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Number Two

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Russell: Number Two

NUMBER TWO

Vanessa Russell

Tranquillity Bloom is the only person left in Sunday school now. It's her and her dad, Horace Bloom, facing off. She is one month past her baptise-by date and is secretly surprised that she has lasted this long, especially after her father fastened her with a stern look and said: "What will you do when Jesus comes back?" and she found herself digging in instead of folding like the rest of them.

"I'd say: 'You took your time.'"

"But he came."

"But he hasn't."

"But he will."

"But he hasn't."

And so on.

Eventually Horace stops to take out his hanky and blow his nose. Tranquillity cracks her knuckles as she waits for her father to rasp the hanky against his white moustache stubble, put it away in his left trouser pocket and start again at number one.

Horace blows his nose, rasps the hanky against his white moustache stubble, puts it away in his left trouser pocket and starts again at number one. Tranquillity's eye twitches. She wishes she didn't have to interject, but number two is upon them again.

The Time of the End in three easy-to-follow steps:

1. Establishment of the state of Israel. Status: Completed, 14 May 1948.
2. Russia invades Israel. Status: Imminent, Saddam Hussein has just invaded Kuwait and is currently pointing swarms of missiles at Israel.
3. Jesus returns and makes the baptised believers immortal. Status: It's all dependant on number two.

Horace tosses today's newspapers at Tranquillity. Sunday, 13 January 1991. Tanks are being oiled, troops are kissing their wives goodbye, and Prime Minister Bob Hawke is golfing in Ascot Vale as the world waits for Saddam Hussein to withdraw his troops from Kuwait before the expiry of the United Nations deadline. Hussein has until Wednesday, 4 P.M. (Eastern Summer Time) to quit Kuwait, or the U.S.-led coalition will go in there and kick out those godless Muslims themselves.

A block away from Sunday school, Coles New World is jammed full with shoppers buying emergency rations, and the petrol station has a snaking, snorting line of cars that are being filled before petrol goes up to ninety cents a litre. A group of sixty-three students from the uni run a "No Gulf War" protest march down Sturt Street, but are forced up onto the footpaths by drivers who don't want to waste their last cheap tank of petrol idling behind a bunch of hippie pinko slackers who are wasting taxpayers' money.

Horace couldn't be happier. It's the Middle East! It's an invasion! He is especially buoyed by a lead article in yesterday's *Saturday Extra* which set out in print the "what if" questions he has been putting to Tranquillity ever since Iraq invaded Kuwait last August.

"What if Iraq launches a missile at Tel Aviv, Israel's largest city?" he reads. "What if the missiles were armed with a chemical device? What if Iraq moves forces into Jordan to threaten Israel? What if? . . ."

"Did you write this article, Dad?" Tranquillity asks.

"The fulfilment of prophecy is writing itself."

Tranquillity shivers. So far, she has been able to ignore this war. It's the Persian Gulf; it's nothing to do with Israel and, as long as it has nothing to do with Israel, it has nothing to do with the fulfilment of any prophecy.

Still, she's been a little out of balance since the situation escalated. Last October she took up knuckle crunching when Hussein threatened to hit Israel with a missile. In November she developed an eye-twitch when Israel said it would hit back at

Iraq if it got bombed. Six days ago she started spurting diarrhoea when Hussein said he would take death to every corner of the earth. It's getting harder to remain sure that number two will not be fulfilled any day.

Horace puts a wooden box between himself and his daughter on the preparatory class table. Tranquillity knows that the box contains an alphabet of felt letters. Horace believes that Tranquillity will not be able to turn away from the sign-of-the-times.

And she can't. She watches him fumbling with the letters, trying to arrange an advertising sign for the hall window that will scare both her and the public into immediate baptism. He scratches his nose. He gulps. He takes out his crumpled hanky and mops at the hair oil that slides down his forehead. He's stuck: he's got sign-block.

Admittedly, this sign will not be his crispest effort, but for the last four years he has been inhibited by his greatest, most successful sign ever: GOD HATES HOMOSEX!

The homosex sign was vandalised within two hours of assembly with a silver spray-canned rebuttal: GOD HATES FUNDAMENTALISTS! Horace got onto the front page of the *Advertiser* and in the photo he pointed at Romans 1:26–27 (although the reader had no way of knowing this, his Bible being reduced to the size of a pixel). The vandalised sign alone made page seventeen of the *Herald Sun*, Horace was labelled “outrageous” in a letter-to-the-editor in the *Age*, and a highly-codified sympathetic piece was aired on “Hinch”.

Horace got seventy-three visitors to his “God Hates Homosex” lecture: forty-five visitors were from the gay lobby who interjected and heckled, but became sick and quiet when he quoted substantiating verses; and the remaining twenty-eight were former Brethren and Sisters who had left twenty years earlier when the Six-Day War failed to bring number two.

Not one visitor returned the next week, despite Horace hiring a hot air balloon and securing it to the pinnacle of the hall.

The lack of public attendance may have been directly linked to the lecture topic, but Horace remains convinced that the stone that toppled Nebuchadnezzar's statue was, and still is, a highly interesting subject.

After five false starts, Horace assembles a sign in front of Tranquillity: MIDDLE EAST INVADED! GET BAPTISED NOW! Tranquillity licks her lips and swallows. He's got her.

"It's not going to happen," Tranquillity says.

Horace doesn't flinch. Normally this kind of blatant flibber-flabbing sends him into a rage so godly that it only shows in a flush high on his cheekbones. His facial tones remain perfectly even.

"It doesn't say in the Bible what exactly will happen to the unbaptised Responsible," he says, "but it does mention weeping and gnashing of teeth. Are you familiar with sackcloth? Very itchy I believe, especially when you slit your skin and rub ash into it."

"Scare tactics, Dad. They may have worked with the other eight losers, but I'm not fooled."

"I suppose you need proof?"

Yeah, she needs proof: like the hairy face of Jesus in front of her. Like Grampy Bloom, resurrected, offering her a flat, round peppermint. Like a burning bush. Like an angel dressed in taffeta and Jiffies beckoning her towards the heavens. Like the Russian invasion of Israel.

"Give me number two," Tranquillity says, "Russia invades Israel."

"Coming right up," says Horace and rustles the newspaper.

Tranquillity feels her bowels gurgle and she wants to leave, but it is much too late.

Tranquillity was four years old when she first started Sunday school. In kinder class she was taught by Olive Whalen, matriarch of the only other family in the congregation, and mother of buck-toothed, desert-booted, man of butter, Daniel Whalen. Tranquillity was barely conceived before Olive

nominated Tranquillity as the clean, insider wife for Daniel, but she couldn't, not if he were the last person before the end of the earth.

As the kinder class teacher, Olive Whalen cut thick, paisley-patterned wallpaper samples into the shapes of Hebrew tunics. Tranquillity stuck these down with paste so creamy that Olive spent as much time slapping away the white plastic applicator from Tranquillity's mouth as teaching her who the men in the paisley tunics were.

Tranquillity's favourite tunic belonged to the great guts Eglon, King of Moab, who was so fat that when Ehud stuck a half-metre-long dagger into his belly, the dagger got sucked in, haft and all, never to be seen again. Her least favourite tunic belonged to the Apostle Paul, who was the direct cause of her itching, behatted head.

The Sunday school year always ended at the end of December with the not-Christmas recital. As Tranquillity was the youngest of the congregation, kinder class was made redundant as soon as she performed and Olive permanently packed away her wallpaper samples, her paste, the table, and the chairs they sat in.

After each not-Christmas recital, Tranquillity's eight brothers and she moved down the Sunday school plank in a yearly shuffle that pushed them, one at a time, from eldest to youngest, into the baptismal bath.

At the end of Tranquillity's kinder year, she stood on the edge of the church's stage with nowhere to go. A tarn of parquetry lay below and an impenetrable red-felt curtain was closed behind. Sister Elsie placed her arthritic claws onto the piano keys and played the melody like it was a rough sea.

"Jesus loves me, this I know," four-year-old Tranquillity sang, stuffing her hand in her mouth, best dress on. Horace conducted, thumbs and forefingers joined, fingers uplifted like a cockatoo's crest and jiggled to the 1-2 beat of Sister Elsie's piano playing. The eighteen-strong congregation behind him swayed from side-to-side, trying to see past his jiggling behind.

Then it happened. She let go.

"For the Bible tells me so," Tranquillity sang, then retched on her fist and stopped singing. Horace's thumbs and forefingers separated and froze. Seven of her eight elder brothers giggled, and her mother tilted her head and bit her lip.

Tranquillity's eldest brother, Reuben Bloom, took some Wet Ones from his pocket and started to mop up.

There was a screech of feedback from the stage. Reuben froze.

"Reuben Bloom," said Horace into a microphone, "Are you Responsible?"

Reuben couldn't deny it; he had gone through ten years of Sunday school. He had been taught God's plan as set out in the Bible, and he knew all of the rules.

"I guess."

"What happens to the Responsible if they are not baptised when Jesus returns?"

Reuben squirmed.

"You're dead," he said; "it's worse than being Catholic."

"The Iran-Iraq War is raging! The fulfilment of number two is only minutes away."

"The war began four months ago."

"These are perilous times! Do you deny that the time of the end is at hand?"

The curtains jerked open to reveal the baptismal bath. The bath was homemade, thirty years old and made with a swimming-pool liner cut to fit its coffin-shaped frame.

"What will you say to Jesus when he returns and finds you unbaptised?" asked Horace and began to roll up his sleeves.

"Don't drink, don't smoke, don't gamble," Reuben recited to himself as he trudged towards the bath, "don't fornicate, don't adulterate, don't vote, don't join clubs, don't go to the theatre, the movies, the football, don't bring friends home, marry Outsiders, read novels, wear scarlet, believe in hell, heaven, angels with wings, Christmas, pagans, Catholics, or the devil. Do get baptised, marry inside, convert your children, and wait

for number two until death do us part or our Lord Jesus Christ returns, amen.”

Amen.

Ten years afterwards, on the night of Tranquillity’s preparatory class not-Christmas recital, Iraq said it would never give up Kuwait and would use chemical weapons if attacked. As Tranquillity stood in front of the red curtains her bowels gurgled.

A screech of feedback came from behind the curtains.

“Tranquillity Bloom,” said Horace into the microphone. “Are you Responsible?”

The stage curtain jerked open and the baptismal bath rocked as the water inside swacked against its sides.

“I haven’t brought my bathers,” Tranquillity called as she teetered on the stage’s apron.

“Never mind,” said Horace. “You can wear a gown.”

The baptismal gowns were white-cotton neck-to-knee shrouds that went completely see-through when wet.

“I’m not wearing a gown.”

“You can go in fully-clothed. Your mother went in fully-clothed.”

Tranquillity turned to look at her mother. Violet Bloom was holding her forefinger in front of her face and counting her children. Each time she only came up with eight.

“I can’t,” Tranquillity said, turning back to her father, “Because . . .”

Because she didn’t want to turn into “Sister Tranquillity” and say “ooh” every time she said a naughty word. Because she didn’t want to drink the sacramental wine that was bargain basement because her dad was worried they’d get a taste for it. Because she didn’t want to listen to a crusty Brother exhort, lecture, give Bible class, Mutual Improvement and Youth Group talks about the significance of shoe-latches. Because she didn’t want to be gagged from speaking even when a Brother asked if anyone had any questions. Because she didn’t hate homosexuality. Because she didn’t want to have to disappear if her marriage failed.

Because she didn't want to get baptised and be forced into marrying Daniel Whalen. Because, mainly, she did not believe in number two.

"What will you say when Jesus comes back?" Horace called.

"I'd say, 'You took your time.'"

"But he came."

"But he hasn't."

"But he will."

"But he hasn't."

And so on.