

Chapter 4. Terry's Ecumenical Adventure

Jake's Work: A Novel by Larry A. Mitchell

The major advantage to being a Medical Examiner, Terry thought, was the job security. There would never be a shortage of customers.

On the other hand, it might not be the ideal career choice for an outgoing and friendly person. Her mother, back in Boston, always started their weekend phone conversations in pretty much the same way. "Have you met someone? Have you tried?"

Had she ever.

Most of her working contact was with corpses, cops and undertakers. They were even less fun to be around than you would expect.

The town funeral home director was sour, sanctimonious and nearly senile. His assistant was young and lecherous but he was not exactly Terry's type. Besides, Terry found the idea of a lecherous undertaker to be a bit unsettling.

That left Terry with cops for company.

Norman was nice but distant. The sheriff was just distant. Wallace was Wallace; he could make even a coroner squeamish.

That left Matt.

Matt seemed like a nice enough fellow, not as macho as most cops were. He was earnest, polite and excruciatingly inoffensive.

She was well into her third spring in Mountain County before Matt asked her out.

More accurately, Matt asked, "Does the line of work that you do, autopsies and stuff, does that make you think a lot about where you will spend eternity?"

So, here she was, going on a church date with Matt.

They arrived late. The LED sign in front of the church was flashing Time to Repent, 11:02 AM.

The American Ministry of Righteousness neo-cathedral, a windowless white stone rectangle, filled a square block. Gilded domes rose above the corners. Blue neon danced along the roofline.

She stared at the thirty-foot holograph on top, an eerie bath of blue and white light portraying Jesus, writhing in unending, twisting agony on the Cross.

"What do you think?" Matt asked, his voice filled with pride. "All computer-generated. Three hundred separate body movements in a ninety-second cycle."

"I had never hoped to see anything like it," Terry said, with heartfelt fervor.

The doors parted for them with an electronic hum.

An usher came bustling up, dressed like a Latin American admiral. He recognized Matt with a deferential nod.

While Matt and the usher consulted a color-coded seating chart, Terry looked around. Off the lobby, to her left, was a Christian Soldiers Commissary, its security grille lowered until after the service. In front of her was a bank of plush-padded doors that lead into the auditorium. Signs were posted on the doors: The Lord is calling. Turn off your cell phones and pagers.

A massive mural filled the wall to her right, showing a buff, sleek Jesus. He looked urbane and personable, like a corporate buccaneer at a SEC hearing. He was strolling down the manicured lawns of Heaven, accompanied by a neutered lion and lamb.

She puzzled at His blow-dried hair and tailored white toga. She glanced at His sandal-shod feet. Had Mary Magdalene done His pedicure?

Terry recalled images of Jesus from her Catholic girlhood. She wondered if Holy Mother Church would take her back, despite her long lapse.

Finally, another usher escorted Matt and Terry into the auditorium and seated them near the back.

A collagen-lipped blonde was standing at the podium, reading announcements in a pert, bubbly, breathless voice, to the congregation. Her waxed legs gleamed in the spotlight, beneath her silk teddy-cut white choir robe.

Matt whispered to Terry, his voice alight with pride, "That's our Sister Grace."

Not my sister, Terry thought, and swallowed back her revulsion.

Suddenly, the doors at the back of the center aisle flew open. A rider on a racing bicycle whooshed down the main aisle, to the front and up the wheelchair ramp onto the stage.

A pair of ushers scurried up to take his bicycle as he strode to the pulpit. He was a short man, wiry and fit, in his white Tour de Grace body suit. He moved with an athlete's swaggering gait.

The blonde clapped her hands in contrived glee and squealed, "It's Little Daddy Holy!"

He removed his helmet. His oversized head featured a petulant mouth and a Napoleonic curl of wavy brown hair.

He did an Elvis lip curl. "Are you fit for Heaven?" His parishioners cheered and clapped, nudging each other to share their delight.

Little Daddy Holy lifted his arm in a Roman salute and went behind the closed maroon stage curtains.

The helium-voiced Barbie-babe squinted at a Teleprompter, "We have a full line of exercise tapes, videos, cassettes, CDs, DVDs, clothing, shoes and other para-, para-, supplies available in the Christian Soldiers Commissary, right after today's program. Be sure and ask for your Auto-Tithe discount."

Sister Grace paused and flashed her porcelain bridgework.

Terry glanced at Matt. She saw him ogling the hussy with bovine attentiveness, as if yearning to be milked. She felt a small, sour epiphany, sympathizing with Jehovah's perpetual testy wrath at the whole sorry herd of mankind.

Could base stupidity have been this pervasive in the annihilated Cities of the Plain?

The blonde in the pulpit had turned her gaze from the Teleprompter to the parishioners. "God has been so wonderful to me this week! Has God been wonderful to you?" She nodded vigorously to cue the congregation.

There were nods in return and a few scattered shouts of "Amen!" Matt's shout was the loudest. Terry edged away from him.

Sister Grace clasped her hands together in exultation. "Why am I not surprised? Of course, God would be wonderful to wonderful people! He is a wonderful God!

"Don't we wish that we could give God a big kiss? We can't, though, can we?" Grace heaved a huge bosom-shuddering sigh.

Matt whimpered and shifted his position.

Terry edged further away.

Sister Grace clapped her hands as if inspired. "I know! Let's take time to share our Material Blessings! Wouldn't that be a wonderful thing to do for God?" There was a general rustling as people reached for their wallets and their purses.

Ushers, armed with wicker baskets on long poles, appeared in pairs at the front of each aisle, awaiting the signal.

Grace held up her hand to give them pause. "Just one thing, though.

"Maybe you're like I am, and you don't like to handle money. After all, you just don't know where it's been." She made a little moue' of distaste. "But here at AMOR, the House of Love, we try to think of your comfort and convenience,

"You may swipe any major credit or debit card or your PewPal card across the top of the payment machine that's mounted above the hymnal rack in front of you.

"Better yet, why not sign up for AutoTithe and its simple, easy paycheck deductions?"

She chirped an ad-lib, "No muss, no fuss!" and paused for a wave of cheering and applause.

Terry thought of the moneychangers in the Temple. Imagining what an enraged Jesus might do to Sister Grace made Terry smile.

Matt leaned across the chasm between them. "Isn't she something else?"

Terry could certainly agree with that.

A buxom, middle-aged woman, with azure hair and a massive prow of a bosom, stepped from behind the closed stage curtains.

"It's Mighty Mama Holy!" the blonde squealed. "Aren't we blessed today? I just love Sunday mornings, don't you?"

The congregation, almost without exception, rose and cheered and stamped its feet.

Terry thought, "Forgive me, Father," and reluctantly stood up, joining everyone else.

The rhinestone matriarch wrung her hands. "Thank you. You are too kind. Before you begin the process of Stewardship, please thank our amazing Grace."

The blonde simpered and curtsied to deafening applause.

"What do you think?" Matt shouted over the tumult.

"I've never appreciated my faith more," Terry shouted back.

Matt beamed.

Mighty Mama Holy announced, "I remember how much you enjoyed my tribute to our dear friends of color during Black History Month. I'd like to reprise that number for you now."

As the parishioners settled into the grim work of coughing up money, the hefty dowager spread the silken butterfly sleeves of her elaborate designer gown and launched into "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child".

Terry found the hefty diva's warbling contralto was almost literally stunning, like being trapped in an elevator with a two hundred-pound tone-deaf canary –and stuck between floors.

She was impressed with the ruthlessness of the collection process; Mighty Mama would likely not fall silent until all the coffers were filled. It was certainly an effective fundraising technique.

The separation of church and state probably exempted the process from the strictures of the Geneva Convention.

After a brief eternity, the loot was in, Mighty Mama had lapsed into simpering silence, and Terry was none the worse for wear, other than a persistent tintinnabulation.

Many in the audience were still wiping their eyes, when Little Daddy Holy reappeared from behind the curtain, clad in a black silk Armani suit. "Let's hear it for my Mama!"

The congregation applauded, hooted, whistled and generally carried on as if the Apostles had just won the Super Bowl.

Amazing Grace sprinted up from the front row, almost breaking a high heel on the wheelchair ramp. She shrieked, "Let's hear it for the Holy family!"

As the congregation went wild, Terry held her face in her hands. Matt was touched and stroked her back. She glared at him. He flinched and retreated across the pew.

At last, after Grace and Mighty Mama Holy had exchanged their air kisses of tacit loathing and taken their seats, Little Daddy pulled the microphone from its stand and went to work, pacing up and down like a talk-show host.

"Today, I'd like to practice a little ecumenism," he announced. "Don't look so worried. I'm not going to bring out the Pope and a couple cantors to do a duet of 'Oy Vey, Maria'.

"'Ecumenism' is just Latin talk for 'the whole shebang'. I want to talk about the rest of our faith. I want to talk about God.

"'Whatever do you mean, Rev?' you ask. 'Don't ministers always talk about God? Isn't that why we pay you the big bucks?'

"Not so. We talk a lot about Paul and the other Gospel witnesses to the Holy Spirit. We talk a lot about gentle Jesus and warm, fuzzy, feel-good salvation. How often, though, do we talk about the Lord of Israel?"

"Let's get real. God didn't blink at sending His Son to the cross. Do you really think He's going to pamper the rest of us?"

"He won't come after us one at a time. He's Jewish, remember? He'll get us wholesale, by the city, by the tribe, by the nation."

Little Daddy Holy strutted and stormed, "Here is the God that we're instructed to fear, the God that kills right and left for the slightest infraction, the God that turned Job into one sorry Hebe - just because He could!"

"Now, you may protest, 'But, Rev, this was a wandering desert people. They were illiterate, savage and smelly, not to mention their tendency to bother sheep. YAWEH had to slap them around a bit to get the point across. Times have changed,' you say.

"Big mistake. Is there a use-by date on the Ten Commandments? Has the Big Guy gone simple like Marlon Brando at the end of The Godfather, making fangs out of orange peels? You hear of YAWEH signing up for anger management? You see any shortage of scourges and afflictions in this day and age?"

"Of course not. The Boss hasn't gone soft and simple. We have."

Little Daddy Holy stared straight at Terry, giving her shivers. "Look at the Catholics. They've gone from the Inquisition to folk masses, bunch of priests and nuns trying to sound like Peter, Paul and Mary. You can't tell High Mass from PBS Pledge Week.

“The so-called ‘mainstream’ Protestant churches aren’t any better. These days, they’re drafting ministers right out of Frisco bathhouses. They talk up a do-gooder God, so they can run around petitioning, demonstrating and bellyaching for every pathetic loser that crawls out from under a rock.

“Only place you can find God’s tough love anymore, is in Israel. That’s no coincidence.

“Read the TANAKH, the real Old Testament, not the one we have, watered down for the export trade.

“Here’s what the TANAKH says: Disobey your parents and you’re dead. Spill your seed on the ground and you’re dead. Mind the store on the Sabbath and you’re dead. Bring God the wrong treat and you’re dead.

“He tells us right up front, Ezekiel 10:25: ‘Is My way unfair? It is your ways that are unfair! When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and does wrong, he shall die for it: he shall die for the wrong that he has done.’

“You see? He repeats the warning, repeats it. The ACLU can’t say that He didn’t mean it.

“Jesus might go looking for the sheep that has strayed but the Old Man’s going to have lamb chops for supper.

“Are you scared, yet? Are you getting worried that God might come after you for crossing the line someplace? Good.

“Fear the Lord. It’s that simple, folks. Fear the Lord.

“We know what God did to Saddam and Gomorrah, what he did even onto mighty Babylon.

“If a place forsakes God and turns to heathen abominations, everything in that place is doomed. Each and every man, woman, child and all their animals, from the highest elder to the lowliest flea, will be destroyed. Every living thing in that place is under sentence of death. It’s just a matter of how God chooses to unleash his terrible wrath, leaving no stone to mark where a proud and noble people once dwelled.

“He can set off a storm, a tremor or a wave to wipe out a half-million lives, with a slap of His hand, like you or I would slap a mosquito.

“You’ve seen that, folks, seen it in the headlines and on the nightly news. When you decide your own fate, will you believe the pious promises of some simpering mommy’s boy from the Church of No Big Deal, or will you believe your eyes?

“Now, maybe one of you pew lawyers could find a loophole, an exception, a change in the Law. Someplace where God says that He be cool with what you do. Pick up a copy of the TANAKH at the commissary, no mark-up for gentiles, and take a look for yourself.

“Don’t bet your soul on the tame twaddle of the tapioca testaments, on bland blather about Good Buddy Jesus.

“There’s fire a’waiting for the sinners, the disobedient, the sorry wretches who were in the wrong place at the wrong time, a fire that won’t fizzle. Make sure you don’t sizzle.

“So, here’s a question for you. Think about it until next time. When and how is God’s wrath going to descend upon Prospect Falls?

“Come back next Sunday and find out more. The life you save may be your own. Make the right choice for yourself and for those you love.

“Come on down here, and let’s pray on it, shall we?”

Little Daddy Holy mopped his brow, grinning in triumph, then piously bowed his head.

Terry struggled upstream, toward the plush-padded exit doors, against the press of the anxious, fearful crowd.

She walked through the lobby and out the door. She savored the clear air, cleansed and freshened by the thundering Falls.

Terry fervently crossed herself.

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