Angel

Elizabeth Taylor

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Extract

ANGEL

Elizabeth Taylor

With an Introduction by
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virago

To
PATIENCE ROSS

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PART 1

i

" 'into the vast vacuity of the empyrean,' " Miss Dawson read. "And can you tell me what 'empyrean' means?"

"It means," Angel said. Her tongue moistened her lips. She glanced out of the classroom window at the sky beyond the bare trees. "It means 'the highest heavens'."

"Yes, the sky," Miss Dawson said suspiciously. She handed the exercise-book to Angel, feeling baffled. The girl had a great reputation as a liar and when this strange essay had been handed in—"A Storm At Sea"—Miss Dawson had gone through it in a state of alarm, fearful lest she had read it before or ought to have read it before. She had spent an agitated evening scanning Pater and Ruskin and others. Though disdaining such ornamental prose, such crescendos and alliterations, before she would say that the piece was vulgarly over-written she hoped to find out who had written it.

She had confided in the headmistress, who also felt the need for caution. She thought it a remarkable piece of writing for a girl of fifteen; if, indeed, it was by a girl of fifteen.

"Has she ever done anything like it before?"

"Nothing. A line or two covered with blots."

" 'Lightning laced and veined the sky,' " the headmistress read. "Did you look through Oscar Wilde?"

"Yes, and Walter Pater."

"You will have to question her. If she is making fools of us, it isn't the first time."

Angel, when feeling dull, was liable to faint and had once told a story of being followed from school through the gas-lit streets on a winter's afternoon; though later, to a policeman, she confessed that she might have been mistaken.

She was questioned by Miss Dawson when the other girls had gone home. She doesn't believe I wrote it, she thought, glancing with contempt at the flustered little woman with the slipping pince-nez and bird's-nest hair. Who does she think wrote it if I didn't? Who does she think could? What a way to spend your life—fussing about with school-lessons, getting chalk all over your skirt, going home to lodgings at night to work out the next day's Shakespeare—cut to page this, line that, so that we don't have to read the word 'womb'.

She looked round the dreary, darkening classroom, at the rows of forms and long desks, and all the familiar maps and religious pictures. Once it had been a bedroom in a private house, The Four Cedars, which was now this school, run aimlessly as it was for the daughters of local tradesmen. Angel had often, during dull lessons, tried to imagine it as a bedroom again, with plush curtains drawn, a fire in the grate, a white satin gown over a chair and herself being laced into her stays by a maid.

"Well, I hope you will keep it up," Miss Dawson said dubiously. She dipped a pen into red ink and wrote 'Very Fair' at the end of the essay.

"Do you read a great deal, Angelica?"

"No, I never read."

"But why not?"

"I don't think it's interesting."

"Such a pity. Then what do you do in your spare time?"

"I play the harp mostly."

She doesn't believe that, either, thought Angel, seeing the suspicious look again tightening Miss Dawson's face. She was as resentful at not being believed about the harp—which was indeed untrue—as about the essay which she had certainly written herself, and with the greatest of ease and speed, just because she had suddenly been in a mind to do so.

When Miss Dawson dismissed her, she gave a little bobbing curtsy as she was expected to and ran downstairs to the cloakroom. The staircase was very dim. A light shone from an open

door across the hall. The conservatory with its palms and eucalyptus trees was grey and ghostly. All of the girls had gone home.

The cloakroom had once been a large scullery. It was fitted with pegs from which only shoe-bags hung now and, in one corner, Angel's hooded cloak. Black-beetles often ran about the cracked stone floor and the walls were damp. There were bars across the window, and it was a frightening place at this time of day. The girls used the back door, where there were shoe-scrapers among the ferns, a row of dustbins, a heap of coke, and always a great many pale yellow slugs.

The lawns and carriage-drive, lighted windows and the four cedars themselves could be glimpsed from the side path and the tradesmen's entrance. Here, among the laurels, two girls, younger than Angel, were waiting. It was Angel's task to see them safely to and from school. Their parents were customers at her mother's grocery shop.

The two little girls, Gwen and Polly, had been apprehensive, waiting there in the dusk. The lamp-lighter had gone by long ago and the sky was now a deep blue. There was a smell of evening in the air, smoky and disturbing.

"I had to stay behind to hear my praises sung," said Angel. She was pulling on her woollen gloves as she hastened along the pavement. Gwen and Polly trotted beside her. They descended the hill, past crescents and terraces of Georgian houses and dark gardens full of whispering dead leaves.

"When you are at Paradise House," Polly asked, "do you ever go into the garden by yourself in the dark?"

"I take my dog with me—Trapper. We go all round the grounds. It's rather ghostly by the stables—just the sound of the horses blowing and stamping."

"Are they your very own horses?"

"They will be when I inherit."

"But who looks after them now?"

"Grooms and stable-boys. It is all kept in order and so is the house. There are dust-sheets over the drawing-room and drugget over the carpets, but the housekeeper sees that every-

thing is polished and shining ready for the day when I can go there myself to live."

"It seems a pity," Polly said, "that you have to wait. Why can't you go there now?"

"My mother lost her inheritance because she married beneath her. She can never go back, so don't ever mention anything to anybody about Paradise House for that reason."

"No, of course not," they whispered quickly, as they always did. "But why mustn't we?" asked Gwen.

"It breaks my mother's heart to hear of it. If you breathed a word of it at home and it came back to her, I couldn't answer for the consequences."

"We wouldn't breathe a word," said Polly. "Will you go on telling us about the white peacocks?"

Every day they listened to the story of Paradise House. It was more vivid to them than the mean streets into which the crescents and terraces dwindled and which lay nearer to their own homes. Naked gas-jets burned in little corner shops, but the rows of yellow brick houses were dark: lights burned in those front parlours, behind the fern-tables and plant-pots, only on Sundays. Coal carts and brewers' drays clattered by, but there were no carriages. The sickly smell from the nearby brewery the girls had grown up with and did not notice.

"Will you tell us some more tomorrow?" Polly asked, stopping by the railings of their little front garden.

Angel often felt jolted when the girls stopped at their gate; partly, from having forgotten them; partly, from having to transfer herself too suddenly from Paradise House to this mean district with its warehouses and factories and great brooding gas-holder.

"I might," she said carelessly. They opened the gate and said goodbye to her; but she had gone on her way already, holding her cloak about her and hurrying along, full of her own strange thoughts again.

Halfway down Volunteer Street was a row of shops: a fish-and-chip shop from which children were running with hot, greasy parcels; a newsagent's; a chemist's where light from

the interior glowed feebly through three glass bottles of red and green and violet liquid and coloured the bowls of senna pods and sulphur lying in the window. Next to the draper's and the last in the row was the grocery shop; there, Eddie Gilkes, the delivery boy, was packing up an order on the counter, weighing sugar into pink bags. The wedge of cheese beside him was covered with his dirty finger-prints. The sawdust on the floor was scuffed about now at the end of the day.

Angel ignored Eddie's greeting and went through the door at the back of the shop. The dark lobby was stacked with boxes. There were jars of pickles and a cask of vinegar at the foot of the stairs. The smell of bacon and soap pervaded the upstairs rooms, Angel's cold, stuffy little bedroom and the bright living-room where Mrs Deverell was leaning towards the fire making toast.

A crochet-work cloth was spread over the green chenille one and the light shone down on the cups and saucers on the table. The room was overcrowded and it was difficult to push between the table and the other furniture, the horsehair sofa, the chiffonier, the treadle sewing-machine and the harmonium. Photographs covered every surface. The chimney-piece was draped with ball-fringed velvet and a bead fringe hid the incandescent gas-mantle.

Mrs Deverell shielded her face from the fire with one hand, but her cheeks were rosy. The room was very hot. "You're home late," she said.

"I wasn't in any hurry."

"You missed your Auntie Lottie. You know how she looks to find you here. I reminded you it was her Wednesday."

Angel parted the curtains and leant her forehead on the steamy window.

"Oh, it's hot in here. I don't know how you can bear it."

She longed to be walking in the country in the cold air and darkness. The reality of this room exasperated her; she turned her back on it and closed her eyes. She did not dare to stuff her fingers in her ears to shut out the sound of her mother's voice. She had forgotten her aunt's visit and was glad to find she had

escaped it. On such occasions she always felt herself brooded over, her mother's sister watching her so intently; too intently questioning her, about her friends and the school, particularly about the school, for which the aunt helped to pay the fees. The two sisters were tremendously impressed that Angel had escaped the board-school at the corner of the road. "Say something in French," they would urge her. Roughly and sulkily, Angel complied. They did not know that her accent was atroeious—as it would remain all her life.

"Allons, enfants de la patrie!
Le jour de gloire est arrivé.
Contre nous de la tyrannie
L'étendard sanglant est levé."

"It's amazing, isn't it?" they would say, marvelling that they had got their money's worth. Angel wondered why she felt ill-used and humiliated. She tried to ward off her aunt's curiosity; was vague and evasive; and when at last they left her in peace, she would kneel on the sofa and look down at the street, at children playing hop-scotch, skipping from ropes tied to a lamp-post; the milkman ladling milk into jugs; the organ-grinder with his monkey.

They would forget her at last, the two sisters, and Angel would listen to their conversation, to the stories of Paradise House, where Aunt Lottie was lady's maid. So often, as this evening, she did not see the street below because the great vision of Paradise House obscured other things. She discovered the rooms and galleries, paced the grassy paths between yew trees and statuary.

"She brought this lardy-cake from the cook," Mrs Deverell was saying. She took it, glistening and curranty, from the hearth. "It shows how much they think of her."

Angel let the curtains drop together and went to the table.

Her mother fetched the toast and the teapot. They stood behind their chairs. "For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful," said Mrs Deverell. "I could do you a boiled egg, if you like. Your Auntie brought me a

few new-laids from the gardener."

"No, thank you, I'm not hungry," Angel said. She tipped the cat off her chair and sat down.

After tea, Mrs Deverell went down to serve in the shop. It was an unspoken assumption that there would be no advantage gained from sending Angel to a private school if she was to demean herself behind the counter when she returned. So she sat upstairs on her own. Her mother had given her a chemise to scallop, but she got no further with it from one week's end to another. When she made a stitch or two, she held the cambric up close to her eyes, but only if she were alone in the room. She was short-sighted and determined to hide it. She would be blamed for any mistake rather than give the reason for making it and run the risk of being forced to wear spectacles.

She was vain of her strange appearance, and in fact her colouring, her green eyes, dark hair and white skin, was remarkable and dramatic; but her features were already, at fifteen, forbiddingly aquiline; her teeth were prominent and her astigmatic eyes sometimes unfocused. Her hands she thought exceptionally beautiful and would look at them for minutes together, as she was this evening, spreading them before her, turning them, viewing them from every angle, imagining garnets clasped round her wrists.

"Madam's garnets would suit Angel," Aunt Lottie had once said, adding, "I'd rather garnets than rubies any day."

"I think emeralds are more Angel's stone," said Mrs Deverell. Angel went over this argument often afterwards. Some days she chose the emeralds, to match her eyes; this evening the garnets, to illuminate her skin.

At Paradise House there was another Angelica, Madam's daughter, whose name was never shortened. Aunt Lottie, in admiration of her mistress and all that she did, had had this name waiting for Angel when she was born. A boy's name was never contemplated, for Madam had no sons. Until Angel

went to school and learnt better, they always spelt the name with two 'l's.

The Angelica whose name had been copied was a month or two older than Angel; but not so tall, Aunt Lottie said. An opinionated little madam, she was described as plump; and pink-and-white. The garnets would be wasted on her. A string of seed-pearls was what *she* merited, with her insipid looks and her hands rough as boys': too much horse-riding and dog-washing, Aunt Lottie thought. Angel, resenting that other girl whom she had never seen but knew so well, turned her hands complacently, considering their shape, and their pallor.

She could hear the shop door-bell ringing below as customers came and went. So many women saved their shopping for the evening and a gossip while their husbands went to the Garibaldi or the Volunteer. In the cosy shop such confidences went on while Mrs Deverell weighed broken biscuits or drew the wire neatly through the cheese. "Not that I'd like it to go any further." Mrs Deverell had usually heard before. *She* had asked for it, she would say, or *he* had asked for it; who could expect other—in a world where marriages were not made by Mrs Deverell—than that they should turn out as they did, with wives pretending their bruised eyes were got from bumping into the wardrobe, or that they would pay a little off next week, then running to the pawn-shop with the flat-iron every Tuesday and fetching it under their cloaks the following Monday.

Mrs Deverell's own married life had been short and flawless in retrospect. Her husband had coughed his way through only a year and a half of married bliss. His photograph was all Angel knew of him. The memory of him had faded more than the photograph, which showed a wax-work of a man with a curly beard and ill-fitting clothes. Angel disowned him. Her brisk, brave, vivacious mother had long ago forgotten him. She had her sister and her neighbours and Angel to boast about to them. 'That Angel', the girl was called in consequence. She was solitary without knowing.

Lax and torpid, she dreamed through the lonely evenings,

closing her eyes to create the darkness where Paradise House could take shape, embellished and enlarged day after day—with colonnades and cupolas, archways and flights of steps—beyond anything her aunt had ever suggested. Acquisitively, from photographs and drawings in history-books, she added one detail after another. That will do for Paradise House, was an obsessive formula which became a daily habit. The white peacocks would do; and there were portraits in the Municipal Art Gallery which would do; as would the cedar trees at school. As the house spread, those in it grew more shadowy. Angel herself took over Madam's jewel-box and Madam's bed and husband. Only that other Angelica balked her imagination, a maddening obstacle, with her fair looks and all her dogs and horses. Again and again, as Angel wandered in the galleries and gardens, the vision of that girl, who had no place in her dreams, rose up and impeded her. The dream itself, which was no idle matter, but a severe strain on her powers of concentration, would dissolve. Then she would open her eyes and stare down at her hands, spreading her fingers, turning her wrists.

At other times she was menaced by intimations of the truth. Her heart would be alarmed, as if by a sudden roll of drums, and she would spring to her feet, beset by the reality of the room, her own face—not beautiful, she saw—in the looking-glass and the commonplace sounds in the shop below. She would know then that she was in her own setting and had no reason for ever finding herself elsewhere; know moreover that she was bereft of the power to rescue herself, the brains or the beauty by which other young women made their escape. Her panic-stricken face would be reflected back at her as she struggled to deny her identity, slowly cosseting herself away from the truth. She was learning to triumph over reality, and the truth was beginning to leave her in peace.

This evening passed without any sense of time going by. She was roaming through moonlit rose-gardens when she heard her mother shutting up the shop, rattling the chains across the door, then slowly climbing the stairs.

Angel was like a tableau of a girl fallen gracefully asleep over her sewing, the cat sleeping, too, at her feet. The fire had sunk low, just when Mrs Deverell was ready to hold up her skirts and warm her ankles for a moment or two.

"Oh, I dropped off," said Angel, yawning languorously.

"You always do. You'd do better to get off to bed." Mrs Deverell rattled the poker in the bars of the grate and took up the bellows.

"Miss Little came in for some soda. She was telling me that poor old Mrs Turner passed away last night with dropsy."

"How disgusting!" Angel said, yawning until tears fell. The first yawn had been affected. Now she could not stop.

Her mother put a little saucepan of milk on the hob and some cups and saucers on a tray. It did not occur to Angel to stir herself to help.

The next morning Gwen and Polly were not waiting at the gate as usual, and Angel, hesitating there, saw their mother watching her in the darkness beyond the lace curtains. As Angel looked towards her she stepped back from the window. The dark stuff of her dress merged with the shadowy room: only her colourless face could be discerned.

Angel gave a push to the iron gate. At the sound of it grating on its hinges, the woman came quickly to the window and rapped on it with her knuckles and shook her head. Her face looked pinched with suspicion and disdain, and Angel, going on down the road, wondered why she was feeling that she had been made despicable. She worried a little, hurrying lest she should be late, until she saw other girls dawdling in front of her.

She had never had any especial friends and most people seemed unreal to her. Her aloofness and her reputation for being vain made her unpopular, yet there were times when she longed desperately, because of some uneasiness, to establish herself; to make her mark; to talk, as she thought of it, on equal terms: but since she had never thought of herself as

being on equal terms with anyone, she stumbled from condescension to appeasement, making what the other girls called 'personal remarks' and offending with off-hand flattery.

Conversation would be dropped when she approached, as it was this morning between Ellie and Beattie, two girls of her own age. When she reached them, she came upon the sort of stubborn silence which meant that they hoped she would hurry on.

"Are we late?" she asked, with an affected breathlessness.

"We didn't think so," Ellie said.

"But if you fancy *you* are, do go on," said Beattie.

She slowed down to their pace and walked beside them. She began to talk about school, with no response from either of them. It was a less interesting subject than the one they had just dropped.

When Ellie stopped by the railings to tie a bootlace, Angel stood by and praised the smallness of her feet.

"They're no smaller than yours," Ellie said roughly.

Angel glanced down at her own, and seemed surprised to find that this was so.

"I suppose you mean you think they're small for *me*," said Ellie, and Beattie laughed suddenly.

After a long silence Beattie remarked thoughtfully: "So she decided on the cream merino, then?"

She implied that Angel's presence made no difference to the conversation she had interrupted, and they both continued it, with mysterious references, so that Angel could not join in. They had indeed been discussing Ellie's sister's wedding, but with more intimate conjectures than those concerned with her trousseau.

"You know I was telling you what Cyril said about the grey pelisse. . . ."

"Yes."

"Well . . ." She lowered her voice and both girls laughed. Angel tried to appear unaffected by the conversation. She despised their animation about such a home-made trousseau; could imagine the deplorably coy behaviour of the bride and

those around her; the wedding at the hideous Congregational Church, and the little house crowded with boorish relations afterwards. Although Ellie and Beattie were from better-off homes than her own, she had other standards to judge them by.

Ellie and Beattie had drifted pleasurably on to imagining their own wedding-dresses and to wondering whether they should go to Folkestone or to the Lake District for their honeymoons. To be married women as soon as possible seemed the sum of their ambition, to get what they wanted from life very early in it and then to ask nothing more, to remain in that state for the rest of their days.

"So exciting! Don't *you* think so, Angel?" Beattie asked slyly.

"What is exciting?"

"Why, getting married, of course."

"It depends who to," said Angel.

"You are always in trouble for ending sentences with prepositions," Beattie said.

"I shall begin and end my sentences as I please." She had stopped propitiating them. "And how can you or anyone be excited about getting married to someone you can't even give a name to?"

"Don't worry!" Ellie said crossly. "I don't suppose we shall have to wait long." To separate themselves from Angel, she and Beattie linked arms, which was against the school rules.

"If you fall in love," said Angel, "what do weddings matter? What have all these clothes and cakes and presents to do with that?"

She had begun this argument to belittle their enthusiasm and to revenge herself, but she was warming to it for its own sake. Until now she had thought of love with bleak distaste. She wanted to dominate the world, not one person.

"Oh, you're very clever," said Ellie. She almost gasped the words: her fury made her breathless. She pushed through the school gate in front of Angel. Her head was high and the colour bright in her cheeks. She had the contemptuous look Angel was often to meet in women, who, feeling their calm

threatened by the unconventional, from fear of inadequacy fall back on rage; and Ellie's anger came suddenly in a great gust, so that she longed to spin round and hit Angel's pale face. "You would," she cried. "Of course, *you* would think such things. Who would expect *you* to believe in Holy Matrimony? Why, it would be very strange if you did."

She hurried on towards the school building and Beattie, looking rather frightened, hurried after her.

Angel could see Gwen and Polly scurrying ahead, too; like mice they darted into the cloakroom when they noticed her. She remembered the expression on their mother's face when she had come to the window that morning, and she felt menaced and bewildered. She pondered Ellie's words, turning them over and over in her mind, walking towards the cloakroom slowly, although the other girls had gone indoors. She was the last, and a bell began to ring for prayers.

The day went sluggishly by. An oil-stove was lit in the classroom, but the girls who sat by the window still shivered, chafing their chilblains. They stayed in their desks as one dull lesson followed another, except that sometimes they were told to stand and do a few feeble exercises, clapping their hands above their heads and swinging their arms. Hour after hour, they were made to learn lessons by heart, French vocabularies, psalms, history dates and the names of rivers, until their heads were so tightly crammed with facts that thoughts had no room to move in them. When the lists were learned they droned them in unison. For their drawing-lesson some tattered prints were handed round for them to copy. There were never any new ones and Angel had drawn the same windmill a dozen times. In needlework, they made chain-stitch patterns on pieces of unbleached linen which smelt of glue.

At midday, some of the girls remained. They stayed in the classroom and unpacked their sandwiches. No one spoke to Angel, who sat at her desk, unwrapped her lunch and ate it hungrily, staring out of the window.