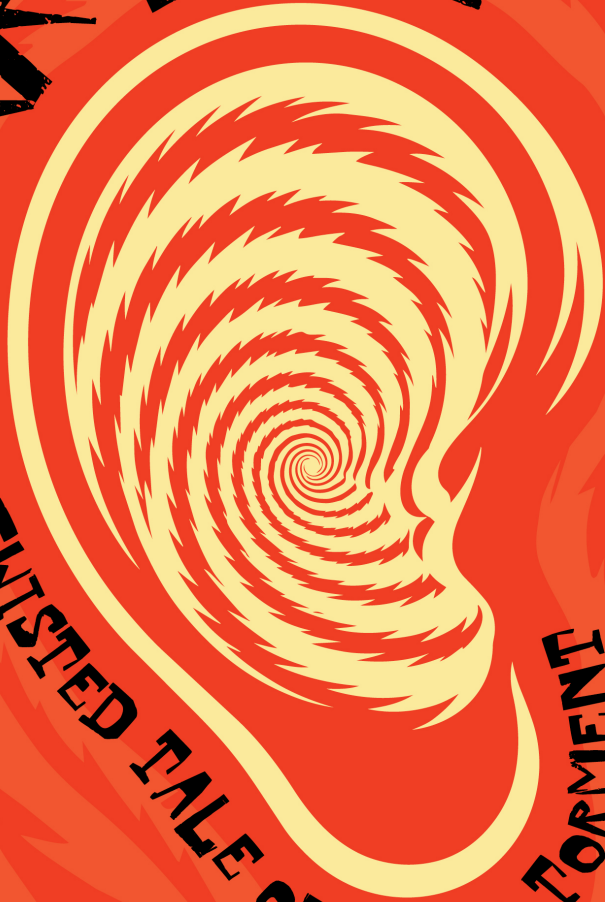


HEAR THIS!

A TWISTED TALE OF SONIC TORMENT

**A
MEMOIR**

**JON
HÉBERT**



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Lyrics © Rouxbadour Records

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IG: jon.hebert.creates

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CONTRIVED REVIEWS

“I was ground into a pulp for this?”

—*The tree used to make this book*

“Brimming with tangential, sarcastic, and self-referential humor—but congested with godawful, second-rate, low-rent, laughable (and not in a good way) comedy.”

—*A back-stabbing thesaurus*

“Never before have I read a more well-crafted mystery than this of a nation of unfortunates trying to find a cure for these insidious, invisible conditions. Bravo on all counts!”

—*Agatha Christie*

“Nice thick paper. Can’t wait to burn through this one.”

—*Chad Rivers, local pyromaniac*

“Hébert has a point about all the God stuff. I mean, mass shootings? 2016? 2020? 2025? What the Hell was I thinking?”

—*God*

“Wait, I’m writing a review for my own book? I have the worst publicist!”

—*Jon Hébert*

To Little j, because it's the little things that matter most.

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

(From wikipedia.org)

Before we get started on this twisted tale of sonic torment together, here are a few helpful definitions:

Tinnitus is the perception of sound when no corresponding external sound is present. Nearly everyone experiences a faint “normal tinnitus” in a completely quiet room; but it is of concern only if it is bothersome, interferes with normal hearing, or is associated with other problems. While often described as a ringing, it may also sound like a clicking, buzzing, hissing, or roaring. In some people, it may interfere with concentration, and in some cases is associated with anxiety and depression.

Hyperacusis is the increased sensitivity to sound and a low tolerance for environmental noise. Definitions of hyperacusis can vary significantly; it can refer to normal noises being perceived as: loud, annoying, painful, fear-inducing, or a combination of those, and is often categorized into four subtypes: loudness, pain, annoyance, and fear. It is known to be a highly debilitating hearing disorder.

Comedy is a genre of fiction that consists of discourses or works intended to be humorous or amusing by inducing laughter, especially in theatre, film, stand-up comedy, television, radio, books, or any other entertainment medium.

For your sake, I really wish I knew how to do it.

prologue

THE INSTIGATORS

Little does anyone know, but on the weekends, Satan seeks to do anything but torment the souls wallowing in Hell's fire and brimstone. You'll frequently find him taking human form and donning a fire-print swimsuit to lounge on a tropical Caribbean beach. Now and again, seeking brisk mountain air, he'll break out his hiking gear and cruise the streets of a high-altitude mountain town. Sometimes he longs for culture and dons a bespoke three-piece suit—black with red tie, of course—to take in a Broadway show.

But this day found him enjoying a cold-weather activity long on his bucket list: an Alaskan cruise. Wearing a black wool peacoat over dark chinos and a mohair sweater, he stood at the tip of the ship's bow as it broke through the waters of Kenai Fjords National Park, his arms spread wide against the frigid wind. He'd positioned himself at the ship's very tip so the tourist behind him wouldn't be in his field of vision, for as much as Satan enjoyed walking the Earth to take in its wonders, he detested seeing any human not undergoing agonizing torture at the hands of his demonic minions.

"Ah, the cold," he said as the strong wind stole his steamy exhales and the wind blew over his sharp horns. For the first time in a long time, Satan felt free. God knew when Satan was happy and knew exactly how to ruin his every cherished moment. But not today. Satan had found ultimate refuge in the cold. Living in Heaven's perfect climate, God didn't even own a jacket, coat, or scarf. The Holy Cheapskate would never spring for them either, because aside from saving souls, He eternally saved on costs.

Satan retracted his horns and left the bow. He pulled his peacoat's broad collar tight around his neck and shouldered his way through the crowd—couples braced against the cold air, wearing thick coats and scarves; tightly swaddled babies cooing in wheeled strollers; kids running around like stray bullets. Bored, he considered lifting his mood by calving a glacier to capsize the boat, or maybe throwing a twin baby stroller overboard to feed the killer whales. Luckily for the humans, his buzzing phone distracted him from creating such a momentary Hell on Earth.

Moloch Assistant, his caller ID read. Satan rolled his eyes in frustration—yes, he could leave Hell whenever he wanted, but never-ending administrative work demanded his attention.

“Satan. Go.”

“Oh, bedeviled one, ’tis Moloch, your loyal servant.”

“Yes, Moloch, I know who you are. We’ve worked together for 300,011 years. Now, what is it? We’re passing the Harding Icefield. You know how rare it is for our kind to see an iceberg. Out with it!”

“God called. He’s coming to visit you.”

“Here? It’s way too cold. He’s pranking you.”

“Sorry, He should be there any—”

Satan’s nose hairs tickled. He sneezed as someone tapped him on the shoulder; confusingly annoyed, he turned, not seeing anyone. When he turned to the other side, his horns protruded in fury and his face twisted in anger: there God stood, this immortal being who’d pranked him using the old “tap on the opposite shoulder” bit. He wore His loose-fitting robe; a dusting of ice particles rested among His white beard’s wiry hairs. Satan expected to see a smirk on God’s face, having pulled off the Heavenly shoulder tap gag, but he instead saw worry, deep concern, even fear.

“What are You doing?” Satan asked. “The humans will notice You.”

“I’m in invisible mode.”

“So, I’m standing here looking like a fool, talking to thin air?”

“Pretty much. We have a problem.” God grabbed Satan’s elbow and moved him to the railing, which overlooked the glacial inlet leading to the Harding Icefield.

“You see the inlet we’re passing?” said Satan. “It’s the whole reason I’m here. You’ve ruined my vacation. Why won’t You let me be happy?”

“You have a lifetime to visit the Icefield. Plus, I’ve seen it. I *created* it. What’s the deal with a big block of ice? It’s not like glaciers are an important part of Earth’s ecosystem. Anyway, as I said, we have a problem. A human wrote a memoir and had the gall to make fun of Me in it. He says I gave him a hearing condition called hyperacusis. And he wrote the most horrific joke I’ve ever read, a roast of another hearing condition called tinnitus. People will have to read the *whole book* just to get to it.”

Satan smiled, smoke tendrils rising from his nostrils. “A roast? Fire, charcoal, burning flesh. Count me in!”

“It’s not that kind of roast.” God lowered His head and gazed into the black sea below. “I wouldn’t have let Jon get hyperacusis.” His bushy white brow bristling in accusation, He looked at Satan. “You wouldn’t know anything about this, would you? Given our deal? I let you take charge of Heaven on the weekends so I can—er—take mandolin lessons on Earth? And you promise not to cause any mischief while I’m away?”

Satan gulped hard, a guilty kind of gulp, before pasting on a sinful smirk.

“Ha! I am unaware of this human or this term, hyperacusis. It sounds like the name of the latest superhero movie. What does it do?”

God dropped His head into His hands, sulking. “You won’t believe it. It’s—”

Satan withheld a smile—God may have cut the vacay short, but at least The Divine Interrupter was in the midst of cosmic suffering. He loved every minute of it.

“That’s alright, Old Man,” Satan said to Him. “You’ve bungled Earthly beasts before and made things right. Remember the platypus?”

God let out a sullen chuckle. “How can I forget?”

“You butchered the Hell out of that poor beaked beaver. Even the blobfish made fun of it. Now, what did You do to make up for it?”

“I gave the platypus poison spurs.”

“And what do the spurs do?”

“They incapacitate anything or anyone they strike.”

Satan held his hands out in exaltation. “See? You turned that furry duck’s life around. You’ll do the same here. Now, what does this *hyperacusis* do to a human?”

God gazed again into the dark sea. “It’s a sound sensitivity disorder. His hearing has become ultra-raw. Every sound is painful to him beyond belief.”

“Not every sound, for sure? You mean loud sounds, like sirens or train whistles? Or a rumbling cascade of brimstone falling upon a thousand souls?”

God shook his head. “He wishes. The most innocuous noises feel like ice picks stabbing his brain. Children’s laughter. Clanging kitchen utensils. Sometimes, the sound of his own voice. Sometimes, the sound of his *girl-friend’s* voice.”

Satan shot his goateed chin back. “That is madness! How is he getting along?”

“It’s difficult for him because—” God stared listlessly at the stars blinking in the clear night sky.

“Spit it out. We’re docking soon.”

“Because I also, apparently, gave him tinnitus.”

“Tinnitus? Sounds like the title of some prog-rock song from the seventies. What does it do?”

God avoided eye contact with Satan. His eyes shifted all around, in fact, as if He were holding in a secret. “That’s not important. What’s important is stopping him. You have to help Me.”

“Whoa, me?” Satan held up his fire-singed palms. “This is Your problem, not mine. You’ve lost your mojo.”

God’s fury began to rise. “Nonsense! It’s not like I’ve allowed the humans to build some bomb capable of killing everyone on the planet ten times over.”

Satan continued to goad The Holy Depressive. “That’s *exactly* what they’ve done, You Old Gaffer. It’s called the nuclear apocalypse. We’ve talked about this. What happens if Earth is no more? We’re stuck saving or tormenting the souls we have *on hand*. We’ll be forever bored! I need a steady supply of *new souls*. You have to intervene, lest Jon creates something more threatening than nuclear annihilation, such as a poorly conceived comedic memoir about the partnership we must keep hidden.”

God looked at Satan with suspicion. “I never described the book as comedic. Or said you were in it.”

Pulling nervously, and quite guiltily, at the wide collar of his peacoat, Satan said: “Oh? Um . . . lucky guesses on my part, right? Ha! But about this human. There’s a treatment? He’s seeing a doctor?”

God’s hands gripped the railing. “He’s been to nine health care practitioners this year. None of them can offer a diagnosis or relief. Most have never heard of hyperacusis. They all downplay his tinnitus like a pimple or a hangnail.”

Satan pursed his lips tight and considered his nemesis’s sad state. The hearing condition He’d unwittingly given the human dug Him deep into depression, which made Him incredibly easy to gaslight.

“Fourteen billion years and You still can’t get Your powers under control. Now You’ve screwed the pooch yet again and accidentally gave a human some mystery medical condition. You’re taking on too much. You have to relax. Read a book. Go to the beach. Meditate. Anything for You to leave me the Hell alone!”

God let out a huff. “I’ll never meditate! The Buddha can go f—”

“Listen to me! Earth is on fire. Pandemics ravage the masses. Mass shootings plague school children. Extreme weather threatens everyone. The third world war is inevitable. Crooked politicians do nothing about any of it. We can’t afford an apocalypse that ends humanity! I need *new souls*, dammit!”

“Fine! But we have to do something about this memoir.”

Satan’s hands emitted sparks as he rubbed them together. “What are You considering? Swarms of paper-eating silverfish? Book bans? Burnings?!”

“We’ll have a trial.”

Satan again shot back his goateed chin. “You’re aware of the dangers of a Heavenly Trial? If the Court finds Jon guilty, he comes to me. But if he’s found innocent? He returns home to do as he pleases, including publishing his memoir.”

God let out a defeated exhale. “It’s the only way. And you’ll be there to offer Me moral support at the trial, won’t you, good buddy?”

As the Divine Mope held His head in His hands in dismay, Satan smiled inside and out. He also glanced forlornly at the passing inlet. Should he stay on the cruise? Or should he attend the Heavenly Trial, which might multiply tenfold the damage this unknown author had done to God’s brittle psyche? He was more than happy to behold the Holy Sad One in distress. And God being dragged through a lengthy Heavenly Court trial? His hyperacusis fumble put on record for all to see?

All the better.

All the more evil.

The decision was made.

“Of course I’ll be there,” Satan said. “No way in *Hell* would I strand You in Your time of need.”

He bared his lupine fangs and clapped God on the shoulder, causing dust to puff out from The Great Thrifter’s tattered, sacrosanct robe.