



The Mackerel Plaza

Peter De Vries

Our church is, I believe, the first split-level church in America. It has five rooms and two baths downstairs . . . There is a small worship area at one end.

There'd be little groups discussing like Kierkegaard and herb cooking and which were the places to go in the Touraine.

I had to call on a woman bent on visiting hospitals and organizing hymn sings among the patients, and to discourage her.

I was only always high-tailing it after everything in skirts, that's all.

'Let us hope,' I prayed, 'that a kind Providence will put a speedy end to the acts of God under which we have been labouring.'

Mackerel has a long, slender face, its rather peevish constituents relieved by red cheeks and blue eyes that have often been termed 'boyish'. Round and yearning, they stand out, among the drawn intellectual's lineaments, like eggs in the wrong nest.

PENGUIN BOOKS

1936

THE MACKEREL PLAZA

PETER DE VRIES



PETER DE VRIES

The Mackerel Plaza

PENGUIN BOOKS

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex
AUSTRALIA: Penguin Books Pty Ltd, 762 Whitehorse Road,
Mitcham, Victoria

—
First published in the U.S.A. 1958
Published in Great Britain by Gollancz 1958
Published in Penguin Books 1963

—
Copyright © Peter De Vries, 1958

—
Made and printed in Great Britain
by Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd
Aylesbury and Slough
Set in Linotype Juliana

This book is sold subject to the condition
that it shall not, by way of trade, be lent,
re-sold, hired out, or otherwise disposed
of without the publisher's consent,
in any form of binding or cover
other than that in which
it is published

FOR GUS LOBRANO

in Memoriam

CHAPTER ONE

LIKE most irritable people I rarely lose my temper (a dog that's let out for regular exercise isn't as apt to run away when it does escape), but I was losing it this morning. I said into the telephone, 'Office of the Zoning Board? This is Mr Mackerel. Reverend Mackerel - of P.L.'

'?'

'People's Liberal.'

'Oh, yes. That church.' The voice at the other end was a female one. 'What can I do for you, Reverend Mackerel?'

'I want to report a billboard in the Mobile Bay section,' I said, glancing out the window over the treetops to an intersection where the offending object was plainly visible. 'This is a residential area, where I need not remind you public hoardings are strictly forb--'

'Yes, I know. You're triple-A out there. Please don't get upset, Reverend Mackerel. Go on.' The woman - or more likely, girl - was audibly eating something, a fact not calculated to soothe Mackerel's nerves or cool his pique.

'I assume a waiver was granted by the Zoning Board or the signboard wouldn't have got as far as it is,' I went on.

'How far is it?'

'It's up! I can see it now from my study window, over there on Cooper Street. And I don't like it.'

'What does it say, Reverend Mackerel?'

'It says -' I craned my neck to look out the window, as though I had again to verify the testimony of my senses. 'It says, "Jesus Saves".'

'Oh, yes.' There was a silence at the other end, except for an act of deglutition, and then a faint crackling noise which I could believe was that of a successor to a swallowed caramel

being unwrapped. 'I only work here,' the girl declared at last, 'but I do remember something about the board deciding that wasn't strictly commercial.'

'Commercial! That's not the point. It's vulgar. And the lettering is that awful new phosphorescent stuff – green and orange. No, this is a blight on the landscape and I protest.'

'I know what you mean, now that you mention it. You're not the first to complain. The Presbyterians are appalled. The Episcopalians are sick. All the better element there, with property values at stake –'

'Oh, property values! Please get that out of your mind, miss. Do you think I own the parsonage I live in? I'm talking about spiritual values. Spiritual and aesthetic ones. How do you expect me to write a sermon with that thing staring me in the face? How do you expect me to turn out anything fit for civilized consumption?'

'I know. It's terribly *de trop*. And in that part of town – the Mobile Bay section!' There was another silence, but a thoughtful one this time, and unbroken by any of those annoying sounds. Then she said, 'But do you think you're entirely right in opposing this? I know this man is a cheap huckster of religion – your religion – but it's the form his faith takes, and don't we need all the faith we can get today? Doesn't the crisis of our time, the mess in which we find ourselves, come from our not having any *belief*?'

'Nothing concerns me more than the crisis of our time, Miss –'

'Calico.'

'Miss Calico. Nothing concerns me more than the crisis of our time, but, believe me, nothing concerns these people less. They're content precisely to let this life go hang for the sake of another, which you and I know doesn't exist.'

'Well . . .' she said, worriedly.

'Oh, come now.'

'But the world needs restraint. Some moral order. And that

should be on any level the given person can grasp. What does the Apostle Paul say?’

‘I have no idea, but Oscar Wilde reminds us that while crime is not vulgar, vulgarity is a crime. Jesus doesn’t save any of these people, because all they want to do is boost their paltry souls into heaven, while completely shirking the obligation to *evolve*. What we see around us these days is not a revival at all but a kind of backsliding, and I do mean that – a failure of taste as well as nerve.’ To make my point I had resorted to a phrase from my last Sunday’s sermon, and I felt it only fair to the girl to favour her with the entire passage. I therefore continued, ‘Let us think and do according to our *time*. Let us graft on the Christian principle of selflessness, as Auden so cogently urges, the Freudian one of maturity, and come up with an ideal suited to our era. Thus two people, each bent on pursuing a different one of these two systems, would die having lived identical lives: one of consideration for others.’

‘Put it under the phone book so it won’t blow away.’ The girl had evidently moved her head a little to address a fellow-worker in her office, but now her voice resumed more clearly, ‘I’m sorry, Reverend Mackerel. What were you saying?’

‘Nothing. Just tell me whom I see or how I go about filing my complaint.’

‘You can send a letter of protest or stop in at the office here and get yourself on record,’ the girl said. The faint glutinate noises reappeared in my ear. ‘Any time.’

‘I’ll be there this afternoon. I have to go into town anyhow.’

‘That will be fine. We’re in the city hall, of course, second floor. Same office with the Beach Commission. I’m here till like five o’clock.’

Bouncing the three miles to town in the plastic bubble my congregation had given me to commemorate my fifth year as their pastor, I mused on the infinite varieties of human belief

and on the no less infinite variations within a given belief. Mobile Bay – so named by some anonymous wit because of the numerous wire and scrap metal sculptors who infested the area – is a special section of a city that is itself a rather special jewel on the exurbanite strand. Avalon, Connecticut, lies forty miles out of metropolitan New York on the New Haven commuting track. It is a community where tired successes flee to enact the old charade of seeking roots, knowing they will never have them but must and will, like the fabled mistletoe, live and die without them, suspended between the twin oaks of home and office. They live a kind of hand-to-mouth luxury, never knowing where their next quarterly instalment of taxes or the payment on a third car is coming from. It is a community where the cleaning women have washing compulsions; where lawn benefits are given for folk singers who have escaped from jail; where an old-fashioned Christmas consists in truly drinking it otherwise than on the rocks for a week. There, Max Kaminsky, Messy Williams, and other noted trumpeters come up from New York to play at Easter services. There, one overhears conversation like, 'After each divorce, Monica's disillusioned, and then she goes and gets married again.' There, I once heard a woman say, 'I've read Billy Budd four times and hate it more each time.' A special culture, with special and terrible needs, which one tries to meet with all the compassion in one's nature.

Our church is, I believe, the first split-level church in America. It has five rooms and two baths downstairs – dining area, kitchen, and three parlours for committee and group meetings – with a crawl space behind the furnace ending in the hillside into which the structure is built. Upstairs is one huge all-purpose interior, divisible into different-sized components by means of sliding walls and convertible into an auditorium for putting on plays, a gymnasium for athletics, and a ballroom for dances. There is a small worship area at one end. This has a platform cantilevered on both sides, with

a free-form pulpit designed by Noguchi. It consists of a slab of marble set on four legs of four delicately differing fruit-woods, to symbolize the four Gospels, and their failure to harmonize. Behind it dangles a large multi-coloured mobile, its interdenominational parts swaying, as one might fancy, in perpetual reminder of the Pauline stricture against those 'blown by every wind of doctrine'. Its proximity to the pulpit inspires a steady flow of more familiar congregational whim, at which we shall not long demur, going on with our tour to say that in back of this building is a newly erected clinic, with medical and neuropsychiatric wings, both indefinitely expandable. Thus People's Liberal is a church designed to meet the needs of today, and to serve the whole man. This includes the worship of a God free of outmoded theological definitions and palatable to a mind come of age in the era of Relativity. 'It is the final proof of God's omnipotence that he need not exist in order to save us,' Mackerel had preached. (I hope I may be indulged these shifts into the third person in relating things about which I am a trifle self-conscious.) At any rate, this aphorism seemed to his hearers so much better than anything Voltaire had said on the subject that he was given an immediate hike in pay and invited out to more dinners than he could possibly eat.

I parked the car four blocks from the city hall and continued my trip on foot. As I walked along the sidewalk, I found my eye drawn to a form swinging loosely along ahead of me in a belted polo coat. I was unmarried at the time, and prolonged physical denial had made me more than normally susceptible to attractive women.

The one of whom chance had put me in view was a young lady I should have judged, from there, to be in her late twenties. She was a shade above medium height, walked with an easy, fluid stride, and carried a book in one hand. She had finely tapered calves and well-moulded flanks, enhanced, of course, by the rhythms of locomotion. I often

find relief, when publicly exercised, in the notation of a bad feature or disillusioning trait. It's something that I imagine most men do to some extent, at least unconsciously, but I had developed it into a kind of technique for stanching useless stimulation. It was therefore in hopes that a plain profile or something of the sort would balance out the ravishing form and thus, so to speak, get me off the hook that I now hurried to overtake this creature.

Shuttling through the noonday crowds like a broken field runner, without breaking into too conspicuous a trot, I drew abreast of her. Then I turned to look. The profile was a good one. Indeed, it quite lived up to the view that had provoked my quest. I thought, 'Damn.' Well, fine profiles do not always survive stern frontal inspection, so I quickened my pace further to avail myself of that. I scuttled on past her, and then, idling abruptly at a shop window, glanced back. Blue eyes swimming in luxuriant lashes met my own. Her complexion was like flawless amber, and her hair was a cloud of honey.

Seething with rage, I stopped in my tracks altogether to get a look at the book she was carrying, cradled in one arm. Surely deliverance lay there. Surely you couldn't be all that beautiful and intelligent too. Of course – the volume would be a trashy romance, or something in the current vein of inspirational pap. Maybe even just a picture book. That would undo the creature in my eyes, and get me off the hook.

She swung on by and I caught a glimpse of the title: Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought*.

My hands plunged into my pockets, I stood watching her trip out of sight. The place next door was a sandwich shop, into which I presently turned and, after waiting a moment for a stool, sat down at the counter and had a cup of coffee. I drank it moodily, thinking of the girl. When I had finished the coffee, I dropped in at a florist's to order some flowers for a bedridden friend, and then set out for the city hall.

It's a nondescript building of four stories, so pervaded,

even to its stairways, with the smells of worn varnish and unventilated records that comprise the odour of officialdom that I was grateful not to have to mount more than two. I found the office jointly occupied by the Beach Commission and the Zoning Board, and stated my business to the girl in charge. She told me the clerk I wanted had stepped out but would be right back. I sat down on a bench to wait. Wandering around the room, my eye was caught by a book lying on a desk. Its title was *Main Currents in American Thought*. There were two desks in the office. The girl on deck sat working at one. The book was on the other. I sat revolving my hat between my knees, my mind a hash of resentment and dumb, preparatory gloom.

The door opened and she swung in. She was wearing a red and blue plaid wool dress. Her eyes were as blue as I remembered them to be. The hair that had seemed like a halo in the bright sun turned out, at close view, to be an abundance of chopped curls worn in the current tossed-salad mode.

'What can I do for you?' she asked, when the other girl pointed a simple finger at me.

'I've come about the "Jesus Saves" sign,' I said.

'Oh, you're the -?' She recoiled a step in surprise, then laughed and said apologetically, 'But you're young. You can't be more than like thirty-five. And you certainly don't look like a preacher.'

This pleased Mackerel. Mackerel so disliked the term preacher, and so abhorred the term brother, as designations for the clergy that he was always grateful for assurances of their inapplicability to himself. It was not merely the wish to elude prototype that lay at the bottom of this, though that wish did exist in Mackerel to an exquisite degree; it was, more cardinally, a fear of quarantine, a desire to belong to his species - in which even the deferential 'Reverend' tended to blur one's membership - that made him want ever so much to be known simply as Mister Mackerel. The familiarity of 'Hi, there, Mackerel' would not have unduly

alarmed him. Just beyond that, however, lay the comic marshlands of 'Holy Mackerel', a nickname under which he had smarted in student days and which he lived in cold fear of some local wit's reviving even here in Avalon, three hundred New England miles from the seminary where he had been trained. But so far so good. For the decade or so since his ordination, fair winds had carried him safely between opposing caricatures: neither Brother Andrew nor Holy Mackerel, but his own dear human self alone.

He murmured some grateful acknowledgement of Miss Calico's notation, and smiled floorward.

'Well, all right,' she said, passing through a gate in a railing to her place behind the counter, 'you're a taxpayer and you have your rights, but . . .'

Miss Calico pursued the argument she had over the phone, briefly and good-naturedly, and not without a charming self-disparagement. She was no fanatic herself, she laughed, and certainly no 'mental heavyweight', explaining the Parrington, when I pointed inquiringly at that, as something a more intellectual friend had given her. 'I'm only groping for answers, like the rest of us,' she said. 'Not enough watts up here though.' She tapped her skull. She picked up the book and thrust it at me. 'Here, you can have it. I mean it. I'll never finish it. No, I insist. It'll go to waste here. My speed is like the Overstreets or Will Durant. Something you can read at lunch.'

'I'll take it on one condition,' I said. 'That I return it.'

She stooped to pick up a wad of paper from the floor and drop it into a wastebasket.

'Conscientious type,' she said, glancing nervously at the other girl as she straightened up. The other girl smiled wanly without raising her eyes from her work, as though amused by some detail in the day's chores.

It was the principal upshot of my call, and established the main track of my interests for some time to come. But a sequel more directly connected with the business that had

brought me came about when Miss Calico said abruptly, 'If you want to file that protest, I'll put you down and make sure you're notified when the Zoning Board has its next meeting. But I'd go easy. I mean I hear the fellow's a religious crackpot, and they can be dangerous.'

'Then it is a private party?' I said. 'I thought it might be some new tabernacle come to town, or a crowd of Jehovah's Witnesses moving in.'

'No, it's a private party. Name of -' She snapped her fingers, unable to recall, and went to a filing cabinet. She rolled open a drawer, tipped a Manila folder partway up and slanted her head to read something in it. She tucked the folder back down and slid the drawer shut. 'Turnbull. Frank Turnbull. He lives over there on Massasoit Drive. What's the matter?'

I gripped the book I had in my hands and made an effort to control myself. I must have paled. The crank was a parishioner of mine. A member of my own congregation! A man exposed each Sunday morning to what were taken to be among the more urbane dissertations available at that hour in Avalon, and this was the fruit of it. He puts up evangelical billboards. It had come to that.

'Nothing,' I said. 'The name just sounded familiar. Thanks a lot for your trouble. You've been very kind. I won't file. This is something I've got to handle myself. I'll return the book in a week or so. I'm very scrupulous about those things.'

I said good-bye and headed back uptown in the runabout, making straight for Turnbull's house and driving her faster than I yet had. I could feel myself losing my temper for the second time that day. And after this, off on another mission of some delicacy. I had to call on a woman bent on visiting hospitals and organizing hymn sings among the patients, and to discourage her.

The problems of running a congregation were getting to be too much for me. I ought to have an assistant.

CHAPTER TWO

RIDING along in the plastic bubble, I thought some more about this business of my temper. At least in that respect I was resembling our Lord, who was forever losing his. It took very little to rile him – Scribes and Pharisees, his family, even a fig tree.

By the time I reached Turnbull's house my anger had pretty well subsided, and I felt ready to deal with him objectively, little realizing what new irritant lay in store for me. It was a puzzle what made old man Turnbull tick. He represented what any minister will tell you is the bane of parish work: somebody who has got religion. It's as embarrassing to a cleric of sensibility as 'poetry lovers' are to a poet, and in much the same way. Besides being a nuisance it can be very time-consuming. Turnbull expected me to be on tap at all hours like a doctor, not scrupling to rout me out of bed in the middle of the night to ask about some spiritual point that had come up in his mind or some doubt that was vexing him. Lately he had become obsessed with a sense of sin – which had undoubtedly touched off the Jesus Saves thing.

I saw his shaggy head watching from the window as I parked in front of his house, a damp, cavernous place in which he lived alone, and he opened the door before I could touch the bell.

'Thank God you've come,' he said, taking my hat. He plucked it directly from my head, which struck me as odd, even by his rather weird standards of hospitality. Indicative of tension.

'Then you called *me*?' I said, closing the door behind me.

'Yes. Your housekeeper said you were out and I left the message. Isn't that what brought you?'