

Satan's Cake

By Charlie Shoup

In case you didn't know, everyone goes to Hell. You certainly will. It's not that you're a bad person. Well, you might be, I don't know. The point is, it doesn't matter. You may have been taught rules and systems on avoiding the place, but no one got it quite right. For reasons unknown, heaven is populated by exactly six muffin makers from the 17th century (and a kangaroo due to a clerical error). But for the rest of us, to Hell we will go. And after a few thousand years of this kind of traffic, you end up with a sizable population down there.

To keep some semblance of order, a tall concrete building stood alone in the vast, burning plains of Hell. While the underworld may have lacked comfy chairs, amusement park rides, and apparently some pretty good muffins, it is wanting for nothing in terms of bureaucracy. In the four hundred and four story building were the venerable institutions like the Departments of Torture, Torment, and Things on the Tip of your Goddamn Tongue.

The office on the top floor was in the shape of a pentagram. Not because of anything sinister, but because it was exactly five times better than your standard corner office. And in the middle of this pointy room sat the devil who started it all.

He had gone by many names like Beelzebub, Mephistopheles, and the Lord of the Flies. But in his old age, syllables were

annoying little things (and some little pig boy ruined the last one) so he just went by Satan. He considered shortening it further to Stan, landing him in one syllable territory. However, he once met a Stan that he particularly didn't like and refused to give him the satisfaction.

But one afternoon, stupid Stan was far from his mind. Because it was the time for work. Ever since his firing from that heaven gig, Satan worked day and night to perfect the art of torture.

He had tickled silent monks, shown modern art to Michelangelo, and even pretended to be unfamiliar with the more self-centered conquerors. "Alexander The Who?" he would say. All of which he regarded to be cutting edge stuff. But his crowning achievement still eluded him: to discover the absolutely, positively perfect way to punish someone.

This was his purpose.

It was true that the ideas had been slow lately. He had been blaming it on his broken trident sharpener but on this day, his creativity was especially halted. It wasn't screams or pleas for mercy that distracted him. It was a cake.

It wasn't even a nice cake, but one of those stale grocery store cakes that sat before him on his desk. Atop its lacquered surface was a set of hastily piped letters that taunted him.

HAVE A HAPPY RETIRFMENT!

Icing or ink, Satan had zero tolerance for typos. Performing a bit of copyediting on the cake, he carefully unstuck the upper half of the sugary exclamation, and filled out the *E*.

HAVE A HAPPY RETIREMENT.

Satan tried to focus on something else. Anything else. His collection of souls perhaps? Through countless bargains with silly mortals, Satan had acquired many souls. They mostly belonged to musicians, artists, and struggling screenwriters. Their talent agents would come knocking as well. But Satan would roll his eyes and remind them that to sell a soul, one must have it to begin with. However, this wealth of souls was locked up in various off-shore accounts and Satan only kept one on him. His soul. And now with the cake properly spelled, it was a sugary assault on that lone soul.

The mandatory (and subsequently hollow) well-wishings and congratulations of the day started echoing in his ears. *Oh, how proud you must be! We'll really miss your torture! I'm sorry about the cake!*

Satan quickly averted his eyes, refusing to look at that damn cake. He tried to find solace in the accolades lining the many walls. But not even the *Punctual Puncturer* award quelled his nerves.

Time, he thought. He just needed more time. One more testament ought to do it. His R and D department were making great strides in the fields of *College Debt* and *Jimmy Buffet Albums*.

But it was over. He was to enter his golden years, or at least that's what his cake wished of him (well, with the period it now felt like an order).

Satan finally worked up the fury to stare into the face of

the cake. He had not felt such disdain since watching *The Devil Wears Prada* and learning it wasn't even about him.

Maybe if he ate the cake's words, they would no longer have power? Maybe then he could continue his search. After all he was hungry for answers. Just answers. It had absolutely nothing to do with sleeping through lunch.

So Satan clawed into the dry cake and stuffed it in his mouth. He regretted not having a glass a milk nearby but he pressed ever on.

His cheeks desperately churned as did his mind. As each letter began to digest, he gained glimpses of optimism. Surely, his best work lay ahead of him. Could he continue his work freelance? Serve on some sort of torture board? After all, a new soul arrived every two seconds due to that human tendency to die.

Satan was convinced that humans loved dying, otherwise why would they do it so much? To die and be punished, that was their lot. As to why they had to be punished never really occurred to him. It was simply their purpose. Albeit, an entirely unpleasant one, but a purpose still.

Purpose. That silly little word was the answer.

"That's it!" Satan hollered, the letters *n* and *t* dribbling from his mouth. "To rob someone of their *purpose* is the torture that cuts deepest! The punishment that lasts forever. Take away someone's purpose and their will to exist evaporates."

Mouth full and chuckling, Satan glanced back at what remained of his spongy punctuation to his career.

"Oh shit."

And Satan barfed and barfed, knowing full well he would not be having a happy retirfment.

