

CHAPTER

No. 1



Marie-Claire pounded dirt from the braided rug hanging over the clothesline behind her home. Sweat trickled down her face and back. Her shoulder muscles ached. She leaned over the railing into the laneway and sneezed.

When she dragged the rug back inside to the freshly swept floor, Maman looked up from her work.

“There is a little extra money this week,” she said. “Why don’t you and Lucille take this and go to the circus? You deserve it, after all your hard

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work.” Maman handed Marie-Claire two coins and began again to pump the pedal of the sewing machine.

“*Merci*,” Marie-Claire said, “but are you not coming, too?”

“I don’t need a circus.” Maman folded another finished shirt and placed it on the pile. “I need only to have my family back together under one roof.”

“Papa says that with what is happening in the West, Louis may be home soon.”

“I pray each night this will be so.” Maman coughed. “You girls go now. I must sew one more shirt before Monsieur Grenier comes from the factory to pick up the next batch.”

“I hope you will at least stop for a cup of tea first,” Marie-Claire said. “*Au revoir*, Maman.”

All the way to the circus grounds, Marie-Claire and her cousin chatted happily, oblivious to the smells from the slaughterhouses they passed, the barrels of decaying fish, the rotting fruits and vegetables in the markets, and the manure on fire at the city dump. On three houses

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in one street, sanitary police were putting up the black-and-yellow placards that told everyone that someone living there had smallpox.

“See my spots, Marie-Claire?” Lucille said. “They are almost gone now.”

“Yes, you are looking much better.” Lucille’s spots were certainly fainter than they had been when she had smallpox in the spring, but Maman had said they might never fade completely.

Above the entrances to the circus tents, illustrated posters lured visitors to come inside—posters for John Coffey “The Ohio Skeleton,” Krao the Missing Link, and Chang the Famous Chinese Giant.

Marie-Claire clung to Lucille’s sleeve so as not to lose her in the crowd. “What shall we go to see first?”

“I hear the giant is very handsome.”

The girls pushed their way to the front of a crowd.

“*Mon Dieu!*” Lucille exclaimed. “He must be over eight feet tall.”

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Marie-Claire pulled Lucille away, behind others gawking at the giant.

“What is it?” Lucille asked. “Do you not think he is lovely?”

“He smiled at me,” Marie-Claire said, blushing. “Let’s go.”

At the next exhibit, Lucille said, “Why, that must be the skinniest man in the world.”

“You can almost see his bones beneath his skin.”

On the other side of the huge tent, the girls stared at a man who looked as much like an ape as a human being.

Outside again, the sun beat down hard upon their heads.

“Lucille, do you mind if we find somewhere to sit down for a minute?”

“What’s wrong?”

“My head . . .” Marie-Claire held it between the palms of her hands as Lucille led her to the shade of a circus tent. “And I feel so terribly hot.”

“Oh, Marie-Claire, this is how . . .”

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“How what?”

Lucille shook her head. “Nothing. I am sure it is nothing.”

“I know what you were going to say.” Marie-Claire felt suddenly hotter. “You were going to say this is how smallpox begins, weren’t you?”

“Before my spots came I had a bad fever and the very worst headache,” Lucille admitted. “But does your back hurt, too?”

“No.”

“Then I am sure you are just suffering from the heat.”

Beside a circus tent Marie-Claire lowered herself to the dusty ground. “Oh, I do hope so, Lucille.”

Lucille put a protective arm around her cousin. “I hope so, too.”

“Today *is* a very hot day.”

“Yes, very hot,” Lucille agreed.

“But I have had enough of the circus. Can we go home now?”

As much as possible the girls kept in the shade of buildings as they made their way slowly through

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the streets. On many houses, tattered remains of placards hung listlessly in the heat. Above them, smoke from the city's factories, hospitals, and manure fires continued to drift across the sky.

At home Marie-Claire gulped tepid water from the bucket beside the wood stove. The bucket was almost empty. Her head still pounding, she plodded downstairs to the tap in the laneway, refilled it, and hauled it back upstairs into the stifling house.

"It is so hot," Marie-Claire said. "Shall we just have some bread and cheese tonight?"

At the sewing machine Maman coughed. "Papa may be hungry when he gets home if there have been many fires to fight today."

But when Papa came home, he said no, there had been only two small fires, and the men of his station were not called. He had spent the day dampening down dusty streets. "I wished I was one of the little boys," he said, "running along behind the hose wagon, soaking myself in the spray."

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Marie-Claire laughed to think of Papa doing such a thing, and realized her headache was gone and she no longer felt feverish.

After their small supper, the family went outside to sit on the iron steps where the air was a little cooler. Maman coughed again as she sat down.

“Are you not well, H  l  ne?” Papa asked.

“I am fine,” she said. “It is just the smoke from that manure fire. Can nothing be done to put it out?”

“I am afraid not. All we can do is wait. It will burn itself out in time.”

A horn from a distant freighter on the river sounded. From a street nearby came the angry voices of a man and a woman shouting. In a house on the other side of the lane a baby cried.

How little Philippe would have hated this heat, Marie-Claire thought. But how she still missed her baby brother’s presence in their home.

“Come, Emilie. Sit on my lap.”

Marie-Claire’s sister climbed onto her lap. “Are you going to tell me a story?”

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“What kind of story would you like to hear?”

“A story about an angel.”

Marie-Claire had barely begun her story when Maman stood up and said, “Sweet Jesus, am I to believe my eyes?”