

Latter Day Lepers

Michael Botur

I told G there was some junk I dug about the Bible, like Madonna and the immaculate collection and how Mary was, like, a feminist. G laughed, called me a freak. I said, Whatever, you the freak. This was up in in that snobby part on the hill what used to be broke but they'll never admit it, the 4-8-9, where you can see all people's rooves, look down on them from above. We got, like, perspective and stuff. G was trying to look beyond it, back to the States. I didn't wanna look at nothin, I just squirmed in the seat and scratched under my bra and waited for G to lead us.

She turned the motor off. Neither of us wanted to get out of the car and into the Assembly, but the peeps who was hanging outside started to go in, so that was the signal. Plus the weather was packin' up, the clouds were bruised and swelling. Assemblies of God's sposda be real welcoming, like a ark, all about love for lepers and homeless dudes and that. We was there to settle a old debate. G's mum, when they was growin up in the States, used to take her to Assemblies. G'd heard mad shit about the church's policies since she came out here.

I went, You sure stuff's more, like, tolerant now? She went, A true Christian follows the word of the Bible, sticks to the scripture, and what the script says is that Jesus loves everybody. Even parking wardens. I thought stickin to the script sounded like they couldn't adapt. G wouldn't hear of it, she was all trusting, said the script was solid. Me, I got told that Santa and the Tooth Fairy and Jesus and shit aren't real when I was, like, five, and I remember how it made the world feel like cold bath water so I didn't want G to feel like that.

The church was a Salvation Army hall. We walked in, holdin hands, last ones in the ark. Our legs went first, we was a bit reluctant. G wanted to close the door; I went, Keep it open. G's all about the PDAs. She goes, Be loud and proud, you don't needa stick to the script. I go, 'Thas a contradiction. She laughed, 'Thas church. The congregationers must've liked what they saw, two chicks holding hands, coz they smiled at you, straight up.

This forty-somethin Island fulla with gold teeth sat down the end of our row. He introduced himself as Timosi, said he was the caregiver for this spasticated girl who slouched beside him, drooling. His tie didn't match his shirt, not even close, but neither did mine, I had the tomboy skinny tie look going, modern styles. All good, we was all on the ark together. Just as I got

my slouch on, put my feet up on the chair in front of me, everyone rose up. There was a greeting in Island language, translation projected with they dodgy projector. They needed to register Powerpoint first before the message was displayed. It was classic, see, these people, they didn't need approval for nothin else. The message on the wall was all like, Faauta, o le mea matua lelei ma le matagofie lava, pe a nonofo faatasi lava o uso and stuff. Shyeah, I grew up on the West Side, the best side, fuck the rest side, I could tell what them words meant, I could read that message from aaages away.

So anyway, this Timosi dude explained the concept with a graspy, calloused hand. Always good to have a interpreter handy, even if his ears were full of hair. The translation was more for G's sake than mine. He was like, 'Brothers, it is good we dwell in unity.' He gave us a smile, for real. I think the script served him right. *Sisters* was missin though, he shoulda gone *sisters*.

There was this inbred mental fulla up front who got real into it, man did his head tilt back far, looked like his head wanted to rock right off his body, he was that into it. I tried to keep my slouch goin as much as poss but these Assemblies – okay, yeah, G'd warned me – these Assemblies, they're all about *ascension*, that means flying up to heaven. Which would explain why the mental stared upways the whole time, wanted to fly. There was tonnes of crosses on the wall, above the band. The crosses was mostly cardboard cut-outs, plastic and crêpe paper, DIY styles. I could see why the mental looked up and flapped his arms and felt at home, there was legit love there, for reals. Sweet as, I thought, Choice enough.

Them hymn words, like the script to the song, was projected for me and G's benefit mostly, 'cause if you looked around the place, we was the only ones out of place. There was only like ten words in their vocab and they just rearranged them for each song, like a remix of praise, *Jesus, love, hallelujah, embrace, sing, forever*. G's top eyelids got heavy and she started not dancing so much, just rocking her head and swaying. She had a hard time pulling me out of the chair but I got up for her sake. She had some memories goin on and I think she was chanting scripture to herself. She rubbed the mental's head, and the heads of some of the other weirdos there – a fulla with skin disease, a few niggas in wheelchairs, people with, like, pink blotches on their faces. Latter day lepers. All of them had minders, dudes like Timosi. I don't have a problem with those freak people, I thought it was all G. Fully reminded me of bein on a ark though, these people came in twos, cripples and caretakers. Even the lepers that was on they own looked like they had a dude beside them. I ain't talkin bout Timosi, I'm talkin about *Jesus*. Get it? Jesus ain't ashamed to sit beside nobody.

Just as the mentals really started spreading saliva around and swinging their arms like they had no joints, it was our time, the church told us, Timosi fully tried to tip G out of her seat and get into the healing, up there with the rejects, like as if there was something to heal about us!

When we were all praised out, we moved our arses into the tea room out back. I was like, *Praise getting' the fudge outta here*, I didn't like what was brewin in the kitchen. The decorations was okay, I spose. The hall had noticeboards with loadsa notices with typos, obviously done on laser printers with clip art. Them colour cartridges is expensive – I thought it was sweet that they spent money just to spread the love. And there was a illustration from the Sunday School tots, of animals on the ark makin' babies. I goes to G, What did the GLBT animals do? Throw a parade?

They had us sit down, I think 'cause G seemed like a weirdo, standing there scratching her shaven head, playing with her nose ring, and they gave us choice biscuits like Squiggletops. G kept scratching her arm so I held her hand. Timosi got a downer to make our drinks and the dude only spilled like ten per cent of my coffee, it was a miracle, hallelujah! There was a guy with tubes in his nose in a wheelchair who joined our table. I got nothing against handicaps, they're like lepers, but, like, it was unusual, that they was bein real inclusive. Like the scripture says shit should be. Like G says the script says.

I got right down to it and asked about Assembly of God's policy. I might not've piped up if G didn't hold my hand so tight. You feel stronger with someone at your side. She was really holdin onto somethin. She couldn't bring herself to arks the question.

Timosi goes, 'The message of Iesu–'

G goes, 'Oh I know the message, yup.'

Timosi looked surprised. He went, 'Iesu, he love the tas collecta, he love piostitute, he love leper, he love sinner.' He looked real kind, gave me the warm fuzzies hard out. I asked Timosi what he meant, seeing as he was from some kinda banana republic. Always good to have a interpreter. Timosi scratched his arm. He went on, 'Jesus, he heal the plostitute, the sinner, the G. You come to da right ples.'

G's hand was firm and tight, white knuckles. G goes to him, 'Um, we don't *need* healing.'

'Plis,' Timosi goes, not hearin her, like he was a telemarketer phoning up during dinner time, readin from a script. 'Iesu, he walk wis the tax collector, the leper–'

While the guy listed all the freaks we were comparable to, for like the third time, G squeezed my hand so tightly that when she stood up, I came with her. The hall hadn't gone quiet, peeps was all safe on they ark, they could pull up the plank any time they wanted and be, like, a island. I thought about the door we'd left open downstairs.

G goes, 'We are not *prostitutes*.'

'You are,' I went, and elbowed G.

'This is serious,' she went, and I shut up big time.

I looked around us. The dude in the wheelchair was lookin up. I checked out the ceiling. Just paint and lightbulbs, so why was he lookin up? And why was everyone standing around us in a circle all of a sudden, with water and hoses and cloths, ready to scrub?

Even when I tripped on the stairs, even when some of them giggled at us holdin hands and I gave them the evils, G was holdin on tight. It was darker outside, a storm had brewed while we'd been inside, and I had to admit man, it'd been warm and bright like a laundromat inside

I locked the car doors, in case the rain got in. I hoped the church would get flooded.

When we stopped at the lights, we were supposed to talk, I guessed. I wanted to know if this was the same Assembly she remembered from when she was a kid, it couldn't've been, and what the hell was in her script that she thought would protect her against leprosy. I was pissed off and tried to shake her hand off mine, but G was holdin on tight, like she'd come out of a audition and she was clutchin a script rolled up in her hand.

'I nicked a calendar,' I said, at last, 'Off the wall, on the way out. Nothin' else worth taking eh. They were dicks.'

'Gimme that calendar, bitch,' G went, 'They owe me a few months. Years, actually.'