

# **GOD BLESS AMERICA**

**a novel by  
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There was nothing. Then all at once, there I was. If I'd ever had a past life, another incarnation, I had no recollection of it whatsoever.

That's the way it started....

No relationship exists in time between one event and the next. In the end you find yourself with nothing but an amorphous heap of experience on your hands. What happened long ago was like a machine gun spraying bullets in a wide arc, with the intent of leaving as many dead as possible.

But once you stop to remember the past, once you try and wrap your fingers around its neck, it's gone forever. What you're left with is the bloody residue of distortion...dreams...fairy tales...illusions. That's not what I want. What I'm after here is the truth, but as soon as the words hit paper, something goes wrong. You realize that no matter how you go at it, you can never pin down the real essence of the thing....

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Anyway, things didn't get off on the right foot. My mother -- Bash was her name -- told me later that I was due on Thanksgiving Day, but it wasn't until late on the Saturday two days before Christmas that I popped out, smack into the middle of the century,

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firmly under the influence of Saturn, the god of death, destruction, and calamity. “The Nameless Day,” the Druids called it. And it’s true, I always do look on the dark side of things -- it comes from being born in winter, on the longest night of the year. Years later an astrologer told me that I had the unluckiest chart she’d ever laid eyes on. For proof she read from the mystical symbols attached to my stars and planets: *“A youth grasping a beautiful woman, who turns into a skeleton in his arms....A man seated at a table, gloomily looking at a violin with broken strings ....A mad dog baying at the moon....”* Etc. But at the moment it really wasn’t so bad down here on earth, not so bad at all.

It was nothing but Happiness, Prosperity, Family and God. The big one, World War II, had been over for a few years, the boys were back on home soil, getting married, buying homes, fucking like rabbits in their mortgaged hutches. A loaf of bread went for only fourteen cents...a new Ford, fifteen hundred bucks...a house in the suburbs, eight grand. Treacly melodies wafted through the air: “Bibbidi, Bobbidi, Boo”...“Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer”...“I Love You (A Bushel And A Peck).” Marilyn Monroe was all the rage, and the New York Yankees kept right on winning....

## **PART I**

### **1.**

The first thing I remember is the sun. It always seemed to shine on 999 Oak Street. There were flowers all over the tiny backyard and the warble of songbirds came from the open windows of the house next door, where Oscar and Eleanor Spatnik lived. I couldn't understand a word they said -- it was all in Polish. The entire length of the street, in fact the whole neighborhood all the way down to the railroad tracks that cut us off from the East Trenton ghetto, was made up of Polacks straight off the boat, with an Irishman tossed in here and there for good luck.

Oscar's head was as smooth as a baby's ass -- I remember that too. He strutted around in a tee shirt, a long tortoise-shell cigarette holder sticking out of his fist. He seemed happy to be alive, not like us across the way. Looking back, it was probably on account of his wife -- she was a good-looking, sturdy piece of peasant ass.

My old man's name was Jake. He wasn't really old, maybe twenty-five, twenty-six, thin as a rail, and drop-dead handsome -- jet-black hair, straight nose, large black eyes. Why he didn't try Hollywood, I'll never know. Gable, Flynn, Colman -- they couldn't hold a candle to him. And always in high spirits; the shit came later.

From time to time he told me stories. He was recently back from Oklahoma via the Pacific Theater -- hell, he was floating in Tokyo Bay when the Instruments of Surrender were signed. But first, after picking up his discharge, he'd got it into his head to turn cowboy out West. When that idea went sour, he set his sights on something more practical -- heating and air conditioning. He

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wouldn't say what went wrong with that brainstorm either. As far as I could make out, it had something to do with his partner, a navy buddy by the name of Ramsey, skipping Tulsa -- or maybe it was Broken Arrow or Chickasha -- with the start-up capital. And so Jake Zajack returned East, to Trenton. He had to have known somewhere deep inside it was inevitable. All losers do.

All this was before I came along. It must have been depressing for the old man, being back in the city of his birth. He never mentioned the Wild West again. His peacoat was packed in mothballs and stashed in the attic. There was nothing else to do but scare up a job. First stop, a steel coil plant...next, the rubber processing factory in East Trenton, a place called Panelyte. Later it would be sheet metal over on Princeton Pike. Wherever he landed, something always went wrong. It was always somebody else's fault -- that would be the story of the old man's life.

What messed him up was meeting Bash, that's what he'd always say later. She was at Panelyte too, doing some numskull job. Stand on the assembly line all day long and your mind wandered, you got poontang on the brain. Tits, legs, ass -- it all looked good. Before he knew what hit him, Jake was in harness forever. Since they were broke, they moved in with my grandmother and spinster aunt on Oak Street.

Jake wasn't around most of the time at the beginning. It was me, my grandmother, Aunt Agnes, and somewhere at the periphery, my mother, Bash. I always had the feeling she didn't want much to do with me. My unwanted presence didn't stop her from trying again, though.

We were in the kitchen, and I was poking at her swollen belly.

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“What’s in there?”

“Never you mind!”

It was nothing but a baby’s ignorant question, but boy was she mad, sputtering and stomping all over the place. I should have figured out right then and there that I was in for it. Later she miscarried, and that was the end of that. For a long time afterwards I don’t remember Bash being around either....

My mother was good-looking too, in a factory-girl way. There were a few more years on her than Jake, but in those days an age difference was something you didn’t talk about. Another item kept hush-hush was that she’d been jilted before the old man made his appearance at the factory. Her fiancé was a decorated army major who’d seen action in the foxholes of Europe. Three days before the nuptials he skipped town. She never heard a word from him again. Maybe he’d wanted more than a char with a seventh-grade education. Maybe it was something else -- who knows? At any rate, I heard the women talking when I was hiding under the table and they couldn’t see me....

So the old man was the fallback, even if he wasn’t much more than a kid. You get hold of a kid early enough, you can mold him.

## **2.**

It was Christmas Eve, just after my third or fourth birthday. The weather outside was vicious, not fit for man nor beast. I was sitting on the couch doing nothing. The old man came in carrying a large box wrapped in emerald paper and tied with a scarlet ribbon.

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Bash tore it open, greedy-like. Inside there was a blood-red Chinese silk dressing gown. You could see that the old man had dropped a wad on it -- probably his whole week's salary. Next thing I knew, Gram was grumbling in Polish, shaking her head in disapproval. She limped out of the room. That's when Bash started in on Jake: "You don't expect me to wear that thing, do you? What do you think I am, some kind of *whore*? A two-bit streetwalker like you had out in San Francisco? Well, I got news for you -- I don't want it! Take it back to wherever the hell you got it from!"

Then it was a free-for-all, with missiles flying through the air and smashing against the walls. The Christmas tree, with its dangling balls and tinsel and electric lights, came loose from its base. There were shouts, insults, and tears. The old man's face streamed with blood -- he'd caught a high heel over the left eyebrow. He reeled around the parlor like a drunk.

"If that's the way you want it! That gown goes back to the store right now, and it's the last present I'll ever buy you, you crazy nut! I try to put a little class on your back and this is the thanks I get! You and your mother both, you belong back in Poland! Neither one of you knows your ass from a hole in the ground!"

Jake gathered everything up, ribbon, wrapping paper, box, gown. He pressed a bloodstained handkerchief to his forehead. "I'll be happy to get my money back -- piss on it, anyway!"

He blew out the front door and didn't come back for a long time. Bash didn't give a damn. At least that's what she pretended. "Go! Get the hell out! See if I care!"

When Jake finally showed a few hours later, the smell of booze was on his breath. After lots of wheedling and begging, Bash slowly came around. They went upstairs to their narrow bedroom. From my

bed in another room, I could hear what happened next.

### 3.

But no matter what, Bash wasn't about to let the old man get away with anything. He had responsibilities now, he was supposed to be a father and provider. If he wasn't home on time from the sheet metal shop she plopped me next to her in the front seat of our third-hand 1941 Chevy Special DeLuxe and we toured the neighborhood bars in search of the poor bastard.

He could usually be found at a no-name tavern on Myrtle Avenue, where even in broad daylight it was dark as night beyond the swinging door. From inside came the raw sounds of life -- curses, loud music from a jukebox, the laughter of women.

Bash dashed out her cigarette in the ashtray. "He must be havin' one hell of a good time in there, that's all I gotta say!"

She hopped out of the car and marched straight in -- she wasn't in the least embarrassed. In a matter of seconds she was dragging the old man out by the scruff of his neck.

There was a shit-eating grin on Jake's lips. The reek of alcohol drifted through the sedan. I was sitting between the two of them, and they weren't saying boo to each other. They'd murder me if they could get away with it, I could feel it, because I was the cause of all this. I don't know how I knew, but I did.

The ride back to 999 Oak Street was torture. Since it was summer, all the neighbors were out on their stoops in their undershirts, smoking their Raleighs and Pall Malls, drinking from

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beer bottles, pinching their wives' fat Polish asses. They eyed the Zajack family like hawks. The stinking pigs were always on the lookout for a spectacle -- a knock-down, drag-out fight would be best. Well, they were about to get what they wanted.

Before Bash even switched off the ignition, the old man threw open the passenger door and heaved into the gutter, a red, yellow, and green gusher full of sausage chunks, onions, peppers, and Italian bread. It seemed like there was no end to the stuff. It was revolting but fascinating to watch at the same time. On account of the distraction, Bash forgot to shut her door, and a big-assed Cadillac appeared from out of nowhere. Some geezer was driving, one of those old guys who has trouble seeing over the steering wheel and no business on the road. He clipped our car, sheered the door clean off. It went flying through the air, all the way to the traffic light at the corner, bounced once or twice and came to rest with a crash.

Bash let out a yelp. She went berserk, lost it completely. And it was all the old man's fault.

"You bum! I shoulda never married you, you drunken louse! Now look what you did!"

"Give it a rest, Bash, or you'll end up like your mother..."

"What's wrong with my mother? Her *house* is good enough to live in, ain't it? Go back to South Trenton if you don't like it here! Go the hell back to that crazy Slovak family of yours!"

"You call *them* crazy? You got some nerve, girl! Look around here, you wanna see *nuts*! And as far as your mother goes, it wasn't my idea to move in with her, don't forget! You're the one tied to her apron strings!"

The Buttsinskys were draped over their railings, craning their necks -- no telling when it would come to blows. Bash struck

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first. Her plastic handbag sailed across the hood of the Chevy and ricocheted off the old man's puke-spattered face. Jake did a pirouette, as if he just took a left hook. There was red everywhere. Blood.

The driver of the Caddy came running down the street toward us, arms flailing. A Jewish shopkeeper, no doubt, heading home at the end of the day to his split-level in the western suburbs. By the time he reached us, he was half out of his mind.

"Vot ist you trying to do? Did you zee vot you did to my car? Oy, vey, you people ought to vatch vot you're doink, you kill somebody someday!"

It was too much for Bash -- her nerves were shot. She hurried past the fellow, the nosy Parkers, the old man, and up the porch steps. She disappeared into the house, slamming the door behind her.

The old man came to his senses; he wiped his face with the sleeve of his tee shirt. Then he tried to mollify the hysterical Cadillac driver.

"It's okay...Calm down! You should watch where the hell *you're* goin'! Sit on a telephone book or somethin'! You're a menace behind that wheel!"

But soon he was making promises -- he was in a hurry to resolve things. "Look, nobody was hurt...we'll settle it out of court, it'll be better that way."

After some coaxing, the shopkeeper went for it; he probably figured he wasn't going to get much from us anyway.

For the moment Jake was off the hook. I could see the wheels turning in his brain. He'd fit the door back on our jalopy himself. Now it was only a matter of how many skins the damage to

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the Caddy would suck out of his wallet....

While the shopkeeper muttered and fumed, the old man took down his name, address and telephone number on a matchbook. Shaking his head, the fellow finally shambled back to his wreck.

Then Jake glared at his audience.

“Why don’t you jerks take a picture? Bunch of stupid DPs off the boat! Why the hell don’t you mind your own business?”

But nothing rattled those people. They sniggered and clucked. They refused to move. Jake Zajack could huff and puff all he wanted, it didn’t mean shit to them!

In all the commotion the old man had completely overlooked me. I’d been playing with the column shift, wishing I could disappear. He finally noticed me, reached in, grabbed my arm and yanked me out, hard.

“And you, you little son of a bitch -- I’ll break your ass!”

Like I said -- I knew it was my fault all along.

**--- END OF SAMPLE ---**

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