

## Simple Church

*Laura Legge*

Danielle lived in a simple church in central Quebec, surviving on wild game and crushed insects and the black huckleberries the rector set out on collection plates. One cool afternoon in autumn, as she toasted her feet by its wood stove, the rector slinked into the vicarage. She had been expecting sentence ever since she and Benoît, a young theology student who slept on the nativity straw beside her, had been caught kissing in the stable. Now Benoît was outside chopping oak on the brickwork, and she was, unremarkably, alone.

The rector had a raven in his hands, sliced from beak to abdomen. He opened the bird's belly and thrust Danielle headfirst into it. The darkness enfolded her like a world. She was scared and short of breath. But what disturbed her most was that she could not understand the nature of the penalty.

Inside the raven, it was warm, if not air-poor. The rector began to shout the story of Job, on his allegorical tap that month. After the devil stole Job's means and family, afflicted his body with lesions, the man remained faithful—later the Lord appeared from a whirlwind to reward him for his faith with wealth and children. Danielle wondered if she could ever believe in heaven the way she believed in the reeking insides of that raven.

Only twenty-five, Danielle had seen evil, eye to eye. She had come to this simple church to flee a partner. She had learned, over the years, to discern when it was safer to submit than to struggle. She went limp against this punishment, finding a way to inhabit the raven in relative peace. She made the space into a sanctum, one of soft and red places to hide, and she settled there until the rector felt the lesson was finished and allowed her re-entry to the broader earth.

At about that time, Benoît appeared in the picture window. The rector was facing the opposite wall, and Danielle flashed her teeth to the young theologian as a means of warning. He escaped just in time. She fantasized about having her own sentinel, someone who protected her as she protected Benoît. How secure she would feel, how unassailable. But that was not her lot. Hers was much more like Job's, a life of trials and troubles, of overcoming others' violence by beating her feet on the high road.

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Later that night in the nativity room, after Danielle had described to him the punishment she had endured, Benoît started to weep. It was unusual for a young man, but perhaps not so unusual for a young theologian, who lived in a moral cloudland, far above the small embarrassments of daily life.

When his face was as dry as one of the rector's persimmons, she said, "I don't know why you cried. I was the one who suffered."

He stared at her as if she were the queen of cynics. No matter how fair, all questions about his conduct seemed to deflate him. He tended to position himself as the sole authority on divinity, though Danielle was here for the same reasons as he, to learn through text and

experience. Benoît had a heavy jaw and a hungry energy. But his insecurity was a frost, and it touched all the space between them.

Save the rector, they were the only current residents of the simple church, although a series of women had passed through in the six months Danielle had been living there. Flame- or black- haired, with gospel tattoos or skin bare as a plucked duck's, speaking French and Arabic and Coptic. But now it was just Danielle; the young man she was attracted to but could not trust; and the rector she, rightly, feared.

Benoît did not seem game to answer Danielle's question. Instead, he went back to his Master's thesis work, which he spoke of, often and with severe gravitas: finding a way to reconcile the existence of God with the existence of evil. He took an archaic poetry book from the mantel shelf and began to tear words from its pages. Each time he did, dust would mist the air, a dank musk chasing his nose into his muslin shirt. With his face still half-covered, he began to arrange the words in a circle on the hardwood floor, NEITHER in the centre. Benoît looked blankly at her. "I can't describe God by what he is," he said. "So I will describe him by what he's not."

Around NEITHER he arranged BODY, INDIVIDUAL, OBJECT, ACCIDENT, SUBSTANCE, STORY, MEMORY, CRUTCH, COMPANION, and on and on, wider and wider, until the circle was as vast as their shared blue sphere. She wondered whether he would, if pressed, use any of these same terms to not-describe her. And if so, if she shared any non-description with his one and only God, maybe his system was unsound.

Outside of the nativity room it started to pour. Danielle went to a small porthole window and, on tiptoe, peered outside. There the rector was running back and forth in the mud, wearing an athletic suit Danielle was tasked with bleaching each Sunday. He was only in his early forties, but his skin hung as loosely as that of a pan-fried hen, and when he ran it seemed to move in the opposite direction.

"Do you think," she asked Benoît, fogging the porthole with her breath, "that the raven was our only punishment?" In response, she heard only the sound of Benoît tearing paper from his poetry book, the lash of the rector's galoshes against the mud. Until the rector caught the two of them kissing, Danielle had managed to stay wholly in his good graces. So she had no sense of how long he would act out his anger, having no past experience to draw on.

Benoît said, in a tone of great impatience, "Of course. Forgiveness is his whole thing, Danielle."

She could see how frightened Benoît was, how his choice to be cross and dismissive was simply a means of reforming his fear. Yet again, the work was hers, to read between his ragged lines. She kept her post by the window. The paper-tearing sounds stopped, and then she felt the theologian's angles beside hers. She felt, at once, the unbearable bulk of humiliation over the raven penance, and with Benoît so near to her, she had the sudden urge to pass a sentence on to him. To whip the bottoms of his feet with birch twigs, or to pour whole, curdled milk down the back of his shirt.

Benoît laid a hand on her shoulder. "Relax, will you?"

The sprinting rector seemed unaware of the filth spraying his athletic suit. Never he mind, Danielle had her bleach. Benoît kissed her on the knuckles, then retrieved his poetry book and moved back to the nativity straw. Danielle watched a row of termites file blindly across the

highest part of the doorframe. She was envious. Pests did not have feelings. A termite certainly did not have to settle its desire to lie down beside an irritating, attractive theology student.

The rector looked through the rain at her face in the porthole. He had stopped running and was now standing on a wet patch of maidenhair moss. She often went to kneel there, on that tender green cushion, when she felt sincere with her religion. Under the burden of his galoshes, the moss was in misery.

“Come here,” Benoît said to her.

Danielle did not need a second invitation. The sight of the rector, standing on something so organic, delicate, made her feel ill. She made sure the door was dead-bolted, then blew out the votive candles and felt her way to the nativity straw. She had an irrational feeling the termites were getting in Benoît’s wild, untended hair, so she brushed it with her fingers. He softened. “I’ve always liked the way that feels,” he said.

They did not say anything else. Benoît fell asleep fluently, while Danielle struggled against her vigilance. At last, she dreamed a soft-edged film of them: flying far above the ground with the kestrels and kingbirds, crossing open country, feeling limitless and free. In those calm moments, she gave no thought to reason or reprimand, only to the sensations that live, like God, without name.

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Six days passed without further discipline. In the same interval the earth had been created, or so the rector had taught them; darkness the first day, mankind the sixth. And so Danielle gave this interlude a monumental weight, as if the rector were consciously building a dominion of terror, which he may well have been, but it only came into being because of her own mind’s work. On the Sabbath day, part of that weight was lifted.

Danielle was in the wringing room, hanging the linens, when Benoît came running to her side. The hem of his shorts was charred, and he gave off the odour of the rector’s clove cigarettes. Again Benoît was weeping, only this time Danielle felt a measure of empathy, because she could tell by his shorts’ blackened hem that he had, in fact, suffered.

“He burned my favourite poetry book,” Benoît managed. “And the words I had gathered, BODY, STORY, CRUTCH, he set them all on fire.”

Though her empathy remained, it was tinged, then, with a fierier sentiment. She remembered how it had felt to be forced into the raven, how choking that stink had been, how sickening the sense of captivity. He was a tall child, his heart without a single callus. His anguish over a few lost objects was nothing in the face of her real, somatic pain.

She collected herself before she spoke to him. “You’ve studied that book for years,” she said at last. “You must know what it says by now.”

Benoît snapped. “Don’t be ignorant,” he said. “You could never understand how much that book meant to me.”

Danielle paused again—long enough to remember her dream of them, out in open country, blooming into a shared freedom—but she was tired of being twice as good as everyone around her. Pettiness rose in her like the holy spirit. She slapped him, and it felt extra physical, inside-of- a-dead-raven physical. This contact startled Benoît enough to make him stop crying.

Rays from the skylight made his damp cheeks gleam, but no new tears tumbled down them. Chastened though he had been, he looked calm. In the countryside beyond the simple church, there were wild horses and there were sheep. She did not have to guess which Benoît would be.

Danielle heard the rector's galoshes a few metres down the hallway. She was wearing a long robe, the scents of her day caught in its weave—the loam by the stream, the rotten Spartan apples in the barn. She lifted its floor-length skirt and invited Benoît to crawl under, creating for him a space of safety, anonymity. In order to fit underneath, he had to curl up like a newborn lamb. His body radiated heat as he breathed, sending upward little waves of love and industry. She felt tenderly toward him.

The rector was not supposed to set foot in the wringing room. He said that in the process of sopping, twisting, and flaying, grime flew as high as the windowsills, making the place unfit for a righteous man. But on that day, he ignored his own rule, a privilege afforded only to him. Danielle knew codes could be changed on a whim by those who had created them—and so, she was disheartened when he entered the room, but far from surprised.

She had run out of linens to string up, so with no busywork, she had to look right at him. His eyes were round and burnished as rosary beads. "I heard voices," he said. "What were you doing in here?"

Benoît remained safely ensconced in her robe. She briefly considered lifting her hem, exposing him to daylight's glare, but instead she chose to be twice as good. "I was washing your clothes," she said to the rector.

He took her by the hair.

And on it went.

Benoît remained in hiding. Danielle moved into her imagination, to numb what was being done. A few moments later, the rector stopped and said he was sorry. He left in a sort of shamefaced way, like a horse who has bucked at the wrong time and been cuffed. She waited until she heard his footsteps disappear down the central corridor and into the repining room, and then she lifted the bottom of her robe. "Let there be light," she said.

Benoît scrambled to the far wall, where he crouched with his knees apart. She removed her robe and began to lather it with soda. This outfit had belonged to one of the other women who had passed through, speaking French and Arabic and Coptic, before bundling into denim and mantles and escaping into the wild beyond. A scent had stayed in the dress, houseleek or bergamot, and she thrashed the fabric until no trace of it remained.

"What could I have done?" Benoît eventually asked.

Danielle's palms were cramped from gripping and twisting the dress. She wished the feeling inside of her were as conventional as anger. Anything but the unease that made her distrust her own perceptions, her body's ability to know the simple realities of this room: its dimensions, dynamics. Anger was a burning home, but at least it was a home. Having thrashed the scent from her robe, she proceeded to tear it into strips. Her skin was dappled with fur and terre matter, flecks of dust and flower stems. She used one strip to wipe that earth away.

"I should have done something," Benoît said. "Shouldn't I have done something?"

In that moment, it occurred to her that Benoît needed her. She could abandon him just as those other women had abandoned the rector, but he required a creator, a book, an ultimate

answer. And there was her power. She could sit right in the heart of her discomfort. If anger was a burning home, then this was an unconstructed one—blueprinted, never to be fully realized, but all her own.

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Over the coming weeks, the punishments mounted. It was obvious to Danielle that her life-knit here had come undone. After leaving her partner, she had lived in several places in which fine had quickly become bearable, and bearable had as quickly become dire, and this felt no different. She knew her flight from this simple church was inevitable.

The day before the winter solstice, a Sunday, Danielle set her sights on leaving. After their special weekly lunch of jambon persillé, which Danielle had made and the three of them had enjoyed, truly, with light and lovely conversation, the rector went to his room to nap. Danielle took Benoît by the hand to the chestnut-drying house, a small building beside the simple church, in order to say goodbye.

Danielle put her hands on Benoît's downy cheeks. He had stopped shaving after the rector began to leave his fresh blades in the rain to rust. Danielle liked the effect, his face as soft to the touch as maidenhair moss. "I'm leaving here today," she said.

Winter had worked its stony weight across the valley, entering the drying house through hairline cracks in its walls. Danielle shook through her gabardine dress. Benoît dropped to his knees and circled her calves with his arms, tickling her shins with his down.

"Don't leave me here," he begged. "I love you."

Instead of offering a hand to help him stand, Danielle squatted beside him. He pulled an instrument from his shirt, a small, laughable piece that looked like a homemade camping spoon. "I've been trying to find a way to get you to safety," he told her. He was solemn. He was serious.

Danielle knew when to struggle and when to move to higher ground. She looked at Benoît, his eyes, his spoon.

She huddled closer to him, impervious for a while to the creeping winter. He lost his balance and crunched her cold toes with the soles of his boots. He tried desperately to redeem himself by kissing his palm and touching it to her sneakers. "I can leave anytime I want," he said. "Can I go with you?"

She considered his suggestion. If they left together, she would have a companion; a body, individual, object, story, memory. A crutch. If they left together, she would be shielded in part from the fear that the rector would hunt her down. And yet, none of that was enough to override her sense that she had to leave alone. If she kept making the same choices she always had, trusting half-loves with her future, she would continue to feel untethered, unsafe, unsure of her own well-being. In that fact, she had deep faith.

"No," she said to Benoît, "you can't."

She kissed him, and through that point of contact moved a deep sentiment, a sensation that lived without name.

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That evening, Danielle and Benoît met at the mouth of the church corridor. They stole down it together, armed with her transcendental desire for freedom and his sharpened camping spoon. Benoît was to distract the rector while Danielle stole layers from the wringing room and escaped through its window to the valley beyond. She would find her way to Montreal, or to Toronto, hoping against hope no one would come looking for her.

Danielle kept one hand on the stone wall as she moved down the corridor toward the rector's sleeping room, grazing limestone, muskrat pelts, strings of dried redcurrants. Her hands were attuned to each texture. When she reached the sleeping room door—intending to pass right by and continue on to the wringing room—she noticed it was ajar. Through the crack she was astonished to hear an older woman interacting with the rector. Benoît, who had been a few steps behind Danielle, caught up and peered over her shoulder.

The rector and the older woman were casting a shadow play against a taut, hanging bedsheet. The woman formed with her hands a raven, her interlaced fingers making its wings beat. While she did this, she recited verses from the Book of Job. Danielle recognized it as the end of God's speech to Job, after he appears from the whirlwind: Who provides food for the raven/when its young cry out to God/as they wander about for lack of nourishment?

Danielle entered the sleeping room then. The rector and the woman noticed her only when she came between them and their light source.

"What is it, Danielle?" the rector asked.

The question calmed her. Only in small pricks did she feel the unease that had been dogging her for months, and they were local to the Ring of Solomon. She wondered how different her days might have been to that point, if someone had asked her this, and kindly, before she had reached the point of exhaustion.

Danielle pointed to the older woman. "Who is she?"

"This is my mom," the rector said. "She's visiting for a few weeks. I think you will get along just fine."

His comportment was entirely different now that his mother was here. He spoke more timidly, his words soft and almost indeterminate. Where usually his rosary bead eyes stared at her, now they darted from corner to corner.

Danielle turned to address Benoît, who was still lingering, fearfully, in the doorframe. "Get in here," she said. He obeyed.

The rector's mother said, "You're very rude."

When Danielle—people-pleasing, best-behaviour-having, twice-as-good Danielle—said, "Thank you," she meant it earnestly. To be seen, even as offensive, was nonetheless to be seen. She studied the rector's mother. Danielle knew little about piety, but she was certain that staying attentive, noticing niceties, was at the heart of sacred life. Beneath the mother's placid surface what Danielle saw was a mundane, commonplace sorrow.

She came closer to the mother, causing the rector to go rigid. He clearly disliked the idea of the two women in contact, and he slid sideways on the quilt to be between them. Danielle cut around. She embraced the older woman, who shook her off like a damp cloak, then whispered something inaudible in her son's ear. Danielle did not like to be discussed. She knelt before the mother and held the woman's tobacco-blotched hands. She could not in good conscience leave

without letting the rector and his mother know the impact they had on her, with Benoît as a forced witness. "I'm leaving here tonight," she said.

"Do you have another place to stay?" the mother asked, clearly concerned.

"No," Danielle said. "But I will find one."

The rector said nothing. Had his mother not been there, Danielle was sure he would have become violent.

The mother looked at the rector. "What have you done?" she asked him.

He looked shamefaced, as he had those weeks before in the wringing room, like a horse who has bucked at the wrong time and been cuffed. Danielle could never—nor did she want to—understand why the rector was the way that he was. But this was the tiniest, most intimate glimpse of a past turned present. She squeezed the mother's hands once, then let go. She stood to her full stature.

Danielle felt differently in that moment than she had, maybe ever. Alive, unflinching. She would carry that feeling south with her, skirting lakes and spanning canyons, toward the rain-gloss of Montreal. The sense of bareness, of being to the point of nonbeing. On her way out of the bedroom, she looked back once at Benoît, to see if he was facing the same renovation. But no, his expression was of simple, undiluted fear. It was easier to look ahead into the void than to look back into his face.

Danielle took everything she needed from the wringing room: a mohair coat, heavy pants, textiles. She could hear the three others talking about her, a vocal cocktail of shaken, awestruck, freaked out. But she did not linger in their reading of her. She went out into the night. What she felt in its cold was not pain but a new wakefulness. She started to walk.