

Angel of Death

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Extract

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an excerpt from
ANGEL *of* DEATH
J Robert King

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ONE

Old man, old man – I see you with your lake-rights cottage and your knotty pine paneling, dark as walnut with cigar smoke. Even now, the blue haze tangles in your hair. You’ve burned your dining table all to hell – the table your wife bought to refinish four years back, though a heart attack finished her first.

I’d helped with that one, too.

I see you, old man. You were a widower even before she died. Of your own design, you marched backward in measured retreat. You never had to battle the army in front of you, nor run out of ground behind you. Until now, the day you will die.

Or rather, the night.

(The old should die at night, and in the fall or winter. The young should die in the morning and springtime. It is an aesthetic concern that had been ignored until the districts were parceled out to individual angels. The middle-aged adult can die any time in the day or year, according to whom or what is left behind. They are mourned as themselves, not as archetypes, as are the young or old.)

Old man, you die tonight in your home, cigar in hand, or better, in mouth. Your recliner would be an easy place to go and... ah, I have the perfect idea.

You see me now, don't you? I can tell by that glassy-eyed stare that sees past all the world and sees nothing at all.

I am that nothing, old man. I am the Bastard Being, extension without substance. I am not the garden shears that snip a rose from the vine, but rather the unexplainable and persistent shadow that overcasts bush and bloom until both are dead. I am an angel descended of the archangels Michael and Samael and Azrael, the bringers of death.

You do not want to go with me. I should not have let you see me so soon. You leap up from the ash-pitted tabletop. Your hamstrings fling back the chair and it barks to the battered hardwood between us as you flee. But I am an angel. Chairs do not bother these sharp Caucasian shins, the linen pants I wear. They are appearances only. I bound through the chair.

You've left your cigar beside the ashtray on the table.

I grapple you. Your hair is greasy on my arm. You bite my shoulder, no more than a cornered badger. I need to calm you down, so I drag you downstairs to the basement. You claw at the pictures on the wall. Some fall. Glass breaks. Those will leave people wondering.

Ah, the furnace room. The exhaust usually goes through this white pipe. Not with a nest of mice in it. Now it comes out here and here, but mostly here.

You're gasping anyway now, so with your face rammed up into that galvanized triangle, it's not long before you are limp in my hands.

The gas will go through the rest of the place by the time I'm gone.

Strange how much heavier you feel as dead weight. Your pants mop the stairs of glass shards as we ascend. I pick up the broken pictures, a nice touch in mind.

You look comfortable in the recliner, especially with the leg-rest up and the pictures on your lap like you are reminiscing. Ah, here's your cigar. With a couple of long draws from me, it flares hot. Your chair catches easily, with all the towels draped over arms and back, and I stand to watch your bruised chest slowly breathing.

You won't awaken. No, not with the carbon monoxide in the air. Your pants peel back like curling parchment, and your leg hair is flashing with orange and sending up white smoke.

I breathe that smoke, sweeter than any cigar.

I must leave. In this form, the carbon monoxide will make me dizzy. Soon the chair will catch the drapes, and the drapes the walls, and there will be neighbors calling the volunteers.

I shift, no longer a thirty year-old white male with a disarming smile and a predilection for murder, becoming nothing at all, the Bastard Being. I move through the back door without opening it and disappear among the bare boughs of autumn.

Time means nothing to me. Time means nothing to any creature in the heavenly choir. But when one must work among humans, to whom time means everything, one must enter time and exit it. There are many such special dispensations for those of us who choose to descend the ladder of being.

Do not be mistaken. There is a true ladder of being – a Jacob’s Ladder, as humans might call it, and angels ascend and descend it all the time. There is an unbroken path from God down to the simplest virus, and humans are somewhere halfway up that infinite climb. Angels are a little more than humans.

Just as dog breeders work in the cycles of canine heat and dirty their hands with dog blood and sperm and shit, so I work in the cycles of humans and foul myself with human frailties.

See, here? I am down in a cafe just off the Dan Ryan, sitting in a vinyl booth and staring at a compartmentalized plate. The cafe is small, with a sixteen foot ceiling covered in dusty tin filigree and insulated pipes from the apartments upstairs. Smoke struggles to cling to the dark heights but is channeled downward from teetering fans that trail threads of soot.

They sit here and eat their congealed grease and smoke their cigarettes, at once adding puffiness to cheeks and taking it from lips. Their faces look like pantyhose puppets with puckered thread marks instead of lips. They sit here and talk of trucks and fish and wallow in German insistence upon old, stout ways. But I am not here to kill any of them.

I am here to kill the jogger who, in fascistic spandex, will be along any moment. He is a forty-four year-old vice president with eyes that recede into his head behind curling brows. He's shaved every day since his thirteenth birthday but even now has the blue-black aggression of denied animality sheening within his jaw. He is a modern positivist, believing that all of life is explainable by him, that anyone who wishes to be successful must merely become him, and that there are no such things as accidents or mysteries.

Here is a moment of accidental mystery for him.

I appear in his path as he reaches Ohio Street and slows to jog in place until the light changes. I have timed the moment perfectly. The eleven-forty CTA is five minutes behind and gunning for the yellow. The runner has a fly darting at his ear. I have a foot in the way and a helping hand-slap on the man's back. He launches from the curb into the accidental and mysterious cliché of the bus's path.

When there's a red spray and a shriek of tires and the sound of screams, everyone notices the victim; no one the angel. As a final touch, I have one of the fat German smokers burst from the corner cafe and – disregarding the blood and its threat of AIDS and the fact that the man's chest is a mere bag of bones – clamp his collagen-depleted lips to the dead mouth and inflate the corpse with lungful after lungful of nicotine and bacon grease.

It is what I do. I am assigned to the Chicago sprawl, reaching south through Lake County, Indiana, and

north past Kenosha and Racine to Milwaukee. It is a natural unit. Heavy industry, mob operations, bedroom communities, ethnic tensions, lake-effect snow, mosquito wetlands, crime, drugs, dirt, and a sort of brutal grandiosity that belies a deep and corporate inferiority complex.

I cannot kill in Berwyn without mourners driving out from Hammond and Whiting. I cannot orchestrate a gang slaying in Racine without the Skokie Sears ending up with fenced diamonds. I cannot release a steel roll on the Edens without it bouncing atop a family of four from Wauwatosa and decapitating the sophomore quarterback of the Hobart Brickies.

Consistency of service is why I have the land I have. With hundreds of murders a year in Milwaukee alone, it is no wonder so many senseless deaths once occurred.

Not that what humans call senseless is what angels call senseless. The death of a child on a bike can be a very meaningful and worthwhile event. It makes for good, heart-wrenching drama. On the other hand, the death of a child in bed through the simple cessation of breath – that holds very little in the way of meaning. Only if the mother is a suffocating presence or the father is an oxygen salesman who is never home – only then would such a death have its poetic effect.

That is what I do, assure that the deaths in the megapolis of Chicago-Milwaukee have a poetry to them, that the death fits the life. Mr Jacob Sonnenbean, the widower with the cigars and the flaming recliner, died alone in the safety and caustic comfort of his cottage,

asphyxiated by his own cheery furnace and burned by his own sources of comfort: cigar and throne. It would not have served for him to fall off a pier and drown or be killed by a shooter in a convenience store. To die of his own vices and devices – that was a beautiful death.

There it is. Beauty. Aesthetics. Keats was right about beauty and truth, and it is my job to assure true deaths. The deaths are many – eight murders a day, on average, ten suicides, seventeen accidental deaths, and ninety-three by natural causes.

I do most of my work with the accidents.

Murders, suicides, and deaths by disease or age have natural resonations. Murderers are usually loved ones, friends, or neighbors – people with a history of involvement with their victims. In these cases, the killer does the job of making sure the death fits the life. He selects the time, place, and means of the demise. Suicides do the same. So, too, bodies have a certain knack for paying back their owners with fitting ends – the dancer has a heart attack after years of bulimia; the businessman yellows and dies beside his basement wet bar; the whore lies in a back room of some dive, her flesh dismantling itself as though every sperm that ever entered her is slicing outward. Of course, I monitor all these incidents, and if a death occurs in a particularly disappointing way, I often will go back in time to manipulate events for a more pleasing outcome.

Accidents and random violence, however, are chaotic, and their results are often pointless. I have, on occasion, saved a person from one meaningless death on a given

day only to subject him to a better end that evening. The old phrase "going down for the third time" has its origin in this phenomenon, that a doomed person may be saved once or twice before finally being slain.

Accidents are my main work, yes, but there is one type of murderer whose work runs entirely counter to mine: the serial killer. Their victims tend to be unknown to them. Their murders are orchestrated to satisfy their own fantasies, not to provide a fitting end to a victim's life. It was because of the likes of Heirens, Gacy, and Dahmer that I was assigned this area. I cannot stop such humans from killing, not until it is their own time to die. Nor can I do much about victim selection, since these men act according to random opportunity or elaborate fantasy. On a night that such a man is prowling for a kill, I struggle to keep up, saving those I can and attempting to tweak the deaths of those I cannot.

My jurisdiction does not go back to the time of Gacy, but does to that of Dahmer. They were similar murderers, in many ways, luring their victims to their homes and tricking them into vulnerable positions. Gacy used a pair of real handcuffs, saying he had a magic trick to show his guest. Dahmer used drugged beer. A mere queasiness was enough to save some of the victims. I caused one young man to throw up on the carpet, and while Jeffrey cleaned up the poisonous mess, his prey slipped out the door.

But I could not save all of them. Some were marked for death, and even if they escaped, I killed them later

that night. Nor could I kill Dahmer, for his time had not come. When at last it did come, it was out of my jurisdiction, in the Columbia Correctional Institute, a maximum-security penitentiary. The job was sloppy – bludgeoning and stabbing with a broken broomstick. I had had a much more fitting end in mind.

Even now, there are three serial killers in my domain. One, Clive Darrow of Griffith, Indiana, hasn't killed in over a decade. A white man, he had been an assassin-style killer, getting drunk and driving his 1976 Ford Grenada past toll booths, open garages, car washes, and other such places and slaying his white victims with a shotgun. The police suspected a race crime by a black man, but the FBI profiled a white man of a little less than Clive's age – 54. The police arrested their black man at the same time that Clive struck and killed a pedestrian and was imprisoned for reckless homicide. He happened not to have the shotgun in the car because he had just lent it to a friend for duck hunting. The killings stopped, the police were satisfied, and Clive sat in a cell for five years of an eight-year sentence. A model prisoner, he found Jesus.

Since his release, Clive has spent his time working as a janitor for Harvey's Department Store and volunteering his time at Hoosier Boys Town. His witness to the young men there includes frank discussions of his serial killings and the difference Christ has made. The listeners give Jesus little credence, and the talk of shootings even less. The police have been called fifty-seven times to investigate Clive's allegations of serial

killings, but have found no evidence, and have ceased responding.

The other two serial killers are still somewhat active. Jerome "Jerry" White is twenty-nine years old and has been killing since he was seventeen. He lives winters at his mother's house in Evanston but spends his summers at a rundown cottage at the flood-prone Methodist Campgrounds in Des Plaines. Like Darrow, Jerry is a born-again Christian, though his conversion yielded the opposite effect.

Always an unbalanced zealot, Jerry's conversion to evangelical fundamentalism at age fourteen gave him a whole new ground for obsession. While most boys his age were handling themselves and, if lucky, a breast or two, Jerry was turning all his attentions toward a leather-bound Bible. He considered his sexual desires to be a form of demonic possession, and eventually convinced himself that even humor was ungodly and evil. On several occasions, he stood with knife in hand and began slicing off his erect penis, only to quit after inflicting tiny cuts.

If he had gone off to college, as his parents had insisted, he likely would have outgrown his delusions. Instead, after high school, he moved to an upstairs apartment in Gary, Indiana, and began trying to rescue prostitutes. He was beaten bloody more than once by angry pimps who wanted twenty dollars for the half hour he'd spent preaching to the women. In time, he came to believe that all the abuses he suffered at the hands of black pimps and drug dealers

had been, in turn, forced upon them by whites of all stripes.

Jerry got himself a junkyard car, painted it black, and used masking tape to write warnings all across it. He rarely had enough money to buy gas, but when he did, he drove the car until it ran dry. Then he would leave it and walk home. He stole the car back a number of times from various impound yards, in the last encounter running down the security guard.

This accidental killing convinced Jerry of his mission, to drive his car by day and slay whites by night until they heeded his warnings. Since that time, he has killed twelve. After his fifth kill, the very pimps and drug dealers who had once beaten him up began hiring him to do hits in white areas. Jerry considered the money a sign from God that what he was doing was right. The police have not yet linked all of his crimes.

Now, Jerry's mental aberrations are so extreme as to prevent him from driving or committing untraceable crimes. His deterioration is severe enough that he may be captured in the act of one of his next murders. He probably doesn't have the wit or the time to kill again, though. He will be dead before Friday this week. I'm planning for him to break into Wesley Tabernacle on the campgrounds, lie down on the altar, douse himself with gasoline, and die as a burnt offering to God.

The last of my three killers is on the prowl even now. I will step down one rung and see if I might direct his hand a bit.

Young man, I see you. I see how you move among them, like one of them. Your battered old London Fog coat comes almost to your knees and sticks too far out as if you are some kind of flasher – the coat of a Goodwill shopper and a murdering madman. Keith McFarland. I know you will kill even tonight. I know you are prowling.

You look lost in your trench coat. Your shoulders are too narrow for the smudged gray polyester that drapes you. Even your thin neck – it should be red but is white and stubbled with the new growth of an inattentive razor – holds an Adam's apple two sizes too large. A greenish Granny Smith, swallowed whole.

You have not bought gas. You duck your oil-sheened black hair away from the cashier and move toward the compact orange bags of peanuts. There you stop. You seem to be looking at snacks. In fact, you glance at the T-shirted man who stands at the counter.

The man has his hand out. He waits for the small flask of Mr Boston spiced rum he will be sneaking tonight on the walk with his collie mutt. He stinks already of a cheap cigar that smolders on the painted board of the gas station stoop.

The cashier knows this man. Not his name. Only his addiction. The man knows it too. He has already doled out the three dollars and ninety-four cents it will take to buy two hundred milliliters of oblivion. Sometimes he pays in nickels and pennies fished from the tie tack drawer and the couch cushions.

The rum is set in his hand. For a minute it glints, liquid gold. Then it is gone in a fold of loose canvas pants.

"Have a good one," the cashier says, sliding closed the ringing register drawer.

The rum man nods and pushes his way out the door. Around him rises a breath of petroleum on asphalt in late autumn. In the momentary gap of the door, the collie is visible, eyes wide with anticipation beside the leash that holds her to the two-by-four stoop. The door closes. Through mud-spattered glass, you see the secret drunk loose his shaggy dog. They make their way out into the lifeless light of the gas station dolmen.

From within your trench coat, you watch.

They move toward the road. Cars whir past in the rushing, gravel-cracking haste of a November night in Wisconsin.

"You need some help?" asks the cashier. He is young. A baseball cap brim curves between his shoulder blades. A sleek, thin ponytail rides his spine.

Your black hair shifts listlessly above your sallow face. "N-N-No."

The trench coat moves; not you, just your coat. Then you, too, are gone into the anonymous glare. You are just another wedge of light in the dirty-paned door.

You pause on the stoop and look toward the angry, shushing cars. A newspaper tumbles over wet blacktop, crumpled but still airborne, not yet soaked and plastered to the road. You follow, white trash after white trash.

Avatar. You do not know that term, but I do. You are the avatar of all backward inbred hicks – a disaffected loner from a silent race that has never been invited into

the modern age. Sullen. Fitful. Gaunt. Enraged. As murderous as the night.

You stutter-step along the gravel margin of the road, in the very footsteps of the man with the secret rum. Human eyes cannot detect it, but I can: the rum man's feet leave faint prints of warmth on the autumn stones, and your feet fall in those very prints. As you pass, the stones turn cold again with night and death.

The rum man turns down that dark road and takes the first bitter swallow of the gall he hides from all but himself and his dog. You stalk and follow. He will be your kill tonight.

These eyes of mine see more than footprints. I see who this man is, and that it is indeed time for him to die. He is a newspaper editor for the local rag, a man using distilled spirits to fill up the gap between what he is and what he had intended to be. A writer. A novelist. A family man. That's what he had hoped for, but instead he lives alone, hacking apart the words of other hacks and making them into the bland garble of modern journalism.

He takes another drink.

Thirty-eight is young to die, but not young enough for this one. A depressive, an alcoholic, a loner, family off in Wichita, and friends... what friends, aside from that collie mutt?

Oh, you have chosen your victim wisely, a moody man who'll be fired for not showing up before he is truly missed, who will be replaced by one of the clamoring young reporters who attack a job posting like

piranha on bloody meat. The FBI would call this a low-risk victim, a drunken man walking alone at night on an untraveled country road.

Except for the dog. I might have had to step out of time to do some orchestration, but you hesitate; you fear the dog. And well you should. A gap-toothed cracker such as yourself had first owned her and kicked her daily until she ran off. She might seem friendly enough, but once there's a shout and a scream and blood, she'll remember your kind and go for your throat.

Ah, though, that's the key. The man has only this dog in all the world. The leash he holds does not so much keep the dog next to him as keep him next to the dog. Ambush them and kill the dog. Let him see you kill the dog. Use your gun on the dog, not the man, and then let him worry over the thing's body. Or, better yet, it's deer hunting season, and this fellow's a budding author – he has an imagination. He'll put the pieces together.

I whisper the idea in your ear. You are too disorganized to do anything but listen. There's a deer path that heads off from the road here through that little stand of trees and out onto the access road. If you walk quietly along it...

You stalk from the road, pulling your coat around you as if it were a rain poncho and you a little girl. Maybe that's what he thinks when, on the red rim of road, he looks back and spits, then takes another drink. He thinks he is hiding from you, and not the other way around. You pick your way across the vacant field then

among the autumn-hard rows of broken cornstalks. Already, he is down the other side of the hill.

Oh, what fun, to hunt this way! The pines are black and murmurous in the settling dark. You see the road beyond, where he will be shuffling into view in moments. You crouch down among tenacious roots of pine and pull out your pistol. It gives you a hard-on every time you touch it. Yes, here will be a good place. They will pass within ten feet. The shot will echo, and the editor will not know the difference between a pistol and a deer rifle. He'll think you're just a bad hunter.

He comes, leather-soled shoes on a chip-and-oil shoulder. He looks around. His face is slack already from drink, though his eyes squint against the night. The bottle in his hand glints purple inside its wrinkled skin of paper. He drains it one last time and throws it into the trees, just near you.

You fire. It's all right. You were afraid, but it's all right.

Half the dog's head is gone. It whines a moment and turns as if to scratch its remaining ear, then goes down upon the chips and quivers sickly.

He doesn't look toward you but sinks down atop the dog. Already he is wailing. He holds the thing stupidly. The thrown bottle was all the better, as if it had triggered the bullet. An accidental but elegant nuance.

He looks up. Blood is on his face, with tear tracks through it. He is furious. Some of the blood is his own, from a lip he has sawed open between teeth. He is murderous.

"Fuck you, God damn it! Fuck, fuck, fuck!" he cries.

Yes, crouch lower, but grin still. That erection feels like a jabbing stick among the pine roots. Enjoy the moment, killer. Your day will come, too.

"Fuck you! Fuck you! God damned fucking asshole hunter! Fuck you!"

His shouts are like the moans of a lover. Don't come yet, killer. Keep it in until he is dead, too.

Ah, he has stopped his shouting. He lifts the still body off the road and sets it gently on the shoulder. He kisses the mutt's tangled fur and whispers something. Now he rises.

He's coming to find you. He expects you to be in the glade beyond, a man who feels bad for having accidentally killed a leashed dog. A man with a rifle that the editor can grab and swing against a tree to break it. That's what he expects to do. That's what he would write about.

He rises, scarred leather soles on the smooth humus of pine. More curses grumble from him, these meant not for you but for himself, stoking his engine. He wants to be good and angry. Hunker down, now. He grabs the brittle bole of a nearby tree. He steps beyond it and keeps going.

You rise. Dead needles fall from you as if you are some monster of humus. He doesn't even hear you, raging to himself. You follow him a couple paces.

"T-T-T-Turn around, quiet n-n-n-now, or you'll be d-d-dead as your d-dog," you say.

Your door-hinge voice is enough to spin him. His bravado is gone. He is white in the dead evening. You

point the gun at his head. He holds his hands up, as if in a movie.

“Kneel!” You manage to say it without your stutter. He complies. Very good. You move up to him, getting the gun to his forehead. Your other hand fiddles with your fly, almost too slow. You’d wanted to be inside him, but this is almost as good.

He pulls away. You shoot.

His head is like a fountain as he falls back. You let him fall and strip off your coat. That’s why you had worn it. It will cover the blood on your clothes after you are finished.

The killing has not happened as I had hoped, as I had planned. You were supposed to ask him to write his own obituary before he died, so that the editor could become a published author only by writing his final words. I am distressed by your impulsiveness.

Still, you do the rest. You drag both bodies away from the road and into a cornfield. Then you take the man’s wallet, and cut off his head and hands. This is hard and messy work, but you’ve done it before. You used to do it because you heard it kept the body from being identified. Of course, in such a small town, it’ll take only days instead of weeks to do a head count and figure out who’s missing, but the amputations are now part of your fantasies. You’ll carry the head and hands home inside plastic and burlap.

These arrangements also happen to serve my ends. The man’s head and hands were what he worked with as an editor, and his work was always separated from

his heart, which makes this death somehow fitting. Also, he lived a life of quiet desperation and inner anguish, so a death of overt anguish and loud desperation is also ironically satisfying.

I could have done better and may even return to the event to make certain you get the obituary written, but there have been serial killer victims who have done much worse than this one.

I will be glad the day I get to kill you, Keith McFarland.