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LAMB OF GOD

One

Mitch steadied himself on the ledge of the bridge.

The cold railing pressed into his back as he hooked his arms around it and leaned forward to stare at the cars zipping back and forth far below.

He had to time his jump perfectly. The goal was to splat on the pavement, not to be the asshole that causes a devastating pile up as he bounced off the hood of an Accord.

He wondered if it would hurt or if he would change his mind halfway through his descent and regret, if only for an instant, his choice to end his miserable life.

He felt the gun in the pocket of his vintage Vietnam jacket and assured himself that should that moment come he could always shoot himself as he hurtled toward the earth.

But could he actually jump? When push came to shove, did he have the intestinal fortitude to allow his feet to leave Terra Firma? Even if he didn't, he simply had to hold on long enough for the white oleander to weaken him, causing him to lose his grip on the railing.

So much thought and planning culminated in this one moment, the final exit. He was completely willing to accept his fate and kiss the world goodbye. He would have done just that had it not been for that fucking lamb.

Far below his perch upon the overpass, Mitch heard horns blare and tires screech. The bleating of a sheep accompanied the sound of galloping hooved feet. His eyes quickly found the source; a small lamb was running in and out of traffic as cars zoomed back and forth across the busy highway.

Mitch winced as a car came extremely close to clipping the woolen creature.

Another horn sounded causing the sheep to recoil in horror. The small lamb let out a heartbreaking cry, unsure as to which direction to run.

"Fuck!" Mitch shook his head, disappointed that he cared so much about some dumb animal that had wandered onto the interstate. His suicide would have to wait, at least until the poison kicked in.

Mitch turned around carefully, slipped between the railing, and found purchase on the bridge. He ran along the railing until he found maintenance stairs that led to the interstate below and descended them quickly. The mental image of the sheep exploding across the grille of a speeding freight liner played out in his mind's eye.

He rounded the corner and came to a stop on the curb. His stomach heaved and Mitch leaned against a support beam as he vomited into the street. Goddamn, the white oleander was starting to kick in. He had minutes to save the stupid animal, if it even wanted to be saved.

He turned back to the street, the amount of cars doubling as his eyes crossed. He was having an extremely difficult time telling which cars were real, which made dodging them quite tricky.

In the median of the busy highway stood the sheep, trying to find the perfect break in traffic through which to bound off to who knows where.

Every now and then it would make a leap for freedom, only to run back to the median with an agonizing cry of defeat and frustration. The poor thing was terrified.

Mitch gritted his teeth and let loose a war cry as he ran into the street.

Horns blared all around him, the sound of squealing tires filled his ears, and the acrid scent of burning rubber assaulted his nose.

“Get out of the road, asshole!” someone yelled.

“You fucking fucktard!” another voice bellowed.

Mitch ignored the insults as he continued toward the lamb, who had gone wide-eyed with terror at the sight of an approaching human.

The lamb turned to run and slammed its head into the side of a stopped car. It backpedaled on unsteady legs and toppled unconscious to the pavement.

A plump woman in overstretched black yoga pants stepped from the car and shook an angry finger at Mitch. “Is that your lamb? You’ll be hearing from my attorney!”

Mitch ignored the woman, stooped down, picked up the little lamb, and cradled it in his arms. He looked back up at the lady. “It’s not mine, but it’s a living creature that has every right to live its life in peace and quiet dignity.”

The woman looked down at the unconscious creature in Mitch’s arms and resigned her anger with an exasperated sigh and an apologetic nod.

Mitch replied, “So fuck off you fat cunt!” He barreled past the now stuttering woman and headed toward the woods on the opposite side of the highway.

Mitch found himself in quite the pickle. He had saved the life of a creature destined for death as he himself was beginning the journey of shuffling off this mortal coil.

He never intended to die painfully of poisoning, not directly at least. But now, as the white oleander coursed through his system, he felt his heart tightening in his chest. The effects of the toxin were exacerbated by the strenuous cardiovascular endeavor he had just undertaken. (Running across a busy interstate to save a lamb, for those just joining us. And if you are just joining us, who the fuck starts reading a book on page six?)

Mitch lowered the unconscious lamb to the tender foliage as the sounds of the interstate resumed in the distance.

Mitch himself was bloody and soiled, which he found ironic because his one fear beyond changing his mind was soiling his khakis when he finally let go of the bridge.

As the lamb stirred to consciousness it looked at Mitch with a confounded gaze as if to ask how it got here. Its head was bruised and bloodied from running into the side of a car.

Mitch smiled at the creature, clutched his chest, and toppled to the earth, landing face first into the lamb’s side.

The last thing he heard before slipping into darkness was the scurrying of the lamb as it got hurriedly to its feet, followed by the thunderous crack of his skull splitting as the lamb buck-kicked him in the face.

Two

The world blinked into view.

At first everything was cloudy, but with each pass of his eyelids things became clear. Overhead, a fluorescent panel glowed brightly. In his peripheral vision he could see the shapes of people standing beside him.

“Mitchell Wallace,” a deeply accented voice whispered. “If you can hear me, blink twice.”

Mitchell Wallace? Was that his name? It sounded familiar so he blinked slowly to indicate that he indeed was Mitchell Wallace. But where was he and how did he get here?

“You are probably wondering where you are and how you got here,” the accented voice said. “All your questions will be answered after a word from our sponsor.”

A female stepped into view, her face hovering above his; a halo of light circled her head from the fluorescent panel above.

“You’re at LDS Hospital. My name is Doctor Geraldine Cunningham and I am sponsoring these doctors from Africa. They will be assisting me in your treatment. If you are okay with this we will need you to sign some consent forms when you are able. Are you okay with this? Blink twice for yes.”

Mitchell blinked and the woman retracted from view. Her pretty visage was replaced by a black man with bad teeth.

“I am Doctor Boubacar Akiloye. You were brought here after you were found in the woods. You had been poisoned and beaten. You suffered acute cardiac arrest brought on by glycoside oleandrin poisoning.”

Mitchell tried to recall what transpired. He couldn’t remember much, just fleeting glimpses of cars, horns honking, and the sound of his face being kicked in.

“Death would have been most certain if your face had not been kicked in. You see, in suffering a craniofacial fracture it allowed Digoxin Immune Fab to enter your system and counteract the effects of the poison. The fascinating part is that the drug is made from immunoglobulin fragments from sheep, and as far as we can tell, you received no such treatment.”

Mitch bolted upright in bed, head-butting Doctor Akiloye’s face in the process.

Sheep? He remembered the lamb and how the son of a bitch had kicked his face in. It wasn’t trying to kill him after all. It saved his life just as he had saved the life of the lamb.

Memories flooded his mind. He remembered the taste of blood as it filled his mouth from where the hoof made contact. He remembered the sheep lowering its bloodied head to his face and he recoiled at the thought of the sheep’s blood mixing with his as he swallowed.

Doctor Akiloye returned to Mitch’s side cursing under his breath. He lowered Mitch back to the bed. “It is important to stay still. You have suffered severe head trauma.” The doctor held his hand to a goose egg sized lump forming on his own forehead. “A type of trauma to which I can now relate.”

Mitch tried to apologize but quickly found that the ventilator tube stuffed down his gullet prevented him from making a sound.

“Don’t try to talk,” the doctor instructed. “Incidentally, your pet lamb survived and is being held at the local farm. I thought a little good news coming out of a coma would be welcomed.”

It lived! Mitch found comfort in having accomplished a goal, the first in his entire life. A pathetic life littered with broken dreams and failures. He even failed at killing himself. How pathetic was that?

At least no one on Facebook knew that he failed. His last status update indicated he was about to punch his own ticket, and the amazing number of likes it received made him feel popular.

The next few days were a hustle and bustle of unfamiliar faces as doctors and nurses

streamed in and out of his room. They poked and prodded him in every way imaginable, took blood out, pumped fluids in, read charts, and wrote in charts. Eventually they were satisfied with his recovery and discharged him.

Mitch stood out front of the hospital waiting for his cab, unsure as to where he wanted to go. Home would be nice, but he was being pulled in a different direction. He needed to find the sheep but all he knew of it was that it was now safe and being held at the local farm. Surely he couldn't ask a cab driver to take him to the local farm and expect the driver to know exactly which one that was.

SAMPLE

Three

James and Marlene Local watched as the yellow cab pulled to a stop at the end of their long driveway. James placed his trowel in the wheelbarrow and reached for his Smith and Wesson Governor before thinking better of it.

"We don't typically get visitors," James said suspiciously as he met Mitch at the top of the gravel slope. "What brings you out here?"

Mitch nodded. "Well, this is odd, I assure you. But, did you recently take in a sheep?"

Marlene, an older but pretty lady with long brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, stepped forward. She brushed loose soil off her hands onto her jeans. "We did," she said apprehensively. "The one found wandering the interstate. Is he yours?"

Mitch shook his head. "No. Not in the sense that I own him, but I did save his life and I wanted to make sure he was alright."

The husband and wife looked at each other as if contemplating telepathically. After a few subtle nods the couple stepped aside and let Mitch cross the threshold to their fertile farmland.

James led Mitch to a classic red barn that stood at the end of a long, planted field. "He's in here," Farmer Local said as he reached for the barn door. "But I think there is something you should know first."

Mitch shrugged. "Okay. What is it?"

"I think this sheep has been expecting you."

Mitch smiled. "What makes you say something that absurd?"

James pulled the barn door open and from within the large structure came the pattering of hooved feet as the little lamb stepped from within into the bright daylight.

The creature eyed Mitch for a moment, then said, "Hello Mitch, I've been expecting you."

Mitch blinked absently, started to laugh, and then stopped. "This is a joke, right?"

The Locals shook their head slowly. "He hasn't shut up since he got here."

"Do I look like I'm joking?" the lamb said, his voice a rich baritone, not at all unpleasant, and holding shades of Morgan Freeman. The lamb was wearing one of James' old trucker hats and was wrapped in Marlene's old tattered housecoat.

"In his defense," Marlene said as she cleared her throat. "If I knew he was going to ask that question, I wouldn't have dressed him so ridiculously."

Mitch nodded. "You're all taking a piss on me, right?"

Marlene looked incredulous. "I assure you, we most certainly are not."

James nudged Mitch with his elbow. "I've been trying to get the Missus to let me do that for years, so if you're game..."

"I meant you're having a joke at my expense." Mitch moved slowly away from the old farmer.

"Mitchell," the lamb said, his voice commanding attention. "Believe me, I am real. Whosoever believeth in me shall not perish."

Mitch looked at the expressionless faces of the farmers. "He's quoting the bible?"

Marlene nodded and pushed a few loose strands of hair behind her ear.

Mitch guffawed and pointed back and forth between the two farmers. He turned and looked at the ridiculously dressed talking sheep and doubled over in laughter. "This is phenomenal," he said, catching his breath and wiping tears from his cheeks. "How long did it take to build the thing?"

"Beg your pardon?" asked Marlene.

"This robotic sheep. How long did it take to build him?" Mitch knelt down beside the sheep and began running his hand over the soft wool. "He's lifelike, I'll give you that much, but you have to get up pretty early in the morning to fool me."

Mitch rammed his hand up the backside of the sheep with a sickening wet splatter. "Ah

ha! Is this a speaker?"

The lamb bleated loudly. "My prostate!"

James licked his lips as he inched closer to the horrified Mitch. "Maybe I'm a robot," he whispered.

Mitch recoiled clutching a hand-full of lamb poop. He slid away on his backside dragging his soiled hand on the grass. "This is real?"

Marlene clasped her hands in front of her; it looked like she was going to pray but thought better of it. "You'll be staying for dinner then?"

Mitch shrugged. It was getting late and he had not eaten since before being admitted to the hospital a few nights prior. But the first thing he wanted to do was wash up and take time to grasp the concept of a talking sheep who quotes the bible.

James Local escorted Mitch into the old farmhouse and showed him the way to the washroom. The bathroom, as well as the house as a whole, was charming. The home was filled with antiques and the scent of years of home cooked meals. It felt like a Cracker Barrel exploded in the home.

On the walls were old paintings of advertisements for shave soaps, biscuit flour, and cooking oils. The couch was draped in hand-sewn patchwork quilts, and the table was set with durable clay plates and Mason jar mugs.

Mitch washed up at the sink, taking in the floral scent of the French milled soaps. He stared from the bathroom and down the hall at the husband and wife as they talked to each other in hushed tones. Their body language was uncomfortable and he couldn't help but feel that he was not wanted here.

He turned off the faucet, dried his hands on the soft guest towels, and made his way toward the dining room where the couple was praying over the food on the table. They were out of their work clothes and into what Mitch assumed was their Sunday best. By the look of the taught buttons on Mr. Local's crisp white shirt, it had been a few years since they had received company.

"I'm sorry," Mitch said as he began backing out of the room. "I'm interrupting."

Marlene lit up for the first time since Mitch's arrival. "No," she said warmly. "In fact, I would love if you prayed over the food."

"That's not really my thing," Mitch answered as politely as possible. "I haven't prayed in ages. I am not even sure God would know who I am."

"God never forgets one of his children," Marlene said as she grabbed Mitch by the arm and pulled him toward the table. "You simply say whatever God puts upon your heart."

Mitch cleared his throat and shifted his weight nervously from foot to foot. He looked at his two hosts, who had their heads bowed and eyes closed.

"Heavenly father," Mitch started, then realized he had no idea what should follow. Should it be a standard Catholic prayer of thanks or a more conversational approach that the born again types used? In his confusion he started rambling nervously and was unaware of exactly what he said but knew, based upon the last few words that left his mouth, that the prayer had gone south. "And we just ask that you bless the fuck out of this meal. Amen"

The Locals stared at him, their mouths agape.

"Amen..." Mitch said again, allowing an awkward silence to linger.

Marlene cleared her throat and whispered her reply. "Amen," she said as she nudged her husband in the ribs.

"Amen, indeed." James took a seat at the table beside his wife and eyed Mitch with apprehension. "That was quite the prayer," he said with a hint of judgment.

"My church is a progressive church," Mitch offered. "We just speak like we believe God would speak if he were alive today."

"God is alive, son," Marlene said with a tsk-tsk. "And I doubt he would refer to his son as a holy bastard or to the Virgin Mother as 'Mary with the Cherry'."

Mitch winced and looked away. As he stared through the kitchen window from his seat at the dinner table, he saw a nondescript black sedan crest the hill. "Are you expecting company?"

James and Marlene turned their attention to the window. They couldn't make out any details of the car silhouetted against the setting sun, but when they saw three men in black suits exit the vehicle, they feared the worst.

James walked quietly to the screen door and rested his hand upon the shotgun he kept next to the door jamb. "You gentlemen lost?" he called to the figures who stood near their car. They were tall and featureless.

"Are you the Locals?" One of the men called back as his partners flanked around the sides of the old house.

"We are. What's your business, stranger?"

"We're looking for a lost creature. It escaped from our facility."

"Nothing like that around here. Y'all best get on now." James' voice was authoritative but filled with trepidation. Upon seeing the men return to their car he felt some slight relief.

James pushed the large wooden door shut and returned to the dinner table. "I was worried they were the damn tax collectors." He winked at Marlene then turned to their guest. "Sorry Mitch, I don't mean to be so jumpy, it's just that we've never had a talking sheep, a battered guest, and shadowy strangers in suits show up at our home."

"James," Marlene said, hesitating, "they aren't leaving."

They all turned slowly in their seats and stared through the window as the sky overhead became dark with thick black clouds that rolled quickly in and blotted out what was left of the daylight. The winds picked up as the shadow figures approached the front steps.

Marlene bolted from her chair and ran to the front door to secure the lock. As she reached the door it imploded with a deafening crack and her body flipped madly through the air like a rag doll tossed aside by an angry child.

James ran to his wife's side. Well, one of her sides at least. The other side of Marlene's body was clear across the room hanging by an ankle from the chandelier. "Marlene," he cried out as he cradled the bloody mess in his arms. "What have you done?"

Mitch was unsure to whom the question was posed, as he had locked himself in the bathroom down the hall. He assumed it was directed at the shadow men but it could have been directed at him. He figured it was a bad time to ask for clarification.

He cracked the door and peered down the hall. Terror caused his breath to catch as he bore witness to the three shadow men merging into one looming figure. The black mass hoisted the old farmer from off the floor and held him by his throat.

"Where is it," the creature hissed as it shook the farmer violently. The sounds of bones snapping filled the air and were coupled with the agonizing wheeze of air trying to pass through a crushed trachea.

"Oh shit," Mitch whispered. "Ohshitohshitohshitohshit..."

The shadow creature slammed the old farmer to the ground and turned toward the bathroom with supernatural prowess. It moved quickly down the hallway, displaying a gaping maw filled with razor sharp teeth.

Mitch let out a shrill and inhumanly long scream as he slammed the door closed and put his back to it. He pressed his feet against the toilet and used it for leverage to push his body weight against the door in hopes that it would keep the door from being pushed in.

The door cracked and was sucked out into the hallway. Mitch felt an icy hand grip his neck and he was pulled from the bathroom kicking and screaming. He was carried effortlessly from the bathroom to the dining room.

He was flipped around and he felt his feet leave the ground as he came face to face with a featureless back mass swirling in the air before him. The stench that came from the shape was that of death, sulfur, and taxes. He didn't believe in hell, but if he had he assumed this is what it would smell like.

He heard a voice inside his head that sounded like a thousand voices speaking at once. It changed in pitch and frequency, like a needle moving up and down a radio dial.

"The harbinger," it said as it leaned in closer, the heat from its breath washing over Mitch's face. "You reek of it!"

Mitch tried to talk but his throat was clasped tightly in the creature's grip. He kicked his legs spastically in hopes of connecting with anything that would cause the grip on his throat to lessen.

Inky blackness began creeping into the corners of his vision and his brain began firing off memories left and right. This is what they must mean by *your life flashing before your eyes*. It was a little disconcerting that his perfectionist sister was in more of his memories than he was, but then again the bitch had always been an overachiever.

Mitch always lived in his older sister's shadow. He was unexpected and his parents had not planned financially for another child. Most of his life revolved around hand me down items from his sister. Her old furniture became his, her old coloring books found their way into his room, her cassette tapes became his property when she purchased a CD player and the CD player became his when she purchased an MP3 player, and so on and so forth. He was always a few years behind the latest trends. But he did look great in his senior prom dress, which luckily was a classic black.

Now, as he slowly died, he thought of her and wondered how she would react upon learning of his demise. Then he remembered that she was one of the first "Likes" on his Facebook status.

"Fuck you, Susan," he croaked. He knew those would be his last words, and he was okay with that.

The dining room window exploded inward and shards of glass flew through the air accompanied by an ear-splitting cry. "Baaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah-ck off!"

The shadow demon howled in anger, loosened its grip on Mitch's throat, and turned to face the little lamb that stood defiantly before it.

"You," the shadow snarled, "must perish!"

Mitch was tossed aside and landed on the dining room table. He gasped for air and clawed at his chest. His lungs couldn't seem to fill fast enough. Finally he got a full deep breath and the blackness flowed from his vision.

He took in the scene before him: A towering black shadow hunkered over a tiny lamb that was standing with its hooves planted firmly on the hardwood floor of a blood soaked farmhouse dining room.

The lamb trembled as its fleece began to glow. "A light has shined in the darkness," it said, as the brightness radiating from it intensified. "And the darkness has not overcome it!"

The light exploded from the lamb, filling the house with a blinding white radiance that smelled like Tide with a hint of Downy fabric softener.

The shadows howled and began breaking apart. They turned inward into themselves and imploded into nothingness. As the blackness sucked into itself, items from the room were pulled toward the black mass like light into a black hole.

The dining room table slid across the wood floor with a screech and splintered apart as it was swallowed by the darkness. Mitch felt himself being pulled toward the all-encompassing darkness and clawed at the floor in an attempt to keep from being swallowed up.

The lamb stepped forward, seemingly unaffected by the gravitational pull of the newly formed black hole, and clamped its jaws around the nape of Mitch's neck. Mitch howled in pain but was immediately overcome with a sense of love and protection as he was dragged away from the darkness into a golden light.

The lamb watched as Mitch found his balance and stood. "Hurry," it commanded. "We have little time and must flee. Head to the road!"

With a nod Mitch jumped on the sheep's back, gripped the fleece of the animal's neck,

and dug his heels into the creature's side with a mighty "Heeeyaw!"

"What the hell are you doing," the lamb managed to ask before its wobbly legs buckled beneath Mitch's heft. Bone spurs snapped through the animal's limbs as all four legs shot out in opposite directions. The lamb disappeared underneath Mitch's portly, linebacker build.

"Oh shit," Mitch cried as he stood from the wrecked carcass of the animal. Mitch ran for the door as the black hole swallowed the lamb then sealed itself up with a sound of someone sucking the last bit of milkshake through a straw.

Mitch crossed the threshold and ran. He kept running until he thought his lungs were going to explode, and then he ran some more. He stopped only when his legs could no longer carry him.

He turned around and faced the house, which was now roughly fifteen feet away. He really needed to get into shape.

SAMPLE