

In the beginning, it was a little-known fact that God was a cross-dresser, living in a bed-sit in Hackney. She called herself Daphne. I knew her because she introduced herself to me one day in the launderette. I was in there distracting people from the banality of powder and softener as I advised a hard-faced young woman that perhaps she shouldn't put those white cotton pants with a red trim in with her white wash. Why I had even approached her was beyond me. I hadn't done my own laundry in twenty years, I had absolutely no interest in her acting on my suggestion, and she clearly didn't want the advice of a woman in a business suit, who seemed to have a drinking problem since I was already drunk at ten in the morning. I couldn't decide if she was about to humour me or punch me, although I felt everyone distance themselves from us, so I suspected the latter. Suddenly, though, I wasn't alone. The cross-dresser who would turn out to be God joined in and it looked as though she was taking my side. With this new development, the launderette crowd drew closer.

'She knows she shouldn't put that in with the whites,' the newcomer said to me, unhooking the pants from my grip and handing them back to the woman, to ruin as she saw fit.

'She just handed you your arse!' I crowed, as the woman grabbed the arse of her pants and screwed them into a ball.

The launderette crowd drew back so quickly I feared a tsunami was imminent, but the cross-dresser ignored everything: the thunderous face and clenched fists of the woman doing her washing, the glee of the crowd at the potential for a fight, and my own careless disregard for my well-being. She turned me away from it all and led me to a seat.

'The colour will run as surely as if she washed her clothes in red wine and will turn her entire white wash pink but she will inexplicably find herself doing it,' she said, as we watched the woman throw the item in with the whites, as if against her will, and ram coins into the slot.

In no time at all, the machine filled with pink suds.

‘Voilà!’ said my new friend throwing her head back and laughing. ‘Actually, there’s nothing inexplicable about it,’ she confided in low tones. ‘God has a fondness for the colour pink.’

She grinned a devilish little smile and I felt a twinge of something that was either hunger or nerves. I wasn’t good at recognising feelings, and I was in a launderette in a strange part of town, it was mid-morning on a weekday, I should have been at work, and I wasn’t in the best shape. The newcomer may have taken my side and helped me avoid a fight but was it worth the price? Now it seemed I had escaped a beating and gained the company of a nutter. I wasn’t really in the mood for company but I chatted with her to be polite.

‘I’m looking for an angel,’ I said. ‘And I’ve just been thrown out of a funeral.’

She nodded as she applied a startling shade of red lipstick, sheathed in a gold case.

‘Thrown out by a priest, can you goddamn believe?’

She looked a little perturbed so I guess she couldn’t goddamn believe it either. I briefly wondered why I had started to sound American when I was so very English but I didn’t wonder for long because I had bigger problems. *If only I could remember what they were.* I concentrated on her lipstick to help focus my memory.

‘Juliette Marglen's Heavenly Colors for Lips,’ said the cross-dresser, presumably imagining I was interested. ‘Ahhh, the ’50s,’ she sighed. ‘They don’t make lipsticks like this anymore.’

She looked at herself in a gold compact of the same vintage. She looked like a Hollywood diva from the 1950s.

She was throwing me into confusion and making me lose my thread. *Goddamnit!*
What were my problems?

‘What was his problem?’ she asked.

‘Who?’

‘The priest.’

‘Oh, him. He said it was sacrilegious to turn up at a funeral drunk. Like I was drunk!

They can be so pompous, can’t they? I don’t think the bride was bothered.’

‘I thought you said it was a funeral?’

‘No I didn’t. You would have thought he’d have been glad of the numbers. They can’t get a good congregation on a Sunday anymore, let alone a weekday. They put people off with their goddamn rules. Anyone who’s different or not toeing the party line. An oddball like ...’

Who?

I looked at her and then looked around the launderette for someone to disparage.

There was plenty of choice.

‘...some of these cats....’ *Cats?* ‘....out they go. D’you know what I mean? If I hadn’t taken a powder he’d have probably called the heat.’

Why was I talking like this?

Her 1950s look seemed to be spreading into my brain, as American slang from past generations jitter bugged through my mind and jived out of my mouth. I envisioned myself in a poodle skirt and then quickly replaced this image with a beret-headed woman in pedal-pushers, all-dressed-in-black. I had a sudden urge to smoke Gauloises.

What the hell was wrong with me?

‘I’d say you were drunk.’

‘Who asked you?’

‘You did.’

Did I say that aloud?

‘Yes you did. Tell me more about this priest.’

‘I only wanted to ask him if he thought it mattered what you wear when you die. I mean, who are you trying to impress? I don’t think God gives a damn what you wear, does He? The priest said God didn’t want me on the premises but I said “To hell with you. How would you know what God wants?” That shut him up. Well, at least until he threatened to call the police. So I took off out of there. I mean, he couldn’t, could he?’

‘Call the police?’

‘Know what God wants.’

‘Only a very few of us do.’

‘You’re one of the very few?’

‘I am God,’ she said. ‘But I’m going by the name of Daphne at the moment.’

‘I’m Di. Nice to meet you, Daph.’

Nutter.

‘No, really. I’m God.’

I looked her over. She was huge, larger than life in every sense and strangely beautiful: six-foot-four, with magnificent breasts, size twelve feet encased in ultra high heels, wearing glamorous 1950s day wear. She didn’t look like anyone I’d ever met but that didn’t make her God.

And yet...

‘And yet what?’

I wished she’d stop doing that. I concentrated on keeping my thoughts inside my head, even though I wasn’t sure if I was speaking out loud or if she was mind-reading. Either way, it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain any of my personal space. She was staring at me. A deep, penetrating stare that was making me feel... *what?*

The atoms in the air around us seemed to vibrate. I was falling deeper and deeper into her stare. Blacker pupils than I’d ever seen were surrounded by a blue that had no right to

exist outside of a high summer sky. She was drawing me in and it was bottomless! I was falling...

She picked me up off the floor.

'We'll try that again later,' she said. 'Do you want to get a coffee?'

'Not really, Daph. I've got to...'

What the hell did I have to do?

I opened my briefcase, looking for a clue, and was pleased to see a bottle of wine and a glass inside. I took them out and poured myself a large one. Thoughts of life and death, heaven and earth, damnation and redemption weighed heavy on my mind but I couldn't figure out why. I wasn't usually given to theological contemplation, although I *was* in the launderette with someone who said they were God, so perhaps that was throwing me off my game. Even still, I couldn't have been more surprised when I heard myself say, 'I'm thinking about starting a new religion.'

I was fairly sure that not only had I not been thinking about this but also that it had never been in my plans. Ever.

'Still pissed off with that priest, then?' said Daph.

'No!'

I'm not petty.

'No?'

'He *was* something of a killjoy, though.'

'You did gatecrash his... service.'

What the hell was she talking about?

'I've been thinking a lot about alien nation lately,' I said, to stop her talking rubbish.

'The movie? I love James Caan!'

'No. Alienation the...thing. There just seems to be so much of it around. And who needs it? Life's too short and death's so... unexpected. It's hard to....prepare.'

'Really? I've never quite understood why. I would have thought it was pretty much the only thing you guys really know you'll have to prepare for.'

'Yeah but at times like that you need some....'

Words failed me.

'Warning?' said Daphne.

I shook my head.

'Comfort?' she tried again.

'Acceptance?' I tried myself but even I wasn't sure if that was along the right lines.

Sometimes it was a minefield inside my head and even I didn't know which were the decoys, and where the real explosives were buried. I tried to get back to where I'd started.

'There doesn't seem to be a religion that I know of that doesn't *alienate* somebody. So I was just thinking if we started something new we could have something a bit different this time. Something a bit more light-hearted, not so judgemental. Less subjugation, more celebration. A wider embrace. A larger catchment area. All-encompassing. Less set in stone. Less what people have been told to expect. I mean, look at you. You say you're God but you're not what most people would be expecting.'

'I am God.'

She did the staring thing again but this time I didn't fall down. This time I fell in. Time froze around us. My skin cooled. I glimpsed infinity. I tasted immortality. I heard the sweet, sweet sound of... *was that swing music?* In that instant, everything I'd ever been told turned on its head.

'God!'

'Yes,' she said, smiling with one side of her mouth and a self-satisfied nod.

She seemed more smug than benevolent but who wouldn't be?

'So you're God!'

'Yes.'

'Here you are!'

'Yes.'

'And look at you.'

'Yes,' she said again.

Her hand smoothed over her hair, down her neck and came happily to rest on her unbelievable breasts. She gave them a quick look to make sure they were still magnificent.

'This is reality?'

'Yes,' she said, but I could feel impatience start to pulse in her voice.

'All the more reason for a new religion!'

'Yes!' she squealed, in a deep voice not entirely suited to squealing but she had so much presence she got away with it. 'I *love* new religions!' she said, leaping to her feet in sudden excitement. 'All that adulation, ritual, and colour.'

It was as though she was describing a fresh love affair complete with new lingerie and shoes.

'Perhaps we could do something a little different this time?' I said, catching her excitement. 'Maybe we could have something that reflects *this* reality? Something that says "Everything you've ever been told may not be true so you're going to have to stop being so goddamned judgemental and know-it-allish." Maybe we could throw in a few drinks...A few parties... More fun...There's plenty of scope, isn't there? What do you think?'

She didn't really answer my question but rushed on with thoughts of her own.

'I've had a hand in the beginning of every religion out there,' she said. 'Sometimes my contribution was as small as handing around the collection plate or stacking chairs. Other times it was as great as giving out stone tablets with instructions.'

'Not the best idea you ever had, if you don't mind me saying so, Daph.'

'I know!' she said. 'Even I admit *that* was a mistake. Humans are far too literal and the ones who end up interpreting my words for other people always seem to be severely lacking in humour. They were clearly meant as suggestions not "commaaandments".' She dragged the word out mockingly and put it in inverted commas with her fingers. 'It's not like they were carved in stone!'

'Is that right?' I mused. I wondered who had got that wrong, me or her.

'I haven't actually had much involvement with the Moonies or the Scientologists,' she said. 'But I'm on the mailing lists for both. Just to show an interest.'

'Well, I won't hold that against you. I'm sure I'm on a few questionable mailing lists myself. In this age of new technology, it's always nice to get some good, old-fashioned post.'

'Let's do it!' she said.

'OK!'

Do what?

'This will be the first religion created in a launderette,' she said. 'But that isn't important. Religions are like children. It doesn't matter how they're conceived, as long as they're loved and believed in. Then they can flourish.'

She took my boozy breath away! How many times do people really listen to a drunk rant on? How many times do they understand their ideas, let alone encourage them? And how many times is it God who is speaking to you in a London launderette on a week-day morning? More than you'd think, actually. You'd be surprised what happens in Hackney.

Even still. Beyond the jaw-dropping wonder of it all. Did I really want to start a religion with God? I barely knew her.

‘Having doubts?’ she asked.

My head swam and I tried to anchor myself in this sea of shifting circumstances by establishing some background on my Divine New Friend

‘What are you doing here?’ I said.

Her face settled into a mask of patience and strained benevolence and her voice slowed to a fool’s pace.

‘I. Am. Talk. Ing. To. You.’

Irritation coursed through my body. ‘No. I mean here. Like this,’ I snapped, trying to cut through the condescension.

I waved my arms around to encompass it all, trying to encapsulate the launderette, London, Earth, the vintage clothes, the body she was in. My gesture must have gotten some of it across because she picked up the thread.

‘I’m here to see what it’s like and have a look at humanity close up,’ she said. ‘I like to do that from time to time.’

I looked her over again. Her breasts looked too perfect to be any man-made substance.

‘Is that actual flesh you’re using to stuff your bra?’

‘That’s none of your business,’ she said, with a coy look at her cleavage.

‘And the cross-dressing?’ I asked. ‘How did that come about?’

I saw her glance at a notebook sticking out of her open bag.

‘It’s a complex system,’ she said.

When she nipped home to change her shoes, I couldn’t resist taking a peek inside. I eased it out and read the title emblazoned across the front in gold handwriting *People To Be / Things To Do* it said. I opened the book to a page marked by a ribbon that had TO BE printed

across the top. At the end of a long list I saw that someone had written 'cross-dressing might be fun', circled it and jotted a date nearby. I skimmed through the rest of the book and by the time she returned I was dying to ask her what she was going to do with the real Paul McCartney when she became him for six months the following year but, as I struggled to find a way to ask without her knowing I had snooped, a sense of other pressing obligations pushed forward again. *What should I be doing instead of asking about Paul McCartney?*

Asking about Keith Richards?

As I'd flicked back through her notes, I noticed that she'd been in and out of Keith since the Sixties. He was probably just a pod by now waiting for her next visit. Still, she got to play with an iconic rock band and be in a Louis Vuitton ad campaign, two things I noticed were crossed out on her TO DO list. Before I could frame a question, though, she leapt in before me.

'So, Di. What about your plans for this new religion? You couldn't shut up about it a moment ago before you knew you might have some realistic support on your hands. Since then you've barely mentioned two words about it. Why don't you pour yourself another drink and we can get cracking.'

I did as I was told.

'OK, then. Let's see. How's it usually done?' she said.

'Couldn't you just kick it off with a miracle?'

'That's old school. We're more subtle these days. We don't like freaking people out... Or witch hunts,' she added, with a shudder.

I suspected she might just have lost her skills but I thought it best to leave her to it. She would surely know more about religion than me. It was hardly my territory, even if it had been my idea.

‘We’ll have to have some tenets,’ she finally announced, after several moments of thought.

I choked on my wine.

‘No, no, no Daph,’ I said, wagging my finger at her to reinforce the point. ‘I’m a *wine* drinker. I can’t stand all those strong lagers.’

‘Not Tennents, you bloody fool. Tenets. You know, guidelines for the religion. Doctrine. Dogma.’

‘Tenets. Right Yes. Of course,’ I backtracked. ‘Let me see. Tenets.’ I swirled the word around my mouth, as if I was at a wine tasting. ‘Tenets.’ I spat out, my face screwed up with distaste. ‘Why do we have to have them?’

‘Everyone does,’ she said.

‘Isn’t that the point of having a new religion, to rewrite the old ways, shake up the status quo?’ I asked, naively as it turned out.

‘No. The point of having a new religion is that I will have a whole bunch of new followers. Believers. People whose love I can bask in.’

I could actually see her preening.

‘Everyone needs love, Di Even me,’ she snapped, catching my expression of disbelief.

‘And you shall have it,’ I said, making the promise without a clue how to deliver on it. ‘But you don’t want humans to follow you blindly and you don’t want to tell people exactly how to live, do you?’

‘Don’t I?’ she asked, looking surprised. ‘Isn’t that what normally happens? I’ve often thought of religion as being like fashion. You tell everyone that there’s something wrong with them to begin with and then you offer them something amazing that will fix it. In fashion it’s support underwear, dieting, beauty products, plastic surgery and this year’s new

trends, and in religion it's playing by a whole bunch of rules that offer you a shot at redemption and the chance to live with me.'

It sounded like a game show that I didn't want to be on.

'Is that really how it works?' I asked. I was feeling a little confused and she wasn't helping.

'I don't know!' she said. 'I could never really work out what you guys were doing myself. In the end I just stopped paying that much attention. I'm open to suggestion, though. So you say, I'm not going to tell people exactly how to live, then?'

'No. And you don't want a handful of people telling the rest of us how to live either, right?'

'No, of course not. If anyone was going to tell people what to do, it should be me. It's my game after all.'

She produced another bottle of wine from her voluminous handbag and said, 'Come on, Di, we've got work to do. What are your thoughts?'

'Well, one of the first things we have to do is encourage people to accept and love themselves,' I said. 'What do you think of that?'

'Weeell, yees...', she dragged her words out then sucked her breath back through her teeth. 'Sure, I want them to love themselves but they still have to love me and not treat each other like shit.'

I scrutinized her while I assessed the situation. So I needed to get the world to love this six-foot-four cross-dresser, while raising universal self-esteem and getting them all to love each other too. I thought it over for ten minutes.

'Well?' she asked.

'Well, one thing's for sure,' I said.

'Yes?' She nodded eagerly.

‘This is going to require more than that one bottle of wine.’

She agreed, seeming to perfectly understand this, and I foresaw a whole day of drinking and religion-building unfurl itself rather pleasantly before me. I was beginning to love this launderette. All my worries seemed to have melted away.

There it was again. My worries. What the hell did I have to be worried about?

‘Jesus Christ,’ I yelled, and leapt to my feet.

I saw her wince. ‘I don’t think there’s any need for that sort of language.’

‘Blasphemy?’

‘More like fuck-uppery,’ she muttered. ‘What the hell is wrong with you? Sit down and have another drink. We’re just getting started.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘I’m supposed to be burying my father.’