

Lord of the Game

a novella

ALSO BY BENJAMIN DEVOS

Madness Has a Moment and Then Vanishes Before Returning
Again

Freaking out the Neighborhood



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Lord of the Game

1

I was in a café drinking my morning cup of coffee when I realized that this whole thing, life, may not be what I thought it was.

I pictured myself as a giant dollar bill being fed to a robot that chewed me up, lifting its mechanical legs in the air, birthing some sentient, highly intellectual being that would figure out how to rehabilitate the planet.

It was part man, part machine, supremely wise but also emotional.

It engineered Earth's pollution through an air-purifying apparatus, and when all of the contaminants were gone the device shot flowers into the sky, petals falling like rain.

Once the world was purified, the man-machine wanted it all for himself.

He betrayed the humans, demanding that every person transfer their consciousness to another world, a virtual one that was endless, and where anything could happen.

Only then would they be pure like he was.

The humans' nanoparticles were transferred, configured down to the harmonic vibrations in the tubules of their nerve cells, precisely duplicated into a new undulating field of unlimited variables.

It wasn't until all of the humans relocated that the man-machine revealed the cost of living the virtual life to be over a trillion dollars a year.

The humans would pay for their stay by becoming virtual slaves, working to fill their virtual accounts,

Benjamin DeVos

so that they could keep riding their virtual unicorns through virtual meadows.

The humans wanted to come back to Earth, but the man-machine told them that if they returned, they would no longer recognize or understand the world in which they left, and would be like monkeys forced to repeat a billion year cycle of evolution.

So the humans stayed, their consciousness flowing like water through infinite interconnected networks.

They lived in a single day that stretched on forever.

I paused again, looked out the window of the café at the moving cars, the people in the streets walking to or from someplace that would cost them something, a piece of themselves.

I wondered if I was already in that alternate dimension.

I wondered if there was a machine somewhere logging everything that I did in some supercomputer.

I wondered if I was merely data to be collected.

Maybe I was just paranoid.

I sat back in my chair, trying to relax, but accidentally leaned too far and fell flat on the floor, spilling coffee all over my lap.

Everyone in the café laughed.

I stood up and yelled, "I'm a human being."

Outside I stared at the sidewalk and the trail of coffee that was dripping behind me.

People in the window pointed at me and said, "That's the guy."

I pulled my jacket over my head and ran away with my face down.

Lord of the Game

I passed a homeless man who was walking around in circles.

I thought maybe he was drunk.

Maybe his children were somewhere wondering where daddy was.

He was standing on the corner, shouting at a shrub.

He was wearing a newspaper on his head like a sailor home from a long voyage.

The homeless man bent over and filled his coat with flowers to offset his ripe smell.

That was how the cavemen did it.

It was his method of reverse engineering.

A way to drag his knuckles across the earth again.

I ran into Fairmount Park and looked for somewhere quiet to sit.

I saw the stump of a fallen tree, and a group of feral hippies holding hands and singing songs in a circle to honor the life of a once prominent maple.

I wanted to sit on the stump and pretend that the hippies were singing to me.

“Kumbaya my Lord, Kumbaya.”

I found a bench with bird poop on the backrest.

I lay down and stared at the tree above me.

There were birds in its branches, probably the same ones that pooped on the bench.

I held up my finger and pretended that it was a gun to shoot the birds.

I didn't want to kill them and imagined it like a video game in my head.

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Every time I shot a bird, two respawned in its place, until the tree was filled with hundreds of birds, raining down poop as I shot them.

I pretended that my arms were turrets so that I could kill more birds, making machine gun noises with my mouth and spraying spit through the air.

I shot bullets up toward the sun and waited for them to fall back down and impale my body.

Guts spraying everywhere.

Dead.

Simulation terminated.

Lord of the Game

2

I walked back to my apartment before it got dark.

When I arrived, the first thing I saw was my cube-shaped aquarium.

There were three goldfish inside.

They were doing underwater backflips.

I fed them, and we chatted about our day.

We talked like fish.

“Bluh-luh-hub-hub.”

I went into the bathroom.

I hopped in the shower and took off my clothes.

I turned on the faucet and pretended my feet were birds in the bath, hopping curiously under the water and splashing in all directions.

I curled up in the fetal position and pretended that I was an embryo.

I sucked my thumb and felt like a big, dirty baby.

I towed off with an old t-shirt and put on a diaper made of bedsheets.

I crawled around the apartment saying, “I want my mommy,” until it was time for work.

I worked at a bar called The Helm and Compass, recently opened by two brothers who moved to Philadelphia from the rural south with the goal of tricking people into giving them money in exchange for old-time music and organic, depression-era staples jazzed up with Sriracha.

The bar had hardwood floors and farm to table coziness, a sort of beacon for a parade of desperate, oversexed, hungover and coked out manic depressives.

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Everyone at the bar wasn't as young and single as they seemed.

Let's face it; all of us were falling apart piece by piece.

It didn't matter if you were single or dating.

Everyone was going to die.

Sometimes on my break, I would change into a blue collared shirt and walk to the Bed Bath and Beyond across the street and customers asked me questions like, "Where are the bath mats."

I answered with the hope that a manager would see me helping out, and either give me a job or assume that I worked at the store until I could convince them to hire me.

Bed Bath and Beyond was like an indoor amusement park compared to The Helm and Compass.

There was nothing to do at the bar except clean.

I swept the floor.

Then I mopped the floor.

Then I wiped down the tables.

Then I wiped the spots off of the silverware.

Then I stored the clean silverware in the supply closet.

Then I organized the supplies in the supply closet.

Then I did it all over again.

By the time I was finished, I wanted to die.

I held up my gun finger and pretended to shoot myself in the face.

My boss Jason saw and told me to stop.

Jason was always telling me what to do.

Lord of the Game

I said, "Sorry," and when Jason turned around I pretended to shoot him in the back, wiping my finger down with a rag and laughing.

Jimmy, Jason's brother and business partner, said, "I saw that."

I said, "Sorry," again.

I holstered my finger into my pocket.

Jimmy laughed.

He had a sense of humor, unlike his brother.

"Go clean the toilets," Jason said. "Someone took a massive dump in the center stall."

He was right.

The smell from the center stall had diffused into the rest of the bathroom.

It smelled like an overcooked burrito filled with hair.

I punched the air, trying to negate the smell as if it were tangible and could be knocked out by a swift up-percut to the jaw.

I loved punching things.

Sometimes I would spend hours punching things around my apartment.

I liked punching pillows the best.

The other day, I tried punching the drywall in the kitchen.

Pretty sure I could break it if I tried.

I thought about my dream of becoming a professional boxer, all of those videos I watched of Mike Tyson.

He was the greatest of all time.

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The most brutal and vicious and ruthless champion there has ever been.

No one could stop him.

His style was impetuous.

His defense was impregnable.

He wanted your heart.

He wanted to eat your children.

Praise be to Allah.

I wanted to learn to fight like that.

My urge to punch something was becoming irresistible.

I punched the toilet in the center stall and watched water splash over the sides.

I punched the seat and cracked it.

The crack looked like a lightning bolt.

I punched it again.

My punches sounded like thunder.

Thunder and another lightning shaped crack.

Soon the toilet was in porcelain pieces on the floor, but I still wasn't satisfied.

I went into every stall and broke each toilet with a barrage of my fists.

It was bliss.

Imagine something that you see every day of your mundane life.

Something that you want to break but don't have the courage to follow through.

That's what I did; I owned those fucking toilets.

I murked every last one of them.

Lord of the Game

As I finished, a nursing student dressed in scrubs held open the door for me and walked into the bathroom as I walked out.

The nursing student closed the door.

I heard the ventilation fan turn on.

I regretted not placing my mop bucket on top of the door to fall on the nursing student when he walked through.

I was bored.

My shift wasn't over until midnight, but I decided to clock out early.

I waved goodbye to Jason, but he was staring at the bartender's boobs and didn't see me.

Her name was Janet.

She'd recently quit her job at Hooters to pursue a better opportunity

Jimmy waved bye for all of them.

Outside it was dark.

I thought I felt raindrops but realized it was an air conditioner dripping on me.

I opened my mouth and felt like I was about to yawn but didn't.

A few seconds later I coughed.

An empty potato chip bag blew by my feet, and I stomped on it.

The bag made a crackling sound.

I walked to the bus stop.

There was a man with two broken legs, using only his upper body strength to maneuver around the street on crutches like an acrobat.

He asked me for a cigarette.

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I felt my eyes twitch in the characteristic way that they did any time I was anxious.

“I wish I could help you, but I don’t smoke.”

The man with the broken legs cursed under his breath.

He looked away and noticed a woman with red dreadlocks and facial piercings exiting a nearby lobby.

She was smoking four cigarettes, one between each finger.

She took a few drags before discarding the burning remains along the sidewalk.

The man with the broken legs wiggled his torso over and picked up the cigarettes with his feet.

Monkey-style.

The woman with the red dreadlocks looked over her shoulder at him and shook her head.

From the other direction, a priest approached and stood next to me.

The priest kept waving behind his ass like he was farting into the wind.

The wind was blowing in my direction.

No smell, though.

Or maybe I was immune to bad smells after experiencing the massive shit at work.

I had a feeling my zipper was open, so gave my groin a tap the way most people tap their pocket to check for a wallet.

All good.

The bus pulled up, and I said, “It’s all good,” to the priest.

The bus was filled with different sorts of people.

Lord of the Game

Faces and bodies in motion.

One of them was an old woman in a yellow raincoat with glasses, another, a younger woman who was carrying a backpack that was bigger than she was.

There was a group of basketball players that were taking turns dribbling back and forth to each other.

I looked at the old woman in the yellow raincoat.

She was glaring at the basketball players, trying to melt their ball with her heat vision.

I sat next to the priest.

He was saying his Hail Mary's while scrolling through emails on his phone.

I took a bag of baby carrots out of my jacket and began to eat them loudly.

The priest stopped texting to look up, then reached into the bag and took a carrot.

My nose twitched.

I felt like a rabbit.

I leaped forward and thumped my foot against the floor.

I tied my shoelaces together and hopped around the bus like a bunny until the driver kicked me off.

I hopped all the way home.

When I got back to my apartment, I tore open a bag of lettuce with my teeth and ate it.

I fed lettuce to my fish for dinner.

The fish ate the lettuce with smiles on their faces.

“Bluh-luh-yum-yum.”

I turned on the television and fell asleep listening to a sad news story about a man who won the lottery

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and divorced his wife immediately after because he thought that he could do better than her with money.

I imagined from the man's voice that he was extremely obese by the way he took deep breaths in between each sentence that he spoke.

Slowly, I drifted off to sleep.

I dreamt that I was in Fairmount Park raking money like leaves.

Dollar bills fell from the trees, and I pulled them into a pile of green bills.

The pile was never-ending and hid the ground from view.

I dreamt that I had all the money in the world.

I used my wealth for good.

I bought every paper plate in existence so that I would never have to wash another dish.

I bought food for the hungry.

I bought homes for the homeless.

I bought clothes for the naked.

I bought parents for the orphans.

I bought peace on earth.

I bought liberty and justice for all.

I woke up feeling humble.

"Maybe someday," I thought.