

SAVING ERASMUS

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A Novel

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Saving Erasmus

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this book is dedicated to the Communities of Believers—the ones I have known—Horizons for Youth, Earlham School of Religion, Omega Institute, Ganas, and others that exist. And to those on the road, a journey, or a pilgrimage: may each (group) know the other.

And to Deborah Norbeck and John Miller who embraced death with faith and now remind me continually of the value of each minute.

1

IN WHICH I MEET THE ANGEL OF DEATH

i did not expect to meet the Angel of Death while he was extricating himself from a washing machine. Actually I wasn't really expecting to meet the Angel of Death at all. Not this soon. Not in this place. Yet there he was, slowly unwinding himself from the open door of Dixie Manufacturer's finest front-loading commercial washer, twisting and turning and pulling his full body up over the rim and out onto the laundromat floor.

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I guess no one really expects to see the Angel of Death in a laundromat, let alone climbing out of one of the machines. I suppose we all fantasize about something a bit more extravagant. The scene in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* where Death is playing chess always resonated as realistic to me. In that scene, Death is dressed in black and hovers with a stark face over a very serious chess game. The surroundings are dark, and Armageddon appears to be looming on the horizon. It is quite ominous. I had always visualized the situation more like that, expecting there would be a little more edge to it. But expectations are tricky when it comes to Life and even I suppose to Death.

I admit that I was a bit startled. Most things need to be pulled out of a washing machine. I have never seen any item coming out under its own volition. Never, until now. I'd just dropped some coins into a dusty vending machine, selected a package of mints, and was waiting for them to drop when I first noticed him. I fidgeted at the catch bin in the machine with one hand and kept my eyes focused on the figure withdrawing himself from the washer at the other end of the building. It made me nervous, yet my curiosity was piqued. The scene brought to mind a monarch butterfly extracting itself somewhat wetly from the confines of the chrysalis, except this butterfly appeared quite experienced in his actions.

It was really just a mint that had brought me into the Quik Clean Laundromat. I had been traveling for a long time and had stopped next door at Agnes's Convenient, figuring that it would be the perfect place to get something for my dusty breath. I was meeting an important

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person for the first time, and I wanted to make a positive impression. Good breath is important.

Agnes's Convenient Store was one of those small little stores served by some barely traveled road and located on the outskirts of an inconsequential town. The signs posted in the windows had a slight discoloration to them from years and years of exposure to the sun. It was the kind of place where you would expect the food to be overpriced and out of date. Still, it looked immaculate.

The note on the door said, "Agnes is gone, Please return later." It was a small sign heavily taped to the inside of the glass door. I should have thought more about the note having been so securely posted, but I was in a hurry, and overlooked this as having any importance. So my quest brought me next door to the Quik Clean, where I would first encounter Death.

So how did I know this was Death? You must wonder that; I was questioning the experience myself. I have to be honest: most of my answer came from a gut feeling. A gut feeling I had learned to trust. There was energy to him, a not altogether negative energy, but something beyond the usual kind with which I come in contact. Electricity ran through my body and something inside resonated. It was an old feeling and one buried under years of layering, but the energy within it was potent. If you put me on a witness stand and asked for physical proof that this was indeed Death, I could not give it to you. Some experiences are like that. You just know.

He did look like an Angel of Death to me. He was tall, but it was not the exact measurement of his stature that

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was important, but rather the effect it had. He couldn't have been taller than seven feet because there was space between his head and the ceiling, but his body seemed to fill the room. His presence brought back a feeling I remember having as a child. Grownups weren't really so much larger than kids, but there was a confidence in the way they interacted and carried themselves that separated the adults from the children.

Death was dressed fully in black. Now you might say that this is a cliché; perhaps you want something more spectacular. Green would be nice. Chartreuse might even be even better. But I am merely a storyteller with a resolve to be true to the story. Black was his color. You picture what you want.

His face was invisible, hidden in the shroud of his cloak. The atramentous fabric hung over his body, rippling now and then, draping down to the floor, and girdling what appeared in outline to be wings. His arms were long and his bony hands extended from the edges of his sleeves. In retrospect, I would say that he was an amalgamation of all the representations of Death I had ever seen. Perhaps the closest depiction I could imagine was the third spirit in the movie *A Christmas Carol*. The 1952 Alistair Sims version. It's the best version.

Death stood erect in the middle of the laundromat floor. He shook his black covering, straightening himself, and knocked loose a few random unmatched socks and a handkerchief. He casually brushed the scattered remains of soap powder to the floor, creating a small ring of powdery flecks at the base of his cloak. He reached toward

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the ceiling to stretch, let out a big yawn, and then turned his head to where I was standing.

I fumbled with the package, attempting to pull a mint out of it, and popped the round object that rolled out into my mouth. Unfortunately this turned out to be a small mass of undigested soap powder. I smiled tightly as I washed it around in my mouth and tried as hard as possible to become invisible, though I suppose nothing is invisible to Death, and invisibility is even more difficult when bubbles are forming at the corners of your mouth.

“Andrew,” he said. I looked around the laundromat. It was deserted. I moved my right foot slowly back behind me as I considered a quick dive out the door. Perhaps there was another Andrew nearby. Maybe that Andrew would soon climb out of another washer or even the dryer.

“Andrew Benoit!” This time there was a hint of annoyance in his pronunciation. I tried to ignore the call, but it was perfectly obvious he was saying my name. His voice reverberated in the laundromat. I guess there could have been another Andrew Benoit around, but since I was alone, it was hard to disregard the fact that I was his focus. Death was trying to get my attention, I was ignoring him, and even Death gets irritated. As he spoke, washer doors flung open, a volley of mismatched socks flew by my face, and I could see used dryer sheets clinging in a corner. One random argyle sock fluttered past my head. It looked familiar.

I stood facing the giant figure, transfixed with a mix of fear and awe. *God won't give me more than I can handle*, I thought. I stood my ground.

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“I . . . I am Andrew Benoit,” I replied, raising one eyebrow quizzically and hoping that he just wanted something simple like directions. My heart was beating rapidly and I dropped the package of mints to the floor. Nothing in my seminary studies had prepared me to encounter Death. Not like this at least.

“Can I help you?” I asked. I had worked customer service for a summer and learned how to diffuse quickly what might become difficult situations. Now, having considered the options of fight or flight, I figured that a third choice would be best. When Death calls your name it’s wise to be helpful.

“I am the Angel of Death,” he said. Okay, my guess had been accurate. I generally take the word of any large figure that knows my name. It’s just common sense.

“What do you want from me?” I asked. I looked up into the faceless void, mints scattered at my feet, a slight tremble in my legs. I am not one for conflict. I would rather avoid a situation that calls me to confront. Simple things like poor service or pushy people on the subway cause me to tighten up, and this was bigger than those. I was facing Death and it was quite possible that I was going to have to put up resistance. Death meant business. He wasn’t carrying a chessboard.

“I am going to wipe out the whole town of Erasmus in a week,” he said with a casual air that belied the significance of his words.

This was important news for me. Erasmus was the small town I was headed for when I stopped for a mint. I’d been offered the job of pastor in the local church, a

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one-year appointment I was eager to finish with and move on. My seminary scholarship required that I work for the first year in a small, less sought-after community, and from all the information I could gather, it seemed that Erasmus had been a particularly hard place to work. I had resigned myself to this fact, comforted by the underlying knowledge that I would soon be headed to bigger and better things. Erasmus seemed like a place that people came from but would never intentionally head to.

“You are going to wipe out the whole town of Erasmus?” I asked. It’s best, I think, to be clear when questioning Death. My expectations for the future were changing quickly and I needed clarification.

“Yes,” he said. “I will be returning for them in a week.”

“Is this God’s work?”

“Yes,” he replied and then paused. “God has been watching this town for a long time.”

“Why would God watch Erasmus?” I asked, incredulous. “It’s a nothing town. Why would God want them destroyed?”

I couldn’t imagine anyone spending very much time examining the town of Erasmus. It was simply one more town like any other between the coasts, a dot in the middle of a line called a road. Erasmus was geographically superfluous. You forget thousands of towns like Erasmus on the way to one place that you remember.

“They have been losing faith,” Death replied nonchalantly as he flicked a small, hardened particle of powdered soap off of his shoulder. It landed on one of the red plastic folding tables and then rolled on to the floor.

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“Soon their faith will be gone.”

“So God called you?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Once a certain number of people in a given community lose their faith, it triggers a natural signal. I get an automatic call. After that, God has nothing to do with it anymore. God stopped being involved with all that destruction stuff long ago. Too heartbreaking.”

Well, that’s good, I thought. God seems to have turned the whole dying process over to a hired hand. No more fuss or worry about making the decision. I suppose I really couldn’t blame God for being exhausted—what with the constant covenant making and covenant breaking that went on. Human beings certainly had not made their Creator’s life easy. No wonder God stepped out of the picture. Sparrows are easier.

“So you’re going to destroy the town in one week because a certain percentage of people have lost faith?”

“Exactly,” he replied.

“Why tell . . . me?” I asked. Why was it necessary that I know? I figured Death pretty much works on his own. I have heard stories of people who have premonitions and visions, but this was not the case here. The Angel of Death was relying on me. I was getting thrown the ball in the last minutes of the fourth quarter and up until this point I hadn’t even been playing the game. No, I didn’t even know the game.

“I have to pick someone,” he said. “They get one last chance. I get to call one prophet.” Death’s voice became very serious. “You’re the one I selected.”

“Is this because I went to seminary?”

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“No, Andrew. That was just part of your path.” He paused. “Actually I picked many. But,” he said as he pointed to the empty laundromat, “you are the only one to show up.”

Great, I thought. A dying man gets a last phone call and I'm it. Thanks, Death. Publishers Clearing House randomly selects Mary Beth Finster from East Albatross, Kansas, to win a million dollars and what do I get? Death and the promise of unemployment.

“I never get picked for anything.”

“No, Andrew. You never get picked for what you think you should have. That is different.”

“But I'm not a prophet,” I said. “I mean, I really don't think I have the proper training.” I'd been called many things in my life, some of which I would rather not see in print, so I will let you ascribe your own colorful and descriptive adjectives and nouns. “Prophet” had never been thrown out in any kind of verbal exchange. *There are no more prophets*, I thought, but even on the remote chance that there were, I was certain I was not one.

“Anyone can be a prophet,” Death replied.

Well, throw the theories in the last paragraph out. I am a prophet. The prophets were a diverse bunch. Jonah, Jeremiah, Elisha, Deborah, Elijah. I wasn't so certain I was of their caliber, and now, I'd been called to save a hopeless town. Stuck in some Godforsaken place, and Death had just informed me that it will be destroyed in a week. So much for job security.

“Then you sent the plagues after the bus?” I asked.

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“That was God,” he replied. “I’m not really big on plagues. Not as signs, at least.”

“But the bus . . . you knew I would turn around?”

“I never know,” he shrugged. “As I said, I called many, but only you showed up.”

Save Erasmus. This was the call. I didn’t even know Erasmus. I had just arrived, and I wasn’t really infatuated with the little I saw.

Save Erasmus? I had hardly ever been able to save anything. I had trouble keeping my checkbook balanced. Once I had found a baby bird in the back yard. The bird was obviously not well.

“What will you do with it?” asked my father.

“I don’t know, Dad,” I said. “I just don’t want him to die.” The bird died after two days. I cried for longer. And a bird is small compared to a town, even a town like Erasmus.

“But how do I save a town?” I asked.

“I do not know of your way,” he said. “You must find that in yourself.”

It was customary in the Bible for all of the residents of a faithless town to dress in sackcloth to signal a change of heart and seek God’s forgiveness. This was not an easy task to accomplish. I pictured myself organizing the men, women, children, and livestock of Erasmus into groups of remorseful supplicants. The men and women I could handle. A little reason, some hellfire and brimstone, and perhaps a few pictures of Armageddon, and they would be convinced. The children would be tougher. Perhaps promises of increased television and new cell phones

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would seal the deal. The livestock worried me most. How would I talk an obstinate bull into putting on a sackcloth outfit? “Look,” I would have to say. “It’s all the rage. The cows love it. And the matadors are raving about sackcloth over in Spain.” The livestock would be tough but the cats would be impossible. I think I’d just bribe them to leave with a load of kibble.

“I have a week, then?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“And then you will return?”

“Yes.” Death was nothing if not succinct.

“Where will you be then?” I asked. I am not one who likes surprises. Just tell me outright, put your cards on the table, so I know what to play.

“You will know,” he said.

“How? How will I know?”

“You will know,” he said again, with annoyance in his voice that reminded me again that I was after all speaking with Death, and it probably was not a good idea to get him angry.

“Do you always come and go through washing machines?” I asked. It really wasn’t that odd, actually. I remember reading *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* when I was a child. The children in the Narnia books find a magic kingdom behind a door in the back of the closet. A washer is not much different from a closet. Both were spaces in which you put clothes. Clearly this morning was a good time to suspend disbelief.

“Not always,” he replied. “But often. I use the broken ones; that way I don’t have to worry about getting wet.”

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Fair enough. The washing machine that he had come out of had a sign that read “Broken. Don’t Use. No Money Returned If You Do.” taped to the glass. There was always at least one broken washing machine in every laundromat I’d ever been in.

“Now I must go.” He sifted through the pockets of his black garment and produced a handful of quarters. “Three dollars for a load. This is getting ridiculous,” he sighed. He placed the coins in the slot and leapt deftly up and into the open hole.

“Please,” he said, “close the door and turn the controls to gentle.”

I reached up to close the door but he scrunched his head back out. “And no soap,” he said with a wry smile. Even Death has a sense of humor.

I nodded in acknowledgment, closed the door gently, and turned the knob to the gentle cycle. I pushed the buttons and the giant washer began to spin. Death was right; he knew how to disconnect the water and initiate the spin cycle so he wouldn’t get wet. I could see his black covering slip and twirl and watched as Dixie Manufacturer’s finest sucked the Angel of Death into its mystical vortex.

I realized after he was gone that I still had many questions for him. It was like when you leave a job interview and you suddenly realize that you forgot to ask about benefits. The questions swam in my head. How can Death be in more than one place at a time? Which came first, Death or Life? Do you like your job? What really happened to Marilyn Monroe, Amelia Earhart, Jimmy Hoffa, Judge Crater, Anastasia, and Elvis? What occurred on that grassy knoll?

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The Angel of Death was gone, and I experienced suddenly a vast emptiness in the laundromat. Those had been big shoulders that had vanished in the turn of a rotor. I was left alone with the immediate call of my task: Save Erasmus.

Save a whole town. Me. Andrew Benoit. Naturally, I felt rather overwhelmed by this unexpected development. I was alone. No one had witnessed my interaction with the Angel of Death. Only the soap particle outline on the floor, the discarded socks, and the dwindling electricity in my body affirmed my experience. My mind slowly stilled, and I became aware of the quiet that surrounded me. Mints lay scattered at my feet. Bubbles were spewing softly from my mouth. Death had just visited me and told me that he was going to destroy a town if I did not convince the inhabitants to repent.

Again I imagined preparing people, cows, and chickens in sackcloth and small signs in order to avoid God's wrath. I visualized preaching a moving sermon that brought grown men to tears, kept children awake, and convinced stubborn bulls to wear burlap. There would be a lot of work to do in the week ahead. This was not going to be easy.

It was only ten o'clock in the morning, and already I had been warned by Death that Armageddon was coming in a week. I considered my options. I'd stopped in the laundromat on my way to meet Mrs. Primrose Davenport, and it seemed that the best course would be to keep the appointment. After all, I had to start somewhere.

I didn't know it yet, but this day was only going to get worse.



2

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

i scooped up the scattered mints with my hand. As I was dropping them into the waste can, I picked one out and flicked the particle of dust off its surface, looked around to see if anyone had entered the laundromat, and, certain the area was devoid of humans, put the mint into my mouth. My breath was of uncertain quality, and a little bleach from the floor could only help.

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Business was sure slow on a Saturday morning in early May. Maybe the residents did their laundry in a stream in Erasmus. I pictured the townspeople pounding rocks on top of various garments while the water flowed underneath. I was open to options. After all, I'd just met the Angel of Death.

The sun was overhead as I walked into the parking lot. The sign was still on the door at Agnes's Convenient Store: the store was still closed. *Agnes must be ill*, I thought. *Or perhaps she's having an early morning rendezvous with a mystery man*. Whatever it was, Agnes's store was anything but convenient on this morning.

I swung my backpack onto my back. The pack was small and held only the essentials that I would need on this spiritual journey: some clothes, a Bible, my camera, and a few pounds of good coffee. The rest of my belongings I'd donated to charity. I was embracing the ascetic life. So far the results had been troubling.

I walked out of the parking lot and made my way across Highway 35, which was the main road in and out of town. A sign read, "Welcome to Erasmus. Population 510."

Welcome? I hardly felt welcome. Frustrated, maybe. Anxious, definitely. Confused? Oh, yes. I looked down the outbound road longingly.

So how did I end up here to begin with? The truth is, Erasmus would never have been on my list of preferred destinations. Coming here wasn't among the affirmations that I wrote out each day. I would never have predicted that early May would have found me in this place. St. Augustine's Seminary requirements,

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Robert Frost, the Marx Brothers, and a baseball brought me. It was that simple.

All right, it really wasn't that simple.



St. Augustine's Seminary and St. Monica's Finishing School for Girls were founded in the early 1900s to train young men to be ministers and young women to be ministers' wives. St. Monica's was bankrupt by the early 1950s, but St. Augustine's had flourished and now prepared both men and women to minister to a suffering world.

My presentation of "The Missing Letter on the Gutenberg Press and How It Has Affected the Modern Church" had been highly lauded and granted me top status in my class. As a result, I'd been offered a place at St. Exupery's Cathedral, a large church advantageously situated on the East Coast overlooking the ocean, with a congregation that included many celebrities.

The ceremony where post-graduate placement decisions are announced is eagerly anticipated each year. It takes place in Montanus Hall, named for St. Montanus, an early martyr, and known fondly to students as "Monte Hall." But as I walked through the voluminous halls of St. Augustine's I was conscious only of uncertainty and indecision.

"Hey, Benoit!"

I turned around and saw Michael Servetus striding in my direction. Michael had entered seminary after first graduating from medical school. He and I had argued

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periodically about one of my favorite comedy teams, the Three Stooges. Michael thought they should only have one combined footprint site at Grauman's Chinese Theatre and I felt they should each have one. Though he had been a difficult pupil for the professors, constantly disagreeing with many of their beliefs, I found him to be one of the most engaging students at St. Augustine's. He had been circulating among the graduates before hailing me.

"Where did you decide to go?" he quizzed.

"Well, I'm still not certain."

"Not certain, old man? You're going to have to announce it shortly! Why, I'd have thought you'd have decided long ago."

"I've got a lot to think about."

"What's to think about?" he laughed. "St. Exupery's is the goose that lays the golden egg! By the way, aren't you going to ask me?"

"Sure, Servetus," I said. "Where are you headed?"

"I'm going to work at a small publishing house for a while. Lyon Press. Not sure I was cut out for this ministering stuff, like you. You were made for it."

Made for ministry. It was a tag I had worn proudly all of my life. Long ago, I had determined that I was going to be a man of faith and good works. That way there could be no question about my calling.

"Yes, I suppose I was," I replied.

My work at St. Augustine's had been exemplary. I had demonstrated an investigative nature and an inquisitive mind. So why was I so uncertain as to where my next move should take me? Well, the truth was, I always

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had difficulty making choices. Even as a child, when my family went to Howard Johnson's for ice cream, my father, mother, and older brother, Jamie, would easily select from the multitude of flavors while I stood trying to figure out what I wanted until someone shouted, "C'mon, kid, hurry up!" from the back of the line. Often whatever flavor I selected would not taste as good as I expected, but at least it was only ice cream. This choice was different.

"Remember, Andrew," Michael said in the tone of a trickster who has the master stumped, "he who hesitates is last."

I stared back at him, waiting, knowing that if I allowed a little time to pass Servetus would, for a brief moment, believe he had won.

"Mae West. Too easy."

"Darn!" he said. "You know those comedians too well."

"Like family," I said. "They're like family."

"Speaking of which," he continued, "is anyone from your family coming to graduation?"

"Ah, no," I said.

"Well," he laughed, "you can share some of mine. I have more than I need."

"Sure," I said quickly. "Hey, listen, I have to go."

"Okay. Good luck with your decision. I know you'll make a good one."

I wasn't so certain. I was waiting for someone to shout, "C'mon, kid," but the halls were silent.

The thing was, just minutes before I ran into Servetus I'd been absolutely certain where I was going. But that

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was before I'd encountered Robert Frost and Professor Anderson.



Professor Archimedes Anderson was one of St. Augustine's leading academics. He enlivened his classes by performing the parts of ancient characters in historical tales. Once he had performed the role of St. Benedict, reenacting the scene where Benedict is nearly poisoned by the men in the monastery, and another of him rolling in nettles. Professor Anderson even used real nettles, which meant the class ended a bit early that day. I loved his classes because he brought religion to life.

In addition to being one of St. Augustine's leading teachers, Professor Anderson was also my mentor. He continually challenged me to think outside the box.

"Andrew," he once said as I handed him my too-well-researched paper that carefully documented how Methuselah spent each of his 969 years, "God does not live in these." He pointed to his ceiling-high bookshelves, crammed with thousands of literary and reference works. "Or in this," he said as he tapped me on the head with my rolled-up paper. "God lives in the people. All the people."

"I know," I replied.

"You think you know, Andrew," he said. "But you must know it here." He pointed to my heart. "Your journey must take you from here," he said as he touched my forehead

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with his finger, “to here.” His finger traced a line in the air that ended at the point of my heart.

“I think I am there,” I told him.

“That is the problem. One day, you will not think it. You will know it.”



Professor Anderson’s room was in the basement of Holscher Hall. He said he liked to believe that he was in the Essene caverns. As I walked toward his room now, I heard screaming.

I knocked on the heavy wooden door. Trash and recycling covered the hallway. Papyrus scrolls were stuffed into bags and a broken ossuary had been tossed into the recycling bin. “Professor Anderson?” I called. From behind the door I could hear vibrant expletives being shouted. Professor Anderson was coloring the air with Latin, Greek, and Hebrew and saturating the atmosphere with words such as Sheol, Baol, and Hades. “Professor Anderson!” I pounded a bit harder.

“YES!” I heard, then, “yes, yes,” again, the tone of voice changing from annoyance to regained confidence. “Come in.”

Professor Anderson was busily dabbing a large papyrus scroll on his desk with paper towels. Coffee dripped from it onto the floor. He looked up. “I’m sorry, Andrew,” he said. “I hope I didn’t frighten you.”

“Well no,” I said. “Is something wrong?”