

Best of Nonfiction

Mercedes Schaefer

Hello? God, It's Me, Mercedes

When my dog is sick, I regret not being closer to Jesus. The way I see it, there's starvation, homelessness, disease, terrorism, and genocide all over the world, so you have to be pretty damned tight with Jesus if you want help when your dog takes a turn for the worse. In high school, a fifteen-year-old kid who walked the halls with me every day went to bed and never woke up. They said an aneurysm. He was a healthy weight, active, no prior heart-related issues. His heart, a year younger than my own, exploded without warning. And if that kind of thing happens, how does Ruger, all ninety-eight pounds of American Bulldog, with his dizzy spells and head tremors, stand a chance?

It's October 2004. A few friends invite me to *A Trip to Hell*, my hometown's alternative to a haunted house. Sarah's mom drops us off. We wait in line. There's hot chocolate, popcorn, and caramel apples. When our group gains the front of the line, a grim reaper ushers us onto a dirt path surrounded by tall trees about a hundred yards or so into the wood line. The first scene is a deadly car crash – teenagers sprawled lifeless, covered in dried, flaking artificial blood. The scene is without sound. The driver, recognizable because he still inhabits the battered driver's side, stirs. He wakes; he takes in the scene; he shakes his lifeless girlfriend, her bloodied head now one with the windshield; he screams. When he stumbles out the driver's side, he runs from friend to friend until it becomes clear that he's the sole survivor. If the dead bodies of his closest friends aren't enough, his guilt steals his breath, brings him to his knees as his eyes fall on the drained bottle of whiskey, thrown from the car unharmed.

We trudge on. Farther back in the woods, a pregnant teenager cries voicelessly. She is alone. She walks into the abortion clinic. The sound of a crude vacuum fills the scene. I shudder; she screams. Is she in pain? Or just overwhelmed by her choice? When she attempts to reconcile with God, He doesn't recognize her. I love you my child, but I no longer know you. You have turned away from me. The grief-stricken divinity casts her lost soul to Hell with the others where it belongs. And we walk on. In a makeshift living room, a working mother dresses for her night

shift at the local hospital. Her young daughter begs her to take the night off. She cannot. They need the money. *Please, stay home, Mommy. Aw honey, don't be ridiculous. I'll be back in time to make you breakfast before school.* She has barely started her car to leave when the stepfather, thus far an inanimate part of the backdrop, crumples his beer can and pulls the small girl violently into the bedroom. Hell on Earth.

As I write this, more than ten years later, other details have become fuzzy. I recall a suicide scene. In my mind, the scene is connected to this girl, this preteen raped in her own home, struggling to tell her mother something she cannot dare let pass her bruised lips. This girl who is without hope. This girl who is empty. This girl who is victim. She attempts to clean what can never come clean, bleach to a blood stain. She takes her own life. But there is no mercy in her act, no release. Our group walks into a mock Hell; this I remember clearly. Hot, suffocating steam blinds me. Fire dances on the walls. Demons screech and wail into the heat, yanking at heavy chains that will never come loose. Among them, the child with child, the girl with nothing but self-disgust and a razor. Reapers claw and shout at us; it is their mission, their sole purpose, to pull every one of us into those flames. We flee.

The trip ends with three doors. *Choice*, a distinguished man upfront bellows. Then, Christ himself walks through our midst, battered and bloody, staggering under the weight of a giant cross. We part quickly, arms tingling, eyes downcast, trying much too hard to swallow. A few of

us check our phones. I suppose there is a lesson in here somewhere. One door is marked Heaven – for the confidently saved. Another has Hell scrawled across the top – for the irrecoverably lost. The last is the ever-popular question mark door. I wonder how many smart ass teenagers have walked spitefully through the Hell door. I admire their defiance as I stumble, dazed, toward the familiar punctuation mark. I pick up a glossy pamphlet, pray with a grey-haired stranger, and arrive early for Sunday's 10 a.m. service at Church on the North Coast. I have since heard that the trip has improved its marketability, adding a school shooting and an Ariel-Castro-like hostage scene. I appreciate the church's attention to current events.

That first Sunday service I recognize my hairdresser sitting three rows from the front. She flaunts a flawless blue-black bob that rests on her contoured cheek. Monday through Friday, and every other Saturday, Jess worked eight-hour shifts in 4-inch black stilettos, carried a \$400 bag, and listened to underground hip-hop. Although I have never seen her place, I bet it's the sort of lofted apartment with white carpets, glass tables and modern artwork adorning the walls – *is that an original Warhol?* She was – still is, I'm sure – delightful. And not just her hair and shoes. On each of the twenty-two days of the month that Jess worked at the salon, she convinced no less than ten clients that they were somehow as fabulous as her. Certainly, they were not. Certainly, I was not. But the light she gave off, the smile, the confidence, the ease, it was legit. And I held

fast to it. I watch her in the third row on that first Sunday, and I get it. She has Jesus. I decide right then that I too will have Jesus.

I had no interest in doing hair. I would write – be artsy in some obscure definition of the word, and Jesus and those stilettos and that white carpet would all be part of my aura. People would think, *that Mercedes, she's got it all figured out*, in the same way that my cousin had once wondered aloud, *how do you party as much as you do and still get straight A's*. I'd never be rich, but I'd be well off (“well off” was about as ambiguous as “artsy”). I'd never be beautiful, but I'd be intriguing. I would never rock a *Honk If You Love Jesus* sticker on my bumper, but I'd hang a cross from the rearview mirror of my spotless Lexus. How I'd get these things was irrelevant; these *things* were merely attached to an idea of myself, an idea that occupied a better part of my young adult years.

At one point, I became consumed with a vague notion of doing third-world humanitarian work. The church helped fund an orphanage in Haiti. I'd be helping poor children, traveling, writing, adding “international experience” to my resume – talk about a grand slam. Perhaps the stilettos and white carpet would be put on hold momentarily, but the path to cosmopolitanism demanded travel – did it not? All the better if I could reach Oz on the road of selflessness. I adored the people I traveled to Haiti with; young, ambitious, thoughtful, and high on Jesus, they all held romantic notions of who they would become. Even better were the Haitians I met: full of energy, life, compassion, and empathy de-

spite extreme poverty and hardship. Before we'd boarded the plane, the group leader had promised each of us that this trip would change our lives forever. He was right.

It's August 2014. My first night in Haiti I write that besides the mysterious climate, Haiti is exactly what I expected. The poverty of the kind you see on CNN. I note the scraggly dogs, ribs protruding, hair matting, nipples dragging the dust. Suddenly, Ruger doesn't seem that bad off. Below that I write, “the dogs distract me from the naked toddler, reddish hair and bulging stomach, tossing himself in the muddied water of a street ditch.” There is a charcoal boy with us, a translator with a wide smile and choppy English. He has no parents. He too grew up in the orphanage. I want to ask him a question, but I don't know which one.

We travel to a nearby village. We hear that it is worse than the others. The villagers are always without enough food, often without drinkable water. We give bread from our truck. Another gift from the white man. At first there is a line; then there is disorder; soon, they pummel each other for precious seconds and thirds. Mothers send their youngest up again and again, knowing we won't turn away those small, bloated bodies. I wonder how long it will be before they eat again. One woman with a naked infant on her hip kicks a toddler repeatedly in his stomach until he releases the soccer ball we've just tossed him. We have turned them into animals. And when our supplies run out, there are still too many hungry mouths. We've failed them, given them nothing

that will last until tomorrow, next month, next year. They chase after our trucks for miles, *Blah Blah gimme un doller*. Our reply is a chorus: *Jezi renmen ou*, Jesus loves you. We brandish our trip with Jesus's name and promptly return to the states to indulge in burgers and fries and report on the great change we've made, the souls we've saved. We sleep soundly with the difference we failed to make. Hallelujah.

As I write this, I've stopped attending organized churches. After Haiti, I asked an elder of the church whether he, whether the church itself (whatever that means), believes that the millions of people who identify with Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Vodoun, etc. will burn in Hell eternally for not calling their God(s), Jesus. He didn't have an answer. It was one of those *our God is a merciful god, but the Book says....* He navigated skillfully around the question as Christians often do. In this Christians closely resemble politicians. I refused to let him off so easily.

"Jesus is love, right? It doesn't seem to me that it matters what we call Him so much as we spread love, don't you think? Seems way too human for God to be so overly concerned with whether we get His name right."

My twenty-four-year-old self, and now my sophisticated quarter-of-a-century self, still cannot make sense of it. Seems so imperialistic. Believe this. Repeat after me. Don't question it. Our way is the right way. Everything else is wrong, inferior. This bread is for you, but only after you say *Jezi renmen ou*. Affiliate your basic needs and your access to those needs with your ability to repeat

after the white man. Doesn't sound like love to me.

These days I try to write more. I read often. I travel when I can. I own three pairs of black stilettos. My carpet is beige, and my car's market value is well under \$20,000. In an ode to Emily Dickenson, I search for Jesus out in the world, in people, in nature, in words. I direct my prayers to Jesus – old habits die hard I suppose – and I pray daily. Jesus and I laugh at the idea that humans have fucked up love so monstrously, as if it could ever be so conditional. *Call it only this; love only this type of person; change who you are; change everyone else around you*. That can't be right, right? And just when I feel like I'm getting somewhere, like I might be onto something, my dog gets sick. I drop to my knees and hurriedly text my church-going pals: *put in a good word for me*.