

## **Picking Up God on the Way to Edmonton**

**by Susan M. Toy**

I slammed on the brakes, nearly running off the road entirely, but managed to safely maneuver the car over to the highway's shoulder.

Rewrapping my fingers around the steering wheel in a resisting grip, I'd first fought the urge to pull to the side, but it was as though the car had kicked into autopilot, and I'd lost my free will. Before I knew what was happening, I was signaling, pressing my foot on the brake pedal. Everything I'd packed in the station wagon earlier that morning shifted forward with a crash into the back of my seat. I turned and looked down the road.

It hadn't been my imagination after all.

Hitchhiking is illegal within Calgary so, just past the city limits, hopeful characters line up, thumbing a ride north. I've never picked up anyone—ever—but this particular man, casually standing alone by the roadside, had really thrown me for a loop.

He resembled George Carlin, but wore a garish yellow-checked suit that looked a lot like a Don Cherry castoff. He'd loped up to the passenger side and grasped the handle before I could think to set the lock – had already opened the door and was leaning in, a blast of cold air accompanying him.

“Thanks for stopping,” he said. “I've been waiting for you almost half an hour.”

“Uh, would you like a lift?” Since he'd already tossed his well-travelled duffel bag behind the seat and was hefting a Kodiak-booted foot over the threshold, my question was moot.

“Thanks, Denise. Yes, I'm going to Edmonton,” he said, settling into the seat and closing the door.

I gasped. “How did you know my name?”

“I'm God,” he replied, holding his hands out, palms up, in front of his chest, as though this fact were self-evident. “Or Buddha, Mohammed, Jah – whichever you prefer.” His voice was nonchalant, like this was an everyday occurrence, God hitching a ride to Edmonton. “I know everything. Besides, I saw

that.” He tapped an ornate sticker bragging *Denise’s Car* I’d pasted on the dashboard when I bought the Subaru.

“Oh,” was all I managed to muster. How could I have allowed this stranger to hop in, invading my space?

“And how do you know I’m going to Edmonton?”

“Well, you’re driving north out of Calgary, aren’t you? And where does most of this traffic end up? Edmonton. Plus,” he jerked a thumb over his shoulder towards my overnight bag, sample cases, and catalogues tightly packed in plastic totes, “you’re on a sales trip. I figured you’d be going far enough along this highway to give us time for a good chat. We’ve never had a real conversation before, have we, Denise? You haven’t wanted to talk directly with me. Well, other than your occasional pleas of *Oh, my God!* – but that doesn’t count.” He flashed a knowing grin.

This was getting weird. I’d never believed in God, in any deity for that matter, nor worshipped one, let alone spoken to one, nor felt a need, or desire, to speak to one. I wasn’t sure I was ready to start talking with one during that trip either – especially one who was self-proclaimed.

“I think you should get out!” I said, jabbing a quivering index finger towards his side of the car.

“Oh, come on, Denise. You don’t really mean that. I know you’re curious. Besides, what are you going to do for the next couple of hours? Listen to the

radio? Talk to yourself? Might as well have some company this time, for a change.”

I looked him over carefully. He seemed harmless, but then they’re the ones we’re warned to be wary of, aren’t they? Or is it the normal looking we should suspect? He certainly wasn’t normal. How could someone dressed in such bizarre clothes pose a threat? My dearly departed father had possessed better fashion sense ... and, believe me, that’s not saying much. But it wasn’t like I’d be driving on deserted country back roads, alone with this guy – someone who had just told me he was God.

Not that I was convinced that he *was* God, but still ... I was driving on THE major highway in the province; I could always find help if I needed it, right? So I decided, in that split second, to take a chance, just once, suspending my disbelief, allowing this guy, God, to ride with me.

At least he didn’t have a bad smell; in fact, I sniffed a heady fragrance of orange blossoms, suddenly noticeable inside my car, as though the guy was carrying his own personal air freshener.

“Okay,” I said, “but if I ask you to get out before we make it to Edmonton, will you do that?”

“You won’t ask. But I’ll agree, if it makes you happy. Let’s get moving. We’ve already lost some time, what with you leaving home later than expected. We’re both on a tight schedule.”

I stared. “How did you kn ...? Oh, right, you’re God.” I shook my skeptical head and blinked, raising eyes and brows heavenward, then turned my attention back to starting the car, and getting us into the never-ending, disinterested flow of highway traffic.

“You’d better fasten that seatbelt,” I said, doing a shoulder check, clicking on the left turn signal. “Even if you are God, I’m the one who’ll get a ticket if the police spot us.”

God buckled up. Then, with hands folded in his lap, he gazed out the side window, watching the predictable countryside unfold.

Once the car was up to speed, I set the cruise control to just above the limit, turned up the radio’s volume, and settled in for the next two-and-a-half-hours.

The Alberta weather had turned unseasonably cold that past week, with temperatures plunging nearly forty degrees from the warmest spell of Indian Summer I’d ever experienced. Suddenly, unwelcome snow was threatening to make a too-soon appearance, even before Thanksgiving weekend. We passed a herd of horses that were snorting steam and stamping the frozen ground. Warmly clad with thick blankets in shades of pink, green and blue, the pampered pets added colour to a bleak-brown landscape, as though making a fashion statement mattered to them. Further on, an already-harvested wheat field had become temporary home to a flock of Canada geese intent on carb-loading in preparation

for their earlier-than-expected trip south. God and I were migrating in the opposite direction.

*God – for crying out loud! What next? Alberta had sure filled up with loonies during this recent oil boom.*

“So,” God said, turning his head to face me, “what do you think?”

I realized that if this guy really were God, he would have *heard* what I’d been thinking. *Oh, my God!* I thought, my eyes darting nervously for a moment from the highway ahead to scan my passenger’s face. *No, scratch that ...* I turned crimson.

Recovering, I said, “You tell me what I was thinking. That is, if you really are God. You should know.”

“True, I could do that, if you insist on proof. But the whole point of this exercise is so you may have a conversation with me. This is your chance to air ideas, thoughts, feelings, ask me some questions, possibly discover some answers.”

I glanced over at God. His smile was beneficent, encouraging. I almost perceived an aura. He looked just like I’d been told he would, back when I was a child and attending Sunday school, when I still believed. Although, in those days, I didn’t yet know about George Carlin. Later, when I was in my teens, he was the Hippy Dippy Weather Man on *The Smothers Brothers Show*. I might have stuck

with religion, had George been promoted as the earthly embodiment of God.

There was never a problem believing or understanding Carlin.

This God's presence in my car was, in a strange way, having a calming effect, though; I felt like he was already a trusted friend, a confidant I could talk with about anything. By rights, I shouldn't have been calm at all; I was way out of my usual comfort zone, sharing private space, and time, with a complete stranger, and not having any choice in the matter.

Keeping my eyes on the traffic, I said, "I'm still not convinced you're God. For one thing, I've never had reason to believe God exists. Why would you wait until now to ... to ... manifest yourself?"

"What do you need? A miracle?" He laughed, shaking his head. "You're not the only person in the world, Denise. I'm trying to get around to everyone, eventually, to talk with them in person, but you humans are a hard lot to keep up with, multiplying the way you do."

"Well, *you're* God – can't *you* control things? Maybe put a lid on population growth? Or is that what the constant wars, disease, epidemics, and pestilence are all about?" It was my turn to laugh.

He held up a hand, stifling me. "You people have long had it wrong, especially these self-righteous prophets. You heap me with credit, blame and responsibility for all situations that are well within your own power to correct. Really, I'm simply a good listener. So start talking."

“And you’ll tell me next you’re not omnipotent, that you can’t predict the future, and we don’t bend to your will?”

I thought back to what had happened earlier, how I’d felt compelled to pull over and pick up this guy in the first place, as though I’d had no control at all.

“Forget about all that,” God said, tapping a manicured fingernail on the dashboard clock. “You’re wasting time. If you don’t want to talk about what’s on your mind then you must at least have some questions you wish to ask.”

I did have questions – plenty of them, but I didn’t think this dude would be able to answer them, even if he were God. I threw a challenging look. “Okay, if you’re God, tell me why the world is in such a mess.”

“Too big a question,” he huffed. “I’m here to discuss questions about *you*. Besides, like I said before, the state of the world is really not up to me.”

“You mean, then, that all those religious people who constantly pray to you, asking for forgiveness, and deliverance from various Acts of God, etc., etc. – that’s all being done in vain?”

“Waste of time and breath.” He sighed. “Help comes from within. And,” he added, “just to set the record straight, those were never my acts. All falsely attributed to me by the insurance industry.”

“Well, shouldn’t you be telling everyone these things?” I waved an arm towards the traffic.

“I am. I’m telling you right now. And I’ll eventually get around to telling as many people in the rest of the world as I can convince to listen to me. It’s hard work getting through to everyone though, especially those who choose instead to follow false preachers that set themselves up as my spokespeople. Those doing it solely for personal monetary gain really get my goat.”

“Okay, so let me put a handle on this – you’re managing to spread your word by posing as a hitchhiker, forcing people like me to pick you up so you can bend their ear, on a one-to-one basis, while they drive?” I grimaced.

“If that’s what it takes.”

A truck passed on the left then pulled into the lane directly in front of us, a little too close for safety. I immediately tapped the brake pedal, cancelling cruise control, slowing the car to avoid a collision.

“Jerk!” I yelled at the windshield. The truck, pulling ahead, barreled down the road, out of sight.

“He’ll get his,” God said.

I glanced over, suspicious now of anything he uttered. Resuming my speed, I was prepared to think nothing more of the incident. Drivers on that highway are notorious for going thirty, even forty, over the limit, and just generally driving like assholes. I’d long become used to that.

But less than two minutes later, as we crested a hill, I was surprised, and pleased, to see the same truck had been pulled over by the police.

“Wow!” I said. “You were right!” God grinned at me then turned to clown-wave at the driver as we passed.

Maybe there was something, after all, to what this crazy hitchhiker was saying.

I glanced at the clear sky just ahead of the car. A hawk, slowly turning in the updraft, took me back to a place in my memory, long ago. My mother’s distant, but always ignored, voice entered my head: *Don’t/Stop/No!* Then a vision of me, winging my way west, and to freedom, as soon as possible.

“So, God, about that chat ...”

I began speaking of dreams, hopes, fears, ambitions, regrets – all of it spewing out, filling up the space between us, and the time ahead. I was a dry riverbed, after a long drought, a sudden, welcome torrential downpour overflowing the banks. A flood of thoughts, ideas, and feelings that had never been exposed before—not even to myself—flowed out of my brain and mouth. I couldn’t speak fast enough to keep up – and I’m generally known as a motor-mouth.

God, for his part, said nothing, merely offering nods of encouragement, leaning an ear towards me, occasionally *tsk-tsking*, laughing at appropriate points, shaking his head and frowning in sadness. He was the best listener I’ve ever encountered – just as he claimed he’d be.

The highway between Calgary and Edmonton is straight as crow-flight, with only one long curve at Red Deer requiring any concentration. The trip is tedious. So I was able to drive competently while spilling my guts. Those two hours flew by and, before I realized, we were already at the turnoff to the Edmonton airport.

God pointed ahead. “Stop there,”

“But this isn’t Edmonton.”

And I hadn’t finished talking.

“Please – stop the car!”

I checked the rearview mirror and pumped on the brakes then quickly pulled over to the shoulder.

“I have another appointment,” God said, unbuckling and reaching back to grasp his duffel bag by the handle.

He had already opened the car door before I could say, “But, wait! I’m not done. I still have lots to say.”

“True, but your time is up.” God smiled on me. “Now that you know how to open up and say it, you don’t need me to be physically present. Besides, I’ve got to get over there.” He pointed at the other side of the highway. “There’s someone from Edmonton driving south who needs to meet me – and you know how godless those Edmontonians can be.”

I couldn't help laughing at his conspiratorial jab in that city's ribs, and the wink he left me with before standing up straight and clicking closed the door.

He walked around behind my car and was about to step over the solid painted line when I rolled down my window, calling out, "But, what about me? Will I ever see you again?"

Waving an arm, and without turning to face me, he shouted over his shoulder, "You'll be okay, Denise."

Miraculously, there was no traffic, so he kept walking across the three lanes, a grassy median, then another three lanes on the southbound side, making it over in less than a minute.

I waved again, shouting, "Thank you!" But I don't know if he heard.

When God reached his chosen spot, he turned and looked north. I waved again, trying to catch his attention. A car came into sight, heading south, and was about to pass completely when the driver suddenly veered off the road, skidding to a full stop. God loped up to the vehicle, duffel bag swinging slightly. He pulled open the passenger door and leaned in. The driver gestured at God who then stood up straight once more, looked across the highway towards me, and threw a quick wave before bending down again, disappearing into the car.

I wagged my fingers out the window as God and his driver began moving, the car pulling back into the reestablished traffic. I watched until they were no

longer visible. The northbound traffic was picking up, too, so I sat for a few minutes, staring at the road ahead, wondering.

Then I shivered, and pressed the button to raise my window.

How did I feel? I wasn't sure. Had that really been God with me in the car? Who knows? I've never seen him again, although now I tend to study every hitchhiker I pass, searching. And, dressed as he was, I'm sure I would certainly recognize him, if our paths were ever to cross again.

I turned the key, put the car in gear, pulled out on the highway, and continued my sales trip to Edmonton. Sniffing the air, I noticed his fragrance had disappeared with him.