

# Heloise and Abelard

*Coby Fletcher*

“We’ll get there by ten.”

Nod and look behind, dance a quickstep ahead of the noise of a thousand feet on the wet pavement of Liège. Feels strange to be thrown into a world you’re not part of; I look around me and can’t shake the feeling that we’re all together in the pit of some great stomach and it’s digesting everyone but me.

Paranoia? Maybe. All these people and I’m the only one in the crowd to see the deluge for what it is: a colossus, a monolithic perversion shoving its big, wet finger up and down the streets until the only things left behind are soaked buildings and sidewalks, grayish channels where the glum looks of passersby hover like flies.

What is life without the usual distinctions? The Certainty?

No Certainty, only formerly sharp sidewalks smeared into walls that become slate roofs ascending worshipfully to the dirty clouds where Goliath lives. And no one cares about him but me. I wonder if he’s watching. Watching me.

Can I really be the only one?

So up goes my face in defiance to the Giant, a hopeful white stone slung from among downturned heads and black umbrellas. I smile to see the strained seams of heaven’s blanket finally ripping under the weight of pooling sunlight, imagine it’s because of me the fool’s gold shafts randomly spill through momentary cracks and return at least some color back where it should be.

Won’t last though. I’m not that important. Never any time for relief, no unwinding the pent-up feeling inside because Goliath does his work faster than two missionaries walk. The skies will close up; rain will fall.

Rain, rain, rain—it douses familiar smells as easily as colors and noises, reduces them to an odor of wet stone that saturates everything from buildings to the clothes of people walking past. And I’ve done a lot

of walking, enough to know the foggy drizzle eventually transforms into a heaviness you drag home under your coat, that spills onto the apartment floor when you undress, grips the bottoms of your shoes, and permeates the carpet where it ripens for days.

And so I live for the golden aroma of a bakery, envy bent women working their way gingerly into the arched doorways as eager children duck by with their rolled, white bags of warm croissants or sweetbreads in hand. Goliath's harvest is a cloudy burden that soaks you from toe to head, but a bakery! This is sanctuary, human sunshine. Good things grow out of bakeries, sweet, sugary glazes and odors that put hope back into people and make wasps as docile as house pets.

"After that, we can be back to the apartment in time for lunch and then plan on knocking on doors this afternoon."

I come away from my smiling yellowjackets, grimace, and nod again. Tracting, or *porte à porte* as he calls it, is just another exercise in futility. City houses are three or four stories high and bend over to stare at you with square, black eyes rimmed by tired circles of pots and wilted red flowers. Here you ring a bell and shutters scream pain above you as some half-deaf old lady sticks her head out and shouts sounds that never fall all the way down. You shout back up, knowing it won't matter even if you're close enough to scream gospel into her ear. A shake of the head and another creak as shutters close, and you move on to a different bell and the same old lady.

I don't let it get me down; for me, it's a victory of sorts. In just six months my hypothesis has been proven with a precision worthy of the best scientific journals: In Europe, one of the two X chromosomes in elderly females is the source of an irresistible impulse to migrate to tall, shuttered houses in the cities and hide with cats named *Minou* behind doorbells and planters.

Strangely enough, I'm not dissatisfied with the mission, not jaded yet. There are moments I slap on blood and spirit like cheap cologne, know I'm alive after all. Teaching will do it, even if opportunities here are rarer than a 7-11. People have been Catholic in name going back to Charlemagne, and it's doubly irritating that most of them don't care about either Catholicism or changing. We're recognizable, too, so they avoid us. We look like the CIA, after all.

"You're going to have to get up the courage to talk to strangers, Elder."

My companion possesses both the uncanny ability to read my mind and the irritating habit of speaking in single-sentence utterances.

I shrug and the overcoat's dangling belt strap flaps steadily against my left calf. He's right, but my improving French hasn't yet caught up with my self-consciousness. Instead, I pass time on foot observing sidewalks, studying the smooth concrete or rough paving stones. With time the differences have become catalogued in my head to the point that I now have the utterly worthless distinction of being able to identify the neighborhood we're in simply by looking at the ground.

Today, it's insufferably bland. We're out in the suburbs and all I can see are fast-moving coal feet. At least my companion knows where he's going. He's been here a month longer than I and already possesses a sense of direction I will never acquire—and don't really care about.

Another corner. One among a million others, after all.

But suddenly it isn't. The few individuals in front of us begin to stop, and I fix on the growing crowd. People enter one by one and coalesce into a small, immobile group where they stand silently and watch. Curious, I inch through the little mass to see a line of figures in dark robes exit onto the sidewalk through a rough, wooden door in the building to the right. My companion, oblivious to anything not concerned with duty, stops and pulls out his yellow planning paper.

Mouth too-slightly agape, I watch a dozen nuns pass by as white moths whispering prayers of contemplation hover over their heads and beat the bittersweet praises of reclusion. They look neither right nor left, but their peaceful confidence is blunt and undeniable, a sweet resignation from the world that sneaks up and hammers a chord I didn't even know was there.

Behold the other runners in this grand race for the souls of humanity!

An unforeseen connection grows with that resounding note; and I touch my tie, feel the silk, and wonder at the serenity of a line. The wind, soft against my face, draws along a smell of bread so pure and satisfying, I have the sudden urge to peel off my clothes.

Who is she? I feel her, silently call out to the end of the line, and she turns, alabaster face, dark eyes, and rose-flushed cheeks draped in black. Young. Intense.

How forlorn the beauty that blooms in a flower chosen to fade!

She breaks with the line and gazes as the rest move on. I forget my-

self, stumble without taking a step and fall toward her covenant-sealed lips to beg, plead, that she give me her gift, a lover's attention.

And she does, completes the exegesis of my mind in fleeting notes plucked on invisible strings, for she knows.

She knows. I am a willing text.

My hand rises to wave and becomes dust, fingers disappearing into a terrible longing. She lowers her head, turns, and falls back into the docile breeze.

A hand grabs my arm. "Come on, Elder. There's work to be done."

I look and she's gone. The crowd continues the process of orderly digestion. I am no David yet, and my eyes sting in Goliath's rain.