



Blue-collar Jesus

[Paul Mitchell]

Your house needs a little reconstruction, a problem with the back deck that has caused floorboard instability. The carpentry team arrives and he is among them. Nothing much to look at, he is just another blue-collar worker, wearing a fluoro orange safety vest like the rest of his workmates. He carries a small blue esky with his lunch and he has what you'd have to call a hipster beard. Long, shaggy. And he has a fairly big nose.

He and the team are still working one night when you get home. You get to talking and he chats with you and his mates about the footy, what is happening on television, that movie everyone had seen. He knows about it all, but he doesn't seem as passionate as the other workers. What is it about him? A peacefulness? Yeah, but also a sense of purpose. A care in what he does as he nail-guns your deck back into order.

Turns out he is from Twerberten in Melbourne's west. You don't admit it to him, but later you have to look it up on Google Maps. It's one of those so-called developing areas that never seems to develop, that always seems to be struggling with one problem or another. He says he likes it there, it is his home, and he is happy just following in his father's trade.

You're not so sure about that.

How old would he be? He seems to possess a wisdom beyond his years—the way he discusses politics and religion with ease, cutting through the nonsense to speak a truth that you thought you knew deep down, but no one has ever put it quite like that before. Maybe thirty?

Thirty from Twerberten, a carpenter and the son of one. He sticks in your memory—actually, you can't stop telling people about him. How he seemed to believe, well, no, *embody*, the idea that the world could be a better place if we lived according to his set of ideas about the last being first and the first being last. As he ate a salad roll one day, he'd talked footy and TV and cricket and movie analogies to explain his vision. It came to something like the winners' trophies going to the street people who didn't even compete.

You couldn't make too much sense of it all, and anyway, he and his team are gone now, your deck is fixed and your house is resting back on its foundations. But he made an impression. You can't stop thinking about winners being losers, about people crying having the last laugh, and all that other stuff he said while he sawed and piled wood.

You should have expected it: suddenly, he is all over the internet, the TV and the papers. This guru, they say, this wellbeing teacher, this young tradie who is telling the polities, the religious leaders and anyone who wants to listen that everything they know about God and the world is wrong. That they'd better get on with taking a straight and narrow road to the actual good life, not something pictured on the cover of *Good Weekend*.

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The talk about him persists. They dissect his ideas on lifestyle channels, buzz feeds, social media and sports fields, and in parliament, churches and back streets.

Come on, he's a nobody. He's a tradesman, a chippie no less, from Twerberten! I've been there. I've seen the place. All Bunnings and shopping malls. I can tell you now, nothing good is coming out of Twerberten.

Well, what I can tell you is he's got a huge following. Have you seen his Twitter and Instagram accounts? If this keeps up his followers will have him running for mayor. And who knows what after that.

What is he? One minute he sounds like a communist, the next a liberal. I can't make any sense of what he's on about. Why do so many losers like him? How can we plot an election course with someone like him out there? It's madness. He sounds like a Green, then an independent. I can't pin him down.

Yeah, sure, he says he was raised in the Church. But in Twerberten? And did he finish secondary school? No one knows. I mean, I trained for eight years and published for ten to even get a look in as a Professor of Theology. Now this: a bloke in an orange safety vest, standing around at barbecues and telling everyone we've got God and God's ways wrong! He can't be allowed to keep it up. And the fake news keeps spreading! He's a heretic, straight out, I'm telling you.

He hangs out in King Street!

Well, at least they've started to hate him in Twerberten. What was that about prophets and hometowns?

That should be enough for one carpenter, you think. If you were him, you'd say your piece, say thank you, and catch the packed train or drive your trade ute back into the Twerberten sunset.

But it isn't enough. What does he do? He decides to march on Anzac Day up to the Shrine! With a bunch of his followers chanting behind him. He gets up there with a megaphone and starts telling everyone to leave the past behind, to let the diggers rest and to stop idolising them! Is he crazy? Then he gets on his high horse about dirty politics and oppressive religion, his two pet hates. The police are there and the right wingers and left wingers and the army and his followers and, well, there was going to be a riot!

They had to arrest him, of course: 'Causing a public nuisance'. But it worries you that they haven't let him out. They haven't even let him speak. It's like they're trying to pretend he never existed. Like everything he was saying was rubbish.

There are some who say he's been killed. Others who say he's alive, somewhere, in another country. Regardless, his followers have gotten the message—forgot to mention, some of them worked in supermarkets and as parking inspectors before they started following him around ...

... But whatever their old lives were, they want to keep them. They don't want to disappear. They're still around, apparently, meeting in secret. Keeping his message alive.

You hold a barbecue on your reconditioned deck. The talk turns to him and his followers and why his message is still out there. Love the ones who make your life hell. There's a spirit stronger than Johnny Walker. Believe in him and you'll never be hungry, even if the barbecue hotplate is empty. You'll live forever, even if you're creaky and old.

God, it was a lot from a carpenter from Twerberten. You lean down and touch your deck. It's beautifully constructed, solid and not a nail out of place. It's hot and sweaty out on your deck tonight and you bring your beer to your lips but, so strange, you're not the slightest bit thirsty.

Paul Mitchell is a Melbourne-based writer. His latest book is a novel, *We. Are. Family* (MidnightSun Publishing).

