

HAPPY NOW

Satan asks

— Well?

— I never thought much about it. Certainly, I never believed any of this was likely. But I guess it's what you don't know that trips you up. I've always thought of myself as...well... moral.

clearer

Leonard was well on the path of righteousness and it was giving everyone the shits. You could see it in the way his little eyes sparkled and his tongue would dart out and wet his lips when he talked to you. What he'd bought was crap and disappointment was sure to follow. I told him as much but my chiding made no impression; his convictions were unassailable. He would lean against my office door, all underarms and shirt buttons straining and say things like: 'Roy, how can you know where you're going without a map?' or 'You've gotta be the man with the plan,' and 'It won't happen until it's written down.' And he had goals and was doing mantras daily, getting closer and closer, nearer and clearer and dearer. The *Manage Your Life* starter kit even came with a little plastic wallet of cards each with a single word printed on it. Every so often, even when he was supposed to be paying attention, he'd flip the wallet out and silently mouth today's selection: 'FOCUS', 'INTENSITY', 'STEELY'.

I told him that all his jabbering and ring-bound manuals wasn't getting my work done, and besides, by then I had my own transformation to worry about.

onionskin

It began on one of those Spring afternoons when perfumed breezes call from shady groves and all you want to do is lie sweet on the new-mown grass squinting up into the sunshine. Instead I was slumped in the second hour of a seminar on the Marginson Sanction. For his own amusement the head beagle was parading his \$100,000-a-year private school education by discoursing on the Greek derivation of some participle or other and all the juniors were wagging their tails thinking how one day they'd be up there and how there'd be some changes then boyo. Meantime, on the other side of the room I'd had no luck flirting with Didi, the russet-haired beauty from the fourth floor, so I was staring out the window watching as shadows engulfed the building opposite, consuming the brilliant afternoon and my whole life along with it.

And at some point I remember leaning back, running my hands through my hair and... youch!

Feigning gas, I left the meeting and ducked into the Mens and there in the mirror I saw them: two inflamed spots just above the hairline. That's great, I thought, boils and craters—the fair moon that was Didi moved further out of my orbit, the likelihood of stellar collisions now even more remote. I rubbed at one and a layer of onionskin came away revealing a hard little white patch. Now I'm thinking oh-no melanoma—payback for all those years fried black on the beach. I'm thinking wart virus. I'm thinking health crisis. Of course back then I had no idea.

health crisis (1)

Even though the morning news had been headlining the epidemic for weeks now, the commuter express was chock-full. The feverish driver waved us on past the broken ticketing machine. Inside someone was coughing up a lung and an old man in the pensioner seats was trying to stem the wash from his nose with the sleeve of his jacket. Even the elegant beauty next to me had

it. One minute she's reading something literary and uplifting, smiling a distracted otherworldly smile, next she's gulping and swallowing, her eyes rolling back in her head, then her mouth opens wide so that we could see her back fillings and she sneezes issuing a warm spray, each droplet an ocean of viral ecology, over us all.

Work wasn't much better. Our building has always been bad for aerosol infections: Monday Janey's got the sniffles from her three-year-old who's picked up something from day-care and by Thursday all of Accounts Receivable are down. It's like working in a Petri dish with air-con. By this time the government had started compulsory home disinfections so when it was their turn, people had to stay home and wait for the fumigators. That said, most people managed to struggle in: it was still early days.

6 good things

— I am not bad.

— Prove it, he says smiling devilishly.

1. I sponsor Lavinia, a five-year-old in Ghana. She writes regularly and tells me how grateful she is; I have a photo of her in my office and last Christmas I sent her a cardigan.
2. On Saturday, I found a woman's purse. It was a cheap vinyl thing but there was a photo of a cat, a fat tabby yawning up at the camera. It must be someone's so I went out of my way to dial the phone number on the back but it was disconnected. So I propped it on a fence where the true owner could easily find it.
3. I gave directions to an old Aboriginal man the other day who was down from Gunnedah and was lost. His eyes were all milky and he'd been drinking even though it was only eight in the morning.
4. I put up with Leonard...

5. ...and I always give something when anyone's collecting for a morning tea or a going-away present and I never ask for change.
6. etc.

encounter

The patches on my forehead had progressed from blistering swellings through tremulous tumescences to eruptions and outbreaks: horns! I was growing horns.

Leonard didn't notice at first.

'What do you think?' he asked handing me the brochure. It was from Enquist Corp, the *Manage Your Life* people. This time (for a price) they promised to reveal further necessary keys to success at a weekend retreat. The text was illuminated with gleaming testimonials: 'I dared to achieve...and look at me now', 'The only thing keeping me back was me', 'For a sharper exterior renovate your interior.'

On the back of the pamphlet was a photograph of the tanned and coiffured über-entrepreneur Roald Enquist himself, looking both smugly paternal and provocative: daring you to attend his workshop; daring you not to.

'I *really* need this,' Leonard said. 'They're advertising the level fives next week and I've got to be ready.' He'd been an acting four for 37 months now, an office record.

'A person can have too much change,' I tried.

He looked up and noticed my new accessories. 'Well,' he said huffily, 'somehow *you've* managed to change.'

'But it hasn't made me happier.'

'That's because you haven't got a plan,' he replied smugly.

I guess he had a point.

authority (1)

As well as a pair of six-inch scratch-glass horns, after a few days of seated soreness I discovered that I had also sprouted a small pink tail.

Naturally, I tried to disguise these changes: wore baggy shorts and a Bulls cap with holes cut out. I'd creep into work early, keep the light dim, the door closed and try to hide out. But people still noticed and sure enough, come Wednesday there's Levinson's EA on the phone—could I just pop up as the DG wanted a word, yes, right now please.

Levinson had a deluxe suite on a sunny corner of level 25 with floor to ceiling views out to the harbour: you could see the sail boats lined up like moths on a water bowl. So I'm standing there in an oblong of sunshine cap in hand, my form now obvious. And there's Mrs Rodent from HR in her orange power suit perched on the rim of one of the black calf-skin chairs, lip-gloss drawn into a silent o, eyes wide taking me in.

Levinson looked up and smiled. 'Roy. Sit, sit.'

'I'd rather stand. It's...'

He eyed the lump in my pants. 'Of course.'

And then he did a funny thing. He must have been on one of those negotiating courses because, to put me at my ease, he stood up. Seeing this the Rodent got up also. So there we were, all three standing awkwardly in a room full of deliciously inviting leather furniture.

'Now look,' he started. 'About your...'

He gestured vaguely. 'There's not going to...this isn't going to... be a claim?'

I hadn't even thought about it.

'Because something like this, on top of this flu thing, it'd just fuck our premiums wouldn't it Grace?'

The Rodent nodded pressing her folder tight against her tangerine bosom, never taking her eyes from me.

He continued: 'Fuck them right royally.'

'It's a personal thing,' I offered.

Levinson seemed pleased by this. 'That's it. We'll call it personal, er...a personal development. What do you think Grace?'

Grace wasn't saying anything she was just staring.

seducing Didi (1)

When I got back the phone was ringing. It was Didi.

'I thought you were...well, dull,' she said. 'But since you've changed.'

'You've noticed—?'

'Well yeah.'

'Aren't you—?'

'No, not at all. I find it—'

'Disturbing? Unsettling?'

'Exciting.'

television (1)

After the evening news they had started running an advisory program with an expert panel: a doctor, a chemist and a young priest in a black skivvy. And they're trying to do the right thing, telling us about boiling water and hygiene.

'What your viewers have got to understand,' said the doctor, 'is that it's a virus. It's tiny, really teeny-weeny.' He held his thumb and forefinger really close together to illustrate.

'The best thing is bleach,' said the chemist. 'Wash everything in bleach.'

'Lemon-scented or original?' asked the moderator.

'Bleach bleach!' replied the chemist, shirtily. 'It doesn't matter as long as it's bleach, and boil everything for three minutes at least.'

The moderator turned to the priest. 'So this plague, is God punishing us for something?'

The priest shrugged his shoulders. 'I doubt it. Why would he bother?'

zone is not a verb

It was the Monday after Leonard's encounter weekend and first thing he pushed into my office and started blubbing.

'I've lost it,' he sniffed. 'I just don't believe.'

'Have you reviewed your goals?' I asked.

This set off a further storm of huffing and snivelling. 'Yes, yes, YES! Everything. Goals, indicators, recited all my affirmations, I've even rung the last-resort emergency help line but they laughed at me. Laughed! I think they were in a restaurant or something.'

'You were doing so well,' I offered. 'Achieving all that stuff.'

'It doesn't mean shit, Roy.' He reached into his pocket and pulled out the card wallet. 'Here tell me what does *exemplify* mean?' He tore the card in two. 'Or *maximise* or *zone*? What does *zone* mean? It's not even a verb.' By then he had all the cards out and was trying to tear the whole fistful but he only succeeded in bending them and turning bright red.

'AaaaAAGHHH.' He threw them to the floor.

Then he turned to me his little eyes sparkling. 'Roy...am I a *good* man?'

With my horns, goatee and twitching tail I was hardly the right person to be asking.

'Good is as good does Leonard.' It was the only thing that came to mind but it seemed to give him some relief.

I looked down at the strewn cards and oddly now they all said the same thing: ☺ THE JOKE'S ON YOU.

health crisis (2)

Although I'd managed not to knock anything over or scratch or tear or rip, my tail had become a problem. Anytime I wanted to remain unemotional and detached it would be standing upright and jiggling about.

And they wouldn't let me on the bus. 'Not without your owner,' said the driver, pointing to a sign showing a dog silhouette bisected by a forbidding red diagonal.

This couldn't go on, so come lunchtime I headed for St Vincent's hopeful that something might be done. But the hospital was overflowing with sniffing sneezing wheezing coughing and gulping citizens, so many that they had spilled out onto the asphalt apron and were sitting on makeshift chairs or propped against rails and walls. And there at the back of the line was the young television priest, now holding a soggy cloth over his nose.

'I saw you the other night,' I said.

'Unnhunngg,' he replied without looking up.

Despite his reduced state, I had to ask him. 'Do you believe it, what you said or was it just for TV?'

'Snuhhh.'

'Because if God is indifferent then none of this means anything.' I'd meant the moaning sea of sickness before us but instead he looked at me taking in my shape through streaming eyes. 'Iffssss gobbbbs sswill.'

'What?'

'Gobbs swill!' And then clear as a bell I heard him say: 'It will set you free,' before re-burying his face into his sodden handkerchief.

I decided not to tell him about Satan.

tells Satan

— So what does it mean?

— You tell me.

— What does the form of something mean? Is a woodpecker that shape because of some inner woodpeckerness descended from the first enumeration of woodpeckers? Or a loaf of bread, or the flash of silver over-leaping a net a referent to the original idea of fish?

— Form follows function Roy. He tapped his horns pointedly.

Without thinking I felt my hands reaching to do the same.

seducing Didi (2)

My transformation was nearly complete: my horns had developed a raking curl, I'd become hairy all over and my fingers and toes had coalesced into tough bony plates. But since office machines were designed for upright bipeds with articulated filaments, photocopying now presented me with no end of trouble. I was in the utility room pawing at a jammed Xerox when Didi walked in.

'I thought I'd frightened you off,' she said standing right up close so I could smell her perfume and hear all the possibilities in her words.

'I've been busy.'

'I can see that,' she replied stroking my mane. 'Here, let me,' she said and bent down and reached into the copier's overheated interior with her slim ivory fingers.

It was just then that Mrs Rodent on patrol, saw us—the monstrously deformed clerk bending over beauty. She panicked, backing along the corridor bawling.

authority(2)

The alarm that had been wailing away for half an hour stopped and in the ringing silence they announced: ‘all trouble has been contained. Please return to your cubicles and continue to work.’

This position was as unreliable and dubious as all their other pronouncements and so was ignored by the few remaining who huddled together in groups.

Meanwhile the guards who had been sent to get me were bunched up at the end of the corridor. Someone had issued them with batons and helmets but they weren’t trained for anything like this: they were tentative and jittery peering at us through their riot shields.

I stamped my hoofs and they backed away. On what they get paid I couldn’t blame them but I knew a more committed force would be coming soon enough.

And I had to see Leonard.

We found him at his desk amongst the usual disarray holding a letter—a look of wonder on his round beet-red face.

‘I’ve done it,’ he said.

‘It’s time to go Leonard.’

He handed me the letter. He’d been promoted: after three years finally he had made it.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ Didi whispered, her breath close in my ear.

Leonard smiled at us benevolently like a dawdling father to his impatient children: 'You go. I can't. I've got so much to do, these new responsibilities.' His hands scuttled aimlessly over the fan of papers.

seducing Didi (3)

Maybe this was a dream; maybe I had just woken up.

I'm galloping down the corridor with Didi astride my back, her fist in my mane. Unbound her hair streams behind us like a pennant. Next we're out in the atrium, the grille is coming down and the alarm is whooping away. But gates cannot hold us. A flick of my will and glass shatters, concrete explodes.

My steely hoofs kick sparks from the road as we gallop through the city of the damned. Everywhere we see how the inhabitants are tormented: signs and billboards of perfection provoke yearning. Nowhere is unoccupied so turning from desire is impossible. Demons in smart black suits poke the pedestrians with pitchforks, laughing all the time.

Seeing all this Didi cries out in anguish. She's so sweet.

the palace of wisdom

After a time we left the city behind and came at last to the sea, shallow endless out to the horizon. So we started our crossing with only the blue sky and the swell of the clouds to measure our progress. After sloshing through empty days and spangled nights we came at last to the shores of another continent. There we climbed mountain ranges, traversed savannahs and finally arrived at the celestial realm.

And there was a gate (or a grate) and an angel with a flaming sword waiting for us. She directed us to look onto Paradise, which seemed to be mostly treed lawns, sprinklers and a white marquee down by a duck-pond. We saw our friends, people from the office, our dead and complete strangers

chatting away, lolling about in a kind of amiable purposelessness. The angel raised an eyebrow, as if to say behold the end of your journey, ask and the gates shall be opened.

I would have loved to have seen the look on her face but our turning away was part of the required theatre, like Eve and Adam looking only towards what was ahead of them: drought and digging about and sweat and grandkids running all over. Even today I still imagine all the possible expressions on that Angel's face: annoyance, incredulity, admiration, envy.

Having Satan as a neighbour is not as bad as you might think. He even baby-sits for us when we go to the cinema and, while sometimes he has trouble choosing an appropriate bedtime story, we agree we could have done a whole lot worse.

and Satan asks

— Happy now?