

“THE LIVING END”

A Novel

by **David Goossen**

PROLOGUE

The smartest thing would be to forget about the whole event. To wash it from my mind and ignore it ever happened. But I know I'm not going to do that. And neither are you. You would have had to be on another planet to miss it. And even then, you'd just get the news a light year late.

Sigh.

I shouldn't even be putting this down on paper. I've checked, done some research on google and that kind of thing, and I'm pretty sure that there has been no one in the history of the planet that has met a god in the flesh, so to speak, and had it work out well for them. How it worked out for the god is another story. I think it's called The Bible. You might want to check it out if you're interested in that kind of thing.

And I'm also pretty sure that my story is not going to be the basis for me getting sainted or canonized, or whatever your church want to call it. This wasn't some sort of vision that came to me when I was in a dream state, nor was it an out of body experience, and it sure wasn't Jesus on a piece of burnt toast. This was a one on one, face to face, body to body – more on that later – Close Encounter of the Third Kind with a real life god. To quote my bible clutching older

sister, 'A gosh-darned miracle.' I mean, he stayed in my apartment.

But for me and my story, it's nothing so grandiose or profound. This story is the simple, basic, a 'you've heard it once you've heard it a million times' story. Girl meets god, girl doubts god, girl loses god.

So there you go. Enough prologue. I have decided, and this is most likely a terribly bad decision that's going to haunt me for the rest of my days, to tell you exactly what happened. My version, not the one you might have seen on the television or the internet. And, to tell the truth, I'm already haunted by the whole experience anyways, so maybe this is a good enough way to exorcize some of these daemons.

And so I begin.

My name is Beth Carstairs. I am twenty-four years old.

Just over fourteen days ago, I met a god.

And he was a real idiot.

CHAPTER ONE

Fourteen days ago

It was called 'The Living End' and it lived up to its name. I don't know why Gavin chose, on that scorching Thursday night, that particular nightclub over all the others we had to choose from. It might have been the happy hour before 7 p.m., except that it was quarter after nine by the time we made it into the actual club, past the steroid juiced bouncers and the vapid fully augmented coat check girl - it's summer in Los Angeles for gods sake, who's wearing a coat in need of checking?

I settled into a corner – my personal favorite place – and observed the early evening people while Gavin went to get the first round of drinks. If we had gone to one of the places I wanted to go to, it would have been me up buying the drinks. I tried not to sweat but it was futile. The club was hotter than the far side of the sun of a summer day.

The club was one of the saddest excuses for a party spot in the greater Los Angeles basin. A halfhearted former carpet warehouse turned into a dance club with the addition of thirty gallons of flat black paint, four strobes, a half a mile of Xmas tree lights and a massive sound

system stolen off the back of Van Halen's touring show. I glanced over at Gavin, barely seeing him at a half a head shorter than just about everyone else in the line up for drinks. The bar was a row of beer coolers bolted together, all with their casters still on. The entire place was designed to be rolled out the back into a truck and disappear into the night before the creditors can make it past the bouncers at the front door.

Glancing around through the murky darkness, watching still sober clusters of friends pound cheap beers in search of the drunken love and camaraderie which will briefly be there at the end of the night – shortly before the morning, the agony of the hangover and the semi sober questions of 'who are you?' and 'where are my panties?'. Gavin was still shuffling forward, inch by sticky inch, towards the bar.

Was this what my almost quarter century on this planet had been leading up to? I could feel the wall behind me sticking to my bare shoulders. The air I was breathing was recycled from a hundred bitter smokers. But no matter how much I hated it, I knew this club was as good as any I would have chosen. With a sigh for my current condition, I wandered off to check my makeup in the bathroom.

After making my way down a almost pitch black narrow corridor, its walls covered with posters for bands long since broken up, reformed and broken up again, I got to what may or may not have been the women's bathroom. A row of battered, graphitized stalls, a broken sink and a wall of scarred stainless steel mirror. One quick glance in an open stall clenched my bladder so tight it might be next Tuesday before it relaxed enough to let me pee, no matter how much I drank. A broken tampon dispenser with a burnt teddy bear stuffed into it and an intermittently flickering fluorescent light fixture added to the ambiance.

Despite the years of scratches done to the mirror, I was able to find a place clear enough to check on how I'm looking. Time for another sigh.

There I am, not quite tall, not quite short, not quite fitting in, not quite standing out. I shake my head and adjust my hair. At least I don't still have the 'Aniston' doo I had had for far too long. Two years after the show went off the air, I was still walking around looking like

1995. Even worse, it was my grandmother, visiting from Cincinnati, who was the first to call me on it. At the Thanksgiving dinner table.

“Is that look coming back, Beth?”

I looked up from my over cooked slightly beige broccoli casserole and frowned, “What look, Nana?”

She pointed at my hair and the whole table burst out laughing. Even my younger brother was in on the joke.

“Don’t you read the supermarket tabloids, honey?” my dad laughed.

“When a show’s in reruns, let go of its fashion, ok?” said my loving older sister, Mary. She with the great life, happily married to an utterly bland but utterly rich orthopedic surgeon, with two adorable kids, an amazing house in the hills and a close personal relationship with our Savior. She shouldn’t be one to talk about being fashionable with her squeaky-clean, 50’s June Cleaver outfits, yet she always did.

The bathroom door banged open and cluster of half drunk college-not-high-school girls stumbled in, giggling uproariously to themselves. They paused for a moment when they saw me at the mirror, then started up again. They continued with the giggling, shifting into shocked laughter as they tried to figure out how to use the toilets without actually touching them, or even entering the stalls.

“These are my sisters boots! I can’t step in... that! She’d murder me!”

“Touch that stuff on the floor and it’ll kill you!”

More giggles.

I puffed up my brown shoulder length hair, - it had started out as dirty blonde, was now mousy brown and, if genetics have anything to do with it, it would end up as my mother’s tarnished silver - acknowledged I wasn’t going to do anything to my make up, since I didn’t bring any with me. I turned to leave, barely less than slightly different than when I came in.

“Hey.”

One of the girls was looking at me. I turned, wondering.

“You want some of this?”

Oh, great. Tough teens. Just what I need.

“I’m ok. Thanks.”

By then three of the girls were looking at me. I looked back. They glanced at each other, nodded in agreement, grinned and then started towards me. I backed up against the counter, feeling the jagged edge from where the melamine had been torn off.

“Ok, let’s just calm down a bit, all right?” I couldn’t step back any further and they were blocking my escape by now. And then they were on me. Three purses whipped open and out came their weapons. I flinched and tried to protect myself but it was too late. Before I knew it, I was facing the mirror again, the three surrounding me from behind.

The same me was looking back from the mirror, only better.

In the blink of an eye, the girls had given me heavy mascara, dark eyeliner, a dark blue eye shadow, and a killer red lipstick, a color that looked like I just bit into a living things flesh.

I looked hot! The three girls nodded proudly to themselves and stepped back.

“Wow.” I said, still staring.

“Girls, our job here is done.” One of them said, proudly.

“No need to thank us, just pay it forward.”

“We’re the sisters of the blessed makeover.”

One of them genuflected at me and they giggled. I looked at myself in the mirror once more. “Damn, thanks sisters.”

The three high-five and, after their friend levered herself out of the stall having successfully urinated while somehow levitating over the toilet, they left.

I was practicing my sultry pout when Gavin finally made it back from the bar. He came up and stood against the wall, scanning the room, four beers grasped precariously in his hands. I looked at him and he continued to ignore me or offer me my beers.

“Hey!”

He glanced over and jumped back, almost dropping all the four beers.

“What?!?...”

“What what?” I stared at him and he stared back.

“What the hell happened to you?”

I jumped straight past curious to righteously indignant. Here I was, looking hot, and he’s staring at me like I’m some kind of freak.

“Nothing the hell happened to me. I went to the toilet while you were getting beers.”

He continued to stare.

“Something happened to you. You look like a...” he stopped suddenly and handed me my two beers. “I...uh...got you two beers!” They were warm and cheap. I ignored his feeble attempt to change the subject and lasered him with my newly done up eyes.

“I look like a... a what?”

Gavin was starting to sweat visibly along his receding hairline. He took a gulp of one of his beers and looked around for some other sort of distraction to get himself out the massive, bottomless hole he’d dug for himself. Not a chance, I had him trapped in the corner, and he was so far down inside his hole I’d have to start speaking Chinese to him.

“Gavin. Stop being a baby. Look me in the eyes, and tell me what I look like.”

“I don’t want to, you’ll hurt me.” He whined.

I took a step back and had a sip of my beer to placate him.

“I look like a what?”

He took a breath and blurted it out. “A slut. You look like a slut. There I said it. Beth, what the hell happened the bathroom, were you mugged by the Suicide Girls?”

“Excuse me, I look hot.”

He shook his head, “Slutty, not hot. Sorry.”

I thought about telling him that one person’s slutty is someone else’s hot but realized he was right. “Shut up and hold my beers.”

I stormed off towards the toilet again shoving my way through the already thicker crowd. Some guy grabbed my arm and turned me around as I tried to get past him. He and his buddies – probably all from the same frat – grinned at me.

“Hey dark eyes, wanna-”

“-screw off.” I hissed and wrenched loose from his grip.

Stupid girls with their stupid makeup in the stupid toilet. Why did I let myself be talked into being their Barbie doll? I knew the answer as I slipped into the foul toilet and tried to get some water to come out the rusty tap. I let them fix me up because I really needed to be fixed up. Just about every part of my life was primed for some fixing. I’d broken up with my last boyfriend, Gibson the actor, six months ago, when I found out he was an idiot. I could say it was other aspects of our relationship where we didn’t quite connect but mostly it was because he was an idiot and it took me a couple years to realize this. Our tight group of friends from high school was slowly unraveling as they started getting job offers in other states, or getting engaged or – gasp – getting pregnant. My manager at the day care center where I worked had it out for me despite every kid and parent loving me. I didn’t like my hair, grudgingly accepted my body but wasn’t thrilled about it, and Gavin was my best friend.

I scrubbed with my hands to remove as much of the make up as I could, ending up looking halfway between the loser of the boxing match between a vampire and a raccoon. Great. Just great. I tried again and succeeded in soaking my blouse, the front of my pants and still the make up wouldn’t come off.

What the hell was this stuff made of? Roofing tar?

After a few more minutes of aggressive scrubbing, most of the makeup was gone, leaving my face looking as if I just finished a four hour crying jag and then got micro facial dermabrasion. I had come into the toilet to “freshen up” and now I looked worse than I had in years. I had no right to call myself a girl anymore.

I was a mess. Getting back to Gavin involved passing the same bunch of frat asses who had strategically placed themselves directly in the way of any girl trying to get to or from the

toilet. But when I pushed by them this time, they just moved out of the way. I was back to being invisible. Was I happy about that? Partially, I guess. Too bad you can't specifically choose who you're invisible from.

I'd like to be invisible to idiots, married men, needy geeks, street crazies and my boss, please. I'd also like to be highly visible, in a good way, to cute guys with good jobs, money and love of life. Yeah, that'll happen.

I slipped up next to Gavin and leaned against the wall. It didn't look like anyone had bothered him in the time I was gone. And if I had left and gone home for the night, I'm pretty sure no one would have bothered him then either.

Gavin is the male me. Pretty much invisible to the opposite sex and mostly invisible to his own sex too. Even gay men didn't hit on Gavin. His job, editing news for a local television station, ensured that he rarely got to talk with anyone about anything other than the story we was supposed to be working on. He was a half step off from being a game coder, except he had to go somewhere to work instead of working in a Cheeto's and sweetened energy drink smelling apartment.

We stared out at the pulsing throng on the dance-floor, watching the mass of bodies pump to the grinding pounding beat which was almost dripping out of the massive sound system. I reached over to grab my beers and Gavin yanked them back, startled.

"When did you get back?" he handed me my beers.

"Five minutes ago."

"Were you crying?"

I shook my head and drank my cheap, warm, flat beer.

"Let's get out of here." I yelled over the music.

He shook his head. "We just got here!"

"Yes, and it sucks!"

He turned to look at me. "Yes Beth, it sucks. All the clubs suck. Your week sucked. My week sucked. The economy sucks. Bruce freakin' Willis' last movie sucked. Everything

sucks. But leaving now and going home to watch “When Harry Met Sally...” on Women's Network in your flannel pajamas while eating a tub of low fat Haagen Daz sucks even more.”

“You’re such a whiner.”

“You’re such a baby.” He fired back.

“Older than you. So watch your manners, young man.”

Gavin scowled and I smiled. He returned to looking out at the club. Gavin hated when I pulled that trump card. I was older than him. Twelve minutes older. Did I mention we were twins? Because of my age seniority, I’d had first pick in our family on everything from popsicles to bedrooms. It drove him crazy and there wasn’t anything he could do about it. Unless he got his hands on a time machine and went back far enough to beat me into our mom’s birth canal.

“What time is it?” Gavin yelled in my ear.

I checked my watch. “Just about midnight. God, have we been here for almost three hours? This is beyond tragic.” At my feet were fifteen empty beer bottles.

“I thought everyone was going to meet us here.”

I checked my phone. Sure enough, I had a missed text from our group of friends. The two hour old text wanted to know where we were. Apparently, they were waiting for us at a club thirty miles across town.

“It looks like it’s just us tonight, little bro.”

“Then it’s your turn to get beers, big sis.” He replied, over the pounding music. I gave him a pouty sigh to which he rolled his eyes. I pushed off the wall and made my way through the crowd to the bar.

The line didn’t look like it has moved since I was last in it an hour ago. Groups of people would get their drinks and move to the back of the line to start drinking them, while cueing up for their next round. Some of the group would split for the dance-floor for a bit and then come

back to save the spot in line for the next group of dancers. I shuffled forward, step by step, trying to avoid getting pushed into the sweat soaked male back in front of me.

Finally I made it to the counter.

“Four beers!” I yelled as soon as a bartender caught my eye. He cupped a hand to his ear and shrugged.

“Idiot.” I muttered then mimed pouring a beer into a mug and put four fingers on my forehead. The bartender grinned and ducked under the counter. He dropped two beers on the counter.

Perfect, a bartender who can’t count. But before I had a chance to play Sesame Street with him, he slipped a foil packet into my hand while taking away my twenty. Then he grinned, winked, grinned again and turned to help the next person, still grinning. I barely had a chance to grab my beers before I was pushed sideways along the bar until I was alone in a corner by a teetering stack of empties.

I looked around, ensuring I had returned to my normal state of invisibility before looking closer at the packet in my hand. There couldn’t be much in it, it wasn’t larger than a couple Chiclets. Cautiously I unfolded the foil to find four small white pills. They looked like my Vitamin D tablets. I looked back at the grinning bartender but he was busy at work. Carefully, I folded up the packet and headed back to Gavin.

“What are they?”

“I don’t know.”

“He just gave them to you?”

“Yeah, he just gave them to me. Them and two beer, twenty bucks.”

“I wonder what they are.”

“The wrong thing to do would be to take them. That would be the wrong thing to do.”

“Yes.”

We looked at the pills, resting in their foil nest, innocent, virginal.

“You said the bartender looked happy?”

I nodded. “Very happy. Very happy and he’s working here.”

“Good point. You’d have to be on something pretty good to be happy working here.”

We both nodded and checked on the pills again.

“Well?”

Without saying anything, I tipped out two of the pills into Gavin’s open hand. I put the other two in my palm and transferred the foil to my pocket. We clinked bottles and popped the pills into our mouths. A gulp of beer and whatever would happen was on its way to happening.