

THE BOOK OF MOON



George Crowder

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For my father,
with whom I took my first steps,
both as a writer and as a little boy...

Chapter One

The Book of Job



I WAS NOTHING.

People would inquire, “What are you? Lutheran? Baptist? Catholic? Jewish?”

I’d have to shrug and answer, “Uh, really, I’m nothing.”

If they were stubborn, they’d offer me more choices, as if maybe one would be irresistible: “Episcopalian? Methodist? Buddhist? Islamic Fundamentalist?”

No, they’re all delicious, I’m sure—but I couldn’t. Really. *Nothing* for me.

I was supposed to become something, I guess. That seemed to be my mother’s plan. One Sunday each month, she would pack my brother and me off to one of Los Angeles’ numerous churches to try it on for size. We’d been doing it for years, but none of them fit any better than the cheap suits Moss and I kept growing out of.

My older brother and I would endure each and every service, wrestling tight, sweat-stained collars like a pair of horse thieves trying to slip the hangman’s noose. We’d crick our strangled necks to peek at Mom, who was pursing her lips and shaking her head at whatever the minister had to say. The preacher’s gospel was invariably her heresy, so we never went back to hear one a second time. I asked her about this once. She said, “Moon Landing, we are going to put a hell of a lot more thought into choosing your faith than we did into choosing your name.”

If I hadn’t been fighting for my last breath, I might have found the proceedings more interesting. The services were like a club, with passwords and secret handshakes. Everybody but us knew what they were doing. When they were sitting down, we were standing up; when we were patting our heads, they were crossing their stomachs. We had our signals completely crossed. God would never know what play *we* were calling.

Moss and I relaxed during the sermon. We could sit there and nothing was expected of us, except not to snore. Then I heard this story about Job that woke me up in a hurry.

Apparently he was an important character in the Bible—they even named a book after him. He was a devout man, and God had blessed him with a big family and lots of livestock. Since those were the low-tech days, I guess there was only so much the Lord could do for the guy. These numbers were remarkably specific and caught my attention: 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 *female* donkeys. No lie, that’s what the man said. *Donkettes*.

Everything was cool until God ran into Satan, and did a little bragging about what a God-fearing character Job was. Satan was not the devil for nothing. He had every one of God’s buttons programmed on his remote, and he pushed them all. Sure, Job loves you

now—and why shouldn't he? You buffed the man out but *good*. But what if his life went in the crapper—would he still sing hallelujah? Send up burnt offerings like he's Dickie's Barbecue Pit? I think not. He's just a fair-weather fanatic.

So God lost it big time. If they did a cartoon version of the Bible, at this point you'd see the sacred steam shooting out of His ears while His eyes would be rolling like pinballs. God told Satan to do whatever he wanted to Job—He was that convinced the man would still be faithful. They probably put money on it to make it interesting.

I can relate, 'cause I've known obnoxious characters like Satan. They make you say things you regret, like, "My old man can drink more beer than all your relatives put together." Glad Dad never actually heard about that little boast.

Still, this did not suggest a high level of emotional maturity on the part of God. I mean, would *you* allow the devil to torture your most loyal admirer just to satisfy your vanity? I certainly hope not.

Satan loves a challenge and he went right to work. While Job was on a coffee break, a servant ran in to tell him that his oxen and donkeys had been ripped off and many of his servants had been killed by the Sabeans. As soon as that guy got done talking, another messenger arrived with the news that a fire from heaven had fried Job's sheep and more servants. Then another guy burst in to exclaim that the camels had just been stolen and even more servants had been massacred. On *that* messenger's heels, somebody else showed up to say that the roof had fallen on top of Job's ten sons and daughters, and none had survived.

Tell me *that* won't make you give up coffee.

But Job still praised God—so the Almighty green-lighted waterboarding. Just don't kill the guy, He said. So the devil gave Job a disgusting plague that made him so nuts he tried to scrape his skin off with a broken plate. Job cursed the day he was born, but he still didn't curse God.

At this point Job's amigos came to cheer him up, but he was such a wreck that they just sat around for a week without saying a word. Finally they got helpful, annoying Job with various theories of what he might've done to wind up in the Lord's doghouse. They figured—as most of us do—that when so many bad things happen to a good person, there's gotta be a reason.

Every time they floated a notion, Job shot it down. *No, that's not it. Nah, couldn't have been that.* Job couldn't think of a darned thing he'd done to get on God's bad side, which of course was right. These tortures were merely a little test of Job's loyalty, to see how much random crap and life-threatening abuse he'd take before he decided Our Heavenly Father wasn't Mr. Wonderful.

I guess Job got a passing score, because the Lord cured his skin disease and gave him double the animals he'd had in the first place. The kids were under warranty, so God replaced them, too. He and Job decided to let bygones be bygones, and they all lived happily ever after. Which was so many years that when he died, Job's age didn't even make sense in a base ten number system. The end.

Whoooooooooa. Take a deep breath, dude.

I can't remember the point of the story, but I knew what I had heard. Give or take beaucoup asses and several centuries on Earth, it was the story of my life.

Chapter Two So the Devil Walks into a Bar...



ALL RIGHT, I'M EXAGGERATING. How can any fifteen-year-old's tally of misfortunes rival the King of Woe's? Naturally I can't match the man donkey-for-donkey.

It's the general tone of Job's story that really gets to me—the way in which, just when you think things can't get any worse, they do. It reminds me of the TV pitches when they keep sweetening the deal—“For just three low payments of \$19.99 we will steal your oxen and donkeys and two-thirds of your servants. But wait—that's not all! If you act fast we will throw in *the death of your ten children*. But wait—there's more! Do not delay! If you call in the next half hour we will include ULCERS, BOILS, AND LICE FOR *YOUR ENTIRE BODY!*”

The last year of my life has had that kind of downward spiral.

We're in the hot July sun, waiting out the line at CJ's coffee shop, across the street from Saint Mary Magdalena's Catholic Church. Mom's working the crowd, flirting with a lanky man who's half her age. He has a *New York Times* and the look of a surfer, a combination that's more than enough to catch her eye.

Moss and I exchange a look and a shrug. “Back in a few,” he says, jumps on his board and skates up the street. I take a seat in the shade and my eyes drift shut.

The story of Job rattled me. I don't believe in God, but if I *did*...



The lounge is a shadowy oasis, unremarkable save for the peculiar customers posed on barstools, immobile as marble statues displayed on pedestals. Hunched over cocktails, their backs to me, each bears a thick pair of wings.

The saloon door opens, allowing a momentary puddle of brilliance, and an enormous angel steps into it. He pauses as his eyes adjust to the gloom. There's no room at the bar, but the newcomer strides to the nearest seat and simply shoves its occupant to the floor, taking his place.

The deposed drinker looks up from where he's landed, still gripping empty stemware. “Satan!” he splutters. “I was just leaving.”

The big angel smiles down thinly. “Take your veggies with ya,” he says, daintily dropping a pick with three pimentoed olives onto the floored angel's chest.

Drifting to the new customer, the bartender plucks the soiled cocktail napkin, gives the counter a rub, and deposits a fresh serviette on the gleaming oak. His forearms are thickly muscled. I cannot see the bartender's face, but he seems somehow familiar.

“So the devil walks into a bar...” he says. His voice has an Irish lilt.
Satan grimaces in distaste. “If I gotta hear that one again, *you’re tippin’ me.*”
“You laughed at it last time...”

“It’s the way you tell it. Such a dark sense of humor, God. *Loved* your work in the Congo.”

“Ah, that wasn’t *me*. Boys’ll be boys, and all that,” God demurs, setting a tumbler filled with an icy dark liquid in front of Satan.

The devil sniffs the drink with satisfaction, and drains the glass in a draught. He sets it down with a sigh. “You’re too modest.”

God refills the tumbler without comment, and the devil sips the new cocktail. “So...what’s the line on your boy Moon?”

“*Moon?*” God’s voice is incredulous. “*Moon Landing?*”

“Might like him with points...”

“Yer askin’ for points...on an atheist?”

“*Agnostic.*”

“Ah, there’s no sport in it, Satan. Take the Madre Garcia and six. Runs an orphanage in Juarez. Devout. She’ll not forsake me.”

Satan sips his drink, considers. “I like the kid.”

“Then *you’ll* give *me* six.”

The devil snorts in disbelief. “Cut the crap. Little cancer, few deaths in the family. Nine outta ten unbelievers sing hosanna just the way you like it.”

“No atheists in the trenches, eh?”

“My point. You oughta be fuckin’ ashamed.”

“It’s not personal, just business. So you think this lad Moon is different?”

“Could be. You want the action or not?”

God polishes a glass, considering. “I’ll give him to you straight up. My best offer.”

“Done.”

God’s big hand enfolds Satan’s hoof in a lingering handshake that suggests a certain affection. “You were my favorite angel,” he sighs.

“Now don’t go gettin’ sentimental,” says Satan, dropping a bill on the bar and heading for the door.

“Standard exclusions apply. Mortal diseases, fatal mishaps, natural disaster resulting in death, and I cover,” God calls at the departing customer.

“You’re gonna read the fine print to *me?*” says the devil, as Moss shakes me brusquely awake.

Chapter Three Where's the Pony?



MY FATHER, DAVID LANDING, a Texan born and bred, was tall enough to stand out in most any crowd and so lithe he could have been a dancer. With his black eyes and chiseled features, Dad was the kind of man you assumed would take charge—though all he could really control was his sports bar, Fanatics. When he was off playing golf, Mom would sarcastically refer to him as “the lone Ranger.” After things got bad, she called him “the *stoned* Ranger.” But only under her breath.

Mom self-deprecatingly claimed to be a “Mediterranean mutt,” with ancestors who principally hailed from Spain, France, and Italy. Like many mixed-breed animals, her looks were striking, highlighted by an olive complexion, flashing green eyes, and a strong jaw with the hint of a cleft chin. Throw in a vibrant shade of glossy red lipstick to frame her dazzling carnivore teeth, and it was no wonder that at Northwestern she had been the sweetheart of two different fraternities, at a time when such Greek accolades were going out of style. She still got looks from our friends that made Moss and me cringe.

A third-grade teacher who lived for culture, Mom liked life hot and spicy. Keeping the peace was not high on her list of priorities: femmes fatales and old movie bombshells had served as her role models. Mom’s saving grace was her sense of the absurd. When that deserted her, we were all in trouble.

Probably my parents never should have married each other. Perhaps opposites attract, but in Mom and Dad’s case, they *attacked*. Pretty much the only thing they had in common was their kids. It turned out we weren’t enough.

Still, the news that their marriage was over came as a surprise to my brother and me. It happened last April, a little over a year ago. We were enjoying a rare mid-week pizza outing—which, in retrospect, should have been a tip-off—when my dad downed a brew, belched softly, and, ignoring my mother’s scowl, declared, “Boys, your mom and I are throwing in the towel.”

“Yo, hit me again, Daddy-o,” my brother said, holding out his plate. He was listening to his iPod and rarely tuned in to the conversation.

Dad slid a piece onto Moss’s plate, murmuring, “Eat up, son.”

“You want to elaborate on that?” I said.

My mother had taken a back seat for as long as she could stand. She pursed her lips and shook her head. “David, you’re not putting it well at all.”

Dad shrugged. “Tomato, tomahto.” He flagged a waiter and waved his empty beer bottle, calling for another.

“We—are—getting—a—divorce,” my mother stated with clipped simplicity.

Moss ripped off his earbuds, a foolish grin plastered on his face. “A *horse*?!! Outrageous!”

“No, she didn’t say that—”

“Rad!”

“Moss, we’re not getting a horse.”

“Well, why not? We could stash the nag in the garage and ride him around the bean field.”

“Moss—”

“Hey, what’re we gonna call him?”

I grabbed my brother by his shoulders. “They’re getting *divorced*.”

Moss’s jaw dropped open. He put down the pizza and looked from me to my mother, to my father, back to me, then around the horn again. The three of us watched him as he processed the momentous news, waiting to see what would finally emerge. At last, Moss looked at us and asked, “Does this have...*anything*...to do with the horse?”

Dad guffawed, spraying the table with a yeasty gout of beer. My mother dabbed herself with a napkin. “For heaven’s sake, David.”

But Dad was doubled over with laughter. “Just...just gimme a minute,” he choked out. “This is not the way your mother planned this.”

“What else is new?” Mom snapped.

“Why are you getting divorced?” I asked.

“You have to ask? Look at your father.”

“Uh, Janice, that’s not the way we planned it, either,” my father said.

“Well, I’m not taking the blame for this.”

“So Dad drinks,” observed Moss, taking up for Dad. “Big deal.”

“It’s an occupational hazard,” I added. “And it could be worse. Dad could be a dentist. They’ve got suicidal tendencies.”

My father cleared his throat. “It’s not just that, boys. You’ve probably noticed your mother and I haven’t exactly been getting along too well...”

There was a quiet moment as we all digested Dad’s statement. This might have been the first direct reference to the cold war that had existed in our house for at least the last year or two.

Tentatively, I broke the silence. “Everybody has their ups and downs...”

“True. But we’ve been more down than up for some time now.”

“And we all deserve better,” my mother summed up. “Our marriage is setting a bad example for you children.”

“Yeah, for schizzle. Let’s hope you two do a better job on the divorce, dog,” said Moss.

“Please don’t call me *dog*, Mr. Homie,” said Mom.

Moss nodded. “Anyone want the last piece?”

We all shook our heads and my brother blithely took the pizza, then cut it in half. He tossed a portion on my plate. “Better munch, bro. Never know where our next meal’s comin’ from, right?”