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“Islands of Peace, of the Blessed”

Janet Garrard-Willis

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

—A. Solzhenitsyn

I have a penchant for saving people. Or, I suppose I should say, for trying. Christ never asked, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” so I figure I have no business asking either. No business, that is, unless I want to be cast out, marked for life, wandering lost in a land without promise.

The first person I remember trying to save wore squeaky oxfords and at first seemed like my savior. Having just entered the sixth grade, I needed saving. Puberty came at me armed with an arsenal of acne, sleeplessness, and the awareness that hand-me-down clothes weren’t going to earn me favor in the world of middle school. My female classmates wore makeup and plugged quarters into the school bathroom vending machines. The boys talked about their sexual forays while I searched for a dictionary. They snapped my bra and told me I had “nice eyes.” Worse, each hour we had to shuffle from class to class, never anywhere long enough to feel comfortable.

Mr. Browden* and his squeaky shoes provided the closest resemblance to comfort I could find; he ran the library. So each day after gulping down my sandwich and half-pint carton of milk, I took my books to the room at the center of the school, settled onto a tabletop, and read. Mr. Browden hovered nearby with a rubber stamp pad, ready to answer questions and smile at my stack of reading.

Mom raised my sisters and me more on libraries than on flannel board. Every summer after swimming lessons, we wrung out our chlorinated swimsuits and wrapped them in our towels like wet jelly rolls, strapped the sturdy soles of saltwater sandals to our feet, and ran a half block north to Peninsula Library. The children’s section sprawled across the entire second floor, and we spent hours badgering the librarians before checking out our load and trudging up the hill back home.

*Some names in this essay have been changed.

By the time I passed the level-three swimming lessons, I'd memorized *Jellybeans for Breakfast*. Two years later, by the time I passed the last swimming test (jumping into the deep end of the pool fully clothed and disrobing without panic or death), I'd found and finished the Nancy Drew aisle. I lay on my bed's gingham dust cover and dreamt about how adolescence would turn me into the willowy strawberry blond with piercingly intelligent, yet beautiful, green eyes who solved cases, saved lives, and sank into the adoring (though somewhat undescribed) arms of my boyfriend, Ned.

So it seemed natural to spend recess in the library when I graduated to middle school. I knew libraries: Dewey Decimal seemed a far less frightening fellow than John Goss, who said he wanted to kiss me and stole my books on the bus. But except for me, nobody seemed to like Mr. Browden. The teachers avoided him, whispering about his mysterious transfer out of the mathematics department. Some of the eighth grade girls in my P.E. class, the ones who brazenly marched between the lockers, whispered that he looked down their blouses while they read. The boys made loud jokes that Mr. Browden was queer, although I had no clue what that implied.

Saving Mr. Browden should have been easy. It was so clear! He felt lonely. He loved his books, and he wanted students to transcend their Esprit bags and aerosol cans long enough to commune with literature. But he lacked social skills, and he felt afraid to reach out to those who mocked him. Mr. Browden needed someone to love him.

I was twelve years old. I'd read the Bible, and I knew love changes people. Mr. Browden just needed to be needed, like Paul or Jonah or the harlot in Jericho.

I wore a skirt of stiff blue cotton that my mother's eighteen-inch waist fit in college. White top with a colored sailboat. Black Mary Janes and bobbed hair, curled under and flipped. Hand-me-down training bra from my sister Chris, pink bow at the center. Math book because nothing insults people more than pity. Hadn't he been a math teacher once? I would show my affection and need just by asking him to help me with my pre-algebra. Perfect.

Mr. Browden knew his math, especially calculations: kneel down next to student; put your hand on her shoulder; turn page in textbook; wait four minutes; ask a question with watery blue eyes; form an acute angle with your arm and the student's opposite shoulder; draw a perpendicular dissection with your other arm and stiff blue cotton. Close the angles.

I don't do math now, although I still try to figure out the formulas for salvation. When, after a year of my silence, Mr. Browden left the school for jail, I pitied him. Him, and his daughter, who was less silent than I. To my young mind, it seemed like our failure; he was lost and, having been found out, taken further from being found.

Leslie Norris writes, "I have not found them, islands of peace, of the blessed." But he and I "would search for them, would keep them floating with [our] breaths."¹ Water surrounds islands, of course. And I learned swimming well during those summer sessions as a child. I could undress in the deep end of the pool, sputter across to dry tile, and kick along the racing lane with a Styrofoam kickboard held rigidly before me. The teachers threw shiny black rings of rubber into the deep end, and I fought the pressure in my lungs and ears to reach and retrieve them. We dove through hula hoops and did flips off the board. I learned dolphin diving and swam a mile-long lake with salamanders gliding sleek-headed beside me in the water.

At seventeen I became a volunteer lifeguard. The mechanics of life guarding are simpler than math. You have strong arms and good lungs; a long, hooked metal pole; oars; and a boat. And you know how to deal with the drowners who, rather than being pulled to shore, drag their potential saviors underneath the cool curtain of lakes and pools. You get a certificate to prove you can do it.

No one teaches you, however, that storms negate training. I resented that, standing on a dock that jounced violently beneath my feet as I shouted to a canoe of girls at Church camp for the first time. First day of my volunteer position, and I shouted across the waves for them to hold on, forget the oars they've long since lost but continue to cry for, and pray for the wind to stop. The kids had been in the lake only a half hour when the breeze lost its temper; everyone scrambled out of the water but these three girls, too panicked to move. I knelt on the slat boards of the dock to steady long, willowy legs, and I held on. I kept shouting.

The lake had no islands for the canoe to drift towards. Voices reached me from across the lake, and I could tell the girls were sobbing. They had nothing to bail with but their empty hands, and the boat was filling with water. They couldn't swim well enough to come back without the boat, and slipping into the water for a moment slammed me against the dock, knocked my breath away, and filled my mouth with slime and splinter. Another girl found a telephone and phoned fifteen miles down the road for the priesthood, which I lack. Two men arrived dressed in white shirts, ties, and piety. They strode out onto my dock with thick-soled J.C. Penney shoes like Peter after a visit to the mall and blessed the water. The waves died down; the men brought the girls in. I ran barefoot down the muddy trail toward my cabin, cursing the boards of the dock and the water and my unsteady legs and a metal hook that could reach only twelve feet.

College came a year later, taking me away from the rain forests and ocean of western Washington. I came to Utah, to the desert bisected by the usually lolling Colorado that both nourishes and tears the junipers from rock during spring flooding. But I lived in Provo, camped on high ground, where it rarely rains.

Todd was from Colorado. He had blue eyes and a voice that left me drowning. On our fourth date, he backed me against a brick wall, slid his hands down my body, held me, and said he wanted to give me a good experience. I sat on the couch swathed in a thick blanket for hours after that, crying.

I'd gone out with him after meeting him at a party. He'd played the guitar and sung with teeth white as milk, but when Lara took the guitar away, his hands lay folded and small against outdated jeans. When he phoned two days later, I'd wondered if he'd had to hold the guitar to get brave enough to call me. He took me to a pizza joint near my house, and as we shuffled through the snow on the way home, he told me about his broken family and how he had nowhere to go for Christmas.

For the fifth date, Todd and I went to the supermarket. Term paper due in the morning, no food in the house, and a towheaded boy smiling shyly as I dragged him through the feminine hygiene aisle. I hadn't wanted to see him again, but he kept calling, kept lilting his voice upwards at the end of each sentence and turning each conversation into a question. He had said he wanted peace on earth, with me as a part of his personal saving grace. At Smiths we ran into people from his apartment complex, and he quickly and loudly introduced me, frantically grabbing my hand and wrapping his arm around my highwaisted jeans like a frightened child reaching for a life vest. He sang on the way to the car, both he and John Lennon advising me that "all you need is love," but I knew I could not save him.

I'm a Mormon. I have been since I turned eight years old, the Mormon estimate of an age of accountability. My parents devoted two Monday nights to explaining baptism to me: remission of sins, taking the name of Jesus Christ, confirmation of the Holy Ghost, accountability for further actions. The Sunday before my baptism, Ma brushed my hair hard, pulling two tight ponytails like red banners at the sides of my head. I went into Bishop Wolfly's office alone, sat in his brown chair with my feet dangling, and answered his questions. Eight years old is not as young as most people think; I knew what I was doing, and I was scared. I knew I couldn't blame my sister when I smeared butter all over the kitchen tile and drew pictures in it, knew I couldn't turn the corners down in my library books, knew I would be Jesus' child with his name to prove it. The bishop told me not to worry, to come back if I ever wanted to for any reason. I stood trembling, and he hugged me close, smoothing the ponytails. His hands felt like Momma's.

They hadn't mixed the hot and cold water well. My heavy polyester dress billowed up toward my knees, and I pushed it down into the water and walked toward my father. I could see my best friend, Vicki, dangling her feet over the edge of the baptismal font, her mother yanking her back. I looked across to my father, who rose like an island from the water. I smiled and slid bare feet across the yellow tile. He held me for a moment, asked,

"Are you all right?" I nodded. He raised one hand to the holy square, proclaimed his authority, and in the name of God drew me into the water. The tile slipped; my feet flew up. I felt my hair float above me, my breath gone from the force of the cold. Then, like Lazarus from the tomb and Christ from the grave, I rose out of the water into my father's arms. Ma dried me with a towel, and I walked to the chapel to wait for the other children to finish dressing so that we could sing, pray, and return home.

When John the Baptist baptized Jesus, the Holy Ghost descended out of heaven like a dove. Does the entry into water always mean—at least for those of us who accept the vision—rebirth and the resting of wings above us? Christ needed no redemption, yet the wings still hovered. Does that mean he needed their guard for that which would be done to him? God knew nails would pierce Christ's flesh; he knew also, I suppose, what would happen to me. He didn't stop either action. But he sent the dove to Jesus, and to me through a circle of warm hands pressed to my temple, his hand through the hands of others. I have not figured out the mechanics of salvation. I do not know whether the devil put some evil design into Mr. Browden's mind or whether he was just lonely and ill. Either way, it was not the devil who touched me. Christ consecrated my baptismal font and gave power for its grace, but it was still my father who lifted me from the waters.

I'm twenty-three now, old enough to know that redemption entails the responsibility of repentance, the responsibility of acknowledging the human acts that serve as liaison between us and the intangible. And I wonder what role forgiveness plays in that process, so carefully laid out in steps before me in the Sunday School manual. "Perhaps forgiveness," writes contemporary New York playwright Tony Kushner, "is the place where love and justice finally meet."² In the water of storm or flood and whatever metaphor we apply to what we do and what others do to us, perhaps forgiveness stands as an island, the unification of me with my loving father after he thrust me under justice's cold surface; he didn't damn me or save me. I forgive that; I have neither damned nor saved Mr. Browden or Todd or the unknown man who bloodied and threatened me less than a year ago.

Todd had a roommate—Scott, a philosophical boy with long, black, perpetually mussed hair that fell across his wide eyes when he laughed. We studied in BYU's honors reading room late on Fridays, me perched on the windowsill and him beneath me in a chair. He would lean back in the chair, tug on his homemade beads, and silently laugh at his reading. I watched from above him, my coat wrapped tight to keep out the chill seeping in from the window. I tugged my own beads like a rosary, cried for him, and one night when he held and gently kissed me, I ceased trying to save him.

We went on an Honors Program retreat together, to Arches National Park in southern Utah. The BYU vans shuttled us down, at one point

releasing our luggage into a merry parade of bouncing duffels on the highway. An atavistic fire warmed our separate figures, and at night we climbed underneath an arch and scraped our hands raw.

The next morning it rained. Rain in western Washington is nothing like rain in southern Utah. In Washington everything is held down, but the heavy desert rains stir up layers of fine red dust into mud, fill the gullies, roar and threaten junipers and JanSport. We'd come to help out the Forest Service, and when the rain started, two rangers gathered us and explained that the water would wash away hundreds of tiny trees replanted in a formerly plowed field. To save the trees, we needed to pile earth around their bases, pat the cones solid, and line them with rocks. About thirty of us started to work, our bandannas and clothes growing sodden as well as soggy. I slipped in the mud and bathed in red. My hands slid over the piles of earth and patted, patted, coaxed, talked to the trees, and prayed root blessings. After building thirty or so little tree fortresses, I just wanted to lie in the muck and sleep or crawl into the vans and desert the desert in favor of a shower and hot chocolate. I wondered if the dirt islands could stand up to the rain or would just crumble the moment we left. My friends must have felt the same; we filtered away, then flooded in a run toward the visitors' center. I sprinted, my shoes splashing more red onto Amy and Jeff and Kimmy as I raced to escape the downpour.

I could not find Scott in the center, in the van, or by the drinking fountain. So I walked back to the field, where I found him, a blue nylon hood pulled over his hair, his glasses streaming rain. No one else remained among the sad mounds of earth that stood up from the collecting water pool. Most of the islands hadn't been made properly; we'd been cold and wet, and altruistic ideals frequently fail in the face of a downpour. Scott shuffled his boots in slow circles, walked around a mound, never looking up. From one island to the next he walked, building up the islands and fingering the trees gently. Up and down he shuffled, and I watched him. I stood silent on the borders, wondering if he could keep the islands from crumbling away, wondering if his care—or anyone's—could keep the seemingly arbitrary storm from erasing our handiwork. And I wondered how all powerful God really is, holding me above but not entirely out of the waters of justice and consequence of my own and others' actions. When Enoch and God looked at the residue of the people, God cried over their wickedness. The scriptures don't tell me whether he could have stopped their actions, but his tears tell me that to hold me, to raise Enoch or Lazarus, God's power doesn't keep him from pain. To lift me, he too must stand in the water.

So I think about Scott holding me, my bishop holding me, my father's arms raised to the square, and the wings hovering to meet the baptized

Jesus, and I think we are all each other's islands. We are not yet wholly redeemed, but we throw out the life rings even when we cannot swim ourselves, lift our children from the water of the womb and of the font, touching and trying to keep each other dry. We forgive, joining love and justice on the ground where both savior and saved cling against the rain.

I walked out to the center of the field; Scott looked at me and smiled as I began to work. We didn't curse the downpour or judge it as an omen. Just round and round—pat, build, caress, move on—our feet solid and rising, our hands gentle, and our heads bowed in love beneath the sky.

Janet Garrard-Willis is a master's candidate in English literature at Saint Louis University. This essay won an honorable mention in the 1997 BYU Studies essay contest.

1. From Leslie Norris's poem "Island of Peace."
2. *Perestroika*, act 5, scene 3.