

Understudy to a Matinee Jesus
by Joe Dornich
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In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Or so they say. My beginning, at least as BibleLand goes, was not so awe-inspiring. Michael called the night before my first day. He said it would take a while to process my employee-parking pass, and until then I should park with the tour buses and shuttle vans, right beside the Sea of Galilee Miracle and Photo Opportunity.

“The what?” I said. “What does that mean?”

“What do you mean ‘what does that mean?’ You got some kind of problem with that particular biblical experience?”

“What? No. I—”

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry. If I seem a bit defensive it’s because the Sea of Galilee Miracle was mine. My idea. Ravanel loved it, and he green-lit it immediately, only to betray me in the end. That Judas. Even so, we must accept and overcome these challenges, and continue to try to live in Christ’s image.”

“Sure,” I said.

“The park opens at ten,” Michael said, “so get here a few minutes before and I’ll show you around. I’ll wait for you in parking.”

And this morning when I pull onto the lot, there he is. I’ve never met Michael before, but even if he weren’t the only person standing in an empty parking lot, he’d be easy enough to spot. He’s the one who looks like Jesus. He’s got the long hair and the beard. He’s got the white robe with the blue sash. He also appears to be standing beside a statue of himself.

“So,” Michael says. “What do you think?”

Florida’s Interstate 4 looms large over the park, and on the wall of one of the exit ramps is a mural of a sunset rendered in the requisite purples and pinks and gold. On the ground is a

reflective sheet of navy blue Lucite with tiny white caps intermittently detailed in. And, standing in the center, is a plaster statue of Jesus. The effect is that if you stand just so, and leave your logic in the car, it does look like Jesus is walking on water.

“It’s cool,” I say. “Very impressive.”

“Thank you,” Michael says. “The idea came to me in a moment of divine inspiration, so I can’t take all of the credit. But of course you see the problem, right?” Then, from somewhere in the folds of his robe, he produces a pack of cigarettes. Michael smokes the kind of long, thin cigarettes you normally see dangling from the lips of Bingo Night grandmas. He lights up. “Take a good look,” he says.

This feels like a test. I’ve never been good at tests, and this one, loaded as it is with first-day jitters, is an unwelcomed development.

As the roar of cars and trucks headed to Tampa sound overhead, I stare at the Sea of Galilee Miracle and Photo Opportunity. I stare at the sunset mural. I stare at the statue of Jesus, arms out, ready to pose with guests. And all the while Michael stares back at me, his frustration with my mystery-solving inabilities growing on his face between puffs.

It’s weird to watch Jesus smoke.

“I’m sorry,” I finally say. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Michael leans in so his face and the statue’s are inches apart. “Can’t you see it? This statue doesn’t look anything like me.”

He’s right. The statue is a much younger, and frankly prettier version of Jesus than Michael’s flesh and blood rendition.

“There’s a certain likeness,” I say, but Michael waves this off. Then he takes a final drag of his cigarette and rubs it out on the statue’s cheek. Then we walk to the main gate and officially enter BibleLand Adventures and Museum.

BibleLand Adventures is a subsidiary of Pastor Roland Ravanel and his Garden of Faith Ministry. Ravanel is a nationally syndicated televangelist. If you’ve been awake early on Sunday mornings, you’ve likely seen him in one of his neon suits, pacing back and forth across your television screen, pleading with the Almighty to save your wayward soul.

As Michael and I walk past ticketing, various signs tell me that, “BibleLand Adventures and Museum is the most prestigious religious theme park in the greater Orlando area.” I feel like

mentioning that BibleLand is the only religious theme park in the greater Orlando area, but I don't.

The first attraction after ticketing is The Jerusalem Street Market. Here various employees in period costume stand behind stalls selling wheat, and spices, and bright pieces of cloth. Other employees pretend to haggle with them over prices. There's lots of furrowed brows and wagging of fingers. In the shade of a palm tree a man struggles to load a basket of figs onto an animatronic donkey.

"Wow," I say. "The customers must love this."

Michael stops walking, turns and stares at me. "Customers? You should know better than that. It was covered in your orientation packet."

Right. This is, I believe, number three of Ravel's Ten Commandments. Essentially they're a list of directives for park employees, highlighting areas of concern that, I suppose, the original ten failed to address. Number three commands that we never refer to guests of the park as "customers," but only as "visitors" or something else. I sort of skimmed the packet.

"Travelers," Michael says. "That's my preference. Remember, when people enter our gates they are transported thousands of miles across the globe, and thousands of years into the past, to arrive in first-century Judea."

Then he says something else, but two fire trucks race each other down I-4, and their sirens drown him out.

We move on to the Garden of Gethsemane. It's a shady little nook where visitors can pray, or at least escape the heat of the sun. It has rocks and flowers and music sounding from concealed speakers. Sure, the rocks are plaster, and the flowers are plastic, but it seems peaceful enough. The music sounds like harp.

"Over there," Michael says, pointing to a small, squat building that's been made to look like a temple, "is the Lost and Found."

"Oh yeah," I say. "What's that? Some sanctuary for redemption and salvation?"

"No. It's a Lost and Found. Guy forgets his sunglasses, misplaces his car keys. A Lost and Found. What's the matter with you? Are you some kind of idiot? Because the last guy they gave me was an idiot. One of God's children yes, of course, but stupid. It was like trying to train a stray dog, except not as cute. So I hope you're not an idiot."

"I'm not."

“Because you’re not that cute either.”

Then the deep gong of church bells rings out from the P.A. system.

“Let’s go,” Michael says. “It’s show time.”

By the time we return to The Jerusalem Market, a number of visitors have arrived. There’s a group of kids in matching T-shirts from some Christian middle school, all of them bored already and lost to their phones. The remaining guests are an even mixture of the elderly and the infirm. Lots of motorized scooters. Wheelchairs. Walkers.

I suddenly notice there’s not a single stair in the entire park.

Soon the crowds roll toward an outdoor stage. Michael seats me just off to the side, drops a script in my lap.

“Try to learn something,” he says.

The title page tells me this morning’s performance is called, “The Good Shepherd.” This is why I was hired, for my theatrical experience. Before this, I worked for Destination Discovery, the children’s science museum. I was in a stage production about health and nutrition. I played Insoluble Fiber, wearing this brown, tube-shaped costume. For the big musical finale I’d don a hardhat and sing about constructing a healthy digestive system. One day Ravel was there with one of his youth groups. He found me after the show and complimented my ability to project so much joy and energy despite having such a pathetic and degrading role. Then he asked if I wanted a job.

“I have a job,” I said.

“You’re a dancing piece of shit,” he said.

Technically I was fiber, but it didn’t matter. He was right. He was right, but somehow it hurt more coming from a man of God.

Ravel gave me his card. He said I should use my gifts in service to something greater than myself. He said I should call him when I was ready for the big time.

The curtain rises and “The Good Shepherd” begins. A dozen actors populate a street scene, all of them wearing historically accurate shawls and robes and headdresses. I’m not sure if this is the “big time,” but their production value is much better. The science museum never even washed my fiber costume. When I complained about the smell, they said it added to the authenticity. Michael enters from stage left, and the crowd grows excited. He is the rabbi they’ve

heard about. He performs a few miracles – makes a blind man see, a lame guy walk. Then a man from the crowd points to Michael. He says no man should have these powers. He calls him a “demon.” Doubt and unrest swells among the would-be followers, but Michael quells this with a rousing speech. He tells them that he is the gate, and that they, the sheep who pass through him, will be saved and find pasture. The sheep/shepherd thing is a metaphor, but there’s also some plastic sheep scattered around for effect. Then everyone joins hands for a big song and dance number about the proximity of God’s kingdom, and spreading the good news. Then the curtain drops and a voice on the P.A. system encourages the audience to peruse the many wonders of the gift shop.

After the show a few visitors stay behind to take their picture with Michael, ask him for an autograph. When they’re gone I ask Michael what he signs.

“Jesus Christ,” he says. “Obviously.”

“Obviously.”

We go backstage so I can meet some members of the cast. Michael introduces me to Chelsea, a short brunette who plays one of the townspeople, and occasionally “Rebekah” when they run the Jacob and Esau production. As we shake hands I notice that Chelsea wears an unusual amount of rouge on her face, applying it so that it creates a perfect circle on each cheek. She looks like one of Santa’s elves. When she leaves to change, Michael says it’s been a constant battle between her and Kenny, the stage manager. He keeps reminding her that there wasn’t rouge in first-century Judea, and she keeps reminding him that she has poor circulation and needs to add some color to her face.

Michael points to another woman. “That’s Melanie,” he says. “Steer clear of her. She’s a nutjob.” Michael says she keeps insisting that the other actresses are going through her things and stealing her tampons. He says that Melanie would like some larger roles, but her accusations aren’t winning her any friends.

“She’ll never be cast in ‘The Crucifixion’ if she can’t relax about a little blood,” he says. “Speaking of, have you seen this monstrosity?” Michael hands me a program advertising the afternoon crucifixion/resurrection production. It’s called “The Ultimate Sacrifice.” On the cover is a picture of a young, good-looking Jesus.

“That’s Colin,” Michael says. He tells me that Colin is rumored to be BibleLand’s most expensive acquisition. He says that before this, Colin was over at Disney World, playing the

Johnny Depp role in their “Pirates of the Caribbean Live Action Spectacular.” Apparently Ravel had been trying to woo Colin away for months. Then one day he went over to the Magic Kingdom with a giant bag of money and dropped it at Colin’s feet.

“Stole him right out from under the Mouse,” Michael says.

I look again at the program. There’s something so familiar about Colin. Then it hits me. “This is the guy from your Galilee statue,” I say. “It looks just like him.”

“Oh, not *like* him,” Michael says. “It *is* him. Ravel made a mold of his face. Do you know I was here three years before I got my first cardboard cutout? Cardboard! Ravel was too cheap to have it weather-sealed, so of course after the first rainstorm it was just this ruined pile of pulp. I took it home, worked on it for hours with my hair dryer, but it was never the same.”

I nod and try to appear sympathetic.

This feels like a lot to take in for a first day.

“And it’s not just the statue,” Michael says. “Come with me.”

Michael drags me through the park, shows me various cardboard cutouts of Colin as Jesus. There’s Colin as Jesus welcoming visitors to the Noah’s Ark Two-by-Two Petting Zoo. There’s Colin as Jesus in front of the Stations of the Cross Cardio Walk. There’s even Colin as Jesus inexplicably riding a motorcycle outside of the women’s restroom.

These cutouts, I notice, have all been laminated.

Then Michael takes me to King Solomon’s Treasures, one of the park’s three gift shops. We walk past the BibleLand T-shirts, and coffee mugs, and shot glasses, to the toy section where there’s an array of plush Jesus dolls. Plush Jesus holding a lamb. Plush Jesus with a halo and angle wings. Even a bloody and beaten plush Jesus on the cross. These too all look like Colin.

“Ravel scrapped all of the old inventory,” Michael says. “Had these specially made.”

“They really do capture his likeness.”

“Yeah,” Michael says, staring at one of the dolls. “Ravel’s probably got some giant portrait of Colin hanging in the sweatshop where these are sewn.”

“You think?”

“Yes. Yes I do.”

Then Michael tells me to join him on his knees so we can pray for those poor workers and their wretched lives.

So I kneel down and pray. Or at least I stare at Michael while he prays.

We're down there for a few minutes, and then Michael turns to me and says, "You hungry?"

We decide to eat in-park. We go over to The Last Supper Café. I'm expecting historically authentic food, but it's just burgers, and corndogs, and pizza. When it's my turn to order I'm still trying to decide.

"I guess I'll get the cheeseburger combo," I say to the girl behind the register. Her nametag reads Becca.

"Do you want the David or Goliath?" she says.

"What's the difference?"

Becca sighs, and then mechanically tells me that the Goliath comes with an extra patty, large fries, and a My Cup Runneth Over free refill. Her eyes never leave the register.

I get the sense that Becca has endured this exchange, this question asked and answered, thousands of times. I can feel the soul-crushing tedium, the monotony of it all. And for some reason I don't want her to associate me with that. Maybe it's because though they look tired, Becca's eyes are wonderfully large. Maybe it's because there's an edged beauty to her, a look that suggests if one dares to touch, they will likely get cut. Maybe it's because this is the longest conversation I've had with an attractive woman in God-knows-when. Either way I want to separate myself from the clawing, needy tourists and their wearisome routine.

"This is my first day," I tell her. "I work here too."

"There's no employee discount," she says.

When we're finished eating Michael takes me to BibleLand's Garden of Faith Auditorium. On Sundays, Ravel tapes and broadcasts his sermons here, but the rest of the week it's where "The Ultimate Sacrifice" is performed.

Colin, of course, has been cast as Jesus, a development Michael complained about for the entirety of lunch. Michael now plays the Roman Centurion who tortures Jesus and oversees His crucifixion. Maybe it's because he gets to pretend to whip Colin, and apply a rubber crown of thorns on his head, but it's a role Michael seems to enjoy more than he probably should.

After the show is over Michael tells me I'll be playing blind Bartimaeus in the morning production, and one of the thieves Jesus is crucified with in the afternoon show. Which is an easy role. I don't even have any lines. Basically I just hang there.

So that's how I spend my first week: blind and healed in the morning, crucified in the afternoon.

The following Monday afternoon Michael and I are having lunch. He, as usual, is complaining about Colin while I make my way through my Goliath burger and steal glances at Becca.

"It's ageism is what it is," Michael says. "Sure, Ravel tried to spin it, told me how Colin will bring in a younger crowd, expand our demographic, but what he really meant was that I'm too old to play Jesus."

I look at Michael. The creases around his eyes are deep enough to hold a coin. Wiry, gray hairs spring from his beard.

"When I pressed him," Michael continues, "Ravel said it was a matter of *authenticity*," and here Michael attempts to do air quotes, but instead uses all of his fingers. It looks like he's clawing the air. "What a crock. If Ravel was so concerned about authenticity he'd sure as hell never let Amber play the Virgin Mary."

I don't know why Michael is upset. He still gets to play Jesus in the morning production, and his centurion role has just as many lines as Colin's, but Michael doesn't want to hear it.

"You'll see," he says. "When years of dedication and devotion are brushed aside, when the happiness you've brought to countless people is forgotten, you'll understand." Then he waves a limp hand at my lunch. "Though if you keep eating that garbage you'll never even get that chance."

"What does that mean?"

"It means if you ever want to play Jesus you can't spend all week eating burgers and corndogs. Nobody wants a chubby savior."

Michael's right. I have put on a few pounds. I spend most of the crucifixion scene sucking in my gut so it doesn't flop over my loincloth. In fact, my whole "Judea" look is a bit of a mess. When Ravel hired me he said I'd have to grow a beard, and I've been trying. I've been trying, but calling what's happening on my face a "beard" would be the most generous and

hopeful of terms. It's more like intermittent patches of stubby, forlorn hair. It's like my face has alopecia.

"That tummy of yours isn't so much of a problem now because the audience isn't paying attention to you," Michael says. "But if you even want to be front and center, you might think about eating the occasional salad."

I do think about it. "Maybe I won't have to take my clothes off," I say.

"What?"

"You know, like, stay covered up."

"You want to keep your shirt on?" Michael yells. "You want to be the first Jesus to get crucified with His shirt on? You're playing the Messiah, the Son of God, not the fat kid at the public pool."

Other customers in the café stop eating to stare at us. Even Becca leans over the counter to see what's going on.

I resolve to go on a diet.

With that, Michael tells me about his plan to retake the Jesus role in the afternoon production.

"All we need to do is convince the visitors to see me in more of a Christ-like fashion," he says.

"We?"

"Once they do," he continues, "they'll demand to see me as Jesus again. Ravel will have to comply."

"Why would I do this?" I say. "I don't want to do this."

Michael sighs and then does this thing with his eyes where they go all liquid and gentle. I've seen him give the same look when he's signing autographs.

"Ravel, though misguided in his approach, was not entirely wrong," Michael says. "I can't play Jesus forever. One day I will have to retire. And when I do I'd like to pass on the role to someone who can fully inhabit it. Someone who appreciates and understands the responsibilities. Not some pretty-boy actor who uses his Jesus part to pick up women."

There's a scene during the resurrection finale where Colin stands on top of a giant plaster boulder, singing about the glory of God, while the rest of us dance beneath him. And maybe it's because he's wearing a robe so white it looks like it emits light, or maybe it's the way the music

swells, or the power of the moment, but I've seen the way some of the female cast members look at him afterwards. Maybe Becca would look at me that way.

"So what do you have in mind?" I say. "How do you make the guests see you as more Christ-like?"

"I'm going to start healing them."

"What?"

"I'm going to heal their afflictions in Jesus' name. Doesn't the Bible tell us that if we believe in Jesus and the works that He does, we too will be able to perform those works? Doesn't it tell us that if we ask for anything in Jesus' name, He will grant it?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, it does. Come on."

Outside of the Garden of Faith Auditorium is a courtyard. Astroturf covers the ground, and Roman statuary lines the perimeter. There's even a couple of employees dressed as Roman centurions wandering around and posing with guests for pictures. This is where Michael takes me. He surveys the various guests, and then settles on a couple that appear to be in their late seventies. He is dressed entirely in khaki, and the baby blue of her Capri pants is the exact shade of her hair.

"Pardon me," Michael says to the man, "but I was wondering if you suffer from any pain?"

This, given the general age and condition of our clientele, is a loaded question. Of course the man says yes. Then he goes on to describe issues with his feet – bone spurs and trouble with his arches.

"Would you like me to heal them?" Michael says.

A family of doubtful chins forms from the loose flesh under the man's jaw. Then Michael gives him the same line about asking for things in Jesus' name that he fed me.

"What do you think?" Michael says. "Shall we give it a try?"

The man looks to his wife. She pulls down her mouth while raising her eyebrows.

"Why not?" she says.

Michael falls to his knees. He looks up at me, and then to the patch of Astroturf beside him. So I fall to my knees too.

Michael closes his eyes, furrows his brow, and lays his hands on the man's feet. "Jesus we ask that you heal this man. That you relieve him from this foot pain, from the torment of these cursed arches that are... too high? Or flat?" Michal pauses, opens his eyes, and looks up to the man. "Which is it?"

"They're too flat," he says.

"These bedeviled, flat arches, be raised in Jesus' name."

This goes on and on. Soon other guests gather around to watch, some of them using their phones to record whatever it is that we're doing.

Finally Michael stands and places a benevolent hand on the man's shoulder. "So how do you feel?" he says. "Any better?"

I just know the guy's going to say yes. He has to. Out of obligation alone he has to. Because when a guy dressed like Jesus spends six and a half minutes praying over your feet (I timed it on the watch I'm not supposed to be wearing) you have to say it worked. But when the man tells Michael his feet do feel better, it sounds genuine. Then, to prove it, he marches in place with a proud, high-elbowed gait. His wife beams. The small crowd applauds. Then, when it's just the two of us again, Michael hits me with the smuggest of grins. Which, to me, doesn't look all that Christ-like.

The next day something strange happens. Actually, two strange things. The first is that Stan, the doubtful heretic from "The Good Shepherd," invites me to lunch. The cast hasn't exactly welcomed me into the flock yet, so it's nice when he says that he and some of the others are going off campus and down the road to the Macaroni Grill. But, before I could tell Stan I'd change and meet him in parking, Michael intervenes.

"Thank you, but we've only got time for a quick bite," he says. "The majority of our break will be spent healing the travelers and spreading the word of God."

Stan side-eyes me for a few seconds. "Suit yourself."

"What the hell was that?" I say to Michael.

"Let's not lose focus," he says. "You and I are building something. Working towards a grander goal. Don't be tempted by some casual hobnobbery."

"That's not what –"

“Respect the path that Christ laid out for us,” Michael says. “Become a Jesus first. Then, if you want, you can get the apostles.”

But I don’t want apostles. I just want some friends.

Still, I follow Michael to lunch. That’s where the second strange thing happens.

After I place my order, and Becca hands me a bowl of the brown wilted lettuce the Last Supper Café calls a Caesar salad, she slips me a note. *Meet me in the whale. Six o’clock*, it says. I’m shocked. I’m overjoyed. My hands tremble as I read it again and again. I completely forget about my food, which Michael misinterprets as both a commitment to my diet and a desire to speed through lunch and continue our healing works.

We return to the courtyard. Michael solicits more guests. He “cures” a man’s tennis elbow, “heals” some arthritis, and I suppose the guests go for it. Honestly I’m too busy thinking about Becca to pay attention. Then something breaks my reverie. In a patch of sunlight, parked between two faux marble columns, I spot a man in a wheelchair. He’s rather large, and is in one of those wheelchairs you move by blowing into straw. His white “Jesus Loves Me” T-shirt has gone transparent with sweat and drool. I pray Michael doesn’t see him. Pray he doesn’t offer to heal him. Just as my panic begins to bloom, Michael’s attention is drawn to another man. He’s younger than our usual visitors, maybe forty or so. He’s limping past some fake shrubs when we approach. He tells Michael that his name is Hershel and that he suffers from pain in his hips and lower back. Michael circles him a few times, surveying him up and down as though this stranger is a piece of merchandise he is thinking about buying.

“Would you mind taking a seat?” Michael says, pointing to a bench. “And now if you’ll raise your legs please.”

Hershel complies.

“It’s just as I thought,” Michael says. “One of your legs is longer than the other. It’s causing your hips to be out of alignment, which is causing your pain.”

And, sure enough, Hershel’s left leg is about two inches shorter than his right. Then Michael gives Hershel his Power of Jesus’ Name speech. Then he offers to cure him. By making his leg grow.

“Hershel, will you excuse us for a second?” I say. I drag Michael beside a statue of an angel wielding a sword of fire. “What are you doing?”

“I’m helping this visitor. I’m showing him the power of his faith, the power of God’s love.”

“You can’t heal this man.”

“The other travelers were healed.”

“Yeah, maybe, but those were joint and muscle issues. Internal pain. Invisible results. This is different. You can’t make this guy’s leg grow.”

Michael smiles and cocks his head to the side. “You’re right,” he says. “*I* can’t heal this man. But Jesus can.” Then he returns to Hershel and kneels in front of him. Then he looks over his shoulder to me. “You coming?”

Hershel is still on the bench, looking confused, looking lost, looking like maybe he should have gone to SeaWorld instead. Saying no to Michael, abandoning him, feels like I’d be abandoning Hershel. So what the hell? I kneel beside Michael.

“Hold his legs,” he says. Then Michael waves his hands over Hershel’s legs and begins praying. “Lord, heal this man, relieve him from this affliction. Left leg grow. Left leg grow. Left leg grow in Jesus’ name. Hips be aligned, back pain be healed. In Jesus’ name, we ask you.” Then Michael pauses and leans down to check if there’s been any change, any growth. This process – praying, then checking – continues four more times.

“It usually only takes a few minutes,” Michael says to Hershel, and then he turns to me, a perplexed look on his face.

And I, for some reason, allow my face to mirror his mystery, as if I too am baffled by God’s unwillingness to cooperate.

Undeterred, Michael continues praying.

Why not right leg shrink, I wonder? Wouldn’t that work too? Aren’t we just trying to even this guy out? Maybe that’s the problem. Maybe we’re being too specific. Maybe God doesn’t like being boxed-in, creatively speaking.

Hershel’s legs are getting heavy.

Michael’s face is uncomfortably close to mine.

My arms are beginning to shake.

Michael’s breath smells like Virginia Slims.

I wish I hadn’t skipped lunch.

Soon I notice the courtyard has become a lot more crowded. Visitors are lining up outside the doors of the auditorium. I shift Hershel's legs to one hand so I can check my watch. "The Ultimate Sacrifice" is about to begin.

"Michael. Michael," I say, interrupting his prayer. "It's five till. We have to go."

But he doesn't stop. Instead Michael prays faster and louder as if, this entire time, speed and volume have been the issue.

The doors to the auditorium open.

Guests begin filing in.

"Hey," I say. "We have to leave. Right now."

Michael stops praying, and once again leans down to examine Hershel's legs. "There's...yeah, there does seem to be some new growth. They're not totally even just yet, but that left leg is definitely longer."

Hershel stretches his neck to see for himself. But there's no change, no growth, his legs are as misaligned as they were when we started.

"Sir, I'd love to stay here, continue being a vessel for the Lord's healing influence, and finish you off," Michael says, "but I have to, you know, I gotta go." Then Michael claps Hershel on the thigh, stands, and jogs into the auditorium, leaving me still on my knees, still holding Hershel's legs in my hands.

The interesting thing about the whale is that it's remote. It's in a far corner of the park, just outside of the Daycare, one of the structures in the Stories of The Bible play area. By six o'clock the park is closing, and the Daycare has been closed for an hour. No one is going to be there. Is that why Becca chose it? For the privacy? Because it's the ideal spot to proclaim one's affections? To perhaps act on those affections?

Here it is, huge and purple, its whale mouth open like the entrance to a small cave, ready to swallow guests.

I breathe into my palm and sniff.

I run my fingers through my hair.

I enter.

Inside is an animatronic Jonah lying on his back, arms and legs flailing in robotic spasms, a look of panic on his face. Beside him is Becca leaning against the whale's side, legs crossed at the ankle, a look of anger on her face.

"I don't know what the hell you think you're doing," she says, "but it needs to stop. Right now."

Oh.

That's what this is.

Okay.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I don't mean to stare. I just thought that maybe, that first day, we had a kind of a connect –"

"What are you talking about?" she says.

"What are you talking about?"

"The circus sideshow nonsense you and Michael are pulling in the courtyard. What are you thinking?"

"That? That's nothing. Michael's just threatened by Colin. He's worried about being forced out, and thinks the healing thing will help."

"He's delusional."

"Yeah."

"And he's dangerous. And he's using you."

I open my mouth to disagree, or at least explain why I go along with it, but nothing comes out.

"I suppose Michael's told you all about when he played Jesus in the crucifixion?" Becca says.

He has in fact. Repeatedly. Apparently, before the Garden of Faith Auditorium was built, "The Ultimate Sacrifice" was performed outside. Guests would gather around a large, concrete hill that was meant to be Calvary. Michael said that his performance of Jesus was so moving that sometimes people would pass out. He said that during one particularly powerful performance, five visitors passed out.

"Did he mention that those people passed out during the summer?" Becca says. "Or that, back then, there were no chairs. How long do think old people can stand in the sun? In Florida? In July? Of course they passed out."

“Michael said it was the power of The Holy Spirit.”

“You’re an idiot.”

I look down at Jonah, lost and confused, thrashing with everything he’s got, going nowhere. “What do you want from me?”

Becca steps away from the whale’s side, rests her palm on my wrist. “I’m just trying to help,” she says. “You seem like a nice and fairly normal guy, which is in short supply around here. Do I think you should keep your distance from Michael? Am I worried he’s going to drag you down with him? Yeah.”

Her hand feels nice.

“Okay.”

The next morning I’m able to avoid Michael right up until the beginning of “The Good Shepherd.” Afterwards, he’s still looking for me, so I hide in the men’s room. When I finally emerge, I see Michael at the far end of The Jerusalem Market, talking with Ravanel.

I change out of my Bartimaeus costume and find a note stuck to my locker. This one is from Kenny, the stage manager. The note reads: *Cast meeting in the auditorium. 11 a.m.*

I check my watch.

It’s 10:55.

When I enter the auditorium the house lights are off, but the stage is illuminated. The curtain is up and all of the props and set dressing have been cleared away. As I make my way across the stage, from somewhere in the darkness comes the sound of a sheep bleating, and then the guttural grunts of a camel. Which is weird.

Kenny enters from stage right. He’s followed by Stan, and Chelsea, and Melanie, and some other members of the cast. Behind them, waiting just backstage, I can see Becca. The others form a semicircle in front of me.

Then a low rumble of thunder echoes throughout the auditorium.

This doesn’t feel like a cast meeting.

“We have to talk,” Kenny says. “There’ve been a number of visitors who have registered some very serious complaints. They’re saying you and Michael are going around claiming you can heal them. Is this true?”

Suddenly I'm very tired. Tired of notes and secret meetings. I'm tired of the drama of this place. I'm about to tell Kenny everything – everything about Michael and Colin, Michael's jealousy, and his plan to reclaim the Jesus role – when I see Becca just over his shoulder. She's shaking her head from side to side.

“No,” I say. “It wasn't me.”

“He's lying,” Chelsea yells, stepping forward, her finger aimed at my face. “I've seen you in the courtyard with him. I've seen the two of you kneeling in front of guests, laying hands on them like a couple of lunatics.” Chelsea continues yelling about blasphemy and false idols, her face turning red with the exertion. So red in fact that it all but obscures the copious amounts of rouge she insists on wearing. Perhaps, I think, her circulations concerns aren't as bad as she lets on, though this seems like a bad time to mention it.

“Are you listening to me?” she says, and then turns to the group. “He's not even listening to me.”

Just as I'm about to respond, the auditorium fills with the sound of a donkey braying. Then trumpets blaring.

“C'mon guys,” Kenny says, shielding his eyes as he looks up into the lights toward the technical booth. “We're trying to have a conversation here.”

“Sorry,” a voice says over the P.A. system. “Pastor Ravel wants us to do a run through of the audio effects. Shouldn't be much longer.”

Then there's the sound of a whip cracking, and then a hammer hitting a metal spike.

“Yes,” I say, “I was in the courtyard with Michael, but it's not what you think. Honestly, I'm not sure why I was there. I certainly wasn't trying to heal people. I don't even believe in what Michael's doing.”

“Pastor Ravel is taking care of Michael,” Kenny says. “I'm here to be sure that you're not also a problem. That you're not with him.”

“I'm not. I swear.”

“Okay,” Kenny says, “that's good enough for me.” He turns to the group. “Everyone good? Satisfied?”

Each person nods while mumbling some degree of acceptance.

Then Kenny leaves, followed by the others.

Even Becca has disappeared.

Again, I'm alone on the stage.

Then, from the darkness, from every corner of the auditorium, comes the sound of a rooster crowing.

It's my lunch break when I leave the auditorium, but for some reason I don't feel like eating. Instead, I just wander around the park, making sure to steer clear of the courtyard. I'm down by the delivery entrance when I run into Michael. His hair is pulled back into a ponytail, and he's wearing jeans and a gray T-shirt. I've never seen him out of costume. It's disorienting. His T-shirt reads "Not Today Satan."

"Hey," I say, but Michael only nods in response.

We just stare at each other for a few moments, the beeping sound of a truck backing up mercifully breaking the silence.

"It seems I'll be leaving this place sooner than I would have liked," Michael says after the truck has parked.

"I'm sorry."

"It is God's will."

"Yeah, I suppose, but still. When they asked me what we were doing I didn't know it would lead to this."

"It's fine," Michael says. "Really. You don't have to worry about me."

Then he smiles, and I don't know if he's still in character or if he really means it, but Michael lays a hand upon my shoulder, hits me with those liquid eyes, and says,

"I'll be back."