

A black and white photograph of a man in a dark suit and tie reclining on wide stone steps. He is leaning back with his hands behind his head, looking off to the side. The background features large, fluted classical columns. The overall mood is contemplative and sophisticated.

ADAM BETHLEHEM

THE UNIVERSAL THEORY OF IMMIGRATION

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FREE SAMPLE
NOT FOR SALE

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For Jennifer

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GOD'S PLANE LANDED ON TIME AT HEATHROW AIRPORT. He had thought about Gatwick or Stansted but the idea of the high-speed rail link pleased him. He could have chosen a scheduled flight but he was attentive to his status and determined to travel in style. In any case, precautions had been taken to ensure that his arrival would not be noticed.

The immigration formalities presented no difficulties and, having nothing to declare, he chose the green channel. Everything was going smoothly.

CONTENTS

THE DECISION

VISITOR IN LONDON

RESURRECTION

AN INDEPENDENT LIFE

TRIALS OF IMMIGRATION

A NEW BEGINNING

EPILOGUE

THE DECISION



CHAPTER ONE

“SIR, IF YOU’LL FORGIVE ME, THERE IS A MATTER THAT requires... I apologise for the interruption.” Gabriel waited for God to speak. This cantankerous mood had been going on for weeks and God’s temper had a way of affecting everything. He cleared his throat and waited to see what form their Leader would take this morning. When these cranky states took Him there was no predicting which way things would go.

“All right, get on with it,” God was leaning back in his chair and Gabriel was relieved to see He was dressed conservatively. Not that superficial appearances could provide a reliable guide but a beard and flowing robe usually indicated trouble. The thought of another tantrum was terrifying – probably God’s intention in the first place. Irritability didn’t make for a comfortable life for the rest of them, even if they were in Heaven.

“I’m sure You’ll remember the last time someone made an awkward suggestion. Being on the team didn’t save Lucifer and we’re all terrified of starting

something that could be divisive. We haven't quite recovered from that last... ah... situation." Gabriel completed the first part of his speech. It was as far as he had managed to get with his preparations before he had been summoned to the inner sanctum.

"That was gossip. Everyone knows I am forgiving." The atmosphere grew heavy but God had turned his back and was contemplating a view of creation, refusing Gabriel a chance to make his point.

"What I mean, Sir, is that some of us felt there had been a slight over-reaction and it may have been better if... oh dear, I beg Your pardon." Even the apology faded into nothingness as the archangel found himself dismissed from the almighty Presence.

Down below, the world spun slowly on its eccentric axis. Another of the inconsistencies that could have been avoided if He hadn't been so trusting, God thought. If He'd considered these problems for even a single moment, it would have been clear that untested angels weren't ready for responsibility. He should have insisted on close supervision instead of handing over the blueprint and hoping they'd get it right. To be fair, Gabriel hadn't actually been unreliable since his promotion to the top spot. He was a fine figure even

after all these years, although recently he had become so... so fussy. It was time for him to take a sabbatical. Any more confused talk would certainly be grounds for dismissal, gross dereliction of duty or something like that. The details could be worked out later.

"We looked at all possibilities, Sir. Without the tilt we had trouble with the seasons. I know You said we shouldn't bother but there were complications and the compromise eradicated many of our problems," Gabriel's hesitant form reappeared in the corner of the office. It wasn't a question of eavesdropping but recently the immortal Being had developed a habit of thinking aloud. "I hope You'll understand if..."

"Didn't I send you away?" God demanded but it was difficult to insist. It wasn't realistic to ask any angel to stay away when he was summoned by a thought.

"We were trying to help." From his position across the table, Gabriel could see his Master had been reading. Today, they were using the mahogany desk from Thailand but it wasn't clear what that meant. Business and tradition? Fairness and reliability? A big change of some sort was coming, that much was evident. God's back was turned and Gabriel leaned in to read the papers on the wooden surface. Contracts? His own... and... Michael?

“Forgive Me, Gabriel. You’ve done well but I think you should know why you’ll be leaving,” God was still looking out the window. A decision had been taken.

“You said not to bother You with every detail. That You didn’t want to know,” Gabriel wasn’t sure if his participation was required but what else could he do? If God needed...

“There you go again. You blather on and never get to the point,” God turned to face Gabriel. His suit was familiar but rumpled. This had never happened before. Of course they’d all heard rumours but there was no knowing which stories were actually true.

“I’m letting you go,” God spoke without emotion. “No no, I don’t want to see that mournful look. Your compensation will be adequate and there’s no need to be thinking about tribunals.”

“Thank you. If You’ve decided, I shouldn’t take up more of Your time. May I ask who’ll be replacing me?” Apparently it was going to be Michael. Why else was there a second document on the table? Gabriel was determined to be dignified even if his thoughts were in turmoil. “Would You like me to deal with the handover?”

It was plain to see that God was losing interest. He was muttering under His breath about the perils of

favouritism. “Enjoy your holiday,” was all He would say.

Michael emerged even as his colleague faded from the scene. He hadn’t been in the office since before the Fall and was surprised to discover he was alone. He looked at the figure seated behind the desk. In recent years there had been no reason for a private audience.

“Ah, there you are. I’ve given Gabriel his marching orders,” God broke into the newcomer’s thoughts, directed him to the single chair and gestured for him to sit. “Officially We can’t say it’s permanent and if he’s ever fit for duty We may have to take him back. Right then, I’m sure you’re anxious to make a start. Remember what happened to your gibbering predecessor and I’m sure you’ll settle in.”

Gabriel returned. He was accustomed to being summoned back and forth but this time he had thought the ordeal was finally over.

“What are you doing here? I thought We agreed you would take time for reflection.” All of a sudden God was on His feet, struggling to contain His temper. For the moment Heaven remained unaltered but on Venus storms were raging.

“Go on, leave, both of you,” God dismissed them with a wave. But they were unable to shift; even as He turned His attention elsewhere, they stayed on,

like bit-part players in the background.

“Excuse me, Sir,” Gabriel was no longer in post but Michael didn’t have the experience to deal with a crisis of this magnitude. He resolved to make one last attempt. “There’s no easy way of approaching the subject and it makes us look bad going around in circles. Perhaps it would help if You thought we should be more direct?”

“Get on with it! There, you have your instructions. Now spit it out. What the Devil’s wrong with you?”

The angels stepped back, ashen where they would once have been radiant. Tales of God’s temper may have leaked out in the past but a detail like this had to be kept secret. The D-word could only mean something terrible.

Gabriel looked across at Michael. It was a long time since they had worked together and the junior angel remained as youthful as ever. Maybe God was right. Gabriel could remember a time when he, himself, had been so innocent but the unrelenting pressure had taken its toll. All traces of enthusiasm had disappeared and the need for measured behaviour had created an endless capacity for prevarication and rationalisation. Gabriel shook his head, wondering how much time had passed during these contemplations. Luckily, God

had other things on His mind and they were no longer centre stage.

Michael looked across and smiled. It was apparent he didn’t understand the peril of their predicament. The Lord of Heaven turned to them with a face of thunder. Michael still had that impish grin. Gabriel braced himself.

“This time you’ve gone too far.” God didn’t need to shout, His wrath was all consuming.

The prospect of never-ness and nothing-ness loomed. Before long, no sound would make it over the darkening sea of anger and all would be lost. Wasn’t it better to slink away and fail? Slings, arrows, outrageous fortune? The reality hit home but nobody said a word. It was now or never.

Gabriel chose his destiny and stepped forward to ensure Michael was protected. Then, looking directly at their Leader, he spoke with all the courage he could muster:

“It’s You who needs the break, Sir! Not me!”