

A VERY

The Gospel according to Joseph Patrick Booker,

MINOR

as interpreted by his faithful scribe, Barth Flynn.

PROPHET

a novel JAMES BERNARD FROST

BUCKING A HEADWIND OF DESPAIR, Frost pedals his verbal bicycle into the belly of the Beast, only to return bearing a brand-new Gospel illuminated with Voodoo cream and composed in the edgy vernacular of Portland's thriving freak scene.

Tom Robbins

Author of *Villa Incognito*
and a lot of other real good books



my triple espresso, or is this some sort of self-service establishment?”

“He wants to distro *me*?”

“Well, he won’t touch *OTT*, but he’ll help you out with *That Sunday* if you think you have more in you.”

“Cool, cool, cool. All right I gotta go.”

Mercyx kept right on, as if she didn’t hear a word. “I’ve got to get you these issues. Dinner? Eight at Blowfish?”

Blowfish? Blowfish was an upscale sushi restaurant that I wouldn’t think Mercyx would get caught dead in. It was anti-Mercyx, as Mercyx herself would say.

At this point the guy at the front of the line had the rest of the line in stitches berating me. “Hello, mister? A tri-ple espresso. That’s three shots. One. Two. Three. Maybe he’s deaf. I’ll hold up my fingers for him. One finger, two fingers, three fingers.”

“Mercyx out,” Mercyx said.



Chapter 10

Where an Unusual Dinner with Annie Mercyx Takes Place

J MADE THE MAN HIS TRIPLE ESPRESSO, filled the next two orders, and basically survived my shift. I wasn’t really sure what to think about the conversation I’d had with Mercyx. The night before, I’d thought I would throw all issues of *His Church That Sunday* into the Dumpster behind the burrito shop or burn them, but now there were a few more copies to contend with. I was still embarrassed about them, but clearly Mercyx had thought they were worthwhile, so now pride mixed in with the shame.

Then there was this dinner with Mercyx at Blowfish thing. Like I said, Blowfish wasn’t a place Mercyx would go – she had a sleeve full of tattoos on her left arm; short, cropped, perpetually bleached hair; and muscled calves harder than Schwarzenegger’s biceps. Mercyx was a burrito-and-run kind of gal, and we assumed, Beale and I, that she was a lesbian, although I have to admit that despite all our adolescent con-

versations, we’d never ventured anywhere close to Mercyx’s sex life.

It’s very strange, when I think back on it, that we hadn’t. Beale’s comics were all about masturbation and frustrated libido, and mine occasionally dabbled in that direction; so you’d think somewhere in there we would have discussed intimate matters, but it just never happened. Mercyx was one of the guys – a fellow cyclist, pool shark, and zinester.

Don’t get me wrong, Mercyx wasn’t unattractive. If anything she was hyperattractive – in a small tits, low hips, Suicide Girls kind of way – but we kind of considered her an untouchable. It was like if we’d shown any interest in her, we couldn’t have been her friend. We saw the way she fucked with other men in her brash, slick-tongued way, and decided we’d rather be in collusion than on a collision.

Mercyx was tough, and we were soft zine boys. At first, we felt privileged just to be in her presence, and then later, since we’d been hanging out with her for almost a year, we forgot her presence as a sexual being all together. She was gender-neutral Mercyx, the Photocopy Queen and our compadre.

So yeah. I’d finally decided that the whole thing was no big deal, that it was just the raw meat, that she’d chosen Blowfish simply because she had a primal urge to sink her teeth into something fleshy and uncooked. There were better, cheaper sushi joints in town, but it was near my apartment and she knew she’d have to cart the zine stash there afterwards.

I walked down the stairs of my apartment, took in the cooling breeze of an unseasonably warm spring evening, and sauntered down Alberta Street, not thinking anything at all about my unwashed, after-cycling T-shirt, my threadbare black jeans, my half-tied Chuck Taylors. I walked down the street and arrived at Blowfish. And there I saw Annie Mercyx, and Annie Mercyx was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.

I am surprised, when I think back on it, that I got words out of my mouth at all. Mercyx was wearing a strapless dress, a kitschy cotton number with ferris wheels on it in pink and yellow pastels. She had on a heavy coat of soft pink lipstick to match, and an ochre-colored eye shadow that extended cat-like to her temples. The contrast between the hard tattoos and the soft colors of her dress was a visual fiasco, making her appear comic and freaky and completely stunning all at once. I suppose the average person would have seen her and just thought she was strange; but for me it was all my fantasies come to life, a beautiful alien from a sci-fi movie.

The words that came out of my mouth – oh, the lovely, stupid words – were, “Annie, do you have a date tonight?”



Zoom of the pattern on Mercyx's kitschy ferris wheel dress.

Now the reality of it is that when I asked Mercyx if she had a date that night, I was being completely sincere. I really thought that she was setting up some office drone to do copies for her. It didn't occur to me that *this* was the date, that Annie had put on a dress and made herself up for *me*. Annie, however, took it as flirting, as if I was up to clever tricks. I had absolutely no idea what I was doing; and yet I was doing all the right things.

Mercyx actually blushed when I asked. I, the embarrassment king; I, Bartholomew Flynn; I was making Annie Mercyx blush. Now it was Annie Mercyx who wanted to just ride right by the store window.

Mercyx responded sarcastically, "Meeting Beale after dinner."

I totally didn't get it. I wasn't gullible enough to think that Mercyx was serious about having a date with Beale – I mean, Beale was the most awkward man on the planet – but I still wasn't making the connect between the makeup and me. "No, seriously, Annie, who are you meeting?"

Mercyx wanted this whole thing to go away. "Why do you call me Annie? Everyone else calls me Mercyx."

I still didn't get it, but I decided to drop the subject of the clothes and answer the question. Mercyx was usually so deadpan, it was strange to see her the way she was, verging on being pissed off. "I don't know, if it bothers you, I'll call you Mercyx. It's just old-fashioned or something. Maybe it's the Little Orphan Annie thing, you know? She had short, orange, funky hair, and your hair, while it's more bleached than orange, is

still funky. But then again, she's so much more wholesome. Maybe it's more the contrast between you and Little Orphan Annie: like it's kind of *ironic* to call you Annie; because you're not an Annie at all, you're much more of a ... of a Mercyx ..."

Mercyx was looking at me steely-eyed. Between that and the yellow streaks on her eyelids, I couldn't continue my usual ramble. "What?" I asked.

"Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Just go off like that."

"Like what?"

"Like arcane bullshit about Orphan Annie."

I did this all the time. That's what we did, Beale and Mercyx and I, we had long, inane conversations about nothing. And there wasn't conflict. What was going on with Mercyx all of a sudden? "I don't know," I said, "because it's funny? I mean, we all do it."

Mercyx was really making me uncomfortable. I knew she was formidable – I'd seen her in action at The Curiosity absolutely tearing into the well-dressed yuppie types always trying to get into her pants – but I'd never been the target of her ire.

"But it's bullshit," she said, "and you know it's bullshit. All those issues of *OTT*. That was the whole point of those issues, to make fun of yourself for all the rambling you do. And then this new church thing, that was the flipside: you showing how much power you could have if you were only sincere. It was brilliant. The *OTT* stuff was funny, mostly because you took every conversation Beale and you and I ever had and ripped it a new asshole, but *That Sunday* – I mean, dude, you're so right – what if we were all really sincere like that preacher guy. If we were to just tell it like it is. We all know how it is, but we never actually tell it like it is.

"You have to tell me a couple of things, and you have to be serious. First off, you have to tell me how you came up with this guy and what you were thinking, and don't go off on some tangent to avoid the question. And then you have to tell me why you really call me Annie, and I don't want to hear any more of that Little Orphan shit."

I'd never seen Mercyx with such metal in her eyes. They were the gray-blue of a circular saw blade. It suddenly seemed unreal to tell her the truth: that Booker was really a guy who had stood up in his makeshift church that Sunday and talked to me. When it happened, it had been odd but not unreal – if anything, it had been ultra-real, like when you're on your bike and the semi next to you starts to come into your lane,

and you know it's going to turn right, and that you're about to be a victim of the dreaded right hook, and that the dual human-sized wheels next to you will crush you, but somehow you slam on your brakes enough to swerve behind him and survive, and then you look around and the world is normal and traffic moves on.

But now it seemed unreal, like I'd made the whole thing up. What was even more unreal was that I hadn't even thought of Booker, the person, since I left his church; in fact, I couldn't even tell you if I'd said anything to him. It was truly as if I'd made him up. But I couldn't have. I'd been at his church, and I could walk over, if I wanted to, the very next Sunday, and I could show Mercyx and Beale the place that inspired *His Church That Sunday*.

It was hard to do, but she was staring at me, and although it wasn't in my nature – as usually when I talk to people my eyes are all over the place, and never actually in the eyes of the person I'm talking to – I looked her back in the eyes, and what I said was, “Okay, there really is a preacher dude, and he really does do a sermon like the one I wrote about in *That Sunday*. As for calling you Annie ...”

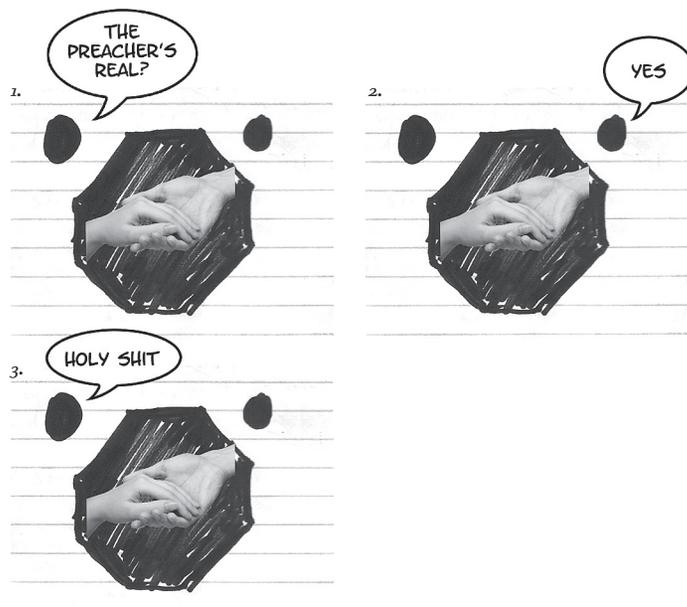
It's funny how realizations hit you mid-sentence, like it did on that day at Blowfish. We'd made our way into the restaurant and used those little golf pencils to fill out our paper sushi menus, and now I was sitting with Annie Mercyx on the back patio, the late evening blue of the sky tinged a deeper shade of blue; not pink like late evening skies are often described – the air too clean and smog-free for that – but midnight blue: a darker, softer, more romantic blue. There was an umbrella over us, and nigiri in front of us, and cute little bowls to mix our soy sauce and wasabi. Annie was beautiful and she was Annie and not Mercyx. It wasn't the truth what I said, because the truth was probably much closer to what I'd already said before about it sounding ironic: before this evening, Annie Mercyx was always more Mercyx than Annie. But somehow what came out of my mouth was more sincere than the truth – and more importantly it was the right thing to say – because the realization I had mid-sentence was that the reason Annie had dressed up, and put on makeup, and confronted me about my ironic bullshit, was that she liked me in a much different way than as a fellow cyclist and zinester; and perhaps even more importantly it was the right thing to say because I liked her – and if I told her that I hadn't really thought about it, that my calling her Annie instead of Mercyx was nothing more than a quirk; then, although I would be technically telling the truth, I would be implying a lie, which would be

to say that I didn't desire to be something other than her fellow cyclist and zinester.

So the way I finished the sentence was this way, “I guess I just wanted to be different. I wanted ... I wanted you and me to be different.”

I know, it's such a cheesy moment – it makes me cringe to write it out – it was so disgustingly sincere, but it's really what I said, and you can't change what you say once you've said it.

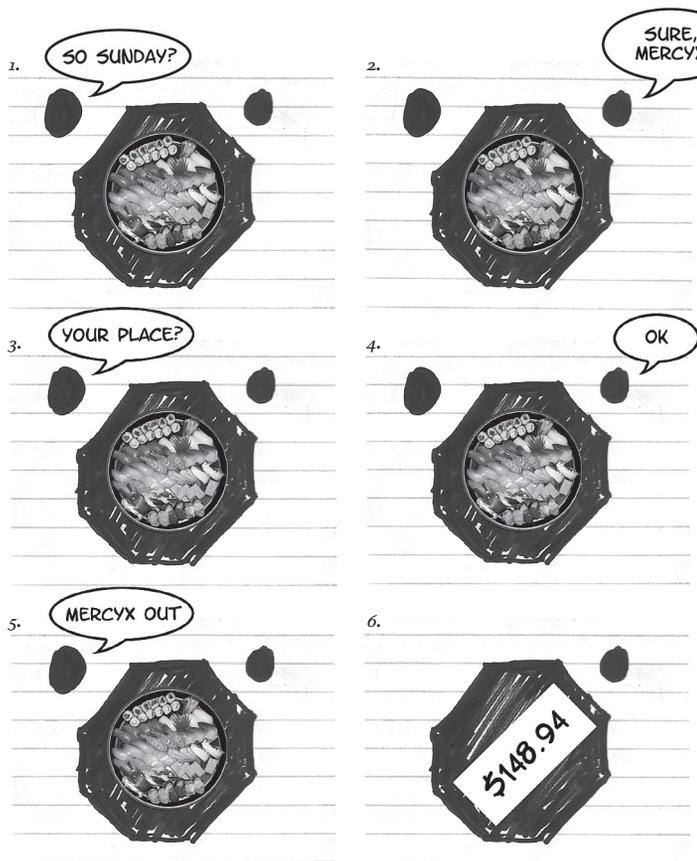
Mercyx reached a hand across the table, in order to grab mine, and then she said:



Mercyx and I consumed our remaining nigiri in an uncomfortable silence, and then agreed to meet the next Sunday at my apartment for a visit to Booker's church. You would have thought that my statement of affection and Mercyx's reaching across the table for my hand would have led to more intimate conversation, a kiss or two, and if this were an R movie or a porn shoot, the consummation of everyone's desires; but all it did was make us feel really, really weird.

By the time Mercyx mercifully let go of my hand, the union had become clammy than anything we'd eaten that night. I felt stupid. I wanted to be witty and charming but couldn't think of anything to say. I wanted to at least suggest an after-dinner cocktail – or make a date to meet that was a little closer than Sunday morning – but I'd lost all my thunder earlier in the evening, and the plum wine that should have made us feel heady and brave seemed to be lulling us into a stupor.

When we got to the bottom of our rice bowls, we were back on a last-name basis:



Chapter v

*Where Joseph Patrick Booker Gives His Second Sermon;
and Where His Member Flops About*

SUNDAY ARRIVED COOL BUT HOPEFUL. Portland was having an Indian summer, and a thin layer of fog hovered over what I thought would be another unusually bright and sunny October day. I'd made a cup of coffee and was sitting on my balcony in a folding chair, waiting anxiously to see Annie's helmeted head riding up Alberta Street.

I'd spent a hard week sorting out my feelings. Before, Mercyx had just been Mercyx, my friend; but now she was Annie, the object of my desire. I'd wanted to call her, to talk to her, to discuss matters; but she was still Mercyx – and you didn't discuss matters with Mercyx. I'd tried to put together issue #12 of *Octagonal Table Talk*, but the only subject matter

I could think of was that of the sushi dinner at Blowfish; and whenever I went to write it, I'd think of Mercyx giving it to some office worker to photocopy and I'd feel like a dumbass. By Friday, I'd resorted to taking long bike rides between shifts, taking the light rail twenty miles out to Gresham and then riding the long, twisting roads of the Old Columbia Gorge Highway past all the waterfalls.

The rides didn't help. I was lovestruck, and it was bad to be lovestruck by someone like Mercyx. Mercyx was cool as granite, like one of the stones submerged underneath Multnomah Falls, rounded and aged by thousands of years of falling glacial melt. There was no getting through to some softer core either – thousands of years of pounding waters had hollowed out whatever softer core there might have been. Mercyx was the kind of person you assumed something horrible had been done to as a child, but who you'd never ask about it.

I was nervous waiting for her to show up. How was I – a soft, skinny, and inkless twenty-two year-old – going to navigate the glacial waters of the Mercyx?

By the time she got there, I'd had too much coffee, so that I couldn't smile but only grit my teeth at her, looking a bit like a soldier digging his heels in for an impact.

"You ready?" Mercyx asked.

"Yeah," I said. I put on my cycling shoes and helmet and we rode over to Booker's church. No other words passed between us.

WHEN WE ARRIVED, THERE WAS NO CHURCH SERVICES TODAY: ALL WELCOME sign hammered into the ground. The signboard, with the George W. Bush quote on it, now read WE MUST BE UNICS ON VIDEO. The doors were shut tight. After sitting on the curb feeling stupid for a while, not saying anything to Mercyx, I finally knocked. No one answered. On my way back to the curb, where Mercyx was gnawing on an energy bar, I noted that the thin layer of fog that had seemed so certain to burn off, had gotten thicker rather than thinner, turning a hopeful day into something infinitely more dull.

"Wanna ride?" Mercyx asked, breaking the silence.

I didn't actually want to ride, what I wanted was for Booker to show up – to rub the flint that was Mercyx and Flynn together – but it didn't look like it was going to happen. "Where?"

"The falls."

"Did it Friday."

"Bridge of the Gods."

"Too far."