



# Real-God

By Ainslie Hogarth.

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Illustration by Brandon Celi

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When Angela dropped off the posters, she'd scowled at him. Naturally. Bobby had tried to keep things pleasant. "Sure Ang, I'll put one up, most definitely." But then of course he didn't put one up *because this was an office for a new condo building, all right, Angela?* He was trying to create a mood here, a call to the good people of the area—the chic people—who were looking to downsize or break into the market. Taping a photo of two missing children to the front window, that would really kill the mood, wouldn't it? *Come to Higgs Falls, where your kids will be snatched by a pervert in the cornfield.* Not that that's even what happened. The Pullman boys had only been gone one night, probably out causing trouble somewhere, like boys should. When they come back and see these posters plastered all over town they'll practically disintegrate from embarrassment. Become dust. The search party will find two tidy dustheaps at the end of Main Street, one with Travis' glasses on top, the other with Daniel's retainer.

"Oh frig, Bobby." Mike shouldered through the front door of the jobsite office a few minutes after Angela left, so charged with panic that the white button-down shirt Bobby insisted he wore to work for professionalism became funny—suctioned to Mike's sweat-slick skin, wrung loose at the neck; Mike's forearms, the size and colour of smoked turkey legs, throbbed at the elbows where he'd managed, just barely, to hike the sleeves—this poorly tailored rag was supposed to mean something? Against the relentless wallop of Mike's meaty heart? Against the pulse points pounding in his throat, signalling frantically, practically vibrating? *Bite it, Bob. Pop that juicy thing.* This shirt was a farce. And Mike was a beast. No shirt could civilize him. No shirt could civilize anyone! *Christ Bob, take it easy.*

Mike slammed his thermos down on Bobby's desk. Creamy coffee sputtered from its mouth, spilling out. "Are you hearing them out there? They're about to walk off the site. They're saying they're not working till you fix the contract, they can't be held to this contract, not now, not when all these people are leaving to look for those Pullman boys. These are special circumstances, and you gotta tell them that this counts, all right? As a special circumstance? These people, they've grown up here their whole lives, they went to school with the Pullmans, you know? Doug's kid is best friends with Travis, for Christ's sake, you gotta tell them they get an extension, all right?"

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Bobby touched Mike's errant coffee droplets with a takeout napkin that'd been on his desk for weeks, then returned it to the same spot, now crumpled and lightly stained. He looked into his employee's fraught, watery eyes and listened to his breath labour against a lifetime of two-dollar cheeseburgers, pints from the Golden Gavel, coffee the colour of rawhide. Last week Bobby wondered if Mike was a genius. This week he wasn't sure how the man was still alive.

Maybe this was a sign the mania was ebbing. The *episode*. Definitely a manic episode. He'd looked it up. Realized he'd likely had them a few times before, too. *Hypomanic*. Not all-the-way-bananas, like the fella he'd read about who thought he was a god and jumped off a building, but halfway-bananas, spending all his savings on a sports car so ridiculous he couldn't even keep it in his own driveway, had to pay to have it stabled, as it were, and for someone to drive him around in it. Fucking *idiot*. Luckily when he came to his senses and needed to unload it, it'd been easy to find another mentally ill man with cash to burn.

Starting this real estate development venture with almost no experience had been the beginning of another episode, surely. Bobby had inherited a good chunk of money from his grandfather and he was tired of looking like a fucking asshole next to his little brother, the fucking dentist, the fucking *tooth mechanic*, with his nice car and his kids and his house, plus a second property on the lake where everyone went to have a great time together. *Teddy's place*. Look at this bit of nature Teddy bought for himself and his family to enjoy. To *recharge*. Teddy's view, Teddy's fresh air, Teddy's calm. It cost top dollar now, Bob knew, to feed your soul.

Bobby could have been a dentist too, if he wanted. He got into law school. He almost went. But he was better than law school, he knew it then, he knew it now. There was no prepaved road that was right for Bobby, and one day they'd all see. When this condo building became the hottest commodity in town, when he sold every unit for record prices, when he drew the good, chic people to this part of the county and they revitalized all of Higgs Falls, *more teeth than you can fucking handle Teddy, you're fucking welcome, you stupid fuck*, they'd all see who he'd been all along. A god. Not the kind that would jump off a building. A *real* one. One that could have popped Mike's hot, pulsing artery between his teeth. But he didn't. Not that he wanted to, but he could, you see? Anyone could, that's the point. But most people in their button-down shirts don't realize.

He'd give the guys an extension, sure. He'd go ahead and put up Angela's poster, too. Benevolent real-god that he was. "All right, Mike," said Bobby, picking up the poster and a roll of tape. "Tell them they can have whatever they want."

All of Mike's sweaty, huffing panic evaporated instantly. "I will!" he said, rapping his knuckles twice against Bobby's desk before turning around and lumbering triumphantly out the door.

Bobby finished taping the Pullman boys to the front

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window, then, from the little patio chair he kept behind the office, he watched the jobsite empty, returning the nods and waves from his appreciative crew. The last guy, Brian, locked the gate behind him, double-checked it, and shot Bobby a thumbs-up before leaving.

Dusk became night before Bobby finally got up to wander the grounds, taking in the smells of cold dirt and lumber and metal and machinery, so much machinery, which for some reason seemed to Bobby like bones, a bunch of skeletons that had once been packed tight with flesh, arranged here as though on display. He thought of the renderings of dinosaurs he'd seen, scientists' best guesses, which couldn't possibly be accurate, could they? How could you glean so much from bones? *Margaret Thatcher's bones would look exactly like Rita Hayworth's, if you know what I mean*. For all they knew dinosaurs had regular skin like humans. *Long red hair like Rita. Big, soft lips. Big, soft titties. You can't tell titties from bone, that's for sure*. Bobby closed his eyes. Imagined a big-titted dinosaur, sharp teeth breaking the skin of a fat pink lip. Her vertical eyes. Ice-cold slits. Glistening. Flashes of movement. *Fuck*. He rubbed himself through his pants and, with pathetic urgency, made his way to a little spot he knew on the site, a dip in the ground that was hidden from the security cameras—one of the many exorbitant costs he hadn't considered when he undertook this project. But there were none pointed here, not at this spot. And there was even a big fuckdoll of a digger parked right in front of it, busty cab, long, slender arm. Bobby slid down into the dip. Some of the guys had parked a couple chairs there, for sneaking smokes. Good guys. He was glad he let them go. Bobby sat in one of the chairs, unzipped his pants, freed his boner. He started

stroking, eyes half-closed, a sliver of fuzzy jobsite just visible. His kingdom. Yes. His creatures. Yes.

His dirt.

Dark. Freshly turned.

Fertile. Sprouting.

Two curled fingers.

Bobby screamed and shot up, launching the chair behind him. Pants down, dick still hard but dwindling, curling like one of the fingers that was sticking out of the dirt, and he knew, the digger right there, the smell of dirt as organic and overwhelming as the whiffs of his own crotch, that this was Travis. Or Daniel. Or both, probably. Here. Their bodies on his property. Travis' glasses. Daniel's retainer. A crime scene now. *Motherfucker*. He couldn't afford for this to be a crime scene. Months of expensive delays in the very best case scenario. The whole project tits up, most likely. And Teddy, fucking Teddy, would pat him on the back as the two of them sat on Teddy's pristine dock, looking out at the lake's rippling majesty. *I'm sorry buddy, it's a tough break.*

He walked toward the fingers, fell to his knees. Touched one. It was stiff. Cold. Definitely dead. He hated to think what the kid had seen before he was planted here, what he'd been through. Wondered whether these fingers were still attached to a hand, an arm, a body. He etched a bit of dirt from around them, revealed the pinky finger, a small palm facing up. And then *toes*. A bare foot. The boy, Travis or Daniel, was folded in half, as though he'd sat in some malfunctioning deck chair. Folded. Or had he been cut in half? Bobby stood up, made a fist, bit the fat of his index finger. And then his heart shot to his throat as a pair of headlights splashed the site, long, quick streaks of light between the equipment. The car stopped next to the office. Bobby could hear the click of the engine coming to rest.

Bobby huddled in the pit, sweating. He would stay as quiet as possible. He wouldn't move a muscle. Knocking. The rattle of the office doorknob. Fuck, he hadn't locked it. "Bobby?" Teddy stepped out the back door. "Bob?"

Bobby stood up, scratching dirt from his fingers with his thumbnail, and made his way toward his brother. "Oh, hi Teddy. How's it going?"

"I just saw Angela, Bob."

Angela.

"She brought some posters for the office. Gave me some of your stuff, too. It's in the car."

"Right."

"She's pretty pissed."

"I know it."

"What's goin' on, Bob."

"Nothing."

"Bob."

"Really, it's nothing. Angela and I, we haven't been good in a while."

"Well, that's not what she says. She says you're not feeling well. Like last time, with the car."

*Shut the fuck up Angela, you fucking bitch, you fucking*

*traitor, going to Teddy of all people, crying to the hero. I was right about you, you're just like them, you're not worthy of me, have never been worthy of me, will never be worthy to stand next to a real-god.*

"This is nothing like that. Look at me, Ted, look around you," Bob opened his arms, gestured to the site, his land of massive, gorgeous machines, all of them reaching up, all of them spreading open, all of them under his command. "I'm fucking great."

"Bob, listen, I don't want to offend you, all right? But I think it's time you talked to someone. This is a pattern. With the car. With Angela. With this." He opened his arms as Bob had, gestured to the site but in an ugly, condescending way. *Bite him, Bob*. "Diseases have patterns. I think maybe there's something going on up here," he tapped his own temple with his forefinger, then curled his fist beneath his chin. Thoughtfully. *Wisely*. The wise dentist. Theodore Nicolette the Third, named after their father, who'd been named after his father; Bobby, the first son, they'd somehow known right away that he wasn't quite right for the family name. "Why don't you go up to the lake house for a bit, huh? I've got appointments all week here, but then I can come up and meet you on the weekend for a few days, what do you think?"

*My hero! Oh, thank you, hero! With your heroic second property! Don't worry everyone, Teddy is here with his second property, everything will be A-okay, Travis and Daniel Pullman, they're going to show up at the lake house too, safe and sound. At the lake house. The greatest place on Earth. Where miracles happen and gods convalesce and all your problems are solved.*

"Bob?"

*All your problems are solved.*

"Bobby?"

*All your problems are solved.*

"Yeah, I'm good, Ted, I appreciate you coming out here, but I'm good."

"Listen, I'm just going to leave the keys to the lake house, okay?" He set them on Bob's patio chair. Foam keychain, the shape of a tooth. Flotational, in case they fell into the lake. "I'll leave them here. You can use the place or not. I'll be up this weekend either way, okay? I love ya, Bob. You know that."

Teddy stepped toward him and Bobby braced himself for the torturous pats on the back he'd been dreading. One pat, two pats. A little rub to wrap up the third. Teddy glanced up at the window, the photo of Travis and Daniel. *MISSING*. He shook his head. "Poor kids."

Bobby nodded. "Yeah, terrible." He nodded and nodded and nodded. "I'll be seeing you then, Ted. You tell the girls I say hi." He smiled as Teddy turned and left, through the makeshift office, into his reasonably expensive car. Bobby stood for a few minutes after Ted left, his mind turning. A whole acre of overpriced land, vacant till the weekend. The jobsite empty too. That eager little digger. She'd make it so easy. He picked up the keys to the lake house, squeezing the foam tooth as he sat down. Teddy's land. The lake house. Where all his problems would be solved. ✱