

WHAT IN
GOD'S NAME

SIMON RICH



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PART ONE

The CEO leaned back in his swivel chair and flicked on his flat-screen TV. There was some kind of war going on in Venezuela. He forced himself to watch for a few minutes: it was the type of thing that people would expect him to know about. Last week at a meeting, some woman had asked him if he'd "heard about Ghana." He'd grinned and given her a thumbs-up, because he knew Ghana had just qualified for the World Cup. But it turned out she'd been talking about a genocide.

He squinted hard at the TV, but within a few minutes, his eyes were glazed over with boredom. He decided to take a quick break. He would watch something else for five minutes, ten minutes max. Then he would flip back to the Venezuela thing.

He pressed the "favorite" button on his remote control and an overweight man appeared on the screen. He had three huge splotches of sweat on his shirt, two under his armpits and one in the center of his stomach.

"Let me hear it!" he was shouting into a microphone. "Let me hear it for the *glory of God!*"

The CEO flipped to another church channel – and then another. Sometimes when he got going with the church channels, he couldn't stop himself. He loved the forceful

SIMON RICH

cadence of the ministers – the way the people shook and moaned with spirit.

He flipped to a Baptist service in Memphis. An elderly woman was sprinting back and forth across a stage, slapping her face and body like she was trying to escape from killer bees.

“Praise God!” she was screaming. “Praise *God*, Praise *God*, Praise...”

A young man poked his head into the office.

“God? Are you busy?”

God quickly flipped back to the war.

“Um... just trying to do something about this Venezuela thing!” he said, gesturing vaguely at the TV. “There’s a war there.”

“Oh!” the young Angel said. “I didn’t mean to interrupt!”

“No biggie. What can I do for you?”

“It’s time for your ten o’clock meeting?”

God looked at his watch and chuckled.

“How about that?” he said. “Must’ve lost track of time!”

The Angel led God down the hallway, towards the executive board room. He thought about making small talk, but he couldn’t think of anything to say. The truth was: he was still pretty intimidated by his boss. He’d worked at Heaven Inc. for five years, but this was actually the first time he’d ever spoken to God in person.

The opportunity had come about by total chance. Craig was drinking some coffee when one of the Archangels smacked him on the back and said,

“Hey page, bring God to the board room.”

Craig was an Angel – a full two rungs higher than “page” – but he hadn’t bothered to correct him; he knew from experience that there was no point in reasoning with an Archangel.

Besides, he was grateful for the chance to finally see God's office.

It fulfilled all of his expectations. God's TV was enormous – at least 60 inches – and his remote control was *nuts* – a shiny, chrome slab that looked like it had been molded to fit his hand. The desk was solid maple and covered with cool executive toys. There was a Rubik's cube (which Craig could see was impressively far along) and one of those metal ball contraptions, where the outer orbs bounce back and forth, for minutes on end, when given the slightest push.

Craig located the boardroom and, with some difficulty, heaved open the heavy brass door. God strolled in and Craig tried to follow him, but a strong hand clamped down on his shoulder. It was Vince – a gigantically tall Archangel with slick blonde hair.

"Sorry," he said, grinning down at him. "Management only."

On his way back down to the lowly Miracles Department, Craig tried to imagine what was happening behind that giant door. They were making huge decisions up there, massive, cataclysmic pronouncements that would affect the fates of billions. He would do anything, he thought, just to sit at that table.

Vince unscrewed his fountain pen.

"NFL?" he asked.

God closed his eyes and massaged his temples.

"Packers," he said, eventually.

The Archangels murmured their approval. Vince wrote down "Packers" on a legal pad and circled it.

"We'll make it happen," he assured him. "What about NASCAR?"

"I like Trevor Bayne," God said. "And David Reutimann."

Vince wrote down the drivers' names.

"NHL?"

God shrugged. "No preference."

He pointed suddenly at Vince.

"Hey, how are my numbers?"

Vince swiftly removed a pie graph from his briefcase.

"Your numbers are *fantastic*," he said. "Eighty-five percent of humans worship you in some way."

"Outstanding," God said, smiling proudly at the chart.

"Any problem demographics?"

Vince hesitated.

"Some college kids have doubts," he admitted. "But we think they'll come around."

"Are you sure?"

The Archangel nodded vigorously.

"It's just a phase."

God squinted at him.

"What about Lynyrd Skynyrd?" he asked. "Whatever happened with that?"

Vince swallowed. Lynyrd Skynyrd was God's favorite band and for months he'd been pressuring his Archangels to somehow reunite the original lineup.

"I'm not sure it's feasible," Vince said. "I mean... half of the founding members are dead."

"What about the guys who are left? Gary Rossington? Larry Junstrom? If you got those guys together in a room, I bet they could still rock."

Vince sighed.

"We'll keep working on it."

God folded his arms.

"And the Yankees?"

"Up three games," Vince said, quickly pulling another chart out of his briefcase. "And A-Rod's got a twenty-game hit streak."

God leaned back in his chair and smiled.
"All right then," he said. "Let's play golf!"

Craig returned to the main floor of the Miracles Department, a grid of tiny cubicles where he spent the vast majority of his life. The place looked even gloomier than usual, now that he had seen God's office and the palatial board room where the Archangels did business. But as soon as he sat down at his desk, and turned on his computer, his bitterness faded. On the screen, flashing brightly, was a Potential Miracle. He clicked on the link and the computer zoomed in on a tiny street in Mobile, Alabama. A boy and a girl were walking home from summer school, looking bored and miserable in the brutal August heat. Craig waited patiently as they approached a nearby fire hydrant. Then he spiked the subterranean pressure and made the pump erupt, drenching the kids with a burst of ice cold water. They danced under the deluge, shrieking with laughter.

Craig couldn't believe it. His trip upstairs had distracted him so much he'd almost missed a Hydrant Miracle. He felt so guilty; he should never have left his desk.

He scanned the globe and quickly found another Potential Miracle. A middle-aged woman in New Brunswick was wearing an old jacket and had no idea her pockets were filled with cash. He hit her with a harsh gust of wind and, after muttering a few intense curse words, she shoved her hands inside her coat for warmth. Within seconds she was pumping her fist in the air, a wad of crumpled twenties in her hand.

Craig leaned back and smiled. The woman was dancing in the empty parking lot now, slapping her buttocks aggressively in a kind of improvised Macarena. There was nothing more exhilarating than watching humans celebrate your miracles. Craig allowed himself to watch for thirty seconds, and then

SIMON RICH

closed the window. If he let himself get sidetracked, he would never get anything done. It was time to move on to the next one.

A tourist in Monte Carlo was walking towards an obviously rigged roulette table. Craig was trying to divert his path when a knock interrupted his thought process.

“Craig?”

A lanky young woman with oversized glasses was peering into his cubicle.

“Sorry for interrupting,” she said, sticking out her hand. “I’m Eliza.”

“Oh *no!* I totally forgot you were coming. Have you been waiting long?”

“Since nine,” she said, smiling brightly to conceal her rage.

“I’m so sorry. How can I make it up to you?”

“Well I’d love a tour. If you’re not busy.”

Craig glanced at his computer screen. The tourist had taken a seat at the roulette table and placed a gigantic sum on black. It was too late to fix things.

“No problem,” Craig said. “Follow me!”

Eliza had just been promoted to the Miracles Department, after toiling for three long years as a Sub-Angel in Prayer Intake. Craig had agreed to show her around her new floor, but his trip upstairs had seriously delayed him. Eliza had spent her first three hours as an Angel sitting in the break room, checking her Blackberry over and over again in search of some kind of explanation. She was furious that Craig had made her wait so long, but her anger quickly subsided in the excitement of the tour. Everywhere she looked, Angels were scanning the globe, typing in codes, changing the world with a few little taps of their fingers. It was as wonderful as she’d imagined it.

"Fuck!" someone shouted.

She glanced into a nearby cubicle. An overweight, balding Angel had spilled his coffee and the murky brown liquid was seeping across his keyboard. He pulled some random papers out of his inbox and used them to sponge up the mess.

"Every time," he muttered. "Every fucking time."

"Who's that?" Eliza whispered.

"That's Brian," Craig told her. "He's going through a rough time."

"Do you guys work together?"

"Nah, we're in different sub-departments. I'm General Well-Being, he's Physical Safety."

"So he prevents accidents?"

"Well... he tries to."

Eliza peeked into Brian's cubicle. His computer monitor was divided into sixteen windows, each one depicting a different Potential Injury. The injuries ranged in seriousness from stubbed toes to 1st degree burns, but they all had one thing in common: they were preventable. Eliza watched as the victims yelled out profanities on Brian's screen. Some of the humans directed their swearing heavenward, as if they somehow knew that Brian was responsible for their pain.

"Goddammit," said an old woman, who had sliced open her thumb on a tuna fish can. "*Motherfucker.*"

Brian closed his eyes and rubbed his face, taking deep slow breaths.

"How does he stop the injuries?" Eliza asked. "Or, you know... try to."

"It's the same as any miracle," Craig explained. "Angelic Influence."

He led her to a nearby closet and handed her a thick, leather-bound book. She flipped through the pages, squinting at the dense charts.

"I know it looks confusing," Craig sympathized. "But after

a while all this stuff becomes second nature.”

Eliza pointed at a fold-out table labeled “Gusts.”

“What’s this one?”

“That comes in handy if you need to move something. Like if you need to get a beach towel out of the way, so a human can find his car keys.”

Eliza unfolded the Gusts Chart. It was forty pages long, plus footnotes.

“Why can’t we just zap the keys into the guy’s pocket?”

Craig laughed. “I know, right? It would make things way easier. Unfortunately though, we can’t break any laws.”

“Which laws?”

“*God’s* laws. Gravity, thermodynamics, time. They’re ironclad. We have to work around them.”

“So we can’t, like, resurrect people. Or make them fly.”

“Right. There’s no teleporting, no telepathy, no making objects disappear. We can’t do anything that the humans could perceive as supernatural.”

“So we can’t do anything fun.”

Craig grinned. “I don’t know about that.”

Earth

Oscar Friedman opened his *Boston Herald* and held it in front of his face like a shield. He just had to make it three more stops without being seen. Just five more minutes and he’d be home free.

“Are you sure it’s your old roommate?” his wife whispered.

Oscar nodded. It was definitely him, sitting across from them on the downtown Red Line. And he had definitely forgotten his name.

“I know it starts with an R,” Oscar murmured.

"Is it Rick? Richard?"

Oscar shook his head and motioned frantically to his wife for more suggestions.

"Ronny? Reginald?"

Oscar clenched his eyes shut.

"I've almost got it," he said. "I'm so darn close."

"Ross? Red?"

It was too late. The roommate had already made eye contact and was lurching excitedly across the car. He weaved his way around a pole and gripped Oscar's elbow with both hands.

"Oscar, it's been forever! We missed you at the reunion."

Oscar shot his wife a terrified look and she quickly thrust out her hand.

"I'm Florence," she tried.

The roommate ignored her and playfully folded his arms.

"What's the matter, Oscar? Aren't you going to introduce me to your lovely wife?"

Oscar was about to confess the truth – when the electric lights flickered out. The blackout lasted forty seconds, precisely long enough to jog his memory. And by the time the bulbs flashed back on, and the conductor stopped apologizing over the loudspeaker, the old man was beaming with relief.

"Honey," he said. "This is *Roland!*"

"We can only affect the lives of humans *indirectly*," Craig explained. "Through discreet, natural phenomena. We can cause electrical blackouts, make hail, use lightning. We can control the tides and trigger sneezes. We just can't do anything that would let the humans know we're here."

"Does anyone ever screw up?" Eliza asked. "You know, cross the line?"

Craig thought it over. Angels rarely got in trouble for their

miracles. But he could think of a couple of instances where employees had gone too far, gotten too flashy and ended up out of a job.

“Someone got in trouble for Wilt Chamberlain,” he said.

“Really? What happened?”

Craig told her the story. It was 1962 and a first-year Angel had been assigned to a regular season match-up between the New York Knicks and the Philadelphia Warriors. The Angel was supposed to support Wilt Chamberlain – God was a fan – but he went way too far. Wilt, normally a 50% foul shooter, hit 28 out of 32 free throws that night and ended up scoring a total of 100 points. It was one of the sloppiest miracles in the history of sports. Not only was the number too high, it was cartoonish.

“If Wilt had scored 97 points,” Craig explained. “Or 103. That would be one thing. But *exactly* 100? It was too conspicuous. The Angel got demoted.”

“That’s awful.”

Craig nodded.

“It’s best to fly under the radar. You can do as many miracles as you want – you just have to be subtle about them.”

“What about God? Can his miracles break the rules?”

“Oh, God doesn’t code any miracles himself.”

“He doesn’t?”

“Nah. That stuff is *really* technical. And he’s really more of an ideas guy, you know? Ever since the beginning, he’s hired people to take care of the nitty-gritty stuff for him. I don’t think he’s *ever* been involved in the company’s day-to-day activities.”

“Doesn’t he care how things are going?”

“Of course he cares! This morning, I went to his office and he was monitoring the war situation in Venezuela.”

Eliza spun around.

“You were in his *office*? Why?”