

SALLY LANE

Seeing the Light

When my sister-in-law, Sonia, called round unexpectedly at 2 p.m. on a Wednesday, I was still wearing my Bayeux Tapestry of a bathrobe. While I was explaining to her the origin of its name—that is, each stain or object recounted an episode in my life in the past few months: the darkened gravy blob from when I'd clumsily spilled my TV dinner, for instance, or the encrusted cornflake from a late-night snack—she interrupted me. When was the last time I'd had a conversation with anyone? she asked. I had to think about that. Did the bin men count? I asked her.

My guess is, it was this encounter that prompted her to send me the brand new book that arrived at my door a few days later. 'Seeking Enlightenment, Finding Jesus', was its title. Sonia thinks that Jesus can solve anything, even gravy blobs and encrusted cornflakes. I have nothing against Jesus; in fact, in my youth, before I got distracted by field sports and boys, he and I were on quite intimate terms. As intimate as you can get in the stiff upper lip Church of England, that is. It was just that, now I was a fully fledged adult, it could be said that he and I had drifted some distance apart.

In any case, I didn't open the book. It lay, still shiny, like an unexploded missile on my kitchen table. Gradually, it got shuffled around and then buried under payment demands, court appearance notices, and bailiff threats. When Sonia phoned to ask if I was enjoying it, I lied and said it was good for my spiritual journey: I would let her know as soon as I had reached my final destination. She seemed satisfied with that and left me alone for a bit.

But then strange things began to happen. The washing machine, for one. It started to whoosh, and then whee, and then whoosh again, and I could tell it was trying to tell me something. The whoosh sounded like the background noise of a desert storm, and the whee sounded like a cry for help in the wilderness. And then my TV, phone, and digital clock all began to show only identically paired numbers, like '18:18' or '07:07', or even palindrome numbers, like '22:22'. I tried to catch the numbers out by peering sideways at my digital screens at odd moments, but they always won by appearing deceptively normal until another significant number poked through. I didn't know if Jesus was trying to contact me, but I didn't want to take any chances. I covered all my electronic items with tea towels, and then hid for two days under the blankets.

It was on the third day, when I emerged, that Jesus spoke to me. I know it might sound like a cliché, but it really was via a piece of toast. By chance, I had adjusted the dial on my toaster that morning, and lo and behold, there it was, the unmistakable profile of the Galilean, outlined in dark chestnut-coloured crumbs, complete with beard and fingertips raised in prayer. Feverishly, I dressed myself in outdoor clothes and headed into town, not knowing what to do, certain only that I had to do something about the powerful fluttering in my chest that was like a bird struggling to be set free.

It was at a stall on the main, pedestrianised street that I saw him. Tall, spectrally thin in a long, white robe, and with the kindest brown eyes I have ever seen. In front of him on an ordinary-looking fold-up table, were deep red and azure blue leaflets, bordered by frames of glittering gold, which spoke directly, promisingly, to the trapped bird within me. I can now barely recall his and my conversation, suffused as it was in a soft, warm glow. All that remains when I try to pick through it is a series of mental snapshots, like the evidence of a long-ago beach holiday: the soothing timbre of his voice, or the length and delicacy of his fingers as he handed me a pen to sign up for a "taster weekend": Shropshire, rolling hills; glassy lakes; no need to pack, everything provided. And a digital detox, so no phones or tablets. As I shut my front door with a definitive click, my final look at these last-mentioned items, still shrouded in their stripy tea towels, wasn't even wistful.

Shropshire turned out to be one of the rainier counties. When it rains, like now, the view outside the kitchen window is a whitewash where everything merges: the edges of the sheep blend into the edges of the hedgerows, which in turn are indistinct against the fuzzy mass of the high brick inner wall and steel gate beyond. Sometimes I joke to myself that if Jesus were to try to reveal himself now, he would have a hard time outlining himself amidst all that blurriness. The reason I joke to myself is that the other sister wives don't have much of a sense of humour, particularly Josie, the newest and youngest, who insists on earnestly explaining everything to me with a Bible verse. This morning she quoted Matthew, saying that 'the one who has endured to the end will be saved', and I briefly pictured tugging hard on one of her silly Midwestern pigtails, but instead I smiled sweetly and asked her if she wanted more toast.

The mention of an extra slice turned out to be a mistake, as Dorothy, the oldest and most motherly, loves my 'Galilean on toast' story and gets me to repeat it at the slightest excuse. Josie, of course, wants to hear it, and when I get to the beard part, she colours a little. The other wives and I turn away decorously; we know from the sounds emanating from Jezza's room last night that Josie, too, has now experienced the delights of our husband's full and bushy beard that he uses, like a large-headed lion, to titillate the pink, blossoming buds of each of his nubile initiates.

Today, Jezza is in town with practically minded Maureen, who has been enlisted to buy the monthly products that we sister wives require. All of us, apart from Josie who is still too new, have synchronised: another reason, I suppose, for Jezza's necessity to continually supply himself with a fresh crop of female recruits. At least when he is away, the left-behind wives seem to stretch and yield a little, like mongrel cats. They are less likely to compete for favour and more likely to linger at the breakfast table, not making such a show, for instance, of standing on chairs to dust in the hard-to-reach corners.

Today is also the day I have allocated for the preparation of my plan. After Josie has finished clapping her little hands at my toast story, I casually ask Dorothy if there are any binoculars in the house. I have spied a birdwatching guide on the living room shelf, I explain,

and am keen to indulge my former hobby. To turn my interest into a group activity, I add, I would be pleased to hold sessions for the other wives to enhance their knowledge of the beauties of creation, in the name of our Creator. At first Dorothy hesitates, knowing she should ask Jezza's permission first, but then when I flatter her by saying she of all people knows every inch of our godly abode, she relents and says there is a pair in the attic.

After I had dried the breakfast dishes, left the bread to prove, scattered corn for the chickens, helped prepare for, then eaten, lunch, and had done my stint feeding the biomass boiler in the courtyard, I was ready. I knew today was an auspicious day, since when I looked at the kitchen clock, it was quarter past three, which in my former digital life denoted a highly significant '15:15'. I installed myself in the upstairs window and looked out. The rain had abated, thinning out the mist, and it was possible to discern the outline of the elm tree, the pale grey stretch of the path curving towards the padlocked wooden gate set in the inner wall (which is taller than the height of two average-sized people and one small one, standing on each other's shoulders), and then the darker grey bars of the outer steel gate, set in yet another wall the same height as the first, about twenty yards beyond.

I keep watching. A small brown and yellow bird flits from the top of the birch tree at the northern boundary of the garden to the hedgerow opposite, and is followed, close behind, by a similar small brown and yellow bird. It is spring, so I imagine that their skipping dance, dipping then rising, is some sort of mating ritual. I lied to Dorothy this morning, of course. I am no birdwatcher, and am incapable, in fact, of telling the difference between a chaffinch and a blue tit. It is something else, *someone* else, I am searching for. Like the little feathered creatures I am ostensibly here to watch, he or she will be identifiable by a flash of a colour—a bold neon orange, most likely, if my former experience is anything to go by. If I wait long enough, I know that it will appear like a sudden flare in the bleak and monochrome landscape: a brief, bright beacon indicative of a world beyond the hedgerow, beyond the wall, beyond the implacable steel gate that sets its rigidity against the sky.

An hour or so later—personal items forbidden to us include

radios, writing implements, and watches, so I can't say precisely how much later—Josie comes into the room, ready to chat. I want to scream at her, particularly when she goes over to the window, blocking the view. When she asks me what I have spotted, I have to stop myself from shoving her to one side, but then, over her left shoulder, I see it, the vivid, neon orange flash beyond the outer gate, and then it is gone. Rushing downstairs, ignoring Josie's bewildered cry, I enter the kitchen. The clock stands at 33 minutes past 4: '16:33'—not yet meaningful, but it is a start.

Over the next two rainy days, I continue my routine. With Jezza back, the wives are scrubbing, kneading, and sweeping with renewed vigour, but Jezza himself is preoccupied with the more immediate attractions of Josie, who has been given special dispensation to sleep in until noon. My latest hobby has not commanded his attention at all: whether the wives are initiated into the mysteries of the Lord's feathered creations or not is all the same to him. And as far as his interest in my spiritual development or personal allure is concerned, it has been a long time since the kindest brown eyes I had ever seen have thrown even a cursory glance in my direction. For this, I realise I am now grateful.

Mist, whiteness, drizzle, patches of clearing, wispy clouds, small brown birds, occasional large, black ones (? crows, rooks, ravens), more drizzle, and then suddenly, the bright orange flash, luminescent, striking, joyful. It always stays for about two minutes only, and then it vanishes again. My three-day sightings, recorded using the communal pen that is taped to the kitchen counter, are now precisely: '16:33', '16:45', and '16:27'. I mark the numbers on my hand, ignoring Maureen when she tells me that the toxicity will seep into my blood and pollute my soul. When she asks me what the numbers mean, I tell her that I am recording my observation times of the sparrows in an effort to understand their nesting behaviours better. What I hope she doesn't notice is that the numbers greatly trouble me: no magical signifiers or prime numbers amongst them that would reveal a clear and unassailable pattern within a complex and mysterious universe: such numbers, I know, would illuminate my own life path and true fate as I seek to navigate my way. On the contrary, the readings are a particularly weak and disappointing

demonstration of numberhood. I am, however, running out of time. I can tell from the rosy sky that evening that the weather will clear tomorrow, and I will need to act while the ground is dry.

Like the blessing of the Lord himself, the next day dawns bright and fair. Outside, the sky is prettily blue, and a variety of green hues sparkles encouragingly amid the freshly bathed vegetation: the dark green of the elm tree; the forest green of the hedgerow; and the tender green of new grass shoots catching the sunlight. To keep my restless self busy until the afternoon, I decide to rearrange the jams and chutneys in the pantry, putting them in alphabetical order, and heaving crates of cobwebby mason jars from the storage room in preparation for next season's batches. Dorothy looks on approvingly. She believes my new hobby is doing me good.

At 16.00, I begin to pack my basket, placing the slices of toast one of top of the other. When Josie asks why I am feeding the birds with toast rather than bread, I reply that it is better for their digestion. When she wants to come too, I tell her it is my meditation time alone with the Lord and mercifully, she nods, conceding defeat.

Kitted out and ready by 16.16, I make my down the path which glistens with interweaving snail trails, dropping the slices as I go. When I reach the first wall, I stop and pick up a stone, nicely heavy, but not too much so. After a couple of minutes of fumbling, I hurl the fashioned object with all my might, listening for the soft thud that indicates its landing. I then run back to the house, up the stairs, and resume my watch, heart thumping, and binoculars in hand.

It is four minutes after my return—at 16.24: not identical, not palindrome, and not even prime, but I don't give a hoot—that I see the neon flash. This time, it does not flare briefly and then disappear. Instead, it becomes an orange shape, which becomes a jacket, which becomes an attachment to the curious face of a postman peering through the bars of the steel gate. In his hand, I see that he is holding a slice of chestnut-coloured toast fastened with three rubber bands to a large stone, which, in turn, is secured to a hand-scribbled note bearing eleven, highly significant numbers with the power to save: the telephone number of Sonia, my clever sister-in-law.