

P R E F A C E

Throughout history, attempts have been made to decipher the perfect day of the week for God's ultimate return. The methodologies used were as varied as the cultures and religions applying them and had little in common with each other, except for the fact that each conclusion became piously set in stone, without compromise, sanctified by theological logic and propagated through means of rigid dogma.

Ironically, it's this uncompromising nature that inevitably leads to counter-arguments designed to bring about compromise. These alternative views, generally labelled heretical by the culture affixing the label, are typically dismissed out of hand and banished to the scrap heap of fanciful ideologies. This became known as the '*my God is the only God, and He says you're a dick*' theory of divinity.

Generations of human ancestry, primarily living in isolated cultures around the globe, became very sensitive to outsiders questioning their entrenched dogma or claiming to know the mind of God and expressed these sensitivities in a variety of ways. Some innocuous, such as lively debate followed by snacks and refreshments, while others, less benign, usually resulted in collective rock-throwing or similar unpleasantries.

The crux of the overall problem looks something like this: A theistic scholar proclaims either a Sunday, Saturday or Friday as the only acceptable day for their deity's arrival. The conclusion is based on the interpretation of scripture, more commonly referred to as holy writing, and touted as the only authentic word of God. Almost instantly, the decree is attacked by others, insisting that the day in question was exclusively designed for rest and worship. Therefore, it was implausible God would blatantly disregard his own laws by conducting miracles, sermons or partisan pep rallies on the Lord's Day.

Vociferous debate ensues until a different day is proposed by a different scholar from a different religion, and the cycle begins anew with a freshly insulted party filing protests based on their specific interpretation of what *their* God wants.

The process continues, adding twists, turns and interpretations over generations until the entire concept is mired in sacred quicksand.

Modern-day thinkers suggest that these attempts to define the holiest of ETAs have irreparably segregated religions, leaving the chances of Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism agreeing on a common day as likely as a Pride parade breaking out in Tiananmen Square.

So, with the three holiest days hopelessly lost to disagreement, the faithful are left debating the merits of Monday through Thursday, the only remaining options for a workable consensus. Although well-intentioned, the devout inevitably overlook the fact that the unfaithful, or secular as they prefer to be known, might also wish to weigh in on the subject. After all, even an atheist can opine about the most suitable day for a non-existent God to drop in. Surprisingly, these unaffiliated souls are pretty vocal on the matter and most adamant that Monday through Thursday should not be considered equal in any way.

The heathen viewpoint looks like this: There's a general consensus that Mondays are off the table because they're Mondays, and Mondays suck. Nobody likes Mondays. The last thing anyone wants to do is dress up in formal attire and meet God on a day so universally loathed and fundamentally flawed.

Tuesdays aren't much better, having their own unique challenge. Tuesdays are generally set aside for employees to call in sick with faux illnesses and/or medical appointments. Mondays are rarely used for this purpose because it looks suspicious – creating a sudden three-day weekend via instant flu bug, dentist visit, or, for the truly inventive, a great-aunt's third funeral. So, by default, Tuesday has been entrenched as the optimum day for skipping work, a day set aside for mental vacations usually triggered by the depressing reality Mondays tend to induce. And since nobody wants God to return while they're at the spa, golfing or playing video games in bed, Tuesdays are off the list.

This takes us to Wednesday, which simply cannot be an option. Throughout the western world, Wednesday is known as hump day. This is an inappropriate term, and therefore an inappropriate day for God's homecoming. God (he, she, or it) is renowned for having prudish attitudes towards sex or anything capable of turning the mind toward the subject. So, dropping in on a hump day seems implausible, even if the hump in question is a harmless reference to the middle of the workweek. Thus, Thursday wins by default.

And who doesn't love a Thursday, the penultimate workday before TGIF festivities? Clearly, the most suitable day for God's grand entrance.

However, timing aside, even the most inept PR agency would balk at the

choice of Phoenix, Arizona, as the quintessential point of arrival, likely opting for the global impact of the Vatican, Dome of the Rock, or the Las Vegas strip.

So it was that on this particular Thursday morning in the year 2005, pre-brunch, the man who would soon be known worldwide as 'God Almighty' received a somewhat less than enthusiastic welcome. Just another forgettable face, stretched through a set of opaque hospital doors to the unbridled apathy of the attending physician, Dr. Rory MacMann.

O N E

Friday, November 13, 2005, 6:15 p.m. EST.

A snow-packed road in Toronto, Canada

Earl Grey had not been created for winter use. His pale skin reddened in extreme cold, his nose suffering the most, blossoming into crimson hues every October as the last crinkled leaf plummeted to the ground. Alcohol didn't help improve the situation either, nor did his tendency to blush brightly at the first sign of embarrassment or shame. Reasonably fit despite a sedentary lifestyle, he did have a roundish face – 'chipmunk cheeks' his mother would call them when she reached out for a pinch. Others said it was a soft, kind face, albeit a sad one. Thin reddish-brown hair hinted at his Irish roots while disqualifying him from any legitimate attempt at growing a beard – clown-red stubble emerging three days into every effort. Otherwise, Earl was a forgettable thirty-eight-year-old man of average height, average brown eyes and an average nose. His above-average ears stuck out ever so slightly, requiring sideburns to conceal the flaw.

As a newspaper reporter, a real journalist, Earl would say, his greatest skill was observation. A skill he knew was wasted in his current role as a lifestyle reporter for the *Toronto Telegraph*. A keen eye or cunning investigative talent was rarely needed to grind out stories about snow tire selection, local hockey results or retirement home craft shows.

The aftermath of a messy divorce had reduced Earl's forward momentum to a crawl. Mass graves of fear, anger and bitterness had been exhumed, leaving him in a constant state of reburial.

Winters made everything worse. The darkness and cold amplified Earl's negative emotions, reducing his desire to fight to Tibetan Monk levels. *Thank Christ Dad can't see me now*, Earl thought, wrestling the car around a snowbank and correcting the skid. *I'd never hear the end of it.*

When Earl was ten, Charles Grey delivered the classic, *what will you do with*

your life speech to his son. Earl recalled how his father stressed the importance of making a name for himself. But he couldn't remember why.

This father-son chat, or more appropriately, the unidirectional speech, took place on the back deck of their cottage in Muskoka, Ontario, where Earl planned to spend the entire summer doing varying degrees of nothing in the humid, hazy sun. However, upon arrival, Charles Grey presented him with a report card that had recently arrived by mail. The report highlighted Earl's academic achievements from the previous school year. He remembered how deeply it cut as his father read out every negative comment recorded by the teacher.

"Capable of greater results!" Charles loudly pronounced as if they were his very own words. "Could do better!" his eyes leaving the yellow paper, locking onto Earl's expression like a bear-trap springing on a chipmunk. "Sometimes Earl daydreams when he should be paying attention. He is often distant and seems unwilling to participate in class." Charles Grey straightened in his chair and prepared to deliver the fatal blow. "Young Earl is a bright boy," he pronounced with an exaggerated thespian delivery, "capable of much more than he is currently delivering. He can easily handle the work but seems unwilling to challenge himself. Instead, Earl chooses to *observe* rather than *participate*. While he seems interested in the lessons and class discussion, he does not engage, only watches and scribbles in his book. This behaviour borders on antisocial, and I fear, if left uncorrected, Earl may become reclusive. In summary, Earl is merely observing the world around him instead of participating in everything it has to offer."

Charles concluded the recital by opening the can of Molson Export his wife had gingerly placed on the side table. "What do you have to say for yourself, Earl?" He forced the question through clenched teeth. "Is this how I raised you, not caring about your work?"

Earl caught a glimpse of his mother peeking out from the kitchen. "I care," he meekly protested, then studied his running shoes, "my marks were... good."

"Marks will only get you so far in life, my boy; you've got to stand out from the crowd, make yourself heard, or else you might as well start driving a truck right now." Charles flicked the report card towards Earl, displaying how valueless and unworthy it was of keeping.

Of course, at aged 10, Earl loved the idea of driving a truck. It looked like fun. And you could do it alone, without people around you, without pressure, just your little universe of thoughts and country music. He hated country music, but being so young, he assumed it was mandatory listening for all eighteen-wheel professionals.

He'd watched *Smokey and the Bandit* a dozen times on DVD, and while all his friends desperately wanted to emulate Burt Reynolds's Bandit character, Earl identified with Cledus, the truck driver played by Jerry Reed. Seemed like the perfect life. Zipping across the country without a care in the world. *What's wrong with that life*, Earl thought, *driving about the countryside with my own hound-dog. Soam-bitch!*

Young Earl sat on a homemade wooden bench overlooking the water near the front railing of the deck. Sunshine dodged through the leathery green leaves and tickled his shoulders, casting deformed shadows on the deck boards in front of him. He instinctively knew to sit still and wait out his father's lecture before commencing a jam-packed summer of wilderness exploration via the boundless imagination of an only child. However, this lecture was well into overtime, longer than any previous, and grinding at his very will to live. Something about its direction was disturbing: the more Charles Grey spoke, the more Earl felt the need to run like hell.

"So, here's what we've done," Charles stated abruptly, interrupting his son's trance. "You'll spend next week here with your mother and I on vacation. After that, I'll drive you up to Camp Wiccappoo for eight weeks of youth assertiveness training and leadership skills." Charles's face was beaming as if he'd just handed Earl a cup of coffee in the Holy Grail.

"W... w... *what?*" stammered Earl.

"It's pardon," corrected Charles, "and you're going to love it. Mrs. Newman's son Miles went there last year; now he's class president."

"But I wanna play here this summer... with you," Earl pleaded, recalling how much everyone hated Miles.

"Nonsense, this will be the best thing that ever happened to you," Charles insisted. "Your mother and I had to save a lot of money all year to give you this. Try to look a little more grateful." Charles Grey rose, indicating that the discussion had ended, and headed inside, his crushed beer can rocking in the breeze, a memorial to young Earl's independence and free will.

Earl sat on the bench, disbelief pinching at his spine, leaving him paralyzed for three hours – long enough for the afternoon sun to set on his hopes, dreams and summer plans.

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The faded black Ford Taurus ran over a clump of hard snow, bouncing Earl's head into the side window and back to reality. He smacked his hand against the steering

wheel. "Assertiveness training!" Earl mumbled with a bitterness usually reserved for presidential runners up, steam from his hot breath briefly frosting the car's windshield. "Why couldn't I drive a goddamn truck?"

A hundred yards beyond an all-night donut shop, awkwardly named The Big O, Earl turned left down a poorly lit street lined with thick maples. The shortcut brought him out in a neighbourhood renowned for payday loan stores and pawn shops. Passing under a streetlight, he knowingly nodded as it popped out of existence, tossing the nearby homes into darkness. Blown streetlights had become so commonplace that Earl simply assumed the technology was dirt cheap and undependable, just another example of his tax dollars in action. Another left, and he pulled into the parking lot of the Excelsior Townhouse complex, coasting into his spot as he unbuckled his seatbelt. As he reached for the door handle, dull vibrations from a holstered Blackberry 8700 spasmed through his hips and up to his brain. *An email at this hour?* He popped three buttons in the middle of his coat and reached inside for the smartphone. After skimming the lengthy email from his editor, Earl focused on the last few paragraphs in horror.

...so, I've got no choice. I've already notified Travel, they'll have a ticket waiting for you at the airport. You'll need to rent a decent camera. I want as many pictures as possible, the hospital grounds, the turmoil, the throngs of believers. Everything you gain access to. As for your press credentials, we'll drop them at the airport tomorrow using a runner; they'll be at check-in. I'm gonna need regular updates and any side stories you can dig up during your downtime, anything to justify this enormous cost. No extraordinary expenses – no room service and NO minibar.

Since there's no chance in hell of getting on the inside, work your angle around the religious nuts who flock to these fucking things. There's little chance the other rags in this town will send anyone, so we may be able to sell a few exclusives.

*Call in twice a day, and don't fuck it up, Grey.
Kindest regards, Ed*

This is a joke, concluded Earl, anger filling the space between his ears. He attempted to calculate the odds that a nobody like him in charge of local interest stories would be chosen to report on the crowds of religious nuts surrounding a Phoenix hospital. Mathematics complete, he concluded that the odds were pretty damn good considering every other reporter at the *Telegraph* refused to go.

Earl sat still in the dark of the car, the overhead dome-light long dead. He stared down at his phone, urging it to light up and reveal a 'just kidding' from his editor, or 'wait a sec, we found a night janitor who's willing to go. And he can write and has his own pen'.

The Blackberry remained dark and unhelpful. Rereading the email, Earl mumbled, "Send an atheist to report on religious nuts. Great plan, guys." Holstering the phone, he shook his head in disbelief and frustration.