a new, unfamiliar person.

"Not what you exsspected, huh?" he intoned.

"To say the least," I stammered. "I was expecting something more... more... "

"Like yourssself," he finished. "Of which religion were you in your mortal life?"

"Well, I tried to view all of the world's religions as at least partly descriptive of a much larger....."

"Hell, boy, just tell me what country you were born in!"

"America."

"JudeoChrisstian then. Hah, they're the worssst. 'God created Man in hiss own image' isss one of your most dearly cherished beliefsss. I know you have a lot of questions in your mind right now, sssso let me tell you about the firssst Genesisssss." He stopped to glare at me. "The one *before* yours."

"My original plan was to create Man in my own image. I built the sssun and the sssolar sysstem. I evolved life on the Earth, sssstarting out with sssimple sssinglecelled organisms and then working my way up to more and more complex creatures until finally I created a life form that represented the very pinnacle of evolution!"

"Man?"; I interrupted the Almighty.

"Nooooo imbecile!!!" he bellowed, tail twitching in annoyance. "The dinossssaurs!!!"

"They were fruitful and multiplied. They filled the earth and the ssskies and the waters. I had high hopesss for the one you call sssauornithoid. I was busy working out an opposable thumb, ssstereo

vision, and a bigger brain for him and all his seeds. Then came an errant asteroid which had escaped my attention. It fell like a giant flaming mountain into the sea. Great quantities of the dust of the earth and a great flood were churned up into the heavens and spread on the four winds to all corners of the Earth. The waters became as bitter as wormwood, the moon as red as blood, and the sun as black as sack cloth. My dinosaurs were cast into darkness and there was a great wailing and gnashing of teeth. Nowadays, I think that you call this the greenhouse effect."

"Uh, I believe that's nuclear winter," I corrected his Omniscience.

"I don't see what your power plants have to do with any of this," he sniffed. "Well, almost all of my beautiful dinosaurs perished in this time of great tribulation. The only thing I could make out of the pitiful survivors was the birds. When the dust finally cleared, all I had left to work with were these furry little rodents who, by some perverse twist of fate, had somehow managed to survive."

"A God has to make do with what he has, so I started over again, trying to guide these mammal things into the roles I had originally created for my marvelous saurians: herbivore and carnivore, swimmer and plains galloper. I finally realized that nothing better than the primates was going to come along for a creature out of which I could make Man. The bipedal part was what almost drove me nuts! With the dinosaurs it had been no problem at all; many of them had already been upright for tens of millions of years. I had to chase your ancestors up into the trees and then back down again to make it work. And now here you are: in charge of the world and putting pictures of my magnificent thunder lizard on (sigh) children's T-shirts."

By now the creator of the universe was slumping in his throne. He was trapped in a world he had made, alright, but which hadn't quite come off the way he had hoped. He curled his long tail up and around into his lap and idly played with it as he spoke. I distractedly noted a detail on it which was missing from the artist's conceptions of dinosaurs: a small barb at the end.

"I see you're confused and disillusioned. Good. So am I and misery loves company. Puncturing your kind's pleasantly self-reflective God stereotypes is the only kick I'm allowed up here." He leaned over and rested his iguana jaw on one claw, looking petulantly off to the side. "I create the Earth for the dinosaurs and in the end it winds up being overrun by furry little titsuckers!"

I must have blanched at that, for God lifted his saurian head and went on to say, "Didn't mean to be crude. Try not to take it so personal. Geez, I mean, I did go ahead and build heaven for you anyway, didn't I? I mean you're here, right? I think I'm being pretty magnanimous about this whole thing considering the situation."

"Wait a minute. If you are God almighty, then surely you could have kept that asteroid from hitting the Earth in the first place," I asked his Omnipotence.

"Nope. No can do. Once you set a solar system into motion, you cannot interfere. It's against the rules."

I blinked. "The rules? Whose rules?"

"Once you've had a few millennia to study theology, you may be sufficiently well educated to discuss such matters," God replied.

Rather testily, I thought.

The End

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