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# Snatches

Martin Rowson

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## About the Author

Martin Rowson is an award-winning political cartoonist whose work appears regularly in the *Guardian*, the *Independent on Sunday*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Scotsman*, *Tribune*, *Index on Censorship* and *Granta*. His previous publications include comic-book adaptations of *The Waste Land* and *Tristram Shandy*. He lives with his wife and their two teenage children in south-east London. He enjoys red wine and the company of agents.

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# SNATCHES

Martin Rowson



JONATHAN CAPE  
LONDON

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For Anna, Fred and Rose, and in  
loving memory of Annie, Butti, Russell, Jon,  
Giles, Ossie and Jos, most of whom would,  
I hope, have enjoyed the following . . .

'For what man in the natural state or course of thinking, did ever conceive it in his power to reduce the notions of all mankind exactly to the same length, and breadth, and height as his own?'

Jonathan Swift, 'A Digression on Madness',  
in *Tale of a Tub*

'A failure of correspondence between subjective and objective is, generally speaking, the fountain-source of the comic as also the tragic in both life and art. The sphere of politics less than any other is exempted from the action of this law. People or parties are heroic or comic not in themselves but in their relation to circumstances.'

Leon Trotsky



# Adam and Eve

Lucy strode across the hard ground before, briefly, traversing a small patch of mud which squidged softly between the long toes of her bare feet. The tickly ooze made her giggle, and then she marched off westward, grinning broadly into the setting sun.

The day, which had been hot, was cooling now it moved towards its close, eased that way by the gentle breeze blowing through the valley and Lucy's hair, ever so slightly disturbing the bits of leaf and flower she'd forgotten were still caught there. Distant animals gave hesitant voice to greet the easterly wind bringing the night. Lucy, now not just pleased but close to joyous, hooted in reply. This was, without doubt, the happiest day of her young life, and when she could clearly make out the darker outcrop of rock jutting from the verdant valley floor she broke into a run, laughing wildly even as she tripped and tumbled, as she often did, pounding across the countryside, each time righting herself and belting forward with a push from her calloused knuckles.

Soon she'd reached the rocks, and screamed with delight when she saw him, squatting on his haunches on a rock about twelve feet above her head, and squinting into the setting sun. He turned his head when he heard her, screamed himself and pounced off the rock to where Lucy stood, grabbing her in his arms and kissing her passionately on her open, gasping mouth. Their tongues writhed together, intermingling their spit and panting breath as he held her tightly in his strong and hairy arms and she pressed herself against him, feeling that strange something melt inside which only melts, though you hardly know it, when you're in love.

He finally drew back from the embrace, breathing heavily, and held her at arm's length just to look at her. The sun, now very low and very red, glimmered in her eyes. They both smiled, then grinned, then grinned more broadly, idiotically, exposing the teeth at the edges of their upturned mouths, before they kissed again. Oh, how she loved him, Lucy thought, how she adored his firm body and funny, puzzled look and even the strange and different smells emanating from the various soft crevices about his body which her short fingers now gently probed. And oh! How she yearned to spend tonight and every night here beneath the stars, him holding her and her holding him in each other's hairy arms, their muzzles locked together in an endless kiss, and neither of them caring that they didn't know each other's names, backgrounds, origins or even, in these changeable times, species. They were young and in love, which is all that really matters.

Soon, as the moon rose and the stars shone bright, they made love on a narrow ledge among the rocks, in the gentle way they liked. Far off and closer by, envious lionesses roared and early elephants trumpeted and monogamous jackals yelped and the whole of animal creation chorused Lucy and her lover as they climaxed and came, over and over again, the warm juices of their love spilling and sticking to their furry loins, legs and bellies until, exhausted and happier than they could have thought possible, they fell asleep, still clinging together on their narrow, rocky, sticky, stinky bower of bliss about five foot three inches above the Rift Valley.

It was around twenty minutes before dawn that they fell.



# Eden

By the time the sun had been up for a couple of hours, and was rising higher and higher into the equatorial sky, Lucy's lover left, loping off across the savannah to who knows where. He'd licked her muzzle and groomed her pelt at the nape of the neck, in the way he knew she loved, and left her to sit sunning herself, leaning against the warming rock. As she watched him go, she smiled and smiled and smiled.

The serpent, coiled up in a crevice close by, opened first one eye and then the other and slithered over to Lucy, where he coiled up again between her splayed legs. She smiled down at the narrow creature, her australopithecine heart still overbrimming with unconditional love for the whole of creation.

'Well,' said the snake, nestling closer to the inside of her left thigh, 'you certainly look pleased with yourself.'

'HmMMMMM,' Lucy hummed, still grinning, and playing with her hair.

'It won't do, you know.'

'Mmmmmmmmmmm.'

'It's going to get worse after this. It's downhill all the way from here on in. You realise that we're all doomed.'

Lucy picked at a scab on her right elbow, not really listening. Snakes were all like this, full of gloom, doom and their own self-importance.

'Soon will come a time when the threads of life that connect us living creatures will be broken. Different species will no longer be able to speak to each other as we do now. The bonds that unite us will be severed and a terrible time will come, when creature will turn on creature. No longer will the edible give themselves from love to those who eat them, but from fear and terror. No longer will the eaters

consume their friends with blissful gratitude. All will be sundered. We will become mere beasts, your kind most of all.'

'Yeah. Right.' Lucy wiggled a bit as the snake nestled closer in.

'My kind can see all this, for we have, in this golden age, the gift of foresight and prophecy. I can see right now the fruit of last night's love growing inside you. You and lover-boy have produced something new, something different. You have a monster inside you, Lucy, a new kind of creature. I can see hundreds and thousands and millions of years into the future, and I can see what it and its kind will turn into. They will seek only to destroy all our friends, they will be driven by greed and fear and hatred, and they will despoil this beautiful world of ours, and make things far far worse whenever they pause, reflect on the ruination and try to make things, as they see it, better.' The snake slithered in even closer.

'Jesus Christ!' Lucy yelled.

'Who?' the snake asked, distracted for a second from his oration.

'What are you up to down there?'

'But while your unborn child, subdividing away in there' - the snake paused to lick whatever it was he had instead of lips - 'shows every prospect of becoming the very devil, I know a way of turning it into an angel. All it lacks, the tiny but defining factor that will and can change all our destinies, is compassion. Just that feeble spark that permits us all to see the bigger picture. Call it empathy if you like, that intangible thing which, it so happens, my species has in spades, and which I can give your little unborn baby and all the creatures after its kind that will succeed it. I can save us all, Lucy. Just let me inside you, there's a poppet. Simply a little nip from my fangs and everything will be fine, as good as it is now, and soon even better. Then we can all live happily ever after. Just . . . let . . . me . . . in . . .'



'Cor! What a perv!' Lucy giggled as the snake pushed his head forward. 'Ooo! Hmmm . . . Ooo, that's . . . mmmmm . . .'

What the snake said next was, obviously, rather muffled, including his hoarse squawk as Lucy instinctively and involuntarily started to squeeze.

THE ADULTERIOS OF  
SAINT LUCY



# The Apotheosis of Saint Lucy

Rocking on thin haunches as if about to leap up to Heaven, Saint Simeon Stylites wiped his long and dripping nose on the sleeve of his hair shirt, peered into the Wilderness through his senile yellow eyes and, rising slowly, stiffly and loudly from his crouching position, shuffled about his platform. His lips fluttered in prayer as he clasped his hands round a jagged lump of rock, specks and patches of skin dropping into his beard and mouth. The rheumy eyes watered as he stared fixedly into the spinning and crossing circles in the heart of the rising sun, bisected by a thin skirt of cloud just above the horizon. The fleshless legs that had lately borne manacles, heavy chains and primitive barbed wire smarted as his knees struck the floor of the platform and crunched on the litter of sharp little pebbles, bones and ossified turds that covered it, and his throat, lined with gritty phlegm, rasped. He spat over the parapet and sixty feet below and several seconds later, the desert hissed briefly in reply. Saint Simeon Stylites, his loins tightening at the chance remembrance of a fifteen-year-old thought, ground his unforgiving fist into his wayward groin, and then clutched the rock tighter, smiling as the blood began to dribble between his fingers and drip onto his sacred thighs, meandering thereafter down to the floor to cloy as it mingled with the dusty rubbish round his knees. And indeed, the saint concluded in his blessed head teetering on top of his weak old spine, surely I am the holiest man alive.

Below, meanwhile, in the cool shadows just before dawn, the first pilgrims took up their places for the day ahead and Saint Daniel Stylites, a disciple of Saint Simeon's on holiday

from his hermitage in the rocks outside Constantinople, was chatting to a Nubian centurion.

‘Oh yes,’ he said, looking up at the platform and smiling contentedly, ‘I’ve been coming here regularly for the last, let’s see, fourteen years, is it? Or is it fifteen? Good heavens! But I must say he’s ailing noticeably. Terrible shame, really, when you think about all the marvellous things he did when he was younger. Do you know that he once fasted for three whole years? Not a drop of water, not a bite to eat. Wonderful really when you think about it.’

Above them the saint could just be seen stumbling at the edge of his platform, and for a second Saint Daniel thought of jumping up and down and waving. Then he remembered his companion and his dignity, though not necessarily in that order, and cocked his head and smiled benignly instead.

The Nubian clicked his tongue. ‘You think he’ll be dead before Christmas? Bloody tragic, that. I’m told the Emperor was planning to come and see him.’

‘The Emperor, eh?’

‘That’s right. This new one we just got.’

‘Yeah,’ interrupted an Italian tourist who, like Saint Daniel and the Nubian, held out his arms in the shape of Christ crucified and squinted through the rays of the sun rising out of Persia at the old man on top of his pillar. ‘Another Egyptian wide boy. The things they lumber us with from Byzantium.’ Saint Daniel looked sideways at the tourist and sniffed loudly. The sun rose higher over the edge of the World, obliterating the shadows as it went.

They stood in silence for a while amid the bustle of pilgrims around the column’s base, each left to his own prayers or thoughts. Saint Daniel thought about his old friend who’d fled the World and its temptations, and thought with fond recollection of Simeon’s rejection of its greatest perils and his remarkable demonstrations of faith performed in his efforts to come to terms with the Living God: the

chains wound tightly round his scrotum and linked to heavy weights dangling from the edge of his plinth; the ever growing height of the pillar as he removed himself further and further away from the perfidious ways of womankind; the turmoils and battles for his soul as sultry succubi disported themselves in the guise of pilgrims in the surrounding deserts and sought to pull him down to Damnation with their caresses.

A reflex grunt of disgust disturbed Daniel's thoughts. It was now nearing noon, and most of the pilgrims were already at lunch in the white convent down the valley. Just a few of the specially pious or especially curious stood, arms extended cruciform, in the heat of the Syrian desert. Saint Daniel blew out of the corners of his mouth at the tiny flies buzzing round his eyes, as scorpions scurried across the hot bright sand.

'Come here often?' the Italian tourist asked.

'Oh yes, fourteenth year. They really are terribly good about it down at the convent, you know. All these people descending on them all year round and never a word of complaint.'

The Italian mumbled something in Latin which Saint Daniel chose to ignore.

'Yes, they all know me down there, but then I am what you might call something of a regular.' Saint Daniel chortled to himself and adopted a blank expression which seemed to tell of some inner peace, as if his soul had settled down to rest amidst the turmoil of this Temporal Battlefield. 'Well, lunch time I think,' he said, patting his stomach, and he trudged off down the valley across the broken stones that littered the ground.

After lunch, having fallen asleep in a grove of ancient olive trees several hundred yards behind the convent, Saint Daniel was disturbed. Having been lulled to sleep by the monotonous of the cicadas, he now awoke to the sound of his

own name being repeated in a harsh whisper. He opened an eye and saw one of the Brothers from the convent, who he couldn't remember having seen before. Opening the other eye, he focused on the monk who was, he reckoned, about fourteen years old and, by the look of him, a Greek. 'What is it?' croaked Saint Daniel. 'What do you want?'

'Father Daniel, you must help me!'

The saint grimaced. 'Look, I'm awfully tired. What is it? I can't really hear a confession out here, you know.'

'Father Daniel!' The monk stared at him with the look of certain madness. 'Father Daniel, I can't hear anything!'

'Well, I'm sorry, but . . .' The saint checked himself and was about to shout the same words again when he was hushed by loud, nasal whimpers as the monk pawed violently at his robes.

'No, no! In here! In here!' The young monk banged his temples with both his fists until his ears began to bleed. Then he told Saint Daniel the wildest story he'd ever heard.

Many years ago - the year Daniel had first come on pilgrimage to Syria, in fact - when Simeon was in his prime and his pillar was only forty feet high, a naive local Arab girl had scaled the column one night, thinking to join the lonely holy man on top in prayer to his potent djinn. Simeon had been scourging himself at the time, and tied up in chains he hadn't noticed the girl pull herself up over the edge of his platform because of the noise of clanking. But when he did, and saw her smiling at him and brushing the muck from her clothes, he let out a dreadful scream that startled even the jackals cringing among the rocks. Before she even had a chance to say hello, the saint jumped on her, tripping over his chains and bringing them both crashing to the filthy floor. Her cries were drowned out by his, as he alternately throttled her and called her Satan, then raped and bugged her, calling her Gabriel, before he grabbed her round the waist and hurled her off his pillar.

Later some monks chased away the jackals with their torches and carried the mad girl they'd found being eaten by the beasts to their convent to see if she'd live, doing their best to ignore her crazy stories. Shortly afterwards Simeon started work on heightening his column.

Daniel remembered this. He also remembered how grumpy the saint had been during the construction, throwing rocks and rubbish at any pilgrim who came within range, and spending the nights preaching vile apocalyptic sermons to the jackals sitting attentively round the base of the pillar. But he'd never heard of any girl rescued from the desert night, nor indeed of any motherless child being reared at the convent. The mad monk's eyes blazed with either rage or fervour, and he went on with his story.

When he was born his mother had stared at him, screamed and run off into Syria. Thus abandoned, he'd been brought up in seclusion by a gossipy old nun who told him contradictory tales of his origins. Yes, he was the diabolical issue of a union between his succubus whore mother and the jackal god of the pagan Egyptians; he was holy Simeon's holy son, brought down to earth on a cushion carried by angels; he was hellspawn conceived in Simeon's battle with Satan, born with no skin to a camel and with eagle's claws instead of hands and feet; he'd been wrested from the slaver's maw of a she-jackal loping off to her den with him held in her jaws by the scruff of his neck. His father was, variously, Simeon, Satan, Jesus, Caesar, an Ethiopian eunuch, the sun itself and the dust of the desert; his mother, alternatively, had been eaten finally by the jackals, had become a pagan empress of terrific cruelty in the East, had been changed into a goblin and swallowed up by a hellhole or had assumed the Kingdom of Heaven in a chariot of fire. But whatever his origins, and whoever his parents, the monk knew this: as he'd grown, and the nun told him thousands upon thousands of stories, she'd mingled them with tales of how Simeon, the holiest man alive, spent every

day in earnest conversation with the Living God, which was why he'd built his pillar to get closer and closer to Heaven, as he was getting a bit hard of hearing these days. Oh yes, the nun added, she and everyone else on God's good Earth had been spoken to by God, and He said the nicest things too.

But as the monk tried to sleep at night, listening to the songs of the cicadas and hearing the sands shift and the rocks crunch as they settled down round Hell, he'd never heard a word from God.

'Never! And now there's the dreams and the blood, Father Daniel! And I can't sleep because of the noise of the pilgrims breathing and the monks praying and the jackals and everything and the pounding in my head and my hair and my fingernails growing and . . . and . . .' The monk was grinding his teeth and rolling his eyes. 'I can't hear God! What does He say? Why won't He speak to me like He does to everyone else? And why haven't I got . . . why haven't I got a . . .' But unable to continue, the monk collapsed in sobs into Saint Daniel's coarse shirt.

'Hi!' Saint Daniel called to the Nubian after evensong. 'Extraordinary thing happened to me this afternoon,' he gasped as he hurried to catch up with the centurion. 'Most peculiar fellow came and told me he couldn't hear God. Now what do you make of that?'

The Nubian snorted. 'Bloody fool.'

'Well, that's what I thought too, and a lunatic as well. And you know what? He claimed he was Simeon's son too! Now, I've known Simeon long enough to know that he's . . .' Then Daniel half heard the Italian mumble something obscene in his vile Latin drawl, and was about to admonish him when a long, loud wail broke through the night.

Up on top of the pillar, with the Great Wilderness dimly lit by distant stars, Saint Simeon Stylites lay dead on the floor of



his platform covered with dust, sand and garbage. His broken body gave off a slight yellow glow and a powerful stench, his hair shirt was alive with bugs, rigid with age and in tatters, his beard stiff with sweat, saliva and grease. The young monk stood over him, trembling with fear. The old man's gums had snapped shut and his jaw had then fallen down to his deflated chest as he'd stared into the Wilderness; there was a gleam in his clouded eye and a smile turning up the edges of his loose mouth, just as if he'd heard nothing the young monk had said to him. Then the saint had tried to point to something, but when the monk looked round there was nothing there. The saint had mumbled words which the monk couldn't understand, and had paid no attention when he'd pulled up his habit to show his father the pubescent female body God had cursed him with. Then Saint Simeon Stylites had given up the ghost. The monk fell to his knees and threw himself across the saint's body, the enormity of the World closing down on him. And yet still he heard no God. As he looked at the cohorts of pilgrims that came and went each day, he'd hear everything: court gossip, the moans of beggars and cripples, the tourists' gasps and chitchat. Thousands, and thousands of thousands, came: on crutches, in litters, with diamonds on every finger, with no toes at all, with powdered or painted or oiled or pitted or disintegrating faces, in the middle of which were the always open mouths from which issued a Pandemonium that filled the skies and enveloped the globe, loading the air to the point of explosion and bashing on the doors of Heaven and Hell alike. And the monk heard nothing through the babel, and began to sob again, his beardless lower lip, set low down in his girlish face, trembling between gasps. Then, slowly, he looked up, and listened to something he'd never heard before. And, more curiously, to nothing else. On top of a pillar some sixty feet from base to summit, in the middle of an empty waste in a barbaric age a small girl, who believed what she was

told and so thought herself a freak on more levels than she could count, heard the word of God come tumbling at her through thousands of miles across the Wilderness.

And the word was 'Jump'.



# New Mexico

'Well?' The albino's red eyes flashed in reply to the thin red light from the setting sun and he counted on up to fifteen. 'Hard day?'

Cortés, you see, came early. That, or the beginning of the World came late. Either way, the conquistador, working to a different timetable, gave the matter little thought and instead screamed blue murder as the attendant priests bolted the crystal skull over his hairy face, counting aloud as they did so. The screams were drowned by the noise of chanting and music while Moctezuma, smiling idiotically at the bound and masked Spaniard, patted his arm and cooed at him. The attendant priests, eyes averted from the God King, smeared narcotic potions of ash and spumen over Cortés's heaving chest and then Moctezuma lowered the onyx knife to the prescribed place a fraction above Cortés's left nipple, drove it in and sliced out a perfect circle in the flesh. The attendant priests danced and chanted. Other priests continued counting as they smeared the blood in geometric patterns on Cortés's torso. Absurd equations flashed through Moctezuma's mind, addled by the peyote he chewed frantically and the hallucinogenic greasepaint covering his face, limbs and torso. A sacred oil of mescal was poured over his hands as he snapped apart Cortés's ribs and severed the aorta and other arteries in a single, rapid, circular slash and he giggled crazily as he held up the vanquished conquistador's black and still beating heart high above his head, silhouetted against the rising sun over the roaring Mexican nation. Then, suddenly, Moctezuma lost count.

Cortés, as I said, came early. The sheaf was not complete. Quetzalcoatl was not yet expected. The end of the World,

moreover, was by no means due.

Down in the plaza below the Great Pyramid youths swung in an unwinding motion from lianas tied to their feet, marking out in their revolutions the exactitudes of the Aztec calendar. Feathered headdresses bobbed among the crowd between huddles of priests adding, subtracting, dividing and multiplying back to the moment of Creation and then back again to now. Old women made signs in the air with their hands, while the priests around Moctezuma counted up to fifteen, then up to fifteen again in a ceaseless round. The remaining blood in Cortés's heart beat out over Moctezuma's cheeks and mingled with the greasepaint, exacerbating its effect.

Cortés had come early. The reports of the invaders failed to alarm the priests busy over their sums. The Spanish envoy had been laughed at and then sacrificed, thus ensuring the easy victory the following dawn when Cortés's army had been ambushed, disarmed and captured. And Moctezuma now laughed out loud, lurched sideways and tossed Cortés's heart over the edge of the pyramid as he was guided to the altar where the Tlaxcalan chief, Cortés's ally and co-celebrant in the continuing act of devotion, lay bound.

Later, however, the Aztec was troubled. Back in the palace in the late afternoon he splashed his sleeve stirring gold dust and marijuana shavings into his coffee, and shouted at the feathered lackey who cringed and backed away, eyes averted according to custom. How could he be sure, despite all the calculations, that this absurd army of pale monkeys had not, after all, been a foretaste of things to come? The Fire Era, although not over, was close to its end and so, therefore, were History, Time and the World itself. Moctezuma wondered, with a tightening feeling in his chest, whether his calculations had been as exact as his fellow gods'. Worse still, the victory sacrifices had, exceptionally, taken place on the eleventh day of the week - with the Tlaxcalans included, the invading army had numbered