

And Starring God As Morgan Freeman

by Ben Greenfield

“Can I get a bite?”

“The *Awntie* Anne's?” Alberta squawked, wiping her buttery hands on her flower-print shorts. “Just finished it. Sorry.”

Finished it? Daphne had paid \$3 for the \$3.20 pretzel, and she'd been doing Alberta a favor by letting her shed 4 nickels' worth of purse weight to cover the rest. Plus, it was Daphne's raffle ticket that had won them the passes for this taping. She wanted to tell Alberta that she had no right to hold the pretzel, much less finish it.

She also wanted to tell her that it was pronounced *Antie* Anne's, and she wanted to tell her that that was fucking obvious.

Instead, she just said, “That's too bad.”

But before she could even get the words out, Alberta shushed her. “Jez is about to be back on!”

Daphne bit her tongue and turned angrily toward the front of the studio.

“Welcome back to *Jez*,” said the show's host. “We're here with renowned movie critic Lisa Lands. All right, Lisa, looking ahead to the summer movie season, what should we be excited for?”

“Six words, Jez,” Lisa began, pushing her Warby Parker knockoffs up her nose. “Morgan Freeman, Morgan Freeman, Morgan Freeman.”

“Okay, I've heard so much about this movie, *God Is Alive*. But here's what I keep wondering: haven't we already seen Morgan Freeman as God?”

“We've never seen him like this. Jez, he's outstanding in this movie. He's *divine*. I've heard some Oscar chatter, but I'll be honest: an Oscar seems too small for this performance.”

Jez was fidgety with excitement. She perked her ears up to catch the subtle sound of pant fabric rubbing against plastic as the audience collectively moved to the edge of its seats. Jez had gotten this far because she had a nose for a viral moment, and her smell receptors were firing.

She leaned in and asked the only kind of setup she'd ever bothered to learn: the perfect one.

“Lisa, what could possibly be bigger than an Oscar?”

As the audience leaned toward the stage for the answer, Daphne's stomach gurgled. Even a decent-sized crumb would go a long way right now.

“You want to know what's bigger than an Oscar?” Lisa said. “The violence in Libya. Monkey flu. The tsunami. Horrible things are happening in this world as we speak, Jez. And as I'm walking out of this movie, I'm reading about them all on my news feed, and I'm thinking to myself, you know what? Morgan's God wouldn't have let all this horribleness happen.” The renowned critic faked a sip from her empty mug.

“Jez, what I'm getting at is this: with all the turmoil the world's going through? I think Morgan Freeman makes a better God than God.”

The studio went silent. Alberta's mouth hung open.

Daphne looked down at Alberta's lap. Fully half of the jalapeño cheddar dip was left. Her jaw dropped. Why was Alberta such an idiot when it came to dip? She would burn through an entire cup of marinara with the first mozzarella stick, and she sucked at anything even remotely related to hummus. Daphne almost ended their friendship last May when Alberta announced that she was having her birthday party at a fondue restaurant. Luckily, she'd gotten a stomach virus that day, because nonstop puking beat the hell out of fondue with Alberta.

But that half-full cheese cup was a creamy door sitting wide open.

The crowd suddenly shook away its shock and submerged itself in its own applause.

Daphne watched Alberta bring her fingers to her lips, trying like hell to force a whistle that was not even close to happening.

Fuck it. Daphne grabbed the miniature cup off Alberta's lap and suctioned its orange goop into her face. She closed her eyes and felt what she was pretty sure would be referred to as nirvana in some Eastern religion. Maybe Hinduism?

#

Morgan Freeman was struggling to feign excitement about his Golden Globe nomination.

He was grateful, sure. But they'd have given the Globe to anyone who played God, because Hollywood needed to sell tickets in Middle America, and Middle America valued religion, and a Golden Globe was the best way for Hollywood to pretend that they did, too.

“So, Morgan,” asked Ella Shaw, dangling her E! News mic over the edge of the red

carpet. “I have to ask you about that *Jez* video everyone's talking about. Do you think you'd make a good God?”

Damn it, Morgan thought. This is why you stay away from microphones with exclamation points on them.

“Aw, you know,” he began, forcing a laugh. He mumbled through the rest of his answer, coughing up phrases like “incredibly humbled, certainly,” and “I am a method actor, so technically I already have,” in the hopes that a sufficiently garbled response would make people stop talking about him.

But Morgan's tics only amplified people's interest. Some thought he was sick. Others, that he was avoiding an answer because he actually was God, and that God, like a police officer, is prohibited from lying about who he is.

While the meaning of his words generated no consensus, though, virtually everyone agreed that Freeman's mysteriousness only further qualified him for a promotion to deity.

Everyone but one.

#

If you think God would stick out on 73<sup>rd</sup> Street and Columbus Avenue, then you're picturing the wrong God. While the God-as-white-bearded-guy-in-robos theory was buried deep in a cliché landfill long ago, the perceptions that have remained in our collective imagination are equally mistaken. God is not bearded. He has no golden staff. What's more, he is not a woman, and he is certainly not Morgan Freeman.

God has a nasal twang, a faded pair of 1993 Levi's, and the resting face of a crabby, underslept 54-year-old with thinning brown locks on his head and thinning brown lox in his

fridge.

There was one question that lingered on the mind of everyone who encountered him. And moments after God joined Morgan in his hotel elevator and temporarily turned the Close Door button into a snake to convince the actor that he was who he said he was, Morgan went ahead and asked it.

“So, God, you're Jewish?”

“Am I Jewish?!” God asked, incredulous. “I'm freaking God.”

Freeman's face betrayed none of the apologetic embarrassment that God was hoping it would.

“No, I'm not Jewish. However, the Jews were the first people. Which is to say, *they* were the ones I created in my image. The rest of you folks came later.”

God paused. “Listen, Morgan. I think it's great that you think you can do my job.”

“God, I was just trying to get off that red carpet. Whatever I said there, I didn't mean.”

“Acting is creating, after all,” God continued, ignoring Morgan. “So you're halfway there. And with the way most of the public treats people like you? Well, deity would almost be a demotion.”

“With respect, I don't think this is necessary.”

“See, that's where I disagree with you, Morgan. I think it is necessary. Let's face it: the entire world seems to agree that you could do my job better than me. And who can blame them? I mean, you really were wonderful in that movie. So why don't we try it out?”

“Is this some sort of joke?”

“No joke. I want you to try being me for a while. See how it works out.”

“God, if you think I don't realize how much work it is to manage everything—”

God shook his head. “It's not the amount of work. It's...well, I'll give you an example. I used to get so angry when I'd hear people pronounce the word 'aunt' *awnt*. Not, like, Category 5 hurricane angry. But 2, once. So I came up with this ingenious solution. I planted the idea in someone's head to start a pretzel company called Auntie Anne's. Follow it with *Anne's* to give the word 'Auntie' some clarity through alliteration. *Antie. Anne's*. Then put one of those stores in every mall in the friggin' world, and pretty soon, no one will ever pronounce Auntie wrong again!”

“Wait,” Morgan said. “So are you telling me it's not *Awntie Awnne's*?”

“Fucking this is exactly the shit I'm talking about; just absolutely zero—”

“God. God,” Morgan said. “I was joking.”

God exhaled the fumes. Morgan's unbreakable calmness was getting to him.

“My point is, intentions only go so far, even for me. There's 7 billion people with free will. Keeping all that and the entire Earth in order, not to mention the rest of the universe—it's hard.”

“And you think the best way to make people appreciate that is to let them see how badly I do it?”

“Frankly? I think it'll help.”

“And what do you do this whole time? Does Heaven have beaches?”

“No, no, I have to get away from Heaven for a bit.” God seemed to become bashful. “I, uh, have some things down here I'd like to try.”

“Such as?”

“Oh. Anything, really.” He paused. “Actually, one thought I had was to try something you know a bit about.” God tapped his foot nervously. “I might like to do a bit of acting.”

Morgan nodded, utterly perplexed.

“It's really nothing. I don't expect it to go anywhere; I don't have even close to your talent. But, I mean, I did always have a knack for what makes people tick. Also, I've been told my Irish accent is spot-on. And—well, you're not interested.”

God was becoming downright squirmy. Morgan felt like he should hold his arm or something to steady him.

“Maybe this whole thing was a mistake. I mean, maybe it's the natural order of things for people to have their doubts about me, and I should deal with it. Besides, you might not be able to handle the loneliness as well as I do. And to make you take the blame for all the world's ills? That'll take a toll, lord knows.”

As God went on, Morgan noticed that his eyes had a remarkably sad droop. It almost didn't matter whether God could actually act; point a camera at a face like that, and it'll find the pain.

Morgan took a deep breath. Then he extended his hand and said, “I'll do it.”

“Say what?”

“I'll do it, God.”

“Okay,” God said, shaking Morgan's hand. “Okay.”

“Looking forward to seeing your work. Let me know if you need any tips.”

“All right, Morgan,” God said. “Same to you.”

“I'm so, like, jumpy,” said Adrian, a scruffy 20-something, as he paced the hallway of the tiny East Hollywood acting studio. “I mean, this role's got 31 lines—33, if you count coughs and sneezes. This could be, like, *the thing* for our careers.

“I bet you'll get it,” he continued. “I mean, the character's supposed to be balding.” Adrian mistook God's disinterest for offense. “Oh, and, I mean, because you're a great actor. I can tell.” Then: “I mean, balding guys always are.”

God looked around for something to put between his eyes and this kid's dumb face.

“You almost don't seem excited! What's that about?”

God sighed. “Did you ever hear of *Making Sparks Fly*?”

“No. What's that?”

*Making Sparks Fly* was a one-act play about a man who wins the affection of a woman by banging two rocks together and literally making sparks fly. It was the first dramatic performance in human history, and, since sparks had only just been discovered, it was considered sci-fi. It was remade multiple times as technology progressed: first as *Making the Fire Burn*, and much later as *The Matrix*.

God had been there for all of them, and he was about to explain to Adrian that this was why he couldn't get his proverbial thespian dick hard about some crappy movie by a rookie filmmaker. This was simply the only audition he could get.

But before he could say anything, the rookie filmmaker, Marshall, poked his skinny face out of his office, pushed his Warby Parker knockoffs up his nose, and called God in for his audition.



“Hey, honey, is he new to the neighborhood?” God intoned, with a whip of his left wrist and a whiff of an Irish accent. He hung a beat, then dropped out of character.

“Okay, cool.” Marshall scribbled a note on his pad, then looked back up.

“Okay, like I said, that was cool. Can I see it again, but a little more tender?”

“Tender?” God asked incredulously. Had this schmuck even read the script?

“Yeah, you know, like, sensitive?”

“Oh, I see: the sensitive kind of tender,” God condescended.

“Exactly!” Marshall said with forced enthusiasm. He really wished he'd taken that second Xanax.

God hissed the line. “Hhhey—”

Marshall winced, which only multiplied God's frustration, which in turn multiplied the length of his H's.

“—hhhhhoney, is hhhhhe new to the neighborhhhhhhhhhhhood?”

Marshall's hands became clammy. He started to speak, but the nervous lump in his throat made him sound like an asthmatic toad.

So he swallowed, then whispered, “That's all I need to see.”

God looked at him blankly, then left.

#

Morgan straightened the pinstriped sleeves of his Italian suit and looked in the mirror. It was a bit *Godfather-y* for Heaven. He toyed with the idea of going the opposite direction and sporting a Stairway to Heaven T-shirt—give the good people of Heaven a laugh. But it wasn't worth the risk.

It wasn't that Morgan worried that people would dislike him; just the opposite. He could get a Grammy nomination for reading a grocery list. But he had to hold himself to a high standard, whether or not others did the same.

But it was getting late, and he hardly wanted the earth to catch fire because he was worrying about what to wear. He grabbed the first blazer he saw.

A ray of light shot out from the space where the blazer had hung. He pushed the other clothes aside, revealing a glowing jacket on a forgotten hook in the back of the closet.

“Oh, gosh. I couldn't.”

But he had to. Hollywood's best costume designers make it to the top for a reason.

And so it was that moments later, Morgan Freeman strode into Heaven wearing the same white suit he'd worn in *Bruce Almighty*.

The people of Heaven stared at it as Morgan made his way toward the holy palace. Some speculated that he was filming a third *Almighty* film. Others, that God had called Morgan in to entertain him with his God impression from the movie.

He'd hoped that Heaven's landscape would camouflage him. But as it turned out, Heaven was not white. The capital city's buildings were as colorful as its people, their clothing, and the glorious works of art that decorated the thoroughfares. Morgan marveled at the beauty. If God couldn't make it as an actor, he could surely be a set designer.

Stepping into God's Control Room, Morgan was encircled by what God called the Universe Monitors. The screens were not confined to two dimensions, or even to three. Morgan could sense far more than what he could see. Just as one can glance at a photo of a market and intuitively understand a great deal about the location, the weather, and the shoppers' financial

status, Morgan found that he could peer at an entire galaxy and be fully aware of its composition, its activities, and its history. He could see black holes swallowing space debris, and he could see planets hurtling around stars, but he could also see individual grains of sand on those planets shifting to and fro as a gentle breeze passed overhead.

Below the screens were a couple photos and old Dilbert cartoons, and below that was trash. Piles and piles of trash. Empty bags of chips, blackening bacon bites, and a couple of snotty tissues. God, it turned out, was quite a slob.

Morgan was as awed by the beauty of God's toolbox as he was disgusted by the condition it was in. Yes, this system was ordinarily controlled by an omniscient being. But as he sat at God's desk, Morgan felt, if not omniscient, at least mostly-niscient.

That wasn't a word, Morgan knew, but he doubted there was an actual word that described what he was thinking. But then something occurred to him.

“Let mostly-niscient be a word.”

A light flashed across a screen as the word popped into existence. Morgan chuckled to himself.

“And I saw that it was good.”

#

Morgan had internalized the *Almighty* movies' lessons well enough that he was out by 5 most evenings. He was such a natural, in fact, that he began to worry that God might come to resent him for doing too well. So he decided to check up on God.

He dialed up a live feed of a Dunkin' Donuts commercial audition.

God's line—something like, “Welcome to Dunkin'! What can I get you today?”—couldn't

have been more straightforward. And yet God could not remember a word of it. What's more, his diction was off, his body language was awkward, and the expression on his face made it look like he permanently had to sneeze.

“Man,” Morgan sighed, as the commercial's director explained to God that he was just not Dunkin' Donuts material. “God is a really shitty actor.”

#

God was drinking a tall boy alone outside of a 7-Eleven when Morgan approached him.

“What the hell do you want?” God barked.

“I just wanted to check in. See how everything's going.”

“I don't do small talk,” he snapped, ejecting a fleck of saliva that ended up on Morgan's cheek.

“Fine. No small talk,” Morgan said, wiping the spit off his face. “I had a couple notes that might help you land roles. First off, breathing. It's a bit of a cliché how important it is, but it also happens to be true.”

“You know, it takes some ego to come down and start giving unsolicited advice to God.”

“I'm trying to help you.”

“I don't need help.” God crushed his empty can and flicked it across the sidewalk. “These casting directors are all just hacks.”

“I'd be happy to put you in touch with my agents.”

“Jesus. I need a drink.”

“I think that's the last thing you need.”

God's eyes were becoming violent. Morgan softened. “Look, I mean no disrespect. But

I've seen too many aspiring actors go down this path. I just want you to succeed.”

“I'm fine on my own,” God growled, and he marched off.

God walked through Hollywood and into Griffith Park, longing for the medium-awfulness he'd felt when he left Heaven. Where there'd been hope, now there was only bitterness. Happiness had felt absent before. Now it felt impossible.

As his energy began to wane, he wandered to Silverlake and sat on some steps. He unrolled himself and drifted off, not even aware that the steps he'd fallen asleep on led up to a church.

#

“Excuse me, Mr. Shore?”

Katie Atwater stood for several seconds awaiting a response.

“Mr. Shore.”

Still nothing. His eyes were closed, but he wasn't asleep. He might be meditating, or he might just be baked, but he could definitely hear her.

“Um, Pauly?”

“Goddamnit, how many times do I have to tell you people: I'm in character! Call me Nugboy!”

“I'm sorry,” she said, feigning deference.

“What do you need?”

“Just— do you know where Mr. Freeman is? No one's seen him.”

Pauly booted his still-vibrating foot massager against the wall. “What?!”

“We tried calling his managers. They said he's in Bora Bora.”

“What the hell is he doing in Bora Bora?”

“I don't know.”

“Christ. You can't make a Pauly Shore biopic without Morgan Freeman. What's your name again?”

“Katie. I'm a PA.”

“It's Katie, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Katie, get Pam, would you?”

“Right away, Nugboy.”

“Good.” As she left, he called out, “And thanks for calling me Nugboy.”

“Shit,” Morgan said, watching this scene unfold from God's desk. “Shit, shit, shit.”

Before the God gig, Morgan had canceled all his appointments and had his team inform anyone who was looking for him that he was taking an extended vacation in Bora Bora. He'd even booked all the flights, just to cover his tracks.

But this was the one loose end he'd forgotten to tie.

Close to a year earlier, Morgan had attended his son's 45<sup>th</sup> birthday party, even though he knew he might see Pauly Shore, who had been unsuccessfully trying to turn Morgan into a father figure since he was in Morgan's son's high school class.

When he arrived, Pauly immediately started pestering him about playing himself in Pauly's big comeback film. He'd said fine, just to get Pauly to shut up.

What he'd forgotten was the signature he'd drunkenly scribbled on a contract that Pauly shoved in front of him later that night. It was revealed to him now, thanks to his mostly-

niscience.

Morgan buried his head in his hands. He couldn't just leave Heaven, but he also couldn't be a no-show—it's not as if someone else could play the part of Morgan Freeman.

But then, what if they could?

Moments later, a photo of Morgan on the beach in Bora Bora landed in Pam's inbox, with an attached apology and a note suggesting that Pauly's movie might just be even better if someone else were playing the role of Morgan Freeman.

“I love it!” Pauly responded when Pam ran the idea by him. “We'll get Cosby! Or, no!” He snapped his fingers. “Fuckin' Danny Glover!”

“Those guys would kill it,” she said. “But I was thinking: what if we took the opposite approach? I mean, Morgan singlehandedly subverted the public's stereotype of God as an old white man. What if we did the same for the public's image of Morgan?”

Morgan knew that, as ideas go, this one was pretty batshit. But he also knew that if it would find a welcome home anywhere, it would be in the scorched, dusty desert of Pauly Shore's brain.

“Okay,” Pauly said. “Yeah, I can see that working.” He nodded, rolling the idea over in his head like a Rubik's Cube he'd bought pre-solved. “I actually think this could be better than if Morgan was doing it. Let's bring in some actors.”

#

God awoke in the church pew with a sore back but a new outlook. He'd been tiptoeing around with the polite submissiveness of a longtime struggling actor, but it was time to drop the bullshit. He had a golden arrow in his quiver, and it was time he started using it. From now on,

he was telling everyone he was God.

When he introduced himself to Pam, she nearly took a euphoria piss in her pants. She'd been well aware that casting someone white would guarantee a slate of thinkpieces and a review in every major publication.

But “Starring God As Morgan Freeman” was something she could put on billboards in Times Square. It was something that could get her on *Charlie Rose*. It was something that could get a major publisher behind her memoirs.

She assumed the guy was schizophrenic, but she knew it didn't matter. This was a jackpot.

God, who was told he was playing a nameless actor who served as Pauly Shore's mentor, was ecstatic to finally be working. He was beginning to understand what people meant when they said they felt like they were in Heaven.

As his first scene came to a close, God sat in his director's chair, and stared into his phone. Which prompted a shake of the head from the 10-year-old girl seated next to him.

“Um, I exist,” she said.

“That's terrific,” God replied. “Me too.”

He returned to his phone.

“I thought *my* generation was supposed to be the ones who are addicted to their phones.”

This sucked. He hated small talk, and had never cared for children either. He always wished he'd made humans grow more quickly, like squirrels. But he had promised himself he'd play nice on the set, so he put the device away.

“So you're an actor, too?”



“I'm Emma. I play the daughter from *Adopted*.”

“Pauly Shore adopted a daughter?”

“No. He did a mockumentary called *Adopted*, where he pretended to adopt some African orphans. There's some scenes in this movie about it.”

“You're kidding,” God said. “I cannot wrap my head around him. He's so committed—I mean, twelve takes for every scene; 3 a.m. wrap every night—but...” He trailed off.

“His actual acting sucks?”

God burst out laughing. “Just so aggressively not good!” Emma laughed along.

“So is your mom here with you, or your teacher, or what?”

“My *Awntie* Rose.”

God winced.

“What?”

“It's that word. The pronunciation.”

She shook her head, failing to understand.

“It's just— Look. I get it. There's an *a-u*; it makes an *aw* sound. I mean, I *would* get it. If there wasn't a store in every damn mall in America called *Antie* Anne's. I mean, it's right there!”

He was getting animated. “What's so damn hard about this?”

The girl laughed.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing. Grumpy old men are just funny to me.”

“I'm not grumpy!”

She doubled over. “The way you say that—*I'm not grumpy!*—makes you sound *so*

grumpy! Why do you even care so much, anyway?”

“Because! It's not how it's pronounced! These things matter!”

“Not to me. I hate grammar.”

“It's not about grammar. It's about things being under control.”

She took a long look into his eyes.

“I'll make you a deal,” she said. “When this movie comes out, if it does good—like, if I get to go on *The Tonight Show* and stuff—I'll tell everyone watching to pronounce it *Antie* Anne's. But only if you'll agree to lighten the heck up. What do you say?”

God smirked. For a kid, this person had something going for her.

“It's a deal.”

#

It was not until *Pauly Shore's Perfect Storm* premiered that God found out he'd been playing Morgan Freeman the whole time. The entire production had been carefully organized to conceal the character's identity from God in order to prevent even the subtlest hint of impersonation. There was a routine: after God left the set at the end of each day of shooting, Pauly and the crew would reassemble. Close-ups of Pauly reciting lines like, “Thanks for the advice, old friend” were re-shot as “Thanks for the advice, Mr. Freeman.” This footage was later intercut with the footage of God.

News of the strange, scrawny, curmudgeonly white man playing Morgan Freeman helped the movie make headlines. The front page of the *New York Post* called it *The Perfect Shitstorm*. To the *Daily News*, it was a *Master-Piece of Shit*. Every critic was perplexed but in love. Pauly Shore had done the unthinkable: he'd managed to make a movie in which someone *else* was the

laughingstock. The film itself was not good—but it was expertly and calculatedly not good. The film was flush with beautifully crafted awful jokes. It had a sense of humor about itself, but without succumbing to the temptation to wink at the audience. It was, put simply, a sensation.

And God was the breakout star. Everyone wanted him on their talk show, on their red carpets, in their ad campaigns—and yet, no one could even figure out who he was. Reddit had its theories: freckle analysis led to widespread acceptance that it was Nic Cage, until a photo of Cage and God together at the premiere debunked it.

For God, fame was Chinese water torture: every talk show's invitation, every agent's call, and every passing pedestrian's comment was another drip. It wasn't just that a quick one had been pulled on him. It was that he wasn't an actor, he was a novelty. He was humiliated.

One night, half a bottle deep, he googled himself. He typed in “God actor.” God looked in wondrous rage at the results. No positive reviews, of course, but no negative ones, either. Even after all the attention God's performance had received, every search result for “God actor” was about Morgan Freeman.

#

“What the fuck is going on in Libya?” God yelled. Morgan spun around, caught off guard by God's appearance.

“Those rebels couldn't get their hands on a weapon to save their lives when I left,” God continued. “Now Tripoli's one big fucking swimming pool filled with blood.”

“God, you know full well that the Qataris were always going to get their back.”

“Bullshit! I leave you alone for a couple weeks, and the world goes to shit!”

“With respect—”

“Fuck respect! Are you even trying?”

Morgan remained calm. “Listen. If there's something else you're upset about—”

“If there was something else, I'd be yelling about something else! Answer my question!”

Morgan's patience was waning. “You know, all I've ever heard from you is complaints. It just makes me wonder: why'd you create the world in the first place?”

“This guy, with his fucking questions. Because I saw that it was good. Didn't you read the fucking Bible?”

Morgan could see a streak of pain peeking out from behind the anger on God's face. “I apologize. I've been doing everything I can in Libya. I haven't slept in a week.”

But God had moved on from Libya. Finally, he shook his head.

“It *was* good. Creating, I mean. It was such a beautiful thing. But man, does keeping it in order get old.”

Morgan nodded. “There's a Vonnegut quote about how it's a flaw in the human character that everybody wants to build but nobody ever wants to do maintenance.”

“Yeah,” God said. “And where do you think humans got that flaw from?”

He walked to the window and looked out at the Milky Way.

“It used to be so much more straightforward. If the pot needs to be stirred, you move some continents around, bring some new species into being. You need a real shake-up? You toss an asteroid the earth's way. But ever since humans took over— I mean, when every little decision you make just pisses millions of people off, it's a different story.”

“I've heard the complaints.”

“Everyone gets mad about the bad things. But no one thanks me for beaches or orgasms.

No one thanks me for Nutella.

“It serves me right,” God continued. “I mean, what did I expect, handing the world over to a bunch of people modeled after me?”

He sighed. “I’m just gonna start over again. Another Big Bang. Just stars, and I can finally get some fucking sleep.”

Morgan was silent. God looked up at him.

“Look, I’m sorry I dragged you into this. You can go now.”

“God, I can try to help.”

“I don’t need your help.”

Morgan made his way to the exit. When he reached the door, he turned back toward God.

“The one thing I don’t understand is this. If you care little enough about the world that you’d destroy it, then why’d you get so upset at me for doing a bad job?”

God absorbed the question as Morgan left the Control Room.

#

With her remaining nibble of pretzel, Daphne scooped out the last of the sweet mustard dip. Perfectly rationed, once again. People liked to talk about “friends with benefits,” but friendlessness had some benefits of its own.

But the smile that this thought brought to her face was forced. The truth was, in her recent solitude, she’d guzzled so many tubs of Auntie Anne’s dip that it was becoming hard for her to taste anything but the additives, which she was pretty certain included ground up pennies.

“Quiet on the set!” yelled a man with a headset and a *Tonight Show Crew* t-shirt.

Trying to force the coppery bite down, Daphne coughed, flinging a shred of pretzel onto

her nose. She looked around to see if anyone had noticed. No one had, but she gasped: there, a few rows over, was her ex-friend Alberta.

“God, please don't let her have seen that.”

God missed Daphne's prayer notification on his monitor, because he was attending to a more pressing alert from the microwave: his lasagna was ready.

Ordinarily, God would just will whatever he felt like eating into existence. But lately, Stouffer's just felt right.

God wasn't destroy-the-universe depressed, as he'd suggested to Morgan. Galaxies; matter and all its properties; penguins—too much work had gone into all of it.

But he was off his game, and his malaise was contagious. Just as a company's tone is set by its executives, God's depression had made the weather a bit more gloomy, people a bit less smiley. Spontaneous dance parties had stopped breaking out. “Free Hugs” signs were at an all-time low.

God swatted an empty pizza box off his desk to make room for the lasagna. He tapped the screen to grant Daphne's prayer, then tuned his monitors to *The Tonight Show*.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Emma Peppers!”

God dropped his plastic fork on the floor in shock. The glowing 10-year-old who skipped over to Jimmy Fallon was the young actress God had spoken to on set. He had forgotten about her, and about her promise to join his *Antie* crusade.

He watched in wonder as Emma explained to Fallon that she considered herself less of an actor and more of an activist.

“So what's your cause,” Fallon asked, “making your buddy Pauly give the world the

*Encino Man* sequel it craves?”

“Nope,” she chuckled. “I saw *Encino Man*, and to be honest, I thought it was kinda immature.”

The audience loved it.

“There's a big problem in this world. And probably half of you out there are part of the problem. You know that soft pretzel shop you see in every mall?”

“*Awntie Anne's*?”

She shook her finger disapprovingly.

“That's the problem, right there. Jimmy, I love you. But it's *Antie*.”

Daphne yelled, “Woo!” She felt a hundred pairs of eyes turn toward her, including Alberta's. She was mortified.

“Well, it sounds like you've already converted one person,” Fallon said. “But why do this? Why do you feel so strongly about it?”

“I don't. But a friend of mine does. And I want to help him.”

God smiled.

“Well, I have an idea for how we can do that,” Fallon said. “When we come back, the Roots will join Emma on her pretzel crusade!”

Daphne went white. A couple years earlier, she and Alberta had downed an entire six-pack of Red Bull one night and come up with what they called Snack-Rock. They'd start a band and put on shows where they'd distribute homemade snacks and play snack-themed songs. Everyone loved music and everyone loved snacks, so they'd be a sensation, for sure. Their band name: The Pretzel Crusaders.

All these years later, they show up at the same taping, and Jimmy Fallon himself inadvertently name-drops them? It couldn't be coincidence.

Daphne looked over at Alberta, and Alberta met her eyes. They exchanged a smile.

After the break, Jimmy Fallon and Emma performed the dueling rap song “I’m Anti-*Awntie*” that they'd worked out before the show. It was clearly going to go massively viral.

As he watched it, though, God wasn't thinking about how many millions would see it. He wasn't thinking about whether it would solve the *Awntie* problem. He wasn't thinking about his acting career, and he wasn't thinking about Morgan Freeman.

He wasn't thinking about anything. He was too busy laughing.

When the bit came to a close, God switched off his TV and took a bite of lasagna. It was gross. The sauce was too corn-syrupy and the ricotta tasted like a carpet.

God tossed the lasagna. He took a sip of water, gargled it, and spit it in the sink. Then he shut off the monitor, willed some latex gloves into existence and snapped them on his hands.

This room was a mess, and it wasn't going to clean itself.