

# Entertaining Angels Unaware

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Lucy hated arguing with her companion in public, even though they argued in English so most people couldn't understand what they were saying, and those who did could probably care less. They didn't argue often, mostly because Lucy had only been in La Rochelle for two weeks and still depended on Soeur Paxton's knowledge of the city and people to function. But the more accustomed Lucy became to her surroundings, the less comfortable she became with her companion, and their arguments grew longer and more frequent.

"But President Martin said we needed to maintain daily contact with our *amies* if we want to see them progress toward baptism," Soeur Paxton said louder than necessary. They were standing over their bikes, having just unlocked them, debating how to spend the next two hours. Soeur Paxton wanted to visit Charlotte, an *amie* the *soeurs* had met tracting the week before, and Lucy wanted to visit Florence, an older *amie*, who after four years of investigating the Church still wasn't ready to get baptized, although she attended church every week and even sang in the ward choir. Soeur Paxton dismissed Florence as a lost cause and a waste of their time, but Lucy admired her unwillingness to join a Church she did not fully understand. It meant she took her conversion seriously.

Soeur Paxton strapped a helmet over shoulder-length hair, so straight and smooth rubber bands would not stay put. She was younger than Lucy, but taller and just as thin. She had a small nose and a small mouth, which would have made Lucy jealous (because her own nose had a slight bump and her mouth was too big) except Soeur Paxton had a habit of setting her lips in a line so thin and stubborn it made Lucy want to scream.

"President Martin says a lot of things," she said, thinking about her previous city, Bordeaux, where she had an *amie* named Sylvie, who didn't

get baptized even though she had finished the discussions in less than three weeks like the mission president suggested, and even though Lucy had fasted every week, which ended the day Sylvie said she no longer wanted to meet with the *soeurs*. That day, Lucy's hope had crumbled like wet sand falling through her fingers, and Elder Tyler had talked to her for over an hour, telling true-life missionary stories so sad and pathetic they were funny, just to make her laugh. Lucy wondered if Sylvie would have been baptized had the *soeurs* refused to follow President Martin's advice. Maybe all she had needed was more time.

Soeur Paxton placed her fist on the outside of her yellow raincoat and thumped her chest. "I just really feel in my heart that this is something we need to do," she said, her expression pained. Lucy resisted the urge to groan and instead looked down the street at stone arcades covering sidewalks and windows full of shoes and bright fabrics and music posters. In less than two weeks and without a single friend in her district, La Rochelle had become Lucy's favorite city.

Lucy had wanted to serve in La Rochelle since she discovered it on her first day in France, but she kept it secret like a wish over a birthday cake, because spoken wishes never came true. While waiting at the mission office to meet President Martin for the first time, Lucy stood in front of a giant map with spokes of string connecting passport photos to red pushpins, whispering the names of cities where she might serve. When she whispered the name "La Rochelle," she got so excited her breath caught in her throat and she had to step away from the map, unprepared for the rush of emotion that accompanied those syllables. She looked around the office as though something extraordinary had happened and wondered if anybody else noticed, but the elders working in the alcove next to the front door hadn't looked up from their telephones or files of paper. When Lucy learned the name of her first area (Pau, not La Rochelle) she pushed the experience to the back of her mind where it would be safe from hope or disappointment, and where it would be forgotten.

By the time Lucy left her second area, Bordeaux, she couldn't imagine serving in another city nor remember ever wanting to. But when she arrived in La Rochelle, she walked outside the *gare* to wait with suitcases at her side and looked through sheets of rain like mercury at the six-hundred-year-old towers and sailboats and cobblestone streets and fell in love with the city. She straightened her shoulders beneath the weight of her bags and breathed slowly, the salt air spreading through her head and

clearing out the murkiness that had lodged in her mind the morning Elder O'Neill called with transfers. Standing under the awning, Lucy allowed La Rochelle to seep into her skin and between her bones and clean out her insides so that she felt empty in a good way.

Lucy loved La Rochelle so much that she almost forgot how much she disliked her companion.

"My heart is telling me to leave Charlotte alone," Lucy said finally.

"We can't both be right, and President Martin is on my side."

Lucy pulled her handlebars to disengage her front tire from the bike rack. "President Martin doesn't know Charlotte. He didn't hear her say I'll see you Friday. Or I need some time to think about this. Or I want to go slow because I'll wig out if I'm rushed into something and pressured to do things I don't want to do."

Soeur Paxton frowned. "Charlotte didn't say 'wig out.'"

"That's because Charlotte speaks French," Lucy said in her most patronizing voice. Soeur Paxton had the worst accent of anybody she had ever met, talking as though her mouth were crammed with mothballs, and Lucy suspected she had as hard a time understanding French as she did speaking it.

"If she doesn't get baptized, it will be your fault."

"And if she tells us to go away?"

"She won't if we're acting in faith."

"Acting in whose faith? Not my faith."

"That's because you don't have any."

So angry that she no longer saw the city or the people surrounding her, Lucy looked at Soeur Paxton and said, "You know nothing about my faith."

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The *soeurs* passed beneath the clock tower on their way to Charlotte's apartment, and Lucy caught a glimpse of the ocean reflecting sunlight that illuminated the underbelly of clouds as it disappeared into the water and lessened. The ocean calmed Lucy and made her feel better because it reminded her she wasn't alone in the world, and she felt instantly connected to distant places. But for the first time since she could remember, Lucy didn't look at the ocean longing to be some place else, just with someone else. She wanted to stay where she was.

Swinging her right leg over the bike seat, Lucy stood on the left

pedal and coasted up the sidewalk to where her companion sat waiting to lock their bikes together. Soeur Paxton smiled, having gotten her way, but Lucy didn't return the smile, protesting her complicity in silence. She would enable her companion with her presence, but she would refuse to participate.

As they climbed the spiral staircase made of cement and iron to the third floor, the back of her companion's skirt swished at Lucy's eye level. Even the way Soeur Paxton walked annoyed Lucy, flicking her heels like a prancing pony. But the more they worked, the less they talked, the faster the day was spent and the sooner Lucy could take refuge in her pajamas, a cup of warm milk, and the pile of letters waiting in the mailbox. Elder Tyler had already written her once from Nantes, and she had been so happy to hear from him, she would have started crying if Soeur Paxton hadn't been watching for her reaction. Missionaries weren't supposed to correspond within the same mission.

"Do you want to knock?" Soeur Paxton asked as though there had been no argument—sweetly, almost kind.

Lucy shook her head without making eye contact. Standing together on the straw doormat, the *soeurs* waited for the door to open. After a minute, Soeur Paxton tried again, knocking longer and louder than before, but the silence within the apartment echoed equally loud, and Lucy's heart slowed down as she recognized the sound of an empty room. She hadn't realized she was nervous.

Allowing Soeur Paxton to knock a third and fourth time, because somehow she knew Charlotte wouldn't appear, Lucy fought the urge to comment on the futility of their argument and Soeur Paxton's spiritual inspiration, choosing rather to enjoy the satisfaction of not being proven wrong.

When Soeur Paxton raised her arm to knock a fifth time, the expression on her face so determined her jaw muscles bulged like she was sucking on marbles, Lucy leaned over and said, "We should probably go." She desperately wanted to tack on a remark about how much time they'd already wasted—because Soeur Paxton loved to proclaim her own efficiency almost as loudly as the gospel, but Lucy didn't say anything else. Instead, they quietly exited from the building, stepping into the dark blue of an early dusk with less than half the windows from the surrounding buildings looking down on them with light.

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Six weeks passed before the *soeurs*' next real argument, which was merely a continuation of the last one. Soeur Paxton wanted to stay at the chapel with their newest *amie*, Virginie, and Lucy wanted to visit Florence. But this time Lucy would not give in. Secretly, she didn't like Virginie. She flirted too much with the elders; and she wore blue contacts and blue eye make-up that reminded Lucy of her sophomore year in high school, when she wore blue mascara to play up her eyes so nobody would look at her acne.

Initially, the *soeurs* had invited Virginie to attend beginning English classes at the chapel, but she preferred studying intermediate English with the elders even though the grammar went beyond her abilities and she frustrated the other students who actually wanted to learn. But the elders let her stay because, even with blue make-up, Virginie was beautiful.

That night, only two students came for the *soeurs*' class, so they decided it would be easier to tutor them individually. Soeur Paxton offered to work with Hervé, a seventy-year-old man with a white mustache and a cane, who wore a wool hat that he would take off every time a woman came in or out of the room. Hervé didn't care about language or grammar. He only wanted someone to ask him questions about the war and the *résistance*, which would have to be translated because he didn't understand English, so he could tell long stories that changed slightly with each telling, spit accumulating at the corners of his mouth as his eyes glossed over with excitement and memory. Taking Hervé by the elbow, Soeur Paxton led him to the corner of the room where she set up two chairs facing each other, so they could sit and nod and pretend to understand what the other was saying.

Lucy, on the other hand, spent the hour helping Émile with his homework, reciting for him a *dictée* in English so he could transcribe the paragraph word for word, which Lucy would then check for spelling or grammar errors. Soeur Paxton didn't like helping Émile, who became frustrated easily, crying when he made too many mistakes and then getting angry or embarrassed and throwing pencils or books because fourteen-year-old boys weren't supposed to cry. But Lucy didn't mind, she liked Émile; he gave her handmade bookmarks decorated with miniature daisies that he pressed between the pages of his textbooks, and he knew the words to every song on the Bee Gee's Greatest Hits album.

Once *cours d'anglais* ended and their students left—Hervé making

the sign of the cross as he walked out the door because he refused to understand that they weren't Catholic—Lucy stood up and announced to her companion that it was time to go.

"I want to visit Florence," she said, putting on her coat and backpack.

"But what about Virginie?"

"What about her?" Lucy looked at the other side of the chapel where Elder Schaeffer stood in front of a chalk-drawn hangman, asking the students to guess a letter. Elder Jenson sat with the students in a semi-circle facing the blackboard and Virginie, who sat two seats away, kept leaning across laps to beg hints from him.

"She'll be fine. She's with the elders."

"But she's our *amie*."

Instead of answering Soeur Paxton, Lucy glanced again at the elders, whose hangman was only two hands from being hung. Really, Virginie's salvation belonged to the entire district because Elder Schaeffer insisted on attending all of Virginie's rendezvous so that, as district leader, he could supervise the effectiveness of the *soeurs'* teaching. Last week, he even went so far as to request a special meeting with Lucy to evaluate her personal worthiness. Apparently, Soeur Paxton had complained about Lucy's letters to Elder Tyler and the late night phone calls from Elder O'Neill, and Elder Schaeffer worried that her lack of obedience might cripple Virginie's spiritual progression in particular and the success of their district in general.

Lucy had started to ask him why, if he was such a stellar missionary, didn't he have any *amis* of his own to teach, but she decided to give Elder Schaeffer the benefit of her many doubts and agreed to a meeting the following morning.

Sitting on the steps in front of the house that was their chapel, the early sunlight illuminating breath from their mouths and noses, Lucy had tried not to shiver as she listened to Elder Schaeffer recite excerpts from the Missionary Guide. She squinted at his blond hair, combed to the side and so well shaped she wondered if he used gel, and understood that he was trying to be the perfect missionary. The kind that appeared on brochures and in motivational literature. The kind that Lucy, disillusioned by the enormous discrepancy between the expectations generated by the MTC and her actual experience thus far, suspected did not exist.

But as he spoke, pounding his fist into his hand as though it were a

baseball glove, while confessing that no matter how hard he worked he hadn't taught past the third discussion nor served as zone leader, Lucy also understood that he was trying to be the perfect missionary because that's how he thought best to love God. And she couldn't find it within herself to persuade him otherwise because she didn't know how best to love God either. So although Lucy hadn't wanted the elders to attend their rendezvous with Virginie, she hadn't had the heart to tell Elder Schaeffer not to come. It might be his only chance to teach a fourth discussion.

Except they didn't actually teach a fourth discussion. Instead, Soeur Paxton and the elders had spent two and a half hours trying to convince Virginie (who dressed up for the occasion in a blue mini-skirt and heels) to be baptized. Sitting on velvet pillows around a glass-topped coffee table set with *tisane* and cookies, they took turns trying to say the magic words that would illuminate her soul and change her mind. But Virginie would only laugh or twirl her hair, and ask if they would like more tea.

At first Lucy worried that Virginie might take offense at the missionaries' complete lack of tact as they stooped to lower and lower levels in their attempts to see her baptized. Elder Jenson, with his thin face made longer by his thin nose and thin hair, even taught Virginie about outer darkness, where the souls of those who rejected the truth after having received it were banished forever from the presence of God, and Lucy leaned over when he had finished to ask in English, "What discussion was that from, Elder?"

Looking at the other missionaries seated around Virginie's table, Lucy felt disconnected from what was taking place, as though she were watching a play from a front-row seat that she couldn't get up and leave, even though she wanted to. But the more Virginie laughed, the less Lucy worried, and she began to realize that she would never fit in with her district no matter how long she stayed in La Rochelle.

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Outside the chapel, the sky was deep purple and the streetlights were on. The clock above the piano showed quarter past eight. At night with no traffic, the *soeurs* could ride to Florence's house in less than ten minutes, which would give them forty-five minutes to visit and still make it home before nine-thirty. Soeur Paxton insisted on "making curfew. Lucy didn't want to miss any phone calls.

“We need to leave right now,” she said, repositioning her backpack, which jingled full of books and pens and keys and loose francs.

Soeur Paxton didn’t stand up. She didn’t look at Lucy either, but crossed her arms while looking at the floor. “I don’t think we should leave Virginie here alone.”

“I’m not asking for your opinion.” Lucy felt the faintest desire to slap her companion. She had heard stories about elders fighting, about eyes blackened and noses broken in three places because one person worked too little or too much depending, but Lucy had never heard of a *soeur*-fight.

She picked up her companion’s backpack and stood in front of her chair, so close their skirt hems were touching.

“I’ve been senior comp since my fifth week in the mission,” she said, “and I’ve never had to play the senior comp card before. But I’m the senior comp and I’m going to Florence’s and you’re coming with me.” Lucy dropped the backpack in her companion’s lap. The elders had stopped teaching and the entire class was staring at Lucy with mouths agape. She hadn’t realized she was yelling.

“Elder Schaeffer,” Lucy called across the room without looking in their direction, “we’re leaving.” She let the screen door slam behind her as she went to untangle her bike from the pile of others at the bottom of the stairs. Tucking the back hem of her skirt into the front waistband and converting her skirt into genie pants, Lucy straddled her bike, buckled her helmet beneath her chin, and left.

Ignoring the impulse to turn around and check on her companion, Lucy concentrated on looking straight ahead, although she wasn’t conscious of what she was seeing. When she glided up Florence’s driveway and jumped off in front of the gate, Lucy couldn’t remember how she got there, only that she had refused to look back. However, Lucy could remember what she had thought about because she was still thinking—mostly about how much she didn’t like her companion, but she was now comfortable enough with her malaise to render it innocuous, like a sliver gradually absorbed into the body.

Wanting to lock her bike, but needing to wait for Soeur Paxton, Lucy finally allowed herself to look for her companion, who was turning the corner at the end of the block, her helmet low enough over her face to cast a shadow from the street lamps so Lucy couldn’t read her expression. It was then Lucy noticed Sebastian’s car.

Like Florence, Sebastian had met the missionaries four years ago; and for two of those years, he successfully conned everyone into believing he was a descendant of the disenfranchised nobility, whose dukedom had disappeared under Napoleonic law. He lived on a sailboat but spent most of his days at Church members' houses, eating their food and taking the clothing or bedding offered in response to his less than subtle hints. When his many promises of repayment failed to materialize, however, even the most gullible members realized he was using pending baptism to prey upon their generosity. And although many members stopped supplying him with food or money, for the most part they chose to ignore his lies and accept him as part of the congregation, simply because he came.

Opening Florence's black iron gate, which squealed in both directions, Lucy rolled her bike inside the small courtyard and propped it against a wooden trellis, naked with winter. Soeur Paxton joined Lucy on Florence's porch, her face like stone.

Lucy knocked on Florence's door and tried to force all negative thoughts out her nose with a long, slow exhale. She genuinely loved Florence. She realized this the day Florence took the *soeurs* to the coast so they could buy a bucketful of mussels, which they soaked in white wine without telling Soeur Paxton, who would have refused to eat any had she known, but who repeatedly proclaimed it the best meal she had ever tasted. Florence reminded Lucy of her grandmother, but ten years younger, so that Lucy had the impression of having lived lost time.

When Florence opened the door, she smiled so wide her eyes disappeared. "I was praying you would come so he would leave," she whispered, waving the *soeurs* into the hallway half-lit by lamps in the salon. Lucy stepped inside, bending down to kiss Florence on both cheeks as she passed.

"Bonjour, Sebastian," she said, holding out her hand. He stood up from the overstuffed armchair to grab her fingertips loosely in a handshake. Sebastian was tall, and his hair was slightly long and starting to turn gray. He wore a shirt tied loosely over his shoulders and canvas shoes. He was dressed like a wealthy man on vacation.

"I was just leaving," he said, smiling. Lucy wondered if he knew that she didn't believe him.

"Bonjour," Soeur Paxton said, nodding as Sebastian took her hand and made an excuse about the time and the important matters requiring his attention. Florence was standing by the open door, and as he leaned

forward to *bise* her three times before leaving, Lucy heard him thank Florence for dinner. Florence waved goodbye while shutting the door, which she locked and leaned her head against, sighing deeply.

“He doesn’t like missionaries, because he knows that what he’s doing is wrong.”

“Why do you feed him if you don’t want him to come over?” Soeur Paxton asked.

“It’s not so simple as that,” Florence said, before clasping her hands and changing the subject. “Now, how about I make some *tisane* and then we can read for a while.”

During the five minutes it took for the kettle to whistle and for Florence to return with linden tea and madeleines, her dog-eared copy of the Book of Mormon pinned to her side with her elbow, the *soeurs* didn’t exchange a single word. Instead, Lucy was thinking about Florence and how Lucy had helped God answer Florence’s prayer. It gave Lucy hope that maybe she had answered other prayers without knowing it. Like maybe there wasn’t just one guardian angel for every person, but rather every person was a guardian angel for somebody else. Maybe angels didn’t have to be perfect.

There was only one moment in Lucy’s life that she could point to and say with absolute certainty that God had answered her prayer. It was her holy moment. One she would never dismiss as coincidence. One that she could return to in memory when the rest of her mind was filled with doubt. It proved that God not only existed but also that God knew Lucy existed, something she had never before believed. Because with Jesus busy saving the rest of humanity from Adam onward, why should he bother with Lucy at all? And as much as it terrified her to acknowledge such thoughts, Lucy was convinced she was an ordinary person with ordinary needs, which, in the eternal scheme of things, were negligible at best.

When Lucy was eighteen and first determined to see the world, she flew to Paris on her father’s frequent flyer miles with a thousand dollars in her pocket that she had been saving since the summer she was fifteen, when a German exchange student named Bjorn stayed with her family for a month—long enough to make Lucy fall in love with the idea of faraway places and the German hockey players with brown hair and green eyes who lived there. Lucy intended for her thousand dollars to last the two months she planned to wander Europe, and she would have left with

fifty-three dollars remaining, if her wallet had not been stolen somewhere between Frankfurt and Paris the day before her flight home.

Without money and because the debit card that her bank assured her would work in Europe didn't, Lucy decided she would spend the night in the Gare St. Lazare, where the trains ran all night and where the airport shuttle bus would pick her up the following morning at six. Impressed by her own sensible decision and calm, Lucy found a chair on the balcony above the *Trains Grand Depart*, and sat down to wait. Her calm lasted for nine hours and forty-five minutes.

At nine hours and forty-six minutes, Lucy's headache reached migraine status, intensifying the ammonia smell wafting from the seat dripping with urine two chairs over, where a homeless man had peed while Lucy's eyes were closed. Lucy needed to pee herself, but public toilets cost money and she didn't have enough energy to explain herself to the bathroom attendant, or try to sneak by without being seen while carrying a twenty-five-pound backpack overstuffed with cumbersome souvenirs like books and shoes.

Tired enough to sleep, but afraid she would oversleep and miss her ride to the airport, Lucy concentrated instead on ignoring her thirst because in the Gare St. Lazare, even water cost money. The irony of simultaneously needing to pee and drink more than she had ever needed to pee or drink in her life, frustrated Lucy until her throat constricted, and she leaned against her backpack and closed her eyes, trying unsuccessfully to will her bladder into reabsorbing excess liquid back into her bloodstream.

Lucy felt a drop of warmth on her chest and realized she was crying. I need help, she thought. Please. And let it be somebody who speaks English. She took a deep breath and exhaled through her mouth while counting to ten, trying to calm herself before she opened her eyes.

"American, right?"

Startled, Lucy looked up and saw a man with white hair, a white polo shirt with thin blue stripes around the sleeves and collar, and white pants. He pointed to the seat next to Lucy and sat down when she nodded.

"How did you know?" Lucy sat up straight, disentangling her arms from the straps on her pack. She wiped her eyes.

He unfolded a train schedule and handed it to Lucy. He wore copper bracelets on both wrists. "Do you think you could help me read this?" he asked, "All the information kiosks are closed."

Lucy took the schedule. The man wanted to take a night train to London and was under the impression that one would be leaving in the next fifteen minutes. Glancing at the black signboard above the lobby, Lucy matched times and destinations with the schedule in her lap until she found it. She pointed to it with her finger. The train would be leaving Paris at 1:45 A.M. and arriving in Dieppe at 3:15. Then he would take a ferry to Brighton and another train to London. He'd arrive in Waterloo Station at 8:16 the following morning. Lucy pointed to the sign and leaned her head closer to his so they might share sightlines.

"It says your train is on *voie 4*," she said, handing the paper back and smiling with lips closed.

The man stood up and put the folded schedule into his back pocket. "I'd better go tell my wife," he said. "This is for your trouble." He held a palm full of francs out to Lucy and smiled kindly, but she shook her head from embarrassment.

"Please. Banks won't exchange coins." He flipped his hand over and held the coins in his fingertips, which trembled slightly and Lucy thought he might drop them. She held her hand out and said, "Thank you," looking the man in the eyes for the first time, which were the same pale blue as her brother's. The coins felt warm against her skin and she watched him leave until he reached the top of the escalator and floated out of sight. Only when he had gone did she count the money in her hand. Thirty-seven francs. Enough for a baguette sandwich, a Fanta, a Lion bar, and two trips to the bathroom.

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After reading with Florence for a half hour, Lucy closed her Book of Mormon and announced it was time for them to leave. Florence accompanied the *soeurs* into the garden, which doubled in size during the winter months when there were no leaves, and leaned over their bikes to kiss their cheeks and say thank you one more time.

When the *soeurs* coasted down the driveway and into the street, which sloped so they did not have to start pedaling until they rounded the corner, Soeur Paxton said it was a good thing they decided to visit Florence. It was the closest she ever came to offering Lucy an apology.

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An entire week passed before the *soeurs'* next real argument. It was

the morning of an Oil Drop Day, a day set aside by President Martin intended to fill the missionaries' figurative lamps with oil so they would not be found wanting when the bridegroom came. Oil that came in the form of faith produced by works of the most devoted kind. On Oil Drop Day, missionaries left their apartments in the early morning and didn't return until night, not even for lunch or when it rained or got so cold Lucy's toes felt like small chunks of ice. On these days, missionaries couldn't do service or visit members (which felt more like recess than work) so those without *amis* had to tract or contact for twelve continuous hours. The most devoted missionaries worked while fasting, which Lucy tried once, but she had only lasted eight hours without food and drink before her head started pounding and she almost fell off her bike, dizzy and faint.

Their argument started with Soeur Paxton disapproving of Lucy writing letters during morning scripture study, but she would not say as much, only sigh heavily from her chair across the room and glare at the paper in Lucy's lap while making observations about how the whole point of Oil Drop Day was to be as obedient as possible because even the smallest infringement would lessen their effectiveness as missionaries and eclipse whatever miracles might otherwise take place.

Lucy ignored her companion's comments, although she would have put the letter aside had Soeur Paxton stopped sighing and asked her to please stop writing. The real irony, however, was that Lucy was writing Elder Tyler about the verse she had just read in 2 Nephi 4 because she was missing him to the point of melancholy and the part about putting her confidence in God and not in man had made the sadness knocking around her chest like a rock stand still. Most often when Lucy thought about Elder Tyler, her mind was clouded by the intensity of emotions she didn't understand and she worked through it best by writing thoughts down so she could fold them up and either send them away or forget about them altogether. But Soeur Paxton apparently hadn't noticed Lucy reading the Book of Mormon; and by defending her actions, she felt she would cheapen them.

"I think you would be a happier person if you would just say what you're thinking," Lucy said, putting down her pen and looking at her companion who sat with scriptures propped open on her legs folded under her, her face half-veiled by her perfectly straight hair, so blond it looked silver. Like an iron curtain. They were still wearing pajamas, and Soeur Paxton's matching satin pajamas were shiny and smooth. Not like

Lucy's, which had a small hole in the right leg and which bunched in wrinkles around her hips and knees. Her own hair was piled on top of her head and rubber banded into a shape not unlike a bird's nest.

Soeur Paxton looked up from her scriptures, tucking her hair behind her ear so Lucy could see her whole face. "Some people try to be better than their thoughts," she said.

"If you were as righteous as you pretend to be, you wouldn't have to try so hard."

"Who are you to judge me?" Soeur Paxton asked.

"Oh, that's right. You're the only one allowed to pass judgment. I forgot."

"How can I not? You're always writing elders in other cities or talking to them on the phone. And we're supposed to be missionaries, or have you forgotten that, too? Am I supposed to just sit back and let you ruin everything?"

"Why is everything automatically my fault? What about the fact you've been in the country eight months and can't speak French to save your life? How many rendezvous have you botched because nobody can understand what you're saying?"

"Elder Schaeffer is worried about you, too."

"What does Elder Schaeffer have to do with anything?"

"He's tried calling before, and the line has been busy."

"How does he know I'm not talking to Charlotte, or Florence, or Virginie? Because I actually talk to every one of them by themselves more than I talk to all the elders combined."

Soeur Paxton pursed her lips and folded her arms. "We just want to help you be a better missionary. We're trying our best to love you. It's not fair for one person to ruin the efficiency of an entire district because she can't keep the rules."

Up to this point in the conversation, Lucy had succeeded in speaking with a mostly civil, slightly raised voice, but now she stood up and started yelling.

"What about you? How can you teach about the plan of happiness when you're miserable all the time? And if Schaeffer's so righteous, then why hasn't he baptized a single person? There's a reason he hasn't taught beyond the third discussion and it's not because O'Neill calls me on Thursday nights. And Elder Jenson is so busy flirting with Virginie it's a miracle he even knows my name. In fact, I'm not sure he does. And how

dare you talk to the elders about me behind my back? Making yourself feel better by calling it love. I don't hide anything from you even though I know I'll never hear the end of it."

"You can yell all you want, but it doesn't change the fact you care more about elders than rules."

Lucy stopped her ranting to look at her companion. "And this is a bad thing?"

"It is if God makes the rules."

"Maybe I just don't have a testimony of a ten-thirty bedtime."

"Which is why I don't want to be your companion," Soeur Paxton said, shutting her scriptures to indicate the conversation was over, the pages thumping hollow. She placed them on the cushion of her seat still imprinted with the heat and weight of her body as she stood up to go get dressed. It was seven o'clock. "You could have at least tried to keep the rules today of all days."

Lucy opened her mouth but closed it again upon noticing Soeur Paxton's scriptures. Despite every rule to the contrary, Soeur Paxton studied only in English.

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Making it a point to leave the apartment at exactly nine-thirty (holding Soeur Paxton's coat sleeve while looking at her watch, so they wouldn't leave a second before or after), Lucy announced that for the rest of the Oil Drop Day she would be completely perfect, like one of the examples in the Missionary Guide, except in the Missionary Guide, people answered their doors when missionaries came knocking and almost always invited them inside.

Lucy liked working. It made the day pass quickly and kept the *soeurs'* conversation at a minimum. She loved the long bike rides to the opposite corners of the city where their different *amies* lived, through air so cold and crisp it stained Lucy's cheeks red. She loved how Charlotte preferred to discuss the gospel while walking on the beach in Porte de Minimes even though it was still winter and windy, and Lucy could block out her companion's voice with the sound of the ocean rushing past her ears. And how their newest *amie*, Nada, would serve rose-flavored *tisane* while they sat on the embroidered pillows her mother sent from Morocco. She loved the way Nada's circle windows, designed to make the apartment look like

a cruise ship, made sun spots on the linoleum floor that traveled toward the wall and bent upward as the sun began setting.

Lucy even loved the Church members in La Rochelle more than she had loved the members in any other city. Perhaps she had not needed them as much in her other areas where she had always had at least one friend among the missionaries. In La Rochelle she felt as though the members were the only people who actually loved her back. Especially Odette, who cooked dinner for the *soeurs* every Wednesday and told stories about her third-grade students so funny Lucy had difficulty swallowing her food. Or Renée, who lived in the same building as Charlotte and would rearrange her schedule to help the *soeurs* teach discussions and whose children occupied Charlotte's son with games so their conversations could continue unhindered. Or *la famille* Marsande, who lived in the Caserne des Pompiers and invited the *soeurs* over to celebrate *la Fête des Rois*, their youngest daughter, Julie, crawling beneath the dining table to decide who should be served which portion of *gâteau*, and placing the paper crown painted with gold sparkles on Soeur Paxton's head after she discovered the porcelain fava bean with her fork. It was the only time Lucy believed Soeur Paxton's laugh to be genuine. Or *la famille* Roux, an elderly couple who rode bikes all over the city just like the *soeurs*, and who would draw maps of secret shortcuts through neighborhoods and bike paths on the back of their Church program during sacrament meeting so the *soeurs* could travel farther faster and get more work done.

La Rochelle was Lucy's only city where the *soeurs* had enough *amies* to fill entire days and sometimes weeks with rendezvous, keeping tracting and contacting to a minimum. But on this Oil Drop Day, all their *amies* had already made plans, so they rode their bikes to *centre ville* with backpacks full of Books of Mormon and pamphlets, and chained their bikes to a lamppost bearing flower baskets beneath the stone arch of the clock tower. From where she stood, Lucy could see past the *vieux port*, cradling sailboats that rocked naked and abandoned on the slowly receding tide, to where rolls of ocean water lifted a line of orange buoys on their crests before breaking against the rock wall that *les rochelais* had built four hundred years earlier. Charlotte had told them the buoys marked the spot where Richelieu's armada sat and starved 100,000 Protestants to death because they wouldn't convert to Catholicism. Lucy wondered what she was doing as a missionary in a city renowned for its resistance to religious change. It was a heritage she respected and admired, even though she could make

comparisons between her mission and Richelieu's, except Lucy would never want to hurt anybody.

Watching her companion stop pedestrians on the street, Lucy marveled at Soeur Paxton's ability to pretend all was right with the world and with "*ma compagne*, Soeur Adams," whom she introduced as though they were best friends, even though she hadn't said a single word to Lucy since their argument that morning. Whenever it was Lucy's turn to make a contact, she would speak about the Book of Mormon because it was a true book filled with evidence of Christ's love, something she believed even on her saddest days.

Two hours into working and one pamphlet later, which Soeur Paxton had given to a woman pushing a double stroller with children sleeping limply like rag dolls, Soeur Paxton resumed speaking to Lucy.

"I know this is going to sound a bit off, but I think we need to visit the Sabbatinis," she said, then winced as though afraid of Lucy's reaction, which evolved from surprise to anger to confusion and back to anger. They were standing near the fountain in front of the *grec* shop that sold fried falafel balls drenched in white sauce, and always smelled of grease and garlic even when closed. The fountain was empty and Lucy wondered if it was broken or if the city drained it for winter.

Soeur Paxton sat on the edge of the empty basin.

"I spend five minutes writing to Tyler about a scripture of all things and you freak out like I'm going to hell and dragging you down with me. But now that you want to visit the Sabbatinis, I'm supposed to be okay with this?" Lucy waited for a response but none came, so she looked at the tops of the nearest buildings four stories high and squinted at the blue sky framed by white stone reflecting sunlight.

"I just really feel in my heart we should go."

"You really feel in your heart lots of things," Lucy began, but stopped. This might have been the first time Soeur Paxton had ever felt in her heart to do something contrary to the letter of the law and Lucy was inclined to believe her.

She sat down next to Soeur Paxton on the fountain's edge so they were close, but not touching and angled away from each other facing different directions. She already knew she would agree to go to the Sabbatinis, but she wanted to sit and think. Make her companion wait. She wondered if Soeur Paxton would have been willing to ruin their Oil Drop Day before Lucy had ruined it with her letter writing. Maybe Lucy

was helping her to relax, or at least see things from another point of view. Like last month, when they were tracting and an old woman who had heard the missionary discussions twice before invited them inside for tea, but only because the missionaries were covered in freezing rain and only because she wanted company.

Soeur Paxton had tried to teach a first discussion anyway, asking if *Madame* had heard of Joseph Smith or the Book of Mormon. Of course she had. And she didn't want to hear any more. Well, what about modern-day prophets? Soeur Paxton asked, her smile stretched across her entire face as though she could change her mind with forced gaiety. But *Madame* had known about those, too. She was a practicing Catholic and happy with her faith. When Soeur Paxton asked what Catholics knew about the plan of salvation, Lucy put down her cup of mint tea on the wooden coffee table inlaid with a brightly colored mosaic of a tree, the roots and leaves of which seemed to drip over the sides of the table and down the legs. She looked past the lace curtains to where the wind whipped raindrops in swirling patterns and regretted having to leave the warm room with her warm tea. But she was embarrassed for herself and for her companion who would not be quiet. Afraid of having trespassed on the good will of their hostess, Lucy stood up to thank *Madame* for her generosity and the most delicious and timely tea but they were warm now, thank you, and must be on their way.

Once outside, but still close enough that if *Madame* spoke English she could hear their conversation, Soeur Paxton was so angry she shouted at Lucy, asking why on earth did she not let her finish the first discussion when she only had one principle left? It was the loudest Lucy had ever heard her companion speak.

"Because she didn't want a first discussion," Lucy said, squinting against the small, half-frozen raindrops that felt like sand in her face.

"I don't see why you call yourself a missionary if you refuse to teach the gospel."

"You weren't teaching anything. She'd already heard it. All you did was piss her off, and she was trying to help us."

"We have a responsibility to bring people closer to Christ."

Lucy stopped walking and spoke loud enough to be heard over the sounds of cars splashing through puddles of rain. "She's probably closer to Christ than you and I will ever be."

\* \* \*

“All right. I’m game,” Lucy said, holding the straps of her backpack away from her body as she stood up from the fountain. Even on cold days her backpack could make her sweat.

The Sabbatinis lived within walking distance of *centre ville* so the *soeurs* left their bikes chained to the lamppost and walked. The streets were narrow, and some were paved with fifteenth-century cobblestones from Québec which, unlike the stones in other cities, were large and round and distinct, the mortar between them long since disintegrated. Lucy watched the ground as she stepped on only the highest stones, making patterns with her feet like when she was a child playing games in the grocery store and could step only on the brown tiles.

The Sabbatinis lived in a building two windows wide and as deep as the city block. Soeur Paxton rang their buzzer, which the *soeurs* could hear far away above their heads; and at first Lucy thought they weren’t home, much like the last time Soeur Paxton had a feeling in her heart. But after the third ring, a sad Frère Sabbatini with bags under his eyes the color of storm clouds opened the front door and invited them inside.

“Oh là là, *les soeurs*,” he said, as he led the way up a spiral staircase tucked into the deepest corner of the building. The wood creaked beneath every step. Frère Sabbatini was born in Greece and spoke French with an accent that was easy for Americans to understand. He was very tall, and his shoulders seemed to extend beyond the width of the stairs so he climbed at an angle. The *soeurs* held their skirts in one hand, placing the other against the wall because the stairs were steep and there was no railing. At the top of the staircase, he stepped to the side and held the apartment door open, allowing the *soeurs* to slip past him on the small landing. “Today is not a good day.”

Soeur Sabbatini was sitting at the kitchen table, cradling a cup of warm milk. She leaned back in her chair, exposing the round bulge of her ninth month and set her cup on the table. Otherwise the room was perfectly still, not filled with the laughter and music and the smells of spicy foods that always welcomed the *soeurs*, even when they came by unannounced.

Motioning for the *soeurs* to sit down, she wiped her eyes with the back of her other hand, as though she had been crying. Frère Sabbatini went into the kitchen to fetch a drink for the *soeurs*. The apartment was so quiet Lucy could hear the milk pouring into cups.

Nobody spoke until he returned with a steaming mug in each hand and sat down beside his wife. "We're thinking about leaving the Church," he said as Lucy was drinking her milk, which made her choke she was so surprised. The Sabbatinis had been members of the Church for almost ten years. Soeur Sabbatini could recite entire chapters of the New Testament from memory and Frère Sabbatini remembered the names and faces of every person to have ever come to Church, even if they only came once, and he loved people with a love so genuine, his entire face would smile when saying hello. Except on this day.

When Soeur Paxton asked why, Soeur Sabbatini blew her nose into her napkin and Frère Sabbatini cleared his throat, but neither of them offered a reason. Lucy put down her mug with a thump dulled by the thickness of the tablecloth.

Frère Sabbatini placed both hands on the table, fingers splayed like starfish. "Because we are tired," he said a moment later.

Soeur Sabbatini was staring into her cup which she turned absent-mindedly with her hands. "Too tired," she whispered, without looking up. Then they explained why.

For over an hour the Sabbatinis talked about how congregations in France were not like the swollen congregations in Utah. How fifty people could never do the job of five hundred regardless of desire or pure intent. Why it was unfair for the leaders in Utah to expect participation in programs like home teaching when all it required of them was a monthly visit to one or two neighbors who lived at most five blocks away. The Sabbatinis were responsible for fifteen families in five different cities, because they were one of only six families with a car. There were not enough Church members in France to staff the programs the leaders in Utah dreamed up. They taught Sunday School and Primary and gave talks in sacrament meeting at least every other month. Soeur Sabbatini organized weekly youth group activities and monthly enrichment nights and drove five women twelve hours to the nearest temple four times a year. Frère Sabbatini played the piano for every meeting and every choir practice. He arrived at the chapel every Sunday at 7:00 A.M. to set up the chairs and attend ward council meeting. The third Sunday of every month he traveled to faraway wards like Périgueux or Nantes to speak as a high councilman and to pass on the love of the stake president. The Sabbatinis paid their tithing. They organized community service days to improve public relations even though *les rochelais* repeatedly vetoed a permit that would allow

them to build a chapel on land the Church had bought twenty years earlier.

All this they did freely, and with love, while working full time at their respective jobs, because they believed it was what God wanted them to do. That it would make them into better people. But now they were not so sure. Most of their efforts went unnoticed, except when they made mistakes. And most of the time they left Church drained of love and energy because they had given all they had to other people.

As the Sabbatinis talked, their hands echoing their words in motion, Lucy's milk cooled until the porcelain of her cup was cold to the touch. She listened carefully to every word, because Soeur Paxton had suggested they come and Lucy felt obligated to help, as though God himself expected her to make everything right. But she was only twenty-two. She did not have any answers. And she was terrified of saying the wrong thing; now that she was in their home, she believed that whatever happened would be her fault.

"So, what do you think?" Frère Sabbatini asked when they had finished speaking, after a minute had passed in silence.

Lucy waited for her companion to explain how we shouldn't go to church for ourselves but for God. How we are commanded to attend church and should endure to the end and have faith, which were all things Lucy had heard her say before.

However, when Soeur Paxton didn't say anything at all, Lucy realized that the question had been asked of her. They were waiting to see what she would say.

She took a deep breath and wiped the corner of her lips with her fingers while she exhaled. Leaning over the arm of her chair, she unzipped her backpack and pulled out two Books of Mormon, which she opened to 2 Nephi 4, keeping one and handing one to the Sabbatinis, pointing at the open pages with her finger.

"I was feeling really sad this morning, but I read this section and it made me feel better." Lucy paused, trying unsuccessfully to read their expressions. "So maybe we can read it together and take turns?"

As they read, Lucy looked for the words that had comforted her that morning, the ones she had written Elder Tyler about, but now that she was reading the chapter a second time, the words didn't look familiar. She wondered if perhaps she had made a mistake.

When the chapter ended Frère Sabbatini closed the book he was

sharing with his wife who was blinking deeply and often. "I feel very strongly that you were supposed to come to my house today, and that you were supposed to share this chapter with me," he said, emotion making his accent thicker.

Soeur Paxton then told them about Oil Drop Day and how she felt inspired to visit their home even though it was against the rules. "And I always try and keep all the rules," she said. When she bore her testimony of God's love for the Sabbatinis, Soeur Sabbatini started to cry. She cried so hard she made loud gulping sounds when she breathed, which normally would have made Lucy embarrassed for her. But she was too relieved to care.

The *soeurs* stayed for three hours total, talking until they laughed, and then they couldn't stop. When Lucy looked at her watch and said they should be going, Frère Sabbatini asked Soeur Paxton if she wouldn't mind saying a prayer before they left. Afterwards, Soeur Sabbatini grabbed both *soeurs* in an embrace made awkward by her large stomach. It was the first time Lucy had ever hugged Soeur Paxton, and even so, she had hugged only half of her. Frère Sabbatini escorted the *soeurs* downstairs to the front door and kissed them both three times on the cheek even though *soeurs* were not allowed to exchange *bisous* with men.

"Today you are not missionaries. You are my angels," he said. "It is okay to kiss angels."

The *soeurs* walked back to their bikes in silence and Lucy wondered what her companion was thinking. In less than two weeks' time, she had seen two miracles because she didn't know what else to call them. However, instead of feeling as though she had done something good, she mostly felt alone.

"What are you thinking?" Lucy asked finally, tired of her own thoughts. She tried to guess what her companion would say. She was completely wrong.

"That it's four-thirty and I'm starving."

In a rare display of agreement, the *soeurs* decided to buy sandwiches from La Mie Caline and eat on the edge of the port, where they watched the sun sink between the towers and turn the water golden.