

Salvation

Laura McCune-Poplin

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She held the umbrella close to her head, limiting her vision to the circle of stones at her feet. Anna watched her companion's hemline bounce in time to the click of her heels against the cobblestones. Water from Soeur Buckley's shoes flicked upwards, soaking the back of her skirt. They walked past a pharmacy. The neon cross flashed above the closed doors, intermittently tainting the wet sidewalk green. Nearby, somebody was burning cedar in a fireplace. Anna inhaled, holding the smell of smoke and rain in her lungs. Soeur Buckley stopped walking.

"Let's go down this street," she said. She checked the name on the blue sign against the one on the map. "Then we can cut across the park."

Soeur Buckley was always trying to find a new route home. At night she would take a yellow highlighter and color the streets on a map she had bought, which hung on the wall above her bed. Her goal was to have colored every street in the city before she was transferred.

Today's street was narrow and crooked; uninterrupted walls of four-story buildings lined both sides. Water pooled in the road where cobblestones were missing or worn down. In one of the puddles sat a dog, licking raindrops off the face of an old man.

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"Is he dead?" Soeur Buckley asked.

Anna looked for someone who could help, but the street was silent except for the sound of raindrops drumming the nylon above her head. She closed the umbrella. Soeur Buckley held out her hand to the dog and petted his head while Anna knelt next to the body. When Anna put her cheek next to the man's mouth, she could smell his breath before she felt it.

"He's just drunk."

Anna rolled him onto his back while Soeur Buckley held the dog's leash. The puddle had soaked through the clothes on the left side of his body. His raincoat fell to the side and Anna could see a dark patch of urine staining the front of his trousers. Gently, she shook the man's shoulders. Then less gently.

"Monsieur."

The dog growled and Anna looked up at the leash in Soeur Buckley's hand.

"Try again," Soeur Buckley said.

"Pardon, Monsieur."

He moaned softly and touched his forehead. Water dripped off the tip of his elbow. Anna helped him sit up, her grasp squeezing the water out of his sleeve.

"My papers? Where are my papers?" He fumbled with his hands, checking the pockets of his raincoat. He felt a bulge in his chest pocket and pulled out a sopping envelope stuffed with folded squares of paper. He put it back.

"Where is Ilka?"

Soeur Buckley handed him the leash. She helped Anna lift the old man to his feet. He was short and frail looking. His wet clothes clung to his skinny limbs. Rain rolled down the front of his bald head and pooled at the tip of his nose. Anna held his hand and supported his back while Soeur Buckley took his elbow and the leash. He nodded to the left. They started walking.

"Who are you?" the old man asked, squinting through the rain at the black nametag on Anna's coat.

"Soeur Adams," she said.

"You're nuns?" He looked over at Soeur Buckley, mouthing the name on her plaque.

Soeur Buckley smiled. "Missionaries. Les Mormons."

"I don't want anything to do with your church," he said after a mo-

ment. The man wrinkled his eyebrows together. They were full of captured raindrops.

Soeur Buckley laughed, looking at Anna over the top of his head. "Even the drunkards don't like us," she said in English.

"I'm Catholic, non-practicing."

"We know," she replied. "The whole country is Catholic, non-practicing."

"So what are you doing here?" he asked Anna.

"Helping you."

They arrived at a red door at the bottom of one of the four-story buildings. The old man pulled his hand away from Anna's and reached into his pocket. He handed her the wet envelope.

"Take one."

She pulled out a piece of paper.

"Take one for her, too," he said solemnly, pointing to Soeur Buckley.

Anna took another paper and put them in her pocket. Suddenly, the old man leaned back and cupped his hands to his mouth.

"Mireille," he shouted. The loud rasping noise made Soeur Buckley jump. The old man started to fall over, and Anna reached out to steady him. He kept yelling.

"Mireille," Soeur Buckley shouted with him.

The door opened.

"Michel. Where have you been?" A woman with white hair pulled back into a bun, took his arm and helped him inside. "How did you get so wet?" she asked, wiping her hand on her apron.

"I fell." He glanced at the missionaries to see if they would contradict him. They didn't. Soeur Buckley held the leash out to the woman.

"Here's your dog," she said.

The woman took the leash and looked at Michel, waiting for an explanation.

"They're Mormon missionaries," he whispered into her ear.

The woman's eyes narrowed. "We're not interested."

She shook a crooked index finger at Anna and Soeur Buckley and quickly shut the door. The missionaries remained on the doorstep, standing side by side. Anna leaned in closer to examine the cracks in the red paint. The door used to be painted white.

After a minute, Anna stepped back from the door and held out her hand. She looked over at Soeur Buckley and smiled. "It stopped raining."

1

He looked past his reflection in the mirror that lined the wall of the booth. The details of his face disappeared as he focused on the stacks of paper covering his table. He leaned toward the mirror, trying to make out a single word from the rivers of backward letters. Instead, he saw a dark red stain spreading through the stacks. He glanced down at his overturned glass and watched the red wine dissolve columns upon columns of neatly penned words.

Michel stood up and clumsily blotted the folded papers with the cloth napkin from his lap. He left the soiled napkin on top of his ruined work, gathered the rest of his piles and shoved them into an envelope, which he placed in the pocket of his raincoat. He moved to another table.

"Another glass of wine, please."

The garçon brought over a glass and a small silver ashtray. Michel took the bill from the tray and replaced it with a ten-franc coin. He began to write on the back. *Places I've spilled my drink: Café de l'Art, La Fête de Bombage, Brasserie de la Poste, Tonton's Birthday Party—1956, Gare de Lyon . . .*

Michel covered the paper lengthwise. He turned it sideways. He wrote carefully, like a first-grade student learning cursive for the first time, making sure to cross all his "t's," and connecting his "a's" low so they wouldn't be mistaken for "o's." When he finished, he took another paper from the envelope in his pocket and wrote, *Drinks I've spilled: red wine, hot chocolate, cognac, coffee, warm milk, whiskey, mint syrup . . .*

He stopped writing at the bottom of the third column and asked for more wine. He carefully refolded the paper into three equal portions and placed it on the table. Michel leaned back against the booth and wiped the white residue from the corners of his mouth. His fingers smelled like tobacco. He felt the tightness return to his chest like a hand grabbing his heart as it always did when he stopped writing. One day the hand would squeeze so tightly Michel would die, but Michel had almost finished.

"We close early on Sundays," the garçon said, filling his glass halfway while glancing at the clock above the bar.

Michel motioned for him to keep pouring, "My last drink."

The garçon started stacking chairs on the tables in the center of the room. The metal gate in front of the glass door hovered like an eyelid half

closed. Michel stood up to leave. He noticed a piece of paper on the floor and stooped to pick it up, his knees cracking like broken twigs. A shoe print covered half the paper. Michel turned it over, *People I've met in cafés*, and put it with the others in the envelope.

The garçon raised the metal gate and handed Michel a piece of beef. "For the dog," he said, motioning toward the door.

Michel shuffled out the door while patting his raincoat pockets, looking for his pen. *Names of dogs I've owned*. The gate creaked closed behind him as he fed the meat to Ilka.

Ilka, Chipie, Beni, Chiot, Bilou . . .

Ilka's wet nose sniffed his hand looking for more. Michel untied her leash and they stood together under the awning, watching the rain rebound off the cobblestones.

2

The letter slipped out of the Bible while she was dusting. Holding her back, she bent down to retrieve the paper folded in thirds.

Another list, she thought. Michel usually hid his lists in a wooden box under the bed. He always waited until she was in the bath. Through the hollow door, she would hear the box sliding against the linoleum, the rustle of papers as he emptied his coat pockets. Mireille could see the scratches the rusted nail-heads carved into the floor. He never mentioned his box crammed with bulging envelopes. Perhaps he thought she didn't know. Perhaps it was just a game, a contrived intrigue to make life interesting, as though life could be prolonged in the recording of it.

She unfolded the paper in her hand and saw her name in the top left corner, *Chère Mireille*. For a second, she was tempted to read it, but obviously Michel did not intend for her to find the letter until after he died. Mireille never opened the Bible except to enter the names and dates of important family events. For the last fifteen years, the only entries had been deaths. Her husband's would be next. Quickly, she folded the paper and replaced it between the fragile, yellowed pages. She glanced at the clock. Michel would be home soon. She turned the Bible over and stroked the cracked leather cover with the smooth skin of her palms—only the outsides of her hands were wrinkled. Mireille looked inside the front cover and traced four generations of death with her finger. She stopped at the bottom of the page. Here she would write Michel's name. Michel as ances-

tor. No more drinking. No more lists. Just venerated memories half-forgotten.

She replaced the Bible on the bookshelf and continued dusting. She would read the letter when he died. After she cleaned out his clothes, threw away his lists. She would give everything to the Croix Rouge. The older she got, the more she threw away, disgusted by the waste of leaving things behind. When she died, she hoped her existence would fade to nothing more than the ink used to write her name in the Bible next to Michel's.

Mireille pulled back the lace curtain and looked out the window. Rain pattered against the glass trying to get in, succeeding in the corners where the window frame had warped with age. She took the washcloth out of her apron pocket to wipe up the puddle of water pooling on the windowsill. The street below her was empty. She looked as far left as she could without opening the window. No Michel.

In the kitchen, the duck had started to boil over. Perfumed steam permeated the apartment. Mireille turned the heat down on the gas stove and covered the bird to let it simmer. Dinner would be ready.

Mireille shook the crumbs off the tablecloth and set the table for two. The thick vapor of boiled duck filled the kitchen, covering the walls with a thin film of grease and moisture. She opened the window to let out the steam and sat down to wait.

4

The candle flame flickered in the draft from the window, bouncing lilac-scented shadows off the walls. Anna lit a candle every night before going to bed. Its glow colored the insides of her eyelids orange when she said her prayers.

Soeur Buckley stopped reading and slammed the Book of Mormon shut.

"You're keeping that?" she asked, looking at Anna who sat cross-legged on her bed, surrounded by books and small scraps of paper.

Anna nodded. She put down the scissors and started painting circles of rubber cement on the back of the old man's paper. *Animals I have seen in zoos*. She smoothed the list into her journal, rubbing the corners to make sure they stayed down. *Brown bear, dromedary, boa constrictor . . .*

Soeur Buckley laughed to herself and pulled the blanket up under her arms.

"Did you see the look on that lady's face when she found out we were missionaries?" she asked. "If I had a picture of her, that's what I'd glue in my journal." Soeur Buckley leaned back on her pillow and closed her eyes, still smiling.

Anna checked the journal to make sure the glue had dried. *Lion, orangutan, gazelle*. She inclined her head toward the open pages and could see the indentations Michel's pen had pressed into the paper. His handwriting looked deliberate, as though every word had been written to last forever. Anna closed her journal and watched the flame's reflection dancing in the windowpane. *Rhino, giraffe, elephant . . .* She turned off the lamp and knelt next to her bed, placing her folded hands on top of the blanket as she bowed her head. Anna could see his body lying in the puddle when she shut her eyes.