

Salvation on 24th Street
January 10, 1982¹

Cathy Arellano

“You should turn back now,” Angel told me. That was hours ago. We said we were waiting for a 14 to take her home, but when the bus came we said, “Next one.”

I didn’t feel the cold and I didn’t hear the men’s “Oye, mijas” when we passed Hunt’s Donuts Open 25 Hours with my arm around Angel. I’d walked on Mission to and from 24th Street so many times before, but that evening the sky had the richest pinks, oranges, and purples mixing with the blue. The palm trees looked perfect standing in the small patches of dirt surrounded by the red and blue bricks of the Mission Miracle Mile. Two weeks ago, the Niners beat the Cowboys in the NFC game. It was a whole new world.

At 24th and Mission, home of the 49ers faithful and Giants diehards, site of The First International Cruise Night, there were more people in the nearby mural than on the street. The viejos on the corner had carried off their card table and bottles of secret waters. The Cristiano strapped his Mr. Microphone to his back after he gave out his last flyer. Horace Mann Middle School and St. Peter’s kids had bought paletas then chased each other home hours ago. The Asian woman who was selling the hammer and sickle newspaper—the one that no one in my family ever bought—packed up when the sun first started setting.

I felt like I was on a movie set. It was so quiet and empty. Just Angel and me. With my arm around her. It was cold and we were trying to keep warm, I told myself as I prayed we could stay in that spot for the rest of my life. Mom was

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probably home from work wondering where I was. Or, she was having a Seven-7 at the Crossroads and not thinking about me. Either way, I wasn't leaving Angel.

"Jesus loves you."

Angel and I let go of each other and looked around. The tall, slender woman with light brown hair and light eyes reminded me of that well-meaning 4th grade teacher who told me I wasn't like the others.

"Jesus loves you," the woman told us smiling and holding a Bible.

Angel smiled back at the woman. I maddogged her.

"Yes, he loves you," she said looking back and forth at us. My wannabe maddogging didn't make her stop.

Angel and I looked at each other then back at the woman. We giggled.

"Haven't you ever heard that?" she asked.

The adults only went to church for the occasional baptism, communion, or wedding. While us kids were at Mission Dolores on Saturdays for catechism classes and Sundays for 49ers. When we came home, there was a game on and we learned the basics of each sport while we traded empties for cold ones. Most of the priests at MD were like our uncles and talked about what we did wrong not about Jesus loving us.

"He loved you so much, He died for you," the lady said. "Won't you love Him back and accept Him into your hearts?"

Angel didn't go to church. Her mama lit candles, broke eggs, and left glasses of water around. Her mama bought weed and soaked it in alcohol to cure Angel and her little brothers and sisters when they were sick.

"I wish my Mom would rub weed on me," I told Angel when she first shared her secret with me.

Angel stepped closer to the woman. If I were with Estrella, Gloria, Ana, or even Andrea, we would've just walked away from that loca with the Bible and fired up.

The lady remained between me and Angel. She told us stories about Jesus, some that sounded vaguely familiar and others I just knew she was making up. After she talked to us for half the night, she looked at Angel on her left and me on her right.

"Won't you accept the Lord?"

I wondered to myself, *Am I still buzzed?* Angel looked at me then at the lady.

"I accept the Lord," she said.

I wasn't buzzed. I was with Angel.

There on 24th standing next to Angel and hearing that lady talk my Jesus, the beautiful blonde-haired blue-eyed Joe Montana, appeared to me.

The lady turned my way, "Do *you* take the Lord Jesus Christ to be *your* savior?"

I looked past the lady and directly at Angel just as two weeks earlier Montana must have locked eyes with Freddie Solomon, Lenvil Elliott, Earl Cooper, and Dwight Clark before each pass or hand off.

The lady stepped closer to me, "Say it. Say, 'I accept the Lord Jesus Christ to be my savior.'"

The streetlight hit Angel as she peered at me with glossy eyes matching her lips as she gripped her books in front of her breasts. Maybe it was the Olde English from earlier. Maybe it's the weed from the day before. All I know is I heard

"Do you--"

I became Dwight Clark rolling into the end zone, turning inside, and stopping between those two defenders. I saw Joe being chased to the right then throwing. I broke for the outside. Then there was only one guy on me.

"Do...you...take..."

I leaped into the air as high as I could. I extended my arms, hands.

"Do you take Angel to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do," I said. And I meant it so help me God. My fingers clutched that ball as if it were my life. I leaned over and kissed Angel. Right there in the Center of the Universe, Angel kissed me back.

The crowd cheered. It was a madhouse.