

Lost at Home

Claudia Thomson

The volume of cheerful chatter is deafening when you're alone. I feel like a mere guppy in a pond full of goldfish. The pealing church bells break the white noise in my head. The crowd hurries in and I follow. As I enter through the large welcoming wooden arch, the quickly-filling pews confront me with a wave of angst. I spot a seat on the end next to a fair-skinned lady wearing elegant white gloves. As she hears my footsteps approaching, she turns with a smile, which quickly changes to grimace when she sees me. She swiftly puts her purse on the spare seat beside her. I head back towards the arch, still searching desperately for a spot. I find plenty of vacant spaces in the middle pews, but the eyes of those around them are judging and vindictive. As the talking crowd quietens, I shrink to the very last row and sit alone.

I am lonely.

I look out the window at the beautiful old eucalyptus trees waving at me graciously in the breeze. A magpie warbles a sweet song to the tree it has made a nest in. A smile of contentment sweeps across my cheeks. The pleasant birdsong is interrupted by the discordant organ pipes. I watch the magpie startle and fly away. My smile fades. The priest begins the service with a sermon about loving everyone, regardless of differences. I notice the lady who rejected me nodding in agreement. Hypocrite. As he continues about the importance of acceptance, the people who glared at me earlier are sitting there with silly smiles slapped on their faces. The message he delivers is too deep to fill these empty vessels. The priest invites everyone to offer the sign of peace to those around them. A sunburnt farmer turns with an open palm, but as I raise my hand, he shifts his eye contact to the person beside him and shakes his head instead. I watch the little boy in front of me eager to give the sign of peace to as many people as he possibly can. He catches my gaze and leans over the pew with an outstretched arm towards me. As our hands meet, a rush of hope runs through my body. A hope that one day, the young and innocent generations will grow up to make society more accepting and loving. That glimmer of hope is shattered when his mother shoots him a look of disapproval. A dark cloud covers the bright sun on the horizon of the future.

I am hopeless.

The priest continues monotonously. I become bored and my mind starts wandering. I begin thinking about how sickening it is that society accepts discrimination against people of colour. My mind clouds with thoughts about

the injustices people like me are forced to face too often. They need to know that they are wrong and unfair. The number of times people have provoked unsolicited feelings of worthlessness or displacement is outrageous. At that moment, I feel like I'm being watched. I scan the room and catch a scowling face directed at me. This tips me over. I can't contain the rage inside me any longer. The pit of my stomach is on fire and adrenaline is pumping through my veins.

I am angry.

I hear the priest say, "We are all created in the image of God." He follows this statement with a rhetorical question: "What does it mean to be the face of God?" My anger urges me to answer. I stand abruptly and walk out into the aisle, stopping in the centre. The priest sees me and falls silent. The congregation turns and stabs me with their eyes. Knowing that I have gained everyone's attention and interest, I gain a burst of confidence. "Let me tell you what it means to truly be the face of God." Murmurs thicken the air. I feel them all judging me with their horrified faces. An accusatory voice raises a question. "Spit it out lady! What does it mean?" My rush of confidence is gone. My cheeks fill with heat and I look down to my feet.

"I am going."

Defeat has been forced upon me. I hear hushed whispers as I slink away through the arch. Muted anger weighs heavily in my stomach. The irony of the situation envelops me. I have been excluded from church
- the church that is supposedly the most open-hearted and inclusive place in town; the church that was built on the land that was stolen from us; the church that is meant to bring people together in unity. A shadow moves across the grass I'm walking on. I look up and see the magpie landing on a branch - back where it belongs. This is my country, but...

I am lost.