

1,479 Words

--
6th Annual Writer's Digest
Short Short Story Competition
18th Overall
--

Anthologized by Trafford Press
As "Armageddon Interruptus"
©2005 Scott Walker Perkins

Daylight Savings

by S.W. Perkins

"No no *no*! This horse is *brown*! I ordered a *pale* horse! Does this horse look pale to you?" The soul shrugged its ephemeral shoulders and stared down at its sandals as The Director seethed at him.

"I thought you said pail... like a bucket," the spectral voice answered. "I thought maybe the horse was supposed to carry water or something."

"A *bucket*?"

"Yeah."

"You expect me to believe that you thought I wanted a '*bucket horse*'? That I detailed a thousand souls to scour creation for the finest pale steed ever seen *and I wanted it to carry water*?" The outlines of the ghost's features had an insolent cast to them. The Director wondered if the man had been a Teamster in life. He opened his mouth to berate the specter again when a cherub appeared at his side. Its pudgy face was set in a grimace.

"We can't find Famine and Pestilence."

“Famine’s at the craft services table -- if Pestilence isn’t with him go ask War.” The cherub nodded and scampered off. The Director rubbed his temples as he watched his diaper slip down, exposing one dimpled cheek. “One of the most powerful angels of the Host and one artist gets stupid and poof! I’ve got an army of fat babies.”

“That horse is brown,” a sepulchral voice interrupted. *“My contract says ‘a pale horse’.*
This isn’t...”

“I know, I know, keep your cowl on,” The Director snapped. He whirled on the soul responsible for the horse. “Don’t just stand there, go find some white paint or something! The hordes of Hell will be here any minute and we need Death to lead them! On a *pale* horse!”

“But I don’t want my horse painted...” Death trailed off as a wisp of smoke escaped The Director’s left nostril. *“Then again, as long as... um... If you need me I’ll be having a cappuccino.”*

“Fine.” The Director began pacing as he waited for the soul to return with the paint. Finally, he grew tired of waiting. “Gabriel!” A tall archangel wearing snappy black robes and dark sunglasses stepped out of the crowd.

“Time for my gig?”

“As soon as the horsemen are lined up. *Gog!* Get your armies to their markers!

You stupid barbarian I *said...*” The Director fell silent as he noticed a human walking toward them. The man had a purposeful stride and a sense of self-importance that screamed “bureaucrat”.

“One of you in charge here?”

“I am,” growled The Director. “Who are you?”

The man ignored him, his eyes on the archangel with the horn. Gabriel had brought out his trumpet and was warming up. The Earth trembled as he ran through some scales and the moon took on a reddish tinge

“You, with the bugle,” the mortal snapped his fingers to get Gabriel’s attention. The earth calmed as the archangel stopped to peer at the human over the top of his sunglasses. “I take it you’re Gabriel?”

“That’s my name.”

“I’m here on behalf of the United States Government to enjoin you against this little concert you’re planning.”

“I beg your pardon, mortal?” The Director stepped between them before Gabriel could respond. “This is the Last Day! Your government has no standing here to tell anyone to do anything, least of all an archangel of the Heavenly Host!”

“Yeah, man,” muttered Gabriel. The Director shot the archangel a quelling glare.

“And *you* are?”

“In charge here,” The Director hissed.

“I’m James McAfee with the United States Daylight Repository and we demand that you cease and desist.” He thrust a sheaf of documents at The Director.

“What in all that’s holy are you talking about?” The Director snatched the papers out of the man’s hand and shuffled through them.

“When Benjamin Franklin realized that the days of our nation were numbered, he and Thomas Jefferson joined together and in 1784 formed the Daylight Saving Time Cabal. Since then, we have been trimming extraneous hours from the calendar and keeping them in a vault beneath Cheyenne Mountain.”

“You can’t do that!” The Director spat, but the government man wasn’t listening.

“Of course the ball didn’t really get rolling until we carved up the country into separate time zones in 1883. That alone helped us make off with hundreds of unwatched hours without anyone noticing.”

“You can’t...” The Director spluttered and dropped the ledger sheets. “Gabriel is going to blow his horn. The seventh seal *will* be broken and Hell’s going to follow Death across that field on a - by hook or crook - *pale* horse and there’s nothing you can do about it!”

“Sure there is.” James smiled in the face of The Director’s wrath. “We’re cashing out.” He picked up the ledgers. The Director’s mouth hung open for a moment until he realized that the sound in his ears was Gabriel, humming *When the Saints Go Marching In*. He glared the archangel to silence.

“Look, nice try and all that. Full marks for sheer chutzpah. Really. I’m impressed.” The Director clenched his hands into fists to keep from throttling the arrogant little mortal. “But the prophecy says he’s blowing that horn and *that’s* what he’s going to do!”

“Not today,” the man shook his head, “because according to this, we have four hundred and fifty years squirreled away in our vaults, and we would like them now, please.”

“That’s not how... wait, did you say *four hundred and fifty years*?” The Director couldn’t help himself. “You’ve only been stealing a couple hours a year, how in blazes did you get four hundred and fifty years?”

“Smoking and cellular phones.”

“I hesitate to ask.”

“Smoking a cigarette takes one minute off your life. We tax that minute at a flat rate of 35%.”

“Of course you do...” the angel took a deep breath. “And the phones?”

“Ever wonder what happens to unused minutes in flat-rate calling plans?”

The Director stood staring at James for what felt - even to the angel - like an eternity. He turned from the man to watch a couple of souls daubing paint onto a pony. In the background, fat babies were hunting high and low for Pestilence amid the chaos of the armies of Magog, who couldn't seem to find their marks. The hosts of Hell were late as usual. You just couldn't find good demons these days.

“I'm sorry, Director, but I am not riding that thing!” Death rattled to a stop in front of him, a Starbucks cup clutched in his bony hand. *“Even with the paint on it, it's still taupe! The Book doesn't say 'And on a taupe horse rode Death!'”*

“It just says 'pale',” The Director seethed. “*Taupe is pale.*”

“This is my only scene in this thing and I'll be damned if I'm riding a taupe horse!”

“That can be arranged!”

“You do not scare me.” Death waved a bony finger in his face. *“Get me a white horse or find yourself another Death!”*

“It looks like you could use some more time to rehearse,” the mortal whispered in The Director's ear.

“Fine! You have your 450 years! Don't waste them. And don't you even think this will work a second time!” The Director disappeared in a swirling maelstrom of fire.

Gabriel fidgeted with his trumpet and stayed with the mortal as around them the armies and various entities began to disperse. Famine had to be carted away in a wheelbarrow as Gog's barbarians looted the catering trucks before they left. A spectral Teamster handed Gabriel the

reins to half-painted pony and disappeared before he could protest. Finally, they were alone on the blighted plain.

“Tell me something, human,” Gabriel broke the silence. “Was any of that for real?” The man looked uncomfortable, refusing to meet the archangel’s gaze. “You might as well come clean. He’s already called it off and he’ll find out the truth soon enough anyway.”

“I’m really a CPA from Kansas City -- these were just a bunch of papers I had in my briefcase for a client.”

“You conned The Director?” The angel loosed a low whistle. The earth trembled.

“Well, things looked a little chaotic. I think maybe he wanted to be conned.”

“Can I tell you something, mortal?”

“Sure.”

“We’ve been here before.” The Angel’s voice dropped and he winked over his shades. “Every once in awhile, the whistle blows and we all assemble on the plain and get ready for the big game and inevitably, some human comes along and talks The Director out of it before we’re ready to roll.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I don’t think his heart is really in it.” The angel mused.

“God moves in mysterious ways?”

“Nah, I just think he likes you people for some reason.” He looked at the horse standing next to them. “Say, I don’t suppose you’re in the market for a taupe horse?”