Saved

Mark Hjermstad*

*Iowa State University

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THE HOT sun beat unmercifully on the old car as it rumbled down the lone stretch of highway east of Hillsboro. Laura mopped her brow with her handkerchief and watched the roadside whiz by.

"Damn, I wish it would rain." Her voice was quiet but forceful. Abner glowered at his wife, then spoke.

"Angel, you know the Lord don’t allow such talk from one of his disciples . . . 'specially not from a woman. It’s a sin, Angel . . . a sin. It’s the devil at work in your soul, and ya gotta fight him . . . you gotta repent. Ya hear that? Every night I pray for you, Angel . . . every night I pray hard . . . real hard. Tonight I’m gonna pray special hard . . . at the meetin’, at God’s meetin’. And you gotta pray too, ya hear? You gotta repent your sins, woman, or you’ll burn. . . ."

Laura just gazed at the searing countryside. "Why doesn’t he pray for rain instead? Rain . . . oh God, for some rain." Abner hadn’t always been that way. He had heard the calling three years after he and Laura were married. That was over fifteen years ago. Now Abner fathomed himself a savior and not just a preacher.
The car sped on, the lone object on the narrow ribbon of highway. The late afternoon sun flashed its brilliance across the car's hood. Laura squinted and looked at her husband.

"Ab . . . do we have to stop in Hillsboro? It's a hole, a goddam hole. And it's so hot, Ab . . . if it would only rain."
A frown came over her face. She leaned over to the window and peered up at the empty sky. Not a cloud in sight. Not one.

Laura shifted her gaze to the highway. Ahead lay Hillsboro, almost obscured by the blinding rays of the western sun. Its approach was rapid. Too rapid for Laura. Soon they were driving over its hot, dry streets. Laura was uncomfortable. She hated Hillsboro. She hated the whole state of Missouri. But Abner insisted they come here, and it was useless for Laura to try to dissuade him.

She rolled down the car window, seeking fresh air, but finding only an unmoving mass which smelled of dust and sweat.

"Gonna die . . . gonna die if it doesn't rain." The thought ran through her head. Her hands searched her purse for a cigarette, found one, and placed it between her lips. She lit it and inhaled deeply, trying to bring some stimulation into her weary body. But it was no relief. She spit out the tobacco flakes which lay on her tongue.

"Ab . . . I'm hungry. Let's eat before we find the meeting tent."

"No time, Angel. It's getting late, and I like to get there as early beforehand as possible. Need to pray first so's the spirit will be in me."

Laura scoffed. She took a heavy drag on her cigarette, then threw it out the window. She stared at the tent which now lay just ahead of them. The town had put it up. It wasn't very big, but, then neither was Hillsboro. The last time they were here, three years ago, the people had filled it. They had been awed by Abner's preaching and had begged him to come back. Now they were here.

"Fools," thought Laura. "Taken in by a man like Ab . . . the second savior . . . Christ reincarnated." She looked at him with contempt.
Abner stopped the car in front of the tent. He stepped out and looked around. Laura followed him. The air outside the car was stifling, but she felt relieved to stretch her legs and walk again. They had driven over four hundred miles.

"A shame the town don't have a big church or meetin' house. It hardly seems fitting for me to preach inside of a tent." Abner paused and surveyed the structure. "But when the spirit's in me I'll preach anywhere—'Where two or three are gathered . . . ' says the Good Book." He disappeared into the tent.

Laura remained outside for several minutes. She examined the street. It was empty. Not a soul in sight. She wanted to walk, but the heat forbade her. She sought sanctuary in the tent. It was dark in there, but the air was cooler . . . a welcome change. Outside it had felt as if her body would explode.

"Two days in this awful place," said Laura to herself. "And to think I married Ab to get away from towns like Hillsboro. God, if it would only rain."

She sat down on one of the benches and waited . . . she didn't know for how long. At last she looked up and saw Abner kneeling on the platform in the front of the tent. He was praying. At least he was going through all the motions. Prayer to Abner was a most dramatic event. His body would writhe with emotion, and his voice would quake incessantly.

"The goddam fool." Laura's voice was barely audible in the massive tent. Unable to sit any longer, she arose and walked to the tent door. The sudden light of the setting sun blinded her. Squinting into the horizon, she noticed a few clouds gathering in the southwest.

"God, please rain."

The setting sun cast a hot and brilliant glow over the dusty town. Laura began to walk. The thought of rain exhilarated her, and she increased her pace. She walked for what seemed like hours. It was dark when she returned. The town people had begun to arrive. Many were already within, holding their hymnals and Bibles, praying and gossiping in alternate breaths. Abner stood in front of the tent, greeting and blessing and praying all at once. Laura took out her white robe, draped it over her shoulders, and walked to the front. She took her seat among the dozen or so people who
sat just below the lectern. Abner called them disciples. They were men and women who had been moved by the spirit... just like Abner. Laura had never been moved, but Abner wanted her there anyway. All the disciples wore white robes.

Laura waited impatiently. When the tent was nearly full, Abner announced the singing of the first hymn. The piano began, and Abner's booming voice was immediately joined by the crowd's. Laura sang the first verse, then gave way and just listened. She longed for the song to be over, for the whole meeting to be over, but no amount of impatience would rush the time. Her discomfort reached its peak when the hymn ended and Abner began to pray.

"Almighty God... as sinners are we gathered here tonight..."

Laura squirmed. They were the same words, the very same words she would hear night after night, town after town, and they struck her ears with a ringing pain. She tried not to hear them, but her efforts were in vain. Abner finished and began his sermon.

"Friends... it's impossible to hide your sins from the Lord. He knows your evil thoughts; he sees your lyin' and cheatin' and..."

Laura's whole body ached. Her forehead erupted in cold sweat, and she wrung her hands feverishly. Abner's words shot through her like tiny daggers, piercing her very mind. The voice increased in volume.

"... there's only one way you can be saved, my friends. You must repent and wash your sins clean in the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ! You gotta be cleansed before the Almighty, stripped of your evil ways..."

Laura trembled. Another minute and she would break. But a distant peel of thunder seized her at the point of breakdown. She listened carefully. Again the thunder peeled, only louder.

"Would it rain? Would it really rain?" Laura had to know. Quietly she arose from her seat and hurried to the door in the rear of the tent. The crowd, enthralled by Abner's words, failed to notice her.

She stepped into the night air. It was cooler, but the humidity had risen. A light breeze had begun to blow, sending the dust swirling through the empty streets.

"Christ... rain, please rain."
She hurried across the street and ran along the sidewalk. Suddenly the air stilled, the thunder ceased. The storm would not hit. Laura’s spirits wilted. She couldn’t go back to the tent.

She stopped and scanned the quiet street. Out of the darkness a flashing neon sign caught her eye. She crossed the street and entered the bar. It was deserted, save for the bartender and the lone man drinking at the far end of the counter. Laura sat down at the opposite end and ordered a drink. Abner’s words still reverberated in her troubled mind. She hastily swallowed her drink and tried to shut them out. The drink helped.

The man at the other end of the bar stared silently at her for some time, then walked over and sat beside her. Laura looked up at him with cold eyes and said nothing. She was still wearing her white gown.

“What’s an angel like you doing in a place like this?” The question was inevitable. The stranger smiled at her. His eyes traced the shape of her body beneath the robe, then searched her face. It was flushed but pretty.

Laura smiled back but didn’t answer. She felt a curious attraction to him. Her look became warmer.

“How about another drink?” The stranger looked at her intently. Laura nodded. Their eyes locked. A nervous joy penetrated Laura’s body, and she felt her whole being move towards him. Neither spoke for several moments.

“How about you and me leaving this place, Angel? You look lonely. You don’t have to be, you know.” His voice was calm and reassuring. Laura assented. They left the bar and stepped into the darkness.

It seemed as if hours had passed. Laura gathered her clothes and dressed in silence. She found her white robe and threw it over her shoulders. Throwing a last glance at the sleeping stranger, she hurried out of the motel and into the street. She felt strangely different . . . new-born and alive. She headed back towards the tent, three blocks distant. A drop of rain struck her face . . . then another, and another. Soon the cool rain fell steadily, soaking her hair and skin and clothes as she hurried on. Laura stopped. The rain was now coming in sheets. It drenched her entire body, bringing her a refreshment she had never before known. She felt
cleansed, purified, redeemed. She spread out her hands and cried into the dripping night.

“God . . . I’m saved!”

Her mouth opened wide to drink of the falling rain. It chilled her lips, her body tingling with new excitement. She ran on, reaching the tent just as a clap of thunder shattered the air. She stepped in, wet and trembling.

The crowd had gone. Had she been gone that long? Only a handful of disciples remained. They were tightly gathered around the kneeling figure of Abner, whose body convulsed and whose voice quavered amidst the echoing strains of thunder.

Laura stood in silence for several moments, then began to walk down the aisle toward the kneeling preacher. Her step was deliberate, her face flushed and heated. The water dripped from the long, white robe, spotting the dry, trodden ground beneath her feet. She reached the front and stood before the group.

Abner, unaware of her entry, looked up. Her white robe gleamed in the light of the overhead lamp, and her face possessed a glow Abner had never seen before. He was startled by her sudden presence and stumbled to his feet. The disciples turned and stared at the dripping figure.

“I’m saved, Ab . . . I’m saved!” The words exploded in the quiet tent. In the distance the thunder continued to roll.

“I’m saved . . . the rain . . . a man. . . .” Laura fell to her knees. “I’ve found it . . . a man . . . he took me, gave me something you never gave me . . . and the rain . . . saved!” Her words died in the night air. She threw her head back and sobbed quietly.

Abner now stood before her, his body casting a dark shadow over the sobbing woman. He stared at her in disbelief, his fists clenched in anxiety.

“What do you mean, Angel, what do you mean?” His fiery eyes met hers.

“Saved, Ab . . . saved . . . a man took me, showed me . . . then the rain . . . at last, the rain. . . .”

Abner shook with rage.

“You’ve sinned, woman, sinned!” He grabbed Laura’s neck and face. “And you dare to stand here before your God? You must repent, Laura, or you’ll die . . . die by the mighty hand of God!”
Laura just knelt there, unable to move, unable to speak, the stinging tears flowing down her cheeks and into Abner's trembling hands. She closed her eyes and felt his hands close around her slippery neck. The pressure increased, more and more, until the thunder crashed in Laura's brain and her eyesight exploded in a brilliant flash. She managed to choke the last words.

"No . . . Ab . . . saved . . . rain. . . ."

Abner released his violent hold. Her body collapsed, the soaking heap striking the barren ground. She lay there, her eyes wide open but devoid of life. Abner looked up. The words flowed from his mouth.

"Woman, the Lord has taken vengeance. It is too late to repent." Abner's figure froze with the words. The disciples murmured amens and began to pray.

Outside the air was still. The rain had passed, and the thunder was only a distant moan. The lightning had ceased, and the night yielded itself to silent darkness.

**Track**

*by Andrea Carlisle*

*English, Jr.*

The boy runs with the rest, steaming glasses slipping down his sweaty nose,

wild hair wet on his brow, young face corrupted, pitted.

skin pouring sweat, stick-like flannelled legs pumping, aching, not moving him now

fast enough, cold lashing his lungs, he surrenders softly to a cough, unheard by the closest runners, who leave him behind, pounding pavement with numbing feet,

ears ringing, ribcage bursting,

mind screaming,

alone.