

The Tower of Babel

Come Sabbath morning, the clouds were thick and dark in the heavens. So was the crowd inside the church, a massive cinder-block addition built right onto the reverend's personal estate. Must be a nice tax write-off that paid for itself. I remembered it as large, gaudy, and gloomy. "A gift from the Almighty for being a good shepherd," he had said. I snuck in through the chapel's back door, wearing a pillbox hat with a dark veil, stockings, long sleeves, and matching gloves. I was hardly recognizable in my respectability.

". . . she be a white slut—a bike . . ." I heard while skirting past a couple teenage girls, and then I sensed unfriendly eyes following me. The seven-member evangelical delegation of Members of Parliament was already seated on stage in magenta, velvet chairs, facing the congregation. All were men wearing thousand-dollar—US dollar—suits.

The air crackled with anticipation—churchgoers milling about and boisterous chatter. The smell of perfume, men's cologne, and perspiration was strong enough to make me cough and long for a seat near an open window where several small male Jamaican anole lizards were doing pushups and tussling for the best positions on the sill.

I noticed Petty Feral standing with Roger, eyeing me, so I put distance between us. I needed to sit front and center that morning, right behind Sister Pius, and tried to maneuver discreetly through the crowd.

In the glow of the TVJ lighting, Sister Pius sat in a finely tailored suit. As always, her silver hair was impeccable and her elephant ivory cane balanced next to her right knee. But that morning, she looked more serious than usual, which was saying a lot. She was busy rehearsing hand-written notes scribbled on index cards.

I sweated through my new dress. All the lighting made me feel as if I were having the hot flashes that I expected would someday accompany menopause. On wobbly high heels, I maneuvered through the tight space between pews. I plopped down into a grudgingly surrendered space next to an elderly couple, but at least I was right behind Sister Pius, still whispering to herself. I quickly opened a hymnal to hide my face from the pulpit.

Activity continued to swirl all around with the last-minute fine-tuning of television lights, microphones, cables, and cameras. A man with dreadlocks, wearing a drab headscarf and sunglasses smiled while uncoiling an electrical cable. Winston. Torn between ignoring him and feeling relief, at least I knew he had my back.

The volume levels of the 2, six-foot-high stacks of choir speakers were turned up so high they hummed, crackled, and trembled.

I clenched my teeth.

Blue Lips slowly rose and stood in front of his throne in a special purple and gold robe, reveling in the silent admiration. The choirmaster tapped his baton. Everyone rose to their feet at once, and on the count of three, the chapel erupted into the compulsory exuberance I had learned to associate with the Holy Spirit. Loud wails, prayers, and hallelujahs soared about in the rafters. Hands reached for heaven, eyes closed, and tears streamed down ebony cheeks until the choir began singing and everyone started clapping and swaying back and forth to *Are you Washed in the Blood of the Lamb?* Then came the soft thuds of closing hymnals, a nervous silence, and a great fanning of bodies sitting back down in the pews.

At 10:43 a.m., Sister Pious slid the index cards into her Louis Vuitton purse. The camera crew was poised around the podium, focusing.

Showtime.

Almost levitating with reverence, Blue Lips began a solemn march toward the dais microphone, his face heavily powdered to buffer the sheen of sweat.

At 10:45 a.m., he submitted to an almost convulsive seizure of the Spirit. His eyes rolled back, and he began delivering his message in the classic biblical tongue. “*Sha-mon-a Ala som-ana afra-sata belong-ala . . .*” It looked painful, like I imagined childbirth would be.

At 10:50 a.m., I could see the microphone winding its way through the chapel in my direction. It then started coming down the aisle toward Sister Pious as she began trembling with the welling up of the Spirit, slowly rising to her feet with eyes closed.

My mouth felt as dry as a Hellshire iguana. I suddenly dropped my hymnal, reached over the back of the pew, nabbed the microphone, and stood tall. “Hark,” I said in my best pulpit voice, “no one who practices deceit and badmind will dwell in my house; no one who speaks falsely will stand in my presence, sayeth the Lord in Psalms one-oh-one, verse seven. Yet false proclamations and prophecies spoken in tongues by this preacher have come from the throat of an open grave practicing deceit. The poison of vipers is upon his lips. Reverend, plead forgiveness for being a hypocrite.”

Sister Pious sought guidance from the pulpit.

The reverend looked reptilian with purple lips. Winston later told me that he paused in his contact with the Spirit to gesture to a nearby group of ushers—*off with her head*.

The congregation sat stunned and silent.

“While orchestrating Sabbath charades, you pretend to be something you are not—someone who cares about others. You and your ilk have made an abortion of the freedom of females everywhere on Earth, denying them the compassion, respect and dignity to chart their own course through life. Your judgments are never idle, and your destruction never sleeps.

Reverend, plead forgiveness for being a hypocrite.”

A scuffle broke out in the back somewhere. The deacons must have discovered Winston.

“You have poisoned the efforts of the farmers’ cooperative with whispered lies. Remove the log from your own eye to see clearly enough to remove the speck from your brother’s, sayeth the Lord in Matthew seven, verses three through five. Reverend, plead for forgiveness.”

I could see men in dark suits frantically searching for the microphone cable. They began fanning out, following the snaking wires over the floor, between the pews, stepping on peoples’ feet and triggering painful outbursts.

“You worship power and confuse the lies of the Beast, the Antichrist, with the truths of the Chosen One—the Messiah. Because of your desire to bring on the end-time of the apocalypse, you refuse to lift a finger to protect God’s creation—Mother Earth. It is easier for you to play the victim than take responsibility. And you disparage others who do not share your beliefs as being lukewarm, yet water that’s too hot and caustic is spewed from all mouths before it burns. The silence of the lambs over such hypocrisy is deafening! Reverend, plead for forgiveness.”

Someone pulled hard on the cord. My hand tightened around the microphone, my umbilical of protection. I could feel myself being pulled over on unsteady heels. For the climax, I attempted to roll my eyes back. It didn’t go well, but I was still behind the veil, so probably nobody noticed. “Only hypocrites pray aloud standing on street corners and in church, sayeth the Lord in Matthew six, verse five.”

The combined power of the ushers yanked the mic out of my hand. But I was the center of attention and didn’t need a mic. I filled my lungs.

“You are possessed with badmind and greed. I remind you that it is easier for a camel to

pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, Matthew nineteen, verse twenty-four.”

A dog yelped outside in the road. “Oh yes, stop the suffering of stray animals in Purgatory! Get your dogs and cats spayed and neutered at the Jamaican Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Kingston. Thus, sayeth the Lord—Amen!”

I feigned my return from the spiritual trance and attempted to gracefully sit back down, primping, and making sure none of my hair had spilled out from beneath the hat. Even through the veil, my relief must have been evident to Sister Pious, who glared at me.

The entire sanctuary was a stunned tableau. The only people smiling were the cameramen and TVJ technicians. But from the single most powerful man on stage, if looks could kill . . .

I was quickly and unceremoniously escorted out of my seat and “helped” from the chapel. The degree of force exerted on both my arms caused my gloves to be pulled completely off. A fitting metaphor for how I would experience Jamaican hospitality from then on.