

Shazia's week



I thought I'd lived a bit. But there's always something round the corner in the US that still shocks me

I like to think I've lived a bit, that I'm open-minded, non-judgemental and well-travelled. But this Easter Sunday, I found myself in the boiling San Francisco heat where, to celebrate Christ's resurrection, a Hunky Jesus contest was taking place in Dolores Park. It was organised by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, an order of gay nuns who devote themselves to community service, human rights and spiritual enlightenment. That's the kind of nun I like, and I was certainly enlightened by Sunday's events.

I went along with my Jewish friend Francesca. It was the only Easter celebration she'd ever been to and I had to explain to her that it probably wouldn't be the most traditional.

As we approached the park we found thousands of people, many of them gay men, dressed in the most elaborate costumes and brightly coloured dresses with weird accessories. They had made an enormous effort for Easter Sunday, more of an effort than I have ever seen anywhere else in the world.

Screaming and cheering began as the contestants stepped on to the hill for the Hunky Jesus competition. It was the most sacrilegious thing I have ever seen.

First up was the Double Jesus – two men joined together by two bright pink crosses, both wearing leather Y-fronts, and with a sign attached to their nipples saying "Twice the Crucifixion". Then came a Jesus with a selection of

weights on his back, falling over himself and splashing red wine all over his face. Contestant number three was Jesus on a stick – a man in a pink dress attached to a lollipop stick that he was licking, with crudely painted toenails and sex toys hanging from all parts of his body. Finally came Michelangelo's Jesus, who was an uncanny Jesus lookalike, except when he turned around he revealed a bare backside.

The crowd screamed; they loved it. I stood on the sidelines in shock.

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There were no Christian groups rallying in opposition, no placard waving or death threats. The only odd thing about the event was me, standing on the pavement with my mouth wide open, notebook in hand, taking notes.

I know if there'd been a Hunkiest Muhammad contest, there would definitely have been a few fatwas flying around the place, certainly a few deaths and, with luck, maybe a resurrection. But I can't imagine this sort of thing happening in Britain. Such defiant exhibitionism is uniquely Californian.

After it all ended, I walked down the street and saw that most of the cars had Support Obama stickers on them. One man was holding

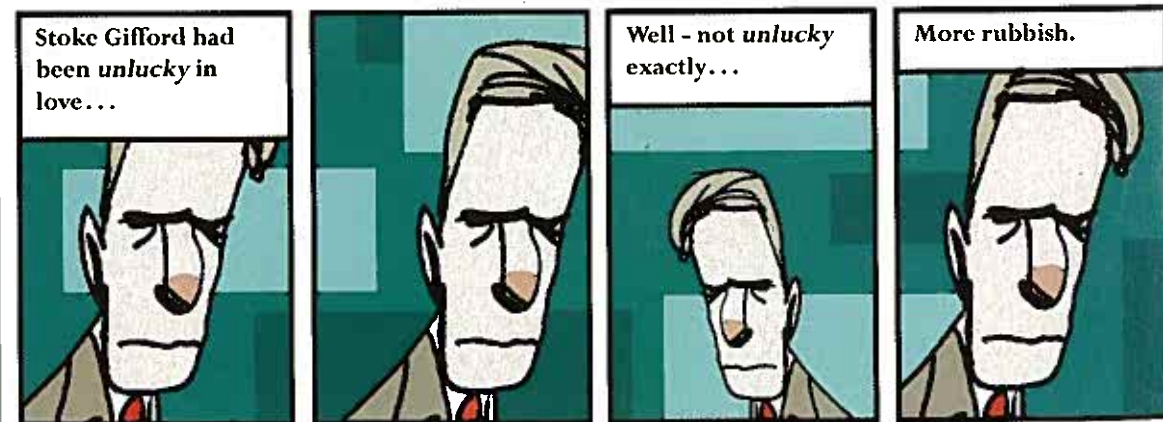
a flag with a picture of John McCain and the words "Burn him like a chip". The strangest thing for me is to be in America, to speak with an English accent, and to be mistaken for a Mexican. People keep coming up to me and speaking in Spanish. I talk back to them in Punjabi. It's a lot of fun.

I'm off to perform in Las Vegas in a few days. I've never been, but I've been warned over and over again by Americans in every other state about its greatness and its tackiness. And if Americans warn you that something's great and tacky you know it's got to be worth seeing.

When I think of Vegas I think of casinos built like Roman palaces and hotels with white tigers in the lobby. I think of Elton John and Céline Dion, two formidable icons of opulence and bad taste. I was looking forward to seeing Bette Midler perform, but now it turns out she's got a week's holiday. Still, there will be lots of interesting people with gambling addictions, whom I can look forward to meeting instead.

I'm beginning to think I haven't lived as much as I thought. There's always something round the corner in the US that still shocks me. I'm sure Las Vegas will be great fun. Who knows? By my next column, me and Michelangelo's Jesus may have been married by a gold lamé-clad Elvis at a drive-in wedding chapel. Here's hoping. ● Shazia Mirza

PAYNE'S GREY BY CHRIS PRIESTLEY



Shazia Mirza has been shortlisted for Columnist of the Year (Consumer Magazines) in the PPA Magazines 2008 Awards for editorial and publishing excellence